

***BUAI*: “THERE IS GOOD AND BAD THERE”**

Experiencing and narrating the spiritual power of music and dance
in the New Guinea Island Region

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ABSTRACT: *Buai* is a form of sorcery known throughout the New Guinea Island region of Papua New Guinea. This socially sanctioned form of magical practice is predominantly used for creative ends, particularly the conjuring of music and dance material. In many parts of New Ireland and among the Lak people of Southern New Ireland, *Buai* is relied upon to deliver new songs and dances for community celebrations and ritual performance. The practitioners of *Buai*, known as *tena Buai*, are revered for their creative powers and occasionally feared for their potential to use their power for destructive ends. Through a combination of personal experience and conversations with *tena Buai* of Southern New Ireland, this article explores the ways in which *tena Buai* are perceived by their communities. In this article I take up the idea that social practices, actions and understandings such as those of the *Buai* practice are intersubjectively constituted through narrative as well as practice and therefore in a constant state of change, flux and negotiation.

KEYWORDS: Papua New Guinea, Sorcery, Lak, New Ireland, *Buai*

Encountering *tena Buai*¹

In 2004 after several years of learning music and dance in the Lak region I encountered a well-known *tena Buai*² practitioner, Toluluai, in Rabaul while waiting for a ship to return me to Southern New Ireland. Toluluai was a *tena Buai* of particular renown who had a reputation for being extremely creative but also potentially dangerous. Toluluai learnt that I was interested in music and after talking to me for a few minutes he wandered away to sit in the direct sunlight alone. I asked my other companions what he was doing and they said he was dreaming. Toluluai returned fifteen minutes later with a new song that he'd conjured especially for me whilst in a dream-like state. Following my encounter with Toluluai my interest in the practice grew and I sought out *tena Buai* throughout Southern New Ireland, the Duke of York Islands and East New Britain. Over several years I conducted interviews with a number of *tena Buai* on the details of the practice and the initiation process. The *Buai* practice is widely spread through southern and central New

¹ Italicised words designate both Tok Pisin and the Lak/Siar language. The latter are differentiated from Tok Pisin words by an (L) after their first usage in the text.

² Following Eves (1998) I use the capital 'B' to distinguish the shamanic practice of *Buai* from the widely chewed betel nut known in Tok Pisin as *buai*.

Ireland, East New Britain and some of the outlying islands in the archipelago, and there are many consistent themes and approaches, as described in the work of Nachman (1981), Eves (1995), Salisbury (1970), Webb (1995), George (1988) and Enos (1977).

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in January and February 2015. During this period I undertook the difficult initiation process required for entry into the *tena Buai* practice. Over ninety-four hours I fasted without water or food in a secluded area of rainforest under the guidance of the most experienced *tena Buai* in the Lak region. My interest in *Buai* began ten years earlier, in the encounter described above. Focusing on their music and dance practices, I have been working with the Lak, predominantly with two main communities in Rei and Siar, since 2001. *Tena Buai* practitioners are conduits for music and dance as well as other creative material. Among the Lak, music and dance choreography is generally attributed to ancestral spirits, and men receive communications from these spirits in dreamt visions. It is also widely acknowledged that a man can compose or 'think up' songs as well, although this is seen as the hard way to go about things and not as likely to produce compelling material. All men and sometimes women are capable of receiving music and dance material in this way, however, *tena Buai* undergo initiation in order to create stronger bonds with spirits to retrieve creative material on a regular basis through dreamt visions.

Spirituality and magic among the Lak

The people of the Lak linguistic group occupy the southern-most part of New Ireland in the New Guinea Island region of Papua New Guinea. The Lak (pronounced 'Luck') think of themselves both in relation to their status as New Irelanders but also in relation to the surrounding islands including the Duke of York islands and New Britain to the south west, the Feni island group in the north, and the many other islands in the Bismarck Archipelago (Figure 1). Another important aspect of the way the Lak understand themselves as a group, follows the perceived status of their region as the *las kona* or 'last corner'³. This phrase is often used to describe the isolation that the people of the area experience. The absence of a road through the district, the scarceness of health, education and other services emphasizes the feeling of remoteness that has come to be understood as a defining factor of life in the Lak region

Partly as a result of this isolation, traditional practices remain a prominent feature of life for the Lak linguistic group. This has resulted in a widely-held perception, by outsiders, of the Lak region as a *ples nogut*, a 'bad place'. The Lak claim to be the source of much spiritual power in the region and often refer to their area as the 'base of the musket', due to the geographical shape of New Ireland resembling the shape of a rifle or musket. The metaphor implies that dangerous power emerges from the base. On many trips out of the Lak region, in New Britain and Northern parts of New Ireland, outsiders have expressed to me their beliefs in Siar/Lak as a source of destructive magical power. The region is also widely associated with the secret men's society known as *tubuan* or *nataka* (L).

³ The concepts of *las kona* (last corner) or *las ples* (last place), are used to indicate an area that is perceived as economically behind neighbouring regions or physically and culturally isolated. The concepts are not unique to the Lak district. The idea is one utilised by many linguistic groups in New Ireland and further afield in Papua New Guinea (see: Gillespie, 2014: 112; Hoenigman, 2012: 291).



Figure 1 - Map of Lak region within Papua New Guinea (author's adaptation of Vector Free map)

The *tubuan* society is arguably the most significant traditional men's practice and has received considerable attention in the literature of Southern New Ireland (see Kingston, 2003; Eves, 2009; Errington, 1974; Tateyama, 1995; Webb, 1995; Wolffram 2011, 2013). The *tubuan* society exerts great influence and is of considerable importance for the Lak people. The secret society is primarily concerned with the generation of the *tubuan* spirits. These spirits physically manifest as 2.4 – 3-meter-tall canonically shaped figures that enter communities for short periods. They appear as part of the mortuary sequences for Big Men or *Kamgoi* (L) (politically significant community leaders). In recent years *tubuan* have also been present on other occasions of importance including the opening of community buildings (including churches, schools, and aid posts) and on the occasion of visits by high-ranking politicians. The power of the cult is significant in Lak communities and all men who aspire to positions of importance in the region seek senior status in the secret society. When *tubuan* appear in communities as part of the final stages of the mortuary sequence they always dance. Their movements, the singing and *kundu* or hourglass drum accompaniment are considered by most senior males in the region to be the finest music and most aesthetically pleasing of the many music and dance styles performed in the region. The ideals of 'lightness' and 'energy' that are encompassed in the performance and movements of the *tubuan* are emulated in all male dance forms. *Tubuan* are understood, in Lak and beyond, to have their origin in the Lak district. Today many other linguistic

groups in New Ireland have *tubuan* societies as well as the Tolai people of East New Britain.

While the *tubuan* are not directly associated with the *Buai* practices that form the focus of this discussion, they are introduced here because of the wider context of spirituality and magical practices of which they are a part. The *tubuan* also present a contrasting example that will serve to highlight the ways in which intersubjective dialogue is essential to local understanding of *Buai* practice, discussed later in this article. As mentioned, the *Buai* shamanistic practice, with origins in the Duke of York Islands, and the *tubuan* society, arising from within the Lak district, have been transplanted to many other regions within the Bismarck Archipelago. As Eves has described in his discussion of the *Buai* complex on the Lelet Plateau in central New Ireland, these imported magical practices can be so readily assimilated within other regions because of a broad shared basis of spirituality and cultural beliefs in magic and sorcery practices (1995: 218). In contrast to what Eves describes among the Lelet Plateau, in the Lak district *Buai* and *tubuan* practices, although related through a shared spirituality, are also significantly different in important ways. Among the Lak, *Buai* initiation is undertaken to develop individual power and renown, while the *tubuan* practices are more complex with both individual and political ends as well as social and spiritual aspects to the practice.

In this article I explore the extent to which local practices and performances generate meanings and power relations that are intersubjectively created through action and narrative. These are often only relevant to the immediate circumstances even as they are replicated across the wider New Guinea Island region. I use the *Buai* practice as the focus through which I explore these ideas.

There are other spiritually significant practices that, while not at the center of this article, bear mentioning, as they remain important to the people of the district. These include the *talung* (L), a spirit voice associated with mortuary practices, and *sinyet* (L), a type of sorcery largely perceived as destructive⁴. The wider context of spirituality also includes Christianity. The Catholic and United Churches are the two largest denominations within the greater linguistic region of Lak/Siar. A fascinating relationship exists between the Christian values, teachings and spiritualities, and the traditional indigenous spiritual ethos of the region. While I will not go into these aspects in detail, it will suffice to say that the two spiritualities mostly coexist as mutually compatible in the minds of Lak people, as they do in many other parts of Melanesia (cf. Robbins 1998, 2004; Lohmann, 2000; Dundon, 2002; Errington and Gewertz 1995: 122-128). As discussed in detail by scholars such as Van Heekeren (2016) Hermkens (2015) and Reithofer (2011), the introduction of Christianity, while often perceived as a means of combating sorcery practices among Melanesian communities, has actually resulted, in many instances, in a heightening of accusations against witches and aggressive sorcery. While the Lak district and the New Guinea Islands region have not been seen the level of retributions and killings that have plagued communities such as those in Simbu district (see Reithofer, 2011), sorcery accusations and retributions do take place. Reithofer suggest, rather vaguely, that this is potentially the result of cultural and historical idiosyncrasies (2011:199). Additionally, I suggest it may also be a consequence of local perceptions about spiritual power which Michele Stephen describes as “a continuum running from the socially despised “witch,” blamed for intra-

⁴ Considering the secrecy involved in the *Buai*, *tubuan* and other practices involving spiritual communion, it is worth mentioning that this article does not expose or reveal any aspect of these practices that are considered secret.

community misfortune, to the socially rewarded “sorcerer” who employs his powers on behalf of the community” (Stephen, 1987: 3). Regardless of the actual reasons for these apparent discrepancies across Papua New Guinea, the *Buai* practice in the New Guinea Island region and specifically in the Lak district, is widely understood as a socially sanctioned form sorcery practice despite its description as being both “good and bad”.

Intersubjective Narrative Construction

As Andrew Lattas points out, narrative forms an important part of the ways in which human experience is mediated (1993: 51). In his article on ‘Sorcery and Colonialism’ Lattas uses shamanism and sorcery as a means to explore the destructive realities which sorcery narratives reveal among the Kaliai of West New Britain. Here I am interested in exploring the constructive narratives that are produced in the Lak region around *Buai* shamanism. Lattas uses Evans-Pritchard’s seminal work among the Azande, taking up Evans-Pritchard’s argument that witchcraft is a moral language for exploring the social constitution of evil. If this is the case, as Lattas argues in his article what then are socially sanctioned forms of sorcery practice? How can sorcery and shamanism be understood if it is not always a ‘moral language’?

My personal experience of the *Buai* initiation process, my research into the *Buai* practice, and the spirituality of the Lak region have encouraged a shift away from an understanding of these practices as having a stable and abiding character; rather, I suggest that these practices and complexes are in a constant state of flux and subtle renegotiation. It is in and through dialogue and particularly action that people get a sense of other’s intentions, frame of mind and worldview. Michael Jackson points out that intersubjectivity can be used in relation to both people and things, “since things are often imagined to be social actors, with minds of their own, and persons are often treated as though they were mere things” (Jackson, 2013: 5). Jackson also suggests that an approach to intersubjectivity should be understood as implying both ‘fixed’ and ‘fluid’ aspects, implying that consciousness is constantly moving between ebb and flow, that our understandings of people, concepts and things are always oscillating between determined and indeterminate states.

In the context of Melanesian communities, intersubjectivity takes on a special resonance due to the ways in which performance, revelation, and display constitute important aspects of social relationships, spiritual power and politics in the region. Music and dance performances in Lak offer opportunities to present and reveal relationships and power relations during moments of heightened display. *Tubuan* spirit figures and *Buai* practice present pertinent examples of the ways in which the Lak intersubjectively constitute their shared cultural understandings. The *tubuan* make brief public appearances that make known several important aspects to onlookers, including the physical nature of the spirit beings (their shape and markings, the way they move, and with whom they interact). Such public displays reveal to audiences, who has the spiritual efficacy to command the appearance of the spirits and what it is that the *tubuan* actually do, that is, they dance. In contrast, *Buai* has no physical manifestation like that of the *tubuan*. Instead *Buai* practices are communicated, and understood, mainly through intersubjective dialogical encounters.

In contrast to the closely guarded *tubuan* society, that is never discussed among non-initiated males in the Lak region, it is interesting to note how lay people as well as *tena*

Buai adherents are willing to discuss *Buai* initiation practices. This is despite the fact that these initiation practices are rarely seen and mostly enacted by individuals or in small groups. What is more, the accounts and details of the *Buai* initiation are remarkably similar and widely understood among men in communities where these practices exist. In this way the *Buai* complex represents a very different practice from that of the *talung* and *tubuan* secret societies of Southern New Ireland. It is my understanding that, as opposed to these other secret practices, which are enacted through revelatory displays and public performances, *Buai* is an intersubjective practice that is conveyed through narrative. In other words, *Buai* is largely understood through discussion and conversation. This is in stark contrast to the other spiritual practices that dominate the region. The *tubuan* and *talung* are never discussed with non-initiates and rarely acknowledged as existing until they are physically or acoustically manifested in village communities. The fact that *Buai* practices are open to discussion, speculation, and dialogue indicates a significant difference in the way Lak communities perceive and understand *Buai*.

Buai is not, however, completely without a public manifestation. *Tena Buai* practitioners become known in the context of male dance performance. Male dance troupes assemble and rehearse in secrecy in order to heighten their revelatory impact. Their public performances, like those of the *tubuan*, are about revelation, power and display. A *tena Buai* practitioner plays several crucial roles in the process of displaying power. In dance performance a *tena Buai* is easily distinguished through his position outside the row and column formation that dancers perform in. Usually a *tena Buai* stands slightly to one side of the front row and may intermittently dance or yell encouragement to the performers. In Lak the dance group is usually affiliated with a men's house or *pal* (L) and the group is known as a *kampalpal* (L). All men's houses are associated with a Big Man or *Kamgoi* (L) who commands the labour of the *kampalpal* group. In this way, when a *Kamgoi* organizes a *kampalpal* to dance, the *Kamgoi* is publically displaying his affiliation with the host of the event. The *Kamgoi* is often the dance leader or *tena Buai* and is therefore publically displaying his power as someone with spiritual efficacy capable of retrieving song and or dance choreography from spirits in dreams. Similar to the ways that *tubuan* performances reveal power and relationships, male dance performances constitute several levels of revelation to audiences. The resulting effect is that, in the Lak region, as in other areas of Melanesia, all of these relationships whether interpersonal or spiritual are performed and publically revealed in order for participants and onlookers to create a space in which the social, political, and spiritual environment can be intersubjectively narrated and performed.

In this way, the manner in which understandings are intersubjectively constituted can be studied ethnographically as Jackson points out, by paying close attention to social interactions, like those displayed in the *tubuan* and other dance performances. In addition, intersubjectivity can also be studied reflexively by focusing on the ethnographic encounter itself, like those narrative encounters with *tena Buai* and other males that I mentioned above (Jackson, 2013: 104). The inherent problem in this model is one associated with the limitations of the ethnographer himself. As Jackson suggests these limitations are "defined as much by his or her social relationships in the field or within the anthropological profession as by the methodology used and the theory espoused" (ibid: 104). In similar ways local understandings are just as complicated and tied to context. So how do we go about making sense of our intersubjectively constituted narratives? Jackson suggests that:

Wolfram: *Buai* in the New Guinea Island Region

The variety of ways in which shared beliefs are used, experienced, and espoused makes it futile to try to elucidate their essence under the rubric of such antinomies as rational versus irrational, true versus false, good versus bad. Rather, we need to elucidate the place of belief in the context of actual existence – how are they experienced and employed, not what they may be said to register or represent. (ibid: 104-5)

In what follows I aim to discuss the *Buai* complex as it was presented to me, and as I experienced it. Throughout there is a constant negotiation between what is said or described as taking place in general and what occurs in a particular instance. The task is to examine the context of the experience and how the accompanying dialogue is used to explain these experiences in each case without recourse to representation, or descriptions of practices as symbolic and referential. It is through this negotiation that I believe a deeper understanding of how the Lak interpret spirituality can be approached.

The *Buai* Complex

The following interview extract, conducted in 2004 with Patrick Toarbusai, typically describes the processes undertaken by *Buai* initiates.

I was initiated in 1974. I was just a child at the time in sixth grade. I hadn't yet gone to high school. I didn't go to the Duke of York Islands. One man, Paul Totandai who learnt about Buai in the Duke of York (islands), came here (Siar) on the occasion of a song and dance (singsing) performance. I wanted to get this thing (Buai) from him so I obtained ten fathoms of roped shell money and gave it to him as a payment. When I did this he said, "I will give you Buai." Now, in this case, Buai doesn't mean betel nut. I was given the head of the karawa (L) fish to eat. The Buai master, he wrapped the fish head in leaves and placed it on top of hot stones to cook. When it had cooked, he placed the fish head on some leaves in front of me. Even though it had just been pulled out of the ground oven, it smelled rotten and was full of maggots. I said, "I am not going to be able to eat this." Totandai said, "No, you must eat it."

I figured that this was part of the initiation process so I ate it. I closed my eyes and I ate it all. I also had to eat all of the leaves, tree shoots, and wood that were placed around the fish head. When I finished eating, I became unconscious. In my sleep I began to dream.

I lay there dreaming. I saw many scary things and I continued to sleep. The whole day I didn't eat a thing. In my dream I saw skeletons walking up to me to try and make me afraid. Totandai had told me that if I was afraid all would be lost, I wouldn't be able to get the Buai and it would all be a complete waste of time. I had been fasting for a long time and I didn't want it all to be in vain, I wanted to get this thing. When I saw all these things coming toward me, I just stared. A dog came up to me and tried to bite my neck but I wasn't afraid. I followed my instructions. It was all just a dream; it wasn't real. These things continued to come at me until finally, as Totandai had said it would happen, two men arrived. The first man carried a black basket with him and he wasn't well dressed. He walked close to me and I said, "I do not want you." He was

the poison man. He came to offer me black magic. If you decide to accept this basket, you miss out on all of the good things and only get the poison to kill people with. If you take this basket you will become a poison man and before too long you will be tempted to use this knowledge to kill people. It is not as if you can hold this knowledge and not use it. The knowledge uses you. When the man with the black basket came, I said, "No, I am not here for you, you can go." He got up and left. The man I was waiting for arrived next. I said, "I am waiting for you, no one else, hurry up." This man took his basket off his shoulder and gave it to me. He explained many things to me, giving me their names and their uses and when he finally finished, I awoke. Once awake I saw Totandai. He had cooked two bananas and left them for me. He smiled and laughed a little and asked me if I had got what I had wanted. I wasn't sure yet because it hadn't yet come back to me but I got up and ate. Later, when all the boys began to learn the songs and dances, I heard the kundu drum and all that I had learnt began to come back to me. As they began to learn the songs, I remembered all that I had been taught in the dream. I began my work and sent the boys to go and find all of the things I needed to make dance magic. (Transcribed and translated from a recorded interview with Patrick Toarbusai 2004).

The narratives about *Buai* travel well and seem to vary little across the many linguistic groups in the region. Toarbusai's experience is similar to many of the accounts related to me by *Buai* practitioners in Lak and to those recorded by Eves among the Lelet people in the Madak region (1995: 8-10) and George in the Barok region (1988: 163-4). Eves describes how, for the Lelet, incorporation via consumption is the "primary means through which shamanic knowledge and power is obtained and practiced" (1995: 228) He describes the Lelet body as a dichotomy of "internal/external or inside/outside"; however this dichotomy is not to be understood as fixed or inflexible but rather it involves a constant renegotiation as people engage with others and the world around them (1995: 228). I follow Eves's lead and explore further the ways in which the Lak people, when talking about, and performing *Buai* practices constantly renegotiate their understandings of what it is.

I will now outline the key aspects of the initiation process and briefly discuss some of the variations encountered. In most cases the *tena Buai* I have interviewed describe their desire to obtain *Buai* as a matter of personal choice. There is no cultural, social pressure or expectation surrounding *Buai* practice as there is with the *tubuan* society in which most boys and young men are initiated between the ages of 12 and 18. *Tena Buai* frequently describe a strong compulsion to seek out a *Buai* master as in the account provided above by Toarbusai. Payment for *Buai* is usually in the form of *tambu*, the traditional shell money of the region, but sometimes a small payment of Kina (Papua New Guinea currency) is also required. A fasting period of anywhere from four days to several months may be undertaken. These variations are accounted for as differences in 'schools' of *Buai* practice (cf. Enos 1977: 1 -7). Toarbusai's description of consuming a rotten fish head is only one of several methods employed. The most frequently relayed practice involves consuming betel nut or *buai* as it is known in Tok Pisin, in small leaf packages that include other plant material. The betel nut and plant material are typically laid on a large leaf in two rows. The initiate is required to eat their way through each row (figure 2). Interviewees commonly recounted the difficulty experienced consuming the small bundles and frequently describe vomiting at some point during the process of eating and having to re-consume their vomit. There is a strong emphasis, in all narratives I have collected, on the need to consume all of the material.



Figure 2 - *Buai* substances laid out on a leaf, ready for consumption (photograph: Luke Frater).

Once all of the items laid out on the leaf have been eaten the initiate invariably falls asleep. The senior *tena Buai* adept who initiated me in Southern New Ireland, Elson Toaniti (Figure 3), describes what happens once the items on the leaf have been consumed:

When you fall asleep the flying fox will carry you above the forest, in the air, then they will return you to the same place. When you awake you will not know what has happened. There are things they will give you, there are things they will teach you as you sleep. Only when you are truly asleep, but if you are half conscious the flying fox will not come for you. (Transcribed and translated from interview with Alson Toanati 2010)

In a later discussion Toaniti explained that the flying fox is the *lingal* (L) – *Buai* spirit. Each night during the four nights of the initiation fasting period the *lingal* carries the initiate above the forest to different locations where *tanruan* (L) – place spirits dwell. *Tanruan* typically dwell in rocky outcrops, small caves, large fig trees and small-uninhabited islands on the coastal fringes (Figure 4).



Figure 3 - Eelson Toaniti the most senior *tena Buai* in the Lak region (photograph: Luke Frater).



Figure 4 - Towow Island, an uninhabited island close to the Weitin valley, Southern New Ireland. The dwelling place of *tanruan* (spirits) utilised in *Buai* practice (photograph: Paul Wolffram).

While sleeping, the initiate is invariably challenged on the first night after consuming the *Buai* substances. The nature of these challenges differs only slightly between accounts.

Wolfram: *Buai* in the New Guinea Island Region

Skeletal figures, large snakes, headless men and various other horrific apparitions appear to the dreamer to scare them and force them to leave the initiation grounds. If the initiate can endure and overcome his fear, eventually as described above by Toarbusai, the first man will appear carrying a black basket. This man is described as a shadow, his skin is extremely black and his movements barely discernable against the night. This apparition is known as the 'poison man'. He offers the initiate a black basket containing sorcery. Should the initiate accept this basket he will be compelled beyond his nature or self-control to practice destructive and harmful sorcery. If the first 'poison man' is dismissed or ignored eventually a second man will appear. Described as 'bright like the dawn', the second man carries another basket. His skin is covered with a mixture of *tar*(L), red ochre powder, and *langaron* (L), a fragranced substance rubbed over the skin, usually adorned in preparation for a dance performance. This man, the *lingal* spirit in the form of a man, carries a basket which contains *Buai* magic and knowledge. The initiate acknowledges this man and accepts a basket from him.

As Toarbusai describes in the interview above, initiates typically emerge from their initiation unsure about their experience or whether they have received *Buai* knowledge. It is usually weeks or months later in the context of a dance performance that the knowledge received in the initiation is recalled. Once triggered, the knowledge and details of certain *Buai* practices become available to the initiate. Like other types of magical practice in the region, *Buai* sorcery involves the use of many plant materials that are widely believed to be magically efficacious. *Kawawar* (ginger), reduced coconut milk imbued with incantations, as well as other specific leaves and barks are revealed to the initiate along with their uses during the initiation process⁵. The knowledge transferred to the initiate is extensive and detailed. Toarbusai describes how he acquired certain knowledge from the *Buai* spirit:

I saw too how to catch the snake, how to hold the snake. As he told me about these things, the knowledge came into my hands. He said, "This is how you hold the snake by its head and this is where you press to make it excrete." He showed me the leaves... All of this was in his basket, which he gave to me and then he proceeded to feed me the information and the incantations... (Transcribed and translated from a recorded interview with Patrick Toarbusai, 2004)

Like all forms of magic practiced in the region these powers are only available to those who can exercise sufficient control over their bodies during the fasting and isolation period known as *kunabok* (L). The *kunabok* involves not only fasting without water and limited amounts of food but also isolation in the bush and avoidance of women. Women are understood as potential contaminants of male spiritual power, particularly menstrual blood. Women are described as possessing qualities of fertility and 'heaviness'. Female reproductive power is seen as oppositional to spiritual power. Female reproductive potential is likened to rich fertile soil that is heavy and moist. Spirits are understood as light, as exemplified by the hopping and floating movements of *tubuan* spirits⁶. Male

⁵ Ginger, (Tokpisin: *kawawar*), is a common magical adjunct used throughout Melanesia and extensively in Lak.

⁶ In the Lak region women are not seen as capable of initiating into *Buai* practice, the loss of water or moisture from the body would equate with a loss of fertility. In Lak conception individuals are either reproductive or spiritually efficacious. However, this is not the case in other parts of New Ireland and East New Britain. In his interview with Turan, a Tolai composer and *Buai* or *abuai na malagene* (Kuanua/Tolai word for *Buai*), Turan describes the *Buai* spirit as having "intercourse with him and

Wolfram: *Buai* in the New Guinea Island Region

dancers seek to emulate these qualities in their performances through their movements and actions. The *kunabok* period of isolation and *alal* (L), fasting, is an essential part of the process of making the body light and spiritually efficacious in preparation for dance performances and all magical undertakings.

Once initiated, adepts must continue to control what they consume for a period of time. Pork is frequently tabooed to *Buai* practitioners for several weeks following the initiation. In some schools of *Buai* recent adepts must also be cautious in their interactions with others following their initiation. A recent adept is in danger of losing his acquired skills inadvertently in the process of offering food and objects to others. Consequently, items must be given indirectly to avoid transferring the *Buai* knowledge along with the object offered. Sometime after their initiation, new *Buai* practitioners are expected to lead dance troupes in performance. As described above *tena Buai* distinguish themselves and generate renown through their skill in choreography and through their composition skills. Many men in the Lak region differentiate between 'pseudo' *tena Buai*, those who have been shown some basic *Buai* practices for the purposes of leading dance troupes and protecting the dances against sorcery attack, and 'real' *tena Buai*, those who have undergone the initiation process under the guidance of a known *Buai* practitioner.

The information and narrative excerpts provided here were collected in interviews conducted with *tena Buai* in East New Britain, the Duke of York Islands and in the Lak district between 2004 and 2010. Alongside the twelve *tena Buai* interviewed during this period I held many informal discussions with men who claimed knowledge of *Buai* practice. In 2015 when I returned to Lak seeking to be initiated into *Buai* I approached Christian Dokon. Dokon is a *tena Buai* in his fifties with whom I have interviewed and discussed *Buai* with many times. When approached to initiate me Dokon was hesitant claiming that his knowledge of *Buai* wasn't sufficient:

Dokon: *There are many types of Buai. I only have part of it.*

Paul: *So who do I have to go to now?*

Dokon: *Only a few men remain who have actually performed the initiation. I only know of Tomileshman and Toaniti who have consumed Buai. These are the only remaining real tena Buai. You must go to the man who has the greatest knowledge, Elson Toaniti.*

Paul: *Toaniti?*

Dokon: *He consumed Buai in the Duke of York islands.*

Paul: *Yes, I've met him before.*

Dokon: *I believe he will be able to give you the real Buai. As I say, we will go and I will put you in his charge. He will tell you all the things you need to do before he gives you Buai.*

fertilizing his musical womb, before he can give birth to new songs" (Enos, 1977: 4). The language used here clearly suggests a conceptual similarity between the creative and reproductive practices. Turan also describes initiating women into *Buai* practice.

Wolfram: *Buai* in the New Guinea Island Region

Paul: *Do you think that Buai is a good thing?*

Dokon: *Buai is good but it offers two things, it's up to you to choose. If you want Buai for knowledge that's okay. Some Buai can provide evil too, to kill people, these sorts of things... leave these things. You get this good knowledge and creative material.* (Transcribed and translated from a recorded interview with Christian Dokon 2015)

This conversation provided quite a different picture of *Buai* from the impressions and understandings I had developed during my previous research. The interviews and discussion I had up to this point suggested that *tena Buai* were more numerous than Dokon suggests here. I followed this conversation with Dokon by interviewing several other senior men from Siar. All of these conversations confirmed that there were now only three men who were known to be *tena Buai* in the region, and only one man was still practicing and would have sufficient knowledge to conduct an initiation. In the weeks that followed, I came to understand that it was not a case of gradual disintegration of the tradition or social and cultural change but rather a disjunction between what is described and what is actually practiced. This situation is quite common throughout Melanesia where sorcery practice looms large in the social consciousness but is rarely seen or backed up by concrete examples (see Reithofer, 2011: 199). A further revelation, brought to light by my interest in initiating into the *Buai* complex, was that Toaniti's *Buai* practice revolved around a particular *Buai* spirit or 'school' of *Buai* that did not pose a risk of obtaining destructive or malicious sorcery. Up until this point all accounts of the sorcery practice emphasized the fact that a *tena Buai* initiate must choose between the 'good basket' and the 'poison basket'. Following Dokon's suggestion that I initiate with Toaniti, Toarbusai confirmed that this was a 'safer' form of *Buai* and only practiced by Toanati:

Patrick: *Some Buai contain positive magic and black magic. Those who get black magic are compelled to use it or the black magic will destroy the host. Buai can also be defined by its creativity. It creates new things. For us, as I said, it brings new music and dance but for you... you can use it to bring you new knowledge.*

Paul: *Where does this new knowledge and creativity come from?*

Patrick: *When you get Buai, the master, we call it sorcery, he pulls the power of place spirits and the ancestors to support you when you use it. So this creative power comes from place spirits and ancestors... There are very few people who are able to perform the initiation. Around here, the only person who can give good Buai, Todipit, is Elson. Now if poor old Elson dies, they must go to the Duke of York Islands and get good Buai and black magic together.* (Transcribed and translated from a recorded interview with Patrick Toarbusai, 2015)

This discussion with Patrick highlights a theme that arose in conversations both before and after undergoing the initiation, a narrative about how I would use the power of the *Buai* once I left the region. In many of the discussions around my entry into *Buai* practice I was told that the power of the *Buai* spirit could be used for creative ends other than those of music and dance. The widely held opinion, as Patrick suggests above, was that all of the creative pursuits of 'white men' could also be enhanced as a result of initiation.

Buai Initiation

Following two weeks of discussion about how I should go about the initiation, I walked south to find Toaniti who agreed to an arrangement, wherein, four days later I should return to meet him in the bush. When I returned with Dokon and a number of men from my host community, I was washed with leaves in the ocean by Toaniti's grandson, Suambu, who had joined us to assist with the initiation. At 83 years, Toaniti attributes his knowledge and longevity to *Buai* practice. The process is also particularly challenging for the *tena Buai* who conducts the initiation, because he too must fast without water and consume only small amounts of food. Once Dokon and all of my companions had departed, the fasting period began. After 24 hours of fasting without food or water I was given the *Buai* substances to eat (Figure 5). That night I was left alone in a small clearing until the early morning when I fell asleep. For the following three days I remained within the clearing, occasionally visited by Toaniti who would converse with me about *Buai* practice. We sang together for long periods, and talked at length about the *Buai* process. Toaniti's grandson, Suambu, also spent time with me during the day. Suambu and I spent most of our time together in silence, occasionally we chewed betel nut and I broke up the time alternating between sitting motionless and walking slowly around the fringes of the small clearing. Each night I was left alone in order for the *Buai* spirit, Todipit, to find me and journey with me to different *tanruan* (L) sites (spirit places). After the second night I was unable to sleep and as the dehydration and exhaustion became more severe, my perception of the sound environment changed significantly. Certain sounds were amplified, my perception of time also altered with brief moments of sleep/unconsciousness interrupting my normal flow of perception.



Figure 3 - Author eating the *Buai* substances after 24 hours fasting (photograph: Luke Frater).

On the final day after 94 hours of fasting without water, the clearing was opened to men from surrounding communities who came to witness the handover of *Buai* knowledge. During the early morning several young men dug a one-meter-long hold in the clearing, lined it with banana leaves, and filled the shallow hole with coconut water. They scrapped and squeezed the flesh of the coconuts into the mixture and created a large fire nearby to heat small stones. Once the fire had burnt out, the hot stones were added to the coconut water one by one to slowly bring it to the boil. I was charged with performing the task of *wom* (L). To *wom* a substance is to chant into it and imbue it with the *Buai* spirit. The chant was taught to me by Toaniti during my isolation and fasting period. Whilst bent low over the *ku* (L), reduced coconut milk, I chanted repeatedly as I slowly stirred the reducing mixture with the spine of a coconut leaf. This task was seen as my first as a practicing *tena Buai*. With the *ku* prepared, the mixture was covered with a large leaf and left to settle.

An hour later when the clearing was filled with onlookers, Toaniti laid out a number of leaves, young coconuts, *kawawar*, (ginger) and *langaron* powder mixtures in the centre of the initiation grounds (Figure 6). Toaniti proceeded to hand me each of the decorated young coconuts, and large leaf bundles containing *langaron*, one by one. With each item that Toaniti passed to me he described an aspect of *Buai* knowledge or power, “This is for dancing”, “this is the Todipit spirit”, “this is of your choosing, not mine”, until finally he handed over the last item saying “I do not need to explain these things, you already have the knowledge”(Figure 7). Once all of the items had been handed over in this manner Toaniti revealed a final item, a small decorated object with ferns and feathers known as a *pampam* or *inamba* (L). Toaniti gave me the *inamba* and motioned for me to hand it back saying that he would “demonstrate its power” (Figure 8). While all gathered watched in silence Toaniti moved to the edge of the clearing and began to quietly chant. The *inamba* jerked violently in his hand, thrusting forward and then swinging his right arm around in violent looping motions. Toaniti’s grandson moved quickly to support him, holding him tightly around the hips to keep him in place. As quickly as the movements commenced they ended, and Toaniti walked back across the clearing to hand me the *inamba*, stating that, “it is alive, you see, this is yours now”⁷.

The initiation concluded with singing in the clearing for an hour. During this final session, in which all of the men present participated, I became emotionally overwhelmed as I experienced the presence of now deceased Lak friends. I drifted in and out of consciousness and felt myself both physically present in the clearing and distant from the location. Throughout my perception of sound was altered particularly in the higher frequencies where high-pitched insect calls in the bush around me seemed to have lower frequency echoes simulating words in the vocal range.

⁷ *Inamba* (L) or *pampam* are small handheld carved wooden items often decorated brightly with dyed feathers. *Inamba* are frequently used in male dance performances and widely used throughout Southern and Central New Ireland. The *inamba* contain *Buai* spirits and when activated through chant and by pressing with the forefinger and thumb around the base, the individual holding the *inamba* may become possessed by the spirit causing violent swing, thrusting and jerking motions in the arm, upper torso and sometimes the entire body (c.f. Eves, 2009)



Figure 4 - *Langaron* powder, ginger root and young coconuts on display before being handed over (photograph: Luke Frater).



Figure 7- Toaniti hands over the last of the leaf packages containing *langaron* powders (photograph Luke Frater).



Figure 8 - Toaniti announces he will demonstrate the power of the *inamba* held here in his right hand (photograph Luke Frater).

Once satisfied that all present knew the song well, Toaniti organized the *ku* (reduced coconut oil), that I had earlier *wom*(ed) to be distributed among the men. At this time, I broke my fast, sipping a water and eating a small handful of rice. In front of all present I was covered in *langaron* (L) powder, a mixture of finely cut fragranced leaves boiled with coconut milk to produce an oil and then mixed with red ochre powder (Figure 9). All of the other men present followed in kind, covering themselves, head to toe with *langaron* powder. Finally, Toaniti and I led a procession out of the bush while singing and beating bamboo slit gongs as we walked along the beach past a crowd of women, children and young men looking on. This final procession was seen as especially important by Toaniti and Dokon, as a form of public announcement of my initiation into the *tena Buai* practice.

The initiation was considered a success. Many of the men who arrived on the final day talked with Toaniti about my *kunubok* (L), isolation period, and were impressed with my ability to endure the four days of *alal* (L), fasting. In the weeks that followed I spent time discussing the process of the initiation and the perceptions of many of the men within my host community. A number of interesting aspects of *Buai* practices were raised during these interviews and informal discussions. Key among these reactions was surprise that I was able to endure the process. In the days following the *Buai* initiation many men came to my house to express their admiration. Several privately confessed that while they had tried to *alal*, (fast) for similar periods, they had always ‘stolen’ water or food and could not endure periods longer than 48 hours. This was particularly surprising given the general acceptance of four days as a minimal period of *alal*, (fasting) required for music and dance preparation. Toarbusai and Dokon spoke with me at length about the process and what would follow in the weeks and months to come, as a result of the *Buai* initiation:

Toarbusai: *Paul, now many see the potential of this. Your initiation motivated many men to get Buai themselves but you heard Toaniti. He said, you will be the last because he cannot fast like that anymore, he’s too old for this now.*

Wolffram: *Buai* in the New Guinea Island Region

You are the last to get this from him... It will not work immediately, when you've completed all the food restrictions, once some time has passed, you will catch this, you will dream things, hear that...you will get many things. (Transcribed and translated from a recorded interview with Patrick Toarbusai, 2015)



Figure 9 - Author on the final day of the initiation following 94 hours of fasting covered in langaron, mixture of scented oil and ground red ochre stone (photograph: Luke Frater).

Dokon was particularly pleased with the initiation and was convinced that the *Buai* process had worked. We talked for some time about the details of the one-month restriction on certain foods that are considered 'heavy' and should be avoided in order to allow the *Buai* spirit to 'take hold'. The restrictions included a four-week abstinence from fish, pork and other red meats. Dokon went on to describe something of the results of the initiation:

Dokon: *This is good, you travelled a long way to get this thing. You fasted well and now you have it. Now you will return to your country and look after it well like you've been told.*

Paul: *The dreams haven't started yet.*

Dokon: *It's not the time for this yet but it will come to you. It is your faith in these processes that will make it work.*

The young men from Lak are afraid of this. When they saw you completed this thing, many eyes were opened.

*This white man has received this! I believe that you will be compelled to return here because the *Buai* spirit will tell you to return.* (Transcribed and translated from a recorded interview with Dokon Toarbusai, 2015)

Conclusion

The *Buai* initiation was a personal revelatory spiritual experience that I have only glossed over here in order to highlight my enhanced understanding of the ways in which the Lak narrate and actually undertake the spiritual practices associated with music and dance composition. Through intersubjective narrative and highly participatory ethnographic practice I was able to provide a lens to focus my own understandings, and my host communities were able to consider anew the nature of the *Buai* complex. For my interlocutors, my initiation into *Buai* worked as a means by which to extend the narratives around the sorcery, and integrate these practices further into their understandings of themselves and their musical traditions. Shifting community perceptions about *Buai* and increased desire for the continuation of the practice were brought about as a result of my initiation process. In addition, the dialogue around the perceived less destructive nature of Toaniti's *Buai* practice with the spirit Todipit became more widely known.

The narratives provided here in relation to *Buai* sorcery practices are clearly different from those explored by Lattas among the Kaliai where sorcery and shamanism is presented as a means to interpret illness and misfortune into social relationships. The *Buai* complex provides the Lak with an opportunity to discuss their concepts of spirituality in a manner in which it is simply not possible with the *tubuan* and *talung* secret spirit societies. The affirming narrative about *tena Buai* practices, which emerged in the context of my initiation, subverts the widely-held narrative about the Lak region as backward and the source of destructive power. This alternative, positive narrative, maintains local understandings of their region as spiritually powerful, but reinterprets them as non-destructive. The *Buai* practice allows the Lak to not only talk about the spiritual power of their region, but also to reformulate their collective identity as the source of great creativity and positive power. I argue that my interlocutors in the Lak region, who initiated and shared narratives with me during the process of my journey into the *Buai* complex, joined me in a process of intersubjectively developing and shifting narratives about *Buai* and their own identity. I do not mean to suggest here that these things are 'made up along the way', but rather that intersubjective narratives are constantly being renegotiated for personal and social reasons. Like the *Buai* complex itself, narratives about spirituality and sorcery are part of the constant creative process of negotiation and understanding power and social relationships.

Note: *Buai* practice and the initiation discussed in this paper are the subject of a feature length ethnographic film entitled *What Lies That Way* (2017), directed by the author. See details at: <www.whatliesthatway.com>

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Wolffram: *Buai* in the New Guinea Island Region

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