David Troolin
_In the footsteps of the Wanbel men_
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I felt the truck shudder and shake as I drove through the Kabeneo River, the forceful green and brown waves heaving and then reluctantly sliding around the sides of my truck. Navigating my way through the rocky riverbed, I marvelled at who I was going to talk with downriver. Earlier that morning, my friend, whom I here call Muntua, visited me with an interesting request: “Brother,” he said, “Let’s go visit my bet brata (in Pidgin, literally “bed brother”, or a person with whom one has a special friendship that is passed down through generations.) I was thrilled to hear those words! The “bed brother” to whom he referred was the great grandson of the first Papua New Guinean to meet Nikolai N. Mikloukh-Maclay and resided. He lived with the Gorendu-Bongu people to help humanity and record the cultural heritage of the people…”

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I also walked and he mentioned the same sorts of things I experienced daily: learning the vernacular language, eating unfamiliar local foods, and experiencing a different culture. I imagined that we were alike, though separated by several generations. To have the opportunity to talk to the descendants of those who knew him sent chills up my spine! I could hardly wait to learn about his story, and what it would mean for me. I told him, “I would like to hear about your expedition to New Guinea. I want to hear my story of Maclay?”

Nearby, palm trees stood like slender sentinels, looking out to the Astrolabe Bay. We passed a church then a school and the Garagassi Point where Maclay had lived and where his monument stands today. We followed it north and then turned off onto the road to Malamo Point, which the timber trucks take to haul logs to the beach for loading on ships. After about a kilometre, we turned into the elephant coast for loading on ships. After about a kilometre, we turned into the

As the rains increased, so did the flooding. A flooded river is a terrifying sight, as it can sweep downstream everything in its path, including people, rocks, trees, and even vehicles. Black rain clouds far back up in the mountains indicated possible flooding as rain fell in the many streams leading into the Kabeneo River. We expected to return in the early afternoon after walking with Muntua’s friends and retrieving a supply of medicines for our village from the Bng Government Health Centre. As we drove, we convinced ourselves that it wouldn’t rain before we returned. We were demonstrating a cultural belief among the Bongu language)! Our smiling welcome party

...We were demonstrating a cultural belief called wanbel – which means to be in agreement and united in purpose…”

As we parked the truck and got out, an older man, wearing a white shirt and shorts, was the first to walk over to me, with his hand outstretched. We shook hands and I learned his name was Asel Tui, the great-grandson of Tui Orodu, the first Papua New Guinean to befriend Maclay. I gave him a small gift of a watermelon from Buan and then he asked, “Why do you want to hear my story of Maclay?”
I told him, “I would like to hear about
Maclay because I respect how he came to learn from and help the local people, and because I would like to write an article to let more people know about him."

"Good, then I will talk with you," he said. Clearly he wanted others to know his story of Maclay, but at first I didn't know why. What motivated this man to want to share the story of an encounter that happened so long ago?

We sat together on green plastic chairs underneath the rest shelter and he began to share with me the stories that had been passed down through the generations. The following is a translation of our conversation, mostly conducted in Pidgin with some English and Sam thrown in.

"On the day Maclay and Tui met, Tui had been walking along the coastline, looking for fish when he saw Maclay approaching in a small boat.

He thought he was a masalai (spirit). Tui watched him approach and was afraid but he didn’t run away. Maclay rowed closer.

He got out of the boat and showed Tui a piece of red cloth. Tui was intrigued."

(As Asel told me this, he explained the red cloth was perhaps even more unexpected and amazing to the Bongu man than the other items Maclay showed him.)

Asel continued: "A red thing attracts our eye. It is a new colour and it is red. When we go hunting, if we see something red, like the red on a cassowary, we notice it. And it (the cloth) got Tui’s eye, and he thought, ‘I think this is a good thing he is holding. A wanbel man lives here and I must go and receive him’. Then Maclay poured salt in Tui’s hand and, tasting it with his finger, mimed the pleasurable feeling. Then he held the salt out to Tui. Tui went closer and slowly extended his finger to Maclay’s hand and tasted the salt for himself. Then he knew Maclay was not an enemy.

Tui went to tell his family that they had no need to fear Maclay and that he was their friend. He told them, ‘You cannot go and tell another village, no! He belongs to us.’ In our vernacular, we would say, ‘He is our brother, aba damu (my true brother).’"

I had heard various explanations for why Maclay came. Some said he was a spirit or tumbuna, others a scientist gathering information about the people...
...The main reason Maclay came was to show the people that they should not fight each other...”

and environment, and still others, a scout for a large church denomination that was soon to enter the area. “Why do you think he came?” I asked Asel and he agreed that Maclay brought various unfamiliar things, such as axes, watermelons and cucumbers. He had told them the Russian names since they didn’t have names for them in their own language and they adopted those words. For example, for “axe”, “watermelon” and “cucumber”, the local people in Bongu and Sum language groups say sabor, abrus, and jigli. But Asel added, “The main reason Maclay came was to show the people that they should not fight each other. He initiated dialogue with the local people and gave them knowledge and an example of how to live at peace with others. It is important to share this memory of Maclay, for me and for my children.” “Nowadays,” he continued, “family ties are a bit loose. We copy things from the outside and it influences us. I think the attitude and actions of wanbel (or ‘are guji’) in the Bongu language, meaning unity of purpose and thought) will start to die out as our young ones are influenced by the outside.”

Asel told me Maclay demonstrated the attitude of wanbel, and Tui did also. “Many people need to know this story. Because Maclay was wanbel, he didn’t have a problem as he stayed at Garagassi Point or when he walked around to see different villages. He showed through his face and his actions that, ‘I am a wanbel man. Come to me.’ And Tui came,” he said. “Maclay’s actions showed he had wanbel inside of him, and so Tui received him. In the days when Maclay came, the villages fought each other. For example, Buan people were afraid to venture near Bongu. But when Maclay came, his way of wanbel showed how people could live peacefully with each other, and later, Buan people started coming to Bongu to see him. I have to make this story known.”

Asel said he did not want the story to “remain narrow and die out”. “It has to become widely known! If all men are ‘are guji’, all will go well.” After we had talked for another half an hour, my friend Muntua said to me in Sam, “The river is good now, let’s go up.” I realised he was thinking that the black clouds further inland might rain but he didn’t want to use that as a reason to hurry. He was trying to maintain the wanbel agreement that the river would not flood. We politely said goodbye, picked up the medical boxes from the health centre and started driving up to the village of Buan. The clouds back behind Buan were black. I didn’t want to be stranded on this side of the river! Would it rain before we could get up to the river crossing? I saw some drops of rain on the windshield. Was it raining harder inland, and even now causing the flood to come down the river? I happened to voice my nervousness to the violence-prone world in which we live. In the words of Asel Tui, “If all men are ‘are guji’, all will go well.”

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