

Notes on the Culture of the Kuli in the Western Highlands of New-Guinea

By

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I. INTRODUCTION

During our anthropological Nanzan University expedition to New Guinea in 1964 I visited the Mengge and the Kuli people who live in the upper Wahgi River area in the Western Highlands of New-Guinea. A description of some aspects of the Mengge people's culture I published in *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. XXIV, 1, 1965. The Kuli are the neighbours of the Mengge with which they have much in common. The Kuli live to the West of the Mengge and thus nearer to Mt. Hagen. With the Kuli I could stay only for a few days. The Catholic Mission has a station there and an airstrip. The Minj-Hagen governmental road passes Kuli territory close to the edge of the great swamps near the Wahgi River. The Mengge call their former enemies the 'Kuli', but this tribe may call itself by a different name. All the information I present here I received from Kuli natives who freely and friendly imparted their knowledge to me. Special thanks I owe to Dents, a very clever young native lady, who teaches in the Mission school at Kuli.

II. IDEAS AND CUSTOMS

1) The lightning, *komp kenangga*.—The lightning comes down and devours men, trees, etc. (For a native explanation of the lightning see G. Vicedom and H. Tischner, *Die Mbowamb*, vol. 2, pp. 316, ff.). "When the first white men passed through our territory, we thought they were lightning-men who came

with the lightning from the sky. We collected everything they had used, and we ate remains of their food and even their excrements. We were convinced these things were powerful and would give us strength in the battles with our enemies", the Kuli said. The Kuli believe that men are living in the sky.

2) The earthquake, *kon kopo ronom*.—The earth rests with its bottom part on a rock. A man comes, holds the earth and shakes it. That makes the earth quaking.

There exists however also another version of the earthquake. There are men living in the earth. They have shaped the earth like a house. All around and above themselves they have finished the house, but there are still three holes open. Through these holes the men come out of the earth to collect firewood. When coming outside, they touch the earth and that causes the earth to tremble. Vicedom and Tischner (l.c., p. 309) report that a different explanation was given to them by the Hagen people: the earthquake men try to remove the post which supports the earth and prevents its falling down (see also p. 319).

Sometimes these earth-men want to find out whether the entrances to their underworld are still in good order or whether they have decayed. So they pull and push the poles, which close the entrances of house, to and fro. That too is felt as an earthquake. They say: "If the entrances are old, everything will fall down and go to pieces". If the poles are still strong, they leave the entrances as they are. If one has become weak, they will say: "We have to construct another entrance."

3) The rainbow.—With regard to the rainbow the Kuli have the following explanation: "In the Jimmi River area, called *Kovunt* (in Banz *Kovun*), there are huge snakes, a male and a female. The male is red, the female yellow. Their son is green and their daughter blue. When it rains, the whole family comes to see us. They watch over us and want to see how we are getting along. When it becomes dark, they sleep on our ground. In one corner of the garden the men dig a round hole in the ground, about five feet deep. This is done before the rainbow appears, and is left there for a long time. The rain fills the hole with water. The rainbow family goes into this hole and sleeps in it. The rainbow is called *kump köpmö*.

4) Fertility magic.—When the fence of a new garden has been completed and the ditches between the single beds been dug, a man or a woman will tie four bundles of sweet potato ropes together with cordyline leaves for strings. These bundles

are bespelled by a man or a woman and planted in the four corners of the garden. The cordyline leaves are not untied but left as they are. (For reference see my article, "*The Cordyline Plant in the Central Highlands of New Guinea*, in: *Anthropos*, Vol. 56, 1961).

5) Death magic.—When people are on their way home from a big festival banquet, they will sometimes meet a man on the way. This man smells that they have eaten good things. He stares at them and places a stone into the side of one of the returning persons. The man, or woman or child, thus treated, feels terrific pains. That indicates that he or she has been hit with death magic, *kump koimp*. The patient cannot sleep and a *kump koimp mendorum wue*, that is, a "death magic doctor", is called in. This man collects *kundup kont* flowers, which grow on the banks of rivers. He lays the flowers in a wooden plate filled with water. The doctor then places these flowers on that spot of the patient's body where the death-magic stone lies. He applies his mouth to the flowers, and presses with his hands both sides of the sick person's belly. Thus sucking and pressing he removes the stone and lays it on the flowers in the wooden plate. Later the doctor shows this stone to all people who will give him a small pig for his services. This kind of *kump koimp*, death-magic, can be cured, but there are other kinds which lead to certain death.

Sometimes a *kump koimp* man or woman places the stone in the neck or in another part of his or her victim's body from where it cannot be removed, and that will prove fatal. There are people who are able to recognize death-magicians. If they meet such a dangerous person on the road, they quickly give him some good food, lest he apply to them a death-magic stone by means of his stare. The death-magic doctor can also tell who has transmitted the fatal stone. If in former times he pointed at a person of his own clan, people went to kill him or her. Instead of a stone the death-magician uses once in a while a piece of wood. The belief in death-magic influenced the people very deeply and the death-magic doctor too was often responsible for untold misery. He had the power to get rid of any person he did not like.

6) Painting the eyes of pigs.—Before the exchange of pigs the animals are painted red, blue, white or black around their eyes. I was assured that the eyes of pigs are not painted before they are killed. This is different with the Chimbu people.

7) The jaw-bones of pigs.—The jaw-bones of pigs are hung up and the people can see how wealthy the Kuli are. This is probably not the only reason for hanging the jaw-bones up. (Cf. H. Aufenanger, *The Use of Bones in the Central Highlands of New Guinea*, *Anthropos*, Vol. 56, 1961).

8) Child birth.—It is men's work to build a small birth hut in the bush. These huts are called *ei mangge*, "little houses". Only married women are allowed to enter. When the mother with the new-born baby comes out of the hut, the men are allowed to see the hut. The placenta is buried beside the *ei mangge* in a hole in the ground. The mother remains about three weeks in the birth hut and goes then back into her real house. Only then may her husband and her children touch the baby.

9) The creator spirit of the Kuli.—Before foreigners came to Kuli, people said: "One man has made us. This man lives in the ground.. His name is *kenangga wue*. As said above in chapter 1, the term for lightning is *komp kenangga*, "it comes from above"; *wue* means "man". This spirit lives in a very beautiful house. He is not married and has no children. His hair is completely white. He has very large teeth which look like the tusks of boars. When a thunderstorm rages with lightnings and thunderclaps, he comes outside. He wants to see whether we are frightened and fall on the ground. The lightnings are the huge white teeth of Kenangga. They break up the ground. The man who has made us comes in the thunderstorm. When a torrential rain falls, landslides occur. They are caused by the teeth of this man. The great man has made some people who live in the earth, and others who live on the surface of the earth. We are the latter. The Kenangga man is very powerful. The thunder is his loud voice. He is good to us, but sometimes he puts us to the test. In former times we used to speak to the Kenangga man. We also used to say: "*Kenangga wue melumba pora etim*", i.e., "the Kenangga man has made all things". The Kenangga man warns people of dangers, then they have a presentiment, a feeling of danger. Sometimes people with a presentiment say: "The spirit of a dead person helps us".

10) The sun.—The term for sun is *ene*. The sun is a man. People say: "When the sun goes over there (towards the north of the equator), he has intercourse with the *komba* pandanus tree. So this tree bears fruit. When the sun goes over there (towards the south of the equator), he has intercourse with the *em* pandanus tree, and she bears fruit. The sun-man has a road

underneath the ground, on which he walks back at night to the east. The wind comes at night and makes us feel cold, but in the morning the sun comes and gives up warmth and strength to do our work. In battle always that party wins which is supported by the sun. This idea appears also in other parts of the Highlands (see H. Aufenanger, *The Sun in the Life of the Natives in the New Guinea Highlands*, Anthropos, Vol. 57, 1962). The sun is like a brother of ours. He comes quickly to give us strength. The sun helps us to find a thief.

11) The moon.—The moon is the son of an old woman in the east. In former times this woman lived in a house near a huge tree. She fed her son, placed him in a netbag which she hung on the wall in her house. When it grew dark the boy told his mother: "Mother! Open the netbag. I want to go to the latrine". The latrine was in the west some distance away from the house. The boy, who actually was the moon, went far to the west. He went to the latrine and then walked under the ground back to his mother's house. From that time on the moon has been doing this every night.

12) The human soul.—The word for the soul of a living person is *mini*, for that of a dead person *gui mini*. When the body of a dead person is decayed, its *gui mini* is like a butterfly or a blowfly. The souls of the dead eat the *mini* (souls) of the pigs offered to them. The souls of animals are termed *mini* as well. If blowflies alight on cooked meat people get frightened because they might be souls of the dead who could kill them. The firefly is believed to be the eye of a dead person. When a firefly comes into a house people are afraid it might be a ghost who wants to kill them. They will go to a *gui ranggufa wue*, i.e., "a man to whom the ghosts come". This man will go to the house of the respective people. While he at night lies on a platform in a man's or a woman's house, a *gui mini* will arrive. It makes all kinds of noises and wakes up the ghostseer. He then will sit upright and speak to the ghost. The latter will whistle and all the people can hear it. There are also female ghostseers, called *gui ranggufa amp*.

13) A spiritualistic séance, as told by Dents who took part in it.—"My father's brother's wife is a ghostseer. The ghosts wait outside the house until the people in the house have finished their evening meal. Then they whistle: 'We wish to enter the house now. You sit near the fire and feel nice and warm. We sit outside and tremble with cold' (Some ghostseers speak in

the Kuli language and the ghosts answer in the Kuli language). When all the people in the house have finished their meal, and also the pigs (whose sty is also inside the house) have been fed, the fire is extinguished. All the men and women assemble in the sleeping room of the house and all entrances are closed. The sleeping mats are spread on the ground and all lie down. The ghosts whistle again: 'You must put out the fire. You try to see us' (all this whistling is translated into the Kuli language by the ghostseer). The ghostseer, in this special case it was a female) lies on the corner of the house and breathes heavily. That indicates that the ghosts will come now. Then they really do come and whistle very loud: 'Are you keeping well?' They come and touch the people present. Then they start singing in the Kuli language, and we all join in this singing of the ghosts. First come the young ghosts and sing. After them the older ghosts enter the house. The young spirits of the dead caress us and pull our hair and ears. We feel them touch our hands. Their hands are very sharp (probably: rough). I tried to hold one of the hands fast, but the ghost pulled it rapidly back. The old spirits speak with the old people (whistling). After a while the young boys and girls want to sleep, but the young ghosts want to continue the play with us. They whistle loud: 'You must not sleep! We want to continue to play with you'. Time and again they wake us up and throw water on our faces and bodies". Dents added: "The above mentioned *gui ranggufa amp* came very often to our house. As a matter of fact, her visits became unpleasant. We had very good food on our mountain. That is why they always came back. The ghosts who visited us, were the spirits of our own dead only".

14) The ghosts reveal a thief.—(Dents continues her report). "In some houses the ghosts speak in the Kuli language. In one of those houses was a ghostseer, who has died now. In the morning my father and I went to the house of this woman. She could summon the ghosts even during the day. We were together five persons: the seer, her husband, their about fourteen years old son, my father and myself. The reason why we came to consult the ghostseer was this: time and again my father's things were stolen, marsupial fur, bark strings, two steel axes, a small knife, two men's dresses, etc. We tried to find out who the thief was. It was cold, and I sat near the fire. The seer gave me bananas and cooked potatoes to eat. She sat with us in the cooking room. Then we heard a man, the seer's deceased

brother, going through the woman's room into the room for the pigs. He spoke with a loud voice in the Kuli language. He remained in the pigs-room and said to my father and to me: 'Father! You and my sister have come early this morning. What kind of troubles do you have?' Now my father answered: 'A thief is always stealing my things. I am very upset about it. Tell me now without any beating about the bush: who is the culprit?' Now the dead man answered: 'Father, I feel sorry for you. Your nephew always steals your things. I have seen it'. Then my father said: '*Na nim numan mondunt*', i.e., 'I thank you. I shall take him to task'. The ghost added: 'Do that, that he may return your things to you. Go back home now!' My father really did take his nephew to task who however denied the theft. He said: 'The ghost has told lies'. My father insisted on having his things returned to him, but the thief never gave them back. My father gave the female seer a mother-of-pear shell, a very expensive object."

15) Sacrifices to the dead.—When somebody is very sick, the *gui ranggufa wue*, the ghostseer, tells the people: "You must kill a pig". Before this pig is killed, the slaughterer, usually the father of the family, lifts up the wooden club and says: "All my ancestors, my brothers and sisters! I give you this pig. Eat it and help my sick wife (or child, etc.)!" Then he clubs the animal to death, apparently in a cemetery. The whole pig is steamed in an earth-oven and then carried home. Usually the people eat in the evening only a part of the pork. The remaining meat is divided up and eaten the next morning.

16) Killing the spirits of the dead.—If somebody has killed a butterfly, he feels sorry and says: "I have lost my thinking and so I killed this butterfly. Perhaps it was a *gui mini* (the soul of a dead person). If it really was the soul of a deceased person, he has really killed it. It is dead. Of course there are also butterflies which are nothing but insects.

17) The soul of a dead mother takes revenge and is reconciled.—If an old mother is neglected by her son, she will threaten him: "When I have died, I shall not watch over you. I shall not cause your vegetables grow well". When after a while the old mother has died, there will be much sickness in her son's family. The pigs get skinny and die, the vegetables wither away, etc. Then the man knows for sure: "My dead mother is the cause of all this trouble". He will kill a pig for his dead mother in order to pacify her.

18) Reburial of the dead.—The Kuli used to take the body of a deceased person out of the grave. The flesh was cut from the bones and put into a niche-grave. The bones were for this purpose placed on the sheath of a *waiming* palm tree and thus carried to the new grave. The flesh of the corpse was put back into the first grave.

19) The dead help find a casowary bird for the big festival.—When the hunters are looking for a casowary bird in the bush, in order to use it for the pig festival, suddenly one of them will shout: "I have got something in my eye!" Upon that a wild casowary will come and sit beside the man. When the hunters see that, they will say: "The spirits of our dead have helped us". The man to whom the casowary comes is an idiot. With the Mengge, the neighbours of the Kuli, only idiots or old men may kill a casowary (see my article, *Details of the Mengge People's Culture in the Highlands of New Guinea*, Asian Folklore Studies, Vol. XXIV, 1, 1965). He is not married. He carries the living casowary bird on his shoulders home, walking in the midst of the singing hunters. In the evening the men slaughter a small pig and give it to the spirits of the dead who helped them to find the casowary. The hunters can shoot a casowary they might contract leprosy. (For lepers a little hut wits, cannot walk properly and have an unstable gait, can find the casowary. Normal hunters are afraid that by carrying a casowary they might contract leprosy. (For lepers a little hut was built in the bush. Relatives brought the afflicted person food until he died. His corpse was buried in the common cemetery.) I was not able to find out why the carrying of the casowary bird should bring about the dreadful leprosy, nor could my informants tell me why only halfwits had the power to attract wild casowaries. There are of course unbelievable parts in this report which nevertheless I write down as I heard it.

III. CONCLUSIONS

The Kuli people believe in the human soul's life after death. The souls of the dead have close contact with the living. They understand and speak the Kuli language just as they did in their lifetime. They can be very revengeful. They cause sickness of their relatives and of the animals of the latter. Through the influence of the dead the vegetables do not grow. But they can also be very helpful by watching over the living. They know

things unknown to the living. They can be summoned by certain people and reveal secret things and doings. They can touch and caress the living. They sing songs and play. They can be placated by sacrifices of pigs. They alight on cooked meat to take part in the meal. They can be killed when they appear in the shape of butterflies and blowflies. They can appear in the form of insects. Their eyes are seen as fireflies. They indicate their presence by throwing small particles into the eyes of hunters. They like to use halfwitted people for their media. They warn their relatives of imminent danger by giving them presentiments.

Peculiar are the Kuli people's ideas about the lightning which are the creator spirit's teeth and about the thunder which is the creator's voice. Although the creator is believed to have some very good qualities, he is presented as a very anthropomorphic being.

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