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# MOBUL

## THE ANCESTOR OF THE KAMBOT PEOPLE IN NORTH-EAST NEW GUINEA

ALANO
edition herodot

is perhaps the best exhibit, demonstrating the significant varieties in stylistic elements as found in the various villages of that region.

This *tambaran* house was built in the sixties at the behest of the government. For this supra regional community house all the larger villages were ordered to contribute one carved post. So this "one village, one post", contribution came from all over the Sepik river system: the villages of the lower Sepik were in it as well as those from the middle Sepik, from Moim upriver as far as Timbunke, Kamanebit and to the upper Sepik. Thus it was possible in 1967 to see gathered together under one roof the stylistic elements of the Sepik river system from the coast, Pora Pora, Keram and Yuat river as far as Ambunti. It is of course quite possible to distinguish the stylistic elements in the villages of the right river bank tributaries from those in the villages on the Sepik itself and of the villages on the left bank; and, striking out further a field, the villages on the lower Ramu, which vary again from those in the villages of the Ramu and Sepik coastal regions. That this calls for more differentiated local designations. For instance, for the lower Sepik region: the Murik style, the Mburu or Bosngun style, the Pora Pora style and the Keram style.

The artistic style in the more important and influential villages on the banks of the rivers just mentioned and on the coast is more noteworthy. At all times there have been famous artists in all villages of this region.



# II. Kambot on the Keram

This book is mainly about the village Kambot on the Keram river. At one time Kambot was the most powerful and influential village on the Keram. In German times the Keram was called Töpferfluß. Situated on the left bank of the river, the inhabitants of Kambot are proud and strong.

But these people are not so tall or so strongly built as, for instance, the people of Imboando on the right bank of the Sepik, north-east of the Keram. The Kambot people are short, even stocky, and their skin is darker. Only Yame Polikap, the old *Luluai* of Kambot, was an exception. He was tall with remarkably light brown skin almost the colour of clay (9). Because of his calm disposition he was a model for all.

Another significant characteristic of the Kambot people is that they are polite and reserved towards strangers. Newcomers to Kambot notice this. Whereas the villagers in Murik and Bien on the Sepik rush to the river bank to greet strangers arriving by canoe the Kambot people show no curiosity whatsoever. They prefer to keep to themselves. However, they welcome people who pass through their village. The Kambot people have been living for ages in the only large village on the Keram, following their own isolated lifestyle, and from this vantage point dominate the whole river region.

There is only one other village down river, Chimundo, which is of some importance. Up river towards the Ramu there are a few smaller villages. On Frank Tieslers map (10) which shows intertribal relations on the north coast of New Guinea in the area of the Schouten Islands, Kambot 2 is situated north-east of Kambot 1, which puts it right in the middle of the impenetrable swamp land between the Bien creek (*baret*) and the Keram. This could mean that the Kambot people migrated through the Pora Pora region to the Keram, much the same as did the people of An-

ang, who, in more recent times relinquished their settlement of Pora Pora II, south of Imberop and settled on the right bank of the Keram south of Kambot (11). But Kambot 2 seems not to have existed (see map). The people possibly came from the south. The old village of Kambot on the Keram is some distance up river. They still have their gardens there. The old village was abandoned when a sand bar formed in the river and grew so big that they were unable to wash their sago there or bring their canoes ashore.

Up to this very day the Kambot people go their own way. In this way they show their independence. But they are of rather calm disposition and do not like confrontation. They cultivate their traditions in their own way and their artists have developed their own artistic style. They are still outstanding wood carvers. Generally speaking the Kambot people are rather peace loving. They observe their own traditions and have developed their own artistic style. They are renowned wood carvers to this day.

Formerly, it was easy to lead this kind of life in splendid isolation, protected from foreign influences. This was possible mainly because of the distance between Kambot and the big world on the great river. Angoram was still an insignificant place, and, after all, to travel down to the great river by canoe would have taken a full day.

And even from Marienberg to Kambot in the fifties it took a full day in the "Theresia", a small motor launch powered by an 28 hp. diesel engine. Marienberg is the first major settlement on the left bank of the Sepik as you travel upstream from its mouth. But in those days, in the early fifties, if you wanted to go from Marienberg to Kambot, you had to leave at dawn, travel upstream as far as Angoram, offload mail and other cargo, take on whatever cargo there was and continue upstream until you came to Magendo 3, which is south-east of the mouth of the Keram on the other side. You entered the mouth of the Keram, 60 to 80 m wide, and followed the meandering river until you reached Kambot at sunset.



The waters of the Keram are dark and muddy, the river having its source on the northern slopes of the Schrader Range. In its lower course it meanders through endless swamplands, sago swamps, broken here and there by larger patches of *kunai* grass. Whereas during the wet season the lower Keram has a depth from 10 to 15 m, in the dry season it is barely 2 to 3 m. Sandbars abound and come to the surface, making travel by motorboat a hazardous affair. With the monotonous chugging of the engine and the heat lulling you into drowsiness, there is nothing of interest as the boat follows the endless bends in the river. There is no sign of human settlements, no village for miles and miles, just a few shelters here and there built on solid ground by roaming hunters.

Chimundo (or Chuimundul) is the first and only village you see on your journey to Kambot, its half way mark. Nowadays the same journey can be made in a speed boat powered by a 50 hp. outboard motor traveling at 15 - 20 mph. From the mouth of the Keram to Chimundo it takes just one hour and from Chimundo to Kambot a little more than 30 minutes. Although not a mission station with a resident priest, Chimundo has a church and, as a half way stop, it becoming more and more important. There are a few houses, in particular a large men's house on the opposite bank.

Twenty minutes by boat south of Kambot on the left bank lies Yip. It is not a native village but founded by the masters of Angoram (12).

The Keram meanders with zigzag bends practically all along its course. There are 15 bends (*'poin'* in Melanesian Pidgin) from its mouth to Chimundo. These bends are hardly indicated on a 1:1,000,000 scale map of New Guinea but another map, sheet Bogia, with a scale of 1:250,000 has many more of these bends. In recent times, in order to shorten the distance some of the bends have been cut through. A toll must be paid to use these channels as they tend to get clogged by drift wood and constant work and surveillance is needed to keep them open.

Today Marienberg and Kambot have an airstrip and thus there is speedy connection to the outside world. But up to quite recent times the Kambot people, being surrounded by swamps and thus protected from enemies, could follow their own traditions undisturbed. The only link with the world in their hinterland was a *baret*, a creek which could take them to Loi on the left side of the Keram. This channel could be negotiated by canoe, but it had to be kept open all the time as water plants kept choking it. The last I heard about it was that it has become completely choked with salvinia auriculata (Hydropterides) resulting in a general extinction of fish and other things living in its waters. A Brasilian-bred beetle which feeds execlusively on salvinia has in the meantime, eaten away all the vegetation <1986/1987>. Today <1990> a poisonous hyacinth (Galtonia candicans) keeps choking the *barets*.

Formerly the people of Kambot maintained no contact whatsoever with those living on the banks of the Sepik, not to mention those living in the Maprik area in the north west of the Sepik. It is most likely that they were completely unaware of their existence.

There was an American expedition to the Keram river in 1928/29. For the members of this expedition Kambot was the largest and most interesting village they had ever visited in New Guinea. Crane, who led the expedition, was the son of an American millionaire and with some of his friends he had crossed the Pacific in his sailing yacht, entered the Sepik and reached Marienberg. Francis Kirschbaum (13), rector of Marienberg mission, took the Americans upstream as far as Kambot. Kambot at that time had about 50 houses built close together and facing the river bank at right angles. All houses stood on piles about 3 to 4 m. above the ground, the houses themselves being quite impressive in space and height. The platform, or the first floor in front of each house was where the people sat as they still do today, for chatting, eating or just lounging. About half of the houses in Kambot had crocodile gables. The projected ridge was in the shape of a crocodile's upper jaw. Apart from these there were four unusually large *tambaran* houses, called club-houses by the Americans. They were very large indeed, about 60 m long. The gables



showed careful workmanship. The Americans said that they were the best they had ever seen in New Guinea. Even Francis Kirschbaum came to the conclusion that he had never seen a better constructed gable. The point of the gable represented the snout (nose) of the crocodile. It rose about 20 m above the ground, and the projecting part of the ridge gable was about 14 m when measured from the main body of the roof.

One has to keep in mind that to the people the whole projection was like the wide open jaw of a crocodile. The bottom side of the upper jaw was the roof of the mouth of the crocodile and this provided space for a painting. They decorated this space with an enormously large human figure surrounded by smaller human figures (14).

Fig. 2.: The last big men's house in Kambot about 1970

We learn from Ignaz Schwab (15) that in 1936 Kambot had approximately 400 inhabitants. More recent statistics are not available. The people live as they always did, in houses raised on piles and with gables facing the river. It would be wrong however to call Kambot a typical water village, as for instance Kambramba on an arm of the Sepik west of Kambot.

It is during October and from March to April that the people of Kambot become water people. Then the Keram is in flood and rises from three to four and more metres above its normal level. Then the people must go from house to house by canoe. But this is necessary only for a few weeks every year. In the dry season no canoe is needed to wander about in the village. The people can walk over smooth paths and smooth clay ground without getting their feet wet. Not one single stalk of grass is to be found on the surface of the ground. They prefer it this way because they are afraid of snakes and other vermin which could hide in the grass.

The mission station (16) situated on higher ground is also built on stilts for practical reasons. Even when the Keram is in flood it cannot be reached. On the other hand when the water is high, canoes can berth within three metres of it. The church itself is not on stilts but has a cement foundation. The builders felt it sufficed to erect it on somewhat elevated ground. The upper part of the village is anyway on dry ground but the area was not big enough, for all the villagers prefer to build their houses about 50 metres from the river. From there it is easier to reach the place where their canoes are berthed and tied with *kanda* (rattan).

To this day there are *tambaran* houses on the rivers edge, their posts standing in up to two metres of water when the river is in flood. The projecting gables of these houses, like open crocodile jaws, lend a distinctive note to Kambots waterfront.

Between 1948 and 1950 Henry Lehner saw three *tambaran* houses in Kambot. Of these the one with the gable painting, standing in the most



prominent position, was the largest. The smaller of such houses stood at some distance from the water.

It is believed that about 1930 Kambot had four of these men's houses. In 1937 Ignaz Schwab wrote about one very large *tambaran* house 54 m long and 10 m wide, with the floor 7 m above the ground (16). A wooden staircase or ladder gave access to the interior by means of a hole in the middle of the floor of the first storey. This ladder is placed in the same position even today - not at the side, nor on the outside as one might suppose. The ladder consists of three strong poles held together by about 30 rungs, saplings as thick as a man's arm, tied to the poles with rattan. The rungs are wide enough to allow three men to go up to the meeting room side by side. A European, however, would find it somewhat difficult to go upstairs on this kind of a ladder (17).

We may assume that this magnificent men's house was formerly the actual spirit house of the place, where the men would hold their more important meetings (18).

At other times, it would seem, the men stayed in the various houses, divided according to age clans. This could explain the fact why even today we have several men's houses in Kambot, or *haus boi* as they call them in Melanesian Pidgin.

Indeed, there is nothing extraordinary in the way the male inhabitants of Kambot conduct themselves. In our villages in Germany we have our inns frequented by men and younger males who, in a spirit of comradeship, drop in and sit around their 'reserved' tables.

Today, even for the local people, the *tambaran* house has lost its significance. It is a *haus boi* or a club house, where the men retire if they want to be by themselves. Here they gossip, sleep, carve their figures or make their *pangal* paintings on their "canvas", strips of the sheath of the sago palm frond. In Kambot they also use the room under the house for their carving and painting. It is also the place for the *garamut*, the slit gong. The whole space under the house is used as living quarters, because it is high and airy.

Other men's houses, for instance those at the Mburu, are not as high above the ground, perhaps about 1,50 m. It is too low for the men to sit there, and so they do not use it (19).

Formerly, the outer walls of the houses including those of the *tambaran* house were decorated with *pangal* paintings. This aspect too has become a thing of the past. Instead of paintings, the people pin colourful advertisements from illustrated papers on their walls.

Up to quite recently the big *tambaran* house had a gable painting representing the ancestral spirit of the Kambot people with his wives. Today there is no men's house or gable painting in Kambot. (cf. J. Huppertz 1986,81, Einige Formen des Totenkultes ..., Some forms of the death cult) (19a) In this way his memory is perpetuated. But not all the spirits with whom the people in Kambot and on the Sepik live were represented in paintings or carved figures. We will discuss this again in the following chapter.

Fig. 3.: Market-day in Kambot. Right next to John Kovač Simon Nyowep



# III. Some Spirit Beings in West-Sepik, East-Sepik and Madang in Papua New Guinea

## 1. The "supreme being"

In their relations with the spirit world the people of north-east New Guinea are far superior to us. For them there is no difference between living beings and dead material, everything is or can be animated.

That is why it is so difficult for us to gain access to their spiritual world. Moreover, with the arrival of the Europeans and the influence of their completely different cultural background, a new common language gained ground in New Guinea. Although a trade language, it facilitated communication in a country with more than 700 languages and dialects. But it also caused considerable impoverishment in concepts. This is particularly true when it comes to name spiritual beings or spirits which the white man, for example, like to refer to under the common name of *tambaran*. This word should be considered abstractly like the word spirit which covers all spirit creatures not known to us by name.

The word *tambaran* is said to have come from the Gazelle Peninsula (New Britain) and probably came to the New Guinea mainland with the Melanesian Pidgin during colonial times. Some wooden carvings which were kept in *tambaran* houses were actually dubbed *tambaran* by us (20). That is misleading, because the *tambaran* is never represented in native art, just like the "supreme being" never is. As regards the wooden figures mentioned a while ago, these had only one purpose, to remind the village people of some important events in the past rarely disclosed to us.

George Höltker, for example, only enumerates the names of the figures which were still in the spirit house of Dongun and Bosngun (Bosmun) in 1937. Because despite some questioning he could learn nothing about the sculptures nor about the masks which perhaps represented famous ancestors or even their relatives (19). Thus we see that it is often impos-