Chapter 7

Unsated sago appetites

Yakub's house is 2 metres off the ground, its narrow front porch with overhanging sago roof only accessible via a steep ladder. These are not the *kum* steps of Markus's house but a vertical ladder. The slatted floor is made from spindly lengths of black palm. Walking across the floor was a delicate exercise. I initially tried to ensure that my bodyweight was evenly balanced over flattened feet, but quickly learned of the resilient nature of black palm, and the way that it springs back beneath the foot. The sago leaf roof was sooty black, cured by hearth smoke against torrential rain. Yakub's entry room had no furniture. A calendar issued by the local Ok Tedi copper mine was nailed to the wall, and the coloured photographs depicted the livelihoods of Yonggom-speaking people who shared the same language as Muyu, and whose land was contiguous. Several rosary beads were suspended next to the calendar. Curious about a photograph on the calendar, I leaned closer and noticed the word '*duka*', meaning grief or sorrow, written next to a date. I asked Yakub whether the date represented the anniversary of someone's death. Yes, he said, his wife Karolina's mother had died on 25 July because of her yearning for sago.

Yakub related the circumstances of his mother-in-law's death directly to the deprivations of East Awin, particularly the absence of sago. Yakub, with Karolina and her mother, and their children and grandchildren, had travelled into the rainforest on the boundary of the East Awin settlement to cut firewood and harvest their peanut crop. The old woman had returned in daylight so that she could see the path more easily. Insisting on carrying one of her great-grandchildren so that she would not return empty-handed, Karolina's mother had tripped and fallen during the journey home. She had died immediately. Yakub explained: 'She did not want to eat bananas or sweet potatoes, only sago. Every day she would ask if there was any sago. She died from hunger, and yearning for sago.' The old woman's fall and sudden death was explained by Yakub according to a logic of yearning. Muyu from the south ate sago at every meal, they even ate sago by itself. If a Muyu person at East Awin yearned to return to their homeland but could not, their death may be induced by their yearning to eat sago.

The death of Yakub's mother-in-law occurred during the island-wide drought of 1997.[1] The drought profoundly affected refugees at East Awin because there was no naturally occurring sago growing within the camp boundary, and in the event of fire most food plants will burn except sago pith which is insulated by the thick bark of the tree's trunk. A woman in the neighbouring camp composed

'The sago song' to describe the circumstances of Karolina's mother's death. Her paraphrased version follows:

> Thinking of [my] region the sago *dusun*
> With yearning recalling in my heart
> Thinking of the sago gardens in [my] region
> Here there is hunger there is no sago
> Fruits and vegetables are just for the time being
> When the hot season comes then food becomes scarce
> Because of the heat, scorched
> Gradually our strength fades we perish from hunger
> Searching for food entering [the forest] to look for sago
> Anywhere and everywhere in the forest
> Until there are some who fall sick in the forest
> Taken back to the village and die
> Hungry searching for sago travelling far
> Old people have no energy fall sick, die
> In the last dry season we experienced one mother in our village die.

Drought conditions revealed Muyu vulnerability in a place where there was no perennial sago, and the gathering of forest food was restricted. Vegetable plants are not perennial and perish quickly in a dry season. 'The sago song' speaks of states of hunger and survival affected by the absence and presence of sago. During the drought people travelled deep into the rainforest beyond the East Awin boundary, forced to search for sago randomly. Their intimacy with their own *dusun* would never require this. At East Awin however, landowners' proscription of food gathering beyond the camp boundary had rendered the territory foreign. Several times Yakub posed the rhetorical question to me: 'What is the use of being thirsty and hungry in another place in a time of drought?' Although the drought was island-wide, refugees at East Awin recalled their abundant *dusun* exactly as they had left it some 14 years earlier.

During the drought, refugees were forced to virtually abandon their camps in order to follow landholders beyond the East Awin boundary to harvest wild sago. The right to harvest this sago was purchased from the landholders for a price of 50 kina per tree, or 100 kina for a large tree. Individual families purchased trees, and some did so in groups. The Wamena Baptist Church spent 450 kina of church funds to purchase nine sago trees. At Atkamba, a community leader negotiated an arrangement with landholders to allow refugees to fell and mattock sago trees, and then divide the processed sago pith with the tree's owner as compensation. In this way, refugees were able to exchange their labour for sago.

Muyu define themselves using the designation 'sago person'. Many northerners had also relied on sago as a staple food, and although rice competed with sago

in coastal towns, adults retained memories of processing sago as children in their parents' village. Sago is a food-starch cultivated from the thick-set trunk of the sago palm which grows to 10 metres in low-lying swamp areas.[2] At maturity, the trunk of the tree becomes engorged with starchy pith which is protected by a 5-centimetre covering of hard bark. After the trunk is felled, the bark is split so that the starch can be extracted, and through a process of kneading, rinsing and straining, the starch forms sediment separated from the woody fibres. This starch can be processed to resemble a kind of flour. A period without sago was conceived as famine or hunger in spite of relative abundance of other crops such as cassava and sweet potato. This is the case for other people and staple foods in the PNG highlands.[3] (In contrast, the Foi of the Hegeso area call their Mubi valley place 'the empty place' or 'the dry place' because there is only sago and no animals for hunting.[4])

In their flight from the homeland, Muyu carried only meagre essentials like sago mattocks. A sago mattock allowed cultivation of a foodstuff that guaranteed their survival. But few Muyu planted sago at East Awin, despite the offer of free seedlings. Planting a sago tree would serve to locate West Papuans at East Awin in PNG. Muyu particularly did not want to imagine themselves still living at East Awin, still living 'outside' their own *dusun* at the time of harvest 10 years on. Muyu resisted cultivating East Awin as a longer-term place of residence. I heard this rationale often: 'On arrival to East Awin we did not plant sago. We wanted independence quickly. We did not want to be here long.'

Markus, who had lived away from his *dusun* since training as a nurse, had planted sago wherever he was. His own experience had taught him to view *dusun* in terms of practice rather than territory: 'Wherever one lives constitutes a *dusun*—wherever one lives or shifts one must plant sago as a sign they are living in that place.' The activity of planting sago expressed Markus's humanity or his Muyuness, regardless of his location. Markus and Yakub, both in their early fifties and employed as health workers at East Awin, had planted sago on their arrival in 1987. Their decision was not simply about consuming the sago pith as flour, it was also about utilising sago palm leaves as roofing material. Their sturdy roofs indicated that they had access to sago palm leaf, but regular cutting of sago leaf for roofing material slowed the production of pith. Such was the importance of roofing material in tropical weather: a dry house was worth at least as much as a sated appetite.

The essential difference between cultivated and wild sago species is that the latter yields less pith, and its leaf is much more porous as thatch. According to Markus, a sago tree's yield may be deduced from signs: the palm leaf's broadrib will be open and bowed toward the ground, and the trunk's girth will be wide. Another test is to chip away a small piece of bark exposing sago pith, then chew the pith and spit onto a leaf. White indicates a high yield. It is commonly

understood that an uncultivated tree will produce less flour. A sago palm ought to be harvested before flowering because the flowering process, which occurs after about 12 years, consumes the tree's edible starch. The sight of a sago palm left to flower, its starch wasted, is said to evoke memories of deceased relatives who once prepared sago for the person as a child, or those too old to harvest the flowering palm.[5] The flowering sago palm as a metaphor for barrenness appeared in people's dreams. Where a hunter dreamed of a sago tree that had already flowered it meant that he would snare an old pig with tusks. To dream of a sago tree yet to flower was to catch a young succulent pig.

In the southern Muyu region, the principal sago species used for flour and roofing material grows from shoots that spread from a central plant or are transplanted from elsewhere. This 'cultivated' species cannot be propagated from the seed of fruit that falls to the ground and subsequently consumed by cassowary, or taken by bats and other birds. Cultivated sago is said to mature in three to five years, and has thorns or spikes that must be stripped carefully before the tree is felled. Its leaf is considered the most durable thatching material for roofs, lasting up to six years. By contrast, 'wild' sago refers to naturally growing sago trees that sucker to form extensive groves, or spread via birds and on the water. Wild sago is slow growing and matures after 10 to 12 years. There were no naturally occurring sago stands within the settlement boundary at East Awin, and some people planted local wild sago from suckers gathered by government employees and distributed in 1987. In conversation about the benefits of cultivated versus wild sago, Muyu questioned why inferior sago yielding less flour and porous leaves had been distributed.

This inferior variety also grows in some Muyu regions, but its palm leaf lasts between six months and two years depending on exposure to hearth smoke, and is considered too porous for thatch. While Muyu preferred cooking hearths to be separated from the main living area to avoid smoke inhalation, at East Awin they had been repositioned to the centre of the house for the purposes of curing thatch. It was not even possible to purchase sago palm leaf from Muyu who had planted their own trees at East Awin, because they had sufficient for their own immediate needs only, and were mindful of the pith's harvest. Dani, who were accustomed to thatching roofs from dried grass, experimented with tall, coarse grass. But the grass in the highlands is short, fine and strong—more resilient than the grass at East Awin which decomposes in the wet. Others experimented with the leaves of the (non-fruiting) forest coconut palm and found that it became porous after several months only. Some purchased palm leaf harvested from forest sago, from the landholders. One parcel or *bungkus* comprised seven sheets of palm thatch, and 30 parcels were sufficient to roof a medium-sized house and kitchen. A single parcel cost the equivalent of 1.5 kilograms of rice, or 5 kina.

Refugees expressed sympathy for the landholders' claim for compensation against the settlement. They claimed 1500 kina per landholder family for every year of occupation since 1987. This amount compensated the landholders for loss of tallwood/hardwood trees, cassowaries, pigs and birds. Trees like sago that had been planted by refugees were considered to be a legacy to the landholders, but the question of ownership was ambiguous. Some refugees claimed that landholders had prohibited them from planting sago outside the East Awin boundary, and discouraged planting sago inside the boundary. This response is congruous with a Muyu worldview that special permission is required to plant sago on another person's land, because sago trees perpetually produce suckers that colonise the area of the initial planting, producing an enduring and ambiguous relationship between the planter and the other person's land.[6] To gather wild sago outside the East Awin boundary was also prohibited unless permission from the landholders was sought, and compensation paid. While hunting and fishing was often done without permission, cultivating sago was in a different realm. Markus explained the difference between hunting game or fishing, and gathering sago:

> If you want to look for fish [they] don't gather in the one place. You must make an effort to find and catch fish. A pig, too, roams about, it does not have a particular place. The hunter of the pig takes a risk he may be gored. A sago tree's location is known. It is located in someone's *dusun*. So permission must be granted and payment made.

Markus's point is that the emplaced nature of sago—inside the boundary of certain people's *dusun*—and the deliberation of harvesting, differentiates it from hunting which is entirely reliant on the individual hunter's dexterity.

The sorts of trees which refugees were prohibited from planting included long-living or thick-barked trees: durian, rambutan, mango, citrus, breadfruit, coconut, *ketapang*, pandanus, *soursop* and sago. Muyu stressed that when they returned to their own region, these trees would be left behind for the landholders. But it was said that the descendants of the planter could inherit certain rights to the tree:

> We don't want to take any of this home, we will just leave it here. Although I have planted this sago garden here, if I should return home, they [the landholders] may have it. But if my descendants come here to see what I have left behind, they may have a part [rights of use]. According to the past, whoever planted sago was the owner.

Planting long-living trees and opening new gardens was countered by the knowledge that one's *dusun* lay fecund, wasted. There was a sense of futility about gardening because (imminent) repatriation would render gardening effort at East Awin fruitless. A Biak woman recalled her father's lamentation about

such futility. Returning from his garden, exhausted by the effort of clearing tall trees and forest undergrowth, he would sing in Biak in a mournful tone that reduced his granddaughter to frightened tears:

> So weary because I am not working my garden there but here
> How has it happened that I am gardening in another person's land whereas I have a garden there
> How has it happened that I am so weary here making a large garden
> I live in this forest here, only gardening
> I ought to be living on the coast: seeing the beach, going fishing.

The hardship of clearing dense forest, and planting new seedlings that would not bear for several years, contrasted with the memory of their own mature yielding gardens and *dusun*. Ruminating on the abundance of their previous *dusun* caused people to fret about the austerity of their lives at East Awin. Muyu's customary practice of shifting cultivation was severely restricted. Shifting cultivation is sustainable in extensive forest areas with small populations, but not in a place like East Awin where several thousand people were relocated to a restricted area within a few months. Poor soil also hindered Muyu people's cultivation practice. Agronomist surveys of the East Awin site proposed that the area did not have enough land available for shifting cultivation as it was practised in surrounding systems, and that weathering from massive rainfall (about 4 metres annually) had produced acid clay soils with low to moderate capability for tree crops and improved pastures, and low capability for arable crops.[7] While the low fertility of the soil was unable to support more than one agricultural crop, opening new gardens became problematic because of restricted space.

In the gardens at East Awin, at least two crops were planted before they were fallowed to become low woody regrowth. In surrounding areas, there was only one planting before fallowing. Fallow periods of 12 months at East Awin were considerably shorter than the period of 15 years observed in surrounding areas.[8] In their own region and in the border camps, most Muyu had relied on sago for energy. In its absence at East Awin, green banana had become the main carbohydrate staple. Bananas were categorised as a wasteful crop. Banana productivity is high in the first year and declines rapidly compared with peanuts and sweet potatoes planted in rotation, or other vegetables that can be planted in old gardens. Other crops at East Awin included taro, pumpkin, snake beans, cucumbers, *kangkung* (leafy green), *aibika*, lowland *pit pit*, corn, pawpaw, pineapples and up to 20 varieties of banana. From 2003, rice cultivation increased after several mills were installed at East Awin by the Montfort Catholic Church.

Many Muyu at East Awin had previously been dependent on subsistence strategies that required access to uncultivated rainforest tracts: the gathering of uncultivated plants (seasonal fruits, berries, nuts, flower buds and palm hearts),

the hunting of edible insects and small animals (grubs, larvae, ants, spiders, grasshoppers, frogs, fish, prawns, lizards and birds), as well as wild pig, cassowary, cuscus, iguana, snakes and bats.[9] While bananas and sago were said to leave people feeling hungry for meat and fat, the rainforest was described as a place of abundance where a person's hunger can be satisfied.[10] At East Awin, game was quickly hunted to the point of extinction and hunting beyond the boundary required permission from the landholders. The extent to which this operated as a normative rule but was not followed in practice is difficult to judge.

Some refugees tried to negotiate rights of use to *dusun* beyond the East Awin boundary. In doing so they were trying to restore practices of everyday life such as sago cultivation and hunting. A group of Muyu purchased 'right of use' to an area of Awin land boasting a sago garden and *ketapang* trees located on the edge of the settlement near the Fly River. The group comprised members of several clans originating from the same or neighbouring villages in Irian Jaya. They had processed sago several times on the land without prior permission before the landholder claimed compensation. Each group member had then contributed pigs and cash sufficient to compensate the owner for past damage, and for ongoing rights of use to the land. The permission was categorised as 'unrestricted' and included the right to lay hunting snares and *tubah* fishing bombs. Subsequently, however, another group of landholders claimed compensation rights to the same area as well as 50 kina for each sago palm felled in the future.

Given the lengths that people went to in order to gain access to sago at East Awin, it is not surprising that women made efforts to simulate the flour. At a performance celebrating the anniversary of the patron saint of the Catholic Church at Yogi camp, some members of the congregation performed a version of the Muyu dance called *ketmom*. The dancing was a procession of vignettes, one of which comprised a man holding a cassava grater made from a flattened milk powder tin punched with nail holes. His sister performed the wringing action necessary to squeeze the sediment from the grated cassava pulp. The father of the brother–sister duo interpreted the cassava vignette: 'It is about wringing cassava. We live at East Awin where cassava has become our staple food, replacing sago.' It is in relation to the other vignettes that 'grating cassava' can be understood as quotidian. These vignettes included: 'combing hair', 'sweeping' and 'planting paddy'.

Photo 3. Grating cassava to become like sago.

Photo: Diana Glazebrook.

'The cassava song', in the Yonggom language, was performed during the visit of the Diocese's Catholic Bishop to East Awin to officiate in confirmation ceremonies in August 1999:

> Every day I am fed up with eating cassava living at East Awin, hungry, hungry
> We want to return home to the place where we eat sago
> Those of us here want to return soon to our place
> The afternoon bird has called therefore we want to return to our place
> Here is not our place of origin, our place of origin is where the sun goes down.

Consumption of cassava marks Muyu displacement in the song. Perhaps because of its abundance, growing like a weed in everyone's garden at East Awin, people's appetites are unsated by it. In the lyrics, cassava is not mentioned as a food simulated to resemble sago, but it is in the subsequent line 'we want to return home to the place where we eat sago' that the connection between cassava and sago is explicit. The song uses two images popular in Muyu songs of yearning at East Awin: the setting sun and the call of the afternoon bird. Both reference the Muyu region.

Cassava is a perennial woody shrub that has enlarged roots filled with starch.[11] The roots can be boiled and eaten like potatoes, or can be grated, kneaded and rinsed to extract starch which can be processed as a sort of flour. The processing of cassava to imitate sago is contained in the following three expressions: '[cassava] changed to become sago', 'I want to eat the same as there' and 'to resemble the taste of *papeda* because I usually eat this'. Imitation is most obviously contained in 'cassava-sago' which is the term used to refer to grated cassava. At East Awin, people processed cassava to make flour for an unleavened bread which they called baked sago, and to make *papeda*. *Papeda* is a stiff, opaque jelly that is flavoured with meat or fish juices. *Papeda* made from cassava flour was considered to be an inferior imitation of authentic *papeda* made from sago flour. Among Muyu, the fact that sago cannot be simulated may be related to its place in Muyu cultural and social life, as well as its taste and appearance. The activity of sago cultivation involves expedition: journeying together to the tree's site, judiciously selecting a tree, felling the tree, collectively processing pith to become flour (mattocking, rinsing, squeezing), wrapping the flour and carrying it home in procession.

Theory of simulation is revealing in a situation of displacement where absent materials or substances like staple foods become the object of simulation attempts. Baudrillard constructs the categories of simulation and dissimulation, proposing that simulation is not a thing of pretence but something that unsettles the difference between the true and the false, the real and the imaginary. Dissimulation leaves the principle of reality intact, and the difference is always clear.[12] Clearly for Yakub's mother-in-law, and most Muyu people I spoke to at East Awin, cassava cannot simulate sago for the principle of reality is always intact, and the difference is embedded in the name 'cassava-sago'. There are instances of sago simulation elsewhere in New Guinea. For example, East Sepik people who went to West New Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s as part of an oil palm resettlement scheme, processed the pith of the fishtail palm to imitate sago.[13]

Yakub used the narrative of his mother-in-law's death to foreground his most recent efforts to repatriate residents of his camp at East Awin to their village in the Muyu region. Yakub explained the reason for Muyu flight in 1984, and prolonged exile in PNG, in terms of disenfranchisement produced by the Indonesian state's failed promise of 'development'. Yakub formulated his own development plan and sought co-operation for its implementation from neighbouring regional governments in PNG and Irian Jaya. The plan consisted of four components: a map titled 'Highway Development', a diagram showing the configuration of a new village, an inventory of services necessary to resettle the village, and a human resources inventory of the skills that villagers had

acquired since living in PNG. In September 2003, I received an email from Yakub via the Catholic Church in Kiunga:

> Child, my plan has happened, from Mindiptanah to Tubmok. Now the governments of PNG and Indonesia have united to clear the road from Kiunga to Dome [PNG] and on to Tubmok [Irian Jaya]. Father will return home to Tubmok in the year 2004, around February. The reason being: the road is already cleared from Mindiptanah to Tubmok.

Muyu anxiety about returning to the homeland or staying at East Awin manifests a dialectical tension between the virtues of the homeland in spite of neglect and violence, and the possibilities of the host country in spite of landlessness and the absence of sago. It is expressed in the phrase: 'If I stay here there's nothing yet if I return I do not know whether I will be safe.' Yakub's plan partially addressed the bases of fear—identified as isolation and underdevelopment—in returning to the Muyu region. Focusing on infrastructure such as transport, market facility for agricultural produce, schooling, health services, and housing, Yakub has attempted to unsettle this tension by increasing the 'safeness' of the homeland region in relation to the host country.

In 2004, some of Yakub's group returned to the Indonesian Province of Papua. They went to the provincial town closest to their village where they squat in makeshift dwellings on vacant land on the edge of the local airfield. Their neighbours are other Muyu returnees from East Awin who repatriated in 2000 and similarly chose not to return to their villages of origin. Over a 20-year period, some of these original villages built out of bush materials are barely distinguishable from the surrounding rainforest. According to Jacques Gros, it is the absence of schooling in these villages that has drawn Muyu returnees and Yakub's group to the closest provincial town. The road from the international border to Mindiptanah envisaged by Yakub has been constructed. So too, the bridge across the Muyu river. But additional public works at Tubmok have not been undertaken. The impasse is this: Yakub squats in the closest provincial town waiting for evidence of development in order to relocate to his village, and the local government waits for evidence of sufficient population return to justify development of facilities.[14]

Other Muyu returnees have not settled in their *dusun* or village of origin either. In 1986, 34 families were resettled as *translokal* at a transmigration site near Merauke. In 1998, almost half of the families had left the site seeking better opportunities: six families had been assigned to new places as civil servants, some shifted to Merauke town for schooling, while others moved to the neighbouring Muting-Asiki area for economic opportunities.[15] It was reported that neither those families who left the transmigration settlement, nor the ones that stayed, had chosen to return to their *dusun* or village, yet:

> They are keenly aware of the fact that they still own traditional land (*dusun*) 'at home'. The rights on this land are watched carefully and normally taken care of by relatives on the spot. If needed they will travel to their land if there is a need to arrange something. They feel quite secure as to their rights and therefore there is hardly any eagerness to move back to their village.

The report implies that Muyu were satisfied with maintaining their *dusun* from a distance. Perhaps it was not that returnees chose to stay away, but that conditions in these abandoned villages (without health clinic, school, transport, market) gave them no option of resettlement there.

What can at least be said of the return of Yakub's camp to the homeland is that even on the edge of the airfield, at a distance of 40 kilometres from his *dusun* and village of Tubmok, he is substantially closer than he was at East Awin.

ENDNOTES

[1] See Bryant J. Allen, 'The 1997–98 Papua New Guinea drought: perceptions of disaster', in R. H. Grove and J. Chappell (eds), *El Nino: history and crisis*, White Horse Press, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 109–22.

[2] Sago (*Metroxylon sagu*).

[3] cf. Ballard, 'The death of a great land: ritual, history and subsistence revolution in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea', PhD thesis, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1995.

[4] Weiner, p. 22.

[5] Kirsch, 'Changing views'.

[6] Schoorl, *Kebudayaan dan Perubahan,* p. 123.

[7] Allen et al., p. 44; P. Bleeker, *Explanatory notes to the land limitation and agricultural land use potential map of Papua New Guinea*. Land Research Series No. 36, Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, Canberra, 1975, p. 33.

[8] Allen et al., p. 44; Bleeker, p. 79.

[9] Kirsch, 'The Yonggom of New Guinea', p. 201.

[10] Kirsch, 'The Yonggom of New Guinea', p. 201.

[11] Cassava (*Manihot esculenta*).

[12] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulation*, p. 3.

[13] Fishtail palm (*Caryota rumphiana*). Mike Bourke, pers. comm.

[14] Jacques Gros, pers. comm.

[15] Jayapura Secretariat of Peace and Justice, 'Situational report on returnees from Papua New Guinea to Irian Jaya dealing in particular with returnees to the Waropko-Mindiptana area', 1998.