

Chapter 2

‘MY POOR BORDER DWELLERS’

(Yafar 1970—1995)

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‘Happiness and absurdity are sons of the same soil.’

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

In memory of Sembos Wiy

When an anthropologist reaches ‘his field’, the group he has chosen to study is always in the midst of some crisis. In addition, he often arrives after everyone else (explorers, missionaries, recruiters, administrators, planters). As a rule, however, he is the first one to stop in the village for more than a few days. And above all, he is the first foreigner to pride himself on his lack of power: ‘I am not a missionary or an administrator ... I am only a man, nothing more’, he tells anyone willing to listen, for fear of being taken for one of the ‘bad guys’. People will not necessarily be glad to hear this, however, for while the local inhabitants do not like the intrusion of power, they often dream of the arrival of a certain form of wealth. And a wealthy, generous man is also powerful. But the ethnologist’s means are limited, and regional development, whose rosy future is much touted by civil servants and local officials, requires an enormous investment of labour. No, true wealth is first of all the wealth of one’s dreams, beginning with natural fertility to which the production of ‘cargo’ — the unlimited resources enjoyed by white people — seems linked. The problem is how to gain access to it, by the shortcut of the imaginary or by the circuitous route of reality.

The following pages present a few of the most striking features and events that gave each of my fieldtrips to the Yafar people of Papua New Guinea its distinctive stamp.¹

1970: ‘No gat rot’

When I first arrived in the Border Mountains, in 1970, it was the era of regular censuses, of the *kiap*’s (Australian patrol officers) speeches on a corner of the village common: speeches

about the nation, about the Port Moresby House of Assembly (first elected in 1964), about voting by secret ballot, about the authority of the *kaunsol*² and the purpose of taxes, about keeping the village clean and the plans for building a road in the near future between the Sepik Loop and Vanimo on the north coast. In the evening, people would gather on the common around the radio each village had received from the Government; the men would huddle close and the women would stand back — for fear they might contaminate the radio with their periods and keep it from working, so the men of today recall with a hint of irony. But Australia's presence in this area dated only from the early 1960s, after the Protestant mission opened its airstrip in 1959. In 1962–63 Indonesia annexed the formerly Dutch western part of New Guinea, and a bilateral scientific expedition definitively established the location of the 141st meridian, which had been the map boundary for over a century. As they lived outside the Dutch enclaves situated on the eastern side of the border, the Yafar had been contacted by the Dutch administration and missionaries only once. In 1964, the Netherlands had founded a Catholic mission in Kamberatoro, in the former enclave of Jaffi, which was soon linked with Amanab by a motorcycle track. I was the last to arrive, but still after less than ten years of effective local colonisation. And the missionaries had practically never set foot among the Yafar, since the Catholics were too far away and the Protestants were too occupied with their Bible School in Amanab.

Labour recruiters, on the other hand, with the authorization of the government, had been busy, and fifteen Yafar had already been to the *tesin*,³ a few had even signed up for a second two-year contract. In 1969, they were all still on the copra plantations on Gazelle Peninsula (New Britain), on New Ireland or on Buka Island; I saw the last two when they returned: tee-shirts, sandals, head gear and a ukelele. Indeed these were the last because the region was subsequently closed to recruiters in order to retain the local labour for the construction of the Sepik-Vanimo road. In contrast to the visiting *kiap's* account, the *boi* returning from the plantations told of the 'good' white bosses in Kavieng or Namatanai (New Ireland), who fed their workers well and took care of them when they were sick, and the 'bad' Whites in Buka, who gave Saturdays off, but made them work on Sundays and some evenings by torchlight; they told of the two dollars a week to buy cigarettes or a prostitute (the remainder of their wages was paid at the end of the contract), of the fights or the good relations between the different ethnic groups on the plantations. Worried about what fate held in store for them, a few of the first Amanab indentured labourers, who left in the early 1960s, had run away from Wewak during a stopover where they were made to do the most distasteful chores; some were captured, but others managed to make their way home, trekking for a month through the Torricelli Range, which was fortunately inhabited.⁴ Such pathetic tales told by the elders are all that will feed the dreams of the younger brothers and sons of these semi-heroes, who had taken a plane, caught a glimpse of town with its supermarkets, and sailed on the ocean where, as Wiy used to say, 'the trees stop'. '*Mipela no gat rot*', 'we've got no road (to jobs)', no hope for the younger generation of escaping the workaday life of a subsistence economy: land-clearers and sago-eaters, pig-hunters and grub-gatherers, a horrifying infant mortality rate, endemic malaria and periodic epidemics of flu or tuberculosis, but for the oldest members of the group, there is also pride in living on one's own land where genealogies are reckoned in gardens, in sago palms planted by one's ancestors

and in fishing rights along the narrow streams handed down from generation to generation. The only road in sight was the future one that the government was asking them to clear across their own territory, in exchange for money: picks and shovels were handed out.

The most valuable thing the *boi* (also called *pinis taim*, 'finish time') brought back from the plantations was their knowledge of Melanesian Pidgin (*tok pisin*), which they passed on to the younger generation; this is the only means of bridging the 750 different languages spoken in the country. At the time, no Yafar man over a certain age and none of the women spoke a word of *tok pisin*. Even today only the younger women are starting to use it. The Yafar who had stayed home knew nothing about the West; they were fascinated by my jungle boots, discovered their recorded voices and even their own faces in photos or in a mirror, and many were unaware that there was any such thing as writing. When they went to Amanab, they would travel in groups of five or six, for fear of sorcery in the territories they had to cross, in spite of the partially completed government road. The mail I sent and received was a complete mystery to them. No wonder then that the ethnographic investigation with its endlessly repeated questions irritated my interlocutors. My work was even boycotted for three months.

Aside from the *kiap*, the Yafar encountered the occasional army unit — national volunteers led by Australian officers. One day a section was camped near the village, and a helicopter dropped off a captain who had come to review the troops. The next day there was a parachute drop, and the Yafar children ran out with the soldiers into the bush to recover the boxes. For the next few weeks, every time the little Cessna from the Kamberatoro mission flew by in the distance, Waya — who will be introduced later — would point his finger in the direction of the aircraft and beckon towards the ground, as though to make something fall out of the sky, while enumerating: 'Fish, meat, tobacco, rice, sugar, biscuits...'

When I left the field on 10 June 1971, I gave my rifle to Wagif, my most valuable source of information, who thereby became the first Yafar *sut boi* (holder of a permit to hunt with a rifle), before going on to be elected councillor. Aside from several young men who were to escort me to Amanab, there was almost no one in the village when I left: my best 'friends' had not even come to shake my hand, and had disappeared into the forest at daybreak. Much later I came to understand that, more than indifference, what they were expressing was a feeling of abandonment, a certain shame at finding themselves alone once more, perhaps a reluctance to show their emotions. When an anthropologist shares his plate and his gun, he becomes, if not a source, then at least a symbol of plenty and well-being, withheld or contested, lost and found again.

1973: 'selfgavman'

In May 1973, the road was open as far as Aynokneri village, where I spent the night on the floor of an abandoned house after having shared a meal of rice and Japanese mackerel with my escort from Amanab. The next day, on Yafar land, I met teams of men busily clearing trees and levelling the ground. An atmosphere of good humour prevailed.

The two-year period of self-government that was to precede the granting of independence in 1975 had been announced and (barely) explained by the *kiap*. The Yafar,

and many other groups in the area, reacted with a mixture of disinterest and fear. Not having experienced the abuses of colonisation in the area, the Amanab felt things could just as well go on as they were. What good was it to bring in poor Blacks in place of rich Whites who, even if they did not share their personal wealth, at least provided some temporary work at the district station. The evening discussions among the men smoking their acrid tobacco or chewing betel in the dim light often turned to their doubts, and to their fantasies, about this abstract entity called *selfgavman*, to which they felt the need to give a concrete and even human shape. Surprising rumours made the rounds of the region. The councillor from Ibagum, near Amanab, went about announcing that Selfgavman was going to come and seize all the food and tear out the sago palms. At one meeting on the road-construction site, he proclaimed that 'he' was in Vanimo and would be flying in tomorrow, in the shape of a tall, obese man with a huge belly — no doubt having grown fat on all that he took from others. Shortly afterwards, news came from Amanab that machines were going to level all the hills and make the forest into a wasteland of cut-down trees: Selfgavman again (in fact a Caterpillar used for the southern section of the road on the Sepik side).

At the same moment, the word 'independence' was spreading in various lexical forms and adding to the confusion. The expression *kisim independens* ('receive independence') lent itself to interpretation: what exactly were they going to receive? Wagif personally believed that the period of *selfgavman* would be followed by the return of the Whites, and was dismayed to learn that all European civil servants were to be definitively replaced by people from New Guinea.

In spite of such fears, internal solidarity operated. Differences were settled amicably, at worst by a verbal clash — and much waving of bare adz handles — in which men violently argued for the abandoning of their evil plants and respect for the government's 'law'. Thanks to Wagif's rifle and a few others,⁵ no one could remember the Yafar ever having eaten so well. I had brought along a new rifle and a few boxes of cartridges (still available over the counter at the time), from which I gave Wagif a stock of 'pig-calibre' shells. Nor were the mediums idle either, but were often possessed by forest spirits, masters of game; evenings were interrupted by shouts from someone in a trance, followed by the feigned anger of the spirit, arrow drawn, then by long conversations between the nameless visiting spirit and the men, who would bring him food and betel in the hope of receiving more animals.

My notebook-cum-journal reflects my frustration each time people had undertaken some activity without informing me (fish-poisoning parties, planting rites, funeral in a neighbouring hamlet and so forth), moments which fortunately alternated with more fruitful days. One of these surprise events was the arrival of fifteen or so Sowanda, fairly distant neighbours and former enemies with whom the Yafar did not intermarry, but among whom their fathers once had exchange partners: first-hand observation of fear and shame behaviour on the part of the visitors — who had come bearing coconuts and yams that they had hoped to exchange for shorts and knives — of jokes at their expense by some of the hosts, of what it means to be non-kin. This was probably one of the last exchanges between the two groups. A short while later, some fifteen men, women and children from another hamlet filed in to receive a penicillin shot that I had promised them, to cure them of yaws, which was still endemic at the time.⁶ To bolster each other's courage, they had all come together, for one syringe that had to be boiled between patients.

By the end of my stay, *selfgavman* had 'arrived', and the Yafar rarely mentioned it any more. For my part, I had managed to capture, on the short-wave band of my transistor radio, other, more remote events which made the 'hair-splitting of the ethnographic study' (to quote my journal) seem all the more petty: the American bombing of Phnom-Penh, the Yom-Kippur war, Three-Mile Island.

1976: the school and the last Yangis

When I returned, in February 1976, the Community School (the government-run primary school, where teaching was in English) that the Yafar and the government had been talking about since 1973, had just opened. A big clearing had been made and wooden buildings with leaf-thatched roofs stood in the middle. The largest held the first two classrooms, surmounted by the flag of independent Papua New Guinea with its yellow stars and bird of paradise. Closer to the road, a tiny roof and a corrugated metal cistern provided water for the *sik haus*, a tiny dispensary measuring a few square metres, where a *dokta boi* (three years of study on the coast) from the district had set out his boxes of chloroquine and dressings. A single prefabricated construction housed the headmaster and his family, brought in from the coast. Next door, Yafar 2 hamlet had not changed. It is there that I learned, upon arriving, that the important Yangis ritual was planned for April. No one had ever been willing to provide me with any details about this cult, but I happened to have brought along Alfred Gell's book, *Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries*, published the previous year, and which proposed an analysis of the same rite (Ida) performed by the Umeda, further to the north.

This was the high point of my six-month stay: I saw Yangis for the first and last time.⁷ The Yafar themselves had not celebrated this rite for more than ten years and this was, to the best of my knowledge, the last performance. The period of relative prosperity that I had noted in 1973 continued, and each hamlet had the two rifles it was allowed. Endemic malnutrition had therefore declined, and it was this feeling of physical and social well-being that made it possible to celebrate the totemic cult, whose purpose, I was nevertheless told, was to foster fertility. Anxious about the prospect of celebrating this sacred rite — borrowed from their neighbours to the north several generations ago — and required to present visitors with garden produce and smoked meat, the Yafar could not conceive of taking such a risk in times of scarcity. The introduction of rifles had enabled them to resume the tradition.

But there was another determining factor of change at this ceremony: the presence of an outsider. The Yafar found themselves obliged, if not to include me in the actual process of worship, at least to give me a status, albeit marginal, but one which allowed me to go about my business of observing and, to a limited extent, of asking questions. The Masters of the totemic moieties thus had a two-fold task: to successfully negotiate with the spirits summoned so as ensure the efficacy of the ritual, and to keep an eye on me (exclude me or admit me, keep me away or tolerate me) as a potential 'spy' who might abscond with some of the primordial *hoofook* — the fertility principle, original substance and key notion of Yangis — or tell the women what I had learned. It was only during the public part of the ritual that I was given almost total freedom, since it was there that, after months of preparation in the

immense wings of the forest, there was to be played out 'in the round' a piece of ritual theatre whose true meaning was carefully concealed beneath a luxuriance of symbols.

Such compromises with the ethnographer always eager for more information, but also capable of serving as a depository — through writing and recordings of images, speech and music — of a body of knowledge that the Yafar and other groups know is doomed to disappear in the near future are indicative of a situation of change, not to say crisis, that strikes to the very heart of cultural identity. A small society with no means of storing information is reduced to the paradox of telling an 'uninitiated' foreigner their ancestral secrets, secrets in which the young generation seems already to have lost interest. A salvage strategy on the part of the elders, for they have one generation at most in which to act, and not every group has an anthropologist standing by, microphone in hand. The request may even be formulated explicitly, as May would later do. But, without being fully conscious of his strategy, the informant can also make the first move and, little by little, reveal what normally should not have been divulged. This was the case of one man who, on many occasions, took pleasure in secretly bringing me what I had been looking for. I do not think it is a betrayal to reveal his name, Wiy, which I mean as a tribute to his tragic fate (see section '1991', below). His information was not always very reliable, and I had to do a good deal of cross-checking, but at the same time, he managed to let his 'betrayal'⁸ be known by the community. He saw his challenge to the established order and to the primordial powers as a declaration of freedom. Immediately after the Yangis ceremony, he put me on the track of an interpretation, which was subsequently confirmed; however, he did this in the presence of a younger man, on whose face I could simultaneously read the extent to which this act was received as a transgression. On other occasions, Wiy secretly brought me a lump of red ochre, or a branch of leaves with bright red spots, both of which were supposed to be the blood of the primordial Great Mother; he insisted that I say nothing about this to anyone, predicting the death of his children if I did. But the next day, an adolescent was dropping transparent hints about this sacred object I had been given the previous day. Wiy had denounced himself, as good a way as any of winning a little prestige.

Through these anecdotes, we can see a change in the destination and the use of secrecy. At a time when a culture is crumbling under the impact of the glittering consumer society — but also under the pressure of the need to secure a bare minimum to eat — what good is a 'religious' secret that is thrown into question by the very tangible reality of 'cargo' and which soon will find no more receivers for its social transmission. What good is it — except to be transmitted elsewhere? Such knowledge can be perpetuated only if a certain ambivalence is maintained, with precisely these false precautions whose sole purpose is to preserve, for a little while, the very value that is in the process of being lost forever. But most Yafar were not this bold, I was going to say this lucid. For May, who that year became my chief interlocutor, things that were taboo could only be divulged in the absence of any witness, and then only by bits and pieces; for holding on to the impression that essential knowledge was still under his sole control was the price to pay for maintaining his status in the community. But I noticed that he, like Wiy, felt an irresistible urge to reveal something of what he knew, a desire in which the dread of symbolic loss and social shame mingled with the gratification of being chosen by the foreigner.

1978: 'blak nogut'

With the Yangis ceremony, people forgot the various misadventures of national independence or the petty problems of parent-teacher relations. It was therefore only when I returned two years later that I realised the enormous disappointment with what people had already felt in 1973 were going to be the meagre times that would come with independence. In Amanab and elsewhere, the Australian administrative staff had all been replaced by indigenous civil servants. On the one hand, the exotic era of European patrol officers, sometimes accompanied by their wives, the times of the butterfly-hunting or penis-sheath-collecting *kiaps* who boasted of their life as cowboys back in Australia or of having just returned from the Viet-Nam war, were over. And on the other hand, the *blakpela kiap*, the 'black kiaps' had no money in the drawers of their administration and therefore no work to give out. They could barely, and then only irregularly, pay for maintenance on the Sepik—Vanimo road, which was constantly being cleared and overgrown again. And yet small chilli peppers were a booming crop; they were not hard to grow and once dried were easily carried to Amanab to be sold to the Administration. Even the women had fields.

The evening discussions reflected a dichotomy not so much between tradition and modernity as between the good old days of the Whites, who had money and 'gave work' and the present, when, in spite of unemployment, administrators still came from Amanab to collect taxes. These tirades invariably ended with '*blak nogut*' ('Blacks are no good', or perhaps '[the color] black is no good'),⁹ followed by the expression of a desire that contained a lingering vestige of hope: 'the Whites must come back', which can be understood as 'white (the symbol of *hoofuk*) must be brought back'. Self-directed racism? Can one imagine an African saying anything of the like in the 1960s? What was I to do? Lecture them on the world economy? Explain the relation between an industrialised country and the Third World? Show them that the wealth of the past had indeed been taken away by the Whites (for example, the copra, which a few Yafar had helped produce and whose destination and use they had never known) and that what the Yafar thought they appreciated was only the crumbs of a cake eaten by others? The cargo conception of economic wealth blocked any rational understanding of this domain. In my own naïveté, I nevertheless tried to defend the notions of freedom and political autonomy — against my own 'colour' — taking the example of Africa, 'that immense country populated with Blacks like you', whom the bad Whites had once reduced to slavery. All to no avail: my audience always brought me back to their local concerns; for them, 'government' equalled their district administration. In the end, I became convinced that their view, for the time being at least, and their own interests could not be situated at any other level and that, in a sense, they were right.

One day it was announced that the *kiap* had come and was camped at the school to collect the taxes for the year (around 5 kinas per adult male).¹⁰ But that day, all the Yafar were preparing to celebrate a rite for the spirits who controlled the game; this was to take place in Yafar 3, the hamlet furthest from the school. Taking me as a witness of the injustice done them, the men from my village decided to ignore the administration's presence and to perform the rite with their brothers of Yafar 3. At around five in the afternoon, a Tolai¹¹ presented himself at the entrance to the hamlet, alone (he had had the tact not to come with a policeman) and dripping with perspiration from having made the hour and a half walk

separating the two villages under the sun of the 'big road'. I was in the ritual enclosure with the men who were getting ready for the night dance: somewhat their accomplice before this patrol officer — perfectly polite, as it happened — who made a little speech to these bad citizens, standing next to me as though to associate me with what he was about to say. He explained that Papua New Guinea was rid of the white colonisers and was about to enter a new era, that the people of New Guinea were now a single people, but that freedom was not easy — the Australians having withdrawn a good portion of their aid — and each citizen therefore had to make an effort by paying the tax. Although I agreed with his arguments, I felt uneasy at being 'taken hostage', even for a moment, by a government representative, and without realising it, I stepped back a pace, and the visitor noticed. In any event, his mission was successful, for to my stupefaction, nearly every man present reached into his netbag and took out here a tin box, there a plastic change-purse, and produced the required sum or whatever he had, in exchange for a receipt.

Although they were opposed to the government actions and not particularly interested in local development, the men never again spoke of organising another Yangis. Shortly after the 1976 ceremony, the Master of the Earth, in joint charge of the cult, died suddenly for no apparent reason; people explained this death by his intimate involvement in certain secret aspects of the rite. When I arrived in 1978, I found Now, my first teller of myths, mere skin and bones, and very weak; he died a few weeks later. I do not count the frequent infant deaths, which often went unnoted, as no one took the trouble to tell me about them.

This mission ended with my inviting May to come and see the ocean. When we got to Vanimo, where, thanks to an Australian friend, we were lodged in the most beautiful house in this provincial seat — the temporarily empty dwelling of the provincial commissioner — May did not even deign to glance at the 'big plane' parked on the airstrip (one of the last DC3s of the national civil fleet), climbed into the car I had rented from the Local Government Council as though he had been doing it all his life, but was awestruck by the ocean surging around his feet, then stirred to enthusiastic dreams at the spectacle of the wealth on display in the supermarket and even more by that of the thousands of coconut palms growing along the coast. All those coconuts rotting on the beach without anyone to plant them no doubt evoked for him some primordial time of abundance. In Wutung, a village on the Indonesian border, we visited a rock shelter containing some old bones still bearing traces of red ochre; May noted the similarity with Yafar customs, but did not notice one villager hesitate slightly before shaking his hand, a small incidence of coastal racism with respect to the 'bush kanaka' from the interior. Three days later he took the Cessna back to Amanab, while I was waiting for my flight to Port Moresby and on to France.

1981: 'we started to die'

When I arrived on 4 August 1981, the *big rot* was open for the first time as far as my house in Yafar 1, and I rode to the foot of the hill on the Local Government Council tractor. A few Yafar had heard the motor and were standing at the entrance to the village; among them was old Waya, morose but visibly glad to see me again. Here I would like to quote a passage from my journal, dated 10 August:

... I see Waya at the foot of a house. A sad reunion. His mourning for his wife is written on his face. He says to me: 'May came back from Vanimo after you left [in 1978] and we started to die.' A moment later he shows me the grave of Awan, his wife, in front of the house, he sits down as though still to keep her company. Next door I find my 1978 house in ruins: floor sagging, roof full of holes, walls torn down. '*Ol manki i stilim*' [the children have stolen everything]. Everything is gone except the cooking stove and the Roman scales. They put me in the *haus boi* [the adolescents' house], which the occupants turn over to me for three days, the time to build a new hut at the other end of the village. Everyone is downcast and/or sick. Ufwan [Waya's elder son] looks sullen or withdrawn, but he is above all feverish. [His wife] Amo is [temporarily] deaf and sick as well, she doesn't even hear me, I am told. Then I come upon Wagif, May's younger brother, leaning on a staff like an old man, face drawn, thin, his eyes are hard and his words bitter: 'I am very sick, I am going to die.' One would have taken him at his word to see him ... Conversation with Wagif on the 4th of August: he rambles on to me about the Yafar's plight; I guess that he feels it to be bleak, hopeless, I see him anxious about the future. Suddenly he quotes the words of the *kiap* who had encouraged them to 'work hard' for the road. Wagif tells me that the road is the only way to change anything, to change life a little. All that spoken dramatically, brows knit and without a hint of a smile. I talk to him about the heveas he planted several years ago and which he let go to weeds. I talked to several other men about their small heveas fields, telling them it was the only saleable crop, the only stable market according to the administration. The road is fine, but there has to be something to use it for [the coast section did not yet exist]. The small chilli peppers [a prosperous crop in 1978] were finished, no more international market.

I found myself with my bundles, my boxes and suitcases in the *haus boi*. It had been raining for two days and the downpour would last another two. Everything depressed me those first days. The nine people dead, for the single hamlet, in barely three years, those who were sick, Wagif and his pessimism, the rain... May hasn't changed, even though Hwam [his first wife, in her 40s] was no longer living, died a year and a half ago. Wiy is still the same, the same ambiguous humor...

This afternoon, in the company of Yow and Kabyo [Ibniy's clan brothers], went to call on Ibniy [an elderly man, sick for over 6 months and living alone in his garden; one of my former 'informants']. Nice orchard-garden near the Yafar 2 road, a real house, two hearths, the door ajar. I see Ibniy, his face straining towards the visitor. He is naked, squatting in the middle of his house between the two hearths, one of which is full of glowing embers. He is nothing but skin and bones and is covered with dirt and *pukpuk* [dermatitis]. His face is puffy, and his feet and hands slightly swollen. Aside from that, he is talkative, speaks normally, but looks deeply unhappy. His eyes are watery. I think it is the smoke or an effect of his illness; Kabyo whispers to me that it is emotion. Behind him is a pile of sugar cane and a supply of red bananas. Three rusty cans brim with water. A ball of sago lies on a dry breadfruit leaf. I give him four tins of fish and some tobacco with newspaper to roll it in. All he has is an old can-opener that he doesn't know how to work. Kabyo and I demonstrate it on the first can. I ask him if he doesn't want to come back to the village, to his house. He seems to agree, though his brothers say that he is the one who wanted to isolate himself here and that he is ashamed of his condition. Yow laughs when I suggest that we take Ibniy back to the village: 'Em i no gat gutpela skin' [His body doesn't look healthy]. I leave, telling Ibniy that we are going to talk it over in the village and that

I will come back. He is overcome with emotion, holds out his hand and asks me to come back before I go home to my country.

In the village, people file through with fevers, deafness, coughs, asking for medicine ... 'Ples bagarap, ples nogut' [The village is done for, no good]. The intention of May and his clan to found a new hamlet isn't very serious according to some [the future would prove the contrary].

Until 1978, Yafar was a community where a certain social harmony reigned, where rifles, chilli peppers and roadwork had changed a few things. Between 1979 and 1981, three events occurred which altered everything: an influenza (or tuberculosis) epidemic — no doubt another contribution from outside — which ran through the whole district and caused 25 deaths among adult Yafar (who number barely 200 individuals); the social conflicts sparked by these deaths attributed to sorcery and the subsequent onset of the break-up of the society, which finally occurred two years later; and lastly, the arrival from West Papua (Irian Jaya) of a hope that was as immense as it was frail, in the form of the Wes cargo cult.¹² To this must be added the ban on the sale of cartridges throughout the border region, a government concession to Indonesia in its fight against the Irianese independence movements, whose members had contacts on the Papua New Guinea side of the border; furthermore, any rifle brought in for repairs was seized. The era of bountiful hunts and sharing pig meat between houses was over. In 1986–87 the sale of arms and munitions was banned countrywide, following a rise in urban crime. Today bows and arrows, spears and traps have once again become the sole hunting techniques practised in Papua New Guinea.

The man who first told me that something was afoot, something hugely secret that I was to keep to myself, went on to inform me almost daily. Trust no longer reigned within the community, there were the followers of the cult and the sceptics: among the former was the main leader, a Yafar 3 man who had never had any power until then, the secondary leaders of the other two hamlets, as well as the youngest men, who periodically went to West Papua (Irian Jaya) to visit allied villages in search of information on Wes, the underground site alleged to contain the original 'cargo'. The few Yafar related by marriage to people in Indonesia were known as 'border-crossers', the legal term adopted by the government, in other words, people who had the right to cross the border for family reasons. The 'brothers-in-law' from the other side spoke Amanab, of course, but they used *bahasa indonesia* rather than *tok pisin*. These foreign kin were accustomed to seeing Indonesian soldiers rather than *kiap*, and the government stations in the region were the Senggi post, Waris (instead of Amanab), and Jayapura (rather than Vanimo or Wewak).

There was an odd atmosphere: men were constantly coming and going between the Yafar hamlets, holding secret meetings in the forest, but some nights they also organised public meetings, featuring inflamed speech-making with a view to preparing the moral restoration of the community that was indispensable to the advent of the millennium. Everyone was supposed publicly to exorcise personal and family disorders. Renouncing sorcery (embodied in the growing of certain magic plants) was the most pressing requirement. Then came marital discord, which gave some women — perhaps for the first time in Yafar history — the chance to speak out in public and to defend themselves or to accuse their spouse. The cult had triggered a wave of solidarity, which was greatly needed by the society as it had been brooding over

suspicious of sorcery since the 1979 epidemic. Cult followers now greeted each other with a military salute, bringing their hand up to a non-existent cap. But we shouldn't be too prompt to smile at the mimicries of others. One day on my way alone to Yafar 3, I spotted the councillor, also the secondary leader of the cult, coming the other way; he was walking with his head down, no doubt lost in some millenarian daydream, and did not see me. When we found ourselves face to face on the narrow path, he spontaneously saluted me, although I was not regarded as a follower of the cult. And to my astonishment, I found myself returning his salute, in all earnestness, before we each continued on our way, without having spoken a word.

Prepared in secrecy, these expeditions to the villages on the Irian border, some ten hours' walk away, worried me greatly; for at the same time I read in the *Post Courier* — the Port Moresby daily I subscribed to — that the Indonesian army was sending reinforcements to the area to put down the Melanesian resisters from the OPM, who had recently been in the news.¹³ The information that was whispered to me said that, in order to join Wes, cult members had to go to combat school, where they learned to fight with knives, bows or spears. I scented the amalgamation that some must have made, on the other side of the border, between a guerilla recruiting drive and the promise of cargo, between the 'prophets' claiming to know the secrets of Wes and the regional OPM leaders desirous of filling out their ranks.

Abandoning my promises to keep out of it, I explained my concerns, without witnesses, to the expedition member I felt most capable of understanding the gravity of the situation. It must be said that, at the time, the Yafar knew nothing about Irian Jaya and had barely heard of a country called Indonesia, which was only a day's walk from there. He promised to pass on my warnings and to look after the youngest boys, but added that, as far as he was concerned, he had had enough of planting bananas: 'Even if I die over there, I don't care.' This laconic response sums up the state of mind of certain men at the time: leave, get away from the confinement of the ancestral land, do anything, but somewhere else. A few adolescents left the school in Yafar 2 just before finishing their studies. This was a far cry from working on local development projects or weeding heveas plantations. Failing jobs in the towns or on PNG plantations, a small door seemed to be opening, if not on the millennium, then at least onto another life. A double-edged prospect, since the slightest contact, even peaceful and accidental, with members of the OPM, could mean years of prison in the Jayapura jails; alternatively, the Indonesian authorities sometimes welcomed PNG citizens with gifts and jobs on the Merauke—Jayapura road, under the watchful eye of the army.¹⁴ Having indulged in numerous abuses over the years, the Indonesian army needed to touch up its image.

Following the departure of the first Yafar expedition to leave after my arrival, I sent a letter with a small party departing the next day to the person — I was not even sure he really existed — who was supposed to receive the Yafar at the other end, asking him to let them return home rather than involving them in a fight that was no doubt legitimate, but which wasn't theirs. An oral reply was sent back that was intended to be reassuring.

From that time on, I was accused, especially by the most fervent followers from Yafar 3, of meddling in what was none of my business and I was suspected of wanting to block their access to Wes. One evening I overheard a leader softly telling a few young men, who were drinking his words, that Europeans were nothing but *rabis man* ('rubbish men'). When I was

more directly challenged, I was obliged to justify myself by saying that my sole concern was the danger the war in Irian Jaya presented for young Yafar men. The image of the White suddenly divested of his aura was linked to the widespread millenarian cliché that Europeans had simply stolen the cargo, which had originally been manufactured by now dead Melanesians. The Yafar were therefore under an obligation to re-appropriate the original *hoofuk*. Aside from the re-interpretation of local myths, the millenarian images I intercepted were often already familiar to me from my readings, including Biblically inspired prophecies, whereas the Yafar were still not Christianised and they had never heard a single verse of the Book of Revelations. A curious paradox: the Bible reached them in a reinterpreted form, not called by its name, unknown to the missionaries and via prophecies that had probably produced numerous conversions some two thousand years ago, in another part of the world. It has often been said that religions are born in times of crisis, in the form of messianic cults.

Rejection of everything that came from the government began with independence and now continued in the millenarian circles. Europeans were assimilated to the government, while discovery of the cargo and the resurrection of the dead were programmed for the other side of the border and in an insecure area. Sometimes the Yafar would catch wind of incidents that had occurred in other parts of their district, over issues they did not understand and which gave rise, among other things, to successive agreements signed between Port Moresby and Jakarta on joint control of the border zone. While the Indonesian army assumes the occasional right to pursue fleeing OPM members across the border, since 1990 they have official authorisation to organise 'civic' visits to border villages in PNG. I do not know if the Yafar benefited from this 'smiling operation'. Would it have reminded them of the visit, already far in the past, of the Indonesian bird-of-paradise hunters who, in the 1920s, had camped with them on friendly terms for several months?

Their disdain for the government received confirmation from an unexpected quarter. Complaints had been lodged with the Local Government Council about the district officer posted at Amanab. With the backing of the deputy from Amanab district, the Council voted to dismiss the officer and, the better to underscore the popular character of the decision, stirred up the population the day he was to take the plane. A few Yafar went to the landing strip, not forgetting to don their war gear, on instructions from the Council — bows and arrows in hand and blackened faces. When they came back, they declared with some pride: 'Dispela kiap em i nogut, mipela rausim em pinis' (This kiap was no good, we threw him out). Unwittingly, they were simply putting into practice the democratic principles chosen by the very government of which the undesirable officer in question had been the local representative.

The day before I left, some ten Yafar who had been absent for two weeks returned from the border deeply depressed. One of them admitted to me that they had been deceived and would not return. The Department of Agriculture agent from Amanab happened to be there, to check their hevea crop. I can still see the councillor, one of the cult leaders, who also held the traditional function of Master of the Earth, sitting at the foot of a coconut tree with his head in his hands, struggle to his feet to take the agent to his plot of land, which was overrun with weeds. For the Yafar, all was lost and everything — but what ? — had to be begun anew.

The next day, just as I was about to climb into the administration jeep that had come for me, old Waya, with his snow-white beard and still imbued with the aura of the valiant fighter he had been, with his natural authority and his inherited function of Master of the Sky and the Sun — he who had always joked with me without ever compromising himself by becoming the foreigner's 'informant' — suddenly burst into tears when I held out my hand. It was the tears of all the Yafar, of whom he felt himself somewhat the 'chief' or the emblem, that ran down his cheeks. When I returned five years later, I did not have the heart to visit his grave.

1986: 'mi winim pinis'

When we landed in Amanab in July 1986, I immediately noticed a new neighbourhood of wooden, leaf-thatched houses a short distance from the landing strip: one of the fifteen camps for refugees from Irian Jaya that lined the border from north to south. Of the some twelve thousand refugees having fled the Indonesian army's repression — northwards, following the failed capture of Jayapura by the OPM forces in February 1984 — more than a thousand lived in the overpopulated camp run by the Kamberatoro Catholic mission on the border.¹⁵ In March 1985, the provincial Government had authorised the creation of a camp in Amanab, intended to relieve the one at Kamberatoro. When I arrived in Yafar — on foot since the road was once again impracticable — a new Pidgin word was making the rounds: *refujis*. But the Yafar did not seem directly concerned by the refugees' fate,¹⁶ as they posed no threat to their lands or their safety.

Their main worry was for their own community, which had literally shattered, with some of the people coming together to form a new local group. The 1981 failure of the cargo cult had put an end to the emerging fraternity and had revived old tensions. After Waya's death, May became the new community leader, even though he was not recognised by everyone owing to a series of complex conflicts resulting from the 1979–80 epidemic. I also came to understand that the Waya of 1981 had been crying not only for his dead and the failure of the millenarian hope, but also over the loss of a battle, his final struggle with his younger clan brother May. The latent rivalry between the two big men,¹⁷ although they belonged to two lineages of the same patriclan, had suddenly crystallised accusations of sorcery, in particular after the death of May's first wife. The break was consummated by the death of Waya's wife, in 1981, which logically May and his family were accused of having caused. After having gathered his lineage and other kinsmen and affines into a secret forest camp for almost two years, May had succeeded in founding a new hamlet as prescribed by the rules, that is respecting ritual and gaining the approval of the guardian spirits.¹⁸ He finished the impassioned account of his battle with Waya by these words: 'When Waya heard that I had founded a new hamlet according to rule, not a word left his mouth, and he bowed his head: I had won (*mi winim pinis*)'. Waya's backers had stayed in the original hamlet (my former place of residence), while Yafar 2 had splintered into a multitude of tiny groups scattered around the forest, leaving the school and its staff by themselves. What had just happened corresponded exactly with the alternation between splitting and regrouping that had been described to me in my early investigations: history went on.

The Wes cult dissolved geographically, as it were, into a vast rumour running up and down the border. With the exception of a few nostalgics from Yafar 3, reality had covered over the dream, the awakening had reduced the feeling of absolute loss to one of a vanished illusion. Wagif no longer talked of going off to seek adventure and leaving his wife and children; he had just had twins, no doubt the first who had both been given a chance to live.¹⁹ The sick man full of revolt of 1981 had given way to a good family man, almost happy in the new group that had been founded by his brother.

Three days after I arrived in May's new hamlet, an old Yafar companion, Bone, suddenly died coughing blood: I understood then that the epidemic had been tuberculosis, a disease introduced by Europeans and then unwittingly spread by the *boi* returning from the plantations. I can still see the Yafar men gathered in the middle of the village common where they had laid the naked body, washing it with banana stalks to bring out the scars left by the sorcerer's magic arrow. When they eventually identified the scar, among the many marks borne by the skin of a forest-dweller, each one in turn vented his anger at the unknown sorcerers who were killing them and going unpunished thanks to the government 'law', which banned reprisals, leaving them powerless and trapped between the crime and an imported law that did not recognise it as such. It was the occasion for the youngest to rehearse their rhetorical skills by taking up their elders' arguments against the invisible enemy.

That year I did not stay long with the Yafar because my mission was primarily to study a Waina-speaking group, the Sowanda, with whom the Yafar used to have exchange partnerships. I found the clan hamlets deserted and surrounded by tall stands of coconut palms that had been there for generations. The inhabitants preferred to live in the forest, in isolated 'second homes'; nevertheless, they kept up their village, as though to make their social structure visible to the naked eye. This double-residence system, which was probably also practised by the Yafar in former times, persists with no risk of splits precisely because everyone does not live together, and when internal conflicts break out, people merely go on living on their respective lands, as they normally do. There is neither fission nor fusion. It is social communication reduced to a minimum. And what isolation! Midway between the Sowanda and the Umeda, a clearing had been made and a future government-run school was under construction, ten years after the one in Yafar.²⁰

When I came back from Sowanda, May resumed his assiduous visits (which had been going on since 1976), taking pleasure in murmuring into the microphone the secret versions of the myths or his interpretations on the openness or the closure of the subterranean world, home of the bad cannibal father. Switching between Amanab and Pidgin, he liked to replay the tape in order to put in a forgotten detail or to underscore certain vernacular expressions. It was at the end of this last mission that he asked me, when he died, to send his two sons the tapes he had just recorded; they were for him a condensation of the most important elements of his culture, something he could not yet transmit personally to his older sons, just on the threshold of marriage. The tape recording would keep his words in suspended animation until his children were ready to receive a paternal knowledge that was respected but already overtaken by history.

On each of my visits, the Yafar Pidgin had added new words. A few had to do with recent institutions, which deserve comment. First of all the word *yut* ('youth'), not only gave

the young men an autonomous status with respect to their parents' generation, but designated groups of young bachelors who banded together into embryonic 'cooperatives' to cultivate common clearings, separate from the traditional gardens, where they produced items that they then sold in Amanab or to the school teachers in Yafar. The earnings were placed in a savings account at the new Amanab branch of the National Bank. The term *pati* ('party') designated the invitation issued by a village to a large number of people from the area — a break with the boundaries of kinship and an unprecedented extension of social relations — for a night of feasting and partying. Large quantities of food had to be prepared and cooked, in particular rice and canned goods, which supposes a substantial financial outlay, nevertheless possibly leading to a profit which would in turn be invested in another *pati*. The invitation was not free, and each diner had to buy his plate, indicated on a price tag (with reductions as the night wore on). In 1986, this new form of 'paying exchange' had just appeared among the southern and central Amanab; the Yafar had accepted invitations but had found the prices prohibitive. May saw this as an opportunity to increase his newly gained prestige as hamlet founder, but he was waiting to get together the sum needed to launch the operation. I left the area without ever having been to a *pati*, but in December 1987, I received a letter signed by May (written by Sembos, see below, section '1991') asking me for a contribution to the organisation of the first Yafar *pati*. With it was a budget amounting to 249 kinas!²¹ May explained that he was going to organise some intensive hunts ('with bows and arrows but with good dogs') to lay in a supply of smoked meat. I never learned whether or not the plan succeeded. Less interesting, from an anthropological point of view, the *kap ti* ('cup tea') was simply a kind of *danis* ('dance') organised by adolescents and children strumming guitars, beating on makeshift percussion instruments (the traditional drums being denied them for this purpose) and singing, until dawn, the same tune, inspired by the so-called Polynesian music played on the radio.²²

What about Christianisation? The only effect I saw was that, when I returned in 1986, all the Yafar, men and women alike, had taken Christian names. Not through baptism, but on their own initiative, they had gotten their information from the missionary in Amanab. Where I had been accustomed to talking with Wagifs, Subwens, Kurays, I found Toms, Johns and one Clemens. In reality, however, these names were largely left on the shelf, and the Amanab names were normally used. At the same time, I learned that the Wamuru, an allied group living a short distance to the east, had 'officially' converted to Christianity under pressure from their councillor. A few young Yafar claimed to be willing to adopt the Christian faith (Protestantism) of their own accord. But they did not see any hurry (this was probably done sometime in the 1990s).

1991: 'dokta boi'

In 1989–1990, I visited the Banaro, in West Sepik, and did not return to the Yafar. However, since the mid-1980s, I had been corresponding with a young Yafar named Sembos, the son of Wiy (see above) and Afwey, who was finishing his nurse's training in Finschhafen. When I first arrived in Yafar, he was about five. In 1981, he finished the local primary school and, with one of May's sons, Kumul, was selected by the provincial Department of Education to

go to the high school in Aitape, on the coast. Both boys completed four years of secondary school and came back to the village; but Sembos applied to train as a male nurse. A year later, he was sent to Finschhafen, on the northern coast, to a nursing school run by the Lutheran mission. And in December 1990, he returned to Amanab where he was to work at the health centre for a few months before being assigned to the dispensary in his own community. That is what he wanted: to come back and care for his own people, to convince them that illness and death could also be natural phenomena, and as a result to help put an end to accusations of sorcery, which had resumed, as he wrote me in September 1990: 'They [certain Yafar] are changing the modern way of life back to *tumbuna pasim* [the 'customs of the ancestors', an allusion to sorcery].' Furthermore, the mortality rate had once more begun to climb due to an epidemic of some sort: 'Yafar people are dying and the village is empty ... starting from babies to adults.' Wagif had let him know that the Yafar were sick and were impatient for him to become the first *dokta boi* in whom they might have complete faith. Sembos in turn expressed his pride in being the first Yafar graduate and added: 'The time for me to graduate is coming and I am very happy that I will be going back to my home land to serve my poor border dwellers.' And as always, he signed: 'Pren bilong yu, Blak skin, Sembos Wiy.' His mention of the border says much about feeling marginal to the nation, forgotten by central government, stuck between a never-finished road and an increasingly militarised zone, symbol of an already forgotten millenarian dream.

Before telling the end of Sembos' story, I would like to come back to the Yafar attitude towards sickness and death. When I arrived in 1973, I noticed the absence of a man whom I knew well because he had helped with my inquiries on my first trip: Woy. I asked what had become of him and was told that he spent his nights in one of his garden clearings, a frequent practice with nothing surprising about it. It was only five days later that I had the presentiment that he must be at home, sick, and not leaving the house, and in fact that is where I found him, lying down, extremely thin, suffering from some disease that affected the lungs, his wife by his side. He admitted that no one came to see him even though he lived in the middle of the village: the result of shame. My antibiotics put him back on his feet and, one night — a sign of life — he was possessed by a spirit while some other mediums were in a trance outside. As he got to his feet for the first time, he fell from the house platform and it was a bloodied medium that rejoined the village community after months of silence. Time and time again the male nurse making his rounds of Yafar 3 found the houses shut, the sick holding their breath so as not to be discovered. I will not come back to Ibniy here, as I have already discussed his case (see above, section '1981').

One last example — though I was not there — is the death of Waya. To be sure, he was an old man. When I arrived in 1986, I asked about his passing away a few months earlier. I was told that he fell ill shortly after May had founded his new group; he stopped eating and within a few months grew very thin (like Ibniy, Woy or Now). Ashamed of his appearance, he asked to be moved to the forest; Wiy took me to see the shelter where he had gone on living for another few months: some palm fronds stuck in the ground at the foot of a tree ten minutes from the village, beside a path, not in a garden like Ibniy. His son, Ufwan, brought him sago every day and some other food until one day he found him dead. Symbolic categories are decidedly more powerful than family feelings and, anthropologist or not, it is

hard to understand how the three children of this universally respected man could leave their father out in the cold of night and the rain, scarcely coming to see him and leaving him practically without food;²³ how a man of such prestige could be subjected to such general indifference. It was because a dying person is seen to be living on borrowed time, a future corpse, for the sick body is no longer that of a social person. It is on its way back to Nature, in a regressive movement in which withdrawal from the community implies inhumation in the primordial forest. People are waiting, during this liminal phase, for the body to have the good grace to step aside and allow the soul to resume its proper place between nature and society. Only then will the living once more speak with this spirit of the deceased, who has joined the anonymous ranks of the dead. The repression of the affects here appears in the form of an irrevocable renunciation, as the programmed consequence of a symbolic logic that has become part of society's law.

The sick person is isolated²⁴ only when his physical appearance — and not simply his condition — makes him 'ashamed' and when he knows that he is doomed. But through an identification with the sick, the shame affects both sides. It is because an emaciated body and dry skin are obvious signs of a loss of *hoofuk* that the person no longer deserves to live in society. If the person has lost his *hoofuk* it means that he has become nothing but a *roofuk* or an *arfêég* (a term that by metaphor designates a corpse), a skin that is shed like that of a snake, which can only be destined to be discarded at the periphery; the centre, in other words the group and the village, must, on the contrary, rid itself of its *roofuk* in order to go on. This is a symbolic aspect upon which Sembos would no doubt have had to reflect.

Another form of resistance is the rejection of the caregivers, whom the sick person attempts to keep outside the group. A lack of faith in the medicine? No, for the Yafar always ask for medication for minor ailments. Lack of faith in the caregivers' knowledge or skills? Sometimes, in the case of young bush nurses. But the answer lies mainly elsewhere: in the anxiety of being transported to the health centre in Amanab or, worse, to the Vanimo hospital. To die anywhere but at home would be interpreted as an act of sorcery from 'outside' — from the groups in the Amanab area, for instance, or from other patients in the hospital — and not as a fatal outcome of the illness: disease does not kill, men do. Sembos would also have realised that the dispensary and its staff are identified with political power: the nurse is believed to have the right to retain you for long-term care, or to evacuate you to a better-equipped hospital without your consent. In this case, the patient is assimilated to the prisoner who is transferred to the coast (since the closing of the small Amanab jail in the 1970s). What is feared is not so much the acquisition of new services as the loss of that which made every individual a social being: the bond linking the person, even after death, with a group, a land and a history.

Let us now come back to Sembos, son of Wiy, from whom I had not heard since he left Findschhafen. It was not until January 1993 that I learned from a colleague in Port Moresby, who called Amanab, that, right after having started at the health centre, Sembos developed a bad cough. The diagnosis was 'TB', probably contracted on the coast. He was cared for in the same dispensary, but soon his parents — Wiy and Afwey — came to take him back to the village. The chief medical officer could not legally oppose their wishes, but Sembos — at his own request — returned some time later to continue his treatment. His family went back a

second time and took him back to Yafar, against medical advice. He died there on 17 April 1991. Contaminated by their son, his father and mother died in turn, a few weeks later, and probably other members of the immediate family after them.

After seven years of study on the coast, he wanted to improve the lot of 'his people' as he was fond of calling them. But the *dokta boi* soon turned into a *sik man*. Imbued with a new status imported from the White world, he was going back to heal bodies and, so he believed, hatreds; but what he brought back was death. He believed he could change the traditional ideas about death, but he became their victim. Defeated, Sembos died like so many Yafar before him, on his own land and in the midst of his family, without medical care and presumed to have succumbed to the blows of human wickedness. Death is even more revolting when it is imputed to others. Whereas symbolic practices disappear so readily from cultural life, the desire to see things evolve remains imprisoned by a 'traditional' explanation that is rooted in a defensive manner of living one's relations with others, which is in turn fuelled by the culture: I can continue to believe in the spirits of the dead while, little by little, forgetting to worship them, I can perhaps forego revenge by physical or magical means on the person responsible for the death of someone close, but on this point I cannot remain silent, for speech is the only weapon still allowed. And it is this speech act, heavy with certainty and feeling, that creates divisions by becoming the coin of exchange of a negative reciprocity ever ready to spring to life.

I immediately wrote to May's son, Kumul, Sembos' former classmate and clan brother, asking him to help me count the dead and those who were still alive. I never received a reply: Yafar wasn't answering.

1995: 'Gol!'

At least not until one day in October 1995, when I received a letter from Kuray, who was an adolescent in 1970 and who had never been to school: he had obviously asked a school teacher to write the letter for him (in Pidgin). He did not answer my last messages or even mention them, nor did he say anything about the past tragedies; at best, he indicated the recent deaths of a few infants. One doesn't wake the dead. He was writing only to ask me to find a *bisnis man* in France who would buy the native gold (*gol*) from the Yafar at a better price than that paid by their government. Yet in the 1970s, a prospector had been sent out by the government to test the Yafar's land, and had concluded that there was no gold. Thus the Yafar's new horizon was none other than that which had inspired the hopes and the migration of so many Europeans to countless Eldorados, among which New Guinea. After all, is there any better symbol of hope and happiness, or any better symbol of disillusionment? Local gold had replaced foreign cargo.

1970–1995, twenty-five years that could be represented by a set of curves, were it not for the impossibility of summing up a slice of collective life in an academic diagram. The first line would be the natural curve of the health of the communities in the area; it has plainly deteriorated since the colonial period. The second line would be the curve of the region's history: migrations, land settlement, etc. The first of these factors triggered defensive reactions — attributions of sorcery — and in former times, offensive reactions as well —

avenging raids — which immediately destabilised the society and even permanently altered the organisation of the local groups. The second factor has almost ceased to be active today, since the land boundaries have been fixed definitively by the administration. With the period of Australian government, and then independence, new and just as fluctuating parameters mingled with the first: the opening of the national space, relations with the government and the regional council, education, the monetary economy, village development, the cargo cult, border problems, Christianisation, the generation gap. Confronted with these new elements, Yafar society has swung between rejection and enthusiasm, between dreams and harsh awakenings. The dilemma engendered by the opposition between millenarian hopes and necessarily slow, uneven development displays the typical profile of the projection of a combination of mythic and psychic images into the near future in order to mask a harsh reality that must constantly be tamed and softened. Since 1970, the Yafar's hopes, and therefore their happiness, have taken two forms: one due to a period of relative plenty within the bounds of self-sufficiency — 'the time of the rifles' — and the other engendered by the illusion of a new era yet to be created, seen at times as being against the Whites and the government, in the expectation of the millennium, and at times as being with them, in the hope that White knowledge, once obtained, would change life. These attempts led to a twofold failure.

The ebb and flow that characterise Yafar history, hopeful rises followed by sudden bitter declines, recall the myth of Sisyphus. When the hero climbed the mountain, his effort was one with his desire, as Albert Camus wrote, whereas the descent was like a 'respiration ... that returns as surely as his misfortune'; the moment of an awakening that raises him 'above his fate'. In 1991, the Yafar Sisyphus once more stood at the foot of his mountain: one hand already on his boulder, he lifted his eyes towards the summit; and in 1995, we find him again bent to the ground, labouring to swirl the clay and the sand in his prospector's pan.

Footnotes

- 1 In the Border Mountains, Amanab District, West Sepik Province; see Juillerat (1996).
- 2 From 'councillors', elected by their village to the Local Government Council, established in Amanab in 1965.
- 3 From 'station', but with the general sense of 'urban area'.
- 4 See Juillerat (1979).
- 5 The administration would authorise no more than two guns per local group, as much in the interests of protecting animal life as for the sake of security.
- 6 The Vanimo doctor, Stephen Frankel, a future anthropologist, had taught me and fitted me out with the proper equipment, before personally visiting the Yafar on one of his medical rounds.
- 7 See Juillerat (1995) and Juillerat ed. (1992).
- 8 Supernatural punishments for revealing secrets involved essentially fertility: the indiscrete person would no longer find game; whereas the social penalties would take the form of revenge by sorcery on the individual or his children.
- 9 White is associated with the beginning state of things, whereas black is connected with maturity, just before decline.
- 10 At the time, one kina was worth around one Australian dollar.
- 11 The dominant ethnic group in the Rabaul area, in New Britain.
- 12 The name was a complete secret at the time, but became public knowledge and was openly used as of 1986 in the area of Amanab and beyond. I will not go into the content of the cult here; see Juillerat (1991, 1996, 2001a, 2001b).
- 13 'Organisasi Papua Merdeka': Organisation for the Independence of Papua or West Papua Movement. War had been brewing in Irian Jaya since the mid-1960s, but it did not erupt in the border zone until the end of the 1970s. In July-August 1981, the military command set up Operation 'Sapu Bersih' ('Clean Sweep'). See *Ethnies* (Survival International France), 3, 1985.
- 14 I want to make it clear that at no moment did the Yafar express the slightest interest in the OPM's struggle, or in its political or ideological interests. The only thing that held their attention was the promise of cargo. Later, I learned that they had never gone further than the Irianese border village where they had relatives.
- 15 The biggest camp was Black Water, near Vanimo.
- 16 Paias Wingti's government was at that time in the process of setting up a cooperative program with the UN High Commission for Refugees; until the end of 1985, the refugees were essentially dependent on aid from churches and NGOs.
- 17 I use the expression in its Pidgin sense of an elderly, influential man, and not in the anthropological sense of a prestigious man involved in ceremonial exchanges.
- 18 See Juillerat, 1996, Chap. 1.
- 19 In former times, the weaker twin would have been killed by the mother herself. The Yafar did not believe that a woman could nurse two children and still fulfill her economic duties.
- 20 Umeda had had a Catholic school from ex-Dutch New Guinea (taught in Pidgin) in the 1960s.
- 21 The list included rice, tinned fish, sugar, flour, powdered milk and chocolate, salt, oil and tobacco. Needless to say, I was unable to satisfy the request in its entirety.
- 22 Other Pidgin terms have also entered the language: *fri* (free), a word I myself had introduced in 1981 in my modest defence of independence, but which had also taken on the meaning of 'free of charge'; *bank*, a personalised institution 'giving' money for local development to 'good' men; *las* (?) *polis*, military police force or policeman traveling by helicopter and tracking notably Melanesians fleeing from West Papua to PNG.
- 23 To give good food to someone who is believed to be dying is regarded as wasteful.
- 24 When a sick man still has a wife to care for him, he remains in the village, but no one comes to see him. It also seems that women in the same state are not set out in the forest to die, but probably installed under the house, where they customarily give birth and menstruate.