Boera Village, Central Province

Is it possible to navigate between customary cosmologies, traditional Biblical understandings and modern learning?

Opening Story

On the patapata in front of Lady Moi’s house in Boera Village, sat two books. The first was Buka Helaga, Taravatu Gunana bona Taravatu Matamatana (Book of God, Old and New). The second book, Ane (Song), was the hymn book of the United Church of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Both are translated into the local Motu language, and they reflect the strength and place of Christianity in the local community. The first song in the hymn book is a simple four-line song:

Namo badina, Dirava, It is good being beside God,
Iboudai aita harnoa; All of us should rejoice;
Toi tamona, Tamana, Three in one, the Father,

Within the Boera community, the members of the 300-strong Women’s Fellowship do rejoice in the sense of common purpose they share. The Fellowship is one of three ministries within the Boera church, forged from both a tribal-traditional and modern sense of the sacred. Like their mothers and grandmothers before them, the women of the Fellowship are strong. They rejoice in their faith, and they rejoice in their ancestral connection to the land and the sea. Yet there is also a deep sadness within the Fellowship, as it struggles to hold on to its traditional practices, and keep its families safe.

For centuries, the women in Boera held their community tight as their menfolk went off to fish and trade, sometimes for months on end. Now, there are new forces pulling people away from the village—boarding schools, the lure of paid employment, the night lights of Port Moresby. But the pulling away is always matched by a coming home of sorts. And today, a handful of women sit on the patapata, next to the Bible and the hymn book, waiting for the return of the body of a young woman, a victim of Papua New Guinea’s growing AIDS epidemic. She was one of a group of women who
moved to the city together, working as bar maids and sending money home to their families in the village. In the last year alone, three of them have died in the same terrible way. A fourth woman—still alive, but very sick—has also come back to Boera.

In the past, when the men from the village went fishing, they took with them in their lakatois (canoes) clay pots made by women in the village. The pots were used for carrying water and food, and storing the fish that were caught. They were also the central item in the famous Hiri trade between the Motuan people and those of the Papuan Gulf villages. Along with the Trobriand Kula Ring (see Chapter 6) the Hiri trade is the most documented trade cycle in Papua New Guinea. William Robinson writing in 1888 records that ‘With a fine wind Yule was soon passed, and at Delena they met four large canoes with Boera natives who had purposed going on to Maiva, but were told to return by the great Yule sorcerer, because he did not receive an arm shell large enough to satisfy him.’ Once a year, groups of men set out in lakatois filled with clay pots, to follow the south-east wind down to the Papuan Gulf, where they traded the pots for sago. This kept the men away for months. It was dangerous, too, and the stormy voyage home often brought with it the loss of life. Back then, clay-pot making was a sacred act.

There is just one woman left in Boera who knows how to make clay pots in the traditional way. Efforts are underway to ensure that young women in community can learn from her before this important skill is lost.
For those who partook in that business, there were certain moral values and obligations to follow. When the men set out in the *lakatoi*, their wives would remain inside the house, abstain from bathing in the sea, and not cut or comb their hair. They ate only vegetables and had their bodies tattooed with tribal designs. It was through their commitment to the sacred traditions and practices that their husbands were protected. If a woman acted outside the moral code, the men would not be successful and the *lakatoi* would not be safe. The women’s strength and respect for the sacred was what ensured the safe return of the menfolk to the village.

Today, there is only one woman left in Boera who knows how to make clay pots in the old way. A whole generation of women missed out on the passing of the skills, drawn away from the village to study at boarding schools. Vicki Avei, a woman leader in Boera and an active member of the Women’s Fellowship, tells the story:

> It’s a sad thing, that most of us missed out on this. The education system came in, and all of a sudden the girls were beginning to understand and wanted to be educated. In those days our schools were always boarding schools, we never had a school in the village. The older women who were trying to teach the younger women could not, because they were not there. There’s a big gap, and the gap is where I start from.

There are cultural and ritualistic laws which govern the passing of this customary skill. Only those women from families whose *lakatois* were successful in the old voyages are able to be teachers, and there are limitations on who can learn, and when. But Vicki, and other women like her, are coming back to Boera to try and fill the gap. The Women’s Fellowship runs workshops to teach clay pot making, along with other skills and practices which used to be shared amongst the women in the old times. And now, there is a school in the village, so girls can be educated and still learn the customary skills.

Each week, the women in the Fellowship pool a percentage of the money they earn from selling the fish which their husbands catch. They use these funds to pay for training for women in the village, for a local health centre, for repairs to buildings in the community. Under auspice of the church, they follow a service program—visiting hospitals, taking care of the sick and vulnerable, cleaning the school. And now, faced with a new threat to their community, they are organising AIDS awareness programs, training women from all the seven clans so they can disseminate that knowledge within their own families. Like their mothers and grandmothers before them, the women in Boera are holding their village tight. People will keep being pulled away—in search of fish, or work, or adventure—but it is the women who keep struggling for their safe return.

Later in the afternoon, the body of the young woman is brought back to the village. A number of the older women and the younger women are there, to
support her family. They cook, and bring the food to the mourning house where her body lays. They sit together outside the house, waiting, holding their community tight once more. Later, she will be buried in the village cemetery, underneath the frangipani trees, just metres from the house where the old woman still makes her clay pots.

**Place—Past and Present**

Boera is an indigenous Motu village nestled on the Papuan coast, about an hour’s drive north-west of Port Moresby. It is a well-organized community, with a population of over 900 people from seven different clans. The roads leading into Boera from the main road are in poor condition, but the village does have electricity, running water, and a number of significant community assets. Its multi-purpose community hall is one of the largest buildings on the Papuan coast, and is used by people from throughout the area. Located next to it is a medical aid post, where government health workers provide treatment and medication. The aid post is adequately stocked, with basic medical supplies, including equipment for pregnancy testing. In the centre of the village is the church and the pastor’s house.

To one side of the church, white sand leads down to the coast and the ocean; to the other side, the village stretches inland, with houses and gardens visible in the foreground, and hills behind them. Motu people traditionally built their houses on stilts extending over the sea—which offered protection from witchcraft and magic—and many of the houses in Boera are still built...
in this way, constructed from a combination of bush and modern materials. Increasingly, however, more houses are being built inland, the result of a growing population, and also a strategy for securing land and restricting the capacity of migrants to occupy traditional lands.

Most of the inland area around Boera is covered by savannah grassland. Topographic work in a 1978 survey by the Royal Australian Survey Corps indicated the presence of medium-level forest coverage across the hills at that time. The survey also showed a stream running from a catchment at the foot of the Udabada hill, through the village and down to the sea. Historically, the creek was an important resource for the Boera people, who used it to float timbers from the forest to build houses and *lakatoi* canoes, as well as for drinking, cooking and washing. Since the time of the RASC survey, however, the creek has all but dried up. Anecdotal evidence pointing to prolonged droughts and extended dry seasons might provide some explanation for this, but it is also likely the result of deforestation around the catchment area. The forests have been significantly depleted by the demand for timber for building and firewood, the clearing of forests for gardens, and the use of land for houses.

Despite the expansion of the village inland, however, this remains a community very much oriented towards the sea. Fishing remains the basis of most people’s livelihoods, and the relationship to the ocean is at the heart of the Boera people’s identity and history. The village is renowned as the centre of the well-documented Hiri trade between the Motuan and Kerema people of the Papuan Gulf, which took place annually until the colonial administration put a stop to it in the late 1950s. (See also the profile on Yule Island in relation to the origins of Boera.) Each year, men travelled in large multi-hulled canoes called *lakatois*, carried by the *lahara*, the south-east wind, down to the Gulf where they traded clay pots for sago and other goods. The men would spend two or three months in the Gulf, doing repairs on their canoes and building relationships with the traders, waiting for the change in seasons which brought with it the west winds needed for the voyage home, but also storms and heavy seas. The return trips were dangerous and, laden down with extra cargo, *lakatois* often sunk on their way back up the coast.

According to the oral history of the Hiri trade, the first *lakatoi* was built by a man from Boera, Edai Siabo. When returning from a fishing trip one day, a huge eel appeared, dragging him under the surface. When the eel brought Edai back up, it instructed him to build a huge double-hulled canoe, fill it with clay pots and follow the *lahara* south-east towards the Gulf. The first *lakatoi* was called *Bogebada* (which means sea eagle in Motu), and it was filled with pots made by Edai’s wife. He instructed her to stay in the house for the whole time he was away, to not bathe in the sea, to keep track of the days he was away, to keep a fire burning and to have her skin tattooed by an old woman. The crew was away for months, and the villagers assumed them dead. They mocked Edai’s wife and told her to remarry, but she
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stayed true to his instructions. Then, one day the *lakatoi* appeared out on the horizon. Edai’s wife ran out of the house, washing herself in the ocean for the first time and dressing in her best costume. She began dancing, shouting ‘hedihoroha Bogebada!’

And so began the annual voyages, with both men and women adhering to the rituals set by Edai Siabo and his wife. The trade continued until the late 1950s, when a *lakatoi* sunk on its return trip to Boera, and the colonial authorities forbade the practice from continuing. After independence, there was an attempt made to reclaim and celebrate the history of the Hiri trade. The Hiri Moalea Festival is now held annually in Port Moresby. Timed to coincide with the PNG Independence Day celebrations in September, *lakatois* travel down from the coast to the city, and each year a *Hiri Hanenamo* (Queen) is appointed—a young woman whose behaviour and conduct shows respect for the traditions first established by Edai’s wife. She is chosen for her discipline, character, beauty, dancing, tattoos and knowledge of customs; and the contest is regarded as a way of encouraging young women to take an active interest in Motuan history and culture.

While the Boera people claim to be the original instigators of and principal actors in the Hiri trade, the history of the voyages has been absorbed into a broader Papuan narrative created in the post-Independence era. This has given rise to some contention over the past few decades, especially around the decision to hold the Hiri Moale Festival in Port Moresby, as opposed to in Boera, the birthplace of Edai Siabo. As a result, the Boera community has not fully participated in the Hiri Moale Festival, although there has been talk recently of reasserting their ownership of the history of the Hiri trade through hosting a festival in the village, at the original site of Davage Beach.

**Organization and Governance**

There are seven main clans in Boera, and traditional ownership of the land and sea is patrilineally passed down within families. The village is organized around a structure which weds the tribal clan system with the framework created by the arrival of Christianity in the late-nineteenth century, and the establishment of the United Church in Boera. The leadership structure consists of seven deacons, representing each of the major clans. From these deacons, a village chairman is chosen through elections held every two years. The role of the chairman is to provide leadership and co-ordinate the deacons, who meet to make decisions on local questions and issues. The chairman also works closely with the Pastor of the village church, who in turn coordinates three committees—the Women’s Fellowship, the Youth Ministry and the Children’s Ministry—all of which have a strong standing in the community.

A stone monument in the village commemorates the landing of London Missionaries at Boera in the 1880s, and in many ways the church and the Pastor’s house are the heart of the Boera community. The church organizes
social, religious and sporting activities, bringing together people from the different clans in Boera while also strengthening relationships with the nearby villages of Porebada and Lealea. Most people in the village are involved in the church, particularly through participation in the three committees. The Women’s Fellowship is particularly strong, acting as a social network while providing a space for the sharing of customary knowledge and cultural traditions. It also plays a key role in the economic organization and upkeep of the village. Women—who are generally responsible for selling produce in markets—contribute 30 per cent of their income to the Fellowship, and this provides a fund which is then used for building repairs and construction, running workshops and training sessions, and the upkeep of the medical centre and community school. The committees are in some senses indicative of modern forms of social organising introduced with the arrival of Christianity, but they also draw on the history of tribal and customary networks of Motuan men and women.

The Community Sustainability Questionnaire was conducted in Boera in August 2006. In total, there were 178 respondents, a sample that was broadly representative of the constituency of the village in terms of gender and age. Of those surveyed, 58 per cent had lived in the village for twenty-one years or more. Another quarter had been in Boera between eleven and twenty years. That is, a large proportion of people within the community have long established connections to the place in which they live, something which would seem to be congruent with the fact that Boera is an indigenous village. However, only 36 per cent of those surveyed indicated that they had lived in the village their whole lives. This would seem to indicate a relatively high level of mobility, which might be explained by the village’s close proximity to Port Moresby.

In terms of its social makeup, Boera is largely ethnically homogenous, with a predominantly Motuan population. There are a significant number of migrants within Beora who are connected to locals through intermarriage or wantok relationships, however many of these are from nearby Motuan villages. As in many places throughout Papua New Guinea, the question of how to respond to intermigration is an ongoing one. Some people express the feeling that intermigration is a source of social problems and tension, and they point to what they see as major cultural differences between Motuan people and those from other provinces. In general though, relationships between locals and migrants are well-functioning. Migrants who have established strong connections through intermarriage or wantok relationships are often granted rights to customary lands by locals in order to build houses and make gardens. However, efforts are being made to prevent the occupation of land by migrants who have not been explicitly granted rights of access.

Another source of social tension relates to the use of alcohol and other drugs, particularly marijuana. There are extensive trading networks with
locals inviting traders into the village to sell marijuana. Its relatively abundant supply makes it cheap, and villagers report high levels of regular consumption. Efforts to curb the supply have been unsuccessful. Likewise, attempts to curb the consumption of alcohol have had little effect. When one trade store owner attempted to obtain a license to sell alcohol his application was blocked by the village councillor on the basis of health and social problems attributed to alcohol consumption. Nevertheless, both young and older men have regular access to homebrew. It costs about five kina for a 500ml coke bottle filled with homebrew, which is enough to get a person drunk, and brewing is both easy and inexpensive.

Overall, however, the strategic conversations, community meetings and results of the Questionnaire indicated a relatively high level of wellbeing within the village. Seventy-six per cent of respondents said that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their community neighbourhood, and a similar number were satisfied or very satisfied with feeling part of that community. The results also indicated a comparatively good level of physical health. When asked to describe their own health, 57 per cent said it was ‘generally good’. Another 38 per cent said it was ‘sometimes good and sometimes poor’, and less than 1 per cent described their health as ‘generally poor’. This compares well to the overall results from all research sites.

Livelihood and Provision

Fishing provides the dominant source of income-generating work, and the basis for the staple diet. Men fish using lakatois—which carry three or four people at a time—or outboard motors, using nets and fishing line. Women primarily work collecting shellfish in shallows along the coast, and are responsible for selling the catch which is not used for their family’s own consumption. The fish is mainly sold at Gerehu Market, which is twenty-three miles away from Boera on the way into Port Moresby. Women who sell at the market travel there and back each day by truck, paying a fee of three kina each way, which is a not insignificant cost. Locally-owned PMVs (public motor vehicles) run from Boera into town, although the poor state of the roads means that many of them have broken down.

In addition to fishing, families in Boera also make gardens, with the crops grown mostly for their own consumption and not for selling. While the long dry season makes continuous growing difficult, the inland soil is generally quite fertile, although. During the rainy season crops like corn, pumpkin, yam, peanuts and green vegetables grow well. Fruits such as guava and pawpaw are also grown. Some drought-resistance crops, such as varieties of yam, banana and cassava have been introduced and offer an important food source, particularly during the dry season. There are also experiments with agro-farming techniques, with a demonstration project initiated by Sir Moi Avei in his own garden, using modern farming techniques for growing crops such as cabbages, lettuces, tomatoes, eggplants and melons. Villagers also grow traditional herbs and plants such as Noni (*Morinda citrifolia*), which
has a long history of use throughout South-East Asia and Polynesia, and is believed to have significant and wide-ranging medicinal qualities, including antibacterial, antioxidant, anti-tumour and anti-inflammatory properties.

Within the village, a number of families keep animals—chickens and pigs—for food, trade and customary purposes. The chickens kept are mostly traditional kinds, as opposed to modern breeds of meat chickens, which are more expensive to look after. Traditional types of chickens can be kept freely in the backyards of houses, and fed on food scraps instead of bought grain. Eggs provide an alternate source of protein to fish, and can also be sold at market, fetching around seventy toea a piece. Pigs are kept mainly as a source of income for families. As well as native pigs which are kept freely in the village, there are a number of piggeries containing modern cross-breed pigs. These are fed on store-bought feed, and there is a high demand for them, particularly from Highlanders living in the city, and mature pigs can fetch over a thousand kina. They are also used for feasting and contributing to bride price.

While the creek running through Boera has all put dried up there is, on the whole, a good level of access to fresh water in the village. There are a two modified traditional wells currently in use—reinforced with cement and wire mesh to prevent contamination—as well as a number of bore water pumps. One of these was established with donor support through the Health Department, while others are installed privately by families with the money to do so. In addition, an extensive Southern Cross solar pump system means that water is available from public taps located throughout the village. Water is drilled from the underground aquifer at a point between the two traditional wells, and pumped by a small generator to a reservoir located up the hill near the village community school. From there, water is piped through the village. The supply is controlled by the village Water Committee, and the reservoirs are opened at morning and night each day. Water is collected daily in containers and stored in homes for domestic use.

Some conflicts have arisen over rights of usage and access. When the research team was present in Boera in September 2006, the first of our three visits across 2006-08, disputes were observed relating to who had access to one of the wells providing drinking water. Because the well is located within the traditional land of a group of families, those families were claiming exclusive access rights. Other villagers responded by trying to assert traditional usage rights. Similarly, conflicts have arisen over the location of water pumps in the village, with customary landowners often claiming control over their usage. One, belonging to an ex-teacher, has been established as a user-pays pump, with villagers charged twenty toea per use—nominally for maintenance costs, but believed by many to be a personal profit-making exercise. Such disputes are evidence of the conflicting imperatives of customary land ownership and the establishment of public utilities, with questions of resource usage rights.
being compounded by contemporary factors of growing population and land pressures. On the whole, however, water supplies in the community are relatively secure, and in this regard Boera is fortunate in comparison to many other Central province villages, which often struggle to obtain sufficient water, particularly during the prolonged dry season.

In addition to fishing, agriculture and keeping animals, there are a few other ways in which people in Boera make their living. A number of people in Boera are engaged in formal employment in the private and government sectors in Port Moresby. A handful of these live in the village, and they commute daily using private or public vehicles. Some younger people move to the city in order to work and send money back to their families in the village. But, as is common throughout the country, formal-sector employment amounts to only a small proportion of all the livelihood activities undertaken by families in the community.

Some people in the village make a living through their skills in arts and crafts. Some individuals and families have skills in carving and shaping shells to make ornaments and jewellery. This is the main livelihood activity for one family in the village, which makes necklaces, armbands and earrings and sells them at market. Their skills are in high demand, with both locals and outsiders visiting them to place orders. Other people make string bags and sell these at markets as well. Roadside stalls are another source of income for some people, selling cigarettes, betelnut, store items and fried food. They tend to occur infrequently however, as the women who run them are usually busy with gardening, fishing and daily household activities.

It has been noted already that Boera was historically a centre of clay-pot making in Papua New Guinea, with pots used for trade as well as for cooking, storing water and preserving food. There is only woman now who knows how to make pots in the customary way, although efforts are being made to pass that skill on to a new generation of women. This is a complex and important skill, with cultural and historical significance for the community. If the villagers are successful in ensuring that it is passed on, this could be a potential source of income-generating activity, particularly if Boera does initiate a festival at Davage Beach to commemorate the Hiri trade.

Most of the money that is earned—through markets, raising animals, making craft items or working in the formal sector—is spent within the village. For most people in the community, food is the biggest expense. There are three trade stores in the village operated by families as household businesses. Their prices tend to be comparable to those in the city, and because of the costs of travelling to and from Port Moresby, most villagers depend on these stores for basic items such as soap, rice, tinned food and biscuits. School fees are another big expense, and can take a large chunk of a family’s income. Other regular expenses include transport costs and contributions to the Church.
Learning and Education

The community hall in Boera is regularly used as a community learning centre, for people in the village as well as those from neighbouring villages. Both government and NGO agencies use the space to conduct educational workshops, including training by the National Fisheries authority on simple methods of fish harvesting and processing; and HIV/AIDS workshops conducted by the National AIDS Council and the UNDP. These training sessions and other short courses have had high participation rates. The construction and upkeep of the community building was funded by the Women’s Fellowship, which also conducts a number of training and educational programs for women in the community. These range from basket-making, to health and nutrition, to agricultural skills and financial management. In addition to those workshops conducted in the village, the Fellowship uses the funds pooled by its members to pay for individuals to participate in other training and educational courses outside of Boera.

Formal education levels in Boera are comparatively high compared to the sites where research was conducted. The highest level of education achieved for 28 per cent of respondents to the Questionnaire was primary school. Another 43 per cent had had either some secondary education,
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or had completed it. Eight per cent of respondents had completed a university undergraduate education, which is the highest figure from any of the research sites, and significantly higher than the overall figure of 3 per cent. The establishment of primary and secondary schools within the village means that children no longer have to leave their families and customary lands in order to receive an education. This was identified as one of the reasons for the loss of customary skills, and so there is hope now that children and youth will be able to learn both modern and traditional forms of knowledge, without one coming at the expense of the other. Some community members commented, however, that the schools were not running well, with students often being sent home early in the day.

Clearly, there is demand for more training and better educational opportunities within the community, both formally and informally. When asked about learning and skills training, 86 per cent of respondents to the Community Sustainability Questionnaire in Boera either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, ‘More training is necessary for doing the work that I would ideally like to do’. When asked what sorts of training they wanted, 48 per cent thought that agricultural training would be useful, and 42 per cent identified income-generation as something they would like to receive training in. People also indicated a desire to have access to training about family life, and traditional ways of doing things.

People in Boera, particularly those of the older generations, talk with regret about the loss of customary skills and knowledge. One man, Paul, described the difficulty experienced in trying to run programs to teach the youth about their history and culture:

We used to have the old people go to the schools. The school had a program for traditional knowledge, art and craft, and the old people would go to the school and teach. But these things have all dropped off. Mostly it is passed through the family, the immediate family. The young generation now are not so interested, they just wander off.

Still, there are renewed efforts being made through peer education and the Youth Ministry. Paul says, ‘We are trying to put the local knowledge together with whatever new knowledge is coming from the outside; trying to blend our local knowledge together … to keep the fire alive.’

Endnotes