

**“Tragedies” in Out-of-the-way Places: Oceanic Interpretations of Another Scale’**

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**A story**

I had just walked about 100 metres to the river to look for the bush knife left by my seven year-old nephew, when I heard the sound of something heavy crashing through the trees. This was followed immediately by the agonizing scream now indelibly fixed in my memory. I sprinted back to the area where we had just finished chopping and loading firewood to find my 65 year-old mother-in-law, Sia, sprawled in the small stream with her lower right leg dangling by a finger-length thread of skin. A huge branch lay alongside her and she looked alternatively at her leg then at me with a combination of terror and disbelief. My aunt, who was also in our firewood gathering group, had already returned to the village with one load of wood and my nephew stood watching in frozen confusion. I pulled Sia gently out of the stream, her leg dragging behind her, and covered her lower body so we did not have to keep looking at her bloodless but almost detached lower limb. There was mixture of disbelief and inevitability in her eyes and her cries and the best I could do was utter reassuring words about getting help soon.

We were in a garden area accessible only by foot and some 30 minutes’ walk from the nearest houses. It was another twenty minutes’ walk to the nearest health centre with a radio-telephone, but some 500 kilometres away from the nearest emergency health care. In spite of the otherwise logistical impossibility of this situation, four years later, Sia is still with us, although not entirely

unscarred, thanks to the fortunate combination of local action and relative economic privilege. The swift and careful work of local women and men ensured Sia was carried out of the garden on a stretcher hastily made of bush materials, and taken to the health clinic before she lost consciousness. This effort was matched by that of Sia's son who lived in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea in the Western tropical Pacific. From his relatively privileged position, as a telephone owner and regular and credible employee of a large organization, he was able to mobilize financial resources quickly enough for a daylight emergency air evacuation from Wanigela's grassy airstrip.

### **The tragedy of tragedies: where is culture?**

Too many other people have died and continue to die in similar or more tragic incidents in 'out-of-the-way' places. For Tsing (1993: 27) 'an out-of-the-way place is, by definition, a place where the instability of political meanings is easy to see'. By this Tsing suggests that for communities who are located within the geographical boundaries of specific nation-states but are considered by urban majorities to be isolated and/or living primitive lives, the discursive constructions of the nation-state are easily contestable. She uses this concept to argue for understanding marginality as formed by dialogues between the relatively isolated Meratus Dyaks in South Kalimantan and urban, cosmopolitan Indonesians. By exploring the particularities of the Meratus arguments, Tsing effectively shows the intertwined and contestable links between small relatively isolated communities, the nation state and global entities. I build on this concept of 'out-of-the-way places' to make more explicit the potency of grappling with the slippery linkages that constitute and are constituted by the use of the more ubiquitous terms 'developing countries', 'the Third World' and 'the economic South'.

My use of 'out-of-the-way' purposely signals my dissatisfaction with these terms and the economic constructs upon which they rest. Although all these terms enjoy wide circulation in scholarly, institutional and activist discourses, their meanings are politically sensitive and are as often strategically specific as they are naively nonsensical. Though all concepts share the risk of eventually becoming engrained with unintended meanings, my use of 'out-of-the way places' is in keeping with Escobar's (1995: 14) plea for the 'liberation of the discursive field so that the task of imagining alternatives can be commenced'. As a less politically loaded term, 'out-of-the-way places' also provides for the possibilities of thinking about 'marginal' places differently. Local places are important even within the complex compressions of space and time that characterize the globalizing tendencies of contemporary political economies (McDowell 1999). However, they are also more than fixed, bounded entities. Local places are known and defined in relation to other places. Marginality is not just geographical distancing but also political, economic and cultural distancing. The importance of the concept of marginality is its imagined centre, which by definition, can be anywhere. An 'out-of-the-way place' then is also a relational concept that requires an examination of what and where the centre is. Equally important, this examination includes attention to the dynamics of local historical and cultural understandings. To engage with these insights requires working with complex constellations of culture and power at various scales of analysis. Tragedies can often cross these scales of analysis but in doing so, too often local places are overlooked.

Almost daily, tragedies involving the loss of human life capture the imagination of the world's media who effectively relay them to the collective imagination of those with access to

newspapers, radios, televisions and increasingly the internet. Often it is the sheer number of lost lives that catapults events from different parts of the world into distant homes. Other times it is the peculiar circumstances of human death and misery that makes them tragedies for so many people to be spectators to. Tragic though all these events are for the individuals involved, I am not concerned so much with the tragedies that make the headlines. Rather my focus in this paper is on the 'smaller-scale' tragedies that occur in out-of-the-way places, such as the one we avoided above. I am thinking about the tragedy of eighteen Tuvalu schoolgirls who were burned to death in their locked dormitory. The doors and windows were locked to stop the girls and boys meeting secretly in the night. The boys were not locked into their dormitories. I am also thinking about the daily death of women during childbirth, as the result of domestic and other bodily violence and as the result of both curable and incurable diseases.

Despite evidence from many reports and the pithy rhetoric from the appropriate authorities who have some responsibility for avoiding such tragedies, it seems that such tragedies may be a 'true' and enduring universal for humankind. For those bodies involved, the resounding response to this view is deadly silence. While there may well be some truly 'natural' tragedies, most human tragedies are preventable. For many people, the easiest way of preventing such tragedies is to consider the structural deficiencies that contribute, for instance, to inadequate rural health and education services. My argument is that greater attention needs to be given to the complex and place-specific constellations of power relations within which particular 'tragedies' occur. In this chapter I examine the complex power relations that constitute, and are constituted by, the small, closely knit community of Wanigela. Because the power dimensions in this community are cast in idioms and understandings from this particular place and time, solutions to the problems of

such tragedies as I have described are not couched in calls for better health or transport services. These solutions belong to the discourses of policy-makers and planners in national government offices who are situated in different places and times. Instead this is a story about how women, as a group and as individuals, are deeply embedded in the masculinist discourses that constitute the conflicts over the distribution of royalties flowing from a logging operation in Wanigela.

In this paper my intention is not that this particular narrative is transformative in itself, but as political philosopher Iris Young (1997) points out, when linked with other similar narratives, the effect is a subversion of those mainstream and malestream understandings of women that view development from a predominantly economic perspective. Instead this story emphasizes how working from the everyday experiences of women in out-of-the-way places provides for different ways of thinking about 'development' and 'politics'. This is the cultural dimension that has too long been 'black-boxed' in preference to globalizing economic analysis (Chua, Bhavnani and Foran 2000).

Furthermore, I hope to show that by examining the ways in which tragedies beset women in out-of-the-way places, new ways of thinking about bodies in development studies are exposed. By beginning with the body of a particular woman in a particular time and place, I am arguing here for more sexual embodiment in the practice of thinking about women and development. I argue that this is one highly effective way of identifying the major dimensions of power that constitute all social relations. Sia was not just an old woman going about her daily chores. She was intimately connected to a raft of highly contested land debates in the villages and for many people this 'accident' was related directly to her involvement in these debates, not just her

misfortune of being hit by a falling branch in a remote garden area. This formulation of culture as lived experience shows how it is possible to ensure that material and discursive constructions of development issues are mutually constituted.

### **Of site and situations**

I write this study after a fourteen year connection to Wanigela, Oro Province, Papua New Guinea, first as a relative by marriage and then as a graduate student. My contingent connections with this place have provided me with special, often privileged, access to language, kinship relationships and knowledge that I draw on for my analysis. I have visited Wanigela numerous times since 1986 and lived there for a number of months in 1995-6. Since then I have continued to visit although my current residence outside Papua New Guinea has limited my ability to remain closely in touch with one of the places I call 'home'. My formal research in Wanigela, which argued for a feminist post-structuralist approach to population geography and specifically fertility analysis (Underhill-Sem 2000), involved collecting demographic data, kinship information and detailed narratives of the maternity experiences of about 30 women in Wanigela. In addition to these more formal data gathering exercises, as a resident of Wanigela I was also involved in discussions about many current events in the area. The major one was the commencement of a relatively small-scale logging operation on a block of traditionally owned land that had been officially leased to the government some 50 years earlier. There were other issues of community concern that I was party to -- the sudden death of young mothers in one part of the village, plans for a new high school and ceremonial activities like bridewealth exchanges. Although relatively small, like many out-of-the-way-places, this community was big on issues to discuss. I draw on these informal discussions for this paper.

## **The everyday culture of resource politics in Wanigela**

Since the mid-1980s, the logging industry in Papua New Guinea has been under close scrutiny because of the relative ease with which corrupt practices by national politicians and bureaucrats have been able to siphon huge financial benefits away from the people who 'owned' the resources (Barnett 1992). A number of legislative and procedural attempts have been made by various national governments to establish a sustainable non-corrupt forest industry. However in the multi-ethnic and politically diverse country of Papua New Guinea, this is not an easy task and continues to be subject to political wavering among resource owners, elected politicians, forestry officials and foreign companies. Filer's (1997) work contains many detailed examples of how these tensions play themselves out at the local and national level throughout Papua New Guinea. In this analysis I am working from yet another perspective that further complicates these tensions because I want to get closer to the culture of politics embedded in the everyday lived experiences of women.

I return to the story that began this article. A year before Sia's accident in the garden, discussions had begun between a relatively small logging company based in another province in Papua New Guinea and some self-appointed representatives of the major clans in Wanigela. Although there had been interests in logging this area before, projects had never eventuated because land in Wanigela, like the majority of land in Papua New Guinea, remains in customary tenure and therefore subject to customary non-written 'law'. Clans are the basic landholding unit but rarely do clan lands in Wanigela form large contiguous blocks. Rather clan lands can be found at widely scattered locations. Boundaries to these lands are recognized verbally in relation to well-

known landmarks like rivers, large trees, mountains and depressions, many of which change gradually over time. For the purposes of large scale logging or mining, this system makes 'economically viable' blocks of land hard to identify unless there is a workable collaboration with the relevant landowners. This difficulty had prevented any previous logging projects.

In Wanigela, however, there was a 12,000-hectare block of land for which in 1954 the government had managed to negotiate a lease for 99 years. The lease was subsequently awarded to Utan Plantations for copra, coffee and cocoa production. In the early 1990s Utan was facing financial difficulties because of low agricultural prices compounded by an increasingly unreliable transportation system. Forced to find alternative ways to boost its low returns, it initiated discussions with various logging companies for the possibility of logging some of the hardwoods within its leasehold area. Only about 100 hectares of the 12,000 hectares leased were planted and so there was still a large part of the lease holding covered in hardwood timber with 58 years to run. Utan management finally contracted a relatively small logging company that opted to selectively log the hardwood and replant with fast-growing balsa. As a lessor, this was within Utan's right; however Section 2(a) of the lease agreement states that standing timber can be removed from the land for the 'purpose only of improvement of the land' (Lease Document). This provision clearly prohibits the lessee from cutting timber for sale so close attention had to be paid to how much would be paid to 'traditional' landowners and the local community, how this would be paid and more importantly to whom it would be paid. Furthermore, the government road did not run the entire way from the coast to the logging area so the use rights of parts of the road also had to be purchased, as did the land adjacent to the temporary landing jetty.

I am not going to detail the considerable debate that followed over how much was to be paid and how this was done. Instead I want to focus on how 'real' landowners are identified and especially how women are incorporated into this process. This is never an easy question in Papua New Guinea where over 90 percent of land is still held in non-written customary tenure. Every piece of land has its own history of ownership that is recalled in different ways by different people at different times. There is rarely a single correct interpretation but rather the greatest degree of acceptance is achieved when claims are no longer hotly challenged. Instead, contesting parties signal their agreement to disagree by retreating from public debates. Those bold enough to go ahead in this situation are taking a risk and it is more likely that the project or activity that led to the disagreements in the first place evaporates.

Women are closely involved in these debates because in Wanigela it is widely understood that they are also resource owners. Despite differences in the day-to-day life of men and women, there is always time for family groups to talk about these issues especially as couples and family groups walk to their often distant gardens on a regular basis. Women and men in different groupings are involved in a variety of activities ranging from laundry to house building and sports training to card playing, when there is often time for both fun and laughter as well as serious discussions. Moreover, when evening meals are eaten and it is time to drink tea or chew betel nut, the talk inevitably turns to these contentious issues.

In the case of the Utan leasehold property, the widely acknowledged owners were three major clans whose forebears were members of a surveying party that accompanied a government surveyor into the bush in 1946. Together they agreed where the boundaries were and a map was

drawn up and subsequently gazetted. The relative extent of the land belonging to each clan was reflected in the relative proportion of recompense each clan was given in return for their land. In the 1990s there were oral records of this survey and a collective memory of the proportionate share each clan was due. Each of the men originally involved had descendants currently resident in Wanigela although some groups had more representatives than others. My mother-in-law, Sia, was however the only resident descendant of one member of that group of three. As a woman this caused problems, but these were not problems of invisibility.

In this predominantly patriarchal place, where on marriage women become members of their husband's clans, the clans that the women originally came from are not, nevertheless, forgotten. So when it comes to sharing resources of one sort or another, these clans are only overlooked at the risk of later retribution. Women are not visible in various public hearings in which the sharing of resources, such as bride-wealth distribution, was debated. However, they are actively involved in the daily discussions that form part of the often many months of build-up leading to the more public event.

During 1995 and 1996, numerous meetings were held by various groupings of people -- clans who were the direct descendents of the three men who surveyed the land, neighbouring clan groups, distantly related clan groups and family groups. Women were part of all these groups. However, when it came to the large public meetings few women participated in the forum discussions although their presence was welcome for preparing and serving refreshments.

At first, Sia was not too concerned with the discussions because her husband and son were

attending the meeting as members of their own clan (Yeyeu) and, among other things, they were tracking events as they related to Sia's clan as well because it was well known throughout the area that she was a member of one of the major clans (Kwakwabu). Despite Kwakwabu not having a male representative in these meetings, Sia was confident her interests would be respected. However, as time went on Sia realized that other clans were claiming more of their share of the royalties. Sia then tried to generate the interest of a close cousin brother (male cousin) who was also part of her original clan but who had lived in the city for many years. She visited other clan members and sent letters to him. After a particularly urgent request from Sia, he eventually came back to Wanigela to attend a critical meeting. However, his lack of experience in the village discussions and his sidelining of Sia's advice saw him go off on a tangent. For Sia, he had failed to pursue the proper justice for their clan that she had hoped, as a man, he could.

Instead of letting the issue go and despite active intervention by her husband and younger son on her behalf, Sia increased her correspondence with her first-born son who lived in Port Moresby. As a member of his father's clan, Sia's son was not directly involved in the land under dispute although every clan had important information to contribute in providing the context for which clans owned which land. However Sia was asking him to help her gain the recognition she felt was owing to her father's clan. There was a financial interest involved but the more pressing concern for Sia was to ensure that her father's clan was not covertly overlooked. Helping his mother with these issues meant her son would be transgressing longstanding norms about respecting one's mother's brothers. Instead he would be directly challenging their interpretations of historical events. With little hesitation, Sia's son responded actively to his mother's request.

He investigated the company and the lease. He studied the relevant documents and followed the legal requirements for royalty payments and he confronted the lessors over the interpretation of the lease and the people they had identified as beneficiaries. Throughout these weeks he was relaying information back to his parents in the village who in turn kept him informed of developments in the village.

Over the several months that this story unfolded, Sia was moving around the village more than usual. In addition to other tasks such as gardening, marketing and attending to church activities, she was also visiting the houses of related clan members. Over time, Sia also became a familiar face at the public discussions. If she did not make it because of conflicting responsibilities like caring for sick family members or being unwell herself, then her husband or village-resident son would attend the meetings and relay news back to her. It was clear that she was being kept informed of discussions and had an opinion about them. Quite often her opinion differed from that of the expressed consensus of the meeting. But she was not the only woman raising alternative views. Nie, the widow of another clan cousin, fully supported Sia. Her position was slightly different however, as it was Nie's husband's clan she was defending because her son, though currently resident in the village, was not confident about talking about custom matters in public forums.

### **Accidents do happen**

As discussions were getting more heated and various people were traveling to and from Port Moresby in attempts to influence the distribution of royalty payments, the first accident occurred. An integral space in all housing areas in Wanigela is a platform or veranda, the kema,

sometimes attached to the main house and sometimes a separate structure. It is the place where people meet, talk, eat and often sleep. Because it is so well used, it is solidly constructed and well maintained. Rarely does it collapse. However, one evening the kema belonging to Nie's family collapsed under Nie leaving her with a badly bruised leg. Although not a life threatening accident, she left for care in the city a few days later. The next incident, involving Sia, occurred about three months later and was life threatening.

Few people made the connection between these incidents publicly, yet for most the message was clear. These two women were overstepping the bounds by their engagement in contentious land issues and should keep away. Along with many other people, I never learned how these 'accidents' were thought to have happened. This knowledge was not shared and talked about -- it was not discursively constructed. However, after Sia's accident, the family decided to stay further away from land discussions even though they felt they were getting closer to reaching that state of agreeing to disagree. This was Sia's explicit advice because she feared the next incident would be fatal. We all concurred with her wishes and did not engage any further in the discussions even though members of our family held particular documents, so we were still approached for advice from other related clans.

The logging continued for about eighteen months before all the machinery was shipped out. Shortly thereafter, logging trucks were no longer tearing down the road raising dust and scattering those who were walking. The road quickly reverted to the foot track it used to be, complete with patches of mud and grass growing in the middle. The balsa continues to grow but there are no plans for harvesting it. Royalty money was distributed and Sia's clan got some but

the final pool for distribution was never known. People were no longer flying between Port Moresby and Wanigela every week or so. Some trade stores closed up. Fewer baked products were sold at the market. There were no more public meetings about land issues. Sia was back in the village after almost a year in Port Moresby including several months in hospital. Now she sometimes walks with the aid of a stick. She and her family still talk about land issues in their private spaces. The story is still told of Sia's accident and numerous interpretations are made of it. I have presented just one version of this story to provide a glance at how embedded the various layers of politics and culture are with each other.

How the branch fell on her I cannot say -- perhaps someone had been in the garden area earlier. Perhaps someone was in the garden area but we did not see any traces of him or her. Why did the branch fall on Sia? Perhaps she was pushing the boundaries. Perhaps her son was pushing his boundaries. Perhaps it really was just a kind of warning. Perhaps a more powerful sorcery would have successfully caused Sia's death and a greater disability. Perhaps there were other people involved. Whatever the answers to these and other questions, this incident will never simply be put down to being in the wrong place at the wrong time. This incident was shaped by resource conflicts in Wanigela just as similar disputes in Wanigela are now constituted by this incident. The answers to the many questions raised by this incident and indented on Sia's body are part of a wider localized understanding of how the world works. They are part of the materially and discursively constructed culture of Wanigela that needs to be taken into consideration in any discussions of development.

**Tragedies in out-of-the-way places: matters of scale**

So what does this story tell us about tragedies on an oceanic scale? And where do women come into this picture? Although women in Papua New Guinea as a group are widely known to be the backbone of the community, they simultaneously continue to suffer a far lower status than men. In many ways the daily lived experience of many women in Papua New Guinea is characterized by hardship, abuse and often death. Campaigning for the rights of women in Papua New Guinea is one critical way to develop a context for women to be heard in local and national democratic places. Yet the potency of women's involvement in local politics, as the above discussion illustrates, cannot be overlooked. Women do have power but not the sort of power that is vested in specific institutions. The power women have is situated in specific places and times because it is simultaneously constitutive and constituting of the societies and polities they belong to. That is, this power is not only woven into the very fabric of society but it also emerges from the general fabric to constitute the many ways in which women express themselves either as a group or individually. One can therefore not damage women without damaging critical warps and wefts in the fabric that is the society. One cannot also predict or suppose a precise way in which women, as a group or individually, will exercise the power they hold. One can be sure though that it will happen.

The two women in Wanigela drew on more power than other members of the society were comfortable with. They were involved in discussions but both Sia and Nie were unconvinced that their concerns were being genuinely addressed so they continued talking. Unable to convince Sia and Nie otherwise, other members of the community chose other ways to express their opinion more forcefully and thus the bodies of these women became the focus of discontent. And with this bodily restraint, their opponents won. In other places, women are

routinely raped, impregnated or physically tortured as a form of overpowering or disempowering them. My analysis seeks to show that while women and young people are very vulnerable to such despicable and uninvited incidents, their assailants inadvertently acknowledge the tremendous power they also hold.

The matter of scale that arises in this analysis draws on new thinking about working with a concept of scale 'not as size (census tract, province, continent) or level (local, regional, national) but as a relational element in a complex mix that also includes space, place and environment' (Howitt 1998: 49, cited in Marston 2000: 220-1). This is useful for understanding the apparent contradiction of the grandness of the concept of Oceania viewed against the localized understandings of place in Wanigela. In this way the matter of scale becomes one of an analysis of the embodiment of power in social relations and the places in which they operate.

Understanding 'scale' only as how the 'local' dovetails into the 'regional' which dovetails into increasing levels of geographical size ending with the 'global' is part of an economic and biological imagination that fails to account for fluid cultural understandings and imaginations.

### **A woman's body scarred**

I have purposely used a particular experience in which a sexually distinct body is scarred. The sexuality of this body is not obviously relevant. Yet on the other hand it is highly relevant. I want to take women's bodies as being more than childbearing bodies. They are also hard working bodies capable of considerable effort and strain in their daily lives. Yet the strength that eventually comes from this hard work, like men's bodies, is not invincible. Like men's bodies, women's bodies can be broken. And when this happens it is a tragedy.

In this paper I have shown that by focusing on the bodies closest-in, their flesh and blood and pain, collective 'bodies' 'out there' -- that is, how women are discursively constructed -- cannot so easily be denuded of their materiality, and therefore so easily overlooked. Rather than take the many examples I could draw on about the untimely and often unfair death of women in childbirth, or as the result of domestic, civil or national violence, I want to discuss the politics entwined in masculinist activities. By doing this my analysis is intended to bring women's bodies into the centre of masculinist discourses about politics and land in the Pacific.

With reference to approaches that polarize political economy from cultural politics, Young (1997: 149) argues that 'specifying political struggles and issues in more fine-tuned and potentially compatible terms better identifies possible conflict and alliance.' Here I have examined the political nuances that surround one particular tragedy in one out-of-the-way place, by focusing on the lived experiences of women in out-of-the-way places. Taking this example of an accident that could happen to anyone in many places -- where large trees still stand -- my intention is to widen the argument surrounding the bodily position of women in the day-to-day politics of life. In doing this I draw attention to the ways in which women are actively shaping their lives by drawing on Young's (1994) concept of seriality which explains how sometimes women come together as a veritable force to be reckoned with, but that at other times women as a group and individual women are not able to come together.

An undercurrent in this paper is the concept of scale in terms of collectivities. Being situated in Oceania where the 'problem of smallness and remoteness' is a familiar leitmotif embedded in

many discussions of development (Hau'ofa 1993), I work with the concept of 'out-of-the-way places' to force a rethinking of the power relationships between places, regardless of geographic scale. This is not to say that large-scale human slaughter is unimportant since the protection of all human rights is an ongoing challenge. Nor do I wish to silence the call for greater action on the part of larger industrialized countries to take responsibility for their contributions to environmental degradation on a global scale. But my aim here is to contribute to the sexual embodiment of development studies by forcing closer attention to the bodies closest-in so that the collective 'bodies' out there cannot be so easily overlooked.

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