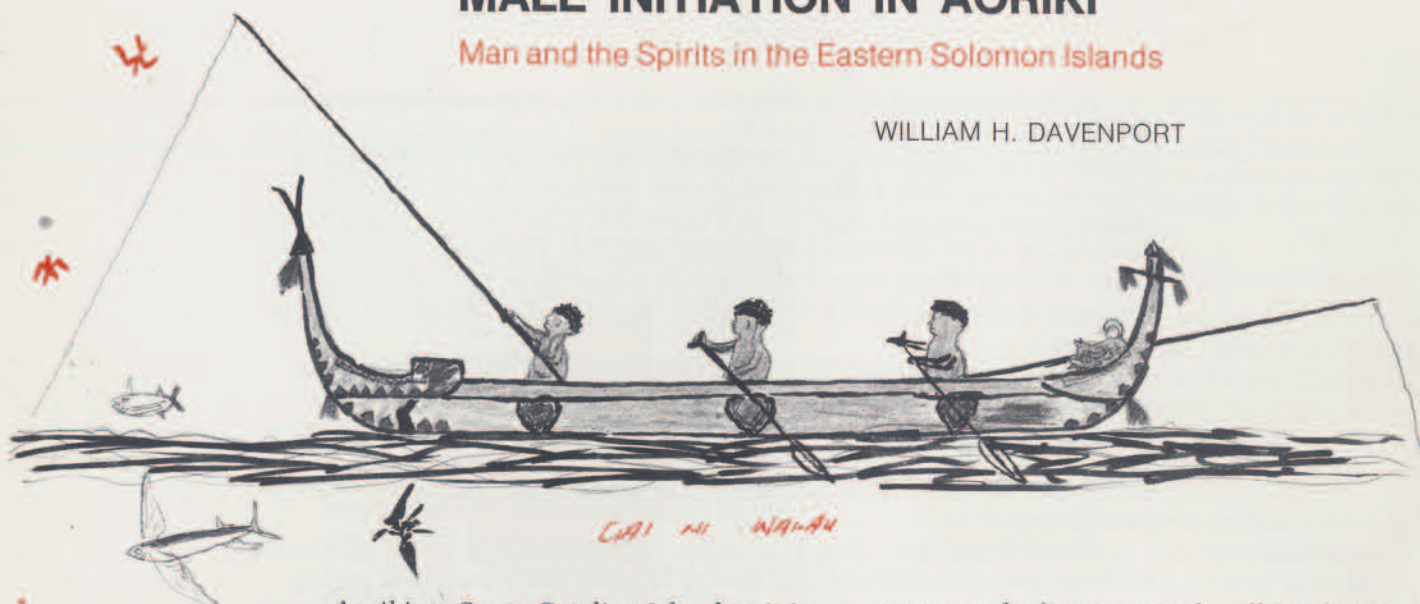


## MALE INITIATION IN AORIKI

Man and the Spirits in the Eastern Solomon Islands

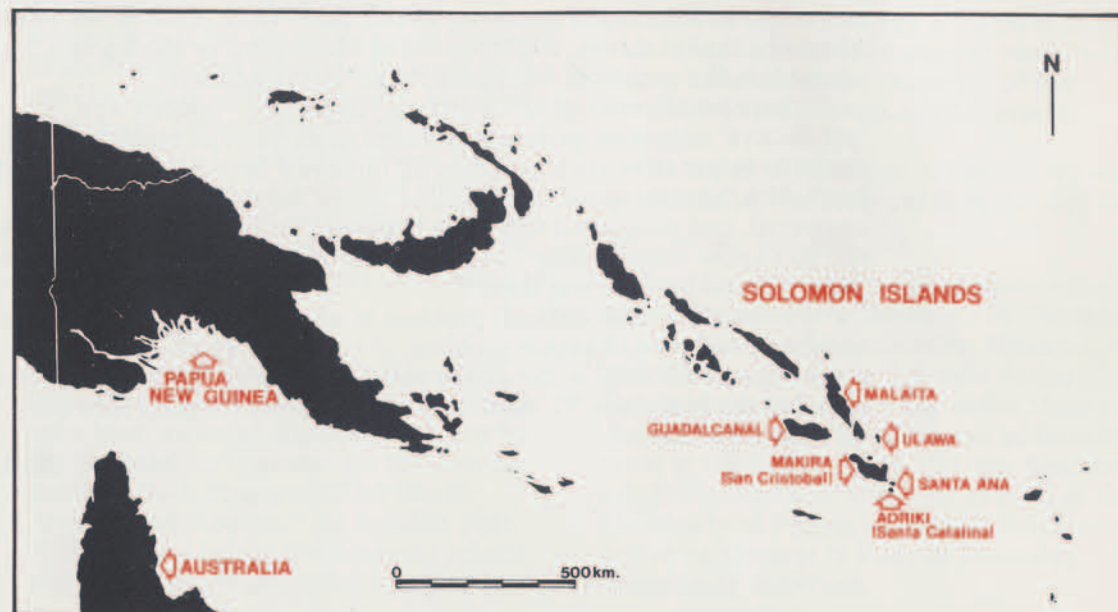
WILLIAM H. DAVENPORT



1. A canoe and its crew approaching a school of bonito indicated by the fishing birds overhead. The forward crewman has dropped his paddle and picked up his pole; the crewman aft tends the pole which is trolled all the time. The figure with the curled-back tail on the stern piece represents a dog that figures in the myth that explains how the deities communicated with humans how to fish the schools of bonito. Drawn by Wagosi of Gupuna Village, Santa Ana Island.

Aoriki, or Santa Catalina Island as it is marked on charts of the southwest Pacific Ocean, is located at the eastern extremity of the Solomon Islands. It has a twin, Santa Catalina, which lies close by, and the two are separated from a much larger island, San Cristobal, by just a few miles of sea. The three names were given to these islands, along with others such as Guadalcanal (of World War II fame), by the Spanish navigator Alvaro de Mendaña de Neyra who encountered the Solomons in 1567. Aoriki has a population of less than 300

persons who live in a single village that is divided into several wards. The communities of Aoriki, Santa Ana and adjacent shores of San Cristobal speak closely related dialects and share the same culture. One of the major ceremonial observances of this culture is the initiation of young males, sometimes described as an initiation into a cult of the bonito. However, due to the progress of Christianity in the area, periodic initiations had ceased—for the time being at least—in all communities but that of Aoriki at the time the study re-



2. Map of the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.



3. Two bonito canoes headed for sea. Each has two lines streamed aft and a forward pole at the ready should fish be encountered. Santa Ana Island in the background. May 20, 1966.

ported here was made. The initiation is, as would be expected, a very religious one. The rite, as I shall attempt to show, also reveals the way humans stand in relation to the oceanic world, according to Aoriki modes of thought.

The object of the Aoriki initiation of boys is to prepare them for participation in an important ritual activity that all young men will be called upon to perform later, when they reach full physical maturity. The activity is the fishing for species of bonito and tuna (collectively called by a single generic term, *wai*au, which will be translated here as "bonito") but principally for the skipjack (*Katsuwonus pelamis*), schools of which appear during the hot months of shifting winds from March to June. Thus, the initiation rite is called "initiation to bonito" (*marafu ni wai*au), but also with a connotation of transformation and change which is one meaning of the lexical form *mar*-.

Bonito, however, are not classed as ordinary fishes. They are sacred, because they are controlled by and are manifestations of tutelary deities. One biological reason for this is that as a group the bonito have copious red blood that resembles that of humans. To fish for bonito is to enter directly into the realm of the supernatural and to come into the immediate presence of deities who also control the destinies of the living. In many ways the behavior of tutelary deities with respect to bonito is an

index of their current attitudes toward humans: allowing the schools to appear and permitting humans to catch them is an indication that the deities are feeling generous and pleased. Moreover, fishing for them is a duty—it must be done—and if successful, it also produces what is considered to be a most delectable food.

Bonito fishing from small canoes in the open seas is extremely arduous. Only younger men in top physical shape can go out, from morning until dusk, sometimes many miles from shore, searching for the elusive and fickle schools. Thus, while the initiation of young boys constitutes spiritual transformation in anticipation of the sacred work ahead, it is also a rite that is directed toward the development of physical strength and stamina. Put another way, however, to be an adult man in a minimal sense is to be able to engage in the search for bonito, first as a crewman in the special canoes, later as a sponsor of both the annual fishing quest and the initiations of the young males.

An initiation is held whenever there is a group of perhaps ten or so boys between the ages of six and twelve years whose fathers are eager for their sons to be put through the rite. Even though it is fathers who support the rite, it is an affair of the entire community; everyone becomes involved, for it is also a community-wide ritual propitiation to the deities. It is predictable when an initiation will be scheduled, because the existence of uninitiated boys dictates the need, but not every attempt to hold one is successful. For each initiate there must be caught a fish, and sometimes an entire season will pass without any being caught, or an initiation may be commenced but insufficient fish are caught to put all the potential initiates through the rite. Also, each initiation is a continuation of the last, for the final public episode in the rite is an offer and acceptance of a pledge by one senior man to organize and be host for the next initiation.

The initiation that I recorded and is described here was held on Aoriki Island from April to September in 1966. In 1964 an initiation had been held, but not enough fish were caught to put all the boys through. A pledge to hold another the following year had been made, but the 1965 bonito season was a complete failure: not a single fish was caught. The 1966 initiation was another try, and as it turned out only enough fish for nine of the waiting fifteen were caught.

At the start of the 1966 season four

bonito canoes with crews of three young men were readied, each under the direction of a senior influential man who owned the canoe. Such crews stay at the ready every day in case schools of bonito are sighted from shore, and for varying periods they go to sea regularly to search out schools that might be out of sight of land. The crews must remain sexually continent and also avoid certain foods and domestic activities that are considered to be contaminating and offensive to bonito.

In 1966 a special purification ritual was held over the four canoes. Two canoe owners had been notified, through dreams, by their tutelaries that the previous year's failure had been due to pollution of the canoes and crews. Holding such a ceremony might increase the chance of success in the current year. For this ritual, several pigs had to be contributed, enough to distribute small portions to the entire Aoriki community.

Commencing the first week in April at least two of the four canoes went out each day, weather permitting. Schools were often sighted, but by the time the canoes reached them, they dispersed. By way of explanation, a school, or shoal, of skipjack bonito is an extraordinary phenomenon. One forms when a school of bait, clustered on the surface, is discovered by the bonito and also by several species of birds. If the bait holds, the school holds; if the bait disperses, the school collapses. Sometimes the school holds together only a few minutes, sometimes for hours. A fully developed school is a frenzy of predation: thousands of thrashing and leaping bonito and dozens of diving, swooping birds feeding on the bait; large groups of sharks closing in from the outside snapping at anything. The sea roils with fish, parts of fish and blood, true fishing birds plummet in for catches and dart out to contend with intimidations from the other species bent on robbing them. And there is the noise, a cacophonous blend of bird shrieks against the roar of a churning sea.

Each school of bonito has its own distinctive markings and behavioral characteristics, which are reflections of the personality of the tutelary deity that controls it. Each school has its inaccessible home place in the sea where it comes from and retires to after feeding. Only the controlling deity brings his bonito school forth so the fishermen can try to attract the treasured fish to their pearl shell lures. It is a game, but it is a very sacred game. (See cover drawing.)

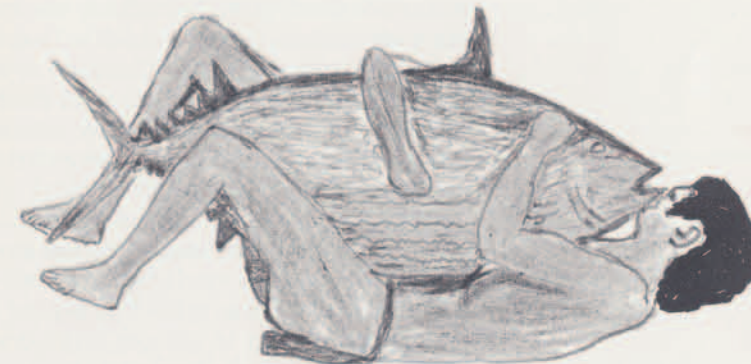
After many days searching and trolling a single bonito was caught. At the canoe house from which the successful crew went out, it was consumed, ritually, by the men who had sons awaiting initiation. In this way, the meal was dedicated to the tutelaries of those men, for at every ritual meal it is assumed a man's tutelary is also present. There were individual, silent prayers for more bonito so the initiation could go forward.

During the month of April nine more bonito were caught: six on one day, two on another, one on still another. Two canoes were responsible for the nine landings. The deities were teasing the fishermen, yet it was encouraging compared with the season before.

As a bonito canoe returns to its passage and canoe house, the crew signals, first by a style of paddling, later by shouting, whether or not it has met with success and how much. If there is success word spreads immediately, and most people drop what they are doing to come to watch the landing. Men gather in front of the canoe houses, women view from other vantage points, for they are never permitted to come in front of the houses or close to the canoes. This is true of every successful bonito catch, but in the case of the initiation, a group equal to the number of fish caught is taken to the canoe houses for their ritual induction. The boy to receive the first initiation is usually the son of the most energetic sponsor who was also the first father to declare his support for an initiation at this time. Each boy is taken individually into one of the returning canoes and made to lie on his back amongst the fish in the bottom while clasping one fish, head up, to his chest. Women, standing on the adjacent beach and reef, wail and cry in protest to the taking of "their son" to the distant "places of the bonito." They will not see the boy again for several months, because he will be isolated in the canoe house, and when he comes back to them he will no longer be a child. In a spiritual sense he will be a man.

While the initiate, as a fish actually, is paddled out to sea for the first time in the bonito canoe, his mother quickly roasts a yam. When the canoe returns to the canoe passage, the boy is fed a morsel of the staple in the canoe as a token meal in order to sustain him for the next and most crucial part of the initiation.

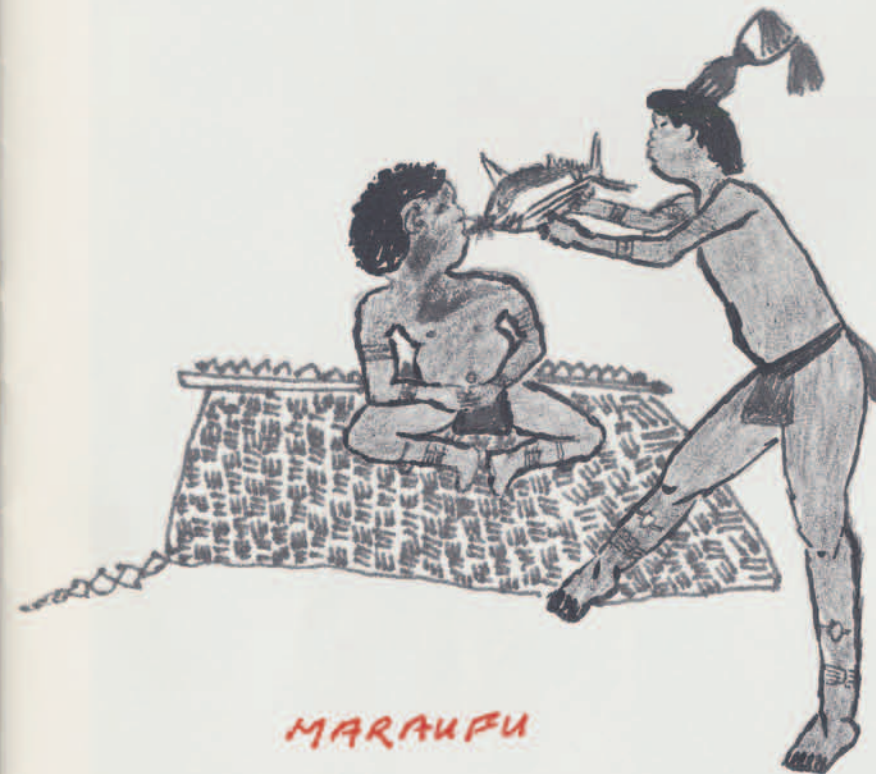
From the canoe the initiate is conducted to a platform, an altar, located to one side



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4 Detail sketch of the initiate clasping his bonito in the canoe. Drawn by Wagosi of Cupuna Village, Santa Ana Island.

5 The ritualist, wearing the comb symbol of the initiation, offers a spell and drops some blood into the mouth of an initiate. Drawn by Wagosi of Cupuna Village, Santa Ana Island.



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and in front of the canoe house. It is here that all bonito are first placed. The initiate's father or another senior man carries the fish that the initiate clasped, cradled in both arms with the head to the left, from the canoe to another man who is standing by the platform. The latter is one who has hereditary powers to perform the most mystical part of the ritual. In this context he is a sacred person and treated with appropriate deference and respect, although in ordinary life he is an ordinary person. The transformation ritual may take one of several forms: a few drops of blood from the bonito's mouth are dropped into the initiate's mouth, parts of the initiate's body are touched with the snout of the fish, or the initiate may be simply anointed with salt-water taken from inside the canoe, which is mixed with the blood of caught fish. In each case, however, an appropriate spell must be spoken by the ritualist as he performs the act.

In 1966 the youngest boys were made to turn their backs to the ritualist and he touched each cheek, shoulder, arm, side of the body, hip, thigh and knee. Older boys received drops of blood in their mouths. It was felt that the effects of the latter are so potent that younger boys might not have the stamina to recover from them. Immediately after receiving the mystical essence from the bonito (made potent by the ritualist's spell) each initiate is assisted, as though he were so weakened he could not walk, to a prepared bed in the canoe house. Attendants see to it that those who were merely touched by the bonito remain absolutely still for several hours; those receiving the blood had to remain quiet for much longer. To move around immediately after the ritual would be to prevent the body from recovering from the shock it received. It might even endanger the initiate's life. The initiates now must remain in isolation from all women and the environs of the dwelling area for months and until preparations have been completed for a major celebration which marks their return to their households and normal village life.

The period of isolation is seen as being analogous to an extended period of recuperation, but there is an explicit avoidance of any practices or foods associated with a woman's recuperation from childbirth. For the first few days initiates are fed only liquids and soft foods, mainly water and grated meat from coconuts. There is a parallel here, too, with the first days of life during which the infant is fed only coconut



**6** The *pogopago*, or payoff. A father of one of the initiates makes a payment of shell currency to one of the crewmen of the canoe that caught the initiation fish for his son. Drawn by Wagosi of Gupuna Village, Santa Ana Island.

**7** *Pogopago*, making payments to the ritualist. The platform altar on which the initiates were given the transformation ritual is to the left and is heaped with areca nuts for the ritual meal to follow. July 4, 1966.

water until the mother's milk is flowing. Spells must be spoken over these first feedings. "My coconut, Porokera (a tutelary deity) I grate it for your initiate." "Make the body of your initiate grow large, stay healthy and gain lightness (agility)."

Before each initiate received his transforming ritual special preparations had been made for the period of isolation to follow. Each had a fine new sleeping mat, new baskets to hold food, a special pointed stick used to husk coconuts and a scraper for the meat, both of which are handed down from one initiate to another. Coconuts picked for the initiates' consumption must be lowered down on lines, not dropped as is usual, so they never touch the ground.

At the initiates' dwellings all food prepared for them is cooked separately, on different hearths which are raised above the ground. Fire cannot be carried over from the domestic hearth to that for the initiates. Only a hard wood, used for adze handles and other men's tools is to be used as firewood. Never may a woman light her smoking pipe from the initiate's hearths. Most important of all, however, initiates must



not be seen by females, especially their heart and stomach regions, which are considered to be in a critical and unstable condition following the initiation. If the initiates are conducted away from the canoe house for fishing or a diversion, they are given coconut fronds to carry, behind which they can hide, should a chance encounter with females occur. In brief, the initiates are sealed off from all domestic life, from gardens, and even from ground (such as beneath coconut trees) where women congregate and work.

Even though there are constant attempts to amuse and entertain the initiates, the weeks and months of isolation are very boring. Some cry for their mothers, and a few never stop trying to escape back to the familiar comforts of their households. Therefore, they are never left to themselves and are under constant surveillance. There is also an attempt to keep them amused by talking about the excitement and dangers of bonito fishing and going on trading voyages, myths and folktales are told, but there is no organized attempt to impart either special knowledge or moral precepts. Mostly, the older men who watch over the youngsters merely try to entertain them and ward off homesickness. One special regime only is followed: at night the boys

**8** Three senior men honor their tutelary deities at the *pogopago* by eating first at the front center kingpost of the canoe house. The leaf parcel hanging from the post is an offering of pork; the bunch of green nuts is an offering of areca for betel. July 4, 1966.



are grouped around a hearth in which the fire is kept burning brightly enough to make their shadows dance on the walls of the canoe house. The initiates are urged to gaze into the flame, which is believed to strengthen their eyes and sharpen their night vision.

In 1966 the weeks of isolation dragged on for the nine initiates, while six more youngsters were waiting in the village for bonito to be caught for their initiations. However, the daily searches for fish were fruitless. In the middle of June it became clear that the strong southeast winds had returned and the bonito season was over. Steps were taken to close the initiation and to move ahead with the remaining observances.

The initiation phase of the rite closes with a formal settling of accounts (*pogopago*). The recipients in the settlement are six: the ritualist who performed the rite of transformation, the three crewmen of a canoe that caught fish, the custodian or owner of the canoe, and the tutelary deity of the custodian and canoe. The principal contributors are the organizer of initiation, the fathers of the initiates who received fish from the successful canoes and male kin and friends of each of the fathers who wished to help.

At the canoe house where the initiates were isolated the successful canoes were brought outside and placed before the platform altar. Three removable thwarts were placed on a mat on the ground alongside. The entire male population of Aoriki was assembled to witness the transaction. The name of one of the canoes which caught bonito was called out, and all those making contributions dropped coins, fruit bat or dogs' teeth currencies, or tobacco at locations designated for the six recipients: on the altar for the ritualist, on the three thwarts for the crewmen, on the canoe at the stern for the custodian of the canoe, on the bow of the canoe for the tutelary. There is a distinction between those contributions made outside the canoe, which the recipients may use in any way they wish, and those made on or inside the canoe which, as all things associated with the canoe, are sacred and cannot leave the sacred precincts of the canoe house, that is, can be used only for sacred purposes.

The payment was repeated after the name of the second successful canoe was called. No recognition was made of the two canoes that did not provide fish. Their custodians and crews were suffering mild humiliation at not being able to catch any

fish. Following the second round of payments, the entire group sat down to a meal in front of the canoe house, (food supplied from the households of the sponsors) but not before sponsors and leading man honored the deities present by first tasting their food at the place of honor of the canoe house, the front center kingpost, where offerings of betel and morsels of food had been hung.

Late in July another ritual was called, the "disposal of coconut husks" (*siki rai gawona niu*). This consisted of a community-wide celebration around the disposal of the accumulated refuse left over from the initiates' food. Since emphasis is placed upon consuming coconuts (which have a growth cycle that is likened to that of humans), all refuse from initiates' food is referred to as "coconut husks," of which there is an abundance. Food introduced and consumed at a canoe house becomes sacralized, and in the process it is moved in a defined sequence across ritual spaces. Initially, all foodstuffs (bonito most of all) are placed on the outside altar (*raitau*). It is from here, too, that prepared foods are distributed to those eating in the vicinity. Unprocessed food is moved from the *raitau* to the front central kingpost (as mentioned before), the honored location for the deities. For example, all bonito must be hung by their tails from the post before cleaning and cooking. The ground directly below, where the bonito blood drips, is an especially hallowed spot on which no one may sit or stand, but over which offerings to deities must be made. Prior to cooking in an earth oven in the canoe house, fish are cleaned and other food is prepared on an enclosed space just inside the left front of the house (*raterate*). This is the refuse accumulating area, where nothing can be disturbed or removed without attendant ritual. It is the cleaning out of the initiates' refuse from the *raterate* that is the concern of the "disposal of coconut husks." All matter removed from the *raterate* must be taken to sea where it will not be disturbed by rats and dogs nor encountered by uninitiated boys and women.

The community feast accompanying the ritual of disposing coconut husks is entirely secular. It is a recognition of the secular efforts that the entire community has expended on behalf of the initiation. In 1966 seven pigs were contributed by the fathers of the initiates which along with lavish portions of festive puddings were distributed to everyone, household by household, and

to many guests who had come from neighboring communities. Each major contribution of pork and prepared puddings (cooked staples mashed with coconut oil or canarium almonds) to the feast made by the father of one of the initiates was made up partly from his own resources and partly from contributions of supporters. However, each contribution of a supporter is either a return for a similar favor done in the past or is a gesture that must be reciprocated in the future. Thus, feasts involve hundreds of debits and credits from the past and projected into the future, the most minute details of which are indelibly remembered.



At the canoe house, a special distribution of food from one large container, filled with pudding and topped over with pork, was made to each initiate, his father and close male relatives. But the bulk of food was consumed by recipients at their own households, and visitors carried away most of what they received in order to further redistribute to others who did not attend.

At this juncture a decision had to be made as to whether or not preparations should commence for the return of the initiates to the community as soon as possible or to wait until the following year after the harvest of new gardens which

9 Seven of the initiates during isolation in the canoe house. They are standing among the bows of three bonito canoes. Their hair has not been cut for several months. September 6, 1966.

10 An initiate carrying a coconut palm frond screen to prevent women from seeing his body. Drawn by Wagosi of Gupuna Village, Santa Ana Island.

11 Three older men keeping initiates entertained at the canoe house by demonstrating some handicraft. September 6, 1966.



were about to be planted. The problem is an economic and social one and is not related to the condition of the initiates who, by now, are considered to be recovered from their ritual change.

The celebration around the initiates' return to secular life is linked with the harvest of yams which by late July has been completed. If the harvest has been good (but Aoriki never has a great one) the festivities are memorable; if the harvest has been poor, the celebration is commensurate. That is the economic factor. The social factor is due to the fact that the man who pledged to organize the entire rite is under

competitive pressure to produce a spectacle that will be a delight to all. If he succeeds he will be praised; if he fails, he will be ridiculed. If he goes ahead in the face of a bad harvest, he is expected to purchase what can't be obtained locally, and that is a very praiseworthy effort. If he cannot call up the resources to put on a great display, he will be accused of assuming a responsibility he could not fulfill.

In 1966 the harvest had been only moderately good, but it was decided to go ahead with the grand finale. Women immediately began to assemble at designated garden shelters all of the yams that were not



needed as seed for the next year's gardens. The sponsoring men went to work assembling other staples and necessities for a feast which would honor all the women of Aoriki for their hard work in the gardens and their support of the initiation effort. Many of the men visited other communities to purchase what was needed: betel nuts, coconuts and various kinds of staples other than yams. On July 22nd every household prepared feast foods while all the men fished. No pork is served at this celebration. On the next day women in relays carried baskets of yams down to the village. Groups, led by single women, followed by younger girls and



married women, sang and danced all the way back to the outskirts of the village where each called out the quantity of yams she carried. With each call, someone in the village answered with a loud cry of affirmation. All the yams were collected at the houses of the sponsors, and a very careful accounting of the number from each donor was kept. In all, 1,060 were delivered (as compared with 2,140 in 1964).

With the delivery complete the women gathered in one part of the village to be served their feast by the men. The first and largest portions of soup, puddings, fish, and betel, went to the oldest married women, each of whom was presented her food individually. Next to receive were all other married women, and they too received individual presentations. Single women were served in groups. Children were fed from their mothers' food; men officially did not receive anything, although they snacked out of sight in kitchens.

Work for the final ceremony falls exclusively on men, allowing the women to turn their attentions to new gardens. The task is to build a high platform which will be a

**12**  
Decorating the platform. The posts have been covered with yams; two men are hanging bunches of canarium almond from the ceiling. August 27, 1966.

**13**  
Hanging special offerings of yams to the tutelary deities on an upright atop the platform. September 7, 1966.



**14**  
Dressing one of the initiates for the re-entry procession. September 8, 1966.

stage for the initiates to mount and show themselves to everyone at their return from isolation. However, the platform (*qea*) and most observations connected with their return are subject to much creative elaboration. In fact, each ceremony at the platform is supposed to be memorable for its novelty and cleverness.

As basic materials for the platform were cut and brought back to the village, one man had a dream, inspired by a tutelary, named Wakio Ni Toro, Fishhawk of the Promontory. This was not his own tutelary, but two other men who were the clients of Wakio Ni Toro did receive favorable communications from the deity to be honored, so the idea was accepted. The bird's body—the platform—about ten feet square and fifteen feet high, was supported by seven posts. Leading upward on two sides were constructed ascending and descending ramps, fashioned as wings. At the front a bird's head was made of leaf panels, and at the back a tail was also constructed.

Convention, however, dictated that the posts of the platform be decorated by a display of all the yams that were brought to

the village, each hung individually. In addition thousands of canarium almonds, another highly valued crop, were also used.

Almonds were hung by skewering each nut and clustering the skewers into bunches. In 1966 it was a difficult job to cover adequately the structure with the yams and nuts available. As a last desperate measure sixty more yams were found to add to the inadequate number. When the decoration was finished, however, the substructure had been sufficiently covered, but only just. A number of sprouted coconuts were finally placed on the ground. Thus, the covering of the structure represented the three ingredients for the best of feast puddings: mashed yam, crushed canarium, and coconut oil.

Other men had been busy carving sculptures with mythical relevance which were placed at the bottom of the ascending ramp. Still others fashioned snakes out of lianas, one of which was draped through the beak of the theme bird, to signify that tutelary deities are associated with the land too. Also, a young man painted a sign to put near the bird's head: *Manu ni Toro*, "Bird of the Promontory." This was a slight change of the proper name of the deity for whom it was named, but the precise proper name of a deity should not be proclaimed in public. The change from Fish Hawk of the Promontory to Bird of the Promontory was quite appropriate. Lastly, two fishing poles, one rigged to overhang the front and one to project over the tail, were rigged. Hung on the fish line of each was a bunch of areca palm nut, one ingredient for the narcotic chewed by everyone and called betel. Betel nut is a conventional sign of a feast, because it is given out following the distribution of food (chewing betel always follows eating). Here, the hanging of betel nut from the fishing poles was doubly appropriate, as a sign of a feast and as trolling lines that are streamed from bonito canoes. These bunches of betel nut will become the foci of the conclusion of the ceremony.

For each initiate new breech clouts of red cloth, fiber arm bands, and combs with red fiber streamers, were made by men. The comb and arm bands are the distinctive badges of initiates. Women who were the most skilled at plaiting made special bags for the initiates to carry, and each father put together, from his own hoard and by borrowing, as many heirloom shell ornaments as he could. For each initiate, too, a thin board, about a foot long, was cut and





**15** Lining up the initiates for the procession. The initiates are shielding heart and stomach areas with the canoe-shaped boards to which pouches of wedding gifts are attached. September 6, 1966.

**16** An initiate carrying the board with presents as he returns to the village after isolation. Note this board is not in the shape of a canoe, but has a pictorial representation of a school of fish. The initiate wears the decorative comb, symbol of the initiation, and also wears strings of heirloom shell ornaments across the forehead and chest, around the waist and legs. Drawn by Wagosi of Gupuna Village, Santa Ana Island.



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incised to resemble the bow of a bonito canoe. Attached to the board is a leaf pouch filled with small tidbits—gum, candy, almonds and such. The initiate will carry this board to shield his stomach and heart as he re-enters the village and will give it away as a present later.

As preparations were near completion, September 8th was designated as the ceremonial day. Rituals were performed to insure good weather. On the 6th and 7th mountains of pudding were prepared, and on the morning of the event eleven pigs were tied to the supporting posts of the platform. Atop the platform, piles of small gifts, such as almonds, tobacco and betel nuts, were assembled at designated places for each initiate. The ideal plan is to station each initiate at a place directly above a post covered with yams coming from his father and to which a pig contributed on his behalf is tied. Lastly, several sponsors tied clusters of yams to uprights reaching above the platform top as special offerings to their tutelaries.

At the canoe house each initiate was coiffed and dressed in the finery assembled for him. It was decided that two of the boys

**17** The procession vanguard carrying spears and shields threatens any "wild" spirits that may be bent on harming the initiates. September 8, 1966.

**18** An older man leads the procession. He holds a lime spatula which he rattles against the betel lime gourd to signal the slow unison movements of the initiates. September 8, 1966.



who were still waiting for bonito would join the re-entry procession; they would receive the actual bonito ritual sometime later. Hence, there were eleven initiates to participate in the re-entry instead of the nine who had actually been initiated.

For an opening of the ceremony, two men, armed and dressed for fighting, rushed to the platform brandishing their weapons and shouting threats. These men were vanguards who were driving away any "wild" or enemy deities who, from jealousy and malice, might be there to attack and injure the initiates. As this pantomime was going on, the initiates were being lined up for a processional return. In the lead was a senior man who signalled every movement made by the initiates by rattling a spatula against a gourd, the container for lime, an ingredient for betel. The line of initiates made its way to the platform gradually. Progress was made by slowly placing the heel of one foot to the toes of the other; by pivoting on the heels, then on the toes; or by slow, small steps in the prints of the person ahead.

Along the path women began to shout salutations: the names of localities where the bonito schools reside, names of the many species and varieties of bonito, names of the birds that fish the bonito schools, poetic allusions to the returning initiates: "A boat is coming, full of men. Who knows about that boat?" "When is that big seabird going to alight with all its children?"

Finally, as the initiates neared the ascending ramp of the platform, the women shouted compliments to the men who constructed it, "Only my brother-in-law could build such a platform; he has many tools and skills to work with." "An important man is coming to kill those pigs."

The initiates went up the ramp quickly and each took his assigned position. As the boys looked down from the platform, a roar





**19** Initiates ascending and descending the platform as one of the vanguard threatens the "wild" spirits away from the structure. Note the decoration of this platform uses canoe motifs; the fish pole and line with a bunch of areca nuts hangs from the after, descending side, of the platform. Drawn by Wagost of Gupuna Village, Santa Ana Island.

**20** The villagers scramble for the gifts tossed down from the platform by the initiates. September 8, 1968.

**21** The initiates crowded along the front porch of a dwelling after descending from the platform. The person at the side is performing the desacralizing ritual. September 8, 1968.

of approval went up. The entire community, thronged below, shouted up at them to throw down their gifts. The initiates obliged, and the crowd scrambled to retrieve the prizes. The excitement died quickly, and the initiates were directed to descend the opposite ramp which ended at the entrance of a dwelling. At the bottom of the ramp the ritualist, who performed the transformation ritual, was waiting with another spell: "Be like the osprey, be like the fish hawk, be beautiful, be agile." He completed the spell by spewing the initiates with a mouthful of spittle.

The initiates were conducted, in pairs, inside the house where two older women waited. Another ritualist had just uttered a spell over their breasts, and each initiate was made to put his lips to one of the women's nipples. Lastly, all the initiates were lined up outside where the bonito ritualists uttered a final spell, and blew heavily on each boy's neck and back. This spell was to remove all restrictions and sacredness from the initiates. Immediately, the initiates were offered pudding which they sampled, and they went off from house

to house to be given more bits of pudding. Finally they were served a large meal containing all the foods that had been forbidden during their isolation.

As the initiates were making their rounds of the houses, men had killed the pigs and were butchering them for cooking during the night. And as the earth ovens were being fired the initiates were individually put through one last ritual, a mock marriage.

For each initiate a girl his age had been selected as a "bride," to whom he was unobtrusively taken by an older woman, not his mother, in order to present the board with the pouch of presents as a wedding gift. The girl reciprocated with a token gift, such as a coin. She also took his comb with red streamers and broke it. That would be kept as a souvenir. The girl was instructed to get up and step across the boy's outstretched legs, a gesture of intimacy permitted only to husband and wife.

Next morning, as people arose and went to the lavatory areas of the beach they found the boards that were presented to the girls as wedding gifts hanging from trees. This signified that some girl had had an "affair" there the night before, and had left behind evidence of the present given to her by her lover.

The mock marriage is explained in this way: years ago the initiation ceremony was performed on young men who were physically ready to commence bonito fishing. They were also sexually mature, and following the initiation, they were permitted to have affairs, even urged to think about marriage. Over the past few generations the age of the initiates has gotten younger and younger, but the mock marriage has remained in the celebration. It was during this change, too, that the custom of building a platform was introduced from another island. Before that, the re-entry of the initiates into village life was marked by only a processional dance from the canoe house to the dwelling area.

The following morning, the 9th of September, before the cooked pork was readied for redistribution, the men who had attached special yam offerings to their tutelaries on uprights atop the platform, retrieved the tubers and hastily prepared a plain soup dish from the staples. Together, they held a simple votive meal around the platform. Most of the initiates, still dressed in their new loin cloths, watched but did not participate.



During the morning all the cooked pork from the eleven pigs and the great quantities of pudding which had been prepared several days before were assembled at the organizer's house. Large, valuable cuts were set aside first for each person who had contributed work or wealth, the size reflecting the relative value of the contribution. Trimmings and special morsels were set aside for the initiates. The rest of the pork and pudding was divided into equal portions, one for each household in the community.

Eventually, all yams and canarium almonds used to decorate the platform would be retrieved and divided evenly among every household. Each household would retain a token portion, and pass the rest on to others, so that everyone who contributed got back an appropriate fraction of what had been originally contributed.

After all the distributions were completed, most of the community drifted back to the platform in the late afternoon to watch the final episode. Two matters had to be concluded: acknowledgment that outstanding obligations had been satisfied and the determination of who would be responsible for the next initiation. Recall the two fishing lines with bunches of areca nut hanging from them: the forward bunch invites the organizer of the last initiation to take the lure and state his mind about the continuity from his initiation to the present one; the after bunch invites any senior man to accept the responsibility to carry the tradition onward and organize the next.

After several speeches which reviewed the major events of the current celebration, the organizer of the 1964 rite stepped up holding two small poles he had been working on during the introductory formalities. One was shorter than the other. As he spoke, it was clear that he was agitated. "Do you see these stud poles which I am making for my son's new house? Do you see that one is shorter than the other? My initiation was like the long one; this initiation is like the short one!" He retired without seizing the areca. The crowd was hushed. A debate ensued as to why it was that the 1966 initiation was smaller in every respect than the one of two years ago. However, everyone knew that there was a long-standing grudge between the two organizers, and that this carried over into many relations between the supporters of each who lived in different quarters of the village. Everyone also realized that nothing could be done about it, and the current aggravation was just one more episode

in their hostile competition with each other. The matter was resolved, for the moment, when a man stepped up and seized the betel that pledged him to organize the next initiation. However, no one was greatly surprised that the person making the pledge was a supporter of the 1964 organizer, thus the rivalry would continue.

Later, it was revealed that at the beginning of the initiation, as some of the initiates were undergoing their transformation ritual, another challenge had been made. The father of an initiate and a supporter of the 1964 organizer presented the bonito with which his son had been initiated to another man, whose son was waiting to be initiated, and who was a supporter of the present organizer. This act signalled a competition between the two fathers to see who would contribute the more to the observance. As it turned out the man to whom the bonito was given did not get his son initiated, because no fish was caught for him. Nevertheless, it was incumbent upon him, at the next initiation, to equal or better his challenger's contributions. This kind of competitive rivalry is basic to the society. It is also a factor that helps the continuation of such social observances as the initiation.

The Aoriki initiation would be incomprehensible without some knowledge of the

**22** The initiates standing in front of bowls of pudding and cuts of pork which will be distributed to those who contributed heavily to the initiation effort. They are still in their festive dress, but have given away the canoe-shaped boards that were carried in the re-entry procession. September 9, 1966.



#### Suggested Reading

**Bernatzik, Hugo A.**  
1936  
*Owa Raha*, Bernina-Verlag, Wien.

**Davenport, William**  
1968  
"Sculpture of the Eastern Solomons," *Expedition*, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 4-25

**23** A man seizes the bunch of areca as a pledge to sponsor the next initiation. The figure to the right is an initiate who has just returned to the village after initiation and isolation. Note the platform here is in the form of a bonito canoe. Drawn by Sao, a notable sculptor, of Natagera Village, Santa Ana Island.



relationship between the tutelary deities and humans. It is the tutelaries who control the destinies of men by releasing and holding back forces that control success and failure. However, there is another class of deities that are considered "wild," that is, they are unattached and have no clients. They seek to interrupt good relations between established tutelaries and their clients. These deities and some supernaturals are represented as sharks, the greatest of all the marine predators. All of this belief is readily explained and acknowledged by every traditionally devout Aorikian.

However, ask a very knowledgeable Aorikian, "What does this all have to do with shoals of bonito and the initiation of young males?" Those that I have queried in this way frankly confess they don't know exactly; that is just the way it is! So, if we wish to bring the bonito and the initiation into closer relationship, we must make some guesses on our own.

An analogy seems to have been made between the human community and the shoal of bonito. Both respond to the powers and attractions provided by the tutelaries. The bonito (and some birds) come together

in response to the schooling of bait, otherwise they reside quietly out of sight. Humans come together for collective work in response to religious goals. The predation in the animal world is like social direction and success in the human social world. Bonito (and the fishing birds) are similar to humans, and they are greatly admired because of the seeming ease by which they attack their prey. Sharks around the fringe of the bonito shoal are like the "wild" deities: they move in to disrupt and destroy the relationship between bonito and birds on the one hand and the bait on the other. In the human scene, the "wild" deities seek to destroy the good relationships between tutelaries and clients. Recall the episode in the re-entry phase of the celebration when the armed fighters rushed up to the platform to clear it of wild spirits who might harm the initiates.

If this analogy fits, then it may be further suggested that one of the unstated purposes of the initiation and the attendant celebration is to acknowledge this mystical parallel between the human and animal realms, and by identifying men with bonito it binds together the supernatural forces that energize both systems.



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