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David Troolin

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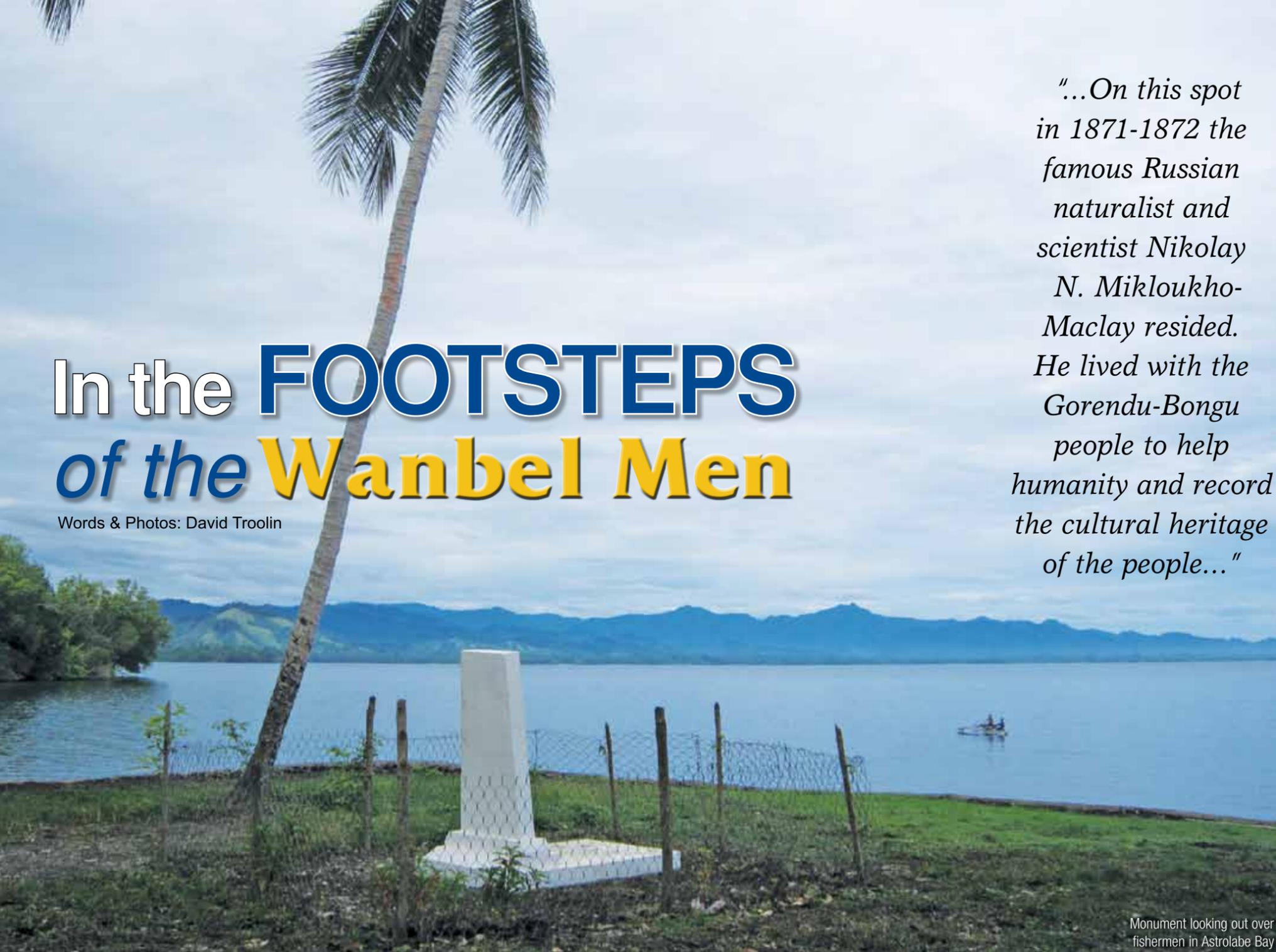
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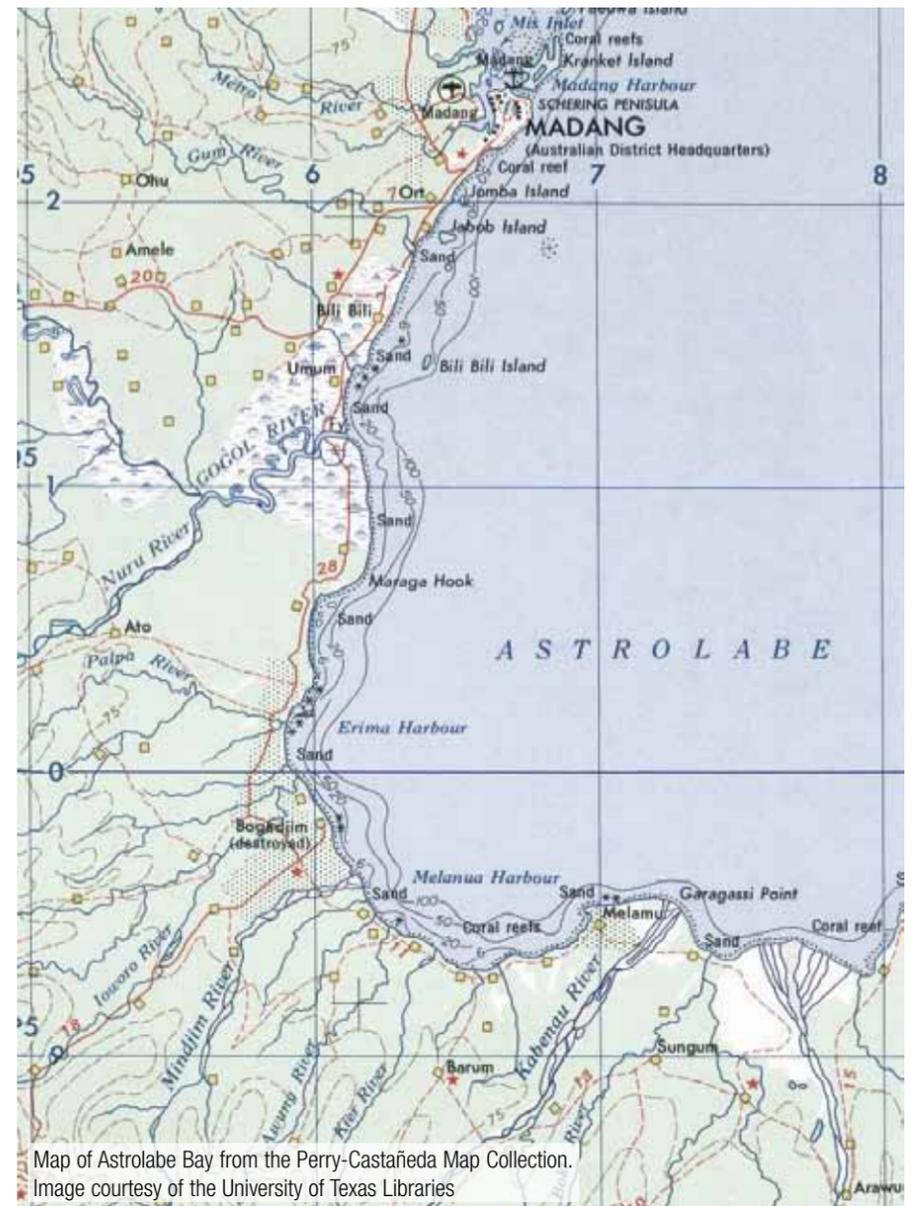
# In the FOOTSTEPS of the Wanbel Men

Words & Photos: David Troolin



Monument looking out over fishermen in Astrolabe Bay

*"...On this spot in 1871-1872 the famous Russian naturalist and scientist Nikolay N. Mikloukho-Maclay resided. He lived with the Gorendu-Bongu people to help humanity and record the cultural heritage of the people..."*



Map of Astrolabe Bay from the Perry-Castañeda Map Collection. Image courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries

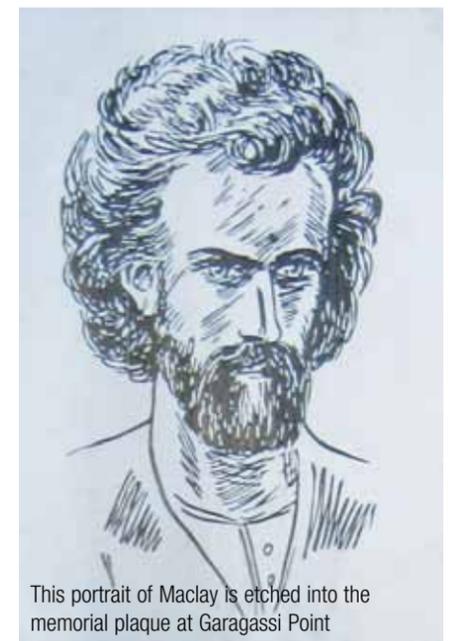


The flooded Minjim, which Maclay would have crossed in his explorations along the coastline north of Garagassi Point

I felt the truck shudder and shake as I drove through the Kabeneo River, the forceful green and brown waves heaving and then reluctantly sliding around the sides of my truck. Navigating my way through the rocky riverbed, I marvelled at who I was going to talk with downriver. Earlier that morning, my friend, whom I here call Muntua, visited me with an interesting request: "Brother," he said, "Let's go visit my bet brata (in Pidgin, literally "bed brother", or a person with whom one has

a special friendship that is passed down through generations.) I was thrilled to hear those words! The "bed brother" to whom he referred was the great grandson of the first Papua New Guinean to meet Nikolai Mikloucho-Maclay! I first heard the story of the famous Russian naturalist in 2002, when my wife, first child and I went to live with the Sam people in Buan village, about 10km from the area where Maclay visited, south of Madang, from 1971

to 1883. The Sam people invited us to live with them and learn their language and culture to help them with language development. They told me about a man who had visited this area a long time ago, back before they, or their fathers or grandfathers, could remember. They expressed various opinions as to why Maclay had come, but they all felt it was an extraordinary event. One of my village fathers had even named one of his sons after Maclay! My interest was piqued by reading C. L. Sentinella's translation of Maclay's diaries, called *Mikloucho-Maclay: New Guinea Diaries 1871-1883*. (Madang: Kristen Press.) Maclay's fascinating experiences in this remote area of PNG seemed especially personal because he had walked where



This portrait of Maclay is etched into the memorial plaque at Garagassi Point



The church that Tui and his family built

I also walked and he mentioned the same sorts of things I experienced daily: learning the vernacular language, eating unfamiliar local foods, and experiencing a different culture. I imagined that we were alike, though separated by several generations. To have the opportunity to talk to the descendants of those who knew him sent chills up my spine! I could hardly wait to learn about his legacy from the descendants of the man who first called him *aba damu* (“brother” in the Bongu language)! Maclay visited the Bongu at a crucial time in history. The people in that area of Madang Province had never seen a foreigner. Their only category for a person with a different colour of skin was

spirit or dead ancestor (known as *masalai* and *tumbuna*). At that time, there was also abundant distrust and conflict between villages. Their social structure reflected the need to be able to organise people to initiate and repel attacks. The Sam and Bongu villages each had a “fight leader” (*kukurai*) – a respected and experienced fighter who could assemble fighters, strategise, and lead the fight against other villages. In short, this was a time of pre-emptive conflict, not restraint and dialogue. Muntua and I, with some others from Buan village, slowly angled through the current and onto the riverbank. This visit was taking place near the end of November last year, when the dry season was slowly giving way to the rainy



Our smiling welcome party

season. As the rains increased, so did the flooding. A flooded river is a terrifying sight, as it can sweep downstream everything in its path, including people, rocks, trees, and even vehicles. Black rain clouds far back up in the mountains indicated possible flooding as rain fell in the many streams leading into the Kabeneo River. We expected to return in the early afternoon after talking with Muntua’s friends and retrieving a supply of medicines for our village from the Ileg Government Health Centre. As we drove, we convinced ourselves that it wouldn’t rain before we returned. We were demonstrating a cultural belief among the Sam called *wanbel* – which means to be in agreement and united in purpose with others, and is believed to bring about success in the groups’ activities. *Wanbel* is a Pidgin term expressed in Sam as either *pari kujex* (“one insides”, a feeling of unity) or *udud kujex* (“one thought,” a plan to which everyone agrees). And so we were determinedly “*wanbel*” that we would make it back before the rains. We would not be stranded on the far side and have to sleep in the truck! After driving slowly down the old logging road, last used for hauling logs in 2010 and now overgrown in places, we came to the Rai Coast Highway, a gravel road that runs generally along the coastline, from the Madang-Lae Highway to places east of Bongu, including the Ramu Nickel Mine at Pasamuk and the Saidor Government Station. We followed it north and then turned off onto the road to Malamo Point, which the timber trucks take to haul logs to the coast for loading on ships. After about a kilometre, we turned into the elephant grass onto an indistinct track. After 50m it gave way to a cleared road, cut by hand with grass knives. This was the road to Garagassi Point where Maclay had lived and where his monument stands today. We passed a church then a school and pulled up near a rest shelter the local men had built for visitors, with bamboo on three sides, the fourth side open. Beautiful white stones carpeted the ground underneath. Nearby, palm trees stood like slender sentinels, looking out to the Astrolabe Bay where two boys were fishing in an outrigger canoe. About 20m from the ocean, a concrete monument sat, dedicated to Maclay’s

*“... We were demonstrating a cultural belief called wanbel – which means to be in agreement and united in purpose...”*

memory. It leant back slightly, like someone reclining, gazing out at the ocean. It was erected in 2013 to replace an earlier monument that was too close to the ocean’s relentless pounding. Affixed to the front was a metal plaque that read, first in English and then in Russian:  
 “On this spot in 1871-1872 the famous Russian naturalist and scientist Nikolay N. Mikloukho-Maclay resided. He lived with the Gorendu-Bongu people to help humanity and record the cultural heritage of the people. The district of Rai Coast was named in his honour.  
 1871-1872 – first stay at the Astrolabe Bay coast in New Guinea;  
 1876-1877 – second stay at Maclay (Rai) Coast;  
 1883 – third and last visit to Maclay (Rai) Coast.  
 The memorial was organised in 2013 thanks to the generous donation of a Russian-Italian family – Valeri, Irma and Valentina Sourin; Chief Sir Peter Barter; along with volunteers from the Madang Resort and Friends of the Haus Tumbuna. 2013.”  
 As we parked the truck and got out, an elderly gentleman approached us with his son and some children. From the way my friends moved over to them and began talking it was obvious they had a relationship. The elderly man, wearing a white shirt and shorts, was the first to walk over to me, with his hand outstretched. We shook hands and I learned his name was Asel Tui, the great-grandson of Tui Ondu, the first Papua New Guinean to befriend Maclay. I gave him a small gift of a watermelon from Buan and then he asked, “Why do you want to hear my story of Maclay?” I told him, “I would like to hear about



The grassy turnoff to Maclay’s monument



Boys fish in an outrigger canoe, with a dolphin circling nearby!

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The newly-built rest shelter



Maclay because I respect how he came to learn from and help the local people, and because I would like to write an article to let more people know about him.”  
“Good, then I will talk with you,” he said. Clearly he wanted others to know

his story of Maclay, but at first I didn't know why. What motivated this man to want to share the story of an encounter that happened so long ago?  
We sat together on green plastic chairs underneath the rest shelter and he began to share with me the stories that had been passed down through the generations. The following is a translation of our conversation, mostly conducted in Pidgin with some English and Sam thrown in.  
“On the day Maclay and Tui met, Tui had been walking along the coastline, looking for fish when he saw Maclay approaching in a small boat.  
He thought he was a masalai (spirit). Tui watched him approach and was afraid but he didn't run away. Maclay rowed closer. He got out of the boat and showed Tui a piece of red cloth. Tui was intrigued.” (As Asel told me this, he explained the red cloth was perhaps even more unexpected and amazing to the Bongu man than the other items Maclay showed him.

Asel continued: “A red thing attracts our eye. It is a new colour and it is red. When we go hunting, if we see something red, like the red on a cassowary, we notice it. And it (the cloth) got Tui's eye, and he thought, 'I think this is a good thing he is holding. A wanbel man lives here and I must go and receive him'. Then Maclay poured salt in Tui's hand and, tasting it with his finger, mimed the pleasurable feeling. Then he held the salt out to Tui. Tui went closer and slowly extended his finger to Maclay's hand and tasted the salt for himself. Then he knew Maclay was not an enemy.  
Tui went to tell his family that they had no need to fear Maclay and that he was their friend. He told them, 'You cannot go and tell another village, no! He belongs to us.' In our vernacular, we would say, 'He is our brother, aba damu (my true brother)'.”  
I had heard various explanations for why Maclay came. Some said he was a spirit or tumbuna, others a scientist gathering information about the people



Monument to Nikolai Mikloucho-Maclay at Garagassi Point, near Bongu village



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A little boy related to Tui offers a wanbel gift



The small bay where Maclay approached Tui in his boat

*"...The main reason Maclay came was to show the people that they should not fight each other..."*

and environment, and still others, a scout for a large church denomination that was soon to enter the area.

"Why do you think he came?" I asked Asel and he agreed that Maclay brought various unfamiliar things, such as axes, watermelons and cucumbers. He had told them the Russian names since they didn't have names for them in their own language and they adopted those words. For example, for "axe", "watermelon" and "cucumber", the local people in Bongu and Sam language groups say sapor, abrus, and jigli. But Asel added, "The main reason Maclay came was to show the people that they should not fight each other. He initiated dialogue with the local people and gave them knowledge and an example of how to live at peace with others. It is important to share this memory of Maclay, for me and for my children." "Nowadays," he continued, "family ties are a bit loose. We copy things from the outside and it influences us. I think the attitude and actions of wanbel (or 'are guji' in the Bongu language, meaning 'unity of purpose and thought') will start to die out as our young ones are influenced by the outside."

Asel told me Maclay demonstrated the attitude of wanbel, and Tui did also. "Many people need to know this story. Because Maclay was wanbel, he didn't have a problem as he stayed at Garagassi Point or when he walked around to see different villages. He showed through his face and his actions that, 'I am a wanbel man. Come to me.' And Tui came," he said.

"Maclay's actions showed he had wanbel inside of him, and so Tui received him. In the days when Maclay came, the villages fought each other. For example, Buan people were afraid to venture near Bongu. But when Maclay came, his way of wanbel showed how people could live



Asel Tui (left) talks to writer David Troolin about Maclay

peacefully with each other, and later, Buan people started coming to Bongu to see him. I have to make this story known."

Axel said he did not want the story to "remain narrow and die out". "It has to become widely known! If all men are 'are guji', all will go well." After we had talked for another half an hour, my friend Muntua said to me in Sam, "The river is good now, let's go up." I realised he was thinking that the black clouds further inland might rain but he didn't want to use that as a reason to hurry. He was trying to maintain the wanbel agreement that the river would not flood.

We politely said goodbye, picked up the medical boxes from the health centre and started driving up to the village of Buan. The clouds back behind Buan were black. I didn't want to be stranded on this side of the river! Would it rain before we could get up to the river crossing? I saw some drops of rain on the windshield. Was it raining harder inland, and even now causing the flood to come down the river?

I happened to voice my nervousness with the others, and Muntua said to me, "Don't talk like that! Don't break our wanbel!"

Later, after safely crossing the Kabeneo River, which hadn't flooded, Asel Tui's message came back to me: the people

of this corner of Madang Province need to hear the story of Maclay and Tui's wanbel, and how their wanbel brought peace.

Although coming from two different cultures and interacting together in a context where pre-emptive violence towards outsiders was the norm, these two wanbel men treated each other with respect and friendship, bridged their differences and brought peace. The story of their friendship, though occurring many years ago, is still relevant

to the violence-prone world in which we live. In the words of Asel Tui, "If all men are 'are guji', all will go well." ▲

David Troolin  
Language researcher  
University of Adelaide

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