Historicizing Edai Siabo: a Contemporary Argument about the Pre-colonial Past among the Motu-Koita of Papua New Guinea

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ABSTRACT
In the 1970s the Motu-Koita, traditional inhabitants of what is now the National Capital District of Papua New Guinea, inaugurated a yearly cultural festival thematically based on traditional coastal trading voyages known as hiri. Contestation over the location and commercialization of the festival in the capital city developed in the new century as one distant village claimed to ‘own’ the hiri. The Motu-Koita view of their past and their identity has been affected by their encounter with Christianity, colonialism and its aftermath, and the rhetoric of the villagers’ claims drew on criteria of authenticity, cultural purity, and exclusiveness which are arguably contemporary rather than ‘traditional’. This article reviews Motu-Koita history, the story of the origin of the hiri, and the local politics of the cultural festival. It attempts to understand the way the past, which was formerly mythopoeically invoked, is being historicized and thereby fixed in new local discourses of cultural and heritage rights and ownership, as Melanesians come to terms with the effects of global processes on their traditions and other resources.
Keywords: identity, cultural property, history, mythopoeia, tradition

INTRODUCTION
What is now the city of Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea (PNG), began as a tiny colonial enclave in the late nineteenth century on the territory of two intermarried peoples who are now collectively called the Motu-Koita or Motu-Koitabu. By the 1950s the Motu-Koita were experiencing the constant growth of the colonial town not only as a loss of territory but also as a threat to their cultural identity. In the 1970s part of their attempt to reassert themselves culturally was the development of a yearly festival thematically based on traditional trading expeditions known as hiri, in which Motuans sailed west to the Gulf of Papua to trade Motu-made pots for sago. The hiri had mythical origins and held great fascination for early colonial observers, who described the phenomenon and its attendant rituals and festivities in some detail. The voyages decreased during colonial rule, finally dying out in the 1950s, but the imagery of the hiri and stories of its origins had become folkloric, and it seemed a very apt symbol for the project of re-asserting Motu-Koita identity and re-emphasising the historical priority of the Motu-Koita as traditional landholders in the face of a growing city of migrants. The yearly festival, known as Hiri Moale (Moale = ‘happy’ or ‘festive’), has ostensibly been successful in promoting Motu-Koita identity. However, the location and commercialization of the festival in the capital city has raised objections in the new century from people of one Motu village, Boera, some 25 kilometres west of Port Moresby. Boera villagers claim to ‘own’ the hiri, on the ground that the first hiri expedition was led from Boera by a culture hero – a
well-known ‘fact’ which has been acknowledged and constantly repeated in oral history and written accounts since the early colonial period.

The rhetoric of the claims by Boera villagers draws on criteria of authenticity, cultural purity, and exclusiveness which are arguably contemporary rather than ‘traditional’. Some precedent for this can be found in the discourses generated when Motu-Koita groups mounted claims in the late colonial period to land in and around Port Moresby which they felt had been insufficiently compensated for or wrongly taken by Europeans in the early colonial period. These claims often set Motu-Koita groups against each other as attempts to identify original proprietary groups tested genealogical reconstructions, accounts of descent-group splitting and oral histories of late-nineteenth-century boundary marking against Western legal criteria of evidence and proof. The inference of cultural property in the Boera claim on the hiri is a new turn, reflecting the increasing impact on Papua New Guineans of discourses of cultural and intellectual property and heritage which are being disseminated by bodies such as UNESCO, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), and other organizations. These are becoming popularized in the country through media coverage of debates about the effects of mining, forestry, and other ‘development’ projects on ‘culture’, ‘tradition’ and ‘heritage’ along with government rhetorics of cultural ‘preservation’, and more specific discussions of intellectual property issues such as copyrights on music and art (Hirsch and Strathern 2004; Kalinoe and Leach 2004; Whimp and Busse 2000).

An influential perspective on ‘proprietary identities’ has been developed by Simon Harrison (2007), who considers symbolic practices in relationship to social identity, particularly ‘the way that collectivities … define themselves through the display of distinctive consumption practices and tastes, styles of dress, speech habits, religious practices or other forms of symbolism’ (2007:6). Harrison refers, in his use of the term ‘proprietary identities’ to ‘social identities whose outward symbols or markers are treated as property, and may be disputed as property’ (2007:4). There are certainly aspects of Motu-Koita identity which would lend themselves to Harrison’s analysis style, such as dances, songs, textile patterns and designs, and perhaps the rituals of the hiri. However, while there may be some resonance in my discussion particularly with Harrison’s interest in the way collectivities preserve an exclusive association with distinctive sets of symbolic practices and attempt to prevent outsiders from reproducing these (2007:7), my interest is rather different, and directed toward the way the Motu-Koita have come to think about their past.

To some degree the Boera claims reflect the efforts of Melanesians generally to come to terms with the effects of global processes on their traditions and other resources. But beyond, or perhaps prior to, the contemporary global/local referents of the Hiri Moale contestation there are historical aspects to this particular case which require us to consider earlier influences on the Motu-Koita. In particular we need to understand the way the past, which was formerly mythopedically invoked, is being historicized and thereby fixed in these new local discourses of ownership. This article reviews Motu-Koita history, the hiri origin story, and the local politics of the Hiri Moale festival toward a more nuanced consideration of the claim made by the Boera villagers. I begin with an account of the Motu-Koita experience of the city’s growth during colonial and post-colonial times, the Hiri Moale festival and the response of Boera villagers. I then problematize the argument of the Boera representatives by examining what we know of pre-contact Motu-Koita society first as prehistory and then as mythopoeia, and discuss the way the Motu-Koita view of their past and their identity has been affected by their encounter with Christianity, colonialism and its aftermath, in advance of their appropriation of proprietorial tropes of heritage.

THE HIRI AS CULTURE AND PROPERTY

The people who are now commonly called the Motu-Koita were originally distinct from each other. The Motu have been subdivided in scholarly literature into the ‘Western Motu’, and the
‘Eastern Motu.’ The latter occupy territory to the east of Port Moresby beyond an inlet now called Bootless Inlet and in former times, when they were the enemy of the Western Motu, were called the Lakwaharu. The Western Motu occupied a coastal area including what is now Port Moresby and extending about 50 kilometres westward (Groves 1972b; Oram 1981). They spoke an Austronesian language, while the Koita, who moved from the hinterland toward the coast a few centuries ago, spoke a non-Austronesian language (Dutton 1969, 1985). The two peoples had intermarried by the time Europeans arrived, and while there were distinct Motu and Koita villages the Motu villages included some Koita groups.

Europeans first arrived in their territory in the 1870s. The first were sailor-explorers and missionaries, who negotiated with the Motu-Koita for land to establish themselves. These negotiations involved payment and were intended by the Europeans to be fair, but it is questionable whether the Motu-Koita recognized this as purchase, rather than gifting for permission to inhabit land. A colonial Administration established itself at Port Moresby within a decade. The various effects which Christianity, colonial rule and the development of the town had on the social activity of the proximate Motu-Koita have been variously documented. Among other things by the end of the colonial period many ritual aspects of the pre-colonial Motu-Koita lifeworld had disappeared (Groves 1954, 1957; cf Seligman 1910). Also, by the end of the 1950s the trading voyages known as hiri which the Motu seasonally made by sea to the Papuan Gulf to trade pots made by Motu women for sago had ceased altogether.

At mid twentieth century, there appeared to be some compensation for the disappearance of these traditional activities and a degree of land loss. The Motu-Koita, particularly those who lived in and around the urban area, were well placed to receive whatever benefits the cash economy, mission school education and technical training facilities had to offer. For a while they seemed destined to become the country’s indigenous élite (see for example Andrews 1975; Oram 1976:52-7). However, from the end of the Second World War several developments escalated their land loss significantly. Colonial regulations controlling the movement of people around the country were changed and increasing numbers of migrants joined the town’s population. Some of these negotiated with Motu-Koita to establish settlements (see for example Hitchcock and Oram 1967; Norwood 1984; Oram 1976:98-9) but as the numbers of migrants gradually grew the traditional landholders found themselves less able to control the process. Further, the colonial Administration negotiated town planning programmes as if monetary compensation payments were sufficient responses to Motu-Koita concerns. The steady growth of the city resulted in increasing loss of traditional land. By the 1970s the Motu-Koita living in and around Port Moresby felt that they were becoming socially marginalized in their own territory and losing their cultural identity.

Motu-Koita villages further to the west had a slightly different experience of the town’s growth. They had difficulty accessing the cash economy it represented, a problem they shared with other south-coast groups who had been missionized early and educated into a relatively sophisticated understanding of the introduced economic system. By the late twentieth century the south-coast region had become divided among several provincial governments. While a number of Motu-Koita villages were encompassed by the National Capital District (NCD) others, including Boera, were now in the Central Province, and like most villages in the province had suffered since the end of the colonial period from the effects of deteriorating infrastructure and dysfunction in provincial administration which consigned them to relative isolation. Central Province villages in general feel socioeconomically disadvantaged nowadays compared to people residing in the NCD, whom they imagine to be better served governmentally.

During the 1950s and 1960s initiatives had developed along the coast toward establishing village co-operative groups aimed at furthering local economic interests. Typical manifestations were local co-operative trade-stores, intensified production of particular local crops to sell in town, and group-owned passenger vehicles and trucks to transport people and local produce to Port Moresby. The majority of these self-help groups foundered economically
after promising beginnings, partly because of their limited knowledge about consolidating and developing business relations beyond their fledgling state. Some Motu-Koita villages west of Port Moresby attempted co-operative movements of this kind, including Boera, which began a self-help organization in 1969 (O. Moi 1979). Known as the Boera Association, it shortly became part of a larger collective called the Hiri Hanua Development Association (hanua = ‘village’) representing Motu-Koita villages in the area. The groups faded away in the late 1970s, partly from a lack of formal business experience and some damaging internal politicking (O. Moi 1979:27-9).

There was more to these groups, however, than a desire for economic development. They were also attempts to maintain and enhance local group identity, which is evident in comments made by Boera villager Oala Moi in 1979 about the Boera Association. Despite the demise of the group economically, Moi pointed to the village’s pride in its history and the impetus to maintain the village’s identity, which he said had been a ‘strong motive behind the association’s formation’ (1979:29). The villagers had always talked about ‘keeping the name of the village up’ (1979:29), and the association had achieved this. The village’s status had also been asserted, he considered, through its Association’s ability to contribute more funds than other villages to the larger Hiri Hanua Development Association (1979:29). Projects like the Boera Association can be seen, then, not only as examples of a wider phenomenon of self-help economic enterprises in the region, but as part of a more general concern among the Motu-Koita themselves about the erosion of their identity which was manifesting itself in a number of ways during the 1970s.

One project which emerged at this time was the revival of some of the ceremonies traditionally associated with the hiri expeditions. Mooted in the early 1970s, the ‘Hiri Moale’ festivities were soon institutionalized, focusing on a modified version of the rituals which had formerly surrounded the departure and return of the trading fleets. The voyages had been made in vessels called lagatoi – multi-hulled craft with crab-claw lateen sails – crewed by more than twenty men each (Groves 1972a; Oram 1982). They left heavily loaded with pots and returned equally heavily loaded with sago. Preparations for the voyages were lengthy and involved strict régimes of self-discipline for the sailors. The voyages themselves were conducted in a similar climate of taboo, invoking the assistance of ancestors for a safe journey. In the early colonial period Europeans who observed the seasonal departure and return of the hiri produced a variety of descriptions of the craft, the rituals and the trade itself (Barton 1910; Chalmers 1887a, 1887b; O’Malley 1912; Stone 1880:101-3).

There is now a popular ‘legend’ of the origin of hiri, blending elements shared among a body of traditional accounts offered by the Motu. The legend states that there was a time when the Motu were unaware of the availability of sago from places far to the west. Then one day a man named Edai Siabo, of Boera village, was taken underwater head-first by a spirit while he was fishing. The spirit held Edai Siabo in its grip long enough to give him ritual knowledge and instructions on how to construct a lagatoi to transport pots westward to a people who would give him sago in return. Despite disbelief among his fellow villagers, he built a lagatoi, persuaded some men to accompany him and returned several months later with sago for his village (Barton 1910:97-100; K. Moi 1979; O’Malley 1912; Oram 1991). A large stone embedded in the sand at Davage beach, close to Boera, is said to be the anchor of the lagatoi with which Edai Siabo inaugurated the hiri trade (Oram 1968:82).

The Hiri Moale, held each September in Port Moresby, proved to be a success. Motu-Koita villages around the city were chosen each year to construct a display lagatoi, and the festival featured dancing in traditional costumes, singing and other activities, including a contest for young Motu women called Hiri Hanenamo (roughly, ‘Hiri Queen’). It became a tourist attraction, sustained yearly by commercial sponsorship, and its preparations were accompanied by newspaper publicity which included reiterations of the legend of the hiri. The annual event restored a degree of pride among the Motu-Koita, but was not without its problems. There were behind-the-scenes factional tensions among contributing villages about
who was to build the lagatoi each year, debates over the availability and appropriateness of sponsorship and the commercialization which the latter aspect engendered. Moves to expand the festival to include ‘cultural displays’ by other PNG groups also created tensions as a significant number of people felt that it should be an exclusively Motu-Koita presentation.

Despite these various issues, and one or two cancellations due to financial or organizational lapses, the Hiri Moale has continued to be a popular event for three decades, although it has not contributed visibly to improvements in the political-economic fortunes of the Motu-Koita. These have been pursued in other ways, including the establishment of successive political representative bodies beginning with the Motu-Koitabu Interim Assembly (established in 1982), which was replaced by the Motu-Koitabu Council in 1992. The most recent body has been the Motu-Koitabu Assembly, established in 2008. While the representative bodies were intended to develop legislative authority, they have so far not had a great deal of political power in fact. Motu-Koita villagers have frequently criticized their apparent lack of achievement, and they are subject to the same grass-roots accusations of inefficiency, corruption and neglect as most institutions of governance in the country.

A simmering discontent about the Hiri Moale began to emerge in the new century when Boera villagers criticized the festival. In a series of letters and statements to national daily newspapers beginning in 2002 they complained about the commercialization of the festival, and about Boera village being left out of the organizational aspects. Boera was ‘the backbone and the origin’ of the festival, urban Motu-Koita were ‘not the rightful owners’ of the ‘hiri culture’. Further, they argued, ‘hiri culture’ had been a preparation for the coming of Christianity, so should not be commercialized. Regular festival organizers responded by saying that the hiri belonged to all Motu-Koita, but Boera spokesmen argued a distinction between ‘hiri tradition’ and ‘hiri trade’. ‘Hiri tradition’ referred to the communal way of life of the Motu people while ‘hiri trade’ was started by one man at Boera. They said that in the early days of hiri only Boera people had pot-making knowledge, and Boera people were the traditional owners of the original ‘knowledge’ of hiri trade. This knowledge was the ‘property’ of the people of Boera village.

In September 2005 a Boera spokesman, Muri Henao, sought a National Court injunction to stop the Hiri Moale being held in Port Moresby, claiming the hiri belonged to Boera. The case did not proceed. In 2006 Boera villagers established a foundation called the Edai Siabo Foundation. Their intention was to bring the hiri festival back to Boera, complaining that their ‘sacred and traditional culture’ had become a commercial activity for foreign-owned business houses and the National Capital District Commission. In September of 2006 Boera villagers held an exhibition of paintings and pottery at a venue in Port Moresby, which a spokesperson told newspaper reporters was intended as an assertion of Motu-Koita identity and cultural heritage and a reminder that Motu-Koita were the legitimate landowners of Port Moresby. Simultaneously the exhibitors emphasized their own village’s status as the origin of lagatoi. In the same month, Muri Henao complained that no Boera villagers had been included in the organising committee for the Hiri Moale. Reasserting that Boera villagers were the ‘rightful owners of the festival’ he announced that Boera would stage a similar festival in November 2006. The Boera festival would be called Hiri Moalena. The name is significant. Its free translation in English is the same as Hiri Moale – ‘Hiri happiness’ or ‘Hiri festivity’ – but Hiri Moale is a phrase in ‘Hiri Motu’ (a.k.a. ‘Police Motu’) the lingua franca form of Motu, whereas Hiri Moalena is a phrase in the more grammatically complex ‘pure Motu’ language. Its use implies authenticity.

The Hiri Moalena took place, but was a small and disappointing event, described by critics as a ‘flop’. It was attended by controversy, as claims were made that donated funds had been misappropriated, that the festival had not been properly organized and that Boera villagers were not properly paid for their contributions. No Hiri Moalena was held at Boera in 2007, while the annual Hiri Moale at Port Moresby continued. As the publicity for the 2007 Hiri Moale got under way in September, Muri Henao repeated what had become an annual
criticism, reiterating his ‘hiri trade – hiri tradition’ distinction, but adding a new trope to his ownership claim: ‘hiri trade’, he said, was the ‘biological’ parent of the Hiri Moale festival.

The claims on the hiri theme clearly reflect Boera villagers’ concern with their identity, as did the development of the Boera Association in the 1970s. The rhetoric of the claims draws on notions of authenticity, cultural purity, and exclusiveness. The Motu-Koita had become practised in negotiating such proprietary criteria in the late colonial period when they began making claims to land formerly appropriated or ‘bought’ in and around Port Moresby and learnt the nuances of Western legal requirements of evidence and proof (Goddard 2007, 2008).

The ‘cultural property’ claim by Boera villagers is not, of course, a land claim, but it nevertheless involves ways of looking at the past largely determined by the same Western historical consciousness which contextualizes juridical criteria of proprietary rights, and contains implicit claims to facticity and historical continuity. My critique below is not intended to determine the ‘truth’ or otherwise of the claims, but rather to understand the colonial influences on contemporary Motu-Koita reflections on tradition and identity. I begin by recounting a conventional ‘Western’ view of the Motu-Koita past, before interrogating that view in a subsequent section.

THE MOTU-KOITA PAST AS PREHISTORY

There has been no conclusive consensus among scholars on the prehistory of the Western Motu earlier than about 200 years ago, when the Motu and their inland neighbours the Koita were settling into the villages which European explorers found in the late nineteenth century. It is generally agreed that the latter-day Western Motu had migrated into these particular sites from other places (Oram 1977, 1981). A number of Koita groups became allied with the Motu villages known as Hanuabada, Tanobada, Tatana, Vabukori and Pari close to where Port Moresby would develop and friendly relations were maintained between the two peoples, though the Motu regarded the Koita as prone to ‘sorcery’. Both the Motu and Koita were fearful of the hinterland people, the Koiari, who they regarded as barbaric and possessed of strong malevolent magic. Of the Western Motu villages established at the time Europeans arrived in the 1870s three, Boera, Vabukori and Tatana, claimed different origins from the rest, despite sharing with them a common language and social organization. The Motu and the Koita villages were divided into residential groups with a patrilineal idiom. These groups were, and are, called iduhu, a term popularly translated as ‘clan’, although anthropologists have equivocated over the appropriateness of the English term (Belshaw 1957: 13; Groves 1963; Goddard 2001).

After the establishment of the latter-day villages there were continued migrations and iduhu segmentations, intervillage marriages and incorporations of non-Motu-Koita persons into local groups. Thus while village identity is discursively accentuated by the Motu-Koita, there is a multitude of links between villages, as genealogical investigation shows. Oral histories reinforce archaeological and linguistic evidence (Bulmer 1971, 1975; Dutton 1969; Rhoads 1982; Swadling 1977, 1981) suggesting a great deal of movement of people and village locations before the late nineteenth century, inviting the inference that the permanence of villages was not a pre-colonial norm, and was largely an outcome of the colonial presence. Oral histories of earlier times are redolent with alternative names for villages which were abandoned, destroyed or relocated. They have provided only a general picture of population movements before European contact (see for example Oram 1981).

Investigations into the distant past do not reveal long-term continuities in regional settlement. Archaeological evidence indicates the existence of human populations more than a thousand years ago in the territory now occupied by the Motu. These people were pottery makers, but lengthy gaps in the archaeological record have raised questions about their relationship to the people now known as the Motu. The earlier inhabitants appear to have taken pottery to the Papuan Gulf area several centuries before the advent of the hiri (Rhoads
1982), but details of what kind of population inhabited the Gulf area then are unclear (Swadling 1980:119). According to their oral histories and archaeological and linguistic evidence from the Port Moresby area, the people identifying themselves as Motu began to settle less than 400 years ago. The people known as the Elema – the inhabitants of the Gulf region – seem to have been settled there for the same period (Swadling 1980:106-8), suggesting that the exchange of pots for sago may have begun not long after both groups established themselves.

Finding a number of variations in pottery styles among different sites and over a period of more than 1000 years in the area, archaeologists and scholars have equivocated over whether the earlier groups were ancestors of the latter-day Motu (perhaps moving away and then returning) or were a different group (cf Allen 1982:200-1; Bulmer 1971, 1982; Oram 1977; Swadling 1977, 1980). Swadling made the interesting finding that among potsherds at Elema sites dating from the early part of the period in which the *hiri* must have become institutionalized none was found which corresponded to the type of pottery made at Boera, but some were found from Lea Lea, another village west of Boera (1980:119-21). She commented that this seemed contrary to the widely accepted story that Edai Siabo inaugurated the *hiri* expeditions from Boera. Bulmer on the other hand argued that archaeological findings, while far from conclusive, were not inconsistent with oral histories placing the origins of the *hiri* at Boera (Bulmer 1982).

In relation to Boera further complications arise from oral traditions among the Motu about the patterns of settlement in the period from about four centuries ago to the time when they were encountered by Europeans. A variety of migration stories were given to mid-twentieth-century researchers, including claims that the people who established Boera, while arriving in the same period as other latter-day Motu and sharing the same language, had a significantly different migration route, and could thereby be distinguished from the others (Chatterton 1968; Groves 1972a:803; Oram 1981). For example Chatterton (1968) believed that the founders of Boera village were ‘Apau’, a different group to those who settled the Moresby area. Citing oral histories from Boera he outlined a migration route from beyond Cape Possession to the west, arriving at Boera about 200 years ago.

Given these uncertainties scholars have found it difficult to clarify the place of Edai Siabo in Motu-Koita prehistory, and some have been unwilling to accommodate him at all. Murray Groves, who did research at Manumanu village west of Boera in the 1950s, described the *hiri* in an encyclopaedia entry (1972a) but made no mention of the Edai Siabo story and did not link the *hiri* especially to Boera village. Groves was reluctant to use oral traditions as clues to history and was critical of scholars who attempted to do so." Many accounts of the Edai Siabo story have been recorded since the arrival of Europeans. One of the earliest of these published by the missionary James Chalmers (1887a) does not give the location of the events, but most recorded oral history accounts agree that either Boera, or the adjacent site of Davage, was where Edai launched the first *lagatoi*. Barton (1910:97) wrote a version in which Edai Siabo was a man instructed by a ‘mythical being’ which was also called ‘Edai’. A Boera interlocutor, Moi Higo, told Chatterton (1968) that Edai Siabo lived at Davage, and inaugurated the *hiri* there, before the Apau moved to their present site at Boera. ‘Siabo’ is also said to be the name of an area inland from Boera (Gwilliam 1982:42; Oram 1991:530).

In the 1940s a palaeontologist took a sample from the putative stone anchor of Edai Siabo’s original *lagatoi* at Davage beach but geologists could not be certain of the stone’s provenance (Oram 1963). In 1982 Nigel Oram wrote that people of all Motu villages agreed that Edai Siabo began the *hiri* expeditions. He added that ‘not entirely satisfactory genealogical evidence suggests that he lived some nine generations ago; but there is good evidence that he existed’ (1982:5). Problematically, the ‘nine generations’ time frame would place Edai Siabo’s initial voyage some time later than the archaeological evidence (i.e. potsherds in Elema locations) for the temporal beginnings of the *hiri* – which some researchers are now suggesting may have been as early as 500 years ago (David 2008; David et al. 2010).
A few years later Oram was no longer sure Edai Siabo had existed. In a 1991 publication he compared 17 versions of the Edai Siabo story and found sufficient variance to discourage him from placing Edai at a specific point in a time scale. He also remarked that the names Edai and Siabo were not found in Boera pedigrees (1991:530) – an unusual phenomenon given the degree to which personal names were traditionally recycled among Motu and Koita. Neither was there any clear statement of ancestry involving Edai, among people whose pedigrees could commonly be recited up to sixteen generations (1991:530). Oram also noted a few regional variations on the *hiri* origin story: some attributing its founding to people from the Gulf district, and some asserting that Edai Siabo himself came from the Gulf district (1991:525). Equivocating over the existence of Edai Siabo, Oram commented ‘it is inconceivable that one person could have founded the *hiri*’ (1991:530). Further, ‘The vagueness of Edai’s genealogical origins enables members of different social groups to claim him as their own’ (1991:533). He also observed variance among the stories in the representation of Edai’s inspiration: sometimes it was a conscious encounter with an ancestor spirit or a sea serpent, other versions implied a dream image. Oram consequently concluded that the Edai Siabo story was a repository for an amalgam of accounts of the origins of nets, trading canoes, and other aspects of an economic order based on the sea, fishing and trade (1991:533, cf K. Moi 1979).

The likelihood that an original *lagatoi* was conceived spontaneously at Boera is also challenged by the 1937 observations of Haddon, who had extensively reviewed the canoe types in the region (Haddon 1975). An inference from his survey was that influential models for various types of craft moved in prehistorical times from the eastward Mailu toward the Motu and neighbouring peoples. Haddon was sure that the *lagatoi* was ‘merely a development of a double canoe with a crab-claw sail. The absence of washstrakes and the more simple construction than that of the *orou* of the Mailu may be reductions due to different conditions’ (1975:230). The cumulative findings of prehistorical investigations into the origins of the Motu, the antiquity of *hiri* voyages and the role of Edai Siabo in their development are far from conclusive, and certainly encourage empiricist doubt about the veracity of the legend. However, they fail to address some significant hermeneutic considerations, to which I will now turn.

THE MOTU-KOITA PAST AS MYTHOPOEIA

The project of prehistory is a product of Western historical consciousness. The latter can be theorized from a number of perspectives (see for example Seixas 2004) broadly addressing the way people think about ‘history’. The development in Western societies of history as a concept in contrast to mythopoetic approaches to the past is conventionally seen as having been conditional upon the emergence of literacy, facilitating systematic listing, cataloguing, and so on (Goody 1987; Goody and Watt 1963; Levi-Strauss 1968:258-62). This brought about a transition from the recognition of temporal sequentiality to the abstract measurement of time which is integral to historical investigation of the past and, in our present discussion, to the conception of the Motu-Koita past as pre-history. It prefigures the chronological investigation of the pre-contact period in which dates are attached to potsherds and other archaeological findings, contextualising considerations of whether and when Edai Siabo organized the first *hiri* expedition. Accordingly, for example, the fit or lack of fit between the dating of significant potsherds and the putative period of Edai Siabo’s inaugural voyage (perhaps nine generations before Oram’s research) becomes problematic in attempts to establish veracity from the various materials available to investigators.

In contrast, in the traditional mythopoetic lifeworld of the Motu-Koita, mythic narratives were not a form of history, but were integral in bringing the past *together* with the present. The extra-ordinary potencies of everyday experience were disclosed in mythic narratives which, among other things, reinforced understandings that ancestors were immanent and could
be ritually engaged to the benefit of the living. It was possible, for example, for members of a mortal community to enhance their relationship to an ancestor by the adoption of dietary and behavioural régimes (vaga) understood to generate personal ‘heat’ (siahu) and qualities of lightness and dryness. The régimes created a degree of separation of the person from communal mortality and brought them closer to the existential status of ancestors, enabling them to partly embrace the power of the latter. The ancestors, then, were seen not as historically distant, but as accessible and potent repositories of knowledge of their own experiential past. Narratives of ancestors were used also to express rights, particularly in relation to places at which ancestors had resided or acted significantly (it is no coincidence that the term siahu is used of ‘rights’ as well as ‘heat’).

Mythic narratives were not subject to the same criteria of proof that would be applied to stories of the past in Western societies. For example, when recounting myths about particular ancestors, a stated genealogy established a speaker’s relationship to the person in the narrative and thus legitimized their version (see for example Goava 1979: passim). Its content was not challenged by other people, whose narratives of the same past event might differ from or even contradict it. To put this another way, mythic narratives had no associated truth claims in the Western legal or philosophical sense. Rather, they represented the environment of the Motu-Koita as constituted by places which were given meaning for the living by the activities of ancestors. In this respect, when considered as mythopoesis, all versions of the Edai Siabo stories offered by the Motu-Koita in former times would have been equally ‘valid’. Any variations among them were a reflection of the way the past was constituted for each narrator, rather than a matter of equivocation over degrees of empirical accuracy, or truth, or facts. When the past is narrated in this way, diversely by many voices, it is fluid, changing, variously reshaped by its intimate connection to the lived experience of the person who invokes it. Conversely Oram’s uncertainty about the existence of Edai Siabo (Oram 1991) reflects Western criteria of verification – a preference for consensus among story-tellers, chronological clarity, a historical orderliness – which were not shared by the early interlocutors who responded to European questions about the hiri.

The name ‘Edai Siabo’ itself is opaque. When the Motu language was grammatically analysed and rendered in dictionary form by missionary linguists (Lawes 1896; Lister-Turner and Clarke 1931) its denotations were formalized and its poetics were largely elided. ‘Words’ were either translatable or untranslatable. From this conservative perspective little can be made of the name ‘Edai Siabo’ beyond the observation that edai means ‘dive’ (or more precisely, to enter the water head-first) and ‘Siabo’ cannot be translated (i.e. it has no ‘meaning’, and may not even be a Motu word). Motuans, however, are as creative with language as Europeans, employing not only metaphor but lexical shifts, abbreviations, and other devices which are often genre-related. This is particularly evidenced in traditional songs such as the ehona, sung on lagatoi and written down by Barton (1910:116-8) – who was unable to satisfactorily translate them.

Names of central characters in Motu mythology are often redolent in the same manner as, for instance, that of the mythical Greek king Oedipus (‘swollen foot’). Two stories associated with my Motu fieldwork village, Pari, illustrate this. Tuna fish, which seasonally visited an inlet behind the village in great schools, were said to be the progeny of a local woman in the mythical past, the wife of a man called Vagi Boge. Customarily the wife of a man takes her husband’s first name as her ‘surname’ so in ordinary circumstances the woman, whose first name was Uguta, should have been called Uguta Vagi. However, in the story of the birth of tuna she is commonly referred to as ‘Uguta Vaina’. Vaina is a small bag, and the word also connotes a womb. Another mythical allusion is contained in the story of a serpent inhabiting the rock of Taurama hill near Pari village to which passing canoeists have to pay obeisance lest it causes their craft to capsize. Taurama is the site of an ancestral village whose members were massacred by the Eastern Motu, and the serpent is said to be an incarnation of the founder of that village. The ancestor and the serpent are named in the
story as ‘Taurama Buasi’. *Bua* means ‘massacre’, and a serpentine inference is evoked by the sibilant onomatope ‘*si*’.

Returning to the name Edai Siabo: as I have said, *edai* means ‘dive’. Siabo is linguistically elusive, but I noted earlier that an area inland from Boera is called *siabo*. In an interview in 1977 a Motuan answered a question about the identity of Edai Siabo with a comment in Motu which was translated thus: ‘Edai Siabo was a man from the old times. Edai Siabo is also a big hill near Boera. The two islands of Bava and Hidiha were formed when part of that big hill called Edai Siabo threw itself out into the sea’ (Gwilliam 1982:42). It is unwise to speculate from such slight instances but a small observation is, I think, appropriate: when approaching them from the mainland, the two small islands of Bava and Hidiha could be imagined as the protruding feet of a man who has gone head-first into the sea. My point here is that the poetics of Motu myths, as they were formerly told, have been lost and their hermeneutic potential significantly diminished in discursive developments since European contact which, among other things, have come to construct Edai Siabo as a quasi-historical individual.

The European interest in Motu accounts of the past contributed significantly to the crystallization of the story of the *hiri* into a popular legend. The voyage denoted by the term *hiri* ('tie' or 'fasten together') was one among several, of various kinds and purposes and involving different types of craft, undertaken by a people whose lifeworld was intimately involved with the sea. For example *hiri lata* ('long tie') were conducted to the distant Elema, *hiri lou* ('return tie', i.e. not requiring a stay for recovery and repairs, etc) to peoples at the eastern border of the Gulf area, and *hiri kwadogi* ('short tie') and *gaura* ('reaching/sharing') to closer groups to the west. Short trips known as *daiva* were also made to people to the east, especially to the Vula’a (or ‘Hula’).

*Hiri lata* (to which the general term *hiri* now refers) were the most dangerous, the most extensive in terms of travel, and the most redolent with ritual preparation, but long-distance trading was only one among many ritual activities of the Motu-Koita, for whom it was a practical necessity. It involved many Motu men as sailors and women as suppliers of pots and other trade items. It also involved neighbouring groups as contributors to preparation and to the welfare of women and children in the months the men were away, as well as participants and recipients in the distribution and disposal of items brought back from the Gulf. The *hiri* voyages were certainly major undertakings, but they were not strange and exotic for the Motu-Koita. Europeans exoticized the *hiri* and their colourful rituals, seeking information and details, describing the *lagatoi* and the voyages they witnessed, collecting stories of past voyages, and therewith a story about how a spirit gave a man information about how to conduct these voyages.

The Motu experienced *hiri* as particular voyages season by season, not as a historically collective phenomenon. Girls and women had tattoos added to their bodies when fathers and husbands left on a voyage, thus each *hiri* was inscribed on women intimately connected with it (see for example Gwilliam 1982:42). Men described their own voyages, or those of their own fathers and grandfathers, as particular episodes since each craft on each voyage linked specific Motuan kindreds to specific groups in the Gulf district who were their exchange partners. Each *hiri* therefore was in itself a source of multiple narratives, shaped by the experience and relationships of the narrator (see for example Gwilliam 1982:42-63; Nou 1975:16-22). Europeans conceived *hiri* in a different way, as a collective phenomenon. The particular knowledge of Motuan interlocutors was interrogated towards constructing a cohesive whole, an understanding of the *hiri* as a historical artefact. The variant narratives, modified by the questions of the interviewers (see for example Gwilliam 1982:42-63; Peta et al. 1975), were only partly preserved, for the real purpose of interested Europeans was the collation of detail, the exegesis of terminology and ritual actions towards the examination of a traditional institution.

The story of the original *hiri* voyage is one among many traditional Motu-Koita stories in which spirits, usually manifest as some kind of animal, disclose vital knowledge to a human.
Implicitly the knowledge Edai Siabo received is from ancestors, whose familiarity with faraway places, their resources, and the means to acquire the latter is understandable in the light of myths of group origin and migration. Indeed, some myths collected in the late nineteenth century indicated the Gulf area as the origin of a primordial population which divided into the Elema, Koiari, Koita and Motu (Chalmers and Gill 1885:151) and as the destination of the Motu dead (1885:153). Another Motu myth explains why edible vegetation is relatively scarce in Motu territory and sago has to be obtained from the Gulf. It tells of a quarrel between two hills – Taurama and Keaura – personified as brothers, which resulted in them parting. Taurama hill marks the eastern end of Western Motu territory. Keaura is the Motu name for a prominent hill in the Gulf district. Some versions locate their original joint existence at the Motu site (Chalmers 1887b:33, Oram 1968:81) and others place them originally at the Gulf site (Riesenfeld 1950:337-9). After their parting and relocation, the two brothers negotiated the trade of their local resources. Some interpretations of the myth of Taurama and Keaura present either or both of them as originators of the *hiri* (Riesenfeld 1950:339).

The Edai Siabo story, then, was in earlier times articulated with a complex mythology transcending individual village or *iduhu* histories. Moreover, it was a story of disclosure/uncovering, whereby knowledge which already existed was introduced into the mortal community in a temporally ambiguous past – a common feature of Melanesian mythology. The story of the acquisition of *hiri* knowledge, like stories of the acquisition of fire, or sorcery, or fishing nets, was not told as an account of the first in a historical order, for the Motu-Koita traditionally did not have a historical consciousness. It was, rather, an explanation of how the *hiri* came into being in the lifeworld of the Motu-Koita. The efforts of Oram and other European scholars to locate Edai Siabo in history (for example by asking how many generations ago he lived), reflect a European concern to understand the *hiri* as a historically developing institution. Oram’s doubt that one man could have inaugurated the *hiri* (fully formed, as it were) indicates a historical rationality which misconceives the real place of Edai in the mythopoesis of the *hiri*.

**HISTORY, CHRISTIANITY AND SACRED TRADITION**

European fascination with the *hiri* story began a transformation of a mythopoeic complex into a historical phenomenon with a legendary temporal beginning. Since the mid-colonial period literate Motu-Koita have added their own written accounts, increasingly influenced by the conventions of European story-telling (for example K. Moi 1979), for their own view of their past is no longer exclusively mythopoeic. That is to say, the past has become the subject of historical consideration by the Motu-Koita themselves. The value of documentation has been absorbed into this colonially learned perspective, as well as an acknowledgement of European criteria of probability. In the process stories (*sivaraidia*) dominated or driven by cosmomorphic imagery have become re-interpreted as *goridia* – fables told for amusement. On the other hand tales of village founders or former warriors have often gained the status of history or quasi-history, legitimated by the combination of archaeological remains, the use of relevant maps and the ponderings of colonial-era scholars, and historicized pedigrees. Genealogies are now meticulously listed, often diagrammed in a style learned from the observed methods of anthropologists and historians, generations are carefully counted and the adopted colonial-era rule-of-thumb estimation of 25 years per generation provides a credible time-frame for past events. \(^{16}\)

Edai Siabo has fared well in this transition, despite his lack of clear genealogical links to current generations. Constant repetition of the story, particularly since the late colonial period and the advent of the Hiri Moale, has established it as a familiar and popular quasi-history. The detailed documentation of the *hiri*, the distinctive form of the *lagatoi*, the gradual consensus that the *hiri* began at Boera, the presence of the legendary stone at Davage beach, all provide
the general context of the fascinating proposition that a single inspired individual invented a
new kind of sailing vessel and undertook the first courageous voyage. Now that the Motu past
is historicized, it is becoming populated by Great Men, as popular Western history is. The
ancestor/spirit instructor remains part of the Edai Siabo story, providing a legendary aura to
the central individual, and thereby the story maintains what is popularly recognized as a
distinguishing characteristic of ‘local’ history in post-colonial Melanesia, the inclusion of a
magical element. In the same discursive movement it takes on the characteristics of quasi-
history shared by the stories of King Arthur, Robin Hood and other inspirational figures of the
Western past: the Edai Siabo legend is understood to be wreathe in narrative embellishments
yet to have a historical person at its core.

These latter characteristics place the Edai Siabo legend in a genre of storytelling
contextualized by historical consciousness which Jean Comaroff (1997) suggests can be called
‘narrativity’. Here ‘past events are condensed into linear, realist accounts that make claims to
authority and public currency, impute cause and agency, and so assert their own truth value’
(1997:43). The Edai Siabo celebrated by the Motu-Koita in the late colonial era and since is,
then, differently conceived than the Edai Siabo of mythopoeic consciousness. Moreover, he
and the hiri have become more than historical artefacts. As symbols of Motu-Koita tradition
and identity, they and their representation have become absorbed into a discourse of
authenticity configured around Christian themes of sacredness and spirituality.

Since being introduced into Motu-Koita coastal villages in the 1870s Christianity has
become so embedded in their sociality as to be absorbed into a rhetoric of ‘tradition’. Gradually
the London Missionary Society effected an integration of Congregationalist Church social
organization with the social structure of villages and the iduhu within them (Groves 1954). By
1881 some Christian ritual was being incorporated into hiri voyages (King 1909:184) and
when the missionary James Chalmers journeyed to the Gulf on a lagatoi in 1883 entreaties
were made to the Christian God as well as to ancestors for protection with no apparent sense
of disjunction (Chalmers 1895:78-80). Moral disciplinary régimes and ritual appeals for
ancestral benevolence were largely adaptable to Christian practice (see for example Goddard
2005:192; Pulsford 1975). Moreover Christian terminology was translated into Motu by
missionaries employing terms whose use had until then reflected non-Christian ontology. For
example ‘sacred’ was translated using ‘helaga’, a term with connotations of potency, and the
word ‘dirava’, which missionaries understood to refer to ‘spirits’, was capitalized and used for
God.

Where some PNG societies are portrayed as retrospectively perceiving a radical ‘break’
between their pre-Christian worldview and Christianity (Jebens 2005:211-12; Robbins 2004)
the Motu-Koita, while accepting that times have changed and much has been forgotten, have
maintained a keen sense of their ‘traditions’. Missionary prohibitions on a range of traditional
dances (Groves 1954), for example, were superficially successful, but the dances were not
lost to memory and were periodically revived (although in modified forms) during the colonial
period in reaction to overzealous missionary attitudes (Belshaw 1957:188-9). The rationales
of iduhu membership and its attendant obligations were maintained, and even preserved by the
integration of Church organization (Groves 1954). Belief in malevolent magic – ‘sorcery’ –
remains endemic in Motu-Koita society, and pre-geriatric deaths of prominent people are
privately suspected to have been caused by it. At the same time Christianity has been used by
the Motu-Koita, particularly since the late colonial period, as sustenance against their
marginalization by the growth of the migrant city of Port Moresby. Christianity has become
part of their ‘traditional’ identity, polemically contrasted to the profanity of the migrant urban
milieu which threatens to engulf them. Judgements are made among the Motu-Koita
themselves on sections of their society seen to have fallen prey to the city’s iniquities (see for

They are well rehearsed in the history of their involvement with Christianity. Famous
figures in the missionization of the south coast are frequently invoked. Dates of the original
building and subsequent replacement of village churches are commemorated, as are the first pastors in villages. At the same time – and perhaps this is a measure of its integration into Motu-Koita ‘traditional’ identity – the advent of Christianity is seen not as a point of disjunction, or a ‘beginning’ of a history, but, as I have written of Pari village, an event in a distant epoch of ambivalent temporality, adjoined to mythologized events (Goddard 2005:149; cf Goava 1979:103-109).

The facility with which rituals appealing to the benevolence of ancestors could be reoriented towards God, the Christian meanings added to Motu-Koita ontological concepts, and the degree of fit between the moral configuration of traditional disciplinary régimes and Christian morality have created among latter-day Motu-Koita a sense of continuity between their pre-colonial ‘culture’ and their Christianity. Moreover the integration of Church-related practice into village social structure, and the polemical use of Christianity as a resource against the challenges of the foreigner-dominated city create a powerful sense among latter-day Motu-Koita that their culture has a ‘spiritual’ or ‘sacred’ aspect. This is reflected not only in implications of fallenness when they criticize those among themselves who have capitulated to Port Moresby’s profane temptations, but also in debates about the commercialization of the Hiri Moale, which is held to symbolize a culture which is exclusive and ‘sacred’. Thus before the specific protest of Boera villagers, yearly preparations for the Hiri Moale were commonly accompanied by protests about variations, commercialization, inappropriate sponsors and additional entertainments which signified disrespect for a ‘sacred’ tradition. In Boera villagers’ criticisms of the way the Hiri Moale was conducted, sacrilege was both an implicit and explicit accusation. Further, a spiritual continuity between a pre-Christian and Christian Motu-Koita culture is clearly implied in the possessive trope stressing that hiri ‘culture’ had been a preparation for the coming of Christianity.

Collectivized, transformed into an artefact, and imbued with a sacred quality integral to Motu-Koita identity the hiri has become an increasingly redolent symbol in Motu-Koita efforts to assert their ethnicity. However, provincial boundaries and differences in governance have imposed political-economic divisions which work against their unity. In popular perceptions around PNG the Motu-Koita are associated with the NCD, and those of them who live outside its boundaries find themselves identified more as part of an undifferential ‘central province’ population. It is not surprising that the hiri has become the subject of a dispute among local groups attempting to maintain their ethnic integrity. Previously, those attempts have given rise to conflicts of a more material nature. In the 1960s, the establishment of a Land Titles Commission enabled the Motu-Koita to make legal claims to land acquired by early European colonizers, but they were quickly set against each other as legal procedure required the mastery of Western rationales of evidence and ownership criteria. Despite legislative accommodation of ‘custom’, the few successful land claimants were those who best learned the language of the courtroom (see for example Goddard 2007, 2008).

Melanesians are being increasingly exposed to discourses of cultural and heritage rights, and are becoming aware of the value of mastering these in the aftermath of colonial rule as they find internationally recognized and legitimated ways of directly challenging the appropriation of their resources. The tropes used by the Boera villagers in claims on the hiri display a nascent sense of the power of establishing a public recognition that local history is proprietary, even though they yet lack the precision which a court of law would demand. Meanwhile the historicization of Edai Siabo continues in subtle but potentially powerful ways in the face of new local developments. The establishment of a liquefied-natural-gas processing plant near Boera is in early stages, with the conduct of now-conventional ‘social mapping’ and ‘cultural impact’ studies. Already, in reports on the cultural heritage of the area, along with a description of archaeological investigations into old village sites, the site of the building of the ‘first lagatoi’ and of Edai Siabo’s anchor are pictured and recorded, with no implied equivocation over their facticity (Esso 2008:9-10, 15-16). An emergent dispute over landownership in the project area has received national publicity. The development will inevitably change the local
physical environment. It remains to be seen whether the story of Edai Siabo has a further and different part to play in the fortunes of Boera villagers or whether, in the face of promises and expectations of economic advantage, their concern for their cultural heritage is reduced to a sigh of regret.

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NOTES

1. ‘Koita’ is the name used by the latter group to refer to themselves, while ‘Koitabu’ is what the Motu call them.
3. Funding for the Hiri Moale has been regularly provided by the National Capital District Commission (NCDC), and South Pacific Brewery, and the British American Tobacco Co has been a sponsor since the 1990s. Other sponsors have come and gone over the years, contributing in a variety of ways; for example the forestry company Rimbunan Hijau donated logs for building the display *lagatoi* in 2001.
4. The claims cited in this and the two following paragraphs are paraphrased from a total of 22 items in PNG’s two daily newspapers, The Post-Courier and The National. The first, a harbinger, appeared on 3 Oct 2002 in the Post-Courier: a letter headed ‘Hiri Moale Festival losing its real meaning’. The main body of reports and correspondence occurred in a period between September 2005, when Boera villagers began to intensify their public protests, and September 2007.
5. The lingua franca was known in earlier colonial times as ‘Police Motu’, reflecting its use by police patrols for communication along the coast. At the end of the colonial period it was ‘officially’ renamed ‘Hiri Motu’, based on a proposition that it was originally spread by *hiri* voyagers. This proposition has been convincingly challenged by Dutton (1985), who shows the difference between the language used by *hiri* voyagers and that of the lingua franca. Interestingly, most of my Motuan acquaintances still refer to the lingua franca as ‘Police Motu’.
7. The revised date has been suggested by David (2008) on the basis of new radiocarbon evidence from archaeological research on pottery found in the mid-Kikori area of the Gulf Province. The tentative date used previously has been about 400 years ago, based mostly on research in the Port Moresby and Central Province area (for example Allen 1972; Bulmer 1971, 1975, 1982; Sullivan and Sassoon 1987; Swadling 1977, 1980, 1981) and to a lesser extent in the Gulf Province (for example Rhoads 1982). This research is considerably earlier that that of David. I am not currently aware of any recent archaeological research from the Moresby area offering a revised date.
8. Most versions of the story ascribe no children to Edai, and represent a sister, Boio, as marrying an inland Koita man. In one or two versions Edai has a son, but no marriage or offspring are mentioned for the latter (Oram 1991). Thus Edai is lost to patrilineal Motu genealogy.
9. An *orou* was a double-hulled vessel with a lateen sail (the same type as the *lagatoi’s* sail), used for trading voyages. Haddon regarded it as a superior craft to the *lagatoi*, calling the latter ‘clumsy’ and a ‘tramp’ (1975: 238).
10. I have elaborated this elsewhere (Goddard 2007, 2008). My representation of the traditional Motu-Koita lifeworld is a work in progress, and involves a degree of reinterpretation of early-colonial-era documentation by missionaries, ethnologists, and Government officials who, as products of their period, were unable or unwilling to recognize what we might call the cosmos-ontology of the Motu-Koita as an integrated system of thought, rather than a collection of beliefs and superstitions.
11. This quality was not, of course, exclusive to the Motu, but was common in Melanesia. A more contemporary example has been elaborated by Van Heekeren (2008) in relation to the nearby coastal Vula’a, who are culturally similar and traditionally linked to the Motu.
13. I have represented the Taurama Buasi story here as if the serpent were still present today. However, when Australian forces built a gun turret at the approximate location of the serpent’s lair on Taurama Hill during the Second World War it considerably weakened the power of this story, which is increasingly less known among recent generations of villagers. The story of the mother of tuna is also now less familiar to young people in the village. Both stories were widely known during the colonial era and were recorded a number of times. I have cited several written sources elsewhere (Goddard 2005: 182, 2008: 37), and collected versions from elderly Pari villagers during the 1990s.
14. The range of canoes used on these trading voyages included lagatoi (for hiri lata), hakona (two-or-three hulled, mostly used for hiri loa), togodava (double-hulled goods carrier, mostly for hiri kwadogi) and irai (the simplest double-hulled form of goods carrier).

15. Edai Siabo is consigned to a footnote in Riesenfeld’s discussion of Taurama and Keaura (1950: 339).

16. An example is the general agreement on the destruction of the ancestral village at Taurama (according to archaeological findings) and the later establishment of Pari village by the Motu avenger Kevau Dagora. His genealogy is well rehearsed by patrilineal descendants in the village, placing the founding of the village at about 1750 A.D. (various interlocutors at Pari village 1991-99; cf Oram 1968; Pulsford and Heni 1968; Golson 1968).


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Abstract: In the 1970s the Motu-Koita, traditional inhabitants of what is now the National Capital District of Papua New Guinea, inaugurated a yearly cultural festival thematically based on traditional coastal trading voyages known as hiri. Contestation over the location and commercialization of the festival in the capital city developed in the new century as one distant village claimed to 'own' the hiri. The Motu-Koita view of their past and their identity has been affected by their encounter with Christianity, colonialism and its aftermath, and the rhetoric of the villagers' claims drew on criteria of authenticity, cultural purity, and exclusiveness which are arguably contemporary rather than 'traditional'. This article reviews Motu-Koita history, the story of the origin of the hiri, and the local politics of the cultural festival. It attempts to understand the way the past, which was formerly mythopoetically invoked, is being historicized and thereby fixed in new local discourses of cultural and heritage rights and ownership, as Melanesians come to terms with the effects of global processes on their traditions and other resources. [ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR]

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