

AMERICAN WRITING

A Magazine

Gone Reflections

by Steven Feld

Monday, 19 July, 1982... We spend three hours in the bush with Jubi in the a.m. walking out to his gardens for Shari to photograph bush images. On a ridge behind Tolo mugun we stop to look at old oga and stare off across the Gulu Ridge to a bare spot where treetops stick through the skyline. It is Seyalen digi, Jubi's old house, abandoned now for almost two years since Watua died. Almost magically a lone amo flies across the tree line and stops. We pass the binoos around and follow it for ten minutes or so as it comes close to us and perches again, then flies off and goes back to Seyalen digi. This all just after Jubi says he quit the place when Watua died: couldn't live there alone.

Those are the opening lines of a journal entry I wrote that Monday night at my small thatch house in Sululeb, a rainforest village in a remote part of Papua New Guinea called Bosavi. The rest of my entry for that day is as short, and gives no indication that the account tells of a significant personal moment, much less, a significant cultural moment in the history of my encounters with Kaluli people. The moment was six weeks after I had returned to Bosavi for a second trip, a short summer trip, after an absence of five years. With me was Shari, my wife of three years, and while this trip combined nostalgia and excitement for me, it was new and considerably more difficult for her. Jubi, my closest Kaluli companion and father figure, had taken to her quickly and fondly, and the three of us went out to the bush that day to see his oga pandanus garden. That trip, like the ones we took most mornings or afternoons, had Jubi teaching us much about the remarkable birds, flora and fauna of the Bosavi rainforest.

Jubi was extremely knowledgeable about these things, as I discovered in 1976 and 1977 when we spent many months together looking at birds, listening to them, and talking about what they mean to Kaluli people. It was during this period of instruction that I often visited Jubi and his wife Watua at the bush house they kept near their gardens at Seyalen digi, a forty-minute walk away from our village at Sululeb.

When I returned to Sululeb in 1982, I immediately saw Jubi perched on a porch at the village center. He grinned broadly, welcoming me back while energetically shaking my hand and stroking my

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chin. Laying out a generous leaf full of freshly cooked bananas called *tidifi*, he joked how the name of the food was the same as my name, “Sidif,” then suddenly switched voice and mood, as Kaluli can, from radiant to somber. “Wataua died, two *dona* seasons ago. I quit Seyalen digi and live here in Gunabo’s house. We have gardens together close by. I’ll take you.”

I expressed my sadness over Wataua’s death and told him that the local missionary had written to me when it happened. I inquired after his children, all of whom were grown, married, and living elsewhere. I introduced Shari. He repeated the name a few times, pronouncing it “Sali,” and asked if she was the sister of “Bage,” namely Edward Schieffelin, an anthropologist colleague who also works with the Kaluli. He was actually asking if, like Kaluli, I had married through sister exchange, reasoning that Shari was a return for my sister “Babi.” In fact “Babi,” Bambi B. Schieffelin, another anthropologist colleague, first introduced me to Kaluli people as her unmarried younger brother so that we could live and do linguistic research together in the same village. From that moment on, most Kaluli imagined that Bambi was given in marriage before I was old enough to take a wife in exchange.

As we lapsed into the intricacies and intrigues of these marriage arrangements, Jubi resumed his playful mood, joking that I had chosen well because Shari’s blond ponytail was silky like the feathers of a bird of paradise. He knew I’d pick up on the innuendoes of such talk, but as we laughed and carried on, a progression of gentle glances and grumbles reminded me that my wife understood none of this and was growing impatient. Famished and cold, her introduction to Bosavi had just been a four hour forest walk through mud and driving rain, culminating with a dangerous river crossing. At that moment we three were all out of sync. Spending parts of each day together over the next three months would bring us close together in new ways.

One of the things that Jubi had taught me about birds concerned their role in Kaluli sentiment and emotional expression. To briefly explain Bosavi myths, cosmology, and natural history, birds are not just birds, they are what Kaluli call *ane mama*, only translatable as “gone reflections” or, perhaps more accurately, “gone reverberations.” These reflections or reverberations are the spirits of Kaluli dead, absences transformed into the presences through lingering grip of forest images and echoes. To each other birds appear as people, and to Kaluli, birds show through and resonate both ways. This idea was powerfully evoked for me one day when Jubi, impatient over my questions, blurted out: “To you they are birds, to me they are voices in the forest.” As I

came to understand, it is not just that Kaluli hear birds far more often than they see them. What they hear are voices that speak their language, that cry, that whistle, that sing, that call out their names. These reverberations invite contemplation and comment because, as Kaluli say, “inside” and “underneath” these sounds one hears voices of friends, children, or loved ones who have gone in the form of a bird. And along with these sounds, corresponding bird colors, textures, movements, and behaviors are visible keys to interpreting a vibrant world of spirit representations.

In this world an *amo*, a Sulfur-crested cockatoo, happens to show through as the “gone reflection” of an older woman. There are a number of attributes that Kaluli combine into this interpretation. Whiteness is age, maturity, and neutralization of menstrual blood — spirits of younger women are commonly red birds. A loud raucous voice is strength, experience, audacity, crankiness; indeed, the alternative for *amo* is *ea*, both a common female name, and, when nasally enunciated and elongated, a distinct mime for the call “EE-YAI!” And slow, deliberate solo flight at the forest edge is, again, age.

So, to get back to the event, and my journal entry, we can now replay the moment and ponder what Jubi experienced, what I experienced, and what we each experienced and interpreted of the other. There we were, looking off at Seyalen digi, both nostalgic, when that lone cockatoo moved across the ridge toward us, stopped, squawked, then went off toward the old house. Was it the “gone reflection” of Jubi’s dead wife? At that moment I knew that Jubi knew that I knew. After all, he was the one who taught me most of what I understood about the Bosavi avifauna and about Kaluli interpretations of natural history. He was certainly aware that I was capable of seeing an *amo* and quickly associating it with the spirit presence of an older Kaluli woman. Besides, our times shared together at Seyalen digi, the poignancy of his leaving there, the reminders of Wataua’s death as a central way he marked our reunion after a long separation, the structural parallel that he, the father, had lost a wife, and I, the son, had taken one — all these things were much too central to our relationship to be out of his awareness.

Obviously, these things were packed into my sense of the moment. I distinctly remember also flashing on three other things. Instantly I thought that Jubi and I might have had a momentarily similar sensation when we saw the *amo*. And then I thought, No, that can’t be, that is too simple. I also recall quickly trying to imagine how I might explain to my wife what had just happened. And then I looked at Jubi.

There were goose-bumps up and down his arms as he held the binoculars tight to his eyes. And as he lowered them, he made a characteristic Kaluli move, twinging the right shoulder up slightly while suggesting a quick shiver of the neck and tilt of the head, eyes blinking once. It was a move I had seen many times. Kaluli make it in moments of contemplation, in the presence of thoughts or events that are serious, unnerving, or profound. I had previously not attended to goose-bumps on Kaluli bodies as a sign of anything but occasional cold. But I knew these had to be different goose-bumps.

Of course I don't know exactly what Jubi experienced but I had such an urge to know what he felt just then. My curiosity about that moment overwhelms me still. Was he overcome by a visual image of Watawa? Did the sounds of the *amo* make him hear her voice? Did scenes from their domestic life, moments shared, sad or tender incidents, funny or uncanny ones rush into his mind? Perhaps these imaginative tendencies were alien to his sensations in the moment. But I know that I thought about these kinds of things right then in a heightened flurry of mental and emotional activity. And I couldn't stop wondering if Jubi did, too.

In some ways, it is much easier to ponder what he imagined of my experience than to ponder what he experienced himself. But I keep coming back to the sense that what happened for him had to be powerful and not ordinary, no matter what what a Kaluli routinely know and feel everyday about birds, death, and home lands as identity signs. For there is no question that it is not every day that a Kaluli starts off nostalgically at an old home, gardens overgrown by weeds, creeks trickling in the foreground and rivers roaring in the background, mentions the loss of a wife and the subsequent need to quit the place in sadness, and suddenly hears and sees a lone cockatoo slowly make its way toward him, stop, then fly off toward the place. Too many coincidences there, not to mention an ethnographer and apprentice natural historian in attendance.

There was quiet, and the time watching the *amo* went slowly, but I am now quite sure that I greatly exaggerated in my journal when I said we watched for ten minutes. It was perhaps two. Shari was still photographing when this episode began. All she said to me when she walked back over and looked at us two was, "What?" It was a request for information, as if we had excluded her from something. Surely we had. I silently pointed to the bird. She said "Oh," and then, as more silent moments elapsed, I knew she had begun to think about why we two were standing like statues, ankle-deep in mud.

With no further exchange of words we soon left that place. Slowly, making our way along an overgrown path, we headed toward a slushy trail that led to a small clearing of secondary forest. Jubi was uncharacteristically quiet as we walked, head slightly down, arms together behind his back. Then all of a sudden he stopped short, arm jutting from behind to point through the dense underbrush. "See that trap — once I got a *mahi* bandicoot over by there." And from then on through the rest of the morning, we were back into our typical bush routines.

For us both, the suspension and loss of time, and then the return to our typical affairs, constituted similar brackets around two complexly intertwined experiences. What Jubi perhaps felt as a sweeping, emotional moment came in the context of his life experiences, where such moments are coherent and real. What I experienced was more a cathartic crystallization of disparate bits of ethnographic knowledge colliding with a sense of momentary wonder and mystery. That is not to minimize what I experienced, for surely the event made me appreciate the way birds show through and echo to Kaluli in a way that I previously could not possibly have apprehended as deeply or as synaesthetically, whatever my own sensibility or ethnographic preparation.

Yet ironically enough, my experience quickly spun into increasing disbelief and even skepticism because the moment seemed just too fantastic, too well-staged. I was dazed, responding as if watching a movie, where such sequences are conventionally scripted and photographed for dramatic editing juxtapositions. This disbelief, this paradox of participation, was perhaps what made me refer to the appearance of the *amo* as almost magical in my journal, while at the same time noting the moment in what now seems an extraordinarily terse and removed manner. If I was instantly pleased and excited by what happened, I was surely more anxious that any romantic attachment to that moment might distance me from intuiting Jubi's experience.