

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 UPON ICH PRACTICED BY THE TOLAI PEOPLE OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA: THE CASE OF *KUTU-TABU* AND *MALAGENE*

Naomi Faik-Simet<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

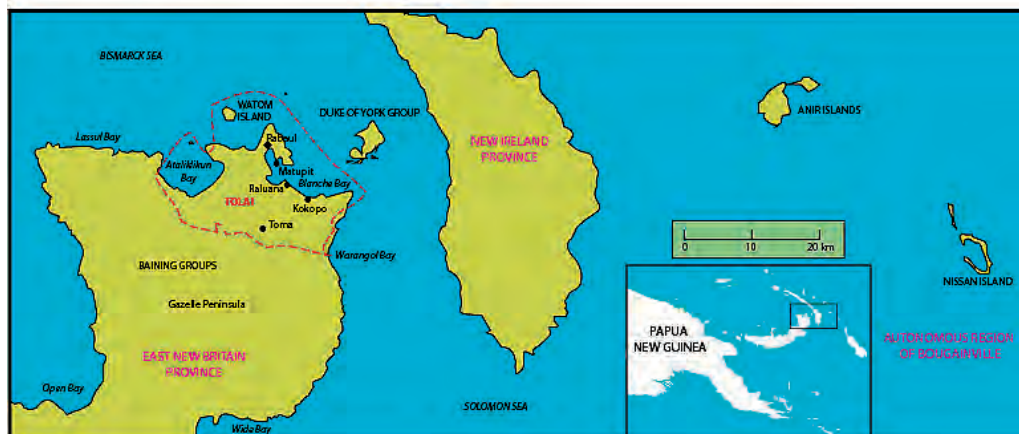
Amongst many other countries, Papua New Guinea was greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It was a very difficult time as many people did not quite grasp the nature of the pandemic. Restriction on the movement of people from one location to another through lock-downs imposed by each country, resulted in escalated economic and social problems. In addition, the pandemic had a detrimental effect on the practice of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), as many of the elderly and ICH knowledge holders had died from other underlying conditions. However, in other instances, the pandemic had a positive impact on some ICH that underwent modification and adaptation to improve their practice. In this study, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon certain forms of ICH were investigated in East New Britain province from 2021–2022. Particularly, ICH practiced by the indigenous Tolai people were investigated. The research field-work was undertaken by the International Research Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (IRCI) in Japan and the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies.

## EAST NEW BRITAIN CONTEXT

Informants for this research were the indigenous Tolai people of East New Britain who are located on the Gazelle Peninsula of the New Britain island (Figure 1). They share East New Britain with two other ethnic groups; the Baining, who are the inhabitants of the interior of New Britain, and the Pomios, who live on the southern end of the peninsula. The Tolai people are known as being culturally superior and sophisticated group of indigenous people in Papua New Guinea (Webb, 1996). Their resilience to colonialism (Blythe, 2019) and the current pressures of globalization has provided the reason for East New Britain to be selected as the context for this study.

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Director – Dance, Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies.

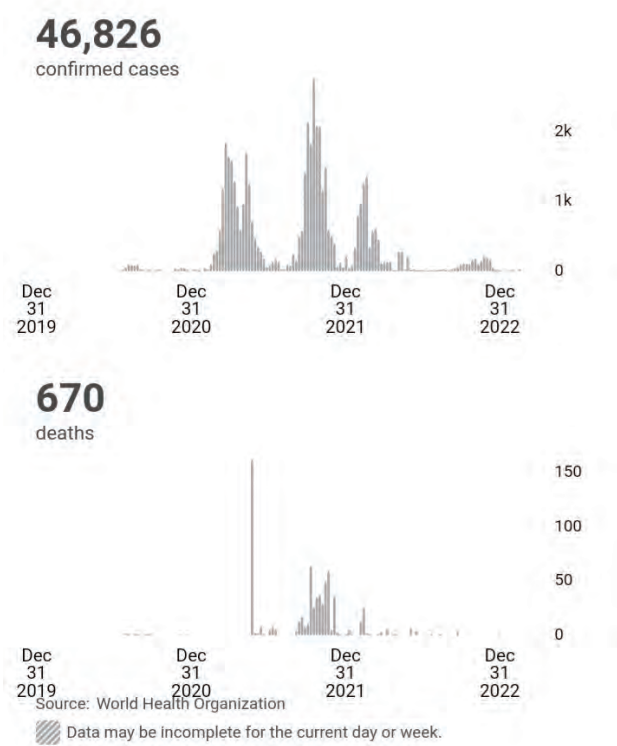


**Figure 1.** Map of East New Britain (Source: Don Niles, Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies)

## IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE TOLAI PEOPLE

East New Britain was the first province in Papua New Guinea to record a COVID-19 case in early 2020. The pandemic gradually reached other provinces in the country over the next two years; 2021–2022. According to statistics supplied by the World Health Organization, the number of confirmed cases for Papua New Guinea from December 2020 – December 2022 was 46,826 and the number of deaths recorded was 670 (Figure 2). Word of the pandemic reached the province of East New Britain following the revelation of the first reported case. The woman who was diagnosed with COVID-19 was from a village near the capital city of the Province, Kokopo. Following this, the fear of the pandemic was heightened even further and created stigma amongst the people. It was clear from the panic and stigma that ensued that while some awareness on the nature of the affliction had been undertaken earlier, not many people understood its nature. As to be expected in this kind of situation, people had their own ideas; much of which was based on misinformation. As a result of this misinformation, many people did not know how to respond to the ailment when it finally spread amongst the population.

In addition, a large part of the population is rural based; the people live mainly in villages. Further, the transportation amongst these rural communities was very bad. A large number of people rely on public transport to travel to town to buy their food supplies. Social distancing was a challenge as these forms of transport accommodated large numbers of people and many times were over crowded. As a result of these factors, a large number of people were infected. Many of these cases were brought into hospitals and other medical center, but at the same time a large number did not make it to hospitals or medical centers. In this scenario then, it would be difficult to establish with any certainty the exact figure of the number of deaths in the province.



**Figure 2.** COVID-19 Case and Death Statistics in Papua New Guinea 2019 – 2022 (Source: World Health Organization)

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I engaged a qualitative ethnographic research methodology for this study as the interviews with participants and observations of ceremonies were undertaken in the Tolai cultural context. Qualitative research. ‘is a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live. Its aim is to understand the social reality of individuals, groups and cultures...’ (Holloway, 1997: 2). Engaging a qualitative research methodology enabled me to undertake a social inquiry to ‘to understand and explore’ my participants’ ‘social and cultural phenomenon’ (Ohman, 2005: 274). As a social inquiry, qualitative research generates data in two ways: one is through observation of participants’ behaviour, action or performance, while the other is through face-to-face interviews with the participants as part of the research process (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). These methods of inquiry assisted me in gathering my data for this study.

Being an indigenous Papua New Guinean woman scholar, I am connected to the Tolai people of Papua New Guinea by marriage. Through this connection, I had access to the participants and the information they provided. Interviews and ceremonial activities were video-recorded and documented. Still photographs of the informants and the kutu-tabu ceremony, and the cultural dance festival were



**Figure 3.** Recording a women's *malagene* at Ralaukaia, Matupit, November 2022. (Photo: N. Faik-Simet)

gathered as part of the data collection. The *kutu-tabu* mortuary ceremony was held in September and the *malagene* (Tolai cultural dance) festival took place in November 2022 respectively. As the research investigated certain intangible cultural heritage that were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to come up with unstructured questions that respected and valued my informants' views. Hence, my questions were guided within an indigenous Pacific research framework (Smith, 1997), that privileged indigenous peoples' voices, knowledge, philosophies, perceptions, interpretation and ways of knowing.

### **Duration of the Fieldwork**

Preliminary work was undertaken in August 2022, where I travelled to East New Britain province to advise the Provincial Administration of the research. As a government employee and a researcher within the Dance Studies Division at the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, it was important to follow protocol before the research was conducted. Having established this understanding at the Provincial level, it was okay for me to conduct the necessary interviews and observations in Matupit village, East New Britain province.

The research was undertaken over a three-month period; August, September and November 2022. Since I was based in Port Moresby, I had to spread the fieldwork activity over three months which required me to travel to East New Britain for the times mentioned. Since the lifting of the ban on the movement of people from one location to the other, there was an increase in the staging of cultural ceremonies as well as traditional festivals associated with tourism. These activities prompted me to attend and conduct research and recording of the *kutu-tabu*



ceremony and the *malagene* dance cultural festival, (Figure 3).

### Informants

The three main informants that participated in this study were Rebecca Darius (Figure 4), John Waninara Vuia (Figure 5), and Ligur Kulaut (Figure 6). Rebecca Darius works for the East New Britain Tourism Authority as a Culture and Tourism officer. Her views were important as she represented the East New Britain provincial government. She gave insights to the impact caused by COVID-19 to the culture and tourism industry in the province. Since the spread of the pandemic, the East New Britain provincial government banned all tourist ships entry into the province. Ms Darius expressed her thoughts in the interview, that the local people depended on tourists to supplement their daily income, and the ban did cause economic challenges since it was imposed in 2020. It was only lifted in 2022, when vaccines were introduced and the cases decreased which resulted in the re- entry of the tourists into the province.

The second interview was held with John Waninara Vuia, the Ward Member at Kikila in Matupit village. As a local level, government leader Mr Waninara Vuia shared deep concerns about the way COVID-19 affected his people. He claims that the pandemic caused social and financial stress upon the people as many of them were not familiar with the restriction on the movement of people and social distancing measures. Even the wearing of face masks were questioned as these rules were considered foreign. He had quite a difficult time during the duration of the pandemic attending to a number of deaths that occurred as a result of COVID-19. Following these deaths in the village, mortuary ceremonies such as the *kutu-tabu* could not be held as the movement of people were



**Figure 4.** Rebecca Darius, Culture & Tourism officer, East New Britain Tourism Authority. November 2022. (Photo: N. Faik-Simet)



**Figure 5.** John Waninara Vuia, Ward Member, Kikila, Matupit village. November 2022. (Photo: N. Faik-Simet)



**Figure 6.** Ligur Kulaut, *Malagene* (Dance) Leader, Tagitagi Male Cultural Group, Matupit village. November 2022. (Photo: N.Faik-Simet)

restricted as well as the ban on large gatherings. As a result, many people put a hold on their ceremonies and were able to stage them in 2022 when the situation improved.

Ligur Kulaut was the third informant who had a key role as the leader of *malagene*, an ICH practice explored in this study. Kulaut expressed concern about how certain *malagene* were affected during the lockdown. *Malagene* is widely performed in Matupit for certain cultural ceremonies and were shelved because of the restriction on the movement of people. This form of ICH is an important Tolai cultural expression and the practice has been maintained for many generations. In addition to ceremonies, *malagene* has also been performed for tourists as another form of generating an income. As the leader of his *Tagitagi* male

cultural group in Matupit village, his dancers have benefited from tourists and he was happy that all normal operations including the performance of *malagene* resumed in 2022.

## **SAFEGUARDING**

The Tolai of East New Britain are some of Papua New Guinea's resilient people who have safeguarded their indigenous practices against outside influence such as colonialism. By maintaining and practicing *kutu-tabu* over a number of years, they have kept this cultural ceremony alive and continue to sustain its significance, as a key part of their heritage. The safeguarding of *kutu-tabu* as a cultural practice is both a wider societal matter but also a clan matter.

For the wider society, the regular staging or performance of *kutu-tabu* ceremonies is important to its continuity. At these ceremonies, one often hears cultural leaders and custodians reminding and encouraging people to continue to perform *kutu-tabu* ceremonies otherwise it would disappear from the Tolai cultural landscape. These cultural leaders and custodians often refer to two situations in the past (Epstein 1961 & 1992), which threatened the continuity of *kutu-tabu*. The first one was the World War II, which saw the destruction of large stocks of Tolai tabu by the Japanese soldiers who had occupied East New Britain at that time. The Japanese soldiers ransacked Tolai households for tabu in order to buy their food and services during the war. As a result, by the end of the war, the Tolai had no tabu left, thus were unable to conduct any traditional cultural rituals and ceremonies, including *kutu-tabu*. It took them about thirty years to recover from this situation, before they could stage traditional cultural ceremonies again.

The second situation was the volcanic eruption in 1994, which resulted in the displacement and dislocation of many people on the Gazelle Peninsula. Large stocks of tabu were also buried in some households across the Peninsula. As a result, not many people were able to stage or perform traditional cultural ceremonies, including *kutu-tabu*.

## **IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON KUTU-TABU**

In 2020 when the first case of COVID-19 was discovered in East New Britain, the Provincial Government immediately issued advice to the public to cease all participation in public gatherings. Movement of people were restricted, which led to the cancellation of cultural ceremonies which included *kutu-tabu*. These ceremonies usually attract a large number of participation and draw crowds of people. Covid-19 posed the same challenge to the continuity of *kutu-tabu* and other traditional cultural practices of the Tolai. Many cultural activities and ceremonies, including *kutu-tabu* either, had to be cancelled or postponed for very long periods.

These cancellations had a detrimental effect on the economic situation as poverty and shortness of food escalated. According to my informants who were interviewed in this study, ceremonies such as the *kutu-tabu* provided the occasion for many villagers to share tabu and food. Many people attend *kutu-tabu* ceremonies to receive their portion of tabu and food that are being publicly shared by the deceased's clan and family. With the introduction of vaccines in 2022, the COVID-19 cases were reduced, then led to the lifting of the ban on the movement of people, eventually, saw a return in the staging of many cultural activities including *kutu-tabu*.

Research fieldwork to determine the impact of COVID-19 on certain ICH was undertaken in Matupit village. Although there are no appropriate statistics provided for the number of deaths that occurred, Dr. Jacob Simet, an elder from Matupit village revealed that in 2020 there were about 4 – 6 deaths per month and in 2021, the death figures increased to about 8 – 10 over a space of 4 – 8 weeks. The impact was quite devastating, as funeral and burials were taking place quite frequently causing financial and physical stress on individuals. The two forms of ICH; *kutu-tabu* and *malagene* were investigated in this study.

### **Kutu-tabu**

*Kutu-tabu* (breaking *tabu*) is part of the traditional religious belief system of the Tolai people of East New Britain, Papua New Guinea. *Kutu* means to cut and *tabu* refers to the Tolai indigenous currency that is still used today (Figure 7). *Tabu* has been used by the Tolai people for many generations as legal tender for the exchange of goods and services, as well as for ceremonial transactions. It is little nassa shells strung onto lengths of cane. Its value has been significant through its distribution in occasions involving mortuary, marriage and other ceremonial events. It is the only traditional currency used alongside Papua New Guinea kina and toea, and its existence is valued not only in Papua New Guinea but throughout the world.



**Figure 7.** *Tabu* shell money. (Photo: N. Faik- Simet)





**Figure 8.** The cutting and distribution of *tabu* during a *kutu-tabu* ceremony, September 2022. (Photo: N. Faik-Simet)



**Figure 9.** Crowd gathering at a *Kutu-tabu* ceremony in Matupit village, September 2022. (Photo: N. Faik-Simet)

*Kutu-tabu* is a Tolai mortuary ceremony that involves large volumes of *tabu* distribution. In this regard it is one of a number of rituals which are part of a mortuary process, which may take a few months, a few years and even a decade. I provide a brief description of the mortuary rite and where *kutu-tabu* fits in this process. The first rite in the mortuary process is of course the burial, which is done mostly in the public cemetery, although some people bury their dead in private cemeteries on their clan land. About a week after the burial, the second rite known as *kutu-palai* takes place. About six months to a year later, the *kutu-tabu* takes place. Between twelve months and two years later, the fourth rite is performed, which is known as the *paluka*. Five to ten years later the next rite known as the *balaguan* takes place. An optional final rite is the *matamatam*, but not everyone performs this. Otherwise, rites two to five are compulsory parts of the mortuary process.



**Figure 10.** The deceased coils of *tabu* displayed on a leu. Rapindik, Matupit island, September 2021. (Photo: N. Faik-Simet)



**Figure 11.** *Tubuan* participation at a *kutu-tabu*. Matupit village, September 2022. (Photo: N. Faik-Simet)



**Figure 12.** Cutting and distribution of the *tabu* coil. Rapindik, Matupit island, September 2021. (Photo: N. Faik-Simet)



In the Tolai traditional religious system, the spirit of the dead went to a place somewhere under the sea called laKupia, but generally known as a *gunan na tabaran* (land of the spirits). All spirits of the dead were expected to go to laKupia. The *kutu-tabu* rite was important to ensuring that the spirit of a deceased person does go to the land of the dead. If this spirit does not go to the land of the dead, it will become troublesome for the living relatives. So, it is a must for the living relatives to perform the *kutu-tabu* ceremony over their dead. As said above, about twelve months after the burial the *kutu-tabu* is performed. This is basically the breaking up of *tabu* (shell-money) by the relatives of the deceased in a number of ways, to certain categories of people but also to others who have attended the ceremony (Figure 8). On the appointed day of the ceremony, hundreds, if not thousands of people gather in a marked location for the ceremony (Figure 9).

The place is marked by a decorated bamboo structure called a *leu* that displays the *tabu* coils of the deceased (Figure 10). Very soon the crowd builds up and towards the afternoon the ceremony commences. In a moment there is a lull of silence which is followed by a screech from somewhere, and the *tubuan* (mask figure) appears (Figure 11). It is followed by a number of men or older boys carrying a number of coils of *tabu*. These coils of *tabu* are brought up into the middle of the crowd and the *tubuan* departs, having done their job of bringing the *tabu*. The coils of *tabu* are then cut up for distribution to all and sundry (Figure 12). The lead players in the distribution of *tabu* are the children of the deceased and to be made sure that everyone who has come does receive a piece of *tabu*, and they are happy with what they got. This is the measure of a successful *kutu-tabu* ceremony.

The knowledge and skill of performing a *kutu-tabu* is held by everyone. However, each clan is supposed to have certain people who are guardians of this knowledge and skill, and they pass it down to the generations within the clan. There is a man in the clan who is the main custodian of this knowledge and skill. This person then has to ensure that one or a number of young men of the clan, who are always with him to receive this knowledge and skill over time, passes it onto others who come after them. Hence, the transmission of the knowledge and skill associated with *kutu-tabu* takes place through intergenerational relationships or within clan, but mostly from the elderly to the young.

## **MALAGENE ICH PRACTICE**

*Malagene* is the indigenous Tolai term for all traditional dance. It is an important intangible cultural heritage as its performance is associated with many Tolai ceremonial activities. The Tolai have a number of *malagene* (dances) in their repertoire and which are divided between the two sexes. There are women's and there are men's dances. At the same time dance performances are segregated, meaning that man and women never perform together in the same dance. The

male dances are *libung*, *wutung*, *kulau*, *tabaran*, *alor*, *tapialai* (*tubuan* - sacred male mask dance), and the dances performed by females are *goigoi*, *patete* and *bilolo* (Figure 13). There are three dances that can be performed by both male and female; these are *parpari*, *libung* and *pinpidik*. The dances belong to the clan but families and individuals may have custody over dances for temporal periods. Like many other traditional dance forms in Papua New Guinea, the *malagene* is affected by the changing times. The biggest force is the intrusion of Western music and dance through digital platforms that are being accessed by mainly the young people through their mobile phones and decrease in the practice of *malagene*. However, this study has revealed that while these changes are there, they have to a minimum extent impacted on the *malagene*. As described above, *malagene* are skillfully crafted by each Tena *Buai* who are also referred to as *Tena Malagene* meaning master dance teachers/choreographers. These *Tena Malagene* are responsible for the transmission of the dance knowledge to the younger generation and usually appear together with their dancers during the actual performance (Figure 14 and 15).

There are certain knowledge and skill required to create, perform and own a *malagene*. Only qualified persons known locally as a *Tena Malagene* (a master teacher/custodian of Tolai dance) can manage, choreograph and teach a *malagene*. All rituals required to compose a song/music for the *malagene*, including the choreographed movements are held with the *Tena Malagene*. He/she follows a pedagogical structure within the Buai practice to engage in learning and teaching creativity which contributes to cultural continuity. By creating a new *malagene* or dance, the *Tena Malagene's* leadership skill, cultural knowledge and



**Figure 13.** Women's *patete* dance. Raulakaia, Matupi island, November 2022. (Photo: N. Faik-Simet)



creativity is valued and respected in the community. All *malagene* performed must be led by a *Tena Malagene* as these dances have multiple layers of meanings that are connected to their beliefs and ancestral practices. Aside from maintaining and preserving a past culture, the choreography and performance of a *malagene* is a result of a *Tena Malagene's* creative skill that embraces change and responds to present challenges.



**Figure 14.** A *Tena Malagene*. Raulakaia, Matupit island, November 2022. (Photo: N. Faik-Simet)



**Figure 15.** A *libung malagene* performed by young male dancers. Raulakaia, Matupit island, November 2022. (Photo: N. Faik-Simet)

*Malagene* has been an important intangible cultural heritage of the Tolai as it expresses cultural resilience, innovation, identity and the Tolai worldview. A *malagene* encapsulates the history and culture of the Tolai people, and by performing it, a people's heritage is transmitted and safeguarded across generations. Its practice was affected throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as many dancers, *Tena Buai* and *Tena Malagene* could not continue their creativity and cultural expression, and it was during this unprecedented time that they realized the importance of *malagene* in fostering cultural cohesion and continuity.

## **POSITIVE OUTCOME**

There were some notable developments during the pandemic such as an increase in new herbal knowledge needed to make local remedies to cure diseases associated with COVID-19. The use of the local lemon fruit was used widely to treat cold and flu symptoms. Other traditional herbs were used extensively to prevent or cure persons who were believed to have COVID-19. In these situations, the local peoples' resilience was seen in their efforts to fight the pandemic.

In other situations, the level of creativity increased, as new *malagene* were created. This was seen in the cultural shows staged for tourists after the lifting of the ban during the post COVID-19 period in 2022. During the lockdown and pandemic period, young people were at home with their elders and during this time, they were learning new skills and knowledge of their traditions which included *malagene*. They were able to perform *malagene* in 2022 when the number of COVID-19 cases were reduced after the roll out of the vaccination. This followed the lifting of the ban on tourists' ships which were now allowed to enter East New Britain. More *malagene* were performed to tourists as well as for their local ceremonies.

## **CONCLUSION**

I was fortunate to observe some of these *malagene* that emerged during the post – COVID period (Figure 16 and 17). Local dance groups in Matupit and other villages in the province used the opportunity to perform existing and new *malagene*. There was an increase in creativity and innovative art derived from the local peoples' indigenous knowledge. Transmission of local knowledge and ICH were evident during the pandemic, as these ICH such as *malagene* were learnt, choreographed and performed to both new and existing audience. The safeguarding, transmission and application of ICH during and after the COVID-19 era was a positive development for many communities in East New Britain and Papua New Guinea, as many people are very much connected to their culture and indigenous systems of survival.



**Figure 16.** Tagitagi Male Cultural Group performing a malagene. Ralaukaia, Matupit 2022. ©N. Faik-Simet



**Figure 17.** Dog mask malagene from Viviran village. Ralaukaia, Matupit, November 2022. ©N. Faik-Simet

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