

A FEAST IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA



The author with Pastor Eric and a group of children from Teptep, PNG. Photograph courtesy of Aren Maeir.

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In recent years, more and more studies have appeared that deal with feasting and feasting-related activities in the ancient Near East – and their ideological, social and economic meaning. While much of this has focused on textual (e.g., Klingbeil 2006; Altmann 2011; Nam 2012) and iconographic analyses (e.g. Ziffer 2005;) and on the archaeological evidence for cult-related feasting (e.g., Lev-Tov and McGeough 2007; Zuckerman 2007; London 2011; Meyers 2012; Greer 2013; Herrmann and Schloen 2014), a growing awareness of the need to study the archaeological evidence of feasting in a broad range of every-day activities, at many levels (e.g., Killebrew and Lev-Tov 2008; Maeir 2008; Ben-Shlomo, Hill and Garfinkel 2009; Yasur-Landau, Cline and Samet 2011; Pollock 2012; Altmann and Fu 2014; Koch 2014; Hitchcock, Horwitz and Maeir 2015), is emerging (for a general overview, see Wright 2010a; 2010b).

After having previously studied, and published on, feasting in pre-industrial societies and the ancient Near East as well (e.g., Ben-Shlomo et al. 2008; Maeir 2008; 2010; Maeir and Hitchcock 2011; see as well the accompanying article in this issue of *Near Eastern Archaeology* [Hitchcock, Horwitz and Maeir 2015]), during a recent visit to Papua New Guinea (PNG) in the summer of 2013, I had the opportunity to witness and participate in

a traditional, commensal feast (on PNG feasting, see, e.g., Brown 1979; Lemonnier 1996; Wiessner 2001).¹ Needless to say, as in the case of any ethnographic insights relating to archaeological finds, this can only be used to provide broad analogies that can expand our ability to understand the past.²

Despite the alterity—and more so, the foreignness – of the cultural manifestations in PNG, interesting insights can nevertheless be found for someone who is both a “Western” observer and a student of the ancient Near East.³ Without a doubt, there are many differences between Iron Age Philistine feasting (discussed in the accompanying article in this issue) and that practiced in PNG, but various facets of the feasting activities which I witnessed – and in fact participated in – shed thought-provoking light on, and at times resonated with aspects of feasting seen in the ancient Near Eastern archaeological record.

The west Pacific island of New Guinea, the second largest island on the globe, currently divided between the independent state of PNG in the east and Indonesian-controlled Irian Jaya/West Papua in the west (fig. 1), is well-known for its astounding biodiversity and variegated and fascinating cultures (e.g., at least 850 distinct languages are spoken on the island). Some of the most famous and seminal studies in ethnographic anthropology

have been conducted here (e.g., Malinowski 1922; Mead 1930; Rappaport 1968), and in recent years, it has been popularized by the best-selling writings of Jared Diamond (e.g., 1999; 2012).

During my visit, my host and guide in PNG, Pastor Eric ‘Shlomo’ Efore (opening photograph), invited me to accompany him to Teptep, the village in which he was born, remotely located in the Finisterre Mountain Range, in the Huon Peninsula, on the border between the Madang and Morobe Provinces of northeastern Papua New Guinea (fig. 1; for research conducted at Teptep, see, e.g., Wassmann 1993; Keck 2005). To get to this village one must either walk for several days in the “bush,” or, as we did, fly in with a small plane which lands and takes off on a grassy runway situated on a steep slope (fig. 2).

The special occasion for the visit was the dedication of a new prayer house in the village. This event was celebrated in various ways. To start with, many guests were invited, which included, in addition to Pastor Eric, myself and our team, various leaders from neighboring villages and tribes, as well as representatives of the local-level PNG government. For this special occasion some of the guests walked for over a week in the bush to participate in the feast!

The construction of the new prayer house was completed before the visit and it was elaborately decorated for the occasion. With the arrival of the guests on the day before the dedication, an elaborate *sing-sing* (traditional ritual dance) was conducted to welcome the guests in the customary manner (fig. 3).

Preparations for the feast to celebrate the dedication had started days in advance (for various perspectives on feasts in PNG, see, e.g., Lemonnier 1996; Kahn 1998; Tuzin 2001; Wiessner 2001). Large quantities of food for the feast were collected (fig. 4), including various local plant foods (such as taro, yams, sweet potatoes, bananas, cauliflower and various beans) and meats (poultry and mutton – as pork is not eaten by this particular community).⁴ The day before, a rectangular cooking pit (a *mumu* – for previous studies on the PNG *mumu*, see, e.g., Driver

1989; Sopade 1997; Sopade et al. 1997), ca. 1 m deep, was dug out in the courtyard of the house in which the feast was to take place and lined with banana leaves (fig. 5). Simultaneously, wood and many medium-sized stones were prepared for a bonfire. In

the middle of the night, prior to the dedication ceremony, the bonfire was lit and was left burning until morning, intensely heating the stones which had been placed within (fig. 6). At first light, members of the community began to fill the cooking pit. First placing a layer of red hot stones on the bottom (fig. 7), men from the community and some of the male guests then arranged layer upon layer of foodstuffs and hot stones in between banana leaves, until the entire pit had been filled (figs. 8–9). The pit was then covered over (fig. 10), and left to cook (the heated stones serving for this purpose) for several hours until after the end of the ceremony. Interestingly, from an archaeologist’s perspective, the only features of the *mumu* pit which would have been archaeologically visible – if this had been excavated many years later – would have been the contours of the pit and a thick layer of stones within.

Following the dedication ceremony, which was unique and fascinating in its own right, the feast itself (*Bung Kakai* [= feasting/eating together] in *Tok Pisin/Melanesian Pidgin*, the national language of PNG; or *But Kalon* [= becoming one in your heart] in the local *Yupno* language) commenced. The *mumu* was opened and the now well-cooked food was taken out of the pit (fig. 11) and placed in large, deep dishes on a long table which was set up underneath one of the stilt-supported houses.

The food was distributed in a very hierarchical and politically-oriented fashion. The first to receive fare were the dignitaries from the neighboring villages and tribes, who were served heaping portions of food (fig. 12). Following this, other special guests, such as myself, in turn, helped themselves to food from the tables. Then, the leaders of the local community took food, followed by members of the local community (fig. 13), and finally by village members and other guests, who were not part of the immediate community.



Figure 1 (above). Map of the Island of New Guinea. Map by Jay Rosenberg.

Figure 2 (below). Approaching landing at the airstrip at Teptep. Photograph by Aren Maeir.





Figure 3 (top left). “Sing-sing” (ritual dance) at Teptep.



Figure 4 (top right). Various foods being gathered next to the *Mumu* (cooking pit).

Figure 5 (bottom left). Bonfire and *Mumu* (cooking pit).

Figure 6 (bottom right). *Mumu* (cooking pit) after having been dug out. Photographs by Aren Maier.



Each person received food in a deep tin or plastic bowl or plate, ca. 20 cm in diameter, which in most cases was filled to the point of spilling over. Following the feast, the large communal dishes and serving bowls were not discarded, but rather collected to be washed and used again at a later time.

As the food was being consumed, a local man, who seemed to be a combination of a bard and a stand-up comedian, performed for the very amused crowd (fig. 14). This was followed by speeches by the various dignitaries and the bestowing of gifts.

This feast had various features in common with feasts that are described in many modern and ancient, Western and non-Western, societies. Aspects of group cohesion and commensality were clearly manifested, as were, at the same time, hierarchical features – all part of the “social drama” (e.g. Turner 1995) of this society. The participation of leaders of other communities was important as well, demonstrating the cardinal role that feasts play in cementing bonds between communities and honoring leaders of other groups, undoubtedly to be reciprocated at a later

stage – “commensal politics” (e.g. Bray 2003) at its best. The large amounts of food, and in particular, protein, which were consumed by all participants at the feast, young and old, guest and local, male and female, stresses the equally important foundation of the feast – an opportunity for a nourishing meal – which is utilized for social and ritual purposes. The traditional *sing-sing* dance combines symbolically-charged imagery (elaborate costumes with complex meaning; see, e.g., Newman 1964 and Knauff 1985 for observations on the meaning and symbolism of analogous PNG ritual behaviors), along with the use of “material mnemonic devices” (e.g. Lillios and Tsamis 2010) – in particular the traditional attires and objects – all serving to enhance group cohesiveness and inter-group connections, and to build up cultural and social memory.⁵

The performance by the “comedian,” which was an integral part of the feast, fits in with the important aspects of “performativity” that have been identified as an important component of commensal feasting activities in various cultures (e.g. Wright 2010b).



Figure 7. Mumu (cooking pit) filled with heated stones. Photograph by Aren Maeir.



Figure 8 (top left). Mumu (cooking pit) partially filled with layers of food and stones.

Figure 9 (top right). Mumu (cooking pit) being filled.

Figure 10 (bottom left). Mumu (cooking pit) covered over.

Figure 11 (bottom right). Mumu (cooking pit) – removing food after cooking.

Photographs by Aren Maeir.



Many, if not all, of these features can be found in almost all archaeological cultures as well, such as those discussed in the article on Philistine feasting in this issue (Hitchcock, Horwitz and Maeir 2015). If one tries to use the observed behaviors as possible analogies to ancient Near Eastern archaeological contexts, several such points come to mind.

To start with, as noted above, the physical evidence of such an event may, from an archaeological point of view, be quite minimal. This should be kept in mind: producing tangible evidence – and understanding – of feasting may require meticulous field methods – and innovative interpretations.

While the cultural and linguistic diversity of PNG is quite unique on any scale, participation in the feast by not only people from the specific community, but also by other people from the village of Teptep, from other villages and tribes in the re-

gion, and even from more distant regions, is of interest. Speakers of several distinct but in most cases mutually intelligible languages were present (e.g. *Yupno* [the local language], *Nankina* and others). Distinct differences in material culture could be seen – such as the different types of *Bilum* (string bags; e.g., McKenzie 1991; Stewart and Strathern 1997; Hauser-Schäublin 2011) carried by people of various origins. I was even informed of different customs of preparing the *mumu*. While at Teptep a rectangular *mumu* was in use, one of the guests at the feast, who was from the village of Bambu (which was about a one day walk to the west of Teptep), told me that in his village the *mumu* was traditionally dug in a circular shape.

How can some of these insights be applied, for example, to the study of the ancient Near East? I would like to suggest a couple of ideas.

If we look, e.g., at the Iron Age Southern Levant, we notice that while the degree of linguistic and cultural diversity attested in PNG is not found, there is a rather large variety of similar, but distinctive languages which were spoken in this region (Israelian, Judahite, Phoenician, Philistian, Moabite, Ammonite, etc.), most of which most probably were mutually intelligible. Add to this the evidence, even if partial, of distinct dialects within these languages (e.g. Garr 2004). It can be assumed that similar linguistic diversity existed not only in the Iron Age, but in other periods as well. In addition, we know of clear regional differences in the material culture in this region, in many periods. Thus, gatherings of an inter-regional nature, even between closely related groups such as the Israelites or Judahites (and perhaps even between smaller scale “tribes” and clans) might have involved linguistic and material differences, which would have to be bridged to enable joint activities such as feasting.

Food-related activities in ancient Near Eastern contexts, whether evidenced in textual sources or the archaeological record, in which people of multiple origins participated would have involved inter-group commensal politics. For example, irrespective of the actual dating and historicity of the Samson narratives in the Bible (e.g., Finkelstein 2002; Weitzman 2002; Yadin 2002), the fact that Samson (an Israelite) is described as participating in a Philistine wedding feast implies/suggests Samson's (or the author's) familiarity with Philistine cultural practices (Judges 14).

As the official reason for the feast at Teptep was the dedication of a prayer house, this resonates with familiarity of various cultic sites in the ancient Levant from diverse periods, at which feasting-related activities might very well have been carried out, and with sufficient awareness, might be identified archaeologically. For example, one could suggest that the objects of diverse



Figure 12 (above). Pastor Eric and local dignitaries eating at the feast.
Figure 13 (below). Villagers waiting in line and eating food during the feast.
 Photographs by Aren Maeir.



origins and the evidence of food consumption at Chalcolithic Gilat (e.g. Levy 2006) were not only indications of pilgrimage, but perhaps also of feasts involving peoples of diverse origins.

Similarly, one can wonder whether feasting activities might have taken place at other Chalcolithic sites which have been identified as temples, such as at Ein Gedi (see now Ussishkin 2014, contra Gonen 2014).⁶ If one accepts the connection between the Ein Gedi temple and the Nahal Mishmar hoard (as Ussishkin 2014 strongly believes, contra Gonen 2014), then perhaps some of these objects were used not only in a specifically cultic context. Perhaps, they might have been used in ritual dances – similar in function to the *sing-sing* in PNG, which as suggested above, serves to enhance group solidarity – and for the enhancement of social and cultural memory.

In a similar vein, we might reconsider the activities that might have occurred at Mt. Ebal (e.g. Zertal 1986–1987; Hawkins 2012). Most scholars agree that it is a cultic site (even if the details are debated – see Hawkins 2012 for a summary of the various views), at which, first and foremost, cultic activities took place. Although Zertal did suggest that group-related feeding activities were

conducted at the site (Zertal 1986–1987: 160), one wonders whether a stronger consideration of the possible feasting-related activities for peoples of various origins that might have taken place at the site might be insightful as well. This can perhaps be indicated by the evidence of food (fauna) and vessels and objects connected to food storage and preparation, and the objects of various origins that were found at the site (Zertal 1986–1987; Horwitz 1986–1987).

As the present article accompanies a study on Philistine feasting in a domestic context (Hitchcock, Horwitz, and Maeir 2015), aspects relating to possible Philistine cultic feasting can

be mentioned as well. For example, the small, rural Philistine temple discovered at the site of Nahal Patish (Nahshoni 2009; Nahshoni and Ziffer 2009; Gadot et al. 2014) might have been the focus of regular feasts,⁷ perhaps even of inter-group character. While the focus of most of the discussions on the finds from the site are on the distinctively cult-related items, the significant evidence of food, and its preparation and consumption, is of cardinal importance as well. Likewise, the apparent evidence of the use of psycho-active substances at the site – whether alcohol-related as hinted by the beautiful head cup (Nahshoni 2009: 91–92), or hallucinogenic as evidenced in the chalices in which incense was burned (Gadot et al. 2014) – may not have only served for cultic purposes, but also perhaps to enhance the commensal atmosphere among feast participants. Perhaps a close analysis of the finds might reveal aspects of the commensal politics carried out at this site; for example, identifying where community leaders and guests sat/ate in relation to regular community members, or identifying the provenance of objects which may indicate the origins of the participating guests.

The importance of feasting for local commensal politics as seen in PNG, might similarly be reflected in the Iron Age Levant. For example, as I have previously hinted to (Maeir 2013), an interesting and potentially fertile avenue of research would be to analyze some of the so-called Iron Age “fortresses” found in various locations in Iron Age II Judah. As opposed to seeing them as direct manifestations of royal Judahite control of its territories (such as “royal estates,” e.g. Faust 2012: 178–89), perhaps they can be related to local-level elites. Such local-level elites would not only have to negotiate their relations with the royal administration, but regularly deal with local-level politics as well – and commensal politics – through feasting. Nam’s (2012) understanding of the Samaria ostraca might be a hint to just such types of practices. On the other hand, aspects of royal feasting can be found as well, and can be gleaned from the textual and archaeological sources. Meyers (2014) has recently discussed various textual and material evidence of this, and the excavators of Ramat Rachel have published apparent remains of such feasting in the Ramat Rachel palace courtyard (Lipschits et al. 2011: 14).⁸



Figure 14. Local comedian performing before the community. Photograph by Aren Maeir.

In summary, while the cultures of PNG are very different from those of the ancient Near East, and while one can hardly find direct parallels between such disparate cultures and time frames, insights on aspects such as feasting that may be gleaned from observing cultures in PNG, can without a doubt help expand the discussions and insights on many topics relating to the ancient Near East. In light of the recent expansion of interest in the study of feasting in the ancient Near East, I hope that some of the observations and ideas that were brought forth in the current study, and initial thoughts on specific instances from the archaeological record of the ancient Levant, will serve as a small contribution in expanding this burgeoning direction of research. ♀

Notes

1. I would like to thank my good friend (*wantok tru blo mi*), Pastor Eric (Papa Shlomo) Efore, of Lae, Papua New Guinea (PNG), his family, friends, and members of his community throughout PNG, for hosting us and guiding us during our stay in the country, and for facilitating the visit to Teptep and participation in the feast. I also gratefully acknowledge the people of the village of Teptep (and other villages in the vicinity) for their warm hospitality and willingness to share with us the experiences described below. In addition, I am grateful to my team – Noam Maeir (who was responsible for the initial connection with PNG and laid the groundwork for the visit), Uri Maeir (who was “on the ground” in PNG at the time and coordinated our arrival and logistics), and Netanel Maeir – all of whose dedicated and enthusiastic participation and assistance enabled this study to materialize. I would also like to thank Louise Hitchcock, Liora K. Horwitz, Brent Davis, Thomas Schneider, and two anonymous readers for comments and suggestions that improved this paper. My trip to and logistics in PNG were partially funded by Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel, and by a Dyason Fellowship from the University of Melbourne.
2. See, e.g., Roscoe 1979 for a call to connect between the ethnographic evidence from PNG and the archaeological record.
3. Similarly, one must keep in mind the alterity that exists between ancient societies and those of the modern archaeologist, or as often quoted: “the past is a foreign country” (Lowenthal 1985).
4. The abstention from pork in this community – and possible insights for the study of the extensively discussed issue of pork abstention in the ancient Near East – will be discussed in the future.

5. Many of the young local children (see opening photograph), who actively participated in the *sing-sing*, had not previously dressed in truly traditional clothes (which are not worn currently on a day-to-day basis), or danced in such a dance. So while serving to welcome the guests and mark the special event, the *sing-sing* also served to educate the children about – and emotionally involve them in – their traditional past (e.g. Locnikar 2006: 37–38).
6. Arav's (2014) observations suggesting that pilgrimage served as an important function at the Ein Gedi temple might strengthen the proposal that feasting activities of peoples of various origins were carried out in the vicinity of the temple.
7. Nahshoni (2009: 91) notes that feasts were probably conducted at the site.
8. The present author was the first to suggest this interpretation to Yuval Gadot following a presentation of his on the excavations at Ramat Rahel, which he gave at the Ackerman Family Bar-Ilan University Expedition to Gath project laboratory at Bar-Ilan University, in 2010.

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