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The Papuan Photographs of Ernest Sterne Usher

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# *The Papuan Photographs of Ernest Sterne Usher*

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## Introduction

THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM holds a collection of around 630 photographs (most accompanied by nitrate negatives that have now been copied onto 35mm safety film)<sup>1</sup> taken in Papua, New Guinea and the Solomon Islands during the period January 1914 until early 1916. These include some remarkably clear images of considerable ethnographic interest. The only information accompanying the collection is a brief description of each of the images and a copy of a letter dated June 1972 from the donor, Mrs Edith Saxton of Melbourne, which explains that the photographs were made by her brother, Ernest Sterne Usher.

An inquiry to the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages in Melbourne enabled us to contact Edith Saxton's sons. They provided some biographical information, but no diaries or letters have been located. However, it was established that Usher went to Papua to work with a Government-sponsored oil exploration team led by Dr Arthur Wade. This provided the information required to trace copies of official reports held in the Australian Archives in Canberra. Inquiries sent to a colleague in Port Moresby resulted in a copy of a newspaper notice of Usher's death. To date, this is the full extent of the archival sources identified for Usher. There are no written statements by him that explain why he took these photographs.<sup>2</sup>

## The Collection

The majority of the photographs were taken by Usher while he was working as a Surveyor and Assistant Geologist with an oil exploration team in the Vailala-Purari region of the eastern Papuan Gulf. A further 83 prints appear to derive from photographs taken in Papua by Evan R. Stanley, Papuan Government Geologist, and 24 prints of photographs taken in Australia by Leonard Langdale Wrathall, both of whom were members of the oil exploration team.

Also included in the Usher Collection are 33 postcards of Milne Bay and Trobriand Islands produced

by W.H. Cooper of the Royal Arcade, Melbourne, twelve others of Papua printed in England for the Papuan Times Ltd, and 52 of the Solomon Islands produced by the Tasmanian photographer John Watt Beattie.

Some of the Papuan Gulf images are similar to those that were taken by Frank Hurley in the same region five years later (Specht and Fields 1984). Other early collections of photographs taken in the eastern Gulf region are those by

- A.B. Lewis in 1912 while collecting for Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago;
- E.W.P. Chinnery in 1916, a Papuan Government Resident Magistrate in the area, whose photographs are held by his daughters in Melbourne;
- Paul Wirz in 1930, who carried out anthropological research in the region and whose photographs are held by the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel, Switzerland;
- F.E. Williams, Government Anthropologist for Papua, during his fieldwork in the Purari region in 1922 and at Orokolo in 1931–2, whose photographs are held by the Australian Archives, Canberra, and by the South Australian Museum.

## Usher in Papua

Usher's early life, education and training are summarized by Pike and Craig (1999:215–6). He arrived at Upoia on the Vailala River in January 1914. In Wade's *Report on Petroleum in Papua* (1915:5), it is explained that Usher and fellow surveyor J.W. Murray were to assist first in a survey west along the coast from the Vailala through to the delta of the Purari River, and then along the Papuan coastline east of the Vailala as far as Port Moresby (Figure 1). Finally they would return for further work in the Vailala-Purari area. The photographs more or less follow that sequence with a date of August 1914 for their time in Port Moresby, coinciding with a visit there by the Admiral of the Royal Australian Fleet at the outbreak of the First World War, an occasion liberally documented by Usher's camera. Back in the Purari-Vailala area, there is a 'Christmas 1915' date

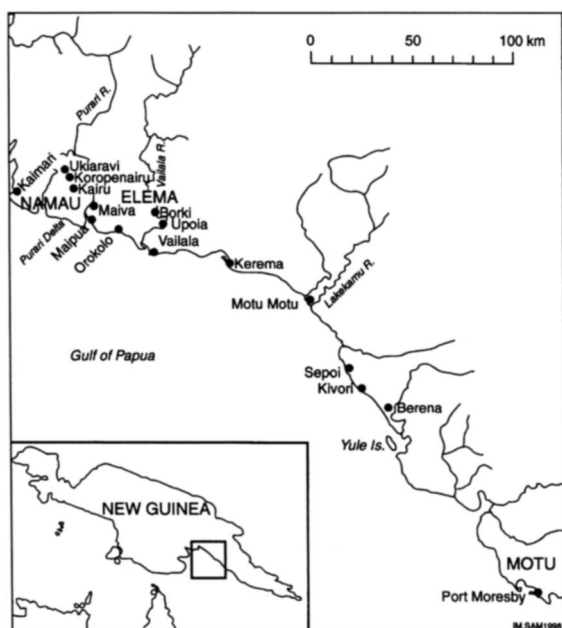


Figure 1. Map showing location of Vailala-Purari area of the eastern Gulf of Papua.

for a Purari expedition.

Around April 1916, Usher (Figure 2) went on leave to Melbourne, sailing on board the *Meklong*. From the sequence of the photographs, it appears that the *Meklong* called in at Samarai, then Herbertshöhe and Rabaul, then sailed around the north and west of New Britain to Witu or Vitu (French Islands), and then south to Morobe on the southern shores of the Huon Gulf, then north-east to Ablingi and Lindenhafen on the south coast of New Britain, and finally due east to the Shortland Islands, Vella Lavella, Simbo Island, Gizo Island, Russell Island, Gela (Nggela or Florida Islands), Tulagi Harbour and Guadalcanal in the Solomons. Presumably the ship then sailed directly to Brisbane and/or Sydney and Melbourne.

### Usher's Photographs

On his arrival at Upoia, Usher immediately began his photography. He recorded on film the members of the oil exploration team, their living conditions and activities. Several of these photographs illustrate Wade's official *Report* (1915).

However, most of the images are of the local people and their way of life, the material manifestations of which have changed considerably over the past 85 years. Usher's photographs represent a relatively

comprehensive record of the more public aspects of day-to-day life in the eastern Gulf at that time.

The terrain was easier on the geologists and surveyors near the coast than it was inland, although the sago swamps had their characteristic difficulties. In a testimonial that Arthur Wade wrote for Usher (dated August 16th, 1914 at Port Moresby) he alludes to the type of country his surveyor had to cope with:

He has a good constitution which has withstood the dangers of a trying tropical climate as well as the more trying work he has had to face in surveying lines through dense jungle [and] almost impenetrable swamp.

The camps set up by the survey teams were usually on the fringes of, or close by, existing villages.

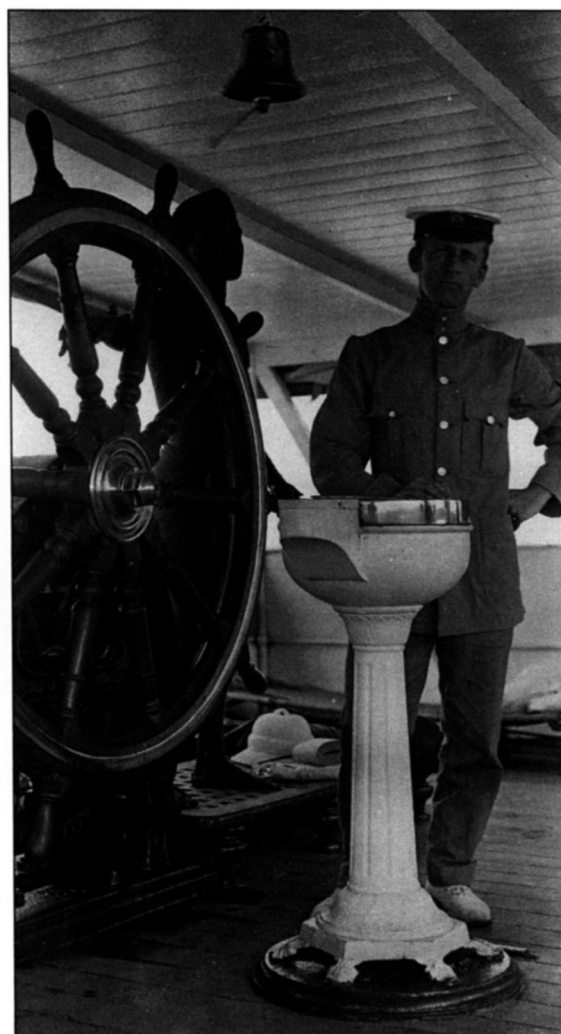


Figure 2. Ernest Sterne Usher on board the *Meklong* (around April 1916?). (Usher, E47)

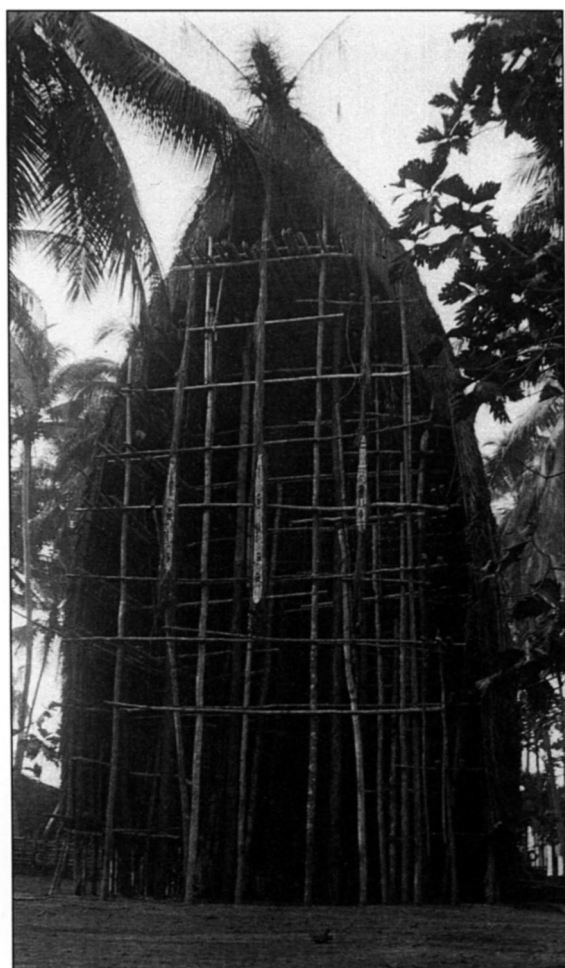


Figure 3. Almost-completed *eravo* at Vailala village, October 1914. (Usher, B88)

The advantage of this practice was that Usher was able to record not only camp life, but indigenous village life and, in particular, the fascinating architecture. A photograph (Figure 3) of an almost-completed *eravo*<sup>3</sup> (men's house) at Vailala village shows three long and narrow carved and painted boards hanging from the scaffolding at the front. Five similar objects were described as 'dancing shields' in an illustrated sale catalogue of W.D. Webster, Bicester, England (Figure 4). They are too long and narrow to be the sacred, named *hohao* boards normally kept in the *eravo*, but could be examples of the purely decorative, unnamed boards mentioned by Newton (1961:25) or the larger, softwood non-functional 'bullroarers' cited by Mamiya and Sumnik (1982:12) from Williams (1936:15; 1940:158).

Orokolo, a large coastal village situated halfway between the Vailala and Purari Rivers, was the site



Figure 4. Reproduction of Webster Catalogue of 1895, Items 6–11.

of a London Missionary Society station. Being situated on the coast, it was one of the ports of call for the *hiri* trading canoes from the Moresby area:

Every year, at the end of September, or the beginning of October, the season of the south-east trade being then near its close, a fleet of large sailing canoes leaves Port Moresby and the neighboring villages of the Motu tribe on a voyage to the deltas of the rivers of the Papuan Gulf. (Barton in Seligmann 1910:96)

The multi-hulled *lakatoi* (trading canoes) of the Motu carried pots<sup>4</sup> and shell ornaments<sup>5</sup> and exchanged them for canoe hulls (*asi*) and sago which could not be found locally. The *lakatoi* sailed to the Gulf villages as three- or four-hulled vessels and returned as reconstructed vessels with many more





Figure 5. Multi-hulled *lakatoi* moored beside Ukiaravi village, Purari Delta (around Christmas 1915?). (Usher, C100)

hulls. Illustrations of *lakatoi* were most popular in books that dealt with this part of Papua and most visitors with cameras endeavored to secure photographs of them.

Usher recorded four views of *lakatoi*. The first is of the central open deck space bounded by the large four-sided shelter that has been constructed on the multi-hulled vessel. The next image shows a fully-rigged *lakatoi* moored off the village of Kaimare in the Purari Delta. The other two images (eg. Figure 5) are of a nine- or ten-hulled *lakatoi* moored beside Ukiaravi village in the Purari Delta, waiting for its load of sago to be brought in exchange for the pots and shell ornaments it has delivered.

The canoes of the Papuan Gulf were generally plain and practical, although some of the larger dugouts had a panel of carved and painted designs along each side. A single dugout for use in river travel was paddled along by people who stood in the canoe. For transport along the coast, outrigger canoes were used because they gave greater stability in the winds and strong currents found in the Gulf.

Usher's eye for ethnographic detail and for everyday activities has provided us with a record of village life at that time: a boy wearing shell wealth ornaments; a widow with tightly bound limbs and torso and another painted with clay. Other images might

still be captured today: an old man staring intently at the camera cradling betel-chewing equipment in his lap (Figure 6); a woman washing her baby in the sea.

A group of women cooking sago in pots and the image of a man using a bow and arrow show interdependence within family groups: the hunters pro-

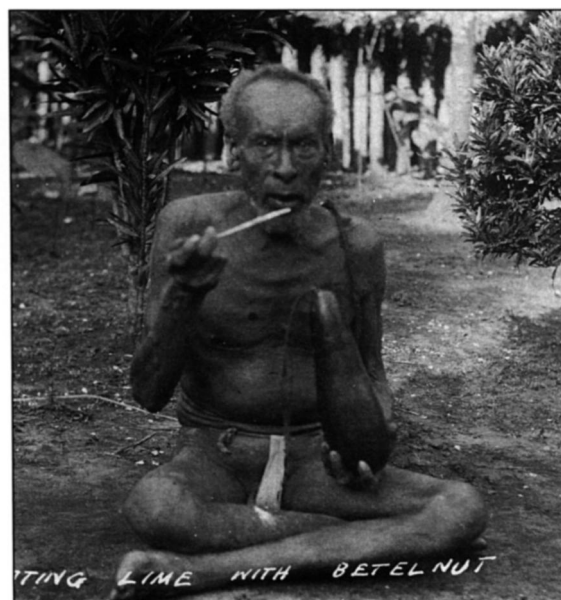


Figure 6. Old man with betel-nut chewing equipment, Nepaga village, Vailala River. (Usher, C26)

viding high-prestige food (cassowary and cuscus) while the women and girls process sago. Another image shows a boy digging out turtle eggs from the banks of the Vailala River.

But life in Papua in 1914–16 was not one of work only; the people also knew how to have fun. A form of ‘hockey’ being played on the beach at the Vailala river mouth is shown.

Fishing provided an important component in the diet of coastal villagers. In his book *In Primitive New Guinea* (1924:241), Holmes records:

surf-fishing engaged in by young and old of both sexes at Orokolo, as well as at other villages along the coast, was done with the aid of conically shaped wicker fish-traps. Periodically shoals of a sprat-like fish named *avaha* were washed into the beach; their coming was hailed with delight by everybody, and whilst they were being caught by pouncing the traps into the water, seemingly at haphazard, with the hope of encircling and entrapping a few, excitement ran very high.

Usher took a photograph at Ipisi village near Kerema of these conical fish-traps; he records on the back of the picture that ‘the boys run rapidly through the water on seeing a fish, and bring down the basket-net over it; a hole at the top enables the fish to be got out.’ He also photographed the use of a Y-shaped frame with a net stretched between the arms of the Y. This device was submerged and the fish scooped up to fall into the slack part of the net at the junction of the fork so that they could not escape.<sup>6</sup> Other photographs by Usher illustrate use of the multi-pronged fish spear and the use of bow and arrow while standing on an uprooted sapling with its stem driven at low tide into the sand.<sup>7</sup>

With the growing influence of missionaries of various nationalities and religious persuasions, traditional forms of clothing were supplanted by items of western dress. Usher encountered these people at a time when these changes were only just beginning. One of the strengths of Usher’s photographic work is his study of groups of people in traditional attire. These groups include families, boys, girls, men and boys together, and women and babies. Many of these groups are deliberately posed for the camera but are nevertheless important studies of dress and adornment.

One reason for posing subjects was that the photographic technology of the time could not cope well with normal movement; this is evident in many of the candid photographs where some individuals in the images are blurred. However, it appears that Usher did no more than ask people to line up; he never sought to manipulate people into the romantic poses of earlier photographers, such as Barton (Wright 1997).

Occasionally, Usher also came upon episodes in the rites of passage from childhood to adulthood, eg. boys going through the ‘*dubu*’ (*eravo* / men’s house) ceremony in Vailala village.

An important Purari Delta ritual object was the roughly-woven cane ‘monster’ called *kaiaimunu*



Figure 7. Interior of *ravi* at Koropenaira village, Purari Delta (around Christmas 1915?) — detail showing smoking tube on floor, hand drums, ‘shield’ and masks. (Usher, D8)





Figure 8. Four men wearing masks, Koraita (near Kerema), February 1915. (Usher, B127)

which 'devoured' the initiands during their seclusion in the *ravi* (men's house). The boys emerged from the *ravi* reborn, with glistening skin, bright shell and feather ornaments, and fore-and-aft '*ramis*' (Motu word for loin cloth) of bark cloth painted with rectilinear designs, young men, as Usher noted on the back of one photograph, 'now eligible to marry.'

Usher did not have the good luck to witness the dancing of the Purari *aiaimunu* (or *hevehe* as they were known at Orokolo, and *semese* at Vailala), spectacular oval masks up to 8 meters tall.<sup>8</sup> But he did photograph a few tied to the front of dwelling houses at Maipua and inside a *ravi* (Figure 7). These were of the coastal Namau type. During his survey along the coast from Vailala to Moresby, he also came across four men wearing a different type of mask at Koraita near Kerema (Figure 8).

The interior of the *ravi* is shown in several photographs: Figure 9 at Iai (Iari) in the Purari Delta shows several carved and painted ancestral boards (*kwoi*)<sup>9</sup> in association with displays of human skulls; Figures 10 and 11 show several *kwoi* in association with pig and crocodile skulls on either side of the central passage of the *ravi* at Ukiaravi and Kairu respectively; Figure 7, taken in a *ravi* at Koropenaira,



Figure 9. Interior of *ravi* at Iai (Iari), Purari Delta (around Christmas 1915?). (Usher, C81)

shows several *kwoi* and *aiaimunu*, a small mask called *kanipu* and, half hidden behind three hand-drums, a carved and painted rectangular board that appears to be a shield remarkably like those to be found among the Fegolmin and Angkeiakmin of the Fly River headwaters in central New Guinea (cf. Craig 1988, fig. 40). The *kwoi* bear carved and painted anthropomorphic, and sometimes zoomorphic, designs on wood recycled from old and broken canoes. Two *kwoi* in Usher's photo Figure 11, taken in a *ravi* at Kairu around Christmas 1915, are the same as two *kwoi* previously photographed by A.B. Lewis in May 1912 in the same *ravi*.<sup>10</sup> The differences in the *kwoi* displays over a short period of only 3 years indicates something of the constantly changing nature of the *ravi*'s interior furnishings.

Apart from his interest in the indigenous inhabitants, Usher noted the European presence on the outstations in the Gulf region, in Port Moresby (especially a magnificent six-frame panorama of the town) and at Herbertshöhe and Rabaul. He also photographed the members of the oil-search team. One fascinating photograph shows J.W. Murray, his fellow surveyor, represented in a manner suggesting that Usher was capable of revealing the deeper nature of his subjects (compare Figures 12 and 13). Many of his photographs, and in particular that of a railway through a rubber plantation on Witu Island (Figure 14), also show his interest in achieving powerful effects through the composition of his photographs — not by manipulating his subjects but by careful framing of what was there.

One of the Moresby photographs (Figure 15) is an interesting study of the appropriation of a European artifact for an otherwise indigenous work. A close look at the headdress of the dancer on the right reveals the incorporation of a pack of playing cards. Western icons became commonplace in tribal life over ensuing years and the appearance of New Guinea art changed accordingly. The introduction of new objects and designs into a tribal society can be both challenging to tradition and a means of widening the horizons of the recipients.

This meeting of two cultures is not necessarily negative, although the asymmetry of power relations between colonizers and colonized meant that most of the change was carried by the colonized. It is safe to assume, however, that when the dancer in Usher's photograph conceived of the playing cards as com-

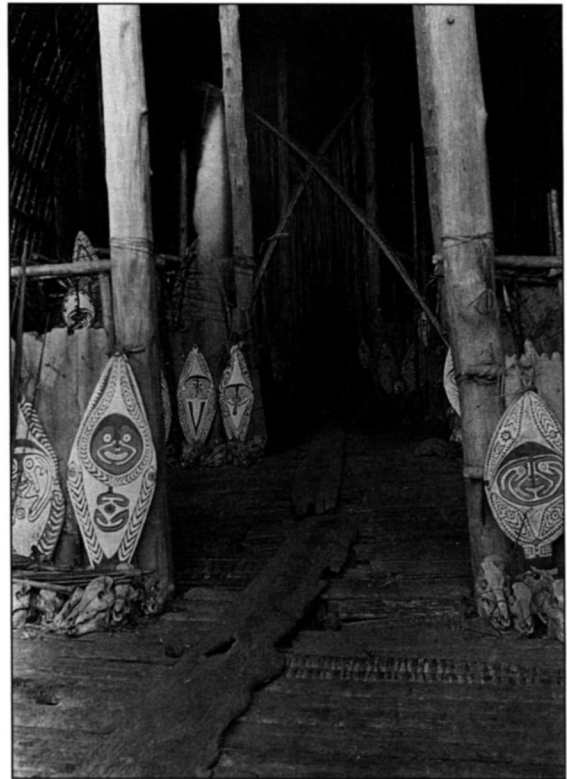


Figure 10. Interior of *ravi* at Ukiaravi, Purari Delta (around Christmas 1915?). (Usher, D6)

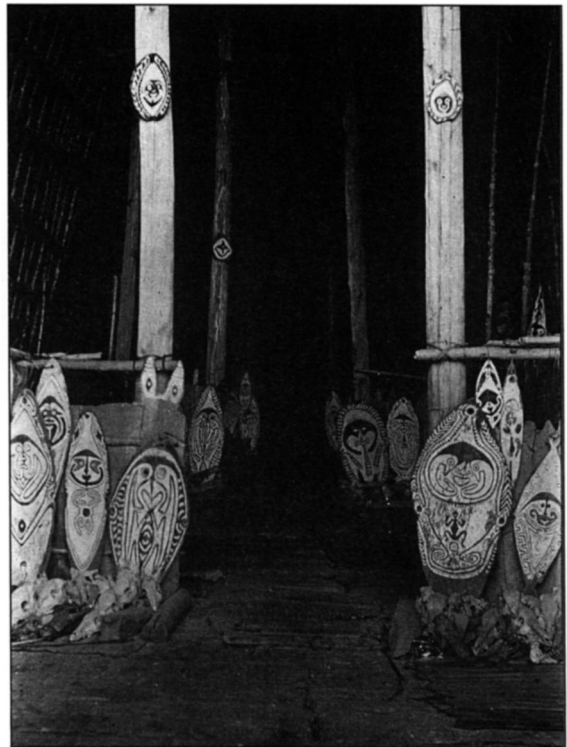


Figure 11. Interior of *ravi* at Kairu, Purari Delta (around Christmas 1915?). (Usher, D17)





Figure 12. Portrait of J.W. Murray, surveyor, Port Moresby, July 1914. (Usher, A184)



Figure 13. Portrait of J.W. Murray, surveyor, Port Moresby, July 1914. (Usher, A198)

ponents for his headdress, there was no threat to tradition but rather an opportunity to impress his audience with something novel, with a new symbol of wealth — the means, perhaps, of acquiring European money through gambling.

### Usher's Death

Ernest Sterne Usher died in Papua on 23 September 1916, not long after his return from leave. The following article appeared in *The Papuan Times* on the 4th October 1916:

#### Boating Fatality

News has been received of the death by drowning of Mr A [sic] Usher, surveyor to the oilfields. This gentleman has been engaged in cutting a new road at the back of Orokolo to a new bore site. Mr Usher was drowned whilst crossing the Vailala river from the west-

ern side at its mouth. There was a fresh<sup>11</sup> in the river at the time, resulting in a very strong current. The deceased attempted to cross in a small canoe with three boys. He was warned by the Village Constable to obtain a larger canoe, but replied that a smaller one would be quicker. The canoe was swamped, and the current swept the unfortunate man out to sea. He endeavored to swim ashore, but became exhausted and sank. His body has not been recovered so far. Two natives reached the shore in an exhausted condition, but the third boy was drowned, and his body washed ashore two days later.

Mr Usher was extremely popular on the oilfield, and only returned to the oilfields three months ago after a holiday south. The sad news of his death caused a feeling of depression on the field, where his many friends heard the news with the greatest regret.



Figure 14. Rubber plantation on Witu (French) Island, New Britain (around April 1916?). (Usher,

In his Monthly Report of September 1916 to the Secretary, Department of External Affairs, Melbourne, dated October 6th 1916, Dr Wade reported that:

On hearing the news [of Usher's death] I went at once to make personal investigations, then closed down his camp and ensured the safety of his field work. Later, aided by his field notes and sketches I went over his recent work. It is impossible at present to estimate what a loss we have suffered by this tragic incident. Few men could ever attain the

knowledge which Mr Usher had of the most obscure tracts of country and not many could keep going as Mr Usher did, even with enthusiasm, under such conditions.

## Conclusion

Research on the Usher collection continues. Although most of the photographs have something written on the back and there is a short description of each photograph in a list for each of the alphabetic series (A to F), we do not know what became of his field diaries that he would have kept to document his survey observations.<sup>12</sup> It is clear that they were taken over by Wade but we have yet to locate Wade's diaries and records. The present numbered sequence of the photographs is occasionally inconsistent with the few facts we do know of Usher's itinerary. It is possible that we could get a clearer idea of the sequence of the photographs from Usher's field diary.

Nevertheless there is sufficient data in the images to throw light on the nature and significance of undocumented or incorrectly described ethnographic objects held by museums (as noted above for the long narrow carved boards in the Webster catalogue), and to conduct a comparative study of



Figure 15. Dancers at Police Barracks, Port Moresby, in honor of the visit of the Admiral of the Australian Fleet, July 1914 — note playing cards in headdress of man on right. (Usher, A147)

ethnographic material over space (that is, comparing the material culture of people in several neighboring communities) and over time (by looking for images from a number of photographers showing the same place at different points in time). The comparison of one of Usher's photographs (Figure 11) with certain photographs by Lewis three years earlier has identified two kwoi apparently in the same men's house but in association with different kwoi on each occasion. Usher's photographs taken at Kaimari in 1915 may be compared to photographs taken by Hurley and Williams at Kaimari years later.<sup>13</sup> Thus there is much scope for comparing the photographs of Lewis, Usher, Chinnery, Hurley, Wirz, Williams, and perhaps others not yet identified, to elicit information on continuity and change in the cultures of the region.

The Usher Collection<sup>14</sup> is one man's window on cultures that have existed for hundreds if not thousands of years, cultures that have not been static but responsive to changes in the environment, to impacts from outside and to impulses from within. We do not know exactly why Usher set about making such a thorough photographic record. Was it simply curiosity? Was it a way of letting his family know what he was doing? Did he have some grander purpose?

These photographs join other major collections of photographs of the colonial era that provide the data for analysis of the way Europeans have viewed tribal peoples in the Pacific (and indeed elsewhere in the world). This paper has not attempted such an analysis but the brief notes attached to Usher's images do suggest that his attitude towards the indigenous people was positive and his aim consistent with an ethnographic purpose of recording the appearance and activities of people still living more-or-less as their ancestors lived before Europeans came to work among them. This record will undoubtedly be of considerable interest to the descendants of these people and it is intended to present copies of the photographs to the PNG National Museum so that the images can become accessible to them.

## Notes

1. Copying of nitrate negatives and production of prints for research and exhibition was carried out by Scott Bradley, contract photographer for the South Australian Museum.
2. In all this research work I was ably assisted by Grahame Pike, who travelled to Melbourne (Victoria) and Tumut (NSW) to interview Usher's nephews. He also prepared an index of the photographs and wrote a draft of a paper, including the Index, which has been published (Pike and Craig 1999). The staff of the Australian Archives in Canberra have been helpful in locating and providing copies of documents relating to the Vailala Oilfields.
3. The men's houses among the Elema speakers, living along the coast between Orokelo to the west, through the Vailala River area as far as Sepoi (near Cape Possession) to the east, are called *eravo*. The Namau speakers of the Purari Delta, west of the Elema, call the men's house *ravi*. The word *dubu* appears to be a Motu word applied indiscriminately throughout most of the Gulf and Central Districts of Papua to refer to men's club houses and/or ceremonial platforms (see Seligman 1910:17–22, 60–65, 141–150). Usher was not always consistent in his use of these terms.
4. There were seven types of Motu pots (Barton in Seligman 1910:114, fn.2).
5. There were three main types of shell wealth: *toia* (shell armlets), *mairi* (pearl shells, whole or crescent-shaped), and *tautau* (*nassa* or 'dog-whelk' necklaces). A large *toia* bought a 250 to 350lb package of sago or one *asi* (canoe hull); a large *uro* pot bought a bag of about 80lbs of sago and a small *uro* pot or a *keikei* pot bought about 40lbs of sago (Barton in Seligman 1910:115).
6. These Y-framed nets were used also by Trobriand Islanders (Young 1998, Plates 75,76).
7. This became a popular image of the Papuan fisherman early in the century (eg. Holmes 1924, book cover).
8. The South Australian Museum has 27 glass plate negatives and one nitrate negative of photographs taken by F.E. Williams in Orokelo, mostly during



his fieldwork in 1931–32. All were published in his book *Drama of Orokololo* (1940) and for the most part concern the construction, dancing, and destruction of the *hevehe* masks. These negatives are archived under the name of F.R. Vyse, Accession No.335.

9. Called *gope* to the west of the Purari and *hohao* among the Elema to the east.
10. cf. Newton 1961, plates 33, 218, which are reproductions of photographs taken by A.B. Lewis in 1912 for the Field Museum in Chicago, two or three years before Usher arrived. The kwoi to the left of the passageway in the first *larava* in Usher's photograph is in a corresponding position in Newton 1961, plate 33; the kwoi to the left of the passageway in the second *larava* in Usher's photograph is in a corresponding position in Newton 1961, plate 218.
11. 'Fresh': a sudden rise in water level, probably caused by overnight rain upstream. Tidal bores also are a dangerous phenomenon in rivers draining south into the Gulf of Papua. It was a tidal bore that swept Michael Rockefeller and his companions out to sea during his work among the Asmat of Irian Jaya; presumably he drowned when he attempted to swim back to shore.
12. Wade's daughter, Dr Gytha Betheras of Melbourne, informed me (personal communication, 31 May 1999) that a great deal of her father's personal effects were destroyed in England during the blitz of World War II. However, it is possible that field notes were deposited in an institution before that time and are yet to be discovered.
13. Eg. Hurley: V.4867, V.4873 in Specht and Fields 1984:167, 169; Williams: Australian Archives A6003/37.3.
14. The Usher photographs may be obtained for exhibition by contacting Barry Craig by email at <bcraig@saugov.sa.gov.au> or post at Anthropology Department, South Australian Museum, GPO Box 234, Adelaide, SA 5001, Australia.

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