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# Landmarks and Kwoma identity

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## Abstract

This paper discusses how various landmarks serve as symbols of identity for the Kwoma, a people living in the East-Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea, and suggest that geographical space is constructed as an anchor for culturally-construed realities. Three different ideologies are analysed — the origin of the Kwoma people, their history, and their myths — to illustrate how location encapsulates a variety of meanings that serve as identity builders. I argue that the different place-names and landmarks reflect the ideology of landownership that counts every indigenous citizen as a customary landowner (Filer 2006), and that territoriality, i.e., the influence and control over a geographic area (Sack 1986), is determinant of the Kwoma identity.

**Keywords:** Kwoma, ideologies, territory, place-names, identity

## Introduction

The land is closely connected to identity. People seek to identify others by asking the question “Where are you from?”, and the answers to that question encompass the very locations deemed to represent the places where they conceptualize their origin. It is therefore a component of identity by which people describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place (Hernández et al. 2007: 310).

Locations important to men (and men only) have been given names, distinguishing them from places that lack significance for them. Names for places often reflect the ways in which places are constituted through shared experiences. Tilley (1994) even argues that places are *created* by naming them. All place-names are culture-dependent and convey a meaning. Social practices construct places and geographical space as meaningful:

[Place] has a history and meaning. Place incarnates the experiences and aspirations of a people. Place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning. (Tuan 1974: 236)

The meaning of places can be specified in a number of ways, for example, by the position where an activity or an object is located, by settings where everyday life activities take place, or by a sense of belonging to a place. Those meanings are encapsulated in the different place-names in which people make explicit their cultural conceptualizations. As put forth by Basso (1984: 22), “With words, a massive physical presence is fashioned into meaningful human universe.” Not all locations receive a name, but those having a name often become landmarks, i.e., geographic locations that structure human representation of space (Richter & Winter 2014) or unique configurations that identify a specific geographic location (Siegel & White 1975). Landmarks are collectively as well as individually recognized by virtue of some symbolic meaning attached to them.

The relationship between the land and how people identify themselves is of symbolic importance in Papua New Guinea where one finds what Filer (2006) calls an “ideology of customary landownership,” which is the belief that the land is owned by its indigenous inhabitants:

In Papua New Guinea landownership is vested in descent groups — tribal or clan segments. All clan members are co-owners. This gives individuals the right to use land but not to alienate it. Thus, land ownership is part of the identity of a group. It is an inalienable right, passed from the ancestors into the guardianship of successive generations. (Toft 1997: 14)

Approximately 97% of all the land in Papua New Guinea is still unregistered customary land (AusAID 2008, Filer 2011). The territorialisation of the country became critical after the suppression of tribal warfare by the colonial authorities in the 1920s. It entailed the subdivision of the territory into smaller social and spatial units where tribes or clans were conceived as having exclusive rights to their own territorial domain (Curry 1997). This landownership can be seen among other things through the names given to villages. These names sometimes derive from the names of founding ancestors or places where people live, or are simply the ones of the tribes or clans inhabiting the area (see e.g. Dwyer & Minnegal 2018).

This article aims at demonstrating the symbolic relationship between the territory and identity of the Kwoma, a people of the East-Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea. This research examines how various landmarks serve as symbols of identity for the Kwoma, and suggests that geographical space functions as an anchor for culturally-construed realities. The study presented here is part of a wider research project to document Kwoma, an endangered Papuan language that will probably disappear within a century (Lambert-Brétière 2018). The data presented in this article come from a total of nine months of

fieldwork in the village of Tongwinjamb<sup>1</sup>, between 2006 to 2008. The examples are drawn primarily from narratives and oral traditional stories, and are identified by author and location in the corpus. (Lambert-Brétière 2006)

The first section of this article presents an overview of the Kwoma people and their language. It then focuses on the ideologies of customary landownership and shows how different landmarks encapsulate the social meanings of the Kwoma territory. The process of territorialisation and how it relates to the Kwoma identity is discussed in the next section, before concluding. Overall, this article illustrates how documenting the association between traditional knowledge and land is essential to understand the Kwoma identity.

## Kwoma

Kwoma is the non-Austronesian language of the inhabitants of the Washkuk hills in the East-Sepik province of Papua New Guinea. Foley (2018), following Laycock (1973) and Laycock & Z'graggen (1975), classifies Kwoma, along with Kwanga and Mende, as a Nukuma language in the Middle-Sepik family. However, the name of the language family is misleading as both Kwoma and Nukuma are dialects of the same language. Bowden (1997: xiv) reports that the two dialects “differ in only minor ways and each is readily intelligible to speakers of the other.” The differences between the two are mostly phonetic and lexical. The two groups also share a similar culture. However, one big difference exists between the two groups: the Kwoma are jungle-dwellers, whereas the Nukuma are a river people.

The Kwoma communities are located at the foot of the Washkuk hills, and their members identify as “mountain people” [*kwo* ‘mountain’; *ma* ‘man’].<sup>2</sup> They differentiate themselves from other communities to the north-west of the hills where people identify as Nukuma “people of the water” [*nuku* ‘top of the river’; *ma* ‘man’]. The identity of each group as a mountain-dwelling people (Kwoma) or as a river-dwelling people (Nukuma) is comprised in how they name themselves. The Kwoma view the hills as tamable, and as such, as a territory they can control. The swampy bush below has no such potential. On the other hand, the Nukuma view the river as their main source of living, providing fish and ways of travelling. This article focuses on the Kwoma, excluding *de facto* the Nukuma,

but it is probable that many of the observations made here about the Kwoma would also hold for the Nukuma.

According to National Statistical Office (2011) census data, 1,465 people (710 men and 755 women), almost half of the total Kwoma population (circa 4,000), live in Tongwinjamb. These numbers make it the most populated Kwoma village. Consequently, the village has split into smaller clan-based units called Tonga-1, Tonga-2, Tonga-3 and Tonga-4 by the community. All speak Kwoma, but mostly women and young children speak it in everyday life. About 80% of the population is bilingual in Tok Pisin—the other 20% monolingual in Kwoma—and younger generations progressively abandon Kwoma to switch to the dominant language, Tok Pisin. Only a few highly educated men speak English. Tok Pisin is the dominant language for official business, for public education, and for religious ceremonies taking place in a church, and as such, is rapidly replacing Kwoma, especially in villages located closer to the multilingual town of Ambunti. Although Kwoma in Tongwinjamb is better preserved because of its isolated location, many men migrate out of the village for higher education and employment opportunities. Moreover, because women must marry men from another tribe or clan, the female population native to Tongwinjamb has to migrate out of the village if they want to marry. These facts suggest that Kwoma is an endangered language of Papua New Guinea.

The Kwoma are divided into four different tribes (*magwi*) composed of a multitude of clans (also called *magwi*): the *Hogwama* living in the villages of Washkuk, Bangwis and Melawei, the *Kowariyasi* living in the villages of Meno and Beglam, the *Wurubaj* and the *Tokogwiyishebi* both living in their respective villages, Urumbaj and Tongwinjamb. Each village is divided into smaller clan-based hamlets, organized following a hereditary ownership of land (Whiting 1941: 6). The hamlets are named after their ceremonial house, located on the highest point of the community. The ceremonial house (*korobo*), also called ‘spirits house’ or ‘men’s house, serves for rituals and also for discussions about village affairs (Bowden 1983). During the inauguration of the house, all the land owners of the clan (*apoko ma* ‘lit. father man’) hang a string bag (*kow*) filled with the ground of which they are the owner (*se kow*) (see Photo 1). This symbolizes ownership of the ceremonial house, and insures unity of the clan.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In the official documentation of the Government of Papua New Guinea, we find “Tangujamb”. In the village, it is written “Tongunjamb” on the façade of the aid post, and “Tongujamb” on that of the primary school. In his dictionary, Bowden (1997) uses “Tongwinjamb” to reflect the underlying phonemic structure. It is this last spelling that I decided to use in this article.

<sup>2</sup> The orthography adopted to transcribe Kwoma is based on the orthography proposed by Kooyers et al. (1971) with two exceptions: i) <ii>: Kooyers et al. used this symbol to transcribe what they thought to be the high central vowel [i].

Following a phonetic analysis on Pratt, I discovered that the central vowel was a mid-vowel, not a high one. Accordingly, and after conferring with speakers, the phonetic character <ə> is used instead of <ii>; ii) <ee> [e]: No minimal pair has been found to prove the phonemic existence of this vowel. Consequently, the character used to represent this vowel will be systematically replaced by the symbol of the high mid vowel <e>.

<sup>3</sup> See Lévi-Strauss (1984) for a discussion of the concept of ‘house’ in various societies of the Pacific, Melanesia, Indonesia and Africa, who suggests that the house acts to



Photo 1: *Se kow* (© author, 15 April 2007)

Up to 1930's, each tribe was settled on the top of a high ridge in the northern half of the Washkuk hills. With the exception of the Tongwinjamb and Urumbanj villages that retained their original residential location, the other two tribes relocated to sites lower down the hills and on the southern end of the Washkuk range. Resettlement made these villages closer and more accessible to the township of Ambunti, the administrative capital of the district, while Tongwinjamb and Urumbanj were left relatively isolated. This study concentrates on the variety of Kwoma spoken in Tongwinjamb.

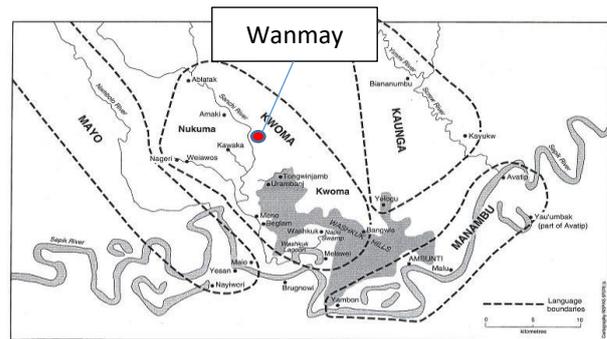
Kwoma has no word meaning “land” or “territory” specifically. The word used to talk about the place where people live is *akama* [*aka* ‘house’-*ma* ‘man’] ‘village’, but it carries more meaning than the physical area where the Kwoma live. It can also mean ‘house’, and it is used to refer to a person’s home place. The concept of ‘home’ is embedded in the land owned by the Kwoma, and this ideology of ownership is visible through a number of landmarks claimed by the people to conceptualize who they are. Ideologies are socially-constructed beliefs, and are complex representations of people, their relations and histories. In the next section, some of these ideologies are analysed to show how they operate to construct the physical environment as a territory owned by the Kwoma.

### Kwoma ideologies

#### Origin

The origin of all Kwoma is not located in a specific period of time but instead is linked to a particular physical location. Kwoma can be traced back to different chthonian ancestors emerging from a single hole in the ground to the north of the Washkuk hills, which is actually a shallow depression in the ground south of Amaki, named *Wanmay* (see Map 1; Bowden 1983).

solidify the unstable relation of alliance between people of genealogical descent and people tied by land.



Map 1: Kwoma territory and approximate location of *Wanmay* (© Dr. Ross Bowden)

It is situated at the foot of the Washkuk hills at the junction between the Kwoma and the Nukuma territories. The meaning of this place-name given to me is ‘the pool of shadow reflections’: *wan* means ‘reflections’; *may* means ‘soul, spiritual power’. *Wanmay* and its location encapsulates cultural and geographical knowledge about the very origin of the Kwoma — and Nukuma — people.

A Kwoma man remembers four ancestors: his father (*apoko*), his grandfather (*yey*), a clan’s founding ancestor (*yey*) and a forebear ancestor (*wayaga*).<sup>4</sup> Men provide accounts of their origin through myths, from the emergence of their *wayaga* and their descendants, and end the story by naming the current generation of living male members. In these origin myths, the journey of the ancestors, where they travelled and the places where they settled are narrated. I recorded such a myth for the Hamikwa clan of Tongwinjamb. The genealogy recounted in the story is provided in Table 1.

Forebear ancestor	<i>Ugey</i>
Clan’s founding ancestor	<i>Kwarpiyaw</i>
Grandfather	<i>Awacheg</i>
Father	<i>Ashow</i>
	<i>Robin</i>

Table 1: Genealogy of a Kwoma man from the Hamikwa clan

Here is an abridged version of the story. The forebear ancestor *Ugey* came out of *Wanmay*; he had a long umbilical cord, long ears and a long tail. Once he cut them off, he buried them in the ground, and soon after, his son emerged, *Kwarpiyaw*. The latter grew up around *Wanmay*, and once an adult looked for his own place to settle. He walked south and stopped near a stream to build

<sup>4</sup> Bowden (1983: 18) specifies that the terms *yey* and *wayaga* “are the ordinary relationship terms for second and third generation patrilineal ascendants respectively”.

a house. During the night while sleeping in his house, a spirit rose from the stream and took over the house. He then saw a small child walking towards him, *Awacheg*. *Kwarpiyaw*i fought the spirit to protect the child and adopted him as his own. The two then left to find another place where to live. On their way they met *Tutay*, a *vey* from the *Teki* clan, with his dog, *Mapwi*, one of the totems of this clan. One day, *Kwarpiyaw*i heard a bird calling him from the mountain, and they all decided to go see where the bird was singing from. Most flying birds are totems of the Hamikwa clan. They travelled south, and stopped at the foot of the hills, to a place named *Waymesey* ‘place of the raintrees’ [*way* ‘rain’ -*me* ‘tree’ -*sey* ‘meeting point’] (see Photo 2). *Kwarpiyaw*i and *Awacheg* continued their journey to the mountain, while *Tutay* and his dog *Mapwi* stayed in the grassland area. *Waymesey* as a symbolic meeting point was chosen as the site for the Tongwinjamb elementary school and the aid post, both still located there today.



Photo 2: *Waymesey* (© author, 15 August 2006)

The sentiment that the Kwoma originate from this area is further expressed in the following excerpt taken from the same origin myth. It illustrates how the Kwoma view themselves as being the first to conquer this territory.<sup>5</sup>

- (1) no mas ya-r no *tok ples* echa  
 1PL before come-PAST 1PL local.language like.this  
 wo-ta-wa, no-ta *olsem* mas d̄əta  
 say-DUR-PERF 1PL-EMPH like.this before DIST  
 kow r̄ə=n d̄əta akama r̄ə=n  
 ground 3SG=OBJ DIST village 3SG=OBJ  
 əta em r̄ə=n no-ta p̄ət̄ə-r  
 PROX place 3SG=OBJ 1PL-EMPH tread-PAST

‘We came first to what we thus call in our language; that ground, that village, this place we treaded on first.’ (Robin01-J-7\_1-3)

The belief that the Kwoma ancestors came out of a hole in the ground is an illustration of how the territory is conceptualized to be at the heart of being Kwoma. This

ideology establishes a crucial relationship between the land and the people, with *Wanmay* as its landmark.

## History

The association of historical events with specific locations is another example of how the Kwoma construct their identity by connecting it to specific places. When the Kwoma migrated to the Washkuk hills, they found that they were already occupied, and it is common knowledge that the land which the different Kwoma clans own today all formerly belonged to a distinct group called Gaya (or Gala, Ngala, Nggala). The occupation of the Washkuk hills by the Gaya is corroborated by oral tradition, as illustrated in (2).

- (2) mas gaya ye d̄ə-ka kwo yi-ta-r  
 before Gaya 3PL DIST-LOC mountain sit-DUR-PAST  
 ‘Before, the Gaya occupied these mountains.’  
 (Ambros01-J-121\_2)

Brage (1990) established the primary location of the Gaya settlement north of Ambunti. This place-name was the Gaya term for the Washkuk range, and was kept after the Gaya were defeated to name the town (Bowden 1997). However, since the Gaya language belongs to the Ndu language family, it is more likely that their place of origin was further northeast, closer to where the Abelam are located (Laycock 1965). Bowden (1983) reports that the Kwoma and the Gaya lived together peacefully until violent attacks started against each other. Joining force with the Manambu, another Ndu group enemy of the Gaya, “the Manambu and the Kwoma managed to overpower the Gaya who fled to their present location, Swakap”, located at the junction between the Sepik and April rivers (Aikhenvald 2008: 16).

Tongwinjamb people attribute the termination of the Kwoma-Gaya wars to a big rock named *Gayadaḡər* [*gaya* ‘Gaya’ – *daḡər* ‘to crush-PAST’] that is conceptualized as having “crushed” the Gaya (see Photo 3). While their parents were hunting for food, and to protect themselves from a rainstorm, Gaya children took refuge under a rock that looked like a veranda. Soon after, the rock collapsed on them, leaving out only the head of a child to tell their story. When the parents came back, they found that all their children had been crushed by *Gayadaḡər*.

*Gayadaḡər* as a landmark serves as a chronotope, i.e., as a point “in the geography of a community where time and space intersect and fuse. Time takes on flesh and becomes visible for human contemplation; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time and history and the enduring character of a people” (Bakhtin 1981: 7). This rock is located in the vicinity of Tongwinjamb where the Gaya were said to be defeated,

<sup>5</sup> Tok Pisin words are put in italics. Abbreviations used: 1, 2, 3: person; DIST: distal demonstrative; DUR: durative; EMPH: emphatic; OBJ: objective marker; PAST: past tense; PERF: perfective; PL: plural; PROX: proximate demonstrative; SG:

singular; ‘-’: morpheme boundary; ‘=’: clitic boundary; ‘:’: portmanteau morpheme.

and marks Kwoma's historical relationship with the Gaya. Furthermore, *Gayadangər* symbolizes ownership of the territory by the clan by anchoring their past in their land.



Photo 3: *Gayadangər* (© author, 14 April 2007)

### Myths

Myths are said to contain information on the categorization of the social world and on proper ethics in relation to that world of social categories. Through myths, one learns about the sociocultural values and norms expected in the community. Kwoma are socialized to fear supernatural beings. (Whiting 1941) These fears are instilled through oral stories repeated as warnings of imminent danger if the spirits are disturbed.<sup>6</sup> The spirits, *shikiyawas*, are said to have permanent residencies all over the territory. River-spirits, often in the form of a black millipede, a snake, or a crocodile, are lying in water environments, while bush-spirits can be found in the forest, residing mostly in boulders and trees. A large number of place-names are a reflection of the interplay between spirits and nature. One stream is called *Manekpa* [*ma* 'man' -*neki* 'hold' -*pa* 'river'], and children are taught to avoid swimming there. According to this myth, one day, a woman went to the stream with her child, and noticed that there was a lot of fish in the water. She sat her child on the bank and gathered the fish in a palm leaf beside her child. However, the fish were actually *mageko* 'black millipedes', large insects with secretions that can burn the skin and temporarily blind a person. They devoured both the child and the mother, leaving only bones behind. When the villagers went looking for them, they found their bones in the stream, and named it accordingly as a stream that imprisoned men, *Manekpa*. This name carries information about this myth and the river-spirit living there.

<sup>6</sup> Whiting (1941: 203) states: "To list all the warnings a person might receive in the course of his life would be to list much of the culture."

Giving mythical names to those places can be seen as one way to ensure that the spirits are not disturbed and that people behave respectfully in their vicinity. All adult Kwoma, men and women, have knowledge of the myths, even if they are not owned by their clan. I recorded some myths in Tongwinjamb narrated by Hamikwa men that were explicitly owned by another group. However, it is more often that people will recount myths from their own clan. A story will begin by stating who the protagonist is and that the storyteller is one of the owners.

- (3) *wanpela* wayaga ma no-ti  
 one forebear.ancestor man 1EXCL-POSS  
 Hamikwa ri hi Makapsapa  
 Hamikwa 3SG:POSS name Makapsapa  
 'One of our Hamikwa ancestors is named Makapsapa.' (Hilary02-R-203\_1)

Spirits are often described as disturbing the environment and are said to be responsible for earthquakes and thunderstorms. Rituals are performed, among other reasons, to appease the spirits and control the geographical environment. For example, the yam ritual composed of three ceremonies honouring three different spirits, *Yena*, *Mija* and *Nowkwi*, is performed to insure the continuous fertility of the yam gardens (Bowden, 1983). Sculptures and paintings are one way to honour and calm the spirits; another way is to sing their song (*yapo*), which are sung version of myths. *Shikiyawas* 'spirits' are claimed by clans, and the land where they are found as well. This includes streams (*pa*) and swamps (*sam*), forests (*mekaba*) and gardens (*now*).

Claiming ownership of a well-known entity such as *Butakom* [a powerful spirit occupying a boulder in northern Washkuk hills] and depicting it in a painting is one way in which an artist affirms his clan's title to the land on which the object is located. (Bowden 2006: 147)

During my fieldwork, I observed that although most myths could be narrated by younger speakers, the link with the natural environment was only established by a small number of elders considered the local memory of the landscape. A cartography of the Kwoma territory with the documentation of the place-names, their meanings, and specific location, is one solution to preserve this disappearing cultural geographical knowledge.

### Kwoma identity

Belonging to a place is an essential component of the Kwoma identity. This belonging is constructed through a process of territorialisation. Territoriality is an "attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence or control people, phenomena, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area" (Sack 1986:

19). Ownership of the territory is visible in the variety of ideologies Kwoma have about their space, be it their origin, their history, and their myths. Place-names are not descriptive and do not point to specific physical details. Instead, they encompass accounts of genealogies and land use histories, with detailed listings of the marks Kwoma, their ancestors, and supernatural beings have left on the ground. Place-naming contributes to the feeling of belonging to an area and to a social group within that particular area, as shown in (1). It symbolizes continuity, and the generational link is manifested in the strong connection with the past and the place, as further illustrated by the excerpt in (2).

By mapping language onto space, people create places and place-based identities. Language and territory are linked together as important markers of identity. Social and individual Kwoma identity are conceptualized as rooted in the land, through connections with their origin, their history and their mythology.

Kwoma identity emerges from how people live in the territory, how they conceptualize their territory and how they imagine their territory (see the conceptual triad proposed by Lefebvre 1974). The Kwoma culture is deeply rooted in their geographical environment, and spiritual beliefs unite them with their land.

Territory is inherited patrilineally: “a man’s wife, though she continues to live in his house, inherits nothing from her deceased husband, but daughters receive a share of his property in trees and of the produce of any gardens he may have planted.” (Whiting & Reed 1938: 195-196). As such, much of the relationship with the land is held by men; women are seen as destructive to men and a disturbance to spirits, which is a familiar ideology of Papua New Guinea (Williamson 1979). Once married, women move to live on the ground of their husband. Women are not true landowners, they only have the usufruct of the land. Consequently, their identity as Kwoma is negotiated through their power as uniquely nurturing and able to make children. More investigation is needed to fully understand the place and identity of women in Kwoma communities.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

This article shows how cultural identities in Kwoma, an endangered language community of the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea, are linked to specific places that serve as landmarks of identity. Ideologies about their origin, their history and supernatural beings are all sources of how Kwoma conceptualize the land where they live. This can be seen through the variety of place-names that construct the territory as owned by the Kwoma. In Papua New Guinea, where land ownership is part of the identity of a group, territorialisation, i.e.,

control over a geographic area, is achieved among other things by giving meaning to space.

Place-names are not only a source of linguistic knowledge, but also of geographical, historical, ethnographic, and of other cultural knowledge. This study demonstrates how Kwoma place-names provide a unique representation of their territory, and contributes to a better understanding of the identity function of landmarks.

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<sup>7</sup> See Bowden (1984) for more information about the gender ideology of the Kwoma.

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