

Reflections on Climate Change by Contemporary Artists in Papua New Guinea

Marion Struck-Garbe

Abstract: The consequences of climate change are already felt in Papua New Guinea, especially on the atoll islands. Between 3,500 and 6,000 dwellers will need to resettle due to increasing land loss, salt-water inundation and growing food insecurity. Once resettled as 'climate refugees' at nearby Bougainville Island, they face losing their self-sufficiency as well as their cultural identity. Contemporary art has been a focus of local artists since the 1970s. Usually, themes and motives are dealing with changes in society, depicting scenes of traditional and cultural events or body art, and decorated dancers. More recently, some artists started focusing explicitly on environmental issues. Losing home and culture due to the consequences of climate change, losing the forest due to logging by multinational companies, or staying hungry because of fish shortage due to over-fishing have become their concern. By presenting and commenting on the motives I want to show how this fear of loss is reflected in their artwork.

Keywords: Art; Papua New Guinea; Climate Change; Resettlement; Loss

This paper shifts the discussion on climate change from a mere scientific or policy discourse to an artistic and cultural perspective on the issue. It aims to draw attention to Pacific culture as seen through the eyes of contemporary artists.

Artistic explorations are not restricted to illustrate scientific discoveries but represent how people in the Pacific think and feel about the threat of climate change. Papua New Guinea artists are conscious of local issues; and through their contribution they are documenting major social and environmental concerns of their people. Art can challenge perceptions of and the relationship with climate change and environmental modifications by deconstructing common views and revealing alternative perceptions.

Climate change in PNG

Papua New Guinea is highly exposed to the effects of climate change and has often experienced extreme weather conditions. Some of the 600 islands of the Pacific Island Nation experience flooding and severe cyclones more often than in previous years. In the long

run, rising sea levels will lead to significant land loss. Flooding, landslides and droughts have adverse effects on people's lives in the coastal and low land areas, but also in the highlands.

Another climate change issue is deforestation, which is rarely mentioned in connection with the Pacific Islands. The

forest's importance for carbon storage was realised fairly recently. Rainforests play a key role in regulating local and global climates. Massive degradation and destruction result in a loss of natural carbon storing and leads to an increase of greenhouse gas emissions.

Papua New Guinea is still hosting some of the world's largest and remaining intact forest landscapes. The forests have always provided a livelihood but due to continued legal and illegal destructive logging and the conversion of forest areas into plantations, the forests and living environment of the people are now under threat.

Sinking islands

It was widely reported in November 2005 that the low-lying Carteret Islands of Papua New Guinea have progressively become uninhabitable, with an estimate of their total submersion by 2015. The islands gained dubious fame as the inhabitants had become the world's first climate refugees.

The islanders have fought a more than twenty years battle building a seawall and planting mangroves. However, storm

Image 1: A. Mebri: Refugees of the sinking Islands, No III, 2008, Acryl on Canvas



surges and high tides continue to wash away homes, destroy vegetable gardens and contaminate fresh water supplies.

Due to the loss of land and inundation, the islanders are no longer able to grow crops (bananas and taro) to feed themselves. Families survive on mainly fish and coconuts; they are battling the swamp mosquitoes that have brought malaria.

60 % of the land area of their islands disappeared already and in a few years they are likely to be completely submerged. Being small in area and low-lying, inhabitants will have nowhere to retreat to as the seas inundate their coastlines.

Carteret Islanders now have to move permanently to another place and find a new home. In July 2009, nearly 3,000 islanders began what will eventually become a big evacuation to Bougainville, the next major island about 80 kilometres away from their ancestral grounds. Relocation will continue over the next 10 years. As the national and local government's relocation plans are slow, the islanders have set up a relocation team. They founded the NGO Tulele Peisa (sailing on our own) that raises money and campaigns for social justice on behalf of the islanders and has begun a series of urgent tasks to move families closer to security (Struck-Garbe, 2009a, 21-23).

The painting from *Alexander Mebri* shows a disturbed crowd. Men, women and children are rushing away from their island. They carry their bilum (net bags) with their belongings or an infant inside. They have only a small amount of space at their disposal. The blue sky merging with the blue ocean evokes a feeling of being lost in a vast environment and escaping into the void. At the same time the painting emphasizes the declining space showing people crowded together.

Alexander Mebri wrote about his canvas:

“This painting depicts the experiences of the people of the Carteret Islands in Papua New Guinea, whose islands are disappearing through rising sea levels. Their struggle to survive, as their gardens are covered by sea water, has finally resulted in their resettlement on higher land, giving hope to the islanders.”

Climate change is provoking the people to migrate further inland and is causing a social security threat due to enhanced population pressure. The tensions intrinsic in migration of peo-

ple can easily become open conflict as people compete over scarce resources. Access to land for gardening or housing and access to fresh water could gear up further conflicts among the islanders. If villagers start to mark borders, forbidding others to come and fetch water from their community wells the existing order might shift (Böge, 2009).

In her terms *Ursula Rakova* speaks: women from Tulele Peisa endorse the picture:

“For you it (climate change) is a matter of lifestyle, but for us it is a matter of life and death. If we do not move we are going to be drowned.”

Displacement seems to be unavoidable. Rising sea levels are not only eating away the land of the tiny atolls of the Carteret Islands, but also their inhabitants' way of life.

Displacement & resettlement

Fear of the resettlement environment and possible tensions with the host communities are strong feelings among the families. They want more safety and security in their new communities. For instance, the ten Carteret Islanders who had been transferred from the islands to the mainland Bougainville in 2009 could not get the legal rights to the land they needed. Landowner issues and the feeling of insecurity towards the new environment drove them back to their home island.

The collage from *Julie Mota* pictures a couple. The woman is holding a baby in her arms. They are in distress, moving, fleeing and leaving their hearts behind. People are faced with looming crises or in other words:

“we have a feeling of anxiety, a feeling of uncertainty because we know that we will be losing our homes. It is



Image 2: J. Mota: Homeless Refugees, 2009, Mixed media on paper



Image 3: A. Mebri: Where has my fish gone, No. II, 2008, Acryl on Canvas

our identity. It is our whole culture at stake.” (Ursula Rakova)

Loss of the land is a disaster. Living on other peoples’ land is not an easy way of life. Land is a very high-ranking issue not only in Papua New Guinea but in the Pacific as a whole. Pacific identity is closely connected with land: the land is part of me and I am part of the land. Furthermore, land has spiritual quality and connects people with the past, present and future. It is life and nurture and it gives the inhabitants a sense of being and belonging. They bury the umbilical cord and want to be buried there when they die. The inhabitants are the guardians of the land and want to stay where they belong, maintaining the key link with the land. In short: land holds life together and holds meaning, land equals identity.

This attitude becomes apparent in the remark of a tribal chief of the Carteret Islands, when asked by a journalist: You are not afraid to stay on the island? He answered:

“I am not frightened. If the island is lost, I’m lost too. I’ll get lost with the island.” (Marshall, 2007, 10, 23-10, 27)

If the land is already inundated by salt-water gardening, food supply is becoming a major problem. This adds

to the workload of women. They have to find another piece of land to start again to grow a productive food garden. The new garden might be further away from home and the journey to and from will take a longer time. If there is a shortage of land, women’s concern increases. They are at the heart of climate change vulnerability (Boncour, 2009, 11; Struck-Garbe, 2009b).

Even though women have the roles of care giver, agriculture worker and water provider they are mostly marginalised from information about and participation in climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies.

While women often have the knowledge, for instance ancestral knowledge about water supplies, that will be useful in planning and implementing community level adaptation strategies, they are not always given the opportunity to voice their ideas. When it comes to politics and decision-making women are mostly excluded despite them being central figures in everyday life. This also holds true for resettlement issues.

Coral bleach and overfishing

The small islands of Papua New Guinea are reef-dependent. Pressures on the reef systems represent significant threats to livelihoods and well-being. Strong reefs play a vital role as natu-

ral breakwaters minimising wave impacts during storms and cyclones and as food provider supplying fish (and protein) and sea-food for daily consumption.

Sea temperatures in the tropics have increased by one degree Celsius over the last ten years and are still increasing currently. Reef building corals become stressed by higher temperatures, they bleach and finally they die in great numbers. Less corals mean less protection and less food for the islander in times when they are experiencing stronger and heavier storms at the same time (Hoegh-Guldberg, 1999).

This work of *Alexander Mebri* illustrates people walking on the reef looking for fish and shellfish. They seem to be in panic because they cannot find any seafood. He gives the following statement to his painting:

“Marine life in the Pacific is slowly being destroyed, as uncontrolled fishing is being carried out by more developed countries, with bigger ships and sophisticated machinery. The simple coastal villager now struggles to catch fish for his daily family’s meal.”

His comment points to an additional problem: Having fished out their own waters, countries like Japan, European Union member states, Taiwan, Korea,

the United States and China are now sending their industrial fishing fleets to the Pacific to exploit the region's stocks. Overfishing is seriously depleting tuna stocks and destructive fishing practices are killing other valuable marine life. Pacific Island countries are being exploited for their resources. For them the ocean is no longer the provider of food. This is a terrifying situation and such a threat to the sustainability of the entire social-eco-system of the islands that it forces the islanders to act desperately.

Deforestation

The importance of the forest and the necessity to reducing emissions from deforestation was recognized by Papua New Guinea's then Prime Minister Michael Somare. He said at UNFCCC COP 13/CMP3 meeting in Bali in December 2007:

"If we lose the world's forest we lose the fight against climate change. Rainforests are our earth's greatest utility – our planet's lungs, thermostat, and air-conditioning system."

Despite this comprehension the Somare government continued to facilitate the expansion of large-scale industrial and destructive logging.

In this painting, *Julia Mota* shows again a folded person surrounded by trees and plants. The person is sad and concerned about forest loss.

Although much of this area is still untouched, policies and practices point to PNG is losing the struggle against forest degradation. Poor governance and a high level of corruption have led to illegal logging. Forest management is poor. The people have seen no benefit from logging, just destruction. At some stage they thought they give away forest for development: According to a former missionary and landowner Brother *Jim Coucher* from Vanimo:

"At first they welcome the loggers because they think it might mean money, but in fact they get very little out of it. The loggers don't do any replanting or clearing up at all ... and they give no benefits to the people. They use bulldozers to drag the logs which create all sorts of problems with erosion."

Forest protection on the one hand and small-scale eco-forestry on the



Image 4: J. Mota: Forest Concern, 2009, Pen illustration, charcoal and watercolor on paper

other could be a way to stop the speed of destruction and to solve the problem of forest loss.

Alexander Mebri depicts a couple who is involved in inflaming a bush fire. In the background there are other people standing closer to the origin of the fire. In the flames appear the eyes of the ancestors watching and crying black tears. The eyes are also symbolising the soul of the forest. The artist comments his works as followed:

"Bush fires, one cause of climate change in the world today, are caused by uncontrolled burning of forests to make more gardens as population increases."

A significant threat to Papua New Guinea's forests is agricultural expansion. The country's high population

growth rate means increasing amounts of land are converted for subsistence agriculture. Typically fire is used for land-clearing and at times - especially during dry el Niño years - agricultural fires can burn out of control. During the 1997-1998 el Niño events, fires burned thousands of hectares of dried-out forest while hundreds of people died from food shortages and famine in the central highlands.

One aspect of *Alexander Mebris* statement is based on the assumption, that less forest means less carbon dioxide (CO₂) is absorbed by trees, which accumulates in the atmosphere as a result of pollution. Deforestation is one of the main causes of climate change, accounting for almost a fifth of all greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, there will be an increased presence of CO₂ if trees are being burnt



Image 5: Alexander Mebri: Bush Fire, 2008, Acryl on Canvas

or being logged (Greenpeace, 2008).

The greatest hazard for the ecology of the rainforest in Papua New Guinea derives from industrial logging. Officially 'selected logging' takes place. However, at present, and for the past two decades, forest harvesting has occurred in a destructive and in an ecologically unsustainable fashion. Phil Shearman's report shows nearly one quarter of the rainforests was damaged or destroyed between 1972 and 2002. The numbers indicate that Papua New Guinea can not and does not regulate forest operations (Shearman et al., 2009).

The impacts of climate change are being felt hardest by some of the world's poorest and remote commu-

nities with little opportunity or support for adaptation to these impact. In 2008, Kiribati's President *Anote Tong* told at an environment conference in New Zealand:

"The climate change is an issue of human survival for sinking islands not economic development".

But nothing has changed. The emissions in the atmosphere will carry on contributing to climate change, so in time the small low lying islands will be submerged according to the worst case scenarios within this century.

Ursula Rakova is riled at this perspective:

"We are angry. Some of our people do not understand the science, but they know they are losing their homes and they are angry they are having to pay for what other people in industrialised nations have done".

John Danger illustrates this comment by means of image 6. In his painting he depicts the human influence on climate changes. Industrial activities in the developed countries produce carbon dioxide and increase the greenhouse gases concentration while the island village is drowned due to sea level rise. Despite the fact that Pacific Island countries are low emitters of climate changing gases, they are in fact among the most vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change. They are the first victims of climate change, which hampers their development. Living in a contemporary society that is culturally diverse, rapidly changing and threatened by environmental disasters and damages means it is important that the arts of this society embrace and reflect these changes. Art is a sensor of society; and it challenges perceptions of climate change by visualising the feelings of threat and danger that comes along with climate change.

Endnotes

[1] Rising flood waters at the coastlines and in the river areas are also attributed to consequences of climate change. For instance, in December 2008 a severe flooding at the Northwest Coast affected 38,000 people or in 2010 between March and May this year many communities along the Sepik River experienced the worst flood in 40 years. An estimated 20,000 people of the East Sepik Province had been affected. But residents have been able to sustain themselves. There are inter-community supply chains thanks to traditional coping mechanism. So that people had enough food and shelter (see also Kempf, 2010).

[2] Pacific Small Islands Developing States, United Nations Members, 2009, Views on Possible Security Implications of Climate Change to be included in the report of the Secretary-General to 64th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, p. 11; http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/resources/res_pdfs/ga-64/cc-inputs/PSIDS_CCIS.pdf

[3] All statements from *Alexander Mebri* were written in an email to me.



Image 6: John Danger: Climate Change, 2009, Acryl on Material

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Marion Struck-Garbe [Marion.Struck-Garbe@hamburg.de], Department of Southeast Asian Languages and Cultures, University of Hamburg, Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1, Ost, D-20146 Hamburg / Germany.