

Fabric of wisdom: the context of Ömie nioge

'Fabric of wisdom: the context of Ömie nioge' was first published in
Wisdom of the Mountain: Art of the Ömie, NGV Publications, 96pps, paperback.'

At Annandale Galleries in Sydney, Ömie artist Dapeni Jonevari sits on a woven mat, her attention on the cloth, nioge, that she paints. Above her, the camera watches, but she pays it little heed. Even as the gallery fills with visitors, her attention remains on the cloth; she rarely raises her head in query. Beside her, Pauline Rose Hago sings as she paints, her high voice part of the rhythm with which she attends to her art. Sometimes the beat of the kundu drum draws the attention of both women and they raise their arms and sway as they sing. Then they become performers. But for whom do they perform? For the strange white onlookers, or for the world of the mountain they have left behind for these two weeks, while in the land of the 'new people'?

In 2004, Dapeni Jonevari sat with the same concentration in her home village high on the mountain the maps call Mount Lamington and the Ömie call *Huvaemo*. In the early-morning sun, she, the 'mother' *duvahe*, or chief, of the Emate clan, and Lila Gama, the 'paramount' *duvahe* of Ömie women, sat on their mats in the centre of the village, their legs stretched in front of them, each with a cloth folded on her lap, the fabric that is their art. Across the valley from their ridge-top village, the mountain peaks rose, clear against the sky, as they dipped their sharpened sticks into the black paint to draw the pathways of *nioge*, the art that holds their culture in place. 'This place, our art', they sang.

During the heat of the afternoon, Pauline Rose Hago sat with the younger women in the cool of a house, children piled around them, watching. Intermittently, the younger women talked as they painted, and when their words were for the ears of women only, the children were shooed away, and their attention lifted from the cloth as they told their stories and laughed and tutted and clapped their hands. When they returned to their work and silence fell once more, or their singing began again, the children crept back until once again the platform was filled with them, leaning against their mothers, lying around the edges of the cloth, learning. There is a great deal to learn, they told me, before a girl grows to be a woman who is acknowledged by the chiefs as an artist and given the freedom of the pathways. Until then, she can paint only in reds and browns and yellows, assistant to the chiefs, painting between and around the pathways, but never marking the cloth with black.

*<http://ngvshop.ngv.vic.gov.au>
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From left, *Duvahe* (chief) Dapeni Jonevari
and *magonahe duvahoho* (paramount chief)
Lila Gama, 2004.
Photo: Drusilla Modjeska

The five years between these moments of painting, one on the mountain, the other on film for *Wisdom of the Mountain*, represents an extraordinary journey. It's not simply that before 2004 the Ömie had no audience beyond the mountain, and that their art is now brought to view in this beautiful exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria.¹ Behind this story is another, more remarkable journey. While many of the Ömie's neighbours, including some of their own people, gave up their art in the aftermath of the war on the Kokoda Track and the coming of the missions, the *nioge* villages high on the mountain maintained it, not as a remnant of past practice, but as integral to their own negotiations with the great changes that have swirled around them since the middle of last century, and before.

Huvaemo: this place, our art

The Ömie are a small tribe – their own census of 2009 counted 1822 of them – who live high on the southern flank of Papua New Guinea's Mount Lamington. It is rugged, precipitous country, with the volcano and its peaks rising on that side in steep, cleat-like ridges. Since the airstrip on the lower flanks of the mountain closed in 2003, visitors to Ömie must walk from the end of a track that turns east from the road between Popondetta and Kokoda, shortly before it reaches the Kumusi River. This is territory of the Orokaiva, a populous and powerful people from a different language group², traditional enemies of the Ömie, who dominate the fertile plain that spreads in a wide sweep from the north coast of Papua, where the Japanese landed in 1942, to the Owen Stanley Range. There is no way to the provincial capital, Popondetta, or to the coast, without the Ömie crossing Orokaivan land. If they leave the mountain from the other side, and approach Popondetta from the east, they meet the Orokaiva again on the northern slopes of Mount Lamington, which the anthropologist F. E. Williams described as a 'piedmont area ... one of the most fertile and beautiful in all Papua'.³ Although the Ömie no longer have to fight off the Orokaiva, their villages are built in defensive positions on ridge tops, and they still pride themselves on their pre-colonial reputation as warriors. The chiefs tell stories of enemy raiders defeated by their forefathers. In the post-colonial realities of today, the Ömie have no greater liking for these powerful neighbours, and they are sensitive to their marginalised position in the modern state of Papua New Guinea. They have no access to decision-making in the provincial government based in Popondetta, and little access to government services. There are only two primary schools in all of Ömie. The nearest hospital is at Popondetta. There is an aid post at the village, where the airstrip was, but none in the higher villages. In Papua New Guinea, fees are charged for all education and medicine, and the only produce the Ömie have to sell is their peanut crop, which they carry down in large sacks to the market in Popondetta. If there's a scarcity, they might make 180 kina for a sack; a glut and it's half that.⁴

It was, in a sense, this marginalised position that brought me to Ömie in March 2004. David Baker, the Director of Sydney's New Guinea Gallery, who'd already visited their mountain, had been invited back to advise the Ömie Culture Group that had been formed some years before in the hope of establishing a tourist *bisnis*. Interested to meet the Ömie and see the barkcloth art, *nioge*, that Baker had encountered in 2002 and 2003, I accompanied him with a notebook.

From the end of the road, it is a two-hour walk past gardens and hamlets to the last of the Orokaivan villages before the Siriwa River, a tributary of the Kumusi, that



From left: Duvaha Dapene Jonevari and magonahe duvahoho Lila Gama, 2004. Photo: Drusilla Modjeska



Younger women paint *ba'a mareji*, the filling between the black pathways, 2004. Photo: Drusilla Modjeska

now marks the western boundary of Ömie. The line, first ruled by colonial authority, is still regarded as arbitrary; land on the Orokaivan side is linked to certain ancestor stories, and there's intermittent friction over gardens along the river that tumbles from the mountain, sparkling in the sunlight, a resting place, cool and restorative, before the long, hard walk up to the Ömie villages. Across the river, the path becomes steep and narrow. We walk in single-file past small abandoned coffee gardens on the slopes above the river, and then we are in rainforest, climbing one ridge after another, dipping down to a stream, or a river, another splash of sunlight, then up again, each rise steeper, each drop to the next river more precipitous.

At Asapa, where the airstrip languishes overgrown and abandoned, there is the desolate air of a place forgotten. We are told that the Ömie of this village, and also of Enjoro village lower down to the east, near the Mawoma River, gave up their *nioge* after the eruption of Mount Lamington in January 1951.⁵ This terrible event, which killed several thousand Orokaivans on the northern 'piedmont' side of the mountain and destroyed the Ömie gardens and villages, was understood at the time to be connected with the previous great disruption of the war between the Australian colonists and the Japanese. Few patrols had ventured into Ömie, and none had walked further than Asapa until 1942, when an Australian patrol arrived, unannounced, to recruit men as labour for the war. It was exceptionally bad timing, for the patrol arrived during the initiation, *sore bijiohe*, of Ömie men that took place every seven to twelve years, during which young men past puberty were secluded for several months in 'egg nests', *ujavue*. These were dug in the ground, lined with leaves and covered with a thatched roof to protect the boys being initiated from the heat of the day as their skin softened, ready for the tattoos that would mark them as Ömie warriors.

The patrol took the boys before they had completed their learning and 'hatched' as men, along with older, initiated Ömie. When Wellington Uruhe, who is now paramount 'father' *duvaha*, or *ama'e duvahoho*, spoke of the war in 2004, it became clear that the sorrow of that time had less to do with the hard labour on the Kokoda Track – though hard it was – than with the devastating effect of an interruption that left the mountain unprotected. The threat, this time, was not from the Orokaivans – who had the Japanese army crossing their land – but from the sensitivities of the mountain itself. In an environment imbued with spirit, where ancestors are an active force, and the mountain is like a large, restless being, the women, though powerful with their own realms of teaching and authority, could not alone hold their world in place.

With the eruption coming so soon after the war, the question for the chiefs, the *duvaha*, was how to respond, how to adapt, to these seismic events. The lower villages of Asapa and Enjoro made the decision to give up many of their traditional practices and beliefs, including the *sore bijiohe* initiation and their *nioge* art. Instead, they allied themselves with their Orokaivan neighbours, and embraced the new teachings of the evangelical missions in the hope that this would win them the rewards of the 'new' wealth.⁶ The upper villages where we were headed, in contrast, moved the other way. Their explanation of the eruption was that the wandering souls of dead soldiers, unable to settle on land that was not theirs, had upset the mountain; in response, their decision was to strengthen their culture rather than retreat from it. This was not without sacrifice, and, perhaps because of the defection of the lower villages, they gave up *sore bijiohe* and all but the smallest remnants of the tattooing. The designs once marked on the body joined the designs and motifs of



Godibehi village, 2004.
Photo: Drusilla Modjeska



Ridge beyond Godibehi, 2004.
Photo: Drusilla Modjeska

the cloth, which evolved and strengthened, increasing in significance as the *nioge* villages grew apart from the lower villages in a breach that has only recently been healed.

From Asapa, it is a short climb on to the first of the *nioge* villages, but to reach highest four villages, there is still a long walk ahead; each of these villages is separated from the next by a half-day walk or more, even for the fleet-footed Ömie. There are fast-running rivers to cross, rocky scarps to traverse. The toe-holds worn in the path by the bare feet of the Ömie do not accommodate our boots. Clumsy *tahua*, in places we haul ourselves up by the roots of the great forest trees that rise 30 metres and more to a silver sheen of sky. To us 'new' people it is an impenetrable landscape, but to the Ömie every ridge, every stream, every step of this vast tract of forest and mountain is known and regulated, marked by clan boundaries, by the territories of ancestral beings, by their cosmology and history. This is *Huvaemo*, their mountain, their land, their home.

At the top of a village ridge, the land opens like a stage, and you step from the sombre colours of the forest floor into a viridian space of gardens and light and fruiting trees. The houses are built off the ground in family groups, and at the heart of each village is the central meeting place and dance ground, the *amorire*. We hear the kundus as we climb the last ridge, and the high voices of women rising above them; at the top, we wait outside the *amorire*, until the cloth that hangs across the gate in welcome is lifted and we're escorted in by the dancers. Men are paired with men, women with women, all of them dressed in *nioge* painted with the colours of the mountain. Children old enough to dance keep step beside their same-sex parent; small children sleep on the shoulders of their mothers as they move to the rhythm of the drums. Banners of *nioge* wave in the air. High feathered headdresses mimic the movement of birds as men lead the dancers across the *amorire* to the guesthouse. Advancing and retreating, the double line separates, one of each pair peeling back to the right, the other to the left, in a circling movement that echoes the circling, swirling shapes of the painted cloth. Across the valleys that drop in every direction, *Huvaemo* and its peaks rise, an ever-powerful presence.

*Walk in, walk in and see for yourself,
This place, our art.
Walk in, and hear for yourself, this song of our art, our people.
This place, our art.*

This place, our art. It's a connection powerfully made when you wake to see the 'mother' *duvaha* painting on their mats in the centre of the village. Or when you see sleeping babies wrapped in *nioge*. Or when a small girl with a scrap of *nioge* in her headdress takes your hand. Or when you are taken into the bush to cut the tree that gives up its bast for the cloth. Or when the clans gather to dance, dusk to dawn, the white cockatoo feathers of their headdresses shining in the moonlight. Or when you first see the bold, minimalist designs of Budo *nioge*.

The impact of encountering *nioge* is visceral and immediate, bringing to mind the Surrealists, who, in the 1920s, fell in love with the Maro barkcloth from what was then Dutch New Guinea, and let its dancing creatures and abstract shapes merge into a European imagination. For one sharp moment, strange and familiar, like and unlike, seemed not so far apart. And yet, even as a tendril of our own culture came to us, the *nioge* shone with the intensity and vibrancy of this place, this



nioge hanging from village house, 2004.
Photo: Drusilla Modjeska



Jaipa Village 2004.
Photo: Drusilla Modjeska

very particular place, and with the receptivity of the Ömie to their great, living mountain, *Huvaemo*.

Avine: light for all to see

Long ago, when darkness covered the whole of Ömie territory, an old woman carried the moon and the sun in her string bag, or *bilum*. In the beautiful moon, or *avine*, story, she walked from the village each morning and climbed to the top of the highest mountain. She cut a forked branch from a tree and planted it in the ground to hang her *bilum* upon. She took out the sun and hung it in the sky. Then she cut the branches from every nearby tree and cleared the bush around her so that down below, everyone could see by the wondrous light. Each day she'd climb up there, put the sun in the sky, and clear some more ground, making a large garden that spread out from the forked branch where she hung her *bilum*. At the end of her day's work, she'd put the sun back in her *bilum*, and in its place hang the moon and a star to provide the silver light of night. Then she would return to the village and carry on as if nothing special had happened. In this way, the story concludes, the old woman brought *the light by which we all see*.⁷

Like the creation story told in this catalogue by Alban Sare, the *avine* story links the power of a woman to the 'light' by which the Ömie 'see'. The old woman creates the mythic garden, not so much to plant vegetables as to make visible that creative space of light where culture is made. In the creation story, Sujo, the first ancestor woman, cuts the tree to make the cloth that will bring *nioge* into existence in an originating exchange that gives birth to both the people and their art. Going back to these foundation stories, kept alive on the cloth, everything about *nioge*, from the cutting of the tree to the pounding of the cloth to the making of the art, is in the knowledge and preserve of women. It is both a source of their power and a visible manifestation of it.

In Ömie tradition, it is said that the first *nioge* decorations were made not by paint, but by soaking the cloth in river mud and cutting it into strips which were then sewn onto the white cloth with a flying-fox bone needle. This is a technique that is still used by some artists, notably Brenda Kesi, 'mother' *magonahe duvahe* of the Emate clan at Gora village; two of her 'muddy bark' *nioge* are now in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia; her beautiful *Muddy bark #2* gestures to the rays of the sun and the moon.

But it is paint that dominates contemporary *nioge* practice. Like the cloth itself, the pigments that are used – black (*barige*), red (*birire*) and yellow (*are*) come from forest plants. Making these, like cutting the bast and pounding the cloth, requires ritual knowledge as well as practical skill. It is through the traditional rules, words and songs, or *jögore*, that regulate all aspects of these transformations – from tree to cloth, plant to pigment – that the cloth attains 'spirit' ready for the hand of the artist.⁸

When the artist sits down to paint, she has already developed a complex relationship to the cloth she holds. First, she will draw the frame, the double or treble lines that contain the image and the power of its meaning.⁹ Only then will she draw the essential structure of the pathways, *ore sige*, the black lines of the design



magonahe duvahoho Lila Gama, 2004.
Photo: Drusilla Modjeska

that give *nioge* its force. She holds her sharpened stick, *hi'öe*, between first finger and third, dips it in the black paint, and with graceful assurance works across the cloth. Some artists work patiently from one corner; others move freely from several starting points, letting the pathways meet as they will. Asked if the whole is carried in mind when an artist comes to a fresh cloth, the reply is that 'the cloth, it knows'.¹⁰ And indeed, watching the movement of hand and painting-stick meet the textured resistance of the cloth, it can seem less that the pathways are laid down than that they emerge from the fabric, rising up, released by the hand, the wisdom, *uehore*, of the artist.

Uehore, translated as 'wisdom', is a word frequently used for the quality that gives an artist her freedom, a *magonahe duvahe* her authority, and Ömie culture its strength. It is not until a woman has attained *uehore* that she can draw the all-important pathways. When she does, she is free to make her own interpretations, infusing *nioge* with her *uehore* as she carries it forward into an unfolding present. Before then, while she is learning, she paints the 'filling', *ba'a mareji*, of the reds and browns and yellows that give the painting texture and depth.¹¹ The *duvahe* are strict in their control of who may use the black; as with any art, there is discipline beneath the freedom.

In introducing us to the ways of the cloth, Lila Gama took control of what we could be told. Only she or another *duvahe* can tell, or authorise the telling of, ancestor stories. Only a *duvahe* can answer questions that touch on systems of knowledge mediated by custodianship and exchange.¹² There was much that we could not be told: esoteric knowledge that is guarded, secrets that can be dangerous in the wrong hands, epistemologies of an 'old' culture that by tradition are not made manifest outside the community. There were discussions, sometimes lengthy, before the answer came, always with courtesy, and always meeting us eye to eye. If it were not for us to know, we'd be told simply that it was a matter of *uehore*, Ömie wisdom, an artist's wisdom. The meanings Lila Gama did want us to grasp lay in the rich alphabet of motifs. While these undoubtedly hold deep layers of internal meanings, they are also the visible signs of Ömie culture, worn on the 'double skin' of *nioge* as a mark of pride, and a warning.

First there is the signature emblem of Ömie, *odunaige*, which comes from a vine with a sharp hook and searching tendrils. It is painted double, with the two stems drawn parallel and the hooks curling outwards, away from each other, not unlike the shape made by the dancers as the double line breaks to left and right in that other creative space, the *amorire*. The *odunaige* was once tattooed on the faces of young women at the end of their initiation, which took place in a house beyond the edge of the village and, though not underground, was as rigorous in its teaching as the initiation of boys.¹³ In contemporary Ömie art, the *odunaige* can appear in many guises; on the cloth it has found imaginative scope that was not possible on the bodies of young women. It can be stout, or as delicate as tracery; the stems can be long or short, and they can merge into, or rise out of, other symbols and motifs, its presence no more than a hidden shape, like a memory or an echo.

Similarly, *vinöhe*, another signature tattoo, a series of concentric circles once drawn on the bellybutton of initiated men, is now freed to spiral across the cloth. But, like *odunaige*, it still signifies the strength of Ömie and the determination of its people.



Duvahe Dapaeni Jonevari, 2004.
Photo: Drusilla Modjeska

Other designs come from traditional objects, some no longer in use; Lila Gama has redrawn the pattern once created on fighting shields, *ejo'e*. In recent work, Aspesa Gadai has turned her wisdom to the carvings on bamboo smoking pipes that are used by Ömie men. Other motifs make reference to the abundant life around them: lizard bones, snakeskin, cassowary eggs, bark of particular trees, the markings of a caterpillar, spiderwebs, mountain ridges, fish bone, frogs, bush snails. All these were put before us to learn. We were taken into the forest to see the bush snails that live in the undergrowth, spiderwebs strong enough to catch bats, lizards that are good to eat when you are ill. But we were raw beginners, and even with the evidence of the 'original' placed in our hands, and the design drawn in our notebooks, we were slow to learn, to be able to distinguish, for example, the angled cross-hatching of the cassowary egg from the cross-hatching of the snakeskin. The problem – for us, though not for the Ömie – is that once a woman has gained her wisdom, she is free to use the designs as she will.¹⁴ Change the cross-hatching and still it is a cassowary egg – as the smallest child could tell us.

It seems that when a woman comes into her *uehore*, it is not simply that she has learned the iconography and the teaching of the *duvahe*, but that she lives them so fully that they form, and inform, her relationship with the cloth as they do with the world around her. They are learned as the steps of the dance are learned, by being taken into the body and into the imagination with language and landscape. With them comes a complex of beliefs and practices that are for the Ömie alone; from the outside, a deeper poetics can be sensed in the *nioge* that hangs in every village, that dresses its people, covering them during the cold mountain nights, that wraps their babies and is exchanged as bride wealth. Handed down the female line, *nioge* is both a stabilising heart to the culture and an evolving art practice broad enough to encompass a way of seeing that belongs to the tribe, and flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstance and the individual eye. When *magonahe duvahe* lean to their work, their breasts empty from feeding their many children, there is no doubting their creative potency, or the authority of their *uehore*.¹⁵

Uehore: their own wisdom

The question put to the *duvahe* in March 2004 by the young men wanting to start a business was whether or not to sell their cloth into a market beyond Papua New Guinea, and whether therefore to begin making cloth with a view to sale. With the closure of the airstrip and the difficulty of the terrain, the Ömie Culture Group had come to accept that tourism was unlikely to succeed. They knew that the more regular cloth made in other parts of Oro province, particularly in Maisin, was sold into the tourist trade, but it was not a possibility they'd considered for themselves; their assumption – insofar as one was made – was that their *nioge* was too irregular and anarchic for such a market, or for the festivals that bring visitors to more accessible parts of Papua New Guinea.¹⁶

There was no memory among the chiefs of any cloth being sold before David Baker visited the Ömie people, and he was the first person to suggest to them that their *nioge* might have value of a different kind. Two years later, the *duvahe* were assembled at Jaipa to discuss the matter. Inside the house where we met with them, it was a solemn occasion; outside, there was a hum of anticipation as people gathered in the *amorire* to hear the decision. The young men who'd registered the



magonahe duvahoho Lila Gama at the meeting of duvahe, the chiefs, Jaipa, 2004.
Photo: Drusilla Modjeska



Meeting of duvahe, the chiefs, Jaipa, 2004.
Left to Right: Lila Gama, Gwenda Uruhe, Chelestin Nanaru, Brenda Kesi, Botha Kimikimi.
Photo: Drusilla Modjeska

Ömie Cultural Group in 2000 were pressing hard to proceed¹⁷; what they wanted was not simply money, though that was the urgent consideration, but also an engagement with the larger polity. They wanted to act on, and in, that life beyond *Huvaemo* in which they had so little purchase, and in order to do so they needed to ally themselves to us *tahua*. The *duvahe* knew this; they also knew from the experience of Asapa, with 'their' anthropologist and linguist, their coffee and airstrip, that the prestige and benefit achieved through commerce and *tahua* can prove insubstantial.¹⁸ Yet there was this persistent impulse in their young men, and the chiefs knew the lure of town, its disruptive effect, and the bad ways that can be learned there. The Orokaivan villages down below might have tin roofs and tanks, plots of oil palm, even trucks, but the *duvahe* know how quickly money hunger can destroy custom, and violence reign when traditional authority breaks down.

They also know that in coming years the Ömie will need educated kinsmen to advocate for them if they are to have a stake in the new order. Life on the mountain is a tough existence. Everything they eat must be grown from gardens, all their building materials cut from the forest, and every drop of water carried up to the villages. There are no tin roofs, let alone rain tanks, or solar panels, or satellite phones. In 2004, the only lamps in the villages were those brought by David Baker in 2002. There was no kerosene, few cooking pots, no wet-weather clothes for the rain that can descend for days at a time. Salt was a luxury. So were nails. As well as these material considerations, the *duvahe* want their culture to survive the pressures that come from outside, pressures they know will increase for each next generation. Was it possible to gain some access to the benefits of the 'new' while at the same time safeguarding the integrity and heritage of *nioge*? Could a bridge be built between the old world and the new, allowing the young men their *bisnis* while at the same time encouraging a next generation of young women to hold to their art? Would selling *nioge* give it renewed impetus and let it adapt for the times to come? It had, after all, survived the ending of *sore bijiohe* and the cessation of tattooing. It had grown stronger in the hands of those who'd seen the eruption as children; but with further change, would it survive into generations for whom the war and its aftermath became another of the old people's stories?

So there was a lot at stake in March 2004, and it would be a long journey of many steps from there to the opening of *Wisdom of the Mountain* at the National Gallery of Victoria. But that afternoon at Jaipa, short of refusing an alliance, the decision lay not with us, but with the *duvahe*. It was a decision that required *uehore*, a decision for the future that only they could make. The word *duvahe* refers also to 'the fork of a tree from which the major branches grow'. In the Ömie conception of life's cycles, the *duvahe* are those who've reached the eighth of the eight stages of life; growing from the roots of the ancestors, these are the men and women who have attained the strength to generate 'new social relationships', like new life spreading in the upper branches of a tree.¹⁹ It is a perfect metaphor for a culture that gathers in its history as it stretches into the future. That afternoon, the faces of the *duvahe* were grave as they spoke back and forth among themselves, and at the conclusion of the assembly there was a certain solemnity as they shook our hands, *tahua*-fashion, and leaned towards us, Ömie-fashion, to breathe in our aroma.

The rejoicing was in the *amorire* when Albert Uruhe, *ama'e duvahe* of the Sahuote clan stepped out like an old king to address the people who'd come from every village to hear the decision. '*Mu'öjamire*', he said. 'Listen!'

Notes

This essay is based on observations, discussions and notes taken in Ömie in March 2004, followed by detailed correspondence with Andrew Naumo, Michael Naumo and Alban Sare of Ömie Nemiss Inc. Andrew and Michael Naumo visited Sydney in 2006; Alban Sare has visited twice, in 2008 and 2009. Dapeni Jonevari and Pauline Rose Hago visited in 2009. I thank all of them, along with other members of Ömie Nemiss Inc. In particular, I thank Reginal Siroriveno for his tireless work, and David Dau for the initial invitation to visit Ömie. I am also grateful for help and support from *magonahe duvahoho* Lila Gama and *ama'e duvahoho* Willington Uruhe and all the clan *duvahe*.

Anthropologist Michael Monsell Davis discussed Marta Rohatynskij's work on sex affiliation in lower Ömie with Andrew and Michael Nauro. James McElvenny and Jeremy Hammond assisted with a lexicon of Ömie words with spellings that supersede those in the Annandale Galleries catalogues of 2006, 2007 and 2009. I acknowledge them all with gratitude.

- 1 Ömie artists are represented by Annandale Galleries, Sydney. Their first exhibition was in Sydney, 19 July – 19 August 2006; the second, in conjunction with the Holmes à Court Gallery, was in Perth, 25 May – 15 July 2007; the third, which Dapeni Jonevari and Pauline Rose Hago attended, was in Sydney, 1 July – 8 August 2009. Ömie work is now in the collections of the National Gallery of Victoria, the Queensland Art Gallery and the National Gallery of Australia.
- 2 The Ömie language belongs to the Bariac sub-group, which is part of the Koiarian family from the south-east of Papua near Port Moresby. This sub-group is a grammatically complex language that also includes a bilabial trill, a rare sound/letter that is similar to blowing a raspberry. The Orokaiva, directly to the north of the Ömie, belongs to the Binanderean family of languages, which despite this close geographical proximity is not directly related to the Koiarian family.
- 3 F. E. Williams, *Orokaiva Magic*, Oxford University Press, 1928, p. 110.
- 4 By any fluctuation of exchange rate, 180 kina is well less than A\$100, and so is its buying power. The sacks weigh between 50 and 60 kilograms if the peanuts are green, between 30 and 40 kilograms if they are dry.
- 5 Mount Lamington (1680 metres), an andesitic stratovolcano, erupted in pyroclastic flows (steam and smoke) in January 1951, with further explosions in February and March. 'An exploding gas cloud engulfed an area of about eight miles in every direction and then sucked back. Hot ash covered a very much larger area, and the rivers whose sources are around the peak ... became choked with ashflow.' (Felix M. Keesing, 'The Papuan Orokaiva vs Mount Lamington: Cultural shock and its aftermath', *Human Organisation*, spring 1952, p. 16.) The breached crater blew to the north, causing devastation on that populated side, including at Higatura government and mission stations. Estimates of casualties vary between three thousand and four thousand Orokaivans. On the southern side, six Ömie were killed, according to today's *duvahe*. Villages and gardens were destroyed, and rivers became too hot to cross. The Ömie were evacuated to Ilimo on the Kokoda road for approximately a year.
- 6 Marta Rohatynskij, an anthropologist who worked at Asapa between May 1973 and February 1975 and in the Wawaga and Mawoma valleys, with a brief return in 1990, was told of 'mass burnings of ritual paraphernalia' at the instigation of 'indigenous catechists' (Marta Rohatynskij, 'Culture, secrets and Ömie history: A consideration of the politics of cultural identity', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1997, p. 445). She argues that the [Asapa] Ömie 'literally gave themselves up to another configuration of power in the control of their lives' (1997, p. 451) and describes their

millenarianism in the approach to Independence. She did not work in the villages above Asapa, and there is no ethnographic record for the *nioge* villages. The art of *nioge* was not being practised at Asapa or in the Wawaga and Mawoma valleys by 1973, and she makes no mention of its practice in the high villages.

- 7 Authorised by Lila Gama, this story was told by Rex Warimo and translated by Michael Naumo.
- 8 Exactly what is meant by 'spirit' is unclear. In our early discussions with Ömie informants, *kiné'i* was translated as 'spirit' and referred to the movement and transformation of an inner force within and between people, and also mountains, rivers, animals, plants, trees, ancestors and so on. However, more recent translations of *kiné'i* have been given as 'bush spirits'. It may be that we were entering realms of knowledge that are not for outsiders.
- 9 This is the dominant practice; there are examples of *nioge* without framing or with partial framing. Asked why this is, the answer of 'wisdom', *uehore*, is given.
- 10 This varies from other barkcloth practices. In Maisin, for example, the women create the design in advance, sometimes testing it in the sand before applying it to the cloth (Anna-Karina Hermkens, 'Stretching the cloth: Hybrid meanings, styles, and gender structures in Maisin barkcloth', *Journal of Pacific Arts*, new series vols 3–5, 2007, p. 106).
- 11 In Maisin, the red paint is given greater significance, being applied last, under strict conditions, to 'complete' the design (Hermkens, p. 108).
- 12 Translated as 'chief', *duvahe* is not a hereditary position. For each clan there are at least two men and two women as *duvahe*. The roles of the *duvahe* are regarded as complementary, both between genders and between *duvahe* of the same sex. The difference between the same-sex *duvahe* is translated as 'chief' (of whom there is one) and 'assistant chief'. The assistant chiefs are the 'investigating' or 'researching' *duvahe*, privy to problems and disputes, and instrumental in discussions, negotiations and the ways in which solutions are incorporated into the ongoing life of the clan. The 'talking chief' has the responsibility of making public announcements when decisions have been made and negotiations concluded. It is this chief who speaks on behalf of the clan.
- The gendered spheres of *duvahe* authority are distinct. Each teaches 'custom for good living', the 'father' *ama'e duvahe* giving advice and instruction to the men and boys, and settling disputes that involve them. The 'mother' *magonahe duvahe* do the same for the women and girls. Both teach Ömie history, cosmology and law, *jögore*. The 'father' *ama'e duvahe* have responsibility for weaving armllets and waistbands, for carving kundu drums, for clearing the bush for gardens, for making traps and hunting, and for bride price ceremonies and funerals. The 'mother' *magonahe duvahe* are responsible for planting and tending the gardens, for cooking, for rituals and practices surrounding birth, and for making string bags, or *bilums*. Most importantly, they are the custodians and artists of *nioge*. The 'paramount chiefs' – one *ama'e duvahoho* for the men, and one *magonahe duvahoho* for the women – are chosen by the consensus of the other *duvahe* as the one among them with the greatest *uehore*.
- 13 According to Rohatynskyj, female initiation began with the individual seclusion of girls on menarche. It then became a group seclusion as with the boys, taking place not underground but in a house outside the village. This practice has ceased in Asapa (Marta Rohatynskyj, 'The larger context of Ömie sex affiliation', *Man*, vol. 25, 1990, p. 430).
- 14 This is a perplexing issue, for it seems to contradict the 'traditional copyright' on clan designs and emblems that are widespread across Papua New Guinea. Harry Beran – whose 'A preliminary typology of the art and artefacts of

Oro Province, Papua New Guinea' (with Edward Aguirre), seen in draft, has been helpful in the preparation of this essay – points out that such lack of restriction goes against the protocols commonly found in other barkcloth practices and production centres in Oro province (Personal correspondence with David Baker & Harry Beran, July 2009). See also Hermkens, who records the serious repercussions that can follow a breach of clan restrictions in Maisin. See also Wendy Choulai, who discusses the implications of 'traditional copyright' for contemporary non-clan based Papua New Guinean textile and fibre arts (Wendy Choulai & Jacqueliyn Lewis-Harris, 'Women and the fibre arts of Papua New Guinea', in Barry Craig, Bernie Kernot & Chris Anderson (eds), *Art and Performance in Oceania*, Crawford House Publishing, Bathurst, NSW, 1999).

Alban Sare's explanation for the Ömie lack of restriction on *nioge* motifs is that today's Ömie come from one originating clan. Part of the confusion may arise from the Tok Pisin use of 'clan', and that other forms of restriction apply. Rohatynskyj (1990) notes totemic affiliations that are restricted in complex ways. Observation of *nioge* since 2004 indicates that there is some specialisation of design among artists, although this is attributed to 'choice' rather than to 'clan'.

- 15 Rohatynskyj emphasises the plant emblem, or *anie*, which a child takes from its same-sex parent as a primary form of identification. This 'sex affiliation', unusual for Papua New Guinea, resulted, she shows, in 'an almost perfect parallelism' between men and women, their 'life cycles stages', rituals and influence (1990, p. 448). However, when Rohatynskyj returned to Asapa in 1990, fifteen years after her initial fieldwork, this sex affiliation with its associated system of identification had ceased; indeed, many informants denied that it had ever existed (1997, p. 441). By 1990, identification had moved to the *ma'i ma'i*, a complex set of land-based totems, 'restricted in usage and supernaturally charged', through which men controlled all access and rights to land. While women had never had a 'direct and personal' claim to land, and residence is patrilocal, their *anie* affiliation allowed them compensating and complementary arenas of strength and influence. By 1990, Rohatynskyj found that women had 'lost their claim to a distinctive power beyond the control of men' (1997, p. 443).

Rohatynskyj did not work in the upper villages where *nioge* continued to be produced throughout her association with Ömie from 1973 to 1990. From observation in 2004, and from discussion with visiting Ömie in Sydney, 2006, 2008 and 2009, it is clear that the parallelism of the *ama'e duvahe* and *magonahe duvahe* with their separate spheres of influence remains viable and continues undiminished. The custom of a woman taking her husband's name as a 'second' name has begun to replace the use of *anie* names for identification outside Ömie, though the 'new' system is not consistently used. While there is evidence of adaptation to outside mores, there is nothing to indicate that the power and strength of the women, especially the *magonahe duvane*, have diminished in ways Rohatynskyj describes for Asapa. On the contrary, the parallelism between *magonahe duvane* and *ama'e duvahe* is apparent in all *nioge* villages.

- 16 This view was shared by Rohatynskyj. Writing of the 'play of cultural self-presentation' in the festivals and performances of post-Independence Papua New Guinea from the perspective of Asapa, her opinion was this: 'The Ömie have never had the opportunity to assert the uniqueness of their identity in [such forums], nor, I suspect, will they ever be able to do so' (1997, p. 452).
- 17 The Ömie Culture Group became Omie Nemiss Inc. in 2004, which now manages the sale of the art.
- 18 Rohatynskyj left in 1975, with only a brief return in 1990; John Austing of the Summer Institute of Linguists left in 1977, after working at Asapa for a decade. The small plots of coffee planted at the end of colonial rule failed to become a source of wealth; prices collapsed, and the road through to the river promised by successive provincial governments never eventuated.

The trade store was raided by *raskols*, and the airstrip at Asapa, which opened in 1963 and was upgraded in 1974, closed in 2003. 'The eagerly awaited *maja i'e*, the new day signified by independence, has become *maja sisé*, a bad day', Rohatynskyj wrote (1990, p. 447).

19 Rohatynskyj, 1990, p. 443.