

REFLECTIONS ON THE LIFE OF TOBERN MONBERG

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On January 8, 2007, professor, dr. phil. Torben Monberg passed away, 77 years old. This is a great loss, because he was a remarkable person both as a scholar and as a human being. For more than 40 years, he was a devoted scholar of Polynesian languages and cultures. Already, as a student had he studied the Maori and Tahitian languages. In 1952, when one of his teachers, professor Birket-Smith, returned from the Galathea Deep-Sea Expedition around the World, where he had visited Rennell, Torben Monberg was advised by him to visit the two Polynesian Outliers, Rennell and Bellona of the Solomon Islands. On these islands, he would find people who were not only friendly and cooperative, but who still had an immense knowledge of the traditional Polynesian religion.

Torben Monberg accepted

the challenge with great enthusiasm. After his exam in 1958 at the University of Copenhagen, he went on his first scientific expedition to the Solomon Islands for six months, and returned already in 1962, as a member of the Danish Noona Dan expedition. In between, he spent one year at the University of Hawaii.

These journeys changed Torben Monberg's life completely, and he since returned to the islands many times.

His final visit to Bellona Island took place in 1998, when he invited his wife Hanne and his children, Pernille, Christine, and Anders, their spouses and Rolf Kuschel, to come with him. Torben Monberg had a great flair for languages, and with his previous training in Maori and Tahitian, he tried in 1958 only a few days after his arrival to conduct interviews in the Bellonese/Rennellese language.

The first two months he remained on Rennell and col-

lected data on their pre-Christian social organization. However, his main interests lied in the religious rituals but with most forgotten on Rennell, he moved his location to the neighbouring Bellona Island. Here he met Paul Sa'engeika, an outstanding informant on the religion and culture.

During the following decades, Paul Sa'engeika patiently explained and related to Torben Monberg the complex and intricate pre-Christian rituals. This became an arduous task, but with the combination of Paul Sa'engeika's patience, intelligence and educational skills, and Torben Monberg's linguistic brilliance, empathy and endurance, these efforts in combination crowned the achievement with success. As a result, Torben Monberg published his highly praised book *Bellona Island Beliefs and Rituals*, which was dedicated to Paul Sa'engeika. Before Torben Monberg published his book on religion, he had also published the book

From the Two Canoes together with the American linguist Samuel H. Elbert. A publication, that contained more than 250 narratives about the Bellonese/Rennellese migration, cultural heroes, ancestors' deeds, and the islands' Christianization in 1938.

The collected oral traditions from 30 different informants stirred up a great interest among the local population, because the narratives were in their own language and with an English translation. Although, he had shown and checked his manuscript with his informants, Monberg, when he returned to the island after the publication of *From the Two Canoes*, noticed that many people had different opinions about the published material.

To his chagrin, and with a wonderful sense of understatement, Torben Monberg noticed that the reception of their book was not entirely favourable. Some criticized him for having missed certain points, others wanted to add some other details.

Conscientious, Torben Monberg wrote down all the comments, which he later published in the article *Informants Fire Back*. Already here, we meet one of Torben Monberg's hallmarks: never to judge what is right or wrong, but always listen and learn from one's own lapses. For Torben Monberg it was paramount to let the Bellonese/Rennellese people know what he had written about them.

He never kept anything away from them, so that they could comment upon his work. Therefore, he always tried to publish as much material as possible in their native language. As his last project Torben Monberg started to make available on the internet (www.bellona.dk) published material from Bellona and Rennell Island. In order to prevent the Bellonese/Rennellese language from slipping into oblivion, Torben Monberg encouraged Samuel H. Elbert to write a dictionary.

For many years, the two researchers worked on this difficult project and finally, in 1975 and 1981 the two volumes of a *Dictionary of the Language of Rennell and Bellona* came out.

With his characteristic modesty and humbleness and despite his tremendous contributions to the dictionaries, Torben Monberg never wanted to appear as co-author with Samuel H. Elbert on these publications.

Torben Monberg admired the intellectual abilities of most of his Bellonese and Rennellese informants. Together, they would work for hours telling stories, discussing the use of a word in different contexts and share their life experiences with one other. In this way, Torben Monberg acquired an intimate knowledge of an ancient Polynesian culture and language, which he was very eager to preserve for the generations to come.

With his emphasis on the accurate record of the endangered knowledge, his meticulous translation into English, and his intellectual commitment, he set a standard for other anthropologists and linguists. One of his colleagues once wrote, "He was one of those rare people who remind one of what anthropology is supposed to be about."

The Bellonese and Rennellese people came to understand and appreciate the work of Torben Monberg. When he arrived on the islands, parents would often send their children to his hut so that he could explain parts of their past culture to them – parts that the parents themselves had already forgotten. Nobody went in vain; he always took the time to explain in detail what the young generation wanted to know.

Realizing, that the youngest generation at school did not learn any basic elements of their own language, he encouraged his wife Hanne to develop a small schoolbook called *Na Leta ma Napa o Mugaba ma Mungiki* ('The Alphabet and the Numbers of Rennell and Bellona'). Torben was always concerned about the education of the Bellonese, and whenever possible, he tried to help young Bellonese and Rennellese pursue their education.

In the traditional Polynesian society, distribution rather than on accumulation was of great importance. Sharing was also one of Torben Monberg's fundamental values.

More than anybody else, he

invited people to make use of his tremendous knowledge. No one ever went away empty handed, when asking for his advice. Likewise, he inspired several researchers from other fields than his own to go to Bellona and Rennell.

Gradually, a group of Bellona researchers – the Danish Bellona Club – gathered around him to discuss the complexities of the traditional culture. Several publications of high scientific value were published and today the islands of Bellona and Rennell are among the most researched societies in the world – thanks to Torben Monberg.

Almost fifty years have past since Torben Monberg planted his feet on Bellona for the first time. Since then, the Bellonese and Rennellese have realized the importance of Torben Monberg's work in saving the oral traditions from disappearing completely. Many are the names of honour bestowed on Torben, among them the name Haangaihenua, 'The Land-Feeder', in recognition and remembrance of his endless generosity to the people on the two islands. A few years ago, he was also awarded the title of 'honourable chief' (hakahua) of Bellona and given the sacred staff nga'akautu'uti as an emblem of his new title. Torben Monberg lived fully up to his honorific title, for he was not only respected among his principal informants, but also among all members of the society. When, in the traditional culture, an exceptional hakahua died, one could sometimes observe certain natural phenomena, which the Bellonese/Rennellese related to his demise. The evening sky could turn an overwhelming crimson colour, and if something like this happened, the Bellonese would speak of it as the power of the hakahua. At Torben Monberg's funeral the skies turned crimson – he was on his way to meet his lifelong friends from Bellona and Rennell. Hakamotu toku 'arigohana Torben – my expression of love for you, Torben.



Hon. Patrick Vahoe

The Minister for the Department of Communication, Aviation and Meteorology, the Hon. Patrick Vahoe (Jr), Permanent Secretary and Staff of the department Communication Aviation wish to congratulate the newly elected Malaita Premier Hon. Richard Na'amo, the Department of Communication, Aviation and Meteorology believe that your new Executive in partnership with Department of Communication will working together to achieve the Provincial plan to move the Province forward in the new millennium Congratulations and wish you all the success.