



NO 35

THE SHARK CALLERS OF NEW IRELAND

ON AN ISLAND IN PAPUA
NEW GUINEA, THERE
ARE PEOPLE WHO
CATCH SHARKS WITH
NO NETS, NO HOOKS OR
LINES, NO HARPOONS:
THEY ARE KNOWN AS
THE SHARK CALLERS.

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARSTEN STORMER

BEFORE BLAZE SOKA STEPS INTO HIS canoe, he asks the shark spirit for permission to set out on the ocean. It's five o'clock in the morning. The air hangs damp and heavy over the South Pacific. The ocean is calm and gloomy, stretched out like a leaden cloth. Mosquitoes are biting; there isn't a breath of wind. It smells of salt, wet coral and rotting wood. The mangroves are rustling, a new day will soon begin: hopefully it will be better than the last few. There's no getting away from it, this week has not been going well for Blaze Soka. He hasn't caught any sharks for days; last week he only caught two. No sharks means less to eat, no kudos, no status.

Blaze Soka's life is like the sea—the level of his fortune rises and falls, there are tides in his existence. He pushes his peaked cap to the back of his head and sticks a cigarette between his lips, rolling it from one corner of his mouth to the other. Then he sets off, paddling away, as black storm clouds gather over the horizon. Blaze Soka is a shark caller.

I am copying his every move, for I wish to learn more about shark callers, and how one goes about catching such a predator. So I shove my canoe into the sea, perform a balancing act on the narrow plank which serves as a seat, and all the time keep asking myself, what the heck did I come here for? To catch sharks—that, at least, is the idea; and to catch them by hand, with no nets, no hooks or lines, no harpoons. That is why I've landed myself here, in the anus of the world.

BUT LET ME START FROM THE BEGINNING. I am paddling off New Ireland, an island in the most eastern part of Papua New Guinea. Years ago I had read about the mysterious tradition of shark charming on this island: about men who go out to sea, entice sharks to come near by singing to them, then catch them by hand. I just had to go there, to the fishing villages of Kontu and Tembin in the wilds of New Ireland's west coast, one hundred kilometers—or five hours on the back of a jam-packed lorry—from the nearest civilization.

In the driver's cabin in front, a distraught couple from Dresden try to convince the jolt-drunk driver that it isn't a good idea to take a sharp bend on a dirt track at seventy kph. In the back little children are throwing up, men are getting drunk on home brewed spirits, and a fat woman with a luxuriant growth of facial hair is stroking my knee and asking if she can stay with me tonight. Her husband grins, claps me on the shoulder and offers me a bottle of brandy. We are traveling through the endless green of the jungle. Now and then the corrugated iron roof of a hut or mission house can be glimpsed.

The people of Kontu and Tembin live off the sea—and you can tell they do, just by looking at the villages: canoes and raffia mats drying in the sun, women cutting up fish, children charging around on the beach, board huts tipped aslant by the wind. They have no roads here, no running water; no electricity, no telephones, no doctors. Tembin does have a Catholic church, Kontu a Methodist one. The nearest school is an hour's walk away. At first sight these villages are just like many others on the coast of New Ireland. The people here are poor; they cultivate some cassava or taro, bananas and papayas, sweet potatoes and sugarcane. It's not a lot. But then, they own the sea—for they are the shark callers of New Ireland.

BLAZE IS NOT THE ONLY ONE. Dozens of boats are glid-

ing silently into the dawn, half naked paddlers in the stern, and with them the weapons of the shark caller: a rattle made of coconuts, to attract the shark; a kind of lasso, to catch the great fish; a cudgel of hardwood, to club it to death; and a spear, just in case. The men all know each other, they wave and exchange greetings. They are friends, acquaintances, relatives, all of them fishermen like him. Blaze Soka is 60 years old and has nine children, a handshake worthy of a dock worker, and feet as broad as paddles. His face is friendly though somewhat jaded. Like everyone here he has a dream, which is all about fame and honor. Blaze Soka would dearly love to become the most eminent shark caller on the island. However this title is still held by old Selam Karasimbe, 74, over in the neighbouring village of Kontu, a few hundred meters from Tembin. It bothers Blaze no end. The old man has caught over 150 sharks, people tell each other in whispers; every child knows his name. If Blaze is to win the title from him, he'll have to show the sharks who's boss—but for days now the sharks have been eluding capture.

We are paddling further and further out to sea, kilometer after kilometer, hour after hour, until the coast is just a narrow strip on the horizon. A shoal of tuna fish swims past, a flying fish lands in the boat. Blaze keeps stopping his canoe, holding his coconut rattle in the water, singing Melanesian songs about famous shark callers in the good old days, mumbling spells. Rattling, singing, rattling, singing, so it goes on all day long. The rattle simulates a shoal of tuna fish; that's how it's meant to attract the sharks. For added effect he dips a spear with a dead fish impaled on it into the water; but nothing happens. Time trickles away, with not a shark to be seen anywhere.

I WATCH, I stare at the sea and wonder whether this tiny canoe offers adequate protection from the fury of a shark. Just once, a dorsal fin breaks the surface and I almost fall out of the canoe with fright. It is starting to rain, the sea is becoming choppiest and waves are slopping into the boat. Time to turn back. Tension gives way to relief, and when at last I step back onto dry land I feel disappointed that no sharks have fallen for the rattle trick.



▲ Above: Fathers in Tembin and Kontu pass on their shark-fishing knowledge from generation to generation.
▼ Opposite page: The liver, heart, kidneys and tail of the shark go to the one who caught it.



BEFORE I was allowed to go out to sea with Blaze Soka to catch sharks, he had warned me about the salt water crocodiles. A few weeks back one of these critters was said to have devoured a pregnant woman. “Over there by the river. So be on your guard when you take a bath!” I attempted a smile, but it must have looked as contrived as a false beard. Then the shark caller led me to his “hausboi,” a bamboo hut for men only, in order to initiate me into the secrets of shark charming. He wasn't going to reveal everything, but basically it was quite simple, said Blaze, smiling so as to reveal teeth stained red with betelnut. I must refrain from sex for 24 hours. I thought of the bearded woman and nodded. On no account must I tread in dog poo or pig shit. Fasting was also a help, he told me. “Only if a man is pure will the shark show itself to him and let itself be caught.” But the most important thing of all was never to point at the shark if it circled round your boat. “Get it? Never point with your finger!” That would break the link between man and shark, and frighten the fish away in an instant. On my first night before boarding the boat I lay sleepless in the “hausboi,” tried not to think of sex, and prayed to Moro the shark god that I wouldn't be gobbled up the next day.

The people in New Ireland live in a time warp. Things have scarcely moved forwards, and the history of the island reads like a buccaneer story. In 1616 the Dutch seafarer Jacob Le Meire landed on New Ireland, the first European to do so, and brought back reports of the bizarre custom of shark charming. German colonialists and Moravian missionaries followed, their pious words lost in the mêlée of aboriginal society. Next came cannibals, head-hunters, adventurers, exploiters, pirates, the second World War, Japanese occupation, American liberation. Now the people are facing a new danger: a lack of sharks. For out there, off the coast, Thai, Japanese and Korean fleets are fishing the sea quite empty. They catch the sharks for their fins, which are worth a fortune in China. “More and more often we're finding dead sharks without their fins washed up on the beach,” explains Blaze. His mouth smiles as he says this, but his eyes are dead serious.

EVERY MAN IN TEMBIN AND KONTU IS a shark fisher. Fathers pass down their knowledge from one generation to the next. Even today every teenage boy constructs his own canoe, and only when he has caught his first shark is he considered to be a man. But many youths are not attracted to the lifestyle of their fathers. They want something more than to paddle out to sea every day; they dream of televisions and cars, lights and cash. Take for example 29-year-old Langan Daniel, commonly known as Junior. He is sitting with his mates Cosmas, 21, and Duma, 22, in a bamboo hut on the beach, and tossing his third bottle of brandy down the hatch. It's nine o'clock in the morning. Junior, a cheerful fellow with decaying teeth, lets life take its own course. For choice he

would now be watching Van Damme films, but in Tembin there are no television sets; there is no electricity either. He burps and sticks a betelnut into his mouth. Apparently he sometimes goes out to sea to fish, and sometimes even comes back with a shark. But now he finds the working life of his forefathers too strenuous, he says, trying to focus his eyes. “But tomorrow we're going to go out together, and then I'll catch you a shark!” he burbles, unscrewing the next bottle. Outside, a storm is raging.

The following morning there is Junior, leaning against his canoe, clutching his head in his hands, babbling nonsense sounds, hardly able to keep hold of his paddle. The sky is a dirty band on the horizon. Nevertheless we set out. Two hours later Junior is dozing in his canoe, when all of a sudden he gets up, totters, and throws his spear into the water. But there was nothing there. Shortly afterwards it starts to rain again. “Foul weather ... no sharks ... turn back ... again tomorrow ... okay?”

FOR FOUR DAYS I WENT OUT TO SEA with the shark callers. We would chew betelnuts, stare at the sea, rattle the coconuts,

sing, curse, drum on the paddle with our fingers—but no sharks appeared. Every now and then a tuna fish, a turtle, a parrot fish or a barracuda; that was it. I made use of the time to engage in conversation, asking the others whether they weren't at all scared, and got looks of blank incomprehension in return. When dealing with people who are ready to drag an enraged shark into their boat by its tail, it's wiser not to broach the topic of fear. The rest of the day we would sit silently on the beach at Tembin, smoking cigarettes. The name Tembin means “no people,” for according to legend the giant Bibilang used to live here, a cannibal who ate any people who came this way. Only after this eater of human flesh had been killed could Tembin be occupied for settlement.

No unnecessary excitement, that's the rule. In Tembin or Kontu there is no urgency about anything. Today is all that matters,

and tomorrow will be much the same as today.

While Blaze is paddling in search of prey, Junior is holding a bottle to his lips and Cosmas and Duma are chewing betelnut, fisherman Toleat Lankupa, 43, catches the first and only shark for days, out there on the sea. He blows his giant conch shell, and the long drawn out sound penetrates all the huts of Tembin and Kontu. Life is put on hold, people rush down to the beach and watch as the shark callers' boats come together to form a clump on the horizon, and slowly glide towards the shore like a huge raft. The wind carries the sound of Melanesian songs, first muted, then louder, until the boats come crunching ashore on the pebbly beach. The first to land is Toleat Lankupa. A two-meter long mako shark lies in the prow of his canoe. His mother puts her arm round her son and weeps with joy and pride, as if he had just swum across the Pacific. Men slap Toleat on the shoulder, children touch the dead shark with curiosity as old Daniel Soka begins to cut it up. The liver, heart, kidneys and tail go to the one who caught it, the rest is shared out among the inhabitants of Kontu. Blaze Soka alone is standing somewhat apart, observing the triumph of his competitor in silence. “Tomorrow I'll catch my own shark,” he says quietly. Then maybe he will will be a step nearer to his dream of being New Ireland's most celebrated shark caller.

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