

# THE ORATOR'S CHAIR

## by William H. Bennett

Oratory in American high School forensics is an honored event. But it is just a contest event. Gone are the days of Chautauqua and mass political gatherings, gone are the times when oratory was a skill that shaped our society and leadership. Sound bites, media, and "image" now control campaigns and public issue focus. Wars are not declared (or avoided) because of stirring speeches, instead "police actions" are taken after "consultation" behind closed doors.

But there are societies where oratory is still important. There are places where speech still determines the future of a clan, or a tribe, or maybe even an entire society. One of the last and strongest vestiges is in New Guinea. And the strongest image of this power is the "Orator's Chair".

Most of New Guinea is still tribal. There are over 830 different languages spoken in Papua New Guinea, over 25% of those known on the planet. Some single villages speak languages unknown to any other people.

But there are similarities between most villages, and one of the most common similarities is the role and power of the Orator's Chair.

Villages are oriented around extended family clans. Except for moral codes recently imposed by Christian missionaries (including sexual guilt and the wearing of clothes), the villages are extremely basic or primitive. Some are the closest place on Earth to true Stone Age societies.

In each village, life is strictly divided by sex. Women do most of the fishing and other tasks which keep day-to-day existence viable. The men live a more relaxed life. Male leadership of the clans and village is centered in the Haus Tambaran (see photo on facing page), the large building that holds the spirits and symbols of the non-Christian beliefs that still form a large part of New Guinea life. Only men may enter the Haus, a two story building that is the core of most crucial village activities.

In the lower level of each Haus Tambaran is the meeting area. A smoky fire is kept going to discourage mosquitoes. Slat board tables

double as seats for male socializing and for special meetings.

Close to the middle of the lower level is the Orator's Chair. In actuality "chair" is a bit of a misnomer. The shape is like a chair but nobody sits on it; instead the speaker stands beside it when he speaks. The chair itself is the spirit that holds the memories of the speeches given and the events that surrounded those speeches. These spirits are so revered and/or feared that outsiders are not allowed to photograph the chairs in most villages.

On the seat of the chair is usually found a collection of palm leaf stems. Each speaker holds the stems in his hand and, as he makes a point that he wants the other men to remember, he places a stem on the chair's seat.

Speeches are made only at pre-arranged meetings. The meeting may be called for the members of one clan, or it may involve all the clans in the village. Any important reason, social or political, is reason

### **Not everyone is allowed to speak ... Young men are expected to sit and listen.**

to call a meeting. Before the meeting word is spread by mouth that a meeting will be held. Then drummers sound out the signal for each person who is to attend to come to the Haus Tambaran. Each adult male in the village has a drum sound code name so it is easy for the drummers to call only the clan or men who are to attend.

Not everyone is allowed to speak at these meetings. Members of each clan and village are reluctant to discuss how the power to speak is awarded. It is highly likely that age and achievement are major determinants. Young men are expected to sit and listen. Nobody can interrupt a speaker. At its best the process is reminiscent of Wordsworth's notes in *The Prelude* "His words came feebly, from a feeble chest. But each in solemn order followed each. With something of a lofty utterance drest -- Choice words, and measured phrase

... A stately speech".

The subject of a speech is almost always pertinent to the reason the meeting was called. Meetings might be on planning a party (or "sing sing") to celebrate a peace treaty or wedding, it might be to discuss village business or construction activities. If the chair has the skin of a cuscus on its head when the men enter then the meeting is being held to discuss a declaration of war.

Or it might be for a plethora of other reasons. The Haus Tambaran meeting is a cornerstone of clan and village life.

These speakers do not have formal training. There are schools in a few of the larger villages, though most have not yet seen such an outside idea or influence. But these schools do not teach "speech" or "oratory".

Persuasive speaking is important in all societies. In developed nations its influence lies in smaller group and business settings. But in the few remaining undeveloped countries, in true indigenous cultures, the power of oratory is still a force to determine the fate of the people. As William Brigrance wrote in Vol. 1 of *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, "but final judgment is here based on effect instead of beauty, on influence instead of appeal to the imagination." And the symbol of it all is the Orator's Chair.

*(William H. Bennett is chairman of CDE and the CDE National Workshops. He is a collector of New Guinea artifacts and has traveled throughout Papua New Guinea, including the Middle Sepik River area.)*

*The factual material included in this article is derived primarily from three sources: visits to Kanganamen, Yentchan, and Reflections of Sepik (by Ron and Georgie McKie, Crawford House Press, Australia, 1993). Important translation and interview material was provided by James Kinjimali of the Snake Clan of Aibom Village.)*