

A sunset scene over a river. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a golden glow and reflecting on the water. A long, narrow boat is on the river, with several people silhouetted against the bright light. The sky is filled with soft, golden clouds. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

THE SUPREME SUKUNDIMI DECLARATION

BACKGROUND PAPER | MAY 2020

*The collective voice of the 28 Haus Tambarans of
the Sepik River, issue this Declaration under the
powers of the Supreme Sukundimi, the River God:
that the Frieda River Mine is banned*

GLOSSARY

<i>Garamut</i>	Ceremonial drum of the Sepik
<i>Haus Tambaran</i>	Traditional 'spirit house' or ancestral worship house of the Sepik, a powerful source of governance and culture
<i>Sukundimi</i>	One of the names of the River God of the Sepik
<i>Supreme Sukundimi</i>	The collective voice of the traditional clan leaders of the Haus Tambarans of the Sepik
<i>Tok Pisin</i>	An official language of Papua New Guinea. Most widely used language in Papua New Guinea



This paper has been prepared by the Save the Sepik campaign. The *Save the Sepik* campaign is a collaboration between Project Sepik, Jubilee Australia Research Centre and Aid/Watch Australia. www.savethesepik.org



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Glossary	
The <i>Supreme Sukundimi Declaration</i>	2
Summary	3
About the <i>Haus Tambaran</i>	4
Project Sepik and the Frieda River Mine Campaign	5
Why a Declaration by the <i>Haus Tambarans</i> ?	6
The <i>Haus Tambaran</i> Process	6
The Role of Women	8
Conclusion	9
References	9

Supreme Sukundimi Declaration

Proclaimed in the Haus Tambarans of the Sepik River

29 May 2020

In light of the current threats to the Sepik River as a result of proposed mining activities in the headwaters of the Frieda River by foreign corporations, aid agencies and the government, the people of the Sepik River affirm their rights to protecting their Sepik River system as a source of their sustenance and cultural heritage.

The Supreme Sukundimi is a coalition of Chiefs from selected Haus Tambarans along the great Sepik River. For many thousands of years, we have been part of this river system. The Sepik River has never abandoned us, nor did it hold back from us.

We, the Supreme Sukundimi, will do everything under our rights as citizens of Papua New Guinea to protect the Sepik River.

We, the collective voice of the Haus Tambaran of Sepik River, under the powers of the Supreme Sukundimi, the River God, assert to the following:

- We call for a total ban on the Frieda River Mine.
- We respect our Sepik River and call on our leaders to give it the same respect and uphold policies that protect it and promote our cultural heritage.
- We assert the value of our traditional economy, which promotes self-reliance amongst our people and communities, and we are opposed to actions and policies which encourage the dependency of our people on others, including the state.
- We are opposed to any extractive development that sees increased transportation on our river system.
- We are opposed to any mine tailings facility that could negatively impact the Sepik River.
- We oppose all foreign programs, bribes and inducements to bring about customary land registration in the Sepik region.

We acknowledge:

- The voices of our ancestors, our voices and that of our unborn children;
- The spirit of all plants and animals of the river, the lakes, the tributaries and streams;
- The strength of our knowledge about our way of life, the wisdom of our dreams and aspirations and we acknowledge our role as chosen Guardians of the River;
- That the Government has not carried out any independent research. Despite this, the Government, through members of Parliament representing the constituencies of the River people, has stated publicly that they want the mine to go ahead;
- That we have not been consulted by the Government and the company with objective and truthful information about the Mine;
- That reliable scientific knowledge confirms clearly that the proposed tailings dam to be built will collapse because of the morphology of the soil, and its geographical location along the Ring of Fire (Zone 1 and 2);
- That clearing and logging taking place is already causing destruction to the River;
- That the Environmental Impact Statement has not been read and fully understood by Papua New Guineans and the people of the Sepik River.
- Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) has not been adequately administered by the Government and the Company.

We thank the people of the River, the Sepik Region, Papua New Guinea and the World who stand firm with us to say 'No' to the Frieda River Mine.

We want to remind the owners of the Frieda Mine; the Government of Papua New Guinea; financial supporters of the mine and individual Papua New Guineans supporting the Mine that:

The Supreme Sukundimi declares that the River is the life of the Sepik and therefore it must be protected at all costs. It is our innate role to guard the River from exploitation and destruction by outsiders. Our future is in peril from this proposed mine and therefore, we have gathered together as Guardians of the River to stand firm as one. We have the ultimate support from our ancestors who live with us in many forms. We have called on all spirits to dwell with us and take up arms to protect our Sepik Way of Life.

The Supreme Sukundimi, through the Haus Tambarans, issues a specific warning to those who are a threat to the life of Sepik. This warning is declared to the following:

- The Government of East and West Sepik Province;
- Politicians of the Government of PNG;
- Leaders of regulatory and statutory authorities;
- Leaders of industry bodies who are proponents of the Frieda River Mine;
- Frieda River Limited and PanAust;
- Investors, silent donors and insurance companies; and
- All other organisations and individuals supporting the Frieda River Mine.

The Sepik River is not ours. We are only vessels of the Sepik Spirit that dwells to protect it. We will guard it with our lives.

The Supreme Sukundimi represents approximately 78,000 people across 28 Haus Tambarans from the following 25 villages along the Sepik River:

Swagap	Kanimabit	Bin	Palrimbe	Karau
Enginmangua	Angriman	Singrin	Yuaruman	Yanjan
Niaurange	Timbunke	Kopar	Mendam	Marianneberg
Kandingei	Tambunum	Watam	Kanganamun	Murik
Korogu	Kringjambin	Wang ngan	Moim	Kararau



HAUS TAMBARAN AT KARARAU VILLAGE

SUMMARY

The *Supreme Sukundimi Declaration* is a statement made by clan leaders of selected Haus Tambarans in 25 villages along more than 1,000 kilometres of the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea (PNG).

The proposed Frieda River mine, which would be situated on the Frieda River, a tributary of the Sepik River, would be the largest mine in PNG history, and among the largest in the world. PanAust, a Chinese company registered in Australia, is currently seeking an environmental permit and a mining license in order to construct and operate the mine.

The Declaration is a powerful call to Papua New Guinean leaders, the Provincial Members of Parliaments (MPs), the Provincial Administrations of East and West Sepik Provinces, and staff of relevant national authorities. The *Haus Tambarans* also call on the spirits of the ancestors of Sepiks and all

other spiritual forces of nature to stand up to declare the Frieda Mine is banned in the Sepik Region.

The *Haus Tambarans* call for a "total ban of the Frieda Mine". They have declared that the River is the life of the Sepik and therefore it must be protected at all cost.

The consensus of the 28 *Haus Tambarans* to the Declaration was collected in May 2019 and March 2020. The *Haus Tambarans* represent 25 villages and approximately 78,000 people, over a distance of more than 1,000 kilometres, from the villages of Swagap in Upper Sepik near the Frieda River to Kopar at the mouth of the Sepik River.

The *Supreme Sukundimi Declaration* provides added support to the existing 6,000 signatures opposing the mine which were collected from voting age population of villages from Iniok to Avatip of the Upper Sepik river area, in the Ambunti District, of East Sepik Province of PNG.



HAUS TAMBARAN IN TIMBUNKE VILLAGE

ABOUT THE HAUS TAMBARANS

Haus Tambaran is a Tok Pisin phrase that describes a type of building that houses the practices of traditional ancestral reverence and honour in the East Sepik region of PNG.

The *Haus Tambaran*, sometimes referred to as the 'spirit house', is an impressive structure with some reaching heights of 25 metres. Inside, carvings of masks, statues and various figures are kept with the purpose of being inhabited by the spirits. While each tribe will vary from the next, these intricate carvings usually serve the purpose of either fending off evil spirits or to help people with specific challenges, for example, warfare or to stop the rain. The spirits, through carvings also perform specific roles in important ceremonies or life stages.

The *Haus Tambaran* is usually located at the centre and highest point of the village. This central location serves as a focal point for the villages where the governance of the life of the village takes place. Not too long ago,

it was in the *Haus Tambarans* where men prepared for war. Today, *Haus Tambarans* are still the main centres for discussions, especially regarding land, resources and the socio-economic activities of the village.

The Sepiks believe that the spirits of their ancestors and the environment about them can be called into the *Haus Tambaran* and used for consultation on important matters. The *Haus Tambaran* process is to respect and consult the many spirits of the surrounding environment and ancestors who take on images, totems, marks, artefacts and other life forms present in the living world.

The most visually recognisable forms of *Haus Tambarans* are from the Maprik area in East Sepik province. The front entrance of the modern National Parliament building in Port Moresby is modelled on traditional *Haus Tambaran* architecture. The National Parliament building is also depicted on Papua New Guinea's 50 Kina note and influenced the building of the PNG High Commission building in Canberra, Australia.

PROJECT SEPIK AND THE FRIEDA RIVER MINE CAMPAIGN

The Sepik River is the longest river in PNG, at 1,126km long it winds in serpentine fashion like the Amazon. The Upper Sepik region has been tentatively listed for World Heritage Status.

Over the past few years, there has been an increase in awareness of the dangers of the mine and the legal processes of organising local resistance. The resistance from people along the Sepik River and others who are supporting them has grown from strength to strength.

Since 2016, Project Sepik, a non-governmental organisation based in the Sepik province, has been leading a local campaign to 'Ban the Frieda Mine'. Project Sepik's principal concerns are the impact that the mine will have on the river and the communities who live on it, and the lack of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) in the process of the company seeking mine approvals.

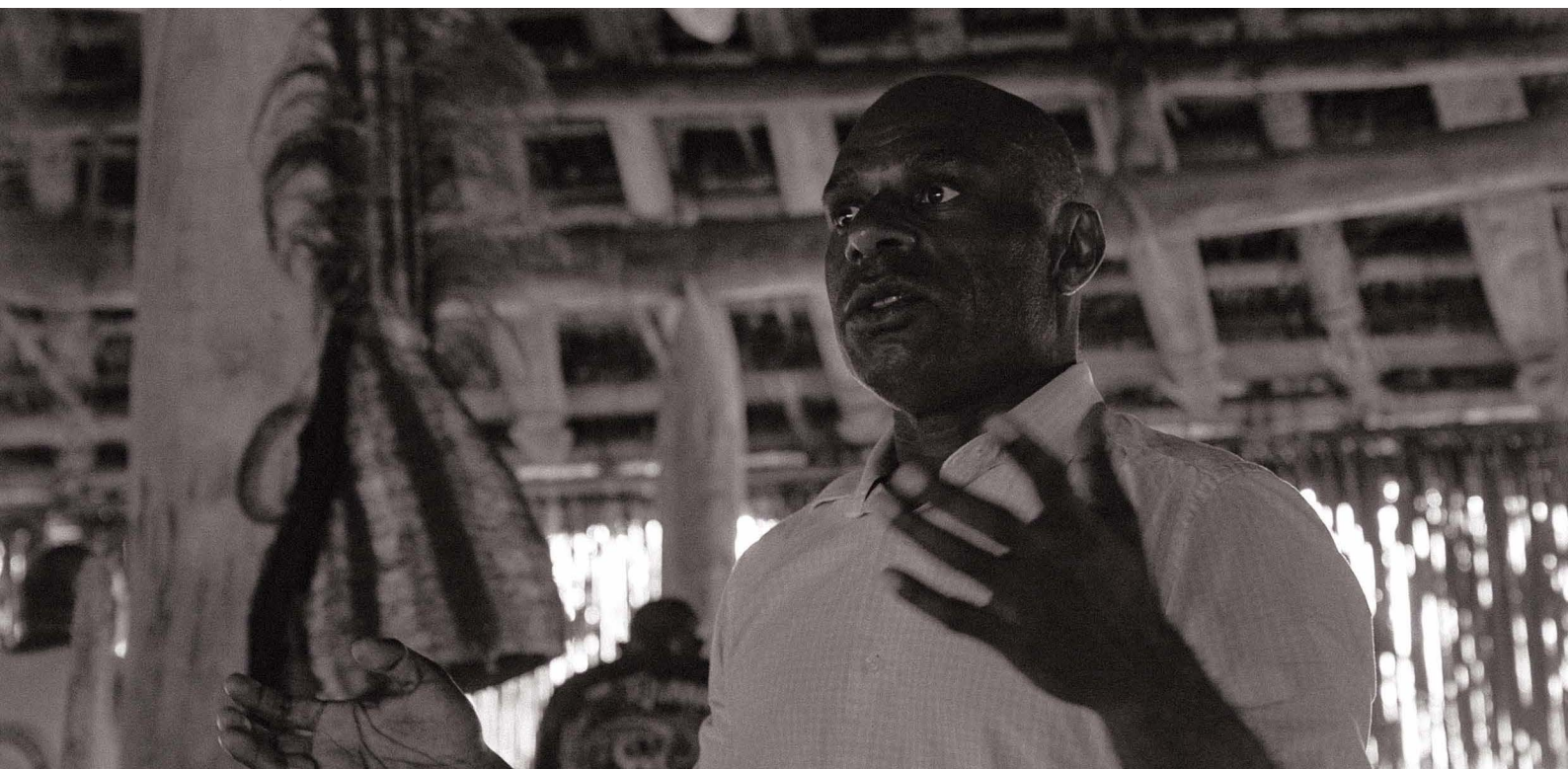
Project Sepik launched a public campaign 'Save the Sepik' along with partners Jubilee

Australia and AID/WATCH in March 2020 to promote these concerns as widely as possible.

Project Sepik, in collaboration with the Centre for Environmental Law and Community Rights (CELCOR), submitted expert reports as feedback on the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that was submitted by PanAust, on behalf of the people of Sepik region and all supporters of the campaign. Project Sepik called on the Government of PNG to reject the EIS for the following reasons:

- The EIS was defective in that it did not have critical information about the tailings dam;
- The EIS did not have settlement plans for the villages which were to be affected;
- The EIS lacked the dam break analysis, which we understand is about the probability and consequences of a dam break, including what is referred to as the 'dam break analysis' in the EIS. The proposed location of one of the world's largest tailings dams is also in a seismically active area.

EMMANUEL PENI, PROJECT SEPIK



WHY A DECLARATION BY THE HAUS TAMBARANS?

Project Sepik observed a consistent narrative in many commentaries on social media, especially on Facebook, and the engagements with the people in the villages. This phenomenon saw people turning to tactics such as magic spells, the calling of ancestors' spirits and those of the rivers, lakes, sky and land and elsewhere to be employed to stand up with the people to stop the mine.

Project Sepik felt a desire in the community to employ traditional cultural modes of expression as a way to articulate the obvious and growing resistance to the mine. Project Sepik visited the *Haus Tambarans* along the Sepik River with the understanding that the *Haus Tambarans* along the Sepik River and other parts of PNG continue to be the central and respected place of governance of all matters of collective communal significance concerning the life of the people in the villages. In several villages, the *Haus Tambaran* decision is final.

The main goal of the *Supreme Sukundimi Declaration* was to harness solidarity and unite voices in this campaign. This is a traditional cultural ritual and practice which is still used today to strengthen and build villages and communities.

The Westminster system of governance stipulates through the organic law of PNG that Counsellors are elected and provide leadership at village and ward levels. Across Melanesia, it is observed that there is a parallel system of leadership and governance. In the Sepik Region and other parts of PNG, the clan leaders have superiority and significance on matters of land, oceans, rivers and resources.

The leadership of the Sepik River, exemplified by the *Haus Tambaran*, is an

enduring system of customary governance, which bestows custodianship on all matters of river life.

The success of applying the *Haus Tambaran* process to this issue shows the power and enduring importance of this ongoing system of leadership and governance.

THE HAUS TAMBARAN PROCESS

Project Sepik first prepared a declaration that would be read out at all the *Haus Tambarans*. The team sent message to the villages a week ahead, then later on, a day before the arrival. Only men who have been traditionally initiated and young men in the process of being initiated were asked to meet at the *Haus Tambaran* of each village.

Food, betel nut, mustard, lime and local tobacco were offered to the *Haus Tambaran* Spirits as a request to make an entreaty. The clan leaders acknowledged and consented to the visit and its purpose. This agreement was confirmed by the exchange of betel nut and this was chewed by all in order to further confirm the agreement. All spirits and ancestors were called to the meeting.

Emmanuel from Project Sepik explained to the men who had gathered the significance of their participation and the signatures representing the main clans. He informed them about the purpose of the document. After all concerns were received, all questions were answered, and the declaration was read out in pidgin. There were pauses whenever translation was needed in the local dialect. Any objections on this document were called for and time given to respond to these objections. The men were then asked if what was read out reflected their wishes and needs. After that, the men organised themselves into their clans, identified the clan leaders and signed the declaration.

**'Em rot wea mipla sa pait long stopim
birua long ikam insait long ples. Waitman
kam na senisim kainkain samting na nau
planti stilman na outsait lain wok long
kam na bagarapim sindaun blong mipela'**

- YOUTH LEADER, YANJAN VILLAGE, PNG, 2019

TRANSLATION - "this is the way in which we fight to stop harm and destruction from entering our village. Outsiders came and changed everything and now we have thieves and outsiders coming into our villages and destroy our way of life"

GARAMUT IN HAUS TAMBARAN AT KARARAU VILLAGE

Everyone in the *Haus Tambaran* usually chewed additional betel nut at the end of this process, and the spirit of ancestors and the forests, lakes and rivers were called upon to take the issue further and be with the people of the river and Project Sepik. The Garamut was beaten to end everything in agreement. The team then took time to inform villagers on the situation of the country and listen to other issues of the people. This process took on average about 2 hours.

The assembly of the *Supreme Sukundimi Declaration* was carried out in two parts. In May 2019, the Project Sepik team visited 9 *Haus Tambarans*, from Swagap to Kanganamun villages along the Sepik River. The activity was later completed in March 2020, from Kararau to Murik village at the delta of the Sepik River. A total of 25 villages were visited. One of the villages decided to have two declarations because they felt that they had two powerful *Haus Tambarans*

and that both voices of the clans should be heard, and another village had three powerful *Haus Tambarans* that they felt should be heard. This means that altogether, 28 declarations were gathered.

The Project Sepik team identified the clans and tribal leaders to be the voice and the signatures representing their clans to support the campaign. This was a huge success, in that women, children and young people showed great support toward their male elders, clan leaders and the Project Sepik team in ensuring that all the spirits of the ancestors were called upon, all spirits of the rivers, lakes, the sky and land were summoned to guard the river and stand together with Project Sepik in spaces of debates and forums. The atmosphere at these villages during the time of meeting was eerie, paranormal and ghostlike.

After the conclusion of the decision, the call to the great spirits on the Garamut was sounded.

The *Haus Tambarans* visited were in the following 25 villages:

Swagap
Kamanimbit
Bin
Enginmangua
Angriman
Singrin
Niaurange
Timbunke
Kopar
Kandingei
Tambunum
Watam
Korogu
Kringjambin
Wang ngan
Palrimbe
Yuaruman
Mendam
Kanganamun
Moim
Karau
Yanjan
Marianneberg
Murik
Kararau

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Traditionally, women usually sit directly outside the *Haus Tambaran* while discussions take place, listening to the matters being discussed.

In Sepik villages, the women are the swambu, the first one to have knowledge, and the archives of information in a community, so the *Haus Tambaran* always pays respect to them. For example, women are usually consulted before a decision is made, and participate in the conclusion of a decision. The essential step in confirming a decision has been made is the exchange and chewing of betel nut. The betel nut is first shared among the women, and the women receive a larger number of betel nut.

The threat posed by the Frieda River Mine is viewed as analogous to warfare, brought by the Government of PNG and an outsider (in this case, a Chinese company). As this situation is analogous to warfare, it was considered very important that the women had greater participation.

In warfare, women's role usually involves preparing the spears, the bows and arrows. Women were also able to do spells, make magic, bring food, and pack items needed for the battle.

Due to the significant threat of the proposed mine, women had greater participation in the Declaration process. In each community, women would have had a conversation about the issue with their partners prior to the formal Declaration process occurring in the *Haus Tambaran*.

Women were also involved in the *Haus Tambaran* process, actively listening outside. When agreement was reached within the *Haus Tambaran*, the women would also give their feedback from outside during the ceremony, therefore also participating in decision making outside. In some villages, for example, Moim village, the women were insistent that their voices be heard so that they could participate in the debate.

CONCLUSION

The *Supreme Sukundimi Declaration* is a united affirmation held by the Traditional Clan Leaders of the Sepik River.

The Declaration is a significant legal instrument that is admissible in the Courts of PNG.

The Supreme Sukundimi are the true representatives of all other inhabitants of the Sepik River. They are the Guardians of the Land, the River and Lakes in the region.

The Supreme Sukundimi convene and impose authority on all matters of life in the area. They have sought knowledge and wisdom from women, youth, all spirits and ancestors. They have reflected on these, looked into themselves and acknowledge the meaning and purpose of life in Sepik.

The Supreme Sukundimi know that they are the Guardians of Life that is borrowed from the children of their children. They emphatically accept their call and duty to represent all generations – past, present and future - and all the spirits of the Sepik.

The Supreme Sukundimi unanimously declare that the Frieda Mine is banned in the Sepik Region in Papua New Guinea.

REFERENCES

- Hüsamettin İnaç and Feyzullah Ünal, 'The Construction of National Identity in Modern Times: Theoretical Perspective,' (2013) 3(11) International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, available at: http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_3_No_11_June_2013/24.pdf
- Karin Louis Hermes, 'Yumi Olgeta Papua Niugini: Cultural Identity formations and National Consciousness Among Urban-Educated Youth in Papua New Guinea. Thesis submitted to the Graduate Division of the University of Hawaii, December 2014, available at: <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/handle/10125/101225>.
- George Jell and Samine Jell-Bahlsen, 'From "Haus Tambaran" to Church: Continuity and Change in Contemporary Papua New Guinean Architecture,' (2005) 18(5) Visual Anthropology, available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08949460500288272?scroll-top&needAccess=true&journalCode=gvan20>
- Geoffrey White, Indigenous Governance in Melanesia (January 2007), available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328346851_INDIGENOUS_GOVERNANCE_IN_MELANESIA
- Ciaran O'Faircheallaigh, Anthony Regan, Dennis Kikira and Simon Kenema, 'Small-scale mining in Bougainville: Impacts and policy responses', Interim report on research findings (May 2016) available at: <http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/4173/small-scale-mining-bougainville-impacts-and-policy-responses>
- Eric Silverman, 'Totemism, tourism, and trucks. The changing meanings of paint and colors in a Sepik River society,' (2018) 146(1) Journal de la Société des océanistes 151-163, available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326628475_Totemism_tourism_and_trucks_The_changing_meanings_of_paint_and_colors_in_a_Sepik_River_society
- 'State, Society and Governance in Melanesia,' DevPolicy, available at: <https://devpolicy.org/state-society-and-governance-in-melanesia20110502/>
- Gudmundur Fridriksson, 'Experience the Spirit of Haus Tambaran,' 28 July 2016, available at: <http://www.gudmundurfridrikssonblog.com/haus-tambaran/>
- 'Welcome To The Spirit House! Kanganaman Village, Middle Sepik, Papua New Guinea,' Ursula's Weekly Wanders, 14 June 2018, available at: <https://www.ursulasweeklywanders.com/travel/welcome-to-the-spirit-house-kanganaman-village-middle-sepik-papua-new-guinea/>
- Oceanic Arts Australia, 'Cult House Finial Sepik River Area East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea,' available at <https://www.oceanicartsaustralia.com/art-for-sale/p-67-cult-house-finial-middle-sepik-river/>



www.savethesepik.org