



Fig. 2: Making dance masks in Koimumu (1997).

and decline presuppose an older essentialist understanding of tradition and culture, it is not my purpose here to check such ideas, for example, by comparing present-day statements, actions, and feelings with Valentine's material. For me, rather, present-day beliefs and practices are particularly interesting with respect to the question whether, and to what extent, they provide a key to the significance of the *valuku* for indigenous constructions of *kastom*. The complaint about the loss of traditional culture in general and the *valuku* in particular is here taken as an attempt to strengthen what, in an emic perspective, is being lost or to recreate what has been lost.

III

When I returned to the northeast coast of West New Britain, people not only remembered Otto Puli's proposal, they also turned it into reality. Thus from June to August 1997 in Koimumu, Vavua, Makasili, and Kerapi, I took part in expeditions called *kuruloto* to collect the wood, leaves,

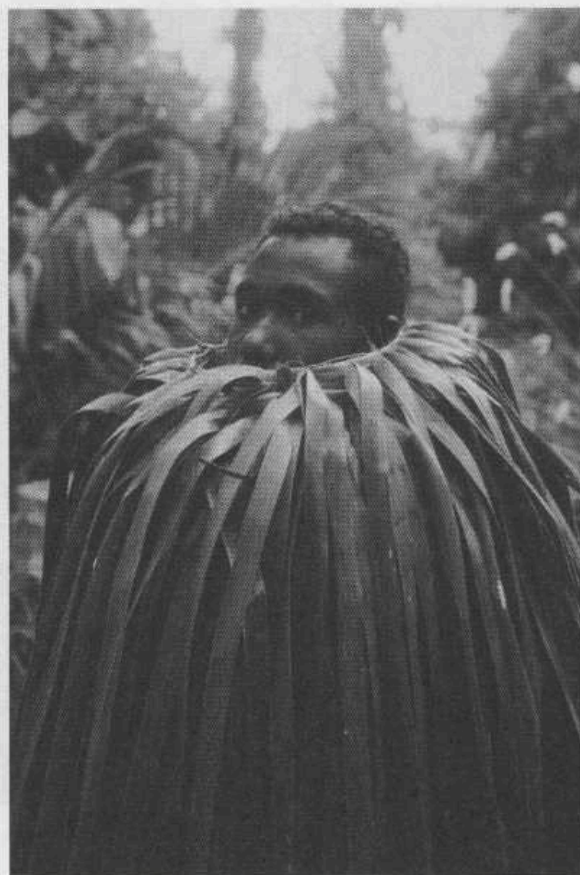


Fig. 3: Before putting the mask, Vavua (1997).

and pieces of bark needed to make masks. The manufacture of masks, which sometimes stretched over several days, then ensued at places on the beach or in the bush called *lomaloma*, which were protected from the eyes of the curious (Fig. 2).

Here the participating men joined wooden or bamboo struts to the different frames and covered these with pieces of bark cloth, which were then painted. The bodies of the masked dancers were also concealed with bark or, more usually, palm-leaf coverings (Fig. 3, Fig. 4).

Starting from the place of manufacture, matters proceeded to the actual performance (*sibi*), which in many cases only led through part of the home village, but in others also through neighbouring villages. My desire to witness the *valuku* from the acquisition of the required materials up to the performance of the finished masks and thus, as it were, from beginning to end was expressly welcomed. Thus I was assured in Makasili that I would "really get everything" (TP: *kisim tru*), whereas Valentine had simply sat in his house, summoned the Big Men from different villages to him, and listened to their stories. Moreover,