

Entry

IT LOOKS SO GRAND from a thousand feet up, the forest glowing deep, green, and vast. The broccoli tops of the trees form an endless carpet, an emerald skin guarding worlds of life within. You look down to see two blue-brown ribbons of water etching the forest canopy. You follow them through the window of your tiny plane as they snake toward each other and merge in gentle delight. Below, in the nestled crook of these two rivers, you look closer, to where the green shifts from dark to bright, from old forest to new growth that is repeatedly cut down but always sprouting anew. Inside this lime-green patch, you see a score of white squares arranged neatly in two rows. Ten line up evenly on one side while their partners face them across a broad lawn, metal roofs glinting in the strong sun. You recall how these structures were built as homes by early Australian patrol officers, so colonial and rugged, trekking in across the swamps and rivers. Adjacent to the houses is the rectangle they laid out, flat and long, its grass kept short and trim. Your plane will swoop down on it now, the gilded spine of that book you have come so far to read. But its content is not what you thought it would be, not a text at all. As you descend, its meaning becomes the faces that line the airstrip, bright and eager as their skin is dark. They watch expectantly as you land. You open the door to a searing blast of heat and humanity. Welcome to the Nomad Station.

Introduction

In Search of Surprise

LIKE MOST ANTHROPOLOGISTS, I was unprepared for what I would find. In 1980, I had been married for just a few months when Eileen and I flew from Michigan across the Pacific. We were going to live for two years in a remote area of the rainforest north of Australia, in the small nation of Papua New Guinea. I was twenty-six years old and had never been west of Oregon. I had no idea what changes lay in store either for us or for the people we were going to live with.

Well into the twentieth century, the large and rugged tropical island of New Guinea harbored people who had had little contact with outsiders. In the area where we were going, initial contact between some groups and Westerners had not occurred until the 1960s. The 450 people whom we encountered had a name and a language that were not yet known to anthropologists. As individuals, the Gebusi (geh-BOO-see) were amazing—at turns regal, funny, infuriating, entrancing, romantic, violent, and immersed in a world of towering trees and foliage, heat and rain, and mosquitoes and illness. Their lives were as different from ours as they could be. Practices and beliefs that were practically lore in anthropology were alive and well: ritual dancers in eye-popping costumes, entranced spirit mediums, all-night songfests and divinations, rigid separation between men and women, and striking sexual practices. A mere shadow to us at first, the dark side of Gebusi lives also became real: death inquests, sorcery accusations, village fights, and wife beating. In the past, cannibalism had been common, and we later discovered that a woman from our village had been eaten a year and a half prior to our arrival. As I gradually realized, the killing of sorcery suspects had produced one of the highest rates of homicide in the cross-cultural record.

The challenge of living and working with the Gebusi turned our own lives into something of an extreme sport. But in the crucible of personal experience, the Gebusi became not only human to us but also, despite their tragic violence, wonderful people. With wit and passion, they lived rich and festive lives. Vibrant and friendly, they turned life's cruelest ironies into their best jokes and its biggest tensions into their most elaborate fantasies. Their humor, spirituality, deep togetherness, and

raw pragmatism made them, for the most part, great fun to be with. I have never felt more included in a social world. And what personalities! To lump them together as simply “Gebusi” is as bland as it would be to describe Oprah Winfrey, Brad Pitt, and Bart Simpson as simply “American.” The Gebusi were not simply “a society” or “a culture”; they were an incredible mix of unique individuals.

Anthropology is little if not the discovery of the human unexpected. I initially went to the Gebusi’s part of the rainforest to study political decision making. Armed with tape recorder and typewriter, I wanted to document how communications with spirits during all-night séances produced concrete results—the decision to mount a hunting expedition, conduct a ritual, fight an enemy, or accuse a sorcerer. But spirit séances more closely resembled a YouTube soundtrack than a political council. The spirit medium sang of spirit women who flew about seductively and teased men in the audience. The male listeners joked back while bantering loudly with one another. In the bargain, their own social relations were intensified, patched up, and cemented. That community results could actually emerge during the night-long séance seemed almost beside the point. And yet, the results were sometimes really important, including one spiritual pronouncement that ended up forcing some villagers to leave and form a new settlement. Sorcerers could be scapegoated and threatened with death; people could be accused or found innocent of crimes. Politics, friendship, and sidesplitting humor combined with sexual teasing, spirituality, and conflict in ways that made my head spin.

You might imagine the first time I tried to translate a Gebusi spirit séance from one of my tape recordings. I sat with male informants in all seriousness as the recorder played. At first, they were astonished to hear their own voices. But they quickly shifted from amazement to howling laughter. Then they attempted, image by laborious image, line by laborious line, to explain the humor that I had committed to tape. With no reliable interpreters, I was learning their language “monolingually.” As it turned out, the spiritual poetry of Gebusi séance songs bore as little relation to their normal speech as rock lyrics do to the sentences of an anthropology textbook. The Gebusi responded to my confusion by gleefully repeating the jokes that I had recorded. Although I was unable to turn nighttime humor into daytime clarity, I certainly gave the men a good laugh—and fueled my own uncertainty. Seeing our strange interaction, Eileen asked the women what was going on. She was told that many of the songs I was trying to write down were “no good” or “rotten.”

For the most part, Gebusi were not only jovial but considerate, quick to apologize, and adept at making the best of difficulties. I ended up liking most of them a lot. As I came to understand their rituals, beliefs, and customs, I strongly appreciated their culture. But I remained keenly aware of my own ethical and moral values, derived from elsewhere. What was I supposed to do with my sense of morality when it collided with theirs?

Much like my own dilemma, cultural anthropology has often been driven by competing desires. Anthropologists want to appreciatively understand the cultures they study. But they also feel compelled to confront the social difficulties and injustices they observe. In Western scholarship, the goal of appreciating other

cultures on their own terms was highlighted during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by European theorists such as Giambattista Vico and Johannes Herder. Broadly speaking, they argued that cultures should be viewed in the context of their own time and place. Later, the same principle was emphasized by the “founding father” of American anthropology, Franz Boas. Similarly, in recent decades, cultural anthropologists have been passionate to understand foreign peoples through the lens of their customs and beliefs. Why should Western ways of life be considered superior?

On the other hand, anthropologists are also mindful of problems and inequities in the societies they study. Some of these injustices have been fueled by the incursions of outsiders. During centuries of colonialism, for instance, Western powers have exploited or enslaved people from many regions, including North and South America, Oceania, most of Africa, and large parts of Asia. Such incursions have often subordinated or stigmatized large segments of indigenous populations on grounds of cultural or social difference, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or age.

But such injustices are not always linked to external forces. Among Gebusi, the domination of women and the scapegoating of sorcerers grate roughly against the splendor of Gebusi ritual performance, spirit belief, and communal festivity. These paradoxes cannot be explained away by the impact of colonialism or Western intrusion.

This fact underscores the challenge that anthropologists face as they focus on social problems and encounter suffering caused or abetted by local customs. It is often difficult for cultural anthropologists to reconcile the wonder of cultural diversity with the difficulties that may be caused by subjugation or violence in the heart of the societies they study. In this regard, ethnographers frequently see social and political life during fieldwork through the crosshairs of local varieties of ethnocentrism, sexism, racism, ageism, religious intolerance, or other forms of scapegoatism. In the process, anthropologists often become more self-aware of the ethnical standards that they themselves hold and that they project or risk projecting onto the people they study. This was the dilemma I faced when I first began my fieldwork.



Ultimately, the Gebusi presented surprises beyond the delightful “good company” of their social life and the violence of their sorcery beliefs and gender practices. It was only later, after returning from the field, that I realized how rare it was even in New Guinea for indigenous customs to flourish with so little inhibition. But my bigger surprises came when I returned to live and work with the Gebusi in 1998 and again in 2008. I suspected that many new influences had swept through the years between these visits. On each occasion, I readied myself to find these changes and to take them at face value. But how could I know what lay in store?

By 1998, my old community had, by choice, picked up and moved from the deep forest to the outskirts of the Nomad Station, which boasts an airstrip and a

government post. Previously isolated in their rainforest settlements, the Gebusi were now part of a multiethnic community in and around the station at Nomad, which includes more than a thousand persons speaking five different languages. In their new setting, my Gebusi friends were stalwart Christians worshipping at one of three local churches. Their children learned to read and write at the Nomad Community School for seven hours a day, five days a week. Gebusi men and boys organized their own rugby and soccer team, the “Gasumi Youths,” which played supervised matches against rival groups each weekend on the government ballfield. On Tuesdays and Fridays, Gebusi women lugged heavy net bags of food from the forest and from their gardens to the Nomad Station market in hopes of earning a few coins. New crops such as manioc, peanuts, and pineapples sprouted in their gardens. Sweet potatoes were now a starch staple, and tubers were also grown for sale at the market.

Gebusi entertainment had also changed. On Friday and Saturday nights, young people tried to find a “party,” “video night,” or “disco”; dancing to cassette tapes of rock music was now the rage. Spirit séances had been replaced by modern music sung to the accompaniment of guitars and ukuleles. When children drew pictures of what they wanted to be when they grew up, their pages filled with colorful portraits of pilots, policemen, soldiers, heavy-machine operators, nurses, teachers, rock singers, and Christians in heaven. Though traditional dances still represented a kind of history or folklore, indigenous rituals were rarely staged in the villages. Without spirit mediums, Gebusi had no effective way to communicate with their traditional spirits, and sorcery inquests following death had been replaced by Christian funerals. Violence against sorcery suspects was practically nonexistent. The Gebusi themselves said that they had exchanged their old spirits for new ones associated with a more developed way of life. In the process, however, they had become subordinate to outsiders who were in charge of activities and institutions associated with the Nomad Station.

By 2008, Gebusi had changed strikingly once again. Due to logistical problems and lack of funds, the Nomad airstrip had been shut down. Government officials had left, the school, health clinic, and sports leagues were shut down, and the market was desultory. With many of their avenues to becoming modern cut off, Gebusi cultivated a remarkable resurgence of many of their traditional cultures—while also taking a much stronger role in the activities of their Catholic church. In character and emotional tone, they seemed to feel much more in charge of the life of their society.

If Gebusi were uncommonly traditional in 1980–82, they then became surprisingly modern—and since, they have more fully combined traditional elements and modern ones on their own terms. Not all peoples change so quickly, nor do they necessarily cycle between periods of less and greater traditional identity.

My fortune has been to forge a deep and lasting connection with a remote people who maintained amazingly rich traditions, sought out and developed a locally modern way of life, and then found greater solace and meaning in some of their earlier customs. The experiences of Gebusi can’t, and don’t, reflect those of other peoples around the world. But they do illustrate how people develop and change their lives under different conditions. The process of becoming modern

while also retaining traditional identity is globally common but neither simple nor singular. Cultural change in the contemporary world is as diverse as the colors that refract through a prism. By seeing these refractions, we can understand how people in various regions share increasingly modern experiences but develop in unique traditional ways. Some peoples resist outside influences. Others blend old customs with new ones. Some agitate for their own autonomy while others accept national or international authority. Though these can be alternative processes, they are more commonly mixed within a single society. Sometimes they are combined in the motives and actions of single individuals. To study these developments is to engage an anthropology of cultural change and social transformation.

Given their distinctive path of tradition and change, the Gebusi provide an intriguing framework for viewing topics commonly covered in anthropology courses. These include the growing or gathering of food; the ways in which kinship organizes people into groups; patterns of social and economic exchange; features of leadership, politics, and dispute; religious beliefs and spiritual practices; issues of sex and gender; the construction of ethnicity and race; the impact of colonialism and nationalism; and, through it all, the dynamics of sociocultural change. The first part of this book portrays these developments among the Gebusi in 1980–82; the second part examines them in 1998, and the third part examines them in 2008. Rather than describing the Gebusi in general terms, I present them as individuals whose lives have unfolded along with my own over the course of twenty-eight years.

My purpose in writing this book has been both simpler and more difficult than providing a general account of Gebusi culture. Rather, my goal has been to let the Gebusi as people come alive to the reader, to portray their past and their present, and to connect the dramatic changes they have undergone with those in my career and in contemporary anthropology.

