

CHAPTER 3



A woman mourns the death of her husband. (PHOTO: Eileen Marie Knauff)

Lives of Death

IT IS HARD TO watch a baby die. Its scrawny body cries until its wails lose force and leave a ghostly little corpse. It was also hard on us that Gebusi men didn't seem to mind. During our first five weeks in the field, we saw first one baby die and then another. As the mother wailed with grief, her women-kin gathered in support. But the men continued to joke and smoke in the longhouse, and the boys played gaily in the village clearing. Only the baby's father stayed close by, and even this was with an air of detached waiting—until the small body could be summarily buried. Managing babies and managing death were both women's work; if women bore the day-to-day challenge and joy of caring for new life, they also bore the sting of its death. Along with Eileen, I visited the mother in each case to lend support. But both times I felt, as a man, that the most courteous thing I could do was to leave. As the second infant was dying, I talked with Owaya, its father. He said that the baby was dying “just because.” But then he wondered whether a woman from Wasobi might have sent sorcery to kill it. As I later found out, the Gebusi attributed all natural deaths to sorcery. But they really only investigated the deaths of adults and older children.

The Gebusi don't think of infants as fully human until they are about seven months old, when their first teeth emerge. Until then, a human spirit is not thought to be completely rooted in their bodies, and they aren't even given a name. Many infants only flirt with life; a third of them die during their first year. The community in general and men in particular seem to protect themselves from identifying too closely with so many young lives that end so quickly. But this distance is not shared by the mother, red-eyed and weeping, nor by her female kin. The father, for his part, seems awkwardly in the middle, experiencing neither the women's emotion nor the other men's distance. As for us, Eileen cried with the women and deeply felt their pain. I commiserated with her in private. But the men treated me jovially, as if nothing had happened. At heart, I was confused. It was my first real lesson in the contours and confinements of Gebusi emotion.

Just three weeks after the second infant died, a third death hit the village: Dugawe killed himself. Unlike the infant deaths, which were

taken as “normal,” this one shocked the community. No one could remember a man having killed himself. Although we didn’t foresee it at the time, Dugawe’s death drew us into a whirling cultural vortex. Events and experiences that we could hardly understand flew by; we struggled to piece them together. People we knew and liked suddenly did things we could not believe. In retracing this path—with its twists and turns, and my own confusions—I came to know much about the Gebusi, about the culture of life and death, and about the challenges of anthropological understanding.

At first, I didn’t believe Yuway and Silap (Boyl’s husband) when they came to tell me the news; they seemed so matter of fact. But within minutes, we rushed off to the forest so they could retrieve Dugawe’s body. When we arrived, the dead man’s wife and two other women were weeping by the corpse. Silap brushed them aside and wailed loudly by the body. Dugawe had been Silap’s classificatory “brother-in-law” (*gol*) and “initiation-mate” (*sam*). Gebusi settlements coalesce by bringing men—and women—together from different family lines. Relations within the village reflect a rich and tangled web of kinship and friendship based on a wide range of family, marital, and friendly but nonkin connections. Silap and Dugawe had not been members of the same male line, but they had long lived in the same village, had become friends, had been initiated together, and were distantly related through intermarriage.

After Silap finished wailing, the women came back to resume their crying. They called to Dugawe and told him how sorry they were about his death and how much they wanted him back. Their raw emotion was thought to soothe Dugawe’s lingering soul and ease its gradual passage to the land of the dead. Meanwhile, Silap smoked tobacco with Yuway and waited until other men from Yibihilu arrived. None of them seemed particularly upset as they discussed how to take Dugawe’s body back to the village. Wondering why he had killed himself, I went with others to inspect his body. Dugawe had been a strong, handsome man, but now his face was pale and slack, already beginning to swell in the tropical heat. I looked for signs of foul play. Perhaps his death was a murder disguised as a suicide. But the only sign of struggle was a mark on the front of his faded T-shirt. Something had poked and scratched the fabric for a couple of inches, but the shirt was not punctured, and nothing had pierced Dugawe’s skin. To the men, however, the tiny scratch revealed a larger canvas of anger and shame. As we later found out, Dugawe had fought with his wife, Sialim, before committing suicide. During the scuffle, she had held an arrow, thrust it toward him, and scratched his shirt. Their fight had been about a sexual affair that was generally acknowledged between Sialim and a young man, Sagawa. Publicly cuckolded, Dugawe had been furious; he had wanted to hunt and kill his wayward wife, her lover, or both of them. But Silap and others had discouraged him from doing this. Incensed but lacking other recourse, Dugawe had fought with his wife. But he was further shamed by her scratching his shirt, his prized possession. When she went off to fetch water, the men said, he had taken tubes of poison concocted for killing fish in the stream and, in a fit of rage, had drunk them all. Empty tubes with the smell of the potent toxin were found nearby. Dugawe had died a writhing death after

poisoning himself in anger against his wife. But he was so much bigger and stronger than she. Why was his anger so self-directed?

For the moment, all I could do was try to keep up with events as the men lashed Dugawe's body to a stretcher and marched it briskly through the forest back to Yibihilu. Eventually they stopped for a smoke and a rest. They joked about the upcoming feast and ribbed me good-naturedly about how I would look if I wore a traditional Gebusi male skirt of "ass grass" for the occasion. Though we had outpaced the women, their wailing could now be heard. The men hurried to reshoulder the corpse, but the women were already arriving, including Sialim. By chance, two more women came through the forest from another direction and converged on us at the same moment. They were fictive "mothers" of Dugawe from an adjacent community who had come to view his body. Upon seeing his corpse, and also his wayward wife, they virtually exploded. Screaming, the two of them tore straight into Sialim. She turned to avoid them, but the lead woman walloped her on the back with a steel ax she was wielding, blunt side forward. She followed this with another heavy blow. Then she turned and threw herself on Dugawe's corpse, pawing and crying in great screaming sobs, as if her emotion could wake it up. Simultaneously, the second woman resumed the first one's attack, screeching at full pitch and poking and shoving Sialim with a pointed stick as if she were going to drive it right through her. Two men rushed in to hold her back while others wrestled Dugawe's closest "mother" away from his corpse. The remainder abruptly picked up the body and raced off with it down the trail. Yuway, Silap, and I followed in close pursuit while the women trailed behind.

When we finally arrived at Yibihilu, Dugawe's body was laid in state in his family house, a scant twenty-five yards from our own. A crowd of women screeched and wailed while others arrived in short order. Many of them pummeled and berated Sialim, who hunched and whimpered but could not run away without neglecting her duty to mourn her dead husband. Our neighbor, Owaya, came up and waved a firebrand in Sialim's face. He let forth with a withering diatribe, which he punctuated with shouts of "*Si-nay!*" As I later learned, this translates roughly as "Burn! Cook! We'll eat!" This was what the Gebusi traditionally did to persons executed as sorcerers. Owaya whacked Sialim with his burning stick and then shoved it into the net bag on her back. She gasped, whimpered, and shuffled several feet farther away.

Inside the house, we gathered with the women who had come to weep over the corpse. Like Dugawe's "mother," some of them flailed hysterically when they first arrived. After a few minutes, the atmosphere slowly calmed. But then a man painted in black suddenly lunged through the doorway. With a loud cry, he drew an arrow back in his bow and then released the bowstring with a loud snap. In my shock, I didn't realize at first that he still held the arrow with the other fingers of his shooting hand—he had snapped his bowstring without releasing the arrow. Yelling, he repeated his action and plucked his bow indiscriminately at all of us sitting in the house. In response, Silap rushed in and interposed himself. With calming words, outstretched hands, and a wan smile, he gradually placated the intruder. As Silap and the attacker moved outside, I went with them and saw

that more than twenty warriors from other settlements were now massing. Almost as quickly, however, the men of Yibihilu were also gathering, not as antagonists, but as peacemakers. Armed with stoked tobacco pipes, they snapped fingers and shared smokes with each of the visitors in turn. Their action seemed to melt the tension like a cooling rain in the heat of the day. In short order, the visitors retired to the longhouse and were provided resting mats; they began to relax. Those of us from Yibihilu scurried to find and cook bananas to give by way of hospitality.

An hour or so later, a government constable arrived from the Nomad Station. Silap and some other men had taken the rare step of sending word to him about Dugawe's death—and inviting him to come to Yibihilu to investigate. Why? Apparently they were worried that the authorities might receive a different tale of Dugawe's death from some other source. After a long conversation through several interpreters, the constable finally wrote a brief entry in his police book: "Reason of death: Suicide caused by his wife fooling around." Though the constable's inquiry was completed, discussion about Sialim continued. Given the anger against her, it was decided that she should go back with the Nomad officer straightaway and stay temporarily at the Nomad Station for her own protection. The main events of the day were then over, but the piercing wails of women continued through the night.

By the following morning, Dugawe's body had bloated grotesquely. His swollen limbs oozed corpse fluid, and his skin peeled to expose putrefying red and yellow-green flesh. His belly and even his genitals had swelled with the gases of decomposition. I will never forget the stench, which burned up my nose, down my throat, and into my brain. Equally powerful was the response of Dugawe's female relatives. With unearthly sobs, they draped themselves physically over the corpse, lovingly massaged its slime, and peeled its skin. Then they rubbed their own arms and legs with the ooze of the body. Corpse fluid on one's skin is a tangible sign of grief, of physical as well as emotional connection with the deceased—making one's body akin to the corpse. Seeing this, it was said, Dugawe's departing soul would know how much they cared for him. Just a little, this would ease his pain and anger at having died.

The men of Yibihilu dug Dugawe's grave by his family house. Then the women rolled Dugawe's corpse onto Silap's back. As he strained and stood up with the weight of the body, its arms flung out dramatically to both sides. The women shrieked. Men rushed to steady the corpse and help Silap place it in the grave. Dugawe's traditional possessions—his bamboo pipe, bow and arrows, and so on—were quickly arranged in the grave by his female kin. Bark was placed over the corpse, and then the hole was filled in. Just as directly, the men retired to the longhouse to rest. The closest female relatives flung themselves on the mounded grave and wailed.

Prior to fieldwork, the only dead body I had seen was the sedate face of a friend of my parents during an open-casket funeral. Now I was shocked and repulsed by the events surrounding Dugawe's death. It seemed hideous that his corpse was allowed to decay and that our women friends wallowed in its stench before it was buried. But I also began to realize that this raw transformation—of a human being into a decomposing natural object—presented an emotionally and physically honest view of death. The reality of Dugawe's disfigurement showed

me the fact of his death like nothing else could do. His demise was not hidden, not made pretty, not covered up in pallid attempts to “spare grief.” Were Gebusi customs improper? Or, was it my own culture’s attempt to gloss over and downplay the physical reality of death that was off kilter?

I ultimately found that the extreme behavior of Gebusi women with corpses puzzled me less than the tamer conduct of the men. As they went to the longhouse to smoke, joke, and drink bowls of local root intoxicant, the men acted as if nothing was wrong. When I heard that a visiting spirit medium would hold a public séance, I thought he would commune with Dugawe’s spirit and inquire about his death. Instead, the séance was a songfest of ribald entertainment. When I asked why, the men said that Dugawe’s spirit was as yet too angry to talk about his death. In the meantime, since they were all together, they thought it best to relax and have a good time.

It was all rather bewildering. Which details surrounding Dugawe’s death were relevant, and which were superficial? How did Gebusi funeral practices and sorcery beliefs influence their social relationships and their emotional lives? I tried to connect the dots by writing descriptions and reflections. But even as the picture stayed fuzzy, additional questions arose. What did Dugawe’s sexual and marital problems with Sialim reveal about Gebusi gender relations? And, to what extent were the circumstances of Dugawe’s death exceptional or anomalous in Gebusi society? As I struggled for answers, further events both sharpened my questions and posed new ones. Gradually, the events following Dugawe’s death unfolded into a sorcery investigation—an inquiry into who had “killed” him. Its twists and turns helped me answer the questions I had, but not in the ways I expected. In retrospect, I realized that this trail of discovery revealed much about the practice of ethnography as well as about the customs and beliefs of the Gebusi.



Although the big funeral feast for Dugawe took place just two days after his burial, it ended up being a sideshow to events that occurred weeks later. By the time the sorcery investigation resumed, my opinion of Sialim had changed. At first, I thought she had acted irresponsibly. She had carried on a sexual affair with a young man named Sagawa, and she had apparently shamed her husband into killing himself. But additional facts painted a different picture. As Eileen found out from the women, Dugawe had years earlier killed not only his first wife but also his own small son. These murders had been so awful that villagers had informed the police, and Dugawe had served a five-year prison term outside the Nomad Station area. To our knowledge, he was the only Gebusi to have been incarcerated in this way.

His prison term over, Dugawe had returned to the area and married Sialim, who had recently been widowed by the death of Dugawe’s “brother.” Gebusi widows often end up marrying a male family relative of their dead husband. Anthropologists term this “marriage by levirate.” Such unions have the effect of keeping the widow’s labor and children within the family line of her original

husband. Knowing Dugawe's history, however, Sialim did not want to marry him. As newlyweds, they fought, and he frequently beat her. On one occasion, she finally sought recourse from the patrol officers at the Nomad Station. Given her bruises and Dugawe's violent past, the police arrested him again and held him at the local jail. It was while he was in jail that Sialim took up with Sagawa, her young lover. Perhaps she hoped that her relationship with Sagawa would become a *de facto* marriage before Dugawe was released from jail. But Dugawe was discharged earlier than expected. Enraged, he wanted to kill Sialim and her partner. But Silap and the other men of Yibihilu persuaded him that he would then receive an even longer prison term than the one he had already endured. In the midst of this tense situation, Dugawe took up again with Sialim. But after their fight in the forest, he committed suicide.

From a Western feminist perspective, it might be argued that Sialim could hardly be blamed. She had been saddled with an abusive marriage and a murderous spouse. She had tried to find refuge, sought solace with another partner, and then stood up for herself when Dugawe fought with her. What villagers took as a sign of travesty—her fighting with her husband and scratching his shirt with an arrow—could have been a desperate attempt at self-defense. However, Sialim was rebuked not only by the men of Yibihilu but especially by Dugawe's female kin. She had gone outside the community, gotten her husband jailed, and cheated on him. To make matters worse, her romantic affair was with a young man who had not yet been initiated.

What was I to think? I could criticize Gebusi values as condoning violent sexism. But Sialim had violated standards of marital fidelity that were deeply held by the Gebusi. I felt stuck in the middle between these viewpoints. Most importantly, though, we were concerned for Sialim's safety, fearing she could be attacked or killed. Eileen asked the police to protect her, and this dovetailed with the men's desires to forestall any more agitation. Fortunately for everyone, she was taken off to Nomad.



As I slowly came to realize, Gebusi inquests into and retributions for sorcery typically did not take place until well after the burial of the person who had died. The main exception was if the corpse itself “signaled” while lying in state that a given sorcery suspect had “killed” him or her. A sorcery suspect might be enjoined to vehemently shake the rotting corpse while wailing his or her grief. If at that unlucky moment the corpse gave a “sign”—spilling cadaveric fluid, “moaning” due to gases in its lungs, or bulging its eyes out or even opening or bursting them as a result of gas pressure from decomposition within the braincase—then the suspect could be axed to death on the spot. If the “verdict” of the corpse was clear, there would be little protest over the killing from even the closest relatives of the person executed. But this had not happened while Dugawe's corpse was starting to decompose. So the men of Yibihilu had soothed the anger of Dugawe's visiting relatives by extending hospitality—snapping fingers, sharing tobacco, giving food, and holding a *séance*.

The villagers felt that further inquiry should not take place in the heat of the moment but should be conducted more objectively over a longer time, somewhat like a murder investigation in Western societies. For the Gebusi, however, the purpose of the inquest was to ferret out the sorcerers who had killed Dugawe through spiritual means. In their belief, all human deaths were caused by people—either through sorcery or through violence. Even a man who had fallen out of a coconut tree and broken his back had been killed by a sorcerer: because the man had successfully climbed many coconut trees in the past, a sorcerer must have made him lose his grip. Deaths from sickness were likewise attributed to sorcery—the sorcerer had caused the lethal illness. In the case of Dugawe’s death, the Gebusi took it as self-evident that sorcerers either had driven Dugawe crazy enough to kill himself or had killed him and then tampered with the evidence to make it look like suicide.

Five weeks after his funeral feast, the real investigation into Dugawe’s death began. In a nod to neutrality, the inquest séances were conducted by a spirit medium who had had little personal connection with Dugawe. But when these séances were inconclusive, further investigation was led by our clever friend Swamin, the main spirit medium of Yibihilu. By this time, I had discovered that Gebusi sorcery had two main types. In one type, called *bogay*, the sorcerer was believed to secretly tie up the feces or other bodily leavings of the victim, thus causing a long, painful illness. The sorcerer then “killed” the victim by burning the fecal matter or other leavings. Anthropologists sometimes call this “imitative magic”—magical use of supernatural powers based on the principle that “like produces like.” In the other variety of Gebusi sorcery, called *ogowili*, sorcerers were believed to take the form of magical warriors who attacked the victim in the forest, usually when he or she was alone. The sorcerer-warriors then killed the victim with arrows and clubs, ate out his or her insides, magically sewed him or her up, and finally cast a spell to give the person amnesia. Although the victim might amble uncertainly back to the village, he or she would die a sudden death shortly thereafter.

Bogay comes under the heading of what ethnographers call “parcel sorcery,” that is, sickness sent by manipulating a parcel of the victim’s leavings. By contrast, *ogowili* qualifies as “assault sorcery,” a cannibal attack by magical warriors. For the Gebusi, *bogay* explained the torment of a long, lethal illness, while *ogowili* explained deaths that were relatively quick and sudden, as well as those caused by accident—and suicide. In these cases, assault sorcerers were believed to force their victims to put themselves in precarious danger. One way or the other, Gebusi believed that all deaths from sickness, accident, or suicide were caused by sorcery. In reality, we found no evidence that Gebusi actually practiced either type of sorcery—and we found much evidence to the contrary. Assault sorcery—that is, the eating and then magical sewing up of a victim to disguise a lethal attack—is simply impossible from our point of view. Although parcel sorcery is attempted quite genuinely by some peoples in Melanesia and elsewhere, our investigations among Gebusi suggested consistently that their accusations of parcel sorcery were trumped-up charges against unfortunate suspects. But Gebusi continued to have unshakable belief in parcel sorcery. Gebusi men staunchly committed themselves to exposing *bogay* sorcerers and taking action against them, including within their own community.

In Dugawe's case, death was believed to be caused by assault sorcery (*ogowili*). Although the *ogowili* is thought to be a man who takes the form of a magical warrior, he may be manipulated to do this by a malicious woman. Possibly, then, Sialim could be found guilty of Dugawe's death if she had had sex with an *ogowili* and induced him to drive her husband crazy. For the Gebusi, this was plausible since Sialim was known to have had a sexual affair with Sagawa.

In his séances, however, Swamin's spirits suggested a different scenario. Rather than accuse Sialim, the spirits described how *ogowili* warriors had descended on Dugawe from a distant settlement while Sialim was away fetching water. Though the assault sorcerers had disguised the evidence and covered their tracks, Swamin's spirits assured the assembled men that signs of their attack could still be found in the forest near where Dugawe's death had occurred. Further, the *ogowili* might then be tracked back to their own settlement, where they could, at least in principle, be attacked in their human form to avenge the killing of Dugawe. To track assault sorcerers through the forest, however, the Gebusi needed spiritual help to guide them.

As Swamin's séance ended, at about five o'clock in the morning, the men of Yibihilu got ready to search for the assault sorcerers responsible for Dugawe's death. Uncertain what was going to happen next, I pulled on my boots and grabbed my flashlight in the predawn darkness. The men were carrying bows and arrows, and some had painted their faces black, like warriors. Eventually, we approached Abwiswimaym, the forest plot where Dugawe had drunk poison. The mood became tense as we anticipated the ghostly form of an assault sorcerer ahead. Quietly and anxiously, men sought cover, pointed their arrows, and advanced warily on their spectral enemy. I pinched my arm to remind myself that we were not likely to find an actual person but rather the evidence of a magical attack by spiritual warriors lurking nearby. But after a while, the area was declared safe.

Next, we searched upstream for the *buluf*—the magically transformed remains of Dugawe after his insides had ostensibly been eaten by sorcerers. With Swamin's spirits guiding us, we found an odd-looking stick that was said to be the "knife" that the sorcerers had used to cut Dugawe open. An indentation in the ground was the "footprint" of an *ogowili*. A discolored patch of dirt was Dugawe's "blood," which they said had poured out during the attack. As incredulous as I was of these associations, the Gebusi around me were convinced. But then again, the very power of assault sorcerers rests in their ability to disguise their attacks and make the results look almost normal. After searching a nearby stream for Dugawe's "skin" and "bones," we followed the water upstream in the general direction of a distant community. But Swamin's spirits then lost the trail of the assailants and could not find it again. Ultimately, then, we could not track the assault sorcerers to their homes or identify them by name. To the men, however, the investigation validated the information given by Swamin's spirits during his séance. Dugawe had been killed by an assault sorcerer from a distant village, but the identity of the person was impossible to determine and no further action could be feasibly taken.

Though I thought this would be the end of Dugawe's story, its final twists did not unfold for another seven months. During this time, Sialim spent more and more time with Swamin's household. Eventually, she willingly consented to

marry him—over the entreaties and objections of her young lover, Sagawa. Strong and robust for a middle-aged man, Swamin had been a widower. During our final year of fieldwork, he and Sialim seemed to be happily married.

Though this would have been a good Hollywood ending, it was not the one we ultimately came away with. It turned out that three years previously, Swamin had killed Sialim's own mother. The old woman, named Mokoyl, had been named as the parcel sorcerer responsible for the death of Swamin's first wife. Mokoyl had tried to prove her innocence by conducting a bird egg divination—cooking eggs that were placed inside a mound of damp and uncooked sago starch. Unfortunately, the eggs had been badly undercooked. When Mokoyl had given Swamin one of the eggs to eat—as she was expected to do as part of the divination—he had promptly vomited. This had been taken as a sign that Swamin's dead wife was clutching his throat, refusing Mokoyl's food, and confirming Mokoyl's guilt. A few weeks later (about a year before we arrived in New Guinea), Swamin had attacked Mokoyl while she was alone in the forest with Boyl (the woman who ended up being Eileen's best friend). As Boyl told Eileen, she herself had tried to run away when Swamin approached. But he had demanded that she stay as a witness, lest he chase her down as well. Petrified, Boyl had watched as Swamin extracted an ostensible confession from Mokoyl and then spilt her skull with his bush knife. He left her dead in the forest as Boyl ran off. Given the spiritual evidence that had seemed to confirm Mokoyl's guilt, most of the community agreed that Mokoyl was guilty and had deserved to die. Her body had been summarily buried in the forest. But villagers from an adjacent settlement, knowing that Mokoyl had been a robust older woman with ample flesh, had dug up her body and eaten parts of it before it decomposed. In so doing, they had also indicated their support for the killing. Government officers never found out about the incident.



If we add this last episode to the chain of events surrounding Dugawe's death, what conclusions can we draw? With the benefit of hindsight, reflection, and analysis, anthropologists are charged with making sense of diverse societies and cultures—and with their own. Experience becomes fieldwork, and fieldwork becomes ethnographic writing. But how does this transition occur? For me in the field, it was challenging. No Gebusi ever gave us a full narrative of Dugawe's death, its aftermath, and the events that preceded it. Rather, the story emerged from our observations over time, casual conversations, transcriptions of spirit séances, event calendars, and structured interviews with individual Gebusi concerning life histories, kinship, and mortality. Also important were oral accounts and cross-checking concerning events that predated our arrival, such as the killing of Dugawe's first wife and of Sialim's mother. This information was written up in daily entries and in reflections on what we thought was happening. Within a few days (while the information was still fresh), we typed these up as field notes and analyzed them in relation to other information we were gathering. Even with events that I witnessed and experienced myself, my awareness was often dim and partial at first—strong in

emotion but weak in understanding. An initial event like Dugawe's death, dramatic as it was, became but one end of a tangled web. It sucked me into a thicket of crisscrossed meanings and histories. Village life was a continuing stream of dramas that linked people together while exposing their differences. Even in the few weeks between Dugawe's burial and the inquest séances for his death, the villagers undertook spiritual investigations for seven other sicknesses, including my own, when I was stricken with my first serious bout of malaria. We found ourselves living in an intricate soap opera—truth more surprising than fiction. Lovers, killers, spouses, co-residents, friends, and relatives all played their parts in concocting a strong and sometimes toxic brew. No wonder that coming together in collective good company was so important to Gebusi—or that it was such an accomplishment!

What is “participant observation” in such a world? In the present case, I observed and, to some extent, participated in the retrieval of Dugawe's body, his funeral and burial, and the spirit séances and sorcery investigations that followed. However, I did not want to participate in any attack on a suspected sorcerer. Eileen helped facilitate Sialim's departure to a safer place when sentiments against her were highest. This said, we worried that more severe violence might occur. Later in our fieldwork, when our understanding was better, an older woman in the village was accused of being a parcel sorcerer. In this case, we were able to act like kin supporters and side with the woman's family when she was forced to test her innocence by cooking a divination sago. Fortunately, no violent action was taken against her, but she nonetheless had to move out of the village with her closest kin. As this episode clearly indicates, cultural anthropologists often court risk and uncertainty as they decide what to observe and how and when to participate in the “participant observation” of fieldwork.

Between events we observed, those we were able to reliably reconstruct, and those we were able to participate in with good conscience, what larger patterns emerge concerning Dugawe's death, its precedents, and its legacy? We can review. My account began with a description of Dugawe's suicide, the attacks on Sialim, and the mourning and burial of Dugawe's body. Then came the surprisingly festive events of the funeral feast held to commemorate him. These were followed by a month of waiting. Then, after other aborted attempts, Swamin, the community's principal spirit medium, conducted a death inquest séance for Dugawe. Surprisingly, his spirits recast the death as an attack by male assault sorcerers from a distant settlement. A hunt in the forest for the sorcerers was inconclusive. Eventually, Dugawe's spirit was declared appeased and his widow, Sialim, was exonerated. Several months later, Sialim and Swamin were married. Rounding out this history were events that occurred prior to our fieldwork. These included Dugawe's killing of his first wife and son; Swamin's killing of Sialim's mother, the jailing of Dugawe for having beaten Sialim; and Sialim's sexual affair with Sagawa.

This web of incidents shows how major events among the Gebusi, such as Dugawe's death, are rarely isolated phenomena. Their causes and conditions link backward and forward through time. In viewing the larger picture, many topics

that might seem disparate—sickness and death, marriage, sex, sorcery, homicide, and suicide—come into interconnected focus. In addition, a single event, such as Dugawe’s death, can expose a host of broader issues: emotional dynamics among Gebusi, relations between men and women, the importance of spirits and spirit mediums, the impact of government incarceration, and even the role of subsistence practices such as fish poisoning. Far from being separate, these features resonate and twine together.

So what does Dugawe’s story tell us about the Gebusi? Concerning Gebusi sorcery and gender relations, the events surrounding Dugawe’s death illustrate the following:

1. Gebusi women take primary responsibility for mourning and for emotionally identifying with the person who has died. Men investigate the death and take action against those deemed responsible as sorcerers.
2. Gebusi visitors’ burials and funeral feasts express antagonism, but this aggression is undercut by the hosts’ hospitality. Deeper anger is usually not expressed until proper inquests and divinations have been arranged.
3. The Gebusi believe that all adult deaths from sickness, accident, or suicide are caused by either male assault sorcerers (*ogowili*) or by male or female parcel sorcerers (*bogay*). Of the two, suspects for parcel sorcery (such as Sialim’s mother) are more likely to be executed.
4. There is virtually no objective evidence that the Gebusi actually practice sorcery, but they firmly believe in its existence. In this sense, Gebusi sorcery is a form of scapegoating. The Gebusi “confirm” the identity of sorcerers through an elaborate variety of spiritual inquests and divinations.
5. Male spirit mediums play a key role in Gebusi sorcery accusations. The opinion of their spirits during all-night séances is highly influential, and they can direct the finding and interpretation of “evidence” that is used to validate an accusation.
6. Though spirit mediums should be neutral parties, the outcome of the sorcery inquest may end up benefiting the spirit medium who conducts them. In Dugawe’s case, Swamin’s spirits directed antagonism away from Sialim, whom he ended up marrying a few months later.
7. After sorcery inquests are completed, social relations are often re-established between the families involved—even if an accused sorcerer has been attacked or killed. After Sialim’s mother was executed, her relatives made peace with the killers. Sialim herself continued to live in the Yibihilu community after both her mother’s killing and her husband’s suicide. Indeed, she ended up marrying her mother’s killer.
8. Sickness, death, sorcery, and marriage often link in a cycle of reciprocity or balance over time. Events that seem spontaneous, idiosyncratic, or even bizarre may end up illustrating deeper cultural continuities. In Dugawe’s

case, Sialim was attacked in reciprocity for his suicide. The earlier death of Swamin's wife was balanced by Swamin's killing of Mokoyl and then by the "replacing" of his deceased wife by his marriage to Mokoly's daughter, Sialim.

The practices and beliefs described above were confirmed by the rest of my fieldwork with the Gebusi in 1980–82 as distinctive to Gebusi religion, politics, and social relations. In much ethnographic writing, one finds similar remarks to the effect that "People X do or believe Y under condition Z." It should be noted, however, that in most, if not all, cases, these summary statements collapse and compress a tangle of ethnographic experiences and information. Such statements are generalizations; they bleach out the complexities of human experience and imply that behaviors and customs continually repeat themselves rather than having the potential to change over time. If their limitations are admitted and understood, however, such thumbnail statements can serve as useful guides for generalization and cross-cultural comparison.

During our fieldwork, features of Gebusi life gradually became both more meaningful and more comparable or contrastive to our understanding of customs in other societies, including our own. This increased awareness sharpens our final lingering question above concerning Dugawe's death: How typical were the events surrounding it in Gebusi culture? This question looms large for ethnography. How do we know if we are observing events that are widespread or "normal" in a given society? Are we paying too much attention to some practices or beliefs at the expense of others? And what patterns of change have emerged to change the relationship between some practices and others over time?

In some ways, the events surrounding Dugawe's death were both normal *and* exceptional, both traditional *and* new for the Gebusi. On the one hand, the burial practices, antagonistic displays, sorcery inquests, and spiritual divinations that surrounded his death were "typical" for many Gebusi during the 1970s and 1980s. On the other hand, certain features of Dugawe's case were exceptional, even unique. His was the only male suicide in almost four hundred adult Gebusi deaths that I was able to document and cross-check through genealogical investigation. He was also the only Gebusi who had killed his wife or his child. Not coincidentally, he was the only Gebusi we knew of from that period who had served a lengthy prison term. Quite possibly, Dugawe's experiences in prison and then at the Nomad jail increased his stress upon being released. That is, his unique experience of confinement and stigmatization may have contributed to his ultimate suicide.

Sialim's actions were also unique; I know of no Gebusi woman before or since who managed to have her husband jailed for having beaten her. She was also exceptional in conducting an open sexual affair while her husband was still alive. These features—Dugawe's unusual violence and Sialim's forceful response—heightened or exaggerated features of male-female opposition in Gebusi culture. Their particular result relates as well to the legacy of Australian colonialism and the presence of Papua New Guinean constables at the Nomad Station. Without these influences, Dugawe would not have been imprisoned in the first place or jailed for beating Sialim.

And yet, these new developments blended as if seamlessly with general patterns of Gebusi culture. This included the subsequent marriage of Sialim to Swamin, which completed a cycle of balanced exchange both in death and in life: the death of Swamin's first wife was avenged by the killing of Sialim's mother and then structurally "replaced" by Swamin's marriage to Sialim herself. Sialim willingly accepted and in some ways pursued this resolution. Did she really care for Swamin? Was she grateful to his spirits for their help in saving her? Or was he simply a convenient protector? Did Sialim dispute the execution of her own mother, or did she accept this killing as legitimate—as some Gebusi do when their relatives are killed as sorcerers? It was hard for us to tell. Perhaps all of these were true for Sialim to some extent. Though it may seem odd or even shocking that a woman could marry her mother's killer, it is not uncommon in cultures around the world for people to live with those who have harmed them or their close relatives. In Western countries, including the United States, this pattern is common in cases of child abuse or spousal abuse; the victim may accept and even defend the family member who perpetrates domestic violence.

Events such as Dugawe's death and its aftermath challenged us to the hilt. They also yielded insights that were crucial to our understanding of death and dying, gender relations, scapegoating, and the power of human affiliation in the face of violence and suffering. Most ethnographers strive to find generalities while valuing the uniqueness of the people and events they study. They seek to appreciate cultures while exposing their ideologies and inequities. And they try to balance participant observation with the importance of their own feelings and values. Like most ethnographers, we both succeeded and failed in all these respects. But the attempt was well worth the effort.