

Entry

IT LOOKS SO GRAND from a thousand feet up, the forest glowing deep, green, and vast. The broccoli-tops of the trees form a huge and endless carpet, an emerald skin guarding worlds of life within. You look down to see two blue-brown ribbons of water etching through the forest. 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 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, it is 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, Eileen and I had been married for just a few months when we 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, if any, contact with outsiders. In the area where we were going, initial contact between some groups and Westerners had not occurred until the 1960s. The four hundred and fifty 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 song-fests 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 David Letterman, Michael Jordan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Hillary Rodham Clinton as simply “American.” The Gebusi were not simply “a society” or “a culture”; they were an incredible group of unique individuals.

Anthropology is little if not the discovery of the human unexpected. I had gone to the Gebusi’s part of the rainforest to study political decision making. Armed with a tape recorder and a typewriter, I planned to document how communications with spirits during all-night séances produced concrete results—the decision to launch a hunting expedition, conduct a ritual, fight an enemy, or accuse a sorcerer. But spirit séances more closely resembled an MTV 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 and also bantered loudly with one another. In the bargain, their own social relations were intensified, patched up, and cemented. That community decisions 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 side-splitting 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 difficult situations. I ended up liking most of them a lot. But floundering in their culture, what was I to do with my own sense of morality, ethics, gender, and justice?

Cultural anthropology has often been driven by competing desires. Anthropologists have long been dedicated to appreciating the diverse customs and beliefs of the world’s peoples. In the Western tradition, this goal was emphasized during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by European scholars such as Giambattista Vico and Johannes Herder. Later, it was emphasized by the “founding father” of American anthropology, Franz Boas. A similar theme runs through one of the

oldest books in the Western world—Herodotus’s *History*. Writing in the early fifth century B.C.E. for a Greek audience, Herodotus described in largely appreciative terms the different customs of foreign peoples, such as the Persians and Egyptians.

In modern times, cultural anthropologists have been passionate to understand foreign peoples through the lens of their own customs and beliefs. Why should Western ways of life be considered superior? Anthropologists are mindful of many injustices caused by Western societies when they historically “discovered” and then exploited or enslaved people from other parts of the world. Many regions—North and South America, Oceania, most of Africa, and large parts of Asia—were conquered militarily and then exploited politically or economically by Western nations, companies, or corporations. These incursions have deeply influenced social relations within foreign societies as well as between them. Although subordination and stigma based on gender, age, race, ethnic identity, and religion have long existed in many parts of the world, these have often been fueled or supported—wittingly or unwittingly—by Western influence.

Much as anthropologists appreciate cultural diversity, then, we also see life in the crosshairs of inequality and domination. And though inequities can be linked to outside forces, they do not always depend on them. 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. It is often hard for anthropologists to reconcile the wonder of cultural diversity with the problems caused by inequity and subjugation. Our mission is not to resolve these tensions so much as to expose and understand them.

Ultimately, the Gebusi presented surprises beyond the good company of their social life or 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 biggest surprise came in 1998, when I returned to live and work with the Gebusi. I suspected that many new influences had swept through their lives during the sixteen years that I had been gone. I readied myself to document these changes and to take them at face value. But how could I have known what lay in store?

By choice, my old community had 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 now stalwart Christians worshipping at one of three local churches—Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, or Seventh Day Adventist. 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” in the general area of the Nomad Station. Fast dancing to cassette tapes of rock music was now the rage. Traditional spirit séances had been replaced by modern music sung to the accompaniment of guitars and ukeleles. 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. Given the decline of spirit mediumship, the Gebusi had no effective way to communicate with their traditional spirits. Death inquests and sorcery practices had been replaced by Christian funerals and burials. Violence against sorcery suspects was practically nonexistent. The Gebusi themselves said that they had exchanged their old spirits for new ones associated with Christianity and 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.

If Gebusi were uncommonly traditional in 1980–82, they have since, in their own distinct way, become surprisingly modern and acculturated. Not all peoples change so quickly, of course. In fact, Gebusi may now be almost as unusual in their openness to outside influences as they were previously for being beyond their direct reach. These changes seem all the more striking given that the Nomad Station is still inaccessible by road; outsiders and goods can reach it only via expensive airplane flights. From above, the Nomad Station looks largely the way it did in 1980. The region has no local resources to spur economic growth or a cash economy, and out-migration is still negligible.

Why, then, have many Gebusi moved near the Nomad Station and altered their way of life? Beyond relatively small changes in local government and the regional economy, their transformation stems in significant part from new aspirations and beliefs. These fuel Gebusi desire to participate in church, school, market, and government initiatives—and to subordinate themselves to the outsiders who control these local activities and institutions.

My fortune has been to live with a remote people who maintained amazingly rich traditions but then sought out and developed a locally modern way of life. The experiences of Gebusi can’t, and don’t, reflect those of other peoples around the world. But they do illustrate how people develop their own forms of contemporary life even in remote areas. The process of being or becoming modern is a global phenomenon, but it is 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 ways. Some peoples resist outside influences more than Gebusi have done. Others blend old customs with new ones more readily than Gebusi have seemed to do. Some peoples or regions agitate for their own autonomy while others accept national or international authority. Through these alternative processes, people respond to the economic, political, military, and

religious influences that affect their local area. 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; 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. 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 eighteen 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 own life and in contemporary anthropology.

