

## CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF A MISSIONARY-RESEARCHER

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The missionary-researcher might well begin fieldwork after an existence as book-bound as any Ph.D. candidate. However, the motives for going to live with people differ from those of most academic anthropologists. Whether one has an academic qualification or not, the primary motive for the missionary-researcher is to come to know and understand people so as to share a faith message with them in a meaningful way. The key term is “dialogue” and just how long that dialogue might last is often not a major issue. For the neophyte academic anthropologist and the novice missionary-researcher alike, culture and sharing people’s lives is a means to an end: for one, an academic qualification; for the other, a key to people’s minds and hearts.

HOW IMPORTANT is the time factor in field research? Mervyn Meggitt, one of my predecessors in research among the Enga people of Papua New Guinea, wrote that

I believe that the great danger in reliance on synchronic investigations is that insensibly they may impose on the anthropologist a synchronic analysis, a theoretical set or predisposition that confirms him in an uncritical acceptance of factitious equilibrium or stability in the sociocultural complex he is observing. In consequence, as we see displayed repeatedly in anthropological monographs, stability is taken to be the norm and change the problem to be explained, whereas, if anything, the assertion should be the other way around. (1979:122)

Meggitt is arguing for the importance of observing the same community frequently over a long period. As a missionary-researcher I have had the good fortune to continue frequent contact with a group of Enga people over a period of thirty years. Although I have lived, worked, and studied elsewhere, I have had frequent contact with people in the Par parish in particular and Enga in general, first as a seminary student (1973–1974), later as parish priest for five years (1983–1988), and now as a regular visitor for research or teaching (1995 until today).

In this article I trace the development of my identity as a missionary-researcher/researcher-missionary in the context of my periodic returns to the field in Enga Province. My identity is closely linked to my ever-changing relationships there, and these changes have consequently had an impact on my understanding of “culture.” An underlying issue is how I have experienced trying to be both missionary and anthropological researcher.

### **Missionary and Researcher**

My entry into the fields of both missionary and anthropological researcher came about more by chance than by choice. The thought of being a missionary was transformed into conviction after an accident I survived while my two climbing companions drowned. The inspiration to study anthropology came at the end of the novitiate year, after my novice master informed me that my taking of religious vows should be postponed until I had had more “rough edges knocked off” and that in the meantime I could study “something.” Having an undergraduate degree in sociology from the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand, I cast around and found I could do postgraduate studies in anthropology at the University of Sydney.

The year of courses at Sydney University proved to be something of an ordeal. My study required the equivalent of three “years” of undergraduate courses, plus honors seminars, all in one year. In February 1973, with the religious novitiate and the year of initiation at Sydney University completed, equipped with my Bible and Lawrence and Meggitt’s *Gods, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia* (1965), I flew to Papua New Guinea. I was going to the Enga District, ostensibly as a seminarian, but with the possibility of collecting data for my thesis during my “spare time.”

Enga has since become a province in the independent nation of Papua New Guinea (PNG). This highlands province now has a population of at least 295,000 people (Census 2000). Most settlements lie between 1,500 and 2,500 meters above sea level. The majority of the population are Enga speakers, though other languages are spoken in certain areas, notably Ipili and Hewa in the province’s far west. Traditionally the Enga people lived by hunting

and subsistence gardening. Pigs were raised for food and, more importantly, for ceremonial exchange. Today most people depend on their gardens for food, supplemented by cash from cultivating coffee and other marketable agricultural products, employment in public-service jobs, and in particular from economic developments associated with the Porgera gold mine.

First contact with Westerners occurred in 1934 when the Leahy brothers ventured briefly into central Enga, followed by Taylor and Black during their Hagen-Sepik patrol of 1938–1939. Christian evangelization began in 1947, with missionaries from the Lutheran, Catholic, Apostolic, and Seventh-day Adventist churches. Most Engas today are baptized Christians. Approximately one quarter of the Enga population are adherents of the Catholic Church, forming the Catholic Diocese of Wabag, led by Bishops Hermann Raich and Arnold Orowae, the latter from Enga. The diocese is organized into sixteen parishes, each supposedly headed by a parish priest, though some parishes lack a resident priest because of fewer missionaries and the slow growth of the national diocesan priesthood.

### **“Red-skin Boy”**

In the early 1970s the “standard” Malinowskian research model was the norm in the anthropological circles I frequented. The ideal was considered to be extended stays with isolated groups in order to grasp the indigenous worldview. Enga Province seemed to provide an ideal opportunity to put such an approach into practice. There were occasions when children who had never seen a European might meet me on a track and their eyes would open wide before filling with tears as they ran for comfort.

I was aware of following in the tradition of Wilhelm Schmidt of the Kulterkreis School. Schmidt, of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD), had attempted to show that the monotheism found among “primitive” peoples was traceable to a primeval revelation (*Uroffenbarung*) passed down by tradition to all the descendants of Adam. Admittedly his theory was no longer taken seriously; however, the Anthropos Institute continues and as a member of the Society of the Divine Word myself, I felt almost obliged to study the religious beliefs of the people among whom I was working.

My understanding of culture at that time came straight out of the books we had been studying in Sydney. With my functionalist categories, Enga “culture” seemed like a fascinating collection of exotic data just waiting for me to uncover. People would patiently answer my endless questions about how, why, and when, but I hardly recall being conscious of the link between the people and their culture. With my museum mentality, I failed to appreciate the intimate connection between who people were and the way they lived.

I began my sojourn at the Par mission near Wabag, living with Father Henry Feldkotter. He spoke the Enga language well and knew a lot about the people, especially what he considered their faults and failings. He would spend his evenings looking for errors in the Enga dictionary (Lang 1973).

People invited me to visit and practice speaking Enga. I only discovered later that the different clans were vying to have me on their side. I found that the older people addressed me either as *kone* (red-skin) or as *wane* (boy), or a combination of both. Even though I was twenty-five years old and had a full beard I did not qualify to be called *akali* (man). The primary requirement to be called a man was that one be married and have children. Since I was trying to be celibate, did this mean that I would be forever addressed as “boy”? The prospect did not appeal to me but I felt there was little I could do about it at the time.

The term *kone* is not reserved for pale-skinned Europeans. A light-skinned Enga person might be called *kone*, and pigs with light reddish hair are also called *kone*. When applied to persons, the opposite would be *pumbuti* (dark, black). Sometimes, if children called me *kone* in a cheeky way, I would respond *pumbuti*, and people would laugh, with little concern about racial overtones.

From hindsight I realize that being addressed as *wane* had more serious implications: it meant that I was unlikely to be taken seriously by the leaders in the community. Father Henry, through his mastering of the language and his position as parish priest, had established his leadership credentials and was not called *wane*. Yet being *wane* allowed me to relate easily with the young people. The women were happy to have a young man eager to accept invitations to courting parties and marriage feasts. No doubt some considered me a prospective partner. (In my first week at Par I was introduced to a young woman feeding a light-skinned child, the son, I was informed, of a European missionary.) The young men convinced me that I should help them build a dance hall. Wanting to be accepted and eager to please, I did my best to fit in with the other “boys” in the community. I remained only six months at Par, but many of the relationships begun then still endure.

After a number of false starts the “red-skin boy” began collecting material on traditional Enga and Ipili religion. Looking back now, I realize that not having quality time with the older men or leaders in the community seriously limited my access to information about sacred matters. However, with the data collected I wrote what I thought was a reasonable draft of my thesis. I will always remember the feeling of dismay, after my return to Sydney in 1974, hearing Professor Peter Lawrence’s judgment on my work: “These are excellent field notes, now you must write them up as a thesis.”

### Spiritual Rambo

Ten years later, in 1983, I returned to the Par mission in a different role. I had studied four years in the United States, been ordained a priest, and had worked happily for four years in the Porgera and Paiela valleys at the western end of Enga Province. By then the priest at the Par mission was Father Leo Defland. He spoke Enga fluently and reputedly knew more Enga swear words than any of the local lads. Eventually I took his place. Being parish priest in a large Catholic community provides a certain institutional status. It also allowed me a privileged opening into people's lives. However, it cuts both ways. On the one hand, hearing hours of confessions each week certainly gave me insights into people's trials and difficulties that I might not have otherwise heard. On the other hand, I simply could not be an impartial observer. At times, as when young church members would enter into polygamous marriages, I felt obliged to confront them though their behavior was sanctioned by traditional cultural norms.

My thesis at Chicago was an attempt to apply both theological and anthropological insights to an Ipili myth. I had read widely in the symbolic anthropology of Geertz and Turner and was fascinated by the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss. Somewhat skeptically, I tried a structural analysis of the myth and it worked! In that American academic setting, in the transformations and oppositions of that Papua New Guinea myth, I felt that I had uncovered many new insights into the underlying grammar of the culture.

My academic insights proved to be short-lived following my return to Enga. In the 1980s the situation was changing rapidly. Papua New Guinea was already an independent nation. There was a new confidence and urgency, particularly in the world of politics. Also, we experienced a resurgence in tribal fighting. I'm sure that spears and arrows may have deeply symbolic meanings, but when the shouting gets louder and the arrows start flying, there is little time to think about symbols or underlying structures.

If I were simply a researcher I imagine that I would have observed the fighting and asked questions after. However, as missionary, I felt I must intervene in the fighting before someone died. In those days—the early 1980s—fighting was with bows and arrows, and with spears and axes at close quarters. I had a gun but sent it back to New Zealand, lest I be seen as a *kiap* (colonial government figure), or lest someone break into my house to steal the weapon. Instead I found a sheet of flat iron and fashioned a rough suit of armor that I wore beneath my motorcycle jacket, and on several occasions went into the middle of fights before anyone was mortally wounded. The sight of a missionary, dressed in a red motorcycle jacket, wildly gesticulating in the middle of the fighting ground was much too distracting for many fighters,

most of whom stopped fighting to figure out how to deal with me. Looking back it appears foolhardy in the extreme. Other times I would come with my camera and threaten to photograph the fighters and hand over the photos to the police. Miraculously the interventions paid off. I would go to both sides of the conflict and use the parish car to take any seriously wounded to different hospitals. Two leading warriors were seriously injured in the fighting at Yampu, near Par. My taking both to hospital and their subsequent survival opened up new relationships with the two men (as well as other clan leaders).

Perhaps it was more good luck than good management, but no one died in a tribal fight during the five years I was at Par. My apparently successful intrusions into the militaristic dimension of life were enough to counter perceptions of my single status or any lack of maturity. I no longer heard people calling me *wane*. It took political turmoil to bring about a change in people's perception of me. A fellow missionary asked facetiously if I was trying to be a "Spiritual Rambo," referring to a character whose name, borrowed from American films, is now a commonly used term in Enga for a fearless warrior. The modifier "spiritual" would no doubt sound odd to Enga ears; however, perhaps my fellow missionary was making a valid point, and Spiritual Rambo sits well with the term the local people used: *nee kapae singi* (one concerned enough to intervene in time of trouble). My protest, and refusal to respond to traditional cultural strategies in established ways, resulted in my initiation into a new social identity.

### Guardian

By the end of my first year as missionary-priest at Par I was feeling bad about not having learned the local Enga language well. I decided to take six months of local leave for that purpose. So, at the beginning of 1985 I went into the mountains and lived with a family, making a point to have no dealings at all with outsiders and not to speak or read any English during my time there. I even had a tape recorder playing Enga language tapes at low volume the whole night while I slept.

It was a strange existence up in the bleak muddy cold heights of Kaiputesa (3,000 meters). I was delighted to have the opportunity to learn the language—something I had wanted to do for ages. However, I found it very trying as the learning went slower than I had anticipated, and I feared that six months would be too short to gain control of the language. The time there was a learning experience in many ways as people's lives and feelings were revealed. Living, eating, and sleeping with a family, I started to realize many things that I didn't even know enough to ask questions about before. The

youngest child in the family died. Another close family member was killed in an accident. I wasn't just observing the funerals. I was part of them.

The experience left a lasting impression on my values and spirituality. Sitting with the old men, we talked about the initiation rites that were no longer practiced. They lamented the fact that young men were no longer interested in such rites. I could see that that the whole worldview of the young people was changing, but volunteered to learn some of the traditional myths, songs, and spells used during the initiation. An elderly man who had been an *isingi akali* (guardian) during the initiation willingly obliged. An *isingi akali* is a man who has a special ritual status in Enga society. His role is to act as "guardian" of the sacred *lepe* plants, thought to bring health and well being to young men (Gibbs 1988). Because the *lepe* plants are ritually associated with a mythical "skywoman," the *isingi akali* had to remain celibate and could have no sexual contact with earthly women. If he wanted to take a wife he had to pass on his knowledge and his powers to a celibate successor before he could marry. My association with the former *isingi akali* at Kaiputesa helped open up to me a religious experience outside of the familiar traditional Christian beliefs and practices. I got a feel for the Enga worldview, which made sense in that bleak forest environment. Here, the academy was the forest. It was not a matter of "raw and cooked" but life and death. Who said that bush demons did not exist? I learned the *titi pingi* – the song recalling the heroic acts of men who had brought with them the sacred *lepe* plant. I was given a *lepe* plant, which I treated with great respect. The experience was both "off the verandah" and "out of the sacristy," leading to understanding through shared life experience.

At the end of that six months of total immersion, I felt as if I was standing in a doorway ready to step out into a whole new world, one I had previously been looking at through a window. The parishioners welcomed me back, obviously pleased with my attempts to speak their language. But it wasn't long before I encountered a bitter consequence of the immersion experience. On returning to mission life I felt alienated from most of my fellow missionaries. "Alien" would be a good term for how I felt at the diocesan meetings where expatriate priests would refer to "them"—meaning Enga people who I had begun to identify with at a "gut" feeling level.

The pastoral church work was rewarding. We tried all sorts of experiments in inculturation of worship and prayer. The people considered me some new form of *isingi akali*—a guardian set apart for dealing with sacred symbols. The gap between the indigenous Enga symbolism and imported traditional Christian symbolism was too great for most of my fellow expatriate missionaries, some of whom thought I was showing the first signs of having gone "troppo."

The experience provoked in me a change in focus from symbols to values. Symbols are fascinating, and at times have the power to influence our ideas and our behavior. I felt that values were a more fundamental element in culture, allowing me to see things as desirable or undesirable, thus enabling or restricting my choices in life. My value system had been altered by my experience living with the Enga family. Thus I found myself at odds with many missionary attitudes. I did not see the Christian message as necessarily promoting individuality, prosperity, or even moral progress. I was more interested in promoting human, and particularly communal, values in the face of modern secular influences. However, there were two significant areas where I felt I could not accept what I perceived as traditional Enga values. First, I was opposed to fear as a motivation for action, and second, I did not accept fully the traditional position of women in Enga society. I might intervene, for example, if I felt a young woman was being forced into a marriage against her will. In supporting young women rather than young men, my role as *isingi akali* was somewhat compromised. I can now see in hindsight that I was not cognizant of the contingent nature of culture—trying where possible to be a guardian of traditional values at a time when the society and its values were in a state of rapid change (Gibbs 2003). In romanticizing the past, I often failed to acknowledge that traditional, Christian, and secular value systems all impact on people's lives today.

### **Friend**

The conversion in my approach to the culture and its values was reinforced by another incident near the end of my time as parish priest at Par. In 1986 I attended the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Catholic church in Porgera-Paiela parish of the same Wabag diocese. This was my first visit after the tearful farewell three years previously. While in Porgera I had grown close to a young girl called Sandewan. It was like a father-daughter relationship, which I treasured. During the celebration, Sandewan's mother presented me with Kiwi, a small fat pig. It was Sandewan's way of reciprocating (in Western terms one would say to "thank" me) for the ways I had helped her. I proudly took Kiwi back to Par where it soon became a pet, following me around wherever I went.

Shortly afterwards I went to Keman, an isolated station deep in the bush, for ten days of private prayer and study. It turned out to be more a time of soul-searching. Why had the gift of a pig affected me so much? Was I not past the stage of cultural romanticism? From a modern Western perspective a gift of a small pig is hardly significant. I began to realize that it was symbolic of a change in my own values. When given a choice I preferred the company



of these people rather than that of expatriate missionaries or others from America or Europe. The local people were symbolized by Sandewan and her pig. This Enga society, so foreign and strange initially, was now “home.” What was the path of greater involvement? Should I take out PNG citizenship and commit myself irrevocably to stay? I wanted to stay, yet the leaders in my religious order were putting pressure on me to go for doctoral studies.

In Papua New Guinea, Enga people have a reputation as being irascible, violent, and “big-headed.” I would not say that the image is false. However, in the field, after many years of sharing life experiences I have caught glimpses of another side. Despite experiencing the frustration of seeing a whole clan’s property destroyed after a foolish drunken brawl involving only a few, of sharing the anger of extortion and threats, of feeling the pain of children dying, I found my impression of Enga culture changing from the stereotyped image of the violent, irascible Enga to one based on relationships with individuals and groups. Research and culture faded into the background as relationships came to the fore. Relationships, of course, take time, and have their ups and downs. It is rewarding when someone gives you a netbag or a pig, but what about when one’s friend appears wanting urgent monetary assistance?

I was becoming more aware that culture, whether viewed as a “system” of beliefs, values, and behavior or simply as a people’s way of life, was constructed and reconstructed through human action and interaction. I hadn’t read anything about action theory then, but my thinking was moving in that direction. It is all very well to investigate structures and values and to try to find out what goes on inside people’s heads, but in the end what emerges as important are people and their lives. In order to build on existing societal structures, we organized the parish into eighteen communities divided according to clan groupings. Thus my life revolved around the ever-changing relationships within and between these groups.

My religious superiors finally won out. At the end of 1988 I left for doctoral studies in Europe. It meant leaving behind people who were now close friends. The Enga have a term for friend, *mona singi*, “where your heart is.” It might sound ridiculous, but as I prepared to leave I became acutely aware of my sense of being a *mona singi akali*, that my relationship with the people was the equivalent of a marriage, and that my going was not a divorce but a forced separation. I left my *mona* (heart) there and vowed to return.

### Storyteller

While in Europe, I attended the funeral of Father John Schwab, one of the early missionaries to the Enga. In the early 1950s, only a few years after the area was derestricted and Europeans were allowed to enter, Schwab had

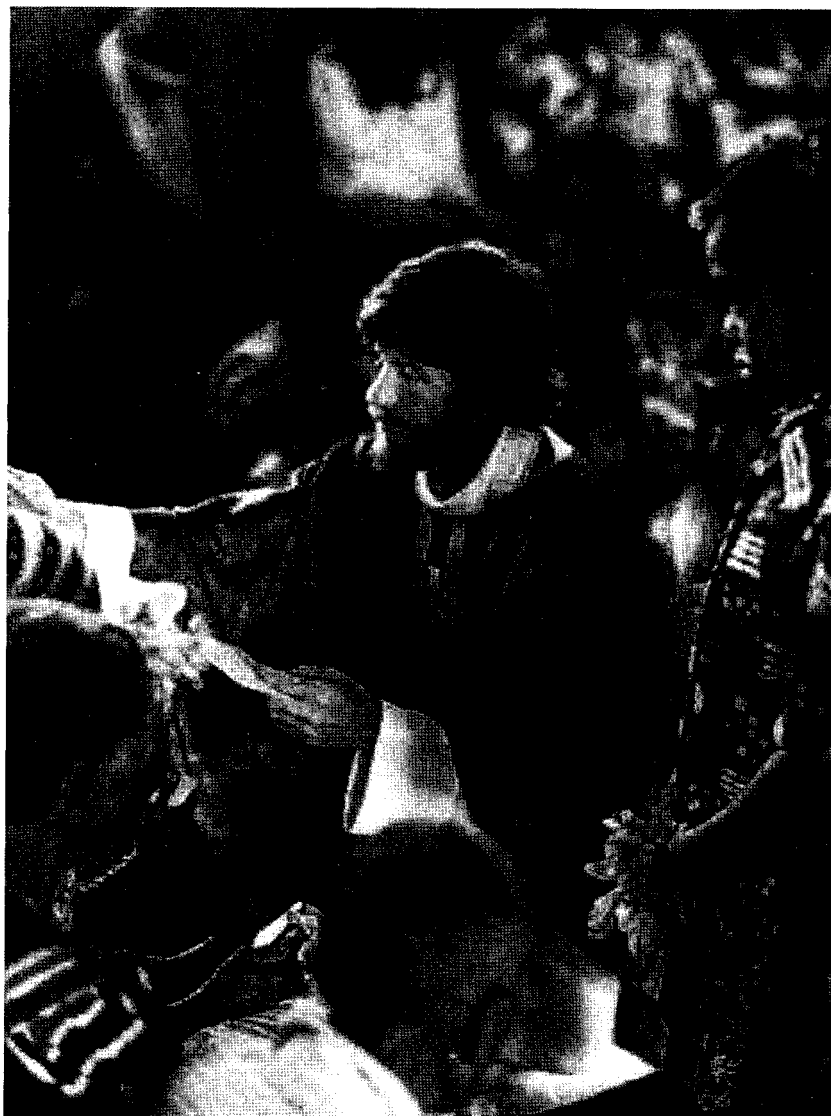


FIGURE 1. Healing Service at Yampu, 1986.

participated several times in the *sandalu* initiation rites. He had wanted to write up the experience but had not completed the work before his death. At his graveside in Austria I prayed aloud in the Enga language, promising my deceased confrere that I would finish the job.

I returned to Enga for a few months in 1993 and again in 1996. Work on Schwab's paper meant meeting the "boys" he had been initiated with forty-five years previously. It was fascinating trying to decipher tape recordings made four decades before and to have them interpreted by men who were now mature leaders in the community. Schwab was for me the epitome of the Malinowskian researcher. I was trying to take it a step further. I was not content to study the rites as historical events. With the initiation rites no longer practiced, and the original participants old and nearing the end of their days, I wanted to delve into how such rites could be reinterpreted so as to have meaning for young men today.

At one stage, in 1996, the Catholic people of Enga had carried what they called a *bokis kontrak* (Ark of the Covenant) around the province. The pilgrimage culminated in a gathering at Par, my former parish. I was asked to give a talk on the history of fifty years of missionary presence in Enga. Rather than present a regular speech, in a moment of folly I decided to try singing the history in the same form as the men had sung about the coming of the sacred *lepe* plant for their initiation. It seemed like anthropological heresy to tamper with such a sacred rite, but the more I thought about it the more the idea appealed. With the help of some men I prepared a fifteen-minute song, using the traditional tune and symbolic word-forms but in fact telling about the seed of God's Word being brought to Enga. The song took me several hours a day over a period of two months to prepare and learn by heart. On the day of the gathering more than 10,000 people converged on the old Par airstrip. When it came to my turn and it was announced that I would tell about the history of the mission I nearly passed out with anxiety. "I must be crazy to even contemplate singing something like this in the Enga language in front of 10,000 people. I'll probably make a total fool of myself!" In the end I took a deep breath and started, and a minute into the song there was an amazing sensation as 10,000 people breathed in together when I paused at the end of each line. The audience sound got louder as the song progressed, and I realized the people were with me. Afterwards some young people said that they were aware of that song but had never actually heard it. There were tears in the eyes of old people as they passed by. Looking back I see the anthropological heresy as a missiological triumph. Even now, nine years later, I am often introduced as a *tindi lenge*—"the one who chanted the *tindi pii*" (myth-story) at Par.

Healthy cultures change in order to live. In their book on traditional Enga culture, *Historical Vines*, Wiessner and Tumu argue convincingly how between 250 and 450 years ago the introduction of sweet potato precipitated rapid changes among the Enga people (1998). The authors describe in great detail how in precolonial times warfare, ceremonial exchange, and large ancestral cults were orchestrated by powerful big-men who were brilliant

orators, flamboyant performers, and skilled economists. These men may have lived with what is termed a stone-age technology in that they used stone tools, but the culture was not stonelike in the sense of being static or inanimate. On the contrary, the precolonial culture was dynamic, and it continues to be so today. Despite the changes, continuity is maintained through stories told and reinterpreted for changing circumstances. Mine was an attempt to continue that tradition while introducing the novelty of the Christian story.

### **Chuck Norris's Brother**

My doctorate in theology from the Gregorian University focused on liberation theology in various parts of the so-called third world. I was fortunate to visit parts of Africa and have extended periods of fieldwork in Bolivia, Peru, and Sri Lanka. So when I returned to Papua New Guinea in 1996 I was more conscious of the effects of globalization and of political factors impinging on the lives of indigenous peoples. I was much more aware of the struggle of the haves and have-nots, and resolved to look at the effects of the hegemony of the missions in Papua New Guinea.

It is an unwritten law that one does not return to one's old parish, so as to allow the new parish priest the freedom to work in peace without people being reminded of the good old days. However, Par is the SVD center for Enga, and besides, my relationships with people there go far beyond those resulting from my being parish priest. In fact, if I should die prematurely in Papua New Guinea I have ask to be buried in the mission cemetery beside the church at Par.

Since 1996 I have been returning there for a week at a time several times a year. I find it a bittersweet experience. I witness what appears to me very patronizing views about the Enga people and their culture both by some missionaries and by some of the educated Enga elite. My offers to help in some ministerial capacity are sometimes ignored by both the missionary and national priests.

With such infrequent visits, my facility in the language is not what it used to be, and I don't know the young people as well as I would like. Recently, after teaching a class in the Par primary school, one student raised the question, "Are you really Chuck Norris's Brother?" I do bear some resemblance to the American actor, I suppose, but had never paid much attention to the young people calling out "Chuck Norris!" as I went past them on the motorcycle. I responded to the question saying that it was a secret that I wasn't free to reveal at the time. Having reconstructed their role models in terms of actors like Bruce Lee and Rambo, I wonder just who the young people think they are meeting on the road.

My being reconstructed as the brother of an American film star illustrates the younger generation's exposure to globalization and its effects. Divine Word missionaries used to have a maxim: "The world is our parish." But, as Michael Rynkiewicz points out, it might be more correct to say: "The world is *in* our parish" (2002:303). In a country that produces excellent coffee we had got used to advertisements for imported Nescafe. Now the most common commercials on PNG television are for condoms: "*Sapos yu tingting long koap, tingim Karamap*" (If you're thinking about sex, think about Karamap condoms). Karamap condoms are imported, and at one kina (about thirty U.S. cents for a packet of three) young people are complaining that now they have to pay for sex!

### Mentor

During recent visits I have been encouraged by many requests from Enga people for courses and workshops on Enga language and culture. I get more requests than I can ever hope to fulfill. As fundamentalist Christian influence has grown in recent years, many Enga Catholics are tempted to adopt a negative view of their culture, which amounts to rejecting everything traditional as evil and sinful. This is a common revival phenomenon documented by many researchers in Papua New Guinea (Robbins 1997; Schmid 1999).

Several young Engans and I have developed a weeklong workshop to try to counter this tendency. It has been conducted successfully with women in six parishes of the diocese and with men in two parishes. Groups of between 50 and 150 mature people gather in a predetermined place, and I come accompanied by a small team of three or four younger educated Engans. For the women, our basic text is Polly Wiessner and Alome Kyakas's excellent book, *From Inside the Women's House* (1992), supplemented by participants' own stories. Over the course of a week, for eight hours a day, the group reflects on topics like childhood, growing up, courtship, marriage, childbirth, sickness, domestic life, religious life, conflicts and reconciliation, aging, and death. For many, particularly the older people, it is an opportunity to relive and share experiences from early days.

The workshop is conducted in the local language throughout, and we use group work and drama, finishing with a special worship service, usually a Catholic mass, in which people celebrate their identities as Enga Christian men or women. For me, the evenings and nights are particularly valuable times to sit around the fire and share with the male participants, or to compare notes with the female assistants in the case of workshops for women.

I find that the workshops are appreciated by the local people, who gain new confidence and interest in their cultural life and its values. It is also a special



FIGURE 2. On the road in Enga, 2000.

opportunity for me to share with them and to document their experiences from childhood until death. I now have thousands of pages of transcribed taped interviews and over a thousand proverbs and sayings collected during such workshops. There is no law of diminishing returns here. The data from personal experiences are pouring in at an ever-increasing rate and my store of traditional wisdom (*mana pii*) is continually being enriched. At this stage we want to experiment with ways to share this wisdom and experience with young people.

Thirty years ago it was me looking for ways to ask people about their culture. Now I find Engas coming to me looking for answers to questions about traditional culture and how to discern what is of value for their lives today. The “feeling for” developed as a result of many powerful experiences must now be translated back into “thinking about” as I prepare the workshops. Seen as a *mana lenge* (teacher, mentor) I find it embarrassing because often people presume I know more than I do. However, it is also gratifying to have people putting that much trust in me in this new form of mission as dialogue. A cutting edge for me is how to engage in dialogue between the traditional Enga wisdom and the wisdom of the Christian tradition that I represent as a Christian priest and teacher. I feel that there are many points of contact if one treats humanity at its deeper levels. There are different forms of dialogue: intellectual, dialogue of life, and of common action. My aim is not so much

intellectual, but more in terms of a dialogue of common action encountered at the more profound levels of life and death.

### **Mediator**

The 1990s have brought major changes to lives in Papua New Guinea. In the 1980s the currency (kina) was valued above the U.S. dollar. Now it is worth around thirty cents. Windfall incomes from mineral resources have mostly vanished in waste and corruption. The economy has stagnated. Less than 10 percent of the population is employed in the formal sector. Government health and education facilities have been drastically reduced in rural areas. The Bougainville crisis drained the country economically and morally. There have been several military revolts. There have also been natural disasters, including the volcanic eruption that destroyed Rabaul, the drought of 1997, and the tsunami in Aitape in 1998. Cases of HIV/AIDS are increasing at an alarming rate. Papua New Guinea ranks 133rd on the Human Development Index—one of the lowest rates in the Pacific region (UNDP 2002).

Economic and political instability have wrought a social toll. The retreat of government services has witnessed a corresponding increase in social disorder and lawlessness. Criminal activity previously confined mostly to the towns now reaches into all areas of society. If coffee growers find a road open to export their crop, they risk losing it to thieves while it is being transported to outlets in town. It is no secret that high-powered firearms and ammunition are coming into the country in large quantities, paid for by locally produced “New Guinea Gold” (marijuana).

How does one dialogue in a situation of anarchy where murder is commonplace? At a conference in Canberra, Australia, in 2002 I described electoral politics in the PNG Highlands as a quasi-religious cult in opposition to the state (Gibbs 2002). This political cult leads to the institution of the state becoming redundant and brings government and many church services to a standstill. Politics has the power to take over the minds and emotions of the people and to sustain that influence for long periods of time. In Enga Province, campaign houses around Wabag were commonly called “animal houses.” Why? “Because animals don’t think,” I was told. “People can do anything they like in such houses and the normal rules do not apply. They don’t think or act like people with intelligence.”

In the face of power struggles, and individual self-interest the state appears powerless to control an increasingly volatile situation. As people become more educated and have improved access to modern means of communication, there is a greater demand for democratic processes that cater to individual freedom of choice. Should one be polite like Alphonse Gelu and call the roughhouse

politics of the emerging political culture, “non-liberal democracy” (2000), or like Standish, simply name it for what is: “Gun-point democracy” (1996)?

On polling day in 2002 at Par, people were shot or cut down during a fight over the ballot boxes. The researcher part of me wants to find out what happened and to write about it. The missionary wants to go and sit with people and comfort the bereaved. The motives are complementary. I went into the fight—with more caution than I used to twenty years before. Then it was bows and arrows. Now warriors use high-powered military firearms. They recognized me as a *katawali* (mediator) and paused to allow me to go back and forth to speak with both sides in the conflict. However, once I had left the fighting resumed and continued for several more months, leaving sixteen people dead and many wounded.

Standing in the mission cemetery, which might one day be my last resting place, I glanced around to view the Par village burned and in ruins. For the moment the mission station remains, though scarred with broken windows and bullet holes, perhaps an appropriate symbol for my own feelings. The local Sabeoko clan is divided and dispersed. Intraclan warfare is notoriously hard to solve. The enemy knows one so intimately. They recognize your footprints. They know your favorite spots. Typically you might meet your end simply in going to the toilet. That is the modern situation in a political culture of rivalry and violence. That is the Enga culture that both researcher and missionary are dealing with today.

### Grandfather

In the midst of the election-related violence I visited an Enga nurse who I had helped through nursing school. She now has six children and named the last boy after me. I was struck by the term she used to introduce me to the child—*kauwane* (grandfather). The term *kauwane* has the connotation of wisdom and respect. People will go to their *kauwane* for advice or consolation. What does it mean to have progressed from *wane* (boy) to *akali* (man) to *kauwane* (grandfather)? I am touched by the term of endearment, yet taken aback by the implication that the saga of my relationship with people in Enga is entering another chapter. That chapter has yet to come, but it is shaping up to be a challenging one.

Now is not the time to retire and dote over one's grandchildren. Nor is it an occasion to imagine that one can conduct apolitical research independent of the interests of different groups in society. There is an urgent task for people of integrity—Christian or otherwise—to enter into the “missionary” tasks of outreach to civil leadership and to engage in a prophetic role that offers alternatives to what, in some parts of Papua New Guinea, has become



a power-hungry, dysfunctional cult. This task is a far cry from the standard Malinowskian model that I began with. For example, today we need fieldwork that will provide an understanding of the youth culture so dominated by the effects of the daily use of home brew and marijuana.

### **A Common Task**

Roger Keesing notes the contrasting stereotypes of the straight-laced, narrow-minded Bible thumping missionary with the bearded, degenerate anthropologist (1981:402). I agree with Keesing that “things are more complicated than that.” Admittedly there are examples of indigenous people being exploited and subjugated, and being promised second-class citizenship in a white man’s heaven. The postmodern critique of missions promotes the idea that missionaries have pushed Western customs onto indigenous cultures, thereby destroying them (Hiebert 1997). From my experience, though, I also see the converse, that is the danger of missionaries pushing for the inculturation of the church whether the indigenous people want it or not. Both approaches suffer from a similar flaw of presuming or allowing little initiative or choice on the part of the local people. There can be both fundamentalist missionaries and fundamentalist anthropologists—both behaving as though they had a monopoly on the truth. Rienkewich notes (1980:174), “The key question is not whether options are good or bad, not whether change should or should not take place, but rather what kinds of power and influence missionaries have, now and in the past over the decision-making processes.” The same question might be put to anthropological researchers because, consciously or not, the participant-observer always affects the people he or she is with.

At the same time, besides the natural processes of growth and maturity, my long-term contact with people in Papua New Guinea has surely left its mark on my beliefs, values, and behavior. Meggitt refers to the “ambiguities of advocacy” in his dealings with the Enga people (1991). I think of my thirty years of relating to Enga communities more in terms of changing perceptions on the part of the people whose lives I have shared and of my own perceptions of myself and the world around me. There are aspects of life in Enga that conflict with my values, such as tribal fighting and domestic violence. I still feel uncomfortable with what I see as brutality in bludgeoning pigs to death and the maltreatment of captured birds or animals.

In other respects, Enga people have influenced me in at least three important ways: spiritually, in ways of relating, and heightening my political awareness. I arrived thirty years ago brimming with individualistic piety. Over the years in Enga I have come to appreciate the importance of communal spirituality. Church community is not something sentimental but includes

tensions and even oppositions. I have come to see how people who call themselves Christian are called to live in communities in which their ordinary human relationships are healed and enriched by a common commitment to Christ and the gospel. I don't see any conflict in a person's being both a true Christian and a genuine Enga. Nor do I see a dilemma in my being a researcher and a priest. To me the roles are complementary, though as I have noted, not all my colleagues would agree.

Secondly, Engas have taught me the priority of relationships. Surely there are striking analogies between ethnographic fieldwork and the missionary enterprise. As Bronwen Douglas notes (2001:39), to be successful both pursuits require long-term intimacy with local people. At first I came with a romanticized view of village life, which did not last long and certainly changed radically during the time I spent living with a family while learning the language. Initially the differences between my attitudes and values were very obvious to the people and to myself. However, gradually as I have become *ae masepae palenge* (literally: local thinking sleeps), differences seem trivial compared to perceived similarities and shared concerns. The main concern that I share with Enga people today is how to move from fear and death to freedom and life.

Thirdly, I think that the Enga community has helped me develop a heightened political awareness. A researcher cannot ignore the fact that Enga is now divided between what the people call the *nenge* and the *nanenge*—literally: the eaters and the non-eaters (the haves and have-nots) (Lakane and Gibbs 2003). I think that the solution to an abused system is not necessarily another one but rather the transformation of the present system in a way to ensure freedom and dignity for a majority of the frustrated and disenfranchised people. Surely research can in some way provide insights that will help bring relief to the disempowered casualties of the present political culture. Are there communal models of shared responsibility that can be salvaged from traditional Melanesian values? Can we identify agents who can deal in a constructive way with the unintended consequences of globalization? Are there ways to relate to the younger generation that will enable them to create a meaningful future out of their present alienation? Enga people must be free to choose their own future. The magnitude of the challenges ahead will surely benefit from a multidisciplinary approach, and that includes both missionary zeal and academic insight.

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