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UPDATE ON PAPUA NEW GUINEA MAR-APR 2007

PRESERVING TRADITIONAL HISTORY IN THE HIGHLANDS

Gumine is a district in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. 40,000 people live in this rugged tributary valley of the Waghi River, with their own distinct language. The area had virtually no contact with the outside world until 1945, when regular Australian patrols commenced. The first school opened in 1965. So, in 62 years a traditional society has seen enormous change – rapidly integrated first into a colonial society then in 1975 as part of a newly independent nation, and now finding itself in an era of globalisation. There have been a multitude of changes in family life, education, law, economy, communications, health, agriculture and every other area of life.

We are working with the community to preserve their cultural history, in a novel and exciting program. Inspiration came from discovering a book amongst those collected in our Australian Book Drive for PNG in 2000. The book “Kaleku” is a photo-essay for young readers of a family from Gumine, published in 1972. We actually knew this family, and on the next visit to Gumine took the book along. It caused a sensation – children and adults were fascinated. Almost no history of the area has been recorded, and all that is written is from an expatriate perspective. Each year, there are fewer community seniors alive who remember traditional customs, first impressions of new arrivals, and the years of change.



Sine Bosbe during her interview

Through interviews and other documentation, the oral and cultural history of the area is now being preserved. A grant was received from the Myer Foundation, and Australian volunteer Patrick Jacob went to Gumine to train our staff Kumani Kuman and Martin Timothy. Eight senior Gumine men and women were interviewed in 2005. Interviews were recorded on digital video and audio tape, and then translated and transcribed. In 2006, 18 more interviews were done by Kumani and Martin, and also our staff member Dixon Dai – Dixon is the youngest grandson of Dai – the chief who, after being wounded in a tribal fight in 1945, walked through hostile territory to the provincial town of Kundiawa to invite in the Australian patrol officers to make peace.



Kora Marme recalling the past

Q: How did you marry all these women, through Tanim Het?

A: Yes, through tanim het (*literally “turning head”*), when we sing and create jokes with the women they start to develop their affection towards us. The other way is through traditional dancing. Now women are lured by money into marriage but during my time it just the meaning of the songs that I sing including the tanim het which attracts the women.

Q: How do you feel towards the woman and tell her that you want to marry her?

A: When I have a strong desire to marry her, I don't go direct and tell her. I send a little child to go and tell her to set the date for me to visit her.

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The community response has been enthusiastic, and the interviews often become clan events. Many topics were canvassed in these interviews, including courting and marriage, tribal fighting, initiation ceremonies, experiences of first contact, impressions of religion, change, and development. The transcripts are extraordinary. They reveal surprising details, which may be known to few others and otherwise soon lost. Answers are frank, insightful, and wonderfully diverse, and are often deeply moving. We have attached excerpts as examples.

Once funds for the second phase of the program are secured, we will interview more seniors, and also engage high school students from Gumine High School so they can learn about their past and the methods and challenges of recording and interpreting history. Written archives will also be examined. All interviews will be catalogued and archived, and we hope to produce a DVD on the program.

Through this program, the rich experiences and traditions of the seniors of this area will be preserved for future generations. The program will also become a model for other communities who want to maintain their heritage.

Thank you for your support!



Aiwa Ya surrounded by clan members during his interview

“When I was married, I heard a lot of noise in the sky and there was a very big thing there and I did not know its name but today they call it an aeroplane. At the same time we saw a white man come into our villageand we all gathered together to see what colour this man was.....and his name was “Magarelyal”... “A “Magarelyal” (Whiteman) has come...” Magarelyal gave us salt, necklaces, and we said that our grandparents and parents who have died have come back and given us these things....At the same time we were afraid but, but later we saw priests, government officials, who came to our village and we realised that they were real human beings”.

Q. Men and young boys used to live in men’s houses and women and young girls and children used to live in the women’s houses. Why did you follow this kind of way?

A: Our great grandparents, and ancestors have followed this tradition. Men and young boys have lived separately from their wives, pigs, dogs in their own huts, and women, children and young girls have lived in their own women’s houses.

Q. When you lived in the men’s houses, your father must have given you advice how to live in the community; can you tell what advice your father and grandfather gave you while you lived in the men’s houses?

A: Our fathers have given us laws how to look after pigs, build houses, look after children, while we were young,. They gave us (sacred) bamboo (flute)this bamboo is used to blow out special training in order to receive the laws in a secret place.....pigs were killed for this special occasion.



One of the bamboo flutes used in initiation ceremonies