



Preface

BACKGROUND

Anthropology is little without powerful portrayals of diverse peoples and their cultures; for beginning students as well as advanced professionals, learning about different ways of life can be both thrilling and provocative. We are challenged to push our envelope of understanding—and to reconsider our own beliefs and practices. Over the years, a number of short books have exposed students to the richness of cultural diversity as lived experience. These typically take the form of short ethnographies—book-length descriptions of the people and culture considered. The present book follows this pattern but attempts to be distinctive in two connected ways. First, I have written this book without the formality and jargon of technical scholarship. This is not to dismiss scholarly writing. But having published some 1,500 pages of academic description and theoretical analysis concerning the Gebusi and related peoples in Melanesia (see “About the Author”), I can take the liberty here to write more concisely, personally, and lyrically for a larger and more general audience. While *The Gebusi* is based on what I think is detailed and rigorous scholarship, it tries to portray Gebusi and my experience with them in evocative and engaging ways.

Second, as a teacher of undergraduates, I have enjoyed writing this book to dovetail with topics and issues covered in cultural anthropology courses and textbooks. This aspect of *The Gebusi* was important to me from the start but has evolved further in the book’s present edition.

FOR INSTRUCTORS AND STUDENTS

This Fourth Edition of *The Gebusi* has been completely revised and redesigned in a highly readable format. No major details from previous editions have been omitted, but tightening and further clarifying the book's contents have made way for significantly updated material based on new fieldwork with Gebusi in 2013.

Update sections now follow chapters 2–10 in Parts One and Two, bringing the chapter stories fully up to date. Major new material from fieldwork in 2013 as well as 2008 is brought together and discussed in Part Three. The *Update* sections allow the book to be read as a story of cultural change topic by topic and chapter by chapter, while the book retains its overall structure of sequential change portrayed over three different periods of time.

Revised and updated “Broader Connections” bullet points at the end of each chapter link the chapter content to anthropological concepts, which appear in boldface. All of these sections include updated material based on fieldwork in 2013. For ease of reference, each chapter's Broader Connections themes are listed under the chapter title in the book's Table of Contents. And an alphabetized index of the highlighted Broader Connections terms, with their page references, is included on my website, per below.

A striking 8-page insert of color photos of Gebusi, in addition to black and white photos in every chapter, showcase people and topics. Together with the book's cover, a rich array of 61 photos link directly to portrayals of Gebusi in the text.

A List of Persons, which indicates what has happened over time to many individuals mentioned in the book, is included prior to the index.

Online Features

- Eight video modules that were made in large part during on-site fieldwork with Gebusi in 2013 illustrate updated topics and link them to larger issues in anthropology. These segments are available for the following topics at www.bruceknauf.com → *Gebusi* → *Gebusi video modules online*:
 - Entering the field
 - Studying Culture
 - Language
 - Subsistence Livelihood
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- Sexuality
- Development and Underdevelopment

Additional Gebusi online modules may become available in due course; check the above website for updates.

- A narrated photo presentation summarizes Gebusi and their changes through 2008 [68 minutes]. This can be used in one longer class or divided into two or three segments (corresponding to the parts of the book) for use in shorter class periods. See www.bruceknauft.com → *Gebusi* → *Gebusi narrated flash presentation*.
- A large photo gallery of fieldwork with Gebusi has been organized and categorized by chapter of the book. These photos and captions with additional information are available at www.bruceknauft.com → *Gebusi* → *Photo gallery of Gebusi, chapter-by-chapter*.
- Gebusi music clips—including traditional singing and contemporary string band music—are available at www.bruceknauft.com → *Gebusi* → *Gebusi popular music, church music, and preaching (2008)*.
- Probing more deeply, chapter-by-chapter Thought questions are available at www.bruceknauft.com → *Gebusi* → *Thought questions*.
- Updated Notes and References are available at www.bruceknauft.com → *Gebusi* → *Notes for The Gebusi 4/E* and *References for The Gebusi 4/E*.
- A list of the bolded anthropological terms that appear in the “Broader Connections” sections of the book’s text is indexed with each entry’s book page referenced at www.bruceknauft.com → *Gebusi* → *Broader Connections highlighted terms Index for The Gebusi 4/E*.
- Instructor’s resource materials are obtainable online via a password from Waveland Press. They include thirty objective quiz questions concerning *The Gebusi 4/E*, and objective ten-question quizzes for each of the author’s eight Gebusi video teaching modules.

In all, this Fourth Edition of *The Gebusi* is a significantly revised, enhanced, reformatted, and updated book, and is enriched by a host of exciting new teaching aids and online resources for instructors and students.

THE GEBUSI

Who are the Gebusi? When I first lived among them, they were a small ethnic group or “tribe” of some 450 forager-horticulturalists living in longhouses in the deep interior rainforest of Papua New Guinea, which is

located just north of Australia in the South Pacific. At that time, Gebusi life was rife with dramatic practices of ritual and body art, sorcery and divination, feasting and camaraderie, violence, and alternative sex practices. When I studied with the Gebusi again in the late 1990s, they had largely transformed. They were then a Christian people of about 615 who frequented the local market, attended government development meetings, played in the regional sports league, attended the local church, and whose children attended the local government school. In the mix, they had become engaged with other ethnic groups in a regional process of nation-building, and they had given up many of their previous beliefs and practices. In 2008 and yet more recently in 2013, Gebusi, now approximately 1,000 people, have weathered a collapse of the local cash economy. Government and its services have been withdrawn, and the airstrip has been closed. In the bargain, Gebusi have rediscovered and rejuvenated much of their previous culture. Now, however, ExxonMobil, the world's largest energy company, is contemplating building a multibillion-dollar pipeline for liquefied natural gas that may cross part of Gebusi territory.

In all, our knowledge of the Gebusi spans a great arc of social and cultural transformation—from remote isolation to active engagement with national and global lifestyles, to resurgence of many previous cultural practices in a new key, and now to the possibility that one of the most expensive energy projects in the world will intrude on their lives. In the process, Gebusi vividly illustrate important features of social change, marginalization, globalization, and inequity—as well as topical issues of subsistence, kinship and marriage, politics, religion, gender and sexuality, ethnicity and nationalism, expressive and public culture, and applied or engaged anthropology. Amid and across these issues and topics run indigenous Gebusi orientations and their cultural elaboration over time.

Most importantly, I think, Gebusi are amazing people—funny, funky, high spirited, and at turns both relaxed and intense. I hope you will agree that they are as wonderful as they are different from a Western perspective. I am privileged to be able to work with Gebusi, many of whom have become deep friends for many years. And I feel fortunate to have the opportunity to convey vital aspects of their lives as well as parts of my own when working among them.

Personal names used in the text are in most cases actual names, used with permission, and in a few cases pseudonyms, including when a depiction is potentially unflattering or embarrassing in a modern context and the person is still alive. Quotations taken from my Gebusi fieldnotes have been lightly edited from the original to make them clearer or more compact.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is hard to express the personal and professional debt that I feel toward my Gebusi friends and acquaintances. Deepest thanks go to Sayu, Didiga, Mus, Halawa, Keda, Mosomiay, Kilasui, Yamdaw, Uwok, and Abi. I gratefully acknowledge help from officials and staff formerly at Nomad, officials at Kiunga, and clergy of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Papua New Guinea's Western Province. Especially in remote regions, field research is difficult if not impossible without financial assistance from funding agencies. I gratefully acknowledge support for my work among Gebusi from the US National Science Foundation, the US National Institutes of Mental Health, the US Department of Education, the Rackham Graduate School at the University of Michigan, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, and Emory University.

Thanks go to numerous persons who have read and commented on various drafts and editions of this book, especially, at present, wonderful editors Tom Curtin and Jeni Ogilvie at Waveland. I am grateful to Elena Lesley for help with proofreading and to Kate Bennett for conceptualizing the photo layouts with me, as well as detailed editing of the book's previous edition. Stuart Kirsch, Laurence Goldman, and a range of other colleagues have alternatively given me general insights and specific clarifications that have informed my work, though they bear no responsibility for the book's shortcomings.

Photo credits are listed on the book's copyright page. I give heartfelt thanks to Eileen Knauff for permission to print a range of her photos of Gebusi from 1980–82, at which time taking quality photographs and maintaining film were difficult and challenging in a tropical rainforest environment. To Latham Wood goes credit and thanks for the cover photo that graces this book as well as several other of its photos. I was most fortunate that Latham was able to take time from his other obligations to go with me to the field in 2013, during which time he was a wonderful presence and much appreciated by Gebusi.

I owe a special debt to my students at Emory University. They have given me the courage not simply to teach anthropology from the heart but to go back to the field—and learn it all over again!

This book is dedicated to the spirit embodied by my friend Yuway (c. 1961–2009), to Sayu Silap and Didiga Imba, and to the past, present, and future of all the Gebusi.



Entry

It looks so grand from a thousand feet up, glowing green and vast. The broccoli tops of the trees stretch out as a broad carpet, an emerald skin shielding worlds of life within. You look down to see two blue-brown ribbons of water etching through the forest canopy. You follow them through the window of your tiny plane as they snake toward each other and merge in gentle delight. Below, in the crook of these two rivers, you look closer, to where the green shifts from dark to bright, from old forest to new growth that gets cut but always sprouts anew. Inside this lime-green patch you see a score of white squares arranged in two neat rows, standing firmly as if at attention. Ten line up evenly on one side while their partners face them across the lawn, their metal roofs glinting in the hot sun. You recall how these structures were built long ago by the first Australian officers, so colonial and rugged, trekking in across muddy rivers and swamps. Alongside these structures, a long rectangle lays out flat, its grass cut 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 substance is not what you thought it would be, not a text at all. As you descend, its meaning becomes the faces that line the airstrip, bright and eager as their skin is dark. They watch expectantly as you land. You open the door to a searing blast of heat and humanity. Welcome to Nomad Station.



Introduction

In Search of Surprise

Like most anthropologists, I was unprepared for what I would find. Eileen and I had been married just a few months when we flew in 1980 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 26 years old and had never been west of Oregon. I had no idea what changes lay in store either for me or for the people we were going to live with.

Well into the 20th century, the large and rugged tropical island of New Guinea harbored people who had had little contact with outsiders. In the area where we were going, first contact with Westerners had not occurred until the 1960s. The 450 people whom we encountered had a name and a language that were not yet known to anthropologists. As individuals, the Gebusi (geh-BOO-see) were amazing—at turns regal, funny, infuriating, entrancing, romantic, violent, and immersed in a world of towering trees, heat and rain, and mosquitoes and illness. Their lives were as different from ours as they could be. Practices and beliefs that were practically lore in anthropology were alive and well: ritual dancers in eye-popping costumes, entranced spirit mediums, all-night songfests and divinations, rigid separation between men and women, and striking sexual practices. A mere shadow to us at first, the dark side of Gebusi lives also became real: death inquests, sorcery accusations, village fights, and wife beating. In the past,



The author in 1980 with Soliabo, a senior man who is attempting to understand what writing is.

cannibalism had been common (we later discovered that a woman from our village had been eaten a year and a half prior to our arrival). As I eventually realized, the killing of sorcery suspects had produced one of the highest rates of homicide documented in human history.

Living and working with the Gebusi turned our own lives into something of an extreme sport. But in the crucible of experience, Gebusi became not only real to us but also, despite their violence, quite wonderful. With wit and passion, they lived rich and festive lives. Vibrant and friendly, they turned life's cruelest ironies into their best jokes, its biggest tensions into their most elaborate fantasies. Humor, spirituality, deep togetherness, and raw pragmatism made Gebusi 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" would be as bland as to describe Beyoncé, Barack Obama, and Bart Simpson as simply "American." The Gebusi were not simply "a society" or "a culture"; they were an amazing mix of unique individuals.

Anthropology is little if not the discovery of the human unexpected. I initially went to the Gebusi's part of the rainforest to study decision making, to see how all-night séances produced concrete results—the collective decision to mount a hunting expedition, conduct a ritual, fight an enemy, or accuse a sorcerer. But spirit séances were more like off-color YouTube clips 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 at their own social behavior, making meaningful connections between raucous all-night sessions and some threats that threatened their infractions of sexual teasing.

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joked back while bantering lewdly with one another. In the bargain, their own social relations were intensified, patched up, and cemented. That meaningful community resolutions could actually emerge during such raucous all-night festivity seemed impossible. And yet, they did, including some that were really important. Sorcerers could be scapegoated and threatened with death; people could be accused or found innocent of infractions. Politics and conviction combined with sidesplitting humor, sexual teasing, and spirituality 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 recordings. I sat with Gebusi men in all seriousness as the track played. They were astonished at first to hear their own voices—but they quickly then shifted from amazement to hilarity. At my prompting, they attempted, word by laborious word, to explain the humor I had recorded. It was tough, as I had no real interpreters and was learning Gebusi language “monolingually.” As it turned out, their spiritual poetry had as little relation to their normal speech as the sentences of an anthropology textbook have to hip-hop. Gleefully, the men responded to my confusion by repeating yet again the bawdy jokes I had recorded. Unable to turn nighttime humor into daytime clarity, I realized at first that the best thing to do was to laugh along with them and enjoy their camaraderie. Seeing our strange interaction, the women said many of the songs were “no good” or “rotten.”

Mostly, Gebusi were not just jovial but considerate and quick to apologize. I came to like most of them a lot, and over time, I grew to appreciate their culture—including their rituals, beliefs, and customs. But I remained keenly aware of my own ethics and values. What was I supposed to do with my morality when it collided with theirs, including in areas of sex and violence?

So, too, cultural anthropology is driven by a dilemma of competing desires. We want to appreciate the cultures we study. But we also confront others' difficulties and injustices. In Western traditions, appreciation of cultural differences extends from Herodotus among the ancient Greeks to thinkers such as Giambattista Vico and Johannes Herder in the 18th and 19th centuries. Broadly speaking, they argued that cultures should be appreciated in the context of their own time and place. This same basic principle was emphasized by American anthropology's “founding father,” Franz Boas. Similarly in recent decades, cultural anthropologists have been passionate to understand other peoples through the lens of their own customs and beliefs. Why should Western ways of life be thought superior?

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But anthropologists are also mindful of problems and inequities in the societies they study. Some of these injustices are caused or fueled by outsiders. During centuries of colonialism, Westerners have exploited or enslaved people across the world, including in North and South America, the Pacific, Africa, and significant parts of Asia. Many indigenous peoples have been subordinated, stigmatized, or simply decimated on grounds of cultural, racial, or religious difference.

But such injustices do not always link to external forces. Among Gebusi, the oppression of women and violence against suspected sorcerers grated roughly against the splendors of Gebusi ritual performance and festivity. Such paradoxes cannot be explained away by the impact of outside intrusion.

These opposing trends underscore the challenge anthropologists face as we investigate problems and suffering: how do we reconcile the wonder of cultural diversity with difficulties caused by subjugation or violence in the heart of the social lives we study? During fieldwork, ethnographers frequently experience social life through the crosshairs of ethnocentrism, sexism, racism, religious intolerance, ageism, or other forms of discrimination. In the mix, we become more aware of the ethical standards we ourselves hold—as well as the risk of projecting these too easily onto others. This is a real dilemma I have felt when working with Gebusi.

Ultimately, Gebusi surprised me beyond the delightful “good company” of their social life and also the unfortunate violence of their sorcery beliefs and gender practices. The biggest surprises have come each time I have returned to live and work with them again. Not knowing what lies in store, I brace myself, quell expectations, and take new conditions on their own terms. Over time, momentous changes have rocked Gebusi. Modern development has come and then largely gone, including government and market intrusion, Christianity, and hopes for business based on money. In this mix, some traditional Gebusi customs seem to have died out for good, but many others have continued or been revived, or rejuvenated in new guises. This checkered and remarkable pattern persists—and will continue yet further.

By 1998, my old community had picked up and moved its settlement—lock, stock, and barrel—from deep in the rainforest to the outskirts of the government airstrip at Nomad. Previously isolated, they were now part of a large multiethnic community of persons speaking five different languages. They became Christian and went to church. Their children went to school. Their women went to market. Sweet potatoes were

now a starch staple. Pineapple were served themselves.

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now a starch staple, and new crops such as manioc, peanuts, squash, and pineapple were grown for sale as well as for consumption. Gebusi considered themselves citizens of the nation of Papua New Guinea.

In the mix, Gebusi spirit séances were replaced by soulful modern songs accompanied by guitar and ukulele. "Parties," "videos," and "discos" were the rage. Children in school drew pictures of their future selves as pilots, policemen, soldiers, heavy-machine operators, nurses, teachers, rock singers, and Christians in heaven. Traditional dances were a thing of the past. And without spirit mediums, Gebusi couldn't reliably communicate with their traditional spirits. As such, sorcery inquests were replaced by Christian funerals—and violence against sorcery suspects happily plummeted. Gebusi said their old spirits had been exchanged for new ones, and for new ways of life. But in the process, they also became far more subordinate to outsiders than they had been before.

Since the mid 2000s, Gebusi have again been changing radically. Due to inefficiency and graft, the Nomad airstrip has effectively been closed. Government officials have gone, the health clinic is shut, the market is desultory, church attendance is down, and schooling is compromised and sometimes nonexistent. In the vacuum of this decline, however, Gebusi have rejuvenated many of their traditional customs—and they have become much more in charge of their own lives and society. If Gebusi seemed uncommonly "traditional" during the 1980s, and if they became surprisingly "modern" by the late 1990s, since then they have creatively combined strands from both these legacies. In the mix, crucially, they have kept control of their own land, maintained a thriving rainforest livelihood, and increased their population without pushing on the limits of their territory.

My good fortune is to know a remote rainforest people who now find meaning by combining earlier customs with new modes of experience. Gebusi don't and can't reflect the lives of people elsewhere. But they do illustrate how society and culture change over time. Like Gebusi, people around the world become modern by both retaining and reshaping their unique identity, drawing on the past while creatively launching it into the future. As an anthropologist, I see culture as the diverse colors that refract through a prism of ongoing experience. By considering these refractions, we understand how people across the globe share a modern world while retaining and expanding their distinctiveness. Some people resist outside influence; others adopt new customs and cast old ones aside. Some agitate

for autonomy; others accept or embrace the political or commercial authority of outsiders. Amid these alternatives, though, most people weave a rich tapestry of hybrid cultural developments.

Exemplars in this regard, Gebusi provide an excellent framework for considering topics covered in anthropology courses. These include distinctive features of livelihood or subsistence; how kinship and marriage organize people into groups; dynamics of economic exchange, distribution, and consumption; the politics of leadership, conflict, and violence; religious beliefs and spiritual practices; issues of sexual and gendered diversity; the construction of ethnicity and race; the impact of colonialism and nationalism; the role of the anthropologist; and, through it all, the dynamics of sociocultural change. Rather than describing Gebusi in general terms, I present them as individuals whose lives have unfolded across decades along with my own. My goal is for Gebusi to come alive for you, for you to get a sense of their past and their present, and to connect this striking story with current trends in cultural anthropology.

Note: See www.bruceknauft.com → Gebusi → Gebusi video modules → "Preface" and "Anthro & Studying Culture" to watch Bruce's surprise and uncertainty when reentering the field in 2013.

BROADER CONNECTIONS

Cultural Anthropology

- Through fieldwork and the writing of ethnography, cultural anthropologists such as Bruce become highly engaged with and attuned to cultural diversity.
- Cultural diversity leads anthropologists to appreciate cultural relativity, the value of each culture on its own terms.
- Anthropologists are also attuned to social inequality, including how differences of sex, gender, age, ethnic identity, religion, and other factors lead some people to dominate and subordinate others.
- Some aspects of social inequality derive from external constraint or coercion, including colonialism, imperialism, or nationalism.
- Other aspects of social inequality may derive from internal social discrimination or stigma, which may be informed by long-standing beliefs and practices.
- In current practice, most cultural anthropologists appreciate cultural relativity and critique social and cultural inequity.

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- Collectively, changes among Gebusi illustrate the relationship between traditionalism, globalization, and how people become modern.
- Because people such as Gebusi draw upon larger influences in their own unique way, they become **locally modern** or **alternatively modern** in their own way.
- A key concern for modern livelihoods is their economic and **environmental sustainability**. Gebusi are fortunate to have land, subsistence, and customs that provide for a thriving and sustainable livelihood.
- The fact that **cultural change** is not easily predictable also makes it especially interesting, surprising, and exciting—and crucial to helping us understand our human world.
- Like peoples throughout most developing countries, Gebusi have recent histories that reflect both strong traditions based on indigenous customs and the desire to participate in and benefit from modern activities and institutions.

Part One

1980–1982



Chapter 1



Friends in the Forest

The bananas were piled up, hot and grimy. Steam floated up from them—as if the air around us could have gotten any hotter! Some were stout as well as long, but most were slender, and a few were quite tiny. But their variety in dozens was a mystery to us then. Though all of them had been carefully scraped, long strands of soot and globs of charcoal remained from their time in the fire.

What to do with this mound of starchy bananas, presented to us so formally in that first village? Kukudobi villagers had probably not seen a white person since five years before our arrival, when the country had become nominally independent and all the Australian patrol officers had left. During the seven years or so before that, after first contact, a patrol officer would try to tramp to major Gebusi settlements once a year and count as many inhabitants as he could find. That was about it. Against this backdrop, our own arrival caused quite a hubbub, a tempest in the forest. Women and children fled while men gasped with curious excitement. Emerging from the forest, the four local men who were carrying our supplies took the lead and we followed them (“When in Rome . . .”) to the central longhouse. As we sat down cross-legged, a flood of villagers did likewise all around us.

They must have done the cooking quickly or already known about our arrival, since it wasn’t long before the smoldering mound of starch was brought in on a palm leaf platter and laid with gusto directly in front of us.

Suddenly I was the focus of great public scrutiny. Short men with bamboo tubes through their noses looked on from all around. I was too embarrassed to check with our carriers or even with Eileen about what to do. Everything was heat and stickiness. I took one of the sooty bananas and began to munch on it, trying to show appreciation. The bananas were dry (technically they were "plantains"), but I forced myself to chew through one and pick up another. The people around us started to grin as I swallowed their food. Progress was slow, however, and, judging from the size of the platter, ultimately hopeless. Using my hands, I signaled that the pile of food was large, my stomach was small, and many people could certainly be fed. What a relief when they broke into pleasant conversation and stretched out their arms, sharing the bananas throughout the longhouse. We had apparently passed our first test.

Anthropologists often talk about "The Gift," especially in Melanesia. How people produce things through hard work and sweat, infuse them with hope and good intention, and then just give them away speaks volumes about human connection. Gifts are at once a social economy and a materialized emotion. As Marcel Mauss suggested, gifts reflect and reinforce social bonds between givers and recipients. In American society, gifts at Christmastime are heavy with meanings that reflect who we are most connected to, the strength and character of the relationship, and sometimes, as well, what we project or anticipate we will get in return.

As in many societies, Gebusi believe gifts should be given to visitors who are peaceful. Their most basic gift was the fruit of their most regular work as well as their primary source of nutrition: starchy cooked bananas. Well beyond food, however, material exchange creates social connection. Gebusi define their relationships by the things they give or don't give to others. In short order, I established a "gift exchange name" with each man in the village—derived from something that was given or shared between us. Gusiayn was my "bird egg"; Iwayb was my "Tahitian chestnut." Based on gifts I myself gave, Yuway became my "fishing line" and Halowa my "salt." Whenever we saw each other, we called each other by these terms, and our relationship was referred to similarly by others: "Here comes your 'bird egg'; there goes your 'salt.'" To have a social identity and to have shared something that was memorable were one and the same.

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In that first village of Kukudobi, we were fortunate to have accepted those starchy bananas, to have eaten a few and shared the rest. It was a simple act, but symbolic in ways we barely appreciated. The patrol officers before us had also come to forest villages. But they had brought along servants or "houseboys" to cook tins of meat and bags of rice they hauled around. In our case, word had already spread that we were looking for a rainforest village to live in and that we ate local food. So we received a hopeful reception of cooked bananas. The other features of local welcoming etiquette were not yet known to us—the calling out of gift and kin names, the hearty snapping of fingers, the dramatic sharing of smoke-filled tobacco pipes, the drinking of water from nine-foot-long bamboo tubes, and the palaver that lasted until the hosts arrived with great whoops to present more food. But even in that first village, the invitation of social life, the giving of food, had been extended, and we had accepted. It was a good start.

As we quickly found out, all the villages we visited wanted us to live with them. Though bossy, the Australians had provided a trickle of outside goods, and when they left, the trickle had dried up. Local people craved the trade items they now associated with white-skinned outsiders: cloth, salt, beads, fishing hooks, soap, and, especially, metal tools. Compared to an adze made of stone, a steel ax goes through rainforest trees like a knife through butter. Metal axes made it easy for people to clear bigger garden plots, grow more food, and build stronger houses. Metal knives and machetes found many additional uses, from skinning animals to clearing weeds.

Besides stoking a passion for trade goods, the Australians left a political legacy that the Gebusi also appreciated: they pacified the Bedamini. More numerous and aggressive than Gebusi, Bedamini formed war parties that burrowed deep into Gebusi territory. Using brutally efficient tactics, they would surround a Gebusi longhouse at dawn, set it ablaze, and slaughter the residents as they fled. The Gebusi had been repeatedly victimized by these raids, and whole settlements had sometimes been wiped out. Typically, the victors cut up the bodies of slain Gebusi and carried them home for feasting. Though it's important to distinguish rumors of cannibalism from the real thing, the eating of Gebusi has been well documented and admitted among Bedamini—and by Gebusi themselves following the killing of their own sorcery suspects.

With just 450 people against the Bedamini's 3,000, and with smaller settlements, the Gebusi were no match for Bedamini war parties. If Australian patrol officers had not forcibly stopped Bedamini raiding, the Gebusi would have become only a remnant people. By 1980, Gebusi were still visibly scared of the Bedamini, but they were seldom killed and no longer massacred by them. And despite outside intervention, Gebusi themselves hardly felt the boot of colonial domination; the benefits of Australian presence far outweighed the costs of their brief annual visits. The officers' main objectives were to update the local census and lecture villagers, via interpreters, to keep their settlements clean and not fight one another. Seen as victims rather than aggressors, Gebusi were portrayed in patrol reports as "quiet, tractable people" and were left largely alone. Hence the irony that even as Bedamini were pacified by armed colonial patrols, Gebusi were left to continue their own sorcery inquests, executions, and even cannibalism within their communities. Living deep and scattered in the rainforest, they hid their actions from Australian awareness.

Though Gebusi appeared at first to be a pristine people, what we took to be traditional customs had actually flourished during the colonial period—along with the use of steel tools to clear larger gardens and build bigger houses. Because Gebusi associate growth with spiritual support, these changes affirmed their religious values as well as their social life. Like streams converging in the forest, material production and spiritual vitality came increasingly together in major Gebusi rituals, especially the initiation of young people into adulthood (as described in Chapter 6.) Ironically, colonial intrusion nearby gave Gebusi freedom to intensify their own customs, allowing them to become even more "Gebusi-like" than they had been before. Although they seemed unacculturated, Gebusi traditions underscored the importance of change all around them. A tribal powerhouse had been laid low while the lowly Gebusi had been left on their own to recoup. Over time, Gebusi resented Bedamini not so much for their former raids as for being recipients of government development projects that Gebusi wanted for themselves.

That Gebusi had both exuberant traditions and desire for contact with outsiders made them perfect for us. Little wonder that we were enamored of them or that they wanted us for themselves. At first, however, we weren't interested.

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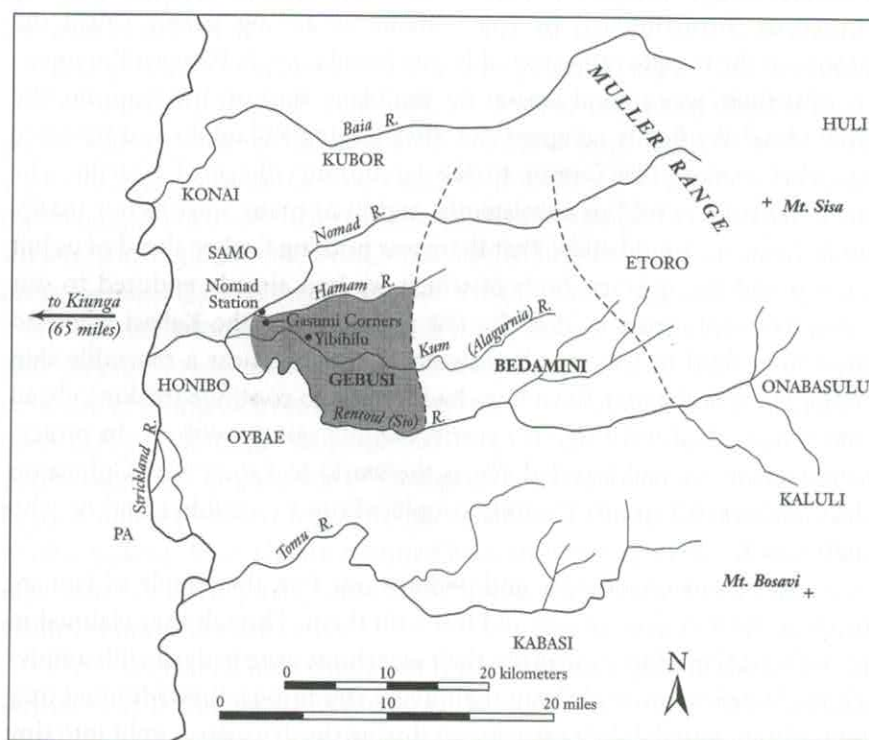
My journey had begun with a blank spot on a map. That was where, back at the University of Michigan, my graduate advisor and I had thought that I would find the most fascinating people. The largest scale maps then available were produced by the US Army—in case even the remotest parts of the globe needed American involvement. The map of Papua New Guinea's Western Province showed an unknown space that stretched across a swampy rainforest north of the Tomu River. We could roughly triangulate the culture of the unknown people who lived there from what was known about groups not too far away. Lacking a name for Tomu River people, I talked by phone to a missionary who had completed an aerial survey nearby. He said these people were probably the "Kramo." Armed with this information, I obtained funding from the US National Science Foundation and the US National Institutes of Health to study political consensus formation led by spirit mediums among people called the Kramo in the remote rainforest of Papua New Guinea's Western Province.

But there was a good reason for the blank spot on the map: no one lived there! We finally accepted this after leaving Kukudobi and trudging for what seemed like forever to the far distant village of Honabi. The inhabitants there told us consistently, and in as many ways as our inadequate language would allow, that there was nothing farther ahead of us but swamp and mosquitoes, both of which we had already endured to our limit. They informed us that the few people called the Kabasi who had previously lived in this area had deserted it to live near a crocodile skin trading post to the east. Even if we had wanted to continue trekking ahead into uninhabited territory, our carriers would not go with us. In professional terms, we had traveled across the world to Papua New Guinea on doctoral research grants to study people whom we couldn't find or who didn't exist.

Sensing our uncertainty and perhaps our fear, the people of Honabi brightly insisted that we stay and live with them. Though they claimed to have a tradition of spirit séances, their assertions were hedged with ambivalence. When we probed about their living conditions, they admitted they typically abandoned their settlements during the dry season, split into tiny groups, and foraged for food even deeper in the rainforest. As the evening

grew longer and the mosquitoes bit harder, the prospect of adapting to their lifestyle for two years seemed more dreadful than admitting failure.

Not knowing what else to do, we trudged back to Nomad Station via the village that our carriers lived in, which was not altogether out of the way. The more we found out about this impending stop, the more interested we became. By this time, our carriers had become real people to us. Yuway was a wonderfully decent young man—tall, sensitive, and strong for a Gebusi. He had a spontaneous sense of concern, interest, and patience even though we couldn't yet speak with him. He would wait to help us over slippery log bridges and often volunteered to shoulder the heaviest load. Gono never said much, but he was as sinewy and dependable as a stout tree, and always alert. Hawi was our nominal interpreter, and though his translations ultimately proved more troublesome than helpful, he was socially and physically agile. Finally was Swamin, older



The Gebusi and nearby groups.

than his unmarried companions but more muscled than they. He would flash a captivating smile under his impish hooked nose and pepper his remarks with articulate bursts that, given the reactions he got from the other three, convinced us that he was both very funny and very smart. As Hawi informed us, Swamin was also a spirit medium who regularly held communal séances.

When we finally reached their village of Yibihilu, the “place of the deep waters,” we thought we had reached nirvana. Having stumbled for days through a sea of leaves, mud, and vines under a closed rainforest canopy, we felt like the miniature children in *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids!*, navigating enormous obstacles in a galactic backyard of foliage. I yearned to look up and out, to see more than the next hidden root that could send me sprawling. By contrast, the “place of the deep waters” was perched on a 40-foot bluff overlooking a serpentine bend in the Kum River. The porch of the longhouse extended out over a canyon through which the river rushed before pooling in a serene basin some hundred yards wide and across which we could see a crocodile lazing in the sun. Farther downstream, the watercourse was calm enough to be traveled by canoe—which was far preferable to tromping through the muddy forest. At dusk, the sky above the river became a breathtaking sunset. The villagers stopped and stared. *Bubia maysum*—“The crimson is being laid down.”

If the village seemed majestic, the people were yet better. Having learned more about us from our carriers in five minutes than the other villages had in five days, their kin and friends gave us the kind of warm welcome, especially in such a remote place, that made us feel on top of the world rather than at its end. As the traumas and troubles of our journey were discussed to the tiniest detail, the villagers laughed good-naturedly. That we were already trying to speak their language—however haltingly—was widely and enthusiastically noted. That we ate local food and that I had somehow carried my own backpack, which the men enjoyed trying on, were also taken as positive signs. Eileen’s presence was also a bonus. White women had rarely been seen by the Gebusi, and probably never in Yibihilu. Eileen shared food and laughter with the women and played with the children. They were enthusiastic and responded in kind. If the men “had” me, the women took Eileen into their own world.

In remarkably short stead, our physical presence, possessions, and desire to speak the vernacular painted us as paragons of beneficence, a

gold mine of goods, and a three-ringed circus of entertainment. Our hands were shaken, fingers snapped, and bellies gorged with countless gifts of food. Everyone seemed quite genuinely to want our friendship. If our reception was anything less than overwhelming, we were too euphoric to notice. As if we needed further encouragement, Swamin held an all-night spirit séance. Word of our presence had drawn villagers from surrounding hamlets, and given the convergence of many people in high spirits, a songfest was almost inevitable. The stars shone as they only do when there is no competing light for hundreds of miles. The songs of the men swelled as the moon rose from its silhouette in the forest canopy. Beneath its glow, their deep-throated harmony echoed as if in a wild cathedral. The music was nothing like, and more amazing than, anything I had heard before. I knew that Gebusi believed in a world of unseen spirits and in places that come alive through the spirit medium's songs. But as the sound washed over me, I knew almost nothing of its meaning. In the moment, however, this only added to the mystery and splendor of their cosmos—a world of wonder I had come to explore.



There was so much we didn't know about the Gebusi at first—including their name. Our ethnographic maps and the missionary who had told us about the "Kramo" had placed a group called the "Bibo" at our present location. But the people of Yibihilu found this terribly funny. They brought us a large starchy banana and indicated that this was the only "bibo" in their territory—one of their three-dozen varieties of plantains. There were no people called "Bibo," they said in no uncertain terms. Their own identity, and also their language, was "Gebusi."

The discoveries of fieldwork had already brought us full circle. We had gone halfway around the world to study a Kramo people who didn't exist. We had projected their presence based on our incomplete maps and our imaginations. But the people we did find—and came to like so deeply—were, in name, an undiscovered group. As green and insecure as we were at the time, this was a comfort. In retrospect, though, our nominal "discovery" of the Gebusi exposed as much about us as it did about our tribal friends—namely, the Western desire to label other peoples and to project onto them our own sense of discovery. Like many anthropologists, we

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confronted our own projections at the same time, and in many respects for the very reason, that we were trying to reach out and understand the lives of others.

Beyond the Gebusi's name, we also quickly encountered one of their central concepts—one that took much longer to understand. With predictable difficulty, we had been trying to explain why we had come to the rainforest. To Gebusi, we obviously didn't fit the mold of other Whites they had previously seen or heard about—patrol officers, who ordered people around and then disappeared for another year, and Christian missionaries, who read from a big book and told villagers to give up their customs and believe in a new spirit. We tried to convey that we wanted to learn their language, to understand their songs, to watch their dances, to join in their feasts—in short, to be with them as they lived and to learn what they were like. In a flash, they seemed to grasp our meaning: we wanted to learn their *kogwayay*. They appeared so certain of this that we had no choice or desire but to agree with them. But we had no idea what *kogwayay* actually meant! In truth, however, they were entirely correct.

Kogwayay is—or at least was, during that early period—the single word that best describes the heart of Gebusi culture. In a way, the term represents their concept of culture itself—the beliefs, practices, and styles of living that are special and unique to Gebusi as a people. At one level, *kogwayay* refers to customs that make their culture different from others. As Gebusi themselves used the term, it refers especially to their distinctive traditions of dancing, singing, and body decoration. But what is the term's deeper meaning? The Gebusi were not much help here. For them, *kogwayay* was a catchall marker of cultural distinction rather than a tool for dissecting it.

When you think about it, it's not surprising that people have a hard time explaining concepts that are central to their culture. Such meanings are often "beyond words." How easy would it be for the average American to define and explain what "love" is to someone who had never heard of this term? In the case of *kogwayay*, we were fortunate that the word breaks down into three distinct units of meaning, what linguists call morphemes: *kog-*, *-wa-*, and *-yay*. *Kog* conveys "togetherness," "friendship," and "similarity." These meanings reflect the collective and communal nature of Gebusi life. Gebusi prefer to do things with as many other people as possible. They hate being alone; they are the opposite of loners. The *wa* component of the word is the Gebusi root of *wa-la*, "to talk." It refers to pleasant



Two unrelated young men of Yibihilu indicate their friendship by dressing in a similar costume, 1981.

casual conversations that are roundly shared. This is what the men did in the longhouse at night—they “*wa-la’d*” by sharing news and gossip, joking, fantasizing, and telling stories around the small glow of the resin lantern. Hour after hour and evening after evening, I came to realize how rare it was for Gebusi to get angry with one another in these gabfests. Disagreements were tempered by friendly smiles, embarrassments covered over by jokes and shifts of conversation.

Yay supplied the exuberant conclusion to *kog-wa-yay*, its exclamation point. Particularly for men, to *yay* or to *kay* is to cheer, yell, joke, and cry out as loudly and happily as possible—and preferably in union with others. These yells have bodily meaning as well. When a Gebusi calls out in concert with those around him, his “breath-heart” (*solof*) rushes out and mingles with that of others. To *yay* or *kay* is to send forth and unite human spiritual energy; it is a vital assertion of collective life.

Taken together, what do *kog-*, *-wa-*, and *-yay* mean? And why should we care? No single English word captures their essence—and this fact is important. As anthropologists, we are charged with learning and conveying concepts that are important to other people even and especially as these exceed our initial understanding. *Kogwayay* was clearly important to Gebusi. The word was frequently used and talked about, it evoked strong feelings, and it was highly elaborated in central rituals and ceremonies. In Gebusi culture, *kogwayay* was what anthropologist Sherry Ortner has more generally called a “key symbol.” Collectively, the three meanings of the word—togetherness, talk, and cheering—conveyed core Gebusi values of happy social unity, of living in good company with one another. And

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kogwayay permeated Gebusi social life. This was evident on a daily basis and was epitomized at important events such as feasts, dances, spirit séances, and the initiation of teenagers into adulthood.

Although *kogwayay* was a powerful and deeply held concept, it did not stand alone. It highlighted the positive side of Gebusi culture, the bright side of their moon. Most peoples try to depict themselves in a good and favorable light, and the Gebusi were no exception. If you were asked to name central values in American and other Western societies, you might use words such as "freedom," "economic success," "love," "self-expression," "family values," or "tolerance." Of course, these are sometimes ideals more than realities. Many marriages end in divorce; people can be shackled by poverty; and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, sex, or age can be as deeply ingrained as it is illegal. A critic from another culture might argue that American society is cutthroat, egotistical, hedonistic, imperialistic, and much less equal or free than we like to believe. If culture is an assertion of ideals and values, these can sometimes hide problems or difficulties. In this sense, culture is a double-edged sword of beliefs and representations. On the one hand, it emphasizes values and ideals that are often, if not typically, good and healthy. On the other hand, extolling these values can cover up less pleasant realities. Certainly it would be shortsighted to dismiss the importance of cultural values. Where would we be without them? So, too, it is good to appreciate the values of other peoples, including Gebusi. But it is also important to recognize the underside of culture—realities that are neglected by cultural ideals. Both sides of this coin are important.

Where do we draw the line between an appreciative view of culture and a critical view of its inequalities? Do we emphasize the fight to free the slaves during the American Civil War? Or the history of slavery that made that war necessary? Do we emphasize the human benefit of toppling a dictator like Saddam Hussein? Or the tens of thousands of lives lost as a result? Such questions have few simple answers. But asking them makes us more aware of both the positive power of culture and the problems it can hide.



Gebusi culture can be viewed from this same perspective. The good company of *kogwayay* was a strong practice as well as a wonderful ideal. But *kogwayay* was also controlled and dominated by men. It was men

rather than women who collectively cheered and publicly yelled. Men were the ones who gathered for public talk each evening on the large porch that overlooked the river. During this time, women were largely confined to whispered conversations in a cramped female sleeping room along one wall of the longhouse, away from the men and older boys. In terms of decision making, it was typically men who determined which settlement their families would live in—who would have togetherness, and with whom. Men took charge of the events most strongly associated with *kog-wayay*—ritual feasts, dances, spirit séances, and initiations. At feasts, men from the host village would proudly present visitors with piles of cooked sago starch—though this food was produced by women's labor. In the evenings, it was men who dressed up in stunning costumes to dance. At initiations, young men were the main focus and were decorated most elaborately. As if to deny the notion of motherhood, boys were nurtured to manhood not by females but, as described in Chapter 5, by the men themselves—through the transmission of male life force from one generation to the next.

Male control was especially pronounced at spirit séances. Late in the evening, men would gather in the dark longhouse and arrange themselves around the spirit medium while he sat, smoked tobacco, and went into a controlled trance. The medium's own spirit would leave his body and be replaced by a soul from the spirit world. After a while, the new spirit's voice would start chanting through the spirit medium, whispering at first and then singing in soft falsetto tones. As the words of the spirit became clearer, the men clustered around the medium and formed a chorus to echo him. Their singing encouraged the medium's spirit to sing louder and with greater confidence. Gradually, the spirit's chants became full songs, each line being repeated and chorused in full-throated harmony by the male chorus.

Gebusi women, however, were excluded from the séance (though they could hear it while sitting or dozing in their own quarters). The men, meanwhile, shouted, joked, and laughed in an all-night songfest of masculine bravado. Perhaps most strikingly, the primary spirits who sang through the male spirit medium were young women. And not just any women, but gorgeous young spirit women who longed to have sex and joke with Gebusi men. In effect, the men's séance singing voiced, projected, and received back their sexual fantasies of women—at the same

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time real Gebusi women could be beaten by husbands or brothers for being flirtatious. By contrast, spirit women were literally embodied by the men themselves, first in the voice of the male spirit medium and then in the men's collective chorus. Spirit séances were, at least to some degree, a male fantasy that celebrated men's sexual desires at the same time that real Gebusi women were excluded, controlled, and sometimes disparaged.

Given this male bias, what were we to make of Gebusi "good company"? Was *kogwayay* merely a cultural value that disguised male dominance over women? This question brings us to the crux of anthropology's appreciation of cultural diversity, on the one hand, and its critique of inequity on the other. For the most part, Gebusi women accepted and appreciated the culture they lived in. At spirit séances, they sometimes took offense at male joking, but more often they indulged and genuinely enjoyed it. Women were excited and galvanized by ritual feasts and initiations, and they actively played their own roles at these events. On these and other occasions, they enjoyed interacting with women who visited from other settlements. It was true that Gebusi women often lived in the cultural shadow of Gebusi men. Sometimes they resisted their second-class status. But for the most part they accepted and embraced it. Women swelled with pride at their own and the men's accomplishments, even when men presented the fruits of women's work as their own. So, too, women tended to accept men's collective prerogative to take violent action against sorcery suspects, and usually as well the right of a man to beat his wife.

In many if not most regions of the world, the activities and experiences of men and women differ. Among the peoples and cultures of New Guinea, the division between male and female realms is often especially marked. Women had their own world, their own lore, and their own female-centered interactions. I found the social life of Gebusi men, for the most part, to be a lot of fun. I enjoyed their banter and horseplay, smoked their tobacco in big bamboo tubes, joked with them, and participated in community feasts.

To both men and women, and for Eileen and me as well, Gebusi children were a great source of pleasure and happiness. We took a particular liking to an impish little boy named Sayu. He was four or five years old and simply the most charismatic child either of us had ever known. His mother, Boyl, was an attractive woman with a broad smile and, we

thought, the strongest intellect in the village. Her husband, Silap, was one of the more important men in the village, one of the principal founders of the main longhouse, and a feisty character with a quick smile.



In the beginning, we didn't know what would happen next. We knew the people of Yibihilu were vibrant and welcoming and their culture was alive with song and celebration. We had naiveté, energy, and trust in our purpose. These were indispensable for fieldwork that was both deeply difficult and ultimately limitless. After several weeks of visiting, it was time for us and for the people of Yibihilu to decide if a house should be built for us at "the place of the deep waters." The villagers continued to be friendly, and some of them were becoming our friends. But they were also very different from us, and we felt the force of this difference.

One night, the conversation finally turned—uncertainly, via Hawi—to how long we would stay in Yibihilu. Dusk was turning into night, and the men and boys around me became silhouettes with bones in their noses and feathers in their hair. Trophy skulls of pigs and cassowaries swayed from the rafters. A chunk of resin sizzled on the stone lamp. I looked up and saw people and personalities I was beginning to know. But they also appeared alien. Some were covered head to foot with the scaly skin of ringworm. Others had streaks of soot or caked ulcers on their skin or large cracks in the thick calluses that lined their feet. Their toes splayed, as if they had been born to stride along mossy log bridges that we inched across timidly. Even when sitting down, I towered over them. My gawky six-foot white frame stood out against their dark bodies, which averaged five feet four inches at full height.

Their skill and prowess in the forest dwarfed my own. How quickly and silently they could climb a tree, club a lizard, shoot a fish, or ford a stream. I knew that until recently they had eaten the flesh of persons killed as sorcerers. Their polished arrows were propped in the corner. Many layers of their culture remained obscure to me. The joy of our beginning made me question whether my giddiness would change to disillusionment when the novelty of our warm welcome wore off. But the die, it seemed, had already been cast. After undergoing years of scholarly training, journeying halfway around the world, and enduring mosquitoes and

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leeches—and with our personal and professional identity on the line—how could we turn back? They asked, “How long do you think you will stay?” I heard myself say, “Two years.” My head swam as I heard the hubbub around me. But in the best Gebusi tradition of “everything is going to be fine,” the discussion quickly turned to where our thatched house was to be built. On this side of the village, or on that one? The following morning, strings were laid on the ground to mark where the walls would be. And our house was built above them.

Note: See Gebusi video clips and commentary on the author's reentrance to Gebusi society in 2013 (“Anthro & Studying Culture”) and on Gebusi language in the field (“Language in Practice”) on www.bruceknauft.com → Gebusi.

BROADER CONNECTIONS

Fieldwork and Culture

- Cultural anthropologists such as Bruce study culture through **participant-observation**. Extended research over longer periods of time results in long-term or **longitudinal fieldwork**.
- **Gift exchange** and **reciprocity** are important ways that human social interactions are established and reinforced—including with anthropologists in the field. Gebusi employ exchange and reciprocity in food-giving and in gift-exchange names between friends.
- Cultural anthropologists are often distinguished from government administrators, missionaries, or aid workers in that they typically try to participate in local means of reciprocity and exchange. Professionally, cultural anthropologists attempt to observe and learn about diverse peoples rather than actively trying to change their customs, behavior, or beliefs.
- The impact of external influence or **colonialism** is diverse; Gebusi largely appreciated Australian colonial presence, but the neighboring Bedamini people, who killed many Gebusi in raids, resisted and resented it.
- Many peoples of the world have been influenced by external threat and pressure either from outside their country or nation (**external colonialism** or **imperialism**) or from inside it (**internal colonialism** or **nationalist domination**).
- Among Gebusi and other peoples, **culture** may be defined as a shared and public system of meanings, beliefs, and values.

- **Cultural change** not only alters practices and beliefs but can reinvent them in new ways over time (the **reinvention of culture** or the reinvention of tradition). Gebusi culture intensified in part because Australians pacified their tribal enemies while introducing them to modern goods such as steel knives and axes.
- Most peoples assert **cultural values** that they emphasize and share as a positive belief system or **cultural ideology**. Among Gebusi, deep cultural values are reflected in *kog-wa-yay*—the “good company” of togetherness, friendly talking, and exuberant or playful cheering or yelling.
- *Kogwayay* among Gebusi can be seen as a **key symbol** in Gebusi culture—a cultural concept or emphasis that is widely shared, prominent, emotionally powerful, and frequently demonstrated.
- In many societies, positive cultural values are complemented by troubling or challenging features of social domination, conflict, or disorder that are downplayed or papered over. Among Gebusi these include **gender domination** of men by women and the **scapegoating** of people through accusations of sorcery.
- Cultural anthropologists often undertake ethnographic fieldwork that is at turns both enjoyable and challenging or difficult. This is true both in remote areas, such as the Papua New Guinea rainforest, and in highly developed areas, including anthropological fieldwork in modern cities in Western or non-Western countries.

Chapter

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