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Chapter 7

In what ways had the Gebusi become Christian by 1998? What was the respective role of: a) white missionaries b) Papua New Guineans from other parts of the country c) cultural beliefs and orientations to modernity d) the prospect or lure of material rewards and the decisions and actions of the Gebusi themselves?

After Bruce Knauft and company returned to the United States several years went by before Knauft would make his way back to Gebusi settlements, sixteen years to be precise. And in that time Gebusi culture had dramatically morphed into a society run by time, and Christianity. This new lifestyle, one might argue, was a loss of Gebusi culture. The stringent practices of Christianity are a far cry from the traditional practices of the Gebusi (i.e. sorcery investigations, rituals, and séances). Not to imply that change was not already occurring, in fact, “[b]y 1980, most Gebusi cut their hair short rather than tying it in dreadlocks,” Knauft continues to characterize the influence of outside forces throughout his second encounter with the Gebusi (114).

“Some men had even sported carefully trimmed sideburns reminiscent of Australian patrol officers,” (114).

Other influences were proliferated by cash cropping, road projects that would connect settlements to other parts of the country, and other “extensive intrusions such as missionization,” work performed by missionaries (114). Given the life expectancy of a Gebusi person was short, a

lot can and did happen to change Gebusi life between 1982-1998. Witnessing an initiation ritual was the falling climax of Knauft's field work in the 1980s. Since he returned in 1998 "only three," of the six young men he saw initiated "were still living," (117).

Thus while "[t]he biggest visible change was their clothing," the Gebusi had overtime all but totally indoctrinated a theology that condemns rituals, séances and killing of any kind (118). Whether it be Catholicism, Evangelicalism, or Seventh Day Adventism, Gebusi settlements adopted the outside influence of missionaries. The most prominent rationale for this drastic shift was the idea of success and accomplishment in life. One preacher was known for having nice clothing, a nice home, and other material that portrayed a prosperous life. He preached "his way of life and his God as a model for Gebusi to follow," and they did (121). The preacher's method was one that required hard work, and consistency to actualize that grace.

Throughout the 1990s, Gebusi men pined for wristwatches as well to portray their own success "[t]hough most Gebusi men could not tell time,"—time becomes an important cultural marker when it comes to practicing religion (119). One of the Gebusi "had said that church would begin when the sun rose above the trees," in a conversation with Knauft (119). In this conversation Knauft gets a glimpse at what other ways Gebusi have become more Christian since his last visit. Gebusi "sang less with their own spirit mediums," and they didn't experience spirits as confidants, they no longer asked "their advice about sickness or sorcery..." (121).

"The Gebusi world of spiritual choices and consequences was no longer governed so strongly by kinship or clanship but increasingly by a man's choice," (125).

Within all the major changes to Gebusi lifestyle was the option of which religious path to take. The Catholic faith "was taken as the 'easiest' faith," for the Gebusi because it allowed them to keep parts of their tradition other faiths would disallow (122). For example, "dancing and

smoking tobacco,” was not as strongly condemned by Catholics as in other faiths (122). On the other end of the spectrum were the Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) “nomad’s most stringent Christian denomination,” which preached a very ‘hard’ fiery-brimstone message (120).

SDA placed bans on “smoking, drinking, dancing, and observing traditional rituals, SDA prohibited the eating of pork as well as smooth-skinned fish,” they kept Saturday, the Sabbath day, holy by banning all forms of labor including gardening (122). Much like the other faiths, SDA emphasized a long-term reward for observance of faith. Somewhere between the Catholic religion and that of the SDA, in terms of strictness was the Evangelical influential force on Gebusi life. Regardless of the direction, major changes had now taken place, the “village shaman, started going to church himself,” in one instance, and “attending traditional feasts was condemned as irreligious,” according to some sects (121, 123).

Relative to Papua New Guineans, it would seem a full embrace on behalf of the Gebusi, as they adopt various influences in a changing society. Perhaps all the sorcery investigations, and homicides contributed to the sentiment, but certainly the roads, and missionary trips play a role as well. The Gebusi were already known to change the location of their settlement once food was sourced in one area, and in one recorded instance, “villagers relocated it close to the Catholic Church, thinking this would be a strong focus for establishing their new lives,” (120-121). Another modern twist to the new religious practice was the inclusion of women, whereas women were not integral to séances, included in tobacco smoking rituals, or sorcery investigations. Inside the churches “pews were divided evenly, with women on the left side and men on the right,” demonstrating an inclusion not necessarily an integration but still an orientation into modernity (132).

Be that as it may this form of colonial intrusion had a strong impact on the Gebusi. An unoptimistic view sees that “much of the value of Gebusi culture had been lost,” just before the turn of the century (131). The good news being that the “Christian way of life had reduced,” violence and more specifically homicide for the Gebusi, converting the rate of homicide from the highest globally to zero (131). The culture that once ran on nature, now ran on ticking time, and “activities were measured against a timeline of hoped-for success,” which gave religion a platform (119-120).

“The reward is deferred, but the deadline is now, since Judgement Day can come at any time,” (126).

The Gebusi now sang spiritual (religious hymnal) in the daytime, as opposed to practicing séances at night. The spiritual concerns were more serious and tempered. Apart from the changes in the clothing there were changing interests in material pursuit for the Gebusi since the early 1980s. Barely under two decades, it would seem from an outside perspective that the Gebusi culture had made significant changes. Clearly, “they have been changed and influenced by Christianity,” (135).