



Journal of the Linguistic Society of Papua New Guinea

ISSN: 0023-1959

Vol. 31 No. 2, 2013

PAPUA NEW GUINEA'S DISTINCTIVE CULTURE: ADVICE FOR INVESTORS

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ABSTRACT

PNG is not a primitive culture but a rich elaborate set of traditions which have evolved to meet the distinctive social needs of this country. For PNG to secure a prosperous future, with hopes to continue oil exploration and mining in rural highlands areas, there must be an understanding of the local culture and customs. First, a good relationship must be established with the 'big men', the village elders. The community will listen when the 'big men' speak. Linked with this aspect is respect for the cultural practices. Their interrelated cultural, religious and social practices, slightly modified by Christian practices, are important to them. People rebel and will not cooperate when others do not respect their culture. Secondly, the benefits of the project must be obvious; immediate rewards, as well as, long term. The profits must be seen to improve the immediate living conditions, access to services such as improvement of roads, the building of schools and clinics and the allocation of targeted educational scholarships and work experience. With the government enticing companies to invest in PNG with improvements to the business environment, more new projects are expected to operate in rural areas. They will only succeed if they work within the cultural parameters.

INTRODUCTION

PNG can secure a prosperous future if there is a greater understanding of the culture and related customs. To bring another world view into this environment, without making an attempt to understand, would be detrimental to progress. If the country hopes to continue oil exploration and mining and invite overseas investors and encourage, in rural areas, especially in the highlands of PNG, there must be an understanding and meeting of the people's felt needs. This is the most successful way to proceed.

Village Viewpoint

Traditional customs are well suited for a rural, isolated village existence. This Village Viewpoint is the default view of life. The Village Viewpoint that explains life as a sum of all the religious, social and personal experiences of the village and rural life; a holistic approach based on social links and networks that have evolved over thousands of years and are inherently and internally coherent. The use of 'Magic' and 'Saguma' are just means of recognising these ancient and proven means of explaining the events. In comparison is the urban, educated, 'western' Critical Rationale Viewpoint that explains 'happenings' as separate individual events that may not be connected to other events (Gesch, 2010: 43). The Critical Rationale Viewpoint is less 'closed' and more 'open' to accepting alternate reasons for an event. Even though these Viewpoints continuously overlap, it is the Village Viewpoint that is the first point of reference. The Critical Rationale Worldview is secondary, but also important. Accepting the fact that both viewpoints are evident and coexist avoids the sense of

downgrading and diminishing the value of each worldview. Negative labelling can have a very detrimental effect on the people, as it devalues what people believe and their history.

Understanding the important cultural elements of the Village Viewpoint is necessary when asking rural communities to embark on new projects that could lead to economic prosperity. Even though the bulk of citizens reside in strong Christian spaces (Douglas, 2003: 8), there is a strong link between the traditional Village Viewpoint and expectations of modernity and ‘cargo’ that follows.

CLAN

For most people, especially in traditional rural villages, live in a complex social organisation called a clan. The clan did not only consist of living people, but of people who have died and those that had not been born. The clan creates protection for a person in a world of enemies. The members of the clan, (the ‘wantoks’) give advice when a person is in trouble or when a person needs guidance in times of decision making. Wealth is clan focused therefore, praising, celebrations and feasts are organised to recognise the new developments, the new infrastructure changes and the improvement of life for all members of the community (Mantovani, 1984: 149). The entire extended family is involved in supporting each other; including raising the school fees for some of their students. Reciprocity is an expected social norm. ‘If you helped me, I will help you’. It’s not ‘every man for himself’.

In many PNG societies, life is measured in corporate wealth. Wealth often linked to the cargo cult mentality, which implies wealth has more to do with luck and blessings from the spirits. Wealth that is obtained should be shared. There are examples of residents of some rural societies, but not all, in PNG that become angry, and even destructive if a member of a clan has more wealth than the rest of them. For example, garden produce, such as watermelons and bananas are slashed, live stock killed and houses with tin rooves burnt down. Homogeneous lifestyles are essential to keep the peace.

‘BIG MAN’ AND POLYGAMY

The clan is run by a ‘big man’ who insists on solidarity and denial of personal desires. No one is neutral; everyone in the clan is either a friend or an enemy (Hovey, 1986: 104). The ‘big man’ utilises ambition, energy and hard-work of his clan members to build up wealth for himself and his and supporters (Bellwood, 1978: 94). He then secures his position by assisting young men with bride price and other forms of exchange (Chao, 1984: 134). It is also believed by many that the ‘big men’ have won their political campaigns because of powerful spells (Gesch, 2010).

Polygamy is still practiced in many parts of the highlands of the country, especially by the 'big men' of the community. First, marriages are considered political alliances and a sign of prestige and influence. Secondly, the number of children is a sign of wealth. A marriage without children is not regarded as a true marriage (Mantovani, 1990: 374). Thirdly, the number of wives is a sign of prosperity. Reputation is all about the number of children, the size of the garden and the contribution to ceremonies. Girls are seen as wealth because of the bride price system. Boys are seen in terms of security. The more boys you have the most secure and powerful you become (Davai, 2011). Women, generally, do not see their role in this society as degrading (Pollard, 2000: 4, 6).

SORCERY

The concept of sorcery and witchcraft pervades the whole culture. It is generally believed that the spirits of the dead are strong and have a great influence on the living (Swain & Trompf, 1995: 2009). People are afraid of the spirits and the possibility of a curse. Spirits are either a cultural ancestral hero, commonly known as the living dead, or evil spirits. It is believed that these spirits can be easily offended or can cause harm. Feasts are frequently organised just to keep the spirits happy or to contact the spirits of the dead to find out who caused the death of a person.

Western-style formal education has been in PNG for a long time but education has not necessarily changed attitudes to the spirits. Many of the tertiary students still wear 'good luck charms'. Some can give perfectly adequate scientific explanations in exams but nevertheless look for the 'real' reason for illness and misfortune in the activity of the spirits. Even at Pacific Adventist University, a Christian University, there are no unexplained tragedies. Bad things are caused by the malevolent activities of sorcerers. 'Beliefs in sorcery and witchcraft, masalais and evil spirits, and traditional models of causality... are well entrenched among educated PNG Youth' (Vlaardingerbroek, 1990: 341).

GENDER EQUITY

Traditional social and cultural attitudes are still a problem, especially in patrilineal societies, as opposed to matrilineal societies where women are respected. '[W]omen are oppressed from the cradle to the grave... Experience shows they are molested as children, they are seduced as adolescents; they are raped. In their maturity they have little economic control over any asset apart from their own bodies; throughout their whole life they are threatened and receive physical beatings; and in their old age they are terrorised, threatened, tortured and murdered because they are believed to be witches' (Brunton 1990: 353). This is especially evident in the Chimbu provinces where most women become victims of suspected

sorceries (Davai 2011). Men are very much in charge of their wives; wife beating is common. There is still a belief among some husbands that they have ‘purchased their wives with bride price’ and therefore, entitled to teach the women who is the boss; they will never learn otherwise! Despite the horrific statistics and stories, the Government of PNG have done little to protect victims of gender-based violence. The lack of ineffective policing to prevent and investigate gender-based violence, means violence against women goes largely unpunished (Opinion Editorial, Amnesty International, 17 Sept, 2010). It is considered a family issue and the authorities have nothing to do with it. However, it is now changing in urban areas as more women are now exposing violence (Davai 2011). ‘Women are an endangered sex’ (Brunton 1990:360)!

Law and order issues, including rape, have become a great concern of the country. Credible research has shown that 75% of women and children experience family violence; this includes rape (Law Reform Commission, 1996) and 60% of men have participated in pack rape (Institute of Medical Research Study, 2006). Even though more girls have access to schools these days, there is still gender disparity. Women are still less likely to go to school, be in paid employment and more likely to suffer violence and poor health and are at greater risk than men in PNG from the country's HIV/AIDS epidemic. Even though PNG is a signatory to a number of international conventions that support gender equity and empowerment of women, these conventions have not translated into national policies, strategies and laws (Clarke 2010-2011).

TIME

Attitude to time can be frustrating. No one prepares for anything until the last moment. Nothing is ever in short supply: there is either plenty or none! ‘Time as we know it has been an unknown concept to Papua New Guineans’ (Hovey 1986: 100). To the locals, time is based on ancestral time; the living memory of events. There is no point looking ahead to the future as it was unpredictable and unknown. ‘Since the Melanesians are looking towards the past, all that has happened in the past is ‘before’ them, and whatever might happen in the future is ‘behind’ their backs, out of sight and therefore unknown’ (Mbiti 1969: 16–17 quoted in Bartle 2005: 33). For many people in PNG, time is not an important consideration but the event itself. Recounting the past and revelling in the joys of past experiences was far more important than anticipating the future of possible hardships. ‘Gutpela sindaun’, is reliving the past good times, sitting in peace, relaxing, eating and enjoying each other’s company. This is what life is all about! Enjoyment is found in savouring the event. The important thing is that things *happen*, not that they happen *on time*.

This 'gutpela sindaun' is essential for health, success, fertility, respect, honour and influence (Fugmann 1984: 282).

IMPLICATIONS FOR A PROSPEROUS FUTURE

It must be remembered that the first point of reference is the Village Worldview. Projects managers must allow the villages to have time to think about the project and discover how village life will be enhanced. Any dialogue that diminishes, submerses or downplays the Village Viewpoint will have no guarantee of success. Cultural genocide is perceived as devastating and utterly destructive to the people (Tinker 1993: 5). Any projects that can bring prosperity to a village or clan must be linked to cultural and religious heritage. The effort and rewards have to improve the whole village. Even any practices that have the goal of modernising a culture must be on the owners' terms (Gesch 2010: 57).

For any project to succeed in rural PNG, the 'big man' must be given the credit for the initiative. There cannot be any losing 'face' within the clan or with other groups. Working through the 'big man', ensuring he is shown respect. By giving the 'big man' 'cargo' illustrates his power and means to provide for his followers. Asking the 'big man' to organise a feast and utilise these spells or blessing, is also a way of guaranteeing success with the project.

History has shown that education does not necessarily change deep seated cultural norms. Ridiculing the possibility of a curse or the work of the spirits only fosters distrust with the 'outsider'. Projects that have the goal of bringing prosperity to the community need to allow the residents of the communities to acknowledge their traditional beliefs.

The attitude to women is gradually changing in the urban areas, but traditional practices are still well entrenched in traditional rural areas. Providing targeted scholarships and work opportunities, especially for women, is a good start in changing gender disparity. Most Papua New Guineans are not vying for modern luxuries; they are satisfied if their basic needs are met; employment, housing and education of their children. The list of essential needs are often described as reliable electricity, clean water, literacy classes, sufficient cash to pay for school fees and sufficient cash to buy a few luxuries (Douglas 2003: 7). Most people move to an urban area for better living conditions, such as closer proximity to schools hospitals and other services (Ridley 1990: 379). When the project allows the resources from the project to benefit the whole community (Polome 1990: 347), it is then time to celebrate, thank God for the blessings and have time for 'gutpela sindaun'. Projects that promote prosperity and infrastructural development in the community must be honoured.

As experienced by the Catholic Church, innovation and planning, with the aim of greater involvement of the community led to a greater level of supervision but the positive effort was greater cooperation (Young 1990: 324). Their experience shows that 'project leaders' have to link the project to some spiritual dimension and reward system. Maximum community participation, including village elders, is essential. Money alone will not guarantee success!

SUMMARY

The government is wishing to use the abundant overseas financial aid to improve the infrastructure and basic health and education services of the country; only then will the country have the ability to become prosperous. To achieve this goal, cultural aspects must be considered. First, remember all cultural, religious and social practices are interrelated. Secondly, any new projects must bring immediate rewards, as well as, long term benefits. Rewards have to benefit all. Thirdly, there must be respect and credit given to the 'big man' and the village elders. Asking the 'big man' to organise a feast and bless the project is will go a long way in guaranteeing success (Gesch 2010: 61). Fourthly, never ridicule a blessing or a curse; it only causes suspicion and distrust. Fifthly, encourage the project to provide targeted scholarships, for education and work experiences. Sixthly, use the profits of the project to improve living conditions of the surrounding community: such as improving the road, building a health clinic or school.

CONCLUSION

PNG is not a primitive culture but a rich elaborate set of traditions which have evolved to meet the distinctive social needs of this amazing country. Papua New Guinea is described as the 'most complicated anthropological jigsaw on the earth's face' (Tropmpf 1994: xiii). The Village Viewpoint is the first point of reference. Even though the Critical Rationale Viewpoint can logically and scientifically explain the reason for events, it is secondary to the Village Viewpoint. Both worldviews coexist in the one person and both are regarded as important, honourable (Gesch 2010: 58) and unique (Nakata, 2006: 270). The Village Viewpoint that is the default; life, death, happiness and worry, obligation and reciprocity, wealth and survival are all viewed from the clan point of view. Even though 96 % of the people described themselves as Christians (National Statistical Office 2000: 25), Christian traditions have been modified to fit into the traditional customs and lifestyle issues important in the Village Viewpoint (Bartle 2005: 14).

The government is offering an attractive business environment with the aim of encouraging overseas business opportunities, especially in mining, oil and gas exploration. The development of fair competition and consumer protection policies, the expansion of the country's transport and infrastructure utilities, the solving of the housing shortage, by provision of a safe, secure and stable environment, the building leadership capacity, as well as, attempting to improve health and education services are all factors that encourage business to invest in PNG (PNG Medium Term Development Plan 2010–2015: 20, 24, 31, 32, 43). Since many new businesses will potentially operate in rural areas, it is important they consider the culture and work with the village leaders. Failure to do so will result in an unsatisfactory relationship.

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