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Chapter 12
Violence Reduction Among the Gebusi of Papua New Guinea – And Across Humanity

Bruce M. Knauft

One of the striking variations across humanity is the degree to which people kill, or do not kill, one another. The homicide rate in Japan, at 0.44 per 100,000 populations, is less than one-twelfth the U.S. homicide rate (approximately 5.4 killings per 100,000 people). The U.S. rate is itself almost ten times less than the current homicide rate in Honduras, at 58 per 100,000 per annum. Overall, homicide rates across the world currently vary by a factor of approximately 133.

Human diversity in lethal violence is also amply evident over time. The rate of killing from all sources in Europe during World War II—the bloodiest conflict known to date—claimed between 50 and 60 million lives, resulting in a homicide rate that can be estimated to be between approximately 455 and 600 persons per 100,000 per annum. Against this, the homicide rate has in recent decades been between 0 and 3 persons per 100,000 persons annually in Western Europe. (Liechtenstein has registered a killing rate of zero out of a population of more than 35,000 in most recent years.) The rate is somewhat higher in Eastern Europe, between 5 and 10 per 100,000. Averaging out these figures and comparing them against the mid-point of killings during World War II, it can be said that the rate of lethal violence from all sources in Europe is currently less than 1/100th of what it was during the 6 years between 1939 and 1945.

On a global basis, the rate of homicide, as reflected in international homicide statistics of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), shows a rather expectable pattern. The most economically developed parts of the world, such as Europe, East and Southeast Asia, North America, Australia, have a dramatically lower rate of homicidal killing than does sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, however, rates of killing are also high in many countries of Latin America and are moderately high also in Russia. In addition, homicide rates in the mid-East are reported to be relatively low apart from violence associated with warfare and related conflicts (Fig. 12.1).

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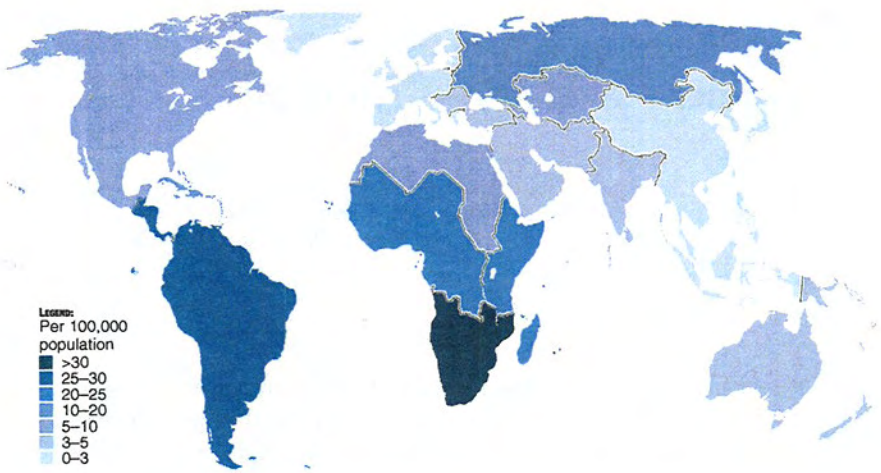

Note: The boundaries and designations used on this map do not imply endorsement or acceptance
Source: UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates

Fig. 12.1 Intentional homicide, rate per 100,000 population, by subregion, 2004 (from UNODC, 2010)

Questions can immediately be raised about the quality and coverage of such data. Indeed a range of methodological challenges confront the comparative study of human killing in modern times much less prehistoric or evolutionary ones (cf., Knauft. 1987c, 1991). Not only do modern governments generally keep violence associated with warfare or other forms of state-sponsored violence separate from interpersonal killings as "homicides" or "murders," the relationship between violent deaths, reporting, registering of information, and national tabulation of killings and their categorization is highly variable between as well as within countries.

Given what we know about these factors in general and qualitative terms, it seems plausible to assert in general terms that current rates of human killing from all causes are high and in some cases very high in the most economically undeveloped countries while being low to very low in the most highly developed countries. The economic rise of East Asia, including China, previously Japan, and now Southeast Asia and India, is consistent with this trend, as is the continuing high rate of killing in Sub-Saharan Africa as well as in Latin America, which harbors the greatest economic disparity between rich and poor people of any world area.

In terms of large political units, it seems evident when comparing the first half of the 20th century to the current period from the end of World War II to the present, that bloody conflicts between major world powers—as also occurred between kingdoms or empires in the past —have now been sharply reduced, resulting in low rates of killing in most developed countries. For instance, the United States has not been afflicted by massive loss of life through violence since the Civil War, which claimed between 600,000 and 700,000 lives. This toll amounts to many times more violent deaths than the United States has sustained cumulatively from violent deaths from all causes since that time.

However, this reduction—the ostensible peace dividend of economic late modernity —has been complemented if not intensified by the redirection, export, facilitation, and failure to forestall slaughter and human wastage in poor countries, including by structural means and the exploits of the international political economy, from which rich countries benefit. As Melko (1990), among others, has documented, relative peacefulness among developed countries and world areas corresponds with the increase and concentration of violence within poorer and less developed countries which are for the most part former colonies of Western political powers. These processes variously involve proxy combat, covert support, and the indirect impacts of violence—in addition to occasional direct invasion by foreign powers themselves. This pattern of external exploitation is related to and complemented by internal dissension, weak government, and bloody feuding between local or internationally supported militias within many of the world's most violent and unstable countries and between factions across them. Even when violent conflict is not caused by external threat and coercion, it is certainly exacerbated, sometimes exponentially, by these.

In Iraq, for instance, detailed statistical calculations document that at least 601,000 Iraqis died in war-related violence between March 2003 and July 2006 (Burnham et al., 2006). Given that the population of Iraq during this period of three and one-third years was approximately 26.5 million, the resulting homicide rate is approximately 680 per 100,000 per annum. This is significantly higher than the upper estimate of the rate of killing in Europe during World War II. Though it may be debated how much of this violence was directly as opposed to indirectly caused by the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the impact of American military invasion and its related effects have resulted in a rate of killing that was more than 100 times greater than the current U.S. homicide rate of 5.4.

It is not surprising that tallies and rates of killing are kept vigilantly separate by state governments for actions sanctioned or supported by the state itself and those considered voluntaristic or personal in nature. The latter are typically characterized and publicized as "crimes," whereas the former, when they are publically calculated and publicized at all, are considered legitimate acts of national security. It should be noted in this respect that the United States intervened militarily against 24 countries since the end of World War II, an average of one country every two-and-a-half years. Armed interventions in a range of countries, including Viet Nam, Laos, Cambodia, Chile, El Salvador, and Nicaragua—as well as Afghanistan and Iraq—have resulted in significant increased rates of killing in those countries during resulting periods of political instability. These more formal military intrusions are in addition to proxy interventions and "black-bag" wars by the United States and other world areas across parts of Latin America and other world areas (e.g., Grandin, 2006). In a post-colonial era, such incursions are typically designed to topple political regimes or, alternatively, repress political resistance rather than annex new territory outright (see Knauft, 2007c). These interventions may not directly cause or explicitly sanction ensuing national or regional violence, but they pave the way for and abet its escalation.

Patterns by which internal armed conflict is triggered, fueled, or facilitated by the interests of regional and world powers beyond or in addition to the United States are characteristic of a number of the world's other major trouble spots. These prominently include eastern sections of the Democratic Republic for of the Congo (DRC), which provide a large treasure trove of mineral wealth that is easily exploited, smuggled, and exported, and which creates huge profits for interests from Rwanda, Uganda, the numerous forces of the United Nations forces (which have now been asked to leave by the President of the DRC) as well as international interests, which increasingly include the Chinese as well as Europeans, a few Americans, and those from other African countries in addition to the Congolese army and a plethora of local militia factions (see Reyntjens, 2009). These vested interests maintain political instability and ensure a large area of effectively tax-free exploitation by continuing to fuel devastating conflict in an area that has seen the most catastrophic loss of human life in the world —now five-and-a-half million persons in East Congo—since World War II and the Holocaust (IRC, 2008).

Immiserating conflicts that have decimated population in places such as southern Sudan, Somalia, and Western Columbia, and Rwanda dovetail with this pattern particularly insofar as regional and international interests support and polarize (if not historically create) opposing sides and preclude effective resolution to conflict (see Mamdani, 2001, 2009; Grandin, 2006). In a larger view, it is unsurprising that the violent upheavals generated by the world's "great powers" during the 19th and early 20th century—what Niall Ferguson (2006) calls the calamitous "War of the World"—has directly and indirectly exported violent consequences to the underdeveloped world —at the same time that the developed world has itself, since World War II, become increasingly "peaceful."

The Gebusi: Past or Forward?

Against this macro-background, this chapter attempts to draw comparative implications from marked reduction in lethal violence in a small-scale decentralized society—the Gebusi of interior Papua New Guinea (see Figs. 12.2 and 12.3).

In particular, this chapter charts, analyzes, and draws general implications from striking and enduring changes in homicidal violence among the Gebusi people of Papua New Guinea from (a) the late pre-colonial period through the early 1960s, (b) the colonial and early post-colonial era of the late 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, (c) a dramatic period of introduced cultural change during the late 1980s and 1990s, and (d) challenges faced by Gebusi during a period of major economic decline and closure of the region's airstrip and government station in 2007–2008. In conclusion, I consider the implications of the marked reduction of violence among Gebusi for our understanding of human plasticity against assertions that human violence is genetically determined or hard-wired, particularly among men. I also link a more flexible understanding of human violence back both to our understanding of global macro-patterns of contemporary violence and, on the other hand, to features of what we know about the long-standing evolution of violence among humans as a species.

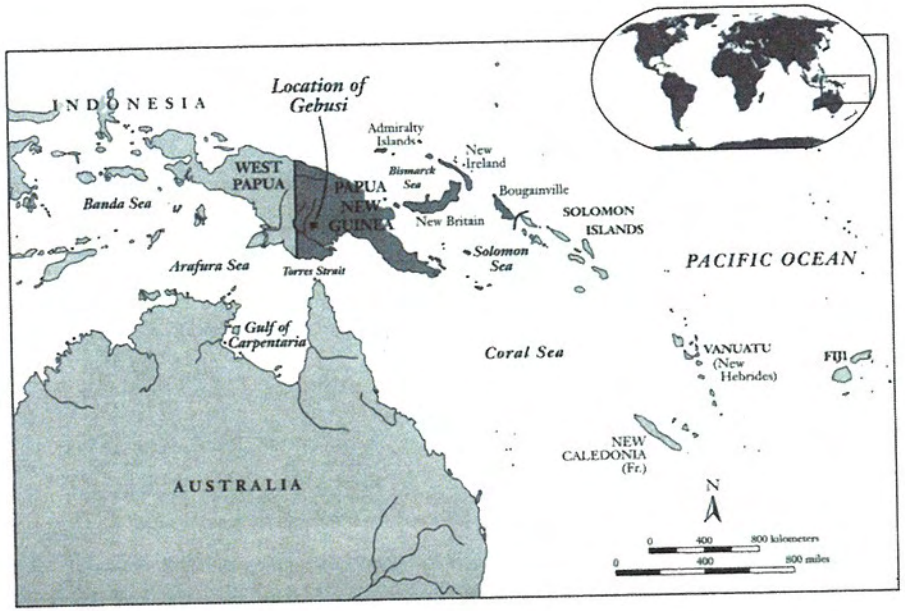

Fig. 12.2 Location of Gebusi

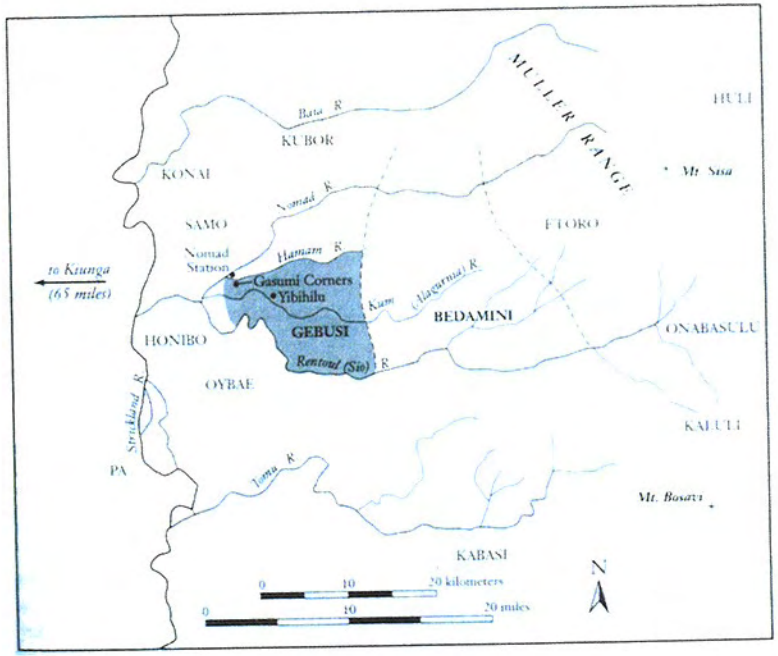

Fig. 12.3 Gebusi in regional context, Strickland-Bosavi area, Papua New Guinea

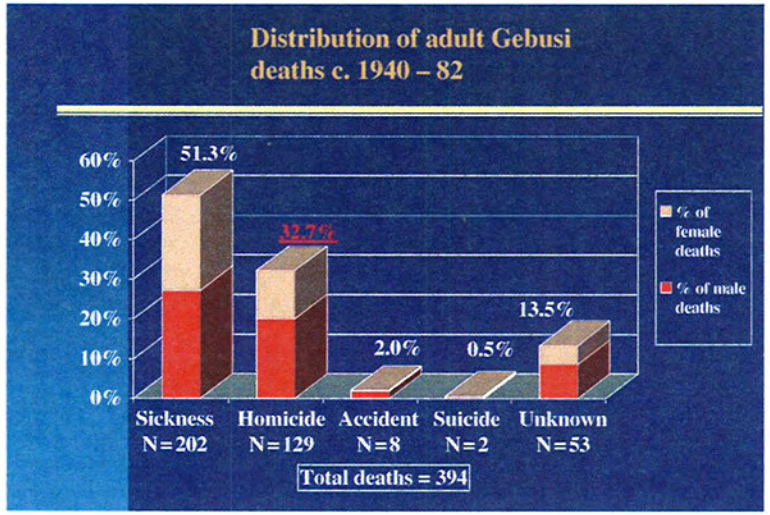

Fig. 12.4 Distribution of adult Gebusi deaths, *c.* 1940–1982

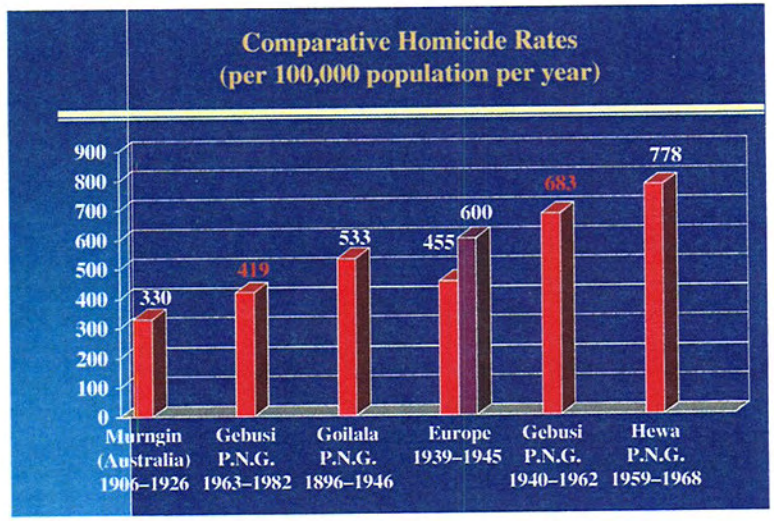

Fig. 12.5 Selected comparative homicide rates per 100,000 population/annum

Expressed in colloquial terms, the Gebusi are remarkable in having gone from virtually worst to virtually first concerning the extent of lethal violence documented ethnographically in a small-scale human society.

During the pre-colonial era, Gebusi had one of the highest homicide rates documented in a decentralized society: at least 39.0% (97/249) of all adult men and women (Knauft, 1985:116; cf. Knauft, 1987c). This homicide rate reduced to 23% of adult deaths (224/103) during the period of Australian administration (1963–1975) and then to 19% (8/42) of all adult deaths during the early post-colonial period (1975–1982). Composite figures are graphed in Fig. 12.4.

In aggregate, the 163 homicides documented across these periods—verified and cross-checked from genealogies of 15 clans that comprised 72% of the entire Gebusi population —were a combination of raids against suspected Gebusi sorcerers by the neighboring Bedamini people (21%) and the killing of suspected sorcerers by and largely within Gebusi communities themselves (65%). Further back in the pre-colonial period, a higher percentage of Gebusi homicides would likely have been caused by massive Bedamini raids. In the sample, by contrast, only 5.5% of the homicides resulted from battles or combat staged by Gebusi themselves, while 3% were insanity related, and the cause was unknown in 5% of the cases.

For purposes of comparative method, as documented elsewhere (Knauft, 1985, 1987c), care was taken to document a maximal Gebusi population size against which homicide rates could be reliably and conservatively ascertained on a per capital basis per annum. The Gebusi rate of killing was found to be equivalent to 683 per 100,000 population per year during the pre-colonial era and still 419 during the early post-colonial era. This rate is exceeded by estimates that can extrapolated from information pertaining to a few other areas of interior New Guinea (see Knauft, 1985:379, 1991; Steadman, 1971 concerning the Hewa and Kelly, 1993 concerning the Etoro). But Gebusi homicide rates remain among the highest effectively documented—and higher than the upper estimate of all killings in Europe (including Western Russia) during World War II (see Fig. 12.5). The rate of pre-colonial killing was almost exactly the same as that mentioned above in Iraq from 2003 to 2006.

Several caveats may be underscored. First, patterns of Gebusi violence are contexted by historical and cultural specifics that are not necessarily typical even within the general context of the country of Papua New Guinea. As documented elsewhere (Knauft, 1985, 1987c, 1991), Gebusi's own patterns of pre-colonial violence evoke the sporadic but sometimes intense internal violence of simpler human societies and even bands of foragers more than they do the blood feuding and warfare classically associated with the so-called "big-man" societies of highland New Guinea (cf., Meggitt, 1977; see more generally Knauft, 1990).

Second, Gebusi pre-colonial rates of internal killing were strongly influenced by the impact of the larger and more densely populated Bedamini population, who predated Gebusi in their less-fecund downstream rainforest environment. Indeed, if it had not been for Australian pacification of the Bedamini between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, Gebusi would very likely have been reduced to a remnant population or completely have been killed out and/or absorbed, losing their cultural identity.

As against this, Australian colonial intervention beginning in 1962–1963 eventually forestalled Bedmini incursion while having little immediate colonial impact on Gebusi themselves, who were seldom directly contacted by the Australians and hence left by and large to their own devices in their remote and marginal parts of the rainforest. As a result, Gebusi were free to continue their own practices, including their own internal violent sorcery inquests, while being spared many colonial

and post-colonial intrusions that have been common in other world areas such as significant land alienation, taxation, cash cropping, expatriate missionization, physical coercion, or expropriation of natural resources by either international or national post-colonial forces, organizations, or agents. It is notable, for instance, that Gebusi stands of timber in virgin rainforest are not quite plentiful or extensive enough, relative to other areas of interior New Guinea, to have yet been subject to logging or deforestation.

Amid the large-scale portrayals made at the outset of this chapter, the specific history of the Gebusi is cautionary in underscoring, first, that not all external impacts are necessarily negative in terms of facilitating or abetting violence, and, second, that violence can often be the product of regionally endogenous causes, including those of long-standing cultural proclivity. These facts do not contravene larger trends—any more than singular counterexamples invalidate statistical generalities. However, they throw into relief the significance of what the Gebusi case may reveal by considering their changed patterns of violence over time.

Cultural and Social Context: 1980–1982

During my initial fieldwork, Gebusi were "traditional" in the sense of being unchristianized and not exposed to significant Westernization. I was hence able to observe and document substantial aspects of indigenous Gebusi social organization and exchange, spirit mediumship; sorcery divinations and inquests; beliefs and practices concerning sickness, health, healing, and death; myths and folktales concerning supernatural beings and forces; and rituals of spiritual commemoration, initiation, curing, community celebration, and for a host of other reasons and causes (see Knauft, 1985, 1986, 1987a–c, 1989a+b, 1991, 1998a).

Intra-community killing of Gebusi sorcery suspects seldom corresponded with outstanding social grievances adduced between the killer and the victim of homicide; in only 9 of 69 intra-community, sorcerer-killings (13%) were a preceding social cause attributed. Instead, the cause of the sorcerer's purported anger was simply that "he (or she) is just a bad person; he sent sickness and death just because" (Knauft, 1987c:456; 1985:142–49). The sorcerer was believed to keep animosities hidden and to be motivated by an irrationally malicious and generally misanthropic spirit.

Gebusi cosmology in 1980–1982 encoded a mirror world and generally inverse relationship between unseen spirits, including those of the natural environment and the world of living humans. Communication with this world was variously possible through spiritual mediums (or shamans) and through ritual practices and divinations to commune, communicate with, benefit from the superordinate awareness of, and enjoy the world of unseen spirits.

The flipside of the Gebusi's generally positive and beneficent cosmological tie between the human and unseen realms was a strong belief in sorcery, including the belief that virtually all deaths by sickness or accident are in fact caused by people. Gebusi exhibited a correspondingly strong commitment to take revenge

against accused sorcerers. More than one-fourth (56/211, 26.5%) of all adult deaths individually precipitated the killing of an alleged sorcerer or sorcery-related homicide. At least 65% of adult Gebusi men had committed homicide, with an overall average of 1.2 killings per man. Killing was preeminently determined by social context, especially in the aftermath of a sickness death in the community. Outside of that context, killing was rare, while within it, even the mildest man easily became a killer.

Both victims and perpetrators of sorcery could be of either sex, and victims could be of any age. Alleged perpetrators of sorcery could also be young or older adults, but children were rarely accused (contrast Kelly, 1976), and young women in teens and early 20s—the key segment of the population in terms of demographic reproduction—were almost never accused or attacked. However, I obtained no evidence that any Gebusi actually collected leavings, retained sorcery paraphernalia, or conducted the alleged magical rites that sent sickness; the sending of sorcery was an attributed and supposed cultural fact rather than a demonstrated behavioral reality.

In practice, the likelihood of sorcery accusation increased with the age of the alleged sorcerer, though some men and women were considered especially congenial and slow to anger and were never suspected of sorcery as they got older. As part of this pattern, Gebusi homicide did not appear to negate the demographic viability of their society, though it did further deplete the number of able-bodied men and women who would, in pre-colonial days, have been able to resist Bedamini attacks.

In significant respects, sorcery attributions and killings among Gebusi functioned as what Christopher Boehm (1999) has described in evolutionary terms as a "reverse" or "counter" dominance hierarchy, whereby potential prerogatives of seniority or leadership are undercut. This is consistent with Gebusi's political organization, which is highly decentralized and had no position of "big-man," headman, or village leader. In practice, the spirit medium—who was in daily life a person with no special rights, title, or prerogative —was key in congealing community consensus concerning the identity of the sorcery suspect. This occurred especially in the course of all-night spirit séances, which took place on the average of once every 11 days and considered a range of social and spiritual issues. Among these was the identity of sorcery suspects and the proper inquests to validate their guilt and the action to be taken against them.

Gebusi sorcery inquests and divinations were influenced and in some cases directed by the spirits of the Gebusi medium, and they included corpse divination, sago divination, searching for ostensible (but magically transformed) sorcery paraphernalia, and other means. Inquest proceedings were scrupulously observed by the kin of the suspect as well as by the community at large to ensure they were ostensibly unbiased. By various means, indictment by the medium's spirits was "objectively" validated by divinations, in many of which the spirit medium himself played no part (see Fig. 12.6).

Following an unfavorable divinatory outcome—sometimes very difficult to avoid—the suspect could be killed on the spot or, more likely, told to "forget the

Fig. 12.6 Armed Gebusi men witness the results of a sago divination undertaken by a sorcery suspect, 1981. (Photo credit: Eileen Knauft)

matter," after which he or she could be killed days or weeks later when accompanied by only a few supporters or relatives deep in the forest. Sometimes suspects were publicly tortured before being dispatched. After the killing, the body of the executed sorcerer was traditionally cooked and eaten by the community at large—excepting by close relatives, who were typically upset by the killing. As such, the person killed was treated "just like a wild pig or cassowary" —since the deceased was considered to have become inhuman and having acted like an animal in resorting to lethal sorcery.

In terms of larger cultural patterns, the killing of Gebusi sorcerers was a negative reciprocity dimension of their pronounced emphasis on exact exchange. This included the ideal of direct exchange of women in sister-exchange marriage, sharing and reciprocity between hosts and visitors at feasts, the exchange of the medium's spirit for those of the spirit world during séances, and direct reciprocity that demanded the life of the accused sorcerer in exchange for the life of victim he or she had allegedly killed by sickness.

Given this larger context, Gebusi perceptions of their own violence were culturally unsurprising but striking from a Western perspective. Gebusi considered themselves peace-loving and friendly people. And outside of the context of sickness death and sorcery attribution, they generally were. Given the small size of their dispersed settlements (26.5 persons, on average), the speed of generational turnover (about 15 years), and the fact that each settlement sustained a killing on average not more than once every 7 years, Gebusi did not consider homicidal violence to be a significant problem. And it was directed, in their view, to *eliminate* rather than perpetrate lethal violence, that is, to excise persons who had betrayed Gebusi trust and become heinous sorcerers within their communities.

Given these patterns and the strength of their beliefs, I considered it most unlikely when I left the field in 1982 that Gebusi would substantially change their orientations or practices in the future.

At the time, I sensed that Gebusi had internalized a pronounced sense of insecurity and ultimate suspicion of each other that had been intensified by their decimation and occasional wholesale slaughter by raiding parties of the intruding Bedamini. On one occasion in which Bedamini marched into my settlement of residence, the man who was the target of their attentions quickly and fully agreed to give up his one large domesticated pig for the Bedamini to kill and eat—in lieu of the man himself. For several days after the Bedamini departed, the village was rife with fears of sorcery attack, with mothers holding their children close and warnings repeated about going into the forest activities without adequate armed escort. Gebusi fears of sorcery were not caused by the Bedamini but they were intensified, further substantialized, and to an extent redirected among Gebusi themselves in the wake of this powerful influence and impact. With the progressive cessation of Bedamini raiding, these fears eased but were still strongly evident and appeared to have become internalized among Gebusi themselves.

Major Changes: 1998

When I returned to the Gebusi in 1998, after a hiatus of 16 years, a principal research question concerned developments in Gebusi patterns of violence and their beliefs and practices of sorcery. On the one hand, between roughly 1940 and 1982, the rate of homicide had declined from 39% to 23% to 19% of all deaths. But on the other hand, Gebusi beliefs in sorcery had seemed very strong, and the comparative evidence from other parts of Papua New Guinea suggested that tribal fighting—as well as beliefs in sorcery—often intensified along with the increasing absence of Australian colonial officials and their police, including in outstation areas (e.g., Zelenietz and Lindenbaum, 1981).

During my absence, Gebusi had undergone many changes (see Knauft, 2002a+b, 2003, 2007a+b, 2010). My community of residence had moved their whole settlement several miles to reconstruct their village next to the Catholic Church, itself built near the airstrip, government station, school, market, and other facilities of the Nomad Sub-District Office (see Knauft, 1998b).

Changes included the following:

- daily weekday attendance at the Nomad school by Gebusi school-age children
- weekly attendance at church and also at other church meetings and teachings
- attendance by most women Gebusi of Gasumi Corners at the twice-weekly Nomad market, including bringing heavy bags of forest and garden produce to sell
- regular attendance and participation by men and boys at rugby, soccer, basketball, and other games arranged in regular league competition at the Nomad sports field (see Fig. 12.7)

Fig. 12.7 Sports teams on the Nomad ball field, 1998. (Photo credit: Bruce Knauft)

- attendance at and active participation in government projects and meetings at the Nomad Station, including various economic and development projects
- walking to Nomad to celebrate and materially participate in festivities for various public holidays and related public festivities—especially at Independence Day, Christmas, New Year, and Easter
- walking to Nomad for free clinic health care or hospital services
- visiting the Nomad police station to lodge complaints or check on the progress of open investigations
- leisure pursuits at Nomad such as attending the Nomad video night, buying petty items at the small Nomad stores, or simply taking a "spin" to the station to see what was going on.

As titled in my 2002 book on the subject, Gebusi in 1998 said they were "exchanging their past" for ways associated with Christianity and the modern practices of the Nomad station and its educated outsiders, including government, school, market, development projects, and market. In this sense, their notion of direct reciprocity in traditional exchange was itself recast to exchange in a modern, asymmetrical way—the past practices themselves for locally modern practices that

were hoped to lead to new and successful ways of life. When I asked Nomad sch children to draw pictures of themselves as they envisaged their life in the future, th pages burgeoned with bright color drawings of themselves as soldiers, police o cers, heavy equipment operators, pilots, rock musicians, teachers, doctors, nurs and modern-dressed housewives (Knauft, 2002a:199–200). Only a tiny percent of the students drew their anticipated future selves as traditional farmers, dance or villagers.

Amid this strong and powerful drive to access the future at the self-avow expense of the past, Gebusi also had strongly internalized a sense of political a spiritual as well as economic dependency upon the authority, knowledge, and ben icence of outsiders. Their ability to lead or meaningfully influence developme at school, market, government, or even the local church was trumped by educa Papua New Guineans from other parts of the country.

Changes did not prevent continuation of traditional sensibilities in some areas Gebusi life, including in subsistence, forays to the forest, and interest in perfor ing traditional dances (if mostly in government competitions at the Nomad par ground). But in comparison to my observations and understanding of Gebusi beli and practices in 1980–1982, it did seem that major and transformational shi in so-called traditional cultural practices had taken place, as Gebusi themsel emphasized.

The agents as well as the subjects of this conversion were primarily Geb themselves. I use "conversion" here at one and the same time for both Christ conversion and conversion of social life and orientations more generally to loca modern forms. Indeed, it is difficult among Gebusi and perhaps among ma Oceanian peoples to divorce the notion of conversion in a religious sense fr that of adopting other forward-looking and locally "modern" practices (see Kna 2002c).

In collective social terms, changes to Gebusi culture included Christian bapti of 84% of the population, and the associated demise and general discontinuati of traditional spirit mediumship, divination (including for sorcery), ritual fig male–male sexual practices, traditional dancing, and initiation. Relatedly, there w a pronounced decline in Gebusi killings or executions of sorcery suspects. W demise of spirit mediumship, Gebusi averred generally that they had little way communicate with spirits or maintain effective contact with the unseen spirit wor

It is important to note that these changes were the primary choice and decisi of Gebusi themselves. Never subject to teaching by Western (white) missionari Gebusi have been evangelized by a combination of Papua New Guinean preach from other parts of the country and by their own lay prayer leaders and tea ers. Revealingly, none of the outside church leaders realized or argued against t persistence of Gebusi spirit mediumship or spirit séances, including in relation sorcery divinations and accusations. Rather, it was Gebusi themselves who cons ered "singing to God" in church to be inimical to and a replacement for "singing the spirits" in traditional Gebusi spirit séances. By 1998, Gebusi spirit mediums all but in the most remote villages had given up the practice and "cut their ties" the spirits in favor of becoming Christians and going to church.

As seen in Fig. 12.8, the period 1982–1998 saw a significant decline in the incidence of Gebusi inquest séances by the spirit medium following a sickness death in the community, as well as a decline in divinations and the public naming of a sorcery suspect. The co-decline of death séances, divination, and sorcery accusation, depicted graphically in Fig. 12.9, isolates the important role of the spirit séance itself in influencing whether divination and sorcery accusation occur (see Knauft, 2002a:ch. 5 for details).

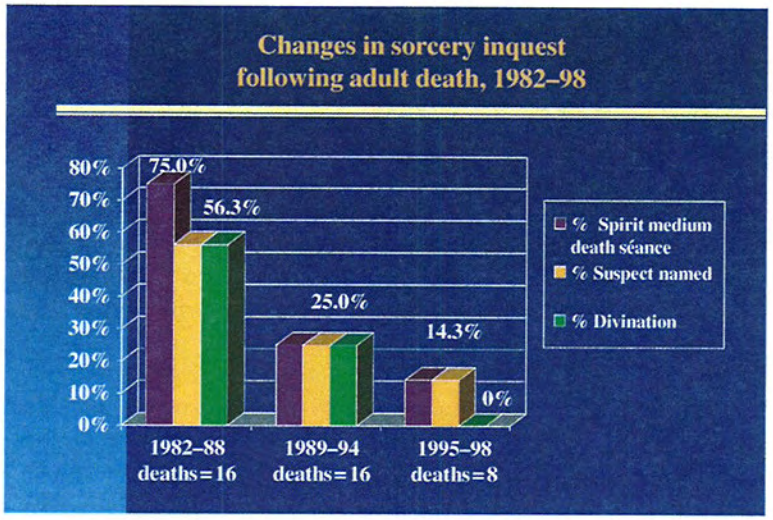

Fig. 12.8 Changes in sorcery inquest following adult death, 1982–1998

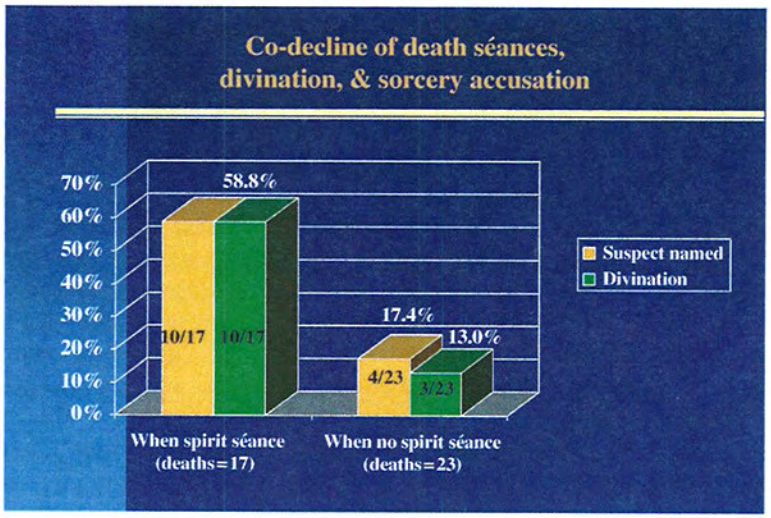

Fig. 12.9 Co-decline of death séances divination, and sorcery accusation, 1982–1998

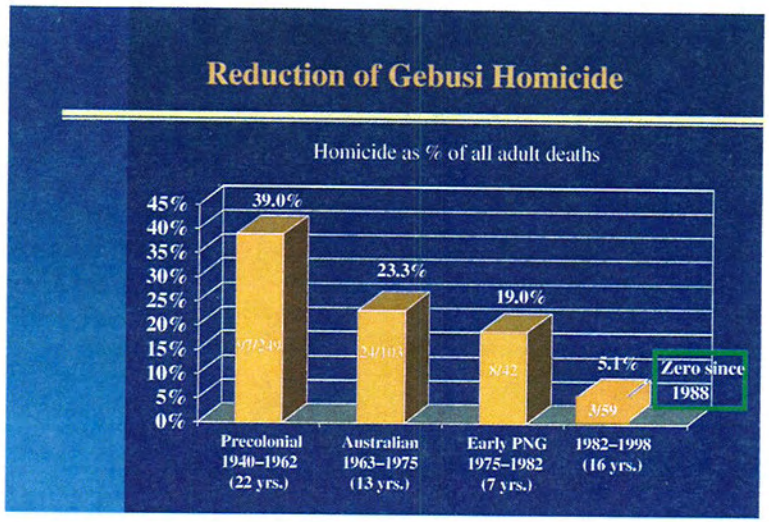

Fig. 12.10 Reduction of Gebusi homicide

It is consistent with these trends that the rate of Gebusi homicide also declined markedly. As shown in Fig. 12.10 below, the rate of Gebusi killing dropped to 5.1% between 1982 and 1998, with just three killings. Furthermore, all of these deaths occurred during 1982 and 1988; since that time, the homicide rate in this community of some 122 persons had been zero. This community was about 1/6 (16.2%) of the enlarged Gebusi population of approximately 750 persons at the time. Analysis of police records at Nomad as well as discussions with Gebusi in other communities suggested that the rate of homicide among Gebusi generally and indeed in the Nomad sub-district as a whole had fallen off very dramatically, and among some groups, as among western Gebusi, has declined to zero (Knauft, 2002a:64, 108).

This great reduction of homicide—and of violence more generally—is striking given the depth of preceding Gebusi cultural beliefs in sorcery and the extent and diversity of their violent retribution against alleged sorcerers. Though Gebusi often privately admitted still believing or suspecting sorcery, especially when one of their own close relatives died of sickness, they consistently agreed that there was little means to verify, validate, or muster consensus around these suspicions or to take concrete action against a presumed sorcerer in the absence of collective spirit séances, divinations, and publically announced discussions and accusations.

Gebusi 2008

Against the backdrop of their social and cultural changes, a further twist in Gebusi trajectories was evident during recent fieldwork in the winter of 2008 (Knauft, 2010: ch. 12).

At the time, the Nomad airstrip—the region's life-line of supply to the outside world—had been closed for most of a year. (I was fortunate to be able to hire a chartered aircraft and an experienced bush pilot, and to make a test landing on the Nomad airstrip, which was thereafter re-opened on a provisional basis with some restrictions.) With no roads to anywhere, the Nomad sub-district—and the Gebusi within it—had sustained a major downturn if not collapse of government services, programs, development projects, trade, and income. The Nomad airstrip closure echoed patterns that are increasingly common in outstation areas of Papua New Guinea and other developing countries: lack of government infrastructure support or funding, corruption of officials, inefficiency, unwillingness of local workers to labor without pay, and departure of qualified officials and staff from remote areas back to major towns or cities. In the case of Nomad, almost all salaried government officials, health workers, and teachers left on the last departing plane flights and continued to receive their pay for work at Nomad while residing in the town of Kiunga or other locations in the province.

Upon arrival, I found that the elementary Nomad school was closed, the health clinic was moribund, and the government officers and development workers had left, including all police. With no salaries or significant monies coming in, the local cash economy had collapsed, and there was very little wage labor. The market that had been bustling twice a week at Nomad was desultory, with very few buyers and very high prices for any outside goods. The sports leagues were defunct and the large ball field at Nomad was covered with two-foot-high grass, with parts of the goalposts taken for firewood. Government houses were boarded up (see Fig. 12.11).

A prime research concern was the legacy of Gebusi conversion, both Christian and modern more generally. It was evident in short order that significant aspects of Gebusi indigenous life had reemerged. A large traditional longhouse had been built

Fig. 12.11 Closed Nomad sub-district office building, 2008. (Photo credit: Bruce Knauft)

Fig. 12.12 Gebusi man with his children, smoking a traditional tobacco pipe in men's section of the community longhouse where initiation was held, 2008. (Photo credit: Bruce Knauft)

in my same community of residence, and a major traditional initiation had been held to indoctrinate a large new cadre of young men. (A significant number in the previous cohort, too old to participate, had never been initiated at all.) Practices of customary male etiquette that had been highly developed and enthusiastically practiced in 1980–1982 but which had been moribund in 1998—including smoking and sharing tobacco in large bamboo pipes, drinking kava (*piper methysticum*), and boisterous displays of male sexual joking—had all been resuscitated and were strongly in evidence (see Fig. 12.12).

Within 2 days of my arrival, a traditional curing dance, with a visiting dancer in full indigenous costume, was held within a few minutes' walk of where I was staying—something that had not happened anywhere in the community during the 6 months of my stay with the Gebusi in 1998 (see Fig. 12.13).

However, some features of customary religious and spiritual life were not reasserted or re-established. Importantly, this included spirit mediumship and spirit séance singing. No new spirit mediums had been initiated, and none had replaced those who had died, retired, or "cut their ties" with the traditional spirits. As a result, the incidence of sorcery divinations, accusations, and violent action against potential sorcery suspects continued to be nil. There had been no homicides since my previous visit.

One major case of sorcery related dispute that had arisen was revealing. This concerned a young man who had gone to work at a logging operation in a distant other part of the province and who had not returned after the expected completion of his contract. His family accused another young man in the community of causing his death by sorcery while he had been gone. However, the matter was brought directly to the attention of the Catholic priest. He, in turn, was able through his contacts to get tenuous radio contact with the young man himself through the logging operations' base headquarters. When the disbelieving parents of the young man refused to believe that he was still alive, the Priest dispatched the man who had been

Fig. 12.13 Dancer at a traditional curing rite, 2008. (Photo credit: Bruce Knauft)

considered to be his enemy to go to the distant logging camp himself and personally retrieve the overdue worker. When the two returned safely together—and having become friends in the interim—the matter was considered successfully resolved. In the mix, the attribution of sorcery was demonstrated to have been a definitive falsehood.

This case reveals not only that suspicions of sorcery linger but also that countervailing awareness, actions, and interpretations forestall their coalescence at the same time that effective means to orchestrate community consensus or action against potential sorcery suspects is undercut.

Gebusi Revisited

During a period of approximately 50 years, Gebusi violence has changed from a consistent pattern of intense intercommunity and intra-community lethal violence—one of the highest rates of killing documented in the ethnographic record—to exhibiting a homicide rate that has dropped to zero. The former pattern of highly elevated homicide endured for a documented period of at least four decades—attenuating somewhat but still surprisingly high through the early 1980s—followed

by a sharp diminution in killing that has reached and persisted at a rate of zero for 20 years from 1988 to 2008.

Underscoring the significance of these changes is the fact that Gebusi have not been particularly pressured much less coerced to initiate or maintain such alteration. It is true that Gebusi were both impressed by and beneficiaries of the Australian suppression of Bedamini raiding during the late 1960s and early 1970s. At the same time, Gebusi were considered, as one patrol officer put it, "quiet tractable people who have seldom given the Administration and difficulty" (Barclay, 1970–71: unpaginated). They carried out their own inquisitions against sorcery suspects internally but these often did not reach government attention.

Likewise, the choice of Gebusi in my community of residence to move near the Nomad Station, to become Christian, and to engage whole-heartedly in the activities and life-style associated with the Nomad sub-district station during the late 1990s was of their own volition. Deep in the rainforest, there was little effective pressure that was exerted or poised to bear on Gebusi from external sources. Unlike many forest peoples, Gebusi have been free to return to their ways of life in the rainforest—and they have indeed done so increasingly following the closing of the Nomad airstrip and the collapse of the local cash and trade good economy in 2007.

Amid this tradition, Gebusi have resuscitated, rediscovered, and/or reinvented many of their long-standing customs and practices, including traditional dances and initiations, residence, and patterns of male etiquette and song-fests. But these developments have consistently not included the practice of spirit mediumship, the singing of séances, divinatory inquests for sorcery, the public accusation of sorcery suspects, or the taking of violent action against them. All these practices continue to be moribund and have become increasingly defunct over a period that now extends to almost three decades. Increasingly during this same period, there is little state-sponsored or other authoritarian or coercive force to prevent Gebusi from taking up their historical patterns of accusing and killing sorcery suspects. If anything, the Nomad police and its legal system have become more vestigial and non-functional in terms of palpable village outreach than they have been at any time since Australian patrol officers first arrived and founded the Nomad station in 1962–1963. Neither have the Christian pastors nor priests been instrumental in combating or even identifying the key role that spirit mediumship and séances have had in both the previous maintenance of Gebusi sorcery beliefs and retributions and their later demise.

Both government officials and Christian leaders from other parts of the country have been significant influences and role models. But these influences have not—and especially in comparative terms —been targeted against the specific ways and means by which Gebusi violence has operated. There has been little to prevent or penalize Gebusi from taking up these practices again.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that directions of Gebusi cultural change—their own distinctive version of becoming at one and the same time locally modern and "traditional" —have been keys to their peaceful cultural revival. These developments have been initiated as well as mediated by the intentions and decisions of Gebusi themselves: not through intrusions of coercion and constraint but rather by Gebusi's own willful volition. It may indeed be the relative absence of outside

pressure—the ability of Gebusi to determine their fate and their local future in their own terms—that has allowed them to avoid patterns of increasing violence that are common if not overdetermined in many undeveloped and so-called impoverished countries where such intrusion is more evident.

A major factor that has promoted these possibilities—and which highlights Gebusi as exceptional amid patterns of polarizing violence in significant parts of the underdeveloped world—is that their distinctive history of interaction with outside powers that has reduced rather than increased their susceptibility to external threat, including in their local regional context. Rather than being subject to massive or violent intrusion—economic, political, religious, or military—Gebusi were fortunate to have the predations of their tribal neighbors suppressed without having these replaced by other effective political agents or organizations, including those of state government, material resource extraction, or business interest.

As Gebusi linger on the margins of the global political economy, their "undeveloped" state does not please them. But they have taken initiative on their own terms to craft what has been for several decades now a positive way of turning marginality into their own meaningful and peaceful cultural development.

The Future of the Past

I conclude with two observations that link together Gebusi patterns, current trends in violent world history, and our evolutionary past. The first is that human patterns of lethal violence are extremely variable and malleable in character and in degree, and in their intensity or absence. Given the adaptability and diversity of humans in many other regards, this should not be surprising. These trends contravene the notion that humans have an innate, genetic, or otherwise deeply predisposed nature to be violently aggressive, including among males (*pace* Wrangham, 1987; Wrangham and Peterson, 1996; Chagnon, 1988).

Second, one of the greatest ways that human violence can be effectively diminished is to reduce the reality and the perception of external political threat. To a significant extent, the high pre-colonial rate of Gebusi internal violence was contexted and predisposed by the systematic predation visited against Gebusi by Bedamini and neighboring groups. By contrast, agents of colonial intrusion were generally viewed as positive rather than as negative or threatening to Gebusi; they were seen as powerful benefactors if not saviors. The Gebusi's giving up of sorcery inquests, divinations, mediumship, and the intensity of their sorcery beliefs have not been so much the product of coercive administration (or of Christianization) as much as a response by Gebusi themselves to new opportunities and ways of life that they have associated with an ability to reformulate their lives beyond their more violent past.

In this sense, the particularities of colonial intrusion, pacification, and then departure in this case created a distinctive space for Gebusi to engage and

cultivate their own path of violence reduction. This contrasts to many parts of the ex-colonial world, including large parts of the Papua New Guinea highlands, in which resurgence of so-called tribal fighting has been common if not endemic. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to address these differences in detail, but it may be mentioned that the effective reduction of external political threat experienced by Gebusi contrasts greatly with the continuing perception of risk from political rivalry and aggression experienced by large ethnic groups in highland Papua New Guinea.

In the broader current context of macro-political economy and the direct and indirect export or structural facilitation of high rates of violence in underdeveloped countries and world areas, a similar point may be made. To the extent that world area powers and the interests of the international community fuel the sense and the reality of external political threat within and between underdeveloped countries, the rate of lethal violence tends to increase. Polarizations, exploitations, and vested interests to maintain rather than reduce conflict intensify.

These patterns are not inevitable or irreversible. To the extent that external influences work not just in principle but in fact to reduce these external stresses, including by depolarizing competing economic interests among militias or other armed factions, the rate of internal violence is more easily and spontaneously reduced.

In a sense, as Boehm (1999) has persuasively argued, the defusing of aggressive domination and its polarizing politics is, in evolutionary terms, part and parcel of the marked evolutionary tendency among humans as a species toward what he terms counter-dominance hierarchies. These leveling mechanisms draw down rather than build up the constituencies of rival alpha males and, on a larger scale, of rival political powers. These tendencies are facilitated by widespread patterns of generalized reciprocity in simple societies and, in complementary fashion, by aversive reactions to the differential amassing of prerogatives—including disproportionate sexual access or material resources—by some individuals as opposed to others. This does not mean that violence is absent in simple human societies (Knauft, 1991, cf., Kelly, 2000). But it does mean that the potential for violent leveling mechanisms—as developed by Gebusi under conditions of external threat and duress—are themselves managed, mediated, and subject to amelioration by prosocial exchange and reciprocity.

Closing the loop among the understanding of violence in our species' past, our complicated present, and our willful future is not an easy task. But flexibility and enormous variation not just in patterns of human violence but in its relative or total absence in important cases are also very hopeful. Reduction of lethal violence is not just a pipedream but a reality across the spectrum of many developed countries as well as for peoples such as the Gebusi for whom such an outcome could scarcely have been imagined or expected by Western scholars. How to extend and expand this pattern, to reduce external political threat and economic exploitation rather than increasing and polarizing these, especially where people are most at risk and least able to combat and repel such pressures, remains not just a key issue but a plausible human goal.

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