

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 sorcery and ritual, body art 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 an economic collapse of the local cash economy. The government and its services have been withdrawn, and the airstrip has been closed.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 multi-billion dollar pipeline for liquified 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, politics, religion, gender and sexuality, ethnicity and nationalism, expressive and public culture, and applied or engaged anthropology itself. 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, 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 my deep friends for many years. I also feel fortunate to have the opportunity to convey vital aspects of their lives as well as parts of my own when working among them.