

Authenticity and Authorship in Pacific Island Encounters

New Lives of Old Imaginaries



Edited by
Jeannette Mageo and Bruce Knauft

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Critical Reflections across Four Decades of Work with Gebusi *Authorship, Authenticity, Anthropology*

BRUCE KNAUFT

In “What is an Author?,” Foucault (1984) suggests that genealogies of authorship reflect changing assumptions about self-constructed representation. In anthropology, the parameters, strictures, and assumptions of authorship have also changed over time. This is certainly true across my own four decades of work with the Gebusi people, who live in the remote rainforest of Papua New Guinea’s Western Province. When I first reached Gebusi in 1980, they were a small isolated group of about 450 persons. Now, they number more than 1200.

At one level, my relation with Gebusi resonates with what Shokeid (2020: 75) calls “the tradition of revisit ethnographies reporting on societal transformation under the forces of ‘modernity.’” This is especially feasible among small-scale rural communities in which face-to-face relations endure with strong continuity over many years (see Knauft 2011a; Howell and Talle 2011). Though my relationship with Gebusi is not exactly a “love story”—as Shokeid characterizes Read’s (1986) revisit to the Gahuku-Gama after thirty years—it is certainly one that I, and I hope Gebusi, have greatly appreciated. My feelings of strong friendship with Gebusi are an important reason why I have gone back to be with them again and again. Indeed, at one uncertain juncture in my life—and when politics back in the US seemed especially dismal—I fantasized about living with Gebusi long-term if not permanently. In ethnographic terms, the richness, surprise, and value of camaraderie across radical cultural difference is a theme that I have tried to develop in works about Gebusi for undergraduates and for a more general audience (e.g., Knauft 2016). This somewhat glowing perspective, however, is but the tip of the iceberg.

My connection with Gebusi spans a bit less than three years over a total of forty, including twenty-two months in 1980–82; one half-year in 1998; several weeks in 2008 and again in 2013; and a summer with them in both 2016 and 2017. Some of my shorter Gebusi trips have been as much to catch up with dear friends as to do research. I have a range of close relationships with Gebusi, including two men, Sayu and Didiga, who I first knew as young boys

and have kept in close and supportive contact with since. I have at least two children named after me (though they are not my own!). Given Gebusi's deep and continuing sense of communality or "good company" (*kogwayay*), I have felt strongly connected to the community of Gasumi as a whole.

Below, I develop analytic and theoretical reflections concerning authorship and authenticity. In the bulk of this essay, I then apply these reflections to different stages of my work and life with Gebusi. Finally, I reflect on this history in relation to contemporary anthropology, including the implications of what I have learned as compared and also contrasted to needs and demands of current new generations of ethnographers. I conclude by considering the denouement of my time with Gebusi, and, more generally, the stakes and significance of the end of authorship and its imputations of authenticity.

Anthropology and Authorship

Underlying and pervading my relationship with Gebusi are strategies and assumptions of making them (seem) authentic while listening to their own assertions of what they themselves find authentic, on the one hand, and worth authoring, on the other. Most Gebusi remain illiterate, and none have gone to, much less finished, college. Their level of education has in recent years declined from its previous very modest level, as schools have alternately been closed and poorly staffed. Gebusi have little opportunity for educational advancement beyond primary grades, and there is no high school in the Sub-District. Internet connection is non-existent and phone signal is all but absent. The airstrip is closed and there are no roads to other areas. Given this continuing isolation, authorship remains in practical terms my own, both as a professional academic and as an advocate and supporter of people I like and admire. When I first arrived in 1980, many Gebusi gave all indications of not knowing that other native peoples existed beyond the small groups directly adjacent to them. The provincial capital of Daru was considered by many to be the land of the dead, and Gebusi were visibly shocked when I showed them ethnographic photos of people living near Mount Bosavi, which they could see from their ridgetops on a clear day.

As for my own subject position of authorship, I am a straight white male, now senior, born in Connecticut and with a long pedigree of white male privilege. This has extended from an honors track at a fine public high school in West Hartford to a BA *cum laude* at Yale, a PhD in anthropology at the University of Michigan, a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of California, San Diego, and an academic job at Emory University that has taken me from green assistant professor to distinguished named professor over the course of thirty-five years. Self-identifying or self-claiming as progressive, liberal, and

against the grain, at college I became committed to progressive/liberal causes through inner city volunteer work, and I took a number of opportunities to live with and try to understand and support people whose background and status were very different from my own. While framed and influenced, often unknowingly, by my privileged circumstances, I gravitated toward an experience-near understanding of people very different from me while living with them in conditions of relative hardship. This seemed to make Gebusi a perfect fit.

"Authenticity," correspondingly, has had its own un-decolonized contradictions over time, including both my attribution of authenticity to Gebusi and the claims, albeit mostly implicit, that some Gebusi have made for themselves. "The Gebusi" are hardly monolithic, either between men and women, those older or younger, those relatively more or less modestly educated, and so on. Hence the substantial challenges in portraying Gebusi "authenticity" as well as developing my own "authorship." On the other hand, my privileged status and history have afforded me numerous opportunities to document Gebusi lifeways, including via professional networks that facilitate access to top-tier journals and university presses. Publishing in such venues is an arduous task, but having elite mentorship provides enormous help that also reinforces confidence and motivation.

In the following sections, I tease apart such professional dynamics in relation to my authorship and my assumptions or assertions concerning who Gebusi authentically are. These issues engage the tension and challenge of all ethnography to encode and portray a compelling larger narrative while also conveying the complexities, contradictions, and inconsistencies of fieldwork, both in the character of others' realities and in our own attempts to re-present these. In fieldwork, the assumed "authenticity" of the experiences of the people one is studying intersect with our "authoring." The relationship between asserting authenticity and asserting authorship becomes a dance over professional time, a dance that is hopefully enriching but at times also charged with grating tension. Larger patterns of "authenticity" and "authorship" then sediment, iterate, and ramify in relationship to one another during successive periods of fieldwork.

My experience with Gebusi is in no way archetypal, but stages and patterns in my relations with them from 1980 to 2020 resonate with or refract off of changes in anthropology over that same time. Though somewhat too charitable, one colleague quipped that, when viewed in retrospect, my work has been something of a four-decade history of the discipline in one field site. Or, as she also put it, my work discovered what the discipline expected me to find at each period (Jeanette Mageo, pers. comm.). This also begs the reverse question: to what degree have these shifting realities been invented by me rather than ethnographically and empirically uncovered? Might a more introverted

or sullen anthropologist have found Gebusi to be retentive and timid rather than exuberant and playful? This risk partly accounts for—or has subliminally informed—my seemingly strong desire to provide copious documentation of Gebusi lifeways, including many concrete examples and case histories, facts, and figures as well as statistical summaries. Commitment to ethnographic specificity was a touchstone of my indefatigable doctoral advisor, Raymond C. Kelly, and this emphasis seems to have stayed with me (cf. Kelly 1977, 1993). I leave it for others to judge whether my accounts of Gebusi are plausible given the information presented in each case.

As Mageo and I discuss in our introduction to this volume, authorship, ethnography, and authenticity blend into each another as if by collusion. This occurs concretely through various means of author-ization, professionalized author-ity, and authenti-fication. As has been well raked over the coals in anthropology at least since the 1980s (Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986), the politics of authorship and authenticity seem not just inescapable but inescapably critiqued in the reflexive examination of our field. This includes the credentialing of our scholarship in relation to the events, objects, and peoples that we represent or encourage to have represented as valid, genuine, and culturally real. In Foucault's (1984) terms, the truth function of authoring and the author function of authenticating truth are closely linked, and perhaps especially so in cultural anthropology.

In anthropology as elsewhere, one can configure a genealogy of how authorship and authenticity have been asserted over time. This does not mean, of course, that our representations have become progressively more authentic. It means, rather, that it can be valuable to chart how our ideas of valid authorship and of ethnographic authenticity have been propounded and asserted differently over time.

Discovering or Inventing Authenticity in Fieldwork

A well-rehearsed story has now introduced four editions of *The Gebusi*, namely, that my search for the unknown Gebusi started with a blank spot on the map—the large-scale ethnographic map of New Guinea at the library of the University of Michigan (e.g., Knauff 2016: ch. 1). At the time, I had never been west of Oregon. Eventually getting to the field, I failed to find the “Kabasi” or “Kasua” people who I was looking for deep in the uninhabited New Guinea rainforest. I ended up instead among the adjacent people, who I “discovered” to be one of the last unnamed tribal groups in New Guinea. In fact, Gebusi had been known from patrol reports but had for various reasons been misnamed the “Bibo,” which was one of the Gebusi's three dozen varieties of plantains, their starch staple. So, in terms of the Gebusi's authored and au-

thetically named existence in the outside world, I became their serendipitous founder.

Beyond authenticating and authoring the Gebusi's ethnic or tribal name—which I rendered phonetically but which in subsequent years they themselves sometimes spell as “Gobasi”—I authenticated and authored Gebusi culture as well. I could claim authenticity in this insofar as I was among the last generation of anthropologists forced by necessity to learn the local language without the help of translators—monolingually, via the vernacular itself. During the early days of learning their never-written language, I stumbled across a Gebusi term, *kogwayay*, that they used to refer to their distinct customs of initiation, ritual, feasting, and camaraderie, and also to refer to the contrast between these and the practices and beliefs of adjacent peoples. “*Kogwayay*” seemed to refer at that time to their own customs and beliefs as opposed to those of other small language groups or “tribes.” I hence took *kogwayay* to be the Gebusi version of “culture.” Given that the three morphemes of the word convey prosocial togetherness (*kog*), casual talk and banter (*wa*), and exuberant joking and cheering (*yay*), I glossed the compound word as “good company.” Correspondingly, I took Gebusi “good company” to be the key symbol and authentic signifier of Gebusi “culture” as a whole.¹

Though not totally unwarranted, this attribution had the effect not only of reifying a single uniform Gebusi culture as a whole but of second-classing women, who participated in the “togetherness,” “talk,” and “joking” of Gebusi social and ceremonial life to a much lesser degree than men. It was men who held decisive central sway in Gebusi collective activities, rituals, and feasts—while women were physically and socially peripheral. Women were excluded altogether from male activities such as all-night spirit séances. These latter focused on, appropriated, and fetishized the ideal sexualized identity of Gebusi spirit women, whose salacious activities real Gebusi women could be beaten for if they attempted to approximate (Knauff 1985a: ch 9; 1985b; 1989). To some extent for me (and for Gebusi themselves?) authentic Gebusi “culture” as “*kogwayay*” was, in fact, male culture.

None of this was lost on my then-wife, Eileen Cantrell (Knauff). Though both of us had been exposed to and influenced by radical feminist politics at the leftist University of Michigan during the 1970s, this impact was earlier and deeper on her than it was on me. In the field, she and I had thought to vouchsafe our individual independence and integrity as researchers and authors by me studying the “men's side” of Gebusi culture and her the “women's side.” Impractical and impossible in practice, this led to tensions on different registers. Suffice it to say that as Cantrell did not continue on in anthropology, and that her results were not available for me to use apart from one published paper (Cantrell 1998), the absence of female perspectives and of feminist theorization in this highly male-dominant setting presented me a continuing conun-

drum. I was at pains to rectify this balance when working solo with Gebusi in 1998 and in 2008—and with a male graduate student, Latham Wood, from the University of Oregon, in 2013. This yielded only compromised results given the highly segregated nature of Gebusi gendered interactions. Bluntly put, it was difficult and all-but-impossible for me as a male researcher to speak with Gebusi women in any serious way. Women could generally not be alone with an unrelated man, and they became reticent as soon as men came on the scene, as they invariably did, to see what was going on—and to take over the conversation (see Knaft 2016: ch. 8).² It was not until I was able to return to Gebusi with a young French female anthropologist, Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke, three-and-a-half decades after my first fieldwork, in 2016 and 2017, that the women's side of Gebusi culture, and my previous assumption of male-centered perspectives, became more fully and palpably apparent (cf. Knaft 1996: ch. 7).

Two other aspects of authorship and authenticity during my first extended Gebusi fieldwork bear mention. First is the physical hardship of fieldwork among Gebusi—living for many months at a time in a roastingly hot, extremely rainy, and drippingly humid insect-infested rainforest environment with no modern conveniences, cut off from outside contact and supplies (e.g., Knaft 2016: ch. 1). In some ways, my initial fieldwork took place in the final historic chapter of anthropology's search for and documentation of simple tribal—a.k.a. “primitive”—societies in highly remote places. As I have argued elsewhere (Knaft 2018), anthropology was arguably dominated by an emphasis on identifying and documenting so-called primitive societies for almost a century and a half, from its inception in the early nineteenth century through much or most of the 1960s and 70s. This emphasis often tended to assume, at least tacitly, that the authoring of ethnographic authenticity was linked to the valorizing import of severe personal hardship and privation endured by the ethnographer while doing fieldwork in remote and difficult locations.

Though typically bleached from reference in credentializing publications, the hardship quotient of fieldwork often remained a significant badge of ethnographer status. This is perhaps all the more notable for being an officially unspoken dimension of anthropological *habitus* (cf. Bourdieu 1977, 1988). Hardship authorized and authenticated ethnographic authorship, what Geertz (1988) called the “I-being-there” of genuine anthropology. In my own case, I came close to dying from chloroquine-resistant malaria in the field in 1980—saved by an emergency dose of liver-pounding primaquine packed as a back-up—and I endured a snake bite from a death adder in 1998. In truth, neither of these carried traumatic repercussions; I was delirious and hence unknowing during my malaria attack, and the snake bite ended up not being very deep. I recovered from both within a couple of weeks and have had no recurrent problems from either. More challenging in fact have been persistent

rashes and fungal infections, sometime ulcerating, which my skin seems acutely prone to in the tropics. Though less heroically debilitating, these have been a constant scourge. At times during my first fieldwork, they painfully prevented me from walking for more than short distances outside my house.

I mention this because while the heroism of arduous fieldwork has now largely been exiled from the “authenticity” of ethnography, fieldwork often remains both highly discomfiting and dangerous (see Howell 1990). I have more recently mentored students—in some cases working within their own countries of origin—who have despite prudent planning and precautions been subject to rape by field assistants, threats to their field situation by drug cartels, vandalism of their field residence, court cases in which they were effectively forced to indict members of their communities who were guilty but nonetheless exonerated and livid at them, and a host of other traumas and maladies. But as opposed to an older anthropology in which hardship was valorized, these slings and arrows no longer “count” very much as an underlying field credential—not a badge of ethnographic honor so much as begging suspicions that adequate precautions were somehow not taken. This is especially marked, and sometimes pernicious, in the cases of gendered discrimination and sexual harassment of female ethnographers, who now constitute the majority of cultural anthropology's fieldworkers. As opposed to being a marker of hardship, such sexual affronts are easily chalked up to or even blamed on the assumed negligence of the fieldworker herself. This is consistent with the longstanding de-classing and diminution of status in occupations as increasing numbers of women enter and succeed in them (e.g., Kessler-Harris 2003). As Foucault would note, the march of “progress” in our genealogies of ethnographic self-valorization carry blind spots and regressions as well as self-perceived “advancements.”

Second is the task or trick or trauma of authenticating for an anthropological and larger audience trends and behaviors that seem glaringly real to the ethnographer, but which are denied or backgrounded by local people themselves. While collecting genealogies among Gebusi in 1980–82, I found that a stunning number of deaths were homicides, often executions of people suspected to be sorcerers. Compiling and double-checking these accounts, I found that Gebusi had one of the highest homicide rates in the ethnographic record—almost one-third of all adult deaths, male and female together (e.g., Knaft 1985a: chs. 5–8; 1987a). Gebusi themselves discounted the significance of such killings, saying they were an unfortunate but necessary response to the practice of sorcery within and between their communities. To me, however, there was a glaring disjunction between Gebusi violence—largely within communities themselves—and their strongly palpable “good company” in (male) social life. This dynamic became the focus of my first book, *Good Company and Violence* (1985a).

The larger point and continuing challenge is how and to what extent we should document and “authorize” patterns that those we study with do not acknowledge or worry about—despite or just because these glaringly contradict the cultural values and standards they otherwise espouse. Are these patterns less “authentic”—or more so—because they are not socially and culturally foregrounded? In a critical or “dark anthropology,” as Ortner (2016) terms it, exposing unacknowledged inequity and disempowerment is important if not the coin of the anthropological realm (cf. Knauft 2019a; see Robbins 2013). Speaking truth to power is all the more important when resisted or downplayed by the powers-that-be. But then, what do we do when we find this tendency at the heart of marginalized, disempowered, or disenfranchised peoples themselves? Hypothetically, what if we found virulent sexism or generational or class elitism within a Black Lives Matter organization, for example? Or within an advocacy group for Dalits (a.k.a. Untouchables) in India? Or accusations of sexual impropriety against an otherwise seemingly spotless and luminary public resistance leader, someone we otherwise admire? Or, as happened at my own institution, harassment charges against a high administrative official in charge of protecting inclusion and diversity?

In such cases and practically by definition, the authoring and authenticating of inconvenient truths is *not* what people say, authorize, or even admit or tolerate being said about themselves. In a current world of identity politics and blowback, the challenge of voicing and publicizing inconvenient truths—wherever they occur—risks its own self-censorship. This self-censorship is often covered over as well as illuminated by “dark anthropology” insofar as it presumes to “know” as if in advance what is darkly unacceptable and what is seemingly so downtrodden as to be beyond reproach. At the other end of the power spectrum, pressures of authority and money that confer opportunities for ethnographic work enforce their own censorship. Contemplate, for example, a researcher studying the Chinese repression of Buddhists in Tibet who cannot publicly mention anything on the topic lest she or he be kicked out of the country and their Tibetan interlocutors imprisoned by Chinese authorities.

Further is the question of who is speaking for whom. While all people should be afforded the right to author—that is, to speak for themselves—under what conditions should they have this right *exclusively*? This engages long-standing questions in anthropology (see Margaret Jolly’s Afterword to this volume). Our identity—be it racial, gendered, sexual, national, religious, and so on—is in tension with our ability to be authors in relation to people whose identity we don’t fully share. And yet, as Bakhtin (1983) emphasized, otherness and outsidership, the difference of and in subjectivity, is central to communication in speech and to intersubjectivity; it cannot be simply rooted out. Crossing divides of otherness and communicating about them remains

a key core value of anthropology to the present. But what authorial privilege should be extended—or withdrawn—based on the field researcher’s own racial, sexual, gendered, national, religious, age, or class-based identity? These awkward questions are not easy to answer but are increasingly central to twenty-first century anthropology.

In *this* context, far from being heroic, the meek challenges I have faced in authenticating and authoring works about Gebusi, including their violence, pale against the stakes and the politics of representation in anthropology today. This is not to critique but rather to champion the importance of finding ever-more creative, insightful, and skillful ways to expose and document otherwise inconvenient truths. Against this, in my own case, it is unlikely that the Gebusi and even the Papua New Guinean government will dispute my discomfiting findings. By contrast, for new generations of field workers, representational politics, ethnographic authorship, and authentication are not less arduous but rather more so than they used to be.

In line with the anthropology of the 1980s and the expectations of my doctoral committee (Ray Kelly, Roy [“Skip”] Rappaport, Sherry Ortner, and Aram Yengoyan), my first major work was a tightly typed two-volume doctoral thesis that was then revised into a 474-page monograph published by the University of California Press (Knauft 1985a). Such a book is almost impossible to publish today. At the time, however, it provided credentialed authorship about a new and authentic society, “The Gebusi.” In addition to supplying a “good old description-in-the-round” concerning Gebusi history, environment, subsistence, social organization, politics, and ritual and spiritual life, the work focused on issues of sorcery, sorcery divination, the killing of sorcery suspects, and the eventual reintegration of peoples and groups following killings within their communities. Thirty-seven numerical tables and twenty-two kinship figures documented the findings and authenticated the work. An expensive hardback, the monograph sold only a few hundred copies. But it received positive published reviews in major journals, and it got me tenure. Written before the era of desktop much less laptop computers, the book took a dauntingly large amount of work to complete. But I was privileged in multiple senses to be able to undertake, complete, and publish it. In our present terms, we could say that this was when I came out as an “author”



Figure 3.1. Momiay Sori in initiation costume with Bruce Knauft in Yibihilu, 1981. Photograph by Eileen Cantrell (Knauft).

to chronicle an “authentic” new tribe from the deep rainforest of Papua New Guinea.

During that period, I had little doubt how authentic Gebusi were. Riding the historical tail of anthropology’s search for distant and isolated peoples, I felt that Gebusi were pretty much the same way that they had always been. It was true that they were remote—a torturous walk from the nearest airstrip, primary rainforest all around, and no roads out. Out-migration, schooling, Christianity, cash-cropping, and wage labor were all nil. By contrast, all-night spirit séances, rituals, feasts, a social life centered around the longhouse, the intense festivity of male initiations, and male-male sexuality were all palpably evident. In retrospect, it is not surprising that I overlooked and downplayed issues of history and historical construction (contrast from that era, Rosaldo 1980).

Gebusi were first contacted by whites in 1959. I did document that by 1980, significant introduced changes included the importance of steel knives and axes, the colonial pacification of the group next door, and alterations of trading networks. But it took me decades to realize the extent to which Gebusi of the early 1980s were a product of colonial and postcolonial development (see more generally, Wolf 1982; cf. Knauff 1999). The very demographic survival of the Gebusi had been predicated on the colonial pacification of their more numerous and bellicose neighbors, the Bedminimi, who had literally been eating them up. The Gebusi rituals, spirit séances, and village feasts that I found so lavish and traditional were significantly enabled in scope, scale, and elaboration by the stability of pacification and by the larger houses and bigger gardens made possible by steel axes and other introduced tools. To some degree, Gebusi’s enthusiastic camaraderie, what Durkheim (1966) would have called their ritual effervescence, were a function of being able to live on their own relatively securely without threat of inter-tribal slaughter and decimation.

Even during that early period, Gebusi learned outside ways very quickly. The facial sideburns of Gebusi men echoed those of Australian officers just a few years earlier. When a museum collector visited by helicopter, Gebusi learned within a few scant minutes exactly what the curator wanted, including what artifacts looked old and authentic enough to be valued for purchase. One man gained a high price by retrieving a pig’s skull from a rubbish dump, quickly rinsing it off, painting it with black charcoal, white clay, and red ochre—and then coating it with ash and soot to make it look old again (see analogous incidents in this volume’s introduction). I am reminded of Gary Larson’s cartoon of natives living in a thatched hut. As the village scout cries, “The anthropologist is coming!” everyone rushes to stash their TVs and don native garb. The same was not true of Gebusi. But my attentiveness to their patterns of ritual display, spiritual divination, and sorcery did betray a keen interest in what I took to be their long-standing traditions.

Modern Challenge, Authenticating Change

In 1998, sixteen years after having left the Gebusi in 1982, I returned, this time solo, for six months. By that time my son had gone from birth to middle school, and my career had become well established. In accordance with anthropology’s then-burgeoning interest in modern development, my goal in returning was not to authenticate their long-standing traditions but to document and authenticate major social change. I was not disappointed.

Unbeknownst to me, Gebusi from Gasumi had moved their entire community from the deep rainforest to the outskirts of the Nomad Station (Knauff 1998a). Here they had become deeply engaged with the Station’s churches, school, market, development projects, sports leagues, and national festivities and holidays. I had wanted to wipe my slate clean of old expectations and to treat this new fieldwork as an entirely new chapter, devoid of traditionalizing projections. What I didn’t realize was that this presumption became its own expectation. And yet, as before, the realities that I found seemed, if anything, to confirm my unstated hopes and assumptions.

As such, my second fieldwork among Gebusi, and my second book about them, focused on schooling, the market, Church and Christian conversion, and new forms of politics and cultural representation. Though in many ways not unfounded, the title of this work was not particularly subtle: *Exchanging the Past: A Rainforest World of Before and After* (2002a). The title concept is in fact a reasonable translation of a quip made by a leading Gebusi man: that while I had been gone, Gebusi had “exchanged” (*sesum*) their past for their future. The phrase is poignant insofar as exchange relations—in marriage, feasting, sorcery retribution, and other aspects of social life—have been and continue to be central for Gebusi. And yet, the higher-order assertion—that “exchange” was not only “in” life but, over time, a condition of change in life itself—was basically the throwaway line of one man that I, as author, elevated to the status of a key overarching theme. In the process, I authenticated not “traditional” Gebusi culture, as I had done before, but the authenticity of dramatic change and transformation.

Though I don’t impugn the detailed expositions and analyses of *Exchanging the Past*, the work does underplay Gebusi continuities, including concerning exchange patterns themselves. As one colleague jokingly reminded me, if I had gone back to Gebusi every one or two years rather than waiting more than a decade and a half, I would have seen more continuity and less radical change. At the time, while cut off from communications during fieldwork, I found myself developing a notion of local modernity: how people, including and especially the remote Gebusi, fashion their own cultural version of being and becoming modern despite conditions of great marginality and underdevelopment. Armed with this perception upon returning to the US, I found



Figure 3.2. Tafiay Haymp with Bruce Knauft at Honinabi airstrip, 2013. Photograph by Latham Wood.

with some delight but much greater frustration that the idea of “alternative,” “local,” or “vernacular” modernity had, during my absence, not just arisen but had become anthropologically dominant in a tidal wave of new journal articles, books, and special collections. I found myself once again behind rather than ahead of anthropology’s changing curve of new interests. In retrospect, my new focus was more a function of anthropology’s emergent zeitgeist than I realized or wanted to admit. Nonetheless, my resulting work on Gebusi—and an edited volume entitled *Critically Modern* (Knauft 2002b)—received positive attention and opened new professional doors for me.

One of the “authenticating” conundrums I still find important from this period is Gebusi’s changing assertions of cultural authenticity. These were strongly marked and made public during the celebrations of Papua New Guinea’s Independence Day at the Nomad Station in mid-September 1998 (see Knauft 2002c, 2007a, 2016: ch. 10). Thousands of local people, officials, and other visitors thronged the government sports field to watch elaborate traditional dances and other performances by villagers. These were staged for public consumption by the various self-described tribes of the Nomad Sub-District, including the Gebusi. This was not the enactment of “tradition” in a locally meaningful or ritual context; previously, ceremonies had taken place through the night, when spirits were considered active, in a dimly lit longhouse. Rather, these new performances were staged for an audience of strangers on the gov-

ernment ballfield to celebrate Papua New Guinea’s Independence in the hot and harsh light of day. Government officials—one sporting a Michael Jackson T-shirt—rated and ranked the performances of different tribal groups. Top-scoring groups received government prize money, and this was indeed a prime motive for competing villagers to stage their performances. Many of the dances were seldom or rarely performed in villages anymore. As such, the display of tradition was authenticated as historic folklore—customs that had been active just a few years before, but which were now moribund and no longer actively practiced. Their display marked a current status of being authentically modern while authenticating traditional life as distinctly historical, a thing of the past.

Complementing these traditional dances were rehearsed skits that mocked and parodied old-time customs. These portrayed previous beliefs and practices in a buffoonish and self-consciously savage way. A sloppily dressed traditional villager tried unsuccessfully to learn how to open a tin of fish from a snappily clad “patrol officer.” The second coming of Jesus Christ caused traditional dancers to fall to the ground and die in Hell. Men trying to chop a sapling with a traditional stone ax fell to arguing and fighting. As if there were any doubt about the relegation of traditional customs to “history,” the meaning of each skit was announced to the audience through a battery-operated bullhorn: “In the old days we were ignorant and did X; now we have ‘come up’ and understand Y.” Many if not most of the skits were arch physical comedy and were very funny, poignantly portraying the farce of tradition against its modern antithesis.

The men from Gasumi staged a particularly powerful skit in which a “sick man” “died” despite the screaming antics of a traditional spirit medium who attempted to save him. Another man was then accused of sorcery and “beaten to death” in slapstick comedy, after which a fight ensued between the two sides. After racing off the performance enclosure, the actors returned with full modern decorum, bowing in stately fashion to the four sides of the encircling audience, which responded with thundering applause and shouts of approval.

At one level this was a clear assertion of new authentic modernity, configured in figure-ground relation to customs now considered ignorant and anachronistic. The man who played the sorcery suspect had in fact killed several people for sorcery in his early years. The man who played the spirit medium was in fact the lay local leader of the Gasumi Catholic Church. Such assertions of what Mageo (Chapter 2) calls *au courant* authenticity rang true with my interpretative assertion that Gebusi were “exchanging their past.” And yet, as I laughed through my tears at the Gebusi’s mocking of their own deep traditions, some of which I had found stately and beautiful, I was left both then and now wondering what was really authentic and whose new view of authenticity should replace who else’s, either theirs or my own, either past or present. This question has deepened for me in subsequent years and visits.

The Return, Revenge, or Recuperation of the Past

By 2005, my trope of authentic Gebusi change was strongly encoded in the first edition of my book for undergraduates: *The Gebusi: Lives Transformed in a Rainforest World* (Knauft 2016). It was highly successful and sold many copies, including as bundled with the then-current edition of Conrad Kottak's introductory textbook. But against my story of Gebusi authentic change, returns to the field in 2008 and 2013 brought more challenges. In particular, my story of unidirectional change and local "development" among Gebusi got shattered. During the 2000s, services and activities at Nomad were withdrawn, and since then they have ended almost entirely. The airstrip is closed indefinitely. The Nomad Sub-District Office has been shut for a number of years, and, with the exodus of paid government workers and their funded programs, the local monied economy has cratered. It shows no signs of recovering. The Nomad area still has no roads to anywhere. In new ways, the Sub-District—and Gebusi—have gone back to being as relatively isolated and marginalized as they were in 1980.

The hows and whys of this decline are an overdetermined issue beyond my present scope (see Knauft 2016: Pt. III; 2019a). Suffice it to say that government inefficiency, graft, the centralization of state "rent-seeking," and the precipitous decline of profits from the Western Province's gold mine at Ok Tedi converged to fuel a stunningly downward economic spiral. These dynamics afflict not only Gebusi but remote rural areas in many parts of Papua New Guinea as well as marginal areas in many other so-called developing countries. The march towards modernity easily leaves increasing numbers of people increasingly behind (see Knauft forthcoming).

For the past dozen years and more, the effective absence of a monied economy has forced Gebusi to be more self-sufficient. In addition to highlighting the unevenness of modern "development"—whereby a few selected areas get rich while many more others are neglected and get poorer (e.g., Ferguson 2005; see Knauft 2019b, forthcoming)—these changes cast special light on the selective resurgence and redefinition of longer-standing traditions that I had previously documented in some detail.

Thrown back on their rainforest subsistence economy, Gebusi could be said to have become more fully culturally authentic in their own way, on their own terms. Or have they? Patterns such as the centrality of a longhouse, the accusation of sorcery suspects, and sister-exchange marriage that I thought were declining or moribund in 1998 have reemerged—or were never as dormant as I had thought. Longstanding patterns of kinship, social organization, and celebratory feasting have continued unabated. And yet, other Gebusi beliefs and practices have been defunct or moribund for decades and show no signs of re-emerging. These include traditional spirit mediumship (Knauft 1989,

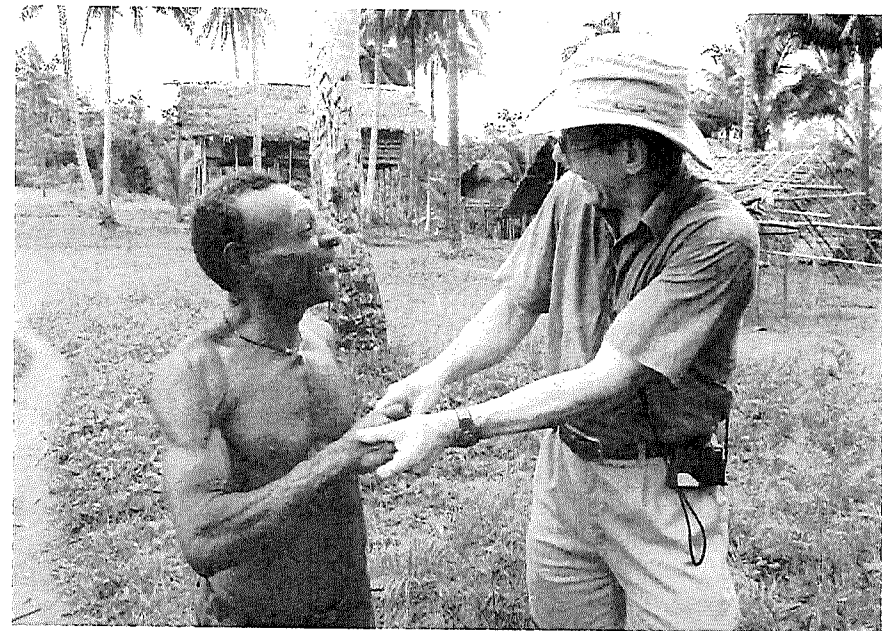


Figure 3.3. Kwuyl Bi with Bruce Knauft in Yehebi village, 2013. Photograph by Latham Wood.

1998b), ritual initiation (Knauft 1985a: ch. 9; 2016: chs. 5–6), the killing of sorcery suspects (Knauft 1985a: ch. 5–8; 1987a), and what used to be called "ritual homosexuality" among men (Knauft 1987b, 2003; cf. Herdt 1982). At the same time, despite or because they raise no cash crops, Gebusi self-subsistence strategies have mushroomed, fueled by a range of introduced crops and creative growing techniques (Knauft 2016: Pt. III). Gebusi have plenty of land, good nutrition, strong health, and surprisingly increased longevity in the face of negligible external health care.

In the process, at least selected Gebusi have become more vocal in questioning my authorship and the ways I advocate for and attempt to help them. This has occurred in part as my closest Gebusi friends and I have gotten older, and a new generation, particularly of young men, is finding its voice. A case in point: in 2013, a colleague who runs a government-approved "Social Mapping" company informed me, prior to my return to Gebusi that year, that an Exxon-Mobile pipeline for Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) was projected, at least potentially, to cross a small portion of Gebusi territory. In attempting to ensure that Gebusi would get their fair share of land-rights compensation, I agreed to take GPS coordinates that could establish firm boundaries for Gebusi tribal territory, thus validating any potential claims that they might have (see Knauft 2013). Though the pipeline was never built—and perhaps never will be—the

specter of such development fueled rampant local expectation, including fantasies of huge cash compensation windfalls (see Knauff 2016: Pt. III; forthcoming). At the time, I tried to explain to Gebusi—through vernacular terms that were woefully inadequate—both what the project would potentially entail and that its prospect was highly uncertain. One of the few young men from Gasumi who I had never really known—he had been born shortly after I had left in 1982 and had been away at the town of Kiunga when I had returned in 1998—asked to see my business card, which I gladly supplied. When he saw that I was affiliated with the Emory College of Arts and Sciences, he launched the idea that I was secretly drawing up Gebusi minerals into my GPS and stealing them to sell for profit, dispossessing the Gebusi. Though the idea was easily dismissed, it was harder to explain to him and others exactly how a GPS *did* work and why it was important for me to use it.

My visit in 2016 had two other notable incidents that both illustrate and complicate features of authenticity and authorship. The first is that, unbeknownst to me, a large house had been built for me several months before my arrival—and well before Gebusi knew that I would be coming, much less that I would be accompanied by Dr. Malbrancke. It was built in hopes that I would indeed arrive and pay handsomely for its construction, an expectation that proved correct, as serendipitous as this was. (The challenge then became to delicately decline offers to build yet other large structures for payment.)

In relation to the building of my house but much more generally, a newly authenticated concept and value had emerged for Gebusi: work as paid labor (see Knauff 2019a). In prior decades, the Gebusi word for work, *hotola*, meant literally “cause-to-be-held”: to hold something as an implement with intent to use it to do something such as chopping wood or cultivating or harvesting food. Now, however, *hotola* meant any activity that merited and deserved to be paid on an hourly and daily basis. All manner of industrious activities that had been collective in nature were now proclaimed to be “work,” that is, individually paid labor. That an average cash economy of only about fifteen cents a day per adult rendered any such payment either moot or ludicrous is beside the point. No matter, such work in principle at least *should* be paid.³

My second axis of newly discovered authenticity among Gebusi came courtesy of my acute and intrepid female French co-researcher, Dr. Malbrancke. Her presence and activities with me transformed the gendered dimension of my relation to Gebusi. I came to realize as I previously had not—no matter how hard I had tried logistically and conceptually—how my previous authorship and authentication of Gebusi had been centered around and dominated by men. In complementary fashion, our new emphasis in the field—including our new ability to include and compensate work with women—resulted in my relations with men becoming more strained, including with some of my closest Gebusi friends.



Figure 3.4. Hugam Mosomiay with Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke in Gasumi Corners, 2016. Photograph by Bruce Knauff.

The larger question, which I presently confront in relation to a potential 5th edition of *The Gebusi*, is how to present for a broad audience the complexity of my changing authorship of them, including what about them seems genuine or authentic. How to do this without making the result too complex or convoluted remains a challenge. Like a venerable introductory textbook of anthropology now in its umpteenth-plus edition, the addition of further new topics and perspectives risks undercutting the whole enterprise—a bit like a Christmas tree toppling over because it was loaded with too many ornaments. And yet, new dimensions of Gebusi authenticity—the outcomes of their experiments with newly authorized customs, both new and old—deserve, I think, to be made known, and in some ways celebrated.

On the one hand, the intent of my future authorship concerning Gebusi includes their continuing lament of their dearth of economic development—in the face of mega-mining and petroleum extraction profits elsewhere in the country (Knaft forthcoming). I would also like to analyze how and why “democratic” elections are such a Kafkaesque experience for them and others in PNG. But my deeper concern is to consider “Why is there Peace?”: to address how and why over a half-century the Gebusi rate of killing has gone from virtually one-third of all adult deaths to absolute zero for the last thirty years. (We double-checked and confirmed these data again in 2017—see Knaft 2011b; Knaft and Malbrancke 2016, 2017.) For the past two decades and more, this absence of deadly violence has continued despite a virtual absence of police or any other agents of outside control. How have Gebusi have gone from being one of the most violent peoples documented in the ethnographic record to just about one of the most peaceful—on their own terms? Sorcery accusations still occur, but they do not end in homicide. In what senses are Gebusi authentically violent or peaceful? Of course, they have, at different turns, been both.

On the cusp of defending my doctoral thesis, I had a dream that my dissertation was a beautiful statue with an elegant torso and limbs—but it lacked a head. In fact, it took me years to sift, winnow, and distill the deeper significance of my work, the larger picture of what I was painstakingly documenting about and with Gebusi. It’s the same for me now. What thread of connection authenticates myriad developments in relation to each other: cultural U-turns and “under-development”; resurgent versus dying customs; working in the absence of money; gendered changes; the continuing absence of homicide; the demise of same-sex relations between men? Finding a rope that can bind these strands takes time—and is greatly facilitated by privilege. Even so, engaging this task is akin to crafting a novel, trying to combat the Balkanization of pieces and parts that can so easily become, in writing, just shreds and patches. Younger generations of ethnographers now face this challenge face in spades,

especially as the value and support for scholarly knowledge becomes less and less secure. It takes time and money—privilege—to facilitate authorship and aspirations for authenticity. This has never been easy across anthropology’s lengthening history. As we appreciate that history, it’s all the more important to engage current challenges that are in no less difficult and in new ways yet more so than they were in the past.

Take-Aways

Though my history with Gebusi is long enough to risk anachronism, I hope a few of its features can have some small value for reflecting on ethnography’s current challenges. I suggest this relevance in eight points below.

1. Establishing anthropological authorship and attributing cultural authenticity have always been challenging and difficult—yet in radically new guises over time.

Older scholars may claim that classic ethnography was both more difficult and more rigorous than it is today. But in many ways, it is now more challenging—and more interesting—than ever. This includes the increasing complexity of both our audiences and the politics of our assertions. We now speak to and across many new audiences and across new and older stakes of identity, representation, and political critique. It is important not to shirk from these complexities but to embrace them creatively, and, as Bakhtin (1983) would put it, as dialogically as possible. As Baudelaire suggested of modernity when coining the word back in 1863, “You have no right to despise the present” (cited in Knaft 2002b).

2. A genealogical approach to authorship and authenticity, the mere facticity of recognizing and admitting changes in approach over time, is useful.

Being self-aware of our own expectations of progress, of scholarly advancement and intellectual betterment, supplies strong critical grist against both anthropology’s past myopias, on the one hand, and its present new conceits and obsessions, on the other. All history is represented through the lens of the present. No matter how seemingly enlightened or progressive or advanced one’s present perspective is, it will be rendered humble by subsequent awareness in and through the future. Though questions about proper authorship and authenticity in the present may seem—and may ultimately be—impossible to answer, they can, for this very reason, be all the more important to raise and address seriously.

3. *Categories authenticate ethnographic experience even as they are later rejected, superseded, and then reinscribed in new guises.*

In a sea of hard-to-grasp new phenomena, influences, and subject positions, new ways of making sense of their challenge arise spontaneously if not invariably—at the same time and in part for the very reason that older categories and optics of understanding are critiqued and debunked. The figure-ground relation between these processes is, on the one hand, one of criticizing and de-ifying past concepts and categories—of rejecting them as problematic or at least putting them in “quotation marks.” Against this, new concepts and modes of orientation are proposed, often inchoate at first, but then with greater clarity and coherence. Over time, however, these are themselves exposed as inadequate and over-reified. This larger pattern remains in our intellectual heritage, a heritage that, in a larger sense, we have arguably not unshackled ourselves from at least since Hegel in the early nineteenth century. This is the intellectual dialectic of intended-as-progressive supersession, even if now in non-paradigmatic and unsynthetic terms (see discussion in Knaft 2006.) Though we may not be able to transcend this conundrum, we can more seriously and mindfully engage our audiences and their stakes as well as our own in the situated present.

4. *Anthropologists must increasingly ask whose authenticity—of a culture, of men, of women, an insider, an outsider, an insider-outsider, an interest group, a contingent—should be represented? And whose authorship should be privileged—his, hers, theirs, ours, hybrid, coauthored; or performative, authoring outside or beyond the text?*

These questions are not new, but they now emerge with increasing intensity and urgency. Similar issues have been present in anthropology since its pre-institutional origins in the anti-abolitionist movement in England during the 1830s: how and how much should we speak for and about the interests of others, and how and how much should we engage political stakes that resonate with our critical intellectualism? (see Rainger 1978, 1980). These conundrums link back to the reification and de-reification of categories over time—but now often hitched to the identity politics of claiming, or being relegated to, one or another subject position. Particularly poignant is the sliding scale of disenfranchisement and disempowerment, on the one hand, and of privilege and dominance, on the other. The boundaries and polarizations between these positions, their imputations or projections, now become important if not key social facts, particularly in our present era of political and social polarization.

On the one hand, circling the wagons around principled categories of moral cleavage and identity can have important practical functions and serve

political purposes, including bearing witness, speaking truth to power, and fighting oppression. We can take for example, Black Power, Malcom X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Louis Farrakhan's Black Muslim Million Man March, Black Lives Matter, and many other related movements and developments in the cause of Black civil rights. On the other hand, the differences between such initiatives are also very important. At extreme, identity polarization risks reifying and reinscribing the very terms of difference, antinomy, and polarization that, in a larger sense, they fight to efface and transcend (see nuanced consideration of this issue by Haider 2018). This can hamper the subjectivity of subordination as well as, ultimately, the politics of combatting it.⁴ There is no easy recipe for knowing which side of the coin one will find: evidence for the critique of an oppressor, or evidence for the critique of the oppressor within the oppressed. This is a strategic and contextual matter in each case, and urgently so at the present time. These issues frontally inform the relationship between authenticity, authoring, and power in a fully engaged anthropology.⁵

5. *A strong value as well as risk in identifying deeply with those we work among is being privy to their less charitable and unappealing attitudes and practices, the dark side of their moon.*

Dynamics of prejudice, discrimination, and oppression can be strikingly “authentic” to our critical sensibility at the same time and sometimes for the very reason that they may be rejected and downplayed by our interlocutors in the field and afterwards. Gebusi effectively downplayed the glaring devastation brought by their execution of sorcery suspects, and Gebusi men downplay their domination of women. Trump supporters deny their racism. Bourgeois intellectuals deny their common racial privilege, and police deny the negative impact of their coercive power. Authenticities claimed and inhabited by people easily if not typically reject or disparage outsider critical assertions of fact over and against their own assertions of authentic truth. Such contestations of authenticity and authorship are no easier to resolve than they are to avoid—and are all the more important to seriously and contextually engage for this very fact.

6. *Our identification and deep resonance with our interlocutors, the people we live with in the field, provide both the conditions and also the necessary points of departure for our own authorship and our own sense of authenticity.*

For better or worse, and however much we squirm or want to wriggle around it, the authenticity of our own authorship is a space we must ultimately accept, inhabit, and cultivate—especially if we want to continue our commitment to an

ethically engaged anthropology. In our digital and social media age, this is an increasingly difficult challenge during fieldwork, in post-field write-up, and in the transition or demarcation between these two. The increasing concern and attentiveness to engagement and reflexivity in anthropology intensifies the issues and the stakes of what Marilyn Strathern (1996) calls “cutting the network.”

Whereas I myself rarely hear from or can effectively communicate with Gebusi when not physically with them, most research today is at the other extreme. For ethnographers working in the present, there is potentially no end to fieldwork. One’s friends and informants, their lives and needs, their interests and supplications, are ever-present on Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, or email. To this is added seemingly infinite new information, new sources, and new critiques that repeatedly come our way. How and when to cut the network of connectivity and simply *write* is an increasingly important challenge and question, that is, if one is to make a space, amid everything else, for contemporary authorship.

Coauthorship and various forms of creative and experimental ethnography are and should be increasingly important (e.g., Vidali 2016, 2020). New, alternative, and underrepresented voices must have more places at the table and a bigger slice of the pie. Amid this process, either for better or for worse, the coin of the academic realm remains the single-authored or lead-authored journal article or book, that is, if one wants to court professional viability and an academic livelihood. All other obligations and expectations are added on top of this—including the pressures on underrepresented scholars and persons of color to represent “their people” in ways that take time and attention—potentially away from their own research and authorship. For the foreseeable future, a doctoral thesis is still likely to be the obligatory work of a putatively autonomous individual, an imputed authentic author. To acknowledge and underscore this if one wants to pursue or maintain an academic career is not to undercut but rather to underscore the complementary importance of persons of privilege themselves taking the time and effort to authenticate the authorship and representation of others.

7. Asserting authorship and attributing authentic value to the people studied and the means of representing them provide no guarantee of getting or keeping a regular academic job. But they are still the best way of increasing the chances of doing so.

Certainly this has been the case for me. And, judging from graduate students, it remains the case. Except for rare periods—the late 1960s are sometimes mentioned—obtaining and keeping a tenure-track job in anthropology has

almost always been extremely difficult, for well more than a century. Certainly this is now getting no easier, and given the current COVID-19 pandemic, it is getting if anything an order of magnitude harder. But published authorship greatly increases the chances of doing so. And for many if not most of us, we have no choice but to study and to do fieldwork and to author things anyway, that is, as if authentically. Ours is not a job but a way of being, a vocation, what Weber (2004: ch. 20) calls a “calling.” Like someone who is at heart an artist or a musician or a creative writer or a cook or a potter, there is little way we can live without doing what we feel driven to do. This is also often true, it is important to register, for those who work as anthropologists or with anthropological sensibilities outside the academy, including in development work, NGOs, and a range of applied fields and professions.

8. Authorship and authenticity in a late modern sense are invariably declining.

Foucault (1984) suggested that authorship—the author function as we presently understand it—is declining and will eventually disappear. If so, our epistemic grounding and what we might call our modern construction of authorship will dissipate. The same could be said of authenticity: following Andy Warhol, Jean Baudrillard, and many others, the classic idea of being “authentic” is itself completely outmoded and anachronistic. This may be an advanced intellectual view, but—as with “clanship” or “development” or “culture” itself—*authoring and authenticity are likely to have far more continuing purchase in our future practicalities, and politics, than critical theory or effete intellectualism may want to admit.* As Marshall Sahlins once quipped, while people around the world adopt reified notions of their cultures with increasing gusto, it is anthropologists who shirk from attributing cultural coherence. The same could be said for ideas of modernity and development, as well as nationality: the anthropological critique has been strong if not obliterating, but in social and political life around the world, the purchase of these intellectually debunked notions seems if anything stronger and stronger.

So, yes, claims of classic authorship and authenticity are waning and, in some contexts, moribund. Certainly, they are severely critiqued. But authorship, like authenticity, continually reinvents itself as it races against critique. Reconfiguring received categories with new terms and in new and subtle ways is now crucial for the future of critical ethnography and progressive anthropology. Everything eventually dies. But as history and culture also consistently show, old things get reborn in new ways. If we have no right to despise the present, we also have little right to despise the past—and risk simply reinscribing it if we reject it too crudely.

Coda



Figure 3.5. Mosomiay Yugul with Bruce Knauff at Knauff's fieldwork departure at Honinabi airstrip, 2013. Photograph by Latham Wood.

Concluding the various editions of my book, *The Gebusi*, is a section called "Farewell." It conveys my sorrow at the airstrip on departing and leaving my Gebusi friends, me crying and them crying along with me. It is a true story, and I sometimes still tear up thinking about and recalling it, how I miss my Gebusi friends. But my last departure, in 2017, was not like that.

With the Nomad airstrip closed, we had to trek and go by canoe across the full tilt of Gebusi land, up the Sio River to Yehebi, where a small Christian airstrip was still maintained. The trip with our gear was arduous, and the sun blazed down on our long trip by canoe on the unshaded river. By nightfall, the rashes and infections on my skin covered much of my body. I was already on antibiotics as well as Benadryl, prednisone, and pain killers. But none of these turned the tide; I really needed to leave the field. The Yehebi people were nice, but many of them didn't know me very well. When the plane didn't come for several days—the pilot was sick—I felt I had to do something. For the first time since 1998, I ended up either having or staging a Gebusi anger display, in this case targeted against the guy who for a few scant minutes had daily radio contact with the MAF plane service out of Kiunga. It was not his fault, but I screamed and yelled and screamed at him just the same. The plane came the next day. By that time, weary of waiting, most of my Gebusi friends had left and gone back to Gasumi.

They needed to attend to their lives and their children; they couldn't wait day upon day just to see us leave. As we finally flew off, I was beyond exhaustion. My final hugs to remaining friends were hardly more than half-hearted.

Since then, I've realized that I probably can't go back to the Gebusi; my contact with them is probably finished. I never say never, but I also face the odds. The Nomad airstrip can't be reopened; it is now overgrown and rutted by pigs. The cost of a helicopter is prohibitive, tens of thousands of dollars, plus difficult and uncertain to arrange, and with little place for cargo. And as robust as I otherwise am, I have to admit that ignoring health risks would now be rash for me and beyond skin deep.

It's common for experiences and relationships to be marked by their end, judged by the terms of their conclusion. My own with Gebusi was not so uplifting as I had hoped or expected. And yet, does it matter? As a teenager, I recall reading a passage, I think by Aldous Huxley, that asked: what difference it would make if the very last thing you happened to do in this life before dying, the very last thing, was to pick your nose? Would it really make a difference, a difference to the life you had lived? As I wrote in my afterword to Howell and Talle's wonderful book, *Returns to the Field* (2011), the end of fieldwork is not branded by its conclusion, not judged against the standard of a rousing finale. Like life itself, the waning of previous authorship or the ending of authenticity will work its own designs. It will then reappear somewhere else in some new guise, with and through others, perhaps unexpected.

The deepest and most authentic thing I have learned and authored with and about Gebusi is how much they have enjoyed life in the face of privation and suffering. In early 1980s, their lives were amazingly short, poorly nourished, ravaged by disease—gravely if not fatally at all stages of life—and plagued by both the imagined horror of sorcery and the real horror of killing each other because of this. And yet, they were the happiest people I have ever known. Their collective bonding and joy and festivity—yes, primarily among the men, but women, too—were breathtaking, overwhelming. I have never experienced anything like it. Though tempered since by the upturns and downturns of their local modernity, Gebusi have weathered the cost and the stigma of being the left behind of the left behind in their ever-more-remote corner of the New Guinea rainforest. Not just their fortitude but their sense of meaning and value in the bargain have been and continue to be remarkable. There are worse things in a professional life than trying to authorize that. And render-it authentic.

Acknowledgments

My foremost debt and acknowledgment in this chapter is overwhelmingly to Gebusi, especially those from the community of Gasumi Corners. The names

of Gebusi friends and associates roll off my tongue, but there would be scores of them to list, and to list a few without the rest would pose its own bias of representation.

I am indebted to all my co-researchers during different field trips, including Eileen Cantrell (Knauff), Latham Wood, and Dr. Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke, as well as the many different organizations and foundations that have supported my work among Gebusi over the years. The present chapter has greatly benefitted from the trenchant remarks of two anonymous reviewers, Dr. Malbrancke, and the gracious comments and collegial support of Jeanette Mageo. I extend especially deep thanks to Katherine Lindquist, a third-year graduate student in our anthropology doctoral program at Emory; her insightful comments on a previous draft of this chapter have been highly valuable to me in relating the potential relevance of my Gebusi experiences to current tensions and trajectories in cultural anthropology. All shortcomings remain my own.

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Notes

1. Sherry Ortner's famous article "On Key Symbols" (1973) was widely read among my graduate cohort, and Ortner herself was a member of my doctoral committee in addition to being the then-spouse of my faculty advisor.
2. See fieldwork video of me trying to talk with Gebusi women in 2013 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWBztaxVxXA&list=PLnmUPXm0T5YXTLsY0NMXeXO0o9kF9R6Y0&index=7&t=0s>.
3. In essence, this was a way to valorize wage work in the absence of wages (see Knauff 2019a). As we contemplate our own contemporary world of increasing digital-age joblessness, the idea that we may configure wage-earning value from industrious enterprise that is not much paid may be closer to home than we might want to imagine—as described in recent critiques of the contemporary gig economy (e.g., Kessler 2018), in David Graeber's searing book, *Bullshit Jobs* (2019), and in Tania Li's *Land's End* (2014).
4. At extreme, when the political tables ultimately do get more fully turned, either in restricted contexts or more generally, this risks domination of a reversed sort, either contextually or more broadly, as Mamdani puts it, *When Victims Become Killers* (Mamdani 2020). One could plausibly view Jewish Israeli treatment of Palestinians in an

analogous way (see <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/bknauff/engaged-anthropology/israel-palestine-conflict-engagement-project/>).

5. The "possession" of authenticity articulates directly with an engaged anthropology that not only includes but foregrounds the facilitation of local or Indigenous voices in pursuit of their own interests (e.g., Low and Merry 2010; Kirsch 2018). In my own career for the past twenty years, my local work with Gebusi has been complemented by applied project work, especially in postconflict conditions across a score of developing countries in east and west Africa, the Himalayas, and southeast Asia (e.g., Knauff 2007b, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). A significant part of this work has been dedicated to "South-South" collaborations between highly dedicated national NGO staff from different countries who learn from each other in direct consultation across diverse world areas (see <http://cprp.emory.edu/home/projects/liberia/index.html>). There are myriad ways that local perspectives can be appreciated and championed depending on specific conditions and contextual opportunities.

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