

# The Gebusi

Lives Transformed in a Rainforest World

**FIFTH EDITION**

**BRUCE KNAUFT**

with Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke



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For information about this book, contact:

Waveland Press, Inc.  
4180 IL Route 83, Suite 101  
Long Grove, IL 60047-9580  
(847) 634-0081  
info@waveland.com  
www.waveland.com

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*To Yuway and all Gebusi—  
Past, Present, Future*

## About the Authors

**B**ruce Knauft is Samuel C. Dobbs Professor at Emory University in Atlanta. He has published numerous journal articles and two substantial monographs about the Gebusi of Papua New Guinea: *Good Company and Violence* (University of California Press, 1985) and *Exchanging the Past* (University of Chicago Press, 2002). Dr. Knauft is a widely known scholar of Melanesia, and his books include *From Primitive to Post-colonial in Melanesia and Anthropology* (University of Michigan Press, 1998) and *South Coast New Guinea Cultures* (Cambridge University Press, 1993). He has also written extensively about contemporary directions in cultural anthropology, including his books *Genealogies for the Present in Cultural Anthropology* (Routledge, 1996) and *Critically Modern* (edited, Indiana University Press, 2002).

During the past 15 years, Professor Knauft has engaged with action anthropology, including project activities and scholarly programs he has directed in West Africa, East Africa, Inner Asia, South Asia, and the Himalayas. He has mentored a broad range of students who have conducted fieldwork in diverse world areas and who are now professionals in their own right. He enjoys teaching undergraduates and regularly teaches Introduction to Cultural Anthropology. The present book was written especially with undergraduates and a larger general audience in mind. Professor Knauft has remained keenly interested in the Gebusi people of Papua New Guinea since his first fieldwork among them in the 1980s, and he most recently worked with them again in 2016 and 2017, accompanied

by coresearcher Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke. He also has significant interest in Tibetan Buddhism, the anthropology of development, and the political economy and class structure of racism, sexism, and political polarization in the contemporary US.

Professor Knauft's CV, selected papers, photos, online teaching modules, videos of him with Gebusi, and music links are available on his website at [bruceknauft.com](http://bruceknauft.com).

**A**nne-Sylvie Malbrancke is a former literature student from École Normale Supérieure. She transitioned to anthropology upon meeting Maurice Godelier in 2009, who provided her full access to his fieldwork material gathered among the Baruya of Papua New Guinea during the 1960s and 1970s. She then conducted her own doctoral fieldwork in New Guinea with the descendants of Godelier's informants among the Baruya (2013–2014) and wrote her dissertation on cultural change, with special emphasis on the ways Baruya women engage with “modernity.” She subsequently accompanied Dr. Knauft on two successive field seasons in 2016 and 2017 among the Gebusi. In late 2017 she started shooting a series of documentaries, *Rituals of the World* (15 episodes), which aired on the Franco-German cultural channel Arte in 2020. The author of several theoretical articles, Dr. Malbrancke has also published a book relating her experiences on television shoots and exploring the rituals depicted: *Rituels du monde* (éditions Dépaysage, 2020). She is now in the process of shooting another series of documentaries for Arte that also focus on rites of passage: *Vivre*.

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# Preface

## BACKGROUND

Anthropology is little without powerful portrayals of peoples and cultures across the world. These change over time. As such, we are pushed to stretch our understanding of others and, in the process, to reconsider our own beliefs and values. Over the years, a number of short books have exposed students to cultural diversity and the richness of human experience. These often take the form of short ethnographies—book-length descriptions of the people and culture considered. Within this genre, *The Gebusi* is distinctive in three connected ways. First, I have written this work without the formality of academic scholarship. This is not to dismiss professional writing. But having published some 1,500 pages of description and analysis concerning the Gebusi and related peoples in Melanesia (see “About the Author”), I here write more concisely, personally, and lyrically—for a larger and more general audience. *The Gebusi* is based on what I hope is detailed and rigorous scholarship, but it portrays Gebusi and my experience with them in more evocative and engaging ways.

Second, as a teacher of undergraduates, I have enjoyed writing this book to dovetail with topics and issues covered in many cultural anthropology courses and textbooks. This aspect of *The Gebusi* was important to me from the start but has evolved further in the book’s present edition.

Third, as described below, the fifth edition of *The Gebusi* includes a dialogue of juxtaposition between my own voice and that of French

anthropologist and Gebusi coresearcher Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke, providing a fresh window of critical reinterpretation in ethnographic portrayal and analysis.

### THE FIFTH EDITION

This version of *The Gebusi* is different enough from previous editions as to be not just an updated but a deeply reframed work, including in relation to front-burner issues in contemporary cultural anthropology. These include the role and subject-position of the researcher, gender, postcoloniality, ethnicity, race, cultural change, government imposition and corruption, and political economy; these issues are more deeply engaged here than in previous editions of *The Gebusi*.

In the summers of 2016 and 2017, I returned to the Gebusi for four months with young French anthropologist Dr. Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke, who has previous fieldwork experience in Papua New Guinea among the Baruya of the Eastern Highlands. In the present book, Malbrancke's contributions provide a second voice, a countervoice, which complements and at times either reinforces or questions my own as original author. In the mix, issues of gender are recontextualized with much greater awareness of women's perspectives; dramatic cases of sorcery inquest, punctuated by the execution of a sorcery suspect, are documented; and matters of government graft and corruption are focused on, including in relation to issues of postcolonialism, ethnicity, and race.

Anthropologists talk much about bringing multiple perspectives of authorship and subject position to their work. This edition of *The Gebusi* engages this possibility by providing independent perspectives of a young French female anthropologist that complement my own as a senior American male ethnographer. The question of subjectivity and of subject position and the politics of representation are front and center in the present work—not as an abstract or theoretical exercise but in the concrete juxtaposition of different authorial voices. We make no particular judgment about or interpretation of this juxtaposition; rather, we leave it to readers, including students, to discuss and debate this issue. In some parts of the book, our authorial juxtaposition is more fleeting or intermittent; in other sections, it is more sustained. The last half of chapter 3, the entirety of chapter 4, and a major section of chapter 11 are written by Malbrancke.

All passages written by Dr. Malbrancke are here flagged with an “Anne-Sylvie” boldface heading, slight left indent, and ragged right margins.

The fifth edition of *The Gebusi* has retained the tone, content, and overall structure of previous versions; its changes can be easily incorporated in syllabi by instructors who have used previous editions. Though some small examples and incidents have been condensed or omitted vis-à-vis the fourth edition, the present work can be productively read as before. The main exception here is that the previous chapter 4, concerning Gebusi kinship, marriage patterns, social organization, and structural patterns of violence, has now been entirely replaced by Malbrancke’s description of events relating to the execution of Powa, a sorcery suspect, which took place in 2016. To accommodate instructors who wish to retain my previous description and analysis of Gebusi kinship and social structure, the full content is posted online at [bruceknauft.com](http://bruceknauft.com) → Gebusi.

It is noteworthy that passages written by Dr. Malbrancke were originally formulated quite independently of the present book. Based on her field diaries, these passages were penned on her own initiative as part of a separate manuscript, *Papuan Chronicles*, that she wrote in French and has since generously translated into English. I did not request, comment on, or review this work prior to embarking on the fifth edition of *The Gebusi*—by which time her manuscript was finished on its own terms. As such, Malbrancke was not considering *The Gebusi* when writing up her chronicles. Yet, we found a riveting juxtaposition between her memoirs and the fifth edition of *The Gebusi* that I had already been planning to write. Given this, and with Malbrancke’s full agreement and support, I have had the privilege to choose significant sections of her work and edit them to provide a second authorial voice that dovetails with the book’s content while also reframing it through her vantage point. Though I have much to say about recent developments among Gebusi, the present edition foregrounds Malbrancke’s own perspective on these matters, except in the final chapter.

Insofar as Dr. Malbrancke and I are collegial friends who refer to each other by our first names, we retain this usage throughout the book as well.

**For students:** “Updates” at the end of most chapters enable the book to be read as a story of cultural change throughout, topic by topic and chapter by chapter. As with previous editions, chapters conclude with

“Broader Connections” bullet points. These highlight and link the material in the chapter with major concepts taught in introductory anthropology courses, with key anthropological terms appearing in boldface. The author’s website, [bruceknauft.com](http://bruceknauft.com) → Gebusi, contains a large range of topically linked photographs and clips of Gebusi music, an index of bold-face terms, videos from and about fieldwork, notes and references to *The Gebusi* fifth edition, and the index to the present book.

**For instructors:** The fifth edition provides links to eight online teaching modules about Gebusi that include video segments recorded in the field: “What Is Anthropology?” “Studying Culture,” “Language,” “Subsistence Livelihood,” “Social Organization and Kinship,” “Gender,” “Sexuality,” and “Development and Underdevelopment.” Go to [bruceknauft.com](http://bruceknauft.com) → Gebusi, or search for “Gebusi videos” in YouTube. Objective-question quizzes have been configured for each of the online teaching modules. These are available online from Waveland Press ([waveland.com](http://waveland.com)) for use by instructors for purposes of student evaluation in relation to the modules.

## THE GEBUSI

Who are the Gebusi? When I first lived among them, they were a small ethnic group 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 into 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. They had by then become engaged with other ethnic groups in a regional process of nation-building, and they had given up many previous beliefs and practices. In 2008 and since, Gebusi, now more than 1,200 strong, have weathered an economic collapse of the local cash economy. Government services have been withdrawn, and the local airstrip is closed. In the bargain, however, Gebusi have rediscovered and rejuvenated much of their previous culture.

In all, our knowledge of the Gebusi spans a great arc of social and cultural transformation—from remote isolation in the early 1980s, to active engagement with national and global lifestyles, to the resurgence of many previous cultural practices. Their development dramatically illustrates a range of key issues in the anthropological understanding of social development, globalization, inequity, marginalization, and changes in gender relations as well as the elaboration and reinvention of indigenous traditions over time.

To me, and I think to Dr. Malbrancke, 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, a range of whom have become my deep friends for many years. I also feel fortunate to have the opportunity to convey significant and vivid aspects of their lives as well as parts of my own when working among them.

Personal names used in the text are in most cases actual names, used with permission. In a few cases we have used pseudonyms, including when a depiction is potentially unflattering or embarrassing in a modern context and the person is still alive. Quotations taken from my Gebusi field notes and from Dr. Malbrancke's translated manuscript have been lightly edited from the original to make them clearer or more compact.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Bruce: It is hard to express the personal and professional debt that I feel toward my Gebusi friends and acquaintances; they are now so many and so varied that it is hard to know how and in what order to name them. My debt to Gebusi women, through the work of Dr. Malbrancke, and to Dr. Malbrancke herself, is key to this fifth edition of *The Gebusi*. I am thankful for help from former officials and staff at Nomad Station and in Kiunga, and to the Catholic Church in both these locations. Especially in remote regions, field research is difficult if not impossible without financial assistance from funding agencies. I gratefully acknowledge support for my field research among Gebusi from the US National Science Foundation, the US National Institutes of Mental Health, the US Department of Education, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, and Emory University.

Thanks go to numerous persons who have read and commented on various drafts and editions of this book, and especially Tom Curtin, Senior Editor at Waveland. I thank Eileen Cantrell for her photos of Gebusi during 1980–1982 and her information about women’s lives and experiences during that time. I owe a special debt to my undergraduate and graduate students at Emory University. They have given me the courage not simply to teach anthropology from the heart but to go back to the field—and learn it all over again! My debt to Anne-Sylvie in the reformulation of this fifth edition of *The Gebusi* is so deep and strong that it is hard to express, including in relation to our collegial friendship both during and since our fieldwork together. This book is dedicated to the spirit of my friend Yuway, and to the past, present, and future of the Gebusi.

Anne-Sylvie: Debt is a central notion in anthropology and a concept we acutely feel every day—be it in the field or back home as we write up stories of events we experienced thanks to the depth of generosity and warmth people have shown us. It would take the space of this whole book to thank all Gebusi properly. I like to think they would enjoy these pages, as their stories live on and reach new horizons. I hope someday I can bring them a copy myself.

My gratitude toward Bruce, who sat on my thesis committee and challenged me to engage with my own research in a deeper and much more elaborate manner, is equally hard to measure and to express. I cannot thank him enough for giving me the chance to return to Papua New Guinea, to fully understand how little I had understood. My intellectual debt, however, does not come close to the debt of friendship I owe him.

I would like to thank my colleagues at CREDO in Marseilles, and especially Maurice Godelier, whose intellectual support has been key to my own trajectory. My deepest gratitude goes to The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, who funded both of our Gebusi fieldtrips and trusted us to advance research concerning their violence reduction.

Finally, I would like to thank you, anthropology student or reader, for you are contributing to the continuing importance of this science of understanding, which the world needs now more than ever.



# Entry

Anne-Sylvie

We flew over the largest uninhabited stretch of tropical forest in the world, a green, luscious coat of uniformity.\*

**B**ruce, 1998: It looks so grand from a thousand feet up, glowing, green, and vast. The broccoli tops of the trees stretch out as a vast carpet, an emerald skin shielding worlds of life within. You look down to see two blue-brown ribbons of water etching through the forest canopy. You follow them through the window of your tiny plane as they snake toward each other and merge in gentle delight. Below, in the nestled crook of these two rivers, you look closer, to where the green shifts from dark to bright, from old forest to new growth that gets cut but always sprouts anew. Inside this lime-green patch you see a score of white squares arranged in two neat rows, standing firmly as if at attention. Ten line up evenly on one side while their partners face them across the lawn, their metal roofs glinting in the hot sun. You recall how these structures were built long ago by the first Australian officers, so colonial and rugged, who trekked in across muddy rivers and swamps. Alongside these structures, a long rectangle field lies flat, its grass kept short and trim. Your plane will swoop down on it, the gilded spine of that book you have come so far to read. But its substance is

\*Anne-Sylvie's entries are from her fieldwork conducted in 2016 and 2017.

not what you thought it would be, not text at all. As you descend, its meaning becomes the faces that line the airstrip, bright and eager as their skin is dark. They watch expectantly as you land. You open the door to a searing blast of heat and humanity. Welcome to Nomad Station.

### **Anne-Sylvie**

The sensations of fieldwork work in millimeters: individually they might not build pyramids, but their implacable multitude turns them into an army of bullet ants, and all combined, they create the poignant and sometimes excruciating tapestry that is “the field.” Taken on its own, a slow canoe ride in the rain would almost be fun—an adventure. A long sweaty walk through the rainforest would be exciting. Dirt, leeches, unfiltered water, falling in the forest, and hearing our carriers laughing at this sight—all of this would just be the expected lot of any expedition extracting you from a comfort zone that you’ll quickly return to when it all stops. If only it all stops. If only. As the evening draws in and the sun goes down, it is time to laugh it off, maybe wine it off. Then those niggly bits will remain “bits,” small things to overcome and keep at bay, a safe distance from which to enjoy the show that our life momentarily provides. But when the show goes on, and you are starring in it, your only horizon expands within that new world, a world that ranges from unknown disorders to creepy creatures.