

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 Government services have been withdrawn, and the local airstrip is closed.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.

Preface

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.