

Kananam Community, Madang Province

What does it mean that outsiders with grand plans and global connections have done so much damage?

Opening Story

The path from the church-building set within the grounds of the Alexishafen is uneven, but well-trodden. The Gamarmatu clan, the main clan in these areas, has settled here for years, with families moving inland from the outlying islands after the heavy bombing during World War II. Many of the islands have also become inhabitable, and lack of access to fresh water supplies or fresh food, particularly the loss of fish from their once-abundant waters, has exacerbated the process. A small community hall is set a little way from the edge of the lagoon, and Papa Paul Buy's house is on the shore-line. He is a village elder and a Gamarmatu Elder in his seventies and lives with his wife. His children are spread around him—an extended family dotted across different lanes and corners in the areas edging the lagoon. Directly across from Alexishafen is Sek, the largest island in the lagoon, comprised of one large family of approximately 1,000 people across twelve hamlets. Other islands such as Dumuseg and Ambusin dot the lagoon; however several have been abandoned because of rising water-levels over the last ten years, presumably due to global climate change. Two islands have disappeared completely, and others are in the process of being subsumed by the warm, blue waters of the lagoon.

It is early afternoon and Papa Paul Buy asks us how we possibly thought we could help his people to come out of this apathy and depression into which they have fallen. His voice rose in consternation as he talked of the dragging of the seas by foreign fishing trawlers, and the arrogance of people who simply took so much from his people's lands and put nothing back. Suddenly he stopped and smiled, and asked us if we were friends. Not quite sure how to respond to such a sudden question, we looked at him. We had earlier asked him to tell us his story, and Papa Paul Buy was keen to understand why we wanted it. He said to us, 'My story is also the story of my people. If I tell you, will you say it like I say it— should I trust you



Papa Paul Buy with his wife, October 2008

like a friend?’ He looked at us and then away, almost like he was going into another time and place.

In the heavy denseness of the afternoon sun, squatting under a straggly tree for shade, we were unsure how to proceed. Then Papa Paul Buy started to speak. His sentences were short and in the local dialect. It seemed a long story as many times Papa Paul Buy stopped and pointed out into the sea, or stopped to reflect, sometimes with great sadness it seemed, and sometimes with pride. A small group of local community members gathered and sat around us with us, including children.

We are Mortonoau people, of the Gamarmatu Clan. We came by canoe built by us, from the knowledge of our ancestors, the word of the ancestors. We came in canoes and boats that could move through the waves of the sea, and the rumbles of the rains. We set upon Sec Island, grew our gardens and fished in the waters and traded with our many people of this noble land, nation. The sea was our garden, it gave us much, it gave us our people, and we gave the sea our respect. Our law, the word of the elders ruled to keep peace, law, justness.

When the bombs fell, and the embankments we had built from corals from the sea broke around us, we took to our canoes and rowed to the mainlands. The church became a place, a home of sorts and we served

in many ways. Independence dawned, with it a new hope that our story of the Mortonoau, the word, the elders, be told – the spiritual fabric, the heart of our people here in this place near the sea. We had hoped that this, our story would have been heard, lived again through this independence. But we are overcome – we are swallowed by that which is large, foreign to our sea, to our fish, our lives, and our word. We are faced with destruction, and our old ways cannot hold together in these times as some of our elders themselves sell their soul and people. But we cannot lose hope. We live with hope, that one day our story will arise – and we will know ourselves, rule ourselves as we proclaimed in 1975 by the PNG colours.

Place—Past and Present

The Kananam community is situated on a lagoon, approximately fifteen minutes by road from the provincial capital of Madang town, with approximately 3000 people inhabiting the many villages scattered across the short stretch of coast and handful of islands. There are three main clans – the Sec Clan, Gamarmatu Clan and Matanan Clan – and two sub clans – the Geonen Clan and the Danu Fon Clan. Like Divinia near Alotau, Kananam is so close to Madang that it can be described a peri-urban in a rural setting. From a survey conducted in this region, we found that 64 per cent of Kananam respondents had lived in the area their whole life, significantly higher than the overall figure of 38 per cent across the eleven other communities sites across different provinces of Papua New Guinea. In the recent years, new settlers representing the Susubanis, Begis and Dapu Clans have also moved in and settled around the water edges, many also seeking jobs with the fishing companies in the area. Masses of mangroves and clusters of coconut trees are perched over the edge of the lagoon, framed by the misty Bismarck Ranges. Traditional wooden canoes – made from a long, slender log with a smaller log that juts from the side as a counterbalance – bob across the turquoise blue waters during the day. Mornings are a slightly busier time as children slowly make their way to school or villagers head out to catch some fish. The canoes which sit along the edge of coastal villages are an important mode of transport but also mark the uniqueness of every village. The shape and design of a canoe can only be borrowed from another village with the appropriate permissions, and compensation must be paid, often in the way of pigs, by those who fail to ask before copying a canoe design.

The manicured lawn and landscaped gardens of the Catholic mission at the Alexishafen stand out conspicuously against the dense vegetation along the coastline. Still a significant physical presence over a century after missionaries' arrival, the Catholic mission remains a source of ire because it represents for most of the community the critical point in their recent history when they were first alienated from their customary land. This land called Vidar was heavily forested and the land was used for making



St Theresa's Catholic Mission at Alexishafen. For many, the building of the mission represents the beginning of the Kananam community's alienation from their customary land, and its presence remains a point of grievance.

gardens. However, the church took over Vidar and used the forests for building houses and boats. In the mid-1990s, the Church handed the land back to the government rather than the Kananam people. The people feel a great betrayal as they understood that they had passed the land over to the missionaries in reciprocal exchange for learning and ministry. The Kananam people were not made aware, until it was too late, that the land was not to be handed back to them, but instead was to be sold privately.

In the late 1990s, Vidar was bought by a private company for three million kina and is now the site of the RD Tuna Cannery, owned by a Philippines company. According to the villagers, the first payment was handed over to the Catholic Church. Villagers described relations with the church as poor. The sisters at the Alexishafen mission later told us that, despite their attempts at building relations, they did not understand why they were despised by the villagers who sometimes stole food from their gardens. For the Kananam people, however, the problem was obvious. Augusta Nalun, the now unemployed local primary-school teacher says angrily, 'while my people here starve, the foreign companies scrape our seas bare and the government pockets get filled'. A large protest organized by the local community in late 2006 drew more than 3,000 community members out against the trawling companies, particularly the indiscriminate acts

of exploitation and human rights abuses they commit. One community member described it, saying:

I got into the tiny boat and we came right up to one of RD Tuna's large trawling boats. I used a large microphone and asked them to leave our young women alone. I screamed at them and asked them who are there to take of the many illegitimate children, who because of our ways, were also now our children. We ourselves were struggling to put one decent meal on the mat.

Nothing seems to have changed much for these people since that protest, though conversations with locally-based NGO Bismarck Ramu revealed that this community protest brought the activities of RD Tuna to the attention of the European Union, one of the company's main markets. Following a visit a few months later by inspectors from Germany, their market sales in Europe have been dramatically reduced.

Organization and Governance

The Kananam communities maintain strong traditional systems of leadership and ways of doing things that have sustained their livelihoods throughout generations. However, family relationships are weakening, due to the scarcity of resources such as land and fish, and the declining daily practices of reciprocity through the exchange of fish and garden food. There is clearly a weak sense of participation in community activities, especially by the young people. The older generation and parents expressed unhappiness because their children are showing less interest in family activities like gardening and fishing, and spend too much time lazing around the houses or in the communities.

There are also indicators of problems emerging as a result of the operation of RD Tuna. Some people in the village explained how, in the early years of the cannery, the village women exchanged fruit and coconut for by-catch fish with the Filipino men on the fishing boats. However, after some years, the fishermen began to reject the fruit and coconut, demanding sex. There is now a 'fish for sex' trade in Kananam whereby the women sell themselves. Seven Filipino-Papua New Guinean babies have been born into the area recently, and the mothers of these babies struggle alternately for survival and acceptance within the community, which is itself struggling to stay on its feet. In the last two years, there seems to be a growing number of HIV cases in the place, prompting concerned community leaders like Alexia and Alphonse to initiate and invite awareness and training programs such as the National level *Tingim Laip* HIV Awareness Program. This program, funded primarily by AusAID, works in partnership with local groups and sites across the area. The *Tingim Laip* Madang Province document circulating in Kananam showed the RD Tuna Cannery workers – 80 per cent female – to be in the highest risk category for contracting the virus.

The hope of employment opportunities at RD Tuna is also attracting new settlers to the Kananam region from further inland. This migration seems to be stretching the fragile fabric of the already-struggling community. Clan divisions are growing, especially as new settlers, equipped with money, buy into lands and set up new groups of settlements. The pressures on the customary models of organization and leadership are great. As the community feels increasingly marginalized from the benefits of development activities around what was once their land and way of life, there is an increasing frustration and growing anger.

For many, the anger is the result of the practical question of the lack of royalty payments and benefits given by the church and the RD Fishing Company for the use their land and the sea. The people also blame the government for not informing or involving them when they engaged the development projects in the communities. The result has been the inability of the community to negotiate a better outcome for their people and place. The simmering anger at the Catholic mission at Alexishafen compounds a rising tension, and community leaders speak of a growing disregard for new approaches by government bodies to respond with new but short-term and under-resourced projects. Alphonse, a community leader in Kananam, argues that the biggest handicap for people is their lack of general information about their basic rights, the National Constitution, and the bureaucratic system, meaning that they are often unable to adequately respond or act. But even for the community leaders, it is difficult to access good or valid information, unless they are able to connect regularly with the Bismarck Ramu NGO, which has been campaigning against the tuna cannery for many years.

Many people also expressed a sense of disconnect from the systems of national and provincial government. Prior to 1975, and in the early years after independence, Government Extension Officers regularly visited communities and worked with the people, however Kananam community members say that this has now stopped. People express a desire for the Government extension programmes to be revived again, on the basis that they made the government presence felt in the communities.

Results from the Community Sustainability Questionnaire indicated low levels of community wellbeing within the Kananam area. Whereas 78 per cent of respondents across all the research sites said that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their community neighbourhoods, only 50 per cent of respondents in Kananam said as such. Similarly, only 56 per cent of Kananam people surveyed said that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their life as a whole, much lower than the overall figure of 72 per cent across all the sites. And again, when asked to what extent they agreed with the statement 'I feel most people can be trusted', only 19 per cent of Kananam respondents agreed or strongly agreed, compared to 34 per cent across all eleven sites in PNG. Forty-seven per cent disagreed or strongly

disagreed with the statement, much higher than the overall figure of 34 per cent. Data such as this correlates strongly with the sentiments conveyed by community leaders and other villagers, namely that this is a community struggling to hold together its social and cultural fabric in the face of massive challenges.

Livelihood and Provision

People's livelihoods depend heavily on resources from both the sea and the land. Both are fast becoming scarce due to population increases, and the acquisition of a good portion of these resources by the state and the church. People in Kananam speak of dwindling fish stocks, and marine resources contaminated by the heavy oil spills from the fishing vessels operated by the RD Tuna company. They speak of the difficulties in making a living and sustaining the livelihoods and wellbeing of their families. The community also tell of health problems, such as stomach aches after swimming in the water, chronic skin-infections, coughing and diarrhoea, which emerged with the arrival of the cannery. At Mataman, one of the leaders of the Bismarck Ramu Group – which RD Tuna has already unsuccessfully tried to bring defamation charges against – explained how the fishery was affecting his village. Less than half of people in Kananam were employed by the fishery, he said, and the numbers of fish in the lagoon dropped in the late 1990s with the arrival of the fishery.

The declining marine resources, and the generally deteriorating quality of the marine environment impacts, not just on the capacity of families to find sufficient food to feed themselves, but also on the possibilities for small-scale income generation. Fishing, and the collection of other marine resources like shellfish, shrimps, lobsters and crabs, is the main income-generating activity for the people in Kananam. Various reef fish are caught using fishing lines and hooks or spears, especially at night, and the fishermen know well the breeding sessions and grounds for the different species. Fishing skills and knowledge are passed through the family lines, especially from fathers to sons, but the waters are yielding much less for the younger generations than they did for their parents.

Another source of income for families is the farming of cash crops. Because of current low market-prices copra processing is not occurring in Kananam at the moment, and most villagers expressed disappointment at this. There is, however, some cocoa farming, and growing betel nut and mustard also provides good sources of income. Families from the Islands make their gardens on Ambusin Island, while those on the mainland villages like Kananam and Tawei villages make their gardens on the mainland. Garden crops are mainly grown for the families' own consumption, but surplus produce will be sold at the food markets. Villagers note, however, that the garden surplus is diminishing with the loss of land. Reducing fish and garden yields are affecting social relations within and between communities, particularly in regards to exchange systems. Fish was once abundant



Traditional fishing struggles against large-scale commercial fishing.

and easily shared with others, and was often exchanged for garden food. Exchanging surplus produce for fish provided villagers who lived from their gardens with an important protein supplement for their diet and also, because garden produce is seasonal while fish stocks are available year-round, provided important food sources when their own food supplies were low. With fish and garden food becoming scarcer, however, increasing numbers of people are turning to 'development' to support their livelihoods, either working in paid employment at RD Tuna or in spin-off businesses. The community as a whole is becoming more and more dependent on income from the cannery, and the cash economy is supplanting former reciprocity-based systems of exchange and barter. Simultaneously, the decline in fish and garden resources means that supermarket food has become increasingly important. This in turn reinforces the need for a cash income.

Food is expensive, however, and when these costs are combined with the costs of school fees, medicines and other staples, the result is community experiencing intensely the squeeze of modern life. Wages at the fishery are very low and conditions poor. The company is increasingly taking over 'spin-off' businesses or creating its own 'spin-off' businesses in breach

of the commitment it made to the community when it first began its operations. The combined effect of an increased vulnerability in their food supply, indeed their livelihood, and the betrayal of the company's prior commitments go some way to explaining why the entire community is so focused on the activities of the company for their survival. In 2003 a report by Nancy Sullivan concluded the following:

Despite the social impact components inserted into the Environmental Plans of RD Tuna Cannery Pty Ltd, and RD Fishing PNG, Pty Ltd, which generally dismiss the possibility of substantive social effects, these companies have had a significant impact on the quality of life for their host communities. A number of environmental impacts have also had cultural effects, and despite complaints, the company has not made adjustments. Wastes disposal at both the Wharf and Cannery is making people sick, as are the noise and odor of these premises. Over-fishing has left little if any fish for these people to live on and conduct trade. Promises of material and developmental assistance from the company to the landowners have not been fulfilled. None of the schools, Aid Posts or churches has seen any real assistance since their arrival. The social breakdown of traditional authority and family values is most alarming, and while some of this might be inevitable for any large development project, they have certainly been exacerbated by negligent company policies and the behavior of foreign company personnel. We find problems of workplace hygiene, social and sexual abuse of women, improper waste dumping, illicit sales of alcohol and cigarettes, disregard for landowner hiring preference practices, and the payment sub-minimum wages.¹

While we found nothing to suggest that company policies or behaviour had substantially changed, the community is beginning to work how it might respond and adapt in sustainable ways.

Learning and Education

Within the Kananam communities, traditional forms of learning and the passing on of knowledge are weakening. Older members of the communities say that the younger generations lack the interest to learn traditional knowledge about things such as dancing, feasting and festivals. While some skills continue to be passed down within families, the danger is that many important forms of knowledge will be lost in part or in whole. At the same time, levels of formal education are not high. In comparison to the average results across all the research sites, there are few people in Kananam and surrounds who have had no schooling. Only 3 per cent of respondents to the questionnaire indicated that they had not completed any level of formal education. However, of those who have been educated within the formal system, the large majority – 62 per cent – have not progressed beyond

primary school level.

Some learning and training opportunities are available through government agencies, Church-provided programmes and non-governmental organizations. Such learning opportunities, however, appear to occur sporadically in response to particular issues arising in the region. Respondents to the questionnaire indicated a strong desire for more learning opportunities within their community. When asked which sorts of training would be useful for them, 65 per cent of respondents said they would like training in family life, and 41 per cent agreed that training in traditional ways of doing things would be useful. In both instances, these figures were higher than the overall figures across all the research sites. Comparatively, respondents in Kananam were less likely to want training in agriculture and income-generation, with 14 per cent and 27 per cent selecting these options. And smaller numbers again indicated a desire for training in technology, management or literacy.

Partly in response to these existing community needs, and as part of the ongoing response to the social tensions and the presence of the cannery, community leaders have already initiated a Community Learning and Development Centre within Kananam. In a letter handed to the RMIT research team by Alexis Tokau in October 2007, it was apparent that the weight of responsibility was heavy and many community leaders were feeling something had to be done. Alexis wrote:

I have taken this bold step to begin a CLDC (Community Learning and Development Centre) in the community ... Our current leaders and the Councillor and SSD Cooperation have not come up with an alternative solution or action to address the issue. Further problem experience in the community is the divisions among clans (5 clans) and in families there is a strong influence on handful of elders who own spin-off business at RD Fishing and ignorant of the rest of the population. Confirm statement from our elders that the sex trade at RD Fishing Vidar is still continuing. Note that the company's operation is still continuing ... females and school age children are being indirectly force to engage themselves in illegal activities. Lack of cooperation is a result of poor leadership ... at the moment we are using the parish hall for our monthly meetings – catholic mama group. We can conduct training here ... women are the backbone of families, communities and even the nation ...

The sentiments expressed in the letter, and the move to establish a CLDC in Kananam, correlate with the findings of the questionnaire, particularly in the articulated need to build training around core issues affecting this community – the erosion of family and community life. The letter also conveys the importance of women in organizing their community and responding to the forces threatening to pull it apart. Despite the many and varied challenges facing the villages in Kananam and its surrounds, the fact that the community is taking active responsibility to address them is

exciting, and points once again to the strengths which existing in so many of PNGs customary communities. If the determination and commitment of the community can be reinforced and supported through the findings of this research report, the Community Learning and Development Centre may well flourish.

Endnotes

¹ Nancy Sullivan, N.T. Warr, Joseph Rainbubu, J. Kunoko, F. Akauna, M. Angasa, and Yunus Wenda, *A Social Impact Study of Proposed RD Tuna Cannery at Vidar Wharf, Madang*, Unpublished report for Bismark-Ramu Group and Gadens Ridgeway Attorneys at Law, 2003. See also Nancy Sullivan, Joseph Rainbubu, Kritoe Keleba, Yunus Wenda, and Chris Dominic, *European Union's Rural Coastal Fisheries Development Project BaseLine Study: Follow-up RRA for Madang*, Nancy Sullivan Ltd, Madang, 2004.