

Land, Language & Identity: Collaboration and Revitalization in Purari Delta Communities of Papua New Guinea

Since 2000, Smithsonian cultural anthropologist Dr. Joshua Bell has been working with communities of the Purari Delta, a tidal estuary on the south coast of Papua New Guinea (PNG), located in the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, north of Australia. An independent parliamentary democracy, PNG possesses immense cultural diversity with a population of seven million people who speak some 850 languages (14% of the world's languages). The country is also rich in mineral wealth and oil and gas deposits resulting in large and small scale logging, oil and gas operations by foreign companies.

These projects have created widespread environmental concerns, as well as new social and economic challenges for traditional custodians. Dr. Bell is documenting the myriad effects that the logging and gas extraction projects are having on communities of the Purari Delta. For instance, while some clans have successfully demonstrated their customary tenure of land and water utilized by these projects, others have not. This has led to growing inequality between and within communities as royalty payments are disbursed to verified customary owners and to increased struggles within clans as members desire to be recognized as chiefs. These struggles are understood to be emblematic of the new era of consumption, jealousy and ascendancy of individualism over kin relations known as *moni kaeou* ('money ground').

Contributing to this discord in the Purari Delta are the legacies of colonialism in PNG by Britain (1884) and Australia (1906) and those of a local modernization movement (the Tom Kabu Movement, 1946-1969), in which its followers destroyed traditional artifacts and encouraged the cessation of ritual practices in the attempt to achieve economic independence. While ultimately failing, the Movement significantly transformed communities.

Working principally with the I'ai, one of six self-described Purari tribes, Dr. Bell has worked with collaborators to create materials in the native I'ai language and English to document their cultural heritage and craft traditions and to keep the local language alive. For instance, he has published a book of historic photographs targeted at elementary children. Other books are planned that will highlight environmental knowledge. A series of maps, based on survey work Bell has done with community members, helps identify sites of cultural importance as well as people's knowledge of their land. Bell and his colleagues from the community hope that these maps will assist in the communities' struggles to have their connections with the land recognized. These efforts will help in determining land rights in the resource extraction projects.

These recent collaborations have emerged as part of Dr. Bell's contributions to the Smithsonian's new Recovering Voices Program, which promotes the documentation and revitalization of the world's endangered languages and knowledge:
http://anthropology.si.edu/recovering_voices/index.htm.

A delegation from Mapaio village will be coming to DC this June to participate in the 2013 Folklife Festival program, *One World, Many Voices: Endangered Languages and Cultural Heritage*:
http://www.festival.si.edu/2013/One_World_Many_Voices/index.aspx.

