

Papua New Guinea: A Dialogue between Culture and Development

By Michael Mel

An address on the Occasion of the 10th Anniversary of the Prince Claus Fund

The Hague
September 6, 2006

Introduction

Your Majesty, Your Royal Highnesses, Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Hello World! This is Papua New Guinea! Hmm? Sorry, what did you say? Read my lips Pa-pua New Gui-nea!

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a relatively new nation-state with a cultural landscape of numerous indigenous cultures. Each cultural group has had its own ways of knowing, communicating and history for many generations. Over a century ago dramatic shifts and changes were brought on by colonization. Government outposts were set up to bring in systems of governance, law and order, education and churches in order institutionalize and normalize the colonial ways of life. Indigenous ways of life including languages, law and order and customs and traditions that had been part of the communities for many generations were cast aside. These influences and changes culminated finally on September 16, 1975 when political independence was obtained and the nation of PNG was established. Today technological innovations (via television, CD-ROMs, DVDs, Virtual Reality Games, Advertising, and other multimedia related practices) are dazzling and beguiling. These new technologies further compound the ideological situation in the maintenance of power and control of the country where indigenous languages, knowledge and ways of life have been put on the path of imperceptible erasure.

This is a panoramic snapshot of the country I come from, ladies and gentlemen. In the ritzy, glitzy razzamatazz world of the 21st Century where everything is available literally at our finger-tips this is a grim picture. That is part of the depth, scale and size of this century – this millennium. But on this great occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Prince Claus Fund, should

we not talk about milestones and achievements? Yes, we are! I mean the fact that a Papua New Guinean, on the 10th anniversary is here should be enough cause for a celebration. Maybe, had history been different the borders I share with neighbours in the region might have been redrawn: we will never know. Clearly there are some things we may not be able to change. On this occasion and at this moment I feel very honoured and humbled to have been named to join a network of wonderful people from across the world that believe in themselves on account of the fact that each one of them is different and for which the Prince Claus Fund, since its inception ten years ago, has recognized and supported.

I would like to take this opportunity to share with you my experiences in stemming the tide of cultural erasure I spoke of earlier. But such a parochial way of looking at things? Well ... I have been in a kind of state of euphoria and I have yet to get my head out of the clouds. But on a more serious note I hope this way of looking at things is a way to sharing with you a window into what is happening in my corner of the world. I will provide a brief background to contextualize for you my place. And since I am a teacher I am going to talk about the way education has been a very important tool for breaking great communities under the guise of development and now how we can through education rebuild them. This rebuilding process is built on an agenda of developing our communities meaningfully based on our own stories, languages, knowledge and history – our culture.

Memories of my place

I remember a place where there was an intricate network of social and family relationships that helped to ensure survival of the group through interdependence and cooperation. People did not define themselves in terms of their individuality, but in terms of group affiliation. Basic to their thinking and knowing was mutuality, not separateness. People's actions stressed participation in activities with others and the establishment of meaningful relationships between people and the environment. All knowledge was viewed as inter-connected with all aspects of the world that included cultural, social, spiritual and personal dimensions.

The experiences of a way of life as described above was a complete contrast to many of us young Papua New Guineans who were enrolled in schools run by the colonial government or the church missions. The experiences

described by a fellow citizen paint a vivid picture of the kinds of processes that were installed to instil in us a new order.

Regarding our names:

At birth my parents had called me Giraure which in the Kuanua language means, 'to look after' because I was born a frail child and my parents were not sure whether or not I would live or die ... On the day I joined the education system this changed. ... No longer was I to be called Giraure as this was a heathen name and as I was at a Christian school I was to be called Nelson, the name I was baptized with.

And our languages:

After several years at the mission school it was decided that I was bright enough to continue my education at a Government school. ... It was at this school that ...I was no longer allowed to speak Kuanua. All conversations had to be in English ... despite the fact that I had no English vocabulary. Teachers made sure we followed this 'golden rule' by forever shouting at us, 'Hey you! Speak in English!' Children caught breaking the rules were punished with grass-cutting, extra work or smacks. I remember being completely inhibited during my first years at school. I could no longer chat idly with my mates. I could no longer make fun through speech. My quick wit was no use to me. I was like a vegetable. I was controlled by the limits of my vocabulary. My days were spent listening to the teacher. Eventually, I found it much easier just to sit and listen rather than attempt to speak, so I sat and listened.

And then our arts:

Most of the content that was being taught to us was as foreign as the English language being taught. Although music has always played an important part in the life of the *Tolai* people and although there is a great variety of *Tolai* songs to be learnt, these were not introduced in our schools. Most of our dances were considered evil. The *DukDuk* dance, the Spirit dances and those dances relating to war were forbidden. Instead they were replaced with a variety of Highland reels ... of the Scottish people. Our own songs – the lullabies of our people, the love songs, war chants, work songs and fishing songs were

neglected. ... Those of us in Mission schools soon learnt to draw Jesus crucified on the cross or other pictures illustrating scenes from the Bible. We learnt how to do scribble patterns, how to fill geometric designs, how to make paper string for Christmas and a whole variety of uses for coloured paper.

Confusion, alienation and isolation have been part of many of us. The difficulties experienced by us have been about subscribing our allegiance on the one hand to our small community and our heritage and on the other hand be drawn into an exciting new world and the nation of Papua New Guinea. As a teacher I find myself asking: which way do I want Papua New Guinean children who are caught in tensions to go? What values and knowledge must underpin their life choices?

I would like to share with you a project that will bring together an interdisciplinary team of researchers from Papua New Guinea as well as beyond. The team plan to collaborate and develop digital recordings of the range of chanted epic tales performed in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. These recordings will then be written in the local languages and translated in *Tok Pisin* and English. The material will be for use by children in schools in order to learn their language, knowledge and values. In doing this the project aims to address issues in terms of cultural disruption and discontinuity as experienced above. Allow me to very briefly describe the project to you.

Background to *Chanted Tales*

In the Central Highlands of Papua New Guinea, including the Southern and Western Highlands and Enga Provinces, there are remarkable oral traditions of *chanted tales*. The *chanted tales* have been poetic vehicles through which peoples of the region have maintained their histories - and shared with others their knowledge of the land and people. They were also an enchanting means of community entertainment.

The stories that were told ranged from love stories of a boy meeting a girl and of conflicts between people and cannibals, ogres or giants structured around the universal themes of good and evil. The stories provided entertainment as well as being a record of history, a pictorial or image map of the home lands and folklore with stock characters that served to educate

the members of the communities on the ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ of their societies and other important knowledge and values that bonded them.

The story-tellers were masters of oral imagery. They beguiled and bedeviled the on-lookers as they juggled and juxtaposed words that were chanted in a seamless rhythmic pattern – an art form which would be new to many today, yet deeply rooted in the Papua New Guinean context. The art form of chanted tales formed a vital part of peoples’ lives in entertainment, history and knowledge about their communities.

Allow me to briefly share with a small part of that art form.

School and Home Cultures through *Chanted Tales*

The chanted tales project is a way to help dismantle the separation of school and home and see them as extensions of the one context. This will be in the way language, and the knowledge within it, are used both in the home as well as at school.

Stories, legends and myths are elemental components of our folklore and mythology in our communities. They serve as windows into the deep and powerful store houses of history and knowledge. Reviving stories of our past is a journey of discovery. All kinds of knowledge and stories lie submerged. This process of discovery will be a way to see, understand and appreciate the wisdom of our people.

Language is an important element in the *Chanted Tales Project*. Social and cultural context is very much identified by language and the use and maintenance of language is important in this regard. The listener also is given the opportunity to listen, decipher and create images in the minds eye as the words come off the story-teller in rhythmic patterns. The construction of the characters, events and the ebb and flow of the story are powerful processes of cultivating the minds eye clues and indications of familiar turf and terrain of the land and creatures that are part of the mythic and folkloric traditions of the community.

Chanted Tales, like any good story, have within them a culture’s sense of what is right, a sense of beauty and perfection. Immersing children in the stories and chants and enveloping their minds and imagination in the events, characters and action, is a journey to help them sense what beauty might be

and what maybe deemed as the right and wrong of their communities. These are processes through which important and essential ingredients in building strong and solid communities, where members know what to do and how to go about their duties and responsibilities are cultivated. Our indigenous communities regarded and practiced education as matters that concerned the hand, head and the heart. These were not seen as discrete entities. They were interrelated components of an individual, and educating a person was about connecting all of these within each person. It will be useful to know, very briefly perhaps, that at an international level there is a catch-cry for the need to re-address the purpose and value of education and educating for the 21st Century and beyond.

A report that came out a decade ago now, that of the UNESCO International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century titled *Learning – the treasure within* (Delors 1996); attempted to review, evaluate and map the future of education. In the Report among a number of key ideas one of them speaks of the most effective way for education with an emphasis on lifelong learning, based on four pillars (Delors 1996: 22-23):

- Learning to know
- Learning to do
- Learning to live together
- Learning to be

The forms of education that have shaped much of the latter part of the last century in the last millennium have been built on the first two pillars. The last two have been given very little attention in education although they are an inseparable part of living. They are in fact the deepest and most fundamental dimensions to human actions.

What is now needed in our schools today is to include these aspects in education. Western education should not be about intellectual knowledge (rational/cognition) and skills (practical/affective) alone, but include matters relating to the heart (emotional/sensibility). The community and its aspirations, its values and beliefs must find a place alongside the two dominant aspects of contemporary education. All three are attributes of being human. Focusing on only two aspects will contribute to a person appearing knowledgeable and skilful, but lacking a certain capacity — the wisdom to recognize and live in a community. *Chanted Tales* and story-

telling are journeys into internalizing a sense of perfection, of beauty, of what is good and right.

This will not be an easy journey as our children gaze at the television screens with value-laden stories and images from across the world. Allow me finally in closing share with you the challenges facing us in this project.

Educating and contextualizing

Re-introducing our own ways is made harder because European ways of knowledge have dominated our peoples' ways of thinking and of life. We only need to remind ourselves of my earlier comments of the world being at our fingertips and the influence of the various kinds of media. A friend and colleague of mine Greg Burnett (1999) discusses the relationship between introduced European knowledge and I-Kiribati cultural knowledge in education in I-Kiribati. One of the main ideas Burnett establishes that because European knowledge has dominated and at the same time subjugated the local body of knowledge the islanders undervalue their own local knowledge. The quest for projects like *Chanted Tales* is to counter this cultural hegemony and reassert and place Papua New Guinean processes alongside those from the European context. European practices need to be contrasted and challenged with indigenous ways of doing and experiencing things.

It is here that I realize the wisdom that has led the Prince Claus Fund to scout, identify, and develop partnerships with individuals and groups that have been and are prepared to challenge the status quo and offer alternatives to making people's lives productive and meaningful. The idea of developing partnerships and working with people to support them from within their own context makes for this relationship to be culturally sensitive and risky. Risky in the sense that often new ideas are hard to sustain because institutions – be donor agencies, NGOs or Governments - tend to support what is known and familiar. Instead institutions need to encourage new and different directions that go beyond the 'accepted conventions'. I am aware of the fact that in 1999 the Prince Claus Fund made an award to the Arab television station Al-Jazeera. According to the Prince Claus Fund Director Els van der Plas, the award to a controversial television station like Al-Jazeera even within the Arab world was politically quite sensitive. I would like to think that institutions (donor agencies, NGOs or Governments) should be prepared to take risks in order to be stimulating and imaginative. On occasions this

attitude may arouse social controversy and if so, they should address these with both courage and responsibility.

We want to ensure that in *Chanted Tales* as a project our culture is developed and sustained. In a political and economic climate where our own traditional values and beliefs have been threatened and questioned there is a need to reassert and re-articulate them. Through our stories and story telling we want provide for Papua New Guineans not a journey back to the days of bows and arrows but to live with the modern conveniences guided by life-enhancing values that are as old time. At times we will have to adapt and change some of our values and beliefs. That is necessary. But that process of maintenance and adaptation must be undertaken and done from within the cultural context and not by outsiders claiming to be experts. This is where the Prince Claus Funds differs greatly because it emphasizes value in building partnerships based on, in the words of Els van der Plas, 'parity and not charity'. Because the true test of whether an object or activity is appropriate to a community is whether its members feel that it represents their values and that they identify with it. This is the key to creating communities, a better Papua New Guinea not based on development agendas driven by economic or political imperatives alone but are cloaked together with the cultural values and beliefs of a community.

'We cannot build a nation simply from technology; we cannot build a nation purely on the basis of the wheel and on the basis of the steam engine. We must build this country; we must build our civilization on values, which have been passed on to us from generation to generation. And I say this: that if we do not agree on common values if it is not now the basis and the stem upon which we nurture and grow our children, then I say there will be no future for this country.'
(Narakobi, 1991)

Translation of part of the story

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| 1. kang mel we mel kaniyl e | Though the tinniest slip of a lad |
| 2. kang mai pup yaka nyirim e | That boy strode from perch to perch |
| 3. kang komonga mong yaka nyirim e | That boy strode from mountain to mountain |
| 4. ukuni yabu tobu midi nyirim e | He wanted to slay the Ukuni |
| 5. kobulka yabu tobu midi nyirim, | He wanted to slay the Kobulka |
| 6. kang mel we mel kaniyl e | Though the tinniest slip of a lad |

7. kang piditap mel kaniyl e
day he was

8. pilyini kub nai-ko, nyirim e

9. kanuni kub nai-ko nyirim e
thing?

10. kang mai pup yaka nyirim e

11. kobulka yabu tokur midi nyirim e
slaughter

12. minabi yabu toku midi nyirim e
slaughter

13. kang mel we mel kaniyl e

14. pilyini kub nai-ko, nyirim e

15. kanuni kub nai-ko nyirim e

Who'd been ignored since the
born

And who's ever heard such a tale?

And who's ever seen such a

That boy strode from perch to perch

The Kombulka tribe he would

The Minyabi tribe he would

Though the tinniest slip of a lad

And who's ever heard such a tale?

And who's ever seen such a thing?

References

Burnett, G. 1999. Knowledge, schooling and post-school opportunities: an exploration of I-Kiribati parents' perceptions of secondary education. In *Directions*, Vol. 21, No. 2. December, 1999. Institute of Education, USP, Suva, (100 – 12).

Delors, J. (Chair) 1996. *Learning: the treasure within*. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century. UNESCO, Paris.

Giraure, N. 1976 *The need for a cultural education programme: Personal reflections* Paper presented at the Eighth Waigani Seminar, 'Education in Melanesia', UPNG, Waigani.

Narakobi, B. 1991. Education and Development. In Avalos, B. and Neuendorf, L. (eds) *Teaching in Papua New Guinea: A perspective for the nineties*. Port Moresby: UPNG Press, (19 – 28)

Rumsey, A. 2001. Tom yaya kange: A metrical narrative genre from the New Guinea highlands. In *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11(2):193-239 American Anthropological Association.

Translation of a *Tom Yaya* Performance By Kopia Noma, March 1997 (The full version of the *Tom yaya* performance and prose summary of the tale can be found in the article by Alan Rumsey as indicated in the reference) CD recording of the performance for the conference presentation was recorded and provided to me by Alan Rumsey.