

Indonesian Village Is Caught Between Worlds Very Far Apart, by Calvin Sims *The New York Times*, March 11, 2001

NEMAUGI, Indonesia — When the first Western explorers came to the lush Baliem Valley of Irian Jaya, Indonesia's most remote province, in the late 1930's, Mayok Mabel was just a young boy at play in this ancient farming village. Back then, his tribe, the Dani, the largest ethnic group in Irian Jaya, lived in circular thatched huts and bathed in the river. Dani men wore only penis gourds and women, grass skirts. Their tools were the stone ax, bow and arrow, and spear. Six decades later, life in Anemaugi remains much as it always has been. Dani women still do most of the work, tending the fields, raising the children and watching over the tribe's most prized possession — the pig, a symbol of wealth. The Dani men have remained polygamous. And Mr. Mabel, who is now blind and retired as chief of this village, boasts that his clan continues to live as their ancestors did for countless generations in one of the world's last vestiges of the Stone Age.

But change is on the horizon. Tribal leaders and anthropologists express concern that a growing number of Dani young people are abandoning the tribe's traditions and animist beliefs for modern conveniences and Christianity. They blame mounting pressure from the government and missionaries, who have tried hard to bring the Dani into the modern world, as well as a recent influx of migrants from other parts of Indonesia and foreign tourists. If the trend continues, some anthropologists fear that within a generation, Dani customs could become a relic of the past, practiced only for tourists, except in a few far-flung villages that have little or no contact with the outside world. "Once the Dani convert to Christianity or go to school and become educated, most of them want nothing to do with the old ways," said Mince Rumbiak, chairman of the anthropology department at the University of Cenderawasih in Jayapura, the provincial capital. "The Dani are being taught that these customs are sinful or that they are uncivilized and an embarrassment."

She fears that many oral traditions, including village histories, songs and dances that have been passed down for generations, could be lost. Already, many Dani, ill equipped to operate in their changing environment, feel trapped between two worlds. In the valley's capital, Wamena, where the Dani go to sell their pigs and vegetables, it is not uncommon to see Dani men wearing a traditional penis gourd, called a koteka, listening to a Sony walkman and begging from visitors, who take their pictures for a few rupiah. Even Anemaugi has not been immune to outside influences. Although most villagers here dress in traditional clothing, Mr. Mabel's toddler grandchildren run around the village wearing matching red and blue Pokèmon outfits. Clad in a burgundy polo shirt and khaki shorts, Mr. Mabel's 21-year-old grandson, Natalis, who may one day be chief, said he liked both traditional and modern clothing. But his friends said they could not remember the last time he donned a koteka, and on this recent day he looked more Abercrombie & Fitch.

Some Anemaugi women said that while they preferred Western clothing, they could not afford it. Other village women said it was more comfortable to go bare-breasted and wear fiber or grass skirts, which require little maintenance, especially for work in the fields. Whatever their choice of clothing, most Dani women carry string bags, called noken, across their foreheads. The bags, which hang down the back, are filled with vegetables, wood, a child, a piglet or anything that needs carrying. As for Mr. Mabel, he bathed in a nearby river this day, with the help of his son Jalee, both wearing nothing but long, orange penis sheaths, and returned to the village compound chanting "Wa! Wa! Wa!" — which means thanks in Dani and is often repeated to make foreign visitors feel welcome.

They excused themselves, briefly retired to a hut, and emerged minutes later wearing feather headdresses, their mostly naked bodies glistening with pig fat used for warmth and styling hair. "Who needs a coat when this pig grease has worked just fine for centuries?" said the elder Mr. Mabel, who does not know his exact age but estimates that he is about 75 years old. "Some people think it's strange that we continue to dress this way and live in these huts," said Jalee, 46, who recently succeeded Mr. Mabel as village chief. "But these traditions are who we are, and we plan to maintain them for as long as we can. I'm a Christian, but I wear my koteka to church."

For decades, the Indonesian government and missionaries have had only limited success in their aggressive efforts to change the beliefs and styles of the Dani. In the 1970's the government came under heavy criticism for a military-style campaign to eradicate the koteka, but the effort failed miserably, as did an attempt to get the Dani to move from

their smoked-filled huts into concrete- block houses. The modern housing proved too hot during the day and too cold at night, and the Dani said they preferred their thatched-roof huts, which retain an optimum temperature. Some Dani have built huts near their new government-supplied concrete-block houses, which are now use to harbor their pigs. The government has also built numerous schools, community health centers and hospitals and introduced new crop technology and livestock, but the valley remains mostly undeveloped.

The first missionaries came to the Baliem Valley in the middle 1950's. The early evangelical work was slow going and focused mainly on gaining the trust of the Dani, literacy and building missions and airstrips. "The early years were difficult ones, and we came under attack more than a few times, sometimes even during Sunday church services," said Betty Wilson, who came to Irian Jaya with the Christian and Missionary Alliance in 1959. Mrs. Wilson said that over time many Dani accepted Christian religion but others refused. Many Dani who leave the valley for the modern life in the provincial capital, Jayapura, never return.

While there are more than 100 distinct tribes scattered around Irian Jaya, situated on the western half of New Guinea, the Dani is perhaps the best known. Native Papuans are Melanesians; their skin is dark and their hair like lamb's wool. Using the fat of pigs, they fashion their hair into a variety of styles, many resembling cornrows, dreadlocks and twists.

For all the exposure to the outside world, many Dani traditions show little sign of dying out. Within the village compound, Dani men and women continue to sleep apart, the men in one hut and women and children in another. After a child is born, Dani couples abstain from sex for as long as five years, allowing the woman to concentrate her efforts on raising the child, a practice that contributes to polygamy. Although not as common as in the past, some Dani women still breast-feed hungry piglets if the sow is no where to be found. And, although it is outlawed by the government, many Dani women continue to follow an ancient ritual of amputating one or two joints of a finger when a relative dies. The joint is removed to placate the ancestral ghosts. Some women in Dani villages have only four stubs and a thumb on each hand. In tribute to her dead mother and brothers, Soroba, 38, has had the tops of six of her fingers amputated. "The first time was the worst," she said. "The pain was so bad, I thought I would die. But it's worth it to honor my family."