Yu Tok Stret: Telling the Truth

Catherine E. Frerichs

Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol21/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
I returned to Papua New Guinea in July 1999 for the first time in twenty-four years. I went for some of the reasons that people have always returned to childhood places after long absences: to re-connect with friends and to see again what was once so familiar. We may not be able to go home again, but we can still awaken parts of ourselves hardly remembered. I also went to satisfy a need I have had through most of my adult life, to come to terms with my parents’ forty years of work as Lutheran missionaries in Papua New Guinea. What differences did they make in the lives of the people with whom they worked? Were their personal sacrifices worth whatever contributions they might have made?

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is the eastern half of the large island directly north of Australia and just south of the Equator. Its 4,000,000 people speak at least 700 languages, not dialects; as a consequence, Pidgin and English are the languages most commonly used. PNG has been independent since 1975, although it is still heavily dependent on Australia for aid. I lived there with my family from 1946 until 1962, with the exception of 1954, which we spent in the United States on furlough. Until this trip, when people asked where I was from, I sometimes evaded the question by saying that my father was from Nebraska and my mother from Minnesota. True, some people admire missionaries and their commitment, but others, especially academics, would say “Really” or “How interesting” if I answered directly and then quickly move on to something else. I got tired of having to explain myself. This trip gave me my own adult knowledge of PNG. I still don’t say I’m “from” PNG, a claim I would presume to make as a missionary’s daughter, but I can more easily say where I grew up and view the trip as a visit back into my past. My first destination was my coastal town and the former Lutheran Mission and now Lutheran Church in New Guinea. I had there, I felt I could take a deep breath; on the other hand, my baby-soft skin. July is the rainy season, and there was rain every day, with high temperatures in the upper 90s. Yes, buildings were smaller and sometimes run-down, but red, yellow, and green mango trees surrounded the guesthouse in Lae, the center of social gatherings. The corrugated iron roof of Andrew’s Church is almost new. On Sunday morning, the pews were pounds of bamboo vases attached to the posts of the church and held the backs of the people.
New Guinea in July 1995. Twenty-four years. I was always told that people have a sense of place. This feeling of familiarity. We may not know where we have been, but we can still awaken a place in our heart. This feeling is the same. I have had through most of my life. I have come to terms with my past. My parents lived with my records. I have never learned about my parents. I have never learned about my childhood. I have never learned about my life. I have never learned about my family. I have never learned about my self. I have never learned about myself.

PNG (PNG) is the eastern half of the country of Papua New Guinea. It is a country of 4,000,000 people. It has a small number of languages, not dialects; as many as 200. English and Pidgin are the languages used. PNG has been a country since 1955, although it is still heavily dependent on aid. I lived there with my family from 1962 until 1965. I was born in Nebraska and Minnesota. True, so many missionaries and their families, would say “I live here.” I would say “I live there.” I was able to move on to something new. I was able to explain myself. I was able to have an adult knowledge of PNG. This is a claim I want to make. It is not that easy to make as the child of missionaries, but I can more easily and less defensively say where I grew up and why I lived there. The trip as a visit back into my childhood was an easy success. My first stop was in Lae, a coastal town and the former headquarters of the Lutheran Mission and now of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in New Guinea. The air is so humid there, I felt I could never take a really deep breath; on the other hand, I liked my new, baby-soft skin. July is the rainy season, which meant there was rain every night but usually sun during the day, with highs in the 80s and low 90s. Yes, buildings were smaller and closer together and sometimes rundown, but a hedge of bright red, yellow, and green croton bushes still surrounds the guesthouse at the church compound in Lae, the center of so many missionary social gatherings. The corrugated iron roof of St. Andrew’s Church is almost rusted through, but on Sunday morning, the people still put flowers in bamboo vases attached to all of the supporting posts of the church and in the tops of the pipes which hold the backs of the benches in place. People come to church, as they always have, walking out of the jungle, possibly arriving before the service begins but just as likely to come in any time during the service. Now, though, the worship is in English, with the sermon also translated into Pidgin. When I was a child, it would all have been in Jabim, the main local language, which I never learned to speak.

At Raipinka, in the Eastern Highlands, the very first place I lived with my family, I could see why my parents told their families that they lived in a perfect climate. At night, I needed four blankets and wore a sweater until ten or so in the morning, but then was comfortable in light cotton clothing, without a trace of the coastal humidity to contend with. There is also a sense
of spaciousness in the Highlands, with their large open valleys, in contrast to the thick jungle of the coast. Our home, made of hand-sawn hardwood, is as solid as ever. In the late 40s, my dad had planted casurina trees, imported from Australia into the Highlands because of their drought-resistant properties. Now they are at least sixty feet tall. Remembering that he had planted them turned out to be my passport to credibility with the nationals to whom I had introduced myself. "Yu tok street," they said. (You're telling the truth.) Village paths, surely ones I had walked on as a child, are worn several inches down from years and years of use. The walls of village houses are made with woven pit-pit, a plant like bamboo but more pliable. The roofs are thatched with kunai grass, the tall, greenish-yellow grass that covers so much of the valleys in the Highlands. The women work in steep hillside gardens, where every inch of arable land is cultivated to grow sweet potatoes, taro, tapioca, and sugarcane. It was in one of these gardens that I met Munepe Yafanko, who took care of me when I was two and three years old. Her eyesight is poor, and I'm not sure she remembered me. But she cut me some sugar cane, which her granddaughter Esther peeled for me with her teeth, and the three of us sat together for half an hour.

All the older men I met at Raipinka remembered my parents, Albert and Sylvia Frerichs. They called my father "Pericks" (they can't pronounce "f's") and described him as "longpela man" (tall man). Twice, I had the chance to talk with Papa Mangi, the senior man of the valley. He was a schoolboy when Albert came to Raipinka in 1941, although he said he didn't stay in school long because Raipinka was far from his home village, and there wasn't enough food at the school for all the students. He remembers Albert going on "church patrol," walking all over the valley to be sure that the villagers were building churches and homes for the evangelists who would be moving there. Papa Mangi has always considered himself a Lutheran but had never been baptized, something he was going to rectify two weeks after I left. He had two wives, which, one of the women in his clan explained to me, he needed because he was an important man. When my parents were there, he would have had to give up one of those wives upon his baptism, according to Mission policy. Now, no one even mentioned that possibility.

I wanted to believe that life in the Highland villages was little changed from my childhood beyond the naked Barbie I saw by one of the houses and the Coca-Cola sign hung on a bush tradestore. Even in the few days I was there, however, there were signs that I was indulging in romantic nostalgia. The road which goes past my old house, and which we traveled on foot or horseback, is now paved. Vehicles of all sorts use it; at one point, my hosts and I had to step off the road to make way for a huge semi with a big sign reading "Explosives" on the front. I was told it was headed for Porgera, several hundred miles to the west, the site of an enormous open-pit gold mine. Even my form of travel was a reminder that my simple, safe childhood represented a way of life that is probably gone forever. I had flown into an airstrip ten miles from Raipinka. While I could have gone overland, using the road that
met at Raipinka reme
Pericks” (they can’t p
Albert to Raip
next Albert came to Raipir
I had the chance to t
evening Albert came to Raipir
I met at Raipinka reme

Life in the towns is now much more obviously
complicated than when I was growing up. The
new prime minister admits freely that the coun-
try is almost bankrupt, a country that has oil,
natural gas, gold, copper, cobalt, nickel, copra,
cocoa, and coffee to sell on the world market.
Little of the money the country earns reaches
the people who have done the work to get the
resources ready for the market because of
widespread government corruption. Everyone I
talked to believes that much of the overseas aid
for the people of Aitape, where the tsunami hit
in July of 1998, never reached the devastated
villages. The local currency, the kina, has been
devolved: I could stay in a comfortable seaside
resort for $35/night, which included breakfast.
The people caught in the middle are those in
towns who no longer have their gardens as
sources of food and who must rely on motor-
ized transportation which they can barely afford.
The towns have now become notorious for their
“rascals,” young men who leave their villages for
the towns, can’t find work, and break into
houses, hold up vehicles, and, less often, rape
women and sometimes kill people. In the short
time I was in PNG, I couldn’t get an accurate sense
of the extent of rascal crime, which affects black
and white alike. Every home in town, however,
now has at least one fluorescent light burning
outside at night. Everyone who can afford it has
a fence. In Lae, I stayed with a
family whose house had been
broken into four times—until
they moved to their present
home, which is surrounded by
an eight-foot fence with a foot
of razor wire on top and three
guard dogs inside for good mea-
ure. I felt safe from anything
but a bomb attack.

A week later, when I was
staying on Karkar Island, fifty
miles off the north coast of Papua
New Guinea, I saw that it was
still possible to have a life ap-
proaching the idyllic paradise of
my childhood—now, as then,
sustained by the work of Papua
New Guineans and Western
money and technology. Karkar
Island, fifty miles in circum-
ference, with an 8,000 foot active
volcano as its defining feature,
is much more than a coral atoll.
The main white presence comes
from the owners of several large
cocnut and cocoa plantations. I
went to Karkar because it was
my father Albert’s first posting
when he went to the then Terri-
ory of New Guinea in 1937. In
March of that year, Albert had been at a pastor's conference in central Nebraska, where, at the age of 27, he had had his first church. He learned that the missionary on Karkar, Daniel Spier, whom he knew, had just died of an intestinal disorder. He believed that it was God's will that he replace Rev. Spier. Albert's father, who had been seriously ill for some time, died in April of 1937, and in July, Albert was on his way to New Guinea, over the bitter objections of his mother, who believed that it could only be the work of the Devil to go half way around the world to work with black people you didn't know. Because of World War II, he was not turned for six years.

My hosts on Karkar were Anna and John Middleton, who, with his brother and their son, own at least four of the coconut and cocoa plantations on the island. If in Lae I felt a virtual prisoner, at Kulili Estates, I could live as freely as I ever have. The Middletons' home has no door; instead, one enters it through a high, wide archway. Anna has long been a patron of New Guinea art, and their home is filled with carvings, weavings, and paintings. I had my own two-bedroom guesthouse near the beach, sleeping in a bed with an ornately carved frame. All of the plantation workers lived on the plantation with their families. Workdays began with a gong sounding at 6:00 a.m. and ended, again with a gong, at 5:00 p.m. The Middletons can live with the freedom they have because (it seemed to me) of their staff of many years, all Papua New Guineans, who care for the house and grounds. How can it be possible to sustain a plantation where the owners are white and workers are black at the close of the twentieth century? My three-day visit gave me only a few glimpses of what a complete answer might be. On the one hand, I had hot and cold running water and slept in my carved bed, while the workers did their washing and laundry in a large spring near their compound. On the other hand, there is almost no other employment on the island besides plantation work, and men can live with their families rather than be hired out as contract labor as in the past. When Papua New Guinea became independent, the Middletons became citizens as a sign of their commitment to the new country, something only a small group of white people did.

For the years that Albert was on Karkar, from 1937-39, he lived at Narer, about 2000 feet up the mountain. As Anna and I walked across a large, open field to the home of the PNG pastor, I could hear "The Old Rugged Cross" being played on a tape deck in a nearby house. When we visited Narer as a family in 1951, my mother wrote her sister that it seemed the "loneliest place in the world." Albert would have had to walk anywhere he wanted to go; coming up from the beach was probably a five-hour hike. We couldn't find any "lapun men" (old men) at Narer who might have known Albert, but the next day in church I met a retired pastor who was nine when Albert came and who knew of his later work in the Highlands as a teacher and then acting superintendent of the Mission. Another man, Mailong Labong, had been a student and then a teacher at a high school my parents began in the highlands in the late 50s. At the end of the church service, Mailong made a speech in Pidgin about how valuable my parents' work was and how good it was that I had come back to visit. He added that help was still needed: his particular interest was in more medical personnel for the Lutheran hospital, the land of 40,000 people. In thanking them all for their welcome of my life and work, the cordial reception at every place, my parents were mentioned, and my parents were mentioned, and the people I met. Before I left for PNG, I was told church life is strong on the island; individual churches had national churches in the consequence of which for the six-month closure of one of the funds. The first indicator of Lutheranism in PNG is there for some time coming near there of Johannes Flie.
can live with the freedom (seemed to me) of their staff (as New Guineans, who cared)

How can it be possible that there are black at the close plantation where the owners are black at the close plantation? My three-day visit gave me the impression of what a complete a the one hand, I had hot and slept in my carved be their washing and lau near their compound. 

is almost no other employ besides plantation work, at their families rather than labor as in the past. When became independent, t citizens as a sign of their con country, something only people did.

And I walked across a lar
of the PNG pastor, I cou
“Cross” being played at
my house. When we visit
1951, my mother wrote I
the “loneliest place in I
and have had to walk at
go; coming up from I

you may in Paul W
but the next day
pastor who was nine wh
knew of his later work
cher and then acting for
Mission. Another m
been a student and the
of my parents began in
nals. At the end of the chu
have a speech in Pidgin ab
parents’ work and h
had come back to visit.
still needed: his particu
medical personnel for

local Lutheran hospital, the only one for this isl
land of 40,000 people. In my simple Pidgin, I
thanked them all for their welcome and told them
a little of my life and work in the United States.

The cordial reception at church that morning
was repeated wherever I went, whenever I told
people my parents were missionaries and I had
grown up there. They thanked me repeatedly
for coming, wondered why I wasn’t staying longer,
and gave me gifts—all this, whether or not they
knew my parents. An American who has lived
there for some time commented to me that I was
honoring my parents by returning as well as hon-
oring the people I met.

Before I left for PNG, I had heard and read
that church life is strong on the local level, butt
the individual churches have contributed little
to the national churches of any denomination, one
consequence of which for the Lutherans is the
six-month closure of one of their seminaries, for
lack of funds. The first indication I had of the
vitality of Lutheranism in PNG occurred the sec
second day I was there. I was staying in Lae, the
capital of Morobe Province. Sunday morning, my
hosts and I drove by a new sports stadium filled
with 2000 people, according to the next day’s
paper. They were Lutherans, celebrating, for at
least six hours, the 113th anniversary of the land
ing near there of Johannes Flierl, the first Lutheran

Munepe Wafinko, who took care of me when my family moved to Raipinka in the Eastern Highlands, in 1946. Munepe’s
granddaughter took me to see her while Munepe was working in her garden.
missionary in PNG. It was not the 100th or the 125th, but the 113th anniversary, thus, presumably, a celebration that occurs every year. As far as I could tell, there was not a "whiteskin" in sight. Even with almost no Lutheran missionaries left in PNG, the Lutheran church is still responsible for most of the education that goes on in Morobe Province. It also runs a teachers college, a seminary, and a shipping company. On Karkar Island, as I have previously mentioned, it runs the only hospital on the island.

I could see that the Lutheran church contributed significantly to the quality of life for Papua New Guineans, and I was touched by the warm welcome I received as the child of missionaries. One event, however, did more than any other to make it possible for me to speak more freely about my background because it gave me a broader perspective on my parents' work. I spent an afternoon with fifteen university students and other young adults at Nagada, just outside Madang, on the north coast of PNG. The gathering began as a writing workshop, organized with the help of Susanna Teta, a third-year accounting student at the Technological University in Lae. I had been in email contact with her prior to my trip, thanks to an adult missionary child who had worked at Nagada in the early 90s, who knew Susanna and her family. She and I agreed that I would do something on writing research papers. When we began, I also asked whether we could talk about issues relating to the church, missionary work, and the students' belief in God when the workshop was over, to which they readily agreed.

Everyone at the workshop was a third-generation Christian. To them, missionaries were ancient history, a fact of life. I tried to ask questions that were open-ended, not leading. Even so, they seemed puzzled by my concern that people like my parents came with their own culture, which would inevitably clash with theirs. They said yes, early missionaries made mistakes, but those who followed learned from them. One commented that it was too bad the missionaries couldn't have brought just the Good News and left their materialism at home. I asked them if the Christian god seemed a Western god. They said, oh no, everybody in PNG believes in a god; they associated the Christian god with one of their traditional deities. So the question was not
Nagada, just outside the coast of PNG. The gathering workshop, organized with the help of a third-year accounted to me by Tim Strickler (Health Sciences), who stays there when he does bat research in PNG.

whether to believe in a god, but which one. They pointed out the role the missionaries played in greatly lessening inter-tribal warfare, a contribution that seems generally acknowledged in PNG, thus literally making it possible for people to sleep safely at night, among other benefits. They thought the contributions in health and education were important as well. They said they have great respect for missionaries and their families. They used to think that all white people are the same, but they see now that that is not the case. Their greatest concern was not the “cultural damage” caused by missionaries (Anna Middleton’s phrase for a great concern of hers) but the dependency created by the missionaries and other foreigners providing aid.

In a conversation Susanna and I had later, she went as far as to say that the first missionaries had blessed the New Guineans they had worked with, and those families were still benefitting with their education, the jobs they were getting, and, in general, the place they held in society. I
had never heard such a statement before and decided to ask Lilo, a German development worker I met, what she thought of it. Lilo, who has worked in PNG for twelve years and is at least somewhat skeptical of missionary work, thought for a moment about the question of blessings and said perhaps there was some truth to it. Her explanation, however, was more pragmatic: the early missionaries had spent a great deal of time with the first converts; thus they received guidance and support that later converts did not.

Talking with the students quite simply lifted a burden for me. Of course they did not speak for all Papua New Guineans, and what they said about missionaries did not apply to all missionaries or to any of them all of the time. The students showed me, however, that people like my parents were part of something much larger than themselves, a part of helping to create a civil society in PNG. Meeting Susanna, Mailong, Munepe, and many others demonstrated to me that missionaries had made a difference for the good in people's lives that they can pass on now to their children and children's children. We take for granted our education and health systems and the fact that we can almost always count on a peaceful way to resolve disputes. Forty years ago, and to some extent even now, after twenty-five years of independence, Papua New Guineans can not count on such essentials.

My talk with the students illustrates the greatest gift the trip made possible for me: being able, for the first time, to see Papua New Guineans as equals. When I was growing up, I'm sure my parents never told me I was better than the people we were supposedly there to help. It was an easy inference to make, however: although we didn't have much by American standards, we had much more, materially, than any of the nationals. We children decided on the rules for games. We flew off to boarding school, and so on. Perhaps we occasionally ate with the nationals, but I don't remember those times. I had never really known a Papua New Guinean before my trip.

Seeing that I was with the students for the first time, to different experiences from my own. They created the defensive barriers I let go of the separation I carried with me into PNG created the defensive barriers that I let go of the separation that I carried with me into PNG.

My parents' lives were different from my own. My parents wrote articles in periodicals featuring young adults' accomplishments and for mission schools, and taught classes for missionary children. They also discuss whether to be involved by a missionary family or to return home twice a year, once a year. The ethics of missionaries had simply not been part of my view of PNG. My parents' lives created the defensiveness with which I carried with me into PNG.

My parents' lives created the defensiveness with which I carried with me into PNG. With their help, I could communicate with a Papua New Guinean, someone I had never really known. I wanted to know more about the good and the bad of their lives. Neither will I be able to spend their lives. I believe my visit as a small vine that I can contribute to the way I view myself. This is the part of myself by showing respect for the land and its people.
remember those times. I had never shared a room with a Papua New Guinean woman or girl until this trip.

Seeing that I was with equals also helped me, for the first time, to differentiate my parents’ experiences from my own. They had probably long ago let go of the separateness and superiority that I carried with me into adulthood, and that then created the defensiveness I felt in explaining myself. My parents’ letters to their families show that their attitudes toward the nationals changed as they worked with them on a more equal basis in churches and schools. The nationals are much less “other.” In the 60s and 70s, both my parents wrote articles for American church periodicals featuring young Papua New Guineans and their accomplishments. I, on the other hand, had gone to boarding school when I was six, a school for missionary children where the parents had to discuss whether two bi-racial children taken in by a missionary family could attend. I returned home twice a year and, in high school, once a year. The ethics of my relationships with the nationals had simply not been my concern during my few weeks of vacation.

This time, it was different. Using English and Pidgin, I could communicate with almost everyone I met. I wanted to know about them as much as they wanted to know about me. Now, I welcomed the chance to sit and listen and suck on sugarcane with them. I believe my parents would see my visit as a small vindication of how they chose to spend their lives. I can never measure the good and the bad of their work in Papua New Guinea. Neither will I be able to say whether my stereotyped attitudes, previously a source of embarrassment and even guilt, are now alive and complicated and a challenge to incorporate into the way I view myself. This visit gave me back part of myself by showing me how my parents had made it possible for me to be a part of this land and its people.