

Marty Zelenietz  
33 Beech St.  
Dartmouth, N.S.  
B3A 1Y6  
Canada

(902) 463-0687

Pages: 10

Words: c. 2800

The Coming of Age in Kilenge

(copyright reserved by author, April 1983)

Chicago is a good training-ground for future anthropologists. Those who want to be true urbanites, to function in the city as a whole, are compelled by Chicago's ethnic diversity to grasp some basic understanding of other cultures, other life-styles. From neighborhood to neighborhood, area to area, obvious differences in store signs, shop displays, and religious institutions reflect the residents' deeper differentiation in origin, background and culture. Just as Chicago is a cultural mosaic, so too is the rest of the world. The change and continuity of city life mirror events in mankind as a whole.

Thus it was that I was back in Papua New Guinea, about to study a small bit of that "mankind as a whole". As we stood at the ship's railing, watching the approaching land take on detail, I and my wife Jill wondered what things would be like in Ongaiia after being away for four years. We had done our anthropological fieldwork with the Kilenge people of West New Britain in 1977-8 and now my employer, the University of Papua New Guinea, was sponsoring our return. We were coming back to study continuity and change in village life. But now there was little time to spend day-dreaming about what we would find. We could see the villages huddled at the base of Mt.

Talawe, and hear the chugging of the mission launch. I hurriedly made sure our gear was ready. In a twinkling, it seemed, the launch was alongside and loaded, and we began our run in towards the beach. Surrounded by old friends, we crowded into the house we were temporarily to call home.

So much was the same in the villages, and yet so much had changed. Langila, a volcano located on the other side of Mt. Talawe, still belched clouds of ash and steam. Men and women still toiled in their subsistence gardens, raising their staple foods of taro, yam and sweet potato. People continued to exploit the resources of the ocean, men fishing from their canoes and women gathering shellfish from the reef. The daily cycle of life was much the same as before.

But Ungaia village had not remained unaltered by the passage of time. The Catholic priest, with the backing and hard work of the villagers, had installed a pure water supply. Fresh water from the taps replaced the tainted and brackish water that had caused so much disease in the past. Village magistrates were a new feature of village life: they carried with them new notions of law for the local people. New houses had been built, and old ones destroyed. Old friends had died, new children born, and people faced new problems as money became a growing part of their lives.

Bill and I had also changed. In 1977, people often asked us why we didn't have any children: a healthy but childless young couple didn't make sense to the villagers. Now, we were the proud parents of an eight month old daughter, and Mari Amaring was the center of attention for the ten weeks we stayed in Ungaia. People were pleased by our choice of names: Amaring is a Milenge name, and anxious women

ascertained our right to use it by pointing out that one of my 'fathers' belonged to a group that owned the name. Through Amaring, we found that in spite of the changes surrounding us, some things had stayed the same. Rich and colorful ceremonies remained an important part of Kilenge life.

First-born children hold a special place in Kilenge culture. They are the focal points of a never-ending series of rituals and ceremonies. As parents of a young first-born, we found ourselves involved in this kaleidoscope of feasting, dancing and singing. It started our second day in Ongaia. A group of women, masquerading as men, stomped and danced on the sand in front of our house. This was narikanga, the homecoming for a first-born who has made his or her first long trip to foreign parts. Laughing and joking, often at the expense of the parents and grandparents, is the keynote of this joyous ceremony. Although we were expecting it, the next part of the narikanga came as a bit of a shock. Jill and I were unceremoniously dumped into the ocean, along with one of Amaring's 'grandmothers'. Ritually, we had returned to Ongaia.

During the following week, villagers made feverish plans for our daughter's nakuvokuvo, a feast usually held shortly after birth but delayed, for obvious reasons, in our case. One of Amaring's 'grandfathers', a close friend of ours, arranged for a pig to be killed in her honor. Pigs are the ultimate symbol of wealth in most of Melanesia. Using pigs, men create and repay debts, accumulate prestige, and establish their importance in village affairs. The killing and giving of even one pig is a significant social act. Never before in our experience in Ongaia had we been associated

with a pig presentation. The death of that one pig vividly impressed on us our changed social status. Jill and I, by having a child, had become far more "human" in village terms.

Women brought great quantities of food and firewood down from the mountain gardens in preparation for the feast. On the day of the feast, they busied themselves preparing the mumus (stone ovens) to cook taro, yam, cassava and sweet potato. After the stones were heated on a fire, they were spread out in a circle. Layers of food, wrapped in banana leaves, were sandwiched between the stones and left to steam cook. I apportioned about 130 lbs. of rice and two cases of tinned meat to women from the various village groups. At sunset, cooked food was distributed with little ceremony, and people feasted courtesy of their little visitor from North America.

The subsequent weeks saw women educating Jill in the less esoteric aspects of child-raising. She came back to the house with endless lists of food a baby and mother could and couldn't eat. People pay just as much attention to the mother's diet as to the baby's, because what the mother eats affects the child's development. Jill, a coconut milk junky, found herself sneaking kulau (drinking coconuts) in private-- whenever women saw her drinking that refreshing liquid, they lectured her on how it would give Amaring colds. Jill learned the songs and games that every mother should know, and much to our delight, Amaring enjoyed those activities. We came to appreciate the joys of having a large extended family, for when we wanted to work there was an endless supply of babysitters, aged 5 to 55, willing and eager to look after Amaring.

I, too, received an education in parenting. One day, when Amaring was sick, Jill's 'mother' came and lectured to me about the dangers of taking an infant too close to the men's house. Men's houses throughout Papua New Guinea serve multi-faceted roles as social centers for men, repositories of sacred objects, and abodes of powerful spirit forces. Approach to these buildings, let alone entry, is strictly forbidden to females. Amaring's illness, it seems, was caused by spirit powers of the men's house, who had taken her anunia (life force) away from her. My 'mother-in-law' told me she had arranged for an old man to sleep in the men's house to find Amaring's wandering spirit. The next morning, I learned that he had met with success. While dreaming, he found her anunia, frightened and crying, stranded at the top of a coconut tree. He climbed the tree and gently led her spirit back to her body. Some people attributed Amaring's recovery to the treatments she received at the mission hospital; others said that the old man had done his job well; and many felt that the hospital and the dreamer worked in concert. Regardless of the verdict, never again did I take my daughter near the men's house.

As the weeks passed, the village elders debated what to do next for Amaring. One faction felt that a simple small feast and short dance in her honor would be enough. Another faction pushed for a full-scale initiation, a nakailenga. In a nakailenga, young girls are formally dressed, and young boys superincised. In my role as observer of village life, I tried to remain aloof from the debate. I announced that either situation would please me, and that I would support either with rice, tins, tea and tobacco. The group

that wanted a simple ceremony had several telling arguments: Amaring should wait until the initiation of other children in her age category; nakailenga traditionally demanded a long period of discussion, organization and planning; and the approaching rainy season would probably ruin any elaborate ceremony. Those pressing for an initiation countered that no one knew whether Amaring and her parents would be able to return to Ongaia when she was truly "of age", so it would be best to get it done now. A marathon discussion in the men's house settled the issue: Amaring would have a nakailenga. Underlying the day-long debate was a question of dinau (debt). One man, an initiation guardian for a child the year before, wished to cancel the debt he incurred in the process. He offered to act as Amaring's sponsor, arrange a guardian, and provide a pig. His brother-in-law also volunteered a large pig. So, Amaring's initiation would occur as part of the on-going ceremony called Sia, the Dance of the White Cockatoo. Sia dancers, with their feathered and plumed hats, and bird-like motions, evoke strong images of the white cockatoo. In 1977, when we witnessed the beginning of this Sia cycle, little did we dream that one day we would see our daughter initiated in it.

With the financing and sponsorship of the ceremony settled, preparations began in earnest. From their large canoes, men cast their nets to catch sea turtles and fish. They refurbished their Sia hats, preferring the convenience of my white typing paper to the tedious job of hunting birds for new feathers. Women looked to their own dancing costumes, and our close friends readied Amaring's initiation skirts and hat. Although the exact date of the ceremony

had yet to be set, women and girls stockpiled firewood for the mumus. In the face of all this activity, the sponsors at last agreed on a day for the ceremony, and in the days prior to the designated time women collected copious quantities of food from the gardens.

Finally, the day of the nakailenga dawned. With the sun rising, I watched the killing and butchering of one of the two pigs that would establish Amaring's name in the village. As the women grated coconuts, taro and cassava for coconut cream pudding, and heated stones for the ovens, I anxiously eyed the dark clouds on the horizon. Would the rain spoil it all? The ominous sky weighed heavy on my mind all morning.

Last minute preparations continued. Some of our neighbors, with the aid of a visitor from Morobe, concocted a special beverage that would enhance their dancing ability. Men gathered in the men's house, ate a meal of pork, baked tubers and rice, and made the final adjustments to their dancing costumes. Women carefully bundled food in leaves and constructed their mumus. The time for the nakailenga had arrived.

A group of women surrounded Amaring and began to paint a red circle around her head. Disconcerted by this unusual treatment from her friends, Amaring began to cry. Her tears streamed as the women added blue paint to her head decoration. With her hair resembling a bright bull's eye, she was hustled off to the other end of the village and given a ritual bath. A laughing, giggling crowd of women and children gathered to see Amaring receive her formal dress. Old and valuable armbands were slipped over her arms. Her new skirts were tied on, and her face painted. Much

to the amusement of the crowd. The men gathered and began the opening dances of Sia. Jill and I were at loose ends, trying to follow all the events and record them on film and in notebooks.

Two young women, decked out in flowers, dogs' teeth ornaments, grass skirts and shell money, lifted Amaring and carried her between them to the head of the procession. Men danced behind as all headed into the center of the village. Then we saw the most important symbolic feature of the ceremony: Old women flung themselves into the path of the dancers, and Amaring and her escorts stepped over them. Amaring's passage over the women dramatized her entry into the community, the replacement of the older generation by the younger. The moment passed swiftly and the boisterous procession arrived at the village center, where people settled in to enjoy several hours of traditional entertainment and sociability. All but forgotten for the moment, Amaring went home for a well-deserved nap.

As per the instructions of her 'mothers', Jill had carefully prepared lanlans (wrap-around skirts that are standard daily garb for both men and women) and other gifts for those who helped decorate Amaring, and for those over whom she had passed. Unsure of how to distribute the gifts, she handed the responsibility, and the lanlans, over to a friend. Much to our surprise, our friend began flinging the presents high into the air over the dancers, and pandemonium periodically punctured the dancing as people scrambled for the gifts. We watched in amazement as over 30 lanlans fluttered into waiting hands.

With dusk approaching, a tired Amaring was brought out once again to the dancers for Aputon, the final dance of the initiation. She



singing procession snaked its way up and down the village. Finally, the nakailenga had come to an end. In a blur, I watched the dancers disperse, the mumus opened and the food distributed. Night settled on the village to find Jill and I emotionally drained. We had escaped the threatening rain. Our daughter had been initiated: we had established her name, her identity, in the village. As the feast wound down, we relaxed. That, we thought, was that!

Early the next morning, my 'mother-in-law' informed me that one final matter needed attending to. I had to make the final exchange with Amaring's initiation guardian. Several hours passed in confusion as villagers searched for the appropriate gifts: a carved Siassi bowl of just the right length and quality, a Madang clay pot of just the right size. As the hours dragged on, I despaired of ever finding the appropriate items. But at long last, Amaring's 'grandfather' negotiated with her guardian, and presto! the gifts were ready, we made the exchange, and the initiation was complete.

We left Kilenge 3 weeks later, profoundly moved by our experiences there, and sorry to say goodbye to good friends. Sari Amaring is too young to remember any of these events, but in the Melanesian tradition, we will "story" to her about them in the years to come. We hope that she takes pride in what happened to her, and what was done in her name. Few North American girls have been initiated in the ways of the ancestors. And in the not-so-distant future, few if any Kilenge boys or girls will undergo the process of initiation. Outside forces press on the Kilenge, and sooner or later they will adapt their way of life to cope with those forces, as they have in the past. Change, for them and for us, is inevitable. What we cling to from

the past may impede our future, but then again, it might just give us the sense of **stability**, of continuity and purpose, that we need to cope with tomorrow.

---

Marty Zelenietz was a visiting lecturer in anthropology at the University of Papua New Guinea in 1981-2. Born and raised in Chicago, he currently lives in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.