

Day 7, Saturday Oct 18



We were greeted this morning by another spectacular sunrise. The fog sat at the bottom of the valley like a field of snow. And the sun turned the sky into the most beautiful blues and pinks and yellows, looking more like a painting than life. Whether you believe in G-d or Mother Nature – it was a work of incredible art.



We had arranged with Joseph and the hotel manager to meet Joseph at 600am this morning to go birding again (this time at the proper time to actually have a chance to see a bird). When we all gathered in the lobby, Joseph was leaving with another group of 2 people. And this exemplifies why tourism is still low here. They have not figured out good management. Needless to say, we were all very upset. The manager said she would find us another guide and we explained that she herself told us to meet Joseph at 600 in the morning! So Joseph came back and took us until the other guide, Paul, showed up. We walked around the grounds again listening to the birds sing and trying to find them. We saw a few small birds (Paul told us their names, but I don't remember them). And then we saw a Prince of Stephanie Estropia BOP. So now I've seen them twice.

At 9 we met with our guide for the day, Raymond, and our driver Paul and headed off to see some Hagen villages. It is the Melpa tribe that lives in this region.

When the Leahy brothers first came into the interior of PNG, it is the Melpa people they encountered. Raymond told us that his grandfather was there, when the Leahy's first arrived, as were many of his clan. Can you imagine seeing a white man for the first time? It was quite a shock (as I described above). The Melpa are said by anthropologists, to be "predisposed to capitalism," because of their complex traditional society in which "big men" earn status by accruing wealth (i.e., pigs) and then giving it all away in ceremonial exchanges (called Moka). Then the men receiving the gifts have to give away even bigger gifts and this goes on and on. The expansion in size of gift and counter-gift, and of the political network it creates, eventually reaches its upper limit set by the capacity of the land, and the ability of followers to take care of the pigs.

The hierarchy here is a tribe which is made up of clans, which are made up of sub-clans which are made up of families. Each family has its own piece of land with plants and walkways acting as borders. Each property has two homes, one for the men and one for the women. A man can have several wives, similar to the Huli. And a Melpa can marry a Huli. But here, with special permission, a woman can enter the man's house. Boys move to live with their fathers at about age 5-6. I say about because there are no records of birth and no one knows their real age. Rather everything is based on developmental age. Sex for the Melpa is not for pleasure but rather just for having children. They watch the moon and thus judge when it is mating season, similar to the birds.

A man becomes a man when he knows how to fish, farm and can grow a beard. They don't marry until they are about 30 (remember – they don't know how old they are), when they are mentally and physically fit.

Marriages are not arranged as much as in the past. Nevertheless, the man still has to pay a bride price. The bride price can be 10-30,000 kina (plus pigs) for an uneducated wife, and as high as 60,000 kina plus 100,000 kina worth of pigs for an educated wife. Since no one man can afford this, the entire clan chips in.

The official language is English but each clan has its own language. When a husband has wives from different clans, the children learn all the languages. Raymond's father had 5 wives and so Raymond speaks 7 languages.

One of the main cash crops here is coffee. In 1985 when PNG became independent, the Australians and Germans came and brought land from the Melpa, paying with shells and pigs – their local currency. They developed coffee and tea plantations and then deserted them. These fields have grown into forests. Slowly the original families are trying to either learn how to grow coffee or are turning them back into farms for vegetables. Nevertheless, coffee is being grown here and exported.

There used to be a clan elder and if there were problems, you would go to him. There may still be a clan elder but now there is less tradition. When the Melpa tribes would fight, it would be over either land, women or pigs – the three most important commodities.

Traditional houses here are built in either a circular or rectangular shape and most often are woven from bamboo or cane. The buildings are low to the ground to keep the inside warm, but the roof is high to keep the smoke away from the people. Cooking and sleeping take place in this communal and open space, although sometimes cooking is done outside. More recently, with “modernization”, many of these homes have become more modern with appliances, windows, and aluminum. To get in and out of the village, they build mud steps, which have to be rebuilt after each rain.



While we were asking Raymond lots of questions about his life, he also asked us lots of questions about life in America. He did not understand why each birth had to be registered, and had never seen a driver's license until Arnie showed him one. He had watched the Terminator and thought that was real, not fiction.

When we asked about his life, he was very bitter. In his village he would have learned to fish and hunt, but the white man came and told them they should be educated to get good jobs. So he went to school and to university and became an engineer. And then there were no jobs. He said he, and 70% of PNGians, feel that the white man “taunted” them.





Along the road we once again saw groups of men hanging out. This time however, we saw many groups playing darts on the side of the road. And the women, with their bilum bags, would all stop and wave and wave at us. And we passed fields and fields of sweet potato and cabbages (BIG cabbages).





Although not on his itinerary (but on ours), Raymond took us to the Mt Hagen market which is the largest and supposedly best market in PNG. He warned us that they have professional pickpockets here and to be very careful. But what a colorful place! The market is a covered market now, as a roof was built about 5 years ago. It is very large and is divided into sections for vegetables, chickens, clothes, pig leashes, etc. People often barter at the markets, trading what they have for what they need. And betel nuts are sold everywhere, in the market and on the road. Everyone wanted us to take their pictures. They would smile, pose holding whatever they were selling (like a cucumber) and wait for us to take their picture. Every vendor was friendly, smiling, waving and posing. The vegetables were all presented in towers or made into designs. There were people everywhere. One woman had chickens inside her bilum bag on her back. This is what we love seeing – the people in action. Since few people have refrigerators, they shop every day for their food. Of course in the villages they grow their own food and then come to the market to sell the rest. The sad part was that they are slowly moving away from home made bilum bags to plastic bags.







Plastic bag replacing bilums

Pig leashes



Roberta wanted to buy some more bilum bags so we went to the bilum bag section. As she was negotiating, a huge crowd gathered around her to watch the white woman. We are still an oddity here.



So in addition to asking each other questions, the day was supposed to be spent visiting three villages. In each one we were seated on a wooden plank (in the first, covered in banana leaves) in a staging area. The three themes for today were war, spirit dancing, and mudmen. In each case, since it was Saturday and the children were not in school, it was the boys that acted these things out for us. During the week it is the men that do it, but the weekend is the opportunity for the boys to learn these traditions.



So the first was “war” in the village of Moika. A young boy covered in white clay came out carrying a bamboo stick and “was clearing the land to plant. When he went home at night, the other clan came and set up a boundary so he would not use their land. The next day the first boy came back and ignored the boundary and so they started to fight. The clan elder came out and told them to stop fighting. A price was paid and every one lived happily on their own land.” This is what the children are taught just in case they have to go to war with another clan, which of course has not happened in a long time.



The second visit was to see the mudmen. Once upon a time the Kali tribe fought the Kulga tribe and took their land. The Kulga ran away to the Asaro River and waited until dusk before attempting to escape. The Kali saw them rise from the muddy banks covered in mud and thought they were spirits rising against them because they had killed Kali men, women and children. And they all ran away leaving behind the women and children. The Kulga moved back onto their land and “adopted” the Kali women and children. So this scene was enacted for us by the children. The mudmen could not cover their faces because legends say that the people of Papua New Guinea thought that the mud from the Asaro river was poisonous. So instead of covering their faces with this alleged poison, they made masks from pebbles that they heated and water from the waterfall, with unusual designs such as long or very short ears either going down to the chin or sticking up at the top, long joined eyebrows attached to the top of the ears, horns and sideways mouths. Today they still apply mud and masks to keep the illusion alive and terrify other tribes. For ceremonies, like the one performed for us, they make masks out of clay with frightening faces to than and honor the spirits. They acted out the fight and coming back to scare their enemies. Then they let us try on their claws. The masks themselves were extremely heavy. Hard to imagine them dancing around wearing those masks.





The third was a re-enactment of the spirit dance. The Melpa believe that there is a spirit in the sky who gives you success (children, health) if you are good, but punishes you (no children, illness) if you are bad. They did not pray, but rather would dance for the spirit. When the missionaries arrived, the Melpa had an easy time switching from one spirit to one god, but refused to marry only one wife. So although they are now primarily Catholic, they still believe in their spirits and teach the children how to do the dance. When there is a large clan celebration, they go to the forest and dance.



They also showed us how they call the spirit of their loved ones that die by accident so that the spirit can be buried with the body. When someone dies they are wrapped in tree bark and buried, and a tree is planted over them (nice way to repopulate the forest). Only the chiefs and elders get tombs on the side of the road so they can be remembered by everyone that passes them. When someone dies, there is mourning for a week before the body is buried (shiva?). Then there is a festival for another 7 days. We passed a funeral and saw a large crowd and lots of flowers.

We were back at the hotel by 2:30 with the rest of the afternoon unscheduled. They haven't told us the schedule for tomorrow yet as they are waiting to hear from the "big man."