

# Faith amid Destruction in the Mountains of Heaven

Papua New Guinea's Enga province is referred to as the 'Mountains of Heaven'. Fr Philip Gibbs SVD relates how two women from the region have coped with injury and loss inflicted during tribal warfare.

**M**aria Tombename lives in the Tsak valley in the Enga province of Papua New Guinea. "Tsak" means "lush" or "green" in the local language. The name is appropriate since this area of Papua New Guinea's highlands is high enough to have a pleasant temperate climate, and low enough not to suffer the effects of frost that destroy the food crops at higher altitudes in the Province.

The Tsak valley is now lush and green. However, fifteen years ago much of the valley was reduced to ugly ashes due to a horrific tribal warfare, in which over 100 people died. Maria did not die, but lost her leg as a result of injuries suffered during the warfare.

Women are seldom targets in Eastern Enga tribal warfare, so Maria used to go close to the fighting in order to harvest food from her garden. Then one day, while talking to a young man near the parish church, a shot rang out and the young man fell mortally wounded. Maria then heard someone from the enemy clan identify her as the wife of a leader of rival fighters. Another shot rang out. She didn't feel anything at first and reached down into her pocket to find her rosary beads. Instead of her beads, she felt blood. She tried to run away but couldn't as the shot had shattered her leg bone. So dragging her injured leg behind her, she crawled to where she could hide until sunset. With nightfall she was able to attract attention and her clan rescued her and took her to hospital where her leg



*Maria Tombename: "Many are in a box with grass growing over them."*

was amputated at the hip. Maria does not bear a grudge against her assailants. She says that she can get around as well as women with two legs and she is glad to be alive. "Many others are in a box with grass growing over them."

The story of Maria illustrates how life is changing rapidly in Papua New Guinea.



*Dokosawana — who took up her father's spear and shield and joined the men in battle after he was killed.*

Formerly men would fight with bows and arrows and spears and they would not harm women. Now they use high powered guns bought with the proceeds of selling marijuana, and sometimes women are shot and killed. People say that the traditional culture and its values are dying and they wonder what is taking its place. Many of the young people learn their values watching videos of questionable quality.

In an attempt to help people retrieve traditional values which compliment Gospel values, I have been leading two teams on 'Faith and Culture' workshops. We have a team for men and a team for women as men and women find it easier to speak openly if they are with people of their own sex. We also divide the workshops into those for mature married people and others for the youth.

I was in the Tsak valley in order to facilitate a week-long workshop for older women there. I almost didn't make it. I left the Mount Hagen mission rather late in the afternoon, steering my trusty Honda 110 motorcycle through the afternoon rains over the 3,000m high Hagen range. Later, in the darkness, a bearing seized in the rear wheel of my bike. There was

no way I could move it. It is a lonely feeling on a muddy road in Enga at night with a heavily loaded broken motorcycle. After an hour a truck appeared and the driver offered to carry my motorcycle to my destination. The women were very relieved when I arrived at 10pm. They set to, preparing a delicious meal of sweet potato, pumpkin leaves and tinned fish. After that I settled into the priest's house - which originally was not a house at all, but a converted water tank. During the tribal warfare, the whole mission station was destroyed, including the priest's house, so the resourceful parish priest opened up a door and a window in an empty 10,000 litre water tank, which now serves as a comfortable (and waterproof) two roomed house.

We met for five days sharing about childhood experiences, domestic life, marriage and childbearing, sickness and death, love and fear. One of the team would give input. Then the women would go into groups to share their own experiences. Finally, it was my task to try to relate their experiences to the scriptures and the Good News. For example, the mature women shared what their mothers had taught them before outsiders came to their valley. Then they tried to discern how one can dialogue between the Gospel, and the communal values from their tradition.

Many of the values found in Enga proverbs are quite compatible with Biblical values. They have a saying: "Bad plants bear bad fruit." (cf. Mat. 12:33 'The tree is known by its fruit'), or "The foolish person likes to accumulate red objects." (cf. Lk 18:24 'How hard it is for those who have wealth...'). Moreover, it would be possible to illustrate many of the Commandments using proverbs, for example, "A piglet that does not follow its mother does not grow well." (4th commandment), or "Human blood is hard to wash off" — If you hit or kill someone you will have to live with the consequences, (5th commandment).

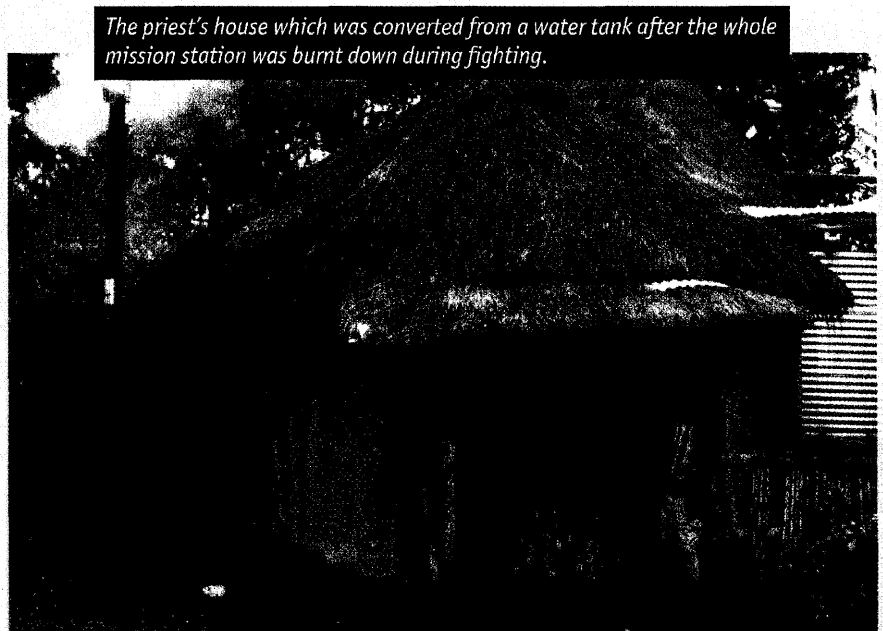
However, the importance of proverbs lies less in simple parallelism than a cre-

ative tension between the values concerned. For example, in the proverb mentioned above about human blood, the concern is not so much for the inherent value of human life, as for the requirement for the murderer to compensate for a homicide lest he be the object of an "eye for an eye" act of vengeance. The Commandment is about preserving the God-given gift of life, whereas the proverb focuses on assuming responsibility after taking a human life.

The day after the workshop in the Tsak valley, I was in another part of Enga and met Dokosawana, a woman with a different experience from Maria Tombename. Dokosawana is a charming woman with a long scar on her cheek which turns into a dimple when she smiles. Ten years ago her clan was engaged in tribal warfare and her father was killed. She was so upset and angry as she dragged the body of

again joined the fighting and intends to continue this practice if warfare erupts in the future. Dokosawana is a member of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. She doesn't mind the fifth commandment about not killing, but rather sees her role as enforcing justice and defending the rights of her people.

Sometimes Gospel values confront traditional values. For example, there is a traditional proverb, "Women do not climb trees." In fact, some women do climb trees — pandanus for instance. However, the proverb is sometimes used against women to tell them that they are unable to do what men do. With some notable exceptions, women are generally treated as equals in Christian circles, and so today the proverb above would be confronted with Gal 3:28, or perhaps contrasted with another proverb, "You can pick up things with a pair of tongs."



*The priest's house which was converted from a water tank after the whole mission station was burnt down during fighting.*

her dying father to the river, that she took up her father's spear and shield and went to join the men in the fighting. The men were surprised to see a woman bearing arms, as this is contrary to Enga custom. At one stage, Dokosawana was wounded in an axe blow to her face, which has left a permanent scar. Others told me how in the fighting she had injured a man by throwing a large knife at him. In recent post-election warfare she

Tongs have two parts that work together. One part would be useless. So, if men and women cooperate and work together they can accomplish something.

There is a great need to continue the dialogue between faith and changing culture today. People themselves tell me how grateful they are to have the opportunity to reflect on their lives in this way. I just wish I had more time to devote to this valuable mission. ■