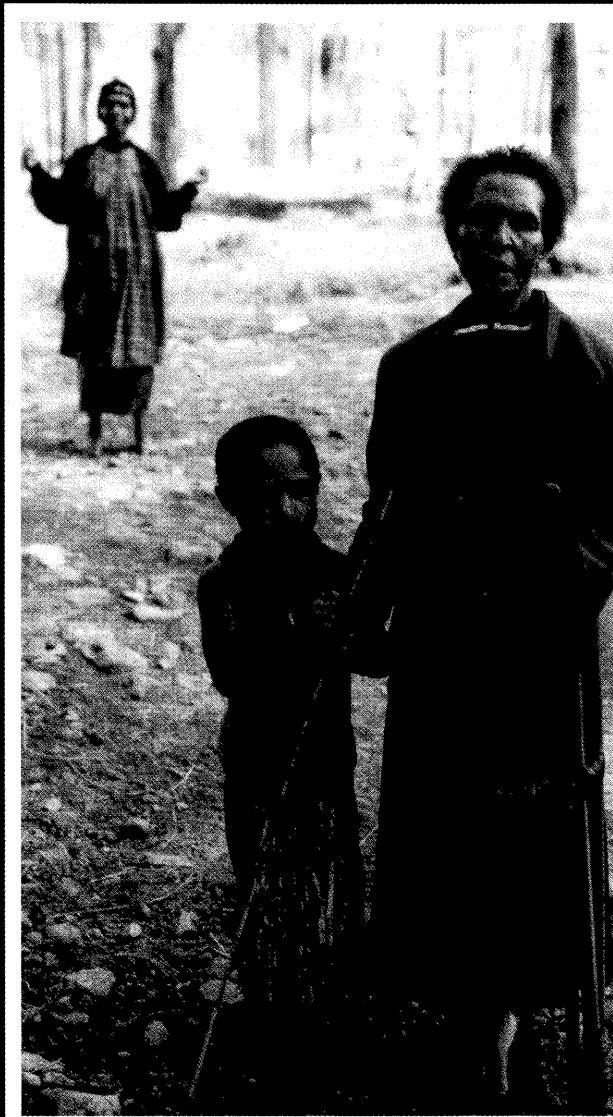


# A Tale of Two Women

*Philip Gibbs SVD*



In order to facilitate a week-long workshop for older women, I was in the Tsak valley of the Enga Province of Papua New Guinea. The valley is called "Tsak" which in the local language means "lush" or "green". The name is appropriate since this area of the Papua New Guinea 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.

I left the Mount Hagen mission rather late in the afternoon, steering my trusty Honda 110 motorcycle through the afternoon rains over the 3,000 mile-high Hagen range. Later, in the darkness, a bearing seized in the rear wheel of my bike and there was no way I could move it. For the next hour I experienced the extreme loneliness of spending the dark night on a muddy road with a heavily loaded, malfunctioning motorcycle. At last a truck appeared and the driver offered to carry me and my motorcycle to my destination.

The women were very relieved when I arrived at 10 P.M. They set about preparing a delicious meal of sweet potato, pumpkin leaves and tinned

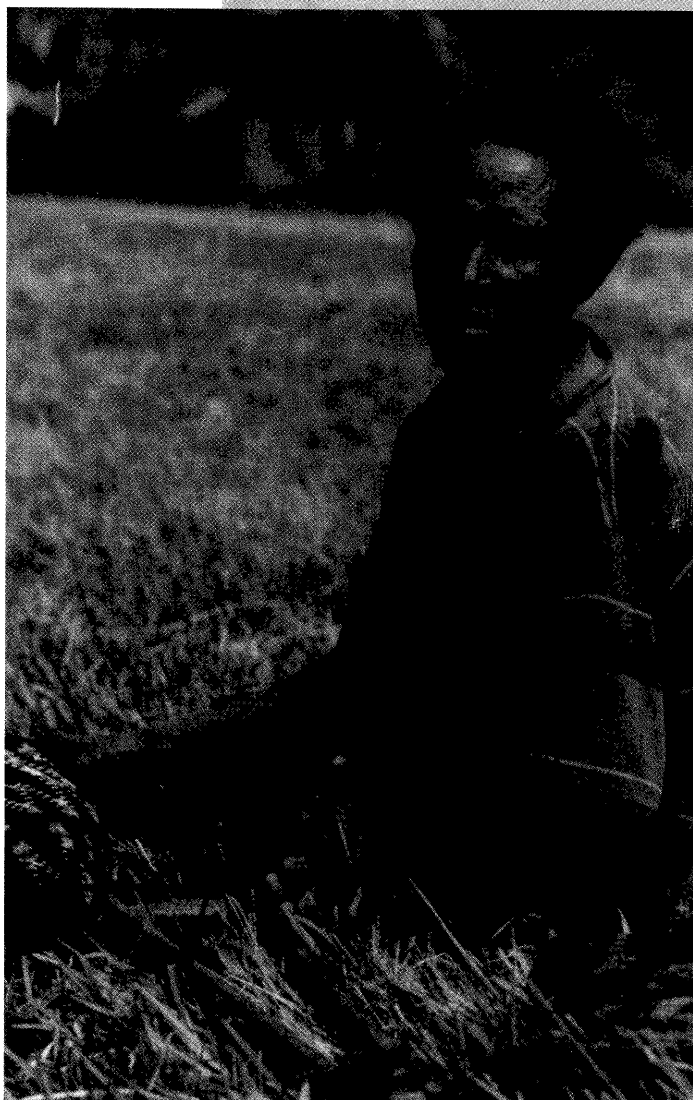
# “a broken bell is a symbol of destruction”

—Enga proverb



fish. After that I settled into the priest's house, which originally was not a house at all, but a water tank. During the tribal warfare the whole mission station had been 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, and it now serves as a comfortable (and waterproof) two-room house.

Maria Tombename lives in the Tsak valley which at this time of the year is lush and green. Fifteen years ago, however, much of the valley was reduced to ugly ashes because of the horrifying tribal warfare in which over a hundred people died. Maria's life was spared, but she lost her leg as a result of injuries suffered during the conflict. Since women are seldom targets in Eastern Enga tribal warfare, Maria would go close to the fighting grounds in order to harvest food from her garden. One day while she was talking to a young man near the parish church, a shot rang out and the young man fell mortally wounded. Then she heard someone from the enemy clan identify her as the wife of a rival leader. Another shot rang out. Maria didn't feel anything at first, but when she reached down into her pocket for her rosary beads, she felt blood on her fingers instead of the touch of beads. She tried to run but couldn't, for a bullet had shattered her leg bone.



Maria Tombename

Dragging her injured leg, she crawled to where she could hide. With nightfall she was able to attract attention and her clan rescued her. She was taken to the hospital where her leg 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," she says, "are in a box with grass growing over them."

The story of Maria illustrates how life in Papua New Guinea is rapidly changing. Formerly men would fight with bows, 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 complement Gospel values, I have been leading two teams in "Faith and Culture" workshops. We have a team for men and a team for women because both groups find it easier to speak openly if they are with persons of their own gender. We also divide the workshops, some for mature married people and others for youths.

The women's group, for instance, began their five-day workshop sharing childhood experiences, cares of domestic life, marriage and childbearing, sickness and death, love and fear. A member of their team then offered specific input, after which the women separated in groups for further sharing. The mature women, for example, spoke of what their mothers had taught them before outsiders came to the valley. They tried to discern, then, through dialogue, how

to relate Gospel teaching and the communal values of their tradition. Finally, it was my turn to relate their experiences to the Scriptures, the Good News.

Many of the values found in Enga proverbs are quite compatible with biblical values. For example, an Enga proverb says: "Bad plants bear bad fruit." That saying compares well with Mt. 12:33, "The tree is known by its fruit." Similarly, "The foolish person likes to accumulate red objects" is like Lk 18:24, "How hard it is for those who have wealth...." The Commandments, too, have parallels in Enga proverbs. For example, "A piglet that does not follow its mother does not grow well" is a fourth Commandment idea. And "Human blood is hard to wash off" is a kind of fifth Commandment warning that a person who hits or kills will have to live with the consequences.

The relevance of Enga proverbs lies in the creative tension between values. For example, in the proverb above about human blood, the concern is not so much the inherent value of human life, as the requirement for the murderer to compensate for a homicide lest he be the object of an "eye for an eye" type of vengeance. The focus of a Commandment is on 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 where I met Dokosawana, a woman with a different experience from Maria Tombename's. 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 her dying father to the river, that she took up her father's spear and shield to join the men in



Dokosawana



## “Human blood is hard to wash off”

—Enga proverb



... I settled into the priest's house, which originally was not a house at all, but a water tank.

fighting. The men were surprised to see a woman bearing arms, since this is contrary to Enga custom. At some point Dokosawana was wounded by an axe blow to her face, which has left a permanent scar. I learned from others that in the fighting she had injured a man by throwing a large knife at him. She again joined the fighting in recent post-election warfare and she intends to continue this practice if warfare erupts in the future. Dokosawana is a member of the Seventh Day Adventist Church and while she allows for a fifth Comandment about not killing, she sees her role as one who enforces justice and defends the rights of her people.

Sometimes Gospel values confront traditional values. For example, there is a traditional proverb, “Women do not climb trees.” But some women do in fact climb trees—the *par-*

*danus*, for instance. Sometimes the proverb is used against women just to tell them that they are unable to do what men can do. With some notable exceptions women are generally treated as equals in Christian circles and the problem today would be countered with Gal 3:28, or perhaps contrasted with another proverb, “You can pick up things with a pair of tongs.” Tongs have two parts that work together. One part would be useless. So, too, if men and women cooperate and work together they can accomplish something.

There is a great need to continue to dialogue about faith and today's changing culture. People 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! ♦