Tokain Group of Villages, Madang Province

Can a strong shared identity provide a basis for projecting a future?

Opening Story

The villagers are gathering slowly in the new community learning centre, which they built themselves in early 2006. The people here are from the Tokain group of villages. There are three main villages in the Tokain group—Tokain 1, Tokain 2 and Simbukanam—and another cluster of five villages in the surrounds—Malas, Dibor, Imbab and Yambrick. These villages fall into Wards 4 and 5 of the Sumgilbar Local-Level Government within the Sumkar District in the north-west coast of Madang Province. The people who live in these villages are creating a shared identity together, and increasingly call themselves the Gildipasi people. The word ‘Gildipasi’ is a strange acronym drawn from the first letters of the Gilagil River, Dibor River, Palesal Creek, the Sinkum Ranges and the Iariniari Ranges—natural landmarks bordering the area where the Gildipasi clans live. In keeping with the complexity of the place, the name is a self-conscious and modern designation but one that builds upon negotiated customary relations.

Gildipasi began in 1984 as an informal local community group in response to the impact of outside forces on community livelihood and traditional ways of life, and is now a central community organization. Of particular concern to it are the impacts of long-term logging in the area and proposed new deep-sea mining ventures. In responding to these threats, the Gildipasi people are drawing strongly on their traditional values and ways of being in order to protect their right to determine their own future. The new centre which the Tokain 1 community have built is a place to gather, learn and organize. It is also, the villagers say, for visitors,

so that they have a place of their own—and then are able to join us for our gatherings. It is not a long walk to the sea from here. The visitor can cross the road that divides Tokain 1 and Tokain 2, and go down to the river. Or else one can walk down from Simbukanam to the river from the other side.
It is a Sunday, and the community is walking towards the community centre after their usual Sunday church service. The church is located at the end of Tokain 2—a large shed that has rows of benches and a slightly elevated platform at the top end. A photo of Christ and a crucifix on a small table seem to be the only signs of an altar. The hamlets of Tokain 1, Tokain 2 and Simbukanam are close to each other, though Simbukanam is located on the hill-ward side. Villagers gather at the church service from all of these places, representing the many clans that co-exist in this place—Baine, Inong Gomang, Yadigam, Dimon, Dalem, Kalasika, Ameng, and Munuguwin. The service is attended by more than a hundred villagers, and the sermon is conducted by a local villager, an initiated preacher who speaks fierily about sin and redemption. On the way back to the learning centre together with some members of the church, we visit a grieving household. A young couple has just lost their first born—a young child, five years old—to a bout of malaria. Someone says that at least seven to eight children die every year from malaria in this small cluster of villages. The child, wrapped in a blanket, lies in her mother’s arms, and the grief is intense. After a while with the family, we continue on to the community centre in Tokain 1, and the walk is sombre.

There are about forty villagers gathered at the community centre when we arrive. They sit on the sand floor—some chewing betel nut and some eating fruits and nuts. They were mostly men, but slowly a group of older women come in and sit down; followed in about ten minutes by some younger women and children. The mood of the gathering is measured after the austere service and the visit to the stricken family. But after a while the room fills up and the meeting begins. When they are more than eighty people in the centre, one of the community leaders jumps up and introduces himself as Alfred Kaket, one of the leaders of the Gildipasi community movement. After introductions, Alfred plunges into the heart of the purpose for the gathering, which is to respond to the interim draft Sustainable Communities research report that we have brought back to the community groups for their feedback and input. Alfred tells us,

We like the way the communities you are working with have been written about, and have suggestions on some changes. But so much has changed too. We are in the middle of new struggles to keep our lives together. Our lands, our rivers, our sea continue to be exploited and we continue to be left outside any discussions by both the government and the development corporations.

One by one, community members get up to give their stories of changes and developments, of ways that they are trying to work together so that their lives in this small cluster of villages do not degenerate even further into ‘chaos’ and ‘decay’. Soon the discussion moves to questions of community and the diversity of communities that live in Papua New Guinea. ‘How do different groups and regions identify themselves?’ ‘In what ways can people
work collectively and effectively, yet hold on to their own history, cultural identity and rituals?’ These questions spark many responses, and the women join in, saying that it is important for their children to know where they come from. Nobody seemed keen to venture into the cities of Port Moresby and Lae, and they speak strongly of the many young people who had been lost in the unrelenting, uncompassionate cities, plagued as they are by crime and clan fights.

Suddenly one of the elders stood up and began to speak about the old traditions, and how the Gildipasi were trying to bring these back in a way that would help the people. We asked more questions and shared our own stories of the cultural rituals in the places where we came from, and there was laughter and cheering as these exchanges led to theatrical expressions and impromptu performances. Pig’s tusks, dog’s teeth, shells that came off the back of native snails—the people tried to describe these items of significant cultural importance. Suddenly Alfred Kaket stands up and says, ‘We will show you how we now will use these deep and important cultural items together as a way we wish to be seen in the modern world. Gildipasi will wear this as our emblem—the carrying of our old ways into the new world’. He then turns to Papa Paul Kodang, an elder in the gathering, and requests him to show us what this emblem would look like. Papa Paul Kodang gets up and disappears out the community centre. No one speaks in the time he is away, almost as if not sure that he would return. He does return, holding some items in his hand. He removes his shirt and puts them around his neck, reciting a verse in pidgin. The crowd cheers and stand up. There is a fever of excitement, a sense of camaraderie. We ask Alfred Kaket’s nephew to help us write down what is said. He writes, ‘We are happy for you to take this as our symbol, our expression into the world as the Gildipasi people of Papua New Guinea.’


These pig tusks, these dog teeth and the decorations—they all belongs to us. Inside Gildipasi these pig tusks and dog teeth show everything about our culture and custom. It belongs to us, all the clans. It shows how we all work together as one in all sorts of ways and types of work. These pig tusks and dog teeth are still used before and still used for us today—and for a long time yet. These dog teeth and pig tusks are a powerful symbol for Gildipasi now and for a long time to come.
Place—Past and Present

To get to the Tokain group of villages from Madang one has to drive along the coastal road for close to two hours. Tokain 1 consists of a circle of about twelve huts resting on stilts enclosed by a scanty belt of shrubs and straggly trees. A larger hut rests on the ground, atypical of the others, this is the new Community Gathering and Learning Centre. Currently, five out of the eight Gildipasi-linked villages have built their own centres—the latest being the one at Tokain 2 which has just been completed and opened in November 2008. The old learning centre at Simbukanam, the neighbouring village, is now used more as a storage place. As the central meeting place for the activities of the cluster of villages, Tokain 1 is seen as the more strategic place to build a learning centre. Just a short walk away is the beach, and the small fresh water estuary which doubles as a washing place for the villagers, particularly the women.

There are two main clans in Tokain 1—the Baine and the Inong Gomang. In Tokain 2, the four main clans are the Yadigam, Dimon, Dalem and Kalasika. And then in Simbukanam are the Ameng and Muniguwin. While the Gildipasi organization offers a modern structural response to developments and issues in the area, it is also evident that traditional structures underpin the community fabric. While Gildipasi rests on traditional (clan) leadership,
there is no singular paramountcy claim within the area; currently the Ameng and Baine clan have taken some leadership role in building the next stage of Gildipasi.

Customary land boundaries, rising from the Sinkum and Iarinyari Ranges and descending into the surrounding Gilagil and Dibor Rivers and Palesal Creek, are being recovered as the markers of a shared space within which the Gildipasi clans meet together to debate and discuss their livelihood and their responses to developments, both from within and from outside of the province. At Tokain 1, a group of villagers gather around a small fire which, apart from the moon, is the main source of light. As introductions abound, it is obvious that there are others here from the surrounding villages—Tokain 2, Simbukanam, Malas, Dibor, Imbab and Yambarik. Conversation centres on developments in the area, particularly the selling of buai, or betel nuts, to the people from the Highlands. The elders here are worried about the discrepancies in the prices that locals are being paid for their buai, which are beginning to cause rifts amongst the clans.

A twenty-minute walk from Tokain 1 is Sumer, one of the hamlets of Simbukanam, named after the first breadfruit tree. Sumer mainly houses members of the Kaket family. Activity is centred on a main cooking and meeting place. Here many of the Kaket family members are involved late into the evening in the discussion around issues and opportunities in the area, as all of the brothers—Alfred, Lawrence and Ortwin are also leaders in the Gildipasi movement. Simbukanam is located on a small hill and has a population of about eighty people. This peaceful village went through its share of negative impact of the development projects especially environmental destructions and associated social disorder as the result of logging in early 1980s. According to the village leaders, their limited water system was polluted and almost destroyed, and social problems such as alcohol and drug abuse linked to the logging operations would have destroyed the peaceful livelihoods of the people if it was not for the actions of the community leaders.

**Organization and Governance**

The community in the Tokain group of villages is a complex one, with multiple layers of organization and identification. The broad community brings together the residents of eight villages, with each village a distinct unit of identification, itself consisting of several clans. Within each village, family ties form the foundation of households, with groups of households bringing together entire extended families, including parents, grandparents, siblings, children, brothers and sisters of spouses. The Kaket family is an example—making up a hamlet of Simbukanam. Multilayered connections and identities are maintained through complex relationships, from the everyday lived reciprocity of cooking, gardening, fishing and child care within families, through to the broader relationships of exchange and communication between villages and clans. There is an apparent ease in
the way communities move across the eight villages and retain a sense of a collective place. In conversations, people are almost always introduced according to which village they come from and who they are related to, and it is easy to see the extensive connections between and across the different villages, created through intermarriages and involvement in the many community activities.

The community leaders believe in having a recognized and respected structures blending in the traditional and modern leadership roles. This means while they respect the traditional leadership structure, they have also established Community Improvement Committees to adequately address concerns and issues brought about by the development processes. Leaders assist and compliment one another to organize and co-ordinate the community activities. The committee consists of the two Chiefs who advise on customary laws, two clan leaders who represent their respective clan people including children, Community group representatives include the following:

- Youth Representative
- Women’s Representative
- School Board Representative
• Community Health Representative
• Environment Representative
• Agriculture Representative
• Church Representative
• Law and Order Representative

Results from the Community Sustainability Questionnaire data indicated high levels of wellbeing amongst villagers in the Tokain group of villages. Ninety per cent of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with their community neighbourhood, much higher than the figure of 72 per cent recorded against all the research sites. Eighty-eight per cent were satisfied or very satisfied with their feeling of safety. These results, together with the information gathered through qualitative conversations and interviews, point to a strong sense of community cohesion and shared identity.

Community activities are important in bringing people together from the different clans and villages in the area, and young people appear to be involved in these activities alongside adults. In the five-hour discussion held by researchers at the Tokain 1 community centre, more than half of the people who attended were youth and young adults. They participated in the conversations and were keen to provide their input and ask questions. The story of the pig tusks dog teeth emblem of the Gildipasi movement was narrated by a young boy—who then spent an hour or so writing down the meaning for the researchers. The participation of community members in issues relating to their locality reflects a high level of engagement in local issues, as well as an increasing disengagement with directives and promises that come from either logging companies or government representatives.

Bringing together all of the villages and clans, Gildipasi is now the dominant site of organization and community identity. It has also located itself at the centre of community governance structures; although in doing so it is underpinned by the existing forms of customary tribal leadership and organization. For instance, elders from the two more active clans in the area are at the centre of the Gildipasi leadership. At the same time, Gildipasi is consciously responding to the forms of power and organization within the post-independence PNG state and nation. In a working document prepared by the Gildipasi people, they write:

Gildipasi finds its roots in the original visions of Papua New Guinea’s constitutional fathers, as stipulated in the preamble to PNG’s national constitution and of PNG as a sovereign national state. Gildipasi does not stand alone, but as a people’s initiative to actualize what the constitutional fathers wanted to see happen. And more specifically, Gildipasi is based on the fifth national goal of PNG—to achieve development primarily through the use of Papua New Guinean forms of social, political and economic organization. “We see true social security
and happiness being diminished in the name of economic progress. We caution therefore that large scale industries should be pursued only after very careful and thorough consideration of the likely consequences upon the economic, social and spiritual fabric of our people…” Gildipasi will not be registered. [The reference here is to the current agenda to register customary land.] As much as we want to move forward and keep up with rapidly changing times, we exist as a community collective; open to working with outsiders, as long as these outsiders do not push their agendas and motives.¹

These community groups are highly conscious of the need to take responsibility for their own wellbeing and the sustainability of their environment, as many development projects continue to proliferate around them with an apparent disregard for genuine collaboration with the local communities who have lived here for generations. A community member Yat Paol, from Tokain 1 Village, who is one of the advisors for Gildipasi’s executive, works as an advocacy and campaigns officer with a local NGO called the Bismarck Ramu Group, located in Madang. Speaking to the research team in 2006, Yat said:

The most significant challenge in working with communities is the rate of change triggered by large-scale development. Community facilitation can be very time-consuming. It takes time to build strong relationships with communities. If another group comes in offering ‘projects’, it can easily undermine their work. Globalization is part of this challenge. There is now a constant movement of information and people in and out of communities, which can influence the way that communities think about the present and their future. There is also a growing concern with new forms of exchange and trade—even at the very local everyday level of community life.

Yat gave as an example the new forms of global ‘environmentalism’ such as carbon-credit schemes, whereby countries such as PNG are made to believe that they will receive cash for preserving their forests. He emphasized that this is not appropriate development, but just another form of cargo culture. ‘Like an aid program, it means that some communities can receive cash for doing nothing at all.’

In the Bismarck Ramu Group, then, as in Gildipasi, villagers and community members are operating with a critical, reflexive understanding of development, one which has a sophisticated sense of the global and regional context shaping local wellbeing and livelihoods, even if such a remote and isolated part of Papua New Guinea. They also have a critical understanding of government and the state. As Yat Paol put it in an email to one of the researchers involved in this project, ‘it is a thing these days that an NGO finds a reason to applaud government.’ This sentiment was echoed in the Questionnaire results. When asked how much they agreed with the statement ‘Governments make decisions and laws that are good for the
way I live locally’, only 24 per cent of respondents from the Tokain group of villages agreed or strongly agreed, compared to the overall figure of 43 per cent across all the research sites. 46 per cent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed, as opposed to 35 per cent across all the research sites.

Gildipasi is asserting its right to determine its own future, rather than have the PNG government and international and multinational organizations make decisions on their behalf. This includes not just economic independence, but also social-security mechanisms and political autonomy (at the local level) and self-determination. In doing so, the organization has structured its responses around the vital components which the Gildipasi people believe are the foundations of their community life. These include youth, women, culture, health, education, religion, law and justice, land and environment, agriculture and business, and governance.

When new leadership took over during the early 2000s, the Gildipasi Planning Committee, became known for a couple of years as the Gildipasi Welfare Foundation. Several community members joined to form a local co-operative, now named Gildipasi Resources Limited, which was then registered as a company with the Investment Promotion Authority (IPA). This company focuses on buying dried and processed copra from local farmers and growers within the Gildipasi area and selling this in bulk to the copra mill in Madang. As Peter Bunam, the chairman of Gildipasi said:

‘We no longer want to rely on outside forces to decide our lives. The Gildipasi Planning Committee which began as a pressure group back in 1984 was an initiative of the people, by the people and for the people. We believe in people-power and in working together. We have had ups and downs—and the movement had its difficulties especially when our prominent leader passed away. But we revived ourselves in 2002, and at a meeting on 13 January 2006, the executives of Gildipasi were elected by the people. Gildipasi was recognized and accepted by the people as Gildipasi business arm—and that the executive would act for the interest and wellbeing of the whole Gildipasi area.

Throughout our conversations, however, people spoke of the long way that they still had to go.

Livelihood and Provision

The people of Gildipasi are primarily subsistence farmers using the slash-and-burn methods. Men and boys help to clear the bush on the new garden plots and burn the dried leaves and stacks and the women and girls do the planting and weeding of the gardens. Men make banana gardens while women and girls other vegetable gardens such as beans, greens, kaukau, taro, and tapioca. Amongst respondents to the Community Sustainability Questionnaire, 96 per cent said that the main place they got their food was from work done on their own land or by fishing. Sixty-nine per cent listed work within the household (including gardens) as their main way of making
a living. Another 19 per cent said they sold goods at market or on the street, while another 10 per cent worked for a wage from a private business or the state, were a casual labourer or service worker, or ran a business. Many people also undertake informal income-generating activities such as selling betel nut, local fruits, clothes or cooked food by the roadside, although these may happen sporadically, and are not necessarily a main form of livelihood activity.

Main source of income for families in community comes from marketing copra, cocoa and garden produce. Crafts such as string bags are also a source of income. String bags (*bilums*) are made from bark of special trees, softened and rolled by the women and woven into string bags. *Bilum* making is one specific skill that the womenfolk are required to learn. Women have been involved in processing Noni products (medicinal *Morinda citrifolia* also used in other villages such as Boera discussed earlier) for use in bath soap and oil, which has a ready market. They are the main sellers at the local food markets. Decisions on spending of the family income are made by both parents, but many times women being the main sellers make independent decisions on spending money on the most needed items for their families, and the men respect those decisions.
A decade of logging in the area—which followed from a series of what are now seen as naïve negotiations on the part of the community—has had a significant influence on the livelihoods of people in the Tokain area villages, and the ways that they are re-constructing these now. Two Simbukanam clans (Ameng and Munuguwin) and one Imbap clan (Saingham) set up and signed the first conservation deed amongst themselves. The Gildipasi people set up the second conservation deed in Papua New Guinea and began earnestly to deal with the multitude of social and environmental problems that such intense logging has caused in their once pristine and dense rainforests. Working now with the new environmental slow crises of declining water quality, loss of access to fresh water, new types of weeds encroaching onto gardens, and chemical run-off, amongst other issues, they are only too aware of the hard work ahead. While not opposed to development itself, the central question is what form such development takes, and how it can be negotiated by much more informed local communities, not just at the level of galvanized community leaders.

The growth of a cash economy and increased movement of people and goods across the region are other factors impacting on the livelihood activities of the Tokain area people, sometimes with disturbing results. An interesting yet troubling new development is the growing corridors of resentment and contempt emerging around the selling of betel nut to the people from the Papua New Guinean Highlands where betel nut is not available. People spoke of Highlanders buying betel nuts for a low price from the local people, only to sell it for a massive profit when they return home. What was once a relatively easy trade of a sack or two of betel nut from a collective household to a buyer from the Highlands is now much more complex, and clear social tensions are arising. This was illustrated when, when one of the research team members—a PNG resident from Morobe—went down to the river for a swim, only to notice a number of local youths leave the river as soon as they saw him enter the water. Later, when they saw him at the discussions in the village, they came up and apologized, saying ‘We thought that you are one of the people from the Highlands, and we don’t want to bathe in the same river with the highlander. They are cheating us’. These divisions are growing, and echo the rumbling hostilities between Highlanders and Papuans in the Central Province region. Community members in Gildipasi described a climate of growing intimidation by the Highlanders, but also noted that while many betel-nut growers have felt unable to renegotiate their prices, some are now slowly responding to the price discrepancies by refusing to sell their betel nut to these buyers.

Learning and Education

Within the Tokain group of villages, as across Papua New Guinea, the church—here the Catholic Church—plays a major role in learning and education activities. Sundays are organized around the church service,
and there is a flurry of activity as children are bathed and clothed in their formal church outfits for the service. Walking down the road to the church, greetings are exchanged and information is shared around the next meeting for *bilum*-making classes, as well as other community activities. On one occasion, Alice Kodang, one of the graduands who had recently participated in literacy training, reminds some of the young children about the literacy class that they had missed recently. An adult literacy, teacher-training class had been conducted at Madang Open University campus in November 2006, and, with the support of Gildipasi, the eight young women who attended this class, established literacy schools at Tokain 1, Dibor, Simbukanam and Imbap. Alice is about twenty-two years of age. After finishing high school, she was trained locally through the Tokain learning centre to run literacy classes for young children up to the age of twelve. But she is frustrated, wanting to move further in her studies and training skills. She is keen to become a primary school teacher, but rising expenses and a lack of security for young women in the cities like Port Moresby and Lae, where such training is available, present too high a cost and risk. So, Alice awaits anyone who comes in from the outside—eager to absorb and learn anything new, anything useful that she can pass on to her young learners.

Several community development courses and skills training programs are regularly run in the area; many of them stimulated though discussions at the Gildipasi meetings and assisted through the community’s partnership with the Bismarck Ramu Group NGO. Before the first research project visit in 2006, the community had just completed a week-long awareness workshop on the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), run by the Bismarck Ramu Group. There are also workshops on health issues, food values and cooking. Training sessions and workshops have given participants skills in utilizing existing knowledge to enable small income-generating activities. There is also a strong presence of traditional arts in the community, and a keen interest to pass on traditional knowledge to the younger generation. This includes crafts such as *bilum* making, painting and basket weaving; but also the use of building materials such as rafters, totem poles (pillars) and boats.

Some of the women in the community discussed the need for more classes and skills-training in a wide range of topics and areas. They mentioned cooking and sewing, but also leadership, book-keeping, report writing, awareness on the rights of women and children, combating violence against women, environmental issues and basic literacy. Women also expressed a desire to build more confidence to participate actively in community-development activities, including decision-making processes. The fact that one of the Gildipasi women was the elected Treasurer of the organization demonstrated the space that was available for women to be involved, and the women are slowly building the courage and capacity to take on
leadership positions in the community.

Learning and education—formal, nonformal, customary and modern—will continue to be a vital part of the Gildipasi struggle, providing the community with tools to better negotiate their place in a changing world. In the words of the Chairperson of Gildipasi,

What will we do? How will we move forward? These are our constant questions. We have good land, good working knowledge—and we are co-ordinated. We have managed to stop the main logging company, and are alert to the subsidiary companies that they form to trick us. Many of our people have been led astray by the presence of money when the logging started. We have lost many, especially our older men to drugs and alcohol. No more! We are alert!

**Endnotes**