

Yalu Village and Surrounds, Morobe Province

Is it possible to negotiate the future by going back to the past?

Opening Story

It is early afternoon at Yalu. The village is thick with discussion about recovering from the government what the people of Yalu see as nearly 359 acres of their customary land. One of the community leaders, Bing Sawanga was at the helm of these negotiations as a representative of both the Aliwang Land Trust Committee and the Land Mobilization Committee. Buno Storm, an elder, comes out of one of the larger bush-houses to greet us. Women busy themselves getting ready a meal. A hen scuttles past with one of the women in pursuit. ‘Your dinner’, Buno Storm said, laughing loudly. As questions deepen around community responses to sustainability issues, Kolam Storm and Nawasi Bonnie, brother and youngest son of Buno Storm respectively, pick up the draft *Community Sustainability report* and turn to the draft write-up of Yalu. They both pore over it – and every so often they talk between themselves.

Almost an hour passes – and meanwhile, more people have started turning up at this end of the village. Many are women, and they sit around, talking to each other, and sometimes with us. As we exchange stories of where we are from and of the different worlds we inhabit, Deckie Maino, leader of the local women’s group and the village expert in making bread in local-made ovens, becomes reflective and asks us how we possibly thought we could understand what is happening in Yalu through such a short stay. It is hard to see how sharing food and talking might contribute to government policy supporting village sustainability. We explain why we had come back with the draft report and, in so doing, were also learning more about the village. The other women nodded, and Deckie Maino laughed: ‘At least you come back, and ask us. We have to give you that. We must give you our famous chicken stew’. There were loud responses that the stew was already on the fire.

As the food was eaten and then dishes cleared, the people gathered around. There were now about thirty people, and many settled back, chewing betel

nut and looking towards Kolam Storm to begin. Earlier, we had asked if there was a particular story of their village and area that they wanted us to write as an entry into the profile of the place. There had been much discussion and it seemed as if they had reached a consensus.

Long, long time ago in the time of our ancestors, one tribe-line lived in the mountains on top of the Yalu River. They called themselves the Ngalunuf. One day they went to see another family. The village was called Ngalugosol. They had a *sing-sing*; a sing-sing without drums; all sing-sing with *chuwen*.

Buno Storm explained that when his ancestors heard the singing they were surprised as the people from Ngalugosol did not use a *kundu* (traditional drum). Instead they were using something very different – a *chuwen* – a kind of a split drum made from black palm.

One day, the young men of Ngalunuf decided that they wanted to try the singing that they had heard the time when they went to Ngalugosol. Yet this time the people of Ngalunuf wanted to try these songs using the *kundu* drums. The young men waited until all the adults left the village to go and attend to their gardens. Whilst everyone had gone the young men started singing-dancing what they had heard and seen from the Ngalugosol. A beautiful sound was created which echoed throughout the surrounding area. Suddenly, realizing their singing and drumming could be heard, the young men stopped singing. The older men and women, returning from the gardens, asked these young men who was singing the beautiful songs in the village. The young men replied that they did not know who was singing.

These episodes continued many times, until one day the older men of Ngalunuf got tired and, wanting to find out who was singing, told an old lady to stay behind and hide in the house when all the men and women went to the garden. All the young men, thinking that every one had gone to the garden like many times before, gathered together and began to sing. Little did they know that the old lady was watching them. In the late afternoon when all the men and women returned from their gardens, the old lady told the villagers of what she had seen. She said that she saw all the young men singing and that they have all this time been hiding the truth. Once the men and women of Ngalunuf discovered that the young men of Ngalunuf were responsible for the singing, they became very angry.

Nawasi Bonnie, the young man, then continued the story.

The young men of Ngalunuf discussed what to do about the situation. They decided that next when all the men went to the garden, the young men would get the married women and have their way with them. When the men came back from the garden that afternoon the women told them of what had happened that day whilst they were at the garden and how

the young men assaulted them. The male elders of the village all met that night to discuss what punishment the young men deserved for the crime they had committed against the married women of the village. They decided that the young men should be banished from the village to go and live some place far away. The elders of the village called out for the young men to come and see them, telling them that because of the trouble they had committed the young men were to leave the village forever and be banished far away from the village and find their own settling place. They heard their fate and left as requested and made a new home away from the village.

The young men stayed at their new home, yet the problem was that they had no women so that they could create a new population for their new village. Then one day one of the young men went looking in the surrounding bush lands when he came across a bushman [magic man] called Mumulafa who held the ability to create black magic. Mumulafa was sitting up a tree with his powerful poison bag [a special *bilum* or string bag containing certain powers] hanging on a branch below. The young man quickly took the poison bag and ran as fast as he could all the way back to his village. When he arrived at the village he informed the other young men of what had happened and told them to be ready to fight in case Mumulafa came back to retrieve his poison bag.

The young men waited on guard till it was night-time and the bushman arrived to be captured on arrival by the young men. Mumulafa pleaded not to be killed and in return for his poison bag would grant the young men what they needed in their survival. The bush man gave the young men many powers that they needed including the ability to create a productive garden, the ability to find animals easily whilst hunting and also most importantly the ability to find women so as the tribe could grow and prosper. Mumulafa took back his poison bag as agreed and was about to leave when one of the young men shot Mumulafa with a bow and arrow and killed him. The other young men in anger got up and killed the young man that killed Mumulafa. After the remaining young men used the magic that Mumulafa gave to them to get women, using this magic the young men were able to marry the girls and thus creating the population for the new tribe. This village/clan till this day is called Ngaluwasuw [Mulamura].

Buno continued:

Our story tells of old ways and new beginnings – and also of old rules and new rules. But we are all linked, and we have to decide what rules to use and what stories to keep. This story was chosen by us to tell of our ways and of the ways we have to live with ourselves and with our new beginnings and endings. Even young people need rules. They have to make good rules themselves too.

The next day Nablu Sngat and Ezikiel Wallys, also of Yalu village surrounds, gave us two written pieces of paper. ‘We have written out the story for you again in pidgin, and this will help you to remember.’ The story recounted above is a combination of what we heard at the gathering at Yalu and what was retold with consistency in those two pieces of paper. The story is an indirect telling of an ongoing process of social negotiation—including negotiation as basic as that involved in the setting up of clans. As in many of the stories we heard, there is an acute recognition of change and the need to do something in the face of old and new complexities.

Place—Past and Present

Yalu is located about seventeen kilometres out of the centre of Lae along the Lae-Madang and Highlands highway between the airport and the town. It is in the Wampar Local Level Government, Huon District in Morobe Province. Yalu is made up of eight small community settlements ranging in population from nineteen to 957 people. These settlements, much like the story that Buno Storm and others unfolded to us, arose out of different circumstances and reasons. Yalu village remains the central point, primarily because of its size and also that it comprises of members of the two most prominent clans—the Timkim clan and the Konzorong clan. The settlements, drawing from NSO 2,000 National Population Census report



Researcher Yaso Nadarajah, right, with community leaders at Yalu Village

include Yalu (957 people, 160 households); Ambuasutz (218 people, 33 households); Langalanga (311 people, 62 households), Anund (19 people, 3 households), Yalu Bridge (184 people, 29 households); Parapi (326 people, 54 households); Yalu Plantation (191 people, 42 households) and Junglik Plantation (403 people, 76 households). In total, Yalu and its surrounds consist of approximately 2,609 people and 460 households. These settlements encompass the area where the Aliwang language has become the main mode of communication. (According to one community member said that 'Aliwang' is a word from the past – it means the shield 'Ali' made of wood and which was sometimes used as a base to sleep upon. 'Wang' means to be on top, and this means to be ready to defend your people.) The customary boundaries, now being negotiated, extend from the ninth mile to the Nawaii Mountain boundary, back of West Taraka down to the Markham River.

Yalu now has an estimated total population of 1,500. It is occupied by both the local Aliwang people and settlers from other parts of Morobe such as the Waingg and Kabwum people, as well as people from other parts of the country. Yalu has a large land area beginning at Nine Mile to Markham Bridge, over the mountains to West Taraka, Bumayong and Igam Army Barracks and ending at Muya Primary School along the Highlands highway. Because of this large unused land area, most of it is occupied by settlers especially from Nine Mile all the way to Yalu along both sides of the highway. Land-owners have until the recent past 'sold' their land to new settlers. The Aliwang people belong to thirteen main clan groups. To list them is to give an impression of deep history, but they are also part of what we saw in the opening story is continuously in process – the Ngalugosol (Timkim, the main clan), Konzolong, Ngalukumbun, Chupeng, Alivis, Ngalumbas, Ngalunuf, Ngalutumb, Ngaluwasuw, Mimin, Siwon, Zam and Waril. Apart from the Aliwang language, Yalu people also speak the Yabem language which is one of the two common languages spoken throughout the province along with Kote.

Organization and Governance

People live in family groups and clans. One household, for example, comprises the elderly parents, their children, in-laws and grandchildren. Some grown-up children have their own houses built next to their parents' homes. Young boys and unmarried men live in *haus bois* which are usually in a central location close to the families. Girls and young women live with their parents in the family homes. Results from the Community Sustainability Questionnaire indicated that 59 per cent of Yalu respondents identified 'neighbourhood or place that you live' as their main source of community, as opposed to 28 per cent overall across Papua New Guinea. Overall, respondents were much more likely to select 'more than one of these' when given a list of possible sources of community (42 per cent), suggesting that in Yalu and surrounds, there is perhaps a stronger

identification with place as the locus of community than a particular group of persons. Almost all Yalu respondents (96 per cent) were either satisfied or very satisfied with feeling part of the community, much higher than the overall PNG figure 80 per cent.

In our second visit to Yalu, it was apparent that there was a great deal of community development activity. Ezkiel Wallys, co-ordinator of the women's group affiliated with Soroptimist Lae, an international NGO, provided a sheet of paper listing the number of activities and groups that are currently active in Yalu and the surrounds. These include six youth groups, Giamsao Women's Group, Aring Women's Group (affiliated with Soroptimist Lae), Aliwang Land Trust (affiliated with Ahi Land Mobilisation), Law and Order Committees (twenty young men helping law and order committees as task officers)¹, small enterprises (Aliwang Holdings and Mopong Binis Group), Aliwang Cocoa Growers Association, twenty-one cocoa fermentaries², with more in the pipeline, and a locally managed water control group, that collects K1.00 per month for basic maintenance costs. The national Department of Health has also introduced and launched the 'Healthy Island' concept to improve healthy living by building 'VIP' ventilated pit toilets in the community.

The community members who came around to meet with us were ready to talk and discuss local issues and also about how they were responding to these issues. As was common with other communities, the rise in local crimes and youth-related issues and violence was their main concern. Some of the women felt that there were now many more efforts to build more training programs and activities – and currently the community was building a big training centre on land that had been donated by the Timkam clan leader. There appeared to be a strong relationship with the local authorities and also that was evident in the number of programs and training activities that members of the community were able to attend or participate in as trainers.

Livelihood and Provision

The majority of the people in Yalu are subsistence gardeners. They grow their own food, some look after chicken and pigs and some grow cocoa and betel nut as cash crops. Some of the food they consume themselves and the surplus ones they sell at the main market in Lae. Some of the people rear chicken and pigs for local consumption and a few have trade stores in the village. Some of local people raise chickens and are contracted by the Niugini Table Birds, which has a huge factory a few kilometres down the highway. A contract with Niugini means building a chicken house, and rearing the chicken provided by the company. It is an attractive contract, as the feed is also supplied as is everything else that is required in the rearing of these chickens. The income helps the family to buy other food and also pay for expenses such as school fees and medicine.

Many of the Yalu people earn their income through the sale of garden food

at the market in Lae. In the survey conducted, when asked about the main way of making a living, 74 per cent said that they work within the household (compared to 57 per cent overall), 12 per cent sell goods at market or on the street (compared to 23 per cent overall); 9 per cent receive a wage from the state (compared to 7 per cent overall) and 3 per cent receive a wage from private business (on par with the overall average). Seventy per cent said the main place they got their food was from work done on their own lands or by fishing (compared to 78 per cent overall), 21 per cent selected 'local shops' and 3 per cent selected 'food markets'.

Food is expensive, however, and when these costs are combined with the costs of school fees, medicines and other staples, the result is the community is experiencing the squeeze of modern consumer life. At the same time the survey indicated that only 25 per cent of respondents considered their household to be struggling financially, compared with 57 per cent average across all locales. Seventy per cent of respondents said they were comfortable, much higher than the overall 35 per cent, and 5 per cent said they were well off, compared to 8 per cent across other locales. The proximity of Yalu to Lae, and also their location immediately off the highway, meant that there were better opportunities for travel to other places for jobs or seeking supporting sources of income. But it remained that the community as a whole is becoming more and more dependent on a cash-income, and the cash-economy was supplanting former reciprocity-based systems of exchange and barter. Young people were keen to experience life in the city, and there has been a slow increase of numbers of young men and women seeking employment in Lae and also other places further away from Lae.

Learning and Education

Local knowledge and special skills are passed down from fathers to sons and from mothers to daughters. For example, local knowledge in making a garden and planting certain local vegetables is passed down within the family. Special skills like black magic and sorcery are also passed down through specific and selected individuals who are within the family group. Some of the persons interviewed indicated that respect for elders and traditional knowledge of doing certain things and activities seems to be waning and many of the elderly people said that the young people in the community are not interested to learn or know about traditional things. They say young people have lost the respect and value of traditional customs. Western values have influenced the way they behave and traditional values are slowly diminishing. They said traditional values should be preserved within the community. Nevertheless it is obvious that rituals and stories have not lost their place in community life. The retelling of an ancient legend (as the storytellers called it) recorded above, and the way it was related in its relevance to contemporary times is a good indication of the use of stories to negotiate change. It was also significant that the story was finished by a

younger member of the community.

When asked what kinds of training or learning would be considered particularly helpful the following responses came up: agriculture 73 per cent (compared to 53 per cent overall); technology 16 per cent (compared to 18 per cent overall); family-life 16 per cent (compared to 37 per cent overall), management 22 per cent (compared to 27 per cent overall); literacy 16 per cent (compared to 19 per cent overall); income-generation 18 per cent (compared to 35 per cent overall) and traditional ways of doing things 16 per cent (compared to 33 per cent overall). Tertiary education as highest level of education completed (at 9 per cent) was on par with the overall figure across the country, whilst primary school was 46 per cent, just slightly higher than the overall figure of 42 per cent. Secondary-level education was much lower at 28 per cent, compared to the overall at 33 per cent, while trade training was higher at 17 per cent than the overall average of 13 per cent. There were no tertiary level qualified compared to the 3 per cent overall.

There appears to be some NGO groups that are funding a couple of small training activities. One such activity is the building of a learning building, focusing primarily on training skills for women. This activity is coordinated by the Timkam clan, one of the two largest clans in the Yalu community area. The site for this centre is on Timkan land. In October 2007, during a site visit by the research team, it was apparent that the basic structural foundations were in place. A couple of capable and strong community leaders are playing a critical part in organizing funding opportunities and addressing community needs. Yalu has two trained teachers ready to teach adult-literacy classes as soon as the building is ready. There also a male member who has attended a week-long course in leadership management in Lae. The course was run by a representative from the Department for Community Development. The women in Yalu seem particularly active in building networks and partnerships with local government and organisations. It was evident that there were also a lot of negotiations and activities in dealing with the issue of land ownership and reclaiming customary land.

Endnotes

¹ Interestingly, though, 39 per cent of respondents from Yalu were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their feeling of safety, compared to 12 per cent overall. It is possible that these task forces are new activities to respond to the feelings of insecurity in the area and amongst the communities. The first visit and survey was conducted in early 2006 and the second visit was in mid-2007.

² In 1950, approximately 150 fermentaries that had existed were closed down by colonial authorities. In 1978, the village decided to rebuild, and currently there are 21 small ones functioning.