



The Pacific Islands and Antarctica

CULTURE

Returning to the Rain Forest

The daughter of American missionaries, Edie Bakker grew up in Wagu, Papua New Guinea, a remote village deep in the Hunstein rain forest. Eleven years after leaving Papua New Guinea, a threat to the people of the village brought Bakker back to her childhood home.

The Sepik River meanders [wanders] through the vast wetlands of northwestern Papua New Guinea. . . . We watched from our motorized dugout [canoe] for a chink [small opening] in the towering grasses that marks a seasonally flooded channel—a *baret*—leading to the Bahinemo village of Wagu. . . .

As we beached on the rough, pebbled shore of Wagu village, people rushed toward us hugging, clinging, laughing and crying. . . . There is no Bahinemo word for “hello,” and only an extended absence requires a greeting: “You’re here,” they said. “I’m here,” I replied.

What brought me back to Wagu was a crisis—the Hunstein is on the verge of being logged. Some of the world’s last major rain forests are in Papua New Guinea. . . . and the thought of such destruction in the Hunstein was intolerable.

The Papua New Guinea government has left land-use questions with local owners. But I worried that foreign logging companies would not tell the Bahinemos the truth about what logging would do to their forest, still crucial to their livelihood and culture. And did the isolated Bahinemos understand what their treasure means to the world? . . .

A woman named Moyali Yalfei, about 45 years old and the widow of the head of the largest landholding clan, told me she thought she *had* to agree to logging. “The [government] forestry department said they wanted it, so I’ll have to give it to them, won’t I?”

It’s not naive [ignorant] of her to think that. A Bahinemo thinks of wealth in terms of personal alliances, not profits. While Westerners base business decisions around profit and expect to cultivate [make] some friends in the process, Bahinemos aim for friendships and hope to earn some money in the process. Some 15 clans control various-size holdings in the Hunstein, and it is an honor to give permission for other people to use your land.

Compounding [adding to] the confusion of Moyali and other Bahinemos is the overwhelming modern need for cash. As it is, the Bahinemos must struggle for years to obtain an outboard motor, clothes, cassette players, . . . and if they want to send their children away to high school, they must save hundreds of dollars for tuition and board. “Trees are our only real source of income,” Moyali said. . . .

With fresh ideas and the best of intentions, . . . conservation groups such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Sepik, and the East Sepik Council of Women have been trying to help the Bahinemos find alternatives to mass logging that will bring the development so desperately desired. They also want local owners to be paid more for their lumber. “Currently, they’ll make \$40 for an average tree, which would sell for \$2,750 on the international market,” said American conservationist Glen Barry. “That’s ridiculous. . . .”

As an alternative to clear-cutting [cutting down every tree in an area] they [also] are promoting portable sawmills. Local people can then selectively harvest trees and rotate the mills through the forest to allow regrowth. There is no need to cut a wide road and no damage from heavy machinery. . . . Moyali, for one, has not been impressed: “It looks like the forest is still being ruined, only less money for us.” Logging companies—who promise to “replant every tree”—would give her clan a larger . . . payment for clearing the land “only one time.” . . .

The stability of the rain forest makes it difficult for the Bahinemos to envision the consequences of logging. Their physical world has not taught them to think in terms of cause and effect. If the Hunstein is destroyed, Bahinemo culture will die also. Not just their outer culture—what they eat, what they wear—but . . . their inner culture. Who they are as a people, how they approach life, will lose its sustaining environment.

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. Why did the author return to Papua New Guinea?

2. Why did the Bahinemo decide to allow logging in their forest?

3. Explain why you think the author agrees or disagrees with the decision.

Activity

Prepare a speech to make at a Bahinemo tribal council. Take the role of a Bahinemo, a government official, a conservationist, or a logging company representative and recommend what the Bahinemo should do about logging the Hunstein forest.