

(A report prepared for the Provincial Secretary, West New Britain
Provincial Government, Kimbe).

by Jill Grant (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design,
Halifax, Canada)

Martin Zelenietz (Anthropology Department, UPNG)

Influence in the Kilenge Area of West New Britain Province

by Jill Grant (Nova Scotia College of Art
and Design, Halifax, CANADA)

and

Martin Zelenietz (Anthropology, UPNG)

1. Background.

The Kilenge people occupy three coastal villages on the north west tip of New Britain, some 30 kilometers west of Cape Gloucester in the Kilenge-Lollo census division. Acting upon the request of the provincial government, during our recent return to the Kilenge area (from November 1981 through January 1982)¹ we observed relations between the Catholic Mission (established in Kilenge in 1929) and the Provincial Government. We found that the state of affairs left much to be desired. While some of the differences and problems resulted from individual personalities and disputes, and hence are too sensitive to discuss in detail, others reflected dilemmas which village people face in attempting to cope with political, economic and social change in modern Papua New Guinea.

This report outlines some of the features of village-Mission-Provincial Government relations as seen from the perspective of the village. In the final section we provide some suggestions for the Provincial Government to consider in its efforts to improve relations in order that it might better effect its aims for social and economic development of the Province, in the interest of all of the people.

2. Relations between the Provincial Government and the Catholic Mission in Kilenge.

It soon became obvious to us that disdain or even open hostility featured significantly in relations between the Province and the Mission: we walked straight into a dispute between the parish priest and the village's elected representative in Kimbe. The substance of the dispute is irrelevant here; however, villagers' reaction to it demonstrated the importance which minor issues can assume. Villagers rallied to the defence of the parish priest, even against a man whom they had elected to represent them in the Provincial Assembly. The motives which prompted support for the "Mission" rather than the "Government" in this personal dispute are too complex to cover in this brief report. But the effect of the dispute was to widen the rift between the Mission and the Province, both in the perception of Mission personnel, and in the minds of villagers.

1. Our earlier research in Kilenge covered the period of March 1977 to January 1978.

Mission staff are concerned about both the services and the policies of the Provincial Government. For example,

- i. Health supplies. As is unfortunately the case with many health centres in Papua New Guinea, the Kilenge Sub-district Health Centre is frequently short of supplies and equipment. Charity from abroad helps to fill the gap, but deficiencies still cause complaints and crises.
- ii. Water supply project. Recently the Mission organized the installation of a reticulated water supply for the Kilenge villages; the project was completed in November 1981. Of the approximately K31,000 required to construct the system, K1000 was provided by the Department of Health in Kimbe. No further support came from the Provincial Government. In contrast, the National Government provided K1500. Both the villagers and the Mission staff resent the lack of support shown for the project by the Provincial authorities.
- iii. Airagilpua. Rumours abound about a Provincial proposal to develop a massive cocoa project at Airagilpua in the Lolo area. Mission staff fear that the project will not benefit the land owners, and they also worry that the planners of the development will not safeguard other interests of people in the area.

Our observations lead us to conclude that the Mission staff feel that in some ways they are in an adversarial position with the Provincial Government. Both the Mission and the Province aim to help the people improve their lives, but their methods for doing so may differ. Also, it is obvious, their ability to influence the actions of villagers differs substantively: the Mission is present in the village and can affect daily activities; the Province has the power of regulation and legislation which enforces compliance on pain of fine or imprisonment. Mission perceptions hold that staff endeavour to assist people in the course of their daily lives only to find their efforts are often frustrated by bureaucracies which can't deliver goods, which constantly enact new regulations, and which promise 'assistance' but not funds.

3. Relations between the Catholic Mission and the Kilenge People.

The perception of an adversarial situation, which characterizes Mission-Government relations, also is a feature of interaction between the people and the Mission, although to a lesser extent. Everyone would agree that the role of the Mission is to help people, both spiritually and physically; they would disagree, however, about the nature of the help to be provided. Mission staff want to encourage a measure of self-help in the villages. The tradition of self-help, "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps", has a long history in European culture, and is highly valued. But villagers

see the role of the Mission slightly differently. In the early days of the Mission, they say, no one had to pay for schooling or health care; now there are fees for everything. Yet, they believe, the role of the Mission should be to help people, not to take away what little money they have. Not everyone understands that the Mission no longer completely controls the school and the hospital. Thus the Mission may sometimes be blamed for policies which are Government's. At the same time (as the next section indicates), the Government is thought to be neglecting services that it should provide.

4. Relations between the Provincial Government and the Kilenge People.

Between any people and their Government, there often exists a degree of animosity: the people believe that Government exploits them for its own purposes; Government members feel that people fail to appreciate what is done for them. There is an element of truth in both perceptions, no doubt. Even so, poor relations are problematic and can often limit Government effectiveness in planning and implementing sound development policies.

In Kilenge, a slight hostility toward the Provincial Government is the result of several factors.

- i. Various fees charged by "the Government" for health services, elementary and high school tuition, and for licences for tradestores or other businesses are very onerous for village people with limited incomes. Regardless as to who may actually require the fee, all levels of Government tend to share in the blame levied.
- ii. While we were in Kilenge, a problem arose over the Tavur, a workboat commissioned to operate out of Cape Gloucester to Kimbe. Ownership and control of the vessel was unclear. At one time the Gloucester Local Government Council claimed the boat belonged to "the people" through the Kilobaka Corporation it set up; hence each village contributed a share towards what was assumed to be the purchase price. It later turned out, however, that the Provincial Government owned the boat. Although the LGC was deemed the principal culprit in this "swindle" (as villagers saw it), the Provincial Government also suffered the loss of some support.
- iii. In part, villagers' hostility towards the Provincial Government reflects personal differences between individual residents and their political representative in Kimbe. Disputes over land and compensation for land have a momentum of their own, and although particular cases may be resolved, the process of conflict and realigning consensus carries on. Some current debates focus on the provincial representative in part because he is not present in the village to defend himself against his critics. Long absences on the part of politicians only serve to estrange them from their constituency.

At any rate, the Kilenge have a history of dissatisfaction with the leadership which they themselves select (see Zelenietz 1980), and thus it appears that the relatively new position of provincial representative is being treated much as are other leadership positions: set a man up as your leader or representative, then begin to complain about and undercut his effectiveness.

5. Comments and Suggestions.

It is a truism to say that Government efficiency and its ability to implement its policies and services are severely impeded if it lacks the cooperation of the people it serves. Hence Governments must endeavour to improve communications and relations with village people. This is especially critical in areas like West New Britain Province where rural communities are effectively isolated from their Government, and where villagers are suffering from economic problems which they may tend to blame on their own Governments (since they don't fully understand the machinations of the global economy of which they are now a part).

Before self-government and independence, life seemed relatively settled and predictable for villagers (except during the Second World War). The Mission ran free schools and hospitals, and people could find easy access to cash by making copra or migrating for wage employment. But now all that has changed. People must pay for Government-provided services. The price of copra is so low as to make its production highly inefficient. Wage labour opportunities are readily available only to skilled workers (see Grant and Zelenietz 1980). People seriously question what benefits independence was supposed to have brought them. They feel alienated from the political process and at the mercy of the economic system. The promised development has not arrived (see Grant 1980, Chapter 4).

It is in light of this perspective that we must examine the influence of the Mission in the village. The effect of Provincial policies and services on this influence has been minimal.

The Mission has a long history in the village, and, it seems reasonable to say, its influence is largely a product of its individual personnel. The Kilenge are "good" Catholics, but they are not overly devout. They retain many traditional beliefs and customs, and the Mission has not tried to undermine those values. Each parish priest who comes to Kilenge has to earn his influence through his own activities; the current priest has reaped a bountiful harvest of loyalty through his monumental efforts to improve village sanitation with a good water supply.

Mission staff may not in all cases be citizens of Papua New Guinea, but in many instances they have a long history of residence with village people.

as spokesmen for the people, they can often give voice to concerns which might otherwise not be heard. When Governments envisage particular developments for rural areas, it might behoove them to solicit comments not only from provincial members for the area, but also from Mission staff and other knowledgeable residents such as teachers and didimen. Thereby some problems may be forestalled and modifications undertaken to ensure that development may be socially, economically and environmentally sound.

6. Final note: development strategies to suit rural West New Britain.

Although large timber projects and estate cash crop developments may be feasible for some areas of the Province, many rural residents need to find new development projects which can offer them home-based income-earning opportunities. The environmental and social disruption of large scale projects is not desirable in all locations; rather, villagers may better be served by development strategies which complement traditional economic adaptations.

Two such strategies come immediately to mind:²

- i. Market gardening. If villagers were to devote a few extra hours a week to gardening they could produce a surplus for sale at market.
- ii. Betel nut production. Greater production of betel nut, a high value to labour input crop, could significantly increase income to rural producers.

The Province could have a significant role to play in both these strategies.

- a. It could improve marketing opportunities and organization. A marketing cooperative or some similar organization could help producers with transporting, grading and selling their produce. Similarly, a Betel Marketing Board could assist the production and distribution of betel nut and pepper leaves.
- b. It could press national government agencies, such as the Department of Primary Industry, to undertake greater research into improving production of garden vegetables and betel nut. Pathetically little information is available to local producers who want to improve their productivity.
- c. It could offer some financial assistance to local groups which want to develop such rural-based enterprises. For example, inland

2. These strategies are discussed in greater detail in Grant and Zelenietz 1982, a report delivered to the Provincial Government already (see References).