

Chapter 10

Relocation to connected places

I heard news of a raid on East Awin by PNG riot police while waiting at the Kiunga harbour for a connection between motorised canoe travelling on the Fly River and a truck travelling inland to the refugee settlement. Some men who had acted as principal interlocutors in my research had been beaten in the raid. The news deeply disturbed me. I had been away from East Awin for six months, and the raid had occurred three months earlier in December 1998. It was reportedly carried out because of a riot at East Awin, but according to many refugees the riot had been fabricated. The resident policeman had trashed his own station at East Awin to justify a raid on the northerner camp of Waraston. It was rumoured that some West Papuan refugees manufactured weapons and cultivated marijuana to sell to Papua New Guinean thugs known locally as *raskols*. Funds raised were then supposedly used to support activities of the OPM. During the raid, many young men were arrested and detained in the prison in Kiunga. There they slept on flattened cardboard boxes in damp concrete cells, and were required to supply their own food. Providing food was not a simple matter, for their gardens were located at East Awin. The journey between Kiunga and East Awin was not scheduled, and depending on the weather, could take 12 hours or several days. The cost of a tractor or truck and motorised canoe was set at about 35 kina for a return journey. When I heard news of the raid at the harbour that day, the men from East Awin had already been detained without trial in Kiunga jail for three months.

At East Awin, the police had trashed and looted several kiosks owned by refugees and incinerated two houses. Women hid with young children in the Immanuel Church, and buried household items in the rainforest, fearing that their houses would be burned down. Young men were the target of the operation and they sought cover in the forest on the margins of the settlement. One of the houses burned had been built by a nurse called Fabian and his wife Katrine in time for the arrival of their third child. During the raid, Fabian attempted to mediate an armed conflict between the riot police and refugees at Waraston camp. The deliberate burning of Fabian's house as retribution was the subject of everyday conversation at East Awin in the following months. A house was said to contain a family's spirit. To have one's house burned or destroyed was to leave behind part of one's spirit. Commenting on the destruction of his son-in-law Fabian's house, Leonardo explained that a house was built on the sweat of its owner: 'According to [Leonardo's north coast] custom, my house mirrors myself, my body. I do not burn my own skin. This house has been built by my own sweat

that has been shed.’ The analogy ‘my house is like myself’ was also pragmatic, for to be without shelter and without tools and cooking implements was to be destitute. The destruction of Fabian and Katrine’s house relativised the experience of displacement at East Awin. The community were confronted with another dimension of displacement, of losing their houses and belongings in a place of ‘refuge’.

Northerners read the police raid, referred to colloquially as the ‘December incident’, in terms of a foreboding future. The December incident illustrated their vulnerability as permissive residents. Their reading was not without foundation—even the US Refugee Committee commented that: ‘UNHCR no longer considers persons with permissive residency ... to be refugees’, because the status ‘is a durable solution which grants recipients similar rights and responsibilities to those of PNG nationals’.¹ Some northerners explained the December incident in terms of allegory. Their treatment by police members during the raid was congruous with a previous experience in 1988, when their church had been burned to the ground to force their relocation to East Awin.²

From 1984, all northerners had lived together at Blackwater camp near Vanimo. After a factional split occurred, a group of about 200 northerners left Blackwater and established a camp at Pasi Beach, to the east of Vanimo. The PNG government wanted to relocate all northerner West Papuans living proximate to the border to East Awin. Blackwater camp residents were suspected of collusion with OPM fighters in several incidents. In 1988, an OPM raid was carried out on an Indonesian transmigration camp at Arso, south west of Vanimo, and hostages were taken and released. Subsequently, about 200 Indonesian soldiers crossed the international border into PNG to raid a camp that was said to contain those involved in the Arso raid.³ It was also claimed that 90 West Papuans had deserted Blackwater camp along with an OPM leader to resume guerrilla activity in the border area.⁴ Commentators suggested that the Indonesian government had pressed the PNG government to close Blackwater camp, claiming that refugee involvement in the attack contravened the terms of the International Border Agreement.⁵

Refugees at Blackwater appealed to the UNHCR not to be resettled at East Awin. A petition with 300 signatures was sent to the UN, the PNG government, and international NGOs. The petition protested relocation to East Awin on several grounds. At Blackwater, refugees had established houses, productive gardens and good relations with the local landholders. They claimed that a large-scale camp would render them vulnerable to aerial bombardment, and there would be difficulty integrating refugees of different ethnicity.⁶ Refugees from Blackwater were eventually relocated to East Awin in 1988, but the northerners at Pasi beach resisted being moved.

From East Awin, Pasi beach refugees recalled their former beachside camp as utopic. At night they had been able to trace car headlights winding slowly around the headland to the capital Jayapura. The headlights guided them mnemonically to the place from which they had fled, allowing a kind of panopticon. They could see their homes in the distance from a position of darkened cover. The familiar coastal environment allowed prosperity. They practised commercial fishing, even purchasing outboard motors to assist their catch. Women baked cakes and breads to sell in the Vanimo market. They played basketball and soccer with the locals, and attended each other's church services. In Appadurian terms they had 'produced locality' among their group and with the landholders, and they had no desire to relocate to East Awin. Unlike refugees' perception of the Awin landholders, northerners viewed their relation with the landholder Ninggra in terms of mutual exchange.

A UNHCR briefing document stated that: 'refugees who refused to move to East Awin in 1988 were forced by the [PNG] Government in December 1989 to move to East Awin camp using the new provisions under the amended Migration Act'.⁷ The act of forcing northerner refugee relocation to East Awin involved the burning of their Immanuel Protestant Church. According to the witnessing congregation, this was carried out by police under PNG government order. The incident occurred during an operation which saw government officials mobilise and transport the Immanuel congregation by aeroplane from their beachside settlement near Vanimo to the inland UNHCR settlement at East Awin. Relocation of the Immanuel congregation was the last in a series of exercises to resettle West Papuan refugees from informal border camps to a single site at East Awin. The rationale of relocation centred around improved service provision, enhanced food security and prospects for self-sufficiency, and segregation of refugees from the local population and military activity in the border region.⁸

The burning of the church was recounted by several northerners. It is represented textually below as a compilation narrative, drawn mainly from the account of a senior congregation member who witnessed the burning of the church. Further details have been inserted from narratives of the same event recounted by three other congregation members:

Between September and December 1989 we were watched by police. The police prohibited us associating with people outside of our camp. They coaxed the older Ninggra people [landholders] to evict us from the land they had given us. The Ninggra people then ordered us to build a canoe to carry 200 people. Ninggra people only know how to build small canoes called *kole-kole*. Whereas we are renowned for building large ocean outriggers. We built two canoes for them. One named Morning Star, the other Wintimbas II. We understood the canoe to be a sort of guarantee for us on Ninggra land. Around this time Bernard Narakobi advised the

Ninggra that West Papuan people were a blessing but if neglected would leave this place and take with them their blessing.⁹ In December the police brought dogs. They were afraid we would resist. We already knew their plan. We had said to them: 'We are not thieves, why are you forcing us to leave?' The women had prepared fried fish and small cakes. Upon the police arrival we invited them to eat. The aroma was enticing. They could not force us to leave after that. The following day we prepared food again. Then the sea became rough and we could not catch fish. Instead, we gave a cuscus skin to the Police Commander, a Hagen man. We captured that cuscus in the tree that we felled for our church's foundation pillar. So, he commanded his unit not to use dogs or weapons or wear uniforms. For two weeks there was no action. Some police were Seventh Day Adventists. They opposed the command to burn our houses, and retreated from duty. They had observed us gathering to pray each morning and feared for their own salvation if they harmed us. Finally in December, the church was lit. We were sitting inside the church praying at the time. The police turned up their vehicle radios to drown out our prayers. A congregation leader scooped soil from around the base of the foundation pillar and holding it skywards pronounced: 'We have been evicted with violence. You must act upon this injustice.' We abandoned the church. We did not wish to see it burn. Upon reaching Vanimo we turned to see the smoke. Later a nun fetched two charred pieces to form a cross for the new church.

To understand the impact on the Immanuel congregation, we need to consider the meaning given to 'the church' by those West Papuans who represent themselves as culturally and authentically Christian.¹⁰ Among West Papuan Christian congregations, faith in God is integral to a discourse of *merdeka* or political independence. Faith in *merdeka* is inextricably tied to Christian faith: people conceive independence as a state that will be brought about by God's intervention. Refugees at East Awin often referred to the books of Genesis and Exodus to demonstrate the territorialised nature of nations. For example, it was claimed that the Bible legend of the flood in Genesis (10) substantiated a Muyu legend of Creation about the territorialisation of nations: in the beginning all people evolved from the island of New Guinea, but when the flood came only Papuans could stay on Papuan land, and other races were carried away to other islands. The book of Exodus was paraphrased as a motif about 'people's yearning to return to or re-possess their place: every human being yearns for their land of birth.' Plainly the emphasis here is on nativism—an almost primordial attachment to a geographical place of origin.

West Papuan theologian and anthropologist Benny Giay has described the church as an emancipatory institution: a pillar or buffer in the journey of the West

Papuan nation, and a last bastion bringing new hope to a people faced with a rigid state order.¹¹ Giay says that West Papuan people hear the Bible according to what they want to hear, and the church both absorbs peoples' aspirations for freedom and is itself a source of inspiration based on a perception that God supports liberation. The Bible allows congregations to imagine a world free of trickery and sorcery, intimidation and trauma. It offers a window onto another world identified by some as a liberated West Papua.

Significantly, West Papuan refugee congregations at East Awin built churches even before they had built their own houses. They gathered in these churches almost daily to read the Bible, sing gospel and pray together. In spite of the religiously inflected struggle for *merdeka*, some congregation members disapproved of the church used as a meeting place. Political meeting that inevitably produced quarrelling was categorised as profane activity. Where a place such as a church is designated sacred through the presence of certain objects like an altar or tabernacle, then actions that are considered to be profane in character are prohibited in that place.

In the process of building the Immanuel Church, congregation members participated in certain rituals to render sacred or en-spirit the building made by men. A ceremony was held at the time that the foundation post was planted. Bible readings were conducted, and congregation members buried money and gifts with the foundation post. These offerings were said to engage God's blessing of the church and congregation. At the time that the church was burned, retrieval of soil from the foundation post symbolically recalled this history of sacrifice. So too did the earlier gifting of the cuscus to the police commander, for its tree of origin was the church's foundation post.

Following the burning of the church and their forced relocation, the congregation built a new church at East Awin and named it Immanuel. In 1998, a tenth anniversary of the Immanuel Church at East Awin commemorated the desecration of the original church. A lay preacher—himself an Immanuel congregation member—explained that both Immanuel churches had been built before people had built their own houses. He read a Bible passage from Revelations (21:3) which had also been read at the time of the planting of the original Immanuel foundation post: 'And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, see, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.' The preacher recalled that the Immanuel congregation had built a place to worship God inspired by Jacob's revelation in Genesis. He recounted the dream in which Jacob received a revelation about salvation and God's presence in exile: 'Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you' (Genesis 28:20–22). The Immanuel congregation at East Awin read into Jacob's revelation

a kind of teleology of return to the geographical West Papuan homeland. Return to the homeland was destined, and tied to faith in God. And faith in God was most obviously demonstrated by the act of building a church before one's own home.

Photo 5. Decorated wall, entry area of house at Waraston camp, East Awin.



Photo: Diana Glazebrook.

The combination of church burning and forced relocation was interpreted by the Immanuel refugee congregation in terms of a discourse of suffering and liberation. The burning of the church had occurred in a place of apparent refuge. At the time, PNG had ratified the UN Refugee Convention and had recognised West Papuan asylum seekers as refugees (albeit with substantial reservations in relation to wage-earning, education, freedom of movement, expulsion and naturalisation).¹² The burning of the church was reportedly carried out by government officials, who, according to my interlocutors, ought to have acted as protectors in a place established as a refuge. Some refugees interpreted the circumstances of their relocation to East Awin as a covert effort by the PNG and Indonesian governments to break their spirit, compelling their repatriation back to Irian Jaya. At the time, it was viewed as the most recent in a litany of events of suffering endured by West Papuans in the homeland, and now in PNG. It acted to substantiate their sense of categorical injustice, and girded their faith in God to assist bringing about West Papuan freedom imagined as *merdeka*. It also deepened refugee distrust in the aspirations of the PNG government, for such a deliberate act of desecration was thought to have been orchestrated by Indonesia.

More than any other event occurring in the period of exile, including the burning of the Immanuel Church, the December incident was cathartic. Northerners had previously given much significance to the idea of East Awin as a united West Papuan refugee enclave attracting international attention. During the raid, northerners were the targets of police interrogation and punishment, while the rest of the population—according to northerners—were ‘ambivalent’ onlookers. The raid effected a very disillusioned nadir in northerners, altering their resolve to endure exile at East Awin. Some planned to leave East Awin and relocate to a coastal environment that resembled their own place. The new status of permissive residency while affecting UNHCR-derived forms of material support, also allowed them to leave East Awin.

Some northerners planned to use the permissive residency laws imposed on them to dwell more comfortably, allowing them to sustain what they see as their political exile. Permissive residency allows relocation elsewhere in PNG and temporary return to the homeland. Each adult has been issued with an identification form and passport photo known as a permission letter. Among West Papuan refugees, permissive residency identification papers were conceived as ‘passports’ allowing return to the homeland to visit their relatives and family. It was claimed that the papers identified them as provisional PNG citizens, as inter-national subjects. Displayed in the Indonesian Province of Papua, permissive residency status is deemed protective, while in PNG it is perceived as discriminatory. People mentioned plans to return to their parents’ or sibling’s home for a particular occasion like Christmas or Easter, before returning again to PNG. Such a return journey is embraced by Casey’s explanations of ‘homecoming’ as a journey that may involve a return trip back to one’s contemporary home.¹³ At a physical distance the homeland may be recalled as an ‘unproblematic geographic location’ which is familiar.¹⁴ Yet a return trip may bring disillusion, and events that have occurred since October 2001 in the renewed campaign to crush independence may have inflected the homeland with terror once more.

The prospect of leaving East Awin to relocate to a coastal environment was an ecstatic one for northerners. But most could not afford the plane ticket out of Kiunga to get to the coast and the mountainous route cannot be traversed otherwise. In theory at least, the conditions of permissive residency enable relocation to an environment that can sustain people’s livelihoods. While the inland, isolated East Awin site was considered to be a place characterised by deprivation, the north coast—also a place of refuge inside PNG—was remembered by northerners in almost idyllic terms. The setting sun at East Awin invoked a coastal landscape for Luther: ‘When the sun sets here, I am reminded of watching the setting of the sun there. I remember the trees radiant in its glow, and fish playing on the water’s surface. I remember my place with deep sorrow.’ This

familiar coastal environment was the most recent memory and experience of a prosperous home, and the only memory for most school-aged children.

Those who have afforded to take advantage of relocation so far have done so in small groups, relocating with several kinsmen or people from the same region to places that are *connected* to the homeland. These connected places are serviced by transport such as minibus and boat, and public telephone facilities. Connected places enable real and virtual contact with the homeland village. Relocation to a connected place means that in spite of the border, social relations with kin and neighbours in homeland villages of origin can be resumed and sustained. The opportunity to resume or generate a new social space across borders resonates with an Appadurian notion of ‘translocality’,¹⁵ and Velayutham and Wise’s application of translocal to the village level offers particular insight.¹⁶ They show the social practices, responsibilities and obligations of a certain community outside the homeland to be exclusively oriented to the small-scale place from where the community originated. In the ‘translocal village’, two places across borders might come to be connected at the level of the everyday by ‘material, family, social, symbolic networks and exchanges’.

For 14 years the sheer isolation of East Awin effectively disconnected northerner and highlander refugees from their homeland villages and regions. In the relocation of small groups of kin or neighbours from East Awin to places elsewhere in PNG that are connected to the homeland, there is the opportunity for new social spaces to be generated—both in the new place of relocation and between this new place and the homeland village or region. Re-entry into material, family and social networks and exchanges, enabled by permissive residency, may serve to anchor people’s sociality in spite of their location outside the homeland.

ENDNOTES

¹ US Committee for Refugees, ‘Papua New Guinea: World Refugee Survey 2003 Country Report’, <http://www.refugees.org/world/countryrpt/easia_pacific/2003/papua_new_guinea.cfm>.

² Diana Glazebrook, ‘Desecration in a place of refuge’, *Cultural Studies Review*, 11, 1, 2005, pp.98–109.

³ Blaskett, p. 308.

⁴ Hastings, p. 228.

⁵ Preston, pp. 865–6.

⁶ *West Papuan Observer*, 9, 3, 1984, pp. 7–8.

⁷ United Nations High Commission for Refugees, ‘Additional background information on the [East Awin] project’, Canberra, 1993.

⁸ Preston, p. 231.

⁹ A former member of parliament, Narakobi is a renowned human rights lawyer and outspoken advocate of the legal rights of West Papuan refugees.

¹⁰ J. Barker, ‘Mission station and village: cultural practice and representations in Maisin society’, in J. Barker (ed.), *Christianity in Oceania: ethnographic perspectives*.

¹¹ Giay, pp. 59–63.

¹² When signing these instruments, the PNG government stipulated that ‘in accordance with article 42, paragraph 1 of the Convention makes a reservation with respect to the provision contained in articles

17 (1) [wage-earning employment], 21 [Housing], 22 (1) [Public Education], 26 [Freedom of Movement], 31 [Refugees unlawfully in the country of refuge], 32 [Expulsion] and 34 [Naturalisation], of the Convention and does not accept the obligations stipulated in these articles' (<http://untreaty.un.org>).

¹³ Casey, *Getting back into place*, p. 291.

¹⁴ Gow, pp. 4–5.

¹⁵ Appadurai, p. 192.

¹⁶ Selvaraj Velayutham and Amanda Wise, 'Moral economies of a translocal village: obligation and shame among South Indian Transnational Migrants', *Global Networks*, 3, 1, 2005, pp. 27–47.