Two keys to attracting the Baliem people

Dorus Rumbiak

There are two keys that can be used to captivate the hearts of the Dani people of the Baliem Valley. The first is to approach them through their elders or community leaders, and the second, through their children. Over nearly 25 years working as a civil servant in the Baliem Valley, I have rarely seen people of Wamena berating or beating their children, no matter how naughty they behave. They never even so much as lay a hand on their children.

The importance accorded to children makes it not uncommon for a husband to beat his wife because she cannot get pregnant. As a result of this, husbands are allowed to marry numerous times for the sake of having children. In Dani families, husbands are allowed to remarry. In fact it is sometimes the wife herself who asks her husband to remarry, to add a wife! His wife is looking for a woman to serve as a wife for her husband, so she can get help with the heavy work, such as feeding the pigs, as her husband gets wealthier. There are Dani men who have had as many as 40 wives, like the great tribal chieftan, Harireak, and some, like Okumnyare, who have married up to 33 times.

In light of all this, I used Dani children as a way to engage the community here to cooperate. I interacted with their children. Many of them I adopted as foster children. One of my former foster children became a bupati (district head, regent), and many others became civil servants. I took them under my wing, fostered them, and even married them off. That was the key I used.

This approach appealed to them. And the foster care was not merely foster care, but had to be true fostering; I regarded them as my own children. When I was in Wamena, they received me as a father. So, if we did not understand their situation or had not worked long in their place, we had to educate the local people in such a way that they could serve as
keys for us to enter their worlds. So, everywhere I went I took on children to foster. I just picked from among the young ones, the little ones, then let them go to school and covered their food, clothing, and so on.

When I was first placed in Wamena as a civil servant, my main task was to maintain security across the area in places where tribal warfare occurred. So wherever tribes were at war, I was there. Basically I would go pretty much everywhere. But I had to learn their ways of resolving the problems that led them to engage in ongoing warfare. Usually, people said that tribal wars happened because of murders, problems over women, or people stealing pigs.

But we had to find out the basics of the relationship between women and pigs. I learned why the pig was so important in Dani society. Indeed in Dani marriages, pigs constituted the main property. Pigs were extremely important throughout the mountainous areas. As far as I know, human life and society here revolved around pigs. Yet, on the other hand, I also saw that the people who kept pigs were people who lived in permanent settlements, unlike the nomadic people who lived in the Mamberamo area. So I knew that they lived settled lives. And this meant that they were bound by patterns that governed their lives in that particular place.

I then looked for them, to meet them. I did not address them as tribal chiefs or clan leaders (orang kaya) because they said: ‘Address us as “bapak” (father). That’s right. We won’t call you “sir”, we’ll call you “son”.’ I felt these were harmonious relationships, and they were what I used. My success in drawing the community closer astonished Controleur Gonsalvez, my superior in Wamena. ‘Ah, Pak Rumbiak can go anywhere,’ said Mr. Gonsalvez, ‘he travels with only two policemen but he feels no fear!’ I was free to go and meet with the people because I used that approach.

SCHOOL IN A REFUGEE SETTLEMENT

I originally came from Biak, but during World War II we were evacuated to Pasi island in Padaido-Atas. And it was on the island that I attended primary school. Then the government opened a Jongens Vervolgschool (JVVS, follow-up school for boys) in Korido. In 1950 all the children who graduated from the third grade in primary school took exams to get into