

## ENET

“In my opinion a gallery is supposed to act like a cathedral, to lift the spirits of the people.”  
(Colin Madigan, Architect of the National Gallery of Australia 1992)

The village was flowering; high waters brought many fish. It was also much easier to hunt wild pigs. Sago palms and trees for building houses, that were now able to float on the water, were transported to the vicinity of the village. I felt as being at home and experienced the freedom of *ming* or *pisin* (in Karawari and Tok Pisin languages: a bird). Then, I noticed her look. I could not resist and was drawn closer to her. “Hallo I am Yapisay I want that flower you have in your basket.” I used my village name bestowed upon me a couple of days ago. “Ok! I want a betel nut for that.” I was quite sure that I understood her correctly though I knew only a few words in her vernacular. She, of course, did not speak mine. For a substantial part of our ‘discussion’ we used mimic, gestures, looks and flowers. We sat down on the grass that had recently been cut. I took my pen and started to draw *wakin* (in Karawari language: a snake) on an empty page in my notebook. Her eyes were following my acts from the beginning till the last dot. Then our eyes met in the middle of an invisible path. She responded by giving me a new flower. From that moment on we met every day and played with different flowers. She became my friend from a silent island that belongs to Karawari speaking Ambonwari people from the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea.

One day I decided to visit my ‘sister’ Alexia, Enet’s mother, and ask her about the lives of women. Because her house was on the other end of the village I had to walk through the whole place. The village is quite big. Census has shown that there are 624 members of this community 63 of whom are absent, working mainly in Lae, but also in Vanimo and Madang. Of those living in the village the women (112) slightly outnumber the men (91). The majority, however, are children (358). I was greeting those who stayed and worked at home. I was perceived as a woman from another world, who I indeed was, and this kind of seeing somehow pleased me as it did to the villagers. When I stopped and sat down in the shade of a so-called wind house, those present touched my hair, earrings, and hands. They were continually asking me many questions. They were laughing all the time telling each other in their language something, which I did not understand. Nevertheless I felt very good. The surrounding forest appeared to me as a gallery filled with amazing atmosphere of invisible wild creatures. It is indescribable by words what kind of harmony such an environment creates. We began to exchange our necklaces and bracelets, smoking *kanakan yaki* (tobacco leaves rolled in a newspaper), and trying to communicate in Tok Pisin. I loved to listen to women’s stories about their lives and the life of the village. Their patience while explaining their everyday practices, such as, for instance, fishing or their production of

baskets and mats, was admirable and my responding to their questions created a wonderful time together.

When you walk through the village you cross the tree trunks over small creeks, that signify the borders between the clans. When I noticed wonderful flowers on trees and vines I thought about that silent child with magic eyes. I entered the garden and there in a wind house was sitting Alexia. "Yapisay, Yapisay, Enet woke me up today and pointed on *wakin* that you drew for her. She wanted to come to visit you, but you came earlier, that is good. Sit down and look, I am making this basket for you." Enet was standing behind her mother, and in her very 'naughty' appearance looked for a betel nut that she expected from me. Even that she did not say anything, her eyes were telling me a lot. My hand immediately slipped into the pocket and I gave betel nuts to all the children that were sitting around. After a short silence Alexia said: "Hey, Yapisay, one day when you will have a lot of money, you will come and take Desmond with you to your country to study. Or you will help us to pay his school fee, will you? You know Desmond, my first born son." I was thinking for a while what she said. In the context of Ambonwari social organization, which I was studying before, I suddenly realized the importance of their way of perceiving and understanding male – female positions in a community and relationships with men. Especially that the first born son is the one who is suppose to inherit everything, and together with the last born son, stays in the house and looks after their parents. Then the role of woman's brothers who are very important because they are mother's brothers of her children or as Ambonwari say: they are male 'mothers'. I replied to her: "Yes, I know Desmond, but what will happen to Enet? She has to study too." Alexia: "But there is no money for girls. Desmond ...". Yapisay: "Yes I can imagine difficulties with money. I do not think that girls and their education are not important." Silence ... "You know how much such school fees cost?" Alexia asked and then told me about the prices for different grades. I tried to explain my position and to speak about women's lives in my country, but I stopped after a while. I realized how much this cultural and cognitive prism influenced me. Our discussion continued in the way of helping each other with understanding our different worlds. She said that the girls marry away from a family ward, that they are supposed to stay in their husband's home, take care of children, and cook the food. She concluded that education for them is not so important. Men on the other hand had to provide money and different important goods. Alexia herself finished sixth grade in a neighbouring primary school and her parents did not have money for her to continue. She went on waving the basket and telling her stories about fishing and times when a whole family went to a bush camp where they spent weeks away from the pressures of the village.

And then, suddenly, a white flower appeared on my lap. "Enet, what's up?" and I immediately threw it back to her. In a second Enet reciprocated. The flower was back on my lap. She hid

herself behind her mother. There were only her huge eyes watching me from Alexia's back. Both of them were laughing and I became more and more fond of this child.

“Children learn early in their lives the dangers of their environment. Their parents may use fear as a vehicle to quieten their children: when they ask for food when there is none; when they ask to be carried on their parent's shoulders but are expected to walk; when they run around, excited and, screaming, a parent may say: “The snake will bite you now” or “the strangers are coming ... Children are not afraid of ‘dangerous creatures’ because they had a bad experience in the past but because they are ‘not at home’ with them. They hear stories about them in which these beings are either very powerful or evil. However, a short time after being scared children see that there is no real threat, forget their fear and continue to run through the bush without thinking of poisonous snakes, strangers, or spirits” (Telban in press).

### **Island from the canoe**

One day we decided to take a canoe and paddle around Ambonwari Island. The waters were high, sun was shining, and Enet, her sister Glenis and me, were looking forward to explore new short cuts through the flooded rainforest. Alexia's husband Samson moved to the front of their canoe while Alexia sat at the back. Thinking of gender relations in Ambonwari I noticed that even the paddles that the men use are different from those used by the women. The middle of a canoe is reserved for children, including me. We filled our canoe with sugar cane, bananas and a large amount of betel nuts and we departed on a trip.

Every small thing, a paper or a nail, has its own place in this world and it is used for something. Nothing is thrown away. All small presents that I gave to Enet were either given to others or were used by her. Giving means receiving and receiving means love.

It was more than one week before I was about to leave the village, when people began to count down my days on their fingers. They said to me all the time how worried they were about me, about my presence and my existence, leaving their life world. Mutual feeling was extremely strong. Ambonwari wanted me to stay with them and at that moment I was not able to tell them that they should not worry, because I felt the same.

Our canoe moved towards the lakes. Many people were fishing that day. Samson talked about everyone's happiness when the water is so high. He smoked a long cigarette of local tobacco rolled in a newspaper while gently paddling our canoe. He told me that during the dry season the creek was almost without water, so that paddling became impossible. However, children were catching the spiders that were continually jumping in our canoe. We

slowly moved through the forest and my picture of the world as a gallery was fully satisfied. We stopped at one place, checked a net for fish and moved forward. I experienced a momentum of a magic reality! And I thought about life in the West, about time that determines restless dimensions of our existence. Why do people in Europe always rush and never relax. My imagination was pushing me into stopping all obligations and staying in this dream of 'innocence' forever. On the other hand I felt that it might be better, or maybe worse, or simply different to return back to my familiar neighbourhood in Ambonwari again. At that moment Enet jumped on me and showed me a small animal, a grass horse that she caught. She asked for a betel nut and observed me while I was taking pictures. Sometimes she bit me when she felt that I was losing my attention. Alexia's voice was echoing from a far "She is sad, because you are leaving soon. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday ...". Again she began to count the days before my departure. We found a small fish inside the net. It was our dinner.

On the last day Enet brought me a small basket with food. Alexia was silent and she almost cried. "Do you know what she asked me in the morning? Why did you come when you are leaving so soon?" I was shocked. I suddenly realized that Enet was right. We developed very intimate relationship. And all relationships carry with them pleasures and obligations. It is not my intention to moralise or to repeat over used phrases that we all know about. Nevertheless I have to mention the fact that life in Europe is losing its grip – in terms of personal relations – in comparison to the one I experienced in the village. I am not talking about the richness of this environment and the consciousness that people have about it, but about humanity in general.

I believe that the island of one's dreams does not have to be surrounded by turquoise water, corals and sharks. I realized it could be hidden in a swamp, mud, with plenty of mosquitoes around. Ambonwari gallery that I discovered changed my life. I daydream about Ambonwari when I walk through the streets of a city. For all above mentioned thoughts, reasons and feelings about my Ambonwari friends I want to dedicate this words to my little friend Enet (Yapai) from Casowarry (Awa) Clan; little today, but not 'tomorrow.'

### **Visualisation of experience**

Visualisation of my experience was the strongest motivation for my work in my aspiration to become a visual anthropologist. I was observing people's ways of behaving, speaking, working, and creating. And I appreciated their looks. It is very hard for me to use words in describing their life world and I do believe that photographs may contribute towards better comprehension of what I am writing about. The children were usually spontaneous but often shy and embarrassed. I noticed magnificent strength in their eyes. We did not speak much. The look was often enough for us to laugh. They were always ready to work and help

their parents and relatives. For me they were very smart and had surprising ideas. Of course, whenever an accident occurred or they felt neglected, their cry was very strong and very long. From my own photographic point of view one sees differently after a few weeks or months living in one place. This is even stronger in a community with intense social relationships. One is able to discover more in a particular personality, because of the look, movement, expressions. Your shots become smoother, caught in everydayness of their life world and focused on details of their existence. The access to a person moves towards real time and space. Your cultural borders are broken; your relationships become very intimate. It takes time to experience the great moments with your friends in any small-scale community. It takes time before one becomes almost an insider able to reflect upon his or her own existence as well as upon the life world of his or her hosts.

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