

Exploring the role of traditional culture in promoting sustainable development in Sinsibai, Western Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine cultural changes within the Sinsibai community. A qualitative research approach was employed, using in-depth semi-structured interviews to gather the views of community members. Both focus group and one-on-one interviews were conducted, and purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used. Data were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that the traditional culture of the people in Sinsibai, located in the Western Highlands Province, has experienced significant changes. While many positive cultural practices have been preserved, some traditions that were no longer beneficial to the community have been discarded. Notably, the introduction of Christianity and education has led to the cessation of tribal fighting in the village, contributing to over 70 years of peace. This has created opportunities for business, education, and agricultural development. A key strength of Sinsibai is its strong community leadership, with most conflicts being resolved by community leaders rather than relying on the police. However, despite the positive cultural changes, challenges remain in the community, particularly with the consumption of marijuana and alcohol by a small number of individuals.

Keywords: Culture, Christianity, traditional culture, Sinsibai

Introduction

Culture is a dynamic system of values comprised of learned elements such as assumptions, conventions, beliefs, and rules (Spencer-Oatey,2012; White,1959). These elements enable group members to interact with one another, engage with the world, communicate effectively, and express their creative potential (Spencer-Oatey,2012; White,1959). It encompasses various facets of life, including clothing, child-rearing practices, dietary habits, marriage traditions, political systems, religious beliefs, and death-related rituals (Spencer-Oatey,2012; White,1959). The strength of the Western Highlands Province (WHP) people lies in its land and the rich cultural values that have been passed down through generations. These cultural traditions help strengthen communities and families. Additionally, WHP has fertile land that is highly suitable for agriculture (Kitan, 2013).

Sinsibai village is located within the Mt. Giluwe Rural Local Level Government (LLG) of the Tambul-Nebilyer District in the Western Highlands Province (Gibbs et al., 2022). Situated approximately 30 kilometres southwest of Mt. Hagen, the village is accessible via a 50-minute drive. The community primarily relies on subsistence farming and small-scale commercial agriculture for their livelihood. Crops such as sweet potatoes are cultivated and transported to distant markets, generating modest incomes to meet basic needs like school fees, transportation, healthcare, and other essentials (Gibbs et al., 2022). The village is equipped with essential infrastructure, including a fully operational health centre and locally owned trucks that provide transport services to and from Mt. Hagen. Despite this, food

security is occasionally threatened by issues such as pests and frost. Educational institutions in the area include Sinsibai Primary School, Sinsibai Elementary School, and the recently established Upper-Nebilyer Secondary School. Most of the residents identify as Catholic, followed by members of the Seventh-day Adventist, Lutheran, and United churches, among others (Gibbs et al., 2022). This paper focuses on identifying the advantages of maintaining traditional culture while embracing post-change developments in the Sinisbai community.

Literature review

Importance of traditional culture

Culture is a dynamic system of learned values, encompassing assumptions, beliefs, and customs that shape the way of life for a specific ethnic group or community (Renteln, 2015; Spencer-Oatey, 2012; White, 1959). These beliefs and customs are important to maintain for future generations to know and understand culture (Greaves 1994; Spencer-Oatey, 2012). For instance, the future generation needs to know and understand the cultural practices, rituals, and languages. This helps communities to stay connected to their roots, fostering a strong sense of identity and contributing to a stable and cohesive societal fabric. This connection also enhances mental well-being and reinforces a sense of belonging (Greaves,1994; Spencer-Oatey, 2012).

In the Western Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea (PNG), traditional culture remains highly significant to the people. They continue to practice traditional customs such as paying bride price, gardening and resolving conflicts in the Melanesian way practices (Gibbs et al., 2022; McKenna et al., 2020). For example, if a conflict arises within the community, local leaders act as mediators to negotiate peace. Once both parties reach an agreement, harmony is restored. Despite the limited police presence, the community successfully maintains peace through these traditional practices (Gibbs et al., 2022; McKenna et al., 2020). In addition, one important aspect of everyday life in WHP is gardening which is practised by every person in the community. This is not a surprise that WHP is the birthplace of Agriculture as Kuk archeological site is found there and is more than 9000 years old (Ketan, 2013; Feil, 1987). In the past people lived as hunters and gathers but WHP were the first people to engage in agricultural activities by cultivating food crops and rearing pigs for protein and ceremonial activities (Feil, 1987). Pigs were important resources for the people of WHP. Pigs were used for bride price, traditional moka, feasts and other traditional activities (Feil, 1987; Watson 1977). In the province, pigs are widely raised by most families, though commercial piggeries are relatively rare. The current market rate for an average-sized pig is K1,000, while a fully grown boar can cost up to K3,000. While some pigs are sold annually to cover school fees, the majority are reserved for irregular events such as ceremonial exchanges, bride price payments, compensation settlements, election hospitality, and pig-centered ceremonies (Ketan, 2013).

Challenges of maintaining the traditional culture

Several influences change the attitude and behaviour of the people in the Western Highlands Province (Kitan, 2023). These changes include education, politics, improved government services such as roads, telecommunication services, electricity and health services and

Christianity (Gibbs et al., 2022; Kitan, 2023). For instance, village people have access to mobile phones. Some people use the phone and access the Internet for good purposes but others use it for accessing illicit materials. Moreover, some developments are positive and change the lives of people (Gibbs, et al. 2022). In the Western Highlands Province, there is less or no tribal fighting which is a positive change that brings development and helps people to live peacefully among themselves (Gibbs et al., 2022). Similarly, (Kitan, 2023) most Western Highlanders embrace development and go into business, agriculture and education (Kitan, 2023). Furthermore, Christian is seen as a positive change in the community. In the past, tribal fights were frequent in the Western Highlands Province but not now because of strong community leadership and Christianity (Gibbs et al., 2022).

Furthermore, in most highlands provinces, conflicts predominantly arise from competition over resources such as land, women, and pigs (Weiner, 2002). Conflict is viewed as an unavoidable aspect of life, with no overarching authority to enforce laws across tribes, regions, and cultural groups (Weiner, 2002). In this power vacuum, physical violence is considered an acceptable form of punishment, particularly for repeat offenders. Offending parties may include individuals, clans, or entire tribes (Weiner, 2002). In the Western Highlands Province (WHP), such issues are often resolved amicably by village leaders (Gibbs et al., 2022; McKenna et al., 2020). This was supported by Ketan (2013), in Melanesia, the classic PNG Highlands big-man model encapsulates the essential features of good governance and problem-solving. Big-man status was earned through competitive success in ceremonial exchanges, maintained by carefully cultivating social relationships, and lost if exchange partners and followers were neglected (Ketan, 2013).

Despite strong community leadership and ongoing developments, communities in WHP still face significant challenges. The first challenge is politics, particularly during Local Level Government (LLG) and National General Elections (Gibbs et al., 2022; McKenna et al., 2020). Elections in WHP are often marked by heightened tribal violence, although tensions typically subside once the elections conclude. The second challenge involves the consumption of marijuana and alcohol. Intoxication frequently disrupts local communities, leading to social disturbances. The third challenge is prostitution, which has been linked to the widespread use of mobile phones. This has resulted in a rise in teenage pregnancies, causing concern among parents and community leaders (Gibbs et al., 2022; McKenna et al., 2020).

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach, using in-depth semi-structured interviews to gather the views of the Sinisbai community in the Western Highlands Province on traditional culture and its associated changes. The study was conducted on March 17, 2022, as part of a group research project titled ‘Social perspectives of different age and gender groups in selected communities in Western Highlands, Jiwaka, and Madang Provinces, PNG’.

Although the broader project covered topics such as culture, youth, children, widows and orphans, social changes, and development, this paper specifically focused on modernization and cultural changes in the local community. The data used in this paper were derived from the researcher's individual interviews, as some of this information was not captured in the published group research findings. With support and permission from the team leader, the researcher utilized these additional data to write this paper.

The researcher conducted two focus group interviews and six one-on-one in-depth interviews. Prior to data collection, a written request was sent to the Headmaster of Sinisbai Primary School and the community leaders to obtain their permission to conduct the study. Upon receiving approval, participants were approached and invited to participate in the interviews. Only those who expressed interest and provided both written and verbal consent were interviewed.

The study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques, both of which are widely used in qualitative research (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The researcher intentionally selected participants deemed most valuable in answering the research questions. The interview data were recorded on a mobile phone, later downloaded to the researcher's computer, and transcribed.

The interviews were conducted in Pidgin, and the transcription and analysis were also performed in Pidgin. Data were analyzed thematically through the following steps: First, during data preparation, audio recordings were downloaded to the researcher's computer and carefully transcribed. Second, preliminary observations were noted. Third, initial coding, a detailed examination of the data was conducted to identify codes and develop categories with similar meanings, leading to summarized insights. Fourth, coding scheme development, initial categories were refined into a coding scheme, ensuring consistent feedback from participants was captured. Fifth, dataset application, the coding scheme was applied across the entire dataset to ensure comprehensive analysis. Finally, thematic mapping, a thematic map was created to illustrate the relationships between codes and themes based on shared categories (Roulston, 2001; Boyatzis, 1998). This systematic approach provided a clear framework for understanding the community's perspectives on modernization and cultural change.

Table 1: Profile of participants

No	Participant	Pseudonym	Number of participants	Gender	Age
1	Focus Group	Focus Group#1	10 plus participants	Male	35-60
2	Focus Group	Focus Group#2	8 participants	Male	35-50
3	P1	Participant#1	1	Male	45-55
4	P2	Participant#2	1	Male	45-55
5	P3	Participant#3	1	Male	45-55
6	P4	Participant#4	1	Male	55-65
7	P5	Participant#5	1	Male	35-50
8	P6	Participant#6	1	Female	35-40

Table 2: Coding of themes

No	Initial themes	Findings Coding themes
1	Influence of modernization on culture and traditions	Influence of Christianity on tradition and culture
2	Marginalization and exclusion	Collective decision making
3	Intergenerational conflict	Respect leaders and elders

Findings and discussion

Influence of Christianity on tradition and culture

All participants from both focus groups and individual interviews confirmed that their traditional culture has changed significantly over the years, with some aspects gradually fading away. Major traditional practices that are no longer observed include “tribal fighting, moka ceremonies, traditional feasts, the use of poison to kill enemies, and traditional singing or dances” (Participant #2). Participants highlighted that “Christianity and education” have had a profound influence on their community and personal lives (Participant #3). When asked about the impact of these changes, participants generally viewed them positively. One participant shared:

“We have accepted Christianity and converted ceremonial grounds into church buildings to proclaim the word of God. The tradition of poisoning people, especially enemies, has ceased and is no longer practised. It was a custom of our grandfathers but has changed due to the influence of Christianity and education” (Focus Group #2).

Participants further emphasized that Christianity has brought peace to their community. They noted the presence of 34 different church denominations in the area, which have collectively formed a Peace Steering Committee. This committee made up of pastors from various denominations, raises awareness about social issues such as drug use, alcoholism, tribal fighting, and other related concerns.

Additionally, participants acknowledged the role of strong community leadership in maintaining peace. They reported that the seven ward councils in the area have enjoyed over 70 years of peace, with no tribal conflicts. They expressed deep appreciation for Fr. William Ross, a pioneer missionary to the Western Highlands Province, who introduced Christianity to the region. One participant stated:

“We thank Fr. William Ross for bringing three important things to Sinisbai and the Western Highlands as a whole in 1934: The Catholic Church, health, and education. These three contributions have greatly helped our community, allowing us to live in peace” (Focus Group #2).

One of the participants further mentioned that an important cultural practice of the Sinsibai people, which is no longer observed today is the traditional pig-killing ceremony. This was shared by Participant 4: “Many of our traditional cultural practices have disappeared as our fathers passed away, taking these customs with them”. For example, they used to raise many

pigs and held special pig-killing ceremonies during specific times, such as when the leaves turned green, and crops like greens grew well in the garden. For such ceremonies, they prepared stones for a mumu (an underground oven for roasting pigs), gathered dry firewood, and readied greens, kaukaus (sweet potatoes), and bananas. The pigs were then slaughtered, and a large feast was organized, bringing together family and friends from far and wide. To distribute the pork, a big wooden table was prepared, and the meat was shared among brothers, sisters, uncles, aunties, and others. Unfortunately, this custom is no longer practised. “As our fathers passed away, these traditions were lost with them” Participant 4. He further mentioned that during these ceremonies, extended family members would gather, making it an excellent opportunity to strengthen relationships. However, with the decline of such traditions, we have lost this valuable way of maintaining contact with our extended families.

The study findings revealed that most participants attributed the peace and order in their community to the diligent work of churches. Through their preaching of the word of God and consistent promotion of peace and justice, churches have played a pivotal role in fostering harmony. This observation aligns with the literature (Ketan, 2013). The Western Highlands Province (WHP) benefits from strong community leadership, with most issues being resolved internally by the communities themselves. In many villages, there is no police presence, as law enforcement is typically stationed only in district centres or Mt. Hagen town. The peaceful environment in these communities is largely attributed to the influence of churches and their continuous efforts to preach the word of God. However, the disadvantage is that some good cultures are no longer practised today such as the traditional pig-killing ceremony which unites all the extended family members when they get together for the event.

Collective decision making

From the two focus groups and six individual participants, all respondents provided consistent answers when asked about how decisions that affect the community are made. It was emphasized that decisions are not made by one individual but are the result of collective agreement within the community. Participants explained that any matter involving the community, such as projects like building a school classroom or a church, is widely discussed, and decisions are made collectively rather than by village leaders or councillors alone. One participant stated:

“As a leader and councillor of the people, it’s hard for me to make decisions on my own. Yes, I am a councillor, but people in the community have different views and opinions. Hence, I gather input from the community to make a collective decision. It’s not a one-man decision but a collective one” (Participant #1).

Participants further explained that while individuals may independently make decisions regarding their families, community-wide decisions involve input from everyone. They highlighted that the decision-making process is inclusive, ensuring that no one is excluded. This process takes time—often weeks or even months—to reach a decision that benefits the entire community. A focus group member noted:

“We all discuss and come up with one decision because it’s not something for one person to decide. It’s a community matter, so we all contribute to the discussion and

agree on a decision” (Focus Group #2).

Additionally, participants stressed the importance of effective communication in the community. Leaders continuously share messages encouraging positive behaviour, such as attending church, working in the garden, and avoiding alcohol consumption, drug use, and prostitution (Participant #4). They also mentioned that raising awareness is an ongoing activity aimed at fostering good habits and preventing social issues.

Respect leaders and elders

The majority of participants expressed that youths in the village generally show respect for their leaders, elders, and parents. However, a small minority tend to disobey their leaders. One individual interview participant shared the following when asked about the relationship between older and younger generations:

“As leaders, when we talk to them (young people), they usually cooperate with us. Maybe 90% of the young people listen to the leaders, but about 10% misbehave and do not cooperate” (Participant #1).

Additionally, most participants, both in the focus groups and individual interviews, discussed disciplining children as a way to guide them toward becoming responsible and productive members of the community. They stated that when children are caught engaging in misconduct, such as stealing, fighting, or committing other crimes, they are disciplined by being beaten. Participants emphasized that this is considered a form of discipline, not child abuse. In the village, if an adult is found abusing a child without a valid reason, they are held accountable and may be required to pay compensation. However, one participant shared a differing perspective, informed by the training received from the Catholic Church. This individual advocated for non-violent approaches to discipline, such as talking to children and encouraging them to attend church. As one focus group participant noted:

“Some of us attended training provided by the Catholic Church, where we were taught that beating children is not the right way to discipline them. The proper way is to talk to them and correct their behaviour” (Focus Group #2).

Conclusion

The study aimed to identify cultural changes in the community that can be viewed as both positive and negative. The study found that there have been changes in the traditional culture of the people of Sinsibai in the Western Highlands Province. While the local people have preserved some positive cultural practices, they have also let go of those that are not beneficial to the community. For example, due to the influence of Christianity and education, tribal fighting no longer occurs in the village. The community has enjoyed over 70 years of peace, which has allowed people to engage in business, education, and agriculture. Most importantly, Sinsibai has strong community leadership, with most issues being resolved by community leaders rather than the police. However, one interesting cultural practice that is dying out is the traditional pig-killing ceremony. This is no longer practised, as young people are not rearing pigs, and organizing such a ceremony requires considerable time and effort. This ceremony was used to bring extended families together. Despite these positive changes,

challenges remain, such as the consumption of marijuana and alcohol by a few individuals in the community.

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