General Information

Source: NBC Today Show
Creator: Bryant Gumbel/Boyd Matson
Event Date: 03/27/1987
Air/Publish Date: 03/27/1987

Resource Type: Video News Report
Copyright: NBCUniversal Media, LLC.
Copyright Date: 1987
Clip Length 00:05:26

Description

Many of the people in Papua New Guinea have been living the same way for thousands of years. But as the modern world rapidly closes in, bringing new technologies, tourists, and economic changes, this primitive culture is being forced to adapt.

Keywords


Citation

MLA
Bryant Gumbel, anchoring:

It’s one of the great things about having two hours to play around with every morning is that we get to shuffle things around. All this week, Boyd Matson has been bringing us up to date on the most primitive place on earth, that being Papua New Guinea, but he’s been doing it at the 7:30 half hour. I figure we couldn’t let the series end without at least giving those of you who only join us for the second hour a glimpse of what we’ve seen there. We’ve seen a Stone Age culture making uneasy contact with the 20th century. This morning as Boyd wraps up that series as he takes us that last step into the capital city of Port Moresby. Good morning, Boyd.

Boyd Matson: Good morning, Bryant. There’s a common belief in Papua New Guinea among people that evil spirits are the cause of most bad things, that they can cause sickness or death. One of the doctors there told me that the national nurses that they come-- have come in and that they train them. The nurses have no trouble accepting the scientific theory of germs and how they can cause disease, but he says often those nurses will tell them they still believe enough in the old ways to think it’s evil spirits that cause the germs. That in essence, is the dilemma facing this island nation off the coast of Australia, how to merge a Stone Age culture with a world that’s thousands of years ahead in science and technology.

The Huli wigmen wearing ceremonial make up and doing the dances they have performed on special occasions for thousands of years. Only now it’s easier to buy the red face paint at the store than to make it from clay, and every day is a special occasion because tourists will pay to see the dancing.

George Morren (anthropologist): There’s no way to turn back the clock. Societies in New Guinea have been penetrated and that’s irreparable. Now, people have to learn how to live in the modern world or things will be worse for them.

Matson: A new age has already dawned in Papua New Guinea’s capital city Port Moresby. The people here have been fast-forwarded out of the Stone Age. Ancient tribes in transition. A clash of cultures, people trying to keep a sense of their identity in the face of a rapidly changing environment. Office
buildings crowd the horizon of Port Moresby. Cargo ships in the harbor unload the consumer wonders of modern technology. In the city, people’s appetites have been whetted for the amenities of the 20th century. Even in the bush, they know there is a different way of doing things. But is it a better way? Will the culture of the West destroy their traditional values?

PIAS WINGTI (Prime Minister of Papua, New Guinea): In Papua, New Guinea we just have to be in control of our own destiny again, and move at our own rate. Not to compete with the Americans or compete with the Australians, you know? This is a very different country.

MATSON: The country’s already moved too fast for some. Trying to make the leap across the centuries, they’ve landed in the cracks, living in shanty towns. There are not enough jobs in the cities and the crime rate is high. For others, there is confusion about how to bridge two cultures, as they try to keep one foot in the past, and one in the present.

Unidentified Man #1: Mostly I found the people around here wear mostly dressed in modern clothes and so I have to follow them and live in the way they live. Wash my clothes and keep them clean all the time.

MATSON: When you go back home, do you dress the same way?

Unidentified Man #1: If I want to go out, to big towns then I may be dressed like this. But back in the village I used to get changed and dress like my people.

MATSON: A people caught between conflicting demands, the pressure to adopt new ways and the pressure to not change at all, because of what tourists want to see and will pay to see.

Here on the Endunne River, there’s a new tribe this year. The Awan moved here a year ago. They discovered it was easier to make a living if they got closer to the white man. Now, if they put on their traditional ceremonies, they can collect the tourist dollar.

When this initiation ceremony for young boys was performed a few years ago, it ended with the boys being given decorative tattoos by cutting the skin on their backs, arms, and faces. Now it ends with the tourists getting in their boats and going home.

WINGTI: We must not encourage the type of tourists we are getting in Hawaii or Fiji where people’s cultures have been destroyed. I think more adventurous type of tourism is needed, you know. Coming to learn or coming to see people, learn the way of living, way of doing things and in this country we cannot offer the same facilities like in Hawaii or Fiji where you have nice beaches all over and you know? For those adventurous tourists who want to learn about our country, they are most welcome.

MATSON: Prime Minister Pias Wingti doesn’t want his countrymen dramatically altering their behavior to accommodate tourists, but money makes a strong argument for change. So now you find former head hunters posing for pictures. Despite advances, Papua New Guinea is just what the travel posters say it is, it’s just like every place you’ve never been. But they also have a slogan that warns, “Tomorrow it won’t be the same.”