

CHAPTER 43

Where Are the Bones In Their Noses?

Dorothy Ayers Counts & David R. Counts

This essay is based on a public lecture and was written specifically for this web site. It is not to be copied or cited without our written permission. Our thanks to Jay Sokolovsky for suggesting it and to Bob Park and Keith McGowan for technical help and, especially to Bob, for managing the West New Britain web page for us until we learned how and for both his help and his moral support. All photos are the property of Dorothy & David Counts.

*Two anthropologists who have recently completed a brief pilot study focused on retired people who live and travel in recreational vehicles are invited to appear on a Saturday evening TV show designed for senior citizens, *The Senior Report*. The show is produced by TVOntario, a provincial educational television station and the host is Bruce Rogers. Mr. Rogers greets his guests before the taping. After he welcomes them, a puzzled look crosses his face, and he asks: “You two are anthropologists who have done research in Papua New Guinea for over twenty years and now you’re beginning a study of RVers? Why would you want to do a thing like that? Why study them? Where are the bones in their noses?”*

For more than two decades we did anthropological research with and wrote about the people of Kandoka village in the Kaliai census subdivision of West New Britain, Papua New Guinea. For a map of Papua New Guinea on which you can locate West New Britain [Click here](#) . For a map and some basic information about West New Britain, [click here](#).

There has been little public interest in our Papua New Guinea research. Dorothy was invited in 1967 to be a guest on an afternoon television talk show in San Antonio, Texas, her home town. The interview was brief and the only question she can remember the host asking was “Where is *Old Guinea*?” In 1974 the “Radio International” program of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation broadcast an interview with us and did a reading of a Kaliai myth “Akro and Gagandewa”, and in 1993 we were consultants to Channel 9, the

PBS station in Seattle, Washington, on a documentary on death and dying. It was not until we did our first field work with full-time RVers - people whose home is their rig and who live on the road -- that the news media or the general public paid much attention to our research.

In contrast with our work in PNG, the public interest in our RV research has been intense. Since 1990 we have been on public and commercial radio and TV in the US and Canada. Newspapers have published interviews with us across Canada and the US. One interview done by a Reuters reporter was published on the CNN website for two weeks. The wire services have widely disseminated our interviews, leading to live on-air interviews with radio stations in Japan, England, and South Africa. Our research was the topic of two TV broadcasts, one a seven minute spot on commercial TV, the other a twenty-five minute documentary on a cable network. We have also done three media tours - two of them involving lectures at 29 American universities - sponsored by the Recreation Vehicle Industry Association.

Media interest in our RV research began shortly after we completed our pilot research on full-time RVers in 1990, when the editor of the *Gerontology Newsletter* at McMaster University in Hamilton, ON asked David to write a short article about our findings. The producer of TV Ontario's regular program dealing with issues about aging, *The Senior Report*, read it and invited us to appear on the show on April 12, 1992. This was when Bruce Rogers asked us the question quoted in the introduction to this essay. Although both may decorate themselves in strange ways on ceremonial occasions, neither RVers nor the Kaliai wear bones in their noses.



Images 35.01 and 35.02

Although both Kaliai villagers and RVers may decorate themselves in strange ways, *neither* wear bones in their noses!

The more we thought about Rogers' question the more fascinated we became by what he was *really* asking and by the assumptions underlying his question. It seems to us that Rogers assumed that the people of Papua New Guinea are so different from us, so exotic, that they are understandable only by specialists such as anthropologists. The "bones in their noses" is a metaphor for "the other. Elderly North American RVers, on the other hand, are all around us. Almost everyone knows one: they may be our parents or

grandparents, our widowed Aunt Ethel or Uncle Bill who has always been a character. What could possibly be exotic about them? What don't most North Americans understand about them? Where are the bones in *their* noses? This essay explores those questions, the assumptions underlying them, and what they mean for contemporary anthropology.

As we see it, one of the most important jobs of anthropologists is to make the "exotic" understandable to the people of their own culture: to answer the question reportedly posed by Evans Pritchard, "why would otherwise intelligent people *do* a thing like that?" The corollary to this is the responsibility of anthropologists to enable US, our own people to see that we, too, are exotic so that we may better understand why it is that we do the things we do.

I: DOING FIELDWORK IN TWO CULTURES

Kaliai, Papua New Guinea

In 1966, as doctoral students at Southern Illinois University, we did our first research in Kaliai on the north coast of West New Britain. We went into Kaliai with very little preparation or training to do anthropological research. Drs. Philip Dark and Adrian Gerbrands co-taught a one-term, non-credit course during which they emphasized some of the lessons of Malinowski - learn the language, remember culture is a whole, live with the people, and stay for a year - and taught us how to use a camera. Both Gerbrands and Dark were interested in primitive art and were excellent photographers; in addition Gerbrands was a cinematographer. We listened to some tapes of the news being read in *Tok Pisin*, the *lingua franca* that is now one of Papua New Guinea's official languages, and Dorothy despaired of ever being able to hear which of those sounds were even words. Dark also advised us (unsuccessfully) to leave our two children, Rebecca (age 7) and Bruce (age 4) behind as they would occupy too much of our time and hinder our research.

When we arrived in West New Britain in the late summer of 1966, children in tow, we were guests of the Darks for two weeks at their research site, the Kilenge-speaking village of Ongaia. There we began to learn to hear *Tok Pisin*, we took our first field notes, and Dorothy met the housekeeping sister from the Kaliai Roman Catholic mission who expressed shock and disapproval that we would take our little children to live with "those people" without a gun to protect them. As it turned out, the sister had spent no time in the villages and knew none of the people well, but her warning sat heavy on Dorothy's mind. We also met Tule, a Kilenge bigman, who informed us that we were planning to go to the wrong village. We should go to Kandoka, where he had kin and business associates. He would accompany us, introduce us to the villagers and make certain we were welcomed and well treated. It appals us now to remember that when we reached Kaliai nobody but the priest at the Kaliai mission knew we were coming; the household goods and Western-style food we had ordered in Lae had preceded us and were left in his safe-keeping. No one asked the people of Kandoka if they were willing to be our hosts; indeed, nobody - including Tule - seemed to think it was necessary even to inform them of our coming, much less ask their permission.



Image 35.03
Kandoka village from the sea

Much later, after we had begun to achieve human status in the minds of the people of Kandoka, some of our friends told us that for months they wondered what we *really* wanted and why we were *really* there. We did not want to convert them, recruit them for labor, or sell things to them - the only type of interaction with local people that the white people they had met were interested in. What, then, could be our purpose in planning to live with them? They also told us that for years some of them continued to suspect that we were really ancestors returned to visit them. None-the-less, they courteously welcomed us to their village and built a beautiful large house for us to live in for the year we planned to stay.



Image 35.04
Our house from across the Kaini River

Although almost all village houses have a space underneath where people sit to visit or work, our under-house space was particularly generous and was furnished with a large bench where visitors could gather to visit with us and each other. The Kandokans also offered us the only gun in the village if we wished to have custody of it, and began to teach us how to speak and how to behave.

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Anthropologists do a unique, schizophrenic, type of field work called participant-observation. It requires them to live with and like the people studied, to participate in daily activities as well as dramatic ones in order to learn how to see the world from other eyes but, at the same time, always to try and remain scientific and objective in doing observations. Anthropological field work is always a balancing act. We spent much of our time observing and asking questions, and the Kandokans were as interested in and curious about us as we were about them. They wanted to know where we had come from, what our homes looked like, what our families were like, how we could light a fire in the bottom of our kerosene refrigerator and get ice out of the top. When we told them that Dorothy's parents were distraught with worry about the safety of their only grandchildren, Kamilus Kolia - one of Kandoka's big men - recorded a tape telling them not to worry; he would take care of us and send us all safely home. In order for us to live safely in the village, to be under the protection of -- rather than at risk from -- the spirits of the ancestors, it was necessary for us to be properly introduced to them. So, when Kolia sponsored a ceremony in which children of his patriline were formally affiliated with their father's group, he led out our son Bruce to dance with the spirits. Although we did not realize it at the time, this was a clear signal that our presence had been accepted by the people of Kandoka.



Image 35.05
Bruce Age 4 Dancing with Kolia

We did research in Kandoka five times: in 1966-67, 1971, 1975-76, 1981, and 1985. During those years we also had two more children, David Riley born in 1969 and Stephen born in 1973. The presence of our children was, we think, critical in convincing the villagers that it was possible for them to educate us and integrate us into their society. The Kaliai are fond of and protective of children, and although we did not realize the full implications of their actions for years, in only a few days they had begun the process of incorporating Rebecca and Bruce - and us - into the community. Few days went by without somebody bringing a gift of food "for the children". Our lack of understanding resulted in the mistakes, and in our education in human behavior, that David discusses in his article "[TooManyBananas](#)"(1990)

Research with RVers

We did not become involved in research with RVers because we were ourselves RVers. Although we briefly owned a “pop-up” tent trailer, most of our camping for over thirty years was in a tent and/or with backpacks. For decades, the only thing we knew about RVers was that we were annoyed if a behemoth pulled in near us in a quiet campground and broke the stillness with its generator. Our favorite story about RVers was of a little girl who left her parents’ shiny Airstream trailer with its television set and colored lanterns to visit our campsite and say wistfully, “I wish *we* could have a campfire.”

In 1978 we first became aware of the possibility that large numbers of North American seniors might give up their homes, families, and communities and become rootless nomads living in their RVs. That summer eight of us went on a two-month camping trip in the U.S. southwest. We visited several national parks there, with an elderly couple in a motor home following us from one park to another. They would greet us and inquire where we intended to go next. They would be there when we arrived, find a campsite near ours, set up their chairs and watch as we, with our tents, sleeping bags and packs, spilled out of our two short-wheel-based Land Rovers and set up camp. Watching us was almost as much fun as watching a circus act, they said. They were full-time RVers. They actually *lived* in that motor home. They amazed us almost as much as we entertained them.

Our second meeting with serious RVers occurred in 1982. We had spent eight months of a year’s research leave living in Victoria, B.C. where we worked on a book on aging in the South Pacific. On June 1 we started home to Ontario, camping as we went. Canadian schools are still in session in early June, and so the forest campgrounds were nearly deserted. The other occupants were mostly friendly retired folks. We struck up an acquaintance with several of them as we shared a pot of coffee or an evening campfire. Some of them explained they had sold their homes and were living as nomads, traveling in their RVs. They said there were thousands of others like them out there on the road, and that they were having a wonderful time.

Bemused, we began to wonder whether there were really thousands of these folks, or if we had just run into a few eccentrics? Why would they leave behind family, friends, their family doctor and maybe, even, their honest mechanic. How would they cope with *two* sets of problems: the problems associated with aging *and* the problems of being nomadic. Why would anybody do a thing like that? Trying to find the answers to those questions might, we thought, be an interesting research project -- someday. We labeled a file “Airstream Nomads”, dropped in some newspaper clippings and a sheet of paper containing those questions, and put it in our filing cabinet under “possible research projects”. Then we returned to our New Guinea research.

In 1990, twelve years after our first chance meeting with full-timers, we each had six months’ research leave. Because of the unstable situation in Papua New Guinea, we were uncomfortable about returning there. For the first time since 1966 we were without a compelling research plan or a field site. So we dug out our “nomads” file and began a literature search to find out what other academics -- anthropologists, gerontologists, sociologists -- had written about elderly RVers. We found only brief mention of RVing as a retirement alternative and discovered that little research had been done on RVers as a group. The notable exception (we discovered much later) was a doctoral dissertation done

in 1941 by the sociologist Donald Cowgill. Cowgill's research was based on a combination of questionnaires and participant observation, but the other studies were primarily survey research. Anthropological-type research on modern RV retirement seemed possible. It seemed worthwhile to investigate further to see if there were enough people out there to study.

We applied for and received a small grant for a pilot project. When we began we had little but questions. We had - and still have - no demographic profile. We were not even sure where to *find* RVers, although we knew there were many retired people in the southern mainland of British Columbia. We went to Vancouver and arranged to rent an old travel trailer for two and a half months. Then we pulled it to a nearby KOA park and started knocking on doors to find out where people went and when they left. The typical response was, "Well, when it starts to rain and the furnace comes on at night, it's time to head south."

As in 1966 when we first went to Papua New Guinea, we had a field research project but little preparation and no idea where it was going to lead us. Also as in 1966, we were lacking not only in how the society worked, but in technical know-how: poling a dugout canoe and backing a trailer into a narrow space both require a lot of skill. In both situations, the only way to learn is to do it. So, once again, we started.

RVers are not New Guinea villagers. There are huge numbers of them -- perhaps millions -- while the largest of the five Kaliai villages only has a population of a few hundred. RVers do not share kinship, history, or long association with a place, and they are not sedentary. Travel, indeed, is the main reason RVers live as they do. Furthermore, we and they mostly share a language and a culture and they are at least familiar with the notion of academic research. Doing participant observation with RVers would be different from doing research with Kandokans. We were dedicated to the notion of living with and like the people we wanted to study and to participation in their daily activities. But first we had to find them. When it started raining, we headed for "the field"

Operating on the assumption that if we wanted to do participant observation field work with people who live to travel, we too must become travelers, we decided to go to the places where RVers told us they went. We also decided to sample as wide a variety of methods and styles of RV living as possible, and to learn about the various options as we went. Although we did not exhaust the possibilities, we did try to go those places people told us about most often.



Image 35.06
"Boondocking" in a casino parking lot – Laughlin, NV

Not knowing any better, in Laughlin, Nevada we paid to stay in a commercial RV park instead of staying free in one of the casino parking lots. When we later told RVing friends about that they hooted with laughter: “Hey, everybody, they *paid* to stay in Laughlin.”

Knowledgeable RVers are more likely to *boondock* (park without hookups, usually free or for a minimal fee) in casino parking lots, sometimes for months, while they attend low cost entertainment, enjoy inexpensive meals, and do some recreational gambling. We never made that mistake again

We next spent a week in the short term parking area at Quartzsite, Arizona. Quartzsite is a desert town on U.S. Interstate 10 and US 95 near the California border. During the summer its population is about 400 and, as one RVer told us, “It’s so hot there in the summertime that when a roadrunner pulls a worm out of the ground it has to use a potholder.” In the late fall and winter Quartzsite hosts the Main Event, billed as the world’s largest flea-market and gem show. In the winter of 1990 the population peaked at 1½ million, most of them RVers. Most RVers boondock in the desert on Long Term Visitor Area (LTVA) land administered by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.



Image 35.07
Quartzsite’s Main Event

Several RVers told us that our study would be incomplete if we missed Slab City, also known as “The Slabs,” an abandoned US military base near Niland, California, named for the concrete slabs that were the foundations of the temporary World War II buildings.



Images 35.08 and 35.09
Boondocking at the Slabs

Residents either park their rigs on the slabs or use them as a patio base. Some do both. While most of the residents of Slab City are seasonal, staying from November or December through early March, some live there permanently. Everyone lives there free. Our informants usually added that we would not want to spend more than *one* night there. To them Slab City was a spectacle to behold rather than a place to stay. We spent a week at the Slabs and were enthralled by the communities that had formed there in the absence of any external authority, dependent on the hospitality of the residents and their sense of independence. As one resident told us, "People think we're here because *it's* free. We're not. We're here because *we're* free."

II: UNDERSTANDING THE EXOTIC

How does an anthropologist make the familiar exotic and the exotic familiar? How can we achieve the epiphany that McPherson experienced? In order to understand - to see what is happening around us and make sense of it - we must first find the common threads linking the particular experiences and activities of people of different cultures. Second, we must realize the complexity that characterizes the seemingly ordinary activity of every-day life. For example, there are numerous and obvious differences between Kandokan villagers and full-time RVers. Their physical appearance, clothing, housing, work-places, and daily activities are dissimilar. Villagers are sedentary, while the organizing principle of the life of RVers is their desire to travel. In spite of their differences, they have similar problems to solve. The solutions they have found to their common problems - living in proximity to others, building communities that provide not only mutual support but mutual satisfaction - are strikingly alike. So how do they do it?

Community in Kandoka: Our Roots Are In the Land

Most Kandokans are born, or marry, into pre-existing communities where people share kinship, history, culture, and land-rights. Ordinarily, children and adults marrying into Kandoka do not have to *create* their community. It is already there, and their task is to find their place in it. Land and kinship are the roots of community in Kaliai. People live, garden, hunt and utilize the resources on land that has belonged to them and their ancestors for generations. Their shared history and legends tell the stories of first settlement, of relationships with the spirits who belong there, and of how early settlers either fought over the land or peacefully agreed to share it and legitimized their agreement by marriage and exchange. Their ancestors were buried there on the land and their spirits reside there still. Mount Andewa is the site of a village populated by the spirits of the ancestors of the present-day Kaliai, including the people of Kandoka.



Image 35.10
Mount Andewa

Creating Community in Kandoka: You Are What You Eat

A person's place in community is expressed in numerous ways, the most important being the idiom of kinship. Everyone who lives in the village must have kin ties to the other villagers. If these do not already exist, or are not established by marriage, then they must be created. For Kandokans, kinship is an expression of shared substance. One way they share substance is by sharing food.

Substance sharing between parent and child begins while the child is in the womb. A father establishes kinship to his child by giving his 'water' (semen) to the child's mother. Kandokans seem to consider a woman to be an incubator until she begins labor and spills *her* vital essence - blood -- during the birth of her baby. The father and his relatives, who will claim the child as a member of their kin group, compensate her for her loss of substance - and claim the child as a member of their group - with gifts of shell money. After giving birth, a mother creates kinship by giving milk to her infant. The baby-talk name for 'mother' is *tutu*, a short form of *turuturu* 'breast'. A baby subsists almost entirely on breast milk for about the first nine months, but as she grows both parents and their relatives provide her with solid food. A young child addresses the adults who feed her as "mother" and "father", for they are the most important people in her life (see Counts & Counts [Father's water equals mother's milk](#) (1983) for a discussion of Kandokan notions of conception, parenthood, and kinship).

The importance of food sharing in *creating* kinship may be most clearly observed in the process of adoption, a common practice in Kandoka. Anyone, including an unmarried person, may adopt a child, usually the son or daughter of a sibling. An adopting parent of either sex has several responsibilities to the child. One of the most critical is to provide it with food. While an infant is still nursing, the adoptive parent indirectly feeds it by supplying food to the lactating mother. Kandokans say that food given to the lactating mother is also consumed by the nursing child in its mother's milk.. Meat and fish are especially appropriate gifts, for these foods are considered to be strengthening. Failure to carry out this obligation nullifies the adoption.

Feeding growing children is a continuing responsibility of parents, and it is hard work. People sweat when they work in the garden to produce food to ensure that their children will live and grow. Their sweat - their vital essence - is incorporated into children when they eat the food their parents provide. Indeed, the exchange of substance

between parent and child that begins with donations of semen and milk to infants and continues with the sweat required to feed them, eventually leads to the parents' bodily dessication that is a mark of old age. When a Kandokan father gives his child food saying, "Eat my sweat" he is reminding the youngster that part of his very substance is in the gift. When Kandokans see a wrinkled elder they are reminded of the years of giving, hard labour, and loss of bodily fluids that are required for the continuation of human life and society.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of food in *creating* kinship. It is so powerful an agent that it generates a kin relationship even with people who are not constructed of the semen and milk of their lineage - people such as anthropologists. Kandokans continuously brought us food "for the children". By doing this they were using their substance to build ties of kinship between them and our children and - by extension - between them and us. Although we never had all our children with us in the village at any one time, they all went more than once and we always had at least two children with us. Over those years we acquired Kandokan relatives, were incorporated into Kandokan kin groups, and became a part of the community of Kandoka.

On September 15, 1975 Papua New Guinea became an independent state and member of the British Commonwealth. As part of the Independence Day celebrations the young people of the village planned to perform a traditional *singsing*.¹ When we arrived in August, 1975, young women in the village invited Rebecca, who was sixteen, to participate in the celebration and she practiced with the group for weeks. On the eve of Independence Day, some of the adults reminded us that since the young people's dance was a traditional one, the girls would be bare breasted. They asked how we felt about her making a public appearance that way. We replied that since it was her body they should ask her how *she* felt. Their smiling response was that she would be dressed "like a bush". Her modesty would not be compromised. She was, indeed, dressed like a bush, as were the other young women, and although members of an audience can eventually pick out which bit of shrubbery is *our* bush in this photograph, they have to look for a few minutes.



Image 35.11

Rebecca dancing to celebrate PNG Independence 1975

The aftermath of Rebecca's first public performance in Kaliai had repercussions, both serious and hilarious, for us. Because six women had formally acknowledged her first public performance, an acknowledgment we were required to formally reciprocate, she - as our first-born child - was formally incorporated into *Gavu Sae*, the patriline of one of our best friends and consultants, under the sponsorship of the man who acted as David's older brother, Jakob Mua. Operating on the principle that if you have to sponsor a ceremony you might as well do it right, we found ourselves desperately scrambling to find enough food, pigs, and shell money to co-sponsor our daughter's coming-of-age without humiliating ourselves and David's village kin. As Mua told David when, at 4:00 a.m. we were still several fathoms short of the shell money we needed to distribute to our guests, "for years you have written down what we've told you and you knew it intellectually. Now you *feel it!*"

While our children were formally recognized as members of their father's patriline, the rights of their mother's group had not been formally established. Kandokans recognize the bilateral nature of kinship. Although the father's line has the stronger claim on children, mother's kin may claim the children if father's kin do not meet their ritual and ceremonial obligations by paying bride wealth and correctly sponsoring the first-born children of the union. David's kin ties were obvious to the Kandokans by the end of 1967, but it took longer to establish the identity of Dorothy's relatives. By 1976 our original house had become ramshackled, and the villagers built us a new house near the centre of the village close to David's *Gavu Sae* kin and also to the members of *Puanu* patriline. With that move, Dorothy's friendship deepened with our new neighbors, Maria Datima, the wife of Mua's (and David's) younger brother Benedik Solou, and with Sergeant Ngaloko, Maria's father. Sapanga Biskit, the widow of Ngaloko's older brother, also began to announce her conviction that Dorothy was her mother, returned from the dead. When we returned to the village for our fourth stay in 1981 we discovered that our house had been incorporated into the family compound shared by Solou, Maria Datima and the family of her brother, Puanu. So, when Ngaloko, head of the *Puanu* line, decided to sponsor a ceremony recognizing the first born children of his sons as members of *Puanu*, the village also recognized Dorothy as belonging to *Puanu* and our two younger sons, Riley and Stephen, as having rights and obligations as members of *Puanu* through their mother.



Image 35.12

Dorothy's kinsman Ngaloko and some of the taro he distributed for the ceremony

By the time of Riley's and Stephen's incorporation into *Puanu*, we were full members of the community. Therefore, for the first time, when the spirits appeared in the village, Dorothy fled with the other women, joining them to feast and parody the ritual presided over by the men (we discuss this event in Counts and Counts [Clowning among the Lusi-Kaliai 1992](#))



Image 35.13

David Riley Sakaili is carried on a shield to be presented to the ancestor spirits

Maurice Bloch has argued that we anthropologists learn much of what we know about the cultures of the people we study at a visceral, non-linguistic level achieved by experience (Bloch 1991). We acquire much of our “cultural knowledge” by *doing* things rather than by just talking about them. This is the strength and the true heritage of the method of participant observation, especially when it involves long-term research. In the process of sponsoring our children we learned a great deal about *doing* and *feeling* (not just knowing intellectually) what it is like to be a villager with debts and obligations, and we understood viscerally, for the first time, the nature of kinship in Kandoka. We discuss our learning experience in Counts and Counts 1998.

Because our research in Papua New Guinea was long term and we lived with and, to an increasing extent through the years, like the villagers, they brought us into their community. They sought for and formalized their recognition of our ties of kinship with groups there. Although we either did not have, or had forgotten, our earlier lives and our kinsmen there, our apparent lack of the usual white people's agenda and our behavior provided evidence of our affection and affinity for the community in general and for certain lineages in particular. Using this evidence, the village brought us - through our children - into the community by providing them and us with food, by including us in everyday activities, and by ritually incorporating our children into the patriline to which they clearly belonged. By sharing food, residence, and ritual with us, the villagers re-established our kinship with them and transformed us from strangers into Kaliai.

Kandokans share food, but they also exchange it, and the way that food is distributed expresses the relationship between the food giver and the food recipient. People share

food - and substance generally - with those to whom they are kin. They *exchange* food with their affines and their competitors. Paternal semen is thought to predominate in the creation of a child, and so the Kandokans are patrilineal. When a patrilineage celebrates the marriage of a son to the daughter of another group, the celebration includes the exchange of food, as in this photograph of Kandokan hosts preparing to distribute food to their guests. The exchange establishes the equality of the two groups and their status as affines. However, the affinal relationship is characterized by paradox. Affines compete with one another, but they also share their most precious resource -- their children. When members of a patrilineage make ceremonial claim to their children, they must feed all those who come as guests. The participation of the mother's patrilineage in this ceremony expresses the ambiguity of the relationship between the two groups. The patrilineal group must present the mother's kin with gifts and food to demonstrate the priority of their claim to the child and their ability to meet their responsibility to her. However, *both* groups also have a life-long interest in the child, and they demonstrate this common concern by cooperating to provide food for their guests. Kandokans would applaud the insight of Marshal Sahlins when he observed that food distribution is a statement of social relations and, therefore, food is both a sustaining and a destroying mechanism of society (1972:215-127-18).

Creating Community among RVers

The people of Kaliai live in community, and under most circumstances they have no need to create it. They merely validate and reinforce ties that are already there. Full-time RVers, whose only home is their rig, must create almost all of their communities from the ground up. Consider: they are travelers who live on the road and spend only a short time in any one place. When they spend time off the road, chances are that those parked near them will be strangers, at least initially. These RVers are nomads, but they are not like traditional ones. Other nomads live and travel in pre-existing community groups composed of people of all ages who are kin and friends. They move together, and when they set up camp they arrange themselves in established residential patterns that express existing relations of kinship, affinity, and friendship. RVers, on the other hand, are almost never related to their neighbors, who are often strangers. While RVers sometimes travel with friends, most travel independently, and most are adults without children on board. Traditional nomads travel, not only because it is their way of life, but in order to find food, to meet with other groups to exchange goods, to arrange marriages, and for other instrumental reasons. In contrast most full-time RVers say that they travel in order to find freedom and because travel is an end in itself. Freedom means a number of things to them, but primarily they value freedom from rules and responsibilities imposed by others and freedom to do whatever they want to do whenever they want to do it. The freedom cry for many RVers is some variation of, "If I don't like it (the weather, the neighbors, the scenery) here, all I have to do is to turn the key."

This attitude contrasts dramatically with that of the Kaliai who consider voluntary isolation to be evidence of either anti-social behavior (adultery, sorcery) or a precursor to suicide. Villagers consider people who shun the company of others to be aberrant, potentially dangerous, and not entirely human. Before the Germans introduced prisons, the people of West New Britain used exile as a sanction against serious anti-social behavior, second in extremity only to execution as a last resort. This contrast expresses a

dramatic difference between Kaliai and RVers: one culture's privacy and freedom is the basis of punishment for the other.

This is not to say that RVers crave isolation and exile. In fact, they want community. Ironically, although most RVers say that they originally went on the road in order to travel or to find freedom, they also say that they stay on the road for years because they make friends with the people they meet there and become part of a community of travelers. If the statement "If I don't like it here, all I have to do is turn the key" is the phrase we heard most often, the second most common statement is either "I know them (fellow RVers) better than I knew the neighbors I lived next door to for X years" or "They're my family now." Here are some of the things that RVers have told us:

Dorma, the owner-manager of a resort park, in response to David Counts' observation that people in the park are friendly and all seem to know each other, replied "That's what they come here for. They have it here and they don't have it back home. They get back home and they miss it. That's why they keep coming back. Almost all of our people come back here every year. When they come back here they're coming home."

Violet said of returning to the Slabs, "It's like coming home. They're your family." She feels that she "can trust the people in our area because they're like we are. They try to make their area look homey. They want it to look like home and smell like home. Everybody watches out for everybody else. Everybody's so eager to help. When you get situated in one group it's like a family, but we don't have a name yet."

Judy was widowed in 1988. She says, "Family was with me for a week after Ernie died, but it is the continuing support of my SKP family who write and drop by to visit that keeps me going. I don't think I'd have made it without SKPs! You'll never know how grateful I am." (SKP or Skips is derived from the pronunciation of the name of the RV club Escapees)

Dwayne, a part-time RV park manager commented that you could live in a Southern California subdivision for twenty years and not know the name of the people next door. Here -- and in RV parks generally - he says, you get a real sense of community and people becoming friends and helping each other. "It's as if people saw others living like themselves and felt they could trust them."

Joe and Kay Peterson agree, In their book, *The New Revised Survival Of the Snowbirds*. they say: "Sharing is the key to all phases of the Escapees Parks... Therefore, it isn't surprising to find the members also share rides to town for doing laundry, going shopping, and for social events. They are [a] tight-knit group who think of themselves as "family." Because of this, those who are in the park keep a watchful eye over a traveling member's property.... Even more important than the feeling of security for things is the knowledge that there is someone there to help you when you need it. There is, for example, special concern shown if someone fails to appear at an expected time. A neighbor will knock on the door to make sure everything is all right. Having neighbors who know and care about you, and who will be there to help you if you are sick, is reminiscent of the old village life that in most places has been replaced with a mind-your-own-business attitude." (Peterson and Peterson 1991:56-57).

These testimonials use the words "family", "home", "help", "friends", "trust", "care". These are the qualities that are necessary for the existence of a community. Sociologist Thomas Bender says:

There are emotional layers to the word ‘community’ and as a result the concept is more than place and activity. “There is an expectation of a special quality of human relationship in a community, and it is this experiential dimension that is crucial to this definition. Community, then, can be defined better as an experience than a place. As simply as possible, community is where community happens.... Community ... is best defined as a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds....A community involves a limited number of people in a somewhat restricted social space or network held together by shared understandings and a sense of obligation. Relationships are close, often intimate, and usually face to face. Individuals are bound together by affective or emotional ties rather than by a perception of individual self-interest. There is a “we-ness” in a community. One is a member (Bender 1978:6-7).

RVers must create this feeling of family -- of community - from scratch. How do they do this?

Sharing Food

One way people - RVers as surely as Kaliai villagers -- create and express community is by sharing food. Almost every gathering of RVers that we attended during our research included shared food at pot-luck dinners, pancake breakfasts, ice-cream socials, fund raising meals, etc. This was true at state parks, resort parks, Escapee parks, and at boondocking areas in the desert. In Escapee parks some sort of food-sharing happens almost every day.



Image 35.14
Thanksgiving at Rainbow’s End

We ate Thanksgiving dinner with Escapees at Rainbow’s End park in 1993. When we asked our table-mates if they did not miss sharing Thanksgiving dinner with their families, they replied “No. These SKIPs are our family.” One man observed that while Escapees is not “communal” it was important that it be a community, and that eating together is an important part of community life. To paraphrase Marshal Sahlins, the least important thing that an RVer do with food is to eat it alone. Why is food sharing so important in creating and expressing social relationships? First, it is necessary for life. A gift of food is a gift of life -- or a gift of death. In Kaliai, the primary way that sorcerers

kill others is by giving them food that has been poisoned, either with a physical or chemical poison or by being be-spelled. Recall Sahlins's observation that food is both a sustaining and a destroying mechanism of society (1972:215-127-18 Thus, just as giving food is sharing one's substance with another, accepting it from another person in Kandoka is an act of trust while refusing it is a statement of suspicion and distrust. Although sorcery is not in the minds of RVers, for them, too, eating food prepared by someone else is an expression of trust and offering it is an expression of sharing and generosity of self.

Second, the food you eat becomes part of you. You are what you eat! This is recognized by both Kaliai, for whom food creates kinship, and by RVers. As Karen explained, when we asked why people offered food to newcomers to the park, "Because it becomes a part of you. It becomes a part of yourself." Ann Marie agreed, explaining that sharing food is important because "Eating together is a sacrament, like the Last Supper."

Finally, people must work to obtain food. One's energy, effort and - in Kandoka at least - ones very substance goes into food production. Thus, when a Kandokan child eats the food prepared by his parents he is eating their sweat - incorporating their substance - and reinforcing his kinship with them. While RVers may settle for simply eating together in a restaurant from time to time, it seems to us that for them, too, the work that goes into obtaining and preparing food has greater significance than merely sitting together to eat. This is why the pot-luck dinner - where everyone eats a bit of food prepared and donated by many others -- is the characteristic food sharing ritual for travelers.

Sharing Labor

In Kaliai work is seldom a solitary enterprise. Whether they are clearing and planting gardens, building fences to protect gardens from marauding pigs, making shell currency, preparing thatch, building houses, planning a ceremonial, sweeping the village free of trash or preparing food, people work together.



Image 35.15
Women sweep the village

Village residents cooperate in the community work of building fences, building and repairing public buildings such as the village church, school, or the house where visiting government officials stay, or making copra to raise cash to support the local school. Kin cooperate in garden work, building and maintaining copra drying sheds, building and repairing the men's house where unmarried boys and visiting men sleep. One of the obligations of kinship is to assist your relatives in their work, with the understanding that they will also assist you. Sharing labor - sharing sweat - expresses kinship relations. Young men and women work for their elders in reciprocity for the work - the sweat - expended by the parental generation in creating and sustaining their lives.

Whereas Kaliai *express* community by working together, RVers *create* community by sharing labor. For example, at the Hot Spring LTVA in southern California, in the early 1980s RVers who wintered there approached business people in the nearest town, Holtville, for contributions of supplies to develop the spring. Volunteers from the LTVA used this assistance to build two spring-fed hot tubs, put in a cement pad, and install two hot showers for use of the residents. Each Monday morning, all LTVA residents were invited to bring bleach and other cleaning supplies to the spring. There they drained the hot tubs and then disinfected and cleaned the concrete slab, tubs, and shower area. The hot spring area has become a free spa and a social centre where residents can relax and talk with fellow volunteers and enjoy companionship and community.



Image 35.16

The hot springs area has become a spa and social centre

The Escapees RV club self-consciously encourages all members to participate in regular cleaning and maintenance chores, partly to keep costs down but, more importantly, in order to develop a community spirit. Cathie Carr, the CEO of the club wrote the following about inclusion in community (Carr 1993:5): “I believe if you want to enter a circle, you can just erase the lines. It is up to you to make the first move. It is up to you to become a part of the community.”

The term “community” is loosely defined as a group of people living in the same locality. It can be a town, an RV park, or a rally location. In every case, the best way to break the ice is to volunteer to help. Inclusion is a guaranteed result. There are a number of ways that Escapees volunteer: they serve food at community meals, they help cook or

clean up after the meals, the clean the clubhouse, police the grounds, work as everything from organizers to parking staff at rallies.



Image 35.17
Rainbow builder at work

They also become Rainbow Builders. These are Escapees members who give their labor to help build parks in exchange for their sites during the laboring period. Many of them do this work because they plan to have a lot in the park, but others - like the elderly gentleman driving the heavy equipment in the photograph - volunteer in order to contribute to the SKP community and because they assume reciprocity. Sometime in the future, they believe, somebody else will help to create the park where they will want a home base. Mutual help also helps to create community among RVers. Almost all new RVers are astonished when strangers offer to help with problems ranging from the trivial to the serious. It is a standing joke - but one based on fact - that if you want to meet people in an RV park all you have to do is raise your hood. Anyone in trouble is assured several helping hands. Fellow RVers offer everything from the use of a tool, or an extra hose to enable you to use a water tap that's just out of reach, to the use of a car for transportation if your spouse is hospitalized with a sudden, acute illness. The importance of sharing and help in creating community among RVers is well expressed by full-time RVers and Escapees members Karen and Scott Bonis: "A most important part of my reality is the sense of community I feel whenever we are with other Escapees. For us there is the clear feeling of being with family. There is no question in my mind that, if some problem should befall us, there would be many, many people who would be willing to go way out of their way in order to help. And we would be happy to do the same for the others in the group. It is a very special bond that is one of the cornerstones of my reality" (Bonis and Bonis 1993:22).

Space: The Architecture of Community

The way in which space is organized, and the use to which it is put, also contributes to creating and maintaining community. The warm climate permits Kandokans to spend much of their lives outdoors. They cook, visit, and work outside, either on their verandas or in the shade under their houses. Recall the generous social space under our house. This arrangement was ideal for us because it was a convenient meeting-place for villagers. There were often several people resting, working, or talking under our house so we did not have to go far to find people to pester with questions. It also enabled our neighbours to observe our activities without being intrusive. Where people live outdoors, in the view

of others, they know each other well. Villagers enjoy and seek out the company of others, and a person who shuns others is behaving abnormally and is carefully watched for evidence of either intent to commit suicide or to practice sorcery. The desire of villagers for contact with other people is present even during serious illness or approaching death.



Image 35.18
Friends and family visit a dying person under the awning

Adults who are dying move to a bed under a temporary shelter in front of or beside their house. The construction of this shelter alerts others to the expected death, and the word is spread to the dying person's business associates, trading partners, creditors, debtors, friends, and kin in other villages. All come to visit, to hear the dying person's wishes regarding the disposal of personal property, and to bring to closure ongoing relationships. This organization of space discourages reclusiveness and facilitates ongoing communication, intense social interaction, and a sense of community.

Most North Americans would probably find it difficult to live in the view of others as the Kaliai do. Our values and architecture stress private rather than public lives. Ideally, each child has its own bedroom, and most of us prefer to live where the walls are thick and do not allow others to overhear our words and actions, or us to know about theirs. This ideal is exemplified in the modern, suburban subdivision where there are no sidewalks or front porches with swings to invite neighbors to visit, and where houses are set far back from the street. Outdoor family life, if it exists, takes place either in the fenced back yard or in a public space such as a playing field, swimming pool, or park. Garage and front doors are shut and locked. There is no implicit invitation to visit informally and, RVers tell us, neighbors often know or care little about each other. The move to these suburbs began after World War II when new affluence enabled city dwellers to leave crowded neighborhoods, where - as in a Kaliai village - everybody knew everybody else's business. They fled these neighborhoods in search of peace and quiet and privacy. Now, four decades later, members of the generation that fled to the suburbs disenchanted with their decision, for although they went in search of privacy, what they found was isolation. RVers seem to be trying to reverse their decision, for many of them seem to be actively searching for companionship, mutual trust, involvement with their neighbors, and meaningful social interaction. They want to create a sense of community. Like the Kaliai, full-time RVers live much of the year in a warm climate that enables them to spend a lot of time outdoors. And, like the Kaliai, they cook, visit, and work outside, but in the shade under their awnings rather than on their verandas

or under their houses. The awning on an RV accomplishes several things. It creates living space for the RVer, it makes the outdoors part of the RVer's home, it creates an area that is neither intimate private space -- as is the inside of the RV -- nor impersonal social space, such as a park's recreation hall, club house, or swimming pool. Like the front porch in older neighborhoods with sidewalks, it is a personal but neutral social space where casual, friendly interaction can occur without commitment to intimacy. Because the space inside a rig is small, when the weather is nice people sit under their awnings to drink coffee, read, or do craft work. Their presence is an invitation to their neighbors to stop and chat, to bring over their own lawn chair and cup of coffee and visit. There people meet and talk, share news, gossip, and maybe a snack, and come to know each other better. The RVer's awning, like the villager's veranda, facilitates the social interaction that is essential to the creation of community.



Image 35.19
RVers gather under the awning

Shared Ritual

Shared rituals permit people to both create and express community. These rituals may be rituals of incorporation, such as the ritual food sharing that occurs in New Guinea villages and RV parks alike. They may be rituals of greeting. Escapees hug one another when they meet on the road and to welcome newcomers into SKIP parks, as they are doing in the photograph below. This ritual reinforces the idea that members of the club are like family because they act like family.



Image 35.20
RVers hug to welcome newcomers

Other shared rituals may be rituals of reversal that mark a break or emphasize a point in the yearly cycle, and that allow community members to experience what life might be like without community or without the social rules that people must live by. During rituals of reversal, people dress and behave in ways that they never would in normal time. For a few days the rules of society are relaxed and people enjoy a “time out” when they can be foolish, rude, or break rules of propriety without fear of recrimination. Clowning activities, found in many cultures, are an excellent example.



Image 35.21
Kaliai women clown at a wedding

In Kaliai, women at the wedding of one of their female relatives clown by wearing men's clothing, carrying spears, and threatening guests -- something women never do in normal circumstances. These women, who meet the kin of their “sister's” new husband, brandish their spears in a warning that if their sister's new husband or her affines abuse

her; they will have to reckon with her kin. Everyone laughs, because these threats are obviously not *real* threats.

They are delivered by clowning women and cannot be met with anger or violence. At the same time, everyone knows that, despite the inappropriate behavior of the display and the climate of fun, the warning is very real indeed. If the brides female relatives are that fierce what would her male kin be like if she were to be mistreated?



Image 35.22
Escapes clowning during member return “rally”

In contrast, the Escapes pictured here clowning are participating in a rally that marks a turning point in the year - the return of members to ‘their’ park in the fall. Lot holders in this park, which is located in the high plains of the US Southwest, usually leave for cooler places in the summer and return in November to spend some of the winter. Returning members and visitors greet one another, feast and drink together, play games, and clown. Participants dress in costume - men appear in drag, adults appear as children or animals - and engage in inappropriate behavior including sexual joking and mock violence. Nobody takes offense - it is all in fun - but there is also a sigh of relief when the rally is over and everyone returns to normal life.

Celebrating Rites of Passage

Community members also share rituals celebrating rites of passage: changes in social status and in the life cycle, such as the incorporation of children into the group, weddings, and mortuary rituals. In RVing communities, these rituals may be used to create community as well as express existing relationships.



Image 35.23
Wedding at a California LTVA

In 1990 we had just pulled into an LTVA in the California desert when our neighbors invited us to bring a pot-luck dish and join them in celebrating the wedding of the area's host. When we demurred, because we had time only to prepare a salad before the ceremony, our neighbor replied with some impatience, "That's ok. It doesn't matter *what* you bring. Just bring something to eat and come." Our attendance at the wedding provided us with an entrance into the community whose members subsequently included us in social events and in the distribution of gleaned surplus vegetables from the nearby large farms. When we returned to the LTVA in 1994 we were warmly greeted by the people of that community and once again included in group activities.

More poignant was the social death of Kamilus Kolia, the bigman who danced with our son Bruce and the ancestor spirits during our first research in 1966. By 1981 Kolia, who was probably in his middle 80s, had become frail, forgetful, and incapable of organizing elaborate ceremonies. Beno, his eldest son was ready to assume the responsibilities of a bigman, but Kolia was reluctant to retire. The solution, one that is unique as far as we know, was to hold a mortuary ceremony for Kolia while he was still living. His sons put it this way:



Image 35.24
“Living funeral” for Kolia

“You are old and will soon die. When you do, we will give you a magnificent *ololo*, ‘mortuary ceremony’, but you won’t be here to see how we honor you. Let us do it now, while you are still alive, so you will know how much everyone respects you.” Kolia agreed and, in this photograph he is dancing with the ancestor spirits who are celebrating and honoring his lifetime success as a bigman.

Following the *ololo*, Kolia withdrew from his activities as a village leader. He looked after small children, helped to sweep the village, and did other menial tasks. He did not, however, garden, fish, hunt, or behave as a bigman. He did not participate in ceremonies and nobody asked his advice or included him in distributions of wealth and food. Kolia was socially dead. Following his physical death a little over a year later there was no funeral to mark his passing. That had already happened. He was buried quietly by his immediate family.

Kolia’s withdrawal from social life is the kind of behavior that some gerontologists have called “disengagement” and is usually associated with retirement and aging in urban industrial society (Cumming and Henry 1961; Cowgill and Holmes 1972; Marshall 1985). It has no equivalent in the community of aging RVers that we studied. Instead, their focus on travel, volunteer work, and social engagement keeps people actively involved in their community. Among Escapees, even those RVers who are too ill to travel are encouraged to participate in the CARE center, an assisted living and adult day care facility located at the club’s headquarters in Livingston, Texas. There people continue to live in their RVs, and spend their days sharing meals, playing games, exercising, doing volunteer work, visiting with other RVers, and participating as much as they are able in the life of the community.⁵ Some RVers even continue their identification with their RV community after death.



Image 35.25
John Bates Tombstone

As his wife Isabelle explained, John Bates loved RVing but was able to do it only a short time. After his death their son engraved a likeness of their RV on his headstone because “He wanted to be in that motor home.”

III: WHO HAS BONES IN THEIR NOSES?

The differences between New Guinea villagers and elderly North Americans who live in recreation vehicles seem to be profound. Kandokans live in ways that North Americans can hardly imagine or understand. To North Americans they are exotic: they are “the other.” *Anthropologists* study New Guineans. In contrast, while it is a little peculiar for grandma and grandpa to sell their house, buy an RV and spend years traveling around the continent, we still understand them. They are familiar. They are us. It might be appropriate for sociologists and gerontologists to study them, but they should have no interest for anthropologists. These are some of the assumptions that we think were embedded in the question Bruce Rogers asked. Why, indeed, would anthropologists study RVers?

Anthropologists study RVers for the same reason they study the people of Papua New Guinea: in order to understand the complexity of the human experience -- the variety of ways in which people perceive the world in which they live and solve the problems that all human beings share. To do that we must learn to see the exotic in the familiar and the understandable in the exotic which is, ultimately, just a way of knowing that we do not yet comprehend. This experience is the ultimate one for anthropologists. Indeed, as McPherson suggests, is probably the experience that *creates* them. If we can achieve this insight, then the world is open to us, for the exotic may be on a Pacific island or just in front of our bumper. There is much to study. With apologies to Walt Kelly and Pogo, “We have met the other and it is *us*.”

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NOTES

1. Singing is Tok Pisin for a performance in which people sing and dance. Usually singsings involve traditional songs and dances, but in modern parlance a sing-along, either *a capella* or accompanied by guitar is also called a singsing.
2. This was when Bruce Rogers asked us the question quoted in the introduction to this essay..
3. An explanatory aside: Escapees have adopted the letters SKP as their acronym. When said rapidly the letters pronounce the name of the club. The letters stand for the values espoused by club members:

Sharing Karing People, Special Kind of People, Sharing Knowledge and Parking, etc. Club members often call themselves Skips.

4. Kaliai stories such as “Akro and Gagandewa” or “Moro” explore the problems of mythic proportions that arise when a human marries or offends one of these Others (Counts 1980;.1994).[To read the text of some Some Kaliai Stories click here](#)

5. The last third of a 26 minute VHS video film called On The Road, produced by Asterisk Productions, was made at the CARE center in the fall of 1966 and illustrates, how the centre works. The video is available from Bullfrog Films PO Box 149, Olea, PA USA 19547-9989. [Click here to go to their web site](#)

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