Understanding life for the local people along the Kokoda Trail: preliminary observations of livelihood and development activity

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE LIFE AND PRACTICES OF BIAGE-SPEAKING PEOPLE

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Content

• Overview of the research:
  • Fieldwork
  • Field Site: Biage stretches of the Kokoda Trail
  • Abuari

• Preliminary observations of development and livelihoods:
  • Subsistence agriculture: focal practice of ‘planting’
  • Burdens and blessings
  • Livelihood from trekking

• How is life for Biage living near the Kokoda Trail: Biage stories of development
Multi-site fieldwork from September 2015 to May 2016

Port Moresby
- Biage life in the village is linked to Port Moresby
- Private enterprise and political interlocution

Kokoda government station, environs & Haela village
- 10 day inaugural ‘Biage Nona’ Seventh Day Adventist Camp in Haela village
  - Traveled via Felai-Abuari “sotcut”

Abuari
- Participated in daily life
- Traveled via “main track”
Field site: Biage ‘land’

The ‘customary land’ of 1,300 Biage-speaking people in the northern stretches of the Kokoda Trail

Main villages

Kokoda Trail: Alola, Isurava, Hoi, Kovelo

Felai-Abuari track: Abuari, Haela, Felai, Kaile (abandoned), Hagutava (abandoned)

Kokoda ‘flatland’: Savaia, Ebei, Kanga

Note there is an error in that Kyile and Pelai appear twice on the map.
Abuari: a Biage village

- Pop.: Approx. 100, 18 households
- Altitude: Approx. 1500 metres above sea level
- Distance: Approx. 17 kilometres from Kokoda government station
- Soil: Anecdotal evidence that it’s more fertile than neighbouring Mountain Koiari
- Weather: Cool with sunny patches during the day & often cloudy in the afternoons. Heavy overnight rainfall. Strong westerly winds during Dec-Jan

Abuari on a clear morning.
Photo: Vanessa Uiari
Planting is a focal practice of daily life
- Taro (siamani & fadia)
- Ritualised yam (haba) planting

Subsistence agriculture is the mainstay of Biage life
- Kaukau (gobeu), banana (uve) & choko tips (siokolo) are staples in Biage diet
- Cabbages, English potato, passion fruit, siokolo, ginger, tomatoes, cucumbers, spring onions, mandarins, oranges are highly valued
- A fully grown fruiting avocado tree
- “Kaovi coffee garden” and history of raising cattle near old Avu village

Members of the community are making a new garden for the head teacher. Mondays are set aside for the community to work for the Abuari ‘Adventist’ Primary School.
Photo: Vanessa Uiari
‘Burden’ of sustaining ‘development’ lies with Biage

WORK HARD TO EDUCATE CHILDREN

Abuari ‘Adventist’ Primary School

• 4 permanent classrooms buildings
• Attached to an elementary school built from bush material
• Semi-permanent teacher’s housing with piped water and ablution
• ‘Lunch house’

ORGANISED AT THE VILLAGE LEVEL

Head Teacher

School Board: Chairman, deputy chairman, treasurer, elder, student representation

Volunteer elementary school teacher and a primary school teacher

Parents and general village community
Prelim. observations

Water dam with piped water to common-use areas including the school and aid post which was established in 2007. All households have access to piped water.

25 students enrolled in the Primary school:
- 6 x Grade 7 (3 from Kokoda ‘flatland’)
- 2 x Grade 6
- 9 x Grade 5
- 1 x Grade 4 (from head Kumusi River)
- 7 x Grade 3

A community hall, using piped water, and village health volunteers at work in Abuari.
Photos: Vanessa Uliari
‘Blessings’ of livelihoods in daily Biage life

BEFORE GROWTH IN TREKKING

• “we could harvest 10 to 20 bags hybrid English potatoes”
  • in mid-1990s Biage sold bags by weight to retailers

• “the mamas took bilums of mandarins and potatoes to sell”

• “carry cargo down to Kokoda – like silot, potato, cabbage”

POTENTIAL CASH INCOME FROM ‘LOCAL’ TREKKING AND AGRICULTURAL ENTERPRISE

• Mustard traders bound for Port Moresby

• Village volunteers engaged by NGOs to carry solar panels and educational supplies along the trail

• Plumbers and other tradespeople engaged in construction in the southern Mountain Koiari stretch of the trail

• Donor-funded project monitoring staff traverse the trail

• Research conducted along the trail

• Porters traveling to and from their villages

• Transporting produce via helicopter to Port Moresby
Prelim. observations

Late March first trekkers appeared in the village – short trek along Felai-Abuari track:

7 women in the village catered – ripe banana, passion fruit, mandarins, oranges, cooked corn and ‘Twisties’ @ 3 kina per packet – K10 per tray although the leader only paid K50 – 2 trays came late

Early April second group of 17 trekkers arrive:

Catering provided by the women

Campsite fees

- Abuari village i.e. accommodated in a home
- Eora Creek campsite i.e. owned by a village elder K20 – K30 per trekker and K5 per porter

Porters fees

- 10 men from Abuari (including a kin group member from Felai) earned approximately K770 each

The day before ANZAC Day, a woman and her nieces carrying fruit, canned soft drinks and ‘Twisties’ to sell at the Eora campsite due south of Abuari village. They trekked from Haela village situated along the Felai-Abuari trail. Photo: Vanessa Uiari
Mid-late April 35 trekkers and 107 porters traversed northwards along the trail just before ANZAC day:

- Women in Abuari provided dinner for trekkers
- Camp site fees for porters and trekkers were charged
- One female trekker asked for her clothes to be laundered
- The porters and other support people were engaged from the Mountain Koiari stretch of the trail
A life of enterprise, leadership and hard work

The story of Biage kin groups from Abuari

2 village elders

1 man and his wife and kin group manage 4 to 5 partnerships with Australian-based tour operators:

- Incorporated his business in 2006
- Manages 4-5 partnerships with Australian based tour operators
- Creating enterprise opportunities for Abuari

1 Biage “Big Boy” his wife and kin group:

- Leads his people in political interlocution
- Multilevel and multilayered business partnerships with Australians

A Biage man (in the yellow vest) working for his ‘big’ brother who is the Kokoda agent for Tropic Air
Photo: Vanessa Uiari
How vulnerable people are marginalised by ‘development’

The story of a ‘young mother’ lamenting her lost youth

The story of stigmatisation of a female ‘volunteer’ primary school teacher fleeing a village and side-lined by the non-government organisation she was working for

The story of a male ‘volunteer’ teacher ‘balancing’ traditional and modern roles

The stories of retributory customary killing targeting the educated Biage

My home, the home of two Abuari school teachers. Photo: Vanessa Uiari
How Biage life is linked to the trekking season or cycle

Monthly trekker numbers 2005 - 2015
How is “our life before trekking, and after trekking”
THANK YOU

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