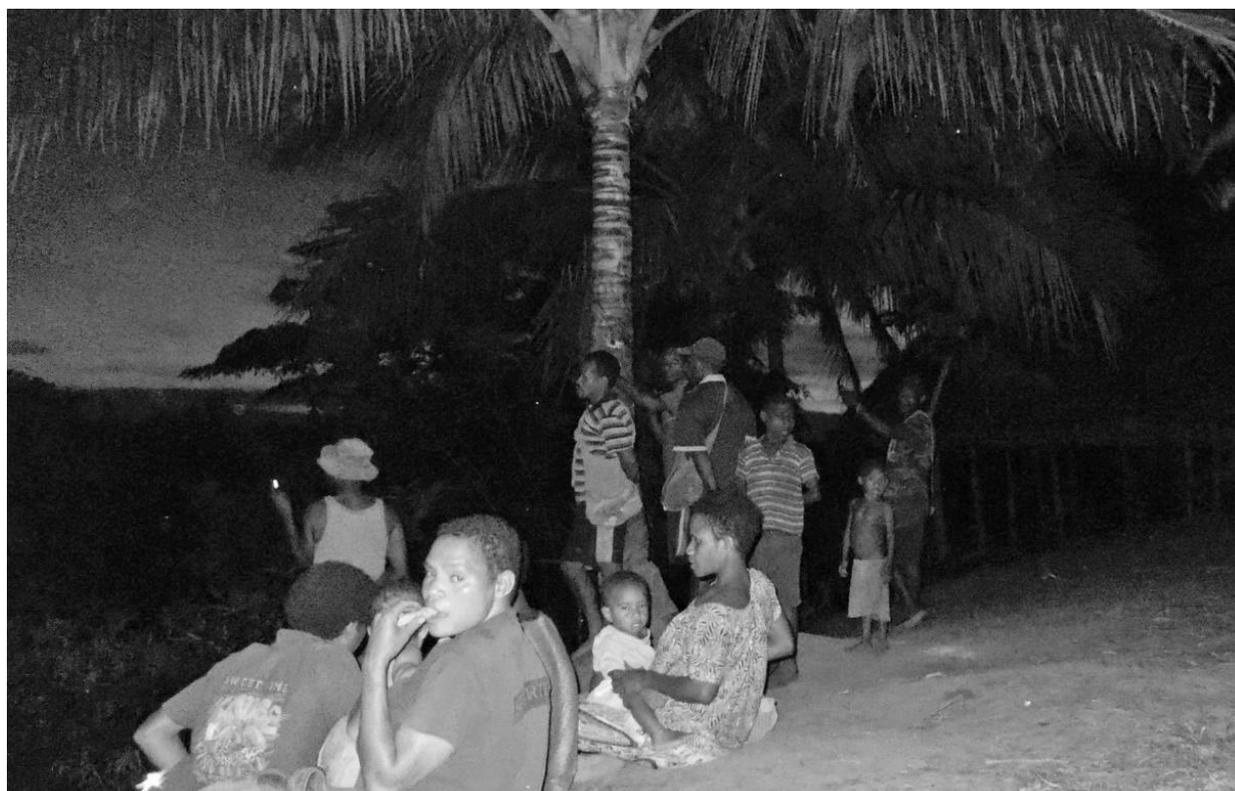


Communication, Privilege and the Ironies of Isolation: From Melbourne To Papua New Guinea

MONICA MINNEGAL AND PETER D. DWYER

Sunday, 5 April 2020: we are in day 14 of Covid-19 quarantine. We are fortunate to be in our own house in Melbourne, Australia. We can access relatives, friends and news of the world by telephone, email and the internet. We order groceries on-line and they are delivered to the front door. We venture outside just twice a week, to place rubbish bins at the kerb and collect them after they are emptied. We write a little, rummage in our library for books to reread and, in the evenings, though without television, sit shoulder-to-shoulder in front of a laptop watching free-to-air Scandi crime drama or movies with an apocalyptic theme.

Tomorrow, all this is over. Except it isn't. For one of us a combination of advanced years and a 'pre-existing condition' means that current constraints will continue to apply. For the other, the constraints will be fewer but working from home may become the norm. We are about to enter a world in which the ways in which people live, work, learn and play are transforming, perhaps permanently. Education is moving on-line. Medical services are experimenting with tele-consultations and virtual diagnoses. The bustle of overcrowded shopping centres may be a thing of the past. Work from home will reduce pollution levels, though a hugely increased demand for



internet services will have its own impact on carbon emissions. And as people spend more time in their own kitchens, and their own backyards, we are promised a new interest in home as the locus for generating a sense of self-worth and well-being.

If, in six months to a year, Covid-19 has run its course then none of this will be unmanageable. Depending on both the temporal extent of the pandemic, and its economic and demographic magnitude, there will be many people who find a comfortable place in the newly emergent ways of living.

And here's the rub. We ourselves are about to shift from quarantine to recommended, perhaps enforced, practices of 'social distancing'. To this time, and for the immediate future, there has been minor inconvenience but no hardship. This reflection leads to a recognition of our privileged position in the world, to the reason why we were in quarantine, and to the irony that for some people their customary isolation could, on the one hand, reduce the likelihood of infection while, on the other, have awful consequences if the disease reaches them. As Scott Waide, writing from Papua New Guinea, expressed it: 'Here is a ... piece of irony for you. The safest places in PNG right now are the villages where up to 70 percent of health facilities are closed because of lack of funding and lack of medicines.'

On March 19, Monica arrived at a small airstrip in a remote part of Western Province, PNG. It was six years since she had been at the village of Suabi. People she knew crowded round, reaching to shake hands, to click fingers, to hug. The all-pervasive warnings about a need to maintain social distance had not reached here. Indeed, no news of Covid-19 had reached these people. The PNG government had acknowledged the pandemic but had not yet declared a state of emergency. No roads reached Suabi. For several years, people living there had been without radio contact that, once, had facilitated emergency medical evacuations. News to and from the outside was possible only by foot – four or five days to the nearest towns – or, most often, via mobile phone connections through an unreliable network. Facebook and WhatsApp – pervasive forms of communication in much of PNG – are inaccessible at Suabi.

As Monica struggled to explain why she would be staying for only one week, not the four originally planned, she talked of the new disease that was spreading through the world. A disease with uncertain cause, with no medicine known to prevent or cure it. She described what people elsewhere were doing to protect themselves, practices her village friends would be well advised to adopt. Don't shake hands – which these people did constantly. Avoid large gatherings – including the market and church services which are primary ways through which information is communicated in a face-to-face world. Keep sick people in the house or, better still, care for them at bush houses – which was past practice, effectively quarantining people to hide them from the spirits that stalked them and made them sick.

A day and a half later, with no advance notice to either local people or Monica, a small plane arrived, gave her 10 minutes to pack, and carried her away to Mougulu, a mission station 25 km to the southeast. Two things had happened while she was in the air, on her way to Suabi. Qantas announced that all international flights would be cancelled in four days' time. And Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF), who were to pick her up the following week,

had a 'landing overrun' elsewhere in PNG. The pilot and three passengers survived but the plane was seriously damaged and the MAF fleet was grounded for a month. Monica's means of exit from Suabi had vanished and her means of exit from PNG was in jeopardy.

Monica knew nothing of these events. Suabi was out of reach to the outside world. Through those days it had not been possible to either send or receive phone calls. But 3,500 kilometres to the south, in Melbourne, Peter had access to multiple sources of news and multiple means of communication. He concluded that Monica should leave at once or prepare for a very long stay. He contacted people we knew at Mougulu. They were engaged with local people in a variety of greatly needed development projects – a new high school, repairing a small hydroelectric plant, installing a solar system at the community health centre – but now, like so many other expatriates, were negotiating their own rapid exit from the country. They had access to a small plane and two were pilots. Generously, they retrieved Monica and facilitated her onward journey to Mount Hagen, in the PNG highlands. Peter made new bookings to Port Moresby, to Brisbane and onward to Melbourne. Thirty-six hours after leaving Suabi, Monica was quarantined at home.

On 22 March, the day Monica left the country, the PNG government announced a ban on all international and domestic flights, closed provincial borders, shut schools and told people to practice social distancing. The next evening, in Melbourne, we received a call from Suabi. Our friends had managed to connect to the always-erratic network, and through the next two weeks we became what they lightly called their 'world news' service. The magic of digital connection made it possible to fund mobile phone costs from our secure location thousands of kilometres away. The information we offered supplemented that from other sources and was relayed to everyone at public meetings.

In these exchanges, our emphasis has been with Covid-19 as a global problem and, crucially, that the illness or deaths that result are in no way outcomes of sorcery. In this region, when tensions are heightened, people almost always explain deaths by reference to the evil, though hidden, actions of others. Practicing 'social distancing' in face-to-face communities is precisely a context in which anxiety about sorcery may thrive. Already, some people are wondering whether four deaths in a neighbouring community are evidence that the virus has arrived and, if so, who it is that has harnessed the virus as an effective medium of ensorcelment. During Easter, a Suabi pastor will be visiting an outlying community in an attempt to reduce current fears about sorcery. There are no health facilities at this village. Our friend is now reasonably well-informed about Covid-19 and promotes recommendations to maintain social distance. He recognises, however, that in asking the people he visits, talks with and preaches to, to refrain from physical contact – for their sake and his own he will decline to shake hands – is to position himself, in their eyes, as a potential threat to them.

Here, then, the irony is double-edged. From a position of privilege, we have experienced little inconvenience by complying with practices of isolation that are seen to be to the benefit of all. By means of radio, written word and internet we can observe the entire world and should the need arise have almost immediate access to first class medical assistance. Our PNG friends have none of these privileges. In striking contrast to us, they are globally

isolated but locally connected. On the first count, the virus is less likely to reach them; on the latter count, their lives may be seriously jeopardized if it does.

Australians may imagine they are emerging into a brave new world, where Covid-19 has created new modes of connection to others, while freeing them from the need to venture to places, and at times, dictated by others. But for many in PNG, and elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific, the impact of Covid-19 may be ultimately experienced as a retreat from connection, and not as a transformation in ways people connect.

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Image: Seeking connection at the communal phone booth, December 2012. (Photo: Peter Dwyer)