

# Epilogue: Ela's Question

ELIZABETH REID

In late 2003, the Howard Government announced that it was sending police, military personnel and senior public servants into PNG under a programme of expanded cooperation. The announcements and subsequent discussion on talkback radio were in terms of 'restoring law and order' in PNG and of 'propping up the country'.

As this was being reported in the papers in both countries, Ela sought advice: 'My parents want Willie to go back to the village and go to school there. What do you think?'

At the beginning of 2003, Ela had brought her six year-old son to Port Moresby to go to school. He had loved his life in the village: catching fish in the river, playing soccer, going to the garden, hunting for birds, swimming. But nobody was making sure that he was going to school, and he was being beaten up by the bigger boys.

The school year had started when he arrived in Moresby. There was just one place left in the preparatory grade. He was of the age group but lagged well behind in school work. He had virtually no English, the language of teaching. 'Let him try it', advised the school.

Willie flourished. He plays soccer, gets into fights in the school yard, learns English and maths, and is beginning to absorb the values that lie behind learning. He does his homework, more regularly than not. Ela or one of her sisters walks him to school, up and down and across the roads of the settlement, and back again at midday.

He lives in one small rented room with Ela and two of her sisters, three young women around their twenties. They are in Moresby to be educated.

'Dad says that the school in the village is OK and they want him back with them.' She paused, thinking out loud.

'If he stays here, he will finish school and then what? There are no jobs, even if you are clever and speak good English. He will become a rascal. Most boys who go to school in Moresby become rascals and take drugs.'

How does Ela think her way through this dilemma? Ela had Willie when she was very young and her parents brought Willie up. She feels an indebtedness to them. She knows that they miss him and are growing sickly. There is no-one else to look after them, although this is not a traditional role for a boy. And looking after Willie in town is not easy for her.

He could do his schooling in the village school, but who would make sure that he attended and help him with his books? Education is not highly valued since it seems to be an investment of very scarce resources with little or no return. Scarcity and poverty give a clarity to decisions.

The village school teaches in the local language and its standards are minimal. But what use could he make of an education in the village? Men's traditional roles, hunting, fishing, horticulture and governance, are dwindling and there are few modern roles or jobs for them. Village life centres on the land, the weather, conflicts, both traditional and new, news from town, rumours, remittances and gatherings. It is absorbing.

What life might Willie make for himself in this village nestling up the side of the mountains, far from the sea, three hours from Moresby, by a road thick with bandits? He will grow up playing soccer, warding off violence and sorcery as best he can, and living a life fashioned by *kastom*, by customary ways of doing things. He will speak in language and be of the village. His identity will be formed by the belief systems and traditions of his clan. He will have no sense of himself as a citizen of a nation, little horizon beyond the surrounding villages and the bus stop to Moresby. Family business will take him there regularly but it will be as a foreign territory, generating fear or aggression. He will be untouched by modernity. He will have been denied the possibility of living in the modern world.

He is thriving at school in Moresby. He has flourished, academically and as a person. It has been pure joy for all to watch. His capacity to learn had, up to then, been restrained by the lack of decent rural schools, health services, communications and other structural factors. He is, in some sense, the same person but as if set free. In Moresby, he is gaining a sense of himself as part of a larger whole as he lives side by side with and comes to know people from different customary groups: a diverse local world, perhaps the makings of a nation. If Willie were to stay on in school in Moresby, his pathway to an interconnected world might be less fraught than that of the girls.

But meanwhile, Ela asks, will he survive the lawlessness of Moresby? Will this education lead to employment? Estimates of youth unemployment in Port Moresby approach 70 percent. In 1990, only 18 percent of the labour force worked for wages, were self-employed or running businesses. Less than a fifth of these were women. Opportunities for employment in the formal sector have shrunk since then.

The informal sector, small-scale trading, retailing, manufacturing and services, is the site of coping and survival in such economies. Yet regulations introduced at the time of Independence made most small-scale trading illegal. The 2004 Informal Sector Development and Control Act introduced into Parliament by Dame Carol Kidu has created spaces in which an informal trading sector can begin to flourish. Already people are flocking to the footpaths to trade, and survive, creating sites of extraordinary energy and vitality.

If Willie remains in town, with or without gainful employment, will he succumb, as so many others, to the addictions of home brew, of pack rape, of gambling, of confrontation, of seemingly wanton violence? Will he become infected with HIV? The growing youth movements, of which Ela and her sisters are members, might provide a sanctuary for him in which other ways of living become possible. Committed youth leaders and groups are springing up in the settlements but they remain without support, their leaders unpaid, and so unable to settle down and establish families.

It is a hard struggle for Ela to have her son in town. There are no hostels in Moresby for women with children. They were lucky to find the small room that they have. Affordable accommodation is hard to find, especially in the safer areas. Landlords want public servants, not students or women alone. Not single mothers.

They consider the settlement neighbourhood where they live too dangerous for Willie to walk home from school by himself, yet their study schedules make it very difficult some days for one of them to pick him up. Arrangements are often *ad hoc*, relying on the good will and availability of friends or neighbours. There is no after school care, even if they could afford it.

It is extremely expensive to live in town. The cost of education is high. So too is health care. Student bus fares keep increasing. The price of rice keeps rising. Meat meals, even with tinned meats, are rare. Rice and greens and bananas or rice and noodles are the staples.

Their situation is precarious. They are imposed upon by *wantoks* from the village, and pressured for money by street boys and friends. They have suffered

sexual harassment, physical abuse and accusations of loose behaviour, sorcery and lesbianism from landlords, security guards and neighbours. A family of sisters without a man in the house arouses hostility, suspicion and jealousies.

They are buffeted by misogyny, exploitation, the difficulties of accessing education, youth unemployment, appalling health services, and one of the most inequitable and corrupt distributions of wealth in the Asia and Pacific region.

How does Ela decide, when these are the options? Village life would give Willie the best of the traditional systems of social support, and embed him in the Papua New Guinea way of doing things. It would also diminish his world. Schooling in Moresby will mean that moving into modernity remains a possibility, but it does not follow that that is where he will end up.

Ela and her sisters live on the cusp of two worlds: traditional village life and modern urban life. They travel constantly, literally and metaphorically, between these worlds, drawn to the advantages of each, but returning each time so far to the city, with its access to education and footholds into modernity. Once there, however, they are harassed by its demands: the need to be able to manage money, to actively seek for jobs, to find and negotiate accommodation, to move about safely, to interact with and befriend different people, and to think through *kastom* in this different setting.

In town, the boundaries of their moral universe are expanding. They are developing a tentative sense of belonging to a larger whole, although still referring to their neighbours as 'that Kerema man' or 'that Sepik woman'. This enforced and growing openness to difference is the precursor to curiosity about others, a mark of modernity. They have come to understand that they may have obligations to people beyond their language group, a pre-requisite of modernity and a pre-condition for the possibility of human rights activism.

The Howard Government was accurate in its talk of lawlessness and violence in PNG. The question is whether the way they decided to set the world to rights will address the complex fabric of the society in which Ela and her family struggle to survive.

The interventionist remedy, no matter how successful the outcome, humiliates and renders childlike its addressees. It provides grounds for people to consider their self-respect injured. As a form of the resort to authority, it diminishes human beings. The humiliation and infantilisation inherent in such a relationship leads to anger, cynicism or frustration rather than to working partnerships.

Ela's question reminds us that what we do and what decisions we take are often determined by the way we see the world. This is as true for the Australian Government as it is for Ela. It also holds true for the Papua New Guineans who

watch bemused as their country is flooded with 'advisers' and 'personnel', all there to 'prop things up' and 'build their capacity'. They ask one another: 'What are they looking for? Why did they come? Don't they have enough food in their place? Have they run out of land there?'

The justification for the placement of Australian civil servants in PNG came perilously close to an elision from a description of unrest and violence to an ascription to a populace: 'they are a violent people', 'they have little or no respect for human life', 'they are rascals and rapists' and so on. The state of their world ascribed causally to its citizens. 'Seeing' the world in this way justifies intervention as an end in itself: Order needs to be re-established, the Rule of Law restored, and They are not capable of doing it themselves.

In this creation of the Other, lawlessness and violence are implicitly portrayed as local tragedies, locally derived. They are not seen as carrying within them their root causes in the structures, ambitions and values of the past, traditional, colonial and national.

Ela and her sisters, as they move towards modernity, understand that they must struggle to resist ascribing qualities to people as a group: 'The Gailala are like that', or 'Europeans are like that'. At the same time they are caught up in the systems and structures, traditional and modern, colonial and national, which perpetuate abuse, disempowerment, disenfranchisement and hopelessness. The same systems and structures are fuelling the HIV epidemic.

This is not the profile of a country in need of propping up. Rather the most pressing need is for a deeper analysis of the factors which have led to lawlessness and violence, which shape Willie and Ela's lives, and of how change might occur.