



Expedition: The Mountain Speaks

Field Study: Anthropology

Summary: Arita Baaijens lived with the Soabesi, a small tribe of hunters in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea, for two and a half months to research traditional knowledge of the natural world encoded in stories, for her third multi-disciplinary survey under her Living Landscapes project. With the help of the Soabesi, she created a so-called deep map, which includes a detailed, multimedia depiction of the lay of the land, tribal land boundaries, ecology, geography and non-tangible aspects, myths, historical events and memories that tie inhabitants to the land. The process of deep mapping includes sensory observations in the field, storytelling and interviews with local people.

THE EXPEDITION

The Bosavi rainforest and livelihood of the hunter-gatherers who live there are under threat because “significance of place” is often overly simplified and reduced to economics. To reverse that trend and to promote cultural and biological diversity, Baaijens employed deep mapping as a tool to document the cultural and ecological aspects of the landscape.

Baaijens took a treacherous three-day walk through the dense, muddy and mountainous tropical rainforest to reach Seane Falls, a hamlet of about 90 inhabitants. A guide, who was known and trusted by the clan, introduced Baaijens to the community, and a local translator assisted her throughout her stay in the village and on field trips.

Baaijens joined men and women to bush gardens and sago swamps and went on hunting trips and visits to other villages. She joined meetings in the long house, and slept wherever it was convenient. Women villagers were not allowed in the mapmaking process, as men are the customary landowners, and only they are



Baaijens stands at the crater rim of Mount Bosavi with Chief Sigalo and his wife Sotobea.



WHO

Arita Baaijens

WHAT

A study that used deep mapping to learn about an indigenous community and the way its members interact with nature

WHEN

Nov. 22, 2016 - Feb. 3, 2017

WHERE

Mount Bosavi, Southern Highlands, Papua New Guinea

WHY

To learn about the Soabesi and help its members create a plan to preserve the Bosavi rainforest and secure their livelihood

allowed to tell the stories connected to the land. Those stories often required that the storyteller and the explorer travel, sometimes long distances, to the place where the story had happened.

EXPEDITION GOALS

The goals of the expedition were to:

- Observe how the unique ecosystem of Mount Bosavi and its crater have influenced the Soabesi language, culture and worldview.
- Introduce deep mapping as a tool to document the physical landscape, as well as the unseen yet felt meaning of native flora, fauna and sacred natural sites that shape the identity and character of the Soabesi homeland.
- Use participatory mapping as a tool to empower the local community to stand up for their way of life and land rights.
- Weave a vision for the future and help design a plan of action to preserve the forest and secure the livelihood of the Kosua.



Yagumè in Seane Falls wearing traditional dress.

EXPEDITION RESULTS

The Soabesi represent a rich and complex orally-based culture. Almost every tree, stone, river and place in their homeland has a story, legend or myth attached to it. Moral lessons, as well as memories and a shared history, are written in the landscape. The relationship between humans and nature (spirits) is reciprocal. Sound and touch, more than vision, define sense of place.

The tribe's language and music are strongly shaped by the landscape, especially the volcano, the source of creation. In the crater live powerful nature beings, or spirits. Out of respect, a special "crater" language must be spoken inside the enormous crater, and no reference must be made to the outside world. Baaijens recorded 13 birds that, according to locals, convey a message. A certain song of the Tenene (black-sided robin) means: "Don't go near the river, it will flood." (And it did.) Hunters report that the small Nene (Tawny Grass bird) predicts the catch of the day: wild pig, cassowary or cascas. Dreams can convey important messages from nature, spirits and ancestors. All dreams originate from Halasé, a group of ponds created by a landslide nearby.

Deep mapping proved to be an excellent practice to collect information in a relatively short time about the meaning of landscape and the natural world. The process sparked discussions about the future of the clan and the preservation of their homeland. The village chief organized meetings with clan members to discuss and complete the map together. Two young male students were told to add images of birds, trees, spirits, rivers and rocks of significance while elders told stories. The map was used as a document to discuss a vision for the future:

- Would the clan actively protect the land or sell out to extracting companies?
- Would the clan proclaim no-hunting zones?
- What options did they have for income generation activities?
- Did they wish to cooperate with organizations to achieve their goals?

The community wishes to combine nature protection and income-generating activities, and they agreed to seek the assistance of Dr. Bas Verschuuren of Wageningen University. During winter of 2017, Verschuuren will visit Seane Falls to help design a community protocol which expresses the Soabesi vision and strategy for the future. The community seeks cooperation with universities to set up a biological research station in the area for students and seeks to explore if and how the crater can become a nature reserve,



One of the many caves in the land of the Kosua tribe, which borders on Soabesi territory. On the right: customary landowner and guide Talex with his son.

managed by the local community. Income generating activities such as high-end safaris for a handful of visitors per year could also provide a small but steady income. Baaijens is working on articles and interviews for several media outlets, as well as a multimedia presentation for general audiences.

Finally, the Soabesi caught and released three animals that, according to the Kosua, no outsider had seen before:

- A giant lizard, that had huge claws and forked tongue and attacks humans. It measured 192 cm or 75 inches, but can grow to more than nine feet long.
- A giant rat, a subspecies of the Woolly rat.
- A tree-climbing nocturnal mammal even the Kosua had not seen before. Baaijens has not yet verified this claim and identified the animal.

CHALLENGES FACED

In the late 1990s, the Soabesi clan refused pressure from the Papua New Guinea government to sign a contract with commercial logging companies in exchange for money. More recently, Exxon wanted to build a gas pipeline through Soabesi land. The clan did not agree and negotiated an alternative route for the pipeline along the Kosua land boundary. The Kosua are generally self-sufficient, but they want to earn more money to pay for school, health care and to buy items like mosquito nets or mattresses to sleep on. It is not clear for how long the clan will be able to resist offers from extraction companies in return for resources. For this clan, the forest and the crater represent the spiritual heart of the world, so they want to preserve them.

Some challenges faced during this expedition:

- Baaijens said nothing could have prepared her for the physical challenges a humid, mountainous, muddy and claustrophobic dense rainforest presents.
- The Soabesi live so remotely and are so cut off from the “civilized” world that it is very difficult to reach out to them or assist the clan from afar.
- A lack of power and technology was an inhibitor to the clan’s progress. Baaijens is



Forest fruits. The forest provides medicine, food, materials and shelter.



Amos and Sinai Sigalo demonstrate how to ignite a flame the old way.

looking for sponsors for a solar panel, lap top and a modem.

- Jealousy between clans and border issues between clans affected Baaijens' work, and she could not go everywhere she had wished to go.

EXPEDITION FUNDING

This expedition was self-funded. A grant was also provided by WINGS WorldQuest.

ABOUT THE EXPLORER

Arita Baaijens is a Dutch biologist and award-winning explorer and writer. Thirty years ago she gave up her job as an environmental affairs consultant and has been pursuing her dream of exploring the world ever since. She has completed over 25 desert expeditions on camel, is the first woman to have crossed the Western Desert of Egypt solo on camel and the first to circumambulate the Altai Mountains in Central Asia on horseback. She blends science, art and indigenous knowledge in her surveys. She employs innovative techniques to blend sensory, geographical, ecological and cultural information in multi-layered maps that can aid and empower indigenous communities to stand up for their way of life and land rights.



A live tree kangaroo captured in the Bosavi crater.



Soabesi elders drew a map of their territory. The stories and myths connected to rivers, rocks and places on the map had to be told where they had happened.

EXPEDITION TEAM
Arita Baaijens

CONTACT INFORMATION:
www.aritabaaijens.nl



WINGS WORLDQUEST

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

www.wingsworldquest.org
info@wingsworldquest.org