

So we will know we are family

Petrus Almet has been a friend of mine for more than twenty years. He is a subsistence farmer and the patriarch of a clan in the mountains of South Central Timor, Indonesia. In recent years the clan has become a bit scattered, with a number of the younger generation leaving the village for college and employment in the larger towns. Like many tribal elders, Petrus is concerned that over time people will lose their sense of connection to the village and their appreciation for tribal traditions.

One day several years ago we received an invitation from Petrus to come to the village. He was going to put a new roof on his house. To appreciate the amount of work that involved, it is helpful to know that the traditional Timorese house is shaped like a very large beehive, with the thatched roof extending nearly to the ground (see photo). Huge quantities of grass have to be cut from the surrounding savannah, then bound in small



bundles and tied to the framework of the roof in layers. A well-made roof will last from 10-15 years.

When we arrived in the village we were surprised to find nearly a hundred people gathered, including various cousins and inlaws and a number of civil servants and college students who had come up from town. The women were busy cooking while the men were gathering thatching material and removing the old grass from the roof. Lacking the requisite skills to be of much use during the process, we took up our place

among a large group of elders who were sitting around the perimeter of the house watching, telling stories, and sharing betel nut. Petrus came and joined us.

“There are two ways to do this,” he explained. “For not very much money I could have hired local laborers to do the job. But I decided to do it according to Timorese tradition, which means I have to invite my wife’s family and all the aunts and uncles and cousins on my father’s side, and we all do it together. Then we have a feast to celebrate the completion of the work. This is going to cost me a cow, several pigs, and who knows how much rice.”

I knew Petrus was no fool, but it puzzled me that he had gone to such expense just to keep tradition. So why did he do it this way?

“It’s worth it,” he said. “If we don’t do this, how will we know we are family? If we don’t come together to work and eat and tell stories, they will all just go their own ways, and that will be the end of us.”

In the years since then I have often remembered this story whenever I reflect on the considerable investment of time and money that is often needed to maintain the human bonds of community. That is certainly what a lot of our work in the Church is about, including the very expensive matter of sending and receiving international missionaries. In economic terms it is difficult to measure the “cost effectiveness” of such investments (although you can find a pretty good effort at an analysis of “social capital” in Robert Putnam’s book, *Bowling Alone*). But whenever I am called upon to explain why, in this day and age, we still need missionaries and mission boards and board meetings, I remember Petrus’s words. *We do this so we will know we are family.*

-- John Campbell-Nelson

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