

## 4

# On oral history and local calendars: experiences in the field in Papua New Guinea

Robin Mearns

### • Local calendars and nutritional studies

Anthropometric means of assessing nutritional status among children are often criticised for comparing unlike with unlike. Jelliffe's standard tables, for example, are scarcely valid if you are comparing the nutritional status of school aged children in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, whose diets are typically deficient in protein, with that of children of a similar age in Europe or North America. However, anthropometric techniques, relying on measurements of a child's height-for-age or weight-for-age, provide a useful means for comparing the nutritional status of two sample groups of children within the same overall population. Measuring height and weight in the field presents few problems other than logistical ones. Telling someone's age however, can be a whole new ball game.

In many parts of the Southern Highlands in Papua New Guinea, there are only very incomplete written records of the birth dates of children older than six or seven years. For those children at school, the school register does include a column for age or year of birth. You only notice the problem when a first-year schoolchild, aged seven, stands before you with a healthy stubble on his chin. Naturally, if he is in Grade One at school, it stands to reason that he is seven years old. For children not at school, you do not even have the school register guesstimate to go on.

Constructing a local calendar is a good way of overcoming the problem of putting ages to people. The oral record of important local events is often very accurate and widely known. For example, I was able to match the

ages of some people to the date the local airstrip was built, in 1961, an event which heralded great change in the area. Their parents' ages you could sometimes judge by the dates of the 'first contact' patrols to pass through these remote parts of New Guinea, in this case during the 1930s. Once a range of reference ages had been set in this way, you could ask mothers whether their second-born was born before or after another woman's child known to her, and of known age, and so on. Laborious work perhaps, but fascinating as well as fruitful in the end.

### • Oral history

Oral history is an engrossing subject in itself. In one area where I worked, Upper Mendi in the Southern Highlands, a number of old men I spoke to remembered very clearly the first contacts they had with white outsiders. Kumape of Egari village and Pondo of Komia village remembered them best. There were three very distinct events which had made a very deep impression on them. Two of these were Australian patrols during the 1930s, one administrative, and an earlier one by gold prospectors. I spoke to several people in different villages about these, and tried as far as possible to match their recollections to the reports of the patrol officers and the script of a radio interview given by one of the prospectors. Suffice to say there was a mismatch. Perhaps the latter's story was censored for Australian radio, though I doubt it.

The 'third time', so the old men's stories go, was during the Second World War when a number of fighter planes flew over Upper Mendi travelling from Wewak on the north

coast towards Port Moresby on the south coast. The noise of the aircraft was at first baffling. Everyone looked around on the ground to see where it was coming from. The eventual sight of many, planes stacked in the sky proved to be unforgettable; the men took great delight in demonstrating with their hands what it looked like.

Finally, oral history serves at least two additional purposes for the fieldworker. Not only can it be used for dating and putting ages to people, as mentioned above for nutritional studies, and as I also found in trying to put a timescale on local vegetation change, but it is also an excellent way to break the ice with people, where you may want to discuss many other things more directly related to 'development research'. While I was researching access to land through clan linkages, land disputes and vegetation change, getting people to tell me their stories made a refreshing change when we got bored with these matters!

- **Robin Mearns**, Institute of Development Studies, Sussex and International Institute of Environment and Development, Brighton BN19RE, UK.