

**On the Threshold of Change:
The Women of Monkey River Village, Belize**

March 2005

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Introduction

Monkey River Village, a small community along the southern coast of Belize has been described as resting on the “cusp of development”. Yet, what does that mean? And more specifically, what does that mean for its residents? During early March 2005, a select group of Penn State students visited Monkey River Village in order to attempt to answer this question. Through interviews and observation, the students ambioned to formulate a portrait of life in Monkey River Village in order to estimate what kind of changes “development” might bring, especially with respect to women’s roles within the community. As mentioned previously, development is a rather nebulous term. It brings with it multiple connotations, which vary widely among audiences, especially between industrialized and non-industrialized nations. For the purposes of this particular case study, let us equate development primarily with the two principle modifications identified by Monkey River Village residents as the first and most important advancements within their community: expansion of the tourist industry and twenty-four hour electricity.

Although the community consists of less than 200 residents, Monkey River Village is nonetheless diverse in its opinions and ambitions relating to the future. The following personal profiles serve as representative vignettes of the women of Monkey River Village. They are field interviews conducted by Penn State students during their week of research in the community. The individuals selected do not represent trends or generalities in opinion among the women of Monkey River Village. Rather, the following interviews were selected in order to demonstrate divergent opinions. Interestingly, the first two personal profiles with older members of the community, represent more “progressive” attitudes, while the later profiles with younger women

may be described as showcasing more “traditional” opinions. In some respects, these younger women may have been expressing more traditional attitudes in regard to women’s opportunities, rights, and liberties because of their more limited life experiences outside the village. The older women in this study were better educated and had lived outside the village for many years. We have changed our informant’s identities in this report in order to help protect their privacy.

Ms. Jones: St. Stephen’s Anglican School Director

Family life is central to the people living in Monkey River Village. Children remain close to their siblings and parents throughout adulthood; many sons and daughters give up economic opportunity elsewhere to live with their aging parents in the village and raise children of their own. In a community of tightly woven extended families, traditional values and attitudes are passed through mothers and fathers, and very little seems to change with the passage of time. When women in the community were asked whether the traditional division of labor frustrated them, they asserted that “women have always cared for the house and the children, and men have earned money outside the home, and this is the way it has always been.” The lives led by parents and grandparents are looked at as examples, and parental influence on children continues throughout adulthood.

Yet for some, life circumstances dramatically change this transference of traditional beliefs. For Ms. Jones, the school director of Monkey River Village, a chance circumstance in childhood dramatically changed the course of her life. In 1943, at the age of 9, she was sent to live with an Aunt in a nearby town.

“My going to Placencia was an accident actually. I had an Aunt who needed somebody to help her, and she asked for my older sister. But my mother needed my older sister’s help more, and I was a sickly child, and so she sent me. It was a good accident, but I didn’t see it that way then, of course. It wasn’t easy to moving out of a family of eight of us to a place where I didn’t know anybody and

the household was run very strictly. But I adjusted.”

The move to Placencia shaped the rest of her life; Ms. Jones continued with her schooling there, and later moved to Belize City to get her diploma, which at that time was the only city in the country with public high schools. She continued on to college, earning her associate’s degree in teaching, and began her career as a teacher in the late 1950s. Ms. Jones was very unique in her accomplishments: not one of her seven siblings had the opportunity to finish high school. By attending school in Placencia and experiencing the world outside of Monkey River Village, Ms. Jones’s perspective began to diverge from that of her mother, who lived a life close to home, keeping house and raising eight children. Like Ms. Jones’s father, who worked as a carpenter, her mother did not have a desire to see the world outside of Monkey River Village.

“I think my outlook on life is different, from my mother’s. I think she was generally satisfied with the life she led with my father, but I desired more. I think it’s because I moved out of Monkey River and saw a different kind of life.”

In addition to shaping her own life, the opportunities that Ms. Jones experienced also had a significant impact on the attitudes and aspirations of the children she raised. After marrying a husband who valued girls’ education as much as she, Ms. Jones had four children, and worked hard to teach them the way she thought best:

“We gave them a lot of attention, saw that they had a proper high school education, we tried to inculcate Christian values in them, and gave them whatever opportunity we could.”

The emphasis she placed on education with her own children resulted in significantly different career outcomes from those of her siblings, who became farmers, traders, fishermen, and tour guides. Her eldest son became a senior customs officer, her middle son moved to the US, her youngest son works as a consultant for the ministry of works, and her daughter works for the Peace Corps. When asked whether her own parents valued education the way in which she does,

Ms. Jones exclaimed:

“Now that is something I wonder because they themselves were pretty literate; we used to read quite a lot, and in those days, a primary school education was almost like a high school education. But I don’t think they tried hard enough for us, and especially for the girls. I think they still had that policy that girls did not need an education.”

Possibly most demonstrative of Ms. Jones’s commitment to education and gender equality is the career success of her daughter. Traditionally, educational and job opportunities in Belize are more limited for girls than those for boys, and Ms. Jones’s unique opportunity to pursue both a college education and a career in her own life led her to raise her sons and daughter with the expectation that all her children (boys and girls alike) would finish school and start a career. Often the challenges were greater for her daughter; at times Ms. Jones had speak with her daughter’s teachers to ensure that she was being treated fairly in the classroom. Ms. Jones’s emphatic support of her daughter’s education marked not only a schism with the attitudes that marked her own upbringing, but also with traditional cultural attitudes. Ms. Jones is a woman who experienced unique life circumstances, earned a degree and started a career against many odds, successfully raised children with uniquely gender-equal perspectives. Fortunately, for the community of Monkey River Village, her work does not stop there.

As an educator, Ms. Jones has the opportunity to influence and shape the ideas and perspectives of her students. Each day, she combats the gender-biased beliefs that her students, both girls and boys, bring into the classroom:

“The girls’ outlook from the beginning is that when they reach a certain age they will take somebody [to marry] and the boys will go out to sea. I have a hard time convincing some of the boys here to continue on with their high school education.”

In other communities in Belize, traditional gender roles discourage girls and encourage boys to go to school, creating a gender bias in favor of boys. But in Monkey River Village, traditional gender roles manage to discourage both boys and girls from pursuing an education, and sometimes more seriously hamper the ambitions of boys:

“I wish I could change the attitude of some of the boys, away from just fishing, the feeling that because their father succeeded without an education that they can do the same. We have tried to train them to remember that this is a changing world, and no matter how we would want to keep the rest of the world out, the changes will come to Monkey River. And unless they are equipped they will find themselves left behind.”

Because boys want to follow closely in the footsteps of their fathers, and they see that their fathers succeed without formal education, they have little motivation to continue on in school.

For the girls of Monkey River Village, attitudes are changing slowly but surely; there are many female role models in the community, such as Ms. Jones, the three female school teachers, and the Village Chairperson, Ms. Smith, who set positive examples for girls in the village. Monkey River Village is unique in the amount of female leadership it has, and this has led to an increasing interest in girls’ education. Also, high school education has become significantly more accessible in recent years. Students can travel to the town of Independence each day to attend school and return to Monkey River Village in the evening, instead of boarding there during the week, which was previously required of high school students.

Ms. Jones is pragmatic in her hopes for her students. She wants as many of her students as possible to continue on to high school, but she also sees the need for providing skills-based training to children who are less academically inclined. She hopes the girls of Monkey River Village have the opportunity to get a job and be independent, something that she believes is too infrequent in Monkey River Village. She cares deeply for the children of Monkey River Village. At the age of 71, she works extremely long hours, waking up at 4:00am each day to begin her

preparations for school. She sees so much that could be done to improve the lives of children in the community and the school itself, but as one individual, she knows she cannot do it all. Ms. Jones recognizes that she had more opportunities than her mother, and her children had more opportunities than her. She sees progress occurring in the Belize, and her hopes are high for the coming generations.

Yet progress in Monkey River Village is tinged with ambivalence; the more education children receive, the less job opportunity they will have as adults in the community. Ironically, as opportunities open up to the community, more people are forced to move out for greater job prospects. Ms. Jones understands that if people need jobs they will leave the village, but her hope is that more will return to Monkey River to raise children, and give back to the community as she has done in her later years.

Ms. Eleanor Smith: Village Council

“I always believed that the community supports you and you support the community.”

Community. It is a concept upon which Eleanor Smith, Village Chairperson of Monkey River Village, has valued her entire adult life and professional career. Monkey River Village is a tiny seaside village whose tranquil life mimics the lazy rhythm of the sea, which in all senses serves as the livelihood of the village. The sea provides food, jobs, and represents the village’s principle connection to the outside world. However, unlike the sea, whose vastness conveys a sense of eternity, Monkey River Village is dying. Just a couple of years ago, it was a town, but due to a decreasing population, the community has been degraded to a village. If things continue as they are, in the next couple of years, even village may be too ambitious of a title.

What problems are slowly choking off this village? Well, in one sense, economic progress and changing expectations among the Younger residents. While the leisure rhythm of the tides yields a lifestyle of lazy bliss, it does not generate the ambition and work ethic necessary to be competitive in an ever-globalizing world. Ms. Smith observes, "I always believed that the community supports you and you support the community. That idea just doesn't sit with many people though. They lack the work ethic. They just sit around, doing nothing." After returning to the small town in which she was born following twenty years of residence in the United States and limited contact with Monkey River Village, Ms. Smith observed, "I saw the problem Monkey River had: low education." Although Ms. Smith explains her return to Monkey River Village as an accident, she affirms that her staying was completely by choice. She has set lofty goals for herself, goals, which judging by her record thus far, she will successfully see through.

Upon her return to Monkey River Village in the late eighties, Ms. Smith immediately set to initiating change. Channeling her efforts through the school and church, her primary targets were the children. Paying out of her own pocket, she hired a young woman, a recent high school graduate to teach elementary school classes. She also convinced a retired teacher to reassume her position. Quickly, Ms. Smith had doubled the teachers and classroom in the village. Education was and is Ms. Smith's primary focus. She has pushed for earlier education and, even more important, more fervent support on the part of the family:

"I'd like to see younger education. They should put kids in school at four. There is a big difference between those who start at four and five. There is little support from parents, both from lack of interest and lack of ability. I would like to at least see parents emphasize the importance of learning. If I win one child every year, I think that I have accomplished something. Have the education so that if you want to use it, you have it. I have always loved people. I work because I want a better life. I saw my mother as dependent on my father. I didn't want that."

This emphasis on education comes from a woman who herself did not finish high school. Rather, at sixteen she dropped out and started working, occasionally taking free courses offered either in Belize City or New York, her two residences after leaving Monkey River, and trying to self-educate through constantly reading. Despite her lack of education, Ms. Smith has led a successful life. She credits this success to a strong work ethic, recalling how she often worked two jobs while in New York City and lamenting on how this affected her family. Thirty years ago, Ms. Smith explains, one could get by with limited education, but today things are changing. In reference to her world with the local school, “I try to emphasize reading, and not only reading, but reading comprehension with the children. The world is changing. You have to be able to survive. Even fishing requires filling out forms.”

Despite her good intentions and dedication to improving education in Monkey River Village, Ms. Smith met disconcerting opposition during the early years of her work: “Not everyone was happy. Monkey River needed help, and people recognized that, but they didn’t want me to do it. They said that I was this American who wanted to change everything. They slowly came around though once they started seeing their kids go to high school.” Eventually attitudes began to change, and they still are changing. In a way, it is killing the village.

Young people with a high school degree and career ambitions are leaving Monkey River in search of employment. It creates a difficult dilemma: how can Monkey River encourage education and professional ambition, while maintaining a vibrant community? Ms. Smith struggles in particular with this conflict,

“I just wish that Monkey River had the professional and intellectual opportunities to attract young, educated people. It kills a town when all of the educated people leave to find work. Kids don’t have anyone to look up to. This is why Monkey River is no longer a town. Not it is just a village. I want the children to continue their education and use it. Maybe, you know with the internet, they can work for

larger companies from the village. Now you can work from your computer anywhere. Maybe that is a solution.”

While it is difficult, if not impossible, to have the prescience to know exactly how to precede, no one would challenge the benefits of increased education, especially for women.

As a small, traditional village, Monkey River is slightly less than progressive with respect to society's opinions concerning women and their roles within the family and community.

“There's this idea that *men are men*,” explains Ms. Smith. This idea has been perpetuated across generations. Traditional ideas are slow to change, especially when women do not have equal access to the economic market. Ms. Smith is hoping to change that through increased education. As she says, “I would like to see less dependency among women. That is hard to change though because women don't have paying jobs. Opportunities are so limited, but these women know nothing else. When you get married you take not only a husband to care for, but you also inherit your father-in-law and any sons that you might have.” Ms. Smith credits her own mother's dependence on her father as inspiration for her to gain economic independence as a young woman. As much as Ms. Smith values community support, she places more value upon individual independence. In fact, when Ms. Smith spoke about the most important qualities for a women in Monkey River Village to possess, she answered:

“Independence. She should be able to take care of children and family if husband were to die. She should have the self-confidence to go after something that she wants. There is nothing to say that you can't. Granted, you may not get something when you want it. But there is nothing to say that you can't get it eventually if you work hard enough.”

Danette Brown: Cook/Waitress/Housekeeper at the *Sunset* (one of Monkey River Village's two hotels)

“That's why Dandrea so close to my mother, not me anymore. She doesn't love me much,” responded Danette Brown when asked about her 7-year-old daughter Dandrea. The

mournful look in her eyes and the solemn tone of her voice testify to the difficulties faced by women in Monkey River Village. Despite its location along the beautiful Caribbean Sea, life in Monkey River Village falls far short of paradise.

Danette Brown is a 24-year-old single mother working in Monkey River Village. She has lived there her entire life, excepting brief stints in nearby towns trying to secure work. During each of these trips, which lasted several weeks, she had to leave and leave her daughter behind. The separation has obviously put a strain on her relationship with her daughter, who according to Danette, looks to Danette's mother rather than to herself for maternal affection. Unfortunately, Danette's case is not unusual within this small town. Many women, abandoned by the fathers of their children, have to travel throughout Belize in order to find work, work that usually consists of waiting tables or cleaning rooms in a tourist hotel. With high rates of extra-marital births and generally low parental participation among single men, women must rely on their sisters, aunts, mothers, and grandmothers in order to raise their children. As Danette explains, "A lot of the women wouldn't mind working, but they don't want to leave home." Unfortunately, in the attempt to earn extra money and improve the quality of life for their families, many women ultimately sacrifice the close bond normally shared between a mother and her children. This is Danette's chief regret. As she relates, Dandrea seemed somewhat detached from Danette when she returned to Monkey River Village. Her sorrow is obvious, conveyed openly in her voice as she admits that Dandrea would rather be with her grandmother than with her mom. This is just one of the struggles that a woman must face if she decides to leave Monkey River Village in search of jobs.

A distinct, yet related problem facing the women of Monkey River Village is that of low education. When asked about high school, Danette responded, "I had to finish early because my

brother was graduating and my mother could only afford one.” Funding for high school is difficult to secure, especially in a town with such a limited cash flow. While scholarships are available, not everyone qualifies, leaving many children with no other option than to drop out before completing the mandatory twelve years. Generations of uneducated women have unfortunately created a misconception among today’s children; they do not see the need for higher education. Despite increases in funding and support for a high school education, the younger girls continue to demonstrate scant interest in furthering their education beyond primary school. Danette is an example of this trend, dropping out simply because she did not like going to school. Does she regret her decision? That is difficult to say. She has made no attempt to return to school. She does, however, stress the importance of education to her daughter. When we asked her what she wanted for her daughter, she said, “I want her to leave and get a better opportunity.” Danette equated this opportunity with higher education. Although as young girl Danette did not herself highly value education, as a mom, she now recognizes its importance, especially for women.

In Monkey River Village, antiquated gender roles prevail: women are expected to stay home and do all the housework and care for the children, while men get formal jobs and earn the family income. Most mothers don’t like their girls playing sports because they feel that it is only something that little boys should do. She wished that she could do some of the men’s’ work and that is why she decided to become part of the tour guide association. When we asked what her biggest accomplishment was, she responded by saying, “probably when I helped my mother to build her house and to pay for supplies. I did more than my brother.” It was hard work and she was extremely proud to show everyone that she was capable of doing a man’s job and more. She

helped lay cement, put up boards, and paint the house. It gave her a sense of accomplishment to be able to repay her mother for all the help that she had provided her raising Dandrea.

With time and across generations, thought and opinions evolve. There are marked differences between the way in which children were raised ten or fifteen years ago in comparison to now. For better or worse, children are granted more liberties. Danette confesses that as a Young girl, she was not even allowed to walk around the village without parental supervision. A more relaxed parenting approach is obviously visible now. According to Danette, “there is less discipline... the kids have grown up faster. A lot of stuff I didn’t know at that age the kids know now, like where babies come from. You just ask and they tell you.” The evolution of parenting is not unique to Monkey River Village, and it cannot be seen as either better or worse than parenting styles in previous years. Children are now afforded more opportunities and learn more than their parents were taught, but through this increased exposure, they are learning about the realities of sex and violence at younger ages. Within Monkey River Village, increased exposure has also opened their eyes to the increased opportunities that lie beyond their small hometown village.

Malvary Hall: Tour Guide

“It’s tradition.”

As Malvary Hall explains, it is because of tradition that things remain the same in this small village. It is the main reason why men and women differ in behavior, opportunity, and quality of life. It is because of tradition that the women of Monkey River Village engage almost solely in domestic work. They complete daily household chores such as cooking, cleaning, washing, and tending to the children. Traditionally, Little to no income was brought into the

family on the part of a woman. As tradition, it is accepted. When asked if she was bothered by the marked distinction between men and women related to work, Malvary responded, “No, they (men) go out and bring the money home.” Yet, despite this seemingly second-class citizenship awarded to women, it is the women who constitute the backbone of the Monkey River Village community. As a result of Hurricane Ivan, which devastated the village in 1998, there has been a great loss in family income and job opportunity in Monkey River Village. Many families moved away when their homes were destroyed by the horrific winds, and as a result, jobs and businesses were eliminated. The loss of jobs and population is now seen as the biggest threat against the community. In fact, in her interview, Malvary identified increased job opportunities as the number one thing what would improve lives of women in Monkey River Village. Families continue to abandon Monkey River Village in search of employment; with each family that leaves, the lives for those left in Monkey River Village seems to become more and more difficult.

It is because of local culture and “tradition” that men remain the primary earners within families; however, all traditions evolve, and the devastation wrought by Hurricane Ivan has initiated some recent changes. Malvary, for instance, is a local tour guide, a position previously held solely by men. She is one of three women in Monkey River Village to have earned tour guide certification. Unfortunately, however, she has yet to give a tour on her own. As all tours require boat transportation, she will need to earn her Motor Craft certification first. Currently, she simply assists her father as he leads local groups. Her brother has shown little support for Malvary’s interest in becoming a tour guide.

Woman such as Malvary who seek employment outside of the home have become more numerous in recent years. One of the reasons for this change is due to the education that the

children are receiving in Monkey River Village. “Schooling is much easier [to access] and better than when I went to school.” When Malvary was in school there was not a nice school house, supplies, textbooks, and there were more students and less teachers. Children in Monkey River Village are now starting school when they are 3 or 4 years old. She expressed her joy that her son would have a better education and schooling. When asked why it’s important her son to have an education and her response was, “ I want him to get a best education. If they don’t have an education then he can’t get a job.” Malvary emphasized how important it was for him to receive a higher education, stating that she wanted him to go as far academically as he could and that she would have to make sacrifices in order for him to do that. Although finding a good job might require her son to leave Monkey River Village, Malvary was fine with him leaving. She said, “if he wants to move its okay. I love it here. I will stay here.” The education in Monkey River Village seems to be improving and moving away from the traditional roles of boys staying in school longer than the girls. Both are now presented with the opportunity of higher education even though many do not make it that far.

Malvary felt that the children today in Monkey River Village are much different from when she was a child. Beyond the better education that the children were receiving she felt that the children have less restrictions and more freedom. Malvary and other women in the community expressed how the kids aren’t kept at home and in sight as much as they use to be. Malvary explained that Monkey River Village is a very quiet place without any crime, “it’s a good place to raise children.” However with the idea of the community being safe, the children are allowed to wander more and end up causing more mischief themselves. When asked what she would do when she saw another Young boy being mischievous she replied that she would scold them or spank them. She stated that the children had more opportunities (such as schooling) but

also had more stuff (such as toys) that she never had a child.

Monkey River Village is unique in many ways and its difficult to witness the uniqueness be overrun by commercialized western ideas. As the same time, however, transcultural and global exchanges can also lead to mutually beneficial evolutions of tradition. Women such as Malvary are just the beginning of the progress being made in Monkey River Village to modernize. Most women long to see more jobs in Monkey River and also to see their children go to high school or college. The irony is that the reason they want their children to seek higher education is to find a better job, but the majority of the time the jobs are outside Monkey River Village. If the educated students could return to Monkey River Village and start their own jobs and businesses in Monkey River, then Monkey River Village's employment issues would slowly be resolved. Until then, there will remain a lack of jobs, income, and perhaps a continuing increase in the number of families who leave Monkey River Village. Traditions of Monkey River are somewhat on the decline, but many of those who grew up there won't want to leave their homes. They want to make it better. Malvary is one of those people. Malvary stated, "there's no place like home."

Conclusion

A small community, with limited access to surrounding towns, Monkey River Village is quiet, safe, quaint community. Just as these rural qualities constitute the core characteristics valued by its residents, they also threaten to undermine the village's future prosperity. Increased emphasis on education, especially among girls, juxtaposed with decreased job opportunities has created a schism within the community. The more progressive individuals, those who aspire to a high school education and beyond, are leaving Monkey River Village in search of jobs. Those

who stay behind carry the burden of maintaining community traditions, traditions that must evolve in the face of new economic and social realities.

These women's viewpoints serve to illustrate the growing tension within the Monkey River Village community. Although one would hesitate to draw too many conclusions regarding community dynamics and opinions from the opinions expressed, these participants were selected with the intention of demonstrating contrasting views with regards to the future of Monkey River Village and specifically with respect to transitioning gender roles. Monkey River Village stands upon a threshold, straddling tradition and evolution. Traditional stereotypes and gender roles have typically limited women's opportunities in education and employment. As women venture into new endeavors beyond the domestic, the community dynamic will undoubtedly change. The ability for Monkey River Village to embrace this change will ultimately determine the sustainability of the community. Petering on the "cusp of development," it is difficult to ascertain what lies in the future for this small community.