

# **The Ketengban people of the greater Nongme area and their environment**



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# Introduction

The Ketengban people inhabit an area on the north-eastern side of the central mountain range in the Indonesian Province of Papua, on the island of New Guinea.

They live in an elevation varying from 6500 feet in the mountainous region to 1500 feet in the northern hills and number between 12000-14000 people<sup>1</sup>

Ketengban language has been classified as Papuan stock and part of the Mek family in the Trans new guinea phylum. There are four different dialects: the Central, Eastern, Western and North-eastern, though all are mutually intelligible<sup>2</sup>

Bounded in the east by Eipomek and the Mek Language, to the west by Apmisibil and the Nggalum language, and to the northwest bordering the less inhabited lowlands, were people speak the more unknown Lepki and Yetfa languages.

Due to its remote location, contact with the outside world began relatively late by New Guinea standards, it first saw foreign missionaries in the mid-seventies and the first airstrips were subsequently strategically built. Today many people belong to the GIDI (protestant) church, and there is usually a simple church built in every large village.

There are 7 airstrips in the area: Aboyi, Borme, Bime, Nongme, Okbab, Omban and Yapil. These functions as hubs for trade and transportation, which are serviced depending on requests, from Sentani by MAF (Mission Aviation Fellowship) Yajasi and AMA (Associated Mission Aviation).

The Nongme Valley area is located in one of the last hillsides before the lowland zone and the border to Lepki speaking people.

Coordinates for the Nongme airstrip is: S4 15.780 E140 11.894 and Altitude are 2779 feet.

Distance to to the provincial capital of Jayapura is approximately 220km (Approx. 50min with Cessna). Distance to other important trade centres that sometimes are reached by foot by villagers are: Wamena (140km, Approx. 1 week of walking) and Oksibil ( 75km Approx. 5 days of walking).

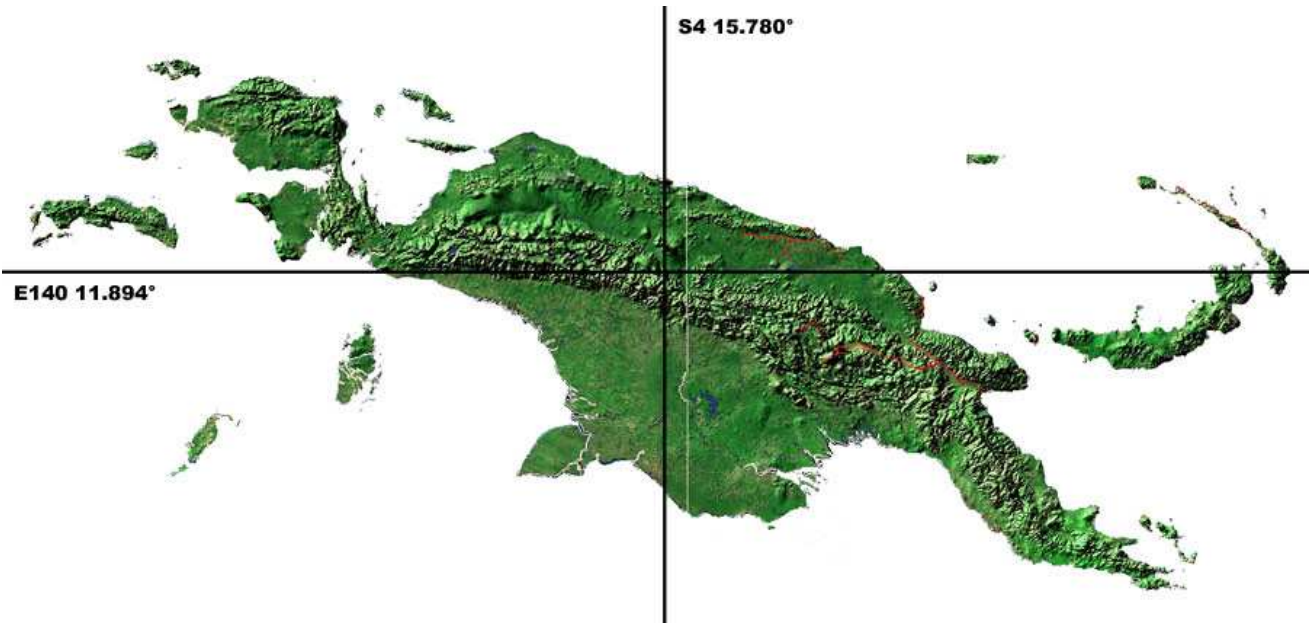
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<sup>1</sup>Grimes: 2000

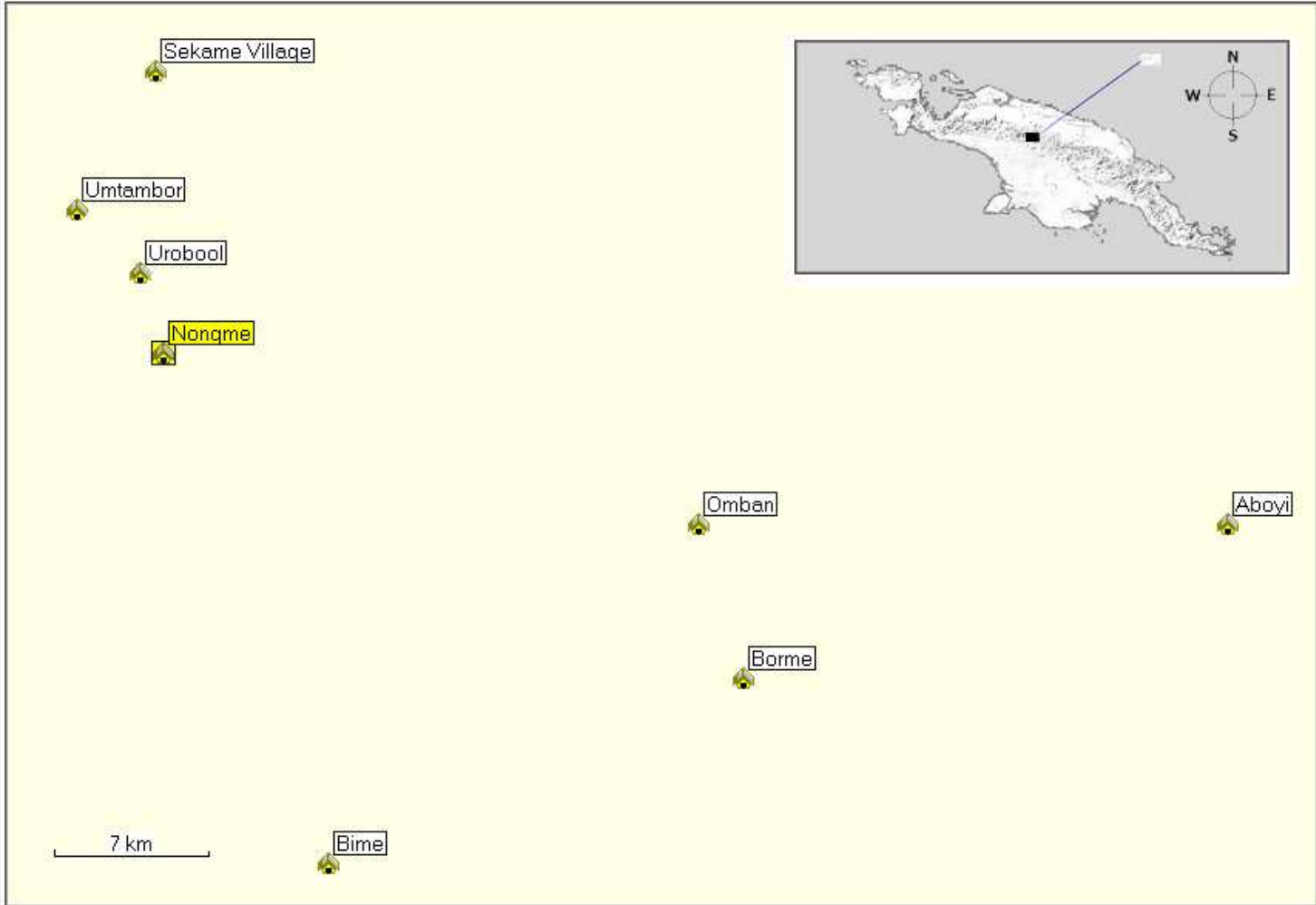
<sup>2</sup> Sims and Sims: Ritual and relationships in the valley of the sun, The Ketengban of Irian jaya

Due to the low altitude, temperature and humidity in this northern area of the Ketengban are moderately higher than in the mountainous regions. The vegetation and animal life here resembles a transition zone between the central highlands and the lowlands.

These slight differences in ecology naturally produce slight differences between the Ketengban people living in the lowland hill zone and the Ketengban people living higher in the mountains. There can be observed differences in habitations, crops produced, materials available in the forest, and material culture.



# Coordinates for larger villages within the Ketengban tribal area



Aboyi	S4 20.0	E140 38.0	
Bime	S4 30.0	E140 16.0	
Borme	S4 23.740	E140 26.100	
Omban	S4 20.0	E140 25.0	
Nongme	S4 15.780	E140 11.894	Elevation: 2779feet
Sekame	S4 08.891	E140 11.687	Elevation: 1671feet
Urubool	S4 13.838	E140 11.305	Elevation: 3356feet
Umtambor	S4 12.303	E140 09.745	Elevation: 4475feet



# 1. Hamlets and Settlements

Nongme is the village where an airstrip is located and it consists of more than 50 households with a village administration building, a church and a radio-operator. Pristine forest covers almost the entire area, except for the land that has been cleared for settlements or gardens. The largest of the hamlets in the area are Umtambor and Sekame, and each of them consists of around 30 households. Smaller hamlets are Ruboi, Yokom, and Urubool that do have smaller populations.

People have settled in strategic living grounds in areas that offer reasonable distances to suitable land and available natural resources. People have also been known to move if a more suitable place is discovered, or if suspicious deaths have occurred in the area they live.

Distances between households and gardens can reach several kilometres, therefore there are often temporary huts built here to accommodate people working in the gardens, as villagers sometimes choose to stay for days to work.

Hamlets and villages in the area are connected by footpaths that are frequently used by villagers for communication and trade.

Due to the high frequency of rainfall in the area the paths are continuously being altered by erosion and walking may sometimes prove to be difficult. A few suspension bridges also help the people to transit the larger Kiri River that can't be crossed other ways in the rainy season.

## 1.1 Huts

The location of huts is always on solid plateaus where erosion does not threaten the buildings to collapse. Land is levelled and plants are removed before the villagers start to build a new hut. Huts are round in shape as is the case with the majority of tribes in the central highlands of Papua. Timber collected in the forest is shaped with an axe to become suitable planks for the walls. A fireplace is built in the middle of huts before the floor is placed, it is a construction that will contain clay and rocks that is the place that food can be prepared later.

The floor is constructed approximately 3-6 feet above the ground at the same level as the fireplace. Timber is also used to hold the floor up. The floor is thereafter covered with long strips of bark as clothing. As thatching<sup>3</sup> for the roof dried leaves from the Sago palm are used. Rope made from rattan is applied to tie up every single wooden stem, plank and sago leaf on the hut.

Traditionally the sexes were clearly designated for different huts<sup>4</sup>, but today the family hut is most common. In the family hut there will be a husband and a wife, their young sons, unmarried girls and widows.

Boys will leave to live in a men's-hut after they have reached a certain age. In this hut we also find widowed men. Family huts and men's huts are of the same construction but the huts containing men are commonly built bigger, since it sometimes has to house up to 20 individuals.

Some people build cages for pigs under huts, but more commonly people tend to build external huts for pigs a bit away from the main settlement.

In Nongme there are a few modern plank and iron sheet built houses. These were not constructed for use as households, but rather for administrative purposes.

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<sup>3</sup> Among the Ketengban I observed two different materials used for thatching. In the areas located in higher altitudes people use leaves from the Pandanus palm, but north as in Nongme, people use dried leaves from the Sago palm.

<sup>4</sup> Sims and Sims: Ritual and relationships in the valley of the sun, The Ketengban of Irian jaya p.3



*A family hut, the entrance is located at the other side*



*New hut in process of being built*





*Sago leaves used as thatch*



*The village of Nongme with its airstrip.*

## 2. The food quest

The Ketengban people are essentially horticulturalists. Fertile soils in combination with high frequency of rain and a warm climate guarantee good and reliable results in gardening.

Many of the gardens around the villages are dedicated to the cultivation of the sweet potato as it is the main carbohydrate staple here, but cassava and taro gardens are also abundant.

Sago Palms are the main carbohydrate staple for many tribes living in the lowlands and by the coast but are also found in this greater area.

The palms grow wild nearby rivers and streams, but are today also more commonly planted near villages as it makes them more accessible. Sago is treated as a supplementary food staple as the number of palms is not particularly numerous.

Bananas, beans, bread fruit, red fruit (*Pandanus conoideus*), cabbage, tomatoes, and sugar cane are also planted.

From the forest wild edible ferns and many species of wild plants can be gathered.

Animals domesticated by the people are Pigs, Chickens, Dogs and Cats, the latter two not (usually) for food purposes. Hunting, trapping and catching animals are also a part of the food quest, as it adds to the protein staple of the household.

At a really young age the kids are familiarised with their surroundings. Knowledge about utilizing land and resources are learned through practical engagement by the kids following adults working. The kids own exploration of the surroundings also naturally enrich their practical skills. Girls while still young will be introduced to participate in the food quest as they start following their older sisters and mother to the gardens.

Boys seem to be able to play for a few more years before they become actively engaged in the food quest, but start early to learn fast how to use bow and arrow, set up traps and cut firewood. They also rapidly learn to recognize sights and sounds in the forests. Within a short time the young boys will begin to bring home small game to the household.

## 2.1 Gardening

Gardening is basically the main occupation for the people in the highland regions of Papua, as is also the case with the greater Nongme area. The villagers are experts on utilizing land in their environment and it provides every family with work and valuable results.

New gardens are either being installed upon old gardens that have been left for a few years, or upon primary/secondary forest that is cut down and cleared. Forest and other vegetation that occupies a desired area chosen for new gardens will be cut down and left until it's completely dried up under the sun. After the vegetation is dry, it will be lit and fire will burn away most of it away, leaving only the largest tree chunks to stand. It is the men's work to slash and burn the desired area. Women tend to do the subsequent work clearing the earth of small debris and roots. Thereafter the new field is ready to be utilized as a new garden.

Woman also does the planting of wished plants and tubers. They daily overlook and work in the gardens and also bring home the desired amount of food that is needed for the household. They always manage to seek out the suitable plants and tubers to be taken, and the ones that still need time in the soil.

Fences made of timber are sometimes built around gardens to protect it against the pigs foraging activities that potentially can destroy weeks of work in just matter of hours.

There are no real gardening efforts for cash crops in the area. But at some occasions villagers produce oil from the Red fruit (*Pandanus conoideus*) that will be filled on bottles, and sent to Sentani/Jayapura where it will be sold.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The red fruit (Indonesian: Buah Merah) from Papua is sold throughout Indonesia with the advertisement that it can cure or prevent, diseases/conditions like: Hepatitis, High blood pressure, Cancer and even HIV/Aids

## **2.2 Animal husbandry**

Pigs are the most important animal raised and every household has a few. The pigs are usually placed in specialized huts that are located a bit away from the main settlement, but some households keep the small pigs in cages under the hut floor.

Pigs are cared for by woman. She feed them in the morning and then releases them to forage on their own or she may direct them to the gardens where she does her daily work. As the pigs spend most of the days without human control they find most of their food while foraging in the forest and in deserted gardens. When the afternoon arrives the pigs will be brought back to their hut, or if they were on their own, they will return to the hut themselves.

They will be fed again in the afternoon. Pig food usually consist of sweet potatoes, taro, cassava or whatever leftovers that exist. Foods that are not suitable for humans anymore are also brought to the pigs to consume.

Pigs are socially and economically valued animals used in social arrangements such as bride price payments. Pigs can also be sold for money at the weekly market in Nongme, and money can buy pigs. As the people in the more isolated hamlets still are not particularly engaged in the money economy and therefore not too experienced to money as a currency, pigs play a role as wealth that compromises a medium that share similarities with a currency.

## **2.3 Hunting and Trapping**

Hunting is sometimes the mere act of catching a glimpse or picking up a sound of an animal, and taking appropriate steps of catching it. But occasionally there are bigger hunting parties organized. These may be organised to secure meat for special occasions or either just because of elements making the men in mood for hunting.

A hunting team may consist of a few men or squads of more than 10 men. Boys ranging from about 7 years up are also often brought on hunting trips and learn rapidly to follow the more experienced men's tactics. Bows and arrows are brought, and sometimes an experienced hunting dog to help track down animals.

Hunting can be done at all times of the day. For birds the hunting is preferable done in the morning and afternoon hours when the birds are considered most active.

Hunting birds are sometimes done from special huts that are built in trees which are known to be frequented by birds. (see photo under). The tree hut hunting is often done by boys and rarely by the elder men, since the efforts usually does not yield large scale results. Birds hunted in the area are: birds of paradise, the large hornbill, white and black parrots, and the large flightless cassowary bird.

The cassowary birds are hunted in the forest and not from the tree huts. It usually leaves visible tracks in the soil and makes tracking it easier. As the bird can run at high speeds the hunter need to shot with precision when the bird is first seen, or it may succeed in outrunning the men. Wild pigs are also a favourite hunt since the biggest of them can give the hunters plenty of meat to share. Smaller pigs will be caught alive if possible and can be reared together with the other domesticated pigs

Hunting at night time is also done and this particular hunt is often for the tree kangaroo. This animal are most active during the night but is almost impossible to spot, therefore the villagers usually hunt this particular animal when there is moonlight on the sky. Moon light will make the animals eyes glint red whenever direct moon light lights it up.

A flashlight also does the trick, and is being used whenever one (or its batteries) is traded in from the city.

Trapping animals are carried out by making traps on specific places where paths of animals are located or where their living grounds are thought to be. Traps are put up on the ground and in trees as well. They are constructed out of wooden stems and solid vines.

As there are different models and sizes set up for different animals, everything from birds, mice, rats, tree-kangaroos, cassowary and pigs, can be caught.

Apart from hunting and trapping there happens to be times when people are being able of catching fish. The nearby Kiri River rumours to hold a substantial quantity of fish.

In the drier months the river will be rather shallow and fish can be trapped with the use of rocks or with nets made of rattan.

Eggs, Lizards and frogs from birds are sometimes collected by women.

The latter can also be caught at night-time when moonlight makes them visible.

Snakes have also been known to be caught and eaten.



## 2.4 Eating customs and the preparation of food

The villagers usually prepare two daily meals. A meal prepared in the late afternoon functions as the most important meal of the day. Preparation of the meal will begin after the women have arrived from the gardens. It is a characteristic sight as they arrive, usually fully loaded with net bags with the daily results from the gardens and maybe a baby sleeping within one bag as well. The meal prepared consist of whatever the women have brought from the gardens and sometimes game brought back by the men.

A meal is also prepared in the morning before the villagers leave for the days work, it usually consist of rests from the evening meal.

Food is prepared in the family huts by the women, sometimes with the assistance from men. Men living in the men's-hut often get prepared food directly from relatives or other friends within the settlement. Other times they prepare it themselves.

Normal preparation of food includes: baking sweet potatoes, bananas, taro and cassava in the hot ashes in the fireplace. Small animals like birds and other vertebrates can be directly put over the fire or it can be wrapped in a banana leaf and put under the ashes.

Earth ovens can also be used to prepare food. These are either put up outside the hut or in the hut itself. The Ketengban people of this area prepare their earth ovens at the top of the soil, rather than under the soil, as the Dani people to the west prepare it.

The ovens are usually constructed rectangular and sizes vary from 1-3 meter in length depending on the amount of food. If there are a special arrangement there will be several earth ovens constructed.

Rocks will be warmed in a fire until they are nearly red hot. Banana leaves are used to make a bed where the first rocks will be placed. Green plants are placed over the rocks before sweet potatoes, red fruit, vegetables and meat can be placed. More green plants are added over the food, and rocks are placed on top, and another layer of banana leaves will prevent hot steam to escape the oven.

The food will be left inside for the designated time the villagers think it will take before the food is cooked, usually 1-2 hours. The rocks are thereafter removed and the cooked food will be visible.

Rocks are also used in the making of sago dishes. Sago starch and water will be placed in a container made of bark from the nibong-palm. Hot rocks will be placed in the container and by using a stick the sago is mixed with the hot water until it thickens and become a thick clear stew<sup>6</sup>.

The further you travel from the Nongme airstrip, people seldom own modern cooking utensils, so the traditional cooking techniques are the norm.

Water for cooking are readily available from nearby streams and rivers. Salt<sup>7</sup> is nowadays bought from Nongme village, where some people trade it in from Jayapura.

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<sup>6</sup> This dish is named Papeda by the people in Papua and made throughout the province.

<sup>7</sup> I have not seen anyone in the area obtaining salt locally, although people told me that people still do it further north, near the borders to the Lepki language area.



*Teenager bringing home Red fruit*



*An old woman on a forest path*





*A hut built for hunting purposes in a tall tree*



*Sago grain is extracted from the palm*

## 4. Appearances and currents of change

Boys wear nothing in the first years of their life. Traditionally they started wearing penis guards after they had reached a certain age, but in the last decades it has become very common for them to wear western clothing. Penis guards are made of a hollowed out of a fruit from a plant that grows wild throughout the highlands. This fascinating attire is less and less used among the men, as have happened in nearly all traditional mountain tribes in Papua<sup>8</sup>. Girls also wear nothing in their first living years, but sooner or later they will be given traditional reed shirts. Many women can still be seen wearing these, but many nowadays cover the top of their body wearing t-shirts.

As expected people that live nearer the airstrip have it easier in acquiring western clothing. The village administration does sell imported western clothing at reasonable prices to the people and the church also actively engage in encouraging people to wear them.

Men are often the person in the household who has the ability to acquire money and seem to prioritize clothes for himself and the boys. As a result there are fewer woman wearing (a complete set of) clothes than men.

A less common custom practised today is the piercing of the ear and nose, where a larger hole is made with a bamboo knife, I could not count any young persons having this, but many elder men have them. Another, more contemporary trend in regard to personal ornamentations is tattooing, but is mostly done by woman<sup>9</sup>.

The process of developing the rural areas of Papua has so far not given the people in the Nongme area great benefits or opportunities. As already mentioned the Ketengban area was first visited by people from outside their cultural area in the seventies, and communication have been persistent since then. Knowledge, technology, entrepreneurship and the organization of work still basically consist of local traditions and practises. Some particular people such as priests and people in the village administration have though been visiting cities like Jayapura, Sentani and Wamena.

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<sup>8</sup> The reason might be quite obvious, people tend to want to make the transition to what some people here value as the standard “of the modern people”

<sup>9</sup> I don't know for sure if this is a new custom, but at least the ingredients of how it is done is new, as worn out battery acid is used as filling.

These cultural interactions have brought them changes in everyday life, such as changes in the already mentioned attire, faith to Christianity<sup>10</sup>, the acquiring of technology like steel axes, cooking pans and matches have also happened, and the organization of a weekly market in Nongme.

Stories about great wealth and goods that exist in the cities do reach these isolated villages in a great speed. Being inexperienced with modern economy and modern material culture make people get very high expectations about future development. The lack of practical perception and experience in regard to issues concerning the conditions “in the outside world” naturally leads to local speculations and theories.

The most explicit example from the area is the newly built landing strip in the village of Sekame (see picture below). It is built without any prior authorization from the government or missionary air service coordinators. Rumours claim that the airstrip was built under the enthusiasm of a local priest with the support of loads of people arriving from far and near. Some of my informants that participated in the building of the airstrip told me of the hope of acquiring goods. With the completion of the project it was believed that airplanes would arrive and the status quo would be altered.

It is clear that the motif was surely that of a material kind. The airstrip has naturally until today not seen a single aircraft land, and the airstrip is probably not in condition to be used either. Referring to conversations I had with pilots that frequent this corner of Papua, claim that they often encounter these spontaneous attempts of making landing strips. The desire to build landing strips in hope of acquiring goods clearly fit the characteristics of that of a cargo cult. At the time of writing the people near the Nongme airstrip are talking about a new landing strip that are “being planned” for a village called Betani located somewhere to the west of Nongme. The word in the village is that there are many men that will leave for this village soon to assist in constructing it.

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<sup>10</sup> Adherents to Christianity were as many as 60%, in 1992, according to Sims&Sims; Ritual and relationships in the valley of the sun, The ketengban of Irian Jaya.









*Villagers in front of the church in Umtambor*



*The people of Sekame village have built a landing strip without any prior coordination with people outside. Someday, it is believed that airplanes will bring goods and wealth to the area.-*



## 5. Government Activities

The larger Nongme area belongs to the district of Borme and in the wider administrative context within the regency of Pegunungan Bintang<sup>11</sup>. The area is situated in the easternmost part of the regency and is located near the border to the regency of Yahukimo.

In Nongme government activity are limited to the small office of the Village head of Nongme. The village head has the job of administering the village and keeping track on various statistics, like births, death and migration.

Nongme is the only village around that is lucky to have a teacher, but having responsibility to teach more than 100 children is an overwhelming challenge, resulting that classes are big and subjects per week is few. The children get probably 1 hour of teaching per day. Classes are at this moment for boys only, the reason are supposedly the lack of teaching capacity<sup>12</sup>.

The school building are made of a sago stems with a sago leafed thatch. There exist no chairs and no tables for the children. Writing books and pens are very limited.

At the time of being there are several kids from the village that have been sent to Sentani/Jayapura for elementary school, and a few have already made it to University. It is hoped by the village administration that these young newly educated people will one day return to the village and lead them into a more prosperous future.

Because of the slow progression of development it is claimed by many local people that the districts in the Ketengban area does really get limited attention from the regency's administration. At the time of writing there is a process going on where the Provincial Government are considering the shaping of a new regency, supposedly called the Ketengban regency.<sup>13</sup> If realised, this regency will become a break-away regency from the regency of Pegunungan Bintang.

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<sup>11</sup> Pegunungan bintang literally means Star Mountains.

<sup>12</sup> In many of my observations throughout rural areas in the more isolated regencies in Papua, like the Memberamo area, Yahukimo and Pegunungan Bintang, I have noted very poor educational facilities. Although facilities only exist in the district villages, does not necessarily mean that these are functioning well. Educational facilities like schools often exist but are too often in bad condition or are not well maintained. Another problem in regard to education is that very few villages have active teachers to educate the children. Some villages I visited had not seen a teacher for a year. Teachers often travel to other places for work, and it can be asked if they really have enough welfare to be able to focus on the children's education. Attention and supervision from the Department of Education and Provincial Government are much needed.

<sup>13</sup> Cenderawasih Post, Monday 20/11/06 p.12

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