

A **STUDY GUIDE** BY KATE RAYNOR

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A Complicated Legacy: Papa Bilong Chimbu

I was privileged to observe the culture and the customs of the Chimbu people before any influence from outside. I have given the best part of my life to the Chimbu, and I'm still very attached to these people, who have given me the name 'Papa of the Chimbu'. My life has been long, and I think fruitful. I am very grateful to God for my religious, priestly and missionary vocation, and to the people of Papua New Guinea. — Father John Nilles

Introduction

In 1937 a young Catholic missionary, Father John Nilles (1905–1993), arrived in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. There he would stay for the next fifty-four years, living with the people of Chimbu, learning their language and way of life, introducing them to his God and Western culture. More than just a priest, he would become an anthropologist, linguist, politician and clan leader. Through Nilles' extraordinary archive of photos, diaries and letters, as well as interviews with those who knew him, filmmaker Verena Thomas pieces together a portrait of this fascinating man – her great-uncle. What she discovers is an unexpected new family, who had made 'Papa' Nilles one of their own. The tremendous respect with which the Chimbu people of the Highlands continue to regard her great-uncle is evident in the warm and friendly reception Thomas receives when she first visits the Dimbi region, some twelve years after Nilles' death.



JOHN NILLES ON HIS
ARRIVAL IN 1937

Papa Bilong Chimbu sets out the stark dangers involved in missionary work. Goldminers and missionaries were the first white people to venture into the remote, unexplored hinterland beyond the Bismarck Range, where half a million people could be found, living in isolated tribes, still using tools from the Stone Age. In 1935 Father Morscheuser, a Catholic missionary stationed in PNG, was murdered. Father Nilles became the first missionary to move into the area – what he called 'the oceanic paradise garden' – after that tragic event. Nilles' compassion and intellectual discipline made him an authority on this region and its people's beliefs and customs.

Papa Bilong Chimbu offers a thought-provoking insight into the complexity of cultural exchange. It is an important film for the information it provides on a particular socio-historical moment, presenting a personal perspective on the history of one of our nearest neighbours. It highlights the ways in which the missionary's quest has informed the shape and development of our world.

Papa Bilong Chimbu is also a compelling character study. As Thomas puts it, this is the story of a man who became part of a big family: both the man and the family deserve investigation. Finally, the film works well as a lively visual document, utilizing a wide and interesting array of resources that students should find engaging.



MARIA WAIGL AND
MARTHA MOGL

Discussion Points and Activities



Curriculum Links

Papa Bilong Chimbu could be used in a range of age and curriculum contexts. It has application in Social Studies, Religious Studies, Anthropology and Philosophy. At senior secondary and tertiary levels, it could be situated in a study of post-colonial discourse, examining the complex legacies of missionaries. It could also be utilized as an introduction to issues of anthropology. For junior secondary levels, it supports an exploration of the history and culture of one of our nearest neighbours, providing a context within which to explore current and past relationships between Australia and Papua New Guinea.

Discussion Points and Activity Suggestions

The following activities include some basic comprehension and information-gathering exercises and a range of straightforward projects.

The many discussion points can be used in a variety of ways: as the focus for sustained writing activities – argumentative, opinionative or creative; as basic research topics; and as topics for class forums, oral presentations or debates. This provides the opportunity to assess a variety of (critical) literacy skills. Students at junior levels may require more scaffolding, and teachers are encouraged to pick and choose as appropriate for the needs and strengths of specific classes and students. Given the wide age range of students that could study this film, an attempt has been made to present topics with varying degrees of complexity and sophistication.

N.B. Students conducting research should be informed that the PNG province Chimbu is also called Simbu.

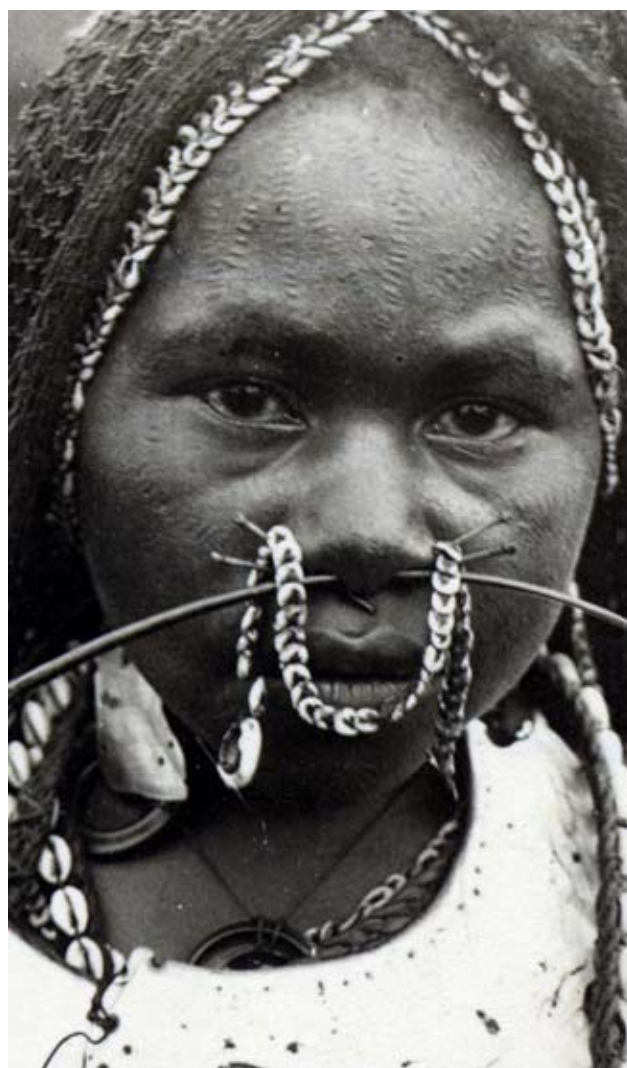
PNG: The Vineyard of the Lord

‘The air was cool and crisp, the people strong: muscular men, gracefully striding women, smiling children with unwashed faces. Everyone wanted to touch me and give me their hand.’

– Father Nilles, on his arrival in PNG

‘When you want to buy a woman, you kill a pig.’

– Martha Mogl, Chimbu province





- Background Exercise. Divide the class into small groups and designate a research topic for each group: PNG topography/geography; history; industry; colonial relations; culture; and spiritual beliefs. Have each group elect a spokesperson to present their findings to the class. Combine the groups' information into a wall display for reference during the unit of study.
- Construct a timeline outlining key events in PNG history (check the Brief Chronology on page 9 of this guide for relevant information).
- PNG gained independence on 16 September 1975. What can you find out about this process, its implications and repercussions?
- What is the role of the pig in PNG culture?



- PNG's currency today is Kina. One Kina is one hundred Toea. Kina and Toea are the names of shells that were used for trade in the Highlands. In what ways do we see shells used as currency in the film?
- What is a *mumu*? (It is the traditional cooking of a pig in the ground.)

Language: The People's Voice

- Over 700 different languages are spoken across PNG. The main language in the Chimbu region is Kuman and Father Nilles won great respect by becoming proficient in it (to the extent that he even published an English/Kuman dictionary). His command of Kuman made him an honorary citizen of the Chimbu people. He was able to interpret Australian colonial policy for the villagers and represent their interests – as one commentator puts it, 'he was the voice for them'. Make a list of the many situations in which Father Nilles' ability to speak Kuman might have been an asset to his missionary work.
- It is also noted that Father Nilles used Pidgin English (also referred to as Melanesian Pidgin or Tok Pisin). The film's title, *Papa Bilong Chimbu*, is Pidgin English for 'Father of the Chimbu'. What information can you discover about Pidgin English?



Not A White Man: Father John Nilles Kawagle

‘He is like our real father. He brought us up.’

– Angela Bonggere, Chimbu province

- Construct a personal timeline for Father Nilles (check the Brief Chronology on page 9 of this guide for relevant information).
- Make a list of adjectives describing Father Nilles’ character.
- How is Father Nilles regarded by the Chimbu people? What does he bring to their lives?
- One tribesman notes: ‘Father Nilles is not a white man, he is a kanaka. He was the father of the Chimbu. We call him papa’. What does the term ‘kanaka’ mean? How did he achieve this status?
- Who was Kawagle? (He was leader of the Siambugla clan and guided the first missionaries into the Chimbu valley.) What was the relationship between Father Nilles and Kawagle? (Three years after independence, the Siambugla people honoured Nilles with the name of their greatest leader.) Discuss the significance of naming and renaming here. Discuss the significance of Father Nilles’ name as set out in the film’s closing credits.
- Write a eulogy for Father Nilles to be published in a PNG newspaper. In what ways might this differ from a eulogy to be published in a German newspaper?
- Where was Father Nilles’ true home? Describe your home and your connection to it. How important is it to your sense of identity? Can you imagine ever relocating and changing your citizenship?
- Father Nilles was born in the German village of Hemmersdorf, near the border with France, in 1905, and

while he spent most of his adult life in PNG, he returned to Germany six times, using his trips to raise money for the mission and his work in PNG. He even had a street in Hemmersdorf named after him. Make a chart outlining the changes that would have occurred in Hemmersdorf during Father Nilles’ lifetime. How was the Germany of 1993 different to the Germany of 1905?

- Write one final letter from Father Nilles to his family, summing up the high points and achievements of his life as he sees them.
- As Verena Thomas comments, ‘Through him we all felt a connection to a foreign part of the world’. Do students have connections with other parts of the world that would reward exploration?

The Life of a Missionary: ‘Alone With The Brown Kanakas’

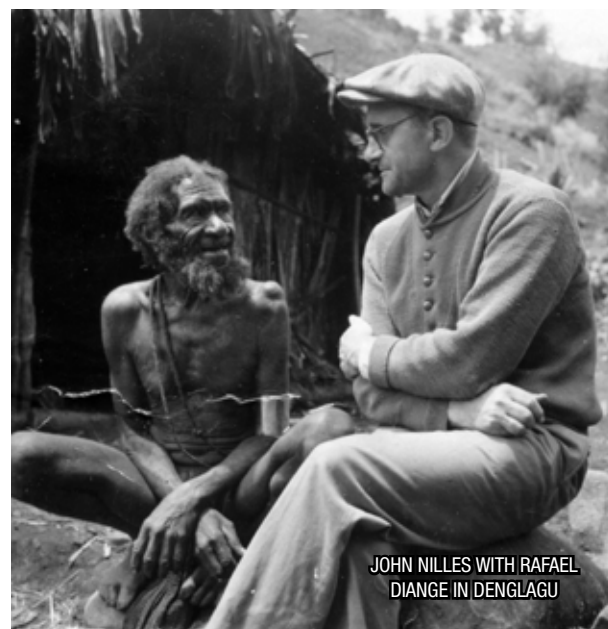
- Thomas notes that when Father Nilles first arrived in PNG, he lived in a small hut and contracted malaria. Make a list of the many hardships you imagine missionaries might have endured in the line of their work. What sorts of things might Father Nilles have missed from ‘home’?
- What did Nilles’ grandmother worry would happen to him in this ‘wild country’? (She feared he would be eaten by cannibals.)
- After his months in internment, Nilles began working in various parishes around Sydney. Write an imaginary account of a ‘typical’ day for Father Nilles in PNG; and a ‘typical’ day in Sydney, highlighting the contrasts where possible.





- Guane Magin says Father Nilles returned to PNG after the War because 'he felt sorry for us'. Why might Magin have formed this impression? Do you think this was a factor in Father Nilles' return?
- Father Nilles' first two choices for mission work were South America and Japan. In what ways might the course of his life have been different had he been sent somewhere other than PNG? Discuss the idea of God's hand determining his fate and the priest's need to be humble before the Church's will. Younger students might enjoy exploring this idea of destiny and self-determination in a very basic way, by outlining issues over which they can exercise some control, and all the many areas of life that appear to take shape without their direct input.
- In one of his letters Father Nilles mentions the first time he came to the PNG Highlands: he was confronted with the terrifying vision of a group of warriors running at him with poisoned arrows. As it turned out, they were rushing to greet him. Write an account of this initial meeting and of Father Nilles' first impressions.
- Now write an account from the perspective of a Chimbu villager seeing their first white person. Consider state-

ments such as this: 'We thought they were dead men with strange clothes. We were terrified. Our parents warned us not to go close to them'.



An Enemy Alien: The War

- What was Father Nilles' 'saddest day as a missionary'?
- In December 1942, Father Nilles was evacuated. What can you find out about the role PNG played in World War Two and the battles that were fought in various regions?
- Father Nilles was classified as an enemy alien because of his German nationality and sent to an internment camp in Brisbane. What can you find out about these camps? What were conditions like? Who was interned in these camps? How many people were sent to these camps? Given the war, do you think this official policy was sound and reasonable? Or was it an over-reaction? Did any of the people in these camps pose a legitimate threat to national security? Are there any parallels between these camps and the detention centres where we lock up refugees today?



Vote 1: Papa Nilles

'I am not ashamed to be called a Chimbu man ... I shall be responsible to my conscience and my God.'

– Father Nilles' first speech to Parliament

'He made a big difference, he made people become strong – to stand up, to speak out in public.'

– Jenny Wal

- In 1970, Father Nilles relinquished his German citizenship, became a PNG citizen and entered Parliament. He was challenged and criticized for being both a missionary and a politician. Do you see a conflict here? What do you understand by the separation of Church and State? Why did so many of the Chimbu people want Father Nilles to represent them?
- What particular issues concerned Father Nilles?
- What do you think motivated him to enter Parliament?
- Why might Joseph Tembe suspect that black people in the House of Assembly would be corrupt?



Rest in Peace

'He is here to stay and to die.'

– Yuanis Miugke, Chimbu province

'You took him to your home and we don't know whether you killed a pig. We are disappointed. We don't know if you gave him a proper burial and party. We don't know. We only cried.'

– Elizabeth Gambugl, Chimbu province

- How did the Chimbu people feel about Father Nilles returning to Germany as an elderly man? Where did they think he should be buried and why? (They felt he should be buried next to Kawagle, in Mingende on Siambugla-Waugla land, as he had taken Kawagle's position as their greatest leader. He should be buried in the community so that his spirit would stay there with them.) What do their beliefs reveal about the depth of their conversion to Christianity?
- The Chimbu people felt that the missionaries deprived them of Nilles' burial. They were saddened that they didn't get to kill a pig and bury him 'properly'. Where do you think Father Nilles would want to have been buried? Do you think Father Nilles knew he would never return to the Chimbu when he left in 1990? Could it be argued that the film gives some sort of closure here?



They Went Out To Sow: Missionaries

'No other Father has got as many medals as I have.'

– Father Nilles

- Do students have any preconceptions about missionaries and their work? Are there any clichés or stereotypes at work here that can be explored?
- What qualities do you need to survive as a missionary?
- What qualities account for Father Nilles' success as a missionary? Consider his sociable nature; his openness to and genuine respect for existing spiritual practices; his intelligence and anthropological perspective; his willingness to apply himself to learn Kuman; his determination to actively participate in the culture of the village – for example, preparing and eating food to mark significant events. (Norbert Bare comments, 'He was regarded as a big man because he killed the pig'.)
- Do you believe missionaries need to be brave?

- Discuss the importance of humility as a personal quality. In a speech given to celebrate his seventy-fifty birthday, Father Nilles noted:

I must admit, that despite having lived amongst the Chimbu for a long time, there are still many things about them which I cannot fully understand, like their basic reasoning process, their motives for action, and their gut beliefs. So I can only ask that my statements be viewed as the observations of an outsider.

- How do you measure the 'success' of a missionary project? (Is it the number of villagers baptized, improvement in quality of life, or abandonment of traditional practices?)
- What is a catechist?
- Verena Thomas notes that as she grew up, she became critical of the role of missionaries in destroying traditional culture. How does Thomas' attitude to missionary work change during the course of the film? Write a statement outlining her initial position. This is a very complex topic and needs to be approached with sensitivity, especially given the chequered history of missionaries in Indigenous communities here in Australia. Without suggesting that one definitive, conclusive answer can be reached on the positive and negative effects of missionary work, try to outline the results of Father Nilles' intervention with the Chimbu.
- The tribal leaders could see clear benefits in working with and for the missionaries. Consider statements such as Kutne Pius': 'We thought the missionaries were great because they brought good things. We were excited about the future'; and Noah Diange's comment: 'When the missionaries came we were so excited about the new goods they brought, we threw away the belief in sun and moon'. Are the 'good things' here material or



GOIYEIMONGENAGL, WAUGLA CLAN



ANGELA BONGERRA WITH FAMILY MEMBERS

spiritual? Elsewhere, tribesman Norbert Bare says: 'Before he came we were wild people. Father Nilles brought us peace. He taught us to be human beings'. Make a list of all the positive aspects of missionary work in PNG, using the film and other resources to provide clear examples. (Issues to consider: the churches became the centre of village life, and warring tribes began coming together in church, a 'neutral' space for working through issues in non-violent ways. The presence of the missionaries also lead to improved standards of living; and they were a force for positive change in terms of education.)

- Why were the people motivated to work for steel axes? What had they been using?
- The mission constructed an air strip, which brought greater access to more goods, Western clothes, and new foods (cabbage, beans, strawberries). The land surrounding the mission was bought for shells, salt and some axes. What is the status of the land today? Is it owned by the Catholic Church? What might the Chimbu people feel about this transaction today? (Consider Noah Diange's comment: 'We were still primitive at that time so we were excited about the shells and we sold the land'.)
- Describe the mission house, Denglagu, the incongruity of the German Alps-style construction in the centre of this lush tropical landscape.
- Consider screening a feature film on missionary work to provide students with another point of reference. (For example, *The Mission* [Roland Joffe, 1986] or *Black Robe* [Bruce Beresford, 1991].)



Men of God? A Matter of Faith or Anthropology ...

- Father Nilles notes: 'Our first business was to explain carefully who we were, and who we were not. We were not miners or businessmen. We were not Government officers or recruiters. We were missionaries'. Do you think the villagers might have been predisposed to regard the missionaries more or less favourably because they were men of God?
- What allows Father Nilles and other missionaries to maintain an unwavering conviction that their faith is the one true faith?
- The Chimbu believed strongly in the spirits of ancestors and of the natural world. From the outset, Father Nilles appeared to instinctively grasp the need to understand tribal beliefs and make an attempt to somehow merge the distinct belief systems. (For instance, he speaks of their Big Spirit, with the sun as its eye, as being not so very different from the Christian idea of God.) His strategy was to try to make connections, and the more time he spent in the region, the more interested he became in anthropology. Then, during his four and a half years in Sydney, he earned a diploma in Anthropology at Sydney University (his thesis was entitled 'The Kuman of Chimbu'). The relationship of trust that Father Nilles had established in his first five years in PNG was deepened when he returned after the war. Thomas notes that he returned as a missionary *and* an anthropologist, seeing anthropology as the key to becoming a better missionary. His studies had given him new insight into the psychological value of deeply rooted traditional practices and a greater sensitivity to the ways in which the traditional spiritual beliefs were not always compatible with Christianity and could not simply be replaced. In what ways did Nilles' interest in anthropology inform his missionary work? Do you think Father Nilles saw his vocation as a matter of saving primitive souls that would otherwise be damned?
- *The missionaries come with their own faith, their own concept of God. They force it on the villagers, dismissing their native belief systems and bribing them along the way with worthless gifts.*
Discuss.
- What right do we have to impose our beliefs upon anyone? Can you force someone to believe in God? Consider the following anecdote from Nilles:

One Sunday in Denglagu, when I spoke about God, the creator of all things, one big man stood up and shouted loudly: 'Padre, Padre, you listen! What you said now is from your faith, but not what we believe!' This reaction taught me three things: first, that he understood my words; second, that he did not agree with me; and third, that I would have to find new ways to explain my concept of God to make him understand.

- Thomas says it was Nilles' goal to:
Marry Chimbu beliefs with those of his own ... Although he had stopped some of the old customs, I felt that the name Nilles was more connected to the traditional than to the new.

What evidence does the film provide to support this claim?





- Describe the church we see in the film. In what ways is it a typical Catholic church? In what ways does it embrace PNG culture?
- When the Chimbu people were baptized they were given new names, and in some instances their traditional names slipped from usage. One man, Norbert, notes with a soft smile: 'Father Nilles gave me the name of a saint'. Angela Bonggere (traditional name: Agum) also discusses how she feels about this. Does their attitude surprise you? Imagine how you would feel if someone decided to change your name. Younger level classes might enact this in microcosm: change the students' names for a day or two and note the disorienting nature of the experience. Ask the students how they feel about their names, how their names inform their identities and operate as markers of their places in particular families and histories. Explore the derivation of their names. Encourage the students to discuss their names with their parents and report back to the class on how they came by their names.
- 'Missionary work is merely bribery on a grand scale.' Discuss.
- 'Foreign aid workers are the missionaries of our day.' Discuss.
- 'The crosses and crucifixes we see slung around their necks mean no more to them than the shells and other decorations they wear.' Discuss.
- 'Estrangement from traditional life and practices is a small price to pay for improvements in the standard of living.' Discuss.

- One villager notes, 'He knew us very well. He followed our culture, so we trusted him and followed his instructions'. Father Nilles encouraged the villagers to abandon what he considered 'bad' customs (for example, polygamy). This might provide an opportunity to explore cultural relativism and the notion of absolutes. Is the custom bad because Father Nilles sees it as such, because it is at odds with his religious beliefs? What cultural purpose might it serve in this particular context? Is it intrinsically bad in itself? These are very difficult and sophisticated questions, but even young students can enjoy exploring big philosophical ideas and moral dilemmas. One starting point could be establishing one simple idea of good (for example, the sanctity of human life), and then exploring the idea that we might classify as bad anything that violates or compromises this. These matters are entirely up to the discretion of the individual teacher, the context in which they are teaching, and the interests and abilities of their students.
- How would you describe Father Nilles' attitude to tribal ceremonies such as the traditional marriage ceremony? In what ways did his stance put him in conflict with the Church?





Looking at The Film Itself

- Make a list of the types of visual material included in this film (for example, photos, letters, stamps, collages, maps, animation, German Television footage of Father Nilles).
- The narrator, Verena Thomas, describes the stamps on her great-uncle's letters as 'windows into an exotic new world'. Select a few examples of the stamps we see in the film and describe their symbolic effect.
- What is Thomas' relationship to the film material? How does this relationship add an extra layer of potency to the film?
- What might have compelled the filmmaker to make this film? Do you think the experience would have been rewarding for her? Write a synopsis and proposal for a film you might like to make about a relative or someone in your family tree.
- Suggest three other possible titles for this film, explaining their significance.
- Write a fifty word synopsis of *Papa Bilong Chimbu*.
- Write a review of the film for a national daily newspaper.
- Design a poster to advertise the film. Annotate the various design elements, explaining your choices, how they interpret and position the film text.
- *John Nilles' personal history replicates the contours of recent PNG history, and through exploring her great-uncle's story, Thomas gives us a window onto a much bigger story.* Discuss.

BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

1884	South-eastern part of the island of New Guinea becomes a British colony, known as the Territory of Papua. Germany claims north-eastern part of New Guinea as the protectorate of German New Guinea, also known as Kaiser-Wilhelmsland.
1905	John Nilles is born in Germany.
1914	World War One begins. North-east New Guinea comes under Australian rule as the Trust Territory of New Guinea.
1921	The two territories of Papua and New Guinea are merged, later becoming a UN Trusteeship under Australia.
1933	First missionary arrives in the Papua and New Guinea Highlands: Father Schaefer, a German Catholic, establishes the first mission station in the Chimbu Valley at Dimbi.
1935	Australian government temporarily restricts access to the Highlands after two missionaries, Father Frank Eugene and Father Karl Morschheuser, are killed.
1937	Father Nilles arrives in the Highlands to establish a new mission station at Denglagu.
1942	As World War Two spreads to the Pacific, missionaries are evacuated from the Highlands. Father Nilles is interned for a short time in Australia along with other 'enemy aliens'.
1943	Father Nilles begins his anthropology degree at the University of Sydney, which he completes in 1950 with a thesis titled 'The Kuman of Chimbu'.
1947	Father Nilles returns to the Highlands.
1951	After seventeen years of missionary work, Father Nilles returns to his home village of Hemmersdorf in Germany for a year.
1970	Father Nilles is voted into Parliament as a representative of the Chimbu District in the House of Assembly, where he serves for two years.
1971	Papua and New Guinea is renamed Papua New Guinea (PNG).
1973	PNG becomes self-governing.
1975	PNG achieves full independence.
1978	The Siabugla people honour Father Nilles with the name of their greatest leader, Kawagle.
1984	Father Nilles receives an Order of the British Empire medal (OBE).
1987	Father Nilles' history of the Catholic mission in the highlands, <i>They Went Out to Sow</i> , is published.
1990	Father Nilles returns to Germany, suffering ill health.
1993	Father Nilles dies in Germany at the age of eighty-eight.

Resources

Books

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Paula Brown, *Beyond a Mountain Valley: The Simbu of Papua New Guinea*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1995.

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Ignatius Willy, *PNG Passionists: The Story of a Jungle Mission 1955-1993*, Congregation of the Passion, Hobart, 1996.

Web Sites

Papa Bilong Chimbu

<http://www.papabilongchimbu.com>

Papua New Guinea

US Department of State: PNG

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2797.htm>

Lonely Planet World Guide

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/worldguide/papua-new-guinea>

CIA: The World Fact Book – PNG

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/pp.html>

An Introduction to PNG

<http://www.geographia.com/papua-new-guinea>

Highlands of Papua New Guinea

http://www.pacificislandtravel.com/png/about_destin/highlands.html

<http://www.usaid.gov.au/country/papua.cfm>

Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/png/png_brief.html

Chimbu

<http://www.everyculture.com/Oceania/Chimbu.html>

Travel Photographs of Galen Frysinger

<http://www.galenfrysinger.com/chimbu.htm>

Kuman

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuman_language_\(New_Guinea\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuman_language_(New_Guinea))

Pidgin English

<http://www.tok-pisin.com/>

Pidgin/English Dictionary

<http://www.june29.com/HLP/lang/pidgin.html>

The Book of Melanesian Pidgin English by Captain John J. Murphy

<http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-conflicts-periods/ww2/pidgin/01.htm>

Internment Camps

National Archives of Australia

<http://www.naa.gov.au/whats-on/online/feature-exhibits/internment-camps/index.aspx>

Papa Bilong Chimbu

2007

Duration: 54 minutes

Director & Producer: Verena Thomas

Co-Producer: Penny Jope

Writers: Verena Thomas, Martyn Ives & Penny Jope

Voice Of John Nilles: Werner Meyer

Camera: Bao Waiko

Sound: Sandra Welkerling

Original Music: Ben Fink

Editor: Verena Thomas



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