

How Arrogance Makes Obnoxious People Popular

Urapmin, a remote community in the mountains of Papua New Guinea, has no electricity in any of its seven villages. The people there, also called Urapmin, have no regular way of earning cash. They build their houses out of materials they gather from the rainforest that surrounds them, and they garden and hunt for their food. In the early 1990s, I spent two years living and doing anthropological fieldwork in Urapmin.

When I lived there, the community had a population of about 400 people, and only a few of them were people whom the others thought about or talked about a lot. A man I shall call Kinimnok was one such character. He frequently boasted, was loud, and was prone to angry outbursts. Most Urapmin tend to keep their successes to themselves, are quiet, and never openly express anger for fear it might make others sick. Kinimnok's manner was quite un-Urapmin.

Urapmin obtain almost all their food from their gardens, which are tended by both men and women. If you put most of your energy into gardening, you are unlikely to go hungry. Men also hunt for marsupials in the jungle at night using bows and arrows. Unlike gardening, hunting is spectacularly unreliable – most trips to the bush net nothing. But when a hunter succeeds, it's a big deal.

Given the possibility that hunting can greatly enhance a man's reputation, the temptation for men to favour hunting over gardening is high, and Urapmin folktales depict the bad ends that come to men who do. In these tortoise-and-hare-type stories, the cautious gardener always comes out ahead of the flashy hunter. Just in case the message of the tales is not clear, Urapmin also believe that men who have a run of luck in

hunting have unknowingly married the female spirit who looks after the marsupials. She first makes her new husband successful in the hunt, Urapmin say, but soon after she will become jealous of his human wife and will eventually try to kill the husband. The first time a recently successful hunter comes close to having an accident while hunting, he assumes the marsupial spirit is ready to be done with him, and he stops hunting for a while.

Kinimnok was a very successful hunter. He hunted all the time, neglected his gardens, which sometimes failed, and frequently proclaimed – clutching his chest in pain – that the marsupial spirit (whom he said he had long been married to) was constantly trying to kill him. No other Urapmin man behaved like this.

While it is allowable for Urapmin men to have more than one wife, Kinimnok was in fact the only man who was married to two women. His younger wife was the daughter of his older one, and Kinimok had raised her as his own child since infancy. These facts only further increased people's sense that Kinimnok was a strange character who often strayed beyond what most Urapmin considered acceptable.

During my first year in Urapmin, I found Kinimnok overbearing and obnoxious, and I assumed that others did too. After all, they often talked about him in mildly judgmental tones. But when he threatened to kill the man the Urapmin had elected to represent them to outsiders, many people began to fear that the government would hear about this threat and jail Kinimnok somewhere far away. Despite the consensus that the threat was outrageous, the prospect of his removal was met with great sadness.

The outpouring of sorrow over Kinimnok's possible removal from the community stunned me. I had to re-evaluate my understanding of what he meant to people. I recalled that although none of the seven villages in Urapmin would let

Kinimnok live within their boundaries – his unpredictable anger was too threatening – members of the village nearest to his lonely homestead had in fact elected him to a minor position as their representative to the wider Urapmin community. I began asking people who their ‘favourite’ Urapmin person was, and to my surprise, the name people gave me most frequently was his. He is so funny, they said, and he often has game to give away. Kinimnok, this person who at one time or another scandalised pretty much everyone, turned out to be one of the most popular people in the community.

In the years since I left Urapmin, I have spent time trying to figure out why Kinimnok was so popular among his people, and recently I think I have found the answer.

Urapmin saw Kinimnok as a ‘wilful’ (*futebemin*) man. He did what he wanted without regard for others. Urapmin think it is sometimes important for people to be wilful. This is so, they say, because people sometimes have to push others a bit hard to make new things such as marriages, hunting parties and gardening groups come to life. Urapmin, though, tend to think that a little wilfulness goes a long way. They also value an opposite quality they call ‘lawfulness’ (*awem*) – a willingness to preserve things as they are, rather than to create something new, and to meet the social obligations one already has.


Most Urapmin spend their lives trying to find balance between wilfulness and lawfulness. Moving back and forth between their two values, most people never realise either one completely, but at the same time, they never fail to fulfil each of them in partial ways. I think Kinimnok captivated other Urapmin because he showed them what wilfulness in its fullest form looks like. Most of them would never follow him in realising wilfulness so absolutely, but in Kinimnok they saw what wilfulness looked like when it was given free expression.

In all societies, just as with the Urapmin, people have to

balance values that are not fully compatible with one another. The values that come into conflict differ – in modern democracies, some of the key opposed pairs are values such as security and freedom, liberty and equality, and the self and the community – but the challenge of balancing them remains. Hence, people like Kinimnok, who give up on balance and put all their efforts into achieving a single value, always stand out from the rest, and they often seem to captivate their fellows.

But even as people tend to find characters such as Kinimnok fascinating, most people don't want to live like them – they are not role models. More than this, most of the time, people are not inclined to put those such as Kinimnok in positions of great power. After all, the Urapmin never put Kinimnok at the head of their government, allowing his wilfulness to do away with lawfulness in their lives. We need more work to determine why it is that, sometimes, this does not hold true, and extreme characters who follow only a single value at the expense of all others come to find themselves in power.

–

This is an adaptation of an [article](#) originally published by SAPIENS.  This article was originally published at [Aeon](#) and has been republished under Creative Commons.