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ROSSEL ISLANDERS AND WANGGULAM LANI
Contrasting forms of social inequality*

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ABSTRACT. This paper compares social inequality in the Melanesian societies of the Rossel Islanders and the Wanggulam Lani. As regards the Rossel Islanders, I rely on the ethnography of John Liep. For the Wanggulam Lani I use my own research among them. The comparison shows how, in these two societies, men acquired prestige and power in different ways: on Rossel Island by prominence in transactions in wealth items, and among the Wanggulam Lani by warriorhood and leadership in war.

In this paper I compare social inequality as it occurred among the Rossel Islanders, who live in Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea, in the extreme east of the Massim, and the Wanggulam Lani in the Central Highlands of West Papua, north of the Grand Valley of the Baliem River. As regards the Rossel Islanders, I rely almost exclusively on the ethnography of John Liep, and for the Wanggulam Lani on my own data. In the past, I referred to the people as Dani or West Dani, but I understand that they now prefer to be called Lani.[1] A comparison between the two is the main aim of the paper. As a result of my reading the ethnography of especially the Highlands of West Papua, I have become impressed with the differences between various Melanesian ways of life. Accordingly, I am intent upon identifying the differences, without at this point aiming at theoretical elaborations. The Rossel Islanders and Wanggulam Lani appear worth comparing because among them men acquired prestige and power in radically different ways: among the Rossel Islanders by shell transactions, and among the Wanggulam Lani by warriorhood and leadership in war.

Liep did a total of twenty-five months fieldwork on Rossel Island in 1971–1972, 1973, 1980 and 1989–1990 (Liep 2009a:xxix). He published a series of papers on the island and, in 2009, "A Papuan plutocracy: ranked exchange on Rossel Island", a lengthy book about his work there. The book

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1 Koos Knol, personal communication

is 'largely based' on his first three field trips.[2] My own work among the Wanggulam Lani, or henceforward the Wanggulam, took eighteen months, in 1960–1962, when I was a PhD scholar in anthropology at the Australian National University. In this paper I quote from the published version of my dissertation, "Government in Wanggulam" (Ploeg 1969).

I first present Liep's account of what he calls the 'plutocracy' on Rossel Island when he researched it from 1971 to 1980, and then Wanggulam society as I witnessed it in the early 1960s. Since both Liep's and my own fieldwork took place decades ago, I use the past tense when presenting our findings. In Liep's case I distinguish further between the 1970s and a more distant past about which he obtained information during his research in the field and with documents.

Social inequality on Rossel Island in the work of John Liep

Introduction

Rossel Island is the easternmost island in the Massim. At 290 square kilometres, it is one of the larger islands of the Massim archipelago and is the only island where the inhabitants speak a Papuan language. As can be seen on a map, it seems isolated from the rest of the Massim. However, Liep argues that the inhabitants were deeply influenced by what he calls the intrusion of Austronesian-speakers into the archipelago, which started about two thousand years ago (2009a:37). And much more recently, in the course of the nineteenth century, they had to deal with various colonial agents, such as whalers, traders and labour recruiters. After British New Guinea was established in 1885, officers in the colonial administration attempted to impose their own colonial order on the island.

As regards the Austronesian-induced changes, Liep points to the existence of matrilineal clans (2009a:67, *passim*). Furthermore, Rossel Islanders use a decimal counting system with numerals that 'are or may be cognates of Proto-Oceanic numerals' (2009a:68). Across a 'perilous sea' (2009a:71), they

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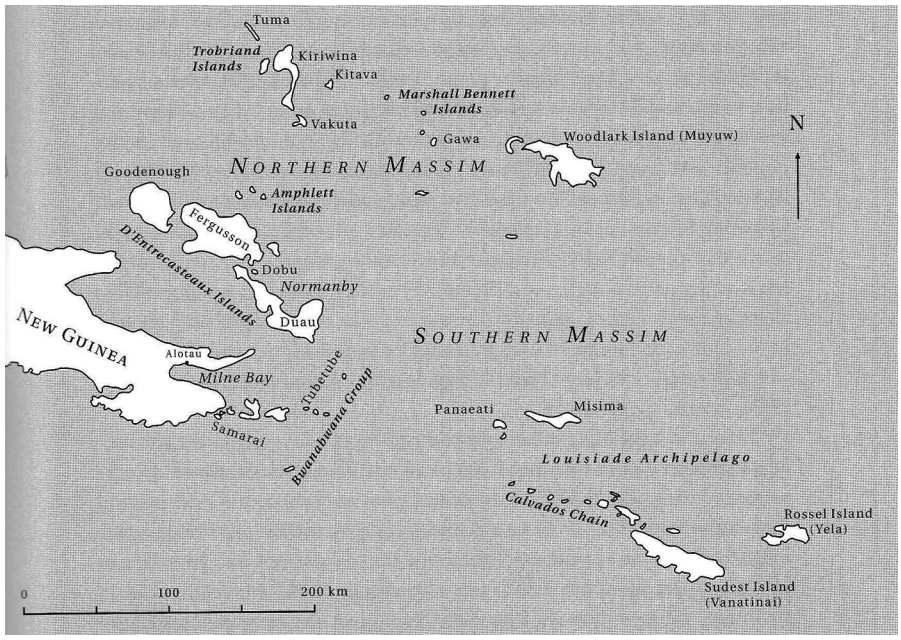
[2] Liep (2009a:xxix). The book was Liep's doctoral dissertation. His examiners were, in alphabetical order, Chris Gregory, Ton Otto and Joel Robbins. Their comments, Liep's summary of the argument (2009b) and his replies to the comments (2009c) were published together in an issue of "Suomen Antropologi" (Gregory 2009, Otto 2009, Robbins 2009).



The Massim (Liep 2009:31)

had maintained contacts with Sudest, or Vanatinai, the island closest to them. Formerly they imported pots, pigs and stone axes from Sudest and traded them to other Rossel Islanders, trade that was status-enhancing (2009a:82–83). However, there are no reports that Rossel Islanders took an active part in the *kula* exchanges,[3] although, also before colonization, they traded *bagi*, the shell necklaces used in the *kula*, with their partners in Sudest. Later, colonial traders started buying them up and transported them farther afield to be sold as valuables that then became *kula* items. Liep presumes that before the colonial era such trade did not occur.[4] Instead of taking part in the *kula*, Rossel Islanders engaged in frequent exchanges among themselves of two shell species that they had elaborately ranked. Liep suggests that this prac-

[3] In Malinowski's own words, 'The Kula is a form of exchange, of extensive, inter-tribal character; it is carried on by communities inhabiting a wide ring of islands [in the Massim], which form a closed circuit. […] Along this route, articles of two kinds, and of these two kinds only, are constantly travelling in opposite directions. In the direction of the hands of a clock, [move] constantly […] long necklaces of red shell, called *soulava* […]. In the opposite direction [move] bracelets of white shell called *mwali*' (1961:81; italics in the original).

[4] Liep (2009a:206). See also Liep (1999).

tice was another Austronesian-induced change (2009b:66). As shown below, these exchanges, and the social organization in which they take place, form the major topic of Liep's book and of ensuing discussions.

Liep was the second ethnographer of Rossel Island. In the 1920s the British anthropologist Wallace Armstrong had worked for two months on the island, and in the resulting ethnography (1928) he attempted a description of the shell exchanges that the Rossel Islanders practised. That report made the institution, or at least his version of it, well known among anthropologists (Liep 2009a:xxvii–xxviii). Since 1995 (2009a:xix) the linguistic anthropologist Stephen Levinson has worked on the island. He has written a brief introduction to Liep's book (Levinson 2009).

At the time Liep worked among the Rossel Islanders, they had been exposed to colonial agents for over a century. The colonial government succeeded in bringing feuding and cannibalism largely to an end around 1900 (2009a:63, 240). This curtailed the power of the indigenous leaders, but 'the "village people" certainly enjoyed' it (2009a:54). A plantation had existed on the island from about the same time, work on which increased the scale of social contacts among the islanders (2009a:232). However, the population had declined since at least the late nineteenth century. Liep estimates that there were about two thousand islanders around 1885 when the people became known to the outside world for killing and presumably cannibalizing a large number of Chinese castaways (2009a:85). It started to rise about 1945 or a little later (2009a:87). By the time Liep started his field research in 1971, the number had risen to about 2500 (2009a:78), and Levinson reports a further rise since then (2009:xix).

Liep argues that local and kinship groups were small in scale. Before colonial incorporation, Rossel Islanders lived in small hamlets with on the average ten inhabitants (2009a:79). Since pacification, settlement size has increased (2009a:106). In many respects kinship organization was bilateral, yet people were also divided between matrilineal clans, the larger of which were sub-divided into sub-clans. While the matrilineal groups held title to tracts of land, these tracts were not contiguous, but instead were 'scattered among the lands of other clans' sub-clans' (2009a:108). Residence of clan members was even more dispersed, given that many men continued living patrilocally after marriage (2009a:108). Liep denies the existence of corporate kin groups (2009a:218) or of 'districts' the territories of which were defended by their inhabitants (2009a:79). Armed violence apparently consisted of small-scale

raids on hamlets and 'the capture of single cannibal victims or girls for prostitution' (2009a:79).

Liep presents a rather grim picture of pre-colonial life on Rossel Island. He argues that the power of the leaders was greater before pacification, since afterwards 'big men could no longer have people killed' (2009a:84). Leaders of 'greater stature had henchmen for their own protection and to send as raiders' (2009a:80). Upon the deaths of 'senior people', the affines had to supply a cannibal victim, either male or female (2009a:84, 241), and Big Men 'swapped […] cannibal victims according to a tacit understanding between them about which young people in their area they could best dispense with' (2009a:241). While Liep admits that his use of the term 'big men' does not agree with Sahlins' characterization of the Big Man in supposedly egalitarian Melanesian societies (2009a:18–19), he nevertheless keeps using the term with regard to Rossel. In this regard I follow him in this paper. However, the small scale of local groups was accompanied by exchanges of shells among an apparently much wider range of people.

Ndap *and* kĕ

Ndap and *kĕ* were the names of the two shell species that Rossel Islanders employed as wealth items. *Ndap* were made out of Spondylus and *kĕ* out of Chama (pacifica) imbricata. *Ndap* was the principal category, *kĕ* being auxiliary items (2009a:194). The islanders had divided both categories into a number of named ranks with greatly different values. Especially high-ranking shells had 'ordinal' value in the sense noted by Chris Gregory (2015:47): if a prestation had to include a shell of rank 'x', no quantity of shells of lower rank could replace it. Islanders could obtain additional shells by searching for them on a beach or by diving for them. But Liep reports that these efforts were largely unproductive, since people hardly ever came by high-ranking shells in these ways (2009a:169–170).

Following George Dalton and Stuart Berde, Liep distinguishes three divisions among *ndap* ranks: 'very high', with four ranks; 'high', with five ranks; and 'low', with eleven ranks (2009a:171–172). As regards the *kĕ*, he distinguishes a high and a low division, with altogether thirteen ranks (2009a:196). The three *ndap* divisions include twenty ranks (2009a:172). High-ranking *ndap* appeared to be more valuable than high-ranking *kĕ*. Moreover, shells were more individuated than their ordering in ranks suggests: shells of high rank had individual names and were believed to be of divine origin. People

knew the histories of their ownership. Assessing the value of a shell was in many cases a matter of expertise (2009a:197). Moreover, it seemed 'reasonable' to Liep that, in the past, Big Men were able to 'claim a higher rank for some shells than other men could do' (2009a:186). Ownership of a number of high-ranking shells was a 'necessary condition' for becoming a Big Man (2009a:331–332), and, at least after colonial pacification, wealth manipulation was the 'predominant sort of social power' (2009a:83). In addition, Big Men had other bases of power, being more knowledgeable in the ritual domain, but also with regard to clan lore (2009a:114) and matters involving land (2009a:130).

In 1973, Liep attempted to assess the number of *ndap* owned by the 131 inhabitants of the settlement in which he lived. He found that together they owned 1024 shells, about two thirds of which belonged to the lowest six ranks (2009a:174). There were four shells belonging to the very high division and fourteen to the high division. One shell was a *dy:âm:andîî*, the highest rank in the high division (2009a:174). Shells of this rank were a necessary part of bridewealth and other exchanges, so they were in frequent demand. Liep traced twenty-one *dy:âm:andîî* on Rossel Island and became convinced that this was the entire stock.[5]

Of the very high and high divisions of *ndap*, Liep writes that they were no longer in circulation. In the case of the former this was because they had been the appropriate shells, the special-purpose shells, to be used when compensating the kin of a cannibal victim – occasions that no longer occurred when Liep did his fieldwork. In the case of the high division shells, their owners did not alienate them, although they nevertheless made them available. When a person needed an inalienable, high-division shell for a transaction, he had to 'elicit' it from its owner by presenting him with 'security' consisting of 'one or two other shells, or a valuable and a shell' (2009a:298–299). The combined value of the security was close to or even more than the value of the inalienable shell (2009a:298–299). This shell figured in the transaction, licensing it (2009a:180), after which its owner withdrew it and

[5] Liep (2009a:182). Liep's account of how Rossel Islanders had imbued *ndap* and *kĕ* with cultural value reminds me strongly of Sibbele Hylkema's discussion of the cultural significance of Maldive cowry shells among the far more numerous Me on the western tip of the Highlands of what is now West Papua. The Me also had ranked cowries, though in their case an Austronesian or other external inspiration is unclear. Hylkema stresses that the ranking had changed over time and was dissimilar among geographically separate sections of the Me population (Hylkema 2012:*passim*). I leave this topic for a following paper.

'replaced' it with a collection of lower-ranking shells. The inalienable shells were inherited, often by sons or sister's sons (2009a:173). If, in the course of time, the stock of high-ranking, inalienable shells does not increase markedly, and Rossel Islanders continue granting them high rank, the upshot being that access to these shells remains limited to a small group of owners and their offspring. They will then continue to form a separate, elite stratum among the Rossel Islanders (2009a:343).

Rossel Islanders maintained that the inalienability of the high-ranking *ndap* resulted from a house fire that had destroyed many shells of high rank. In Liep's reconstruction, this took place in 1918. However, in Liep's view the process had been a more gradual one, resulting from the Big Men's apprehension that the shell exchanges might be superseded as a result of the introduction of British and Australian money and of commodity exchanges. That process would have further undercut their dominance, after colonial incorporation had outlawed their use of violence (2009a:83, 191). Liep comments that 'influential seniors and outstanding big men are found' (2009a:331) among the owners of high-ranking shells.

The above exemplifies the complex sets of transactions that Rossel Islanders practised in their dealings in shells. Liep provides another example when discussing prostitution, an institution abandoned in the 1930s (2009a:292–293). A group of men captured a girl, 'usually' with the consent of an 'important' relative of hers, so as to capitalize on her sexual services. They presented her 'guardian', that is, her father or mother's brother, with a *dy:âm:andîî* that they elicited by means of a 'ladder of mobilisation', a chain of transactions among the members of the group, each of them spending a shell of higher rank than he had received from one of his companions. The guardian had to return the *dy:âm:andîî*, whereupon he received a replacement. The group of men gave other relatives of the girl 'good low-ranking' shells. Its members acted as procurers in their turn. The girl could keep part of the income, and another part went to the wife of the procurer in charge (2009a:292–293). After two or three years, the girl might decide to marry. She was considered an 'attractive' partner, given her earnings.

Above I have pointed to the range of transactions that Rossel Islanders had put to use. In the Epilogue to his book Liep raises the question 'Why all this complexity', without, however, answering it (2009a:326–328). In my view, Hylkema provided an answer after discussing the complex wedding arrangements of the Me: he thought that the Me had instituted the complex, if not 'nerve-wrecking' proceedings because they preferred it that way

(2012:159). Another aspect of the Rossel transactions was their wide social range. Liep presents lengthy analyses of the shell transactions accompanying many, if not most, of the social institutions of the Rossel Islanders. In the following, I will mention bridewealth and pig feasts. During both, many people participated by extending shells to others. In the absence of corporate groups and sizeable local groups, I conclude that shell transactions constituted the widest net of relationships.

Bridewealth

In the case of a marriage, the transactions started with the transfer of a *dy:âm:andîî* from the groom's side to the bride's side. The transfer 'legitimize[d]' (2009a:214) the marriage. Strikingly, Liep points out that the shell had to come from outside the groom's ward (2009a:216), so the transfer created, or continued, relations between people living in different settlements. The actual bridewealth was paid in two instalments, the second being much larger than the first. The groom, accompanied by one or more sponsors, went on a 'patrol', a term modelled on colonial administrative practices (2009a:224), to secure contributions. Consequently, contributors tended to hail from a wide geographical range. Liep witnessed, in two hamlets of a single settlement, the transfer of two such prestations on consecutive days. This special event attracted 'a large number of guests from most of the island'. It was unruly, with heated discussions about the value of the shells being offered (2009a:225–226).

In addition to creating relations over a wide area, shell transactions often created long-standing relations, if only since the debtor was unable to settle his debt: 'bridewealth leaves a man indebted for a large part of his life' (2009a:237). And a third aspect of the transactions was the significant role the Big Men had in them. The 'exo-practice' of having to secure a *dy:âm:andîî* from elsewhere so as to get a marriage sealed depended on a local Big Man who was able to arrange its use (2009a:216). Liep comments further: 'Even though the exchanges have been democratized [in the course of the colonial era], it is still the big men and other seniors who dominate the bridewealth proceedings, [...] [and] exchange the higher-ranking shell money' (2009a:232). Bachelors were wise to seek the Big Men's support. As Liep's research assistant, a Rossel Islander, told him: 'A young man who fails to give gifts to the big men must wait a long time to get married' (2009a:224).

Pig feasts

Pig feasts among the Rossel Islanders consisted of the distribution of the edible parts of a single, enormously fattened domestic pig against shells. They often resulted from a challenge in which one man, the 'pig-eater', challenged the pig-owner to hold one (2009a:260–261). The feast led to a multitude of shell transactions, in part with high-ranking shells. They started with the pig-owner pooling shells with his associates and handing them out as initiatory gifts, with the pig-eater having to raise a *dy:âm:andîî* to reciprocate for the major part of the pig. He did so via a 'ladder of mobilisation', as in the case of managing a prostitute. Also the other recipients of initiatory shells endeavoured to raise valuable return gifts in a similar manner. Hence the number of persons taking part became considerable. Liep states that the various parts, or cuts, of the pig were ranked, just like the shells.

The distribution of the meat against the shells was indeed a feast. Large numbers of people attended. The pig-owner, with male and female helpers, prepared a choice meal: pork with sago and vegetables, cooked in one or more earth ovens. This was the culmination of a lengthy sequence of interrelated events which Rossel Islanders saw as an achievement (2009a:267). Moreover, pig feasts occurred regularly: Liep counted how many took place in the village of Pum, his place of residence, from 1972 to 1980. During that period, in which the number of inhabitants increased from 140 to 206, there were over thirty pig feasts as against twelve transfers of bridewealth instalments (2009a:97, 293). Feasts were often reciprocated, with the pig-eater and pig-owner roles becoming reversed, the owner becoming the eater. Liep collected data for seven feasts, held in 1972–1973. The pig-owners received on average 627 shells and 15.37 Australian Dollars. Big Men also played an important part during pig feasts in just being present. Moreover, their high-ranking shells featured in the exchanges, for which they were rewarded with extra slices of pork. Liep suggests that men gained satisfaction from the fact that such high-ranking shells had been part of the proceedings at their pig feasts, while for their part the Big Men 'insisted' that their shells should be made use of (2009a:275).

Plutocracy

Although the word 'plutocracy' features in the title of Liep's book, and although he discusses Big Men throughout his text, he does not use the word

until the last, brief section of the Epilogue (2009a:341–343). Much earlier in his book he characterizes 'the power of wealth and the social inequality it produces in Rossel society' as 'a more general dominance diffused among a stratum of the population, more like a form of "class rule" acting in the innumerable relationships to the relatively disempowered' (2009a:133). He discusses two aspects of this type of dominance: first, the concentration of wealth, that is, of high-quality shells, in the hands of a small group almost exclusively of men; and second, the tendency of at least a number of these men to evade their obligations and promises: 'big men in general are often blamed for their cunning and shiftiness, all their tricks and lying, especially in connection with monetary dealings' (2009a:334).

In his comments on Liep's book, Gregory queries Liep's use of the concept primarily, it seems, because the Rossel Island Big Men did not have a more affluent life-style than other islanders (2009:90). Liep admits, in his reply to Gregory (2009c:105–106), that he uses the term in a 'tentative or experimental' way. However, it is clear that these Big Men were the owners of high-ranking shells as the most prominent assets to be had in Rossel Island society, most prominently because they were a cultural means of reproduction. These men also used them to exert dominance. As far as I can see, that seems enough reason to call them plutocrats.

This state of affairs on Rossel Island, with Big Men defaulting and creditors complaining, leads Liep into long, critical discussions of 'reciprocity', the 'spirit of the gift' and the 'generosity' of Big Men as posited by Marshall Sahlins (2009a:5–8, 18–19, 312–316). In the case of Sahlins, he points to the unwarranted uniformity of his model. That point seems justified to me. However, as regards reciprocity and the spirit of the gift, he seems to mistake the ideology for the reality. Whereas according to the ideology obligations should be met, the reality is often that debtors attempt to evade them as much and for as long as possible.

Liep noticed that Big Men had been able to maintain the indispensability of high-quality shells, especially in respect of bridewealth and mortuary payments, which in Liep's words are transactions 'most closely connected with control of people and the negotiation of their relationships' (2009a:340). They were also transactions that occurred again and again, so the participation of Big Men was just as regularly required. While in the course of the colonial and post-colonial eras the middle- and low-quality shells came to be used like coins, high-quality shells remained enclaved, special-purpose valuables. Liep was told 'The big men are much afraid of […] money' (2009a:340)

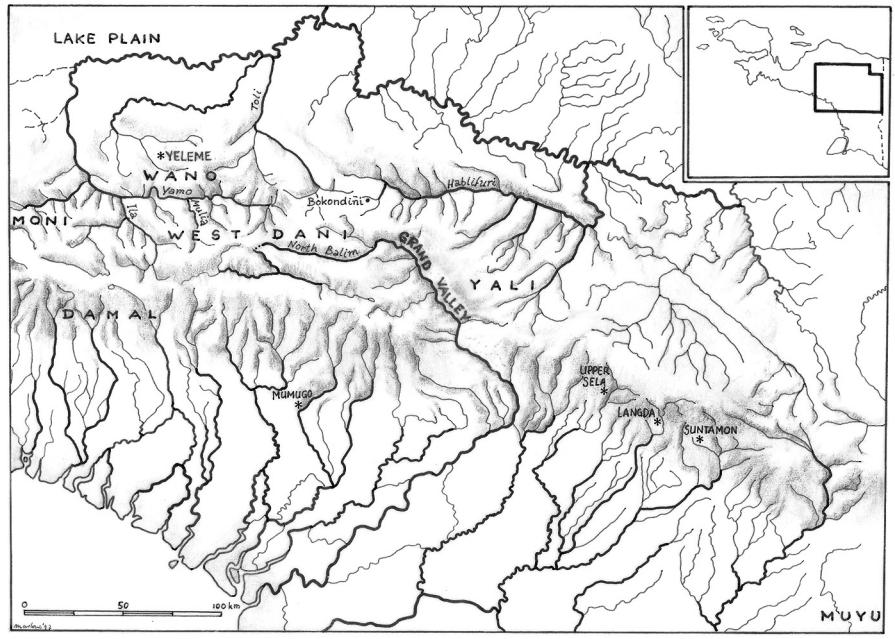
and, at the time of his fieldwork, they had apparently managed to press this dislike on to the other, 'smaller' Rossel Islanders. Levinson, who started his research in 1995, states that in 2006 'the gerontocracy of shell-money plutocrats still perdures, [and] marriages and mortuary feasts are still conducted' as Liep described them (Levinson 2009). That Rossel Islanders have persisted in accepting the exclusive value of several categories of shells, notwithstanding their discontent about their dependence on their owners and the availability of a state-backed currency that seems to provide an alternative wealth item, is an intriguing problem for which I cannot find a solution in the existing ethnography.

Social inequality among the Wanggulam

Introduction

The Wanggulam were a group of Lani. At the time of my field research in the 1960s, it was not known that the Lani were the largest ethnic group living in a number of Highlands valleys in West New Guinea. Although I regard them as a single ethnic group, the various groups of Lani did not follow an identical way of life (Ploeg 2020:Chapter 5). The Wanggulam lived in the Boko valley, in the northeast of the Lani habitat. My discussion in this paper refers only to them. When I started my field research among them, in May 1960, they had been exposed to direct influence by colonial agents for only a few years: missionaries had opened a station there in 1956, and the Dutch administration had arrived in 1959. Among both missionaries and administration these stations, and the area immediately surrounding them, became known as Bokondini, a Lani word meaning 'the flat area near the Boko'. The colonial peace that the administration had imposed was still tenuous (Broekhuyse 2020:101, 104). However, there were no fights between the political units in the valley in the course of my research, which lasted to September 1962, though minor fights still occurred. From early 1960 onwards, the people were deeply engaged in a Christian revitalization movement that I have described in an earlier paper (2007).

Unlike the Rossel Islanders, the Wanggulam were members of corporate groups, which in their case were patrilineal. Two such groups, united by multiple, mutual marriage links, formed the nuclei of their political groups.



Central West New Guinea (map: Marlous Terwiel)[6]

And, again unlike the Rossel Islanders, the two groups had adjoining territories that they defended or at least attempted to defend against attackers. As in previous publications, I call these groups 'parishes'. The Wanggulam formed one such parish. Warriorhood and effective leadership in war were the main avenues to gaining prestige and influence. Wanggulam presumed that these qualities were hereditary: warriors had warrior sons. I did not manage to establish whether this presumption had a factual basis, but if the Wanggulam were right and their leaders were the sons of leaders, they, like the Rossel Islanders, lived in a stratified society.

In "Government in Wanggulam" (Ploeg 1969) I used the expression 'big men' to refer to Wanggulam leaders. I realized at the time that my use of 'big men' did not conform to Marshall Sahlins' characterization of the expression (1963), but I retained it because it was a straightforward translation of the words the Wanggulam used themselves. However, when Maurice

6 The map shows the location of Bokondini, north of the Grand Valley of the Baliem River. The names Moni, Damal, Wano, West Dani and Yali refer to ethnic groups and the areas where they lived. At the time the map was made, I still used the name West Dani instead of Lani. The quarries from which the Wanggulam derived most of their stone artefacts, as related below, are located in Yeleme, in the land of the Wano.

Godelier pointed out that Sahlins' Big Men did not occur among the Baruya living in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea (1982), I reconsidered this issue. According to Godelier, the Baruya recognized a range of leaders, both by ascription and by achievement. For the latter, he coined the term 'Great Men', distinguishing between, primarily, Great Men warriors, Great Men shamans, and Great Men hunters (1982). For Godelier, Big Men societies, such as the Enga and the Melpa in Papua New Guinea and the Me in western New Guinea, were more recent phenomena, transformations of earlier Great Men societies. However, Wanggulam political organization was different again, given that their leaders were also warriors. Hence I dropped the term 'big men', using instead 'leaders' or 'leaders-warriors', as I also do in this article.

Some time before the colonial authorities had imposed their peace, probably less than a generation before, the Wanggulam had been routed by the forces of a formidable leader-warrior. They had vivid memories of that fearful episode, and although they had managed to return to their lands, they still felt insecure.

Wealth items

Wanggulam parish contained almost five hundred people, and my impression is that neighbouring parishes in the Boko valley were of a comparable size. Given that the marriage links between the two major constituent groups were mutual, I conclude that their relative status was one of equality. In the case of the Wanggulam, the two groups were called Penggu and Karoba, and Wanggulam parish was often referred to by the name Penggu-Karoba. Contracting a marriage was accompanied by the exchange of wealth items, marriages being the most frequently occurring occasions for such exchanges. There were various categories of wealth items: pigs; smoothly polished stones (*yao*), up to around forty centimetres long (Pétrequin and Pétrequin 2020:135); tightly looped strings, of human length, or longer, set with cowrie shells; and single cowries.

As regards the source of these four items, the pigs were locally produced. The cowries had to be obtained from elsewhere until the arrival of the colonial authorities, who used them as coins in their payments to the Wanggulam. The *yao* came from a group of quarries on the northern edge of the Highlands, several days walk to the west. The Wanggulam obtained stone for their tools from the same quarries (Pétrequin and Pétrequin 2020:132–

133). *Yao* were ranked, but the criteria used to do so remain unclear to me. Also the ethnographies of other Lani groups, most of whom used *yao*, fail to mention such criteria. Moreover, the Wanggulam distinguished between male and female *yao.* The archaeologists Pierre and Anne-Marie Pétrequin write that this feature occurred especially among Lani living in the northern part of their territories (2020:134–135). Just as the Rossel Islanders knew shells of high rank by name, the Wanggulam knew such highly valuable *yao* by name. However, they had not been oligopolized. Cowries, like pigs, were apparently distinguished by size only. I do not know whether or, if so, how the Wanggulam ranked the four categories of wealth items, although it seems safe to assume that single cowries ranked the lowest.

The use of *yao* may be ancient, since the Pétrequins write that the quarries concerned have been in continuous operation for at least two thousand years (2020:51). How long cowries have been available to Highlanders in Western New Guinea has not been researched. As for the Lani, in 1921 Paul Wirz did fieldwork among those living in the Toli valley, northwest of the Boko valley. He noticed that the people then owned cowries and that they were eager to acquire more (Wirz 1924). He obtained a set of cowries on a string, which I saw in the Basle museum of anthropology in the early 1960s. It had far fewer cowries attached to it than those I saw among the Wanggulam in the early 1960s.

A wedding included two major prestations. One was assembled by the bride's party on the first day of the wedding and handed to relatives of the bride's mother. The second was assembled by the groom's party and handed to the bride's party a few days later, when the bride was brought to the groom's hamlet. No further exchanges of wealth items took place. In Chris Gregory's terms, the Wanggulam arrangement is a 'one-off' matter, in contrast to the 'ongoing marriage exchanges' (Gregory 2009:87) practised by the Rossel Islanders. The two prestations had to match one another in both quantity and quality, and also had to match the assemblage of wealth items transferred during the wedding of the bride's mother.

The assemblage of the first payment was an important public occasion. It took place on the first day of the wedding, while women dressed the bride in her wedding skirt. Pigs were killed and slaughtered and their meat cooked so that the guests, contributors to the payment, could be rewarded with slices of pork. The smoke of the fire heating the cooking stones announced the special occasion. The *yao* were greased with lard, which enhanced their shine, and were laid out in a row. In normal life they were stowed away; men

were delighted at seeing them and letting them slip through their hands. The fathers of the bride and the groom were to provide highly ranked *yao*. Their new owners held on to them and stowed them away so as to have one ready for a forthcoming wedding of a son or a daughter, or for the transfer of compensation for a killing. So the highly ranked *yao* circulated slowly, and people were apprehensive that they might get lost.

Rotating leadership

Unlike among the Rossel Islanders, among whom their Big Men were conspicuous during wedding ceremonies, among the Wanggulam the fathers of the bride and groom had the central positions during the wedding ceremonies, and it was their task to conduct the distribution of the assembled wealth. In the course of time, a sequence of men performed this central role in a series of weddings. I have called this feature 'rotating leadership' (Ploeg 1969:108). As I show below, such rotation was also part of Wanggulam agricultural practices.

Soon after my arrival among them, the Wanggulam started preparing new food gardens. They co-operated in doing so. Mostly, new gardens were made on land covered by young forest after it had been cultivated and subsequently fallowed. The first task then was removing the regrowth, which was usually done by working parties of men and youngsters. I was struck by how independently the men went about their tasks: arriving in the first half of the morning by themselves, working by themselves, and taking a rest when it suited them. The only labour specialization was that the trees were pollarded by youngsters. The man they were helping, who held title to the land they were clearing, and who I suggest was the leader for that day, was elsewhere, preparing a large earth oven for the meal that he was to offer his helpers. On these occasions too the smoke of the fire heating the cooking stones announced the special occasion. At the same time, women harvested the food to be prepared. Once the food had been cooked, the leader for the day took the initiative in distributing it. Some of it was eaten there and then, but a lot was carried off when people dispersed, and was taken home.

One or a few days later, the next working party worked on the garden land belonging to another participant. It followed the same scenario. Indeed, the working parties worked in a series: after the land had been cleared, a fence might have to be built, or an existing fence might have to be repaired. The dried leaves, twigs and small branches of the cleared vegetation had to

be burnt. Moreover, the first harvest of prized crops, like winged bean, other beans and corn, was also the occasion for a working party.

Wanggulam realized that, although land rights were distributed equally, some men and their wives were more diligent agriculturalists than others and consequently had better harvests. It is not clear to me whether all men also had equal access to high-quality *yao.* Nevertheless, the arrangements I described above show a large measure of equality among adult men.

The same observation can be made during other large, joint undertakings. I mention two: a harvest feast of oil pandanus fruits, and pig feasts. I was able to observe one such harvest feast (Ploeg 1969:86–89, 122–125, 216). Oil pandanus was a male crop. It fruits seasonally, and during the feast men pooled part of their harvest. It was an eagerly anticipated, large-scale, enormously festive occasion to which most Penggu men contributed pandanus fruits and during which they were cooked, with other food, in eleven large earth ovens. The firewood stack heating the cooking stones was correspondingly large, and its smoke correspondingly impressive. Apart from mission-inspired meetings, this was the largest gathering I witnessed during my field research. As with the working parties mentioned above, the participants were familiar with the proceedings; they did not need any guidance. But during the distribution of the cooked food Wandin was in the leading position, announcing the names of the donees. Wandin was a Penggu man and their greatest, most meritorious warrior and war leader. After the Wanggulam had been routed from their territory in the Boko valley, he had led their return (Ploeg 1969:78). He may also have been decisive in setting the exact date of the feast. Several times I heard the occasion referred to as Wandin's pandanus feast. However, at one point during the distribution I noticed another Penggu man instructing him what to do, whom Wandin obeyed.

Pig feasts were celebrated by entire parishes (Ploeg 1969:119–120). I did not witness one so had to rely on oral information about feasts that people had taken part in. As was the case with the pandanus feast I mentioned, men took part as independent producers, pooling their produce, each man contributing one or more pigs. Their pigs were killed on the same day, in the settlements where the owners lived. The pork was cooked there, so smoke from the fire stacks went up from many parts of the parish territory, producing a unique signal. The cooked pork was distributed in the course of a few days to fellow Wanggulam, as well as to outsiders. Those who told me about the events represented the occasion as a community feast. As I understood the proceedings, the distributions were not centralized in so far they were

not managed by a single person, as I had witnessed during the Penggu pandanus feast.

By chance I had attended such a distribution during a visit to Denise O'Brien, who carried out field research in the upper catchment of the Toli river, farther west (Ploeg 1969:89). Her field site was separated from the Boko valley by a watershed. During this large-scale feast, men and women distributed parts of what they had brought to the assembled food to exchange partners. That happened simultaneously and engendered a most lively scene.

Comparison

The above accounts of Wanggulam and Rossel Island societies are based on fieldwork carried out during the colonial era, in Liep's case several decades after incorporation had started, in my own almost immediately afterwards. For the Wangggulam too, the recent past was a pre-colonial past. My observations took place during the start of the colonial era, but much of what the people told me about their lives, referred to their pre-colonial past. As regards Liep's research, a great deal in his book concerns his observations during his fieldwork, but, as I made it clear in earlier sections of this paper, he adds information about the early colonial and pre-colonial past as well.

Comparing the accounts of Wanggulam and Rossel societies, it seems at first sight that in the former case it was especially the adult men who had greater access to the assets their lives required. Unlike the Rossel Islanders, they did not depend to this end on Big Men or other leaders, and consequently they appeared to enjoy greater degrees of equality and freedom. However, that conclusion has to be qualified. I did my fieldwork at a time of peace, a peace enforced by the colonial authorities, while the Wanggulam had earlier acquired prestige and power in fighting and warfare. Contributing wealth items, however highly ranked, organizing working parties and contributing to harvest and pig feasts was secondary to performing in the context of armed combat, by killing enemies or by leading war parties. Fights in which a number of men took part appear to have occurred regularly in the Boko valley before the colonial intervention. What Liep relates about the pre-colonial past on Rossel shows that leaders, supported by henchmen, were both willing and able to kill people living close by, 'in their area' (Liep 2009a:84). Moreover, these men held the highly ranked shells that people needed on occasions such as weddings and pig feasts – occasions that occurred again and

again and that pervaded social life. Whereas, among the Wanggulam, their leaders offered protection against attackers, took the lead in protecting their lands, and thus acted for the benefit of their co-parishioners, among Rossel Islanders their Big Men added to unsafety and created resentment.

In his comments on Liep's "A Papuan plutocracy", Joel Robbins argues that Liep has a mistaken view of what really mattered among the Rossel Islanders. According to Robbins, Rossel Big Men entertained 'fantasies of standing at the apex of an elaborately hierarchical system', while the other people lived their lives 'in something like the largely reciprocal kinds of ways so many other Melanesians do' (Robbins 2009:79). Liep does not accept this argument. In his answer to Robbins, he argues that, instead of being a fantasy, '[c]eremonial exchange on Rossel is at the heart of social reproduction, the prestige economy of pig feasts and the acquisition of status properties like houses and canoes' (2009c:101). And elsewhere he characterizes Rossel Island society as one in which 'a monetary instrument became the key medium in the practice of social relations' (2009c:106). I find Liep's answer convincing. However, in my view Robbins' argument does not apply to the Wanggulam either, and nor does Liep's argument. What really mattered to the Wanggulam were not transactions regarding wealth items, but retaliation, and showing strength and fighting spirit.

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