The Anthropology of Morality in Melanesia and Beyond

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2007

ASHGATE
Chapter 6
Reconfiguring Amity at Ramu Sugar Limited
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One of Kenelm Burrridge’s most enduring insights into Papua New Guinea sociality concerned the significance of achieving an amity based on moral relationships of mutual equivalence. Thus, in *Mambu*, he wrote concerning the Tangu he knew in the early 1950s:

All Tangu, howsoever related, assent to the notion of amity. Amity exists within its own moral right: it is the critical norm by which all relationships are judged, and with which all relationships should coincide or approximate...The breach of amity immediately sets in motion procedures designed to ensure a return to amity. As a result, in action on the ground, amity entails relationships shifting until the mutual obligations contained within them can approximate at least to an overt conformity with amity...

Amity is itself most significantly manifested in the idea of equivalence: in the idea that individuals are in a state of moral equality, one human being, as a whole, being neither morally worse nor morally better than another. Amity is a function of equivalence: through equivalence the most perfect kind of amity may be found. In action, equivalence, and therefore amity, finds primary expression in formal exchanges of foodstuffs, whether they are between individuals, or groups of households (Burridge 1960, 17).

And, as Burridge amply showed, given the tangle of relationships that constituted Tangu sociality, controversies concerning who owed what to whom and why were not only common, but ramified widely and intricately. Indeed, amity was far from a steady state and much of Tangu social life could be seen as focused on claims and counter-claims concerning whether or not it had been fulfilled or breached, and, if so or if not, what should be done. Such wranglings, especially in their more intense forms as they became “disputes,” embodied for villagers—and, in particularly illuminating ways, for their anthropologist(s)—what was at stake in Tangu life.

At stake was the performance of a sociality of a particular sort—what we have elsewhere termed “commotion” (Gewertz and Errington 2002). This sociality was predicated upon on-going and self-assertive engagements: one in which people compelled each other into active participation in each other’s pasts, presents and futures. In such a sociality, morality or amorality could be measured by one’s willingness to recognize or repudiate another as worthy—as efficacious—players in the same game. Such recognition or repudiation was, in essence, an affirmation or a denial of agency—indeed, of the capacity to effect history (cf. Strathern 1992).
And it was such a profound repudiation—such a seemingly absolute denial by whites (mostly Australians) of the efficacy and worth of Papua New Guineans—that profoundly irked, baffled and frustrated those among whom Burridge worked—hurting them into a range of activities, including, of course, cargo cults.¹

Most anthropologists working in present-day Papua New Guinean villages, some fifty years after Burridge's first fieldwork, would recognize the persistence and generality of these Tangu themes that Burridge has set out so gracefully and compellingly, with such ethnographic and moral insight. They would recognize the extent to which ideas focusing on mutual recognition of worth—of amity, equivalence, engagement, agency—have remained significant to visions of sociality among contemporary Papua New Guineans. Certainly, we have continued to find "Tangu-kinds" of engagements—commotions—in our work among the Chambri, both in their home villages and in their village-like squatter settlement. Thus, three brief examples:

1. Very late one night in 1994 our old Chambri friend, Godfried Kolly, eventually opened the door of his squatter-settlement house in Wewak's Chambri Camp in response to a Chambri drunk. The drunk had been raucously noisy for hours, keeping everyone awake. At first Godfried responded to his pounding on the door, demanding access to Godfried's store of beer, by shouting for him to go away. But, as soon as the man reminded Godfried of their specific though (quite) distant kin relationship, the door was opened and beer provided.

2. While acting as sponsors of a ceremony at Ingingai (one of the Chambri home villages) during 1999, we were plunged into a protracted discussion of ritual protocol and of the relative priority of various ancestral presences. However, since we viewed the occasion as a solemn ceremony of commemoration—and since our time was short but our money, not—we decided to cut through what we saw as the self-assertion typical of Chambri male politics: we decided to pay whatever it took to get matters back on track. However, it soon became clear that such events of controversy and contention were not just a predictable distraction from the ritual's objective. They were central to it. In fact, one of our friends shook his head with frustration at our lack of appreciation of the spirit of the ritual, telling us that we had killed them all (that we had stopped them all dead) with our money.

3. During 1999, while we were attending an evangelical service at Ingingai, an emotionally exultant preacher insisted to us that our presence meant that we were all equal in God's eyes: that God loved all of his children—both black and white—and that we would all end up in heaven one happy day.

There is no doubt, we think, that such contemporary attempts to achieve amity through claims—and counter-claims—would be intelligible to Burridge's Tangu. However, there is also no doubt that these contemporary commotions intimate that important shifts have been underway. Although Burridge's Tangu were already, to

¹ We allude here to "In the Memory of W. B. Yeats," a poem in which W. H. Auden eulogizes: "Mad Ireland hurt you in poetry." (1940).
some extent, influenced by urban migration, commodities, cash, Christianity and English-based forms of education, these forces and processes were to become increasingly significant in succeeding years. Indeed, these forces and processes were to shape in important ways an emergent system of *incommensurate* differences, largely cash— if not class-based. These differences, by their nature, were—as Burridge clearly recognized—reconfiguring the system of moral equivalence. (See particularly, Burridge’s discussion of the effect of money on social relations.) They were redefining who could make what claims on whom. In fact, they were leading to a reconsideration of whether and under what conditions amity would be even feasible and desirable.

In the pages that follow, we trace out this reconfiguration with reference to several sociality-revealing wrangles—indeed, disputes—that took place at Ramu Sugar Limited (RSL), a modernist enterprise considerably different from both Tangu and Chambri villages. (For a social history of RSL, see Errington and Gewertz 2004) As we shall see, at RSL, much of the rhetoric of amity and equivalence persisted. Nonetheless, as claims and counter-claims played out, self-assertions were shifting into shake-downs, if not extortions; concerns with engagement were moving into preoccupations with liability. In fact, claims for equivalence were leading to terminations of social relations. It was, in effect, as Sahlin’s (1981; 1985) has described for another Pacific area, that structures were transforming, connotations were shifting.

First some background.

**Ramu Sugar Limited**

Brought into existence in the late 1970s in a remote part of Papua New Guinea, RSL was an embodiment of imported industrial production. Its Dickensian, smoke-belching, steam-shrieking factory and vast fields of carefully tended sugar cane contrasted sharply with the surrounding grassland, punctuated only by an occasional village. RSL became not only an immense physical fact, but an immense social fact: it not only dominated and organized the landscape, it also shaped—and was shaped by—the consciousness of those culturally diverse thousands who left their homes to live and work there.

RSL was, moreover, built to be a centerpiece in newly independent Papua New Guinea’s development efforts. Achieving Independence in 1975, relatively late in

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2 We have described commensurate differences as difference in degree and incommensurate differences as differences in kind (Gewertz and Errington 1991). Money (and presumably other items) could be used to establish and demarcate either sort of difference. However, at a certain point, having *more* money than others might come to mark one as a significantly *different* kind of person than others, as we illustrate in (Gewertz and Errington 1999).

3 See especially Burridge (1969a, 41-46).

4 We use the past tense (or variants of it) whenever possible in this chapter to convey the idea that events have taken place in particular historical contexts—not in some timeless state, in some “ethnographic present.”
world history. Papua New Guinea urgently wanted to develop and to avoid the mistakes in development made by other former colonies. It wanted to catch up and to learn from the errors of the rest. Created as both a grand project and a private, for-profit enterprise, RSL became a major—although often contested—component of these endeavors. Significantly, it was to be unlike sugar operations elsewhere, rooted as they usually were in a grim colonial past. It was, instead, supposed to bring enlightened capitalist prosperity—good wages, technical skills and a modern infrastructure—to transform a region deemed remote, underpopulated and underutilized. Furthermore, it was to benefit the entire country.

RSL was also seen as bringing national self-sufficiency in a major commodity. Indeed, sugar, with such other imports as rice and canned mackerel, was already becoming central to the diet of Papua New Guinea’s swelling urban population. Moreover, self-sufficiency in sugar would also have important symbolic value: it would be a particularly appropriate assertion of national will. After all, sugar had originally been domesticated in Papua New Guinea (some 8,000 years ago). Furthermore, sugar was a major export of Australia. And Australia, it was thought, had protected its overseas market by stifling the development of a sugar industry in its (now former) de facto Papua New Guinea colony. It was not surprising, therefore, that for advice concerning the creation of its sugar industry, Papua New Guinea sought out not an Australian-based firm, but a British-based one. They chose Booker Agriculture International (BAI), a company with much experience in establishing plantations in developing countries. BAI—and, in its later form, Booker Tate Limited (BTL)—would eventually help establish RSL and provide its corporate managers.

RSL thus became a Papua New Guinean, agro-industrial sugar complex, staffed by thousands of Papua New Guinean “nationals” from all over the country as well as by “expatriates” from many parts of the world. What came into being was both

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5 As of 1886, the northern half of what became the country of Papua New Guinea was a colony of Germany and the southern half, of Britain. In 1921, after World War One, the northern half—New Guinea—came under Australian administration, first, as a League of Nations Mandated Territory, then, as a United Nations Trust Territory. In 1966, the southern half—Papua—though still formally controlled by Britain, also came under Australian administration. The two territories—New Guinea and Papua—were administered separately by Australia until 1942. Subsequently, Australia brought both under a single administration (although the United Nations retained some responsibility for the New Guinea portion). This condition prevailed until Papua New Guinea’s Independence as a single nation in 1975.

6 For an excellent analysis of the local impact of sugar operations under post-colonial, albeit equally grim, circumstances, see Schepers-Hughes (1992).

7 Of the 668 permanent employees working at RSL during 2000, about 40 percent came from the three provinces nearest to RSL: sixty-nine from Madang; one hundred and eighteen from Morobe; and seventy-eight from Eastern Highlands. But, there were permanent workers from all of the country’s provinces, with the exception of Western: twenty-one from Central; thirty from East New Britain; sixty-one from East Sepik; forty-three from Enga; ten from Gulf; twenty-three from Manus; eleven from Milne Bay; four from New Ireland; nine from North Solomons; eleven from Oro; seventeen from Sandaun; seventy-five from Simbu; twenty-nine from Southern Highlands; thirty-six from Western Highlands; nine from West New Britain; and one whose province of origin we do not know. In addition, there were thirteen permanently employed expatriates: four Australians; five Britons; two Fijian-Indian-
impressive and complex.\textsuperscript{8} Certainly, for the Papua New Guineans who have lived and worked there, RSL became a big deal.

At RSL, culturally diverse Papua New Guineans, with their nuclear families and neighbors, came to live in a secure, comfortable and regulated company town. It was a gated, residential community provided with the physical amenities of electricity, water, and sewage as well as with the social amenities of schools, churches, recreational facilities and medical posts. There, with their varied workmates and to the sound of factory sirens and the regulation of time clocks, they came to perform the highly coordinated tasks which had evolved world-wide over four centuries of sugar field and factory management.\textsuperscript{9}

RSL was, in other words, a rather distinctive and modernist place: those living there were brought together so as to work for wages; they were there primarily to produce a commodity for sale on the market; they survived largely by purchasing food with the wages they earned; they generally lived in nuclear families and interacted with neighbors and fellow workers who were likely unknown to them prior to coming to RSL.\textsuperscript{10} This is to say, RSL was definitely not a village in the Tangu or Chambri sense.

Although RSL was not a village, the post-colonial, village court system that had been instituted nation-wide was, nonetheless, expected to operate there. Village courts were supposed to be relatively informal and to make decisions that took local

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\textsuperscript{8} The land which eventually became RSL was purchased from indigenous people in 1956 by the Australian administration to be offered to Europeans in pastoral leases. When RSL was established, it had to buy the leases from these Europeans. The leases came as a package involving several small cattle ranches scattered down the Markham Valley and one large ranch in the Upper Ramu Valley. The latter was divided: a portion became the sugar operation and a portion remained as a ranching operation. Although there has been some synergy between the ranching and the sugar operations (cows, for example, were sometimes fed molasses and cane-tops), the two were quite different kinds of operations.

\textsuperscript{9} For informative discussions of the development of sugar cane processing technology—including its great improvement in the 19th century—see Deerr (1950) and Mintz (1985). See Bakker (1999) for a state-of-art specification of sugar cane growing techniques.

\textsuperscript{10} RSL became part of a 500 hectare township (known as Gusap). The township was carefully planned and controlled. Its residential center, consisting of two adjacent gated communities, was surrounded by over 7,000 hectares of RSL-owned sugar cane fields. RSL staff lived in these two gated communities. All houses or apartments were provided with basic and free utilities and most were reserved for (again) RSL’s almost 700 permanent RSL employees and their immediate nuclear families. These families were defined in the Employees Handbook as “one husband or one wife and dependent children” (RSL 1993, 4). Any visitors, whether members of an extended family or wantoks more generally, were to be registered and allowed to stay for no more than three weeks.
 customs into account. (They were, thus, unlike district courts which were more formal and based decisions on codified national law.)

Because RSL's village court encompassed people from a myriad of cultural groups, with a myriad of local customs (again, those living at or near RSL came from all over Papua New Guinea and, in the case of expatriates, from all over the world), it was recognized as somewhat unusual. In fact, it was sufficiently unusual that, during 1999, the Madang Provincial Government sent two instructors to run a refresher course at RSL to advise (or remind) RSL's village-court magistrates (themselves Papua New Guineans from varied locales) how best to deal with the diversity of those coming before them. Together with the magistrates, we attended this course. The primary instructor (an Engan) introduced the judicial challenge in this way:

At Ramu Sugar there are people from the Highlands, Sepik, Papua, Kainantu, Madang—and it is not clear which of their customs should be followed at the village court. Moreover, there are mixed marriages—a Sepik may be married to someone else, a Highlander to someone from Madang. If their marriage breaks up, one side says that it wants K2,500, two pigs and all the saucepans in compensation. The other side says, that's not our custom. So the work of the village court is not easy because there are all sorts of people: some village courts have heard cases of people from Italy, from Rome, from New Zealand. So how do we know which customs we should use? Because we have "God-given intelligence" [English words used]. Whereas a monkey will try to get food out of a pipe with its mouth, a human will use a stick to do so. God has given humans the capacity to size things up and figure them out.

This instructor was especially concerned that the RSL village court magistrates use "mediation" during court sessions. Their job, he said, was not to make people afraid, but to help people achieve composure, bel isi in Pidgin English. This was a prerequisite for all else. All of us were prone to sin; we all had good and bad sides, but most of us would rather be good. Mediation would help us learn how to be good. To mediate was to use the law in a non-aggressive way. Indeed, the instructor stressed, "the key in mediation is not to dictate, but to give people suggestions—to say, 'if I were you, I would do such and such.'"

In the four breaches of sociality we describe below, we provide a spectrum of cases showing a range of rhetorics of equivalence. Though all of these cases project

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12 RSL provided free room and board to these instructors and gave RSL employees released-time to attend the course. There were ten students in addition to us. All were Papuan New Guinean males; six were RSL employees; three were "outgrowers," neighboring Mari villagers, all (Markham speakers) who had put their land in sugar cane; one was a local businessman. The RSL employees occupied different grades and were from various provinces: one Grade 3, from the Enga Province; two Grade 5s, from the Western Highlands and Enga Provinces; two seasonal employees from Madang and Enga Provinces; one manager from the Morobe Province. Two of the outgrowers were from the Mari village of Bumbu and one was from the Mari village of Bpinumpun. And, the businessman, the owner of a trade store and snack bar located on RSL property, was from the Eastern Highlands Province. All had been elected (although few elections were contested) by their different RSL and Mari constituencies.
amity, the projections range from the amicable to the intimidating: from the "if I were you," in the empathetic sense of "if I do unto others," to the "if I were you," in the coercive sense of "if you know what's good for you." In so doing, they reveal the increased recognition of (cash- and class-based) incommensurate differences that in new ways create obstacles and opportunities to assert efficacy and worth. (It should be noted that many of these cases at RSL seem to reflect the same tensions that Jørgensen, this volume, describes as arising between Highlanders who did and did not receive income from the nearby Ok Tedi mining project.)

Instance One: The Model for Mediation

During the provincial-sponsored training course, the primary instructor asked the magistrates to provide their own real-life examples of disputes and to adjudicate these disputes. They were to divide into two groups, with one enacting the roles of claimant, defendant, and witnesses and the other, village court magistrates. The overall goal was to use their human intelligence so as to recognize and even to advocate the reasonability of cultural perspectives not their own.

One example the class provided was of particular interest to us because we already knew something of its real-life circumstances. The dispute concerned Emmanuel Moba, one of the students and a magistrate from Bumbu, again, a local Mari village that had put its lands into sugarcane for sale to RSL. Moba was in conflict with his in-laws from Chimbu in the Highlands. Moba's son had met a Chimbu woman when her mother was teaching at one of RSL's schools. The couple was living at Bumbu and already had two children. Her family had set her bride price, in both money and pigs, at a level Moba thought was unreasonably high—much higher than was usual among the Mari and among coastal people more generally. Moreover, her family was putting increasing pressure upon him to pay, particularly because, as someone with land in sugarcane, he had a regular income. However, Moba regarded much of this income as already entailed by the far more reasonable claims of immediate kin. What to do—particularly since, in his experience, Chimbu could pursue their interests with uncomfortable persistence.

The members of both groups decided which roles they would play. Moba, playing (as many knew) himself, was invited by the mediators (members of the other group) to describe his grievance. Sketching out the case, he said that the problem involved "a man of the coast and a Chimbu woman." He said that the family of an in-marrying Chimbu woman wanted K6,000 and two pigs in bride price, but it was not the custom of his coastal group to pay so much. Coastal people paid a maximum of K1,500. Could the court reduce the price? Then the man representing the Chimbu side of the case spoke. Interestingly, he was himself a Coastal from Madang. He said that it was usual Chimbu custom to charge much more than they had asked of this Coastal man, as much as K8-9,000 and ten-to-twelve pigs. They had already reduced the price to help him out, and had no intention of reducing it more. After all,

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13 In recent years, the Papua New Guinea Kina has fluctuated considerably in relation to the U.S$. During the time of most of our actual RSL research, in 1999 and 2000, we estimate that K1.00 was worth about U.S$.35.
there had been two children born by this time. The girl's father, paternal uncle and grandfather would not change their minds and the law had to straighten this all out now. Moba (obviously switching from a generic Coastal to himself) said that he only got paid for his sugar cane once a year. It wasn't the same as for those coffee-growing Highlanders whose money came in more often. Could he have a little more time?

The man playing the chief mediator of the village court first cautioned that it was not up to him to dictate a resolution. Nonetheless, he continued, if he were the Coastal man, he might agree to pay K3,000 and one pig at the next Christmas and the same amount the year after. Moba and the "Chimbu" responded that this seemed fair. The mediator then said he would instruct the village court clerk to fill out the appropriate form and give a copy to each.

Finally, the instructor asked what the class had thought of this resolution. Pretty good, everyone agreed, because each side was treated equally and each could be seen by the other as having a plausible case.

This resolution was, then, defined as a model of what magistrates should strive for in their village courts. The outcome of bel isi through mediation defused the conflict between different cultural groups that threatened to get out of hand. Though the Maris, at least, felt that, by virtue of their sugar income, they were likely to be targets-of-opportunity, the resolution of the dispute defined neither party as delinquent—neither as cheats nor as extortionists. And because the dispute was more cash-based than class-based, differences were not so incommensurate as to defy establishing relations of relative equality. However, perhaps partly because members of different cultural groups were involved, the relationships restored (or established) were amicable in rather minimal form. As such, the sociality that emerged was less the stuff of on-going life than something people could live with. It resulted less in the commotion of a long-term engagement, than a reasonably affable stand-off in which each agreed to leave the other relatively alone—provided that certain conditions were, and continued to be, met.

**Instance Two: The Village Court and the Moral Young Man**

Subsequent to this refresher course, we attended a number of village-court sessions. One of the cases involved (not surprisingly for Papua New Guinea) a big pig.

A mature man (referred to by the magistrates as "big man") brought charges against Tony, a young Chimbu who worked as a seasonal laborer in the RSL packing house.14 The big man had come down from his home village to insist that Tony (referred to by the magistrates as "young person") repay him for the pig he had killed upon the occasion of Tony's wedding. The big man explained that he was the maternal uncle of Tony's wife's father—and had been asked by his sister's son (again, Tony's wife's father) to kill a pig in celebration of the wedding. It was, he stated, a huge pig, worth K1,000—and one for which he had expected to be paid. After all, Tony was working for money and could afford to pay.

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14 Seasonal employees were hired for the annual six-to-seven month harvest season. The number of seasonal employees was greatly multiplied three times the present number during the early years when a large labor force was necessary to cut the cane by hand.
Tony responded by telling the magistrates that he had, in truth, thought the pig to be a counter-prestation in recognition and appreciation of the twelve pigs and K1,240 he had distributed during the marriage ceremony. Nonetheless, when the big man had suddenly arrived at RSL on three previous occasions, he had given him K100, K40 and, finally, K20. What more generosity did he owe a somewhat distant affine who kept arriving unexpectedly and demanding money?

The magistrates, particularly the Highlanders among them, were very interested in this case. They carefully questioned both men to verify the facts: to determine who had paid what to whom. And then they turned their attention to the size of the pig. Just how big a pig was it? It was definitely worth K1000, the big man insisted—and it had been “killed for nothing.” A witness who had seen the pig was called and verified that it was a very big pig. The coastal magistrates (Moba in particular) persisted in wanting to make sure that it was not, for instance, a K500 pig. How long had the big man taken care of it: two years? three years? The big man insisted again that it was a huge pig and that the young man was a “big head”—was someone who thought he knew it all. One magistrate suggested that the case should be referred to the appropriate village court at Chimbue. But the big man insisted that, because Tony worked for wages at RSL, the court should be heard at the place where people had immediate access to his wages.

Moba considered it odd that all the elders at Chimbue had seen the bride price distributed and the big pig given but had not seemed to think that further exchanges were necessary. However, the big man would not be mollified, persisting that he had killed his pig for nothing. Moba then told Tony that, regardless of whether the big man was his affine, maternal relative, or kinsmen, Tony should help him out. Tony replied that he had been helping him out, but couldn’t do much more since he wasn’t paid that well at RSL and had debts to co-workers. The big man insisted that Tony just didn’t care. Indeed, he continued, “I almost died last year when I came down here to the lowlands.” As evidence, he produced his “health book” and showed the magistrates his diagnosis of malaria. His parasite count had been 100,000.

The magistrates reached a decision a few minutes later: one that they thought would allow Tony and the big man to “shake hands.” Although they could not be certain as to the size of the pig, they were sympathetic to the big man’s plight, including his high malaria count. Moreover, they felt that Tony did, in fact, want to make the big man happy by doing the right thing. Since he had already paid K160, the magistrates concluded that K40 should be forthcoming. That would mean that the big man would receive K600 for his pig. Would this be ok? Yes. But, since Tony only earned K120 for two months of work at RSL, he would need two more months. Granted.

The two left and the magistrates prepared to turn to their next case. But, before they could do so, Tony came back into the room. He wanted to explain, he said, that he wasn’t a “big head”—he wasn’t disrespectful to the authority of his elders and of tradition. Not only would he comply with the court-ordered line, but he would try to get a pig to send back with the money.

In as much as this case involved members of the same group, it differed from many (though far from all) of the village court cases at RSL—and, indeed, it differed from the “model” case presented in Instance One. That this case concerned people
who, by virtue of both kinship and homestead, were likely to remain involved in
each other’s lives affected the important distinction between those who worked for
money—had a regular (if seasonal) income—and those who didn’t. To be sure, the
big man was trying, to some extent, to “cash in” on a kinship obligation. He had
singled out Tony because of his salary. But this was not all that the big man was
doing. At stake for him was more than maximizing his investment. He was also
affirming his personal efficacy by demanding the respect that compensation would
convey. Correspondingly, despite the evident element of coercion, if not extortion,
in the big man’s actions, Tony found it important that he be understood by the
magistrates as a moral young man. Moreover, in wanting to compensate the big man
with not only money but a pig, Tony wished to do more than settle a grievance. He
wished, as well, to further amity.

Instance Three: The Tables Turned

Our next case concerned employees at RSL who had extensive, face-to-face
relationships with each other, yet were separated not just by culture but by race.
Though race relations at RSL between expatriates and nationals were far different
from those in pre-colonial Madang District, many of the difficulties of establishing
mutual moral worth remained. First some background about RSL’s attempts to create
racial amity.

There were many explicit attempts on the part of expatriate managers to create
a solitary community of sugar-producers from all of those working and living at
RSL. (All expatriates by the time of our work were managers—not supervisors
or workers.) One such attempt was to promote self-conscious representations of
community in the Sugar Valley News (SVN), a generously illustrated, mimeographed
booklet published twice a year between 1983 and 1991. Importantly, as we shall see,
this booklet provided largely expatriate-orchestrated images of how members of this
community should see one another.

In the SVN, there were many profiles (as well as photographs) of people—
both nationals and expatriates—as equal members of the RSL community: all
had educations that equipped them with the particular skills they brought to the
common sugar-producing enterprise; all enjoyed their leisure time in various ways
with friends, neighbors and co-workers; all had supportive, nuclear families. And
all appreciated the beautified homes in which their families lived. In one issue
of the SVN, for example, under the heading “Health, Garden and Home: Garden
News,” we see portraits of four gardens and the houses they surrounded. Each was
a winner in the RSL-wide competition that had been organized for the best garden.
Accompanying these portraits were descriptions that stressed a European aesthetic
of the domestic landscape.

This carefully landscaped garden is the result of hard work and a love for beauty. Spreading
trees shade a rich green lawn and a blaze of shrubs and annuals give color (Anonymous
1985, 17).

And:
The most striking features...[of two other of] the gardens...are the well cared for lawns (Anonymous 1985, 18).

Interestingly, all the winners were nationals. All, moreover, were awarded their prizes for plantings very different from those we found around the supervisor's house into which we moved during 1999; there we found the trenched, mounded and scrupulously weeded sweet-potato gardens so pleasing to Highlanders' eyes and so central to Highlanders' subsistence. Although vegetable gardening was not disqualifying in the RSL garden competition, subsistence had to be distinguished from, and not dominate, aesthetics. Thus, one prize-winning Papua New Guinean housewife was described as spending "alot of her time tending the vegetables and flower beds" (Anonymous 1985, 17). Correspondingly, the national wife of a high-ranking national manager at RSL told us that her husband would allow her to plant only ornamentals on her front lawn. If she wanted to plant Papua New Guinea subsistence crops, they had to be discreetly hidden in back of their house. Otherwise, expatriates might still think of them as "natives."15

Indeed, while the SVN was careful throughout to equalize expatriates and nationals, the equality was based upon the acceptance of Western patterns of social organization and Western aesthetics. For expatriates to have set the terms of inclusion in a less selective, less self-interested way would have been radical. Although RSL expatriates would (for the most part) strive to say that "they were as good as us," these same expatriates would be unlikely to recognize, much less accept as meaningful, the reverse aspiration: to strive to say that "we were as good as them." In this regard, it would be a rare RSL expatriate who would seek to understand, much less participate in, the aesthetic pleasures of sweet potato gardens. Or to understand, much less participate in, the other aspects of Papua New Guinean life at RSL that reflected indigenous standards of sociality and inclusion.

In fact, virtually the only portrait we have of an expatriate accepting these local standards of sociality and inclusion was that of the instructively anomalous court case we now turn to. Reported in the SVN, it presented a Papua New Guinean-orchestrated vision of community, of conviviality—of equalization. And, in that instance, the expatriate's participation was involuntary.

An extraordinary court case was tried a few months ago here at Ramu. Former Manager, Mr.[an expatriate], was arrested shortly before his departure from PNG to England. The arrest was seen by many as an attempt to keep Mr. from leaving the country.

Village Court Magistrate, Mr. Veto Oraraka, had received a summons from one of Ramu's female national employees[,]...and the arrest took place shortly afterwards, outside RSL head office. Officers present at that time were RSL Security Guards, accompanied by 'SingSing' [ceremonial] dancers led by Mr. Jim Wilson (in full sngsng costume) and the employees of Building, Estates and Housing. Most of RSL's clerical staff also witnessed the arrest.

15 On the aesthetics of work in another Papua New Guinea context, see Demian (2000). On the importance of homes and gardens in the colonial enterprise, see Macintyre (1989).
At the trial, held at the "Ree" Hall, and at which Village Elder, Mr. Hiuka Atape, and others were present, the defendant was accused of adultery. Mrs. had brought along her baby boy...as testimony of the defendant's misdeemeanor...

[After reluctantly admitting guilt, a compensation fine of K20.00 per night maintenance fee for...the child] was set by the Magistrate. Furthermore, a special potion was prepared and drunk by...[the defendant], in the presence of the court "to prevent him from committing any such further offenses". Magistrate Orarake also ordered...[the defendant] to pledge a good-behaviour bond for not less than 1 year, before finally dismissing the case.

To continue the good feelings resulting from this decision, the court defendant and witnesses retired to enjoy well-earned drinks and food prepared by Danielle Wilson (Anonymous 1987).

Significantly, the article included a photograph of the village court proceedings. In the center and looking at the camera was the glum-faced expatriate defendant. He was flanked by some 30 nationals who were either in security uniforms or in the shells, feathers and leaves of native ceremonial finery. All were standing respectfully before—and subject to the authority of—the seated, Papua New Guinean magistrate.

In this case, it was Papua New Guineans who were promoting the relatively self-conscious representations: it was they who were setting the terms for comparison—defining the nature of equalization. In so doing, they were affecting a set of reversals and transformations of the usual RSL patterns of authority and community. This paternity case provided Papua New Guineans with competence and legitimacy: it allowed them to implement their ideas about justice. Thus, they made the expatriate progenitor into a Papua New Guinean father: they made him join a Papua New Guinean family; they made him become a member of a Papua New Guinean world; and they made him become, through the efficacy of the potion, a part of a newly constituted Papua New Guinean community, one in which his membership was as a chastened, rather than as an authoritative member. It was into their sociality—and on their terms—that he was inducted.

Such an "induction" was, we think, especially gratifying for these Papua New Guineans. In particular, it would have been an occasion to get back at Europeans for generally having things (including sexual encounters) their way. More generally, it perhaps would have been an opportunity to assert a fundamental vision: a vision not only of what mutual engagement should or might be, but of what it should have been: a vision in which different sorts of people, through their mutual willingness to be players in the same game, were recognizing—and should have long recognized—each other as having worth (cf. Bashkow 2000).

However, gratifying though this "induction" was, few present at the case likely expected that the progenitor would actually commit himself to this sociality—this narrative of mutual engagement. In fact, immediately after the case he returned to England. There, with wife and family and far from the jurisdiction of a Papua New Guinean magistrate court, nothing much could be done when (as we are virtually certain was the case) he neither established a relationship with his Papua New Guinean son nor made payments to support him. Hence, the amity established
in the Rec Hall proved finite. That he could—and did, after all—leave pointed to the fact that the differences between him and his Papua New Guinean “inductors” still remained importantly incommensurate, both in terms of access to resources (airfares and the like) and of inclination (refusal for these ties to bind). Rather than commitment to on-going mutuality, he sought, in effect, a quit claim payment—whatever it took to get out of there.

**Instance Four: Obligations Beyond the “Vanishing Point”**

The last case we wish to discuss involved the coercive use of moral claims through the application of an explicitly hybrid genre—one increasingly common at RSL and elsewhere in Papua New Guinea (cf. Strathern and Stewart 2000). This genre linked moral accountability with modernist mechanisms of control. Its use demonstrated mastery of the rhetorics of both tradition and of state-sanctioned power. We provide here a gem of this genre. It was a letter demanding that Jacob Bando, the Police Station Commander at the government police station located at RSL, RSL itself and the managers of the two mini-supermarkets at RSL pay K60,000 to the kin of Ben Saiyo Wionti for his wrongful death.

The bare facts were both well known and inconclusive: Wionti, a member of a nearby Kafe-speaking group, had been killed. He was shot, perhaps accidentally, by Bando, who may have been drunk when he tried to break-up the domestic dispute between Wionti and his wife. Wionti’s kinsmen then arrived *en masse* at the RSL police station in forceful protest. A temporary truce was negotiated, in part by RSL managers. During this truce, Bando fled to Madang and the resident families of the police stationed at RSL also left for safer areas. For several days, the market and the rest of the RSL commercial center were nearly deserted because retribution was a real possibility.

Eventually, a letter demanding compensation was received by RSL and the two mini-supermarkets at RSL. Sent by twelve “spokesmen” of Wionti’s kin, it was written in serviceable English although marked as a translation from Pidgin. Here it is in slightly amended form:

**TRANSLATION FROM PIDGIN ENGLISH**

Saiyo Ben Wionti

Rihona (O’Cean) people

18th July, 2000

**DEMAND FOR COMPENSATION OF K60,000 (SIXTY THOUSAND KINA)**

1. K20,000 from PSC JACOB BANDO. The Government and the public saw and know that you, the PSC of Ramu...Police Station, shot and killed [Mr. Saiyo Ben Wionti], at midday on Saturday, July 1st, 2000, when he and his wife were having a domestic argument.

2. K20,000 from the two business houses - Papindo’s and Macate’s Super Value.
a) These stores always suspect people of stealing things. And the people of our area are frequently suspected by the police. And now, we see the fruits of these suspicions, since the police shot and killed BEN SAIYO WIONTI.

b) Community policing and guarding: The police always patrol around and guard the properties of the two shops, keeping their employees and their wives safe.

c) Unemployment: If the two companies had employed Ben Saiyo Wioni, he would not have been shot and killed. They overlook the people from surrounding villages and only employ people from other provinces.

3. K20,000 from Ramu Sugar Company.

a) 49% of the shares in RSL is owned by the Government. A Government employee shot and killed an innocent person. There was no good reason for the shooting.

b) Ref. Points 2; part (b) and (c).

c) Ramu Sugar Company has not built a public toilet. Therefore, the late BEN SAIYO had to use the sugar field. His wife suspected that he had gone with another woman into the sugar field and started arguing with him. This lasted until the PSC shot and killed him.

Are there different laws applying to the National and Provincial government levels? We would expect that the Governor of the province, if he had a car accident, to pay K30,000 for to keep the peace among the family of those he had injured. What is the difference when a PSC of the Police Department shoots and kills a person for no good reason?

We made it easy and left everything in the hands of the Law and have waited patiently for 18 days. It is almost three weeks now and no one has properly replied to us. We would like to take the law into our own hands now and, therefore, demand payment from you all.

We would like to receive an answer within the next 14 days, starting from today, July 18, 2000, through August 1, 2000.

The above points summarize our demands.

Those who wrote the letter intended to hold a range of people and organizations to their legal and moral responsibilities. Their claims rested on these points, on these lines of causality and of connection:

1) PSC Bando, as the person who killed Ben Saiyo Wioni, must pay compensation.

2) Wioni, should as a local person, have been employed at either of the two stores. If he had been, then the police would have protected him rather than shot him. These stores must, therefore, pay compensation for not hiring him, a fact which led to his death.

3) The Government was Bando’s employer and, hence, was responsible for his actions. The government was also the major stockholder in RSL. Thus, RSL must stand-in for the government in this matter.

4) RSL was additionally and significantly responsible since, if it had build a public toilet, Wioni would not have had to use the adjacent RSL cane field to relieve himself. His wife, thus, would not have suspected that he was engaged in an affair in that cane field and would not have quarreled with him. If she had not quarreled with him, there would not have been the domestic
 obviously, such claims as these were potentially unlimited. They could, for example, have readily encompassed those who sold Bando the beer he had allegedly consumed. They could have easily encompassed the kin of the woman with whom Wionti was purported to be having an affair. They could have even ramified to encompass the two of us, since many thought that we would benefit from writing about Wionti’s death. These claims were based substantially on a moral logic Burridge and the Tangu knew well—one of multiple and ramifying social connection: our lives had affected each others’ and therefore we must take responsibility for the effects. This was true not only of individuals but of entities such as the government, the police, supermarkets and RSL (cf. Gewertz and Errington 1991). These claims of connection and responsibility were also amplified and substantiated by a techno-legal language which asserted knowledge of and access to (district and national) court procedures and powers. Taken together, the moral logic and techno-legal language could be used to justify large numbers of irate and formidable Highlanders gathering in righteous indignation to assert their rights. The history that such claims were generating in contemporary Papua New Guinea was one in which nothing stayed fixed. It was a history where anything could happen and one in which, whatever happened, someone, somewhere, had to have been responsible.

This case against RSL and the other defendants was unlike those we considered earlier. In the first three instances (the cases of Moba, Tony and the wayward expatriate) there was common agreement that the relations being invoked—those of kinship and marriage—should entail on-going obligations. In this fourth case, there was no agreement that the relationship being invoked between Wionti and the defendants carried any obligation at all. Certainly the defendants repudiated the argument that they had breached an amity and thus behaved irresponsibly: in their view, they had neither moral nor legal obligation to hire someone lest he might at some point be shot by the police while quarreling (post-defecation) with his wife. Indeed, from the perspectives of RSL and the mini-supermarkets, unless there was a contract or other explicit agreement, there was the presumption of no relationship—of no connection (much less of binding connection) between Wionti and themselves. Thus, for the defendants, a successful defense would be to repudiate liability by (among other things) establishing that due diligence had been exercised so that obligations (extraneous to the production and sale of sugar) had been minimized if not entirely avoided. Their solution to the claims against them—as guided by their attorneys—would be to ignore it or, if pushed into court, to have it dismissed as groundless.

Those bringing the claims were hedging their bets—indeed, concatenating them—so as to compel RSL and the other defendants to respond to their demands. The claims of Wionti’s kin were couched in ways that both did and did not presume amity: social connections (as intricate and extensive) and responsibilities and obligations (as pervasive and encompassing) were presented as both the basis of moral entailment and the basis of contract and liability. Thus, RSL and the other defendants not only should pay, they could be forced to pay. Wionti’s kin would probably be most satisfied if they were able to elicit a large compensation payment from contrite
defendants; however, they would still be happy if they were able to extract a large, "quit claim" settlement from unrepentant defendants. In a contemporary Papua New Guinea, where social relations have become increasingly mediated by money, either outcome would have established Wionti’s kin as people to be reckoned with; amity established or amity forgone — either outcome would have established Wionti’s kin as efficacious and as worthy.

Conclusion: New(ish) Wine in Old(ish) Bottles

Throughout this chapter we have, in effect, been addressing the broad question of how “the reproduction of a structure become[s] its transformation” (Sahlins 1981, 8). As we have shown, this reproduction and transformation involve a process wherein “the old names that are still on everyone’s lips acquire connotations that are far removed from their original meaning” (Sahlins 1985, ix). Concerning the rhetoric of amity and of moral equivalence in much of Papua New Guinea—the logic of reciprocity and of commotion—we think that this process has become rather far advanced. Indeed, a casual perusal of Papua New Guinea’s English-language daily newspapers, the National and the Post Courier, shows that there are currently a range of meanings (a range of connotations) concerning this rhetoric and this logic (cf. Wardlow 2006). Correspondingly, such a range of meanings suggests that the fundamentals of social life are themselves shifting—are themselves transforming.

Thus, in these newspapers: tradition may be depicted as the bedrock of local morality as well as the “business” by which villagers extract resources from their urban kin: the “Melanesian Way”™ may be depicted as the model of mutually acceptable decision-making as well as the justification by which politicians claim the prerogatives of “chiefs”; the outerities of the “grassroots” may be depicted as the

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16 It had been, in substantial part, an attempt to defend and preserve what was best about Papua New Guinean forms of egalitarianism as recounted by Papua New Guinean lawyer and now senior politician, Bernard Narotini (1980), in his Melanesian Way.

17 Members of the emergent middle class in the Papua New Guinean town of Wewak often spoke about themselves in ways that strongly implied an inevitable superiority because of ancestral precedent. Even those from among Papua New Guinean’s most competitively egalitarian groups would describe their fathers not as “big men” but as “chiefs,” that is, as hereditary leaders. To be sure, their fathers may well have been prominent, possessing more of what others had; pigs, pearl shells, ritual knowledge, wives and land. After all, the practices of colonial administration, such as installing local leaders as headmen, may have dampened fluctuating inequalities to the extent that the momentarily influential could ensure educational and other forms of “advancement” for themselves and their children. Yet, perhaps not surprisingly, our middle class informants saw their distinction more as the product of ontology than historical caprice or process. They were separated as permanently privileged because they were of a “chiefly” line.

This modern-day rhetoric of “chiefs” was, in fact, proving increasingly useful to politicians in particular and to members of the middle class in general to justify growing class differences. (See, for comparison, Beetier 1996; Feinberg 1978; Howard 1996; Lutkelnau 1996; White and Lindstrom 1998.) It summarized and made more palatable the shifts in life’s opportunities that everyone knew were taking place. It allowed for a transformed present in terms of a
assertion of egalitarian-based rights as well as the means by which the poor assert benighted cargoistic views or make irresponsible “hand-out” claims; the ultimatums of landowners may be depicted as the expressions of inalienable connection to place (ples, in Pidgin English) as well as the threats by which they—in concert with politicians and others of the elite—assert the powers of maximal disruption. This is to say, in a contemporary Papua New Guinea (again, one increasingly influenced by urban migration, commodities, cash, Christianity and English-based forms of education) it has become a matter of public debate—of explicit concern—whether and under what conditions amity, in Burridge’s sense, would still be feasible and desirable.

Through our discussion of a spectrum of RSL-focused instances we have tried to convey the nature of this transformation of structure and shift of corresponding connotations. We have shown Papua New Guineans increasingly making (oldish) demands for the recognition of equivalent worth within a (newish) context of truncated, diffused and provisional sociality; and we have shown Papua New Guineans increasingly evaluating (oldish) demands for equivalent worth in terms of (newish) quantitative measures that make differences incrementally commensurate. And, often (or, at least, sometimes) before anyone knew what was happening, the compulsion of on-going amity frequently became the composure of bel isi, the contention of court-litigation, or the finality of quit-claims. To be sure, Kenelm Burridge (as suggested) might not be surprised, but we expect that he would be disappointed.

reinvented, stable past which defined distinction not in terms of continuity but of difference. It also implied that difference still carried certain, though distinctly limited, obligations. Thus, unlike big men (again, who were like everyone else but more so), contemporary “chiefs” were clearly different, at least partially—though not completely—dissociated. This, we think, both signaled and facilitated a shift in political process in the direction of increasing stratification. The big man’s compulsory egalitarianism and leveling redistribution to his allies was becoming transformed: it was changing into the politician’s discretionary handouts to his electorate (such handouts, drawn mostly at election time from large slush funds, were perhaps a form of stratified redistribution) as well changing into, for example, the middle class Rotarian’s voluntary service—diffuse noblesse oblige—to the generalized less fortunate.

In fact, if the cultural bases allowed (and perhaps even if they did not), chiefly claims by the most elite might be followed by formal chiefly installation. We were not, therefore, surprised to learn that several national politicians holding especially desirable senior posts—posts which conveyed numerous opportunities, both licit and illicit—were given chiefly titles by their kin and constituents. Not only have such men of long-term eminence as Sir Michael Somare, often described as the father of the country, been transformed into “the chief” (by which title he is generally known throughout the Sepik and beyond), so also have others of more recent prominence. Thus, during 1996, both of Papua New Guinea’s daily newspapers carried front page pictures of a chiefly installation. Each newspaper published captions such as “ Paramount chief is a new title for Deputy Prime Minister Chris Haiveta, pictured above shaking hands with leaders at Lokena village after being ‘crowned’ ” (Tannos 1996, 1).