

The Anthropology of Morality in Melanesia and Beyond

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Chapter 6

Reconfiguring Amity at Ramu Sugar Limited

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One of Kenelm Burridge'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 Indingai (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 Indingai, 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.² These differences, by their nature, were—as Burrige clearly recognized—reconfiguring the system of moral equivalence. (See particularly, Burrige's discussion of the effect of money on social relations.³) 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 Sahlins (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.⁴

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

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 Burrige (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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ What came into being was both

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 and, then, as a United Nations Trust Territory. In 1906, 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 Scheper-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.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.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.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

Australians; and two Indians. Finally, there were 789 seasonal employees, about whom we have incomplete information. However, we do know the provinces of origin for about three hundred of them, and these included all but Milne Bay and New Ireland. We might add that the terms "nationals" and "expatriates" were commonly used by both nationals and expatriates to refer to themselves and to the other.

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.

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.

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.)¹¹

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.¹² 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

11 On village courts in Papua New Guinea, see, among others, Gordon and Meggitt (1985), Scaglione (1985; 1979), Westermarck (1997; 1986), Zorn (1992), Goddard (2005).

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 Bopirumpun. 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.

