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978-0-521-10499-9 - What Gifts Engender: Social Relations and Politics in Mendi, Highland Papua New Guinea

Rena Lederman

Excerpt

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# 1 Mendi coming into view

. . . quite suddenly, at a spot where a large tree had recently fallen, we came to a break in the forest. And as we looked excitedly northwards, O'Malley and myself stood spellbound gazing at the scene of wild and lonely splendor.

Below us, on the opposite side of the Ryan [River], a large lake lay on a platform of the divide, while about two miles to the northwards; and beyond the gorge, gold and green, reaching as far as the eye could see, lay the rolling timbered slopes and grasslands of a huge valley system. On every slope were cultivated squares while little columns of smoke rising in the still air revealed to us the homes of the people of this land. . . . Beyond all stood the heights of some mighty mountain chain that sparkled in places with the colors of the setting sun. As I looked on those green cultivated squares of such mathematical exactness, I thought of wheatfields, or the industrious areas of a colony of Chinese. . . .

"My mother!," said Sergeant Orai. "People like the sand. They have plantations. What people are they?" [Hides 1936: 77–8]

## Introduction

In April 1935, after more than three months of marching across sparsely populated country, and after scaling the massive limestone barrier of the Karius Range, an exhausted troop of Australian government officers and coastal Papuan policemen and carriers marveled at their first sight of the land of the Huli, in the Papuan Highlands. The Hides and O'Malley patrol never entered the valley of the Mendi River, whose people – *Ip Mend Ol* – are the subjects of this study. The first patrol through Mendi, led by Ivan Champion, who described his experiences less poetically than did Jack Hides, occurred in November 1936. But Hides's impressions of their neighbors ring true for the Mendi as well. Champion reported that his party was met all along the way by large groups of men, who provided them with food and guided them on their way. Like Hides, Champion was impressed with the intensity of cultivation, the density of the human population, and the beauty of the casuarina pine-lined, parklike clearings at the centers of settlements.

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Plate 1. The Mendi Valley, looking southward along the government road to Mendi town (the airstrip is visible in the distance). Grassland, gardens, and stands of casuarina pines in the foreground.

As a result of Champion's patrol, a government station was set up soon afterward (with Champion in charge), far to the south at Lake Kutubu. Most of the Mendi, however, saw white people for the first time only after the Australians moved their administrative headquarters for the Southern Highlands District (now Province) to the Mendi Valley in 1950, establishing it at a place the people call Murump.

Western travelers' accounts, such as those of Hides and of Champion, remark on the unlikely familiarity of Highlanders' style of life. Hides (1936:88) exclaimed, "I thought of pretty little farming areas of Australia, scores of them, in a setting of great rolling timbered plains." Instead of sparse populations of slash-and-burn cultivators (more common in the tropics), here were large, settled populations "like the sand," which achieved densities of more than four hundred persons per square mile in places. Highlanders appeared to be masters of a sophisticated farming system; based overwhelmingly on the intensive cultivation of sweet potatoes (*Ipomoea batatas*), this system involved techniques of drainage, mulching, and soil conservation, required little or no fallowing, and supported large herds of domesticated pigs as well as large numbers of people.

The people Hides and O'Malley met appeared to them to be well off: "We were in a land of plenty," Hides declared. This was a reference perhaps as

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much to the attitude of the people as to their objective circumstances. He could not get his hosts to accept the steel tools, cloth, and beads he offered in recompense for the food they had given him and his troop. Instead, they showed him their own green stone axes and their necklaces of Job's tear seeds, which they preferred. Dismayed, he learned that had he brought along cowries and mother-of-pearl shells, these would have been accepted eagerly; the Huli, like the Mendi and other Highland peoples, had a complex system of exchange in which shells, pigs, and other valuables – some produced locally and others obtained through trade – were given as gifts at marriages and funerals and on other occasions, ceremonial and mundane.

Their involvement in exchange and their concern with shell wealth led some subsequent anthropological observers to call Highlanders (and other New Guineans who share these interests) “primitive capitalists” (Pospisil 1963; Epstein 1968; Finney 1973). This characterization was bolstered indirectly by anthropological studies, beginning in earnest during the 1950s and 1960s, on leadership and politics (e.g., Read 1959; P. Brown 1963; Strathern 1966; Meggitt 1967; Berndt and Lawrence 1971). These studies presented Highland societies as egalitarian, and leadership as achieved rather than as inherited. Highland leaders (“big-men”) are self-made men, entrepreneurs with a flair for oratory and for political organizing, whose ambition for prestige – obtainable through success at competitive ceremonial wealth distributions – motivates their productive efforts.

Yet, as we might suppose, the political economy of the region is quite different from that of Europe and North America. Production and the circulation of wealth are organized without the benefit of a market economy; ceremonial gift exchanges constitute one component of a decentralized system capable (at least in the central Highlands) of linking together thousands of people living in several high valleys, speaking different languages, and belonging to many tribal groups, through a largely egalitarian political process quite different from that of Western states.

This economic and political structuring constitutes a challenge to the persistent assumption that the development of social scale and complexity of organization involves major concessions to hierarchy and to centralization, particularly to stratification and state forms of organization (see, for anthropological examples, Sahlins 1963; Spooner 1972; S. Polgar 1975; Cohen and Service 1978). For reasons relevant to a changing Papua New Guinea, and arguably beyond its borders as well, we may wish to understand indigenous egalitarian institutions better: how decisions are made and disputes resolved; how increasing scale is managed without fundamental transformations of structure; and how individual differences in energy, commitment, and skill are accommodated.

Our empirical understanding of relatively egalitarian polities comes mostly from the study of extremely small-scale and economically unproductive for-

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aging societies (see Lee 1979; Leacock 1981; Woodburn 1982; see also Sahlins 1972, Chapter 1).<sup>1</sup> What one might venture to call “democracy” among foragers like the Kalahari !Kung San is often said to be the outcome of the naturalistic ecological constraints of a mobile existence: an existence that is antimaterialist, underproductive, and communal by reason of necessity.

Whatever the value of the conventional views about egalitarianism derived from the study of foragers (which both Lee and Sahlins criticize), Highlanders do not fit this model. Their decentralized and predominantly egalitarian political relationships are reproduced on an impressive demographic and economic scale. Moreover, there does not appear to be any simple correlation between economic intensification and the development of political centralization or inequality in the Highlands. In fact, both regional comparisons (Modjeska 1982) and archaeologically and ethnographically informed speculations concerning long-term change (Golson 1982) point in the opposite direction, as do some analyses of more recent transformations (see Strathern 1971 for comments on the “democratization” of ceremonial exchange in colonial Papua New Guinea). The experience of the Mendi and their neighbors provides us with a demonstration that a radical kind of democracy is possible on a scale not commonly found in Western experiments with political anarchism.

Highlanders’ life-style presents other analytical anomalies. In contrast to some other egalitarian peoples, Highlanders are not communal in spirit; their manner of organizing work and their way of motivating material transactions appear to be individualistic. Personal ambition and a competitive logic characterize wealth exchange and social relations generally. Nor do Highlanders follow what Sahlins (1972) called the “Zen road to affluence.” Their intensive and pervasive involvement in gift exchange ensures a high demand for pearl shells, pigs, and other valuables. What is more, central Highland exchange systems are “competitive” (see Strathern 1971): One gift engenders a return, each creating new social obligations, which must be acquitted in order that balance – a critical objective – be achieved over the long term. The expandable demand for wealth generated by competitive gift exchanges may help account for the productivity of the economy of the region.<sup>2</sup>

It may also account for the observation that the economy of the Mendi, like that of other Highland peoples, appears to have been stimulated and not simply inflated by the influx of pearl shells and other exchange wealth accompanying the arrival of Westerners (Strathern 1971; Gregory 1982b; Lederman 1982). The recent efflorescence of ceremonial exchange may also have been attributable to the abolition of tribal warfare undertaken by the Australian administration in its effort to establish political control of the Highlands region. But the imposed peace does not entirely account for it. The response of Highland political economies to alien influences reflected a long-term indigenous trend toward expansion and intensification. At the least, garden production had been expanding and intensifying during the few centuries before

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contact (Golson 1977, 1981, 1982; Watson 1977; see also Lacey 1981; Modjeska 1982; Lederman 1986). Any presumptions we might have about this as a static “land that time forgot” ought to be buried.

In subsequent chapters, I will consider the social contexts of having and exchanging wealth that give Mendi “materialism,” “individualism,” and competitiveness their particular cultural meaning. An understanding of the ways in which the Mendi structure their social relationships, and of their conception of social accountability and social value, is central to an appreciation of the dynamism of Mendi history.

### **The region and the population: background**

There are many answers to Sergeant Orai’s question “What people are they?” We can answer it by means of sympathetic projections like those of Hides or by means of surveys, population statistics, and other descriptive techniques designed to facilitate cross-cultural comparison. The question can also be answered by the people in question themselves, whose stories describe how their forebears discovered and settled the land, explain the reasons for present-day alliances and hostilities between clans and tribes, and account for the recent appearance of the “red-skinned” people among them. No single sort of answer yields the whole truth.

As much as one’s sense of space and time differs when traveling by plane – moving rapidly and viewing the ground from a distance – from when walking along a mountain trail, so much the understanding afforded by a scientific survey differs from that of the people being surveyed. Demography and geography reveal the manner and dimensions of the Western discovery and use of the place, as well as a global frame of reference. From this perspective, the Southern Highlands Province, at the center of Papua New Guinea, is the least accessible and least economically developed Highland province. It was the last major populated region to be brought under Australian administrative control: Administrative headquarters for the province were set up in the southern part of the Mendi Valley only during 1950–1, and the region was classified “restricted” (meaning that only government officers with armed police could travel there) until 1965, and at least one part of the province was not derestricted until 1977.

The Australian administration began at once to improve the business climate by banning tribal fighting and by organizing local labor for road work, but the Southern Highlands remained relatively inaccessible for a long time. Only a fair-weather road connection to Mount Hagen, the nearest marketing center, was available until 1976, when the all-weather Highlands Highway (the only land route linking the Highlands with coastal towns and ports) was extended through Mendi town. As a result, the region became a significant site neither of expatriate plantations nor of locally run cash-cropping enter-

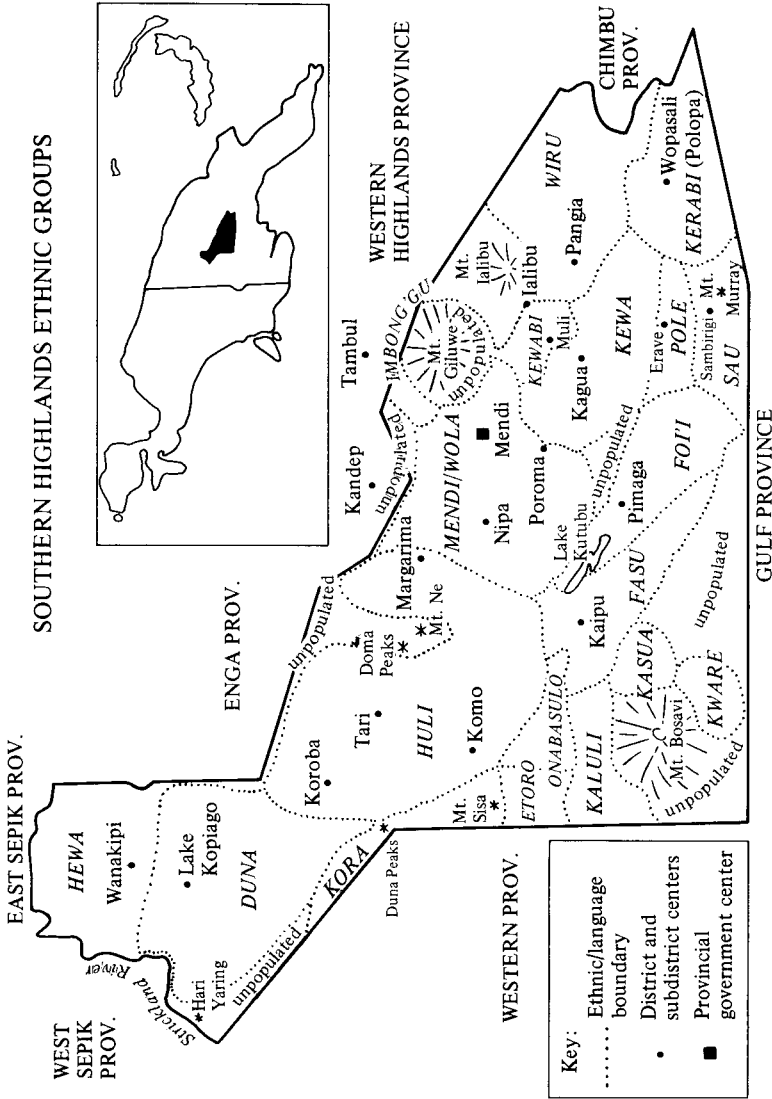
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Map 1.1.1. Southern Highlands Province (after Eastburn 1978). Scale: 1 inch = approximately 50 km.

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prises. The colonial history of the Southern Highlands was dominated instead by government administrators and missionaries (Ballard 1978). The result was a relatively equitable but exceedingly limited distribution of services and infrastructure to the various districts and subdistricts. That situation may soon change, however (see Simpson 1976, 1978): Soon after independence in 1975, the Southern Highlands Province applied directly to the World Bank for a grant to fund agronomic and public health research and commercial development. Awarded well over \$20 million, and starting up slowly during 1978 and 1979, the Southern Highlands Project will probably have profound effects on the regional political economy.

Most of the province's 237,000 inhabitants live in the high montane valleys between 1,400 and 2,400 meters above sea level, whereas approximately 8 percent live in lowland regions like the territory around Lake Kutubu, which was the first site of the old Southern Highlands District headquarters briefly during the late 1930s before World War II interrupted Australian involvement there (see Map 1.1). The highland valleys are separated by limestone ridges and by five volcanic cones. The largest of these mountains, Mount Giluwe (4,368 meters), forms a part of the eastern boundary of the Mendi Valley, separating it from Ialibu. The Mendi Valley itself is about 25 miles long and wedge shaped (see Map 1.2). It expands as one moves northward toward the hills of the Kandep area in Enga Province, where the northern Mendi have relatives and, in precontact times, used to travel to exchange southern products (such as tree oil from the Lake Kutubu people and pearl shells) for indigenous salt and renowned Kandep pigs. In addition to their Kandep connections to the northwest, the northern Mendi have kinship and trading relationships with people living in the northern part of the Lai Valley to their west and with Tambul residents living to their northeast. Although Mount Giluwe appears to present an insurmountable barrier between Mendi and Ialibu, inhabitants of these two Southern Highlands districts have a long history of contact via the walking tracks that mark that mountain's slopes. Today the Highlands Highway, which goes around the south side of Mount Giluwe, greatly facilitates such contacts.

The valley contracts as one moves southward past Mendi town, which is located at a place called Murump on land ceded to the Australian authorities by clans living at Umbim and nearby localities. Residents of the lower Mendi Valley have kinship and trading relationships with people living even farther to the south, east, and west, in Kagua and Nembi, and southern Ialibu and Lai valleys.

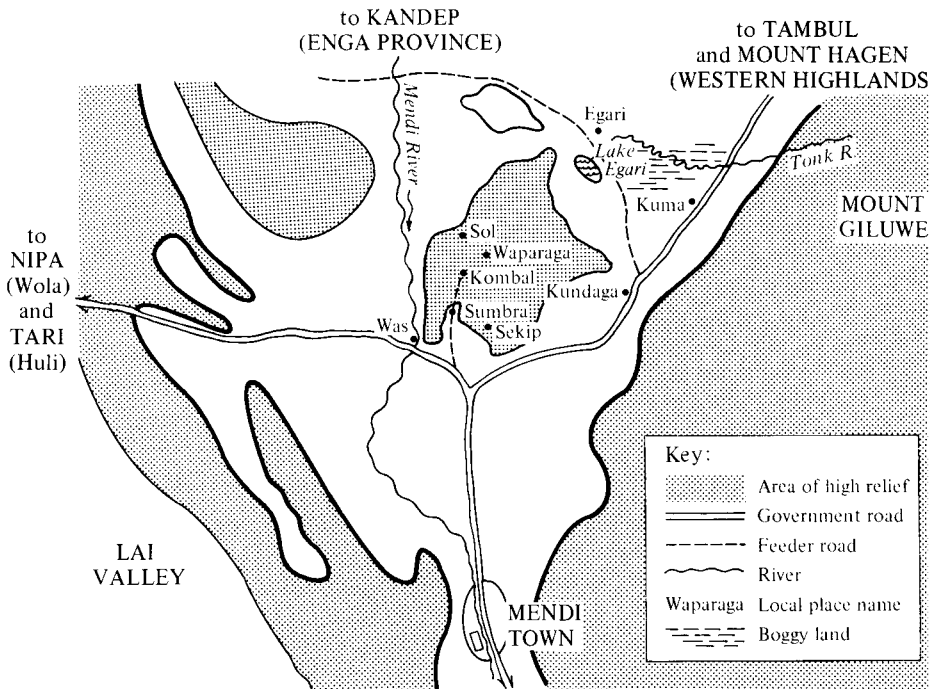
Linguistic relationships between Mendi and other parts of the province are complex. Perhaps two-thirds of the people living in the Mendi Valley speak a language that has been called Wola or Angal Heneng (referred to as *ngail enenk* in upper Mendi, the latter dialectical variant translating as "true [real] speech"). Some linguistic work has been carried out in Nipa, two valleys to

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Map 1.2. The Mendi Valley. Scale: 1 inch = approximately 6 km.

the west of Mendi, by members of the United Church (Methodist) mission (see also Sillitoe 1979) and in the lower part of the Mendi Valley south of Mendi town. At least three dialects of the language exist; the variant spoken in the northeastern part of the valley (the Upper Mendi census division, where the present study was undertaken) differs in phonology and in some grammatical features from the variants found around Nipa and south of Mendi town.

Although the area including Nipa, the Lai Valley, Mendi, and probably also the Nembi Plateau constitutes a linguistic unit, it does not follow that it is a cultural or political unit too.<sup>3</sup> Speakers of Wola/Angal Heneng do not invariably have more to do with each other than they have to do with speakers of other languages. In fact, the residents of the western part of this language area in the Nipa district (those whom Sillitoe 1979 calls the Wola) appear to have as much in common with the Huli, their neighbors to the west in the Tari Basin (see Glasse 1968), as they do with eastern members of their own language group in the Mendi Valley,<sup>4</sup> although they also have culturally distinctive practices. Conversely, the linguistic boundary in Upper Mendi be-



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tween Mendi speakers and those speaking Imbonggu (the Ialibu language) appears to have little meaning, at least in relationship to socioeconomic life. Imbonggu speakers in Upper Mendi follow Mendi social rules and differ from Imbonggu speakers in Ialibu (see Wormsley 1978).

Therefore, when I refer to ‘‘the Mendi’’ in this study, I mean residents of the Mendi Valley regardless of their linguistic preferences (and especially people living to the northwest and northeast of Mendi town, where D’Arcy Ryan and I each conducted research). I will not be referring to the whole language community; indeed, to do so would be to gloss over significant differences.

Waparaga (called ‘‘Wepra’’ by local residents), the community in which this study was conducted, is adjacent to the language boundary between Angal Heneng and Imbonggu speakers. The Suolol tribal territory, of which the Waparaga community is a part, straddles this boundary (as do other upper Mendi tribal territories) and is made up of localities both in the Imbonggu-speaking northeast and in the Angal Heneng-speaking southwest. People in Waparaga speak one or the other language, often being at least passively competent in the language with which they do not primarily identify. Members of this tribe function as a social and political unit despite their linguistic diversity.

The Mendi are aware of certain cultural differences between their own customary social relationships and those of their neighbors. For example, they distinguish their exchange system from that of the Enga, and their marriage customs from those of their Ialibu relatives and Huli acquaintances. We might bear in mind that in the New Guinea Highlands, as elsewhere, language differences do not always suggest social or cultural distance, nor do language similarities necessarily imply similar social structures. Differences in mode of life (whether or not differences in language are involved) do not imply any lack of contact either; both in the precolonial past and in the postcolonial present, the Mendi have interacted with foreigners while maintaining a sense of themselves.

In 1979, approximately 40,000 people lived in the Mendi and Lai Valleys, a geographical region called the Mendi Subprovince (or District) and divided into five ‘‘census divisions’’ (CD): Karint, Upper Mendi (both located north of Mendi town), Kambiri, Undiri (both in the lower Mendi Valley) and the Lai Valley (west of the Mendi Valley), all of which are part of one Local Government Council. Land and population figures for Mendi District and for census division appear in Table 1.1. A look at the table indicates that the district as a whole, and northern Mendi (Karint and Upper Mendi CDs) in particular, is moderately densely populated by Highland standards.<sup>5</sup> Government analysts do not consider the area to be land short, unlike the Chimbu and Enga Provinces. However, both expatriate and indigenous observers in the Province are worried. Since the population is increasing at an annual rate

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[More information](#)10 *What gifts engender*Table 1.1. *Mendi district census divisions: land and population (1976)*

Census division	Population	Gross area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Est. arable land (km <sup>2</sup> )	Est. population density (persons per km <sup>2</sup> arable)
Lai Valley CD	8,842	238	152	58
Karint CD	8,505	146	124	69
Upper Mendi CD	9,170	536	186	49
Kambiri CD	5,629	363	290	19
Undiri CD	5,126	186	126	41
Total (Mendi District)	37,272	[1,469] <sup>a</sup>	878 <sup>b</sup>	42

<sup>a</sup>This figure was obtained by totaling up the individual Census Division figures. The Village Directorate (from which all the other figures were obtained) claims that the gross area for Mendi District equals 1,374 km<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>b</sup>Lower land availability estimates for Mendi District were obtained by Simpson (1976), who reported the total District area as 1,258 km<sup>2</sup>. From this figure he deducted 500 km<sup>2</sup> (land over 2,400 m in altitude above sea level unfit for cultivation for climatic reasons) and another 300 km<sup>2</sup> (land unfit for cultivation for topographic reasons). Thus, *total arable land* = 458 km<sup>2</sup>. Using these figures and the Village Directorate population figures, we would conclude that District *population density (1976)* = 81 *people per km<sup>2</sup>*, or about 1.2 hectares per capita.

Source: Village Directorate, 1976.

of two percent and commercial coffee and cattle projects (which use land extensively) are ongoing or planned, the land situation is changing for the worse (Simpson 1976, 1978).

### The region and the population: the social dynamics of land use

Population density figures are notoriously hard to interpret. Various methods of measuring population density are used by researchers working in different places. No clear standards may be possible because of the varied uses people may make of the land and the diverse methods of cultivation people may employ. A change in techniques can make certain land arable that previously was not. A change in people's notion of what they want to produce can have the same effect. The adoption of sweet potato into the Highlands about four hundred years ago appears to have had the effect of opening up land at higher altitudes than people had previously cultivated.

The introduction of commercial cattle projects into the Mendi Valley during the last decade or so has taken some of the best land out of food production. The remaining gardens may eventually become overtaxed; cattle is not a substitute for older products but rather constitutes an addition, with uses that