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

Rena Lederman

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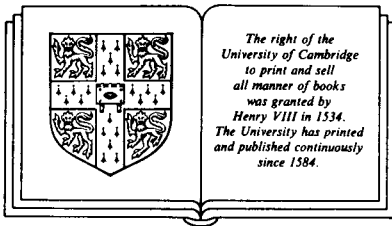
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# What gifts engender

## Social relations and politics in Mendi, Highland Papua New Guinea

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## Preface

This book, a description and argument concerning social relations and politics in Mendi, is meant as a contribution to the comparative ethnography of Highland Papua New Guinea. In it, I attempt to demonstrate that Mendi culture and history are structured in terms of two principles of relationship: *twem* and *sem*. Whereas *sem* relations create bounded groups (“clans”) with an existence independent of particular individuals, *twem* relations generate ego-centered, unbounded networks. Clans regulate access to land and are the primary organizational basis for male cooperation in ceremonial exchanges, whereas networks regulate access to fluid resources such as pigs, pearl shells, and money. While clan prestations require that the flow of wealth be dammed periodically, *twem* etiquette encourages the constant circulation of wealth. While clans are implicitly hierarchical, being exclusively male, *twem* networks are egalitarian and broadly inclusive, men and women, unmarried people, and old widows and widowers all participating in them.

On the basis of these and other contrasts developed in the chapters to follow, I will argue against the common assumption that network relationships are simply a means by which individuals accumulate valuables for display during clan festivals. I will argue instead that *twem* relations constitute a kind of sociality distinct from clanship; moreover, they involve an ethic of exchange contradictory to the ethic of clan solidarity. Although network and clan obligations may be fulfilled simultaneously (and are, in a sense, necessary to one another), they also sometimes conflict.

This structural problematic is realized in the tensions one may observe between men and women, on the one hand, and between leaders (big-men) and ordinary men, on the other. It is also expressed in a political rhetoric of gender meanings, so much a part of both everyday and public discourse. That is, the contradictory implications of *twem* and *sem* relations make certain important aspects of Mendi politics intelligible.



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The general purpose of the analysis presented here is to make Mendi history – by which I mean the insider’s sense of the significance of events – accessible to outsiders; at least, I hope to have made an initial stab at that. The historical focus is on one Upper Mendi political community’s Pig Festival (*mok ink*), a sequence of events similar in some respects to ceremonies that are well known in the anthropological literature on the Highlands. That literature has emphasized male leaders and formal ceremonial prestations of wealth. This study rights the balance by paying attention to ordinary men and women, as well as to the wealth transactions that take place in everyday settings, the frame of reference within which the structurally significant character of *twem* relations becomes visible.

As the foregoing implies, I hope this study will contribute to Highland ethnography and to anthropology generally in a number of ways. It has something to say relevant to an anthropology of gender (as a study of male-female relationships and of gender ideology in a Highland society that is somewhat atypical in those respects) and to an anthropology of power and politics (as a study of the articulation of hierarchizing and equalizing structures, and of the social force both of words and of culturally constituted things). It also has something to say relevant both to an anthropology of history and, within that, to what might be termed a political economy of the “gift.” By this I mean that gift exchange in Mendi and elsewhere engenders a type of sociality with differentiated forms of its own and a distinctive historical dynamic, and with particular implications for the structuring of people’s understandings of, and practical action in, their world. Studies of gift relations, therefore, are not an antiquarian concern but have a direct bearing on our understanding of local resistance, both explicit and tacit, to the world of the market. In other words, and as the concluding chapter of this work suggests, a study of gift exchange in Mendi illuminates not only the shape of a given world but also the outlines of a world being made.

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## Acknowledgments

I write the following words knowing that as the names and thanks march by, they diminish one another by their weight of numbers. The fact is that each mention is remembered freshly, even if listing them all here cannot convey that. This is more a personal litany than an adequate appreciation, and for that I am sorry.

The research on which this book is based was undertaken from September 1977 until April 1979 and again for three months in 1983. I was financially supported during the longer period, in part, by a National Institute of Mental Health predoctoral research fellowship and a National Science Foundation predoctoral research grant. In 1983, I was supported by the American Philosophical Association and by a Princeton University faculty grant. I thank all these institutions for their aid.

I owe Andrew Strathern a large debt for steering me to Mendi. Both Marilyn Strathern and Andrew Strathern have encouraged and helped me frequently over the past decade; I am grateful to them both.

In Papua New Guinea, thanks go to the staff of the Department of Anthropology / Sociology, University of Papua New Guinea, and particularly to Mary Jane Mountain, who chaired the department when my husband, Michael Merrill, and I arrived for the first time in Port Moresby and who was so friendly and helpful to us. Thanks also go to Marc Schiltz and Lisette Josephides and to James and Acsha Carrier for their hospitality during my stay in Port Moresby in 1983.

In 1977, Gary Simpson (then of the National Planning Office in Port Moresby) was able to orient me concerning development issues in the Southern Highlands and was instrumental in putting me in touch with Dr. John Millar, Superintendent of the Provincial Hospital in Mendi town. Together with Dr. Eilene Sowerby, John provided my husband and me with aid and with hospitality throughout our first stay in Mendi. We also appreciated getting to

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know several other doctors and teachers in Mendi town, and we thank them for welcoming us into their homes. Various government officials helped us when we first arrived in town. Among these, thanks to Francis Pusal for encouraging us to settle in Wepra and to Lyn Clarke for keeping in touch with me long after I left Mendi. During my solo return voyage in 1983, the generous help of Rob Crittenden (lately, team leader of the agricultural research wing of the Southern Highlands Rural Development Project) and Jim Dees (concerned with project financial records) was deeply appreciated.

The people in Mendi to whom I owe the greatest debt are my neighbors in the Wepra community where Mike and I spent most of our time. We are still in awe of the ease with which they incorporated us into their lives. The debt I owe them can be repaid only by commitment to ongoing friendship and reciprocity, a promise provisionally fulfilled by my return visit in 1983. Both Mike and I look forward to the next time. Some people became especially good friends of ours: I am thinking of Nare and Nande and their children, of Mel and his brother Tolap, of Wange and Aku, of old Wendo (who died a week before we left Wepra), of Orpeyap, Alcome, Onge (my first *twemol*), Tekopiri, Andrew Ipopi, Alin, and Namba. Nare and Nande – our hosts in Wepra – and Mel, Tolap, and Wange – who helped us as field assistants – were all daily companions of ours.

Once I had returned from Mendi to New York, I depended on the help and patience of my teachers at Columbia University, particularly Alexander Alland, Clive Kessler, Abraham Rosman (my doctoral thesis adviser), and Paula Rubel. Thanks also to Paula Brown Glick of SUNY–Stonybrook, who served on my thesis committee. I cannot begin to thank the friends with whom I spent time while writing the thesis upon which this book is based. I will single out four: Nancy Lutkehaus, who shared the experience of doing fieldwork in Papua New Guinea with Mike and me (working on Manam Island); Lina Brock, who ran around the Columbia gym track with me, animatedly discussing kinship theory; and Alan Steinberg and Susan Schecter, with whom Mike and I shared a house in the mountains during the summer of 1981, where we all wrote together.

My husband, Michael Merrill, is in another category. Any thanks I offer cannot repay all the practical and metaphysical help he has given me before, during, and after fieldwork in Mendi. On the other hand, he got to travel and see the world, an agreeable exchange.

This book is dedicated to two families. First, it is dedicated to my host family in Wepra: to Nare, Nande, Paki, Papuan, Lonis, Wembe, and Rina. I miss them deeply.

This book is also dedicated with love to my own father and mother, and to my brother and sister.