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978-0-521-10766-2 - Fighting With Food: Leadership, Values and Social Control in a Massim Society

Michael W. Young

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 THE ISLAND AND ITS PEOPLE

Goodenough Island is the westernmost of the D'Entrecasteaux Group, an archipelago of mountainous islands which curls above the eastern tail of Papua. These islands were first sighted as early as 1782 by the French navigator Bruni D'Entrecasteaux, but it was Captain Moresby in 1874 who was the first European explorer to name and set foot on them (see Moresby 1875).

Administered first from Samarai as part of the Eastern Division of British New Guinea, they came under Australian rule with the transference of the Crown colony to the Australian Commonwealth in 1905. Today the D'Entrecasteaux are administered as a sub-district of the Milne Bay District, and carry a population of about 33,000. The sub-district office is situated at Esa'ala, on the northerly prong of Normanby Island. Since 1963 Goodenough Island has been served by a patrol post at Bolubolu on the east coast. Bolubolu is eight road miles from a large air-strip (laid down during the Second World War), which currently receives a weekly DC3 flight from Port Moresby, the administrative capital of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea. Esa'ala, however, is six to eight hours from Bolubolu by government boat.

A native local government council was proclaimed in 1964, giving the island for the first time in its history a substantive political unity. The council became multi-racial in 1968 (though the non-indigenous population was less than 15), and in the same year there was discussion of the possibility of amalgamation with the neighbouring council of West Fergusson. The indigenous population of Goodenough numbered 10,375 in 1967 and it is this well-defined geographical, linguistic and cultural unit which forms the maximal ethnological focus of this study.

ENVIRONMENT

The island, which is shaped like a tilted egg, is approximately 300 square miles in area. The bulk of it consists of a dissected massif which rises to over 8,500 feet above sea level, but this extremely rugged and densely-forested interior is uninhabited. Clear, fast-flowing watercourses plunge

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steeply from the centre of the island. Geologically, most of the island consists of acid igneous rocks which occur in areas of relatively recent volcanic activity, and these basalts provide the richest soils on the island. Generally speaking, however, the soils are thought to be poor. The violent tropical rainfall and the precipitous topography of the island together cause excessive drainage, so that everywhere soils tend to be shallow (Cole 1958).

Few rainfall statistics are available for the island, and none that are entirely reliable. Fig. 1 presents two sets of averages based on my own



Map 2. Goodenough Island

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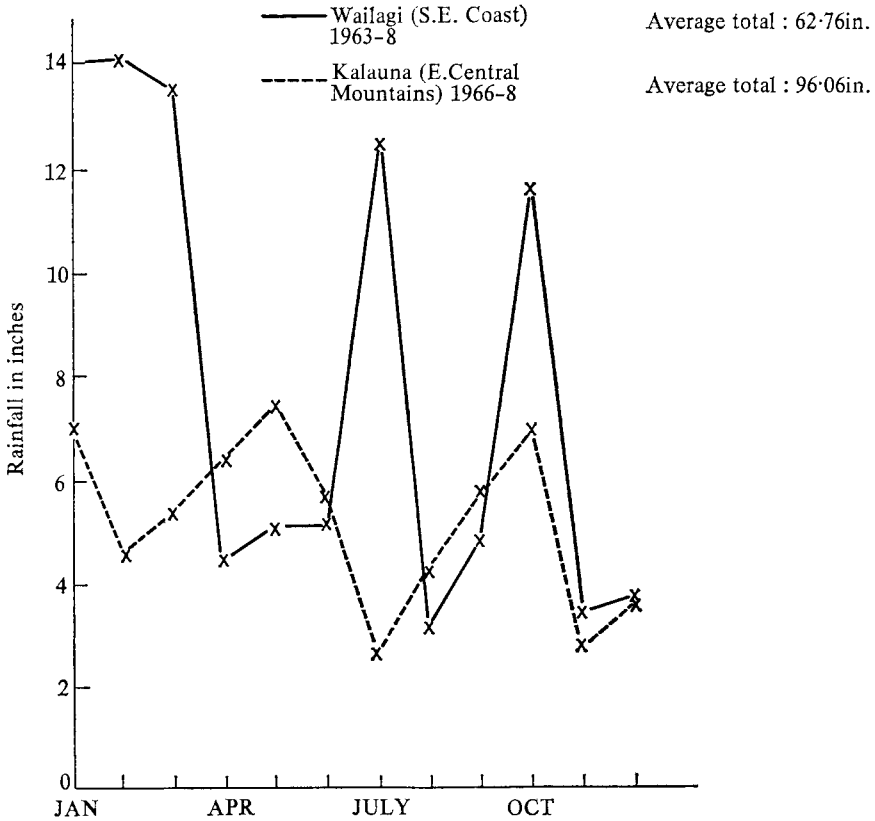


Fig. 1. Rainfall distribution on Goodenough

figures for Kalauna and those recorded at a mission school in Bwaidoga. Predictably, the mountain site is wetter than the coastal site; even so, for most of the inhabited areas of the island, precipitation would be under 100 inches for any 'average' year. Generally speaking, the southeast season dominates the climatic year, bringing cool, breezy weather, and owing to its partly sheltered position in the lee of the mountainous mass of Fergusson Island, somewhat unpredictable rains. The northwest monsoon period, lasting approximately from October to March, is humid and moist but even then good rainfall is not entirely dependable. As far as the records go, serious droughts with crop failures and human privation of famine proportions occurred in 1899-1901, 1911-12, 1946-7 and 1957-8.¹ In addition, innumerable local droughts have been recorded and scarcely a year seems

¹ *British New Guinea: Annual Reports* 1899-1900, 1900-1, 1902-3. *Papua: Annual Reports* 1911-12, 1949-50. *Patrol Reports* 1946, 1947, 1957, 1958. Jenness and Ballantyne 1920.

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to pass without some part of the island suffering food shortages. Although Goodenough is by no means unique in the Massim in being drought-prone (cf. Brass 1959; Fortune 1932, pp. 131–2; Malinowski 1935, pp. 160–3; Powell 1960, p. 119), its inhabitants have effected a peculiar cultural adaptation to this ecological factor, and one which will receive attention in later chapters.

Temperature is equable throughout the year and uniformly high. Monthly means of daily maxima (day) are probably within the range of 83–9°F and daily minima (night) within the range of 73–6°F, with only slight seasonal variation. Mean monthly relative humidity is probably between 75 and 85% (*Allied Geographical Section* 1942).

Mixed rain forest is characteristic of the lower mountains and along the stream courses of the lowlands, but much of the land below 1,000 feet is covered in rank grasses and the commonest plant association in these regions is the savannah one of *Themeda* and *Albizzia*. This lowland zone of savannah and open grassland is thought to be the result of the removal of primary forest for cultivation purposes (Van Deusen 1957). The area of this zone is believed to be increasing yearly through inadvertent or intentional burning off, which in unexpected ways poses a threat to the future ecological viability of the human population. In 1966–7 a series of locust plagues devastated the coconut crop of practically the entire island, and, but for timely – and costly – administrative intervention by aerial and ground spraying, the food crops too would have been seriously depleted.¹ Since this event, the Administration has repeatedly warned the islanders of the long-term dangers of burning-off, and stiffer penalties have been introduced for causing fires which get out of control.

LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL VARIATION

Culturally and perhaps linguistically Goodenough, together with the northwestern portion of neighbouring Fergusson Island, forms a relatively homogeneous area (see Jenness and Ballantyne 1920, p. 27). Despite some highly distinctive features, the most prominent of which is patriliney, this broad culture type can probably be regarded as a variety of the Southern Massim.²

¹ Entomologists maintained that the species (similar to *Locusta migratoria* of Biblical times) reached plague proportions due to exceptionally favourable breeding conditions produced by dry weather and burnt grasslands (Mr T. V. Bourke, personal communication; *South Pacific Post* 14 Dec. 1966).

² Since Seligman (1910, p. 9) appears to regard matrilineal descent as diagnostic of the Southern Massim, there are good grounds for excluding the Northern D'Entrecasteaux altogether. However, in several other respects, particularly in the indigenous material culture, including art, the region well qualifies for inclusion. It is not my intention here to propose a more satisfactory classificatory label.

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With one exception,¹ all communities speak dialects of a single Melanesian (Austronesian) language which is referred to in the literature as Bwaidogan. The earliest authorities seem to have minimized the linguistic divisions while the latest appear to have maximized them. Thus while Jenness and Ballantyne (1920, p. 56) maintained that 'there are several dialects spoken on Goodenough Island and North Fergusson, no one of which differs very greatly from the rest', a survey conducted in 1965 by a Summer Institute of Linguistics team attributed Goodenough with no less than four distinct languages.² I would be inclined to argue for a much lesser degree of specificity, since it is probable that the dialects were mutually intelligible indigenously as they are today. The islanders are still acutely conscious of their dialectical differences, however, since they serve them as badges of village allegiance; and in Kalauna for instance, there is a conscious resistance to the adoption of Bwaidogan words and phrases. Jenness and Ballantyne were nevertheless correct when they predicted that Bwaidogan, as the medium of Methodist teaching throughout the island, would become its *lingua franca* (1920, p. 56).

Although minor cultural variations coincide with linguistic distinctions, the most conspicuous and profound cultural division is that between inland and coast dwellers, which is reflected in native stereotypes of *kwana oyaoya* (people of the mountains) and *kwana imolata* (people of the littoral). The former are cast as hunters and snake-eaters who are afraid of the sea; the latter as fishermen and snake-loathers who are afraid of the high bush. Additionally, some influences from Fergusson Island are evident along the adjacent east coast of Goodenough, so there is a broad cultural distinction also to be made between the eastern and western parts of the island. In the east, for example, there has been a relatively recent adoption of some Fergusson forms of mortuary ceremony and food distributions. A more traditional impulse from the same general source is the 'canoe complex'. From Belebele to Wagifa canoe builders send their new vessels to neighbouring villages to solicit gifts of food, pigs and, indigenously, shell valuables. In earlier times the adjacent coast of Fergusson from Fatavi to Kukuya formed part of this gift-exchange circuit associated with the launching of new canoes.³

¹ Buduna or Budula is a tiny enclave of later migrants whose speech differs quite markedly from the other speech communities on Goodenough. Their own myths of origin derive them ultimately from a site in Mud Bay in the south of the island, from whence they sailed to the Amphletts and thence to a succession of settlements on the north coast of Goodenough, where they remain at present. Their language may have some affinities to that of the Amphletts. It is also notable that they are one of the few peoples on Goodenough who still make pottery.

² Personal communication from Miss J. Hockett of the S.I.L.

³ See Chowning 1960, for an account of this practice in Molima, on the south coast of Fergusson. In contrast to Molima, the gift-exchange and canoe-building complex on

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Despite local cultural differences, however, basic structural principles, the major social institutions and the value systems associated with these, appear to be uniform throughout the island. A broad definition of Goodenough Islanders would characterize them as a light-skinned, Oceanic negroid people¹ with a subsistence economy based on the cultivation of yam, taro and banana, dwelling in what Hogbin and Wedgwood (1953) would describe as discrete multi-carpellary parishes, the carpels of which are locally-anchored patrilines. Pig husbandry and, on the coast, fishing, are important subsidiary economic activities. A system of leadership by 'big-men' and hereditary ritual experts is articulated with a value system which centres on food production and distribution. Food exchanges are a major preoccupation and an expressive feature of almost every kind of institution and social event. Otherwise, public ceremonies are few and art (nowadays) virtually non-existent. The world-view is pervaded by belief in the efficacy of magic in most areas of human action, the social aspect of which is a preoccupation with sorcery. The most salient contrasts between Goodenough and what is known of other Southern Massim cultures appear to be the presence of patrilineal descent groups and an agnatic ideology, a puritanical attitude towards sex, absence of belief in female witches and relatively undeveloped trade relations with neighbouring societies.

Mention should be made, finally, of perceptible differences to be found today between communities on Goodenough which have been unequally exposed to missionary influence. Although this is essentially a continuum of acculturation, villages which represent the extremes, such as the two which I studied, manifest some striking contrasts. It is fortunate from this point of view that the study by Jenness and Ballantyne was completed before social and cultural changes had got far under way. Their monograph, while entirely lacking a sociological orientation, provides a valuable compendium of indigenous customs, thereby preserving a base line from which may be gauged changes occurring in the intervening generations. Many of the usages which they describe for Bwaidoga are scarcely remembered there today; others from Fergusson or elsewhere have taken their place. Yet even in Bwaidoga, the community most intensively influenced by the Mission in its midst, there is a tangible continuity of tradition and a certain pride in its uniqueness and persistence.

Goodenough is not associated with mortuary feasts or memorials to the dead. Further, Goodenough was never a link in the *kula* chain which bound many other islands of the Massim; although some villages constructed sea-going canoes, they were used for war and short trading trips rather than for the long *kula* voyages characteristic of the Dobuans and Trobrianders (Malinowski 1922). Shell valuables were obtained (principally from Amphlett Islands traders) by barter for pigs and yams.

¹ Physical type in the Southern Massim is described in Seligman (1910, pp. 3-8) and Malinowski (1922, p. 36).

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CONTACT EXPERIENCE

The pacification of Goodenough Island was effectively complete by the middle of the second decade of the century, and there are few old people alive today who can recall either the taste of human flesh or their villages being in a state of war with their neighbours. For the most part, the government had imposed its rule without need for violence, though there are two or three ugly exceptions in the record (Monckton, 1921 pp. 95–103; *British New Guinea: Annual Report* 1897–8; *Patrol Reports* 1910). Once homicide and cannibalism had been suppressed, the influence of the government became secondary in importance to that of the Methodist Mission, and except in the matter of resettlement, perhaps, until quite recently the government's role has been almost entirely restricted to the somewhat negative one of imposing and enforcing regulations.

As indicated by the number of recorded patrols, few Goodenough villages would have seen a government officer more than once a year until the 1960s. Just before the Second World War a patrol post was established at Mapamoiwa on Fergusson Island, and from this base two patrols a year were made on Goodenough. During the war there was considerable ANGAU (Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit) activity in the area, associated with a large bomber base on the island; and later a police camp was established by the Department of Native Affairs at Bolubolu for a few years. This was abandoned about 1950 and the post at Mapamoiwa re-opened and closed again twice in the following decade. The current revival of Administration interest in the island dates from 1958 when a series of agricultural and medical surveys discovered a sick, hungry and apathetic population. This state of affairs had been the result of the inter-related factors of prolonged drought, over-recruitment of male labour for work abroad and inadequate gardening by those who remained. Labour recruitment was closed for almost two years, seed yams were widely distributed, and the situation improved as adequate rains returned. A patrol post was opened at Bolubolu in 1963 and since then a series of energetic officers have helped to effect more economic development than was probably evident during the whole of the previous period of European administration.¹ Since 1964 the local government council has brought the

¹ In 1958 one officer could write: 'Economically and socially these people have shown practically no development since the arrival of the Administration 50 years ago.' He attributed this situation to (1) the fact that the island is one of the 'prime sources of labour in the Territory', (2) neglect by the Administration, and (3) 'lack of ability of the people to help themselves' (*Patrol Report* 1958). The remainder of the D'Entrecasteaux had apparently fared little better. Another officer referred to it in 1957 as 'the dead heart of Milne Bay District' (*Patrol Report* 1957).

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direct participation of the people into the problems of their future development. To date, however, the council has few substantive achievements to its credit, and in 1967 it was rated by an experienced official (in a private communication) as among the most inefficient in Papua.

Mission influence, although unevenly spread in space and time, has thoroughly permeated Goodenough culture. The Methodist Overseas Mission has been based at Wailagi, on land purchased from Bwaidoga, almost continuously since 1898. For a long time most villages on the island have had a resident native teacher, usually a Bwaidogan, sometimes a Dobuan, whose task it is to preach on Sundays and teach children during the week. The educational attainments of these men are generally very limited, as is their grasp of Christian doctrine. Their teaching, however, with its curious blend of Biblical stories, ethical precepts and categorical restrictions, has over two or three generations been more or less passively assimilated. An often incongruous syncretism has resulted in which Christian values are commonly expressed in word, though less commonly in deed, where an older stratum of values is still dominant. Except in Bwaidoga, Church sanctions against the use of magic and the practice of polygyny, for example, are generally weak and inoperative. Again, excepting Bwaidoga, it would be true to say that mission leaders have notably less influence than traditional leaders. There have been no mission representatives at all in Kalauna since 1964, other than informal 'prayer leaders' who hold poorly attended 'services' in the villages each Sunday. (The last resident teacher, a Bwaidogan, fled Kalauna after his wife had been seduced by a Kalauna man.)

For Kalauna and neighbouring communities at least, my general impression was that the high point of mission influence had been passed a generation or more ago, and that if anything it is now in decline. The sharp edges of the pagan culture have been worn down by the ubiquitous Methodism, but the indigenous growths of materialism, pragmatism and individualism remain firmly rooted in the people's subsistence and society, and until these are radically altered the culture will probably remain proof against further Christian subversion.

Sixty years after the Methodist Mission settled at the Dobuan heart of the D'Entrecasteaux, the Roman Catholic Sacred Heart Mission entered the area, and about 1950 a station was established at the northern end of Goodenough. There was initially considerably acrimony between the two missions, particularly so on the part of the Methodists, who regarded the Catholics as intruders. But where there are no zealots there can be no heretics, and the majority of Goodenough Islanders were passive and bewildered spectators of the confrontation. The Catholic Mission intro-

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duced considerably higher educational standards in the schools it was able to establish, which had the salutary effect of prompting the Methodists to take formal education more seriously than they had done hitherto. English was taught for the first time in the 1950s. Government legislation in 1952 brought all schools under the control and direction of the Administration, which eventually had the effect of raising standards of teaching in those schools the Administration recognized. By 1967, however, there was still only one government (i.e. non-mission) school on Goodenough, and this, like the handful of mission schools recognized by the Administration, was only of primary standard. The very small number of Goodenough children who had received any secondary education at all by 1967 had acquired it at mission schools elsewhere in the District. Probably no other single factor has contributed as much to the present state of political ignorance and apathy among Goodenough Islanders as the long-term neglect of their basic education (see Gostin *et al.* 1971).

Two other influences of the post-contact period should be mentioned. The war years brought considerable disruption for a large proportion of the population. The Japanese assault on Milne Bay in 1942 resulted in a force of 360 Japanese soldiers being marooned upon the west coast of the island. After some months they were driven off by an Australian task force, and for the remainder of the war a large air base was maintained on the flat plain in the north east of the island (McCarthy 1959, pp. 347–9; Odgers 1957, p. 32). The native population of several villages close to the base was evacuated to the adjacent coast of Fergusson Island to make room for several thousand Australian and American air-force personnel. Those islanders who were able to remain recall this brief era as one of novel tinned foods and unexpected perquisites in money and material objects. But when the armed forces withdrew, all materials and supplies that were not considered useless were taken away, leaving the indigenes to salvage what they would of the air-strip matting, the empty oil drums and the tons of rusting scrap iron.

For as long as a decade after the war, patrolling officers were apt to blame the effects of the war (including the Military Administration, ANGAU) for the unhappy state in which they claimed to find Goodenough Islanders. There were pockets of discontent which provoked small-scale cargo cults. There was a succession of droughts which seriously hindered the attempts of the people to recover from the disruption of war. There was an increasing flow of willing recruits for labour abroad, yet there was a passive resistance to government attempts to interest young men in apprentice training. Finally, officers found cause for complaint in the 'apathy' and 'surliness' of the people, of which they found evidence in the

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untidy villages, the unkempt roads, the ramshackle houses, the shiftless village constables and the unwilling carriers.

Although, as far as is known, there were very few native casualties during the war, its psychological impact was probably considerable. Other forms of European enterprise have been minimal by comparison, and their impact correspondingly less. There have been fewer than a dozen commercial coconut plantations in the history of the island and all have been small. Currently there is but one. There is also a moderately profitable, European-owned trade-store which supplements its income by recruiting labour for employers in Samarai and Port Moresby. Indigenous enterprises are on a very much smaller scale. The people of Goodenough give only covert value to successful entrepreneurship. Accumulation of native wealth and the manipulation of capital were not such conspicuous features of their political system as they appear to have been elsewhere in Melanesia. Sorcery was, and still is, greatly feared by those who would display an uncommon talent or a conspicuous degree of wealth, whether this be counted in gardens, pigs, shell valuables or cash, and the D'Entrecasteaux islanders as a whole affect an uncompromising egalitarianism. These are probably important factors in the weak personal incentives of would-be entrepreneurs.

Copra is the most immediate source of income, but co-operatives have yet to be tried on Goodenough. Production is on an individual or family scale, and either sold at low prices to the local European traders or personally taken on an expensive expedition by boat to the Copra Marketing Board in Samarai. For a brief period the local government undertook the responsibility of sending copra into Samarai on behalf of local producers, but the plan was ill-administered and failed to win their confidence. A generous estimate would put the number of people on Goodenough earning more than \$A30 a year from this source at about 200.¹

Cash crops other than coconuts have been experimentally grown from time to time under the direction of administration agricultural officers, but none has proved notably successful. Chillies, coffee, cocoa, peanuts and rice have all been tried but are nowhere on the island a significant source of income. Timber resources are considerable but they remain unexploited. One or two saw-mill ventures by local entrepreneurs have failed through lack of capital and technical knowledge. Cattle projects have been mooted at intervals for the grass plains in the north east, and the council has finally, in 1968, set aside a fund for a small herd. In sum, the island – and

¹ I would estimate the per capita income of Goodenough Islanders at about \$15 in 1967. Of this figure copra production would account for about \$3 and income from wage labour for the remainder.