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FIGHTING WITH FOOD

*Leadership, values and social control
in a Massim society*

MICHAEL W. YOUNG

*Assistant Lecturer in Social Anthropology in the
University of Cambridge*

WITH A FOREWORD BY
PROFESSOR W. E. H. STANNER



CAMBRIDGE

AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

1971

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521107662

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First published 1971

This digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 72-158549

ISBN 978-0-521-08223-5 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-10766-2 paperback

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FOREWORD

Having been privileged to watch the development of Dr Michael Young's researches in Goodenough Island from their inception, and having read his field-reports with intense interest, I am now gratified to be invited to write a Foreword to the completed book.

Dr Young prepared himself with care to study one set of problems only to find on arrival in the field that they seemed less significant than others which began to force themselves on his notice. It is never easy, and it may be inadvisable, to jettison a well-prepared plan of work and to try to devise another to meet the apparent demand of unexpected facts and situations. How can one be sure that what one came to study may not turn out in the longer run to be as significant as it has seemed, on good grounds, from afar? It would have been defensible for Dr Young to persist with his predetermined study: as yet, there are no canonical specifications for anthropological fieldwork and, under the rule of the scholar's sovereignty of interest, he might justifiably have said that *his* interest lay in things more fundamental than the passing parade. But as Salisbury did in the same situation among the Siane, Dr Young responded positively, and with rewarding results. He saw that the passing parade can *itself* be a true subject of anthropological inquiry and that *within* it what is fundamental to the process of a society's life is tested as well as revealed. This stance called for intellectual flexibility, technical ability, and theoretical insight. In my opinion, the account of 'the bitter-sweet life of intensive sociality' in the westernmost D'Entrecasteaux Archipelago is a more significant contribution to social anthropology than the study of political development with which a less perceptive or more timorous scholar might have persisted.

The work of Seligman, Jenness and Ballantyne, Malinowski, Fortune and others left us with at best an outline of some possibilities of Goodenough culture and society. Dr Young's book removes most of the ethnographic obscurity which had hung over the western Massim. It also makes possible for the first time some controlled comparisons with other Massim societies and with some in the wider Melanesia. It provides as a basis a careful but vivid analysis of the inwardness and outwardness of a somewhat isolated society in marked contrast with others, adjacent to it, which have been long familiar, and have had much to do with shaping our expectations of Melanesian studies. In my opinion *Fighting with food* should earn its author place in the front rank of specialists in that region. His clear and often felicitous writing is not the least of the book's attractions.

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In spite of some good taxonomic and synoptic essays in recent years, it is still difficult, for some of us at least, to see Melanesian sociality as an overall pattern. This book could strengthen an impression of a divided mosaic made up of strongly figured local identities. Almost every element of any local piece has a shape and quality reminiscent of those within other pieces. The difficulty lies in typing and comparing the ensembles so as to make the mosaic coherent.

It is, then, almost with expectation that one hears that Goodenough society is composed of a large number of small political units in rivalrous or friendly alliance, and of clans intricately arranged in traditional enmity or amity. That the physical scene is one of coastal and inland villages following somewhat different styles of life and responding differently to alien influences. That there is a dominant ideology of agnatic descent, inheritance and succession; that the pattern of residence is tightly patrilocal and patrivilocal, and at times fratrilocal; that shallow patrilineages are anchored by symbols and magic to the villages or their constituent hamlets; that villagers have a potent sense of community and a pride in the persistent uniqueness of clusters of people, in spite of some ambiguity about identities; that networks of kinship, friendship and mutual interest cross-cut intra-village and inter-village life so as to formalize enmities and enjoin amities; that the villages are functions of social rather than ecological or demographic factors; and that mobility is low. Or that matrikin are warm, friendly, uncompetitive and unpossessive, affines friendly but somewhat embarrassed, and patrikin competitive, quarrelsome and prone to violence in some situations while sentimentally well-disposed in others. Or that men are timorous in love, prudish in sex, disposed to regard courtship as a title to later adultery, and capricious in their choices of wives from among the unlaughing, unfaithful, rather predatory girls; and that marriages are brittle and unstable, and divorce has no stigma. Or that there are no ritualized initiations into adulthood. And so on. All these features, and even collations of some of them, are familiar. The same might be said of some features of the rivalrous food exchanges which in this island have been developed almost to the stage of efflorescence. But not all. Goodenough's title to identity and uniqueness probably lies here if anywhere.

Dr Young's description and analysis of the exchanges, following on the account of the structure and organization of the society from the contrasted viewpoints of two villages, are thorough and thoughtful. The title *Fighting with food* is an apt description of a system in which clan-leaders seek with fanatical zealotry to gain renown for themselves and for their supporters by prestations of food, the main valuable, on rival groups,

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daring the not uncommon disaster of a greater return prestation. The methods are coercive in a variety of forms which intended victims can hardly – and because of their own zeal, hardly want to – evade. The purpose, at least the nearer purpose, is to requite or redress a real or fancied injury by inflicting humiliation, the shamefulness of a publicly revealed inferiority in food wealth. Dr Young make it readily understandable that valuations, through symbolisms of extraordinary subtlety and range, should concentrate on food in an island where drought, food-shortage and famine were familiar, where pigs and shell-goods were not a store, standard and symbol of wealth as in so many parts of Melanesia, and where external trade had not developed strongly. He considers the fact of rivalry to be a complex function of the structure and organization of the society, and the expression of the function a regulative, restitutive and integrative mode of social control, in the all-prevailing symbolic idiom of food. He demonstrates a persuasive ‘fit’ between environment, subsistence, settlement pattern, social structure, social control and leadership on the one hand and the sumptuary and redressive aspects of the food-exchanges on the other. He is able to suggest, further, on convincing grounds, that the main external causes of change – steel tools, Government administration, the suppression of warfare, and mission teaching – far from loosening the ‘fit’ have, so to speak, tightened it by allowing and even inducing an evolution of the traditional system. The product, at least where people cling to the old ways, and above all to the old symbolic idiom, has been something like a hyperbolic version of the system of rivalry.

Satisfying and fascinating as the account is, Dr Young accepts that he has left some questions unanswered and no doubt some unasked. Such candour inclines a reader to put the greater reliance on the positive findings. It is perhaps only a puzzle of formulation rather than of fact that, in a society where one of the canonized moral values is ‘an uncompromising egalitarianism’, a main and continuing enthusiasm of life should be to shame one’s fellows into a public status of permanent inferiority, not equality. If I have understood Dr Young’s thesis aright, it is that the Goodenough Islanders have enlarged the redressive element of the institution. Could it be, rather, or additionally, the punitive element? So that it is to the jural aspect that theoretical analysis might progressively turn?

One aspect of *Fighting with food* of which the author modestly makes little is its revelation of the dynamism capable of persisting in a Melanesian society under the worst conditions of external power. That the people of this island, poor in resources, but for long the prey of the external recruiter, and for longer still almost totally neglected by the Administration,

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should have retained the will to go on being themselves, and to preserve their animated and enthusiastic scheme of life, has much political import for those who are now concerned with the future of Papua–New Guinea. Dr Young’s insightful account of that life in the dynamic round, and not just in the flat of its plan and structure, is a very notable contribution to a larger purpose than social anthropologists are yet encouraged to assist.

W. E. H. STANNER

The Australian National University
Canberra

1 June 1971

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The field research on which this book is based was carried out whilst I was a Scholar of the Australian National University. For its generous financial support and many facilities, I owe this body a considerable debt of gratitude. I am grateful to the members of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, both for their intellectual stimulation and their friendship. I would like to thank particularly Professor A. L. Epstein and Professor W. E. H. Stanner for their counsel and encouragement, and Dr A. Chowning for her patient and painstaking supervision of my research and writing. Professor J. A. Barnes, Mr A. Forge, Dr H. I. Hogbin and Dr P. M. Kaberry read the manuscript in its earlier thesis form, and offered many helpful suggestions for its improvement. No one but myself, however, is responsible for the defects of argument and presentation which still remain.

Members of the Administration of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea who helped me in so many ways deserve my warmest thanks. In particular, I am grateful to Graeme Baker, John Boulderson, Terry Bourke, Barry and Marion Downes, Peter Hill and Graham Mathews for their hospitality and assistance. I owe special thanks also to those European residents of Goodenough – Ailsa Hall and Clem Rich, Margaret Hooper, Pat Mylrea, Margaret Walker and Fr Kevin Young – who helped mitigate some of the Island's hazards and discomforts.

The greatest debt of an ethnographer is inevitably to the people he studies. I thank all those Goodenough Islanders whose lives in some small part I shared. If I found some aspects of their culture distasteful, this does not diminish the respect and affection in which I hold them. Despite their initial suspicions of a white alien, they showed me tolerance and friendliness, and in time paid me the compliment of trust. It would be invidious to list those to whom I owe most, but I must mention my dearest friends and most conscientious assistants: Manawadi, Velowalowa and Kawanaba of Kalauna, and Tomokivona of Bwaidoga. Without these men my knowledge of Goodenough culture would be very much the poorer.

Finally, with pride as well as gratitude, I acknowledge the untiring assistance of my wife, whose resourcefulness in the field was an inspiration to me.

M. W. Y.

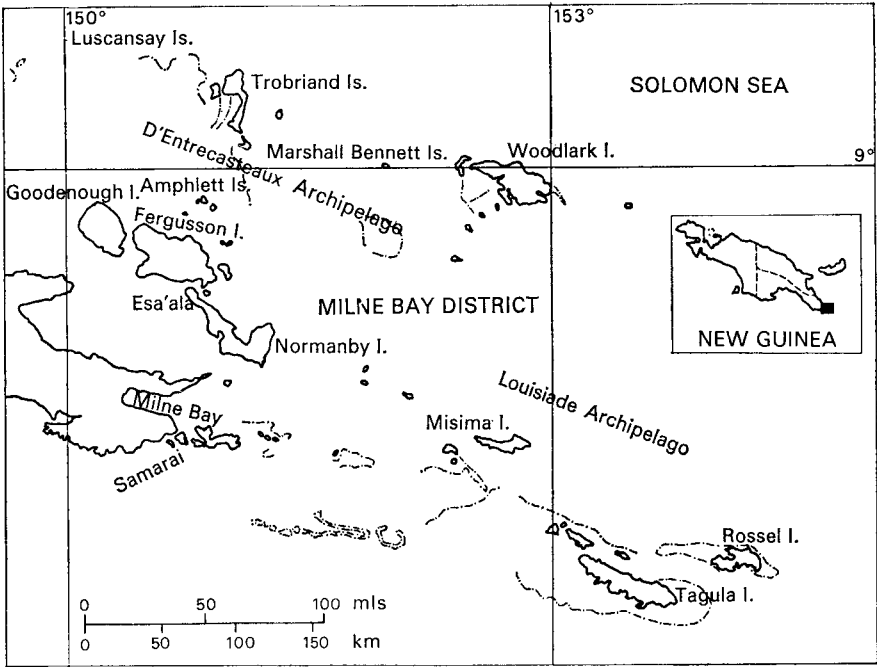
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Map 1. The Massim: Southeastern Papua

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PREFACE

This book, an amended version of a doctoral thesis, is based on fieldwork carried out during 1966–8 under the auspices of the Australian National University. My research plans, drawn up in Canberra early in 1966, were for an investigation of traditional and modern leadership in Goodenough Island, Papua. I intended to study the recently-established local government council as an emergent political institution, and to try to detect the processes by which the leaders of hitherto separate political units might bring about a form of centralized authority structure through modes of co-operation beyond the village level. Such an investigation would demand a familiarity with the socio-cultural framework, and the institutions and processes therein which could be regarded as political. This could best be achieved by that time-honoured technique of social anthropology: participant-observation in the life of a community. For purposes of comparison it would be necessary to study in depth at least one other community on the island, selected to bridge the apparent range of social and cultural variation.

The project was still-born. The council was immature, its role in village affairs was insignificant, and local leaders were for the most part unconcerned with its existence. It took some weeks to discover this, of course, and by that time I was beyond regret, having already become immersed in affairs of greater moment to villagers than mere council matters. I mention my original research plans because they largely determined my choice of a field base. A further consideration was that my wife and infant son were to join me once I had established a home, and I wished to be no more than a day's journey from competent medical help should it ever be required. Moreover, there seemed to be no virtue in isolation as such, and my initial patrol of the sparsely populated northern and western portions of the island convinced me that poor communications would hinder rather than help my research. The eastern side of the island is served by a vehicular track, and about 60% of the island's population lives within an hour's walk of it. It was also desirable to be within reasonable walking distance – no more than half a day – of the patrol post and local government council headquarters, to enable me to keep at least a light finger on the pulse of events of political moment. My range of choice was thereby reduced to less than a dozen villages.

The largest of these was Bwaidoga, which recommended itself by its size, the fact that it was the home of the council President, its documented language (Jenness and Ballantyne 1928) which I had already begun to

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learn in Canberra, and the fact of its also being the scene of an early ethnographic study by Diamond Jenness and the Rev. A. Ballantyne (1920). As the site of my first community study, however, I rejected Bwaidoga. I feared, rightly as it proved, that as the headquarters of the Methodist Overseas Mission on the island, missionaries had dominated the life of the community to such an extent that traditional leadership patterns would be exceptionally difficult to reconstruct. I decided to return to it, however, as my choice for the second, comparative community study.

Rejecting other coastal villages, therefore, and all hill communities of less than 300 people, I was left with only two choices. Mataita seemed suitable but for its unusual degree of hamlet dispersal, whereas Kalauna appeared favourable from every point of view. It was half an hour's walk from the road at Belebele and an hour by cross-country path to the patrol post. It was of above-average size and the most highly nucleated settlement in Goodenough. Since the compactness of Kalauna was apparently a function of its physical environment rather than of some centripetal social principle which would almost certainly have been atypical for the culture area, I had no reservations about welcoming the advantages which accrue to the ethnographer in a densely settled village.

Kalauna people seemed prepared to welcome, or at least to tolerate, my residence among them, and with the help of the councillor I commissioned eleven young men to build me a house. Since living space is at a premium in Kalauna, I was obliged to accept a site in a marginal hamlet which, however, commanded a view of the main path into the village. A few days after my appearance and before work on my house had begun, a village meeting was called at which I was the main item on the agenda. Speaking through an interpreter I put across my case for wanting to live there, and scotched the vague cargo rumours which had accompanied my baggage up the hill. These were no trouble to me subsequently, although a few individuals remained unshakeable in their belief that I was a 'spy' for the ancestors.

I spent thirteen months in Kalauna altogether, from September 1966 to May 1967, plus a few weeks in August 1967; then again from mid-January 1968 until the end of April, with a final fortnight there in June 1968. I tended to work intensively through a small number of informants, finding that close and personal relationships with a few friends were more productive, as well as more satisfying, than dependence on a wide range of acquaintances. Although I became fairly proficient at 'hearing' the language my speaking knowledge of it remained unimpressive. On the positive side, this probably did something to undermine my Goodenough friends' racist belief that all Europeans are innately more clever than all Papuans.

Two field periods were spent in Bwaidoga: from May to July 1967 and

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from May to June 1968, a total of five months. The contrast between Kalauna and Bwaidoga was stimulating, and the study of the latter provided valuable correctives to the perspectives I gained through the study of the former. Impressionistically, there was a brooding quality about the atmosphere of Kalauna, which was partly due to the position of its sombre, tree-shaded hamlets beneath towering mountains, and partly due to the existence of sorcery fears and the occurrence of frequent quarrels. By comparison, Bwaidoga had a sea-freshness, a brilliance of light and a sense of spaciousness. Its people seemed less prickly in their relationships with one another; they were untroubled by sorcery and showed more relaxed attitudes towards food – the source of so much competition in Kalauna. Clearly, a transformation of values had occurred in Bwaidoga which gave it a ‘progressive’, but rather dull and Apollonian air. Kalauna had retained an exciting Dionysian quality which seemed almost anachronistic in a long-contacted and heavily missionized area of seaboard Melanesia.

Social values are given an important place in this book. It seemed to me that I could not adequately account for the behaviour, institutionalized or ‘spontaneous’, which I observed in Goodenough without a fairly detailed understanding of these – particularly those relating to food. In gradually relinquishing my prepared research topic and in taking up one which the daily preoccupations of Kalauna people thrust at me, I discovered that although leadership remained a major focus of my study, it was articulated to something better categorized as ‘social control’ than ‘political process’. The phrase *vemunumunuya au’a aiya’aine*, ‘hitting/fighting/killing with food’, was reiterated in my presence for a long time before I grasped the fact that it referred to a regular form of punitive sanction as well as to a conventional form of status-acquisition. It was first brought home to me, perhaps, when Wakasilele’s friend from another village presented him with a large pig. Wakasilele is a ‘big-man’, a tough, stony-faced leader with a ferocious temper and a haughty pride, who on occasion even managed to intimidate me. His friend was not a ‘big-man’, but he left Wakasilele speechless with emotion when he gave him the pig. ‘Why is he being given the pig?’ I asked. ‘Because his friend is angry with him’, I was told. I learned that the friend had earlier brought Wakasilele some shell-fish from the coast, but the latter had churlishly spurned the gift. The giver was shamed, insulted and indignant. To point out to Wakasilele in the most humiliating way possible that he had committed a breach of good manners, his friend presented him with the most valuable asset he possessed – a pig. The emotion Wakasilele was struggling with was shame and presumably contrition. There was no ‘political’ element that I could discover in this incident. The act of giving the pig was purely punitive and redressive.

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Preface

In general terms this book is about social control: the ways in which Kalauna people coerce, manipulate, and sometimes manage to control each other, and the reasons why they use certain means rather than others. 'Sanctions' is the operative word, perhaps, for this does not attempt to be a definitive ethnography of social control in Kalauna. I do not deal with processes of socialization, nor do I treat exhaustively modes of conflict resolution. I am concerned, however, with those mechanisms or instruments of social control which Berndt would classify as 'coercive' and directed towards the 'deliberate regulation of conduct' (1962, pp. 10–11), and which Pospisil (1958) would presumably regard as 'legal' – although it seems to me preferable to avoid the use of those question-begging terms 'law' and 'legal' in this non-didactic context.¹ In so far as I do elucidate processes of conflict resolution and dispute settlement in Kalauna, this monograph is some small contribution to the anthropology of law; though the reader may well feel that here the opposite of Nader's stricture applies (1965, pp. 17–18), and that my account of Kalauna's 'legal system' leaves it too deeply embedded in the socio-cultural matrix to be of much use for comparative purposes beyond a range of similar Melanesian societies.

More specifically, then, this book is concerned with the regulative aspects of competitive food-giving. In order to demonstrate the role, functions and consequences of such behaviour, it has been necessary to analyse it within a context of specific social, cultural, environmental and historical conditions. Thus, Chapter 1 sets the scene of modern Goodenough and looks briefly at its contact history, especially the changes which have occurred in settlement pattern and local grouping. Chapter 2 introduces Kalauna by describing its environment, settlement and residence patterns, and by giving a short history of the community. In Chapter 3 the institutions of kinship and marriage in Kalauna are briefly examined, mainly as providing bases for community integration, but also as providing sources of conflict. Wider institutional modes of integration are described in Chapter 4, which is concerned with the ideology of clanship and the general structure of the community. Chapter 5 identifies leaders, considers their attributes and discusses the structural and cultural restraints on bigmanship. In Chapter 6 I attempt a limited quantitative analysis of instruments and agencies of social control in Kalauna, considering in turn the redressive and regulative

¹ I agree with Gulliver (1969, pp. 12–13) that: '... it should be possible to ignore some of the older, and bitterly contested, controversies: does "law" necessarily entail the possibility of the use of force, or the practice of adjudication, or the existence of a court? For example, do conciliation processes, duels, song contests, and various types of self-help come within its realm? It is more desirable to analyze these kinds of phenomena in their own contexts, in order to understand the social processes and ideas at work and to perceive the comparable factors and the significant variables at both the intra- and the cross-cultural levels.'

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value of a variety of sanctions. The social values associated with food are the broad subject of the following two chapters, while in Chapters 9 and 10 I deal with competitive food exchanges: 'fighting with food'. The significant part they play in social control is considered, and the course and consequences of their development during the post-contact era are also discussed. In the final chapter I pull together the several themes of social values, leadership and social control in the analysis of their most dramatic institutionalized expression – the festival. In a brief Conclusion, I restate my general model of the development of competitive exchanges on Goodenough, consider the reasons for their demise in Bwaidoga, and finally indicate some problems which require more investigation.

The ethnographic base of my general topic is of necessity broad, and several chapters are therefore concerned with laying it down firmly. A historical dimension has also been essential, for not only are Goodenough Islanders themselves highly conscious of what traditions and institutions they have retained, modified, adopted or lost, but the early study by Jenness and Ballantyne (1920) invites the frequent backward glance. Despite its shortcomings as a systematic treatise, and its total neglect of the problems anthropology is concerned with today, their monograph provides useful background for a crucial watershed in the islanders' history. The social and cultural changes undergone in Bwaidoga during the fifty-five years between Jenness and Ballantyne's fieldwork there and my own are, in their own way and on their own scale, just as profound as those which have affected our own culture during the same period – with the difference, perhaps, that the Bwaidogan's standard of living has not altered substantially since 1911. Bwaidoga receives scant attention in this work, however, for its main focus is on institutions which that community has renounced.

A final word on method and scope. On one level the book is an attempt to integrate the general and the particular. I have flirted with the 'extended case method' but stopped short before the point where tedium begins to replace enlightenment. In giving illustrative case material I have tried to use the same *dramatis personae* whenever possible, so that not only may the reader trace analytic and sequential continuities between certain events, but that he may also become familiar with a number of individuals, grasping something of their personalities and life-styles. The behaviour, coercive techniques, and 'careers' of several leaders, for instance, may with the help of the index be traced through case material in the text.

In his attempt to convey the quality of life in an alien culture, the anthropologist is defeated ultimately by the nature of his medium. For although Goodenough Islanders stand in rigid postures when a camera is pointed

Cambridge University Press

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

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at them, their social life is flux and movement, and any description of even those aspects of it which are 'salient' must proceed, as Gregory Bateson noted (1936, p. 3): 'not with a network of words but with words in linear series'.

M. W. Y.

Cambridge, 1971