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0521312124 - The Making of Great Men: Male Domination and Power Among the New  
Guinea Baruya

Maurice Godelier

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# The making of great men

**Male domination and power among  
the New Guinea Baruya**

MAURICE GODELIER

*Translated by Rupert Swyer*



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*To my parents.*

*To Warineu, Kandavatche, Djirinac, and Ambiaraiwe, who guided me with patience and intelligence back into the world of their youth, before the arrival of white men.*

*To the masters of the rituals, Inamwe the great shaman, Tchouonoon-daye whose task it was to separate the boys from the world of women, Ypmeie of the Baruya clan who turned them into warriors and men.*

*To all the Baruya and particularly to Koummaineu, friend and companion for so many years.*

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## Preface

This book is about power, primarily that of one sex over another: the power of men among the Baruya, a mountain tribe in the interior of New Guinea, that immense island north of Australia better known to the French as Papua.

Until 1960, the Baruya were self-governing and their society was one of those that our own calls primitive, because it lacked those two pillars of “civilization,” namely, classes and the state. In 1960, Australia decided that the time had come for it to civilize the Baruya, and it extended the power of its state over them. To bring them peace, it undertook to “pacify” them and, having pacified them, it set about governing them.

Before 1951, the Baruya had never seen a white person; yet without being aware of it, they had already become materially, economically dependent upon them. This dependence had begun a decade earlier. On a visit to a tribe with which they regularly bartered their salt for stone implements, they first laid eyes on fine steel axes and machetes, probably made in Sheffield or Solingen. Nobody had been able to explain who had manufactured these marvels, but they enthusiastically adopted them. Without giving the matter another thought, they flung their stone and bamboo tools, with which their ancestors used to clear forest, into that selfsame forest, or abandoned them in their gardens. Therefore, as with many tribes living in “inaccessible” regions, their material subordination to the world of the white man predated their political and ideological subordination, and this material subordination has never ceased to grow, even though their country has been independent since 1975.

By 1951, however, they had already been made aware of the presence of the white man. One day they had looked up into the sky, terrified, as two huge birds tore out of the sky, spitting fire at each other, then chased each other over the horizon to the east. This must have been an episode in the Battle of the Pacific, toward the end of World War II. A little later, the Baruya learned from a distant tribe, to which they had traveled in order to obtain



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steel axes, that inside the belly of these firebirds lived beings of human aspect, but with a different skin.

The Baruya governed themselves with neither ruling class nor state until 1960, although inequalities existed. One part of society, the men, governed the other, the women; it was not that they ruled society without the women, but against them. So the classless Baruya join the long list of societies that already attest inequality between the sexes. The subordination, oppression, even exploitation of women are social facts, whose origins lie not in the emergence of classes but predate them and are different in nature; male domination consolidated and renewed itself in a thousand different ways with the myriad forms of exploitation of man by man in a society that preceded our own. Needless to say, there is no good reason why things in classless societies should happen everywhere, or even in general, as they have among the Baruya. At any event, there is good reason to study a classless society whose mechanisms and ideas condition and legitimize in other forms the male domination that exists in our own society.

The Baruya social order, however, does not reduce itself to the equality of all men among themselves relative to the women. For the same mechanisms that establish this equality work simultaneously, and just as much, to produce certain men who stand out from the rest and rise above them. Some do so by virtue of their exceptional skill in activities that everybody is supposed to perform, such as war and agriculture; others become “great” by virtue of their special ability to perform functions useful to all but accessible to only a few, those who display the requisite gifts (shamanism) or who inherit the exclusive right to perform them (e.g., initiation rites). Needless to say, it is one thing to become “great” through inheritance of a function that makes one great because of one’s lineage and ancestors, and quite another to become so through personal worthiness, a distinction that nobody can gain through inheritance alone. But whether inherited or merited, certain positions of power do exist in Baruya society, and these form a social hierarchy distinct from men’s general dominance over women. It is a complex hierarchy, which rests upon, amplifies, and has its roots in this dominance, although it is not co-terminous with it. The making of “great men” is therefore the vital complement and capstone of male domination: the central argument of this book.

This is not to say that the Baruya are utterly lacking in women who are widely regarded as “greater” than the others, and, the men confidentially admit, greater even than many of themselves. What is unthinkable is the idea that any woman could be as great as the great men, the great warriors, or the great shamans. The only sphere in which superiority might have been possible – shamanism, the only area in which the two sexes cooperate and compete in a common activity that is useful to society as a whole – is so conceived and organized that the female shamans are excluded on principle from

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the most arduous and glorious magical struggles, namely, those aimed at enemy tribes; and above all, it is not in the power of any female shaman to initiate others.

Two types of inequality thus combine to create order in the social life of the Baruya: inequalities between men and women on the one hand, and among men themselves on the other. The term *inequality* implies powers and privileges for certain members of the tribe. One striking feature of Baruya social organization, however, is the absence of direct links between power and wealth. Wealth does not give its owner power, and power does not bring with it wealth. The contrast between this society and ours is obvious; the contrast is more striking with all those New Guinea societies ruled by “big men,” those important men who have risen above their fellows primarily thanks to their impressive ability to produce and/or accumulate wealth in terms of pigs, shells, and so forth, and to distribute it with calculated generosity, each thus gathering around him a group of loyal retainers, under obligation to help him aggrandize his name while hoping to share in his glory and largesse, by supporting him with their goods and services.

The problem is whether or not there is some deep-seated reason preventing wealth and power from combining in the Baruya’s social structure. I believe that there is such a reason, and that it lies mainly in the principle that governs the social aspect of the reproduction of life, that is, relations of kinship in their society. In contrast to many other societies in Melanesia and elsewhere, only a woman is worth another woman, and cannot be exchanged for pigs or other forms of material wealth when two groups wish to ally and ensure their reproduction. The entire development of certain forms of power and wealth is ruled out by the governing principle of relations of kinship. Perhaps this instance may give us some insight, by way of contrast and through its negative aspects, into some of the conditions that have led to the formation of classes and the breakup of community societies elsewhere.

The last feature that we have chosen to study, in which the Baruya transcend their particularity, is the role that sexuality plays in their thought and theories, acting as a kind of cosmic foundation of women’s subordinate position, and of even the oppression that they endure.

In their view, every aspect of male domination, whether (to resort to our own categories) economic, political, or symbolic, can be explained by sexuality and by the different position that each sex occupies in the process of the reproduction of life. To be sure, similar attitudes can be found in our own culture, among those who regard the subordination and oppression of women as “natural.” But I must point out straightaway that the concept of nature as it exists in our society is unknown to the Baruya; they do not place men on the side of culture and women on that of nature, but rather the contrary.

However, as in our own culture, sexuality – the differences of form, sub-

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stance, and bodily function, the anatomical and physiological differences that arise from the different functions of the sexes in the process of the reproduction of life – supplies a steady stream of material from which are fashioned the messages and explanations that serve to interpret and justify the social inequalities between men and women. It is as if sexuality were constantly being solicited to occupy every nook and cranny of society, to act as a language to express, and as a reason to legitimize, facts of a (mainly) different order. Although one is right in thinking that the existence and diversity of male domination in many societies stem not from a single cause but from many, and that they rest upon more than one basis, one does wonder what it is that pushes sexuality and human sexual differences to the forefront of social consciousness, of conscious thought and language, making them bear witness to and justify inequalities that are of an essentially different order.

For in what society is sexuality not ubiquitous, carrying its load of fantasies wherever it goes? Yet it may be, as our analysis of the Baruya suggests, that sexuality only breeds fantasies when asked to do so, when forced to fabricate messages and hold forth on facts whose origins lie elsewhere and transcend it, when sexuality starts to serve as sign and meaning for things that in fact bear no relation to it. Over and beyond the twists and turns of desire of the other and the self, the visible dominance of sexuality seems to be a kind of dissembled confession of its invisible subordination to other relations between men and women within the overall logic underlying the workings of each society. Indeed, one sometimes wonders whether psychoanalysis – which in our culture claims to be the rigorous study of sexuality and desire – really does perceive all the extraneous elements in sexuality. Yet without listening, and without an attempt to decipher the signals thus heard, its theoretical discourse is liable to produce nothing more than mythology, as convincing, and as unconvincing, as the Baruya myths.

The three main themes of this book will be the machinery of male domination, the production of great men, and the ideological justifications of this social order. I could have written a different book about the Baruya, several even, and I intend to do so. I owe it to the Baruya in the first place, to those who have encouraged me, and lastly to myself. If I have chosen to devote this first book to the relations between men and women and male domination, rather than to a study of relations of kinship or land tenure, it is because the former involves the major social contradiction in their system to my way of thinking. Furthermore, it is no longer possible to ignore male domination in our own society, or to remain indifferent to the real struggles of those men and women who wish to put an end to it. Like many others, I long believed that it was first necessary to fight for the abolition of class relations, and that all the rest – oppression between the sexes, races, nations – would unravel or be resolved once these class relations had been abolished. It was a scientifically false vision of classes, races, and the sexes, a politically conservative

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vision which, in the name of revolution, justified us in turning a blind eye to and doing nothing about all these other forms of domination and oppression; they could and should await their turn. Needless to say, analysis of a single case, the Baruya or any other, is not in itself sufficient to build an explanation of the forms and reasons for male domination in the history of humanity. Many empirical studies are necessary. But these will only acquire their full importance after we have become better able to state the problems and formulate the relevant questions. Such progress might be achieved by leaps and bounds on the occasion of one or another of these studies.

My choice of theme and ideological background also stems from my desire to write for a wider public than that of my fellow anthropologists. It is a risky undertaking, liable to end up as neither fish nor fowl, too technical for some yet insufficiently precise for others. I must therefore rely on the indulgence of all.

One may easily imagine, on reading these pages, just how much time and confidence it must have taken on the part of the Baruya to introduce me to their way of thinking and allow me to see (as they themselves expressed it) not only the leaves, branches, and the trunk, but also some of the most secretly buried roots of their thought. I must ask the reader who may sometimes be tempted, according to the lights of his or her own philosophy or mood, to regard the secrets confided to me by the Baruya as derisory, grotesque, or even obscene, to remember that for them they are an essential part of their identity, a vital, sacred force inherited from the past, on which they depend in order to withstand all those voluntary or involuntary pressures that our world brings to bear upon them, often enough in perfectly good faith, but more often still deliberately. An anthropologist cannot side with those who, deliberately or unaware, despise and/or destroy the society that they wish to know and make known. Knowledge is not a game without consequences. Every society has secrets that it protects and that protect it. To hand them carelessly over to the public without debate or precaution would not merely be treacherous or irresponsible, but would actually pervert the work of scientific investigation into a force of aggression and domination.

The Baruya did not tell me everything, and I promised them not to divulge all they told me. What I have withheld, the reader will have guessed, relates to the men's efforts, strenuously hidden from the women, to produce great men without women's intervention. It is indeed one of the contradictions of social science; for to keep silent is to side with the men against the women, whereas to put these things down in writing is already tantamount to weakening the power of those men who agreed to pass on to a stranger, a friend and a man like themselves, what they still wish to conceal from their womenfolk. Such contradictions are inevitable; we can neither ignore them nor abolish them, and they must be allowed to pursue their course. The anthropologist cannot avoid speaking out and acting, both in the societies that he

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studies and in his own. But he should never act and speak for others in the society that welcomes him as a guest, just as in his own society he cannot allow others to speak and act in his place. To these opposing demands there is no simple solution.

Understandably it took a good deal of time and money and material resources to learn these things. France is a long way from New Guinea, and the Baruya do not live near the capital of their country, Port Moresby. I should like to take this opportunity of thanking those public and private institutions that have helped me to complete my work: the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, Paris, to begin with, which generously granted the bulk of the funding necessary for my frequent visits to the field since my first visit in 1967; the Wenner-Gren Foundation, which on two occasions facilitated otherwise impossible undertakings; and, lastly, the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris, which has ever been ready to lend a hand in sorting out otherwise inextricable situations. And, in the name of the Baruya, I should like to thank the Fyssen and Polignac foundations for having generously responded to the tribe's appeal, conveyed through me, and helped me to purchase its first truck, after it had completed construction of the mountain road which for the first time linked it directly to the rest of the world.

In 1975, I invited a young anthropologist, Jean-Luc Lory, to join me in the field to help me complete my study on kinship and land tenure. He subsequently developed a keen interest in shamanism and discovered certain important facts from which I in turn have benefited. Then, in 1979, Pierre Lemonnier, a specialist in the study of technologies, joined the team for a more extensive and more detailed study of the material conditions of the Baruya, which I had already started to explore. Today, both are engaged in the huge task of comparing the social structures of all the Anga tribes on the basis of what we know of the Baruya, and I expect their findings to recast my own outlook.

I must say that this book, however imperfect it may be, would never have reached its present form and balance without Marie-Elisabeth Handman, its first reader, who devoted much of her time to tidying up the style and harmonizing its internal proportions.

Needless to say, though, research is more than just a question of material or intellectual matters. In a country such as New Guinea, however much things may have changed since 1967, one still needs a guide, a place to sleep, a timely helping hand, and the list of all those who helped me when I was in need is too long for inclusion here: Europeans and New Guineans, missionaries and civil servants, doctors and carpenters. I should like also to thank the government of Papua New Guinea which has smoothed the path of my research program since independence.

Lastly, I address my concluding remarks to the Baruya, to those dozens,

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hundreds even among them, who at some time or other gave me a fragment of the substance of this book, or deployed their ingenuity to alleviate some of the hardships of life in the bush, to which a white man will never become wholly accustomed.