

WOMEN IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: Gendered Transformations in the Ipili Mining Era

A reproductive regime once based on “bridewealth” is undergoing rapid change.

by Aletta Biersack, Professor, Department of Anthropology

Between late March and the end of July 2015, I resumed my research on gender in the Porgera and Paiela valleys of Enga Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG). PNG achieved independence from Australia in 1975. Gold has been mined in the Porgera valley since the mid-1940s, but it was not until 1990, when hard rock mining operations replaced alluvial mining, that these two valleys underwent rapid change. I went to PNG to see for myself what had changed. I was especially interested in impacts on women. The 2015 research built on my long-term research among Ipili speakers and their “reproductive regime”: social organizational strategies for creating peaceful networks among kinspeople and affines, strategies that are informed by a worldview focused on death and the necessity of reproduction in the face of it. A key to this organizational work was the groom’s gift of bridewealth to the bride’s kin, which set the relationship among those involved in the network on amicable terms. Another key to this organizational work was the willingness of young women to marry men whom their kinspeople had chosen for them. Women could and did say “no” to recommended spouses, but there were sufficient inducements to encourage acquiescence in most cases.

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The research confirms what my early twenty-first century research suggested: that this reproductive regime is in trouble. Mining has transformed a “gift economy” in which relatives by birth and by marriage shared wealth, confirming their commitments to one another, into a money- and market-based economy in which erstwhile gifts are now commodified



Left: Figure 1: Porgera women demonstrate against the proposed closing of the Porgera Hospital, carrying a sign saying “Where is my future?” / photo by Aletta Biersack.

as people search for cash and the purchasing power cash brings in the new commodity markets that have opened up. In this new context, (hetero)sexuality is becoming repurposed for pleasure- and cash-seeking, and young women choose partners based on economic considerations rather than on the sociopolitical considerations of yesteryear. The prevalence of what are referred to as “loan” marriages makes this clear. In a “loan” marriage, the groom does not pay bridewealth, at least not initially and, typically, the couple is drawn to each other through mutual attraction. This means that the married couple is not embedded in a social network to

which it is obligated and can function mainly (although not entirely) independently of their relatives. The trend is clear: nowadays the nuclear family replaces the network node as the key structural element in the society.

There are consequences for women’s changing situation. In the past, women had a structural importance once they married, for arranged mar-

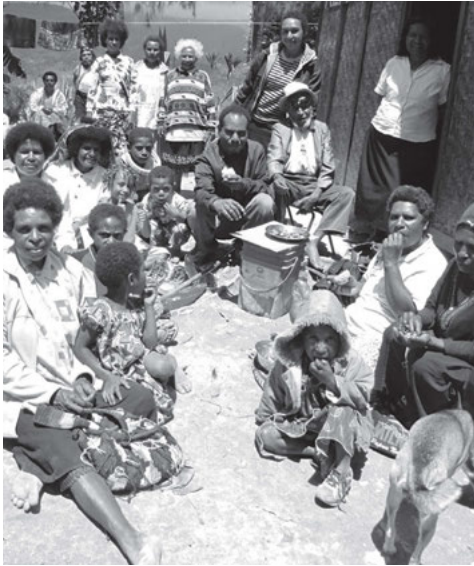
riages and the bridewealth they generated created the “roads” and “bridges” that connected people in networks of mutual support and exchange. These “roads” and “bridges” were rendered permanent in the next generation, through the children bridewealth-bound women bore. But with the repurposing of sexuality, women have lost the structural importance they had as reproducers. Given the masculinist character of gold mining and the fact that the employment and leadership opportunities

mining has opened up have overwhelmingly benefited men rather than women, development has disadvantaged women.

The overall ethos of the mining era is arguably hedonistic. Paielas and Porgerans have long entertained millenarian expectations, even before Australian explorers entered the highlands hoping for a life free of labor, sickness, and death. With the arrival of white males and the bonanza riches generated by gold mining, expectations have increasingly focused on a life free of gardening and pig husbandry, one that is tied to money and commodity consumption. For men, including male youth, alcohol and marijuana are among the more prized commodities, and much of today’s violence against women and children (domestic violence, rape, etc.) is fueled by these drugs.

Women also want to acquire money. This is for the most part to feed their families (men tend not to share their income with their spouse, certainly not to the level required by household expenses), but many women and girls also want to be free of the work of gardening and they strive to find a way to live in a monetized economy that has few employment opportunities for them in any way they can. Many women sell produce, scones, cigarettes, soft drinks, and the like, and can get by on this income. Others, especially younger women and girls, become sex workers.

While having multiple partners exposes a woman to HIV and AIDS (reaching epidemic



Above: Figure 2: Women, men, and children of the breakaway Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Right: Figure 3. This young woman is wearing bridal finery and is announcing her pending marriage to encourage the relatives of her husband-to-be to contribute to the bridewealth / photos by Aletta Biersack.



proportion in this part of the world), marriage itself exposes women to HIV and AIDS because husbands tend to have multiple partners. In any case, a woman can't know whether her husband is cheating on her; she can only suspect—and worry.

A double standard pertains to sex work. Females are stigmatized by it, but men purchase sex without loss of reputation. Men don't like using the condom and may become violent if their wife insists on condom use and/or refuses sex out of fear of infection. As a result, family life has become vastly more difficult than it was in the past, when marriages performed social organizational work and were embedded in broad and dense networks of support and also when alcohol and marijuana were not available. With bridewealth, a married woman stood to receive protection from her male kinsmen—the brother in particular, who relied on his sister's bridewealth to finance his own marriage. But without bridewealth, married women have little protection and must fend for themselves. Nor has there been much institution building around the issue of violence against women and girls, although, with the recent establishment of a “Family and Sexual Violence Unit” in the Porgera valley, this institution building has begun. Another positive sign is that women are taking the initiative, even using rights talk, to advance their own interests, as in the June 2015 women's demonstration against the proposed closing of the Porgera Hospital, which, as mothers, Porgera women saw as a women's issue (see figure 1).

In the course of my research, I discovered an unexpected connection between mining and gender relations. Women in the Paiela valley are now engaged in alluvial mining. The alluvial mining brings women into contact with an ethnic group to the northwest that is known

for its witchcraft accusations and revenge killings. Paiela women who engage in this alluvial mining are suspected of becoming witches and killing people. Papua New Guineans in general have no understanding of natural causation and look to supernatural causes (witchcraft, for example) of anyone's death. In 2014 two alleged witches were slaughtered in the Paiela valley in payback for the murders they were alleged to have committed. These beliefs and practices are new, tied to the alluvial mining, but they are also spreading—from the Paiela valley eastward into the Porgera valley, for example. It is only women who are believed to be witches, not men, and the discourse around witchcraft betrays what I see as a misogynist sensibility. The spread of new forms of “sorcery” (as it is generically called) in the Papua New Guinea highlands is cause for alarm in PNG governmental circles, so much so that the 1971 Sorcery Act, which lent credence to beliefs in sorcery, was taken off the books in 2014, and the national government has crafted a national sorcery policy, as yet unimplemented, to combat sorcery allegation-related executions.

Also unexpected was the discovery of a Seventh-Day Adventist (SDA) breakaway church that requires participants to abstain from sex, even if married. The church attracts older women for the most part, women who have already borne children and who prefer not to bear any more or who are menopausal. Surprisingly, there are also some male participants. The prophet leader and his followers believe themselves to be at the dawn of a “new contract” era in which everyone will be economically equal, women will dominate men, and blacks will rule whites (see figure 2).

The stark contrast between the horrific events now occurring to avenge alleged witchcraft killings, on the one hand, and, on the

other, the progressivism of this breakaway SDA cult, a cult that imagines a world in which the leadership is entirely black and female and economic inequalities do not exist, has made me realize that contemporary women in this area have many different life experiences. Some women do receive bridewealth upon marriage while others enter into “loan” marriages; some marry for love, others for money or out of a sense of obligation, and some still do receive bridewealth (see figure 3); some engage in alluvial mining and fear for their lives while others stay close to home; some are sex workers while others are devout chaste followers of a prophet who says he is Christ; and still others are respected and successful gardeners and business women.

I want to return to Porgera and Paiela at least one more time to put together an anthology of such stories, demonstrating how diverse the women of Porgera and Paiela today are. Hopefully this research will contribute to the growing archive of research on violence against women and girls in PNG, especially in the highlands, that is being generated by anthropologists such as myself, to aid local, regional, and national governmental bureaus and NGOs, acting in partnership with Australian aid donors and academic institutions, for the purpose of reducing, if not expunging, violence against women and girls in PNG. ■

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