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Dead Pigs:
An Essay on the Irrelevance of Development

P. O. Box 628,
Port Moresby,
Papua,
Territory of Papua
and New Guinea

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Mr. Ricahrd H. Nolte,
Executive Director,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
535 Fifth Avenue,
New York, New York 10017,
United States of America

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Somewhere between the glossy banalities of smiling cannibals in tourist brochures, and the meticulously structured kinship charts of anthropology, lies the surrealism that is the contact situation in the Western Highlands. Ladies in the latest (modest) Sydney fashions, including nylon stockings (quite unusual for the tropics), alight from their four-wheel-drive vehicles in Mount Hagen, to brush their way past groups of leaf and grass clad men to sit and sip a gentle cup of tea. Tourists drink their whiskies in the carpeted motel, with sounds of muzak all around, waiting for the guides to lead them forth to venturesome photography of hired savage warriors at a singsing, and then perhaps to "barter for stone axes at bedrock prices — direct from the 'manufacturer'," as Qantas promised. And outside the town — population: 2,841 indigenes and 778 expatriates, 5,670 feet high, and annual rainfall: 93.42 inches — more than 300,000 Western Highlanders sit, work and play as development goes by, or add the benefits of trucks, roads and agricultural advice to ceremonial exchanges ages old.

How then to disentangle past and present, permanent and transient? The tourist leaflets advertise the air-conditioned comfort and the pleasant clubs: see the primitive outside — a subtle variant on other places' much more strident ironies. In Rabaul, "our tropical paradise", "truly a 'melting pot of nations'", so the local tourist guide says, "it is customary for women to avoid wearing excessively brief garments which are considered unsuitable for a multi-racial community." In Goroka, in the Eastern Highlands, Pidgin is advised — first four phrases in the Chamber of Commerce's brief dictionary: "forget about it", "don't do it", "I don't want it", "No!" Mount Hagen, on the other hand, has a genuine "frontier atmosphere with modern facilities" — a sewered stone age, for the observer.

In Mount Hagen, a permanent resident, as usually defined, cannot possibly have lived there for forty years. Modernity is a passenger truck taking celebrants to a pig-exchange. Tradition is a man in feathers blowing a plastic whistle at a singsing. Both the tourist

The symbol of the Western Highlands

and many anthropologists miss out equally on what is happening, the grotesquerie, exuberance, pathos and excitement, that surround the participant-observer in the actual contact situation, as the ancient and the new, the innocently amusing and bizarre, neither blend nor clash as theory has it, but mix a bit, and clang a bit, and sometimes miss each other altogether in the real world around them.

Pigs and Change

Traditionally, the Melpa people of the area around Mount Hagen have held several main kinds of singsing, men and women quite apart although often celebrating simultaneously. The main kinds of men's singsing are:

mar, at which long lines of men sway up and down on the balls of their feet, elbows touching, chanting or, nowadays, blowing plastic whistles, to the beat of kundu (hour-glass) drums, before distributing large quantities of cooked pig from one group to the individuals of another;

kinain, at which they sing or whistle, dancing in a circle, before sending live pigs or quantities of goldlip shell (Pidgin: kina) to their partners in a ceremonial exchange (Pidgin: moka);

kngkui, at which a group may celebrate and eat its own cooked pigs; and

wari, at which a gathering of men may sing and dance with no attendant ceremonies.

The women, on the other hand, have but two main kinds of (separate) singsing:

weld, in which they decorate themselves with fresh pig-grease, to make their bodies shine, and paint their faces with colourful designs; and

mala, at which they dance and sing with little prior personal preparation.

Pacification and the requirements of orderly administration and economic development have not brought an end to the rich ceremonial life of old. Indeed, the reverse has been the case. The end of warfare has allowed more time to follow agricultural pursuits, while steel tools and expert agricultural advice have meant that less time is now required

to produce more food, and more varieties of food, of better quality than before, and more efficiently. Roads and trucks have made it easier for more people to travel further, much more quickly, to many more singsings than before. Much of the Western Highlands is, therefore, at that stage of development when more goods and time are available for ceremonial than before, while the demands of the (primarily tree-crop-based) cash economy do not restrict the people's ceremonial penchant. If anything, too, their competitive instincts have been channelled from the business of survival and the desire for victory in war, into competitive gift-giving and feast-holding.

Perhaps the government and missions have learnt too. People in feathers mean good business for the burgeoning tourist industry. There is no need to suppress what does not hinder development, and what may, in fact, give zest to life and change. It may be possible to adapt some traditional ceremonial to Christian purpose — just like Christmas. On the other hand, it may simply be that the Western Highlanders are more vigorously proud, and culturally less tractable, than their now ceremonial-less , often culturally suppressed, coastal brethren.

Nowadays, development has wrought one vital change to the sequence of events after a singsing. There is usually a doctor quite close by to treat, or to conduct a postmortem upon, the victims of that medically uncertain agglomeration of symptoms and sicknesses that is loosely called pigbel (literally: "pig stomach"). Whether the victims suffer pains or die from the effects of under-cooked, over-aged (because ceremonially exchanged over too great a distance for too long a time), diseased or worm-infested, meat, or because their systems cannot withstand the effects of a large quantity of protein on an otherwise protein-short diet, the result, in social terms, is the same: sorcery, on the part of the meat's donors or handlers, is almost universally suspected.

Pigs for the Governors: a form of mar plus taxes

Now that fighting is illegal, competition among the 53 Melpa tribes must take other forms. Competitive pig-giving by one tribe to its friends, and voluntary tax-collecting to test which has the greatest number of adherents, are, to turn von Clausewitz on his head, "nothing more than the continuation of war by other means." The present aim, however, is not simply to impress one's enemies and friends, but to show the government too which is the most prestigious Melpa tribe. The controlling power which stopped the fighting must at least be judge of who below it is the most important.

The voluntary tax-collecting cycle is little more than ten years old. It exists alongside the old pig-giving cycles, and is, indeed, followed by the distribution of cooked pig: a form of mar plus taxes.

Painting daughter for the singsing

In 1959, the Jika gathered on the airstrip at Ogelbeng to be counted. A tax of one shilling per male adult was levied so that the District Commissioner could tally the numbers that were present, while the people from other tribes marvelled at the spectacle. The one shilling levy was then given to the government to thank it for its work in bringing peace and development to the area, and to impress it with the Jika's size. The money was, of course, returned in due course to be used to pay for a local developmental project that was chosen in consultation with the people.

In 1964, the Mogei held a similar singsing and tax-collection on the airstrip that then ran through the centre of Mount Hagen. It was also followed some time later by a distribution of cooked pig.

On January 10, 1970, Menembi tribe took up the challenge presented by its Jika and Mogei predecessors, to see how many men there were inside Menembi. As the vice-president of the Dei Local Government Council put it, "mani inap toktok", "the money will tell us [how many men there are inside Menembi] ". There was a special irony to this ceremony, however, in that the government whose representative received the tax money from Menembi to hand on to the Dei Council to spend on a local project had recently announced that it was presently investigating ways in which it could outlaw voluntary tax-collections in the Territory, in order to frustrate the activities of a dissident movement at Rabaul that had managed to collect money that would normally have been paid in taxes to the Gazelle Peninsula (multiracial) Local Government Council.

My experiences before the tax-collecting ceremony contained many bizarre juxtapositions. On the way from Mount Hagen to Muglum, where the ceremony was to be held, I picked up some local school pupils, who showed me where where long lines of stakes were set out in a field whither live pigs would be brought and tethered for a live-pig ceremonial exchange. A little further on, I was told, we would find a car that had mysteriously been left outside a village late one night during the previous week by the village people's ancestors. When we arrived, yours sceptically could see no car, and was not reassured as to the children's veracity until the following week, when the Territory newspaper reported that there had been trouble in a village near Mount Hagen when police had attempted to recover a stolen and abandoned car. The car, the angry villagers had adamantly claimed, had been sent them by their ancestors.

We arrived at Muglum just at dusk, as the third day of practice for the singsing was drawing to a close. As the young men danced enthusiastically around in a few large circles, for no better evident purpose than to expend their excess energy, their elders sat, bedecked in pig-grease, paint and feathers, on the back of a truck, drunk.

Being white, and, therefore, presumably a figure of authority, my presence brought an awkward halt to proceedings. The attendant policeman saluted, then reported to me on the conduct of his contemptibly primitive (to him) charges, and waited for a quiet word of commendation. Only after I had completed this ritual, trying desperately to remember how important people really do inspect the troops, could I arrange accommodation with the evilly black-painted visage that hid the local councillor. We drove back to his home in state, a carload of greased and shiny, feathered, painted warriors, plus a local shirt-and-shorts sophisticate, and myself.

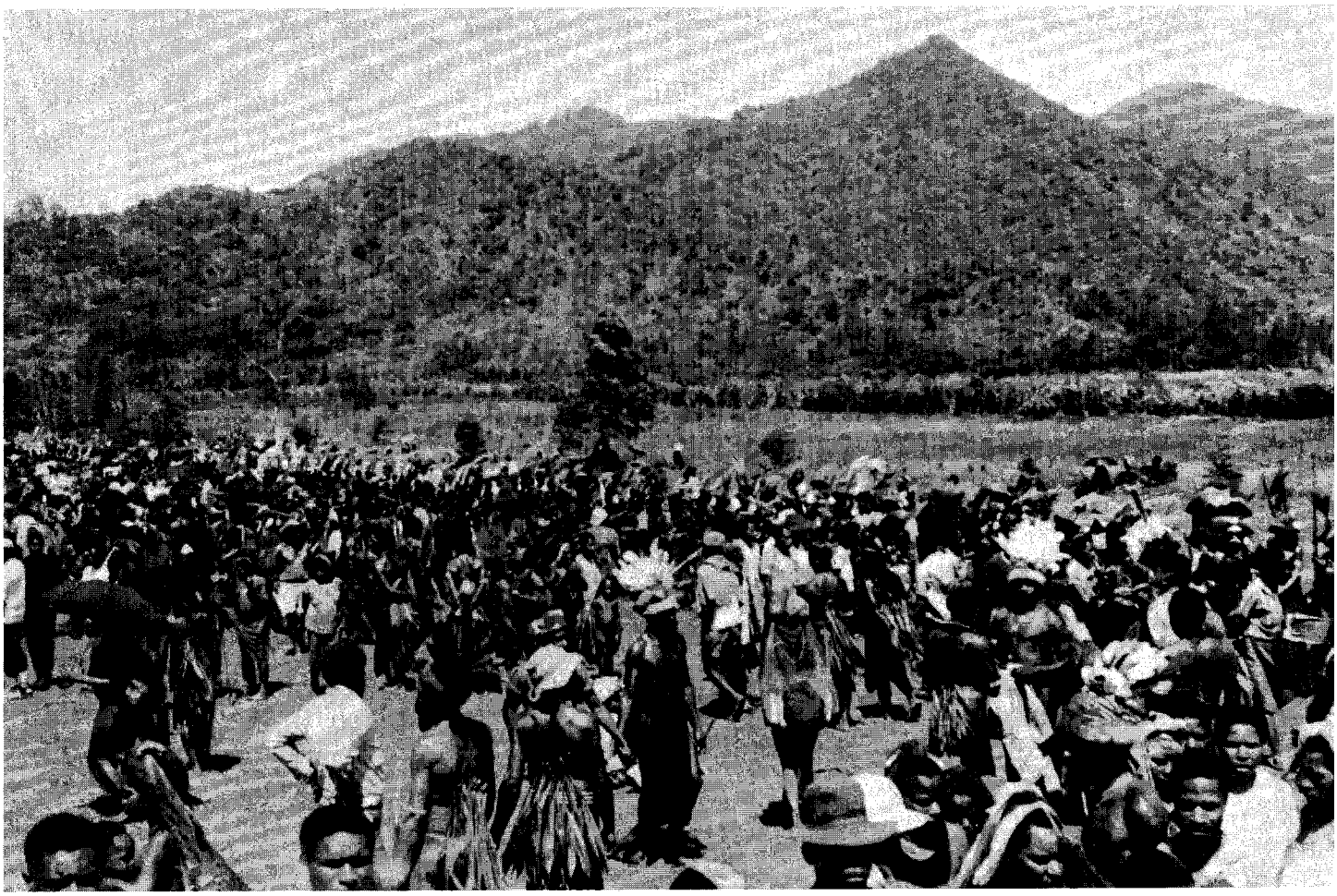
Saturday morning shone bright and hot, an important reason for starting the singsing early on the shade-less playing fields of the Muglum Primary T School.

Putting a headdress together

From dawn onwards, the Menembi people started to walk or drive in from their dispersed settlements, scattered among those of other Melpa tribes through the Mount Hagen area. The young and the old; men of no other education than that of their ancestors; high school pupils who answered one's questions in fluent English; men who wore long strings of short bamboo-pieces from their necks to show how many groups of (eight to ten) goldlip shells they had given away in ceremonial exchanges; and youngsters who wore similar strings as decoration, to impress the girls, without ever having participated in a single exchange of shells themselves; all came. As they arrived, they found a vacant spot on the grass where they could unwrap their feathers from the bamboo, banana-leaf, or plastic coverings that protected them from the dew and rain. Carefully, they constructed the blue and red feathered panels, often with a cardboard backing, and vertical white feathered strips between and around their three main sections. The panels had a strip of white along the top, and were surrounded on either side by the vertically-placed long, delicate, black feathers, with a bobbed effect at the end, common to several species of birds of paradise. The whole structure was surmounted by several of the superb orange-shading-into-brown-plumed paradisaea raggiana or red bird of paradise. Then the men stood still; the feathered panels patiently, securely, placed upon their wigs of human hair; a crescent-shaped shell strung from each neck; an intricately carved bark belt around the waist, whence hung a calf-length apron (called a pulpul) from the front, a small branch of leaves behind; while their wives or a friend smeared their bodies till they shone with pig-grease (kept in a small leaf bag). Their faces too were painted, sometimes with a mask-like design put on with charcoal around the eyes, or, more generally, over the whole face. Many younger women women painted one another's faces, red, yellow, blue, in fanciful designs, and then greased their flaunted bodies too.

As the men were decorated to the satisfaction of their wives, and subject to their own appraisal in a mirror, they made their way to a long length of wire along the ground, along which they arranged themselves in council ward groups for the singsing. At the centre, as a symbol of the benefits brought by contact, were two old men, who told in cheerful cackles how they had once been required to fight each other, now a long time ago.

By mid-morning, the line of chanting, swaying men was more than five hundred yards long. Back and forth the warriors swayed, elbow to touching elbow, beating a drum or holding a spear, chanting or blowing a plastic whistle, up and down on the balls of their feet. The long lines of rising, falling pulpuls undulated as the waves do on an equally good day by the sea. As the crowd of spectators, from other Melpa tribes, and from much further away, summoned to bear witness to Menembi's size, gathered to watch, "big men", councillors and others, ran along the line of men flailing poles before them to beat their crowding followers back from the spectacle. The spectators were free to dress in Western clothes, as did the non-participating councillors (their fellow-lawmakers having to be content with their badges in their wigs, just above the centre where a small round shell was placed), or in a variety of traditional styles. The Menembi tribesmen, and their Rogaga friends, brought there to swell Menembi's size, were required to decorate themselves identically.



The noise, the grease, the movement, seemed so close, so all-encompassing, until one stepped back: to see a thin line of people, perhaps a few thousand closely clustering spectators, lost in a small valley, a narrow strip of colour midst the green, against the background of the distant, high, blue mountains. A moment of movement in an ageless valley. And one tried to imagine what a similar gathering might have meant before the people knew that there were other, and yet other, valleys further on .... Did they once think that this was the world, or do people confined to a single valley not think about a world?....

Fortunately perhaps, one's propensity to what some call philosophical introspection, others projected fantasy on to the unwitting, was brought abruptly to an end by the arrival of a number of young, jeans-and-coloured-shirt dressed louts, who proceeded to set up hooplas, chocolate wheels, and other games of very little chance (at winning), for charities they did not name. Around the field's perimeter, near the trucks, and along the road, were stalls that sold cheap pancakes (ten cents for two), meals of rice and meat, cigarettes, and drinks ....

The tax-man cometh

Gradually, the line filled out, the chanting and yodelling went on, to drum themselves into a tired memory pierced only by the shrillness of the plastic whistles. Then, at about mid-day, a small group of older men, preceded by their stick-wielding path-clearers, walked along the line, holding forward a large basin to collect the ten cent pieces that mysteriously appeared from purses hidden beneath bark belts. Behind them came the father of the councillor with whom I had stayed, to collect a like amount from each of the Menembi celebrants in payment for the use of the ceremonial ground, which he had sold to the government for the school, and on which the singsing now took place. Menembi itself lacked a good open piece of ground to use for such a singsing, so why not use that of another tribe, even if it were no longer theirs? Well might one ask how permanent a sale is thought to be among a people who do not so much own their land as establish rights to it through use. And behind the councillor's father came another group, basin in hand too, for the ten cent donations of the Rogaga tribe, to help the Opei line, near Banz, to stage their own singsing at a later date.

The tax, then, was twenty voluntary cents per man, at the orders of their leaders: ten cents each to the government; and then ten more; from Menembi as a form of land-rent for the day; from Rogaga to help some friends.

And what were the simple, repetitive chants they sang? Very loosely translated, from a heavily Pidgin-influenced Melpa into Pidgin, then into English, they said:

> "I am short [of things] and [you should help me but] you are trying to be bigheaded."
>
> "Before, when there was war, you fought me and you won. Now the Europeans have come, and you play around and walk freely where I can see you. If it were otherwise, and you had previously killed some of us, then I would seek revenge."

"This [kind of] singsing [that is, the mar] was begun by our ancestors.

Now the present generation is trying to do the same thing.

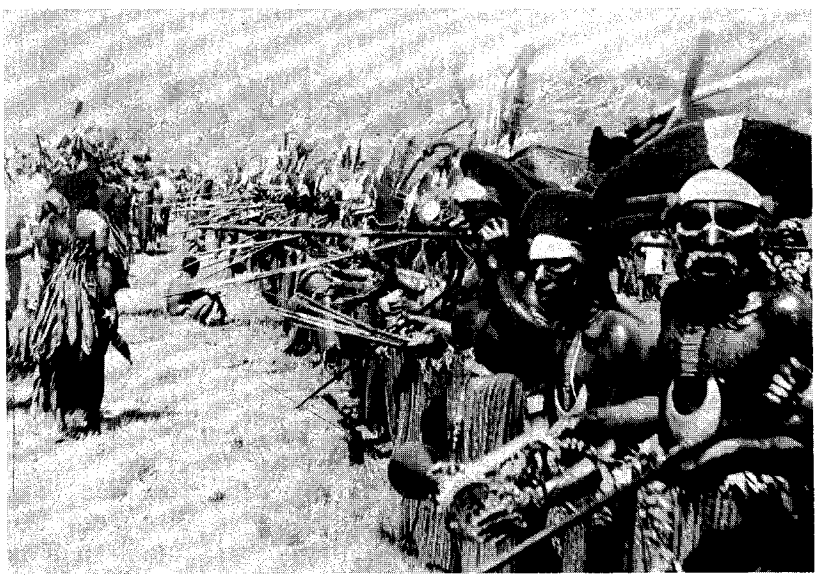
This singsing is being held so that people can see it, and imitate it, just as our ancestors did before."

As the day wore on into the early afternoon, and the sun beat down upon the sweltering dancers, the line started to break up. All that remained was for the tax-money to be presented to the District Commissioner, who had not yet returned from a special meeting of the House of Assembly in Port Moresby with the local member. The older people sat down on the grass, or under the trees across the road; the young men linked arms, and bounced around (both legs together) in several circles, singing, with a group of giggling and self-conscious girls in the centre. The "big men" adjourned to a small, shaky, bush materials, reviewing stand, set high on spindly poles, and about a dozen of the most important of them harangued each other and a dwindling crowd from inside this structure, arguing when it would be best to kill, cook, and distribute Menembi's pigs.

The argument, which was gradually working its way to a compromise that the pigs could be ready in about a fortnight, was still in train when the Assistant District Commissioner for the Mount Hagen Sub-District arrived, with the president of the Mount Hagen Council, and a group of leaders from other Melpa tribes.

"We will wait for the D.C.," the A.D.C. began, in Pidgin. "We have come to see all of the Menembi people gather together to celebrate, and finish their party. I am happy to see all of this, and we will wait for the D.C. to come ...."

And, sentence by sentence, in the ritual gabbling of the first few words, followed by a long, drawn-out "——O", typical of Melpa oratory, the speech was translated for the crowd:



> "I don't have much to say. I am happy to see all of you Menembis , and to see you finish this celebration of yours. It was good. Now it is over, and we must all think about our work again, whatever work it may be, so that we can develop our area, our people, and our land, all of us Hagen people together."

Then, with the District Commissioner's arrival, the money could be presented.

"Your decorations," the D.C. said, "are good. Don't forget your old ways. Many men are shirt and trousers people only, but your old ways are good. Keep them, because all of us like them. Hold what you had, and put it with the new. Don't denigrate the past and leap about to grab the new."

The answer, which preceded the presentation of a brace of fowls and some bird of paradise feathers to the D.C., was a superb piece of syncretism. Although the heat has forced us to remove our decorations, we understand why you are late, explained the vice-president of the Dei Council:

> "We are not cross at you, because you have been away to the House of Assembly, the big men's house for all of Papua-New Guinea."

The money would be counted later:

> "It will tell us how many people there are in Menembi."

Carefully, then, so as not to compare one tribe unfavourably with another, especially as the Jika and Mogei just are the two most numerous Melpa tribes, the District Commissioner compared the number of Menembi men to the number of leaves on a tree, or the number of hairs on a donkey.

One week later, it was announced that the particular donkey that the D.C. had in mind had exactly 1,079 hairs (that, is, $107.90 had been collected for the Dei Council to use on a local project to be decided upon in consultation with the people).

After the date of the pig-distribution had been decided, and the usual speeches on how grateful the people are that the government now controls them, the gathering gradually broke up. The young men leapt on; the old went home; and many people just hung on, to gossip, argue, drink, and fight.

Late in the afternoon, the local member was pressed by some of his constituents to give them money for a drink. As member for an electorate that embraces both the Mul and Dei council areas, he carefully gave five dollars each to men from the Mul area and to men from the Dei Council.

Still later, one of the member's own close kinsmen began to mock another tribe because the former's line had once killed a member of the latter in battle. While the three attendant policemen alternated

between saluting, then reporting to, me, and simple inactivity, about a thousand tired warriors began to mill around the coming fight, while struggling simultaneously among themselves to ensure a truck-ride home. A large-scale brawl was only averted through the use of quite novel crowd-dispersion tactics: while the member waded in, fists first, to pacify his drunken kinsmen, other eager pacifiers drove their lorries back and forth, horns blaring, slowly, inexorably, through the centre of the crowd. Some of those who were assaulted in the interests of peace were compensated by cash-payments from their law-enforcing kinsmen later in the night, to forestall a later search for vengeance.

My final memory of the day is of the fear of the policemen that they might miss a truck-ride home, and of the member that the veneer of peace and unity would be broken. To the wouldbe moderniser in this area, the primordial attachments of the village people are an ever-present threat to order and development. Their leaders' fears that these attachments could assert themselves are a stimulus to rapid social change at village level, and to cooperation with the only overriding authority in the area, the government. They are also a powerful reminder of the closeness and lifeways of the past, a source of opposition to too rapid constitutional or political change. Doubtless, the three fearful but contemptuous New Guinean policemen, who stood watching as an inter-tribal fight hovered on the verges of beginning, would have agreed that the best that one can hope for as a leader in this area is to hasten slowly.

Pigs for Peace

If the ceremony described above was in the nature of a tribute to modernity garbed in traditional forms, then that which I attended on the following day can only be described as a traditional ceremony that served to seal off conflicts from the past, in the interests of development. The latter set of ceremonies was a series of compensation-payments to prevent revenge for deaths and debts incurred pre-contact. As killing has now been effectively outlawed around Mount Hagen for between twenty and forty years, depending upon the particular communities involved, these compensation-payments are really something of a seal to the past: parts of a system of exchanges that is drawing to a close, as memories of previous losses fade, and the number of present-day killings declines. And yet the past is perilously close at hand: my interpreter, for example, was a young man, of about my own age, who had been appointed as a ward committeeman of the Mount Hagen Council by the District Commissioner (that is, he was a non-elective liaison between the elected councillor, who came from another clan, and his own clansmen), because he had promised not to avenge the deaths of his father and his brother in a fight over land about a year ago.

Although some of the people who participated on the Saturday reappeared as visiting dignitaries or spectators on Sunday, and vice-versa, very few people participated in both ceremonies. Among those who did was my host of Friday night, the councillor, who, having lent his (technically, now alienated) land to Menembi on the Saturday, reappeared on Sunday as a "big man" in a clan of the recipient tribe, Remdi, in a traditional pig-meat

distribution, or a mar.

There was some uncertainty as to how far back in time the events commemorated on the Sunday originally took place. Thirty to forty years would probably not be a misleading guess. At that time, so I was told, the Elpulump clan of the Kumdi tribe had killed a man of Kunjimp clan (also of Kumdi tribe) in battle. In addition, Kumdi men had killed three men of Remdi tribe, and, by 1970, they were also quite seriously indebted to Remdi for generous moka gifts of goldlip shell (that is, gifts of kina given in ceremonial exchange in expectation of eventual repayment with interest). Now, these debts were to be repaid in a series of interconnected ceremonies, as the men of Elpulump compensated those in Kunjimp for its death, and then four Kumdi clans (including the two preceding) would join together to compensate two Remdi clans, and pay their debts, with interest, in the moka. The exchanges represented clan-wide comings-together of individual debts and obligations (to the giving clan from its debtors, then of the givers to the recipient clan, and then their creditors) in what appeared to be just inter-group exchanges. The various clans involved modulated a wide series of individual and communal obligations, and desires for prestige through generous giving or repayment.

The ceremonies began on the Friday and Saturday of the week before the actual exchanges, when the men of the Kumdi and Remdi clans concerned met together for a singsing, probably not different in terms of the participants' personal adornment, noise, song, and dance, from that described above. Then, on the following Saturday morning, the morning of Menembi's voluntary tax-collection, the donor clans herded their long-kept, gradually fattened, pigs together to be slaughtered and then cooked.

The meat is cooked, the stones have cooled

The Melpa kill their pigs by hitting them **hard** on the head once or twice with a stout piece of wood. If the beast, which may be tethered only by a single leg, manages to escape in panic, then bows and arrows may be used by its pursuers. When it is dead, the pig is thrown into a fire to singe its hair, and then the butchering and cooking can begin.

The pig is cut up with a razor-sharp bamboo knife. A slit is quickly cut from between the shoulder and the neck, on one side of the head, down the stomach, to the pig's hindquarters, and then the action is repeated, from the other shoulder, in the same direction. The pig's insides are removed, and the women take them off to wash out the blood and other impure contents (in the stomach and the bowels) in a stream. Then, the head is severed, and the butcher reaches in to pick out the spine and other bones from the inside. The main portion of the pig consists of the flesh of the stomach, sides, and back, together with the limbs, a single, flat, piece of meat, no more than a few inches thick, that can be laid out on the ground.

The Melpa way of cooking pig differs in some details from that of other highlands peoples. A large pit, or — as in this case — a series of large pits, up to fifteen or twenty feet in length, by six feet wide, and perhaps five feet deep — the measurements vary widely — is dug. Stones are heated close by, until white-hot, when they are tipped into the pit(s), so that they cover the bottom, and, as far as possible, the sides too. Banana-leaves are then placed on the stones, and on them the pigs' heads, stomachs, and offal. Next come more leaves, with the main portions of the pigs laid out quite flat, with more hot stones on them as battens, and then more leaves. In this case, the meat was left to cook in the pits from Saturday morning until around midday on the Sunday. Only after the pits have been opened, and sometimes only after the pig-meat has been distributed to its intended recipients, are the pigs cut up still further: into halves, along the centre, so that each half-pig includes one fore- and one hind-trotter, or into quarters. The pigs are not cut into smaller pieces until their recipients divide them up for actual consumption by their families and followers.

The atmosphere before the distribution was one of mounting exhilaration and tension. On the Saturday night, for example, I was almost ordered from a party, though invited, by one of the hosts, whom I had never previously met nor offended, and who was quite well-known for his public statements opposing the coastal radicals' demands for more rapid constitutional change, because, as the gentleman concerned put it, "Mi no laikim masta. Mi no laikim masta kam insait" ("I do not like Europeans. I do not want a European to come inside [the house]"). Colonial dependence and conservatism are clearly not the same as a commitment to fostering the emergence of a multiracial society in Papua and New Guinea, nor even as gratitude and liking for Australians. My own desire to leave found little solace in the stolid persistence of my multiracialist defenders against the abuse and beer-bottle-throwing of my antagonists.

This contretemps may, of course, have been explicable in terms of my being a guest of the man who had defeated my unwelcoming host (who was a fellow-tribesman and clan-mate of the former) in an election. But, if so, this theory found little support in the general atmosphere on the morrow, when, as the only European present, I found that people pushed their way over, past, against me, as they carried their pig to be distributed, as if I were, if not invisible, at least a hindrance and of almost no account. It was as if they could not see me, while those who did obviously found my presence irritating, and irrelevant to their main concern of stacking or receiving pig, if not (at least in some cases) completely unacceptable, as when my host both refused to let me pay to photograph, and threatened trouble for those who asked.

My experiences on both days seem to have a single common factor: at the time of a pig-distribution, a mysterious form of swine-fever seems to obsess the entire local population. Everything and everyone else is irrelevant, if not a nuisance, in the all-important business of giving, receiving, and consuming, pig.

Sunday morning opened bright and hot, palling to a dark and drizzly day soon after lunch, and violent downpour by late afternoon. From early morning, people could be seen along the roads, or coming in on trails around the mountain-ridges, bearing each a quarter-pig, or half, suspended from a pole between two men. The pits in the nearby villages were opened, and pig was piled up, to be carried or driven by truck, to an open field (near Murip), which was deeply pitted by the drains that ran between the mounds of earth in which sweet potato had been grown. Rapid movement over the field where the distribution took place was, therefore, not at all easy.

Small groups gather their meat together
before adding it to the main pile

One of the orators has his say beside the pigs

All morning, people walked and drove in with their pieces of pig, placed them in long lines on the ground, then sat and talked close by. Dress was optional: white feathers, fur, human hair wigs, all manner of bright decoration. When the actual exchange began, things happened so quickly that I despaired of recording what was going on. No wonder that most anthropologists can only reconstruct such ceremonies through comparing the participants' intentions with a careful check of what a sample of them actually did.

While Kumdi's Elpulump was piling up the meat to give to Kunjimp, I sought a brief respite from the noise, the movement, shoving, pushing, brushing past, and grease, in a quick walk around the field. I returned a few minutes later to find small groups of people seated together on the ground again, with their pig-meat, and those recipients who had already got their pig from their Kunjimp friends, and who had no part in the second distribution, disappearing over the fields with their meat upon their backs.

The most remarkable aspect of the afternoon's activities was their organisation. Probably five thousand people were gathered together in a single field for a common purpose on the same afternoon. Not just members of one clan or a small group of clans, but many debtors from other clans were asked to pay their debts to Elpulump that afternoon, so that Kunjimp could be paid, and then pass on its excess meat to waiting creditors from yet other clans, before the action was repeated so that Kumdi could

Bringing home the bacon

give meat to Remdi. Not bad for a group of societies in which their colonial rulers have frequently despaired of finding effective leaders and/or signs of organisation!

While the first exchange proceeded, and meat was being carried home by some of the recipients, more meat was still arriving for the second distribution, which took place on the other side of the field. There, a pile of meat, approximately fifty yards in length, by six feet wide, and three to four feet high, was being constructed, partly of meat from the first distribution, and partly of meat brought by two more Kumdi clans. Men and women pushed their way, almost frenziedly, through the spectators to add more meat to the growing pile, as the "big men" yelled and pointed with sticks where it should be put. At the centre of the long line of cooked and gutted pig were two pigs placed across it, heads still on, at forty-five degrees to the main pile.

As the huge mound of meat was built and added to, an almost mediaeval drama took place just close by, as a crowd of young children began to taunt a local mad-woman, by chasing her, and pelting her with sticks and leaves and grass. Elsewhere in the highlands, I have only found an attitude of gentle mockery and tolerance to the insane. Here, surrounded by laughing adults, who formed one side of a corridor, with a reed-surrounded creek on the other side, the children chased and tormented the woman, who had decorated herself by covering her head with white clay — a skull-like apparition, with only her hunted eyes showing through.

As the mad-woman reached the end of the corridor, she would turn to chase the scattering children with her stick. Who chased whom was hard to say. But, as always in such cases, the scene suddenly became serious, when the hunted, taunted woman tore the pulpul from a young girl's front, and was chastised for her pains, had the pulpul torn roughly from her hands, then was forced to give her chasing up.

A little while later, a gentle, smiling, old, mad man began to speak in imitation of the main orators at the distribution, and his chastisement began. He was saved by the rain, and the general desire to get the ceremonies over, and to go home to eat the pig.

As the day darkened, and the rain began to fall, the second pig-distribution commenced. The mad-woman was still being chased, dogs barked, people talked and shouted, and pig was still being added to the pile (which ultimately contained between 1,000 and 1,600 pig carcases, depending upon whose estimate one accepted), when the Kumdi "big men" gave their talks.

Remdi stood or squatted along one side, Kumdi on the other. About five Kumdi "big men" walked up and down between the meat and the closely pressing people along a shortened side of the pig-line, yelling in the same breathless, ritual way as had the orators on the previous day: in a ritualistic gabble — "This is to repay our debts for men we killed and kina received" — followed by the long-drawn " ——O". All of the speeches were made in the same half-yodelled, half-yelled manner. All were internally repetitive, and very similar, both in content and in style, to one another.

Pig-headed

Then three Remdi "big men" spoke in the same way, in a reciprocal of the first speeches: "This is why we take the pigs, the debt is settled, ——O." As they strode along the line orating, pig still came, people pushed to gain a better look, the mad-man called, the children "played".

Then the president of the Mul Council, a "big man" in Remdi, stood to direct his followers to carry off their pig, to be distributed in piles and lines as at the start, then halves and quarters, and even to be further cut, among his fellow-kinsmen, followers, and creditors, and then among their kinsmen, followers, present creditors and future debtors. The men started to walk or drive off, their wives and children following, carrying great chunks of meat, a bilum ("net-bag") full of pigs' heads, or a leaf-bag full of fat or offal. Small groups gathered to distribute what they had received among themselves, or to cut their meat up even further for their kinsmen. Many more people than were actually there that day would ultimately eat varying quantities of re-heated pig that night. Thousands of small debt-repayments and moka

gifts had been coordinated in a single afternoon's exchange between the clans of two large tribes.

Then, as the rain descended, and darkness fell, the trucks revved up, the visitors and participants sped away by car, or ran across the fields, and hurried through the hills, to the warmth and pig at home. And then a local kiap came to see if all was well.

Conclusion

And that is the Western Highlands today: a place in which modernity is honoured in traditional forms, and past debts and conflicts settled so that more development may take place in peace. At this stage, modernity, in the shape of trucks, roads, and agricultural advice, has made it easier to celebrate more lavishly, for wider groups of people, more often, than pre-contact. Alcohol, coloured beads, tinned food, and trucks, have added zest, decoration, and variety to life. Coffee, tea, cattle, and pyrethrum are adding cash.

Now, the area is still absorbing the effects of change into the old, as ancient forms and ways expand. Soon, however, the people will be forced to choose — more probably, to decide, unconscious of the long-term options, small step by relentless step, with no experience to guide, no realistic, certain goal in view — between adding to the past, and opting for the presently possible new, as a depressed, north Australian slum with kunai houses, pigs, and kiaps to rule over them. The past will cease to absorb the modern, and will slowly be replaced, to become but a distant — almost myth-like — memory of a grandeur, violence, and excitement, that sanitary conditions, steady work for wages, and regular prayer, can scarce replace.

But, such a picture is, of course, misleading for one simple reason: much as later generations, and outside observers, may long for, or admire, the past, the man who has not experienced development is the very one who sees nothing noble in the savage. Or does the persistence of the ancient in the Western Highlands into the 1970s indicate a different assessment of the situation there: a willingness to accept the benefits of change, coupled with a refusal to compromise the essence of the past?

Yours sincerely,

Edward Wolfers.

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