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## Symbolic Violence and Ceremonial Peace

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### Introduction

In her 1987 contribution, *Ritueller Wettstreit mit Feldfrüchten*, Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin sought to elucidate the long-yam complex practiced by the Abelam of Papua New Guinea. The Abelam describe these exchanges in competitive terms, claiming that whereas, in the days of war they fought with spears, nowadays they fight with long yams. In Hauser-Schäublin's view, however, the post-contact era has seen a shift in these festivals to a more ritual emphasis. Although they still contain an element of competition, the post-contact focus is more on symbolic action that binds together those who exchange yams. In Abelam cosmology, yams are the children of their human progenitors. Thus, when yam growers exchange long yams over a period of years, each is sacrificing a 'child' to the other, relating them in an act of communion.

As always, Hauser-Schäublin's interpretive treatment is insightful. In this case, though, it leaves unclear *why* the Abelam exchanged and continue to exchange long yams. Why should partners seek to bind themselves together through reciprocal sacrifice in the first place? Like the Central Abelam, the Yangoru Boiken to their east also mounted competitive food exchanges. Whereas Abelam exchange was focused on long yams with pigs as supplementary gifts, the Yangoru Boiken made the pig their principal commodity of exchange, with short yams a frequent supplement. This difference notwithstanding, the Yangoru complex was very similar to that of the Abelam, but exegesis

painted a very different picture of its meaning. Rather than a reciprocal sacrifice of spiritual ‘children,’ the Yangoru Boiken explicitly viewed their exchange practices as substitutions of symbolic violence for actual lethal violence. Other New Guinea societies – including the Abelam – make similar claims, and I suggest that in this conceptual substitution lies the clue to *why* these small-scale societies practiced exchange.

## The Yangoru Boiken

One of the several pleasures of contributing to this volume is the opportunity to express my gratitude to our honoree for the enormously valuable role she played in shaping my career. In 1979, it had been my intention to conduct fieldwork among the Abelam, but shortly before leaving for New Guinea I happened to contact Hauser-Schäublin. As she pointed out, a lot of ethnographers had already worked among the Abelam, and she suggested that I focus my fieldwork instead on a large linguistic group right next door, one that had yet to receive any anthropological attention. So it was that, in late 1979, I came to study the Boiken people of Yangoru. As speakers of the Ndu language family, the Yangoru Boiken are similar in many ways to the Abelam: a village-based people who depend on yam, taro, and sago for their subsistence, they have a patrilineal bias in their social organization, a leadership system based around big-men, and so on. Like the Abelam, moreover, they practice competitive exchange. Their social systems are divided into two moieties, and on reaching adulthood every Yangoru man inherits an exchange



Members of the Lebuging moiety enter to receive their pigs, Kworabre Village, 1979

partner of similar age in the opposite moiety to his own. From then on, for the rest of his active political life, he is expected every year or so to confer on this partner a pig, occasionally supplemented with other foods, in particular yams and soup.

These ceremonial prestations take two main forms. The most common is the relatively informal occasion known as a *polyawawi* (“pig and yam [gifts]”), when a man confers a pig on his exchange partner before a small audience of their relatives. In bygone days, somewhat more elaborate and prestigious versions of this exchange also sometimes occurred: the *polya pak* (“baked pig”), in which a man cooked the pig for his partner and feasted him and his relatives with vegetable foods; and the *polya chugweyi* (“pig soup”), in which he not only conferred a pig on his partner but also feasted the 20 to 30 members of his partner’s moiety with a soup of pork and the first fruits from his garden. The other type of exchange was communal, the members of an entire moiety combining to confer pigs, soup, and/or other foods on members of the other moiety. These ceremonies occurred every two to five years or so, and they involved an entire village and drew audiences from allied and even enemy communities. The *nimba gur* (“beard cutting”) ceremony was mounted to terminate the mortuary sequence: it “finished (i. e., honoured) the names” of those from the sponsoring moiety who had recently died, thereby releasing male mourners from their taboos against shaving. The *walablia* (“call/song to the wala”) could also be pressed into service as a terminal mourning ceremony, but its principal purpose was to rejuvenate the earth.

The *walablia* was more elaborate than the *nimba gur*, beginning with an extended period during which each member of the sponsoring moiety in turn mounted an elaborate version of the *polya chugweyi* for the opposing moiety. Both ritual sequences, though, climaxed in a communal pig-lining that was followed by two nights of celebratory singing and dancing. The pig-lining festivals got underway around mid-morning. To the pounding of slit-gongs and “the song of the dogs,” the *waranchangile*, the pigs were born into the festival hamlet trussed to poles and lined trotter-to-chine across its ceremonial piazza. The tally was formally counted off on the slit gongs, the donors celebrated the count with loud whooping, and the men of the receiving moiety followed by their wives then entered to receive the pigs.

In bygone days, several masked, befronned, and decorated figures representing the *wala* spirits of the donor clans would appear and start dancing in a courtly fashion around the line of pigs, but partly on account of missionary opposition, few *wala* have appeared in Yangoru since the late 1930s. The lined pigs were now conferred on their recipients by leaders of the donor clans, and each was whisked away until just one giant pig remained. Ideally, this pig would be the largest on display and so heavy that it had to be bound to a litter and carried by four men. After briefly withdrawing to arm themselves with spears and wooden war-swords, the receivers would return and, after a fury of insults back and forth, suddenly descend on the remaining pig, hoist it to their shoulders, and while members of the donor moiety dogged their steps with mock spear thrusts, try to rush it off the piazza without dropping it.

With this, the pig-lining was finished. The receivers retired to their hamlets leaving the donors to finish up various ritual obligations, and after a good night's sleep everyone again met for two or three nights of singing and dancing called the *lumoblia*. From dusk until dawn, a pair of male musicians armed with drone flutes and hand-drums and surrounded by a circle of male singers filled the night with lively rhythms as armatures of singing and dancing women and children swept in stately fashion around them.

#### Exchange and Symbolic War

Even to a naïve observer, the aggressive connotations of these pig-exchange ceremonies are unmistakable, and exegesis reveals in fact that the entire complex is an elaborate form of symbolic war. The Yangoru Boiken advance this symbolism explicitly and with specificity. The symbolism begins with the pig, which depending on the context stands as both a spear and a human being. As a *gift* – a commodity in the process of transaction – it is a symbolic spear. “Pigs are our spears!” one young man declared proudly to me as he surveyed the pigs being carried in to a *walablia*. “A small pig, that is just a small spear,” another man commented. “But if I give a big pig, then I have truly speared.” Yet another man, whose pig had just been conferred on its recipient yelled in triumph to the crowd: “I have speared a man ... now he feels pain!” A celebrated ancestor of Hambeli village was said to have “a two-headed spear” because he gave pigs to partners in two different villages: “One way, he threw it at Sima; the other, he flung it at Kworabre.” As spears, pigs are ‘flung’ at the exchange partner: the term for exchange partner, *gurli* (*urli* in southern Yangoru), is a cognate of the verb *gurlu* (or *urlu*), “to spear.” Thus, *gurli*, the person to whom a pig is given, can be translated as, “One who is speared.” A man who encounters difficulty persuading his relatives to help him reciprocate his partner’s pig will complain to them: “This man’s spear is in me!”

At the same time, pigs are symbolically cast as humans. Village members are referred to as “pigs without tails,” or “village pigs” – a reference to the Yangoru practice of docking the tails of domestic piglets in the belief that this will prevent them from going wild. Conversely, people who do not belong to the village are “pigs with tails” or “wild pigs,” that is creatures who dwell in the surrounding bush. Thus, if someone dreams of being chased and bitten by a pig, it is an omen that someone is plotting his death by spear or sorcery – an enemy if it has a tail, a real or classificatory consanguine if it has none. If a man dreams of his *gurli* receiving a pig, it means that likewise the *gurli* will soon die. This equivalence also features in *hwabu*, the little stories that are told around the evening fire for amusement or as bedtime tales to children. In *The Story of Why Men Exchange Pigs*, for example, it is said that long ago pigs used to truss men to poles and give them to their exchange partners. Forewarned of their impending fate by a *mogrum-bwino* lizard, however, the men one day jumped up, grabbed the pigs, and bound them to poles – which is why nowadays men exchange pigs rather than pigs exchanging men. *The Story of the Women Who Were Pigs* tells of two pigs who could pass back and forth between the realm of the humans and that of the pigs by taking off their pig skins and becoming women.

## Pig-exchange, Pig-hunting, and War

This dual symbolism – the pig as spear and the pig as human – mapped onto the symbolism of war in two ways, one indirect, the other direct. In the first, both pig-exchange and war were explicitly modeled as pig-hunts. In this imagery, the *hwapomia*, the hereditary leaders of the clans that were conferring the pigs in a *nimba gur* or *walablia*, were cast as hunters of wild pigs and the members of their clans as their ‘hunting dogs.’ It will be recalled that wild pigs represented people from beyond the village – *par excellence*, members of enemy villages. Thus, in the days of war, warriors went to the battlefield with cries that they were “off to hunt some wild pigs.” Each clan had its own ‘wild pig’ and ‘dog’ names, and on the battlefield itself they would taunt the enemy lines, shouting that they should beware, “Kurngri-njagri [their ‘dog’ name] may bite you!”; or, conversely, “Kilenjik [their ‘wild pig’ name] will snap at you!” When warriors had succeeded in infiltrating enemy territory and killing people in their gardens or on their paths, they would sing the strophic *waranchangile*, or “song of the hunting dogs,” a melodic parody of dogs baying in triumph.

Warriors, in sum, were hunters of wild pigs, and enemies were the wild pigs they hunted. This symbolism echoed through pig-lining ceremonies. As they prepared for a ceremony, members of the donor moiety were said to scour the countryside for pigs to “spear” and “kill” – i. e., for pigs to purchase and bind to poles for the upcoming festival. Once the pigs had all been brought in and lined across the ceremonial piazza, the donors celebrated their triumph with the *waranchangile*. The announcement on the slit-gongs of the number of pigs lined was said to tally the number of pigs that had been ‘speared.’ After the pigs had been counted off, the donors sounded a loud whoop, referred to as, *Wara wozIku, wara su*: “The hunting dog wags its tail; the dog is happy.”

The second – and dominant – manner in which pig-exchange mapped onto warfare was by direct equation: pig exchange was war, exchange partners were warriors, and pigs were spears (as they were given over) and fallen warriors (once they had been given). This imagery of war begins with the two moieties, which were named after the two great war confederacies – Lebuging (“white or light-coloured pig”) and Samawung (“black or dark-coloured pig”). In this military context, pig-exchange was a “fight” against the “enemy.” Time and again, I would ask the identity of a man’s exchange partner, and receive the reply, “I fight with [so-and-so].” “*Wunera gurluwa, nana waliau mungera polyera*,” it was said: “My exchange partner and I, we fight with pigs and yams.”

The kind of ‘fighting’ in which these partners engaged differed according to the contexts of their exchange. The individual, informal exchanges that occurred at a donor’s hamlet were said to be “pretend ambushes,” while the *nimba gur* and *walablia* ceremonies were likened to “pretend open battles.” The latter symbolism was especially apparent in the finale of a pig-lining. In the open battles of pre-contact days, the climactic moment came when a spear or spear-thrower dart brought down a warrior. The enemy line would immediately try to ensure its kill by launching a “heavy rain” of spears

and darts to drive the victim's comrades back. Under cover of this fire, a death-squad would then try to reach the fallen warrior and kill him with a blow to the head from a palm-wood sword. For their part, warriors from the victim's ranks would dispatch a rescue squad to try and drag him back from the front to safety. It was this contest between death squad and rescue party that was enacted at the climax of a pig-lining around the large, litter bound pig that remained after all the others had been conferred. In this theatrical vignette, the pig-receivers tried to hustle the 'fallen' body of their 'comrade' off the 'field' while their 'enemy' chased after them, trying to make them drop him. "If they trip and drop the pig, we [the pig donors] laugh. We say, 'You're not up to it! You lose! You die!'"

This metaphor of battle was echoed in the songs of 'victory' with which pig-givers celebrated the success of their pig-lining:

I flung my spear into you [my *gurlu*],  
 And you are laid low.  
 I pluck it out, and you are made tall again!  
 I speared a frightened man!  
 I killed a frightened man!

That evening, the pig-givers would proclaim on their slit-gongs the number of pigs they had conferred on their exchange partners, just as they would in bygone days the number of enemies they had slaughtered in battle. The *lumoblia* festivals that celebrated 'victory' in a pig-lining were likewise those that, in the days of war, celebrated kills in battle. And woe betide any clan that had fallen short in its gifts of pigs: their exchange partners would ridicule them mercilessly in song or, as the Yangoru Boiken put it, *Gira tung gurluk*: "They [the singers] shoot [their *gurlis*] with spears."

## Signaling and Sacrifice

The Yangoru Boiken readily acknowledge that lined pigs are the symbolic victims of war. What comes as an initial surprise, though, is the identity of these 'fallen warriors'. In so far as a pig prestation is a symbolic act in which a spear is thrown at an enemy, it would seem logical that the pig represents the corpse of the exchange partner. In the *act* of giving, this is indeed the case. Once the pig *has been given over*, however, quite another imagery comes into play: the fallen warrior is not the receiver but the giver! Thus, when members of the receiving moiety enter to receive their pigs, they shout: "My *gurlu* has died". The lined pigs, it was explained to me, constitute the "spirits" (*kamba* or *mangung*) of the donors' (not the receivers') descent groups. Pig-receivers, it is said, take these symbols of the donors' groups and, by killing and eating them, "finish them off" – just as men are finished off on the battlefield.

There is, in sum, a reciprocity of death in Yangoru Boiken pig exchange that echoes Hauser-Schäublin's analysis of Abelam long-yam exchange. Among the Abelam, exchange partners take turns in sacrificing their 'spiritual' children to one another; in Yangoru, the act of giving a pig kills the receiver, yet, once given, the trussed pig represents the corpse of the giver. Like the Abelam, moreover, the Yangoru Boiken even conceptualize the pig as a 'child' – or at least, "like a child" – to those who rear it. For the Boiken, however, the salient point is not the pig's status as a child but rather the symbolic violence represented by its exchange. In this, they are no different to many other communities in New Guinea, where competitive exchange is referred to as a kind of "fighting with food." Ceremonial prestations are spoken of as "fighting," or as a "battle," in which givers "wound" or "strike" receivers with gifts identified as weapons or "blows" (e.g., Allen 1976:42; Brown 1979; Held 1957:165,226; MacDonald 1991:190; Oosterwal 1963:83; Strathern 1971:54,95,129; Young 1971). Indeed, as Hauser-Schäublin notes of the Abelam, they too equate long yams with spears. "Now we no longer fight our enemies with spears," they told Kaberry (1941/42:344) in reference to the effects of contact; "it is taboo; now we only fight with yams."

But why should exchange be equated with war? I have argued at some length elsewhere (Roscoe 2009) that among the organizational obstacles faced by small-scale societies is that of how to manage conflicts of interest. In these communities, people who might share some common interest in collective action, such as defense against attack, confront the problem that their other interests may not coincide. How, then, do people ensure that these conflicting interests do not result in the kind of lethal fighting that would destroy the collaborative action required to secure the interests they share? In politically centralized states, this conflict-of-interest problem is managed by the state's claim to monopolize physical violence and by its provision of centralized and (ideologically, at least) 'neutral' organs of detection, mediation, adjudication, and sanction.

Small-scale, politically uncentralized communities, though, lack such centralized organs of social control. What they institute instead, I have argued, are ceremonial displays that serve as reliable signals of military strength. The genius of this solution is that it allows individuals and sub-groups within a community to establish who would win a fight to the death over conflicts of interest without anyone or any sub-group actually having to risk an actual fight to the death that might destroy their capacity to pursue collective actions that are in everybody's interests. The competitive exchange of food and other material commodities was the most common medium for reliably communicating individual and sub-group military strength (the construction of gigantic spirit houses was another, and large, coordinated exhibitions of singing and dancing a third). The quantities of food, pigs, and other valuables mustered in these exchanges authentically signaled the size of the sponsoring group, the number of kin and allies willing to support its projects, the individual commitments and abilities of all these individuals, and their capacity to suppress their individual interests in order to work together and organize a large-scale action. Those who succeeded in consistently demonstrating supe-

rior military strength through such displays were those whose interests prevailed when internal conflicts threatened a community; those who fell short were those obliged to yield. As the Yangoru Boiken recognized with unusual clarity, ceremonial exchange substituted symbolic warfare for actual warfare within the community, and those who demonstrated the greatest 'strength' in exchange would be those who would prevail when interests were in conflict.

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