# Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea

Chapter 7: Men working for women

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Harvest Competitions

* The annual growth cycle of yams is so deeply interconnected with the social and political well-being of Trobrianders, that even the months of the year are named for each stage of growth.
* With exceptionally large harvests, the time for “play” (*mwasawa*) begins.
* When a chief or hamlet leader decides to show who he is by spreading his fame among many other villages.
* He organizes a yam competition (*kayasa*), a harvest event that requires lots of planting.
* The organization and control of the competition is vested in the chief or hamlet leader, and his success reflects on the status of his matrilineage.
* The first part is between the gardeners.
	+ To the men who produce the most yams, the chief gives payment valuables, such as stone axe-blades or money, as a reward for their expertise.
* At a future harvest, the recipients are expected to stage a yam competition in return to prove their own equal or superior ability.
* Making friends demands seducing people with things, proving one’s influence and power.
	+ Lovers, too, are call “good friends,” but only marriage stabilizes relationships between clans.
* The outpouring of yams at harvest is used in the most dramatic way possible to emphasize and build on the seductive qualities of being young.
* Yams provide the wherewithal to create fame by political influencing “friends” through enormous displays and distributions of yams.
* When the two months of nightly dancing finally end, the hosts conclude the competition with spectacular traditional dancing held during the day.
* Some villages are renowned for their knowledge of dances brought by their ancestors and loaned to others for a price.
* To mark the end of dancing and competitions, the yam houses are metaphorically “overturned” and emptied of their harvest.
* Pigs are chased, tied up, and hung on poles; and wooden crates 10 or 15 feet tall.
* They are fastened against coconut palms and filled with yams.
	+ One crate and one pig are divided among the residents of each hamlet who participated as guests and dancers.
* Cricket was introduced as a substitute for village fighting and as a sport that would replace the harvest dancing and open sexuality.
* Over the years, the game has changed dramatically from its original British version.
	+ The cricket players are essentially dressed and magically decorated as if they were attending a dance competition.
	+ With cricket, however, young women and men are no longer equal dance partners but dress in all their traditional finery as spectators.
	+ It is played during the day, with fifty players on each team, and continues for eight or nine hours.
	+ Each side is known for their chants and dance formations, which they perform at the beginning and end of each inning.
	+ The words are sexual metaphors, used as one team taunts the other and exhibits their physical and sexual prowess to the appraising eyes of the young women on the sidelines.
* After the cricket matches ae complete, the host team holds a huge feast, distributing pigs, yams, and betel nuts in the manner of the dancing competitions.
	+ This day is to broadcast the host’s fame as he and all his relatives demonstrate their ability to organize and pay for the event.
	+ Although lavish displays of yams “makes people happy,” they also fan jealousy.
* In 1981, fighting over the score by a guest team became so intense that several men burned down some village houses in retaliation and only their subsequent arrests restored the calm.
* The Australian government’s annual reports from the turn of the century to the 1970s note again and again the harvest months are the most precipitous time for village fighting.
* Weiner explains how she saw two men fighting with each other over yam gardens.
	+ They were so verbally abuse in their criticism regarding their yam growth, they challenged each other to see who has the bigger yam.
	+ In the end, a winner was announced, and without speaking, the men of the rival matrilineages separated.
* All parties believe that the losers, having been publically humiliated, will try to destroy the members of the other lineage through sorcery, a fear that lasts for generations.

Death and Women’s Wealth

* Not all harvests allow the chief increase their status in the village
* Deaths in the village result in an emptying of the yam houses to feed mourners
* Appearances in the village also change during the mourning period
* During this period, “playing” is prohibited out of respect for the hamlet where the person lived
* The mourning period lasts until all the skirts and banana-leaf bundles have been distributed
* these distributions only occur during the yam harvest season
* if someone dies during the year, the yam competitions are replaced by competitions in women’s wealth
* the dead person’s kinswomen are in charge of all the distributing in this case
* the goods are distributed evenly amongst those who are involved in the mourning
* women who do not accept large baskets so that other people can receive more are seen as “a wealthy woman”
* this allows her to showcase her power and her matrilineages power
* a woman who does this becomes a part of the competition to become a “wealthy woman”
* a woman’s success is also determined from her own hard work and her ability to produce a vast amount of banana-leaf bundles and skirts
* the distribution also only takes place when women have a storage of wealth
* to begin producing the skirts, women are required to find a large number of banana leaves
* after a death, it is common to see young girls at the age of 5 or 6 working on the first stage of creating the bundle
* when the women take over, they begin cutting and forming the bundles
* bundles that are made through this method are valued the most
* the bundles have no value outside of the Trobriand Islands but the labor and time invested in the creation of them gives exchange value
* on the day of distribution, the bundles are labelled clean, dirty, or old
* the production of skirts is much more difficult to create and requires more time and attention
* only the most beautiful red coloured skirts can be given away as wealth
* the banana leaves are cut, dried and the colored during the production process
* the dyes used to color the skirt were made from special roots only which made the process much more difficult
* for women of rank, there are tiny white cowrie shells that are woven into the band
* since it is much more difficult to create, bundles are a better source of wealth

The need for bundles

* the key to finding large amounts of bundles is a woman’s husband
* when a woman needs a large amounts of bundles, her husband is obligated to purchase the amount she needs for her
* men also use their money to buy rice, tinned fish, or tobacco, and then use these items to trade for bundles
* not only do women need bundles for someone’s death, they need bundles to buy things from someone who does not have bundles
* each time the prices in a store increases, the price of bundles increases as well since they are tied with the national currency
* since a woman’s brother gives her and her husband yams every year, her husband is obligated to get her bundles when she needs them
* by giving yams to his sister, a man secures women’s wealth from someone in another matrilineage from his own matrilineage
* when men give yams to their sisters, and their sister’s husbands, they create a debt that can only be repaid in women’s wealth
* women use their husband’s resources to make their matrilineage look stronger
* by giving away a large amounts of bundles, a women and her matrilineage seem unaffected by what everyone assumes as a sorcerer’s success
* a woman can only draw on her husband’s support as a result of her brother supplying yams
* therefore, if a man decides not to support his wife, then the brother may choose not to supply them with yams since his work is measured against the needs of his matrilineage when someone dies
* all chiefs must take place in the supplying of bundles as well
* it is easier for them to supply bundles because of their vast numbers of yams
* but since the yams are not provided by oneself, one is always dependent on others for their supply of yams
* the essence of the yam productions is for women to return bundles and skirts for yams that her brother gave to her
* women are different from men because they can make the bundles and skirts by themselves
* the exchanges do not create debt but removes the debt created during one’s life
* the production of yams shows the strength of relationships among individuals
* however, the relationship revolves around women for their economic roles influence the productivity of men
* men work for women both in the garden and in their purchases of women’s wealth

**Anthropological Themes**

Political Organization

Conflict and Resistance: Conflict is always a part of a villager’s life, as it is a serious disagreement or argument. It is during the harvest season when most fights take place in the villages. The most dangerous fights lead to a yam competition. This competition (*buritilaulo*) provoke such hostile feelings that other villagers do everything that they can from stopping one from taking place.

**Individuals, groups and society**

Status and Role

* the term status refers to one’s standing or position in society.
	+ status is exemplified as women try to become the “wealthy woman” who is seen as the most powerful.
	+ Another example is chiefs who are higher in status due to their ability to practice polygyny and receive more yams to purchase bundles
* the term role refers to the function one has in society
	+ the chiefs are expected to organize and distribute bundles when a death occurs during the yam competitions
	+ when there isn’t a yam competition, the kinswomen are in charge of the distribution
	+ males are expected to create yam houses for their sisters, and sister’s husband
	+ females are expected to create bundles and skirts for themselves

Group and Social Identity

* the yams that the chiefs have defines their power and status in society
	+ since they have more, they are regarded highly
* some women are regarded as one with a strong matrilineage and are known as “the wealthy women”
	+ this is because they are hardworking, can produce large amounts of bundles and skirts, and/or refuse goods for others to be wealthier

Socialization

* the harvest competitions are a time of interactions
	+ children play with each other
	+ the chief or hamlet leaders organize a gathering with other villages
	+ you make friends at a gathering, whether they are friends, or lovers
	+ chiefs create affinal relationships among many matrilineages outside of their clan

**Belief System and Practices Rituals**

The Trobianders follow the same rituals during harvest competitions and cricket matches. The prizes which the Chief awards the winner of the harvest contest is usually the same throughout the years. In Cricket matches, villages follow the same ritual during innings, in which each team does their dance and sings. Sorcery: This is always something which is a great fear among villages. An example of this on this chapter is the belief people have after someone is humiliated after a challenge. All parties believe that the losers, having been publically humiliated, will try to destroy the members of the other lineage through sorcery, a fear that lasts for generations.

**Anthropological Terms**

**Taboo**: a social or religious custom prohibiting or forbidding discussion of a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing.

* Children are not allowed to be “playing” during a period where someone has died

**Redistribution:** A form of exchange in which goods flow into a central place where they are sorted, counted, and reallocated

* Goods are distributed evenly amongst those who are involved in the mourning

**Prestige:** widespread respect and admiration felt for someone or something on the basis of a perception of their achievements or quality

* Women compete to see who are seen as the “wealthy woman”

**Cultural Relativism:** principle that an individual person’s beliefs and activities should be understood by others in terms of that individual’

* To understand the value of the bundles, one must view it in the perspective of the Trobrianders

**Meaning:** attribution of particular significance to persons, relations, objects, places and events

* Bundles are given a meaning and value due to the extensive labour required to create them

**Reciprocity:** exchange of goods and services of the same value

* A man uses pigs, yams, and various other crafted objects to purchase bundles

**Community:** Traditionally, it referred to a geographically bounded group of people in face-to-face contact, with a shared system of beliefs and norms operating as a socially functioning whole

* The community of the Trobrianders share beliefs as they all believe in the importance of yams and bundles.