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Women don't have testicles: The 'making' of masculinity among twenty-first century Baruya (Eastern Highlands, Papua New Guinea).

Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke.

Introduction

On my second day of fieldwork in the Wonenara Valley, Eastern Highlands, Papua New Guinea, precisely where Maurice Godelier had carried out his seminal ethnography in the late 60s to the late 70s, I saw a Baruya man hit his wife with a log outside their house. While nearby observers informed me this was a common sight in every Baruya village, they still commented: “*i no trupela man*” – “he isn’t a proper man”; not that conjugal violence is always condemned *per se*, but there are legitimate reasons to beat up a wife, and this wasn’t one of them; in that respect, the Tok Pisin sentence could also have meant “he isn’t a proper husband”. Just like brothers are expected to behave a certain way, men as husbands have prerogatives and duties towards the woman who is their wife, while remaining someone else’s sister – which is also an integral part of what “being a man” is all about. During the scene I witnessed, the woman’s brother came to her rescue and demanded compensation, as he should, since blood had been spilled. The brother would thus strengthen his relation to his sister, while the husband, through monetary compensation (or more rarely, killing a pig and sharing its meat), would rebuild his relationships with his affines (wife’s brothers and parents) and would restore the idea, within the community, that he was a man worth having a relationship with, someone capable of “*stretim*”, of “straightening” or repairing the damage he has caused.

Defining masculinity is an every-day matter to contemporary Baruya, especially as the more formal and definitive means of traditionally “making men” – through ritual initiation – have been modified. In anthropology Baruya are well known from Maurice Godelier’s publications. *The Making of Great Men* (1986) demonstrated how male initiations were ideologically anchored by the exclusion of women, as their weakening qualities were considered a threat to masculinity. Godelier’s paradigm of Great Men enriched Sahlins’ (1963) binary model of Big-men versus Chiefs by ethnographically refining dynamics of social stratification and power logics at play in the region. Godelier demonstrated that the Big-Man model did not match up with Baruya conceptualizations of power and hierarchy; this acephalous society took decisions collectively without ever following one figure of authority, and the main social hierarchy was between male dominance and female subordination, as deeply encoded in the conceptualization of respective

bodily substances: semen would make a body grow strong, whereas menstrual blood and vaginal fluids would weaken it. The status of Great Men was not achieved or necessarily inherited, it was “discovered” during initiations, and then practiced or refined throughout youth and adult life (sometimes with a subsequent initiation), alternatively as a great warrior or **aoulatta**, a shaman or **kulaka**, a cassowary hunter, or a salt maker. These exceptional men were described by Godelier as men who would rise above the rest of “ordinary men”, but only for as long as their duties would last. As such, *contexts* would make these men greater than their contemporaries, without ever resulting into any long-term hierarchy. While a Big-man would typically derive his authority from the prestige acquired through demonstration of wealth and influence (see Strathern 1971, Lemonnier 1990), there was no such concentration of functions among Great men, whose sphere of influence would never extend beyond one domain. In other words, no influence in one area of social life (e.g. war) would translate into overall influence or authority onto the group as a whole.

How do masculinities emerge and express themselves when those very contexts that created them in the first place are virtually moribund? War was the main occasion for proving one’s masculinity, the avenue of “Greatmanship” *par excellence*, as both the great warrior and shaman would seize this occasion to demonstrate their skills against the enemy; male initiations, spurred and justified by the ever-latent risk of war with the neighbouring group, the Ipmani, were the main social gathering, as the Baruya never organised large-scale exchange ceremonies. Both these contexts found themselves under attack when the Baruya were colonized and Christianised, when they were told to put down their bows and arrows while learning to “*mekim bisnis*”, to follow another model, that of the rational man drafted by Western economics, and reproduced in the money-making patterns Papua has followed as a Nation since colonization by the capitalist West. Where do Baruya men stand now, how do they define themselves in relation to these new contexts?

The Great men paradigm has already created much debate, and important publications and debates dating back from the 1990s (e.g. Godelier and Strathern 1991) tried to pinpoint the conditions for the appearance of Big-men where other models of masculinity had previously prevailed. While studies such as Scarlett Epstein’s (1968) or Ben Finney’s (1973) demonstrated how Big-men were entrepreneurs in the making, and how the social logics and dynamics of their societies prepared them to welcome and adapt to the Western-like, capitalist modernity, very little has been said about the relationship between Great men – who seemingly share no trait with entrepreneurs – with this same modernity. Rather than wondering how one type of man turned into another one, it seems worth shifting the interrogation in order to focus on the mutation of the avenues for Greatmanship: the fact that the contexts have disappeared doesn’t necessarily

entail the disappearance of prestige altogether, nor does it mean that a Great man logic is no longer at play in Baruya conceptualization of power. In this respect, one important change in matrimonial practices will draw my attention in this paper: the recent introduction of brideprice among a population formerly used to practicing sister-exchange almost exclusively means, as Godelier would put it, that the sphere of reproduction (of the group) and the sphere of production (of wealth) are now intertwined, whereas they used to be disjointed. The exchange of money for a wife, Lemonnier recalls (1990), is one essential element of Big-men societies, allowing one man to accumulate wealth, in order to marry many wives, who will help him raise and exchange more pigs, so as to demonstrate yet more power and influence. Competition, as well as an increment in the sum given for a wife, are two crucial components of this type of man and society. Do Baruya men define themselves today through the possession of material wealth and the “access” to more wives that this allows? How does masculinity respond when longer-standing notions of male prerogatives are under threat? Do we witness new violence against women, as was observed elsewhere in Melanesia? (E.g. Knauff 1999).

When assessing the relevance of ideal-types, one should not so much consider how precisely they fit a new context, but keep in mind they may undergo transformation and may adapt to a new socio-economic backdrop while remaining valid to an extent, shedding light on a new situation: first I'll look how Great men logics are still at play among the Baruya despite their new matrimonial practices, before wondering if the disappearance of some contexts and some statuses mean that Great men are no longer a valid model to shed light on contemporary Baruya society. The analysis of the symbolic shift that both semen and menstrual blood have undergone will help understand how the Baruya justify different places and roles within society. Finally, I will attempt to reflect upon the construction of gender as a modality of action within a type of relationship that is previously defined by the Baruya – albeit in an essentialist perspective – as a biological “given”: in that respect, the assertion “*em i gat ball*” could very well point to the idea of compromised masculinity, as its contexts of appearance and expression have gone. My contention is that the “male domination” described by Godelier as the operative structuring of social relationships has lost its ideological justification; but how do genders coexist today in Baruya society?

Material possessions and masculinity

My own knowledge of and familiarity with the Baruya had first stemmed from a three-year Master's thesis based on Maurice Godelier's own field-notes, digitalized and stored in restricted access on an online platform (see Dousset 2009); this initial step of the project enabled

me, after my own fieldwork in 2013-2014 as a doctoral student, to conduct a longitudinal analysis of the variable relation between Baruya marital norms and actual practices. While looking into the impact of brideprice on a society formerly used to practicing sister-exchange almost exclusively, I tried to assess the relevance and usefulness of the paradigms elaborated by Godelier to shed light on various phenomena observed among the Baruya: both the model of Great men and the concept of male domination talk about genders – their relations, respective roles and construction (or “making”) – and dealing with masculinities means reflecting upon femininities as well, especially insofar as Baruya masculinities had to be constructed, traditionally, *against* their feminine counterparts.

When prestige disappears from traditional contexts, new opportunities and avenues open up, and as Bruce Knauft observes, “in Melanesia and Amazonia, male prestige is increasingly dependent on the acquisition of cash and commodities; conversely, it is less directly dependent on the efficacy of local corporate or collective male activities” (1999: 190). Having disappeared from collective contexts, prestige would be embedded within more individualistic avenues, or at least would depend on the action and entrepreneurship of a single individual. Indeed, while the Baruya are still relatively isolated from the rest of the country (no road links them up to the nearest town, and they have to walk in the bush for two days before reaching the Highlands Highway), they are part of a wider economic network, as they started in the 1970s to grow and sell their parchment coffee to coffee export companies based in Goroka (capital of Eastern Highlands Province) or Ayiura (capital of the district). Some Baruya have opened a “*stud*”, or tradestore (there are 5 in total in the Wonenara valley, for roughly 2 500 inhabitants), to sell the manufactured products that have become indispensable even in remote villages (soap, matches, salt, cooking oil); they reinvest the benefits in new merchandise, and in the school fees for their cousins who live in town¹ and sometimes brideprices. Similarly, a few individuals migrate to town for short periods of time, in order to work as security guards (the Anga, or former “Kukukuku”, are known and feared in the country for their fighting skills), in coastal plantations or in various kinds of companies.

But their situation contrasts starkly with the reports given by other ethnographers in different parts of the country: Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi shows for example that Gende people, in the south of Madang Province, have emigrated *en masse* since 1982-83, because they had a social incentive to do so – indeed, the obligation to take part into the exchange system was

¹ The free school fee policy means those who are schooled in the valley, at the elementary and primary levels, don't have to pay anything anymore.

crucial to the definition of masculinity. Men were proven to be men insofar as they could have and produce wealth, and be part of the exchange networks:

[...] many Gende men were asking themselves whether they were ‘pigs’ or ‘men’, and if they were ‘men’, why was it that ‘money’ bossed their every move rather than it being they who bossed money as their ancestors had bossed pigs? Ever since western goods and cash were accepted into the Gende exchange system, their uneven distribution has been a factor in migration. [...] From the 1970s into the 1990s, as many as one half of Gende men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five were living in towns far distant from their home villages. (2012: 84-85)

Economic disparities double up with another problematic, that of the definition of masculinity itself: “while it can be interpreted as a problem of inequality, the Gende – and especially Gende males – saw it as a question of masculine identity” (*id.*: 84), as “within this system, individuals reveal themselves to be more or less ‘good’ and ‘human’ on the strength of their exchange performances relative to competitors both within and outside their clan” (*ibid.*). A similar situation was described by Newman among the Gururumba (Eastern Highlands), where a man is displayed as “a fully functioning person” if he participates in exchange activities (1965: 94). As Bruce Knauft explains, this model of society suggests that male status “relies increasingly on material acquisition and success in a cash economy”, and when these aspirations are not met, or with difficulty, the situation “poses a threat to emergent notions of masculinity and can fuel new aspect of gender polarity or antagonism toward women” (1999: 171).

These elements do not adequately characterize contemporary Baruya social life, despite the introduction of money within their daily life. Money is important in order to acquire manufactured products, and to pay brideprice, but it is not important *per se*, and will not condition someone’s status. Never have I heard any man be judged, valued, even qualified or characterised, by the amount of money he earns. Yet disparities are vast: between a local teacher, who was trained in town and came back to teach at the local school, making up to PGK 20,000 a year, an elected “*consol*” (Local Level Government), making roughly PGK 50 every fortnight (PGK 1,200 a year), or the average family selling coffee (between PGK 500 and PGK 1,000 a year), the divide is important. It is there, but it does not *mean* anything socially. This in turn explains the very limited migrations to town found among Baruya: although having money is desirable, to take care of one’s family and afford nice things, it has not turned into a social incentive.

The local way of practising brideprice is worth a longer analysis here, to show how it defuses the possibility for one man to become someone else’s creditor for the payment of brideprice: giving a sum of money to get a wife was not a part of traditional Baruya marriage,

which was (almost) only sealed by the reciprocal exchange of sisters, or compensated at the next generation by the gift of a daughter. Nowadays, a third of all recorded marriages are concluded with brideprice, but this modality hasn't caused sister-exchange to disappear at all. They both co-exist, and one is interpreted through the lens of the other²: for the Baruya, brideprice and sister-exchange are one and the same thing, only two versions of one single system – that of reciprocal exchange. Something has to be given back for a wife, and that is the cardinal value of Baruya marriage. Godelier had argued differently: in what he saw as two alternative logics (brideprice and sister-exchange), the pivotal element was the idea that one allowed for “unlike” things to be exchanged, while the other only existed through the idea that a woman was only ever worth another woman (see Godelier 1991: 227-28, 293-94). What's more, these two forms of kinship relations would correspond to two modes of production and reproduction, as one was connected to the sphere of production of wealth, and the other disconnected from it. In his model, these institutional features would be mutually reinforcing, to the point of creating different “types” of societies: the Big-Men and the Great men societies. I have elsewhere reflected on the model elaborated by Godelier (Malbrancke 2015), who attributes a “leading role to the nature of kinship relations” (1991: 227), in a similar hierarchy of functions to Marx's distinction between infrastructure and superstructure (Godelier 1975: 15); there I have shown that for contemporary Baruya, the transformation of kinship relations implied by the introduction of money into the marital sphere did not lead to a different social stratification – because indeed, what appears to be a change in their matrimonial practices is not one, it is merely a variation on a theme.

The opposition between brideprice and sister-exchange doesn't hold, maybe because the Baruya have not adopted a foreign means of sealing matrimonial alliances, but have rather adapted the brideprice to their own logic of sister-exchange. However, their brideprice might not be considered “canonical” when we look at it closely. Firstly, no marriage is conditioned by the payment of a brideprice, which usually happens 4 to 30 years later (after 10 years on average). It is not a preferred way of marrying, it is seen as a solution to a demographic impediment: in the absence of a “sister” to exchange, there can be no direct reciprocal exchange, and the promise of a brideprice to come at a later date resolves this problem. This means that no one can benefit from someone else's need of cash to get married – marriages happen, and then the compensation

² Which is made obvious in the daily vocabulary: “*baim meri*”, literally “buying a wife”, means both “exchanging a sister” and “giving a brideprice”; my own assumption that these were two different systems, that had to be expressed through different words caused a few misunderstandings at first. When a woman would tell me “*em baim mi pinis*”, she merely meant “the exchange is complete”, without giving any clue as to whether this had been done through the gift of a “sister” (real or classificatory) or the payment of a matrimonial compensation.

will ensue, its nature depending on various factors (proximity between the two families³, the birth of a daughter, etc.). This contrasts sharply with what Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi observed elsewhere in the Highlands, among the Gende (2012), where the need for cash was linked to a pragmatic necessity (getting married) as well as a symbolic one (proving one's worth). Similarly, on the part of the bride's family, there isn't any strategy or idea of profit associated with the sum they ask for: brideprices vary between PGK 500 and 2,500 and depend on how closely tied the two families already were before this new alliance. Among Baruya, nobody emerges as a powerful ("rich") figure who could help financing someone else's brideprice in order to obtain benefits or favours in return and thus gain in renown – a typically big-man-like strategy. Someone richer than someone else won't help a man outside his lineage or clan get married by offering him money; no relationship of creditor/debtor emerges from the practice of brideprice, maybe in part because of its flexible quality and because the brideprice is paid collectively. It is always men as a group (the groom, his brothers – real and classificatory –, his uncles, cousins, etc.) who pay someone's brideprice, and who will, later on, when a brideprice is paid for a woman from their lineage or clan, receive a small amount of money.

The fact that richer Baruya men don't always marry more than one woman is also significant: polygyny was always possible among the Baruya, but *de facto* limited by the obligation of giving a "sister" in compensation. The apparition of brideprice could mean, for the men who happen to be well-off, the end of this limitation and the possibility to marry more wives (who in turn help raise more pigs, sometimes with the prospect of being more important in the large-scale exchange ceremonies – see A. Strathern 1971 and M. Strathern 1972). So among the Baruya money and marriage, while being linked, don't entail each other.

This disjunction between material possessions and masculinity doesn't mean that material possessions are not enviable for the Baruya – they are, and those who have what everyone covets will not hide their precious possessions: whether they are of practical use (torches to go to the latrines at night, solid shoes to walk up and down the mountain) or prestigious only (an analogue watch even though one may not be able to tell the time), these objects, quite often associated with the anthropologist, are sought after by virtually everyone. The main object associated with prestige in that respect is the cell phone: Digicel coverage (the main phone operator in Papua New Guinea) is hardly present in the valley, with only one patch on the airstrip at the top of the mountain allowing one to check text messages or missed phone calls, but many a Baruya man comes back from town proud and happy to have acquired a second-hand phone, rarely topped

³ Commensality is cited as the main reason to ask less money to another family, as closeness is already there, through the context of sharing food.

up, and rarely functioning. They will then go to the airstrip every day to point it to the sky and wait until a notification appears, or until someone sees them with a phone in their hand. A more recent addition to the objects of male prestige is fire weapons: I could count 5 of them in the whole valley, ranging from a homemade gun to a Winchester, rarely equipped with ammunition; they would cost between PGK 300 and 1,500, and were again used purely for prestige, as they would almost surely jam if fired up. What is remarkable is the idea that no hierarchy is ever associated with this sort of prestige: possession of rare objects merely points to a fact (one went to town, one works closely with the anthropologist, one has a salary), but is never coloured with axiology – someone being “worth more” or “more of a man” than someone else. No man’s reputation or name is made bigger by the possession of material objects – the Baruya would find this idea comical. As a result, no power is associated with wealth, and no rich man will become, *de facto*, an important man.

Prestige and power

Where is authority located then? Who has the power – if this question even makes sense? As a traditionally acephalous group, the Baruya were used to taking decisions collectively. As stated earlier, Godelier’s model of Great men described clearly how functions and statuses did not imply authority over the group as a whole. Even the best of warriors, whose name was recalled for generations afterwards (Godelier 1986: 107) would never gain authority over other spheres of social life, and if they were to do so, carried away by the lure of prestige gained during warfare, they would be considered as despots, and killed (*id.*: 174-175).

Since Godelier’s time though, as Papua gained independence (1975), a new democratic system was imposed onto its many groups, asking them to elect, every five years, one figure of authority who would be their “go-between” with the government. The Local Level Government (LLG) elections happened during my fieldwork, in July 2013, and their smooth proceedings point to the respect with which the Baruya treat the process. There are 5 *consols* in the valley, elected for five years, and a “president” for the whole district; people vote by choosing three names out of the pool of candidates – who can be men and women, aged over 18 – and elect at the same time the *consol* of their “ward” (or “vote area”) and the president of their district. This system is meant to defuse any attempt at corruption; but as Raiwin, a 31-year-old male informant and friend of mine, told me, “you just vote for your friend”⁴. Politics are not associated with “colours”, parties

⁴ And as I witnessed, these friends may sometimes heavily remind you the importance of the “wantok-system”; I also saw one candidate bribe his way to the elections, distributing instant noodles and bars of soap against promises of vote; in the end, he was not elected.

or ideas, and it's the network of people ready to vote for someone that determines the outcome of the election.

That being said, the Baruya do comply with the idea of locating authority within *one* person, but in fact, they will not necessarily follow that person's decisions. The story told by Yangweema, who was *consol* in the valley for five years (for Wuyabo vote area, where I resided), sheds light on the actual exercise of power. This sixty-year-old man had always wanted to build a dispensary in the village, to avoid the two-hour walk down the valley, and up again, for sick people in need of medication. The only "*haus sik*", or dispensary, was also known for running out of medication quite often, as I could witness for two months in 2013. Having received a subsidy of PGK 1,000 from the government, Yangweema went on to buy some necessary material (corrugated irons, nails and various tools), and offered to pay a few men for the other tasks – gathering wood, making planks, building the actual house. But the remaining budget didn't allow him to pay each of them much, and no one agreed to help. One year on, the material was not being used, and the money was lingering in the "community account". This shows, Yangweema said, "that no one follows us, no one listens to us". Some former and current *consols* disagree with his statement, telling me that on the contrary, people are very respectful of the authority placed into the people they elect; Filip, who replaced Yangweema, even said: "of course they obey, otherwise it would be chaos here". But Filip mistook an absence of authority from *one* person on the whole group with a state of anarchy; what happens is more subtle. While the Baruya willingly vote and elect a "representative", they don't invest *all* the authority (if any) into that figure of power. Instead, many more statuses pop up, often with overlapping functions, and with very different sources of designation: the "magistrates"⁵ are designated by the population, trained in town then paid by the government, and act as mediators in the disputes that don't require the ruling of a "*kol*", or village court, where they act as official representatives of the Papuan State, mixing, as one of them told me, "the Constitution with local justice" (Elijah Nokai). But some Baruya men also tell me they themselves act as "mediators", "*mausman*", "*leaderman*" – many terms seemingly covering the same tasks and quite often resulting from self-designation: they all act as intermediaries to help resolve conflicts between two parties. Some of them think they have a right to intervene during the proceedings of a village court, or during any gathering, to lecture the audience, and rephrase for the benefit of the assembled community the rules of living together.

⁵ There are currently six of them in the Wonenara Valley.

Power and authority are as fragmented as they used to be, and important decisions can only ever be taken collectively: in July/August 2013, as a threat of war with the neighbouring tribe, the Ipmani, was looming again (over land disputes that were never resolved since the conflict officially ended in the late 1980s), men would gather and talk. The negotiations could involve members of the Ipmani group, and sometimes women (who would not easily talk in public though), and no one would ever appear or stand as a leader, more listened to than any other Baruya. For daily tasks necessitating collective work, public announcements are made through the villages at dawn: building someone's new house, helping with making planks for the school, building a fence around the airstrip, etc. Some projects pertain to traditional, expected behavior, whereby men gather to work collectively (see Godelier 1986 and Lemonnier 1999); but more and more projects involving the whole community are paid by the small and rare subsidies coming from the government. However, people know the money seldom actually comes through, and if it does, they tell me it's not enough to divert their time and effort from working in their gardens – the population is three times what it used to be, and with fast-growing families, people need to work more to provide their daily rations of sweet potato and taro, the staple crops. As a result, fewer projects involve many men; however, while a clear sense of individualism grows within each village (*"i no wok garden?"*, "this is not like working in your garden", is what Meyana, a 55-year-old shaman, would tell me to explain why no one was ready to work for the community, for example to clear a road after a tempest), this doesn't go hand in hand with the idea that power and authority should also be individualized. The only way to understand contemporary Baruya politics is to read it through the lens of Godelier's Great man paradigm. Then only will this situation of multiple sources of power, of overlapping functions, of segmented statuses (as opposed to the concentrated ones in a Big-man society – where wealth is associated with prestige and eventually with political authority) become understandable.

The fact that changing matrimonial practices – if it is indeed a "change" – have not led to a different social stratification doesn't completely answer the question of masculinities, and of how they are "made". It also raises new issues: while mutual exchanges of "sisters" were organised by the families, and sometimes by the grooms themselves, marriages concluded through brideprice are more and more the initiative of the women, who choose their groom, on criteria that do not pertain to the realm of kinship (is this man a good worker? Does he "sleep around"? Physical attraction also plays a bigger role now). This underscores again the fact that men virtually lose control of all the spheres where they used to "dominate" their sisters and daughters.

A shift in the symbolism of bodily fluids

I would like now to turn to the ideological making of men and masculinity which, if we follow Godelier, was anchored into what Herdt would call a “fetishism of fluids” (1996), whereby semen (embodiment of maleness) would be considered in stark opposition with menstrual blood (embodiment of femaleness), both polar opposites standing for life and death:

[...] sperm is life, strength, the nourishment that gives life strength. Therefore men give their sperm to drink to their wives weakened by menstruation or childbirth. But sperm also makes women’s milk, develops their breasts, and makes them nursing mothers. [...] Sperm gives men the power to make boys be born again outside the mother’s belly, apart from the world of women, in the world of men and by their efforts alone. (Godelier 1986: 52).

On the other end of the spectrum, menstrual blood would be taboo, causing women to seclude themselves every month in a temporary shed called “**mundeanga**”, where they’d go to give birth as well; in the olden days, the whole village would be segregated, men and women treading on different paths, and sitting in different parts of the house. As Godelier shows clearly, the “facts of the female body” were a constant source of disgust and fear among men: he mentions quite extreme reactions on the part of the men who were once interrogated by the anthropologist about frequenting the **mundeanga**, or about coming anywhere near a vagina. He talked about screaming, yelling, an attitude that “verges on hysteria, mingling disgust, repulsion, and above all fear” (1986: 58). The fear is that men’s strength will be weakened by mere proximity with vaginal fluids, along with the idea that menstrual blood is a reminder of a wound, pouring out of an invisible gash – as such, it is “out of the norm”, and outside the boundaries of the body (see Douglas 1966).

The main social gathering in Great men societies is the moment dedicated to the initiation of young boys, which prepares them for warfare while the masters of rituals “detect” the next Great men. Such initiations, conducted regularly, were for Godelier unambiguously aimed at making men *without* women: in this respect they constituted a second birth, from which the mothers were absent (1986: 47)⁶. Through initiation only could the boys’ bodies grow and be purified from the female substances they had been in contact with throughout infancy – substances that were thought to be polluting and weakening; it would take “ten years of sexual segregation, four major ceremonies at intervals of several years [...] to separate a boy from his mother, to sever him from the world of women, and to prepare him to cope with women again when he marries” (*ibid.*). This purification was also conducted through regular inseminations of the younger initiates by their non-married elders; the transmission of semen was deemed

⁶ But see Bonnemère 2004 for a reappraisal of women’s place in male initiations.

indispensable in order for them to grow strong, as semen was considered to be the source of life and strength, but was believed to be in limited quantities in the male body. Much like the neighbouring Sambia (Herdt 2006), the Baruya thought that male bodies were not able to develop on their own, and needed this outside intervention, as opposed to the female body, never in need of external intervention to become ready for reproduction (female initiations would only last a fortnight, at the onset of first menstruations).

I argue that the notion of masculinity today is less constructed *against* the female realm: notions of “pollution” (e.g. Douglas 1966, Meigs, 1984), of “sexual antagonism” (Langness 1967) have been revised and questioned in more recent works (see Herdt and Poole 1982), as distorted lenses through which to view the processes of construction and conceptualization of both genders. Moreover, on the field, I have observed that a new perception of bodily substances has come to redefine matrimonial prescriptions and proscriptions – both in discourses, and in actual practice – and the place accorded to women in the process of reproduction and in socio-economic spheres of daily life. I gathered testimonies about changing sexual practices, influenced by exogenous discourses which are relayed by recently established institutions, such as churches, school, and justice; these discourses have contributed to change the perception of male and female bodies and to guide new behaviours between the sexes. Indeed, blood is more and more reinvested with positive connotations, being the substance used in discourses to point to a shared identity: people used to think of themselves as a unit going through the male line, in virtue of shared semen (as a result, cousins on the father’s side – FBD – would be the most forbidden); “*mipela wanpela blut tasol, wanpela famil?*”, “we are one blood only, one family”, is a common expression nowadays. As a result, family ties going through women are now seen as closer than they used to be: MZD, formerly a cousin Ego could marry, is now forbidden, and in fact⁷ avoided. Meanwhile, the taboo on menstrual blood slowly decreases: young married women with children tell me they do not have to be secluded during their menses anymore, and men will not systematically avoid them; young men at school learn about the physiology of the bodies, and do not fear being in contact with girls. Some men even tell me that menstruated women just need to wash their hands if they are to cook for them. A hygienist and medical discourse prevails now, and overtakes the stigmatisation or valorisation of bodily substances: it is all about what they can *carry*, not about what they *represent* in themselves.

In this respect, semen has lost its former status: instead of thinking that it helps people grow stronger, the Baruya now conceptualise it as an agent of death. In the Wonenara valley, they

⁷ I have used a software to deal efficiently with important quantities of genealogical data and get precise results from all the marriages collected by Godelier and then myself; see Malbrancke 2012 and 2016.

are well aware of sexually transmitted infections (especially syphilis and gonorrhoea), and they stigmatise semen as the main vector for the transmission of such diseases. Its absorption has thus become taboo: indeed, married men and women now declare that oral sex is no longer practised by anyone, be it young initiates at the housemen (the practice had disappeared in the early 1960s) or husband and wife. I argue that this is partly because of a shift in the symbolic value attributed to semen, which was moved from a nourishing, life-inducing substance, to a source of disease. Asking people about their sexual practices was not easy, and took time and confidence; I started discussing the subject with women who particularly liked and trusted me – I only interrogated married people on the matter, as sexual issues are not meant to be brought up in front of younger and unmarried people. To the question of whether or not they would “drink their husband’s water”, women react today with disgust and fear – precisely the reactions observed by Godelier among the men thirty-five years earlier, when he would bring up matters of female vaginal fluids, especially menstrual blood (1986: 58). My female friends were very sympathetic towards me as they heard me talk about fellatio: they assumed that I was only asking because I was used to it myself (which they also found amusing). So they warned me that semen was not meant to be eaten (“*i no bilong kaikai!*”), and predicted serious illness should I do so. Although men also declare that fellatio is no longer practiced, their own etiology of sexually transmitted infections attempts to cast the blame and source of contamination onto a category of women, those who occasionally sell sex to married men, thus causing infections to spread. The figure of the “*tukina meri*”, the local expression used to qualify women who either exchange sexual favours against money, or who are known to sleep with many men (the “*pasinja meri*” described by Holly Wardlow among the Huli – see among other publications Wardlow 2006) is particularly interesting and reveals a radical change in the polarization of the bodies: men are now ready to pay to have sex, to bring their sexual fluids in contact with women’s.

Rapes didn’t exist at all in the past but are fairly common nowadays, and are usually settled by a village court (“*keol*”) whereby the assailant is condemned to pay between PGK 500 and 1,000 to the family of his victim. It is thus a new form of violence that is unanimously condemned by the community and can never be justified. This phenomenon resists, among the Baruya at least, to a reading that would locate its root and justification within the exercise of power. As if “diminished” men had recourse to rape as an attempt to remind women of their “place”. In my opinion, rapes happen nowadays because men no longer fear being in contact with women’s bodily fluids, but not because they need a new avenue to be superior to them. Issues of power were absent from the court proceedings which I witnessed: it was always about desire in the assailant’s justifications – and in fact, in the late 1980s, old people declared to

Godelier that fellatio in the housemen used to help young boys grow but would also “keep young men out of trying to have sex with women” (Godelier’s unpublished fieldnote book n°XXXI, p.37). This new phenomenon could thus be read as the expression of sexual desire that can no longer find satisfaction within the homosocial universe of the housemen. Similarly, Fiona Hukula (2012), in her analyses of interviews conducted with convicted rapists in Port Moresby, suggests that the idea that locating the root of such acts of gender violence in stakes of “power”, belongs to Western rhetoric and does not take into account the social contexts in which these acts actually take place. To her, this “will of power” remains very marginal in the justifications phrased by the Papuan men who talk about their actions, which often have to do with a wider network of relationships (getting back at a whole lineage, etc.).

By all accounts, and following the same logic, men also disregard the traditional taboos surrounding sexual intercourse: births are no longer spaced out like they used to be (leading to the impressive demographic growth I have already mentioned), and specific tasks (like clearing a new garden) or moments of the day do not prevent them from trying to have sexual intercourse, which is a constant subject of complaint for women. They confide in me that their husbands “ask everywhere, all the time”, forcing them to agree if necessary; the women complain especially because of the unwanted pregnancies which augment their workload. As Pamela (a woman in her mid-thirties, with four children) phrased it: “they always want to have sex, but then we have to take care of the children, so we’re tired of it!” However, a new taboo has emerged: men are to abstain from sexual intercourse with their pregnant wife, a prohibition that was not explained or justified by my female informants but spelled out as an obvious fact. This contrasts perfectly with the norm of the past, whereby “the man, not content to make the child with his sperm, continues to “nourish” it by means of repeated coitus, and makes it grow in the woman’s belly” (Godelier 1986: 51), a habit consistent with the vision of semen as the substance of life. On the contrary, nowadays semen is perceived as a harmful substance, which extends in-utero and results in men no longer “nurturing” the foetus. This changing perception of bodily fluids goes together with changing ideas around procreation: no longer negated, women’s role in making a child is now acknowledged on the same level as men’s, even though women only are deemed infertile. What do these transformations entail (or imply) about women’s roles within society – and thus about men’s too?

The reduction of gender asymmetries?

Studies in the Pacific have shown how gender tensions may be recast over time and in the face of changing socio-economic backdrops. Bruce Knauff’s analysis comes to a grim conclusion:

all forms of discriminations and victimisation of women seem to have worsened as men's frustration and anger increased, in the face of new and unreachable means of proving their masculinity (1999: 179). For Baruya men, economic opportunities only rarely present themselves, and there are actually very few incentives to move to town, as I have stated above. But instead of observing a "backlash effect" of this compromised masculinity, with new forms of violence against women aimed at re-establishing this lost power⁸, what we witness is the emergence of a discourse, shared by both sexes, that blames this state of affairs on men's "laziness": they are said to perform fewer tasks than before and to let women in charge of more and more of the daily work. In fact, and this contrasts with situations observed elsewhere in the country, women also find a space within the political and economic spheres, albeit with restrictions. There seems to be a double standard as far as voting for a woman is concerned: if any man can run for *consol*, only educated women will be deemed worthy of the job. Out of the 5 male candidates for Wuyabo *consol*, only three could read and write (more or less painfully – they were not all formerly educated), but all my informants, men and women alike, would stress the importance of an education for all *female* candidates only. Meanwhile, people agree to say that women would do better *consols* than men, as they can handle the money in more efficient ways. A disjunction between words and deeds is clearly at play here, as men do not vote for women yet, but say they would – at least they say so to a female anthropologist.

Women are also part of the "modern" economic network, as they usually keep and manage the benefits derived from the coffee sales: although land always belongs to their husbands or fathers, they work to pick, wash, pulp and dry the coffee, and as a result they are entitled to the money they earn. The same goes for the pigs they raise and sometimes sell on the market, along with other locally grown foodstuff⁹. Men even tell me women are better at handling the money, they are compared to "*bilum*"¹⁰, and will not waste this hard-won money playing cards. But gambling is actually also a feminine activity: men and women gather up in small groups every day in the coffee season¹¹ to play cards (the "*Seven lip*" mostly, see Pickles 2012); the intermingling of sexes is more and more common, as young men and women play ball together, dance at the yearly disco party, etc. Men's and women's roles tend to be more and more

⁸ Here the fact that gender-based violence is more often labelled "inappropriate" than before, and has to be justified in order to be socially acceptable supports this argument. See the last paragraph of this paper.

⁹ It was always the case for Baruya women (1986: 16)

¹⁰ The traditional netbags used in Papua New Guinea to carry everything, from sweet potatoes to babies

¹¹ When there is enough cash available in the village; coming October, people stop playing as they have already spent almost all their money or need to hang on to it as the wet season is coming and they'll rely more on manufactured foodstuff.

interchangeable than in the past: women now have access to weapons (axes, machetes), which used to be men's privilege only, and men taking care of children is not a rare sight.

To an extent, a *de facto* separation of the sexes may remain on some occasions, but tasks are rarely allocated specifically to men or to women and above all, they are not allocated on the basis of physiology like in the past. Men are in charge of punctual, collective tasks such as building a house, clearing a new garden, making a fence (although these tend to be more individualised than before) while women do the regular, solitary, daily tasks. Male initiations do happen, but they've been largely amputated, and the degree of separation from the female world¹², lessened: boys talk to their mothers and eat with them before they're married or have children, as soon as the new "generation" of young initiates has come into the housemen, to "replace" them; some of them will go to school and sit next to girls – the taboo on speaking to women is limited to married Baruya women. And even then, I have witnessed two boys from the housemen communicate in a non-verbal manner with a married woman to obtain some tobacco and share a moment with her.

Modernity hasn't worked in a linear manner, and as prostitution emerged in village life, and could be seen as a form of female empowerment (see Wardlow 2006), ideas of what a "good woman" should be and do were reactivated, as a reaction against those who are said to "put their bodies on the market". This tendency has been observed elsewhere in Melanesia, where Christian morality has put emphasis on female propriety, as women have become markers of morality in economically and socially changing contexts (Knauff 1997, 1999). The presence of five Christian denominations in the Wonenara valley thus played an important role in asserting what women's place and role should be. Indeed, Churches are mainly frequented by women, who also find there a new possibility for speaking in public (see Bonnemère 2012). Both an instrument for male imposition of "moral values" onto women and a public means of expression for them, churches constitute a problematic area for gender relations. This is an important point: nowadays contexts define gender relations more than a deep-rooted ideology anchored in bodily substances. But are genders themselves defined only through the relationships in which they are enacted?

A word on gender relations and bodies

So far I have left unexplored the quote used as a title for this article; yet the meaning behind this expression, used fairly often by children and adults alike, points to a certain conception of gender that would gain from deeper analysis. It is hard not to mention Marilyn

¹² Which is also, as I said, less clearly defined than before, as there are nowadays few areas or activities that contribute to the idea of a "feminine sphere".

Strathern's seminal book, *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), when touching upon questions of gender in Melanesia. Her revolutionary approach allowed researchers to look at gender differently in this part of the world, and to understand it as a modality of action and not just as people's property. Indeed, she observed among Hagen people (Western Highlands) that a person was not defined as a man or a woman according to set attributes, but rather according to modalities of action – production (of goods destined to be exchanged) for women, and transaction for men, both crucial in a society where large-scale competitive exchanges are the main ceremonial event. It is an accepted fact now that gendered concepts of masculine and feminine do not depend and are not reducible to male and female sexed bodies. In fact, the Baruya's old "fetishism of fluids" is even less pronounced than before, thus leading us to hint at a reduction of an essentialist view of male and female roles and places within societies, as these are no longer as strongly linked to what people have in their bodies – semen or menstrual blood. What does this quote mean? And what does it mean in relation to the regular violence observed against women? It seems to remind the ethnographer of some – literally, essential – facts of the bodies, that do not disappear when their substances shift in meaning and symbolism: men and women don't have the same genitalia, and this is always still there in the way Baruya see both sexes and conceptualise their roles within society. This declaration of difference is not the proverbial "he's got balls", denoting a purely male form of courage by metonym; it is nothing else than the mere fact of biological life, the first given that will then help people navigate within complex entanglements of relations, coded behaviours, rules to be observed between both genders. And maybe it is the last rampart to men's threatened – or even diminished – masculinity.

Yet it doesn't serve to justify any new form of violence against women – this would be an inadequate reading of the quote and the relations of power between men and women. If anything, my own assessment of Baruya daily life shows an increasing condemnation of violence against women¹³: men and women alike know very well which reasons make this violence legitimate or not. Girls are reminded during initiations¹⁴ that not feeding their husband, playing cards instead of working in the gardens or sleeping with other men could lead to well-deserved blows. On the other hand, men are strictly forbidden to beat up a wife because she refuses to have a co-wife. While it is precarious to assess the augmentation or reduction of violence in contemporary Baruya society in absolute numbers, in comparison to the past, one can try and understand the dynamics of the perception of violence within the same society. It is hard for the

¹³ Which contrasts with the situations observed elsewhere in the country, where paying a brideprice has been used as "justification" for violent acts against a wife (see Eves 2006). Baruya women are more anxious about their husband beating them up if no exchange at all has been arranged.

¹⁴ The last female initiations were observed by Pascale Bonnemère in March 2010. Many informants have thus been able to tell me about the "teachings" received during their own initiation.

ethnographer to link up discourses with practice, as factoring in the incidents of violence that are not reported is an impossible task. Meanwhile, the tendency to glorify the past, and to paint it as a state of general happiness and smooth coexistence between the sexes (a rhetoric I very often heard on the field¹⁵) makes it hard to understand if the instances of violence have been aggravated, or made more public and thus more condemned. As a result, what seems to emerge in Baruya society is the idea that wife-beating is not a category of violence in itself, as beating up a wife becomes violent, and perceived as such, only when it is deemed inappropriate. The very fact that more and more acts of violence (between any given members of society) are perceived as inappropriate may be new. In the story opening this paper, the wife had refused to let her husband marry another woman. She was legitimate in her vetoing this decision, and the story should have ended there. Her husband got angrier when, after the first blow, she ridiculed him in public – because he was resorting to violence when he shouldn't have been. In such episodes of violence, never is the sentence “*em i gat ball*” invoked, either as justification or explanation. My contention is that it is not used in contexts that imply or reinforce a sense of male physical dominance – a dominance that is more and more often questioned, first and foremost as its symbolic grounding (the superiority and importance of semen) has been severely undermined.

To an extent, Baruya men still have to be “made”: the ritual of the initiations may be “*nating*”, devoid of meaning, as informants willingly repeat to me, but it still happens, and the first stage was held again in December 2013, when hundreds of young boys were separated from their mothers to be gathered in the housemen, and many pigs slaughtered and eaten together, to mark this moment as one of commensality for everyone in the valley. Yet I argue with Pascale Bonnemère (2015: 17) that these initiations may not so much make *men* as they make potential *fathers*. As such, it is not gender that emerges from the various rituals and teachings, it is a way of becoming another type of man within the social sphere – no longer just a brother or a son, but a father. As a result, people complain now that young men and women get “*marit nating*”, an essentially ambivalent expression that talks about the (temporary) absence or compensation (to be specified at a later date, as marriages happen before the exchange is effective, or even before its modality has been defined by the families) at the same time as it points to the fact that young people do not get married with the same “preparation” (initiation) as before: some girls may get married with no initiation, and the people complain that young men haven't learned, as boys, how to grow a garden, build a house, be a husband and a father – at least not as effectively as in the past. This ultimate recourse to physicality, expressed in the graphic quote I used as title to this paper, is all the more interesting that Baruya men do not get caught up in any form of denigration

¹⁵ But, as I stated above, at odds with what Godelier observed, e.g. 1986: 148.

for “not being modern”, even in their shaming of the new generation – men are shamed for not being like their glorious ancestors, not for not being like the figure of the modern entrepreneur. After all, “em i gat ball”, still.

It is always in the modalities of being a certain type of man or a woman involved in a certain type of relationship (a sibling, a spouse, an affine) that people define what kind of man or woman they are, and that is where they can potentially “fail”: men are bad husbands when they beat up their wives; adult women who are violent towards other adults will even be called “childish”, as they behave like “little girls”. But for the Baruya gender is what orients someone’s actions, a frame within which to act (appropriately or not) in a certain type of relationship that one’s gender will always imply (as everyone has parents, gets married and has affines). As Meyana, a 55-year-old shaman, once said to me and a group of women, after a long session on genealogies: “alright, now you women, you go work, me, I’m a man, I can just sit here and smoke”. As a man, or as a woman, people should act in such and such a way, actions that are further specified within an array of relationships involving the same or the other sex. When Baruya people point to a cat, or to a baby, and tell me “*em i gat ball*”, or when they are drawing little people on a blackboard with chalk and add their genitalia saying “*em i man, em i gat ball nau*”, it looks like gender is located into the body – a characteristic that is there or is missing, but that is always the stepping stone from which the rest will ensue.

Later on, what kind of man they will become – a lazy one, a Great one, a successful one – doesn’t only depend on initiations anymore, as new *avenues* for Greatmanship and prestige open up, even if *statuses* disappear. The irony is, these avenues for pursuing male agency are now open to women as well, who find more and more space in society to be seen and heard. But one fact remains, strong enough (for now) to keep women out of certain negotiations, to create double standards when it comes to politics, and to define, when is convenient, people’s “appropriate” behaviours: *meri i no gat ball*.

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