



La Vie qui vient d'ailleurs. Mouvements, échanges et rituels dans les Hautes-Terres de la Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée (Comparative Anthropological Studies in Society, Cosmology and Politics, Vol. 10). By Almut Schneider

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La Vie qui vient d'ailleurs. Mouvements, échanges et rituels dans les Hautes-Terres de la Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée

(*Comparative Anthropological Studies in Society, Cosmology and Politics*, Vol. 10).

By **Almut Schneider**

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La Vie qui vient d'ailleurs is the first monograph ever written in French on a population of the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Moreover, it proposes a different perspective on a society, the Gawigl, close to the Melpa (or Hageners), who are well known for their large-scale ceremonial exchanges and Big-Men as described and analysed in the seventies and eighties by Andrew and Marilyn Strathern. Almut Schneider focuses on life-cycle exchanges (*magadl*) and horticulture, and shows that for the Gawigl external elements (women, tubers, spirits) are needed for the creation and reproduction of local social entities.

After having clearly presented the debates that animated the anthropology of the area from the sixties onwards (for example, How are local groups constituted? Or Is the notion of unilineal descent useful in explaining the territorial configuration?), the author introduces her own perspective, which is deeply anchored in ethnography but does not resort to the vocabulary commonly used in anthropology. Terms like clan and local group are replaced by the Gawigl notions of Name ('Nom') and House ('Maison'), which the author has uncovered progressively by living for almost two years in the small Marapugul Valley.

The book itself is constructed with the idea of reflecting the logic of the ethnographer's observations (p. 21). The three first chapters are thus devoted to presenting the different spaces in which the Gawigl move about: the forest and its different states (Chapter 1), the forest gardens (Chapter 2) and the inhabited space, with its small gardens, houses and ceremonial places (Chapter 3).

Chapter 2 'Planter : Les jardins de la forêt' (Planting: Forest gardens) is exemplary of the sharpness of the author's ethnography. From the presentation of the gardening work by both genders and the analysis of garden products as temporal markers in the relational network created between a man who decided to open a new garden (who is called the root-man, 'l'homme racine') and other men to whom he lent the use of some plot, there is not one dimension of horticulture that is not described in detail. Above all, one should recall that the root-man is not considered as the owner of the garden he opened but as an 'organiser of cultivable lands' and that plants cannot reproduce if the cuttings come from the place they first grew in. Planting supposes transplanting from one place to another.

Chapter 3 describes the spatial organisation of local entities, with their houses, sweet potato gardens, paths and ceremonial places. Two local terms are introduced. The House is composed of the brothers and sons of a particular place and associated with a ceremonial place. Houses are unstable residential entities, which like human beings are born and die, move after marriage or when going to live in another place, by contrast with land and Names which are fixed local entities (p. 108). This implies that although 'Names and Houses have common features such as the sharing of arable land, of food, and of the ceremonial gifts they receive' (p. 162), a Name cannot be considered as a House that is simply more populated.

Separated by a series of pictures that give a true sense of the life of the people, four chapters follow, with the first having a transitional character between the first three devoted, as I have already said, to the way Gawigl space is organised and the last three concerned with

life-cycle exchanges and rituals. Chapter 4, the transitional chapter, is the most technical and difficult of all since it analyses the kinship terminology but thanks to the many diagrams and the synthesis, which is much longer here than in the other chapters, the reader has a better idea of what the text is talking about. The author focuses on gender as one classifying criterion and aims to show how it is used in the kinship terminology and how it is combined to other distinctions: generation, laterality, and affinity (p. 123). In doing so, she follows the approach that French anthropologists Barraud and Alès put forward in a book they edited in 2001 (*Sexe absolu ou sexe relatif ? De la distinction de sexe dans les sociétés*, Éditions de la maison des sciences de l'homme) and does not really care to qualify the kinship terminology among the types defined by Morgan (she only says in passing that it is Iroquois in a footnote, p. 130). The result of her analysis is that what makes the difference between vocabularies used by men and women with regard to affinity is marriage, because it separates the brother-sister pair. With regard to consanguinity, the male and female terminologies are distinct with respect to the generations referred to, that is, with respect to the time difference. In other words, marriage establishes a dissymmetry, which carries social values, but that is ephemeral since the generational temporality draws quickly the system back to symmetry within the consanguinal vocabulary (p. 150).

Chapter 5, precisely on marriage, is quite detailed and focuses both on the negative rules that organise it and on the numerous payments and exchanges involved. Here again, figures representing the directions in which pigs and money move are much appreciated. On the whole, the chapter reveals that the main objective of marriage is to open 'new paths', that is to have relations of affinity in the maximum number of Houses possible. This is a characteristic of other Western Highlands societies, where marriages are closely associated with ceremonial exchanges. The idea is 'to turn strangers and people living far away into affines in order to engage long-term exchanges with them' (p. 194). This has of course an effect on the kinds of preferred marriages: for example, as far as possible, no marriage ever replicates a former one. Over time, relations of affinity are transformed into relations with maternal kin, which are very important both in daily life and ceremonial events.

The following two chapters focus on rituals and exchanges. Chapter 6 'seeks to understand how paths between Houses established through marriage are made, unmade and made again over time' (p. 202). The text thus deals with child conception, transmission of vital substances and principles, birth, and the *magadl* exchanges that are done for children and male deceased. These exchanges link two Houses with different Names over the time of a human life. The *magadl* prestations are organised by a father for his children and by his sons in the case of a deceased man. They are organised in three phases: the first (that of the 'plantation') lasts several years and consists of regular gifts of food made by the wife's family to her and her husband. They cease when the father of a child gives the *magadl* prestation to the child's maternal uncle. The second phase consists in assembling this prestation, and the third is the *magadl* feast. The *magadl* prestation is composed of pigs (from five to twenty) and money (from one to ten thousands kinas) and, like the bridewealth, requires mobilising one's relationships. The *magadl* feast gathers people (affines, maternals, exchange partners from the Name of the two Houses involved – that of the child's father (or the deceased's sons) and that of the child's maternal uncle. Speeches relating the history of the relationship between the giver and the receiver of the prestation accompany the display of pigs, which are attached in a row on the ceremonial ground. A big meal of pork and tubers, which have been cooked in large earth ovens in the morning, follows. To explain why the *magadl* is not made by the sons of a dead woman, A. Schneider proposes that this is because her maternals have already received a large part of the marriage payment, which terminates the relations a woman has with her maternal uncles and their House. By contrast, 'for a man, his relation to his mother's House ceases only when he dies' (p. 245).

Based on what elderly Gawigl men told the author and not on first-hand observations, Chapter 7 describes and analyses a ritual – called ‘making the named-spirit (faire l’esprit-nommé)’ – that was performed once a generation, the last having been held at the beginning of the nineties. Names, as the most encompassing social entities, were involved here. The ritual was organised when general fertility was felt to be declining and the knowledge associated with it always came from an outside Name: an expert spent weeks with the men of the Name who had decided to perform the ritual and guided them all along. It would be too long to describe in detail the whole set of ritual actions involved, but let us say that it was composed of three moments. The first consisted in collecting and burying stones – the ‘bones of the Spirit’ – and in building a high fence to shield the men’s activities from the eyes of women and children. Inside two long houses were erected, separated by a long earth oven, and one small house, called the ‘house of the Spirit’, which would house the stones during the last phase of the ritual. The second moment lasted up to two years and was essentially devoted to acquiring pigs and making them grow. Relations with affines and maternal kin were subject to changes because the prestations due by men to their wives’ families had to be postponed and kept for the ‘making the named-spirit’ ritual. The last phase was very short in comparison: after a three-day seclusion, the men left the Spirit place, fully decorated, and performed the ‘Spirit dance’, while hundreds of pigs were cooking in the earth ovens nearby. The first afternoon, the ritual specialist had unearthed the stones and placed them on ferns inside the small house. Once the first cooking was finished, he took several pieces of fat to coat the stones, and the next day, local specialists painted them. After the dance, the specialists took out the stones and buried them exactly in the place from which they had been taken.

Schneider interprets all these gestures as representing the birth of the Spirit, to which a body was given through the ointment of grease and the painting. According to her, their burial is equivalent to conception (here the result of male action only), and the second phase, during which pigs are gathered and nourished, to gestation. The capacity of the Name to regenerate itself is demonstrated by the final feast, with the meat of hundreds of pigs being distributed and eaten.

In this study, the author reveals that ‘the exteriority principle’ organises the relations between persons, between persons and land, and between Houses. As in horticulture, where cuttings must come from another garden, reviving general fertility requires the intervention of a ritual expert from another Name, who imports a foreign Spirit. This fundamental value takes two forms: a movement from the exterior and the arrival of something unknown and distant.

Finally, the author’s main hypothesis is that the ‘making the named-spirit’ ritual has something to do with the constitution of groups. She posits that its analysis can help to understand the plasticity of the social units and the way they change in time and space. In this regard, the book offers a new perspective on a topic that has attracted the attention of scholars for decades.

This work must thus be recognised as making contribution on two levels: it is a very detailed ethnography of a Western Highlands group with a focus on horticulture, life-cycle exchanges and a ritual that was not studied by previous ethnographers in the area; and it is also a new theoretical proposition for understanding the social morphology of Highlands populations in general.

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