



**HAL**  
open science

## Making the Baruya great again: From glorified great men to modern suffering subjects?

Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke

► **To cite this version:**

Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke. Making the Baruya great again: From glorified great men to modern suffering subjects?. Australian Journal of Anthropology, 2019, 30 (1), pp.68-83. 10.1111/taja.12305 . hal-02473278

**HAL Id: hal-02473278**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02473278>**

Submitted on 11 Mar 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**Making the Baruya Great Again:  
From Glorified Great Men to Modern Suffering Subjects?**

*Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke – EHESS, CREDO*

**Abstract**

This paper explores avenues for prestige-making now available to and championed by the Baruya, the archetypal “Great Man” people of Papua New Guinea who I recently studied following previous work by Maurice Godelier. Amid critiques by Robbins and Ortner of anthropologists’ drive to document and empathize with “suffering subjects,” I suggest that being “left behind” and “forgotten” is an important part of Baruya social life that reinterprets previous ways of “making great men.” Baruya exposure to material and institutional modernity remains very limited. Local rhetorics of being “last place” (*las ples*) are both concomitant and discordant with Baruya assumptions and assertions of being “the greatest people” of their region. Unable to revive traditional contexts for producing great men through warriorship, shamanism, cassowary hunting, and salt-making, Baruya turn to the very modernity they cannot quite reach for their own pursuit of masculinity and prestige – which paradoxically now lies within domains also open to women. Desirous to both establish continuity with their glorified past and to depart from it, Baruya’s local modernity itself constraints their newly-shaped desire for prestige – and dramatically changes gender relations in the process. Though the concrete impossibility to “be great” reinforces Baruya perceptions of enduring what we might call a “suffering slot”, the larger issue is how concrete experiences sediment into socio-cultural change over time. This process is informed by a tension between a quest for modernity and its larger failure, resulting in a drive to re-ignite longer standing values of morality, spirituality – and ultimately, greatmanship.

**Acknowledgments**

This paper was originally delivered at the 2017 American Anthropological Association meetings (AAA) held in Washington DC, in a session entitled “Dark Anthropology and the Savage Slot”, organized by Bruce Knauff and myself. My contribution owes a lot to Bruce Knauff and to our discussant Dan Jorgensen, whose fine and constructive comments and revisions have been invaluable. My doctoral fieldwork was conducted under the supervision of Pascale Bonnemère, who I thank heartily, as well as all my Baruya interlocutors. All errors, deficiencies or shortcomings obviously remain my own.

### **Greatness and suffering as analytic tools and emic perspectives**

On a fine summer's day of 2013, my 31-year-old male friend Raiwin and I were casually talking, and, unprompted, he boasted to me that the Baruya had won a national archery competition back in the 1980s, justifying it with a definitive statement: "we're the best in the world in shooting bows and arrows... maybe second only to the Indians". Such assertion is supported, in Baruya vision of themselves as a remarkably skilled warrior group, by recent factual exploits, like winning the 7-year war against their neighbors and traditional enemies the Ipmani. A mixture of historical reality and fantasized accounts about themselves thus fuels a clear male feeling of superiority with regards to other groups in the country. Their sense of "being on the map" (and, for some of them, of being downright world-wide known) is in turn reinforced and justified by the existence of Godelier's books dedicated to them (and which they have seen and sometimes read in their English translation), and by documentaries made about their own male initiations or wider aspects of their culture ("Towards Baruya Manhood", was made by the Australian filmmaker Ian Dunlop in 1969, and "Her name came on Arrows: A kinship interview with the Baruya of New Guinea", was made by Allison and Marek Jablonko in the 1970s). The Baruya fully embrace the prestige associated with being the only tribal group in the region to have had long-term visits from three generations of European anthropologists: they would in fact tell me with great pride that the neighboring Ipmani and Wantekia would lament to them that they wished some white anthropologists would settle among them and write down the stories of their ancestors.

As the archetypal "Great men", the Baruya happen to be quite well-known within Melanesian anthropology: following his long-term ethnography among them, Godelier coined the term (1986) and enriched previous paradigms of political stratification prevalent in the region (see Sahlins 1963 and A. Strathern 1971 for later rich exemplification of the Big-man model in ethnographic case study). These "Great men" have also had an experiential sense of being great in ways that exceed and complement their traditional avenues for Greatmanship. Not only did some of them use to be fearless warriors, powerful bush doctors, renowned salt-makers, skillful cassowary hunters, but as a group they were *greater* than any other tribal group in the region. In other words, while it could be argued that "greatness" is an outside analytic attribution (a tool built by Western ethnographers to account for a political system different from existing ones), it can be argued that these "Great men" have had a long-standing sense of *being* great: their emic sensibilities are not reinforced but rather reflected by the model of political economy. Greatness

is part and parcel of their own lived experience and the way they (re)present and assert themselves both to neighboring groups and to external visitors<sup>1</sup>.

Meanwhile, and not in complete contradiction with the previous statements, the rhetoric most often heard while in the field in 2013-2014 (thirty-five years after Godelier's last long-term field trip) was that of being forgotten about, of being the "last place" for development and "modernity" to happen in concrete ways (this "*las ples*" syndrome is commonly found in rural Papua New Guinea – see Englund and Leach 2000: 230, Jacka 2005: 649, Kulick 1992). Like similarly remote places in New Guinea (e.g. the Gebusi of the Western Province, see Knauft 2002a, 2002b), the Baruya haven't been subject to significant out-migration, land alienation or resource extraction. Contacted in 1952, they overall have felt little outside encroachment or coercion. Their exposure to material and institutional modernity remains limited: despite the presence of elected councils and local representatives of justice, as well as government workers such as teachers and health workers, their daily complaint is that they have been left out of the government's preoccupations or rationale for development. The relative absence of government is illustrated materially: local infrastructures are virtually absent, as there is no road connecting the Baruya to the nearest town, and no Digicel tower in the area providing them with cell-phone coverage; in the Wonenara valley, populated by some 2,500 inhabitants, there is no running water or electricity<sup>2</sup>. The one bush clinic (*haus sike*) of the area is rarely restocked and often closed; I do not know of any child or adult ever receiving a vaccine (or anything other than amoxicillin, for that matter). This lack of transportation infrastructures has material impacts, mostly on the high prices of the (rare) manufactured goods men and women buy, and on the low rates of the parchment coffee they sell. The Baruya participate in capitalist development but are marginalized within it, which starkly contrasts with their former success as salt-makers in the traditional tribal exchanges in the region (see Lemonnier 1981, 1984). The Baruya thus say that in today's national context they are the "last" subjects, but they strongly feel they don't deserve to be, as "Great subjects".

---

<sup>1</sup> Baruya sociopolitical history prior and during colonialism is not irrelevant here, and can be underscored to compare their situation with other highly marginalized peoples, and to potentially account for how tropes of modernity, progress or development are differentially appropriated or resisted: Baruya were regionally successful as the dominant warring group in their local context, which contrasts diametrically with other interior New Guinea groups, such as Gebusi (with whom I conducted 5 months of fieldwork in 2016-2017 with Bruce Knauft). The latter were largely passive victims of unilateral Bedamini overrunning (e.g. Knauft 1999, 2002a), and for them the incursion of white colonization and ensuing pacification resulted in relative progress in terms of their own regional place, which was not the case for Baruya, who rather felt a form of cultural demotion in their region (see below). This difference seemingly informs or at least influences some of their divergent responses to appropriation of modern tropes in newly divergent neo-traditionalizing ways (see Knauft, this volume).

<sup>2</sup> Note that the Adventists successfully completed, in June 2014, a hydro-electric project in the neighboring Baruya valley of Marawaka, a two-day walk away from Wonenara.

Amid recent critiques by Robbins (2013) and Ortner (2016) of anthropologists' drive to document and empathize with "suffering subjects", I suggest that being "left behind" and "forgotten about" is an important part of Baruya social life that reinterprets and informs previous ways of "making great men". As they themselves endorse a discourse about being suffering subjects, and insofar as this is an emic perspective, the trope of the suffering slot cannot be overlooked or glossed as the analyst's construction, but can also be taken, at least to an extent, at face value. The concrete rendering of such discourse will be analyzed through various lenses, in order to question a potential gendered dimension of the suffering subject, as well as a generational one<sup>3</sup>. Before doing so, it seems necessary to submit the discourse around greatness to the same questionings: one may ask to what extent my own analysis centered around greatness was prompted by my being a third-generation ethnographer in the area, whose theoretical lens was greatly influenced by that of my predecessors. Similarly, the gendered component of my own subject position could be relevant in trying to understand whether men were trying to come across as particularly "Great" to a woman. The degree to which "greatness" is an outside analytic attribution that reinforces as opposed to reflects emic Baruya sensibilities is somewhat lessened by the fact that assertions of superiority were multiple and unprompted. This is why I frame them as dimensions of lived experience: Baruya men are constantly picturing and presenting themselves as "the best at" (archery, making gardens, passing exams, making machetes<sup>4</sup>, etc.). The fact that I frame such assertions now as claims to "greatness" instead of using words such as "strength", "excellence" or even "dominance" ("*mipela igat moa strong*", "*mipela nambawan*", "*mipela igat moa save*") is probably informed by the model coined by Godelier. I do not believe it invalidates the analysis, insofar as the point for Baruya is to claim such superiority, as a group, in their region, if not the country or the world.

As Robbins (2013) suggests turning to the study of the good, of the resilient and recuperative ways in which people deal with their conditions and foster positive values even in their disenfranchised settings, one may ask whether the very condition of suffering isn't in itself

---

<sup>3</sup> One may also ask to what extent such questioning around greatness was also prompted by my being a third-generation ethnographer in the area, whose theoretical lens was greatly influenced by that of my predecessors. The degree to which "greatness" is an outside analytic attribution that reinforces as opposed to reflects emic Baruya sensibilities is somewhat lessened by the fact that assertions of superiority were multiple and unprompted. This is why I frame them as dimensions of lived experience: Baruya men are constantly picturing and presenting themselves as "the best at" (archery, making gardens, passing exams, making machetes – and, when proven wrong on that score as their machetes state "made in Brazil", at cutting things with machetes – etc.). The fact that I frame such assertions now as claims to "greatness" instead of using words such as "strength", "excellence" or even "dominance" ("*mipela igat moa strong*", "*mipela nambawan*", "*mipela igat moa save*") is probably informed by the model coined by Godelier. I do not believe it invalidates the analysis, insofar as the point for Baruya is to claim such superiority, as a group, in their region, if not the country or the world.

<sup>4</sup> When proven wrong on that score as their machetes display the mention "made in Brazil", men would retort that they are at least the best at cutting things with machetes.

fueling such attempts and justifying some not-so-good practices<sup>5</sup>. In other words, can an “anthropology of the good” dispense altogether with an “anthropology of the suffering subject”?

### **Greatness in modernity?**

The tension between greatness and marginality is reflected in how Baruya men both reactivate long-standing values of Greatmanship while aspiring to modern ways of being great; but they bitterly assess their attempts at reaching modernity as not being as successful as the perceived ancestors’ achievements and enactments of greatness. Pacification and global economy have changed the conditions for status acquisition in contemporary Baruya, who feel unable to revive traditional contexts for producing great men through warriorship, shamanism, cassowary hunting, and salt-making. Some changing contexts have indeed erased the possibility for the emergence of the major types of Great men: since pacification, the great warriors (**aoulatta**) have become redundant; since a local dispensary opened, people have become more reluctant to seek out the help of a bush doctor (or **kulaka**); since the forest was cleared to make more gardens for a growing population, hunting cassowaries (**kayareumala**) is no longer practised, or very marginally. Coffee is now planted and produced in lieu of the traditional salt gardens, which traditionally allowed the renowned salt-maker (**tsimaye**) to produce potassium salt bars, used as currency which transited in inter-tribal networks of exchange, bringing in axes, shells and other exogenous goods (see Godelier 1969, Lemonnier 1981, 1984). Shifted opportunities and values have changed Baruya politics: in order to find the Great men of today, we need to let go of the assumption that initiation, warfare, salt and gender are the only means for a Baruya to become a Great man.

The main plight afflicting Baruya relationship to modernity is the fact that the current means of being modern offered to them are viewed as mostly out of reach. In this respect, Miller’s perspective is illuminating: he contends that “the condition of consumption represents, at the very least, one possible idiom for these larger problems of modernity” (1995: 2). According to him, modernity can be understood as the self-conscious awareness that one is forging identity through the consumption of exogenous objects. For Baruya, modernity seems to be conceptualized as the painful self-conscious awareness that one *cannot* forge identity through the consumption of exogenous objects or in fact through the production of traditional objects. This contrasts starkly with other ethnographic descriptions of the disjunctures introduced by

---

<sup>5</sup> As Robbins also acknowledges: “It is not that imaginings of the good cannot sometimes be set aside in practice or put to use in ideological projects that support the continued existence of structures of violence and suffering” (2013: 457).

modernity and the consumption of goods not produced by traditional forms of labor: Wardlow describes such a situation in the Southern Highlands, where Huli people worry over “the inundation of commodities from elsewhere, the decreasing prestige and moral value of physical labor” (2002a: 149). Baruya anxieties around the material domain are manifested differently: for them, material wealth is not a source of anxiety because it replaces older values, but because as an addition and reinforcement to long-standing socio-cultural values it is not easily accessible. Thus, the disjuncture that marks and qualifies Baruya modernity is not located in the “moral relationship between production, consumption, and value” (Wardlow 2002a: 161), but rather between the desirability and actual accessibility of modernity’s material manifestations, a tension which results in Baruya’s marginal (and awkward) position and posture: they are not as “great” as in the past but they cannot be as great as desired in the present.

Despite relative remoteness, even by national standards, Baruya are embedded within the global capitalist economy: they have used the space formerly taken by their salt-cane gardens to build an airstrip at the top of their valley; they traded their traditional salt-making skills (see Godelier 1969) for the “modern” ones of growing coffee, which is today their only cash crop. In the good years, parchment coffee brings its cultivators an average of PGK 1,000, or roughly USD 300 (per man landowner<sup>6</sup>, of which there are two dozens in the village of Wuyabo), thus putting the Baruya in a much more enviable position than equally remote groups lacking such means of making important amounts of money (see Knauff 2002a, 2002b), but in a less privileged position than some clans among other Highlands populations living near mining areas and who received land compensations (e.g. Jacka 2005 and this volume). Unable to now produce the potassium salt that once built their reputation in the region, older men also feel that this new avenue of Greatmanship is hard to achieve with the same success.

Interestingly, while opportunities have shifted, some previous avenues of prestige gain new purchase value in “modern” terms: the very existence of great men seems to work together with aspects of modern life, at times in mutual reinforcement. As Lemonnier recounts (2013: 208), two old men who used to officiate the Lutheran service (Gessom and Nareka – the latter is also a bush doctor), would regularly assert that local boys were the best at school because they were still initiated. Male initiations<sup>7</sup> are the very reason why people still have strength and can go to school at all: “In Goroka, I was told, two out of fifty pupils get to high school, whereas in

---

<sup>6</sup> Typically women do the bulk of the work of picking, pulping and drying the coffee cherries, but as men are the landowners, they tend to control the proceeds, which they frequently share with their wives and extended family.

<sup>7</sup> In contrast with Tuzin’s description of the collapse of the Tambaran among Ilahita Arapesh (1997), Baruya male initiations haven’t disappeared altogether, but have been greatly transformed (see Malbrancke 2017).

Wonenara or Marawaka<sup>8</sup>, fifty out of fifty pupils get to that level”<sup>9</sup> (*ibid.*, my translation). Similarly, when threats of a war with the neighboring tribe the Ipmani loomed (early 2013 and all the way until my departure in late April 2014), Baruya men and women of all ages would tell me that the **kulaka** (bush doctor), could jam the enemies’ Kalashnikovs and stop their bullets; despite their own less elaborate and less valuable guns (some homemade weapons and a couple of Winchesters, without any bullets), Baruya thus felt their traditional superiority could and would still protect them. They would lament, still, that they were somehow inferior materially, not being armed themselves with Kalashnikovs<sup>10</sup>. In this specific case, it appears that being a “suffering subject” in the “savage slot” is both recognized by Baruya and internalized as a condition, and used selectively as resistance or empowerment against the modernist stigma of being backward, less well endowed with modern equipment than their neighbors.

The willingness to assert greatness and superiority concretely but through traditional means (a war of bows and arrows with their former tribal enemies – over a land tenure issue to establish the property of a coffee garden) is not the prerogative of older men<sup>11</sup>. The youth may go to school, have more exposure to other cities in the country through contracted work in coastal plantations and in towns<sup>12</sup> but they also appropriate a discourse of greatness in both modern and more traditional settings, despite their elder’s (somewhat stereotypical) rhetoric of complaint about the state of the youth in a word they feel is neither modern nor traditional.

### **Modernity at a cross-road: *rot blo ol tumbuna* and *nupela rot***<sup>13</sup>

For Baruya, the choice to pursue the “modern way” and to embrace its prestigious symbols doesn’t negate the importance of “the way of the ancestors”, and doesn’t therefore imply “the embrace or rejection of “tradition” or “modernity”” (Wardlow 2002a: 151). I argue that the main principles of the dynamic between prestige and shame at the heart of Greatmanship persist, even

---

<sup>8</sup> The two Baruya populated valleys of the Eastern Highlands.

<sup>9</sup> My own account is that a bit over half the students were admitted into grade 9 after the grade 8 exam in October 2013; my friend Raiwin, whose quote opened this paper, ranked second in the whole district.

<sup>10</sup> It was often requested to me as a gift to bring along in my future fieldwork. My inquiries never revealed whether the Ipmani did in fact possess such guns; a very elaborate story of gun trafficking in the region through a white pilot formerly working for MAF was regularly repeated, but I could not find any actual eye-witness of such transactions.

<sup>11</sup> Note that during the months of skirmish, the enthusiastic lot were mostly the youth, who told me they wanted to prove they were the best. In fact, Nareka, an old bush doctor and former Lutheran pastor, told me once that he feared a war would start over a bunch of “impetuous hotheads”, when the majority of (older) men wanted things to settle down.

<sup>12</sup> I numbered around 150 Baruya who were living outside the Wonenara valley at the time of my fieldwork (out of 2,446 people). Most middle-aged and older men had been to town for work or pleasure in the past, while women of all ages were much less exposed to that opportunity (over half of the women formally interviewed had never left the area). Contrast with the situation observed by Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi among the Gende, where male emigration had reached 50% of men between the ages of 18 and 45 in the 1970 (2012: 85).

<sup>13</sup> The “way of the ancestors” and the “new way” as they were expressed by my interlocutors in the national vehicular language, *Tok Pisin*.



as its avenues have been modified: the “*rot blo tumbuna*” is all more glorified than the local socio-cultural values haven’t fundamentally changed in the modern context, but rather have adapted to it. The importance of having a family, of working in the gardens, of caring for affines, has not subsided even as the youth reaches for new systems of explanation – typically mentioning the importance of science over ancestral myths. Despite the undeniable prestige located in the consumption of manufactured foodstuff and in the possession of exogenous objects (whether these come from the town or the Whites, and notwithstanding their actual usefulness in the bush<sup>14</sup>), the rhetoric of the “*rabis man*”, elsewhere linked to a lack of material possessions, is only ever applicable among Baruya to lazy people, who do not have the work ethic that is otherwise fostered and rewarded socially. In fact, and in contrast with Big men logics (e.g. Godelier and Strathern 1991), money has not reached a stage of being socially valued in any significant way: masculinity is not measured only or mainly by material possessions (contrast with Knauff 1999), even though these are desirable and sought after; the incentive to earn money is not, for Baruya, linked with the need to prove one’s virility and “goodness”, measured mostly by the strength of people’s exchange performances (contrast for example with the Gende, also a Highland group, described by Zimmer-Tamakoshi, 2012: 84). The logics at the heart of Greatmanship have survived the introduction of money in the area: the greatness Baruya are trying to find and assert nowadays resonates and aligns, albeit in adapted form(s), with that of the past (see Malbrancke 2016a and b for more details on the structuring of power and the attribution of authority in a group that remains essentially acephalous).

This relationship to modernity is further exemplified by their adoption of Christianity. Among contemporary Baruya, the adoption of the Christian syntax is not at odds with maintaining or claiming to follow traditional values and practices, and Christianity is therefore not the object of any form of “resistance”, even from non-believers. Instead, converts and others are brought together around a core of shared values, whose strength and legitimacy have been reasserted on two simultaneous levels: as part of their ancestral tradition, and as emanation of an exogenous modernity. I was quickly struck by the tendency to bring “the rules of the Church” (or “Ten Commandments”) together with a corpus of indigenous laws re-phrased in a Christian idiom (the “Ten Laws of the Baruya” – see Malbrancke 2016c). This very rhetoric was highlighted as a justification for the decision to convert: my interlocutors would find conversion positive insofar as there were no compatibility problems in relation to their unanimously glorified

---

<sup>14</sup> Typically, people have mobile phones even though there is no Digicel coverage and can rarely recharge them (solar panels are rare in the valley, I counted 2 for 700 people living in the village. Videos or musical files are only available for download in town. Watches are also a praised item even though very few people actually need the time.

tradition. Christianity isn't a project perceived to complete the transition to the modern, as it is for example among Ipili (see Jacka 2005: 648). Among Baruya, Christian idioms and contents are used to justify rather than contravene or transform longstanding non-Christian values and practices: it appears that an indigenously secularized approach to Christianity supplants and informs Christian theological content without radically altering or modifying the traditional hierarchy of moral values. Instead, indigenous values regarding gender relations and social stratification orient the use of religious metaphors, which justify and sometimes reinforce traditional behaviors while casting them as modern. In fact, as Bonnemère has convincingly shown (2016), among Baruya churches as such do not establish a clear rupture from longstanding gender-based norms, and can even contribute to their reinforcement: her recent investigations demonstrate that only within denominations where a non-Baruya pastor preaches to the congregation can women find a larger public role.

It seems to me that the Christian subject does not suffer because he or she laments a past state of pre-Christianity that rimes with ignorance and backwardness (unlike in other documented cases in the region – e.g. Barker 2012, Errington & Gewertz 1995, Eriksen 2007, Jebens 2005, Knauft 2002a, Robbins 2004). Among Baruya as elsewhere, gender subordination is reshaped by engagements with modernity: while modernity opens up new contexts of opportunity for female identities, this very restructuring of prestige entails its own backlash effects, as men feel threatened in their own modern identity, because they are not the sole representatives or beneficiaries of newfound opportunities, such as contact with the outside, proximity to exogenous institutions like school, church, shops, etc. There is increased fear of women's licentiousness in these very places: non-Christian men typically tell me that people who attend the weekly services belong to a "*pamuk lain*" ("a depraved lot"), and young pupils are suspected of having sex in the bush instead of going to classes.

Contrary to what Knauft observed among the Gebusi people of the Western Province (e.g. 2002b), the local desires to be modern among Baruya do not spiral with a subordinated representation of what it means to be traditional – if anything, this very desire also fuels a sense of pride in what it means to be traditional. In his famous paper about "develop-man", Sahlins (1992) touches upon the concept of humiliation, later taken up by various contributors in an edited volume by Robbins and Wardlow (2005) and applied to different ethnographic settings. In his model, this psychological category is key in the process of socio-cultural change: for Baruya

however, it is striking that Christian conversion has not over time imposed or required rupture with or renunciation of traditional orientations, or any sense of humiliation of their past<sup>15</sup>.

We may ask if the Baruya distancing of Christianity is a way for Baruya *men* to retain as much of their own cultural and behavioural dominance: Baruya men not only go to church less often than women but could potentially see women as disrupting the traditional code insofar as gender relations are concerned (see Bonnemère 2016 and below). If men are *de facto* less associated with Christianity than are women, then their framing of a distinctively Baruya moral within the Christian rhetoric could be a means of reasserting their own gendered inscription within both Christianity and secular modernity. In fact, a source of shame for contemporary men may have to do with women's newfound role within modern settings. As Ortner complained, "there is still a certain deep masculinism to much of this scholarship, such that things like the study of women, children, families, genders, sexualities, and all the politics thereof seem beneath sustained notice" (1999: 990): my aim here is not only to touch on the gendered relation to modernity, but also to lay the emphasis on what appears to be a gendered profile of frustrated modernity among Baruya.

### ***Men as "suffering subjects"?***

Modernity is more than tangible material changes, it is also a horizon of (concrete or fantasized) possibilities, and as such its analysis requires to trace how rhetorics and claims to modernity articulate between generations and across genders. I argue here that men not only appropriate the means to be modern (and its prestigious manifestations), but also the discourse on modernity: they're the ones mentioning it, and portraying themselves as the "most suffering subjects" within it. Just as they were the ones confiscating all claims to greatness (apart from a couple of notable exceptions, as women could be **kulaka**, i.e. bush doctors), they now read the current situation through the lens of their own male prerogative to greatness, and interpret women's role within the modern context as newly experienced forms of "encroachment". An important transformation of Greatmanship, which in turn fuels the feeling of "suffering subject", is indeed the gendered dimension of these new prestigious avenues, which are now (in theory at least) also open to women. However, women gradually get access to prestigious avenues without phrasing any claim to greatness that would challenge male prerogatives. In other words, it seems that in

---

<sup>15</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, one finds the case of the Kwaio of New Guinea described by Akin (2005), and whose sense of humiliation derives from a sense of failure to remain fully traditional; it appears that among the Baruya the drive to be modern *and* traditional is how they assert greatness, and the failure to do both results in their sense of suffering.

the modern context Baruya women tend to work concretely in ways that advantage them *de facto* without « asserting » culturally to do so, especially at the expense of men.

As much of the research in Melanesia reminds us (e.g. Counts 1990, Eves 2006, Jolly et al. 2012, Knauff 1997, 1999, Wardlow 2002b, 2006, this volume), postcolonial contexts tend to draw women more than men into the “suffering slot”; gendered forms of violence point to “an important chapter in the “dark anthropology” of Papua New Guinea, a chapter that is still being written” (Wardlow, this volume). Among Baruya, however, modernity is marked by a decrease in gender-based forms of asymmetry and violence. In the olden days, women would be symbolically, materially, ideologically and politically subordinate to men (Godelier 1982: 222). With little power over their domestic trajectory or matrimonial destiny, Baruya women were also excluded from the possession of land, of sacred knowledge, and relegated to a minor role in decisions pertaining to the interest of the community (Godelier 1982: 223). This peripheral place in the public sphere was legitimised and reinforced by a deep-seated essentialist ideology that defined female bodily fluids as polluting and weakening, in opposition to semen, which was conceived of as the source of life and strength (Godelier 1982: 99). Previously ensconced in myriad traditional features of Baruya social and spiritual life that are now in decline or threatened, this substantialization of “male domination,” has in recent years itself largely evaporated. As I show elsewhere (Malbrancke 2017), as bodily substances and conception beliefs have been redefined, it is the ideological foundation of male domination that has been sapped at its core.

Women’s recent growing role in public spheres of social life can be placed along a continuum of combined transformations, which are located on ideological, political, and economic levels. The systematic and “necessary” subordination of women has lost its essentialist justification: no longer anchored in nature (in a polarization of the bodies), this political construction is being challenged on many fronts, leading to lessened practiced differences between the sexes. Some avenues are still largely hypothetical but not questioned *on principle*, even if double standards may still apply. Women are now finding spaces within the political and economic spheres, albeit with restrictions: they can run for council during the LLG elections, as people generally accept the idea of a woman “*bosim ol*” (being in charge of things) in politics, especially since the 2012 general elections brought a woman, Julie Soso, as governor of the Eastern Highlands Province<sup>16</sup>. However, double standards clearly apply: any man can run, but for a woman to be deemed an acceptable candidate, people (men and women) state that she needs to be educated.

---

<sup>16</sup> Defeated since then in the general elections of 2017.

Similarly, women's economic autonomy is a possibility, despite some constraints in the land tenure system: while women cannot own land, they are the ones doing most of the work of picking coffee and usually share or control all the proceeds with their husbands. It would still be unthinkable for a woman never to marry, but not impossible to leave their husband and be the single head of their household, and even to do business: a woman I knew, Parieuc, was single-handedly running the first sheep business in the valley since her husband had deserted her and moved to town (she had no wish of ever getting married again). Since the 2012 Tuition-Fee Free Policy was installed by O'Neill, girls have been attending school in growing numbers (families used to favor their sons over their daughters, as the latter were and still are more helpful in the gardens), but their presence there is fragile, and entirely depends on this policy being continued.

Interestingly, no women would ever frame such objective progress and penetration into avenues of prestige as a demonstration of "greatness" or as challenging men's authority – but rather as claims to equality<sup>17</sup>. Women's growing sense of their own responsibility in the material and social reproduction of the group is patent and illustrated on a daily basis in our formal and informal<sup>18</sup> conversations: they picture themselves as the "*bilum*" of the family (the national netbag, in which they carry children, foodstuff, firewood, but also a metaphor of their better handling of money), lament about men's growing negligence not only with tasks around their own houses but also with work dedicated to the community<sup>19</sup>. Their *de facto* achievements are never used, however, to claim cultural status in ways that would frontally challenge the male prestige system. The very concrete sense (and materialization) of women's usefulness within their own family and sometimes for the wider community (like clearing the paths or the market places) is not ever framed in a discourse asserting their role within the modern context, or asking for that acknowledgment from men.

---

<sup>17</sup> Such assertion begs further questioning though, as it calls to mind Ardener's famous piece on "Belief and the Problem of women" (1972: 3 and 6): the idea that men talk about themselves in terms of models, at a metalevel, while women would not, has to be challenged to make room for the possibility that it is rather the ethnographer's lens, combined with men's acquired talent for providing the researcher with bounded models he or she needed to collect, that eventually distorted my own understanding of women's narratives and self-positioning within modernity. I thank Dan Jorgensen for raising that point and must limit myself to quoting some of the ethnographic data I collected to better understand how and where women position themselves by contrast with men.

<sup>18</sup> On this I would quote Ardener again (1972: 2) only to specify that obtaining information from women was not an issue I faced particularly during my fieldwork; only a few older Baruya women could not speak *Tok Pisin*, and none ever refused to talk to me, with or without a translator. Formal interviews were rarer than with men, and typically yielded much less interesting information than our informal talks (especially when a husband or brother was known to have been formally interviewed already). Casual conversations often led to very intimate confidence, and helped me get a more refined sense of how Baruya women conceptualize and represent their position within society and modernity, with regards to men.

<sup>19</sup> One complaint had to do with the fact that men took on the collective task of building fences around the airstrip at the start of my fieldwork in 2013, per official regulation; however, no one thought of including a gate anywhere, for women to be able to cross the airstrip and fetch water more quickly and easily; instead our daily trips doubled in time and distance, as we had to go around the fence to reach the source.

Despite this relative discretion from women, it appears that men feel threatened and express this in different ways: among Baruya as elsewhere, recent changes linked to the advent of material modernity result in daily reactivation of longer-standing notions of gender propriety. While gender-based manifestations of violence are less normative than they used to be, and more often subject to discussions and retribution in the village, forms of male resentment against female appropriations of modernity lead to new manifestations of violence or, more subtly, animosity and a default mode of antagonism and mistrust. While the formal stigmatization of women declines (notably with the gradual disappearance of the belief in female pollution), it finds new informal ways of resurfacing, through reinforced forms of domestic constraint. One example from my time in the field is quite telling in this respect: Essira had been appointed as women's representative in a government-funded initiative, but her husband Gonoï prevented her from taking on this public role, without providing any explanation (to either her or me when I asked). Ultimately, it seemed that only a divorced woman, her sister Djelaila, could take on the post without fear of being stopped by a male relative.

As Wardlow has analyzed (2002a: 162), the “traditionalization” of women is also a function of modernity, insofar as women become placeholders of the past: while men would have to deal with the business of becoming modern, women would embody the (reassuring) stability of tradition. However, the Baruya situation slightly diverges from this narrative, as Baruya men tend to want to personify and appropriate both modernity *and* tradition. However, faced with female's attempts at being modern, men's anxieties result, to an extent, in a reactivation of long-standing notions of gender propriety as backlash to female growing role in modern contexts. Typically, notions revolving around what it means to be a “good wife/good woman” (*gutpela meri*) are given new purchase value. “Feminine propriety” (Knauft 1997) is reactivated as specters of female independence loom – women running their own business, women being heads of their households and not wanting to remarry, women refusing a sister-exchange marriage, women's proficiency in *Tok Pisin*, etc. Similarly, people's anxieties around female forms of freedom crystalize around the (fantasized) figure of the “*tukina meri*”<sup>20</sup>, who comes to embody everything that is wrong with modernity – including the very desire for money, which men feel should be their sole prerogative.

Men pose as suffering subjects, while women are given avenues to be modern but without framing their own achievements as modern ones. However, women also phrase their

---

<sup>20</sup> I was never given the chance to talk with a self-acknowledged *tukina meri*, or with a man who confessed to having sexual intercourse with such women. The name comes from the 2-kina banknote, worth about 60 cents of an American dollar, and has come to be used in any context to illustrate someone's lack of commitment or deviant behavior.

complaints in this modern setting (mostly amongst themselves or to me, sometimes unprompted): it is clear from their statements that their own suffering does not strictly overlap with men's, even though they may express grievances about the lack of money and transportation to town. More specifically, contemporary Baruya women explain that they are forced to have more children than in the past (as they lament to me that men have abandoned the traditional taboos restricting sexual intercourse – see Malbrancke 2017 for more details). As a result of having larger families, women do not have the time or energy to raise pigs<sup>21</sup>, as they are too busy harvesting sweet potato or other staple food for their offspring and husband. In their own picture of “modernity”, women feel that their work is heavier than in the past. As Clark and Hughes remind us (1995), quantifying change is arduous, for the current perception of effort and labor can itself be informed by a distorted vision of the past (either idealized or decried as “obscurantist”). In the early 1970s, Godelier assessed that Baruya women were worse off from the introduction of steel tools than men, whose own labor/leisure ratio bettered with the advent of technical modernity (1973: 217).

The “suffering subject” as analytic tool is not a monolithic one: analyzing the gendered dimension of the “suffering subject” allows us to bring up relative suffering and suffering in different ways. Men suffer vis-a-vis modernity, and women's relatively elevated status with respect to it, while women suffer domination at the hands of men, both traditionally and also continuingly in the present. Men resist in the sense of « keeping Baruya Manship Great Again » at least in cultural terms. But on the other hand, women exert their own resistance to victimization within the new structures that modernity entails, like the public mediation of conjugal conflicts. In fact, in the realm of law and order, a striking misunderstanding orients men's disillusion with modern justice: to them, if the ever so distant “*gavman*” (government) ever manifests itself, it is in favour of women: “you just have to look at the law, it's made on purpose for women!”. This misrepresentation stems from the fact that the Constitution is referred to as “*Mama Lo*” (the Mother of all Laws), which people wrongly understand as a law designed for women (“*mama*” is a common *Tok Pisin* expression to refer to a wife or mother), aimed, first and foremost, at defending women. In consequence, men would typically assume that any accusation of rape would lead to a magistrate ruling against the man in the village court; as a result, men come to question on principle any woman's accusation of rape, casting it as a lie, an attempt to obtain compensation money from an innocent man.

---

<sup>21</sup> According to my own census, in Wuyabo there were in 2014 three times fewer adult pigs than in 1969 (see Malbrancke 2016a, pp.80-81).

Overall, men now lament that they have to obey women's orders (even at the provincial level), and even use the changing weather patterns as illustration that "when women are in charge, everything goes awry" (as Meyana, a 55-year old bush doctor, told me). Ultimately, *men* are perceiving and representing themselves as the epitome of the "suffering subject" in the modern context: not only do they hijack pretense to modernity, but also all pretense to its "darker side" – they are the only ones suffering in it.

### **Conclusion:**

Among Baruya then, the category of "suffering subject" appears to be part of a male emic perspective and discourse, a category of lived experience which in itself shapes local understandings of modernity: despite individual variability in attaining "modern" means of prestige (be it doing business, becoming a church leader, attending school, going to town, being friends with the white ethnographers), there is a constant in the way men talk about themselves as a group in the face of modernity. In their view, modernity becomes a scale, with its different "stages" of development (effective as well as fantasized or projected), which give rise to and reason for bitter comparison with other groups in the valley. However, this category has no long-standing cultural value, but stems from perceived changes happening in the country, which in themselves and by contrast create remoteness and suffering. It is a product of modernity, not insofar as it results from the analyst's perception, but because it appears among Baruya to be a recent construction borne out of frustration in front of the contrast between a glorified past and a mediocre present. Indeed, it is part of the received rhetoric to paint Baruya ancestors as essentially "content" people: they were those who could go under the rain with no clothes on, those who could defeat their enemies with bows and arrows, those who could work hard and had free food, and mainly those who could hold "proper" initiations and become "real men" ("*man tru tru*"). The locally pervasive feeling of being downgraded, taken down the spiral of cultural demotion, is created by a local construction of the "before and after" (Knauft 2002a). The discordance between their desire to be progressive and a concrete impossibility to do so (both in their own terms and in ways that resonate with the spectacle of modernity they sometimes catch a glance of) is what makes the suffering subject. To Baruya then, suffering is an attribute of modernity. As Knauft puts it, modernity creates a "political economy of marginality" (2002b: 131). Therefore, the self-acknowledged suffering subject tries to find ways of making himself – as individual and as a group – great again. It seems then that the anthropology of the good and the suffering subjects are complements, which analytically imply each other.



The concrete impossibility to “be great” reinforces Baruya perceptions of enduring suffering, a sense of “second-classness” which is not always “complemented by a greater sense of assurance in homegrown space” (Knauff 2002b: 125), as a growing sense of inadequacy marks all spheres of social life. As Jacka (this volume) aptly pinpoints, an “anthropology of the good”, complementing the study of the suffering subject by an examination of “the different ways people organize their personal and collective lives in order to foster what they think of as good” (Robbins 2013: 457) runs against problem of level or scale. What is good for individuals may not be from the group’s perspective. Among Baruya it seems that combatting a sense of (male) suffering entails reassertions of greatness at times directed *against* members of the community, mostly women.

The larger issue at stake is how concrete experiences sediment into socio-cultural change over time, and how the quest for change results in a drive to re-ignite longer standing values of morality, spirituality, and Greatmanship. More than the inseparability of continuity and difference, the example of the Baruya seems to emphasize how continuity can be sought out and sometimes achieved through change, and even reinforced when change is desired but unreachable. There is no clear sense of ruptural change, and not a mere illustration of continuity in change, but rather continuation in trying to achieve change, and the sedimentation of former values in their adaptation to different contexts (see Sahlins 1981).

The idea of humiliation as a trigger towards change can be usefully elaborated upon, as the the notion can be adopted but displaced, not to account for rupture and social change (Robbins and Wardlow 2005), but rather for social continuity. It would appear from this example that when change is desired but unreachable, this very humiliation (becoming a suffering subject through cultural demotion) fuels cultural continuity. On the one hand, humiliation directed at indigenous culture and values opens the possibility for radical cultural change (people being convinced of their own worthlessness in modern contexts), but, on the other hand, humiliation directed at people’s failed attempts to change their indigenous culture may re-ignite a form of endogenous willingness to reassert their own former cultural glory. Among Baruya however, this self-consciousness does not fuel the rhetoric of *kastom*, used elsewhere to reject Western dominance altogether (see Keesing 1982, Tonkinson 1982). It is within this Westernized, “modern” context, whose very logics seem to escape their control, that Baruya men want, and try, to be “great again”.

## Bibliography

- AKIN, David, 2005. "Ancestral Vigilance and the Corrective Conscience in Kwaio: Kastom as Culture in a Melanesian Society". In *The Making of Global and Local Modernities in Melanesia. Humiliation, Transformation and the Nature of Cultural Change*. ROBBINS, Joel, and Holly Wardlow (eds.), pp.183-206. Aldershot, England: Ashgate.
- ARDENER, Edwin, 1972. "Belief and the Problem of Women". In *Perceiving Women*. ARDENER, Shirley (ed.), pp.1-17. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- BARKER, John, 2012. "Secondary Conversion and the Anthropology of Christianity in Melanesia". *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 157: 67-87.
- BONNEMÈRE, Pascale, 2016. "Church presence and gender relations in the Wonenara valley (Eastern Highlands Province, PNG)". *TAJA he Australian Journal of Anthropology* 27 (2): *Gender Revisited: Towards a re-definition of gender through Christianity in Melanesia*, pp. 206-225.
- CLARK, Jeffrey and Jenny Hughes, 1995. "A History of Sexuality and Gender in Tari". In *Papuan Borderlands: Huli, Duna, and Ipili Perspectives on the Papua New Guinea Highlands*. A. Biersack, ed. Pp. 315-340. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- COUNTS, Dorothy (ed.), 1990. *Domestic Violence in Oceania. Pacific Studies*, vol.13, no.3 (special issue).
- ENGLUND, Harri, and James Leach, 2000. "Ethnography and the Meta-Narratives of Modernity". *Current Anthropology* 41(2): 225–248.
- ERIKSEN, Annalin, 2007. *Gender, Christianity and Change in Vanuatu: An Analysis of Social Movements in North Ambrym*. London and New York: Routledge.
- ERRINGTON Frederick and Deborah Gewertz, 1995. *Articulating Change in the "Last Unknown"*. Boulder, Westview.
- EVES, Richard, 2006. *Exploring the Role of Men and Masculinities in Papua New Guinea in the 21st Century: How to address violence in ways that generate empowerment for both men and women*. Report for Caritas Australia.
- GODELIER, Maurice, 1969. "La monnaie de sel des Baruya de Nouvelle-Guinée". *Journal of the Papua New Guinea Society* 3: 17-23).
- 1973. "Outils de pierre, outils d'acier chez les Baruya de Nouvelle-Guinée". *L'Homme* 13(3) : 187-220.
- 1986 [1982]. *The Making of Great Men: Male Domination and Power among the New Guinea Baruya*. Transl. by Rupert Swyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- GODELIER, Maurice and Marilyn Strathern (eds.), 1991. *Big Men and Great men: Personifications of Power in Melanesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- JACKA, Jerry K., 2005. "Emplacement of Millennial Expectations in an Era of Development and Globalization: Heaven and the Appeal of Christianity for the Ipili". *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 107, No. 4, 643-653.
- JEBENS Holger, 2005, *Pathways to Heaven: Contesting Mainline and Fundamentalist Christianity in Papua New Guinea*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- JOLLY, Margaret, Christine Stewart and Carolyn Brewer (eds.), 2012. *Engendering Violence in Papua New Guinea*. ANU Press.
- KEESING, Roger M., 1982. "Kastom in Melanesia: an Overview", *Mankind* Vol. 13(4), pp.297-301.
- KNAUFT, Bruce M., 1997. "Gender Identity, Political Economy and Modernity in Melanesia and Amazonia". *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp.233-259.
- 1999. *From Primitive to Postcolonial, in Melanesia & Anthropology*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- 2002a. *Exchanging the Past. A Rainforest World of Before and After*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- 2002b. "Trials of the Oxymodern. Public Practice at Nomad Station", in *Critically Modern: Alternative, Alterities, Anthropologies*. B. Knauft, ed. Pp. 105-143. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- KULICK, Don, 1992. "Coming Up in Gapun: Conceptions of Development and Their Effect on Language in a Papua New Guinea Village". In *Kam-Ap or Take-off: Local Notions of Development*. G. Dahl and A. Rabo, eds. Pp. 10–34. Uppsala: Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology.
- LEMONNIER, Pierre, 1981. "Le commerce inter-tribal des Anga de Nouvelle-Guinée". *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 37 (70-71) : 39-75.
- 1984. "La production de sel végétal chez les Anga (Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée)". *Journal d'Agriculture Traditionnelle et de Botanique Appliquée* 31(1-2) : 71-126.
- 2013. "Arcs, flèches et orgue électrique. À propos de modernité et d'offensives évangéliques dans la vallée de Wonenara (Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée)". In *Jésus, moi et les autres. La construction collective d'une relation personnelle à Jésus dans les Églises évangéliques : Europe, Océanie, Maghreb*. PONS, Christophe (ed.), pp.189-226. Paris : CNRS Éditions.
- MALBRANCKE, Anne-Sylvie, 2016a. Une épouse pour de l'argent ? Des pratiques matrimoniales en mutation et leurs répercussions socioculturelles chez les Baruya de Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée. PhD thesis, School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS), Paris.
- 2016b. "Women don't have testicles: the "making" of masculinity among 21<sup>st</sup>-century Baruya (Eastern Highlands, Papua New Guinea)". *Paidema*, 62: 69–89.

- 2016c. "Dix commandements mais pas de Dieu : christianisme et changement socioculturel chez les Baruya (PNG)". *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 142-143: 241-256.
- 2017. "Du sperme au sang : métamorphoses de la parenté et de la société baruya (Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée)". *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 144-145 : 299-314.
- MILLER, Daniel, 1995. Introduction. In *Worlds Apart: Modernity through the Prism of the Local*. MILLER, Daniel (ed.), pp.1-22. New York: Routledge Press.
- ORTNER, Sherry, 1999. "Review: Some Futures of Anthropology". *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 26, No. 4, pp. 984-991.
- 2016. "Dark anthropology and its Others. Theory since the eighties", *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6 (1): 47–73.
- ROBBINS, Joel, 2004. *Becoming Sinner: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society*. Berkeley & London: University of California Press.
- 2013. "Beyond the suffering subject: toward an anthropology of the good", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 19, 447-462.
- ROBBINS, Joel and Holly Wardlow (eds.), 2005. *The Making of Global and Local Modernities in Melanesia. Humiliation, Transformation and the Nature of Cultural Change*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate.
- SAHLINS, Marshall, 1963. "Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia". *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 5, No. 3: 285-303.
- 1981. *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities. Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- 1992. "The Economics of Develop-man in the Pacific". *Res*, Vol.21, pp.13-25.
- STRATHERN, Andrew, 1971. *The Rope of Moka. Big-men and Ceremonial Exchange in Mount-Hagen New Guinea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- TONKINSON, Robert, 1982. "Kastom in Melanesia: an Introduction". *Mankind* Vol. 13(4), pp.302-305.
- TUZIN, Donald, 1997. *The Cassowary's Revenge: The Life and Death of Masculinity in a New Guinea Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- WARDLOW, Holly, 2002a. "Hands-Up"-ing Buses and Harvesting Cheese-Pops: Gendered Mediation of Modern Disjuncture in Melanesia. In *Critically Modern: Alternative, Alterities, Anthropologies*. KNAUFT, Bruce (ed.), pp. 144–172. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 2002b. "Headless Ghosts and Roving Women: Specters of Modernity in Papua New Guinea". *American Ethnologist* 29(1):5–32.
- 2006. *Wayward Women. Sexuality and Agency in a New Guinea Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

ZIMMER-TAMAKOSHI, Laura, 2012. "Troubled Masculinities and Gender Violence in Melanesia".  
In *Engendering Violence in Papua New Guinea*. JOLLY, Margaret, Christine Stewart and Carolyn  
Brewer (eds), pp.73-106. ANU Press.