

FORUM

A DISCUSSION OF JOHN LIEP'S RECENT BOOK,
*A PAPUAN PLUTOCRACY:
RANKED EXCHANGE ON ROSSEL ISLAND (2009)*

· JOHN LIEP, JOEL ROBBINS, CHRIS GREGORY, TON OTTO ·

In September 2009 a group of scholars met at Aarhus University, Copenhagen, for the defence of *Mag. Scient.* John Liep's doctoral thesis, published by Aarhus University Press under the title, *A Papuan Plutocracy: Ranked Exchange on Rossel Island (2009)*. The book is the first full-scale modern ethnography of the well-known shell money system on Rossel Island—one of the most complex such systems on record. Liep's ethnography is very powerful, but more than that, the book is built around an ambitious and unusual critique of notions of reciprocity and the gift economy that are of great general importance. Liep's three examiners were Joel Robbins, Chris Gregory and Ton Otto. In light of the depth of debate that marked the occasion of the defence, there was a general feeling that the discussion deserved a wider forum. The result is the texts that are published together here.

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AN OVERVIEW OF ROSSEL ISLAND EXCHANGE

· JOHN LIEP ·

In the enchanted archipelagos east of New Guinea known as the Massim by anthropologists, remote Rossel Island is the last outpost facing the trade wind from the southeast. Its 4,000 inhabitants diverge from the rest of the Massim peoples by speaking an extremely difficult Papuan language. They thus represent the last remnant of the autochthonous population that peopled the Massim islands before the invasion of Austronesian immigrants into the region some two thousand years ago. In some respects Rossel culture differs from that of the Austronesian-speaking societies to the west but Austronesian influence is also marked, notably in matrilineal descent and in the exchanges of valuables of shell and greenstone that permeate the social life of the Rossel Islanders. Ranked exchange of shell decorations is well known from the Massim *kula* but the hierarchy of Rossel Island money is outstanding by virtue of its extraordinary complexity.

The question is thus posited of the derivation of such an objectified hierarchy in an island otherwise characterised by the absence of descent group ranking, and with what, on the face of it, seems to be a common Melanesian big man system. It is my hunch that this shell hierarchy and the ranked financial operations in which it is activated must be understood in connection with the wider Austronesian environment in the Massim.

A majority of students of Pacific prehistory now agree that the Austronesians who entered Melanesia some 3,500 years ago had a hierarchical social organisation with chiefs, nobles and commoners. In Polynesia and Micronesia, which were settled only by Austronesians, their hierarchies survived and expanded. But in western Melanesia, where the invaders mixed with Papuan populations, they devolved into so-called egalitarian big man systems although there are traces of hierarchy in many places. This is also the case in the Massim. I believe that the ranked system of exchange on Rossel is a legacy from a time when the island was in articulation with Austronesian hierarchical formations to the west. In the prologue of my book I therefore describe the Massim as a background to Rossel Island. I analyse Trobriand hierarchy and asymmetric exchange and I trace remnants of hierarchy in decomposed forms in the rest of the archipelago.

I do not want to give only a synchronic analysis of an isolated island society. I speculate on pre-historic formations and transformations far back in time and account for colonial and post-colonial changes in history. Further, my understanding of Rossel exchange has profited by comparison with other systems of ranked exchange in Indonesia and the Pacific. My aim has been to widen the scope of analysis in time and in space from Rossel Island as a small Papuan outlier in an Austronesian sea.

The bulk of my book is of course concerned with explicating Rossel Island society and the complex system of ranked exchange that permeates the social life of its people. Part one sets out the general background. I first present the colonial history of the island. I then zoom in on the village of Pum on the north coast of Rossel that has been my base during my periods of fieldwork. I describe settlement history, the clan system and the importance of cognatic kinship. The following chapters outline dimensions of power, the positioning of women and domains of economic life. Part two is the detailed exposition of ranked exchange on Rossel Island. I describe the two types of shell money and the other kinds of valuables and go on to analyse institutions of exchange: bridewealth and mortuary exchanges—which both constitute important moments in the cycle of social reproduction—the complicated pig feast and remaining forms of payment. Chapter Ten—‘The rules and practice of ranked exchange’—is a grand attempt to interpret the various financial operations that allow ranked payments to be launched and the strategies which participants employ. In the epilogue I argue that ranked exchange on Rossel produces a social stratification where a minority of big men dominate the rest of the people through their monopoly of high-ranking shells and superior skill in operating exchange.

Joel Robbins provides a summary of Rossel shell money exchange in his following contribution. I shall therefore present only a selective outline of it from my own perspective.

Shell money exchange on Rossel Island¹

There are some twenty ranked classes of *ndap* (shell money) in which I distinguish three divisions: the very high, the high and the low division. Every *ndap* rank has a name and each *ndap* in the two upper divisions also has its own individual name. These shells are all owned permanently by individual big men (and some women) and are only transferred in inheritance. Shells in the very high division, which were formerly used to pay for cannibal victims, are now out of circulation and have a very special position: they are lent out to

appear as the most valuable objects in exchange rituals, but only for a short time. Then they must return to their owners again. This of course gives the owners of these shells influence on the timing of exchange rituals. Big men also appear at these exchanges as expert directors and witnesses. The high-ranking shells serve as a license to authorize the occasion. When the person who receives such a shell gives it back again he receives a large payment of low ranking *ndap* instead. This is a *replacement* for the big shell he cannot keep. The shells of the high division are thus a prime example of Annette Weiner's (1992) concept of "inalienable possessions" and of "keeping-while-giving". The actual circulation of *ndap* in exchange among people on Rossel thus takes place with *ndap* in the low division.

The *kê* shell money also has many ranks, but almost to the top of the system they may still be transferred in exchange. Yet, also here a displacement of value may take place. Big *kê* are often withdrawn after having been transferred for some time to a recipient when the former owner demands them back again. This is not always agreed upon beforehand. The recipient is then put off with a lower ranking *kê* as a substitute. A big *kê* may sometimes be replaced with a payment of lower-ranking shells but this happens only rarely. More frequently the recipient, if he is not strong, will have to be content with the substitution. Big *kê* are thus in principle transferable in exchange, but they are often withdrawn again. These operations give rise to a lot of bickering among people about the greed and deviousness of the big men. This arrangement of pro forma participation in exchange of high-ranking objects and their subsequent withdrawal and substitution or replacement by low ranking shells is unique to Rossel.² This greatly complicates exchange on Rossel and makes it a more difficult example from which to study ranked exchange. But if a theory can make sense of the most difficult case it should be able to explain the simpler ones.

I see two main results of my research in this book. First, I have established that there is a general form of exchange I call ranked exchange. Second, I propose an alternative approach to exchange that challenges key assumptions of exchange theory: the principle of reciprocity and the theory of the gift.

Ranked exchange

First of all, this is characterized by 'ranked money'. Modern money is first and foremost an instrument of market exchange. It measures value as a quantity, a price. There is a common denominator: the crown, or the euro, or the dollar. We may compare all things in the market in terms of this single unit. In this way we may know the price of everything and the value of nothing, as the saying goes.

A ranked currency, on the other hand, measures value as a quality. It denotes the worth of persons and things. This is because ranked money is not a price-making instrument in a market economy. It is a symbolic standard for displaying social distinction, and at the same time it is a means of payment for valuable things. High-ranking monies are rare and personalized treasures, each with its own name. They are surrounded by an aura of the sacred and imbued with myth and history (Weiner 1992). Low-ranking monies are more common and anonymous pieces. A ranked system of money thus measures worth on a scale from the sacred down to the profane. High-ranking money is like our orders and medals. Low-ranking money is more like our notes and coins.

I have traced ranked money from Indonesia out into the Pacific to New Guinea and the Melanesian islands, to Palau in Micronesia, and to Samoa and Tonga in Polynesia. In eastern Indonesia it may be brass gongs, elephant tusks or gold ornaments. In Palau it is antique glass beads. In Melanesia it is usually some form of shell money. In Samoa it is finely woven mats and in Tonga it is mats and bark cloth. The money stuff thus varies a lot, but this should not make us overlook the common features of these systems. These societies are all in the orbit of the Austronesian migrations.

In these systems ranked money invariably plays an essential role in exchanges concerned with social reproduction: exchange rituals at birth, marriage and death between groups of people related through marriage. Through these exchanges rights and obligations between people as kinsmen and affines are addressed, negotiated or severed. They address rights in spouses and children, rights of residence and use rights to land. These recurrent flows of currency (and also of food and stimulants) between people through generations are thus the 'blood circulation' of social reproduction. Moreover, ranked money appears in payments when titles of nobility are conferred and they pay for status symbols such as big canoes and houses. Formerly, these monies could also in various places be used in payments to murderers to kill people, to head-hunters to take people's heads, or to acquire girls for prostitution. The ranked money of Rossel Island could even pay for victims of cannibalism.

Ranked exchange is not something of the past, taking place in some anthropological terrarium. Kinship exchanges in many of these societies have expanded enormously. They still involve ranked money as well as foodstuffs and pigs. But in most places they have also absorbed trade goods and modern money. This is not the case on Rossel Island however. Here, the big men have had the power to uphold a ban on modern money and commodities in bridewealth and mortuary exchanges.

Most of the societies with ranked exchange I have mentioned are also societies with a hierarchical social organisation, although Rossel is not. They have ranked classes of nobles and commoners and they have political systems of chieftainship. In these societies it is nobles who own and exchange high-ranking money largely between themselves. (They also operate with lower ranking money.) Commoners only exchange lower-ranking money. High-ranking money is only sparingly parted with in very important payments while low-ranking money flows more easily in greater quantity. In payments monies of different rank are typically combined. Such 'scaled payments' thus display distinctions of the social rank of donors and recipients.

I have said that ranked money represents value as a quality, not a quantity. There is no common denominator. Ranked monies of different value are therefore difficult to compare in exchange. This makes ranked exchange a complicated game to operate. In these societies a number of financial procedures have evolved in order to build trust, to effect loans and honour debt, and to carry out exchanges. There are procedures I call solicitory gifts, security, pledge, deposit and replacement. These are all subsidiary exchanges where the movement of lesser valuables enables the release of high rank valuables in exchange. I have only the space here to discuss one of them: the pledge.

Critique of gift theory

During my fieldwork it was difficult enough to untangle the strange features of the high-ranking *ndap* and *kê* shells, the withdrawals, replacements and substitutions. Another thing was the contradictory statements I recurrently seemed to get from my informants. People would tell me that that if they ‘helped’ someone collecting shells for some payment they had a right to get their shells back some time later. For good low-ranking *ndap* and higher-ranking *kê* this usually takes place in the form of a ‘loan’ where a lower ranking shell is given as a pledge from the borrower to the lender. I was told that on presentation of this pledge later on by the lender to the borrower, the latter should return the original shell or he should find another one of similar or even better value. But I was also told that from the perspective of the borrower, “he cannot think about that man [the lender]; *he* has the pledge, [the borrower] may let him ‘float’”. The Rossel word *ngm:aa*, which I call pledge, in fact means ‘to dodge’, as one sidesteps to avoid something thrown after one. There is a way to try and regain one’s value by lending the pledge to a third person, a good friend, who promises to return a better shell. By doing this a couple of times people hope that they may end up with a shell even better than the original one that was ‘lost’. But often they do not succeed in this game and end up losing even the pledge. “To take is not to give” as Shakespeare said in another context (*Richard III*, Act 1, Scene 2).

These contradictions troubled me for a long time. I was unable to understand them by means of the prominent anthropological theories of exchange. First, there is Malinowski’s principle of reciprocity (1926) which says that the reciprocal give-and-take of gifts between two parties is the basis of social structure. These gifts and counter-gifts balance in the long run and sustain symmetry in the whole system of mutualities. Second, there is Marcel Mauss’s theory of the gift (1990 [1923–24]): in archaic societies, as he said, there is a moral obligation to repay gifts fairly. This even induces people to be generous because the generous giver rises in people’s esteem while the close-fisted sinks. The principle of reciprocity in gift giving would ensure that wealth would be fairly shared in a population and that transactors would remain equal. Such dogmas went well with beliefs that Melanesian and other ‘primitive’ societies were in essence egalitarian. I think that these ideas were part of a utopian stream in anthropology where ‘noble savages’ walk on as extras in our own dream plays about blissful societies. I could not get a handle on Rossel exchange with these theories.

Then it dawned on me that things would look different if I changed my perspective. As Sherlock Holmes said, “I came to the conclusion that I must approach the case from another aspect (...) everything which had been disconnected before began at once to assume its true place” (Doyle 1989 [1893]): 382–84). I had started out with the assumption that exchanges took place between actors that were equal and that exchanges in themselves should sustain that equality. If I realized that actors were always already involved in relations that were as often as not *unequal* and that differences of power were regularly at play among exchangers I could understand these seeming contradictions. People were not equal: they were seniors and juniors, men and women, big men and lesser men. A loan might not be freely given but could be a contribution from a person under pressure. A debt was not something invariably to be honoured. It could be evaded. People were not always in agreement about the fairness of an individual transaction or about the whole organisation of exchange. Exchanges did not conform to some just principle of reciprocity. They were

negotiated by actors in different power positions. This is my second accomplishment in this book: a challenge to a central part of the anthropological canon.

Rossel is a very 'monetarized' society in terms of the shell money. The cycle of social reproduction is permeated with shell exchanges and walled off from the world of modern money and commodities. Pig feasts involve complex mobilisations of shell money. Big men pay for the construction of large houses and canoes. Even some forms of labour may be paid with shells. There is a class-like stratum of big men who own and operate the high-ranking shells. They dominate exchange rituals and they exert considerable influence over the rest of the population. I have therefore dared to call this regime a *plutocracy*.

NOTE

It is an honour that the Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society has dedicated space to critical debate about the content of my book. I have fond memories of the occasions when I have had the opportunity to develop my ideas on exchange for discussion during visits in Helsinki and I am happy that I at long last can discuss the final result of my researches here.

NOTES

¹ In addition to the shell money, valuables such as ceremonial greenstone axes, ceremonial lime spatulae and various kinds of shell necklaces appear in exchanges on Rossel Island. There is no space to discuss them here.

² This was not always so. Formerly, high-ranking shells were actually transferred in exchanges. When a house fire (during the time of the First World War) destroyed many valuable shells this caused a financial crisis and a collapse of trust among the big men. Those in possession of high rank shells held on to them and the present arrangement is the result.

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