

ON THE RANKING OF SHELLS AND PEOPLE  
COMMENTS ON *A PAPUAN PLUTOCRACY:  
RANKED EXCHANGE ON ROSSEL ISLAND*

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*Introduction*

This is a magnificent piece of scholarship. It has been a lifetime in the making and it shows on every page, in every paragraph and every sentence of this meticulously argued and beautifully produced ethnography. If the ethnographic studies of the Massim can be likened to *ndap* shells of different rank, then this book will find its way into the very high division where it will circulate alongside the classics such as Malinowski's *Argonauts* and Young's *Fighting with Food*.

Liep not so much resolves the theoretical controversies about exchange theory that Armstrong's 1922 book on Rossel Island shell money generated, but dissolves them and raises a whole new set of more interesting questions. Rossel Island has been defined as exceptional in Melanesian studies because of its extraordinarily complicated shell-money system and its exceptionally difficult language that bears no family resemblances with the Austronesian languages found on the neighbouring islands. Insofar as the exchange-system is concerned, Liep convincingly demonstrates that it is a variation on a familiar Oceanic theme. He does this by presenting original data on the rules and practice of Rossel shell-exchange and situating it expertly in a broader comparative perspective.

What makes this book especially valuable is that Liep is well aware of its limitations and makes no attempt to hide this. Of course, every ethnographic report is limited to some extent but what sets Liep's book apart is that he does his best to define precisely the boundaries of his knowledge and understanding. He is careful to distinguish what he knows well from what he is unsure about and what he does not know. What he gives us then are, respectively, persuasive arguments about which there can be little debate, speculative propositions about which reasonable people may disagree, and questions that require more research. I am primarily concerned with the latter two issues here.

*Liep's central argument*

His book has two parts: the first provides the setting, the second his discussion of ranked exchange. Liep is not content to present mere background data in Part One; he is concerned to develop an argument. The central issue is the extent to which Rossel is part of the Massim region and apart from it. From a linguistic point of view the place is unambiguously apart, for, as Levinson (2006b: 158) notes, the language on Rossel is an isolate "whose relations to any other languages are completely obscure". From a sociological point of view, however, it is a different story, and this is the one Liep tries to tell using comparative ethnography, archaeological evidence and colonial history.

The data on the territorial limits of the circulation of Rossel Island shell money (*kê* and *ndap*), valuables (lime spatulae, stone axes and red shell necklaces) and state currency (cash)

is revealing as Table 1 below illustrates. Cash, stone axes and red shell necklaces are found throughout the Massim; indeed Rossel is the main manufacturing site of the shell necklaces that are used in the *kula*. Lime spatulae have a more limited circulation within the Louisiades group of which Rossel is part; *ndap* shells circulate only in Rossel and the neighbouring island of Sudest, whereas *kê* shells are only found in Rossel. *Ndap* and *kê* shells, then, are quite literally the material objects that define Rossel culture.

| Region                  | Type of exchange object |                    |               |  |      |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|---------------|--|------|
|                         | <i>kê</i> shells        | <i>ndap</i> shells | lime spatulae | stone axes<br>and red shell<br>necklaces | cash |
| Rossel Is.              | √                       | √                  | √             | √  | √    |
| Sudest Is.              |                         | √                  | √             | √  | √    |
| Louisiades group        |                         |                    | √             | √  | √    |
| Other Massim<br>regions |                         |                    |               | √  | √    |

Table 1. Type of exchange object by region of use (Source: Liep 2009: 201)

Another telling fact is the pattern of use of these objects in the different types of exchange that occur in Rossel as Table 2, constructed from material supplied by Liep, reveals. The *ndap* shells are used for all the major exchanges: bridewealth, death, pig feasts, houses and canoes; *kê* shells for everything except death, whilst money has only permeated pig feasts and houses and canoe exchanges. In other words, bridewealth and death exchange are cash-free zones within Rossel with bridewealth exchanges the only ones where *ndap* and *kê* circulate. It is obvious, then, that the sphere of Rossel kinship is the key to understanding the circulation of these shells and Liep rightly identifies the “cycle of social reproduction”, as he calls it, as the sphere requiring special analytical attention. This notion is particularly apt because it draws attention to the diachronic dimension: exchange practices on Rossel set up debts and obligation that last generations.

| Exchange objects | Type of exchange activity |             |            |                |
|------------------|---------------------------|-------------|------------|----------------|
|                  | death rituals             | bridewealth | pig feasts | houses, canoes |
| <i>ndap</i>      | √                         | √           | √          | √              |
| <i>kê</i>        |                           | √           | √          | √              |
| valuables        | √                         |             | √          | √              |
| cash             |                           |             | √          | √              |

Table 2. Type of exchange object by type of exchange activity (Source: Liep 2009: 209)

Liep also notes other cultural similarities across the Massim—the ‘megalithic complex’, transvestite dance, linked totems, sago puddings prepared by men—as well as differences. Mortuary rituals are relatively truncated compared to other areas in the Massim, *sagali* food distributions are absent, and there are no ‘flying witches’. Levinson’s (2006a: 9) recent work on clans and kinship confirms Liep’s observation that the elaborate totemic system—a clan has a plant, a bird and a fish—is shared by Austronesian neighbours. This is significant for Liep’s argument because it suggests that the similarities permeate deep into the social structure of Rossel life.

Melanesia is famous for its ceremonial pig exchanges but the Rossel case is, it seems, an intriguing variation on this general theme in interesting ways. In the highlands of PNG hundreds of pigs are exchanged in elaborate ceremonials. In the famous *moka* exchanges these pigs are led onto ceremonial grounds and given away. In other areas they are butchered, the carved meat displayed and then given away as pork. In Rossel, by contrast, only *one* pig is killed, cooked, and then distributed along with shell money. Furthermore, a distinction is made between bush pigs and village-fattened pigs of European origin. It is the latter that are the subject of highly structured ceremonial distribution, a tradition that goes back to the time of Armstrong and beyond.

The other peculiarity of the Rossel exchange economy is the elaborate ranking of the *ndap* and *kê* shell money. A possible first ranking is based on gender. The *ndap* and *kê* were special words for penis and vagina (n. 24, p. 200). The *kê*, Liep (pp. 200–201) argues, may have been a form of women’s wealth. Women de-string them, and they are given to a girl’s closest female relative at marriage. This hypothesis of Liep’s is a plausible one because divisions of traditional wealth items based on gender are found elsewhere in the Pacific. The general idea of ranked valuables, too, is widespread; but what distinguish the Rossel case are the many complicated divisions within each category of shell money.

Liep, who is rightly concerned to correct the exceptionalist status of the Rossel exchange system, argues that the variations found in Rossel are part of a general Oceanic theme whose origins are to be found in the deep history of the area. He reviews the archaeological evidence and notes that the Austronesian colonisation which began about 2000BP had a profound influence on the area. With them came the hierarchical chiefly societies, the legacies of which are still with us today. The Trobriand Islands provide the outstanding example of this because a chiefly system—albeit with an unstable hierarchy—can still be found there today. Other societies, of which Rossel is an example, do not have chiefs but, argues Liep, we find other traces of the pre-colonial cultural integration of these societies into the hierarchical Austronesian world. In the particular case of Rossel the outstanding legacy is the system of ranked valuables. “I believe,” argues Liep (p. 328), “that the notion of ranking was introduced into Rossel as part of an articulation with a wider, hierarchical Austronesian areal system.”

The argument, Liep concedes, is speculative but advances in Oceanic archaeology in recent years require that the anthropological implications of recent findings must be confronted. We should see this thesis not so much as the rehabilitation of speculative history but as an hypothesis for serious discussion. A consideration of the deep history of Rossel poses two distinct questions: the origins of their language and the origins of ranked exchange. These are separate questions, I would argue, because the latter raises the question of value which is a transhistorical problem. Thus the deep history of language must account

for the uniqueness of the Rossel language while the deep history of value must account for the fact that Rossel is a recognizable variation on a general theme. That said, the specific thesis Liep wants to develop about the historical relationship between ranked societies and ranked exchange must be questioned because a ranked exchange system does not necessarily need a ranked society as its condition of existence, a point I will return to below.

Liep has used the concrete case-study method in order to comprehend the bewildering complexity of the shell-money exchanges that surround the main exchanges at marriage, death and pig feasts. The task of truly understanding the complexity, it must be said, is impossible. One would need a team of 'ethno-accountants'—one for each big man—working 24/7 over many generations to record all the transactions. Even if one could collect all this data, one would still have the problem of uncovering the rules from the strategies. The problem Liep was confronted with, then, was the classic one of trying to see the wood for the trees. He has managed to do this by dogged persistence over a long period of time. His great ethnographic achievement has been to uncover the simple complexity of the situation by showing that the financial procedures are governed by six basic principles (see ch. 10). The six principles do not admit of a simple summary though it suffices to say that "deception and default is an essential element of the game" (p. 318). Liep is right to stress the generality of this essential element. Indeed, deception is probably one of the defining characteristics of *homo sapiens* (Leslie 1987).

Another important ethnographic achievement is to show how all this complexity derives from the 'cycle of social reproduction', by which he means the synchronic and diachronic relations of kinship and marriage. He stresses the need to distinguish 'clans' from 'sides'. The former are the familiar exogamous descent groups that lie at the heart of much theorising about kinship and exchange. These are usually seen as the corporate land owning groups that exchange women. In Rossel the clans are matrilineal but these are dispersed and do not function as organised groups. There is also a very strong patrilineal ideology on Rossel which is important for the transmission of names and shell money, among other things. However, it is the 'sides' which he says are the key to understanding the strategies of everyday practice concerning exchanges of shells in the key spheres of marriage, death, pig feasts, etc. But what is a 'side' (*yoo*)? How widespread is this phenomenon?

As I understand Liep, this notion is an ego-centric type kindred grouping that stands opposed to the socio-centric clans. In other words, clan is an 'absolute' category whereas sides are relative conceptions. Thus there are always two sides, the giver and the receiver, and the parents of the bride and groom become focal points for the fanning out of sides. He notes that the notion is a widespread throughout the Pacific and provides evidence and argues that "the organisation of kinship exchanges is much more complex than the simple model of an exchange between two groups establishing an alliance" (p. 218). This simple model is, he argues, highly misleading for the Rossel case.

I confess that I am particularly receptive to this idea because I have found that the notion of 'side' is extremely important for understanding kinship in middle India. Like Rossel the Halbi speakers of India have exogamous clans but the pragmatics of everyday life hinges around indigenous notions of 'brotherhood' and 'otherhood'. This is a relative grouping of an us/them kind. Of course, the constitution of the 'us' group and the 'them' group is different from the Rossel case but is, as I will suggest below, crucial for understanding indigenous notions of equality and rank.

Liep's central argument, then, raises the general question of the relationship between history (deep and shallow), kinship and exchange. The rich ethnography he presents has clarified some old questions and raised new ones. However, given the importance of kinship for his thesis, a curious absence from his book is a discussion of Rossel kinship terminology, something he obviously has lots of data on, and views about, that differ in some respects from the account given by Levinson (2006a).

*Towards a critique:*

The forgoing has tried to convey something of the richness of Liep's ethnography and the argument that sustains it. There can be no question that he has moved the debate well beyond that started by Armstrong's ethnography by providing us with new ethnographic insights into Rossel Island shell money and the values that inform its use. The great merit of the book, I repeat, is that Liep defines the limits of his argument very precisely. I come now to a consideration of these limits and of the new directions his work opens up.

*Alienability and inalienability*

If Liep makes a mistake defining the limits of his book then it is on the side of modesty. He stresses that his inability to learn the language severely limited his ability to understand the culture. This is certainly true but very few anthropologists have succeeded in mastering a Papuan language and even fewer admit it. Nevertheless his use of the case study method has supplied him with a rich haul of 'objective' data. While he has not always been able to provide an indigenous exegesis of this material, his use of the comparative method and deep history has enabled him to provide an interpretation of the data that locates the specificities of the Rossel case within a general theoretical framework. Most importantly, though, his work poses new questions for future research. Just as he has done to Armstrong, so will future ethnographers do unto him.

In the spirit of constructive critique, I would like to ruminate on some of his theoretical interpretations and on the directions his research may take us. Critiques often tell us more about the critics than the work under consideration. This is because the thoughts of critics are determined by their own fieldwork experience and the theoretical position they hold. In order that the reader may judge the fairness of my comments I should state that I am the author of a book on colonial PNG called *Gifts and Commodities* (1982) whose central argument Liep finds "dogmatic" and "absurd" (p. 9). These are harsh words and I am unable to let them pass unchallenged.

Any author welcomes critical engagement with their work, but it is something else to be the target of barbs like 'dogmatic' and 'absurd' especially when they are based on unsubstantiated assertions that are the polar opposite of the truth. Contrary to what Liep claims, I have never claimed that gifts are 'ontologically inalienable'. The *historical* dialectic between alienability and inalienability has always been my central concern as a quick glance at the table of contents of my book reveals (see also 1982: preface, 115–116). Furthermore, the idea that my historically-informed method has anything in common with the ahistorical "controlled fictions" of Marilyn Strathern (1988: 6) is simply false as Strathern, who has

fully understood my basic argument, acknowledges (1988: 18). Fortunately polemics of this kind, and lapses in attention to scholarly detail, are rare in Liep's book.

The fact is that I am broadly sympathetic to the theoretical and methodological position Liep adopts. Like him I believe that it is important to stand firm on the scientific status of anthropology and that progress can be achieved with better data and persuasive argument. Like him, I also believe that it is necessary to analyse the dialectical relationship between alienability and inalienability in a historical context. Generalising synthetic accounts like mine, based as they are on secondary data, demand to be critiqued in the light of new ethnographic data of the kind Liep has provided.

In this respect Liep's ethnography provides new historical information on inalienability absolutely essential for understanding the shell money transactions on Rossel today. He tells of how a fire destroyed many high-ranking shells leading to a reform of the system such that many high-ranking *ndap* became inalienable. He notes that this event, along with other events that occurred in the early colonial period, required the islanders to make considerable adjustments (pp. 189–191).

In his attempt to make sense of this historical and other ethnographic evidence he collected, Liep finds the theoretical answer to his problems in Annette Weiner's (1992) theory of inalienable possessions. I find this a curious choice because her work is ahistorical and her so-called paradox of 'keeping while giving' strikes me as contradictory rather than paradoxical. *Kula* valuables, for example, are not kept and given; they are unambiguously given not kept (albeit reluctantly upon occasion). As for high-ranking *ndap* shells, they are not kept and given; they are unambiguously kept and loaned out for short periods of time. In any case, Weiner's ahistorical theory cannot explain the circulation of low ranking shells which "approach cash and are used interchangeably with coins at pig feasts" (p. 182). This is the familiar case of things being now gifts, now commodities, now something else, depending on the social context.

Liep's work helps us understand the specific ethnographic context on Rossel. He reminds us that there is no 'watertight boundary' between the high and low division, but rather a 'sliding transition' between the categories. As such, the playing card analogy that many people have used, myself included, needs to be rethought. The internal ranks do not form a fixed, well-ordered sequence such as 2, 3, 4 ... 10, J, Q, K, Ace of hearts. The ranking, Liep (p. 183) tells us, is not based on a fixed standard at all but, rather, is one that must be continually re-negotiated. Thus "the performances of exchanges becomes much more of an art that requires specialist knowledge, as well as, sometimes, persuasive skill".

In other words, values have valuers. Our eye must not be seduced by the glitter and beauty and apparently fixed rank order of the material objects; we must shift our glance, as Liep does, to the valuers: to the big men and other people who control them and give them their values.

#### Exchanges and life-cycle rituals

I turn now to the questions of where Liep's work might lead us by locating his study in a broader comparative context. Liep's findings concerning marriage exchange and death rituals illustrate yet again a very familiar theme that is found in the Pacific generally. People in this part of the world invest an extraordinary amount of time, energy and money in gift exchanges

centred on marriages and deaths. These exchanges seem to be never-ending and ever subject to inflationary pressures over time. If agricultural involution characterises the production systems of rice farmers in Indonesia then cultural involution is the name of the game in the exchange systems of the people of the Pacific.

Liep's description of the marriage and death rituals on Rossel fit into this general pattern. He notes (p. 232), for example, that bridewealth payments have become greatly inflated throughout the twentieth century: the amount of *ndap* in bridewealth has doubled while the quantity of *ndap* has risen by up to 800 percent. Marriage sets up a cycle of exchanges that lasts for decades. The eventual death of the married couple is but a moment in this cycle that continues until the death of the children of a marriage; but this cycle is in turn part of another that begins with the marriage of the children, and so on.

His ethnography is rightly concerned only with local historical explanations for local problems. For example, he argues that bridewealth inflation must be seen in relation to the intensified social intercourse in Rossel Island brought about by colonisation. "Exchange," he argues, "has been democratized in the sense that more people are now involved and wider relationships activated in exchange events" (p. 232). The merits of this argument aside, data like this, seen in its broader context, poses the general question of why all this cultural elaboration?

Liep places his book in the broader context of the Pacific. However, my experience of working in India and the Pacific suggests that an even broader frame of references is needed, one that covers Asia and the Pacific as a whole. This was the frame of reference for Lévi-Strauss' (1969 [1949]) classic work on kinship and it may be time to rehabilitate comparative thinking on this scale, modified of course to take account of present historical circumstances and questions.

Insofar as marriage and marriage payments go, two obvious facts stand out for me. The first is that cultural involution in India centres on the *once-off* wedding ritual rather than *ongoing* marriage exchanges. In both places there is hyper-inflation in the amount of time, energy and money devoted to staging the rituals and the exchanges associated with them, but in India all this is focussed on the once-off ritual that celebrates the beginning of the union. This concern with the precise point in time becomes almost an obsession in the case of wealthier families who employ astrologers to fix the precise wedding time to the second to ensure an auspicious future for the newlyweds. In Fiji, where around 40 percent of the population are of Indian descent, this contrast between the Asian wedding ritual and the ongoing Pacific marriage and death exchanges defines an aspect of the multicultural life that is contemporary Fiji. Christianity has introduced the wedding into Fijian culture but as something in addition to, rather than as a replacement for, the traditional death and marriage ritual exchanges.

The second fact is that matrilineal cross-cousin (MZD) marriage is found in the elite extremes of this Asia to Polynesia region with patrilineal cross-cousin (FZD) marriage occurring mainly in Melanesia. Rossel Island fits this general model because here a father's sister daughter (FZD) is a preferred marriage partner (pp. 253–257). Among the Tongan elite (Campbell 2001: 42), a preference for marriage with MBD can be found, a similar situation to that found among some Tamil Brahmins (Gough 1956). But we must not be too hasty to reach conclusions about the apparent similarities of the Tonga and Tamil Brahman case even though both are hierarchical societies because Tonga is like Rossel in

that marriage and death exchanges are culturally elaborated whereas among the Tamil Brahmins it is the wedding ritual.

Why is it that marriages in the Pacific are culturally elaborated and weddings in India? Part of the reason for this is that women are radically severed from their father's kindred and lineage in India whereas they are not in the Pacific. This has far-reaching social and cultural implications which cannot be gone into here save to say that indigenous notions of rank and hierarchy are but one of them. But just what do these words 'rank' and 'hierarchy' mean?

The rank order of people

Liep uses the terms 'rank' and 'hierarchy' interchangeably as in: "The most elaborate *hierarchy* in the region was that found in the Trobriands where there was a division of *rank* between noble matrilineages (*guyau*) and commoners (*tokay*)" (p. 38, emphasis added). He also tends to speak of 'inequality' and 'stratification' in the one breath (p. 331). He opposes 'equality' to 'inequality' and speaks of Melanesian inequalities versus Micronesian hierarchies (pp. 20–21). Liep does not spell out clearly what distinguishes inequality from hierarchy but, as I understand him, it seems to be the number of axes on the power relations found in different areas.

In Rossel there are two—age and gender—but these, he stresses, are not reducible to single determinative set of factors. Male dominance, he argues, "is embedded in an ideological realm of reproductive taboos" (p. 126). Age divides males into juniors and seniors; it also sub-divides the latter into big men and rubbish men.

Melanesian equality, too, has its dimensions but for Liep this is an 'overgrowth' in the Massim, not something that has deep roots.

Overall, we find in the Massim traces of asymmetric affinal relations that indicate that there is a hierarchical aspect to marriage alliance, but apart from the Trobriands they are overgrown with institutions and practices that tend to produce symmetry in either the short or long term. (p. 49)

In other words, Melanesian equality is found in the symmetry that marriage alliances produce over time. Patrilineal cross-cousin is one classic way of bringing this about. In the language of 'sides', wife-givers and wife-receivers achieve a short or long-term equality in status. As Liep notes: "In contemporary practice the affinal relationship is reciprocal" (p. 235). This fact, he says, is reflected in the affinal terminology. He finds some evidence of the superiority of wife-takers but asserts that this is a "relic of former times" (p. 235). Insofar as marriage is concerned, then, ranked exchange in Rossel brings about an *equality* in the rank of the wife-giving and wife-receiving sides. This is the underlying paradox of Liep's book: ranked exchange, equality of sides.

This raises the question of the dimension of inequality that characterises Polynesian societies such as Tonga. Liep's discussion of 'hierarchy' in the Trobriands suggests that the answer is to be found in the distinction between nobles and commoners. This indeed is a defining characteristic of the Island Kingdom of Tonga. However, while 'stratification', 'hierarchy' and 'rank' are concepts that belong to the same semantic fields it is important to distinguish them if we are to have any hope of making progress in understanding ranked exchange in these different regions.

Stratification has its basis in economics and property. In an agrarian economy, for example, one is either landed or landless; those with land have either more of it or less. Hierarchy, Dumont (1980: 36–38) reminds us, is an ordering of people based on religious values not economic ones. For him the key religious value of Indian hierarchy was purity and pollution: Brahmans are pure, sweepers impure, with endless intermediate classes in between. Hierarchy in the Pacific, he noted (1980: 139–140), was based on different religious values but the details can be passed over because it is ‘rank’ that is in question here.

Rank, for its part, is an ordering based on respect: people of equal rank show each other mutual respect; those of lower rank show superiors respect. This varies from culture to culture but bodily behaviour is one obvious way it is expressed among others: one does not stand above a chief; one touches the feet of one’s father, etc. Rank, hierarchy and stratification are cross-cutting orderings of people found in all societies. They are closely related concepts but not identical. Just how is beyond the scope of this note but it is useful to pursue the difference between rank and stratification a little further.

It is clear that a society such as the Trobriands is based on rank just like Tonga, but that stratification in the latter is much more pronounced in the sense that the royal family owns all land. But the key to understanding rank in the Pacific is not just the respect commoners have for nobles but the respect that cross-siblings have for each other. Here is a third important contrast with India: generally speaking, mutual respect characterises the relationship between cross siblings in the Pacific; in India, by contrast, it is mutual familiarity (Wadley 1976). The mutual respect that cross-siblings have for each other in the Pacific varies but the general theme of avoidance is a widespread one that has received much scholarly attention (Marshall 1983). One sign of this contrast are differences in modes of greeting. In Fiji, for example, indigenous Fijians greet each other with a hug and a cheek-to-cheek kiss but cross-siblings do not touch. Indo-Fijians have adopted this mode of greeting as their own and cross-siblings greet each other this way too. Indo-Fijians, too, have relatives they avoid but cross-siblings are not in this category.

While an avoidance relationship generally characterises the relationship between brothers and sisters in the Pacific, the precise nature of the avoidance varies greatly. Of particular interest is the variation to be found in Tonga. Here cross-sibling respect is asymmetrical rather than mutual: the brother must show respect for his sister even if she is younger. The force of this value varies from family to family but, as a value, it is a crucial one for understanding the specificities of rank in Tonga and, by inference, the form rank takes in Rossel. This is because it brings us back to the question of sides.

If patrilineal cross cousin marriage is the preferred form in Rossel then it is the matrilineal form that is preferred in Tonga. As such, valuables go from ego to the father’s side whilst demands to give can be made from relatives on the mother’s side. As Morton (1996: 122) notes, “One of the earliest lessons children learn is to *kole*, make requests, particularly of their matrilineal relatives.”

The idea of the gift as a demand or a request is an important theme in the Pacific, and possibly elsewhere, that has not been given due emphasis in the literature. This is because the obligation to give has been framed in terms of the idea of generosity and subordinated to the obligation to repay with increment. Liep is right to critique the idea of generosity. The idea of request is a key theme of his book (e.g. pp. 18, 93, 196) and is an issue that calls out for further investigation and development in a comparative context. In Fiji, for

example, requests to give are called *kerekere*. One of the best ethnographic descriptions of this notion can be found in Sahlins' ethnography of the Fiji island of Moala (Sahlins 1962: 203ff.). However, it is something of an irony that the theoretical significance of this material remains undeveloped in his classic treatment of the theory of exchange (Sahlins 1972). The comparative question that arises concerns the question of from whom one can request. This evidence would suggest that the answer to this question is tied up with the values of respect and the rank-order of sides.

The obligation to give in response to a request is different from the obligation to repay a rival in an agonistic bout of competitive giving, but clearly both obligations are present in the classic Highlands PNG systems of exchange. The would-be big man makes requests of his kin as he assembles his big *moka* to give to his opponent. In the ranked societies of Polynesia the emphasis is on affirming the chiefly status quo rather than trying to resolve the unstable 'alternating disequilibrium' of big men. The context of the request is, therefore, very different.

The nature of the big-man system on Rossel, Liep argues, is a plutocracy. Just what this involves it not fully developed in Liep's book. His main contribution is to present an ethnography of ranked exchange, not one of a ranked and stratified society. In this respect his main title is something of a misnomer. Plutocracy, as he defines it, is an apt description of a class society of the Tonga-type but not of Rossel. He provides some anecdotal evidence of stratification—noting the better houses the big men live in for example—but the data is unconvincing. In any case, Tonga is both stratified in class terms and ranked in terms of sides, the basis of the latter being the asymmetry of cross-siblings (younger sisters > brothers; wife receivers > wife givers). It may have been that the ancient Tongans planted the seeds of a rank society as they passed through the Massim all those centuries ago and that the symmetry we find now between the sides is a relatively recent 'overgrowth' but the data presented here is unpersuasive as it stands. We need more data on sibling rank and kinship relations generally; we also need more data on the inheritance and the strategies of the plutocrats to control wealth. But that would be another book.

This book needs to be appreciated for what it is: a detailed ethnographic investigation of ranked exchange in one of the most complicated systems of shell money on ethnographic record. A better title would have been *Ranked Exchange on Rossel Island: A Papuan Plutocracy?* for such a title would have captured what the book has achieved and a question it poses.

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EXCHANGE AND INEQUALITY, TIME AND PERSONHOOD  
COMMENTS ON *A PAPUAN PLUTOCRACY:  
RANKED EXCHANGE ON ROSSEL ISLAND*

• TON OTTO •

This is a book that captures the reader's attention from the start, not only because of its beautiful lay-out and illustrations and the exotic phenomena that it describes, but also thanks to the author's academic assiduousness that transpires through its pages. It is the culmination of more than 35 years of dedicated study of a curious and complex system of monetary exchange that exists on Rossel Island, an eastern outlier of the Louisiade Archipelago, far to the east of the mainland of Papua New Guinea. In Part I 'The Setting', the book provides an overall ethnography of the Island, which forms the background for its focus on ranked exchange in Part II. Rossel Islanders have developed a system of monetary exchange which is unique in the world because of its complexity. Two distinct shell currencies (*ndap* and *kê*) each comprise as many as twenty ranked categories of shells that play different roles in various exchange practices. It is a prime achievement of this book to describe these practices in detail and to develop an original set of theoretical concepts to be able to do this. Thus the shells can variously be used to make a deposit, provide a security, constitute a replacement, solicit a gift, offer a pledge, or return a (reduced) substitution (see p. 298 ff.). Ranked exchange is of course not limited to Rossel Island, but the unique complexity of the Rossel system derives from the combination of three features: the extraordinary number of categories in the rank order; the feature of 'licensing', which involves the use of inalienable shells in initiating exchanges (making a deposit that is later returned); and the