



JOHN LIEP

A PAPUAN PLUTOCRACY

RANKED EXCHANGE ON ROSSEL ISLAND

A Papuan Plutocracy

Ranked Exchange on Rossel Island

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Troels Østergaard Sørensen
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John Liep

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shell necklaces and ceremonial stone axes. Pw:ep:u, Morpa (April 1972).

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To fellow anthropologists of the Massim –
they have waited thirty years for this book

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they must be entirely due to my own inadequacy. But apart from this I feel that I have always met with acceptance and great tolerance of my sometimes tedious questioning and recording. In this respect I could hardly have found a more welcoming community.

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Wagner; a workshop on Culture and History in the Pacific organized by Jukka Siikala at Helsinki in 1987; the Paris workshop the same year organized by Marilyn Strathern and Maurice Godelier on great men and big men societies; and an ASAO session on state and indigenous currencies in Melanesia convened by David Akin and Joel Robbins in Hawaii in 1996. The late Daniel de Coppet generously invited me to Paris in 1993 to give papers on my research at the ÉHÉSS. I thank all the organizers and participants of these meetings for enlightening discussions.

Lastly I find it difficult to express how much I owe my wife Annette Liep, who has accompanied me on all my field trips. She assisted me with several surveys, demonstrated much practical ability and a better capacity for participation and socializing than I, and was an always understanding and patient companion. I am not particularly good with my hands, and apart from betel chewing, I used to say that we maintained a division of labour where I observed and she participated. She learned to weave all the types of Rossel baskets, and when a curator at the museum in Port Moresby took out specimens for their collection, he unwittingly selected several that had actually been made by her. Our children Anton and Maja, who have each been with us on two visits, easily made friends and did much to facilitate our acceptance on the island.

Rossel Island is now being studied by the linguist Stephen Levinson, who began fieldwork there in 1995, a few years after my last visit. He has published articles on linguistic problems from Rossel but also a number of essays of decided anthropological interest, for example on colour terms (Levinson 2000), on evolution and culture (2006a), on the kinship system (2006b) and on landscape (2008). He will undoubtedly be able to correct some of the mistakes I have made, as may even students from Rossel Island itself one day. I am fully aware of my own shortcomings, especially with regard to my linguistic skills, and know that I may only have scratched the surface of Rossel culture. Stephen Levinson has read parts of my manuscript, and I have benefited greatly from his comments. He has also generously agreed to write a foreword to this book.

Note on Orthography

In this book the orthography of the Rossel language (*Yélitnye*) established by James and Anne Henderson (1987) is used. There are several dialects spoken on Rossel. The Hendersons have made the one spoken around Jinjo on the northeast coast of the island the ‘official’ standard. The one spoken around Pum where I stayed varies from the Jinjo one in some respects. In many instances I follow the official standard, but where different words are used or words are pronounced differently (as I heard them) I usually follow my own spelling. The phonology is very difficult so I may have misheard many words.

The vowels are the following

i		î		u
	é			ó
	e	ê		o
		a	â	

All back vowels are rounded. Vowels may be short or long, the latter shown by a double letter, for example **aa**. Vowels may also be nasalized. This is shown by putting a colon in front, for example **:aa**.

The spelling of some consonants needs explaining. The ng sound as in English ‘sing’ is spelled **ng**. A soft g is spelled **gh**. A prenasalized g, however, is spelled **nk**. Prenasalizing is common, thus **mb**, **nj**, **nt**. There may be double nasalization so that one says m and ng at the same time. There are double stops so that one says k and p simultaneously or t and p simultaneously. Double stops may also be prenasalized so that a simultaneous m and ng is followed by a simultaneous b and g. This is simplified into **mg**.

Some place names that are more widely known outside the island such as the larger bays and the ten wards have for a long time had a conventional spelling. I have chosen to use this instead of the correct Rossel one.

With regard to individual’s names, there is a convention, established by patrol officers who did not know that the society is matrilineal, to use the Christian name followed by the father’s Rossel name as the surname. I do not

follow this rule. I prefer to use the Christian name followed by the individual's most commonly used Rossel name. Often I mention only the Rossel name. This was the name I usually used on Rossel.

The Hendersons have preferred to split compound words up into their components. I usually write them as one word.

The Rossel people (*Yéli yoo*) I simply call the Rossels, an expression that is now accepted by them.

Foreword

Stephen C. Levinson

Director, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen

In this book, John Liep tackles one of the enduring puzzles of ethnographic reporting, an indigenous money system, which is a peculiar concretion of social value, backed up by elaborate institutions and rituals of exchange. No-one can blame Armstrong, the first ethnographic reporter on Rossel Island, who was working at the dawn of systematic ethnography, for likening the Rossel Islanders to the bankers of the Pacific, and seeing in their institutions the embryos of Western capitalist institutions, with debts, interest, brokers, and specialized markets. But he was wrong about nearly all the facts, as John Liep shows in this book. It turns out that the economic system cannot be understood in terms of an incipient western commercial system, but must instead be understood in its own terms and in relation to indigenous institutions.

This, the second ethnographic monograph on Rossel Island, follows Armstrong's account of 80 years ago which was based on just two months' fieldwork. Despite the controversy that Armstrong's account caused in the anthropological journals and the college common rooms, no-one had gone back to check the facts before John Liep first set out 35 years ago for Rossel. Rossel Island has a peculiar attraction: the last island, way out to the east of Papua New Guinea's foot, and inhabited by a people who are genetically and linguistically distinct from the surrounding Austronesian peoples and who have a vibrant culture of their own.

Although Rossel Island money and the indigenous economy is the focus of this book, it is a wide-ranging monograph, touching on everything from sorcery to horticulture.

Since John Liep has not had the opportunity to return since 1990, it is worth saying something about the current situation in 2006, so readers can judge to what extent the generalizations made here still obtain. I do so from the vantage point of a linguistic anthropologist, whose work since 1995 is based at Cheme village, staying in the very same house (or at least on the very