
Foreword

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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

same site) that the Lieps used in 1971, before they concentrated on the more western area around the village of Pum. The population is now burgeoning – it now stands at a census count of 4,000, which certainly under presents to some degree the actual numbers, especially as many Rossels work abroad. That represents a 25 % rise in just 15 years or so, occasioned probably by two factors. One is better medical provision, thanks to the Catholic Mission and the Misima health centre, with immunization of children and better malaria control. This may reverse: the malarial parasite has become more and more immune to chloroquine and other drugs, AIDS is sadly taking hold, and the Catholic Mission is slowly winding down its material support to the community, in line with an indigenization of the ministry. The other factor, very relevant to this book, is changing sexual mores, with more and more early conception, and less and less control by village elders through the instrument of shell-money – like everywhere else, the Puritans of the Louisiades are discovering that there is a distinction between sex and marriage. Still, the island is rich; it has huge lagoons with affluent fisheries, and with less than 20 persons per square kilometre, it is far from any Malthusian limit.

The other major change since John Liep's last visit has been the gradual retrenchment of government and trade. Far from globalization, this has been, in some aspects at least, development in reverse. Long gone is the airstrip or the government wharf mentioned in these chapters, no government officer resides on Rossel, no regular shipping calls at its shores, no Mission boats regularly supply the schools and aide posts. Small stores can hardly get supplies of rice and sugar and fishing hooks. Sheet iron, engines, electricity, saw mills, are all almost gone, save for the Jinjo Mission site, where royalties from the Misima mine and the efforts of the last white missionaries allowed rebuilding after cyclone Justin in 1997. Dinghies with outboard motors, political favours for votes, await the rare supply of fuel, as does the Mission generator with its friendly lights. Trade in copra (dried coconut for oil) has greatly diminished, although there is an occasional upswing as at the time of writing, but it has been replaced as a source of cash with a restricted season of beche-de-mer fishing, when young men can earn small fortunes diving for the Asian delicacy. For a few months traders arrive in boats, with tea, sugar, rice, flour and other basic goods to exchange for smoked sea cucumbers: I estimate that well over a quarter of a million kina (\$100,000) flows into the island in one season, only some of which flows straight out. This cash buys guitars, football boots and short-lived gadgets, but filters down to pay the now steep school fees that beggar large families. For along with the health service, education flourishes, well

beyond its capacity to deliver jobs and opportunities: Rossels are deeply serious about the education of their offspring. They have made huge efforts to build literacy in the local language, aided by the Hendersons, the SIL missionaries who translated the New Testament during Liep's time in the island, and have more recently printed dictionaries and school materials. The Hendersons are gifted linguists, and without their thirty-year investment in the language, its secrets would remain locked up in an impossibly difficult phonology. The 90 phonemes still present a serious hurdle to writing the language. Still, as at the time of writing, all Rossel children go through village schools for the first years of education, where they learn the idea of writing through their own language before progressing to English, the *lingua franca* of the province.

Despite these changes, Rossel cultural life retains the vibrancy it always had. Sacred sites are still sacred, sacred song cycles are still performed, the gerontocracy of shell-money plutocrats still perdures, marriages and mortuary feasts are still conducted in just the way here described, the subsistence system is just the same, but with less influx of foods like rice and tins from abroad, and the inhabitants of Pum, Wulanga and Yongga still work hard to manufacture the *bagi* used either for personal decoration or in the Kula exchanges of other islands. At the eastern end of the island anyway, which I know best, the shell money is still the only currency with which to pay for pig meat, canoes, and brides, although cash may slowly erode these functions. I have even seen the shell money under manufacture, with fresh *ndap* blanks from the Conflict Islands ground down on river boulders, and old, oversized *ke* likewise being ground down to modern requirements.

One sequence of events perhaps captures this curious balance of forces, between the traditional and the new, better than any other. It started with enormous disquiet about the new millennium, when many believed the world would come to an end, and messianic cults had a brief efflorescence. Now, in the village which is the centre of this monograph, there has arisen in the last three years a cargo cult of serious proportions. Led by a failed politician, an ex-cameraman trained by the BBC in London, the cult offers untold riches through a reversion to the traditions of ancient times, when Homeric heroes walked Rossel. Sect members are told to rebuild the mythical longhouse of the Pwélevywo sacred place, to dress only in traditional costume (now largely replaced by Australian secondhand clothes), sing the traditional song cycles, and awake the dead. Along with the ancient heroes, Moses, even Christ, will reappear, and tell them where to find the buried ingots of gold, taken and hidden (in some versions) from the wreck of the St Paul (the vessel that, as Liep

explains, brought Rossel Island into history). No need to work their fields, no reason to keep their cash! The newly invented rituals make various references to the shell money which figures so largely in this book – for example, it is said that all week long a fire is kept burning under a basket of *kê ndap* (shell money) consisting of four big *ke kn:ââ* and eleven valuable *ndap* (see the body of the book for explication), perhaps in gesture to the smoking of beche-de-mer, another source and symbol of great value.

The cult has a fatal attraction for those with a smattering of knowledge about the outside world, and consequently, to my amazement, some of the best educated, most worldly Rossels have been involved. But the rest of Rossel has mostly turned against the village of Pum, and has tried to ostracize its inhabitants – the leader was even hauled before the magistrates at Misima, on the grounds that he was blaspheming and breaking the peace, but the case was dismissed when he successfully claimed he was simply rebuilding the traditional culture of Rossel.

The cargo cult at Pum had a surprising international consequence in 2006. At the current time, PNG is crawling with prospectors fuelled by the burgeoning Asian economies, and with gold at an all-time high, attention turned once again to the veins that crop up in the nearby islands of Misima and Sudest, where gold has been mined historically. The Rossel Island Gold Exploration Company (a shadowy Australian investment company) bid for licenses to prospect precisely where the myths and cargo cult suggest that gold should be found. In the past, Rossel elders have resisted all such invasions, but now the attitude was different. Led by younger politicians (some of whom have themselves unsuccessfully dug for gold), the communities voted in favour of the prospecting, because, as they explained to me, the time had come to find out whether the myths, and the cargo cult built on them, are true or false – if true, as some of these younger politicians imagine, Rossel will develop and enter the modern world; if false, as others are sure, the lies of the cargo cult may perhaps be finally laid to rest.

As the cult shows, Rossels are used to a plurality of beliefs. They believe in Christianity, but they also believe in the spirits of sacred places, and more inconsistently, in the overwhelming power of sorcery. They believe in the efficacy of shell-money, but also trust in banknotes. They know modern medicine works, but will also try local remedies. They trust the traditional crops, but will experiment with any new crop, however improbable. One is reminded of accounts of the first stirrings of rational enquiry in archaic Greece – it took

many centuries to evolve a rational mode of disputation, in which rumour can be distinguished from fact. No such revolution has occurred on Rossel. In 2005, some time after the real Indonesian tsunami, rumour got about that there would be a cataclysmic tidal wave. The entire population, carrying grannies and babies, headed for the hills, and remained there for days, until hunger and practicality enforced a return to the villages. It is true that in April 1997 cyclone Justin had sensitized them to real calamities: Although Rossel is used to cyclones once a decade, and even has cultural adaptations for these events (e.g. traditional ground houses or cyclone shelters built to withstand massive forces), Justin broke all bounds, physically changing the landscape for generations of human lives, levelling mountains, redirecting rivers, destroying forests, reefs and mangrove swamps.

Rossel Island society is thus poised between tradition and modernity. Unlike many societies in the modern world, it is not clear that globalization is here an unstoppable economic tide (unless of course the myths come true and Rossel is full of gold), but may rather leave this little island, far off in the ocean, aside, for rising fuel costs threaten to turn this maritime province into a backwater. But other aspects of globalization will hit hard, and AIDS is likely to be one of them.