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Introduction to Baruya society

This chapter is merely intended to sketch in the outlines of Baruya society. Later chapters analyze the essential aspects of their social organization in greater detail: the division of labor, property, relations of kinship, male and female initiation, and warfare; in all cases from the standpoint of relations between men and women.

In September 1979, the Baruya numbered 2,159 individuals spread among 17 scattered villages and hamlets, at an altitude of between 1,600 and 2,300 meters along two high valleys, Wonenara and Marawaka, in a chain of mountains, the Kratke Range, whose tallest peak is Mount Piora (3,720 meters). This region was the last in the Eastern Highlands province of New Guinea to pass under the control of the Australian colonial administration, in June 1960. It was first explored in 1951 by a young officer, James Sinclair who, having heard talk of a tribe, the Batia, renowned for the salt that it made and traded with its neighbors, had mounted an expedition to seek them out. These Batia were none other than the Baruya. Yet it was not until 1960 that the Australian administration decided to set up a reconnaissance and control post at Wonenara. In 1965, the region was declared pacified and open to free movement for white men.

By their language, material culture, and social organization, the Baruya belong to a distinct collection of tribes or local groups long referred to by certain of their neighbors by a term of insult, which has become widespread since its adoption by the Australian administration. This term, *Kukakuka,* is not employed by the Baruya themselves. In their language, *Kuka* means "to steal," "thief." Today, linguists, missionaries, and anthropologists are striving to have this offensive term struck from official documents and parlance, and propose to replace it by that of *Anga,* which in all the languages of this vast ethnic grouping signifies "house." It may not be altogether satisfactory to call all these groups Anga, but it is surely better than calling them "thieves."

Linguistically, the Anga groups as a whole are unrelated to the Melanesian

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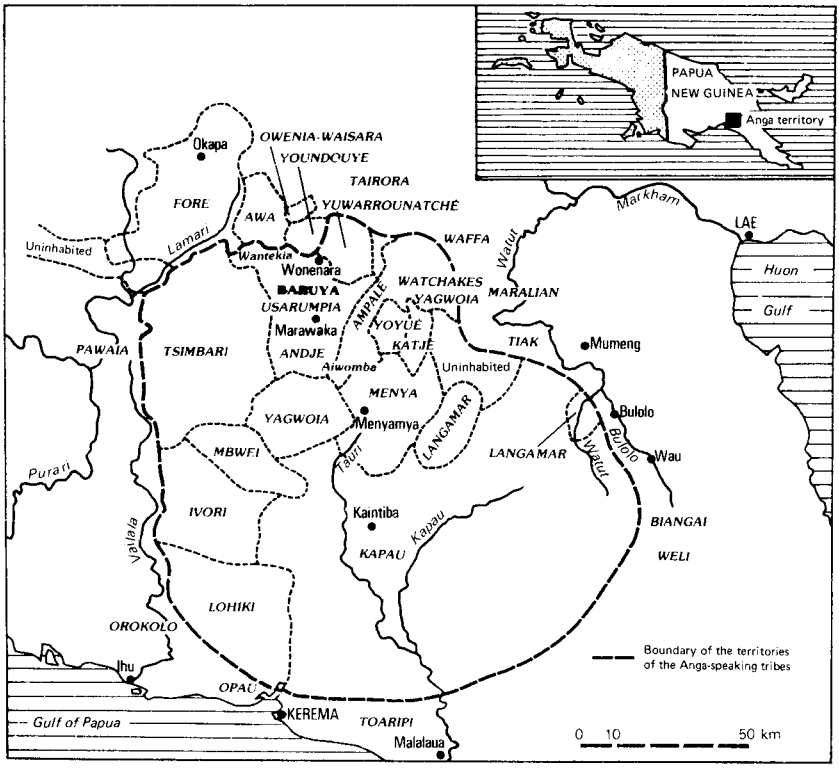


Figure 1. Territory and languages of the Anga tribes

languages spoken by the coastal tribes of Papua and New Guinea, but it may one day be possible to link them to the phylum of non-Austronesian languages spoken in the interior of New Guinea. This matter will be for the linguists to decide; for the time being they lack the necessary evidence to conclude one way or another. Whatever the final word on the origins and groupings, we do know today, thanks to the work of Richard Lloyd, that the Anga populations speak some eleven languages among them. [Figure 1] According to glottochronology, these took more than a thousand years to differentiate among themselves, starting from a common root-language; certain of them, however, such as Langamar, diverge considerably from the others. The striking thing about the distribution of these languages is the wide disparity in the number of speakers. The most widely spoken are the Kapau and Menye languages, the first spoken by 30,000, the second by at least 12,000 people, whereas the least-spoken, Kawacha, probably has fewer than 50 speakers today. The Baruya rank fourth, well behind Kapau and Menye, with

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5,248 speakers who include the Baruya themselves and seven small tribes who are their more or less immediate neighbors.

The extent of difference in the number of people speaking these languages reflects an event that helps to explain the history of the Baruya themselves, namely, the impressive expansion of the Kapau and Menye groups to the detriment of their neighbors, some of whom have disappeared entirely. In all, over 70,000 individuals probably speak these eleven languages and share a culture. For the most part they live in the northern part of a vast, extremely rugged expanse of territory stretching from the Vailala River in the west to the Bulolo River to the east, and from the Watut River in the north to a point some miles from Karema on the Gulf of Papua coast in the south. We still do not know how many local groups occupy this huge tract of land, for some of them, east of the Vailala River, live in a remote, almost inaccessible region and have never properly been studied. All these groups, however, are reputed to live in a state of perpetual warfare, and their raids used to sow fear and even panic. Some of them, in the Wau and Bulolo area, actually killed the first Europeans to enter their territory in search of gold, and subsequently put up armed resistance to expeditions sent by the Australian administration to pacify them and obtain their submission.

These facts shed light on the history of the Baruya and agree with many features of their oral traditions and those of their neighbors. The Baruya claim descent from a group of refugees called Baruyandalie. They split off from the Yoyue tribe when their native village, a place called Bravegareubar-amandeuc, situated three days' walk from Marawaka, not far from Menyamya, was burned and some inhabitants, the Baragaye, were massacred by others with the help of an enemy tribe, the Tapache. These Tapache were themselves pushed by other groups: the Mouontdalie – evidence that there was a general expansion of the Menye (Menyamya) and Kapau (south of Menyamya). The Baruya refugees did the same themselves later on, when they seized the territory of the Andje who had given them hospitality, and forced them to flee farther, and in their turn to drive out yet other groups. Thus by degrees Anga groups expanded toward the northwest through the process of war and uprooting of populations which periodically gave birth to new local groups or tribes, resulting from new combinations of ancient, but now splintered, groups; in order to commemorate their emergence, these groups gave themselves new names.

According to our estimates, the flight of Baragaye refugees to Marawaka must have taken place around the end of the eighteenth century. Their descendants gradually swelled in numbers until they decided to grab the territory of the local groups that had given them shelter. They achieved their goal with the complicity of one of these groups, the Ndelie, who belonged to the Andje tribe and who also betrayed their own folk. A new tribe thus arose; it took the name of one of the clans of the victorious refugees, the Baruya clan,

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and absorbed certain lineages of the vanquished local groups, generally lineages or segments of lineages to which the refugees had given women. Finally, in the early twentieth century, the Baruya gradually penetrated the neighboring valley of Wonenara, driving out its inhabitants. These also belonged to the Anga linguistic group and they now constitute, together with the Baruya, the northwestern frontier groups of the Anga. Beyond stretch the territories of the Aziana, Awa, Tairora, Fore, and other tribes whose languages and cultures are profoundly different. Anthropologists such as K. E. Read, J. B. Watson, L. L. Langness, R. Salisbury, and others consider them to be variants of a mode of social organization specific to the Eastern Highlands.

The social organization of the Baruya may briefly be described as an acephalous tribe consisting of fifteen clans, eight of which descend from the Menyamya refugees and seven of which were absorbed from local groups. The clans are divided into lineages, which are themselves segmented. Residence is patrilocal, and it seems that originally each lineage dwelt together in a separate place. But continual vendettas, the possibility and (on occasion) the urgent need to go live with one's affines (relatives by marriage) or with one's maternal kinsmen, have led to coexistence and interdigitation around a central core of segments of lineages belonging to different clans.

The Baruya live at the foot of slopes covered with vast tracts of primary forest (tropical rain forests) and secondary forest. The latter consists of the vegetation that grows in the taro gardens, which are generally cultivated at an altitude of between 1,800 and 2,300 meters and are left fallow for periods of between fifteen and twenty-five years. Below 2,000 meters, the forest increasingly gives way to grassy savanna, most of which results from overintensive cultivation scorched by the populations whom the Baruya ousted after their arrival. Before the advent of steel tools the savanna, choked by tall tough grass (*Imperata cylindrica*) was left untouched. In those days, the Baruya had nothing but bamboo swords and stakes to cut the grass and uproot clumps and stumps. Today, with their shovels and machetes, they can reclaim this once unproductive land. Furthermore, now that the tribal wars which formerly made it essential to perch villages on top of steep, almost inaccessible hills have ceased, there is a general trend to locate villages and gardens below in the warmer zones. The region lies 3° from the equator. Rainfall is heavy and seasonal variations fairly sharp. Temperatures vary considerably between night and day owing to the altitude. The midday temperature of 30° centigrade often falls to 8° or 9° centigrade at night. Horticulture is the main economic activity, supplemented by pig breeding and a sizable output of vegetable salt. Salt is filtered and crystallized into bars weighing approximately three to four pounds, and used to serve as a means of exchange or currency. Until around 1940, the Baruya used several different types of adzes fitted with polished stone blades to hack away the forest or manufacture their

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weapons and implements. They used bone chisels, bamboo knives, and string bags woven from vegetable fibers. However, as we have seen, in the decade preceding the arrival of the first white man the steel ax and machete made their appearance among the Baruya, trickling through the channels of intertribal trade in the opposite direction to their salt bars. Without any outside encouragement or pressure, the Baruya then considerably stepped up their production of salt in order to substitute these new means of production for their traditional stone tools. However, this substitution was not completed by 1951 when Jim Sinclair's patrol set foot on their territory.

Their essential crop is the sweet potato, which is cultivated relatively intensively in the deforested areas surrounding the villages and in the secondary forests. The taro comes quite a long way behind in terms of diet, but is a plant of the first importance from the ceremonial and social standpoints. It is grown in the primary forest on newly cleared land or in irrigated gardens. Their techniques of draining waterlogged land and of irrigation by means of channels, and even by means of conduits made of bamboo or hollowed pandanus trunks laid end to end, and of light terracing following the relief of the land, temporarily halting soil erosion on steep slopes, are evidence that the Baruya are familiar with intensive forms of agriculture, even if they tend to prefer slash-and-burn horticulture and scratching the soil with a digging stick. Hunting and gathering play a minimal role in subsistence, but have great ceremonial importance.

Ownership of the land is collective in the sense that all the descendants of a common ancestor are joint owners of the land cleared by that ancestor. Everywhere cordyline bushes planted by the first men to clear the land stake out the boundaries of their property. Land-use patterns are flexible, however. Anyone can easily obtain permission from his maternal kin or his wife's brothers to use a parcel of their land for a garden on the understanding that he will render them the same service if asked. Women retain the right to use their ancestor's land through their lifetime, but they do not inherit it and, consequently, cannot hand it on to their children.

The social division of labor governs the material activities of the Baruya, that is, hunting, gathering, horticulture, pig breeding, salt production, the manufacture of weapons, implements, clothing, adornments, house building, and so on, indicating with great precision what each person can and must do according to sex and age. We shall analyze this division of labor later. Each Baruya is capable of doing, more or less successfully, all that is expected of him or her, but certain individuals, especially in activities with an artistic content, such as the manufacture of adornments, stand out from the rest by their taste and skill. Among men, this is so in the wickerwork headpieces into which they stick their feathers, and for the women, in the making of string bags and fiber bracelets which they dye and hand out among themselves and to the men.

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One activity not covered by the simple sexual division of labor but that really does amount to a specialized handicraft, is the production of salt from the ashes of a plant cultivated for this purpose. The most complex operations, namely, evaporation and crystallization, are performed by men who have learned the technical and magical secrets involved from one of their relatives or neighbors.

These tasks are performed either individually or collectively, depending on their difficulty, on their degree of urgency, and on the material means of production available to the Baruya. For instance, all the men in a village cooperate to clear the primary forest in the appropriate season for planting taro, and the women join forces to go and gather and carry the straw needed to thatch houses. As we shall see, this cooperation involves a network of social relations, primarily those of kinship (more those of affinity than of consanguinity), followed by those of neighborhood and coresidence.

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PART ONE

Social hierarchies in Baruya society

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Women's subordinate position

When I first visited the Baruya, in 1967, walking from village to village by day and sleeping at night in the men's house, which stands at the top of each village and where the initiates live, what struck me immediately were the signs that there existed a dual hierarchy: between men and women on the one hand, and between those men who were admiringly pointed out to me as great warriors, *aoulatta,* and the rest.

Signs of women's subordination to men were plentiful, but the most spectacular was the scene I witnessed over and over again along the trail each time a man passed by or overtook a woman or group of women. The women would stop at once, turn their heads, and if one of their hands was free, quickly draw a flap of their bark cloak across their faces. The man would walk on without a glance at them, and the women would resume their journey.

Sometimes though a handful of young initiates would stop short at the sight of a group of women rounding a corner, and plunge into the undergrowth on either side of the trail to hide. If this spot offered no hiding place, they would freeze where they were, turn their backs to the trail, hiding their faces beneath their cloaks just as the women did when men passed by. At that time, all men, young and old, still went about armed with their bow, steel ax, and machete, and the men's houses were chock full of boys and young men who frequently spent part of their day practicing their archery skills and comparing their performances.

I also discovered that the Australian administration was interested in finding out the exact number and names of the great warriors, whom it referred to in its census figures as fight leaders and suspected of possessing powers capable of working either for or against it. Indeed, it had already appointed some of them *luluai* or *tultul,* that is, appointed to represent the Baruya in dealings with the central authorities. In other words, some of the war chiefs had become pseudo-headmen of the village.

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In 1981, women still frequently stopped to let men pass, but few, apart from the old women, still hid their faces. The great warriors were old or dead. Men rarely went about carrying their bow. Many children, including some girls, went to school each day, and the young men spent more time on the coastal rubber or copra plantations than on archery. Still, many years spent with the Baruya since 1967 have merely confirmed my initial impressions, while enabling me to discover other, more complex though less visible hierarchies, whose architecture I shall be describing below.

The signs of male domination: bodies, space, gestures

There are abundant outward signs of men's dominance over women. First among these are the bodily adornments, the fact that among the Baruya the men are the fair sex. On their brow they wear a red headband, the color of the Sun, of whom the Baruya claim to be the sons. They decorate their heads with different feathers depending on their stage of initiation and function; an eagle's feather, for example, signifies a shaman. The loincloth [*pulpul* in pidgin] takes the form of an enormous sporran covered by numerous reed belts. The women are much dowdier in appearance, and they are forbidden to wear or to touch the men's headfeathers.

Formerly, Baruya territory was crisscrossed by parallel paths, the women's paths lying below the men's ones. The villages themselves were divided into three zones, and this division still persists. Dominating the village were one or more men's houses, surrounded by a palisade marking off the area strictly forbidden to women. The men's house is where the boys live after having been taken away from their mothers for purposes of initiation at around the age of nine or ten. They remain here until around twenty or twenty-one, when they will marry. Married men return to sleep in the men's house whenever their wives give birth or menstruate. Right at the bottom of the village, in a coppice or patch of undergrowth, the women give birth to their children beneath shelters of leaves and branches, which they burn after use. This spot is strictly forbidden to men, and whenever anyone suggests that they try to set foot here they refuse to do so, displaying their disgust by a series of shouts, strident laughter, and foot-stamping that in our culture would be taken as a sign of hysteria.

A men's house is a vast edifice, the largest in the village, sturdy, built to last, with a bouquet to indicate its function to visitors. The menstrual huts built by the women, on the other hand, consist of branches cut and bent over to form a lean-to, onto which clumps of grass are thrown. That is sufficient for a few days. Women bury the placenta and stillborn babes or those they do not wish to keep in the nearby undergrowth.

Between these high and low places in the villages lies a bisexual area, containing houses in which families live together, the family consisting of

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husband, his wife or wives, his unmarried daughters and uninitiated sons. But the moment one enters a house, one finds that the segregation of the sexes is reproduced once again. The interior is divided by an imaginary line passing through the middle of the hearth, which stands in the center of the circular floor. The wife and her children live and sleep in the semicircle closest to the door. On the other side, beyond the hearth, lies the husband's area, and this is where all men entering the house are supposed to take up their position. A woman must avoid entering the male part of the house, and in no case may she walk across the hearth, as her vagina would be liable to open over the fire, which serves to cook food destined for the man's mouth. The hearth itself is built by the men from the husband's lineage, his father and brothers, who kindle the first fire there, like the Sun, in Baruya mythology, which gave to men the primordial fire. It is men too, the husband's coinitiates, who build the newlyweds' home and top off the roof with four or five pointed sticks known as *nilamaye*, "Sun flowers," placing the building beneath the protection of the Sun, which is the father of all the Baruya.

But we need to look beyond these outward signs, adornments, bodily attitudes, areas, and gestures permitted or forbidden, and to analyze the place accorded by the norms of Baruya society to men or women in the various activities that produce their material and social existence.

The place of men and women in their various activities

Access to the means of production and to the means of destruction

Land tenure of either farm or hunting land, which is the primary condition of existence, is in the hands of the men, who transmit it from one to the other.[1] Wives, their sisters, or their daughters have no part in this. Women do, however, retain lifetime use-rights over the lands of their ancestors, but as I have already pointed out, they never inherit them.

The manufacture of weapons and implements is an exclusively male activity, just as the manufacture of salt and the task of going to trade it for stone blades or the black palm wood with which they used to make their tools and bows were reserved for the men.

Even the digging stick, the women's essential tool for planting and harvesting, is not made by the women themselves. A father will make it for his daughter, a husband for his wife, and give it to her. As men, they naturally possess the necessary tools, that is, polished stone adzes or, today, steel axes. But this male monopoly over the manufacture of the means of production

[1] Maurice Godelier, "Land Tenure among the Baruya of New Guinea," *Journal of Papua and New Guinea Society* (November–December 1969): 1–15; in collaboration with C. D. Ollier and D. P. Drover, "Soil Knowledge amongst the Baruya of Wonenara, New Guinea," *Oceania* 42 (1) (September 1971): 33–41.

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