

**FROM POLLUTION TO EMPOWERMENT: WOMEN, AGE,  
AND POWER AMONG THE BENA BENA  
OF THE EASTERN HIGHLANDS**

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This article explores how various cultural patterns of age and gender in both precolonial and postcolonial times created differences in the lives of older and younger women. Among the Bena Bena of Ganaga village in Papua New Guinea's Eastern Highlands Province, three sets of gender ideas were used to evaluate women's activities and capabilities as they moved through the life course in precolonial times. Women could use these ideas as sources of power and influence in their relations with men and women. The achievement of social adulthood and menopause offered women a greater range of opportunities, expanded their power bases, and formed the basis for age stratification among women. Sixty years of culture change and economic development have transformed the Bena Bena into coffee-producing peasants. Although women's work loads have increased, their power bases and many of the activities through which they earned prestige have remained intact. The final part of the article explores how a wide variety of changes associated with the development process affect the contemporary ideas of age and gender that inform women's behavior and the relationships that they form with other women and men.

**HOYAPELLO WAS MARRIED** to a man of Ganaga village in 1948, before her first menstruation. Marriage before first menstruation was not common among the Bena Bena in precolonial times. Hoyapello's guardian and clan pushed for the marriage because the alliance would be beneficial and because Hoyapello and Bari (her husband) had developed a strong attraction for each other during courting. Through the years, Hoyapello earned a reputation for being an excellent gardener, a woman who gave generously to

guests, and a strong woman who gave birth to many children (eight born, six living).

In the 1970s Hoyapello began to participate in producer-seller markets. Later she also branched out into the sale of commercial yarns, which were in great demand for the making of women's carrying bags (*bilums*). At this point she had two hard-working, unmarried daughters at home who could work in the gardens, feed the family, and gather wood and water. As time passed, it became clear that one of her sons had the talent for university. Although the family had been involved in coffee production before, they now expanded their plantings and increased their time in picking and processing coffee so that they could acquire the money needed for their son's expenses. In 1976, after a whirlwind courtship of five days, one of Hoyapello's older daughters married a man from Bougainville and left with him when he returned to his job at the copper mine. Although Hoyapello's other older daughter also wanted to get married, she was held back to help with subsistence production and household maintenance.

Hoyapello and two other Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) women were instrumental in the establishment of an SDA Women's Welfare group or Dorcas Society in Ganaga in the early 1970s. The main goal of the Dorcas Society was to help the old and other needy people in the surrounding communities. Society members earned money to support their welfare activities by picking other people's coffee and clearing garden land for a fee. The activities of the Ganaga Dorcas Society ended in the late 1970s, when the community no longer had a resident pastor.

Hoyapello and other women eagerly became members of the Ganaga Women's Association Fund Club in 1977. This club was established by a Filipino woman who had married a man of the same clan as Hoyapello's husband. Hoyapello told me: "The Mrs. [the woman who founded the club] told us that it was no good to sit down and do nothing. She told us to start some small work now. She said that if we worked hard now that later we could join hands, work in business, and make money." Women like Hoyapello used the money they earned from cherry coffee and market sales to pay the membership fee. Hoyapello was chosen as one of the three committee women who would represent the opinions of other club members. When the Fund Club was transformed into the Bena Bena Women's Development Corporation in 1982, Hoyapello was elected as one of the seven members of the board of directors. Like other older women, Hoyapello was able to purchase shares in the corporation as a result of her income-earning skills. She was also able to play an active role in these activities and in the corporation because she had a supportive husband and a strong, unmarried older daughter who did much of the gardening and provisioned the household. Hoyapello's achieve-

ments in market sales and her role in the Bena Bena Women's Development Corporation as well as her expertise and knowledge of childbirth and midwifery have brought her community recognition and prestige. The life and experiences of my "mother" Hoyapello are an example of the successes that some contemporary older women in Ganaga can achieve.

Between February 1983 and May 1984, I resided in the Upper Bena Bena village of Ganaga, located in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea. One of the things that I observed during my fifteen-month stay in this community was a major difference in the lives and opportunities of younger and older women. Older women, like Hoyapello, were involved in a greater variety of activities than younger women and also played a prominent role in newly introduced organizations. In the following I strive to explore (1) how various gender ideas affect the perception of women's characteristics and activities in different contexts and at different stages of the life course, (2) how women's opportunities, choices, and access to power and authority in the past and in contemporary contexts change as they age, and (3) how precolonial patterns of relations among women continue to affect women's lives in the postcolonial period.

### **Background**

Throughout this article I will explore how native concepts of age and gender affect the lives and relationships of Bena Bena women. From my perspective, concepts and ideologies of gender are not monolithic and immutable but flexible, situational, multifaceted, negotiated, and achieved. In fact, gender ideas are not just about male-female relationships, but they also convey important messages about values, social identities, and relations and access to power and authority (MacCormack and Strathern 1980; Ortner 1974; Strathern 1987).

A woman's age also influences her relations with other women. As noted in the introduction to this volume, many scholars have explored how women's opportunities and access to power improve and change as they become older and enter the later stages of the life course (Brown 1982; Counts 1984). This transformation in the lives of older women can form the basis for age inequality or stratification among women (Foner 1984). This relational principle plays a role in shaping women's opportunities and aspirations as well as their perceptions of themselves and others.

The mutability of gender concepts and the transformation in the lives of older women suggest that women's access to power and their power bases evolve as they move through the life course. My understanding and use of the concept of power subsumes two key points. First, power allows individ-

uals to have influence over their own autonomy and control over the choices and autonomy of others. Second, power allows individuals to have differential access to material and nonmaterial resources and knowledge. Authority is the social recognition, sanction, and legitimation of an individual's use of power. Unlike Lamphere (1974), who sees power as vested in particular offices, I follow Foucault's (1980) perspective that power exists in human action, is not a structure that is owned by one social group and denied to another, and can be exercised and deployed through a variety of strategies, networks, and mechanisms.

Native patterns of gender and age and the existence of various types of relationships among women can influence the outcome of the development process (Boserup 1990; Foner 1984). The way of life of the Bena Bena of the Eastern Highlands has been transformed in the span of sixty years. In order to understand how change and development have affected the choices and opportunities of the women I came to know in contemporary Ganaga, we must first explore how concepts of age and gender affected Bena Bena women in precolonial times.

### **Gender and Age in Highland Societies**

Much of the literature on the nature of precolonial social relations in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea has focused on the stratified or unequal gender relations between men and women (Allen 1967; Brown and Buchbinder 1976; Feil 1978; Hays and Hays 1982; Josephides 1985; Keesing 1982; Lederman 1986, 1990; Meggitt 1964). In most instances the lives of men as a group have been contrasted hierarchically to the lives of women as a group. Only rarely has age been seen as a source of inequality in Highlands social relations, and in these few cases analysis has focused on how men as a stratified group are opposed to women as a homogeneous group (Gelber 1986; Godelier 1982; Modjeska 1982; Strathern 1982a). E. Faithorn (1976) and, more recently, M. Strathern (1987, 1988) suggest that the preoccupation of Highland ethnographers with gender inequality has masked the presence of other sources of inequality such as age, kinship, and personality.

As a result of her work among the Hua, Meigs feels that Eastern Highlands ethnographers have overemphasized the existence of male dominance in gender ideologies (1984, 1990). Among the Hua, male dominance is only one of three gender ideologies that affect the actions of men and women in different contexts and at different stages of the life course (Meigs 1990: 105). The male-dominant or what Meigs calls the, "male chauvinist" ideology portrayed women as physically and morally dirty, stupid, and of shifting loyalties, and was used to promote male bonding for warfare. A "female-

superior” ideology, used in male cult rituals, both acknowledged women’s reproductive power and imitated this power through bloodletting. Finally, an ideology of “complementarity” that emphasized the dependency of men and women was invoked as a model for successful marital relationships. Meigs also found that menopause changed women’s lives dramatically (1976, 1984). Not only did they have access to a greater range of opportunities, but they also could cross over and perform the activities of men. Meigs’s ideas are also significant for other Eastern Highlands cultures.

### **Precolonial Ganaga**

My understanding and partial reconstruction of life in Ganaga prior to Australian contact is based on discussions with contemporary men and women and comparative insights drawn from other anthropological research on the Bena Bena (Keil 1974; Keil and Johannes 1974; Langness 1963, 1964a, 1964b, 1967, 1969, 1971, 1974, 1987, 1993).

The Bena Bena refer to the time period prior to Australian contact as the “fighting time.” During this period the Bena Bena participated in sweet potato horticulture, pig and cassowary husbandry, regional partner-to-partner fixed equivalent trade, and life-course exchanges. Endemic warfare based on the bow and arrow and organized through big-man leadership was also a key feature of the past. Members of each of the three patrilineal clans resided together in separated fortified hamlets that were strategically located for defensive purposes.

In the precolonial period women’s roles in the division of labor were focused on the activities of horticulture, animal husbandry of pigs and cassowaries, household maintenance, and the raising of children. After menopause women could also participate in extradomestic activities such as curing and male initiation. Men performed certain activities in horticultural production and animal husbandry, but their primary activities were based in warfare, exchange, and leadership. Various gender ideas formed a rationale for this division of labor. Over and over again the stories that contemporary residents told me about the “fighting time” highlighted the existence of all three ideologies stressed by Meigs (1990).

Older men told me that women were characterized as weak, wild, inconsistent, and threatening and men as intelligent, strong, and single-minded, primarily in the context of men’s cult (*nama*) activities. During cult initiation younger men were taught to view men’s activities as superior to women’s because it was through these activities that men could achieve big-man leadership.

These male-dominant ideas devalued women’s characteristics at the same

time that they recognized women's fertility and reproductive power. A critical component of this perspective was that men feared and were threatened by the possibility that women could pollute or contaminate them with menstrual and childbirth fluids. Contemporary men and women agreed that women had a responsibility to protect both men and society from these powerful substances through the observance of behavioral tabus.

Bloodletting was an important component of male initiation and male cult activity among the Bena Bena, as among the Hua and other Highland groups. Older men and women told me that bloodletting hastened the growth of young boys and girls. Later, adult men performed bloodletting to maintain their strength. Bloodletting has been interpreted as a simulation of menstruation and an effort to control the reproductive process (Langness 1974; Lindenbaum 1976). Following Meigs (1990), this second set of Bena Bena ideas reflected the positive nature and power of female fluids and fertility and the superior role and control that women play in the reproduction of society.

Many of the ideas that contemporary Ganaga men and women expressed to me about the precolonial relationship of men and women in marriage reflect a "complementary" gender ideology (Faithorn 1976; Meigs 1990). Marriage was the most important life-course event for men and women, and a married couple was expected to strive to be an interdependent team. For example, when her husband needed garden produce, pigs, or cassowaries for feasts and exchanges, a woman should cooperate with him if he performed his obligations in horticultural production and animal husbandry. Some older women also told me that they played an important complementary role in ritual (see also Hays and Hays 1982).

Bena Bena ideas of the perfect marriage were reflected in their concepts of an ideal man and woman. An ideal man upheld male concerns, performed male cult rituals, fought bravely in battle, killed many men, cooperated with his wife, and gave generously in life-course events. A Bena Bena big-man or *gipina* exemplified this ideal. An ideal woman, exemplified by the big-woman or *gipinae*, was a wife and mother who controlled her reproductive power and the fluids associated with it, worked hard in the gardens, produced many pigs, cooked and gave away a lot of food, produced many children, listened to and obeyed men, and supported her husband.

Both men and women had power. For men power was grounded in skill in warfare and active participation in life-course exchanges. A woman's power in the early stages of her life was grounded in her fertility and potential for reproduction. Although I did not explore this in the course of fieldwork, it is possible that some of the ideas of both Andersen (1972) and S. Errington (1990) concerning island Southeast Asian cultures may be use-

ful to an understanding of women's power among the Bena Bena. Both of these scholars suggest that a person's power may be related to the amount of intangible, mysterious energy or potency that is embodied in that person. It is possible that women's capability for reproduction was viewed as a highly potent, creative energy. This potency may have been threatening and fearful to others if they were uncertain about how a woman would use it. A married woman's power base expanded when her abilities in childbearing and subsistence production demonstrated her social responsibility and commitment to her husband and his community. After menopause, when a woman's reproductive potency was finished, a woman's achievements and authority provided a new power base for her.

When individuals controlled their own impulses, worked to emulate ideal behavior, and cooperated with their spouses in marriage, they demonstrated their commitment and responsibility to society. Clan members recognized this critically important achievement by calling them social adults. Adulthood was not a one-time event but part of a cultural process that continued throughout an individual's life course (Barlow 1995; Lutkehaus 1995). Adults who strived to be the best that they could be within the boundaries set for their gender were said to have a name. Having a name meant that one had social esteem, prestige, and authority. For both men and women this name was the first step in the achievement of the position of big-man or big-woman.

### **The Female Life Course in the Past**

During the "fighting time," a woman's life course was divided into six stages. In the following I will explore how the gender ideas and expectations highlighted above and the gendered life course offered younger and older women different experiences, opportunities, and relationships with women and men.

#### ***Younger Women***

When a woman became pregnant, a male from her husband's clan would step forward and volunteer to be the woman's guardian. As Hoyapello told me, "A woman's guardian and his wife were supposed to be like a brother and sister to the woman." A woman was assisted in birth and cared for after birth by her female guardian and other older women. If the child was a girl (***panae***), her mother's guardians became ***her*** guardians. New guardians would step forward for a woman's next pregnancy..

The guardian and his wife had the responsibility of performing a series of life-course rituals and feasts during which knowledge, magic, and ritual

were used to cultivate a girl's sexual and reproductive power/potency and prepare her for marriage. Older men and women in contemporary Ganaga also told me that these events made girls happy, strong, and beautiful. Some of these rituals were performed by the guardians alone, and some involved the participation of a wider set of clan relations. As *panae*, young girls assisted their mothers with various activities and took care of younger children.

A young woman became a *yafanae* when her breasts began to develop and with the onset of menstruation. The first menstruation ritual for young girls was performed by the female guardian and other older women. This was a highly celebrated event because it brought physical evidence of a woman's potency, fertility, and reproductive power. On the day following first menstruation rites, the young woman's guardians held a public feast to acknowledge and celebrate the young woman's readiness for marriage. During the course of the feast, the *yafanae* sat on a banana-leaf bed and was given prime sections of pork as well as previously tabued red-colored food (*marita*, pandanus fruit, and red *pitpit*, wild asparagus).

After first menstruation rites, negotiations could begin for a young woman's marriage. While a *yafanae's* guardian, big-man, and other older men found a husband for her, she was expected to attend formal courting parties and live a life of freedom. A group of young men from a clan would invite a group of young women from another clan to sing and "court" with them on a banana-leaf bed inside the men's house.

A young woman became a *yafaye* after she was delivered to her husband's community. Before her relatives left her, they helped the *yafaye* prepare a sweet potato garden. The bride distributed the first harvest to those people in her husband's community who had contributed to her bride-wealth. New brides could not reside or have sexual relations with their husbands until after this first harvest and until wives had been found for all of a man's age-mates. During this period, which could range from two months to three years, a *yafaye* resided with her mother-in-law and assisted her in horticultural and animal husbandry tasks.

A woman was viewed as an *ae* when she began to cohabit and have sexual relations with her husband. The early years of marriage were very difficult for a young couple. The man and wife were virtual strangers, and the activities of warfare, courting, and male cults gave the couple few opportunities to get to know one another. During the "fighting time" women could not easily return to their natal villages, and so they were forced to make the best of their marriages.

A woman's transition into married life was also affected by ideas of male superiority. From the perspective of a husband and his community, the motives of in-marrying women were highly suspect. In fact, many contem-



porary men in Ganaga told me that these women were sexually wild and highly threatening during their early years of marriage. I would suggest that women at this stage of their life course were characterized in this way because during the “fighting time” it was common for former enemy groups to exchange sisters in marriage. When these new wives entered the communities, their loyalties and commitment were unknown and thus they were more capable (from the community’s point of view) of using their sexual and reproductive power/potency in a harmful or negative way.

In the early years of marriage, an *ae* could use her power in the reproductive domain to try and gain better treatment from her husband. She could, for example, threaten pollution or the prevention of conception. Men of all ages thought that regular wife beating was required to tame these wild and threatening women and transform them into wives and mothers.

Although older women did not portray the characteristics and power of in-marrying women in a negative way, they told me that a bride’s mother-in-law and other older women were constantly evaluating a bride’s gardening and pig husbandry abilities and her personal qualities to ensure that she was worthy of the bridewealth given for her.

When a young couple finally settled down in their marriage, a woman could begin to expand her power base through her achievements in subsistence production and motherhood. Each day women from the clan would go together to the adjacent gardens to cultivate and harvest crops for their own households under the watchful eyes of an armed guard. As Hoyapello told me, “During the fighting time we did our garden work quickly because we were afraid of being attacked.” As Faithorn found among Kafe women (1976: 89), Bena Bena women received prestige and increased their social reputation through the cultivation of well-tended and extensive gardens, through the tending of a large and healthy pig herd, and by providing their families with food.

A woman’s commitment and reputation also increased as she generously provided crops and pigs to support her husband’s political and economic ambitions. It was clear that men were dependent on the subsistence production of their wives and that their cooperation was essential to a man’s acquisition of a name. When a woman supplied her husband with resources, her productive power was viewed positively and could be described in terms of the complementarity of husbands and wives. However, when wives were unhappy with their husbands, they could use their power in a negative way by withholding crops and pigs, and thus undermine their husbands’ activities.

Throughout a marriage a particular bone of contention for women was the practice or threatened practice of polygyny. Vicious physical fighting and sorcery use between co-wives was both common and expected. A common

action of a jealous wife was to set the house of the new wife on fire when the husband and new wife first slept together. In time, most co-wives grew to help and cooperate with one another.

Except for the occasional communal work party, women performed their horticultural and husbandry tasks separately. There were other contexts in which women worked and acted as a group. Women of a clan performed and participated in rituals for life-course events, and they worked together to prepare food for clanwide feasts. Seclusion in the women's house during childbirth and menstruation offered women an important context for the exchange of information and gossip. Hoyapello told me that women sometimes lied about having their periods so that they could spend time with friends. All of these activities formed the basis for the development of informal ties and networks among women (March and Taqqu 1986). These networks provided mutual self-help for both everyday problems and crises. Women also supported each other by caring for children and provisioning the household during times of birth and menstruation (Schneider 1993:151-152).

A woman's transition from wife to mother relieved some of the pressure exerted on her and allowed her to begin to create a place for herself in her husband's community. As Meigs found among the Hua, "a new woman's alienation from her husband's community diminishes once she has borne a child and continues to diminish with each subsequent birth" (1984:20). Motherhood brought physical evidence of the positive and superior side of female power/potency. Male children were desired, especially as firstborns, and women sometimes practiced female infanticide, using paid female curers to achieve the goal. Contemporary older women expressed ambivalence about childbirth. They knew that contraception could lead to polygyny, but at the same time they feared the pain and possible death associated with motherhood (see also Faithorn 1976:91).

### ***Older Women***

As the years passed, a woman would continue to increase her reputation through her activities in subsistence production and reproduction. Older wives were rarely the victims of domestic violence because their achievements in these areas demonstrated their social commitment. According to Hoyapello and other older women, at some point after menopause all women achieved social adulthood and were called ***alopae***. The onset of menopause alone did not make one a social adult. Both the lack of pollutive ability associated with menopause as well as a woman's reputation were considered in this life-course shift. Achievement of this 'social position was viewed as

recognition of a woman's accomplishments as a wife and mother and her commitment to the complementary model of marriage.

Although menopause meant the loss of a power base for women, adulthood brought them the authority to influence the choices and opportunities of others. Within her own household an *alopae* controlled the labor of her unmarried daughters. Mothers-in-law had only limited control over daughters-in-law once a couple began to work as a team. With sexual segregation adult women headed their own households and directed, organized, and controlled the labor of younger women, including co-wives.

Adult women also had more authority and control over decisions concerning the allocation of the fruits of their labor. Husbands often consulted older wives about the timing of particular feasts and exchanges. Husbands and wives also mutually decided to act as a woman's guardian. Adult women were significantly involved as well in marriage and bridewealth negotiations. The authority of older women afforded them new experiences and opportunities outside the household. Adult women played important roles in male initiation and controlled various rituals to celebrate the maturity and change in status of females in their clans.

During the third stage of male initiation, female guardians and other women of the clan, under the leadership of adult women and their big-woman, educated and initiated young girls. First, the older women took the young girls down to the river and performed bloodletting on them. Contemporary older women told me that this was thought to enhance the growth, strength, and beauty of the girls and their ability to work hard in the garden and carry many children. This association between blood and growth may have been a reflection of a belief in the potency and efficaciousness of women's reproductive power. It is possible that female bloodletting reported elsewhere in the Eastern Highlands may also have had this meaning (Hays and Hays 1982; Lindenbaum 1976; Newman and Boyd 1982). Older women also transferred important knowledge about gardening and pig husbandry and the systems of magic associated with these activities.

Adult women in the clan and a girl's guardian organized and controlled rituals to celebrate a girl's first menstruation. Bena Bena first menstruation rituals are similar to those reported elsewhere in the Highlands (Ross 1965; Sexton 1995; Warry 1986; Whiteman 1965). When a girl first noticed the appearance of menstrual blood, a small house of wood and banana leaves and a banana-leaf bed were built for her in the corner of her mother's house. The young girl would remain inside this house for one to two months, depending on the wishes of her parents and guardian. During this time, women from her clan would bring her gifts of food. According to Hoyapello,

older women would often sit with the girl and cry because soon she would marry and leave the community. Older women also sang songs to educate younger women about their roles as wives and mothers and to magically enhance their strength and beauty.

Contemporary older women told me that adult and other older women had the responsibility of teaching younger women about how to both use and control their power/potency in socially responsible ways. Hoyapello told me that "men's work was not enough. We [women] worked with men to protect everyone from the power of blood."

Because female fluids could be contaminating and polluting to others, *yafanae* learned about the tabus that would affect their behavior during menstruation and after childbirth--and at all times simply because they were capable of these processes. Though these tabus affected a woman in her home community, they were most rigid when a woman married and moved to her husband's community. For example, women could never walk directly through the center of their husbands' community because they might walk over something and contaminate it.

During menstruation and childbirth, women were exempt from domestic duties and had to reside in the communal women's house. According to Hoyapello, most women viewed their confinement during menstruation and childbirth as a vacation from work and responsibility.

The potency of female fluids necessitated sexual segregation. Residence in the men's house protected men from possible pollution and preserved the strength of warriors. Older women played a complementary role in perpetuating male-dominant gender ideas by cooperating with men in male initiation and by educating young women about the polluting quality of female fluids (see also Hays and Hays 1982). It is possible that older women joined with older men in supporting, maintaining, and reproducing an ideological system that included customs and ideas such as pollution and tabus in an effort to protect their privileged position and keep younger women in their place.

While younger women learned how to protect society from their power/potency, they also learned how to manipulate this power to their own ends. A woman could use this power against men through the manipulation of tabus, the withholding of subsistence production and sexual access, and the use of magic and plants in abortion and contraception.

After a *yafanae's* confinement was finished, her guardian, her big-woman, and other adult and older women carried her down to the river, where she cleansed herself. The girl and, the other women present performed bloodletting to cleanse her of menstrual fluids and encourage her growth and beauty. This event provided another context for adult and older

women to stress the positive and superior qualities of female fluids and power.

After the cleansing, the *yafanae* returned to her mother's house, where she was ritually prepared for public presentation. While magical songs were sung to enhance the girl's strength and beauty, her skin was rubbed with the juice of banana stalks and other leaves and her nose was painted red. Although the first menstruation ritual was but one of the events that prepared a girl for marriage, it was one of the most important events in which older women could control and supervise the transformation of *yafanae*.

Adult women also had the opportunity to achieve positions outside the household. Some became active as midwives and curers, monopolizing knowledge about the use of plants and spells for conception, abortion, and contraception. The expertise of midwives concerning difficult births was widely respected. Both curers and midwives were paid by patients for their services.

Although most adult women had a greater range of activities and more authority than younger women, not all adult women had a name. Adult women who assiduously sought to be like the ideal woman were said to have a name and received additional social esteem and prestige. Certain activities of older women appeared to be limited to women with a name. The most prominent role an adult woman with a name could achieve outside the household was that of big-woman (*gipinae*). All of the women in a clan designated one woman they trusted to represent their interests and perspectives within the community and in clan meetings that were attended by men. A big-woman also helped to organize and orchestrate female clan rituals and clan feasts, and generally acted as an advisor to women.

In summary, a cursory comparison of the lives and opportunities of men and women during the "fighting time" indicates that men and women were not equal. Bena Bena men were the major players in activities (such as exchange, warfare, and leadership) that affected the dynamics within and between groups. As I have noted elsewhere, age stratification affected the relations among men so that older men played a more prominent role in these activities than younger men (Dickerson-Putman 1996).

Women, however, were not a homogeneous group that could summarily be compared and opposed to men as a group. Although women were never equal to men, some women were more unequal than others. Older, adult women, for example, played a complementary role with men through the performance of rituals that not only socialized females but also protected their own interests and advantages.

First menstruation brought physical evidence of a *yafanae's* fertility and reproductive power/potency. While adult women, using both female-superior and male-dominant ideas, transmitted knowledge about these

powers and ritually prepared a young girl for marriage, the important men in her life orchestrated the marriage itself. The motives and abilities of a **yafaye** were suspect, and thus men in her husband's clan feared the new bride would use her reproductive power against them. As an **ae**, a young wife could begin to prove her worth and win the esteem of others through her success in horticulture and pig husbandry. When she controlled her potency and used her resources to support the goals of her husband, she demonstrated her commitment to the complementary model of Bena Bena marriage. However, if a husband thwarted his wife's efforts to win esteem, she could manipulate her potency by withholding sexual access and resources and threatening pollution.

Motherhood critically changed a woman's life because it increased her prestige and broadened her power base. Reproduction and continued expertise in subsistence production brought women greater influence with their husbands and within their households.

Menopause and demonstrated commitment led clan members to refer to the woman as an adult. The achievement of adulthood expanded a woman's activities and opportunities for esteem and brought her authority both within and outside her household. Although younger women played a greater role in subsistence production and held a greater sexual attraction for men, an adult woman's technical and ritual knowledge of production, her successful rearing of children, and her experience in provisioning a household made her continuously valuable to her husband and crucial to his success.

Some adult woman also had the chance to acquire a name and become eligible for new roles such as that of **gipinae**. Older women's greater opportunities for acquiring prestige, visibility, and authority in community affairs and their impact on the lives and knowledge of younger women formed the basis for age stratification among women.

Inequality, however, was not the only relationship that existed among women. As women established themselves in their husbands' communities, they made friends, established networks, and cooperated in the performance of life-course events. I now turn to consider how the patterns that affected women's lives and opportunities in the past influenced the ways in which women were affected by the development process.

### **The Development Process**

In a period of sixty years the Bena Bena have been transformed into coffee-producing peasants. A detailed analysis of Australia's development policies for the Papua New Guinea Highlands has been provided elsewhere (Brookfield 1972; Dexter 1961; Dickerson-Putman 1986; Downs 1980; Munster

1979). These policies were grounded on a Western model of gender and were particularly concerned to change men's roles. The cash-cropping of coffee, conversion to Western religions, and new forms of leadership were explicitly introduced to men to replace their roles in warfare, big-man leadership, and ritual. The then-current model of maternal deprivation and the belief that women could be treated as a homogeneous group affected Australian development plans for Highland women. Income-earning activities, such as the cash-cropping of coffee, were not considered appropriate for women because they would negatively affect their ability to serve their families and communities. Instead, women's clubs were introduced by missionary wives and nursing sisters to improve the homemaking skills of Highland women. Although it was recognized that the unpaid labor of women in subsistence production was crucial to family life, nothing was done to improve or support these activities.

The Australian colonial administration, believing that colonies should pay for themselves, focused their development on the extraction of resources from core areas. The arrival of explorers and missionaries into the Highlands marked the beginning of the first phase of Australian development. Between 1932 and 1934 both German Lutheran and Seventh-day Adventist missionaries contacted the Ganaga area. The Leahy brothers and Mike Dwyer first contacted the Bena Bena in 1930 and probably passed by Ganaga in 1932 in their search for gold (Leahy 1991; Munster 1979). After the establishment of a patrol post in the Bena Bena area in 1934, officials (*kiaps*) could begin the long process of abolishing warfare and introducing a Western form of justice. During this period male cults were broken up, pacification was established, and a dispersed form of clan settlement was introduced.

Beginning in 1953, Australia introduced small-holder coffee production (Amarshi, Good, and Mortimer 1979; Dickerson-Putman 1986; Donaldson and Good 1981; Howlett 1962, 1973). Highland horticulturalists became peasants as the cash-cropping of coffee linked local communities into the world market system (Meggitt 1971; Strathern 1982b). Because a Western model of gender continued to inform Australian policy, the cash-cropping of coffee was envisioned as a new role only for men. A status-raising welfare approach still emphasized the transformation of Highland women into Western-style homemakers (Barnes 1981; Gardner 1976). Bena Bena like other Highland women did, however, become involved in newly introduced producer-seller markets. During this period a medical post, community school, and formal fenced market area were established on the edge of the Ganaga community.

Since 1975 the Highlands have been influenced by the most recent phase

of development--that associated with independence. One particular focus of the Papua New Guinean government is to increase the role of women in the development of their country. This focus is also a requirement if the country wants to attract development investments from such institutions as the World Bank. The government hopes to achieve this goal by creating special women's groups and projects that foster the skills necessary for increased women's participation (Goodman, Lepani, and Morawetz 1985; Hughes 1985; Stratigos and Hughes 1987). The colonial belief that women can be treated as a homogeneous group persists.

### **Age and Gender in Contemporary Ganaga**

Change and development have created a new world for Ganaga residents. The contemporary community of Ganaga consists of eighty-seven households (347 people) dispersed over seventeen named hamlets. Sixteen (18.3 percent) of these households are members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. As peasants, Ganaga residents must achieve a delicate balance between subsistence and income-earning activities (Dickerson-Putman 1986; Healey 1989; Howlett 1973). Income-earning activities are considered *bisnis* and are afforded high cultural value and renown by both men and women. A small number of Ganaga households are also involved in investment-based activities such as trade stores, coffee buying and processing, and development corporations.

The cessation of warfare, the introduction of steel technology, and the dispersal of new kinds of crops have allowed Ganaga women to expand beyond the limits of precolonial horticulture. Women's subsistence production continues to emphasize the planting of sweet potatoes in intercropped gardens and the animal husbandry of pigs (goats if you are Seventh-day Adventist) and cassowaries. Women raise fewer pigs than in the past because of the increased importance of money in life-course exchanges. Steel technology facilitates the clearing of land, thus allowing women to plant more gardens (the average is three) with a wider variety of crops. Production of new cultigens such as European vegetables provides women with the resources that are necessary for participation in producer-seller markets (Dickerson-Putman 1988). The increased work load of women is further exacerbated when men become so preoccupied with income-earning and leisure activities that they fail to perform their essential roles in horticultural production.

Most households in Ganaga earn cash through participation in the picking and selling of coffee. In fact, coffee sales (especially parchment) are the highest source of annual incomes for Ganaga households. The introduction



of coffee has also increased the work load of women because women are expected to devote time to their husbands' coffee gardens.

Ganaga women are usually able to keep and allocate the money they earn from the sale of cherry coffee, but men almost always claim the money earned through the more profitable sale of parchment coffee (see also Sexton 1988). Women do control the money that they earn in marketing. Men show little interest in or concern about women's market earnings, probably because these earnings seem inconsequential when compared to the amount of money that can be earned through the sale of parchment coffee (see also Warry 1986).

Like other Eastern Highlands women (Dickerson-P&man 1992, 1994b; Sexton 1982a, 1982b, 1986), the women of Ganaga responded enthusiastically to the introduction of both government-sponsored and non-government-sponsored women's groups. Ganaga was the home of a non-government-sponsored group called the Bena Bena Women's Development Corporation. Women used the money they earned through producer-seller markets and cherry coffee sales to purchase shares that were first invested in various village-based activities and later in a restaurant and in real estate.

Various changes associated with the development process have also affected the formation of ties between women. Dispersed settlement means that a woman has fewer opportunities to interact with other women in her husband's clan. Although ties do develop among women in the same hamlet, the decline in clanwide interaction means women have fewer networks for mutual support. The elimination of the communal women's hut and a decrease in the clan participation of women in life-course rituals also means that women have fewer contexts for the exchange of knowledge and gossip.

Breakup of the male cult, cessation of male and female initiation, pacification, and the fact that most husbands and wives now reside together have brought great changes to the lives of Ganaga residents. Despite these changes, various sets of gender ideas and the ideological boundaries and division of labor they supported in the past continue to affect relations between men and women and between younger and older women. Although male cult initiation and activity have not been a part of Ganaga life since the 1950s, men still recognize the potency of female fertility and reproductive power. Men's continued belief in the possibility of female pollution reflects the persistence of male-dominant beliefs and means that women still have the responsibility for following various behavioral tabus. As in the past, menopause offers older women more freedom and a greater range of choices and opportunities. Individual menstrual huts located at the edge of hamlets have replaced the communal house of the past. Women's

activities and characteristics are also still viewed as inferior to men's activities and qualities.

Only older men and women who were initiated in the past perform bloodletting and other purificatory rituals. The decline in the widespread performance of bloodletting indicates a loss of context for female-superior gender ideas. The positive and superior qualities and power of female fertility and reproduction are still celebrated in first menstruation rituals that are performed for *yafanae* (including Seventh-day Adventist girls).

Although the roles and activities for men and women have changed dramatically since precolonial times, gender ideas that encouraged complementarity still flavor contemporary perspectives on marriage.

Past notions of the ideal woman are still used as a role model for contemporary women. Subsistence production, childbearing and rearing, and household maintenance are still considered the primary activities through which women can achieve the esteem of others. Women's identity as social adults is still grounded in menopause and the demonstration of achievement. One change is that income-earning activities such as marketing and coffee production are now viewed as appropriate activities for women. In fact, some residents claim that an additional characteristic of the ideal woman is the ability to earn money.

### **The Female Life Course in the Present**

#### ***Younger Women***

In contemporary Ganaga a woman's life course is divided into five stages. Although Western-style education has been available to all young people in Ganaga since the early 1960s, parents believe that education is a better investment for boys than for girls. Those young girls (*panae*) who do attend community school are eventually expected to settle into village life and marry. First menstruation rituals still celebrate the fertility and reproductive power/potency of *yafanae*, although the participants and content have changed. As in the past, these rituals are viewed as the last of a series of life-course events that are organized by a girl's guardian and signal her readiness for marriage.

For various reasons, older men and women have, lost much of the control that they used to exert in the arrangement of marriages. Although young women do not choose their husbands, contemporary young people are usually not forced to marry against their will. In contemporary Ganaga young men and women have more freedom and opportunities for courtship. As I

have explored elsewhere (Dickerson-Putman 1995), younger women would like to have more say in the choice of their spouse. Many younger women believe that they can improve their lives if they marry an educated young man who might have a future in *bisnis* or village politics. This belief has led to a proactive strategy in which young women aggressively fight off female rivals.

Some parents insist that a potential wife come to the husband's village and work for a few months before a marital arrangement is settled so that they can assess her ability to make a garden and thus avoid future problems. Sometimes young men and women do not follow the wishes of their parents. Increased opportunities for courtship and inflation in bridewealths have led to a contemporary situation in which couples move in together and enjoy sexual relations before the transfer of the bridewealth. This strategy is used when parents and children do not agree on the choice of spouse or when a young man's family simply does not have the resources for the bridewealth. This situation has a negative impact on women, because the transfer legitimizes a marriage and is required in the event that a woman wants to take legal action against her husband.

After a young woman is married, she spends the first month of her stay in her husband's village living with her mother-in-law. In contemporary Ganaga a couple begins to reside together after the wife's initial month of transition. The *yafaye* life-course category is no longer necessary because cessation of male cult activities means that men no longer marry as a group. These early years of marriage, however, continue to be difficult. The motives of in-marrying women are still suspect, and so husbands still believe that new wives must be tamed and domesticated through beating. The yet unproven commitment of new brides also means that community members fear that they could negatively use their potent reproductive power. Again, these ideas reflect the persistence of male-dominant gender ideas.

The ideology of complementarity continues to be used as a model for contemporary marriage. Younger women still use their power in the reproductive sphere to try and gain some control in the early years of marriage. As marriages stabilize and women display their capabilities in production and reproduction, their power base expands, they receive esteem and prestige from others, and they are able to negotiate with husbands and exert power in household decisions and resource allocation.

A number of men and women in Ganaga told me that domestic violence in the later stages of marriage is much more common today than in the past. They believe that this is so because men and women spend more time together and thus have more opportunities to fight over the allocation of

time and resources. These arguments reflect the fact that, as peasants, Ganaga men and women are trying to balance their involvement in subsistence and income-earning activities.

As in the past, young women in contemporary Ganaga devote most of their time and resources to subsistence production and reproduction. Motherhood still means that women gain prestige for their commitment to their husbands, to their husbands' community, and to the complementary model of Bena Bena marriage. In the early stages of their reproductive careers, younger women do not have older children to free them from domestic production. The constraints on younger women are even greater than they were in the past. First, their work load has increased because of their obligations in coffee production. The new dispersed form of settlement also provides fewer opportunities for women to form supportive networks that could relieve some of their burden.

Many younger women resent the fact that time constraints have prevented them from taking advantage of new opportunities to become involved in income-earning activities such as marketing. Younger women are also less able to convince their husbands to share the profits from coffee production with them. Both of these difficulties mean that these women do not have the resources to participate in local and regional women's clubs and investment corporations. In sum, the life-course position and time constraints experienced by younger women prevent them from taking full advantage of new and contemporary opportunities.

### ***Older Women***

Contemporary older women continue to increase their reputations over time through their complementary participation in subsistence production, reproduction, and new income-earning activities. Like younger women, they have also experienced an increase in their work loads. This is not as great a handicap for older women because most can delegate this extra work to younger female dependents in their households.

Continued belief in the potency of female fluids and associated male-dominant and female-superior gender ideas means that older women still lose a power base but also realize more freedom and greater authority at menopause. This life-course shift and demonstration of loyalty, responsibility, and capability are still prerequisites for social adulthood and greater access to extradomestic activities. Outstanding lifelong achievements continue to be rewarded when community members refer to a woman as someone who has a name.

The types of 'activities and roles available to contemporary older and

adult women, however, have been greatly transformed by the development process. The role of big-woman is no longer available to older adult women. Older women still perform the important roles of curers and midwives, and some continue to gain renown in this way.

These changes have affected precolonial relationships among women. The contemporary use of individual menstrual huts has eliminated one context for female interaction. As mentioned earlier, the new settlement pattern has also lessened women's opportunities to form friendships and networks.

Contemporary life in Ganaga has also lessened the degree to which older women as a group control the transmission of knowledge and the ritual transformation of younger women. As a group, the women of a clan no longer initiate and teach young girls about how to make gardens and provide for their families. Now young girls learn these lessons from their mothers and other women in their hamlets. First menstruation ceremonies are also no longer performed by the older women of a clan. Hoyapello told me that the only real change in the content of the ceremonies is that bloodletting is no longer performed on the *yafanae* as part of her cleansing. Today first menstruation ceremonies and associated rituals and magic are undertaken primarily by the female guardian and a few close female relatives of the young woman, for example, her father's sister. Important information concerning pollution tabus, the cultural evaluation of female fluids, and strategies for manipulating her potent, reproductive power are still passed on to the *yafanae* on this occasion. Much of this cultural information reflects the persistence of both male-dominant and female-superior gender ideas.

The nature of the age stratification system among women has also been transformed. In contemporary Ganaga many of the precolonial bases for this system have been replaced by older women's greater ability to acquire and control cash and the opportunities this access gives them to investment-based activities.

Older women have greater success in controlling cash than younger women, because their committed behavior affords them the ability to negotiate with husbands and convince them to share coffee earnings (especially from parchment). These negotiations over the allocation of both time and resources, however, have led to an increase in domestic violence among older couples.

Participation in producer-seller markets is also more possible for older women. In an earlier study a statistically significant difference was found in the annual market earnings of younger and older women (Dickerson-Putman 1988). Older women are able to earn much more money in this way because they have the time and the domestic authority to allocate their duties to others. In fact older women may have an expanded impact on household

decision making because their market earnings are the second highest source of annual income for most households and the highest source of household income during the rainy season.

Some older women in Ganaga have used a part of their earnings to become involved in investment-based activities. The greater participation of older women is reflected in the fact that the mean number of shares held in the Bena Bena Women's Development Corporation is forty-three for older women and sixteen for younger women ( $p = .01$ ). Older women also play a major leadership role in the corporation. For example, the seven-member board of directors is composed entirely of women over the age of fifty. Many women in Ganaga told me that Hoyapello, one of the board members, would have been a *gipinae* in the past.

Today some older women earn renown (name) for their ability to earn money from newly introduced activities. Younger women become frustrated because they lack the time, freedom, support, and money that affords older women the opportunity to participate in marketing and women's clubs.

### Summary

Careful examination of women's lives in both precolonial and postcolonial Ganaga reveals that their opportunities, the way they are perceived, their power bases, and their relationships with other women and men changed as they progressed through the life course.

During the "fighting time" a woman's first power base was her fertility and capacity for reproduction. Depending on the context, the potency of this power could be perceived as threatening (male-dominant gender ideas) or as a positive creative force (female-superior gender ideas). Motherhood and capability in subsistence activities expanded her power, and her achievements were then viewed through a lens of complementarity. Demonstrated commitment and expertise in production and reproduction also brought younger women the esteem of others.

Menopause and continued success in subsistence production were the means for reaching social adulthood and prerequisites for acquiring a "name." Complementarity was most often used to characterize the activities of older, postmenopausal women. At this life-course stage, authority both within and outside the household became a woman's primary power base.

Relationships of both cooperation and stratification existed among women in the past. As time passed, in-marrying women developed ties of mutual support. These ties were especially crucial for younger women who lacked dependents to ease their work loads.

Various gender ideas, pollution beliefs, and behavioral tabus were some

of the key elements that created differences in the lives of younger and older women. Menopause and social adulthood expanded older women's activities, brought them greater authority both within and outside their households, and allowed them contexts in which their control of knowledge and ritual both shaped the lives and opportunities of younger women and supported their role in a system of age stratification.

The development process transformed Ganaga residents into peasants and introduced new income-earning and investment-based activities to the community. Culture change increased women's work loads, but their power bases and many of the activities through which they earned prestige remained intact.

Although change and development have eliminated many cultural institutions of the past, such as male cults, some elements of the three gender ideologies discussed above not only continue to persist apart from their original context but still inform women's behavior. Prior to menopause, women's fertility and reproductive power are situationally perceived in either a positive (female-superior) or a negative (male-dominant) way. Complementarity, in contemporary Ganaga, continues as the model for evaluating success in marriage.

Relationships among women have also been affected by the development process. Various factors including dispersed settlement, individual menstrual huts, and a transition from group- to family-based rituals have lessened the opportunities for women of all ages to develop ties of mutual support and cooperation.

During the time of my fieldwork, older women still experienced a shift from a life constrained by pollution beliefs to one that offers potential for empowerment. Celebration of first menstruation, observance of tabus, and greater freedom at menopause still support the inequality of older and younger women. However, the nature of this contemporary stratification differs from its counterpart in precolonial times. In the past, older women as a group had greater ritual and ideological control over younger women. In the Ganaga of today older women have less ideological control over younger women but greater ability in their own lives to control access to new economic activities. The brief life story of my mother Hoyapello well illustrates some of the reasons why contemporary older women can take greater advantage of the new culturally valued income-earning and investment activities available to them in their community. The differential access of older and younger women to these opportunities is now the basis for a new system of age stratification in which older women occupy the top rung.

The data reviewed here have implications for the development of gender and development policy. As I have observed elsewhere, policy makers in

Papua New Guinea and other developing countries must be sensitive to the ways in which native concepts of gender and age can affect women's ability to take advantage of projects and organizations that are designed to improve their participation in the development process. In communities like Ganaga, where pollution beliefs and other gender-related ideas continue to influence women's lives, there will always be some differences in the lives of older and younger women. A recognition of age stratification as an important, enduring cultural principle and a new emphasis on the creation of cooperative and nonhierarchical ties among women of different ages could eventually create a situation in which younger and older women work together for development. When women become empowered and united, they can begin to develop bonds of communication, cooperation, and integration with men. It is only when women and men work as equal partners that the true development of Ganaga and Papua New Guinea will begin.

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