BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Rena Lederman, *What Gifts Engender: Social Relations and Politics in Mendi, Highland Papua New Guinea.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Pp. 291, figures, maps, appendixes, references, index. US$52.00.

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Ethnographies of Melanesian cultures have been generally dominated by, if anything, the subject of exchange. Rena Lederman's *What Gifts Engender* is one such. Notwithstanding, this study of political economy among the Mendi of the southern New Guinea Highlands skillfully traces out a rather new direction, and this is its greatest strength. In essence, Lederman inverts the conventional "subsistence bias" (pp. 14-18) of most Highlands studies; production is thereby viewed as largely the consequence of socially conditioned distribution and exchange rather than the other way around.

The result is, on the one hand, a convincing rectification of D'Arcy Ryan's original description of the Mendi and, on the other, a far-reaching critique on nearly the full range of issues that have been raised from the earliest studies up through the most recent pan-Highlands comparisons (equality vs. inequality, big-manship, group vs. network relationships, agricultural intensification and the centralization of power, the significance of large-scale ceremonial vs. everyday exchange, gender relations and male-female antagonism, native vs. Western economic categories, home production- vs. finance-based societies, subsistence vs. exchange production, reproduction vs. reciprocity). Lederman's book draws within a singular focus such classic systems as the Melpa *moka*

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and the Mae Enga tee as well as the more recent market- and development-oriented studies among many other Highlands groups.

The emphasis here upon exchange and distribution derives chiefly from Stephen Gudeman's neo-Ricardian argument that "an economy is socially constructed, its local interpretation culturally formulated" (1978:359; see also Gudeman 1986). The Mendi, for example, raise and acquire pigs, pearlshells, and money according to a patterning of obligations by which they ultimately will have to give them away. Accordingly, Lederman's treatment of Mendi economics is conditioned by Mendi kinship, gender, and political organization and values. This leads her inevitably away from the analytic categories of Western economics ("subsistence," "gift," "loan," "debt," "profit," "credit," and so forth) towards indigenous relationships and meanings.

Lederman thereby grounds Mendi society in the coexistence of two interdependent but partially contradictory structural principles: *sem* (corporate clan unity) and *twem* (personal autonomy). *Sem* is realized in the formation of and exchanges between groups (lineages, clans, and tribes); *twem* in networks of interpersonal relationships, chiefly among affines. To Mendi, clan unity and personal autonomy are both evaluated in positive terms, and neither can be reduced to the other. Also, both principles are expressed through different rules but often in common exchange situations: warfare compensations, mortuary prestations, pig festivals, and bride-wealth payments. Typically, clansmen depend upon their separate networks of *twem* partners to obtain articles destined for corporate exchange, and upon receiving prestations from other groups immediately redistribute the wealth along the lines of their personalized networks. *Sem* and *twem* are thus at least partially overlapping and supportive of one another.

Nevertheless, Lederman clearly establishes that *sem* and *twem* are construed as independent ends in themselves and may frequently conflict. In many exchange situations, very simply, a particular actor may be obliged to contribute the very same article to fellow clanspeople and to an exchange partner outside the clan simultaneously. It is in the structural interdependency and conflict of *sem* and *twem,* indeed, that implications arise for decision making and, hence, societal integration in the spheres of gender relations, clanship and affinity, political organization, and development and social change. The result overall is a view of the Mendi roughly intermediate between the relatively centralized and structured Melpa and Mae Enga of the northern Highlands and such "loosely structured" (p. 20) southern Highlands societies as the nearby Etoro and Kaluli (see below).

From this vantage, Lederman is able to reflect critically on a wide range of comparative generalizations that have been proposed. Possessing their own *twem* exchange partners, for example, Mendi women enjoy a degree of personal autonomy rare in the Highlands. They number men as well as women among their partners, and they transact with all the same kinds of wealth (pigs, pearlshells, money) that men do. And although only men can participate directly in *sem* clan exchanges, even these are partially subsidized and constrained by the indirect participation of women through their *twem* exchanges. Lederman is able to show, therefore, that the evaluation and antagonism of the sexes and the contradictory interpretations of the separation of their respective domains among the Mendi is considerably more complicated than most others have been willing to grant for the Highlands.

Of notable significance, and underscoring her emphasis upon the social ends of distribution in favor of the limitations of production, Lederman also observes that while Mendi groups do engage in periodic large-scale ceremonial pig kills *(mok ink),* there is no evidence of large fluctuations in the size of their pig herds over time. More is involved than ecological adjustment. It is of similar interest, too, that Mendi men and women exchange wealth according to *twem* reciprocity when they do not have any apparent "need" to. Indeed, Lederman rightly emphasizes that the Mendi typically exchange according to principles of *sem* and *twem* alike when everybody already possesses or produces the same things.

For Lederman, these observations have additional implications for Highlands political organization. Andrew Strathern has proposed (1969), for example, that leaders' sponsorship of large-scale exchange through "finance" rather than "home production" results in greater centralization of political power under a relatively few big-men. Lederman shows, however, that while Mendi big-men (as well as ordinary men and women) depend largely upon "finance" through *twem* exchange rather than "home production," they are considerably less influential than Melpa or Mae Enga big-men. Local variations in scale of political organization are considerably more complicated.

Along similar lines, Lederman is rightly critical of previous studies of Highlands political economy for their nearly exclusive focus upon large-scale ceremonial exchange activities and big-men to the relative neglect of small-scale everyday exchange among ordinary people. Among the Mendi, once more, she demonstrates convincingly that even large-scale pig kills--organized at the group or clan level through the activities of clan big-men according to *sem* relations--are crucially facilitated and

constrained by means of personal networks of exchange according to *twem* relations.

As fruitful and insightful as these and other comparisons with the "northern Highlands" are for her, the question must be asked about their appropriateness relative to the possibility of a systematic comparison with neighboring societies in the "southern Highlands"--societies with whom the Mendi seem to bear a stronger family resemblance. Lederman herself seems to recognize clearly both the issue here and the opportunity missed:

> In Mendi and other parts of the Southern Highlands, where there are many contexts in which obligations to personal networks of exchange partners have priority and where there are fewer contexts in which obligations to fellow clan members are invoked, the analytical challenge to incorporate networks into a general account of social relationships is great. In Mae Enga society, Mount Hagen, and other parts of the northern Highlands, where the corporate obligations of clan members are more frequently stressed, this analytical problem may not exist. (P. 21)

Nonetheless, she regrettably settles upon comparison in the latter direction, that is, principally with northern Highlands societies. And among them, quite understandably, she relies most heavily upon the Stratherns' descriptions of Hageners as more or less epitomizing the rest. As just a crude measure, for example, Andrew and Marilyn Strathern between them have twenty references listed in the bibliography, compared with six each (the next most) for Meggitt on the Mae Enga and Lederman herself on the Mendi and five for Brookfield and Brown on the Chimbu.

But it just so happens that the southern Highlands have recently inspired some of the most well-documented and sophisticated analyses we have for anywhere in the Highlands and, what is more, these have been of societies possessing structures closely akin to that of the Mendi. I have in mind Kelly's work on the Etoro (1976, 1977) and Schieffelin's on the Kaluli (1976) to which Lederman alludes in passing but never discusses in any detail. This is particularly perplexing in the case of the Etoro since it is from Kelly's account (among others') that she obtains the very concept for a "complex articulation of structural principles" that informs her analysis of Mendi *sem* and *twem.* Similarly, Schieffelin's notion of "opposition scenario" that he developed for the Kaluli could very likely be accommodated to the precise sorts of conflict between group unity and personal autonomy that Lederman has identi-

fied and documented so impressively in her generous use of Mendi case material. It is a minor disappointment, then, and hopefully only a temporary one, that the reconciliation of these theoretical and ethnographic variations peculiar especially to the Mendi and other "loosely structured' societies of the southern Highlands was not here attempted.

Finally, and related to this last point, as convincing as Lederman's depiction is of the interdependence and conflict of *sem* and *twem* principles, the final result falls slightly short of delineating the outer margins of the system that might enable it to be characterized as in some sense a "whole" or "totality." In certain quarters, of course, this is regarded as neither necessary nor theoretically desirable. Yet, it would seem to be no more than an extension of the course Lederman has already laid out, that is, moving from distribution and exchange to other dimensions of Mendi society and culture. What is still only hinted at, in other words, is a consideration of Mendi symbolism, particularly of a religious sort.

The Mendi pig festival is presented as the prime exemplification of the structural dialectic of *sem* and *twem;* Lederman devotes an entire chapter to it, exploring its kinship, affinal, economic, political, and historical ramifications. The pig festival's conclusion is marked by a large-scale pig kill and distribution of pork *(sai le).* Not figured into the analysis in any serious way, however, is that the blood of these pigs is being fed to the hosts' ancestral ghosts *(temo)* to forestall their jealousy and the misfortune this would bring upon the living (p. 180). This would not appear to be a minor oversight. Pig kills, both large and small, performed on a variety of occasions, are similarly interpreted as gifts of blood to ancestral spirits (pp. 179, 268n). Also, in previous times Mendi would kill and eat their own largest pigs rather than give them away so that their ancestral ghosts would not become envious of the *twem* exchange partners who would have gotten them (p. 265n). Possibly related to this is the belief that living kin share with their ancestors as with one another common kinship substance in the forms of both blood and food, apparently (p. 34). It is through food, in fact, that ancestral ghosts exert considerable control over their descendants; as ancestors' bodies are buried in clan lands, their influence pervades the very food living humans (and pigs) eat (p. 34). Food, blood, and pigs, then, are all vital mediators between the Mendi and their ancestors (p. 258n).

To look at the religious symbolism of the Mendi and their exchanges with the dead would merely help complete what Lederman has already so nearly accomplished--that is, to comprehend Mendi distribution in the proportion of a total social and cultural system.

Regardless, Lederman's detailed handling of Mendi society, economy, and politics stands as a sophisticated and handsome addition to the growing corpus of Highlands ethnographic variation. But beyond that, and following chiefly from her focus upon distribution, *What Gifts Engender* is certain to provoke considerable rethinking of a great many of the central and likely outworn stereotypes that have emerged from the Highlands of New Guinea.

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