

**CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE IN GENDE SOCIETY:  
OLDER PERSONS AS VICTIMS, TROUBLEMAKERS,  
AND PERPETRATORS**

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A familiar sight in Papua New Guinea's towns are aging, sometimes decrepit panhandlers and bottle collectors. Less visible are elderly hospital patients with apparently no close relatives to attend to their needs (Christine Bradley, pers. com., 1989) and older persons who have been dumped in town to be looked after--or not--by migrant kinsmen. The reaction of many Papua New Guineans to this apparent neglect is that such unfortunates should be sent back to the village where "there would be no shortage of people to care for" them (*Times* 1986a). More sinister is the belief that since the "wantok system safeguards against begging" all beggars are con artists in search of an easy way to make money (see *Times* 1986b).

Such beliefs, of course, have less to do with reality than with the believers' cherished image of themselves and their society. In field trips to several less-developed rural areas in Papua New Guinea, I have, for example, witnessed numerous instances of neglect and even physical and emotional abuse of the elderly. Not uncommon was the sight of poorly nourished and sometimes seriously ill older men and women working all day on steep hillside gardens or walking long distances with heavy loads on their backs. Equally disturbing were cases where old men and women were living alone in isolated garden houses to escape accusations of sorcery or the harassment and ridicule of other villagers.

While perhaps few families neglect their elderly in such fashion, the

situation of Papua New Guinea's elderly is not as good as it could or should be. In this article, I examine one aspect of the situation: the existence of intergenerational conflict and its relation to economic inequality. Drawing on my research among the Gende people, I present cases in which older men and women are victims, instigators, or perpetrators of conflict with and between younger family members. I also show that an understanding of intergenerational conflict is pertinent to an understanding of wife-beating and other domestic problems in Papua New Guinea. Although there are other sources of conflict in Gende relations, I focus almost entirely on inequality and unequal exchange relations since these were the underlying causes of the most severe and enduring conflicts I witnessed or heard about. Finally, I introduce a cross-cultural perspective and, using the available economic and demographic data, argue that intergenerational conflict is likely to intensify in Papua New Guinea as the number of older persons grows and the impact of increasing economic inequality makes itself felt in a social and cultural context that is more demanding and less supportive of its elderly than is commonly believed by most Papua New Guineans.

### **The Gende**

The Gende homeland is in the Bismarck Mountains in southern Madang Province. There, on steep hillsides or in well-watered ravines, the Gende cultivate large sweet potato gardens and gardens planted with taro, bananas, sugarcane, and other food crops. From the surrounding forest the Gende collect many wild plants and animals, including several species of bird of paradise, the plumes of which are items of self-decoration and exchange.

Gende settlement patterns reflect their use of swidden horticulture, the importance of close kin relations, and the cessation of tribal fighting in the 1930s. In the past, the Gende lived in small hamlets located within the separate territories of named clan sections. Today, they live in villages of several hundred or more persons, although kin divisions remain evident in the pattern of house clusters. For convenience and as a place to escape tensions in the village, most households also build smaller bush houses near their main gardens.

The division of labor in a village is based primarily on sex. Men hunt, build houses and fences, and clear areas of forest and secondary growth for new gardens while women do most of the gardening, raise pigs, and, with some assistance from other household members, attend to domestic chores such as tending small children and cooking. Age is relevant in

that young children and very old persons are normally not expected to do the heaviest tasks of clearing garden land or carrying heavy loads of firewood or food. However, depending on the degree of stress a household may experience as a result of outstanding exchange debts, a high number of dependents, or other such pressures, even very elderly household members may be called upon to engage in productive tasks.

As much as half the food a woman grows is fed to pigs. Among the Gende, pigs are highly valued items of exchange and, along with money and other valuables, are used to fulfill obligations to kin, affines, and other exchange partners, or invested in prestige-making events such as the competitive pig feasts known as *poi nomu*. A convenient starting point from which to describe Gende exchange patterns is marriage, since marriage initiates a host of exchanges between kin groups at the same time as it signals a shift in the flow of goods and services between parents and children.

The first major exchange associated with marriage is the payment of bride-price to persons who have contributed in some significant way to the bride's upbringing and education. Traditionally, a young man contributed little to his intended wife's bride-price, relying on parents and other supporters to make the major contribution. A second set of payments owed to the wife's family is child-wealth, a payment that validates a man's claims over his children. Most couples try to fulfill this obligation themselves. However, since a failure to pay child-wealth within a year or two of a child's birth may result in the loss of that child to its mother's group, a man's relatives may pay a substantial portion of the child-wealth for some or all of his children. Other exchanges involving a wife's kin are contributions to the death-payment parties of a woman's parents and brothers, and payments made on behalf of an aging or deceased wife for her past contributions to her husband's group as wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. Since death payments are linked with inheritance or transfer of land rights, they will be treated in greater detail below.

Given the exigencies of the exchange system, young men and women often require the support of older persons long after reaching physical maturity and having children of their own. It is expected, of course, that early on the young will begin to reciprocate the assistance they are or will be receiving by helping their parents in ways such as babysitting, collecting firewood and water, clearing new gardens, and weeding. Reciprocation, however, starts in earnest when newly married couples begin making gardens and raising pigs of their own. The first debt to be repaid is the bride-price. If a woman's bride-price has been large, it

may take many years to pay off this debt--called *tupoi*--to a husband's parents and any other persons who contributed. Since both bride-prices and *tupoi* are often converted into buying a bride for a woman's brother or making large contributions to major pig feasts, the sooner these debts are paid the happier everyone is. The respect a couple enjoys as result of having "made" *tupoi* is increased if they then go on to invest in the child-wealth payments, initiation ceremonies, and marriages of their own and others' children. Such investments are also a way of banking surplus production until it is needed to host a pig feast or death-payment party and are commonly regarded as a form of old-age security.

The explicit ends of the Gende's large-scale pig exchanges, the *poi nomu*, are to demonstrate the hosts' industry and strength, to make women happy by giving large amounts of pork to their relatives or in-laws, and to improve relations between the living and the dead by dedicating the souls of slain pigs to deceased kin and affines. Major pig feasts are also showgrounds for aspiring big-men to demonstrate their generosity and superiority over lesser men by being the largest contributors to the festivities. A big-man's contributions may be ten or more times as great as those of any other man; his success depends on his ability to manage his exchange relations in such a way that debts owed to him--*tupoi*, bride-prices, compensation for his contribution to a nephew's initiation ceremony, and so forth--are paid in time to be used at the pig feast (see Zimmer 1985).

An important element of a major pig feast is the death-payment party, *kwiagi*. While *kwiagi* may be held at any time, most are held in the weeks immediately preceding a pig feast in order to settle unpaid debts associated with recently dead clan members or in-married women. Normally, the flow of goods is from the deceased's children to their mother's brothers or father's mother's people. When a group is planning a pig feast, it is important that outstanding death payments be paid lest its success be endangered by supernatural intervention or the ill will of the intended recipients.

*Kwiagi* are also associated with the transfer of land rights held by the deceased before his or her death. A family that is unable to pay off its *kwiagi* debts prior to a major pig feast must rely on others to do so. Such help may be in the form of a loan or outright purchase of the land rights. In recent years, some of the more affluent migrants and their village kin have extended their land holdings in both their own and their mothers' or wives' clan territories by contributing large sums of cash to others' *kwiagi*. In some cases their assistance has been unwanted, the children of the deceased landowner being forced into a position where

they have to lease the land in question from the new owners with little likelihood that they will ever be able to afford to recover the lost land rights by repaying their “helpers.”

### **Exchange and Intergenerational Conflict**

Even a brief discussion of the Gende exchange system reveals numerous stress points in relations between the generations.

The relationship with perhaps the most potential for conflict is that between father and son. Sons rely on fathers for land and bride-price support. They also expect that their fathers will side with them in disputes involving other persons. In one case I observed, a twelve-year-old boy threw rocks at his father and other family members when his mother ignored his right to be served food before his sisters and younger brothers, and his demands that his mother be punished for her insult went unmet by his father. The boy accused the father of caring too much for his wives. He also complained that he himself would never be able to marry since his father was already in his fifties and had long since spent the bride-prices of his oldest daughters as well as the *tupoi* payments arising out of investments in the marriages of other men's sons on achieving his own political ambitions.

In fact, young men can and do receive bride-price support from persons other than their fathers. However, while such outside support may ease tensions between a father and son, it may also result in intense bitterness on the part of the father, who feels he is losing his son to another man. Since fathers expect sons to be their main support in later years, a son's divided loyalties may become a source of irritation, nagging, and recriminations. When a son tires of his father's demands for attention or a father becomes enraged by his son's indifference, the bitterness may turn to violence. On most such occasions, the violence is brief, with a young man shoving his father aside or accidentally injuring him while fending off the older man's blows. While there have been instances of a father's or son's assault on the other ending in death, sustained physical violence between parents and children is rare. Anger is more often expressed in less direct ways such as the destruction of property or assault on a third party. For example, in one case I witnessed, an aggrieved son set fire to the home his father had built for him and left the village for his wife's place. In another case, an old man killed one of his daughter-in-law's pigs after his son refused to give him the pig for exchange purposes.

A second relationship subject to conflict, with potential for even

greater violence because it involves more persons, is that between a man and his father-in-law. Disputes over bride-price, for example, pull in all sorts of aggrieved parties, such as disappointed brothers-in-law who may pressure their fathers and sisters to end marriages that have failed to bring in bride-prices large enough for them to acquire brides of their own. The last of the major tribal fights in the Gende area was precipitated by the insufficient payment of bride-price and death-payment debts. When the offending clan was driven off its land, the fight escalated to include most Gende clans. Fifty years later, bad feelings remain between relatives of battle casualties and members of the opposing sides.

A more recent clash between in-laws began when an older man attacked his son-in-law for refusing to pay an overdue child-wealth payment. The man then accused his son-in-law's father of paying an inadequate bride-price for his daughter and struck the other man several times. When the man died a month later from unrelated causes, his relatives nonetheless demanded compensation for his "murder." Although the complexities of this case are too detailed to relate here, it is illustrative to add that the conflict spread and the daughter's marriage ended after a number of violent episodes between herself, her husband, and those of her in-laws who were living with the couple in town.

Acts of violence involving women and older men are less common than physical aggression among men or between husbands and wives. Conflicts may arise over a young woman's refusal to comply with her father's choice of marriage partner or a father-in-law's demands that a young bride do more than her share of the productive labor. But it is unusual for a woman to strike an older man and almost as rare for a man to hit his daughters or sons' wives. More often, an angry or resentful young woman will run away from home, refuse to work, or threaten to commit suicide. For their part, men profess reluctance to use physical force against young women because of their fear of women's sorcery and the fact that when they are elderly it is their daughters and daughters-in-law who will most probably attend to their care.

Older women's behavior towards their children and grandchildren is for the most part nurturant and supportive, with women willing to work long hours to raise their sons' bride-price pigs or--in an urban context--tending their daughters' children while the daughters work outside the home. In return, younger persons often speak lovingly of their mothers and may be extremely protective of their mother's interests to the extent of taking her side in clashes with other members of their own patrilineal kin group. Men often take advantage of this close-

ness by using their wives as go-betweens in conflicts between themselves and their children. Conflicts do arise, of course, especially when a mother feels unappreciated or places excessive demands on her children's time and resources.

Relations between women and their daughters-in-law are less amicable, especially when they come from different clans. Until a daughter-in-law fulfills her *tupoi* obligation, she has little say over how her production is used and the pigs she raises may go to fulfill obligations her husband has to his mother's clan. Even after a woman has gained control over her own production, her husband may take advantage of the opposing interests of his wife and mother to advance his own interests, thereby aggravating tensions between the women.

In one particular case, an elderly widow was being pressured by her brothers to contribute a large number of pigs to their pig feast. Although the woman had been relying on her son to help her, he instead used his wives' pigs to fulfill other obligations and to establish a name for himself during his own clan's pig feast. Sorely disappointed, the woman took up residence in her brothers' village. Soon after, the son received word that his mother was deathly ill as a result of his failure to help her. Fearing trouble with his mother's relatives, the son sent several men to retrieve her. Carried home on a litter, the old woman did indeed look close to death. Amid much wailing and expressions of grief, the son begged his mother's forgiveness for giving in to his "wives' pressures" to give their pigs to their own relatives. The son's three wives were obsequious to their mother-in-law, who rallied rather suddenly after she and her brothers were given pork to eat and promises of several pigs from men indebted to her son. In the end, relations were restored between mother and son but the son's wives grumbled constantly for more than a week about the old woman's "trick" and their being blamed for the incident.

Finally, mention should be made of conflicts between older men and women. Such conflicts draw in younger persons who feel obligated or that it is in their interests to defend one or the other of the disputants. A case in point was a woman who became violently jealous when her husband had an affair with a much younger woman, bringing her to the village to live in the old couple's home. When insults failed to drive the young intruder away, the older woman turned on her husband, striking him in public and calling him a "dog man" who chases after women indiscriminately. The older man persisted in having his way, however, until an unmarried son returned home on a visit and angrily reminded his father that he should be helping his mother raise bride-price pigs for

himself and not expect her to pay bride-price for a co-wife who was, according to the son, little more than a prostitute. The father struck his son for this insult but was persuaded to give up the younger woman when the son threatened to turn his back on him.

### **A Society under Stress**

Since contact by German missionaries in 1932, many changes in Gende lives have exacerbated intergenerational tensions. Mission interference with traditional marriage practices resulted in a decrease in polygynous marriages and suffering on the part of abandoned wives and their children. Many young men have refused to take part in male initiation ceremonies in spite of old men's warnings that to renounce the past is to destroy Gende society. And with the cessation of tribal fighting, the men's houses have lost much of their significance and the solidarity of older and younger male clan members has been breached.

More far-reaching effects, however, have come about as a result of economic change. In the 1930s men and boys began leaving their villages to work on coastal plantations or to attend mission schools. Male migration increased after World War II as men sought work on coffee plantations and construction projects in the highland valleys and new towns to the south of the Gende's territory. Although many migrants returned home after a few years' absence, others were joined by their wives, or married women near their places of employment. One outcome of this more permanent migration for the migrants' relatives was the loss of productive labor and an imbalance in exchange payments. Since wages were low, migrants' exchange debts often accumulated to the point where angry relatives threatened to break off relations if the migrants or their wives did not return home. For some villagers, the situation was serious enough that they actually did disinherit their migrant children, giving bride-price support and land rights to those village youths or migrants who were quick to recognize opportunity.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Gende struggled to develop their region and to educate their children for an urban job market that increasingly offered highly paid positions for qualified Papua New Guineans. Beginning in the early sixties, much effort went into building a road intended to link the Gende to the outside world, villagers planted many thousands of coffee trees, overseas companies began a search for valuable minerals, and parents helped build a boarding school for grades one through six at the Catholic mission in Bundi. In some cases, profits from coffee growing and wages from a mining camp near Yan-



dera village helped balance the loss of payments from less successful migrants. However, the unpredictability of work at the mining camp and the fact the most of its employees came from one village introduced new inequalities into the region and problems for workers who--on a wave of prosperity in the seventies--had entered into new exchange relations they could not maintain during subsequent periods of unemployment. In the seventies, as the first high school and university graduates began sending home generous remittances, the relatives of less successful migrants and unemployed school-leavers were less able to maintain balanced exchange relations with more fortunate villagers.

When I began my Gende research in 1982 the road was unfinished, little work had been available at the mining camp for several years, coffee income was negligible, and the primary source of cash for most village households was remittances from the more than 25 percent of the population who had migrated out of the area (see Zimmer 1985). Income differences were extreme, with some village households having fifty times as much cash per individual member as other households. This inequality manifested itself in differences in prestige, land rights, bride-price support, and much more. Inequality, moreover, was no respecter of age.

One of the most poignant effects of inequality on the elderly was that hard work most of their lives did not guarantee they could retire from garden work or active participation in exchange competitions. Older persons whose migrant children gave them little or no support struggled to compensate for their children's shortcomings: men and women in their late sixties and seventies were maintaining a workload suited to much younger individuals (Zimmer 1987). Even villagers who had risen in status or standard of living as a result of their children's generosity suffered the envy and harassment of their less successful children and other villagers. How inequality among offspring can affect their relations with parents is illustrated in the following example.

Widowed for several years and no longer involved in subsistence gardening, Francis (not his real name) led a comfortable existence being cared for by his unmarried daughter and youngest son and receiving much attention and support from his other three sons and their wives. Toward the end of 1982, however, Francis's relations with two of his sons became strained when he failed to contribute a substantial sum of cash to his deceased wife's death payments. The expected source of the cash was a migrant son whom Francis visited in Port Moresby just prior to an important pig feast. When Francis returned home, village rumor had it that his son had given him K 1,000 (approx. US\$1,350 in 1982).

Francis did nothing to dispel these rumors but declared that he intended to invest the money in a profitable beer-drinking club. In spite of many arguments, his sons in the village were forced to pay off their mother's death payments without his help, using pigs intended for other purposes in order to avoid losing land to a wealthier clan member. When Francis began clearing a piece of land for his club, his sons refused to help and ordered their wives to stop feeding him. In the end, Francis never did build his club, his children have several times accused him of sorcery in failed attempts to receive compensation, and it is apparent that Francis's town-dwelling son did not give him a large sum of money and that the old man felt compelled by his situation to pretend otherwise.

Equally serious in its effects on family relations is the high cost of today's bride-prices. As poorer families have attempted to increase income by demanding higher bride-prices for their daughters or abandoning their sons in favor of giving support to more-promising youths with well-paid jobs, the numbers of bachelors and women married to non-Gende husbands have increased dramatically (Zimmer 1988). In 1982, for example, my census of Yandera village's resident and absentee populations showed that only thirty-seven of the sixty-seven young men between the ages of twenty-four and thirty-five were married and that most of the married were living in town (twenty-three of thirty-seven). With no guarantee that they will ever contract a socially legitimate marriage, many young men experience great anxiety over their prospects and a sense of alienation from their elders. Expressing this frustration in angry outbursts and accusations of greed and uncaring behavior against their parents, young men with uncertain futures are a volatile component of both village and town.

Convincing others to raise a large bride-price is only the beginning of a young man's troubles. Bride-price supporters must be repaid and couples who are slow in doing so may be denied access to garden land as well as other forms of support. Although the possibility of dispossession and ostracism from the village may be less threatening to affluent townsmen, the following example illustrates how risky it is for any young person to ignore the expectations of his or her elders (cf. Zimmer 1985, 1988).

In 1982, a former mechanic who had been away from the village for thirteen years returned to Yandera with the expectation that he and his second wife could plant gardens and coffee trees on land his deceased father had set aside for him long before. Unfortunately, an older relative was already using the land. The younger man appealed to his father's brothers for help, but they were indebted to the intruder--a

local big-man--and unwilling to evict him. Because the young man had not kept up with his exchange commitments during his long absence, other villagers were unsympathetic to his plight. Frustrated, the young man went to the big-man's gardens and pulled out some newly planted sweet potatoes. When his act of aggression was discovered, a fight broke out between the two men, with both hitting and shoving one another. After several such altercations, the younger man finally acquiesced when his wife was "allowed" by the big-man to make gardens on a portion of the disputed land. Until the road was completed in 1986 and the young man became the driver of a truck owned by one of the big-man's daughters, he and his wife were forced to adopt a submissive attitude in their dealings with other villagers to remain in the village.

In this instance, the conflict ended without directly involving the younger man's wife. This is rarely the case, however, in arguments between migrants and their supporters, for a woman's in-laws are usually ready enough to suspect her of turning their son's thoughts away from them or spoiling his chances of success through some act of sorcery. While in-laws generally refrain from using physical force against their sons' wives, in one reported incident in town a man struck his daughter-in-law when she claimed she could not feed him because her husband spent all his money on drinking and prostitutes.

More often, women become victims of violence (and sometimes perpetrators) when parental agitation goads a beleaguered husband into striking his wife (Zimmer 1988). On a recent visit to a new cardamom project near Bundi, I was told of one young wife whose marriage foundered following a final violent episode with her husband in which she gave as good as she received in the way of blows and insults. The cause of the battle was the young woman's refusal to sleep with her husband, a denial allegedly encouraged by her mother as a means of pressuring the young husband to pay an overdue installment of the bride-price. The expected bride-price was an unusually high one for the Gende--over K 7,000 as well as pigs and other valuables--a fact related to the couple's employment at the cardamom plantation.

While parental interference can incite conflicts between husbands and wives, undue harassment or greed on the part of parents or in-laws can also result in their abandonment and neglect by aggrieved children. Today's young women, feeling themselves to be overworked and facing long years of raising pigs or working at paid employment to repay bride-price, sometimes attempt to fulfill their dreams of a better life by running away and contracting *de facto* relationships with similarly minded young men. Such actions can be devastating for aging parents.

For example, in a case that took place in town, the parents of a runaway wife were left with the prospect of paying back most of her large bride-price. Since the mother was unemployed and the father had just lost his job and was too old to have much chance of finding another, they had to rely on others to help settle the debt. In a heated meeting of the two families, the old couple tried to evade returning any of the bride-price by accusing their daughter's in-laws of driving her away with their constant complaints and nagging. Unable to turn the case in their favor, the old couple ended up giving away land rights in their home village to some of their financial backers, thereby reducing their option of returning to the village to live out the remainder of their lives.

### **Intergenerational Conflict in Cross-Cultural Perspective**

In *Ages in Conflict*, Nancy Foner argues that in those nonindustrial societies where they exist, structured age inequalities are a primary source of intergenerational conflict. In such societies, the advantages that come with old age include control over material resources and the marriage arrangements of younger men and women, the acquisition of special knowledge and mystical powers, and the adoption of ritual roles and other positions of prestige and authority (Foner 1984:30-38). Where such privileges are rigidly maintained without regard to the desires and ambitions of younger persons or the declining capabilities of the elderly, intergenerational relations may deteriorate to the point where the elderly are abandoned or even killed by their children or other dependents.

By contrast, in many Papua New Guinean societies inequality is less structural than achieved and growing old confers few, if any, special privileges (see Counts and Counts 1985). Moreover, to achieve high status older men and women require the help of younger persons, help that must be carefully marshaled through the timely and often long-term support of younger persons' interests (see Berndt and Lawrence 1971). While interdependence and mutual self-interest undoubtedly favor the suppression of some tension, they can also be a source of great frustration when the expected support is not forthcoming. The resulting sense of injury may, as the examples in this article have demonstrated, precipitate open conflict (cf. Warry 1987:233-234, 200-201), the severance of relations (Brown 1970), and even sickness (A. Strathern 1968; M. Strathern 1968).

In reviewing the effects of change, Foner notes that the elderly are losing their privileges as the young question old values and obtain new

and often economically independent positions in the larger socioeconomic systems in which their parents' world is but a segment. Although the elderly retain a measure of influence over temporary migrants through their control of land rights and political dominance in the village, traditional sanctions are ineffective when the young can find support and pursue their interests outside the context of village and family ties (Foner 1984:224-231).

In Papua New Guinea, where the politically ambitious must curry the favor of the rural majority and marriage payments continue to rise, the young cannot so readily ignore their elders. Regardless of newly acquired values, a young man wanting to run for political office or marry the woman of his choice must rely on his network of kin relations for support. This ongoing dependence can create tensions as parents pressure their sons and daughters-in-law to pay back substantial bride-price investments (Rosi and Zimmer 1988) and husbands treat expensive wives as property and subject them to stringent and often arbitrary regulations on their behavior (Kivung, Doiwa, and Cox 1985; Toft 1985).

At the same time, cash income inequalities within local communities have widened the gap between rich and poor households, leaving increasing numbers of parents in a position where they are unable to give as much support to their children as they might wish. Indeed, except where cash cropping provides older men and women with alternative cash incomes, parents may rely on migrant children for the necessary cash for both major exchange payments and store-bought food and household items.

In Gulf Province, where out-migration is as high as 60 percent and local sources of income are limited, the elderly are especially dependent on the success and generosity of their children. In *Left Behind in the Village*, Louise Morauta reports on the grim situation of one old couple who were not receiving remittances from their migrant children:

Household 1 consisted for most of the time of an elderly couple. Unable to make sago any more, and without a canoe (for fishing), their strategy was to live in and eat from a relatively large garden although their subsistence production was below average. . . they had only one son, an unproductive although adult ne'er-do-well often absent in his wife's village and all but one of their daughters was married in town and not remitting home. Their one daughter resident in Kukipi was left a widow with eight dependent children at the end of 1978. She frequently ate meals with the old couple during the survey. The

old man and his wife thus had no kinsmen on whom to call in the village and no resources with which to set up relationships of mutual support with others. Other villagers were well aware of their plight and were sorry for them, but through the whole of my 1979 study nobody stepped in to help them either substantially or regularly. Among the 39 income survey households I can identify a total of eight in such circumstances, one fifth of the total population of households. (1984:89)

That such neglect--or its spectre--might breed animosity and tension between parents and their children goes without saying.

### **The Statistics of Neglect**

Although there is increasing anthropological interest in aging and the elderly in the Pacific (see Counts and Counts 1985 and articles by Donner, Rubinstein, and Zimmer in Rubinstein 1987a), national governments have been slow to investigate the problems and special circumstances of their older citizens. In Papua New Guinea, for example, there is a paucity of data on the incomes and living conditions of older men and women. Nevertheless, the 1980 *National Population Census* (Papua New Guinea 1988) does include citizen population and percentage distribution tables by age, residence sector, sex, education, and economic activity. In the context of the processes I have outlined here, I would like to speculate upon what these statistics may mean about the situation of the elderly in Papua New Guinea.

The first point I wish to make is that although the proportion of older persons in Papua New Guinea is low (see Table 1), in 1980 there were more than 400,000 Papua New Guineans over the age of forty-four who, if anything like the Gende, were busy trying to maintain their exchange relations on a par or competing with others for secure land rights, prestige, and the old-age security of extensive networks of well-placed and generous supporters.

Given differences in education and income-earning capacity among both older and younger persons, some of the 400,000 may not have been doing too well. For example, in 1980, 19,009 men and women over the age of forty-four were living in towns throughout Papua New Guinea. Of these, only 129 had completed high school and only slightly more than 10 percent had more than five years of regular schooling (see Table 2). By contrast, over 50 percent of the urban population between the ages of twenty and forty-four had completed sixth grade or higher and

TABLE 1. PNG Citizen Population by Age, Sector, and Sex: 1980

Age	Persons		Males		Females	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
<b>All Sectors</b>						
Total	2,978,057 <sup>a</sup>	100.0	1,557,067	100.0	1,420,980	100.0
0-9	898,929	30.1	467,882	30.1	431,047	30.3
10-19	687,342	23.1	370,353	23.8	316,988	22.3
20-29	471,672	15.8	245,894	15.8	225,769	15.9
30-39	354,865	11.9	179,450	11.6	175,415	12.3
40-44	145,265	4.9	74,544	4.8	70,721	5.0
45-49	113,504	3.8	58,567	3.8	54,937	3.9
50-54	113,181	3.8	58,253	3.7	54,928	3.9
55-59	84,005	2.8	43,112	2.8	40,893	2.9
60-64	63,016	2.1	33,816	2.2	29,200	2.1
65-69	26,949	0.9	14,448	0.9	12,501	0.9
70-74	13,249	0.4	7,505	0.5	5,744	0.4
75+	6,080	0.2	3,243	0.2	2,837	0.2
<b>Rural Village Sector</b>						
Total	2,439,728	100.0	1,235,350	100.0	1,204,378	100.0
0-9	744,204	30.5	385,944	31.3	358,260	29.7
10-19	547,137	22.4	284,257	23.0	262,880	21.8
20-29	332,738	13.7	159,913	13.0	172,825	14.3
30-39	294,304	12.0	140,140	11.3	154,164	12.8
40-44	129,873	5.3	64,256	5.2	65,617	5.4
45-49	102,629	4.2	51,543	4.2	51,086	4.2
50-54	105,501	4.3	53,250	4.3	52,251	4.3
55-59	79,079	3.2	40,022	3.2	39,057	3.2
60-64	60,274	2.5	32,174	2.6	28,100	2.3
65-69	25,719	1.1	13,742	1.1	11,977	1.0
70-74	12,654	0.5	7,142	0.6	5,512	0.5
75+	5,616	0.2	2,967	0.2	2,649	0.2
<b>Rural Non-Village Sector<sup>b</sup></b>						
Total	172,782	100.0	109,525	100.0	63,257 <sup>c</sup>	100.0
0-9	44,546	25.8	23,607	21.6	20,939	33.1
10-19	49,806	28.4	32,391	29.6	17,415	27.6
20-29	43,115	25.0	29,408	26.9	13,707	21.7
30-39	20,461	11.8	14,092	12.9	6,369	10.1
40-44	5,351	3.1	3,684	3.4	1,667	2.6
45-49	3,850	2.2	2,595	2.4	1,255	2.0
50-54	2,616	1.5	1,791	1.6	825	1.3
55-59	1,610	0.9	1,063	1.0	547	0.9
60-64	871	0.5	542	0.5	329	0.5
65-69	306	0.2	184	0.2	122	0.2
70-74	153	0.1	103	0.1	32	0.1
75+	97	0.1	65	0.1	32	0.1

TABLE 1. **Continued**

Age	Persons		Males		Females	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
<b>Urban Sector</b>						
Total	365,547	100.0	212,202	100.0	153,345	100.0
0-9	110,179	30.1	58,331	27.4	51,848	33.9
10-19	90,399	24.7	53,706	25.3	36,693	23.9
20-29	95,819	26.2	56,582	26.6	39,237	25.5
30-39	40,100	10.9	25,218	11.9	14,882	9.7
40-44	10,041	2.7	6,604	3.1	3,437	2.2
45-49	7,025	1.9	4,429	2.1	2,596	1.7
50-54	5,064	1.4	3,212	1.5	1,852	1.2
55-59	3,316	0.9	2,027	1.0	1,289	0.8
60-64	1,871	0.5	1,100	0.5	771	0.5
65-69	924	0.3	552	0.2	402	0.3
70-74	442	0.1	260	0.1	182	0.1
75+	367	0.1	211	0.1	156	0.1

*Source:* Adapted from Papua New Guinea 1988:30-31. Age groups in the original are given in five-year cohorts; here younger age groups have been collapsed into ten-year cohorts to save space.

*Note:* Totals may not sum 100%, due to rounding.

<sup>a</sup> Sum indicated is inconsistent with data by sex.

<sup>b</sup> Includes plantations, mining compounds, rural administration posts, and so forth.

<sup>c</sup> Sum indicated is inconsistent with data by age groups.

almost five thousand had completed twelve years of regular schooling (Papua New Guinea 1988:54). Thus, although a quarter of the over-forty-four age group were working for wages (Papua New Guinea 1988:84), it seems likely that the younger and better-educated would have had a virtual monopoly over the better-paying jobs and that most persons over forty-four were at least partly dependent on their children or other young persons for their welfare.

Since not all younger migrants to the towns are employed or earning high enough wages to provide more than the basic necessities of life, it would also seem likely that some or even many urban households--including older members--are unable to maintain their exchange relations at competitive levels. This is certainly the case for many Gende migrants (Zimmer 1985) and an analysis of the 1973/1974 Papua New Guinea Urban Household Survey recognized a small but not insignificant category of migrants who had either lost the option of living in the rural sector or faced the prospect of a difficult position in village society



TABLE 2. PNG Citizen Population 45 Years Old and Over, by Highest Grade Completed, Sector, and Sex: 1980

	Total	Highest Grade Completed					
		None	1-5	6-7	8-9	10-11	12
<b>All Sectors</b>							
Persons	419,984	396,425	17,139	4,697	1,007	525	191
Males	218,944	202,989	10,878	3,557	887	467	166
Females	201,040	193,436	6,261	1,140	120	58	25
<b>Rural Village Sector</b>							
Persons	391,472	375,050	12,500	3,054	601	235	32
Males	200,840	189,997	7,832	2,238	530	214	29
Females	190,632	185,053	4,668	816	71	21	3
<b>Rural Non-Village Sector</b>							
Persons	9,503	8,055	933	334	88	63	30
Males	6,343	5,212	706	267	83	52	27
Females	3,160	2,843	227	67	5	11	3
<b>Urban Sector</b>							
Persons	19,009	13,320	3,706	1,309	318	227	129
Males	11,761	7,780	2,340	1,052	274	201	114
Females	7,248	5,540	1,366	257	44	26	15

Source: Adapted from Papua New Guinea 1988:51-54. In the original, separate totals are given for each grade achieved.

as a result of low income and a failure to exchange gifts with their home villages (Garnaut, Wright, and Curtain 1977:64-74). Whether this situation resulted in violent conflicts between parents and children was not reported. But when the consequences of not fulfilling one's exchange obligations include dispossession of land rights or loss of status, the situation suggests a widespread potential for intergenerational conflict.

The situation of the rural elderly may be even more severe, especially when they have no close kin living in the village or sending home remittances (see Morauta 1984 and Zimmer 1987). In 1980, approximately 18 percent of Papua New Guinea's citizens were living outside villages while less than 7 percent of those citizens over the age of forty-four were similarly located (Table 1). Even more significant, in terms of the possibility of older men and women being left behind in the village to fend for themselves, is the wide variation in absenteeism rates at the provincial, district, and subdistrict levels and the near absence of young adults in some areas of Papua New Guinea. For example, in Malalaua Dis-

trict, Gulf Province, over 60 percent of those ages eighteen to forty-five are absent from their home villages while only 30 percent of those over age forty-five are absent (Papua New Guinea 1982:121). Similarly, in Mumeng District, Morobe Province, over 50 percent of the young adults are living elsewhere while close to 70 percent of the older population remain in the villages (Papua New Guinea 1983:197).

In localities where older persons have opportunities to raise cash crops and earn money of their own, children's absenteeism may be less of a problem. However, not all older persons own sufficient land or are physically able to look after cash crops and, even in more developed areas, the rising costs of exchange obligations may eat up whatever the elderly may gain from independent cash-earning ventures. For reasons including ambition, lack of support, and inflation, many older persons in Papua New Guinea continue working well into their sixties and seventies. According to census data, in 1980 half of the rural village population over age sixty-four were engaged in subsistence and cash-earning activities (Papua New Guinea 1988:80).

### **Conclusion**

Economic inequality and exchange pressures have contributed to intergenerational conflict among the Gende people. Since most Papua New Guinean societies are similar to the Gende in the use of reciprocal and competitive exchange as a mediator of social relations and status, I suggest that the generally lesser economic opportunities of the elderly in Papua New Guinea may reduce their capacity to successfully manage transactions involving their close relationships and ongoing security. As a consequence, intergenerational conflict may be more widespread than is commonly supposed.

Moreover, with less education and fewer health-care services than their urban counterparts, and the belief of many Papua New Guineans that the village is an ideal place for older persons, Papua New Guinea's rural elderly may be a particularly vulnerable segment of the population. For example, while estimates now place 96 percent of the rural population within two hours' walk of a primary health-care center (Aitken 1987:26), the focus of most rural medical centers is on maternal and child care and the treatment of common diseases and injuries, not on the special health-care needs of the elderly (see Stratigos and Hughes 1987). Struggling to meet the demands of traditional exchange systems with perhaps little or no support and burdened with overwork and sickness, many older men and women may be leading lives of quiet, or as this article suggests, not-so-quiet desperation.

Although at present the elderly are very much a minority--and perhaps a depressed one--in Papua New Guinea, future generations of older men and women are likely to be more of a political and social force. Better educated and larger in numbers, they may lobby for greater privileges and more reliable forms of social security. In the meantime, the belief that the young are necessarily benign caretakers of the elderly ignores such situations as I have outlined here and it would seem imperative that the national government consider the elderly as a special case deserving of more-informed social policy and support.

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