WHY IS THE CASSOWARY SACRIFICED?

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INTRODUCTION

A central concern of Ralph Bulmer’s work was the elucidation of the symbolic import of natural entities in Melanesian cosmology. Through his consummate ethnographic skills Ralph has left us an extraordinarily rich record and analysis of the natural history lore and symbolic structures of the Kalam of New Guinea’s northern highland fringe. One of his most significant works was one of his earliest publications on the Kalam: ‘Why is the Cassowary Not a Bird?’ (Bulmer 1967). This work, whose mildly whimsical title suggests something of his unassumingly innovative approach to Melanesian anthropology, helped set the stage for the more recent development of studies of Melanesian symbolic systems. It marked an important shift of emphasis in Ralph’s own work, from a predominant concern with Kyaka Enga corporate political and economic structures (e.g. Bulmer 1960), to the conceptual schemata of the Kalam, especially regarding their perceptions of the natural environment and the supernatural. This change of focus anticipated a similar shift in Melanesian anthropology in general.

The subtitle of the cassowary paper, ‘A Problem of Zoological Taxonomy Among the Kalam of the New Guinea Highlands’, also understates its significance. For the paper is about far more than the seemingly abstruse topic of ethnotaxonomy among remote Highlanders. In fact, in its attention to the social context of belief and practice it cuts to the heart of a continuing interest today in the relation of symbolic structures to social systems and material worlds. ‘Why is the Cassowary’ lays bare the lineaments of a cosmological scheme in which the powerful, elusive, wild, and extraordinary cassowary figures as a key symbolic element that, in its special relation to mankind, underscores man’s separation from and embeddedness within a threatening but revivifying nature.1

The present paper2 is offered in the spirit of Ralph’s own fascination as ethnographer and ornithologist with the cassowary. Indeed, readers familiar with Ralph’s cassowary paper will note many similarities of ethnographic detail and analytic orientation. This is not unexpected, for the Maring who are the subject of this paper are eastern neighbours of the Kalam. Although of different language families, with quite divergent socio-political organisation, Maring and Kalam ethnozoology and cosmology show a remarkable degree of convergence.

In respect of cassowaries, however, Maring and Kalam disagree on two crucial points: to the Maring it is undeniably a bird, while the Kalam assert that it is not,3 and the Maring traditionally captured wild chicks and raised them in homestead areas, while the Kalam tabooed bringing live cassowaries into settlements. These differences are not crucial to this paper. Rather, I focus on one singular feature of Maring treatments of cassowaries: every bird, captive or wild, that dies at the hand of man constitutes a sacrifice to the spirits; and, as far as I am aware, the cassowary is the only animal whose killing is invariably treated as a sacrifice.

Rappaport (1968; 1979) argued inter alia that the periodic massive Maring pig-killing festival – the konj kaiko – operated at the ‘cognised’, emic level to restore proper relations between living men and the spirit world; to effect a re-integration of the cosmic order. I take essentially the same view here of cassowary sacrifice. In many respects, cassowary sacrifice replicates the symbolic labour of the kaiko, but in muted and fragmented form. Kaiko are more or less regular and obligatory festivals staged by the whole local community after periodic warfare (Rappaport 1968). However, cassowary sacrifices lack such underlying cultural and ecological regulation. They are conceived of as being essentially adventitious, rather than responsive to the regularities of human experience. Cassowaries are killed at the behest of individuals, and the whim of chance (though the Maring can account for such chance). Cassowary sacrifice is managed by an individual, though small kin groups may mobilise under a leader’s direction. Yet their erratic occurrence is of immense symbolic significance. The sacrifice of pigs serves to redress impaired relations between men and spirits, those relations often resulting from impaired relations between men themselves. The sacrifice of cassowaries may serve this function also, but more than re-integration of man-spirit relations, it also expresses fundamental propositions about man’s relation to cosmic forces that pig-sacrifice does not address.

ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND TO CASSOWARY SACRIFICE

Before outlining the varied forms of cassowary sacrifice I should sketch in some background material. The Kundagai are one of over 20 named Maring local groups, or clan clusters, composed of an association of several putatively patrilineal clans. Their territory spans the crest of the western Bismarck Range in the
Western Highlands and Madang Provinces. My data were gathered in one of three Kundagai settlements, Tsuwenkai, located at around 1600 metres on the Jimi River side of the Bismarcs. Kundagai territory is adjacent to their traditional enemies in the Simbai Valley, the Tsembaga. In broad outlines Rappaport's (1968) account of Tsembaga ecology and social organisation is applicable to the Kundagai.

The Kundagai domain includes very extensive montane forests which are an important source of forest products, notably bird plumes and live cassowaries. These goods ensure the Kundagai an important place as suppliers of valuable goods in an extensive trading system. Hunting is of considerable importance in the Kundagai economy, primarily as a source of trade goods rather than food. But beyond its material significance, hunting (and gathering) in the forest brings men (and women) into a close association with wild, undomesticated things of nature. Elsewhere I have argued for the significance of the Maring concepts of tap wumbi and tap demi which may be glossed as referring to 'things of culture' and 'things of nature' (Healey 1985; 1988).

The cassowary familiar to the Kundagai is the Dwarf Cassowary, Casuarius bennetti, known locally as kombli or yongge. Though seldom seen it is fairly common in heavy forest, and its chicks are eagerly sought to be raised to adulthood before being traded or sacrificed in times of sickness or for bridewealth. The cassowary does not figure prominently in myth among the Maring.

The cassowary is unambiguously associated with nature and wild things. Even when raised within the cultured space of homesteads it is referred to as tap demi, 'something wild'. In this, it contrasts with domestic pigs, konj wumbi, which conceptually share a common cultural identity with their human masters (see below).

The point to note at this juncture is that the most important objects of sacrifice are 'cultured' pigs and 'natural' cassowaries. The most elaborate ritual attending sacrifice is reserved for the mass slaughter of pigs in the konj kaiko – the culmination of years of intensive husbanding – and the trapping of a lone cassowary. There is a contrast between intense and prolonged direct human endeavour in producing pigs, and the chance encounter by a wild bird in the depths of the forest with a device camouflaged to disguise its association with an absent man. It is the ideological balance achieved by these contrasts that I argue serves to restore the integration of the cosmos, and the following account seeks to analyse the symbolism of cassowary sacrifice in this light.

Few men become notable hunters, and fewer still adept at trapping cassowaries. The skill carries no particular status, but involves the assumption of onerous taboos for long periods, while trapping is in progress.

Trapping techniques are essentially the same as those described for the Kalam by Majnep and Bulmer (1977:151 ff). A man constructs ten or more large springe-traps, strung out across several ridges in the forest. Elaborate precautions must be taken when setting traps to avoid disturbing the vegetation which might alarm the birds. The trapper must avoid eating bananas, which would render inoperative the magic breathed into traps.

Once he has trapped a bird the hunter secludes himself in a bush house, avoiding travel or being seen in public, until the ritual sequence initiated by a successful kill is completed. This may take up to two years.4

With the aid of a fellow clansmen and close non-agnatic kin, the trapper brings the dead bird to a raku, or sacrificial grove, in a forested area, where it is suspended by the neck from a pole of the primary-forest gum tree (unident.) specially erected for the purpose. Here it is plucked and gutted but not dismembered. Care must be taken to ensure that no part of the bird comes in contact with any part of banana palms, or that the feathers are not burnt. The bird is cooked in two on-ground ovens – cylinders of bark decorated with colourful leaves deemed pleasing to the spirits. The body is cooked for many hours in a large oven, while the internal organs are cooked more quickly in a small oven. The flesh of the bird is widely distributed, while the guts of the bird is more quickly in a small oven. The flesh of the bird is widely distributed, while the guts of the bird is more quickly in a small oven. The flesh of the bird is widely distributed, while the guts are eaten by the trapper and his immediate male cognates.

Cassowaries belong to the spirits. The generosity of spirits in yielding cassowaries to a hunter demands reciprocation if men are to maintain the proper relation with spirits upon which continued health, fertility and territorial integrity depends. Thus, cassowaries must be treated properly and a return offered. However, it is not within man's power to determine when a transactional sequence begun with the killing of a wild cassowary is to be completed. A successful trapper is enjoined to continue trapping birds until the spirits cease letting cassowaries fall victim to his traps. In the interim, it is necessary for a trapper to make an initial, partial return to the spirits for the birds he kills. Failure to do so courts the danger of the cassowary killer, his family, and pigs being afflicted with itching sores, pinggam-gambo. Just as cassowaries are 'hot', romba-nda, so are the sores.

The initial return for a cassowary consists of koi-ma: larger game mammals or kapuls. The trapper and his lain catch two or three kapuls of any kind and prepare them for cooking. Here I use the Pidgin term lain, in the sense employed by the Kundagai, to refer to an essentially ego focussed group of close consociate cognates and affines. Kapuls are small and are quickly cooked and eaten, just like cassowary innards. Thus, they are cooked in the smaller oven in which the cassowary guts have been cooked, and are spoken of as a
return gift to the spirits for the guts. The kapuls are eaten by men of the trapper’s *lain*, but may be shared more widely.

The kapuls-for-cassowaries sequence is repeated as long as more birds are caught. Each cassowary is cooked in the same *raku* as the first. The bones are carefully wrapped up and secreted in the rafters of a cooking shelter erected over the oven site. The bones must be kept safe from pigs and human enemies, for they are inimical to the growth of pigs, while enemies may use them in harmful sorcery. Thus, when the trapping sequence is concluded the oven site is excavated and armed with sharpened stakes to trap enemies attempting to steal the bones.

Eventually the remaining traps rot away. The trapper then makes an address to the spirits asking if the last of the cassowaries has been given. If he cries with emotion this indicates a positive answer. The trapper now pledges a full return for the birds he has caught. He waits until he has a pig to offer in sacrifice, and calls for others of his *lain* to pledge pigs also. Other men are also welcome to contribute pigs. Eel traps are then set. They are cylinders of bark, closed at one end with a lattice of sticks, with a latticed door at the other end which is attached to a trigger mechanism. Eels can be kept alive in such traps, suspended in streams, for several weeks.

Once several eels are trapped, the final ritual takes place. The parcel of cassowary bones is wrapped in the succulent leaves of streamside plants; this is then placed on the ground, and an eel trap held over it. Water from a bamboo container is poured through the trap. The lip of the bamboo is embellished with a sprig of a red cultivated plant, *korambe* (*Impatiens plaiypelia*). Though red, a colour classed as ‘hot’, *korambe* is a moist and fleshy plant, and like the eel is ‘cold’, *kinim*. The cold and wet properties of the water, *korambe* and alive eel wash over the package of hot bones, so cooling it. The eel used to wash the bones is killed and cooked separately in the oven in which the cassowary guts and kapuls had been cooked. This eel is consumed by men and boys only.

The sacrificial pigs are killed in the *raku* and laid out preparatory to being butchered. The remaining eels are clubbed to death and draped over the dead pigs. Pigs and eels are then cooked together in earth ovens and distributed widely among men, women and children.

On the completion of the ritual feast men take the package of cassowary bones to the headwaters of forest streams. Here they are carefully hidden under the stream-bed where they will remain cold and bound by the roots of water-loving plants, never to be found.

The ritual consequences of killing a wild cassowary by means other than a trap are much less elaborate. The hunter is not required to go into seclusion, although he and his immediate kin are in a dangerous ritual state until a return of kapuls, and in due course a pig, is made to the spirits.

The treatment of captive cassowaries shows elaborations of a different kind. Captive cassowaries are killed for varied reasons: for example, as part of a bridewealth presentation, to propitiate spirits in times of sickness and to celebrate the return of migrant labourers.

Although men sacrifice birds to the spirits they can only do so because the spirits have previously allowed them to capture chicks, and have nurtured them as they do pigs and people. Thus, men should also offer pigs to the spirits in return for birds killed. In a sacrifice I witnessed in 1985 this obligation to return a pig was discharged immediately after the slaughter of the bird.

In preparation for a sacrifice, the host and his helpers gather firewood, vegetable foods, leafy sprays from forest trees to line the ritual oven, and a *gum* tree pole. On the day preceding the sacrifice ancestral spirits are loudly called to gather in the host’s homestead yard to receive the cassowary. At sunset, the host and males of his *lain* retire to a house for an all-night session of singing *de* songs in honour of the bird.

*De* songs (so named after a repeated refrain) are funeral songs that conform to a general melodic structure, and are performed in the night before the culminating mortuary ceremony for the recently dead. The singing moves participants to tears and attracts the spirit of the dead person who is the subject of the songs (cf. Schieffelin 1976). Up to this point, the spirit, reluctant to relinquish its former existence, has lurked about homesteads, where it constitutes a danger to the living. At dawn, the singers emerge to expel the spirit from domestic space into the forest. *De* songs are thus part of a ritual sequence which moves human spirits from cultured to natural space – which is where captive cassowaries come from, and to where wild cassowary bones are returned. In this ritual episode sacrifice thus parallels funerals (cf. Keessing 1982:139).

On the occasion of killing a captive cassowary, the subject of *de* songs are recently deceased kin of the singers, who are collectively the recipients of the sacrifice. The *de* party leaves the house at dawn and proceeds to the nearby hutch where the bird is penned. Here, a cane loop is pushed through the bars and the bird strangled. The corpse is loaded into a finely decorated string bag and carried to the cooking area, passing between leafy-sprays of forest trees known as ‘cassowary gates’, said to serve as signposts for the spirits to help them find their way to the feast being prepared for them. The cassowary is removed from its string bag and suspended from the *gum* pole. Here it is decorated with beads, a few shells, and, nowadays, money.

After being so displayed for a short time while pigs are sacrificed and butchered for cooking in separate ovens,
the cassowary is plucked, gutted, and packed into an on-ground oven. Those males present who share common ancestral spirits eat the cassowary entrails, but the rest of the bird, and the pork, is widely distributed. Not being from a wild, trapped bird, there is no requirement to bury the cassowary bones in forest streams, and they may be secreted in dense ‘birdsnest’ epiphytic ferns in homestead areas.

ANALYSIS OF CASSOWARY SACRIFICE

The treatment of cassowaries plays upon the contrast between nature and culture. But since all cassowaries are offered in sacrifice to spirits this contrast is played out in a ritual field focussing on the relation of humankind to the domain of spirits.

There is nothing intrinsic in the occasions on which cassowaries are killed that marks them off from occasions when pigs are killed. Pigs are the usual sacrificial beast and, in that sense, cassowaries are substituted for pigs, though this substitution effects no change in the relation of the sacrificer to the spirits.

If the sacrifice of a cassowary achieves nothing more in human-spirit relations than a pig sacrifice does, what, then, does it achieve? In brief, I argue that cassowary sacrifice achieves its distinctiveness at the symbolic level of the expression of balanced relations of cosmic forces and properties, rather than at the ‘practical’, if religious domain of relations with supernatural powers.

The traditional approach to sacrifice, out of Hubert and Mauss (1964), is that sacrifice serves to effect some real change in the sacrificer or the object/focus of sacrifice, be that material or concrete evidence of the favour of the gods, atonement for wrongdoing, or achieving a state of higher grace. Sacrifice, in short, is directed towards some quite specific end. This is quite clearly evident in piacular sacrifice by the Maring in times of sickness, but is by no means so in all other sacrifices, as when, for example, a cassowary is killed for a bridewealth presentation, or to celebrate the return of migrant labourers.

What sacrifice ‘means’ in this context could be approached in a variety of ways – its relation to social structure, to Maring concepts of individual identity, folk medicine, etc. I choose here to consider it in terms of its relation to a total symbolic system that encompasses the place of mankind within the cosmos, since this orientation embraces all other aspects of sacrifice. If this essay is to remain within manageable dimensions, however, it is necessary to be selective in the material chosen for analysis.

The encompassing meaning of sacrifice turns upon a set of contrasts between pigs, cassowaries and humans. A central meaning of sacrifices in general is the substitution of the victim for the sacrificer. Elsewhere, I have argued for the identification between pigs, cassowaries and humans on several conceptual dimensions (Healey 1985), and I summarise the essential elements of the argument here. The cassowary is unequivocally a wild and potentially dangerous and anti-social creature of the forest, pre-eminently a creature ‘of nature’, tap demi. As such, it stands in marked contrast to man as a cultured being, something ‘tame or cultured’, tap wumbi. Mankind is set apart from all other creatures as the possessor of a soul, miny-nomani (lit. ‘soul-consciousness’). Only humans also become spirits, rawa, on death, though some spirits are autochthonous. As men keep pigs, so spirits keep game, spoken of as the ‘pigs’ of the rawa. One of the pre-eminent pigs of the spirits is the cassowary. Pigs thus stand in a relation to humans as cassowaries do to spirits; they are linked in a common association, but contrasted with mankind. Nonetheless, by the conditions of their nurturance and their submission to human will, pigs share essential cultured characteristics with mankind, in contrast to cassowaries. Pigs, then, may be encompassed within the concept of tap wumbi. Just as pigs may be contextually treated as wild or tame, ‘natural’ or ‘cultural’, so man may be regarded as sharing certain wild and destructive characteristics with cassowaries, notably in times of war, when ritual preparations explicitly play on the kinship between savage warriors and violent, asocial cassowaries.

This sketch should be sufficient to indicate that pigs and cassowaries embody aspects of human identity. It follows that when the Maring sacrifice these beasts to the spirits or give them in affinal prestations (and most pigs so transferred are first sacrificed), they are substituting the animals for themselves. Pigs critically share substance with their owners, being fed from the same gardens, and are nurtured by the favour of the ancestral spirits. Pigs thus represent, or are substitutes for, members of particular lains. Cassowaries do not share identity with humans in such culturally constructed material ways. They remain undomesticated, even if captive, though like pigs they are nurtured in part by ancestral or local autochthonous spirits.

Pigs and cassowaries are the most important animals that are reared by the Maring. Most households keep some fowls, and a very few have tame cockatoos or hornbills. None of these creatures are ritually important. The only other animals approaching the significance of pigs and cassowaries are dogs and eels.

With cassowaries, eels are the principal ‘pigs’ of the spirits and, as we have already seen, figure as sacrificial animals in the cassowary-trapping sacrifice sequence. Like cassowaries, they are sometimes captured and kept in small submerged cages, albeit for short durations. But again, like cassowaries, they are untamable. With cassowaries, eels are unambiguously ‘wild’ creatures.
Dogs, on the other hand, occupy an ambiguous position. The New Guinea Wild Dog is found in the forests and its pups are sometimes captured to augment domestic stock. Although few dogs are kept they are valued primarily for their aid in hunting. Formerly, before the Maring had access to shells, dog tooth necklaces were important objects of prestations. Superficially, dogs share the ‘cultured’ characteristics of pigs. They are friendly, useful co-residents, who are sometimes obedient – they ‘hear’ and ‘understand’. However, dogs do not share essential substance with their masters. This is partly because they are more or less indiscriminately carnivorous, while humans are restrained (and constrained by taboos) in what flesh they eat, but largely because they are not systematically fed. Thus, unlike pigs, they are not incorporated into the everyday operations of the household. Dogs subsist by catching small game and snatching what food scraps they can from around the homestead. Despite the pleasure that people and dogs may find in one another’s company, dogs are inherently dangerous and antithetical to human life. In this they contrast markedly with pigs. While becoming tame and domesticated, dogs are essentially wild animals that exist within the cultured space of homesteads. This is clearly evident in their unpleasant personal habits, unmodified by domestication. In particular, dogs defecate indiscriminately about homestead yards. Pigs, of course, do this too, though usually only piglets are let loose in yards. Unlike pigs, however, dogs take a keen interest in their own faeces, and the Kundagai regard their habit of sniffing shit to be grossly unpleasant. Dogs’ defecatory habits are a weaker variant of those of cassowaries: the birds are said to foul their own nests and even to feed on the undigested fruits passed in their own copious droppings.

Unlike other animals, dogs are not spoken of as being ‘pigs’ of spirits. However, they are associated with a particular malevolent spirit, the *rawa ganch*, which sometimes visits habitations in the company of dogs. Dog-shit close to houses is an omen of death brought by the *rawa ganch*. But dog-shit in homestead yards is itself inherently powerful and dangerous: its very presence may cause a person’s *miny-nomani*, which wanders during sleep, to become lost, so causing illness, even death. By contrast, the faeces of other creatures (including humans and pigs) is polluting, but lacks the intrinsic power to threaten soul-consciousness.

Dogs are also antithetical to growing taro, a ritually significant crop. One should avoid entering taro gardens for a time after killing a dog or after one’s dog has had pups. Although dogs are eaten by some Maring, all Kundagai observe a taboo on eating dogs. This is suggestive of an identification between dogs and humans, for there is also a taboo on entering taro gardens after killing people or after a wife gives birth. No such taboos attend the killing of pigs and cassowaries or the farrowing of domestic sows.

The ambiguous relation of dogs to mankind is further reflected in the disposal of dog bones in contrast to disposal of bones of other creatures. I have already noted the careful disposal of cassowary bones in the forest, a matter to which I shall return shortly. Human bones are also disposed of fastidiously. Formerly, the corpse was left on an exposure platform until all flesh had rotted away. The bones, objectifying the enduring quality of agnatic groups, were then secreted in subclan cemeteries, *raku*, where ancestral spirits gathered whenever sacrifices were prepared for them. Before final interment, a man’s widow sometimes wore his longbones, jawbone or mummified fingers about her neck. The point is that human bones are retained, and displayed in visually and olfactorily very noticeable forms, before finally being hidden from view but in a known general location. Cassowary bones are kept hidden, and hidden in such a fashion as to become irrevocably lost.

Bones of most other creatures are treated very differently, in being considered appropriate food for domestic pigs. Thus, bones of pigs, wild game and especially eels are often fed to pigs, causing them to grow large and fat. On the other hand, were pigs to eat the bones of cassowaries and dogs, they would suffer the ‘hot’ affliction of scabies. Dog bones, nonetheless, receive more muted, almost ambiguous treatment. Dead dogs were formerly raised on exposure platforms, like dead humans. When the flesh had rotted away the canine teeth were retained for necklaces and the bones were thrown out where pigs would not find them – in streams or in the bush – but while cassowary and human bones are hidden with deliberation, dog bones are lost more through inattention than care.

Bones, then, endure, either in their own form (for cassowary, dog and human) as objectified substance, yet hidden, or in transformed manner as the fatty flesh of pigs. Within the logic of Maring concepts of substance (cf. LiPuma 1988), pigs grow because they incorporate, in part, the substance of past pigs fed to them as bone. Thus, pig-substance embodied in bone enters a cycle of recurrent sacrifice; in that sense, future sacrifices of pigs are dependent upon the bones yielded by past sacrifice, which can be fed to a new generation of beasts. Bones as food contribute to the productivity of pigs. Importantly, this productivity of pigs is displayed by the practice of hanging pig jaw-bones in cordyline shrubs in *raku* and homesteads where pigs are sacrificed. The long lines of aging, mossy jawbones bear witness to the successful communication between men and spirits through sacrifice at particular *raku*.

With cassowaries, however, there is no sense of the cumulative performance of sacrifice, for their bones must be returned to the forests from whence they came. Nonetheless, as a dangerous and powerful creature
brought into cultured space in sacrificial rites, the cassowary represents wild and destructive forces, metaphorised in the capacity of their contact with pigs, fire and certain crops to engender skin diseases. Skin diseases constitute an assault upon the social identity where culturally a taut, lustrous skin is indicative of health and personality. Here remember that besides the power of bones to cause sickness in pigs and people, cassowary feathers must not be burnt nor carcases contact bananas or kwiai. Note also the common highlands theme of the importance of 'skin', or outward appearance as a locus of social persona (e.g. Strathem 1979). The power of cassowary bones to harm must be neutralised.

Thus far, it is clear that the cassowary, as a prenaturally wild being, is inimical to culture in the sense of the productive enterprises of humans: pigs, crops and fire, paramount objects of cultural activity, must be insulated from improper contact with the cassowary. But there is also an identification between the cassowary and aspects of male identity in general, and certain categories of male in particular. To complete my analysis of the meaning of cassowary sacrifice, it is therefore necessary to outline briefly aspects of Maring gender attributes. This leads to a consideration of sexual complementarity in the paradigmatically cultural domain of production.

I have noted that cassowaries are considered 'hot', romba-nda, while eels are cold, kinim. Relatively few other creatures are categorised in these terms, but importantly humans are, men being 'hot', women 'cold'. Thus, while there is at a general level an identification of people with cassowaries, this is particularly marked in reference to men and notably warriors.

Maleness is also associated with high altitudes, the colour red, hardness, enduring strength, and dryness; femaleness with low altitude, softness, weakness, damp and rot (see also Buchbinder and Rappaport 1976). The shades of recently deceased males reside in the high altitude forest. As 'hot' denizens of deep forest, which in the Kundagai domain at least means high altitude forest, cassowaries are loaded with 'male' valence. Here it is worth noting that the sacrifice of cassowaries depends solely on the prowess of males. Indeed, there is an identification between hunter and cassowary. The cassowary-trapper maintains a solitary and secluded existence in a bush hut until the trapping sequence is completed. He becomes an asocial forest-dweller like the cassowary itself, eschewing the company of family, and avoiding cultured, cultivated open spaces.

In contrast to cassowaries, pigs killed in sacrifice are the product of complementary male and female labour, in which the greater burden of female labour is explicitly acknowledged. Significantly, there are certain sacrifices in which female gender is ascribed to pigs (explicitly or implicitly), notably in a fertility ritual occurring shortly before the mass slaughter of pigs in the konj kaiko festival, and in the ritual disposal of trapped cassowary bones. Both rituals involve draping the dead pigs with eels. Though cold creatures of damp, low places, the phallic properties of eels are clearly appreciated by the Kundagai in these contexts (cf. Healey 1985:160; Rappaport 1968:213).

It should now be clear that the washing of cassowary bone packages with water that has passed over an eel not only neutralises the 'hot' cassowary bones with 'cold' eels and water, but serves to restore male and female forces to complementarity. Draping pigs with eels, and then cooking them in the same oven, parallels the similar sequence in the eel-ritual leading up to the konj kaiko. Elsewhere I have interpreted that rite as a merging of the complementarity of male and female principles into a more generalised conception of reproductivity (Healey 1985:160), in which neither maleness nor femaleness is dominant.

As an unambiguously wild, natural creature, cassowaries are cooked in ovens constructed from the bark of forest trees, and lined and decorated with leaves from the forest. This, as informants point out, underlines their association with the wild, and separation from the domestic, heightened by the taboo on any contact between cassowaries and the cultivated banana (the usual leaf lining of ovens) and the kwiai plant. Why are these two plants singled out for this avoidance?

Bananas are said to be antithetical to cassowaries because their leaves are agitated by even light breezes, so advertising the presence of homesteads. In like fashion they will transfer their 'visibility' to cassowary trapping magic, so that the birds may detect and avoid traps. Kwiai must be avoided because the plant has a very strong root system and is difficult to uproot. If brought into contact with cassowaries it transfers its strength to wild birds, who will resist the attraction of the magically charged traps.

Bananas are redolent of homestead areas - they are one of the most prominent markers of house sites. Kwiai is a low grass-like growth, easily missed in the dense tangle of a garden. Though important elements of the diet, neither bananas nor kwiai are strictly staples. With sugar cane, bananas are the most important male crops. Kwiai is a female crop, but of minor importance in comparison to tubers. Nonetheless, their association with gender is significant in this context, as are their physical properties. To begin with, there is a superficial physical resemblance between the two plants though the banana is tall, as is appropriate for male crops, and kwiai is low lying. Importantly, however, the plants represent inversions of gender attributes. Thus, though tall and visible, as are men, the banana is weak, and filled with cool juices (it is not, however, classed as 'cold'), characteristics associated with female gender. Kwiai on the other hand, though low and obscure, is remarkably strong in the roots and stem. Each plant, strongly associated with one gender, contains
attributes associated explicitly with the other (males are strong, hard, and dry and associated with things above the ground, females are weak, soft and damp and associated with things on and below the ground). In combination the two plants constitute a unified symbol of the indissoluble complementarity of the sexes in the cultural domain, in which gardening dominates everyday activities. The various avoidances surrounding cassowary sacrifice all serve to underscore the separation between wild, natural things, embodied in the cassowary, and tame, cultural things, embodied in bananas and kwiai.

CONCLUSIONS

Pigs killed in sacrifice are the outcome of complementary male and female labour in the production of crops fed to animals. There is no such complementarity in the production of cassowaries for sacrifice, which is achieved by hunting — a male activity. Large scale pig sacrifices are well documented in the New Guinea highlands, and are treated as analysable complexes in themselves. What I argue here is that cassowary sacrifice becomes intelligible as part of a larger complex of ritual activity which includes pig sacrifice, and is set in an implicit construct of a cosmic order.

Rappaport (1968) has interpreted the Maring ritual cycle, set in motion by warfare, as a process of bringing the relation between a local human population and its guardian spirits from a state of maximum segregation to one of re-integration. If, as I have already argued, there is an identification between pigs and people, we are led to the conclusion that pigs figure in sacrifice as substitutes for people. This is hardly a surprising conclusion in terms of the literature on sacrifice. However, I have noted that pigs embody only the essentially cultural aspect of humankind. There is also a wild, natural, even chaotic aspect, which is represented by the cassowary.

If, then, sacrifice is to be ‘effective’ at the highly generalised, encompassing level of re-integrating the cosmic order through supplication of the generality of spirits, then sacrifice must embrace the offer of all aspects of humankind, metaphorised in both pigs and cassowaries. Pigs, of course, are frequently sacrificed by households, though large scale, co-ordinated konj kaiko sacrifices are at long and variable intervals. Cassowaries are seldom sacrificed, but the objective volume of kills is not the issue. Conceptually, they restore a balance to the cosmos, because they invoke dimensions of the cosmic order that pig sacrifice does not directly touch. The symbolic significance of cassowaries as objects of sacrifice rests in their capacity to counterbalance the significance of pigs as objects of sacrifice.

This analysis has proceeded with Ralph Bulmer’s Cassowary paper very much in mind as a general model of the kinds of data that may be adduced as evidence in an analysis sensitive to cultural context. Ralph ends his paper with an incisive and speculative foray into border issues of ritual attitudes to animals. Following his lead, I make these concluding suggestions, with a more modest comparative point in mind.

New Guinea societies vary in the degree and nature of stress they lay on the exploitation of wild resources, and the symbolic properties and significance of wild things in their images of the universe and ritual practice. At a fairly high level of generality it seems reasonable to suggest that the Maring and other fringe highland groups maintain a more intense relation than central highlanders with the non-domesticated world. This is evident both in a greater importance of hunting and gathering in the economy, but more importantly, in the salience of essentially wild resources in ritual activities. These societies also tend to conceptualise the relation between things of culture and things of nature in an essentially balanced and complementary state, and the sacrifice of wild animals — be they cassowaries or other game — assumes considerable importance. Such societies are also noted for the general absence of systems of competitive and incremental ceremonial exchange of material valuables and the emergence of inequalities grounded in the control over domesticated resources.

Contrasting with such societies are those clustered mainly in the densely populated central and western highland valleys which show marked tendencies towards inequality emergent out of intensely competitive ceremonial exchange. Significantly, such societies lay considerable stress on transactions involving pigs, especially live animals, and the supplication of spirits of clan ancestors through the sacrifice of pigs. Somewhat impressionistically, the image of central highland cultures is one of dominating domestication: everywhere the environment itself shows the dominance of mankind and culture — it is a cultivated landscape in the broadest sense. As in the realm of practical activity, so in the religious domain: the forces of nature are kept at bay by the domestication of non-human powers.

If such contrasts between the symbolic systems of highland societies are at all valid — and of course I have grossly oversimplified them here — they need to be explored through a much more thorough examination of the full range of human material and symbolic relations with the naturally conceived world. Ralph Bulmer’s work stands as an exemplar of the complexity of the ethnographic task involved, and of the analytic insights that may be attained.
NOTES

1. Later fieldwork prompted Ralph to modify some of his statements in the cassowary paper (see Majnep and Bulmer 1977), but the essentials of the analysis remain unchanged.

2. Based on a total of 18 months’ fieldwork in 1972, 1973-74, 1978 and 1985 in the Jimi Valley, Western Highlands Province. At various times I received financial support from the University of Papua New Guinea, the PNG Department of Natural Resources, the Myer Foundation, the New York Zoological Society and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. I thank these institutions for their support, the provincial and national governments for permission to undertake research and my Maring hosts for their patience and generosity. A longer version of this paper was delivered to a conference on Sacrifice in Melanesia at the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, in 1987, and I thank participants for discussion of the paper. Dr Don Gardener and Professor Jan Pouwer also commented helpfully on earlier drafts.

3. Majnep (in Majnep and Bulmer 1977:150) qualifies this assertion.

4. This seclusion is not as onerous as it might seem, for after a period of residence in a bush-house, where he is brought provisions by male kin, he may resume residence in his homestead. Nonetheless he should be circumspect in his movements, avoiding public gatherings, especially those attended by outsiders, and move from his home to gardens by well-screened minor paths. Even this period of partial re-integration into the community is spoken of as seclusion.

5. Nowadays the dead are buried in graves marked by ornamental shrubs and flowers and sturdily fenced against pigs.

6. For the Kalam, the crop singled out for opposition to cassowaries is taro (Bulmer 1967). My Kundagai informants were aware of this, but denied any need to keep cassowaries and taro segregated.

REFERENCES


MANY VOICES: RHETORIC AND ETHNOGRAPHIC UNDERSTANDING IN A BORNEO DAYAK COMMUNITY

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In 1977 Ian Saem Majnep and Ralph Bulmer published a remarkable ethnography: Birds of My Kalam Country. The significance of this book for anthropology lies less in the wealth of information about Kalam ornithology which it contains than in the relationship between its joint authors as articulated in the text. In what was, for the time, an extraordinary departure from convention, it is Majnep (anthropological subject)