

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LIFE OF INFANTS AMONG THE
BALIEM VALLEY DANI, IRIAN JAYA

BY

LESLIE BUTT

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
MCGILL UNIVERSITY, MONTREAL

JANUARY 1998

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN PARTIAL
FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

© LESLIE BUTT 1998

NOTE: PAGE NUMBERS IN THIS ELECTRONIC VERSION
OF THE DISSERTATION MAY DIFFER FROM THE ORIGINAL.

(Please include a reference to "www.papuaweb.org version"
in citations of this dissertation)

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	i
LIST OF TABLES.	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.	iii
ABSTRACT.	vi
RÉSUMÉ.	vii
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION. SITUATING THE POLITICAL INFANT:BODY, SOCIETY, NATION	1
The Place	
People of the Valley	
The Problem: Infant Bodies and Power	
The Body	
Politics and Power	
The Chapters	
2. RESEARCH PERMITS AND MARRIAGE PROPOSALS: TRADITIONAL FIELDWORK GONE AWRY.	36
Gaining Access	
Cultural Diversity as a Fieldwork Obstacle	
On Being a White Woman: The Spectre of Wyn Sargent	
Sargent's Own Story	
Sargent's Story as Told by the Dani	
Commentary	
3. WE STAND STRONG: SOCIAL LIFE IN THE BALIEM VALLEY.	66
Inequality Among Men	
<i>Kaneke</i> : Power Through Ancestors	
Body Lore	
Women's World	
The Division of Labour	
Marriage Patterns and Social Organization	
"Runaway Wives" and the Demographics of Marriage	
Analytic Summary of Women's Status	
Conclusion	
4. THE SOCIAL BODY OF THE INFANT.	115
Theories of Sociality	
The Social Body of the Infant	
Conception and Birth	
Commentary on Conception and Birth	

The Unfinished Body of the Newborn	
"Fixed" and "Variable" Characteristics of the Infant Body	
Conclusion	
5. NEGOTIATING INFANT DEATH.	145
The Death of Hermina's Baby	
Tactics of Silence	
On Infanticide and Women's Silences	
Polygyny and Ancestor Politics	
Ancestors and Power	
Household Relationships	
Conclusion	
6. SEX RATIOS AND THE VALUE OF INFANTS: FURTHER	
INQUIRIES INTO LOCAL BIOLOGIES	174
Sex Ratios as Local Biologies	
Gendered Beliefs and Practices	
Symbolism and Demographic Patterns	
Conclusion	
7. "NORMAL" INFANTS AND THE POLITICS OF HEALTH CARE . . .	193
Biomedicine and Infants in Indonesia	
Constructs of the "Normal" Infant	
The "Mantri's Secret": Techniques for Applying Biomedicine	
Jacob and the "Mantri's Secret"	
Simeon the Strategist	
Albert's Ambitions	
Commentary	
Conclusion	
8. THE INDIGENOUS INFANT AND THE BODY POLITIC	227
The Child Within the Indonesian Nation-State	
Infant Weigh Clinics: The Production and Manipulation of Statistics and	
Families	
The Production of "Abnormal" Infants'	
Culture and the Health Bureaucracy	
Health Care Workers and the "Primitive" Patient	
Culture and Control: Pelesina Bathes her Baby	
Discussion	
Conclusion	
9. CONCLUSION.	265
APPENDIX.	272
GLOSSARY.	275
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	277

LIST OF FIGURES

Figures	Page number
1. Map of Irian Jaya	5
2. Photograph: View of Baliem valley from the South	13
3. Photograph: Juliana is weeding the terraced sweet potato gardens	13
4. Photograph: Lesina carries her newborn in a netbag	15
5. Photograph: This infant girl is about ten days old	15
6. Household compound in Kuliama	70
7. Photograph: An alliance leader kills a pig with an arrow	71
8. Photograph: The man with the ax is removing the bones	71
9. Photograph: Preparing a steam oven for sweet potatoes	72
10. Photograph: "Sweet potatoes are people fuel"	72
11. Photograph: Elders and leaders at an alliance-strengthening ritual	73
12. Photograph: At a December 1994 church opening in Woma	73
13. Photograph: Negotiations over the placement of the dead pigs	74
14. Photograph: Once the pig has been cooked	74
15. Photograph: Abel Hubi leaves his silimo	106
16. Photograph: A 'runaway wife' goes to village court	106
17. Photograph: This child reflects ideals of plumpness	128
18. Photograph: The busiest Posyandu I attended	*
19. Photograph: Wamena staff and a mantri weigh a Western Dani girl	*
20. Photograph: Infant receiving injection at Kuliama	*
21. Photograph: Women and children waiting for immunizations	*
22. KMS Health Card: Front	232
23. KMS Health Card: Back	233

(* photograph unavailable)

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page Number
1. Division of labour of Dani men and women	95
2. Number of wives of Kuliama married men in 1995	102
3. Type of problem resolved at village office legal court between February 1993 and February 1995	109
4. Fixed bodily characteristics of the infant	139
5. Variable characteristics of the infant	140
6. Age distinctions for Kuliama children	142
7. Sex ratios from small community censuses in Irian Jaya Highlands	179
8. Use of Puskesmas by age and sex of child in the West Baliem valley	180
9. Diagnosis by age and sex at clinics in Wamena, Asologaima, Hitigima and Kuliama	182
10. Healing resorts	212
11. Infant mortality rates by source of data for Irian Jaya in 1985	243

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the course of working on this dissertation, I have incurred many debts. While a brief mention here in no way reflects the levels of institutional, financial, intellectual and emotional support I have received, nonetheless I want to acknowledge my gratitude to all those who helped make this dissertation possible. For financial help, I thank the Asia-Pacific Foundation for funding preliminary research and language training in Jakarta and Yogyakarta in May and June 1993. I thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a doctoral fellowship and the McGill Faculty of Graduate Studies for funds to prepare and carry out research in Irian Jaya in 1994 and 1995. I also thank the Eastern Indonesia University Development Project (EIUDP) and Women and Their Children's Health Project (WATCH) for providing financial support for a medical anthropology training seminar. I am grateful to the following people for their assistance in obtaining funding: Rebecca Aiken of the Institute for Islamic Studies at McGill University; Jacques Bertrand; staff from EIUDP, especially Dr. John Moore and Dr. Nello Angerilli; Dr. Nasikun of Gadjah Mada University; Jerome Rousseau; and Drs. Naffi Sanggenafa of Universitas Cenderawasih. For permission to carry out research in Irian Jaya, I acknowledge the generous sponsorship of the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI). I thank Dr. Yulfita Raharjo, Jose Levelink, and Drs. Naffi Sanggenafa for supporting the LIPI application through its various stages.

While in Indonesia, many people went out of their way to assist me and my family. Agencies and individuals who gave warmly of their time include staff from the WATCH project, based in Wamena; the Catholic Church of Wamena and Pater Frans Lieshout, Pastor Dominicus and Sister Josepi in particular; Tammy Conklin of CUSO;

the Mission Aviation Fellowship and the Bergstrazer and Willms family in particular; Region Beyond Missionaries Union missionaries Sue Trenier and Jesse Williamson; and World Vision International. For help above and beyond the call of duty I thank Thomas Walsh of CUSO and Nello Angerilli of EIUDP. I thank the following student from the UNCEN-WATCH medical anthropology research seminar for excelling at their fieldwork training and for being so much fun to work with: Yosepina Griapon, Fenty Lase, Gerdha Numbery, Andri Andriastuti, and Susana Srimi.

In Kuliama, I shared ideas, advice, sweet potatoes, and countless conversations with friends on a vast number of topics. For their patience, friendship and support, I thank in particular Oskar Hubi, Pastor Dominicus Wetapo, Lina Matuan, and Stefanus Kossay, Hermina Kossay, clan and alliance leaders from the Hubi-Kossay alliance, staff from the government village office, *mantris* Albert and Jacob, and all the infants and children who were the object of my focused attention. I am particularly grateful to Pastor Dominicus for his willingness to debate important issues and for pushing me gently into unexpected research terrain. For the introduction to Kuliama I thank Suster Josepi, and for the protective arm and graceful invitation from the first day in the village I thank Pelesina Hilapok, for her welcoming overtures, and for a fine sustained friendship throughout the year. *Lauknyak!*

For assistance conceptualizing and carrying out this dissertation, I have an extraordinary committee to thank. Margaret Lock's outstanding supervision and intellectual rigour always challenged and inspired me to work to the highest standards of academic excellence. An exemplary scholar and a fine and generous person, Margaret embodies the soul and spark of good academic work, and it has been a privilege to work

with her. Jerome Rousseau provided consistent encouragement and support for my project, much-needed pragmatic advice during the research application procedure, and steady, thoughtful feedback during the writing-up stage. Allan Young has consistently offered support and inspiration throughout my time at McGill. His wise counsel and intellectual rigour have helped keep me grounded at critical junctures. Christine Jourdan has offered guidance, a social network of fellow Melanesianists, and the example of her research standards in the Solomon Islands. Finally, I thank the late Roger Keesing for encouraging me to dig deep into Melanesian studies, for always sustaining a critical perspective, and for his numerous writings that continue to challenge and stimulate me, even after his death, to produce the best work possible.

I have friends who have helped me out: by reading and critiquing what I write; by challenging me with talk about anthropology; by refusing to talk about anthropology; by providing opportunities; and by just being in the right place at the right time. In approximate order of debt and gratitude, I want to thank: Marta Kombong; Pelesina Mabel; Paula Rawung; Sukwan Handali; Pastor Dominicus; Pelesina Hilapok and Oskar Hubi; Welys Taduni; Susana Srini; Muridan Widjojo; Lina Matuan; Rose Bergstrazer; Saptono; Jane Slemon; Leslie Robertson; Lawrence Hammar; Allyson Butt; Peter Ronald; Pater Lieshout; Lauren Carter; Anne Harfenist; Robert and Sarah Hewat; Dara Culhane; Jose Levelink; Fern Brunger; Heather Young Leslie; Carole Smith; Kathy Odzers; Michael Kenny; and Margaret Rodman. I thank my boy Malcolm for being such a great field assistant and for being good-humoured about having to move back to Canada from the comforts of Wamena. Last but not least, I thank Andrew for his good humour, his tolerance, his support and his kindness.

ABSTRACT

Among the Baliem valley Dani of the central highlands of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, infants play a prominent role in social relations. Infant mortality rates among the Dani are above two hundred and fifty deaths per one thousand live births, and birth rates are low. To these patterns of infant survival and growth the Dani consistently ascribe complex meaning. Drawing from anthropological research conducted in 1994-1995 in the Baliem valley, this dissertation demonstrates that indigenous meanings about the infant body and assessments of infant health link the infant to political relations within polygynous families, to antagonistic gender relations, and to affiliations with powerful ancestor spirits. Gender relations play a prominent role in explanations about infants, particularly for infant death. A study of sex ratios during the first year of life and biased use of health services by gender of the infant suggest the Dani may generate and validate cultural patterns of gender difference during the earliest months of life.

Infants also play a prominent role in national politics. In Indonesia's attempts to assimilate indigenous peoples into the country's economic development agenda, the infant appears in health promotions as a member of a contrived ideal family. These national cultural models, grounded in a concern with population control, translate into an applied health agenda for infants that has little impact on the mortality rates of the very young in Dani society.

The infant is a powerful figure at the central of many social and political relations. The richness of meaning attributed to infants in the Baliem valley suggests that further research is needed to correct lacunae in anthropology about one of life's key social figures.