The Massim Culture Area and Its Texts

By Allan C. Darrah

The Massim, clearly a western rather than indigenous category, lumps together cultures in the northeastern tip of Papua New Guinea that have presumed similarities of language and culture. The term Massim refers to a cultural area first defined by A.C. Haddon after the usage of Carlo Salerio, a Marist missionary to Muyuw during the nineteenth century.[1] The geographical boundaries of the cultures included in this designation center on the northeastern coast of Papua New Guinea's mainland and the adjacent islands including the Louisiade Archipelago, the D' Entrecastaux group, the Trobriand Islands, the Marshall Bennetts, the Woodlark/Muyuw cluster and the Laughlans. Young (1983) attributes to Haddon the establishment of the Massim as a geographic area joined by cultural characteristics in common.

> In 1894 the English ethnologist A. C. Haddon synthesized what was known about the artefacts and anthropometry of British New Guinea, and it was he who defined the ethnic and cultural singularity of the whole southeast region. The entity of the Massim took shape. It was a people and a place, a 'culture area'.

C.G. Seligman further developed the notion of the Massim by defining the shared cultural characteristics of the peoples of this area. As noted by Young these similarities include:

> .....matrilineal descent associated with a set of linked totems which regulated marriage, residence in hamlet clusters, maritime trade networks, and characteristic style of decorative art employing spirals and scrolls. Hereditary chieftainship was conspicuous in the Northern Massim and cannibalism prevalent in the south. Later research has shown that apart from the art style no single cultural trait is common to all Massim societies, but Seligman's work in documenting a broad ethnic, linguistic[2] and cultural homogeneity in the Massim allowed the conception of a distinct culture area to mature. (6-7)

Young goes on to note that Massim societies also share a number of institutions which are characteristic of Melanesians as a whole:

1

The first written use of Massim, in reference to Melanesia, occurs in an account of Massim cultures written by Father Carlo Salerio, an Italian Catholic missionary to Woodlark (Muyuw), in 1852-55, where he refers to the language spoken on the D'Entrecasteaux Islands as Massim. (Afflick 1983)

2

Except for Yela on Rossell Island, Seligman classified the languages of the Massim as belonging to a single Melanesian (or Austronesian) family. Ralph Lawton notes that Kiriwinian or Kilivilian language has the largest number of speakers with a variety of dialects encompassing the Trobriand Islands, Kaileuna, Kitava, Simsimla, Iwa, and Gawa. Here he takes exception to Lithgow's classification of the languages spoken at Kitava, Iwa, Gawa, and Yanabwa as part of the Muyuwan language. [Lawton 1994 p.6]

> Religious conceptions are fundamentally concerned with growth and regeneration; ancestors spirits and culture heroes are solicited for their help in secular pursuits. Male sorcerers have powers of life and death, and leadership is commonly buttressed by the magical control of food production. Hereditary leadership in varying degree can be found throughout the Massim, though whether it is vestigial or emergent is difficult to say. Broadly speaking, however, some notion of rank is woven into the egalitarian fabric of Massim societies, and almost everywhere it is expressed in feast giving, festival cycles or elaborate mortuary exchanges. Such enterprises, usually competitive in nature, are the work of true leaders or big men, and they create pervasive debt networks of pigs, vegetable food and other forms of wealth. (p 7)

With the publication of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* Malinowski made the Massim area famous as the home of *Kula*.

> Indeed, the *Kula* sphere of influence and the ethnographic area of the Massim tribes almost completely overlap, and we can speak about the *Kula* type of culture and the Massim culture almost synonymously. (AWP. 28)

However, not all communities in the Massim traditionally took part in the *kula*. The *kula* involves not only the exchange of shells but also is a means for the exchange of ideas. One only has to read 19th century accounts of the extent of cannibalism in New Guinea to get a full appreciation of how important an institution like *kula* must have been for providing an umbrella of security for all sorts of exchanges. For example in the Trobriands the traditional lubricant of social life, magic, is believed to have originated in the past when the first ancestors arrived from below ground. Magic, which can be lost as a result conflicts between the living, cannot be re-invented, but it can be replaced by buying spells from one's neighbors in the *kula*.

The *kula* facilitates trade of foods, manufactured items and raw materials, as well as an exchange of ideas. Many of the lithic cultures of the Massim, particularly coral atolls like the Trobriand Islands, were dependent on exchanges for stone, the raw material from which tools were made, in order to clear land for gardening. Even after iron tools supplanted stone ones, resulting in a cessation of the exchange for stone on *kula* voyages, igneous stone objects continued to retain considerable ritual and economic importance. *Beku*, stone axe blades, are still objects of great value and are used to buy land, make bride wealth payments, and secure the death of one's enemy.[3]

3

In Omarakana, the Tabalu will point to a pile of rubble which cover the famous stones that give their leader the power to cause drought . (Weiner 1988c p. 99) During a 2000 visit we were shown what looked like river stones of igneous origin which were said to have powers over peoples welfare. In the Trobriand Islands and Gawa stones are thought to contain the spirits of ancestors who control the fertility of the gardens. Battaglia reports in Bringing Home to Moresby, that when urban Trobrianders in Port Moresby decided to hold a competitive yam gardening contest they air freighted, at great expense, stones to make their plots fertile.

Anthropology's second gloss of Massim culture, dating from 1920 until 1980 owed everything to the work of Malinowski with lesser contributions from Powell (the Trobriands), Fortune (Dobu), Jenness (Goodnough), but was also enriched by important texts from missionaries like Fellows and Baldwin, as well as administrators, most notably Austin. In the nineteen seventies a second wave of ethnographers completed studies based not only on the Trobriand Islands but also on the other major islands of the *kula* ring. Scholars were spurred into taking a more regional perspective by the two *Kula C*onferences and their subsequent publications. As a result other Massim cultures began to emerge from the academic shadow of their Trobriand neighbors; while at the same time students of the Trobriands became increasingly aware of the importance of placing Trobriand culture in the wider context of the Massim. For researcher rethinking the cannon of Malinowski, or other ethnographers, it became possible to look to these materials and ask what relevance, if any, the information contained therein had for the Trobriand context. A relative small but important third wave occurred in the 1990's with the work of Kuehling, Bickler, and Digim'Rina.

And just as the stream of texts from the second wave dries up[4] there has been a 21st century fourth wave of ethnographers including Catherine Lepani, Mark Mosko, Sergio Jarillo de la Torre, and Michelle McCarthy, along with historian Andrew Connelly, all from whom great things are to be expected in the future.

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4 The exception being the ever-productive Gunter Senft. There are also reports that Giancarlo Scoditti is back in the field.