

Women, mobile phones, and M16s: Contemporary New Guinea highlands warfare

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This paper reports upon a series of recent developments in New Guinea highlands warfare. Building upon existing literature highlighting the deep influence of modernity within this context, we draw attention to two particular developments yet to be reported in the literature and which appear to be of special significance. Through an analysis of Aiya warfare, Southern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea, we document the direct and increasing involvement of women within warfare, as well as the important role played by mobile phones used by warriors to communicate before and during fighting. These two developments are situated in relation to broader shifts currently reshaping Melanesian sociality, namely, the ambivalent and fraught position of women within an emergent PNG society, as well as the rapid diffusion of mobile phone technology throughout the region.

Keywords: tribal warfare, mobile phones, gender, Papua New Guinea

INTRODUCTION

A recent special issue of *Anthropologica* explores the topic of ‘Ending War and Sustaining Peace in Pacific Societies’, with many of the papers based upon ethnography undertaken within Papua New Guinean societies. Most of the papers describe post-colonial societies within which open physical violence has, through colonial suppression, been replaced with various forms of occult and magical violence. In an interesting analysis of continuing warfare and its contemporary metamorphosis into *raskolism* and crime,¹ Roscoe notes that warfare remains of vital cultural importance to many societies in the highlands area and that ‘the wars once again being fought in the contemporary highlands resemble their pre-colonial antecedents in many respects but differ in some others’ (Roscoe 2014: 328). His point highlights an issue of crucial importance for the anthropology of war in Papua New Guinea and constitutes the focus of our article.

This paper provides a preliminary analysis of contemporary intra-ethnic, inter-clan armed fighting among the Aiya of the Southern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG). In particular, it focusses upon two especially significant

developments in the conduct of conflict: the use of mobile phones during fighting and also the participation of women in warfare. Research on PNG highlands warfare began with a 'virtual explosion' of studies undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s, shortly after the area was 'opened up' and then pacified by the Australian colonial administration from the 1930s onwards (Knauff 1990: 266; see Koch 1974; Berndt 1962). Forcibly suppressed throughout the colonial period, warfare in the highlands then underwent a sudden resurgence in the post-independence period, which was typically attributed to high population density and perceived land pressure (Meggitt 1977; Strathern 1977; Gordon 1983). A more recent vein of research has illuminated the noticeably modern character of contemporary highlands fighting, and it is this field of literature to which the current article most directly speaks. Here the terms 'modernity' and 'modern' are understood not as agentive forces intruding into a 'traditional' society, but simply as markers of contemporary social context and experience, the character of which will emerge from our ethnographic descriptions. The developments that we trace within Aiya warfare, then, should not be seen as occurring to or impinging upon a population hitherto isolated from the outside world, but rather as the latest expressions of the continuing and extensive influence of wider regional and global spheres within their lives. The studies that have considered the influence of modern warfare reveal a shift in the basis and character of fighting from that described by earlier anthropologists. From an image of 'tribes' fighting pitched battles with bows and arrows and spears over land, women, and pigs, we are now presented with a much more complex picture of increasingly young, disenfranchised male groups, often under the influence of alcohol and/or marijuana, launching surprise ambushes with modern weaponry over a range of socio-political benefits (Yala 2002; Alpers 2005; Haley and Muggah 2006; Wiessner 2006, 2010; Rumsey 2009; Kopi 2011; Roscoe 2014).

Our paper confirms these findings but adds to them by emphasising two particularly intriguing aspects of Aiya warfare, namely, the use of mobile phones as well as the direct participation of women in fighting. Several seminal studies have explored the significance of mobile phones in reshaping existing Melanesian sociality (Cave 2012; Logan 2012; Lipset 2013; Jorgensen 2014) and here we build upon these by illuminating a unique context of deployment. On the other hand, the changing role of women within contemporary PNG and the Pacific more broadly is a topic now receiving considerable attention. These studies highlight the intrinsically ambivalent nature of the transformations affecting PNG women today, whereby expanded personal autonomy occurs alongside increased vulnerability to risks such as violent crime and sexual assault (Jowitt and Newton Cain 2003; Wardlow 2006; Jolly *et al.* 2012; Stewart 2014). Our paper shows that women's involvement in Aiya warfare is similarly fraught, opening to them a formerly exclusively masculine arena of conduct at the same time as exposing them to new dangers. So, while the paper is focussed on warfare, we also contribute to the growing literature on both mobile phones and gender relations within PNG and throughout Melanesia.

WHO ARE THE AIYA?

The Aiya are a group of Kewa people living in the densely settled western part of the Kagua-Erave district in Southern Highlands Province, PNG. The name 'Aiya' refers specifically to a dialect of the Kewabi/Kewapi language. Owing to their close proximity to administrative centres such as Mendi and Kagua, the Kewa, who today number around 100,000, have received their fair share of attention from anthropologists and linguists. Various aspects of social organisation have been investigated, from language (Franklin 1968; Yaraepa 2013), marriage and family (Macdonald 1984), politics, gender, and exchange (Josephides 1985), and more recently into Christian inter-denominational conflict (Jebens 2005). The majority of these anthropological studies took place during an era when warfare had been suppressed. As such, we hear little of the topic, though Josephides' work among the southern Kewa living in the Sugu Valley does contain passages describing traditions of warfare and their suppression, which will be discussed in greater detail below (Josephides 1985; Josephides and Schlitz 1991: 206–208). Also, none of the mentioned studies concern the Aiya. This paper, therefore, fills two immediate gaps in the ethnographic literature, in that it is among the first publications on a Kewa population to take contemporary warfare as its primary focus, and also the first anthropological research undertaken on the Aiya.

The Aiya live in villages ranging in size from 25 to 100 households. Each village is organised principally around two to three patrilineal clans (*ruru*), with political authority vested in elected councillors and other senior leaders. Like most rural Papua New Guineans, the Aiya are predominantly subsistence gardeners who generate a small cash income through marketing vegetables. This money is then used to purchase various manufactured food and household items, as well as to pay school fees. Other means of earning money exist, such as growing coffee, raising poultry, and running trade stores, though these enterprises are often short lived, rarely profitable, and plagued by mismanagement and jealousy. Religiously the Aiya are strong adherents of Christianity, belonging to a variety of denominations, including Catholic, Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventist (SDA), and Nazarene.

TRADITIONAL AIYA WARFARE

According to our elderly informants, prior to the 1950s fighting was certainly very widespread, with almost all local Aiya clans continuously involved in one conflict or another. Wars typically started as tit-for-tat infractions that escalated to reciprocal assassinations and ambushes until the ambit of the conflict absorbed whole clans. At this point war would be formally declared and preparations for battle undertaken, most importantly the erection of palisades around villages to fortify them against enemy incursion (Josephides 1985: 29). Wars themselves were full scale pitched battles and concluded typically because of the death of fight leaders (*muduali*) or because one side had defeated and overrun the other.

Although conflict was typically initiated by two opposed clans, it quickly enveloped allied groups, so that fighting was between confederacies of allied clans and not individual clan groups. Allies were typically sought from within the immediate Aiya population but were also recruited from other Kewa speakers in the Ialibu, Kagua, and Erave areas. For example, the Regerepa clan of the Aiya area has a long-standing ally relationship with the Ipilimi clan of the neighbouring Ialibu area, who speak a different dialect of the Kewa language. This alliance was expressed in the Kewabi saying *ari kilua kanda repena, ipa ulu pere repena*, meaning 'Mount Giluwe is my pillow, the Ulu river is where my legs are stretched.' The practical significance of this expression is that any enemy or rival entering the described territory would be attacked by the two affiliated clans, a military commitment that persists today. Other Aiya clans forged similar ally networks throughout the Kewa area. While allies were of crucial importance in that they increased military force, such relationships were occasionally strained in times of need, such as when forcibly displaced clans searched for refuge among friendly neighbours. As one old man reported during an interview:

We were never welcomed easily when we migrated to other villages. Only those people with pigs or kina shells and other valuables including young girls were accepted promptly. We made payments with those gifts to enter the territory even of our allies.

This cautious attitude to accepting displaced clans is understandable given the fact that receiving them represented *de facto* support should the enemy pursue them into their new home.

Fighting was undertaken not so much to obtain resources such as land and women but to exact revenge over one's enemies. As Josephides and Schlitz report for the Sugu Valley Kewa:

Though the victors often drove defeated groups off their lands, acquisition of territory was not the victors' goal. They were more concerned with the settling of old scores; their military objectives were to rout the enemy and neutralise them as a fighting force (Josephides and Schlitz 1991: 206).

Warfare had a spatially fluid character, starting in one place and then easily spreading into the territory of neighbours and allies. This meant that the number of people affected by any given conflict, and thus the amount of injuries, deaths, and property destroyed, was significantly greater than if the fight been restricted to a single clan territory.

The weapons used when fighting were limited to the bow and arrow and also spears. As such, while dangerous, warfare wasn't a particularly deadly activity. When an adversary was injured by a spear or arrow, they often survived and if they died, it wasn't immediately. Communication on the battlefield was primarily verbal, though when stealth demanded, bodily gestures and also techniques such as smoke signals were employed.

Warfare was seen as a strictly male domain. Women were forbidden from participation lest their presence precipitate death and misfortune in battle. Further, as

Josephides states, women 'claimed to be ignorant of, and unconcerned about, the reasons for wars, which they said were men's affairs' (Josephides 1985: 30). Their role was rather to maintain domestic integrity and to ensure warriors were fed and nurtured. Their exclusion from active warfare was accompanied by a customary prohibition on killing women during fighting, lest she carry the perpetrators in her *bilum* (string bag), meaning that her departed spirit would haunt and harass them.

This was one of many ritualised codes that governed the conduct of warfare among the Aiya and here I draw attention to a few that are of relevance for the later discussion. The first concerns the treatment of slain enemies. Killing an adversary in battle was surrounded by many ritual prohibitions. The body of the fallen warrior was not moved or in any way harmed by the enemy, instead being left for kinsmen to come and collect at nightfall. Should the corpse be disrespected in any way, then it was believed the warrior's spirit would cause illness and misfortune. Treating the body ethically would promote victory in future warfare. Macdonald (1991: 67) also makes the point that getting an enemy's blood on one's skin could similarly incur misfortune.

Success in battle also hinged crucially on maintaining good relationships with one's own dead relatives, both recently and long departed. On the one hand, warriors supplicated their clan ancestors in order to ensure success in battle. On the other hand, relatives recently killed in battle, even during an ongoing conflict, were appealed to for assistance. In some cases warriors would not only implore the dead man's spirit for help but would sleep with the corpse as a demonstration of affinity.

The consolidation of Australian colonial governance and religion in the Kewa region from the 1950s onwards suppressed Aiya warfare. The next two decades represented an ostensible colonial 'success story': a portrait of a people whose ready acceptance of Western values, attitudes, and technology was solving social problems like tribal warfare (Meggitt 1977). Armed conflict had largely ceased, the rule of law prevailed, and the Aiya had converted in large numbers to various branches of Christianity, seemingly embracing messages of universal peace and brotherhood.

The process of colonial subjugation certainly produced extensive changes within Aiya society and it would be misguided to say that the mentioned shifts were purely cosmetic. However, the predilection to resolve simmering disputes and gnawing resentment through warfare was never fully eliminated, instead lying only just below the surface of everyday life, threatening but seldom expressed. Following independence in 1975 and the subsequent gradual atrophy of formal structures of governance, especially in the areas of service provision and the maintenance of law and order, the mechanisms keeping these deep-seated cultural orientations in check gave way. This resulted in the resurgence of Aiya warfare, especially since the 1990s, in a more potent and deadly form.

GUNS, DRUGS, AND MACHETES

One of the most obvious changes to Aiya warfare in the post-colonial era is the weaponry that is used. While an earlier generation of warriors fought with bows, arrows,

and spears fashioned out of the natural materials at hand, today combatants use an array of modern weaponry, including automatic and semi-automatic rifles such as M16s, AR15s, and SLRs (Self-Loading Rifles), grenades, as well as steel machetes (for other examples within PNG see Strathern 1992; Wiessner 2006, 2010; Haley and Muggah 2006; Roscoe 2014: 329). These firearms have transformed the nature of warfare. For one, such weapons greatly expand the range over which an individual can engage the enemy. Bullets are also far more deadly. In a corner of rural PNG with a dearth of professional medical assistance, being shot in battle typically means death. Unsurprisingly then, the number of fatalities from any given fight has spiked in recent years.

This seemingly cash starved, rural population has managed to gain access to a range of powerful firearms. But how has this occurred? This issue has been recently discussed in fine detail by Alpers in his excellent report for the Small Arms Survey on the gun trade in SHP (Alpers 2005). He states that:

Very few commercially made, high-powered firearms are smuggled into PNG from foreign countries. Instead, the majority are stolen from fellow countrymen who own them legally, but fail to keep them securely. Most of these leak from state-owned stocks, although many are also taken from lawful owners during burglaries and in other crime. In recent years, soldiers and police provided the most destructive firearms used in crime and conflict in PNG (Alpers 2005: 48).

When not stolen or leaked from the police and defence force, these firearms may be purchased on the internal black market. Several authors claim that these purchases are almost always financed by local educated elites and politicians (Alpers 2005: 102; Yala 2002: 9–10; see also Strathern 1992: 236; Wiessner 2010). Furthermore, not only do the privileged purchase these weapons, there is a strong correlation between buying guns for the community and obtaining political power. As Wiessner states in her excellent article on contemporary Enga warfare, ‘Businessmen and politicians living in cities provide money for arms and ammunition, or the goods themselves, to maintain a “big name” at home. Without this source of arms, fighting with modern weapons would be limited’ (2006: 12).

Several of our informants also spoke of firearms being supplied from Australia in a ‘guns for drugs’ trade taking place throughout the Torres Strait and southwest coast of PNG, whereby cannabis grown in the highlands is exchanged for weapons smuggled from Australia. Some even claimed to have participated directly in the trade. One man related how he packed a bag with 50 kg of cannabis and carried it with several accomplices to Kikori in Gulf Province. There, he claims, they were met by a man in a boat, who, with the use of a satellite phone, arranged a meeting with another boat, where they exchanged the drugs for guns. According to this informant, the guns obtained in this manner were then sold to people in the Aiya and Kagua areas for use in inter-clan fighting. Other Aiya respondents stated that other nearby groups, particularly the Kewa living in the Sugu Valley and Erave areas, were also directly participating in the guns for drugs trade and that the Aiya occasionally either hired or bought firearms from these places.

Whether or not such a guns for drugs trade exists, and the extent to which it influences the weapons being used in highlands warfare, has been subjected to considerable critique. Marshalling the extensive official evidence provided by the Australian Federal Police (AFP), Alpers (2005: 59–63) concludes that the volume and significance of this trade has been greatly exaggerated by both the Australian media as well as local Papua New Guineans themselves, and that the real number of firearms entering PNG via Australia and the Torres Strait amounts to no more than a handful annually. This is not to negate our informant's account, only to properly contextualise it as perhaps an infrequent occurrence within the overall scheme of gun supply in the Aiya area and the highlands more generally.

Another significant transformation within the conduct of warfare in recent years has been the treatment of fallen enemies, one of a number of examples that vividly exemplify the erosion of ritualised codes of deference and respect within fighting mentioned earlier. Where previously warriors avoided disrespecting the corpse of a slain adversary, combatants now not only mutilate the dead bodies of their enemies, but there is a tendency to make these attacks as horrific as possible. From one perspective this can be taken as simply the loss of customs of respect governing relations to the enemy. But to understand this situation exclusively in terms of loss overlooks the emergence of a series of new, albeit grotesque, practices. The mutilation of bodies does not indicate an absence of culture, but rather its radical transformation as existing customs of avoidance and fear of ritual consequences are inverted by contemporary practices of humiliation and degradation. We note too that similar transformations of moral value resulting in the ritual humiliation and degradation of bodies have occurred in conflict situations elsewhere in the world, for example Rwanda (Malkki 1995).

MIGHT IS RIGHT: THE MORAL AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF CONTEMPORARY AIYA WARFARE

Not only the rules of warfare, but also the reasons why it is undertaken, have been significantly altered. Earlier it was described how traditional Kewa warfare was principally about settling the score, having the last word, or inflicting a final and crushing defeat upon one's enemies (Josephides 1985: 28; see also Wiessner 2006). Our research confirms that seeking revenge continues to be a primary motivating factor in contemporary Aiya warfare, but that this key motive is now inflected by a range of exogenous socio-political factors incorporated throughout the colonial and post-colonial periods.

Of the three inter-clan conflicts we discuss here that have occurred since 1995, all have been organised principally around seeking vengeance for wrongdoing or injustice. In the first conflict in 1995, a pastor's son was accidentally shot dead by a stray bullet fired at a banana thief. Compensation of 40 pigs and K30,000 (\$14,000 AUD) was paid to the boy's family and the culprit was incarcerated. However, shortly thereafter the killer broke out of jail and went into hiding with relatives. This incensed the

dead boy's family, who felt that the man who recklessly took the boy's life should not enjoy such liberty. To this they added an additional grievance that the pigs and money they had already received did not adequately compensate the loss of the boy's life. What they wanted most was to take vengeance directly and in a manner equivalent to the injustice they had been forced to endure. They consequently travelled by car one night to the village where the man was understood to be hiding. However, upon arrival they learned that the man had already fled. One of the boy's family members then shot and killed the elder brother of the culprit. This retaliatory killing precipitated a large-scale fight between the two conflicting clans, with the culprit's group ransacking and destroying the village of the killed boy's clan. Three men were killed and several others seriously injured.

Exacting revenge was also a prominent factor in a fight that erupted in 2002 following a local council election. A young man from the area described that

It all started when two men from one clan chopped the ballot box containing the sitting councillor's marked votes. The councillor, supported by his own clan, responded by beating the two. The relatives of the two men who had been injured wanted revenge and then gathered and retaliated by starting a big fight with the councillor's clan.

Again we see that an interpersonal conflict between members of two clans quickly spreads to encompass wider social groupings. Having beaten the two men for chopping the ballot box, the councillor's clan were chased to a nearby village. The people living there thus became embroiled in the fighting for harbouring the fleeing councillor and his relatives. During the warfare that followed, this village was almost entirely destroyed. Several men were killed by rifles apparently hired from Poroma and Mendi, while most of the resident population were displaced and thereafter ravaged by sickness and hunger.

A third major fight in recent history happened in 2008 and was catalysed by events several hundred kilometres away in Port Moresby. In response to the suspected infidelity of his wife, a medical officer instructed his kinsmen to bash the man with whom he thought the adultery occurred, resulting in the man's death. Accepting partial responsibility for the death, the medical officer brought the body back to the Aiya area together with K12,000 (\$5,700 AUD) compensation. Unhappy with this amount, the aggrieved family demanded more. While negotiations were still taking place, the feuding parties learned that a brother of the medical officer had been murdered and badly mutilated in Port Moresby by the clan of the man initially killed, in order to take revenge for the first killing. The ongoing negotiations in the Aiya area immediately broke down and a full-scale war broke out between the two clans and their allies. The conflict, which lasted eight months, was fought using M16s, SLRs, and grenades either bought or hired from Kagua and Mendi. At its conclusion a path of death and devastation had been left behind. Three schools, two aid posts, and five villages had been burnt and looted, while 16 men were killed in combat.

All of these cases reveal continuity as well as disjuncture with the fights of the pre-independence period. Firstly, we can note revenge as a key motivating factor for

conflict. None of the cases involved one clan and their allies taking the land or women of their enemies, even if displacement and sexual violence occurred during the conflict itself. Rather, in all of the three instances discussed above, fighting took place mainly for moral reasons: to right perceived wrongs, to settle the ledger of injustice, to have the last word in an ongoing conversation of warfare. Another important continuity between past conflicts and those presented above is the expansive and encompassing tendency of their socio-spatial parameters. Like fights of the past, those we described above typically started as interpersonal altercations, which, through their collective implications, quickly expanded to encompass the social groups to which the parties belonged and were affiliated.

Yet while the morality and structure of intra-ethnic warfare among the Aiya shows strong continuity with the past, we also note that the proximate causes of fighting have in certain instances been transformed. In particular, contemporary political competition such as local level government (LLG) and district elections are a crucial motivating factor of violence in Aiya society, as they are elsewhere in the highlands region (for example, Yala 2002; Haley 2002, 2004; Haley and Muggah 2006). As the deadly events that spun out of the ballot box illustrate, the electoral period, particularly the voting process, is fraught with danger. The gradual escalation of payback attacks into ambushes and battles is consistent with the pre-independence period, but here the catalyst and objective became the benefits associated with being a ward councillor, LLG president, or Member of Parliament.

The broader argument is that changes to the social and cultural landscape, particularly since independence, whether in the form of electoral politics, the introduction of technologically sophisticated weaponry, the replacement of avoidance with humiliation in regards to the treatment of dead enemies, or the purported exchange of guns for drugs, has radically changed Aiya warfare, notwithstanding the important continuities in its moral and processual structures. From this point, however, we wish to draw attention to two remarkable attributes of contemporary Aiya warfare with much more recent origin: the presence of both mobile phones and women within the context of fighting. Taken with the other transformations already discussed, we can see that ethnic conflict among the Aiya is continually remade as local people absorb into their lives new and pervasive exogenous elements from wider regional and global spheres of influence.

WOMEN AND MOBILE PHONES WITHIN CONTEMPORARY AIYA WARFARE

Since the liberalisation of the telecommunications industry in 2007, and the entry into the market shortly thereafter by the Jamaican based network provider Digicel, access to mobile signal coverage throughout PNG has expanded rapidly. Whereas prior to 2007 only 4 percent of the population was covered by mobile phone networks, today around 75% of the country is covered by mobile phone networks (Cave 2012) and approximately 41% of the population now owns a mobile phone (Suwamaru 2014). The sociocultural transformations produced by this rapid diffusion of communicative

technology have been considerable, affecting personhood (Lipset 2013), interpersonal relationships (Andersen 2013; Jorgensen 2014), interactions with the ancestral and cosmological domains (Telban and Vavrova 2014), as well as health and education, market activity, and reducing business costs (Suwamaru 2014). That the majority of this literature should discuss the impact of the mobile phone upon interpersonal sociality is unsurprising given that this is the primary functionality of the devices themselves. Our data, however, reveals a remarkably different context of action into which the mobile phone has been incorporated, namely, warfare. Wiessner's insightful piece into contemporary Engan warfare also briefly mentions the role of the mobile phone in contemporary conflict situations. There she states that since the proliferation of mobile network services from 2007 onwards, 'tribal leaders have developed rapid response units to inform each other of conflicts, rush to the trouble spots, and nip trouble in the bud' (Wiessner 2010: 15). But while these statements disclose how the mobile phone may be used as a preventative tool by elder clan leaders, here we draw attention to how the mobile phone is used by armed groups of young men to facilitate and organise fighting.

Communication on the battlefield has always been of paramount importance within Aiya warfare, as it is in armed conflict generally. Coordinating attack, identifying enemies, and knowing when to retreat, all depends crucially upon clear, effective, and often surreptitious communication. Previously this was accomplished by means of embodied symbols: language, calls, whistles, gesticulation, as well as natural phenomena such as smoke signals. These techniques effectively communicated information among combatants, though their weakness was that they could often be seen or heard, and thus partially interpreted, by enemies. In contemporary warfare these methods are rarely practised, having been obviated by the mobile phone. The ability to communicate exact information, completely silently and beyond enemy detection through text messages, is an enormous advantage over customary techniques. The mobile phone has thus become the tool of choice for battlefield communication.

According to our interlocutors, mobile phones may be used in a wide variety of ways during fighting. Prior to engaging the enemy, combatants typically organise themselves into several groups of around five or six individuals. One of these members is assigned the role of communicator and is equipped with a mobile phone loaded with credit and a solar panel to charge the battery whenever necessary. Through these communications officers, groups communicate among themselves to arrange and confirm their attack positions over large distances. These small groups often disperse throughout a wide area in preparing to attack and may be separated from each other by several kilometres. The importance of the mobile phone in enabling such configuration and movement is thus crucial. Once the fighting is underway, text messages and calls continue to be made back and forth between these allied groups, relaying information concerning ammunition supplies, injuries, enemy positions, required support, and so forth.

However, like the previous means of battlefield communication mentioned above, the transmission of information using mobile phones was not incorruptible. Our

informants reported that on one occasion a text message sent by a group to their relatives, informing them that their ammunition had been exhausted, found its way into the hands (phones) of the enemy, who then proceeded to burn down the village of the enemy, knowing they had no way of defending their community.

As with the purchase of firearms, supplying combatants with mobile phone credit is financed largely by local elites, thus affirming their central role in the creation and maintenance of armed conflict. This educated and wealthy political elite must therefore be understood as key players in the perpetuation of armed conflict in the Aiya area as well as throughout the highlands of PNG (see also Haley and Muggah 2006; Wiessner 2006, 2010).

Another development in Aiya warfare is the direct participation of women in combat, an arena they were formerly prohibited from entering. Like the use of mobile phones, this particular transformation of Aiya warfare speaks to broader cultural shifts currently taking place within contemporary PNG society. The dynamic intersection between gender, Christianity, personhood, and modernity, has received considerable academic attention of late by scholars working within Melanesia, especially PNG (Jowitt and Newton Cain 2003; Wardlow 2006; Jolly *et al.* 2012; Stewart 2014). Collectively these studies reveal an intrinsic ambivalence to the experience of women in contemporary PNG society, rural and urban alike. On the one hand, the twin processes of colonisation and missionisation have opened up new opportunities for women's participation in public religious, economic, and political space. Yet contrasting with these developments is a disturbing vulnerability to sexual and domestic violence, continuing exclusion from formal education and employment, and some of the worst maternal health in the world. One can accurately say that life for women in PNG is a paradox marked simultaneously by increasing opportunity and abjection.

The fraught nature of women's position in contemporary PNG society is consistent with the ambivalent character of their involvement in Aiya warfare. Firstly, women's attractiveness is used as a diversionary tactic on the battleground. We were told that it was common for women to enter a fighting area naked, so as to distract the enemy, leaving them open to attack. In another instance, a girl was seen walking very slowly through long grass either within or near an active battleground. As two enemy fighters approached the girl they realised that lying between the girl's legs was an armed man. However, in this case the deception had unexpected consequences. Rather than attacking the two enemies, the armed man fled, leaving the girl alone, who was then caught and killed.

Another role that women play in contemporary warfare is that of healers. Females, particularly young girls, are believed to possess restorative powers. If an individual is wounded in battle, young girls are told to walk over the injured body, in the belief that their intrinsic lifeforce will restore the warrior to health. We were also told that the urine of young women may be applied to wounds for the same purpose. Women, particularly those married into enemy clans, could also be used for reconnaissance. Often a woman in this position was asked by her paternal relatives to obtain information from her husband's clan and then secretly relay it to them. Pospisil also underlined

the importance of women shouting intelligence to their husbands during warfare among the Kapauku of West New Guinea (Pospisil 1964). For Aiya women, this was a risky undertaking, however, since if the woman's betrayal was detected by the family of her husband she could expect to be at least chased out, if not seriously beaten. To avoid such scenarios, women are often made to choose in advance which side they will give their allegiance to.

The participation of women in warfare is not restricted to information gathering, healing, and distraction however. Aiya women may also perform violent acts within warfare. As violent actors, women are often armed with bush knives. Above we explained how earlier codes of fear and avoidance regarding the treatment of slain enemies had been subverted by a new code of mutilation. The act of chopping and slicing the bodies is performed principally by women. Whether they do this voluntarily or under male duress is uncertain.² Having shot and killed or mortally wounded an enemy, the men will throw the body to the women who then proceed to sever the limbs, raise them on sticks, and sing songs of mockery and celebration.

Of particularly high importance is that many women were fully involved in fighting alongside men on the battlefield with firearms. Though we were unable to interview any women who had participated in this manner, one male informant explained that:

Those ladies who were tall with small breasts and found to be physically fit, and could run very quickly and jump or skilfully avoid shots fired by the enemy, were provided guns to fight beside the men. They painted their faces and went to the battle lines to face the enemies.

The man's remarks demonstrate, firstly, that women participate alongside men in active battle and, secondly, that a masculine physique (tall, with small breasts, physically strong) is an important qualification for this involvement.

Furthermore, those women who fight in warfare are accorded the same prestige and respect as that distributed among and to male warriors. Another male informant stated simply that:

We call the ladies our brothers because they do almost everything men do.

It thus appears that women's full participation in warfare, as well as the status such participation may afford them, hinges crucially upon their fulfilling certain masculine attributes. They must physically resemble men, but we also see that they are symbolically coded as 'brothers' despite being female.

It should be noted that while unusual, women's participation in fighting is not without precedent. In his critique of Mead's earlier work on the Mountain Arapesh, Fortune (1939: 37) revealed not only are these people warlike but that:

A few cases are told of women who intervened actively in warfare, and there is record of one such who was buried by the men's secret society, with all a warrior's honors. (Ordinarily the sacred flutes, secret in the initiated men's society, are kept severely away from women and used to honor men's burials only.) Of such a woman it is said, in praise, *kw ar aramanum ulukum*, "She had in her a man's heart."

Van de Kroef's work on headhunting among the Marind-anim of southern coastal New Guinea (now Papua Province, Indonesia), also underlines the important role played by women in supporting raids upon neighbouring communities, though he states that they do not participate directly in beheading victims (Van der Kroef 1952: 225). More recently, Wiessner mentions in passing that of the thirteen hired mercenaries operating in the Enga area interviewed in the course of her research, one was in fact a woman, though we do not learn any further about the character of her involvement or how she was viewed by either her male counterparts or the community more broadly (Wiessner 2010: 11).

Like the Arapesh, Aiya women's participation in warfare was direct and brought with it prestige, in some instances equal to that of men. Yet while the participation of women in Arapesh conflicts is described by Fortune as rare and even anomalous, Aiya women's participation in contemporary warfare has been normalised and is becoming increasingly frequent. How can we make sense of this particular development in Aiya warfare? To be sure, women's participation in warfare, like PNG women's involvement in other formerly male domains, is marked by a clear ambivalence. As a result of the increasing local exposure to regional and global spheres of influence since the colonial era, former cultural codes of warfare (such as those pertaining to the exclusion of women and the respectful treatment of dead enemies) as well as the technologies and catalysts of fighting were radically transformed. The existing morals were eroded at the same time as new, Christian and generally western ideas of gender equality were widely espoused by missionaries and colonial officials. It would seem that this ideological and cultural maelstrom whereby existing customs are eroded, a new morality is enforced, and the drive for warfare remains unregulated by a negligent state, has created a new form of warfare where practically 'anything goes', including, most importantly, the active participation of women within warfare.

But opening this realm to women has simultaneously opened women to new risks. They may now share with men the right to act violently and the pride attached to victory in battle, but their inclusion in warfare is on perilous and subordinate terms. Utilising their sexuality to distract enemies, employing them as expendable decoys, and charging them with the butchering of slain enemies, reveals that women's participation in warfare is fraught with serious risks to physical and psychological wellbeing. We also note that a particularly worrying aspect of women's violence is the increasing involvement of young girls. Moreover, the young girl discussed previously, who was used to hide a gunman between her legs, was killed when the ruse in which she had been involved was discovered by two enemy warriors.

CONCLUSION

Following Roscoe's (2014) signal that contemporary highlands warfare has undergone considerable change from its pre-colonial manifestations, our article has revealed that the continuing influence of modernity upon Aiya warfare is deep, complex, and problematic. The incorporation of exogenous cultural elements has

significantly reshaped this practice, particularly over the last 30 years. Our paper has confirmed certain salient changes documented elsewhere in the highlands, such as the escalating use of firearms and other modern projectile weapons; an increase in the mutilation of dead enemies; the crucial role played by electoral politics in catalysing warfare; as well as the important position occupied by local elites in financing and manipulating conflict. We have also contributed two important new insights to this literature, namely, that Aiya warfare utilises mobile phone technology and also that it directly implicates women. It was noted that while the use of mobile phones in warfare is simply a more effective means of achieving the existing aims of communication and organisation by stealth, the involvement of women was more morally ambiguous.

While our discussion has emphasised the changes that have come about during the era of global late modernity, it has also revealed that the underlying morality of warfare has remained largely unchanged. The Aiya have absorbed a range of exogenous socio-political catalysts, especially electoral politics and the substantial material wealth it promises for a successful candidate, but the driving motivations to fight are more or less the same as before these outside influences arrived. Now, as then, the Aiya engage in fighting to exact revenge on other people they feel have seriously wronged them. For the Aiya, as for many New Guinea highland societies, violence is the preferred means of dispute resolution. Should a serious crisis or contravention arise, the Aiya often choose to settle it violently before, and instead of, compensation payments or verbal discussion. It is for this reason that in the highlands region one often hears colloquial Tok Pisin expressions uttered by young men such as *'toktok maski, yumi pait pastaim'* (forget talking, let's fight first); *'pait pastaim, bihain stretim'* (fight first, talk later); *'nogud bus naip bilong mi sem, yumi wokim action pastaim'* (I don't want my bush knife to be shy/ashamed, let's fight first). All of these and other similar expressions exemplify the cultural predilection for violence. More broadly, therefore, contemporary Aiya warfare represents a complex mixture of exogenous and indigenous beliefs and practices, whereby new technologies and ideologies have been incorporated into an existing cultural arena without transforming the basic morality underpinning its performance.

The issue, though, is not whether the persistence, expansion, and innovation of violence will continue, but rather what will be its human cost be. The continual absorption of cultural elements from the urbanised, industrial world is rapidly transforming warfare in important ways, but our data and those of other anthropologists who have worked on the same issues, has revealed that this process is making an already deadly custom into a grotesque theatre of violence. Highlands warfare, and violence more generally, has been partially disembedded from its historical cultural moorings, and has not been contained but rather enabled and exacerbated by the emerging socio-cultural context (cf. Forsyth and Eves 2015). The question now falls to the PNG government of how to manage this emergence of new forms of violence as they seek to gradually position the country alongside other regional powers as a developed, democratic, and orderly society.

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NOTES

- 1 The form of violence undertaken by *raskol*, a Tok Pisin term for criminal. This is typically opportunistic violence and robberies undertaken by gangs of young armed men. Also, throughout the text, both vernacular and Tok Pisin terms are italicised, the difference being specified in each case.
- 2 It may be that men's allocation of this task to women constitutes evidence that they still taboo mutilation and utilise women as a means around their own direct transgression of the taboo (Roscoe, personal communication).

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