

The Grand Valley Dani

**A Vanishing Culture
in the Highlands of New Guinea**

The people known as the Grand Valley Dani live primarily in the Grand Valley of the Balim River in the western highlands of New Guinea. It is not known how long they have occupied the Grand Valley (they are seemingly uninterested in the details of their own history), but Karl Heider believes they have probably been there for centuries (Heider, 2004). They are an egalitarian society with little technology (they used stone and bamboo tools into the late 20th century), limited art, and they rely mostly on horticulture for subsistence (Heider, 1996).

Recently, the Dani's long-standing way of life has faded over just a few decades. These changes began with the arrival of western missionaries following World War II, but the most serious threat to their culture has come from the actions of their own Indonesian government (Heider, 2004). My objective is to describe various aspects of their culture as it existed near the beginning of their contact with westerners, to contrast these aspects with modern American culture, and finally to try and determine how each of these cultural aspects has been affected by outside contact.

DIVISION OF LABOR

The work that needs to be done within a society is usually divided up in some fashion to different classes of individuals. Work is often assigned along gender lines, or to different age groups (Heider, 2004). The Dani have well defined roles for the division of labor among their members. Specific work tasks are assigned along gender lines (a common division across cultures), although the types of work assigned to each group sometimes differs from other cultures.

The Dani exhibit mechanical solidarity, meaning they are bound together by their sameness: Their values, beliefs, and rituals (Heider, 2004). They are not dependent on one another for their survival, since they show almost no specialization. Everyone can, and is expected to do, just about any work that is performed by their labor group (Heider, 2004).

Dani men build the wood and grass houses (Heider, 2004), and prepare the fields for planting (Heider, 2001, 190). When they are not doing this heavy work or engaging in battles, they also weave the skirts worn by women, and weave bark and shell bands (Naylor, 1974, p. 117). It should also be noted that while it may not strictly be classified as labor, only men perform the various ceremonies and rituals (Heider, 1996).

Dani women are responsible for planting sweet potatoes, tending them, and harvesting them (Heider, 2004). They also are assigned the duties of raising children, tending and feeding pigs, and making salt (Schwimmer, 1997), as well as weaving carrying nets (Naylor, 1974, p. 117). These tasks are made somewhat more difficult by ritual finger amputation which is performed only on girls as a part of the mourning observances (Schwimmer, 1997).

Children are progressively assigned real work tasks as soon as they are able to perform them. Examples include: Collecting firewood (boys), caring for children (girls), and feeding pigs (girls). These tasks are assigned along the same gender lines as they would be for adults (Naylor, 1974, pp. 117-118).

It is difficult to find any similarities between Dani culture and the culture here in the United States. Individuals within American society possess highly specialized skills, and it would be difficult to find a single person who could subsist on their own, away from the society. We are interdependent for our survival, meaning we exhibit "organic solidarity" (Heider, 2004, p. 177). And while there are still some roles within our society that are gender-specific, we are consciously endeavoring to blur the lines and disconnect skills and roles from gender.

FOOD PRODUCTION STRATEGIES

Food production strategies are the ways a society goes about acquiring the food necessary to feed its people. The Dani mostly eat sweet potatoes, with the tuber making up 90 percent of their diet. They also raise pigs, and grow a variety of other fruits and vegetables in house gardens (Heider, 2004).

The Dani have a fine-tuned approach to horticulture, growing their sweet potatoes in a large network of fields on the valley floor which are bounded by ditches. Fields are planted year-round, and each family always has some fields in the process of being harvested (Heider, 2004).

The ditches around the fields serve several functions. They allow water to drain away from the fields during the wet season, and are used to deliver spring water to the fields when the climate gets drier (Heider, 2004). Another important contribution is that they function as mulching basins. topsoil washed off the fields combines with weeds that have been pulled and trimmings from the vines to provide enriched mud for the next field being planted (Heider, 1996). The ditches also keep unwanted pigs out of the fields (Heider, 2004).

The Dani have developed an efficient, renewable cycle for their sweet potato gardens. When a field has lain fallow for a time, men clear the field of larger growth and burn the remainder (improving the fertility of the soil). After turning the soil with large, fire-hardened digging sticks, they scoop the rich mud from the bottoms of the ditches and spread it over the field. Women collect cuttings from more mature vines and plant them in the new field, then return to the field occasionally to remove weeds and tend the growing potato vines. The women begin harvesting after about six months, taking tubers only as needed for daily food preparation. A field will be continually harvested in this fashion for up to three months. Once good-sized sweet potatoes can no longer be found, pigs are allowed to root in the field for the remaining potatoes, churning the soil and further enriching it with their droppings. The field is again allowed to go fallow (Heider, 1996).

Every household keeps pigs. They are only killed and eaten at special ceremonies, but both pigs and ceremonies are so plentiful that each Dani gets a little pork each week (Heider, 1996). These domesticated animals are not only well cared for-- the Dani also practice certain medical operations on the pigs which are intended to help them grow. Most male pigs are castrated (this is also done to remove them from the breeding pool). Females undergo a mysterious procedure in which two incisions are made on the belly, and in each a thin white cord is found, severed, and replaced before the incision is closed. Karl Heider never determined what the procedure accomplished, but the Dani assured him it help the female to grow larger (Heider, 1970).

United States farmers make up a very small percentage of the overall population, in stark contrast to the Dani, where every member of the society can and does participate in food production. Unlike the Dani, who farm using only manual labor and very low-tech tools and methods, American farmers engage in intensive agriculture using heavy equipment, fertilizer, and pesticides. Like the Dani, farmers in the United States also raise domesticated animals for their meat, but this meat makes up a much larger percentage of the American diet, close to 30 percent (Mardigan, 2003).

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Social organization refers to the ways in which a social group is subdivided into smaller groups and how the membership in those groups are determined (Heider, 2004). As simple and unstructured as the daily life of the Dani is, their social organization is considerably more structured and well-defined, both in terms of family connections and political alignments.

The roughly 50,000 Dani in the Grand Valley are members of one of two exogamous, patrilineal moieties: Wida, or Waija. This basically means that each person is a member of their father's moiety, and must marry outside of their moiety. Each moiety is made up of several sibs, which are patrilineal descent groups, each identified with a particular bird species. Extended families within a sib tend to group together geographically. while moiety membership tends to be evenly distributed throughout the valley (Heider, 1996).

A complication exists where children are concerned. Every Dani is born in to the Wida moiety, regardless of their father's affiliation. Later, at a pig feast before they are married, boys whose fathers are Waija go through an initiation which makes them Waija (Girls whose fathers are Waija automatically become Waija without a ceremony) (Heider, 1996).

The political landscape is very different from the familial one. Extended family compounds are members of large confederations containing as many as 1000 individuals, named for the sib of the most important men. These confederations represent the largest stable, peaceful social units, and have associated territory.

Confederations are usually joined together into alliances, which, as the largest social unit, exist mostly to wage wars against other alliances (Heider, 1996). Alliances seem to always be in a state of war (Heider, 2004). While confederations are quite stable in both membership and territory, alliances can and do change (Heider, 1970).

Leadership within sibs and political units is informal. Decisions are made by consensus, with certain "big men" leading through influence based on respect and standing, rather than leading by inherited or assigned power (Heider, 1996).

It should be noted that all the Dani of the Grand Valley share a common culture and a common language, regardless of their lineage or alliance (Heider, 1970).

The United States is a single society with a highly organized political structure. We have at least three levels of government: National, state, and local (with the last being represented by either county or municipal government, or both). We have a complex system of codified laws, specifying transgressions from our desired norms, and the prescribed consequences. We have police to enforce the laws, and a justice system to punish transgressors.

The Dani, on the other hand, have no written laws. Children learn Dani norms as they learn everything-- by watching and overhearing (Heider, 1996). Violators of the expected norms are confronted, meetings are held, and a solution is usually reached which includes the payment of some sort of restitution in the form of pigs or shells, and possibly withdrawal by the transgressing party to another location (Heider, 1970).

MARRIAGE

Marriage is an important social structure which provides a new economic unit for the support of offspring, regulates sexuality, and often binds kin groups together. It is often used as a vehicle for exchange and the distribution of wealth (Heider, 2004).

Young Dani men hoping to marry face the prospect of choosing a wife from only half of the eligible female population. This results from the exogamous nature of their moiety-- they are required to marry outside their own moiety (Heider, 1996). Bride wealth is exchanged at Dani weddings, which are only held every five years during the ebe akho (Pig feast) alliance-wide ceremony. All women who have passed through puberty since the last ceremony, unless they are crippled or sick, will be married at this time (Heider, 1970).

An interesting practice involves the ages at which Dani can marry. Women are expected to marry shortly after puberty, while most men wait many years after maturity to get married (Schwimmer, 1997). This reduction in the "eligible bachelor" population facilitates another interesting practice: Polygyny. Dani men are allowed to take multiple wives, yet women cannot marry more than one man at a time (Heider, 1970). Within this arrangement, each wife usually has her own house where she sleeps, serves food

to her husband and family and cares for her children, while the husband sleeps in the men's house of the compound (Sargent, 1974).

Yet another unusual practice is the observance of abstinence from sexual activity between a husband and wife for an extended period following the birth of a child, usually lasting between four and six years (Heider, 1970). Heider observed that this period of abstinence did not seem to be associated with sexual anxiety, although in the case of men with multiple wives, this should be less of an issue. Even though Dani women marry quite early, they seldom have more than two children. Some Dani explained that "women simply do not want more than one or two children because of the work and bother involved." (Heider, 1970, p.73). Of course, with five years or so between births, the number of children a woman could have during child-bearing years is certainly reduced.

Marriages in the United States vary greatly in their rituals and ornamentation, but all hold to one common theme (and law): Marriages are monogamous. Most subcultures within the United States are more or less endogamous (e.g. Jews are more likely to marry Jews), but few are as rigid about it as the Dani are about their exogamy with regard to their moiety. Unlike the Dani, few American weddings serve to create closer bonds between descent groups. Most are love marriages formed to benefit the newlyweds.

OUTSIDE CONTACT

Many cultures once existed for many years with little or no contact with outside cultures. Outside contact came in multiple waves to the Dani, and each brought different influences. Some had a greater impact on their way of life than others.

Even before the arrival of westerners, the Dani were not entirely isolated. their principal crop was sweet potatoes (native to South America), and they possessed decorations made from shells which could not have originated from the Balim river valley (Heider, 2004).

After World War II, Missionaries arrived in the Grand Valley, hoping to bring Christianity to the Dani. They, along with Dutch officials, were alarmed by the Dani's constant warfare, manner of dress, removal of girls' fingers, and appeasement of ghosts, and were determined to put a stop to these practices (Heider, 2004).

The Dutch government was successful in ending Dani warfare, and the chopping off of little girls' fingers, by the mid-1960s (Heider, 1996).

Even greater changes occurred after Indonesian Independence and the incorporation of the Grand Valley into Indonesia in 1969. Outsiders from elsewhere in Indonesia and from outside the country flocked to the Grand Valley. The Dani have not benefited from the increased tourism, as even the most menial jobs were snapped up by the outsiders

(Heider, 2004). The halting of finger mutilation, combined with the availability of iron tools, resulted in an unforeseen consequence: Women could now participate in the heavier tasks of horticulture, and the division of labor shifted (Heider, 1996).

Indonesian schools have produced a generation of Indonesian-speaking Dani, many of whom leave the valley for better opportunities. Older Dani who have not learned Indonesian, are denied many opportunities even within the town of Wamena (Heider, 2004).

The pacification of the Dani had effects, too. With no war to wage, the role of men was diminished within the society. Alliances, formed mainly to wage battles, also became less important (Heider, 1996).

By the mid-1990s, Dani women had given up wearing their traditional married woman's skirt in favor of cloth skirts. Most men now wear pants, but penis gourds are still seen. While sweet potatoes remain a major crop, cattle, rice, fish, and coffee are all now cultivated in the Grand Valley (Heider, 1996).

One surprise is how little outside contact, particularly Christianity, has affected marriage among the Dani. According to Heider (1996), it seems that Polygyny is just as prevalent now as it was in the 1960s.

CONCLUSIONS

It seems likely that the Dani way of life remained relatively unchanged for hundreds of years prior to contact with Westerners, but the pressures placed on them by new authorities (first the Dutch, and then the Indonesian government) to conform to outside values has increasingly undermined their practices, and ultimately the bonds that hold them together (Heider, 2004). As they are assimilated into the greater Indonesian culture with its more western values, the Dani are moving away from mechanical solidarity and becoming dependent upon the Indonesian government. They are also losing many of the aspects of the culture first studied by the Harvard Peabody Expedition in 1961.

When I began this project, I was saddened by the inevitable assimilation of the Dani. However, as time went on, I began to question the Dani's dedication to their culture. I formed a new opinion when I read the following commentary by Heider on the extinguished rituals of war, the married women's skirt, and the chopping off of little girls' fingers at funerals: "These three traits seemed essential and thoroughly rooted in Dani culture, yet in the end all were discarded abruptly and definitively, even willingly." (Heider, 1996, p.172).

I believe the Dani do not mourn the loss of their old culture. There is a constant theme which runs through nearly all accounts of the Dani: Their approach to life is casual, quiet, and laid back. They are relatively uninterested in power, intellectual pursuits, and

art. It is quite possible that their culture remained unchanged for so long because they knew no other way of life. Their culture is now changing, as all cultures do (Heider, 2004). They don't really seem to be too excited or alarmed by it, so perhaps neither should we be.

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