

‘Start from the Garden’: Distribution, Livelihood Diversification and Narratives of Agrarian Decline in Papua, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship that identifies ‘distribution’ as the key to inclusive governance has promoted suspicion of development agendas that foreground ‘production’. This article analyses controversy around food and cash transfers and decentralized development funding in Indonesia’s contested Papua territory. Some observers and recipients allege that these instruments, which have proliferated under ‘Special Autonomy’ reforms intended to defuse the West Papuan independence movement, have caused a decline of indigenous subsistence agriculture. Papua’s various distribution (and distribution-like) mechanisms were instituted under pressure from international agencies, in response to mass unrest, and in the wake of crises that altered Papua’s role in Indonesian development. In Papua’s Central Highlands, food and cash distribution instruments have addressed farming shortfalls and played a role in the diversification of livelihoods — a shift that animates anxious speculation about the viability of indigenous social reproduction. Such commentary gestures to a contested development horizon featuring extractive and agrarian agendas with divergent implications for the reproduction of distinctive rural livelihoods. Laments about the harm to rural productivity caused by distribution evoke but gloss over threats of devaluation of labour, highlighting tension between popular concerns about social reproduction and scholarly anxieties about the celebration of production.

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INTRODUCTION

On 1 February 2018, reporters asked Yohana Yembise, Indonesia's Minister of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection — and one of the few prominent national politicians originally from Papua province — to comment on news of famine thousands of miles east of Jakarta in Papua's Asmat regency. The Minister offered an explanation that, she said, applied to Papua's indigenous people in general:

They used to plant sweet potatoes and sago, but after Raskin [Beras Miskin — Rice for the Poor programme] arrived they came to depend on rice. So, when the rice arrives late, how can you find food? Now most people in Papua depend on rice, so finally they don't cultivate anymore, they no longer plant sago or sweet potatoes. That is one of the reasons. (Erdianto, 2018)

Yembise expressed what has become a commonplace element of public discourse about the effects of distribution programmes on indigenous livelihoods in Papua. This discourse tends to situate food aid within a set of interventions to which Papuan livelihoods have been subjected during the past two decades, ranging from food and cash transfers to decentralized block grants for local development projects. Yembise's comments exemplify a view of various types of distribution instruments as forces that invite recipients to abandon subsistence farming, generating new forms of dependence and vulnerability.

Debates about the effects of distribution programmes on recipient livelihoods are not new, but have been revived by scholars who pit categories of *distribution* and *production* against one another as opposed logics of development (Ferguson, 2015; Hanlon et al., 2012; Standing, 2013). The recent 'distributionist' literature has criticized what it alleges are antiquated lines of analysis and policies according to which successful development practice requires the mobilization of productive labour. Such criticism, which opposes agendas based on developing 'productive forces', might suggest that concerns about Papuan recipients' declining productivity reflect an outdated and moralized 'productivism'. At the same time, development scholars and policy makers remain concerned about the loss of agrarian livelihoods and related issues of food insecurity and accelerated urbanization (Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2012). Even governments that abet displacements of peasants — for instance by facilitating various kinds of 'land grabs' — tend to recognize the difficulty of sustaining floating populations detached from the means of production. Such difficulties have been compounded by the reluctance of many international development finance agencies to endorse state roles in industry (Kentikelenis et al., 2016).

Various arrangements to distribute food and cash have proliferated in Papua under, and in parallel to, a set of reforms known as 'Special Autonomy', implemented in 2001 to defuse the long-running conflict between Jakarta and the West Papuan independence movement. Since then,

distribution mechanisms, and the offices that administer these mechanisms, have become sites of competition and objects of criticism. Such contestations have been particularly intense in the La Pago customary territory (*wilayah adat*), also known as the Central Highlands (Pegunungan Tengah).¹ La Pago's distinctive agrarian livelihoods, based on sweet potatoes and pigs, are iconic of the West Papuan independence movement, whose leaders often hail from this region — arguably West Papua's heartland.

This article examines controversies around food and cash distribution arrangements and livelihood diversification in La Pago to intervene in debates about distribution, social reproduction and agrarian labour. It focuses on the Balim area at the centre of La Pago which, with a total population of over 500,000, hosts Papua's most important concentration of indigenous people.² The majority of this population is rural and attached to households that practise subsistence cultivation. Unlike other densely populated areas of Papua, newcomers from other parts of Indonesia form a small minority in Balim, mostly concentrated in the town of Wamena, a hub of commerce, transportation and administration. A bustling town of approximately 40,000, Wamena is the seat of Jayawijaya regency (*kabupaten*), the most populous of La Pago's 10 regencies. Wamena also hosts offices for other regencies, making it a site of administrative and political interactions that mediate the distribution of funds, aid and rations. The town has also hosted protests and witnessed incidents of political violence, notably during the Papuan Spring of 1999 which led to the negotiation of Special Autonomy, and at various times since then, including major riots and state violence in 2019.

Narratives of agrarian decline among subsistence farmers raise the spectre of a crisis of social reproduction. In political discussions in and about Papua, the following questions have become ubiquitous. Are subsistence farming livelihoods in La Pago viable, or at risk of terminal decline? Does Special Autonomy promote or threaten their viability? A range of critics — including mainstream Papuan politicians, pro-independence figures, and observers who are hostile or neutral towards the independence movement — allege a causal relationship whereby direct distribution draws recipients away from farming. Such criticism gestures to questions of political responsibility for livelihood change among the indigenous population, and indirectly evokes key dynamics of social reproduction for subsistence producers: the need to maintain access to productive land and to quantities of goods sufficient to replenish their capacity to work that land (Smith, 2020). In other words, narratives of distribution policies causing agrarian decline conjure up the

1. All translated terms are in Indonesian, unless otherwise noted as Grand Valley Dani (GVD).
2. Categories of indigenous (*orang asli Papua, masyarakat asli*) and newcomer (*pendatang*) are conventional in La Pago. The latter category refers to residents who moved to Papua from other parts of Indonesia during the 20th and 21st centuries (and their descendants); the former to those who trace their ancestry to land tenure within the Central Highlands.

category of labour power, along with uncertainties in its value and its attachment to land (Araghi, 2003; Marx, 1965; Meillassoux, 1972).

Influential work by anthropologist James Ferguson has highlighted the importance of ‘distributive labour’ as part of livelihoods for many global South populations. This observation motivates Ferguson’s claims that distribution and production should be separated in analysis and policy, and that ‘lack of distributive entitlement is the underlying cause of poverty’ in sub-Saharan Africa (Ferguson, 2015: 38). The former claim negates both the tenets of classical political economy and Marx’s corrections to them. The latter, meanwhile, refutes world-historical understandings of the reproduction of global inequalities through the division of territories and populations between high and low value-added production processes (Frank, 1979; Mhone, 1995; Rodney, 1973; Suwandi, 2019; Wallerstein, 1974). In Papua, the presence of export-oriented primary resource extraction and the relative absence of processing or manufacturing installations together express a dimension of these extractive global value relations (Aditjondro, 2007). Some pro-independence critics suggest that the corrosion of indigenous agrarian systems is a tactic whereby the central state and international agencies foster a loyal political class and detach rural populations from the land to facilitate natural resource extraction (Yoman, 2010) — a sort of ‘primitive accumulation’ by stealth (Araghi, 2009; Bond, 2007; Marx, 1965: 506–49).³ The idea that direct distribution can serve agendas of accumulation and domination recalls historical arguments by food regime analysts, notably regarding the Food for Peace programme through which the USA transferred domestic farming surpluses to cultivate dependence and loyalty in many global South countries, displacing peasantries in the process (Araghi, 2003; Friedmann and McMichael, 1989; Zachar, 1977). While my analysis does not support a view of Special Autonomy as a mere accumulation tactic, the widely discussed possibility of an extractive expansion — and its implications for land and labour — inform my interpretation of narratives of agrarian decline.

The argument in the article is composed of two parts. First, it focuses on a convergence of financial pressures on Indonesian industry, environmental pressures on La Pago subsistence farming, and popular unrest in Papua and across Indonesia that, together, set the stage for the state’s politics of distribution. It shows how the elevation of distribution to a central role in development and social protection policy in Papua was a response to a set of crises operating at multiple scales. The second part of the argument examines the contradictory effects of distribution programmes for food security and farm labour in the Balim area, and interprets narratives of agrarian decline and anxieties about dependence on state allocations. I argue that laments about recipients becoming unproductive both signal and

3. An understanding of distribution as a Trojan horse for dispossession inverts Chatterjee’s analysis of social protection policies for peasants in India as instruments to ‘reverse the effects of primitive accumulation’ (Chatterjee, 2008).

yet subtly obscure the possibility of labour devaluation, the question of responsibility for such a process, and the existence of contending development agendas (that is, large-scale resource extraction vs value-added agriculture) with divergent implications for the reproduction of distinctive indigenous institutions. To conclude, I discuss a gap between, on the one hand, scholarly anxieties about the celebration of production and, on the other, recognition among recipient communities of the contradictory effects of distribution.

The data presented and analysed below were collected primarily during a total of 18 months of field research in Jayawijaya regency, conducted between 2012 and 2014. The main research consisted of participant observation and focus group discussions in Wamena and in three sites in the rural hinterland, as well as with people, mainly students, from the Balim area living in the Papuan capital Jayapura. Discussions focused on livelihoods, development policies and initiatives to promote economic empowerment among indigenous residents. I also studied documents produced by government bodies, NGOs and news media, and scholarship on regional livelihoods. My research drew additionally on prior fieldwork experiences in the area, and previous work for an international NGO in Wamena, during which I had documented discussions about livelihood change and studied the local history of conflict and protest.

DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL PROTECTION, BEFORE AND AFTER CRISIS

Since 2000, Papua has been affected by three inter-linked reformulations of development and social protection priorities for Indonesia as a whole: intensification of resource extraction especially in outer regions of the country; decentralization of authority over development funding; and implementation of cash transfers and food distribution to address food insecurity in the wake of crisis. Before examining these elements, it is necessary to situate them in a history of development paradigms in Papua and across Indonesia.

Occupying the western half of New Guinea, the territory and population of Papua entered colonial history through 19th-century Dutch efforts to defend the control of spices in the nearby Moluccas (now Maluku). The Netherlands East Indies established sovereignty over coastal Papua during the early 20th century, mostly staying out of highland areas until its post-World War II expulsion from (the rest of) Indonesia. Having identified the Balim area as Papua's major population centre, the Dutch invested in administration and infrastructure there (Farhadian, 2005; Rutherford, 2012). Papua's 1963 transition to Indonesian sovereignty initiated its integration into a dual structure of rural development, based on intensifying smallholder cultivation in land-scarce areas such as Java, while facilitating

resource extraction and agribusiness in land-abundant outer islands (Fuglie, 2010; Li, 1999). Papua became part of an Indonesia on the cusp of violent transition to Suharto's New Order, which neutralized peasant militancy and institutionalized a resource rent structure that permeated the state apparatus (Gellert, 2010; Sidel, 1998). The US company Freeport McMoRan obtained the concession to mine copper and gold at Tembagapura in Mimika regency, 200 km west of the Balim area. The Freeport mine eventually became the world's most productive gold and copper mine; by 2005, its activities generated a full 1 per cent of national tax revenue and the mining sector accounted for 63 per cent of GDP for Papua province (Ballard and Banks, 2009). The ore from the mine is processed outside Papua, and partly outside Indonesia — a contentious lack of local value-added jobs that has prompted Mimika's regent to call for Freeport to build a local smelter (Fadli, 2017). Other raw commodities such as timber, oil, gas and palm oil have also accounted for significant growth in Papua. Overall, Papua's integration within Indonesia saw its patchwork of subsistence zones traversed by commercial networks and punctuated by enclaves of export-oriented primary production, with international capital playing a major role, and the military deployed to counter separatism and secure (and claim rents from) extractive operations.

The 1997 Asian Economic Crisis, known in Indonesia as *krismon* (a contraction of *krisis moneter* — monetary crisis), further increased the importance of the extractive sector. The devaluation of the Indonesian rupiah caused a collapse of import-dependent industry, leading to mass unemployment in the country's most densely populated regions (Fukuchi, 2000a). The low rupiah increased the international competitiveness of Indonesia's primary commodities, and investments flowed into extractive and agribusiness activities especially in outer regions (Fukuchi, 2000b). These developments — which only indirectly affected La Pago, given its lack of industries or large-scale extractive activities — were involved in a wider restructuring of regional and local governance.

Special Autonomy in Papua is a heightened case of regional autonomy implemented across Indonesia after the crisis, under World Bank supervision, as part of International Monetary Fund (IMF) debt relief conditions. Special Autonomy responded to pro-independence protests and subsequent negotiations between Jakarta and independence leaders. The protests had expressed discontent with various issues, including security forces' protection of resource extraction operations, and the predominance of newcomers in commerce and administration. Special Autonomy included increases in the percentage of extractive rents and taxes retained by host provincial and regency administrations — a widely announced 'return' of resource wealth (Mollet, 2011; Sumule, 2002; Timmer, 2007). Autonomy also decentralized development funding, with block grants transferred from higher to lower administrative levels (province, regency, district, village). Administration of block grants became the work of committees formed at each administrative

level. The disbursement of funds at district and village levels has tended to have a ‘distributive’ character fostered by the use of hard cash — a logical medium given the limited presence of banks in rural areas.⁴ Block grant disbursal has sporadically been embroiled in conflicts which gained intensity with the proliferation of new territorial administrative units under a process known as *pemekaran* (partition, lit. blossoming) which has fostered competition for the authority to award building contracts, staff offices and site new roads (Suryawan, 2011). Construction booms spurred opportunities for contractors, suppliers and merchants — business categories dominated by newcomers from other parts of Indonesia (Ajo, 2016; Upton, 2009). State investments in Papua have thus played a role in somewhat offsetting stagnation in more densely populated parts of the country.

The third reformulation that conditioned Papua’s politics of distribution was the introduction of cash and food transfer programmes throughout Indonesia in the wake of the 1997 economic crisis. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank recommended these instruments to address the explosive growth of unemployment and consumer prices that constituted the crisis, especially for non-farming populations that relied most on wage work and commercial food purchases (Sumarto and Bazzi, 2011). Wielding the pressure of IMF debt negotiations, experts from the two agencies advised Jakarta to shift from consumer and producer subsidies (on fuel and farming inputs, in particular) to cash and food allowances targeted to those most in need. The central government implemented first unconditional and then conditional cash transfers. The distribution of rice became associated with a reform of the national staple crop agency, Bulog (Badan Urusan Logistik — Logistics Agency), that had managed prices, distributed state employee rations and coordinated supply (Yonekura, 2005). The centrepiece of Bulog’s food distribution has been the Raskin programme that distributes rice to populations below a poverty threshold.⁵ Raskin has become inordinately important among rural populations in Papua, which regularly ranks at the top among provinces with the highest proportion of residents below the poverty line (Saidah, 2014). The next section focuses on the Balim area to consider distribution programmes there, and the controversies they have incited, within a trajectory of livelihood diversification.

4. The distribution-like quality of village-level development funds had been a feature of Inpres (*Instruksi Presiden* — Presidential Instruction) credits instituted under Suharto to sponsor rural construction and infrastructure (Robison, 1981).

5. In 2012, the OECD claimed Raskin was a less efficient approach to food security than the provision of conditional cash transfers (OECD, 2012: 16–17). In 2015, Raskin was renamed Rastra (Rice Aid for Prosperity); in 2019 it was announced that Rastra would be replaced by a card-based individualized system of staple food allocations, though it is not clear if or when this change will reach Papua.

POLITICS OF LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION

As in highland areas across New Guinea, farming in La Pago was based on a complementary system of sweet potatoes and pigs from the 17th century onwards (Haberle, 1998; Watson, 1977). In and around the Balim valley, the sweet potato–pig complex has supported a dense population that practised egalitarian land tenure, developed agroforestry techniques to manage limited fertile land and, until the colonial period, conducted virtually no staple food trade with other regions (Boissière and Purwanto, 2007; Peters, 2001).⁶ Sweet potato cultivation has usually involved a gender division of labour, extra-household coordination and land frontier insurance. Women customarily had the responsibility of planting and preserving knowledge of the functions and properties of different varieties. Men have tended to be responsible for sporadic heavy work such as clearing plots and building fences to prevent pigs (periodically deployed for tilling) from destroying crops. Occasional work contributions between homestead production units took place as necessary, usually with in-kind compensation. Sloped land frontiers were typically planted to provide an insurance hedge against crop failure in case of flooding (Purwanto, 2008).

The start of the brief colonial period initiated a process of livelihood diversification spanning roughly from 1950 to 1985. Most of the Balim population adopted use values such as manufactured clothing and household articles, durable foods, and items related to modern schooling and Christian worship. This process began with the provision of food, building materials and work to missionaries and government staff; this was followed by access to rice and other rations for a thin stratum of indigenous mission and state employees; and the growth of market trade in timber and new vegetable cash crops by indigenous producers and imported goods by newcomer traders. The construction of a road network through the valley floor demanded periodic indigenous labour and partly reorganized farmland by drawing some homesteads away from sloped insurance plots. In 1977, the regency administration, then controlled by the military, implemented Operasi Koteka, distributing goods such as manufactured clothing to replace customary attire of gourds and grass skirts (Sugandi, 2014). The state also oversaw rice cultivation projects, with limited success. Compared to subsidies targeting smallholder rice farmers across Indonesia during the 1970s, the relative lack of investment in sweet potato farming and pig husbandry meant that farm output grew more slowly than the population.⁷ This was

6. National agencies tended to consider sweet potato as a secondary or starvation crop (*palaw-ija*); in the late 1980s it started to emerge from neglect in agronomic research and policy (Boomgaard, 2003; Soenarjo, 1989).

7. From 1973, booming oil revenues and Green Revolution hybrid seeds enabled Suharto to fund smallholder rice farming inputs, which contributed to increasing the national share of rice consumption compared to other staples (Djurfeldt and Jirstrom, 2005; Manning,

also due to pressures on the valley's limited farmland, increased by conversion of land for the expansion of Wamena's built area, and crop damage due to periods of drought or excessive rain (Peters, 2001). By 1985, data for the entire Central Highlands placed sweet potato output at 64 per cent of estimated consumption needs, with the remainder satisfied by a combination of corn and other new secondary crops as well as access to rice rations for sporadic infrastructure work (Karafir, 1989).

A second stage of diversification took place between approximately 1986 and 2000. Larger youth cohorts entered higher education as a gateway to state employment, migrated to work in mines and plantations, took on seasonal or semi-formal work in tourism and hospitality, or joined the lowest informal ranks of trade (such as selling newspapers) or transportation (collecting fares on minivans that connect Wamena to rural districts). Out-migrant Balim communities grew in Jayapura and elsewhere, and student communities settled in cities outside Papua such as Manado and Yogyakarta. Students received bundles of food and money from parents in the highlands and took on informal or at times illicit work in cities. Growing needs for cash and participation in labour markets contributed to further monetization of the Balim economy, and cash or rice and other goods increasingly replaced customary in-kind contributions at lifecycle ritual gatherings. Even as Wamena's continued growth added to land pressures in its expanding periphery, this period saw further diversification of farming, as some districts began growing coffee as a cash crop (Achmady and Schneider, 1995). Meanwhile, the Jayawijaya regency administration banned the use of chemical fertilizers to protect waterways used for sanitation. This decision seized on the exclusion of the sweet potato system from national farm-input supports, laying the groundwork for later proposals to optimize sweet potato production for international niche health markets (ILO, 2013; Mahalaya, 2011).

The 1997 El Niño event caused drought in highland areas across New Guinea, setting the stage for a precursor to the state's distribution of goods on the basis of need (Boissière, 2002). International media drew attention to the drought on both sides of the border dividing Indonesia from Papua New Guinea, generating pressure on Jakarta and Canberra to intervene.⁸ Indonesia's national government provided food aid through the Jayawijaya administration, which enlisted the help of domestic and international NGO staff in and around Wamena. International donors in Australia, the EU, USA and Canada made contributions, as did domestic corporations, amassing a quantity of aid goods that exceeded the actual drought relief needs at the time (*ibid.*). This aid stretched the duration of relief beyond the time that

1987). These developments marked something of an exception amid the US's withdrawal of food aid that had underpinned the post-war international food order (Araghi, 2003: 51; Friedmann and McMichael, 1989).

8. Australia has participated in some state functions in Papua New Guinea, especially at times of crisis, since its formal colonial role ended in 1973.

recipients in some districts needed to recover production levels necessary for subsistence. Prolonged relief aid prefigured the targeted social protection policies that Western development agencies would soon advise (or demand) that Jakarta implement as part of debt relief conditions. This situation in turn foreshadowed later anxieties about perverse incentives, as some interactions between officials and recipients suggested that aid was conditional on visible lack, and could be jeopardized by the mere appearance of healthy gardens — inciting practices of performing neediness or concealing assets (*ibid.*).

The drought relief episode preceded the uprisings in and around Wamena that, as part of the Papuan Spring, led to the bundle of reforms under Special Autonomy. During subsequent years, food and cash transfers became objects of dispute and speculation. While Raskin in the Balim area became embroiled in corruption and theft scandals, I heard reports of attempts by groups in some districts to intercept fund committees as they transported block grant payments. Waiting outside offices or homes of officials in Wamena became a regular activity for household heads seeking to secure allocations, and ad hoc entourages accompanied regency officials on junkets to Jayapura to affirm claims on block grants. Acquaintances in Wamena described trips to home villages to mediate conflicts over allocation disbursement. Meanwhile, recruitment for offices and committees motivated growing cohorts of high school graduates to leave the highlands for higher education (Munro, 2018).

Through successive periods of diversification, indigenous agriculture enabled the reproduction of labour power and purchasing capacity and made primary products available for commerce and construction. These factors have contributed to the development of markets and of extractive and agribusiness operations outside the region, and to the elaboration of a regional state apparatus whose expansion now relies on distribution channels.⁹

Diversification, Dependence and an Ascendant Staple

By 2014, the work of ensuring access to various state allocations had become an important element in indigenous livelihoods in Wamena's rural hinterland. Sweet potato and rice now coexisted as primary staples. One man in his late 20s, who lived in a district adjacent to Wamena, explained: 'We don't invest in an economy for ourselves. We hardly farm anymore. If there is no rice in the kitchen, I send my wife to the market to buy 25,000 Rp (US\$ 2.50) worth of rice. We can't go long without something from the district, or the garden'.¹⁰

9. A subordinate peasantry that subsidizes growth in other sectors is expected in scholarship on articulated modes of production (e.g., Rey, 1971).

10. Interview, married man, Jayawijaya, Papua, 18 May 2014.

Since a very small portion of sweet potato cultivation is for market sale, statistics on change in output over time should indicate the extent of reduction of subsistence farming. Reports by government and non-governmental agencies often contain irregularities, some reports showing growth of planted area and product, some a slight decrease and still others (probably the least reliable among the group) severe collapse. For Papua as a whole, a 2015 report jointly produced by the World Food Programme (WFP) and provincial agencies showed an increase in total sweet potato production from 290,000 tons to 412,000 tons during the period 2006 to 2014, with a plateau from 2009 to 2012 followed by a jump from 2012 to 2013 (Dewan Ketahanan Pangan Papua et al., 2015). Previously, a 2013 ILO report indicated a production peak in 2009 followed by small yearly decreases (ILO, 2013). The ILO study further focused on Jayawijaya regency and showed that output there decreased by 6 per cent from 2010 to 2012 (146,000 to 137,000 tons) (ibid.). Annual reports by Jayawijaya regency suggest an increasingly dramatic situation: a 69 per cent reduction in production from 2011 to 2019, with an implausible reduction of planted area by over 50 per cent from 2015 to 2016. Such strong fluctuations are likely exaggerated due to inconsistent data-gathering methods, or disruptions caused by episodes of violent conflict that have damaged government offices and disrupted work routines. Another possible factor is the incentive to underestimate food production to maximize allocations — or to overestimate it in the run-up to elections, to align with inflated population numbers. The provincial administration, meanwhile, has partnerships with WFP and ILO that promote the reporting of accurate data, and — at least for ILO — alignment on prioritizing support to smallholder farming (Indrawan et al., 2017; Sumule, 2002). Whether or not it is correct to identify a broad collapse of indigenous agriculture, the 2015 joint provincial–WFP report listed six of Jayawijaya’s 40 districts as ‘Priority 1’ for food security, according to indicators including low income and prevalence of infant stunting due to malnourishment (Dewan Ketahanan Pangan Papua et al., 2015). While agriculture appears to support a fairly stable quantity of indigenous labour, it is reasonable to assume that subsistence production has, at the very least, not kept up with population growth. Narratives of decline identify concretely occurring livelihood diversification and food insecurity, the actual severity of which is uncertain — uncertainty that is, to some extent, characteristic of the regional politics of distribution.

As sweet potato production has stagnated or decreased, government-distributed rice has become a major component of the subsistence basket. In 2019, media reports disclosed that the total monthly allocation of Rastra (ex-Raskin) rice for Jayawijaya regency was 4,656 tons per year (Yewun, 2019), while the regency administration reported a total harvest of 73,891 tons of sweet potato. Factoring in the difference in energy density, this corresponds to a ratio of calorific intake from sweet potato compared to

government aid rice of less than 4 to 1.¹¹ The actual importance of rice is surely considerably greater when considering commercial sales and employee rations, and the significant portion of sweet potato used as pig feed. It is clear that the role of distributed rice in rural indigenous diets has reached a comparable order of magnitude to that of subsistence products.

The increased importance of rice has inflected household dynamics and, in some cases, expressions of personal worth. These dimensions became clear during my 2013 stay with a household in a district near Wamena. I had known this family for a few years and when visiting I usually brought store-bought snacks and supplies such as cooking oil, detergent, coffee, sugar and tobacco. At a shop by the minivan terminal on the outskirts of Wamena, I ran into an acquaintance who was familiar with the household and who advised me to bring rice. As I arrived at the destination with a 25 kg sack of imported rice from Vietnam (carried by a younger relative), I was surprised to find the mother, Lina, weeping. She eventually explained that all this time she had been too shy (*malu*) to ask me to bring rice, even though the household needed it.¹² Lina told me that as she lacked brothers or other close male relatives, she had nobody to call on to supplement the rice ration her husband received as a lower-echelon state employee, and which barely lasted half the month.¹³ When I asked about her gardens, Lina told me there were often no sweet potatoes to be harvested, and they were too expensive to buy at the market.¹⁴ Floods had recently damaged crops, temporarily limiting income from produce sales. Meanwhile, Lina said, her husband and other men always seemed to be away in Wamena and unavailable to work in the gardens. I came to interpret Lina's tears as a reaction to my emulating part of a kin role — contributing to food stocks to cover farming shortfalls — to which she had inadequate access. For an outsider to momentarily take on part of this role called attention to a vulnerable situation of dependence.

Lina's complaint about loss of men's horticultural labour resonated with comments I had heard suggesting that men, especially, were spending more and more time in town, where they would socialize, consume areca palm nut, drink and gamble. During another visit, when the topic came up, Lina's husband defended himself by asking how he was supposed to ensure they

11. Energy comparison is based on figures of 3.58 kcal/g for dry white rice and 0.86 kcal/g for uncooked sweet potato (Bjarnadottir, 2019; see also 'Calories in Uncooked Rice': www.nutritionix.com/food/uncooked-rice, accessed 17 September 2020). Indigenous diets may also include secondary crops like corn, taro and pumpkin, fruit, vegetables, pandanus nuts, fish and pork, as well as commercial instant noodles, sugar, cooking oil, eggs and chicken.

12. Visit, Jayawijaya, Papua, 19 June 2013.

13. Rice imported from countries such as Thailand and Vietnam is known as 'clean rice' (*beras bersih*) and sold at higher prices than domestic rice (*beras Bulog*).

14. In 2013, a quantity of sweet potatoes suitable for a meal of approximately four people cost Rp. 50,000 (roughly US\$ 5). One could purchase 4 kg of rice at the same price, and this would last for several meals.

would have enough rice and money for expenses if he didn't lobby office holders who, even if they represented the district, one had to chase down in town. As the uncertain demands of politics drew on pre-existing gendered divisions of agrarian labour, they could also disrupt its organization.

Evocative Rice

Pro-independence critics of the politics of distribution have reflected from time to time on the problem of livelihood diversification through the prism of contrast between sweet potato and rice. I often heard members of customary organizations, whose mandate is to revitalize *adat* (custom), contrast a present of an unhealthy population displaced from farming and dependent on rice and other imported processed foods, to a past of an independent (*merdeka*) and physically strong indigenous population nourished on sweet potatoes. Pro-independence organizations have deployed images of customary vitality to rally support for the movement. In such communications, the critique of reliance on non-local foods is aimed both externally and internally: the auto-critical aspect laments an apparent willingness to abandon the staple around which a distinctive social and political organization, and its attachment to land, were historically organized (Assolokobal, 2007; Hisage, 2006). One version of the lament identifies 'collapsed fences' as icons of decline, with the disrepair of an infrastructure that keeps pigs out of gardens implying neglect of domestic agrarian duties (Mahalaya, 2011; Sugandi, 2014). Lina's household was among those reputed to 'still hold on to custom' (*masih pegang adat*) by maintaining customary religious practices and living in a compound of thatch-roofed structures (GVD: *silimo*). Lina's reluctance to ask me to contribute rice to the household suggested hesitation to disclose difficulties sustaining the agrarian pillar of *adat*.

During another visit, Lina recounted how, as a child, she had enjoyed eating rice that her father received from the Dutch Catholic mission. She recalled marvelling at qualities that distinguished rice from sweet potatoes — its fluffiness, uniformity, and ease of cooking contrasting with the unpredictable nature of sweet potatoes (which require longer preparation and are more likely to have bad spots or to cook unevenly).¹⁵ Some student activists who had studied outside Papua described being torn between liking rice and being concerned about an apparent decline of sweet potato. One organizer allied to the customary network confided with a nervous laugh that while valuing *hipere* (GVD: sweet potato) politically, as a 'basis of Balim people's existence' (*dasar kehidupan orang Balim*), it was more convenient and enjoyable to cook and eat *nasi* (cooked rice) on a daily basis.

15. Reports of lesser-quality or insect-infested rice distributed by Bulog in Papua somewhat disrupt this picture of contrast (Kusumaryati, 2020).

In 2007, the evocative character of rice had had a different tenor, as rice was at the centre of allegations of food poisoning that spread via text messages describing people falling ill or dying after consuming store-bought goods. Accusations against traders ranged from unscrupulous sale of out-of-date products to deliberate poisoning campaigns to kill Papuans, and protests shut down all the area's markets for a week (Nerenberg, 2019). Claims of toxic rice had reframed its commercial and political hegemony and its pleasing and convenient qualities as signs of danger. In contrast to sweet potato's perishability (it can only be effectively stored in the earth, attached to a live plant) and official neglect, rice's durability and fungibility lend it a currency-like aspect that has facilitated its commercial and bureaucratic spread in many countries (Boomgaard, 2003). In Papua, Special Autonomy-era distribution programmes have been the latest mode of rice's institutionalization. These factors enable rice provision to evoke a narrative of agrarian decline beyond what can be shown in statistics, or what one can observe of a stagnant yet enduring subsistence farming sector.

Detecting Agendas

Some independence movement voices conceptualize dependence on distributed rice and cash as means through which Special Autonomy detaches indigenous Papuans from the land so as to facilitate resource extraction (Yoman, 2010). In two Balim districts, I heard acquaintances speculatively refer to reported geological surveys and discuss whether the financing of new road construction projects was linked to mining and timber interests.¹⁶ Such speculation resonates with the description by one movement partisan of innovation in central government tactics for integrating Papua, with the 'age of global human rights' (*zaman HAM dunia*) requiring substitution of violence for more seductive techniques to facilitate the appropriation of natural wealth.¹⁷ While such partisan speculation identifies concrete forces involved in Papuan politics, I hesitate to see Jakarta's various policies as dominated by any unitary intent to detach indigenous producers from farming. At least some national and regional office holders show an interest in stemming the loss of subsistence livelihoods.¹⁸ In La Pago, the decades since the inauguration of Special Autonomy have seen a proliferation of research and extension interventions aiming to increase sweet potato yields and overcome drought, flooding and pig disease. As for the various distribution

16. Such speculation has been noted elsewhere in Papua (Kirksey and van Bilsen, 2002).

17. Interview, married man, Jayawijaya, Papua, 8 October 2013.

18. In Jayapura, government concerns about urbanization of La Pago populations can be read in anti-independence leaflets that appeared in 2014, calling on newcomer and coastal Papuan communities to reject separatist agitations by recently arrived highlanders, and in news reports suggesting highlander settlements in suburban hills cause erosion and flooding in the city.

programmes, while they tie rural households more tightly to time-consuming demands of an urban-centred structure of politics, they also patch over farming shortfalls and counteract market pressures on household subsistence. This contradictory character is relevant to the question of what livelihood diversification and narratives of decline show in relation to theoretical debates about distribution and agrarian livelihoods.

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND THE VALUE OF AGRARIAN LABOUR

There is a long history of debates about distribution policies and what they entail for productive economies and the reproduction of working populations. One thread of debate surrounds the conservative view of welfare provision as a ‘moral hazard’ that entrenches ‘entitlement’, seen as antithetical to productivity (Mead, 2008). Margaret Thatcher famously espoused this view to justify dismantling Britain’s social safety net (Thatcher and Keay, 1987), while progressive voices argued that social protections are necessary to account for the inevitability of some degree of unemployment (Offe, 1982). A genealogy of these debates can be traced to the Speenhamland allowances of 1795 to 1834, by which the British state supplemented the wages of the lowest-earning landless rural workers during periods of high food prices. While criticizing Malthus’s claim that the state’s guarantee of the ‘right to live’ created a moral hazard that obstructed the proper functioning of the labour market, Marx and later Polanyi argued that the allowances effectively subsidized employers and merchants and removed incentives to work, causing a crisis of agricultural productivity and a devaluation of labour (Marx, 1965: 421–25; Polanyi, 2001: 81–107). Concerns about moral hazards and declining productivity combined in a middle-class moral panic, and opponents’ claims that the allowances encouraged a ‘culture of indolence’ find an echo in comments about recipients of aid in La Pago becoming too ‘lazy’ to grow food (Block and Somers, 2003). However, unlike early 19th century Britain, the recipient population in La Pago today remains largely in control of agricultural land, even as parts of the population have diversified into non-farming livelihoods, such that indigenous critics are themselves vocally concerned about declining productivity.

Recent ‘distributionist’ polemics have tended to negate the legitimacy of productivity as a factor in development, restating long-standing critiques of ‘productivist’ foils in economic theory and policy. One such foil is the Marxist tendency to celebrate industrial wage labour as the optimal basis for working class agency (Lenin, 1939); another consists of agricultural modernization agendas (whether based on concentrated ownership or collectivization) that agrarian ‘populists’ have suspected of homogenizing diverse cultural and ecological milieus (Scott, 1998). Indigenous inhabitants of La Pago occupy an awkward position in relation to these overlapping histories of debate, in that attachment to a distinctive subsistence farming

system has exposed them to scrutiny both from the state's agricultural modernizers and from distributionist perspectives that might dismiss anxieties about a stagnant subsistence sector.

To note the uncomfortable place of subsistence producers' anxieties in relation to this history of debate helps to clarify a conflation at the heart of the scholarly elevation of distribution as the key to development. This conflation, of Malthusian panic about 'cultures of indolence' with legitimate concerns about productivity and social reproduction, emerges as 'progressive' voices confront 'conservative' criticism of social safety nets, and dismiss concern about productivity as an unjustified moral fixation. The over-corrective dismissal of productivity — a concrete, multifaceted category with relevance for the reproduction of populations — promotes a misleading conceptual binary and policy choice between production and distribution.¹⁹ In the anthropology of development, the result is a 'new orthodoxy' that resonates with the hegemonic 'post-productionism' in rural geography (Evans et al., 2002).

In the Balim context, where distribution is embodied in both cash and rice, a binary opposition between distribution and production can acquire a sense of truth through experiences of agricultural labour fragmentation and political marginalization within the rice-based national food system. Recipient populations' grounded critique of distribution-based policies thus highlights the uncertainty that haunts the social reproduction of indigenous smallholders. Unlike abstract conceptual balancing of distribution and production, I interpret such rhetorical contrast as a device that draws refracted attention to a potential devaluation of indigenous labour and disruption of its attachment to land.

There are superficial similarities and important differences between the implementation of distribution-based policies in Papua and South Africa, the context that is central to Ferguson's arguments. Each case features a reorganization of governance through which a subordinate majority gained political representation. In South Africa, populations that are the main targets of cash transfer programmes had largely been removed from subsistence peasant livelihoods as part of colonial mobilization of labour for estate agriculture, mining and industry (Legassick, 1974; Martin, 2013). Decreased profitability, slow growth and political unrest due to landless unemployment were among the factors that precipitated the fall of apartheid and, eventually, the embrace of a bundle of distributive social protection policies (Grundy, 1991; Martin, 2013). By contrast, in La Pago, there was no sustained colonial history of dispossession for the establishment of landed estates, and the scale of mobilization of indigenous labour outside farming has impacted

19. According to Meillassoux (1972), behavioural models based on individual choice underpinned a liberal tendency in economic anthropology that focused on distribution practices (which imply agency) while downplaying the organization of production (which implies structures of constraint).

but not eliminated the subsistence-farming aspect of the indigenous economy. The fact of the enduring subsistence economy, and its importance in the independence movement's representations, fosters criticism that directs attention to distribution programmes' possible negative effects on agrarian livelihoods.

Underlying local critical commentary is a friction between different visions of development. The question of whether a major mining boom will occur if and when requisite transport and energy infrastructures are put in place exists in tension with alternative development visions based on valorizing indigenous agriculture — notably proposals by a range of provincial, national and international agencies to improve sweet potato farming and (in some versions) install local processing facilities to connect Balim farmers to international health-food manufacturer markets (Ginting et al., 2014; ILO, 2013; Mahalaya, 2011; Saraswati et al., 2013).²⁰ Debate over the impact of state distribution on productivity is understandable in light of this contest of development agendas, with their divergent implications for labour, control of the value it generates, and the reproduction of indigenous households and distinctive institutions.

Contradictory aspects of the effects of distribution on subsistence agriculture are especially marked when tied to a competitive political apparatus and an ascendant staple food: it might help recipients remain attached to land, and yet lower the relative value of their subsistence products. This possible devaluation hinges partly on differences in the quantities of time, energy and investment required to secure allocations as compared to farming; discrepancies between relatively predictable distribution arrangements compared to occasional extreme weather; and the durability and convenience of rice — not to mention cash — as compared to perishable, uneven, less predictable sweet potatoes.²¹ To impose an abstract separation of 'distribution' from 'production' is to cloud the fact that, for subsistence producers, distributed goods may be goods that recipients no longer produce themselves. What might seem like misplaced moral concerns about 'losing the will to work' can more relevantly be interpreted as a critique of recipients' seeming complicity in a potential devaluation of their labour and loss of productive autonomy. Such a critique anticipates emerging development agendas and associated revaluations of land and labour.

CONCLUSION

The global pandemic and crisis of 2020 provided new impetus to concerns about reliance on non-local goods in Papua. At a May 2020 seminar on

20. While such efforts have stalled, recent statements by Bulog leadership suggest renewed momentum towards including regional minority crops in food security policies (Bulog, 2020).

21. This is a question of relative diminishment of both exchange and use values.

food security in Jayapura, prominent Papuan church leader and anthropologist Benny Giay stated, ‘The Papuan nation should start from the garden, because we originate in the garden; but recently an incorrect approach to the state has made indigenous Papuans become seemingly disempowered, due to Raskin’ (Yeimo, 2020). For Giay, new uncertainties in commodity provisioning reinforced a sense that the possibility of indigenous thriving depended on prioritizing subsistence production and rejecting Special Autonomy’s politics of distribution. Meanwhile, in many Western countries, social-democratic forces seized on mass unemployment to demand basic income and other (re)distributive policies (Prabhakar, 2020), while some on the political right (especially in the US) warned that income supports hamper productivity by creating incentives for workers to remain idle (Rothman, 2020). Taken together, these debates illustrate how distribution programmes’ impacts on labour and productivity become contentious when policy makers elevate distribution to a central role in development and social protection — conditions the latest crisis has fostered. In this sense, Papuan concerns about agrarian decline under Special Autonomy foreshadowed the recent renewal of debates about the effects of distribution on labour productivity.

Distributionist scholarship has tended to reject development policies that prioritize the growth of employment in value-added production, dismissing what to many is an undeniable imperative: organizing production to ensure that growing populations have durable access to the goods they need and the capacity to maintain that access in the face of various kinds of disruption.²² Such a dismissal is disturbing given its alignment with hostility on the part of US-allied development finance agencies to state roles in production. Abstract theoretical balancing of distribution against production risks projecting scholars’ anxieties about production-centred discourses onto concrete debates among contending development agendas.²³ Scholars of development should analyse processes through which distribution takes on policy prominence, interpret debates about specific policies and programmes in relation to unfolding histories of labour and production, and analyse development conflicts that such debates refer to.

22. In a related vein, one critic of Universal Basic Income proposals in India argues that it constitutes a capitulation to models of economic growth without growth of employment (Roy, 2017).

23. Marx, analysing political economists’ use of categories of distribution, production, exchange and consumption, wrote that they constitute ‘members within a totality, distinctions within a unity’, within which ‘production predominates ... over the other moments’ (Marx, 1973: 32). Marx critiqued theoretical assertions of the autonomy of distribution for favouring the ‘dialectical balancing of concepts’ rather than the ‘grasping of real relations’ (ibid.: 31). At its most basic level, Marx’s discussion is a reminder that without production there is nothing to distribute.

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