

NEW GUINEA COMMUNICATIONS VOL. 13

KAL MULLER

Yali, Mek, Ok
*Three West New Guinea
Highlands Cultures*

Galda Verlag

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YALI

INTRODUCTION

Lying to the east of the Baliem Valley, the rugged and steeply escarped Yali territory presents a stark contrast to the flat, fertile land of the Dani. In fact, all the landscape of West New Guinea to the east of the Baliem Valley is considerably more broken up, with fewer flatter, fertile areas as compared to the west. The central mountain range reaches 4,000 meters and sends spurs only some 40 kilometers long to reach the flat lowlands of the Asmat area to the south.

There are three major ethnic groups in these eastern West New Guinea highlands: the Yali, the Mek and the Ok. The Dutch contacted the Ok in the late 1950s when their last large-scale scientific expedition filled in the last large blank spot on their map of Dutch New Guinea. The Mek and the Yali were the last major groups in the highlands to experience continuous contact with the outside world. (The Ok living in PNG had hosted regular Australian patrols before the Dutch contacted their linguistic brothers in West New Guinea.)

The word Yali covers three geographically distinct language groupings, separate but related. These groups live in the north and south of the central Jayawijaya mountain chain (hence in two separate watersheds), west of the Baliem River. These areas are the Pass Valley (or Abenaho) dialect in the northernmost Yali territory, the Anggruk dialect in the middle, and in the south, the Ninia dialect. When the missionary John Wilson wrote his (revised) text in 1999, his population figures gave some 5,000 souls for the Pass Valley area, 15,000 for the Anggruk region, and about 9,500 for the Ninia in the southern watershed.

According to the pioneer and long-term missionary M. Bromley, some of the southern Yali group was called the (North) Ngalik, one of the three

Ninia Village is located on the south-facing side of the central mountain range. Pioneer Protestant missionaries opened this station and built the airstrip with only reluctant Yali men's help.



sub-families of the Greater Dani language family. The speakers of the South Baliem language used the term Ngalik, which meant those living ‘outside the rim’ of the valley. According to the Reverend John Wilson, the word Yali means the ‘people of the east’ (of the east-west trade route) with Hupla as the ‘people of the west’ at the opposite end.

M. Boissière, an agriculture researcher, also divided the Yali area in 1999 into three dialects: Pass Valley in the north, Anggruk in the center, and Ninia in the south. (A dialect usually means that some 80 percent of the words are the similar.) The Yali language, then with over 30,000 speakers is the 5th most used one in West New Guinea, after Lani, Dani, Ekari/Me, and Biak. To the south of the mountains, Boissière tells us that the history of the settling had a double origin: the Hupla from Seinma in the Baliem Valley and Yali from the Anggruk area.

The Evangelical missions also divided the Yali area into three according to the dialect areas. In the Pass Valley lands, the dominant church was The Netherlands Reformed Congregation. In the Yalimo/Anggruk area, it was the Gereja Kristen Injil with missionaries from Germany and Holland. The Regions Beyond Missionary Union evangelized the valleys to the south of the central mountains.

The languages to the east of the Yali are Kosarek, Nipsan, and Kimyal (Korpun). To the south, it’s Momuna (Sumo and Dekai), a lowland people. To the east of the Yali, we find the Kimyal, a Mek language, then also of the Mek group: the Una (Langda, Bomela, and Suntamon) Nalca (Endoman, Kono), Eipomek and Ketenbangan (Bime and perhaps elsewhere). To the west, it’s the Lani and Dani languages.

Wilson tells us of the Yali’s cultural distinctiveness inherited from both east and west. But the blend and other features not found elsewhere make Yali culture a distinctive one. Their appearance was very distinguishing as well, with the men wearing many rattan hoops around their lower torsos, recalling dynamo windings, then with the penis sheath sticking up and out from under it all.

This form of dress is now largely a legacy of the past, as many aspects of their traditional culture. After 1969, there was an almost complete change in Yali culture as a result of missionary work and increasing contacts with other Christian groups from the highlands. In 1969 sacred objects were burned in many villages, along with abandoning traditional ritual activities, such as warfare, cannibalism, and supernatural healings. Some aspects however did not change: marriage, social organization, gardening

techniques, pig husbandry, and the building of houses. Missionaries did not object to these activities. Efforts took considerably longer than among the Lani, but missionary efforts were eventually rewarded with mass conversion to Christianity. As with the Lani, this was based on the desire to adopt a new way of life, with access to its material goods such as clothing, medicines, soap, seeds, and steel tools.

We are fortunate in that an anthropologist, Klaus F. Koch worked among the Yali from 1964 to 1966 in an area unaffected by the missions. He was able to document the traditional culture before it weakened and partly disappeared, as did other highlands cultures under the influence of the modern world. He worked at Pasikni Village in the Yelemo (Jalemo) Valley north of the mountain range where, by the time he left, mission influence was restricted to some steel axes, knives, and an increase in shells that were readily incorporated into the traditional economic system. The area had not yet been brought under government control, with warfare and selective cannibalism still endemic. Koch recorded copious materials about Yali warfare. He also saw and documented Yali initiation rituals before they disappeared.

(Note: Koch spells the group's name as Jale, but we use the common current spelling of Yali. He also spelled the village where he lived as Pasikni, while Reverend Zollner spelled the same village as Pasikini.)

We are equally fortunate to have available in English (thanks to a translation) Siegfried Zollner's magisterial study of the Yali. He spent many years with this group, and wrote (in German) an extremely thorough study. He covers many of Koch's topics with more detailed information. Koch's focus was on conflicts and violence, and my text on these (and some other) subjects is based on his interpretations. For some subjects, I combine the writings of several authors. My texts on the supernatural and mythology are based mainly on myths. Koch's and Zollner's publications are complemented by John Wilson, a sensible missionary from Scotland with a keen interest in anthropology. And we are also fortunate to have extensive information on ethnobiology and ethnobotany, the subjects of two dissertations by Manuel Boissière and W. Milliken.

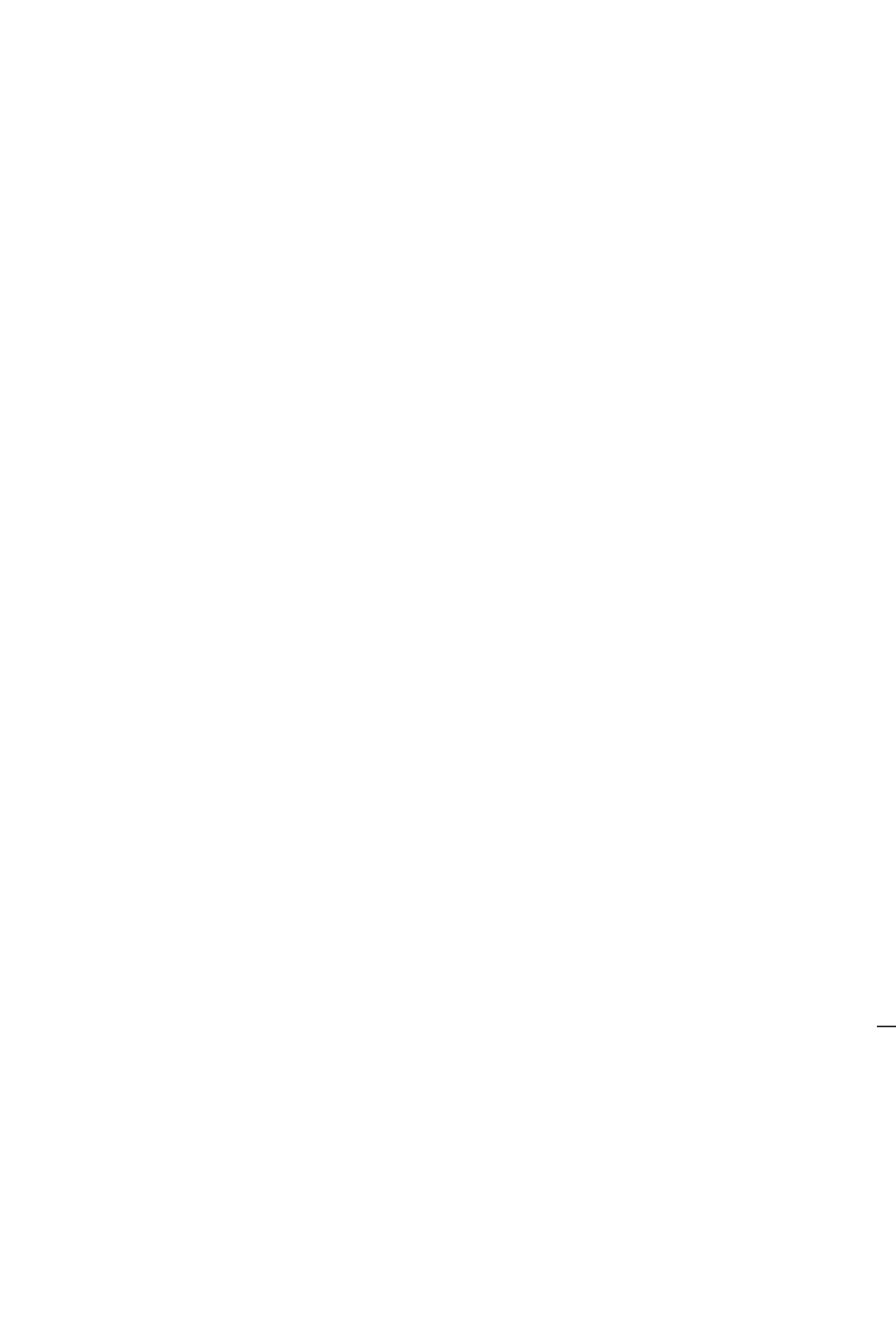
Boissière worked in the southern part of the Holuwun area, south of the central mountain peaks, for two periods between 1996 and 1998. His complete dissertation is only available in French, but I've translated a fair amount of it and posted it on Papuaweb. This is an extremely important work in the context of the evolution of Yali society. While Boissière did not speak the Yali language well, he worked with an interpreter and was able

to record an amazing amount of information, much of it not mentioned by John Wilson who resided there for some 20 years. Of course, Wilson was not a trained anthropologist, and his main concern was with adapting the Yali to Christianization. Boissière used an integrated approach to his work, melding three indispensable and complementary disciplines: plant ecology, ethnobotany, and anthropology. His information about Christianity differs considerably from that of the missionaries who published considerably earlier. Boissière's experience with the Yali was far from the cannibals described by Robert Mitton or the warlike people as described by Koch. His work is very valuable as his primary focus is on traditional agriculture. The principal works on agricultural practices in New Guinea up to his dissertation had mostly come from the Papua New Guinea side of the international border.

Most of my text is based on all the above-mentioned scholars and I have copied blocks of text without attribution or using quotation marks, as this is not an academic work. I do mention the relevant author periodically when using information from him.

Wilson and Zollner spent much longer in the Yali area than Koch. They emphasize the supernatural aspects of Yali culture while complementing and enlarging various aspects of Koch's text. Where there are discrepancies between Koch and the missionaries, we will defer to the missionaries. Koch spoke some Yali language, but it is certain that the missionaries spoke it considerably better. Plus, their long residence allowed them a perspective unavailable to Koch. But of course, that does not make Koch necessarily wrong if he disagrees with the missionaries.

While several of these authors point out some differences between the Yali living to the north and south of the mountain range, we will treat them as one unit. Due to the mission at Anggruk, the influence of the outside world was first felt to the north of the mountains' central watershed, where much of the culture was lost. To the south, traditions were preserved considerably longer.





Yali communities built their huts on high mountain ridges for safety against attacks. Sheer mountainsides resembling cliffs deterred easy movement around the Yali homeland. (Photo: K. Reuter)

POPULATIONS AND GEOGRAPHY

1

The Yali numbered about 10,000 and live between 1,000 and 2,000 meters altitude according to Koch. He continued by writing that they belong to the Dani language family but represent a distinct culture. Wilson elaborates on these facts by going into greater detail. He wrote that Yali was one of the three subfamilies of the Greater Dani Language Family, called North Ngalik. It was divided into three areas by dialect. First, we have the Pass Valley (or Abehano) dialect, located in the northern extremity of the Yali area. Next comes the Anggruk dialect, in an area called known as Yalimo. The Ninia dialect was found south of the watershed of the central mountain.

Geographically, the Yali group is divided into two major areas by the central mountain range. The majority live in the northern watershed of the mountains, in the Yahuli and Ubahak River systems. The Yali groups that reside to the south of the mountain crests spread over an area drained by the Kwik, Heluk, Seng, and Solo Rivers. Holuwun, the most important settlement in the south, lies in the Heluk Valley at an elevation of only 1,000 meters. It dominates the confluence of the Heluk with the Baliem Rivers 500 meters lower. This area's distance, some 50 km from Wamena, can be reached in 25 minutes by small aircraft or three days of hard walking.

This southern portion is extremely rugged. It starts from 4,000-meter mountain peaks and in only some 40 kilometers reaches the lowlands that form the southern border of the Yali territory. Steep forested slopes and ridges accentuated by numerous limestone cliffs and outcroppings that in places constrict each of the four rivers into impassable gorges dominate the landscape. This geography restricted internal travel, but not as much as inter-group hostilities.

Yali lands cover about one-fourth of the Star Mountains area, the eastern extension of the central mountains in WNG. The range continues into the PNG highlands, with the international border splitting the Ok people. According to Wilson, the eastern boundary of the Yali was a high mountain spur separating the Solo from the Indol Valleys. The Indol Valley was traditionally considered a part of the Yali area, but it now falls into the territory of the Kimyal, a Mek group. The western boundary of the Yali was located on the west side of the Kwik Valley, where considerable intermarriage and trade occurred with an offshoot of the Lower Grand Valley Dani. To the north, this boundary was at Pass Valley. The ethnic

group's territory is known as Yalimu (also spelled Yelemo and Jalemo), meaning 'the place of the Yali'.

Note that spellings of Yali words change according to the region and the author. We include some of the alternate spellings and words for the same item.

EARLY CONTACTS WITH
THE OUTSIDE WORLD

2