



Discovering The Dani

So recently was the area charted, that many maps of the Central Highlands of Irian Jaya still bear the legend "Relief data incomplete". **Dan Bool** trekked through this isolated region of eastern Indonesia and met the Dani people

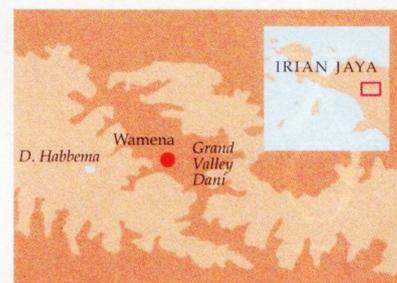
The passage of time for the Dani people is marked by the passing of the seasons and the planting of the crops. But, if they had a concept of a western calendar in their culture, June 23, 1938, would surely stand apart as a momentous anniversary in their long history.

On that cold and blustery day in the central highlands of Irian Jaya, thousands of years of isolation came to an end when American explorer Richard Archbold descended from the clouds into this vast swathe of culti-

vated land. Landing his seaplane on the waters of Lake Habbema, Archbold led the first forays into the Dani lands.

But it was not until some 15 years later that American missionaries, with a "mandate from heaven", arrived to open up the entire valley area. Though early success was hard to come by, nowadays the majority of the Baliem peoples have been converted to some form of Christianity.

With no written records, scant archaeological evidence and no external contact, in many ways our known



history of the peoples of the Baliem highlands starts in 1938.

(A 1921 expedition to the summit of Mount Trikora, at the edge of the Grand Valley of the Baliem River, had encountered Dani people—but the expedition still managed to miss the valley itself.)

Even today, as the daily flights from Jayapura drop in over the mountain wall that encircles the valley, the same ordered gardens and farms are still visible that led one American World War II pilot to compare their appearance with that of the checkerboard farmlands of Idaho.

Author Robert Mitton calls it "the only place in the world where man has improved on nature."

Not normally given to such over-

statement, he also calls the valley “as close to Paradise as one can get”.

When Irian Jaya joined the Indonesian Republic in 1963, a combination of parties tried to drag the Dani into the 20th century. They sought, unsuccessfully, to introduce pants and discourage the wearing of penis gourds, or *horim*. Present-day programmes are sensitive to the traditional culture and change is slowly taking place, with health and education improving all the time.

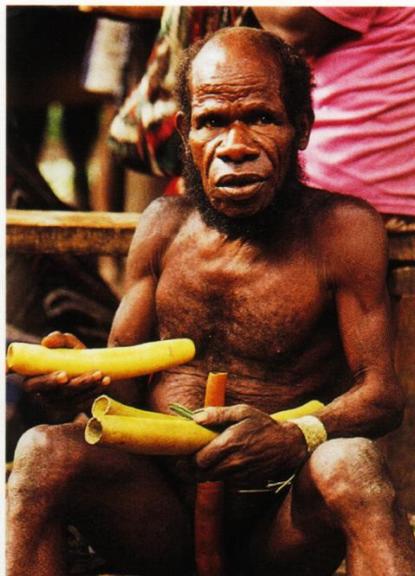
Happily ensconced in the fertile lands of the Baliem, the Dani remain, even to this day, in many ways rooted in their traditional lifestyle. In its most basic sense, Dani culture centres on three things: the sweet potato, or *hipere*, that forms the dietary staple; pigs; and ritual warfare. (The latter, understandably discouraged by the government, is less frequent these days.) So central are these that the only counting systems developed among the Dani are for keeping track of livestock and produce. Consequently few Dani have any real idea of how old they are.

The various peoples of the Dani, a word which itself is a derogative name applied to the inhabitants of the Baliem area by groups outside, may roughly be divided into three main groups along the lines of their languages (Western, Southern and Northern Dani), all of which in turn may be divided into clans allied into large and fluid confederations.

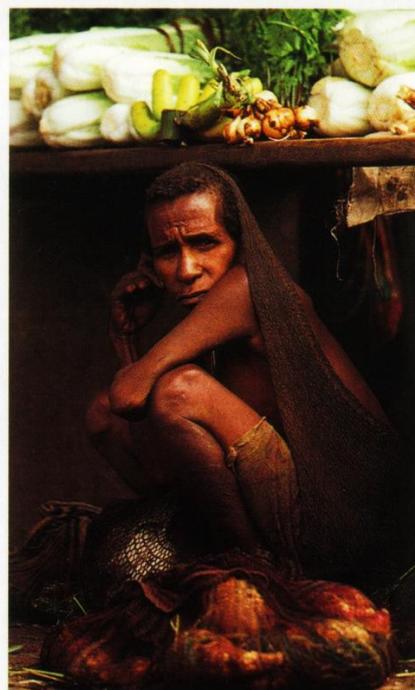
The people of one “village” do not cluster in one area, preferring instead to live in scattered compounds close to their farmland. Each compound—one men’s hut, or *honai*, several women’s huts and a long, rectangular hut housing the cooking fires and pig stalls—is home to a small number of families. The small, round, thatched huts, with little ventilation, certainly offer a visitor the chance to learn at least one word of Indonesian: *asap*, or smoke.

Some of the farmland is given over to the cultivation of crops, such as tobacco, tomatoes and green vegetables, for sale in the small, bustling market of Wamena.

Most arable land, however, is given over to the nurturing of any of 70 varieties of sweet potato, which fulfill practically the entire dietary desires of the Dani. Baked, steamed or fried, the Dani thrive on *obi* as other peoples thrive on rice. Though it is impossible



From top: a Dani man selling penis sheaths; a woman with the family piglet, a precious Dani possession; fresh vegetables are plentiful; many women wear bags known as *noken* suspended from their foreheads



to ascertain when this New World vegetable arrived, over the years the Dani have developed a sophisticated irrigation system to maximise the yield from their mountainside plots.

Except for sporadic maintenance of the irrigation network and compound huts and fences, the men do few of the day-to-day chores. They leave the long and arduous work to the women, who must plant and weed the plots, tend the pigs and the children and be responsible for the cooking.

In the past, much of the male energy was devoted to martial affairs.





Taking A Walk On The Wild Side

The Baliem valley, in the highlands of Irian Jaya on the Indonesian side of New Guinea, spreads 60 kilometres long and 15 wide. The nutrient-rich Baliem River meanders along its length, then disappears through the Baliem Gorge to wind south towards the Arafura Sea.

A basic tarmac and dirt road now stretches the length of the valley, connecting the lowland villages to the day-trippers. More adventurous tourists seek the challenge of longer treks up into the tribal heartlands.

One such trek takes you to the base of Irian Jaya's second-highest mountain, Mount Trikora, around Lake Habbema and back through the villages to the west. Good preparation is a must; plenty of dried food and warm clothes are essential—temperatures can drop to near freezing.

A long day's walk from Wamena, climbing up from the valley floor and skirting the high mountains, the flora changes from lowland forest to alpine rainforest. The Dani people leave their plots and scattered village compounds to greet strangers with soft calls of *nayak* and *la-o* accompanying firm and slow handshakes.

Leaving behind the villages, the track winds up through the damp emerald of the rainforest. Along moss-

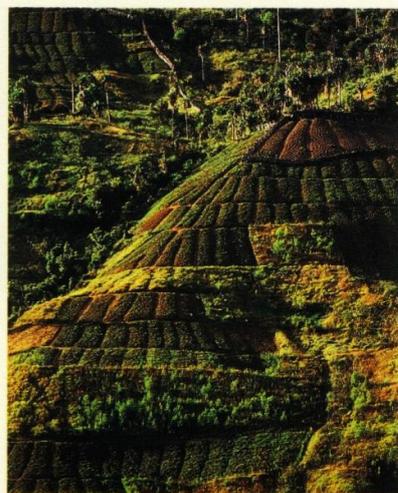
covered logs, felled to provide an elevated walkway over the muddy forest floor, this stage of the trek is a test of balance and concentration. Unburdened by baggage and wearing hi-tech boots, we inch slowly up slippery inclines. Our porters, barefoot and weighed down with our kit, make light work of the slick beams. One consolation of the Baliem rainforest is its complete lack of leeches, mosquitoes and other blood-sucking bugs.

A couple more days' walk brings you to the high alpine savanna. At about 3000 metres, the flora abruptly changes—along with any ideas of keeping your feet dry. Heading up to the base of Mount Trikora, the cold and

One consolation of the Baliem rainforest is its lack of leeches and other blood-sucking bugs

swampy highland plains are a barren and stark contrast to the relatively mild lowlands of the valley floor.

On the bleak shore of Lake Habbema sits a small guest lodge fashioned as a giant *honai*, but without the double-walled insulation of the huts. Wearing everything we possess, we pass a restless night huddled together



Top: looking down the Baliem valley from Mount Trikora; Dani cultivation methods make use of the fertile but steeply-sloping valley sides

there at the mercy of the elements. Within a long day's walk is the remote village of Daelah. Less than 20 tourists have passed in the previous year. Few of the older Dani here speak Indonesian, so we rely on our porters to translate.

We stay around the village the next day, welcomed into the small abodes. The following morning, we leave our hosts to their peaceful lives and descend through the cultivated gorges, down the valley on the last leg of our trek. The rooftops of faraway Wamena, the administrative centre, glisten like a rough diamond, promising hot showers and food that hasn't come out of a packet.—*Dan Bool*

Where the theft of a pig, or murder of a clan member, would likely have resulted in a clandestine war party where any member of the other group would have been considered fair game, ritual warfare was man against man.

In bigger battles, large groups of elegantly coiffured men—smearing with ash and pig-grease, adorned with headdresses of cassowary or bird of paradise feathers, fetishes of cuscus fur and bibs and necklaces of cowrie shell—would face off across a selected field, hurling insults at each other to the delight of the gathered crowd. Sporadic engagements and forays towards the enemy lines would bring down a hail of spears and arrows, but fatal injuries were uncommon.

The high wood and liana watch-towers, or *kaio*, are less evident these days, but would once have been constantly manned by warriors on guard against a surprise attack. Ritual battles are still organised, but these days are conducted more for the enjoyment of tourists.

Among the Dani, there is no sense of inherited value; respect is earned by each individual, irrespective of his or her parents. Leadership of any particular clan is neither patrilineal nor matrilineal, but is assumed by charismatic men rising above their peers. These so-called “Big Men” attain their status through their achievements; on the battlefield, in their generosity and in their accumulated wealth.

Wealth is determined by the number of pigs a man possesses, and the number of wives in his compound—although one is inextricably linked with the

other, since the price of a wife does not vary with her lineage. Rather, it is relatively fixed at around six healthy adult pigs—which at today’s prices translates to roughly US\$2500. Pigs are the family jewels of the Dani and as such are afforded a level of affection and attention Westerners might associate with pet dogs.

To the outsider, one of the most distinctive aspects of the Dani culture is choice of dress. Although they are often photographed in full ceremonial costume, for day-to-day living the Dani move about unencumbered by an ex-

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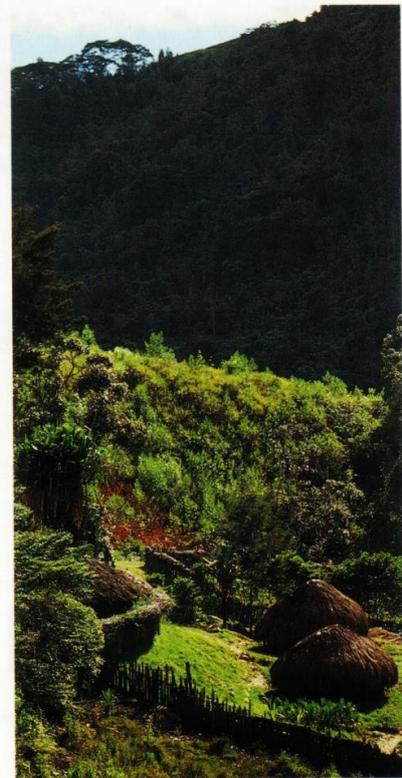
Liana bridges cross streams that can at times become raging torrents; Dani huts are situated close to their food gardens

cess of clothing. For the men this means sporting a home-grown, customised penis gourd, or *horim*, which in the West Baliem is characterised by a long and tapered shape, in contrast to the stout ones preferred in the East. Attached to the wearer by strategically placed threads, the penis sheath is the only item worn at all times.

The women wear two varieties of skirts, depending on their marital status. Young girls wear short grass skirts, while married women wear woven skirts of fern fibre, slung low around the hips in a way that seems to defy gravity. The only other ubiquitous

item worn by the women are the net bags, or *noken*, beautifully woven from bark fibre and often decorated with the colourful skin of wild orchid tubers. Suspended from the forehead, everything that needs to be carried goes into a *noken*, whether it be sweet potatoes, piglets, or even infants, who can often be found snoozing comfortably at the bottom of the outer bag.

A sample of Dani ways may be experienced in the throng of Wamena market, where housewives haggle for their purchases next to Dani men smeared in pig fat and naked but for



their *horim*. But the only way to really get an idea of their lifestyle, and to appreciate the stunning scenery of the valley, is to get away from Wamena, into the rainforest and cloud-covered peaks that lie beyond, where shaky liana bridges cross thundering rivers, and barren landscapes of wind-blown marshland beckon the adventurous traveller. □

Dan Bool is a photojournalist who travels extensively in Indonesia