



Wanbel and its meanings

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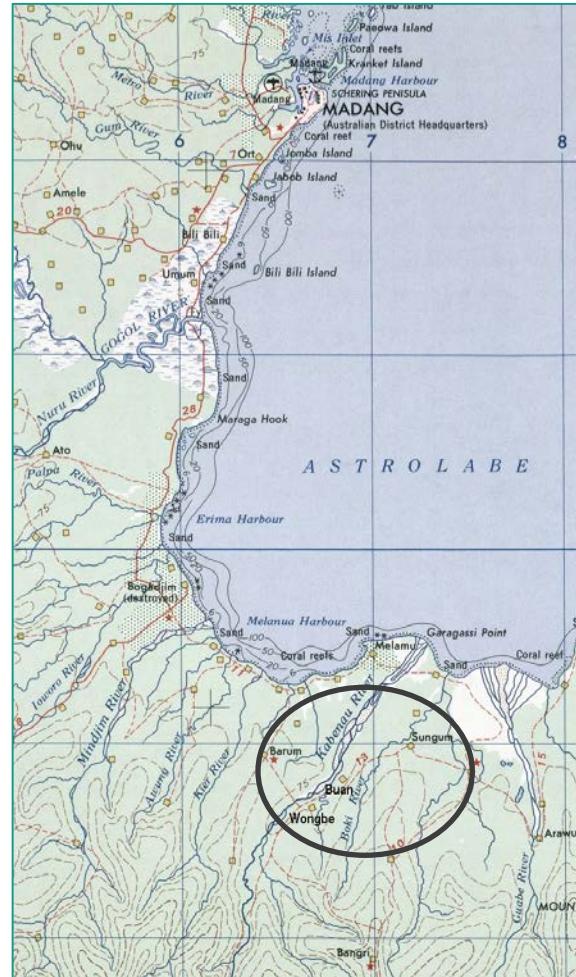
Wanbel's web of meaning

- People construct meaning in their lives in complex, varied, and shifting ways.
- Sam people encapsulate their identity as a collective, deriving meaning individually as they are entangled in each other's lives and as they compel themselves to be *wanbel* ("unity, alignment of desires, and reconciliation leading to the good life").
- No issue is too divisive to be resolved if all sides are devoted to pursuing *wanbel*.
- “Whatever the problem, *wanbel* is the answer.” (Troolin, 2018:95)

Wanbel in context

Creation story of the Sam people:

- Sam people came from a special hole in the ground, surrounded by white stones. They were created as *ker kujex*, ("one blood," Sam).
- The closest unit is the people who use the same cooking fire, called *balag kujex* ("one fire," Sam)
- *Wanbel* returns them to their default state as being one people.



Aspirational meanings of *wanbel*

- Sam people believe that they will be protected and accomplish their goals if they are *wanbel* (Street, 2014).
- The goal of *wanbel* is *gutpela sindaun* (being well/human flourishing) and this motivates people to engage in the give and take of *wanbel* (Rowsome, 2001, Troolin, 2018).
- The desire for *wanbel* is a strong community force that pulls people to engage in divisive discussions and put aside grudges and live and work together.

Experiential meanings of *wanbel*

- *Wanbel* for the Sam people is not simply agreement or harmony but how the Sam people approach conflict, resolve trouble, and material needs.
- The *wanbel* process itself is a reflexive way of discussing issues of personhood and relationality.
- They work through differing views and ideas to flourish as composite and individual persons. *Wanbel* is a thorough, dynamic, and turbulent way to sustain and create mutually dependent relationships.
- Meetings are creative, co-creative spaces. The outcome is not set from the beginning, but is worked out together, as everyone says what they think and feel. Saying “we are *wanbel*” is performative.



Literal meanings of *wanbel*

Researchers have termed it social, collective, or communal harmony, cooperation and harmony, and unity of purpose (Brison, 1991; Leavitt, 2001:162; Schram, 2013:30).

Wanbel in Sam: *pari xosolox*: “insides smooth, peace”; *pari beli*: “insides good, love”; *pari kujex*: “insides one, togetherness/unity”; and *udud kujex*: “thought one, united action plan.”

Pari = (“insides, feelings, dispositions”) [alul=ruin; hunjudx=give; turdis=combine]

Udud = (“thoughts, ideas”) [hali=bad; udu=let it go; bail=stubborn; pesxa=acquire]

Daily meanings as people pursue *wanbel*

- People are both individual and dividual; seeing each other as not self-contained individuals but interconnected and entangled bundles of relationships (Ingold, 2008; McAllister, 2025).
- Be on guard against disunity; constant monitoring of relationships among people who are more collective than individual.
- Deeds are more authentic than words (“just talk” (Troolin, 2018:143)).
- Maintaining relationships takes effort (exchange). Work to enhance relationships (meshwork), i.e. the Kula exchanges (McAllister, 2025).
- Be intentional and strategic to help others be *wanbel*.

The problem of opacity

- For the Sam people, the *pari* is a self-contained part of a visible person, knowable only to each person.
- Becoming and remaining *wanbel* requires that people have some idea of when others are not *wanbel*, both to gauge if an issue is created or a solution is not acceptable.
- The only reliable way to estimate someone's *pari* is through their deeds and secondarily through their words.

“Just talk”

- The Sam think of speech as sometimes not reflecting *pari* well, though this is mostly due to the speaker's intentions (see Robbins, 2012).
- Statements that are not substantive or lack meaning are called *antap tasol* (“only at the surface”) or *toktok tasol* (“just talk”) in Tok Pisin, or in Sam, *sam neiya* (“just talk”).
- Insincerity needs *gerei* (“straighten, put right, fix”), the action of sorting through the remains of their old house, some which they will want to use to build a new house (Troolin, 2018:143).

Overcoming the problem of opacity

- Elicit emotional reactions.
- Urge people to share their thoughts and feelings (even speak in ways that encourage those with divergent ideas).
- Reassure those reluctant to share that everyone wants to hear their thoughts.
- Persuade people that genuine sharing of ideas is important to become wanel.
- Accept that issues may resurface as meanings shift through new experiences.

Conclusion

- *Wanbel* allows people with different ideas and experiences to become united, as at their creation.
- However, opacity prevents seeing into another's *pari*, and words by themselves are insufficient to ascertain another's thoughts.
- *Wanbel* allows them to talk about and critique relationships, in which dividing the community is on one hand a form of violence and on the other hand, sacrificial, in view of the goal of being reunited (as when they were first created) and achieving *gutpela sindaun* ("wellbeing" TP).

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