Power and the Big Man in New Guinea

As anthropologists we tend to be confused at times as to whether we ought to be ethno-sociologists or empirical philosophers. Falling uneasily somewhere between two opposed camps, we continue to look for 'data', but are often unclear what to do with it. We must make a stand. In this paper I argue for the "primacy of semantic anthropology over more 'sociological' endeavours" (Heelas: "Meaning and Primitive Religions" J.A.S.O: this issue). A sociological approach to political realities tends to begin with a search for 'leaders, power, authority, anarchy' and so on, fitting the existential situation into the categories formed by political science. Semantic anthropology first goes to the indigenous interpretations and then decides how best to translate them, often leading to a proliferation of categories, some of which we may immediately recognise, others of which will stretch our powers of imagination. Given the proliferation of cultures and their particular ways of seeing the world we must be prepared to accept such a proliferation of categories. Being prepared to look at other peoples' ways of seeing the world is a healthy step away from the mechanistic model of man implicit in much of the sociological type of anthropology. Behaviour is rule-governed, but we must first of all find the rules which govern a particular people's behaviour; and these are unlikely to be rules couched in terms derived within a highly stratified, industrial society if the culture in question consists of a few thousand people living close to the soil.

In this paper I wish to illustrate some of the problems surrounding the analysis of power structures in New Guinea. My argument generally is that works on concepts such as the 'New Guinea big man' have been largely methodologically misguided, given our present state of awareness about certain facets of New Guinea thought. We must know more before we can generalise. "...social anthropology is comparative or it is not a discipline at all" (Needham 1967:447n.), but we must make sure that what is being compared is susceptible to comparison, and if so, on what level. In situations of social change, such as those which prompted this debate, the 'before' and 'after' may be so very different that a completely different type of analysis is appropriate to the 'before' from that which seems adequate for analyzing the 'after'. Any meaningful comparison is not a simple matter of a question of the "were the old leaders more powerful than the new?" type, but a matter for detailed and painstaking conceptual analysis. The 'before' and 'after' debate I am referring to in this paper centres upon two papers (Brown 1963 and Salisbury 1964) which I present here in such a simplified form to deem it necessary to direct the reader to the sources to avoid misrepresentation. For the present purposes, however, the main threads are drawn out briefly.

The introductory remarks of Brown's paper will set the scene nicely: "It is a commonplace in the study of changing political systems that the imposition of alien rule restricts the power of traditional authorities. Yet I am going to claim what may seem the reverse – that alien

rule gives new powers to the native authorities it establishes....(Brown
1963:   1). Whereas in the typical New Guinea society leaders are
subject to constant control by the group within which they operate, never
being sure that "his opinions will be respected, that his orders will be
obeyed" (op. cit.: 6), the new 'leaders', the government appointed
luluais, were directly responsible only to the local officials, such as
the District Officer, and often wielded significant power. From a situ-
ation of "anarchy", new leaders were in a position to become "arrogant
satraps" (op. cit.: 2). Salisbury, in his supplementary interpretation",
argues that, in New Guinea, "Although the indigenous ideology was one of
democratic equality and competition, the empirical situation at this time
was one of serial despotism by powerful leaders" (Salisbury 1964:225).
The "ideology" of New Guinea politics was, he agrees, one of equality,
but there were powerful leaders, characterized by him as "directors",
who were despotic and whose emergence "can be regularized within the
political structure" (op. cit.:237). Until the government intervened,
appointing lulais whose status he describes as "a bureaucrat rather than
a satrap" (op. cit.: 232), indigenous leaders were often to be seen as
despots and to prove his point he cites the careers of three such men who
held sway over their fellows for some time; and stories collected from
Tolai of indigenous leaders which commented on "their 'badness' and
unpleasant natures" (op. cit.: 226). The advent of not only government
control but also of economic and social innovation restricted the power
of the despots and, although the luluai could become powerful, there was
adequate machinery for controlling his activity in the form of the
District Officer who, "aware of the dangers of satrapy" will "lean over
backwards to be legalistically correct" (op. cit.: 229).

One of the central criticisms which Salisbury makes of Brown's
approach centres upon what he calls a confusion of "political reality"
and "ideology" which leads to mistaking "functional anthropological
reconstruction for fact" (op. cit.: 225). Of course, there is a danger
in any anthropological investigation that one's view of the realities
of a situation will be over-influenced by the indigenous comments on
that situation. Categories may not be hard and fast, but mere descript-
ive devices open to a considerably wider interpretation than is given by
the people. And at the level of a search for political 'facts', we may
wish to avoid a too literal reliance upon the statements of our informants
who are not, it is clear, social scientists, and who may lack the desired
precision in their own political philosophy. What Salisbury is saying
is that if we wish to ascertain whether the advent of the administration
had a certain effect upon the political realities in New Guinea societies,
we must take care to compare not ideologies, but personalities, histories,
facts, and data. Only in this way can we satisfactorily begin to make
an objective assessment.

Unfortunately, there are severe limitations to this approach, not the
least of which is that it is an almost unattainable ideal in itself.
Salisbury himself tends to drift into an account of the 'ideology' of
government policy in the way he deals with the powers and limitations of
lulais. Throughout his account of the position of the luluai Salisbury

uses phrases which lack the sort of detailed factual backing one would expect
from one whose approach is to establish "reality" over "ideology". We
are told of the "official position" of the luluai; we hear about what is
"prescribed by government ordinance"; that the luluai has "no statutory
authority to adjudicate " certain disputes; "as far as the administration
is concerned" the luluai acts as a mediator; and officially "the luluai
is not the judge in own case". As for the administration, the District
Officer "is aware of the dangers of satrapy", "must weigh the dangers
against the advantages" and will "lean over backwards to be legalistically
correct" (op. cit.: 228-9). It would, perhaps, be tedious to demand
that Salisbury should provide concrete evidence that the official position
reflects the "political realities", and I do not think statistical
evidence would be of any real value in deciding one way or the other.
Yet where Brown has been accused of failing to differentiate between what
Salisbury must see as a model of political relationships and the actual
careers of individuals within the political arena exemplified in that
model, one is entitled to demand that in a reply, a critic should himself
make a clear distinction between his own model and the 'factual' situ-
ation which he is offering as evidence for a "supplementary interpretation".

What has gone wrong, however, is not that Salisbury has offered us a
more precise method of gauging the respective powers of pre-contact
leaders and administration appointed luluais and then failed to match the
ideal with his own rendering of the situation, but, rather, that the
question itself is not so susceptible of scientific analysis as one may
be led to believe from Salisbury's second paragraph. One is increasingly
led to the question of what sort of evidence will establish one view over
the other. How can one be sure that the pre-contact leader who was
prominent for many years was really popular or unpopular, and whether his
power was really great or 'merely' legendary? Salisbury's attempts to
establish the 'facts' on this score rely upon the only data a frustrated
historian has access to in an essentially non-literate society, namely
oral tradition, and he points to the hopeful fact that the local Tolai
informants kept "a lively tradition of the history of the 1880's."
However, "stories" have to be dealt with in a far more subtle way than
they are treated by Salisbury in this paper.

In an attempt to illustrate the government appointed Luluai's limi-
tations Salisbury writes that a luluai operates as a mediator in disputes
within native custom "of which no official cognizance is taken" whose job
it is to suggest a "compromise which is enforceable only to the extent
that a party which does not accept the compromise then becomes guilty of
an offence against Native Regulations such as disturbing the peace"
(Salisbury 1964: 228). Salisbury's use of the word "only" seems to
ignore the significant point that, even if we are here concerned only
with policies, the new 'leader' has a significant sanction which his
predecessor lacked. Whereas in the indigenous "ideology","no leader can
be sure that his opinions will be respected, that his orders will be
obeyed...." (Brown 1963: 6) the luluai who fails to convince disputants
has a sanction against those who do not "respect" his "opinions".
Granted that the District Officer will "lean over backwards to be

legalistically correct", the disputant will go before the kiap as "guilty
of an offence against Native Regulations" (Salisbury 1964: 228). which,
even in a situation of common respect, trust and understanding between
Kanaka and administrator, is an unnerving experience for any defendant.
And where there is a fundamental lack of respect, trust and understanding
in the relations between the black man and his 'superiors', the threat
of being brought before an examining District Officer is alone suffic-
ient force to grant the luluai a great deal of power in situations
of dispute.

The activities of Bumbu, a luluai at Lae (Hogbin 1946: 45-6) could
be seen as a balance to the activities of the "despots" cited by Salis-
bury (1964: 228), and we could spend time deciding whether he was an
"exception" or whether his "emergence can be regularized within" the
administrative situation. It is true that it was not government policy
to give power to the luluai for it to be misused in the way Bumbu misused
it, but neither is it the policy of the indigenous political ideology in
New Guinea for people to be subjected to the arbitrary whims of "despots".
But the real answers to the problem will not be found by counting heads
- piling up examples of luluai corruption, by adding up how many years
a big man held sway against the average term of office of a luluai, by
giving too much credence to traditional tales of "bad" leaders in the
pre-administration days, nor even by establishing, presuming that we
could, that the administration is generally very fair in its treatment
of complaints against the luluai who misuses his position. The prob-
lem lies much deeper than any amount of this sort of data gathering will
be able to penetrate, and we will go much further towards a solution if
we look at what the indigenous leaders meant to the people they led,
whether any powerful men are best described as "despots", and if so,
whether their "emergence can be regularized within the political
structure".

There are cases of legendary strong men in many New Guinea societies.
Indeed, in a political situation in which no formal rules obtained
which could regulate the behaviour of a man with strength or charisma,
it would be curious if there were not "exceptions" to the general pattern
of acting within the implicitly defined system. (Cf. Hogbin 1951;
Popsipil 1958; Burnett 1959; Finney 1968). Yet we cannot always be
sure what impact these men have. It is not to be unquestioningly
assumed that strength in a New Guinea society will automatically lead
to political success. One is easily led to believe that in a free-
floating political system a man with strength will be the man with
authority. Amongst the Gahuku-Gama, however, the strong man "may be
admired for his abilities. He will earn a name, even attract adherents,
but he is unlikely to achieve generalized authority or lasting influence"
(Read 1959: 433). Amongst the Gahuku-Gama there are strong men but the
real leaders are not those men. The real leaders are, rather, those
men who have strength and the qualities associated with it, but who have
learned to temper their strength with an awareness of the other values
of the society, the most significant of which is the maintenance of
equivalence.

Equivalence, or reciprocity is a key concept throughout New Guinea societies, and where there are equivalences to be maintained, it is very easy for the insensitive strong man to overstep the mark, and to lose favour within the society. In Gahuku-Gama, "successful leadership seems to require a considerable degree of self-control. It needs judgement if not calculation and sensitivity to the nuances of opinion and feeling in the gathering" (op. cit.: 431). To be a successful leader, to gain lasting support from the people a man must have strength: must have skills in oratory, in manipulation, in management, in production; but he must also have an insight into the problem of the antithetical natures of unbridled strength and the subtle maintenance of equivalence: "It is men who possess this insight - and whose self-control enables them to profit from the knowledge - who are 'selected' as leaders in the traditional sociocultural system" (op. cit.: 434). The existence of strong men in Gahuku-Gama society is not to be questioned. What is to be questioned is whether, in this case at least, their position "can be regularized within the political structure". Any strong man with power would here be better described as a 'bully' or a 'swashbuckler' than a 'despot' or 'director', for his activities are to be seen outside the political system, not within it.

Big men, the normal leaders in traditional New Guinea society, are not merely political figures. Their roles in society are far more universal, and they form the pivot round which many definitions and activities circulate. In Hagen society, for example, the rise of the big man is not only linked to his leadership of a segmentary group, which of itself would easily lead to despotism, but he also has a central role in the exchange system referred to as moka. Moka systems are fairly rigid based upon equivalence and although the competitive aspects of the system will tend to create situations of tension, the leader of the moka group will be well advised to take care not to try to push his exchange partners too hard, for it is success in moka which "is perhaps the most important single criterion and index of influence and prestige." Although a man may achieve some status through strength in other fields such as "prowess or former prowess in war, and by their forcefulness and shrewdness in debate of public affairs", the relevant title of "'numi', or 'ranking leader' is explicitly stated by informants to be achieved when a man first becomes a principal in the Moka and to be held only as long as he maintains this role." (Bulmer 1960:5.) This is a situation which holds throughout the area of moka activity, not just for the Kyaka of whom Bulmer is writing.

It is the big man's role in the delicate area of equivalence which acts as a brake on his personal ambitions. Drawing support from his clan or sub-clan for the means of exchange, he has their interests to consider as well as his own, and stands to lose a great deal by mismanagement. Even when he attempts to create a personal prestige by individual action, scope for gaining authority is severely limited (Cf. Strathern 1966: 364-5).

The typical big man is, then, a central figure within a group. His position is defined by the group, rather than the reverse. Whereas

within a business or a centralized state one refers to "X and Co." or to the "kingdom" and so on, the big man in New Guinea, even though he makes many more suggestions than others as to what should be done, how, when, and by whom, is dependent on the group for his role, status, and position. That there will be a leader or leaders is subject to an unwritten rule; who that leader shall be is not so much the decision of one man, but of the group. "'The name of the apumtau (leader),' they say 'was heard first on the lips of the people. It was they who decided whether they wanted a certain man to direct them. The village picked an apumtau; he did not make the claim himself.'" (Hogbin 1946:42). Thus it is in most New Guinea societies, that "authority is achieved rather than ascribed" (Read 1959:425), for it is rarely the case that the selection of a big man will precede the establishment by that individual of his powers in all the relevant fields of endeavour.

Having had his position defined by the group for whom he will act as a guide and mentor a situation arises in which the definitions begin to flow back to the people. Aims and objectives are defined within a situation of "consensus democracy" in which the 'elected' leader acts as a filter through which the activity is decided and executed. In the Hagen area, for example, "The people themselves, with and through their wua nuim have decided their goals and how these were to be achieved. The big man, in his turn, had to adopt a personalistic philosophy and deal individually and on a person-to-person basis with those whom he represented." (Brandewie 1971:209.) It is this definitional role of the big man which anchored him to the people. Those who did become despots, though their strength may have led to a position of real power, and though, in rare cases they may have held sway for a considerable time through coercion and intrigue, were essentially outside the political norms of New Guinea society and flourished not upon the vagaries of the political philosophy of a fluid society, but upon fear, greed and charisma, factors which can lead to the temporary breakdown of even the most carefully monitored political system. Given that these "exceptions" were supplementary to, and not derived from the political system, we may be tempted to lend credence to the assertion that "Primitive Melanesian Society ... was living proof that anarchy can work." (Hogbin 1951:141.)

We have so far been largely unaffected by indigenous terminology. The problem has been set out and examined almost entirely in terms defined within our own political theories. "Anarchy" and "satrapy", "despots" and "directors" are terms which have great value in our own political philosophy. But "English language patterns of thought are not a necessary model for the whole of human society" (Leach 1961:27). What we ought to be far more concerned with is the indigenous reaction to the big man, and to the luluai. To assess the thesis that "alien rule gives new powers to the native authorities it establishes" (Brown 1963:1) we not only have to judge whether we think the luluai is more powerful than the big man, for this is only half the answer. It is, surely, the people who experience that power who are to be the best judges of the respective powers of the old leader and the new leader. And just as we should take notice of the indigenous thoughts on the individuals and categories in question, we must not forget that the

concept of "power" itself may well have nuances of meaning for the Kanaka
which we, with our preconceptions formed within one particular political
system, may tend to overlook as irrelevant to what we define as a
question of politics. It is to these latter considerations that I will
now turn.

There seems to be a general attitude amongst many writers on indigenous
political systems that a big man has an "office". That the "status" of
a big man is a fixed entity, at least so long as an individual has that
status, and that, for a particular group, one man will be "the" big man
for a time, to be succeeded by his successor when his powers wane. The
feeling one gets is that there is a "big manship", like a Presidency, or
a throne, which is filled now by one man, now by another. But to take
this as an accurate picture of all New Guinea societies would be to mis-
represent the meaning of the indigenous term which we translate as "big
man". Let us look at the evidence from the Hagen area. "The big man's
role in society is a very pervasive one, yet difficult to characterize
in clear, unambiguous terms. In some cases informants are definite:
"So-and-so is a big man'. At other times they are doubtful, or they
state a man's position relative to that of another person. The response
may also depend on the lineage affiliation of the informant. Miap of
lineage X is a big man for an informant from lineage X, but someone from
another lineage may call him a 'rubbish man', the precise opposite.
Indeed, at times of competition, even a commonly accepted big man may be
called by this epithet." (Brandewie 1971:195). So for Hagen, at
least, the ascription of "big man" is more of a description of someone's
abilities than a label or title to be attached to the appropriate man.
It is a relative term which does not have an excluse indigenous word to
describe it. "The expression 'big man' is a translation of various
phrases, the most common of which is <u>wua nuim</u>, meaning 'great-important-
wealthy man'." (Brandewie 1971:196.) The separate terms have other
uses and it is significant that, "A woman may be called an <u>amp nuim</u>;
she is one who knows how to raise many pigs, who is strong and has many
children" (ibid). Thus it is that a strong man can aspire to <u>wua nuim</u>
and strong women can have similar aims, even though her sphere of acti-
vities will be considerably less within the community as a whole than
than of a big man. There is also the dubious term <u>wua korupa</u> or
'rubbish man' to describe a man "who is always asking for things. In
any case he is a man who does not engage in many exchanges, or when he
does he is primarily concerned with his own benefit" (op. cit.: 196-7).
It would appear that a strong man who used his influence to his own ends
could even be referred to as a 'rubbish-man' - certainly not the name a
leader would aspire to.

There is evidence that this sort of relativism in the ascription of
the indigenous term which we render as 'big man' is fairly widespread.
In a general survey of the status of the big man in Melanesia,Sahlins
writes that "Big men do not come to office.... It is not accurate to
speak of "big man" as a political title, for it is but an acknowledged
standing in interpersonal relations - a 'prince among men' so to speak
as opposed to 'The Prince of Danes'." (Sahlins 1963:289.) It is not
surprising that we do not find in many New Guinea languages, a term

which would adequately translate into "director", for even the "lesser" term, "executive" is not an accurate reflection of the big man in most New Guinea societies. The fact that the big man does, in fact, execute certain plans is hardly the point, for those plans have been created in a situation of "consensus". The big man is simply he who is considered to be fittest to execute certain tasks at a particular time; for a finite period he is 'the best man for the job', and there is only a distinction of degree between him and an ordinary man, and even between him and a 'rubbish man'.

It is clear, then, that it is misguided to try to match the big man against the luluai in an attempt to balance their respective powers. There is a logical distinction between the two terms. Whereas the term 'luluai' refers directly to an official status, irrespective of the individual who may at any time be fulfilling the role, and so is a name or reference, the term for 'big man' is entirely descriptive and cannot have meaning without reference to a particular big man. To say of a certain man that he is a big man is, in part at least, to define what the term means; he is an example of the sort of thing we mean by 'big' or 'nuim'; and it would make no sense to talk of a big man who had no wives, took no part in exchange ceremonies, was unaware of his reciprocal relations with people, had no gift for oratory, had no supporters in gift exchange or warfare; generally who lacked support from his fellows, for it is precisely these people who define the big man. A man who had none of these qualities would logically not be a big man, and had he once been a big man, the recognition that he no longer possessed the appropriate qualities would in itself entail the removal of the description 'big man'. A man cannot be a 'big man' if he is not at one and the same time a 'big' man, cannot be wa nuim if he is not nuim. The big man is essentially a man.

On the other hand, by being given an office, a recognizable status by the administration, the luluai has no need to justify his title. Of course, it may be the case that he was given the post as a result of certain skills being displayed by the man, although this is not necessarily the case. Again, the execution of certain duties, the liasing with the District Officer, the mediating between the nature and the administration are marks of a luluai. But they do not themselves make a man a luluai. Even if it is the case that a luluai who failed to do what luluais are meant to do would be removed from office, there is an office from which he can be removed, and that office is a vacuum waiting to be filled by the next luluai. There is no logical, immediate link between a luluai's activities and his being a luluai, and it would be of little value in defining the term luluai to point to one and say that is the sort of man who is a luluai, because he may well be a very unusual type. Logically a man can be a luluai whatever his qualities. The luluai is essentially an office, and whereas a group can say of a man "You are no longer a big man" thereby making it true merely by the statement of the group, it would be of no avail for a village to go to a luluai and say "you are no longer a luluai" for even if they were to steal his cap and baton, they cannot steal his title; this privilege rests with the administration.

The problem does not hinge merely on a fine logical point, however, It would hardly be of importance if it were not for the corollary that the big man is defined within the community and the luluai defined from outside the community; by the white man. Of itself the situation in which "..... sometimes only nonentities can be persuaded to accept the office" (Salisbury 1964:229) would tend only to a disregard for the whole idea of the luluai. But when these 'nonentities' begin to demonstrate that they can have power over men who have established themselves through the more recognizable channels of exchanges, speeches and so on, it becomes clear that the question hinges not so much upon the individual big man and the individual luluai but upon the very validity of the traditional definitions. And this, again, does not restrict itself to the traditional definitions of big man alone, but rapidly extends to other fields. Salisbury cites a case which is apposite to the argument: a luluai from Siane "was taken to court accused of intercourse with a non-nubile girl, an offence which is a capital crime in native theory and much more serious than adultery. The Native regulations do not recognize this offence, however, and the case was dismissed despite the evidence." (Salisbury 1964:229.) Not only do we have a case here of a luluai getting away with what would not have been tolerated from even a big man in the pre-administration days, but we find that the natives have lost the means to operate sanctions against a man who commits what is to them a capital crime. In the practical sense, intercourse with a non-nubile girl has ceased to be a crime, though for no accountable reason. Alien ways of thinking, new ways of operating, often implemented through what the indigenous people see as a "nonentity" are challenging the Kanakas right to define their own terms. No longer are they able to define their leaders; no longer to define their laws. A luluai who can capitalize upon this situation, "the progressive fellow" will quickly find "that alien rule gives new powers to the native authorities it establishes" (Brown 1963:1).

To a certain degree, then, Brown's thesis seems to hold. But whereas the alien rule in New Guinea does give "new powers to the native authorities it establishes", this does not necessarily refute the "commonplace in the study of changing political systems that the imposition of alien rule restricts the power of traditional authorities" (ibid). So long as we retain our ehtnocentric stance in the study of changing political systems, the two assertions seem at odds. Closer examination of the indigenous situations in New Guinea show that, far from being mutually untenable in this area, both may be correct. For having begun to establish that the "traditional authorities" were not generally individuals, or when they were, they were acting in concert with a group within which they received their definition, we will not need to find evidence for or against the restriction of power in the traditional authorities in the range of behaviour of the big men over their 'subjects'. Traditional authority, rather, lies in the "consensus democracy" of the group as a whole and a restriction of the power of the group as a whole, if it is to be established, will not be found in any re-allocation of responsibility or authority within the group, from individual to individual, or from group to individual, but from the powers of the group itself, acting

in co-operation with, and through the big man. What we need to discover
is whether or not "the imposition of alien rule" restricts the power of
the typical New Guinea political unit as a whole, remembering all the time
that the concept of 'power' is subject to a variety of interpretations,
depending upon the culture which is under scrutiny at the time.

What we should be looking at is the relationships which have sprung
up between Kanakas and white men, attempting to ascertain whether there
is a feeling by the native peoples that the arrival of the European has
led to a restriction of their own powers. There is a prima facie case
for saying without further ado that this must have been the case since in
all areas the administration imposed rules and laws, many of which were
received grudgingly by the natives. We have already seen how the luluai
could easily be resented in the general ambience of a traditional society
for the simple reason that he wielded power without first having achieved
the status of a big man. On the other hand, the magistrate was not
drawn from the ranks of the nonentities. There are those who would
argue that the typical New Guinea native would happily follow a magistrate
so long as he was strong and commanded respect. Of course in many areas
the magistrates filled this strong-man role quite well. Amongst the
Elema, for example, "Magistrates were physically and mentally strong and
self reliant; in many cases they had been recruited from the ranks of
those who knew how to 'manage' the natives - the expatriate planter class"
(Cochrane 1970:40). These men would command respect, just as the strong
man amongst the Gahuku-Gama would command respect. But he could not
fulfil the role of leader, of big man, because he had no idea of, or if
he did, he took no notice of the necessities of equivalence, and all the
other values of the society. He was the sort of man who would get
things done, but there would be an over-all feeling of unease, even on
the part of those who followed him, probably because they had not the
desire to maintain the equivalence required of a successful big man. The
short term impact of such a man would be fruitful, "But the magistrate's
status was not the same kind of status that was possessed by the 'big man'.
Traditional 'big men' has presented a synthesized cultural image of their
society. The magistrate ignored Elema culture and his status was of a
personal nature - the Elema could not think of him as their 'big man'."
(op. cit.: 42). The imposition of alien rule, biting as it does at the
traditional definitions, will need to do more to compensate for their loss
than supply strong magistrates and transistor radios - indeed these items
may well be even more destructive than constructive.

The definitions to which I refer are not merely political. Minor
irritation could only be the result of a redefinition of political real-
ities if these were not already as closely interwoven with the other areas
of thought and action in New Guinea societies. For the removal of power
from the "consensus democracy" into the hands of, immediately, the luluai,
but more significantly, into the European sphere of activity requires a
political reaction only in so far as the concept of "consensus democracy"
was political. The evidence is that the reactions were marginally pol-
itical, but were more strikingly "millenarian", "messianic", embracing a
far wider range of realities of political power between individuals. So
long as we are not lulled into believing that the reactions to European
contacts generally referred to collectively as "cargo cults" were scarcely
disguised political movements, or political reactions framed in an essent-
ially magico-religious mode as a result of the fact that this "is the
characteristic type of explanation which is current in that society"

"Jarvie 1946:67) we shall be able to begin to see that "consensus democracy" was not a merely contingent element in New Guinea societies, but part of a conceptual framework to which no element of thought or action was unrelated. A functionalist would be able to tell us this, but would be unable to explain why the new system, which was functionally sound, caused such difficulties. A structuralist would also be able to show the interrelations between the seemingly disparate areas of thought and action, but the typical structural model would lack the fluid dynamism required to reflect the nuances of indigenous modes of thought. What is required is not a general model to 'explain away' the phenomena, but a careful examination of the details of at least one situation of culture contact and its ramifications in the changing modes of thought and action amongst the people contacted. A big man in one society may have strong similarities with his counterpart in other New Guinea societies: and European administration has followed an essentially similar pattern throughout the territories: Native Regulations applied wherever the appropriate machinery was available and labour legislation under which natives were liable to imprisonment for breaking their contract of employment by running away, for refusing to work, and even for failing to show ordinary diligence, applied universally between 1893 and 1946 irrespective of the reactions of the respective groups of natives. But we will not understand reactions to these situations on the part of the indigenous peoples by attempting to draw out patterns without in each instance discovering how big men were operative and fit into the cognitive map, and exactly what the Europeans respresented to the peoples, not just in a political sense, but in the wider concepts of the respective patterns of thought. Where political questions are, for the Kanaka, inseparable from other questions, reactions to the new situation will depend upon the whole conceptual framework of each society. For the advent of a new class of beings such as Europeans must have represented, and, moreover, a class of beings whose behaviour showed both ignorance and disregard for the moral, political, and philosophical realities recognized by the contacted peoples, hand-in-hand with ostensible power over the physical environment, the taxonomic systems will be severely strained. Thus it is that what is called into question in the typical New Guinea society with the advent of the European, both Missionary and Kiap, is not just the validity of political structures, but the validity of the whole conceptual scheme within which the political structure gained meaning. Europeans are not just another set of phenomena to be slotted conveniently away into a pre-existing category or class, but a means of severely testing the whole categorical and classificatory system itself. In some cases the problem was easily overcome, if we can believe the ethnographers' reports; in others, the impact has been to "make the world turn over".

Keith Patching.

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