Introduction

Revenge is a persistent motif in narratives of conflict. In state-based societies, and in monotheistic religious systems, its operation shifts from kin-based and interpersonal contexts to the imperatives of centralized orders of society. Kin-based revenge, previously seen as a sacred duty, then becomes devalued in favor of centralized processes. The societies we ourselves have directly worked with in Oceania developed another solution of their own by settling conflicts through payments of compensation for killings or accidental deaths, which over time could turn into positive ongoing exchanges of wealth items. Revenge was thus transformed into exchanges without the direct coercion of the state or an idea of a single powerful god, although in recent times it has been strongly inflected through encapsulation in state systems.

Revenge is a theme that has long been an important part of ethnographies on Pacific cultures, seen largely as a political phenomenon. By using the term "sacred" we draw attention to the deeper imperatives rooted in kinship, descent, reciprocity, balance, and ideas of the cosmos that underpin such practices. In the most immediate and pragmatic terms, revenge is important because it is declared to be demanded by the spirits of kin who have been killed in physical conflicts, and it is therefore sacred in that sense. In broader, but related, terms, revenge becomes a component of transcendent values in life, a central focus of such values, and thus also sacred, indefeasible, not to be questioned. Our narrative, however, also shows that such a value is not immutable, because physical revenge can be replaced by exchanges of wealth stemming from payments of compensation to stave off retaliatory action. Finally, taking the idea of the cosmos and a sense of balance within it as a part of the revenge complex, we also argue that retributive action to redress forms of wrongdoing or also environmental

disruptions is a significant emergent feature of this complex and is therefore important in ways going well beyond contexts of political violence, extending into eco-cosmological contexts.

In this Element we focus mainly on Oceania, but it is important to recognize that the processes we discuss have been widespread in human history, and also that the imperative of revenge remains latent also in centralized political systems, appearing in the injunction not to take the law into one's own hands, but to leave it to the legal system or to the deity to encompass justice in the short or long run.

The history of revenge as a political theme is important throughout Oceania. It is found elsewhere, however, in epics dating from pre-state times, for example in Njal's saga, the epic of Gilgamesh, and Homer's two epics (the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*). It is also the basis for stories that relate to early times of knights and warriors, and it is a powerful motif in narratives of historical conflict among the Maori population in New Zealand. Wherever ideas of honor are at stake, there combats to settle issues are likely to flourish. In Polynesian societal contexts, including the Maori, ideas of *tapu* intersected with ideas of revenge. An infringement of a *tapu* rule was an offense against a whole range of spatial rules and privileges and could lead to violent retaliation.

However, peace would depend on settling issues about the breaking of *tapu* rules or else in revenge retaliation. How broadly revenge was enacted was another important factor. Raymond C. Kelly made this point central to his discussion of the evolution of warfare in pre-state societies (Kelly 2000). His analysis was predicated on the idea that warfare is a collective political act of violence or physical force carried out in the name of the group, with responsibility therefore falling on the whole group. Collective responsibility means that retaliation for a killing may fall on any member of the group (or perhaps any adult male member, depending on how the matrix of violence is constructed).

Such an outgrowth from a narrow to a broader kin basis of calculating revenge could occur gradually over a number of generations, and we can find cases where the evolution to group responsibility and liability is in process but is not completed. In such cases an individual is always held responsible for starting a cycle of violence, and accordingly has to recruit help from group members and a network of related kin and allies in order either to wage further aggressive acts or to raise wealth items to pay compensation for an injury or killing already inflicted. There is, therefore, a combination of individual and collective criteria involved.

We will exemplify our argument in part with cases from places in the world where we have conducted research over many years, especially the Duna and Hagen areas of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. While we deal directly with some processes of historical change, we are interested in setting up models of a small number of cases where the sacred revenge theme is found most clearly. The historical time of the descriptions depends on the times when the fieldwork was carried out and the materials published. We use ethnographies in which the theme is most clearly demonstrable and prominent. We do not suppose that these studies exhibit some ethnographic time zero, but they do represent times prior to substantial or sweeping exogenous changes, as for example when revenge activities were suppressed in Bellona Island by government action and Christian missionization (Kuschel 1998).

We have chosen a select number of cases that are paradigmatic for our theme. We do not aim at any comprehensive coverage in terms of the wider area of Oceania and its various subdivisions. In fact, it will be obvious that our cases come mostly from the South-West Pacific, with a focus on Melanesia. However, the importance of ideas about revenge is evident throughout the wider region, and our analyses here could be extrapolated *mutatis mutandis* to cases across the Pacific.

One type-case we have mentioned above comes from the ethnography of the Huli and Duna peoples of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. The Huli and Duna both trace descent, and therefore eligibility for group membership, ambilineally or cognatically, meaning that membership may run through either male or female links, with some weight in terms of leadership tending to be placed on male or agnatic links. The ambilineal structure goes with a fluidity of recruitment of males for collective violence. In social contexts where there is great stress on agnatic lines, at least in ideological terms, collective responsibilities tend to be more defined, and the starting point for action becomes the group rather than an individual.

Regardless of such a difference in kin structures, revenge taking remains the norm until and unless the crucial move from killing to compensation is made. Moreover, the strongest motivation for seeking it remains at an individual or close kin level, feeding into the group solidarity. From the Hagen area in the Western Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea magical invocations, spoken at the time of going into battle in order to seek revenge, make this clear. A close relative of a man killed in fighting might invoke the ghost of his dead kinsman, telling the ghost to come and be at his elbow as he deploys a lance, or to sit on his eyebrows and nose and go ahead of him to assist in finding an enemy to kill. Close relatives were thus seen as those most immediately guided by revengeful ghosts into battle, emphasizing the sacred imperative to exact vengeance.

Such an imperative was not simply a rule or custom, to be followed out of a sense of duty or obligation. Instead, it was underpinned by emotions and by a sense of what the ghost of a killed relative would expect of its kinsfolk. The emotion was (and is) expressed in Hagen as *popokl*, a combination of frustration and anger, essentially a conative process impelling the person in one of two directions, either to take action to alleviate the *popokl* or to suffer it and fall sick as a result.

Popokl-induced sickness can be interpreted as a protest syndrome. *Popokl* is a dangerous, liminal state that can lead to sickness or to aggressive action on the part of the person who experiences it. *Popokl*, which is said to lodge in the person's *noman*, or mind, in Hagen conveys a sense of existential loss that goes with a sense of imbalance. *Noman* is both the seat of thought in general and the seat of the adjustment of the person to their social world. When the *noman* is well adjusted or "straight" (*kwun* in the Hagen Melpa language), the person's breath and their words flow easily from the chest to the mouth without any blockage. When the *noman* lies askew or blocked in the person (*peta ronom*), thoughts and judgment do not flow freely. To restore the person's emotional state to balance, either they must take redressive action or their sickness resulting from *popokl* has to be healed.

This emotional syndrome in Hagen finds its parallel in folk expressions widespread in Papua New Guinea about the effects of anger. The expression in Tok Pisin, a national lingua franca that grew out of early contacts with employees on coastal plantations and interactions among locals themselves, is *bel hat*, "hot stomach" or "hot insides," since *bel* in Tok Pisin covers all inside parts of the body. The opposite of *bel hat* is *bel kol*, "cool insides." Cool means calm, balanced. Hot means aroused or disturbed. *Bel hat* is the expected normal response to an injury, an insult, or the death of a kinsperson. Getting even by taking revenge is one means of cooling the insides. Where avenging a death is seen as a sacred activity required by dead spirits, we have the groundwork for a system of sacred revenge. However, the problem lies in what the processual outcomes are.

Bellona Island

A striking study that shows how far the ethic of revenge can go when it is not curbed or mediated by other values is the work by Rolf Kuschel on the small

Pacific island of Bellona in his book *Vengeance Is Their Reply: Blood Feud and Homicide in Bellona Island* (Kuschel 1998), one of a number of Polynesian Outlier islands in the Solomon Islands. The key to the remorseless pursuit of lethal vengeance on Bellona (Mungiki) is the concept of honor, linked to male-gendered values of strength, dominance, and concern not to be seen as weak. Kuschel argues that the reason why Bellonese men invariably sought to exact revenge for an insult or a killing was because not to do so would at once deplete their personal honor and diminish the standing of their kin group. The maintenance of honor was thus considered to be a prime social value, imbuing revenge with a sense of sacred value. The whole system was brought to a halt only by colonial control (Kuschel et al. 1999), accompanied by conversion to Christianity in 1938.

Torben Monberg's detailed ethnographic studies of Bellona rituals (Monberg 1991) clearly reflect the strong sense of honor that informed ideals of male personhood. Men might even get into conflict with the powerful Sky deities over issues to do with their honor, and these deities could also be capricious and hostile to humans when they felt slighted. Ancestors of particular groups were also seen as potentially pursuing causes of vengeance resulting from slights to their honor while they were alive.

In order further to understand the contextual basis of such a strong emphasis on honor and vengeance, while also explaining why this did not lead to the eventual demise of the groups as a whole through internecine killings, it will be useful to look at the ecology of the island and at the social exchanges of food that sustained positive relations among individuals and groups. Bellona is a small island, about 10 km long and 2.5 km in width on average, with high coral cliffs on its shorelines, and a high population density, based on its fertile interior soil. Settlements are mostly clustered in the interior. There were in the past three main groups, but one had become extinct. Group membership is traced patrilineally, and the highest rank is

held by the agnatic male descendants of those ancestors who are commemorated as the original settlers. Genealogies of 24 generations were traditionally maintained in connection with this system of status. The various groups were (and probably still are) connected by ties of intermarriage, and affines were expected to engage in food exchanges. Indeed, the ethic of exchange, pervasive in Oceania, operated strongly in Bellona. At every feast, equal baskets of cooked food were given out to recipients, who then exchanged the baskets further as a means of strengthening social bonds in general and asserting a general equality among themselves. By contrast, however, we also know that people were very concerned about their relative status in the local lineage system being recognized, and this meant that there was an underlying structure of inequality that was both precariously maintained and vehemently insisted on.

All in all, it is apparent that Bellona, as a Polynesian outlier, somehow combines aspects of competitive leadership based on performance with hereditary status based on lineage seniority characteristic of chiefly systems. In this milieu, sacred revenge becomes hyper-emphasized, but it is also circumscribed. Revenge pertains only to men and particularly falls on men of high status. It can be exercised only against a killer or his close relatives (i.e., it cannot lead to war in Raymond Kelly's sense). Women cannot be killed in a revenge action. Given the fact that everyone is living in a crowded space and much effort has to be put into maintaining garden production and food distribution, there also has to be a method for peace-making after a round of homicides, and there was indeed an elaborate ritual of apology for killings that could be resorted to. As we have pointed out in an earlier publication, the step missing here is a linkage between gift exchange and conflict resolution, the crucial evolutionary step taken in the Papua New Guinea Highlands societies (Strathern and Stewart 2013).

"Payback" and Its Cosmic Implications

G. W. Trompf, in his insightful book *Payback* (Trompf 1991), has explored the ramifications of systems of revenge in parts of the South-West Pacific (Melanesia). Seeking for underlying shared features in the cultures of this region, Trompf developed the idea that "retributive logic" was a universal theme in the indigenous religious systems. Situating this theme in its historical context, Trompf notes that the incidence of fighting between groups may have increased as a result of epidemics of disease introduced by outside colonizers and traders (Trompf 1991, p. 26), and attributed to the sorcery of enemies, leading to vengeance raids. This pattern no doubt existed in some cases (see also Stewart and Strathern 2004). Inge Riebe (1991), for example, argued that the spread of witchcraft accusations among the Kalam people, who live on the northern edges of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, was related to the dissemination of malaria into the Kalam area following its gradual spread southwards from lower-altitude areas in Madang Province as a result of early contact with outsiders.

Trompf notes (p. 25) that in discussing revenge killings he makes no distinction between feuding and warfare, because the ethic of revenge runs through all contexts of reciprocal violence. This is quite true. However, from another perspective, it is useful to bear this distinction in mind, because sacred revenge is transcended only when groups find an alternative way to maintain their reputations for strength, and this is achieved through group-based practices of compensation and exchanges of wealth flowing from these. A shift in practice of this kind also entails a shift in ideas of male personhood and a development of leadership based on exchange rather than on killing. Trompf refers to a statement that for the Chimbu people a heavy responsibility falls on the clansmen of any man whose killing has not been avenged: to carry out the act of revenge – or else? The implication is that failure to execute

revenge is a failure in male or masculine identity, and that revenge is the only way to recover this identity and to re-balance the cosmos. The problem here is that the revenge killing will not necessarily be accepted by the other side as legitimately ending the sequence, so how can peaceful relationship ever be established? Because of the imperative to exact revenge, Trompf comments (p. 27) that "no Melanesian society could afford to shun violence" – unless, we may add, it found another way to express masculinity or a different definition of manhood itself. While in this Element we highlight the sacred character of revenge as a means of explaining its prevalence as a very costly form of social action, we also highlight the pathways by which revenge is transmuted into competitive exchange, taking Mount Hagen as our type-case.

A major purpose of Trompf's own discussion is to situate the meaning of revenge within the context of religion and to point out that this connection between religion and violence demands an "honest recognition" (p. 29). The invocation of "religion" here implies that the highest values of the society were tied up with revenge. An interesting exemplar follows in Trompf's text. He cites materials on the Gari people of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, in which warriors tied knots in ropes to mark a symbolic strangling of their enemies, or they might cut up pieces of softwood, marking these as spears to kill named combatants. This kind of diversion into ritual symbolism suggests the pathways in which physical violence could be transformed into ritual violence. Trompf's next example (ibid.) shows this potentiality very clearly and directly resonates with data from all over the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. In Santa Ana, of the Eastern Solomon Islands, guests arriving for a ceremony by canoe were greeted by a set of armed and decorated men from the hosts, who would launch a mock ritual attack on them as a reminder of the potentiality of conflict and a *choice* not to engage in it (Trompf 1991, p. 30). Such ritualized challenges are a ubiquitous feature of compensations or peace-making events in the Highlands. In Hagen, for example, at a point where live pigs are going to be

given away in the *moka* complex [wealth exchange complex] (see, e.g., Strathen and Stewart 2007, 2011), a selection of the male donors, highly decorated in costumes reminiscent of both warfare and social display in general, race down the line of pigs, calling out and stabbing the air with their spears, sometimes running into the pigs themselves, before gathering again at the head of the ceremonial ground to engage in the ritualized special speech form called *el ik*, "arrow talk," paradoxically associated with making peace (Strathern and Stewart 2000a).

Another example from our field areas can be drawn on here. Among the Wiru people of Pangia in the Southern Highlands Province, elaborate pig-killings were held in the1960s during early colonial times, involving gifts to partners who belonged to groups with whom they had been fighting in the recent past. Two practices of ritualized violence stood out on these occasions. Both inculcated the mode of killing pigs to be given away. In one act, a man killing a pig by clubbing its forehead would call out *Ne te moa*, "you get shit" – this to the intended recipient of pork from the pig. The term is an insult, and the pig being killed stands for the person who will receive the meat but is himself symbolically killed by the act of clubbing the pig. The second practice involved cutting up the pig to be given away in an unusual way. Instead of carving a pig into two longitudinal sides in the normative way, a donor would cut it crudely in half horizontally, so that its head and chest constituted one part and its rear the other. This was a representation of the recipient. What was ostensibly an act of friendship could equally be regarded as a continuation of hostility. In effect, such ritual acts encapsulated both alliance and enmity (see Strathern and Stewart 1999a, 2000b). We cannot establish whether such acts had a long time-depth or were recently established. In the context of recent pacification by the Australian Administration, it is, however, clear that ritualized forms of aggression of this kind belong to transitional phases of historical relations