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978-0-521-10229-2 - Big Men and Great Men: Personifications of Power in Melanesia

Edited by Maurice Godelier and Marilyn Strathern

Excerpt

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Introduction

MARILYN STRATHERN

One of the figures that Melanesia has given to world ethnography is that of the big man. Yet the prominence of this figure in certain societies of the region has been inevitably juxtaposed to its absence from others, or to the presence of chiefs or forms of rank that thereby seem aberrant. In supplying a specific counter-type, however, Godelier's 'great man' does more than elaborate a political typology. It leads him into specifying the conditions of social reproduction, and thus a general basis for societal comparison.

Big men are produced in systems that promote competitive exchanges, the transfer of women against bridewealth, and war compensation procedures that allow wealth to substitute for homicide. Great men, on the other hand, flourish where public life turns on male initiation rather than ceremonial exchange, on the direct exchange of women in marriage and on warfare pursued as homicide for homicide. Beyond these institutions, then, lies a difference that Godelier locates in the fundamental way in which men transact with one another. In his words, the relevant question is whether exchanges between groups and individuals depend on a quest for non-equivalence, and thus incorporate principles of calculated disequilibrium or unequal exchange (as in the substitution of human lives for wealth; or whether they rest on principles of equivalence and on mechanisms designed to restore equilibrium (wealth for wealth, life for life). The implications, he argues, go beyond the nature of exchange. Where things substitute for human life, the reproduction of social relations (including relations of kinship) comes to depend upon the accumulation of material wealth. This feature of big-men systems is absent from great-men systems. There, since the circulation and redistribution of wealth is not an essential factor in social reproduction, it is not essential to relations of domination between people and local groups. Domination is achieved through the ritual and other powers that great men have at their disposal, and through a male ideology promulgated in initiation rites that sets men's general power against women's.

Godelier looked to the Papua New Guinea Highlands societies with their

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prominent big men for comparisons with the great men he found on their cultural borders among the Baruya. In doing so, he has created a new centre of theoretical interest, complementing that of the recently denoted Mountain Papuans (J. Weiner 1988). In turn, to see big men from the perspective of great men gives these former figures a different cast. The differences do not disappear; rather, we re-perceive their nature. This is of some significance for general anthropological theorising about the nature of sociality.

The big man had been taken as prototypical of a type of group organisation, so that his presence or absence elsewhere classified the society under review. Godelier's break with this mould has accomplished several things:

- 1 it has given a name to a figure prominent in people's presentation of themselves, but quite different from big men; typologies can no longer proceed along the presence/absence axis, with an embarrassed nod at 'chiefs';
- 2 it has broken with the Highlands-centric definition of what is interesting, namely the activities of groups, and the public occasions on which they appear;
- 3 it has broken with the assumption that big men are above all political leaders and that to describe their activity is to describe political life.

For in tending to equate the activities of big men with group structure, Highlands anthropologists have also tended to endorse a long-standing set of assumptions in Anglophone anthropology at large, namely the equation of groups with social structure and of politics with society.

This proclivity has had profound consequences for the analysis of social life. And evidence from the Papua New Guinea Highlands has seemed to sustain it to the last. Quite apart from the inroads of alliance theory, or feminist anthropology, or studies of the political economy, or even an appreciation of those other Papua New Guinea societies where ritual rather than ceremonial exchange orders relations between men and where myriad other counterindications show how big-men systems are far from typical of Melanesia as a whole, that figure of the Highlands big man has appeared irreducibly concrete. For the first time we are in a position to re-assess the nature of these central systems through the very construct which has seemed to give their group structures such distinctiveness and solidity.

It is intriguing that much the same could be said of the 'chiefs' who are taken as so characteristic of many seaboard and Massim peoples. From the perspective of the difference between big-men and great-men societies, this book offers an approach into these other Melanesian systems, as it does into those which appear either to produce no such figures at all or – as in the ranked grades of Vanuatu – to produce multipliers of them.

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Texts, these days, do not survive without subtexts. A number of controversies run through these pages. One concerns an established debate over the admissibility of historical reconstruction and the necessity for hypotheses about evolution and social change. Some of the contributors would have liked to have seen a resolution. Indeed, they present far more material in the way of suggestive critique than Godelier deals with in his conclusion; instead, that returns us to the specific problematic with which the book began. There is also an editorial shaping to the collection which forms a subtext of sorts. The chapters are arranged so as to indicate two other controversial issues, raised briefly in the preface.

If the historical debate is anthropologically well established, the gender debate is perhaps less so. An explicit question is raised against the unthinking gender that we take to be so self-evidently male in the figures of big men and great men, and an implicit one against the accounts of social systems which would epitomise sociality in such a gendered form. There is a strategic parallel here with the anthropologists' Melanesia/Polynesia conundrum, where the 'regions' are more frequently contested (e.g. Thomas 1989a) than the axes of our contrasts. It was implied that the internal scrutiny of one of them (in this book, Melanesia) could offer an indirect commentary on their analytical pairing. In a similar but more direct way, gender configurations from this part of the world allow us if we would but look – and against wisdom acquired from perspectives elsewhere – to consider indigenous analysis of male-female relations through the apparently singular personifications of one sex alone.

A new debate is also adumbrated. It comes from an old one: the nature of the comparative enterprise. But here what is opened up are questions concerning comparability that definitively eclipse decisions about units of analysis and dependent and independent variables. They touch on general features of human practice in the reproduction and replication of social/cultural forms. They come through our analyses as the chaotic reappearance of shadow problems on the borders of our purviews that seems to imitate or repeat the very problems we set out to encompass. So the same problems may appear 'within' our units of analysis as seem to lie right 'beyond' them. The result is a sense of bifocalism. By way of example: on the one hand a difference between restricted and generalised exchange appears to contrast entire societal types, yet on the other to exemplify clusters of attributes coexisting within a single system. Thus a global comparison of societies is faced with the chaotic knowledge of internal differentiation within any one, and any fine internal discrimination is faced with the magnitude effect of radical global divisions that make their co-eval

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operation seem a logical impossibility. Yet our analyses yield this insight with reluctance. For as a conclusion it is itself an analytical rather than a theoretical critique; and one with which anthropological theories of human organisation have yet to deal.

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PART I

Godelier's schema are applied to three areas of Melanesia – the Papua New Guinea Highlands, the Massim on Papua New Guinea's seaboard and the islands of North Vanuatu. From each of the overviews it emerges that both big men and great men and in some cases chiefly styles can be found within the same region.

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CHAPTER 1

*From great men to big men: peace,
substitution and competition in the Highlands
of New Guinea*

PIERRE LEMONNIER

This overview of Highlands societies documents many of the inter-societal differences that have given rise to the great man and big man models. Indeed, Lemonnier sets up his challenge as imagining how one may 'get' from one to the other. At the same time, he introduces a point which other chapters develop: a key principle that first appears to differentiate whole societies quite radically (equivalence or non-equivalence in the exchange of persons and things) can be shown to coexist within the one. Thus, the idea of substituting wealth for life which seems absent from marriage and homicide arrangements in great men systems is 'already' a part of other life-cycle events. The question then becomes accounting for the distinctive competitive element of ceremonial exchange in big-men systems, a difference of organisation rather than principle, and Lemonnier sketches a possible sequence through looking at warfare practices and their associated compensation procedures.

Anthropologists working in Papua New Guinea have encountered a range of forms of economic and social organisations which, although limited, illustrates an eternal question: where do social differences come from? Apart from the obvious dissymmetry that typifies the way in which rights and duties are parcelled out to the two sexes, three theoretical types of hierarchical relations can be identified among the men; for want of a better term I shall call them politico-economic relations. Whereas in many societies differences of status are neither grounded in nor even linked to the manipulation of wealth, in others this activity is automatically associated with the exercise of a limited and diffuse, but nonetheless very real, power over others. In yet other societies, these hierarchies are hereditary, whereas in the first two cases status is generally acquired by the individual himself over a lifetime.

Specialists have named these men 'great men', 'big men' and 'chiefs' respectively; their status differs from that of the majority of the male members of the society. For whoever is interested in the conditions and mechanisms of social differentiation, the presence of any one of these figures

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raises two questions: what causes big men to appear in a society? how does a society 'get' from power that is limited in time – and which disappears, so they say, with the person who exercises it – to hereditary power? I deal here with the first question and with reference to those Highlands societies in which the two principal figures, the great man and the big man, are said to rule the social roost. As defined by Godelier (1986a), 'great men' are perhaps as rare as 'big men' depicted by Sahlins (1963); furthermore, these two idealised figures are merely an illustration of the two ends of a continuum of forms of power, which itself parallels a continuum of economic and social structures.

Of the many models that set out to explain 'the transition' from great-men societies (or at least those with big men) to big-men societies, one of the least vulnerable to attack by counter-examples comprises a hypothesis shared by Godelier (1986a: 163-88) and A. Strathern (1982b: 128), among others. It proposes an organic link between the presence of big men and (a) the existence of major networks of ceremonial exchanges that accompany them; (b) marriage 'outside the group'; and (c) the use of various forms of wealth (pigs, shells) in exchanges involving either the transfer of individuals from one group to another (marriage) or their replacement (compensation for homicide). This hypothesis brings out the absent principal characteristic of societies without big men: the equivalence of both what and how is exchanged. There are two aspects to non-equivalence here. On the one hand, non-equivalence in nature arises when one of the terms of the exchange (a woman, a dead warrior, a stolen pig) is replaced by wealth. On the other hand, competition lies in the quantitative non-equivalence of the 'objects' exchanged, and can certainly be found in societies without big men, in the form of warfare.

I shall first of all recall that in Papua New Guinea non-competitive ceremonial exchanges often signal momentary pauses in warfare; then, comparing the various societies without big men, try to pin down the conditions in which non-competitive ceremonial exchanges expand and become large-scale ceremonial exchanges. It will then become apparent that the substitution principle is already at work in societies without big men. Finally, I posit the existence of several possible links between the extension of the substitution principle, the expansion of large-scale ceremonial exchange systems and the role played by big men

Exchanges born of war, exchanges born of peace

Papua New Guinea warfare is neither totally oriented towards conquest and extermination nor a game; it is a competitive activity, coupled with a

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system of bookkeeping for balancing life and death which is central to the representations of inter-group exchanges. A question arises about the nature of the relations between these two forms of competition: warfare and large-scale ceremonial exchanges.

Armed conflicts bring with them depredations that deal severe blows to agriculture and pig raising; several authors have remarked on the antagonistic nature of warfare and ceremonial exchange, and even go so far as to assert that they are incompatible (Bulmer 1960: 11-12; Modjeska 1982: 54). This leads to two remarks: first of all, it becomes obvious that they only 'seem' to be incompatible, for ethnographic works report their co-existence in reality; secondly, in placing too much emphasis on what seems to militate against the simultaneous presence of warfare and large-scale ceremonial exchanges, there is the danger of glossing over the complementary relations and the logic that unites these two forms of competition.

There is no doubt that big men play an active role in warfare and derive from it part of their prestige. They launch it (A. Strathern 1971: 79), gather or pay allies (A. Strathern 1971: 70-1) and are often great warriors (P. Brown 1967: 43-4; Lederman, 1986: 144; Meggitt 1977: 18-19; Pospisil 1958: 90; A. Strathern 1971: 75). War itself produces consequences that big men turn to their advantage: it creates refugees, whose reception is largely controlled by big men and used in constructing networks of partners and dependents; and drives people to shelter their pigs with neutral groups, which nurture the mechanism of 'finance' (even if in a minor way). Finally, and without claiming as does Sillitoe (1978), that big men start wars and systematically manipulate them to their own advantage, it is undeniable that war provides them with a chance to exercise their talents as organisers and, in doing so, to accumulate prestige (Meggitt 1977: 17).

Moreover, ethnographic studies provide numerous examples in which warfare and large-scale ceremonial exchanges follow one another (Josephides 1985: 37, 181-3; Meggitt 1974: 31-3; A. Strathern 1971: 53-80) and sometimes occur simultaneously; among the Tombema-Enga, when a war went on too long, women carried on the transactions necessary for continuing *Tee* exchanges (Feil 1980: 26; 1984a: 110). One may also notice that a partner's displeasure can lead to war (Berndt 1962: 81) even in groups where the big-man complex is highly developed, as among the Chimbu or the Mae-Enga (P. Brown and Brookfield 1959-60: 40; Meggitt 1967: 32). The theoretical incompatibility of the two phenomena finds so little support in the facts that it would be reasonable to wonder if they are not two – perhaps transitional – forms of the same social reality, namely inter-group competition.

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There is nothing new in this idea, and many specialists esteem that warfare and the large-scale ceremonial exchanges in New Guinea are like phenomena (Berndt 1954–5: 184; P. Brown and Brookfield 1959–60: 42, 46, 49; D. J. J. Brown, 1979; Godelier 1986a: 170; Healey 1978; Lederman 1986: 150; Meggitt, 1967: 32–3; 1974: 170–1 n. 15; A. Strathern 1979: 106); it should be remembered as well that Lévi-Strauss (1943) showed, for another part of the world, that war may be only the other side of economic relations. I would suggest that the large-scale ceremonial exchanges may in fact be born of war – more precisely, on the occasion of peace ‘treaties’ – and, in the remainder of this article, shall attempt to pin down the conditions of this social transformation (see Modjeska (1982: 54) and A. Strathern (1985: 109) for a similar suggestion).

Peace depends largely on the activity of big men. Their talents as orators enable them to force the decision to stop the fighting and they dominate events by the scope of their network of acquaintances and their relative wealth (Feil 1980: 27; A. Strathern 1971: 76; Pospisil 1978: 56–7, 60). But my hypothesis that large-scale ceremonial exchanges have their origins in war rests above all on the existence of war-related prestations in the most highly developed of the competitive exchanges. According to A. Strathern, *moka* is the occasion for transferring wealth to ex-enemies and to allies of the responsible group in order to compensate their dead in battle. These payments may entail counter-prestations, which may themselves be transformed into *moka* exchanges (A. Strathern 1971: 94–6, 121–2; 1981: 210). It should also be noted that Melpa (or ‘Hagen’) big men number more partners among their group’s traditional enemies than other men (1971: 122). Such critical features of the *moka* can be found in the great ceremonial exchanges of the Chimbu, Enga, Kapauku, Kewa and Mendi (P. Brown 1972: 49–50; Elkin 1953: 183–4, 189; Josephides 1985: 8, 85, 145; Lederman 1986: 149, 162–3; Meggitt 1974: 71; 1977: 114, 202 n. 5; Pospisil 1958: 84; A. Strathern 1971: 76).

Because of the gifts made to compensate war dead, or because of the consecutive exchanges to which they have given rise, past wars are central to the major cycles of ceremonial exchanges that characterise big-men societies. This being so, what is the role of similar compensation prestation in societies without big men, particularly on the occasion of exchanges of wealth accompanying pig kills?

The ‘pig kills’ (or ‘pig festivals’) of the Eastern Highlands are periodic events during which three types of ceremonies take place more or less simultaneously: exchanges of meat, especially pig meat; fertility rites; and male initiation. And, among these exchanges of wealth – some of which are competitive – the prestations made to compensate for the death of allies

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have pride of place. This is the case in the *nama* cults of the Bena Bena, Gahuku-Gama and Gururumba (Langness 1972: 183; 1974: 193; Newman 1965: 53; Read 1952: 20). Further west, the *kaiko* cult basically rewards both the ancestors of the Maring Tsembaga and their allies in the latest battle (Rappaport 1968: 151–2; 1982: 303–4) but, unlike cults of the *nama* type, there are no male initiations during the *kaiko*, these being nearly non-existent among the Maring (Rappaport 1986); on the other hand, the *kaiko* does include fertility rites (Rappaport 1968: 210ff). Finally, among the Duna, compensation payments made to allies for those killed or wounded in battle comprise the better part of the biggest exchange, to such an extent that Modjeska sees war as ‘the pre-condition (and perhaps pretext) for these exchanges’ (1982: 91–2).

Allies are not the only ones to receive compensation for their dead; some of the societies without big men also practise compensation for enemies killed. This is the first purpose of peace ceremonies, when they exist, as among the Gururumba (Newman 1965: 53), Siane (Salisbury 1962: 26–7, 97, 100) or Daribi. Among the latter, each man killed is the object of a payment: ‘This payment is equal to a large bride-price and includes two pigs . . . As these pigs are led to the place of payment, the recipients aim their bows at the men leading them, then slowly swing the arrows downwards and shoot the pigs, emphasizing the “substitution” involved’ (Wagner 1972: 53 n. 17). These ceremonies may be rounded off by exchanges of women (Berndt 1962: 159, 235–6, 254–5; Hayano 1974: 288; Luzbetack 1954: 77–8; Rappaport 1968: 220–1; Reay 1959: 59, 90; 1984: 77). They are also an occasion for establishing or re-establishing economic exchanges (Koch 1974: 82–5; Rappaport 1968: 218–20). What can be seen emerging is the possibility of transforming the gifts compensating for the dead or wounded, and authorising the re-instatement of peace, into more or less regular exchanges of wealth and women. The ethnographic data illustrate a similar theoretical sequence.

There are societies in which war is an almost continuous phenomenon and peace ceremonies extremely rare: for example, the Jale, Baktaman, Maring or Dani (Barth 1975: 151–2; Heider 1970: 122, 162–5; Koch 1974: 82–5; Rappaport 1968: 218–20). In other groups, such as the Polopa, those who have suffered a loss can choose either revenge or compensation. A new cycle of exchanges is then established, this time between enemies (D. J. J. Brown 1979: 721–2). Similarly, the Gahuku-Gama do not appear to engage in peace negotiations with their permanent enemies, but vendettas are brought to an end by either a reconciliation ceremony or payment of a compensation (Read 1955: 253). Fore and Wiru customs illus-