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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

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BIG MEN AND GREAT MEN

The societies of Melanesia have been a constant stimulus to anthropological theory. In this collection of essays, anthropologists who have worked in all parts of the Melanesian region of the Pacific bring their expertise to bear on a single theoretical issue. This is a hypothesis formulated by Maurice Godelier concerning the relationship between power, kinship and wealth. Although tightly focussed on Godelier's work, the book opens up a major enquiry into the constitution of society in a part of the world where men of prominence come to personify the nature of power. 'Big men', entrepreneurs of exchanges, and 'great men', who flourish in societies characterised by restricted exchanges and ritual complexity, appear to belong to quite different systems. This book considers how substantial the difference between them really is.

The Melanesian 'big man' has been a stock anthropological figure for thirty years. This is the first time that the construct is fully explored, in terms of what it tells us about the social evolution of Melanesian societies, the relationship between wealth and ritual powers, the nature of male domination, and the comparison of apparently egalitarian political systems with those, also found in the same region, dominated by chiefs and rank.

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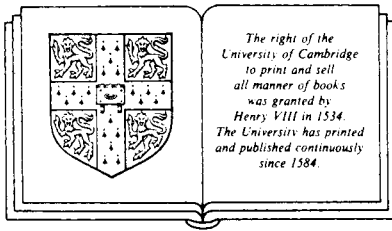
*Personifications of power
in Melanesia*

edited by

MAURICE GODELIER

and

MARILYN STRATHERN



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articles on Rossel ethnography and gift exchange as well as on the history of anthropology in Denmark. He is Lektor at the Institute of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen.

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Donald Tuzin received his Ph.D in 1973 from The Australian National University and is now Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, San Diego. In addition to numerous papers on Melanesian topics, he is the author of *The Ilahita Arapesh* (1976) and *The Voice of the*

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Tambaran (1980), and co-editor, with Paula Brown, of *The Ethnography of Cannibalism* (1983).

Roy Wagner, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Virginia, has published on the Daribi of the Papua New Guinea Highlands (*The Curse of Souw* 1967, *Habu* 1972, and *Lethal Speech* 1978) and on the Usen Barok of New Ireland (*Asiwinarong* 1986). His two works of anthropological criticism are *The Invention of Culture* (1975) and its sequel, *Symbols that Stand for Themselves* (1986).

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Preface

The societies of Melanesia have been a constant stimulus to anthropological theory. No other region of the world has had quite its sustained impact on the discipline – and one that in recent years seems if anything to be gathering momentum. Yet Melanesianists have been curiously reluctant to extend their own syntheses to the region as a whole. That requires a local theoretic, and theoretical contributions tend to come either in the form of programmatic articles or as a selective and thus domesticated framework for ethnographic monographs. Although several collected essays have appeared, some notable, these generally pose an ethnographic problem that is then worked out through the various localised contributions. What has been lacking is debate that *starts* with theoretical issues common to the region. This book does exactly that.

Its origin is a workshop convened in Paris in 1987 by Maurice Godelier and myself to consider a thesis initially developed in Godelier's comparison of the Baruya from the so-called Highlands fringe with societies from the central Highlands of Papua New Guinea. His monograph, *The Making of Great Men*, draws its theoretical inspiration from a semi-outsider's early attempt at synthesis, Marshall Sahlins's seminal yet necessarily abbreviated comparison of Polynesia and Melanesian chiefs and big men. Sahlins makes the figures of prominent men paradigms for entire polities. In effect, Godelier argues that within Papua New Guinea differences between entire social systems are made evident through such personifications of male power. He offers a pivotal contrast between the figures of big men and what he calls great men. Chapter 8 in his book, 'Great men societies, big men societies: two alternative logics of society', sets the agenda. The workshop intended to find how far the correlations which Godelier formulated so clearly in his own work held elsewhere in Melanesia.

Anthropological understanding of the region has for long been dominated by conventional distinctions between the Highlands and Lowlands of Papua New Guinea, and between the apparently egalitarian nature of

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these societies and their seaboard and island counterparts who have chiefs, systems of rank and graded societies. These quite radical differences have always been an embarrassment to any attempt to describe Melanesia as a whole, not least in their echo of Sahlins's particular Melanesian/Polynesian contrast. It was important to include Lowlands and island societies in our purview, and the volume extends Godelier's ideas geographically and culturally.

The results were productive, and in the best sense a surprise. The dimensions along which we sought to differentiate societies turned out in many cases to be discernible axes of differentiation *within* societies. At the same time, unexpected similarities appeared. The conventional distinctions between Highlands, Lowlands and island societies were not the barriers to comparison they seemed. This raises a significant challenge to traditional methods of cross-societal enquiry in general. It is not just that typologies are revealed to have limits, but the systemic nature of the differences and similarities between these societies question our understanding of cultural forms. The recent orthodoxy that cultural regions such as 'Melanesia' are mere artificial fabrications of the anthropologist does not allay it. Rather, it is as though these societies invite us to make contrasts that they then replicate on various scales for our edification; as though a gross difference between 'Polynesia' and 'Melanesia' were also being acted out in front of our eyes between the tiny islands of the Massim. The invitation is replicated when it also looks as though the very opposition between big men and great men societies can be found – as in one notable case documented in this book – within a single set of siblings.

A 'Melanesian' perspective merely stops the replication at one point. The justification for doing so lies in one resultant insight. The triangulation (big men, great men and chiefs) that informs many of the contributions here appears as the effect of dislodging the original terms of a binary contrast. But the third term is not so much dialectical outcome or mediating compromise or segmentary product as a remainder, what is left over after a two-way comparison is completed. Chiefs compared with big men leads to the discovery of great men; big men compared with great men uncovers 'odd men' who are neither, and so on. It would be trivial to suggest that 'more' instances would obviate the strategy. The interesting question is what in these societies elicits the analytical strategy from us. The book consequently makes no apology for privileging two terms (big men/great men) since any such pair would have similar analytical effect. It has, however, taken us (as anthropologists) the breadth of our regional scope to perceive this.

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This is then no ordinary set of conference papers whose coherence has to be justified after the event. The individual chapters of this volume offer a progressive and sustained argument which takes the reader through a sequence of positions, culminating in Godelier's reformulation of his original thesis. The strength of this enterprise can be attributed to three things.

First, the problems which the book addresses are not narrowly conceived as simply concerning styles of political leadership. The contributors have been chosen for their wide spread of interests – although all have first-hand fieldwork experience in Melanesia, they are also known for their writings on political economy or kinship, or gender relations, or the analysis of ritual and the exposition of symbolic forms. Secondly, they comprise scholars who have contributed to recent debate, the more senior being included because of current rather than earlier work, and the more recently published because their ethnographic writing has evolved in the context of contemporary issues. They bring a sense of the questions that should be concerning anthropologists in the 1990s, though these are not merely for anthropological edification. The reformulations offered here realise a particular kind of commitment to the peoples of this region; for the scholar there is no terminus to the work of understanding. One does not stop with this or that model – because the effort of comprehension must not stop. It is hoped that this commitment will be conveyed to the reader in the way in which the different chapters carry one another's ethnographic insights. Finally, although Godelier's work opens and closes the book, this is far from an act of homage. On the contrary, almost every chapter takes significant issue with Godelier's original ideas; together they are the un-making of his theory of great men. But the critiques are positive, not negative, and crucial to this has been his own participation in the debate.

The focus which Godelier's work originally presented has not been only decomposed but recomposed. In order to convey that sense of movement, the book adopts an unusual format for edited collections. The conventional 'theoretical-introduction-plus-ethnographic-cases' formula simply makes each an appendage of the other. Here, by contrast, following a brief explanatory introduction, the chapters are carried forward by their own momentum. The rubric at the head of each are in the editors', not the author's, words.

MARILYN STRATHERN

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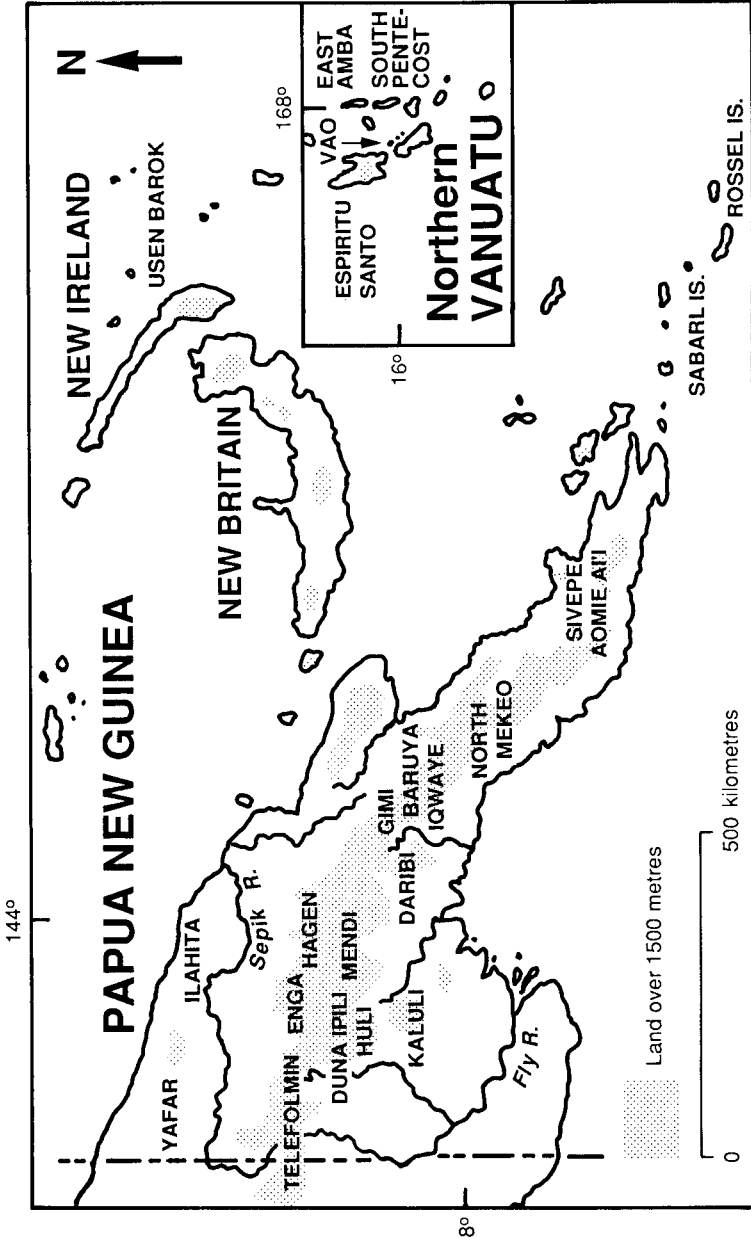
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Map of Papua New Guinea