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978-0-521-29410-2 - Urbanization in Papua New Guinea: A Study of Ambivalent Townsmen

Hal B. Levine and Marlene Wolfzahn Levine

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## 1. Introduction

We lived in Papua New Guinea for two and a half years, mostly in Port Moresby and Mount Hagen, but also visited many other urban centres, and in that time we rarely heard Papua New Guineans say a kind word about their towns. They complained of how expensive it was to live in the towns, and of the violence there, and of the danger and difficulties involved in living amid so many strangers. But even though they would denigrate town life, the migrants seemed to crave the excitement and exotic quality of what was still a largely European colonial environment. They enjoyed the night-life and sophistication, the money (when it came in) and the escape from village responsibilities, and they appreciated the chance to learn and experience new things.

At the same time, however, people seemed to perceive these as being wrong or even decadent reasons for leaving one's home. The message from most townsmen we met was pretty clear, that a person's proper place was back in the village. The fact that one was addicted to town life was nothing to be proud of.

This ambivalence towards city life was like an undercurrent in Papua New Guinea. It typically surfaced when people were feeling frustrated, unhappy or nostalgic for some reason, or when they were under direct pressure from kinfolk in their village. Then they often talked of going home and would sometimes leave quite suddenly, vowing not to return. But when people did go back they would boast about their urban experiences and, despite promises to the contrary made to their families and to themselves, they would probably turn up in Port Moresby or Lae again, laughing about how boring and uncomfortable village life can be. One's home was in the village, but there was a new life in the towns.

The towns of Papua New Guinea were originally colonial centres, always planned by and for white men, and thus essentially alien places. Colonization and extensive contact were relatively recent, and independence came only in 1975, making this one of the newest of 'developing nations'. As in the rest of the Third World, and despite their late start, substantial numbers of Papua New Guineans are moving into their urban areas. But rural life is still vigorous in the nation as a whole, and people are not very likely to be forced into town by the desperate rural poverty or severe land pressure one finds in parts of Asia, Latin America and even the Pacific. There is a real, viable rural alternative for Papua New

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Guinean townsmen. Traditional culture and social organization are very much alive and are even having a significant impact on the towns themselves as the people gradually change them from alien places into urban centres uniquely their own. The course of Papua New Guineans' adjustment to town life and the modification of their urban environment through the use of Papua New Guinean social idioms provides the theme of this monograph.

We have tried to synthesize the research that has been done in urban Papua New Guinea and to produce a meaningful and coherent picture of the main trends of urbanization as a social process. In order to accomplish this, it has been necessary to integrate the information by means of a conceptual scheme which is capable of pulling disparate studies together, but also flexible enough to accommodate the range of data and perspectives used by various researchers. The approach we have taken directs attention to the interaction between people and their urban environments and allows for an appreciation of the Papua New Guinean response to a type of social change that is occurring in most developing nations.

**Analytical framework**

Urbanization is viewed in various ways by social scientists. Perspectives differ not only by discipline but within the same subject as well. Rather than engage in an extended discussion of the various meanings and theoretical perspectives used in studies of urbanization in the Third World<sup>1</sup> we will concentrate on a presentation of our own views (developed from the overall literature, local case-studies and our own fieldwork) which provide the theoretical framework for this book's organization.

Discussing urbanization as a social process implies a focus on 'elements of culture, behaviour patterns and ideas' that are characteristic of towns (Little 1974: 7). Although some scholars concentrate on urbanization as involving a distinctive way of life (Wirth 1938) and one which greatly differs from that of rural villages, everyone who has done urban research in Papua New Guinea has recognized that elements of rural behaviour, culture and ideas greatly affect urban social organization. The distinction between rural and urban social behaviour may be quite subtle. In later chapters we will show how rural idioms of behaviour may produce distinctive social forms in urban environments. It would be easy to miss the

<sup>1</sup> General summaries and critiques of anthropological and sociological approaches to urbanization in the Third World may be found in Mitchell (1966) and Gutkind (1974) who refer readers to the numerous other sources available. Hanna and Hanna (1971) give a concise discussion of various viewpoints from different social sciences and Breese (1966) also discusses some of the different meanings of urbanization.

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importance of these idioms, however, if we used a framework which reified the urban sphere by treating it as a self-contained social system.<sup>2</sup>

It is crucial to avoid this tendency. In countries such as Papua New Guinea, where urbanization is such a recent phenomenon that the majority of urban dwellers were born in 'tribal' villages, it is more useful to conceive of our task as an analysis of the adaptation of urban immigrants to what is for them a new type of social environment.

Although that environment does differ in important ways from the rural one, the notion of adaptation allows us to view urban immigrants as bringing behaviour patterns into town with them, abandoning, modifying and retaining them as they are exposed to various social situations. Some of these situations may be best dealt with by the use of rurally developed social idioms while others may call for responses in terms of more peculiarly urban behaviour.

Towns are usually conceived of as having a number of distinguishing characteristics. Hanna and Hanna (1971: 6), for example, in their study of urbanization in black Africa, have identified relatively dense populations, a large number of social roles and a relative permanence of population and socio-economic infrastructure as being 'criteria of towns'. Geographers and demographers often specify a certain minimum population as an additional criterion of urbanism. Relatively little attention has been paid to the problem of what constitutes an urban centre in Papua New Guinea. The local Bureau of Statistics classifies settlements with a minimum population of 500, population density of 500 per square mile (approximately 200 per square kilometre), and a 'generally urban character', as towns for census purposes. This definition might seem excessively liberal to many social scientists, but even centres small enough to fit such a minimal definition may be towns in the local context. However, even though we feel the Bureau of Statistics definition is a defensible one, the fact that no substantial body of research data exists for towns with populations of less than 10,000 perhaps makes this a moot point.

In any case, we follow Gulick here. He stresses that size of population is less important to a sociological definition of 'urban' than the sort of traits mentioned by the Hannas (Gulick 1974). In Papua New Guinea all of these are associated with the presence of significant concentrations of non-indigenous people and the economic and social institutions created by them. An expatriate presence, along with the other criteria mentioned, defines a particular area as urban in Papua New Guinea.

When rural tribesmen or peasants move from their village to an environment with urban characteristics they typically become involved in

<sup>2</sup> Discussions of how to conceptualize the urban system abound in the urban anthropological literature. The sources mentioned in the previous footnote will introduce and refer the student to most of these.

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social situations that result in increased interactive range, in other words, situations in which they must deal with people who have either no place, or an uncertain one, in their particular rural system of social relations. Entering a position in a complex division of labour often involve the urbanite in a greater differentiation of roles and density of role relationships than in rural areas.

Some anthropologists have suggested that urbanization may profitably be approached in terms of an analysis of the roles assumed by townsmen: their combination, differentiation and availability. The urban social field may be conceived of as allowing for considerable flexibility of roles and role relationships in some spheres of urban life while prescribing particular combinations of roles in others (Banton 1973 and Southall 1973b, cited in Rew 1974: 214).

Viewing urban environments in a similar way we may conceptually distinguish two aspects of urban life which present themselves to formerly rural tribesmen settling in towns, demanding their entry into conceptually separate but interrelated fields of social relationships. Aspects of city life which relate to personal security, and leave an individual more or less free to choose his own associates, may be approached by the establishment of different sorts of social relationships than those which are entered into as a result of going about the more structured tasks of working for wages, living in multi-ethnic housing areas, dealing with bureaucracies, the foreign domination of business and supervisory positions, etc.

Like most newly developing nations, Papua New Guinea is not a comprehensive welfare state. High unemployment, housing shortages and the presence of known tribal enemies and potentially dangerous strangers are factors which necessitate a degree of mutuality on the part of migrants. People from rural areas may also need considerable urban socialization to cope with the mechanics of transport, job-hunting, the use of other urban facilities, etc. The strangeness of the environment also has the potential to produce loneliness and alienation if congenial and familiar company is not found. These exigencies of urban life may be most successfully met by the establishment of social relationships with people on whom the migrant has some moral claim, for example, a kinsman or fellow ethnic. The social networks constructed in the course of establishing personal bases in the urban environment may then be built in terms of behavioural styles and idioms that show great continuity with those used in rural areas. Although these strategies of establishing social relationships may have rural referents and idioms, their use in an urban environment is bound to produce social forms which are in some ways distinctly urban. But it is in this sphere, relating to personal security and establishing oneself in town, that roles and role relationships are left

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open or flexible by the urban system and the migrant most free to use his own personal and cultural styles.

Having such bases of security allows new townsmen to partake of the wider urban social field and weather the crises (most notably unemployment) which may overtake them in it. But behaviour and social relationships on the job, in relation to neighbours, government officials, expatriates, etc., are likely to be phrased in ways that are less continuous with rural social idioms. In contrast to the close relationships one has with kinsmen and fellow ethnics, those in the wider social sphere are likely to be more transitory, segmental, and superficial, though of course friends may be made here as well. Such relationships may be phrased in terms of specific work and racial roles, more general socio-economic statuses, etc. – idioms which are more or less peculiar to the urban environment.

We are then suggesting an approach to urbanization in countries like Papua New Guinea in terms of examining sets of social relationships, some of which allow townsmen to use rural strategies to adapt to urban life while others demand more urban and western behavioural patterns and idioms. Of course, these sets are unlikely to be as readily separable on the level of everyday life as they may be as sociological abstractions (or 'ideal types') which help provide a framework for analysis. For a better understanding of urban reality as reflected in day-to-day experiences we should recognize that the two sets of social relationships discussed above are necessarily linked and interwoven. It would be a gross oversimplification to ignore this linkage. To do so would imply a false dichotomy of 'native' aspects of urbanization on the one hand and purely introduced ones on the other. The really interesting social action is in our opinion the creation of new kinds of urban systems, out of what often were formerly alien colonial administrative centres, through the social action of townsmen who (in the case of Papua New Guinea) were excluded from those centres in the past except as temporary menial workers.

This creation may come about substantially through the selective exchange of idioms between the spheres. If townsmen attempt to establish close personal ties in the work situation, for example, by extending rural idioms to it, the idioms and the work situation may be subtly altered and take on a new flavour. On the other hand, socio-economic status differences from the more western urban sphere may take on significance in relations between kin and fellow ethnics, significantly altering a mode of relationship with important rural referents. By concentrating our synthesis on the interrelating of these conceptually separable spheres of social relationships, we feel we will be able to develop an understanding of urbanization as a social process in Papua New Guinea.

In summary, we will view townsmen as influencing urban systems while

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being influenced by them. In order to grasp the way in which this is occurring, we need to understand how social action is initiated within the context of certain constraints and incentives to behaviour which are imposed by the urban environment and the migrants' status and background. We should try to understand how social action is formulated (Berger and Luckmann 1966, Blumer 1969), how situations are seen by townsmen and the way in which new joint action (developing as a result of urbanization) emerges out of a framework of previous patterns of behaviour and requisites of the urban system, which is itself fundamentally affected by this dynamic social process. This to us is the essence of urbanization as a social process.

**Organization of the monograph**

Papua New Guinea's towns developed in the context of a colonial encounter which affected the development of particular urban centres and the urbanization process. In the second chapter we consider the main elements of the colonial situation, the policies and practices of various administrations, and the general nature of indigenous societies and their response to colonialism, as they bear on urban development. The overall lack of industrialization, late development of facilities for permanent indigenous residents, urban morphology, etc., are all important aspects of urbanism which are direct results of the colonial situation.

Chapter Three is concerned with the peopling of the towns. Migration itself is, of course, significantly affected by colonial policy and labour needs. But as we shall see, rural-urban movement has become increasingly detached from formal controls. The kinds of people who do come to town, their areas of origin, skills, reasons for coming, perception of the advantages of living in towns, commitment to an urban or rural future, position in the emerging socio-economic hierarchy, greatly affect urban life-styles and are the main topics discussed in this chapter.

With the background provided by the second and third chapters, we move our discussion towards urban social relationships. Chapter Four examines the establishment of primary relationships in urban areas through the use of kinship, ethnicity, traditional and urban transactional styles and idioms. The use of such primary relationships and principles of categorization to establish a base in the towns, their effect on the composition of neighbourhoods, leadership, women's roles, and the importance of strategies aimed at the maintenance of rural ties, are all part of the continuing process of maintaining a secure urban niche.

The fifth chapter is concerned with the application of some of these same idioms to what we have called the wider social field. It examines the world of work, the relationship between job prestige and individual

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prestige, the importance of socio-economic categories, inter-ethnic interaction patterns, and élites. The tendency of townsmen to perceive, categorize and stereotype each other in pervasively ethnic terms is also discussed in detail.

Although we maintain that Papua New Guineans have been creating a new urban culture, Chapter Six focuses on an aspect of urbanism which has been less amenable to penetration by local social idiom. Melanesians have found that dealing with bureaucratic organizations is a major stumbling block in coping with town life. This is demonstrated in a discussion of urban government, voluntary associations, businessmen and bureaucracy. Colonial-style urban institutions and local people will have to adapt mutually to each other's presence for the emergence of truly national urban centres to eventuate.

Chapter Seven begins with a critique of various views of local urbanization. This is followed by a comparative discussion of towns in other parts of the world which is designed to point out the relatively unique as well as the more generally shared aspects of the Papua New Guinean situation. We then summarize our account of the towns as Papua New Guinean places and conclude with an overview of problems and prospects for the future.

## 2. Urban development and form

Our aim in this chapter is to sketch the overall development and form of urban areas in Papua New Guinea in light of the country's colonial history. We stress general trends in order to show how policies and perceptions about natives, and their own late familiarity with towns and westernization, have combined to cast urban forms in a particular mould. After a consideration of aspects of traditional societies, and various sections dealing with colonial developments, housing policy is stressed as an especially visible and important instance of the effect of colonial policy on urban morphology and social differentiation. The chapter ends with a discussion of urban variety to balance the emphasis on general trends.

The relevance of traditional societies to opening a discussion of early urban developments may not be immediately apparent, especially since we pointed out in the introduction to this monograph that Papua New Guinea's towns were founded by expatriates. Unlike many other areas of the developing world such as Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and West Africa (but in common with the rest of the island South Pacific), there were no indigenous pre-colonial urban settlements in New Guinea. As we will show in some detail below, native people were given little scope to participate actively in the development of their country's towns except as hewers of wood and drawers of water until late in the colonial period. Nevertheless, even from the beginning, the nature of local societies and cultures themselves acted as a crucial influence on the development of the formerly colonial centres.

We should point out, however, that any attempt at a brief overview of Papua New Guinea's traditional societies is bound to be problematic. There are two apparently contradictory avenues of approach to take. One would be to stress that in an area of 12,000 essentially independent villages, whose people speak approximately 700 different languages and have been the subject of more intensive anthropological research than any comparable region of the world, a capsule overview is really impossible. While we could perhaps bypass the issue entirely and simply refer the reader to the available literature, this would prevent us from showing that certain aspects of the overall socio-cultural landscape of Papua New Guinea fundamentally influenced the urbanization process.

The second path (which we have taken) is paradoxically to stress that local societies are very similar indeed – at least with respect to their

degree of overall socio-cultural integration. We will, then, be referring more to a common level of structural complexity than to aspects of socio-cultural diversity. As much as we feel that students of Melanesian society should not be mesmerized by the area's uniformity of societal scale or its great cultural diversity (Barth 1971), we would argue that this very general approach is most advisable here. Although each particular local culture or social structure may influence urbanization in a variety of ways, the available urban literature is by no means extensive enough for us to compare each group's experiences and impact nor to arrive at a complete understanding of all the comparative implications of cultural difference for urbanization. Although we do attempt this for a limited number of groups and circumstances later in the book, what we wish to stress in this chapter is that the interaction of a certain type of society and variety of colonialism has greatly influenced urban development in Papua New Guinea. Hence the discussion which follows presents only a basic overview of a situation which may, if urban ethnographies become extensive and detailed enough, eventually warrant more detailed comparative ethnographic analysis.

### **Traditional societies<sup>1</sup>**

Papua New Guinea's indigenous settlement patterns and social organization reflect the fragmented nature of the island's environment, its isolation from the eastern and western centres of civilization, and the needs of small-scale subsistence economies. Administrative policy was greatly influenced by the distribution and lack of political and economic centralization of the country's relatively small population (approximately 2.5 million people) which was spread out over 700,000 square kilometres. Papua New Guineans' responses to urbanization are, of course, importantly related to the type of societies they come from, as well as the roles colonial administrators allowed native people to play in urban life.

Local indigenous societies are typified by a lack of elaborate social hierarchies. Acknowledged leaders are men of influence who (in the great majority of societies) have achieved positions which rest on a base of personal qualities and relationships. 'Big-men' create obligations and followers by bringing prestige or material benefit to others through their

<sup>1</sup> The literature dealing with local traditional societies is enormous. The three-volume *Ethnographic Bibliography of New Guinea* provides sources prior to 1968. The *Encyclopedia of Papua New Guinea* provides summary articles on various aspects of societal scale such as economics, politics, etc. An overview of Melanesian settlement patterns, location and trade is found in Brookfield with Hart (1971). Bulmer (1975) provides an up-to-date summary account of the area's pre-history.

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astute management of generally available resources. They neither occupy a position in a formal government bureaucracy nor control exclusive title to resources. Access to land (the primary means of production) is regulated by the kinship system, and all members of a kin group have land rights. Bureaucracies, police forces and social stratification (other than on a basis of sex and age) are aspects of life introduced by outsiders which assume greatest importance in towns. Traditional social systems were organized in terms of kinship idioms, not caste or class.

Such personal forms of leadership and social organization, resting on obligation and support by local kin, are effective in small-scale societies. Traditional societies were indeed small, rarely extending past local settlements of a few hundred people. Although tribes in the highlands, for example, may have up to 8000 members, these are ephemeral entities, often split by fighting, which rarely function as units.

In marked contrast to the world economy which is making ever greater inroads into Papua New Guinea, traditional economic activities are subsistence-oriented and do not involve elaborate division of labour nor full-time specialization of tasks, except on the basis of age and sex. The main subsistence activity is vegetable gardening, which provides for the bulk of the diet, and (on the coast) fishing. Aside from pigs and dogs there were no domesticated animals. Although pigs are crucial exchange resources and Papua New Guineans seem as attached to them as certain Africans are to cattle, they compete with humans for food, cannot be herded and do not provide milk. There was no transhumescence in Papua New Guinea. Everyone was in some way dependent on the production of vegetables from small plots worked with simple tools. Although the anthropological literature details the existence of various forms of shell money, the production of highly sophisticated works of art, and a series of long-range trade systems (e.g. the Kula described by Malinowski (1922)), these operated within the context of the political situation outlined above and the great predominance of subsistence activities in the economy.

Although Papua New Guinean societies are homogeneous in terms of their scale (or level of structural complexity) this is only a very general aspect of social systems. A major theme in the extensive anthropological literature on Papua New Guinea's traditional societies is the extraordinary cultural diversity, mentioned above, which coexists with this unity of scale. This diversity itself is a fact of great moment to Papua New Guinea as a nation state, because it is in the towns that people become most aware of this heterogeneity and act on it in interesting ways.

The island of New Guinea was peopled by many different waves of pre-historic migrants. The history of these migrations is largely unknown, and may never be fully understood because of the length of time over which they occurred and the great number of movements and local