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0521385040 - Stealing People's Names: History and Politics in a Sepik River Cosmology

Simon J. Harrison

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Introduction

This is a study of cosmology and political life among the Manambu, a people of the Sepik River in northwestern Papua New Guinea. When I was planning my fieldwork early in 1977, there was little published material on the Manambu apart from an outline of their language (Laycock 1965) and a brief but fascinating ethnographic sketch by Newton (1971). These suggested close cultural links between the Manambu and their downriver neighbours, the Iatmul, whose culture had been the subject of one of the most original monographs in the ethnographic literature (Bateson 1958).

Before I had ever been to Papua New Guinea, I had been intrigued by Bateson's references to ceremonial debates, in which Iatmul descent groups disputed the ownership of ancestral names and totems, and by his characterisation of the Iatmul as a people among whom personal names formed 'a theoretical image of the whole culture' (Bateson 1958: 228). But I had no plans to make such matters the focus of my own research. I hoped to study a more familiar theme in Melanesian ethnography: the ceremonial wealth-exchanges which tend to be an important feature of traditional Melanesian politics, and the self-made leaders, or Big Men, who earn their status and influence in these transactions.

But it was clear from the start of my stay among the Manambu that the villagers had an intense, and highly disputatious, preoccupation with the ownership of personal names. I arrived at the settlement of Avatip, where I later established my home, to find the community in the throes of a major dispute between two of its largest descent groups. A few years earlier, both of these groups had apparently given one of their infant children the same name, Manggalaman. It was explained to me that it was anomalous and highly offensive for children of different descent groups to be namesakes. The two groups had since then quarrelled bitterly over which of them owned the name, each accusing the other of having 'stolen' it. Preparations were under way for what my younger English-speaking informants described as a debate, in which the elders of the two sides would compete and the winners (by some obscure means described to me only as 'like a school examination') would force the

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losers to relinquish the name. The atmosphere in the village was very tense. My rather rash attempts to enquire into the dispute at this stage were met with a good deal of suspicion. As I only learned much later, the senior men of each side were closely guarding certain secret mythological lore crucial to the dispute, and were very apprehensive that it might fall into the hands of their opponents and enable them to win the debate.

The debate took place: a big, elaborate event which lasted for about twenty hours and involved the whole population of the village. Before many more months passed, a number of similar disputes broke out between other descent groups, and more debates were staged. Much time and energy was being spent on these affairs; the important political figures in the community were men expert in debating, and these oratorical contests seemed to be the key political institution of the society. The villagers did not make competitive or otherwise overtly 'political' gift exchanges with each other, and wealth seemed to have little political significance. I felt that I would be giving the rather low-key bridewealth and mortuary payments, which I witnessed in the meantime, an artificial importance if I made them the focus of my research. I also began to feel quite disoriented, as the months went by and I established personal relationships, by what appeared to me a completely unintelligible obsession with the ownership of names on the part of my friends and informants, who seemed in all other respects people of exemplary good sense and sanity. It became a personal necessity to discover the reasons for it, a way of surviving what is wholly inadequately called culture shock.

Altogether I spent a little under twenty-two months among the Manambu, between July 1977 and December 1978, and between July and December 1979, and the 'ethnographic present' of this study refers to those years. I made my home at Avatip because it was the largest of the three Manambu settlements, and seemed therefore to offer the best opportunities for research. The questions in which I became interested called for an intensive familiarity with a single community, and I carried out most of my research at Avatip except for short visits made to the two other communities for purposes of comparison. I was quickly incorporated into the clan system and given a Manambu name, though I suspect this was done in a spirit of systematisation rather than for sentimental reasons. The Manambu are relentless 'totemic' classifiers and insist on including virtually everything in the world, even stray Englishmen, into their totemic categories. The Manambu language is not an especially difficult one and in time I was able to understand it reasonably well. But throughout my fieldwork I remained a mediocre speaker of it and often had to resort to the *lingua franca* of Melanesian pidgin, in which most of the villagers were fluent. The language of Avatip oratory uses a specialised, archaic and heavily 'Iatmulised' lexicon and a difficult, esoteric imagery; I found debates impossible to follow without extensive help.

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The immediate ethnographic aims of this book are to explain why rights in personal names are the most important strategic resource for which political actors at Avatip compete; to describe the processes by which these conflicts over names are carried out and resolved; and to examine their implications for the political history of the society. But more broadly, my theme is the relation between the symbolic order and the order of political action and power. In Avatip society, power consists in knowledge and rests on the most insubstantial yet refractory of bases: an intersubjective, shared world of meaning. In the early chapters of this book, I discuss Avatip religion, cosmology and ritual, because it is these which define, for men, the goals of all political action and form the universe of means and ends within which they compete. This discussion lays the groundwork for an analysis, in the later chapters, of the politics of debating and of the key processes of conflict in the community, which I shall call name-disputes.

Avatip descent groups have specialised hereditary functions in magic and ritual. These groups, or rather the senior men who represent them, are conceived as collaborating in this way to maintain the total world order. To the villagers, their society is held together and made into a politically organised totality, a 'polity', by the organic interlocking of all their descent groups' cosmological powers. At one level, the early chapters form an extended exegesis of a fundamental concept, *ndja'am*, which encapsulates the idea of a 'total' reciprocity between groups, involving exchanges of women, wealth, magical and ritual services, and esoteric knowledge.

Ever since Durkheim's critique of Spencer's sociology, a long-standing question of theory in social science has concerned the opposed perspectives of holism and individualism: the question whether society is to be understood as a supra-individual reality or as just a collection of transacting individuals (Andreski 1984: 37–41; Barth 1966; Durkheim 1933; Gellner 1973: 1–17; Leach 1961a; Peel 1971: 185–191; Popper 1957; Spencer 1876; Tuzin 1976). What has made this question a difficult one to settle is that it is not only a question for the observer. The peoples that we study may themselves often be faced with making similar choices about how to represent their social worlds, and may implicitly use theories resembling nominalism and realism. As Gellner (1973: 5) notes, individuals may themselves 'have holistic concepts and often act in terms of them.' A folk model of this sort may perhaps only be an ideology, a politically motivated misrepresentation of the way the society in some sense actually works. But even though it may be only an ideology, it will feed back upon action and have real effects.

Avatip social theory, as expressed in ritual, is very much a realist one: in ritual, men portray their society as a transcendent, relational totality, with the

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subclans and their funds of ritual power having a timeless reality quite independent of the existence of their members. All the processes of political action that I analyse in this book are oriented wholly toward that image and are impossible to understand without reference to it.

I try to identify the conditions – social, economic, historical and so forth – that have predisposed Avatip men toward adopting realist conceptions of this sort in their ritual representations. But more importantly, I wish to examine the consequences which the use of this model have for long-term processes of political action.

The most basic consequences are first, that cosmology and ritual are conceived to form a closed, finite universe of personal names, ritual powers and other forms of immaterial property that men treat as having a reality transcending themselves; and second, that men compete politically on the basic assumption that those resources, and the status they confer, are limited and of scarce value.

Avatip realism is implicitly a political ideology because the division of ceremonial powers in the society creates hereditary inequalities in status between groups and between individuals. These inequalities operate beyond the sphere of ritual only in limited and indirect ways. But they are an important organising principle of ritual, and are given their most intense and overt expression in the rituals of the male initiatory cult. Outside of these ritual contexts, the relations which men and groups have with one another are relatively egalitarian, and extremely competitive. But what they are struggling constantly for are hereditary positions of high status in ritual, and the goals of all political competition are these 'ascribed' ritual prerogatives. For men hereditary stratification is a powerful religious ideology. Yet it is only episodically, in the actual staging of large-scale rituals, that they are able to bring this stratification into existence and live it in collective experience. A major initiation ritual requires years of complex planning and preparation. During those years, innumerable negotiations and intrigues take place as men, and the groups they represent, begin competing for the most important roles in the ritual. When the ritual takes place it is, in effect, the brief crystallisation of the power relations which have provisionally been established through these protracted struggles. The current balance within a constantly shifting field of power relations is transfigured, momentarily, into a ritually-validated hierarchy of status. A major ritual is a difficult and, in terms of time, energy and social conflict, *costly* achievement by political groups and the men leading them. It is the accomplishment of a short-lived moment of consensual and legitimate hierarchy among themselves.

This brings me to the significance of Avatip debating. When two groups compete in a debate for the ownership of a personal name, they are in fact competing, in the allusive and metaphorical language of oratory, for a secret prerogative in male initiatory ritual. Although debates are entirely public

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events, only initiated men, supposedly, ever understand the real issues at stake. So far as women and noninitiates are concerned, debates are disputes purely over personal names. Quarrels over names, although noninitiates do not 'officially' know it, are actually the back-stage politics of the rituals of the male initiatory cult.

The debates are, in fact, an integral part of the preparations for an Avatip ritual. When plans are laid for an important initiation, a prolonged and often complexly interconnected series of disputes break out, creating or reopening major political rifts in the community. These disputes are, in other words, geared in to the successive phases of the initiatory system and, together with the initiatory system itself, follow a cycle lasting about a generation. These cyclical patterns of conflict are the subject of the book's later chapters.

I focus on two subclans which, in very different ways, are pivotal in the network of political relations in the community. One is a small, politically weak but ritually very senior subclan whose cosmological powers are being, and have been for several generations, gradually appropriated by more successful rivals. The second is the largest and politically most powerful subclan at Avatip; although it is a junior group, its leaders have tried over the generations, with some success, to make it ritually the most important group in the community. This part of the book is, in a sense, the history of these two groups, and of the conflicts they have been involved in, or which have in one way or another revolved around them, and which had shaped the major political processes in the community in the post-contact period. What I particularly try to show is the way in which a descent group's fortunes in the ritual system are linked closely, both as cause and effect, to its reproductive fortunes. Underpinning the competition for names and ritual prerogatives, there is another kind of rivalry altogether: for demographic viability and for the reproductive powers of women.

Polity and cosmology in Oceania

Avatip ritual, myth and cosmology are constantly altered and revised as groups, and the leaders representing them, compete in debates and challenge one another's status. One of the aims of this book is to identify the patterns of change in ritual and cosmology which these processes of political competition produce.

At one level, the basic symbolism and organisation of Avatip ritual and cosmology seem to have remained stable over a very long period. Groups rise and fall in status, but most of their disputes result simply in redistributions of ritual privileges within the existing cosmology and do not alter the cosmology itself. Nor do these processes result in any overall transformation of the political system, because all that happens is that a succession of identically-constituted subclans displace each other in a fixed status hierarchy. But what I

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wish also to show is that these competitive processes have involved, for some political actors, a purposeful long-term aim of bringing about changes of a different order: modifications not just *within* the existing structure of political-cosmological relationships, but *of* it.

In writing this book, I have drawn much inspiration from the extended-case method, which I regard as a powerful technique for the analysis of long-term patterns of conflict (see Van Velsen 1967). But I use a time-scale somewhat longer than is usual in an extended-case study proper, because the processes I shall describe extend over a period of three, or in some cases more, generations. Sometimes, I shall write as though the political actors in Avatip society were descent groups. This is not an attempt to hypostatise these groups but an effect of the time-scale of the processes I wish to analyse. Many conflicts in the community are short-lived, but the ones in which I am especially interested, for reasons I shortly discuss, are transgenerational. In other words, they transcend the careers, and the lifetimes, of the political actors who actually carry them out. An Avatip leader, by being born into a particular subclan, is born also into a complex of long-standing ritual disputes. These define for him, as they did for his predecessors and perhaps shall for his successors, a set of major, long-term political goals and strategies which have been highly consistent over the generations. It was fortunate for my research that Avatip has had a large, stable and permanently settled population for several hundred years. There are extensive and detailed oral histories from which to reconstruct, fairly reliably, the political relations between groups over my chosen time-depth of somewhat under a century.

Although I have borrowed from the extended-case method a concern with recurrent cycles of conflict, I have not tried to borrow the theoretical perspective with which the method tended to be associated. This perspective, a sophisticated and late version of structural-functionalism, was an attempt to integrate the analysis of conflict into a view of society as founded ultimately upon moral consensus. The aim of the 'classic' extended-case studies (for instance, Turner 1957) was to examine the ways in which repetitive patterns of conflict function in the reproduction of social systems, and serve in the long term to maintain homeostasis and stability.

The conflicts I analyse are certainly cyclical, but I argue that they involve, and did so before European contact, a dissensus among men regarding the significance of ascribed inequality. Avatip men certainly consider hereditary inequalities to be fundamental in the organisation of ritual. But the intense inter-group disputes which precede every ritual are not only struggles for status but also pre-emptive attempts these groups are making to prevent each other from gaining excessively or permanently dominant positions in the ritual status hierarchy. It is quite clear from their consistent political strategies, that the leaders of at least one of the larger and more powerful subclans have for a long time actually been seeking this pre-eminent status, and that others are

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trying to prevent them from gaining it. The leaders of this subclan have been trying to bring about a basic change in the structure of the cosmology: the transformation of a system of cooperative reciprocities in which every group plays a role according to its specific cosmological functions, into a quite different pattern in which one powerful descent group, their own, dominates the community and controls all the key ritual powers.

Forms of ritual organisation analogous to both of these patterns exist in other Oceanic societies. The first resembles the ritual systems of the Aboriginal societies of central Australia such as the Aranda (Spencer and Gillen 1904), based on a collaborative interdependence of politically equal clans each with its own distinctive totemic powers. But the Oceanic societies in which the second pattern is found are the chiefly polities, in which the major ritual powers are a prerogative of those of high rank or chiefly status. A widespread feature of Oceanic cosmologies, in other words, is an association of particular cosmological functions with particular descent groups; but a rearrangement of the ritual responsibilities, of the way in which these ritual powers are distributed among groups, can imply wholly different forms of political organisation. Each of these cosmological patterns contains the possibility of the other because, in principle, one can be transformed into the other by degrees, and without any change at all in the substantive contents of cosmology, simply by a gradual alteration in their social distribution. The 'same' cosmology can remain, the same ritual symbols enduring timeless and unchanged over history, but their political *meaning* can be progressively transformed by a reordering of the key social roles and relationships among the actors in ritual. Depending on the degree to which ritual powers are controlled by a minority or dispersed equally among all descent groups, they can 'signify' either rank at one extreme or complete political equality of groups at the other.

My argument is that the reason why certain Avatip subclans are seeking to achieve a pre-eminent status in ritual and cosmology, is that they are seeking to use that dominance to legitimise claims to ascribed political authority. In the disputes over cosmology which have been taking place this century in the higher grades of the men's cult, some of the most senior custodians, and innovators, of Avatip ritual and cosmology have been trying to establish embryonic forms of rank and chieftainship. I am not suggesting that the political system could be transformed *simply* by transforming the structure of the cosmology: in order to change cosmology in this way, a subclan must in the first place achieve a real *de facto* political dominance over other groups. What the ritual system offers, to a group sufficiently effective in defeating all rivals, is a means of institutionalising that *de facto* power. That is, the cosmology contains within itself the conceptual possibility of a new form of political organisation, and it is that conceived possibility that some political actors are seeking to make real. What has made conflict between groups so incessant and intense for several generations is that the ultimate issue at stake in these

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disputes has been, implicitly, the actual political system of the community as it is represented in ritual.

Up until some years ago, it was common to distinguish two broad geographical patterns of leadership and political organisation in South Pacific societies: the chiefly polities of Polynesia, based on rank and ascribed leadership, and the egalitarian systems of Melanesia, in which leadership is gained by personal achievement (see Sahlins 1963). A number of authors have since then argued that this oversimplifies an often complex interplay, in these societies, between principles of ascription and achievement, as well as the complex diversity of political systems in the region as a whole (Allen 1981, 1984; Chowning 1979; Douglas 1979; Godelier 1986). In the same geographical region as Avatip, for instance, there is a very wide spectrum of forms of leadership. At one extreme there are small-scale, seminomadic groups with minimally developed political institutions, such as the Sanio-Hiowe (Townsend 1978) and Bahinemo (Dye 1984; Newton 1971: 18–32) of the Upper Sepik. At another extreme, forms of rank and ascribed political office are found among the speakers of Austronesian languages in the Schouten Islands (Hogbin 1970, 1978; Lutkehaus 1984a, 1984b; Wedgwood 1934) and, in more attenuated versions, in some of the mainland societies with which they have trade connections (Josephides 1982, 1984; Lipset 1984; Meeker et al. 1986; Meiser 1955). In the middle Sepik foothills, to the north of Avatip, the Abelam and other intensive yam-cultivators have 'Big Man' polities of a classically Melanesian type (Forge 1970; Kaberry 1971); while elements of ascription and incipient social stratification have been reported among some of the Iatmul fisherfolk of the lower Sepik River (Metraux 1978: 50).

But in contrast to this variety of political forms, certain basic similarities in Sepik ritual organisation stand out. Each local polity usually consists of a number of kin groups differentiated from each other by hereditary ritual accoutrements. These appurtenances commonly include, as they do at Avatip, totems, spirit-beings, personal names, initiatory sacra, myths, song-cycles and spells. A large and important part of these regalia usually relates to the community's male initiatory cult, each segment having its own cult-spirits, sacred objects, ritual functions, and initiatory lore.

In effect, the same basic structure of ritual serves to support a variety of political arrangements in Sepik societies: small-scale chiefdoms, egalitarian systems, and others in which, as at Avatip, ideologies of male egalitarianism and of hereditary privilege coexist in an uneasy and unresolved tension. These political systems are different actualisations of the possibilities of power offered by a widespread Oceanic configuration of ritual and cosmology.

Ritual and history

An often noted characteristic of ritual symbolism is its ambiguity: the fact that the same symbolic content can serve to represent quite different patterns of

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social relationships. It is in this ambiguity of ritual that its political utility lies, because the same symbolism can be put to quite different, and even contradictory, political ends (Leach 1954). An important recent analysis making this point is Bloch's (1986) study of the circumcision ritual of the Merina of Madagascar. Bloch shows that the symbolism of this ritual has remained remarkably unchanged over several centuries, despite enormous political transformations in the society. More or less elaborated, truncated or expanded at different periods, the ritual has nevertheless been carried across the centuries with its core symbolism unaltered; what has varied over history are the political functions or uses to which it has been put at different periods by different interest-groups. The history and function of the ritual on the one hand, and its symbolic content on the other, remained two largely autonomous dimensions that coexisted but did not strongly interact.

The function of a ritual, Bloch argues, is open to political manipulation and is therefore highly variable over history; its symbolism, on the other hand, is relatively impervious to time. The crucial point which Bloch thereby establishes is that ritual symbolism is not directly determined by political and economic circumstances, because the same system of symbols can be made to serve wholly different political-economic regimes. In that respect, religious representations have their own historical autonomy. But this autonomy seems, to Bloch, a kind of inertia: rituals are refractory to changing social conditions because they represent the world as unchanging, and do so in a way that is only semi-propositional, half way between a statement and an act, and so cannot easily be challenged. But it does not follow that ritual itself is necessarily static. All that follows is that, whatever changes occur in a ritual, it will always retain its semi-propositional character and the images of the world it portrays will always be ones of changelessness and stability.

The sources of the stability of ritual symbolism must therefore be sought elsewhere, in its uses rather than in its intrinsic characteristics. Among the Merina, the successive political groups that associated themselves with the circumcision ritual arose in processes of state formation, periods of nationalistic resistance to colonial rule, and so forth. That is to say, these groups came into being through political transformations quite extraneous to the ritual order itself. The ritual was simply a resource they used for their own ends as they came and went over history. What they sought from associating themselves with the ritual, and playing key roles in it, was the prestige or 'unchallengeable' legitimacy this could confer. The ritual remained highly stable over centuries of political upheaval, because it was to the advantage of these successive groups to conserve it, not alter it, and to put its aura of timeless authority in the service of their particular goals. The symbolism endured, contra Bloch, to the extent that its political function did *not* change, but remained that of legitimising traditional authority. All that changed were the political orders that used the ritual for this end.

Comparing Avatip and the Merina, I would suggest a general point about

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those ritual systems which are used to legitimise traditional authority: that what is manipulated for political ends, and therefore highly variable over history, is not indeed the symbolic content of ritual, but the social identities of the key actors in it, the social distribution of the rights of control or 'ownership' in the rituals. These are the components of ritual that articulate most closely with historical processes, because they depend wholly on, and more or less immediately reflect, the changing realities of power relationships. Fundamental political changes can happen, yet they leave the ritual system essentially unchanged, except that certain roles in the system are played by different categories of actors.

Avatip and the Merina differ in that the formation of new political orders among the Merina was simply *reflected* in these reapportionings of ritual roles; at Avatip new political orders form *through* such processes. Working within the existing content of Avatip ritual and cosmology, from which all power draws its legitimacy, new political orders *can* only form themselves through reallocations of the key rights and roles in ritual. I am not arguing that reallocations of this sort are in themselves a sufficient condition to transform the political system, but that they are a *necessary* one.

Where the two societies most basically differ, in short, is in their conception of the relationship between the ritual order and the shifting realities of power. When new political orders arose among the Merina, they only sought legitimacy from the ritual, not their reality. Their control of the circumcision ritual was not a necessary condition for their existence. As Bloch argues, the reality of all the successive regimes was based upon domination and violence, and their *existence* was fully guaranteed by wider political and economic processes quite beyond the ritual order.

But Avatip is a society in which political groups do not simply draw legitimacy, but also their identities, from the ritual order. They define themselves as intrinsically ritual entities. More accurately, it is the political system itself as a global totality that is defined in this way. The control of all the different rituals by particular descent groups, the organic interdependence of all their different ritual functions, are the conceived basis of their reality as a unitary political whole and the means by which they construct themselves in the first place *as* a system of political relations.

In such a society, real political changes can in principle originate as innovations in ritual, myth and cosmology, because forms of authority that do not yet exist can nevertheless be constructed *conceptually* as permutations of the existing organisation of ritual. This freedom of ideation is in fact historically highly determined; but the basic historical constraints are those imposed by the existing patterns of ritual and cosmology, on which the legitimacy of all power is based. That is, actors can imagine new forms of political relationships only by unfolding or developing the inner possibilities of these inherited structures of ritual in something like the activity that Lévi-