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0521416914 - Payback: The Logic of Retribution in Melanesian Religions

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Preliminaries:
The Theory of Retributive Logic

This book concerns itself with some of the more remarkable features of Melanesian life: payback killing or the taking of indiscriminate revenge on enemies; prodigious acts of generosity without guarantee of comparable returns; and intricate modes of explaining important social events, especially disaster, sickness, and death. It will be argued that vengeance, reciprocity and the means of interpreting social affairs are integrally related in most Melanesian worldviews, and that these traditional interrelationships help explain why Melanesia's adjustment to rapid technological and social change has its own special flavour. Behind the Melanesian pidgin term *bekim* (payback)¹ lies the presumption that life, punctuated by dangerous feuding and competitions, coloured by the excitement of reciprocities and trade, is to be apprehended as a continuous interweaving of gains and losses, giving and taking, wealth and destitution, joy and sorrow, vitality and death. How Melanesians think about the significant events and situations affecting them, and how their thinking is translated into action, are points of inquiry covered by my phrase 'the logic of retribution'.

Elsewhere I have used the idiom retributive logic of both biblical and Graeco-Roman beliefs about the divine distribution of rewards and punishments in history (Trompf 1979a: 93–106, 155–74, 231–41, 285–95; 1979b: 219–29; 1983a; 1990a; 1994). Here I define it as any logical framework of ideas

¹ As a verb = to give back, to reimburse, to answer, or to average: as a noun = exchange, repayment, payment, payback, or revenge, in Papua New Guinea pidgin (Mihalic 1971: 66). For equivalents elsewhere, cf., e.g., Camden 1977, s.v. 'Pei', 'Bak', etc., and note the Solomonese *peimbak*. *Pebek* (*im*) is not commonly used in Melanesian pidgin(s), but gaining wider currency. Pay(-)back as a substantive is itself barely beyond English slang, receiving its heaviest usage among anglophones of the southwest Pacific.

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enabling people to give reasons for their retaliations and concessions, and to interpret the dramatic changes of human existence in terms of rewards and punishments, praise and blame. Human thinking, admittedly, is bound up with action and, for that matter, emotions; yet, in the following pages I will concentrate on styles of reasoning, setting the priority of this study on the way people explicate actions and attitudes, and only secondarily on external behaviour and emotional states. That Melanesians interpret vicissitudes of life in terms of requital or retributive principles is clear from published research, but the notions involved have not been thoroughly examined in their interrelationship as expressions of religion, and retributive logic has not yet gained recognition as an important cross-cultural phenomenon.

Retributive logic is endemic to humanity. Childhood experiences in every culture are quickly filled with rewards and punishments for doing 'right' and 'wrong' with the gifts and withdrawals of parental affection, with instructions about right behaviour and attitude (whom not to enrage, for instance, or how to recognize and account for the significant happenings in everyday life). Coping in any society requires the ability to estimate. Children come to 'test' the degrees of permissiveness in the human and natural worlds. When wanting their own way, they intuit when they are over-exasperating another, either giving in or holding on to their 'victory' in accordance with their current temperament or relative sense of security. In their play and widening experiences they come to appreciate an inchoate spectrum ranging from homely safety to real danger, and from pleasure to pain. All the basic principles of education and socialization to be found the world over presuppose and reinforce this incipient, infantine power of assessment or calculation. One misdemeanour incurs more parental wrath than another, and to acquire the simplest skills, such as walking and talking, is to learn to surmount levels of inadequacy by doing better. Simple notions of causal relation develop from the parents' or child's own threats: 'if you do that, I will do this!' It is in this 'ready reckoning' a primal casuistry usually learnt within the complex environment of a family and other humans, within a veritable forest of words, symbolic actions and fluctuating emotions, that one detects the child's furtive rehearsals of retributive logic (Piaget 1924; Ginsburg and Opper 1969: 72–116; Chomsky 1972: 13–33, cf. von Bertalanffy 1971: 208–09; Berger and Luckmann 1967: 58–71, 168–73).

Revenge

To feel inclined to pay back those who are ill-disposed towards us is to be human. Few there be who are 'enthusiasts for punishment' who become 'excited when publicly covered with opprobrium and infamy' (de Sade [1787] 1931: 326–7). Aggressive urges usually well up in us when faced with

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condemning, unpleasant, threatening, or overbearing attitudes, when realizing we are being deceived, and especially when convinced that we have done nothing to merit some act of malevolence. Our reactions hail from those childhood experiences of frustration and fear, when we felt the drive, in our tantrums and stubbornness, to overcome the powerlessness of being young (Dollard et al. 1939; Megargee and Hokanson 1970, cf. Arendt 1970; May 1972). The will to revenge, however, is not a 'pure emotion' even if entailing such passions as aggression, anger, cruelty or lust. We can almost invariably give strong reasons why we want to pay back, and there is so often present that element of calculation, that intuited estimation of the 'price' that we think ought to be exacted. But of course any sense of proportion will vary with personality and culture, and the rationale for vengeance in one social setting may be entirely unacceptable in another. Where smallish tribes have been traditionally in armed conflict, as in Melanesia, apparently vicious acts of reprisal—the killing of an unsuspecting child from among the enemy, for instance—will be socially accepted. Citizens of the large-scale pluralist societies of the West, by contrast, while still sending their soldiers to war, tend to pass off the 'pre-civilized' Melanesia as a scene of relentless 'feuds'; these moderns are more likely to locate the legitimate norm of payback with the elimination, certainly the weakening, of one's business competitors, or with the relatively peaceful struggle of classes and pressure groups to obtain power. That there is a universality of rationally justified recrimination, however, is beyond doubt (Fromm 1973: 272, cf. Simmel 1955).²

Retribution is not only something we contemplate, but also enact. How it is translated into action—how quickly, and in what measures—is an issue that can hardly be avoided here. With the loss of one's spouse through murder, for example, one would naturally feel impelled to kill the culprit in return, and to seek immediate requital. Various resentments may be harboured in the breast for many years, and groups, such as Melanesian villagers who see the foolishness of openly attacking an unwanted, better-armed colonial administration, may bide their time until an opportune moment. When such a chance arrives, retaliation might not take a violent form, since payback has a thousand less-severe faces and can be as covert as robbery and scandalmongery, or as open as a public exposé, a challenge of words, a refusal to cooperate, cursing, snubbing, sarcasm, or just plain unfriendliness. The relative severity of reprisals obviously hinges on the contexts. A range of payback 'mechanisms' can be detected in all spheres of human intercourse, being in play between individuals (competing

² Please note that, in this book, payback is not automatically identified or synonymous with violence, or even aggression (both of which have their own special typologies). Thus, although I may appear to side with those denying human aggression is instinctual (e.g. Heller 1977: 32, 83), in fact I am not dealing here with aggression *in general*.

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brothers and sisters, rival peers, between husband and wife, young and old) and between groups (such as households, clans, factions, political parties, denominations, classes, nations, power blocs). Thus, the amount of satisfaction demanded is likely to depend on the number of people involved, as well as the issues at stake. The adult, moreover, will have learnt to be more calculating than the child. The infant's active payback can include physical violence—with stones and sticks—as well as a mere utterance or a releasing verbal revenge; yet adults have a wider choice of policies to follow, or 'more games to play' (Berne 1961: 98–115; 1964: 83–138), and they can give many more persuasive reasons to explain their rancour. Payback, at any rate, becomes increasingly attended by logic, as the life-cycle proceeds—or, better still, reinforced by more sophisticated forms of logic (A. Freud 1937; Homans 1951: 287; Sartre 1956: 221–23; Mead 1934: 300–02; Scheler 1972: 43–78, cf. Schoeck 1966; Heidegger 1967: 326–29).

Revenge and rationality are at no point more openly enmeshed than when the former is legitimized by broadly accepted values, when it acquires such a high-sounding name as 'redress', for instance, or is carried out by a 'justly indignant' punitive expedition. Alexandre Dumas could count on the sympathy of his European readers for his hero Edmond Dantès, Count of Monte Cristo, who with such native cunning brought ruin on those who wrongfully consigned him to the dungeons. Japanese warriors acclaimed those who had the equanimity to carry out public tortures on the enemy during wartime, and felt justified in scorning those who could not die like a samurai (Bergamini 1971: 959–60). Moral outrage or indignation, then, can lead to vengeance as an abunden duty, and can have effects as direful as the Nazi holocaust or as comparatively innocuous as a pressure to resign (cf. van der Post 1963). Tormented by the paradoxical nature of it all, the famous German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche fell into despair: humanity everywhere 'has sanctified revenge (*Rache*) under the name of justice (*Gerichtigkeit*)' ([1887] 1969: 73–74); now, it is a matter of subjective (even if sometimes legal) opinion as to which is which.

Punishments based on socially accepted rules or laws, of course, which are apparently the inheritance of all documented societies, constitute a species of payback in the negative sense. The culprit to be required, particularly if the crime is deemed heinous, takes on something of the status of an enemy ('an enemy of the people') who must be brought to heel. The types and degrees of punishment vary considerably across cultures and history, for 'sanctions' can either be negatively 'subtractive' or positively 'inflictive'. It is noticeably common that a (sizeable enough) group is prepared to put one of its own number to death for wrongs done, an extreme it traditionally applies to its military foes, or those threatening the very existence of the group or society from without. In human cultures, though, degrees of penalizing are developed (perhaps by trial and error, perhaps

by pondering legislators) and the punishments always reflect some relation to the known possibilities of human revenge (such as torture, deprivation of rights, exile, shame, snubbing, subordination, labelling) and this is a relationship quickly enough understood, since punishments have been typically 'natural inventions' inevitably framed in terms of those negative manoeuvres people rarely like to see falling upon themselves. Legal principles and theories of punishment, moreover, even in the most 'modernized' nations, are still expressed in terms of (negative) retribution, *Vergeltung*, and so on, as if a society has to 'get its own back' on those who have betrayed its dearest values.

Law, we note, can hardly be confined to the judicial or arbitration system controlled by those of high social authority, or maintained by officialdoms; there is a multiplicity of law-making and rule-making levels in all cultures. Institutions, companies, 'grades', peer clusters and varieties of subgroups or subcultures are all capable of making their own regulations, as are households, or even individuals. Punishments can be meted out by all these sectors, within bounds that are calculated according to tradition. Significantly, again, almost none of the sanctions they employ—'sacking', the disallowance to pass from one degree of attainment to the next, consignment to bed for the night without a meal, and so forth—ever escape associations of vengeance or recrimination. The line between penalty and vindictiveness is often so blurred, indeed, that it appears failed students can be 'paid back' for their laziness, let us say, or workers fired for their unproductiveness, or unsuccessful seekers of promotion can be paid back for creating jealousy, and so forth (Pospisil 1956: 751; 1967a: 2–26; Peristiany 1967; Moore 1973, cf. Weber 1925: 124–76; Mayntz 1963: 103–20; Acton 1969).

Reciprocity

What of payback as (re)payment rather than revenge? What of rewards rather than punishments? Cynics like to affirm that humans generally find it harder to make sacrifices than to exact a price. This view compels, although misleading comparisons can produce false impressions, especially when one sets our reluctance to concede freely against our eagerness to say or do something spiteful. The fact is that constraints are usually placed on one's own wild, overreactive will to revenge, just as self-interest teaches against our being over-generous. Certainly, one cannot adjudge our basic tendencies in the abstract. Altered circumstances and varying experiences, to offer as flexible a generalization as possible, eventually leave us all with a scale of rewards to bestow and penalties to impose, and how we balance matters is again subject to temperament and culture, let alone intelligence and intuition. Such complexities! Yet, it remains true that to sacrifice something of one's own or one's self for the sake of others usually requires

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more conscious effort than to satisfy the impulse, when felt justified, to dispossess or subvert. Such self-sacrifice falls within the cooler ambit of reciprocities—of friendlier give-and-take, trade, domestic sharing, or the fulfilment of social and ritual obligations. This is a broad sphere of activity that calls for hard work and constant repair, vulnerable as it is to neglect or mismanagement and, thus, to the lurking, divisive forces of blame and vindictiveness (Mauss [1925] 1967; Lowie 1937: 233, cf. Lévi-Strauss 1949; Becker 1956; van Baal 1975a).

Positive and negative payback, however, can easily be taken as two sides to the same coin. Giving can not only occasion a sense of debt or obligation in others, or even embarrassment, shame or guilt; it is almost always attended by a measure of self-interest. The extent of one's generosity, in fact, is so often affected by the security of special friendships, or perhaps by the desire to buy favour, dominate sexually, taunt someone who deserves a pointed lesson, or just to keep up appearances before a person we secretly despise. It will often pay to be generous or full of good works, further, not only because virtue brings others' support (as well as its own rewards!), but also because it means one's competitors or enemies are disarmed. From a position of strength one's magnanimity can prey on the weak, and in moralistic cultures righteousness can be one way of maintaining personal superiority, even of putting down those we love most dearly. There is also the phenomenon of aggressive self-sacrifice that demands love by heaping it without moderation on select friends (Storr 1970: 110). Thus we can reward ourselves by rewarding others and yet injure those we surreptitiously choose to be untouched by our initiatives—a fact of life that makes the injunction to love one's enemies seem psychologically unbearable or politically impractical to the realist.

Here, admittedly, we are edging towards endless arguments over altruism and egoism (cf. Sorokin 1950; Rand 1961: 81–83, 117–23), or covert as against overt motivation; but, whatever the outcome of such altercations, the presence of retributive logic is not in doubt. It still persists when we simply feel and act upon the weight of our responsibilities; there is always the threat that we will be 'punished' by non-acceptance or by loss of sustenance or reputation if obligations are left unfulfilled. Few there are who do not feel bound to live up to expectations—as required by parents, for instance, or by some group, society conceived as a whole, or by the spirits or God—and we are for ever learning afresh how much they demand of us.

Retributive logic, then, is a logic of human motivation. We may be going to do something in the future: our assessment of consequences in terms of retaliation or concession brings this logic into play. We may have exacted a recompense in the past: whether we recognize our real motives or repress them for a later rationalization, at some point we are pressed by the need to justify our action to ourselves. If it lacks a satisfying *rationale*, or if its

basis has been called into doubt by some unquestioned moral axiom, our own logic or the judgments of others may find us ashamed or guilty. The logic does not have to be perfect or valid or sound, it simply has to *appear* that way or to be meaningful (and it is culturally relative, in any case). We certainly have to make sense to ourselves. Then again, our motivations are generally conditioned by an ethos which surrounds us and which we can even cultivate. Life usually blossoms when we are praised, given to, or readily accepted, so that we can afford to be mellow and self-giving. We are susceptible to resentment and depression if conditions are otherwise, and more than likely to worsen our position or self-estimation by over-reacting. Life has its vicious circles; even in riding on the crest of a wave, there lies the possibility of falling either through another's jealousy or one's very own pride (Rosenzweig 1938; Flugel 1945: 114, cf. Rank 1932: 80-85; 1945: 245; Allport 1958: 3-46; Goffman 1959; Rokeach 1976; Laing 1970: 18-37; 1971: 83-86; van Sommers 1988).

It has been helpful to isolate the dimensions of 'positive requiring' by concentrating on individual motivation; yet, who can deny that all these attitudes and thoughts lying behind actions are substantially conditioned by human groups and societies? Thus, it should not surprise if in the following pages we explore the fulfilment of obligation or other related expressions of morality as aspects of social reciprocity. Among the socioeconomic transactions and rituals that are characteristic of primal cultures, there are concessions, gifts and exchanges between mortals, and fascinatingly analogous interchanges between humans and the gods. Occasions of extraordinary hospitality and sacrificial rites are perhaps the most intriguing of all such would-be reciprocations, because of the apparently one-sided cost to the sacrificers and rewards heaped upon other agents. The group rationale for such phenomena are of immense interest as manifestations of shared retributive logic and as complex blends of altruistic and self-interested activity.

Explanations of significant events

The logic of retribution, to be sure, does not only cover one's own predispositions to reward or punish, but those of other people and of other forces as well. It is often these others who bring about and involve us in occurrences quite independently of our wills.

Humans endow events with meaning; they recognize a change, especially when it affects them personally, and so distinguish changes for better and for worse; they also give reasons why changes, or any events accounted significant, have happened. That people put shapes or spatial images on events (referring to them, for example, as behind or in front, moving up or down, or curved, or in blocks) is an important subject for anthropological

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and psychological study (e.g. Jung [1912] 1956). More to the point, however, is that there is no known culture whose members do not explain the most important happenings in their lives in terms of rewards and punishments. The event of a death calls forth this explanatory mode in its sharpest form. Something or someone is blamed. Even if in Western culture the wrathful God and the spiteful Devil are less fashionable causal agencies, conceived over and against diagnosed natural processes, blame is assigned still—to an almost personified cancer, for instance, to an untrustworthy doctor, an ill-disposed member of the family, or even to the self-neglectful dead person.

In the ‘first world’ West, of course, or even in the cancer wards of ‘second world’ provincial Russia, so brilliantly described by Solzhenitsyn, consensus explanations for death do not come easily, but in most societies it is of concern to the extended family or community that a single cause can be agreed upon. In virtually all small-scale societies, further, the crucial question will be whether the death was ‘good’ or ‘bad’, whether, for example, it appropriately completed a person’s visible life or was the result of some outside evil. And the event of death hardly stands alone in requiring interpretation; serious trouble, sickness, various types of tragedies, as well as the blessings and good fortune that make up their opposites, are commonly explained in terms of a retributive logic. In the West it has been less and less characteristic to instance the divine distribution of justice in events, a tendency out of step with cultures still open to the inroads of spiritual powers. Certainly, a host of ‘third world’ peoples believe in the efficacy of sorcery and magic, the vengeance or blessings of ancestors or deities, and the existence of supernatural power behind either disaster or fecundity in ‘nature’. Nevertheless, retributive logic can persist in a secularized garb (even in Marxist or atheistical consciousness), for weal may be ascribed to praiseworthy skill, cunning or plain commonsense, and woe to human folly. In any case, ‘modern’ as against ‘archaic’ people still retain their scapegoats, and have their ‘folk devils’ to blame (Cohen 1973, cf. Burke 1968: 445–52; Ryan 1971; Szasz 1973).

In explaining the vicissitudes of life each culture has its storehouse of knowledge. Its custodians usually like to say ‘I told you so’, referring to precedent and precept. Hence, medical diagnoses, local lore, proverbs, poems to cover human situations, rites, customs, treaties, let alone tabus and laws, provide people with the *scientia* by which to explain events in terms of recompense. In some cases it will be concluded that a person has been requited by an intervention of the gods or the dead; in others it will be found necessary for the living members of the community to punish an offender; and so forth. The reasons given for such conclusions, and the assessments as to prices paid, form the most highly reflective and most communal side to retributive logic. Even in countries with secularized legal systems millions still take the commands of God or Jesus to have a higher

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legal validity of their own, and to have uncanny value in explaining eventualities too personal or profound to be covered by the law, whereas in thousands of traditional cultures, it may be the actual breaking of an important rule (taken as sacred) that brings on sickness even unto death.

The modes of explanation we have been discussing, then, provide the cognitive basis or *rationale* for payback and reciprocity. Many of us may need these modes for psychological support, to justify ourselves, since we humans tend to 'project the sins that reside in our hearts, locating them far off, in others, in adversaries whom we then assail and persecute for our own guilt' (Roszak 1973: 131). On growing older, too, we draw increasingly on experience, particularly those 'sorry experiences' that quench the 'glad heart of youth' and hence our social poses come to take on their individual stamps (Kierkegaard [1851] 1941: 103). Most important of all, however, humans usually work with the interpretative frames they have inherited culturally, acting in terms of society's expectations and permissions; it is therefore tradition or socially accepted norms that most commonly serve to bind together the actions and explanations that interest us here. Thus, a warrior who believes his dead relative has been the victim of sorcery will have reasons for taking revenge, even though these may be barely comprehensible to a secularized Western mind. Some other person, assured that his own neglect has incurred the wrath of ancestors, and so brought trouble, will have good grounds for placating them with rituals and food offerings. One of the chief aims of this book, moreover, is to show that peoples of Melanesia invariably give reasons for certain traditional behaviour patterns, such as killing and eating their enemies, which many would deem irrational. The rational bases of revenge and reciprocity in their case are almost always consistent with socially sanctioned ways of accounting for significant events. This means, intriguingly, that their traditional acts, not only of giving and taking, but of homicide against enemies as well, were in some sense religious, or else bound up with worldviews and belief systems normally graced by that awkward, all-too confusing term 'religion'.

Admittedly, this rather special religious integration of thought and action has been breaking up in a changing Melanesia. Besides, there are other cultures in which religious doctrines stand against violence and vindictiveness, thus making it plain that retribution and religion are not necessarily identifiable, and that the logic of retribution is not always religious. There are, in fact, several theoretical problems issuing from my use of the phrase 'retributive logic' (concerning rational thought and action, for one, and religion for another) that crave further (if somewhat more philosophical) analysis.

The epistemology of rationality

The logic of retribution is normally ‘consistency logic’; truth is a datum rather than a problem, and the problem becomes how to interpret and act in the world with the accepted truths (Gibson 1921: 1). Some might wish to refer to this logic as a form of ‘bounded rationality’ (Brookfield 1972: 159–60) or even ‘pre-logical mentality’ (Lévy-Bruhl 1922: 47–60), but such expressions are objectionable because every logic is culture-bound, and it is a pitfall of ethnocentricity to conclude that some peoples are generally less rational (or more rational) than others (Trompf 1980a: 340, cf. Lukes 1970: 194–213; Ling 1973: 144–45; Kleinig 1980: 91; Hollis and Lukes 1982). It is not necessary for us to adjudge retributive principles by canons of would-be absolutist logic at Oxford University, let us say. Nor is it initially helpful to subject any system of retributive logic to technical criticisms, let alone value judgements, until one discerns the part it plays in a society, whether it is psychologically or ethically supportive, whether it sustains an ecology, and such like. European logic has been extraordinarily useful for developments in nuclear physics and biochemistry, yet this does not mean that it is the only or governing form of logic in Western consciousness, nor more useful than apparently curious retributive logics of primal societies, for nurturing a balanced psyche. The most important first step is to recognize logics of retribution as styles of reasoning, to establish that they have a phenomenology as logical frameworks of ideas. We can tell this kind of reasoning is in play when someone gives reasons for fighting back or doing a favour, for blaming or praising, for inferring that a happy outcome was merited or that evil must be paid for ‘with a price’. The task of the observer is to find out how all these lineaments fit together as a general pattern of thought, held together collectively or in the minds of individuals.

It is hardly an easy task. Difficulties are compounded by the entrenched dichotomy between rationality and irrationality. There is a satisfying paradigm that sanity never produces rashness, and that people knock each other over the heads only when they are unable to control irrational impulses. Not only does it presuppose certain Western (Enlightenment) value-judgements, but it also tends to obscure a blatant existential fact: that non-rational factors are for ever at work *while* we are doing our thinking and reasoning (and vice versa). Now, one could hardly deny the *unimportance* of mental activity at times of extreme physical duress (in the midst of a fight, for instance); yet, what remains of real interest to the student of retributive logic is that people can almost always tell you *why* they were so vehement, why they did something that seemed so charged with emotion! They have reasons for their apparent irrationality, a simple truth which ought to make one wary of judging human behaviour, let alone