Introduction: The twists and turns of difference

This book is our telling of the ways that class inequalities in contemporary Papua New Guinea have been convincingly, and with telling effect, told. It is about the contexts and processes, both "traditional" and "modernist,"[1] within which many relatively affluent Papua New Guineans were conveying to whole categories of their countrymen that the latter lacked viable or legitimate claims on significant resources. It is about how it has become both possible and plausible for these relatively affluent "nationals" – even those living in rather modest urban centers like Wewak, the capital of the East Sepik Province and the fifth largest town in a Papua New Guinea of some 4 million people – to present themselves in an apparently diverse range of contexts to other Papua New Guineans (including members of their own cultural groups) as fundamentally superior.[2]

It is about how, by 1996 – scarcely two decades after the formal end of the era in which an Australian child could address a grown "native" man as "boy"[3] – a Papua New Guinean physician could comfortably distinguish himself from others in his cultural group by calling them "bushy" and himself "civilized"; how Papua New Guinean members of Wewak's Rotary Club could remind each other not to invite countrymen of the "wrong" sort to their annual benefit auction; how a group of Papua New Guinean businesswomen could designate themselves as models of entrepreneurial success while implicitly blaming poor women for their own continuing impoverishment; how a Papua New Guinean store owner could snap his fingers at his golf caddies so that they would move with more alacrity; how Papua New Guinean members of Wewak's golf and yacht clubs could congratulate themselves on the exclusivity of their organizations; how a Papua New Guinean politician could advise the rural poor that they should no longer aspire to the ownership of

Toyota Land Cruisers – such as he, in fact, owned – but would have to content themselves with water buffaloes as the appropriate technology for their scaled-back futures; and how a Papua New Guinean national court judge could define the "ordinary" man as the well-educated, urban man.

This is a book, thus, about an "historical phenomenon, [one] unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness" (Thompson, 1964: 9). It concerns the contemporary workings in Papua New Guinea of class – not "as a 'structure,' nor even as a 'category,' but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships" (Thompson, 1964: 9). As suggested by the examples just provided, the relationships which have become class emerged as men and women came to "feel and articulate the identity of their [material] interests as between themselves, and as against other men [and women] whose interests [were] different from (and usually opposed to) theirs" (Thompson, 1964: 9). Class, we show, has been happening in Papua New Guinea, and its happenings have increasingly become evident to many.

This is a book which many Papua New Guineans had hoped could never be written. After the obvious inequities of the colonial caste system had abated, they had hoped the strenuous egalitarianism which had characterized much (though not all) indigenous Papua New Guinean life (at least among men) might be preserved as the valued basis of a new political order.[4] It was an egalitarianism where differences were largely commensurate, based upon fluctuating degree rather than, as with class (to say nothing of caste), upon fixed kind: where powerful men and powerful groups had, for the most part, simply more of what all others had (such as pigs, shells, wives, ritual knowledge, trading partners and allies) rather than sharply differential access to economic and cultural capital (such as employment networks, educational opportunities, and sartorial, gustatory and conversational skills [cf. Goody, 1982; Bourdieu, 1977]).[5] Correspondingly, it was an egalitarianism where, because personal and collective fortunes and alliances often shifted, the powerful rarely remained perpetually so; where perceptions of life's prospects were shaped by the relatively realistic recognition that "big men" and "rubbish men" (and certainly their immediate descendants) could, in the course of events, interchange places on a single continuum.[6]

We, too, had shared the hope that this egalitarianism, one which had in fact first drawn us to Papua New Guinea, could be preserved. However, we soon began to worry that it would prove especially vulnerable to the imposition of those incommensurate differences – those inequalities of kind – existing between "first" and "third" worlds: we feared that such a new postcolonial political order would be fundamentally undermined if Papua New Guineans found themselves depleted of resources and value. Hence, for some time in our writings we had been concerned, for instance, that Papua New Guineans were, for a pittance, yielding up their mineral and timber resources to international corporations and that they were performing their culture as professional primitives – as the "embodiment of the exotic" (Gewertz and Errington, 1991a: 205) – for an international tourist industry. It was, though, only in our most recent work that we have begun to give full attention to perhaps a more insidious (if related) threat. This threat had already attracted the concern of some Papua New Guineans themselves.

It had been in order to define, defend and preserve for a new nation what was best about indigenous forms of egalitarianism that the Papua New Guinean lawyer and now senior politician, Bernard Narakobi, wrote *The Melanesian Way*. In that book, published five years after Independence, he lamented the emergence of a "PNG elite – be they civil servants, politicians, religious officials or private businessmen and women ... [who] have no authentic touch or feeling for rural and urban poor but they seem to know all the answers to the problems of the poor." He pledged that "firm steps" would be taken to preclude a "class society ... emerging in this country" (1980: 108).

What instead happened

As our initial examples suggest, "firm steps" were not, however, taken. That this was so has stemmed from the fact – and from the complex responses of an emerging nation to the fact – that Papua New Guinea was, and has remained, extremely vulnerable to an international economy. Indeed, in 1975, the year of Independence, Papua New Guinea "held the dubious distinction of being the most dependent independent country in the world. Forty-five percent of the government budget came in the form of an Australian grant. On top of this, Papua New Guinea had one of the highest propensities to import of any country" (Turner, 1990: 33). Indeed, virtually every-

thing not produced by the subsistence sector had to be imported and imports rapidly came to be, for both urban workers and many rural smallholders, necessary luxuries: canned fish, rice and kerosene, to say nothing of outboard motors, cars and trucks. Exports, on the other hand, were almost entirely primary products, subject to substantial international price fluctuations. (Initially these were plantation crops; subsequently timber and minerals.) Moreover, during the early years of Independence, it was expatriates (largely Australians) who filled most managerial and technical positions, both in the government and in the private sector. Indeed, "[o]wnership of the formal economy was largely vested in foreign hands. Papua New Guineans owned few businesses, and those they did own were small" (Turner, 1990: 33).

Many Papua New Guinea politicians, contemplating the future status of their postcolonial nation, decried these circumstances of dependence and explored alternatives. In so doing, they commissioned a report from a (largely expatriate) team recruited through the Overseas Development Group of the University of East Anglia. This was, at the time, "the most radical center for development studies in the United Kingdom . . . [whose members] adhered to the various socialist strategies carried out, for example, in some African countries such as Tanzania" (Jacobsen, 1995: 232). From such explorations, the vision of national sovereignty that emerged in newly independent Papua New Guinea was centered on greater self-reliance.

To implement this vision, Papua New Guinea began a policy of "localization." Papua New Guineans were steadily to replace expatriates in the public service. (In 1972, there were 7,900 expatriate public servants; in 1988, 1,719 [Turner, 1990: 44].) Such a policy proved convenient, not only ideologically (given socialist leanings) but practically. This was so because the (colonial and postcolonial) educational system, though highly restrictive at its upper levels, was nonetheless producing appreciable numbers of secondary and tertiary graduates who expected good jobs. By localizing the civil service (and in the absence of a strong private sector), the government could assure employment of – in fact, become the principal employer for – the more advanced graduates of its own educational system. The government, however, did more than simply localize, it also expanded in response to political exigencies. It expanded not only by continuing to absorb the educated, but also by providing a new layer of bureaucracy – and politicians – at the provincial level in

response to pressures (especially from resource-rich areas) for greater regional control (see Conyers, 1979; Standish, 1979; Filer, 1990). (In 1960, there were about 5,000 employed by the government; in 1990, with a population of less than 4 million, 50,000 were so employed [Millett, 1993: 14].)

At the same time, Papua New Guinea sought to enhance its self-reliance through generating more private sector employment and greater national revenues. (The government could only afford to employ so many; its own expenses were high and the Australian subsidy – while still substantial – was diminishing.) The government, thus, encouraged major foreign enterprises to develop the country's rich natural resources. So as to control the influence of such foreign enterprises and to generate income for its burgeoning public service sector, the government insisted that it be a major stockholder in such facilities as the copper and gold mines at Bougainville, Ok Tedi, Pogera and Lihir, and the oil fields at Kutubu.

To be sure, with this "progressive localisation in both public and private sectors . . . [there were] more Papua New Guineans earning higher salaries" (Turner, 1990: 76). And government revenue from resource extraction was considerable. Yet, Papua New Guinea's economy remained, and has continued to remain, vulnerable, with its principal expenditures still going to imports and its principal income still coming from exports of primary resources (Millett, 1993). The government bureaucracy has become relatively large and expensive, financed mainly by such exports, and the private sector has remained small. (In 1990, the some 50,000 government employees comprised over one-quarter of those [relatively few] wage-employed Papua New Guineans [Millett, 1993: 14, 20].) The major extractive enterprises have remained substantially staffed at the managerial and technical levels by expatriates; and once on line, these enterprises have become sufficiently mechanized so as to provide only limited (at least relative to the government) employment of local people. Moreover, these enterprises were ultimately controlled by multinational corporations whose policies and profits (and payments to the Papua New Guinean government) were subject to the vagaries of a world market.

The general goal of self-reliance also led to such fiscal measures as high import duties and an artificially bolstered kina (the national currency). These policies promised the trappings of a strong economy: taxation of imports would encourage local production and in turn self-sufficiency, and a bolstered kina would remain strong,

vigorous and internationally competitive. Actually, the government's fiscal measures did little to foster real economic viability. For instance, the strong kina itself probably has contributed to Papua New Guinea's dependency: an artificially elevated kina has likely discouraged domestic production by creating products too costly for ready sale on the world market.

Not coincidentally (given an established bureaucracy), the high kina did keep the civil servants reasonably happy. Despite tariffs, their salaries accorded them considerable buying power, certainly relative to most other Papua New Guineans. For the majority of citizens, however, the best they could expect under these circumstances was for the government to use a significant portion of its revenues – principally its shareholder portion of profits – to provide basic social and infrastructural public services. But, even these expectations were to prove largely unfulfilled. Because the government was unwilling or unable to provide services efficiently and because income from the resource sector (though considerable) proved less than anticipated, the government eventually faced increasing fiscal difficulties. Contributing to these difficulties was an insurrection on Bougainville, leading to the closure of the major mine there (Filer, 1990). In this situation, the government not only lost mine revenue, but had to pay out a large amount for an ineffectual military effort to suppress the rebellion. Eventually, it literally ran out of the foreign exchange on which its still import-dependent economy rested.[7]

An Australian government report summarized these circumstances: "For Papua New Guinea, 1994 was a year of crises. Despite strong growth in government revenues the budget deficit spiraled . . . There was a loss in confidence by international lenders and the government was forced to float the kina because of the sharp drop in foreign exchange reserves" (AusAid, 1995: 17). The terms of the ensuing bail-out by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund required the government to accept "structural adjustments." These were the provisions (ostensibly) necessary to reduce governmental expenses and to increase productivity and international competitiveness. They included retrenching civil servants and decreasing existing "subsidies" to health and educational facilities; they also recommended the registration and subsequent privatization of traditionally owned land. In these ways, it was argued, governmental costs not only would be reduced but responsibilities for social services would be appropriately shifted from the govern-

ment to the actual users; moreover, users, encouraged to invest in and borrow on their land, would be better able to pay for services and otherwise sustain themselves.

The 1994 crises were a heightening – and, for many, a clarification – of what had been happening for some time. Most of the relatively few Papua New Guineans with good jobs remained well-positioned, while most of the myriad with no regular income became additionally deprived – not just of what had become essential commodities but of what had become essential services.[8] Regardless of whether the "structural adjustments" imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund could ever prove practically (or morally) justifiable, the new stringency Papua New Guineans were experiencing when we encountered them in 1996 had led to a further sharpening of social distinction.

There was obviously still money around for some. Most of the extractive industries were still running and government spending was still substantial. Indigenous contractors were still getting contracts for, among other things, government and foreign-aid financed projects such as for road maintenance, bridge construction, and land reclamation. Politicians were still using their "slush funds" to travel to Cairns (for entertainment or, perhaps, to invest in Queensland real estate[9]) and to purchase votes or otherwise mollify key constituents. Civil servants were, generally, still receiving salaries. Business and professional people were still selling products and services. Agricultural entrepreneurs were still earning income through the sale of such produce as coffee and betel nut. And craftspeople were still earning (some) money through the sale of their artifacts. But opportunities had become progressively constricted and those who were comfortably through the door – those (as in our book's initial examples) of the relative elite who had substantial access to what money there was – were increasingly differentiated and were increasingly differentiating themselves from others.

This elite – these company managers, politicians, civil servants, professionals and assorted businesspeople and entrepreneurs – were mostly middle class (given that their primarily resource-extractive economy was, largely, controlled by non-Papua New Guineans, by international owners of capital). This is not to say, we must emphasize, that there were no important differences in access to power and resources among those of the middle class. Thus, for example, there were many differences between newly credentialed primary school teachers, whose parents had had little formal educa-

tion and no salaried employment, and well-educated senior civil servants, whose parents had been advantageously placed during the colonial period. Comparably, there were many differences between small-scale retailers, whose businesses serviced primarily those squatters who lived in their vicinities, and major wholesalers, whose businesses involved direct engagement with overseas producers, distributors and financiers. In addition, there were important differences between local politicians, whose election to the Provincial Assembly gave them only limited power and resources, and national politicians, whose election to the Parliament gave them access to an extensive public trough and to influence peddling. Nor – as these examples imply – is it to say that there were no individuals whose class positions were ambiguous or in transition. (Rural schoolteachers, although salaried, may have had more in common, for instance, with subsistence-oriented villagers than with affluent urban dwellers.) Nor, finally, is it to say that there were no differences in interests within this middle class. Certainly the proposed structural adjustments would unequally affect civil servants subject to retrenchment and agricultural entrepreneurs anxious to buy and sell land (Thompson and MacWilliam, 1992).

But it is to say that many middle-class Papua New Guineans were increasingly, and with crucial consequences, becoming less and less connected to the poor and their problems. Indeed, those of the middle class – especially its more affluent members – were both engaged and caught up in the social and cultural work of creating new forms of distinction. Through this work a crucial shift in daily life was being rendered normal and reasonable. The consequence was that many of those once contenders in the same, relatively fluid, political field could become regarded – could become redefined – as ontologically inferior.

Why study class happenings in Papua New Guinea?

In its focus on the social and cultural work of creating new forms of distinction, this book is both about Papua New Guinea and about much of the rest of the contemporary world.[10] Thus, to bring it back home, this book is at least indirectly about the students we have taught – and not just those attending elite private colleges – who have accepted (often, we suspect, without experiencing the slightest dark night of the soul) their successes as having had little to do with their frequently privileged social contexts (of good neighborhoods,

decent secondary schools, and special tutoring). Rather, they have tended to attribute their achievements to their own cleverness as well as to having made the right choices.[11] And, correspondingly, they have believed that those unable similarly to prevail have (largely) themselves to blame. By showing how the instantiation and internalization of class-based inequalities have proceeded in Papua New Guinea, we mean to convince our students (and others) that they, also, have been subject to – and in most cases beneficiaries of – comparable processes.

While such a telling of the happenings of class could be grounded in a variety of ethnographic contexts, we think Papua New Guinea a particularly apposite case. By focusing on Papua New Guinea circumstances, we can show with special clarity not only that these processes have taken hold, but also how this shift in the nature and understanding of relationships has been propounded in increasingly insistent and compelling fashions. This is because the social forces in Papua New Guinea that were (among other things) establishing and maintaining class-based inequalities were more than affecting lives: they were rapidly transforming lives. Many Papua New Guineans were explicit in their recognition of these ongoing transformations. For example, we were often told by one or another informant that his father lived in the "Stone Age," while his own son lived in the "Space Age."[12] Although we would contest the evolutionism inherent in many such appraisals, there is no doubt that change in Papua New Guinea has been experienced as precipitous.

For most Papua New Guineans (even for those having the longest colonial histories), significant encounters with the European presence were likely to have first occurred since the late nineteenth century. The Europeans initiated changes that were sometimes dramatic, frequently intense, and often indelible. That these changes occurred within a relatively brief and recent time has meant that they could be remembered and locally discussed with considerable clarity. (In areas where "first contact" was more recent, the inception of these changes could be documented by eye-witnesses.) Therefore, Papua New Guineans, whose readily available experiences might have encompassed the pre-contact and the transnational and whose sensibilities might have encompassed the indigenous and the postmodern, were not only caught up in dramatic change but were also often preoccupied in thinking about and negotiating that change. Hence, Papua New Guinea's relatively recent and compressed colonial history, conjoined with its frequently egalitarian indigenous

ethos, has made it a particularly informative context for considering transformative processes – especially those of class happenings.

Because we began our field research in Papua New Guinea prior to its Independence, we too have been involved in, and have been able to write about, many of these changes and transformations. Certainly, it has been our conversations, sustained over time, with Papua New Guinean friends and acquaintances about their varying pasts, presents and prospects that have helped us in writing this book – the latest in what we have come to think of as a serial ethnography. The local knowledge we have garnered from years of work among the Chambri of Papua New Guinea's East Sepik Province, both in their relatively remote home fishing villages and in their urban, squatter settlement in Wewak,[13] has been essential to our present focus on the unfolding processes of distinction. Especially, insight into the lives of the rural and urban poor, known as the "grass roots" (and our consequent distress at the distress of our friends among them), has been central to understanding (and working to convey) these processes. Class happenings, after all, are class *relationships*, wherein (for example) a middle class comes into existence only in association with a lower class (see Ossowski, 1963; Thompson, 1964). One cannot, thus, describe middle-class sociality and culture without discussing the creation and experience of new forms of invidious distinctions affecting privileged and deprivileged alike. The lives of those Papua New Guineans who have benefited from key socioeconomic changes cannot be separated from the lives of those who have not benefited.

By conveying these increasingly divergent lives we will, in essence, be demonstrating the effects of not taking the "firm steps" that Narakobi called for: the growing significance of the happenings of class to the organization, experience and direction of late twentieth-century life in Papua New Guinea.

What is Melanesian about Papua New Guinean class happenings?

We have argued that Papua New Guinea could be a generally informative context concerning (to repeat) the ways that men and women have come to "feel and articulate the identity of their [material] interests as between themselves, and as against other men [and women] whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs" (Thompson, 1964: 9). This does not mean, of course, that this context unproblematically reflects the dominant,