

Emerging Class in Papua New Guinea: The Telling of Difference

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I

The middle class – the (new) Melanesian way

The Wewak Rotary Club

We begin our talk about the emerging nature of class distinction in contemporary Papua New Guinea life with discussion of a particularly salient set of contexts and engagements for forging the redefinitions central to the happenings of class: for creating new inclusions and exclusions through which the connections and disconnections with past and present and with other Papua New Guineans were reformulated. Our focus is Wewak's Rotary Club. A thoroughly middle-class, capitalist-based organization both in its American inception and its Papua New Guinean manifestation, Rotary facilitated efforts by members of Wewak's middle class to create and consolidate their new identities and interests. To understand this context of redefinition – of class happenings – we will explore what Rotary International, both as organizational form and ideology, brought with it to Papua New Guinea, what it has encountered there, and what it has produced.

The inception of Rotary as a middle-class institution

Rotary's worldwide career began in the United States in the early twentieth century. Its founder, Paul Harris, had come as a young lawyer to a Chicago characterized by daunting social anonymity and economic competition – features only exacerbated by the cut-throat impersonality of an increasingly powerful corporate capitalism.¹ Harris, realizing that others, too, lacked both friends and business contacts, undertook in 1905 to create a fellowship of those pledged to aid each other in business.² Believing that only noncompetitors (and one might add, class equals) could be friends, and sensing the

advantage in having diverse business allies in what he hoped would be an economically fruitful network, he recruited for his club a single member (if possible, the most distinguished) from each of a range of occupations. Initially, in order to display their professional services, members hosted meetings in rotation (hence “Rotary”) at their various business establishments.

In the ensuing several decades, Rotary expanded exponentially in the United States, with clubs in every major city by 1915. At the same time it spawned two direct competitors, Kiwanis and Lions, in 1915 and 1917. Clearly Harris’ effort to deal with the isolation of atomized individuals in highly competitive entrepreneurial capitalism was appealing, particularly to middle-class, small-scale businessmen and professionals. Providing an essentially conservative way of working within the existing system – of prospering within rather than opposing or significantly transforming the system – the Harris model of sociality might be viewed as Durkheimian rather than Marxist.

Indeed, given its continuing insistence on its “classification system” – there being *one* representative from each occupation – Rotary remained fundamentally premised on an organic solidarity. This solidarity took full cognizance of an advanced division of labor and the existence of occupational enclaves. At the same time, it sought to avoid the potential anomie deriving from the insularism of occupational enclaves. Yet because Rotary also sought the *best* representative from each occupation, it relied on the continuing activities of these occupational enclaves in fostering professional excellence. Thus, eschewing any Marxist idea of an explosively riven society, Rotary – in its middle-class, and perhaps Panglossian, aspirations – hoped that its, in effect, Durkheimian minisociety was also a Weberian (medium-high) status group.

Its members were prosperous, influential and respectable, yet rarely truly elite. The center of gravity in the Rotarian microcosm consequently remained in the middle or upper middle class – with managers of small-scale businesses and with professionals. As such, and perhaps as a continuation of its Midwestern cultural roots, its ambiance also remained friendly and informal – neighborly.³ However, for reasons additional to the fact that the social extremes were either not recruited or did not join, Rotary never fulfilled its organizational premise of becoming an organic whole. Members early on concluded they were restricting themselves to a less than viable sphere, especially since they were obligated to give each other

favorable terms. In short, they needed outside business. Therefore, Rotary had to look outwards to cultivate economic relationships with non-Rotarians.

Members were also sensitive to charges of social isolation. Clearly influenced by the ideals of the Progressive Era, Rotarians began to concern themselves with issues of social welfare, such as the need of underprivileged children for recreational facilities. Reflecting this social concern, they coined the motto which persists today: "Service above self." Yet, perhaps a more accurate motto might have been, "Service *and* self."

Rotary as a "service organization" could be regarded as a strategic expansion of its founder's vision of a community in which sociability and profit were equally legitimate and necessary. Thus, another Rotary slogan, first uttered in a keynote address delivered at the national convention in 1911, became, "He profits most who serves best." In this view, it was good business to do a good job, as by serving customers well, and it was good business to do good more generally, as by contributing time and money to community projects. In other words, businessmen could expect to flourish from the patronage of their satisfied and prosperous neighbors. Furthermore, this slogan reflected a view in which public good was synonymous with good capitalism, a capitalism that was small-scale and personal, middle-class and noncorporate. And, of course, in such a community context, fellow Rotarians would remain important social and business contacts.

Rotary soon became international. Expanding first to Canada and then to the British Isles (where by 1912 there were ten clubs), its global expansion (initially, though not exclusively, throughout the English-speaking world) accelerated greatly after World War One. Rotary arrived in Wewak, a long way from the first Chicago club, in 1965. At the time of our research in 1996, the Wewak club was one of ten in Papua New Guinea, all clubs belonging to District 9600. (District 9600 included seventy clubs: those in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and also in part of Queensland, including Brisbane.)

In understanding the Wewak Rotary Club, the problem we faced was not so much to explain why Rotary had flourished among white (mostly Australian) expatriates during the 1960s. After all, there were more similarities between the heartland of early twentieth-century America and the periphery of the Antipodes a half-century later than might at first be expected. The American citizens who, for

instance, thronged to world's fairs celebrating the global triumph of material progress and control were not that different in their middle-class expectations and aspirations⁴ from those Australians who sought a convivial and affluent life in business or government during the economic prosperity of Papua New Guinea's post World War Two colonial period. Both these Americans and Australians felt justified in, and validated by, the extension of their particular way of life to the rest of the world. In a world laid open for business, it seemed that prosperity *appropriately* went to those who also served – those who provided “uplift,” whether through building playgrounds or shouldering the “white man's burden.”

Rather, our analytic problem became how to explain Rotary's persistence in Wewak – and by extension, Papua New Guinea – in a postcolonial time marked by economic decline and a widespread shift of important jobs from noncitizens to citizens. What was Rotary's consonance with Wewak's middle class – both emerging and remnant? How, for instance, did the concept of service-above-self manifest itself there? And what were the broader socioeconomic implications of Rotary's existence in a rapidly transforming Papua New Guinea?

On Wewak's middle class and its Rotarian “chiefs”

Wewak's Rotary Club was one of Papua New Guinea's smaller ones, with twelve members during 1996. Six were Papua New Guinean nationals and six, expats: one Chinese and five Europeans (including the two of us).⁵ In fact, according to membership figures in the *Governor's Newsletter*, published by District 9600, there were at this time only about 250 active Rotarians in the whole of Papua New Guinea. However, because members conspicuously worked for the public good and represented widely held middle-class values and aspirations, Rotary's significance, both in Papua New Guinea generally and in Wewak in particular, was greater than these numbers might suggest.

Certainly Rotary was well known for its commitment to service. For example, when the Port Moresby club on 22 May 1996 flew Papua New Guinean Siamese twins (with their parents) from Papua New Guinea to Melbourne for surgical separation, Rotary was lauded throughout Papua New Guinea and Australia. And, in Wewak alone, Rotary reached thousands through its service activities. Also, as we shall see, the Wewak Rotary Club successfully

persuaded many of the town's several hundred middle-class nationals and expats to participate in its fund-raising efforts.

There could be no doubt that the restricted membership and affluent sociability of Rotary – as well as that of the larger, purely recreational golf and yacht clubs, with paid-up memberships of 60 and 85 respectively – provided a desired exclusiveness for some members of the middle class. Though Rotary was smaller than either the golf or yacht clubs, many of Wewak's middle class found its combination of exclusive fellowship and commitment to service especially appealing. Indeed, attendance at the twice-monthly Rotary meetings was often substantially augmented by guests, some of whom were prospective members. Yet membership was very expensive – sometimes too much so – in both money and time.

In fact, we met both nationals and expats who told us that they had appreciated Rotary, but, after a few meetings, had found participation difficult to afford. It was not just the yearly dues of K90.00 (one kina was equivalent to US\$.80) that discouraged them from joining or continuing their membership. Monthly dinners cost K15.00 and fines for minor infractions of Rotary rules – such as coming late to a meeting (although minimal in comparison to fines in Rotary Clubs elsewhere) – mounted up. Most financially draining, and key to fulfilling the standards of the affluent sociability that constituted Rotary's fellowship, were standing rounds of drinks. We, for instance, would return home from a dinner meeting full of fellowship but depleted of funds, having spent K60–80.00. Even an ordinary business meeting typically cost us K25–30.00. Early on, when we semijokingly mentioned to the club's president, an affluent national physician, that we had to visit the bank prior to Rotary meetings, he jovially remarked that a Rotarian should not complain about the cost of anything, especially not of Rotary: he should enjoy his job, and enjoy earning and spending money on fellowship and on service.

Though Wewak's Rotarians sometimes complained that service was not a value easily adopted by all nationals (or, for that matter, all expats – whether, for instance, Chinese or European), we found that service was, at least rhetorically, valued by a significant number of Wewak's middle-class nationals. Even some of the same persons criticized by Rotarians as unduly self-focused would offer examples of community service. One national woman, for example, explained her own intense preoccupation with her multifaceted business by mentioning with pride her father's signal contribution to the

economic and social development of Wewak and Papua New Guinea more generally. (We will meet her again as our golf partner in chapter 3.) Another national, a businessman, justifying his preoccupation with his own affairs, stressed the generous financial assistance he regularly gave to local fund-raising activities, including those of Rotary. (More will be said about these activities later.)

Indeed, we were struck by how similar the six nationals active in Rotary – five men and one woman – were to the dozens of other members of Wewak’s middle class with whom we spoke at length. One was a physician in private practice; one, a bank manager; one, a high school headmaster; one, the International School’s headmaster; one, a trade store owner; one – the only national woman – an administrator of the province’s “youth” office. They came from various provinces and ethnic groups in Papua New Guinea. Four married outside of their cultural groups. Only three spoke their native languages well and not one regularly spoke a native language in his/her home (even in the two cases in which both spouses spoke the same native language). All were fluent in English and had completed tertiary education. Many sent, or intended to send, their children to the International School so that they might learn, as one Rotarian put it, the “non-Melanesian inflected English which would allow them to become competitive in a world market.” As the children of fathers who themselves worked for the government or for missions, none had been brought up in villages.

Significantly, and again, in a manner completely typical of the many national middle-class business and professional people to whom we spoke, all nationals in Rotary stressed the complexity of their relationships with grass-roots relatives who, as less affluent and educated, were different in a variety of ways. All recognized that kin demands for economic assistance, such as to pay school fees, or engage in ritual activities, or just to hang-out in town, could mean financial ruin unless properly controlled.⁶ Most had established stringent rules to regulate these demands, lest they be “pulled down” to the grass-roots level. They explained to their kin that they could only occasionally help with more than a few kina and, then, primarily for some worthy purpose such as school or hospital fees. Many stressed that they sought to educate their kin to “respect” the demands and complexities of their middle-class lifestyles – to recognize and accept that they had to meet their own considerable expenses, which ranged from restocking their stores to buying toilet paper for their families.

In fact, though, they often did finance ceremonies in their home villages, particularly death rituals for senior kinsmen. Yet, they regarded this less as a commitment to tradition than as an investment. Knowing little of ritual specifics or attendant cosmology, they participated financially largely to strengthen their future claims on ancestral land – land they explicitly referred to as an “asset.” At the same time, they resented being asked by villagers to contribute to ceremonial work. They thought the villagers were making an extractive business out of such rituals and so “draining resources” better used in other ways.

One Rotary member, for example, who still resided on ancestral land only a few miles from Wewak, had for years accepted his mother’s advice as to which of his ritual obligations were mandatory. Nevertheless, despite the thousands of kina he expended – money he wanted to invest in the expansion of his in-town office complex – he still bitterly quarreled with his kinsmen. Most recently, he and his siblings had sought without success to convince their cousins to grant them full ownership of their share of ancestral land so that they might develop it without further consultation or claims. So strained were relations that he was reluctant to drive at night: he was afraid his cousins, resentful of his success and wishing to maintain their collective power over him and his family, might throw rocks at his van or, more likely, hire someone to attack him or his vehicle.

Yet, even as interactions with grass-roots kin became increasingly instrumental and as customary practices – generally concerning life-cycle rituals and land tenure – became redefined in a pervasively cash economy, few of the middle class wished to give up entirely their cultural identity. They still (at least when asked) defined themselves as members of a particular ethnic group, although, significantly, they might joke, disparagingly, that they were not one of those “bushy Boiken.” Certainly, at the very least, they defined themselves as, for instance, “Sepiks.” Most held a genuine interest in their traditions, although this interest had become limited and ambivalent.

Thus, one Rotary member with political aspirations (whose activities we discuss again in chapter 5), an Arapesh by birth, asked us to send her the three-volume set of Margaret Mead’s *The Mountain Arapesh* (1970). She, like many members of the middle class with whom we spoke, had grown up away from her cultural group and hence was largely ignorant of her traditions. Prompted both by a diffuse personal curiosity about her “roots” and by a more pressing

political need to convince village people that she was still located in her culture, she wished to acquire distinctive cultural authority. Indeed, she sought a kind of cultural connection which would, in effect, elevate her over others in her cultural group. Hence, if elected as representative of her constituency, she would have both connection and separation.

Importantly, the particular articulation of connection and separation provided a frequent justification for developing class distinctions, a justification with a neocolonial, Melanesian twist. All of Wewak's Papua New Guinean Rotarians – and most others in Wewak's emergent middle class – often spoke about themselves in ways that strongly implied an inevitable superiority because of ancestral precedent. Even those from among Papua New Guinea's most competitively egalitarian groups would describe their fathers not as "big men" but as "chiefs," that is, as hereditary leaders. To be sure, their fathers may well have been prominent, possessing more of what others had: pigs, pearl shells, ritual knowledge, wives, and land. After all, the practices of colonial administration, such as installing local leaders as headmen, may have dampened fluctuating inequalities to the extent that the momentarily influential could ensure educational and other forms of "advancement" for themselves and their children.⁷ Yet, perhaps not surprisingly, our middle-class informants saw their distinction more as the product of ontology than of historical caprice or process. They were separated as permanently privileged because they were of a "chiefly" line.⁸

This modern-day rhetoric of "chiefs" was, in fact, proving increasingly useful to politicians in particular and to members of the middle class in general, to justify growing class differences (see, for comparison, Feinberg, 1978; Besnier, 1996; Howard, 1996; Lutkehaus, 1996; White and Lindstrom, 1998). It summarized and made more palatable the shifts in life's opportunities that everyone knew were taking place. It presented a transformed present in terms of a reinvented, stable past which defined distinction not in terms of continuity but of difference. It also implied that difference still carried certain, though distinctly limited, obligations. Thus, unlike big men (again, who were like everyone else but more so), contemporary "chiefs" were clearly different, at least partially – though not completely – dissociated. This, we think, both signaled and facilitated a shift in political process in the direction of increasing stratification. The big man's compulsory egalitarian and leveling redistribution to his allies was becoming transformed: it was chang-

ing into the politician's discretionary handouts to his electorate (such handouts, drawn mostly at election time from large slush funds, were perhaps a form of stratified redistribution) as well as into the middle-class Rotarian's voluntary service – diffuse *noblesse oblige* – to the generalized less fortunate.⁹

Kinsmen and constituents did not, of course, overlook this attenuation of the ties between themselves and their leaders: kinsmen complained that their middle-class relatives had “turned their backs” on them; constituents complained that they never saw their politicians except before an election (as we shall see in chapter 3). From the perspective of the Rotarian, and other middle-class “chiefs,” however, this attenuation freed resources which could not only be invested in business and family but in relations with one another as useful class equals. Harris and his subsequent Rotarians combined sociality with business; so also did Wewak's Rotary Club members. They bought each other drinks, dined together, and gave each other business assistance and advice, including somewhat privileged information. True, Rotarians (as did others in the middle class) cultivated their own networks. They kept up, for instance, with university classmates and with colleagues met elsewhere, including those met during training abroad. Nonetheless, Rotary was particularly important to them. Members talked about how useful Rotary was, how well-placed Rotarians were both locally and more generally. Indeed, one Rotarian jokingly described Rotary International as an “extremely effective Mafia.”

Part of the importance to these middle-class nationals of their Rotary networks, we came to understand, stemmed from the fact that Rotary was not only inherited from expats, but still included them. Furthermore, these middle-class nationals cherished the fact that the Wewak club remained part of the worldwide organization of clubs constituting Rotary International.¹⁰

Wewak Rotary in – and as – a world system

Simply put, in postcolonial Wewak, the expat members of Rotary remained important arbiters of the degree to which national members were not just economically and socially advantaged relative to other Papua New Guineans but were superior, having not just cash but cultivation. At the time of our research, these expat members were: the male, Australian owner of a company selling portable sawmills and exporting tropical hardwoods; the male,

French manager of the Catholic Mission's large wholesale and retail business; the female, Chinese–Australian manager of her family's wholesale and retail business; the female, British head of a program to educate teachers of the disabled; and two American anthropologists (having only their labor to sell!) – who, shortly before their departure, were replaced by two, married Canadian volunteers. (These volunteers had recently been assigned to Wewak to aid a women's organization in accounting and in marketing.) All (even in their way, the anthropologists) saw themselves as generally low-key, supportive mentors of the national Rotarians.

Often through example or discussion of established Rotary Club procedure and etiquette, subtleties of middle-class European lifestyles and standards were conveyed (see Bourdieu, 1977).¹¹ Thus, the expat Rotarians would clarify how to engage in nonpartisan good works (as with an even-handed distribution of the children's books received from an Australian Rotary Club); how to approach a fellow businessperson with a civic appeal (as in eliciting a contribution to the annual fund-raiser); how to entertain at home (as with providing drinks and hors-d'œuvre during the occasional unofficial meeting, always held in expat homes); how to maintain accounts and fiscal reputation (as with paying Rotary bills promptly); how to exhibit gracious manners (as in writing thank-you notes to other clubs which had offered toasts to one's own). The "instruction" was apparently accepted without resentment and, in fact, meetings seemed warm, and fellowship, generous. This sociability assumed that the ontological difference between these "chiefs" and the grass roots was such that Wewak's Papua New Guinean Rotarians could, with a modicum of polishing, meet international standards. Indeed, the sociability indicated to them that membership in Rotary itself was both the means to, and the measure of, such acceptability.

In their turn, the national members of Wewak's Rotary Club helped the expat members deal with some of the generic difficulties foreigners were likely to encounter. Virtually everyone – expat and national alike – who engaged in business in Papua New Guinea met with difficulties. But the expats, in particular, found what they considered to be the poor roads, unreliable labor, inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy, and ever-present problems of protecting person and property from attack especially frustrating. Many expats to whom we talked wondered openly whether they had remained in the country too long and, in outstaying the late colonial prosperity, had fallen behind those who had remained at home. Rotary did in a

very real way provide its expat members with useful connections which could help them do business with nationals in what was for them a trying context.

Rotary helped expats in another crucial regard. It helped them improve their public image. The expats not only considered themselves to be struggling against adverse circumstances but, as non-citizens engaged in business, to be vulnerable to accusations of exploitation, accusations which some feared could lead to deportation. Thought to have made large profits and to have invested them abroad, they were widely regarded as having no real connection with or commitment to the country or its people. Rotary counteracted this problem. It enabled its expat members to demonstrate to each other and to the public that expats and nationals could work productively together and socialize comfortably with each other. Moreover, it demonstrated to all that they could work not just for the benefit of themselves or other Rotarians, but for the betterment of the country.

The idea that Wewak's Rotary Club was part of Rotary International, a worldwide organization, was appealing to both its national and expat members. This was so in part because they all recognized that Papua New Guinea was peripheral as a third world nation. Certainly Wewak's Rotarians stressed that they were part of a community composed of millions of Rotarians: wherever they might find themselves, they were ensured of a welcome, of fellowship and assistance, from other Rotarians. Attesting to this fact and following standard Rotary practice, the Wewak Rotarians displayed at their meetings club banners from Australia, Japan, France, and the United States, as well as elsewhere in Papua New Guinea. These had been obtained by (mostly expat) members during visits to those clubs in exchange for Wewak Club banners. Comparably, and following standard Rotary protocol, Wewak Rotarians often proposed and reciprocated toasts linking them with other clubs.

In addition, many of Wewak's Rotarians would eagerly peruse and respond to the *District 9600 Newsletter* and the *Rotary Down Under* magazine, as distributed by the club's secretary. Once, for instance, an article describing the annual International Convention to be held in Calgary was discussed, with both national and expat members expressing a desire to attend. On another occasion, a national hoped that after the forthcoming fund-raiser, the Wewak club could make a generous contribution to the district's (Australian) governor for one of his special projects described in the newsletter. Similarly, an expat

suggested sending a letter of support and condolence, as suggested in the newsletter, to the Hobart Rotary Club in Tasmania, reeling from the massacre at nearby Port Arthur.¹² As one final example: an expat described to other interested members his pleasure at the warm response he had received from the Rotary Club in his Australian home town. In fact, through his efforts, the Nedlands Club, made up largely of wealthy professionals, was sending the Wewak Rotarians many medical supplies for distribution to the less fortunate of the province.

Thus, as an international organization, Rotary provided assurance to the nationals that they had come up to the international standard;¹³ it provided assurance to the expats that they had not fallen below that standard.¹⁴ For them both, Rotary furnished the international connections as well as the context for service which ensured that all could unite as exemplars within a contemporary Papua New Guinea.

It was at their annual dinner-auction that these Rotarians most directly engaged comparable others in their vision of a desirable and achievable sociality. (This was a sociality achieved, as well, at golf functions, as we shall see in chapter 3.) This event brought together those of similar identities and interests so as to evoke a community of the middle-class residents of Papua New Guinea committed to a lifestyle in which good fellowship, good business and good works were seamlessly and without contradiction combined. The Wewak Rotarians, through their initiative and example, were thus emulating Paul Harris. They were crystallizing from the ambience of a world-capitalist culture both consciousness and substantiation of what it took for the middle class to thrive: a convincingly universalized, seemingly practical, pleasing vision, as well as enactment, of the right and proper. Of doing well by doing good.

Exemplary exchange: the annual Rotary dinner-auction

On the evening of 22 June 1996 selected members of the public began arriving for one of the Wewak Rotary Club's dinner meetings. As usual, it was held in the dining room of the New Wewak Hotel, on this occasion festooned with balloons. This dinner meeting was, however, to engage in some unusual, if annual business, as the decorations suggested. It was held to raise the money needed for the next year's service activities through the auction of donated goods and services. These goods and services had been solicited by

Rotarians, sometimes persistently, over a two-month period from commercial establishments in Wewak and beyond.

Eighty-one people spent 20K each to attend. By place of origin they were: 29 Papua New Guineans, 16 Chinese and Filipinos, and 35 Europeans. Although it was assumed that many of Wewak's expats would come as a matter of course, nationals were to be recruited, provided members could vouch for them. Central to the concerns of both nationals and expat Rotarians was that the national guests should not be rowdy and that they should have enough disposable income to bid generously. To this latter end, the auction was scheduled for a payday weekend, so that the nationals in particular would still have some of their fortnightly earnings to spend.

Guests arrived at the hotel's dining room in what the printed invitation had specified as "tropical formal dress": usually a white shirt and dark trousers for men, and a somewhat fancy frock for women. After milling about, chatting, buying drinks from the cash bar in a convivial, cocktail party manner, they examined the goods which Rotarians had earlier arranged into auction lots and placed in an impressive display at the front of the dining room. Then, the guests were seated for dinner and asked to check underneath their chairs in search of the two sticky labels indicating who had won free dinners at local eating establishments.

Guests were welcomed by the President of the Wewak Rotary Club, who was a national. In his address, he touched on the history of Rotary International and then on the founding of Wewak's club: it was begun in 1965 and, though still small, it was now healthy with twelve members. These members had, in accord with Rotary's motto of "Service above self," done much good work over the past few years. They had, for instance, renovated the building housing a literacy center for women, paid the correspondence course fees for worthy students from remote villages in the Province, provided an X-ray machine to a mission clinic and given books to local schools.

Then, as at all club meetings, the president proposed a toast to Queen Elizabeth II and to Papua New Guinea. Again in accord with club protocol, the International secretary proposed another toast to the Rotary Club of Amherst, Massachusetts as thanks for its contribution of \$250 to the Wewak club's malaria control project. (This contribution, requested by the anthropologists, purchased inexpensive mosquito nets.) Next came the induction by the president and president-elect (the Papua New Guinean owner of a trade store) of two new members, the Canadian volunteers. Finally, the

club's usual sort of formal business concluded, the dinner and conviviality began. This was the portion of Rotary gatherings given over to the explicit value of fellowship. The food was ample and conversation was animated.

Then came the main event: the auction. Following the club policy of "black/white" rotation, this year's auctioneer was the European manager of Boral Gas. (The other usual auctioneer, considered as good, was the Papua New Guinean head of security for a large Chinese-owned conglomerate.) Throughout, the auctioneer presented jokes evoking in-group knowledge. Beginning with reference to Rotary as a service organization, he announced a series of forthcoming public service lectures to be sponsored by the club and given by well-known local persons, whom he named. His announcements were greeted with howls of laughter. One lecture, entitled "Do It My Way," was to be given by a notoriously irascible European male golfer on golf etiquette; "Bali, Island of Love," was to be given by a European woman who had recently vacationed in Bali without her husband; and "Alcoholics Anonymous and How It Has Helped Me," was the title of lecture to be given by an absent and frequently deprecated Papua New Guinean politician.

This kind of dangerous humor was expected, and the auctioneer continued it throughout the evening. Once, for example, he alluded to a long-standing and fierce business competition between the two major Chinese wholesale operations in Wewak. This competition had, according to popular understanding, recently intensified with one firm reclaiming only with difficulty a shipping container of canned mackerel, worth about K45,000, which had ended up in the other's warehouse. Summoning the aggrieved owner of one firm and the representative of the other to the front of the room, the auctioneer presented an award for the best purveyor of gourmet food to the aggrieved owner. Looping a necklace of completely ordinary sausage links over his head and on to his immaculate white shirt, the auctioneer proclaimed the superiority of his firm's famous product. The auctioneer then handed the rival firm's representative a can of corned beef to present to the other in acknowledgment of the other's superior meats. As this spoof unfolded, the auctioneer pointedly stressed that it was meat and not fish being presented – thus invoking, through this humorously positive transaction in meat, the bitterly negative transaction in fish.

In addition, the auctioneer laced his bidding patter with ambiguously – sometimes dangerously – humorous jibes and other personal

references. His evident strategy was to engage members of the audience by keeping them both amused and a bit off balance. Indeed, early on he announced that he would try to generate higher bids by creating contention rather than harmony at the auction: he would pit Highlanders against Sepiks, Catholics against Protestants. Thus, he surreptitiously attached a package of condoms to the picture frames donated by the local pharmacist and insisted that the Catholics present (who included a priest and several nuns) could *not* abstain from bidding on these items. Another of his more dangerous jokes involved a case of Mobil engine oil. After warning the hotel's manager and cook that this was not for frying chips, he solicited a bid from a former pilot – a man whose Mobil-lubricated engine had suffered catastrophic failure – saying that if he were still flying, this item would be of interest to him.

Such comments had their intended effect: they did indeed create an atmosphere of convivial competition. Bidding was reasonably animated on what was, in fact, a fairly wide assortment of goods and services. For instance, a Honda water pump (donated by the Papua New Guinean manager of Toba Motors) went for K510; and a ten-minute helicopter trip over Wewak (donated by the European pilot for Helipacific) went for K110.

The big spender of the evening was the Papua New Guinean manager of Wewak's Mobil Oil depot and service station. He and his wife had also won the prize for the best-dressed couple, a dinner for two donated by the Papua New Guinean owner of a local hotel. He bought the following: a case of Pepsi Cola donated by the Papua New Guinean owner of a local retail trade store; a case of Coca Cola donated by the company's European trade representative; a portable radio cassette unit donated by the Chinese owner of a local retail and wholesale store; an "executive" briefcase, raincoat, T-shirt and cap donated by the Papua New Guinean business manager of one of the country's English-language daily newspapers; a set of sports equipment, including a soccer ball and a rugby ball, donated by the European trade representatives of Puma Sports and Supervalve Wholesale Distributors; and a circular saw donated by the Papua New Guinean manager of the local branch of Steamships Hardware. He spent, in all, K735 – and went home, he told us, very pleased with the evening. This was so not only because he had acquired useful items, but also because the items he had donated (two cases of aforementioned motor oil and a fountain pen set) went for good prices (K90 and K95, respectively).

Others also bid generously: a European parish priest spent K525; the European owner of an oil-tank construction firm (which had recently completed a facility at a massive, internationally financed gold mine, soon to open on Lihir Island) spent K340; the Papua New Guinean headmaster of Wewak's International School spent K210

The final tabulations were made and the books closed on the auction a few days later at the club's next regular meeting. According to information distributed, those attending had spent K5,280 on the auction and K2,563.30 on the dinner, a raffle, several other fundraising diversions and on various special items such as paintings donated by students at a local teacher's college. After expenses (principally the cost of the meal), the Rotary Club netted K5,980.82. Members reflected on the event with considerable satisfaction. They were pleased not only with the amount raised, which would allow them to finance a number of service projects, but also with the way it had been raised. The evening was a success. It was regarded as more than a means to an end. It was an end in itself.

For the duration of its annual dinner-auction, the Rotary Club of Wewak had coalesced Wewak's middle class into a momentarily complete, organically solidary community based upon an apparently seamless union of self *and* service. And as self and service became linked in an immediate and ostensible manner, the connection between private interest and public interest became more than just an article of capitalist faith in an hypothesized long-term (see Parry, 1989). Indeed, the dinner-auction became a virtual *tour de force* of capitalist adjustment and justification: it was an occasion to portray, and exuberantly enact, as noncontradictory a set of linked distinctions central to modernist social and economic interaction and obligation. In so doing, gifts and commodities, cooperation and competition, social entailment and disentailment could no longer be as readily – or as necessarily – seen to be disjunctive.¹⁵ In what approached the best of all possible worlds, donors from a wide range of commercial specialties received favorable publicity, and hence future business reward,¹⁶ for their gifts of commodities; bidders from a range of professional and business occupations competed jovially for good buys in an exemplary free and fair market (in the auction, participation was open to all present and value was transparently determined);¹⁷ monies raised were to be used as gifts – to the excluded but still deserving less-fortunate. By what was, in effect, a muddling or at least partial collapse of these distinctions increasingly

pervading everyday Papua New Guinea life, the Wewak Rotary Club provided a template for the formation of a middle-class sociality: it was a sociality of the unentailed but voluntarily concerned. It was a sociality of neighbors, not of kin.

For the nationals, who were among an emergent middle class, the template authorized what was for many a hard and painful transition in lifestyle. As middle-class consumers, if not entrepreneurs, entailed commitments of kinship or gift exchange were almost impossible to maintain in a commodity economy. The dinner-auction facilitated a reconfiguration, both in ideology and in action, of such particularist and enduring ties into a diffuse middle-class sociality.¹⁸ For the expats, in effect direct heirs of Paul Harris, the template did not have to assist them to break ties and reorient relationships. Rather, it worked to affirm the rightness of a way of life long underway by promising that the alienation and social discord of a striving capitalist individualism were not inevitable.¹⁹

It must be stressed that the dinner-auction was not just an occasion for individuals of certain identities and interests to engage amicably in diffuse sociality. It was, as well, an occasion for these individuals to exhibit a heightened collective consciousness of their membership in a special kind of social category. Selected by Rotarians from the community at large as suitable, they acceded to – indeed, by all evidence, embraced – an ambience that invoked a moral community. In part, this community became defined, bounded and solidified through the operation of the dangerous humor. This humor evoked certain widely recognized tensions – those arising from commercial, ethnic, and religious competition as well as from personal delicts and difficulties – only to treat them all as amusingly idiosyncratic.²⁰ Certainly, this humor defined those present as sufficiently solidary that they could tease each other without taking offense.²¹ At the same time, such humor provided public recognition that those present knew a lot about each other and, therefore, were bound together, not only in mutual tolerance, but in mutual regulation. Thus, Wewak Rotarians provided an annual context in which they and like-minded others could make manifest with minimized ambivalence and awareness of contradiction that they composed a class with acknowledged interests.

Conclusion

We have discussed a moment in the complex process of class happenings, a process, as mentioned, more historically than ethnographically documented. We have provided a relatively thick description of the way a group of relatively affluent Papua New Guineans has been gaining a new kind of consciousness about differences and similarities – about identities and interests – through engaging in the Rotary Club of Wewak, either as club members or as participants in club activities. Their engagement, although clearly not the sole cause of their new consciousness, played, we think, an important role in actualizing and manifesting the modernist transformations underway in Papua New Guinea. Indeed, they would fully agree that, in accord with the Rotary template, they had an important role in (to reiterate) “energizing and transforming civil society” (Hooper, n.d.: 22).

Yet, however optimistic and energetic members of this class might be, they – and their expat associates – were, after all, confronting a world affected by the increasing power of corporate and multinational capitalism, a fact to which we will briefly return in our conclusion, where we consider the long-term implications of the Rotary and the other templates we will discuss for an emerging Papua New Guinean middle class. In our next chapter, we describe another set of contexts and engagements for forging the redefinitions central to class happenings: whereas the Rotary allowed the affluent to emerge as the middle class, an organization of middle-class businesswomen redefined the grass roots as the lower class.