1 Change and development

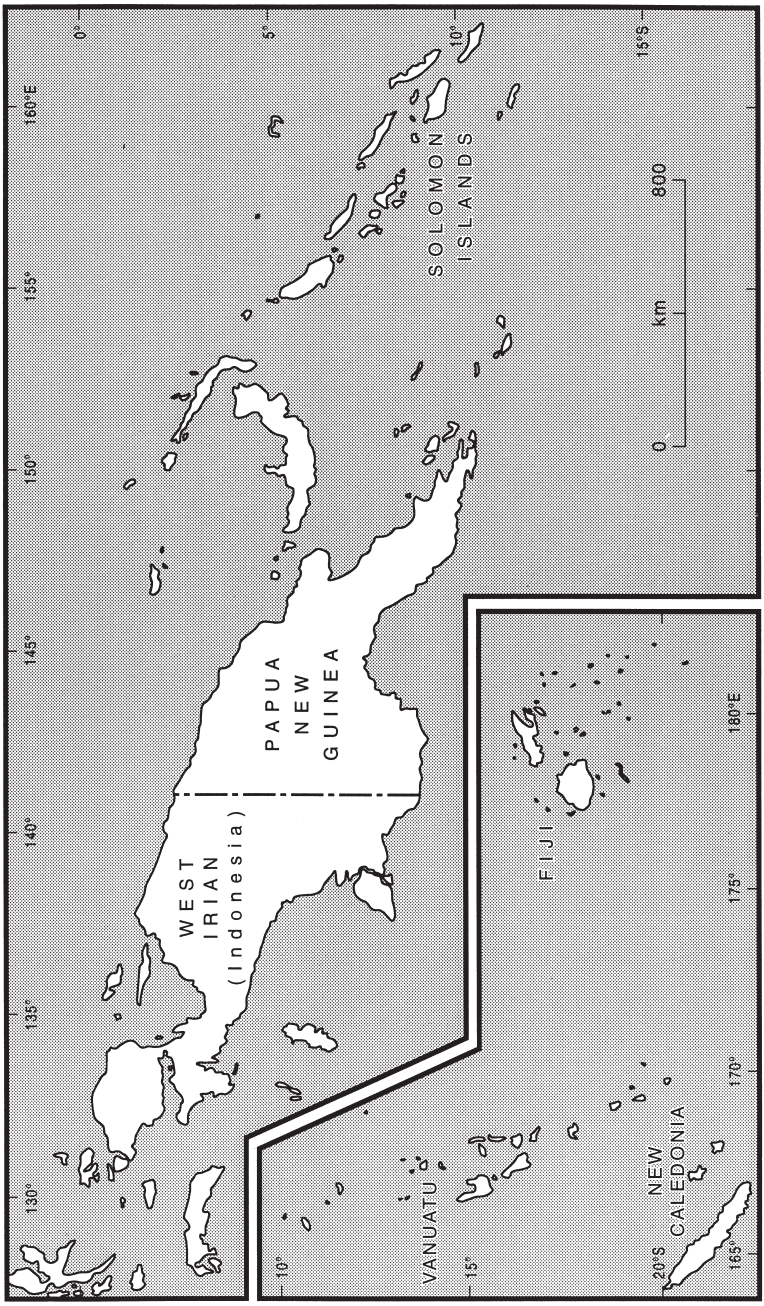
People in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea tell the following story:

> Long ago in the forested mountains of Papua New Guinea lived two brothers, one dark- and one fair-skinned. One day, the fair-skinned one, who was considerably more talented and able than his dark-skinned brother, made a particularly successful hunting trip. Returning with several marsupials, he told his somewhat lazy brother to collect some firewood to heat stones for an earth oven, for they were going to have a feast. Once the oven had been prepared and the eviscerated and singed marsupials were cooking, the fair-skinned man decided to go to a garden some way off to collect greens and other vegetable delicacies to cook and eat with the meat. He was gone a long time. When he returned he found that his brother had opened the oven and eaten all the meat and was sleeping off his gluttonous meal. He was furious; this was the last straw. He told his greedy, stupid and indolent brother that from that day forth he would have to fend for himself, and then he went away. He disappeared, no one knew where, and from that day to this those mountains have been inhabited by dark-skinned people only.

Storytellers today often go on to say that the arrival of Europeans marks the return, after many generations' absence, of the fair-skinned brother's descendants. This book is concerned with the consequences of this 'return'.

Social change

Any society, tribal or modern, is a dynamic entity. Although anthropologists commonly present their work in the form of a synchronic account, they do not intend to imply that the societies they study are static. They work in this way for a variety of intellectual and practical reasons, not the least of which is that it is all many fieldworkers can manage. The societies they study are clearly not stagnant, if only because their membership is constantly changing through births and deaths, and their institutions and arrangements will be continually changing for this and other reasons as well. Some crucial questions are the source of this change, its extent and the speed with which it takes place.



Map 1 The new nations of Melanesia

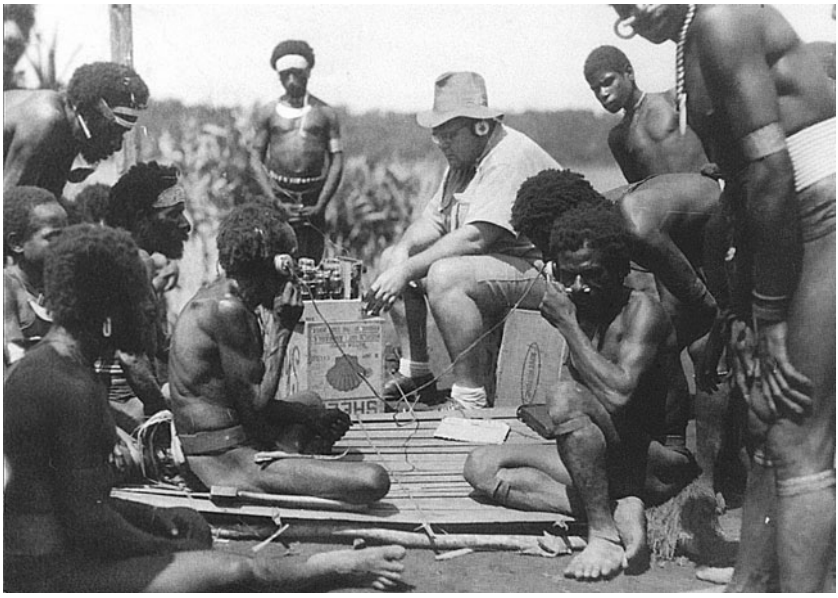


Plate 1.1 The fair-skinned brother's descendants return: a two-way radio link established at Lake Kutubu *ca*. 1938.

Change may be internally or externally generated or even imposed. No group of human beings anywhere is entirely content with its lot; its members are constantly pressing to improve their social situation. The changes they effect in the structure of their society, its institutional arrangements and so on, are usually small in any generation, although cumulatively they may appear considerable. Whereas generally they are gradual, constraints may cause pressures to build until they erupt, commonly as revolution. The slower the change in technology, the more gradual the change in social arrangements. Internally generated change is rarely disruptive of the established order.

Change of this kind is the concern of evolutionary theory, which postulates that societies, like organisms, evidence lineal change, being subject to dynamic environmental and sociocultural forces that constantly promote it. The idea is that this change is advancement. In this respect evolutionary theory underpins the notion of development, which assumes the adoption of improved technological procedures and more effective institutional arrangements. The danger is that this idea of improvement can lead us to make pejorative judgments about the societies that are targeted by development agencies, thinking of them as a lower order of humanity.

Plate 1.2 An armed Papuan constable taking manacled prisoners back to stand trial.

Internal forces are rarely solely responsible for change, however, because, leaving aside the problem of distinguishing one society from another, few societies exist in isolation. Besides generating change themselves, societies inevitably adopt practices and objects from their neighbours. Many changes in societies occur as a result of pressures from outside. The critical questions are again the extent and speed of these changes and who is controlling them. In traditional Melanesian cultures it was the people concerned who made these decisions, and the rate at which they adopted traits from their neighbours was gradual and the resulting changes rarely disruptive. It is when one society moves on another and forces it to change that the situation is altered dramatically – the extent and speed of change increase markedly, resulting in social disruption and confusion. This happens only when the invading society is sufficiently powerful to dominate the other which invariably means that it is technologically superior. We recognise here the historically inevitable intrusion of industrial society into the non-industrial cultures of the Pacific, which started with European exploration of the world and has proceeded apace over the past 200 years, leaving very few if any places unaffected. This is the change that is associated with economic development in the Third World.

We can distinguish three aspects of this forced change: technological innovation, social consequences, and indigenous rationalisations. In a broad sense (for these issues inevitably overlap in reality), the following chapters are ordered according to this sequence.

Technological innovation is inevitable given the technical superiority of the industrial world. People with only stone tools are certain to jump at the opportunity of acquiring steel ones once they recognise their superior efficiency, and the same is the case with many other manufactured goods, clothing, processed food, and so on. Those who adopt many of these things do so freely; Melanesians are eager to swap grass skirts for cotton dresses, local vegetables for biscuits, and so on. There is no necessary compulsion at this level, and because there are no checks considerable damage can result – sickness through wearing dirty clothing, malnutrition through a shift to unbalanced processed-food diets, and so on. Where those involved see the technical innovation as having no advantages or as threatening to interfere with their lives, representatives of the powerful industrial world may compel them to accept it – to construct airstrips or roads, for example, or to give up land for plantations or mines.

Technological changes, whether voluntarily or coercively adopted, are certain to have social consequences. Access to manufactured food and clothing will lead to changes in local productive arrangements and possible modifications in the composition and organisation of the social groups involved. Gardening and hunting may decrease, for example, or the cultivation of plants required for apparel may cease, with consequent changes, sometimes extensive, in the cooperative arrangements among those involved. The establishment of a mine or plantation employing considerable numbers of local people, for example, can produce far-reaching social changes in a brief period – a virtual externally generated revolution – and, sometimes nearly as disturbing, can attract migrant labourers from other regions, deserting their homes and families for varying periods in pursuit of work.

In addition to these indirect technologically induced social changes there are others directly imposed by the colonising social order. These usually include, for instance, modifications to the traditional political system, which are particularly disturbing if the dominated polity is stateless as it was everywhere in Melanesia. Pax Europa always involved the imposition of a system of alien law courts to settle disputes, the curtailment of local political autonomy, and the ruthless suppression of 'tribal warfare'. In the Sepik region of New Guinea, for example, patrol officers executed those whom the Supreme Court found guilty of head-hunting by hanging them in public and then cutting up the rope into short

lengths for distribution among those present – in the words of one such hangman 'as a reminder of the power of the government and what it could do to people that offended its code' (Bloxham quoted in Nelson 1982:187).

When swift and far-reaching technological and social changes occur, the people caught up in them are often confused, even bewildered and dismayed, but they inevitably try to make some sense of what is happening to them. The myth with which this chapter opened is an example of an attempt to understand such events – to explain them in terms of what is known. Especially in the early stages of contact, before those colonised have been exposed to formal education and come to some understanding of the invading order, these indigenous rationalisations are bounded by traditional knowledge. This knowledge may be inappropriate for making sense of the changes forced on them pell-mell by the outside world.

Attempting to account for the arrival of Europeans with little knowledge of the world beyond the valleys they occupied or the islands and swampy coastline they frequented, Melanesians have no choice but to extend their cultural lore. Because of the inappropriateness of this traditional lore for explaining what is happening, indigenous rationalisations may appear comical in their misconceptions of industrial society, although more often they strike the sensitive as melancholic. Melanesians are individually as intelligent as anyone: it is simply that their cultural heritage equips them only in a limited and seemingly unpragmatic way to explain what happens when the industrial world overturns their lives.

Issues defined

Central to the study of social change in anthropology is the notion of **economic development**. This is a somewhat unfortunate phrase because the word 'development' implies improvement, which is not always the experience of those subjected to it. It customarily refers to a material advancement in people's lifestyles: the introduction of scientific medicine or improvement of medical services (inoculation programmes to control disease or pesticide spraying campaigns to eradicate vectors, the establishment of health centres and so on), the introduction of scientific agricultural knowledge and practices (programmes to introduce new crops or improve strains, to promote soil conservation and the application of fertilisers, and the like) and the establishment of industries and businesses. All of these developments involve new technology and therefore it would be more accurate to speak of technological rather than economic development.

In many regards this development covers the first of the above three aspects of change, namely technological innovation. It is only here that we can legitimately talk of development representing progress, for it is only on a technological level that we can refer to industrial society as more advanced than non-industrial society. Chain saws and tractors can fell timber far more quickly than stone axes, modern drugs cure certain diseases more effectively than ritual, fertilised soils yield considerably more crops than untreated ones, and so on. These are indisputable advances which, if introduced sympathetically with regard to both the cultural and the natural environment, may be welcome. **Modernisation theory** assumes that technological advance and economic growth will proceed when conditions are right and bring material benefits to currently less developed nations. Development is a matter of arranging conditions to promote take-off.

Technological innovation invariably brings in its train other changes that may not be perceived by those caught up in them as desirable or in their interest. We cannot speak of this **social change** – change in the social organisation, economic arrangements, or political ordering of another culture or shifts in the aspirations or ideology of its members – as improvement, for who is to say that one social system or political ideology is better than another except in terms of culturally specific values? There are no absolute grounds on which to make such judgments. Growing more and better crops can be considered progress, but we cannot speak of the breakup of extended families into nuclear units or the demise of totemically organised social groups as good or bad. Indeed, we can turn the tables on ourselves by looking at some Melanesian institutions in the light of our own priorities, for they are often very sound in these terms. If we believe in equality, fairness and individual liberty, for example, the stateless political systems of the region are superior to states in their promotion of these values. Likewise, if we value biodiversity and worry about industrial destruction and pollution of the natural environment, we have to appreciate the tribal land tenure systems of Melanesian societies which, subject to constant renegotiation, repeatedly thwart outsiders' attempts to overexploit natural resources. The disturbance and bewilderment experienced by those concerned when such change occurs swiftly often cause it to be judged undesirable. More than just the social consequences of technological change, social change may include technological innovation and indigenous rationalisations as well. It is a more neutral term than 'economic development', and is the term favoured by anthropologists, who are keenly aware that rapid change cuts both ways.

Anthropologists who become involved in development projects are seen as practising **applied anthropology**, but this is something of a

Plate 1.3 A sign of the globalised times: dancers from Central Province, Papua New Guinea performing at a 1997 cultural show.

contradiction in terms. The only way in which anthropological knowledge can be applied in development contexts is to couple it with a knowledge of some other field such as agriculture, engineering, medicine or economics. Training in one of these vocational areas combined with an anthropological background that fosters awareness of and sympathy for other cultural arrangements is far more likely to promote a sustainable and workable development project than technical expertise alone. Otherwise, anthropologists can only advise on social problems and policies as they think those concerned perceive them, and here they run the risk of indulging in social engineering – interfering in uncalled-for ways in other people's sociocultural arrangements.

Anthropology is not an applied science; it cannot predict outcomes or solve problems. Beyond documenting the traumas of social change, it can only suggest likely outcomes in a general way and recommend policies that may prove less disruptive. The problem is that social disruption is unavoidable, and anthropologists commonly find themselves acting as weak brakes on the development juggernaut. The culturally loaded issues in question, arguments over ideology and belief, become political matters out of any discipline's hands. Nevertheless, the term 'applied anthropology' continues to be used by those who think there are solutions to the

Plate 1.4 Picking tea on a plantation in the Western Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea.

enormous social problems posed by economic development when instead they are amenable only to compromise and attempts at conciliation. The idea that social scientists, and anthropologists in particular, can help move less developed countries relatively painlessly into the industrial world is a dangerous myth, raising people's expectations far beyond what is practicable and leading to disillusionment and even a sense of betrayal.

The people of the world's less technologically developed nations – the Third World – tend to be materially poor, largely peasants or the urban dispossessed. The resources of their countries tend to be concentrated in a few hands while the majority of the population lives in poverty. Political revolutions will be necessary to effect substantial technological development that will assist the masses. It is manifestly inappropriate to think that applying anthropology or any other discipline can solve problems of this order. In Melanesia, with its traditional egalitarian social order, a small wealthy immigrant community, scarcely developed resources and predominantly tribal population, the issues are of a somewhat different order, and we can think of the region in some regards as beyond the Third World. The majority here are materially poor, but exceedingly few live in poverty, and many lead contented and fulfilled lives according to their

own cultural lights. It is refreshingly different from places like India and South America, and its problems with regard to technological development are its own.

The first phase of the development process experienced by the majority of Third World nations was **colonialism**. When the European powers claimed suzerainty over other regions, the inhabitants of these regions, technically and politically less powerful, were unable to prevent them from exercising it. The European governments subsequently instituted colonial administrations to create the conditions conducive to European settlement and the exploitation of the region's resources. Local populations were enslaved or even systematically slaughtered (as were Aborigines in parts of Australia and as are Indians in parts of Amazonia today). After the unspeakable terrors of the World War II a new spirit entered into international politics – a resolve to give ordinary people, including those in the colonies, a fairer deal. There were also at this time stirrings of militant nationalism as the colonised began to demand their rights. As one colony after another was granted political independence, we entered the post-colonial or neocolonial era. The latter term is used by some writers because few of the nations involved have achieved economic independence; they remain exploited, the colonial powers having created and left in control local elites with a vested interest in seeing that the situation remained unchanged. Today multinational companies exploit their resources to the benefit of the industrial world instead of colonial governments.

This view of the development process is referred to as **dependency theory**. Its argument with modernisation theory reflects in large part our culture's political divide between left- and right-wing philosophies. The dependency interpretation of the international economic and political order is that development aid for the massively underprivileged populations of the Third World is no more than a gesture towards Western electorates' virtually non-existent conscience and that investment in technological development in their regions is largely intended to facilitate exploitation of their resources for the benefit of the industrial world. There is, unfortunately, some truth to this jaundiced view.

Implicit in the foregoing discussion is the idea that development policy and practice operate on two levels: that of national or international debates about priorities and agendas with macro-level development plans; and that of regional or local demands for assistance prompting micro-level development initiatives. At the national or international level, we find large-scale development programmes designed to influence an entire country and its economy. Some examples of nationally planned development are road construction, the establishment of health centres,