

## (RE?)DISCOVERING CHIEFS: TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF LOCAL LEVEL GOVERNMENT IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA\*

In the 1960s and 1970s, what most people knew – or at least thought they knew – about Papua New Guinea’s ‘traditional’ societies was that they were essentially egalitarian: excepting a few societies which possessed hereditary chieftaincies, leadership was typically by ‘bigmen’, who achieved their status through competition, and community decision making was predominantly consensual. Although challenged by a number of scholars from the mid 1970s, this stereotypical view still has a good deal of currency. In recent years, however, stimulated by a series of reviews of the provincial government system and attempts to nurture new local-level political structures, it has come under increasing challenge within Papua New Guinea. In the mid 1990s people are (re)discovering chiefs on a wide front and are looking to traditional ‘chiefly’ structures as part of a move towards more extensive political decentralisation. This paper looks briefly at the discussion of traditional authority in the anthropological literature, examines the emerging political discourse on ‘chiefs’ within Papua New Guinea, and comments on its contemporary political significance.

### **Bigmen and chiefs in pre-colonial society<sup>1</sup>**

In the early postwar decades, the period leading up to independ-

---

\* This paper was first published as a discussion paper in the *Regime Change and Regime Maintenance in Asia and the Pacific* series in 1997.

<sup>1</sup> The subject of leadership in Papua New Guinea has generated a sub-

ence, Papua New Guinean societies (and most of Melanesia generally) were characterised as 'acephalous', lacking the formal, hereditary chiefly structures which typified neighbouring Polynesia and other small-scale traditional societies in much of Africa and Asia. Leadership was seen to be localised, and normally determined by competition on the basis of skills in warfare, oratory, accumulating wealth and arranging exchanges, or in the possession of special knowledge or personal qualities. Exceptions were noted, mostly amongst Austronesian-speaking coastal societies<sup>2</sup> but these were regarded as deviations from the norm. Thus, in his influential but ultimately controversial article on political types in Melanesia and Polynesia, Sahlins (1966:162) contrasted what he described as 'the Melanesian scheme of small, separate, and equal blocs' with 'the Polynesian polity [of] an extensive pyramid of groups capped by the family and following of a paramount chief'. These differences, which Sahlins argued, were reflections of 'different varieties and levels of political evolution' (ibid.:163), produced two distinct types of leadership: that of the Melanesian bigman and that of the Polynesian chief. Elaborating on the former, Sahlins said:

---

stantial literature by anthropologists and at least one political scientist. It is not intended here to cover a field already well ploughed, but rather to highlight some of the major features of the debate as a basis for the discussion which follows. For an introduction to the literature on traditional leadership in Papua New Guinea see Standish (1978); Chowning (1979); Douglas (1979); Allen (1984); papers by Morauta and Reay in May (1984), and Godelier (1986:chapter 8). There is also interesting comparative material in Berndt and Lawrence (1971), *Anthropological Quarterly* 51(1) (1978) and Strathern (1982a).

<sup>2</sup> The most commonly cited example was the Trobriand Islands, about which there is a large literature. But Leach (1982) argues that traditional leadership structures in the Trobriands were substantially influenced by the early colonial impact and that the title of 'paramount chiefs', used in colonial reports and perpetuated by Malinowski, was 'applied inappropriately in the Trobriands based on misconceptions of the political system' (ibid.:253). Also see Malinowski (1922:chapter 2, 1935:vol.1 33-40); Powell (1960); Uberoi (1962).

... the indicative quality of big-man authority is everywhere the same: it is personal power. Big-men do not come to office; they do not succeed to, nor are they installed in, existing positions of leadership over political groups. The attainment of big-man status is rather the outcome of a series of acts which elevate a person above the common herd and attract about him a coterie of loyal lesser men. It is not accurate to speak of 'big-man' as a political title, for it is but an acknowledged standing in interpersonal relations... In particular Melanesian tribes the phrase might be 'man of importance' or 'man of renown', 'generous rich-man' or 'centre-man', as well as 'big-man'. [ibid.:165]<sup>3</sup>

This model of bigman leadership was further elaborated in an entry on 'political organisation' in the *Encyclopedia of Papua and New Guinea* (1972):

Such authority as does exist is based almost exclusively on personal ability, not on inheritance, descent, or supernatural sanction. Leadership is almost always achieved, almost never ascribed... It is achieved through personal charisma, by accumulating wealth in the form of pigs and other material goods that can be used to aid others thus placing them under an obligation, sometimes by the possession of specialised knowledge, or through sheer physical power and the ability to direct warfare... This pattern of authority – that of the 'big man' or 'man with a name' – is virtually universal in New Guinea... Decisions were reached by consensus, with leaders and elders exerting more influence than others. Power and authority were diffuse and non-centralised... They were not elaborated into political offices or other specifically governmental institutions. [Langness 1972:927, 933. Also see de Lepervanche 1972; Lawrence 1971]

As several commentators have observed, the 'bigman model'

---

<sup>3</sup> In a footnote Sahlins (1963/1966:171) notes exceptions of 'proto-chiefdoms' in western Melanesia, listing Buka, Manam, 'perhaps Mafulu', and the Trobriands.

was heavily influenced by African segmentary lineage models prevalent in the anthropological literature of the time (see Barnes 1962/1971; Langness 1972; Strathern 1982b) and by one or two major contemporary studies of Papua New Guinea highlands societies – notably Brown’s (1963) study of the Siane, which characterised pre-colonial Chimbu society by ‘the absence of any fixed authority (“anarchy”)', and went on to say:

The stratification by rank or authority described in some coastal communities is unknown in the highlands . . . We can recognise qualifications for leadership, but there is almost equal opportunity for every man to attain these qualifications. There are no hereditary positions, and few hereditary advantages. [ibid.:3-5]

In time, critiques of the bigman model came from two main directions. On the one hand, Hau’ofa and others reminded their readers that:

Although [societies which do not fit the Big-man paradigm] are widely regarded as aberrations from the general Melanesian pattern, along much of seaboard Papua from the Purari Delta in the west to the Trobriand Islands in the east, there are many systems with more or less developed hereditary authority structures<sup>4</sup>

and suggested that:

It is probable . . . that Melanesian societies with hereditary authority structures are more common than we have realised . . . We could more profitably adopt the view that there is a range of leadership structures in the region manifesting all degrees of relative ascription and relative achievement. [Hau’ofa 1981:291-93]<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Hau’ofa lists, in addition to the Mekeo, the people of the Purari, the Orokolo, Elema, Roro, Kaopo, Nara or Pokao, Kabadi, Doura, Koita, Motu, Sinaugoro and other coastal groups between the Motu and the eastern boundary of the Central Province, the Trobriand Islanders, Kalauna, Mafulu, Kuni, Goilala, Kuma, Chimbu, Murik, Wogeo, Manam, and Buka. Also see Douglas (1979); Chowning (1979).

<sup>5</sup> Hau’ofa’s study of the Mekeo was published in 1981, but the thesis from which it derives was submitted in 1975.

On the other hand, there were suggestions that even in the highlands societies portrayed by Brown and others as conforming to the bigman model, leadership was in fact frequently passed on from father to son, and was often more despotic than communalistic. In a reconsideration of the bigman model, Standish (1978) quoted Chimbu informants' statements that in pre-colonial times leadership was commonly hereditary, and pointed out that such statements were consistent with early accounts of missionary-anthropologists Bergmann in Kamanegu (Chimbu) and Vicedom in Mount Hagen, and more recent studies by Reay amongst the Kuma and Strathern amongst the Melpa (Vicedom's Mbowamb of Mount Hagen). Having reviewed this evidence Standish concluded:

The central core of the 'Big-man' theory is the open nature of the competition for leadership which is achieved on merit rather than ascription. In the highlands, manifestations of operative hereditary principles have been identified in several areas, and practical demonstration shown not only of the mechanics of advantage for members of certain lineages, but also several instances of succession. 'Hereditary advantage' is perhaps a better term for the findings presented. [Standish 1978:33; similarly see Douglas 1979:9-10]

Chowning (1977) went further: while acknowledging that bigman status is 'largely achieved', she goes on to say:

. . . it is not true that everywhere in Melanesia any man had an equal opportunity to achieve high status . . . almost everywhere the heirs of a Big Man, if only by virtue of their special wealth and knowledge, have a much better chance of achieving high position than do others. In some societies . . . anyone who is not closely related to a former Big Man is publicly condemned and shamed by the community for trying to achieve such a position. [ibid.:42, 45]

Standish's reconsideration also addressed the subject of lead-

ership styles. According to both early accounts by outsiders and the recollections of informants, he observed, leadership in Chimbu (as in other parts of the highlands)<sup>6</sup> was frequently despotic. Standish cited Bergmann (1971-72:195):

I have known chieftains who had killed [or had henchmen kill] more than 100 people . . . Nobody dared to contradict them, because they feared to incur the chieftains' displeasure.

'Such behaviour', Standish comments, 'is very hard to reconcile with a "big-man" courting popularity'. Rather,

It is clear from the evidence presented that the techniques of leadership within clans and more particularly sub-clans varied from conciliation, compromise, persuasion, inspiration and bargaining, to threats and sheer brute force. [Standish 1978:22-23]

Oliver's (1955) account of leadership amongst the Siuai [Siwai] (which Douglas (1979:9) suggests was 'a basis of Sahlins's Melanesian political type'), and references by Salisbury (1964) to the Tolai and Chowning (1979) to the Lakalai, suggest that despotic behaviour was not restricted to the highlands.

Finally, much has been written about social stratification in 'traditional' Papua New Guinea societies which suggests a common pattern of socially, politically and economically differentiated layers, ranging from the *rabisman* or 'slave' (Vicedom and Tischner 1943-48; Oliver 1955) at the bottom, to the bigman or chief at the top, with a variety of categories of 'ordinary men' and minor or specialist leaders in between, overlaid by systemic status differences based on gender and age.<sup>7</sup>

Simplistic versions of the bigman model thus require substan-

---

<sup>6</sup> See, for example Watson (1971), Strathern (1966).

<sup>7</sup> In a volume on *Social Stratification in Papua New Guinea* (May 1984), chapters by Morauta and Reay review the data on social stratification, respectively, for lowlands and highlands societies. Also see Standish (1978); Strathern (1982a). The issue of gender is specifically addressed in Morauta (1984), Reay (1984) and Godelier (1986).

tial qualification to take account of, first, the effective continuum in (and common mix of) leadership patterns, from hereditary or ascriptive to competitively achieved; second, the range of leadership styles, from the ruthlessly despotic to the leader-as-steward, and third, the existence of varying degrees of social stratification.

This qualification having been made, however, it is probably still true that, compared to other largely 'tribal' societies, including those of neighbouring Polynesia, traditional leadership in Papua New Guinea can be generally characterised as largely dependent on personal qualities (and as a corollary only partially susceptible to inheritance). It is substantially constrained by competition, by specialisation of leadership roles, by the prevalence of communal modes of decision making, and by communal demands on leaders and resentment of leaders who attempt to raise themselves too far above other members of the society. Thus, for example, after pointing out the necessary qualifications to the bigman model, Chowning (1977:46) nevertheless concludes, 'Sahlins is right to stress the contrast between what a Melanesian leader is likely to accomplish . . . and what some Polynesian chiefs could do' (similarly see Chowning 1979:68; Morauta 1984: 9-10). It is also probable that in the great variety of patterns of social organisation amongst Papua New Guinea's traditional societies, there were systematic differences between highlands societies, where leaders frequently seem to have been individualistic and aggressive, and lowlands societies, where there seems to have been generally greater emphasis on mediation and group decision making.

The general pattern of non-hierarchical (or weakly-hierarchical) leadership and essentially communalistic social organisation was probably reinforced by the colonial experience and the particular form which emerging nationalism assumed in the 1970s. The German and British colonial administrations enlisted, respectively, *luluai* (or *kukurai*) and *tultul* (in New Guinea) and village constables (in Papua) as their agents at (roughly) village level,

with some 'paramount *luluai*/chiefs' representing groups of villages. These systems were perpetuated under early Australian colonial rule.<sup>8</sup> But though indigenous local officials were initially selected as people of influence in the society, their basis of appointment seems to have had as much to do with personal relationships between the selected individuals and the colonial administration as it did with traditional leadership structures (hence *luluai* and *tutul*, and village constables seem often to have worked as translators and go-betweens for colonial officials, and, later, as former police and administration officers). Moreover, since the role of village official, as intermediary between villagers and the colonial administration, often attracted resentment or abuse from both sides,<sup>9</sup> it was one which traditional leaders often avoided. Thus after ineffective attempts by the early German administration, the German, British and later Australian regimes did not develop a system of 'indirect rule' in Papua New Guinea, as the British and Germans did in other parts of their colonial empires.<sup>10</sup> And given the extreme political and social fragmentation which characterised Papua New Guinea society, there was certainly little prospect of creating an institution like Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs. Moreover, since the activities of missions (which in Papua New Guinea frequently preceded government) were often subversive of traditional authority structures – much as Chinua Achebe has described for Africa in his

---

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account of colonial administration see Reed (1943), Mair (1970), Rowley (1958, 1965) and Downs (1980). Also see Blackwood (1935:47-49).

<sup>9</sup> Until well into the 1980s it was not uncommon for villagers to stage 'pantomimes' on festive occasions, in which villagers enacted a visit from the *kiap*, who ordered the village official to line up the villagers, complained of the state of village tidiness, ordered that latrines be dug, and frequently kicked the village official's backside.

<sup>10</sup> Liz Adams has drawn my attention to a 1938-39 patrol report by Ian Downs, then a patrol officer in Madang District, who informed his superiors that in the area between the Gum and Gogol rivers 'there was no native remotely resembling or even fractionally fit for the position [of *luluai*]'.

novel *Things Fall Apart* – the effect of missionising was often to create competing sources of influence in village leadership.

In the postwar period the establishment of local government councils and cooperatives, and eventually of the national parliament, coupled with the growth of cash cropping and paid employment, and the spread of schools, ensured that leadership in the newly emerging political system was likely to go to a new group of younger, educated people, often experienced in government administration or business, at the expense of traditional leadership (even though a number of traditional leaders remained influential in national politics for some time).

It is notable that in many of the ‘second generation’ and later studies by anthropologists, reference is made to the decline of traditional leadership. Chowning (1979:66), for example, notes that the chiefs mentioned in W.E. Bromilow’s early study of Dobu are not mentioned in Reo Fortune’s later study; Blackwood (1935:47-49) comments on the impact of colonial administration on the role of traditional lineage heads, and Hogbin (1978:11) notes that on revisiting Wogeo in 1974-75, 40 years after his initial fieldwork, ‘These hereditary headmen were also no more’. (Also see Oliver 1955:423; 1973:196-98; Chowning and Goodenough 1971:162; Sarei 1974:50; Douglas 1979:5, and more recently, Sabin 1988 [quoted below] and Deklin 1992.)

Such tendencies were reinforced by the communalistic national ethos which emerged in the early 1970s. Elaborated in the concept of ‘The Melanesian Way’, this philosophy emphasised, often in a somewhat romanticised way, the egalitarian, communalistic nature of Papua New Guinea societies and what it saw as the essentially consensual nature of traditional decision making. The principal exponent of the Melanesian Way, lawyer, philosopher and member of parliament Bernard Narokobi, declined to define the concept (though a collection of writings on the subject by Narokobi and his critics, entitled *The Melanesian Way*, was published in 1980 [Narokobi 1980]), but the late Gabriel Gris described the essence of the Melanesian Way: ‘. . . our peoples

are communalistic and communalism is the basis for our traditional way of life' (Gris 1975:137).<sup>11</sup> The philosophy of the Melanesian Way was strongly reflected in the reports of the Constitutional Planning Committee (CPC), which provided the basis for Papua New Guinea's independence constitution. Its *Final Report* (1974) states that 'our people are firmly against "elitism" which is both unjust and undemocratic' (p.2/7), and a section entitled 'Papua New Guinean Ways' endorses 'those practices of participation, of consultation and consensus, and sacrifice for the common good' which it attributes to traditional societies (p.2/14). These principles were subsequently written into the constitution, notably in the preamble, which acknowledges 'the worthy customs and traditional wisdoms of our people', and includes in a statement of 'National Goals and Directive Principles' specific proposals on 'equality and participation' and 'Papua New Guinean ways'. Under the directive principle of equality and participation, the constitution asserts that no citizen should be deprived of the opportunity to exercise his (*sic*) personal creativity and enterprise, consistent with the common good, 'because of the predominant position of another'; under 'Papua New Guinea Ways' the constitution states as one of its goals, 'to achieve development primarily through the use of Papua New Guinean forms of social, political and economic organisation'. In 1975 the Melanesian Way was given royal approval when in a speech on the occasion of Papua New Guin-

---

<sup>11</sup> A later, but more comprehensive, statement of the concept has been given by Papua New Guinean lawyer Tony Deklin. Deklin (1992) lists amongst the essential features of 'the Papua New Guinean Way': a 'relatively high degree of participation . . . in general communal life'; 'the absence of authoritarian regimes (such as chiefs) in most PNG village communities'; the high values placed on consultation and consensus ('Both consultation and consensus . . . are crucial elements in decision-making processes in Melanesia. Consensus is valued so much that the process of reaching it can sometimes involve days, weeks, even months . . .'); and social equality ('. . . the society is classless. With the disappearance of the traditional Big Man, social equality is complete'). Also see Samana (1988:*passim*); Momis (1973).

ea's independence, Queen Elizabeth II said:

Great store is rightly placed on the ability of your people to solve problems by consensus and discussion. That is the Melanesian Way. I am sure it will lead to success. [Quoted in Narokobi 1980:184]

In the early post-independence years the egalitarian ethos remained strong, at least in rhetoric. Nine years after independence the then foreign minister and later prime minister, Rabbie Namaliu, in an address at The Australian National University in Canberra, referred to an advertisement in the Australian press the previous year, which depicted a Papua New Guinean dressed in traditional finery, with a caption which referred to 'the big chiefs'; 'The advertisement was misleading', Namaliu said,

in suggesting that traditional leaders in Papua New Guinea can rightly be called 'Chiefs', when most, in fact, are properly called 'Bigmen', who gain power through personal achievement rather than accession to office.' [Namaliu 1984:1]

Some time during the 1980s, however, the egalitarian ethos of the Melanesian Way seems to have waned,<sup>12</sup> or at least to have undergone some revision. By 1991, in the face of growing problems of law and order, former prime minister Sir Michael Somare told an Australian journalist that what Papua New Guinea needed was a benevolent dictator: 'Dictatorship would go a long way to solving the country's problems', Somare was reported as

---

<sup>12</sup> Standish (personal communication) sees the controversy over amendments to the Leadership Code in 1980 – a controversy which led to a split in the coalition government and the first post-independence change of government in Papua New Guinea – as something of a turning point. But there were earlier symptoms – for example, increasing involvement of national politicians in business, and some evidence of corruption, from the 1970s, and widespread calls for the deployment of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force to assist police in the highlands in the same period. The truth is that the principles of egalitarianism, communalism and consensus probably always coexisted with the common practice of inequality and coercion.

saying. The 'hard line' of Singapore's former prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, was needed in Papua New Guinea, he said; 'Papua New Guineans need discipline' (*Sunday Herald* [Melbourne] 17 March 1991). Shortly after this Somare presented a paper to the XVIIth Pacific Science Congress in Honolulu, on the subject of 'Melanesian Leadership'. In it Somare argued that

... most of the men who were first called on to lead our Pacific countries were, in fact, traditional leaders in their own right. They were all *big men*, *taubada*, chiefs of paramount clans, *sanas* [Somare's own title], *ratus*, *lohia bada*... Some of these leaders came from long lines of hereditary chiefs and were recognised aristocrats or members of chiefly families. Others were heads of paramount clans or the founders of clan dynasties. And yet others again, because of outstanding personality, and their ability to articulate the unspoken aspirations of their people, assumed a role they seemed destined to fill. [Somare 1991:105]

(Here he referred specifically to Papua New Guinea's first governor-general, Sir John Guise, who, Somare suggested, '... drew his authority, partly from the mantle passed on to him from Reginald Guise, his grandfather, who came from a noble county family in England'.) As against the virtues of traditional Pacific leadership, Somare deplored the 'tyranny of the ballot box'; under the colonially-introduced democratic processes involving one person one vote, Somare said, 'our traditional leaders... were virtually pushed to one side. They saw their influence and their authority quietly and slowly eroded by a process that was foreign, arbitrary, and very disruptive', adding: 'Some of us think great danger lies in the blind acceptance of the ballot box and what they ['Westerners'] call "majority rule"' (ibid.:106). Somare praised Fiji's Ratu Mara as 'The man who challenged and has survived the "tyranny of the ballot box"'. At the same time, Somare argued, 'what made our chiefs so effective... was what we might call *concern for people*—for *their* people that is' (ibid.:107).

This nostalgic regard for the more authoritarian aspects of

traditional leadership was invoked in frequent demands by national and provincial politicians and others for tighter social control (with Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia mentioned as models), for more draconian measures to deal with the problems of breakdown in law and order, and for censorship of the media.

By the early 1990s popular references to 'chiefs' had become increasingly commonplace.<sup>13</sup> When I commented on this, first in Port Moresby in 1991 and later at a seminar in Canberra attended by several Papua New Guineans, I was told that Papua New Guinean societies had always had chiefs, though foreign anthropologists had failed to recognise this, and that indeed many of

---

<sup>13</sup> By way of illustration, the following have been randomly selected from recent newspaper reports. (They do, however, exclude Bougainville, from whence references to chiefs are commonplace.)

- 'Revive traditional system of leadership – village chief' (*Post-Courier* 27 April 1993) (reporting the proposal by 'a village chief' from Rigo, Central Province, to establish 'a village body or authority based on traditional village leadership system', to deal with problems of lawlessness and lack of coordination at village level).
- 'Chiefs ban sports since fatal fight in Mumeng' (*Post-Courier* 11 May 1993) (reporting a decision by 'village elders' in Mumeng, Morobe Province, following a 'tribal fight' sparked by a local soccer match).
- 'Sir Charles – chief of two cultures' (*Post-Courier* 17 January 1994) (on the investiture of Sir Charles Maino, former Justice secretary and chief ombudsman, as KBE (Knight of the British Empire) and 'paramount chief of the Inauai [Mekeo] people').
- 'Tapini chief dies in road slip' (*Times of PNG* 3 March 1994) reporting the death, in a road accident, of 'the Paramount Chief of Tapini').
- 'Chiefs set to boycott prince's visit' (*Post-Courier* 8 June 1994) (reporting the threat of 'New Ireland traditional chiefs' [*maimai*] to boycott a visit by Tonga's crown prince unless compensated for 'past performances with similar dignitaries' visits', including, apparently, the initiation of Prime Minister Wingti as a *maimai* in 1986; said the chiefs' spokesman: 'We are an elite group with traditional power. To call us out from our village, you must pay each of us with traditional shell money worth K10').
- 'PM praise for Sepik chiefs' (*Post-Courier* 10 July 1995) (reporting Prime Minister Chan's response to a welcoming ceremony in Wewak attended by national MPs from the Sepik and outgoing provincial assembly members).

the people with whom I spoke – whose origins ranged from Bougainville to Enga – were themselves chiefs or the sons or daughters of chiefs.

In what follows I do not intend to enter into a debate about the ‘authenticity’ of chiefs, but rather to briefly trace the emerging discussion in three specific instances:

- (a) in calls for chiefly institutions in East Sepik (a province with which I have had a long association);
- (b) in the emergence of a chiefly political structure in Bougainville; and
- (c) in proposals for the incorporation of traditional authority structures in measures (recently legislated) to replace (or reform) the provincial government system.

A concluding section will look at the political implications of these developments.

### **Chiefs in East Sepik**

East Sepik is not an area renowned for chiefly status, though hereditary chiefs appear to have been common along the north coast. Hogbin (1978) describes a system of hereditary headship amongst the Wogeo (an Austronesian group in the Schouten Islands north from Wewak):

The office of headman is ascribed; that is to say the title [*kokwa*] descends by hereditary right, though not necessarily to the father’s firstborn. [ibid.:37]

Having noted that ‘birth by itself does not ensure distinction’, and having discussed the ‘basic qualifications’ for leadership, Hogbin concludes:

In other words, the successful Wogeo leader, apart from his hereditary right, must be the same sort of individual as a big-man in those areas of Papua New Guinea and Melanesia generally, where titles are wholly acquired. [ibid.:42]

However, Hogbin presents a picture of the headman which is very different from that of a stereotypical ‘chief’ or despotic bigman:

A traditional saying runs that a stranger can easily discover who is the headman by looking for the person with dirty hands and muddied feet . . . It is said that at a feast he should leave the most succulent taro, the slabs of lean pork, and the strips of white fat and be content with the bones . . . ‘The host should see that ordinary folk depart with full bellies; he himself holds back and tightens his belt’. [ibid.:40]

Aufenanger (n.d.:250-51) refers to hereditary leadership, *kokal*, on another Schouten island, Koil, and a similar pattern is described by Wedgwood (1933-34) and Lutkehaus (1990) for the Manam, also in the Schouten group (but administratively part of Madang Province).<sup>14</sup> On the mainland, Aufenanger (n.d.:18) describes a hereditary chieftainship system in the (non-Austro-nesian-speaking) Wewak-Boikin area:

One family in the village is the *kinyau* family. It possesses the highest rank in the village. The chieftainship is hereditary . . . The highest *kinyau* has the title of *kokal*.

In his 1975 autobiography former prime minister Sir Michael Somare describes his ascendance to the traditional chiefly title of *sana*, a title held by his father and grandfather before him. Somare is from Karau village in the Murik Lakes at the mouth of the Sepik River, but he records that his people migrated there from the upper Sepik and that his great-grandfather, ‘a big fight leader and peacemaker’, was the first *sana* (Somare 1975:16).

Elsewhere in the East Sepik Province various forms of ‘bigman

---

<sup>14</sup> Recently, Bernard Narokobi, having rejected an Order of the British Empire in the New Year’s Honours List, accepted the gift of a necklace, *sawai*, from Sup villagers from Mushu Island. ‘One who wears this,’ it was reported, ‘is recognised as the son of a wealthy chief and can marry a number of women’ (*Post-Courier* 6 July 1995).

model' seem to predominate. In a survey of 'social control' for the *Encyclopaedia of Papua and New Guinea* (Ryan 1972) Berndt groups the recorded Sepik cultures together as 'Type IV leadership' – 'illustrating one kind of leadership, focused on the "big man" who gains ascendancy through personal achievement, including, in many cases, aggression' (Berndt 1972:1053). In a later overview of Sepik (East and West) politics, Mitchell (1978:6) distinguishes between the 'eastern section of the Sepik River Basin', in which 'hierarchical political systems predominate' and the western section, in which 'all the societies are egalitarian'. In the same volume Metraux (1978:50) observes: 'The Iatmul [a Middle Sepik River group] do not have chiefs but they do have a kind of incipient aristocracy'. But whatever traditional leadership structures may have existed, by the mid 1970s they appear to have been substantially disrupted by the impact of missions, the colonial administration and the national government, including local government councils, and by the effects of migration, education, and *bisnis* (business). One would expect that the general effect of these developments has been to undermine chiefly authority (as Hogbin suggests has been the case in Wogeo) though more recently Errington and Gewertz (1990) have described the emergence of a 'chief' amongst the previously chiefless Chambri.<sup>15</sup>

In the early 1980s, with the local government council system in East Sepik already in a state of advanced decline, there was some discussion about the possibilities of reviving local-level government through the establishment of community governments (as had been attempted with some success in the North Solomons Province). In the Boiken area, north of the provincial capital Wewak, a proposal had been discussed in some detail and a constitution was being drafted for a movement known as Arapesh Kita Muna by the national parliamentary member for

---

<sup>15</sup> For a more extensive discussion of leadership patterns in the Sepik see *Anthropological Quarterly* 51(1) 1978, Lutkehaus (1990), and Lutkehaus et al. (1990:*passim*).

Wewak Open and author of *The Melanesian Way*, Bernard Narokobi, and lawyer Peter Donigi. This development, and a move to incorporate a formal chiefly structure in the Trobriand Islands, were referred to in a national review of local-level government chaired by Narokobi in 1981:

In these two provinces [East Sepik and Milne Bay] there is a move to cater for both the traditional leadership based on heredity, and new leadership based on popular voting. There is emerging an English type bicameral system, with the hereditary chiefs occupying the Upper House and the popularly elected occupying the Lower House. [Department of Decentralisation 1981:11]

The Trobriands initiative was written into the Milne Bay provincial constitution (see Anere and Ley 1997:116) but the Narokobi-Donigi proposals appear to have foundered (though the Arapesh Kita Muna was still in existence in the early 1990s).

Ten years later, following a period of fractiousness within the East Sepik provincial government and increasing antipathy between the provincial government and East Sepik national MPs, the East Sepik provincial government was suspended. Subsequently, part of the provincial headquarters was burned down, the former premier was charged with arson and other offences, and several members of the suspended government were charged with misappropriation (see May 1997a). This series of developments confirmed the generally negative popular view of provincial government in East Sepik<sup>16</sup> and strengthened a growing cynicism towards politicians and political parties.

In Port Moresby, the burning of the provincial headquarters prompted East Sepik students at the University of Papua New Guinea to call a meeting of resident Sepiks to discuss the political situation in the province. The meeting, convened by Narokobi (then attorney-general in the Namaliu government), was held at

---

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the progress report of the parliamentary Select Committee on Provincial Government Review on its tour of East Sepik Province (PNG National Parliament 1990:volume 2).

the National Parliament in June 1991; Donigi was chosen to chair the meeting. An interim committee was elected at the meeting and given the task of preparing the terms of reference 'of a permanent committee to look after the affairs of the Province and its people' (letter from Donigi to Somare 17 June 1991). The committee produced a set of recommendations which were amended and approved at a second meeting of Sepiks the following week.

The resolutions of the second meeting called for the establishment of an East Sepik Promotion Commission (ESPROC), whose object was 'to promote social, economic and political welfare of the people who originate from the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea'. ESPROC was to have an executive arm, to be known as the Council on Economic, Social and Political Development of East Sepik Province (CESPODES); CESPODES' first objective was listed as

- (a) To continually review and recommend ways of improving the social, economic and political structures, norms, practices, policies and their implementation for a better and improved government and development of the East Sepik Province and its people.

Within CESPODES there were to be three permanent committees (political, economic, and social). The terms of reference of the Permanent Political Committee were:

- (a) To review and recommend a political structure for East Sepik Province which shall take into account the traditional political structures that existed prior to the advent of Europeans and which shall supercede the provincial government system.
- (b) To recognise and recommend measures to promote the establishment of the title of *Kokal* (Chief) to precede the names of all clan leaders in the Province.
- (c) To recommend measures to promote the establishment of a register of all *Kokals* in the Province which register shall include the names of their clans, clan land, village and language group.

(Re?)*Discovering Chiefs*

- (d) To recognise and recommend measures to promote the legitimisation of the traditional powers of the *Kokals* or Clan Chiefs in matters concerning:
  - (i) politics,
  - (ii) control and use of land,
  - (iii) dispute settlement,
  - (iv) law and order issues, and
  - (v) environmental protection and management of resources.
- (e) To recommend measures to promote the establishment of a Council of *Kokals* or Council of Chiefs in the Province to be composed of four (4) *Kokals* elected to the Council by all *Kokals* in each language group.
- (f) To recognise and recommend measures to promote the establishment of the position of 'B. . .' [sic] to be elected by the Council of *Kokals* to hold office for a period of five years and who shall:
  - (i) be the esteemed political head of the Province;
  - (ii) preside over all meetings of the Council of *Kokals*; and
  - (iii) counter-sign all agreements between foreign investors and the clan *Kokal* on behalf of the landowning clan.

There seems to have been general support for the proposal to replace the provincial government by a 'Council of *Kokals*', but not universal support: a distinguished former national and provincial government officer and member of the provincial assembly, Peter Waliawi, objected to the proposed composition of ESPROC as 'creating an elite group', and on the proposed political structure commented:

I do not think we should confuse the situation to take ourselves back to the Traditional Chieftain System which is clear in some areas while not in others . . . [and] which could lead to revival of unsocial [sic] and malpractices of the past as these were the sources

which kept some of them in the authority . . . [Letter from Waliawi to Donigi 27 June 1991]

Another Sepik colleague observed that, since leadership roles in his (Boiken) village were specialised, with different clans having different traditional roles, it was far from clear which clan leader was the 'chief' (Joe Naguwean, personal communication, April 1993).

In the event Donigi went overseas and though Narokobi told the National Parliament late in 1991 that he believed strongly 'that we should reintroduce the chieftain system' and hoped to introduce legislation to this effect (*Daily Hansard* 5 November 1991), the recommendations endorsed by the meeting of Sepiks in Port Moresby seem to have lapsed. In 1993 a new provincial government was elected according to the provisions of the provincial constitution. The model proposed by the Donigi committee, however, resurfaced in 1992 in the recommendations of the Bipartisan Committee (see above).

### **Chiefs in the North Solomons (Bougainville)**

The North Solomons Province was the first to replace local government councils by a system of community governments. Initially, the process appears to have been spontaneous. Peasah records that,

Local traditional, political culture had a substantial impact on the composition and operation of the community and village governments, which were spontaneously and unofficially established by the people in the 1970s to replace the unpopular local government councils. [Peasah 1994:184. Also see Connell 1977]

In 1978 this development was formalised with the passage of a provincial *Community Government Act* which sought, *inter alia*, 'to promote and recognise traditional leadership and authority while merging these concepts with those of the modern

government ideals and structures' (Togolo 1986).

Members of the community governments were variously elected or appointed by communities. Each had an assembly and executive headed by an elected president or chairman<sup>17</sup> and a full-time community government officer was appointed in each sub-district. The head of the community government was paid a retainer (of around K1000 per annum) and expected to spend two days a week on the job (Griffin and Togolo 1997:366-67).

By the early 1980s the number of community governments had grown to over 70, and they were becoming a source of some disgruntlement, especially in areas where they were seen as challenging traditional authority. The provincial Division of Local Government subsequently initiated steps to reduce the number of community governments through amalgamation. At the time, several communities moved to create 'councils of chiefs'. By the end of 1987 there were councils of chiefs for (at least) Tahetahe, Hanahan and Hakets, Malasang and Hangan, Solos (Gagan) and Buka (see Sabin 1988:2).

In 1987 the North Solomons Provincial Assembly passed a resolution (6/87) calling for an investigation into the establishment of a council of chiefs system in the province and the abolition of village courts. A Bougainvillean then at the University of Papua New Guinea, Ephraim Manhi Sabin, was commissioned to prepare a report for the assembly; this was completed in early 1988 (*ibid.*)<sup>18</sup>

The proposal to establish a council of chiefs system seems to have been generated specifically in response to dissatisfaction with the way in which the village court system and community

---

<sup>17</sup> A 1981 Committee of Review into Local Level Government reported that: 'In the North Solomons, a Community Government is a collection of several villages . . . Members of the government are usually hereditary chiefs who amongst themselves, elect a Chairman' (Department of Decentralisation 1981:11).

<sup>18</sup> There appears to have been a subsequent redrafting of this document within the provincial administration; the later draft is referred to by Peasah (1994) as the Tsereha Report.

government system were functioning. As expressed by Sabin (ibid.:28):

The provincial government has taken this initiative to establish Council of Chiefs primarily because of problems faced with and created by the Village Courts in the province . . . It was originally intended that Village Courts use traditional methods in dealing with cases and settling disputes. However . . . Village Courts avoid traditional punishment in preference [for] the Western standards of punishments . . . They refuse to use our traditional laws . . . [which] govern customary land rights, customary marriages, customary ceremonies, and many other areas of our Bougainvillean or Melanesian society.

Sabin went on to suggest that the village court system had become 'too formal' and that 'The people have lost trust and confidence in the system' (ibid.:28, 29). More specifically, Sabin reported that traditional leaders saw village courts as 'a foreign power which is undermining chieftain authority':

Village Courts do not allow our chiefs to settle disputes amongst their people – to make decisions on matters that affect them and their people. Village Courts leave 'no room' for our traditional leaders to move. Everytime they want to 'rise', the Village Courts are always [there] to discourage or stop them . . . Our Chiefs see Village Courts as a great threat to their very existence – it could wipe them out. [ibid.:29]

Sabin's view of traditional leadership on Bougainville appears to have been heavily influenced by a reading of Blackwood (1935) and Oliver (1955).<sup>19</sup> But he also undertook an extensive survey of traditional leadership in communities throughout the province. Summarising the results of this survey Sabin concluded:

The whole position has been fundamentally altered by the new system introduced by the Germans, continued by the Colonial

---

<sup>19</sup> See especially pp.29-31. Sabin quotes with apparent approval the observation of Blackwood (1935:49): 'It is certain he [the lineage head or *tsunaun*] possessed power of life and death over those under his jurisdiction'.

government . . . and devastated by the present Village Courts and Community Government system . . . Although there exists a traditional form of leadership, it is quite difficult to ascertain. In some areas of the province, this leadership can be easily identified, whereas in other areas it is very difficult. For instance, a person cannot differentiate between an ordinary person and a chief. In such areas this traditional leadership is virtually 'dead'. [Sabin 1988:30-31]

However, Sabin said, traditional leadership '*can be* revived and practised in the light of today's social, economic, and political development' (ibid.:30-31).

Progress towards the establishment of a council of chiefs system was disrupted by the conflict on Bougainville which erupted in 1988 and by the general breakdown of administration which occurred following the withdrawal of national government personnel and security forces in 1990 (see May and Spriggs 1990; Spriggs and Denoon 1992). The withdrawal of government services and collapse of formal political structures in 1990, however, created a vacuum of authority which was largely filled by clan elders or chiefs. Village councils of elders or 'chiefs' became the effective form of government in many parts of the province and played an increasing role in organising communities and subsequently in responding to initiatives for reconciliation and reconstruction.<sup>20</sup> In 1991, as part of the national government's efforts to reestablish government and restore services on Bougainville, a *Bougainville Interim Authorities Act* was passed, establishing (initially) six interim authorities.<sup>21</sup> Section 4(4) of the act provided that 'the people of the area [of the interim authority] may select

---

<sup>20</sup> See, for example *Post-Courier* 22 July 1992, 27 April 1993; *Times of PNG* 8 October 1992, 22 April 1993.

<sup>21</sup> These were for Nissan/Atolls, Buka, North-east Bougainville, North-west Bougainville, Central Bougainville and South Bougainville. Subsequently the South Bougainville interim authority split into two – Telei (Buin) and South-west Bougainville – and later still the Banoni and Nagovisi split from the South-west to form a Bana Interim Authority, making a total of eight.

or recommend their representatives to the Minister'. A subsequent report on progress from the South Bougainville Interim Authority presented the following picture for South Bougainville:

The Council of Chiefs System of Government is now emerging in South Bougainville. The Area Chiefs Council (ACC) and the Clan Chiefs Council (CCC) is now fully participating in the restoration of Peace. As a result of these changes, a division is established to coordinate the activities of the Chiefs.

The Division has now established ACC in areas previously under community governments and CCC in villages. The Chairman of ACC would now form the combine [*sic*] Chiefs Assembly (CCA) and they would report direct to the Interim Authority.

The priorities of the division is to re-establish village courts system and to re-appoint village court magistrates. This would assist in settling disputes and other Social Disturbances in the Community.

The co-ordination of the Chiefs to fully participate in the rehabilitation programme is well underway . . . [South Bougainville Interim Authority 1992:5]

In Central Bougainville, also, informally-constituted CCC emerged as effective units of government, though on major issues affecting the whole village most of the population of the village attended meetings, effectively providing a village assembly (A.J. Regan, personal communication, June 1995). In other areas such as Telei, Siwai and North-west Bougainville similar village-level councils were termed 'Village Councils of Chiefs' (VCC). In most parts of the province groups of CCC/VCC formed a second level of government to deal with issues of a larger scale or on which villages wanted an outside conciliator. These were known variously as village, community or area councils of chiefs. In Telei and Central Bougainville a third tier, called ACC, was created (*ibid.*).

When in 1995 provincial government was restored on Bougainville, in the form of the Bougainville Transitional Govern-

ment (BTG), with one representative on the BTG from each of the old provincial government electoral constituencies, the area councils of chiefs acted, in effect, as electoral colleges, selecting from amongst the nominations of village-level councils the BTG representative for the constituency.

The (re-)emergence of chiefly structures in the North Solomons has not been without controversy.<sup>22</sup> There have been disputes both about who the 'chiefs' are and about whether traditional chiefs provide an appropriate form of leadership for the 1990s. Nevertheless, in a relatively short space of time councils of chiefs appear to have become well entrenched on Bougainville, and when this paper was being written [1995] proposals were being drafted for a formal, province-wide, structure of councils of chiefs. Under the proposed arrangements village councils of chiefs, or elders, would be elected (having regard to the existence and form of traditional authority) by village assemblies; above these would be area councils. This would replace the previous structure of community governments and directly-elected provincial assembly.

### **Chiefs in the political system**

From around 1990, considerable stimulus was given to consideration of traditional leadership by renewed debate over the future of provincial government (see May and Regan 1997:chapter 4, Postscript). In July 1990 a parliamentary Select Committee on Provincial Government Review (Hesingut Committee) delivered a progress report,<sup>23</sup> in which it recommended that the Organic Law on Provincial Government be amended to replace existing, elected, provincial governments with bodies compris-

---

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, *Post-Courier* 13, 18 October 1993; *Times of PNG* 23 February 1995.

<sup>23</sup> Before reporting, the committee canvassed public opinion in four provinces 'which, in the opinion of the Committee, were better managed than the rest'; these included East Sepik and North Solomons.

ing presidents or chairmen of local government councils or community governments (PNG National Parliament 1990:13). The Hesingut Committee's final report was tabled the following year but the recommendations predictably met with strong opposition from provincial government sources and little progress had been made towards implementing them before the term of the parliament expired in 1992.

Soon after the new government came to office it made clear its intention to overhaul the provincial government system. In August 1992 Village Services and Provincial Affairs Minister John Nilkare announced a Village Services Programme designed to 'empower' some 240 community governments and link them to the national government through a structure of district centres and community councils.<sup>24</sup> A specific feature of the programme was its proposal to incorporate in the new system a formal role for 'traditional leaders', who were to receive a monthly allowance of K40 for their contribution to the programme (*Post-Courier* 18 November 1992).

Two months later Prime Minister Wingti announced that the National Executive Council had agreed to the abolition of the provincial government system (*Post-Courier* 12, 16 October 1992) and legislation to enable the repeal of the Organic Law on Provincial Government was drafted. However, continued opposition from the provinces – especially the provinces of the New Guinea Islands Region, which threatened secession if provincial government were abolished – forced the government to modify its position, and in November 1992 a Bipartisan Parliamentary Select Committee on Provincial Government (headed by Kavieng MP Ben Micah) was appointed to carry out a further review of the system.

After touring the country, the Bipartisan Committee submitted a preliminary report early in 1993 and a final report in

---

<sup>24</sup> The Village Services Programme is described in statements published in *Post-Courier* 14 August 1992:24-25 and *Times of PNG* 12 November 1992:32-33.

August. The general thrust of the Committee's recommendations was to replace the elected provincial governments by authorities comprising national MPs, heads of local-level governments (local government councils, urban authorities and community governments), and a small number of sectoral representatives; to reduce the legislative powers of provincial governments, and to substantially increase the role of local-level governments. In addressing the latter, the committee commented that:

... in the decades leading up to independence, the colonial government ... emphasised local autonomy and self-determination. This has resulted in the creation of the system of local-level government councils throughout Papua New Guinea. As a consequence, the indigenous forms of leadership, political structures and decision-making processes have been largely pushed aside.

Because of the strong evidence that indigenous forms of leadership and decision-making processes are inherent to the social fabric of the village communities inhabited by eighty-five percent of Papua New Guineans, we are of the opinion that this traditional leadership system must be encouraged as one of the options of local-level government. [PNG National Parliament 1993:64]

The committee proposed two options for local-level government: elected community governments, and 'non-elected representation – chiefs and traditional bigmen' (ibid.:67-68). Under the second option community governments would comprise 'traditional bigmen or chiefs and women' (thereafter referred to in the report as 'councils of chiefs'), but with provision to include 'limited elected representatives and nominated representatives of churches, youth and women, 'if and only when traditional bigmen and chiefs require them' (ibid.). The report went on to say that 'the council of chiefs/bigmen who comprise the legislature shall be direct representatives of their lineages, clans, communities and tribal groups' (ibid.:68); and on the subject of 'election/selection' stated:

- The position of chief is acquired by birthright, by the customs of the people, and by community recognition.
- The position of chief is held for life and shall be appointed as chief to the community government by the council of chiefs of the area and according to the custom of the area.
- A bigman assures his leadership by achievements through a system of reciprocity. A bigman shall be appointed by a method of selection determined by the custom of the tribal groups.
- A bigman is known as bigman by custom of the tribal groups.  
[ibid.]

The local-level governments so constituted were to have law-making powers on local matters of concern, 'powers to make the customary laws of the area', and authority for village court functions.

There was considerable opposition to the Bipartisan Committee's proposals from some sources (particularly within the Islands Region)<sup>25</sup> and confusion between Nilkare's Village Services scheme and different initiatives for change in the provincial government system<sup>26</sup> (at one stage there appear to have been three different pieces of draft legislation on the same subject). However in June 1995 an Organic Law on Provincial Governments and Local-Level Governments, based on the recommendations of the Bipartisan Committee, was pushed through the National Parliament. It states that provincial assemblies shall

---

<sup>25</sup> As against this, a former East New Britain premier, in a joint statement with a provincial MP, welcomed the legislation, commenting that 'their village chiefs and councillors would resume their "rightful roles as traditional leaders" . . . and be given the respect they have been denied for the last 20 years . . .' (reported in *Post-Courier* 7 April 1995).

In the highlands, a meeting of highlands premiers presented a position paper to the prime minister which, in criticising the proposed reforms, called for a major overhaul of the political system, including 'special consideration' of the role 'chiefs' could play in a restructured provincial government system (*National* 3 March 1995).

<sup>26</sup> The details of these developments are recorded in May and Regan with Ley (1997:Postscript).

consist of all national MPs from the province, heads of rural local-level governments and urban councils or authorities, an appointed representative from women, up to three members appointed by the provincial assembly, and:

where the chieftaincy system is in existence and is accepted in a province, paramount chiefs from the province not exceeding three in number or their duly appointed nominees, who shall be appointed by the Minister responsible for provincial government and local-level government matters on the recommendation of the Provincial Executive Council. [S.10(3)(d)]

The anticipated effects of this will be a shift of political power to the local level and a significant increase in the role of 'chiefs'.

## **Conclusion**

The (re)discovery of chiefs in Papua New Guinea, and attempts to incorporate traditional authority structures into the national political system, raise several questions.

An initial, if perhaps peripheral, question concerns the 'authenticity' of the chiefly status currently being claimed in some communities. As will be clear from the first section of this paper, many pre-colonial societies in Papua New Guinea did have hereditary chieftains, and, even in those which did not, bigman leadership frequently, if not normally, rested on a mixture of ascription and what Standish (1978) has called 'hereditary advantage'. The fact that many early accounts of Papua New Guinea societies, highlands as well as coastal, identified 'chiefs' when later accounts denied their existence perhaps says as much about the administrative and theoretical predispositions of early European contact and ethnographic scholarship as it does about social actualities: those who expected to find 'chiefs' often found them; those who did not expect to find chiefs found 'bigmen'. What is clear – unsurprisingly, when one considers patterns of leadership in other societies – is that heredity normally bestowed

an advantage on the children of political leaders in traditional societies, even where leadership was not actually ascriptive, and that even in ascriptive chiefly societies heredity did not ensure security of tenure. Moreover, leadership styles clearly varied considerably from community to community and were susceptible to individual personality and circumstance; they probably also varied significantly over time. In this context discussion of 'authenticity' is particularly problematic. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that some creative rewriting of traditional social structures is currently in progress – Errington and Gewertz's account of the rise of Chief Mathias Yambumbe providing a nice example – and contemporary claims for the previous existence of chiefly structures appear to be only weakly correlated with the recorded occurrence of chiefs in administrative and anthropological sources.

A more interesting question concerns why the dominant rhetoric of egalitarianism and consensus, enshrined in the constitution, is being increasingly outweighed by one which emphasises instead hierarchical structures and social discipline.

In fact, the discourse on chiefs is part of a broader tendency in Papua New Guinea politics towards a more assertive national leadership and an increasing inclination towards authoritarian forms of social control. This is encapsulated in the 1991 speech by Sir Michael Somare, quoted above, but has been manifested also in the demand for more draconian measures to deal with problems of law and order, in attempts to impose media censorship, in more widespread use of the military in internal security operations, in a growing status consciousness amongst many of Papua New Guinea's political leaders, and in frequent calls for tighter social control, with Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia as models.<sup>27</sup> Such sentiments spring in part from a widespread belief that 'imposed' Western institutions of parliamentary democracy were not well suited to Papua New Guinean society, and

---

<sup>27</sup> In 1992 a group of NGOs and church organisations placed a full-page advertisement in the *Post-Courier* (7 August 1992) urging Papua New

that problems of breakdown in law and order, specifically, reflect the inappropriateness of Western-style democracy. These arguments run counter to the view, dominant in the 1970s and well expressed by Deklin (1992), that democratic government is consonant (*marit tru*) with traditional politics; they also challenge the general belief of the 1970s and early 1980s, that the Papua New Guinea constitution which in 1975 defined the features of the independent state was 'home-grown'.

The argument that Papua New Guinea's political institutions are 'inappropriate', however, is compatible with the fact that at the time of independence most Papua New Guineans had a very weak sense of identification with 'the state'. In the 1970s, I used the term 'micronationalism' to describe a tendency, in many parts of the country, for organised local or regional groups to 'disengage' or 'withdraw' from the larger, national, community, 'seeking in a sense of common identity and purpose, and through some combination of traditional and modern values and organisational forms, an acceptable formula for their own development' (May 1975, 1982; the quotation is from May 1982:1). Amongst the larger of these groups were the separatist Papua Besena, the Highlands Liberation Front, and the separatist movement on Bougainville. By the 1980s micronationalism and broader separatist tendencies in Papua and the North Solomons appeared to be on the wane and there was some evidence of a greater sense of national identity. But unfulfilled expectations, an increasing incidence of 'tribal fighting' and *raskolism*, declining levels of government provisions in rural areas, tensions created by big resource-exploiting projects (most notably on Bougainville and at Ok Tedi), reports of police brutality, well-publicised evidence of corruption amongst political leaders, and a growing cynicism towards politicians at both national and provincial level, have tended to erode popular perceptions of the legitimacy of the state (cf. Standish, 1992, 1995). Against this background, a return to

---

Guineans to resist what they described as 'overwhelming evidence [of an] increasing and dangerous trend towards the militarisation of society'.

'traditional' forms of social organisation and control, albeit often romanticised, has an obvious appeal to communities who believe they can deal with their problems more effectively than a distant, and largely 'foreign', state. As Chief Vere Bau of Kwalmurubu village, Rigo said, in proposing 'a "mini" sort of government . . . based on traditional village leadership system':

Today, the disintegration of traditional village leadership system and non recognition or respect of village customs and culture of village level create confusion and frustration amongst village people. Leadership roles played by some individuals . . . even some elected members of the highest level of government are creating all sorts of confusion amongst the ordinary village people . . . consequently law and order problems become more confounded (*sic*) . . . there has been no sign of development at village level. [Quoted in *Post-Courier* 27 April 1993]

The appeal of 'traditional authority', in other words, has much the same attraction as micronationalist withdrawal had in some parts of the country two decades ago. It is, consequently, no coincidence that calls for councils of chiefs are strongest on conflict-torn Bougainville, were most vociferous in East Sepik following the burning of the provincial headquarters, and have emerged most recently on Lihir as that island's vast gold and copper mine is about to start operations.

This points to a final set of questions: if there is a shift to traditional forms of authority, how is traditional leadership to be defined and how effective is it likely to be in 'people empowerment' and restoring law and order?

The new Organic Law on Provincial Governments and Local-Level Governments implicitly assumes that traditional leaders will emerge (the questions of 'election/selection' of chiefs and bigmen/women was addressed in the Bipartisan Committee's report – see above), and indeed this seems to have happened on Bougainville – though not, as noted above, without some dispute. But it cannot be assumed that Bougainville's example can be eas-

ily replicated elsewhere, least of all in those areas, including much of the highlands, where competition for leadership was traditionally intense. Moreover, qualities on which traditional leadership was based, such as prowess in war and ritual knowledge, are not necessarily the qualities needed for leadership in the late twentieth century. What seems likely is that the introduction of 'traditional' leadership into formal political arrangements will provide another arena for political contestation and that this is as likely to weaken local-level government as it is to strengthen it.

As to its likely effectiveness, amongst communities which have become relatively remote from the reach of the state, or have chosen to disengage, there may be virtue in a revival of traditional leadership, just as many villagers gained from the introduction of village courts and community governments. But as Morauta (1984:28) warned over a decade ago: 'Traditional systems may not . . . be the panacea . . . that they are sometimes made out to be'. For one thing, advocates of the chiefly system, in arguing that the colonial administration 'pushed out' traditional leadership, perhaps dismiss too easily the possibility that in shifting from traditional to introduced political systems ordinary village people were expressing a preference for the new forms; such a possibility is suggested by Waliawi's reference (quoted above) to the 'unsocial and malpractices of the past' which kept some leaders in power, and by the recurring references in the ethnographic literature to the despotism of certain chiefs and bigmen. For another, the welfare of village people today depends in part on their ability to capture a share of the goods and services flowing from the state; chiefly or bigman leadership will only be effective to the extent that it ensures access to these benefits, and that implies its articulation with the state.

It remains to be seen whether the shift towards traditional leadership represents a substantial and permanent change in the nature of Papua New Guinea's political system or whether, like the Melanesian Way, it is primarily philosophical and semantic. One should not underestimate the capacity of Papua New

*State and Society in Papua New Guinea*

Guinean politics for creative adaptation; however, any attempt at a wholesale (re)introduction of chiefly structures seems fraught with problems, not least that it is unlikely to meet the more optimistic expectations placed upon it.