Chapter 7

‘MIPELA WAN BILAS’

Identity and sociocultural variability among the Anga of Papua New Guinea

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It is not unusual today to belittle or even to reject out of hand that pillar of ethnography, the comparative approach. Among the practices regarded as particularly futile is the use of models, suspected of being a mere reflection of anthropologists’ a prioris, especially when these models are built from data gathered many years before. Taking the opposite tack, the present article defends the virtues of a comparative ethnological approach that uses comparable sociological entities. In other words, I intend to show how an anthropology of nuances focuses on assemblages of sociological phenomena whose regularity, simple presence or distortions in space or time make it possible both to characterise the sociocultural identity of a given population and to envisage the structural or the historical transformations it has undergone.

I have taken the example of the Anga tribes of Papua New Guinea, or rather the Anga culture. This sociological entity is considered to be homogeneous to a degree such that any micro-variations observed lead to defining specific social logics, and understanding the presence or absence of these logics in other parts of New Guinea or the rest of the world leads to better knowledge of the ways societies operate and evolve. First of all, I will lay out the ethnographic landscape as described in the different studies conducted among these groups by some ten anthropologists since the mid-1930s. Particular attention is given to the way the singularities identified in each area of social reality consolidate and confirm each other so that systems of compatibilities appear whose variants reveal the mutual implication of structural logics and functional dynamics. In this respect, the contrast between Anga forms of social organisation and those found in two other regions of New Guinea — the southern coastal societies and the Highlands Big Men groups — is enlightening. Then I will give a brief account of the way the members of one Anga society, the Ankave, represent to themselves the various sociocultural assemblages with which they deal, and how they
produce and reproduce their identity and their differences. Finally, using this example, I will attempt to show how monographs and comparative studies can complement each other; in the course of this demonstration, I will underscore the sectors of anthropological research that would be excluded by a study carried out at the local level alone.

**Anga culture: about unity in diversity**

Why speak of an Anga ‘culture’ in the first place? Why consider that this set of New Guinea Highlands populations exhibits specific sociocultural features which make them a good subject both for study in their own right, insofar as they form a whole, and for comparison with other sociocultural sets? In short, what is the nature of the homogeneity observed in the twelve Anga linguistic groups, and what is the nature of the heterogeneity that appears when they are compared with other populations, of New Guinea in particular?

Their specific homogeneity can be appraised in two ways: first of all, certain sociocultural realities — such as language and material culture — are so original that they are in themselves enough to distinguish the Anga from the other cultural groups of New Guinea; and second and above all, one finds in these groups certain mutually reinforcing sets of traits of social organisation and of representations whose specific combination is enough to set the Anga apart from other societies in New Guinea.

**Language**

The Anga are the direct descendants of a population of non-Austronesian speakers who settled the Menyamya region several thousand years ago (Bhatia, pers. com.); today, numbering some 70,000, they are dispersed over a territory of 140 by 130 kilometres comprised of steep mountainous terrain at the intersection of three provinces of the independent State of Papua New Guinea: Eastern Highlands, Gulf and Morobe. Driven by that passion for differentiation so typical of societies in New Guinea, as well as — probably but how can one be sure? — by demographic growth incompatible with the resources of the Menyamya valley, which were decreasing as the forest cover regressed, part of this population left its original home and gradually spread from valley to valley until there were finally some forty tribes or local groups speaking ten mutually unintelligible languages.

In terms of both their syntax and their vocabulary, the Anga languages form a relatively homogeneous family, whereas they bear very little or no resemblance to other languages of New Guinea, even those that are geographically close. According to the Swadesh test (which measures the relative closeness of a hundred common words), the proximity between the Anga languages themselves ranges from 21 to 75 per cent, whereas they share at most 3 to 5 per cent of their vocabulary with any other geographically close language. Bilingualism is limited to villages and hamlets located near a border with another Anga group. It may have become more frequent after the Australian-imposed peace, thereby favouring mobility between groups, but it is certain that at least a handful of people spoke the language of the trading partners or affines they visited from time to time.

Worldwide many examples of imperfectly congruent cultural and linguistic areas can be found. In the case of the Anga, however, a strong coincidence between language and
culture exists on two levels. The Anga linguistic family as it has just been defined correlates closely with representations and practices which will be shown in this article to constitute one vast homogeneous culture with regard to the whole of Papua New Guinea. It is possible to further divide the Anga tribes into several continuous sets that share similar technical practices, social organisation and systems of representation, and which, in the majority of cases, correspond precisely to the different Anga languages (see below). For instance, the Baruya language is spoken by the members of five tribes, each of which has its own territory and political organisation. Likewise, marriage, residence pattern, cooperation in performing tasks, initiations, male domination, warfare and land-holding, take similar forms in all these Baruya-speaking tribes and, in most cases, contrast with those found in neighbouring groups.

Sometimes two Anga groups speak different languages but have very similar social organisations — the case of the Baruya and the Simbari, two geographically close groups whose vocabularies also show the greatest degree of similarity (65 per cent); the reverse is not found, however: in the present state of our knowledge, the sociocultural heterogeneity observed between same-language tribes is always much less than that observed between one linguistic group and another. For example, at the far western edge of the Anga territory, the small lowland groups living along the Vailala River have, at first glance, very similar patterns of territorial occupation and use. Whether one takes the Sambia, the Ankave, the Ivori or the Lohiki, their low population density, their mobility, their dispersed residential pattern or the relative importance of hunting and gathering compared with horticulture, all contrast with the way the members of these same groups live at higher altitudes. And yet, beyond these apparent similarities, each small lowland community is sociologically much closer to the other members of its own linguistic group, with which it shares a political organisation, kinship system, world view and male-initiation system, than with other semi-nomadic groups which are geographically close but belong to a different Anga group.

The number of tribes thus speaking a given Anga language and having the same social organisation and system of representations varies from one (among the Ankave, Ivori, Lohiki) to more than a half dozen (the Menye and the Kapau-Kamea): it is roughly proportional to the number of people who speak each Anga language, which ranges from fewer than a thousand (Ankave, Ivori, Lohiki) to tens of thousands (more than 15,000 for the Menye and more than 30,000 for the Kapau-Kamea).

To sum up: language is a primary criterion of sameness and difference for the Anga, based on an evaluation of relative similarities or differences. Any Anga language bears more resemblance to any other Anga language than to a non-Anga language, whether or not the latter is geographically close. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the term ‘Anga culture’ for the set of all tribes speaking an Anga language, keeping in mind that each Anga language corresponds to one or several tribes which make up a subset of this culture, with its own characteristics. These will now be examined.

Material culture
All Anga are horticulturalists, in other words farmers working small fields (0.1–2.5 ha) — referred to as ‘gardens’ in the literature because of the large number of species grown and the
individual attention given each plant — cleared for the most part in the forest. Tubers (taros and sweet potatoes) ensure the bulk of the diet, but large quantities of sugar cane, bananas and leafy vegetables are also produced. Everyone also raises pigs (in reality domesticated wild pigs, *Sus scrofa papuensis*). Hunting plays a marginal role in the diet, but game (marsupials, wild pig, cassowary) occupies a fundamental place in initiation rituals and exchanges (particularly between affines). Compared with other parts of the island, the intensity of Anga horticulture and husbandry is middling. For instance, the Anga do not dig their gardens, make compost, or use manure or mounding, practices which in other areas are designed to produce the large quantities of tubers needed to feed their bigger herds. Nevertheless, although these negative features of Anga farming go hand in hand with the absence of large numbers of animals and therefore with the lack of any developed system of ceremonial exchanges involving pigs, they do not suffice to characterise a particular sociocultural grouping.

There are, however, some techniques which are peculiar to the Anga. This is the case of several objects (bee-hive shaped dwellings set on low pilings, men's grass skirts made of thick layers of flattened aquatic plants, a belt incorporating two cassowary femurs marking the groin, eel-traps), and at least one complex practice, the production of salt from a plant. Alongside these specifically Angan artifacts or practices, there are many other technical features that can be found in other New Guinea groups (or in other parts of the world); but their simultaneous presence tells us we are among the Anga. For instance, many human groups shave the top of the head almost entirely, leaving only a topknot; likewise clubs with a stone head in the shape of a ball, a disc, a star or a pineapple are frequent in New Guinea. But a man wearing this haircut *and* carrying such a club is sure to be an Anga. The same conclusion can be drawn upon seeing a person wearing a barkcloth cape and a grass skirt as described above, or strips of cowrie shells and plaited stalks of orchids across his chest and standing in front of a bee-hive-shaped house, and so on. Not only are these elements of material culture found in one form or another in all Anga groups, they are rigorously absent from neighbouring societies. And *vice versa*, several traditional techniques found in neighbouring groups are not used by the Anga. In the northwestern part of their territory, for example, just across the Lamari River, people sleep on headrests, the men's houses have a centre post, men braid long artificial locks into their hair, and so on. Furthermore, in the case of all these objects and practices, there is no intermediary situation. Clearly, material culture is one of the areas in which the Anga and their neighbours inscribe their identity: and use of the technical features described above disappears *de facto* as soon as one steps outside the Anga territory.

Of course the Anga share a host of techniques with other groups in New Guinea: their way of making fire, use of the adze and digging stick, use of bows and arrows, use of bamboo as a container, and so forth. The important point is that several objects and even entire techniques are either peculiar to them or radically unknown to them, and that these technical peculiarities or these absences are observed in all Anga linguistic groups. In themselves this assemblage of technical features — which have no functional significance here — does not say a lot about Anga social organisation in general. There is no question of reverting here to nineteenth-century German evolutionism and characterising a population by an assortment
of objects for which some *a posteriori* meaning has been imagined, I simply want to point out a second type of cultural production — techniques — which, like language, have features that, by their very existence, differentiate the Anga from the other populations of New Guinea: for instance, a wrapped bar of Anga salt looks like nothing else on earth.

By their simple presence (or absence) — that is what we are talking about and not the relative frequency of a phenomenon — the vocabulary items or the techniques just discussed are cultural features which set the Anga apart from any other population in New Guinea. In addition, the groups delineated in this way happen in this case to be rigorously identical. Nevertheless, even though there are links between language and techniques, among the Anga as elsewhere, this particular coincidence in the mapping of two kinds of sociological phenomena does not imply any particular relation between them. Very little is known of the history and the internal consistency of Anga languages or techniques, although specialists may one day succeed in restoring them. This perfect coincidence merely tells the outside observer that, at least two areas — Anga thinking and their practices — show a pronounced degree of homogeneity and originality which clearly distinguish the Anga from the other populations of the island. We shall see that these same groups are also set apart by the overall form and logic of their social organisations.

**The Anga in the New Guinea setting**

Although no systematic study has yet been devoted to the internal consistency of the Anga’s languages or their technical acts, we do have comparative studies and regional overviews of the social organisations of New Guinea which show both the Anga’s specificity and their place within the broader set of Melanesian systems. Of course, many of the features of social organisation found among the Anga are present in other groups as well. Take, for example, various aspects of the kinship system (e.g. sister-exchange), representations of attacks on the body (by invisible spirits and so forth), land-holding (reversion of right of use to the descendants of the original clearer), political organisation (power linked with success in war) or male—female relations (role of initiations in the reproduction of male domination). Conversely, certain practices are less developed among the Anga than in other Melanesian societies, or are totally unknown. Of course, *each of these practices is not meaningful in itself, but as a component of a particular social logic*. Maurice Godelier was the first to underscore this consistency, following his analysis of a northern Anga group, the Baruya. This strictly Angan configuration — which defines Great Men societies — is opposed both to the basic configuration of Big Men systems, illustrated by the majority of Highlands societies, and to that found in the coastal groups of southern New Guinea. As we shall see, alternating comparison and analysis of each of these three types of social logic will enable us both to develop general models that contrast these logics *and* to refine our understanding of Anga social organisation itself.

**Via Big Men: discovering Great Men**

The ethnology of the central Highlands tribes of what is today the independent State of Papua New Guinea, who most resemble the Anga in terms of their environment and forms
of agriculture and husbandry, underlines the place of ceremonial exchanges of wealth and the political status of the organisers of these exchanges, generally referred to as ‘Big Men’. When one of these events is to be held, the members of a group (often a clan or a local group, but sometimes a whole tribe) are mobilised more or less regularly in view of presenting gifts of various goods to the representatives of another group. The latter reciprocates at some later time by in turn giving to those who created this obligation an equal or greater quantity of the same items of wealth. In the eastern Highlands, such exchanges entail small amounts of goods and take place during the performance of fertility cults and male initiations.22 In the west, on the other hand, considerable quantities of wealth are manipulated, and their ostentatious distribution to the guests is the focal point of these encounters, whose relative success or failure reflects on the reputation of the groups present and affects the quality of their relations until the return exchange, usually several years later.

The primary aim is to gather at the most opportune time a sufficient amount of wealth: especially pigs (which will be given live or in the form of meat and fat), but also valuable shells, feathers or cosmetic oils. In preparation for these events, whose success provides the basis of their prestige and their political foundation, the Big Men of each clan or tribe enlist their dependents, who may be kinsmen, neighbours, refugees to whom they give land or young men they are helping to marry by providing part of the bridewealth.

Full-blown ceremonial exchanges are the most visible expression of an original complex of social relations in which several of the most characteristic features of these societies are combined and interwoven. In fact, on the occasion of such events, all manner of personal gifts are made at the time as a group receives a collective gift. For, if a Big Man speaks and acts on behalf of his followers, those who helped him amass the wealth also give some of the items to guests with whom they have a personal relationship: affines, maternal kin, members of a clan or a lineage on whom they themselves have inflicted losses in battle which must be compensated. As a number of studies have shown, it is because the same items of wealth (essentially pigs and shells) are used in the various types of ceremonial gift-giving that these can take place simultaneously.23 In particular, payment of bridewealth and gifts accompanying the growth of children or payment of homicide compensation belong to the same exchange sphere as the intergroup ceremonial prestations. In other words, the animals or the shells received on the occasion of a marriage may be used in turn for personal or collective gifts of another order. Since intergroup exchanges are always in some way connected with the processes of compensating for killings by which peace is established and preserved, it is in the end the possibility of considering pigs24 as a substitute for a life which lies at the heart of these ceremonial exchange systems.25

But equating pig meat with human life is only a necessary condition for these simultaneous ceremonial prestations. If intergroup exchanges occupy a central place in group life and embody such a range of social relations, it is also because various political, matrimonial, economic and other institutions assume forms that are not only mutually compatible but mutually reinforcing. In a Big Men society, peacemaking and peacekeeping procedures, intergroup competition and marriage are all features of social reality involving the manipulation of wealth by Big Men; and the social relations they activate or the prestige they procure in one area have repercussions on the other areas of social life. Therefore the Big
Man’s characteristic skill at manipulating wealth is as useful to him in making peace as it is in organising the ceremonial exchanges proper; and from his success in ending conflicts, he reaps the prestige he uses to attract the followers who aid him in his economic ventures. Another particularity of these societies: in many circumstances, relations between individuals or between groups give rise to activities that fuel both the mechanisms of ceremonial exchanges and the Big Men’s strategies. For example, young men seeking a wife, refugees or the unfortunate outcasts known in the literature as ‘rubbish men’, all those who receive help from a Big Man generally reciprocate by raising pigs for him. Likewise, the enemy or ally who receives a homicide compensation often goes on to become an affine as well as an exchange partner and rival. Big Men are richer than the common man: they have more wives, who combine their labour to raise a bigger herd; their greater number of marriages also means that these men have more affines (who are privileged exchange partners) and therefore find it easier to obtain wealth or to cause it to circulate.

Visibly at every turn there is a web of actors and social relations which translates into a circulation of wealth orchestrated by Big Men. These converging and mutually reinforcing behaviours and institutions, all of which come into play in intergroup ceremonial exchanges, constitute a social logic specific to the Highlands. Activation of the principles of social organisation discussed above does not always yield as tightly woven, coherent a fabric of personal and group relations as that found in the Big Men Societies in the western part of the region (the most representative), but everywhere: 1) compensations for life and death generally take the form of gifts of wealth; 2) political power is based on skill in negotiating peace, organising intergroup exchanges and building up a following of dependents; and 3) the pig exchanges mobilise the minds, energies and hopes of individuals and groups alike.

Although the Anga share some similarities with the central Highlands groups, the two models contrast radically. Comparing the central Highlands pattern with his analysis of Baruya social organisation, Godelier saw that the links between the various areas of social reality that made Big Men societies so original involved the very features that were absent or altogether marginal in Anga groups, namely: regular ceremonial exchanges between groups, political power bound up with the manipulation of wealth, and systematic use of pigs in the gifts accompanying marriage or compensation for the life of warriors killed in battle.

By way of contrast, in a Great Men society, the group is mobilised by war and male initiations. Around these two events revolve three main hierarchies which structure the life of the society: the ranking of Great Men among themselves (masters of the initiations and great warriors; sometimes great shamans); the subordination of all women to the men as a group; the authority of the oldest men over first-stage initiates. At the centre of this system of institutions and social relations stands, in the mind of every Anga — albeit to a varying degree — the idea that women’s sexuality is detrimental to men, that it saps their warlike spirit and therefore jeopardizes the survival of the group. The initiations give the men physical and moral strength; it is also in this framework that they are taught the practical knowledge which enables them to compensate for this dangerous state of affairs. And at the same time, these rituals found and regularly confirm male domination.

It is therefore entirely logical that the figures exercising positions of direct responsibility in initiations or warfare should be those who, because they were born into a particular
lineage (masters of the initiations) or owing to their personal talents (great warriors or shamans) rise above other men. Intra- or intergroup exchanges of wealth are very limited. The only collective ceremonies of this kind are feasts at which a tribe or a local group presents itself with cooked vegetable foods and game at the same time as it honours new initiates. Yet ‘wealth’ (shells and vegetal salt) is not absent from other exchanges; but given the limited circulation, and above all as we shall see below, given the relative compartmentalisation of prestations, the absence of intergroup relations based on the giving of wealth does not leave room for an organiser of exchanges like the Big Man.

This schema varies from one Anga linguistic group to another, but the relations between the political sphere, male—female relations, warfare and initiations are in all events those described above. For example, Pascale Bonnemère’s analysis of the Ankave case shows that the elements brought into play and enacted during male initiations vary with the local theories about how children are made and grow.\(^30\) Ritualised homosexuality — fellatio practiced by the initiates on the older boys — for example is found only where semen is regarded as the primary substance needed for a child’s conception and growth in the uterus. These theories in turn affect the way the men block out their own use of female substances or powers in the course of the initiations to re-engender the young boys and turn them into adult warriors. Likewise, any role ascribed to women in the making of a human being or an adult man appears to have a direct correlation with their status in the society.\(^31\)

The war/initiations/male domination complex is obviously not the only one whose social organisation turns out to have important variants when Anga societies are compared. But it is striking that, for each area examined so far, it is the same elements that are combined differently from one group to another. We have seen this to be true for the variants in the form and content of male initiations, which faithfully reflect the (different) theories about the production of human beings. A similar situation appears in the connections the Anga make between sickness, attacks on the body and preservation of the social order. All groups in this set share the idea that, with a few exceptions, individual bodily dysfunction results from harmful actions performed by another person or by a spirit following some behaviour that has upset the social order. But the correspondence established between the various types of attack on the body, sickness or symptoms, and the particular sociological context varies from group to group according precisely to those features which oppose their ways of maintaining good relations — i.e. relations deemed normal and desirable — between kin and neighbours. Whether or not the carriers of disease are manipulated by magical means in order to weaken the opponent — if they are, the pathogenic agents extracted from the patient’s body are systematically directed towards enemy territory\(^32\) — determines whether or not the shamans take part in making war, which in turn alters their political role as well as the way they acquire their powers.\(^33\) Furthermore, within the local group, the contexts and forms of aggression on the body (sorcery or attack by invisible spirits) reinforce the rules of good conduct, which are precisely those that distinguish a group. For example, among the Ankave, these practices and the resulting sicknesses remind everyone of the necessity of not neglecting the exchanges and the sharing of food and objects around which the life of the society is built. Baruya sorcery, on the other hand, stresses an implicit reference to cooperation in tasks and in sister-exchange.\(^34\)
It is the existence of variations affecting limited sets of elements (like theories of conception and growth, initiations, or invisible actions on the body and their disease-carrying agents and how these relate to maintaining social harmony), together with the fact that they intervene in the framework of specific and always identical social patterns (the making of warriors out of range of the women's debilitating influence, punishment of deviant behaviour by sickness) which justify speaking of one culture, an original set of institutions, practices and representations around which each Anga group has developed its own specificities. By comparing the monographs on these societies, it is possible gradually to define the overarching structure, the framework common to all their social organisations, and at the same time to identify the areas and ways in which these are dissimilar, and the extent of their differences.

Reassessing the role of wealth among the Anga
The multiplication of ethnographic studies on the Anga had one noteworthy result, which was to confront the Great Men model of society, elaborated by Maurice Godelier from his own work with the Baruya, with the data gathered in other groups. We have seen that, in Anga societies as a whole, the principal hierarchies are, first, the distinction between Great Men and the rest of the male population and, second, men's domination of women. None of these societies holds intergroup feasts, and the manipulation of wealth does not provide a base for political power. Power here lies with the men in charge of a complex of institutions in which are tightly interwoven war and the mechanism of initiations by which the men preserve and reproduce their fighting abilities while at the same time keeping the women, and to a lesser extent the young initiates, in a position of inferiority.

The main result of these comparative studies on the Anga is that, in each tribe, we find that core of relations which Godelier showed to be central, consistent and endowed with a social 'logic'. More specifically, whatever variants we found offered no indication that male initiations were not regularly to be designated as a crucial institution in these societies, ensuring each time the two main functions underscored by Godelier: 'constructing a collective force of all the men, held together within their generation by a bond stronger than anything that could divide them', but also with respect to women, presented as 'a constant source of danger for men and especially a danger for the reproduction of the society as such'.35 It could be added that, at the same time as the men themselves ensure that the bodies of the young men emerge matured and hardened from a complex process that protects them from women's harmful powers — a process nonetheless based on female procreative powers — they also equip the initiate's mind and at the same time that of all the men, to withstand that other threat to the warrior: terror of the enemy. Male initiations are a school of courage, constantly teaching the warrior both endurance and mastery of his own fear.36

Comparative Anga ethnography also confirms the absence of that central pillar of the Big Man complex: political power based on the manipulation of wealth. More broadly speaking, it confirms the opposition between the world of Great Men and that of Big Men, in which 'the role of wealth in relations within a society … seems to lessen the necessity of constructing male domination through … the initiations'.37 Conversely, Godelier's
hypothesis of a connection between initiations and marriage by sister-exchange without bridewealth must no doubt be abandoned. Most Anga groups do indeed practise a form of marriage involving the obligation to make gifts of wealth to the wife-givers, notably in the form of bridewealth, and this is done without the slightest emphasis on sister-exchange. Nevertheless, all these societies have Great Men who fit the Baruya prototype trait for trait, and all place male initiations at the top of their list of collective events. At the same time, intergroup exchanges of wealth are not found in any group. In other words, if the Anga situation is counter-proof that, without generalised circulation of wealth, there is no room for Big Men, conversely it shows just as categorically that marriage with bridewealth in the totality of cases is by no means inconsistent with a Great Man system. Perhaps there is some particularity of northern Angan initiations (Baruya, Sambia) — for example ritualised homosexuality — that is in some way connected with the dominant mode of marriage in these societies, which is sister-exchange. But the male initiations themselves, as they are generally performed by the Anga, do not appear to be linked to any particular type of marriage. Likewise, it is no longer possible to consider that the small scale of the exchanges of wealth among the Anga stems from the fact that ‘the production of kinship relations is not based on the accumulation of material wealth [and that there is therefore] little inducement to produce such items of wealth, especially pigs’. The ethnography shows two factors at work here: a scale or threshold effect when it comes to the respective quantities of wealth manipulated by Big Men, and a phenomenon of quality, since the very way this wealth is used plays a crucial role.

In all Anga groups, marriage alliances include a series of gifts to the bride’s people: game, pig meat, labour. Where the dominant form is direct or deferred sister-exchange, gifts of wealth are not directly involved. In particular, no bridewealth is given. But this does not mean wealth is absent from the ceremonies marking the stages of the life cycle. In Baruya groups, for example, even two generations after a marriage for which a woman was not given in return, and in spite of the birth of many daughters and granddaughters to the couple, the descendants of the original bride’s paternal and maternal kin demand a compensating gift of wealth from the wife-takers’ lineage. An identical payment — comprised of strings of cowrie shells, vegetal salt, barkcloth capes and, today, Papua New Guinea currency, but never including pig meat — must be paid when, following a marriage by ‘sister’-exchange, one of the women has borne many more children than the other. In other words, even in a group where sister-exchange is central, wealth plays a potential role in marriage.

Among the Ankave, whose form of marriage involves bridewealth, the payment is presented as compensation for the body of the bride, for the labour she will provide and for the children she will bear; the emphasis is on the (relative) break with her paternal group and on the affiliation of her children to her husband’s group. The other shell-gifts are made at the time of a boy’s initiation, after a death and in compensation for a killing following a feud or at the conclusion of peace with the enemy. The point common to all these gifts of shells is that they occur in extremely well-defined contexts. A specific context usually calls for a specific type of shell. The pearl-shell a maternal uncle gives his newly initiated nephew is the only possible response (potije gift) to the pig killed for him earlier in compensation for having been struck at the same time as his nephew during the initiations (dtoe’ gift): the
must be a whole pig (that has been killed) and the corresponding counter-gift must be a pearl-shell. Likewise, the brideprice (abΩxΩd' nΩdΩγΩwΩ), lit.: money for the woman) is paid to the bride's paternal kin in the form of strings of cowrie shells invariably placed on top of the haunches of pig meat for the maternal kin. Compensation for a killed warrior must be composed of an assortment of shells, but must never include any game or pig meat. In each case, the circumstances of the gift, its direction and the kind of object given are very clearly defined. Interestingly, these exchanges involving shells reproduce a feature common to all Ankave ceremonial gift-exchanges, even those having nothing to do with wealth. For instance, the gift presented to the maternal kin of a woman who is pregnant for the first time can only be comprised of pig meat; the gifts given the cross-cousins of the deceased at the ceremony concluding a mourning period are smoked eels, and so forth.

Ultimately, analysis of the Anga's uses of wealth and particularly its circulation in the prestations marking the life-cycle stages reveals the extreme compartmentalisation of the exchanges in which these goods feature. Unlike the world of Big Men, where pigs are regarded as a sort of universal equivalent that can be used in a great number of gifts and transactions, the Anga exchange many kinds of 'objects', and in most cases one kind cannot be substituted for another: a gift of game cannot be replaced by a gift of shells, and a shell cannot replace a piece of pig meat. Animal meat is generally used to compensate the care given to the body and its growth, while shells repay a group for the loss of one of its members. Even shells have narrowly defined uses; often a particular circumstance calls for a particular kind of shell. The ‘commercial’ sphere allows certain substitutions: for example, vegetal salt functions as a currency, in other words as a universal equivalent, among the Baruya. Likewise, the Ankave seem always to have purchased pig meat with cowrie shells. But the possibility of substituting one kind of goods for another is strictly limited to such economic relations.

Compared with a society like the Baruya, where the predominant marriage pattern is the two-way exchange of women, Big Men societies are characterised, as I have said, by a single sphere of exchange in which marriage and all manner of compensation processes involve the transfer of wealth. But with respect to other Anga groups which exchange wealth for women — and in general to compensate human lives — the circulation of wealth in Big Men systems is distinguished by decompartmentalised exchanges: goods of a same type or those that are direct substitutes for each other (e.g. pigs and shells) are used indifferently for a great variety of gifts. In Big Men societies what is given and the circumstances of the gift are still clearly set out, but the bulk of the gifts are comprised of pigs — either living or in the form of cooked meat.

Such compartmentalisation of exchanges is typical of Anga societies (and by extension, of Great Men societies) and functions as a curb on large-scale movements of wealth. The use of shells or vegetal salt to compensate the life of warriors killed in battle is another. By excluding pigs from the goods used to indemnify a group following a killing, the Anga also preclude any possibility of prolonging the peacemaking ceremonies by a peaceful form of rivalry based on the exchange of pigs. Finally, the limited importance of pigs in Angan exchanges goes hand in hand with a minimum use of ‘financing’, which is so central to the prestations and politico-economic strategies of Big Men.
Wealth and Great Men: reassessing the model

The foregoing close-up of the way the Anga manipulate wealth helps to refine the opposition between Great Men and Big Men on one of the axes defined by Godelier, but it accounts only in part for the forms of exchange and the place of politics in Anga society. There are known cases of groups in southern New Guinea that make a limited use of pigs in their compensation procedures (marriage, homicide, peacemaking), but which have gone on to develop competitive exchanges of vegetable goods; and these exchanges are explicitly presented as substitutes for armed violence. Yet owing to the absence of ‘financing’, which is in turn linked to the absence of pigs in these ceremonies, there are no Big Men in these societies.48

In other words, although analysis of the Anga’s use of wealth shows how they differ from Big Men societies, it says nothing about the absence of linkage between politics and the exchanges which, together with a particular way of associating war and male-female relations through the initiations, globally characterise the world of Great Men. Once again it is the confrontation of Anga ethnology with other types of societies in New Guinea — and I use the much-disparaged word, ‘type’, deliberately — that enables us better to circumscribe the areas of social reality and the relations which underpin the specificity of Great Men systems as illustrative of specific social logics.

Compared with the Big Men societies of the western Papua New Guinea Highlands and with the societies on the southern coast of the big island, the Anga are distinguished first of all by the absence of intergroup ceremonial exchanges, something anthropology might legitimately be expected to account for. The societies on the southern coast of New Guinea are ample proof that the nature of the goods available for such exchanges does not in itself explain their absence: just as the members of these societies vie perfectly well to outgive each other in vegetable goods, so the Anga have no lack of game or cultivated plants whose exchange could a priori give rise to rivalry, not to mention pigs, which could easily be raised more intensively given the potential of their environment and their agriculture. Therefore what needs to be explained is the absence of intergroup exchanges themselves.

To do justice to this question would exceed the scope of the present article. But it is possible to posit that this absence depends not so much on a single factor as on several features of Anga social structures which are mutually reinforcing, in other words, on a coherent set of practices and representations that leaves no room for such exchanges.49 In the first place, all Anga groups have food-giving ceremonies, planned in advance and requiring additional labour on the part of individuals and the group: these are the feasts marking the end of the initiations. At these times, the whole community, usually a valley or an entire tribe,50 gives tubers (and often game) to the initiates and their ‘sponsors’. When this ceremonial food has been distributed, most of the other people present consume the leftover meat and the piles of tubers that have been baked for the occasion. Anga ceremonial exchanges are therefore inward-looking, with the communities actually making gifts of food to themselves.

Of course this characteristic is not in itself inconsistent with intergroup exchanges; but it may be comparable to a tendency observed on the southern coast of New Guinea, where cooperative events are associated with the reproduction of the group as a group, and particularly with regard to external enemies. Are the importance of these common initiations
and their relation to war incompatible with all peaceful relations with the outside, in other 
words with enemies? Could it be that, for some reason, each group of societies in New 
Guinea chooses to engage in a *limited* number of collective events: war and intergroup 
exchanges for Big Men societies, war and initiations for the Great Men? The south coast 
groups showed that this is not so, since, in addition to their intense practise of a warlike 
activity (headhunting), they also organised male initiations and intergroup exchanges. 
Nevertheless, these societies did not seem to have had masters of rituals, that is forms of 
political power based on the monopoly of access to the invisible, in this particular context. 
Power accrued first of all to the great warriors — who were often mediums as well — and 
then to the owners of gardening magic, whose talents qualified them for second place as 
organisers of the ceremonial exchanges of vegetable goods.51 The determining factor seems 
therefore to be the *number of sites in which political power can be exercised.*

In New Guinea, before the upheavals wrought by contact with the outside world, the 
four areas of life in which political activity might be rooted were warfare, monopoly of access 
to the invisible, initiations and ceremonial exchanges. These areas could overlap, but for 
some reason, the rule seems to have been that, in a given society all four were rarely 
developed at the same time. The Anga political arena was dominated by the great warriors 
and the masters of the initiations, as though no room remained for a third form of political 
power connected, for instance, with the creation of economic exchanges. To this must be 
added the rigidity, even the ranking,52 of the political positions in Anga societies: for 
instance, the great warrior’s power falls dormant for the duration of the male initiations; and 
*vice versa*, the master of the initiations barely has the right to voice an opinion outside the 
male rituals. The areas of political life are clearly segregated, both by sector (war, initiations) 
and by period of activity, and nothing argues for the existence of any political rivalry centred 
on the organisation of ceremonial exchanges.

No one feature of social organisation just discussed seems sufficiently determining in 
itself to exclude all possibility of peaceful intergroup exchanges among the Anga. But 
everything suggests that this characteristic of Anga societies arises from the conjunction of 
these features and their mutual reinforcement, which is altogether real; for every feature 
mentioned relates directly to the link between war and initiations that is central to the 
collective undertakings of these groups and which affects (or used to affect) even the most 
humble features of daily life.

*Anga identity: ‘mipela wan bilas’*

First man

This survey of Anga culture would be incomplete without a rapid discussion of the way the 
Anga represent and experience their membership in a particular tribe as well as their 
inclusion in a much broader ethnic group. It is one thing to show how comparison between 
the Anga ethnography and that of other groups in New Guinea enables us to define the 
salient features of Great Men societies, and by means of successive contrasts, to refine the 
social logics that demarcate the island’s vast sociocultural groupings. But how do the Anga 
themselves define and reproduce various sociological units? How does each Anga group
perceive the other neighbouring or more remote groups? In short, how do they explicitly or implicitly determine their own identity?

Until the 1950s or 1960s — and even today in the case of the most isolated groups — the members of an Anga tribe knew very little about the world beyond the ridges and streams bounding their territory. Sporadic visits were made to the neighbouring valleys, where there were enemies, trading partners or affines, but more remote hamlets were known only from hearsay. Even today, aside from a few politicians or administrators, only ethnologists and linguists know the exact tribal make-up and the geography of what we call the ‘Anga’ ethnic group. Many Anga know that there used to be an Anga balus (‘the Anga airplane’, in Tok Pisin; it flew in the 1980s) or that an all-province Anga Development Authority, created in the late 1970s, oversees Anga community rural development. But for most Anga people, awareness of an Angan entity distinct from other peoples of Papua New Guinea came only after the Australian government imposed its peace, which made it possible for Angans to travel without having to fear for their lives. Only when they began to leave to work on the plantations (between 1955 and 1975, as a rule) did the Anga realise that their neighbours were not the only ones who wore grass skirts, barkcloth capes and body ornaments very similar to their own, or that those who wore these same bilas were only a small portion of humanity.

All Angans were nevertheless conscious of belonging to an overarching set of tribes, which they saw as including between a third and half of the groups we ethnologists now know to comprise the Anga culture. This set was de facto identified with all humanity. For each tribe, this inclusion in a larger unit was (and still is) legible in the relations with other Anga tribes — who spoke different languages and had different customs — but also and above all in a common history, several episodes of which often form the basis of the initiation rituals. In particular, every linguistic group situates its beginnings and those of the whole community of ‘wan bilas’ somewhere around Menyamya, usually near a cliff a few kilometres west of the present-day Menyamya administrative post. Each tribe surrounds the location and the name of the hole from which humans emerged — in this instance the Anga, but some informants have no qualms about adding Europeans — with utmost secrecy, even though they know they share these secrets with other Angans. The origin myths say that the first man to come into our world — the ‘middle’ world for the Ankave, who will serve here as our example — gave those who followed him — the respective ancestors of the different linguistic groups — their language and their body ornaments, before each set out on the long trail that eventually led them to their present-day territory. Several of these myths also tell how the bones of one of these first men were shared out among all the groups and were made into the awls used to pierce the septums of the boy initiates. In one version of the Ankave myth, for example, the man whose bones played this crucial role was put to death ‘because he had no name’ — a radical as well as spectacular way of reserving human status for the Anga alone! From his blood sprang the red cordylines that generation after generation of Ankave have cut and used to mark out and decorate the sacred enclosures where they initiate the boys and which they then replant near the house of the master of the initiations. The blood also soaked into the ground where it had spilled, and this earth is magically preserved in a bamboo tube and rubbed on the initiates’ bodies. The man’s spirit
showed the first master of the initiations how to make the young boys grow and make them strong.\textsuperscript{58} This ‘history’ belongs to the Anga groups twice over, for it is found in the origin myths of several groups, and the content itself refers to a common origin. It thus both creates a bond between the Ankave and the other Anga groups and, through the use or the sharing of objects or substances that go back to mythic times, it binds men together, diachronically (from the time the Ankave appeared on earth and learned to turn boys into adult men) and synchronically (among all the initiates of a given group).\textsuperscript{59} The Ankave bone-awl is only one component of their $\textit{oxemdx}$, a magic bundle whose powers are activated by the masters of the initiations when it comes time for the rituals. The $\textit{oxemdx}$, too, appeared when the Anga emerged from the ground, so that, in the event one of these objects was destroyed, they were able to procure one from a neighbouring group. One last example of the Anga’s common past evoked in the initiations: in one of the ‘lessons’ taught Ankave initiates, the origin of the rituals is explicitly associated with the appearance on earth of the Ankave tribe and the other Anga groups.

Reference to this common past is made in one form or another in every group, especially during the initiations. For J. Mimica, in the Iqwaye ceremonies during the male rituals, ‘every boy … enacts the stages of primordial creation of the first men’\textsuperscript{60} that occurred at Kokwayakawa, which is none other than the Baruya’s Bravegareubaramandec, the Sambia’s Kokoyoko and the Ankave’s Obixwa.\textsuperscript{61} Periodically the Baruya go to the site of their origins to pick the magic leaves required for their masculine rites.\textsuperscript{62}

The male initiations are not the only time their shared origin plays a role in Ankave ritual life. At mourning ceremonies, they sing dirges recalling the stages of their slow migration through territories that now belong to other groups. In an entirely different domain, the spells recited silently before setting a trap evoke the overcrowded men’s houses in the groups with whom the Ankave lived in some distant past, a way of encouraging the masters of wild game to let them capture many animals. It is also the opinion that different clans, and thus the linguistic groups in which they prevail, have over the course of their mythic history acquired distinctive traits: one clan climbed up a tall column of smoke into the sky to get bananas and sugar cane; another is associated with the origin of the moon and fire, or initiations; others still brought humans dirges, barkcloth capes, vegetal salt and so forth. At the tribal level, the members of certain clans specialise in specific functions or tasks, either because they are recognized as having a particular aptitude — the Baruya have warrior and shaman clans\textsuperscript{63} — or because they have inherited a ritual object and/or specific knowledge — the case of the masters of the initiations in all groups. Possession of such an object may be traced back to the beginning of time (the case of the Baruya $\textit{kwaimatnie}$, given by Sun and Moon before today’s humans ever saw the light of day)\textsuperscript{64} or to the original distribution of languages, body ornaments and ritual instruments. But possession is also the outcome of historical processes that have led various clans (sometimes lineages) of the same tribe to specialise in certain tasks which they perform at given points in the male initiations.\textsuperscript{65}

This history of the sharing out of a symbolic activity, or if one prefers of setting in place a complementary functioning of clans and tribes, anchors part of the Anga political order in a remote past. Besides the ranking of Great Men discussed above,\textsuperscript{66} it institutes the initiations, sets their content and justifies the segregation of women from what is seen as
crucial knowledge. At the same time, however, this history also stresses the wholeness of Anga culture as well as the specificity of the various social units that comprise it. In other words, regular reference to a mythical past held to be common to all Anga — of which each tribe obviously has its own version — is also a prime component of the identity of each linguistic group (read: cultural subset) and of each tribe, but also of each Anga clan. We will now see that knowledge of the individual history of each tribe plays a similar role.

Us and the others: building a tribal identity

Each tribe identifies with a specific past comprised of migrations, natural catastrophes, wars and peaces, or marriage alliances. Being a member of a tribe means subscribing to its past as its members imagine it at a given moment; it means adopting a large portion of the friends, enemies, trials or heroic ancestors of all those, in one or several valleys, who consider they have a territory to defend in common and who work together to reproduce their physical existence and their social order.67 This past itself defines an identity: for instance, ‘we’ are those who are willing to go to war against or alongside those that our tribal history designates (even temporarily) as enemies or friends. Or again, taking the lower-ranking social units such as the clans in a given territory: ‘we’ are those whom our ancestors led to a given valley or hamlet in a more or less recent past.68

All members of a tribe hold in common various cultural representations and social institutions, which they also share with the members of the other tribes that make up their linguistic group. For example, they acknowledge having a particular way of dealing with their dead, of managing the forest, of initiating their children or of acquiring a spouse. Like the more immediately visible identity markers — ‘costumes’ and body ornaments, type of house, bows or arrows and so forth69 — these practices and their corresponding representations are seen as distinguishing elements of a cultural (and linguistic) community. The distinctive features of each group may be listed in response to the ethnographer’s questions, but they are also spontaneously forthcoming when the Anga talk about their neighbours. Sometimes, when telling war stories or when on a trading expedition or a ‘patrol’ with some missionary, government official or ethnologist, someone will inspect a tree or a fruit and explain its use (or the fact that this is unknown). Or, as the Ankave do, recall that a frightful war followed by large-scale migration was triggered by some women who had made fun of the grass skirts worn by the neighbours invited to their male initiations. But the points that elicit the most comment invariably involve whole sectors of the social organisation. The Ankave say:

— With the Kamea, it is the women who squeeze the red pandanus seeds!
— The Iweto do not beat the drums when they mourn.
— You know, with the Menye, its people who eat men, not the *ombel’*[spirits]!

The most startling case — at any rate the most stupefying to hear — is no doubt the remarks made by the first Ankave man to visit the Baruya (to work on the Marawaka airstrip in the
1970s). Two things and only two had struck him: 1) the Baruya exchanged their sisters in marriage without giving bridewealth; and 2) Baruya women's septums were pierced. In other words, an Ankave traveller immediately puts his finger on two sociological phenomena — forms of marriage and the existence of female initiations — that occupy a prime position among those ethnologists identify and comment on for pages, if they do any travelling at all between groups (preferably on foot, but it can be in their minds, in their colleagues' books).

Sharing a history and recognising sociological specificities are obviously not the only elements that go into a tribe's identity. This history is constantly being reproduced (and transformed) through various collective practices. Taking the Ankave as our example once again, three events are (or were) capable of drawing the bulk of the population of the three valleys that form the tribe's territory: first-stage initiations, war and final mourning rites. The male ceremonies alternated between the two principal Ankave valleys, with the specialists of each local group collaborating for the occasion. As is often the case, what is periodically reconstituted during the initiations is the entire edifice of the tribe. The unity of the tribe is also expressed in another area that is less tangible, but which indisputably concerns the whole Ankave group: that is the existence of a terrifying community of invisible man-eating spirits harboured and guided by humans (ombd'). These spirits periodically gang up on a given local group, even though their dwelling places are dispersed around the four corners of the territory.

The initiations, the ceremonies closing a mourning period, even when the ombd' from a neighbouring valley come to lend their colleagues a hand (or rather a 'tooth'), are all occasions for a division of labor which illuminates the complementarity of various members of the tribe: everyone takes part in the same event by performing complementary tasks, either all together or in turn. This is true for the masters of the initiations, who are responsible for whole ceremonies or specific ritual operations, but also help their colleagues in all circumstances, at least when the different Ankave valleys are at peace with each other. It is also the case when certain warriors from one local group support their cousins in border fights or when ombd' cross the mountains in the night to devour the corpse of a victim one of them has killed by magic. It is true as well when an Ankave man goes to sing and beat the hour-glass drums for the ceremonies marking the end of mourning for a distant kinsman in a local community other than his own.

In all these circumstances, the battle, the rite or the ceremony is the more-or-less direct manifestation of a set of representations specific to a given culture (in this case the Ankave linguistic and cultural subset). But these individual events always concern a given community — the whole tribe or only the members of one of its constituent local groups, depending on the case. The simple act of excluding some of the other members of the group defines a social unit, resembling the others in structure or the meaning of the rites, exchanges or meetings it organises, but unique in the identity of those who participate. The evil deeds of a man-eating spirit, the warrior's zeal, the presence of a mourner, or the knowledge of a master of the initiations, each makes its contribution to a collective event, alternately as privileged actor or organiser (a specialist) and then as spectator or ordinary participant. The way these alternating collaborations contribute to the cohesion and the expression of the tribe's group identity varies, but each time, they give rise to a mixture of sharing and
complementarity of the type that underlies the distribution of the ritual objects among the different linguistic groups or clans of a tribe.

**The informant, the comparatist and the model**

Syntheses that attempt to distinguish Big Men and Great Men systems using a system of relations between a few social practices favour certain orders of phenomena at the expense of other *a priori* just-as-worthwhile features of the group under examination. So why all the fuss about such typologies. There are three reasons.

First because, far from simply ‘fishing’ for some sociological features to bolster up a foregone conclusion — a frequent criticism of comparative models — the syntheses advanced for New Guinea begin with a study of the most salient institutions and social practices — presented as such by the informants themselves — in the groups studied.

Next, because the practices whose interrelations and consistency are confirmed by anthropological models in view of comparing contrasting forms of social organisation are not only those that mark stages in the collective life of these communities, but also those that serve to distinguish them from their neighbours and to construct and reproduce, year in year out, their social and cultural world: initiations, male-female relations, warfare, attacks by man-eating spirits, and so on.

Last of all, *these models take into account the greatest number of variables conjointly* (exchanges, marriage, the political sphere, male-female relations, use of the natural environment, war, peace) and relate them to each other in a meaningful way. They indicate which phenomena are linked, in each set of societies (Big Men and Great Men societies), and the nature of the relations between them. These relations obviously take a particular form in each group. For instance, among the Anga, as we have seen, where the particularities of the war/initiations/male domination complex have repercussions on the women’s status, on the content and unfolding of the initiations, or on cooperation in performing tasks, the representation of the person is not identical in all groups, far from it. Nevertheless, the relations that are crystallised in the initiations and which form their foundation are connected in every case with gender relations, with incompatibilities of state between male and female bodies, with the ways they mature, with the need men have to block out the fact of using female powers to produce warriors on their own, and so forth. Each ethnographic reality is just as particular in Big Men societies. Even in New Guinea’s Western Highlands province, where these figures come closest to the ideal-type described in the models, a study of the identity and the role of those taking part in exchanges (as givers or receivers), of the forms of marriage, the site of competition or even the nature of the groups participating reveals profound differences. But in every case, the concrete societies accurately illustrate the model relations between marriage, homicide, compensation, intergroup competition or the organisation of exchanges. In other words, whatever their diversity, all so-called Big Men societies fit the general model established twenty-five years ago, and this model is opposed, as described above, to all forms of Anga social organisation inasmuch as these groups are Great Men societies corresponding rigorously to Godelier’s model, even though each fits in its own way.
It can never be sufficiently stressed that the practices retained in these models mobilise the thoughts and actions of the members of these societies on an everyday basis. Thus, in spite of thirty to sixty years of ‘contacts’ with the outside world, exchanges, enemies, man-eating spirits and even, until very recently, the initiations still constantly occupy the thoughts of all Anga people. Likewise, in Big Men societies, preparations for ceremonial exchanges were and are still central to group life, especially when the resulting succession of ‘alternating disequilibrium’ is the peaceful version of the eternal intergroup rivalries. Andrew Strathern explains that, unlike the new activities stemming from the market economy, the missions or the State, ceremonial exchanges are one of the key institutions which enable the Melpa to preserve their social identity with respect to the non-Melpa world. In addition, the crucial character of the institutions and representations retained by the models has been emphasised in all monographs, whatever the date of the study or the author’s school of thought. This answers another frequent charge that ethnologists and their informants are themselves incapable of appreciating the distance between an earlier state of the cultural systems they describe and their contemporary form, and notably of apprehending the changes that have occurred in the wake of the Western invasion.

The logics described in the anthropological models make no claim to account for all specificities of the societies concerned or to reduce individual geniuses to a common essence. This would be futile, for each population has a social structure, techniques and symbolic systems whose richness and ultimate coherence can be fully expressed only by a monographic study. It would take several books to describe how the members of different and sometimes cross-cutting sociological units (tribe, valley, clan, lineage, valley local group) produce, exchange, share, celebrate or fight ‘together’; how their feelings of loyalty shift with the context; and notably how the range of contexts itself changed after the monumental event of the Highlanders’ discovery of the existence of white people. In particular, we would need to understand why certain of these ‘focal institutions’ that A. Strathern talks about gradually take a backseat in some groups, while they remain crucial for another group that is neither more nor less open to the outside.

The multiplication of new situations — or if one prefers, the acceleration of history — favours comparative research. Though it would be good to consider the extent of the changes, which may vary in magnitude according to whether they are studied in the decades immediately following ‘contact’ or in a society that has suffered from more than a century of colonial violence. But unless he or she is working in a society that has been deeply transformed by indentured labour, the State, missions and the market — in which case the definition of a sociocultural identity can become an issue of knowledge and power — even the most experienced and tenacious ethnologist will never get even the most ‘inward-looking’ informants to systematically compare their way of life with those of other groups in their area. Undeniably, the Ankave man mentioned earlier put his finger on a fundamental point when he spontaneously contrasted Baruya marriage or initiations with the practices of his own group; but he knows nothing about the Anga groups on just the other side of the territory whose queer practices strike him. And systematic comparison of Anga cannibalism or study of the various bases of political power in New Guinea are the least of his worries.

An extremely meticulous monographic approach is indispensable for constructing and
refining models; conversely, these models lead to further exploration of their particular ethnographic spheres in each society studied. Nevertheless, while continual feedback between the two approaches appears as necessary for the elaboration of models as it is for the refinement of monographs, it is important to remember that the two are complementary: it is not a case of either/or. The comparative models summarised in this article describe sociocultural sets that resemble each other in the way various features of their social organisations form *systems*; these features are as invisible for someone living in the society as they are striking for someone looking on. No doubt the models offer a ‘simplified’ vision of these societies and the logics — in the sense of coherent associations — we think we see at work; but ‘simplified’ does not mean ‘distorted’. All societies in which Big Men (or respectively Great Men) have been identified correspond, without forcing, approximating or twisting the ethnographic data, to the syntheses constructed to account for them. It is clear, for instance, that many societies in New Guinea have neither Big Men nor Great Men. But among the groups usually considered to be Big Men societies (Melpa, Enga, Mendi, etc.), not one corresponds merely ‘somewhat’ or ‘roughly’ to the model described at the beginning of this article. All display the entire set of *general* characteristics set out in the model. The same goes for the Great Men societies, whose typical social logics are illustrated by all Anga groups.

Comparing these models with each other, or with those of other New Guinea social systems, means trying to select which components in a consistent set of sociocultural practices, institutions and representations, are likely to change when one shifts one’s mental gaze from one set of societies to another. It also means attempting to circumscribe the structural, functional or historical conditions — insofar as such a distinction can be made — of these transformations. In short, it means seizing the opportunity to understand the diversity of tiny portions of humankind that can reasonably be compared. Such an endeavour remains, at least for the author of these lines, the aim and the justification of anthropology.

**Footnotes**

1 *Mipela wan bilas*: ‘we who have the same body decorations’, in *Tok Pisin* (also called neo-Melanesian or Melanesian Pidgin). Spoken for over a hundred and twenty years now, Tok Pisin began as a trading language, based on English (85 per cent of the vocabulary). Today it is the *lingua franca* of nearly two million people, and is in the process of becoming a Creole in its own right, since many children are now raised directly in this language (see e.g. Kulick 1992).


3 Kulick (1992: 2).

4 Thirty km long and between 5 and 10 km in width, the Tauri River valley is today an immense expanse of grassland extending above and below Menyamya; one must go up the side valleys to find the rainforest, which is sometimes now confined to the ridges.

5 Until recently, there were still twelve: in addition to Kawatcha, which was spoken by a scant 30 people at the beginning of the 1970s, according to Lloyd (1973: 79) and which seemed to me to be on the brink of extinction in 1980; at the same time the Ameye language had apparently only one native speaker left, a man I encountered among the Langimar. The Kamasa could not be located this trip. On the western edge of the Anga territory, several other groups are mentioned as having had their own language which died out within living memory.

Little is known about bilingualism along the borders with non-Anga groups. Owing to absence of contacts, bilingualism did not exist in the western part of their territory, which was separated from the Pawaian groups by several days’ walk through a remote no-man’s land. In the south, where ‘Kukukuku’ (Anga) raids terrorised the coastal populations, the few peaceful relations that existed were strictly commercial. Little documentation is available on the situation in the northern and western parts of the territory, but judging from the relations observed today between Baruya and Youndouyé or between Sambia and Fore, for example, bilingualism was extremely rare. Likewise, in the early 1980s, northwestern groups (Watchakes, Jeghuje, Langimar) had only episodic contacts with the Markham Valley tribes (Lemonnier, n.d.).

Three possible exceptions come to mind: ‘Yagwoia’ speakers are split into two non-adjoining groups (Yeghuje and Iqwaye); we will leave it to the ethnologists who have already described them (H. Fischer and J. Mimica, respectively) to detail their sociological similarities and differences. Likewise, the apparent homogeneity preliminary studies have indicated among the Kapau (known as Kamea in the southern and western parts of their occupation zone) may be only an illusion. S. Bamford’s work (1997) is a first step towards improving our knowledge of the tribes that comprise this linguistic group, which happens to be the largest. A third exception could be the two Langimar- (or Angaatata-) speaking groups, today separated by more than a day’s walk and located on either side of a Kapau enclave; as far as I can judge, however, the (incomplete) information I obtained in Benula (in the west) cross-checks completely with the data collected by B. Blackwood among the ‘Manki’ in the east (Blackwood 1978: 17).

The Baruya proper, but also the Youwarrounatche, Wantekia, Andje and Usarumpia.

See note 7 above.

For the distinction between culture, tribe and society, see two extremely clear texts by M. Godelier (1973: 93–131 and 1985: 159–165).

Anga horticulture has been described by Blackwood (1940), Bonnemère (1996), Bourke (1980), Lemonnier (1982, 2000) and Lory (1982).

In the western Highlands, it is not unusual for half of the sweet potato crop to be used to feed pigs, which may number up to several hundred per square kilometre.

By ‘technique’, I mean both intellectual and material means of acting on matter (for techniques as social productions, see Lemonnier 1992).

Like any other material culture, the Anga’s presents itself on the whole as a system. In other words, some of the elements employed in technical behaviours (raw materials, means of working, energies, gestures, skills and knowledge), and often entire technical activities (agriculture and husbandry, ways of building house walls and garden enclosures, use of plant fibres for making string, barkcloth, grass skirts, carrying bags, etc.) connect together into systems of relations in which functional dependence, symbolic processes and social logics are tightly interwoven. Yet only parts of these systems have been explored as yet (e.g. for the Anga, see Lemonnier, 1986), and, with the exception of totally original activities like the production of vegetal salt, it is still not possible to list a series of operations or a combination of techniques specific to all Anga groups and to them alone. For example, there is nothing to indicate that building a specifically Angan house or trap involves any original way of working the wood or the bark. In these examples, the only clear specificity is the final assembling, visible in the finished object.

This can be seen, for example, in the technical vocabulary, but also in indigenous representations and classifications of elements (materials, tools, agents, etc.) and of the results of technical action (Lemonnier 1993a). In particular, language is one of our rare gateways to the representations of the elementary means of action on matter (see, for example, the unsurpassed article by Lefébure 1978).

Which would have to be limited to a given technique: e.g. one might imagine that a certain verb form in Anga corresponded to a strictly Angan technique. But this does not imply any overall correspondence. It should be remembered that Haudricout showed that even the congruency between words and things is very imperfect (1942; see also Haudricourt and Delamarre 1955).

At least not for the Anga as a whole. Nevertheless see Healey (1981), for their languages; and Fetchko (1972) and Lemonnier (1986), for their material culture.

Unless otherwise indicated, the expression ‘Anga group’, which I will use from here on, refers to one of the sets of Anga tribes having the same language, identical techniques and, as we will see later, the same social organisation.

24 The pig, its meat, fat and blood, are considered to be substitutes for or tokens of life. But since pigs and shells are interchangeable, the latter can fulfill the same functions as equivalents of human life.
27 Allies who do not receive compensation for their people killed are potential enemies.
28 Whatever Hays (1993) may say; he maintains that ‘Highlands’ is nothing more than a ‘fuzzy set’ completely lacking in consistency or anthropological interest.
29 For Great Men societies, see Godelier (1982). The terms Big Man and Great Man have become standard usage. They refer to two different political statuses and forms of social organisation sui generis. As far as ethnographers know today, the only Great Men societies are the thirty or forty tribes characterised by the Anga language and culture, whereas Big Men societies are found in several large cultural sets of the New Guinea Highlands. When speaking of warfare, the ethnographic present refers to the period before the pax australiana, even though the 1982–1988 war between the Baruya and the Youwarrounatche, and the regular skirmishes between the Menye and their neighbours constitute notable exceptions.
34 Lemonnier (1998a).
36 Herdt (1987: 25–27) has rightly stressed this other feature of Anga societies, which was the perpetual climate of insecurity stemming from the constant threat of enemy attack and the fear this generated.
39 These groups are the Ankave, Ivori, Kapau-Kamea, Langimar, Lohiki, Menye, and Watchakes. Nowadays the Sambia too practise a form of marriage involving gifts of wealth (Herdt, pers. com.).
41 Several Anga groups practice marriage with bridewealth payments on a very small scale, alongside the dominant practice of sister-exchange (see Godelier 1982: 50–56 for the Baruya, but this is true of the Watchakes as well). The groups mentioned earlier practice only marriage with bridewealth.
43 A crucial point, but one I will not go into here: these payments, which are explicitly regarded as compensation for children, are not required when the couples formed by an exchange of sisters have gotten along well, helping each other with their gardens and giving each other pieces of pig meat when the occasion arose. This indicates an indirect but indisputable equivalence between life (children born to the union), work (collaboration between the brothers-in-law), pigs (shared meat) and wealth (given as compensation). If we recall the roundabout ways by which the coastal societies of southern New Guinea too calculate equivalences between women and wealth in a general context of direct exchange (Lemonnier 2002), we have enough reasons to pursue investigation into the conditions in which New Guinea societies establish or fail to establish some equivalences that have crucial consequences.
46 For instance, in Melpa marriage, a distinction is made between the ‘pig for public distribution’, the ‘pigs for the house’ and the ‘pig for the girl’s vagina’ (Strathern and Strathern 1969: 147–156). The same is true for the Tombema-Enga (Feil 1981: 66). Unless I am mistaken, the ethnography does not mention a particular term for the numerous items of wealth, aside from the pigs given for a marriage (e.g. Brown 1969).
48 For a discussion of how the various elements whose association constitutes the essence of Big Men societies are disjoined in southern New Guinea, see Lemonnier (1993b: 140–146; 1995).
49 This does not mean individual factors do not play any part at all. For instance, it seems indeed that, in New Guinea, peaceful competition in ‘economic’ exchanges involves primarily locally produced goods (pigs and yams), whereas pearl-shells, which can be used in all Anga groups as the equivalent of a warrior’s life, are the result of a business transaction, a brave one, to be sure — the journey is long and sometimes through enemy territory — but one not visibly involving local labour.

50 Apparently it is only in certain Kapau groups that male initiations are limited to the one hamlet (personal work in Aseki during 1980).


53 Or rather to certain neighbouring valleys. In 1993, nearly half the Ankave men in Ikundi had never been to the valley immediately north of their territory, the home of their traditional enemies, and nine out of ten had never visited the most distant Ankave hamlet, although it was less than three days’ walk away. Almost none of them had ever seen the Vailala River, which bounds their territory on the west, and although all were familiar with Menyamya (the closest administrative post, two days’ walk away), three quarters had never been to an important mission located less than an hour’s drive north of Menyamya. The women’s movements were even more restricted.

54 ‘Anga’ is a name invented by white people to replace the term ‘Kukukuku’ (or Kukakuka), whose meaning in the various Anga languages that use it varies, but is usually pejorative (Lloyd 1973: 67–68; Blackwood 1978: 6–8).

55 We understood ‘common’ history to mean the history shared by the groups with which each tribe recognises ties, and not that of the whole set of what are today defined as Anga groups. Similarly, for the Melpa, a prototypical Big Men society, ‘the history of a group … is decisively bound up with the history of its moka [ceremonial exchanges] transactions, and each moka is both an expression and a redirection of that history’ (Strathern 1991: 209; see also Ballard 1995).


57 In one form or another, the tendency to identify one’s own group with humanity is found in all groups (however we do not know if this is true around the perimetre of the Anga territory). The Iqwaye regard some Anga as less human than others, less human than themselves, in any event (Mimica 1981: 56–59). In the same vein, the Baruya regard themselves as better than their neighbours, whose skin is darker because they live farther from the sun (Godelier 1982).

58 For more on these points, see Bonnemère (1996: 252–253).

59 The death of the man who brought order to the first humans was therefore necessary in order to obtain the bones used to pierce the boys’ septums. The Ankave see this operation as killing the initiates, before they can carry out the procedures by which they transform their bodies so as to re-engender them as adult warriors, according to Bonnemère’s interpretation of these rituals (Bonnemère 1998).

60 Mimica (1981: 51).


65 See, e.g. Godelier (1982: 135ff). Among the Ankave, it is the two largest clans that are responsible for the initiations.

66 I will not go into this here. Instead, see e.g. Godelier (1982: 135ff).

67 ‘A tribe is therefore a provisional combination of a certain number of kinship groups in one territory. Tribes come and go…’ (Godelier 1985: 163).

68 In reality several clans appear, in name at least, in several Anga linguistic groups at once. The Anga were, and in most cases still are, unaware of this, so that it has no sociological impact on their daily lives (this is obviously not the case for Anga history, by which I mean the one that remains to be written by historians). Here I am talking about those social units that are functionally recognised as clans on the local level.


70 These practices are not frozen: they change with the historical evolution of the groups in question (splits and mergers, escapes to another territory, etc.). Again, see Godelier (1985: 163–165). What I have written here about tribal identity is also valid for the reproduction of the identity of a valley or a local group.
These men, called *i'pan'nd' xdnjej* (*mothers of the initiates*), are the custodians of the sacred *oxem'dd* (*man-fight/anger*); this is also the name of the red cordylines mentioned above, which must be present for the ceremony to take place.

Now that there is less need for warriors, and that tensions have arisen between valleys, it is the unity of each valley that is produced. Nevertheless, there is some nostalgia about the collaboration of earlier times, whose disappearance is felt as a threat to the group’s security.

Unlike ordinary humans, *omb'd* are very fast, travelling underground or along invisible pathways made of long strings of shells (*for more on omb'd*, see Lemonnier 1992, 1998b).

Contrary to the situation created when sacred objects are held by only a few clans (Godelier 1982: 134–157), alternating participation in mourning ceremonies, for instance, does not imply a political hierarchy.

For example, A. Bensa (1996: 42–43) speaks of ethnological monographs in which ‘the analysis cuts the material (the ‘data’) … to fit the meanings it wants’, and whose ‘dim light … results essentially from systematically taking the data out of context’. Or Hays (1993: 48) denounces studies guilty of ‘imposing a priori a grid of traits to demarcate a ‘region’.’ Note that these authors, who are objecting on principle, are simply assuming all comparative work to be stupid and lacking in rigour, whereas the only receivable criticism on this subject would be a case-by-case demonstration of the inanity of the comparisons proposed or of the inexactitude of the supporting ethnographic data.


Strathern (1971b: 11).

‘The new activities do not in themselves constitute relationships between persons in the Melpa social system. They are all activities oriented towards others: other people, other structures. By preserving *moka*, and certain associate key institutions, notably bridewealth payments, the Melpa have retained a sphere for their own continuous history, which acts as a filter in respect of the outside’ (Strathern 1991: 211; italics added).

When it comes to Oceanic ethnography, some even venture to suggest that Big Men are a colonial product resulting notably from the devaluation of shell money following the massive imports of shells by gold prospectors and administrators (Hays ed. 1992: 12; 1993: 147). It is pointed out that, as a consequence, the exchanges were modified in 1940 and 1950 (Hughes 1978: 316). This is true. But it must be remembered that the first ethnographic accounts we have of the Mount Hagen Big Men go back to 1934 (the arrival of Vicedom), which is a year or so after contact (April 1933). Can it be seriously maintained that the observations of Vicedom, or those of Strauss (who arrived in 1936) describe a radically new situation? Or that A. Strathern was incapable of accurately documenting the changes that had occurred in Melpa society since it had opened up to the rest of the world? Even Knauf (1993: 8), whose remarkable survey of the southern coastal societies of New Guinea shows the interest of a rigorous comparative approach, does not hesitate to write: ‘It is all too easy to find polar contrasts between regions for which primary accounts were gathered at different times and/or with different ethnographic and theoretical agendas.’ Not only is there nothing ‘easy’ about looking for strong correlations between social practices, but as soon as two or three societies are involved, the comparative approach becomes a brainteaser in which the researcher spends the bulk of his time chasing after counter-examples to support his hypotheses and rejecting those thus invalidated.

Sister-exchange without payment of bridewealth remains the predominant form of marriage among the Baruya, while bridewealth payments have become common among their Sambia neighbours (Herdt, pers. com.). In another sphere, that of vernacular architecture, some groups have rigidly maintained the shapes and techniques observed at contact, while others quickly adopt architectural elements seen elsewhere; but for the moment this contrast remains unexplained (nevertheless, see Coudart’s hypotheses, 1994).

This is demonstrated by several authors in Strathern and Godelier eds. (1991).