

9

The Social Dynamics of Protest Organisation and Leadership

There are no spectacular successes in the history of Pacific Island resistance to the Germans. The only two major threats to the empire—Lauaki's *mau e pule* and the Sokehs rebellion—both ended in exile or death for their participants. In retrospect, they never could have succeeded. Aside from the fact that German officials could always appeal to the home government for help to repress opposition in an emergency, the Island communities lacked a number of organisational preconditions which were necessary for an effective attack on German sovereignty.

Firstly, there were no 'masses' in any of the three colonies, no politicised peasantry or proletariat which could be used as a lever against the German regimes. In 1914, though social changes were beginning to have visible effects, Samoa, Ponape and New Guinea still contained well-integrated, pre-industrial societies. The Samoans remained tied to their local descent groups and village organisations of production and distribution; they rejected any efforts to draw them into wage labour on a regular basis. The Ponapean reforms emancipated the ordinary Islander from the uncertainties of the feudal system without altering the traditional mode of economic life or the set of close-knit loyalties and obligations within the districts. New Guineans experienced much greater mobilisation of labour for the plantations and more radical social change, but no urban work force or permanent pool of wage labour had emerged before 1914; employment with Europeans was generally a temporary experience in those years.¹

The explanation for this state of affairs lies partly in the weakness of the colonial economy, and its subordination to the imperial economy. The home government's failure to provide sufficient support for rapid commercial growth, and the unwillingness of *Grosskapital* interests in Germany to invest where returns were still small and uncertain, saved the Pacific colonies from large-scale economic penetration and helped to preserve local social structures. The latter, in turn, gave the colonial peoples shelter from the economic demands of the regime: the Islanders could always choose between growing crops for subsistence or for

market, or they could sell their labour. The local alternative, with its greater independence, was usually preferable. This depended, of course, on the availability of land. In an area like Madang, some of those who lost land were able to find shelter and support from neighbouring groups and still avoid wage labour, while in the Gazelle Peninsula and other areas reserves provided some guarantee of a local economic alternative to plantation labour. Instead of a growing proletariat, the Germans had to deal with a moving labour frontier which receded further from the old areas of settlement as cash cropping and other forms of economic opportunity became more widely diffused.² Such a frontier was too unstable to act as the focus of mass movements.

We have seen also that colonial rule fell unevenly on social groups within the colonies. While chiefs had their powers whittled away, ordinary people in the villages remained largely untouched by foreign governments, or, as in Ponape, benefited from reforms at the expense of their chiefs. Each community or individual elite got something different from the colonial system, which made it difficult to organise a mass movement against the Germans.

If there was no mass movement of the dispossessed, neither was there any new vision of society capable of defining the enemy and unifying all the old hostile groups. The appeal to patriotism (*lotonu'u*) by the Samoan *Malo* in the *Oloa* movement may have been more widely received in a more sophisticated anti-colonial age, but the rapid disintegration of solidarity among the chiefs after the Vaimea incident shows that it had little meaning for the Samoan people in 1904-05.

In the two open resistance movements of the German Pacific—Lauaki's *mau e pule* and the Sokehs rebellion—the ideological call which marshalled support initially was not sufficient to sustain revolutionary sentiment or create a permanent wider organisation. Lauaki was unable to offer all Samoans a more stable, more prosperous life than they were already enjoying under Solf's regime. The importance of the *Ali'i Sili* question and the power of *Tumua* and *Pule*, for which Lauaki was fighting, were challenged effectively by Solf's rule. *Tumua* and *Pule* were responsible for several disruptions to peace—in 1900, 1903 and 1904—and the new Samoan administration was proving more functional and efficient in 1908-09 than the old *Malo* ever had. Lauaki's ideas were an appeal to old ways, but to old ways that were not uniformly regarded as perfect ways; Lauaki's ideas were designed to reinforce traditional divisions not to transcend them. Moreover, his

view of Samoa in 1909 as the cockpit of imperialist rivalries among the Great Powers was obsolete, and offered nothing but a return to chaos.³

On Ponape, Soumadau en Sokehs emerges as the legitimate leader of the Sokehs uprising. It was not a crusade for Ponape's liberation, but an angry reaction against Carl Boeder's mounting persecution, and most of the districtspeople followed Soumadau in loyalty to clan and district. Only one vision moved them all: that was the negative belief that Sokehs was to be destroyed, an idea which applied to Sokehs alone, and which made the rest of Ponape hang back in fear when Germany brought in her military might.

In neither of these cases did Lauaki and Soumadau have sufficient strength of personality to make up for the absence of an indigenous proletariat or the lack of a revolutionary ideology. There is a sense in which both men can be said to have possessed 'charismatic' qualities. Lauaki, the supreme orator chief, more than any other Samoan, embodied the highest values of Samoa in his knowledge of tradition and his skill in politics. Soumadau en Sokehs, the warrior chief par excellence, had led famous charges against the Spaniards in 1898; he was the self-appointed guardian of district honour, the successful store owner and erstwhile friend of the German Governor. Both men had all the trappings of a magnetic personality, all the hallmarks of potential charisma. Yet both lacked the ability to overcome all the instabilities inherent in their movements and to commit a broad cross-section of people to their campaigns.

It is this which defines a truly charismatic movement. In the view of one sociologist, charisma is less an individual quality than a social relationship in which the message and the movement itself are more important than the greatness of the leader.⁴ Firstly, true charisma exists only within the context of a social movement: until recognised by others it does not become real. Secondly, there must be a message which is relevant to the people and expresses their unsatisfied wants. The truly charismatic leader in these terms is followed because he embodies and articulates values and aspirations in which his followers have an interest; and because he offers a realisation of those values.

Lauaki's vision of the restoration of traditional politics did not capture the imagination of all, or even of most Samoans. In fact, a large group and their leaders perceived it as divisive, selfish and retrograde. Only if Solf had resorted to force against the orator chief in March 1909 would Lauaki have received the signs and martyrdom necessary to give him a genuinely charismatic role.

In a similar way, Soumadau was able to draw only his kin and districts people to him, in what was generally perceived to be a hopeless gesture. His protest, like that of Lauaki's, was by and large the protest of a political elite, with a select following; it represented a crisis for him, rather than for the whole people. The only Islanders both men could mobilise were those already susceptible to integration through traditional bonds of authority and social solidarity.

Though these acts of open resistance failed, not all opposition to German policy proved fruitless. It is clear from the histories of the three colonies that German rule in the Pacific was a process of constant compromise between relatively weak and highly personalised administrations on the one hand and the leaders of Island communities on the other. Whether in New Guinea, Ponape or Samoa, the Germans never gained absolute control over the politics of their Island populations. We have seen, for instance, that the New Guinea policy of permanent government presence through the appointment of *luluais* was constantly subject to disruption and frequently it failed to achieve even the minimal organising goals expected of it.⁵ Other instruments of colonial control, like the head tax and compulsory road works, also had only a limited effect.

If, in theory, Micronesia and Polynesia contained much more penetrable societies than New Guinea, and lent themselves to manipulation through their hierarchical authority structures, in practice they proved as large an obstacle to German control as did New Guinea. Ponapeans were able to influence German administrative policy right up to Boeder's last brutal acts, since none of the four governments between 1899 and 1910 was fully aware of what was going on in the districts. The rebellion occurred after Boeder had made it clear by his actions that he spurned any idea of compromise between his regime and the Islanders. Only when the Islanders had been beaten or cowed into subjection by the sheer weight of numbers were the Germans able to do what they wanted on Ponape.

Of all three colonies, Solf's Samoa comes closest to achieving a workable system of control and the genuine bureaucratisation of Pacific Island authority. In a compact and homogeneous society such as Samoa, a great degree of direct involvement between the Island community and the colonial Governor was possible. A strong personality like Solf, having a positive conception of his role and a good knowledge of, and sympathy for, local custom, was able to influence greatly the pattern of inter-communal politics. Solf understood local

aspirations and the limits to which the Samoans were prepared to be pushed. This was manifest in his refusal to bully the Samoans into serving only the European economy; in his defence of his paid native bureaucracy as a delicate balance between German and Samoan notions of sovereignty; in his sympathy for Mata'afa Josefo despite his complicity in the *Oloa*; and, most importantly, in his reliance, during the Lauaki crisis, on a political strategy right up to the brink of civil war and total bankruptcy of his administrative conception.

Yet, for all that, not even Solf gained complete control over the Samoan polity. If his administration had the appearance of a methodical progress towards a political ideal, that was because Solf was skilful at rationalising the decisions forced on him by the turn of events. In reality, the Solf period was one of experiment and of pragmatic solutions to current crises.

From the beginning, Solf had to compromise with those Samoans who wielded political power. To gain acceptance for the German regime he was forced to allow the continuation of the *Malo* style of government: a central Samoan administration controlled by the chiefs and orators of the victorious party; the dictatorship of the strong. The local government which Solf set up in 1900 also represented a delicate balance between Samoan and German power. Though it served to counteract the old power of *Tumua* and *Pule* chiefs, Solf found he was obliged to pay incumbents' salaries as a kind of indemnity for the prerogatives they surrendered when Samoa became a German colony, and to use officials who were familiar to local villagers since the people would not obey a stranger. In effect this meant that the traditional power of village elites was hardly inhibited, and the colonial government could exercise relatively little control over them, particularly as the wages paid to them were not enough to guarantee loyalty, and dismissal could alienate the villagers.⁶

This balance of interests continued to operate through to the end of German rule. Solf had to negotiate the question of the head tax with the Samoan elites before implementing it; he had to maintain the political fiction of the paramountcy long after he had succeeded in undermining the *Oloa* movement and abolishing the *Malo*; he found it necessary to allow Lauaki freedom of movement up until late 1908 despite the fact that Lauaki consistently championed campaigns to reinstate the old elites in power. Even when Solf had the upper hand in 1909 he could not afford to use a military offensive for fear of provoking a general rebellion. The final compromise lay in his solution

to the *Ali'i Sili* question. All Solf's plans for Samoa had revolved around the removal of this final obstacle between government and people. But here, too, Solf was forced to meet the Samoans halfway. The old, single position of *Ali'i Sili* was now replaced by two new ones, the *Fautua*, which created an entirely new relationship between the two royal families and the administration. Furthermore, the Germans felt obliged to distribute a considerable indemnity to the chiefs to forestall their protests. In the light of these constant adjustments of purpose, it becomes clear that what one author has called Solf's 'thorough, if diplomatic absolutism',⁷ was more diplomatic than thoroughly absolute.

In Pacific Island politics, therefore, the role which Islanders themselves played in shaping the character of German rule cannot be ignored. Their initiatives, counter-thrusts and general political sophistication helped to influence colonial policy even when open resistance failed. The key to their success lay with the Island leaders or elites, those people with a major influencing or decision-making capacity. Leadership is crucial in explaining any process of socio-political change. In the Pacific it has added importance, for Island elites like Nanpei, Lauaki and To Bobo not only possessed multiple roles in their societies as politicians, businessmen and church officials, but also they were the most immediately affected by the impositions of a foreign, centralised government.

As we have seen, German colonial rule rarely engaged the whole society. Those who lost their prerogatives and their freedom of manoeuvre were men like the cartel of chiefs and orators in Samoa, and the higher district chiefs in Ponape. These were the Islanders who resisted any encroachment on their powers, or schemed and intrigued in order to influence German policy. The history of Pacific Island politics under German rule is the history of elites, not mass movements, of interactions between *leaders* of different groups and different cultures. Particularly in small colonies like Samoa and Ponape, the major crises of sovereignty occurred when Island elites suddenly found themselves forced to choose between total dependence on the new regime or stubborn defence of their old ways and traditional prerogatives.⁸

Lauaki and Soumadau en Sokehs chose the latter course and, on the surface, failed. Yet they cannot be dismissed simply as unrepentant 'resisters' or 'romantic reactionaries' in contrast to the 'more deft' collaborators like Nanpei and To Bobo. These are terms which, thanks to the work of African historians, have been shown to be outdated and

misleading.⁹ 'Collaborators' and 'resisters' were often the same men in the Pacific. Lauaki and Soumadau, after all, did not come to grief until late in the German period, when they decided to challenge German rule head on. Until that moment they had acted as important spokesmen for their people and gained respect as effective leaders in the eyes of the Germans. Lauaki had organised the support that had allowed Mata'afa Josefo to stake a convincing claim to the paramountcy on the eve of German rule. He had been involved in the *Oloa*, an attempt to modernise the people's economy while defending the right of the old *Malo* to speak for Samoa. In switching his allegiance from Solf to the *Oloa* and then to Solf again in 1904-05, Lauaki proved himself an extremely adaptable politician, and he gained an important, if temporary, victory when he persuaded Solf not to deport him along with the other ringleaders of the movement in 1905.

As for Soumadau, if the Germans were able to establish a hold on Ponape in their early years and work through the district chiefs with a minimum of conflict, then Soumadau was one of the chiefs who made it possible. Even Carl Boeder is said to have counted Soumadau as a special friend and to have cultivated the chief's friendship in the early days of his reign.¹⁰ Certainly Soumadau virtually led the negotiations over the district's grievances about work periods in 1910, and he was made overseer at a high rate of pay as a tribute to his influence and organising capacity.

The Germans clearly needed the co-operation of such men in their effort to assert control over the Islands. Without the collaboration of Lauaki and Soumadau in the early days of German rule, they would never have been able to make Germany's presence acceptable with so little use of force. That Solf, Hahl and Fritz—even Boeder—realised this, is implicit in the way they cultivated the friendship of these chiefs and sought their support.

In the end both Lauaki and Soumadau were committed to a traditionalist view of life, a view which led them into open resistance and removal from any further influence on their societies. Yet both have achieved a new level of influence, perhaps a new kind of charismatic appeal, posthumously. Lauaki was resurrected by nationalist Samoans of the 1920s and 1930s as the persecuted proto-nationalist of Samoa, and even today, in areas well beyond his home district, he is regarded as Samoa's model orator chief. Soumadau and the district of Sokehs had already gained admiration and respect from the other districts, even enemy districts, at the time of the rebellion, because they were prepared

to make the ultimate sacrifice of their lives to uphold Ponapean self-respect in a manner honoured by the people. Soumadau, and the districtspeople with him, had proved that they were the embodiment of the Island's warrior ethos. The lesson has lost little over the years. In the final analysis, an effective, even a charismatic leader does not have to be successful: in the long-term perspective of history, adversity and failure can serve as much as success to strengthen faith in a person and that person's goals.

There were, however, other elites who, in the end, did not go the same way as Lauaki and Soumadau, elites who never threw down the gauntlet to the Germans in the way Lauaki and Soumadau felt compelled to do. Once again, to call these men simply 'collaborators' would be misleading. They were men who co-operated for a variety of reasons, not necessarily from the conviction that all things European were automatically superior. Some, like Saga and Taumei in Samoa, Henry Nanpei in Ponape, or To Bobo in New Guinea, were seeking a middle way. They never responded inflexibly to the demands of their German rulers. They made no permanent choice to serve or to resist, but moved between co-operation and opposition according to the pressures upon them and their own political and economic objectives.

Perhaps this is the measure of the most successful Islanders under German rule, for astute leadership and limited resistance often succeeded in checking European pretensions, thus enabling the leaders to consolidate their own positions and move relatively quickly into modern politics. A good example is Henry Nanpei. During German rule his position was far greater than his title suggested. He was the leading benefactor and organiser of the Protestant Church on Ponape, regarded by both Spanish and Germans as the 'commander' of the Protestant forces in the south against the Catholics in the north. In addition he was the Island's largest and most prosperous businessman and its most Westernised chief. The Germans counted him, rightly, as the key element in their control of the Islanders, at least in the south, and successive administrations courted his support and aid for their policies.

For his part, Henry Nanpei had grasped quickly the long-term meaning of European sovereignty, and he was prepared to try new forms of leadership and authority under the Germans: witness his 'advisory council' to act as consultant to the regime. And in accepting the land reform scheme, as well as influencing others to do so, Nanpei was able to fashion an alliance with the administration which assured

him of German support and assistance during the remainder of German rule.

For all that, Nanpei in no way abandoned traditional values or traditional commitments. Sympathy with the direction of social change did not exclude loyalty to established patterns of political life. Nanpei's major concern remained his position within Kiti district. He had engineered the disturbances in 1908 in order to deter the Germans from penetrating too deeply his stronghold in Ronkiti, just as he had led the campaign against the Spanish in 1898; he had set out to intimidate the German regime while collaborating with it in order to guard his position and landed estates against the encroachments of Sou Kiti; during the revolt of 1910 he is said to have succoured the rebels from his own trade stores with equipment and foodstuffs.¹¹ The suspicions about Henry Nanpei's activities, which flourished in all quarters, among Ponapeans as well as among Germans, confirm the ambiguity of his attitude to European rule. Though, outwardly, he remained faithful to the German regime until 1914, it was probably because he was satisfied that it provided him with the best possible support for his position and influence in Kiti. The shrewdest assessment of Nanpei's priorities throughout German rule was made by Governor Hahl:

His activities were designed constantly to assert his own claims, never those of the German regime. He certainly would have become a rebel, as in the Spanish period, if he had feared that we endangered his reputation or his possessions. In my opinion he relied [on us] with all possible caution.¹²

To Bobo in the Gazelle Peninsula is a second example of this cautious attitude to the Germans. Like Nanpei, he could see beyond the immediate crisis of the 1893 war to the permanent effects of the changes going on around his people, and he chose the government to be his future patron. As 'big man', preacher, organiser and later *luluai*, To Bobo was an important support to the German administration. But, like Henry Nanpei, he remained ambivalent to the Germans and did not support their policies under all circumstances. He fought the Germans for land reserves, and encouraged independent cash cropping by the Tolai rather than the regular wage labour for plantations which Hahl favoured. To Bobo is an example of those creative elites who recognised colonial rule as a revolutionary situation and encouraged their societies to adapt.

A third example is the Manus Islander, Pominis, the 'cannibal'

catechist accused of warring on his neighbours and raiding European schooners. After selling his village's land to the mission, Pominis abandoned his ministry for the life of a secular 'big man'. His case illustrates neatly the dual strands of co-operation and resistance in emergent Pacific leaders. Pominis's training enabled him to stake a more powerful claim to leadership in his own society, but it did not inhibit him from following custom and going to war to protect his group. Again, his conversion and work for the mission did not guarantee that he would never return to the old ways and old ambitions of material power. This was a common risk which continually undermined the evangelising successes of missionaries in German New Guinea.

Such leaders were able to combine cultural conservatism with innovation, were able to exploit new avenues of power and opposition while remaining loyal to traditional values. Frequently their motives are not altogether fathomable. Some of them wished to encourage their societies to adapt to the structural changes and new patterns of development. Most of them, it must be recognised, were primarily self-interested, and possessed only a vague vision of betterment for their communities. All of them were involved in what one historian has called 'the politics of survival':¹³ the need to come to terms with vastly more powerful forces which exercised the ultimate say over the future of their societies. But such a phrase, which tends to emphasise the *response* of Pacific Islanders to German rule, must not be allowed to obscure the creative side of their political activity. For Pacific Islanders, through their leaders and institutions, often took the initiative in colonial politics, while the Europeans struggled to make responses which accorded with their colonial objectives and their own image of themselves. The colonial relationship was never equal, and Pacific Islanders were seldom able to maintain their autonomy, but, given the presence of sufficiently gifted individuals in influential positions, their societies were dynamic enough to adjust of their own accord and to a level upon which they themselves had decided.

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