

**DECISION-MAKING AND AUTHORITY  
IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA:  
COMMENTS ON POWER AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE**

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The proper relation between power and the person has preoccupied human society since social time began. Papua New Guinea, recently independent and still extensively traditional, is an excellent example of this dilemma given also the vivid acculturative changes occurring there. Events before and since Independence in September 1975 are outlined here in relation to emerging uses of authority and decision-making in this microcosm of compressed history, if not social evolution. Several concepts seen as basic to the issue of power are also suggested.

This new nation, plus its adjacent islands, occupies the eastern half of the world's second largest island, some 2600 kilometers long and 700 kilometers wide (1600/400 miles). It is second in size only to Greenland, both mini-continents in their own right. The western half was formerly under Dutch control and is administered by Indonesia as Irian Jaya, a province of that country since a United Nations interregnum in 1962. PNG includes the former German colony of Kaiserwilhelmsland as its northern half, added to the German empire by its own proclamation on the northeast coast in 1887; this act was countered at the same time by the British who claimed the southern half, Papua. Early colonial activity was confined mainly to the coasts, excepting adventures, explorers, and gold prospectors who ventured into totally unknown interiors. World War I brought a temporary halt to these activities and at its conclusion the former German territory, via the League of Nations, became the Mandated Territory of New Guinea. Together with Papua, both were jointly administered by Australia. World War II saw the establishment of a military administration of Allied forces.

In 1946 the Mandated Territory became a Trust Territory of the United Nations, Papua still retaining its unelaborated status as a "territory" of Australia and both still administered by that country. The two areas together became "self-governing" Papua New Guinea in December 1973, in preparation for full independence which followed in September 1975. Meanwhile the bulk of its citizens, if they were aware of the momentary

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dramatics of Independence, were still largely unaffected and largely unaware of the implications of this transformation and *de facto* social revolution.

Power in precontact PNG was vested in autochthonous units . . . over 500 of them, each ethnolinguistic entity or "culture" which at its scale of ecology, social organization, exchange and conflict was politically self-limiting. The introduction of a national government, a national identity, primary industries such as mining and timber, and cash crops such as coffee has required profound transition for most of the country's 3,000,000 people at an accelerating pace. Some 80 to 85 percent of those people are essentially "traditional" in enculturation: small-scale, subsistence, non-literate local groups linked by strong ties of dialect, kinship, and reciprocity. The inroads of Christian missions (and their differentia) have also had pervasive influence on life-style in urban and town areas, often divisively so within the rural hinterlands.

These ethnolinguistic units are in turn composed of myriad egalitarian local groupings based on both kinship and residence for which the labels of phratries, moieties, clans and lineages can be used only with difficulty: extensive ethnographic research in Melanesia has indicated the functional importance of affiliation, recruitment, distance, individuality and idiosyncrasy within the broader behavioural matrix. The demography of these cultures varies widely, from residual groups in the low hundreds to major language groups in the tens of thousands. Nowhere however did any in terms of organization approach what we think of as a polity, and decision by forceful individuals or "big men" (Tok Pisin: *bikpela man*) traditionally characteristic of PNG, who instrumented collective activities of local groups, were the ultimate source of any broader "political" activity. This precontact situation has changed with rapid acculturation, yet local-level decisions still provide the basis for broader expressions of intention. One could posit that the political spectrum in Papua New Guinea is presently tri-modal, firmly *local* in its major mode with recognized authority and decision-making emerging at *provincial* and *national* levels, at least in terms of perceptions by the bulk of rural adults.

In the 1960s, these spheres of authority were transposed through the development of Local Government Councils which bridged hitherto autonomous local groups. These Councils, plus a national House of Assembly structured along the lines of a Westminster system of parliamentary government under the aegis of Australia, continued into 1973 when self-government was proclaimed, a formal effort at full indigenous control of internal matters. Events and political changes have thus been extraordinarily compressed and over a period of some 10 to 15

years and far less in isolated areas, transition or better, transformation of a collectivity of traditional groups into nationhood has occurred.

With Independence in 1975, the existing nineteen districts or major administrative structures, each with its District Officer and administrative hierarchy, were redesignated "Provinces" with elected governance including a Premier. This was an abrupt change for many of the former districts, and several still have intermediate status. The first national election was held in 1977, and 1982 will see the second such exercise of collective or at least collated national will. True to Melanesian appreciation of and participation in local discourse and intensive group interaction, there are now a large number of political parties and the national government is essentially one of coalitions across regional and cultural regimes, "Papuan" and "New Guinean," "Highland" and "Coastal," for example.

One may rightly deduce that PNG's population is also characterized by the importance of "community," that quality which, evident from a distance, becomes elusive when one attempts to utilize or operationalize it. For the purposes of programmes, field research and related efforts, the writer has found useful a conception of community which views it as the largest grouping of individuals within which experience can be personally meaningful and yet shared; within which information is mutually and immediately intelligible; and for which a usually continuous geographic area serves as a living space. Indeed, this definition is derived in part from fieldwork in Papua New Guinea and other locations (e.g., Malaysia) and indicates core characteristics of community which are simultaneously those next vulnerable to the stresses of sociocultural and psychosocial change. These last include regional interchange and commerce, extended exogamy, schooling, roads and other transport networks, mass media, and promotion of new collective identities.

Acculturation has thus evoked a disequilibrium in the local human ecosystem quite at variance with the sort of biosocial homeostasis extant earlier. The nature of precontact economics involving barter, exchange and the pervasive Melanesian ideal of reciprocity has become less personal and of broader scale, with the introduction of a cash economy linked more and more to change *qua* "economic development." And as biological or natural selection decreases, sociocultural selection increases: this can be positive, for the homeostasis cited above was at most a quasi-homeostasis characterized by short life expectancy, high infant and maternal mortality, debilitating infectious diseases such as malaria, leprosy and yaws, and continuous warfare between traditional enemies. All of these were recapitulated in particular cultural styles with particular worldviews, and there is no need to evoke Rousseau in characterizing or rationalizing the precontact situation. For present-day Papua New Guinea, acculturative pressures upon the

enculturative datum have evolved new conditions for the expression of power taken as a dynamic of social disequilibrium in the human ecosystem.

One surmises then that a "natural ecology of power" which is not characterized by bioenergetics alone exists with its own limits, in turn implying a "critical mass" with respect to demographic, sociocultural and political factors. Within these limits much is possible, i.e., respect them as initial constraints; go beyond them and one is in troubled realms, e.g., the irrelevance of misguided and/or mismanaged "development" programmes, the divisiveness of conflicting multinational and indigenous interests, the awesome malaise and spiritual wastage of cultural anomie, or the entropic catharsis of revolution. There are, however, many ways for revolutions to occur and they do not all necessarily come from the barrel of a Kalashnikov or Armalite. Rather, revolution is one sector of the spectrum of power, another of which is decision-making through direct participation at the local level of the new polity for e.g., conflict resolution, policy direction and policy implementation.

Some comments on health and the quality of life are also appropriate. Ultimately, the social exercise of power must refer to some relatively local sphere and to the domain of self. An approach to health in both its personal and transcultural aspects which has been found useful by the writer, sees health as a continuing psychobiological state based upon the cumulative experiences of an individual's lifetime, good and bad; health is both the ability to rally from an insult to the human organism and the ability to learn, and thus to grow in the fullest sense. Such an approach reflects contemporary thinking, field experience, and the nature of the human life-cycle. In relation to the collective or group aspects of our considerations here, every culture has in effect its own definition of "health," implicit or explicit, which refracts broader premises. These premises include notions about the quality of life, however distant or inarticulated: the future, hope for the future, some transformation or projection through time beyond our immediate existential dilemmas. In the third or developing world, these are felt particularly strongly in their cultural and linguistic context, and, as with Papua New Guinea, involve new political frames.

For the writer, the key issue or crux of power is the sort of meeting one sees between individual and society, the conjunction of self and polity if you wish. This necessitates and validates the sort of discussions and conceptual altercations so dear to anthropological discourse. These are hardly the purview of an ivory tower, if indeed they ever were, and involve issues which are very real for each individual within their own conceptual schema. They concern *ideals* of which the poorest peasant or the wealthiest capitalists retain cognizance, achieved however inefficiently with whatever

agonies . . . and also stasis . . . by the political act. In the nature then of what I call the dialect between self and polity, which we still do not understand very well, lies the heart of matter: the appropriate use of power to enhance the quality of life for the majority, perceived as such.