2 Rethinking Old Problems: Matriliny, Secret Societies and Political Evolution

MY EARLY INTEREST in the comparative study of male initiation rites and secret societies in Melanesia (Allen 1967) had been in large measure generated through reading the old ethnographies that dealt with the great variety of elaborate male rites found in the Torres, Banks and north Vanuatu islands. The early workers, especially Rivers (1914), but also Layard (1942) and Deacon (1935), devoted considerable attention to the task of understanding the contemporary distribution of cultures. Impressed by the complex and seemingly unpredictable way in which similar cultural items appeared in diverse social contexts in neighbouring communities, they concluded that the resultant patterns of distribution must be consequences either of internal evolution, as in the supposed advance from matriliny to patriliny, or of the historical movement of peoples and cultures. Nor was such diffusion necessarily a purely local matter for both Rivers and Layard were of the opinion that many traits, especially megaliths and sand-drawings, had diffused all the way from the banks of the Nile. Even Deacon, whose training at Cambridge somewhat post-dated both the evolutionary and diffusionist periods, was so impressed by the data that he too devoted much of his time to the task of allocating discrete cultural

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items to one of four major complexes. And now, when I too look at the same area, I find myself greatly intrigued by the varying ways in which diverse modes of descent, male cults, ritual hierarchies and leadership systems are distributed throughout the archipelago.

In returning here to problems of distribution I hope to avoid the more obvious errors of the unilinear evolutionists and the more extreme diffusionists. A central weakness shared by both approaches was their inability to provide any satisfactory explanation as to why a particular collectivity of cultural items should together constitute a single complex. Thus, in Deacon's four-culture scheme he described one of them as an immigrant culture characterized by the rite of incision, the fringed skirt, penis-sheaths, musical bows and patrilineal descent. Having noted, quite legitimately, that these traits do in fact go together in contemporary Vanuatu, he attempted to explain this by suggesting that they also constituted parts of an integrated immigrant culture in some remote period. Likewise, in Rivers' scheme cultural items are today associated either because they share a common archaism or have diffused from a common source.

Such a view of culture is not in accord with my understanding of the north Vanuatu data. Elsewhere (Allen 1981), I have stressed the frequency with which cultural items move from community to community. The point I want to make here is that the items so diffused are invariably small fragments from a larger complex. At the generous rate of a few such innovations per decade it would take a very long time for all of the elements of a single ritual complex to move from one community to another, much less a total cultural repertoire of the type indicated by Deacon. A necessary consequence of such piecemeal diffusion is that the contemporary association and distribution of traits can tell us little or nothing of the past history of the area. Whereas Deacon would presumably argue that incision rites, penis sheaths and patrilineal descent co-exist today on Malekula as a consequence of their prior co-existence in the cultural repertoire of an immigrant people, I would on the contrary argue that their concurrence, though undoubtedly a result of past diffusion, obtains today in part because they functionally interrelate both with one another and with other aspects of Malekula culture, but even more importantly because their introduction

confers benefits, especially those of a political kind, on their sponsors. Furthermore, when diffusion takes place the introduced cultural items commonly acquire new meanings and new functions in accordance with the predominant local social and political institutions and their associated ideologies.

I do not, however, wish to imply that comparative analysis must remain content with the demonstration of how cultural features vary in accordance with the functional requirements of underlying structural arrangements. The constant diffusion of cultural items throughout these islands over a very long period has almost certainly not taken the form of a regular replication of social institutions at a like level of developmental complexity, but rather has been in conformity with complex processes of historical growth and decay. My aim in yet again employing the comparative method is to contribute to our understanding of the developmental processes that underlie cultural diversity, especially diversity in the scale and complexity of political relations. Like Keesing (1982), my hope is that by the use of increasingly sophisticated modes of analysis we will ultimately comprehend something 'of the invisible hierarchy of forces and pressures that have led to (the) evolution, spread and perpetuation' (Keesing 1982:54) of social systems. However, a necessary precursor to such an undertaking is a detailed analysis of the ways in which the component elements of a culture interrelate with one another. It is only by this means that some understanding can be gained of the forces that maintain or change a social system. The difference between the kind of analysis that I am here advocating and that carried out by the earlier unilinear evolutionists can be illustrated best by a brief examination of a topic that greatly interested the latter—the widespread occurrence of matrilineal institutions in the northern and central islands of Vanuatu.

Matrilineal descent and evolutionary theory

When Rivers first came to the islands in 1908, he was firmly committed to the major tenets of nineteenth-century evolutionary anthropology, including the widely held belief that matrilineal institutions constitute contemporary survivals of primitive social forms. He was convinced, as were his predecessors Morgan (1877) and Bachofen (1861), that in most parts of the world matriliny was

eventually replaced by 'superior' patrilineal institutions. Though Rivers subsequently argued that cultural diffusion (Langham 1976:162-291) is of greater importance in understanding the contemporary distribution of traits, he did not in any way question the basic postulate concerning the primitiveness of matriliny. Instead of the spontaneous and predetermined evolution of matriliny into patriliny, he now argued, as in the second volume of his monumental two volume *History of Melanesian Society*, that the contemporary cultures of such islands as Malekula and Ambrym are the end result of immigrant peoples with patrilineal institutions mixing with and politically dominating the indigenous matrilineal peoples. His student Layard and also Deacon continued to develop diffusionist models, but still without in any way questioning the priority of matrilineal institutions in the northern islands.

There were two basic considerations that underpinned the early belief in the priority and primitiveness of matriliny—on the one hand, the apparent absence of matrilineal institutions in the highly evolved and civilized societies of nineteenth-century Europe, and on the other, the supposed 'natural' and hence obvious features of matrifiliation. Whereas the male role in reproduction is at best inferential, most particularly so under conditions of sexual promiscuity, and may even at times be unrecognized, everything to do with female reproductivity—menstruation, pregnancy, parturition and lactation—is visibly grounded in nature and hence can provide an obvious model for its cultural elaboration in the form of matrilineal kinship.[1]

[1] Margaret Jolly (1991:55) has, quite rightly, noted that,

> ... although undoubtedly physiological maternity is more visible than paternity, we cannot assume that Melanesian theories of procreation and nurture simply reflect this 'natural fact'. Do ni-Vanuatu share our views that maternity is more primary and natural? Allen's notion of a certain and obvious maternity seems hard to reconcile with the beliefs of other Melanesians, such as Godelier (1986) reports for the Baruya, where what we might presume to be natural relations of mothers and children are negated at every point.

Her facts are, of course, quite correct: the Baruya, and no doubt other New Guinea Highland peoples also, do indeed so negate the mother/child relationship that the role of the mother in both procreation and nurture is valued solely as a

So far as I am aware no effective attack has ever been made on this simple and to my mind weighty argument. What instead occurred was its abandonment as a result of the general demise of evolutionary anthropology in favour of structural/functionalism. There is no need here to enter into a detailed account of this shift in perspective—it is enough to note that the sequence of matriliny first and patriliny second was frequently cited as one of the least supportable and most conjectural propositions put forward by the evolutionists. The seemingly most damaging criticism was the clear evidence that contemporary societies with matrilineal descent groups are by no means clustered at what might be regarded as the simplest or least evolved end of any postulated evolutionary continuum. Furthermore, the functional point of view necessarily led to a representation of matriliny and patriliny as alternative and in many ways functionally equivalent variations on a common theme. It therefore became fashionable to demonstrate the supposed similarities between groups organized in accordance with both modes of descent. For example—both matrilineages and patrilineages may take on corporate features, be subject to similar segmentary processes, and operate as war-making, blood-vengeance or ritual groups.

Yet beneath this veneer of functional equivalence there still lurked the old evolutionary conviction that matriliny has inherent limitations and weaknesses of a kind that make it likely that a future move to patriliny will at some point occur. As Nash noted in her

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means of transmitting valuable male semen to the child. Hence, much less matriliny, the Baruya take agnatic affiliation to an extreme degree of elaboration. But such examples do not in any way negate my contention that the incontrovertible visibility of the facts of procreation and child nurture can provide an obvious model for the development of notions of matrifiliation and matrilineal descent. Indeed, the fact that such examples as the Baruya are found only in societies that elevate everything to do with men to an extreme degree surely supports rather than negates my argument.

And finally, my understanding of the Vanuatu ethnography is that maternity is indeed commonly viewed as more 'primary and natural' than paternity. Though this is especially the case in those communities with an explicit ideology of matrilineal descent, it is of considerable importance elsewhere also.

introduction to her report on the matrilineal Nagovisi of south Bougainville:

> ... The notion that matrilineal societies are particularly fraught with conflict has long been respectable modern and anthropological dogma: perhaps the most succinct example of this point of view is Richards (1950), although others have made the same general points. (Nash 1974:i)

The most commonly cited 'dysfunctional' feature of matriliny is the separation that occurs between the line of authority that runs through males and the line of group placement that runs through females. Indeed, Schneider (1961:7-21) directly derives all of his nine defining features of matrilineal societies, each of which is presented as containing its own inevitable internal contradiction, from the male authority problem. Again, I do not wish to enter here into a detailed discussion of such matters—suffice to note that despite such seemingly fatal internal disorders, matrilineal systems continue to flourish in many parts of the world—including much of north and central Vanuatu. Though this can be partly explained, as Nash (1974) has done for the Nagovisi, by demonstrating that many of the supposed functional disorders are either exaggerated or spurious, I would like to put forward a somewhat different argument based on the proposition that in pre-state societies matriliny, because of genuine internal problems, including one that has not yet been referred to in the literature, is more likely to stimulate evolutionary development than is patriliny.

Let me take the patrilineal case first. A well-established feature of the so-called patrilineal societies of Melanesia is their adaptability and flexibility—the way in which the descent ideology can be maintained both by genealogical fiction and by the use of ritual in the face of both demographic and political flux. This adaptability is in large measure predicated on a key feature of patrifiliation universally—the inferential status of men as genitors and hence the vital importance of the father as a socially, rather than as a biologically, defined status holder. Put bluntly, because fathers are never known with certitude, it is no difficult matter to juggle with genealogies and turn men into agnates by the use of ritual—as they do in the Small Islands and in other non-matrilineal areas of

Vanuatu such as Malekula, Ambrym, south Pentecost and Tanna. Furthermore, the same processes that help turn non-agnates into agnates also facilitate the transformation of effeminate and weak boys into masculine and strong adults capable both of defending the community and contributing to its reproduction. In other words, agnation is closely linked throughout Melanesia with male cults entered via compulsory rites at or about puberty and their attendant stress on lineage solidarity, male strength or power in both the sexual and political arenas, and endemic warfare.

Shifting the emphasis slightly one could also describe such societies as ones in which political action and the formation of political groups is substantially coextensive with the patterning of relationships by reference to kinship and affinity. Though big men may at times create followings that transcend the limits of enduring agnatic kin groups, they do so very largely by recruiting non-agnatic kin and then, over time, converting them into yet more agnates. In such societies it is rare to find any kind of overarching supra-kinship political structure, and I would suggest that this is so simply because the agnatic ideology is politically advantageous, especially for adult men, in small-scale stateless societies.

Matrilineal descent, by contrast, is far less flexible. Children visibly come forth from wombs—mothers are seen to be such and there is little that is inferential or circumstantial in the determination of maternity. In conformity with this simple fact I would like to stress a striking and again much ignored feature of matrilineal systems—the parallel inflexibility of matrifiliation. It follows that wherever this kind of immutability occurs groups defined by reference to the matrilineal principle are deprived of that vital political attribute of membership flexibility. It is, indeed, very difficult for such groups to assume the range of political functions commonly associated with their agnatic counterparts.[2] But whereas

[2] I do not, of course, deny that matrilineal descent groups can, and frequently do, take on important political functions. My point is simply that in so far as they adhere to an inflexible rule of membership recruitment they cannot provide the ideological basis for the definition of the enduring core of either male or female members of local groups. Where the matrilineal groups are widely dispersed, as is often the case, they provide political links that cut across rather than unify hamlets, villages, districts and even islands. Nor do I deny that matrilineal groups can at times function in a manner analogous to that of their agnatic

the earlier unilinear evolutionists would have seized on this as yet another clear reason for the inevitable transformation of matriliny into patriliny, I would like to suggest that a more common, and certainly more progressive, evolutionary response was the development of various forms of supra-kinship political institutions operating in association with a continuing stress on matriliny. I say more progressive for a number of reasons. Like Keesing, I find the agnatic model with its stress on male power, inter-group hostility, big-man aggrandizement and the subordination and exploitation of women to be 'expressions of cruelty, inhumanity, oppression and terror' (Keesing 1982:54). But perhaps of even greater evolutionary import is the sheer effectiveness of the agnatic model and hence the absence of any major stimulus for the freeing of politics from the restraints of kinship.

Within the patrilineal areas of Melanesia the only significant institutional developments that at times lift political action above the level of lineage dynamics are the formation of age-grades and the emergence of big men in the context of elaborate exchange systems. Age-grades emerge from the context of male initiations when the rites are held at relatively long intervals (seven to ten as against two to three years) and the initiates are recruited from a large number of localized lineages, perhaps all of those found within a single sub-tribe or even tribe. The most elaborate of such systems are found in the eastern highlands of Papua New Guinea and though they undoubtedly result in the formation of important cross-parish bonds, it should be stressed that such expansion occurs not by the emergence of a supra-kinship political ideology but simply by the extension of the lineage principle to the level of the sub-tribe or the tribe. In other words, the expansion of the initiatory group is

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counterparts—that is, to overlap with and provide the unifying ideology for either the male or female member of local groups. But whenever this occurs it is necessary that non-uterine kin be periodically incorporated into the localized segments of the matriclans. There is some evidence that this occurs in parts of Bougainville, the Huon gulf and in New Britain and New Ireland. However, my impression is that the incidence of such incorporation is far less than in most agnatic communities and there is a correspondingly weaker association between locality and descent. With the possible exception of north Pentecost (Lane, R. 1962) no such localization of the matrilineal groups occurs in Vanuatu.

accompanied by a parallel extension of the agnatic genealogy to ever more remote apical ancestors. It should also be noted that the resultant age-grades do not assume the major political functions that are commonly found in association with otherwise similar systems in many parts of Africa.

The big-man/exchange-system development occurs throughout Melanesia but is found in its most elaborate form in the western highlands of Papua New Guinea. Though systems such as this undoubtedly lift political action somewhat above the kinship level, indeed the most successful big men commonly and deliberately flout kinship conventions, their evolutionary potential is nevertheless severely limited by the personal and hence short-lived nature of the followings created by the individual efforts of such men. The frail empires built up by big-men in the context of ritual and economic entrepreneurship are likely to dissolve into their constituent kinship or local units when their creators either grow senile or die. In other words, no enduring and overarching political structures are generated in such big-man polities.

The situation differs in a most striking manner when we turn to the main matrilineal areas found within Melanesia; the Huon Gulf, most of New Britain and New Ireland, the Massim archipelago, Bougainville, parts of the Solomon Islands and much of north and central Vanuatu. Though the polities found in such areas conform to the general Melanesian pattern in so far as they are small in scale and without any overarching structures of a bureaucratic or administrative kind, they nevertheless also exhibit structural features with political implications of a kind not commonly found in the agnatic lineage areas. I refer here to rudimentary forms of hereditary social stratification, usually found in conjunction with an increase in the political significance of territorial organization (much of the Massim and also in modified form in central Vanuatu), voluntary male associations, either in the form of secular club houses, (parts of the Huon Gulf), or of discrete secret societies, (north-east New Britain and adjacent areas and throughout most of the matrilineal areas of north Vanuatu) and elaborate male status hierarchies based primarily on achievement (north Vanuatu). Though each of these institutional complexes is at times found in non-matrilineal

societies, they seldom exhibit an equivalent degree of autonomy from the restraints of kinship as they do in the matrilineal areas. It is also worth noting that where such institutions are found in non-matrilineal societies there are frequently good grounds for believing that they originated in matrilineal areas and then spread by diffusion. It was precisely the evidence in favour of such diffusion in north Vanuatu that led to the elaborate classifications of cultural complexes in the work of Rivers, Layard and Deacon. In the subsequent sections I shall re-examine the north Vanuatu evidence and in so doing provide some substantive support for the above suggestions.

Matrilineal descent and local organization

A distinctive feature of the agnatic model is the way in which the descent ideology is used to express the unity and solidarity of a localized group of men, commonly the co-residents of a discrete hamlet or village, but at times extended over a whole sub-tribe or even tribe. In other words, in such societies descent and locality substantially overlap and reinforce one another. Though a similar localization of the adult male or female members of matrilineal groups can and at times does occur it is nevertheless the exception rather than the rule and is also likely to require rather complex and special arrangements. The Nagovisi of south Bougainville (Nash 1974) provide the only Melanesian example I know of in which the women and not the men constitute the co-resident and enduring core of lineage members.[3] In accordance with this localization of the matrilineal descent groups the latter predictably take on some of the political functions normally associated with clusters of agnatically related males. Furthermore, the Nagovisi women are the owners and

[3] There are two additional matrilineal societies, Lesu in northern New Ireland (Powdermaker 1933:25-60) and north Bougainville (Blackwood 1935:17-20) in which uxorilocal residence is the norm, but in both the parishes are multi-carpellary and osculant, intra-parish marriage is common and there are many exceptions to the rule of residence. In other words, the female members of the matrilineal clans do not form localized segments that coincide with politically significant territorial groups. There is no evidence in the available ethnographies that would indicate any parallel to the dominant position held by the Nagovisi women in lineage affairs.

managers of lineage property, including land, and the senior women are the effective lineage leaders and decision makers. However, at a higher and less kinship-restrained level ambitious and capable men periodically emerge as typical big men who create temporary alliances between a number of localized lineage segments.

The only way in which the adult men of matrilineal descent groups can reside together is by adhering to the rule of avunculo-virilocal residence—that is to say, the boys or young adult men leave their fathers' local group to join their fellow male uterine kin, commonly at or shortly before marriage. Such a system of delayed and discontinuous male co-residence necessarily reduces the effectiveness of uterine kinship as a political ideology and is hence likely to be supplemented by other and possibly non-kinship forms of political association. In the Trobriands the matrilineal descent groups are ranked in a rudimentary form of social stratification, leadership, though it exhibits typical big-man features, is also of a quasi-chiefly kind, and the *kula* exchange ring provides an institutionalized context for political action. In north Pentecost, where there is a lower incidence of avunculo-virilocal residence, the matrilineal descent groups are correspondingly less localized (Lane, R. 1962a:1). Here, as in neighbouring communities, the public graded societies and the discrete secret societies provide contexts for political action that are substantially divorced from both kinship and locality (Codrington 1891:87 and Lane, R. 1962b:1-5).

In all of those remaining areas in Melanesia in which matrilineal descent is of importance the resultant groups are totally divorced from local organization. As a result of either variable or preferential virilocal post-marital residence both the male and the female members of the descent groups are scattered over wide areas, in some cases extending from island to island and even crossing major linguistic boundaries. Descent units of this kind, which frequently take the form of clans grouped into moieties or phratries, differ from their agnatic counterparts in that they are true descent groups—that is to say, membership is determined solely in accordance with descent criteria. Though adoption may be a common occurrence, as it is for example, throughout much of north and central Vanuatu, it only occasionally and under exceptional circumstances takes place between clans. Otherwise, clan and moiety membership is a

permanent and unalterable consequence of having come forth from a particular woman's womb.

I have argued that this inflexibility in membership recruitment greatly reduces the extent to which matrilineal descent can be made the basis for political association. When such groups are, as is usually the case, widely dispersed, it is evident that whatever solidarity and unification there may be amongst the members of local groups, it cannot be expressed in the idiom of matrilineal descent. Indeed, in most cases local groups are internally divided on the basis of clan membership.

The evidence from north Vanuatu, and indeed generally from throughout Melanesia, indicates that when this kind of extreme disjunction occurs between descent and locality alternative forms of political association are likely to develop. Broadly speaking they are of two main kinds. Firstly, a retention of the matrilineal descent ideology for political purposes, but instead of reinforcing local solidarity, clan membership is used by both men and women in seeking followers, trade partners or protectors in remote communities. As Hogbin and Wedgwood (1953) long ago pointed out—osculant (open) multi-carpellary parishes in conjunction with dispersed descent groups result in widened social, economic and political horizons. For example, men of the yam (*damu*) clan in east Aoba can expect to find fellow clan members not only throughout that side of the island but also in such neighbouring islands as Maewo and Raga. Furthermore, since the clans are grouped into moieties that are again widely recognized on an inter-island basis, ties of clan affiliation traced through non-uterine cognates and affines encompass a very wide area indeed. I do not, however, wish to expand here on the various ways in which dispersed matrilineal descent groups can lead to a proliferation and expansion of the big-man area of political influence. Blackwood, P. (1981:35-84) has developed this argument in his discussion of the east Aoba data. Rather, my intent is to stress the frequency with which one finds additional forms of political association occurring in societies of this type—most especially discrete secret societies and public graded societies in north Vanuatu.

Matrilineal descent and discrete male secret societies

There are, broadly speaking, two main varieties of secret male associations found in Melanesia—those entered via compulsory rites, usually at or about puberty, and those entered via voluntary rites and without any formal restrictions based either on age or kin-group membership. Just as there is a very high correlation between the compulsory male rites and the quasi-agnatic type societies, so too is there a striking association between the discrete secret societies and matrilineal descent systems, especially those with an accompanying dual organization. Furthermore, in those relatively few matrilineal communities in which there are no discrete secret societies, the descent groups are either partly localized, and hence take on at least some of the political functions normally associated with agnatic lineages, or some form of social stratification with political implications is found.

Rivers noted this same association between matrilineal descent and discrete secret societies and indeed regarded it as of such fundamental importance that wherever he found even the slightest indication of either past or present secret-society type activity in a patrilineal community he took it as strong evidence for a former state of matriliny. He did not, however, regard the secret societies as an integral part of his postulated archaic matrilineal moiety form of social organization. Quite to the contrary, he suggested that the secret societies are only found in those matrilineal areas where immigrant peoples bearing a superior patrilineal culture have settled. Such immigrants, he maintained, came in small groups and hence were obliged to go, as it were, underground. Because of this, rites which in the immigrants' home environment were public affairs, became in the matrilineal context minority secret cults.

It was precisely this kind of imaginative but unverifiable type of historical reconstruction that led to the collapse of diffusionism and the consequent lack of interest in Rivers' work. But, as is so often the case with this remarkable man, he was, I suggest, highly perceptive not only in noting the link between the matrilineal dual organization and the discrete secret societies, but in suggesting that the latter are some kind of functional counterpart to the open male cults found in the patrilineal areas. Whereas Rivers sought to explain the linkage in terms of hypothetical movements of people

and subsequent adaptation, I would appeal instead to internal developments in social and political organization. Descent throughout the Torres and Banks area in north Vanuatu is wholly matrilineal and the only true descent groups are three phratries in the Torres and moieties in the Banks. Furthermore, because there is no clear pattern of post-marital residence there is also no significant local clustering of either adult male or adult female uterine kin. It is under conditions such as these that I would expect to find alternative forms of political association and it is, I suggest, no accident of history that both the discrete secret societies and the public graded societies are prolific and elaborate throughout this area.

Let me stress in particular the political importance of the secret societies. On the tiny island of Mota in the Banks with a diameter of less than two miles and a population of about 500 persons, Rivers (1914, vol.2:87-129) recorded the existence of no less than 77 secret societies when he visited the community in 1912. Many of these societies had permanent cult buildings in the bush where the members kept their regalia and elaborate head-dresses and where they frequently slept and ate in preference to the village men's house. Each society took great pride in its own unique insignia, masks, dances and tabus and each strove to gain members at the expense of others. Any male of consequence found it imperative to belong to numerous societies—both to advance in the public graded society, and hence aspire to influence and leadership, and as a necessary means of property protection. Though the dynamics of social and political life are sadly lacking from the accounts of Codrington and Rivers, it is nevertheless evident that these societies dominated the political scene in a way they did not do in islands further south. The societies displayed numerous Tammany Hall-style characteristics, including political assassination and general terror tactics. One of the more important of these Banks islands secret societies was that known as *kwat* and a distinguishing feature of the initiation of new members was the manufacture of elaborate head-dresses, also called *kwat*, and their public display in dramatic dances. Other important themes included the use of shark symbolism, a long period of initiatory seclusion, the payment of heavy entrance fees and the employment of hoaxes or ordeals in the treatment accorded to novices.

Elements of the same cultural kitbag are found in islands to the south, but the further one moves away from pure matriliny the less adequately can the accompanying social formations be described as discrete male secret societies. In Chapter 3 I describe secret rites known as *na nggwatu* which were traditionally performed in cognatic west Aoba. Though clearly related to the Banks islands *kwat* rites they are no longer initiations into discrete secret societies but rather dramatic occasions in the political careers of big-men attempting to expand and consolidate their followings. Whereas in the Banks Islands head-dresses associated with spirit beings symbolized the political power of a group of adult male initiates, in west Aoba similar head-dresses formed part of a set of power symbols relevant to big-men polities. Whereas the west Aoba rites were held whenever one or a small group of big-men felt that it would enhance their political careers, in the Banks Islands they were held either when a man of substance wished to gain membership or when a particular society was short of members.

Some 40 miles to the west of Aoba lie the Small Islands off the north-east coast of Malekula and here again elements of the same cultural complex reappear, but now in the context of compulsory male rites of initiation into manhood. That we are in fact dealing with the same cultural tradition is beyond dispute, as recognized by Layard, Rivers and Deacon. Layard, for example, in discussing the Small Island rites devoted a whole section of his account to what he called the *kwat* element, evident most especially in that the rites are called *na bhago* 'the shark', the guardians or initiators are called *to mbat*, which means 'head' while the novices are called *mov ghal* or *moh wal*, variants of the west Aoba word for initiators, *valiu.*

Though the Small Island rites incorporated many details found in the other two areas, the whole emphasis here shifted onto the relationship between, on the one hand, the novices and their guardians, and on the other hand, the initiated men and the uninitiated women. The participants were drawn from a village whose male members represented a single agnatic lineage. The rites were held in each village approximately every six to nine years and the age of the novices ranged from about 4 to 22. At each initiation the youths of one set of alternate generations, those who in the matrilineal area would belong to just one matri-moiety, were

initiated by the men of the other quasi-moiety. But whereas in west Aoba the initiators and the novices related to one another in impersonal category terms, in the Small Islands each novice had his own personal initiator. The different character of the relationship is indicated in that Layard, who witnessed a number of these rites on Vao, chose to refer to the *to mbat* men as guardians or tutors rather than as initiators. Throughout the twelve months of the initiatory period each guardian looked after and cared for his novice, tended his wounds and even shared his beatings. Though no actual homosexual relationship obtained between these two, the tutor on Vao was nevertheless said to be married to the novice and the latter sometimes referred to his tutor as *teme natuk*, one of the terms used by a wife for her husband.

As in west Aoba, many months of preparatory work were devoted to gardening and to building a special initiatory house—though the latter was located at the edge of the village rather than in the bush. Throughout this period, and even more so during the final 30 days seclusion, numerous hoaxes were played on the novices, many of which seemed not unlike those found in west Aoba. But whereas in west Aoba each hoax was arranged by a small group of men who must then be paid substantial amounts by the sponsors, in the Small Islands there were no payments—there were indeed no sponsors. Furthermore, while in west Aoba most of the hoaxes took the form of alarming the novices at the prospect of some future unpleasant experience, like the eating of human flesh, which in fact did not occur, in the Small Islands the novices were first deluded into thinking that something pleasant would happen whereas in fact the truth was quite the opposite. The general impression I get is that in west Aoba the hoaxes made fools of the novices and added to both the prestige and the wealth of sponsors and of daring initiators, but in the Small Islands the stress was rather on the necessity of putting the novices through a number of unpleasant experiences for their own good—either directly as in the case of the incision operation, or indirectly as in the case of the many painful curative rites.

Just as the voluntary exposure of reddened penes by daring initiators was the key event, the event that above all others was thought to generate 'power' in the west Aoba rites, the compulsory incision of young boys' penes had a parallel importance in the Small

Islands (see Chapter 3, pp. 79-80 for a more detailed account of Vao initiation). I would like to stress the many similarities and differences between these two rites. In both the key feature was the exposure of the reddened penis, an act which was deemed to be 'powerful'. But whereas in west Aoba the power of the act (*karai nggwatu*) seemed to lie in its radical departure from normative behaviour, in its 'badness' as my informants put it, in the Small Islands the idiom of power appeared to have more to do with the transformation of weak and effeminate youths into adult males with powerful phalluses. I have interpreted the west Aoba version of penis power as a functional correlate of a polity based on bigmanship—an interpretation that is in conformity with the striking fact that only a few men, men who are not even novices, elect to perform *karai nggwatu*. The Small Islands version, in which all of the boys of a single lineage have their foreskins cut, employs, by contrast, a power idiom appropriate to a polity based on agnatic solidarity and lineage continuity. In order to support this interpretation I will quote at some length from Layard's account:

> ... in the Small Islands the unincised youth is said to be 'only a woman', by which is simply meant 'undifferentiated', and only becomes a 'man' when he is incised and made to suffer every kind of humiliation and is at the same time taught those esoteric secrets which, though in many cases apparently futile in themselves, bring him into direct contact with the ancestral ghosts and, by creating in him a new spiritual life unshared by women, make him into a full member of the tribe.
>
> In this way, the act of incision, together with the accompanying initiation rites, achieves a triple result. In the first place, the undifferentiated youth becomes differentiated from nature by means of the sacrifice performed on his own body. This sacrifice in turn creates in him a new spiritual power having its seat in the glans penis. Thirdly, the glans penis, having through the operation lost its natural protection is provided with a new one. This artificial protection is the plaited penis-wrapper, which ... serves to cover up the exposed glans ....
>
> In a sense therefore, the penis-wrapper may be regarded as a container in which the seat of power is enclosed ... the fundamental reason why the mutilated portion of the body should be so carefully concealed is due to the psychic power gained in return for the

> material sacrifice, a power centred in the mutilated part and to be jealously guarded from view. (1942:479-81)

I would interpret this graphic passage as asserting that previously undifferentiated boys are, by means of ritual acts that are believed to generate power in their penes, transformed into effective male members of solidary lineages. The power in the glans penis thus generated must henceforth be both protected and made dramatically evident by the wearing of penis wrappers—a custom found only amongst those communities which practise either incision or circum-incision.

In my earlier comparative study (Allen 1967) I argued that compulsory male initiations in Melanesia, especially those which included penis operations, are most likely to be found in societies in which the male members of the politically all-important local groups were represented, both internally and externally, as agnatic kin. I furthermore suggested that it was the under-lying structural and ideological differentiation between the sexes that provided much of the dynamic basis for the selection of symbolic acts and their associated meanings. Hence we find the great stress placed on such features as male secrecy, tales told to deceive the women and the use of numerous symbols of male power believed to be generated and controlled in the course of the rites. I also suggested, though I did not perhaps sufficiently develop, the related argument that such a representation of male power has special functional significance in stateless societies where notions of agnatic brotherhood and unilineal descent are the principal bases for group formation and political action.

Let me put this important point in slightly different terms. In much of Melanesia an ideology, which I think can be legitimately described as an agnatic ideology, is made the basis of co-residence and co-operation in a wide range of contexts, especially in warfare, ceremonial exchange and the performance of major rites. Those men who attempt to live, fight and work together express their commonality of interest in terms of supposed brotherhood and common descent through males from an eponymous male ancestor. We have learned to recognize the great flexibility of this ideology—of the way it can permit adaptation to the exigencies of the demographic and political flux. When groups low in numbers seek

new members, outsiders, that is to say non-agnatic kin, are incorporated and turned into agnates in a remarkably short span of time. But an agnatic ideology is not in itself a sufficiently powerful agent for the formation of solidary political units. It is here, I suggest, that the vital significance of male rites of initiation, indeed, of the whole corpus of ritual paraphernalia associated with male cults, can be discerned. Such rites, by the use of symbols that stress the powers both of ancestral ghosts and male sexual and reproductive capability, transform a bunch of youths of diverse social origin into a new generation of agnatic kin.

The public graded society

In approximately the same area of north Vanuatu in which the *kwat* complex occurs there is another prominent institution known in the literature as the public graded society. Wherever this occurs, it consists of a number of ranked grades entry into which is gained by the performance of ritual based on the sacrifice of pigs, the transfer of payments for insignia and services, and the performance of elaborate dances. Members of the various grades are marked off from one another by their exclusive right to certain insignia, titles and ritual privileges. Men who attain the highest rank are believed to acquire or gain access to supernatural powers which they can then utilize in their attempts to control the political aspirations of those beneath them. The more elaborate the hierarchy and the greater the specification of rules and procedure the greater the degree of control the institution gives those at the top. A further important political feature of the institution is that it results in a form of hierarchy based on competitive exchange conducted in conformity with an egalitarian ideology. As P. Blackwood (1981:76) has noted, 'through exchange the graded society divides and differentiates between individual men, but at the same time it bridges divisions between structurally differentiated units of the society and draws men together in general.'

As thus delineated the graded society may be represented as a unique institution in so far as it combines the competitive egalitarian ethic commonly associated with big-man polities with an elaborate form of social hierarchy. Where social stratification occurs elsewhere in Melanesia it is commonly of the ascribed form in

which high status is a correlate of senior position within a ranked descent group. But in all versions of the graded society, even in those in which hereditary considerations influence the recruitment of top title holders, achievement in a competitive context is a prerequisite for success. One may therefore say that the presence of this institution is such as to encourage the formation of political ties that are partly freed from the constraints of kinship. However, the extent of this freedom varies greatly from area to area—with the greatest degree found in conjunction with matrilineal descent systems and the least with those that most fully conform to the agnatic model. I do not intend here to conduct a detailed comparative analysis but would rather refer you once again to Blackwood's (1981) paper. I will substantiate my point in a schematic way by contrasting two areas—the strongly matrilineal districts of east Aoba and the quasi-agnatic Small Islanders.

The population of east Aoba is divided into a large number of named and exogamous matrilineal clans grouped into a pair of named and exogamous matri-moieties. Both the clans and the moieties are widely dispersed and hence instead of providing a possible ideological basis for local group solidarity they act in a contrary manner both by internally dividing local groups and by providing a structural basis for the proliferation of inter-community political connections. East Aoba is indeed striking in its absence of nucleated and politically effective local groups. Though homesteads tend to form small clusters in the vicinity of ceremonial grounds, alliances between clusters are constantly shifting, individuals frequently maintain two or more households in different localities and individual rights to property are more highly developed than elsewhere in north Vanuatu.

Unlike the Banks and Torres islands, there were no discrete male secret societies but rather analogous rites performed for the glorification of big-men. Indeed, east Aoba was, and still is, a classic big-man political system in which outstanding leaders draw followers and hold them primarily by their charisma. But despite a statistical preference for patrivirilocal residence and patrilineal inheritance of land rights, the above mentioned contrary features inhibit the emergence of solidary agnatic lineages. As might be expected, there are therefore no male rites of initiation into

manhood. I would like to argue that the absence both of discrete secret societies and of agnatically structured local communities accounts for the exceptional political importance and elaboration of the public graded society in this community. As a hierarchy of graded positions in which membership of the top grades greatly increases the political effectiveness of leaders, the east Aoba version is more elaborate and more resistant to change than its counterparts elsewhere in north Vanuatu. Again, by comparison with other versions, the east Aoba emphasis is on individual status differentiation rather than the formation of a limited number of discrete strata. Though each grade-taking ceremony is a major social occasion involving large numbers of participants from numerous localities, the key events focus on a few leading individuals, in particular the man who takes the grade and his chief sponsor. Other participants, especially donors or suppliers of services or insignia, are related to the grade-taker in a variety of ways either as fellow clansmen, neighbours, more remote kin or affines, neighbours or simply exchange partners.

The movement of individuals through the grades is primarily based on achievement in a competitive entrepreneurial context and is only in relatively minor ways influenced by ascriptive consideration. Though a high-ranking father or mothers' brother may speed a boy through the lower ranks the requirements for entry into the higher grades are such that additional and wider support are necessary. Put in slightly different terms, one could say that though kinship status plays a significant part in the acquisition of low titles, for the higher, the actions of title-takers, sponsors and donors are only marginally influenced by kinship considerations. The rule whereby a man aspiring to a given grade must find a sponsor of that grade or higher ensures that those near the top of the hierarchy must calculate their chances in political rather than in kinship terms. One could therefore describe the east Aoba version of the public graded society as a highly institutionalized context for the selection and legitimation of big-men and for the formation of predominantly personal networks of followers and supporters. It is therefore noteworthy that the public graded society continues to occupy a more prominent place in the social, political and economic life of east Aoba than elsewhere in north Vanuatu.

If I might indulge briefly in a piece of conjectural history, I think that there are some grounds for contending that a version of the public graded society, possibly not unlike that in east Aoba, first appeared in a matrilineal area with dispersed exogamous clans, but without discrete secret societies. Such a conjecture is certainly in accord with a number of east Aoba beliefs concerning the past—in particular the well formulated notion that both the matri-clans and the graded society were introduced into east Aoba by the sky-dwelling creator deity Takaro. Prior to this event east Aoba was said to have been a place of endemic warfare between localities and no one could travel safely from place to place. The clans had the effect of regulating marriage and in providing widespread kinship links that could be used for political and other purposes. The graded society is particularly associated with the concept of *tamwata*, meaning peacefulness or quietness, as against *vuro*, meaning war or fighting. *Vuro* most typically took place between discrete and solidary local groups, whereas successful participation in the graded society depended on the maintenance of widespread networks of intercommunity indebtedness, exchange and sponsorship. Warfare between localities is, as I argued earlier, most likely to occur in the quasi-agnatic type of society—a consideration which raises the interesting possibility that matrilineal descent may have succeeded rather than preceded patriliny in the history of east Aoba. The clans, having necessarily weakened the earlier agnatic war-making groups, created conditions favourable for the internal development of a status hierarchy based on achievement.

If I am correct in seeing the graded-society complex as having initially developed in matrilineal communities it then becomes a matter of some interest to explain its presence in the quasi-agnatic western islands of Malekula (including the offshore Small Islands), Ambrym and Epi. One preliminary and partly supportive point to note is that whereas in the matrilineal area the institution in question is mostly known by a variant of the word *hukwe* (*sukwe, hungwe, sungwe*, etc.) in the western islands it is known by a variant of a quite different word *manke* (*mannge, maki, mage,* etc.). It is also worth noting that while in east Aoba the institution is ascribed a divine origin, in the western islands it is commonly regarded as having diffused historically from some neighbouring community.

Though such diffusion seems to have taken place at least many hundreds of years ago throughout Malekula, elsewhere, introduction is a more recent historic event (see Patterson 1981:192 and Tonkinson 1981:241).

There is, therefore, some evidence to suggest that the public graded society has only fairly recently diffused from those matrilineal areas in which it originated to the more strongly agnatic islands to the west. But just as the secret societies were transformed in the agnatic areas into compulsory male rites of initiation, so too has the public graded society adapted itself to the political life of a society structured in conformity with lineage solidarity. This is especially so in the Small Islands where the *maki*, instead of providing a finely calibrated hierarchy of status positions relevant to a competitive big-man type polity, operates rather as a group affair in which the two 'halves' of an agnatically structured village alternately initiate one another *en bloc* into two main grades—the low and the high *maki.* Though the diacritical ritual act in east Aoba and in the Small Islands is the same—the slaughter of tusked pigs on a ceremonial ground accompanied by the acquisition of titles and insignia and succeeded by the eating of sacred food, in east Aoba only one man kills the pigs, assumes the title and insignia and eats sacred food prepared by his sponsors, whereas in the Small Islands half the men of the locality enter the grade and the other half act as sponsors. Furthermore, though the similar ritual acts in the two communities are performed for an identical purpose—the acquisition of ritual powers that are relevant both for political purposes and for achieving a desired goal after death, in east Aoba the powers thus acquired are of a kind deemed likely to give legitimacy to an individual's attempt to exercise authority over others, whereas in the Small Islands the powers are thought to contribute to the collective needs of the community by establishing links between the living and dead members of agnatic lineages.

The difference between the two versions of the institution is perhaps most apparent in the context of kinship. Whereas the east Aoba grade-taker increasingly frees himself from the restraints of kinship the further he climbs the hierarchy, in the Small Islands almost all of the roles and relationships generated in a grade-taking ceremony are strictly defined in kinship terms. To be more specific,

in east Aoba there are some 16 main grades and in addition a number of optional and supernumerary ones. From this it necessarily follows that when a man approaches the apex of the hierarchy there may be only a handful of men in the whole of east Aoba of sufficiently high rank to act as his sponsor and to provide various ritual services. Such men may or may not be kinsmen or neighbours—it is immaterial in terms of the rules of the game. In a similar manner, no direct or specific kinship considerations determine a grade-taker's network of pig donors and other relevant exchange partners. Obviously kin connections provide a useful base to build upon, but it is especially a future or established big-man who seeks partners at the outer limits of or at times even beyond the parameters of either kinship or propinquity. Finally, the company of men who perform the important accompanying dances are selected on the basis of availability, reputation and willingness—with kinship a matter of little or no import. In the Small Islands everything is the reverse—there are only two main grades and sponsors and title-takers are related to one another as alternate generations of co-resident male agnates. Important individual roles are mostly filled by reference to kinship status and dance groups are recruited from villages linked to the host village by formal ties of kinship or affinity. Though there are a few supernumerary titles taken by individuals seeking increased authority, most of such men take the titles in order to legitimate a position already defined by reference to kinship seniority, rather than to give ideological substance to achieved rank.

North Ambrym is of special comparative interest for here one finds a social structure almost identical to that of the Small Islands, but a variant of the Malekula public graded society that was imported only about 200 years ago. As might perhaps be expected, the dynamics of the institution are somewhat further removed from the concerns of kinship than in the Small Islands. Patterson (1981) has provided a detailed analysis of the political implications of the dual presence of indigenous kinship-based rituals with power connotations and imported *mage* rites. In the first set of rites participants seek to tap powers that are rooted in the fabric of the kinship system, most especially those associated with the ontological nature of women, whereas in the second the emphasis is

on the transformation of such powers into the political context of achieved status and competitive leadership.

The position in south-east Ambrym (Tonkinson 1981) is even more striking for it seems that the public graded society only reached this area immediately prior to European contact. It is therefore no surprise to find that it almost immediately collapsed leaving in its stead a predominantly ascriptive form of leadership predicated on lineage seniority rather than on competitive bigmanship.

Kinship idiom and political evolution

I would like now to briefly recapitulate my argument concerning matrilineal kinship and in so doing stress its implications for the political evolution of pre-state horticultural societies.

I have argued, in a manner not unlike that of some of the early evolutionary theorists that the dramatic visibility of female reproductivity must have provided at a very early stage in the evolution of human society a natural model for the conceptualization of social inter-relatedness. In addition to childbirth itself, menstruation, pregnancy and lactation are all exclusively female physiological processes indispensable for the perpetuation of the species. By comparison, the male contribution to reproduction is always inferential, sometimes unknown, seldom adequately comprehended and never dramatic. It is for this simple reason that I am tempted to hypothesize the priority of matriliny in the evolution of social institutions based on the idiom of kinship.

Yet again following the hints of my predecessors I have stressed the dysfunctional features of matrilineal kinship, especially when as a descent ideology it is extended into the sphere of political action. The natural and obvious features of female reproductivity limit the extent to which matrilineal descent groups can adapt to the exigencies and flux of the political process. I would suggest that the limitations inherent in pure matriliny most probably became sufficiently acute to stimulate the development of alternate political ideologies when horticulture began to replace hunting and gathering. The resultant increase in population, together with the increased productive value of land, almost certainly led to a corresponding increase in the political importance of solidary

groups of co-resident males capable of defending their valuable property. Such groups need to be so structured as to readily adapt to the fortunes of war, migration and demographic variability, and hence if common kinship is to continue to be used as the idiom of unity and solidarity it must necessarily be more flexible than pure matriliny. One possible evolutionary response was the development of what I term the agnatic model for male solidarity and political cohesion, another was the retention of matriliny for the reckoning of kin-group membership, but accompanied by the emergence of alternative and substantially kinship-free forms of political association, in particular rudimentary forms of social stratification and voluntary political associations, especially male secret societies.

Of these alternatives the matrilineal, because it directly stimulated the emergence of autonomous political institutions, must be regarded as having the greatest evolutionary consequences for the future formation of rudimentary state-type polities. The agnatic development, simply because it provided such an effective kinship model for the formation of political units from the village to the tribal level, was less likely to stimulate the development of alternative political structures.

It is, not, however, the possible evolutionary implications of my analysis that I wish to stress but rather that throughout Vanuatu, and most probably in all pre-state societies with a horticultural economy, matrilineal kinship may not only have historical priority over its agnatic counterpart, but continues today to be regarded as the most true or incontrovertible form of kinship connection. There is, I believe a great deal of evidence to support the contention that in all of the islands of Vanuatu for which we have adequate data, the people most readily think of kinship as a matter of women giving birth to children and thereby generating 'lines' of descendants that spread from community to community. In predominantly agnatic north Ambrym as much as in matrilineal east Aoba or Nguna, the kin who can be most relied upon for succour, support and protection are those linked through a succession of wombs and vaginal passages. In some fundamental ontological way 'real' kinship is uterine kinship and all other consanguineal and affinal connections are of a secondary or derivative kind. The 'real' kin are such because they are generated by the natural reproductivity of

women—the others have reality only in the less certain context of cultural creativity. Let me repeat here this central point—I am asserting that throughout Vanuatu, including those communities seemingly most fully committed to the agnatic ideology, 'real' kinship is still defined by reference to people's beliefs regarding menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and lactation. In those societies overtly structured in conformity with matrilineal principles the process is quite straightforward—here the natural model of female sexuality and reproductivity is directly incorporated into the cultural definition of kin group membership and primary kinship identification. But in those societies that have opted for the agnatic model, the process is necessarily less direct and of a more subtle kind.

In most communities with socially important kin groups of the agnatic type it is probable that one will also find a parallel theory of primary kinship relatedness based on an elaboration of beliefs concerning the reproductive power of men rather than women. For example, in Malekula, the Small Islands, north Ambrym and south-east Pentecost a great deal of cultural elaboration focuses on the penis and the semen that it ejaculates. In each of these strongly agnatic areas male novices at compulsory rites of initiation have their penes operated on and all initiated males wear impressive penis wrappers. As Patterson (1976:281) notes of the north Ambrymese 'a man's power resides principally in his penis which a woman may not touch and should not even see during intercourse.'

Now one might well imagine that in such beliefs and in others focusing on semen, one has evidence of an independent male alternative to the natural model of female reproductivity that underpins the social recognition of uterine kinship. I would like to suggest that in north Vanuatu, and most probably throughout Melanesia, any such assertion of independence would be a serious misrepresentation of indigenous beliefs. In each of the three agnatic areas mentioned above there is abundant evidence to support the assertion that the reproductive powers believed to reside in the penis and in semen are themselves directly modelled on the natural reproductive powers of women. It is most especially in the context of the compulsory male rites of initiation that the novices symbolically identify with women and their reproductive powers. As

the 'wives' of their initiators they have their penes cut so that the reddened glans are exposed in a manner clearly modelled on female genitalia, they are subsequently secluded for the same period required for a woman after childbirth, and they finally emerge in public with their seemingly huge penes wrapped in bark so as to conceal the secret of their 'male' strength. That is to say, the natural reproductive power of women, which in the matrilineal societies is directly used as both the fact and the idiom of kin-group recruitment, is in the quasi-agnatic context transformed into an ideology both of male strength and of male contribution to the reproduction of the social system. The powers that men tap in their rites enable them to transform each new generation of boys of diverse social origins into a cohesive and solidary group of adult males capable both of fertilizing their women and defending the community against outside aggression. It is for this reason that one repeatedly finds in those Melanesian societies that most fully conform to the agnatic model, male cults in which such symbolic themes as menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth figure so prominently. It is only in a relatively few societies that the agnatic theme is taken to such an extreme that the natural model for primary kinship shifts from the female to the male role in procreation. For example, in the Small Islands and in much of Malekula ritualized homosexuality plays a significant though not dominant role in compulsory male initiations. There is good evidence that the penis, especially its head, and male semen, are here regarded as natural manifestations of male sexual power and hence vital in ensuring the reproductive success of men.

But amongst the Big Nambas, where patriliny is taken to a greater extreme than anywhere else on Malekula, male homosexuality has assumed such importance that it extends beyond the ritual confines of initiation to a much more pervasive and long-lasting aspect of male social relations. As might be expected, the Big Nambas are the wearers of the largest penis wrappers in Vanuatu. It would seem that the penis has here substantially replaced the womb and the vagina as the idioms of human reproductive power—a power that in both instances is transformed via the ritual context into a political ideology that legitimates leadership and dominance. But this is a topic that I explore in greater detail in the next chapter.

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