

# 1 Rank and Leadership in Nduindui, Northern New Hebrides

THE IDEAL MODEL of the Melanesian big-man system of leadership is now well established in anthropological literature and has figured prominently in a number of theoretical and descriptive studies. The defining characteristic of the model is that such structural prerequisites as age, generation or either kin or local group membership are of minimal importance in the selection of leaders and in the definition of authority, 'The attainment of big-man status is rather the outcome of a series of acts which elevate a person above the common herd and attract about him a coterie of loyal, lesser men' (Sahlins 1963:291). The kind and degree of authority achieved by such leaders is directly dependent on their individual ability to create dependants and attract followers; and they do this in the competitive context of exchange transactions, oratory, warfare, sorcery etc. The personal qualities required of a leader are of such a kind that the great majority of men possess them, though in varying degrees. The result is a diffuse and competitive system of leadership in which important policy decisions are arrived at in public meetings in which all of the adult men of the community participate. The big man is little more than the '*primus inter pares*'. Though it may be asserted with some confidence that the majority of Melanesian leadership systems

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approximate to this model, it must also be noted that the emphasis placed on egalitarianism and personal achievement is everywhere restricted to at least some degree by such formal considerations as marital status, age, seniority and relative group size and strength. But in the most typical big-man societies, factors such as the above operate as tactical advantages rather than as structural prerequisites. The processes of leadership recruitment, though perhaps favouring the occupants of particular status categories, do not exclude the possibility of recruitment from other less favoured categories.

There are, however, a number of Melanesian societies in which structural prerequisites result in somewhat greater deviation from the simple big-man model. I refer especially to those societies in which leadership is formally restricted by hereditary criteria. Most commonly this takes the simple form of hereditary succession to office, though occasionally it operates in conjunction with a more generalized form of social stratification. The most usual offices are village or lineage headmen, though sometimes there may also be such specialists as war leaders or ritual experts<sup>1</sup>. But even where such offices exist, as amongst the Wogeo islanders in the Schouten group (Hogbin 1935, 1970), the Koita, Roro and Mekeo of South-East Papua (Seligman 1910; Hau'ofa 1971), the Purari of the Gulf of Papua (Williams 1924; Maher 1961), the South-East Solomon Islands (Ivens 1927; Fox 1924) and the central New Hebrides (Guiart 1963), the kind and degree of authority exercised by the incumbents is at least as much a reflection of their own personal achievements as of the formal positions they occupy. An hereditary leader (*kokwal*) in Wogeo inherits the right to exercise authority

<sup>1</sup> Since I first wrote this article Godelier (1982) has identified yet another important variety of Melanesian leadership which he termed the 'great-man' configuration, found most notably in the south-eastern highlands of Papua New Guinea, though no doubt elsewhere also. Great men are those who attain eminence in specific spheres of life, such as warfare, hunting or shamanism, but like their hereditary counterparts and unlike big men, they 'have no "supralocal" political power or prestige, nor do they symbolise the wider political relations in society' (Feil 1987:103). Also, unlike the big-man type ritual experts found in north Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides) which I will shortly describe, Godelier's great men do not attain their eminence on the basis of their entrepreneurial skill in complex inter-local exchange systems. They are, by contrast, 'highly parochial, essentially localised' (1987:103) leaders.

solely within his own localized descent group. Such groups seldom exceed about 50 persons and usually consist of just one half of a single village. But some *kokwals* exercise authority over much larger groups; perhaps even a number of neighbouring villages. Such men achieve their authority in the same manner as big men elsewhere in Melanesia. 'A *kokwal* who has energy, ability and that indefinable quality personality is respected and enjoys a great deal of power ... Prestige is maintained by feasts and distribution of food on certain occasions.. .' (Hogbin 1935:319). The inheritance of a *kokwal* title puts a man in the race for power and authority; to become a true leader he must attract followers through the successful demonstration of superior abilities. Furthermore, though succession to office is ideally conceived of in hereditary terms, various stratagems are employed to avoid the selection of inadequate office-holders.

In a few areas, notably the Trobriand islands (Malinowski 1922) and to a lesser extent in north Bougainville (Blackwood 1935), the South-East Solomon Islands and Manam island in the Schouten group (Wedgwood 1934), the hereditary principle is taken a stage further through the formal ranking of unilineal descent groups. Most commonly this takes the simple dualistic form of low and high ranking clans or lineages, though in the Trobriands the principle of differential rank is somewhat more elaborate and extensive than that found elsewhere in Melanesia. But even in the Trobriands the political units are still small in scale, the social strata are not sharply differentiated from one another and office confers only limited authority. Both Powell (1960) and Uberoi (1962) have convincingly demonstrated the underlying similarities between the indigenous Trobriand political system and the more usual Melanesian big-man pattern.

In both Wogeo and the Trobriands formal structural principles—hereditary succession to office and hereditary transmission of rank—impose only relatively minor limitations on otherwise basically competitive big-man systems of leadership. Office confers but little authority and rank simply limits the arena of competitive action.

In this chapter I describe and analyse an example of yet another and quite different form of deviation from the simple big-man model. Throughout the Banks, Torres and northern New Hebrides

islands as far south as Epi there existed in the past, and still exists today in some areas, an elaborate status hierarchy commonly referred to in the literature as 'the graded society complex'. Though there are considerable local variations both in form and in content, the institution everywhere exhibits a number of features in common. Within each area of uniformity, men, and in a few areas women also, are accorded differential status by reference to the positions they occupy in a formal hierarchy of ranked grades. Hence, like the Trobriands, social stratification provides a structural modification of the egalitarian component of the big-man model. But unlike the Trobriands, rank is achieved rather than ascribed. Even in those few areas, notably amongst the Big Nambas in north Malekula (Deacon, 1934; Guiart, 1950-1) and possibly also in north Raga (Lane, 1962), where the highest ranks are reserved for the members of particular kin groups, only those members of such groups who perform specified rituals can in fact assume rank. Elsewhere, no formal structural considerations, whether based on age, seniority or heredity, seriously restrict the processes of rank recruitment and distribution. Those men who are fortunate enough to have high-ranking fathers or other close kinsmen may start with an initial advantage by moving rapidly through the lower grades. But the requirements for entry into the higher grades are of such a kind that only those with great personal ability succeed in gaining entry.

High rank can only be acquired by those men who possess personal attributes of a kind similar to those possessed by big-man type leaders found elsewhere in Melanesia. They must be good orators, industrious, consistently successful in whatever they undertake, and above all highly skilled entrepreneurs. But whereas in the typical big-man society there is a striking absence of culturally specified gradations of achievement, in the northern New Hebrides each individual male occupies a precisely specified position within a complex hierarchy of named grades each with its own entrance requirements, insignia and privileges. Furthermore, whereas the typical big man achieves his position in a relatively unstructured context of competitive action, in the northern New Hebrides he must learn to exercise his entrepreneurial and other abilities within a highly specified framework of exchanges, payments and ritual performances.

My central concern is to examine some of the implications of such a hierarchy for the way in which authority is acquired and exercised. I am most especially concerned with the complex problem of just what kind of relationship obtains between rank, as defined by graded society criteria, and leadership. For example, when an individual assumes the various titles, insignia and privileges associated with a high grade, should this be interpreted as little more than a formal recognition of the degree and kind of authority he has already achieved in otherwise typical big-man type contexts (exchange transactions, oratory, sorcery etc.), or does entry into the grade in itself confer additional authority specifically associated with the formal position he now occupies in the status hierarchy? I hope to demonstrate that the latter is indeed the case, but that predictably such authority does not amount to very much. In other words, men of high grade who no longer excel in typical big-man contexts sink into relative obscurity, though perhaps less rapidly than their counterparts in most other areas of Melanesia. High-grade membership provides a structural bulwark that ensures the probability of continuing authority in at least some specified contexts.

A considerable body of literature exists on the graded societies, and though the best accounts, such as Layard's (1928, 1942) on the *makia* of the Small Islands and Deacon's (1934) on the *nimanghki* of Malekula, provide a fund of detail on the ritual and mythology associated with grade-taking ceremonies, relatively little published material is available on the political aspects of the institution. Neither of these authors nor earlier writers such as Codrington (1891) and Rivers (1914) provide us with the kind of information necessary to relate the formal structure of ranks and titles to the actual distribution of power and authority.

My own fieldwork was carried out between 1958 and 1961 and again briefly in 1969 and 1980 on Aoba<sup>2</sup>. The island (which is about

<sup>2</sup> In 1981, with the gaining of independence, the former French/British colony of the New Hebrides was renamed Vanuatu, whilst the island on which I worked was changed from Aoba to Ambae. Because this paper was first published in 1972 I have decided to retain the names as they originally appeared. The 1959-61 research was jointly financed by the Australian National University and the Colonial Social Science Research Council. The 1969 and 1981 visits were funded by the Australian Research Grants Commission.

25 miles in length from east to west and about eight miles from north to south at its broadest point in the centre) has a total population of approximately 6,000 persons. Culturally, linguistically and socially the people are divided into two major communities, the Mwerambeo who inhabit the north-west corner, and the Mweraulu who are more widely distributed along the north, east and south coasts. Within each side of the island there is a high degree of linguistic and cultural uniformity, most especially amongst the Mwerambeo, whereas between the two communities there are numerous and important differences.

The great bulk of my fieldwork was carried out in Nduindui district, west Aoba, and hence my analysis is primarily based on data acquired in this area. From the point of view of the present paper this is hardly an auspicious circumstance since Nduindui is amongst the least traditional of New Hebridean communities. The subsistence economy has been largely replaced by cash-cropping for a good thirty years (Allen 1968), the great bulk of the population has been converted to Christianity for even longer, and the last grade-taking ceremony was performed a few years prior to my first visit. However, despite these serious handicaps I was able to gather a considerable quantity of data from a wide range of informants, who had not only witnessed ceremonies but had themselves directly participated as sponsors, donors or rank-takers. Furthermore, I was fortunate enough to attend a number of grade-taking ceremonies in east Aoba districts where the institution continues to function vigorously.<sup>3</sup> Though there are many important differences between the east and west Aoba versions of the *hungwe*, the similarities,

<sup>3</sup> Bill and Margaret Rodman, then students of the University of Chicago, spent the whole of 1970 investigating the *hungwe* (*huqe*) of Longana district, East Aoba. However, their important publications were not available until after I had written this article. See especially Rodman, W. (1973 and 1977) and Rodman, M. (1981 and 1987). Though the *hungwe* was nowhere practised in west Aoba during my early (1959-61) fieldwork, nevertheless in describing the institution I use the present tense for two reasons; the continuing importance of the institution in east Aoba and a partial revival in some Nduindui parishes in the post-independence period. In 1981 I had the good fortune to attend one such ceremony in the inland parish of Nataluhangele. It was most especially followers of the Nagriamel movement who were self-consciously seeking to revive '*kastom*'.

especially as regards form rather than content, are sufficiently numerous and important to have resulted in much illumination—especially in assessing such matters as authority, status and leadership. I might add that on each occasion on which I visited east Aoba I was accompanied by Nduindui informants who took great delight in specifically pointing out both the similarities and differences between the two versions of the institution.

My procedure will be first to provide some basic descriptive material regarding the more formal aspects of the *hungwe*—the number and kinds of grades, the essential procedures whereby grades are acquired and an outline of the main sequence of events culminating in grade entry. I will then concentrate on those aspects of the institution already indicated—its implications for leadership and the exercise of authority.

### *Hungwe*

The Nduindui use the term *hungwe* in a number of different contexts; a man is said to make a *hungwe*, to have a *hungwe* name or title, and to himself be a *hungwe*. There are numerous different ways in which a *hungwe* can be made, though in each the distinguishing features consist of the ritual killing of a number of animals, typically though not exclusively pigs, the purchase of various insignia, the eating of sacred food cooked in a special oven, the drinking of kava, and the assumption of a formal title together with various associated privileges.

There are three basic rules whereby this elaborate status game must be played. First, each participant is formally required to begin at the bottom of a broadly agreed upon hierarchy of *hungwe* performances, each of which is progressively more complex, expensive and prestigious than that which precedes it. Secondly, for each grade the participant is required to carry out a long sequence of actions that are, at least in theory, immutable and based on precedence, though in fact subject to some variation. Any significant departure from the formal requirements must first meet with the approval of the senior men present. A third and most important rule is that entrance into a given grade is dependent on the aspirant finding at least one and usually a number of men of the aspired to or higher grade who are prepared to support him in various ways. Most

importantly, he must find at least one such man who will act as his formal sponsor, who will ceremonially 'lead' him into the grade, and sell him the necessary insignia. For most grades, however, he must find a considerable number of such men who between them carry out a whole range of services. The greater the number of high-ranking men recruited for such tasks the greater the resultant prestige.

The Nduindui regard three titles as of special importance. There are, they say three principal ways in which a man can make his *hungwe*; the *moli*, the *levuhi* and the *vira* ways, and each of these should first be made in the *hehe* and then in the *hakwa* manner. A man who has completed the full cycle of ceremonies culminating in *hehe moli* is said to be a *hungwe* of the *moli* kind who has reached *hehe moli*. There are thus six principal stages in the hierarchy (see Table 1), each of which I term a grade, grouped into three broader status categories which I term ranks. There are also a number of less clearly differentiated grades which include some prescribed rituals which precede *hehe moli*, yet others which may occur at intermediary stages, and a number of supernumerary grades that may be taken after *hakwa vira*. Each of these additional grades, though of importance from the point of view of individual status differentiation, nevertheless all fall within the formal triple distinction between *moli*, *levuhi* and *vira*. For example, a man who has completed the full cycle of ceremonies up to *hakwa vira* may decide to repeat the *hehe moli* ceremony. Such a man is said to be a *vira* man who has reached the exalted grade of *hehe moli bakarua* (literally 'hehe moli twice').

Informants commonly refer to the whole *hungwe* complex as a 'road' (*hala*) that closes in a circle and which a man should traverse three times in order to become a full or complete *Hungwe*, to merit the title of *Hungwe Lakua* (*Hungwe* big). The young boy begins his long journey when he is formally launched into the *moli* cycle with the sacrifice of a single tusked boar. When he reaches *hakwa moli* he is said to have closed his first *hungwe*. He is a true *Hungwe* but may be distinguished from the *Levuhi* and *Vira* men as a *Hungwe Kelekele* (*Hungwe* small). Then he may begin again with *levuhi* until it too is closed with the *hakwa levuhi* performance. If there are no *Vira* men in his parish he will almost certainly be said to be a

*Hungwe Lakua*. Finally, he moves into the company of the truly exalted by entering upon and perhaps closing the *vira* road.

I cannot, of course, provide a quantitative breakdown of the population in terms of grades held, though I gained some indications from genealogies and informants' memories. It seems clear that *vira* men were rare indeed, probably never more than about half-a-dozen

TABLE 1 Nduindui *hungwe* grades

Rank	Grade	Animals killed
Pre- <i>moli</i>	<i>hehe toa</i>	Ten fowl.
	<i>hehe ngwanungwanu</i>	One tusked boar.
<i>moli</i>	<i>hehe moli</i>	Ten tusked boars,
	( <i>hehe livo hangavulu</i> )	at least 3 <i>livo</i> *grade.
	<i>vihage mwele hangavulu</i>	Payment of ten pigs.
	<i>hakwa moli</i>	Ten sows.
<i>levuhi</i>	<i>hehe levuhi</i>	Ten tusked boars,
	( <i>hehe mambu hangavulu</i> )	at least 3 <i>mambu</i> grade.
	<i>yihage mwele hangavulu</i>	Payment of ten pigs.
	<i>hakwa levuhi</i>	Ten sows.
<i>vira</i>	<i>hehe vira</i>	Ten tusked boars or hermaphrodites, at least 3 <i>ala</i> grade.
	<i>vihage mwele hangavulu</i>	Payment of ten pigs.
	<i>hakwa vira</i>	Large number of sows and castrated pigs, preferably 100.

\* In Nduindui, as elsewhere in the northern New Hebrides, tusks were trained to curve backwards so that they pierced the cheeks, penetrated the lower jaw (*livo*) and finally reappeared a second time outside the cheek to complete a full circle (*ala*). A full-circle tusker (*ala*) was regarded as the perfect sacrificial animal. A boar of *mambu* grade was just short of the full-circle.

in the whole district of some 2,000 persons, or approximately one to every four or five parishes. *Levuhi* men were much more numerous, perhaps one or two to most parishes, or thirty to forty in the district. The *moli* grade would have included the great majority of remaining adult men together with many of the male children of *levuhi* and *vira* men. Just how many men never made any kind of *hungwe* at all I found hardest to estimate, though certainly they would have been very few, possibly only imbeciles or the seriously handicapped. Almost all boys were sponsored by their fathers for the preliminary *hehe tea*, and the first minor grade of *hehe ngwanungwanu*. This was ensured through the belief that a man who died without having killed at least one tusked boar would never enter the abode of the dead but instead wander endlessly as an unhappy and dangerous ghost in the vicinity of his village.

I will now give a brief outline of the formal sequence of events leading up to and culminating in the assumption of the *hakwa moli* grade. I will take a hypothetical individual whose father has sponsored him through a number of minor preliminary ceremonies when still a child—in other words he has already ‘opened the road’ by killing ten fowl and at a later date one tusked boar. He has begun his *moli* but not yet become a *hungwe* by performing either *hehe* or *hakwa moli*.

His first task will be to find a man of *hehe moli* grade or higher who will act as his formal sponsor, who will literally sell him the grade. In finding such a man he is not bound by any formal rules of kinship, co-residence or whatever—any willing member of the appropriate grade will do. A potential sponsor must take a number of factors into consideration. On the positive side, he would gain through the heavy payments that must be made for his services, and through the opportunity to take a prominent role in a spectacular ceremony. But if the sponsor should be of humble rank, he will be very cautious. Others of higher rank may either resent his presumption, or for a variety of personal reasons, perhaps a quarrel with the title-taker or some close kinsman of the latter, wish to see the attempt fail. Hence low-grade men are most unlikely to take on the role of sponsor without having first gained the consent of those of higher rank whom they deem relevant to their own ambitions. If a prospective grade-taker fails to gain the support of his village

leaders, his prospects are likely to be bleak. But if determined he may find some other high-ranking man elsewhere in the district who for any one of a variety of reasons may be prepared to sponsor him. Such complications are, however, comparatively rare. I mention them because they provide some indication of both the extent and the limits of the controls that can be exercised by the top ranker within a given community. If he regularly frustrates the ambitions of his followers he will risk desertion—an empty men's house and a weak village. Ambitious men are constantly on the lookout for disgruntled juniors seeking support outside their own villages.

Having found a sponsor the young man must set about building up the much more extensive basis of support that he will need in order to stage the *hehe moli* ceremony. If his sponsor is a leading man his battle is half won, for the former is likely to make available many of the things needed, especially a ceremonial ground (*sara*), a slit-gong orchestra (*tingi-tingi*), and a men's house (*vale*). If not, then he must acquire the use of such facilities through the payment of substantial quantities of mats and pigs. By far the most important items that he will need are a number of pigs to be killed on the big day itself; for the three major *hehe* ceremonies they must be ten tusked boars or hermaphrodites and for *hakwa* ceremonies either sows or castrated boars. For *hehe moli* there should be ten boars at least three of which should be of *livo* grade. In theory he could supply all of these from his own or his wife's herd, but in practice he will gain greater prestige if he can provide one fine tusker and persuade a number of other men to supply the rest. Since each of these men will have to be repaid with a similar pig plus one or more lesser pigs and mats, the amount depending on the length of time that lapses before repayment, this prestigious method of getting his sacrificial animals is most costly. The making of these arrangements can be difficult and may take a considerable length of time. He may lend out young pigs to other men to tend until they have reached the appropriate stage; he may donate a medium-grade pig to another man either for *hungwe*, death, marriage or some other major event, and hope to extract a higher grade animal when he subsequently needs it. In each case long-range calculations and assessments are vital. Whatever the method employed he must, before firmly committing himself to his *hehe moli*, ensure as well as he can that

the requisite number of pigs of right grade will indeed be available. This requires considerable entrepreneurial abilities.

The grade-taker must ensure that someone of *hehe moli* grade or higher will be prepared to provide him with the various insignia of rank he must wear on the sacrificial day. Most commonly this will be done by his sponsor, though it may be someone else. Heavy payments are needed—thus for *hehe moli* he must pay one tusker of *kwari* grade (with visible tusk) for each of the following: an apron worn from waist to knees with *hehe moli* design (*matai talai*); a leaf of the croton variety worn on the small of the back (*kwari hangavulu*); four parrot feathers (*vului sivi*) for the head; arm band (*buku*); and red paint (*uli*) for face and chest.

On top of all this he will require a large stock of less valuable pigs, a big supply of mats and much vegetable produce in order to pay for many additional services. These include the planting of cycas stakes (*mwele*) on which the pigs are killed, the making of the sacred oven (*matakambu kokona*), the playing of slit gongs, the tending of his tusked boars by his wife or other female relative, the making of kava, the performance of dances, the eating of sacred food in the *vale*. The higher the grade the more numerous are the services and the higher the payments.

Some of the items required come from his own gardens, from the industry of his wife and from close kin. Others will be presented to him on the day itself, by those cancelling past debts, or by those who choose to initiate a new relationship by investing directly in his ceremony. The ability to manipulate this whole complex network of debt and counter-debt is indeed the prime criterion for success in the *hungwe*—and it is this feature that most firmly relates the *hungwe* to the big-man system of leadership. Because no man can be sure just how much he can raise in this manner on a given day he is certain to indulge in intensive lobbying to extract as many firm promises as possible. He may hold a formal dance and song festival at which he attempts to persuade his guests to make some kind of commitment. But even after such an event, he may be so uncertain of support that he performs a magic rite designed to draw his wavering backers. It would be extremely humiliating to arrange and publicize a grade-taking ceremony to find that insufficient donors or pigs or other vital items have turned up. Though this seems to happen rarely, many

men nevertheless get less support than they would have wished for. Evidence from east Aoba also makes it clear that it quite often occurs that a man has to cancel a ceremony through last-minute withdrawal of support.

When the title-taker deems that he has made all preparations to his satisfaction he announces the forthcoming event with set slit-gong beats performed every day for a stipulated period. The main day, that on which he kills the pigs, may open early in the morning with formal dances staged by neighbouring villages. Throughout such performances the title-taker dances around the company in the hawk-style holding aloft bows and arrows in one hand and ceremonial staff in the other. The donors then begin to drag their goods to the centre of the *sara* each accompanied by a roll of the slit gongs. Each donor of boars for sacrifice dances spectacularly onto the *sara* with assistants dragging the animals. He circles them, makes a speech on any subject that strikes his fancy, though usually extolling the virtue of his pigs and the feats of his ancestors, and then the title-taker accepts them by circling with arms extended in hawk-style and touches each one with the sacred cycas (*mwele*) leaf. When all donations have been made and the various goods sorted out and put in their right place, the sponsor dances out in full regalia and after making a long speech presents the insignia to the title-taker. If the latter has sufficient goods on hand he may then make full payment to his sponsor and anyone else supplying services. More likely he will make some token payment and announce a future date for a separate repayment ceremony (*vi hage*). When the business transactions are finished the sponsor, title-taker and perhaps a few others of high rank, especially if they have donated tuskers, retire and don regalia. When ready they form a line headed by the sponsor, followed by the title-taker, and then others in descending order according to rank. They circle in various ways around the sacrificial ground and in and out amongst the animals, the exact pattern depending on the grade being taken. The title-taker then kills the boars one at a time by bashing their skulls with the blunt side of an axe. He should start with his own pig, a good tusker, and finish with the best donated animal. Just prior to killing the first pig he stamps with his foot beside the animal, and then catching it by the neck utters the following words '*hom tai na mwasunggu, inau*

*moli*'—'cut my *mwasa* (ceremonial club), I am *moli*'. After killing the other nine he returns to the first and placing a foot on its body publicly announces whatever new name he has chosen. As he does so he inserts his index finger through the crack in the skull, plunges it into the brain and rubs his bloody finger across his forehead. Assistants then rapidly extract the jawbones of the ten pigs and senior men gather around for a careful examination leading to judgement regarding the stage of growth reached. The jaws are hung on the ten palm stakes where they remain for some days until taken to hang in the title-taker's house.

At this stage many things happen all at once. The donated pigs are returned to their donors who either cook them on the spot or carry them home. The tenth pig is set aside for cooking in the sacred oven. Other men begin to grind kava outside the men's house; they then serve it to the title-taker and sponsor, and to any other men of high rank present. Inside the building groups of men prepare one or more ovens according to how many grades are represented amongst those intending to stay. These ovens are most important, for only men of like grade can eat from the same oven. But unlike elsewhere in the northern New Hebrides there are no fixed positions for ovens; all that is required is that they be separate from one another. A donor of high rank, preferably though not necessarily the sponsor, then kills a *mambu* tusker just outside the entrance and cooks it in a special oven. This is the *matakambu kokona*, or 'oven sacred', and the title-taker, together with those of appropriate rank who choose to eat with him, remain for three or four days in the men's house quietly consuming the pig and drinking kava. No one can approach during this period for the men are in a most sacred (*kokona*) condition.

The sequence of events culminating in each of the higher grades, though broadly similar to those described above, differ in such diacritical matters as the number and quality of pigs that must be killed, the insignia that are purchased and the scale of payments made for services. There are, however, some interesting differences between *hehe* and *hakwa* grades that should be noted. In all *hehe* grades tusked pigs, either boars or hermaphrodites, must be killed, whereas for *hakwa* grades they must be sows or castrated pigs. Though informants regarded the distinction as most important they tended to evaluate the two kinds of animals in somewhat variant

ways. Boars, especially those with good tusks, are much more valuable than sows—they cost more and are much harder to rear. In line with this distinction sacrificial boars are tethered to the sacred cycas (*mwele*) which then remain on the *sara* for many generations, whereas sows are tied to ordinary (*mwenda*) stakes which do not grow and are in no sense sacred. Yet *hakwa* grades are higher than their *hehe* counterparts, and there are a number of most important ritual enactments in the *hakwa* ceremonies that do not occur in the *hehe*. In the first (*rangai toa*), which occurs some days prior to the actual pig-killing, the grade-taker commissions a high-ranker to get his men to build a wooden table (*bata*) or platform near his men's house (*vale*). Four posts about 4 feet high are driven into the ground about 2 yards apart and on top is built a platform on which is placed a layer of coconut leaves and then earth. After the ritual killing of ten sows, assistants make the sacred oven (*matakambu kokona*) on the *bata* or table, not on the ground as for *hehe* rites. The ritual is most elaborate—a fire has to be made with young green sappy wood and then carried to the table. When the food (one yam and one fowl) is cooked a high ranker, probably the sponsor, eats a bit of chicken and yam, and calls the title-taker to come and take two morsels of each food. The title-taker then throws a piece of yam and a piece of chicken over the grave of any of his ancestors who are buried nearby, calling out 'Here grandfather, here is your food—come and eat it'. The other pieces he throws over the roof of his house with a similar statement. He then eats the remainder of the food in the men's house. For the next two or three weeks he remains in the building with any other high ranker who wishes to join him. They eat pig and taro cooked in another sacred oven made in the usual manner on the ground. However, this oven must be lit from hot coals saved from the first one made on the *bata* and kept continuously alight throughout the whole period.

A second important ritual performed in *hakwa* but not *hehe* ceremonies is that known as *taundi mwango*. This, like the foregoing, occurs some days before the killing. The grade-taker gets some men to build a round fence of wild sugarcane stakes about 5 feet in diameter and about 6 or 7 feet high. One hundred young green coconuts are then collected, and after two sacred leaves have been inserted in holes the nuts are placed in a circle around the

enclosure. Next, one hundred short bamboo tubes, each filled with salt water, are placed in bundles beside the nuts. Finally numerous cycas leaves cover the lot. With the scene thus set, a high ranker, usually the sponsor, comes onto the ground to the accompaniment of slit-gong rhythms and wearing all his insignia of rank. He approaches the enclosure and kneeling on the ground removes the palm leaves and while waving them over the nuts and bamboos breathes a spell directed to Takaro. The liquids, already powerful in their natural state, are now super-potent. After breathing the spell silently four times the high ranker stands up and hands two coconuts to the title-taker who is standing inside the fence. The latter pours the liquid over his head. The same is repeated fifty times with the nuts and then likewise with the bamboo tubes ten at a time. Finally, attendants place the bamboo shoots around the dancing ground, especially near any tracks leading onto it.

Informants stated that the rite had two explicit aims. Firstly, the candidate acquires great strength (*tangaroa karea*) as a result of all these *kokona* liquids that are poured over him—a strength that will enable him to kill his pigs well and to wear his insignia without ill effect. Secondly, other men will feel an irresistible compulsion to assist him on the big day; those who promised to donate pigs will do so, those with debts to cancel will do so, those contemplating a new investment will take action. The bamboos placed around the ground transmit the power of the ritual in all directions to all persons throughout the island. From now on the candidate must lead a quiet life in his *vale*.

Finally, some informants told me of another *hakwa* rite which they claimed used to be performed long ago—it went shortly after Christianity was introduced. They were not very clear about what went on, simply that after the ten sows were disposed of an eleventh was killed and then cooked on a stone platform outside the men's house. The rite was called *kura bonbon* which literally means 'burn smell'; the pig was burnt on an open fire so that the smell and smoke could rise into the sky where either the benevolent creator deity Takaro or the potentially malevolent guardian ghost Ngwelevu could smell it. They clearly differentiated the rite from *rangai toa*—the latter had a wooden table, the food was fowl not pig, it was cooked in an oven and not on an open fire and it was eaten by the

title-taker. Informants were uncertain as to who if anyone ate the pig.

Emerging from the above data there are two central features I would like to discuss in greater detail—both are essential for an understanding of the way in which the institution provided a formal framework for the exercise of authority. First, the recurrent theme of ritual potency or power, and second, the presence of more direct forms of secular control inherent in the structure of the institution itself.

### Power or strength

At various stages in the above account I referred to certain objects as *kokona*. The Nduindui use the word, as sacred is used in English, to indicate a condition rather than an attribute or property. All those things and persons said to be *kokona* contrast with those said to be *mwenda*. *Kokona* objects are essentially those that are subject to some kind of *tabu*; they are things set apart because they contain a power that may cause injury or harm when approached by the unauthorized or unprotected. *Mwenda* objects are those without any *tabu* and do not contain any dangerous powers.

The Nduindui employ a number of different concepts to indicate the kinds of powers that may make things and persons *kokona*. The least specific and also the least relevant in the present context is the local version (known as *manaki*) of the common Pacific concept of *mana*. Codrington's classic description, most probably in part based on east Aoba informants, is broadly in accord with the results of my own enquiries. He wrote,

It is a power or influence, not physical and in a way supernatural, but it shows itself in physical force, or in any kind of power or excellence which a man possesses. This mana is not fixed in anything, and can be conveyed in almost anything; but spirits, whether disembodied souls or supernatural beings, have it, and can impart it; and it essentially belongs to personal beings to originate it, though it may act through the medium of water, or a stone or a bone. (Codrington, 1891:footnote, p. 119)

Though informants were far from consistent in talking about this and related concepts, most stressed the relevance of *mana* in

accounting for successful action in relatively humdrum routine contexts. In the early stages of a man's career his success in gardening, pig-breeding, oratory etc. may be attributed to his strong *mana*. Though often gained from external sources, as from certain stones or leaves, *mana* is most commonly used to indicate something inherent in the individual's personality. Strong *mana*, though a necessary prerequisite for success in the *hungwe*, is not itself directly generated through participation in *hungwe* rituals.

*Tangaroa*, like *mana*, is a property that all men possess, though in varying degrees, but whereas *mana* refers to inherent power that enables an individual to carry out routine tasks in a successful manner, *tangaroa* specifically refers to a man's capacity to manipulate supernatural forces. A *tiu tangaroa* is the ritual utterance that accompanies all forms of magic and sorcery, and a man whose spells are reputed to be both numerous and effective is said to have a *tangaroa karea* (a good or effective *tangaroa*). Some informants stated that *mana* is that which makes *tangaroa* effective; others that *tangaroa* is a quite separate power or force.

In practical terms, the distinction between a spell and the capacity to make it work (between *tiu tangaroa* and *tangaroa karea*), whether or not accounted for in terms of *mana*, provides a convenient rationale for the weakness of hereditary principles. The son of a powerful leader may inherit many spells, but unless his *tangaroa* is strong they will be of little use to him. The Nduindui do not believe that *mana* and *tangaroa* are constant and unchanging attributes: *mana* may be acquired by finding or purchasing objects that contain it, *tangaroa* by inheriting or purchasing spells. But it is most especially when a man puts himself into the sacred or *kokona* condition that his *tangaroa* is presumed to be most effective. Men who kill numerous high-grade boars tethered to the sacred *mwele*, who wear sacred insignia purchased at great cost from other great men, who eat food cooked in a sacred oven, who have sacred liquids poured over them, and in various other ways come into close physical contact with a whole range of sacred things and persons, thereby themselves become sacred. Men who are sacred are said to be in a condition that necessitates their being set apart (*tabu*) from lesser mortals. This is in part symbolized in physical separation through the institution of the men's house and the sacred ovens, and

in part through the employment of height as an idiom of authority and power. Men who have achieved exceptionally high grades are thought to be no longer like ordinary mortals. They are high (*aulu*) in the sky, and because of their proximity to the sky-dwelling deity Takaro are also in possession of powerful *tangaroa*. Such men are sometimes given the title of *siroi siroi*, 'sweeping high over' like a hawk with its wings spread out. A title-taker, when he dances around his tusked pigs before killing them, extends his arms, a performance called 'hawk's dance'. Indeed, the greatest men identify themselves directly with Takaro by announcing at the conclusion of the sacrificial rite the impressive words 'I am in the sky above—I am Takaro' (*Inau taitai aulu —inau Takaro*).

Men who have achieved the highest ranks are believed to be directly aided by supernatural beings. Ghosts, though they may assist occasionally, are mostly considered troublesome beings and best avoided. The bush spirits sometimes befriend a man and give him useful spells and magic objects, most commonly a means of increasing his supply of pigs and mats. But the greatest powers result from Takaro's special favour, which can be won only by sacrificing pigs. The recognition of Takaro as the ultimate source of supernatural power is expressed in the triple utterance of his name as a preface to all *tiu tangaroa*. The identification of deity and personal power is also apparent in that the word *takaro* is itself a linguistic variant of *tangaroa*. In this context it is perhaps worth noting that an important Maori, Samoan, Tongan, Marquesan, Tahitian and Hawaiian deity is known by the same name (Williamson 1933:238-43).

From what I have said thus far it is evident that progression through the *hungwe* grades is believed to generate ever increasingly effective powers of a supernatural kind which periodically render the holder both *tabu* and sacred (*kokona*). Such a set of beliefs constitute a powerful sanction for the exercise of authority. The *hungwe*, however, is not the sole context in which such powers may be gained. The paraphernalia of magic and sorcery may be acquired directly through inheritance, purchase or a chance encounter with some friendly spirit. But though a man may thus become an effective sorcerer without having achieved high grade, his capacity to influence others or to attract followers will be limited. Indeed,

even his 'power' as a magician or sorcerer will be regarded as less than fully effective through his failure to tap the major forces embodied in the *hungwe* rituals. Furthermore, such men can control others only through the negative sanction of fear; in positive terms they have nothing to offer their followers other than the supernatural powers themselves. Though an outstanding sorcerer may attract a small group of apprentices, he can never hope to muster the scale of support normally available to a high-ranking *hungwe*. Hence, if he should seriously offend a high-ranker, the latter may simply dispatch a group of young men to destroy his gardens, burn his house or perhaps kill him.

Another context in which supernatural powers are acquired is in secret-society ritual (*na nggwai* and *na nggwatu*). In Chapter 3 I provide a detailed discussion of these rites; here I will simply make two points. Firstly, the power acquired in such rituals, though very great, differs radically from the *hungwe* kind, and secondly, the two institutions are closely interrelated. Whereas *hungwe* powers are derived from close physical association with objects and persons said to be *kokona*, secret society powers generate a condition known as *hati*. Things that are particularly *hati* are menstrual blood, faeces and urine; foremost amongst *hati* actions are incest, adultery and public exposure of the sexual organs. In broader terms, *hati* connotes 'bad' power, power gained through daring to do that which is normally regarded as abhorrent. In everyday life *hati* actions are those that are regarded as especially heinous, but in secret-society ritual the same objects and actions are believed to confer great powers that are highly dangerous to others and are both feared and admired. For example, novices are tricked into eating faeces, initiators dance with exposed penes painted red as though dripping with menstrual blood and senior initiators symbolically copulate in public with their sisters. The powers generated by such rites are so great that the ceremonial grounds on which they are performed remain *tabu* for many generations. Though it is now at least half a century since such rites were last performed in west Aoba, the area is still full of *tabu* grounds. The power is said to remain in the ground and hence any trespasser is likely to suffer from a headache or possibly even die.

Although there are no formal rules relating secret-society participation and *hungwe* grade, there is no doubt that the two are closely interlinked. Participation in the secret rites, either as novice or initiator, adds relatively little to a man's status; as in the *hungwe* the big thing to do is to organize a ceremony in one's own name. To mount such a complex, expensive and large-scale operation would be quite impossible without high *hungwe* grade.

By far the most important feature of the *hungwe* as regards leadership and authority is the rule whereby only men of the aspired-to or higher grade can provide the paraphernalia and services essential for grade membership. This rule ensures that two of the essential ingredients of leadership, dependants and control over valued property, increase in direct proportion to rank. A man of high rank, a *hungwe lakua*, has a club-house full of young men eager to help him in his various projects. These men constitute a willing labour force whether for gardening, construction of some kind or clearing a new ceremonial ground. They also provide that other vital commodity—physical force. If a *hungwe lakua* should decide to kill a man, or destroy his house and gardens, he has in effect a small army at his command. His older and more senior debtors, anxious to gain his patronage or delay repayment of a loan, are likewise ready to support him in disputes and discussions about policy. The large payments that he receives from those men he chooses to support enable him to plan yet greater feats. At an early stage in the career of such a man he may use part of the wealth flowing in to acquire additional wives who in turn enable him to build bigger gardens, rear more pigs and fowl, and accumulate more mats. With this increased flow of internally produced valuables he can rapidly increase his range of debtors by making loans at high interest rates. Ultimately he mobilizes his dispersed wealth by taking a new grade himself, by sponsoring a son or other dependant, by staging a secret-society ritual, by clearing a new *sara*, by building slit-gongs, or by erecting a bigger and better men's house.

I must emphasize, however, that a given rank does not automatically result in the continuing support that enables a man to move higher. This is especially true of those young men who quickly achieve a high grade as a result of their father's or other close kinsman's sponsorship. When the sponsor dies his advance

will halt if he cannot demonstrate his own entrepreneurial and other skills. Though he can provide desired insignia and services, he will not gain the massive support needed for a new grade if he cannot convince others that he is a good investment; no one will bring pigs, mats and garden produce if they feel he cannot so manage his exchange relationships as to be able to repay them when they in turn need the goods. Furthermore, those seeking sponsors and investors can give their support to whomever they think will best serve their interests. Neither kinship nor locality nor any other formal criteria limits this freedom of choice. If a youth should offend his father he can always turn to someone else for help. If a parish leader should make himself unpopular or somehow undermine belief in his powers, he will soon find his club-house deserted, his store of valuables reduced and hence his authority either diminished or lost.

A *hungwe lakua* who rests on his laurels, or who begins to make mistakes and miscalculations whether through laziness, incompetence or senility, soon finds his support withering away. Others may begin to show reluctance to invest in his projects for fear of losing their investment. The drop in his success rate will in turn be attributed to a decline in the supernatural power over which he was once assumed to have control.

The major point I want to make in this paper is that a man of high rank is unlikely to lose authority and influence to either the same extent or so rapidly as the typical big man who is likewise losing his grip. No matter how senile or ineffective the old *hungwe lakua*, providing he can still totter onto a ceremonial ground and perform some minimal stylized actions, he can continue to provide valued assistance to others through his inalienable grade right to act as sponsor, to plant cycas palms, to sell insignia and to light sacred fires. Furthermore, though he himself is believed to have lost much of his personal power, he retains the formal symbols of that power. His continuing right to don impressive regalia on ceremonial occasions most assuredly assists him in clinging to at least a little prestige.

The following episode casts considerable light not only on the kind of authority that goes with rank, but also on the extent to which a group of high rankers may act jointly to protect their grade interests. The episode also indicates something of the way in which

rank cuts across otherwise discrete and autonomous political units, the parishes. A man called Vira Hehe of Saranavia parish held his *hehe moli* ceremony about 1920. When dancing formally around his ten tusked boars prior to killing them he was followed by his wife, also clad in *moli* insignia. Under special circumstances this would be a legitimate thing to do: she herself would have had to have killed at least one good tusked boar on the same occasion and purchased her insignia from another *moli* man. Perhaps this had been done—informants were not sure—but what was seriously amiss on this occasion was the presumption of a man of such low grade to so honour his wife. Even then it might have been all right if he had initially gained the agreement of all other high-ranking men concerned in his affairs, especially those attending the ceremony. This he had not done. Vira Hehe had assumed falsely that his personal renown, regardless of his low grade, was such that no one would challenge his right to so honour his wife. But he made a grave miscalculation. Attending the ceremony were at least a dozen of the top title-holders in west Aoba—some performing services, others simply attending as witnesses. They said nothing on the day itself but met together to discuss the matter in the nearby parish of Navuti a few days later. They decided that Vira Hehe must die for such presumption. Informants stressed that if they had not done so they would have been admitting that Vira Hehe, despite his low grade, was more powerful than they were—that his *tangaroa* was especially potent. They chose one of their number, a man of *levuhi* rank of Navuti parish called Paul Hungwe, to administer poison. They secretly instructed some young men of Saranavia to play dice with Vira Hehe—one of his favoured recreations. On the appointed day Paul went to Saranavia and joined the game. When Vira Hehe was looking in the opposite direction Paul dropped some rat poison on a slice of melon and offered it to Vira. The latter ate it and by the following morning was dead.

When I asked my informants why the Saranavia men had made no attempt to avenge their kinsman's death—the usual procedure under such circumstances—they replied that this was unthinkable because the decision to kill him was made by *na hungwe*. It was not made by any one individual or kin group or locality, but was a joint decision of high rankers from throughout the district. The decision of such a

body is said to constitute an act called '*a leoki u hivo lo banga*'—'word is above on the banyan tree'. Like the mighty banyan tree with its spreading arms, the decision of a group of *hungwe* is 'high up', beyond the reach of lesser mortals.

Though I think the evidence is clear that a position of high *hungwe* rank constitutes an office in that it confers authority, it is also clear that the institution is much more fundamentally an elaborate cultural specification of the means whereby power and influence previously gained through industry, generosity, entrepreneurship etc. is publicly expressed and confirmed. In other words, though the north New Hebrides system of leadership shares much in common with the typical Melanesian big-man syndrome, it differs by reference to the unusually high level of cultural specificity, rather than in structural type.

But by the same token the *hungwe* system of leadership also shares much in common with the eastern highlands 'great-man' system described by Godelier (1982). Like the Aoba *hungwe* the Baruya great man attains political influence and authority as a direct consequence of his attainment of high rank in a complex ritual hierarchy. But, whereas the *hungwe* attains his pre-eminent position in the ritual hierarchy primarily as a consequence of entrepreneurial success in a complex exchange system, the great man attains his high rank more as a consequence of seniority and the support of his junior fellow clansmen.

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