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Structure and flexibility in a New Guinea society. Review article

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STRUCTURE AND FLEXIBILITY IN A NEW GUINEA SOCIETY

REVIEW ARTICLE

It has been adequately demonstrated that many New Guinea societies are made up of strikingly variable and flexible elements, and that these societies tax to the utmost the capacity of anthropologists to discover an underlying system. (See for instance Barnes 1962, Brown 1962, de Bruyn and Pouwer 1959, Dutoit 1962, Epstein 1964, van der Leeden 1960, Pouwer 1960, 1961, 1964, Vayda and Cook 1964). Labels which, in other areas, have been applied successfully as *aids* in the search for system, have proved less useful in New Guinea. On the premiss that no society can survive without somewhere and somehow displaying system, the phrase 'loose', 'variable' and 'flexible' must be considered unsatisfactory, as applied to a system, when no indication is given of the structural framework within which the variations occur. Nor is it sufficient to approach the phenomenon of variability by means of a diachronic analysis and by stressing environmental factors. Although historic and demographic accidents as well as continuously changing ecological features are highly important for the *operation* of New Guinea social systems, they do not determine the *structure* of a system. Social processes and interactions do not occur at random but are conditioned by structure.

Let us consider some of the difficulties experienced in searching for structure in a multivalent reality. The late professor Held, used the term "incomplete unilaterality" to account for the social organisation of the Waropen (Geelvinck bay) where we find unilineal descent, but no clearly unilineal descent groups and where a prescription of unilateral cross-cousin marriage is not accompanied by a circulating connubium (1947: 60, 114).

Schoorl (1957: 34), in dealing with marriage regulations of the southern Muju (Southern New Guinea), notes a bride price type of marriage which would imply, in principle, considerable freedom in the choice of mates. He finds it hard to reconcile this with the fact that the Southern Muju also have preferential marriage with mo. bro. da.,

thus restricting the choice of mates. Moreover, he turns the latter marriage type (unjustifiably, in my opinion) into the cornerstone of the locally current Omaha system of kinship terminology (for a more extended discussion see Pouwer 1961: 17).

Some societies in the western interior of Sarmi (Northern New Guinea) were characterised by van der Leeden as fundamentally patrilineal and even double unilineal (1956: 160, 164). Bilateral elements and tendencies, however, are so numerous and significant in these societies that van der Leeden (1960) and I (1960) found ourselves involved in a somewhat confusing polemic concerning classification: are these societies (double) unilineal with bilateral divergences or (am)bilateral with a patrilineal tendency?

In the body of my doctoral thesis on the Mimika (SW New Guinea), I described the traditional descent groups (*taparu*) — which are strongly bound together by common residence — as (weakly) matrilineal (1955: 87). In a postulate attached to my thesis, however, I contradicted myself by labelling these same groups 'non-unilineal with a matrilineal bias'. The relationship between significant matrilineal, patrilineal and (am)bilateral phenomena in this society remains shadowy throughout my doctoral dissertation.

Oosterwal, discussing some tribes in the Tor district south east of Sarmi, conjures with bilateral demes (1961: 178), in conjunction with ambilineality in the case of non-endogamous marriages (1961: 182). The notion of ambilineality, as a modality of *lineal* arrangement, is not apparent from his data. He also finds unilineal traits.

In the lowlands of Mimika, the hill country of eastern Vogelkop and in the Star Mountains along the Papuan frontier, I noted the joint occurrence of *structurally significant* phenomena which are normally classed under four types: patrilineal, matrilineal, ambilineal (Vogelkop) and bilateral. Although in my article on the Star Mountains (1964) I attempted to treat these categories as modalities of a combination of lineality and laterality, this is more than the usual typologies are able to absorb.

In his Dutch doctoral thesis on the Argunians that will be discussed in this review article van Logchem (1963) like other investigators before and after him, has to contend with a precarious typological and terminological armoury which offers him inadequate support in his attempt to disengage the system from the data. The thesis presents the results of two months' field research in 1957 and a further two

months in 1958. It covers some 20 villages, comprising about two thirds of the total number of settlements situated at Arguni Bay east of Fak-Fak, along the western coast of West New Guinea.

Since his period in the field as a government anthropologist was short and his research objective was to be limited to the investigation of bride price, acculturation, shamanism and cargo cult phenomena, a full and intensive cultural survey was out of the question. In the author's own account of his methodology, the unavoidable restrictions and imperfections are frankly admitted. Indeed it is a tribute to van Logchem as an investigator that he managed to gather as many and as accurate data as he did in the short time available.

Mainly for government's purposes, about one third of the book is taken up with a general introduction to land and people (Chapter I) and a historical survey of contacts with and influences from Indonesian and Chinese traders and Mohammedan rajahs. Contacts arose as the result of the establishment of trade agencies by Molucca princes, the Netherlands government, Protestant and Roman Catholic missions and Mohammedan proselytising. (Chapters II and part of III). The description of the acculturation process would have gained in colour and depth if there had been less chronological fact (Chapter II) and more specific data on the significance, evaluation and interpretation of the foreigner and his world (see especially Chapter VII). The author has several interesting skirmishes with this problem, but is not able to make a full attack owing to an understandable shortage of relevant data.

Thus, we are told that the Rajah of Namatotte is thought by many even today to have power to act as protector of crops (p. 30). As this seems to contradict the statement that the Rajah and Rajah-Commission 'no longer have a real function under today's conditions' (p. 28), additional information on the Rajah and his influence would be desirable.

According to Peters, a government official quoted on page 31, the statistical distribution of religious affiliations is as follows:

Protestant	56.15 %
Islam	33.5 %
Roman Catholic	2.5 %
Other affiliations	7.85 %

The author calls the Mohammedan population group an important minority (p. 32). He makes little mention, however, of tension between Mohammedans and Christians. Mixed marriages are not exceptional (p. 34). On the other hand, the author quotes a few cases of territorial and political barriers set up between Christians and Mohammedans in mixed settlements. The number of these mixed settlements is, in any case, notably small (three out of 29). He notes the rarity of Christian conversion among the Mohammedans, a phenomenon which has been reported for other societies. How Christianity and Islam manifest themselves in the

everyday life of believers does not become clear from the description. According to the author, there has been no breakdown in the society's belief, in the old spirit world and in shamanism. Christianity and Islam play a comparatively small part in the spiritual life of the majority of Argunians. These statements (p. 33) increase our curiosity about a remark made on page 32: the position of Islam relative to Christianity does not appear to be weakening significantly in spite of the fact that the Mohammedans have no schools whereas the Christian missions depend on schools to establish and strengthen their influence.

The treatment of cargo cults, a rather regular feature since 1937 or earlier, is somewhat summary (Chapter VII). The author states they are based on traditional millennial expectations and founded by messianic healers. As evidence for millennial expectations existing 'from time immemorial' (p. 198), he summarises a myth which makes the impression of having been provided with a salvation-oriented apotheosis after contact with foreigners and for the purpose of the cult. A man who for material reasons is disappointed in his wife, and who is building a ship, turns to 'the Lord' with the request to make the ship seaworthy. Next morning he finds a ship complete with engine and crew. The man departs with a promise to return. Whether deeply embedded and richly patterned millennial expectations (comparable to the Koréri on Biak - Kamma 1954) underlie the familiar incorporation of new elements in a traditional framework seems to me in this case doubtful, to say the least.

Nor does it become entirely clear which specific factors of expectation (i.e. representation) led to cult movements (i.e. action). Representations of the same type are found elsewhere in New Guinea (e.g. in Mimika and in the Hattam area of the NE Vogelkop) without a concomitant promise to return and without a cult movement. As motivation for the movements, the author mentions in general terms a collective sense of deprivation felt by all generations (though for different reasons, viz. page 195), but I should like to see this proposition related to a detailed description of a specific movement, the movers, the moved and, if applicable, the unmoved and those opposed to the movement. Data of this kind are lacking although the author should not be blamed for this omission.

It may well be asked whether the author would not have been wiser to leave out some material marginal to his main thesis, as this tends to raise more questions than it solves. Lack of data induces the author either to somewhat tiresome and inconclusive argument or to schematic treatment of subject matter. He might with advantage have concentrated on his main theme, viz. the basic pattern of social organisation in its historical perspective (Chapters IV-VI), on which he has many interesting and theoretically significant things to say.

It is praiseworthy that the author has placed discussion of social organisation in a diachronic perspective and did not start from an imaginary social equilibrium and historical 'zero point'. This would have done considerable harm to the description and classifying of social organisation.

Traditional economic conditions did not, according to the author, provide a motive for the existence of exclusive, strictly organised group ties (p. 100). There was an abundance of land for shifting cultivation

which was the mainstay of the economy. The natural environment contained little or nothing else that would lead in earlier times to strong economic linkage with a particular residential area. Accordingly, we hear nothing of individual or even group rights to landed property. Boundaries of areas of residence and, if you will, disposable domains were very vague, while earlier social units had no strict territorial or kinship boundaries. A simple, strongly generational, kinship terminology of (bilateral) Hawaiian type offered few difficulties to a flexible, variable social organisation. There was a choice between many possibilities of post-marital residence.

A number of families made up — and partly still make up — an unstable, impermanent commensal unit living under one roof and collaborating in shifting cultivation. These units were built up around a core of close consanguines (e.g. siblings, cousins, parent/child, mo. bro./si. son). They combined into larger aggregates comprising 200-300 persons (p. 118), which I propose to call *territorial kin groups* (van Logchem's term '*local kin group*' seems to me less adequate). These traditional (in the sense of incompletely traceable) kin groups are still the largest recognised overcapping units. They are not 'ancestor based' and may therefore not be characterised as unilineal or ambilineal descent groups. Marriage partners were predominantly drawn from within the same territorial kin group. An individual could simultaneously be a manifest member of kin group A and a potential member of kin group B through bilateral kinship, marriage or affinity. Membership in kin group B could even be more than potential: a person could own cultivations in B's territory without residing with B (p. 119). As it was possible to transfer from A to B, territorial kin groups were not closed and clearly bounded units.

On an intermediate level between commensal units and territorial kin groups, there were (and are) 'sub-groups', even less sharply delineated and not populous enough to tend towards endogamy (for examples, see p. 121). Little can be said about these (so the author tells us on page 122) except that they must be aggregates of kinship-linked commensal units.

Understandably, the author has found it hard to categorise the observed forms of kinship and territorial organisation within the usual terminological framework. In the end he opts for the following terms: *plurilocal extended family* (lowest level) and *extended kindred* or *extended personal kindred* (highest level) but he does not introduce a separate term for the middle-range aggregates, as these in his opinion

do not differ essentially from the extended kindred (p. 122). The designations non-unilineal or cognatic descent and deme are rejected on what seem to me correct grounds (See pp. 122, 120).

The problem of *substantial* typology is less important, however, than the question of *composition* or *arrangement* on which the author's discussion does not reach complete clarity. He gives the impression that anything is possible, although we must assume the existence of a system of some sort and therefore some limitation of the possibilities. A more effective approach might have been a comprehensive analysis operating on two levels of abstraction, namely the organisational and structural level. (On this approach, see Firth 1961 : 30-40).

On the (lower) organisational level we are concerned with concrete ends which may be accomplished by joint activities of persons. A clear example is collaboration in shifting cultivation, performed by a commensal combination of families (termed *ladang groups* or pluriform extended families by van Logchem). There are, of course, other forms of joint activity. An analysis of formal and informal organisation leads us to the underlying structuring principles or principles of organisation. In the present case, some of these are undoubtedly a combination of (1) lateral arrangement and (2) arrangement according to territory and residence; as well as (3) the principle of reciprocity.

Lateral arrangement clearly lies at the bottom of kinship terminology and of the organisation of extended family and extended kindred. With regard to the last-mentioned group, the author states this emphatically (p. 120). Plurilocal marriage derives from the operation of the principle of lateral arrangement. The thesis unfortunately does not show whether the degree of lateral kin relationship with the cores of extended families and the smaller territorial kin groups had (or has) functional significance. If such significance exists, a direct positive relation between degree of kin relationship and position or influence in the group would have a delimiting and sealing effect.

The combined operation of the three particular principles mentioned above, sets up the system and the boundaries within which variations occur. It is the investigator's task to measure the interrelation between and the relative weight and position of these three structuring principles as they affect the organisational level. Thus he explains the system by means of a *positional model* rather than by placing it in a hocus pocus typology. One has the impression that laterality had greater weight than territoriality. The relation between manifestations of reciprocity on the one hand and the other two above-mentioned principles on the

other hand could then, for instance, be measured by considering the relative status and position of affinal immigrants and of persons whose membership of a local group rests on lateral kinship. Marriage is, after all, among other things an expression of reciprocity. Did affinal immigrants perhaps have a lower position in law and in fact, and is this position perhaps being gradually strengthened? The author confines himself to the general statement that, as far as known, the affinal immigrant was always regarded as a full member of the group (p. 123). He has not convinced me that such an assertion is valid for those affinal immigrants who cannot claim membership of the in-group on grounds of kinship.

There is a second way in which the relationship between reciprocity and the two other structuring principles could be determined empirically. It would be possible to establish the frequency and motivation of virilocal marriage as against other modalities of residence. The author informs us (p. 116) that 'apparently' patrivirilocal residence was the more prevalent, but that there was no preferential principle. He gives no reasons for the higher frequency. They might lie in the circumstance that the man, more than the woman, serves the interests of his group in external relations and that, for this reason, he prefers to stay "at home". The reasons might lie equally well in the consideration that, by paying bride price, the husband acquires, in principle, a preferential position with regard to the choice of residence.

In respect of the villages Weswassa and Tiwara current data are presented on persons who settled outside their natal village. Analysis of these data shows the notable result that among such persons, women are in a clear majority. For all the women, the motive of migration was marriage with a man from another village. Not one of the men who migrated, did so on the grounds of an uxorilocal marriage (p. 129).

There are numerous, sometimes very striking facts which show that the principle of reciprocity has important structuring effects, especially through marriage as a form of exchange. The writer is justified in laying a connection between, on the one hand, the existence of separate kinship terms for *mo. bro.* and *fa. bro.* and, on the other hand, the relationship between bride giver and bride taker. As heir of *mo. fa.*, *mo. bro.* may find himself in the position of bride giver vis à vis his *si. hu.* and after the death of the latter, vis à vis his *si. son.* The position of substitute father and therefore also the terminological identification of *mo. bro.* and *fa. bro.* could not be reconciled with such a role (p. 105, 106).

With regard to the possibility of matri-virilocal residence, van Logchem makes the interesting observation 'that the Argunian always mentions the possibility of joining his mo. bro. or mo. bro. so., but never of joining his fa. si. or fa. si. so. We may therefore assume that where cross cousins lived together, fa. si. so. had joined his mo. bro. so., who was his 'superior', whereas it was unusual, or at least less usual to join one's fa. si. so" (p. 116). If cross cousins lived together in an extended family, the mo. bro. so. acted as leader; whereas in case of coresidence of brothers in law, the wi. bro. would be the leader.

The relationship bride giver/bride taker takes an arresting form in the chain reaction of payments of traditional valuables on the occasion of a marriage. On this subject, the author gives detailed information in a separate chapter on marriage (Chapter VI). I quote:

"As a beginning of course the bridegroom pays *harta* (Indonesian term for ceremonial valuables - P.) to the bride's family, in principle his wi. fa. The latter will feel called upon, in recognition of the *harta* received in respect of his daughter, to make a *harta* payment to his own bride giver or the latter's heir (the bride's mo. fa or his heirs, viz. mo. bro. / mo. bro. son. - P.). This person, by the same principle, will feel obligated to make a *harta* payment." (The recipient of this gift would in practice often be the bride's mo. mo. bro. or his heirs, viz. the bride's mo. mo. bro. so. - P.).

Thus we see that a marriage not only brings a new bride giver/bride taker relationship into being, but that it also gives a time depth to bride taker/bride giver relationships established in previous generations. *Harta* obligations therefore definitely have, among other things, a binding function (p. 157). In principle, the Argunian holds that the chain of payments ceases when the rightful payee is dead and has no heirs, or no known heirs. In practice, it is rarely that more than three payments are made. These must be financed separately which leads to a further increase in the number of people involved in the transactions.

The writer points out that this chain reaction model has two types of *mechanical* structural implications: every married man belongs to a *harta* line of men who are not close consanguines; every married woman, however, belongs to a 'matriline' consisting of women bound together through the mo./da. relationship. It is unfortunate that the writer leaves us uncertain whether the bearers of the culture are aware of, and give recognition to the two lines technically derivable from the model (especially the 'matriline'), for instance in the form of separate reference terms. Unless this is established, these implications of the model must still be treated as unverified on the empirical level. It is

perfectly possible, furthermore, that cultural awareness, though present, goes no further than to provide a certain time-depth to *matrifiliation*. Nor does the transfer of obligations and debts in the male line need to lead to more than the emphasising of *patrifiliation*.

The strongly developed institution of adoption, so the writer tells us, is indissolubly linked with the system of *harta*-obligations. The following example is characteristic of the specific importance of reciprocity in this connection: it is an axiom for the Argunian, according to the writer, that a man should be able to 'earn back' by means of his daughter the *harta* paid for his wife (p. 167). The bride giver should guarantee this as a counterprestation for the bride price received. If a man's marriage does not produce a daughter, the bride giver should offer an adoptive daughter, usually a daughter of his son or a younger sister of his son-in-law (sic. - P.). It even happens that the bride giver parts with his only daughter for this purpose.

All these details may have clarified to the reader that the importance of the other two structuring principles is equalled if not exceeded by the principle of reciprocity, especially as manifested in and through marriage as a form of exchange. The author, who seldom makes categorical assertions, remarks that *harta* obligations are often decisive for the social and economic actions of Argunians (p. 156). The author would have given a sharper, more articulated and more consistent picture of Arguni society, if he had been able to use the structural method of analysis, i.e. if he had meticulously followed through the manifestations of the above mentioned structuring principles and, more especially, if he had traced in more detail the relative position of these manifestations.

In Chapter V, the author shows that today the contours in the society are being more sharply drawn, as the result of the concentration of dispersed micro-settlements in villages and the emerging market production complex. Almost every aggregate of population concentrated in villages, has become a predominantly endogamous unit as a result of the increased density, with the implication of a sharper delineation of kinship boundaries. The growing economic importance of landed property has led to a sharper definition of group territories. Local residence is nowadays considered to be more or less prerequisite to the exercise of rights to land, to the planting of sago, etc. The territorial basis of social organisation has become much firmer. To put this differently: the relative importance of territoriality has grown and

the relative importance of (bi)laterality, which is not in principle linked with residence, has declined. Perhaps we may speak of a shift in emphasis from laterality to territoriality.

Within the framework of laterality, we may discern, in the practice of day-to-day relationships, a shift in emphasis in the direction of patrilineality. The author quotes a significant phrase often heard from the lips of the people: 'we understand better today (i.e. since the intervention of government and missions) that we have to look to our *fathers' dusun* (Indonesian term for landed property - P.) and cultivations' (p. 138).

Whether, as the author will have it, this "naturally implies also the emphasizing of *patrilineal reckoning of descent*" (my italics - P.) seems to me questionable, even if we allow for the possible effect of the not yet very functional family names, introduced by western administration and passed down from father to son. Certainly, the specific importance of matrilineality has not declined, and the same is true for matrilineal kin relations in the framework of the chain reaction of *harta* payments. A *patrilineal* notion nowadays exists hardly if at all. A *conception* of patrilineality and patrilinearity should be clearly distinguished from the *statistical* occurrence of these phenomena, as the occurrence may well be noted where the conception does not exist, and conversely. The author himself points out correctly that even if claims on a contested nutmeg stand are pressed on the grounds of heuristically construed descent lines, a society may still be laterally structured (see pp. 146, 147).

This detailed discussion of the contents of van Logchem's meritorious thesis (it is to be hoped that more than the title on the title page will be made available in English!) may have given more concrete shape and persuasive force to the argument I put forward in my article on 'The Structural and Functional Approach in Cultural Anthropology', printed elsewhere in this issue. I argued there that the theoretical assumptions and the method of structural analysis can be extremely valuable for the discovery and explanation of system, especially (though not exclusively) in societies characterised by a flexible, variable and opaque structure. By proceeding on this basis, it is perfectly possible and practicable to make a structural comparison between numerous manifestations of a limited number of identical principles operating in different societies. It is not necessary to restrict oneself to a comparison *within* the unilineal or non-unilineal or bilinear categories; there is no objection to crosscut this conventional rubrication. Differences in structure discovered in this way may perhaps be correlated

with particular factors. It is only at this stage of investigation and comparison, I believe, that the greatest benefit can be derived from intercultural *functional* comparison.

To be more specific, is it possible to compare fruitfully, over a wide area of cultures: the patrilineally oriented tribes of the Star Mountains, the patri-ambilineally oriented mountain tribes of the Eastern Vogelkop, the matri-ambilaterally oriented population of the Mimika coast and the bilaterally oriented groupings around Arguni Bay. The indications patrilineal, ambilineal and (am)bilateral in this connection are no more than superficial catch-words for complex socio-cultural phenomena which become susceptible to meaningful comparison by reduction to identical structuring principles.

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