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Elders in the shadow of the Big-Man

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ELDERS IN THE SHADOW OF THE BIG-MAN

"... the old men sat and wept over the profanation and their loss of power and privilege."

Codrington, in The Melanesians, 1891.

I. Introduction
Leadership in the South Pacific has drawn the attention of a number of scholars in the last several decades. Following the model given by Sahlins in his much-quoted article, ‘Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-Man, Chief’ (1963), anthropologists could work with a handy dichotomy: leadership based on achieved status in a sphere of egalitarianism (the big-man of Melanesia) versus leadership based on ascribed status of hereditary rank in a sphere of social hierarchy (the chief of Polynesia). These two ideal types apparently left little room for much focus on the many overlapping and divergent types of leaders to be found in the vast areas of the South Pacific. The spectacular Melanesian big-man — the Songi of Oliver’s monograph on the Siuai of the Solomon Islands, who, according to Bronwen Douglas (1979:3), was the inspiration for Sahlins’ article — was threatening to become a caricature.

Literature abounded in which the Melanesian big-man’s characteristics of personal ambition, managerial and oratorical skill, and calculated generosity were illustrated. In the meantime, however, one scholar challenged the position of the big-man. The Austrian anthropologist Justin Stagl, in a relatively unknown article in the German Zeitschrift für Politik, juxtaposed the big-man’s leadership with that of the elders. In his article, ‘Alteste und Big Men. Politische Führungsrollen in Melanesien’ (1971:368-383), the two types of Melanesian leaders were compared and analyzed, and in the end both were merely reduced to an interplay of authority and power inherent in every form of political organization (pp.369,380). This undermining of the big-man’s theoretical status by bringing the elders into the picture did not make any waves — not even ripples — on the sea of anthropological

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literature, even though bits and pieces concerning the elders did appear in recent articles (eg., Douglas 1979:9; Chowning 1979: 69-70).

Ten years after Stagl's article, at the 1981 Amsterdam IUAES Intercongress, a paper (yet unpublished) was presented by Michael Allen, in which the Melanesian elders again shared in the theoretical focus: ‘Elders, Chiefs and Big-Men: Social Structure and Political Evolution in Melanesia’. Stagl, who had neither an evolutionary outlook nor goal, had placed the leadership systems of elders and big-men on a single interacting plane. Allen, in his turn, placed them on opposite ends of an evolutionary scale of polities in Melanesia, viz., from the small-scale system where power is entrusted to the seniormost men of agnostic lineages (through the intermediate chieftainships), to the fully-evolved matrilineal societies where big-men regularly emerge as self-made leaders. Identifying the true place of the elders in the infinite complexity and diversity of Melanesian political organization obviously cannot be a realistic aim of the present article. It does appear to be time, however, to pull the elders out from the shadow of the big-man and make a reassessment of their respective roles.

The term “elders” can be misleading, because it broadly refers to those having authority by virtue of age and experience. For our purposes, “elder” will refer to the senior male member of a unilineal descent group, as long as he is capable and responsible. It is thus a hereditary position, though in practice it usually involves a certain degree of achievement; and authority is legitimated through tradition (Stagl 1971:369). The position of the old people will also be discussed in this article, but they will be referred to as “the elderly” or “the aged”. “Big-man” is an equally ambiguous term, which has become embedded in the literature because it is the literal translation of the native title received by important men in many parts of Melanesia. Though in some places it can designate anyone who is physically large or “splendid”, or elderly and respected for any reason (Chowning 1979: 66), here the term “big-man” will be used to refer to a Melanesian leader whose authority is based on personal power (primarily an achieved position). To attain this position he must generally exercise such character traits as ambition, intelligence, charisma, persuasiveness, generosity, and managerial as well as rhetorical skills.

As background to an examination of the elders’ role, a brief summary will be given of Rivers’ historical hypothesis concerning a former gerontocracy in Melanesia. Carrying through on this idea, the remnants of such gerontocracies today will receive mention, and a new hypothesis on the subject will take its place beside the old one. It is further the purpose of this paper:

— to discuss the relatively neglected hereditary aspects of Melanesian leadership;
— to compare the status of aged men as being the object of ridicule in some Melanesian societies, as opposed to their being the object of respect in others;

— to examine the roles of the elders and the big-men, particularly in the light of Stagl's article, including such interesting points as: stability/social immobility and authority in the elders versus instability/social mobility and power in the big-men; their respective roles as managers versus entrepreneurs; the functioning of elders behind the scenes as mobilizers of local resources and labor; and the place of elders and big-men when Melanesian societies have been differentiated according to descent groups and group size.

II. Historical scope on gerontocracy — hypothesis and present-day practice

In 1898 Haddon, Rivers and Seligman launched on the famed Torres Straits Expedition, and less than two decades later Rivers completed the mammoth task of writing what he called *The History of Melanesian Society*. Partially based on Codrington (1891) and also relying on Graebner’s attempt to analyze Melanesian culture in 1909, the second volume of *The History* deals with a number of theoretical aspects of Melanesian culture.

Rivers states that his standpoint remains essentially evolutionary (1914:5). Interesting for the present article is his hypothesis that at one stage in Melanesian history a gerontocracy prevailed: a ruling class of old men who directed the course of community conduct. The primary factor leading to the gerontocracy was, according to Rivers, the native belief in the magical abilities of old men. This supposedly gave the elderly men sufficient power to enable them to monopolize all the young women of their community (Rivers 1914:68). Taking the idea further, Rivers suggested that many ceremonial elements, such as a girl being married as an infant and the ritual of simulated capture, were throw-backs to the gerontocracy period, i.e., attempts to escape the dominance of the old men (Rivers 1914:105).

In Rivers' evolutionary scheme the disappearance of the gerontocracy began with the coming of the "kava-people" (p.313), and he believes that the institution of hereditary chieftainship is due to immigrant influence. According to him, chieftainship came to those parts that were settled by a people superior to the natives; in one instance he even alludes to the physical appearance of the chiefs being different from that of the commoners (p.324). While such statements may be interesting for speculation, more pertinent is the observation made at the time of his expedition to Melanesia: "It would seem as if even now the condition in most parts of southern Melanesia has not departed very widely from a state of gerontocracy, although the qualification of age has largely merged in one dependent on possession of high rank.
in the *sukwe*” (pp.324-325). (More will be said about the *sukwe* in Section V.)

It is worth noting that Ann Chowning refers in a recent article to a few societies where a sort of gerontocracy exists at present. The Banaro and Ilahita Arapesh are examples she cites of societies where senior initiates of cults, acting as a body, are thought to control the well-being of society. In addition, similar situations are said to arise when all the older men are assumed to know sorcery and threaten its use to keep their juniors in line; the Orokolo and the Kove are examples of such societies (Chowning 1979:68). (This use of sorcery would tend to support Rivers’ early hypothesis concerning how old men originally gained power to form a gerontocracy.) But as Chowning says, most of the “gerontocratic” societies which can be listed today are reported to have additional individual leaders as well (p.69).

It is also interesting that concerning the idea of gerontocracy, Michael Allen (1981:5) fits this stage in his recent evolutionary scheme of Melanesia. He brings forward the point that a few societies exist today which may be described as gerontocracies, eg., the Avatip of the Sepik and the Small Islands of north Vanuatu, in which power is predominantly an attribute of male agnatic solidarity, the greater part being concentrated in the hands of lineage elders. In a footnote he mentions a number of other societies approximating this model but modified by additional features. All of these societies are placed at the simplest and least evolved end of the range; here leadership is ascribed and big-men are virtually non-existent.

This information on gerontocracies — past or present — raises some suspicions concerning the dominant image of the big-man as the vital, self-achieved leader in Melanesia. Old men would appear to be the antithesis of such energetic, ambitious figures. These suspicions can be helpful in opening the door and allowing more light to fall on the position of the elders. Is the big-man phenomenon relatively new? The background presented in the above hypotheses could perhaps provide some new insight into the question of Melanesian leadership, suggesting that the elders may have been the most important figures throughout history, and that their contemporary position in many instances reflects and supports such hypotheses.

III. *Hereditary aspects of Melanesian leadership*

It has already been mentioned that the dichotomy of Polynesia/ascribed leadership — Melanesia/achieved leadership is a convenient starting point for analysis, but nothing more. To call it oversimplistic would be an understatement in view of the many degrees and combinations of hereditary leadership to be found in Melanesia.

Bronwen Douglas, criticizing Sahlins, points out that the less stratified forms of hereditary leadership commonly found in coastal
areas in Melanesia were "embarrassing and were either ignored or excused as 'clearly exceptional' 'bumps in the geographical gradient'" (Douglas 1979:3). She adds that it seems likely that hereditary rank and chieftainship were more widespread, especially in the coastal areas, at the time of European contact than they are today (p.5).

In the previous section it was brought out that there are some societies where leadership automatically goes to the eldest (capable) member of the agnatic lineage, and a body of these elders may rule in a kind of gerontocracy. For the Orokaiva, Williams says that there is no well-defined chieftainship, "but merely a recognized ascendancy of the old men". The eldest of a clan's men is its leader, provided he is competent and has the right personality for the position (Williams 1930:104). Beyond the obviously hereditary societies, however, there are innumerable cases to be found of lineage heads exercising leadership authority in the same societies where big-men are prevalent. Examples can be given from a few of the better-known monographs in which big-men are prominent.

In Salisbury's *From Stone to Steel*, the Siane have lineage heads (elders) who exercise authority by making decisions, representing the lineage to outside groups and rebuking young members of the lineage. In doing these things an elder is acting on behalf of the members of the lineage and not as a private person (Salisbury 1962:32). Further among the Siane, however, big-men are the leaders.

In Young's *Fighting with Food*, the Kalauna society members live in hamlets. The kinship unit to be found in these is the patrilineage called *unuma*. Young claims that the *unuma* has corporate status within the community as a kind of minimal political group. The senior male member (elder) is generally the leader, and there are exclusive rights and special customs attached to this position (Young 1971:36). The Kalauna have big-men as their prominent community leaders, however.

Marie Reay tells in 'Present-day Politics in the New Guinea Highlands' that the skilled subclan orator of the Kuma, "Rhetoric Thumper", was a hereditary leader; he was the most senior agnatic descendant in a direct line from the founder of the subclan. On the other hand, this position counted for little if other members of the group would not heed what he said. He often had a secondary leader to help him. In addition to the hereditary "Rhetoric Thumper", the Kuma also had ambitious self-made men; here they were called "strong man" or "real man with a name" (Reay 1967:199-200).

In Read's article entitled 'Leadership and Consensus in a New Guinea Society' on the Gahuku-Gama, the subclan is comprised of patrilineages. The head of a lineage is the group's most senior man (elder). However, as Read points out, beyond this level of segmentation, authority is achieved by big-men (Read 1964:240-241).
Oliver's *Solomon Island Society* also provides some examples. The Siuai belong to scattered matrilineages, and there is no definite hereditary leadership as such. Nevertheless, Oliver's description of authority in the Siuai hamlets is reminiscent of the above examples. A woman or man who is spoken of as "the Old-one" gives directions about how things should be done. The eldest woman supervises activities such as almond-hulling, thatch-sheet-making and prawn-fishing. The eldest man settles minor disputes and decides to move the settlement in case of an epidemic (Oliver 1955:238-239). Although this example does not belong under the heading of hereditary leadership, it is a good example of old age being respected and senior community members asserting leadership. Moreover, in addition to the roles of the Old-ones in the Siuai hamlets, there is apparently a display of deference, affection and interaction between members of alternating generations (Oliver 1955:271). Nephews are also known to visit their mother's brothers extensively (the famed big-man, Songi, was raised by a maternal uncle and sponsored into leadership by a paternal uncle) (Oliver 1955:271,423). Such points tend to indicate the importance of family tradition where leadership is concerned.

The above illustration leads us to the next point which should be dealt with when discussing hereditary leadership: the hereditary aspect of the big-man's position. Though the position is by definition achieved, it must be mentioned that the sons (or close kin members) of big-men are more likely to succeed their fathers as leaders than are other arbitrary ambitious men.

The best example of this is given by Strathern in *The Rope of Moka*, who went so far as to meticulously seek empirical patterns among the Hageners. His evidence, based on ninety-seven big-men, suggested that major big-men have a 3:1 chance of being sons of big-men. It was also apparent that there were clusterings of big-men within particular lineages of a clan. Strathern speculated as to whether or not it was in fact big-men who were the founders of distinct patrilineages. More plausible, however, was an explanation that the big-man stimulated others in his lineage to engage vigorously in *moka*, and in turn he would help them obtain wives; thus they could also become big-men. Strathern adds that major big-men did place value on the idea that at least one of their sons should take their place. An example is given of a major big-man who for years kept his hair matted and unkempt in sorrow at the early death of an eldest son who had showed promise in having the qualities of a big-man (Strathern 1971:208-212).

In her book on the Kuma, Reay reports that the son of what she calls a "spontaneous leader" (as opposed to "authorized", hereditary leaders) succeeds his father in 64% of the cases (Reay 1959:114). Among the Dugum Dani, too, heredity has an indirect effect on prestige. It is easier for a potential big-man to rise in importance if his father was a
leader (Heider 1970:93).

There were more varieties of hereditary leaders. Sometimes primo-
geniture was merely mentioned, though very few details were given
(eg., Rivers 1914:99). In some Melanesian societies there was
hereditary leadership, but with some leeway of choice in the matter.
A Wogeo leader, for example, could choose a first-born son from
any of his wives as his successor (Hogbin 1940:35). In a number
of societies succession was hereditary in principle; but if the senior
man did not demonstrate the proper capabilities, he was passed by in
favor of the craftier "cadet", according to Guiart, and the elder would
have to seek his future elsewhere (Guiart 1963:640-641).

Thus, hereditary leadership, which has been relatively neglected in
anthropological literature (Stagl 1971:368; Chowning 1979:69), is by
no means scarce in Melanesia. A number of societies clearly had
hereditary leadership, with the leading position being filled by the
senior male member of an agnatic lineage, provided he was competent.
A group of these elders could then rule in what might cautiously be
termed a gerontocracy. More societies, however, appear to have
combined leadership by hereditary elders in the hamlets together with
the ambitiously enterprising big-men, who served on a larger level of
organization. These combinations are to be found in a great many of
the well-read monographs on Melanesia (eg., Salisbury, 1962; Young,
1971; Reay, 1967; Read, 1964; Oliver, 1955). Still, relatively little
attention is given to these lineage heads (elders) as compared with the
hard-working, calculating big-men. One might even be tempted to say
that some Western bias could be present, fostering an uneven distribu-
tion in the amount of attention paid to elders as opposed to big-men
leaders. Moreover, even the big-men themselves, supposedly occupying
an achieved position par excellence, have been shown to have a
number of hereditary aspects in their leadership position, particularly
when this topic is empirically examined (cf. Strathern, 1971; Reay,
1959). Finally, other variants of hereditary leadership, with differing
degrees of a leader having influence in saying who his successor will
be, can be found in Melanesia. The more examples of hereditary
leadership, the more plausible the case for the elders can be made.

It is now time to take a look at the attitudes toward the aged in
Melanesian society in order to attempt to discern how seriously the
elders were taken as leader figures.

IV. Ridicule versus respect for the aged

It is frequently said that Melanesia, as an ethnographic laboratory, is
an area of extremes and oppositions (eg., Langness and Weschler
1971:10). This characteristic also holds true for the differences in
various societies' attitudes toward their elderly members — an
important issue when discussing the leadership and potential leadership
of elders. In some Melanesian societies the aged are ridiculed; in others they are treated with a great deal of respect, seniority even being a prerequisite for leadership. Let us review a few examples of these extremes. It is useful to mention the negative attitudes as well as the positive ones in order to avoid making the false impression that one or the other is a ubiquitous situation for the elderly in Melanesia.

In a monograph on the Chimbu, Paula Brown tells us in no uncertain terms that in their society “the past is not honored; the aged are ridiculed”. She relates an incident when she attempted to enquire of an elderly Chimbu about the conditions of his youth, before and in the early days of European contact. His adult son said, “He’s an old man and he doesn’t know anything; what are you talking to him for?” (Brown 1972:6). In another article on the Chimbu political system, she also notes that individual leaders can lose their following as they age and are unable to keep up their activities or fail in any enterprise (Brown 1971:218).

Glasse and Lindenbaum (1971:372), when discussing leadership among the South Fore, point out that neither of the two types of leaders — the warriors nor the tobaku sorcerers — are ever old men. The warriors were men skilled with a bow and arrow, “hot” fighters; and the sorcerers were men of vigor.

Many writers stress the point that a leader holds prestige only as long as he demonstrates strength, aggressiveness and vitality, for example in being a successful fighter. Or in other instances, he must constantly be proving his managerial prowess and eloquence, eg., by organizing grand feasts. It is obvious that an older person would gradually lose his abilities in these kinds of activities. Codrington (1891:53) was the first to report this: “The power of a chief naturally diminished in old age, from inactivity, parsimony, and loss of reputation”. Pospisil (1964:49) says of the Kapauku Papuans that a leader’s greatest prestige is derived from wealth, which depends on successful pig-raising and trading. One can easily lose his position to a younger and more successful pig-breeder and trader. Berndt (1962:174-175) states in Excess and Restraint that traditionally even the leader of a lineage or village was not so much its hereditary head man as was “the strongest of its strong men”. While the elders may be well equipped to train youths at initiation or perform sorcery, and their kinship status may be higher in seniority, it is the enterprising man who holds the prestige. When the process of distributing wealth diminishes — as it inevitably does when the leader grows old — the latter’s prestige also declines. In Een zuster voor een vrouw, Van Nieuwenhuijsen-Riedeman (1979:89) states that the oldest of the clan, who fills a number of functions, loses prestige when he physically and mentally declines. One would tend to think that such a situation is not surprising; however, as we shall presently see, there are some Melanesian societies where old age itself
is a requirement for having prestige and where all old people are treated with deference.

A last example borrowed from Langness is a good transition to a discussion of old age being given authority and prestige. For the Papuans, he says, a leader remains a leader only as long as he can dominate others, either through his ability to help them or to maintain their respect. If he fails in any undertaking, his followers are quick to shift their loyalties. At the same time, there is authority apart from that of the big-men, which is allocated on the basis of age. Again we are given the example of the eldest male of the lineage acting as spokesman. Moreover, he says: “the principle of age is a general one. Older people, provided they are active, have authority over younger ones” (Langness 1973:154-155).

The best example of a Melanesian society where old age is very important is the Lakalai of New Britain. Chowning and Goodenough (1971:119) report that respect is required of a Lakalai “in most exaggerated form” when dealing with his older affines. In organizing festivals an old man who has many junior kinsmen and who is senior man in his hamlet, is in a position to command the labor of many (Chowning and Goodenough 1971:145). These authors distinguish between different types of big-men among the Lakalai: there is the senior man in sib affairs and the senior householder in hamlet affairs; the most prominent residents in a village or territory they call “magnates” in order to distinguish them from other big-men. Age is also an essential quality for becoming a magnate. “The older a man becomes, the better are his chances of being recognized as the community expert in connection with such important matters as weather control, gardening, hunting, curing, love, war, and sorcery” (Chowning and Goodenough 1971:155-156). It is even so that in the Lakalai society, the elderly members institutionally dramatize their authority in the valuku club and impress upon the community the power that lies behind such authority. Wearing elaborate masks and doing impersonations, the valuku club members — all aged men — provide an “institutionalized expression ... of the ‘teeth’ in the seniority system of authority relationships”. The solidarity of the community's old people is emphasized vis-à-vis its other members (Chowning and Goodenough 1971:170-171).

In his book Social Change, Hogbin mentions that in the stable conditions of primitive times, the knowledge and experience of the elderly entitled them to deference. They knew how problems had been previously solved and were thus in a position to deal with difficulties. However, this kind of respect was said to be diminishing in the world of today, where past experience was worth less and where young people were often better equipped to meet the new needs (Hogbin 1958:187-188).
As a last example of deference being shown to those of seniority, Read's article on the Gahuku-Gama again underlines an essential issue. He notes that ideally a man should respect any other man who is his senior. If young people oppose their elders, they must face a possible withdrawal of support (Read 1964:243-244). And support is precisely what is needed for any level of leadership success in Melanesian society.

Having reviewed the range of attitudes toward the aged — from ridicule to respect — it can be said that loss of prestige with increasing age is by no means predominant in Melanesia. Any misunderstanding on this point was probably due to the fact that the big-man — who had to be vital to keep up his ambitious activities — overshadowed the elders in the literature. There are apparently enough examples available of the aged being shown respect. A solid case can be made concerning elders who are leaders by virtue of the fact that they have attained a respectable age in an agnatic lineage. This information will hopefully aid in further pulling the elders out from the shadow of the big-man.

V. Some comparisons of the roles of elders and big-men, particularly in the light of Stagl's article

The background information provided in the previous sections concerning the hereditary, ascribed position of (most of) the elders as opposed to the ambitiously achieved position of the big-man, makes it easy to understand an opposition presented in Justin Stagl's article: the leadership system of the elders is characterized by social immobility and it produces a stable basis of authority; at the same time, the leadership system of the big-men is characterized by a high degree of social mobility and produces a fluctuating basis of power. Stagl posits that every form of political organization maintains itself through an interaction between authority and power; and in Melanesia this interaction is institutionalized in the dual leadership systems of elders and big-men (Stagl 1971:369). Although he unfortunately does not first come with his own definitions of "authority" and "power", his postulate — especially in view of the many examples which can be found of elders — would seem to bear logic. Power here can be seen as control over human, ideological and material resources; the big-man is able to get his followers to work, to fight and to contribute to feasts. Authority, on the other hand, would be legitimate power; in the case of the elders, they may effect many of the same activities as the big-men, and their power is legitimized by tradition.

Stagl carries his comparison further, into the realm of the economic foundations for leadership roles. He notes the traditional dichotomy by researchers of Melanesian exchange systems into exchange of subsistence goods and exchange of prestige goods, including status.
Without going deeply into the very complex systems of reciprocity and redistribution in Melanesian economy, it can be simplistically said that the elders are the managers, while the big-men are the enterprisers (Stagl 1971:370). It is the elders who direct the business on the hamlet and household level, for each household must produce its own consumption goods. For example, an elder might make a decision about whether a certain area of grassland is to be burned or not (Van Nieuwenhuijzen-Riedeman 1979:89). In essence, these elders have charge of all the community property. They can take decisions concerning bride prices, atonement money, agreements with neighboring groups, and the use of ritual. On the other hand, the big-men are the organizers of great feasts where goods are redistributed with “calculated charity” and where alliances are made (Stagl 1971:370). It takes a vigorous, manipulating and enterprising leader to carry out this kind of prestigious transaction. Still, the big-man, in spite of all his enterprising, does not accumulate wealth; his standard of living may even be poorer than that of others, because he binds followers to him by giving them goods or services. At the same time, the renown he receives from the feasts is shared by his followers. Thus, as Stagl points out, the elders manage the daily subsistence, while the big-men enterprise for the prestige of the group. The two kinds of leaders interact with one another within and beyond the borders of the groups and the political communities (Stagl 1971:371). Again, Stagl has come up with some interesting postulates; but just as Sahlins’ division of political systems for Melanesia/Polynesia was over-simplified, any simplistic model stands the chance of taking a beating when subjected to empirical evidence — and particularly in such a diversified area as Melanesia proves to be.

Stagl places a great deal of emphasis on the club house and the community gatherings in his discussion of political structure in Melanesia. In these club houses gather the two group levels: the descent groups represented by the elders, and the informal groups (factions) of followers attached to a big-man (Stagl 1971:372). The club house is the center for discussions and decision-making by the men on cults, feasts and war; it is the place where guests are received and where important transactions take place, for example those concerning the exchange of women or prestige goods. The big-man organizes the construction, improvement and maintenance of the club house. In the Siuai society of Bougainville, Oliver reports that a club house must be properly maintained in order to reflect continuing credit on its owner. Proper maintenance, then, means “giving feasts for it and in it” (Oliver 1955:378-379).

Codrington also elaborated on the club houses, which were present in all the villages on the Melanesian islands he observed. There the club was called suqe (Rivers called it sukwe); and to obtain a high
place in the suqe, a man had to have mana, be "a man of authority, a great man, one who may be called a chief". He noted that "in the absence of any more directly political arrangements among the people, it is plain that a valuable bond of society is furnished by the Suqe... in which a considerable power of control is vested in the elder and richer men, who can admit or reject candidates for the higher ranks as they see fit" (Codrington 1891:102-103). Stagl states (though he cites no examples) that when the club house community with its male core comprises a descent group, the leadership is in the hands of the elders; but more frequently the recruiting of members is free, and the big-man is the powerful figure in the club (Stagl 1971:372). A public gathering is open to women and children as well as men and is less secretive. But again, if the group is united by descent, the elders take the lead; if by common attachment to a big-man, it is he who can direct the activities.

Stagl cites Hogbin as having called the big-men the "mouthpieces of the elders" (Stagl 1971:373). It is interesting that this phrase was also used by Read in his pertinent article, 'Leadership and Consensus in a New Guinea Society', from which an example will be given concerning a community gathering. Here Read describes an event where the clan orator opens the proceedings "with the swagger which is the mark of the 'strong' man, for modesty is not regarded as a virtue" (Read 1964:245). This orator is obviously the big-man. Read says that while the debate is in progress the "elder statesmen", who very seldom engage actively in disputation, may move unobtrusively to the orator's side to give advice or to offer their views on the matter at hand. Yet, says Read, "the orator is not simply the mouthpiece of the elders" (Read 1964:245). Both Read and Stagl point out that what the orator thinks is clearly significant; the latter has the task of trying to reconcile many different points of view presented at the gathering.

In another book cited by Stagl (The High Valley, 1965:101), Read speaks of "the subtle authority of the elders behind the scenes" (Stagl 1971:373). The big-men work more directly on a public and group level, while the elders often work informally through discussions with important individuals. Decision-making may be in the hands of the big-men, particularly with regard to giving feasts, but here too, the influence of the elders can be felt: their authority in mobilizing the resources and the labor within the descent groups is needed (Stagl 1971:373). This point concerning the group's resources is an apparently important one. Hogbin mentions that throughout most of Melanesia in earlier days "the elders acquired both prestige and a reasonable chance of living at the maximum standard of comfort available by handing out the traditional valuables as bride price for their young kinsmen". They were honored for their generosity, and the young men offered labor to pay back the debt. With the introduction of cash
money, however, this advantageous position of the elders began to decline (Hogbin 1958:94).

Another feature of Stagl's article was to point out that similar forms of leadership systems can be found in other geographical areas. He mentions East Indonesia, Africa, South America and California. Though it is beyond the scope of the present article to go into any details of similarities, it is interesting to note that some astounding parallels can be found between Melanesian traditional leadership and leadership in Eastern Nigeria in the pre-colonial period. The article by Jones in the book *Politics and Leadership. A Comparative Perspective* (1979:45-65) will undoubtedly provide food for thought on the issue of elders and big-men.

Finally, Stagl makes an attempt to differentiate between elders and big-men according to descent groups and group size. He asserts that the leadership roles of elders and big-men form a single system in ethnographic reality; it is only through ethnological analysis that they can be separated. For descent groups and residence he concludes that a continuum could be made with segmentary lineage systems on one end (the Kapauku or the Orokaiva are examples), and local groups comprising members of different descent groups on the other end (the Dani or the Siuai are examples). In the former the status position of the elders and big-men is nearly the same; in the latter the distinction between ascribed and achieved positions is clearer. As far as Stagl is concerned, all Melanesian societies fall somewhere in the middle, for he sees no possibility for the existence of a complete unification or separation of these two leadership systems. Moreover, the more important a leader is, the more united are the status positions of elder and big-man in one figure (Stagl 1971:378).

Differentiation according to group size is also placed on what Stagl calls a spectrum. Dividing Melanesian societies into three categories according to linguistic similarities and size of the political communities, he places the stratified and relatively centralized, densely populated large groups on one side (around 5000 members of a political community; the leader may tend toward despotism in these); the egalitarian hunters and gatherers with marginal leadership and small political communities he places on the other side. The greater number of Melanesian societies are to be found in a middle group with political communities of several hundred members. Here the two different leadership roles of elders and big-men are to be found, while there is no differentiation in leaders' positions in the hunters/gatherers societies (Stagl 1971:378-379).

While such a typology does seem plausible, it is interesting to compare Stagl's divisions with those of Michael Allen. The latter places leadership systems in Melanesia on an evolutionary ladder with the elders of lineages being the leaders of the smallest and least
complex societies. In the intermediary form Allen places hereditary title holders (chiefs) and a rudimentary ranking of descent groups. This middle form is found in conjunction with both patrilineal and matrilineal descent, but he cites the most evolved examples as being found in the matrilineal Trobriand Islands. According to Allen, the most common form of polity and the one which has moved the farthest along the evolutionary scale, is the form to be found in the matrilineal societies such as east Aoba and south Bougainville; in these, big-men regularly are prevalent as self-made leaders (Allen 1981:36). Allen's rather complex "matrilineal" argument will not be analyzed in this paper, but the two viewpoints, both involving elders and big-men, were worth placing side by side.

What can be said with certainty is that the puzzle of Melanesian political systems has not yet been solved. Stagl satisfies himself by taking a leap into universality: he finds that the dualism of the two leadership systems — of elders and big-men — is characteristic for all levels of political organization (Stagl 1971:380).

VI. Conclusions

As so often is the case, he who seeks a simple solution must come to a rude awakening. So it is also with the roles of Melanesian elders and big-men. All that can be concluded with confidence is that labeling Melanesia as having "achieved leadership in a sphere of egalitarianism" is not only misleading but often incorrect. Whereas big-men have frequently taken the limelight in the literature of political anthropology concerning Melanesia, it is time that they be put in their proper perspective. It is time that the elders — who are also present and play an important role — be brought out from the shadow of the big-men and begin to take their deserved place beside the latter in the central focus.

Already in 1914 Rivers was discussing the hypothetical existence of gerontocracies in Melanesia, i.e. a ruling class of old men directing community conduct. Many of his ideas are merely interesting from a speculation point of view, but he also makes the observation that the condition in most parts of southern Melanesia at the time of his expedition (1898) appeared to be similar to a gerontocracy; the difference was that age had merged with the qualification of high rank in the *sukwe* club. Today Rivers' hypotheses of Melanesian gerontocracies do not sound so far-fetched in the light of research of small societies where power is in the hands of lineage elders (eg., Banaro, Ilahita Arapesh, Orokolo and Kove). Michael Allen's recent evolutionistic theory additionally provides a place for gerontocracies: at the simplest, least evolved range, where leadership is ascribed. Thus, the elder men may have held a prominent place in early Melanesian society, the remnants of which could be found at the time of the first
explorations by Western man and even up till today.

Far from being an area where achieved leadership is the rule with only few exceptions, hereditary leadership in Melanesia was shown to be a common phenomenon today in various forms — and it was probably even more common at the time of European contact. Many examples are available of lineage heads exercising leadership authority in the same societies where big-men occur (e.g., Siane, Kalauna, Kuma, Gahuku-Gama and Siuai). Moreover, even where big-men are prevalent, this position also has its hereditary aspects, as evidenced, for example, by the Hageners, the Kuma and the Dugum Dani. More varieties, such as primogeniture or the ascribed leader having some choice in which of his sons will be his successor, can be added to the lengthy list of hereditary leadership in Melanesia. The numerous examples serve to support the case for elders having a viable place in Melanesian leadership systems.

A certain amount of ambiguity persists with regard to the attitudes towards the aged in Melanesia. While it is undoubtedly the case that the elderly are ridiculed in some Melanesian societies, for example among the Chimbu, in other instances the aged are treated with exaggerated respect. Losing some vitality for warring or feast-giving may reduce prestige in many circumstances, but sufficient examples can be supplied of societies where seniority is a prerequisite for high status and leadership recognition; among these, the Lakalai are an illustration par excellence. It would appear that respect for the aged was closer to the rule than to the exception. Further, it is not unlikely that some of the references in the literature to diminishing respect with ripening age are due to declining mental capacities which can occur in the elderly; in these cases it would not be surprising that a leadership position would have to be relinquished. Another misconception may have been propagated by the fact that the image of the vital, ambitiously active big-man as Melanesian leader prevailed in the literature. Such an image drew attention away from the elders, who indeed occupied a place which should not be overlooked.

Finally, Justin Stagl’s article was worthy of consideration. By opposing social immobility/stability with social mobility/instability and managers with enterprisers; by looking at the roles of elders and big-men in the club house or the public gathering; by noting the subtle authority of the elders in the mobilization of local resources and labor; as well as by attempting to differentiate between groups according to type of descent and group size, Stagl’s article is commendable. His juxtaposition of the elders with the big-men in Melanesia sheds new light — but unfortunately not enough clear light — on the (sometimes contradictory) dualism of Melanesian leadership forms. It becomes obvious that the elders have been slighted in their due attention. The big-man caricature begins to give way to a more
complex picture where the hereditary elders play an undeniable role.

Just how essential the elders' role is in Melanesian polity is difficult to determine. It would seem that the place of these lineage heads may have been unjustly underplayed by researchers and theorists. Perhaps, in order to even the score, it is time to direct more research toward this specific hereditary leadership and — at least temporarily — to place the big-man in the shadow of the elders.

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