THE NEW CAPITALISTS OF THE NEW GUINEA HIGHLANDS

JENNIFER J. ERWIN

WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY


TO THOSE ACCUSTOMED TO THINKING OF NEW GUINEA AS A LAND OF CARGO CULTS, THE HIGHLAND SITUATION MAY BE SURPRISING, BUT CARGO CULTS ARE RELATIVELY RARE AND GENERALLY WEAK AND SHORT-LIVED IN THE HIGHLANDS. DR. FINNEY GOES AS FAR AS TO SUGGEST THAT CARGO-CULTISM AND CASH-CROPPING ARE COMPETITIVE WITH EACH OTHER AND ARE THEREFORE ALMOST MUTUALLY
exclusive. He says, "Where significant and reasonably rapid returns from cash-cropping and commerce are possible, rational economic effort prevails over the cargo cult" (Finney, 1968:329). This would seem to suggest that there were significant differences between the highlands (which facilitated rational economic effort in the immediate post-white situation) and the lowlands and islands (where cargo cults, with few exceptions were preferred).

This paper is an attempt to explore the reasons for this: that is, to try to discover why the native reaction to the whites should be so different in the highlands when compared to the rest of New Guinea. We must presume that in the pre-white situation there was something in the Highland ideology which was particularly amenable to the adoption of capitalistic activities. The main thesis of this paper is that it was the ideological differences concerning leadership qualifications of the Highland "big men" and the "big men" of the seaboard areas which caused the differences in their acceptance of Western ideology.

So far there have been few systematic attempts by anthropologists to explore the cultural or ideological difference between the two areas and then to formulate some cohesive results from the scattered unintegrated studies. The person who has gone farthest in trying to find differences between the highlands and lowlands is Dr. Peter Lawrence who, in a paper given at the Honolulu Conference in 1965, comes close to what we are seeking. "An immediate, if rough comparison can be made," he says, "between the two areas..." (Lawrence, 1967:73). He goes on to say that there is evidence that the cognitive systems of the Highlanders rely heavily on purely secular thought. Here we begin to get into differences in the ideologies of the two groups. By way of contrast, Lawrence says
of the seaboard societies, "There seems little doubt that in most cases religion dominates the cognitive system at the expense of purely secular thought" (Lawrence, 1967:73). He then goes on to relate this secular-religious distinction to differences in reaction to development. He states that in the highlands several factors, when coupled with the emphasis on secular thought, produce a low incidence of cargo cult and a fairly practical approach to Western concepts of economics and education. By way of contrast, the seaboard societies, where the cognitive systems are dominated to a greater extent by religion, show a high incidence of cargo cult and also "an unrealistic response to economic development and education" (Lawrence, 1967:74). He says many students in the seaboard areas are still searching for the magical key to the wealth of the Westerner.

This formulation at least brings the contrast into the foreground, but because it is a purely psychological analysis, anthropologists can scarcely be satisfied to leave it there. What we are seeking are basic ideological explanations for the differences in mentality between the peoples of the highlands and those of the seaboard. In other words, we need to find some significant ideological variable which will help to explain why cognition in one area is more receptive to Western political and economic ideas than it is in the other.

A hint of where to look for such a significant variable in ideology is given by Dr. Finney. Discussing the high degree of business enterprise shown by his ten leading Gorokans, he says:

"This development should not, however, come as a surprise to anthropologists who know New Guinea, where the emphasis on individual achievement is so marked in traditional society. Indeed, of the first two anthropologists [to work near Goroka], Read
(1959:435-436) foresaw the ready acceptance of innovations by ambitious and leading men and Salisbury (1962:137) virtually predicted their emergence as modern entrepreneurs. (Finney, 1968:328)

"Ambitious and leading men" refers of course to the so-called "big men" found in the highlands and elsewhere in Melanesia. Like most students, my knowledge of "big men" in Melanesia was first gained from reading Dr. Sahlins' well-known article, "Poor Man, Rich Man, Big Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia," which has been reprinted in several of the recent books of readings. As soon as I began reading the monographs on the highlands, I had a strong feeling that somehow, much of what Sahlins says about "big men" in Melanesia in general did not fit the highlands "big man" pattern. I have since been encouraged to pursue that line of argument upon discovering that at least three of the recent workers in the highlands explicitly reject parts of Dr. Sahlins' formulation, as far as their own tribe is concerned. Dr. Ploeg, working with the Wangulam says firmly that Sahlins' "formulation is not applicable in Wangulam society" (Ploeg, 1969:77-78), and Dr. Rappaport, working with the Maring says that they show no pattern "in which certain individuals, having achieved the status of 'big men', command or coerce the activities of the subordinates and vie with each other in feast giving" (Rappaport, 1967:28), thus repudiating one of the generalities made by Dr. Sahlins concerning all Melanesian "big men". The third highland critic of Sahlins is Dr. Meggitt, whose criticism follows exactly the same lines as I will take later in this paper; namely, that the highland "big men" confer benefits on their followers to a much greater extent than the Sahlins formulations would suggest, (Meggitt, 1967).
Thus encouraged, I have continued to look for differences between the "big man" pattern in the Highlands and that described by Dr. Sahlins as general for all of Melanesia. The variations I have found are rather subtle and therefore difficult to put into satisfactory words, due to the fact that they are ideological differences. The first of these involves an ideological atmosphere in which the concepts of egalitarianism and innovativeness are seen in conjunction with each other in the Highlands. The second difference between the two areas is related to those qualities which are sought in terms of choosing leaders. Lastly, a discussion of the importance of status and reputation in the Highlands will hopefully provide a third contrast.

**Egalitarianism and Innovativeness**

Authors like Salisbury, Lawrence, Read, and Sorenson have come quite close to expressing the point I wish to make here; however, they seem to have confused the issue for at least some of their readers. Dr. Claessen, for example, recently questioned Sorenson's reasoning when, in the article in *Current Anthropology*, Dr. Sorenson links egalitarianism with "an attitude of tolerance toward innovation" or "migration into a new land" (Sorenson, 1972:350). At first glance, the coupling of egalitarianism with innovativeness does appear to be incongruous. Upon closer examination, however, the relationship is not nearly as antithetical as it appears. If we take egalitarianism to mean the acceptance of innovations on the part of associated individuals, as long as they do not infringe to any great degree on the rights of others, then we can see how equality may be associated with individuality. In this respect, innovativeness is less likely to become selfish or
DESTRUCTIVE. IN EFFECT, THE HIGHLAND TRIBES, FOR THE MOST PART, REPRESENT A SORT OF COMBINATION OF COMMUNAL SPIRIT AND CAPITALISTIC ENDEAVOR. INNOVATIVE INDIVIDUALISM WITHOUT REGARD TO THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS IS APT TO RESULT IN AN ATTEMPT TO DOMINATE. ON THE OTHER HAND, PURE EGA LITARIANISM HAS NEVER BEEN PROVED TO EXIST, AT LEAST NOT TO MY SATISFACTION, BUT EVEN IF IT DID EXIST IN ITS PUREST AND MOST IDEALISTIC FORM, LITTLE WOULD BE ACCOMPLISHED IN TERMS OF INNOVATIVE PRODUCTION AND SUBSEQUENT ADVANCEMENT.

SEVERAL OF THE AUTHORS HAVE BEEN CONSCIOUS OF THIS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EGA LITARIANISM AND INNOVATIVENESS, AS I PREVIOUSLY STATED, BUT THEY HAVE FREQUENTLY BEEN MISUNDERSTOOD BECAUSE NONE OF THEM HAS STRESSED CLEARLY ENOUGH THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EGA LITARIAN COUNTERPART TO HIGHLAND INNOVATIVENESS. EGA LITARIANISM, IT WOULD SEEM, IS EXCEPTIONALLY STRONG IN THE HIGHLANDS AND VIRTUALLY ABSENT IN THE COASTAL AND ISLAND GROUPS, PARTICULARLY AS IT APPEARS IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEABOARD LEADERS AND THEIR FOLLOWERS. WITHOUT RESPECT FOR ONE’S CONTEMPORARIES, INNOVATIVENESS MAY GET OUT OF HAND, AS IT APPEARS TO HAVE DONE IN MANY OF THE SEABOARD AREAS.

EGALITARIANISM SHOWS UP AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON IN THE RESULTS OF A HIGHLY QUANTITATIVE STUDY MADE BY DR. LANGNESS ON SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AMONG THE NUPASAFA GROUP OF THE BENA BENA. IN AN ACTUAL COUNTING OF HEADS IN EACH OF THE NUPASAFA RESIDENCE GROUPS, LANGNESS DETERMINES THAT ABOUT FIFTY PERCENT OF ALL THE KNOWN AGNATES OF EACH GROUP ARE APPARENTLY RESIDING AND PARTICIPATING ELSEWHERE. HE CONCLUDES THEN, THAT AROUND FORTY-EIGHT PERCENT OF THE NUPASAFA GROUP ARE NON-AGNATES, MAKING IT IMPRUDENT TO SAY THAT THE NUPASAFA RESIDENTIAL GROUP IS PATRILINEAL IN A STATISTICAL SENSE AT LEAST. ONE OF THE CONCLUSIONS WHICH HE DRAWS
From his detailed study is the fact that "the maintenance of the group strength is as much a part of the ideology as the notion of patrilineal descent," that "the commitment to maintain the group strength can and does override descent as a recruitment principle," and "that rights conferred by residence equal those established by birth" (Langness, 1964:169).

These kinds of statements clearly point out the importance of an egalitarian view toward non-agnates moving into or residing in a clan or residence group, and the fact that they have opportunities equal to those of the agnatic members of the group. Finally, Dr. Langness says of the Bena Bena, "which group a man elects to reside in is a personal matter, as are the choices he makes with respect to other kinds of social interaction" (Langness, 1964: 171). In this statement we see cultural tradition influenced by the ideas of innovativeness, in that a man is free to make his own decision concerning his place of residence. The important thing to note here is the interaction between the two ideological concepts in terms of residence patterns. There would be no significance to having the freedom of choice if the agnatic members of the group refused to accept the non-agnates on equal terms. Conversely, there would be no purpose in a fluid residential pattern combined with equal rights for non-agnates, if no one in the highlands were innovative enough to move into a new residence group.

Speaking of the Mendi, Dr. Ryan discusses the failure of clan and residence affiliation to coincide and the general fluidity of Highland social structure and he says, "I must stress here, as in most other aspects of Mendi life the importance of individual choice" (Ryan, 1959:275).

Dr. Marie De Lepervanche expands the ideas concerning group solidarity and residential fluidity by saying that the "big men," not the ancestors, are the focal points for Highland residence groups.
Speaking of the Gururumba village wards she states, "The sources of community integration, Newman says, lie in the power structure and not in the kinship structure: people think of themselves as a group because of their ties of reciprocity and allegiance to a Big Man (1965:59-61)" (De Lepervanche, 1968:177). She makes it perfectly clear, however, that the principle of reciprocity applies equally to the "Big Men" in egalitarian Highland societies where "no man has absolute authority over others" (De Lepervanche, 1968:176).

Dr. Read discusses "two largely antithetical orientations in Gahuku-Gama culture" which he refers to as "the value of 'strength' on the one hand and 'equivalence' on the other" (Read, 1959:427). He also refers to these two values as being the criteria for choosing leaders. In discussing beliefs of the Gahuku-Gama, Read appears to be using these values once again when he states that the Gahuku-Gama believe that the supernatural power or force is simply there, although it is neither named nor personified in their language. However, they believe also that this power has to be tapped by the application of individual skill and knowledge to be useful. The power, they believe, is available to everyone (i.e. "equivalence" or egalitarianism), but that the power is useless to the individual who makes no effort to learn the means of access to it by personal effort (i.e. "strength" or innovativeness).

Sorenson provides us with another example of the operation of egalitarianism in conjunction with innovativeness when he discusses the receptive reaction of the Highland Fore to Western presence. He describes the Fore as being happy to use the Australian patrol officers as an excuse to stop warring, and thus give all those involved equal
ACCESS TO THE GOODS AND IDEAS BEING INTRODUCED BY THE NEWCOMERS. He says that at the same time, the Fore readily seized the opportunities which arrived with the Australians since they were already adapted to exploratory and innovative behavior.

A Dutch anthropologist, Dr. Oosterwal, writing on the people of the Tor, further emphasizes the importance of the egalitarianism enculturated into the lives of the highlanders. Dr. Oosterwal stresses the need for what he terms "consensus" by "big men" of the Tor, without which these leaders are reluctant to act at all. He gives several detailed instances of how action was paralyzed, sometimes for as much as a year, because no agreement could be reached as to which of several possible lines of action should be followed. Because there was no consensus, the "big men" abstained from leading (Oosterwal, 1961). This point has also been made by Dr. Rappaport in his ethnography of the Tsembaga (Rappaport, 1967).

Hopefully, this discussion and the subsequent examples have helped to explain why the ideological concepts of egalitarianism and innovativeness, which were already working together in traditional highland culture, made the peoples of the highlands more receptive than the seashore Melanesians to the opportunities and ideas provided by the white man.

ORATORY SKILLS AND MANAGEMENT ABILITY

The second consideration of ideological differences between the highland leaders and those of the seashore, and the subsequent explanation of the greater receptivity to the white man's ways by the highlanders centers around oratory skills and management.
ABILITY. WE SHALL NOW ATTEMPT TO SHOW AN IDEOLOGICAL SIMILARITY BETWEEN WESTERN CONCEPTS OF LEADERSHIP AND ECONOMICS AND THOSE OF THE HIGHLAND PEOPLES, AND FURTHER TO COMPARE LEADERSHIP QUALIFICATIONS IN THE HIGHLANDS WITH THOSE DESCRIBED BY DR. SAHLINS FOR MELANESIA IN GENERAL. MY RESEARCH HAS TENDED TO POINT UP ORATORY SKILLS AND MANAGEMENT ABILITY AS BEING THE TWO MOST PREVALENT QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP SOUGHT IN THE HIGHLANDS. IN REFERENCE TO ORATORY SKILLS, FOR EXAMPLE, DR. RAPPAPORT SAYS OF THE Tsembaga:

"WHETHER OR NOT A MAN IS A BIG MAN DEPENDS UPON HIS PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES. BIG MEN, IT IS SAID, HAVE 'TALK' (ČEP)... THEY HAVE OPINIONS... WHICH THEY CAN EXPRESS ARTICULATELY AND WHICH THEIR AUDITORS RESPECT." (RAPPAPORT, 1967:29)

IN TERMS OF MANAGEMENT ABILITY, RAPPAPORT DEFINES "BIG MEN" AMONG THE Tsembaga AS "THOSE WHO MORE FREQUENTLY THAN OTHER MEN INITIATE THE COURSES OF ACTION TO WHICH A GROUP COMMITS ITSELF" (RAPPAPORT, 1967:29).

DR. MARIE REAY CALLS THE SUBCLAN LEADERS OF THE KUMA "RHETORIC THUMPERS" AND SAYS THAT, "THE MEN WHO FILLED THESE ROLES PRACTISED A GENERALIZED LEADERSHIP WITH TWO FACETS, MANAGEMENT AND ORATORY" (REAY, 1964:244).

DR. SAHLINS: "BIG MEN," ON THE OTHER HAND, ARE DEFINITELY DESCRIBED AS COERCIVE ALMOST WITHOUT EXCEPTION, OFTEN TO THE POINT OF BEING EXTORTIONISTS. HIGHLANDS LITERATURE CONSISTENTLY DENIES THE EXISTENCE OF THIS TYPE OF LEADERSHIP BY ITS "BIG MEN," STATING MOST OFTEN THAT LEADERS IN THE HIGHLANDS DO NOT COERC, DEMAND, OR REQUIRE THE CAPITAL OR LABOR OF THEIR FOLLOWERS. GIVING ORDERS, IN FACT, IS CONSIDERED TO BE AN INSULT IN THE HIGHLANDS, ACCORDING TO DR. SORENSON. TRADITIONALLY, HIGHLAND LEADERS SUGGEST COURSES OF ACTION RATHER THAN GIVE ORDERS. AS TRADITIONAL "BIG MEN" BEGIN TO
Look more like business entrepreneurs, in the post-white setting, we begin to see some exceptions to this form of leadership. For example, Dr. Finney says of his Gorokans that on occasion some have used their government-appointed positions to force labor or monetary support from their followers, but this has only occurred rarely, and "the leaders have not been able to maintain the flow of free labor for long" (Finney, 1968:325).

Dr. Paula Brown has reported what she terms "despotism" among some post-white Chimbu leaders who were appointed to positions of leadership by the Australians, but according to the bulk of Highland literature, this phenomenon, if it occurs at all, appears to be the exception rather than the rule. Furthermore, she, like Finney, is referring to the post-white situation. From all indications, despotic leadership continues to fail in the Highlands because these people refuse to follow this sort of dictatorial rule. Moreover, the government-appointed headmen (luluaiais) can be forced into action now by the white patrol officers; whereas, in pre-white days, as we have already said, no one could compel the "Big Man" to act unless he wanted to.

At any rate, no writer in the Highlands has described a "Big Man" even half as despotic as the leader, Bumbu, described by Dr. Hogbin in his ethnographic account of the coastal Basuma village (Hogbin, 1951).

All this evidence seems to further point up my contention that "Big Men" in the Highlands are most frequently those who are the most gifted orators and the most successful managers, but, leaders in the Highlands do not make it to the top rung unless they express the inherent personality traits associated with egalitarian and innovative ideology.
If we wish to get into a cultural change study of highland leadership, a look at specific highland leaders during the transitional period between the traditional time and the time of the introduction of Australian rule is enlightening. This is especially helpful when we are attempting to analyze differences between highland "big men" and those of the coastal regions. Read contrasts a traditional leader, Makis, with a transitional leader-type, Goluwaizo, in his discussion of the Gahuku-Gama (Read, 1965). Marie Reay makes a similar contrast between traditional Kuma leader, Konangil, and post-Australian leader, Nopnop (Reay, 1964). A third contrast is made by Paula Brown between traditional Chimbu leader, Kondom, and a more Westernized leader, Siwi (Brown, 1972). In all cases, the traditional leader was as we have described him, but the three post-white leaders appointed by the Australians were clearly inclined to act differently - more despotic, as in the case of Goluwaizo, or more personally ambitious, as in the cases of Nopnop and Siwi.

In pre-white days, some of the main functions of a "big man" were to arrange and manage pig-feasts (where an individual in one group exchanged with an individual in another group), to arrange the exchange of bride wealth, and to organize initiation ceremonies and other ritual activities. Since, in these functions, one of the main problems was a matter of timing, the purpose being to get all the exchanges correlated in terms of date and location, the best leaders were those able to demonstrate managerial skill of a high order.

By way of example, Dr. Darcy Ryan says that among the Mendi he has seen up to a thousand pigs slaughtered for one of these inter-group displays attracting thousands of visitors, an occasion
WHICH MAY NECESSITIZE FIVE YEARS OF COMPLICATED GIFT TRANSACTIONS
BY THE INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANT DONORS, IN ORDER TO ACQUIRE THE
NECESSARY PIGS (RyAN, 1959). THIS IMPLIES THAT THE "BIG MEN"
RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FINAL SLAUGHTER OF A THOUSAND PIGS AND THE
COORDINATING OF THE ACTIVITIES OF THE THOUSANDS OF ATTENDANTS HAVE
TO DEMONSTRATE A VERY HIGH LEVEL OF ORGANIZATIONAL ABILITY, AND WE
MUST NOT FORGET THAT ORATORY PLAYED A TREMENDOUS PART IN THE SUCCESS
OF THESE OCCASIONS.

STATUS AND REPUTATION

THIRDLY, AND FINALLY, THE "BIG MEN" IN THE HIGHLANDS IN PRE-
WHITE DAYS SHOWED AN EXTREME DESIRE TO ACHIEVE STATUS AND TO ENHANCE
THEIR REPUTATIONS AS GREAT LEADERS OR SUCCESSFUL INNOVATORS. THEIR
ATTITUDES IN THIS RESPECT WERE MUCH MORE AKIN TO THE HIGH DEGREE OF
STATUS-CONSCIOUSNESS WHICH WE KNOW TO BE PREVALENT IN THE UNITED STATES
THAN WERE THOSE OF THE "BIG MEN" OF THE SEABOARD AREAS. HOWEVER, THE
HIGHLAND ATTITUDES TOWARD STATUS, AS OPPOSED, I BELIEVE, TO THE
ATTITUDES IN THE UNITED STATES FALL WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF EGALITARIAN
IDEOLOGY. ALL OF THE LABELS THAT ARE COMMONLY USED TO TRY TO DESCRIBE
THE WESTERN ACHIEVEMENT-SYNDROME CAN BE APPLIED TO THE PRE-WHITE
ACTIVITIES OF THE HIGHLANDERS, AND, INDEED, MANY OF THOSE LABELS
HAVE BEEN USED ALREADY BY ANTHROPOLOGISTS. THUS, MARIE REAY, AND
SHE WAS ONE OF THE FIRST TO WORK IN THE HIGHLANDS, SAYS OF THE KUMA:

"THE KUMA 'BIG MEN' OR 'MEN OF STRENGTH' WHO
CAN COMMAND MUCH WEALTH ARE ENTREPRENEURS. THEIR
PROFIT IN THESE TRANSACTIONS (I.E. PIG-FEASTS)
IS INCREMENTAL REPUTATION. INTANGIBLE AS
REPUTATION MAY SEEM, IT IS THE ULTIMATE THAT
THE KUMA SEEK THROUGH THE PURSUIT OF SECULAR
VALUES." (REAY, 1959:96)
Says Dr. Bulmer of the Kyaka:

"Moka exchanges are a particularly important field for individual enterprise in gaining power and prestige in a social system where leadership and influence are almost entirely achieved rather than ascribed." (Bulmer, 1960: 252)

Space does not permit any more examples, but those given surely show how important it was in pre-white days for Highland leaders to seek reputation and prestige fairly, through what Finney calls "conspicuous investment," as opposed to Veblen's term "conspicuous consumption" in reference to the display of wealth in America.

CONCLUSIONS

In light of statements such as those just mentioned and others already quoted in this paper, I believe we can go further than Dr. Lawrence (1967) has gone in defining the ideology of the Highlands. He said that in the Highlands, cognitive systems placed a great deal of emphasis on secular thought. My conclusions are that the emphasis on secular thought can be broken down into at least three ideological components: (1) egalitarianism associated with innovativeness, (2) oratorical skills coupled with management ability, and (3) flexibility in the pursuit of status and reputation. Westerners may have difficulty understanding an ideological system in which these three elements are combined, but this is why exploring Highland ideology is so frustrating and yet so fascinating to many anthropologists.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

BROWN, Paula


Bulmer, R.N.H.


De Lepervanche, Marie


Finney, Ben R.


Hogbin, H. Ian


Langness, L. L.


Langness, L. L. and Weschler, John C.


Lawrence, Peter


Meggitt, M. J.


Newman, P. O.


Oosterwal, G.

1961 People of the Tor: A Cultural Anthropological Study on the Tribes of the Tor Territory. Asen, Netherlands, Koninklijke Van Gorcum.
Ploeg, A.

Rappaport, Roy A.

Read, Kenneth E.

Reay, Marie

Ryan, D. J.

Sahlins, Marshall D.

Salisbury, R. F.
1962 From Stone to Steel. Melbourne, Australia, Melbourne University Press.

Sorenson, E. Richard