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## **Afterword: In Search of Melanesian Order**

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**Abstract:** These essays explore three contemporary forms of order in Papua New Guinea: improvised village courts, a nursing school curriculum including village practicums, and student boycotts and strikes. My comments assess these new sorts of order as reflected against earlier ethnographic accounts of Papua New Guinean societies as well as those elsewhere in Melanesia. This often has taken the region's social groups and lineages, religions and belief systems, and most recently the Melanesian state itself to be weak, messy, and inconstant. I ask how culturally "Melanesian" are these contemporary examples of order and disorder, and find significant continuities in their underlying nostalgia for an imagined, more orderly past, in beliefs about causes of disorder, and in strategies and remedies to order and reorder everyday life.

### **Keywords**

Papua New Guinea; Melanesia; Social Order; Disorder; Social Movements

These essays present three analyses of contemporary forms of order in Papua New Guinea: improvised village courts, a nursing school curriculum including village practicums, and university student boycotts and strikes. Order, or the absence thereof, has been an enduring topic in ethnographic accounts of Melanesia societies in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere in the region. Melanesia has been branded with flexible lineages and social groups, diffuse religions and belief systems, and most recently with weak, even failed, states. These various arenas of disorderliness all might be reflexes of some deep structural irregularity—what anthropologists once called “loose structure” (e.g., Watson 1965). Melanesian social life, as many others have noted, lacking firm hierarchy, permissive of personal competition, suffering sorcery and witchcraft, and boasting a multiplicity of genealogies and charter myths, is messy. Nonetheless, groups, communities, and organisations manage to cohere (for some time being, anyway) although they often do so backgrounded by constant complaint, backbiting, and griping about all sorts of local disorder, as well as persistently innovated designs to find or make more robust social orders.

In a world of global flows, creeping individualism, sectarian conflict, and economic struggle, one might question the particular Melanesianness of social disorder and of specific strategies to rectify this. Anthropologists have weighed likely mechanisms that produce social order in stateless societies since the early days of Lewis Henry Morgan, who contrasted *societas* systems (based in persons) with *civitas* states (based in territory) (Colson 1974; Golub, this issue). With no sovereigns, no police, no courts in the former, why do people behave? Stateless social order, insofar as it exists, sediments out of custom, kinship obligation, exchange systems, dispute settlement moots, sorcery fear, sundry rewards and punishments, and much more.

Order can be a puzzle even now after states have occupied all worldly territory save Antarctica, *societas* having yielded to *civitas*. All sorts of disorder, and projects for ordering, pop up everywhere. One might find local justice initiatives, university student strikes, cultural competency units in educational curricula, and political machinations in general almost anywhere one looks. In these case studies, then, just how distinctive is Melanesian order? My summary comments reflect these three Papua New Guinean examples of contemporary order-making order against classic Melanesian ethnography, in search of cultural continuities in the ways that people today battle chaos, seeking better organisation and social harmony.

### **Disorderly Melanesia**

As ethnographic regions go, Melanesia has been particularly defined by all sorts of social looseness, or messiness. Early ethnographers in island Melanesia liked to blame disorder and confusion on native irrationality. Codrington, for example, hoping to outline a description of Melanesian religion grumbled, ‘[t]he ideas of the natives are not clear upon many points, they are not accustomed to present them in any systematic form among themselves’ (1891, 116). W. H. R. Rivers, similarly, applying his genealogical method, complained that some island kin systems ‘form such confused, and at first sight lawless, masses of detail that without a key they might seem only to mirror the vagueness and confusion which many believe to be characteristic of the thought of primitive man’ (1914 vol. 2, 11). Not long afterward, Rivers’

student Bernard Deacon blamed depopulation, colonialism, and plantation labour recruitment for disorderly villages on Malekula:

Depopulation makes intensive work here impossible, and more than depopulation, the break-up of groups, owing to recruiting for other islands and concentration on plantations and mission areas. . . The result is that the pattern and flow of native life is broken; the body politic is a desiccated corpse. (1934, 22)

Order worry continued when anthropologists later made their way into the highland valleys of New Guinea. R. A. Barnes, in his landmark article ‘African Models in the New Guinea Highlands’ (1962), found only untidy patrilineality rather than distinctly defined and orderly African-style descent groups. He blamed Melanesian individualism: ‘This multiplicity [of kin group allegiance] in New Guinea is largely a result of individual initiative and is not due to the automatic operation of rules’ (1962, 7). A decade before, Jean Guiart on Tanna also impugned Melanesians for cultivating a disorderly society:

Un esprit chagrin pourrait condenser les résultats obtenus en disant que nous avons trouvé seulement du flou, de l’à-peu-près. En des termes plus objectifs, il nous est apparu impossible de décrire un système social ordonné et rigoureux. L’éparpillement de l’autorité apparaît comme une conséquence locale, poussée jusqu’à l’absurde, d’une tendance générale dans l’archipel. [A humbled spirit might condense the results of research by saying that we have discovered only flux, little more. In the most objective terms, it appeared to us impossible to describe an ordered and rigorous social system. The scattering of authority appears as a local consequence, pushed nearly to absurdity, of a general tendency in the archipelago (my translation)]. (1956, 107)

As would Barnes, Guiart blamed Melanesian propensity for persons to escape structure. Tanna, he said, was ‘la royaume de l’individualisme’ (1956, 115). Unsettled by New Guinea’s flexible descent rules and fluid kin groups, anthropologists moved to locate structure and order in the region’s exchange systems and practices. Exchange, however, creates influence more than it does authority; influence, while a significant source basis of power, does require constant cultivation and can evaporate more quickly than official and status-based authority. Those troublesome individuals can escape their one-time betters and their demands by balancing exchange debts, setting forth to stake their own kingdom claims and to tell their own stories. Schwimmer concluded his analysis of exchange-generated structure among the Orokaiva with the warning: “one must always be prepared to see a positive cycle of reciprocity break down and a negative one begin, often in a most violent manner” (1973, 215).

Just as Melanesian descent and local groups are disordered, so are their religions, if indeed messy sets of overlapping beliefs should be labelled ‘religion’. Ron Brunton, in his 1980 article ‘Misconstrued Order in Melanesian Religion’, accused fellow Melanesian ethnographers of wrongly reading too much order into Melanesian religion. Order, first,

should ideally be separated into at least four different components: the degree of elaboration, or comprehensiveness, of a religious system; its internal coherence; the uniformity of beliefs and practices; the extent to which elements of the system persist over time. (Brunton 1980, 122)

Melanesians religions are woefully lacking on all counts. They, so Brunton claimed, are barely elaborated, incoherent, multifarious, and unstable. ‘Many Melanesian religions are weakly integrated, poorly elaborated in a number of sectors, and subject to a large degree of individual variation and a high rate of innovation and obsolescence’ (1980, 112).

Furthermore, the independent Melanesian states are likewise fraught with fragility and weakness. The Southwest Pacific, at least in some quarters, is denigrated as a troubled arc of instability. Whether or not one accepts “weak state” arguments, one certainly finds in these case studies some evidence of patchy and irregular governance. Where once worries fixated on the mechanics of shamolic descent and residence groups, concerns have escalated to fix on urban riots, military coups, secessionist movements, and failed states incapable of carrying out normal bureaucratic functions. ‘Forced decolonization of the Melanesian states was hurried, resulting in underdeveloped states and poor nation building. It created weak states that have become weaker’ (Evans 2012, 30). Assigning blame for such failure, others have looked beyond hurried decolonisation to unhappy elements of Melanesian culture itself.

Even more, in roughly the same years as weak state worries were spreading, anthropologists busily worked to decompose the Melanesian person. Whereas Guiart and Barnes, writing at the heyday of anthropological modernism, could blame Melanesian individualism for feeble social structures, that individual and his agency melted away in new, sophisticated ethnographic readings of the Melanesian person. No more individual, Melanesians are more finely known as messy and nebulous ‘dividuals’ encompassing in their very persons the fluids, nourishments, and identities of others, not to mention bits and pieces of nature itself. In an often cited quote, Marilyn Strathern drawing on her research in Papua New Guinea argued that Melanesian dividual identity is always already conjoined with others:

Far from being regarded as unique entities, Melanesian persons are as dividually as they are individually conceived. They contain a generalized sociality within. Indeed, persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them. The singular person can be imagined as a social microcosm. (1988, 34)

As goes Melanesian groups and organisations, so goes Melanesian persons. Those still with a penchant for individualism might well take ‘plural and composite’ persons to be inchoate and disorganised. No matter the exact character of their deficient personhood, rampant individualism or microcosmic dividualism, Melanesians invite ethnographic reproach for ongoing social disarray. They often likewise blame themselves.

### **Nostalgic Order**

Islanders, too, and not just ethnographers, look around and lament disorderly persons and disorderly communities, if not their own at least among their neighbours. They blame disorder on ineffectual government (Schwoerer), corrupt politicians and bureaucrats (Andersen, Syndicus), faulty local *kastom* (Andersen), obstreperous others, and even their own sinful selves. Many have stories of former, more orderly but now vanished worlds. To some degree, this reflects widespread presumption of cultural degradation (although traditional temporal concepts were more often cyclical or spiral than lineal, see Gell 2001). In societies, where knowledge is valued but stored principally in living memory, people often entertain a degradationist view of history. The past is a heroic past. Once common special powers and forces no longer exist. The elders of a community, who control its most valuable information, through mischance or a perverse venality, manage to die right and left without passing along important secrets to their heirs (Lindstrom 2007, 218).

One finds such nostalgic social order on Tanna (where Guiart failed to find actual order). The Tannese ‘typically represent their past as consisting of a series of disjunctions. An initial period of peace and harmony (called *Niprou*) collapsed into an era of dualistic hostility (the moieties Numrukwen and Koiameta), which itself was remade as Sipi versus Manauaua within historic times’ (Lindstrom 1990, 189; see Bonnemaïson 1994, 142). Similar mythic appreciation of more orderly epochs pops up in Papua New Guinea. Murik Lakes elders, for instance, nostalgically lament eroding village solidarity in an ‘ongoing discourse of rupture that has been voiced by senior generation after senior generation’ (Lipset 2006, 252). Not far away, older Gumu-Samane men ‘remember the men’s house system as a perfect machine of social order’ (Handman 2015, 160). ‘Stories they tell of men’s house practices present a world in perfect order, uncluttered by the kinds of daily disturbances that any central institution has to bear’ (2015, 165).

These oldsters blame youth, creeping modernity, but also inherent local flaws for the dissolution of once orderly village society. That ancestral past may or may not actually have been better ordered, although it looks that way from current perspective. More recent history, too, can look better and better as some compare firm colonial order with weak postcolonial anarchy. Memory of the days of Australian, or British, or French authority can shine brighter in comparison with present-day mayhem. Schwoerer (this issue) reports ‘a widespread nostalgia among the older men and women for the “good old days” of the Australian Colonial Administration’ (see also Andersen and Syndicus, this issue).

### **Disorderly Roots**

Although rightly criticised, the old opposition between chiefly Polynesia and egalitarian Melanesia does hold some water. In Melanesia, local social orders and hierarchies tend not to flow down from one generation to the next but must rather be constantly recreated. Even where hierarchy exists, leaders cajole rather than order their followers. Back to Tanna again, and back to the beginning of ethnographic observation in Melanesia, James Cook in August 1774 complained: ‘they all called themselves *Areekees* (or kings); but I doubt if any of them

had the least pretensions to that title over the island. It had been remarked, that one of these kings had not authority enough to order one of the people up into a cocoa-nut tree, to bring him down some nuts' (1777, 71).

Some Islanders see the limitations in local forms of authority, and they work to strengthen these. A few have advocated replacing national parliamentary systems with presidential. Since the 1970s, men across the region have also self-nominated themselves as chiefs, or *jifs*, hoping to burnish their local orders and get a few more people up into those trees. But, alongside weak hierarchy, they can blame themselves for creating disorder. People go their own way. They are jealous of others' success. Youth don't listen.

We might here reconsider the chronicles of Melanesia's famous cargo cults as exemplars of temporary but typically unsuccessful social orders. According to cargo cult exegeses, movement followers often blamed themselves to explain cult failures. Why did cargo never arrive? Why did movements collapse? The disillusioned suspect sneaky sorcery, disruptive sexual relations, or lack of faith as eroding cultic order. Peter Worsley thus reported on the failure of Madang's Eemasang movement: 'The root of the trouble was sin. Sin must be rooted out by public confessions and public punishment' (1968, 213). Kenelm Burridge (another individualist) traced failure of the Mambu movement to guilt: 'The cult has failed in its explicit object because of guilt, or, the failure of the cult is evidence of the existence of guilt' (1960, 38). Or, 'after the fact, cultists typically attribute the *failure* of their world to transform, or cargo to arrive, to cracks in totalized unity and to the baneful influence of dissidents and covert sorcery' (Lindstrom 2011, 262). Fear of sorcery in particular undermines order, but too much order can spark suspicion of sorcery. It is telling that the improvised Tairora courts avoid adjudicating sorcery accusations as too unruly to tackle (Schwoerer, this issue).

The Melanesians surveyed in these analyses locate roots of disorder in weak leadership and court systems (Schwoerer); in unruly rural communities (Andersen); in spoiled university students (Syndicus); and in corrupt or ineffective bureaucrats and politicians. In good Melanesian fashion, much order concern focuses on loose talk—on insults, swearing, slander, and disrespectful gossip. Skilled oratory attracts and helps create order and organisation: Syndicus (this issue) observed that 'elaborate performances of different styles of speech' were the heart of student assemblies. Andersen's health workers (this issue) struggled to style an effective health education lecture. But jealous talk and insult equally undermine order. People open their mouths to gossip, to complain, to criticise, to disrespect or to insult, and disorder results: Tairora villagers sue one another for slander (Schwoerer, this issue); PNG Highlands health workers must mind what they say lest they accidentally insult villagers who might erupt and attack (Andersen, this issue).

Ordering becomes even more difficult when people are displaced. Concern with persons in place is a second, good Melanesian practice. During Goroka University student strikes, local (or *asples*) students dominated pressure groups that ordered around fellow students (Syndicus, this issue). Health workers, however, who give orders when away from home, are in a trickier position. Better order, so people hope, will come when everyone returns to

kastom, or retreats home to their proper ground, or respects respect, or follows Godly or ancestral commands.

### **Ordering Strategies**

We can agree with ethnographers and with Melanesians themselves that their persons and communities can be disorderly. This does not imply, however, lack of strategies or remedies to order or reorder everyday life. These three analyses recall certain enduring ordering strategies that people in the region have long deployed.

*Divisions of Authority:* In (in)dividualist Melanesia, there may often be too many cooks in the kitchen, all chiefs no Indians, but people strategically devise ways of giving everyone something to do, each a part in an organised structure. A local account of traditional leadership duties on Tanna makes this clear:

The role of each individual in a group was defined by the place he occupied inside the canoe during a voyage. TUPUNUS is the person who stays in the center of the canoe. He is the agrarian magician ... he guarantees the group's survival because he controls the secrets of edible plants ... The IARAMARA sits in the front of the canoe ... he is a lord. He is the person who one puts up front, to strategically conceal the authority figures more essential in the canoe's composition. The helmsman or 'voice of the canoe', the IANI NIKO, directs the canoe. He is the captain and sits at the rear. (Iati 2012, 66, transl from French)

Elsewhere in Papua New Guinea,

The men's house had a number of specific roles (overall leader, ritual garden specialist, ritual poison specialist, negotiator, and so forth, with any person lacking a specific role considered a warrior). Young men would be slotted into one role or another at the end of the male initiation rituals. (Handman 2015, 29)

Descriptions of Melanesian social movements, and the temporary structures they achieved, similarly reported shared responsibility for creating order, as Peter Worsley long ago noted:

The sects are also fond of ranks, titles, offices, badges, etc., as we have seen in the case of the Fijian 'cricket' clubs, the Mansren movement, the Marching Rule movement, and several others. The psychological satisfactions which these honours provide for frustrated individual leaders will be obvious enough, but there are deeper social reasons for the constant splitting and the 'plethora of offices'. (1968, 241)

The same divided leadership option characterised Tanna's Unity Movement (an offshoot of its long-lived John Frum sect):

Following the recommendations of the Spirit, [the prophet] Fred created a police force that monitored the authorized colors (green, red, yellow, black, white) and their attribution to each adept or group of adepts. Red is the color reserved to his guards

(police). These guardians of the faith (security officers of the colors) are permanently mobilized (on duty all the time) to control the roads (to check all roads) ... Black is the color of *kastom*, of those who are associated symbolically with the principal crops (yam, taro, manioc) ... Green is the color of those connected with John Frum, with all the myths and rituals that emanated from him. White is dedicated to the Spirit itself. A symbol both of light and the Church ... Yellow is, at least according to Fred's detractors, an attribute of *Tangalua* [traditional sea snake/spirit]. But for Fred, this is the dominant color of the rainbow of Unity (Tabani 2008, 192-193, transl from French).

One notes similar divisions of leadership in Goroka student movements (some serve as orators; others lead the pressure group, Schworer this issue), and a more contentious gendered division of leadership among Andersen's student nurses.

*Fences and Cults*: If Melanesian order is often fragile and fleeting, its chances improve within groups that are tightly bounded and controlled. Strathern noted this function of men's group fences:

When men build fences around cult areas they create a unity both between themselves and in relation to the spirits with whom they are joined ... In so far as men's activity is thereby seen as the deliberate binding together of persons whose social orientations are otherwise diffuse and variously directed, the unifying nature of the collective action is inherently energizing in making the participants other than what they were. (1988, 296)

Fences circumscribe personal particularities, boiling these away into a unified group identity. One might expect the same of more recent social movements, cargoistic or otherwise, whether or not they erect actual fencing. Within cult confines (and to these we can add some Christian congregations) everyone and everything is better unified, at least for the moment.

Worsley's concluding functionalist reading of Melanesian movements was that 'the main effect of the millenarian cult is to overcome these divisions and to weld previously hostile and separate groups together into a new unity' (1968, 228). These cultic unities transcended established connections of kinship or place. Unifying prophets command followers 'to forget the narrow loyalties of the past, to abandon those things that divide them and to practice a new moral code of brotherly love' (1968, 237). Worsley continued:

It is for this reason that we find such heavy emphasis laid in all the cults upon a new morality. The social order is to be transformed by radical political and economic changes. But the new order must also have a new morality ... All prophets, therefore, stress moral renewal: the love of one's cult-brethren; new forms of sexual relationship; abandonment of stealing, lying, cheating, theft; devotion to the interests of the community and not merely of the self. (1968, 251)

To order new moralities, movement leaders everywhere devised ritual to coordinate action, to regulate their followers' bodies, times, and spaces. Collective singing, dancing, and marching



were key acts of ordered togetherness. Early anthropologist E. W. P. Chinnery, to give one example, so described Papua New Guinea's Kekesi Rites:

the songs I am giving you must be sung regularly by the people, otherwise trouble will come to you ... When going to and from the gardens the people are not to straggle along, but to fall in, similar to the police working for the Government. The following commands may be given to the people whilst working in the garden or coming to and from the same: *A kush! A sha! A shun man! A shun be! A hon de shen! A som!* (Chinnery 1917, 452-453)

We can note reflections of these syncopated techniques in the analyses offered here. Goroka student strikers congregated at the *lukaot* forum and the fused crowd synchronically took up shouting in unison (Syndicus, this issue).

To ensure that followers behave themselves, and new order is maintained, movement leaders once employed 'police' or pressure troops to bring them around, at least until they ran away to escape those movement fences. Back to Tanna, both early Christian and John Frum movement leaders protected new orders by innovating police forces. They also convened courts where they sat in judgment to try and punish sinners and the disorderly (Lindstrom 1990, 39, 41). Lukewarm university strikers likewise risked being pulled back in line by their pressure group peers (Syndicus, this issue). Tairora leaders declared themselves judges of disorder (Schwoerer, this issue).

*Kastom, God, and State*: Those striving for order in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere in Melanesia can also call on higher authority to legitimate the enterprise. Ancestral authorities have always been useful, the spirits liable to strike dead the unruly. Nowadays, to such customary authorities one adds also God and the State. Worsley described movement prophets thus projecting their new orders 'on to the supernatural plane' (1968, 237), and those in the order business continue to evoke ancestors, and kastom at large, today. PNG nursing curricula encouraged cultural competency, or at least respect for kastom, in hopes of finding more order. Tairora local judges busied themselves codifying a 'customary law' book to justify their court decisions. Doubling down, they also sought to link themselves, discursively at least, with the distant authority of the state alongside holy writ (Schwoerer, this issue), as did Goroka student strikers who appealed to virtuous state authorities to combat corrupt university bureaucrats (Syndicus, this issue).

Appeals to God, too, supplement evocations of ancestors. That Bibeori village book of offences echoed the Ten Commandments. Goroka nurse educators likewise advocated God's harmonies to combat social disorder and confusion (Andersen, this issue). Schwoerer (this issue) likewise notes the church as a fenced (in Strathern's terms) focus of local order. When such local orders are shaky, people can at least hope that the invisible hand of kastom, of the state, or of God might possibly reach down to settle affairs.

### Still Searching

Melanesian order, social and otherwise, can come and go. My main cases in point here are the region's celebrated 20<sup>th</sup> century social movements, most of which have long melted away. And so have fissiparous kin groups, villages (see Rodman 2013), political blocs, religious congregations, and interpersonal hierarchies. Promises of future good order always lie in the shadow of present disarray. This is not a region where much concrete structure drops down from previous generations to constrain the present. Instead, people busy themselves making order as they go. Filer, challenging the "myth of Melanesian communism" argued: 'Melanesian communities have always been on the verge of disintegration, even in pre-colonial times, and it has always taken special qualities of leadership, in each succeeding generation, to prevent them from splitting apart at the seams' (1990, 9), but that leaders who cultivate compromise can generate at least temporary islands of order within restless seas of 'perpetual turmoil and virtual anarchy' (1990, 10). Even in the most chaotic times, Melanesians have order in mind. They reenergise mythic orders of the past; they write up the law; they draw on much actual ordering experience.

These particular examples of contemporary order in Papua New Guinea may likewise be fleeting. Relations between Papua New Guinean health workers and their rural clients might remain tense despite honest nursing student professions of cultural respect. Rural people create precarious laws and courts, mimicking yet inviting a distant state which won't intercede. University student strikes boom, and then they fizzle, leaving always the possibility of another one. Although some final and lasting order is elusive, "order-making projects" (Golub, this issue) are constant. Established orders may be unstable, but tenacious ordering keeps people Melanesian.

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