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ISBN: 9780080970868

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Big Man, Anthropology of
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Abstract

Referring to achieved leadership (often contrasted with inherited ‘chieflty’ rank), ‘big man’ has come to stand for a type of political organization closely associated with, although not limited to, Melanesia. This article locates the term’s early uses, tracks developing analyses, and notes the shifting place of these studies vis-à-vis larger scholarly arguments. Contemporary trends include waning interest in classic comparative typology building in favor of historically and culturally situated understandings of personhood and social action: attentive to gendered and emergent class relations, to nation-making and governance dilemmas, and to the impacts of international agencies and corporate interests on local communities and environments.

Referring to an informal style of achieved leadership, the term big man has come to stand for a type of polity distinguished, for example, from political systems with formally elected offices or inherited ranks and statuses. It is closely associated with, although not limited to, the ethnography of Melanesia (islands in the southwestern Pacific located just north and east of Australia, for example Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji). While prominent in regional ethnography, political anthropology, and social evolutionary theorizing from the 1950s through the 1980s, this construct has become less visible as a focus of research in recent years. Contemporary work reflects a methodological turn away from typology building (and the functional and evolutionary/developmental theories it served). Emphasis has shifted toward historically and culturally situated understandings of personhood and social action: attentive to gendered and emergent class relations, to nation-making and governance dilemmas, and the impacts of international agencies and corporate interests on local communities and environments.

Early Work and Developing Analyses

Big man is the Anglicization of a descriptive phrase bikpela man (and variants) – meaning ‘prominent man’ – common in Melanesian lingua francas (like Tok Pisin and Bislama) and analogous phrases or terms of reference in that region’s hundreds of local languages, e.g., nema asori on Tanna (Lindstrom, 1981: p. 902) and ol onda in the Mendi Valley (Lederman, 1986b). The term was widely adopted in post–World War II (WWII) Melanesianist anthropology (e.g., Oliver, 1955; Read, 1959; Meggitt, 1967) to refer to male leaders whose political influence is achieved by means of public oratory, informal persuasion, and the skillful conduct of both private and public wealth exchanges. The anthropology of big men comprises both regional ethnography (the sociocultural interpretation of case materials derived from extended field research) and – as this ethnography is puzzling from a comparative perspective – theoretical debate.

Ethnographic Foundations

While a variety of political systems – involving both inherited and achieved positions, and both ritual performances and political/economic displays – have been observed in Melanesia (as throughout the island Pacific) from the early colonial period to the present day, the big man style of leadership is a notable feature of political life in highland New Guinea (comprising independent PNG and the Indonesian province of Papua, also known as West Papua), Bougainville, parts of the Solomon Islands (e.g., Guadalcanal), and elsewhere. Highland New Guinea in particular is distinctive, in anthropological’s cross-cultural ethnographic record, for high population densities and communities loosely organized in terms of kinship groups (e.g., ‘clans’ and ‘tribes’ associated with named territories). Their horticultural economies are characteristically based on intensive tuber (sweet potato, taro) cultivation and pig raising. Big man societies intrigued anthropologists and theorists of development for opening up the possibility that economic intensification might be possible in the absence of formal political hierarchies (see Section Political Typologies and Developmental Puzzles below).

Ethnographic research began in earnest in the New Guinea highlands only after WWII, when colonial authority was extended throughout the area and tribal warfare suppressed. It continued apace during the 1970s – when most parts of Melanesia made the political transition to independence – and, with shifting analytical and topical concerns, through the final decades of the twentieth century into the new millennium. Early on, it became evident that highland Melanesian socioeconomic life was relatively egalitarian; that is, access to garden land was universal (a flexible concomitant of kin relationships) and systematic differences in access to subsistence means, spouses, and valuables were muted or absent.

Direct participation in clan events was a more or less exclusively male prerogative and a key means by which men advanced their local and regional social standing; however, it was not obligatory. Even for men, collective clan interests did not necessarily take precedence over personal relationships with kin and other exchange partners, relationships in which
women were also involved. Finally, communities did not typically have institutionalized decision-making councils, nor did political or administrative offices exist to be filled. Instead, men earned leadership status by organizing events held in the names of clans and tribal alliances: they motivated their communities to participate by means of oratory, informal politicking, the cultivation of large personal networks of exchange partnerships, and their own personal and household production work.

Despite the lack of formal political roles and structures, during precolonial and early colonial times clans affiliated with one another in regional alliances for warfare and for elaborate ritual performances associated with initiations and fertility cults (some of which involved multiyear planning). People also frequently came together to sponsor competitive displays and exchanges of customary valuables like pigs and pearl shells: festive events in which thousands participated in a coordinated fashion as recipients and donors. Periodic exchange festivals of different scales and degrees of social and political complexity have driven intensive garden production for generations in the highlands and some other parts of Melanesia.

During the colonial period and – after PNG independence in 1975 – continuing into the present day, exchange events also came to incorporate money (e.g., PNG national currency, kina) and nontraditional goods of all sorts (e.g., cows, trucks, and cartons of beer). The desire to participate in these events even helped to prompt early participation in wage work and commercial endeavors. Held to mark important life cycle events like funerals and marriages and to constitute or reorder regional alliances between groups, exchange festivals require skillful organizing and long-term planning. They also require the intensive cultivation of sweet potatoes to feed large herds of pigs, which, in turn, are slaughtered to mark important events (not simply for household consumption) and also invested as wealth in the elaboration of personal exchange relationships.

It is in these contexts that the activities of the big man have been critical. Indeed, investigations into the dynamics of political agency associated with big manship were a centerpiece in the matrix of anthropological investigations into gendered social and political forms and, relatedly, into indigenous concepts of personhood and of the morality of social action.

Early in Highlands research, Kenneth Read (1959) noted a tension between culturally sanctioned assertions of personal autonomy and of group purpose. In Euro-American cultures, an apparently analogous tension counterposes naturalized, ‘individual’ interests to morally obligatory collective interests (e.g., the state). In contrast, Melanesian cultures implicate both differentiating and collectivizing interests as different but equally sociable possibilities inhering in a distinctive (and distinctively gendered) concept of personhood. Personal autonomy is enacted in the creative elaboration of networks of kin and exchange partners (affines, friends). Each person’s social network makes possible the enactment of interests that converge partially – and may also regularly conflict – with the collective (and, in Highland New Guinea, typically male) projects of clans. While the composition and size of exchange networks reflect the contingencies of personal effort (as in the case of friendship circles in Western societies), clan affiliation and rights to land are givens. One generally belongs to one’s parent’s group, inheriting homesteads and garden land through one’s father or mother, although conventions vary across Melanesia and involve considerable flexibility on account of a pervasive recognition of multiple bases for membership and land claims (e.g., Lederman, 1986b).

Against that background, big men make their names not simply by mobilizing wealth for personal network ends – like staging impressive funerary wealth distributions and generously supporting their exchange partners when the latter stage events – but also by successfully orienting their own and their clansmen’s respective network interests to collective projects. They persuade fellow clan members to organize their personal, often divergent network affairs to advance common clan events. By enabling events like large-scale wealth distributions between tribal and clan alliances – strengthening the reputations of these named collectivities by demonstrating their organizational capacities – big men augment their group’s reputation (‘name’) in the very act of augmenting their own renown.

In all this, their influence is personal and ephemeral relative to that in societies with inherited rank or with formal councils. This absence of structurally reproduced power has given Melanesian communities a reputation for egalitarianism (among men, if not between men and women). Men with leadership ambitions work to develop personal access to resources within and outside their communities. They achieve fame and influence by using local and regional social networks as bases for organizing collective wealth prestations. By means of both public oratory and private persuasion, big men work to add a certain collective value to actions that would otherwise be everyday and personal.

These events therefore make and remake clans and tribal alliances, which were means for collective defense in the precolonial era. In recent generations, they have been important bases for launching commercial endeavors – for example, cattle herding, coffee plantations – and have also constituted social springboards for provincial and national political careers.

Political Typologies and Developmental Puzzles

In post–WWII anthropology, ethnographic accounts from Melanesia and Polynesia were influential in modeling socio-political ideal types (respectively, big man societies and chief-doms). Such typologies were central to theories of cultural evolution and economic development, of special interest to anthropological archaeologists (who reconstruct the long-term social histories of human populations from material evidence: see Section Anthropology of Big Manship in a Wider Field below) and also to social theorists both within and outside of sociocultural anthropology. For the most part, theories of social evolution assumed that less economically productive societies characterized by limited social differentiation and political decentralization tend to give way, over time, to more productive types characterized by elaborate divisions of labor and centralized, hierarchical political systems. They posited a series of functional interdependencies among variables like population density, technology, the organization of production, ‘surplus’ production, and sociopolitical stratification (see Lederman, 1986a). Against this background, the big man societies of Melanesia are intriguingly anomalous.
Marshall Sahlins’s (1963) typological comparison of the Polynesian chief and Melanesian big man – perhaps the single most influential argument concerning Pacific polities – established the figure of the leader as key to arguments concerning their societies’ historical fortunes. With Polynesian chiefs as a developmental standard, Sahlins highlighted the limited coercive power of the big man in mobilizing wealth for public prestations, and identified these limits in the refusal of his clansmen (understood as his political supporters in regional interclan prestations) to put up with his increasingly unreciprocal behavior.

Viewed from this perspective, evidence of large-scale, intensifying, and expanding systems of wealth exchange in Melanesia was puzzling. Ethnographically grounded arguments by Mervyn Meggitt (1967), Andrew Strathern (1971), and others with extensive fieldwork experience in highland New Guinea demonstrated that – while relations between men (dominant in wealth exchange) and women (mainstays of horticultural and pig production) were conflictual – relations between leaders and their fellow clansmen were not predominantly extractive (as Sahlins had supposed). Instead, big men were able to tap labor and other resources in groups other their own by means of personal exchange networks.

Meanwhile, a convergent line of research – bent more on understanding economic change than sociopolitical systems – developed a comparison between Melanesian exchanges and capitalist markets. Dubbing Melanesians and particularly their leaders as ‘primitive capitalists,’ this work emphasized apparent similarities between local orientations and Euro-American cultural values like personal achievement, competition, material wealth, and financial reinvestment. For example, Scarlett Epstein (1968) labeled Tolai leaders ‘primitive capitalists,’ and Ben Finney (1973) argued that these similarities culturally and psychologically ‘preadapted’ Goroka big men for capitalist development.

Indeed, during the colonial period, highland Papua New Guineans were notably entrepreneurial. They reinvested wealth in commercial enterprises, like trade stores, rather than simply spending cash incomes on consumer goods. These lines of research came to an ambivalent resolution in the 1980s and 1990s. Specifically with respect to the anthropology of big men, Maurice Godelier (1986) centered attention on the structure of marriage exchanges in an argument meant to suggest that the big man type – with its emphasis on the manipulation of wealth – is not as typical of Melanesia as earlier ethnography implied. In communities where marriage conventions de-emphasize bride wealth (transfers of wealth for persons or their capacities) in favor of ‘sister exchange’ (transfers of persons for persons), he argued that one observes not big men but ‘Great Men,’ varieties of male prominence (notably initiation cult leaders) founded on ritual expertise. Some recent work in areas of Melanesia whose local political systems are conventionally characterized in terms of inherited rank have found Godelier’s Great Man construct surprisingly apt (Barker, 2012).

Nevertheless, Godelier’s position followed the classic pattern of using ethnographic cases to construct political economic types as elements in hypothetical developmental sequences. It made diverse cases comparable and capable of being organized as a progression but at the cost of assuming that these cases shared a common commitment to the maintenance of male collective (clan) interests. The Great Man idea also situated big manship on the frontier of market capitalism. However, this strategy of comparative analysis was already under siege ethnographically and theoretically by the mid/late 1980s.

Contemporary Trends

The relative decline in research on big manship as an ethnographic focus in its own right, during the 1990s and 2000s, is part of a long-standing disciplinary trend away from deploying ethnography for comparativist projects of developmental modeling and toward treating ethnography as a means for understanding culture histories.

Rethinking Anthropology, Rethinking Big Manship

Typology building and developmental theorizing, common in early to mid-twentieth century sociocultural anthropology (and political anthropology particularly), treated cultures as objectively identifiable, historically stable, socially boundable units of comparison. Over the past 30 or 40 years, however, a widespread theoretical reorientation in sociocultural anthropology from (as Clifford Geertz put it in his well-known 1983 essay, ‘Blurred genres’) a ‘laws and instances ideal of explanation’ modeled on the natural sciences ‘toward a cases and interpretations’ ideal drawn from the humanities scrutinized the very idea of bounded, stable, objective cultural units. In favor of situated, reflexive accounts of cultural process more amenable to critical translation than to positivist comparative analysis.

On the whole, Melanesian anthropology has not only reflected but also spearheaded these transformations in comparativism and the ‘culture’ concept (e.g., Roy Wagner’s 1975 Invention of Culture). In this new staging, big man has moved out of the analytical limelight, although not out of sight. Hardly relics, big men are everyday facts of life in the rural and urban communities and the provincial and national governments of twenty-first century Melanesia. The shifting array of contradictory values, beliefs, and rhetorics about big men are equally contemporary. They constitute postcolonial transformations of what Sahlins (1963) referred to as the ‘Melanesian contradiction’ – the already delicate ethico-political balance that successful leaders had to maintain between reciprocity and exploitative self-advancement in rural communities a generation ago, now made orders of magnitude more difficult by its articulation with market logics and the politics of nation making.

During the 1990s, investigations into big manship became absorbed into a wide variety of academic, policy-oriented, and community-based projects concerned to understand and intervene in the ‘emergent forms of life’ (in the sense Michael Fischer developed in his 1999 Annual Review essay by that name) characterizing contemporary Melanesian experience. It therefore makes little sense to separate the anthropology of big men from these other literatures. Nevertheless, while these projects do not identify themselves with the ‘anthropology of big men’ as such, they do still acknowledge portions of that
foundational literature as historical grounding for a remarkably wide range of freshly conceptualized research foci, including gender relations and ‘engendered’ violence, socioeconomic transformations (e.g., emergent class relations and the social and environmental impacts of globalization and extractive industries), and the dilemmas of governance. The following paragraphs sample these themes.

Melanesian gender studies have long directed attention to divergent and conflictual perspectives and relations within communities. While ‘sexual antagonism’ was a well-developed theme by the 1970s, the past two decades’ work historicizes regional experience and sets it in a global context (e.g., Jolly and Stewart, 2012). It renders the male-centered (and certainly male leader-centered) typification of whole cultures analytically unusable and big manship a decidedly qualified value (e.g., Lederman, 1986b, 1990, 1991; Godelier and Strathern, 1991). This research has attended to gender ideologies and gendered practices as grounds for making sense of conflicts between and among men and women, particularly in relation to emergent forms of female political and economic action and leadership, like the ‘Wok Meri’ movement in the Eastern Highlands (Sexton, 1990) and Kulka women’s club intervention in a tribal war in the western Nebilyer Valley (Rumsey and Merlan, 1991). These gendered engagements are transforming local ideas about ‘maleness’ that long underpinned big man and associated ideas about collective social forms (e.g., male initiation ‘cults’).

In recent years, anthropologists have also encountered mirror images of the big man that deploy its metaphorical value for new ends. For example, describing local perspectives on the past generation’s social transformations among Dano speakers in the upper Asaro valley of PNG – which foreground increased crime and economic inequality – Thomas Strong (http://anthropology.nuim.ie/research/why-are-men-papua-new-guinea-highlands-shrinking-0) writes, ‘People point to men’s bodies as further evidence of social decay – they claim that the present generation of men are smaller, weaker, and more fragile than the ancestors’ and seek to reinvent both themselves and their culture by various means (including evangelical churches and commercial enterprises).

This theme of ‘troubled masculinities’ – in the comprehensive sense that Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi develops in her chapter, ‘Troubled masculinities and gender violence in Melanesia’ (in Jolly and Stewart, 2012) – is by now reasonably well developed in anthropological writing on gender and contributes to a contemporary cross-disciplinary interest in the dark side of economic and political change.

Complementary work dissects incipient class relations as Melanesians situate themselves relative to a roiling global economy (e.g., Gewertz and Errington, 1999) and analyzes struggles over the meaning and value of ‘environmental resources’ – struggles that mutually implicate transnational and local social agents and frames of reference (West, 2006). Big men have long brokered or actively invited these entanglements, particularly the articulation of gift- and market-oriented projects. While early writers interpreted customary big man activities through a capitalist lens (recall Section Political Typologies and Developmental Puzzles), ethnography of the 1990s and 2000s developed subtle understandings of the moral valences of ‘gift’ and ‘market’ as distinct, often opposed, kinds of relations even as their mutual entanglements have ramified.

These subtleties echo in ambivalent and contradictory commentary about the ethics of big men in everyday talk, popular media, and policy discourse. Because customary exchange relations are as much political as economic, references to ‘big men’ become convenient concretizations of otherwise abstract arguments about both development challenges and governance dilemmas (Sullivan, 2005; see also Section Anthropology of Big Manship in a Wider Field below).

For example, Highland PNG peoples have personified the state itself as a ‘big man,’ an idiom that collapses the scale distinction between ‘local’ and ‘national’ in order to insist on a relationship of equivalence and mutual responsibility between them (Clark, 1992; compare Joseph Ketan’s 2004 book, The Name Must Not Go Down: Political Competition and State-Society Relations in Mt Hagen). Observations like Clark’s make evident the salience of idealized references to ‘big men’ as political rhetoric. Such references can therefore be productive ethnographic foci for understanding the stakes for Melanesians as the wealth-mediated but community-centered competition (that is, competition premised on a wealth ‘commons’) with which big manship has customarily been associated confronts – however ambivalently, unevenly, and contingently – structural inequalities associated with neoliberal development (that is, premised on private property and individualist constructs of interests) in the context of ineffectual or absent state regulation.

Similarly, Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi’s (1997) instructive case study of the life and times of Ruge Angiva – a “self-proclaimed ‘last Big Man’” of southern Madang Province – reads as a contemporary morality tale about the incompatibilities of traditional big man and Western style capitalist interests, particularly their respective valuations of community and kin loyalties. Related tensions were evident in Tim Sharp’s fieldwork on large-scale betel nut traders based in Mt Hagen. Despite the impressive geographical and financial scale of their enterprises, Sharp (2013) reports that relations among traders recall the interplay of cooperation and competition characteristic of clansmen and big men (see also Mosko, 2013). On the other hand, in a 2012 University of St Andrews dissertation, The Pattern Changes Changes: Gambling Value in Papua New Guinea, Anthony Pickles charts the rise of new forms of exchange relations and renown associated with slot machine gambling, which favor “big shots” (see also, e.g., Pickles, 2013). The latter term – which Keir Martin’s provocatively titled 2010 article, ‘The death of the big men,’ analyzes as a linguistic index of the emergence of a new category of unambiguously problematic political elite – is defined in explicit counterpoint to ‘big men’ of the sort Zimmer-Tamakoshi describes.

**Anthropology of Big Manship in a Wider Field**

Even though the anthropology of big men is no longer as evident as it once was in Melanesian studies or as discrete
a literature as it used to be within political anthropology, it can be located in a number of other notable contexts.

It is alive and well in recent editions of introductory textbooks in sociocultural anthropology, like James Peoples and Garrick Bailey’s 2011 *Humanity: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, where it is used to illustrate leadership styles possible in ‘egalitarian societies,’ in contrast with leadership typical of ‘ranked’ societies, but with contemporary cautions concerning the disconnection between such typologies and “the lives of actual people” (p. 293). Big manship is also featured in comprehensive surveys of regional anthropology; for example, Paul Sillitoe’s 1998 book, *An Introduction to the Anthropology of Melanesia: Culture and Tradition*, devotes a full chapter to big manship, focusing on customary practices of the Siuai people of Bougainville.

The big man/great man/chief typology also appears (as John Barker noted, *pers. com.* 10 July 2012), “in contexts in which we are discussing/updating the insights of our own anthropological ‘big men’.” Indeed, two recent critical appreciations of influential Melanesianist scholars – Barker’s own 2007 edited collection, *The Anthropology of Morality in Melanesia and Beyond* (a substantive engagement with Kenelm Burridge’s work) and *The Scope of Anthropology: Maurice Godelier’s Work in Context*, a 2012 collection edited by Laurent Dousset and Serge Tcherkézoff – offer chapters that rethink big manship ethnographically and analytically. In keeping with contemporary theoretical trends, these works contribute to a more thoroughly historical perspective on the politics of shifting contexts for meaningful action.

Over the past several decades, anthropological archaeologists have recognized the general value of ‘ethnographic analogies’ in reconstructing the living social practices likely to have produced the material remains discovered in their excavations. They have begun to recognize the particular value of ethnographies of big manship in expanding their interpretive imaginations beyond conventional correlations between intensifying systems of production and exchange and hierarchizing political structures (see *Section Political Typologies and Developmental Puzzles* above) to more historically nuanced scenarios. Encouraging more sophisticated mutual engagement between archaeologists and ethnographers and more sophisticated theorizing and modeling of political action, Paul Roscoe (2000) reviewed the past decades’ ethnography of New Guinea leadership. This comprehensive and admirably critical review articulates important cautions concerning comparativism. (By the by, its bibliography also testifies to the attenuation of big manship as a topical focus in the regional literature after the early 1990s, compared with previous decades.)

References to big manship also appear from time to time in contemporary ethnographic reports from outside of the island Pacific, especially in analyses of local political dynamics in the context of ‘absent’ or contested state influence. For example, in a 2012 Stanford University talk concerning post-civil war Lebanon, Marten Boekelo highlighted ‘neighborhood big men’ in an account of reworked forms of governance emergent after older mechanisms for the local mediation of the state and central political actors had broken down with the eruption of violence.

The term and its classic anthropological referents appear occasionally in popular media outside Melanesia, where it is used (with a positive valence) to signify decentralized or nonhierarchical influence, e.g., of Internet bloggers, and (with a negative valence) to refer to “crony capitalism” and other distortions of democratic process. For example, in an extended metaphor, an *Anchorage Daily News* article (“Juneau’s Big Men should be scrutinized,” 18 May 2012) written by Kenai Peninsula College anthropologist Alan Boraas compared state legislators visiting their districts after state budget negotiations to Viking raiders returning home with the spoils of war, the point being that local leaders reinforce their local political clout by personally redistributing state wealth to their constituents. Referring to Sahlins’s Melanesian exemplar, the article asserts that Alaskan legislators “function as ‘Big Men’” in so far as their actions bypass the constitutional process mandating state agency control over local budget requests. Legislator-big men act as “gatekeepers to whom citizens come hat in hand.” However, while “the state funding system is, at least in theory, transparent, non-government requests via the Big Man system are not” because that system relies on networks of “who knows whom” fueled by bribelike gifts (“a late-evening phone call, a fishing trip”).

As if to echo such popular media representations, political and economic policy scholars’ diagnoses of the causes of political ‘dysfunction’ in PNG and other Pacific island nations locate big manship prominently in this picture, although in inconsistent ways. On one side, in a 2007 report, Francis Fukuyama (http://www.sais-jhu.edu/faculty/fukuyama/Governance_PNG.doc) situated the big man as an anchor of indigenous democratic process and as an obstacle to the consolidation of state power. He argued that without a well-developed administrative bureaucracy, the national government has a limited ability to provide basic services like education and health care, especially in rural areas where the continued strength of kinship-based social structures and big manship – “highly unstable coalitions based on personality and patronage networks” – act as checks on the development of strong state control (p. 6). He linked the weaknesses of state agencies to the fact that “Papua New Guinea is arguably one of the most inherently democratic societies in the world.” That is, conventions of “prolonged discussion and deliberation” and the ‘big man’ style of achieved leadership – “constantly subject to challenge and change” (p. 9) – all work against consolidation of strong state institutions. Fukuyama noted, however, that these same decentralizing sociopolitical dynamics also short circuit the development of powerful regional ‘warlords’ who might be in a position to challenge the state (as in Somalia or Liberia). Fukuyama concluded that governance reform in PNG may therefore depend on the prior cultivation of common national identifications that transcend the local loyalties with which big men are strongly identified.

Then again, other observers of PNG development trends have situated big men at the center of dysfunctional governance itself in diagnoses of the reasons for ‘stalled’ economic development. Writing in 2012 in the East–West Center’s *Pacific Islands Report* (http://archives.pireport.org/archive/2012/April/04-18-an.htm), Helen Hughes associated that
country’s “political stagnation” with elections that yield only “a changing roster of ‘Big Men’ to exploit parliamentary power. Senior public servants share in the spoils.” Asserting that “Since the 1970s the Pacific has received the world’s highest aid per head of population,” Hughes concluded that foreign aid has not promoted rationalized economic development. Instead “aid is regarded as ‘cargo’” (a term implying material wealth acquired by mystical means) to be redistributed strategically to curry favor with constituents. Similarly, in a 2005 Australian National University ‘State, Society, and Governance in Melanesia’ discussion paper (http://ips.cap.anu.edu.au/ssgm/papers/discussion_papers/05_04_dp_patience.pdf), former University of Papua New Guinea political science professor Allan Patience noted shifts in Australian aid policy that were motivated by “security fears” concerning “mutations of traditional (‘wantok’ or ‘bigman’) structures of power into virulent forms of crony politics,” a political form “resistant to democratic institutions, transparency in government, and conventional state-making strategies” and therefore vulnerable to exploitation by international crime syndicates and terrorist networks.

These core themes of regional development policy analysis are echoed, debated, and countered in opinion pieces and letters to the editor of The National, The Post Courier, and other Melanesian media, where denunciations or praise of big manship figure prominently in commentary concerning the impacts of Western development agendas on historically Melanesian political and economic forms.

In contemporary discourse among urban elites and rural villagers, the figure of the big man is something of a key symbol. It powerfully condenses several tensions in twenty-first century Melanesian sociopolitical life at the heart of contemporary policy debates about governance. As Nancy Sullivan (2005) and the impressively varied collection of papers on ‘the challenges of governance’ in the Pacific that she introduces make clear, it stands for a neotraditional vision of properly reciprocal or redistributive sociality in counterpoint to both the alienating impacts of international consumer culture and the disappointing performances of national and provincial state governments. It also stands for the corrupting influence of excessively narrow loyalties and the oppressive dominance in domestic and public life of practices and values historically associated with maleness.

Holding contradictory impulses simultaneously in view is a characteristically anthropological move, whereas both popular and policy discourse tend to simplify or resolve them in some way. Loyalty to kin and expectations concerning material reciprocities can appear as nepotistic corruption or as a bulwark against capitalist individualism. Similarly, calls for the cultivation of cross-sectional national identity can appear as a ploy to undermine the very social resources most reliably available to ordinary people, under present conditions, in their disorienting encounters with multinational corporations and agents of neoliberal political and economic reform. However, contradictions among these points of view are themselves social facts with material impacts on the outcomes of projects that communities and experts care about.

## Conclusion

In short, big manship is present both in public discourse at the national and local levels in Melanesia and among national and international development scholars and policy analysts with regional expertise. It is, therefore, a live issue in need of fresh ethnographic attention; this constitutes one rationale for a new generation of anthropological investigations into twenty-first century transformations in this leadership form, its associated social relations, and its shifting rhetorical values among diverse social actors.

Those investigations may be enriched in unexpected ways by continued or refreshed familiarity with an earlier generation’s contributions to the anthropology of big manship. Similarly, contemporary anthropological archaeologists may be persuaded to draw on that literature as an exceptionally well-developed source of insights into the workings of decentralized political systems, on which to model their interpretations of the material evidence of past sociopolitical and exchange systems.

New fieldwork and ethnographic writing about big men are more likely to identify themselves with contemporary theoretical and topical rubrics than with the ‘anthropology of big men’ as such. However, so long as big manship, its variants, and echoes remain a focus of lay and expert attention in Melanesia, anthropological work will continue to enlighten by situating particular perspectives and experiences sympathetically in culture-historical context, and their commonalities and differences critically in juxtaposition.

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**See also:** Anthropology and History; Comparative Method in Anthropology; Development: Social-Anthropological Aspects; Elites, Anthropology of; Exchange in Anthropology; Gender: Anthropological Aspects; Inequality: Comparative Aspects; Oceania, Sociocultural Overviews: Melanesia; Political Anthropology; Postcoloniality; State: Anthropological Aspects; Tribe.

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