have considered two presentations of it. One is a figure who holds within his own will a precariously demonstrated capacity for unification in the face of external relations, while the other is one conduit among many who hold between them the powers necessary to accomplish equally hazardous internal divisions.

CHAPTER 12

‘Interests’ in exchange: increment, equivalence and the limits of big-manship

RENA LEDERMAN

From the perspective of Mendi, however, also emphatically a big-man society, it is the unity of Baruya and Hagen – rather than Hagen and Mendi – that come to look more alike. This chapter effectively re-challenges any simple correlation between great men/big men and equivalence/equivalency in exchange strategies. Lederman examines Mendi notions of increment: mandatory incremental gifts are embedded in kinship transactions in such a way as to produce generalised exchange structures which enchain people through personal rather than clan relations. Competitive exchanges, by contrast, concerning clans acting as groups, work to stress accountability in terms of equivalence. This interplay between personal network and political group demonstrates that the collective or unitary appearance of ‘groups’ has no special fidelity. If big men represent these units, they only represent their own efforts in making them appear, Lederman both details the political realities of personal and group action and reproduces the issue of historical extrapolation between different social forms in the Highlands.

By presenting ‘great men’ (along with the social order which produces them) as typical, Godelier has effectively removed the ‘big man’ from his central, definitive place in Melanesian ethnography to a new position of relative peripherality. At least as much as other recent revisions of the classical ways anthropologists have played the region (e.g., B. Douglas 1979), that disorienting turn has created new openings in the act of closing older ones.

In this chapter, my intention is to explore a few responses to that movement, on behalf of the big man. On the one hand, I am concerned to clarify the interests that have been brought to bear in creating the big man’s relative position in the comparative politics of the region. On the other hand, I draw on my own ethnographic experience with the Mendi, a central Highland people, in order to reveal yet another set of interests. Following from the last chapter, Mendi ethnography enables me to engage one dimension of the difference Godelier (1982, 1986a: chapter 8) has identified between the ‘alternative logics of society’ associated with great men and big men: the distinction between ‘equivalent’ and ‘non-equivalent’ exchanges central to the contrast between Baruya ‘sister exchange’ marriages and marriages
Big men and great men

Among the Baruya sometimes, too, but more typically in societies with big men involving exchanges of women and wealth.

Mendi would appear to exemplify the big man sociological ‘logic’ foregrounding non-equivalent exchanges, for not only do they use wealth (pearlshells, pigs and money) in marriage and mortuary prestations, but – as among their northern neighbours in Hagen – they also have a system of ‘competitive’ exchanges, replete with occasions for returning gifts with incremental value. However in Mendi, as among the Baruya and elsewhere, ‘alternative logic’ also exists. So, as I will show, incremental gifts consume contradictory interests in Mendi exchanges, and transform non-equivalent relations into equivalent ones. An analysis of Mendi exchanges indicates how misleading it is to construe ‘balance’ and ‘competition’ as opposed principles (cf. Goedel 1980b, and this volume). It also suggests that, while we need to think through our bases of comparison with respect to ‘great man’ and ‘big man’ (viz. chapter 11), we must not take the big man category for granted; rather in which there may be significant differences among big man societies such as Mendi and Hagen.

More muddles in the models

Space into time

I have been playing with spatial metaphors partly to hint at their diversity, and also specifically to avoid a certain processual ont the repositioning of the big man ought not to be construed as creating yet another developmental progression. Arguably one of the biggest problems in placing the big man comparatively has been our difficulty in representing his practice in ways that do not suggest incipient capitalism. That is, it would be no improvement to substitute a new ‘great man–big man–businessman’ sequence for existing alternatives.

This problem partially derives from influential, contemporary modes of making sense of sociocultural difference, descendents of the nineteenth century social evolutionist comparative method, by means of which a spatially distributed diversity of societies is grouped into types, and arranged in temporal sequences (e.g. some developmental logic: increasing ‘population size’, ‘complexity’, ‘hierarchies’ or ‘efficiency’; recent examples abound but see, for instance, Johnson and Earle 1987). It is probably unnecessary to reiterate the very general Boasian objections to this method (e.g., Boas 1896). But we do need to review our strategies for making sense of Melanesian diversity in light of what we now know of its historical dynamics.

Thus, for example, Foley (1986b) has recently discussed the special problems inherent in the application of the comparative method to Papuan languages where extensive diffusion and the absence of documentary historical sources make distinguishing cognates from borrowings nearly impossible. His cautionary comments were perhaps not adding anything to what Boas and others already understood at the turn of the century – bear in very direct ways on the comparative analyses of Papua New Guinea cultures where, as Foley (1986b) points out, quoting Mead, each community ‘preserves an aggregation of widely defined traits peculiar to it. The implication is not that forms of knowledge other than localised description are unattainable in this part of the world. Rather, such criticisms suggest the importance of an historical knowledge of regional inter-cultural relationships (such as Goedel’s reconstruction of the movements and interactions of the Baruya and their Eastern Highlands neighbours), and of understanding their generative conditions. These concerns include the contested character of local socio-cultural systems (a practical expression of their characteristics, inequalities and contradictions), the openness of local practices to foreign elements, and the modes of ‘interested innovation’ or manipulation of received categories, rules and relations. As an analysis of the Baruya case, Goedel’s ‘alternative logic of society’ is a contribution to this second kind of understanding; other exemplary contributions include the work of Wagner on forms of symbolism (1978, 1981), M. Strathern on gender (1988), and Munn on value creation (1986).

The developmentally motivated typologies upon which comparative generalisations so often depend are frustrated by exceptions. I reinforce a point also raised in earlier chapters: the categories we create by assigning significance to any satisfyingly complex but still comprehensible assortment of distinctions – big man (achievement) versus chief (ascription); great man (inter-exchange) versus big man (bridewealth exchange); production (pig kills) versus finance (enchanted exchanges); pigs (production) versus pearl shells (exchange); gift (inalienable) versus commodity (alienable) – fall apart when their elements turn out to coexist in whole or in part (and without any clear relations of dominance) in this or that society. Each ethnographic instance of a type contains allusions to the others within its own ‘typical’ practice.

This may be true everywhere; but it makes some rhetorical sense to emphasise that exceptions are the rule in Melanesia. Our typological centres and transitional peripheries have seldom been designed to represent actual historical relations among the peoples we are describing. Instead, the temporalised directionality of our comparative analyses more often derives
from (on the one hand) using cultural values native to our own field communities as a basis for ordering ethnographic information from a wider region or (on the other hand) using Western history as a model – or both together.

A key text for our purposes, and an exemplary foil for our more regionally restricted exercises in comparative politics, is Sahlin’s 1963 paper comparing Polynesian chiefs and Melanesian big men. The paper’s social-evolutionary argument was based on his historically mixed metaphor whose contradictions reveal the pitfalls of this approach. Sahlin called Melanesian big men enterprising while likening Polynesian chiefs to feudal lords. But, despite the historical relation between European feudalism and capitalism, Sahlin characterized the materialistic Melanesian type as relatively backward, while the elegant Polynesians represent a social evolutionary advance. In his comparison, the relatively large-scale, centralized polities and more productive economies of Polynesia apparently had more historical momentum to maintain autonomy in the face of outside forces than those of the Melanesians, with their small-scale communities, decentralized regional economies, and tendency to rebel against extractive leaders. From this analogical and exogenous perspective, a Melanesian historical rationale is unintelligible.

Sahlins’s argument is far from anomalous. Most of us have subtly temporalized our analytical distinctions without adequate historical justification. For present purposes, we must note that a set of familiar, ‘evolutionary’ presuppositions lie behind the great-man/big-man contrast itself (Godelier 1986a: 184-8) and ask whether it is appropriate to picture big-man societies – in which, as Godelier points out, person/wealth substitutions are dominant in marriage as well as in death compensations, political alliances and so on – as a key step down the road from kinship to class society?

While Godelier’s thesis is complex, particularly for recognizing the coexistence of opposed social logics in Baruya practice, still, in the absence of an understanding of the meaning of wealth in big-man societies, the big man may become simplified as the great-man’s Other (and as in all things ethnographic, also inserted in relation to ourselves). Which brings me to a second general issue.

**Metaphors of the market/state**

In order to create narrative closure in ethnography, we often write as if we needed to decide (that is, make a determination concerning) the balance of power among our subjects of study. The technique makes for strong conclusions, but it also freezes historical process. Although it may accurately reflect the experience of political hegemony in state societies, this mode of representation is not necessarily appropriate to Highlands ethnography (see Lederman 1989). A different effect, less likely to be embarrassed by events, results from seeking out the negative moments: the instabilities in existing relations of power, the presence of alternative visions of society, and the possibility of an ‘inventive adjustment of social practices’ (Modjeska 1982: 108). While surely not foreign to social practice in state societies as well, ‘inventive adjustments’ are, after all, what Highland social practice is about (see Foley 1986b, and generally Wagner 1981). A similar wariness of the tendency to metaphorize our own state of affairs might improve the ways we have written about exchange and wealth in big-man societies.

When discussing ‘exchange’ in the Highlands, we often enlist terms like ‘debt/credit’, ‘investment’ and even ‘interest’ or ‘profit’ (in the case of incremental gifts like moka). A. Strathern (1980; 1978c), of course, contributed ‘finance’ to our glossary of exchange terms. This language is consistent with that used by Sahlin (1963) again, whose metaphorical allusions to the houseman-like qualities of big men find echoes in equations others have made (not metaphorically but quite literally) between big men and capitalists e.g., Pasipati 1965; Epstein 1968). This language pervades ethnographic writing, but its use inhibits our understanding of the workings of Highlands exchange systems, particularly in big-man societies. It therefore stands in the way of a comparison between great men and big men.

Consider the following: A. Strathern has acknowledged that ‘the Highlands systems of prestige gift-giving do map themselves on to an introduced capitalist system in a remarkable fashion’ (1982a: 551), and has suggested how the principle of increment at the heart of moka might be implicated in the development of inequality in Melpa society. But Strathern has also quite consistently and clearly rejected the suggestion that big men are proto-capitalists (1976; 1978b; 1982a; 1982d). He has, for example, explicated the Hagen big man, Ongka’s principled distinction between ‘lo’ and ‘kustom’ more than once, and has contrasted the political economies of Hagen and Tola – specifically on the question of indigenous mechanisms for profit-making and exploitation – to this end.  

Nevertheless, in the face of his vigorous rejection of models of economic exploitation for an understanding of Melpa big men, the metaphors of ‘finance’ (and the ‘interest’ that accrues on return gifts in moka-style, ‘competitive’ ceremonial exchanges) reinsert market meanings back into discourse on Highlands political economies. Given a concern with wealth and an affinity-only individualist idiom of personal agency in big-men societies,
readers keep coming to the opposite conclusion. For example, referring to Strathearn's statement quoted above, Feil (1984a: 235-6) has argued that
‘this remarkable fit must surely... undermine the status of’ moala as a system of gift exchange’, and suggest its ‘increasing cognitive equivalence’ with ‘business’ (see also Feil 1982).

This metaphorical glossing of alternative political economies mars Godrieler’s big-men/great-man distinction; in particular, it encourages him to link big manship with making ‘inequivalent’ exchanges and with ‘competition’ without adequate cultural contextualisation. I pursue this issue in the next section, using Mendi as a case in point. I am concerned in particular with the ‘principle of increment’ in Mendi exchanges, and explore the relationship between increment, balance and competition as it is constituted locally. In summary, I argue that incremental gifts create the possibility for relations of equivalence even though they appear to involve a material imbalance and no direct reciprocity. Incremental gifts mediate two alternative, potentially contradictory, logics of exchange in Mendi – ego-centred, exchange network relations in which men and women together participate, and collective, clan relations that are the concern of men (especially big men) – such that each becomes the source and the end of the other. In this field of tension, the limits and elaboration of big
man ship are integrally part of the constitution of clanship, and not a function of ‘non-equivalent’ exchanges as such.

Mendi big men in context

I thus take up a small but significant subset of the issues Godrieler has raised. By situating big manship against a more complete picture of variations in socio-political structure in the Highlands region, Godrieler has put us in a better position to understand the transformational possibilities particular to each of them. My own Mendi-based perspective reflects a Southern Highlands bias, which may hold to shed light on variations within the big-man syndrome while also refining the distinctions Godrieler has identified.

Background

Some facts help to situate Mendi relative to other central Highlanders. On the one hand, the Mendi employ production techniques that are quite comparable to those of high altitude Enga (e.g. Waddell 1972), and they devote about half of the sweet potato crop to sustaining pig herds of about one pig per capita.

On the other hand, population pressure in Mendi has not reached the levels attained in some parts of the Northern Highlands (20-80 people/km² in Mendi as against over 100 people/km² in the Northern Highlands population centres of Enga and Simbu Provinces). In the Highlands, there is a correlation between the population sizes of the widest named collectives and population density (P. Brown 1978); while Mendi ‘clan clusters’ or ‘tribes’ (som onda) appear to be smaller than those in the most densely populated Northern Highlands areas (up to 1,500 members as against over 2,000 for the Mae Enga or Simbu), they are quite comparable to groups in other parts of the North, including Hagen.

For present purposes it is interesting that, like other Southern Highlanders (Wola, Kewa, Wiru), big men among the Mendi are not nearly as ‘big’ as are their counterparts up north. Suggestive indices of their status relative to other men include, for example, their means of access to wealth and labour relative to that of ordinary people, and their public roles as orators articulating group policy (direct in the south relative to the north). What is more, the collective focus of public, ceremonial life – the stage on which big men perform – is not as clear in the south as it apparently is in the north. Southern Highlands ethnographers with diverse theoretical leanings (e.g. Sillins, LeRoy, A. Strathearn and myself) have had to acknowledge the significance of non-group forms of sociality (for example, matrilateral and affinal exchange partnerships), which are not a special preserve of big men. That is, it appears that both big-manship and clanship are limited in the south relative to the north, and that other social forms may be more prominent there.

The question of structure

As Godrieler emphasises (1986a: 164), when Sahlin raised the key question of how big men obtain wealth for prestations, he focussed squarely on the systematic limits on the personal power of leaders. He identified these limits in the refusal of a big man’s clan supporters to put up with unreciprocals behaviour in the interests of increasingly large regional redistributions. Godrieler notes that in the end Sahlin’s model of the big-man society is a kind of un-structure (a notion quite in keeping with the ‘loose structure’ paradigm that Highlands ethnographers such as Watson were developing at the time). But it focussed debate; Meggitt (1967) soon pointed out that it underestimated the structural constraints on, and overestimated the extractive character of, relations among clansmen obtaining in Highland societies. A. Strathearn (1971) argued that it overlooked the ability of big men to draw on resources of labour and valuables in groups
societies, and wealth and other exchanges are culturally constructed as
incommensurable (however they may appear objectively), whereas people such
as Hagen must be considered as having no real knowledge of them. In this,
other than their own by constructing networks of exchange 
apparent remoteness or difference, however much it be perceived, is in its 
contextual relevance for a particular exchange relationship.

[Image 0x360 to 653x1147]

Duality of Money/Exchanges

Like Hagen, people in the Mundurucu consider gold and copper as "money"
(equivalent to "gold and copper in exchange") even if their social use is
limited to transactions in exchange. This seems to suggest that people of
other cultures do not recognize the idea of "money" as we do, even though
the concept is widely accepted in the West. Therefore, it is not surprising
that the movements of money in the Mundurucu are not very different from
those in other societies, since the Mundurucus consider gold and copper as
"money" even in the absence of a formal system of exchange. On the other
hand, the idea of "money" is not as widely accepted in the Mundurucu society,
and the movements of money are not as well-defined as in other societies.

The dual nature of money in the Mundurucu society is evident in their use of
gold and copper as "money". This is a unique feature of the Mundurucu society
that sets it apart from other societies. It is likely that the dual nature of
money in the Mundurucu society is a result of their cultural constructs, since
they recognize gold and copper as "money" even in the absence of a formal
system of exchange. This suggests that the idea of "money" is not as widely
accepted in the Mundurucu society as it is in other societies, and the
movements of money are not as well-defined as in other societies.

The Mundurucu society appears to have a dual nature of money, which
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other societies.
occasion of collective exchange events, because these men are themselves participating in the exchange with their exchange partners, thereby forming the exchange network. As such, we can see the exchange as a social institution in itself, which is part of the social order.

The exchange network is a complex system of relationships between individuals and groups. It is not a simple transaction between two parties, but rather a series of interconnected exchanges that involve many different parties. In this way, the exchange network can be seen as a social structure that is constantly being formed and reformed.

The exchange network is also a place where people can learn about the social norms and values of their society. Through the exchange network, people can learn what is expected of them and how they should behave in different situations. This is especially important for young people, who are still learning how to socialize and interact with others.

The exchange network is also a place where people can form relationships with others. Through the exchange network, people can meet new people and form friendships and other types of relationships. These relationships can be important in helping people to feel connected to others and to their community.

The exchange network is also a place where people can express their identities. Through the exchange network, people can show off their social status and their cultural heritage. This can be important in helping people to feel proud of their identity and to feel connected to their community.

The exchange network is also a place where people can gain power and influence. Through the exchange network, people can gain access to resources and opportunities that they might not have otherwise had. This can be important in helping people to achieve their goals and to improve their quality of life.

The exchange network is also a place where people can learn and grow. Through the exchange network, people can learn new skills and knowledge, and they can also learn how to be better at socializing and interacting with others.

In conclusion, the exchange network is a complex and important social institution that is part of the social order. It is a place where people can learn about the social norms and values of their society, form relationships with others, express their identities, gain power and influence, and learn and grow. The exchange network is a place where people can be socialized, and it is an important part of the social order.
Equivalence, interaction, and structural limits on Ndmbing men

Egalitarian, interaction, and structural limits on Ndmbing men

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they could not be more different from those of the Baruya; but, as we will see, they may have an analogous effect. Mendis are quite explicit that, by not replicating the affinal linkage of their fellow lineage members, they aim to develop their exchange relationships as widely as possible (though people typically make exchange partners of one another’s affines). Incessant wealth exchanges — in which wealth doubles back from a recipient to a donor again without passing through many hands — and incessant sexual liaisons are derivd in the same breath.

Despite the theoretical possibility of insiquin between ‘mopae-taking’ and ‘mopae-giving’ relatives implied by the incremental gift rules that hold between them, one asymmetrical relations between individuals are made to balance in a number of ways. As have already stated, mopae itself construed as a replacement for something lost — obtains the asymmetry of affines, making possible delays, reciprocal exchanges of like objects between them.

Beyond this, everyone has both ‘mopae-taking’ and ‘mopae-giving’ partners; that is, even a man with no sisters or wives of his own can establish such relations with clan sisters and his brothers’ wives, and with clan brothers’ wives and their people. And everyone acts as a ‘mopae-taker’ and a ‘mopae-giver’ to separate sets of partners in appropriate contexts (like pig kills). A man is expected to give his wife (optionally, his brothers’ wives) and her relatives incremental gifts on certain occasions. He arranges to get such incrementals gifts from his (classification) sisters and their husbands. Incremental gifts may also be given reciprocally between clansmen, and between men who are related through sisters.

In any case, while men may find themselves heavily obligated to their respective affines around the time of the Pig Festival, they are not especially indebted to their local big men. Big men are themselves obligated to exchange partners outside their subclans. The personal performances of big men during public prestations are impressive not because these men have charmed to inherit large numbers of ‘mopae-giving’ exchange partners (e.g., sisters) or clan ‘supporters’, but because they have actively created unusually large networks of ‘mopae-giving’ and ‘mopae-taking’ partners, and have then successfully orchestrated so large a number of otherwise mundane, private obligations in public view. Clan events enable all men to acquit their personal debts publicly, giving their individual actions an ‘incremental’, collective meaning. Incremental gift rules are a means of constituting these events as collective, and serve both to enlarge and to control the flow of wealth from one conceptual ‘side’ of each person’s network to the other. They provide a rationale and an incentive for delaying requests for repayment of what would otherwise simply be personal tuvavu obligations until the collective occasion, in anticipation of a greater material return. But the point is not simply that the return is greater quantitatively, in terms of how much wealth partners receive, display and give; the point is that it carries additional meaning, in the collective relations and agents it helps to realise. In this way, it is the very course of fulfilling personal exchange obligations, men impress one another, their allies, and their enemies by producing something other than simply ‘persons’. Just as incremental gifts create the possibility for reciprocity in personal tewa partnerships, they also imply no asymmetry among groups. While Mendis marriage rules encourage fellow subclan members to marry into different subclans, at the same time, Mendis prefer to marry allies. In fact, there is a very high density of marriages between neighbouring, exogamous clans belonging to the same named tribe or belonging to neighbouring, allud tribes. Consequently, members of one tribe — ‘brothers’ who may plan to stage a pig kill or warfare compensation together — are invariably also affines or maternal kin (though they may also have affinal connections with people outside the tribe). Conversely, in so far as they are allies, intermarrying clans are also referred to as ‘brothers’ (aem); as such, they are expected to present a unified front vis-à-vis minor or major enemies in performances such as the Pig festival as well as in warfare. That is, bride wealth and other personal wealth substitutions are compatible with reciprocal relations between groups: ‘sister exchange’ operates indirectly, at another level, for other ‘reasons’.

We might further consider the relationship between personal networks and political groups in this context. Together with the conventions for creating unrelated exchange partnerships, Mendis marriage rules imply that each individual’s exchange network will be unique, overlapping only partially with that of his or her spouse and agnates. Indeed, their network relations are what distinguish clansmen from one another; these relations are a social realisation of Mendis notions of personal agency and ‘autonomy’, defined specifically against demands for co-operation and collective identity as clansmen.

For this and other reasons, as I have argued elsewhere (Lederman 1986), network relationships cannot be viewed merely as a technique for fuelling clan prestations in Mendis; they are a structural principle in their own right. They are characterised by a logic of exchange distinct from that of male intra-clan relations and a demand for wealth sometimes contradictory to that created by clan events. That is, whereas collective events require a periodic accumulation of wealth in preparation for their staging, network relationships demand a rapid circulation of wealth. Exchange partners
have, in effect, equal claims on (if divergent uses for) the wealth any of them is holding, but has not already promised to allocate to some specific purpose.

Because of the high value Mendi men and women accord to their exchange partnership obligations and the anti-accumulation rationale of those relations, staging clan events is always problematic. What is at issue is the very realisation of clans themselves. This may seem an extraordinary statement (in view, for example, of truans in Highlands research about the practical necessity of groups in warfare), but it must be seen as a fact of Southern Highlands society that collective life does not take the form of the clearly bounded, positively defined, and even segmentally organised groups apparently found among some of the Northern Highlands people such as Mace-Enga. Mendi is by no means an extreme case; one has only to compare them with Wire, Wola, Huli, or Dona to view them in the proper perspective.

The challenge, in making clan events happen at all in Mendi, is to mediate the contradiction between accumulation and circulation inherent in the clanship/network relation. The problem is that everyone (women and ordinary men, not just big men) is involved in networks which, while they have their own innovative moments (viz., transformations between asymmetrical and symmetrical exchange relations among partners), are conventional relative to clanship. Clanship appears to be a more contingent relationship, and only some men are consistent advocates of collective action. Such advocacy is the distinctive feature of big-manship, and is how Mendi big men achieve renown. Women, in particular, are specifically excluded from clan affairs and have little commitment to clans as such.

This challenge is met in at least two ways, the first being structural and the second being a matter of political strategising. During the Pig Festival, conventions about making incremental gifts serve to conjoint personal network interests with those of male collective action, organising the parallel fulfilment of network obligations into a vast demonstration of collective agency. They are especially significant with regard to women’s interests, since they serve to channel wealth through pig-killers’ wives to those women’s relatives in the process of publicly recognising women’s work (cf. Modjeska 1982: 107). The Pig Festival is thus made to appear in women’s interests no less than in those of big men; its exchange conventions redefine the products of female agency (pigs, children) as means for male creativity (making clans), with the proviso that those products be reconverted in the event itself and returned to networks again.

This is, then, yet another way in which incremental gifts create a sense of equivalence, not only from the perspective of groups (which reciprocally exchange women and wealth), nor only from that of particular men (who can turn their nape-taking and nape-giving partnerships into reciprocal relations), but also from the perspective of women, who cannot participate at all in collective events. The effect of incremental gifts for women, apart from symbolically acknowledging the value of their productive and reproductive action, is to define collective prestation as just as much a matter of networks as a matter of clans. From this perspective, public prestation are but a phase in the continuous inter-conversion of collective and network relations in which the collective has no special finality. Even collective prestation made by men to their allies in the name of their group to compensate for war-related deaths amount to an only temporary damping of the flow of wealth, soon released for redistributions to particular clansmen, who are, in any case, inevitably exchange partners of the sponsors’ wives (Modjeska 1982 makes a similar point with respect to Hagen and Enga).

Secondly, from a political perspective, the challenge of making clans is met by big men, who play a key role in actively constituting collective social agency. Their strategic orontical interventions during clan policy meetings, together with private persuasions, transform relations and actions that would otherwise be construed as merely personal into collective ones as well (Lederman 1980). Public performances are particularly important because they are almost invariably witnessed by members of allied groups. In Mendi, big men make their names as consistent organisers of collective action in a political world where such action has primarily a negative motivation: where groups realise themselves not on the basis of some positive ‘solidarity’ but against one another, in response to friendly or hostile challenges from the outside. Therefore, I agree with the comparison Godelier (1969a: 165) draws between the Baruya great-man category, awolatta, and big men, both of whom attain a regional reputation and ‘represent’ their groups to outsiders. In the Mendi case, there is no unambiguous centre to that which is being represented, and not just big men but any man (even against his intentions) may be taken as its ‘representative’ (see Lederman 1986: chapters 2, 6) although big men are critical to the achievement of an incremental, collective effect.

Ultimately, it might be possible to compare different big man societies in the Southern and Western Highlands around how the struggle between centrifugal family or network interests (or in the case of the Dona [cf. chapter 13] and Huli, commitments to clan parasitise other than one’s own agrarian one) and the centrifugal interests of patrilineal groups is joined. I would guess that big men appear most prominent to us wherever male collectivity can be construed, at least from time to time, as an unconstrained relation (as in Hagen and perhaps Mace-Enga societies): where the social
moment defining and defined by what we identify as leaders can be represented as simply 'omnitary'. Where male collective agency is compromised – as in Mendi and other Southern Highland societies – big-manship appears limited as well. But these variations have no apparent relation to the presence of equivalent or non-equivalent exchanges, both of which appear in all of these societies.

Indeed, Mendi and the Southern Highlands offer a perspective from which the collective character of great-men societies – with their centralised initiation cults – and of some big-man societies such as Hagen – with their men’s house groups – look oddly alike. In the south, male collectivity is less positively defined, and readily dissolves into intra-network dialectics of one sort or another. In Mendi a partial withering away of the clan (and big-manship with it) is effected by extending wealth exchange to its limit with women and ordinary men also participate in their own names. But this does not mean an eclipse of ‘kinship’ in favour of the market as Godelier suggests; only a decentralised version of the gift, much extended in time and social space and still, overtly, an orchestration of reciprocities among persons.

NOTES

1 Of course, Sahlin wrote his paper before most Highlands societies were described, and cannot be faulted for underestimating their economic scale. He did not overestimate their political decentralisation, however.

2 More generally, Sahlin’s (1983b) analyses of the encounters between Captain Cook and the Hawaiians ought to have demonstrated that such ‘remarkable mappings’ may occur despite qualitative differences in society and cosmology; they merely exemplify the power of cultural interpretation to assimilate the strange to the familiar, often with ease despite the potential for dramatically destructive unintended consequences.

3 Note that one cannot claim that ‘wife-givers’ are subordinate to ‘wife-takers’ in Mendi (cf. Godelier, this volume). But neither are ‘wife-takers’ forever subordinate to ‘wife-givers’ as Godelier argues for the Baruya, since reciprocal exchange relations can be achieved between Mendi affines.

4 I say ‘nearly’ Baruya-style because ‘equivalent’ affinal exchanges among Baruya engender asymmetrical relations between men (a situation which does not hold between Mendi affines).

5 That is, while skill at wealth exchange is indeed a necessary condition of big-manship in Mendi, it is not entirely sufficient.

6 Much more could be said about this matter, as it bears the ‘apostrophe’ of pigs.

7 That is, for all their similarities, there may be significant differences between Mendi and Hagen that focus on big men and ceremonial exchange – encouraged no less by the ‘great man’ critique than by earlier contexts of research – may obscure.

In particular, and referring to the previous chapter, we may require some image other than ‘One Man’ to evoke ‘collectivity’ in Mendi, where that relation is not represented as the outcome of the big-man’s single will, but as the coordinated project of many men. Unlike in Hagen, in Mendi collectivity never entirely eclipses the differentiated identities and relations of clansmen; marriages do not feed into a cycle of group-to-group prestations, and even in events of the largest size, such as ‘moi moa’ groups display themselves in the very act of unveiling the personal networks of their members in a marked and augmented form. But this does not make Mendi similar to Baruya; in Mendi ‘many men’ do not appear as so many specialised kinds of prominence since each is different from the others in the same way. Generally, prominence is not an especially revealing window on the character of solidarity or power in Mendi.