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C'est qui, le patron? Kinship and the rentier leader in the Upper Watut

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C'est qui, le patron? Kinship and the rentier Leader in the Upper Watut

It is dominant national ideology in modern Papua New Guinea that its village societies universally include (a) a division of people into clans based on descent from an ancestral founder, (b) exclusively owned clan territories, and (c) 'true' leaders who capture the consensus of their community. This is notably seen in the ideological formation of people known as 'landowners' who have rights to certain things, usually in heroic opposition to some other groups or institutions of government. I'll call this the Melanesianist paradigm (e.g. Narokobi 1989).

It is a bitter irony that anthropologists have long been familiar with 'loose structures', 'cumulative patrification' (Barnes 1962) and other things that ruin the purity of lineages, various multilocal systems of residence which destroy simple territoriality, and a range of leadership models in which 'consensus functions' are not prominent. As a consequence, we seldom bring back accounts of landowners that fit the Melanesianist paradigm very well.

I want to give an account of a group I am working with whose organisation challenges the paradigm in a way than even I find usual. Oddly, this is a rare example—the Gebusi are another (Knauff 1985:161)—of a people *with* pure descent; on this occasion, it is the other two orthodoxies which fail.

The Upper Watut are an Anga people in Morobe Province living near Bulolo and tracing their origin to a place in the Kapau District called Hamtai. Previous ethnographic work was by Beatrice Blackwood (1950, 1978), who lived in the district for about seven months in 1936-37. Life expectancy is not good here, but I have met one man, born around 1928, who could give a clear description of her visit to Nauti village. In 1987, three Upper Watut lineages won a court case to secure 50% of the Hidden Valley gold prospect at a place called Mt Naiko, pre-determining the terms of my own fieldwork, a consultancy project for the mining company CRA.

The Upper Watut have a series of descent categories, *taka*, which they translate as 'clans'. Actually they most resemble surnames in that patrilineal lines of these names—Nautiya, Titama, and Apea, for example—can be found in settlements anywhere in the culture area. I will translate the *taka* as 'ancestral lines'. Some *taka* are very common while others are quite rare (Table 1).

In anthropological terms, to be given an accreditation as 'groups', things like ancestral lines ought to possess at least two of the following attributes:

- a. members of the society identify members of their own and other groups in a consistent and exclusive manner;
- b. its members recognise responsibilities to other members;
- c. discernible organisational or management functions are active at the group level;
- d. rights or properties can, in some circumstances, be held by the group notionally acting as an autonomous legal person;
- e. relations between different groups are 'political' in nature.

Male member	Female member	Occurrence
Nautiya	Nauti	Common
Equta	Equiti	Common
Titama	Titami	Quite common
Apea	Apiei	Quite common
Tausa	Tafi	Quite common
Angamdea	Angamdi	Not common
Yaquiana	Yaqiani	Not common
Patea	Patei	Not common
Qapatea	Qapati	Very rare
Angapea	Angapei	Very rare
Tanea	Tanei	Very rare

Table1. Main names of ancestral lines, *taka*, in Upper Watut villages

Upper Watut ancestral lines satisfy only the first criterion; namely that people can and do make consistent and exclusive identifications. People cannot be Apea in one context and Titama in another, as is the case in their eastern neighbours the Biangai, a non-Anga bilateral group society. At the same time, the Upper Watut are far stricter in following pure descent than the clan and tribe systems of the highlands, where a range of people raised outside their own clan—orphans, children born out of wedlock, refugees, and the issue of uxorilocal marriages—can easily become members of the host clan. This almost never happens in the Upper Watut. As we shall see, the consequences are profound.

Exclusive identification is the *only* group-like attribute of the ancestral lines. There is no obligation to rally to the defence of distant members of the ancestral line in the manner that clansmen in corporate group societies must do. Organisational or land management functions are absent. No modern rights attach to the names (though some vaguely known-abot characteristics are nostalgically associated). Politics is not about the relations of groups to other groups.

The composition of actual communities

Traditionally, Upper Watut people lived scattered about in the bush in defensive camps called *taknga* (presumably *taka* + *anga*). This was a severe handicap to Beatrice Blackwood, who found the conditions of ethnography so different than she had been used to at Buka a few years earlier (Blackwood 1935:xx-xxii) that she found it impossible to pursue normal ethnographic inquiries. What is published of her data, however, fits in with the following picture.

A new camp was established on his own land by one man alone, or perhaps accompanied by his brother. Close relatives, often in-laws, then came and asked him permission to settle with him. High on the list of considerations in traditional times was the assurance of security. The camp grew into a recognisable hamlet, and in traditional times a military stronghold. Others came, less closely related to the founder this time, and the hamlet grew into something a bit larger that could be called a ‘village’—if of course it was not about to undergo fission in a new cycle of hamlet formation.

The nearest Anga people for whom there is a full-length ethnography published in the post-war period are the Jeghuje of the Banir River, studied by Hans Fischer in 1958 and again in 1965. Fischer (1968) described the disposition of Jeghuje settlements in both years. He shows clearly how what would be called *taknga* in the Upper Watut were founded, grew through the accretion of followers of the founder, and finally came to consist of a jumble of in-laws, and unrelated members of different ancestral lines numbering up to about 200 people. In the last stage the founder may have even gone to live somewhere else.

Let me explain some of the dynamics of this situation. In the Upper Watut it is an especially strong principle of society, as among the Jeghuje, that when inlaws and matrikin request land, it must be granted. Hospitality towards these people is true of all known societies in Papua New Guinea, but in many places people eventually gossip and ask ‘haven’t these people their own land to go to?’ and find ways to see that people do not overstay their welcome. The Upper Watut never do this and settlements come to be made up of people with several consistent kinds of connection to the landowning lineage.

People of the landowning patriline are *kwaika* or ‘spear’ people. People connected to them through sisters or mothers are known as *ka* or ‘bilum’ people. A last category are *aqa nanga* (‘together permanently’) or non-line people who came long ago, typically as companions of the founder, they have acquired ‘citizenship’ of the place.

What the Upper Watut do very seldom is convert non-members of their lineages into members any method of adoption or falsifying genealogies as is well known in the highlands. Strathern (1972) showed that about a third of the Western Highlands Kawelka originated as non-agnates. In my own work in 1980-81 among the neighbouring Tungei, I found that this tribe traditionally had ‘cleaner’ descent, but about 10% still originated as non-agnates (Burton 1984). But in the Upper Watut the ‘bilum’ people and permanently attached people remain fixed under their own ancestral names even though they may well have come to live with the landowning patriline in the very distant past.

Two cases

Two examples are noteworthy.

Our ancestors chased the Manki all the way from the Kapau District to where they live today just under the Three Sisters, a distinctive cluster of mountain peaks on the extreme eastern border of Anga country. They finished them all off until just a handful were left. Their ancestor, X, found his situation

hopeless. He was only an adolescent and it was only a matter of time before he, too, would be killed. He prepared breadfruit leaves, and other things we use to cook meat with, and brought them to our ancestor's garden. But he was out fighting and instead our ancestor's wife met him. X presented himself with the leaves, saying 'You can kill me now—here, I've brought leaves for you to cook me with'. The old woman felt sorry for him and when her husband returned she persuaded him to allow X to live. They found him a wife and let him make his gardens unmolested on Manki Ridge. The Manki grew up from this pair and they still live there today.

This is a simplified version of the history of the Manki, who form an outlier of the Langamar Valley language (McElhanon 1984:28). It is significant that after X's 'surrender' he does *not* join the people who spared him. Were absorption possible along the lines described by Strathern, or as mentioned in passing for eastern Anga groups, he may have been expected to come to live with the men who gave him a wife. Then, after a generation or two had passed, his descendants would have become jurally indistinguishable from their own descendants. But it did not happen.

The second case is the only example I have found where absorption is poised to occur happen, but where village spokesmen were unable to figure out how to legitimise it:

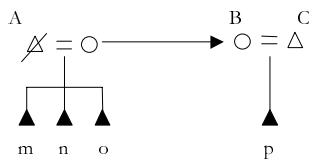


Figure 1. Is p a member of the line or not?

A married the woman B and had several children, m, n, o. A then died and B remarried to C, having one more child, the living elder, p.

The 'problem' is that C was not on the line, he was the last remaining member of an unrelated patriline who had come to stay with them. Therefore p cannot be counted with the real agnates—or can he?

I argued that he can, reasoning as follows. The Upper Watut have no divorce whatsoever, and are strict about practising the levirate. Thus, the point in question was on what basis B could possibly remarry to C? Surely if C were not a 'brother'—or at least his behaviour tolerated as if he were one—he could not have inherited A's widow? On further inquiry, C had come to live with A and his people as an unmarried teenager, had become treated as a lineage brother, and because of this was able to marry the widow, B. It was thus a levirate marriage. There should be no question, therefore, that his living son, p, should be counted with the agnates, m, n, o and their 'brothers'.

My informants, who were keen to normalise p's case, were sceptical, but eventually saw my point. What I found intriguing was their anxiety over what seemed to me a perfectly ordinary case of 'cumulative patrification'. To them, though, it posed a serious problem of legitimacy. (I should say have no idea whether they will reproduce my particular line of reasoning in future—time will tell.)

Upper Watut leadership: the ingredients of power

The foregoing provides the foundation for a discussion of authority and legitimacy in the Upper Watut. Legitimacy is the basis of leadership in this society, as claimed by current village spokesmen.

Let me narrow down what Upper Watut leaders are and are not. They are not in the mould of the big-man. This is easy to establish: pigs are uncommon; shells were rare traditionally and not acquired in trade; the type of feasts at which men rise in prestige by giving away wealth and pork are absent. Godelier's (1986; Godelier and Strathern 1991) candidate model for Upper Watut leaders would be the 'great man', who wins status as a famous warrior, hunter, or shaman. Unfortunately, with no military action, not much hunting at all, and initiations long discarded in the Upper Watut, we are left with much about what a great man *is not*, but comparatively little about what he *is*.

I can identify three candidate ingredients of power in the Upper Watut:

Firstly, power is exclusively male. The status of women here is so low here it strains belief. Women in neighbouring non-Anga villages, with whom the Upper Watut nowadays interact in town, are

talkative, educated and entrepreneurial. By contrast Upper Watut women are deprived schooling in childhood, have little participation in the cash economy, are obliged to keep an exaggerated distance from outsiders and frequently denied access to basic health care on various pretexts. They experience a rate of mortality scarcely rivalled elsewhere in Papua New Guinea, and genealogies show that it is a typical life experience for a man to marry two or three wives serially as one dies after the other. Men are those in control.

Secondly, Upper Watut people say everything used to be done with *pa*. *Pa* is secret talk and ritual knowledge. It may well be obsolete, even if people think it is or was important, or look at a man whose actions are effective and say he must have *pa*, when actually events beyond his control, such as the outcome of a court case, have gone his way.

Thirdly, the Upper Watut theory of knowledge rigidly identifies valid or efficacious information, such as that concerning landownership and settlement history, with the direct connection from a founding ancestor to a lineal descendant, investing the latter with an exclusive authority. A man will feel he need simply recount his ancestor's actions in coming to piece of land, and his priority in doing so, to demonstrate the strength of his own claim to that land. Here is an example:

My ancestor asked his brother if he wanted to go out hunting. The brother agreed and the two started to come this way [towards the place where the village now is]. They came this way and finally arrived at the creek X where there is a big rock. My ancestor said 'Let's go on'. His brother said, 'I'm tired, I want to go back'. So he turned around and returned to his house. My ancestor crossed the creek and walked on. He came here and named this place. He went on to the headwaters of this valley and named all the creeks in it. There was no one else here. This is my land. My ancestor's brother went back the other way; his descendants cannot come and say they own this land.

Naturally, the speaker's opponents, actually his parallel cousins, give a different version of what happened and say *they* now own the area. Elements of this are familiar to all ethnographers. But there are two oddities. First, the story lacks any hint of contemporary politics—we learn nothing of what was going on at the time. Second, the ancestor is found roaming about unaccompanied by anyone else. Real Upper Watut men do not act in a solitary way; it is certainly hard to conceive of them setting out to discover new land without companions, especially when we know their non-Anga neighbours were ready to pounce on them and carry off their heads to display on trophy platforms in their fortified camps to the east.

But this is an ideological solitude, designed to assert and legitimise the exclusive possession of land tracts by an individual, the current head of a patriline. In a clan society this would be very strange. While it is a courtesy not to inquire of a clan's history outside of it, within it all men, and many women, are joint custodians of its oral history. It is not controversial to ask anyone for information, and especially knowledgeable elders will be pointed out to you. But in the Upper Watut, you must take extreme care not to betray knowledge of a story in front of its 'sole proprietor' before he reveals it to you himself. A slip can unleash a tirade about liars and thieves, who, you are surprised to learn afterwards are extremely close relatives. To be on the safe side, even other members of the same patriline will refer you to its head, as *only* person who possesses true knowledge about his history.

However, if one substitutes 'knowledge', in the sense of the possession of factual information, for 'the right to speak' about lineage matters, much light is thrown on the situation. The key point is that it is 'the right to speak' that rests with the senior male member of the patriline. This gives rise to an significant aspect of Watut leadership. Village 'elders' can be extraordinarily young. A 27-year-old Watut man ranted and raved at me one morning about where I should and should not hold meetings. But he wasn't the clone of a dispossessed trouble-maker in a clan society dominated by wealthy, late-middle-aged big-men. He was the senior man of his patriline segment; he *did* have 'the right to speak' before other older men.

Let me return to the ingredients of power. There is a fourth principle, but it exists in permanent contradiction to what we have just seen. In traditional times, maternal uncles and their kin performed three great nurturing tasks: over a decade they went hunting and gave bilums bulging with smoked possums to the parents of girls betrothed to their nephews in childhood, they initiated their nephews and pierced their noses in adolescence, and they gave their nephews land in adulthood. This creates lifelong obligations to matrikin for which there is no closure: as far as I can see nephews make betrothal payments for their nephews, and then they for theirs, *without* a proscribed pattern of returning women. I have to confirm this with a proper analysis of the genealogies I have for about 1000 people, but it looks this way at the moment. The outcome certainly leaves men in a permanently deferential relationship to the people their mothers came from.

This is set against the masculine ideal that true men should not defer to others: no, they should kill them, and seize their land. It is in stark contrast with the relationships men have with their brothers; unencumbered by the responsibilities of joint membership of a group with corporate functions, and obligated in a different direction for betrothal payments, relationships with brothers are fissive and disputatious. The primary pathways for distribution of important vegetal foods, notably *kamga*, a processed forest fruit known in pidgin as *sis*, lie with matrikin, not brothers.

The Upper Watut say they have three 'sins', to use the modern word: adultery, *panga* or the type of witchcraft usually known as *sanguma*, and theft. For each the penalty is death. In my recent fieldwork, that is since mid-June, there have been two homicides¹ at Yokua village, population about 250, one for suspected adultery and one for theft. The Upper Watut would not say 'we marry the people we fight' as in Enga, which is a political statement, but 'we fight those who wrong us', which is predominantly about unmediated disputes between individuals. Many of these are people who stand in the relation of brothers.

Is the deference that men receive from their sisters' children an unrewarded power? It looks that way at the moment. Is the ruthless aggression with which men must treat everyone they must not defer to—including members of their own patriline—an instance of 'warre of all men against all men'. There is certainly something in this; it is an analytic line worth pursuing.

C'est qui, le patron?

The ingredients of power I have listed for the Upper Watut pose great difficulties for the a 'consensus' view of village leadership, or any modified version based on democratic principles. As I have said, the 'right to speak' for land and resources resides solely with the senior member of the senior branch of the village's landowning patriline. He is, loosely speaking, the settlement leader.

Though inherited leadership is not that uncommon, this kind of leader fails to match any of the Melanesian stereotypes that are well described in the anthropological literature. The existing 'closed position' leadership types are chiefs—not seen here—and various kinds of lineage headmen, who perhaps include the peace and war 'chiefs' described for some coastal societies. 'Headman', though, is a term so abused by general writers, or treated as a catch-all by ethnographers not interested in leadership, it has largely become a non-category.

At any rate, I will now call the Upper Watut patriline leader, with designed ambiguity, a *patron*. In English he is a reasonably expansive fellow, a sponsor. In French he is a stern figure not to be argued with.²

Who is he? The patron is a proprietor. He derives his position from ownership of the land on which the settlement stands and his grant of gardening rights to his followers: his patriline and the people I described earlier as *ka* (matrikin and affines) and *aqa nanga* (permanently attached people). The patron's followers are publicly silent. Village elders *without* the right to speak, as I have intimated, pretend ignorance of quite simple information; they say little or nothing at village meetings, even when directly addressed.

The patron heads his patriline, but far from ruling it, he is likely to be permanently at odds with most of it for quite a lot of the time. This is because it lacks the features of group solidarity that it would have if it were clan-like. Nor do patriline 'brothers' owe a debt of allegiance to the head, as clients are expected to. They should be loyal, but they offer a divisible loyalty at the best of times. The patriline is only a pedigree with rights attached to it, not a small bit of a corporate group.

As for members of other patrilines who reside with the owners of the land the settlement stands on, these people are simply clients of the patron and have limited rights to say or do anything.

A provisional list of characteristics for the *patron* would appear to be as follows:

1. as a senior man of a lineage (or its head), his authority extends over other co-owners of the land by virtue of his higher genealogical position;
2. as a landowner, his authority extends over the non-owners (*ka* and *aqa nanga*, see above) he gives permission to settle, on pain of withdrawal of this privilege;

¹ After this was written, another instance of wife murder occurred at Nauti, in December 1996. The husband suspected adultery; he surrendered immediately to the police.

² I am grateful to comments from Pierre Lemonnier at the Marseille conference reinforcing the not-to-be brooked autocracy of *le patron* in French usage.

3. he implicitly offers a safe haven to settlers in return for a duty of allegiance to him;
4. when he lends productive assets, namely tracts of land, to people who do not own them he expects them to defer to him in decision-making;
5. when he lends land he expects to take a proportion of 'profits' from any activities that make use of it or the resources contained within it.

If the first three seem acceptable principles, the inferred obligations created by the last two are problematic in a democracy. The basis of modern local level government is that village officials are fairly elected from all villagers and that a village represents 'one people', typically 'a clan' in the Melanesianist orthodoxy I mentioned at the beginning. It is also assumed that people within the village have more or less equal rights to its resources—that they are more or less equally all 'peasant farmers'. This is simply not the case in the Upper Watut. The *patron* is a landlord. His mandate is as the first among unequals, and his constituency that of a 'pocket borough'.³

In pre-colonial times, I suggest that the inequality I have described would have been temporary and unimportant. As represented earlier, the settlement system was for a never-ending pattern of foundation, growth, fission and new foundation. In a subsequent round those now silent would become active, by being the founders of new *taknga*, and those now active, silent by virtue of being clients. But this cycle is now broken and settlements are permanent. As a consequence, as secondary landowners are removed from active participation in village decision-making, and a stratification of rights has occurred that sits uneasily with the assumptions of village egalitarianism made Papua New Guinea's constitutional fathers.

Scope for competition in leadership

In two current villages, there is disputation between the descendants of an ancestor's first wife and those of his second wife. In both, the senior descendant of the first wife is the 'official' leader, following the principles I laid out earlier. This leader would now be a village councillor, if the Upper Watut Council had not become defunct soon after it opened about 25 years ago, and may be expected to be the Ward Member for whatever new 'local level government' is eventually introduced following the recent provincial government reforms. However, at the present time his main recognition comes from acting as the principal village representative on various committees regulating dealings between the mining company, various representatives of government, and landowners. His privileges of recognition include attendance at meetings at Wau, control of a small budget for village assistance, a fuel allowance to drive the two hours from the village to Wau, and so on.

In both cases, the descendants of the second wife are struggling to assert the autonomy of their lineage segments. They have argued that the rights of the senior are weakened because where he does live is not the true home of the lineage; or he does not direct benefits to them from the village budget; or his son has struck up an adulterous relationship with one of their wives. They is scope even to contest that their greatgrandmother was the founder's *first* wife, not the second.

This is actually a form of competition for legitimacy based on history and ways of doing things which are alleged to be truer than other ways. In an earlier seminar, I referred to this type of competition for supremacy as 'fighting with history'. At the time I was mainly referring to the enduring struggle between the Upper Watut leaders and those of the Biangai, their neighbours, as seen in constant litigation between the two in the court system. However, it applies just as neatly within Upper Watut society as it does in the context of its external relations.

Conclusion: is the 'patron' a new species of leader

A good deal more analysis needs to be given to the concept of the *patron* before we can say that he exists as a consistent leadership form. If he does, he succeeds in the tradition of the 'despot' leader discussed in the 1960s by Watson, Brown, Salisbury, Strathern and others. It may be that he is a creation of the *post-colonial* period with its growing emphasis on the ownership of resources, or that, if present before, his despotism was contained by the need to secure the military support of his clients. Unlike the big-man, who dies without support, he can get away without sharing benefits with anyone if he has to, or feels able to run

³ A *pocket borough* was, before abolition, a town of which the representation in the Westminster parliament was under the control of one person or family (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

the gauntlet of *panga*, or just wants to be aggressive in the manner that Anga men say their ancestors have shown them.

How does what I have said sit with another discussion of Anga leadership, namely that focussing on the hypothetical transition of great men to big-men in Lemonnier's (1990) book *Guerres et festins*? Lemonnier identifies sequences of homicide compensation as providing the springboard for the men who organise them to become big-men. This is certainly true in Western Highlands where *wu ombil/wu embil*, 'man's bones', payments of pigs lead off several types of major pig festival.

The answer is that it does not lead anywhere in this direction, as the key ingredient of collective responsibility for group warfare is absent in the Upper Watut. I cannot say how this fits with circumstances in western Anga groups where clans, tribes and group warfare are vividly described. What is the relevance of what I have said? Have I over-objectified the *patron* as an identity? In response to this, current struggles for control of resources exist quite independently of me. At least five previous consultants were hired by the mining company before I was—I did not invent the company's difficulty in establishing a constructive dialogue with the landowners—and in some cases the positions of particular leaders have been objectified by decisions won in court on the strength of their own wits, beginning a decade ago. In many discussions of the control of resources, examples being legion in forestry as well as in mining, it is clear that a distinctive new kind of 'work' for some varieties of Melanesian leader has appeared consisting of a deep engagement in wresting control of benefits from potential rivals, often at the expense of politically weak sections of village society such as women and the young. Lumping benefits together as 'rents', the new leader is a 'rentier', and those who benefit with him, a 'rentier class'. In the Upper Watut, the *patron* is a ready-crafted template of a rentier leader, and he and his peers and their families, *not* their supporters and close agnates, prospective members of an exclusive rentier class.

Mining companies are often portrayed as destructive of village societies by causing divisions within them. However, it is important to distinguish between exploration projects with a small scale of operations, and operational projects where, as is well-documented and as CRA, the prospector at Hidden Valley, is painfully aware, social and environmental dislocation can be immense. In the exploration phase, experienced mining companies have no intention other than to direct benefits as fairly as possible to all those identified as members of the landowning communities. Unfortunately, at Hidden Valley, the rentier leaders of the communities have been quite successful in thwarting the company's efforts to do this up to the present.⁴

I cannot not say this is an entirely promising analysis.

⁴ After a full decade of exploration, the flow of those benefits over which village leaders had discretionary control to ordinary villagers was minimal. At a meeting at Nauti village on 31 November 1996 to propose the division of a lump sum of K200,000 between five villages, one leader spoke out against a village mini-hydro scheme on the grounds that as he had moved to town he needed the money for a security fence at his house. Village health and a school scholarships fund came equal sixth on his and his colleague's list of priorities. 'Leader's projects' came equal first.

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