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UNIFORMITY OF CULTURE AND LOCAL VARIATIONS IN THE NORTH CENTRAL
NEW HEBRIDES

par

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Having received all my scholarly training in France, I have been almost reared in the Culture Cycles theories of the German and Austrian Schools, the principal exponents of which were in France before the war by Dr. Montandon and Dr. Rivet.

For a young man working as I was day after day in a Museum, this kind of research was very tempting, and you will pardon me if I add, very easy. After some time on the field, not only had I to think of more urgent types of research, but I came quickly to change entirely my mind on the subject. I mean now to give a short illustration of this.

My examples will be taken from the New Hebrides.

The Northern New Hebrides are made of a chain of islands surrounding a kind of inland sea, a kind of a small Mediterranean, the shores of which were at all times in close contact one with another. It is a well-known fact that the districts opposing one another on different islands have often more in common than neighbour districts on the same islands.

I will take as my first example a rather material one: the wooden drum or gong as you will want to call it, the name of which bears striking analogies in some places: nambwe tingting at Matanvat in North Malekula, atingting on North Ambrym. Layard describes elaborate ceremonies relating to its erection, and taking a definite place in the ritual cycle of the Maki. On North Ambrym, where both the dancing place and the carved drum are of personal ownership, there is no other ritual for its erection than the payment in pigs of the sculptor, and the beating of it for more than a day and a night, one man after the other, until it is thought that the sound is good, having lost its newness. Beforehand, a fowl will have been sacrificed and its blood spilt in the hollow. In both cases, the drum has the same collective value, for the sending of messages and the accompaniment of dances. We will not dwell here on the symbolism of their carvings. The ownership being different in each case, the related ritual is normally enough on a different plane.

We can make use for comparison of another case; the big sea-



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going canoes which permitted frequent inter-island voyages. They have more or less the same distribution as the vertical slit gongs. But then these canoes are always of communal ownership, possessed by what is called a "company", a group of men who usually band together for the purpose of building it and for its use. The work finished, after a ritual designated to desacralize the canoe, they go around the ports with which their people are traditionally related on their island or on the next, and everywhere receive presents of food after having been pelted with small fruits and nuts.

There is no difference here between the local customs as regards newly made canoes, but then, why should there be? In either case, the gong and the canoe, how can we build any hypothesis of their origin or think of them of a single origin: in the last instance where the ceremonial is similar in each local set up, it could well have evolved from the frequent sea contacts between the coastal people of each island; these contacts can explain the uniformity which could have been as much slowly acquired as introduced all at the one time.

Speaking of these close coastal relationships brings us to another aspect of the culture of this area: the easy transmission of elements of local culture from one place to another. Since the studies of Layard and Deacon, we know the importance of the tusked pig as playing a role closely related to that of a monetary medium. It is possible to buy a number of things and pay for them in pigs at more or less fixed rates. Pigs, too, are used for the payment of ceremonies, mostly those of the grade-taking ceremonial cycle, known as Maki, Nimangki, Mage, etc. In the same way whole sets of ceremonies, dances or simply songs can be acquired and paid for, far or near, given and made use of and then sent on further for a price.

Studying a yam-giving feast which was to be held at Melbulbul in North Ambrym. I was painstakingly writing down the words sung at the almost daily rehearsals of the dances to come: when I had completed this task, I found out it was useless, as the song had had to be bought, through a number of go-betweens, on the island of Epi, much to the south and nobody could help in the translating of the now written text. I learnt then that it was, on Ambrym at least, certainly not the only instance of figurative dance bought, learnt, held and then sold to another group, without anybody being capable of putting a meaning to the words of the song. I found the same thing later on Malekula.

The importance of this factor is such that North Ambrym was still three years ago receiving Naluan, men's semi-secret ceremonies, as a new cultural element, while it had already died out on Malekula, from where it originated, at least as far as Man Ambrym is concerned. The range of these introductions goes from the simplest of songs to

a ceremonial complex entailing many months of preparations, specific taboos, and week after week of ritual and festive events. When this is the case the observer can eventually map the route it took from one island to another, from place to place, according to traditional relationships which enable any new element such as the tentative more or less political movement with cargo-cult features, to be handed on in the same way from one group to another.

My point is then that these sociological features carried on from one place to another evidently cannot fulfil in each case the same functions nor answer the same needs. The breath-taking ritual called gol in Southern Pentecost, where young men, their feet fastened to a bush rope, dive from the top of a tower, is there the essential part of a yam first fruit ritual. On the eastern coast of Malekula, this same dive was part of one of the grade-taking ceremonies of the Namangi.

In another way this opens the possibility of quick-change in the ceremonial aspects of the social structure and may allow indefinite local variations. This seems to have been the case with the Namangi, the great hierarchy apparently so characteristic of the area. In the course of his life, a man must climb up the whole scale so as to attain a kind of chiefly status by which he shares authority and power with the few men of equal rank to his. Similarly to this formal set of grades, the ritual features are arranged so as to follow a kind of hierarchy, growing in complexity and importance. The material symbols specific of each grade, show the same tendency, if their local multiplicity does not hide from us the growing symbolic value of the changing artifacts; ritual houses, carved wooden posts or tree-fern carvings. On North Ambrym the picture is the clearer; the carvings, non-existent for the lower grades, start with a simple tree-fern carved human head, then as the grades are higher come the arms, the upper part of the body, then a man with all his sexual attributes, then two human figures, male and female, in a pit; the latest introduction from Malekula brought in over everything the representation of a house with tree-fern carved posts. But if this case is the simpler, all the evidence points to its external origin; we are confronted with the conclusion of a process instead of with a basic and original conception. Moreover, this conclusion has been reached by the means of the geographical factor of transport, much more than by an internal evolution, submerged as it came to be under the dominant external introduction.

Another aspect of this complexity is shown by the differences in context between the variations of the grade-taking hierarchy. On North Ambrym, it appears as being built as much on the necessities of personal ambition as on community-feeling. It is there, by all means, a secular institution, including taboos, but void of any invocative or sacrificial aspects. In Southern Malekula, Deacon showed us this institution strongly intermingled with the ancestors' cult,

everyone of its carvings being the abode of an ancestor's spirit, a temes.

It would be impossible in so short a time to make this discussion bear on the details of the ritual complexes as this would mean having to describe as a start the material aspects of each local hierarchy, grade after grade.

Let us dwell on another aspect of what neighbour relationships can bring about when they play havoc with an institution apparently so well defined as the namangi. Our example will be the problem of the relationship between the grade hierarchy and the hereditary chieftainship in Northern Malekula; it is both a problem of contacts and a problem of local evolution.

Deacon, in Miss Wedgwood's able edition, tells us: "In Lambumbu, chieftainship, although undoubtedly inconceivable apart from the possession of the full Nimangki dignity, and though built up by the Nimangki, transcends the constitution of this society, and has become for all practical purposes, the prerogative and heritage of one or two families who have the prestige of a line of chieftainships behind them, in each of the small areas which go to make up the district; thus the sons of a man of Rus Nevat dignity are permitted to eat at the fire naamb ruhvaru in virtue of their father's position, although they, themselves, have only purchased the lowest Nimangki title of all; the privilege of using this fire has become heritable, passing from father to son. It can be, and is, also sold, but only by a member of one "chiefly" family to another, never to a "commoner". In this way the degree is kept select and its members form an aristocracy.....

..... But not only are people other than the near relatives of chiefs prevented from buying Rus Nevat, and eating at naamb ruhvaru, there are also groups of people in the community who are never allowed to enter the Nimangki at all. They are not permitted to acquire any pigs, or at most a very few, and should their stock rise above the prescribed number, the surplus must be given to the chiefs. Further, while not allowed to obtain wealth for themselves, they are expected to help others in its acquisition by working for the "privileged class". These repressed people eat apart from other men at a fire of their own called naamb retan (fire below), which is not made inside the amel, the house of the Nimangki, but in the village near to the women's fire, the naamb taghah. Just as the privilege of eating at the naamb ruhvaru is handed down from father to son, so these disabilities are also inherited patrilineally, and the members of this class are identified on ceremonial occasions by their special girdle, nau vŋgoniar ..."

This short description appears to be very much to the point, as it gives us in a few lines the two principal features of the

political structure of Northern Malekula: the blending of a namangi type organization with hereditary local chieftainship and the division of the people into groups of different status, equally hereditary in the patrilinear line: the lower class people, the commoners and the chiefly clans.

The structure shown by the group of the so-called "Big Nambas" people, on the North-West of Lambumbu, offers the observer another kind of blending. The local social structure is patterned according to a hierarchy which comprises the following categories:

Firstly - The individuals, members of certain clans, who do not possess any ceremonial rights whatever, but furnish the operators of circumcision and eventually the customary human victims offered to the victors for the settling of peace after an unhappy war.

Secondly - The ordinary commoners, who have the right to participate in a very second-rate copy of the grade-taking ceremony, running between stakes to which are fastened their own pigs and slapping the first one on the line on the back of the head, shouting at the same time the new name of which they can now boast, the same one as the Chief's.

Finally - The chief has all the rights and prerogatives which are the normal attributes of the Melanesian Chief. Moreover he is the only one to have the right to fasten the pigs to the raised stones set up in a long row, starting from the dancing ground, and to have the actual right of killing or at least striking the beasts on the head with his ceremonial pig-killing hammer. The greater part of the pigs mustered for the occasion, the number of which can be of more than a hundred, goes to another chief who is the inviting chief's traditional partner for that ceremony, each one in turn receiving pigs from his partner after having, with his group, given some days before, the representation of a kind of theatrical dance.

The newest feature is here this concept of chieftainships organized two by two. The existence of the chief without his ceremonial partner seems unthinkable. In time of stress, another will eventually take the place of the missing, or Christianised partner, as happened in 1952, but there is the feeling that something is amiss.

Among the "Big Nambas", it can be said that the chief has taken unto himself the substance of the ritual of the grade-taking type so much so that the word mangi only means here the pale copy left to the common people. The compromise between the classical Namangi and the hereditary chieftainship is heavily balanced in favor of the latter institution.

Among the neighbour groups of the Batarmul, to the North, the

balance is still as heavily in favor of the chief who is the only one who can give any pigs to an external group. In compensation, he alone supports the weight of all the taboos enforced for a whole year after the ceremonial part itself has finished. The headman of the clans of his side, that is those who furnished him with the necessary pigs have the right to take on the same title as has been received by the chief for the killing of the beasts.

At Matanvat, the Nanaki, similar in most respects to the Maki described by Layard, offers us a more equal compromise in which the chief is the only one to take the initiative but where the head man and any other man they have agreed to, participate in the actual killing of the pigs, and ascend a ceremonial stone platform to shout their new name; they are then all subjected to the food and sexual taboos of the year to come.

In either case, the chief can only fulfil his function for the existence of another chief who is his traditional partner. It seems that in the case of Matanvat, the depopulation has forced the widening of the area from which groups could be invited, and a greater range of possible partners. In this latter case, too, the higher-grade pigs are given by the Chief to his ceremonial partner; the lesser ones are given by their owners to the man from the invited group who is with him in a definite ceremonial relationship called navelne. It is said that for the last three generations, the men of the group called Betnatsal, theoretically of inferior status, have acquired the right to participate on equal terms in the nanaki. This equalisation of ceremonial rights seems to have coincided with the new economic equality of opportunity brought about through European contact: any man could acquire similar sums of money by letting himself be recruited or by making copra.

The study of other cases from native societies living in the vicinity of the "Big Nambas" area, would bring up the same characteristics, the pattern being the more in favor of the hereditary chieftainship - the institution of which only exists in Northern Malekula - where the localities are the closer to the "Big Nambas" tableland. Further on, "democratic" tendencies, so to speak, appear stronger.

It might be that chieftainship is here the result, if not of the direct introduction from outside, at least of an outside contact, and that its accompanying "class" or "cast" differentiation features have arisen in more or less the same pre-white contact conditions as in Fiji, the Loyalties or New Caledonia. This would be corroborated by the myths which all give to chieftainship an external origin, representing the first chiefs as young boys who had arrived from the outside or had a super-natural origin, and were chosen for that rank because the people recognized the need they had for a chief to further and organize their ceremonial relations with neighbour groups. But then Namangi, too, can be analyzed as having been more or less recently evolved, perhaps under similar conditions.

In any case any amount of examples would show that in the case of the Malekula chieftainship, a kind of centre can be determined, if not as centre of origin, at least of greater strength of the institution. Contrarywise, the features of the Namangi have been so transferred from place to place along different routes, and in a number of cases became so mixed up, that we might perhaps manage, after a long analysis, to suggest some secondary spots of diffusion: but probably nothing as regards origin. I cannot see the possibility of work being done to link any of the hypothetical diffusion centres to any other culture traits, social or material. It seems well-nigh impossible to analyse the culture of this part of the New Hebrides in its component elements and to try to map possible migration routes or even the distribution of cultures, as Deacon tried to 25 years ago. Nevertheless, I would think that the study of the local variations of culture traits and institutions does not necessarily lead to such a disconsolate conclusion. Much can come out of the thorough analysis of these variations, on the one hand representing introductions from neighbour districts and on the other hand coming from local evolution "sur place"; and in any case from the study of their functional role within the local structure. Then we can more easily integrate in the picture the apparent results of the more modern contact situation.

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