



Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies

# State Society and Governance *in* Melanesia

## MYTHS OF COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT: SUSTAINABILITY, THE STATE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA, SOLOMON ISLANDS AND VANUATU

**PENELOPE  
SCHOEFFEL**

### THE TWO DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE

It has become fashionable of late to view 'development' as a discourse which problematises 'the other' from a western perspective (Escobar 1995, Crush 1995). But while much writing in this vein speaks of one development discourse, that of economism, there are indeed two contending but interrelated levels of discourse on development; that of economism and that of communitarianism. The former is associated with economic rationalism on which there is a large critical literature. The latter, communitarianism is far less rigorously criticised, no doubt due to what Dore (1994:18–21) terms a 'liberal egalitarianism taboo'. Both discourses share a reality called 'development', but they problematise the culture and system of production of particular groups of people in different ways.

From the economic viewpoint, poverty is caused by economic stagnation, organisational inadequacy, underproduction and insufficiency of information. Economism is predicated on belief in the existence of universal human economic aspirations and pathways to modernity via technological change and economic growth. It

assumes the efficacy of acts of intervention called projects, in which capital, technology and know-how are administered in prescribed doses to encourage greater efficiency of production. It measures the results by increasing consumption. It continues to be the dominant paradigm in most aid and development agencies.

The communitarian point of view sees poverty as the effects of structural forces of inequality, oppression, and marginalisation. It is predicated on belief in the redemptive potential of transformative social action. It assumes the efficacy of acts of intervention to stimulate 'sustainable' self-generated development based on self-help at the 'grassroots' community level in a participatory manner, with goals of empowering people to act for themselves to overcome the causes of their poverty. It firmly rejects as ethnocentric Durkheim's and Weber's classical theories of modernisation, and their notion that 'development' involves a transition from small to large scale forms of organisation, and from collectivism to individualism. In the wealthy democracies of the West, whose taxpayers and voluntary donors provide the funds for most development activities, the communitarian agenda has gained considerable influence on bilateral and multilateral aid

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policies. Most aid donors and development finance institutions have sought to broaden their legitimacy since the 1980s by borrowing from the communitarian agenda long established by development non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

### **COMMUNITY-BASED DEVELOPMENT**

There can be few villages in Melanesia that have not at one time or another had development projects of communitarian inspiration. These have ranged in scale from multi-million dollar cattle projects funded by loans from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, to small revolving credit schemes or farming projects funded by NGOs. But despite the diversity of scale involved here, they have had a common element of logic: that new systems of organisation and production can be grafted onto old as a result of largely external inspiration, and in the space of a few years. Further they have shared common errors of understanding as to the nature of the traditional systems they sought to improve.

One common misconception is that communities in Melanesia are in some sense undifferentiated in terms of the aspirations and interests of the people who comprise them. In Melanesian societies, for all their diversity, there is a status quo of conflict and competition between older and younger men for power and control. Thus social cohesion is always fragile. Throughout history communities regularly disintegrated, with groups moving away to establish new settlements and identities. As Filer (1990) has pointed out:

Melanesian communities have always been on the verge of disintegration, even in pre-colonial times, and it has always taken special qualities of leadership, in each succeeding generation, to prevent them from splitting apart at the seams.

He observes that development projects, like other change-provoking events, can accentuate this inherent instability, speeding up the rate of

social change and undermining “the sort of compromise which has traditionally been sufficient to contain, to counteract the forces of disintegration.” While he is referring specifically to major mining projects, even small development projects can have this destabilising effect.

A common misconception, that has been highly influential in development thinking in past decades is that rural Melanesians will take readily to communal enterprises for rural development. Development planners, observing a degree of community cooperation and collective ownership of land in the tenure systems of Melanesia (while overlooking the individual nature of usufructuary rights and household-based commercial and subsistence production), have assumed that collective economic action is traditional and can be developed.

For example in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu there have been hundreds of small-scale aid-funded fisheries projects in which donors provided ice boxes, fishing tackle, and in some instances, freezers, engines and boats, to youth groups, village groups or fishermen’s cooperatives. The inspiration for such projects is that in many parts of Asia it has apparently been a successful strategy among poor, marginal, specialised fishing communities (Pollnac 1991:273–80).

But there are very few specialised commercial fishers in Melanesia, and those which exist have developed spontaneously in response to the opportunities offered by proximity to large urban markets. So in Melanesia few, if any, of these fisheries projects succeeded for more than a few years (see for example Rodman 1982, 1989; Carrier 1981)

Community-based projects, whatever their purpose, commonly become a source of conflict. The assets of the project usually become a source of dispute: who has control of them? Who determines how, when, and by whom the assets are used? Who is responsible for maintaining or replacing the assets? If a loan is involved, a group may work in unity until it is repaid, but once the



asset is paid for and is used to earn cash, problems begin to arise over the division of income within the group. Community-based projects seldom offer group members with much individual reward, yet they may arouse unrealistic expectations within the group. When the anticipated returns fail to materialise, members may accuse one another of misappropriating money, or blame one another for lack of success, so that dissension arises and interest in the project wanes (Schoeffel 1991).

Another reason why community-based development projects have been so popular with aid donors in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu is frustration with the inefficiency of the state apparatus. By working directly with communities, it has been hoped that more effective development processes might be achieved. This is a kind of communitarian version of the argument for privatisation and the rolling back of the state; it holds that people acting on their own behalf will do a better job than public institutions. Some development NGOs have come to believe that by-passing government is actually a virtue in itself because of the predatory characteristics of the state in many developing countries. This paper argues that in terms of sustainability there is no substitute for state agencies, including local government, for rural development, which I define as improving the health, education and livelihoods of rural people.

### **A CASE STUDY FROM VANUATU**

The difficulty of achieving community-based management of new services and activities is typically underestimated. I could give dozens of examples from contract research I have done in the Pacific over the past 25 years, and there are hundreds more in the archives of the various donors to the region. The example I have chosen, a water supply project in Vanuatu that I reviewed in 1991, illustrates the pitfalls of substituting community management for local government services. The government of Vanuatu provides water supplies to villages throughout the country

through a rural water supply unit based in the capital. This unit operates mobile teams which design and install water supply systems on a project-by-project basis, as funds become available from an array of donors. The technology provided was usually simple, low-cost gravity feed systems. A suitable spring is located, from which water is collected into a large tank, from which water flows downhill in pipes and through sub-tanks to the various village outlets. These systems need regular simple technical maintenance to remain operational. The maintenance arrangements adopted in many regions of Vanuatu were for the villages served by a water supply system to form a water users' committee. These would be expected to elect from amongst themselves a president, secretary and treasurer, collect the water fees, maintain a bank account and records of expenditure, and hold and disburse the funds collected on behalf of the communities. The water committee was to identify a person to be trained by as a 'village plumber' and to subsequently direct and pay him to carry out maintenance and repairs to the system. The Local Government Council was supplied with tool kits, to be looked after by its staff plumber, and these were to have been available to be borrowed, as needed, by the village plumber. The arrangement was necessary because local government councils lacked the resources to provide maintenance services themselves. To cut a long and complicated story short (see Schoeffel 1995) the project funded by my client had run into trouble, as had the 22 other water supply systems previously installed on the same island—of which only four were still functioning. According to the rural water supply staff this failure rate was not peculiar to that island; there were similar problems of maintenance in many other areas of Vanuatu.

The project I reviewed was to have provided three water supply systems. The first, which served 27 villages and 1,345 people, had been in operation for about three years but was beginning to malfunction. The water committees were inactive, the village plumber had not been

paid and had stopped work, and most people had stopped paying their water fees. Various reasons were given. Some said that because the pipes were on their land, they should not have to pay water fees. Some felt they should not have to pay because it was the responsibility of the government to look after the scheme. Some said that they followed *kastom* and did not vote in elections, therefore they should not have to pay for things the government did, such as providing a water supply. Some said that the water committee already had enough money, but were not spending it. Many said they did not have enough money to pay the water fees—however discussion revealed that they did have some access to money, but had other priorities for spending it. These people said that they expected that water would continue to flow from their taps without needing any more money to be spent.

The second project had been abandoned, uncompleted after many delays, partly due to technical problems, and partly because it had become embroiled in rivalry between political factions. Both factions regarded the project as a gift from their local member of parliament to his constituents, one which was likely to increase his chances in the forthcoming national elections. The faction who opposed this politician and who were campaigning for their own candidate had tried to sabotage the project (hoping thus to undermine the status of their rival), by actively discouraging the contribution of labour. They also persuaded the owner of the land where the water source was located to demand impossibly large amounts of compensation.

The third project had been long delayed, but during my review, orders were sent to the rural water supply unit from high political levels in government that the project was to be given priority, presumably to win votes for the incumbent member of parliament. But although a hundred volunteer workers began to enthusiastically dig and lay the main pipes, no water users' committees were formed because the villages and hamlets to be linked by the

water pipes belonged to three different territorial groupings. The leaders of each territorial group understood that technically the system needed to be maintained as a whole. However they declared that to form one management group representing three territories would be without cultural precedent, and thus impossible. It seemed that this system, too, was doomed to failure.

The engineers who ran the rural water supply program saw the cause of the problem as community indifference, lack of motivation, irrational attitudes, and the mistaken belief that government has the duty and the resources to provide free services to village people. As far as they were concerned, the project was technically and economically feasible but the 'beneficiaries' were unable to organise themselves to manage it. They believed that 'community development' was the key to the achieving of more successful outcomes, that somehow the people could be persuaded to act and think differently with more aid and the use of volunteers.

The crux of the matter was that the water supply technology chosen, although the most technically efficient and cost effective, was unlikely to succeed under the prevailing arrangements. The political structure of local communities was unsuited to the demands of managing it, but at the same time, people were strongly opposed to paying the taxes which would enable the local government council to manage the water supply systems on their behalf. Furthermore, there was a consensus in the three areas that infrastructural projects such as road-building, water supply, and other village amenities were the return on investments in local politicians. The electorate made a 'gift' of power, prestige and privilege to the politician by assisting with his campaign or electing him, and he, in turn, reciprocated by providing projects for his supporters. Women (who had to carry water from the river when taps ran dry) were angry when their water supply system ceased to function, but men did not seem particularly concerned about it. It was the idea of the project



as a gift, and the prestige it conferred upon the political faction which had supported the politician who was thought to have given it, that dominated much of the discussion of the project during my review.

## **DEVELOPMENT AS A SYSTEM OF EXCHANGE**

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The way in which rural Melanesians perceive development projects is often very different to the perception of the donors. If the project is not seen as a gift from a politician, it is often seen as being for the interest and benefit of the donor. An example of this is a community forestry project in Papua New Guinea,<sup>1</sup> which aimed to enable landowners to establish a forestry plantation by providing funds and technical assistance. Seeking to understand the motive behind this gift, in which people were paid the minimum wage to plant their own land with trees, a local leader among the landowners came to the conclusion that the assets of the project, including the trees, belonged to the overseas government funding the project, and that the project was somehow in the commercial interests of the donor.

Accordingly, he encouraged the landowners to believe that the donor had incurred an obligation to provide them with all types of material benefits. The local leader was further encouraged in his erroneous beliefs by participating in a study tour for landowners. This was sponsored by the donor to allow selected local leaders of the various community forestry projects they had sponsored in Papua New Guinea to see other community forestry projects in the Pacific region. Following this experience, the leader drew further conclusions that there were mystical associations between plantation forestry and the donor, and predicted bounteous wealth would be forthcoming for those who allowed their land to be used for the project. When these expectations proved false, interest in the project waned and it was judged unsuccessful, as were all the other similar projects.

No matter how we wrap up aid in terms of partnership, and cooperation, in anthropological terms the universal aspect of gift-giving is that it bestows a superior status upon the giver and places an implicit obligation upon the recipient. Bilateral aid in the Pacific has come to be understood by recipient island states as a system of exchange in which richer countries give gifts of material and technical assistance, which are to be reciprocated with support for the geopolitical objectives and economic interests of the donor.

At the local level aid projects are often seen as transactions between the recipient and the donor as described above. The transactional nature of the aid system also operates between donor and recipient bureaucracies with imperatives to give and to receive. In many Pacific island countries with high levels of aid or soft loan dependence, some government departments receive virtually no budget for their operations, but rely on a succession of aid or loan projects to carry out their functions (and to keep their staffing intact). They formulate aid requests, framed by their own infrastructural and operational needs, to be passed up through government channels to be prioritised and offered as a pick-list to donors. The system is extremely vulnerable to political manipulation.

## **CULTURE, HISTORY AND GOVERNANCE**

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The invocation of tradition by post-colonial Pacific leaders to mystify their self-interest has been the subject of extensive academic discussion. (for example, Lawson 1996). But the notion that there were traditional answers to development was very influential in the 1970s, when most of the Pacific states became independent and when the views of most of its present leaders were formed. The notion was influenced by the communitarian discourse that a yet undiscovered alternative route to development, one compatible with non-Western philosophies, in which economic development, in the sense of increased and widely shared material prosperity, could be achieved without the loss of

community and collective ownership. In Melanesia many leaders and intellectuals believed that under independent governments, traditional values of sharing and redistribution could somehow be reconciled with political and economic development. This was to be done by adapting colonial institutions to make them more culturally appropriate. It was hoped that local control would solve the injustices and distortions of development in the colonial period, and that local knowledge would shape more appropriate development strategies. Such ideas are to some extent still wistfully invoked today.

The notions formulated by Hyden (1980, 1982) of an uncaptured peasantry and their economy of affection in East Africa have considerable relevance to understanding the political culture of contemporary Melanesia. Rural people can more or less survive without an effective state, particularly if they are unaccustomed to one, and their adapted versions of old political and economic mechanisms serve them well enough in its absence. Hyden's analysis, however, falls into an intellectual abyss between economic and communitarian discourses. The liberal egalitarian taboo on cultural explanations of underdevelopment is that they allegedly blame the victim or propose the intrinsic inferiority of one society versus another. But cultural explanations within a mainly economic discourse have recently re-emerged; for example Fukuyama's (1993) neo-Hegelian notion of an end to history, versus Huntingdon's (1993) notion of competing cultures of modernity.

Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu were governed very paternalistically for almost a century and only minimal levels of formal education were made available to indigenous people prior to the 1950s. Therefore until quite recently few people had much experience of modern systems of institutional organisation and management. The colonial state barely touched the lives of most people, the churches having far greater influence in most areas. Through most of rural Melanesia kinship

continues to be the basis of social organisation, and meaningful political organisation rarely encompasses more than a few hundred people. Over the past fifty or so years the organisational structures imposed by the colonial state only lightly impinged upon the basic structures of local organisation and leadership, despite the extensive social and economic changes which had occurred with colonisation and Christianity.

The new organisational structures of the colonial state were based on bureaucratic principles in which positions were, at least in theory, defined and limited by laws and regulations. The powers of an office belonged to the office itself, and not to the person who held it. As Meleisea (1987) has pointed out, this was barely comprehensible to traditional leaders in Samoa during the colonial era. What was the point of holding a prestigious public office if one could not use it for the benefit of oneself and one's kin and supporters? In Melanesia few were permitted to hold decision-making public offices until the 1970s, shortly before the Australians, British and French administrations abruptly handed over government to local control. Throughout this century Melanesian and foreign colonial systems of government coexisted in only slightly overlapping spheres. Few people had any knowledge of how the state and its associated political processes were supposed, ideally, to function. Today this uncertainty manifests itself in a widespread indifference to the task of building the efficient, impartial, legally-based systems and institutions which have been basic underpinnings of successful modern states since the late 19th century.

Further, as Larmour (1997) concludes in his analysis of corruption issues in the region,

...it may be embedded in a wider, but non-corrupt, framework of inept governance (mismanagement, lack of accountability, arbitrary decision-making and so on) that provides the opportunity for specifically corrupt acts, and reason for popular suspicion that they may be occurring.



For example at the time of independence in Papua New Guinea, local government was in its infancy in many provinces, but well-established in others. In many districts state functions such as the provision of health and educational services were effectively contracted out to missions. Church leadership networks overlapped with local government, so that church elders, deacons and catechists were also councillors in the state system. The country was governed under a lean, highly centralised four-tier system of administration at national, district, sub-district and ward levels. This system existed mainly for the purposes of keeping the *Pax Australiana* and facilitating the operations of missions and plantations. It was not until the late 1960s that health, education and other basic services were provided widely in most rural areas. The introduction of a decentralised system of provincial government in the late 1970s led to a gradual decline in the quality and coverage of these services, despite the rapid expansion in the size of the state. This was due largely to a shift of resources away from local government, and from sub-district mission and state services, to the provincial centres, government headquarters and also to the discretionary budgets of politicians. Only in provinces where local government was already well developed was there a reasonably effective integration of provincial and local government. By the 1990s the failure of provincial government, and the virtual collapse of rural services in many parts of the country led to a further search for alternatives.

The collapse was not merely the result of the inefficiency of the bureaucracy and the allocation of resources, which were also common in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu where services operated better. It was most severe in Papua New Guinea as the result of declining law and order, particularly highway robbery, which not only crippled the rural economy but disrupted mobile services such as the monitoring of schools, and maternal and child health services. It also created a major disincentive among civil servants to accepting employment in rural areas.

In the early 1990s, a 'Village Services Program' was proposed to overcome the problems of the collapse of government services beyond the provincial centres. This aimed to hand out funds through a hierarchy of committees from the national to the village level for community group-managed projects. Characteristically, it contained no institution-building elements but rather, proposed to reinforce a system of centrally controlled political patronage. In 1996 a new system was designed for recentralisation of state functions and powers. Local-level governments with elected heads, and ward representatives will be reconstituted. The heads of the local-level governments will have seats in the provincial assemblies along with the members of parliament representing provincial electorates. Executive functions will be exercised by the provincial member of parliament acting in the capacity of provincial governor, with a deputy to be elected from and by the Assembly. Resources will be allocated to local-level governments and provinces on the basis of population. Although this may seem like an efficient and democratic system of popular representation—and it is not all that dissimilar to the systems of Solomon Islands and Vanuatu—it is unlikely to solve most of the prevailing governance problems, because *representation* is not the issue; these countries are all very democratic, at least in terms of popular representation.

The problem lies in the nature of public expectations about the politician's role. Political office is won by demonstrating power through the capacity to attract and amass wealth, and redistribute at least some of it and thereby to win renown. This is an understandable elaboration of older patterns of political action. Just as many rural communities in Papua New Guinea shelter and protect bandits (who are approved of for sharing the fruits of highway robbery with their communities), people throughout Melanesia will re-elect corrupt politicians if they are seen to be generous to those who support them (see Reahy 1982; Dinnen 1997).

Even highly-educated Melanesians who are well-versed in the theory of the modern democratic state, must bow to this way of doing things if they wish to win public office. Thus the substantial amounts of public funds channelled into discretionary or slush funds allocated to politicians in Papua New Guinea and Solomons has been largely unchallenged by those with political aspirations. It also partially explains why people often feel no obligation to repay development bank loans, particularly when such loans have been made as part of a local development project seen as a gift from a politician. In this manner, aid programs are systematically incorporated into the political system of give and take.

Bureaucratic systems are similarly subverted, becoming entangled with systems of overt patronage and processes of reciprocity in which favours are given and received on the basis of personal relationships and mutual obligations. This has a profound effect on the malfunctioning and often the failure of development activities conceived according to western conceptions of rational processes. Another problem which undermines the functions of the bureaucracy in providing rural services is that people from different areas of the country dislike and distrust one another. This was nicely quantified in a small survey in Papua New Guinea which demonstrated that the more distant a group of people, the more they are feared (Sagir and Schoeffel 1993:64). This often makes it difficult for civil servants who are not locals to work effectively in rural areas. But perhaps the most intractable problem is a massive lack of administrative capacity in relation to the rational ideals of the bureaucratic system. This does not necessarily imply a lack of motivation, education or talent among civil servants. The almost indecent haste with which independence was conferred upon most Pacific countries, given the lack of preparation for it through prior long-term localisation of public institutions, is also a factor. But more important was the decision of new Pacific island states to use the public sector as a

means of job creation and wealth distribution, and to organise it in ways that gave politicians excessive executive powers over it. This meant that principles of merit in appointment and promotion were severely weakened, adequate salary levels could not be sustained, and the efficiency and effectiveness of the public sector, as much as it ever existed, declined. People lost faith in the state as health and education services, public works and the administration of justice deteriorated and placed their hopes increasingly upon political patronage and *wantokism*. Because government is weak and incompetent, people have no faith in it, and their cynicism and recourse to alternative means of self-help keeps government weak and incompetent.

## RESHAPING THE STATE

In a study of a number of village community development projects (which included water supply schemes), in Western Samoa in the 1970s, Gullestrup (1977) observed that in only one of the village projects did the government have to manage the project. This was because the village was factionally divided, in contrast to the other more united and public-spirited communities. However revisiting Samoa some fifteen years later he observed that the schemes had all failed except the one with government management.<sup>2</sup>

If we are talking about sustainable rural development—the ongoing provision of basic services for health, education and public infrastructure—the most sustainable means for rural Melanesia is state services. Community capacity is vulnerable to all manner of undermining influences, the capacity of the churches is highly variable, and NGOs wax and wane on the basis of their funding and leadership. This means that there is no alternative, if the current problems of rural development in Melanesia are to be addressed, to building the capacity of the state to do its job better and to building the capacity of local government to ensure accountability. This is not to argue against the contracting out of state





services to NGOs and missions where appropriate, but that a contracting system will only work where there is an efficient and accountable state apparatus. The universalist argument of those economic rationalists that the less state the better is certainly not appropriate for countries in which 80 per cent of the population live in semi-subsistence circumstances. Today these are circumstances of increasing poverty, as the ratio of population to resources becomes ever less favourable. For example Papua New Guinea ranks 127 out of 175 on a world scale of human development and has among the world's highest rates of infant and maternal mortality (UNDP 1997).

The present initiatives by the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank in the region which aim to promote policy reform are arguably needed. But the economic recipe for reform may place too much emphasis on macroeconomic reform at the top and not enough emphasis on institutional reforms at the bottom. One will not necessarily lead to the other. Downsizing the public sector is not necessarily the answer to the present development problems of Melanesia. Indonesia, for instance, has a vast bureaucracy, is beset with problems of inefficiency and corruption, but in the comparatively underdeveloped regions where I have worked, such as Manggarai, Flores, Seram and Maluku, the rural populations are far better served by the state than those of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands or Vanuatu. Indonesia has had remarkable success in raising standards of health, education and rural productivity, and limiting population growth since the 1970s. This has been achieved through the efforts of a highly centralised seven-tier state system which reaches into every hamlet.

In Melanesia a privatisation agenda will not necessarily lead to increased efficiency and cost effectiveness, given the political environment, as Larmour (1997:6) points out. In the present circumstances it is hard to see how the private sector will be able to soak up retrenched civil servants, or where the political will to retrench

them will come from in the first place. And as I have argued, stop-gap alternatives to the state at the local government level, such as NGOs, churches and community groups lack sustainability. The primary focus should be upon making the fundamental roles of the state effective as a building block for everything else. The World Bank defines these fundamentals as the establishment of a foundation of law; maintaining an undistorted policy environment, including macroeconomic stability; investing in basic social services and infrastructure; protecting the vulnerable; and protecting the environment. With its latest focus on the role of state in development, the World Bank also began to build a bridge across the intellectual void between the economic and communitarian discourses (World Development Report 1997).

I will conclude this jeremiad by suggesting two measures which I believe should be tried. The first would be a mass educational campaign for rural Melanesians on where the state gets its money from and how it spends it. The second would be to tie state funding for local services to local contributions, even if this was done on a scale of a hundred dollars from the state for every one dollar paid in local government tax. A similar model was used in the North Solomons Province system before the civil war on Bougainville, which was widely considered to be the most effective system of local government in the country.<sup>3</sup> By encouraging people to understand that there is no pie in the sky, and by increasing their sense of ownership of their local state services, it might be possible to build a counter-force against the political pillaging of the state and create a climate of opinion for constructive reform of public institutions.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Data from an unpublished study by Colin Filer et al., University of Papua New Guinea, c. 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Gullestrup, Pers. comm., 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Toney Regan, Pers. comm., September 1997.

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