

12 From Possession to Apotheosis: Transformation and Disguise in the Leadership of a Cargo Movement

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INTRODUCTION

In his study *Tikopia Ritual and Belief*, Firth argued that spirit mediumship incorporated 'a subtle blend of personal and social characteristics' (Firth, 1967: 308). The personal element was to be seen in possession, the exhibition of 'abnormal personal behaviour' indicating to observers the presence of spirits (p. 296). But taken on its own, possession (as Firth used the term) contributed very little to the resolution of social or ideological problems among the Tikopia, being characterized by apparently insane and often destructive behavior. Whatever personal meanings such outbursts held for the madman, they were lost on his fellows, who derived little or no benefit from them and, on the contrary, often sought to cure the affliction or at least to constrain its more troublesome manifestations. But, the victim who was able to exercise *control* over his affliction and channel it in a socially useful direction could, thereby, transform possession into mediumship. Thus, according to Firth, what distinguished the medium from the possessed individual was the ability to channel abnormal behavior so as to communicate a socially relevant *message*. Unlike the 'merely possessed', mediums were positively required in Tikopia society, not only as a source of practical guidance in worldly affairs, but also on specified ritual occasions (pp. 323-4). Moreover, the medium was able to voice public opinion, and lend it some authority, in the face of chiefly despotism. As Firth put it, 'spirit mediumship provided a kind of alternative channel for decision-taking than the socio-political channel of chieftainship' (p. 309).

In some sense, then, the Tikopia medium was able to exercise authority comparable to that of instituted leaders. The authority of the medium arose not merely from the abnormality of his behaviour,

but the extent to which he could formulate messages which were sensitive to group consensus, organization and ideology. In other words, the medium had to *achieve* some large part of the authority he harnessed (Firth, 1970: 33). His capacity to influence society resulted not merely from the unusual ability to demonstrate possession (which, on its own, was socially useless), but from the additional ability to direct his abnormal experiences in socially relevant directions. Firth was tempted to contrast this avenue to achieved authority with the more explicitly *ascribed* authority of chiefs: 'To be a spirit medium offered a way of obtaining a position in the social structure which a person could not reach by hereditary means' (1967: 323).

Nonetheless, Firth's description of mediumship highlighted the considerable difficulties which are presented by the distinction between ascription and achievement. The Tikopia medium typically began his career quite unintentionally (1967: 306):

Most . . . spirit mediums seemed to have had at some time in their history an event of psycho-physical disorder which then, as it developed, was interpreted by others as spirit possession.

Thus, whatever influence a medium was able to exercise in society was commonly ascribed to him in the first place, and only later did he develop the skills required to exploit his talents on a more regular basis. This situation indicates a shift over time in the elements from which mediumship was constructed. Possession and mediumship, as Firth defined these terms, were not merely alternative roles but formed the elements of a politico-religious process in which the one was transformed into the other.

In addition to highlighting the developmental aspect of mediumship, Firth's account brought into focus some of the potential disparities between public ideas about the political influence of mediums and the empirical 'reality'. One of the outstanding characteristics of mediumship generally is that it entails a conceptual distinction between the medium and his authoritative pronouncements. As Firth (1967: 323) explained:

the Tikopia distinguished fairly clearly between the power of the spirit, and the personality of the medium . . . Again and again in a public or domestic rite I have seen a medium in trance state as the centre of attention being treated with great respect, his every word listened to with great care. But before and after it he was simply a man, even a junior member of the household, and treated as such with no respect whatsoever.

The Tikopia themselves did not acknowledge the political achievements and talents of mediums since, according to the ideology, their contributions to society were of little account. But, Firth made a good case for the argument that mediums could be motivated to a considerable degree by the desire to wield authority. He wanted particularly to interpret the behaviour of young mediums in this way, but observed more generally:

The opportunity which . . . [mediumship] gave for assumption of control of a social situation, even though temporarily, was in my view one of the inducements for entry into the mediumistic state. (1967: 324)

Thus Firth revealed a situation in which mediums not only achieved influence through their peculiar talents but also were in some degree motivated by the desire to wield authority, whereas the ideology strenuously denied that the mediums themselves exerted any influence or could be attributed any kind of authority in their own right.

In order for mediums to gain public recognition of their talents, to achieve authority on their own account and thereby to extend their influence, some development of Tikopia institutions was clearly required. One theoretical possibility, which Firth recognized, would have been the establishment of prophets (although, in practice, prophets were not to be found on the island). Unlike the spirit medium, a prophet is accorded ideological recognition for his abilities as 'an interpreter of the divine will' (Firth, 1970: 31–2). He is also thought to be personally driven by some revelation to act in the interests of the community. Correspondingly, the prophet exercises authority in his own right, on the basis of his exceptional insight, oratory and moral fortitude. As Firth (1970: 33) succinctly put it:

As a vessel of the divine all a medium can do as a person is to produce the words or other actions of the spirit. [But] a prophet is not just a mouthpiece for divinity. He reproduces the words of God in his own person, often with his own commentary. . . . Linked with this, a prophet usually regards himself as having a strong moral commitment towards the people he represents.

Thus, whereas the medium never receives personal credit for resolving social problems, the prophet's personal achievements and talents are widely recognized. The prophet is able to exercise influence in society even when he is not communing with spirits or ancestors, whereas the medium is nothing on his own.

The next logical step in this process is the emergence of leaders who do not merely interpret and promote the divine will on behalf of transcendental authorities, but who assume the role of a divinity themselves. In his fine characterization of Tikopia chiefs, Firth identified a complex mixture of divine, priestly, chiefly, democratic and regal elements. He wrote:

In Tikopia chieftainship there was a strand of kingship, or supreme social and political authority, conceded to the chief by his people but capable of being exercised with power on his own responsibility as the sole ultimate decision-maker for the clan he headed or the neighborhood where he lived. Linked with this was a strand of special mystical quality, of sacredness, which endowed him with attributes not possessed by ordinary men. . . . King he might be, of special sanctity, yet he had not become so automatically . . . he was an elected leader with responsibilities to the people, and not simply a god-given monarch with divine mandate to rule as he wished. A Tikopia chief had divine rights *as king*; he had no divine right to *become king*. (Firth, 1970: 35)

Firth identified, in the same passage, still further complexities in the role of Tikopia chiefs, thus clearly highlighting the processual and 'multidimensional' character of political leadership, even a sort which is ideologically construed as hereditary (see also Firth, 1964: ch. 6). But, what is of immediate concern is that the paradoxical combination of divine kingship and democracy in Tikopia chieftainship may be seen as a logical extension of the role of the prophet, although this was not in fact the situation on Tikopia. It constitutes a logical extension in the sense that the Tikopia chief or priest bears some of the characteristics of a prophet who has been installed in office and thereby transformed by a sort of electoral process from the position of a gifted or privileged man into something far greater – a sort of divinity in human form, surrounded by an ambience of royalty and sacredness. I shall presently describe an actual case of such a transformation, a process which Firth (e.g. 1970: 32) anticipated in some degree.

Regal-style leadership is by no means the end of the line for these strings of potential transformations. A further step may be taken, for example, which leads in the direction of a more creative and perhaps even more dictatorial role. I have in mind the sort of leadership which Firth (1967: 159), following a well-established tradition, referred to as 'charismatic'. But, Firth (p. 159) also drew attention to a more precise and definitive aspect of such leadership, namely that it permits

'free invention beyond the existing range of religious ideology'. This is the really crucial point to make, since it highlights the peculiarity of a form of leadership which is engaged, above all, in *making history*. The innovative, creative leader is an achiever *par excellence*, and his role is in some sense a logical outcome of the process which begins with possession. Firth (1967: 161) also recognized other potential channels to such power, but in this chapter I shall focus on some aspects of the particular developmental process suggested by Firth's analysis, and by my experiences among the Mali Baining of Papua New Guinea. This is a process in which the victim of possession is transformed into a medium, then a prophet, then a divine and regal figurehead, before emerging chrysalis-like, as a 'maker of history'. The case study which I shall present concerns not the career of a single individual, but a more complex process involving two close kinsmen. My example will nonetheless demonstrate a stepwise progression through the five successive stages in the formation of religious leadership, which are suggested by Firth's analysis.

Besides highlighting the developmental character of certain kinds of leadership, it is necessary to draw out some of the ways in which elements of ascription and achievement vary with respect to the ideological importance attached to them, often independently of the demands which are actually made on the talents and expertise of religious leaders. The issue of 'ascription versus achievement' may seem to be rather old-fashioned and uninteresting but, much remains to be discovered about the interplay of these elements in traditional leadership. In the 1960s the topic was close to the hearts of Oceanic ethnographers as a result of Sahlins' seminal article (1963) on the achievement of influence in Melanesia and its ascription in Polynesian chiefdoms, including Tikopia (although see Sahlins, 1963: 288n). Meggitt (1967) roundly criticized this model, noting in particular that Melanesian big men are inheritors of power to a greater extent than Sahlins appreciated. Recently, however, Godelier (1986, 1991) has reopened the debate by contrasting Sahlins' 'big man' with an image of so-called 'great men', whose authority is to a greater extent ascribed. Yet, even these more subtle characteristics oversimplify the situation,¹ as the following materials demonstrate.

FROM POSSESSION TO MEDIUMSHIP

I shall develop and illustrate my argument with reference to a cargo cult among the Mali Baining of East New Britain, my knowledge of which is based upon two years of fieldwork between 1987 and 1989.

On arriving in the Mali village of Dadul, I found an elaborate ritual system operating according to a sort of established calendar of repetitive events. Every day, food offerings were presented to the ancestors in a so-called 'Cemetery Temple' (*Haus Matmat*), and individuals made donations of money in pursuit of absolution for sins. Every Tuesday and Saturday, offerings were also presented at another large temple, and the whole community then gathered in a 'Meeting House' (*Haus Kivung*) to be lectured and castigated by 'orators' (*komiti*), whose task it was to fortify village morals and reiterate cult ideas. Every Thursday and Sunday, the people abstained from productive activity; every other Friday they laboured in a communal garden which they referred to as 'paradise', and every month they gathered with great solemnity in the village clearing to pay for the sins of ancestors dwelling in a sort of purgatory. Their debts having been paid, these ancestors gradually joined the spiritual elect, known as the 'Village Government'. Ancestors in the Village Government were like God; indeed, they were conceptualized as manifestations of Him. They came to eat in the temples only when they were satisfied with the moral condition of the living. One day, it was said, they would return to this world in the bodies of white people, bearing all the wonders of Western technology, and the supernatural means of endlessly renewing them. But the occurrence of this miraculous event depended on the satisfaction of three conditions by the living: firstly, the establishment of good relations with the Village Government based on reciprocity and a kind of divine morality which transcended it; secondly, the cultivation of moral strength mainly through meetings and monetary donations; and finally, the endurance of God's punishment for original sin through the observance of certain taboos and ritual acts.

This religious system was known as the *Pomio Kivung* or simply *Kivung*.² Its rituals and ideology were reproduced on the kind of cyclical calendar indicated above. Many types of activity were conceptually 'led' by senior men in the sense that a priest leads his congregation in prayer. Such leaders were not empowered to create new rituals or ideas, and any attempt by them to do so would have been unjustifiable and almost certainly unsuccessful. The people of Dadul had maintained their village cult for nearly two decades, and such changes as they had seen in that time had largely been imposed upon them from the supreme leaders of the *Kivung*, who lived far away and spoke another language. It was these foreigners who first developed the cult: they were the sources of authoritative knowledge on cult procedures, and with them lay the responsibility to announce

the imminent arrival of the cargo when the living had satisfied the conditions for the return of the ancestors.

In 1987 a new form of leadership emerged in the remote community of Dadul and led to the establishment of a breakaway sect, attracting about 200 supporters, which claimed to be able to bring about the miraculous return of the ancestors on its own account. The new style of leadership in Dadul began to take shape when a young man called Tanotka, scarcely out of his teens, experienced a state of delirium and allegedly uttered four cryptic statements: 'I am Wutka.' 'I am a post.' 'I will stand in two villages.' 'Recall (imperative) the story of Aringawuk.' Tanotka said many other things, and most people in Dadul attributed his strange behaviour merely to feverish derangement. But Tanotka's elder brother, Baninge, elaborated an alternative interpretation. According to Baninge, Tanotka had been possessed by the ancestor Wutka, who would support the community in its pursuit of cargo and salvation. He used the metaphor of a central post, which supports the roof of a traditional round house. When Wutka said that he would stand in two villages, he meant that he would offer guidance to the people of Dadul and its twin village, Maranagi. Aringawuk, meanwhile, was the hero of an obscure myth which could now be understood to imply that the *Kivung* had not, after all, originated in distant lands, but in the heart of Mali Baining territory. The myth, as it was at last appreciated, meant that a young man from their own ranks would guide them to salvation, in place of some distant and foreign leader.

The sickness or possession of Tanotka occurred a short time before my arrival in the field. But, eyewitness accounts, even allowing for considerable distortion, suggested that Tanotka had not intended to convey the impression that he was possessed. It is by no means certain that, in his delirium, Tanotka actually made the cryptic statements that were later attributed to him. Throughout the ordeal, Baninge nursed his younger brother at his own house, and everybody recognized that he had enjoyed privileged access to Tanotka's statements and was best placed to recount them. Baninge was the original and principal advocate of the possession theme, and nobody was in a position to assert that he was wrong. But by the same token, one of the main problems confronting Baninge was that nobody felt able to assert that he was right. Wutka had apparently promised to rise to power in the body of Tanotka. But his power to lead depended upon the establishment of a following. If only the people could be induced to admit that Tanotka's words (if indeed he had spoken them) were those of a God-like ancestor, then Tanotka (or the 'ancestor within')

would become a true leader, just as the alleged possession had predicted. In other words, a broad acceptance of the prophesy was an initial condition for its fulfilment.

Firth's terminology is not easy to apply to the role of Tanotka during the early stages of his career. According to his elder brother, Tanotka was a medium. Unlike a medium, however, Tanotka had probably not (as Firth's definition required) actually demonstrated personal control over his experience, so as to formulate a socially relevant message. Rather, this had been done on Tanotka's behalf, through the ingenuity of his brother, Baninge. Thus, it seems reasonable to describe Tanotka, at the outset of his career, as the victim of possession. As in most equivalent cases of possession among the Tikopia, Tanotka neither invited nor directed the mental disorder which afflicted him.

During the weeks following his initial experience, however, Tanotka emerged more clearly as a true medium, in Firth's sense of the term. Some of the things he said during this early period seemed to indicate a lack of control, but Baninge excused his younger brother, saying that the fault lay with the community – specifically its inability to distinguish between statements which came from Tanotka's rather childish mind and those which were planted there by the ancestor Wutka. Yet, even if Tanotka was increasingly gaining control over his experience of possession, Baninge continued to exert a critical influence over the interpretation of his statements. The transition from a situation in which social relevance was merely attributed to Tanotka's statements to one in which he created relevant messages himself was, therefore, incomplete. Alternatively expressed, the role of medium was split, to some extent, between the two brothers. In time, Tanotka began to assume a certain amount of authority in his own right as an interpreter of transcendental messages, and not merely as an unimportant vessel for them. Thus, the element of mediumship (such as it was) began to give way to something which more closely resembled the role of a prophet. Meanwhile, Baninge's role in the process became ever more complex and Machiavellian.

FROM THE ROLE OF PROPHET TO APOTHEOSIS

The first step in the legitimation of Baninge's ideas about his brother's possession was to be seen in the introduction of an apparently minor modification to the rituals of the Cemetery Temple. It was usual practice to situate a male official or 'witness' (*kuskus*) within the temple for the period during which offerings were left to stand on the

tables every afternoon. During his vigil, the witness might hear strange noises, indicating that the ancestors had come to 'eat'. The presence of noises was unquestionably a healthy sign, indicating that the ancestors were satisfied with the morals of the living community. But if the vigil passed in silence, and other signs of visitation were lacking, it was obvious that the community had caused offence. While discussion of Tanotka's alleged mediumship was still buzzing around Dadul, Baninge's father had an unusual experience during the course of his vigil in the Cemetery Temple. Instead of hearing strange noises, he heard the voice of an ancestor affirming that Tanotka was a genuine medium for the ancestor Wutka. Baninge's father publicized this experience and, soon afterwards, all the men who were stationed as witnesses began to hear such verbal messages. Baninge almost certainly had a hand in the first report, received by his father, and in the persuasion of other witnesses that it was their duty to hear what the ancestors had to say. I know, for example, that one younger official was severely castigated by Baninge for failing to receive messages during vigils, and was eventually persuaded by a compromise which permitted the youth to count as significant thoughts planted directly in his head, rather than transmitted acoustically through his ears. This dispensation subsequently proved popular among the witnesses generally, and the telepathic technique was taken as evidence of increasing moral and spiritual advancement.

Messages received from the ancestors in the Cemetery Temple came to be known as 'reports.' Over a four-month period, 41 per cent of these reports were concerned with the legitimation of emergent ideas (especially Baninge's interpretations of Tanotka's statements). In a less obvious way, all the reports expressed the increasing influence of Baninge, because he took upon himself the task of posing questions to the ancestors just prior to the vigils in the temples. The reports were thus formulated as fairly predictable replies to Baninge's questions. Yet Baninge's influence was very discreet. The beauty of the new system was that reports seemed to come

from the ancestors, who conveyed them to the witnesses, who conveyed them to the orators [i.e. the senior men], who conveyed them to the people. Less obvious was the fact that Baninge loaded this ideological conveyor belt. As such, Baninge (and not some divine ancestor-spirit) was the 'real' ghost in the machine. (Whitehouse, 1995: 98)

Baninge subtly manipulated the reports in order to place pressure on the senior men to rally behind him. The responsibility for

disseminating *Kivung* ideas had always resided with three particularly respected seniors whose main forum was the meeting house, but who also addressed daily congregations at the cemetery and slightly less often in the village clearing. I have translated the title of these officials as 'orator', since their main function was to reiterate the standard ideology through persuasive and skilful speeches. These senior men had long been the nearest things to leaders in the community. Two of these orators were initially hesitant to support Baninge and Tanotka. In the face of this obstacle, the witnesses (at Baninge's instigation) received a series of reports, chiding the orators for dragging their feet and obliquely accusing them of delaying the miracle through their lack of faith in the new ideas.

But reports only formed a part of Baninge's strategy in building support for his campaign. He also relied heavily on dreams as sources of transcendental legitimation. Baninge's dreams introduced new cosmological theories, for example, of the relationship between the living and the dead, symbolized by a ring of salvation divided into semi-circles of physical and spirit worlds. Moreover, this particular dream was dramatically adapted as a form of ritual expression, entailing the formation of a great ring of human bodies, naked and shivering in the mists of dawn. The ring ceremony became an endlessly repeated ritual for the duration of splinter-group activities. But it can hardly be stressed enough that while Baninge was still building support for his ideas, he disguised his influence at every turn with respect to his own dreams. Such dreams, Baninge insisted, did not come from his mind, but from the ancestors. With calculated deference, he related these messages in confidence to the orators. When the dreams were publicly transmitted, they were heard from the lips of these senior men:

The fact that . . . influential reports and dreams started (in an empirical as opposed to an ideological sense) with Baninge, was cleverly disguised by the mechanics of the new institutional role of the witness and the seeming alienation of Baninge from the production, interpretation and social consequences of his dreams. (Whitehouse, 1995: 108)

Soon after the basic machinery for the legitimation of Baninge's ideas had demonstrated its effectiveness, certain changes became apparent in Tanotka's role. I have already described how Tanotka converted his experience of possession into willing mediumship. But, once Tanotka realized that his statements had the backing of the orators and witness as well as the general population, he began to

paraphrase and interpret messages from the ancestors rather than let them speak directly through him. Thus Tanotka increasingly became something more than a mere medium and correspondingly achieved some authority in his own right as an analyst and interpreter of the transcendental realm. Tanotka developed his skills as an orator, and as time passed he was more often asked for his own opinion on religious matters rather than to act as a mouthpiece for Wutka or some other specific ancestor. In Firth's terminology, Tanotka moved more in the direction of a prophet than a medium. But, this too was a passing phase, for just as Tanotka was enjoying his first taste of personal authority, the witnesses were receiving reports which suggested that he was destined for still higher things.

It soon transpired from reports that Tanotka had entered the Village Government on a spiritual plane and, therefore, embodied divine authority on his own account; he was not merely an expert interpreter of ancestral messages. These ideas about Tanotka were also being attributed, in reports, to Baninge, although he was accorded a secondary role. At the outset, such ideas had a mysterious character, since they initially raised more cosmological questions than they answered. But as the theological arguments were refined and legitimated in the ensuing months, Tanotka's apotheosis came to be more comprehensively understood. It culminated in the effective election of Tanotka to the office of 'holder of the key' to the transcendental world (and its cargo). The element of democracy was clearly apparent in Tanotka's induction ceremony, when each member of the community came forward to shake Tanotka's hand and give him money as an indication of allegiance to him. Henceforth, Tanotka ceased to be a prophet in the sense of being an agent or interpreter for higher authorities, and was installed as a paramount authority in his own right. Tanotka's counterpart among the Tikopia would have been the chief, whom Firth (1970: 32) distinguished from a prophet by virtue of his induction into office, which suggested democratic elevation, and his semi-apotheosis, which suggested 'a divine mandate to rule as he wished' (p.35). The main problem confronting Tanotka was that he did not really know *how* he wished to rule.

Racked by indecision, Tanotka responded to his election by withdrawing from public life and isolating himself from worldly concerns. His food was brought to him, and his gardens tended by volunteers. People were no longer permitted to ask questions of him or shake his hand while he was eating, nor could they call out his name or sit at a higher elevation than he. Tanotka's closest kinsmen and most loyal

supporters were instrumental in increasing the remoteness of the new divine king.

To some extent, this scenario fit with the way people might have expected a divinity to behave. Nonetheless, at some stage everybody expected Tanotka to stop resting on his laurels and get on with the task of leading his people to a wondrous miracle. He had no remit for indefinite leadership, nor even temporary complacency. As the time passed and there seemed to be no satisfactory signs of further advancement towards the miracle, group morale began to flag and dissatisfaction was even apparent among some of Tanotka's senior supporters. It was at this point that Baninge decisively and dramatically swept to power. But before I proceed to describe this next phase, it is necessary to take stock in more analytical terms of the changes which had taken place in Tanotka's style of leadership.

The transformation of Tanotka's role, from that of a kind of prophet to that resembling a remote and kingly divinity, corresponded to a shift in the elements of achievement and ascription which entered into his leadership. During the period when Tanotka was developing his talents as an expert cryptologist and orator, his participation in public life was quite prominent. His authority at that time did not derive entirely from reports and dreams, over which Baninge exercised the most important individual influence, but was also to some extent achieved by Tanotka himself. Tanotka clearly had a talent for speechmaking and the use of vivid imagery, and he also displayed considerable sensitivity to the mood of group consensus. If Tanotka had not demonstrated these fairly scarce qualities, Baninge's efforts behind the scenes would not have been enough to establish Tanotka in the role of a prophet. But, as Tanotka underwent gradual apotheosis and removed himself from public life, he took on more the character of a passive figurehead, doing little to achieve or consolidate his authority. Certainly, he did not require any special talent to maintain his role at that time, and he relied almost entirely on the willingness of others to ascribe a divine and regal ambience to his lethargic existence.

Looking back over the whole of Tanotka's career up to this point, it therefore becomes clear that there was a pendulum swing between ascription and achievement in his style of leadership. From a situation at the beginning, in which Tanotka had been ascribed a special position in the community that he had done nothing to earn, he gradually developed some control over his experience of possession and contributed personally to the development of his role. During his mediumistic phase, the element of achievement in Tanotka's exercise

of authority was not given ideological recognition, since he was assumed to have no control over the words of ancestors. But, with the adoption of a more prophetic style, Tanotka's talents as an orator and specialist received proper acknowledgement. Indeed, they were probably over-estimated insofar as Baninge was sometimes the 'real' source of interpretations which Tanotka then disseminated. But whatever Baninge's contribution, there was undoubtedly a phase in the development of Tanotka's leadership when his own achievements were instrumental in sustaining his authority – a phase which may be associated with the defining characteristics of the medium and the prophet. Thereafter, the pendulum swung back in the other direction. Tanotka's apotheosis was accompanied by withdrawal from public life. The task of sustaining Tanotka's position fell almost entirely to his supporters, and he invested relatively little effort in assisting them. Thus the role of divinity was for the most part ascribed to Tanotka, rather than achieved by him.

Tanotka's career has served rather well as a way of demonstrating the developmental character of religious leadership, the fact that it is more in the nature of a *process* than a definable institution. Firth's analytic categories, which in many ways suggested this diachronic perspective, have provided a useful framework for my exposition. They also highlight the importance of differentiating between achievements which are ideologically acknowledged and those which are not, as in the distinction between the roles of mediums and prophets. I want now to examine this general issue more closely with regard to Baninge's career.

THE IDEOLOGY AND REALITY OF ACHIEVEMENT AND ASCRIPTION

It will be recalled that after some months of inadequate progress, Tanotka had become increasingly remote, and there were signs of demoralization in the community. During this period, Baninge had been manipulating reports so as to establish himself as a sort of equal to Tanotka, rather than his second-in-command. Baninge was now increasingly reported to be the divine leader of Dadul, whereas Tanotka's jurisdiction had been gradually restricted to the twin village of Maranagi. While these images of Baninge were forming, he responded modestly or not at all, and generally seemed unmoved by them. At the point when morale was at its lowest, however, Baninge seized the moment, stepping forth at last from the shadows and assuming the role for which he had long prepared.

Baninge began by holding a great meeting at which he urged the

population to unite behind him in a daring and controversial plan. In essence, he wanted to evacuate the village of Dadul and lead its residents to Maranagi, where the two communities would join together in the performance of climactic rituals to welcome the ancestors back from the dead. Many of the details of Baninge's plan were calculated to alienate the state, the Catholic Church, the Maenge leaders of the *Kivung*, and surrounding villages. In committing himself to acts of rebellion, Baninge demonstrated the strength of his conviction about the imminence of the miracle, the fact that he was beyond the reach of secular state control and would have to answer only to the transcendental government of ancestors, of which he was a member. A less obvious intention behind Baninge's plan was to consolidate his position as leader and furnish himself with almost dictatorial powers. For, in alienating so many external groups, Baninge placed himself in the unenviable position of a potential target for any physical attacks or prosecutions directed towards the splinter group. In this way, Baninge assumed responsibility for the actions of his followers, and they in turn felt able to obey him without fear of being prosecuted themselves. In private conversations with me, Baninge made his intentions in this regard quite explicit, and the rank and file correspondingly denied personal liability. Thus, during the ensuing period, Baninge seized group property and funds to finance his extravagant plans; he publicly denounced the mission, challenged the state, ordered the removal of certain children from school, and organized controversial and climactic rituals at Maranagi. He was now declared by his followers to be the God of all creation.

I see in all this a particularly complex interplay of ascription and achievement. Baninge's career began as almost the mirror image of Tanotka's. Comparatively little authority was *ascribed* to him at the beginning, although he was, from the outset, *achieving* the basis for leadership (his brother's and, indirectly, his own). In ideological terms, however, Baninge was seen as having been forced into a position of prominence which he had never deliberately invited. Then, at the appropriate moment, the situation changed dramatically and Baninge suddenly assumed a dynamic and openly dictatorial role which, by its very nature, revealed him to be an individual of great political ability, an archetypal achiever and a 'maker-of-history', as well as being ideologically attributed transcendental authority.

It is not easy to separate the elements of ascription and achievement in Baninge's divinity. In a sense, he helped himself to authority by manipulating reports and other sources of revelation, but on the other hand the bases for such authority were indicated in pre-existing

ideology and did not require much modification to be set in motion. Moreover Baninge relied heavily on the willingness of witnesses, and subsequently the orators, to support (and in some degree to create) the logical and ritual bases for the legitimation of splinter group ideas.

Nonetheless, I think it is clear that, in terms of ascription and achievement, Baninge's career followed a very different pattern from that of Tanotka. The latter had exhibited the character of a pendulum swing, whereas Baninge's career was typified by an extraordinary level of personal achievement from first to last. But what is particularly striking about Baninge's case is that, from his followers' viewpoint, it *seemed* that he had been *ascribed* authority. The crucial part he played in setting up his own success was not widely appreciated. Those who had not been privy to the long-term planning which Baninge had invested in his career were deeply impressed by the sudden and unselfconscious way in which he seized power. Far from exposing his long-disguised ambition, Baninge's unexpectedly dictatorial character presented itself as evidence of genuine apotheosis. The question arises, however, of why Baninge had to go to such lengths to disguise his aspirations and build his basis for power through the manipulation of Tanotka.

The short answer to this question is that, prior to the whole affair, Baninge's reputation in the community had been particularly poor. He had been an unruly youth, frequently identified as an instigator of disharmony among his peers. Moreover, he had achieved some notoriety in other respects, such as his determination to marry against the wishes of his seniors. Baninge had made some efforts, with limited success, to improve his standing in the community. But, had he openly appointed himself a mouthpiece for the Village Government, it is almost certain that he would have been denounced as a liar or an agent of Satan, putting pay to his thinly disguised ambitions. The route to power which Baninge in fact pursued was far more cunning.

When Baninge first struggled to muster support for Tanotka's ascendance, he seemed to be acting out of character. Baninge and Tanotka were not 'true' brothers, but matrilinear parallel cousins, between whom relations were stereotypically rivalrous in Mali Baining culture. The rivalry between these two had been especially severe, frequently culminating in acts of violence, for which Baninge usually received the larger share of the blame. Such behavior was deplored in the *Kivung*, not merely as detrimental to the individuals concerned, but as a threat to the moral condition of the whole community – and, thus, its chances of achieving the long-awaited miracle. When Baninge declared his new, positive relationship with

Tanotka, the turnaround was completely unexpected. The younger was now, in a sense, the elder, the oppressor now a meek devotee. Where there had been conflict, there was harmony; where disunity, now solidarity; where jealousy, now devotion. The religious implications of this reversal were readily exploited.

Less obvious was the fact that such a scenario served to disguise Baninge's personal ambition. He promoted not himself but his brother – and not just any brother, but a major rival whom Baninge, acting ambitiously, would have been expected to discredit rather than to worship. Baninge did stand to gain respect and influence as a sort of right-hand-man, but there was little to suggest that he was interested in such accolades. Baninge seemed rather to be motivated by a personal revelation which compelled him to push his brother forward in the interests of the whole community. It was as if his personal inclinations and petty rivalries had been overridden by moral imperatives. If Baninge's efforts brought him some prominence, then he seemed to regard this as coincidental. And, as I have indicated, he was sensitive to the mood of his seniors and entrusted them with the transmission of his insights. Just as Baninge wanted to ensure that greatness was initially thrust upon Tanotka, so he carefully set up a situation in which he could be seen to have inherited this power rather than to have pursued it.

CONCLUSION

These materials demonstrate clearly the difficulty of characterizing types of leadership in terms of 'ascription' and 'achievement'. In the case of a medium, personal achievements are alienated as 'the work of the gods', whereas the prophet receives some more substantial part of the recognition he deserves. But, the story of Baninge's career highlights a deliberate veiling of achievement which goes far beyond religious alienation. Baninge disguised his influence, not merely by attributing his plans to the ancestors, but by disseminating them through other people's mouths: Tanotka's, the witnesses', the orators', and so on. Understanding the interplay of ascription and achievement in Melanesian leadership is thus partly a matter of appreciating and unveiling layers of mystification. It is not sufficient, therefore, to say that 'ascription of status is more characteristic of great-man societies' (Liep, 1991: 31, describing Godelier's position), since this ideological reality (assuming that it has been accurately documented) obscures ever more inaccessible political realities in which much of the impetus and direction of social action is contrived,

sometimes openly, but more often through the achievement of influence over more or less covert social relations.

The other point is that elements of ascription and achievement in authority are forever changing. This process can conform to identifiable patterns, and I think it is testimony to the depth of Firth's theoretical insight, not to say foresight, that his analysis in the 1960s of religious processes among the Tikopia lends so much to an understanding of the development of Tanotka's career among the Mali Baining. But it must be stressed that this need to adopt a diachronic perspective does not apply only to the study of possession, mediumship, 'propheticism', apotheosis and so-called 'charismatic leadership'. Rather, I suspect that all forms of traditional leadership are stronger or weaker, and more or less open to competition or manipulation, at different times. Claims to succession, as well as the nature and distribution of political talent in a small-scale society, are in constant flux, even when the official rules of political life are not. In such a kaleidoscopic social world, the balance between ascription and achievement is no sooner characterized than it no longer obtains.

A problem with much current terminology for leadership types is not merely that it fails to convey the critical elements of transformation and disguise in the construction of authority, but also that it masks the extent to which authority may be quite unpredictably attributed. This is easy to see in the case of Tanotka's possession, which entailed the attribution of authority rather than its 'achievement' by Tanotka (at least initially). Such processes, however, may also enter into the establishment of the 'big-man', the archetype of the personal 'achiever'. After all, it is not merely what a man does that makes him 'big' but how people interpret his behavior, what meanings they attribute to it. As with possession, so with bigmanship, an individual's behavior need not be intentionally impressive for an impression to be made. Young has described how the big-man Kimaola on Goodenough Island was attributed a sinister ambience as a result of his physical weakness and childlike qualities which, in another individual, would have been merely pitiable or contemptible (Young, 1983: 211-12). In a region where religious ideologies make much of the idea that things are often not what they seem (see, for example, Barth, 1987: 22-3 or Gesch, 1990), it is hardly surprising that big-men can sometimes rise to prominence on the basis of attributions which they could hardly have contrived, and need do little to exploit.

By the same token, the term 'chief' conveys stereotypes of leadership which artificially divide Melanesia and Polynesia and obscure

the common ethos in which political careers are made. The term 'chief' is widely used to designate the Polynesian ideal of stable, inherited rank based upon a denial of many practical sources of influence, and of the transformation of chiefly authority in the course of individual careers. In some cases, chiefs fail lamentably to project the right image. Besnier (Chapter 3 this volume) reveals that Nukulaelae chiefs lack the characteristic attributes of chiefly rank (genealogical superiority, *mana*, sanctity, powers of coercion, and so on). If these officials resemble any kind of widespread leadership type it is perhaps the paramount *luluai* of colonial New Guinea (or the 'councillor' of more recent years). Howard's analysis of the demise of Rotuman chiefs (Chapter 7) suggests a similar trajectory. But even where chiefly legitimacy is intact, the prevalent stereotypes of ascribed leadership markedly fail to reflect the actual processes and struggles of political life, as Shore demonstrates in his highly sensitive descriptions of Samoan chieftainship (Chapter 5). Samoans have terms for ideal chiefly attributes, but are constrained from publicly clarifying and labelling certain aspects of achieved chiefly authority and the differences of rank between chiefs which are consequent upon them. Perhaps, as Marcus (1989) argues, Samoa typifies the 'populist' end of the chiefly continuum. But, even a strict adherence to genealogical criteria in succession cannot eliminate the processes by which chiefly authority is extended, diminished or otherwise transformed in the real world.

The bias of terminology in favor of political ideals rather than political realities contributes substantially to the conceptual isolation of Polynesian and Melanesian political systems. Sahlins' early formulation (1963), for all that specialists may no longer consider themselves to be constrained by it, reflects certain aspects of the current problem very clearly. The chief is represented as the incumbent of inherited status, the big-man as a sort of self-made entrepreneur. In spite of the sensitive qualifications which contemporary ethnographers make with respect to these images, these remain some of the most basic ideas which the labels 'big-man' and 'chief' convey as analytical terms. Indigenous terminology likewise gives these images substance, and private qualifications appear shadowy by comparison. Yet behind the stereotypes of big-men and chiefs is a common political principle which holds that *general material abundance is the concomitant of strong leadership (and vice versa)* (cf. Feinberg, Chapter 2 this volume). In both Melanesia and Polynesia, men of prominence are above all providers, and their capacity to provide is usually understood in religious terms. The point hardly needs to be elaborated in relation

to big-men, whose importance as providers is immediately obvious. But, even in social systems revolving around initiation and 'sister exchange', leaders rise to prominence as providers of *knowledge* and, through knowledge, general prosperity. In such societies, material abundance and security are explicitly construed as the concomitants of strong leadership, including the authoritarian domination of juniors in the course of their enforced submission to the agonies of initiation. It is hardly surprising therefore that in Papua New Guinea, as in Polynesia, material shortages in the present are widely attributed to the weakening of traditional authority. In this respect, the political logics of Melanesia and Polynesia are premised upon the same assumption. One can begin to understand, then, why Melanesian cargo cults often seek to reinstitute authoritarian values in various ways, and produce leaders who resemble Polynesian aristocrats. A particularly famous example would be Yali of Sor (Lawrence, 1964; Morauta, 1974) who was hailed as the 'King of New Guinea'. It would be inappropriate, I think, to dismiss this claim to regal status as a misapprehension of the nature of kingship. Melanesian and non-Austronesian groups have a deeper appreciation of kingship and chieftainship than is generally supposed, because their political systems are premised upon the same assumptions that pervade Polynesia.³ A critical difference is that Papua New Guineans can rarely do more than beseech the divine, whereas Polynesians (most notably those of noble lineage) can personify it. Nonetheless, the potential is always there for a rare and heroic figure to capture and retain the elusive source of authority and prosperity.⁴ The process by which this occurs is not based substantially upon claims of genealogical superiority, as in many Polynesian societies, but is constructed out of materials which Polynesians would readily recognize.

My conclusion, then, is that there is an underlying unity to Melanesian and Polynesian political life. Chieftainship is, of course, more highly institutionalized in Polynesia than in Melanesia, where I am suggesting that it is for the most part latent. But, the cultural logic of chieftainship is common to both regions. These observations might be easier to appreciate if terms like 'chief' and 'big-man' did not have an antonymical quality. In the real world of politics, however, chiefly authority can be extended and transformed through the guile and cunning of political strategists, so that the Polynesian situation is hardly the opposite of bigmanship. When chiefly figures emerge in Melanesia, they are not installed on the grounds of noble descent, well-known exceptions aside. But, the process is intelligible from a Tikopian (and more generally Polynesian) viewpoint, and this

is partly because Polynesian chiefs are never simply born, but in practice are made. Chiefs are made in Melanesia and Polynesia out of a common stock of cultural understandings about the relationship between obedience, social order, material prosperity and transcendental intervention. The considerable advantage of Firth's terms for religious leadership is that they capture some of the processual and paradoxical aspects of real-life politics. Through this lens the opposed stereotypes of Melanesian and Polynesian leadership begin to fade, and a common stock of expectations, strategies and achievements seems to come into focus.

NOTES

- 1 For more detailed criticisms of Godelier's position, see Whitehouse (1992a).
- 2 For background information on the Pomio Kivung movement, see Tovalele (1977); Bailoenakia and Koimanrea (1983); Trompf (1984, 1990); Whitehouse (1992b, 1994, 1995, 1996).
- 3 Allen (1984: 20) cites four publications which also highlight the existence of common political models in Melanesia and Polynesia (see especially Douglas, 1979: 26-7).
- 4 A fine example is Errington and Gewertz's (1985) analysis of Mathias Yambumbe's rise to chiefly rank among the Chambri of East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. The cosmological background to Yambumbe's apotheosis closely resembled that of Tanotka's ascension. Of particular relevance is the fact that both leaders exercised transcendental authority to the extent that they were thought capable of supernaturally transforming the material conditions of existence.

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on the Occasion of his 90th Birthday
Edited by Richard Feinberg and
Karen Ann Watson-Gegeo

The book is an ethnographic and theoretical exploration of the rise of new forms of leadership at community and national levels in the islands of the Western Pacific. Changing definitions, functions and expectations of leaders have followed upon political independence for many new nations in Oceania. Islanders are reworking leadership offices, synthesising traditional and Western models, and drawing on indigenous values and symbols to validate the resulting new structures.

These changes raise basic questions about leadership and tradition and bring new challenges to old debates in Pacific anthropology, explored by the contributors to this volume

Leadership and Change in the Western Pacific is published as a tribute to Sir Raymond Firth, whose classic work on Tikopia has been an inspiration to generations of anthropologists.

The Editors
Richard Feinberg is a member of the Department of Anthropology, Kent State University and Karen Ann Watson-Gegeo is in the Division of Education, University of California, Davis.

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