



Melanesian egalitarianism: The containment of hierarchy

Knut Rio

University of Bergen, Norway

Anthropological Theory
2014, Vol. 14(2) 169–190

© The Author(s) 2014

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1463499614534113

ant.sagepub.com



Abstract

Using Dumont's analysis of value, this paper discusses the interplay between equality and hierarchy in Ambrym Island, Vanuatu. From this vantage point Melanesian egalitarianism appears to be a dynamic and hybrid form that reproduces itself through tensions between different forms of potential inequality. The discussion is situated within a thoroughly globalized society, where money and Christianity have played a fundamental role for over a century, and where ceremonial displays and exchanges of food are still absolutely central to village life. Those food ceremonies create important material spectacles of sociality, where the exhibition, destruction and distribution of food are part of an ongoing process of submitting potentially hierarchical structures to an ethos of egalitarianism.

Keywords

Egalitarianism, Melanesia, social structure, ceremonial economy, value

Introduction

This paper addresses the status of egalitarianisms in Melanesia, specifically in the island of Ambrym in the nation of Vanuatu. This is a very complex subject, since we are dealing with a form of Melanesian egalitarianism that has become tightly intertwined with a globalizing model of equality and individualism. This has created a distillation of cultural forms, where we see that a lot of the variation of ritual is being turned into ceremonial displays of food for swift exchanges in relation to death, marriage, circumcision and birth. Comparative cases have been documented from other Melanesian settings (see Young, 1971; Carrier and Carrier, 1989; Foster, 1995; Bashkow, 2006). I argue that this ceremonial activity is central to a

Corresponding author:

Knut Rio, University Museum of Bergen, Cultural History Collections, Haakon Sheteligsg. 10, Norway.

Email: knut.rio@uib.no

notion of containing and displacing hierarchy, and this also spills over into how people conceive of cash-labour, money, and the sale of ritual art.

Melanesian egalitarianism

The traditional model of Melanesian egalitarianism has typically been described as variations on a Big Man model (see Sahlins, 1963; Strathern, 1971; Lindstrom, 1981, 1984; Godelier and Strathern, 1991; Sillitoe, 1998). This model is set within ritual polities, where individuals often emphasize their autonomy but are nevertheless continually under the interpellating influence of kin and cosmology when it comes to carrying out work, ritual obligations or marriage (see Harrison, 1990). A social and cultural hierarchy is formed out of the differentiation in achievements; between 'great man' ritual specialists, 'big man' entrepreneurs, shamans, sorcerers, great gardeners, warriors, witches and people without these abilities. The highest degree of influence is manifested in the 'big man' or 'great man' who achieves his renown and status through demonstrating particular abilities in ritual knowledge, entrepreneurial manipulation of wealth, charismatic oratory, magical powers, and/or warfare skills. It should be noted that the big man model has clear limitations on how much influence a person can realize or demand, before he becomes subject to fears about sorcery attacks, jealousy, gossip and foot-dragging when it comes to carrying out work and other odious demands. Therefore I stress the value of autonomy and relative limitations in group leadership in this model. If a relation violates autonomy people might choose to stay out of it (see Stasch, 2009: 44). In Strathern's big man model the autonomous person is also a holism onto him or herself, a microcosm of the totality of relations. The autonomous person is thereby a paramount value, exactly as the vantage point from which these relations gain a capacity to act (Strathern, 1988: 274–5).

For the sake of brevity and simplicity we might call this a model of hierarchical influence and egalitarian autonomy. It is hierarchical since there is a value on differentiating and encompassing processes in terms of gender and status, and it is egalitarian since there is a value on personal autonomy. It should not be confused or reduced to a model of equality, since it implies many articulations of inequality and dependence; for instance based on gender or relative positioning in a symbolic-ritual formation (see Kelly, 1993: 473, Strathern, 1988: 138–43). It is also well documented how this egalitarian model carries a potential for developing into more enduring hierarchical structures, and Vanuatu offers perhaps the most striking examples. The 13th-century reign of Roy Mata on Efate Island has been documented by archaeologists as a centralized ceremonial polity of great proportions (see Spriggs, 1997: 207–10). The Malekula system of massive sacrificial ritual documented by Layard in his 1914 fieldwork is another, more recent, example (Layard, 1942). The whole society was consumed in a sacrificial cycle that each lasted for six years and involved the killing of many hundred pigs, the most valuable featuring as substitutes for human beings. At the peak of the ritual the greatest of men stood up on a stone platform and announced their increased status. The ritual stone altar

with its burning fire was equivalent to the volcano – the home of spirits – and the men joined that society of ancestors. They became superhuman. Their existence was now split between being man and spirit, as the spirit of the sacrificed boars passed over onto the sacrificer so that his soul could take on eternal life. In cases like this the life of the big man took on proper hierarchical qualities as he was no longer sharing the world of the lesser men and women and as these qualities became fixed properties of his bodily person. He represented differentiation taken to the extreme. We need to keep these dynamic features of Melanesian egalitarianism in mind when we consider its recent development.

This big man model, which has been well documented in many Melanesian ethnographies over the last century, has become historically entangled with new processes and understandings of *equality* introduced to the region. These came via traders in the 19th century and then later via missionaries and colonial government officials. Very schematically, we might say that commodity trade introduced new general purpose money that created a platform for the equalization of various use values that served to neutralize the restricted circulation of all kinds of valuables. They were moved out of customary symbolic ritual exchange contexts so as to be exchanged at markets in the new towns and in much frequented harbours (see Carrier and Carrier, 1989). Christianity introduced to the region ideas of moral levelling, of equality before God, and ethical freedom to choose a ‘new life’ (Burridge, 1960). It often opposed what was indigenously coined as *kastom* (see Lindstrom and White, 1993; Lindstrom, 1990). In Christianity there was a promise of liberation from the hierarchical influence and control that related to the customary symbolic-ritual polity. Christian emphasis on moral choice and individual self thus merged with local customary understandings of a difference-based autonomy. Paradoxically, this growth of new hybrid forms of egalitarianism went hand in hand with colonial-racial relations. The establishment of a colonial administration included forms of indirect rule that appointed local village administrative leaders who ensured villages were clean, roads clear, grass cut, and schools, aid posts and cemeteries tidy. The plantations also had their own systems of coercive administrative ranks and forms of discipline labour. In short, there emerged new institutions and techniques for coercing people to work and obey the routinized life of the modern global citizen (see Wagner, 1974; Lattas and Rio, 2011). This was a new egalitarian model of moral equality that had its own coercive power and technologies of surveillance and control. Whereas the former model was a model of difference-based autonomy and plurality pertaining to origins, descent and categories of persons (see Kelly, 1993; Scott, 2007), the introduced model refigured differences within a unitary moral frame where every person should be equal before the law of government and the laws of God and the Bible (see also Robbins, 2004). In Christianity, each person is related to a congregation of individuals that needs pastoral care, that is to be looked after by a ‘shepherd’ who watches over his flock, so that individual members do not go astray and can be brought quickly back into the fold. Here the pastor is a new kind of spiritual leader who cares for both group and individual simultaneously. This is what Foucault (2007) defines as ‘pastoral

power' and that he thinks defines the history of the state and colonial power. It carries huge potentials for government and increases the regulation of people's lives. It provides an unprecedented platform for the exercise of detailed forms of power. Even though Foucault does not write about Melanesia specifically, the effects of pastoral power become visible as elements in the social movement of Christianity.

The model we see emerging in these historical developments of church, colonialism and money economy we might call a model of equality and communitarian leadership. The equality model is based on the tight engagement between individual, group and leader. If there had been no concept of group or leadership before, in the colonial period chiefs, plantation managers, priests or pastors, patrol officers and district agents were installed as shepherds for various scales of group formations: villages, clans, plantations, islands, districts or nations. The previous Melanesian model, it has often been argued, carried no idea of either individual or group as stable fixed realities (see Lawrence, 1984; Wagner, 1974, 1991). It was on the whole alien to the notion of permanent leadership *over* anyone or the idea of an enduring group. Hence no people in their right mind would take it upon themselves to stand for the group in terms of governance over others, even though big men would at times appear as an 'aggregate' of the clan, or as people's 'capacity for unity' (Strathern, 1991: 211). This is different from Foucault's shepherd who is a figure that cultivates a capacity for individual realization for each and every member of his flock or congregation. Here individuality and group identity and solidarity are mediated and realized through the participatory and authoritative presence of a charismatic leader. I believe we see this form of governance and 'pastoral power' clearly articulated in recent social movements or cargo cults such as the ones recently described by Tabani (2009) and Hviding (2011) from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. If we follow the important argument from Wagner's article, 'Are There Social Groups in the New Guinea Highlands?' (1974), the construction of group-identity and leadership in Melanesian represent fluid and pragmatic responses to colonial forms, and in my view they carry lasting social effects.

But it is not the purpose of this paper to delineate how these two models have come to be intertwined in various ways in contemporary Melanesia. The models are never visible in their pure form, and can only serve as analytical concepts of moments, tendencies and possibilities. The point will rather be that the ethnographic reality as it presents itself to us in Vanuatu or elsewhere in Melanesia is no doubt an overlapping, complex and at times contradictory field of values, based in some instances on the value of difference and autonomy and in others on the value of equality. Under the appearance of being 'traditional', customary ceremonial practices are hybrid social forms, which combine customary and modern forms of inequality with customary and modern forms of egalitarianism.

Keeping this synthesis of values in mind, I will try to overcome the notion of 'two worlds' and instead focus on the articulation of values in the contemporary model of egalitarianism in Vanuatu. The point will be to demonstrate its logic of

articulation and the effort that goes into its production and maintenance. I propose to keep in mind Louis Dumont's work on values. His key point, namely, that the social is always motored by the hierarchization between contrary values, is still of use to the anthropological project. This model allows us to think about the social as an ongoing process of coding and recoding, which is organizing social formations in certain directions. This analytical concern demands of us a continual search for new empirical material for an understanding of the direction of this hierarchization (see Rio and Smedal, 2009). I will try to pinpoint how a previous model of hierarchical influence and egalitarian autonomy is, perhaps in surprising ways, being overtaken by a value on equality and communitarian leadership. This goes along with the fondness for money and the marketplace, the interest in the life of Jesus and a simultaneous worry about material wealth. This sets the agenda for much of Melanesian life, in a manner that brings it into close proximity to much else that is going on globally.

The love of Jesus, the love of money and a globalizing Melanesia

In the following I will argue that globalization and cultural change in Melanesia has been an ongoing concern for over a century and is articulated through a constant preoccupation with money and Christianity. A central point here will be to figure out how money and exchange play into the egalitarian model. As an introduction to the way Ambrym Islanders have been involved in international relations of business and diplomacy we can start with a glimpse of how the colonial British District Agent in 1961 was astonished to discover that Ambrym ritual arts had been thoroughly commercialized:

A visit was paid to Tainmal's village (Fanla). Not wishing to offend pagan sensibilities we refrained from suggesting that they should hand over supposedly sacred objects planted on the dancing ground, and enquired whether facsimiles could be made. This respect for custom was ludicrously inappropriate: it transpired that the dancing ground is in fact a shop-window, and at the rustle of a sufficient number of banknotes Tainmal's son Tofor would uproot slit gongs and statues from the ground – later to be replaced from factory or stock. Although the objects were not actually tagged with f.a.b. prices they were obviously controlled and there was no discount to be had for government. Mr. Woodward acquired an excellent 11' slitgong and a three-fern carving at £50 a-piece. (extract from touring notes, Central District no. 2, dated 6/9/1961)

Here the District Agent's respect for the Ambrym people's 'sacred objects' is contrasted to his surprise to find that this artefact trade was firmly established. I witnessed the same sense of surprise in the year 2000, when tourists who arrived in the same Fanla village were still shocked to find price tags on ceremonial artefacts. The stereotype of the noble savage and authenticity is a persistent idea among western tourists (see also Stasch, this issue). And maybe this is also our

main problem with the issue of globalization: that we think of it continually as a new encounter, whereas the encounter itself is already firmly assimilated and institutionalized in local practices. Plantation work was already well known to people before 1860; the island also has a history of missionization that goes back to 1880, and both Jesus and money were well entrenched in culture and social practices by the end of the 19th century. The Presbyterian missionary Reverend Maurice Frater who visited Ambrym at the time comments with a certain disappointment that:

Money, of course, was a new thing to them, and they were readily infatuated with it; but there was nothing with which they could not part to obtain it. They opened graves, and sold the skulls of their dead. Possibly, after all, the love of money is a greater idol than any of the grotesque figures identified with heathen worship. . . . The love of money . . . is taking possession of many of the converts, and is even colouring their ideas of heaven. . . . Recently, in one of the Christian villages, a dying man had a vision of heaven, and what impressed him most was the fact that the streets were lined with gold. (Frater, 1922: 126–7)

The status of money in this period of early cross-cultural exchange must be considered in this light: both as powerful artefacts and emblems of the Christian faith, but also in the attempt of Ambrym people to use money to create effects of regeneration for their own society (see also Lattas, 2006; Rio, 2007, 2009). The conversion that took place at that time seems to bear similarities to that described by Robbins for the Urapmin of PNG almost a century later (Robbins, 2004). Under circumstances of complete humiliation and depopulation, Christianity was used by the Ambrym people as a vantage point from which they could rid themselves of their 'culture' and start anew. They changed their demographic structure and moved to new villages by the sea. They started living with relatives who had formerly been taboo, banned grade-taking rituals, divested themselves of the skulls of their ancestors and magical remedies, abandoned their men's houses, assembled in newly-built church houses and searched for work in the local coconut plantations (Eriksen, 2008: 36). Around 1920 Ambrym Island was completely reorganized and a new social structure was installed, where equality surpassed ritual hierarchy. The pastor of the church congregation, the village chief and the manager of the plantation were the new types of village leaders. All were individuals valued for their commitment and capacity for modern work.

These changes seem to fit agricultural practices of slash and burn, that now involved the anticipation that 'New Life' would grow out of the process of destroying custom. Kenelm Burridge very poignantly described this dynamic of change in his account of Melanesian millenarianism at the point where Christianity, ritual hierarchy and nation-making melted together in the famous cargo cults of the region. He found that all these influences centred on the indigenous creation of a new type of person, 'the new man', the individual taking shape as a hybrid figure of indigenous creation: 'a Kanaka can only find himself whole

and entire within terms of a synthesis that contains both worlds and is, therefore, larger than either. He must make a new man' (Burridge, 1960: 33).

The vision emerging of Christian life often made clear references to that new category of the person contained in the Holy Book. It promised peace, love, and prosperity – and hard work – and knowledge of the Holy Gospel would lead the way towards Higher Meaning (see also Rio and Eriksen, 2014b). In Vanuatu this overturning of the hierarchical platform for differentiating power also began to occur in myths detailing how a big man was in the end overthrown by lesser men. The theme here was inequality and hierarchy and the transgressive acts of big men, but in the era of 'the new man' these stories began to feature the downfall of big man arrogance. Another similar topic in myth, documented by Lattas in New Britain, is how the lowest of people can turn out to be the greatest in terms of productivity or potency (Lattas, 2010: xxxv, 279–80). Perhaps this indicates an adaptation of myth to what the early church movement was prophesying about the new man.

Following from these historical events, all ethnography that has been produced from the region, back to the first ethnographers, has been a description of cultural elements that have since the beginning been radically changing. In fact, generally, the focus on globalizing effects has been a continuous way of framing Melanesian anthropology since its start, at times seeming to be the very driving force for anthropology's engagement with the region. In Vanuatu it comes through in publications such as Bernard Deacon's *Malekula: A Vanishing People in the New Hebrides* (1934), Felix Speiser's *Ethnographische Materialien aus den Neuen Hebriden und den Banks-Inseln* (1923) or W.H.R. Rivers' *Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia* (1922) that were all very much set on the exploration of the 'degradation' of human life in the islands due to the western-induced changes such as wage-labour, Christianity, new diseases, 'cultural decline', and altered forms of consumption and morality. Later, maybe as a particular tendency of PNG studies, this concern with globalization was for a while left in the background in studies that instead documented cultures that were supposedly intact. Important Island-Melanesia¹ contributions, such as Raymond Firth's *Essays on Social Organization and Values in the Western Pacific*, therefore became an exception to that trend in the region (see Firth, 1964). He instead continued the emphasis on how changing patterns in material consumption, political structures and religious life had produced a lot of motion in the archipelago. Firth struggles with the complexity of human values, but he keeps dwelling on what he calls the 'originality' with which Melanesian people articulated these changes (1964: 191). In his *Essays* he reaches for a unified anthropology of value because of that very dilemma of observing the particular ways that Melanesian societies were undergoing earth-shattering changes due to the globalizing colonial system of the Commonwealth.

A later attempt at understanding the localization of change in Melanesia has been Chris Gregory's effort to look at the interplay between commodity relations and gift relations in PNG (Gregory, 1982). Gregory proposed that the capitalist economy was in many ways transformed into local gift relations, as the value of the

gift relation reigned supreme. Money and valuables could be incorporated into the already existing ethos of gift relations. Carrier and Carrier proposed a correction to this – from a view of Ponam and Manus islands in PNG (Carrier and Carrier, 1989). They suggested that the nature of kinship relations and local relations of production were actually changing according to market values. A major claim of the book was that the colonial economic system gave people easier access to money on an individual basis, enabling them to bypass former structures of authority and the big man, and in effect creating cognatic kinship as a new arena for engagement along horizontal, flat or *equal* relations (1989: 92). The ceremonial economy of death and marriage thus picked up in popularity, since young people with economic means could now more freely and frequently engage in kinship obligations. This was not the expression of a traditional model of gift-relations and big man influence, but rather the downplaying of difference, democratization of exchange and the choice of an equalitarian model fuelled by the capitalist economy and compatible with its forms of competitive individualism. The circulation of money enabled people to build new forms of ceremonial exchange.

Since then, we have had Joel Robbins' (2004, 2009) important analysis of the hierarchization of values that has taken place among the Urapmin of PNG due to charismatic Christianity. He argued that Christian values emphasizing the individual self in relation to God have been totalizing Urapmin social life such that previous values of kinship relations and ancestral dependence have become encompassed as inferior values. From the point of view of Vanuatu ethnography, Annelin Eriksen likewise demonstrates in a historical analysis how the church has also transformed the hierarchical relations between different values. In her account, the former values of a ritual hierarchy and male greatness have become submitted to churchly values that emphasize communal work and more equalitarian relations between women and men (Eriksen, 2008, 2009).

These points link up with a growing ethnographic awareness about the actual emerging presence of a new type of personality in Melanesia: the possessive individual. The concept is derived from Macpherson who saw capitalism and the commodification of labour and skills as requiring a new kind of relationship of the self to itself (Macpherson, 1962). It is only through being self-possessed, owning oneself as a form of property, that the individual can be free to sell one's labour in the marketplace and free to make other kinds of choices with regard to, for example, politics, matrimony, consumption, etc. We need to be mindful of the tension that can develop between this new type of individualism and the moral obligations that adhere to the ceremonial economy. Much contemporary ethnography indicates that the question of value has been compartmentalized to this tension alone, and that many traditional Melanesian metaphysical topics such as male spiritual power or relation to ancestors have been rendered obsolete. In a special issue of *Anthropological Forum* edited by Karen Sykes (2007), the contributors discuss the moral claims that confront the possessive individual in PNG. Whereas new elites have the tendency to celebrate the possessive individual as a virtue and as the moral answer to becoming successful in business and politics, the grassroots engage

in moral scrutiny and a critique of those persons who are hostile to the values of kinship, sharing and traditional social norms. In contrast to the Dumontian approach of a totalizing hierarchy of values, the reference to Macpherson's possessive individualist is meant rather to look at the articulation of conflicting moral claims at the ground level.

In Keir Martin's essay in that collection we get a view of how the Tolai of New Britain articulate that tension. We are told that in contrast to the European society that forms the context of Macpherson's study, where possessive individualism, i.e. the virtue of being an autonomous economic agent, was a virtue both for the elite and the grassroots in early industrial society, in PNG 'the contest is over the social context (if any) in which it is appropriate to present oneself as a possessive individual' (Martin, 2007: 286). As pointed out by Strathern, it is not self-evident in Melanesia that one should 'have the right to products of one's own work' (Strathern, 1988: 142), but this is now changing. Martin describes people who are called 'big shots', i.e. men of influence in business and politics, and how they model their behaviour on that of expatriate white men and in opposition to community life based on a cycle of ongoing ritual obligations. The interesting thing that the big shot does is to compartmentalize ritual obligations from his life as a businessman – 'to fence in the relational person' (2007: 289) – in what appears to be a thoroughly modernist and individualist manner. The virtue of being autonomous economic and political players is from that vantage point also thrown back as a moral claim against the grassroots: if they are going to prosper they will have to be responsible for their individual well-being.

In the following I shall first and foremost elaborate on developments among the grassroots, as representing one important trend in Melanesian modernity. On Ambrym Island all social processes run counter to this production of big men and big shots, and my description here underscores the Melanesian denial of new manifestations of power.

The construction and deconstruction of superstructure

A dimension of this development is that kinship and kinship obligation itself is also changing, and perhaps concealing certain aspects of an equalitarian character. As pointed out by Carrier and Carrier (1989: ch 2), one result of colonization and other historical developments in Melanesia has been the elaboration of kinship as a fundamental platform for social life. Carrier and Carrier report that the Ponam one day out of four are engaged in kinship ceremonies that are internal to the island (see Carrier and Carrier, 1989: 213). This reflects that the Ponam, who have been particularly keen on the incorporation of cash-labour and market relations, more and more invest their surplus energy into a particular articulation of kinship, relations, alliances and political networks between villages. We can assume that this activity to some degree is about reformulating and re-casting the global order inside a construction of totality that they are ultimately in control of.

We know little about the historical transformation of Ambrym kinship prior to the first descriptions of it around 1920 (see Rio and Eriksen, 2014a), but there is no doubt that the classificatory marriage system has since then been of overwhelming importance to island life (see Scheffler, 1970; Rio, 2005, 2007). In agreement with the point made by Carrier and Carrier, marriage ceremonies have been transformed from minor, insignificant events into costly displays, seemingly carrying elements of both bride-price and dowry, that now overshadow other forms of rituals and life-cycle ceremonies (see Eriksen, 2008: 78–9). It is assumed that every person on the island is related through an overarching model of family connections, traced through ancestors and marriage. This has everyday implications of obligation and orientation. It means, for instance, that if someone somewhere has died, the value of connectedness obligates one to contribute to his or her mortuary ceremony in some way or other, either with tears or food. If certain of one's relatives who live in a faraway place spill their own blood, say in an accident in Australia, and this is brought to one's attention on Ambrym, one can go to one of his classificatory brothers who lives in one's village and claim compensation for this blood that is shared and belongs to all relatives. Hence kinship is perceived as a pool of life substance that all people hold stakes in and that constitutes their superstructure for all sorts of shared and equal engagements. The material expression of this superstructure is the exhibition and sharing of food at regular ceremonial exchanges. In contrast to the case of the ceremonial pig killings a century ago, described by Layard (1942), there is absolutely no build-up of super-human status in ceremonies today. On the contrary, I argue. Pigs are being killed, cows are being butchered and cooked, yams and taro in great quantities are being displayed and distributed and huge sums of money figure as bride price or ceremonial payment, but no longer in the form of sacrifice or for gaining spiritual power. They merely express bilateral connections.

The build-up to ceremonial prestations is characterized by people from far and near coming to contribute to the gigantic display of food heaps, to promote their relatedness, and on the other end to walk back home with shares of this communal prestation. In this way they see both the formation of their own superstructure, but also its temporary existence, its dependence on continued work and its distribution. The ultimate value in this process, one might say, is not the superstructure, the system of kinship or relations as a permanent body. It is rather the value of communally constructing *and* deconstructing this superstructure with its temporary celebration of ephemeral glory.

In this regard Daniel de Coppet (2008) has raised a very important point. From a similar setting in the Solomon Islands he engages in what we might call critical comparison, comparison not merely meaning inter-cultural translation but radically seeking out the meeting place between cultural concepts. Instead of comparing different concepts of the individual per se, he tries to find the *Are'are* concepts and categories that would satisfy us as actually comparable to the western concept of the human body or individual. Rather surprisingly he finds that the relevant comparison would be the *Are'are* concept of shell money. He describes the western

concept of the human body as a concept of totality remaining from the European history of Christianity, kingdoms and polities, wherein the body emerges as an image of totality, interchangeably featuring in the death of Jesus in the sacrifice for mankind, the body of the king as the body of the nation or society, and the indivisible individual as a supreme body. In comparison, the *Are'are* hold no similar vision of the discrete individual body. The person's substances are always distributed, influenced and claimed by someone elsewhere. But in the course of social processes of ceremonial exchange a *comparative* vision is constructed: of strings of shell money as a discrete body that contains socio-cosmic relations. The ritual exhibition of shell money is in fact the only instance wherein the different features of a total being take shape – uniting the different aspects of being into one single presence that is able to, like the human body for western society, totalize and transcend all aspects of the socio-cosmic world. However, from the point of view of Ambrym social life, I would add to De Coppet's analysis that this assemblage of totality is not at all an end in itself or unproblematic. It is not the display of the shell money that is a paramount value, in analogy with the display of the individual in European society. The issue in the Melanesian ceremony is rather what to do with this figure of totality, once constructed. My impression is that they construct it as an image of a complete superior being – in its very materiality being set outside of human relations – for the sake of expressing what they *do not* value (compare Clastres, 1987: 217). The figure of governance that follows in the wake of such a vision of totality is not what they desire. In contrast to western ceremonies that institutionalize a figure of superior power, as in a kingdom, people here privilege a ceremonial process that takes apart totality as soon as it is constructed. It is the ephemeral that is privileged.

I have in my earlier work accounted for social life on Ambrym Island by using the concept of 'thirdness' as the way that these Vanuatu islanders conceptualize hierarchy. They institute a third vantage point in every situation as a point of view that always encompasses dualist relations of exchange. Sometimes this takes place in the field of what we call the religious – such as in witchcraft or divination (see Rio, 2002) – but it also organizes the everyday life of kinship relations and agricultural structures (see Rio, 2005, 2007). But in contrast to the Hindu situation where the perspective of totality, of the cosmos, the king or the Brahman, is valued as a superior value, the third vantage point is also on Ambrym valued as a given hierarchical social fact, but one that cannot be accepted. Here lies in my view the essence of Melanesian egalitarianism.

The conflict is articulated on all scales: for instance one accepts that mother's kin are superior because they give life, but one negates this by engaging in reciprocity with them. This is the repeated theme in all the crucial ceremonies of contemporary Ambrym. In this way ritual life, killing of pigs and food displays, that used to install superhuman qualities in big men as we saw in Layard's account, has taken on the inverse meaning. Instead of building power and status they effectively deconstruct inequalities. Even the Australian manager that ran the coconut plantation in North Ambrym from the 1950s was submitted to this form of

equalization. The 'Master', as we are told people called him, spoke the vernacular language and staged his own food-exchanges for his Ambrym kin and in fact sponsored most of the kinship ceremonies of his village age-mates. This costly affair became a necessary requirement for managing to live with that structurally hierarchical situation of master and servants. The same is also the case with the churches on Ambrym: they need to combine pastoral leadership with a lot of ceremonial food displays – in fund raisings, 'bazaars', and in relation to gardening season celebrations.

The perspective of the third party has in this way to be cultivated by social processes because it threatens to overcome people by its totalizing motion, and in this capacity dual exchange is instrumental. In my view it is in this regard that material displays become so significant for Melanesians. As in De Coppet's argument, the third point of perspective, as it makes itself manifest through the material presence of the totality of a food heap or shell money, reflects back at people and makes them see their place in the kinship superstructure. The production of that moment itself is crucial, but even more crucial is the necessity to resolve that situation, as people rapidly direct the focus away from that moment of totality over onto a focus on exchange and deconstruction of that discrete body. The process becomes equalizing and represents the maintenance of the egalitarian model, and it manages to encompass or control the ever-present potential of hierarchical relations.

What to do with objects

I will in the following expand a bit on this, and I am interested in the comparative role of exchange and the object. The assemblage of material objects in Vanuatu villages is quite limited, and there are only a handful of artefacts that they produce and like to maintain. These include, of course, clothing, houses and canoes. In a normal household there may also be a radio, a number of kerosene lamps and torches, bush knives and spades bought from Chinese stores for garden work, and also a selection of cooking pans that belong to the realm of women's wealth. In an average household there will be bows and arrows and maybe a rifle to hunt birds and fruit bats; there will be baskets made from coconut leaves or pandanus, and there is a selection of plaited pandanus mats for sleeping on, and these figure in ceremonial prestations on all important occasions. The men will also have their plaited penis-wrapper tucked away for ceremonial occasions or tourist performances, and some women still keep a string skirt for similar purposes. The objects that figure most prominently in Ambrym villages are the wood carvings that almost every household carve or display in case sporadic tourists should walk by, or in case one should want to travel to town and sell something in order to raise some money for some purpose. As money itself is not supposed to figure visibly in these villages, wood carvings are in a sense the most visible manifestation of money in a reserved form. The commercial wood carvings are all adoptions from the ritual sphere, either as pig-killing hammers or wooden effigies that used to figure in the

ritual hierarchy of the *mage*. The *mage* hierarchy came to consist of 12 steps that men would climb throughout their life, beginning in early youth with circumcision. It was closely related to inter-island exchange of emblems and ritual insignia, such as plaited belts, coloured mats, special breeds of pigs and shell money, as well as names, songs and spells and entire rituals, of what we can see as a regional ritual polity (Huffman, 1996).² However, since the 1960s the focus has been much less on ritual initiation and more on the carving and sale of the material emblems (Rio, 2011).

Apart from this world of locally valued objects there is little interest in the great variety of objects that people get a glimpse of in the touristy capital of Port Vila. For people on Ambrym, objects merely serve everyday purposes of gardening, cooking and dwelling and money is required for school fees and remittances. Even though people are fascinated by and to some degree desire store consumables, the real interest in objects can only be ignited by ceremonial prestations – the arrangement of heaps of food, mats, calico, money and other life-sustaining things. This is when material objects become really significant to Ambrym villagers. Big and potent yams are dug out from the ground and displayed with great pride and are of great interest to spectators. Special hand-fed pigs are taken from their hiding places in people's hamlets and dragged onto the ceremonial ground, to the great astonishment of the audience as they display their full-circle tusks that have taken many years to grow. Plastic bags filled with money are suddenly displayed and given away, with amounts of *vatu* greater than people normally suspect anyone of holding. The impression of each ceremony is thus overwhelming, with its display of large bundles of bananas, yams and taro, entire cows that have been cut into pieces and cooked during the night, and, of course, the number of people that come into the ceremonial ground with their products.

I suggest that this is telling us something interesting about the benefit of the object category itself for Ambrym people (see also Rio, 2009). If Vanuatu people had wanted to they could just as easily have hunted for wild pigs, dug out wild yams and picked breadfruit, without keeping up the care, love and energy of these refined products such as big yams or tusked pigs that are of such centrality to their ceremonial events. I believe objects in this setting take on a particular meaning, which relate them to these larger discussions about hierarchy, equality and exchange. They are not merely produced and then exchanged. Instead, all object categories will have to go through a ceremonial stage before being transferred over to distribution. The exhibition of objects is still essential for the way these people conceive of their society, and this attention and energy towards the ceremonial prestation that Melanesians tend to uphold should be interesting to the debate about globalization. I believe it represents a well-established handle on the globalized circumstances, a systematic effort of digesting the pressure of external forces on their societies. It could even be seen as an ongoing effort of keeping control of a hierarchy of values, as the result of a two-century-long history of experimenting with that hierarchy in various ways. Today the ceremonial economy seems to be so well established and efficient that many of us have been led to believe that it

represents 'traditional society', whereas it should instead be seen as a modern companion or answer to the capitalist economy.

Hierarchy and egalitarianism in Melanesia

In order to convey the full implications of this importance of materiality in relation to kinship and a hierarchy of values, I think it is important to keep drawing together other materials from the Melanesian region. So far I have tried to convey certain links between values of kinship, of ceremonial display and a keen attention of the Melanesian person to outlets of exchange. But against the overly euro-centric assumption that exchange alone can constitute sociality – a view that has been predominant also in Melanesian studies – I want to go deeper into the comparative materials from Melanesia. I will look closer at two articles that spring from a Dumontian starting point and that actually manage to bring some realism to this problem of exchange and ceremonies in Melanesia. These are Joel Robbins' article about 'Equality as a Value' (Robbins, 1994) and André Iteanu's article 'Partial Discontinuity' (Iteanu, 2004). In both articles it is argued that exchange is not in itself what constitutes society in Melanesia, but it is instead the most visible effect of a tension of values where exchange manages to encompass hierarchy or ritual as an opposite value – through a continual social process. Iteanu points to the ill-defined relation between exchange and ritual in the anthropological literature and the legacy of Mauss that has been to make the gift, and hence exchange, into the 'total social fact'. Iteanu discusses the problem of the Maori *hau*, and builds a new theory of *hau* that he supports with his PNG materials. He interprets the *hau* from the perspective that *hau* is in fact casting light on a *separation* between ritual and exchange. In Mauss' account the *hau* – such as the '*hau* of the forest' – originates within the realm of sacrificial rituals between forest spirits and priests – and in the first instance it is being given 'with no bargain over it' (2004: 102) in a hierarchical setting of priests and spirits. When passing the thing over to a third party the terms have changed – the thing must circulate, it must be returned, the parties of the exchange now being on equal terms in an atmosphere of 'directness, agreement, and exchange of equivalent value' (2004: 103). According to Iteanu it was this processual *contrast*, and perhaps tension, in relations, between a ritual hierarchy of relations and over into an egalitarian exchange, that was the purpose of Ranapiri's story told to Best. This then corresponds well with the Orokaiva of PNG and how they structure ceremonial process – at a point when they have become thoroughly Christian and subject to a cash economy of oil palms. The ceremony seemingly directs attention away from the activities of church and commercial labour, but these new institutions become an absent presence inside the ceremonies.

The ceremony moves in stages; from the stage of *pure*, with its ritual actions between big men and ancestors, which leads on to the *pondo* food distribution between the big man and other clans. All the ritual speeches of the *pure* will be remembered through the food items circulating, but these food items no longer

carry any *hau*, so to speak – they are now merely food objects that circulate under quantitative measures of give and take. This became highly visible when an Orokaiva big man used the *pondo* for a Christian ritual, where sins were burnt on pieces of paper and prayers to God were said – but where there was no food distribution in the end. People were disappointed, and even though words of God were exchanged these could not be resolved from the ritual context (still carrying the *hau*). They left the question of hierarchy unresolved. Iteanu elaborates: ‘Ritual stages a hierarchical relation that links, through an intermediary, the receiver to some superior category, such as a class of supernatural beings, the affines or whites’ (2004: 110). In reference to the Maori who exchange with the forest through the intermediaries of priests, Iteanu adds: ‘Tamata Ranapiri uses the word *hau* only when the object circulates towards the superior pole of a relation’ (2004: 111), and ‘ritual feeds new objects and meaning into social circulation, while exchange prolongs and expands ritual’. This comparison between Maori and Orokaiva results in the acknowledgement that in both cases ‘exchange is superior to ritual’ (2004: 111). Every ritual event is systematically broken down into exchange, as a necessary alteration of the relations as set up by the ritual. Melanesian ceremonies often feature such a binary process, notably with a stage of production, ritual and display, and a stage of exchange, distribution and dispersal. The early moment of ritual and display is hierarchical, between givers and takers and humans and ancestors. All the display of wealth makes the feast sponsors socially superior and celebrated, but this hierarchy violates the value of egalitarianism and often makes the feast visitors desirous, jealous, unsatisfied and prone to causing sorcery. It is a moment of social tension, and the next stage of dispersal is a relief. Feast visitors among Orokaiva are actually materially compensated for the injury that is done to them in the event of their seeing the huge accumulation of valuables and feeling desire for it (Bashkow, 2006: 195). We note here the similarity to the keen attention of Ambrym Islanders to their ceremonial displays of food that also leads into a process of distribution as a therapeutic relief of the display of so much food and valuables. Egalitarianism emerges as a constant, ongoing concern about hierarchy.

In a sense Joel Robbins’ article gives us a closely related approach, but from a slightly different angle. He is arguing directly in terms of equality and inequality. He turns to Michael Young’s material from the Massim region of PNG – and shifts around the claim that ‘exchange is the basic value in Melanesian society’ (1994: 39) and instead proposes that Melanesians value exchange because they value equality over hierarchy. Through a detailed analysis of Young’s account of Kalauna ceremonial life he demonstrates how each and every time hierarchy arises as a possibility, the Kalauna direct the process instead into details of quantity and equivalence in exchanges. Most visibly, in the roles and division of labour between the *inuba* (as a master of ritual in Iteanu’s terms) and their hereditary exchange partners, *fofofo*, ceremonial process places the ranked festival sponsors on a platform. There they are immobilized, covered in finery and valuables, and in a sense they materialize, as evidence of their ranked status, in contrast to the foreground of

activities of the exchange, rhetoric and distribution of food between *fofofo*: 'the *kaiwabu* should not be seen to move, speak, eat, drink or do anything except gaze fixedly at the crowd and vigorously chew betel' (Young, 1971: 249). According to Young the *kaiwabu* is displayed by the food-givers in this ceremony in order to both symbolize superiority and high rank, but also the individual who is muted and set apart from society. They explicitly remark on their system as anti-hierarchical: 'You have only one king and one queen in England, but when we make turns to make Fakili and Modawa everyone is like a king or queen' (Young, 1971: 253). It is in relation to this theatre of superiority that Robbins is on to something very important when addressing globalizing Melanesian societies:

We are again faced with the seemingly paradoxical expression of inequality as non-relatedness, immobility, distance from and inactivity in the buzz and hum of social life as constituted at a high pitch by institutions of competitive exchange. How do we interpret this paradox, this stone-still monument to a power that plays 'dead' at the very moment when it has created its best chance to live? (1994: 47)

Robbins' response is that 'immobility connotes hierarchy' (1994: 48) and that hierarchy is not what structures society in Melanesia at this present time. Here I want again to enter into the discussion, with a comment on materiality in this type of social context. I believe both Iteanu and Robbins (via Young) describe Melanesian egalitarianism as it is evolving from hierarchical, differentiated egalitarianism and into equalitarian egalitarianism. Here the popular motif of the rubbish man, the mute man, and the potentiality and sacredness of defilement in many myths around the Melanesian archipelago testify to a modern vision of how 'the last shall be the first' as it is expressed in the Bible.

Even though the explicit personification of superiority is no longer enacted in Ambrym ceremonies, one will notice that there is something peculiar going on when social products flow into the ceremonial ground. All things that go into the massive prestation are rid of ownership or reference to social relations. This is itself the main work of the ceremonies – the carrying into the ceremonial ground, the placing of every tuber of yam or taro in heaps, and the endless restructuring of these heaps. Every object, down to the smallest taro vegetable, bed linen or coin, is going back and forth between heaps, being explicitly rid of any relation to the person bringing it in. Things are being made purely material – and so the whole aim and character of these events produce a cleansed space of non-personified valuables. The ceremonial ground is whitewashed and explicitly purified of ownership, personality and thus relationships. In terms of scale, materiality completely encompasses the social. In relation to De Coppet's point this moment not only constructs an image of totality but, as Robbins points out, inertia. The things, the food, the participants and the audience stand there to illustrate complete immobility and paralysis of the social. The married couple freeze into statues overloaded with dresses, garlands and money, as do the child in circumcision and the corpse in mortuary ceremonies. The killed pigs also appear alongside the other objects of

inertia on the ceremonial ground in a moment's transformation from subject to object. That is the peak of any ritual moment on Ambrym, a moment of transferral and transformation, 'adding new meaning to social circulation', to again quote Iteanu (2004: 110). The pig killing is always ritually staged, with a certain amount of oratory and attention towards the purpose of the killing, and this is often the only mark of ritual in Ambrym social life. But the sacrifice no longer installs superiority and eternal life to the male sacrificer, as in Layard's account a century ago. Instead, as the pig is killed, just as one realizes the potentiality of that power over life and death, people instead rush into the process of cutting the meat, sharing it, distributing it and taking pieces here and there. The question of superiority is exactly what is avoided. Only thus can the social be distributed and exchanged as currencies and products for dyadic and equal reciprocal relations. At the dissolution of the ceremonial event, every household will appear to carry home bits and pieces of this ceremonial body, a material object sliced into many pieces and being sieved back into the ongoing life of each and every one.

This demonstrates a point for egalitarian society, I argue. These important objects, such as yams and pigs and bags of money, and the impression of inertia generally, are used for creating attention around the very viability of equalitarian society. As these products appear in the village, suddenly no longer as pigs to be fed or yams to be grown but as fully mature objects, they represent a vision of society's future. These are now the objects that will cause further eating and sociality – they hold the possibility for life, growth and sociality. Their ritual killing and distribution is necessary, I suggest, to make it clear that this object category – this visualization of the total productive capacity of society – has to be overcome. If not, it would be a category of society raised above the participants; a being in demand of leadership, for unequal distribution of means, and possibly removed from access altogether. The objects in this moment potentially raise questions – of ownership and origin, of wealth, of rights and of jealousy. Hence people want the wealth to become visible – but only for a short time – and they also want the *killing* of wealth to be visible. And they always lead every event of ritual into a question of exchange, anti-personalized distribution of pieces of the ritual sacrifice – pieces of yams, pieces of pigs, sums of money, etc. The total and monumental appearance of social process – manifest in the body of things – is then shifted into the sieving character of distribution and exchange. The question I wish to pose in relation to the topic of this special issue is: is this not an explicit articulation of the principle that equality is a paramount value and, further, that social equality is at odds with wealth, and also at odds with the potential hierarchy made visible through the revelation of wealth?

Conclusion: Denial of hierarchy

A century ago the big men of northern Vanuatu would stage sacrificial pig killings for the instalment of their superhuman powers. I have argued here that in the globalizing process linked to Christianity, monetary value and colonial labour

regimes, ceremonial life has made an almost unnoticeable turn against this former model of hierarchical differentiation. What remains from a former model is perhaps a vision of personal autonomy and denial of leadership, but this is now achieved through an overall value placed on equality and equalization. As a hybrid between a differentiating model and a communitarian model, we might see the contours of a society that collectivizes difference but differentiates community. In this society there can be no real big men, no permanent idea of wealth and, paradoxically enough, no enduring concept of superstructure or community in that sense of the word.

We realize that exchange can be used to both keep hierarchy within view and to neutralize it. By hierarchy I mean 'a relation to a superior category' (Iteanu, 2004: 110), and I assume that the display of wealth through pigs, shells, money or food is always, in the Melanesian world at least, also a revelation of, or a glimpse into, a hierarchical world where their human relations take a different form. Melanesians use immobility and objectification to establish relations where they can see themselves encompassed by objects as a relation to something superior – what De Coppet calls a discrete body of totality and what I have termed superstructure – and they use these moments of objectification to continually, over and over again, ceremonially purify themselves of hierarchy through its sacrifice, splitting up and taking apart. This can be the only reason I see for their apparent lack of interest in objects generally, and their intense interest in ceremonial displays.

Hierarchy is being featured as a *possibility* of the social that is at its most potent when objects and statuses are being on display. With the ever-present possibility of people to earn money by selling wood carvings to the tourist market and keeping apart food or money for themselves, the ceremonial system again and again draws these elements into itself and thereby only increases their force. Exchange relieves the system of values from its pressure and tension between hierarchy and equality. The killing of pigs, the giving away and eating of food, as well as the sale of ceremonial sculptures represent a continual overcoming of the hierarchical preconditions of the social. It is interesting then also to look at the whole history of commoditization in this light – as the market of tourist art manages to conceal this specific cultural direction in the production and display of ceremonial art. Inside the global movement of market value, where all sorts of things are drawn into a pool of private consumption, from body organs to rare coins or primitive art, people around the globe are also to a large degree free to create institutions around the delivery of these goods. The globalized market is simply not interested in the specificity of culture of the suppliers to regional markets. Therefore the market can in many different ways provide a sanctuary for a lot of things that are dense with cultural meaning in the social world from which they come. So also with Ambrym ritual art.

The question of value in social systems has been Dumont's major point (Dumont, 1982). Though we normally use value for describing the ability of money to substitute for human life, labour, services or commodities, the concept for Dumont has an extended meaning. It refers to the social field wherein money is

only one (although important) indicator of value. Value is a relative concept that allows for different values to develop in different societies – it allows for change in values within a social environment and it allows for the destruction of values by ideological struggles. Value is closely related to social ontology in the sense that it directs a view on social causality, and I have tried to point out how values of equality and hierarchy respectively have been continually re-articulated in Melanesian settings under the influence of globalization. In this context ‘exchange’ has no doubt been descriptive of very much that has been going on between people in Melanesia. But beyond exchange and money we must also allow there to be whole sets of values that are hidden from view. I suggest that the realm of exchange is always a re-routing of issues that are not *about* exchange to start with, such as the constitution of life or ritual expressions of superior relations. It can also be an arena for expressing change with regard to how a value of differential autonomy becomes overtaken by a value of equalitarian autonomy. Here money comes back into the picture, since money also turns out to be a great technology for concealing cultural values that are of upmost importance to social process. People on Ambrym hide and distribute money, it seems, in order to reveal that money is really crucial for their paramount value: equality. Money seems to be their ‘encompassing valuable’ since it is easy to get rid of. If money came permanently out into the open it would reveal all the real but hidden inequalities that society creates. This changes the terms by which we perceive exchange to be instrumental for a value system or a ‘culture’ in the context of globalization. When a value of differential egalitarianism eventually gives way to a model of equality, one can imagine that it will only reinforce the power of the demand for destruction and sacrifice since these are the instruments of equalization. The analytical problem that this raises is that the fine distinction between egalitarianism and equalitarianism is hidden from us inside these indigenous practices. And further, local, indigenous forms of egalitarianism merge with global forms just like local forms of hierarchy merge with global forms of hierarchy. The issue is also that equality does not come naturally anywhere, and that the more you move towards a state of equality the more striking its unequal potential becomes.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank organizers Jukka Siikala and Joel Robbins and participants at the symposium ‘Dumont and the Global Order’ at the University of Helsinki for comments and suggestions. In particular I thank Rupert Stasch for reading earlier versions of this paper and adding very useful material and reflections to it. The review reports also made significant contributions to the argument. I am also very grateful to Annelin Eriksen, Andrew Lattas, André Iteanu and Chris Gregory for critically engaging with my argument in the final version. No doubt they will all still have partial disagreements with it.

Notes

1. A term used for the nations of Melanesia that lie to the east of mainland New Guinea: the Bismarck archipelago, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia.

2. The ritual hierarchy constructed a separate male sphere, where men of different grades were ordered around separate fires in the men's house, and where they became more and more alienated from social life as they reached higher grades. Towards the time of the Second World War this ritual complex was breaking down, probably due to altered courses of exchange now governed by colonially defined routes and products, but also the church and its altered village structure and more equalitarian and gender-neutral social paradigms (see Eriksen, 2009).

References

- Bashkow I (2006) *The Meaning of Whitemen: Race and Modernity in the Orokaiva Cultural World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Burridge K (1960) *Mambu: A Melanesian Millennium*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Carrier J and Carrier A (1989) *Wage, Trade, and Exchange in Melanesia: A Manus Society in the Modern State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Clastres P (1987) *Society against the State*. New York: Zone Books.
- Daws G (1968) *Shoal of Time: A History of the Hawaiian Islands*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Deacon B (1934) *Malekula: A Vanishing People in the New Hebrides*. London: Routledge and Keegan.
- De Coppet D (2008) From the western 'body' to 'Are'are 'money': The monetary transfiguration of socio-cosmic relations in the Solomon Islands. In: Stewart PJ and Strathern A (eds) *Exchange and Sacrifice*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press, pp. 3–27.
- Dumont L (1970) *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dumont L (1977) *From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dumont L (1982) On value (Radcliffe-Brown Lecture 1980). *Proceedings of the British Academy* LXVI: 207–241.
- Eriksen A (2008) *Gender, Christianity and Change in Vanuatu: An Analysis of Social Movements in North Ambrym*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Eriksen A (2009) Gender and value: Conceptualising social forms on Ambrym. In: Rio K and Smedal O (eds) *Hierarchy: Persistence and Transformations in Social Formations*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 89–113.
- Firth R (1964) *Essays on Social Organization and Values*. London: Athlone Press.
- Foster RJ (1995) *Social Reproduction and History in Melanesia: Mortuary Ritual, Gift Exchange, and Custom in the Tanga Islands*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault M (2007) *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Frater M (1922) *Midst Volcanic Fires*. London: James Clarke & Co.
- Godelier M and Strathern M (eds) (1991) *Big Men and Great Men: Personifications of Power in Melanesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gregory CA (1982) *Gifts and Commodities*. London: Academic Press.
- Harrison S (1990) *Stealing People's names. History and Politics in a Sepik River Cosmology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Huffmann K (1996) Trading, cultural exchange and copyright: Important aspects of Vanuatu arts. In: Bonnemaïson J, et al. (eds) *Arts of Vanuatu*. Bathurst: Crawford House Publishing, pp. 89–113.

- Hviding E (2011) Re-placing the state in the Western Solomon Islands: The political rise of the Christian Fellowship Church. In: Hviding E and Rio K (eds) *Made in Oceania: Social Movements, Cultural Heritage and the State in the Pacific*. Oxford: Sean Kingston Publishing, pp. 51–91.
- Iteanu A (2004) Partial discontinuity: The mark of ritual. *Social Analysis* 48(2): 98–115.
- Kelly RC (1993) *Constructing Inequality: The Fabrication of a Hierarchy of Virtue among the Etoro*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Lattas A (2006) The utopian promise of government. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (NS) 12(1): 129–150.
- Lattas A (2010) *Dreams, Madness and Fairy Tales in New Britain*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press.
- Lattas A and Rio K (eds) (2011) Securing modernity: Towards an ethnography of power in contemporary Melanesia. *Oceania* 81(1).
- Lawrence P (1984) *The Garia: An Ethnography of a Traditional Cosmic System in Papua New Guinea*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Layard J (1942) *Stone Men of Malekula, Vao*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Lindstrom L (1981) 'Big-man': A short terminological history. *American Anthropologist* 83: 900–905.
- Lindstrom L (1984) Doctor, lawyer, wise man, priest: Big-men and knowledge in Melanesia. *MAN* 19(2): 291–309.
- Lindstrom L (1990) *Knowledge and Power in a South Pacific Society*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Lindstrom L and White G (eds) (1993) *Custom Today* (special issue of *Anthropological Forum* 6(4)).
- Macpherson CB (1962) *Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Martin K (2007) Your own *buai* you must buy: The ideology of possessive individualism in Papua New Guinea. *Anthropological Forum* 17(3): 285–298.
- Rio K (2002) The sorcerer as an absented third person: Formations of fear and anger in Vanuatu. *Social Analysis* 46: 129–154.
- Rio K (2005) Discussions around a sand-drawing: Creations of agency and society in Melanesia. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 11: 401–423.
- Rio K (2007) *The Power of Perspective: Social Ontology and Agency on Ambrym Island, Vanuatu*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Rio K (2009) Subject and object in a Vanuatu social ontology: A local vision of dialectics. *Journal of Material Culture* 14(3): 283–308.
- Rio K (2011) High chief, *Waetman* and the traffic of ritual objects in Vanuatu. In: Hviding E and Rio KM (eds) *Made in Oceania: Social Movements, Cultural Heritage and the State in Oceania*. Oxford: Sean Kingston Publishing.
- Rio K and Eriksen A (2014a) Rivers and the study of kinship in Ambrym, Vanuatu: Mother right and father right revisited. In: Hviding E and Berg C (eds) *The Ethnographic Experiment: A.M. Hocart and W.H.R. Rivers in Island Melanesia, 1908*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Rio K and Eriksen A (2014b) A new man: The cosmological horizons of development, curses and personhood in Vanuatu. In: Abramson A and Holbraad M (eds) *Contemporary Cosmologies: Critical Re-Imaginations in Anthropological Theory and Analysis*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 55–76.

- Rio K and Smedal OH (eds) (2009) *Hierarchy: Persistence and Transformation in Social Formations*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Rivers WHR (ed.) (1922) *Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Robbins J (1994) Equality as a value: Ideology in Dumont, Melanesia and the West. *Social Analysis* 36: 21–70.
- Robbins J (2004) *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Robbins J (2009) Conversion, hierarchy, and cultural change: Value and syncretism in the globalization of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity. In: Rio K and Smedal O (eds) *Hierarchy: Persistence and Transformation in Social Formations*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 65–89.
- Sahlins M (1963) Poor man, rich man, big man, chief. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5: 285–303.
- Scheffler HW (1970) Ambrym revisited: A preliminary report. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 26: 52–66.
- Scott M (2007) *The Severed Snake: Matrilineages, Making Place, and a Melanesian Christianity in Southeast Solomon Islands*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Sillitoe P (1998) *An Introduction to the Anthropology of Melanesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Speiser F (1923) *Ethnographische Materialien aus den Neuen Hebriden und den Banks-Inseln*. Berlin: Quarto.
- Spriggs M (1997) *The Island Melanesians*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Stasch R (2009) *Society of Others: Kinship and Mourning in a West Papuan Place*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Strathern A (1971) *The Rope of Moka: Big-Men and Ceremonial Exchange in Mount Hagen, New Guinea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strathern M (1988) *The Gender of the Gift*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Strathern M (1991) One man and many men. In: Godelier M and Strathern M (eds) *Big Men and Great Men: Personifications of Power in Melanesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 197–214.
- Sykes K (ed.) (2007) *Interrogating Individuals: The Theory of Possessive Individuals in the Western Pacific*. (special issue of *Anthropological Forum* 17(3)).
- Tabani M (2009) Dreams of unity, traditions of division: John Frum, *kastom*, and inter-manipulation strategies as cultural heritage on Tanna (Vanuatu). *Paideuma* 55: 27–47.
- Wagner R (1974) Are there social groups in the New Guinea Highlands? In: Leaf M (ed.) *Frontiers of Anthropology: An Introduction to Anthropological Thinking* New York: Nostrand Company, pp. 95–122.
- Wagner R (1991) The fractal person. In: Godelier M and Strathern M (eds) *Big Men and Great Men: Personifications of Power in Melanesia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 159–174.
- Young MW (1971) *Fighting with Food: Leadership, Values and Social Control in a Massim Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Knut Rio is a Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Bergen. He is currently the chair of the Cultural History Collections at the University Museum of Bergen. He is also co-editor of *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*.