While the small scale of New Guinea’s traditional societies and the diversity of her languages have been, and still are, obstacles to rapid social and economic development, the very same diversity of her traditional cultures, and their richness, and the diversity of human talents and experience that these provide, are also among her greatest assets (Bulmer 1969:1).

INTRODUCTION

In several publications Ralph Bulmer addressed the issue of regionally unequal development in Papua New Guinea and its effects on national unity (1969; 1971). In this paper I would like to deal with this general issue. The paper is prompted by research I carried out among the Kovai, in the Siassi district, a relatively backward region in Morobe Province, during 1978-79.1 Its specific subject is how Kovai experienced their relationship with the provincial and national governments of the independent state Papua New Guinea. I analyse this relationship referring to Gellner’s ideas on the nature of nationalism.

After the Introduction I first summarise Gellner’s views as set forth in his book Nations and Nationalism (1983), while in the second part of the paper I apply Gellner’s argument to the Kovai. In restricting part of my analysis to them only, I think I am over-cautious. I selected the Kovai to do my research since the scope they have to undertake monetary activities in their home area is limited. It is especially transport which is the bottleneck for economic development. As for education they are privileged. In my view the Kovai were in an intermediate position with regard to incorporation into the colonial and post-colonial economy, and this was an important reason I chose to work among them. If my work was to have any practical effects among the people studied, I thought that this would be more likely to occur in an intermediate area, as a result of hints based on...
local knowledge, than in a backward and isolated one where the infrastructure lacks that which makes monetary activities a possibility, while, at the other end of the continuum, areas with many links with the outside world are less in need of such hints, supposing they are feasible.

There are many areas in Papua New Guinea in which the infrastructure is weak and an impediment to economic development. My impression is that the inhabitants of at least these areas may use the same strategy as do the Kovai to improve their lot, but I did not have the time to scan the literature to reinforce this idea. To stress the likelihood of the wider applicability of the points raised in the paper, its title mentions ‘in Papua New Guinea’, and not ‘among the Kovai’.

GELLNER ON NATIONALISM

For Gellner nationalism is a phenomenon occurring due to the transformation of agrarian, more specifically agro-literate, to industrial society. In agrarian societies literacy is either completely absent, as it is in pre-agrarian societies, or, as in agro-literate societies, a small proportion of the population is literate. In these cases the literates form part of the higher strata. Agro-literate society is characterised by a sharp dichotomy between the illiterate peasants, the great majority of the population, and the ruling class. Both groups are usually culturally heterogeneous. The peasants are culturally divided along ethnic lines; the ruling class on the basis of occupation. It is in the interest of the rulers to stress their distinctive way of life, so as to legitimise their privileges, both with regard to the peasants and to other strata within the elite. Since their way of life is an expression of their high position within society, the rulers do not want other groups to adopt it. Among the peasants heterogeneity persists since peasant communities are largely self-reproducing, although they are constituent units of a larger grouping. Peasants derive their identity and security in life from their membership of such a community. Children are shown and taught the way of life of the community by their elder generation. Gellner calls this endo-training, or endo-socialisation, since it relies on skills and knowledge at hand in their own community. In Gellner’s terms, in agro-literate society cultures proliferate, and, also in a single polity, there is no tendency towards homogenisation. Because of the different status of the ways of life of the ruling class and of the peasants, Gellner refers to them as high and low cultures respectively.

Gellner contrasts these conditions with those prevailing in industrial society. Compared with agriculture, industry allows far greater expansion of production. The changes in production methods which make this increase possible ask for new skills and new knowledge. Hence the younger generation is instructed in school, by a system of ‘exo-socialisation’, taken out of the hands of the parents and other relations of the pupils who may not have the capacities required. School education extends literacy to the very large majority of the population. While in agrarian society identity is based on membership of a local community and a place in the network of social relations in that community, its base in industrial society is education and the qualifications it provides. To the degree that education is extended to a growing proportion of the population social inequalities are lessened. Gellner characterises industrial society as tending towards egalitarianism. It does so of necessity, since the population needs to be mobile, so as to be able to take the jobs and positions which industry and the accompanying private and public services demand. Cultural barriers which, in agrarian society, were elements of social structure, become counter-productive in industrial society, since they hamper mobility. Industrial society has to be entropic and if it is not, it is fission-prone.

The cohesion of the local communities is accordingly weakened, they cease to be autonomous, people owing their allegiance to the shifting organisations of which they, for their livelihood or other needs, become members. Exo-socialisation spreads high culture to the mass of the population, while local, low cultures are in part assimilated or languish. It is nationalism, Gellner argues,

which is about entry to, participation in, identification with, a literate high culture which is co-extensive with a political unit and its total population and which must be of this kind if it is to be compatible with the kind of division of labor, the type of mode of production, on which this society is based (Gellner 1983:95).

This quotation provides the elements for Gellner’s conception of a nation. Nations are groupings of which people are willingly members, while members share their culture with fellow-members. In this view it is nationalism which brings about nations and not the other way round (p.55). For this reason nationalism became a strong force in Europe in the 19th century, when multi-cultural, agrarian societies were transformed into mono-cultural, industrial ones.

In case of a barrier to access to the high dominant culture, and hence the impossibility to identify with it, Gellner sees two possible outcomes. The one is that those locked out unite, raise an existing local culture, or elements from it, to the status of high culture, changing it in the process, and split off to form a separate polity. Where this is unfeasible, for example because they live dispersed among the rest of the population, the polity
in question is beset with unrest. For Gellner the latter condition is “one of the gravest dangers that industrial society must face” (p.70).

Only in passing Gellner discusses colonial and post-colonial societies, the subject of this paper. For him the post-colonial states are a testing case for his idea that nationalism has to result in polities with homogeneous cultures. While colonial African States exemplify the cultural barriers which, in Gellner’s view, characterise agrarian society white rulers dominate sets of ethnically divided African peasants. The post-colonial states interest him in so far as there has been neither the imposition of an African high culture, nor the redrawing of boundaries to make them fit ethnic groupings.

While I think Gellner’s analysis is immensely stimulating, I do not accept it in full. For example Anderson’s analysis (1983) of nationalism makes clear that nationalism also occurred in agrarian societies such as the Spanish colonies in Latin America. Here the barrier which the - metropolitan - bearers of Spanish high culture erected also to well educated members of their colonial societies was a contributing factor in the movement towards independence, while it is unclear to me if the secessionists promoted a high culture different from the one of their former Spanish overlords. Another contributing factor were the barriers in the career possibilities of the colonial elites to the effect that separate colonies with separate public services became separate states (Anderson, 1983: ch.4). That I do not fully accept Gellner on nationalism, does not hamper me in my analysis of a possible role of nationalism in Papua New Guinea, since I want to use his ideas to make clear in what ways the situation in Papua New Guinea might contrast with the analytic picture he presents of nationalist states.

### PAPUA NEW GUINEA

**An agrarian society?**

Papua New Guinea is an agrarian society, of sorts. Its high culture was introduced by colonial interference and originates from an industrial society. Also, the state apparatus of Papua New Guinea is financed in part from the proceeds of industrial enterprise, notably gold and copper mines, and for another, decreasing, part by grants from Australia, earned indirectly by industrial enterprises. While in agrarian society the state organisation is financed by tribute from peasants, in Papua New Guinea the only direct taxes peasants have to pay are to finance local government councils and not the central government. In addition to locally raised revenues, the councils receive grants from central government to finance development projects. Moreover, services such as medical aid and education are provided at below cost.

The country has in common with Gellner’s characterisation of agrarian societies that the peasants are subdivided into ethnic groups and categories. To a large extent these are of colonial derivation. What is now Papua New Guinea consisted in the pre-colonial era of thousands of autonomous communities, ‘villages’ in administrative terms, a number far larger than the 700-1000 languages often quoted as an index of the area’s lack of supra-local organisation. To create order, the colonial authorities, in government and in business, grouped people into a limited number of ethnic categories. In some cases they represent mono-cultural entities, as with the Tolai, in others they lump together people speaking scores of languages with divergent cultures, linguistically and/or otherwise, as with ‘the Sepik’. The different sociological status of the categories reflects the course of colonial history, the Tolai being a group of people living close to a centre of colonial activity, while the Sepik were at a periphery. The origin of the names of these categories is in some cases obscure. The term ‘Siassi’ which denotes the multi-cultural group of people living in the archipelago centred on Umboi, in between New Britain and the Huon Peninsula has been explained in several ways (Harding 1967:122-3; Pomponio, pers.comm. 1987).

A trait which Papua New Guinea has in common with industrial society is the school system which extends to a small majority of the country’s children. This system of exo-socialisation, however, runs simultaneous with the endo-socialisation in rural communities. Most Papua New Guineans still live in villages. With the growth of colonial society and the colonial economy, village autonomy has decreased, but their social organisation has in most cases remained intact. School education has enabled many young Papua New Guineans to take blue- and white-collar jobs and some have reached top positions. Most, however, have been born in villages, hence are ex-villagers who early in life have been socialised into a non-literate society. This entails that the social boundary between the elite groups and the peasants has become less sharp, a point I return to below.

Workers in organisations introduced by the colonial authorities may be drawn from a number of ethnic categories. Where the number of workers who have to co-operate is large, as in unskilled jobs, they often attempt to associate with wantok, mates who to some extent share ethnic backgrounds, or, preferably, wamples, people from the same area or village. Here the delineation of what forms an ethnic group, or an area, is made by Papua New Guineans themselves and serves to order relations within the work force they happen to be members of. Because of differences in the social contexts in which these categorisations are made, the lines of demarcation may be drawn differently from those used by either expatriates, or other Papua New
Guineans. In elite positions, where numbers are few, people may form multi-ethnic associations (Brown Glick, pers.comm.)

Post World War II efforts to promote country-wide primary education, and accordingly country-wide literacy, have failed. They had to fail, and not only because of the means lacked to contact all villages, and build and man schools there. For most Papua New Guineans their livelihood depends on their growing most of their own food, on their own land, by means of the knowledge and the social relations they learned how to put to use through endo-socialisation. The monetary sector of the country is so small that it provides only a small minority of the population with jobs. Hence the country can persist only if the majority stays put in their villages and keeps growing their own crops. For them literacy is not essential. It is a skill primarily of interest to the churches, since they encourage people to read religious texts.

**Papua New Guinea, a nation?**

Villagers know that they are citizens of the independent state Papua New Guinea, and that they share their citizenship with other villagers. Temporary stay away from their villages has made a great many Papua New Guineans increasingly aware of the large numbers of distinct groups within the country, the areas they come from, and the cultural variety among them. In this way Papua New Guinea has become an 'imagined' grouping, which Anderson views as an essential feature of what he calls a nation (1983:15-16). The term denotes that membership is anonymous since members of such a grouping know personally only a tiny fraction of their fellow members. A nation shares this feature with many other groups, so a distinctive characteristic is called for and Anderson finds this in 'the style in which they are imagined' (1983:15). As for nations Anderson defines this style referring to the perception among members that their nation is 'limited', that it has boundaries separating it from other units; that their nation is 'sovereign', or, in my interpretation of this term, independent; and that it forms a 'community'. Of these characteristics many Papua New Guineans possess the first and second, but I am unclear about the prevalence of the third.

Membership, however, means different things for different groups of citizens. For the elite it means that they are entitled to man the institutions created by the colonial authorities and can reap the benefits in terms of prestige, power and money. For villagers it means that they can claim active support by these organisations so as to improve their living conditions. That happens in two ways: directly by creating openings for participation in the money economy by means of a range of development projects; and indirectly by providing jobs to village youngsters who have received school education, and who then for the villagers become their tentacles in elite organisations. Their jobs give their village relatives some prestige, and especially parents expect to share in their salaries. Kovai felt that they, just as much as all other villagers in Papua New Guinea, have the right that their children get salaried jobs. At the time of my research they were frustrated in this regard since school education has become more costly, qualifications for jobs have become higher and, yet, there are fewer vacant jobs available.

What are the consequences of these developments in terms of high and low cultures? The members of the elite are bearers of a 'second culture', a culture they have been socialised in after their socialisation into village culture. I use this expression in analogy with 'second language'. They have to be fluent in English and follow a western life-style, or elements from it, while performing their jobs. There is no alternative, since in ruling the country they have to run the institutions set up by the colonial authorities. For these institutions there were no Melanesian models. The profession by members of the elite that, also in their public life, they follow a Melanesian life-style, apparent from dress, style of leadership, and generosity towards former co-villagers, may be the start of a new high culture, of Melanesian character if compared with its Australian predecessor. It is an effort to invent a high culture, so the elite can emphasise a Papua New Guinean identity separate from that of its former colonial overlord.

They share their Melanesianness with the rulers of the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, the dissident Kanaks of New Caledonia and the inhabitants of Irian Jaya. This does not threaten the separateness of these countries, in so far as they are independent, if the elites do not want amalgamation. Their careers halt in their respective capitals, so boundaries created by colonialist interference have become effective barriers fostering the emergence of separate states. Also among the nations discussed by Gellner, notably the western European ones, differences in high cultures are not pronounced while each nation, presumably, possesses its own one. Possibly, also, the differences are more important than the resemblances, as Schwartz (1982:111) argues with respect to traditional Melanesian cultures. In that case a slightly different life-style of the Papua New Guinea elite might become an authentic high culture.

For Gellner there is a sharp cultural rift between elite and peasants in agrarian societies. In Papua New Guinea the situation is more complex. In the past elite the has been increasingly drawn from non-elite groups, from peasant communities, and social links between elite members and their village relatives remain in existence. In the late colonial era, when the elite consisted of expatriates, the rift was large. Nevertheless, and not in accordance with Gellner's model, the colonial administration saw it as its task to decrease the gap, to let
villagers adopt elements of a life-style less alien to its own. Villagers appreciated this aspect of the administration's work and for many it seemed the rationale for its presence. With the localisation of the public service the cultural barrier decreased further, although less than some elite members, stressing their Melanesian life-style, professed. However, the Kovai seemed to prefer a larger gap, to start from. They were critical of the performance of the Papua New Guinean public servants, and thought expatriates would be more effective. As far as villagers in general are concerned: they are in competition with other villagers for the services provided by the state, and to a lesser extent the churches. Papua New Guinea is not a desperately poor country, neither at village, nor at state level. The man-land ratio is favourable; the availability of suitable agricultural land is not seriously strained. The state has money to spend on village projects and the main problem for villagers is to gain the attention of officials, so some of the money will come their way.

To this end they use at least two strategies. The first is that they take part in the introduced way of life, as they themselves perceive it. This is the bisnis strategy, most conspicuously followed by Big Peasants and other business men. The second is by demonstrating a viable local culture, distinctive from other cultures, and hence entitlement to a place in Papua New Guinean society. In the course of my field work the Kovai demonstrated the worthiness of their life-style by their dancing in which they excelled, both in their own view and in that of onlookers and which they showed at regional events such as the annual Lae Show. Whereas, in Gellner's model, peasants are second class members of the state and are destined to remain so, in Papua New Guinea it is not the possession of a high, literate culture which grants people full membership, but their own life-style. The second strategy, which the Kovai employed, has likely gained currency during the years after independence when also members of the government started to stress the indigenous character of Papua New Guinean society. A conscious revival of Kovai culture took place in the late 70's, and in the years since I left, there has been a further 'incredible resurgence' (Pomponio, pers.comm., 1987) of cultural practices. Since Pomponio worked elsewhere in Siassi, it is of interest that she observed the same phenomenon as I did.

The two strategies mentioned above contrast since the one seeks the adoption of foreign culture elements, the other demonstrates ones from their own culture. However, the same contrast appears in separate 'cargo cults', or subsequent phases of such cults. These strategies are attempts, and when they prove ineffective, its former adherents may change tack. Moreover, I doubt if the bisnis strategy aims at the overall adoption of a foreign culture, and the other at the overall retention of a local one. With the Kovai at least this was not the case.

Finally, I stress that the Kovai, unlike some of the followers of the kastom movement in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands (see Keesing 1982) are not traditionalists. They are Christians, who want to increase their participation in the cash economy. Their displaying their own culture is not part of an anti-colonial struggle, but rather of a struggle against the way incorporation, in this case post-colonial, proceeds, if not against the small extent of incorporation.

Cultural totemism

Cultural diversity is large in Papua New Guinea. The number of cultures is not known, since the number of languages is an inaccurate index of cultural diversity, and since it is also a matter of local perception of behavioral differences. It seems likely there are several hundreds. As Schwartz (1963; 1983) has pointed out, the inhabitants of Papua New Guinea are consciously multi-ethnic; they are aware that different groups in the country have different ways of life and they maintain these differences. This situation persists from the pre-colonial era. Specific cultural features are part of specific cultures and should not be taken over by the bearers of other cultures. There is system in cultural variations so, with regard to the Manus archipelago, Schwartz speaks of an 'areal culture'. In his 1982 paper he coins the term 'cultural totemism' by which he refers to an attitude among the inhabitants of Manus Province

which made them hypersensitive to selected cultural and linguistic differences but relatively blind to the similarities between groups thus defined as different. This subgrouping of society in terms of diagnostic cultural traits I have termed 'cultural totemism', comparing it with the coding of social structure in terms of natural species, the attribute relations among which provide an analog for the relations among social groups (Schwartz 1982:116).

With the growing awareness among Papua New Guinean villagers about the cultural variety within their country the scene seems to be set for a country-wide 'areal culture' in which totems such as dance styles and costumes mark different groups out.

Schwartz does not restrict his observations to Manus Province in which, before the establishment of the German colony New Guinea, trading had led to areal integration. He concludes that in Melanesia cultural 'diversity became a way of life' (1982:117) due to migrations and the settlement of speakers of Austronesian
languages among speakers of non-Austronesian ones. While his view may pertain more to the coastal areas than to those island, it seems to me a hypothesis worth further investigation.

Like Manus Province, Siassi is an area where intensive trading had provided areal integration. The Kovai shared the totemic attitude towards culture, in differentiating between several cultural traditions within the area, after people had originated together from the centre of Umboi. Contacts between the members of the several cultural groups existed in the first place in trading. In the course of the colonial era contacts increased, and during my field work the groups were in competition for the opportunities which the post-colonial order provided.

Discussing their problems the Kovai tended to refer to themselves as Siassi. Some of their problems they did have in common with other Siassi, others where more specific and concerned primarily themselves or their own village. That they called themselves Siassi, in talking to me, need not imply a nascent sense of regional identity, but merely the recognition that the use of a term which the Kovai thought outsiders, namely colonial authorities, had first applied to them, was suitable when talking about themselves to another outsider, part of the colonial and post-colonial scene, namely an anthropologist. It was a term which, according to the Kovai, marked them a place in Papua New Guinea. Among themselves villages were the primary identity conferring groups, as they had been in the pre-colonial era when they were the warring units. Co-operation between them was problematic. During my stay there were a number of quarrels between villages, some over seemingly trivial matters.

Cultural diversity and national unity

In a column in the Times of Papua New Guinea, Eileen Tugum reports the following:

Our country is so unique with its 700 plus languages and rich cultural heritage. They give us our identity and make us proud to be Papua New Guineans. In Japan last year, during a lecture on culture a delegate from the Philippines shocked the Japanese lecturer and delegates from Burma, Singapore, Fiji, Indonesia when he told them that they had 80 different dialects, but PNG stunned them when a delegate told them that PNG had over 700 different languages, which also represented the different tribes. When they looked at us we were bursting with pride (Tugum 1988:8).

The statement, by a member of the elite, shows that Papua New Guineans do not automatically associate cultural diversity with disunity. Can it go with national unity? There are several reasons why it seems likely to add to quarrels and to become a barrier to national integration.

In the first place cultural differences often imply evaluations. Other customs or skills, or the lack of them, may be considered to be inferior or threatening, as in the case of sorcery. If, for example, groups with a culture held to be inferior are advantaged, ethnic prejudice may amplify the discontent which would have arisen anyway. Secondly, corporate accountability can be traced along ethnic lines, with the flexibility with which such boundaries are drawn. A conflict between two individuals can in this way grow into one between coastal and highland Papua New Guineans.

Such quarrels are likely to arise where people from different ethnic groups have to interact regularly and/or intensively, as in towns or in ‘non-village’ rural areas, especially resettlement schemes. In village Papua New Guinea interaction takes place primarily with people from one’s own and from neighbouring villages. Here ethnic considerations are not the primary causes affecting co-operation beyond the village. Villages remain the primary base for economic and social security. Gellner (1983:86) argues that the hold a shared high culture can have depends on the erosion of local structures which provide people with their identity and security. Among the Kovai village structure is still strong, although the introduced high culture has a hold on people, and although the people wish to be enabled to adopt elements from it. Otherwise national integration is not an issue for them.

NOTES

1. I acknowledge the support of WOTRO, Foundation for Scientific Research in the Tropics, the Hague, grant W52-249, and of Utrecht University. I thank Paul Streumer for drawing my attention to Anderson’s book on nationalism.

2. This argument draws on Anderson’s analysis of the rise of a number of independent states in Latin America in the early 19th century (Anderson 1983: ch.4).

REFERENCES

Images of development in different parts of Papua New Guinea have been constructed in remarkably divergent ways by local people, depending on their historical experiences since the time of first contact with Europeans. In many parts of the Highland region from the 1950s onwards development meant primarily agricultural change, in particular the cultivation of coffee, tea, and fresh vegetables as forms of cash crop. However, in certain areas which came under administrative control rather later and have tended to be left aside in the process of introducing new crops, this image has been displaced by that of the mining company, which will by its very presence, it is hoped, bring wealth into the area by tapping oil and mineral resources deep below the surface of the ground. An extreme case of this pattern of aspirations is found in the Lake Kopiago district in the far north-west part of the Southern Highlands Province. The example, I argue, shows a concordance between peripherality and dependence in the context of capitalist-driven change. The further implication here is that this kind of concordance should also hold elsewhere. Less peripheral areas will show a more independent ideology than those which are clearly “on the fringe”.

The Duna-speaking people of Lake Kopiago were first brought under administrative control from the late 1950s onwards, partly from Mount Hagen and partly from Koroba. Isolated patrols and explorations, however, had passed through the area since 1934, when the Fox brothers visited in search of gold, followed by James L. Taylor and John Black on the Hagen-Sepik patrol of 1938. Certain existing circumstances of the Duna predisposed them to look on these early patrols and the later incursions of the government officers and missionaries in ways which generated and later reinforced their sense of being peripheral and dependent. Chief among these circumstances were their position in regional trading networks and their experience of epidemic illnesses. In terms of trade, the area was dependent on others for its supply of stone axes, salt and shell valuables. Axes and cowrie shells came to the Duna adjacent to the Strickland river primarily from the direction of Oksapmin while salt packs came in from the east from the “Obena” people, that is, from Paiela and the Enga area. The Duna themselves thus had largely to rely on their pigs as a means of drawing in vital trade goods from elsewhere, yet these same pigs were affected, perhaps from as early as the 1940s, with new epidemics emanating from places exposed to outside contact further to the east (cf. Frankel 1986). In addition the human population was severely affected by epidemics of influenza and diarrhoea, which they attempted to combat by ritual means in a series of crisis cult performances. Their lack of success in dealing with these new perturbations probably shook their confidence in much the same way as is reported for the neighbouring Huli, and conduced both towards their acceptance of the obviously powerful whites who appeared shortly after these untoward events and at the same time to their contrapuntal belief that the arrival of the whites could presage the end of the world, an image which continues to haunt their thinking to this day.