

BIGMAN OR CHIEF?

KNOWLEDGE AND POLITICAL PROCESS ON TANNA

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They seem to have chiefs among them; at least some were pointed out to us by that title; but, as I before observed, they appeared to have very little authority over the rest of the people. Old Geogy was the only one the people were even seen to take the least notice of; but whether this was owing to high rank or old age I cannot say.

James Cook (1842:519--diary entry,
 August 1774)

Chieftainship may be said to exist only in name. In a village of eight or nine men, six will claim to be chiefs.

Agnes Watt (1896:110)

On the whole, there seems ground for believing that there was a suzerain chief over every group of villages in the old days in all parts of the island, and that the lack of this group head on the east coast is due to some outside influence, which weakened the local council. This accounts for the fact that the people of the west coast near Lenakel regard Iavis (now a ruling elder of the Presbyterian mission in that part) as one who was formerly a suzerain chief, worthy to wear the high head-dress of his office. But Koukarei (an elder in good standing on the east coast) is thought by his people never to have been a chief of higher standing than the others in his part of the island. It is significant that Koukarei is regarded by Iavis's people as one who was a suzerain chief in the old days, though his own people know nothing about any such office.

Charles Humphreys (1926:37)

In his heathen days he (Koukarei) was a great warrior, and was one of the two war-chiefs whose influence extended to the whole of this side of Tanna. Such was his position and authority that even though the natives all knew that he had become a Christian, the heathen, as well as the Christians, still regarded his word as supreme for war or peace. . .

Thomson Macmillan (1935:14)

Sahlins' (1963) famous typological distinction, Melanesian bigmen versus Polynesian chief, has come under recent scrutiny. A careful reading of the historical and ethnographic literature proves that these types are too broad and clumsy. Leadership was sometimes achieved in Polynesia while it was often inherited in Melanesia. Douglas notes:

Throughout the South Pacific there was a much greater interplay and overlap between ascription and achievement than has commonly been allowed. Within Melanesia heredity was often a factor of some importance in succession to leadership. Geneological and biological seniority were frequently stressed, and more rigid social stratification may sometimes have existed traditionally. Within the more stratified societies ability and success were generally essential components of secular and/or political authority, and in some cases force had supplemented or even superseded rank as a dominant basis of hierarchy (1979:26).

Although the contrast of bigman versus chiefly systems is a blunt instrument with which to dissect the intricacies of Pacific leadership structures, I will use these two concepts in this paper--but as endpoints of a continuum rather than categories of a typology. Various attributes associated with each sort of political system are listed in Figure 1 as follows:

Figure 1

<u>Bigman</u>	<u>Chief</u>
achieved status	ascribed status
personal ability	rank
polities defined by residence (and kinship) principles	polities defined by kin- ship (and residence) principles
polities small (under 1000 members)	polities large

polities temporary	polities permanent
weak central authority	strong central authority
consensus	force

Judged in terms of each such pair of attributes, most Pacific political systems would fall somewhere between the poles, although any one system would cumulatively be either more chiefly or more bigmanish.

Discovering hidden bigmen in Polynesia and unsuspected chiefs in Melanesia is a rewarding enterprise. I discuss, though, a different problem in this paper: a single society encompassing the possibility of both chiefs and bigmen. These two alternating leadership patterns best appear if one assumes a diachronic rather than synchronic perspective.

The political landscape of Tanna, an island in the southern New Hebrides, is for the most part populated by bigmen (nokur asori). Status achievement depends on skill and personal ability although bigmen are also defined by age and by kinship and residential structures in place. Each village (or kava-drinking male group) recognizes one or two men whom are deferred to and respected. Co-residents (usually kinsmen to some degree) are almost always co-supporters of the same local bigman. These groups are small (about 50 people in Southeast Tanna). Local bigmen govern by influence and advice; social decisions are reached by consensus.

Over time, however, a few village-based bigmen manage to so increase personal status that they transcend the usual residential and kin boundaries of political influence. Their names become known throughout the island. They attract numerous followers (including ordinary bigmen and their own followers). They create area-wide political organizations which may include upwards of several thousand people. Within these organizations, social consensus partially gives way to force in decision making. Central authority is buttressed by the establishment of police forces and guards with specific duties. Ascription of leadership roles (which is the ideal also among ordinary bigmen) becomes increasingly important: sons of extraordinary bigmen tend to inherit their fathers' status. Thus every so often on Tanna, an extraordinary bigman manages to transform himself into something of the order of a Polynesian chief. He creates a political organization which, in terms of the attributes listed in Figure 1, is more Polynesian and less Melanesian in character. He creates a central authority, uses force, raises the membership of his political organization from 50 to a thousand or so people, and passes or attempts to pass his status on to a son or ward.

It may be objected that, in a sense, this is what all Melanesian bigmen do. As Sahlins notes:

The big-man's personal career has a general political significance. The big-man and his consuming ambition are means whereby a segmentary society, "acephalous" and fragmented into small autonomous communities overcomes these cleavages, at least provisionally, to fashion larger fields of relation and higher levels of cooperation (1972:137).

This, indeed, is what happens on Tanna. A significant difference, however, concerns the provisionality of these "higher levels of cooperation." As opposed to most of the rest of Melanesia, bigman organizations on Tanna do not necessarily collapse at the death of the founding bigman but may last several generations before they eventually disintegrate, and component units (small political groups centered on the ordinary, garden-variety bigman) go their own ways. The system revolves through a cycle of two political moments: the one a situation of small, competing, residentially-based bigmen; the other a situation where these atomic units have been linked into a large, area-wide organization ruled by a chief (or, at least, a very bigman).¹ An anthropological metaphor might be Leach's (1964) description of the alternation between gumlao and gumsa in the highland societies of Burma.

This century has seen two predominant chiefly organizations: the Presbyterian Tanna Law and what I will call, for the sake of symmetry, the John Frum America Law.²

Tanna Law consisted of several political organizations led by converted Christian bigmen. Three centers of power corresponded to the three mission stations in 1900: Lomai and later Iavis ruled at Lenakel, Praun at Port Resolution and Koukare at Waisisi-White Sands. The Christian breakthrough occurred in the initial decade of this century. Growth in church membership during these years is shown in Figure 2 (data taken from the Annual Report of the New Hebrides Mission, 1895-1901; New Hebrides Magazine, 1903-1912).

Figure 2

	Port Resolution Kwamera	White Sands Weasisi	Lenakel
1895	6		
1898			11
1899		25	61
1903	33		
1904			220
1907	43		
1908	104		

1909	147	192	375
1910	207		500
1912			400

Joining the church was not only a religious act but also a political one. Becoming a church member implied becoming a member of one of the political organizations established by the early Christian chiefs. This dual set of allegiances was often residentially demonstrated. New converts left traditional lands to join the large villages created near the missions. In Tannese culture, physical presence (whether it be at a decision-making meeting or a residential presence within a village) means agreement with and support of local bigmen.

The new Christian chiefs formed police forces charged with enforcing ideological policy. Organization law forbade all work on Sunday, drinking and transporting kava along the roads, the traditional hair style, wearing of ninhum (penis wrappers), dancing, adultery, swearing, recruitment to the New Caledonian plantations, etc. Praun, at Port, appointed his policemen for terms of a year (Guiart 1956:136). Law-breakers were tied up and sometimes whipped by the police (with bull's penises according to informants). They were then brought to new courts established by the Christian chiefs. These were a version of the traditional dispute settlement meeting tinged with the European notion of tribunal. Guiart states that these courts were established in 1906 upon the suggestion of officers of the English Men-of-War Cambrian and Prometheus with the "conseil" of the missionaries (particularly Macmillan). Watt, however, argued:

It is said that some of the missionaries set up native courts. In one sense that it true; in another it is not. From time immemorial the natives had courts, i.e., they met to discuss whether certain individuals were guilty of crimes laid to their charge; to find out who were the offenders; and to determine the punishments to be inflicted. What the missionaries did was to use their influence to improve the constitution of these assemblies, and to eliminate from their decisions the partiality, vindictiveness and barbarity which so often characterized them (1908:21).

The judges of the courts [Koukare, Praun, Iavis, Tavi, Lomai (Guiart 1956:139)] were the leaders of the Christian political organizations. Punishment consisted, at first, of cash fines. These, to the chagrin of those outside the organization, went to the church. Guiart quotes a 1908 letter from Macmillan to the

British Resident Commissioner at Vila:

I may say that when these things, these courts began, I advised the men to be careful not to let fines be inflicted for personal ends, and sometimes the money went for kerosene for school (church) lamps, in one case for the purchase of a school lamp, and latterly since the natives began collecting money for a new church, it was voted to that fund (1956:135).

On January 2, 1909, the courts were made official by the joint British-French Condominium government and punishment restricted to forced labor on new roads that were being constructed. Law-breakers were exiled from their own villages for the term of their sentences, and placed under guard of bigmen in a different area of the island. The Condominium assumed complete jurisdiction over the courts on December 20, 1912 and appointed Tanna's first district agent, M. Wilkes, to oversee them. The same joint resolution forbade any arrest on the island without the consent of the district agent. (Today, this law, if in fact still in force, is frequently ignored).

Wilkes' replacement, J. Nichol, was more favorably inclined to the Presbyterian mission than was his predecessor. The joint regulation of 1912 ordered the appointment (after local elections) of four assessors to assist island government and advise in court cases. This assessor system was enlarged during Nichol's reign. The chiefs of the Christian political organizations retained judicial authority as they assumed the new assessor role, although they lost the power to constitute courts themselves. Guiart sums up Tanna law thusly:

Sous l'autorité des missionnaires, principalement de MacMillan, Koukare de White Sands et Brown de Port Resolution, s'arrogèrent le pouvoir civil, envoyant les "police" arrêter les païens s'ils violaient la discipline d'une église dont ils ne faisaient pas partie (1956: 173).

Praun (Brown) died on February 4, 1934 and Koukare also in 1934 but the political organizations they created endured for some years more. Leadership status was inherited by each one's son: Meiaki Pilot at Port and Caleb Koukare at White Sands. The entire Port Resolution organization abandoned the Christian ideology in 1941 and turned John Frum cultist. Although battered by John Frum defections, the core of the White Sands organization

survived and has since rebuilt itself.

America Law. Rumors of John Frum first came to the attention of Nichol in 1941. Guiart (1956) recounts the history of rumor and cult action. Activity was centered in several villages, over the years, including Ipikil on Sulphur Bay. Ipikil bigmen, beginning in 1942, suffered a long series of arrests and deportations, ending in 1956. During this period, and perhaps because of the attention directed to them, these men (Nampas, Poita, Nakomaha, Mweles, Nikiau, Ietika) were acknowledged cult leaders. Government repression, however, frightened away potential supporters of cult activities. It was not until the Condominium authorities decided to treat the cult as a religious movement rather than subversive force that an area-wide political organization could develop.

Nampas returned home from exile in 1956 and created a John Frum based political organization centered in Sulphur Bay. Villages in the hills south of Port Resolution had, during the first cult excitements of the early 1940s, descended to the Port to dance for John Frum. Villages here had been in the old Port Resolution Presbyterian organization under Praun so these continued links are not surprising. By the late 1950s, however, all these villages had come under the control of Sulphur Bay.

Upon returning, Nampas raised a red flag (on Friday, February 15, 1957). Whatever the historical truth, people today explain that this flag raising corresponded to Nampas' assumption of leadership of the cult in East Tanna.³ Rumor circulated claiming that the flag had come from John Frum, via the American armed forces stationed on Santo from 1942 to 1947.⁴ By raising it, Nampas demonstrated his personal power and knowledge; a power partially based on the assumption that the Condominium was afraid of the flying red flag. Outside powers (the United States in particular) would protect all people gathered under the flag from further persecution by the Condominium. The causal reasoning here may have been flawed but the belief proved true, corresponding as it did, to the new governmental policy of tolerance. About this time, Nambas instituted Friday⁵ as the cult's day of worship. He demanded that all organization members meet weekly at Sulphur Bay to dance until Saturday dawn. Nampas took the beliefs, rumors and symbols of John Frum and created a John Frum church. This church was made in the image of the earlier Christian political organizations of Tanna Law.

As the political cycle revolves on the island history correspondingly repeats itself. Over the past 39 years there have been several versions of John Frum armies, police and guards. The most recent version of these armed (with clubs) forces was created early in 1979. This is the gats (guards) based at

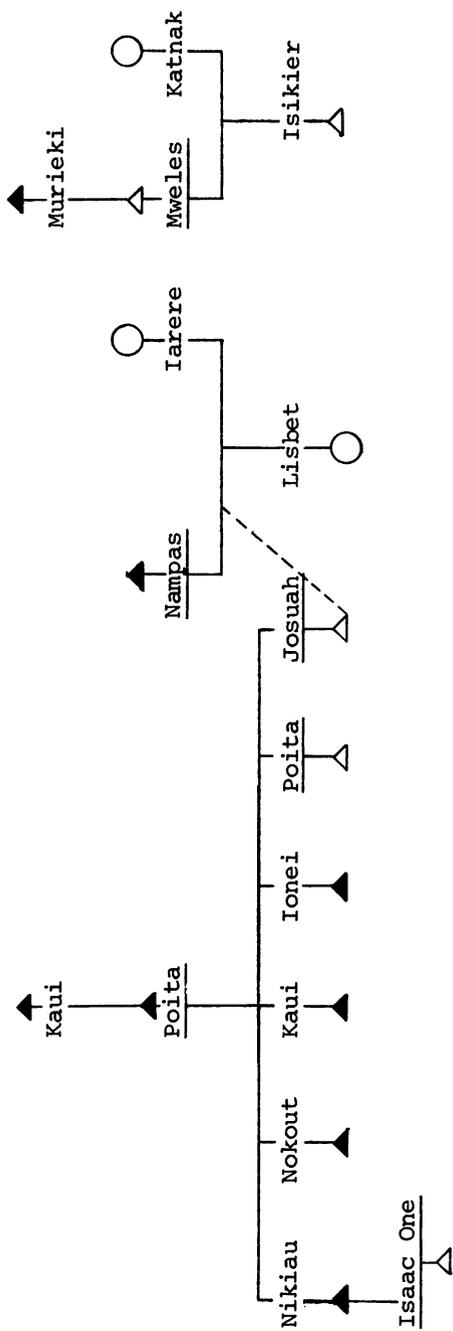
Sulphur Bay. One or two men from each supporting village (such as Iati from Iapiro) spend one week a month guarding the United States flags now flown daily at Ipikil. Police forces have also appeared in two other villages. These are connected with a recent spate of flag-raising on the island (either the US flag, or a one-star design used by the Four-corners organization⁶). I know of three forces (at Ipikil, Imanaka and Imwafen) now active, guarding the flags of various political organizations. These groups are more or less allied and, to an extent, admit a pre-eminent place to the Ipikil bigmen. The Ipikil organization is referred to as the rinhi (mother of) the others. I have recently learned of an exchange policy between the different forces. Ipikil guards went to Imanaka for a week; they explained that the new guards knew nothing of the proper way to raise a flag and they graciously offered to teach them.

As did their Christian predecessors, cult police, on orders of the Ipikil chiefs, tie up and kidnap (actions Guiart (1956:131) described as "garrochage des prisonniers" in reference to the Tanna Law police) those men and women who break organizational law or otherwise come to the attention of the Ipikil leaders: Keiuaiu (non-cultist) who killed Kamti's (cultist) pig; Paupauk who tried to club her husband Naius. As in Tanna law, much concern is directed towards sexual crimes. Tafra who became adulterously pregnant and Kamaiu who eloped for a day, were both tied up and carted off to Ipikil.

Offenders, once at Sulphur Bay (where they may be required to stay upwards of several months) are forced to take part in a dispute-settlement meeting during which the collected bigmen and chiefs discuss the crime and set the punishment. Punishment consists mostly of fines of pigs and kava, rather than the forced labor favored by the earlier Christian courts, although a few men, accused of sorcery, have been permanently exiled from their own villages.

The Ipikil organization claims 26 teams of supporting, ordinary bigmen. Assuming 50 members in each constituent group would indicate an organizational membership of 1,300 people (it is probably a big higher), this represents a huge increase over the numbers possible in an ordinary bigman's following. Nampas died in 1967.⁷ His death did not lead to the collapse of the Sulphur Bay political organization; leadership passed to Mweles and Poita. Second generation cult leaders are now emerging--most of them patrilineally related to Nampas (notably Josuah and Isaac One). The genealogy of the John Frum chiefs is shown in Figure 3. Past and present cult leaders are shown underlined.

Figure 3



-----adoptive link
Nambas adopted Josuah as his heir.

In summary, chiefly political structures on Tanna:

- subsume smaller, residentially based bigmen and followers into a much larger political organization with a central authority;
- are characterized by the use of force rather than consensus to settle disputes and to enforce organization law and the decisions of the chiefs;
- take control of dispute-settlement activity--chiefs take it upon themselves to judge and punish;
- tend towards ascriptive rather than achievement based leadership recruitment principles as original leaders die off;
- are marked and regulated by various ritual and boundary markers which both identify people as organization members and differentiate them from other Tannese.

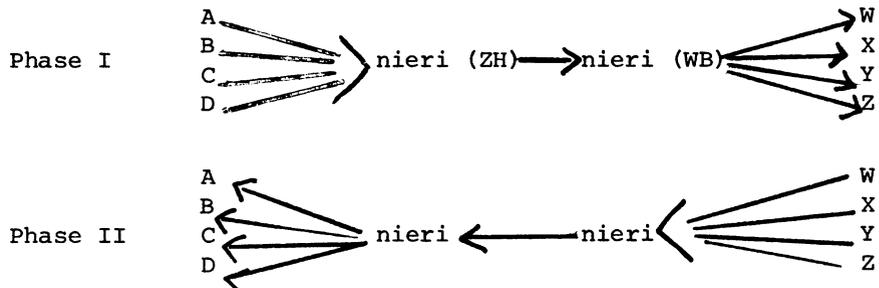
What drives this system? How do particular bigmen transform themselves into chiefs? How are the political organizations that they create maintained and how do these survive the death of founding bigmen? What brings about an organization's collapse and breakdown into its atomic units? Before addressing the problem of the constitution of political status, I will explain first what it is not.

Status on Tanna, unlike much of Melanesia, depends little on economic activity--whether production, distribution or consumption. Most Melanesian bigmen achieve status by various economic maneuverings: organizing feasts, providing pigs, shell and other wealth for bride prices, participating in large, formalized exchange systems (toka, moka, te, etc.). Different economic strategies of status achievement, either productive or distributive, have been noted (see Strathern 1969). On Tanna there is very little of this. All men have essentially the same access to the means of production and to the means of distribution. Although a man may make a name for himself through abnormal economic activity (especially within the monetary economy) this is not a necessary requirement for political status nor (in Southeast Tanna) even very common. The inherent economic equality of men is apparent in a series of Tannese economic institutions (or the lack thereof).

There is no formal exchange network of valuable objects. There is no bride price. Wives are obtained by the exchange of a sister and most men have inherited rights to some variety of

sister. Feasts occur at important events in the life cycle--naming, hair-cutting, circumcision, the onset of menstruation, marriage and death--but the individual most concerned with the life in question is responsible for organizing his own feast. He collects goods to give to his wife's or mother's people. These goods (calico, tubers, kava, pigs, baskets, mats, bark skirts, blankets) are lent to the feast giver by a wide range of kin and friends. They do not come from one or two bigman sources. Any good given must eventually be reciprocated, ideally with an exact replacement. If a man gives his brother a pig to use in a circumcision feast he expects, eventually, a pig in return. Return payment, however, may stretch out over the years. Time payment allows a man to meet his obligations whenever he is best able. Men are rarely pressed to find quickly large amounts of goods. There is little need to turn to wealthy bigmen to finance a feast, or to repay a feast. Most goods will be reciprocated at the time when the receiver of a feast (say for the circumcision of his sister's son) makes a return feast (for the circumcision of one of his own sons) and sends goods in the opposite direction. Feast receivers must become feast givers to the tune of the exact amount of goods received. The quantities of pigs, kava, calico and so on are all carefully counted and remembered. Any man receiving a heap of goods farms them out to friends and kin. These people become his bank. When he organizes his return feast, he calls upon them to refund an example of what he gave them. No interest is expected. This exchange structure is shown in Figure 4 as follows:

Figure 4



The practice of absolute equality in economic exchange makes it difficult for a man to amass a spectacular amount of capital goods to use in status competition. If he works very hard to give a large amount of goods at a feast, the receivers are morally bound to equal his efforts (and status) by repaying him. There are inequalities in exchange but these are more a source of griping and backbiting gossip than a mark of status differential.

Two feasts are not tied to the life cycle. The nieri is an exchange of yams, taro and pigs between bush and sea villages. This feast has not been held in SE Tanna for about 50 years. The nokwiari is a pig-killing, dance event in which each dancer must provide a pig to exchange. The general exchange structure is the same as in the above figure. Men of one side (nao dancers) present pigs to those of the other (toka dancers). The toka reciprocates a few weeks later and pigs flow in the opposite direction. The two nokwiari dances on Tanna in 1978 led to the 190 and 212 pigs respectively. The nao dancers lay out their dead pigs in an impressive line a hundred or so yards long. This is a situation which cries out for some bigman to intervene and organize the pig distribution among the toka dancers but none appears. Instead, each pig giver ties a personal marker to the tail of his pig (such as different species of leaves, cigarette wrapping, pieces of tinsel). The toka dancers line up and walk down the row of pigs. As soon as a man sees a pig similar in size to the one he plans to eventually present in return, he claims it. The owner of the pig is probably unknown to him. This does not matter. He saves the marker to retie onto the tail of the pig he will present in return, when toka reciprocates nao. As Guiart notes:

on remarquera que cette coutume d'une marque distinctive obvie, au moins dans ce cas, à la nécessité d'avoir un dignitaire particulière pour se charger de la répartition; chacun sachant longtemps à l'avance quelle marque portera le cochon qu'il recevra (1956:34, note 1).

It is possible for two men to exchange pigs while remaining strangers throughout the entire process. This is very different from other Melanesian exchange systems wherein partners have known and swapped goods with each other for years.

Most Tannese bigmen, not specifically interested in distribution, are equally disinterested with production. They do not necessarily have larger gardens than ordinary men, husband more pigs or earn more money. Of the two bigmen on whom I have income data, one has an average yearly income which is comparable to that of other households in his village while the other makes considerably less.

This is not to say that Tannese are uninterested in their own material circumstances and the possible improvement of them. They are. Economic ability, however, is only a possible but not necessary qualification for political status. Those familiar with definitions of the Melanesian bigman which define the status as one fundamentally based on some sort of economic activity may wonder what, in fact, supports the Tannese bigman. Prowess in warfare may have been a traditional route to status. Macmillan claims for his principal elder, Koukare, the status of war chief--although, as Guiart notes (1956:131, note 2), this is not a traditional political

status. Paton also describes military skill as an attribute of the political status enjoyed by Miaki (Meiake):

so sad was the condition of Tanna that if a man were desperate enough in wickedness, if he killed a number of men and tyrannized over others he was dignified with the name and rank of chief (1889: 280).

The Tannese themselves speak of porisman. These were men upon whom, by the accuracy of their shooting, devolved the duty of protecting village mates from ambush and sneak attack (especially while drunk on kava). I suspect this to be a role which emerged after the introduction of firearms (mostly post 1860s). As Tannese saw few police until Nichol arrived in 1916, the role label must also be of recent date. Policemen, however, are considered to have had only second rank status. They were under orders from local bigmen (as they are today).

There are also two inherited chiefly statuses in traditional society: the Ierumanu ("ruler") and the Ienientete ("spokesman of the canoe"). These are the Tannese versions of the Polynesian sacred and talking chiefs. The ideal roles of each chiefly status also admit a Polynesian character. The Ierumanu does not involve himself in daily political maneuvering he rarely speaks at meetings; he does not fight in wars. This is all left to the Ienientete who, nevertheless, has a lower status than the Ierumanu (but cf. Guiart 1956:88 who says the opposite). These statuses conceivably diffused into Tanna with Polynesian colonization of the nearby islands Aniwa and Futuna.

The Ierumanu and Ienientete statuses do not of themselves guarantee political authority. Only in the situation where such a status holder is also a bigman do they mean much politically (outside of a few ceremonial occasions, such as the nokwiari). These two statuses are, in fact, pawns in bigman games. Most bigmen attempt to appropriate one or the other of them. If a man is not lucky enough to inherit clear rights to a chiefly title he can manipulate geneology or share the status with several other claimants. The fact that, in many cases, rights to a chiefly title are disputed, the high frequency of male adoption, the classificatory kinship system all serve to loosen the situation and allow the game to proceed. There is also disagreement on whether the lineal blood (neta) descendent of a Ierumanu or his namesake (if these are not the same person) inherits the status.

Many bigmen become Ierumanu or Ienientete after they are first bigmen. A case in point is Mweles of Ipikil. Although he is of a refugee line, he is a powerful John Frum leader at Sulphur Bay and has appropriated the title of Ierumanu (and is so listed by Guiart

1956:385). No one will deny this status to his face although many do so behind his back. The chiefly status system has come to resemble the bigman system--in regard to the number of such men on the ground. An informant could cite five men with rights to each status at Yankwaneme inwarum⁸ (which, counting all associated hamlets and villages, has a population of about 100). The dissonance between these titles and actual political power is also shown in figure 5. Of the three bigmen who live in the area, one claims status of Ierumanu in tandem with another man (his father's father's adopted son's son)--a claim, by the way, not universally recognized--and two have no chiefly title at all.

Figure 5

<u>Ierumanu</u> with associated....	<u>Ienientete</u>
1. Turiak (lives outside the area) and Rapi (residential bigman)	1. Neai (dead, no replacement yet named)
2. Napau (ordinary man)	2. Neai (dead, no replacement)
3. Kiri (lives outside the area)	3. Kouata (dead, no replacement)
4. Iati (ordinary man)	4. Nehaki (reasonable status)
5. Kouahak (dead, no namesake replacement) and Napau Rosicko (dead)	5. Kwatar

Another informant would have given a different list. Most men claim partial or total ignorance of the local Ierumanu and Ienientete; others may make a private but not public claim to these titles for fear of precipitating dispute with rival claimants.

Inherited titles may have been of greater political import in traditional society. The importance of inherited status in a context of endemic warfare is unclear. Watt's observation which heads this paper (she settled on Tanna in 1869) provides some evidence against the presence of powerful chiefs with inherited positions. The contemporary ideal of status ascription and the presence in the culture of chiefly titles are in contradiction with two of the three other defining features of status. These are relative age (mature)⁹, sex (male) and a sort of power which is best described as personal knowledge.

Both ordinary and extraordinary bigmen (or chiefs) have political status because of what they know. The ordinary bigman, based within a village (who usually drinks kava first, chews his own kava less often, speaks more at decision-making meetings, organizes group activity) is most often the oldest capable man within his residence group. The importance of age runs hand and hand with that of knowledge. Older men (with the exception of certain schooled knowledges) are assumed to know more. Ordinary bigmen need knowledge of geneal-

ogy, group history (nafkuien), traditional song and story (kwanage), land boundaries, land plot names, past disputes and settlements and all that which now falls under the rubric "custom."

All these sorts of custom knowledge, however, only get a man so far politically. Custom knowledge may be enough to sustain a man's status, along with age, within his own residence group. It is not usually enough to generate status outside this group. All men claim to know custom; for knowledge to be politically powerful it must be, at least partially, secret.¹⁰ The chiefs of Tanna, bigmen who escape the bounds of local residence and kinship to create political organizations of higher order, are those men who have control over different sorts of knowledge. Such bodies of knowledge, historically, have included the religious (Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, Bahai, John Frum) and the political¹¹ (Sipi/Manauaua [see page 21] the Condominium power structures, the new political parties).

Knowledge as a Value. Among the Tannese, there are those who know (urukuren nari) and those who do not--the latter being described by various metaphors: Man Bus, iema ramara ia nepituvien (a man living in darkness), in rata uau (he misses what he sees). For men attempting to raise their prestige, any body of knowledge is a possible vehicle which might carry them onwards. This potential value implies that an incoming body of knowledge, such as a religion, always has initial if limited success as men attach themselves to it, hoping to raise their status. Such men are usually the ambitious young who have yet to establish a reputation. Turner and Nisbet had their Viavia and Kwanaun, Paton initially, his Nowar and Nouka, Durand his Topu and the Watts their Kaipapa--of which Watt wrote:

he has brought us several present which I always took care to pay for, as I do not wish to be in debt to anyone. He is not much of a chief but is a clever, officious fellow (1896:88).

Other incoming religious missions have also attracted followers from the ranks of the young and from disaffected older men.

Over the past 200 years, only a few knowledges have enjoyed general success: Presbyterianism, John Frum cultism, and recently (and connected with these two) national political parties. Other knowledge has also been accepted on Tanna including off-island labor migration, and coconut culture. These economic knowledges, however, evade the control of bigmen and have not served as the basis of political organizations. Access to knowledge must at some level be restricted to certain bigmen such as cult prophets, or church pastors and elders. People must learn enough about a body of knowledge to value it but not enough so that they can dispense with the

brokers of knowledge.

Presbyterian missionaries worked long and hard from 1858 onwards. Watt first baptized a few men in 1881 but real success, as noted above, did not occur until the 20th century. This success was perhaps connected with the end of the labor trade with Australia in 1906 (which had up to then been an option open to Tannese men) and probably correlated with the increasing importance of the monetary economy, the establishment of the Condominium and the perception of Europeans as people to be envied instead of merely endured. The bigmen of 1900 (of about 40 or 50 years old) would have been children or small men at the re-establishment of the mission on Tanna in 1869. The success of Christianity at the time may have corresponded to the demise of an old order of bigmen and the rise of a new one which had never experienced a Tanna without missionaries.

Once Western culture and its works became valued, the church, which specifically conceived of its mission as partially a civilizing one, became a natural place to which to turn. If missionaries did not, at first, provide knowledge of English, they did teach literacy, write books in the local languages, provide some access to European goods (via lay-traders and mission boxes), encourage cash cropping, enjoy connections to the outside world and teach Biblical knowledge and the way of life thought to be a necessary step on a ladder to civilization (cleanliness, clothing, houses with walls and beds, use of money, literacy, destruction of old culture, banishment of superstition, etc.).

The next successful body of knowledge was the John Frum cult. Guiart notes a falling away from the church in the 1930s (either a recidivism back to custom or a second conversion to the new Roman Catholic or Seventh Day Adventist missions) but the churches did not empty until May 11, 1941, when they did so with a spectacular suddenness. Guiart attributes the success of John Frum to a disillusionment with Christian teachings. The Christian bigman political organizations had also been passed onto second generation leaders and these men may have been less successful than their fathers in holding their organizations together. The Presbyterians refused to teach in English and the curriculum of the many scattered schools tended to be mostly Biblical. Having passed Christianity, Tannese were ready to attempt English and arithmetic--subjects perceived as also necessary for a successful acquisition of European power (and immediately useful in business management). E. Macmillan noted in 1924:

I am afraid the principal reason for this advanced knowledge is the desire to make money, for they think that if they can speak English and know enough arithmetic to be able to weigh copra and work out the price correctly, they will have a better chance

of getting work from a trader, being well paid for it (1924:22).

After a promising beginning, Christianity failed to meet the desires and felt needs of the Tannese. The John Frum movement, in its original unorganized form, encompassed practically the entire population of the island. It has since seen its membership drop to about half. Individuals or entire villages periodically fall away claiming that it is an empty knowledge; like the wind (rosi nemitagi) there is nothing in it. Whether or not the John Frum organizations will face their own 11th of May, however, remains to be seen.

If a knowledge is discredited, this does not imply its total disappearance. A coterie of men have their status wrapped in it and may furthermore, be seriously and genuinely convinced of its truth. The Presbyterian church, in fact, has made a comeback and during the 1967 census, 1,609 adults and children claimed to be Presbyterian.

Tannese culture is not a closed, static entity. People are open to change and search actively for "roads" by which they might achieve their desires. A body of knowledge is successful if it addresses these felt needs. Some knowledges, such as the John Frum when it was in its cargo cultist stage, are specifically concerned with the acquisition of material goods. Bodies of knowledge, however, are judged valuable both in terms of intrinsic content (basic goals, notions of truth) and extrinsic aspects. Although the former may be of ultimate significance, the latter is of immediate consequence. Political organizations founded on a knowledge keep going after numerous failures to achieve ultimate goals as long as they are successful in the local political arena. The John Frum organization has been extremely able at this. Even with no Americans (save tourists) in sight, John Frum chiefs and their followers more than hold their own against local rivals. They are also feted by European television teams and movie makers; the French Resident Commissioner endures at least one annual pilgrimage to Sulphur Bay.

Sources of Knowledge. Knowledge comes from both internal and external sources. Outside knowledges were imported by missionaries, traders, and at present by national political parties. Tannese desire to learn was matched by an equal desire of these newcomers to teach (although the teachers and learners may have had different expectations of the specific information content of the education process). New sources of knowledge periodically diffuse into the island depending upon the dynamics of the larger Pacific context.

Other bodies of knowledge are home-grown, or better, home-dreamed. Knowledge is attributed to supernatural invention rather than to individual genius. New songs, new herbal medicines and cures, predictions, instructions for future behavior, explanations for misfortune are all sought from one's ancestors who communicate

in dreams. A specific ritual offering of a white male fowl and white kava may be made to instigate an ancestral communicate, but much knowledge comes unsought as people sleep, pass over to the "side away" (ienkaren pen), and enter into communication with the dead. Certain men and women, urumun (kleva in Bislama) act as mediums with a greater ability to communicate with the supernatural. Kleva may have specific spiritual contacts with whom they sometimes communicate while awake and in broad daylight. These spiritual exchange partners, although invisible to the rest of us, appear to teach the medium the requested cure for illness, proper action, location of a lost object, etc. They may be specific ancestors or other spiritual beings. Lisbet at Ipikil has contact with One, Isaac, and Mister World (see Guiart 1956:211, 221 note 2).

Guiart points out that John Frum is of the same type as these ancestral teachers. His early orders to uphold custom are similar to other messages people receive in dreams or via the mediumship of kleva. Guiart cites one informant's description of spiritual messages:

la loi (law) les condamnait a des peines de prison pour ce genre de visions mais comment pouvaient-ils, eux, empêcher les morts de parler? Ce n'est pas la chose nouvelle et il en sera toujours ainsi, malgré la loi (1956:243).

Tannese history is a hodge-podge of attempts to broker knowledge from internal or external sources. Recent bits of knowledge include the Four-corners movement and the notion that Prince Philip is the son of Karapanumun (a spirit living on Mt. Meren in Southeast Tanna). Rumors and shreds of information sweep the island periodically with varying rates of success. A particular knowledge only becomes politically significant if bigmen are able to use it to create a chiefly political organization. It is thereby transformed into ideology.

The ideological success of a knowledge depends on its perceived value but also upon the contemporary political scene, the failures of other ideologies and bigmen, new hopes and expectations, the persistence of missionaries and other knowledge brokers and the relative status of the men involved.

Once knowledge enters the system from any source, it is partially transmitted by inheritance. A son inherits secret knowledge (of medicines, magic stones) from his father and is also taught other sorts of knowledge such as land boundaries, geneology, group history. The notion that secret knowledge is inherited may improve the chances of sons to inherit from fathers in knowledge-based political organizations.

To answer in summary the questions posed above: Men make a name for themselves by convincing others of the value of what they know. In the process of teaching this knowledge to others (or at least intimating what they know) extraordinary bigmen create political organizations, constructed out of ordinary bigmen plus village atomic social units. People join such organizations for the intrinsic and extrinsic value of their constitutive knowledge. Included here is the situation where one village joins organization X because its traditional rivals on the next ridge belong to organization Y.

The bigmen in control of these knowledge-based organizations achieve a disproportionate amount of status. The usual political authority of the Tannese bigman changes to something approximating the political power of a Polynesian chief (complete with personal army). Political organizations survive as long as the embodied knowledge remains accepted. Ideological organizations do not totally depend upon the personal charisma of a bigman. Common adherence to the ideology is the glue that holds an organization together. At the death of a founding bigman, the organization has good chances of survival if the succeeding leaders can claim a special relationship to the knowledge. Since these men are often the sons of the previous chiefs, the cultural expectation of inherited secrets lends validity to their succession. At lower levels, ordinary bigmen usually maintain the ideological affiliation of their fathers as part of their own inherited knowledge.

Ideological organizations lose and gain members in internal and local disputes. Large scale ideological collapse, however, depends on the successful promulgation of a competing body of knowledge which better meets the eschatological and political desires of the people.

Are these larger, chiefly ideological structures an artifact of culture contact? It may be that the construction of large-scale political organizations was impossible in the old troubled days of war, raid and ambush. There were, however, traditional political relations between numbers of people. One of these relationships was a moiety system. Men were divided into two sides: Numrukwen and Koyometa. Members of the same moiety might fight but major wars were inter-moiety conflicts (Gray 1892). A moiety, though, did not have a chief or other centralized authority; moieties seem to have been important particularly in a context of conflict. The creation of an entirely new moiety system (Sipi/Manauaua) within historical times--reputedly under the guidance of four men from Ianamakal village--is something closer, perhaps, to the concept of political organization discussed here.

The diffusion into Tanna of new knowledge from Polynesian settlers may also have had political impact. One can speculate that this new

knowledge (the notion of talking and sacred chiefs: Polynesian spiritual figures such as Matiktiki and Tagarua) was used as is knowledge today--the men closest to the source become brokers and teachers and thus increase their political status.¹²

One can only wonder if knowledge was important in traditional status acquisition and if area-wide political organizations were viable in traditional society. Paton did speak of an allegiance of bigmen opposing his mission. He described one such group led by his enemy, the "war-leader" Miaki who, according to Paton, gathered together "refugees and outcasts from Tanna and from other islands" (1889:280).¹³ Nisbet also wrote of an anti-mission party but it is impossible to know whether these larger groupings were long-lived organizations with certain bigmen acting as central authorities or whether they were particular and temporary allegiances to drive out the Europeans and chastise their supporters at Port Resolution.

Was it the missionaries who created chiefs on Tanna? It is true that Europeans from Cook onwards expected to discover chiefs on the island. This was particularly true of Nisbet and Turner passing as they did on their journeys through the crucible of Samoa (and surrounded on Tanna by Samoan servants who did the early interpretive work on Tannese language and culture for the London Missionary Society). They used the word "chief" liberally in their diaries; Cook had previously used the word ariki.¹⁴ Macmillan considered Koukare to be a war-chief and McLeod later described him as a paramount chief (personal communication). To assume, though, that the chiefly role was a European creation would be a mistake. If Europeans came to Tanna looking for chiefs, bigmen, working within the possibilities of traditional culture and with the new opportunities, were more than happy to provide what was wanted (and often more than what was wanted--see Watt's (1908) comments on native courts, for example).

To conclude, I want to note new pressures on the Tannese to discover, somewhere, somehow, chiefs amongst themselves. If, in the past, the missionary, the Man-of-War captain, the explorer, the government agent demanded chiefs, it is now the new national government that requires them. Chiefly status has been written into the new national constitution: chiefs are required to advise on any law affecting custom or land; a council of chiefs, of a sort, has been set up on Tanna; chiefs need to be found to be elected to the Mal-fatumauri (National Chief's Council); the new local council elected on November 14, 1979, on Tanna is constitutionally required to include five custom chiefs among its members.

Status depends upon a relative perspective on Tanna. There are men, leaders of ideological organizations (such as the various John Frum groups, the associated Custom people, the political parties, the

churches) who might be called chiefs--or at least very bigmen. But a man's chiefly status, legitimized as it is to my knowledge, is never indisputable nor undisputed. Those possessing different knowledges deny out of hand any exalted status to the bigmen of different ideological organizations. Even chiefs of allied organizations are challenged. A local chief, member of the Malfatumauri, is often more an object of scorn and derision than of respect.

Although principles of status ascription are the ideal, the son of a chief or bigman has no assurance of succeeding to his father's status. He may inherit a traditional chiefly title but this has little to do with political power. Since status is founded in knowledge, new knowledge, uncontrolled by sitting chiefs, is a threat to their position and to the stability of their ideological organizations. Bigmen of established organizations must either discredit or co-opt any new knowledge.¹⁵ Powerful, wild knowledge overturns the applecart (as happened to the Presbyterians in 1941). It remains to be seen what the Tannese will make out of this new expression of the old demand: Take me to your leader!

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NOTES

¹The system probably never completely dissolves into discrete atomic units. As one political organization loses members, a competing one gains them.

²I have actually heard the term "America Law" used in reference to the actions of the John Frum guards.

³There are other John Frum based organizations on Tanna--notably the John Frum-Custom group in the Southwest.

⁴Noncultists claim it was merely a red danger flag Nampas appropriated from some fuel dump.

⁵ Guiart (1956:155, note 3) says that John Frum himself declared Friday to be his Sabbath when he first appeared at Green Point and further states the day the Sulphur Bay men originally chose (in the 1942 outbreak) was Monday. I do not know if Nampas decided to raise his flag on Friday because of its established symbolic connection to John Frum or for other reasons.

⁶ The Four-corner movement is an ideological organization led by Sasin of Imwafen village in conjunction with a French colon, Antoine Fornelli, who once proclaimed himself king of Tanna. The movement was active in 1974 (see Guiart 1975) until Fornelli's deportment and subsequent banishment from the archipelago. He has surreptitiously returned to Tanna several times, the most recently on November 19, 1979. He has provided supporting bigmen with flags and necklaces (both carrying the device of a circled star) and official membership cards with his signature.

⁷ Nampas' death day, December 22, was made a cult holiday falling conveniently close to the Christian celebrations at Christmas.

⁸ A clearing, the social center of residential groups, used for kava drinking, decision-making meetings, exchange ceremony and traditional dance.

⁹ Bigmen hope to pass status on to sons or wards but the importance of age as an attribute of status makes this an unlikely immediate occurrence--although men may subsequently fill their fathers' shoes after most members of the preceding generation have died.

¹⁰ It is true that some custom knowledge is both inherited and secret. Each man knows various herbal cures. Once man knows the magic (and owns the proper magical stones) for taro growth, another for yams, another for rain, another to control the fall of volcanic ash, and so on. In this respect, Tannese culture is like a Chinese puzzle, or the combination of a bank safe: many men know part of the answer but no one knows the complete combination. This level of secret knowledge, if one wants to purport a social function to it, holds society together as each individual must exercise his own secret knowledge for the good of the community in general. But this is not the stuff out of which status is made.

¹¹ Although religious and political organizations are not neatly differentiated. Certain religions have become associated with certain political parties--although there are enough cases where, say a John Frum village is also Vanuaaku Party, to indicate that this is not a one to one relationship.

¹² Although knowledge is often considered to be personally owned, there is not a developed copyright system, as there is in the north of the Group. While in the North, men sell knowledge to others, Tannese bigmen give it out free in return for political support.

¹³ Macmillan (1935) reports that many of Paton's opposition came from White Sands and other distant areas. The Port Resolution people sent messages out for warriors to come assist them drive out Paton. The rationale was that if a Man-of-War showed up to punish them, they could claim ignorance and blame people from other, inland, areas of the island.

¹⁴ Cook wrote: "They all called them areekees (or Kings); but I doubt if any of them had the least pretensions to that title over the whole island. It had been remarked that one of these Kings had not authority enough to order one of the people up into a cocoa-nut tree to bring him down some nuts. Although he spoke to several, he was at last obliged to go himself (1842:514).

¹⁵ As the Sulphur Bay organization has co-opted the Four-corners movement. Mweles became one of Fornelli's original corners. When Sasin raised his first flag, Sulphur Bay went in force to see if his flag was the same as their own. I am told that the Sulphur Bay organization plans not to allow any flag to be raised on Tanna unless it has this similarity (to the Stars and Stripes). Luckily for Sasin, the chiefs decided that his one-star flag was close enough and they okayed his knowledge and his political organization. This co-opting (or "blessing") process implies the pre-eminent status of the co-opters (Ipikil) over the co-opted (Four-corners).

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