the structure of exchanges in Mendi curtails the scale of collective transactions and hence the “size” of big men. Modjeska returns to development questions, using the Duna to exemplify how the expansion of sweet potato or pig production enabled the (pre)historical displacement of ritual-mythical practices by gift-economic ones. Jorgensen correlates the distinction between big man and great man with differences in the evaluation of men’s and women’s (re)productive capacities—a consideration given less emphasis in the volume than one might expect.

Perhaps because of its unusual genesis, the volume is unusually coherent. Each paper separately enriches the newer literature inspired by the figure of the Melanesian big man (see for example the papers in volume 29 of the journal Ethnology), but together they render further discussion of big-man ship as a style of leadership, or even as a form of politics, unacceptably simple. This outcome is the positive legacy of Godelier’s effort at comparing “alternative logics of society.” The positive value of this volume for a non-Melanesianist audience likewise consists in its double demonstration of the familiar limitations and untried possibilities of comparative analysis.

ROBERT J. FOSTER
University of Rochester

* * *


Harrison’s much-anticipated monograph, Stealing People’s Names, is the finest anthropological picture of a Sepik society since the work of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. The book focuses on Avatip, the largest of three Manambu villages, located along the upper reaches of the middle Sepik River. Until now, there has been little anthropological information about this unique Sepik culture. Based on twenty-two months’ research from 1977 to 1979, Stealing People’s Names investigates the political order of the society as it inheres in the symbolic realm of culture.

Harrison arrived in Avatip prepared to investigate the male-dominated prestige exchanges of material wealth that constitute a dominant mode of political process in Melanesia. But he was soon presented with a problem, for Avatip lacks these exchanges. Moreover, the village seemed remarkably preoccupied with the ownership and disputation of totemic names. Indeed, political process in Avatip, culminating with dramatic oratorial debates, revolves around these names rather than such material wealth as shell valuables, pigs, and land. In other words, the political economy and history of Avatip were being played out in an arena of symbolism and cosmology rather than one of wealth objects. Harrison’s goals were to describe and explain these processes.

Manambu cosmology is a fixed system of timeless categories that organize the world and human society. This cosmology, enshrined in totemic names
and mystical spells that are patrilineally inherited within subclans, exists independently of human action. Posing an interesting contrast to Durkheim’s depiction of Australian totemism, Manambu groups fill cosmic categories rather than determine them. The totemic names are imported from neighboring, non-Manambu villages. Each subclan has trading rights with specific villages, whose mystical power is ranked. Names imported from neighboring Iatmul villages are the most powerful. Ritual hierarchy in Avatip arose from this differential access to non-Manambu mystical knowledge.

Totemic names encode secret prerogatives in the male initiation and cult, under the custodianship of senior men. Secular life in Avatip is egalitarian, but the ritual system is hierarchical, determined by the hereditary names that assign descent groups fixed positions in the graded cult. By debating the ownership of totemic names, men compete for ritual prestige and hierarchy. Avatip political power, Harrison contends in his first argument, is mystical rather than material.

Whereas cosmic categories are fixed, the social groups that fill them are constantly undergoing change as men compete for names and hereditary positions within the prestige system of the male cult. The history of Avatip is largely a continuous political process whereby the ownership of names, cosmic categories, and ritual positions “itinerate from one group to another as time goes by, but in themselves are relatively fixed and enduring” (190). This is Harrison’s second argument. By successfully challenging Levi-Strauss, Harrison demonstrates how history can exist within and through a static totemic cosmology. Related to this argument is a third, namely that the site of Avatip history is the intersection between ascribed ritual status (corresponding to the fixed cosmology), and secular or egalitarian competition (by groups for names and their associated ritual grades).

However, ritual power and hierarchy fail to translate directly into secular life, and the political strength of patrilineal descent groups depends ultimately on marriage. Subclans rely on affines for alliances and shared totemic knowledge, the latter often leading to the usurpation of names. Over and above the system of hereditary names, therefore, political authority arises from marriage. In this respect, a third dynamic enters Harrison’s account in addition to that between historical change and static cosmology, and the secular and ritual domains, namely, that between reproduction or demography and cultural production. Since, in Harrison’s argument, marriage underpins the transmission of names, Avatip totemism is a male displacement of female or maternal reproductive powers onto the plane of cosmology. This is a fourth argument.

Anthropologists have long maintained that Melanesian societies cohere through gift exchanges between persons and groups, such as the pig exchanges common in Highland New Guinea. Often these material or big-man polities are said to differ qualitatively from societies where political prestige arises from mystical power, such as in the Sepik. In Harrison’s view this is a false dichotomy, one that
incorrectly opposes the material and the ideal, the symbolic and the economic. Instead, Harrison argues for a continuum, claiming that Avatip conforms to a big-man system in structure, differing only insofar as names rather than pigs and material objects are transacted. This, Harrison’s fifth argument, successfully contests materialist visions of history and society, although he still anchors political process ultimately in marriage.

Each chapter is finely crafted as the book progresses through Harrison’s multitextured argument and the Avatip ethnography. Topics include a fascinating section (32–40) on how an Avatip subclan is figured as a nexus between principles of patriline and uterine affinity; the morphology of totemism and names; how totemism influences personal identity; the ritual hierarchies; and male initiation. A chapter on totemic debates clarifies that the hierarchical ritual system fails to become permanent in secular political life because the debating system undermines any permanent alignment of subclans and ritual offices. The final chapter, “Symbolic Economies in Melanesia,” questions the supposed dichotomy between wealth-based and knowledge-based Melanesian polities, striving instead for synthesis based on “value” rather than the type of goods exchanged.

Harrison punctuates his text with case studies that illuminate his wider arguments concerning Manambu political processes, including a feud between two subclans over who shares totemic origins with Europeans. We read about the political decline of a prestigious subclan through its loss of totemic knowledge across necessary but in this case, ultimately dangerous, affinal alliances, and how another subclan is using its increasing population and expanding affinal alliances as political power to elevate its previously low status in the male cult. This makes especially evident the interplay of marriage, secular action, totemism, and ritual hierarchy.

Harrison’s study is reminiscent of Geertz’s account of the nineteenth-century Balinese city-state. By focusing on the “symbolics” of political power, Harrison challenges both Levi-Strauss and materialism, convincingly demonstrating that a fixed cosmology can generate history and, moreover, that Avatip is a society driven by cultural values that are not, in the final instance, the result of material wealth and power. This is the most inclusive, articulate, and theoretically informed account of a Sepik River society since Naven, Bateson’s classic. It offers novel and provocative insights for the anthropological community as well as concise and detailed ethnographic descriptions of use to all scholars interested in Sepik cultures and Melanesia.

ERIC KLINE SILVERMAN
University of Minnesota

* * *