CLASS AND SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION IN OCEANIA*

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The rise of cognitive anthropology has recently stimulated a growing interest in intercultural variation. However, the research is often based on individual factors. Meanwhile the intercultural variation based on some social factors, especially the division of a society into social groups and strata, seems to be more significant. Separate social groups and strata endowed with various ranks and statuses already appeared at the dawn of history when the socioeconomic classes were developing. Hence that was also the time when various distinct social subcultures were emerging.

Before an analysis can be made of these processes, it is necessary to deal with some theoretical issues concerning the internal differentiation of ethnic culture.[1] Some Soviet scholars conceptually divide culture in two related ways. The first is determined by the principle which claims that each cultural form includes both productive and reproductive activities (technic-technological aspects, according to M. S. Kagan) and the objectivized results of such activities (Markaryan 1973; Kagan 1974). The second one has

* When the republication was discussed, the author noted that there was a mistake in the original title. The correct title should have been: "Culture and Social Differentiation in Oceania." The author noted that this is important, because the core idea was to study how social differentiation is reflected by culture. (Eds.)

How to cite this book chapter:
Shnirelman, V.A. (2021). Class and Social Differentiation in Oceania. In J. Siikala (ed.), *Culture and History in the Pacific* (pp. 125–138). Helsinki: Helsinki University Press. https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-12-9

to do with various real cultural forms: production culture, consumption culture, interaction culture (or etiquette), socionormative culture, physical culture, artistic culture and so on. It seems quite evident that the emerging social differentiation affected distinct forms of ethnic culture rather differently. In order to understand this process, an extensive survey of the ethnic cultures of New Guinea, Melanesia and Polynesia has been conducted.

Incipient social differentiation was revealed in New Guinea and some Melanesian regions, where it was closely connected with the coming of the so called big-men, the respected commoners' leaders. Here I use the term "big man" in the broad sense of the word in spite of Godelier's proposal (Godelier 1982) to preserve it only for unformal leadership directly connected with material wealth. Such an approach seems to enlighten the evolutionary process leading to the big man as messenger (in Burridge's sense). In this perspective the latter appears not as a strict regional variant but as an evolutionary stage, which can be investigated not only in Melanesia, but in other different parts of the world, too. Big-man status and prestige were deeply rooted in everyday activities. His authority rested on oratorical, war-like, magical, technical and other important skills. However, personal participation in food production and the organization of communal activities was often the main road to renown. A big-man's influence and authority were determined by the size of his social network, i.e. they directly depended on the number of his following (kin relatives, affines, friends). Polygyny, hospitality, regular participation in gift exchanges and sponsoring feasts, frequent visits to other communities, aid to his agnates in collecting bride-price and the fulfillment of some other obligations served to strengthen and extend the effective range of the big-man social network. Therefore only a wealthy big man was able to display the generosity expected of him (Burridge 1975; Chowning 1979).

Deviations from the shared model were patterned according to the prosperity of any given society. Physical strength, aggressiveness, military skill and, less frequently, magical and oratorical abilities were the main attributes required to become a prominent leader in some impoverished societies of the New Guinea Highlands, the role of material wealth being only secondary. For instance, the status of a Maring big man was derived from magical strength, secret ritual knowledge and the keeping of the sacred stones. A big man intercommunicated regularly with the Fight Ancestor Spirits and played an important role in military actions and gift exchanges (Lowman-Vayda 1973). Among the

Tairora of the Eastern Highlands a big man kept his outstanding position due to his physical strength, aggressiveness, ability to terrify the commoners and military success.

There were no essential sociocultural differences between a big man and ordinary folk in the societies in question. According to J. Watson (1973: 273),

> ”The symbols of superordination are not well developed in Tairora life... There are no sharp differences of housing, clothing, utensils — although there may be some of diet. There are no status terms — other than those like ‘strong man’ — to match the terms of some Melanesian societies. There is no visible inheritance of superordinate status other than that which may accompany the differentiation of an older, resident sib from the members of an immigrant group whose outside origin is still remembered. Nevertheless among individual men there is a considerable range of behavior appropriate to the expression and the acknowledgement of prowess and strength ...”

J. Watson gave a detailed description of the behavior of a mighty Tairora big man, called Matoto, and other commoners. Matoto’s authority and the fear of him were so great that in his presence the commoners moved slowly, kept their eyes averted or on the ground and sometimes spoke with lowered voices. Conversely Matoto himself stood out by his imperious and proud bearing and threatened violence to enforce his demands on the ordinary people.

In the more developed societies of the Central and Western Highlands of New Guinea big man status was connected more with material wealth, the ability to speak eloquently and the sponsoring of feasts and gift exchanges. At the meetings the prominent orators were singled out among the others by their behavior and manner of speaking; moreover the style of talking was frequently of more importance than the words themselves. The most respected were those orators who were able to speak long before giving their ultimate opinion. The experienced orator was a man of fact, he could take the characters of his opponents into account and was equipped with vital knowledge of the clans’ histories and their interrelationships. Usually the big man in question made a speech at the end of a discussion when all the points of view had already been expressed and he could present the majority’s opinion instead of his own, hence increasing his authority. Among the Melpa the role of oratory was so great that a man could not claim the big man status if he possessed all the required qualities but one — the ability to speak (Strathern 1971, 1975).

The big men in question distinguished themselves from the commoners particularly by their behavior, and in some societies special rules had to be followed (special verbal expressions among the Dani) to make contact with them. However, local big men already had some unique features in their material culture. For instance, unlike ordinary houses, the Kapauka big man's habitats were large and multi-roomed. Besides, only the big men possessed certain precious adornments and bags of a particular type (Pospisil 1963: 272, 275, 276). The magnificent ceremonial dress of the Melpa big men differed from the commoners' both in quantity and quality. Here only a big man wore a pendant (*omak*) of bamboo sticks providing a record of successful exchanges (Gitlow 1966: 83–85; Brandewie 1971: 205–07).

Ancestor cult, known almost everywhere in the New Guinea Highlands, focused on worshiping most of all the late big men's spirits. When a big man died, care was traditionally taken to ensure the preservation of his skull and bones, which afforded their possessors strength and security. The skulls of the late big men were dug out and replaced in special shrines. The big man burial practice was like that of the commoners but the mortuary rites were on a larger scale. Big men were buried with most of their personal ornaments only in a few instances (among the Kuma) (Reay 1959). And only among the Kapauka were their bodies occasionally mummified (Pospisil 1963: 265).

The Papuans of the most prosperous Highland societies believed that the big men's spirits also dominated in after-life. Therefore the commoners treated them with great respect and appealed to them on behalf of the clan's prosperity.

It seems of great importance that a big man was allowed to ignore the traditional norms, and the more authority a big man had, the more resolute he was while violating the acknowledged custom and moral order.

Big man status was not inherited and the educational system was the same throughout the New Guinea Highlands. However, the big man system prompted Papuans to instill aggression and bravery into boys from an early age.

Hence the emergence of the big man system led to the incipient social differentiation of the single shared ethnic culture. At the beginning the process touched but a few cultural domains. It was only within the technic-technological (behavior, etiquette) and ritual (ancestor cult) ones that social differentiation became visible. Some socio-cultural distinctions appeared rather early in ceremonial life in the form of high material status symbols (adornment, clothing). Polygyny and some food taboos were

additional features of the emerging elite subculture. The big man activity led to changes in the socio-normative culture: it eased the acknowledged customs and opened the way to new social relations, while violating the established moral order. Finally, the big men were broad-minded and had fairly extensive environmental and social knowledge, especially of history, mythology, traditions etc.

In Melanesia the big man subculture was of almost the same character as in New Guinea, but more complex, and in some places the subculture connected with the real chiefs came into being instead of it. Some Solomon Island societies serve as an example. The existence of the secret men's clubs with their hierarchy and the appearance of the prestigious exotic shell valuables were distinct features of many local ethnic cultures. Everywhere only the wealthy men regularly participating in gift transactions and sponsoring feasts were vested with real authority, although the high status was hereditary in some places (among the Rugara of Bougainville). A considerable food surplus was required to fulfill these onerous responsibilities and only an industrious individual could become a leader. However, tillage of large plots was not possible without additional labor, and a successful man had many dependents who worked so he could present food and valuables to affines and rivals. Moreover, in some societies (among the Siuai of Bougainville) the leaders were already exempt from particularly hard kinds of manual labor (Oliver 1955, 1973).

Personal bravery was not an intimate leader's characteristic; he was just a leader who initiated war and head hunting. To keep their high social status the leaders had to be favored by their ancestors or some other demons, propitiating them through regular ritual sacrifices. The leaders themselves were conceived to have some magical strength, bringing success. As in New Guinea, the most powerful ancestor spirits were considered to be those of the late big men. The emerging trend towards high status inheritance had ideological roots in the folk belief that these ancestor spirits primarily supported their direct descendants (Oliver 1955; Ross 1973; Scheffler 1965).

The leaders were rather influential, and their opinions earned great respect at communal meetings. However, as in New Guinea, the local leaders were those who instigated activities rather than those who commanded and administrated. Therefore they had to be people of outstanding oratorical experience.

The emergence of hereditary high status succession strengthened an interest in genealogical knowledge. The most knowledgeable were the ambitious individuals because skillful manipulation of genealogical traditions was an effective way to gain high social

position. It does not appear to be a coincidence that big men were the best experts in their own and neighboring clans' genealogies and histories on Choiseul Island. While conducting politics they benefited from this extant knowledge (Scheffler 1965: 67).

As in New Guinea, the leaders were not necessarily subject to the rules which governed the commoners. One who abused his power, however, could be disposed of by force or even killed. At the same time, through their control of the male cult, the big men also had an important role in the maintenance of law and order.

As a rule, the leaders fulfilled their responsibilities themselves, though elsewhere they had some assistants (executors, sorcerers, messengers).

In everyday life the leaders distinguished themselves especially by their behavior. But unlike in New Guinea, the corresponding etiquette was rather complex: the commoners avoided touching the leaders, spoke to them only at their signals, sometimes glorified them in their presence, and so on.

Apart from some cultural variations alluded to above, the leadership had rather weak expressions in the ethnic culture. The leaders' houses were usually larger, and the polygynical leaders frequently possessed more than one house. When pork was distributed, the leaders usually received the best cuts of meat, and the first fruits of the new harvest were brought to them elsewhere. An ambitious Siuai man had to sponsor the building of a new clubhouse and make regular feastings in honor of the guardian spirit (Oliver 1955: 372–77; Oliver 1973: 282, 283). It was the leader who kept the prestige clan's valuables and disposed of them on Choiseul Island (Scheffler 1965: 122). On Guadalcanal Island, where the prestige valuables fell into the category of personal property, a leader had to give them up by burying them deep in the jungle; otherwise he would lose all his authority (Hogbin, 1964: 70).

In Guadalcanal a wealthy man engaged dancers and singers to participate in communal ceremonies, hence promoting the development of music and dance.

The leaders' interments were always distinguished by their richness. Sometimes they were arranged in special places or by special rite. The big men's skulls and bones were everywhere endowed with great magical strength. According to local beliefs, the big man's spirits lived more happily in the after-world than the commoners'.

The education of the big men's and commoners' children had no sharp differences. However, the rites of passage were sometimes more elaborate for the former. "The son or other close kinsman of a big man was likely to start off with many advantages ranging from

special attention on ceremonial occasions to education and inherited wealth" (Chowning 1979: 70). But as in New Guinea, individual personality and ability were ultimately of the most importance. The education of the elite was exceptionally complex on San Cristobal. However, unlike other Solomon Islands, the hereditary status succession dominated there; real chiefs existed and an elite subculture developed (Fox 1924).

Hereditary chieftainship existed in the Trobriand Islands, among the Rugara of Bougainville, in the Southern New Hebrides and in some other places in Melanesia. Throughout North-Western and Central Melanesia the chiefs co-existed with the leaders of achieved status, and sometimes rivalry developed between them.

These chiefs and leaders were not distinguished from each other by their social functions and cultural features. In both cases they had to carry out regular gift exchanges and organize communal labor and entertainment. The range of their power was closely connected with the prestige wealth they possessed. Both chiefs and leaders distinguished themselves by various cultural traits, especially by the size and quantity of their houses, ceremonial clothing, prestige personal belongings, some food customs (only the elite had the right to drink kava and to practice ritual cannibalism in the Southern New Hebrides), and, of course, by behavior. The interaction between people of high status and commoners was patterned according to the complex rules of conduct.

Especially fractioned cultural differentiation was disclosed in the Northern New Hebrides, where it was linked with the developed rank systems. Each rank had its own section in the men's house, its own plots, signs of ownership, ritual painting, adornments, etc. (Rivers 1914, 1: 61–63; Layard 1928: 186–89; Deschamps, Guiart 1957: 234, 235). The development of the rituals linked with the rank systems influenced the artistic and musical-choreographical cultural domains: the various ceremonies required the production of masks and statues, the building of mud or stone monuments, the performance of singers and dancers. In The New Hebrides the chiefs and big men had more power than in the Solomon Islands. In some places they were the ones who made crucial decisions, and community meetings became either fictitious or completely disappeared. Sometimes the chiefs had assistants and servants, and their plots were tilled by the commoners.

The after-world was believed to consist of two parts: for the good (wealthy and high-esteemed men) and for the bad (commoners). Some people thought that the spirits of those who had not sacrificed pigs could not get to the after-world at all and wandered around the settlement, bothering its residents.

Taking all these facts into consideration, the conclusion can be drawn that the social subcultures were developing primarily along the line of increasing ritual activities, resulting in particular in the emergence of the secret men's societies (Duke of Yorks, New Britain, Northern New Hebrides, Banks Islands and so on). The material peculiarities of the leaders' subculture were accumulated and developed only in the context of those rituals. However, in ordinary life their subculture was distinguished from that of the commoners by only a few traits (house size, etc.). The development of the potlatch-like feasts and exchanges led to the appearance of the special prestige wealth category, which was at the leaders' disposal. The sociocultural evolution tended to the formation of the executive and compulsory staff, the leaders monopolized the right to make decisions, and, the role of communal meetings diminished. Meanwhile the leaders became freed from heavy manual labor, and the etiquette connected with them became extremely complicated. The leaders' role increased in the intellectual cultural domain: being the most knowledgeable people, it was believed that they had mystical strength derived from the supernatural world. The big man spirit cult reached its apogee. The education of the future leaders required more attention; the role of hereditary succession increased and, accordingly, interest in the genealogies grew. The perfection and complication of the artistic cultural domain, bound with the big men directly or through the entertainment they sponsored, ran parallel with the processes alluded to above.

Analysis reveals that under the evolved leadership the ascribed status role tended to increase. This process led to the emergence of a hereditary elite which, by its subculture and social status, was in its primary form not unlike the leaders with achieved status. In this sense it would be inappropriate to oppose Melanesian societies, managed by the big men, and Polynesian ones, ruled by the chiefs, so forcefully as has been done by M. Sahlins (Sahlins 1963). More probably there was a dine between these types of political systems.

The process in question ran much further in South-Eastern Melanesia and some Polynesian regions (Samoa, Tonga, Society Islands, Hawai'i), where the domination of the hereditary succession called for the tendency of endogamy among the elite and caused the emergence of the incipient cast system (Guiart 1963; Hocart 1929; Oliver 1974; Stair 1897; Williamson 1924; Ellis 1831; Sahlins 1958). The processes culminated in the ultimate separation of the high status subculture, now expressed practically in every cultural domain. The formation of the elite consumption culture terminated only in the chiefdoms. The chiefs' houses were distinguished not only by size, but by location, construction and ornamentation. The

chief's household, including a number of wives, relatives and retainers, usually occupied the whole ward, and the chief's settlement stood out by its size and plan. It was not difficult to recognize the aristocrats by their clothing, headdress, adornments, tattoos, insignia of office (staff, fly flap, etc.) and, sometimes, by their hair style. Everywhere the elite diet was more balanced than that of the commoners: the chiefs ate dogs, pork and fish more regularly; they always received the best pieces of meat, and some kinds of food (for instance, turtle) were taboo for the general public in some regions. There were artificial fishponds in Hawai'i, where specialists bred fish for the chiefs' needs (Kikuchi 1976). The elite enjoyed the privilege of kava drinking. In some regions it used special dinner-sets.

The elite reproduction culture also had some peculiarities. High status persons tended to look for marriage partners in their own social habitat. This resulted in distinct intertribal marriage circles, based not upon ethnic, but social principles. Conversely, the commoners usually married inside their settlements, the latter being the basis for tribal endogamy.

The complexity of the chiefs' subculture and the growth of the social separation each required a special mechanism for intergenerational culture transmission: formal education, accompanied by teachers and actual schools for the elite, arose in some more evolved chiefdoms (Handy 1965).

The evolution of socio-political culture was mirrored in the further development of the chiefdom machinery, the increasingly numerous attendants and the despotic trends among the rulers. There were a number of hierarchical chiefs' categories in the most developed chiefdoms. Although everywhere the paramount chiefs were the initiators of wars and took an active part in ritual life, the warchief's and priest's offices were separated from that of a hereditary chief. The Fijian chiefs held such a sanctity that they were freed from secular and religious executive power (Thompson 1968: 61–62, Hocart 1952: 34). This trend took a step further in Tonga, where the paramount sacred chief, Tui Tonga, lost all genuine power. Public speeches displaying deep historical and mythological knowledge continued to be one of the important administrative functions. In New Caledonia these were made by the chiefs themselves, and the best examples of their oratorical art served for the young chiefs' education (Rau 1944: 57–59). However, in some regions the high chiefs were represented on public occasions by staff orators.

Hence the chiefs of the most evolved chiefdoms had a huge staff of assistants, managers and other attendants who were responsible

for various activities both in the chiefdom and in the chief's household. Besides the categories enumerated above, there were treasures, cooks, messengers, guards and so on. A council of nobles made decisions on all crucial problems, but sometimes the chiefs had great despotic power and changed the social rules and customs at will. The latter was a model for emulation by the retainers and servants and the order, dominated at the chief's court, was treated as "moral degradation" and "depravity" by the commoners. Actually it was a process of rejecting traditional customs which hindered further evolution, although it frequently took rather ugly forms, scaring the commoners away and making them conserve the traditional way of life.

The South-Eastern Melanesian and Polynesian chiefs were frequently exempt from agricultural labor at the commoners' expense. The latter were obliged to provide the chiefs with food in Hawai'i. Those who were slack in doing such work were expelled from their lands or even put to death (Malo 1951: 61). Unlike agriculture, some handicrafts were prestigious. Canoe-building, tapa production and whale tooth cutting were exceptionally elite occupations in Tonga.

Some kinds of sports and games were reserved mainly for the elite; archery in Tahiti, some kinds of hunting in Tonga and Hawai'i, cock fighting in Hawai'i, and so on.

Travelling a lot and participating in intertribal relations, the aristocracy had a wider mental outlook and intellectual interests than the ordinary folk. The former displayed deep knowledge of geography, military issues, history, mythology, ritual and ceremonial practice. The Polynesian elite tended to monopolize this kind of knowledge and keep it secret from the commoners. The genealogical traditions were kept secret, especially, serving as an important means of struggling for power.

The aristocratic concept was closely bound to one of supernatural "mana" power and stated that "rulers, chiefs and distinguished persons generally differ from the common people in the fundamental sense that they are believed to have been selected and endowed with a special quality of the highest worth" (Goldman 1970: 11).

The chief's personality was considered sacred, as was everything he touched. Therefore, so as not to step on the ground, the chiefs were carried in litters (in Tonga, Hawai'i, Samoa) or astride the shoulders of special retainers (Tahiti). The chief's etiquette was particularly complex in such conditions: elaborate rules were worked out for behavior in the chief's attendance or treatment of his personal property; one had to adopt a special method of speech

or form of address when speaking to a chief or about him ("chief's language").

After-life was imagined as reflecting the present state of social affairs. Almost everywhere the chiefs' spirits were supposed to attain paradise, becoming deities. The poor commoners who could not pay the priest had a rather miserable afterlife in a kind of limbo. On Tonga the commoners' souls, unlike those of the elite, were believed to perish at death. Everywhere religion supported the aristocracy, pointing out its closeness to divine descent. Most of the rituals and mysteries, consecrated to the supreme deities, were kept secret by the priests from the ordinary folk. The religious ideology even tried to found a hereditary status succession: for instance, on Fiji a violation of the order in question was perceived as the reason for a crop failure.

The high status individual's outstanding position both in life and after death was pointed out in mortuary rites, distinguished from those of the commoners both in quantity and quality. Commoners' corpses were bound and buried under the house floor, in the garden or cave, almost without any grave goods on Samoa, Tahiti and Hawaii. However, the chiefs' interments were arranged in stone vaults, or huge stone monuments were set up above graves. Chiefs' burials could be recognized by the richness of the burial equipment. Their bodies were subject to some preservative treatment and in some cases they were actually embalmed. The relatives dug out the chiefs' skulls and bones after the decay was completed, and kept them in special shrines.

The rise of chieftainship stimulated the further evolution of the artistic cultural domain. Dancing and singing performances involving professional actors, the development of poetry, the erection of monumental buildings and statues, the perfection of other artistic forms were directly or indirectly connected with the chiefs' activities.

To sum up, the origin of chiefdom was a crucial point in the process of ethnic culture social differentiation. Socio-cultural distinctions were expressed slightly and only in a few cultural domains of the typologically early cultural complexes connected with the big man. And only with the chiefdoms did the high status subculture first become definable as a fully distinct entity.

Both socio-political systems promoted the long-distance exchange of prestige valuables. But if the distribution of these items under the big man system conditions depended primarily on the distance from the place of their production, then only the chief's settlements, or "central places" in archaeological terms, were supplied with them in the chiefdoms. The archaeologists

discovered these very distinctions in the Near East between the obsidian supplying zones in the Early Neolithic, on the one hand, and the Later Neolithic and Chalcolithic, on the other hand (Renfrew and Dixon 1976).

The implication of this analysis is that it is necessary to correct some points in the methodology of Melanesian and Polynesian ethnic culture studies, because evidence of ordinary folk culture is inappropriate for the description of elite culture, and vice versa (Butinov 1985: 207, 208). The marshalled data put the investigation of the social differentiation process in a new perspective, particularly concerning the interpretation of prehistoric cultural frontiers. Undoubtedly the Skythic animal style area in Eurasia or the Hopewellian interaction sphere in the American Mid-West mirrored the intertribal spread of the elite prestige valuables, while there were a number of separate ethnic cultures connected with ordinary folk within each of them. Meanwhile this line of research has its limits because it may be virtually impossible to discern the evolved big man system and early chiefdom by their cultural features.

Notes

1. This paper is a shortened version of the author's article published as "Klassoobrazovaniye i differentsiatsiya cultury (po okeanijskim etnografitscheskim materialam)"/Class formation and culture differentiation (according to Oceanic ethnography). — In: Ethnografitsheskiye issledovaniya razvitiya kultury. Ed. by A. I. Pershitz, N. B. Ter-Akopian: p. 64–122. Moscow; Nauka, 1985.

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