



The *warawara malanggan* in Lesu

The Historical Anthropology of a New Ireland Society

Göran Aijmer

Abstract. – This study examines some features of symbolism, originally encountered in New Ireland by Hortense Powdermaker and other early ethnographers. It aims to reconstruct certain features of the symbolic grammar of this Melanesian society as they might have been before modernization transformed social life. The essay concerns a plaited nonfigurative *malanggan* object used in death and memorial rituals. It suggests that this artefact was an iconic symbol with reference to one of two cultural modalities, each with a different dominant presupposition. The object implied a vision of a universe of pure uterine belonging in a world without men. [*New Ireland, women, ritual, art, death, symbolism*]

Göran Aijmer, Professor Emeritus of Social Anthropology at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, and currently associated with the Gothenburg Research Institute of the University. His research focuses on symbolic expression and articulation in fields like politics, economy, and religion. His regional projects have concerned southern China, Southeast Asia, and Melanesia. He has worked in many universities, more recently in the Research School of Asian and Pacific Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, and the Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia, Norwich. Recent monographs are: *Cantonese Society in a Time of Change* (with Virgil K. Y. Ho, Hong Kong 2000); *Meanings of Violence* (co-edited with Jon Abbink, Oxford 2000), *New Year Celebrations in Central China in Late Imperial Times* (Hong Kong 2003). – See also References Cited.

Introduction

This study offers an examination of some ethnographic data collected by American anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker in northwestern New Ireland in the Bismarck Archipelago in 1929–30. It is an attempt to discover what information these

might yield to a reexamination 74 years after their initial formulation in the field, in the village of Lesu. At that time, New Ireland had already long been under heavy outside influences, from both the German and later Australian governments as well as from missionary activities. In Lesu there was a small base for Roman Catholic activities in the area as well as a Methodist mission. There were many settlers' plantations around, providing work for local village people and thus stimulating male migration. A new road, built and maintained by a considerable amount of *corvée* labour, had changed former patterns of communication. Warfare between local communities had been brought to an end.¹

The aim of the present essay is to reexamine a few Lesu conventions in an attempt to explore some aspects of an artefact as an object of art and ritual in a premodern setting. Needless to say, what we may hope to gain is not a picture of some original state, but glimpses of an ongoing social life in a dynamic environment in a remote period.²

1 For a survey of the history of early colonialism in New Ireland, see Derlon 1997a: 24–29; Panoff 1979. For biographies of Hortense Powdermaker, see Mark 1980; Wolf 1971. See also her autobiography, Powdermaker 1966.

2 See Aijmer 2001 for a discussion of the main theoretical propositions that inform this essay.