‘Self-evident Chiefs’: Transactions of Chiefly Inheritance Among North Mekeo (PNG)

From the time of first exploration up to the present, the Austronesian-speaking peoples of the Pacific have been typically depicted by Europeans including anthropologists as ‘chiefly’, meaning in large measure that the political, legal, economic and religious institutions of those societies have been or continue to be dominated by persons occupying discrete hereditary offices. In the preponderance of cases, these offices have been described as being ideally transmitted intact between persons genealogically or by descent, most often by customary rule of patrilineal or matrilineal primogeniture. Some consistent anomalies in this characterisation have been noted empirically, however. The explicit rules of genealogical succession have often been disregarded, as when a chief’s eldest son or nephew is judged to be incompetent. Also, the contours of chiefly organisation in many instances have demonstrably changed since European contact, giving rise to novel criteria of office that appear to be antithetical to genealogy (success in business, attainment of Christian or secular educational distinction, and so on). Even so, I maintain, to the extent that anthropological and legal scholars continue to deploy “chieftainship” as an ideally heritable bundle of rights and obligations, by contrasted with other Oceanic leadership forms (e.g. “big men”, “great men”), the notion has tended to be taken as self-evident. Moreover, the oversight may soon prove to be socially consequential. In light of impending IPR legislation in many Pacific nations, it appears that many persons nowadays acknowledged as “chiefs”, while lacking genealogical claims to hereditary succession, are likely to be granted monopolistic control over customary rights for numerous forms of indigenous property, intellectual or otherwise, that continue to be construed as fundamentally hereditary (e.g. customary land). It is thus imperative that the grounds of Oceanic chiefly authority and agency, both traditional and modern, be clarified. Central to this concern are the processes of inheritance and genealogical succession that supposedly distinguish “chiefly” from other forms of Oceanic domination and reproduction. In this paper, therefore, I argue from an examination of the case of North Mekeo chieftainship in both traditional and modern times that chiefly “succession” and “heredity” do not coincide with the stereotypical image of Pacific inheritance by genealogy that has frequently been attributed to it. Rather, it is by virtue of numerous interpersonal transactions of particular sorts between, on the one hand, the heir and his/her predecessor and on the other the heir-apparent and his/her intended constituents that successful heirs to chiefly office establish and legitimate their claims to office. Furthermore, these chiefly transactions over inheritance conform with the dynamics of personal partibility, sociality and agency which I, following Marilyn Strathern and others, have elsewhere portrayed as characteristic of both traditional Mekeo sociality and various contexts of recent historical transformation (e.g. commodification, charismatic Catholicism, gender relations).