

## THE THEATER OF POLITICS: CONTRASTING TYPES OF PERFORMANCE IN MELANESIA

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In this article I interpret phenomena that have traditionally been considered "religious" in anthropological literature as contrasting types of performance. Specifically, I contrast the *malanggan* of the Tikana people of northern New Ireland with the "Johnson cult" of the Lavongai people of New Hanover.<sup>1</sup> *Malanggan* have commonly been seen as religious ceremonies, which honor the dead but which also function to integrate and sustain society; while the activities of the Lavongai following their vote in 1964 for the American president, Lyndon B. Johnson, called "the Johnson cult" by local authorities, belongs to a category commonly called, by an earlier generation of anthropologists, "cargo cults." Here I examine the *malanggan* ceremony and the Johnson cult as performances that express the aspirations and values of individual Tikana and Lavongai in ways that reflect the respective structures of their societies and styles of their cultures.

The Tikana people of northern New Ireland continue to perform their traditional *malanggan* ceremonies to "finish" the dead: socially, politically, economically, psychologically, and, perhaps, spiritually. These ceremonies have been known for over a century, and there is no reason to suppose that they are not much older. Like religious plays of the Middle Ages, these regularly repeated performances tell of the ancient verities as they tell of contemporary manifestations of them; and, in the telling, recreate and reinforce them. The traditional roles are played by the living as they were once played by the dead, following a script known to the ancestors. While *malanggan* are group affairs par excellence, they are also the stage on which individuals play their parts.

It is *malanggan* around which all power relations in Tikana society are structured, and it is, therefore, *malanggan* in which political leaders seek to find their places of influence.

The Lavongai people of New Hanover are only now relinquishing their roles in "The Election for America," a performance that has run for over twenty-five years, since 1964, without a single repeated scene. Opening when half the Lavongais voted for President Johnson of America to represent them in the newly formed House of Assembly, the action has moved steadily forward, the players creating a long narrative as they interact with each other, with their adversaries in New Hanover, and with the passing parade of government officers (before and after Papua New Guinea became independent in 1975), missionaries, European residents, anthropologists, and others who stray onstage. The improvised theater of the Johnson cult has provided the script within which the men of New Hanover (with the mostly passive acceptance of women) have found their way to various positions of influence on their own stage and on the larger one of the nation from which they still seek independence. While individuals created their own parts and ad-libbed their own lines, they acted responsively to each other and succeeded in achieving, en masse, a great deal of power for their group.

In what follows, I will try to make clear the contrasting uses of theater to form power structures in these two contrasting societies, and to summarize the research findings on which I base these generalizations.<sup>2</sup>

### **Tikana and Lavongai: Structure and Culture**

The Tikana and the Lavongai peoples occupy neighboring islands, New Ireland and New Hanover, respectively. Both islands lie north of New Guinea and are part of Papua New Guinea. The two groups have much in common with each other and with other Melanesians.

Both the Tikana and the Lavongai live largely in coastal villages of seventy to three hundred people, though there are still a few villages in New Hanover that are a half hour's walk up the mountain. Both peoples live on sweet potatoes, yams, taro, sago, chickens, fish, pigs, and, now, canned foods and rice. In both islands, villages are composites of named hamlets, each associated with one, two, or three clans.

#### *Social Structures*

Both the Tikana and the Lavongai have about a dozen named matrilineal clans, of which three to seven dominate in any given village. Here

the similarity between the two societies sharply ends: the Tikana live in matrilineal, matrilocal extended families, whereas the Lavongai live in nuclear families, which are, if possible, settled patrilocally. The Tikana say that nuclear family units may live either at the mother's place or the father's, but nearly all of them who are raising children (and, in any case, a majority in the village) live uxorimatrilocally with their matrilineal kin; and, thus, with clear access to matrilineally controlled land. The Lavongai say that they have always preferred to live in the father's place, and the plurality of them do so. This means that they are settled on land that belongs to a matrilineal clan to which neither the father/husband nor the mother/wife belongs. In the old days, it seems likely that women of a man's father's clan might have been more often selected for marriage, making virilocality consistent with matrilineal clans, but mate selection is a matter of romantic love today. In any case, fragmentation of clans, subclans, and lineages, and reliance on the nuclear family, as well as unclear relations between people and land, are today intrinsic to Lavongai social structure.

Every Tikana village has at least one big-man who "goes first" for it. He is a man who has been installed as a *memai*, a speaker for his people. These *memai* were usually among those who also occupied positions of leadership created by the Australian colonial government, and contemporary leaders in Papua New Guinea are often installed as *memai* back home in their villages.

The Lavongai did not have traditional big-men who led their villages, although there were some men, called *vaitas*, who sponsored initiations of young boys. Men appointed by the Australian colonial government often wielded considerable force among villagers, who feared being taken by them to jail. Some contemporary leaders are working with the PNG government, while others have created a separate polity, the Tutukuvul Isukul Association (TIA, United Farmers Association), within which they have, for the first time, built a widespread intervillage network.

### *Cultural Style*

The style<sup>3</sup> of Tikana culture is *group-oriented, institutionalized, and egalitarian*. The greatest value is keeping the group moving along the known path together. This is achieved through clearly institutionalized rules, which regulate relationships between individuals and groups and between people and land, and through following clear maxims in behavior: give, help, do things together. The group is prevented from

separating into hierarchical classes as people help the weak (including children, the handicapped, foreigners) and withdraw support from anyone who appears to be too strong. Daily life follows well-known routines: everyone knows what to do and feels included. People move slowly, carefully, responsively in relation to their fellows, and few words are added to synchronize their smooth interactions.

The style of Lavongai culture is *individualistic, noninstitutionalized, and peck-ordered*. The greatest value is the creation, protection, and assertion of the self. This is achieved through constant attention to seizing the main chance, gaining the upper hand. Alternatives are known, and none is institutionalized or required. People interact through taking, asking for help, teasing, flirting, provoking, rejecting. Every situation separates individuals into new peck orders wherein the weak struggle to survive, the strong to maintain their ascendancy, and all demand equality for their individual selves. Lavongais move assertively, alone; or sit in laughing and loquacious groups, finding their ways among their fellows through complex verbal probes.

### **New Ireland *Malanggan*: Political Aspects**

The all-encompassing role of *malanggan* ceremonies in New Ireland life is well known.<sup>4</sup> They serve to draw out individuals who lead their groups, and to create and recreate entangling alliances with other groups.

#### *Networks*

My research found people in attendance and participating in *malanggan* events who came from other islands as well as from villages strung out for one hundred miles along the east coast of New Ireland, and villages from across the mountain range on the west coast. In one case, people came to renew ties that had begun forty years earlier when a woman married from a central village to one further north. Not uncommonly, people came from villages long associated with a host village through several generations of intermarriage.

The core of participants are connected through marriage, but a central principle of *malanggan* structure requires bringing in new people from outside. It is more difficult and adventuresome to start an exchange with someone who, while no doubt distantly related through some web of intermarriages, has not been a regular partner in ceremonial events.

Exchanges are of pigs, shell currency, and *malanggan* art objects,

which function as, among other things, a special kind of wealth. Insider groups are enjoined to spread their wealth of various sorts to outsider groups as widely as possible, and it is explicitly recognized that the trickling down of resources, a leveling process, is an important function of *malanggan*. Everyone eats pig on such an occasion.

Networks form as the result of individual ties, and *malanggan* depends on the hard work and sustained attention of large numbers of people.<sup>5</sup> Immediate family will feed a pig for four years in preparation for a *malanggan* for an important death in the family. Those who wish to have help must fulfill their own obligations, and help others also to fulfill theirs. This is a slow-moving but not stress-free society: the Tikana say they feel their debts “stuck to their skin.”

### *Leadership*

Big-men in New Ireland, who are called *memai* (speakers), function entirely in relation to the organization of *malanggan*. The single *memai* who will lead a *malanggan* sits with the relatives of the dead (usually several dead who will be memorialized together) to plan the series of events of the ceremony. They also confer with other *memai* who will play important roles. Struggles for power are not public and not violent, but are carried on with finesse, and have consequences for the groups of people who “come behind” leaders. Leaders do not boss but rather help the group: they are its servants, not its masters. The aim of political activity seems to be to bring up the weak and to keep in check the strong, so that resources and respect will be distributed adequately to all. Reciprocal exchange requires equal partners, and it is an essentially egalitarian balance that is sought. Tikana people express strong approval for their traditional society, where “no one is poor.”

### **New Hanover Johnson Cult: Political Aspects**

New Hanover had no integrating mechanism comparable to the New Ireland *malanggan*. Individuals clustered into factions in 1964 when they voted for Johnson, factions that finally began to dissolve only in 1983, but which never really became unified groups.

### *Networks*

That the groups one fought in war might contain one’s cross-cousin, whom one had to leave for others to kill, shows that politically stable networks did not reach out to include even close neighbors whom one

married. There were no regular exchanges of pigs or other valuables between villages or clans, or even between affines, that wove stable ties between individuals or families or communities. There were occasions, called *pata*, in which one community might provide food for another, which was later expected to reciprocate; but these occasions promoted subsistence industry, not political leadership, as they did not require, as a *malanggan* does, an established institutionalized leader for their organization and direction. Similarly, there were, and occasionally still are, gatherings called *wag* held in memory of a single dead person, but these are feasts prepared by the immediate relatives of the dead and are not occasions, as are *malanggan*, that require cooperation even within one village, let alone across a dozen villages.

The vote for Johnson united people along the entire southern coast of New Hanover and in the adjacent small islands in a political force, which led to the elimination of the Lavongai local government council, the refusal to pay taxes, the boycotting of subsequent elections, and the prevention of explorations and development by outside mining and timber companies. These political successes were accomplished by Johnson cultists who had evolved into the United Farmers Association (TIA): an economic development organization in the mind of the American Catholic priest, Fr. Bernard Miller, who helped to found it, but primarily a political action group to many cultists. TIA has continued to dominate events in the Johnson cult area, although it began to lose members and power after Fr. Miller was transferred in 1983 and money began to go astray. The anticultist faction in New Hanover, located mainly at the western end of the island, tries to participate in the postindependence government, but few changes have taken place anywhere in the island: as the cultists point out, the government is not interested in "saving" the people of New Hanover.

### *Leadership*

By 1967, there were no traditional leaders functioning in New Hanover; nor had there been for many years, nor had there ever been any who regularly functioned outside, or even within, their own villages. I found three cases of men, from different ends of the island, who had become *vaitas* by sponsoring the seclusion of young men for initiation. Novices were drawn from neighboring hamlets or villages, as was the food that fed them and their initiated elders in seclusion. So far as I could determine, these *vaitas* did not exercise any 'leadership in other contexts. There were also men who were *bosap* (war leaders), men who took the

initiative in fighting other groups. In warfare, young boys stood next to their fathers (and moved down the line if they discovered themselves to be facing their cross-cousins) until they had killed someone and were then considered able to fight independently. Men often complain about the absence of anyone who can lead them well, but laughingly admit that it is a Lavongai fashion to be unwilling to follow anyone. "We are like little streams coming from a river," one told me. "Each one goes off in a different direction." Thus, they continue to live "like dogs or pigs," rubbish lives, as they say, waiting for someone to come to "save" them. The Johnson cult set the stage for the emergence of leadership qualities in many men who had previously been afraid to confront the colonial administrators, but none emerged as leaders of their fellows, each of whom claimed to be following only his own idea, his own wishes. In TIA, however, officers were elected, and President Walla Guk Guk has served, until recently with the help of Fr. Miller, as a respected leader (the first one, it seems, the Lavongai people have ever had) since 1967. Now, no one says that he stole money, but many think he has made promises he cannot fulfill.

### ***Malanggan as Theater***

*Malanggan* ceremonies combine the attributes of carnival and country fair, religious ritual and political ceremony, pageant and theater. Here I am going to look at *malanggan* as theater: a kind of religious drama similar to those of the Middle Ages, but without a supernatural focus. In its basic structure, it is reliably and reassuringly repeated, like Mass in the Catholic church, which some scholars have viewed as drama (Brockett 1977);<sup>6</sup> its personnel and special events, however, vary with the particular deaths honored. While all the ceremony is progressing, it is guiding not only the social and emotional transformations of a *rite de passage* ending mourning for the dead, but also guiding exchanges that create or strengthen political and economic relationships.

#### *Performing Malanggan*

*The Plot of the Play.* A *malanggan* ceremony begins when the relatives of the dead, usually led by matrilineal kin of a dead big-man, decide to sponsor a ceremony to "finish" the dead of a hamlet or village. A *memai*, who may or may not be of the same clan as the dead, is selected to organize events. A known sequence is followed, although not all *malanggan* ceremonies include all possible events.<sup>7</sup> At each of these,

people gather and contribute pigs and other foods, accomplish specific preparatory tasks, and plan and schedule future occasions. On the last day of the ceremonial cycle, a final peak in activity and offerings is achieved: people come from afar, the big pigs of close kin are finally brought cooked to the feast, offerings of song and dance by costumed performers are enacted, and the palm leaf barriers hiding the cemetery are removed to reveal the new cement markers and *malanggan* art objects now decorating clean graves in a clean cemetery. Much is made of secrecy in preparing these events, a secrecy that has to do not with magical power or mystical value, but with the gradual unfolding of the drama. The dead are now “finished”: socially, in that the ties they helped to create have been reformed by new exchanges; politically, in that a new *memai*, if needed, has been installed on this last day; economically, in that the relatives to whom the dead left shell currency and money have now paid out all these resources in exchange for the pigs, *malanggan* art objects, and services brought to them, so that the economic resources of the dead have been returned to circulation in the community; and emotionally, in that this final day requires an end to mourning. “You cannot go around sorry, sorry, sorry all the time,” one old *memai* told me. “*Malanggan* is a time to forget the dead and be happy”; and so the institutionalized play that fills the last day of *malanggan* creates, and symbolizes, a time to be happy: the happy ending people worked so hard to achieve.

*Acts and Scenes.* I have tried to briefly show the *malanggan* as a bounded art form by analyzing it into a dramatic sequence of acts and scenes:

- Act I: Preparations
  - Scene 1: Families Meet to Plan for the *Malanggan*
  - Scene 2: Announcements in the Villages: A *Malanggan* Will Be Held
  - Scene 3: Cleaning the Bush and Bringing the Bamboo for the New Cemetery Fence
- Act II: Working Together and Separately
  - Scene 1: Making Costumes, *Malanggan*, and Cement Monuments in Secluded Groups
  - Scene 2: Endless Scraping of Taro and Sweet Potatoes in the Cook Houses
  - Scene 3: Preliminary. Feasts Wherein Support Is Garnered and Measured



- Act III: The Last Day: A Time to Be Happy  
 Scene 1: *Bot* (Sing and Dance) All Night Before the Last Day  
 Scene 2: The Final *Malanggan* Ceremony: Celebration and Farewell  
 Scene 3: Good News: On the Way Home with Full Baskets

*The Script.* The words and actions of *malanggan* are traditional, simple, and repeated: there are many little parades, often led by children, as people lay down money and shell currency next to pigs being given or received, speeches over the pigs, a brief speech by an old *memai* installing a young *memai* to take over the work of the dead. Through repeated participation in many *malanggan* from childhood on, people know how to participate, how to “come behind” someone, how to help. The *memai* is the only character who has many formal lines to speak, but they require no special talent or rehearsal: “*Arakok! Arakok! Arakok!* (I say it is good! It is good! It is good!).” Other men announce the arrival of pigs or payments in simple repetitive formulas, and those who wish to do so make little speeches about the history of exchanges to which they are contributing.

*Production Arrangements.* The families of the dead decide, when they have raised their pigs and are “ready with shell currency” and have calculated the resources of their closest kin, that it is time for a *malanggan*. They invite a *memai* to take charge.

*The Director.* The *memai* will then be the director, but he must work in constant consultation with the families and with other *memai*. “A *memai*’s mouth is tired from talking,” one *memai* told me. “What do you think?” another said at a public meeting where a hundred gathered at a preliminary feast called to set the date for the final ceremony. “I am only one. It would not be good if I alone decided.”

*Actors.* Most actors in a *malanggan* play the social roles assigned to them by kinship, affinity, and locality in relation to the producers of the *malanggan*. In one ceremony, for example, a person may “come behind” someone who is wife to the cross-cousin of the dead; in another, that person may be the wife of the dead. There are a few special roles, assigned by the producers: Bringers of the *Malanggan* Art, Bringers of the Cement Monument, Bringers of the Bamboo for the Cemetery

Fence, Pig Cutters, and so on. The great worry regarding *malanggan* is that people may become "cross" and jealous over these assignments and "spoil" the *malanggan*. In one case, the leading *memai* stayed home on the last day and let another man take over lest those who were "cross" spoil the day. So intent on maintaining unity are the Tikana that no one mentioned the change, and many did not seem to realize what had happened. Each played well his or her part, and the show went on as scheduled, with an understudy in the lead role.

*Acting.* People play roles that are played in daily life, but are formalized and made public in *malanggan*. All have often played supporting roles and, having watched others, are ready without rehearsal to play leading ones when their time comes.

*Costumes and Props.* Only the *memai* has a formal costume for *malanggan*: a particular leaf arm band into which the feather of office is stuck, and the well-known shell ornament of New Ireland, the *kepkep*, around his neck. All others wear their everyday clothes when they are working, but for some of the final occasions they may wear their best dress-up outfits: not the shirt they wear on Sundays, but colorful party clothes. *Malanggan* ceremonies require, perhaps above all, *malanggan* art objects. And yet some Catholic villages no longer use them, for fear of offending the priests who used to think they were false gods, but who now decorate their houses and churches with them. People say they were never gods but "just decoration." Most villages also mark graves with cement monuments nowadays, which are erected, alone or along with the *malanggan* decorations, on the final day of ceremonies. One village originally planned only to have cement, but then someone said, "What, were they men who were nothing that they should not have *malanggan*? Did they not bring *malanggan* to other men?" And so the *malanggan* decorations, too, were ordered, at great expense.

Many other props recur: the little houses traditionally decorated with leaves and feathers in which *malanggan* objects are displayed, the new bamboo fences around the cemeteries, the slit drums, the shell trumpets, the feast food itself.

*Special Effects.* Special effects are provided by a slit drum, beat to call people together (in the old days there were many different codes known to some), the shell trumpets blown to announce the arrival of a

pig, the New Ireland “whistle drum,” and the songs and dances of the people at appropriate times in the schedule.

*Scenery.* The first ritual event leading up to a ceremony requires people to chop down trees and cut bush on their way to the village cemetery. This is a “token” task nowadays, but in the old days this day to “Clear the Bush” probably meant a return to an abandoned site where loved ones had been left in their graves, which had become overgrown with jungle.

*Auditoriums.* The cleared space and the cemetery provide the auditoriums in which speeches are made. Pigs are killed and cooked “off stage,” near the beach, which is the men’s domain.

*Stages.* Stages are built in the village or in the cemetery for some performances. I have seen a stage built on which singers performed “to help people now to be happy,” and another built in a cemetery on which a *memai* made his final speech and passed on *memai*hood to a young man. People distinguish *memai* who got their status “on a pig” or “on a stage,” but the distinction merely marks variety in the occasions and does not signal rank differences.

*Audiences.* Most audience members are also participants in the preparations, the exchanges, the giving to major performers, or the production of the event. However, it is important that everyone is invited and that members of the public often do come only to the final feast. “What will the news of the *malanggan* be?” one *memai* asked at a preliminary feast. “Will people be good and truly full up?” It is a mark of success when the news is good and when food is left over for people to take home in their baskets.

#### *The Meaning of the Malanggan: What the Play Is About*

*Malanggan* is essentially a ritual performance. Its meaning is primarily acted out, rather than thought out; believed or accepted for its established and directly apprehended impartation, rather than for its argument or utilitarian functions. If, however, the ritual component of *malanggan* is its *sine qua non*, it is not a supernatural ritual. It is religious in that it relates to Ultimate Concerns,<sup>8</sup> but the dead are not helplessly stranded in some unpleasant place or condition without it.

*Malanggan* is performed because, as various *memai* told me, "it eases the thoughts of the living about the dead." "We don't think of the spirit [of the dead]: we think of their way of living. We think of a person's life, not of his or her spirit, and we want to reciprocate." And, "*Malanggan* is not about the spirit: it is for respect." The respect invoked is not only for the dead: it is the foundation for all relationships, including political relationships, in a successful *malanggan* and in Tikana society.

Like the medieval morality play *Everyman*, *malanggan* ceremonies are about each person's mortality and our coming to grips with the inevitability of death. Like *Everyman*, the dead celebrated and "finished" in *malanggan* "are deserted by Kindred, Goods, and Fellowship. Eventually only Good Deeds goes with *Everyman* into the grave" (Brockett 1977: 117). At one *malanggan* I attended, the leading *memai* addressed, metaphorically (at least), the spirits of the dead brothers being honored, telling them to leave the village and the living who mourned them: "Walk away, William. Walk away, Makalo." And their living brother added, "'Walk away' to William and Makalo? Do even *I* say this? Yes." While Kindred and Fellowship deserted them and their Goods were redistributed among the living, the Good Deeds and hard work of the dead were constantly invoked during the ceremony: "I see the widows of the dead here, and all those of their villages who come behind them with hard work, They are like a picture of the hard work of the two men [who are dead]." And, "Whenever I got something up, he was there, helping." But at a *malanggan*, it is time to "finish" the dead, and go on with the life of the living.

The most basic symbolism of *malanggan* is hard to see, because its symbols are very mundane and very direct: all activities are symbols of the same activities. Giving symbolizes and ritualizes giving, helping symbolizes and ritualizes helping, doing things together symbolizes and ritualizes doing things together: each activity dramatizes and symbolizes, more generally, all the efforts that sustain not only *malanggan* but also life, including the efforts to achieve a strength of character, of person, of body that inspires others to make their own contributions.

People everywhere make art forms from the skills required to make a living. Tikana have made a dramatic ceremony out of theirs. *Malanggan* makes honorable, beautiful, exciting what otherwise might be (and is for the Lavongai) boring and tedious labor; it makes a virtue and an art of necessity, a justification for pride where otherwise there might be contempt and weariness. Fears of deprivation are driven out by a display of plenty, the sadness of death terminated by a group affirmation of life, a sense of directionlessness lifted by a clearing of the known

path. When the *malanggan* is over and daily life resumes, the activities required to maintain life, having had their fundamental values ritualized in drama, retain some of their glory.

### **The Johnson Cult as Theater**

The Johnson cult was part millenarian movement, part political action, part union protest, and part street theater. Here I am going to look at it as improvised drama, which successfully guided the Lavongais of the south coast of New Hanover through a confrontation with the colonial government, gave them a new understanding of their situation, and greatly increased their power to break government laws and to take control over their own lives. Unlike the revolutionary theater of the 1960s in America (Brustein 1971), the Lavongais' intention was originally merely resistance, not social change. They chose a weapon that was one of their sharpest but most ordinary: mockery. Surprised by the power they suddenly saw they had, they have continued to move together in their satiric drama for over twenty years. They won one thing they sought: the ability to make some of their own decisions. But they never got what they asked for: help in overcoming their isolation and developing their island. Unfortunately, as one man said regarding self-government, "just to be boss, with nothing, by and by it will be no good." In telling about the Johnson cult, I will have to tell how it was done, not how it is done: while it has continued its epic course over the years, the Johnson cult, unlike the New Ireland *malanggan*, had not been played before and will not be played again.

#### *Performing the Johnson Cult*

*The Plot of the Play.* The central problem of the play was the struggle for "moral equivalence"<sup>9</sup> with everyone else in this world against men whose morals were in question and whose competence had amply been found wanting. In 1964, the Australian Administration of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea held elections in which people were asked to choose representatives to the newly formed House of Assembly, a kind of "practice parliament" created to prepare the people for self-government and independence (which were finally achieved in 1973 and 1975). This government action posed the proximate question and the initial dilemma. The play is about the responses of the Lavongais to this election. People in the villages heard about the election only second- and third-hand from their councillors: they did not know most of the candidates

(Europeans), did not like the rest (some Europeans and some educated Lavongais), and had no developed interest in being represented by anyone. In this situation, which was, to them, absurd, they found it easy, and amusing, to make an absurd decision: Let's vote for the president of America. Word spread quickly, and when people gathered at the Ranmelek Methodist Mission station to vote on 15 February 1964, they found a blackboard set up before them on which had been written: "We want Johnson of America." The government officers were unable to get people to put their ballots in the red plastic ballot boxes prepared for them at this first and then at several other polling stations on the south coast, but on the north coast people voted "properly." Thus began the division between "Those Who Voted in the Box" and "Those Who Voted on the Board," a division which continues today.

Over the next few months, government officers patrolled the villages to explain that Johnson was not a candidate. Never mind, said the Johnsonites, now identified by the government as "cargo cultists" (Worsley [1957] 1968; Lawrence 1964): we want to vote for him anyway. Next; the government sent surprise patrols to gather census data, a preliminary record-keeping device necessary for tax collection, and threatened jail for any who did not appear to be counted. Finally, tax collectors, accompanied by eighty police, began to patrol by boat: "I looked out one day," one Catholic Sister told me, "and there was the Spanish Armada in the harbor!" Mass arrests began, and continued for three years. The charge: tax evasion and default.

Finally, the local American Catholic priest, Fr. Bernard Miller, called a meeting, and during discussions the idea of forming an economic advancement organization emerged and was enthusiastically endorsed. Called the Tutukuvul Isukul Association (TIA, "Stand Together to Plant," translated "United Farmers Association"), the organization established rules, collected dues, elected officers, claimed communal lands, cleared trees, planted coconuts, and placed TIA "flags" on the new TIA plantations. Those who were "the enemy," the anticultists who had "voted in the box," carried vicious rumors to the government officers, claiming that the cultists were "crazy," that they expected cargo free from the Americans, and that TIA was just a cover: "Those Who Voted on the Board," they said, were still waiting, as TIA members, for Johnson to come. Cultists did not answer these charges: they just worked hard, as they said. In a dazzling set of political maneuvers, they put themselves far ahead of their adversaries in the pecking order. In 1968, TIA president Walla was elected president of the local government council, to which cultists had refused to pay taxes, and he and his

supporters then voted the council out of existence. As they had hoped, “government came up inside of TIA.” In 1972, Walla was elected to the seat in the House of Assembly that Johnson had failed to claim in 1964, but he found it a do-nothing body, and he came home to pursue TIA’s work in New Hanover: plantations were purchased, transport acquired, and outside companies seeking to explore and exploit were prevented from gaining access to New Hanover resources. “The enemy” struggled in vain to join the activities of the new provincial and national governments, both of which had ceased, by 1980, to try to collect taxes, or to jail, or to govern New Hanover. In 1983, TIA members held an “independence march” and, later, proudly gathered at Mt. Patibung, site of American map-making activities in 1963, for a celebration. On this occasion, Walla declared independence from the Westminster-style government of Papua New Guinea, and demanded rule by an American-style presidential system. They were, it seemed, on this day, King of the Hill.<sup>10</sup>

But was that, after all, what they had wanted? To be powerful and alone?<sup>11</sup> Was that the direction their play meant to take? The actors, gradually realizing that the audience (the Australian administration) has left the theater, have begun to wonder themselves what the play was about. The show needed Johnson to arrive, *deus ex machina*, to straighten all the tangles that had evolved in various directions. But he never came; nor, alas, did any other Americans bearing grand schemes. The ending in view is neither happy nor tragic, but the vague and rather sudden denouement of comedy that signals that actors and audience alike are weary of the complications of the play and ready to go home.

*Acts and Scenes.* The history of events in the Johnson cult can be seen as developing dramatically, and analyzed into acts and scenes.

- Act I:       The Election
  - Scene 1: A Fireside Chat: Mulling Over the Upcoming Election
  - Scene 2: Gathering at the Mission, the First Polling Station
  - Scene 3: The Vote for Johnson of America
- Act II:     Government Versus Cultists: Responses and Initiatives
  - Scene 1: Meetings to Hear Gentlemanly Explanations

- Scene 2: Surprise by Census Patrols and Threats of Jail
- Scene 3: Tax Patrols, "the Spanish Armada," and Mass Arrests
- Act III: New Directions and Old Fashions
- Scene 1: "Why Not Develop Our Place?" The Emergence of TIA
- Scene 2: Hard Work, Strong Faith, Vague Hopes, and "The Enemy"
- Scene 3: From Political Drama to Dramatic Politics: Seizing Control Without and Within the Power Structure
- Epilogue: What Did We Get? What Have We Got? What Did We Want?

*The Script.* Individuals who converged at the Ranmelek Methodist Mission station to vote on 15 February 1964 had no thought of this day's being special. They did not expect this election to help them solve the problems with the co-ops, coconuts, coffee, and the council about which they had long complained. When, suddenly, the word spread that some people were going to vote for America, people were elated, and they all agreed to the idea: "We like it." But they did not know what to do. From there on, they improvised the script from their life experiences and their participation in contemporary events.

Consensus flashed at the mission on that day, and no one who was there will ever forget it. It all happened so fast that no one had time to decide who would do what, but that is a feature of improvised dramas: scripting is not necessary. People were guided by a common understanding and a pleasing perspective on reality. There was much confusion, but one thing was clear: instead of voting for one of the candidates offered up by the Australian administration, they were going to vote for someone they really wanted, for the president of America. They had wanted to be ruled by the Americans ever since some Lavongais had worked with Americans during World War II. And at the time of the election in 1964, memories of American generosity and egalitarianism had been refreshed by the presence of a group of U.S. military map makers finishing work that had put them in New Hanover, two thousand feet up Mt. Patibung, for several months. All drama grows out of people's lives, and it was the Americans present "backstage" on Mt. Patibung, and those remembered from wartime, who significantly defined the social and cultural context within which "The Election for



America” was played. Suddenly, at the Methodist mission station in 1964, what had been a half-hearted obedience to a government order became a genuine opportunity for self-expression. The script for the Johnson cult, unlike that for the New Ireland *malanggan*, had not come down through the ages: it had to be ad-libbed. Since this art comes easily and daily to Lavongais, their script grew and flourished.

*Production Arrangements.* The whole show was originally arranged by the government officials: cultists and anticultists merely responded to government cues. But the actors did not like the version of the myth they were asked to reinforce in the show; so they eventually quit trying to influence it, ignored the producers’ orders, and took over the entire production themselves.

*The Director.* No one took responsibility for directing the show once it split off from the official version. There were messengers and spokesmen, but each person took responsibility only for himself and his own actions and beliefs. It was hard for Europeans, used to centralized control, to believe that there was no director: “This was a very well-organized thing,” one Australian missionary told me. Those who are familiar with contemporary European theater or the New York Living Theater, however, are aware that drama may be developed, sometimes in relation to audiences, by actors without interference from directors.<sup>12</sup>

*Actors.* The accounts of the vote at Ranmelek mission given by all the actors reveal the sense of drama that built toward the events of that day. People had found a way to play themselves, all leading roles, instead of the dull, subservient roles assigned by the government. Pengai had been the “mouth for everyone.” It was he who had sent his brother, some days before, to find out “the name of the man who replaced President Kennedy” (about whose death people had heard on the radio) from a group of Americans who were working on map making at Mt. Patibung in the New Hanover mountains. Old Savemat was given the important role of writing the vote on the blackboard, to which he, as a local mission worker, had access. His nephew helped him choose what words to write in pidgin English: “We want Johnson of America. That is all.” When the government officers saw the board next to their red plastic ballot box on the morning of the election, they turned the board around, and proceeded to call the people of the first village on their list to come forward with their ballots. It was Yaman, a man whose arm swung uselessly at his side, who stepped forward as others hesitated, and created

his historic, and his only, part in this drama: "Our vote is already written on the blackboard," he said. "We want Johnson of America." "True?" he asked, looking back at the crowd pressing forward around him. And then every man, woman, and child shouted out, "Yes!" and ran away, leaving the place clear of people! Nearly everyone shouted with laughter as they retold and reenacted this scene. They loved the joke they had played on the Australians.

But one actor, guided by his own thinking, played a lonely role in this scene. As everyone melted away into the bush, only Councillor Silakau remained behind. He saw that the patrol officers were upset and ashamed, and he, a man who sometimes cried in church over the plight of the helpless, felt a little sorry for them. He and the Australian missionary and his wife voted by dropping their ballots into the red box. No one was left to see him, and he did not remember for whom he had voted. He had, however, he said, not allowed other men to "boss my thinking," and he had played the part that was true to himself.

Each actor seemed most interested in telling me about his own role in the drama, less interested than I was in the whole play. But that is as it should be: an improvisation is played primarily for the players, not for the world, and each plays primarily for himself, though in relation to each other and to a general theme. Each actor enhanced primarily his own understanding and only incidentally that of other people. In living theater, the individual may express all his feelings: in this case, resentment and longing, sardonic wit, and the inalienable right of each individual to be his own hero. But the power, usually unacknowledged, from which each person gained strength was the power of the people together. As Pengai, who clearly understood this, said: "Before, each man knew for himself, in his own way. In the election, all our knowledge came together."

*Acting.* "Does it ever seem to you that these people are just acting?" Carroll Gannon, an Australian medical officer who was very close to the cultists, asked me one day. In an improvised drama, the personae of the cast and characters are blended, as they were in the Johnson cult, and the conflicts between cultists, noncultists, government officers of various sorts (administrative, police, service), missionaries of various faiths and nationalities, and European residents are all basic to the plot and pivotal to the action of the play. It is difficult to clearly know, then, when people are acting and when, if ever, they are not.

At first, the government officers of various ranks did not play themselves, but, rather, their own busy roles as professionals. Still, it was hard for them to act their parts well, because they had to abandon the

script with which they had come to New Hanover, and they were not allowed to ad-lib a new one. They needed authorization, instructions: cables were sent, cables were received. Back in government headquarters on the mainland, meetings were held, decisions were made. A new script was forwarded, but it was the same old script: business would proceed as usual. The vote for Johnson would not be mentioned, law and order would be restored, patrol officers would patrol the villages.

Opposition changed the Lavongai expression from an impulsive to a serious demonstration. The cultists were forced to play in earnest because the government did: patrol officers began to take people off to jail, to give chase, to shoot coconuts off trees as “demonstrations of strength.”

While there was no director and no script, there were some actors who tried to clarify, for themselves, each other, and the audience, what was happening. Oliver was the most philosophically articulate of these, and he took his own little show on the road. He traveled from village to village after the vote, talking to people. As a result, he said,

Their minds were clear. That is, they got our thinking, that's all. They must all stand up and be strong in this work, and make this trouble, so that it will have a name, or a year, or a time that by and by all places must hear of this trouble, and seek out the meaning of this trouble: it has come up from what? It has come up from lying, that's all. Making bullshit at this time, for plenty of years.

I asked, “From the lying of Australia?” and Oliver answered, “Yes, about looking after everyone.” Seeking deep personal meaning and clarification is one of the goals of contemporary people-oriented “poor” theater.<sup>13</sup> Those who heard Oliver did not try to decide whether Oliver was just acting or whether he was sincere in his beliefs: they just listened. “The enemy” and the government officers, however, said Oliver was a fraud.

Nevertheless, some of the Australians and missionaries, disgruntled in their own work, began to dislike their parts and to like the Lavongais. Downstage, away from the others, many government officers and other Europeans slipped some tax money to the cultists and noncultists to show they were really good guys, just acting out the villain role assigned to them. A man named Bosap said that officers were all alike, just doing their jobs; but some of them found ways to step out of character.

Scenes from the Johnson cult were dramatically reenacted at least several times by the cultists when they performed for various events,

usually holidays in the mission calendar. It was the arrest and jailing of the men on which these reenactments focused. The government officials with guns were always played as clowns.

*Costumes and Props.* There were not many props or costumes in the Johnson cult, but the cultists made the most of what they had. It was the blackboard, the guns and nightsticks, and the red jail *laplaps* (wrap-around skirts) that recurred in their accounts and in their reenactments. And the red ballot box became a symbol for the enemy, as did the hated badge of the councillor.

When the drama shifted to scenes of TIA, new props became crucial. Fr. Miller believed that symbols were important to people, and he created for TIA what were called "flags," painted wooden signs made to mark the new plantations. People often wondered what these flags meant, and did not always fully accept a mundane explanation.

*Scenery.* Scenery was provided by villages, jails, prison boats, the bush: wherever confrontations occurred.

*Special Effects.* A few gunshots rang out and into the story line, and one smoke bomb: a young man, to everyone's horror, was ordered to go stand in it. "The people," the government officer who gave the order told me, "must understand our strength."

*Auditoriums.* The auditoriums were the cleared spaces in villages, as they were for New Ireland *malanggan*.

*Stages.* All the world's a stage for the Lavongais, and wherever two were gathered together there were players.<sup>14</sup>

*Audiences.* As in *malanggan*, the audience was composed of participants in general. But occasionally outsiders were brought in specifically to be "audiences": most notably, a United Nations Visiting Mission and other outside "experts" who came to hear Lavongai grievances. But they were really there, Lavongais sometimes thought, to make them stop acting like this, pay their taxes, and get off stage.

#### *The Meaning of the Johnson Cult: What the Play Was About*

The Johnson cult was an attempt to create a moral order where people felt that one was lacking. In order to do this, they seized control first of

the definition of the situation; specifically, of the goals of the election offered to them by the Australians. Both Australian government officials and the Lavongais' own educated elite had failed to help them: it was, therefore, morally justifiable for them to vote for America, a country that would, they hoped, help them. The *raison d'être* of the Johnson cult was its support for the assertion that each individual, his true wishes and beliefs, his equal worth with all others, is of Ultimate Concern; and each person is worthy of being saved in this world, in his own lifetime. "The Australians have been here for many years, and they have not changed our lives. Now we want the U.S.A. to have its turn. We want them to teach us the best way how to live good, happy, and useful lives," Samuel wrote in a speech read to the U.N. Visiting Mission.

In contrast to the Tikana, who defined the meaning of life in terms of the good lives of the dead, Lavongais who remembered the dead saw in their lives nothing to emulate, and much to abandon. It was the anticipated death of the self, not the past deaths of others, that figured explicitly in cultists' explanations of their actions. They wanted something for themselves in this world: not mere cargo, as their detractors claimed, but good and meaningful lives.

The Johnson cult was a dramatic expression in which each actor was able to gain some understanding of his role and to affirm his faith in himself and in a moral universe. Cultists strutted and fretted their hour upon the stage, and then they went to work in TIA. They let the world know (literally, through the U.N. Visiting Mission) in a powerful expression that they affirmed the value of their lives, however barren of the world's goods and savvy.

An improvised drama based on the true lives of the actors does not end, but shifts its focus and rests. As the Lavongai actors rest, sitting and talking, "turning things over in our thinking," I suspect that they are wondering, still, what really happened: had they, indeed, won all their confrontations, consolidated their power? But was that what they had wanted? Perhaps when the drama picks up again, it will meander its way toward some clearer answer, or some truer question.

### **Conclusion**

Some scholars of theater think that all theater is political, while others restrict the use of the term to that which is intended to be political.<sup>15</sup> As an anthropologist, I prefer to see all theater, and all art, as having political aspects. I think it is more difficult for us to see that all politics also

have dramatic aspects, and are led by artistic dimensions. In exploring these dimensions, we find that we anthropologists need not, must not, limit our definitions of "political organization" to such characteristics as "legitimate use of force."

Art, and specifically theater, no doubt has universal underpinnings, but the forms built on top of these are certainly culture-specific edifices. My Lavongai friends who attended *malanggan* ceremonies found them astonishingly boring: "If we had to wait this long to eat in New Hanover," said one, "we would all long since have gone home." The fullness of symbolic associations swelling the meaning of actions for Tikana were unknown and unfamiliar to Lavongais. And Tikana who were asked to join the Johnson cult found the very suggestion, made in a church building, rude and disrespectful. Soft lies to save other people's faces are a steady feature of everyday life in New Ireland, but the deliberate marshaling of individual wit and conviction to form heavy satire with which to assault others is unknown, unfamiliar, and profoundly unpleasant to the Tikana. Such satire is widely, but not universally, known among oppressed oppositions in the world, as are formal, respectful, repeated ceremonial dramas among those established in some power structure. It is important for anthropologists to use theatrical and other art models in the analysis of society, culture, and politics, if we want to understand any of these. Without politics, art has no power; without art, politics has nowhere to go, and no way to get there.

### NOTES

1. I have conducted fieldwork among people of the Tigak, Kara, and Nalik language groups of New Ireland, whom I am calling the Tikana, during seven periods of research: 1965, 1966-1967, 1972, 1974, 1983, 1988, and 1990. I worked with the Lavongai of New Hanover during these same periods of research, although I was not allowed to visit their island in 1965 and 1983 (Billings 1989b and Billings 1992). Findings regarding the Tikana and Lavongai are reported in Billings 1969, 1970, 1972, 1983, 1987, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1992; and Billings and Peterson 1967.

2. Research findings that have especially contributed to my understanding include Hauser 1952; Lomax 1968; and Bernstein 1964. See Billings 1970, 1972, 1987. See also Billings 1989c.

3. This concept is developed in Billings 1972 and 1987.

4. See especially Groves 1933, 1935; Powdermaker 1933; and Lewis 1969.

5. I have seen 250 to 650 attend such feasts. They were usually initiated by men, but sometimes by women. All the public speakers I saw were men, but I was told women could also play this role.

6. I have used many of the categories Brockett uses in organizing my analysis.
7. For a discussion of the selection of ritual events, see Turner 1989.
8. "Ultimate Concerns" is Paul Tillich's term for "religion," widely discussed in his work and in the work of others about him. See, e.g., McKelway 1964.
9. Kenneln Burrige coins this term in his work on Mambu (1960). All active Johnson cultists during this period were men. Their wives and children generally supported them, but they said the vote for Johnson was "men's business."
10. Several people tape-recorded this event. The local news media gleefully reported that TIA members had met on Mt. Patibung "to await Jesus," but the tapes confirm TIA members' accounts: they heard speeches about TIA, sang some traditional songs, and ended with a Methodist prayer.
11. In coming to my present understanding of the Johnson cult and the people who created it, I have often thought of Max Weber's work on prophets and pariahs (1952), and especially of a poem about Moses by Alfred de Vigny (1951), which contains these lines:

*Je vivrai donc toujours puissant et solitaire?  
Laissez-moi m'endormir du sommeil de la terre.*

[Must I then live always powerful and alone?  
Let me lie down in the sleep of the common man.]  
*Moise, lines 49-50*

12. The Living Theater is the prime example. See Brockett 1964.
13. Grotowski has written clearly about this point (1968:37): "[T]he decisive factor in this process is the actor's technique of psychic penetration. He must learn to use his role as if it were a surgeon's scalpel, to dissect himself. It is not a question of portraying himself under certain given circumstances, or of 'living' a part; nor does it entail the distant sort of acting common to epic theatre and based on cold calculation. The important thing is to use the role as a trampoline, an instrument with which to study what is hidden behind our everyday mask--the innermost core of our personality."
14. "All the worlds a stage and all the men and women merely players" (Shakespeare, *As You Like It* II: 7, line 139).
15. Schechner (1974) holds the former view, Kirby (1975) the latter. Schechner (1985), Schechner and Schuman (1976), and Victor Turner (1957, 1974, 1982) have led the way to the kind of analysis I attempt here. Potential pitfalls of the approach have been probed by Sandall (1978).