CHAPTER 4

TRADITIONAL SOCIALIZATION AND EDUCATION IN MELANESIA

Kilenge [New Britain, Papua New Guinea] children sense that their teachers may not approve of village customs. By its very nature, the school transmits to its pupils a perception of their inferiority. Because students are generally taught about non-indigenous concepts and topics, they may infer that the ideas and practices of their forefathers are less significant… When such doubts lead to acts of disrespect, outraged parents and village elders quickly blame teachers for turning them against them… in other ways they value [schooling] as a means by which their children are learning about the outside world (Zelenetz and Grant, 1986).

The complex and perplexing issue of education as a largely Westernizing force is significant also to Melanesians. Fieldwork and literature reveal many sentiments and reactions similar to those above of the Kilenge. While in an ethnographic sense this chapter explores Melanesia, it focuses on the nation of Papua New Guinea (PNG). In the years preceding Independence in 1975 there were earnest steps towards modernizing PNG society. One was to promote education, that is, Western education, and I played a small part in this. In 1970–71 I worked with the Pacific Islands Regiment, in Wewak, Vanimo and Goldie River, near Port Moresby, teaching politics and citizenship, and preparing officers and men for their roles in the national army. Essentially, they were to be the ‘loyal right hand’ of the democratically elected national government. I maintain a strong interest and some involvement in PNG education.

Transformation of educational institutions and methodologies is a chancy business involving major innovations and disruptions to local communities. As seen in the previous chapter, the aims, methods and results of traditional education vary considerably from western education. Where traditional education taught accepted cultural ways, preparing individuals for village life and placing the talented in positions of leadership within the society, academic western education tends to be differentiating, setting the educated person apart from the uneducated. Traditional knowledge was a complex, but related whole, designed to ensure a cohesive community by emphasizing the interrelationship of kin. Information imparted was age appropriate and relevant to local needs and circumstances. Learning was associated with the need to use what was learned. Unfortunately, the imposed, didactic, top-down approach to education and development has, too often, failed to deliver its promises.

Western-influenced schooling now plays a significant role in the institutional structure of most third world countries and for Indigenous minorities in Western countries. Those interested in cultural transmission can profit from experience gained in roughly similar circumstances elsewhere. It may be that an understanding of the
evolution and results of formal education in other colonized or formerly colonized countries can throw some light on problems, outcomes and alternatives in PNG.

The problem is, which countries or regions to compare? One major area with characteristics similar enough for a constructive parallel is sub-Saharan Africa. Others might be tropical Australia, particularly the Northern Territory, and much of Melanesia. In these areas tribal and peasant societies have little in the way of formal education. This comes with modernization when these societies are colonized, sometimes dispossessed, coerced, proselytised and indoctrinated to fit the new political and economic order. Both sub-Saharan Africa and Melanesia were exploited as slave reservoirs before they were brought under colonial rule at the climax of European imperialism in the late nineteenth century. For both, colonialism brought a limited number only of white settlers and the question of local political independence was either hardly raised or effectively suppressed until after World War Two.

A more sociological dimension is the common lack of an established ‘overall’ civilization. As for traditional Australia, in Melanesia large-scale political and social affiliations were non-existent. The dominant ‘primordial attachments’ were clan-based in character, flowing along lines of kinship, both real and classificatory. The traditional social world can be seen as one of concentric circles. Innermost is the family, the household, the village. Next are friends and allies relatively nearby, with whom women have been exchanged. A little wider encompasses the dialect group (wantoks), also friends and allies. Those seen as targets for raiding, but, on occasion, for trade, are next. Relations with them are fraught, suspicious; they may be seen as enemies. Finally, there are those beyond the known world, complete strangers and foreigners.

Another similarity is that of the systems of land-tenure, involving community ownership either by village or a lineage group. Land tenure, heritage, customs, ties and obligations to land, are crucial to an understanding of the role and effect of Western education in sub-Saharan Africa and Melanesia.

In both areas the invading colonial system endeavoured to bring about major transformations in economic, political and social life: incorporating people and economies into world-wide trading patterns, forging national communication systems and political control, and creating rigid, caste-like social systems. In Africa and Melanesia, as pressures for local self-determination and independence grew, the colonial regimes, through their educational, bureaucratic and military systems, allowed a minority to enter the colonial elite. Many of the newly educated young people adopted the manners, lifestyle expectations and values of the white colonial elite they were gradually replacing. They shunned physical labour, often turned their back on village life despite being quite prepared to use local and regional affiliations for political gain, and saw their education as both an escape from subsistence lifestyle and a qualification to exercise authority over the uneducated.

Since the early 1960s a minority of Papua New Guineans has been incorporated into the ruling elite, which in 2010 still includes significant numbers of expatriates and non-Indigenous citizens of PNG. This high status class, with more political power and higher incomes than the rest of the population, has emerged due to rapid localization of the bureaucracy, expansion of secondary and tertiary education, considerable