Discussion of Marai

Melanesian Consensus: Questions?

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Leo Marai's article proposes to study the central role of consensus in conflict resolution in Melanesia and to describe its particular psycho-cultural characteristics. He applies his view to the resolution of the Bougainville crisis as an illustrative example.

The Melanesian view of the power of consensus has caught the attention of several anthropologists and has spawned a small literature (Leavitt, 2001). As Marai puts it, 'without consensus, there is no Melanesian way of resolving conflicts'. In western culture, we frequently use 'agreement' and 'consensus' near synonymously. Needless to say, the western notion of 'agreement' runs less deep. Adversaries who wish to argue with their opponents often begin by saying 'I agree with my opponent that … but …'

It is clear that the Melanesian concept of the term 'consensus' is far richer. It is generally defined as the product of a complex group process in which the varying views of individual members converge to near unanimity. Such a result is highly prized in Papua New Guinea (PNG), for the belief in the potency of consensus is widely held. Indeed, in one study of a revivalist movement among the Bombita in PNG, Leavitt (2001) noted that the idea that consensus itself had the power to bring about the new age was generally believed. Leavitt (2001) argued that this high valuation is the result of the highly rule-bound nature of relationships in Melanesian society that is the source of both ambivalence and dissatisfaction. From this point of view, consensus allows group members to discuss controversial issues without risk of giving offence or of crossing bounds. 'Everyone is working toward the same goal while at the same time preserving a sense of personal autonomy' (Leavitt, 2001, p. 155). Correspondingly, there is a sense of heightened affect, hope, enhanced effectiveness, and group cohesion. In this sense, consensus is a precondition for agreement.

Marai gives considerable attention to the role of the leader in enabling the group to achieve this sometimes exhilarating sense of cohesion. Traditional Melanesian (male) society is one of equals; leadership is not generally hereditary but a mark of community respect. The leader may hold an office, generally 'chief', but as often he is a 'Big Man', a person of repute and influence. Unlike a chief, the Big Man holds no political position that gives him power, but must use the admiration he has earned for his economic skills, his rhetorical gifts, his courage in war and his ritual knowledge to exert his influence. He attempts to heighten pre-existing movement toward consensus; he does not overtly impose it. Certainly, he may attempt to guide the group based on his own beliefs. But his position is delicate and unstable. 'If a big man demands more from his associates than they see themselves as receiving in return, they will desert him' (Sillitoe, 1998, p. 109). Such leaders are skilled at sensing the subtle shifts in opinion among group members, and using them to achieve a degree of alliance and coalition (Sillitoe, 1998).

As I understand Marai's discussion, consensus is at once a prerequisite, a process and a goal in conflict resolution. By its very nature it must be conduced face-to-face, hence, it is characteristically a small group process. It is a 'bottom-up' form of decision-making among political equals. Young (1998) refers to this as an 'elicitive' approach to conflict resolution in contrast to a more westernised prescriptive one. He states that:

> Prescriptive approaches generally assume universal models of conflict resolution, which are then applied or adapted in particular cultural situations. Elicitive approaches, on the other hand, recognise the existence of distinctive cultural understandings of conflict and its resolution, which are then clarified, elucidated, and enhanced through reflection and dialogue. (p. 211)

However, several qualifications are in order. It is unlikely that social groups use only a single style in their negotiations. It is quite likely that the norm is a mixture of the

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two and that part of a leader's skill is in knowing when to shift between them. Furthermore, Young's description of the elicitive leadership style does not adequately capture the high affective charge generated in the course of arriving at consensus. It is largely cognitive. In Marai's examples, ritual, symbolisation and music are used to maintain a forward momentum.

The final part of Marai's article is entitled 'The Bougainville Conflict: A Consensus Approach' and it is here that he demonstrates the way traditional elements were incorporated into what was a protracted and complex negotiation. For example, elements 'like breaking of spears, killing of pigs, feasting, singing, shaking hands and dancing' were identifiable in the peace process. In this context, they provided a form of continuity between traditional and contemporary practices. They served to 'reinforce peace', presumably by referring back to practices that historically had signalled the achievement of consensus.

This, despite the fact the specific negotiation processes employed in the various Bougainville crisis negotiations used methods that would have seemed out of place a generation before. These were marked by a preponderantly prescriptive approach (particularly in the latter years of the crisis) relying on 'universal models of conflict resolution' and working with representatives drawn from governmental institutions and rebel factions, and with the participation of at least three foreign governments. Although in the early period of the crisis the groundwork was laid at the community level, later negotiations were not face-to-face as had been typical in those described in the earlier part of the article.

In his bibliography Marai includes an excellent 'on the ground' description of these earlier practices from elsewhere in Melanesia (Gregory & Gregory, 2002, 2003). In fact, because of the lack of security and the absence of external monitors, early alliances were often shifting and changeable. From 1997 on (almost a decade after the onset of the crisis) intensive attention was finally paid to establishing security (including unarmed monitoring forces from New Zealand, Australia, Fiji and Vanuatu) and a UN Observer Mission. By 1998, the political process began to operate and gradual agreement on outcomes did not begin until June 1999 (Regan, 2002).

On the most contentious issues, the decision to defer discussion at the outset was important in permitting negotiations to proceed.

After a lengthy process, the outcome included the passing of two constitutional laws by the National Parliament. During this eventful, tortuous and often tragic decade, the growth of national feeling ('one people, one country, one nation'), the emergence of a bipartisan consensus and the use of traditional symbols served as countervailing elements to divisive forces and marked the gradual achievement of consensus. In this sense, achieving consensus is sealing an oath.

One notes, once again, the complex dimension of what seemed at first a univocal concept. One would hope that Marai will go on to write in more detail of topics he only touches on in this article. It would be interesting to learn more about psychodynamic issues underlying the Bougainville negotiations — how the anger, sadness, regret and happiness were addressed. What has been the impact of acculturation, post-colonialism and the development of new economic structures on contemporary Papua New Guineans and women's rights? What has been the effect of these rapid changes on the concept of 'consensus' as a reparative mechanism? What has been the impact on mental health of those who can find a place in the new market economy and on those who are excluded?

It is to Marai's credit that his article challenges us to address issues of critical importance in global politics and does so by introducing us to the ethno-psychology of one of its smallest participants. One looks forward to further contributions from him.

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