

Capitalism,  
Primitive and Modern

*Some Aspects of Tolai Economic Growth*

T. SCARLETT EPSTEIN



## Capitalism, Primitive and Modern

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Economic Development and Social Change in South India*  
Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1962

# Capitalism, Primitive and Modern

*Some Aspects of Tolai Economic Growth*

T. SCARLETT EPSTEIN

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1968 by Michigan State University Press

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 4RN  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

First issued in paperback 2019

Copyright © 1968 by Taylor & Francis.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

ISBN 13: 978-0-87855-397-6 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-1-138-50789-0 (pbk)

To Bill, Micky, and Debbie



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group  
<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

## Foreword

A foreword to this book is gilding the lily. Scarlett Epstein is well known already for her excellent study of economic development and social change in South India, praised from the economic point of view by Sir Arthur Lewis. She has also published many articles on her research in India and among the Tolai of New Britain, including two in collections of essays on economic anthropology with which I have been concerned. This foreword then is a salute to a colleague as much as a continued declaration of faith in the importance of her contribution to a still too little studied subject.

I have no specialist knowledge of the Tolai area, but I visited Rabaul and its neighbourhood in 1951 for a brief space and was impressed by the vigour of the economic processes of the Tolai people, their lively political interests and their wish for independence of government control. I noted the wide range of cash transactions into which the people entered and the relative wealth and sophistication of their technical equipment. But I was struck also by the intermingling of traditional and modern elements in their culture: a house with a mixture of thatch, wood, and corrugated iron; an outrigger canoe side by side with a copra drier. I was astonished by the Rabaul market with from two to four thousand people at various times buying and selling an imposing diversity of local products: coconuts, canarium almonds, areca nuts, lime and betel leaf, peanuts, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuce, melons, pumpkins, papaya, spinach, sugar cane, yams, maize, limes, aubergines, fowls' eggs, baskets, whisks. Most of the sellers were women coming in trucks and jeeps or walking in with head and back loads. What was of special interest was the fact that three kinds of currency were in use, shillings, cowrie shell strings, and tobacco. All the transactions I saw were in fairly small amounts, one shilling, one span string of cowries, one stick of tobacco,

and it appeared surprisingly that there was no haggling. I was told indeed that all transactions were in quantities of a shilling, its multiples and equivalents, and that the size of the package given in return varied according to the state of the market.

In discussion with some senior Tolai people I heard what to an anthropologist even in those days was a startling suggestion—that their community should change their structure from matrilineal to patrilineal. According to my particular informant it was not fair that a child should not inherit from his father and that another man's child should. He argued that there was much support for the change. 'All like rausim this fella fasin' (people would like to throw out this idea).

I was not in the area long enough to check my observations, to find out how representative were the market practices, the level of economic achievement, the sophisticated, dynamic attitude towards the social structure. But I came away feeling the fascination of the social scene and the need for proper anthropological analysis of its components.

In this book Scarlett Epstein has richly set out for us the Tolai economic situation. With a wealth of carefully recorded detail and a stimulating theoretical approach she has examined the development of these people from a traditional shell money accumulating economy to a modern cash economy with achievement of a high productive order. The Tolai are remarkable for their rapid, massive response to the new opportunities presented to them by introduced technology and communication facilities. Dr Epstein has been able to explain how the flexibility of their social system and their partially monetised, traditional economy have assisted in these developments. Yet they have not abandoned all their former way of life. The limited labour requirements of their crops allow them to blend innovation with traditional institutions, and side by side with a lively interest in modern cash benefits they still accumulate cowrie shell strings for use in traditional transactions. Moreover, considerable as is their economic achievement in modern conditions, growing pressure of land, maintenance of traditional forms of land tenure, and lack of investment in commerce and manufacturing industry have tended to hamper their attainment of levels of capitalised enterprise comparable with those

of the most developed sectors in the economy. Dr Epstein reveals with great skill the complex interrelationships involved in this whole situation.

The book is thus a contribution to economic anthropology in two major ways. It provides a most interesting example of the subtle interrelationships between traditional and modern forces in an economic and social system. It also faces frontally the problem of economic growth in a Western Pacific society, and by careful analysis demonstrates the significance of social factors for an understanding of economic problems.

*London, November 1967*

Raymond Firth



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group  
<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

## Acknowledgments

This book is based on field work which I carried out on the Gazelle Peninsula during fifteen months between 1959 and 1961 as a Research Fellow in the Department of Pacific Economics, Australian National University. The writing up of the material in this form was made possible by the award in 1966 of a Visiting Fellowship in the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University. My thanks are due to Professor J. G. Crawford for his continuous encouragement in my work.

I am deeply indebted to many officers of the New Guinea administration for their help in making records available to me and the readiness with which they gave me the benefit of their own experience in the Territory, as well as for their warmth and hospitality. In particular I would like to thank J. R. Foldi, D.C., Rabaul; H. West, D.O., Rabaul; J. Emanuel, A.D.O., Rabaul; C. Liddle, A.D.O., Local Government, Vunadadir and their families; J. Lamrock and R. Pulsford of the Department of Agriculture; and K. Gorrenge and G. Dunn of the Tolai Cocoa Project.

My debt is greatest to my many Tolai friends and informants who patiently helped me to learn their language, put up with my many tedious and detailed inquiries and altogether spared no effort to help me understand their way of life. The Rapi Toks not only generously allowed me to observe all their social activities, they also insisted that I participate in them, including taking my place as a member of the dance team at a large mortuary rite. To Bilak and his wife Ia Varpian, in whose hamlet my house was built, were my constant guides and companions, so were many other Rapi Tok men, women, and children of whom I can mention only a few: Tarai, To Dungen, To Nelson, To Riet, Turme, Iaure, Ia Ngai me, Ia Delila. My local research assistants, To Peril, To Enos and To Magugu

were tireless in helping me collect the data I wanted. I shall always gratefully remember the sincere friendship and hospitality the Rapirok people offered me; the coil of their most precious shell money, which they helped me to accumulate, serves as a permanent reminder of my stay among them.

My thanks are due to Mr E. K. Fisk who worked painstakingly through the manuscript and also to Professor J. A. Barnes for his comments on earlier drafts. I am also grateful to Dr H. C. Brookfield, who advised on the technical aspects of the topography of the Gazelle Peninsula, as well as to Mr H. Gunther for his assistance in drawing the maps.

Chapters 3, 4, and 7 first appeared in the journals *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, *Economic Record*, and *Australian Journal of Agricultural Economics* respectively. They are reproduced here in an altered form with permission.

Finally, I wish to thank my husband and our two little daughters who, throughout the period of writing this book, have borne patiently my ill temper and shortcomings as a wife and mother.

*Canberra, September 1967*

T. SCARLETT EPSTEIN

# Contents

Foreword	vii
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	xix
1 The Tolai Scene	1
2 Primitive Capitalism	19
3 European Contact and Tolai Economic Development	34
4 Economic Change	54
5 Subsistence Consumption and Modern Capitalism	88
6 Cocoa Production and Sales	114
7 Rabaul Market	134
8 Conclusion	165
Bibliography	177
Index	181

## Tables

1	Copra production	38
2	Value of imports into New Guinea and estimated Tolai consumption	43
3	Estimated income from agricultural produce	51
4	Population in the Tolai area	51
5	Age and sex structure, Rapitok, 1960	56
6	Average monthly budget, migrant households, Rapitok, 1960	65
7	Average monthly budget, villager households, Rapitok, 1960	66
8	Average capital assets, Rapitok, 1960	68
9	Truck budget, Rapitok, 1961	72
10	Monthly shop account, Rapitok and Baining	74
11	Tolai agriculture	80
12	Relationship between capital assets, migrant and villager households, Rapitok, 1960	82
13	Distribution of capital assets, Rapitok, 1960	86
14	Sources of food and sundries, Rapitok, 1960	89
15	Average non-productive property, Rapitok, 1960	92
16	Estimated balance of payments, Rapitok, 1960	98
17	Allocation of working time, Rapitok, 1960	100
18	Cocoa production, New Britain	115
19	Cocoa production, Tolai	116
20	Distribution of cocoa trees, Rapitok, 1960	125
21	Cash and tambu trade, Rabaul market	149
22	Sold and unsold produce, Rabaul market	151
23	Average value of produce, Rabaul market	155

TABLES

xv

24	Average and total produce, Rabaul market	156
25	Distribution of produce sold, Rabaul market	157
26	Types of produce, Rabaul market	158
27	Types of sold and unsold produce, Rabaul market	159
28	Transactions by different categories of buyers, Rabaul market	162

# Plates

	<i>facing page</i>
1 Preparing a coil of tambu	86
2 <i>Above left</i> Display of accumulated tambu wealth	87
<i>Above right</i> Splitting coconuts for copra	
<i>Below</i> Fishing at Matupit	
3 <i>Above</i> A small parish retail store	102
<i>Below</i> Hot air copra drier	
4 <i>Above</i> Rapitok men repairing a jeep	103
<i>Below</i> Sellers at Rabaul market	

# Maps

I	The Gazelle Peninsula and adjacent areas	3
II	The northern Gazelle Peninsula	55
III	Rapitok parish	57
IV	Cultivation pattern	78
V	Rabaul market	136



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group  
<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

## Introduction

This book is about the Tolai, a Melanesian people living on the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain, to the north-east of the mainland of New Guinea. The Tolai are reported to have been cannibals until about the end of the last century (Pfeil, 1899:131), yet nowadays they are regarded as one of the most sophisticated and advanced people of the whole of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea.

I made a study of the Tolai in the years 1959-61, including two periods, totalling 15 months, living with them in a parish. This study revealed many particularly interesting aspects in the economic life and development of these people, some of which have an interest and significance which goes far beyond the affairs of the Tolai people and those immediately concerned with them. The purpose of this book is to describe and discuss these aspects of Tolai economic development and to analyse the general theoretical implications which emerge.

Economic expansion has become a problem of world-wide dimensions. Administrators and entrepreneurs in advanced economies are nowadays highly change-conscious; national income statistics are carefully collected and compiled with a view to examining the growth rate of economies. Growth rate targets are set and national policies geared to their achievement. Yet it must be borne in mind that economic progress is a fairly recent phenomenon even in what are now highly industrialised societies.

From the earliest times of which we have record—back say two thousand years before Christ—down to the beginning of the eighteenth century, there was no very great change in the standard of life in the civilised centres of the earth. Ups and downs certainly. Visitations of plague, famine and war. Golden intervals. But no progressive violent change (Keynes, 1933:360).

The rapid and essentially continuous rise in per capita income in Europe and North America during the past two-and-a-half centuries, which has come to be regarded as 'normal' in these countries, is in fact a unique phenomenon in the history of mankind.

This recent and very rapid economic expansion in certain parts of the world has created a glaring discrepancy between advanced and underdeveloped economies: the former are wealthy and grow richer year by year, while the latter are poor and are only slowly emerging from their past economic stagnation. Most of these backward countries are former colonies in Africa and Asia. In many of these areas the rate of political development exceeded that of economic growth: political aspirations by far outstripped economic resources. Nationalist movements in these dependent countries made it clear to colonial powers that they had to be granted political independence. However, newly emerging states in Africa and Asia frequently found that, although they had gained political independence, they did not yet form economically viable units. Western countries realised the need to give financial assistance and other help to these newly emerging nations in order to ensure their survival and the persistence of democratic institutions. Western economists and technical experts were sent to draw up plans of development for these backward countries. But in a democratic system, which is the ultimate aim, the population cannot be forced to react positively to new economic opportunities.

The take-off into economic expansion in the advanced countries is well documented. By contrast, little is as yet known about the process of initiating growth in the underdeveloped areas of Melanesia and parts of Africa, many of which are still composed of a great number of small and fairly independent tribal or village economies. Frequently, environmental factors are responsible for this fragmentation and isolation, as, for instance, is the case in the Highlands of New Guinea. The rate of development varies considerably from society to society, depending on a combination of indigenous and exogenous social, cultural, political, and economic variables. Some of the major political and social variables are political institutions and

organisations, and social mobility and flexibility in the traditional system of social relationships. Specialisation and trade, the internal economic potential, that is the proportion of unused resources (Fisk, 1962:466), market forces and other external influences (Fisk, 1964:158) are some of the economic determinants of growth.

It appears impossible to reduce the complex and intricate interconnection of all these different kinds of variables to a simple causal relationship with economic development. However, with small-scale societies such as the Tolai of New Britain, who were contacted by Europeans only towards the end of the last century, it is at least possible to attribute the beginning of economic development to the economic factors of the introduction of steel tools and the widening of the market with its different aspects—the availability of new and exotic consumption goods, the introduction of foreign currency, and so on. Not all so recently contacted societies have advanced at the same rapid rate as the Tolai. In some, the slow rate of economic growth has been a disappointment to planners and administrators, while in others the speed of change has been startling. Any observer of the Tolai cannot help but be struck by their quick and positive response to new economic opportunities.

At the end of the nineteenth century the Tolai were technologically still extremely primitive: they used sharp pieces of bamboo, stone axes, and pointed sticks as their main tools (Kleintitschen, 1906:16). Yet only fifty years later they already owned a large number of motor vehicles, as well as costly copra driers and cocoa fermentaries. In terms of per capita cash income the Tolai are still underdeveloped and poor. In 1959 their estimated per capita cash receipts, subsistence production excluded, amounted to no more than £25,\* which represented only 11 per cent of the U.K. per capita income for the same year. Nevertheless, the Tolai of the Gazelle Peninsula already gave an impression of great wealth as compared with other small New Guinea societies.

\*Monetary figures are given in £ Australian, the currency ruling at the time of my study. Prior to 1933 the £ Australian was at par with the £ Stg. Since then it equals only 16s. Stg. Australia changed over to decimal currency at the beginning of 1966.