



## SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

# The Melanesian Way: Interpretation in the Context of Leadership and Consensus as the Approach to Solving Conflict

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the interpretation of the Melanesian Way in leadership and its role in conflict resolution within Melanesian communities. It aims to analyse how traditional leadership values, particularly the “Big Man” leadership model, contribute to social cohesion and dispute settlement. A literature review and narrative analysis were used to interpret the socio-political significance of Melanesian leadership structures. It argues that although the Melanesian Way refers to a complex system reflecting values and norms developed over thousands of years, it remains relevant today. The findings indicate that Melanesian leadership is deeply influenced by Christian values, shaping conflict resolution strategies that emphasize consensus, charisma, and social harmony. This research contributes to the broader understanding of indigenous governance by demonstrating how traditional leadership systems remain relevant in contemporary conflict management. By highlighting the effectiveness of culturally embedded governance mechanisms, this study offers insights into alternative models of conflict resolution beyond state-centric approaches.

## KEYWORDS

Big Man; Consensus; Conflict Resolution; Melanesian Way

## INTRODUCTION

The term Melanesia is known as the region that extends from the province of Papua in Indonesia in the west to the Fiji Islands in the east. This region is situated in the southern part of the Pacific Ocean along with the region of Micronesia and Polynesia. These three subregions denote a broad culture that is distinct from one to another. As a culturally based sub-region of the South Pacific, along with Micronesia and Polynesia, the Melanesia has its own interpretation of social and political system, and the way of life and social system in the region, called the Melanesian Way, based on the tradition and their very own culture that stands from thousands of years (see [Lawson, 2013](#); [Sahlins, 1963](#); [Sillitoe, 1998](#)).

As both a geographical and cultural region, Melanesia has a long history of civilization that reflects values that are very fascinating to learn and to understand. The geographical approach will show the wide range of understanding the identity of Melanesia in the Pacific. Whilst the cultural approach, the identity of Melanesia has its idea of the Melanesian Way, which represents the way of understanding the culture of the Melanesian, as well as serves as the main discussion in this article.

This article aims to elaborate the uniqueness of leadership in Melanesian culture. There are three styles of leadership in Melanesia, namely the Poor Man, the Rich Man, and the Big-Man. It is essential to understand that these three styles of leadership do not exclusively belong to Melanesian culture solely. Another source writes that the three styles are also found in the culture of Polynesian ([Sahlins, 1963](#)). Among the three, the Big Man style is considered to be the most prominent style. It has been discussed in many books and writings for years and is believed to be the most representative among leaders in Melanesian social and political entities (see [Rio, 2014](#); [Sahlins, 2013](#); [Robbins, 2016](#)).

The leadership itself is very essential in Melanesian community. Not only it helps the management of the community, but it is crucial especially in the approach of the way Melanesian in solving the conflict. Conflict in Melanesian is latent. Although Melanesian believe in the concept of egalitarian and group consensus, as the interpretation of the spirit of Melanesian Way, horizontal conflict always has the potential to occur in society. For example, domestic violence is often transformed into horizontal conflict involving clans and tribes if this comes from a couple of different tribes.

Moreover, this type of conflict spiralled into a problem of day-to-day politics. If it does not meet the solution or consensus between parties, this will turn into mass chaos involving bloody and deathly violence. To understand the danger of this situation, one must realize that on a certain level, the transformation of the conflict into a bigger scale could be utilized as a commodity of political intervention by international political entities. They tend to intervene especially when it comes to the concern of human rights and civil protections. The risk of this intervention is high, considering the situation of conflict management in the state of emergency and violence. Most of the time involves another violent approach that is believed necessary by the authority. All this will lead to the interest of foreign entities

concerning humanity and human rights by taking action and intervening with local and national governments.

Another example of the typology of the conflict is the struggle of power that have been the characteristics of the conflict in Melanesia in the post colonisation period. As one the last parts of the globe to experience the colonization of the European, Melanesia also experienced evolution in terms of their civilization. Pacific islanders have had their contact with the European explorers, beachcombers, traders, and missionaries since the late of 1500s. The later contact was with the colonial governments. During the time of colonisation, the Pacific islanders had become a part of the global economy. The Melanesians in particular, were having their part of providing labour both in the Pacific and beyond. For example, they work for the plantation of the sugar cane in Fiji and Queensland, as well as providing workers for the plantations of the coconut in Samoa ([Dinnen et al., 2010](#)).

It is believed that the contact with the European, the colonial, apparently brought changes in sense of physical and cultural development. For example, the use of the language of Pidgin or Tok Pisin, the language based on English and spoken in the border of Papua and mostly in Papua New Guinea, and still to this very day. The language is also believed to be the answer to the language barrier among people of the two regions, where the invention of the language is dated back in the 19th century, since the first encounter of Europeans with Melanesians due to trading ([Siegel, 2024](#)).

However, the legacy of colonisation is severe. They deconstructed social situations, by putting groups of the local in the opposing position to each other to induce conflict. The exploitation of both natural and human resources, on the other hand, give cause to shortage and scarcity that lead to poverty in society. The withdrawal of the colonials will generate questions about the succession of the leadership, in terms of who is the rightful to lead post colonials. In this situation, conflict is most likely inevitable, that every group or clan will fight for their right to claim the leading position. It is known that there were several occurrences of internal conflicts throughout Melanesian political entities in the mid 1980s. To name the few of it, there were the military coup in Fiji, the Bougainville rebellion movement in Papua New Guinea, the attempt of coup in Vanuatu, and the murder of Jean-Marie Tjibaou in New Caledonia (see [Hamid, 1996b](#); [Paramma et al., 2021](#)).

On top of that, the post-colonial era shows the complexity of the conflict within Melanesian countries, with the character of the power struggle among groups within the country. For example, the series of conflicts in Papua, the Melanesian entity in Indonesia. As an integral part of Indonesia, Papua has a long history of conflict identified with both vertical conflict between government and community, and horizontal conflict within groups, tribes, or clans, with all conflicting parties competing in their attempt to control all resources in Papua ([Mara, 2021](#)).

In the time of conflict, the role of the leadership is very crucial to mitigate the potential of the conflict to exacerbate. The leader in his leadership is required to apply the most

relevant understanding to meet the end solution and the consensus within the community that will help to resolve conflict.

With this background, this article argues that although the Melanesian Way refers to a complex system reflecting values and norms developed over thousands of years, it remains relevant today, as seen in some Melanesian leaders in the region. This paper particularly discusses how the Melanesian Way as the traditional concept of thinking plays a role in the leadership and is accepted as the best approach in resolving conflict within today's modern community of Melanesia. Considering the Melanesian view, traditional approaches such as Melanesian leadership in the spirit of the Melanesian Way are the most effective. They believe that only Melanesian understand the problem of and in Melanesia.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Melanesian way is accepted as a complex system that reflects values and norms that were constructed thousands of years, from ancient period to today's modern civilization in the region. It refers to the series of beliefs and behavioural guidance within the Melanesian community. Melanesian way can also be viewed as a series of wisdom of the civilization that stands the test of time for thousands of years, far before it was considered to meet the civilization of the West.

Melanesians believe in the Melanesian Way. It has the relevance of the religion in it, because it is divine ([Narokobi, 1983](#)). Just like religion, it passes down the generation as an integral part of the heart and the soul, and therefore it grows with the body and the mind and accompanying every Melanesian. To put the relevance of the religion in the context of Melanesian Way, the value of Christianity reflects strongly in it. As Narokobi mentions in his book, the Melanesian Way coincides with Christian or other religious truths. It said that Melanesian way may coincide with the logic, but at the same time it still prompts its own uniqueness. Christian beliefs have evolved and interacted in many ways with Melanesian cultures ([Jones, 2019](#)).

Throughout the time of contact with the European, Christian missionaries were the most lasting people to have a part in the evolution of the social constructions within the Pacific people including in Melanesia. The impact of the missions in their inexorable quest of converting the islanders was profound, that by the late 1800s, the majority of the Pacific Islands people had been Christianized, and so was Melanesia. Since then, the Christianity has become an essential characteristic of Melanesia. So, it is only clear to state that to understand Melanesian Way will always involve the value of Christianity ([Douglas, 2003](#)).

The idea of Melanesian Way in the way it describes Melanesian can be divided into two divisions, personal and community. As a single person, Melanesian emphasize patience and compassion. Therefore, they live in a peaceful and non-violence manner in their person-to-person relations, on a daily basis. Patience and Compassion itself have been the core idea of what Jesus had taught as the moral of Christianity. It is written in the Galatians 5:22, with

the words “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” These teachings have been the principle of life of the Melanesian that grow with age.

In the aspect of person-to-person relations, the community, Melanesian emphasises on the act of a cosmic-persons where they tend to live in a harmonious universe or cosmos. In this very sense, Melanesian are taught to live in a harmonious life with nature. This is the representation of the concept of adjoining nature. They believe in the state of being close to nature in the most natural way. Again, the value of Christianity probably will be most approachable to help to understand the context above. Although it is not necessary to be accepted as the sole ground thinking, the relations between human and nature had been narrated in the book of Genesis, where the story of the creation of the earth began. The words of God being said to the first humans on the earth in Genesis 1:28: “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it”. And so humans vested the power and rights towards the earth and what fills on it.

Apart from being consistent with the value of Christianity, as a culture that stands from hundreds of years, Melanesian have this traditional spirituality that is viewed as Melanesians’ expression of their totality in relation to the great spirits of nature. And that includes the close relations of Melanesian with land, forest, mountains, rivers, birds and animals ([Nongkas & Tivinarlik, 2004](#)). For Melanesian nature was perceived as the source of both their physical sustenance as well as spiritual and intellectual nourishment. Therefore, being close to nature gives impact on the occurrence of nature-based socio-economy systems in the lives of Melanesian and is a part of Melanesian civilization until today.

The other reflection of Christianity in the Melanesian Way can be seen in the essential ideas of unity of the body. In this very sense, Melanesian Way is interpreted as the product of politics and culture. Melanesian believes in the concept of Unity and Diversity in the Body, that reflects the message bible in 1 Corinthians 12:12: “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts forms one body, so it is with Christ”. To put the context in the message, the body is described as a unity. It comprises many organs, but the organ system serves as a singular mechanism. Therefore, it reflects the way they see Melanesian nations as one united nation.

Melanesian people have very strong sentiment of unity among Melanesian thus affecting the way they perceive their freedom, independence, and sovereignty. This is not necessarily understood as Melanesian as one country. But rather the sentiment of solidarity in unity. So much they believe in the purity and value of Melanesian, they have this aphorism of *Wantok* ([Standish, 1978](#)). One way to understand *Wantok* is that *Wantok* (Melanesian Origin / wan; one / tok; nation, refers to Melanesian Race). This sentiment of solidarity also comes from the spirit of the Melanesian purity of identity. It is once explained that Melanesia is inhabitant of people who are of neither Asian nor European. At the very same time they believe that are not African or Polynesian, even though they have people of

lighter complexion ([Narokobi, 1983](#)). Thus, arises the believe in Melanesian people or countries that no Melanesian (as a whole) is free and independent whilst one other Melanesian is not. Freedom and independence should be as a whole Melanesian. Not partial. To put in in a simple word, there is no freedom in Melanesia unless all Melanesian countries is holding their independence. Because just like what the bible postulates in the chapter, every organ and part of the body feel pain together and they grow together, as whole.

The other way to understand this context of unity of the body is the depiction of egalitarian society with the belief in the concept of group consensus. Body – and so its organs grow together. The organs of the body never work on their own. By this, the concept of decentralization is significantly important in the political administration in Melanesian. The synergy between the political entities among Melanesian as a country is seen as essential. The political transformation of Papua, with the forming of a new administration of autonomies in the region will be the best example of it.

## **METHODS**

The method of the research of the article is qualitative research. Data used in the research obtained from literature studies, which include data from books, journals, annual reports, and news and articles released on the online platform. Data is processed through a qualitative approach offered by [Miles and Huberman](#) (1984) which emphasises the analysis of the text narratively. The narrative analysis model focused on the effort of interpreting and identifying the actual meaning or reality beneath the phenomena that lies on the narratives displayed in the form of text. The narrative analysis in research method allows the possibility of one to understand the phenomena through the story both delivered in narrative text or narrative oral ([Moleong, 2014](#)). Through this method, one should be able to determine the answer for the question, by analysing the structure of words in the language system. Added to this, the analysis mode of metaphor also used to deepen the possibility of exploring more meaning through the symbols in social cultures.

To support the effort of building strong analysis of the context, as mentioned earlier, the article also relies on the utilization of the approach in interpretive social studies offered by Newman. In his work of interpretive social studies, he suggests that the interpretive method is related to hermeneutics that is largely found in philosophy and religious studies, which also emphasize on text analysis which could refer to conversation, written text, and pictures. ([Newman, 2000](#)). This interpretive method guides and helps researchers to conduct deep reading to absorb deep and wide viewpoints, and then develop deep understanding in the target of discovering meaning embedded within text.



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Melanesia: Brief Understanding

Melanesia, in the way it is viewed, can be identified as both a geographical and cultural-based region. Melanesia is the archipelago group that extends from New Guinea in the west to the Fiji Islands in the east and includes the Arafura Sea. It is the subregion of Oceania which is situated in the southwestern Pacific Ocean. Melanesia is one of the three divisions of the cultures in the South Pacific, where it sits along with Polynesia and Micronesia (see Figure 1).

Geographically, the Melanesia will depict the large stream of Islands including Papua, Central Papua, Highland Papua, South Papua, Southwest Papua, and West Papua of the Indonesia, Torres Strait of the Australia, New Caledonia of which under the administration of French, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Fiji, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands. The region shares border with Indonesia in its western part, Australia in its southwestern and southern part, New Zealand in the south-eastern part, the islands of Polynesia in the eastern and north-eastern part, and islands of Micronesia in its northern area (see Figure 1).

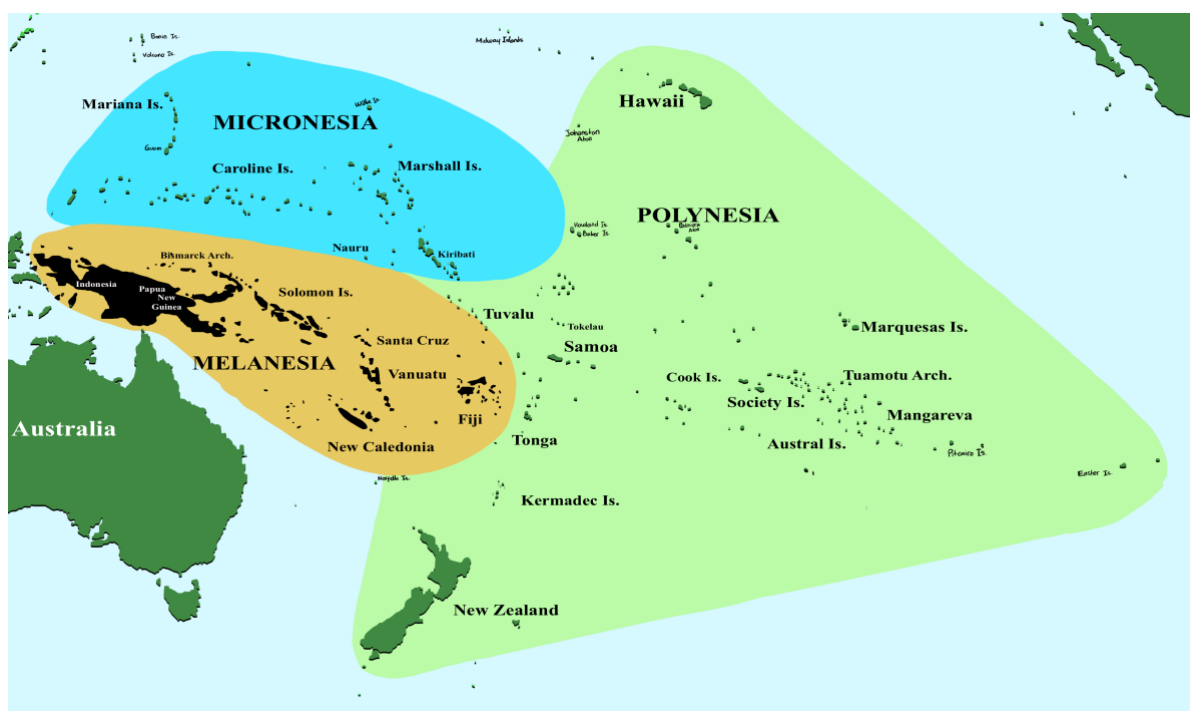


Figure 1. The Geographical Map showing the cultural divisions in South Pacific comprises of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. *Source:* Figure drawn by the authors, adapted and modified from [Battis \(n.d.\)](#)

In the sense of a culturally-based region, Melanesia is unique. The name of Melanesia has multiple ways of identification. Its etymology, for instance, the term Melanesia refers to two ways of understanding. First is the identity of the black, and the second is the symbol of colonisation. The term of Melanesia refers to the concept of Black Island ([Hamid, 1996a](#))

which has a loose interpretation of it. One source suggests the etymology of the name of Melanesia derived from the Greek language *melas* which translated as 'black' and *nesoi* translated as 'islands', and is translated as the islands of black, ([Keesing & Khan, 2024](#)). Another source also defines Melanesia with the same etymological approach stating the origin of the name with those two Greek words has the reference to the dark skins of the inhabitants ([Collins Dictionary, 2024](#)). In other words, the black that is attributed to the definition of the name of Melanesia itself is not to refer to the land, but more in reference to the dark skin of the inhabitants of the island.

The aspect of the colour of the dark skin in the etymology of Melanesia has been confirmed by the scientific findings. Although it is still enigmatic, archaeological studies seemingly conclude that there is a relationship between Melanesian and Aboriginal Australian, which is the indigenous people of Australia, with one of the characterizations of dark skin ([Kayser et al., 2001](#)). What we know as the present day of Australia, Tasmania, and New Guinea were part of the same landmass, known as *Sahul*. Through tens of thousands of years the rise of the sea levels separated the lands and subsequently isolated the people and became the habitants of today's Melanesia.

Aside from the aspect of geography and demography, Melanesia has the constructive idea in its identification, that serves as the forging factor of the solidarity and the unity among the Melanesian people in the region. Melanesia is described as a region which has the sentiment of the colonisation of the European. Whilst the region has not been discussed much in the context of global politics, the region played significant position as the battlefield of the World War II, with some would refer it as the Pacific Theatre ([National WWII Museum, 2024](#)) which translated as the major theatre of the World War II that represent a large portion of area covering the Pacific Ocean, East Asia, and Southeast Asia ([Britannica, 2024](#)).

Due to these historical legacies of colonisation, even in the aftermath of World War II, some of the countries in the region still suffer for the struggle to declare their independence and gain their deserved sovereignty. The fight for independence and the ability to survive from long endurance of decades of brutal colonisation under European countries have brought the Melanesian people to the idea where the name of Melanesia is recognized as a symbol of fight and the unity of sovereign Melanesian countries. This situation will lead to the sentiment of the solidarity of Melanesia generated by the belief that Melanesian will always be treated unfairly wherever their existence. Therefore, they also believe that Melanesian should live in the land of Melanesia together with Melanesian only.

In the context of regional power, the region has not gained much recognition. The Pacific islands in the Pacific Ocean, as the mother region of Melanesia, have not been able to play a significant role in the context of international politics. At least the involvement of the countries as a region and in the region towards political and economic issues could be taken as the most prominent example of it. To see the further elaboration for this is the existence of



a regional forum of APEC. It comprises countries in the Pacific rim, in total of 21 countries ranging from America, the North and the South, to Oceania, with North Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Pacific. Thus, making APEC is basically the region of the regions. It is the region where the regional power converges. Even with the term of the region is mentioned repeatedly, Pacific islands in the APEC apparently represented by one country only namely Papua New Guinea of the Melanesian cluster.

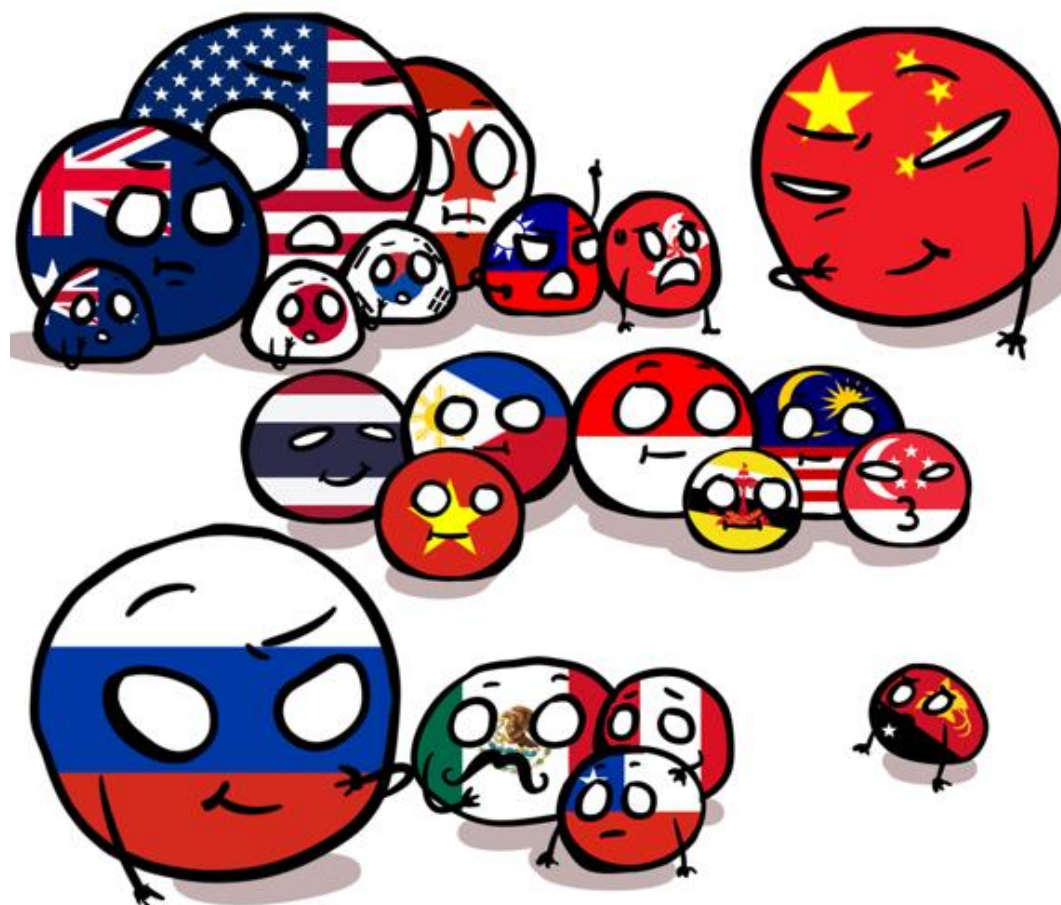


Figure 2. Illustrative interpretation of the regions and the power of the APEC. Notes: It shows that Papua New Guinea is the only representation of Melanesian country that represents limited scale of political power. Based on the illustration, Pacific islands is a far-distanced entity and probably considered to be limited in existences. And this situation probably applied the same with the existence of the Melanesian countries as whole. *Source:* Drawn by the authors (2024)

### Contour of Conflicts in Melanesia

There are many typologies of conflict in Melanesia. But, as the author can conclude from limited reading sources, the article offers two, and this not limited to, of the common types of conflict in most Melanesian countries. And the discussion of these types of conflict will take elaboration on sources and contours.

As mentioned earlier in the previous chapter, Melanesia is the name that has relevance to the idea of the legacy of colonisation. In this very sense, to achieve independence is always means to achieve power. And parties will be eager to fight for any gain of power. In the era of post-colonialism, to achieve and to for sovereignty will always be challenging. There will be the risk of the claim over the political throne that attempted to be seized in the most formal or frontal way.

Other than that, the natural blessing of Melanesia is also viewed as the source of conflict. Glenn Banks in the article titled Resources and conflict in the Asia Pacific region: Linking resources and conflict the Melanesian way pointed out that the region of Melanesia is experiencing what it is called as 'resource curse' ([Banks, 2005](#)). The term was initially coined by Richard Auty (cited in [Auty & Warhurst, 1993](#)) an economic geographer, referring to natural-resources-dependent countries. He describes that the term resource curse is understood as the situation of how countries rich in mineral resources were unable to utilise the resources to boost wealth in their economies. This thesis proved to be attested as a study made by Jeffrey Sachs and Andrew Warner found a strong correlation between the abundance of natural resources and an impoverished economy. Later in the study, they showed concrete evidence that surprisingly poor-resources countries often outperformed the rather rich-resources countries in sense of economic growth ([Sachs & Warner, 1995](#)). Thus, in this very sense, the 'resource curse' can be simply understood as a situation where the existence of abundant natural resources poses, or even means the existing threat to the country's economy.

Melanesia is blessed with abundant natural resources. During the era of colonisation, the region of Melanesia was blessed with a wide range of plantations namely sugar cane and coconut that had become the prominent commodity of international trade. And since the 1980s, the region is also well known for its mineral deposits such as nickel, gold, and porphyry copper. This blessing situation could turn into another situation of high dependency on the nature sector, that has the potential of avoiding the possibility of development in other economic sectors. This kind of high dependency in both optimistic and pessimistic sentiment could be the magnet that attracts the interest of the global economic entities to acquire access and control of exploitations towards the resources and gaining enormous profit from it. For this, the competition for access and control will occur not only in the level of the elite, but also within the group of interest in Melanesian community. To put in the example, we can see the structural conflict, if we can call it that way, in the experience of local government of Papua – central administration of the government of Indonesia – and the formerly known as Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold Inc as global business entity from United States ([Mara, 2021](#)).

It was mentioned earlier in the previous chapter that there is this concept of cosmic persons that coincides with the Christianity taught about how men must subdue to earth, in the book of Genesis. Instead of seeing it as the command to take care of the earth, humans

tend to see this as the entitlement towards earth what resources are in it. But this does not necessarily be seen as the factor that contributes to this kind of conflict particularly in Melanesia.

The identity of Melanesia constructed in the value of Melanesian Way, in one of which is *Wantok*, somehow could pose a threat, especially in the aspect of non-traditional security. For many external observers, The *Wantok* system in Melanesia, is perceived as the practice of nepotism and cronyism ([Morgan & McLeod, 2006](#)). This is challenging for the dream for social and political stabilization in the country. Other than this, the challenge from nepotism and cronyism, the sentiment of *Wantok* gives challenge for integration. In the experiences of Indonesia, *Wantok* is believed and perceived in Papua only, particularly if we talk of Melanesia in the experience of Indonesia. They believe that only Papua shared common history and ancestry that belonged to Melanesian cultures for hundreds of years. They shared very distinct cultures that have commonalities with Melanesian in the Pacific but considered different with the other tribes of the east in Indonesia. This has been the colour of the long-lasting conflict of Jakarta – Papua.

The characteristic of Melanesia is also feasible for friction and makes the region vulnerable for conflict. As we can see, Melanesia is depicted in a relatively large archipelago from the eastern part of Indonesia to Fiji in the Pacific Ocean, with various indigenous people scattered across. For example, the existence of the black-blond and white-red people. In this sense, the ethnology/anthropology-based identity could have the possibility of becoming the source of the horizontal conflict. The condition of the islands in the region being far distanced, generates possible sentiment of anti-integration among Melanesia ([Hamid, 1996a](#)). The separatist conflicts pose a great challenge for Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, where it is often referred to as ethnic or tribal separatist movement. Reilly, in his article writes that most conflict in Papua New Guinea takes place in the local level between local groups and have not presented threat to national government, while conflict in Solomon Island involved two of the main island groups, Malaita and Guadalcanal, and gave impact to the dismissed of elected government ([Reilly, 2008](#))

### **The Melanesian Way: Interpretation and Implementation in the Aspect of Leadership and Conflict Solving Management**

There are three styles of leadership in Melanesian culture, namely the Big Man, the Rich Man, and the Poor Man. As mentioned early in the introduction, it is important to remember that these three styles of leadership do not represent the exclusivity of the belonging to Melanesian culture, as Sahlins writes in the article adding the chief style of leadership, thus making it four types in the culture of Polynesia.

During the writing of the article, the author faced a quite hard time in attempting to find more elaboration to get to the core idea of the Rich Man and the Poor Man style in the leadership in Melanesia. Although the three concepts have been alluded to repetitively in

few articles, it seems that the Big Man is more prevalent concept compared to the other two, with the most of being discussed academically ([Paul, 2012](#); [Godelier, 1986](#); [Standish, 1978](#); and [Sahlins, 1963](#)), or in the online reviews.

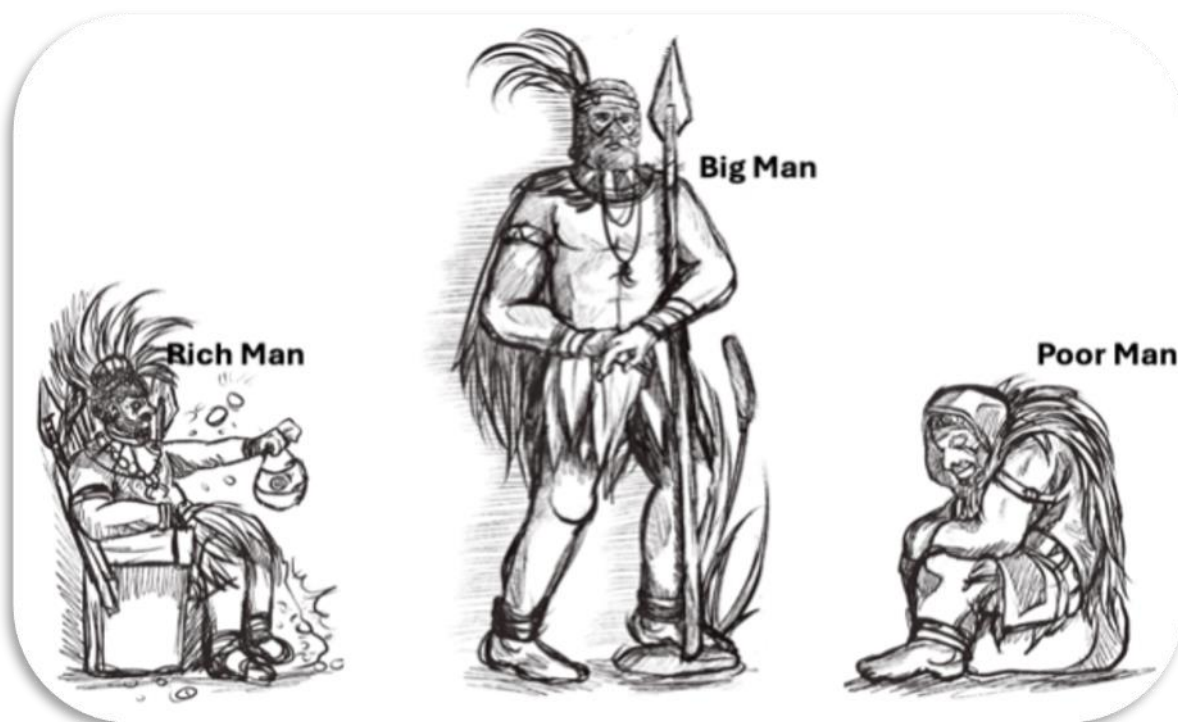


Figure 3. The fictitious illustration of the three styles of the leadership in Melanesia. *Source:* Drawn by the authors (2024)

In regard to this consideration, the article will take focus on the exposition of the Big Man style, whilst still offering relevant argument and elaboration in describing the understanding of the Rich Man and the Poor Man style of the leadership in the spirit of Melanesian Way, and how it helps resolving conflict in Melanesia. The idea that is almost close to explain the style of the Rich Man probably can be seen in the explanation of the King Leadership, with the characterization of the claim of the leadership is by inheritance and having resources to support the leadership. This style is typical in traditional society.

On the contrary, the Poor Man style is depicted as completely different from the Rich Man and is challenging what is accepted as leadership in today's modern world, where most leaders are seen at top of the pyramid having all resources and power and wealth. The Poor Man on the other hand has only its wisdom to offer. The idea that is almost close to explaining the style of the Poor Man in leadership probably is the wisdom of the man. Since the Melanesian possess strong attachment to Christianity, hence this article will offer a loose interpretation of the style based on the thought of the Bible. Poor Man emphasises on the concept wisdom of the man. The bible in Proverbs 8:10 – 11 reiterates the importance of



wisdom. It says that wisdom is better than jewels. Wisdom is divine for it is God's treasure, that He offers for His followers.

Wisdom is the concept of common sense or knowledge that is held by members of a society or culture. When people accept someone for their wisdom, those people believe that the answer of life lies in the words of the wise man. The example of wisdom can be learned from the story of Jesus, in the faith of Christianity. No gold and jewels and treasure attached to Jesus, yet multitude followed Him for His words and lessons.

For a traditional society in Melanesia, for instance, wisdom is the essential part of their identity and conducted as the way of life on a day-to-day activity. The community of Melanesia live for thousands of years in remote islands and are isolated because they depend on their traditions and traditional wisdoms as means and the knowledge of survival. This wisdom is being passed to generations as basic knowledge.

Poor Man in the Melanesian culture is understood as the style that arose from traditional context, as the culture of Melanesia has stood for centuries way before the Europeans came and made contact in the region. As [Narokobi \(1983\)](#) stated in his book *Melanesian Way*, he believed that Melanesia is an old civilization that has been able to discover its own meaning of life.

And then there is the Big Man style. Melanesian Big Man is based on a bottom-up egalitarian system, that is the claim of the leadership is not inherited or with formal councils. It has been present in Melanesian societies for centuries, with roots in traditional customs and practices. It seems that the concept of Big Man is familiar with the culture of Melanesia for most academic discussions and writings have linked the concept with Melanesia ([Paul, 2012](#)). Initially it plays as an important symbol of status and power in communities in the region, but over the time it has adapted to the changing conditions of the socio-economic ([Cassar, 2023](#)). The term Big Man refers to a socio-political role observed within traditional Melanesian societies and other tribal societies worldwide ([Vasundhra, 2023](#)).

Big Man is the most prominent style of leadership compared to two others. The Big Man style in many discussions has been linked to the definition of the Great Man theory of leadership, which emphasises on the belief that the leader is born, not made. This way of understanding the Big Man style is probably based on the idea that it has the character of charisma, supported by a stand out physical appearance that is big, fit, healthy, and strong. The idea of the Big Man is familiar to traditional belief about the birth of the leader in the early form of civilization throughout the history of the world. The first civilization always requires someone who is strong enough to ensure the safety from dangerous forces outside the community. And the character of strong traditionally refers to the physical endowment of a man. In this sense, the leadership of the Big Man was born in the lack of social stratification society with the character of simplicity of technology. The Big Man is also believed to have the ability to utilize resources and is skilled in wealth distribution ([Godelier, 1986](#)).

Tabel 1. Big Man Role

Role	Explanation
Leadership	It serves as the leader with the responsibility of guiding the community through difficult times and conflicts.
Wealth Distribution	It has the skill to acquire wealth from any resource available in the surroundings and it has the responsibility to distribute the wealth to ensure the welfare among the society.
Mediator	It helps resolving disputes within the community to ensure social harmony.

Source: Adapted from [Vasundhra \(2023\)](#)

The Big Man also has many aliases. It is known by the name The Prince Among Men, Man of Importance, Man of Renown, Generous Rich Man, and Centre Man. Serving as the key points of the discussion, this paper highlights the essential purposes of conducting the leadership in Melanesian culture is resolving conflict in society. One of the key concepts of this is finding consensus. Consensus, by definition, is a generally accepted opinion or agreement, or in single word is unanimity. In the situation of conflict, consensus is referred to resolution of when the opposing parties abandon their own idea of interest and agree on a statement that is agreeable to all. In search towards the consensus, the method of a dialogue is required repeatedly, time after time with the constant involvement of both conflicting parties.

In the experience of Papua New Guinea (PNG), for instance, most of the problem or disputes within the society has been solves through the discussion of the groups, aiming for the building of a consensus for a win-win solution for both parties to agree on ([Benjamin, 2016](#)). Consensus in PNG can also be viewed as the Melanesian way of resolving disputes and conflicts. It is also known that the consensus had brought peace, harmony and long-lasting solutions for disputes in the traditional societies in PNG. For the people of PNG, the ability to reach consensus among the people during the conflict situation is the bless from God above. The consensus saves them as well as providing them the ability to keep holding on as one nation despite many cultures that they have during the four decades of their independence.

Consensus is about respecting people's wishes, as the part of the education of people to be used to society. In Melanesian culture, leadership is intact as a whole body of institution with the followers. The sense of belong to each other opens the way of direct contact between leader and its people, where people can communicate their wishes and leader listens and responds by shaping the best decisions to fulfil the interest of the majority. Leader is always in the spirit of harbouring his intention in finding the best solution or resolve conflicts without having to sacrifice any party of its people.

Another characterization in the leadership among Melanesian, especially in the Big Man style probably best glimpsed through the situation where the leader is being very much



loved and respected by its people. And this, in some of the period of the history, generated the event of long-serving of political reign in countries, including in the politic of Melanesian countries. To this extent, the experience of political journey of PNG can be taken as an example. PNG had Julius Chan, who held the throne and spanning 50 years of political reign, and one the longest-serving leader in PNG ([Australian National University, 2025](#)). It is important to underline that, for some liberal thinking, the context of long reign political status may seem to be the plain example of violation of democracy. But for Melanesian, it is the expression of love and trust.

The leadership of Chan is characterized as being sharp and strong. As a Big Man in the country, he had this view that when a leader reaches the stage of ultimate power, somehow, unknowingly, they tend not to listen, since they believe that, everything they do is correct. They forget everybody else and do things their way. Bougainville, 1989, was clear depiction. At this time, he was determined to bring secession crisis and civil war to an end (or at least to a peace negotiation). To restore peace, he hired private military contractors to use *psychological warfare* to showcase the power of PNG. This is the statement where Chan believed that he was just a master of his own destiny ([Standish, 2016](#)).

After the nation's struggle in 1970s, trying to define its identity as a self-government and independence country, PNG's people entering the era of the unknown, according to Chan in one of his interviews. Everything was unprepared. PNG did not own currency, a central bank, nor any commercial banks. The economic structure was not in place. This situation was added by the conflicts and potential disintegration in the country. Chan was very worried about ethnic issues and regionalism. And he constantly put attention by the movement of dynamic, yet aggressive of highlanders to urban areas ([Standish, 2016](#)). Ethnic issue was like a time bomb that can explode anytime. Not knowing the direction to go, PNG's people cling and move together, sending a strong message of unity ([Chan, 2010](#)). This served as ground thinking during his political reign, that he would take a careful mind when came to the issue of self-determining-referendum and autonomous region policies in Bougainville and any other parts of PNG. For him, unity is the key in preventing conflict and helps to reach consensus in time of conflict.

Differ with PNG, Papua's political history had no record of longest-serving leader. As one of the provinces in the Republic of Indonesia, the longest serving leader was Governor Lukas Enembe, serving from 2013-2018 and 2018-2023, ten years altogether, which equals to two serving periods according to Indonesian national laws, although he started his political career in since 2001 as part of leaders in Regency of Puncak Jaya. But even so, Governor Enembe was very much loved, and his death was mourned by thousands of Papuans ([RNZ, 2023](#)). The love for Papuan Chief of Enembe, expressed by their willing to carry his coffin to his final resting place, 55km away, while singing, dancing, and chanting Free Papua. More of this expression is business in Jayapura were closed and Indonesian flag was lowered half-mast. National mourning was called for two weeks, by the United Liberation Movement for

West Papua, in honor for the former governor. He was known to be very humble, generous, and people friendly. He was popular and close to his people, mostly people from the same clan and tribe ([Robin & Giroth, 2023](#)). And he always put emphasis on his people. Thus, he was labelled as “father of Papuans, a son, chief of Papuan people, father of development, father of education, and most honest and loved leader of Papuan people” ([Kogoya, 2024](#)).

What seems to be the relevance of the event with the concept of Melanesian Way in leadership, in Papua? The former governor was loved for his great sense of leadership. During his reign as a leader in Papua, Enembe consciously and consistently to implement the value of Melanesian Way. He was a pluralist and had sense of egalitarian manner where he put respect to differences and equality. Once he said “*kasih menembus perbedaan*”, translated as “love transcends boundaries”. This expression is most notably found in the Christianity thought, which in one respect play role as the ground of thinking in Melanesian way. It holds the believe where love is a powerful emotion that has the ability to conquer all obstacles, all division, all segregation. And thus, he put no favoritism on tribes, religion, skin and hair color, nor in social status ([Syufi, 2024](#)). Everyone is one, they are equal (so is before the eyes of God) and they deserve every sense of equality.

Melanesian way also strongly reflected his way of solving problems within the region. He believed in unity of Papuans in the land of Papua. Which he used to reverse the logic behind the idea of proliferation of administrative regions in Papua. In his mind, although Papuans have to experience administrative divisions, making them walled in cities and districts, the unity of Papuans from Sorong to Merauke is principal to maintain the identity of one Papua. This is the quality of his leadership. As well as the reflection Melanesian solidarity. Remember that Melanesian way is promoting the value of Unity of the Body, this is what he did. He dreamt and fought for the unity of Papua, because it only works this way. Only the unity that represents the identity of one Papua will help to prevent conflict and disintegration, as well as help to reach consensus in the time of conflict. He called for humane security approach to resolve conflict between liberation movement and national government in Papua ([Perkasa & Satria, 2021](#)), putting no emphasize on who to blame, but rather focus on involvement and inclusivity, believing in the value of love and compassion to all parties. As the result, the development index and economy are increasing, and the inter-region connections are improving.

In his remark in a biography in 2020, he acknowledges on the importance of the rise of Papua into the new civilization, characterized by being autonomous (if not independent) dan prosperous ([Japalatu & Susilantoro, 2020](#)). As the last addition to the discussion, the biography itself tells the story about Chris Sohilit, government employee in Regency of Lanny Jaya. He is known to be the type of Big Man in his region. A civilian with the soul of militant. He is firm, brave, and is the front man when it comes to the security of Lanny Jaya, considering the region is familiar with armed civil group. In respond to conflict and civil war caused by civil armed group, his firmness and bravery always sail in the same boat with

the approach of being persuasive and inclusive. He always emphasizes on dialogue, in seek of consensus. He listens and understand, with compassion and love to the people. Working in form of generosity as the representation of fruit of faith in life. Under this type of leadership, his work transforms Lanny Jaya into the new and modern civilization as what it is being seen today. The phrase *Beta Papua* is probably the best expression to confirm that Melanesian way is the way to solve problem, for only Melanesian understand the problem.

## CONCLUSION

Melanesian Way refers to complex system that reflect values and norm that constructed thousands of years, and heavily influenced by the thought of Christianity. The series of the wisdom of Melanesian Way emphasize on the respect to *first*, the existence of other Melanesians the representation of the egalitarian society, through the act of patience and compassion, creating peaceful and non-violence environment in person-to-person relations. This is the also the interpretation of the act of submission to God's, where Melanesian believe about the fear of God and respect for the rule of Law. *Second*, the sustainability of the environment through the concept of harmonious universe as a cosmos-persons.

There are three styles of leadership in Melanesia, namely the Rich Man, the Poor Man, and the Big Man. Each style of the leadership in Melanesia represents unique way of understanding, with the Big Man is the most prominent style in Melanesian culture.

Conflict resolve management in Melanesian culture underlined the importance of the consensus, where it considered as the most representative of the majority will and interest. Consensus is reached by listening the wishes of all parties involved in issue of conflict, thus aiming for the best resolution. It also requires inclusivity and compassion, to ensure the humane approach is enforced during the time of conflict.

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