

# ON THE GENERIFICATION OF CULTURE: FROM BLOW FISH TO MELANESIAN

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We extend Wilk's discussion of how more powerful people can set the dimensions of common understanding through which socio-cultural groups communicate and contest. Focusing on one group in pluralistic Papua New Guinea, we demonstrate that, in setting these dimensions, representatives of the state and emissaries of global capitalism have been gaining control over culturally specific forms of knowledge. Through analysis of three events, we show that the Chambri have been losing control over their local knowledge as it has been rendered understandable to others. In effect, becoming understandable – 'legible', in Scott's apt phrase – has entailed 'cultural generification' such that the cultural particular either has become translated into the cultural general or into a general example of the cultural particular. In either case, through such generification, local knowledge and knowledge-makers have become not only comprehensible to, but also controllable by, outsiders.

In clarifying the ways in which cultural forms may be self-consciously shaped and invoked in political contestation, concepts like 'objectification' (Handler 1984) and 'substantivization' (Thomas 1992) have been useful. Wilk (1995) has furthered our understanding of these politics of culture with his discussion of 'structures of common difference'. These structures are the (often essentialized) terms, the dimensions of contrast and comparison, through which objectification and substantivization take place. In his focus on these consequential terms shaping such contestation, Wilk has demonstrated that some – the more powerful – can set them to their own advantage.

In this article, we extend Wilk's discussion in two related ways. We show that, under contemporary socio-political circumstances, *simply to engage in the process* of setting common terms of cultural contrast and comparison, of setting the parameters of comparability, is likely to favour the more powerful. This is so because virtually any comparability established between local people and such others as representatives of the state and emissaries of global capitalism will favour the latter. Simply put, the cultural forms that constitute local knowledge may lose their compelling grounding as they become rendered understandable to, and by, others. Moreover, and most importantly, we show that to become understandable in this way is, in effect, to become 'legible', in Scott's (1998) apt phrase. Significantly, in Scott's view, through legibility, local knowledge and knowledge-makers are rendered not only comprehensible to, but also controllable by, outsiders.<sup>1</sup>

Ethnographically, we focus on comparability and consequent legibility as they have been established in culturally pluralistic Papua New Guinea. There, representatives of the state and emissaries of global capitalism have been gaining both intellectual and administrative control over the some eight hundred culturally specific forms of knowledge, power, and sociality. To render such diversity legible (to set the common terms) has involved translation of a special sort. This translation has taken the form of 'cultural generification'<sup>2</sup> such that the cultural particular either has become translated into the cultural general or into a general example of the cultural particular. In the three accounts about the Chambri of the East Sepik Province that follow,<sup>3</sup> we illustrate different, though related, facets of this translation.

Our first account, about the man who became a blow fish, concerns the incremental irrelevance of highly specific local knowledge, knowledge that once had been transfixingly powerful and the basis of binding social interdependence. We convey with this account that the role of 'tradition' has been changing in two ways.<sup>4</sup> Under most circumstances, it has become diluted to provide a not very demanding backdrop for people, less concerned with maintaining the cosmos through a totemic division of labour, than with making ends meet, through controlling the resources necessary to survive in an increasingly commodified economy. Under certain other circumstances, tradition has become situationally focused, evoked to provide outside adjudicators with arguments for land claims. In these latter instances, the tradition presented to these adjudicators as evidence, as 'objective' demonstration of multi-generational ownership and occupancy, has become formulaic and generic.

Our second account, about the burning-down of a men's house, concerns the Chambri recognition, through a compellingly dramatic set of events, of what was being lost with the loss of tradition. Indeed, the Chambri had to confront not only the circumstance that a men's house, both the icon and repository of Chambri tradition, had been destroyed but that it had been destroyed by the police acting as agents of the state. Moreover, the Chambri had to confront the fact that, to receive compensation, they had to reduce the magnitude and complexity of their loss into the standardized (legible) terms demanded by lawyers and judges, 'objective' enumerations and eye-witness accounts.

Our third account, about the resurrection of a men's house, concerns the Chambri attempt to bolster tradition by making it more relevant to their present lives and interests. Through the newly constructed men's house, tradition thus embodied should have provided (among other things) the basis for making money through tourism, for dealing effectively with the state and its elite representatives, and for creating a 'modern', interdependent sociality – one of co-operative work and of companionable leisure. However, this Chambri effort to create a brave new future by affirming their tradition, by displaying a fine-grained and intimate articulation with their immediate realm, was again significantly compromised by the necessity of dealing with powerful outsiders. To be appreciated by these outsiders, these local understandings would either have to be translated into a highly general form or appear to comply with a generic definition of what the 'traditional' was like. In the latter

case, the Chambri display of specific cultural knowledge would, at best, appear to these outsiders as an example of type rather than as a *sine qua non*: as a generally plausible manifestation of tradition rather than as an embodiment of immediately grounded truth.

Thus, while seemingly a process of equalization, considerably more would probably be lost for local people in this translation than found. As parameters of comparability have become set, as distinctive cultures have become presented and indeed shaped so as to be more readily comparable to other cultures (and, hence, legible to powerful outsiders), local people have often yielded up their compellingly parochial understandings.<sup>5</sup> (Indeed, the loss of local autonomy through the fact of engaging in such 'conversations' suggests, once again, the truth of what has been called a parable for paranoids: 'If they get you asking the wrong questions, it doesn't matter what your answers are'.)

We intend, hence, for 'cultural generification' to link Wilk's discussion of the structures of common difference with Scott's concept of legibility, in order to show how the apparently reasonable imposition of the seemingly neutral canon of mutual intelligibility makes certain forms of knowledge vulnerable. We show, in other words, how the creation of structures of common difference is not only political but is political in a way that is likely to disadvantage parochial (highly local) understandings and convictions. And we show, as well, that these politics are likely to be not only concealed but also justified on political and intellectual grounds by virtue of their apparent equity and reasonability. As such, these politics lend themselves to state mechanisms of control.

#### *Account one: the man who became a blow fish*

On 18 July 1994, Thadeus Yambu, a Chambri elder of Wombun Village, at his request, provided us with a demonstration of some of his most important, secret, patrilineally inherited totemic powers.<sup>6</sup> Insisting that we take notes, photograph, and tape-record him, Yambu became quite literally, from his perspective, a blow fish; or, what amounts to very much the same thing, he became the ancestor who was or could become a blow fish. In this way, he would ensure the local propagation of this species.

When we arrived at the appointed time, Yambu cleared his house so that only he, his wife, and we remained, and he closed the doors so that no one else could see in or interrupt. After inserting totemically significant leaves in his ear-lobe holes, he went to a large sago-storage pot (*pan*) which he had previously moved to the centre of the room. From that pot he retrieved a bamboo flute and a small clay flute which he placed in a string bag hung from the central post of the house. He then walked to the door, turned to face the central post and the flutes hanging there. Uttering a set of esoteric multisyllabic names with great seriousness and intensity, he stamped his foot, pressed crossed arms against his chest, and paced deliberately back towards the objects. As he paced, he sucked sharply through his pursed lips so as to make two alternating sounds, the sounds of the blow fish. Then, flutes in

hand, he posed for photographs, standing behind the sago pot and beside his seated wife.

Next, he ushered us into his men's house. There, he had us record and photograph him while he played distinctive rhythms on a totemically proper slit gong. Finally, he had us photograph him while he sat on the men's house bench appropriate to his clan and its powers. The overall goal of his demonstration, he said, was for us to include his story – everything, the photographs, description, names – in our next book.

We had, of course, long been aware that there were ritual procedures comparable to Yambu's throughout the Middle Sepik. Bateson (1946: 121), after all, described 'immanent totemism' as widespread in this region:

In every village you find the living embodiments of the ancient mythology – the man who bears the name which was once borne by the founders of the village. He will straighten his shoulders as he tells you 'I steered the canoe which brought my clan to this place.' Another man will stamp on the ground as he says 'I am Kevembuangga. I put my foot on the mud and made it hard so that people could live. But for me there would be no people. There would be no pigs'.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, since the totemic procedures for becoming Kevembuangga or for bringing pigs (and blow fish), for regulating and co-ordinating the social and natural universe, were secret, we had never seen them enacted, much less been invited (in fact, urged) to witness and so fully to document them. Moreover, Yambu's demonstration was one of a rash of similar events we were asked to record during 1994 and again during 1996 and 1999. Indeed, throughout our three visits to Chambri during the 1990s, we were struck by the accelerating frequency of requests to inscribe comparable practices, which we previously had found difficult to learn about even in outline.

Senior Chambri men, such as Yambu, were explicitly concerned that their knowledge would die with them: younger men seemed uninterested in mastering the highly specific – intensely local – knowledge, as with the names and the procedures to become a blow fish. And Chambri elders were concerned that, with the increasing loss of this corpus of cosmological knowledge and attendant practice, the totemic division of labour through which they regulated their world would no longer be viable. (This was a totemic division of labour in which the separate yet cumulative contributions of individual ritual experts, each contributing specialized knowledge and techniques, compelled and ordered the full range of forces that affected them all: blow fish, canoes, mud, people, pigs, etc.) If this totemic regulation were lost, it would not be possible to sustain the Chambri social, cultural, and physical whole which, though based on its parts, was greater than their sum.

Yambu's concern, however, was not limited to this. Although he wanted us to act as witnesses and inscribers so as to memorialize his distinctive and vital contribution to the Chambri whole, he also sought efficacy in the legal terms necessary to deal with a state bureaucracy. This bureaucracy was evermore important, for instance, in adjudicating land claims made on the basis of 'traditional' occupancy. Thus, Yambu wanted us to be able to document his cultural repertoire under circumstances in which increasing litigation in government land courts meant that, as another

man with a comparable request to us put it, 'no ancestral rituals and stories, no land'.<sup>8</sup>

To a large extent, the very factors that made Yambu's ritual knowledge and enactments so compelling to him also sharply limited their transmissibility, their translatability, to others. The highly particular knowledge that compelled Yambu's transformation into a blow fish, the unabashedly parochial knowledge he feared would die with him and which he wished us to document for posterity, was rapidly losing relevance both to Chambri youth and to those non-Chambri who arbitrated land claims.

For many Chambri – even in the home villages, to say nothing of those living in urban areas elsewhere in Papua New Guinea – the necessity of earning money for flashlight batteries, clothing, school fees, and sometimes outboard motors, was more pressing than that of regulating the cosmos. Indeed, as far as everyday life was concerned, it was Christianity, not the activities of totemic practitioners, that was usually thought to regulate much of the world.<sup>9</sup> And while Chambri were often proud to make the claim that they came from a place where culture and tradition were strong, being a Chambri was increasingly a matter of occasionally choosing to enact a rather basic, a rather typified, form of a ceremony, itself selected from a reduced inventory of ceremonies, as with a death ritual or brideprice exchange.

For non-Chambri, such as the bureaucrats whose judgements were increasingly affecting Chambri lives, Yambu's sort of parochial knowledge could not be counted on to convince, even in a land claim. After all, Chambri totemic, patrilineal land claims might well be adjudicated by, for example, a Tolai magistrate who was not only from a non-totemic matrilineal society but was probably, by virtue of his education, long away from any 'traditional' village. Moreover, the appraisal of competing traditional claims in court demanded that a magistrate exhibit a rationality that, while taking account of particular cultural logics, was not embedded in and bound by them. Hence, it was far from certain that a non-Chambri magistrate, especially if faced with challenges from lawyers using Western rules of evidence, would find testimony that Yambu (in the privacy of his own house) became a blow fish (complete with sucking sounds) even admissible as court evidence, much less as proof of traditional ownership of resources.

In other words, both at home and abroad, the cultural knowledge that was increasingly mattering, that was usefully credible, was that which was sufficiently generic to translate readily across generations and across cultures. And, in this regard, many Chambri, already generified, had become generifiers. Accepting structures of common difference, they had become not only the objects, but also facilitators, of state control.

### *Account two: the destruction of the Kwarmakui men's house*

Adam Klarem, a Iatmul from Japandai Village, had married a Chambri and was living with her at the Chambri village of Kilimbit. By Chambri accounts, the marriage was not welcomed because it was seen as yet another Iatmul encroachment on Chambri ancestral resources, especially the fishing rights in Chambri Lake. (The Chambri had long challenged the Iatmul settlement of

several small islands within the lake and had taken Iatmul to court with inconclusive results.)

Their dislike of Adam was exacerbated in April 1994, when, with his wife away in the provincial capital of Wewak, he took up with Sarah, another Kilimbit woman, whose husband was also away. Adam's young daughters began gossiping that their father was rarely at home, especially at night. A group of men, including Adam's affines and Sarah's affines and agnates, called a men's-house meeting to investigate the likely reason for his frequent absences. Adam did not attend the meeting, as he had been requested to do. The men subsequently waited until late at night when they went to Sarah's house. Hearing male snores within, they forced open the door, found Adam under Sarah's mosquito net, and told him that they would take him to the village court the next morning.

Rather than pay a substantial fine of K500 (then US\$500) levied by the Kilimbit Counsellor on behalf of the families of the aggrieved spouses, Adam ran away to his home village of Japandai. Infuriated at his refusal to accept responsibility, the Chambri men involved in the case attacked his house and crocodile farm. Adam then complained of the destruction of his property to the police at the Pagwi patrol post. Included in their jurisdiction were the Chambri villages as well as Japandai and included in their ranks were (it was rumoured) several of Adam's friends from Japandai. Shortly thereafter, several police came to Kilimbit, warning residents that they would soon return in force. Three days later, a heavily reinforced contingent arrived in three speed-boats and one motor canoe. Without making serious enquiries of anyone, according to our Chambri sources, they burned down the men's house in which the initial meeting had taken place and arrested those they said had destroyed Adam's property.

Aghast at the precipitous destruction of the men's house, the Kilimbit Counsellor contacted the East Sepik Provincial Office of Culture and Tourism in Wewak. Its Information Officer flew in to investigate. He then advised those Chambri concerned that they had a case against the police for destroying 'cultural property'.

We were subsequently enlisted to type, and sometimes to translate into English, the documents that Chambri, in consultation with each other and with two lawyers (a Chambri and a non-Chambri), were preparing in order to present their case in court. The documents contained evidence of three related types: testimonies by eyewitnesses to the events, inventories of the items of destroyed property, and lists of the items' owners and cash value. We give (with Chambri permission and Chambri spelling of Chambri names) excerpts of each, focusing on the form in which the evidence was provided.

#### TESTIMONIES BY EYEWITNESSES

This first testimony we typed (by local request) exactly as it was presented to us in neatly printed, entirely serviceable English. The letter was addressed to the Assistant Secretary of Culture and Tourism of the East Sepik Province and was from Mr Bernald Tangi, who was Counsellor of Kilimbit Village.

## THE COMPLAINANT MR. BERNALD TANGI

The actual police presence twice at Kirimbit village of Chambri Lake on Monday 18/4/94 and on Thursday 21/4/94 have no links with either my tribal members, my family's affairs or any of that nature. Therefore, the mobile police on Thursday 21/4/94 at 10:30 A.M. to 12 midday had burnt down or ashed the historical Kwarmakui Tambaran House, the host of real traditional and historical items ... This is actually what I heard and seen of the policeman ...

*Thursday 21/4/94 (Second Trip)*

At 10 A.M. the police mobile arrived home (Kirimbit village) and asked for me immediately. I came forward. Without further words, I was hit on my back with a gun butt and slapped on the right side of my face with his hand twice. The men from the three villages – Wombun, Indingai and Kirimbit – were that morning work, doing community activity. Because of the police presence was unknown to the whole Chambrians, the youths engaged with police arrest were among the people out working. This took time for the youths concern to come to the police. The policemen at the time could not wait that long so:

- (i) policemen started cutting down sugar canes, yams, destroyed banana plants etc.;
- (ii) the policemen set fire onto the historical Kwarmakui, the house tambaran – the host of valuable traditional items ashed down (time 10:30 A.M. to 12 noon).
- (iii) the officer in charge ... assembled the wanted men and took them to Pagwi. The people from three village witnessed this sorrowful and unpleasant moment. For further information and other relevant issues concerning this, please don't hesitate to do so.

Thank you.

BERNALD TANGI

The next testimony, also to the Assistant Secretary, was from Herman Kiampi, who presents himself as an eyewitness to the events. This letter was neatly written in Neo-Melanesian. We translated and typed it by local request, careful to preserve its original form.

## THE COMPLAINANT MR. HERMAN KIAMPI

On Thursday, April 21, 1994 at 10:30 A.M. I heard the police come and I went to look and saw 4 motor boats come to shore on my land.

At this time I went straight to the front of my house tambaran at the shore and I stood some 10 to 15 meters from the shore. I stood there as the boats pulled ashore. I stood there as the policemen came ashore.

When I saw the movements of the policemen I was afraid because as they left their boats they displayed much force. First of all, as they left their boats they kicked canoes and they picked canoes up into the air and threw them on the ground. They then ran inside the house tambaran. I, Herman Kiampi, stood and looked at all of the actions of the policemen from the front of the house tambaran.

At the time the policemen went inside the house tambaran they took everything that was inside – chairs, garamut sticks – and they threw them around; they beat the garamut and they threw everything outside. At the same time, they set the house tambaran on fire and the fire caught on and spread around the house tambaran. We were not able to remove anything from the house tambaran.

Everything – all of the ancestral things – were destroyed at the time the fire burned the house tambaran. The policemen took some carvings and chairs and put them in their boats. Some policemen cut things that stood in the house tambaran. It was me, with my own hands, who built this house tambaran that was burnt.

The police commander gathered his force who destroyed and burnt down the house tambaran and they then arrested some men and put them in a motor boat and went to Pagwi and then, eventually, to Maprik with all the things they took from the house tambaran.

All of this I saw with my own eyes.

## INVENTORIES OF ITEMS OF DESTROYED PROPERTY

The inventories, running into hundreds of items, were divided into distinctly marked categories. As requested, we typed them exactly as they were presented to us – in Neo-Melanesian and in the original form. The categories (in translation) were: music flutes, once sent by the Provincial Office of Culture and Tourism to Port Moresby where the National Museum learned about them; nine posts of the house tambaran; ancient traditional carvings; masks of ritual figures lacking flutes; decorations and baskets of the masked figures; ancestral spears that have become models for tourist carvings; slit gongs of the house tambaran; slit gongs belonging to the two ancestral Sakisim crocodiles.

We present here the items under the category ‘ancient traditional carvings’. (‘Generation’, in this inventory, refers to genealogical antiquity.)

## ANCIENT TRADITIONAL CARVINGS

1	of the	6th	generation which has 6 male figures that decorate it, named Parampano
2	of the	7th	generation, each having 1 big face and a big snake and lots of faces, named Meprkampan and Kanoyapan
1	of the	7th	generation which has 1 big face and a big snake and lots of little faces, named Wariwope Mansinoyapan
1	female	post	named Taguryaris
1	ancestral	face	which has cowrie shells, named Mewiyapan
3	ancestral	faces	which have cowrie shells, all named
10	chairs		Warintamby for sitting down
1	whet		stone
1	oil		can
1	male		carving
2	bird-of-paradise		carvings
1	ancestral		sago spathe
6	carved hooks		for hanging things up
5	tongs		for retrieving food from the fire
2	bundles		of cane
3	old-style		brooms
1	mask		of the ancestor Sakimang
6	mountain onions		
6	yams		
14	sugar canes		
3	papayas		
3	bananas		
2	Malay apple		
1	canoe		

## LISTS OF THE ITEMS' OWNERS AND CASH VALUE

These lists focused on four cosmologically and socially significant areas (*nankemp*) within the men's house, each of which contained large, named, clay sago-storage jars (*pan*, comparable to Yambu's mentioned earlier) in which clan-owned flutes and other named ritual accoutrements were stored. The list, entitled 'All of the Ancestral Items of the 4 *Nankemp*', enumerated the areas, the jars, and the ancestral (personal, not generic) names of the items the jars contained. Each item in turn was listed according to its estimated kina value and according to whether its owner was a men's house as a whole or a clan representative (the great majority of cases). For instance, within the Tangumankawinh *nankemp* and in the Ariyonthnh *pan*, the Chambri clan-leader, Marcus Angonki, had stored:

	Kina
Taguryaris	5
Sikampunnemenan	5
Uampunkawi	5
Agoror	5
Gmnkise	5

By our calculation, thirty-two men were listed as having stored items worth between K3-5, adding up to K385 in all.

*This, then, was the extent of the damages that could be claimed from the total destruction of the Kwarmakui men's house.*

The lawyers consulted concerning the destruction of the men's house had advised their Chambri clients that admissible evidence must follow a certain form. This form accorded with what is, in effect, a 'modern', natural-history episteme (Foucault 1970): eyewitnesses had to testify; destroyed items had to be inventoried; these items' owners and cash values had to be specified and listed. This is to say, evidence had to be offered as 'a system of variables all of whose values ... [could] be designated, if not by a quantity, at least by a perfectly clear and always finite description' (Foucault 1970: 136). Such an episteme regarded the 'credible' as based on visual perception (and this would include the reading of texts) and established through consensus. Hence, given certain assumptions about the priority and relative uniformity of the faculty of sight in intersubjective perception, evidence could only be delimited in terms of a finite number of visually apparent characteristics, characteristics upon which individuals in general would agree (see O'Hanlon 1995).

Such an episteme was, it must be noted, antithetical to the 'traditional' Chambri system of knowledge/power, wherein people could, among other things, dream truths and regulate the universe through chanting secret names (see Lindstrom 1990). Under the modern natural-history episteme, however, the deposition of an individual who claimed the knowledge/power of dreams and chants would be deemed irrelevant to and inadmissible in court proceedings. Thus, the testimony of someone who had been told in a dream that an ancestor in the form of a blow fish had impelled the police to burn down the men's house as retribution for another ancestor having stolen his secret names many generations before, might well have convinced elders assembled

in Kwarmakui, but it would most likely have been ruled out of government court in Wewak. While the natural-history episteme promises a universalization in access to knowledge and an ease of consensus, it can, in fact, be seen as privileging only certain kinds of viewers with particular types of knowledge (see Knauff 1996; Stoler 1995).

Significantly, in conforming to this modern episteme, many Chambri came to the stark realization that its strictures reduced the Kwarmakui men's house to a written list of the items it had contained – items worth, by their own evaluation, a mere K385. They could, of course, have altered the numbers, arbitrary as they largely were, and increased the value of the items by a hundred- or even a thousandfold. However, to have increased the monetary value of the items into which Kwarmakui had been reduced would have been also to invite social dissension and conflict among possible claimants. If, for example, the Ariyonthnh *pan* was said to have contained flutes worth, not K25, but K2,500, then others than Marcus Angonki would probably have claimed at least partial ownership of them. They would perhaps have claimed ownership of the bamboo out of which Angonki's ancestors had fashioned the flutes or of the tools used to craft them.

But such dissension, we were explicitly told, would have exacerbated rather than offset the collective damage the police had inflicted. It would have, in effect, added internally inflicted insult to externally inflicted injury. The destruction of Kwarmakui was, after all, not just the destruction of material items, each worth a smaller or larger amount. It was, from the perspective of senior Chambri men, an attack on what they did and what they were: it was an attack on that which gave Yambu and his Kwarmakui counterparts a common field for concern, for both competition and co-operation. It was an attack on their shared sense that such things as transmogrifying into blow fish both happened and mattered.

Indeed, rather than further submit either to a process that fundamentally devalued their beliefs and activities or that further undermined collective life, the claimants decided by 1999 not to pursue the case actively. Instead, they were pinning their hopes on another ongoing effort, the completion of a new men's house, Olimbit, which would be the greatest, largest, and most 'traditional' men's house in all of contemporary Chambri.

### *Account three: the resurrection of the Olimbit men's house*

When we arrived at Chambri, in June 1999, we were invited to visit the newly completed Olimbit men's house. At the appointed time and carrying a cluster of betel nuts to which K15 had been attached (an indication of respect for the men's house on the occasion of our first entry), we approached a massive two-story structure that quite literally appeared alive. To the thudding sounds of two slit-gong drums, Olimbit's woven palm-frond sides moved rhythmically in and out as if expanding and contracting in breath. After circling the outside as instructed, we entered to find the house filled with the men of Kilimbit, seated on their totemically designated benches. Our betel nuts and money were accepted by an elder who hung them on the central

post as an offering to all present. In this way we were introduced to an Olimbit which was a vital and compelling – a powerful – whole.

The men were clearly proud of their structure, which had taken great effort over many years to build. Attesting to labour both concerted and extensive were, for instance, the massive posts and beams. Carried to the site, hoisted by hand and affixed without nails, they had also been elaborately carved or painted with totemic designs. In addition, many – the posts particularly – had been be-spelled by Yambu-like practitioners. The central rear post, for example, *was* the ancestor Apandimi, who had himself become that post. Originally arriving from neighbouring Mensuat, he had carried a net bag that was covered with the blue feathers of a ‘goura’ pigeon and that contained the bone of a wallaby and a piece of sago; in fact, it was Apandimi (some said) who first brought sago to Chambri (where it supposedly replaced mud as the staple food). And it was his descendants who not only created and enlivened the Olimbit post but who would (again, like Yambu for blow fish) enact their share of a totemic division of labour by providing the rituals necessary for sago growth.

In important social and cosmological ways Olimbit was, therefore, the condensed embodiment of a world regulated by Chambri power. However, despite their impressive achievement and our evident appreciation of it, the men assembled at Olimbit spoke to us at length of their anxiety that their efforts would prove fundamentally in vain. As one elder had phrased it, they built the house so that tourists would come ‘every day, every hour – by water, by plane, by ship, and by motor canoe’. But, they had received few tourists and little income. Many thought that tourists were not coming because the house had not yet been formally ‘opened’ and hence could not be placed on the government’s official list of national cultural property: since Olimbit was not on this list, no tourists were advised by the Office of Culture and Tourism to visit it. In fact, since the men’s house was not on the official list, some at Olimbit were worried that the modest income from those few tourists who had visited might prove a source of trouble with authorities.

Although all thought it important to hold a formal house-opening sooner rather than later, they had agreed initially to wait until Christmas. Then, many young Chambri men, especially those yet to be initiated, could return home from their jobs throughout Papua New Guinea for the Christmas holiday. This would provide enough time to open the house with a ritual initiation, a skin-cutting, as was appropriate. Yet, of even greater importance to a successful opening than a skin-cutting would be the attendance of such important government officials as Sir Michael Somare, the senior statesmen for the region. And such officials would only come if they could fly in. Thus, many in Olimbit were thinking that they should delay the opening even longer, until late in the following year, when the Chambri grass airstrip would likely be dry enough to be serviceable.

At its most general level, the problem with all of these delays was not just that income was being lost, but that Olimbit was beginning to feel inefficacious. Its very existence should have been more evidently compelling: as the product and manifestation of combined and co-ordinated social and cosmological power, it should have served as a force field controlling what was

necessary for Chambri well-being. In particular, it should have compelled the likes of Peter Barter, who, despite having visited Olimbit, still sent the tourists who cruised the Sepik River on his *Melanesian Discoverer* to other men's houses. (Was he, perhaps, simply waiting for the house to be officially opened?) But perhaps Olimbit might compel *us*, the anthropologists. We might be induced, as was suggested, to arrange for ambassadors from all over the world to travel to the opening or for a troupe of Chambri cultural performers to tour the United States and create interest in Olimbit.

Or, as was also suggested to us a bit later, we might assist John Maram with his effort to engage outside funders, at least partially on Olimbit's behalf. Maram asked for our help in promoting his proposal for 'an ethno-economic development program of Chambri people of East Sepik Province'. He planned to submit this proposal to several NGOs on behalf of the (nascent) 'Chambri Lake Cultural Institute', for which he was a 'contact person'. This proposal asked for K40,000 (because of a decrease in the value of the Kina, equivalent to \$15,000) to construct 'a mall network of individual guest houses and other buildings to accommodate tourists and other visitors' to the Institute. The Institute itself was dedicated to preserving the 'living "Book" of Chambri wisdom and experiences'. It focused on Olimbit, presented as 'a living folk-museum of Chambri cultural Arts and Sciences, in which carving, the preparation of traditional foods and medicines and many other aspects of Chambri traditional knowledge can be viewed and studied by scholars, researchers, journalists and tourists'. The proposal, in addition, described the Chambri people as 'some of the best educated, and most progressive of all the Cultural Groups in Papua New Guinea, while at the same time holding firmly to the roots of their traditional culture', as exemplified by the 'forthcoming traditional opening ceremony' of Olimbit.

Significantly, though, Maram's proposal called attention as well to the difficulty Chambri have been finding in transmitting and translating their specific knowledge across epistemological boundaries, both generational and cultural. While asserting that Chambri had a firm grasp on traditional knowledge, Maram's proposal also stated that 'few people are left in Chambri who know how to carve specific ceremonial masks and make music tubuans' (masked figures). Moreover, the proposal called for a 'development program' to address a crisis among youth, an

extremely high school failure, dropout and push-out rates (over 60%); few economic opportunities, or any other creative outlets for the energies of young people; disaffection and a growing cultural gap between generations; a loss of language and cultural knowledge that is vital to success in community and family life, *for the inheritance of land*, and for the assumption of roles and responsibilities within the traditional structure of the Chambri nation; high (and rapidly rising) incidence of alcohol and drug abuse, crime, communal violence, frustration and aimlessness among the youth; and a general pattern of youth moving to cities and towns, and falling into hostile and unhealthy life-ways (emphasis added).

Olimbit, then, was the centre-piece in a local effort to resurrect a vital Chambri whole, one greater than the sum of its parts. It was pivotal to an effort to be

simultaneously 'traditional' and viable in a Chambri world increasingly generationally divided, cash based, and externally affected. It was pivotal to an effort to reverse a devaluation, both local and extra-local, of Chambri culture and sociality, whether through the reduction of aged totemic practitioners to irrelevance or through the reduction of a men's house to an inventory.<sup>10</sup>

As a repository of co-ordinated 'traditional' knowledge, Olimbit was designed to be both manifestation and source of power-filled order, an order encompassing both Chambri and those people and things affecting Chambri. As such, and in ways that vindicated Yambu and his peers as well as those seeking adequate compensation for Kwarmakui, Olimbit (and, by extension, Chambri more generally as place, people, and culture) would compel and shape increasingly important relationships with powerful non-Chambri others: with Peter Barter and his tourists; with the decision-makers of NGOs; and with those adjudicating land claims – a concern never far from Chambri and other Papua New Guinean minds. If Olimbit could compel in these relationships, it might at the same time pull Chambri's own evermore externally focused youth (already half-way outsiders) back into the Chambri orbit with the promise of a coherent and prosperous, indeed 'modern', future.

But to have such a compelling future, Olimbit's message would, we argue, have to be both de-parochialized and attenuated. For example, it is virtually implicit in Maram's proposal that the living book of Chambri wisdom would have to be presented in a readily translatable form. Its message would have to be conveyed with sufficient generality and brevity that the visiting scholars, researchers, journalists, and tourists (to say nothing of disaffected Chambri youth and representatives from sponsoring NGOs) would both be able to and wish to comprehend that message. And if this 'book' were to contain such parochial particulars as the full details of Yambu's blow fish ritual or the myriad names of flutes contained in one or another of Kwarmakui's *pan* or the many stops of Apandimi's mythic journey to Chambri, these details would probably be presented and understood less as intrinsically believable (less as manifestations of encounters with the 'really real') than as (at best vivid) illustrations of what 'traditional' belief might plausibly (given structures of common difference) look like in Papua New Guinea (or Melanesia or the Pacific).

### *Conclusion: the generification of culture*

Late twentieth-century Chambri have become thoroughly enmeshed in a world of regional, national, and global engagements. In this world, inter-related extra-local forces and their agents – whether of the Papua New Guinea state, NGOs, or tourism – have been pushing the Chambri (with or without their compliance) in the same direction: towards rendering them legible through generification. They were, thereby, becoming translated into units both comparable to others and controllable by others. They were becoming comparable to others as a component of a national imagined (and regulated) community (Anderson 1983), or as a needy Third World people, or as a touristic experience. And they were becoming controllable by others as the subject of the prescriptions and expectations of extra-local elite emissaries from the state, from NGOs, and from tourist enterprises. In effect and most generally,

Chambri (and other Papua New Guineans) were becoming vulnerable to 'surveillance and censorship, or to promotion and sponsorship by the administrators of power and knowledge who command the "discursive procedures, apparatuses, and institutional arrangements that regulate the 'practice' of that knowledge"' (Wolf 1999: 22, quoting Lindstrom 1990: 15).<sup>11</sup>

Under these conditions of vulnerability, the Chambri future would not really belong to those who could conduct themselves as blow fish. Rather, it would belong to those who could conduct themselves as Papua New Guineans (or as Melanesians or as Pacific Islanders); or it would belong to those who could act as traditionalists (or primitives in transition) empowered to both preserve and develop; or it would belong to those who could provide the focus of someone's best (or worst) vacation.

#### NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1999 meetings of the American Anthropological Association in the session, 'Inequality, the state and the meanings of "tradition": cases from Southeast Asia and Melanesia'. We thank Henry Delcore for inviting us to participate and James Weiner and Maria Lepowsky for commenting as discussants.

<sup>1</sup>We are describing a contemporary Papua New Guinea wherein people, things, ideas (and disciplines) are brought together, separated, and transformed by forces systemically regional, national, and global. Theorists of such a circumstance have often emphasized transformations that lead to creative syncretisms and playful hybridities (e.g. Lipsitz 1990; Rosaldo 1989). Scott (1998), it seems to us, provides an important corrective with his discussion of legibility as reflecting and furthering important asymmetries in power. In addition, Appadurai (1996), Clifford (1997), Featherstone (1990), Featherstone, Lash, and Robertson (1995), Lash and Friedman (1992), Waters (1995), and Wilson and Dissanayake (1996) discuss globalization and its discontents in manners that inform our Papua New Guinean ethnography.

<sup>2</sup>Philibert (1986) is the first we know to have described a Melanesian culture as 'generic' in his discussion of the politics of tradition in Vanuatu (cf. Derlon 1999).

<sup>3</sup>Before we began to collaborate in our work with the Chambri, Deborah Gewertz made two independent trips there, in 1974-5 and in 1979. Together we have visited them five additional times, in 1983, 1987, 1994, 1996, and 1999.

<sup>4</sup>The concept of 'tradition' (or the 'traditional') must, of course, be understood as often invented. See, for the most general exposition of this position, Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983). For compelling Pacific comparisons, see Linnekin and Poyer (1990) and Keesing (1992). Note, as well, that the meaning of 'modern' must be understood as multifaceted and situationally contingent. For an excellent, recent summary of the issues pertaining to invented traditions and the politics of tradition in the Pacific, see Babadzan (1999).

<sup>5</sup>In regard to the process whereby cultures are presented and indeed shaped so as to become more readily comparable to each other, we are reminded of Fjellman's (1992) discussion of the erasure of cultural (and historical) differences, differences that make a difference, in the depiction of peoples and events at Walt Disney World. See also Errington's (1988) discussion of the Festival of Nations in Rock Creek, Montana, where cultural differences were reduced to a small number of set themes. Thus, what was presented as a celebration of difference was actually one of similarity. See also, concerning the Chambri, Errington and Gewertz's (1996) discussion of a comparable process, the individuation of tradition, through which culture becomes a matter of consumer choice.

<sup>6</sup>Thadeus Yambu, recently deceased, was the real name of our friend and informant. We have changed all of the names of other Chambri we discuss, except for those, as in Account two, who submitted official testimony to the courts.

<sup>7</sup>For more recent elaborations of Sepik cosmology, see Harrison (1990), Lipset (1997), and Telban (1999).

<sup>8</sup>Ernst (1999) and Jorgensen (1999) document an analogous process resulting from the bureaucratic adjudication of land claims. Ernst calls this process 'entification', whereby formally fluid groups become entities claiming timeless fixity so as to press their 'traditional' rights to land. As Jorgenson (1999: 9), referring to Scott's discussion of legibility, puts it, 'What emerged in response to attempts to create legibility was a series of experiments in clanship' (see also Guddemi 1997).

<sup>9</sup>Papua New Guinea's constitution describes the nation as a Christian country, and certainly Christianity was extremely important to many of our informants. Recently, in fact, a miracle was said to have taken place on Chambri Island: a statue of Mary was seen descending from its pedestal and walking about within the church. See Gewertz and Errington (1997) for some elaboration of Christianity's importance to different categories of Chambri, including women and 'big men'. See, for apposite Pacific-focused comparisons, Barker (1990), Douglas (1998: 223-318), Robbins (1995; 1998).

<sup>10</sup>We had the occasion to show one ageing totemic practitioner from Kilimbit a class essay about men's houses written by a Sepik student attending teacher's college, which stated that 'Haus tambaran is a special building in which the "spirits" are kept. It is also the place in which initiation takes place. Different areas have their own ways of planning and designing carvings in the Haus Tambarans. People living along the Sepik River build their Haus Tambarans using high posts and that is to prevent it from high floods. In the Haus Tambarans, skulls and bones of enemies also the Spirits of their dead ancestors are being kept inside, which they believe would give them power to fight and to live as a strong and hardworking member of the society or area. Women and small children are not allowed to enter the Haus Tambaran, if they do so, they will get sick and die. If the women cook food for the people in the Haus Tambaran, they will stand far away and the other elder men will come and take the food to the Haus Tambaran. When the old Haus Tambaran is worn out, a small haus is built in which the Haus Tambaran equipments are being transferred to, big singsings are then held, and later the equipments are taken to the New Haus Tambaran.' Our Kilimbit friend was incensed by the brevity and generality of the description. He said that it would take many books to begin to do justice to the topic.

<sup>11</sup>We suspect that Stanley (1998) would find that we, in our description of generification among the Chambri, suffer from the same 'melancholia' as does MacCannell (1992), in his discussion of tourist-focused performances at Yosemite. That analysts experience this melancholia stems, Stanley suggests, from their sense that others have lost cultural efficacy. This sense, in his view, derives from a semiotic assumption that there should be 'a clear correspondence between unambiguous signifiers and their signified' (1998: 151); in the absence of such a correspondence these analysts empathetically assume that there will be a feeling of loss. However, in Stanley's view, people are not so easily upset nor, correspondingly, should be their analysts. This is so, he (1998: 151) claims, because there is 'considerable room for ambiguity, for fluidity in categories and, above all, for changes in significance over time'. This makes it possible for people to 'sustain their sense of identity through performance in a postmodern world' (1998: 151). We grant that under certain circumstances such postmodern (dramaturgical) coping may be feasible. But we would want something of a fuller socio-economic contextualization than Stanley provides to accept that our discouragement concerning the coercive effects of state control upon Chambri-like people is not well founded. In fact, rather than being melancholic at the lack of clear correspondence between Chambri signified and signifier, especially since ambiguity has been central to 'traditional' Chambri politicking, we are depressed at the loss of Chambri power.

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## **De la générification de la culture: de poisson-globe à mélanésien**

### *Résumé*

Nous prolongeons la discussion de Wilk sur la façon dont les peuples qui ont davantage de pouvoir établissent les dimensions du sens commun par lequel les groupes socio-culturels communiquent et rivalisent entre eux. En portant l'attention sur un groupe de la Nouvelle Guinée papouasienne pluraliste, nous démontrons qu'en établissant ces dimensions, les représentants de l'État et les émissaires du capitalisme global ont gagné un contrôle progressif sur les formes culturelles spécifiques de savoir. Par l'analyse de trois événements, nous démontrons que les Chambri ont perdu contrôle sur leur savoir local au fur et à mesure qu'il est devenu compréhensible à d'autres populations. En effet, par le fait de devenir compréhensible – 'légible', selon l'expression appropriée de Scott – il s'est produit une 'générification culturelle' telle que le particulier culturel a été soit traduit au sein de la généralité culturelle, soit tourné en exemple général de particularité culturelle. Dans les deux cas, à travers une telle générification, le savoir local et les auteurs du savoir sont devenus non seulement compréhensibles mais aussi contrôlables par les étrangers.

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