The Individuation of Tradition in a Papua New Guinean Modernity

ONE THING WAS CLEAR about doing anthropology in a contemporary Papua New Guinea: virtually everyone was self-conscious about "culture." Papua New Guineans, like others worldwide, were invoking culture in dealing with a fluidity of identity and a shift in the locus of important resources in a late-20th-century, postcolonial "modernity"—a modernity progressively affected by transnational capitalism and by state power. In contexts ranging from local assertion to state certification, culture, equated with the "traditional," was evermore employed in these changing circumstances as both a source and resource. It was understood as a central and explicit determinant for current identity and political efficacy.

Culture was understood by Chambri of the East Sepik Province as a priori, ontological, and collective—as the ultimate and enduring basis of local value and power. Yet, though Chambri had for some time insisted that their culture differentiated them from others, both the nature of the differences and the processes by which these differences were produced and utilized were shifting (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Stolcke 1995). Where culture was actually employed as a source and resource, it was being redefined as a means to transitory and self-serving ends. On the individual level culture was, in many regards, increasingly enacted as personal lifestyle choice, and on the collective level culture was, comparably, increasingly enacted as interest-group politics, as serving loosely to link persons pursuing provisionally shared self-interests.

This shift was not only a critical ethnographic moment for Chambri as they engaged modernity but one that, in its analysis, could contribute to an ethnographically grounded, comparative study of modernity. In fact, because the explicit invocation of culture as source and resource has become undeniably (and often violently) a central aspect of modernity from Eastern Europe to the Amazon, the contribution our Chambri case makes to this comparative study may be especially instructive. Certainly, Papua New Guinea provided a modernist context in which the rhetoric of culture was extraordinarily pre-occupying.

After all, the newly created, rapidly modernizing state of Papua New Guinea was composed of over 700 different linguistic groups which (at least since the colonial era) took their separate cultures and distinct identities very seriously. Discourses that focused on culture and cultural differences permeated Papua New Guinean contemporary life. It was a context in which local people clearly recognized that they were involved in a novel process of change. This context required them to understand what was going on and to determine what was acceptable and unacceptable in their pasts, presents, and futures. As Chambri were, both individually and collectively, trying to ascertain what traditions to preserve, transform, or abandon, the meanings of both modernity and tradition/culture as major and explicit reference points were themselves being negotiated and mutually affected—although, as we shall see, they were being affected unequally.

Our focus is on a key moment in a widespread, widely recognized process—one better documented in history than in ethnography—in which the meaning and use of culture was shifting as it was invoked in modernity. Whereas culture as source and resource may be locally regarded as "the only relation to the national society . . . beyond the control of national and political elites" (Turner 1995:17), in its actual employment it may be importantly redefined by such elites. At least in reference to the Chambri case, the nature and efficacy of culture was increas-
ingly subject to definition and specification by the Papua New Guinean purveyors of transnational capital as well as by the representatives of the state. In certain regards, they had become the arbiters of culture. Our case thus concerns an important instance in which what were rather nostalgically understood by locals as old and reliable meanings were employed to bridge new, modernist circumstances. Although it appeared that existing sources of understanding and efficacy were thereby perpetuated, these sources were importantly undermined—the inalienable, surreptitiously appropriated.

A discussion of everyday and pervasively transforming encounters between the traditional and the modern lays the foundation for an analysis of a local debate that attempted to specify the meaning of Chambri culture in contemporary Papua New Guinea. Though the debate was understood as an effort to reverse an erosion of the traditional by the modern, the debate itself subtly but significantly contributed to the process of erosion.6

The Forging of Modernity into Tradition

Godfried Kolly had long been self-consciously aware of Chambri culture. He had, after all, worked as our Chambri research assistant since the mid-1970s, both at the ever-growing squatter settlement of Chambri Camp in the provincial capital of Wewak and at the somewhat remote home fishing villages on Chambri Island.7 However, his interest in Chambri culture, especially as source of identity and resource, had become increasingly explicit in recent years. He and a number of other Chambri had become part-time professional cultural performers. In 1987 we had been asked to take publicity pictures of the assembled members of the Yambai Culture Group so that they could more readily gain employment at local hotels, performing Chambri dances and songs for tourists. The photos show Godfried and some dozen, mostly young, Chambri men and women resplendently and traditionally costumed. In 1990, Godfried and 14 other Chambri men and women toured Europe. Called the Sepik Performers, these Chambri, along with two additional Papua New Guinean troops, the Highlands Performers and the Trobriand Performers, sang and danced their traditional music at various locations throughout England, France, and the Netherlands.

When we saw Godfried in 1994 at Chambri Camp, he told us in excited detail about this tour. After taking us through his photo albums from the trip, he got out the actual traditional costumes he had worn during the cultural performances. In addition to the headdresses of feathers, necklaces of pigs’ tusks, and belts, armbands, and legbands studded with shells, he had worn a loincloth composed of plastic strips cut from bright yellow pack-
For the same reason that he liked this program, Godfried also appreciated a brightly colored calendar widely distributed by Arnott’s Biscuits (Figure 1). It was in fact a conspicuous decoration in his house at Chambri Camp. This calendar promoted the Arnott’s Biscuits product line as the “taste of paradise,” a reference to the bird of paradise in Papua New Guinea’s national emblem and thus to Papua New Guinea itself. Featured on the calendar and representing the Arnott’s Biscuits product line was a bare-breasted young native woman in traditional finery. She was painted in a design of extensive tattoos and wore a feather headdress and grass skirt. Holding a cracker in one hand, she gestured with the other toward an array of multicolored, cellophane-wrapped products of Arnott’s Biscuits. It was as though she were offering something for every Papua New Guinean taste.

Godfried explicitly saw this young taste-of-paradise woman as similar to the kind of cultural actor he wished to be. When we responded that she was probably an invented traditional, that Arnott’s Biscuits had likely constructed a cultural composite lest it circumscribe its potential market of biscuit buyers, Godfried objected. He then not only specified her precise, rather distantly located, cultural group, but speculated as to her exact village. Intrigued by his answer, we subsequently asked various Chambri to tell us what culture the taste-of-paradise woman represented. Interestingly, although no two people named the same culture (suggestions ranged from ones in the Gulf to ones in the New Ireland Provinces), all insisted she was a traditionally attired member of the particular culture they had specified.

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Clearly, as these examples show, Godfried and other Chambri both valued the traditional and defined it rather broadly. Thus the term and its attendant value could readily encompass not only such relatively novel contexts as cultural performances and advertising displays but also the particulars of those performances and displays such as loincloths made of bright plastic, explications of the meaning of costume, and images of mudmen and of befeathered beauties with soft drinks and biscuits in hand. To Chambri, these performances and displays did not ordinarily denote loss of cultural authenticity as they might to Western tourists (Gewertz and Errington 1991:25–100). Rather, to Chambri they were likely to indicate a modernity characterized by continuity—even augmentation—of cultural strength, vitality, and resilience. Yet this ready conjoining of the traditional and the modern carried important implications that did not favor Chambri interests—implications that concerned not authenticity but efficacy.

We were not surprised that Godfried, and other Chambri, so easily embraced and incorporated as their own the various accoutrements of modernity. After all, Chambri belonged to one of the “borrowing cultures” (Mead’s [1970] term) of the Sepik. Borrowing, though often initiated by individuals in continual and assertive rivalry with others to enhance the power and prestige of their particular clans, was believed ultimately to enhance the power and prestige of the larger cultural group. Chambri and their neighbors eagerly traded back and forth the ritual items that conferred and evoked efficacy, such as flutes, masked figures, large rocks, and sometimes whole ceremonial complexes (Tuzin 1978). Many of the incantations through which Chambri clans regulated portions of the immediate natural environment—participating in what was, in essence, a competitive ritual division of labor—derived their potency from polysyllabic names acquired from non-Chambri neighbors. Chambri accounts of the origin and clan ownership of specific ritual figures, elements, and procedures often stated without embarrassment their non-Chambri sources. In sum, for Chambri the traditional had been, in important regards, a process of innovation by which clans sought not only to augment their own powers relative to those of others but also to conjoin their augmented powers with those of others to create and maintain a locally grounded center of collective powers.

Chambri culture itself was understood as sustaining what was, in effect, a particular force field, accreted to, as well as emanating from, Chambri Island. Vested in place as well as in persons (both living and dead), Chambri collective powers—if strong—were thought to keep the social and physical world under control, and by Chambri rather than by others. Proper concentration and mustering of these powers would keep their world and its resources anchored, rather than drifting; regulated, rather than chaotic; attracted, rather than dispersed. Chambri were consequently far more concerned that their culture be cosmologically and spatially centered than that it be cosmologically and spatially bounded.

In such an eclectic construction of the traditional, the Chambri could, hence, be understood as successfully negotiating—or perhaps even bypassing—what Miller has suggested is a key difficulty in constructing a convincing modernist culture. Because modernist culture “is knowingly forged with a sense of struggle and fragility, [there is] a sense that it could be otherwise and a constant fear that it is otherwise” (Miller 1994:321–322). The difficulty is highlighted by Miller through the double meaning of forged: the authenticity of the diligently crafted all too easily becomes the inauthenticity of the fraudulently contrived. But for Godfried and other Chambri, such a shift or drift from one polar meaning of forge to the other did not seem especially likely. (Nor do we think that the pun, which would be rather cumbersome to translate, would make much sense to them.) Through a flexible definition of the traditional—itself linked with a tradition of borrow-
Figure 1
The 1994 Arnott’s Biscuits calendar.
ing—they were creating a modernist cultural identity that appeared to them to be stably grounded while adaptably contemporary. In other words, by readily absorbing what others might regard as the contrived (such as bright plastic rather than natural material loincloths) into the crafted, Chambri appeared to be circumventing some of the risks of cultural loss, alienation, and vulnerability.

Yet we wonder whether this rather generous definition of the traditional might, in modernist circumstances, be too inclusive, whether certain kinds of borrowing might carry unforeseen and unfortunate consequences for Godfried and other Chambri as well as other contemporary Papua New Guineans. What, for example, might be the consequences of incorporating the representations of Papua New Guineans presented by PepsiCo and Arnott’s Biscuits under the single broad umbrella of the traditional? Might the disparity in power and in commitment to the traditional between Arnott’s Biscuits (a large international firm for whom the traditional was important only as it helped sell relatively novel foods to Papua New Guineans) and the Chambri be at least somewhat obscured? Might the fact that Godfried thought of himself and the taste-of-paradise woman as comparable cultural actors serve to conceal distinctions that actually made a difference?10

To the extent that Godfried and other Chambri found their models of the traditional and the cultural actor in the commercials of Arnott’s Biscuits rather than, for instance, in the cultural performances of other comparable Papua New Guinean groups, an important—though insidious—shift in control was taking place. In accepting Arnott’s cultural images, as well as in seeking its corporate sponsorship, Chambri were potentially undermining their efforts to forge an efficacious modernist cultural identity. Their efforts at appropriation and cultural enhancement were likely to be met by Arnott’s co-optation. What might initially appear a successful “utilisation of a dynamic popular culture [might prove] the reduction of the subject to a mere instrument in the reproduction of a triumphant capitalist-consumer culture” (Miller 1994:71; see also Sklair 1991).

Simply put, PepsiCo and Arnott’s Biscuits were conveying, in a way that Chambri (and, presumably, other Papua New Guineans) found convincing, that there was no dissonance—in fact, there was full consonance—between a completely traditional identity and a fully modern soft drink-consuming, biscuit-eating identity. Indeed, these modern activities were presented as quintessentially traditional. Conversely, accepting what we viewed as invasively agglomerating images would mean that the thereby transformed traditional would be perniciously all-penetrating. There would remain no place so local, so remote, so politically autonomous as to provide refuge to any Papua New Guinean from the incursions of a certain sort of national (and international) political economy. This political economy was not only one in which being a Chambri was increasingly defined as comprising a portion of national market share, but one in which being a Chambri was increasingly defined by external cultural performances, themselves dependent on corporate endorsement as well as governmental sponsorship and certification. In effect, with co-optation of the traditional in the interests of a consumer ideology, home villages would no longer be places to return to as importantly distinct from towns, as cultural “heartlands” of power, knowledge, and efficacy, as spaces of resistance and reprieve.

These images were signaling and significantly effecting a critical shift in Papua New Guinea’s political economy. In particular, villages were changing. They had long retained a persistently noncapitalist configuration within a larger capitalist system so as to subsidize the larger system by absorbing labor costs and providing migrants.11 However, as the towns have come to have semipermanent or permanent populations and as they have continued to grow relative to the villages, the role of villages in underwriting urban capitalist enterprises and town life in general has been diminishing.12 Not only have Papua New Guineans increasingly moved into towns, but growing numbers have been born and raised there.13 Moreover, home villages were no longer significant beneficiaries of remittances sent from the towns (Carrier and Carrier 1989). Given an urban economy characterized by high prices, high unemployment, and low wages, few in the towns were able to remit. The relatively few who did have reasonable incomes were subject to continual claims by their unemployed or underemployed urban kin and neighbors.14

Certainly, the meaning of Chambri home villages relative to towns was shifting. Chambri villages were not only losing a special role in the political economy (including rewards in the form of remittances), they were losing their special role as a locus of concentrated cultural significance and efficacy. In other words, Chambri culture was becoming, in both a physical and metaphorical sense, less centered. As PepsiCo, Arnott’s Biscuits, and the national government were increasingly becoming the adjudicators of the traditional, villages were correspondingly losing their special role as reference points for cultural distinction. No longer importantly different from towns in both economic and cultural dimensions, Chambri villages were simply becoming poorer and more peripheral (Howard and Rensel 1994). Even a village subsistence economy based on fish and sago, which might provide an essential security if town life became oppressively harsh or untenable, appeared less valuable to many Chambri. For such as Godfried, accustomed both to consuming soft drinks and biscuits and to defining identity importantly in terms of that consumption, fish and sago were no longer the traditional. They were just the second-rate. Some urban Chambri who had returned to Chambri Island as
school teachers mentioned, almost with pride, that their children repudiated fish and sago for tinned meat and biscuits.

We think there were yet other implications in the way PepsiCo and Arnott's Biscuits were effecting a shift in the political economy through their (re)definition of the traditional. We see a calculus of association implicit in the Arnott's Biscuit calendar through which the taste-of-paradise woman—a repository of the traditional—has come to have no more inherent importance than the array of products she displayed and represented. If anything, she had less, since she was just a medium for selling them. In addition (assuming Chambri were right that she was from a particular group and not simply a cultural composite), she could readily be replaced by representatives from any of the 700 or more cultural groups that composed Papua New Guinea. This in turn suggested that there was some rough equivalence implied in the calendar between Arnott's line of 30 or so biscuit types and Papua New Guinea's "line" of 700 or so cultural groups and therefore that, to Arnott's Biscuits, the nation of Papua New Guinea was itself equivalent to the company's product line, to its national market.

It should also be noted that following this calculus in which the array of cultural types and the array of consumer products—people and biscuits—became roughly equated, any particular cultural representative was as devoid of intrinsic meaning as any particular sort of biscuit. All were interchangeable, to be retained or replaced according to market performance. The only ultimate source of value in such a political economy was consumer choice manifested through purchase. Implied by the images of the traditional embraced by Godfried was a Papua New Guinean "paradise" in which town and country became comparable as equally traditional and that the traditional became a matter of consumer taste, like the personal choice of one or another biscuit or soft drink.

Clearly, tradition and modernity were and remained major references points, but the meaning of each had shifted in mutual interaction. As Chambri became "biscuitized," Arnott's Biscuits had become "Chambrified." However, the shift vastly favored Arnott's Biscuits over Chambri. Chambri culture, transformed into market share, affected Chambri efficacy vastly more than the Arnott's Biscuit product line, transformed into fare for the traditional Papua New Guinean, affected Arnott's Biscuits' efficacy. Chambri "biscuitized" increased Chambri commitment to and engagement in a political economy in which they had, even as market share, relatively little power. Arnott's Biscuits "Chambrified" only enhanced Arnott's Biscuits' efficacy in that same political economy in which it was already very powerful. While being traditional biscuit-eaters had become a significant source of cultural identity and efficacy for the one, being purveyors of traditional images and products was only an advertising campaign for the other. Whereas Chambri were being transformed in ways that were not easily reversible, Arnott's Biscuits retained the capacity to change its marketing strategy at any time.

To be sure, most Chambri would not directly implicate PepsiCo and Arnott's Biscuits in transforming the relationship between villages and towns and in reducing the traditional to an individual lifestyle choice. Thus Godfried contested our interpretation that Arnott's Biscuits was interested in the traditional only as a means of marketing its product. Yet, as we shall see below, many were worried that the significance of their home villages as a locus of cultural meaning and efficacy was at risk. They were, in a related way, also worried that the significance of Chambri culture as a collectively maintained force field was being eroded. They were concerned that Chambri as place would increasingly become poor and peripheral and that Chambri as culture would increasingly become decentered and dissipated in power.

Both linked concerns were articulated in a remarkably self-conscious debate about the continued efficacy of Chambri culture. The occasion was a visit to the island by provincial officials to determine whether a well-equipped medical aid post, complete with solar power and refrigeration, would be situated there.

Controlling Modernity by Tradition

On July 21, 1994, Chambri leader Matias Yambunpe, accompanied by the East Sepik assistant provincial secretary and by the head of (Wewak's) Boram Hospital, traveled from Wewak to Chambri Island. Yambunpe arrived to ensure that Chambri credited him with providing a much desired medical facility and to ensure that a decision could be reached as to the facility's specific sitting in one or another of the three Chambri home villages.

While the visiting officials were off examining possible sites for the aid post, Yambunpe addressed the men assembled from each of the villages. His audience, convened in the only full-equipped men's house on Chambri Island, listened to him with respect. Though no longer holder of formal office, Yambunpe at 61 continued to formulate and represent Chambri interests in various political arenas. In many ways he had become a professional articulator between the local, regional, provincial, national, and—occasionally—international spheres.

Sitting by the (cosmologically significant) central fire of the men's house, Yambunpe began dramatically, arousing and crystallizing his audience's anxiety about losing efficacy as Chambri. He charged the men with having allowed Chambri "culture" (his term) to become prostituted (the pidgin English word pamuk was used). Specifically, a group of young men from the village of Kilitibit had been hired by an out-marrying kinsman to perform
Chambri songs and dances at a non-Chambri political event. The men had given a performance on behalf of the non-Chambri politician whom their out-marrying kinsman and his (non-Chambri) affines supported. Moreover, the politician was running for a seat in the Provincial Assembly from the Angoram District, a district that did not include Chambri Island.

Yambunpe continued his diatribe, invoking a somewhat idealized vision of what senior men would consider Chambri harmony and efficacy:

It is in the Chambri language that the fish are brought into our lake. If trees bear fruit, if the rain comes, all of this occurs in the Chambri language. And the name of Chambri and the name of Yambunpe go hand in hand. We cannot just allow our ancestral songs to come and go. Angoram is not our district; our district is Ambunti and our subdistrict is Pagwi. It is my name that is known at the airports. It is my name that is known at the drinking places. It is my name that is known everywhere. If the Chambri name is bad, then my name is bad. Everyone knows that Chambri is my line. If the Angoram line decides to go to court because Chambri youth went there to sing, it has a right to do so. If this happens, who here today will take responsibility? Who here will say, “I was asked and I told them they could go”? No one will take responsibility. These youth just went because they wanted to. And what they did was to prostitute the name of the Chambri people and of Yambunpe. Yambunpe did not send them, and now they have messed things up. All of our ceremonies are going to be ruined because of this mess up. This is prostitution. Chambri customs should not be prostituted.

Why have you elders stopped holding general meetings? If the fathers do not tell their children what to do, then the children will just act of their own volition. Who is going to teach them things if you do not talk to them? Who is going to tell them where they can go, where they can express their culture? I have become strong, it is true. But I am not the only one with eyes and ears. Others have them too, and others know that what has happened is not right. Why have the three villages stopped meeting together? If we remain disunited, we will go nowhere. Consider that government officials have come today to find out what the general agreement is at Chambri, not the agreement of one or two men. I don’t know what action the line at Angoram will take. I do know that you must meet with the young people and teach them about their culture—about the customs of our ancestors. You have a real problem among you now and from now on you must stop ruining your culture, stop prostituting your tradition.

A senior man from Wombun Village responded, “Yes our customs have been prostituted. Our young people must be silent and listen to what I have to say.” Then, in the traditional manner of a Chambri orating in the men’s house, he picked up a handful of coconut fronds and, slapping them down one by one, enumerated the occasions that Chambri masked figures had appeared in inappropriate, non-Chambri contexts. Another senior man from Wombun followed:

If we do not maintain order here at home then disorderly things, like the young men going out [to Angoram], are bound to follow. At Wombun, I hold the culture and it is here. If it goes out, I must know about it. If I send it out, then it is all right. What the young men have done is prostitute our culture. We must hold general meetings and teach the youth what to do.

A general discussion followed about each of the occasions in which ritual figures had been displayed before a primarily non-Chambri audience. One ritual figure had been appropriately displayed in Port Moresby when Rabbie Namaliu (a member of Yambunpe’s Pangu Party) had been selected as Papua New Guinea’s prime minister. Some thought another figure had been sent out inappropriately on another occasion. But one man countered that this was during a cultural festival and so was justified. A senior man from Indingai said that these figures have their own laws and if Chambri do not follow them correctly they will get sick and die. Another senior man from Wombun said that Chambri should never perform their culture for the government: “Just look at Paul Wanji [a non-Chambri in the National Parliament who represents the district that includes Chambri]. We performed in support of him and nothing good has come from it. Once elected he has forgotten who we are.”

Yambunpe reentered the discussion at this point:

The government is okay; it will provide us with an aid post. If it were not for the government, nothing would come. But when I heard about Angoram, I was very sorry. I do not think we are going to fare well during the next election and this is your fault. It is the problem with the leaders of the Chambri community. It is the problem with the greedy men who just want money.

Yet another senior Wombun man spoke: “No big man was asked about this.”

In what proved the concluding speech of this discussion, Yambunpe described his view of proper Chambri procedure:

When our fathers held a ceremony, this is how they did it. They got betel nut and hung it up in the center of the men’s house. They invited others to come and talk about what ceremonies should be organized. Should there be just songs and dances, or should there be a masked figure? All the big men were asked to come and discuss. It was not just a matter for a man and his wife or a man and his sister. The central fire of the men’s house had to talk and then that talk had to be shared with the other two fires. One week, two weeks passed. People organized and the ceremony was held.

Finally, Yambunpe warned, “Prostitution! I am telling you, you will destroy Chambri culture.”

At this point, the government officials returned. Shaking hands with each person present, they circled the men’s house. The assistant provincial secretary then announced that only one site was suitable. Only one was
large enough to accept future population growth and was accessible enough to serve as "a public service for all the people of the region." Although some Chambri readily agreed with this analysis, many of the senior men continued the traditional rhetoric with which Yambunpe had begun the meeting. They presented their particular ancestral claims to the proposed location of the aid post.

One Chambri, for example, insisted that since he was responsible for the ancestral slit-gong drums known as Ilasone and Pangasone, drums that pulled together the entire Chambri population in ritual activities, so too should he be responsible for providing the ancestral land for the aid post, which would also pull together the entire Chambri population. Eventually, after other senior men had made equivalent speeches, the assistant provincial secretary brought these traditional considerations to an end by flatly stating, "If you cannot decide on a suitable place, then we will have to move the aid post elsewhere, where the people want it more—where the people want it enough to agree on a reasonable site." Yambunpe interjected at this point, reminding the Chambri that all his—and their—hard work in attracting the aid post to Chambri would be lost if they could not act together. Administering still another prod, the government officials warned that they must soon return to Wewak. With that, the assembled Chambri assented to the government's plan and thanked the government in a round of applause.

Yambunpe was self-consciously presenting himself as a thoroughly traditional Chambri leader. As such, his linked claims that his personal reputation had intrinsic value and was a matter of public concern surprised no one. Chambri had long regarded their force field as embodied in and measured by the efficacy of particular leaders such as Yambunpe—men who made things happen. Hence, Chambri would find it both plausible and appropriate that Yambunpe would state that his interest was the Chambri interest. This did not, of course, mean that other Chambri could not vehemently challenge Yambunpe by asserting that their reputations were as important as or even more important than his. By charging that his name and, correspondingly, the name of the Chambri people and Chambri culture itself had been prostituted, he was expressing his fear that in this modern world (which encompassed Sepik villages, government offices, drinking places, and airports), Chambri cultural efficacy was being lost, that it no longer compelled across a full range of contexts: regional, national, and international. He was warning that Chambri must act immediately to restore the value of their culture, lest it be permanently devalued as a resource.

It would, however, be a mistake to interpret Yambunpe's warning about the devaluation of Chambri culture as an indication that he was alarmed in any simple way about its commodification. After all, the venue for his speech was a men's house built as a cultural attraction for tourists. Not only was it filled with Chambri artifacts for sale, it was on occasion the site of ceremonies such as initiation to which tourists were also invited as paying guests. Although often distressed by tourists, resenting their occasional indifference to their artifacts and ceremonies, Chambri had in recent decades regarded their culture as an essential economic asset, one that would provide prosperity and renown. In fact, they took considerable pleasure in the remuneration and recognition they received by representing Chambri with songs and dances at both national and international cultural shows. Therefore, the concern with the prostitution of culture did not seem to refer directly to selling that which should not be sold.

Nor was Yambunpe warning in any simple way against cultural interchange per se as contaminating or demeaning. Far from regarding such interchange as polluting or debilitating, Chambri had, as earlier mentioned, long relied for their viability—indeed, their vitality—on a regional system of trade in ritual complexes and, it might be mentioned, in subsistence goods. Some of the specific ritual figures mentioned by senior men in the discussion Yambunpe precipitated were generally recognized to have had such exogenous origins. In addition, it was the polysyllabic names acquired from non-Chambri neighbors that were used in Chambri incantations to regulate the natural environment—to bring, as Yambunpe said, the fish, fruit, and rain. Thus the prostitution of Chambri culture did not concern any parochial aversion to a possible "miscegenation" of "borderland" exchanges (Rosaldo 1989).

Rather than a primary concern with the commodification of culture or with cultural interchange, the image of prostitution conveyed anxieties that Chambri culture as a collectively maintained force field was becoming increasingly less focused and, correspondingly, increasingly more a matter of individually invoked self-expression. The event of immediate concern was defined as one in which individuals, primarily as individuals, not as members of a (Chambri) collectivity, were enacting and representing Chambri culture. It was, thus, "greedy men who just want money," "a man and his sister," or "a man and his wife" who were dissipating and decentering Chambri culture as a means and context of power. Yambunpe and other senior men saw these actions as both indicating and fostering a general and progressive erosion of the Chambri cultural force field in modern times. And unless this erosion was checked, only further decline could be expected. No longer would national and international respect be accorded to Chambri leaders (as virtual embodiments of Chambri culture), no longer would success be ensured for particular candidates in forthcoming elec-
tions, no longer would the physical welfare of Chambri on Chambri Island and in Wewak be sustained.

To be sure, control of youths was not an entirely new problem. Certainly in recent decades, youths were often derided by their elders for their lack of knowledge of, and interest in, traditional culture and for their unwillingness to accede to arranged marriages. Nonetheless, there was a sense that even wayward youths would remain ultimately subject to the Chambri force field. There was a sense that, no matter how far they might wander both culturally and spatially, they would still respect the bonds tying them to (an admittedly changing) Chambri center, and these bonds would remain strong. However, in this present instance Yambunpe and his senior colleagues were afraid that these bonds had become critically attenuated. In other words, they were afraid that their culture as a collectively maintained force field would be destroyed if a radical privatization occurred. Chambri culture, they feared, was becoming a private matter over which individuals, acting for themselves alone, were asserting disposal rights.

Whereas Yambunpe could plausibly claim that, as the embodiment of collective Chambri culture, his travels abroad represented an extension of the Chambri force field, he could also claim that the unauthorized travels of young Chambri performers (travels at the behest of non-Chambri leaders of centers of power) represented a weakening of the collectively maintained force field. Whereas Yambunpe could plausibly claim that he had an intrinsic meaning as a cultural embodiment, the youths performing at Angoram did not. If Chambri culture lacked intrinsic value and meaning such that it could be bought, sold, consumed, discarded, or given away by individuals, as might a commodity such as a soft drink or a biscuit, then it became simply a matter of any man (and his sister) for himself. In this regard, these youths as purveyors of Chambri culture were at least somewhat comparable to the taste-of-paradise lady who, like that which she offered, had value only to the degree that others would buy (or hire). From Yambunpe's perspective, culture thus surveyed and offered by the culturally disengaged and detached was culture dissipated, culture prostituted.

To judge from the response Yambunpe received concerning the prostitution of Chambri culture, others were either already aware of or readily recognized what we have dubbed the "biscuitization" of the Chambri. Yambunpe's diatribe, though, was more than a generalized critique of Chambri practice. It was especially focused on the prospective construction of an aid post on the island. Chambri efficacy, in other words, had to be maximized in this important engagement with the forces and benefits of modernity.

Nevertheless, in the very perception that Chambri had to maintain themselves as a centered cultural group if the government were to take them seriously, the traditional idea of Chambri as a force field was being subtly reworked. As we have seen from Yambunpe's diatribe and the response it provoked, the traditional idea of force field was such that, if power were concentrated, all aspects of life went well for Chambri. These aspects embraced, for instance, environmental regulation and physical welfare as well as success in governmental elections. Chambri also knew that success in this governmental sphere required not only cosmological but more narrowly defined political action. The Chambri force field, in other words, had to be able to mobilize an effective voting block or interest group. To manage successfully the forces of modernity required that Chambri be effective in a contemporary electoral politics of districts, votes, and deals. Thus for youths to campaign as Chambri on behalf of a candidate from another district suggested not only a weakening of the force field but a lack of electoral unity. Correspondingly, if leaders like Yambunpe could not plausibly claim to deliver the Chambri vote as a block, then their power to attract government-controlled resources would be diminished. In other words, Chambri as "biscuits" could not be counted on to act in concert with other Chambri. They were simply interchangeable with other Papua New Guineans, each acting on his or her own individualistic behalf. As such, they would be just part of an undifferentiated and fluid electorate. They would likely be of uncertain allegiance and political effect unless mobilized into an interest group or voting block. Yet relative to a Chambri force field, constituted on what were understood as enduring, intrinsic, a priori, and ontological groundings, a voting block or interest group would likely be far more situational and ephemeral.

Voting blocks or interest groups, constituted as they were by individuals united in the mutual pursuit of personal self-interest, were likely to dissolve into their constituent components anytime particular goals were reached or personal objectives shifted (Varenne 1977). Whereas Yambunpe was apparently capable, at least temporarily, of linking force field with voting block or interest group in order to incorporate and politically mobilize such wayward Chambri "biscuits," the tension between these forms of organization would almost necessarily remain.

The extent to which Yambunpe's synthesis was weighted more toward voting block or interest group than cultural group, Chambri "biscuits" were likely to remain, or revert to, "biscuits."

We think that several additional consequences followed when the traditional force field and modern voting block or interest group became connected. The continuum between them meant that Chambri culture received validation as an important basis of collective identity because it was efficacious in attracting modern resources. To the extent that Chambri could maintain the conviction that they must act so as to maintain their traditional force field, they would likely have a measure of modern political
efficacy as voting block or interest group. Conversely, the
continuum also meant that government officials would
find in the Chambri a political entity that, because they
could do business with it, deserved recognition for cul-
tural distinction and efficacy. That the government meet-
ting took place in a Chambri men’s house itself was doubt-
lessly intended to suggest a fundamental respect for
traditional Chambri culture. On the other hand, by meet-
ing in the men’s house half the electorate, namely Chambri
women, were, much to their annoyance, disenfranchised.

However, the fact that the continuum between the
traditional and the modern resulted in the Chambri as
(partially) “governmentalized” and the government as (par-
tially) “Chambrified” was likely to affect each party une-
equally. For instance, that Chambri tradition would be
validated because it “worked” in a modernist context also
carried vulnerability. Although the idea of force field was
likely to give Chambri as much power as they would
probably ever have in such a context, it was a decidedly
limited power. The Chambri, even as voting block or interest group, had only modest influence in regional
politics, to say nothing of national or international poli-
tics. They would likely have to cope not only with the
disappointment and frustration of political failure in these
arenas but, perhaps, with ensuing ontological disquietude
and uncertainty.

Correspondingly, the government, though concerned
to show respect for Chambri tradition, was never willing
to be bound by it. Thus accepting a men’s house as the site
for a government meeting did not mean that the govern-
ment was significantly subject to Chambri rules and pro-
cedures concerning the significance of ancestral, ritual
prerogatives in discussion and decision making. Nor did
respect for Chambri tradition mean that the government
regarded Chambri as a relatively equal, comparably sov-
eign group. The government certainly was not going to
cede to Chambri, as cultural force field, ultimate rights in
disposing of such government resources as aid posts (or,
as was vitally important elsewhere in Papua New Guinea,
moral rights). For the government, the calculation of
Chambri power was, in essence, strictly and narrowly
political.

Conclusion

Focusing on the use of culture as source and resource
in a rapidly changing, highly pluralistic world of increas-
ing commodification, we have offered this essay as a
contribution to an ethnographically grounded, compara-
tive study of modernity. We have shown that in Chambri
dealings (whether direct or indirect) with economic and
political elites, both the nature and the efficacy of culture
have subtly but importantly shifted. Culture has been
increasingly redefined as market share and as interest
group or voting block in ways that individuate collective
identity and privatize collective power.

Such contributions have been suggested by Daniel
Miller, among others, as a means to offset the pessimistic
position of many theorists of modernity—those who re-
garded as virtually inevitable the capitulation of indige-
 nous peoples to the homogenizing juggernaut of transna-
tional capital and its social and political support systems.
As Miller put it, ethnography was likely to counter the
“deeply baleful tone of much theoretical work” because it
could demonstrate the creative appropriation by local
peoples of products and social forms designed for pur-
poses other than those their producers intended.17

The ethnographic moment in modernity that we have
described leaves us unclear as to whether Chambri should
be optimistic or pessimistic about their future. Certainly,
they were, at turns, both. Indeed, we have indicated some-
thing of their ambivalence—Godfried’s sense of possibil-
ity, Yambunpe’s sense of loss—as they engaged with pro-
cesses of modernity. Extrapolating from the situations
described in which culture and tradition have been in-
voked and used to achieve identity and efficacy in moder-
nity, we—and, to a significant extent, many Chambri
themselves—envision a future with several possibilities.
Three of them, obvious extensions of what Chambri have
thus far experienced, would not, we suspect, dispel their
ambivalence. A fourth, we venture, would strike many
Chambri as the best of all possible worlds.

The first and most likely possibility would be a con-
tinuation of the present circumstances. The individuating
and privatizing processes of commodity consumption and
of interest-group or voting-block politics, prompted by the
purchasers of transnational capital as well as by the repre-
sentatives of the state, would continue, interrupted by
moments of attempted cultural reclamation in which
Chambri would periodically wonder, “What on earth is
going on with us?”

The second possibility—more likely in the towns, but
also conceivable in the villages—would be an accentua-
tion of these individuating and privatizing processes such
that Chambri culture would become emptied of funda-
mental value or specificity of content—perhaps becoming
for these reasons implausible as ontology and as a priori.
Under such circumstances ancestral precedents would
become less a matter of ritual (and collectively focused)
prerogatives than of individual land claims.18 The Chambri
would become, in essence, residents, citizens, and con-
sumers within the nation of Papua New Guinea. Economic
differences among them and other Papua New Guineans
would become increasingly salient and determinative of
personal identity and collective association.

The third and least likely possibility would be a kind
of nativist, neo-orthodoxy in which Chambri tradition,
perhaps stripped of recent accretions, would become re-
ified so as to allow them to claim, for example, that “we’re poor, but pure.”

Yet another possibility is based on a Chambri faith in their capacity to appropriate creatively. It was outlined in a Chambri proposal for governmental development funds. More than a continuation of the status quo, it would be a thoroughgoing eclecticism in which tensions between tradition and modernity would be relieved. It was one in which Chambri could, without dissonance, have the best of both circumstances. This vision—perhaps concomitant with an enhanced sense of situationality, of multiplicity of context, of lives as multifaceted—was based on a conviction that Chambri would, and should, remain Chambri and that PepsiCo’s soft drinks and Arnott’s Biscuits products would, and should, remain important in their lives.

According to the proposal submitted by several well-educated, professionally employed Chambri, the Chambri living in town were “a people in bondage” to squalid life in the squatter settlements. They lacked sufficient land, money, and food and were subject to disease, malnourishment, and evil influences, as well as to disturbances and attacks by drunks and criminals. The solution presented in the proposal was to transform life in the villages so that individuals would decide to come home—so that they would no longer be attracted by “bright city lights.” There needed to be a well-organized development project to freeze and market the abundant fish in Chambri Lake so as to provide the money for a variety of amenities: electricity, television sets and receiver dishes, sports programs, social clubs with snooker tables, restaurants, mini-supermarkets. These embodiments of modernity were, however, to be employed in the context of strong, revitalized Chambri traditions. Thus, rather than be the cause of disturbance and criminal activity as in the towns, beer would be consumed at Chambri in the men’s houses, following the traditional etiquette focused on seating arrangements at central and subsidiary fires.

In this vision, the town, not the village, was to become the backwater. Traditional centers of power would become augmented by the best of modernity. By making Chambri villages so filled with the amenities of modernity that individual Chambri would choose to live there, the attraction of the Chambri force field would be supplemented by (or transformed into) the attraction of the modern lifestyle. Rather than peripheral in a global village, the Chambri home communities would become the model of a globe of villages.

Not bad work, if the government or PepsiCo or Arnott’s Biscuits would help them get it.

Notes

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1. The term culture as it is used here is the subject of local political invocation and contestation. Modernity (or modern or modernist) is to be understood as multifaceted and situationally contingent. The concept of the traditional (or tradition) is to be understood as invented. See, among others, Hobshawm and Ranger 1983. On postcolonial modernity, see Lee and Ackerman 1994 and Turner 1996.

2. Our fieldwork among Chambri has been long term. Gewertz has been returning to live with them, both at their somewhat remote fishing villages on Chambri Island and at their urban settlement in Wewak, since 1974, and Errington since 1983.

3. The literature on modernity has become enormous. Of the vast corpus of works available, we have found the following to be among the most anthropologically germane to our present study: Berman 1982; García Canclini 1990; Giddens 1991; Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991; Lash and Friedman 1992; Miller 1994; Taylor 1998; Thomas 1991; and Williams 1980.

4. These were, in other words—and contra Strathern (1988:315)—societies that emphatically named themselves.

5. See, among others, Burke 1978; Schama 1987; and Thompson 1963.

6. Many ethnographers of the Pacific have, of course, focused attention on the transforming encounters between the traditional and the modern. For instance, the growing Oceanic literature on the invention of tradition has come to include such seminal works as Keesing’s (1992) discussion of the effects on Kwaio culture of Western ideologies. In addition, Carrier (1992) has edited an important volume demonstrating the complex ways Melanesian societies have engaged Western influences. Our present essay about the Chambri, however, has differed from much of this literature in that we have perceived a significant and insidious redefinition of local ideas of culture so as ultimately to support (rather than to resist) outside interests. For a recent and significant collection that generally corroborates this perspective, see Foster 1995.

7. In 1994, there were 316 people living in Chambri Camp, 208 people living in Kilimbit Village, 141 people living in Indingai Village, and 327 people living in Wombun Village.

8. We were unable on this research trip to consult with the designers of the calendar concerning their strategies.

9. See Errington and Gewertz 1986 for a more complete discussion of this topic.

10. For important comparative data, see Foster 1992 and n.d.


12. Perhaps 25 percent of Papua New Guineans have come to live in towns. We thank Dan Jorgensen for providing this statistic.

13. Chambri Camp, for example, increased in population by 62 percent from 1987 to 1994, while the three Chambri home villages decreased in population by 14 percent. In addition, 31 percent of those living in the Camp were younger than 15.
14. Of the 215 men and women older than 15 living in Chambri Camp during the time of our 1994 research, only 16 had jobs paying regular wages. No one younger than 25 had such a job.

15. At one time Yambunpe had been president of the Gau Local Government Council, member of the National Parliament, and member of the Provincial Assembly.


18. During 1994, Chambri sought to register their traditional land claims with the National Lands Commission. To this end, traditional names marking clan and sometimes family holdings were inscribed on a tracing of a government-issue map of the Chambri Lakes region. They thought this would be decisive documentation in case of encroachment by non-Chambri.

19. Lawrence (1984) described such a reaction on the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea in response to decades of failure to achieve development in the form of cargo.

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