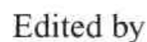
Globalization and Culture Change in the Pacific Islands



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Toward an Ethnographically Grounded Study of Modernity in Papua New Guinea

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To convey with accuracy the place of Papua New Guineans in a global world, we must first address the remarkable persistence in popular magazines, newspapers, and books of a particular view. This view is that Papua New Guineans are peoples whose desires derive from conditions of unchanging remoteness, peoples whose desires befit those living "untouched by the outside world" within the "land that time forgot" (see Shenon 1994; Raffaele 1996; Bruckner 1999; Flannery 1999; Stille 1999). However, the Papua New Guineans we have long known have become very much aware of themselves as engaged in processes of change; correspondingly, they would not, in fact, want to have their current desires represented in such an erroneous and (insultingly) anachronistic fashion.

Significantly, anthropologists themselves have, to some extent, contributed to such a (mis)representation, especially through their use of the stylistic convention that has become known as the "ethnographic present." (This use of the present tense for describing social practices deemed "traditional," whether they last took place many years before or that very day, has served in many ethnographies to portray peoples and practices as out-of-time, as changeless.) We, therefore, stress at the outset of this chapter that cultural anthropologists must, once and for all, abandon this convention and write with the recognition that no societies have ever been truly static in their practices. This means that ethnographic writing must employ a range of tenses to convey accurately when events, including "traditional" ones, have actually occurred.

Moreover, since cultural anthropologists are meant to understand the way people have been living their lives, and these lives have always been led under conditions of change (albeit to varying degrees), anthropologists must pay close attention to these lives as they have been taking shape in their

fully contemporary circumstances. In the case of Papua New Guineans, the last thirty years have brought them such interrelated transformations as the following: an end of formal colonialism with political independence from Australia (in 1975); an increasing reliance upon money for ceremonial, subsistence, and commercial purposes; a concomitant focus on cash-cropping, tourism, wage labor, and entrepreneurial activities (ranging from small roadside stalls selling local foods or imported second-hand clothes, to large stores, service stations, and construction companies); a generally irreversible devastation of entire areas through large-scale mining and logging by multinational firms; a rapid increase in population and in urbanization (with about 20 percent of Papua New Guineans living in urban areas); an intensification of the importance of education, literacy, and Christianity (especially charismatic forms); and the accelerating importance of class-based social and economic distinctions.

Finally, and perhaps paradoxically, these contemporary lives should be described so as to indicate that they may have undergone further change since anthropologists were last in the field. Thus, we will use some variant of the past tense throughout this chapter as we focus on what contemporary Papua New Guineans have desired in what has undeniably become a Melanesian modernity. (We should also note that we will usually place quotes around "traditional" but not "modern." This is to provide a reminder that the "traditional" has never been static. Such a reminder is presumably not necessary concerning the modern, as most people assume the fluidity of modernity.)

We are especially interested in two things about this Melanesian modernity: how these modernist changes have affected, and have been affected by, the construction of new sorts of desires and the creation of new sorts of selves; and how these modernist changes, while globally impelled, have been locally configured. By way of illustration, we begin by describing what some Chambri of Papua New Guinea's East Sepik province have stated to us about what they desire to have and to be. First studied by Margaret Mead and Reo Fortune in 1933 (see Mead 1935) and subsequently by us (during seven field trips, beginning in the early 1970s and most recently in 1999), the Chambri—and their desires—have, like others in Papua New Guinea, undergone significant transformations.

When Mead and Fortune visited them, the Chambri lived in three large villages, each having between 300 and 500 individuals. Indingai, Kilimbit, and Wombun were located south of the Sepik River on an island-mountain within Chambri Lake. They caught fish, some of which they bartered for sago produced by non-Chambri; they also participated in an elaborate social and ritual system predicated on patriclan-based totemic prerogatives. (Gewertz 1983 and Errington and Gewertz 1987 discuss this social and ritual organization.)

From the 1930s through the 1950s, relatively few Chambri left their villages to travel to the coastal town of Wewak: These were mostly labor migrants traveling to plantations elsewhere in Papua New Guinea or prospective catechists training for the Catholic mission service. However, by the early 1960s, Chambri began to journey to Wewak in greater numbers for other purposes and for longer periods of time. They came, for example, to supervise their children who, having completed the limited schooling available at Chambri, were attending mission schools in Wewak; or they came to watch out for their kin who were receiving treatment at the Wewak hospital. In order to provide housing for themselves, they eventually rented from indigenous landowners a small area adjacent to one of the main roads. Here they built the makeshift houses that formed the nucleus of what became Chambri Camp.

By the early 1970s, ever more Chambri traveled to Wewak, usually staying with those kin or covillagers already living in Chambri Camp. Many came primarily to earn money to take or send home. But they also came to see what town life was like. Women who came to sell fish might stay several months before returning to Chambri; men who accompanied them, or those who came alone, might look for jobs and stay longer. If no jobs were

found, they eked out a living selling "traditional" carvings and baskets to tourists. They built houses or additions to existing structures from whatever was available—bush materials, scavenged pieces of sheet metal, and even cardboard—and squeezed these in as they could. And eventually many living in the camp came to consider town their home.

This is not to say that Chambri living in Wewak and Chambri living in the home villages became entirely disconnected from one another (Carrier and Carrier 1989). Those from the town might visit the home villages to attend such rituals as death ceremonies. And those from the home villages might visit the town to seek medical attention, sell produce or artifacts, make major purchases, or just experience urban life. While it is true that many in the town and in the villages came to view the other as more backward or less grounded, their lives remained both mutually affecting and affected. Their lives were still influencing each other and were still influenced by the same deeply penetrating global forces, primarily those of commodification, Christianity, and class.

But how, more precisely, had these globally driven modernist changes influenced Chambri desires, indeed, Chambri selves? To find out (during the mid-1990s), we asked Chambri—both at the camp and at the home villages—what they wanted for their futures. We give a sample of their responses.

Soli Pasap (we use pseudonyms throughout) was an unmarried twenty-four-year-old unemployed Chambri who lived at Chambri Camp. He neither knew the Chambri language nor the name of the group into which he was supposed to marry, facts which only mildly embarrassed him. At our suggestion and in response to our questions about his future, he wrote (in English):

> I as an individual will be a future leader of my home community, my family and my future life. As Papua New Guinea is a democratic country, I have all the authority over my life. I will choose my own partner who I know would be the right one for my future and the well being of our children and ourselves as parents. In my future life I have always planned to live a simple life. I will have just enough to build a permanent house, buy food and clothes for the family and also school fees for the kids. That I will have. I as an individual don't want to be a person that everyone would look upon as they would a rich person with a lot of money. I've learned much from the past years and proven to myself that people with a lot of money face lots of problems, such as drinking alcohol every day, husbands busting up their wives, going around with other women and many more things.

He also told us that he hoped his music career would flourish because, like many of his peers, he was "very music-minded." He was a keyboard player for the interethnic, pop-gospel group "Shalom"—a group that often played for an American-derived but Papua New Guinea-run Catholic youth organization known as Antioch. (This group was introduced into Papua New Guinea in 1985 [via Australia] so as to win back urban youth from increasingly popular, charismatic, Protestant sects and—as we shall see—to focus these youth on Christ rather than on commodities, perhaps acquired through crime.)

Cleanne Kalap was an unmarried, forty-year-old leper, with missing toes and fingers and a badly eroded nose, who also lived in the Wewak settlement. She reported to our research assistant, in response to his questions about what she wished the future to bring (and we translate): "I want to weave baskets so that I will have some money to buy food and other things I need. And, in addition, I want to pray to God and Jesus to guide me in my life so that I can remain at peace for all time."

Peter Yuman was a married fifty-four-year-old big man living at Indingai Village (again, one of the Chambri home communities) who was at the height of his powers. He had just sponsored a large, expensive, and prestigious ceremony for the construction and naming of a huge motor canoe. He told us that his future would be even better than the present. This was so because his already extensive powers had been recently augmented by Christian power. He was receiving visitations from Jesus,

with whom he had first conversed, in the Chambri language, on August 17, 1991 at 3 A.M. Although he would still exercise ancestral prerogatives in the control of natural resources (in particular, he would regulate the water level in Chambri Lake and control the reproduction of several species of fish), he could now do so more effectively. Rather than regulate through the uncertain and often hazardous medium of complicated incantations and manipulations of ritual paraphernalia, he would use the more reliable medium of the Holy Spirit. Commensurate with the augmentation of his powers, he wished to extend his connections abroad. He, therefore, instructed us to send him a photograph of one of Deborah's classrooms. Students were to be shown standing in front of a picture of him projected on a screen. Also to be included in this picture was a table on which were placed a Catholic Bible and a carving he knew we owned of his ancestor. We were to send him this picture, along with the names and the addresses of the female students portrayed. His son could examine the picture and correspond with the students he fancied and then, perhaps, choose from among them for a bride.

August Soway was an unmarried twenty-two-year-old who was the son of the only successful trade-store owner in Indingai Village (and one of the few successful businessmen on Chambri Island). He had been sent to Wewak to replenish his father's stock. While staying in Chambri Camp, a case of beer, a case of canned mackerel, and a case of cooking oil were stolen from him by other Chambri, including a very close relative—his own mother's brother's son. Immediately after the theft—and before compensation was eventually paid—August told us in considerable distress that he intended to live his future as a "white man," as someone beholden to, and trusting of, no one. He also told us, on other less-trying occasions, that he thought his and his father's future—especially as it pertained to their business—would be much brighter if they (and other Chambri) were not obligated to disperse large sums of money on expensive funerals, initiations, marriages, and the like, and if they could own and develop land individually (rather than as members of large kinship groups).

Adam Kendu was a married forty-three-year-old resident of Chambri Camp, who had recently registered as a "mastercrafts person" with the Department of Tourism and Culture. In his application, he described himself as an expert in dancing, carving, and painting, and in telling traditional stories. To implement his plans for the future, he sought funds from various government officials to purchase a 15-horsepower outboard motor, two drums of gasoline, two amplifiers, one generator, three microphones, and a mixer. Together with other members of a Chambri cultural performance group (a group of which he was president), his goal was to travel throughout the Middle Sepik in order (and we translate) "to teach all the young people to learn their traditional dances. They will see how we Chambri perform ours and this will please them and cause them to follow their own traditions." He had become a great supporter of "tok ples" schools, designed to ensure that all Papua New Guinea children achieved literacy in their own native tongues. And he also hoped to continue with his work as a soccer referee and, perhaps, to gain certification to preside over international matches. Finally, he hoped that some corporation, such as Pepsi Cola or Arnott's Biscuits, might sponsor his cultural performance group to represent Papua New Guinea (and the corporation) at international cultural festivals.

Marcus Legu was a sixty-year-old resident of Kilimbit Village on Chambri Island who supervised the building of the Olimbit men's house in the "traditional" manner. It was to him that other villagers went when they needed clarification concerning the techniques of construction and the significance of such structures. He was very optimistic about the future because he believed many tourists would visit Kilimbit to see this men's house, and he hoped that these tourists would not only spend money on admission to Olimbit but would also buy the many artifacts that would be displayed therein. He told us he wanted (and we translate) "tourists to come by plane, by boat and by foot, every day, every hour, every minute."

Roger Bemas was a forty-eight-year-old Chambri who had been among the first B.A. graduates from the University of Papua New Guinea. Serving as a government administrator in the national capital of Port Moresby, he hoped to find time to write a book about the Chambri past and its traditions. In addition, he hoped to implement his vision about the Chambri future and its possibilities. These he described in a proposal he intended to submit to the government for funding. In the (English) draft we saw of this proposal, he portrayed Chambri as "people in bondage" to squalid life in the squatter settlements where they lacked sufficient land, money, and food and were subject to disease, malnourishment, evil influences, and disturbance and attack by drunks and criminals. The solution was to transform life in the village so that people would choose 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 in order to provide the money for a variety of village amenities: electricity, television sets and receiver dishes, sports programs, social clubs with snooker tables.

Agnes Alatip was an unmarried nineteen-year-old resident of Chambri Camp who had to leave high school after her second year. She told us that she had long worried about why she had been born a woman, about why God had put women on this earth. Recently, however, she had joined the Antioch Catholic youth organization, which had taught her (and we translate) "to be proud that I'm special because God first visualized and then made me. I am the way I am because of God and I thank him for making me that way. I am not a robot woman made of discarded pieces of metal. . . . I have life and I have blood and God gave me this body to do his work." Before she had to leave school, she thought she might want to be a banker, but now she wanted to be a policewoman. In addition, she wanted to continue to take Jesus into her life because he had helped her find equanimity.

Jonna Parep was a married twenty-three-year-old resident of Wombun Village on Chambri Island who devoutly supported the Catholic organization called the "Legion of Mary" (whose members fervently prayed for the sick and troubled). When we asked her about her future, she told us that, once her six children were older, she wanted freedom to travel, perhaps as a member of a cultural performance group. Until then, she hoped that her many overseas friends—those who had visited Chambri as tourists and with whom she corresponded—would send her the presents she had asked for, in return for the baskets she had woven and sent them. From us, according to the note she slipped us as we were leaving Chambri Island, she wanted (and we translate) "a little wrist-watch and a radio cassette. I want both of these things. You can send the wrist-watch airmail. The radio cassette you can bring with you when you come next time. . . . I want a JVC or a National Panasonic. A big radio, I don't want it; I want one of the nice, really small ones."

It is not exclusively because we are still immersed in our data that we have presented them in this "experience-near" form. We have provided these accounts—some might call them scarcely more than field notes—to convey with immediacy important aspects about a contemporary context. Contemporary Chambri *were* caught up in—indeed, *were* preoccupied with—processes of rapid and ongoing change. Moreover, they were responding to these processes of change through a range of desires (sometimes contradictory). These processes and the varied responses they engendered suggest a significant fluidity to contemporary life among the Chambri (and other Papua New Guineans). It is this fluidity—this sense of life under circumstances of transformation and possibility—that anthropologists must deal with lest we ultimately endorse the perspective of the popular articles referred to earlier.

What we as ethnographers of the Chambri must come to terms with, then, in what must (at least in part) be an ethnography of modernity (see, among others, Miller 1994; Friedman and Carrier 1996; LiPuma 1998; Gewertz and Errington 1999) are circumstances in which

people were wanting, for instance, big ceremonies; no ceremonies; "traditional" men's houses; endless streams of tourists; Jesus in their lives as a source of personal tranquility; Jesus in their lives as a source of augmented personal power; autonomy in the choice of marriage partners; continued social entailment to avoid becoming white men; private land ownership; increased personal efficacy as women; fulfillment of their place in God's plan; successful individually owned businesses; continuation of the Chambri language and culture; movement back to Chambri from Wewak; international travel; enough food; snooker tables; televisions and receiver dishes; name-brand electronic gear.

Making sense of such circumstances demands a fine-grained ethnographic exploration of the lives of those many Chambri who have been caught up in that complex of sociocultural transformations increasingly significant throughout the contemporary world. Many of these transformations have involved a partial shift from what were experienced as "traditional" identities derived from kinship, occupational, and gender positions to ones frequently constituted (and reconstituted) through (more) subjectively focused forms of self-expression—including those centered on consumption and other displays of personal taste. (And, in such a shift, the nature of the "traditional" itself has become subject to transformation and contestation. See Giddens 2000:54–68 for an interesting discussion of what happens to the idea of the "traditional" under modernity.) Such an ethnographic exploration, thus, must consider what, for instance, the consequences would be for Chambri personhood of "a modernity in which . . . [they would find themselves] with ever more responsibility for self-creation" (Miller 1994:71).

To elucidate these experiences and consequences, we must confront the processes driving the globalization of modernity, both in their local particularities and in their worldwide generalities. This is so not only because "[w]ithout ethnography one can only imagine what is happening to real social actors caught up in macroprocesses" (Marcus and Fischer 1986:82). This is what has been happening, in this case, to the Chambri as they, for instance, have sought corporate sponsorship of cultural performance groups from PepsiCo and Arnott's Biscuits. But it is also so because without ethnography we cannot comprehend the macroprocesses themselves. In other words, unless one knows what actual people have been doing with the "practices, institutions, and discourses" (Foster n.d.) of modernity, one cannot clarify what effects—both immediate and cumulative—these practices, institutions, and discourses have been having and how they have been, in turn, shaped. In this latter respect, we subscribe to Friedman's statement that "global social processes are constituted largely by local strategies" (1992:365), as well as to Miller's claim that, in studying modernity, it is crucial to consider "all those elements of contingency and variability characteristic of humanity" (1994:80). It would, hence, be a mistake to expect global processes ever to be entirely monolithic (see Kelly 1992).

Completing an ethnographically grounded study of modernity among the Chambri of Papua New Guinea would, therefore, involve the presentation and analysis of a substantial range of often on-going, various (indeed, sometimes competing) efforts at self- and social construction (see Battaglia 1995; LiPuma 1998). (In addition, it would involve the consideration of the frequently contradictory characteristics of modernity itself: thus, we would have to consider both increasing bureaucratization and increasing social fragmentation, both increasing personal idiosyncrasy and increasing cultural uniformity throughout the globe [Miller 1994].) To complete this project would, clearly, be a long-term endeavor. But, to sketch out the way we might deal with the construction of contemporary Chambri desires, we offer the following observations followed by a somewhat extended example.

There have been huge shifts in the lives of Chambri (and other Papua New Guineans) since we began working among them in the early 1970s. These have been linked to the changes Friedman documents "in the flows of and accumulations of capital in the world