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 beit 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 patrilineal-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, even more Chambri traveled to Wewak, usually staying with those kin or villagers 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 eeked 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 am 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-trivial 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 indi-}

vidually (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 “mastercraftsman” 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 Lega was a sixteen-year-old resident of Kilimbim Village on Chambri Island who supervised the building of the Ominbir 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 Kilimbim to see this men’s house, and he hoped that these tourists would not only spend money on admission to Ominbir 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 receive 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 entanglement 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 socio-cultural 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
arena and (consequently) ... in identity construction and cultural production” (Friedman 1992:338). In particular, as can be seen from our accounts, we have found ever more emphasis on various aspects of individualism in important and interrelated areas of life. (This is not to say that individualism takes the same form everywhere.) In economics, increasing numbers have tried to rationalize business activities by separating them from the demands stemming from other, more “traditional,” aspects of social life (see Gewertz and Errington 1999). In religion, there have been increasing numbers who have left “mainstream” Christian religions (such as Catholicism and Lutheranism) to find more intensely subjective forms of religious experience and expression as members of charismatic Christian groups (Robbins n.d., 1995). (See Westermark, chapter 26.) (Some Chambri have even prohibited their children from praying with other “non-reborn” kinsmen—those who haven’t taken Jesus into their hearts.) In consumption, there have been (and here our data agree with those of Foster 1995, 1997) increasing numbers who have been defining themselves, by virtue of their preferences for often brand-name consumer goods, as members of the “new generation” (to use a phrase from the almost ubiquitous Pepsi Cola commercials of the mid-1990s Papua New Guinea).

As both producer and producers of these goods, Chambri and other Papua New Guineans were, hence, redefining themselves and their desires in modernist terms. Moreover, as modernists—or at least incipient modernists—they were being actively encouraged in their self-creation: they were being actively encouraged (and have been encouraging each other) to adopt new ways of constructing their identities and objectives.

To give one example focusing on these shifts especially as they pertain to self-creation in religion and consumption, many Chambri youth have joined the recently imported, Catholic-sponsored, charismatic, Antioch youth organization. During intense weekend retreats (that were explicitly compared to now generally defunct initiation ceremonies), young men and women from diverse cultural groups, under the guidance of older Papua New Guineans designated as “mommies” and “daddies,” were enjoined to write life histories. These histories were typically cast in the form of testimonies that established disconnections and contrasts between old lives in “traditional”—kin-based—social contexts and new ones in freely and fully entered religious fellowships. Moreover, these particular histories contrasted a worldly modernism, based on the competitive acquisition of consumer goods, with a more spiritual modernism, based on the sharing of religious experience.

Such disconnections and contrasts can be clearly seen in the testimony of Pauline Kamasap. Entitled “Self-Image or God’s Image?,” it was delivered at an Antioch retreat we attended and well conveyed the globally derived but locally compelling Antioch rhetoric of modernist self-creation. In its virtual entirety (and in translation):

God made me special so that I could do special works. I know that I must grow and become better, inside of me. All of us have to concern ourselves with what is special about each of us, with our own special competencies. I am almost ashamed to reveal to you all that I have learned. Once I thought that I was alone with my feelings, that no one else felt the things that I did, that no one else would understand. But we must talk to each other about what kind of men and women we are. God has a plan for my life and he has made me sufficient to fulfill it. I must take care of myself to insure that I am able to fulfill God’s plan for me. . . . God is my friend and I want to talk to you today about the ways in which we can all be good friends with each other and with Him. Friends know each other well; they tell each other everything.

There are Prime Ministers; there are Kings, Queens and Presidents. These are important people, but they are worldly people. It is their custom to lie and to trick people. Many have married two or three times. Although they may be able to play a four-string guitar with one finger, although they may be muscle men who have all the women following after them, although they may appear to be needed by
everybody, these people are a long way from God. I have seen them and I know.

God is in competition with worldly things. Who will win? What do I think? I’ll tell you. I laugh at the big men. Yet, I have discovered, I still have two sides, a good one and a bad one. Yes, Antiochians, sometimes even now I sit down and think to myself that I would like to be a famous singer like Janet Jackson. I would like to take a big airplane all around the world. I would like to wear long earrings, lipstick and my hair in little snakes. I haven’t done any of this. Yet, I still want it all. Sometimes, Antiochians, sometimes I feel that I am insufficient, that I am inadequate. I tell you this because it is not right if I hide my desires. My desires, my wants, are tools I must use to make my life better. I can’t fool myself. I can’t say that I don’t want these things.

My mother and my father struggled to pay my school fees; they wanted me to go to high school. It was their dream that I would finish school, find a job and be able to repay all of their hard work on my behalf. But I ended up with a Standard Six Certificate—with nothing. They were angry with me. And I thought I was rubbish. I couldn’t find a job, but, Antiochians, I have come to discover that it is all right. God has a plan for me: I can sew clothes; I can help my parents take care of the house. And I know God loves me.

I began by sewing for myself and for my best friends, but now I sew for many people. They are happy with my work. They let me know that I have wisdom, that I count in God’s eyes. There are many of us who wonder what kind of people we are. All of us would like to be admired by others. All of us would like our names on top. Now I know that I have a style and a way of my own. I can help others. . . . When my friends are angry with one another, I can help out. I am like the local radio, laughing and trying to make my friends feel happy. They know I can help them and have come to share their thoughts with me. They appreciate my advice . . .

Let me tell you about a time when I was afraid and when I was courageous. I was angry with my father. I threw a stone at our house. I wanted to fight with him, I was so angry. I thought to myself, I have bones [strength, for-
to testify. About his misguided former life, he would tell of sharing the loot of a theft his friends had committed: He had not only gratefully accepted some of the music cassettes they had stolen, but had congratulated them for their success.

In this way, Antioch sought to provide a context of self-creation—a context to shape and verify a modernist, a subjectively focused, personhood. Through a process of individual resocialization, based on the model of the Western nuclear family, Antioch youths were transformed in an impressively effective way. Pauline Kamasap’s testimony was, by its very nature, an example of such resocialization at work; it conveyed in axiomatic fashion the parameters of an Antioch-constructed and authorized subjectivity. Her account, like those of the others, freely acknowledged the personal shortcomings of her former self-centered, commodity-oriented life: Defiant of legitimate (especially parental) authority and wedded to worldly things, she was unhappy. She was filled with loneliness and a sense of worthlessness. But her life changed when she decided to accept the positive influence of an Antioch friend as well as the influence of Antioch more broadly. Pauline, hence, came to realize that God had a plan for her in particular. From this she gained peace, renewal, respect, many additional friends, and satisfying, useful work. In other words, she learned in the context of the Antioch community (in the context of “God’s Great Big Family,” to cite an Antioch song) what the special things were that God had put inside her.

Pauline’s testimony revealed a subjectivity that elicited responses of empathetic identification. It was, at the same time, a means both of self-discovery and of mutual validation. Antiochers learned, and rehearsed, that each of them was a special and valued subjectivity, with a specific place in God’s eyes and plan and composed of a distinctive mix of goodness, desire, frustration, longing, self-doubt. Each, thereby, was shown to be both unique and comparable to others.

Antioch, therefore, provided a context in which personal testimony and response were understood as providing convincing evi-

dence, both idiosyncratic in detail and general in purport, about the nature of matters both worldly and spiritual (and, moreover, about the appropriate relationship between them). It was, in so doing, defining and creating a certain variety of subjective self for Antioch participants. In these regards, we would like to suggest, in passing, that the Antioch testimony was somewhat analogous to the early European novel. Without wishing to imply that the processes of modernism (and capitalism) in late-twentieth-century Wewak were precisely replicating those, for instance, in eighteenth-century England (Miller 1994), there may have been in each case a somewhat similar focus on the development of a roughly comparable subjective self in rapidly and profoundly changing socioeconomic circumstances (see also Anderson 1983).

Addressing the often linked experiences of personal isolation and mutual curiosity, both Antioch testimonies and novels purport to provide realistically detailed glimpses of the personal life of others (see Watt 1957; Abercrombie, Lash, and Longhurst 1992). Through these accounts, listeners and readers gained empathetic access to a largely hidden world of domestic details and to the private sensibilities often engendered there. And in gaining access, listeners and readers were able (as “models of” joined with “models for” [see Geertz 1973]) to form, comprehend, and validate their own subjectivities as both comparable to, and distinct from, those of others.

All of this being said, we must stress that—despite continuing personal and social transformations—local, ethnic commitments remained highly significant to many Papua New Guineans. (Recall that contemporary Papua New Guinea was characterized by various and often competing efforts at self-creation, efforts that sometimes blended the “traditional” and the “modern.”) Chambri, for instance, universally supported the creation (in accord with national policy) of the Chambri-language elementary schools alluded to earlier. Such schools, they thought, would not only accustom their children to a
school setting but, more significantly, would serve to preserve Chambri language and cultural identity. Chambri also continued to participate actively with each other in various forms of reciprocity and compensation; indeed, we often saw Chambri giving other Chambri the consumer goods that they had just purchased or received.

And, in fact, even in response to our persistent questions, we could find no Chambri who could imagine ceasing to be a Chambri. Even one such as Soli Pasap (with whose account we began)—a youth who had spent his entire life in town, spoke no Chambri, was strongly invested (like Agnes Alatip) in new forms of social organization such as Antioch, and was very concerned with self-definition as a new-generation consumer of pop-music and other products—shook his head with horrified amusement at our outlandish questions. "What after all," he said, "would I be if I weren't a Chambri?"

But we must also stress (as the bulk of this chapter has indicated) that what being a Chambri consisted of had become less clear: It had become for many an increasingly diffuse and varied experience. It was as much characterized by stressing the importance of preserving Chambri language as by actually speaking it; it was as much characterized by giving voluntary presents to friends and age mates as obligatory presentations to kin and in-laws.

Finally, we must suggest that this lack of clarity had broader implications. Speaking Chambri with other Chambri was yielding to speaking Pidgin English (the lingua franca of the country) to Chambri and non-Chambri alike, and payment of bride price to in-laws was yielding to giving a cassette to a friend (possibly someone not even a Chambri) who shared a person’s musical taste. These signaled a transition in the most general system in which desire was formulated. The increasing importance of non-ethnic alliances and engagements based on consumption corresponded, we think, to a continuing postcolonial transition: one linked to the earlier mentioned "flows of and accumulations of capital in the world arena" (Friedman 1992:333).

Corresponding to these flows and accumulations, Chambri—both collectively and individually—were less affected and preoccupied than before by the absolute and categorical differences of the sort that had characterized a colonial caste system. As this hierarchical and exclusionist (caste) system had played out in Papua New Guinea, blacks and (largely Australian) whites were often sharply distinguished in status and worth by the (allegedly) inherent characteristics of race. In contrast, Chambri of late have become more affected and preoccupied by the still incremental (though nonetheless increasingly extensive) differences of an emerging postcolonial, modernist class system. As this hierarchical though seemingly less exclusionist class system was developing in Papua New Guinea, all, regardless of race, were often importantly distinguished by (allegedly) acquired characteristics of relative wealth and access to economic resources. This class system, moreover, was operating within the orbit of a transnational capitalism that generated what Sklair has described as the "cultural-ideology of consumerism" (1991:129).

The absolute and categorical distinctions of the colonial system had fostered local desires for absolute and categorical transformation, as (perhaps) through cargo cultism. In these cases, people wished to transform abruptly old lives and societies into new ones, so that blacks hoped that they would suddenly become whites, or at least the equivalent of whites. In contrast, the incremental distinctions of the postcolonial system were fostering local desires for incremental personal enhancements as through lifestyle shopping (whether of material or antimaterial sort). Thus, elite Papua New Guineans (who became the particular focus of our research during 1996) distinguished themselves (and the members of their nuclear or, at least, nucleated families) from others within their cultural and linguistic groups. This was not only in terms of their key economic positions within the country but also in terms of their successful embodiments of a coveted, consumer-focused lifestyle (see Ogan n.d a, n.d b; Hooper n.d.; Ogan and Wesley-Smith 1992; Gewertz and Errington 1999).
Correspondingly, they often associated themselves with others of their class position, regardless of ethnic background.

Zimmer-Tamakoshi vividly illustrates class-based, cross-ethnic commonalities in her depiction of the arrival lounge at Papua New Guinea’s principal airport:

There... one sees expatriate children and the children of mixed-race marriages and elite Papua New Guineans arriving home from school in Australia, wearing western fashions... As... [they] leave the airport in their parents’ air-conditioned cars and head for the comfort of European-style homes, less affluent youths stare openly, their expressionless faces masking whatever feelings they have about the differences between their own and the students’ lifestyles. (1998:1–2)

This is not to say that the injuries of caste have been entirely eliminated. (However, the relatively few caste-like encounters that contemporary Papua New Guineans would likely have—as with sometimes disdainful tourists—were more often sources of passing, though perhaps evocative, irritation than abiding and infuriating preoccupation.) It is to say, though, that the injuries of class have been increasingly affecting Papua New Guineans. Indeed, it is to say that the primary factor shaping the construction and possible fulfillment of modern Papua New Guinean desires would be the future form and trajectory of Papua New Guinea capitalism within a global world.

Many of us, in reflecting on past fieldwork, have rebuked ourselves for having ignored certain of our “informants” concerns, especially those that did not seem to fall within the purview of our anthropology. Certainly, for a long time (and to our present regret) we were inclined to put down our pencils, as it were, when our Papua New Guinea friends began talking about such topics as Christianity and World War II. Correspondingly, in reflecting on our contemporary research contexts, we need to think about what have been the matters of local concern that we have tended to ignore or downplay in importance. Without here probing the complex of personal and professional considerations for our selective inattentions, we nonetheless suggest the following. Unless we can fully recognize the extent to which our informants have been and, presumably, will continue to be caught up in such world-pervasive preoccupations as brand-name products, popular music, and evangelical religions (and, we might add, sports), we would be repeating the error of the popular articles—that of misplaced anachronism—with which we began.

REFERENCES


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