

## The Capitalism of Chambri Cosmology

Raymond Firth's 1954 Presidential Address to members of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland was entitled "Social Organization and Change." It concluded with this advice (in paraphrase): To understand social change, whether in structure (such that basic elements of society alter) or in detail (such that social action, though not merely repetitive, does not alter basic social forms), it is necessary to study closely the social setting as well as the results of individual choices and decisions. It is necessary, in other words, to look carefully at social organization. Indeed, as stated earlier in his address and implicit in his focus on long-term fieldwork, although structure provides a framework for action, circumstances may lead to "fresh choices" and "fresh decisions." These choices and decisions may ripple throughout a structural framework and, sometimes, beyond it. When this departure from a structure becomes permanent, the result is social change.

Thirty-four years later, social change was still on the mind of another distinguished scholar delivering an important address. This was Marshall Sahlins in his 1988 Radcliffe-Brown Lecture in Social Anthropology, "Cosmologies of Capitalism." It reflected his earlier formulation of the "structure of the conjuncture," as "the practical realization of the cultural categories in a specific historical context, as expressed in the interested action of the historic agents, including the microsociology of their interaction." This process with its focus on choices, decisions, motivated engagements is, as Sahlins explicitly referenced, "reminiscent of Firth's distinction between a de facto 'social organization and a de jure or underlying 'social structure.'" Sahlins' particular interest (and one he carried through to some extent in his Firth lecture at these ESFO meetings in 2008) was in understanding the ripples of social change that ensued during the

conjunctures of capitalism with local systems of meaning, practice, and structure. Thus, in his Radcliffe-Brown Lecture, he showed that local peoples (the Chinese, Hawaiians, and Kwakiutl, as examples) “struggle to integrate their experience of the world system in something that is logically and ontologically more inclusive: their own system of the world.” In essence, Sahlins argued that capitalism has taken various cosmological forms as people, through their choices and decisions, attempt to harness it, generally to become more of what they already were.

Of course, culturally embedded choices and decisions are often compromised: they may ramify in difficult to control ways (as with escalating potlach competitions); they may be rendered nugatory (as with opium wars and other forms of external coercion). And, of special importance to us here, they may be compromised when the cosmologists working to indigenize capitalism are themselves changed by the (often ongoing) conjunctures. Specifically, we stress that part of capitalism’s rippling effect may be to change the deciders and choosers into those who actively desire structure breaking, fresh choices and decisions.

In this presentation, we focus on the Chambri of Papua New Guinea’s East Sepik Province to consider a salient set of ripples as they swept through Chambri home villages: ripples opening up the ontologies of Chambri totemic practice to the possibilities of capitalist-inflected choices, decisions, and agents. In so doing, we consider historically the ongoing process that is the multi-generational capitalism of Chambri cosmology. We will, in other words, be tracing a shift in the sociocultural environment of Chambri environmental regulation, a shift that has attracted the attention of Chambri as well as ourselves.

We should mention that this presentation is part of a larger retrospective project, one that focuses on changes between 1974 and 2015. This larger project concerns tensions and complementarities between rural and urban economies and socialities as they engage both men

and women. Here, however, our focus is on one dimension of the multiple shifts affecting Chambri over the span of our research: the dimension of village-focused, male-oriented totemic practices.

### Totemism as a Protection Racket?

During the Christmas holiday of 2015, we often sat with Lucy Sai on the porch of her “permanent materials” house, catching up on what had happened. Everybody had cell phones; many had solar panels. Women were earning money through the sale of smoked fish, but men were largely idle. Few if any were carving artifacts because tourism had virtually ceased. One day our musings were interrupted as five men, all in their early ‘40s, filed purposely down the main path linking the three Chambri villages. As wage earners, they were concerned that the high waves of Chambri Lake would prevent their timely return to jobs.

Indeed, the lake had become increasingly erratic in recent years. This was understood as partly the result of the introduction of an alarmingly omnivorous fish. Prior to the arrival of the pacu (*Colossoma macropomum*), Chambri Lake had been filled with floating grass islands, waterlilies, and extensive grassy fringes extending 50 meters or so into the water. All of this vegetation had disappeared, leaving nothing to obstruct the actions of the wind and the waves. These conditions often made travel across the lake dangerous, even in a motor boat. And, so it had been for several days.

The pacu was not the only cause of the rough water. The five men passing Lucy’s porch were on their way to deal with the more proximate cause: they were intending to pay the totemic practitioner who had riled up the water so that he would calm it down. As Lucy explained with some consternation, this was not how it once worked. As we were to discover from her and

others, the totemic division of labor, which had, in its coordination, regulated the Chambri “environment,” had largely collapsed. On the one hand, the lake often seemed to have acquired a life of its own. On the other, when controlled, it was by the wrong person, for the wrong reasons. Acting as an entrepreneur, the current practitioner was neither totemically authorized, nor even of the right clan. He had bought the magic from a cash-short old man as an investment. Most distressing from the perspective of many Chambri, the **sole** point of his “business” practice was to make trouble so that people would pay him to stop: these would include women catching fish to sell at regional markets, as well as the likes of our five Chambri workmen. In effect, this totemism was a protection racket.

We knew, of course, that totemic practitioners of the past had not been above causing others trouble. Nor had they eschewed gifts of appreciation, as when women were especially successful in catching a particular species of fish. We also knew that the lake and other aspects of (what we would call) the environment had always been capricious. Yet, with this fragmentation and commodification of cosmology, many Chambri worried that a threshold had been crossed concerning the way totemic powers were now being used. This compelled a stock taking: how had their history of choices and decisions made at least some Chambri so commercially self-interested?

### Our Totemic Baseline

When Deborah first arrived at Chambri in 1974, the totemic division of labor, with its mix of competition and cooperation was active—this despite systematic European contact since the 1930s, including a resident European, Catholic priest since the 1950s. Often awakened by booming slit-gong drums, men would converge in elaborate men’s houses to debate, in archaic Chambri, about their ritual prerogatives. Mingling dance and oratory—displaying immense

“communicative competence” (Bauman, 1975:293)—debaters would allude to their secret totemic names and attendant special powers: to those effecting their identity with the crocodiles and other ancestors which had established Chambri as people and Chambri Island as place; to those ensuring the vitality of their patrilines and their capacity to attract wives; to those making their rivals fearful; to those regulating their portion of the universe in its succession of seasonal changes.

In 1974, the dry season had been uncommonly long and much of Chambri Lake had been reduced to mud flats. The rains, when they finally began, were sporadic and light, creating myriad shallow puddles in the lake bottom. While accustomed to the mosquito-ridden transition seasons, the swarms were so dense, that Chambri men called a three-village meeting at a central men’s house. The meeting began on the morning and lasted throughout the day. The debaters dealt with four questions. Which ancestor was responsible for bringing these mosquitoes? Why had the ancestor brought them? Who had the power to invoke that ancestor? Who was in fact doing so?

It was quickly agreed that the ancestors Mali and Yambukei were responsible for the plague. No one doubted this; their descendants openly admitted it. However, which of the descendants was responsible for invoking them was not at all clear. Nine men were named by various debaters as potentially having the power to bring the mosquitoes. Six of these were present at the meeting, but one immediately denied any responsibility, asserting that as a recent widower he thought of nothing except his dead wife and young, motherless children. Each of the remaining five justified his ancestors' actions, stating a range of possible reasons that Mali and Yambukei were angry. Principal among these was that Chambri (of various sorts) had failed to respect them for their vital totemic services; in particular, Chambri had failed to show proper

appreciation to these ancestors for the variety of wild fruits they provided their descendants. Hence, it was proposed, that Mali and Yambukei were angry because they had not received the annual tribute for their services; because they had not been thanked by women who sold their fruits at markets; because their seeds of their fruits were heedlessly scattered about by Chambri children. In addition, their ire might have been aroused by the embarrassingly drunken behavior of a Chambri man when visiting the Iatmul village of Sepik River rivals.

Each of these putative reasons for their anger was extensively discussed by debaters. Some of the men imitated pigs and chickens following Chambri children to eat the wild fruit seeds dropped carelessly from their hands. Others mimicked the drunken Chambri's garbled and abusive conversation with the Iatmul villagers. The spectators appreciated the skill—often virtuosity—that such performances demanded. Although they laughed at the mime and at each lewd, drunken remark, they were alert for mistakes. Hour after hour, in various performative registers—both serious and farcical—the debaters sought to impress their allies and intimidate their rivals: by alluding to their totemic knowledge and therefore their totemic power, they contended over much that then mattered—the inheritance of totemic names, the ownership of tracts of land and water, sorcery prowess, and clan alliances.

Crucially, linked with and reflecting the power/knowledge system of Chambri totemism made manifest in such debates was that eminent men retained and manifested their power by arranging strategic marriages for themselves and their children: marriages for which high bride prices were paid and received; marriages that upheld and ordered multigenerational alliances (as with mother's brother's clans); marriages that ensured that their sons joined them, together with their in-marrying wives and children (the latter as new members of the patriclan), in large and impressive houses.

Importantly, the reproduction of this power/knowledge system meant that the choices and decisions of senior men were increasingly seen as being at the direct expenses of the choices and decisions of junior men. Social reproduction was not only difficult because the performative ballet of men's house debates was dauntingly difficult, but because the senior men would delay, virtually until their death bed, to convey the knowledge requisite to convincingly debate. Senior men also wished to augment their power through appropriation of new opportunities, in the form of cash and commodities, rippling through their system (much as did the Kwakiutl and Hawaiians in Sahlins' analysis). They encouraged at least one of their sons to get an education and a well-paying job. Remittances, it was hoped, would enhance clan prestige and continuity by enabling bigger and better bride prices. In 1983, for instance, such a large cash bride price was paid that the groom's father bragged that his clan could kill the bride because her death compensation had already been paid.

### Young Lives

In 1987, the same ripples which allowed clan leaders to conceive of becoming more of what they already were, allowed their sons to conceive of becoming less of what their fathers wanted them to be. Struggling against the "effects of power which" (as Foucault would predict) were linked, as evidenced in the men's house debate, with knowledge, competence, and qualification," these young men answered the question of "who are we" by insisting that they were "young lives" (Foucault 182:781). Indeed, the choices and decisions these young men exercised were explicitly directed toward participating in another system, one building since a variety of late-19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century "first contacts" and increasingly pervasive after Independence in 1975. They were self-styled "newcomers," using Bourdieu's term, struggling against "orthodoxy" so as to make their own choices and decisions: struggling, and this too is

Bourdieu, to “make their [own] mark (or ‘epoch’).” In effect, such would not be possible “without pushing into the past those who [had] an interest in ...eternalizing the present stage of things” (1983:60). At this time, these young lives embraced a system ostensibly premised on personal choice: one which conjoined freedom of religious choice, freedom of commodity choice, freedom of marital choice. Of these three, marital choice was by far the most subversive, at least on Chambri Island.

Thus, in what became a cause célèbre among young men talking to us about the repressive actions of big men, was the story of the defiant Nick Ambri. It was over performances of Nick's Yerameri Drifters Band that the big men had instituted a ban on all-night dances. Both Chambri young men and women, we discovered, frequently sang Nick's songs, sometimes to the accompaniment of cassettes they had made of him and his band.

Nick's songs blended traditional and modern elements: the lyrics consisted of a brief Chambri phrase repeated over and over, yet were concerned with themes of love and rebellion and were set to string-band music. The following eight songs (in translation) were the entire corpus of Nick's music:

Come here. (This was addressed to his girlfriend.)

Father, mother, I don't belong here.

Mama said slow down. (But he did not listen.)

Mama said so. (But he did not listen.)

She follows me when I walk about. (This referred to the devotion of his girlfriend.)

You're too loud. (This was what the big men said about his music.)

You don't want to wait for your boyfriend. (He was trying to convince a woman to reject the man arranged for her as husband and to accept him.)

Bernadette. (This was the name of his girlfriend, later his wife.)

It was clear to us that the power for Chambri youth of these songs of love and rebellion came in significant part from the circumstances of Nick's own life. Whereas other young men and women we had known had fled Chambri for the town of Wewak rather than be subject to arranged marriages or other forms of coercion, Nick had, after attending vocational school in Madang for a year, chosen to remain at Chambri and challenge his elders. He had, we discovered, defied his father by marrying Bernadette, the woman of his own choice. His subsequent and lamentable death was, unfortunately, in the view of young Chambri men and women, entirely predictable. That they were convinced that his father had killed him through sorcery for his obduracy. He was, they told us, not afraid to defy the big men; he told them "that we should be allowed to marry whom we choose because we are young lives."

Regardless of whether Nick thought his intransigence might end in his death, the extent of his opposition to his father was impressive and instructive. It testified that representations of modern personhood were certainly attractive and persuasive to Chambri youth. These representations appeared in Western concepts of freedom of choice, in Catholic Church teachings about the freely entered "Christian Marriage" and in popular literature, music and advertising that extolled stylishness and the importance of fulfilling desire and romance. For example, a typical advertisement in a Papua New Guinea newspaper might be for the very expensive Nissan 280ZX. Depicted with two attractive Papua New Guinea women draped on hood and trunk, the Pidgin English caption (translated) stated that "it should be acquired by everyone who wishes to have a good time" (Mathie and Cox 1987:17). Young men often

pinned such sexy advertisements to the walls of their houses (all posted on Facebook, nowadays). Young women also clipped pictures from magazines. One showed us an extensive collection, kept in an old school notebook. Her pictures were of white women, posed in romantic settings such as rose gardens, wearing formal, frilly dresses -- frequently bridal gowns. She had underlined several of the captions, including: "With the rustle of silk and the hint of tulle, you will be the envy of all single girls. Make sure you choose the dress of your dreams on your wedding day."

If such choices and decisions weren't structure breaking, they were at least structure cracking. And the big men knew this. Not only were their children increasingly defying them, they were—their sons in particular—disinterested in acquiring their totemic knowledge and attendant performative skills. In essence, as young lives, the kids were both attacking the system and opting out of it, demanding that stock be taken. One big man, Andrew Tambwi Kwolikubwi Yorundu, did just this, albeit unsympathetically. In 1987, while recounting Chambri myths to us, he began to recite secret names as a group of young men played ukuleles nearby. He told us, disdainfully, that these young men were so ignorant that they didn't even recognize that the names they were hearing were secret.

### Who Wants to Be the Catfish?

On July 18, 1994, Tadeus Yambu, a Chambri elder, summoned us to a demonstration of some of his most important, secret, patrilineally inherited totemic powers. He wished us to not only take notes but photograph and tape-record him as he became, quite literally from his perspective, a species of catfish—or, much the same thing, he became the ancestor who was or could become that catfish. Recognizing that young men were currently disinterested in mastering the highly specific names and procedures that effected this embodiment, he hoped that our

documentation might bridge a generational gap. By this time, many Chambri elders had moved from disdain to alarm at the “newcomers” assertion of “difference.” In fact, those with young lives wanted to get themselves known and recognized by endeavoring to impose new “modes of thought and expression.” (Bourdieu 1983: 57-58). These new modes disconcerted the “orthodox,” who were rightly concerned. They feared that, with the increasing loss of this corpus of cosmological knowledge and attendant practice—the *doxa*—the totemic division of labor through which they had regulated their world would no longer be viable. In addition, these elders knew that, for many Chambri, the necessity of earning money for flashlight batteries, clothing, school fees and sometimes outboard motors, was often more pressing than that of regulating the cosmos. Moreover, as we shall see in our next example, it was increasingly plausible that Christianity could be an important force in ordering the Chambri world.

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

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

In every village you find the living embodiments of the ancient mythology -- the man who bears the name which was once borne by the founders of the village. He will straighten his shoulders as he tells you "I steered the canoe which brought my clan to this place." Another man will stamp on the ground as he says "I am Kevembuangga. I put my foot on the mud and made it hard so that people could live. But for me there would be no people. There would be no pigs" (Bateson 1946: 121).

For Yambu's part, after his cosmologically salient embodiment, we were ushered into his men's house—indeed, the only elaborate one standing—where junior clansmen had been assembled for their instruction. He had us tape record and photograph him playing distinctive rhythms on a totemically proper slit gong. He then had us photograph him sitting on the men's house bench appropriate to his clan and its powers. Finally, he charged us to include his story—everything, the photographs, descriptions, and names— in our next book so that there would be a consultable record of his importance and that of his knowledge.

#### A Grand, Yet Fleeting, Synthesis

By 1994, Yambu was hardly alone in his fear that his secret knowledge would be lost upon his death. In fact, many senior Chambri men had asked us to tape record their corpus of ancestral names, chants and stories lest these be lost. At the same time, however, one somewhat younger and still vigorous man was reveling in an upward trajectory. Patrick Yarat had, with the help of remittances from his sons, just sponsored, as he explained to us, a large and very

expensive ceremony for the construction and naming of a huge motor canoe. And, he told us that his future would be even better than his present. This was so because his already extensive powers to regulate the high and low water levels of Chambri Lake and control the reproduction of several species of fish—something he described as a “public service”—had been further augmented by divine 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, he could now do so through the more efficacious medium of the Holy Spirit; this was preferable to the uncertain and often hazardous medium of complicated incantations and manipulations of ritual paraphernalia. 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 which contained the following elements: 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 was placed a Catholic Bible and a carving he knew we owned of his ancestor Saun. 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.

Yarapat died in 2008. He had been one of the last of the traditional leaders. By the time of our 2015 visit, just the posts of his large house remained. His men’s house was in shambles, his networks, fragmented, and many of his ritual powers, dispersed. Sebi Yarapat, the only of Yarapat’s sons still living at Chambri, told us more about his father’s death. Yarapat had fallen under the influence of a hardcore totemist who convinced him to return to his earlier reliance on

ancestral power alone. Jesus, resenting Yarapat's apostasy, became a wrathful God—afflicting him with a boil which, when scratched, resulted in Yarapat's precipitous decline.

Typically and problematically, his father had held on to his secret names and consequent powers until the very last, transmitting little to his sons. The loss of such secret names—and not from his clan alone—was evident, Sebi thought, in the undeniable changes in Chambri Lake. As mentioned, the floating grass islands, the water lilies, and the shoreline grass fringe had disappeared and the increased winds and waves often made fishing and boat transport difficult. To be sure, Sebi and other Chambri agreed that the introduced “pacu” contributed to these changes. Nevertheless, if ritual controls had been in place, the consequences—primarily of wind and wave action—would have been limited. Indeed, Chambri ritual power more generally had been dispersed. “Nature” (seemingly, by this time, a separate domain) was, Sebi said, now substantially on its own—often just following its own patterns. No one seemed able to consolidate and hold as much power as when Yarapat, acting in concert with other practitioners, regulated the Chambri environment.

### Young Lives Come of Age

Deborah had known August Soway since he was a baby. In 1994, he was an unmarried, 22-year-old. The son of the first successful trade-store owner on Chambri Island, he had been sent to Wewak, where we were then living, to replenish his father's stock. While staying in Chambri Camp, a case of beer, a case of canned mackerel, and 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, Soway told us in distress that he intended to live his future as a "white man"—as someone beholden to, and trusting of, no one. Much to his relief, Chambri had rallied around him and compensation was paid. However, he had told us on several occasions

that he favored editing Chambri custom. For instance, his and his father's future—mostly as it pertained to their business—would be 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.

In 2015, at 42, Soway was living on Chambri Island and still helped his father with the trade store. In addition, he expanded the family enterprise into crocodile farming and was working as a motorboat driver. Although married according to traditional precept, he and his wife were living apart. He was trying to extricate himself from the marriage, but her family would not give back the money paid in bride price. Moreover, his girlfriend, also in a traditional marriage, was in an even worse predicament since her husband was abusive. This said, the lovers had become evangelical Christians, putting their faith in God. For her part, she told us that God would eventually uphold her right to choose a husband she loved.

In catching us up on what had happened on Chambri Island since our last visit, Soway pointed out that most of the big residential houses were gone and only a single men's house remained. With the collapse of tourism and the market for artifacts, men were largely idle. Young men, in particular, rarely had anything to do, yet none wanted to be on the school committee or train as the next catechist. The usual excuse, often met with general amusement, was that they would be busy starting their own business. But, all they really wanted was to be given money by their fish-selling mothers for home-brewed, distilled liquor and marijuana. Furthermore, they were using “black magic” so that their enemies lost all control when drunk and got into trouble.

In effect, he wondered if Chambri culture had been edited too much. There was no longer any solidarity. Previously, a man like Yorundu controlled one type of fish; others like Yambu and Yarapat, controlled something else. They all worked together. There was “unity.” Now people were using power perversely by, for example, making the wind perilously strong for fishing or travel and then demanding money to calm the waters. Those doing this were not even the people who should have these powers. They had bought them from their true owners, for purposes of extortion. They were corrupt.

### The Capitalism of Chambri Cosmology

We have in this presentation conveyed a village-based, mini-history of one set of Chambri shifts, drifts, and stock-takings over the last forty plus years: a history of choices, decisions, and ramifying ripples. As should be clear, we do not mean this history as an allegory of a lost Eden. All civilizations have their discontents, and those discontents among the Chambri had long been close to the surface. Significant among them was intergenerational conflict wrought by earlier shifts and decisions such that young lives demanded fresh choices and fresh decisions. However, in embracing what was, in essence, a different ontology and logic, these young lives precipitated, as Raymond Firth would note, a structural change: a structural change that, in neo-liberal-speak, was a game-changing structural adjustment. This is to say, the environment of environmental control significantly shifted as the regulation of the winds, water, and fish moved from a cosmological division of labor to a for-profit, “business” enterprise.

The result was a striking example of totemic ontology transformed by the logic of capitalism. So striking was it that many Chambri, who as young lives had themselves struggled against the “effects of power,” fretted about the “knowledge, competence, and qualification” of

the latest “newcomers.” Impelled to take stock of what might become the new doxa, they asked “who are we”: “what have we become”?

Thus it seems (to invert a famous quote from Mick Jagger) that sometimes, you get what you want, but not necessarily what you need. And this is especially the case as the huge, Chinese-financed, “Frieda” gold and copper mine looms on the Sepik horizon. Many Chambri look forward to the business opportunities it may provide; at the same time, they fear the attendant environmental transformations, ones over whose elements they may have little control.