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## The Problem of the Semi-Alienable Anthropologist

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One sweltering afternoon in the small office of a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Lae, the second city and economic engine room of Papua New Guinea (PNG), the discussion had turned from the NGO's activities to more philosophical issues of why urban women faced so many obstacles, including family violence, and how difficult it was for women to find a satisfactory means of redress for it—my topic of research from 2016 to 2017.

'I know you used to work in Milne Bay', said one of the staff members. She was referring to the southeasternmost province of PNG, one of the corners of the country included in its matrilineal fringe. 'But, you know, in most of PNG, it's the men who own the land.' She went on to note that it is men's direct connection to land (*graun* in Tok Pisin) that grants them particular privileges and entitlements and, ultimately, is what differentiates them from women as a category of persons. 'The men are the only source of support and the men are isolating the women from the connections of the Melanesian way', she said. 'The vine needs the tree to grow upwards; the sister needs the support of the brother to flourish.' Echoing the more prosaic observations of my other interlocutors in poetic, and also very Melanesian, terms by means of the gardening

metaphor, she was explaining why there were problems with what women were trying to achieve because their menfolk were blocking them from their fundamental source of spiritual power: the land.

She also invoked these concepts as part of a wider philosophy articulated and popularised by Narokobi (1983) as ‘The Melanesian Way’. This philosophy was both a charter for the good life, according to the late PNG jurist’s positioning of his own nation in the aftermath of independence, and an effort to speak back to the European regimes of knowledge in which he had been educated, with their legal and social scientific grasp of how human beings ought to treat each other—but in a PNG, rather than colonial, register. This meant, among other things, taking seriously the differentiation of persons and the rights and obligations attendant upon persons depending on the way they were so differentiated. This was precisely what the NGO staffer referred to when she reminded me that Papua New Guineans are primarily differentiated by their relationship to land, and that I could not hope to grasp issues such as gender-based violence without starting from that very particular first principle. Talking about violence as a form of inequality—the starting point for most foreign NGOs and national agencies indoctrinated in the language of foreign NGOs—skips over and occludes many of the other proximate causes that Papua New Guineans might regard as contributing to violence. Even where these proximate causes are describable as forms of inequality, they are often located in relationships and systems that are not those upon which the NGOs and other agencies focus, or perhaps even have a political interest in ignoring (Rooney, 2014).

After a century of offering their engagement and hospitality, Melanesian people have become adept at calling the attention of anthropologists to social organisation. This is not quite the ‘cultural appropriateness’ that has become a mainstay of development discourses (Macintyre, 2001, p. 108), but rather an invitation to attend to those questions that are actually pressing for people who choose to take seriously the assertions of social researchers that our job is, above all, to listen. If non-Melanesian anthropologists have spent most of the history of our relationship with Melanesian peoples insisting that social organisation—the differentiation of persons by means of their relationships—was one of our fundamental areas of interest, Melanesians have responded accordingly by framing their own interests in terms that are intelligible to their foreign interlocutors.

Often, the first aspect that becomes foreclosed in this effort is the possibility of Melanesian people having a say in how they themselves want the social research to look, or whom its primary audience will be (Hukula, 2018).

This is particularly critical in circumstances in which anthropologists have been contracted directly by development projects, either commercial or humanitarian in nature, to do our listening with the ultimate aim of rendering the project more effective. Such were the conditions of my recent work in Lae, as a contract researcher for a major international development organisation. Under these conditions, a researcher enters into a relationship with a research community and occupies two subject positions simultaneously: that of the professional listener, and that of the professional reporter back to the organisation or company for whom they work. For a researcher who has origins in the research community, or a closely related community, a third subject position is added to these first two: that of the 'insider' who must act temporarily like an 'outsider' (Narayan, 1993; Ryang, 2005). These two or three positions may become blurred in a scholarly publication such as this one, which is rather the point of the exercise; in our speaking to a world of academic interlocutors, we must necessarily obscure the multiple positions we occupy and our own differentiation at any given time as researchers, contractors, students, teachers and friends.

Each of these positions also contains its own inequities, generated both by the global structures of inequality and exploitation in which much social research takes place (West & Aini, this volume) and distinctions drawn on a more immediate scale. This chapter is offered as a meditation on how some anthropologists have become exemplars for how to occupy these multiple positions, and of the attachments and detachments they demand at various points in the ethnographic endeavour. Martha Macintyre has been one such exemplar, particularly as I have found myself following a research trajectory that looks very much like hers, seemingly by accident. Did this in fact occur by accident or, as our respective original research communities in Milne Bay Province might argue, was I following a road she had opened up, which was then maintained and extended by the multiple interests in which our lives as researchers are entangled?

## On Semi-Alienability

PNG is renowned, among social scientists at least, for its kaleidoscopic internal diversity. While much attention is given to its 800 or so languages, the focus of anthropologists on social organisation, and the other political forms that may proceed from the way societies are understood to reproduce themselves over time, has had certain key effects. I refer both to effects on the way anthropologists have taught ourselves to think about PNG, and the way Papua New Guineans have taught themselves to think about anthropologists. There is a convergence of interests, to be sure, but one of the hallmarks of well-conducted ethnographic work is that the point of convergence is seldom where anthropologists think it will be.

I will return to this point shortly, but first, let us return to that linguistic diversity for a moment. My own apprenticeship as an ethnographer involved, among other things, learning Suau, an Austronesian language spoken by roughly 7,000 people on the south-eastern coast of Milne Bay Province. Once I had come to grips with the possessive system used in this and other Milne Bay languages, I enjoyed playing the following game. Some men would walk by, or perhaps paddle close to the shoreline in a canoe, carrying an indignantly trussed-up pig. I would then ask them the same question three times—except that it was not the same question. In English, it would be ‘Whose pig is that?’ every time. Not so in Suau, where the shifting of the possessive form in each iteration turned it into a set of differentiated questions. *Hai ena salai*: ‘Who owns that pig?’ *Hai ana salai*: ‘Who are you giving that pig to, so they can eat it?’ *Hai salaina*: ‘Whose funeral feast are you taking that pig to?’

At that point, the pig-carrying men might laugh or give me a stern look, or both, because the last question is quite intrusive in nature. However, they understood what I was doing and so did not give me a hard time about it; better for their resident *dindim* (white-skinned foreigner, also the place that such people come from) to learn how to speak properly. ‘Speaking properly’ in this case also meant thinking properly about pigs, the pre-eminent wealth item in the part of the world where I was working, and their attachment to, detachment from and re-attachment to different people for different socially significant purposes.

I had been primed to do this by one of the most important articles I read in preparation for embarking on fieldwork in Milne Bay all those years ago. The article was ‘The problem of the semi-alienable pig’ (Macintyre, 1984),

and it gave me the required tools for thinking about pigs, specifically, and value, more generally. In her original work on the island of Tubetube in the Engineer Group of Milne Bay's many archipelagos, Macintyre not only learned to play comparable linguistic tricks with the way pigs are spoken about, but showed more significantly that pigs are one of the ways in which Milne Bay people think about relations between human beings. Pigs, as pre-eminent valuables with the heroic capacity to reproduce themselves and the tragic counter-capacity of being killed and eaten at significant points in the human life cycle, shift in and out of their identification with people. In Tubetube and Suau mythology alike, they are identified as having been the replacement exchange item for humans in a deep cannibalistic history. In the languages of both societies, they may be imagined as part of a person or an object of their consumption, depending on who is giving, receiving or eating—hence my question game regarding a pig in mid-transaction. 'Things that a person creates or produces', Macintyre wrote:

can only effect transformations that bring renown when they are extended beyond the socially defined self and are enchaind in serial, semi-alienable relationships with people outside one's immediate relatives. People are invariably friend or foe, affine or consanguine, neighbour or stranger. Pigs are neighbourly food or placatory gifts from enemies. They are flexible objects of exchange and their status in any particular transaction is variable and open to interpretation. (1984, p. 120)

Pigs (and their transaction) assist Milne Bay peoples to resolve, in other words, a conundrum that exists in Milne Bay societies. Pigs and persons are sometimes regarded as inalienable components of one another, as if they were kin or body parts. At other times, they are regarded as separate, so that one may be substituted for the other or even consumed by the other. What changes the status of either the person or the pig vis-à-vis each other is not their inherent identity or alienability. The movement of pigs between persons is itself the process that determines both who the people are in relation to each other, and what kind of entities the pigs are within the terms of a given relationship.

This process can be scaled up. By 'up', I am using the conventional spatial metaphor for indicating that a perspective taken on social relationships is something other than intimate or face-to-face in nature, so that one might be presumed to be talking about an entire society, rather than details such as people and their pigs. But I have in mind Strathern's (2004) observations

about detail remaining constant, regardless of where the presumed observer imagines themselves to be standing on an observational scale. For Strathern, any shift in perspective retains the same degree or amount of informational detail regardless of how far ‘up’ or ‘down’ the scale of social relationships one moves. She notes that:

Scale switching not only creates a multiplier effect, it also creates information ‘loss’. Different types of data may appear to substitute for one another—a generalisation about socialisation, say, in lieu of a description of a puberty rite. Information loss appears as the eclipse of detail or of scope by whatever is the present focus of enquiry. It can occur equally through domaining as through magnification or telescoping. (2004, p. xv).

What appears to be informational loss with a shift in scale, Strathern argued, also entails information gain—as, for my purposes, when talking about pigs by means of people enables anthropologists to talk about people by means of other people. There are also questions to ask regarding whether any scale of observation can be presumed, particularly when people arrive at their domaining decisions by means of triangulation through pigs, through other valuables or through other persons. This is now a classic issue in anthropology, but one that always bears repeating. One of the things that Papua New Guineans delight in pointing out to visitors who have expressed an interest in social organisation is the way that their systems of value allocation are a critical mode of distinction between their own regional, ethnic or language group and some other group or groups. The scaling of such identifiers is nearly immaterial to the ways in which comparisons are drawn. My Suau friends, for example, made much of the fact that they expected such modest payments in pigs and cash for everything from brideprice exchanges to compensation orders following a court case. This, I was told on numerous occasions, showed how different Milne Bay people were from, say, Motu-speakers from Central Province or people from any of the highlands provinces, where (as my friends had heard or even witnessed) payments in the hundreds of pigs or many thousands of kina might change hands. There was a certain moralistic chauvinism at work in these statements, whereby Milne Bay people could be held up as exemplars of Christian humility and frugality. Beyond this, they were remarking on differences in social organisation and its ramifications, whatever the scale or axis of comparison. ‘In the highlands you need two hundred, three hundred pigs to get married,’ I heard on several occasions, ‘but for we people, four or five pigs is enough!’ This would be followed by

uproarious laughter, in amazement at the implied avarice of Highlanders, but also with the faintly self-deprecating implication that a person in Milne Bay could simply go and get married on the cheap.

These distinctions matter, both when they are the object of humour and when they are an earnest means of trying to locate a person according to their regional or ethnic parameters, so that you have some ground for explaining something to them they may not understand once they have relocated: 'I know you used to work in Milne Bay, but ...'. In this moment, the anthropologist was located in an unanticipated way. I had been prepared, throughout my fieldwork in Lae, to have to re-inscribe my identity among my new interlocutors as a white foreigner—one who originated from the United States, if I could manage to add that qualifier, since it would place me in a politically different relationship to PNG, as compared to being Australian. This choice, as I rapidly learned, was not mine to make. My co-researcher Zuabe Tinning, from Morobe Province herself, introduced me consistently as a Milne Bay woman; this framing would shape many of the conversations that followed. The framing Zuabe chose was a fictional one, as neither my whiteness nor my origin in a wealthy country could be erased by her strategy. The strategy functioned nonetheless to identify me as belonging to a slightly different category of white person: one who did not just drop in and then leave forever, but rather returned consistently enough to acquire a regionally more symmetrical identifier alongside the structurally asymmetrical one. This category also suggested a white person who was perhaps interested in following similar rural-to-urban pathways to those navigated by many Papua New Guineans. By the time I left Lae, at the conclusion of the project, Zuabe and others were saying proudly, 'You're a Morobe woman now, and you have family here now! Come back to rainy Lae!' I had been located, detached and re-attached; the geopolitical scale movement in whose terms I had planned to present myself was backgrounded entirely.

This process can be disorienting for the anthropologist who must learn to think about the social and political relationships in one place in terms of those they learned in another (Macintyre, 2003, p. 122). The process is particularly salient for an intellectual tradition in which the background to any comparative method has nearly always been European and North American societies. A reorientation is required to draw comparisons that are not between a non-European context and those of Europe and its settler-colonial extensions, but rather between one research site and another. Further, when people in one place locate an anthropologist as

originally attached to a different part of their own country, the critical question becomes not so much ‘What are you doing here’, but rather, ‘What are you doing here, and not *there*?’ A merely institutional account of the researcher’s relocation—I was funded to come here, I was hired to come here, there was a new project I wanted to do here, and so forth—will not suffice. The relationship between Papua New Guineans and foreign anthropologists is, again, both a longstanding one, and one that has never only been about institutions and their expectations. It has also been about hospitality and its effects. The reasoning goes something like this: if you have come here, it must be because you want to be with us, rather than those other people, or perhaps in addition to them. In a country characterised by increasing internal mobility and rural–urban migration, this kind of move makes perfectly good sense; however, a question remains for the new host community to answer—what was it about us that drew you here? Often the explanation offered is that it is precisely the same things that cause Papua New Guineans themselves to move around the country and to experiment with the panoply of social and economic forms sometimes associated with concepts such as ‘modernity’ or ‘cosmopolitanism’ (Cox, 2018). These terms do not refer to historic periods in the PNG social imagination, but rather to the way certain details of contemporary social life are used as comparators for other details.

## Periphery to Metropole and Back Again

Milne Bay Province is in a corner of PNG. This is not a straightforward geographical statement, any more than talking about scaling particular social forms ‘up’ was a straightforward spatial one. Although the province does encompass the southeasternmost extremity of the Papuan mainland and its adjacent island groups, its fortunes have waxed and waned throughout the colonial and post-independence history of the country. Once a destination of choice for the missionaries, copra planters, bêche-de-mer and pearl traders, and anthropologists who formed the colonial vanguard, it became economically and politically isolated following the conclusion of World War II. To some degree, this isolation has been deliberate, as Milne Bay and European-descended elites alike have resisted infrastructural connections to the rest of the country that represent a threat to the cultural homogeneity and colonial history upon which their



influence is founded. And some of it relates to the inevitable movement of capital and its accompanying political interests to more lucrative resource extraction projects elsewhere in the country.

For a brief time, Milne Bay hosted one such project: a gold mine on the island of Misima. Gold has been documented in the Louisiade Archipelago of Milne Bay since the earliest trading exploits of Europeans in the region, but it was not until the late twentieth century that a large open-cast mine was developed. By this time, the practice of mining companies bringing in social researchers to monitor the ‘impact’ of the mine was well established, in response to lessons learned from the humanitarian disaster on Bougainville and the environmental one at Ok Tedi, both sites of major independence-era gold and copper mines.

Enter the anthropologist. Martha Macintyre was among the first wave of anthropologists hired by mining companies in PNG to undertake what they called ‘social impact assessment’ and what the anthropologists—crucially—still regarded as ethnography. Misima lies roughly 100 kilometres due east from Tubetube, where Macintyre had established her expertise as a Milne Bay ethnographer; as such, one might have expected there to be a seamless ethnographic transition from one Milne Bay society to another.

This was not to be the case. Notwithstanding any pre-existing differences between Misiman and Tubetube society, the economic and social worlds of Misima were on the verge of transformation. As Macintyre later noted (2007, p. 50), all mines in PNG are located in remote rural parts of the country; therefore, they must create an entire physical and civic infrastructure in lieu of any government investment in the same, let alone the kind of ‘organic’ cosmopolitanism imagined to emerge in towns and cities whose existence is unrelated to the existence of a mine. With these physical infrastructures also come new social infrastructures of differentiation, as land acquires both monetary value that it never had before, and a potential for alienability that it also never had before, in a country where some 85 per cent of land is held under customary tenure. New distinctions in the qualities of land gave rise to distinctions in the qualities of people, a phenomenon first observed by Macintyre on Misima and later on Lihir, in New Ireland Province. In both cases, she argued, debates over who had the authority to consent to a mine underlined, deepened and, in some cases, outright created any number of social divisions: between young people and their seniors, between men and

women, between those holding customary title and those actually living on the land, and between educated people working in towns and their families back home at the mining site (see Bainton, this volume). These divisions, Macintyre noted, potentially made a mockery of negotiations between mining companies and the landowners they sought to consult:

The issue then is *who* is to give consent? Is the question one of effect on a *community of people* who live, work and have rights to some areas of land? Or is the consent to be obtained from those who are indigenous and have or claim customary rights to *the land*, even when these are not recognised by the state? Is the group who is to give consent to be defined in terms of residential status, customary rights, legally recognised rights according to the national law or genealogical connection to the original customary owners? (2007, p. 55, emphases in original)

This list of potential axes of differentiation has implications that reach far beyond how a mining company can possibly identify 'landowners' from whom to gain consent. As fraught an issue as that is, it is not my primary concern in this chapter. Rather, I wish to point to this moment in the process by which an anthropologist who has moved from a classic village setting, presumed to be culturally homogeneous and with an intact system of social reproduction, to a setting in the midst of radical change, begins to query how social groups can even be identified at all and who can speak on their behalf or represent their interests.

Of course no rural community is the cultural isolate so beloved of anthropology in the mid-twentieth century, and no society exists outside of time and change. These propositions have been undisputed in our discipline since at least the end of the previous century. Here, I call attention to the figure of the anthropologist who is relocated from a classic setting on the periphery to one that is rapidly being transformed into a metropole, albeit a temporary one. Mines do not last forever, although they may be in operation for decades. What endures instead are people's experiences of the mine and its aftermath (Gilberthorpe, 2013; McKenna, 2015).

One might argue that the mining communities that became the focus of Macintyre's research are inherently unstable, boom-town economies prone to the host of social woes that crop up wherever a large extraction project appears. Debating the inevitability or otherwise of the 'resource curse' is not my project. My aim is instead to show how the axis of comparison so

often presumed in anthropology—between a rich-country metropole and a poor-country periphery—becomes unsettled by Macintyre’s trajectory. We have always known that even presumed peripheries include their own local metropolises. Less often is an anthropologist able to watch the formation of a metropole in action, with its uneasy relationship to the periphery it once was and may one day be again. In a position to precisely observe this process of transformation, first on Misima and then on Lihir, Macintyre has documented some of the ongoing effects of the emergence of the metropole itself.

I say ‘ongoing’, now that I have followed a roughly similar trajectory—not to a mining community, but rather to one of the more ‘organic’ metropolises in PNG. The relative newness of Lae, which itself began as a gold rush town in the 1920s, and of the city as a concept in the PNG cultural repertoire, is without question a factor in how debates around new social distinctions are played out as an element of life in the new metropolises, whether they emerge through urbanisation or economic transformation through resource extraction. Inequities are built into both modes of urban emergence; both the original colonial order and the neo-colonial order of resource extraction and the aid economy have advantaged foreign interests and priorities over those of Papua New Guineans. For example, many towns in PNG were never built with the intention of having any Papua New Guineans in them; the original colonial vision for these small urban zones was that they would be exclusively European in population, except for a necessary cohort of single, male Melanesian labourers (Gibson, 2019; Levine & Wolfzahn Levine, 1979). Papua New Guinean women, in particular, did not become a significant demographic in such towns until the late 1960s, shortly before independence in 1975 (Jackson, 1977). As the newest city dwellers in the country, women in PNG are still discovering what ‘city life’ might possibly mean for them (Demian, 2017). In its broadest sense, my own recent work has focused on exactly this. Although thematically focused on the topic of domestic violence, its actual remit has been to explore the ways in which social organisation has changed in the city, and how women are trying to navigate these changes in ways that might make urban life for them not only safe, but also satisfying.

The nature of city life in general is still very much a project under construction in PNG’s cities and towns. There are issues that all urban Papua New Guineans confront every day: an infrastructure that is not adequate to the size of current urban and peri-urban populations, an insufficiency of

jobs in the formal sector, and a quite spectacular insufficiency of housing accessible to families of the grassroots, to use the common PNG term for citizens with few educational qualifications or similar cosmopolitan achievements, usually but not always because they have started out life in the country's rural areas (Cox, this volume). Because there were no cities or towns of any kind in PNG prior to the colonial era, many urban Papua New Guineans are still learning how to negotiate, on a daily basis, interactions with people with whom they may have little or nothing in common. Whether these interactions occur briefly in one of the town markets or every day in the workplace, the relationships that comprise city life are largely unmoored from the structural expectations that might govern them in the more rural, ethnically homogeneous parts of the country.

This means that both men and women in PNG are experimenting with the imaginary of the city as a different kind of life, freed from the constraints of the village; there are any number of consequences to this experimentation (Foster, 2008; Goddard, 2010). For example, there is no popular consensus on who has ownership of which spaces in the city, how those spaces in the city are to be used, who is entitled to use them, and in what ways; the ongoing debate about the growth of settlements and unofficial markets is one expression of this lack of consensus. On a more intimate scale, many men may feel that their wives should be subject to the same constraints on movement that they might be expected to adhere to in a village setting or, perhaps, even greater constraints, because the perceived risk that they could leave their husbands for another man is higher.

A common complaint voiced by urban PNG women, both grassroots and middle class, is that those forms of action associated with 'modernity' that appear to be available to men in the city are not also available to them—or, if they are, the consequences are more severe (Demian, 2017; Spark, 2011). From romantic courtship and involvement in commerce, to consumption of alcohol and gambling, many women feel they are held to standards of behaviour that men are not, and given a threshold for their ambitions that men are not. So while city life appears to offer boundless opportunity to men and women alike, there are structural asymmetries that place multiple obstacles in the way of women who might like to imagine themselves stepping into those opportunities.

In her own consultation with women in Lae on the subject of policing, Macintyre noted the distinctions that women in the settlements did not draw—notably, between the violence of men engaged in criminal activity and the violence of police (2008, p. 182). Instead, women living literally on the periphery of the city regarded the immoderate consumption patterns valued by men, whether in established cities or in the mining boom towns, as precisely what presented a threat both to the safety of life in the city and to their own domestic lives. Whether because all the household income was being spent on beer, or due to the direct effects of its consumption on men aiming to become drunk and express their feelings in that manner, women in Macintyre's interview cohort pointed to the connection between styles of consumption coded as masculine as one of the primary obstacles to their being able to live lives they considered satisfactory in the city.

For Macintyre, this meant, among other things, that some of the more innovative theories generated by anthropology in PNG and other Melanesian contexts were re-opened for debate. The issue is not that they were faulty to begin with, but rather that the comparative scheme on which they were predicated—a 'Melanesian' conceptual framework on the one hand and a 'Euro-American' one on the other—has shifted significantly. As Macintyre put it:

The emphasis on alterity and the invitation to use Melanesian concepts as tools for scrutinising Western ideas about persons, selves and embodiment has proved difficult in practice. It still appears most successful when applied to 'classical' anthropologically defined cultures or communities rather than people in towns, populations around mining developments or other industrial developments, or those marginalised young men who move from village to town in their desire to engage with modernity. (2008, p. 184)

Alterity remains in the picture; for anthropologists, at least, this must always be the case. The foundation of the discipline is that we are always others to each other. However, concerns about alterity now belong to a generation of Papua New Guineans whose sense of sociality has shifted profoundly as they grapple with life in a world of others who are no longer distinguished by the ramifications of exchange relationships and inalienable value. Rather, they are distinguished by emergent and, at times, violent divisions of gender, class and those exhausting imaginaries that anthropologists and other social scientists have sought to dismantle for decades—the country and the city, the collective and the individual,

the traditional and the modern. All of these are rearing their heads again as young Papua New Guineans, and often their elders too, ask what it is that they now owe each other in social environments where anyone could be from anywhere, and the value of persons and things seems to be in free fall (Macintyre, 2011).

‘When the “body politic” alters’, Macintyre noted, ‘so too do concepts of order, social obligation and sanction—and all the ideas which underpin harmonious sociality, indebtedness and the rights involving people and their products’ (1995, p. 31). She was introducing, in this case, the way Tubetube classifications of persons as either potential kin or potential food were recorded in the oral history and language of the island, and retained even after the ‘pacification’ of the colonial era their connotations of objectification and violence. But Macintyre elicited these distinctions—the term used for the body of a person who is a relative and that used for the body of a captive—from her Tubetube interlocutors in the course of discussing other kinds of objects and other kinds of persons. The uncovering of an oral history of violent exchanges and their implications for present-day relationships suggested, for Macintyre, that no consideration of social organisation could ever only account for those elements of social life where persons were harmoniously integrated in an unchanging social and political landscape.

## **To Matriliney and Beyond!**

It may seem odd to move from a discussion of the nascent conundrums facing Papua New Guineans to a topic as classic, not to say hoary, as unilineal descent. However, as with most themes touched upon in this chapter, my purpose is to highlight how old anthropological concerns and concepts are continually repurposed in a country with such a long engagement with anthropologists as PNG. These concepts are being used in ways that locate both Papua New Guineans in relation to other Papua New Guineans and anthropologists in relation to other Papua New Guineans, as in the vignette with which I opened the chapter. In the conversation with the NGO staff member in Lae, the matriliney with which I was presumed to be familiar from one part of PNG was set against the patriliney of much of the rest of the country, as a way of framing what I had yet to learn about why women could not act successfully without the support of their menfolk. The social and epistemological comparisons being made for my sake were between one part of PNG and another.

That is to say, any assumptions about what anthropologists are using as their environment or background for comparison—the way most, if not all, anthropological theory is generated—cannot be taken for granted. If Macintyre's work shows us anything, it is this: regardless of whatever anthropologists think they know about a place and their own perspective on that place, the rug will continually be pulled out from under them by people who have already located their visitor somewhere else, among some other people.

I began this chapter with a story from very recent fieldwork; here is a story so old that it predates my having travelled to PNG for the first time. I had decided, as a young and exuberant research student in the mid-1990s, that I was going to work in Milne Bay Province. The province had only recently lifted a five-year moratorium on the presence of foreign researchers, and as a condition of granting a research visa, required an invitation from someone within the province. My PhD supervisor had put me in contact with a local activist who was interested in having someone conduct research in her maternal village. But she had also offered a caveat to my being that researcher: 'I don't want a feminist, I want someone who can get the job done'.

It was an intriguing restriction. I half-joked to my supervisor that I would simply leave my feminist badge at home. There followed a discussion of what my sponsor meant by this statement. When I finally arrived in Milne Bay nearly a year later, the answer I discovered was not any of the reasons I had tried to anticipate. Again, we cannot know what kind of identity our interlocutors will choose to engage with, because identities are not stable objects. Upon my arrival in Alotau, the provincial capital, my sponsor informed me that I would be studying 'the matrilineal kinship'. This sounded very much like a feminist project to me, steeped as I was at that point in a regional literature that emphasised the political and cosmological authority of women (Lepowsky, 1993; Macintyre, 1987; Weiner, 1976). This was one of the most important incorrect assumptions I made about working in the province, one that would shape how I came to understand social life in Milne Bay over the next 20 years, later still in urban PNG, and how I continue to reflect on the practice of anthropology itself.

Following her first relocation within Milne Bay Province itself, Macintyre noted that Misimans had no trouble reconciling institutions that seemed on the face of it to be in conflict with one another, such as Methodism and a homegrown spirit cult originating in the 1930s. The position that

the two spiritual practices ought to be mutually exclusive is an exogenous one, belonging to European missionaries and colonial administrators. The people of Misima and its neighbouring islands did not, in Macintyre's experience, perceive a cosmological inconsistency between Christianity and the local spirit cult, but instead regarded them as outgrowths or manifestations of each other. During her work on Misima, Macintyre became interested in 'the ways in which contradictions can be virtually ignored in one context because they are seen to be resolved in others' (1990, p. 99).

Macintyre effectively called the bluff both of the colonial fears of cargo cultism and its presumed incompatibility with Christianity, and of anthropology itself. Both depend, historically, on a model of alterity in which the axis of comparison is between the society under consideration and the anthropologist's own. However, in her consideration of how people on Misima find their own concepts of the person, of the spirit, and of relationships between the living and the dead in the ostensibly imposed institution of Christianity, Macintyre showed the adroitness with which Papua New Guineans relocate the comparative project. The church, as an institutional form, is a colonial import. Its nature then changes almost immediately in relationship to the local spirit cult, which in turn is inflected by its relationship to Christianity—because institutions, like entities on any other scale from pigs to gods, do not possess an *a priori* identity. The playfulness of the Misiman spirit cult, and its organisational references to both Christian and colonial administrative structures, is precisely the kind of move Macintyre went on to track with each of her own movements made throughout a career of the Papua New Guinean style of detaching and re-attaching persons, things and institutions to suit their own comparative schemes.

How does this relate to the theme of social organisation or, indeed, to inequality? In both the vignette with which I opened the chapter and the instruction I was given by my very first interlocutor in Milne Bay, the thorny question of matriliney was raised as the ground upon which I was told to build my understanding of social differentiations and the asymmetries that could arise from them. For the twentieth-century anthropologists working in this corner—as it is still imagined or presumed to be—of the country, matriliney became a way to talk about economic exchanges, political forms, and the magical capacities inhering in the domain of femininity. These exercises were fruitful and important ones, as they teased out the connections between social organisation



and institutions on a 'larger' scale that have become part and parcel of how anthropology does its comparative work. The conversation has now shifted, for people both within the province itself and outside it, in a PNG experiencing internal mobility of a kind unprecedented in its history. I have heard a district court magistrate in Alotau, the provincial capital for Milne Bay, exhort his disputing parties to remember that they should think about their relationship to land in terms of matriliney, as a means of telling them not only who they are, but also who they are in the unfolding time of the dispute itself (Demian, 2011). I have heard a high court judge from another matrilineal part of the country, New Ireland Province, point immediately to matriliney as that which distinguishes him from most other Papua New Guineans, in that his status shifts as soon as he goes home. He may be an elite jurist in Port Moresby, but is also a clan member who knows his place vis-à-vis sisters, both literal and classificatory, who have the right to act as his 'boss'.

These are, on their face, rhetorical claims. They offer Papua New Guineans engaged in regional mobility the chance to reflect and act under the sign of place-based identities in one context, and institutional or class identities in another. Social group formation under these conditions of multiple contexts becomes 'more situational than ontological: they are the product of immediate interests rather than of fundamental essences' (Errington & Gewertz, 2004, p. 85). The gesture towards fundamental essences (such as 'the matrilineal kinship') is itself a way of describing a set of distinctions and interests that people may exercise under some conditions, but not others. One of the first things noted by Macintyre in her own work in Misima and New Ireland (2001, 2003) is that a matrilineal system of inheritance guarantees nothing in terms of the transformational effects of a mine offering any material benefits to women. The matrilineal buck, as it were, stops at the point where the emergence of a mining metropole creates new opportunities for training, employment, travel and control over the distribution of royalties. Matriliney still has work to do as an arbiter of distinction between people from Milne Bay or New Ireland and other parts of the country, but it is not imagined to be extensible into the new forms of social and economic action presented by a mining boom.

Matriliney and its limits present a case in point for the problem of alienability. To put the problem in alternative terms, some institutional forms appear to 'travel' more readily than others, just as some social researchers find themselves readily detached from one site and embedded in another, while also retaining an identification from the previous site.

What is retained, and what is left behind or replaced, is not a decision made by anthropologists themselves. It is one made by their host communities and interlocutors, and is liable to shift at any time. There is no stable axis of comparison that can be presumed, and there are implications here not only for anthropology, but also for development and other area studies in their considerations of the bases for inequality and any actions that might be undertaken to rectify it.

The societies of Milne Bay Province—and their colonial-era designation, ‘the Massim’—exert a perennial gravitational pull on the anthropological imagination. This pull acted upon both Macintyre in the 1970s and myself in the 1990s, and continues to attract the interest of graduate students. The distinctiveness of this corner of PNG at times seems self-evident, certainly in the insistence of Milne Bay peoples that certain features of their societies, often with matriliney at the top of the list, continue to set them apart from the rest of the country. Milne Bay is not the only matrilineal corner of PNG, but this minority mode of social organisation has been picked up by other Papua New Guineans as a feature to identify both Milne Bay people and foreign visitors whose sojourns began in that province. The identification of matriliney with Milne Bay, as demonstrated in the conversation between myself and the NGO worker with which I opened this chapter, is telling. Matriliney itself had become detached from its original context and made to stand for something other than a system of reckoning inheritance and identity. It was now a synecdoche for a region of the country, and a way of demonstrating how relationships to land and to other persons changed as one moved from one place to another. In turn, these relationships became the starting point for understanding how inequality itself could not even be understood in the same way in different parts of the country. Actions imagined to stem from such inequality—such as violence—would conceivably have entirely different causes depending on where one was, where one had come from, and which relationships were at the forefront at any given time.

In the same way, a region that once contained a distinctive social feature has now become contained by it. So, too, are the persons—whether local or foreign—who are identified by others as belonging to that place and, therefore, to that social form. Never mind that the social form is itself subject to processes of re-containment and re-contextualisation in the face of the economic, political, religious, and other vicissitudes of history that Milne Bay peoples have engaged with over the past century and a half. If even the most fundamental way of thinking about kinship can be scaled

up to contain an entire region, and can further be imagined to encompass the researcher who leaves that region and travels to other parts of the country, then what appears to be a loss of ethnographic detail can become, in the moment of identification by another, the revelation of an entire perspective on how distinctions in social relationships are configured that one never knew one possessed until the original context was left behind. This perspective is not that of the original host community or their region: that remains their own, always. Rather, it is perspective as a technique for detachment and re-attachment, as a means by which the ethnographer's new friends, colleagues, and interlocutors come to know who she is, and therefore what kind of knowledge she seeks.

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