

# Prologue: Pragmatism, Prescience and Principle

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The advantage of reflecting on a good career is that one also reflects on the value of academia and the diverse strands that make it up. Martha's has been an excellent career to reflect upon. In her tribute to Martha (included at the end of this volume), Dora Kuir-Ayius has given us the metaphor of the *bilum* (a woven string bag) to describe this. In this volume, her colleagues, students and collaborators celebrate Martha as writer, researcher, teacher and supervisor, editor, policy activist and participant observer. The *bilum* metaphor asks us to consider the way those strands feed off each other to motivate a career that demonstrates both strength and form. Here, I will concentrate on the intellectual, ethical and political form of Martha's work. However, I also want to acknowledge Martha's sustained contributions to anthropology in Australia, including her work as editor of *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* and the work involved in supporting anthropology through the Australian Research Council process.

What struck me, both as I revisited Martha's work and listened to the speakers at the workshop that formed the genesis for this volume, was the coherence of intellectual, ethical and political underpinnings; the intellectual conceptualisation of methods, problems and concepts; the ethical obligation to register inequality and injustice and also to pay attention to people's own goals and the political imperative to get things done.

Martha and I both first visited Papua New Guinea (PNG) in 1979. This was a time when the perspective on anthropology was both historical and material, and the context, of course, was postcolonial. Martha came to that

context not only with a historical consciousness but also well and truly steeped in a century of the historiography, archaeology and ethnography of the *kula* ring (a regional trading network in PNG). What is remarkable in one of Martha's first papers, 'Warfare and the changing context of "kune" on Tubetube' (1983), is the piecing together of evidence from different points in the regional space of the Massim and different points in time and the situation of interpretations of both warfare and the *kula* in their regional and historical specificity. The article sets the stage for Martha's sustained critical scepticism of the assumption of 'culture'.

Her empirical attitude is pre-cultural in the sense that it values the regional sense of material flows and political dynamics, rather than privileging the perspective of supposedly distinctive cultural positions within those regions—part of that 'translocal microregionalism' identified by Lederman (1998, p. 440) as a through line of the literature on Melanesia. Martha's empirical attitude is also post-cultural, in the sense that she views the politics of these regions as integral to Melanesians' responses to both the violence and possibilities of colonial and postcolonial contexts. It is from the point of view of the convergence of pre-cultural and post-cultural perspectives that Martha mounts her rejection of the closure or equilibrium model of the *kula* ring (a similar convergence forms a key point of Lederman's take on the 'culture area').

From my reading, this rejection is key to Martha's work, because it brings into play the connection between historical perspective and questions of agency that runs through her work. It envisions the Massim as a set of interconnections—where the horizon of a politics lies elsewhere, with people who may or may not be persons.

This brings me to the next major strand in her work. I remember a 1994 conversation with Martha about the implications of Marilyn Strathern's *Gender of the gift* (1988), particularly the configuration of agency, individuality and personhood. Martha was particularly concerned with what she understood to be the exclusion of objectification as an integral aspect of the treatment of socially significant human others in Melanesian social systems—in other words, that these social systems might, at critical moments, depend on the denial of personhood to others. The result of this concern was her 1995 paper, 'Violent bodies and vicious exchanges: Personification and objectification in the Massim'. She rejected the mapping of the following oppositions onto one another: commodity logic/gift logic, reification/personification and Western/Melanesian.

She critiqued this as a ‘benign’ view that elides specifically Melanesian connections between violence and reification and the integral role these play in the dynamics of exchange (Macintyre, 1995, p. 34).

In the Massim context, ‘partibility encompasses ideas of dismemberment, destruction and violence’ (Macintyre, 1995, p. 34) and also depersonalisation (1995, p. 32). The classification of captives in war as *gum* is telling:

We called them ‘our meat’. We called them *gum*. *Gum*, this word is old. It means a payment of flesh. Before, that man or child or woman was somebody. But we call them *gum*. Not a person, just our thing. We address the captive as *gum*. (Macintyre, 1995, p. 35)

The point of Martha’s analysis was not the cultural dominance of either personification or objectification, but rather that both were integral moments of a dialectics of exchange and violence. Her informant Pansi ‘explains quite clearly that the personification of a group of people in the captive is necessary for the objectification of the *gum* to have force and meaning’ (1995, p. 38).

This dialectic of objectification and personification is made particularly clear in an account of the reclaiming of a female captive by her kin group. Martha showed that:

she as a person is first objectified, then given a social identity within a group, then bargained for in terms of her substitutability, then personified as a mother within Tubetube social space, and finally reconstituted within her natal group by virtue of her exchangeability for pigs and valuables. (1995, p. 38)

This series of moves were based on the capacity for the ‘abstraction’ of the woman’s reproductive capacity; therefore, Martha’s implication is that these dialectics are intrinsic to exchanges surrounding marriage. It is telling that the violence of that abstraction is noted in the account itself: ‘our daughter is not a pig, we do not want pigs. You cannot substitute for her with mwali or bagi’ (1995, p. 38).

For Strathern, the pivot (or elbow) is the key to her conception of an agent who acts with ‘another in mind’ (1988, p. 272). For Martha, it is the exploitation of this dialectic of personification and objectification, the figure of the *gum* that opens up the possibilities of agency. Over time, her work has developed in such a way as to allow the discussion to exist

in parallel to distinctive contemporary forms of male and female agency. Three strands of discussion have been particularly salient: violence and the intersections of Christianity and domesticity, on the one hand, and of work and money, on the other.

Martha's work has been integral to the development of the literature on the intersection of gender and modernity and of the specific problem of masculinity within that framework. The three key ways in which a critique of culture has had formative impacts on anthropology are also key to her work: a genuinely historical anthropology, fundamental concern with the way that anthropology as practice and as a body of data has been embedded in colonialism and its legacy, and gender as a generative and foundational form of difference. She has been particularly concerned with the intersection of masculinity and violence (Macintyre, 2008). Martha renewed her critique of Strathern's emphasis on partibility and of the dominant role it had assumed in accounts of Melanesian social reproduction. In her view, this account obscures the significance of 'relations of conflict and exclusion', and by extension from previous work of objectification, that are 'manifest in situations of contestation and rivalry' (Macintyre, 2008, p. 180) and integral to the historical dynamics of Melanesian societies. In Martha's view, it is only by recognising these historical continuities that we can understand the ways in which such capacities for violence have intersected with the forms of violence and alienation that are peculiar to modernity. One side of this argument concerns how the 'view that "strangers were enemies" and the parochial dimensions of conflict in the past continue to be expressed in settings where conflict arises' (2008, p. 187). In this way, new sources of violence may be folded back into a distinctively segmentary political dynamics. However, Martha has also argued that what is at stake here are not only tactical and strategic understandings of male agency but also 'continuities in masculine embodiment and self-presentation, as both beautiful and dangerous' (2008, p. 181)—the figure of the Melanesian Rambo is key in this context. Most tellingly, it is only if we recognise these continuities that we can understand the ways in which young Melanesian men turn against their own relational social contexts in embracing forms of hyper-masculinised autonomy. In Martha's view, the only adequate approach is to ground both dynamics in forms of historical continuity.

A similar kind of argument for a historically specific understanding of Melanesian engagements with modernity is to be found in Martha's work with Margaret Jolly (1989) on domesticity, family and gender in the Pacific. In their Introduction, they emphasise the convergence of three factors or processes:

1. the *longue durée* of the impact of Christianity, colonialism and trade on these systems
2. the enormous variability of Melanesian domestic and household relationships and their articulation within a wider politics
3. the considerable variations in European takes on domesticity, sexuality and gender that were engaged in this history.

In part, this model speaks to the feedback dynamics of this history, in which local transformations in Christianity in one part of the Pacific inform later missionising processes in other parts. Equally important, however, are the very active two-way processes through which mission models find their fit with local domestic and gender relationships: 'the link between missionary desires, actual mission models, and perceived changes in Pacific domesticity is not a direct chain of causation' (Jolly & Macintyre, 1989, p. 11). It is in the undetermined nature of that chain that Martha finds agency.

To describe what I understand Martha to envision in these histories, I return to what is conventionally represented as the opposition between gift and commodity forms and reinstate them as forms of historical continuum, consistent with Mauss' account. When these two meet in Martha's imagination, they do not do so in mutual antagonism and incomprehension, but rather as a kind of exploratory finding of fit—potentially exploitative, but also liberating, forms of fit. In this idea, the potential for the commodified and objectified form of exchange is always inherent in the concealed interest of the gift. Further, what meets is not only the gift and its politics but forms of work and forms of violence. Martha's work invites questions not only of logical histories of money, but also logical histories of the gift and of violence. All three are grasped as exhibiting internal dynamics of objectification and abstraction, even as they exist in tension with relationality and partibility. In this, we find the internal connection between Martha's anthropology and her engagement with development studies and a range of consultancy projects with gender, work and resource politics at their heart.

I have already emphasised that Martha's historical perspective disposes her to critique closed, or simply self-sustaining, models of culture. This is equally a function of her ethical bent. This raises not only the imperative to understand but also questions about wellbeing and rights and of their intimate companions, violence and power—about the future, about capabilities and their denial and the morality of labour. Martha has always discussed the way women remain prisoners of certain kinds of social dynamic, but she has also placed emphasis on the moments at which they, often suddenly and surprisingly, walk away from them, as indeed may men (Biersack, Jolly & Macintyre, 2016; Macintyre, 2011, 2017). She identifies women who move into the wage economy as a way of gaining direct control of wealth and who then move back into the gift economy of kinship as transactors in their own right (Macintyre, 2011). As I read Martha, it is not only the commodifying power of money—reciprocal independence, in Gregory's terms (1982, pp. 100–101)—that allowed women such mobility, but also the potential within the gift economy itself for an objectifying perspective. I believe her view to be that, unless we work to understand what enables people to walk away from such dynamics, and what futures they see in those contexts, our broader social theory will remain impoverished. The dynamics of fit that I discussed above form part of the way in which Martha approaches this. Equally important are feminist critiques of masculine models of individuality and autonomy, such as possessive individualism, and a recognition of the importance of care and the way it is religiously mediated in PNG, as a continuity in Melanesian modernity.

However, I believe there to be a kind of transhistorical understanding of capability, and of key human processes such as labour, that enables Martha to see and work with a critique of culture in both understanding these contexts and in approaching them as policy and local political issues. In this, we see the quite radical nature of her divergences from Strathern's more Dumontian take on difference. At the same time, she clearly wants to avoid being trapped into the Nussbaum (2000) and Sen (1999) ethnocentrism of tradition as (by definition) 'unfreedom' and of agency as an idealised civic without inherent potentialities for violence. She is equally concerned to avoid the faux universalism of human rights regimes in her engagement with Merry and the 'vernacularisation' of rights (cited in Biersack & Macintyre, 2016, pp. 10–12).

There are two keys to the way Martha steers a course between the Scylla and Charybdis of the assumptions of cultural coherence, on the one hand, and of the abstractions of rights and capabilities, on the other. One is her career-long commitment to research based on participant observation: the understanding of people and their actions in the real context of their lives and the sustained tracking of people and contexts over time. In this way, culture reappears not as the assumption of coherence, but rather as the concrete specificities of context and the carefully recorded and analysed meaning-based forms of agency through which people build lives and imagine futures in those contexts. The other lies in the sustained character of her writing over time: a commitment to writing complexity as an understanding of the complex of relationships and interests that converge in a situation. Three features of Martha's writing struck me: her insistence that readers pay attention to detail and find the argument within it; a commitment to clear writing, accompanied by a refusal to allow readers to evade complexity, and an ever-present awareness of the past and its diversity, which informs a writing problem firmly embedded in the 'what is' of the present.

A 2006 article Martha wrote for the *Development Bulletin* on indicators of violence against women brought much of this into focus. Her overall points were clear—there is no point in collecting numbers if they are not used, and you cannot use the numbers if you do not understand how and why they were collected. Her description of her own practice is salutary in its detail:

In my own work, monitoring crime in an area where there is a large mining project, I note the reports that are recorded in the occurrence book, noting every person who comes and speaks to the police officer at the desk. I also note whether any action was taken, any investigation or charges laid. Does she withdraw the charges? Does this lead to a court case? Does the victim of the crime turn up to court? Is the person convicted? Depending on which dataset I chose to go with, I could have a prevalence rate of 0.5 per cent or 15 per cent. I know that under-reporting is a problem in all countries, but how do I decide what to multiply it by to estimate actual prevalence? (Macintyre, 2006, p. 61)

In sum, Martha writes against closed systems and de-contextualised abstractions. She methodologically works to understand people in their context; however, she does not write to trap them in it. She names the interests that actors bring to specific contexts and insists on giving those

interests explanatory power and ethical force, whether negative or positive. Martha's work is pragmatic in the very best sense that William James gave to the term:

[she] turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems and pretended absolutes and origins. [She] turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power (James, 1904).

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