

8. Conclusion: Society Reformed

Having traced the transformations that have taken place over the past century, it is obvious that Lihirians are not simply advancing towards a final destination in an inevitable world-historical teleology. They are actively shaping their lives and the forces that impinge on their existence. They are using new things and opportunities for their own purposes, although often with unforeseen outcomes. Lihirian society has been irreversibly reformed, but Lihirians have never passively capitulated before the global capitalist system, nor does everyone regard all of the changes as entirely unwanted. While there is a definite nostalgia for an idealised past, exacerbated by a strong sense of cultural rupture coupled with a hyper-traditionalism, nobody imagines a utopian return to primordial life and ancestral ways. Traditional Lihirian culture might have had superior values, but money, trade store food, televisions, beer and cars were not part of that era. Modern Lihirian culturalism is premised on the demand for new things, or more precisely the requirement to indigenise them. In a veritable hall of mirrors, Lihirian desires reflect and refract Western dreams of an advanced urban egalitarian society where everybody has the capacity for endless consumption in order to advance their ideas about what life is all about.

At the same time, Lihirians remain divided over their hopes for modern life and how they are best achieved. Lihirians are highly aware that the new influences, challenges and agendas brought by large-scale resource development have created deep social divisions. The tremendous form of change created through mining means that there is little unison over many aspects of their lives, such as leadership, the use and inheritance of resources and wealth, social values, gender roles, governance, which road will lead to the imagined future, and even what this new life will look like. However, in response to the extreme experience of mining and the lack of consensus over so much of their life, it seems that many Lihirians look to *kastom* as the one thing that they should all be able to agree upon. As a result, their efforts are doubled in this direction in order to create and maintain a semblance of social and cultural unity and continuity.

Lihirians might argue that things were better in the good old days, but with the arrival of the mine, their ancestors have never been venerated with such style, colour and magnitude. Lihirians have proven themselves to be quick students of commercial cunning — especially as they craftily extract concessions from the mining company — and they use this to stage the most elaborate traditional feasts they have ever known. Lihirian economic practices amply demonstrate that, although Western capitalism is planetary in scope, it is not a universal logic of cultural change (Sahlins 2005c: 495). Lihirian inventions and inversions of tradition are their attempt to create a differentiated cultural space within the

world system — effectively the Lihirianisation of modernity. As Joel Robbins (2005: 10) points out, contemporary customary activities should be seen as a new form of cultural process, not symptoms of the ‘death of culture’ or its incoherence or irrelevance.

Contrary to popular Western thought, the introduction and use of new goods has not meant that Lihirians had to adopt the whole cultural package that accompanies money and other useful items, nor has it necessarily set them on an inevitable course of cultural corrosion that will eventually rust out any trace of their traditional existence. As Thomas (1991: 186) notes, this line of thought reiterates the spurious assumption that ‘material culture is an index of acculturation’. However, if Lihirian strategies have allowed *kastom* to be carried forward into a new world, this has not been without cost. As we have seen, the practices and values associated with mortuary rituals have been transformed in ways that people find profoundly disturbing. Moreover, it would appear that the particular version of *kastom* which Lihirians practice seems to divide them even further — and this is the paradox behind the ideology of *kastom*. Even so, many Lihirians remain convinced that *kastom* is the true road that will lead them (back) to a state of equality and social balance — but in a world where everyone is also equally rich. Many Lihirians have been left baffled as to why this conviction has proven tragically false. This is a familiar story throughout all of Melanesia’s resource development projects, where unprecedented amounts of cash and resources injected into communities routinely undermine even the most flexible social systems of leadership and distribution. This may well confirm that *kastom* was simply never equipped to deal with mineral wealth.

In response to these dilemmas, the authors of the Destiny Plan have proposed a way out of the quagmire which they believe will allow Lihirians to achieve the dream of a reformed, egalitarian and well-off society — to live fuller *Lihirian* lives. However, the Lihir Destiny, as a concept and a destination, remains ambiguous, if not downright contentious. This is partly because people cannot agree upon which road will lead them there, but also because these roads seem to point to different visions of how this life will be lived.

At one level, Lihirians are caught between competing cultural values seemingly ascribed to different activities and ways of being. But even though the Destiny Plan aims to modernise Lihir according to perceived Western values — to hasten the transition from develop*man* to development — it is not premised upon, nor has it generated, the kind of cultural humiliation which Sahlins suggests is necessary for the total abandonment of Lihirian culture. Instead, we can see the double-edged side of humiliation, which has created a heightened self-consciousness and spurred on a greater commitment to retain a distinctive Lihirian identity. The Destiny Plan might be structured around the philosophies of Personal Viability that demand a refashioning of the self, but in the imagined

future, *kastom*, kinship and traditional values and epistemologies remain central, albeit in a highly regulated form. The question is not whether these aspects of the Lihirian lifeworld should be discarded, but rather how they can be managed so that people can simultaneously recognise themselves as Lihirian and live modern lives in a developed society. In the same way that we might consider more classical cargo cults, or perhaps even the Nimamar movement, as an attempt to transcend the binary opposition of *developman* and development in order to achieve something entirely new, a creative synthesis, there are some ways in which the Destiny Plan pursues a similar ambition. This analogy should also alert local leaders, mining company management and the government to the limitations or some of the internal contradictions in this vision.

The Destiny Plan is not a simple road to modernity, partly because it encompasses the hybrid cultural, economic and ideological space in which many Lihirians find themselves. While the Destiny Plan indicates that the key to long-term economic independence — indeed the future viability of Lihirian society — can be found in entrepreneurialism, it emphasises *bisnis* in the narrowest of terms, overlooking or concealing the fact that many Lihirians also use the term *bisnis* to refer to relationships that are fostered through *kastom*. This strategy ultimately fails to recognise the absolute entanglement between these spheres, or the level to which both of these activities currently rely upon the corporate mining economy. Needless to say, this ideological distinction is routinely undermined by the ways in which Lihirians engage with capitalism as they pursue the *developman* project. Moreover, even though the authors of the Destiny Plan reject the so-called cargo mentality and unrealistic landowner expectations, as expressed through local manifestations of the dependency syndrome, they still expect an ‘uncalculating gift’ from the mining company (Godelier 1999: 208). Despite their criticisms of landowner proclivities and their protestations about the need for self-reliance, the ideology of landownership has a complete stranglehold on them. Thus we might consider the Destiny Plan as a simulacrum that echoes the outward manifestation of the modern world, with its incessant categorisation, hierarchies, distinctions and control. From this perspective, we begin to see the centrality of mimesis as practice, and the enduring tension between knowledge and implementation which ultimately frustrates the immediate realisation of the Lihir Destiny.

The widespread expectation that the company will deliver all forms of economic development means that many Lihirians, and especially landowners, fail to see the need for PV. Ultimately, mining benefits enable landowners to live Lihirian lives on a bigger and better scale; they are not totally reliant on farming, nor do they have to front up to the market place for the expected hiding. Their subsistence existence is augmented by their freedom to consume. As mining benefits subsidise the ceremonial economy, people are able to pursue *developman* with more splendour and pageantry and boost their own political standing at

the same time. The majority of non-landowners might resent the landowners for appearing selfish, for failing to redistribute wealth in expected ways, or for polarising their political status, but this barely detracts from their desire to enjoy and partake in such an existence.

Nevertheless, emergent class relations linked to the arbitrary allocation of landowner wealth and status, coupled with the daily reminder of global inequalities reflected in the wealth of the mining company and its expatriate managers, has left some people susceptible to PV promises. The same capitalist system that has consistently denied Lihirians equal footing with their colonial *masta*, their proselytising missionaries, their expatriate bosses, and their adopted anthropologists, has been repackaged and sold back to them as something new that will enhance rather than detract from their lives. Through a conceptual sleight of hand, capitalism is presented as a fair system that is able to increase, rather than decrease, social equality, and as one that simultaneously requires self-regimentation and offers hitherto unimagined possibilities for personal accumulation. The morality of the capitalist system depicts differences between the rich and the poor, or elites and grassroots, as differences in degree rather than differences in kind. In the words of Gewertz and Errington (1999: 42), such differences come to reflect 'a relatively fluid continuum of personal attributes rather than a relatively closed set of categorical differences'. Economic inequalities are thus not only fair but necessary, because they represent people's contribution to society and the efforts they invest in the processes of production. In this new world, the individual is responsible for community well-being. As Polanyi (2001: 114) would have it, the assumption is similar to Mandeville's 'famous doggerel about the sophisticated bees' who demonstrated how private vice can yield public benefit.

The strategies outlined in the Destiny Plan require people to be *interacting* individuals — or 'dividuals' as Marilyn Strathern might see it. Depending on the context or the task at hand, they might act (or imagine themselves) as sole proprietors of the self in a *bisnis* transaction, and then acknowledge their relationally embedded position in society when performing *kastom*. But in reality, it is not always so easy to make an effortless transition or to maintain the boundaries between supposedly different economic spheres, nor does everyone necessarily want to engage in such cultural acrobatics. For example, when I once asked Francis Bek why his small entrepreneurial endeavours had not succeeded (why his PV 'money garden' failed to take root), he replied that it was simply because 'the ways of Lihir' were too fixed in him (*pasin bilong Lihir em i pas pinis long mi*). Recognising this 'embodiment of history' (Bourdieu 1977) helps us to understand the field of expectations which many Lihirians are trying to negotiate their way through.

But there are some people, such as members of the emerging elite, who successfully manage their demanding relationships, as well as a growing number of people who

wholeheartedly embrace PV as a strategy to achieve such outcomes. Samuel Tam and the authors of the Destiny Plan have been seeking to create an environment in which people can constitute themselves as possessive individuals. Indeed, as Hobbes would have it, in the world imagined by PV, it is possessive individuals pitted against one another all the way down. There can be no other way. If PV is appealing, it is perhaps because it articulates what people already suspected: that private ownership, management and consumption of wealth underpins the sort of lifestyles being presented as genuinely modern. The strong identification between modernity and certain forms of consumption and ownership means that possessive individualism becomes something worth striving for. For some, PV taps into an incipient desire to break away and distinguish one's self from people embedded in tradition, collective obligation, and consequent relative economic poverty — traits of 'backwardness' in the over-extended distinction between tradition and modernity.

When elite leaders like Mark Soipang leave their air conditioned office in Londolovit and drive to Putput village to exchange their suit for traditional attire and self-consciously mount the stage to perform the *rohriahat* rituals in the final *karat* feast, as Soipang did in 2008, they demonstrate that they are neither fully beholden to tradition or to modernity. These 'masters of development', who are still deeply involved in *developman* projects, reveal the room for creative action that has been opened up in these new circumstances. These leaders are not still wandering through the desert of cultural humiliation in search of the other side. Instead, their activities tell us that cultural transformation does not occur on a linear scale, but appears as people negotiate their way between idealised and supposedly opposed states. What I have presented in this book are the tensions that exist as people move between *developman* and development and negotiate a new hybrid space: the cancellation of essentialised difference through imaginative synthesis.

However, it is worth remembering that the *developman* process contains a historical and structural paradox which Lihirians cannot avoid. As long as Lihirians continue to equip themselves with fancy and useful things from the market for the vitalisation, reproduction and progression of their own cultural order, their culture will become increasingly dependent upon the relations of the world system as it is manifest locally through the business of resource extraction. This is surely a point which the authors of the Destiny Plan have recognised. Unfortunately, in such a hostile context of global capital, and with the inevitable prospect of mine closure, there are particular types of *developman* that may prove devastatingly self-destructive. Perhaps only then will Lihirians experience total humiliation. But it remains to be seen whether this will make them truly modern subjects of the global capitalist order, or whether they will lose their ideologies and fantasies but keep their customary practices.