

7. Custom Reconfigured

The claim is not that culture determines history, only that it organises it (Sahlins 2004: 11).

Kastom i no inap dai, em bai stap oltaim [*kastom* cannot die, it will be here forever] (Paulus Tala, Puki hamlet, Lihir 2004).

Throughout my first weeks of fieldwork in late 2003, I was immediately drawn into a web of mortuary rituals and *kastom* politics. Several days before I had landed on the island, a young man named Stanis Kanpetbiah from Lesel village had unexpectedly died. When I eventually found my way to Lesel, I made my way into the men's house and sat with the men from Tiakwan clan who had adopted me during my previous visit. This was home for several weeks: here we ate, slept, socialised and remembered Kanpetbiah. Throughout this mourning period, pigs, shell money, cash, garden produce and trade store food were exchanged and consumed. Women prepared food for guests while senior men sat inside the men's house talking, smoking and chewing betelnut. People were expected to follow mortuary taboos that maintained the sombreness of the occasion. Respect was being paid to the recently departed, through processes that 'finish the dead' and continue the lineage through a gathered sociality. My introduction to Lihir gave me a glimpse of an institutionalised form of social reproduction embedded within the men's house. This was, in the words of one man, *pasin bilong Lihir* (the ways of Lihir).

This occasion also revealed new processes, values, practices and tensions. Not everyone from the lineage stayed for the entire duration. Males travelled around, and went to work in the mine, or came to socialise for a few hours at night before retreating to their own house to sleep, while some men drank on the sly, now that beer was considered an integral part of any customary gathering. Women negotiated keen divisions between kinship lines made apparent by the unequal distribution of wealth between the assembled clans. Senior males conspicuously harangued younger males as they addressed new disputes and deviations from men's house ethos, concerns over the correct ways to perform *kastom*, and the need for clan unity. A Catholic communion service was held in the men's house, followed by the distribution of Kanpetbiah's possessions. There was a level of ambivalence and dispute over the dispersal of his savings and whether or not it was right for people to keep a record of the store-bought contributions to the feast — whether gifts bought with money should be forgotten or reciprocated. After several weeks, the mourning period was finished, the taboos were lifted,

and the remaining males launched into a spectacular drinking binge, spending hundreds of kina on beer and spirits. They drank well into the following day, stating that this was a time for *hamamas* (happiness).

At the time, I wondered what was implied by *pasin bilong Lihir*. The trade store food, the blue plastic tarpaulin shelters, the trips to the market in hired vehicles to buy more tobacco and betelnut for guests, the ferrying of recently purchased pigs on the back of trucks, each one's presence announced with a blast from a car horn, and the excessive drinking, made the event appear like a parody — not quite modern, but certainly not traditional. However, this was a socially significant event. Meaningful transactions were taking place, and relationships and collectively held values were expressed and maintained. Introduced goods and styles did not detract from the purpose of the occasion. Indeed, they helped to elicit sociality on a grander scale.

Beyond the absence of thatched huts, traditional goods and ornaments of rank, there were perhaps some ways in which this event still reflected the façade of contemporary *kastom*, if not a deeper reformation of society. This occasion was acceptable to participants and served intended social purposes. But it did so through processes in which contradictions of meaning were unintentionally and unconsciously concealed or veiled. This was not 'spurious tradition' (Handler and Linnekin 1984) or inauthentic culture, for to be sure, tradition is not stasis but a particular way of changing in new circumstances. But the performance of Lihirian *kastom* presents a seamless continuity with the past that masks disjuncture and fears of declining sociality, which raises important questions about how modern mortuary feasts retain their status as the embodiment of tradition and *kastom*. In this chapter, I look at the ways in which Lihirians engage with *kastom* in both conversation and in practice, and how this is related to their own responses to extreme social and economic changes and the ideas, visions and plans of the new political elite — the very particular modernity promulgated in the Lihir Destiny Plan.

Understanding *Kastom* as Culture and History

When Lihirians use the term *kastom*, it can assume a variety of meanings depending on the context and the intentions of the speaker. It can refer to those activities, beliefs, values and forms of behaviour that are also glossed as *pasin bilong tumbuna* (the ways of the ancestors), but it in no way encompasses everything their dead relatives once practiced. In recent years, the Tok Pisin word *kalsa* (culture) has entered Lihirian discourse. It derives from the English word culture, but like *kastom*, it often refers to certain values and practices, usually associated with an idealised past, rather than culture *per se* — all the

cultural intimacies of daily life that anthropologists are so fond of documenting. Lihirians alternate between these terms, but generally they can both be seen as descriptive and conceptual tools for referring to the past and assessing the present. At the national level, the potency of these terms derives from their vagueness (Narokobi 1980; Keesing 1982: 299), but in Lihir, it is their specific meaning that gives them such rhetorical strength.

If we are to maintain that culture is always in a state of flux and never static, and that change can originate from both inside and outside a community, then we must recognise the efficacy of 'inventions' and interpretations of culture which occur in the present (Wagner 1975). Thus *kastom* is the product of interpretations of the past by present generations as much as it is the residual essence of the past which has trickled down to the present. In Lihir, *kastom* is a feature of the discourse of change. At times, its referential meaning can appear vague and encompassing, but its reflexivity allows for comparison and contrast with other sets of cultural practices. *Kastom* cannot be viewed as an unconscious cultural inheritance, as if it is somehow distinct from a self-conscious proclamation of the past in the present. It is a self-conscious construction of the past which is used to inform present behaviour and a sense of identity.

The emergence of the discourse of *kastom* is not solely the result of recent change and development; it has been present since at least the late colonial period. However, it has gained a greater *ideological* stronghold since mining began. This is part of an ongoing process of cultural reflexivity characteristic of the experience of modernity. It also reflects the more general Melanesian phenomenon wherein specific ritual practices and forms of sociality are reified and held in contradistinction to local images of Western society, politics, economic practices and personhood (Bashkow 2006).

While anthropologists have commonly approached *kastom* as a rhetorical creation at regional, national and local levels, we should do well to consider Akin's argument that anthropologists might have reified it more than Melanesians (Akin 2005: 185). When *kastom* is severed from its cultural moorings, we are likely to overlook the intense interaction between culture and *kastom* as both continually shape each other over time, and thus be led to neglect 'the concurrent subjectivisation of *kastom* as culture' (ibid.: 186). This is important to remember because it reinforces the point that *kastom* is not merely the essentialisation of Lihirian culture, but part of Lihirian people's 'culturally specific modes of change' (Sahlins 1992: 22).

Mining has exposed Lihirians to alternative forms of living and relating that have challenged and destabilised existing ways of life over a very short period of time. As a result, many Lihirians look to *kastom* for social stability, which has generated a sort of mass 'custom cult' whereby Lihirians spend incredible

amounts of time and resources ritually reaffirming their belief in *kastom* as the true road to a harmonious modern existence — the enactment of the developman project. Notions of *pasin bilong Lihir* consciously reinforce this belief and form part of the ideology of *kastom*, which in the Marxist sense distorts or conceals particular realities. Social relations have been reified to the extent that *kastom* is held in opposition to the road to development outlined in the Destiny Plan, which is based upon the peculiar ideology of Personal Viability, or *bisnis*. But as we have seen, this is further complicated by the fact that the Destiny Plan opposes and simultaneously incorporates both the ideology of *kastom* (by rejecting the developman process and proposing a codified set of *kastom* rules) and the ideology of landownership (by rejecting dependency upon compensation whilst demanding corporate funding for an alternative grand scheme). Moreover, the ideology of landownership requires the specification of land rules to determine who can receive compensation, which in Lihir is inseparable from the codification and the practice of *kastom*. We can thus begin to see how *kastom* directly emerges from the legal bowels of resource development, and the tensions and ambivalences in the different ways that Lihirians conceive of development and *kastom*.

The ideology of Lihirian *kastom* has been highly permeated by a Manichean allegory comprised of contrasting opposites which help to emphasise the specifics of each category. Missionary discourse has been internalised throughout much of Melanesia, as people come to see their world and their history as a set of oppositional contrasts that depict struggles of light and dark, goodness and evil, God and Satan, indigenous and exogenous, tradition and modernity, or *kastom* and *bisnis* (Kahn 1983; Errington and Gewertz 1995; Foster 1995a; Robbins 2004). In some cases, development is even conceptualised as ‘rebirth’ (Keesing 1989: 27). Paradoxically, in many instances, these inherited postulates have been inverted in a new Manicheism: instead of associating *kastom* with the heathen, people are expected to preserve their ancestral values and to keep the temptations and ‘cultural sins’ of Western life at bay. Such dualisms assist the objectification of traditions and customs as something ‘thing-like’, to be (literally) separated from people and communities, reduced to written form, or made into a budget line item, an ‘LJNC portfolio’, or a new category to be ticked off on the Personal Viability checklist along the road to the Lihir Destiny.

The doctrine of *kastom*, especially as it is manifest in Society Reform and the Destiny Plan, requires the exclusion of ‘non-indigenous’ things. However, the difficulty of enacting this doctrine is mirrored in the struggle to retain local business as a separate sphere of activity. Thus the inability to implement reified Western relational and economic practices in daily contexts is deeply entwined with the complexities associated with segregating *kastom* from capitalism, whether it is *bisnis* or the corporate mining economy. In practice,

the conflation of these supposedly separate spheres constantly compromises the pursuit of both. When taken too literally, these cultural polarities ignore crucial interpenetrations and fail to capture the actualities of the Lihirian economy. As modern consumer goods are poured into Lihirian exchange, and are often preferred over those of traditional origin, *kastom* generates an increasing demand for them, reinforcing dependency upon capitalism more generally. Ironically, we then find that capitalism actually ‘energises’ *kastom* rather than subtracting from it (see Thomas 1991: 197).

Staging *Kastom*

In July 2004, I became involved in preparations for the mortuary feasts being performed by members of the Lamatlik clan who belonged to the men’s house in Natingsangar hamlet in Kinami village, into which I had become incorporated. This feast, which was one of the few occasions on which I was more involved as a host (*hurkarat*) than as a guest (*wasier*), was the next stage in fulfilling obligations to a recently deceased clansman, Umbi, and two other men, Piong and Rapis, who were still alive. This *katkato*¹ was led by Bah Arom, his maternal nephews John Zipzip, Clement Papte and Peter Toelinkanut, and several of their sons and male affinal relations who resided in the same hamlet.¹

At first glance, this is an unlikely event on which to concentrate. It appears to refute ethnographic orthodoxy: it was neither ritually nor politically climactic. The ‘deceased’ were not yet ‘finished’ — indeed, two were still alive. However, through comparison with a later *katkato* (or *pkepke*) feast in Putput in July 2006, we can gain insight into common *kastom* practices, including the ways that men stake their claims, make rules, and reproduce their standing in society, and into the collapsing or merging of feasting stages. Through comparison, we can gauge the excessive nature of the Putput feast, which demonstrates the way that differential access to wealth influences the performance of *kastom* and also the difficulties with codified ideals for both landowners and non-landowners. My intention is to convey a sense of the performance of *kastom* as temporally contextualised social action, rather than to provide a processual account or an ahistorical tabular summary that privileges structure over practice. In short, these two feasts highlight the point that, while people happily offer authoritative versions of the sequential structure of mortuary feasts, every

1 The men’s house that I was affiliated with through my incorporation into Tiakwan clan is located in Lesel village, the site of the first mortuary feast I attended. However, I was more closely aligned with the men’s house in Natingsangar hamlet in Kinami village, where I resided. My main patron, Francis Bek, is the son of Bah Arom, the owner of this men’s house. In Lihir, it is common for at least one son to remain in his father’s hamlet. As a result of my connection to Bek, I was closely involved with Arom’s nephews and the activities that took place in their men’s house.

performance reflects an improvisation of general procedures. Mortuary rites might be sequential, but the outcomes are not axiomatic or unproblematic. Various factors will always determine the results and the reception, ensuring that mortuary rites remain a contingent and flexible practice.

Moreover, it is common to see *katkato* rather than final *karat* feasts being performed, partly due to the relative difference in scale and ease of mobilisation. There are two types of *katkato*, both essentially the same feast with the same purpose, the difference being whether the celebrated person is still alive (*katkatoptoh*) or dead (*katkatoptmiat*). The first feast in Kinami was a combination of the two. Both types are directly concerned with the inheritance of political power and resources within the lineage and clan. *Katkatoptoh* is common, partly because there is more at stake. If the 'deceased' (who is still termed *kanut*) witnesses the host's efforts, then there is a better chance that the host will be rewarded. The same applies to final *karat* feasts. The cumulative result of these changes is the collapse of sequential feasting time. People have to make *kastom* sooner, while relatives are still alive, to reciprocate existing debts from other 'prematurely' performed feasts, to secure their own resources and customary influence, and to maintain prestige within this sphere. In effect, the availability and integration of cash has enabled competition to be 'brought forward', and has transformed what was formerly a post-mortem competition between 'heirs' into a regular ritual performance of the political stratagems that permeate contemporary village and lineage power struggles. While mortuary ritual has always been partly driven by economic and political factors and the need to fulfil obligations, there is a structural and symbolic transition as greater emphasis is placed on money, resources and competition, displacing the centrality of the 'deceased'.

Making *Katkato* in Kinami

Zipzip and the others had been preparing for this event since the death of their clansman in 2003, but within weeks of the planned date there was still confusion as to whether things would go ahead as scheduled. Not all of the necessary pigs were secured and much of the food would still have to be bought. Extra gardens had been planted in preparation, but they would not provide enough yams to cater for the entire event. Some talked about postponing things, while others insisted on proceeding. As the opening day drew closer, it was becoming obvious that we would need to travel abroad for our needs. Three days before the intended start, two dinghies were sent to Tabar to find suitable pigs. Zipzip and Toelinkanut often insisted to me that locally raised pigs should be used because they carry more prestige, but the inflated demand could not be met internally.

The feast was to be held over six days, and would combine parts of the *rahrum* feast that had not yet been made for Umbi and Rapis. This combination was largely for reasons of prestige, practicality and necessity, and to accommodate the constraints of employment. Clement Papte worked in a relatively senior position in the mining company's Human Resources section and had taken leave for this feast. With so many last minute preparations, and the lingering doubt over the number of pigs, he was anxious about whether the event would begin before he had to return to work. Several others were bound by similar commitments, while some could only attend during the evening.

Another three boats were used in addition to the first two, and by the Sunday evening before the event was due to be begin, all five dinghies arrived back with a total of 19 pigs. All of these pigs were transported from Londolovit wharf to Kinami on a large flat-tray truck that had been hired at great expense from a neighbouring village. Monday morning was spent putting these pigs into temporary caged enclosures (*garum*), collecting the final pieces of firewood, and husking green coconuts for the men's house. This work was performed collectively and it was expected that other groups within the village would assist as a sign of inter-clan solidarity. Women cleaned around the men's house, tidied the grave sites within the men's house and put flowers on Umbi's cross. Rice and tinned fish were cooked for workers (hosts) and guests who arrived early. Another three boats were hired and sent to Masahet to collect other relatives and garden food. Preparations were made for the *kienkien* feast which acknowledged the preparatory work and opened the main feast.

By Tuesday morning guests were still arriving. Over the course of the week, some 300 people, including women and children, would attend. Not all of them would stay in Natingsangar, as many were either from Kinami or travelled from the surrounding villages. In Lihir, guests are not directly invited; instead, people come to demonstrate support and alliance. Once the hosts have announced their intention to hold an event, news spreads quickly, and it is expected that people in the neighbouring villages will attend, reflecting the open nature of feasting and Lihirian attitudes towards hospitality.

The advent of motor transport has significantly changed the role of the hosts, which used to require the construction of large temporary houses for visitors, both inside and outside the men's house enclosure. Increased availability of transport means that guests can simply attend on those days (or in many cases for those hours) when food is distributed and consumed. Previously, people stayed with the hosts for several weeks or even months, increasing the debts and obligations between guests and hosts, giving each party greater purchase on the other's resources. For all the talk of declining hospitality, not everyone has been disappointed by the changes. The drain on resources and the uncertainty

about when guests will leave can prove burdensome. Although the duration of the feast has shrunk, the nature of contemporary *kastom* ensures greater expenditure over a shorter time.

On Tuesday afternoon, a single pig was killed and cooked in the men's house for the *kienkien*, while women cooked vegetables outside. Zipzip made a speech to announce the activities for the following day and to acknowledge the beginning of the feast. Guests received portions of cooked pork and yams with their *pinari* (gifts of betelnut, pepper sticks, green coconuts and tobacco), which had mainly been purchased at the market that morning.² By the evening, the shelters were brimming with women and children, while men and young males slept in the men's house and other shelters constructed for the occasion. The hamlet was abuzz with chatter, screaming children, chastising mothers and packs of dogs seeking scraps.

On Wednesday, the *rarhum* commenced. Not all of the stages were performed, only the most important — the *balunkale* and *berpelkan*. Visually, the feast was distinguished by clan heirloom *mis* strung up in the men's house. There was some disagreement over the stages as some people later insisted to me that instead of *ber pelkan*, it was *balunpeketal* that was performed. The latter name refers to the pigs that are normally killed when the deceased is seated and decorated in the men's house during the first mourning period before burial. This was a minor point of discrepancy, but it demonstrates how feasting rarely follows an ideal format. Donors are not always aware of how their pig will be used or whom it will eventually commemorate. Guests are even less likely to be aware of all the stages or last minute changes. Consequently, feasts are 'judged' by different standards of 'correct procedure'. Ultimately all three pigs were considered part of the *rarhum* and were treated as *bualtom*, which meant that they were confined to the men's house.

On the Wednesday morning, guests were served rice, tinned fish and vegetables. Males from the host group began preparing the pigs, cutting the two pigs marked for *balunkale* into nine portions to be cooked and distributed to the nine matrilineal groups that attended. A third pig (the *berpelkan*) was specifically for in-laws and cross-cousins of the 'deceased' person who was being honoured. Women prepared vegetables outside to be cooked with the pork inside the men's house. Women made their own separate earth oven outside the men's house that would only be used to cook vegetables. When the pigs were uncovered, the portions of pork and vegetables were placed in separate piles on the leaf beds together with betelnut, tobacco and green coconuts to form what is known as

2 One of the hosts described this transaction as *zukulwasier*. Although the name seems apt, since it means 'food given to guests', it normally refers to a stage within a final *karat* feast when food is given out to please guests while they wait for the dances to commence.

pinarilam (the big gift). This is the usual fashion for *balunkale*, which is strictly *bualtom*. During the day, women were busy weaving baskets (*piar*) to be used in later food distributions, and did not uncover their food until later that night. The three boats that had been sent to Masahet to collect other relatives came back that evening, and another small truckload of people arrived from Kunaie village.

By Thursday morning, the pork had all been eaten. Ordinarily, *rarhum* feasts are concluded with *susulkwil* (washing the skin) — the customary baths taken after men have abstained from washing during the feast. This is typically a climactic moment that ends a very sombre feast.³ In this instance, when the *bebeh* pigs were announced (pigs cooked in preparation for consumption on the final day), this signalled the end of the *rarhum* and the beginning of the *katkatop*. On Friday, the climactic day of the feast (*banien*), the *bebeh* pigs were uncovered and distributed for consumption. Four pigs had been killed: one (the *berpelkan* pig) was consumed separately by cross-cousins and in-laws of the ‘deceased’, while the other three, known as *iolnizenis* (the pigs that people come to see being cut), were consumed by the assembled guests.

Buying Sociality

Completion of this feast required that the remaining pigs be butchered and distributed for guests to carry back to their men’s houses. Before this could happen, the pigs had to be lined up in front of the men’s house (a process known as *pasuki*) and publically ‘purchased’, which is crucial to the succession of leadership and the inheritance of resources (see Plate 7-1). As one of the leaders of the feast, Zipzip walked to the centre of the hamlet with a list of names corresponding to different pigs. Moving from pig to pig, he called out the name of the donor and whom it was intended to honour. It can be argued that this is the most essential element of *katkatop* and *karat* feasts. Some men even suggested that, if nothing else within the feast succeeds, the event is still considered to be ‘correct’ so long as this process is complete, and the hosts then have a legitimate claim on leadership succession and control over clan resources.

3 In the past these feasts were distinguished by strict taboos that applied to all males. Aside from remaining quiet and showing respect, this also included prohibitions on washing. This relates to the significance of the pigs (*bualtom*), which should not be carried outside of the men’s house at any time during the feast. Men were expected to refrain from washing off the grease from these pigs during the feast. If they had to leave the enclosure for any reason, they were not to wash. The *susulkwil* signifies the end of these taboos as well as the feast itself. The prohibitions on washing have been lifted, mainly because of mission and government influence in areas of health and hygiene. In some instances, those men most closely associated with the celebrated person in the *rarhum* still adhere to this ‘rule’. Usually, there is a pig to mark this important stage. The area where the men wash (which includes the section of reef) is now under taboo (*mok*), the reef cannot be used for fishing, and women are prohibited from passing through this area.



Plate 7-1: Peter Toelinkanut and John Zipzip arranging the pigs in front of the men's house, Kinami village, 2004.

Photograph by the author.

In those instances where the 'deceased' is an influential leader and maintains control over clan land (a title known as a *tamboh wan a pour*), it is in this context that the mantle of control can pass from the 'deceased' to the host. While not all 'deceased' clan members are influential or have significant resources to be inherited, and not all hosts will succeed to leadership or inherit land, this is still an important opportunity to demonstrate leadership. Just as hosts usually organise themselves under a central leader, guests also align themselves under a leading man. The presentation of pigs is above all a statement about leadership, people's access to resources, and their ability to coordinate themselves under their big-man. Hosts do not provide all of the pigs presented on this occasion. It is rather their ability to manage relationships that is manifest in the number of pigs they can arrange for their allies or guests to provide, which either reciprocate existing debts or create new cycles. This is an equally important opportunity for guests to express their respect for the 'deceased' and their capacity as a group.

The public 'purchasing' of pigs is usually termed *ravo matanabual*, which refers to the display of the 'price' or 'eye' (*matan*) of the pig (*bual*), with fathoms of *mis*

linked together and rolled up in a leaf wrapping (*ravo*). The recipient pulls the shell money out of the wrapping whilst moving backwards and uncoils it for public inspection. Payment can occur in either the men's house enclosure or the central hamlet ground (*malal*), and in some exchanges the 'buyers' simply walk over to the 'sellers' and toss the required amount of shell money at their feet or into their baskets. The most important thing is for exchanges to be publicly verified.

On this occasion, all payments involved a combination of cash and *mis*. As the transactions got underway, the crowd was drawn in, eager to see just how much had been spent and whether the 'prices' matched perceived values. Only pigs purchased in Lihir were exchanged in public. Pigs raised and provided by the host group or their allies incur no payment; guests who receive portions of pork are expected to reciprocate when they later host the same feast. Pigs contributed by hosts or their allies (regarded as *wasier*), which have been purchased from an existing exchange partner or someone else, must be paid for on the final day of the feast. When pigs are purchased locally, transactors make arrangements prior to the feast and, depending on when the pigs are used, payment then occurs after they have been consumed or before they are slaughtered (see Powdermaker 1971: 201). The problem with pigs purchased offshore is that they require outright payment, which means that the owner is generally not required to attend the feast and there is no public verification.⁴

The obligations created through these transactions exist independently of the indebtedness that is created (or repaid) when the pig is later put to use. The emerging image is one of continual management. Big-men must be able to manage their relationships with the people from whom they acquire pigs and the people with whom they exchange live pigs or the guests who receive cooked portions of pork. Thus, in addition to the debts that are reconciled or created between hosts and guests, there is a complex matrix of exchange relations surrounding an event. New and pre-existing relationships are continually being negotiated. The ability to purchase pigs with cash, without any ongoing obligation, reduces the extent of this network.

There were three types of pigs being butchered at this final moment: *katmatanarihri*, *karemiel*, and *puatpes*. The pigs that had been lined up in front of the men's house (*katmatanarihri*) were to be butchered and then distributed to the assembled clan groups to carry back to their men's house for consumption. These gifts must be accompanied by a woven basket of vegetables (*piar*), and it is assumed that they will be exactly reciprocated at later dates when these

4 In some feasts, donors who have purchased their pigs from elsewhere have made a public announcement about the price of their pig and where it was bought. In these instances, the announcement is often intended to demonstrate their purchasing power.

men's houses host the same type of feast. Such gifts represent the strength of the host clan and the unity of the men's house. Portions of *karemiel* and *puatpes* are respectively allocated to men and women who helped to organise the feast. *Puatpes* and *karemiel* are not necessarily lined up in front of the men's house. If there are not enough pigs left over for these purposes, portions of pork can be drawn from *katmatanarhiri*, but only after they have been lined and paid for. *Puatpes* are often contributed by guests, and hosts will generally not know how many are going to be 'donated'. Allies will use this opportunity to make unexpected contributions to put hosts in debt, or to repay existing debts to them, and to test the leadership of the hosts. These pigs, which must be reciprocated at later feasts, are the objectification of solidarity (or *berturan*), and they represent the level of respect that a host can command. In this instance, 12 *katmatanarhiri* pigs were lined up in front of the men's house, including one *tinanakarat* (the backbone of the feast), and approximately 25 more were given as *puatpes* and *karemiel* by a range of supporters.

In many ways, this feast was considered to be successful. There was an abundance of food, the guests were satisfied, the weather was clear, internal politics were kept at bay long enough to stop the event from splitting apart, and the hosts had demonstrated their collective capacity.⁵ Relationships between the hosts and guests benefited from this experience, and respect (*sio*) was shown towards the 'deceased' (*kanut*) and the assembled guests (*wasier*). Peter Toelinkanut was reluctant to admit that success was contingent on the use of trade store food, buying pigs offshore, and purchasing yams and other gift items at the local market. He conceded that this was necessary because of the short planning horizon, but the event certainly failed to match any codified ideals. If the feast had been unsuccessful, then this would not only have been an embarrassment, but would also have confirmed the absolute necessity for a return to 'true *kastom*'. For the hosts, a range of relationships and expectations were ultimately at stake. But obligations to the 'deceased' were effectively fulfilled, important social values were still in place, sufficient money was spent without too much ostentation,⁶ and the event *appeared* to maintain ideas about protocol and tradition. Most importantly, pigs were lined up in front of the men's house to validate the actions of the hosts, while individual transactions reinforced notions of virtuous sociality. Although purists noted the deviations

5 Magicians are commonly engaged prior to feasts to ensure good conditions, an abundance of food, and the satisfaction of the guests. Competing or hostile groups and individuals may attempt to counter these efforts through negative sorcery. Problems with feasting are often understood as the result of sorcery attacks, and despite their commitment to Christianity, many people continue to understand certain events as being specifically related to sorcery, indicating a continuum of spiritual beliefs rather than a set of absolute categories.

6 Several of the hosts reckoned that K18 000 or more was spent on this event by the host lineage and its supporters. Most of these expenses were for boat hire and the purchase of pigs. Other expenses included truck hire, trade store food, generator fuel, and market items like yams, sweet potato, betelnut and tobacco for *pinari*.

from past practice, people also reminded me that *kastom* survives precisely because they were still performing such mortuary feasts. While the ideology of *kastom* might distort the representation of actual social and economic processes, it is the continuity of *kastom* that is uppermost in their minds. However, as we shall see in the following case, it is possible for *kastom* events to be successful in some ways and to fail in others.

The Essential Developman: Pkepke Putput Style

During a later visit to Lihir in 2006, another member of the LJNC, who was also a wealthy landowner from the Likianba sub-clan of the Tinetalgo clan in Putput, was hosting a large *katkatop* feast, which is known as *pkepke* in this part of Lihir. During the preceding week, utilities from around Lihir, loaded with drunken males, regularly made their way to Putput to deliver pigs for exchange and consumption. Several of these pigs died from exposure before the event had even begun. Some people speculated that the donors were already competing over their contributions, and that the disregard shown for the pigs was simply a reflection of their wealth. On the final and most important day of the feast, more than 30 large pigs were presented by allied clans to honour the ‘deceased’, several of whom were still alive. As the pigs were presented, many of the male guests became increasingly inebriated. Various people reported that over six pallets of beer had been sold from beer outlets in Putput and surrounding villages during the previous two weeks.⁷ Pigs were typically presented by very boisterous and inebriated groups of men, usually with gifts of garden produce, bales of rice, boxes of tinned meat and cartons of beer. They were met by an equally drunk and excited host group to perform the customary ‘sham fight’ (Plate 7-2) with *mis* that accompanies the presentation of pigs (Plate 7-4) and dances. As the two groups approached each other, individuals typically planted one foot in front of the other as they held up a strand of *mis* like a spear and rocked back and forth in a mock challenge, shouting out appropriate relationship terms such as *a berturan* (friends), *a berpelkan* (cross-cousins), *a bertman* (fathers and children), or simply *a ginas* (happiness), together with statements about whether their pig was repaying or creating a new debt. As the afternoon wore on these encounters became increasingly farcical as drunken men tripped over themselves in their stupor and grew more aggressive in their greetings.

⁷ There are approximately 120 cartons per pallet. In 2006, one carton of beer (24 bottles) cost approximately K140 at local beer outlets in Lihir.



Plate 7-2: Customary sham fight to greet guests, Putput village, 2006.

Photograph by the author.



Plate 7-3: Paul Awam exchanging shell money, Putput village, 2006.

Photograph by the author.



Plate 7-4: Guests blowing the conch shell to signal their arrival with pigs for presentation, Putput village, 2006. Note the dollar sign on the conch shell, another instance of the incorporation of cash in ceremonial life.

Photograph by the author.

The assembled pigs were lined up to signify each of the 'deceased', followed by exchanges of *mis* and cash (Plate 7-3). As the pigs were butchered, the place was transformed into a sort of apocalyptic haze with the excited actions of the hosts, the squealing of pigs as they were about to be suffocated, and the smoke and smells from the fires that scorched the pigs' bristles before they were cut. One of the hosts, Paul Awam, announced that, even though this was a *katkatop*, supporting groups wanted to contribute dances to the occasion. Lively dance troupes from Malie, Masahet, Matakues, Putput, and from a far afield as West New Britain Province, performed throughout the afternoon and entertained the masses (Plate 7-5). When a minor drunken fight broke out over sorcery accusations, the day effectively wound down. Nevertheless, with over 500 guests, and an estimated combined expenditure of K60 000, this group had facilitated an exceptionally large *pkepke*. Indeed, in some ways the event was considered to be too successful, which raised plenty of criticisms. As we rattled around in the back of a truck along the bumpy road home to Kinami, my friends keenly observed the deviations from *pasin bilong Lihir*, and could not help but comment on the demise of ritual feasting.



Plate 7-5: Dance troupe, Putput village, 2006.

Photograph by the author.

This event reflects the mixture of concerns over *kastom* and the waning significance of the men's house and its associated ethos. It captures the ways that landowners have succeeded and failed at the developman project. The hosts would doubtless claim that this was a valid event: exchanges took place, money was spent, people came together, pigs were lined up in front of the men's house to honour the 'deceased', and were later consumed. But some reactions suggested otherwise. People were concerned that the men's house was no longer the sacred ground where big-men nurture younger males. Some were angered that excessive drinking is now part of *kastom*. Some even rejected the feast because it was too excessive. The high number of pigs purchased offshore, the presentation of trade store goods, the drunken celebrations, and the inclusion of dancing were all heavily criticised. Traditionally, dancing only occurs in *karat* feasts, and only the mournful *rangen* songs are sung during the *pkepke* feast. The energised festivities detracted from what should have been the sobriety of the event, hence blurring the emotional distinction between *pkepke* and *karat* feasts. But the most damning critique came from people who boycotted the event because they knew that it was funded by mining royalties. It represented the arbitrary distribution of wealth rather than the actual strength of the clan or the hosts. People argued that the money used to perform *kastom* for 'deceased' clan members was only available because of the hard work and the feasts previously performed by the 'deceased' themselves, which secured ownership of the very ground within the SML that now provides wealth for the current generation of landowners.

The Cultural Logics and Hazards of Exchange

These events remind us that mortuary feasts are never unproblematic sites of social reproduction, free from contest, critique or failure. *Kastom* is always threatened by backstage tensions within the core group of hosts, the potential for unforeseen problems (especially with last minute preparations), and the possibility that guests will not play their role properly, by not bringing promised pigs, refusing to eat the feasting food, or disturbing the proceedings through fighting or drunken behaviour — not to mention sorcery. In reality, *kastom* pivots on anything but virtuous sociality, which means that there is little unanimity or clarity over the meaning of *pasin bilong Lihir*. There is an obvious tension between dogma and praxis. Moreover, by putting their wealth into circulation and expending vast resources, hosts and allies risk the real possibility that people will fail to reciprocate in culturally (and economically) appropriate ways. Ultimately, *kastom* is 'dangerous circulation' (Foster 1993).

Ideally, exchange follows a typical cyclical pattern. As groups and individuals exchange items with one another, and hold feasts that nurture others, these

processes are reciprocated, ensuring a sense of inclusion, mutual indebtedness and the 'repayment' of previous 'investments'. Traditionally, the objective was not to make a 'profit', or to return more than one receives. This is the basis for the current ideal of equality. In the past, when groups exchanged pigs for shell valuables and presented yams for consumption, these items were invested with the same 'cultural value'. The pigs were raised locally, yams were home-grown, and *mis* was not a mere currency, but represented the moral standing of individuals and groups. Older Lihirians often speak in terms of a closed cycle of reciprocal exchange of cultural equivalents. To an extent, isolation ensured that exchange was once very parochial, which may account for the development of strict notions of equivalence.

An equivalent gift should not only look similar to the original, but should ideally embody a similar level of physical effort, nurturance, and culturally significant skill, all of which are required for its creation, growth, exchange and eventual consumption. What is exchanged represents aspects of the donor; it is the moral autonomy invested in the gift that must be reciprocated. This is not to be confused with Maussian notions of *hau*, or an equivalent 'spirit of the gift' (Mauss 1925). As Sahlin (1974: 157) argues, we should avoid the temptation to try and understand the economic principle by concentrating on the 'religious' overtones of the concept. Godelier (1999: 106) presents a similar criticism, asserting that things do not move of their own accord, but only by the will of individuals. In debates surrounding the inalienability of gifts, it remains a moot point whether they are reciprocated because of claims over the produced object or simply the debt created through giving it to another person (Strathern 1982b: 549). Nevertheless, in Lihir the obligation is to return and perpetuate what is engendered through the act of giving. However, this becomes more problematic when we consider what is actually given in contemporary *kastom*.

As in other parts of New Ireland, Lihirian exchange and circulation are premised on a cultural logic of revelation and subsequent concealment. This parallel process permeates the wider social sphere, as individuals and groups elicit particular social values and responses from one another (Wagner 1986; Eves 1998). This enables people to regulate what others see and know about their identity, particularly their wealth (Foster 1993).⁸ Richard Eves (2000) has extended this observation in order to explain the perceived rise in sorcery among the Lelet. He argues that the expansion in forms of wealth through their engagement with the market economy has brought a loss of control over the processes by which sociality was previously regulated. People are no longer able to effectively reveal and conceal wealth at will. Certain types of modern wealth — such as trucks or permanent housing materials — simply fail to fit existing

⁸ See Strathern (1985) for a more general discussion on the relationship between seeing and knowing throughout Melanesia.

cultural logics governing the categories of wealth and value. Such things cannot be hidden from view, nor is this always desired. Individuals and groups are more vulnerable to sorcery that may arise through jealousy, envy or discontent over new forms of inequality. Thus the correlation between modernity and the discourse of sorcery is culturally constituted and not simply the generic by-product of global forces.

In Lihir, the sheer scale and variety of wealth, and the related inequality, surpass anything found in Lelet, and make Lihirian feasting and exchange a very risky business. The stakes have risen not only in terms of potential gains but also real and perceived losses. The rise in sorcery accusations that accompany times of upheaval or rapid social and economic change (or 'modernity') has been regularly noted in the developing countries of Africa (Geschiere 1997; Ferguson 1999, 2006; Meyer 1999). It therefore comes as no surprise to find that changes in Lihir have been followed by a definite increase in the discourse of sorcery (though not necessarily more incidents of the practice, which is rather more difficult to quantify). This is no doubt related to the double bind of exchange that has more general social implications: one must exchange wealth and hazard the dangers of circulation in order to produce social relations.

On Commodities, or What is a Lihirian Gift?

If exchange items signify personal investment, then how should we understand the transaction of 'gifts' and 'commodities' in these feasts? Melanesian exchange systems have mainly been understood through the intellectual legacies of Marcel Mauss. There has been an inordinate amount of anthropological attention paid to gifts at the expense of commodities, or simply an assumed agreement on the nature of commodities. While there has been some insightful work produced on the nature of commodities (Godelier 1977; Taussig 1980; Gregory 1982; Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987), we cannot assume that their character or constitution is axiomatic.

The terms of reference for anthropological understanding of the relationship between gifts and commodities were substantially influenced by the (1982) publication of Gregory's book, *Gifts and Commodities*. His work has been evaluated and challenged, but for the most part his distinction still provides the analytical template for this type of study. At the heart of his work lies a tidy formulation that is convincing and easy to remember: inalienable objects are exchanged as gifts between mutually dependent transactors, while alienable objects (commodities) move between mutually independent transactors, typically engaged in market relations. Gregory draws directly from the theoretical wellsprings of Mauss, arguing for an 'indissoluble bond' between the

giver and the gift (inalienable possession), which is contrasted with (alienated) commodities to which people have no real connection. From this overdrawn opposition, it is usually inferred that the foundational principles of both forms of exchange are reflected in contrasting moral evaluations. As Gell (1992: 142) so neatly put it: Gift-Reciprocity-Good/Market-Exchange-Bad.

Although Gell pithily captures the essence of this overstatement, Sahlins and others before him first noted the intervals of sociality and morality in reciprocal forms of exchange that effectively place exchanges within a spectrum of reciprocities (Sahlins 1965).⁹ Even if traditional exchange is generally characterised by morality and constraint, this does not imply everyone acquiesces in it, or that there are no contradictions, such as inclinations of self-interest in societies that customarily demand high levels of sociability (Sahlins 1974: 203). Variables such as kinship distance, wealth, rank, and the actual items of exchange inevitably determine the nature of reciprocity. Thus, what we find in the ideology of *kastom* and assertions of *pasin bilong Lihir* are fantasies of reciprocity that overlook or conceal these contradictions, variables and gradations, so that all economic interactions are 'judged' against an idealised 'pure gift'.

The actual performance of Lihirian *kastom* would appear to support Gell's unorthodox proposal that distinguishes between gifts and commodities, not on the basis of the character of the relationship between people and things (alienable/inalienable) or between people and people (independent/dependent), but rather the nature of the social context of a given transaction (Gell 1992: 146). This has particular significance for Lihir, where people exchange things that are hardly inalienable possessions, but nevertheless fulfil intended social purposes. Perhaps, then, it is useful to consider Apadurai's (1986) insights on the social life of things: at various stages or 'phases' in the life or 'career' of an object, it may be a commodity or it may not. In which case, gifts that are said to be 'inalienable' are not merely the inversion of commodities.

The production of commodities is a cultural and cognitive process. Commodities must be made as material items, and labour needs to have a price, but they also need to be culturally recognised as a certain type of thing. This echoes Simmel's (1978) observation that value is never an inherent property of objects, but is rather a judgment made about them by particular actors. Various things might be marked as commodities at one time and treated quite differently at another, and what one person recognises as a commodity may not be treated in the same way by someone else. Kopytoff (1986) refers to this as the 'cultural biography' of commodities. Things destined to be commodities can become something completely different, such as a gift. In order to comprehend Lihirian exchange,

9 See also: Malinowski 1961; Oliver 1955; Gouldner 1960.

we need to grasp the mutability of objects. If we view commoditisation as a process of 'becoming' rather than a 'terminal' category (an all-or-nothing state of being), then it is possible to emphasise the social context of exchange rather than the nature of the object itself.

So far, these Lihirian feasts are beginning to reveal more than they intended about the objects being exchanged and the people exchanging them. Aside from the interpenetration between *kastom* and the cash economy, we can see the disguised processes that re-value the goods in circulation. Concentrating on the context might allow for the possibility of substitution, but does this imply that the mere act of exchange brings forth the desired social values? Put otherwise, could any token be used for the sake of eliciting an ideal sociality? Apparently not: it is not possible to use just anything. The ideology of *kastom* is premised upon the use of culturally recognised objects, and is rhetorically resistant to the use of certain goods. Despite the flexibility, there are still specific ideas about the constitution of an appropriate gift. So perhaps it is still necessary to focus on these things.

Gifts from the Ground and Gifts off the Shelf

Yams distributed during feasts are ultimately an objectification of the lineage and the clan's ability to enliven itself through productivity, their capacity to coordinate themselves underneath their big-man, and his own competence in making an event successful. In the social language of food, yams are an important idiom that expresses commonality between the donor and the receiver. In daily contexts, women cook yams for the household, and during feasts, men often cook yams in the men's house. The presentation of yams during feasts is part of the male performance of objectifying and distributing nurturance to clan members, allies and members of the opposite moiety. These actions extend the daily efforts of women in nurturing and sustaining individuals and lineages.

Presenting yams also represents the ability to produce healthy and abundant crops. In the past, garden magic was more central to agricultural production. Gardening involves a division of labour between males and females. Much of the strenuous work — such as clearing, fencing and tilling — is performed by males, while females are more engaged in planting, careful tending and harvesting. Males usually take the public credit for a successful feast (which implies the ability to produce plentiful crops), but they recognise their dependency upon female labour. Gifts of pork (*puatpes*) specifically acknowledge this contribution.

On mainland New Ireland, where taro is the staple feasting tuber, Clay recalls some instances in which Mandak people purchased taro, or hired other people to plant gardens for them after their own crops failed. However, purchasing taro for mortuary rituals 'was a mark against those sponsoring the feast ... [and]

buying taro with cash from copra and cacao sales added nothing to the buyer's prestige' (Clay 1986: 138). Eves (1998: 242) cites a similar reluctance among the Lelet to purchase taro for mortuary feasts. At the start of mine construction in 1995, Lihirians insisted that they would continue planting gardens for feasts and they would not include trade store goods in these events, indicating the cultural significance of food invested with the giver's time, substance, effort and knowledge. This is the way in which communal feasting enables groups to nurture and continue a gathered sociality. Before long, however, rice and other trade store goods came to be regarded as a substitute for garden produce. Lihirians in paid employment, supposedly without the time to maintain large gardens, were expected to contribute to feasts by purchasing and presenting trade store items. This also expressed the prestige associated with having access to money within the clan. The use of store food was initially justified as an appropriate way for workers to 'repay' the efforts of parents and relatives who previously paid for school fees, provided food and nurturance, and made other beneficial purchases throughout their earlier lives. Over time, this has evolved into a general expectation for their inclusion in *kastom*. Nevertheless, despite these changes, disdain for the use of purchased produce for ritual purposes remains central to the ideology of *kastom*.

Porcine Presents

We find similar contradictions in the transaction of pigs. Nostalgia and desire for the exclusive exchange of locally domiciled pigs is set against the common mainland New Ireland practice of purchasing pigs from other areas. The use of pigs from elsewhere is a concealed statement about the contradictory nature of status. Big-men should be free of debts, yet the display of pig debts in mortuary feasting reflects the prestige which they have gained through links outside the clan and beyond Lihirian shores — not to mention the ability to purchase pigs with cash.

As in other parts of Melanesia, pigs are significant for their pre-eminent value as food for human consumption, as the dominant object of exchange, and as repositories of tremendous symbolic potency (see Jolly 1994: 173). Lihirians take great pride in raising their pigs, and recognise the close relationship identity between pigs and humans.¹⁰ Lihirians describe feeding a pig as *tananie a bual*, which is another form of the verb *tinien*, which carries the sense of caring, nurturing or feeding people. Pigs are not simply the embodiment of labour and

10 The close bond between humans and pigs, and the significance of pigs in various aspects of social life, is a general Melanesian phenomenon (see Bulmer 1967: 20). They are central items in exchange cycles (Strathern 1971b; Megitt 1973), victims of ritual slaughter (Rappaport 1968; Keesing 1976), and a common feature in bridewealth payments and war compensation, where they can be regarded as 'substitutes' for human life (Glasse and Meggit 1969; Modjeska 1982; Macintyre 1984).

productivity. Older Lihirians claim specialist knowledge or 'talk' that makes their pigs grow faster and bigger. This knowledge is in decline among younger generations, but the capacity to raise large healthy pigs is still considered to be the result of hard work and the ability to deploy specialist knowledge in productive ways. Pigs are also a primary means for reconstituting damaged social relationships. Pigs are identified with the donor, and consumption within the men's house rectifies an impaired moral relationship. The presentation of live pigs for exchange and cooked pork for consumption is an objectification of the moral attributes of the donor. They are not singular isolated gestures; they predicate a similar response from the receiver at a later date. These presentations convey a complex message of moral autonomy which represents the donor's capacity for autonomous action in relationship to someone who is 'deceased'. Here morality involves individual self-determined action directed towards the nurturance of relationships.

In reality, since mining operations began, fewer Lihirians are rearing pigs, despite the fact that some people have started small piggery projects (*banis pik*). The stated preference for locally domesticated pigs is a way of presenting Lihirian pride that has little relation to what is actually happening, highlighting the ambivalent character of pigs as practical necessities and symbolic repositories. The purchase of foreign pigs is a way for men to display their affluence and put others in debt, for reciprocity requires a pig of equivalent size and a similar level of expenditure. On any given day, people from the neighbouring islands of Tanga and Tabar arrive in dinghies in Lihir to sell their pigs. These are not always prearranged customary transactions: other New Irelanders have seized upon the opportunity to exploit a flourishing 'exchange market'. Pigs are valuable for their association with *kastom* and social reproduction, but also because one pig can fetch over K4000. People from other areas have complained of the internal disruption this has brought to their own exchange relations. Some people are disinclined to trade pigs within their local networks unless people can match the price paid by Lihirians. In the absence of other avenues for making money, pigs are an important source of cash which is then redirected back into other local exchange systems. Effectively, the commoditisation of pigs for Lihirian *kastom* has become the means for other communities to engage with the cash economy and modern forms of consumption.

Social Currency

The contemporary ceremonial economy does not revolve around the exchange of inalienable possessions. This is not to say that there are no highly ranked shell valuables that must remain within the clan, where ownership reflects political standing. However, by 2000 or even earlier, certain types of highly prized shell money, such as the rare *pangpang* or the *ndolar* arm shells, were rarely

active in the local economy.¹¹ Gifts are supposed to embody the ‘spirit’ and substance of the giver (or the producer), but there is no ‘insoluble bond’ that compels reciprocity. The absence of substance does not necessarily detract from the outward significance of the gift or the sociality created through exchange, yet this fact is complicated by the ambiguous nature of *mis* and other shell valuables. Like pigs and yams, they fulfil multiple purposes and possess a range of values. *Mis* has proven equally fluid: it is simultaneously a prized valuable, a daily currency, and a commodity.

According to Wagner, the Barok counterpart (*mangin*) approximates the functions of three kinds of currency: it is ‘vital wealth’, as part of the economy of human attachments; it is ‘money’, as an exchange medium in the local economy and as a good that can be redeemed by state money; and it is ‘money’ in another sense, as a medium of moral merit (Wagner 1986: 83). *Mis* can be understood within this framework, for like *mangin*, ‘it approximates a kind of triple metaphor: each standard of exchange draws away from the definitional certitude of the other two’ (ibid.). As in Godelier’s (1977) description of Baruya salt currency, the character of *mis* shifts on the basis of the social context of its use.

Lihirians proclaim the value of *mis* in highly moral terms. It is reified as the pecuniary analogue of the ‘stable’ and ‘social’ nature of Lihirian society juxtaposed against an essentialised, anti-social, cash-based society (see Bloch and Parry 1989: 6). However, notional opposition stems also from an ongoing struggle for representation of self and other which has only intensified in the context of mining, as Lihirians have willingly adopted contrasting orientalisms and occidentalisms about cash and shell money. In reality, antagonism is not directed at cash *per se*, but at the manner in which it so unequally distributed in the context of mining. People are thus compelled to the performance of *kastom* as a means for redistributing wealth and achieving unity. Many people recognise a lack of ‘control’ over *kastom*. This seems to prompt them to imagine that, because *kastom* is Lihirian, they should be able to ‘control’ it and keep it separate from the cash economy. This is especially true of the Society Reform leaders, the LJNC, and the authors of the Destiny Plan. The Destiny Plan proposes strategies to subject the cash economy to Lihirian interests, ideally to regulate *kastom*, *bisnis*, and the corporate mining economy. So *mis*, as the money of *kastom*, partly retains value or significance through its *ideological* insulation from the cash economy. It is valuable because it is *described* as incommensurate

11 These precious items are considered priceless and rest in the hands of a few elderly men. As elderly men feel less tolerant of an increasingly ‘disrespectful’ younger generation of men, they are disposing of this wealth, sometimes by burying it or throwing it out to sea, to ensure that these younger men are not the beneficiaries of hard work and high status that are no longer appreciated. At the same time, some men are hoarding their shell valuables and thus reducing their use value.

and should be used for certain transactions with specific social purposes. But in such radically different circumstances, the enduring value is also contingent upon the wide variety of uses to which *mis* can be put.

Since mining began, the production of *mis* has greatly increased. When it is manufactured for sale, it does not acquire cultural significance until it is used in *kastom*. Otherwise it is obtained through social relationships. The majority of Lihirian *mis* are not inalienable possessions. While some shell valuables which are 'loaned' or transacted must eventually return, in most cases there is no intention to recover the same strand. More often than not, *mis* functions as general purpose currency that is commensurate with various objects and services.

Mis is nearly always used with the intention to establish or maintain relationships, to correct a social imbalance, or provide someone with the means for entering into new relationships: it is a key item in the process of social reproduction. It derives part of its value from being an exchange item that binds people together in different ways, which gives each strand an important social history. But Lihirians happily use *mis* for a variety of needs outside of ceremonial exchange, such as for decoration in church celebrations or school graduations, or as gifts to visitors — which may indicate the variety of activities now encompassed under the ideology of *kastom*. Alternatively, when it is used for the opening of new office buildings, businesses or trade stores, it plays a valuable role in the performance of the ideology of *bisnis*. Not surprisingly, many people complain that *mis* is now 'devalued' and has 'no meaning'. This reflects the paradox of meaning or the fantasy of value: people want to insulate or sequester *mis* and other items to increase their moral value (as the money of *kastom*), but at the same time, they want to use *mis* as a currency or for other uses, to reinforce its 'token' value and its Lihirian identity. Thus, both *kastom* and *mis* retain their significance through *practice* and *use*, even if those practices or uses are now rather different from before or contradict dominant ideologies.

This process is certainly attributable to the florescence of shell valuables that corresponds to the loosening of restraints on ownership and technical knowledge. *Mis* is no longer held solely in the hands of leading big-men; it is easily attained by men and women with money, regardless of their customary influence. If men are short of *mis* to purchase pigs for an upcoming feast, or caught out by an unexpected death, they can make arrangements to purchase more. When value is contingent upon scarcity, increased production ensures greater use, but it also facilitates the process of 'devaluation'. This is analogous to the devaluation of the pearlshells once used in Hagen *moka* transactions that were eventually replaced by money because of the massive influx of shells during the colonial period (Strathern 1971a, 1979; Hughes 1978; Healy 1985). But in this case, *mis* has not been abandoned for another exchange medium, and

it continues to coexist with cash in nearly all *kastom* transactions. However, at a deeper level, the modern production of *mis* reveals the dependency of *kastom* on *bisnis*. For those people involved in the production of *mis*, it is explicitly the *bisnis* of keeping *kastom* alive, generating sociality through the medium of mortuary ritual.

Splicing the System

The persistence of mortuary rituals is less a consequence of any attempts by different groups to isolate these practices from outside influence, and more a result of the inherent flexibility and general capacity of Melanesian exchange systems to appropriate introduced goods. This point serves to highlight the contradiction within the ideology of *kastom*, which purports that insulation ensures continuity. This contradiction is thrown into further relief by the appeal to *kastom* as a means to achieve social stability, which demands the incorporation of new items and forms of wealth for wider distribution. Thus, the endurance of *kastom* also results from a historical preoccupation with achieving unity in the face of modern social divisions. The significant amount of time that Lihirians now spend memorialising their dead and enacting their ideology of *kastom* must be attributed to the more unpleasant aspects of modernity associated with mining.

The Lihir exchange system is regularly spliced with the capitalist economy. The purchase of goods for *kastom* represents a more general Melanesian phenomenon: modern Melanesians taming or domesticating commodities as they convert them from market goods into cultural gifts (see Weiner 1976: 78–9; Heaney 1982: 229; Carrier and Carrier 1989; Akin 1999). The ideal cyclical image, in which sociality is made to ‘come up’ through the reciprocation of ‘equivalents’, is maintained through customary practices that present certain goods as if they embody the culturally valued attributes that were traditionally invested in gifts. When Zipzip and the others purchased pigs from Tabar and other places, they usurped female contributions to *kastom* through their access to cash, removing female productive capacities from the equation, which effectively reduced the distinction between producers and transactors. Every time that Lihirians use commodities in *kastom* exchanges — be they pigs, shell money, garden produce from the market, or trade store food — their action sustains the cyclical image of continuity, but in reality, this ‘cycle’ is cut and spliced with the cash economy. The processes of development *reinvigorate*, vitalise and authenticate *kastom* by maintaining the illusion of continuity.

Lihirians are unlikely to exclude new goods from *kastom*, because there is a growing expectation for them to perform modernity within a locally defined

cultural framework. Each *kastom* event increases the inertia of this consumptive pattern. The net result is the transformation of a system of delayed reciprocal exchange to the point where transactions that would have previously been delayed are now 'sped up'. While exchange functioned as a levelling device in the past, providing an important avenue for dispersing wealth and resources and consolidating group membership, the scale has now increased and form of wealth has changed. The exchange system previously entailed an ebb and flow in which wealth and prestige were somewhat 'regulated' by human productivity. The huge influx of money has destabilised the cyclical nature of exchange as exchange wealth grows within the hands of a minority. Mortuary rituals are now literally performed on unequal ground: the inequitable distribution of wealth means that there is no longer any equilibrium underpinning the pattern of exchange, and some people will stay in the game with far greater ease than others.

We might conclude that Lihirian society has been 'reformed' by the global forces of capitalism exerted through the mining operation, and that *kastom* — or the local moral economy — is being hollowed out in theory and in practice. One inference that we can make from the processes embedded within these feasts is that cultural continuity is an illusion. Some Lihirians would certainly agree, and this strengthens their resolve for a return to true Lihirian ways and their commitment to the ideology of *kastom*. But we also have to recognise that many of these changes have arisen internally and intentionally to ensure the continued practice and relevance of *kastom* in entirely altered circumstances. While this might not happen in the ways proposed by the authors of the Society Reform Program or the Destiny Plan, Lihirian mortuary rites are self-consciously performed as *kastom* — as activities that are both indigenous and ancestral, which is the source of their cultural authenticity and validity.