

**RESISTING STATE ICONOCLASM
AMONG THE LOMA OF GUINEA**

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Pamela J. Stewart
and
Andrew Strathern

Series Editors

RESISTING STATE ICONOCLASM AMONG THE LOMA OF GUINEA

Christian Kordt Højbjerg
UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN

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RITUAL STUDIES MONOGRAPH SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE FOR RESISTING STATE ICONOCLASM AMONG THE LOMA OF GUINEA

Ritual, Secrecy, and Continuity

—Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern

The retention of “tradition” in the face of “change” is a long running discussion in anthropology, especially in relation to the influence of new religious practices and economic and political transformations. Christian Kordt Højbjerg’s *Resisting State Iconoclasm* is a valuable contribution to this forum as well as to the literature on the Anthropology of Religion in West Africa. We are delighted to include the work in our *Ritual Studies Monograph Series* (1).

Publications from the South-West Pacific (also referred to as Melanesia) on similar topics to those raised by Dr. Højbjerg can be usefully compared in a number of instances. In terms of religious change and alteration of “traditional” ritual / religious practices our work in the Hagen, Pangia, and Duna areas of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea (see Stewart and Strathern 2002a; Strathern and Stewart 1999a, 2000a, 2000b, 2004a), as well as the work of Bashkow (2006), Biersack (1999), Clark (2000), Engelke and Tomlinson (2006), Gibbs (1994), Jacka (2001), Jebens (2005), Knauft (2002), Lattas (1998), Reithofer (2005), Robbins (2004), and others, can serve as an ethnographic set for comparative analysis with the African materials.

Significant ritual cycles centering on Female Spirits in the Hagen and Pangia areas of Papua New Guinea were introduced into the areas through transmission in which outside ritual experts brought the knowledge of the related practices to the important leaders of the communities, who wished to hold per-

performances to secure the establishment of economic and political ties as well as to invoke cosmological links with the Female Spirits in relation to the local ecological environment of the groups involved in the performances. The *Amb Kor* (Female Spirit) ritual cycle in Hagen was held to renew the fertility of the cosmos and bring health to the community (Stewart and Strathern 1999; Strathern and Stewart 1998, 1999b, 2000c, 2003). Likewise, the *Laiyeroa* (Female Spirit) ritual cycle in Pangia formed a part of a set of indigenous practices dealing with fertility, health, and prosperity (see Stewart and Strathern 2002b; Strathern and Stewart 2000c). The influences of the Christian churches, Lutheran, Catholic, and Pentecostal, have brought new ritual practices into these areas, dramatically transforming the previous ways of imagining the relationship of the people to their cosmos and their land (see Stewart and Strathern 2000a, 2001a, 2001b; Strathern and Stewart 1997, 2000a). In the Duna area of Papua New Guinea we found that the Female Spirit (*Payame Ima*) remains a vital, albeit transformed, aspect of the landscape, which is nowadays heavily imbued with Christian ritual cycles and cosmological referents (Stewart 1998; Stewart and Strathern 2000b, 2002a). The *Payame Ima* has been invoked in issues to do with compensation payments from companies, e.g., mining concerns, in terms of environmental pollution and impact, since the *Payame Ima* is said to protect the eco-system as well as the people living within it. The *Payame Ima* is also remembered in expressive genres, such as the popular sung ballads, *pikono*, of the Duna (Stewart and Strathern 2002c, 2005a) where she is depicted as assisting young men in their heroic challenges against cannibal spirits and other feats. In the past she was also held to be the presiding entity over the bachelors' growth houses (*palena anda*) where boys matured into young men, learning practices such as how to decorate themselves and help their hair to grow and how to interact with their environment and cosmos in a "proper" manner (see Stewart and Strathern 2002a).

Ritual cycles held to honor male spirit beings were also a part of the complex of cosmologically directed activities in the past. In Hagen, the *Kor Wöp* (Male Spirit) ritual cycle expressed in the widest sense the regeneration of the power of spring water, fertility, and health (Stewart and Strathern 2002d; Strathern and Stewart 2004b).

In our examples here we note the articulation of reactions to outside forces by local populations in relation to ritual practices. All of these examples of ritual practices from our field areas in Papua New Guinea raise issues parallel to those explored by Dr. Højbjerg. First, what is the meaning of secrecy? Second how have practices changed and how do people view these changes? And third, how are people's memories of previous practices constituted? Dr. Højbjerg discusses numerous theoretical and comparative approaches to such problems,

from the cognitive to the sociological. He also provides an in-depth investigation into how secrecy actually operates among the Loma. He finds that many aspects of ritual knowledge are “personal possessions”, linked to bodily experiences and in that sense kept private. Secrets may also be transmitted only gradually to apprentices over time. (Initiation grades everywhere practically mandate such a circumstance: an extreme examples is given by Fredrik Barth on the Baktaman people of Papua New Guinea, Barth 1975.) Some secrets, Dr. Højbjerg, suggests, should be seen as “public secrets”, since they differentiate and segregate whole categories of people in terms of their supposed ritual knowledge. He applies this point to gender relations. Women are excluded from participation in many rituals; but, by the same token, their presence “behind closed doors” was highly relevant to these occasions and contributed to their meanings in a gendered field of social relations.

Many parallels—as well as some contrasts—appear here when we compare these findings on the Loma with the Highlands Papua New Guinea contexts. There, too, women were formally “excluded” from many ritual events in the sense that they were not permitted to take part in secluded areas fenced off from public ceremonial grounds; this in spite of the fact that in numbers of cases the male participants in rituals directed their actions to putative Female Spirit figures (see Strathern and Stewart 2004b). Indeed the Female Spirit in Mount Hagen was said to be jealous of and hostile to the men’s human wives should they intrude on her domain and would turn their bodies the wrong way round if they did so. Ritual cosmology itself therefore explained their “exclusion”. Yet women were positive participants in and beneficiaries of the rituals. They raised pigs and assisted in their slaughter for these occasions, and their own fertility was held to be enhanced by the rituals practiced. The men acted as specialists on behalf of the whole community, according to the logic employed here. And the knowledge of this was reflexively available to the people themselves, making everyone willing to put work and effort into the preparations for the events (see Stewart and Strathern 1999). In the case of the Loma, Dr. Højbjerg also observes that the respectful silence of the women and children in the face of Poro celebrations strongly contributed to the sense of the significance of the overall event. In other words, women were not just “excluded”; or, if they were, this was on the basis of their collaborative performance of respect for the occasion. We ourselves have previously made arguments of this kind central to our construction of the model of collaboration rather than gendered antagonism in the Hagen Female Spirit complex (see Stewart and Strathern 1999; 2002b).

Secrecy itself may be contextual and varying. And it may be destroyed, only to be reconstituted later. Among the Loma government iconoclastic forces had

enforced the display of ritual paraphernalia considered secret in the early 1960s; yet these secrets were re-instituted in 1991. This historical reversal undoubtedly was a product of Loma resistance and resilience, played out in dramatic performance modes. We may compare, and contrast, this dramatic revival of practices with two phases of historical change in the Hagen area of Papua New Guinea. Catholic and Lutheran missionaries, and their indigenous evangelists alike, from the 1930s onward, discouraged people from holding their large-scale spirit performances. In the 1960s, however, a number of revivals of these performances took place, sponsored by local leaders who were keen both to extend their reputations in all of the historical domains of prestigious activity, and also to reclaim control over aspects of fertility and prosperity which had lain in abeyance during the initial time of the missionary prohibitions. Some leaders rationalized the revival in terms of an additive logic. As one leader, a very famous man of the Ulka tribe in the Nebilyer Valley, explained the matter to Andrew Strathern in 1965, in his view the sacred stones and site of the *Kor Wöp* (Male Spirit) enclosure had been laid down originally by God (*Gote-nt etepa pinditim*). Others recognized the conflict between the old religion and the new and were concerned to mediate it. On one occasion, among the Ukini Oyambo people in the far western corner of the Baiyer Valley, leaders themselves first completed the appropriate rituals for the Female Spirit (*Amb Kor*) and then, in an apparent renunciation of ritual secrecy, displayed the hitherto hidden stones emblematic of the Spirit on the high trestles (*ropoklama*) from which pieces of pork steamed inside the enclosure were customarily distributed onto the upturned spears of eager visitors. On other occasions, where the Christian presence was not so strong, leaders simply held the Christian opposition at bay for the duration of the ritual. One local performance tended to stimulate another in a neighboring group, in a chain-like fashion reminiscent of how chains of ceremonial exchange occasions known as *moka* emerged over short runs of time between allied groups (see, e.g. Strathern and Stewart 2000a; Stewart and Strathern 2005b). In a given tribe (political unit) its member clans might perform the *Amb Kor* rituals in turn, none wishing to be left out of the cycle designed ritually to ensure prosperity and fertility. Among one group, the Kawelka, by the time each clan or sub-clan had finished the whole ritual sequence (which spanned in each case a number of years), Christian influence in the wider Hagen area had become so entrenched that it was unlikely the sequence would ever be repeated. Revival thus ran its historical course, ending when Christianity, especially its charismatic and Pentecostalist versions with their own promises of fertility and salvation, finally took over. The state as such at no time intervened either to support or to denounce the “traditional” rituals. But the enshrinement, after 1975, in the Con-

stitution of the Independent nation of Papua New Guinea (PNG), of the notion that PNG is a "Christian nation" certainly paved the way for the new religion's success.

In many cases, among the various groups, the power of sacred stones was considered to have been destroyed by their exposure to the eyes of the public, including women. But the matter is not quite so clear cut. There were many secret procedures that were not revealed, whose power could still be held to have been emplaced in the earth and to be continuously at work. In the case of at least two Kawelka sub-groups, the sacred stones were buried in places shown only to eldest sons of the leaders, so their location to this day would not be known to more than a few people. While the ritual practices have been overtly suspended, if not repudiated or superseded, not all secrets have been revealed. People's memories of these earlier practices, then, are likely to be a compound of historical displacement accompanied by an ambiguous sense of continuing presence. Such a presence is obviously much attenuated by comparison with the Loma situation analyzed by Dr. Højbjerg; but it shows how secrecy is a matter of degree and context and lends itself to historical variability and ambiguity. In Papua New Guinea generally, the assault on indigenous ritual was certainly mounted at least in part in the name of the ideology of "modernity", with which Christianity was also associated, but there was no revolutionary state iconoclasm. Indeed PNG's first leaders of the nation after Independence were keen supporters of indigenous culture and some remain so today, combining adherence to "tradition" with allegiance also to one or another Christian denomination. Perhaps we should note here that in PNG at these times there has been no element of Islamic iconoclasm led by reformist prophets such as Dr. Højbjerg reports among the Loma. Nor was there any sense in PNG that the promotion of local solidarity precluded or impeded the growth of national consciousness. "Tradition", actually, has been co-opted into the cause of "modernity" as often as it has been excluded from it; all depending on the political convenience of the day. Tradition thus becomes a strategic resource, to be deployed at will. In this way it is like secrecy. As Dr. Højbjerg points out for the Loma, partial revelation goes along with secrecy. Revelation points to secrecy, and vice-versa. In PNG, published versions of rituals may contribute to this process; and politicians' use of such knowledge or their allusion to it may help to enhance their own prestige or power over others. PNG leaders may well encourage research workers to make certain practices known, while also promising not to reveal others. Andrew Strathern was once encouraged to give a tape-recording of chants performed for the *Amb Kor* to the local radio station so that people in the wider area would know the performing group had conducted

the ritual. These chants, unlike the spells and acts performed and witnessed only by the immediate participants, are heard widely beyond the sacred enclosures in which the ritual takes place, and this is an important part of the ritual performance itself.

Dr. Højbjerg's overall purpose is to rehabilitate the idea of continuity outside of imputations of "Orientalism". In this he succeeds admirably. Indeed, it is time overall to reject the fictional dichotomization of "tradition" and "modernity", since these elements of social life and ideology intertwine and coexist (for a review of issues see Strathern and Stewart 2004a and see also Strathern and Stewart 2000d). One of the prime reasons for this situation is also fundamental in theoretical terms: the play of imagination as a powerful force in many social and cultural activities (see for example Stewart and Strathern 2004a; Strathern and Stewart 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b). Imagination creatively comes into play in other arenas such as in the new uses of performative elements as a part of "cultural revival movements". We have noted this in our work over the years in Taiwan (see for example Stewart and Strathern 2005c; and Strathern and Stewart 2005c) as well as in Ireland among the Ulster-Scots (see for example Strathern and Stewart 2005d). Many of these elements are transferred from prior ritual contexts and placed into new ones where they both retain elements of previous meaning and create new meanings in altered political and social environments. "Cultural revival movements" are dependent on specific forms of indigenous knowledge which is important in a variety of applications (see for example Stewart and Strathern 2004b).

Christian Højbjerg's study of the social and historical dynamics of secrecy, resistance, and continuity among the Loma, who span an area between Guinea and Liberia, takes its place among a generation of interpretive case studies on African contexts of life which bring together analysis of politics and economics with an understanding of culture and history. A parallel to Dr. Højbjerg's work can be found in that of Mariane Ferme on the Mende of Sierra Leone to the west of the Loma (Ferme 2001; see also the earlier work of Kenneth Little 1951). The Poro and Sande secret societies are transnational phenomena in this part of Africa, and among the Mende, as with the Loma, they depend not just on secrecy, but on its performance in social contexts, with multiple plays on hidden linguistic meanings and the ambiguities of ritual displays of masks. Ferme notes for example (2001: 161, citing Simmel 1950) that secrecy and power "are both predicated on the relationship between the subject's concealed aims and their visible manifestations in the external world". The same applies to the Loma, with the added force that attacks on these secret societies among them have served, rather than obliterating them, to increase the layerings of ambiguity and secrecy that surround them and lend to them more power. Dr.

Højbjerg's in-depth study makes a fresh and distinguished contribution to this and many other themes in contemporary anthropological theory and analysis, while solidly grounding itself in ethnographic exposition.

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Endnotes

- (1) Other titles in the Ritual Studies Monograph Series include:
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