

Embodying Modernity and Post-Modernity

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Embodying Modernity and Post-Modernity

Ritual, Praxis, and Social Change in Melanesia

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CONTENTS

Series Editors' Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xxi
Chapter 1 Bodies in Transition: An Introduction to Emerging Forms of Praxis in the Pacific, <i>Sandra Bamford</i>	3
References	12
Chapter 2 Producing Ömie Locality, <i>Marta A. Rohatynskyj</i>	17
Abstract	17
An Expanded Geography	19
Body and Place	21
Village Consolidation and Traditional Embodiment	25
Localized and Delocalized Bodies	30
The Delocalized Body and the Strategy of Modernity	33
References	34
Chapter 3 "Our Skins are Weak": Ipili Modernity and the Demise of Discipline, <i>Jerry Jacka</i>	39
Abstract	39
Introduction	39
The Ethnographic Background	41
The Notion of Biodegradability in Ipili Cosmology	44
Traditional Practices of Disciplining Bodies	45
The Biodegradation of Land and Its Renewal	49
Cyclical Society, Cyclical Earth	54
Contemporary Concerns over the Demise of Disciplinary Practices	55

Conclusions	61
Acknowledgments	62
References	63
Chapter 4 Machine-Thinking: Changing Social and Bodily Divisions Around the Ok Tedi Mining Project, <i>Dr. Tony Crook</i>	69
Abstract	69
Machine-Thinking 1	70
Iteration 1. <i>Reflexivity</i> . Two Observations on Anthropology's Own 'Machine-Thinking'	73
Iteration 2. <i>Alternatives</i> . Two Observations from Thinkers on Machines	76
Iteration 3. <i>Ok Tedi</i> . 'A Community and Not Only a Mining Operation as Many People Think'	77
Machine-Thinking 2	78
Iteration 4. <i>Conception</i> . Two Observations from Ankaiyakmin Men and Women	83
Iteration 5. <i>Knowledge</i> . Two Observations from Ankaiyakmin Perspectives	84
Iteration 6. <i>Cultivation</i> . Two Observations on Ankaiyakmin Cult and Horticulture	87
Machine-Thinking 3	88
Iteration 7. Two Concluding Observations on Machine-Thinking	96
Recapitulation	98
Acknowledgments	100
References	101
Chapter 5 "Dying Culture" and Decaying Bodies, <i>Thomas Strong</i>	105
Abstract	105
Bones and Stones	113
References	120
Chapter 6 Modalities of Modernity in Maisin Society, <i>John Barker</i>	125
Abstract	125
The Youth Fellowship Movement among the Maisin	127
Contrasting Images of the Body, Personhood and Morality	131

Three Perspectives on Modernity	137
Incremental Modernity	139
Conjunctures and Continuities	143
Modernity Pluralized	147
Conclusion	152
Acknowledgements	154
References	154
Chapter 7 Unholy Noses, <i>Sandra Bamford</i>	161
Abstract	161
Ethnographic Background	162
Kamea Initiation	165
Embodiments of Detachment	168
Christian Bodies, Pagan Practices: Negotiating ‘Modern’ Lives	173
Resistance, Accommodation and Contemporary Ambiguities	178
Acknowledgments	180
References	180
Chapter 8 The Thickness of Blood: Kwoma Definitions of “Us” and “You,” <i>Margaret Holmes Williamson</i>	185
Abstract	185
References	207
Chapter 9 “Family Planning”: The Politics of Reproduction in Central New Ireland, <i>Karen Sykes</i>	211
Abstract	211
International Family Planning Initiatives	211
Ethnographic Background	213
Women’s Management of Procreation	219
Men’s Management of Procreation	224
The Government’s Work with the Health Service in the Mandak Region	226
Some Conclusions about State Interventions in Family Planning	233
References	237

Chapter 10	Self-Decoration in Hagen and Duna (Papua New Guinea): Display and Disjuncture, <i>Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern</i>	239
	Abstract	239
	Introduction	239
	Hagen	240
	Cultural Shows and Tourism	242
	Duna	245
	Modernity and After	250
	References	252
Chapter 11	A Body of Postcards from Vanuatu, <i>Lamont Lindstrom</i>	257
	Abstract	257
	Postcards and Tourists	258
	Poses	260
	Bodies, Romantic and Picaresque	263
	Body Parts	267
	Painted Faces	268
	Eyes	268
	Breasts	269
	Penises	273
	Smiles	276
	Postcard Mirrors	279
	References	281
Afterword—Embodied Historicities, Eric Hirsch		283
	Dilemmas of Embodiment	283
	Views Across Time	284
	What Kind of Subject?	286
	Events	288
	Rupture	289
	Between Myth and History: Embodied Historicities	291
	References	292

SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart

We are pleased to include the present set of essays in the Ritual Studies Monograph Series. As Editors of this Series we have sought to include manuscripts that present diverse perspectives and that constitute a part of a wider geographical representation. The Pacific is one of the areas that we have ourselves worked in and written much about, and the present edited volume provides us with an opportunity to make some comparative comments on the topic here.

The subject of the body and embodiment theory has provided a vigorous strand of theorizing in anthropology as well as in ritual and religious studies, particularly since the 1990s, with the work of Margaret Lock, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Emily Martin, Thomas Csordas, and many other scholars, drawing on themes from phenomenology, medical anthropology, and the philosophy of cognition and experience. Apart from the by now well-known stress on reconceptualizing mind-body relations that is central to this theoretical enterprise, some of the most recent work has taken up the difficult question of setting our studies into the context of historical change. This was the chief purpose of our co-edited volume of essays on *Identity Work: Constructing Pacific Lives* (Stewart and Strathern eds. 2000) which brought together chapters looking at ideas of personhood across the Pacific region from the viewpoint of life histories and wider contexts of historical change.

Our edited collection addressed questions such as: How have ideas of the person in society changed with colonial and post-colonial conditions? How well do academic stereotypes relate to the complexities of particular life stories? How can we move beyond simplistic contrasts, such as a supposed shift from collective to individual orientations, which have flowed from characterizing "Melanesian" sociality as a mirror opposite to that of "the West"? (Both terms, "Melanesia" and "the West," are artificial notions that are used to impose a certain definitional and ideological construct on people living in par-

ticular geographical regions. See for example Carrier 1992 for an insightful discussion of this issue.)

The essays in Sandra Bamford's volume can in many ways be seen as continuing this enterprise of exploration, since they are all concerned to look at social changes through the lens of changing ideas about the body. The body, in Pacific cultures and elsewhere, is intimately connected with notions of self, person, identity, growth, decline, attachment to the land, emplacement, the flows of substances, the cosmos, the effects of new disciplines such as are brought by government and missions, empowerment and dis-empowerment, the devaluation or re-valorization of customary practices such as witchcraft and sorcery, and ritual practices associated with the person's place within the landscape/environment and the cosmos. With these notions in mind, we selected Bamford's edited collection to appear in the Series because its chapters aim to address the above range of topics.

Since these topics are all close to the interests of many Pacific specialists (see for example Strathern et al. 2002), as well as having a broader cross-cultural relevance, we comment here further on a number of them from our own fieldwork and writings, especially on the Hagen and Duna areas in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Many comparative points could also be made in relation to the topics here with discussion on parts of South-East Asia, e.g., the ritual association of the python with Sky Beings and the cosmos in general (see for example Strathern and Stewart 2000a). Here we bring out the significance of some of the more salient themes in the essays that are presented. At an earlier stage we also read and commented on the essays included in this volume.

One significant point is that historical changes have by no means brought about a uniform sense of empowerment among people. Within Papua New Guinea initiation practices were in the past a prime means whereby young people were not only inducted into the maturation cycle of development within their communities but were also given a local identification with their place through various food taboos or preferences and by their adaptation to their environment. Food taboos, for example, might tie them in with their kinsfolk as well as with their place, doubling and joining these senses of identification. While initiation as such was not practiced in the Hagen area (Western Highlands Province) in historically remembered times, spirit "cult" houses invariably partook of the forest environment as a source of power. Houses of this sort were festooned with silvery-grey and rusty-red leaves from the forest, and special plants representing good health, the purging of dangerous materials, and long life, were presented to the participants by ritual experts.

Young boys were inducted into these rituals organized by their seniors within their community (on these ritual practices see Strathern and Stewart 2000a; Stewart and Strathern 2002a).

Among the Duna people of the Southern Highlands Province in Papua New Guinea, cohorts of such boys were formally secluded in the forest for periods of time under the tutelage of senior bachelor ritual experts who taught the boys the magic of making their head hair grow long and how to tend to and make themselves appear large and attractive. The house in which they lived during the time was called the “ginger house” (*palena anda*), and the senior bachelors were said to be linked to the Female Spirit of the environment, the Payame Ima, as her ritual “husbands.” The Payame Ima was said to transmit ritual knowledge to the senior ritual leaders so that they could prepare the boys for the rigors of adult life (on these ritual practices among the Duna see Stewart and Strathern 2002b; Strathern and Stewart 2004a). This was also the case for the cohorts of men who celebrated the Female Spirit “cult” in Hagen.

These Highland Papua New Guinea ritual practices, whether specifically focused on “initiation” or otherwise, can be seen as transformations of a particular ritual logic that links powers of growth to the forest areas and joins male and female powers together to ensure the maturation of a new generation within the locality (see Stewart and Strathern 1999). Given this fundamental aim, it is not surprising that, with the demise of such ritual practices in colonial times or thereafter, we can see aspects of “deterritorialization,” in Arjun Appadurai’s terms, emerging (Appadurai 1996).

Labor experience elsewhere, outside of the local community, may help young men or women to learn more about the outside world and so to mature in that sense, but it cannot replace the symbolic tie to the locality, and it must in some ways contribute to the weakening of that tie. Since the locality was seen as the source of growth for the new generation, we might well expect what we do actually find in many cases: that people’s bodies, in spite of introduced “health care” and new sources of nutrition, including protein (often uncertainly available in any case), are seen by themselves as becoming weaker or smaller, or as maturing at an “inappropriate” pace.

In the Duna case, this idea is further tied up with notions of cyclical time reckoned over a span of fourteen generations. The social disorders resulting from a breakdown of community control by seniors over juniors are said to be signaled also by young people growing up too fast (and by implication not properly or fully) and entering into sexual relationships too early: something that the earlier ritual practices regulated, producing adults in a fashion considered timely. More recently the times are seen as “out of joint.”

Control over bodily growth and also over the creation of new bodies was a very marked feature of many Highland Papua New Guinea societies. In the Hagen area proper times and occasions for the mixing of sexual fluids so as to make another human being were carefully prescribed. Repeated acts of sexual intercourse were thought necessary to build up the child in the womb along with the mother's blood (Strathern and Stewart 1998a). After a child's birth, its placenta and part of the umbilical cord were buried in the local soil of the group where the child was born to root its identity there within the land. A post-partum taboo on sexual intercourse was observed for a period of two to three years to enable the child to imbibe the mother's milk without what was seen as interference from, or undesirable further mixing of the mother's substances with the father's semen, until the child was ready to be fully weaned. While this clearly was a device to safeguard social relationships, it was also clearly designed to allow the child to grow and as a conscious method of population control by the group, aimed at producing a healthy child before the mother became pregnant again. Loss of such practices caused various health related problems in terms of child and mother wellness. Health care programs or family planning projects need to take factors of indigenous knowledge of this sort into consideration before implementing new policies (on indigenous knowledge see Bicker, Sillitoe, and Pottier 2004, for example; on anthropology and consultancy work see Stewart and Strathern 2004a).

A perception of unfavorable bodily change easily goes with the development of nostalgic perceptions of the past. Such a nostalgia, as Jeffrey Clark identified it for the Wiru people of Pangia, may pertain to the pre-colonial past (Clark 1989) in cases where that past is relatively recent and well within the memories of most adults. The Pangia area was brought into colonial administration only after 1960 and Clark's work there was done in the 1970s and the 1980s. Sharp changes in people's lives probably induced them to perceive a considerable rupture in their history and to experience a marked disempowerment over their own activities, which was then signaled in the idea that their bodies were smaller and weaker than those of their ancestors.

In the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, decorations are thought magically to add to the size and impressiveness of their wearers (see our essay in the present volume). In the past the discouragement by missionaries of ritual growth practices, as discussed above for the Hagen and Duna areas, and of the decorations that went with these took away from people this periodic method of personal bodily enhancement, which over time had to be replaced by other ritual practices and methods of bodily decoration.

In other areas in Papua New Guinea where there had been a longer experience of change, following Independence in 1975 and the many challenges that ensued, a second stage of nostalgia developed centered on the colonial era itself. Post-Independence economic and political complexities multiplied, and in many areas there has been both a perceived breakdown of social services to rural populations and an increase in relatively endemic outbreaks of violence within the Highlands region (Stewart and Strathern 2002c; Strathern and Stewart 2003). In these circumstances older people who came to adulthood in colonial times or shortly thereafter may speak nostalgically of the times of colonial “pacification,” road-building, and the first introduction of health services and schools in their areas. Outsiders from Australia and elsewhere are sometimes associated with this idea of “pacification lost.” In the Duna area in the 1990s older people occasionally said that they were pleased to see such Outsiders because they thought that their own government had “chased them all away,” leaving people to their own devices (Strathern and Stewart 2000b). This “second wave” of nostalgia is clearly different in its implications from the “first wave,” in which Outsiders were seen as having had primarily deleterious effects on people’s senses of their bodily strength and proper maturation.

The manifold, and sometimes contradictory, impacts of Christianity have come into play here, at both conceptual and practical levels. People in the past in Papua New Guinea, at least in the Hagen area, certainly had ideas of a distinction between inner thoughts and the outward presentation of the person, even though in the longer term such thoughts were said to be evidenced on people’s skins because of the linkages of substances in the body (Stewart and Strathern 2001a). But what would have been new to them, in many ways, was the concept of the “Christian body,” in which the signs of maturity and social acceptability were altered from those of before. New clothing was made into a mark of the new affiliation into the Christian world of ritual practices and beliefs.

Baptist missionaries in the 1960s in the Baiyer Valley west of Mount Hagen explicitly said that they did not want people to wear their “traditional” decorations because Christians needed to dress in the introduced new style. As local people have joined the churches we find a heightened ambivalence towards the indigenous cultural patterns of behavior which stems from both government and missionary influence, often most immediately from the latter in the case of ritual practices. Here is the source of the fear often exhibited towards former sacred objects of power such as stones or woven figures embodying the forcible strength of non-Christian spirits (Stewart and Strathern

2001b). It is not really that church teaching managed to reduce such objects to a state of being meaningless or powerless. More frequently, the objects are held to retain their power, but this power is often rhetorically claimed to be Satanic. Sometimes objects turn up that were previously thought to have beneficial influences, e.g., being used in magic to increase the number of healthy pigs that a person had, but now they may be said to be objects that produce negative and harmful effects because of their new association with "evil" through Christian teachings. Thus, symbols from the non-Christian "pagan" world may become a negative metaphorical resource or a backdrop against which to project Christian ideas of "good" and "evil." The overall effects, however, are often patchy. Different Christian denominations had and continue to have different and evolving ways of dealing with "traditional" practices. Catholic missionaries in the Highlands were generally accommodating towards indigenous forms of body decorations, although they were not necessarily so flexible when it came to non-Christian ritual practices and ideas about the cosmos that went along with these (see Strathern and Stewart 2000c for discussions on this point from the Hagen area).

In the part of the Duna area where we conduct our research, people said that the Baptist missionary who first evangelized to them in the 1960s had told them to adhere to their practices regarding rules centered around menstruation. Variations of ritual restrictions that occurred throughout Papua New Guinea play differently into the subsequent construction of regional or even national identities, which can also vary with the historical time period.

Greatly at issue in all domains of change is the rhetoric by which people are persuaded, or persuade themselves, to see their lives as irrevocably altered, whether for better or worse. Change is always happening, as it did in pre-colonial times when Highlands groups within Papua New Guinea adopted new rituals, suffered through tribal fighting, or were impacted by various epidemics and natural disasters. The colonial period brought much change as has the post-colonial period. Anthropologists have indicated this sense of contemporary change through terms such as modernity and post-modernity. However, in spite of the somewhat monolithic rhetorics of change that are the legacy of colonial and post-colonial influences, there has also been a growing realization that the sheer range of variations in historical transformations exposes the actual multiplicity rather than the uniformity of variables in constant change. Modernity is not one thing, but many, it does not have a specific origin or terminus, and thus we cannot use it as a master trope to index all the cross-cultural patterns that we observe.

We ourselves have suggested that it is better to rely on the concepts of history and contemporaneity rather than on the package of notions and values encapsulated in the term modernity (Strathern and Stewart 2004b). This is not to deny that from time to time people themselves may adopt this kind of rhetoric, as in Paliu Wantoat's movement in Manus (Mead 1956) or Tommy Kabu's movement in Papua (Maher 1961). In one place, modernity may primarily refer to Christianity, in another to business activity, in another to new forms of politics, in yet another to all three; but the permutations of emphasis even within such categories can be numerous. Nor should we assume that there is a uniform direction of change; for all the homogenizing influences, there are equally as many that promote heterogeneity just below the apparent public surface of social life.

The same point applies to the issues of changing notions of personhood, self, and relationality in the contemporary context. Putative universal contrasts between "Melanesia" and "the West" in this regard have had the unfortunate effect of both stereotyping the descriptions of peoples living within the South-West Pacific and of pre-empting the analysis of patterns of change in this part of the world in terms of a supposed transition from communalistic to individualistic modes of conduct. The earlier argument about this matter was founded on what was essentially a vision of substances, the composite substances that are thought to make up the human body. But agency is not the same as substance. A person may represent a composite of father's substance ("grease") and mother's substance ("blood"), but neither in Papua New Guinea nor anywhere else do people assume that this means their agency is equally circumscribed. It does mean that they are likely to take this dual identity for given and to act upon it; but it does not mean that their agency is completely equated with their social ties as these are constructed. The debates on personhood that have occupied the literature need to be considered in the light of this point. We have earlier offered the concept of the relational-individual as a way of resolving the now well worn debates about models of personhood and of allowing for individual agency as well as relationality (Strathern and Stewart 1998b).

More fruitful than this old classificatory debate is the study of contemporary patterns of change in all their complexities, including transnational flows of ideas and beliefs, localized versions of introduced ideas and beliefs, and locally generated new patterns of behavior and belief (see Lewellen 2002; also Strathern and Stewart n.d.). In terms of overall theory, a combination of studying "glocalization"—that is, the realization of global influences in local contexts and the local transformations of such influences—and embodi-

ment—that is, how change is variously inscribed, experienced, and acted upon by the whole embodied person through time—can tell us much about the South-West Pacific and other areas as well. In this regard one should not, and actually cannot, deny history by attempting to subsume it under the recursiveness of concepts of time and sociality. How history is defined by people locally will of course vary in any region, whether one is considering different senses of history as represented by the “Europeans” that we ourselves have worked with in Scotland and Ireland or among local peoples in the South-West Pacific. Within Scotland many different senses of history exist, and the local context has to be used as the point of reference (Strathern and Stewart 2001). Assuming that all people living in a vast geographic region have the same notions of history is a fundamental logical flaw. Even within the Papua New Guinea Highlands, Hagen and Duna ideas of history vary considerably. There is no general South-West Pacific “philosophy of history”; but there are local philosophies based on indigenous knowledge and experience.

To return to our Duna example: The Duna do have a recursive theory of time, spanning fourteen generations, as we have noted. They are also, however, well aware that change (*arikena*) continues to come up in their lives in ways that they can neither predict nor fully control, and that their future is uncertain. While they may have wished to encompass the arrival of Outsiders into their lives by arguing that this arrival was predicted by their ancestors and in some sense therefore belongs to their “own” history, they do not, of course, say that their ancestors predicted the development of the nation-state and its problems. What is clear is that resistance, accommodation, and acceptance of the factors from the Outside world in general are best expressed by the Duna in their own terms, as when they demanded compensation from an oil drilling company in terms of a new “myth”/story/narrative about harm done to a powerful underground spirit (Tindi Auwene) who figures in their “traditional” mythology (Stewart and Strathern 2002b). Their concern with the body, and the aptness of embodiment theory here, are shown by the image they presented in their narrative of this spirit’s body being menaced and harmed by company drills that bored into the spirit’s body in the search for natural resources to extract from the ground. The narrative goes on to say that the spirit’s body stretches out across Papua New Guinea, with the center of its body being located in the Duna area. It was said that the spirit directed a local boy, with the aid of local female spirit (Payame Ima) entities, to journey underground so as to be able to knock aside the drilling bit that was threatening to pierce the spirit’s chest.

Equally, the fear of oil being extracted from the ground was expressed in terms of an idea that the oil represented the “grease”/substance of the Duna ancestors that had accumulated there over the ages. These images both acknowledge the keen awareness of the Duna of unanticipated change and demonstrate their creative acts of agency to cope with their history as they themselves present it. The same might be said of indigenous tropes by which people explain the workings of machines.

History always contains a fluidity that may be solidified or altered in ways that are extremely context dependent, whether in the South-West Pacific or elsewhere. [Our current research in Taiwan among both the Han and the Austronesian-speaking populations demonstrates this point clearly, as we have written about recently (Stewart and Strathern n.d)]. One could add here that philosophical questions of temporal recursiveness are ones that can be posed for any geographical clustering of peoples and are, like all exercises of the imagination, interesting to think about.

We return here to an example from the Hagen area where people in the 1970s would often discuss the breakdown of cars in terms of the possible agency of their ancestors, and would also perform ritual ceremonies called *kela memb* on new vehicles by decorating them with flowers and wiping red ocher on them, an action which resembled the ritual acts of wiping red ocher on pigs marked for sacrifice. (*Kela memb* is an old term in Hagen, referring to various acts of ritually requesting prosperity, fertility, safety, and success for an activity. Red ocher was used for facial adornment at important celebrations and when decorating the valuable pearl shells, used in the past for *moka* exchanges.) The automobile, as a complex piece of machinery, was brought, by this ritual activity, morally and politically into the Hageners' own substance-oriented world. But this does not prevent them from simultaneously realizing that if the machine develops a fault, it needs to be repaired by mechanics. In effect, people are able to think, at least within the limits of their acquired knowledge, in more than one thought-world. Challenges and difficulties arise when these thought-worlds definitively clash.

The cosmological emplacement of the body and its sometimes multiple manifestations of representation can clearly be seen in ideas about witchcraft and sorcery. These sorts of ideas of attacks on the body and life-force are ones that are found in the South-West Pacific as they are found in various transforms globally (see Stewart and Strathern 2004b for examples from Papua New Guinea, Africa, Indonesia, Europe, etc.). Violence against persons accused of witchcraft or sorcery represents another turn of embodied politics that arises in times of social tensions and has an extensive historical time depth. It also

represents just one of the recurring problems, manifest in altering historical forms, in localities in Papua New Guinea, that are scarcely anticipated by orthodox theories of "modernity."

It is useful to look at the interplay between the body, substances, powers, cosmologies, and historical contexts when considering how people structure their imagined and their lived worlds (Strathern and Stewart 2004c). Also, the role of the imagination is a factor that must not be overlooked. The imagination is pivotal in the expression of agency in either curbing one's actions, because of various fears, or motivating one to act after imagining particular desired outcomes. The world of the imagination includes "iconic codes", i.e., codes that are embodied or expressed "outside language" (Aijmer 2003: 3). Vincent Crapanzano's concept of "imaginative horizons" and "frontiers" is applicable here, especially when considering frontiers "that postulate a beyond that is, by its very nature, unreachable in fact and in representation" (2004: 14). Imaginative capacities direct and drive actions that result from a process of interaction with the world as well as with the cosmological emplacement in which local people live their lives.

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