

# from darkness to light in the George Brown Jubilee: the invention of nontradition and the inscription of a national history in East New Britain

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This article is our response to a challenge from Don Kulick and Margaret Willson, anthropologists who have lived with the Gapun villagers of the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea. While in the field, they witnessed a troubling event. A visiting friend of Kulick's wished to videotape a traditional ritual to show his friends at home in Sweden. The villagers obliged him by dressing up as savages and cavorting about. They engaged in what had become for them a rather common type of performance, referred to locally in Pidgin English as a "konset" or "drama." In these performances, they portrayed their ancestors as "bus kanakas," or country bumpkins. According to Kulick and Willson, the actors

generally appear shirtless, dressed in ragged sago-frond skirts with flowers drooping from their hair. Their speech is loud and boorish, often it is gibberish, conveying an image of senseless babble. The actions of the actors tend to be exaggerated and over-large—gestures are sweeping, arms are thrown about, walking becomes stomping. [1992:147]

In other words, according to Kulick and Willson, Gapun villagers displayed racist assumptions about themselves in their dramas. These assumptions, moreover, appeared not only in their gestures but also in their narratives—many of the skits concerned natives who were incapable of following the appropriate advice of colonial officials or Western missionaries.

Kulick and Willson were troubled by these performances because they saw Gapun villagers as incorporating in them "a Western stereotype of the savage" (1992:149)—what might be called an auto-orientalized view of native life (cf. Said 1978). While some anthropologists have analyzed comparable self-representations as modes of resistance, or at least as creative appropriations of Western imagery for indigenous purposes (see, among others, Comaroff 1985; Lattas 1992; Taussig 1987), Kulick and Willson rejected this view for the Gapun context. After they had questioned Gapun villagers about what the participants believed themselves to be doing, Kulick and Willson argued that it was "more reasonable to see the villagers' actions as

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*In this article, we examine the reasons that Duke of York Islanders in Papua New Guinea's East New Britain Province were greatly amused by their own annual "Jubilee" performance, one incorporating remarkably racist imagery about their ancestors. During the performance, which celebrated the 1875 arrival of the first Methodist missionaries, the ancestors were depicted as bumbling savages who were then "civilized," brought from darkness to light. Contrasting the performance we witnessed in 1991 to several described in the late 1920s, we demonstrate that the play frame had changed: that which was funny in 1991 had not been so before. The change entailed a repositioning of the present with respect to the past in response to shifting power relations from the period of colonial domination to that of nation formation. [Papua New Guinea, nationalism, performance, humor]*

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reinforcing, entrenching and embodying the colonist discourses which permitted the development of the image of 'the savage' in the first place" (1992:149). They challenged ethnographers to explore comparable "echoing images" (1992:150) for what they could teach us about the complexity of colonial power relations.

In accepting this challenge, we analyze a somewhat similar reenactment of the past, performed by a group very different from the Gapun, which we observed in August 1991 while living on Karavar. This reenactment was performed regularly by the Duke of York Islanders of Papua New Guinea's East New Britain Province, as well as by their closely related neighbors, the Tolai. In this "drama" (a term also used by Duke of York Islanders and Tolai) and in the other festivities of an annual event locally termed a "Jubilee," villagers celebrated the August 15, 1875, arrival of the ship *John Wesley*, carrying the first missionaries: the Methodist minister George Brown and his Fijian assistants. To the great hilarity of a large local audience, villagers recreated the transformation of their "ancestors" from wild, indeed precultural, savages into staid and civilized Christians. This was seen as a transition from a time of darkness, a time known as the *momboto*, in which people could not see the path of proper conduct, into the enlightened present.<sup>1</sup> Some villagers, clad immaculately in white and singing hymns, portrayed Brown and his entourage. Others, covered in mud, vastly unkempt, and trembling with cannibalistic frenzy, portrayed the ancestors. In the course of the drama, the ancestors were pacified—literally cooled—by the seductive harmonies of the Methodist hymns and enculturated by the display of such Western cultural items as money, steel tools, and salt.

Perhaps most striking about these annual dramas, filled as they were with negative stereotypes of savage and stupid ancestors, was that the local audience so thoroughly enjoyed them and viewed them as so remarkably funny. No one to whom we have spoken came away from these dramas feeling in the least demeaned, although many had frequently expressed anger when they remembered past interactions with racist Europeans and Asians (particularly, in the context of plantation work and forced labor during World War II).

One possible explanation for the villagers' great amusement at the depiction of their ancestors as cannibalistic incompetents can be found in Kapferer's argument that the comic aspect of a performance "tells participants to question the truth of all statements appearing within it, that what appears within it has no strict necessity" (1983:209). As "conscious reflexive mimesis" (Calkowski 1991:644), moreover, comedy provides the possibility of "rerealization," whereby objects, actors, and events may be transformed. But what statements were opened to question during the Jubilee? Whose verisimilitude was challenged? And what was being reconfigured?

The scholars whom Kulick and Willson questioned for viewing comparably racist self-depictions as creative appropriations of Western stereotypes might answer that the Jubilee performances projected the metamessage "This is how some might view our ancestors, but you and I know that it is a hegemonic view which can be contested and transformed." They might compare the Jubilee to the cargo-cult narratives Lattas described as "allegories for present relations of inequality" (1992:28), and suggest that as a performance—as an alternative social structure on the margins of society (see Bauman 1975)—the Jubilee would be additionally efficacious. As a means of rerealizing these relations of inequality, it would create "an objectified medium outside the self" (Lattas 1992:27) through which racially subordinated Papua New Guineans could reconfigure existing lines of fragmentation and distinction—could, in other words, remake themselves as the equals of Europeans in the "resistance spaces" (Seremetakis 1991:5) of the performance.

And so, we believe, some early Jubilee dramas did indeed operate, when those enacting them were aware of themselves as subordinated in what was, though a trust territory of the League of Nations, in effect an Australian colony. But, since independence in 1975, when these long-contacted East New Britains emerged as among the most enterprising and best educated in Papua New Guinea, the "strict necessity" of the statement within the drama—that "civilizing"

changes had been effected by the European missionaries and colonists—had long been accepted in this context and had also been encoded in many other historical memories (see Errington 1974a).

Those who staged, performed, and witnessed the contemporary Jubilee drama viewed themselves as the most sophisticated—as the most advanced, the most cultivated—of Papua New Guineans.<sup>2</sup> (Interestingly, the Tolai-dominated East New Britain provincial government had recently hired two Canadian anthropologists to study its ethnic minorities.) Among those who attended, for example, were several who had observed to us that, unlike Highlanders, who still sometimes wore leafy coverings over their genitals, Duke of York Islanders wore, as “native dress,” *laplap* and *meri blaus* (wraparound skirts and loose blouses) introduced by the missionaries in the mid 1870s. (In fact, at a beauty contest we attended in 1991, several East New Britain contestants objected that a defining characteristic of the “native dress” event was the wearing of “primitive” clothing and the baring of breasts.) For them, the coming of George Brown had become a historical *event*, much as for others, the coming of the Pilgrims or the signing of the Declaration of Independence had become (on events of this type see Biersack 1991; Sahlins 1991).

In most cases, our East New Britain informants accepted as *fact* that their ancestors had once been savages (cf. Young 1977). And as fact, ancestral savagery was definitely not within the 1991 Jubilee “play frame”—to use the term adopted by Kapferer (1983) and others—to be evaluated as arbitrary and possibly to be rejected or reconfigured. What made this contemporary Jubilee performance funny, then—its challenge to strict necessity—was the assumption that depictions of ancestors *were* depictions of self. The metamessage of the contemporary performance, we suggest, was that there existed *no* implicating connection between those portrayed as savages and the audience viewing their shenanigans.

Indeed, the 1991 Jubilee drama presented the total eclipse of ancestral savagery by Brown’s arrival as what might be called an “anchor event,” one that convincingly defined the appropriate basis and nature of national life in contemporary Papua New Guinea. It addressed the question of how a nation could incorporate tribal multiplicities and include those who still wore leafy genital coverings as well as those who had not done so for over a century. The 1991 Jubilee performance, in other words, did not challenge the depiction of a savage past. Instead, it rerealized Papua New Guineans as citizens of their own country by separating them from their common precultural pasts—by separating them from what was, in effect, an invented and ubiquitous nontradition. Moreover, as an anchor event in the contemporary nation of Papua New Guinea, the Jubilee performance effected different ideological work than it had once done: no longer providing a resistance space for East New Britains, it had become, for them, a dominant discourse that substantially precluded resistance.

From the first stagings of the Jubilee to those of the present, the participants had altered both the nature of the performance and the play frame, repositioning the present relative to the precontact past. There had been a change from improvised to standardized performances that marked the emergence and development of official history corresponding to the development of a nation state (for a description of the standardization of history in a similar performance event, see Neumann [1992:81–90]). There had been, too, a corresponding and significant change in what was considered funny: what was thrown into question, at whose expense, and with what kind of laughter, all changed. Moreover, we suggest—and adduce additional evidence from similar performances in the Solomon Islands (White 1991:133–156)—that these changes could be regarded as the fulfillment of what had seemed only a distant possibility during the early Jubilees: that the resistance to European domination might prove ultimately successful, that (to return to Lattas’ discussion of cargo narratives) black skins might assume the roles of white ones.

In sum, by taking a historical view of performance—by attempting to draft a social history of a particular enacted auto-orientalism—we demonstrate that what cannibal ancestors may signify is not fixed. The point is straightforward: the uses and meanings of laughter at what might be considered racist self-representations were complexly negotiated in a context of shifting power relations. In other words, we demonstrate that to understand the “echoing images” we were enjoined to explore, we must investigate the changing harmonies of their echoes.

## the early Jubilee

The minutes from the New Britain District Synod of October 18, 1923, described the decision to provide a “Jubilee of Methodism in the District” (Methodist Overseas Mission Papers 1923:61). It was to be celebrated on August 15, 1925, not only in the Duke of York Islands, where Brown had first arrived in the area, but throughout the district. Indeed, by this time much mission activity was centered in New Britain among the numerically dominant Tolai, who, as mentioned, were close neighbors of the Duke of York Islanders, with a similar language and culture.

The Jubilee was at least partially designed to raise funds from both Papua New Guinean and overseas sources. Special souvenir issues of the *Missionary Review* and the Tolai *Nilai i ra Dowot* were to be issued to mark the occasion. (*Nilai i ra Dowot* means *Voice of the Truth*; Tolai had become the language of Methodist Christian education throughout the district.) The synod hoped to raise a Jubilee fund of not less than £1500, which would be “devoted to the erection of a new and up-to-date building to be known as the George Brown College, with provision for a theological institution” (Methodist Overseas Mission Papers 1923:62).

The special souvenir editions were, in fact, published. Both proclaimed the extraordinary success of the mission in the years after Brown’s arrival. Thus, the Reverend John W. Ackroyd wrote in 1925:

This year is the jubilee year, celebrating the beginning of missions in New Britain, and as the interest of missionary enthusiasts in all Methodist circles in Australia will be more or less directed to this field of labour, it is appropriate that our friends be given an insight into the work of the church in this little-known country. . . . Fifty years ago the first missionary came to this land, and if it were possible for him to pay it a visit to-day, he would have every reason to thank God for the planting of Methodism in this corner of the world. Fifty years of future work in New Britain will tell of a wonderful increase of Christianity and uplifting of these people. [1925:5, 7]

We know something of the celebration itself from church sources. J. W. Burton, the general secretary of the mission who traveled from Australia to New Britain in order to see the Jubilee, kept a journal of his trip. Unfortunately, he was delayed by bad weather and missed the Jubilee by a few days. He did, however, visit several of the Jubilee sites in the Duke of York Islands and New Britain and described several church services he attended. On August 23, he witnessed a “thrilling sort of service” at Molot, in the Duke of York Islands, the site of Brown’s first arrival. At this service

The old men told how they remembered Dr. Brown landing at that very spot fifty years ago. How they made up their minds to frighten him away. They kept their war dances going all night long close to the hut where the Fijians slept, and brandished their spears as they yelled their war cry; but he could not be terrified. They described with a vividness and a detail that could not be translated the old bad days and there was unmistakable gratitude in their eyes as they spoke of the present time and of all the joy and happiness the Lotu [church] had brought them. [1925:14]

These old men had themselves experienced Brown’s arrival. They were among those who were to become the “ancestors” in later Jubilee performances. However, as Burton presented their accounts, they had not been bumbling savages at the moment of missionization but rather ferocious, if benighted, warriors. Perhaps they did credit the *Lotu* with bringing joy and happiness—certainly many of our friends and informants were grateful to the church for helping

to end indigenous warfare—but they did not at this time think the church had transformed them from clowns into Christians. They remained formidable rather than foolish.

None of our sources reveals with certainty whether or not these vivid recollections of Brown's arrival were presented in the form of a drama, or whether this drama was humorous. While the idea that a commemoration should take place was clearly at the church's initiative, we think it likely that the comic elements were an indigenous contribution. After all, there was a long tradition of the comedic, as Mitchell has demonstrated in a masterful survey of Pacific performance humor. He concluded that "the ritual and theatrical comedic forms of Oceania, although roughly analogous to those in the West, are indigenous inventions long antedating contact with Western colonialism" (1992: 33). Moreover, for both Duke of York Islanders and Tolai, clowning was an expected component of many rituals. For example, when the powerful *tubuan* figures (central to a male secret-organization) were about to "die," they moved throughout the villages with exaggerated and hilarious decrepitude, limping and brushing flies from their sore-ridden bodies. As commonly, at least in the Duke of York Islands, individuals might voluntarily burlesque ritual proceedings by, for instance, dancing with exaggerated lewdness while others remained serious and controlled. (See Shore [1982:259–260] for discussion of a circumstance in which this opposition was an expected part of ritual structure.)

Our first clear indication of the performance of a humorous Jubilee skit—in this case, obviously an indigenous improvisation—comes from Burton's journal covering a later visit to New Britain. In 1929, he and several Methodist dignitaries traveled to Matupit, a coastal Tolai village immediately adjacent to the Duke of York Islands, on the occasion of its Jubilee. Although the improvisation in 1929 was performatively distinct from the established Jubilee drama of 1991, the contrast between the humor displayed in each—both in kind and in focus—is most suggestive. (The contrast can be no more than suggestive, however, because the comparison between Tolai and Duke of York Island Jubilees is somewhat imprecise. Nevertheless, as we have already stated, Tolai and Duke of York Islanders were culturally and linguistically very similar. In addition, they had a largely common colonial history, first under German and then under Australian control.) Burton wrote:

As we neared Matupit there was not a soul to be seen and we thought this very strange. As we got nearer we saw a high placard about 12 feet long I should think and perhaps 7 feet deep. On it was printed:

#### WELCOME

REV. FRANK LADE, M.A.  
PRESIDENT-GENERAL

J. W. BURTON, M.A.  
GENERAL SECRETARY

We dropped anchor but still there was no sign of human life and Margetts [a missionary working in the district who was a member of the visiting party] guessed that they were up to some of their dramatic tricks again. At length, Lade, Margetts and I got into the dinghy to go ashore and even when we were close in to the beach there was no sign of anyone though we heard a little sound from behind the placard that made us suspect that the people were in hiding thereof. As the dinghy grated on the beach, however, four nearly naked and highly painted savages rushed out with up-raised clubs and poised spears. They rushed at us dancing around the boat and splashing in the water making the most hideous yells. Afterwards Margetts translated to us what they were saying. It was roughly this—"Who are these white men. They are bad white men. They have come to disturb our peace, let's kill them. They are worthy of death." Then after a while they said—"Perhaps they are not bad white men for they have no weapons." And eventually after a lot of dancing and shrieking and palaver they said "Perhaps these are Missionaries coming to bring us the Lotu, let us not prevent their landing."

It appears that they were re-acting what had taken place when Dr. Brown landed fifty odd years before. We then walked up toward the placard and when we got close to it suddenly it was drawn up and some three or four hundred natives, who were hidden beneath it, burst out into a song of welcome. Afterwards the mass opened and formed two long lines down which the President-General and myself walked to see the Native Minister's house. . . .

We then went on to the big Missionary Meeting in the Church. There was a fearful lot of singing and then by and by a collection bowl was passed round but it came back with only a few shillings and some odd coppers in it. I thought that this was a rather poor collection from a crowd of people such as this, but after they had another hymn the old Chief came forward carrying a bag and he went up to the bowl, and poured from the bag a vast quantity of florins and shillings whereat the people clapped. They had another

hymn and then another Chief from another part of the building came with a similar bag. The result was that they had a collection of £137. They do this dramatic thing rather well. Margetts was telling us of a case where he went to a Missionary Meeting and they said how sorry they were that they were poor and could only give these few odd shillings, and by and by a man came up and said he was too poor to give anything and all he could offer was a coconut, but when Mr. Margetts received the coconut it was fearfully heavy and lifting off the top he found it was packed with notes and silver. On another occasion they gave a poor collection but presented an excellent model of the "Montoro" and in the hold of this model [mission] boat was about £400. Still on another occasion the people had given a very meager offering and one of the Missionaries noted that there was a wire stretching from the ceiling of the Church down to the pulpit and he could not understand what it was for, but after they made a great exhibition of their poverty there came sliding down the wire the model of an aeroplane and in the aeroplane was two or three hundred pounds. These are all their own ideas without any suggestions from Europeans so that they have not only generous hearts but a very keen sense of humour. [1929:35–38]

This "keen sense of humour," displayed in both the skit of welcome and the ruse of offering, was at the expense of the European visitors. A placard welcomed specific visitors to an apparently uninhabited village where they were tricked into participating in a skit about George Brown's arrival but then were treated with deference as honored guests. Later, offerings were collected but at first little money was given. There was, thus, the momentary assertion that the natives did not have to celebrate Brown's arrival, did not have to greet the missionaries, and did not have to contribute money to the church. Though they did celebrate, greet, and contribute, it was in such a way that their compliance became a critique of the circumstances enforcing that compliance (cf. Scott 1985).

The fact that "Margetts guessed that they were up to some of their dramatic tricks again," taken in conjunction with the likely existence of an indigenous satiric tradition, suggests that practices of resistance through symbolic appropriation were well established. Moreover, these "tricks" should be understood with respect to widely held (and often reported) Melanesian views concerning the importance of reciprocal transactions—prestations and exchanges—in defining personhood, establishing sociality, and asserting power. Not surprisingly, local resentment was rife in this East New Britain context, where expatriate Europeans sought fortunes through an export-oriented plantation economy, an economy based on nonreciprocal and extractive relationships with the natives. In the Duke of York Islands during the 1930s, for example, the "Dog Movement" developed: according to Worsely, its name was "said to reflect the native view of the way they were treated by Whites" (1968:48; also, see Errington 1974b).

Indeed, it would be hard to think of more refined and distilled commentaries on the history and nature of colonial relationships in East New Britain than the cash-bearing coconut, ship, and airplane (cf. Counts and Counts 1992). The locals overwhelmed the missionaries with gifts, concealed and conveyed in appropriate—and appropriated—vehicles marking European domination: these gifts indicated, we suggest, both capitulation and resistance.

The compliance at the Jubilee and at the other missionary meetings acknowledged who really controlled the coconut plantations and the ships and planes serving as the economic basis of that colonial society. Power relations being what they were, capitulation was inevitable and resistance had to be indirect. Without launching into an exposition of colonial history, let us provide two texts illustrating what the natives were up against in the area of Papua New Guinea described by Hank Nelson as most staunchly maintaining racial separation (1982:171). These texts, both written in 1925, are taken from the *Rabaul Times*, the newspaper of New Britain's administrative and economic center. One, a letter to the editor, appeared just eight days before the initial Jubilee. Written by a plantation manager, it was entitled "Corporal Punishment":

To the Editor

Allow me through the columns of your paper to express my views regarding the present system, which precludes any plantation man, or any other man who has the handling of natives, from administering, or at least in having the power to administer corporal punishment to delinquent natives. . . .

I have invariably found that the average native labourer in these islands has the mentality and general characteristics of a child and should therefore be treated as one. . . . What child respects a weak parent, even in these days of infant emancipation? . . .

I maintain that if the Administration should allow responsible plantation men to hold licenses for inflicting corporal punishment . . . there would be far less trouble arising between master and servant. Not for the reason that the master would be forced to exercise this privilege, but the mere fact of the master holding that power being known to the native would be conducive to better discipline and there lies the secret. [Rabaul Times 1925a]

While the paternalism, patriarchy, and prejudice expressed in the above letter need no explication, the same sentiments in the following poem might need to be understood in context. Entitled "The Educated Native," the poem alluded to a debate then raging in the pages of the newspaper, and elsewhere, about what many planters regarded as the ill-considered missionary policy of educating the natives.

For 50 years the native of this country has been taught  
To set aside his evil ways—and do the things he ought—  
By faithful men and women (some departed and at rest)  
Who gladly left their native land, their kindred and their best.  
Their motive was a high one, they never thought of pay.  
Their one desire—to lead the "coons" from "darkness" into "day."  
So day by day and year by year, the bush kanaka grew.  
In contact with his teachers, his ways and habits knew;  
In course of time (we may presume) he passed his final test,  
And, consequently, he went home to help "instruct the rest."  
And so today we meet him—though at first it is hard to say  
Which coon belongs to "darkness," or which coon belongs to "day."  
So, if at any time perchance, you ever are in doubt,  
I strongly recommend to you, don't leave your cash about;  
If, on the other hand you do, as sure as you are born  
You'll only have yourself to blame to find the lot is gone. [Rabaul Times 1925b]

Perhaps the "very keen sense of humour" that Burton noted in Matupit was related to the jocular tone with which our European poet described the transition from savagery effected during the course of colonial contact. Although the poet indirectly blamed the missionaries for the misguided assumption that natives could be educated out of their darkness—"darkness," as we shall see, was a word frequently used by Methodist missionaries to describe the precontact condition of villagers—missionaries themselves often had similar doubts, or at least had to fight against them.<sup>3</sup> Consider the following excerpt from a confidential report submitted to the Methodist Board of Governors in Australia by the official delegation to the first Jubilee:

Our first impressions were surprisingly unfavorable. Usually the romance of a new people intrigues the observer and creates an atmosphere of charm. But such was not the case here. The filthiness of the women in and about Rabaul, and in the villages, was a smarting disappointment; while the dull apathetic expressions of so many of the men haunted us. We could not fail to reflect upon the impression that must be made upon the mind of the casual tourist and unfriendly critic as this picture meets his eye. Even in our Christian villages, except during Church hours on Sunday, we found people clad in dirty garments and showing very little outward sign of missionary influence. . . .

We were disappointed further in the low average intellectual level of the people and their lack of mental attainment. There are, of course, some outstanding exceptions to the above general statement, for we met some of our Native brethren who, when all circumstances are considered, are men of whom we as a Mission are justly proud; but we found [it] very hard to counter the criticism that the people of these islands are "low-grade humans". The explanation is probably that of arrested development. For centuries they have been isolated in a way that is difficult for us to imagine, and their mental life in consequence has been stunted. We must remember this fact in all our judgments, and regard their state as a still more urgent call to us for help. We believe that, in spite of all outward seeming, they have dormant possibilities, and it is our God-given task to evoke these. [Jenkin and Burton 1925:2]

Under these oppressive colonial circumstances—when many Europeans did not feel the least compelled to disguise their racist sentiments—it was little wonder that expressions of autonomy and independence had to be placed in a play frame. The Jubilee skit of 1929, the subsequent offering, and the offerings at other missionary meetings incorporated props that were gems of oblique appropriation, at a time when natives knew full well that most whites regarded them as thoroughly inferior.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, natives knew that they could not fully dissociate themselves from the roles colonists insisted that they play: they were not laughing at themselves as

"savages," past or present. What could be rejected within this play frame—what could be rerealized in this allegory of inequality—was not the fact of colonial oppression but its legitimacy: though grateful that the missionary presence had resulted in the cessation of warfare, there was deep resentment of the inequality that had also ensued. At least some of the statements locals presented as open to question were these: We are poor, benighted bush natives living in darkness; we are dull, apathetic, "low-grade humans." On the contrary, they asserted: We are clever enough to fool you, to frighten you, and to impress you—to establish ourselves collectively as persons of worth—with our prestations of that which you most value, money.

### **the 1991 Mioko Jubilee: the dramatic invention of a nontradition**

By 1991, with the entrenchment of an increasingly powerful indigenous elite responsible for economic policy and political governance in an independent Papua New Guinea (cf. Hooper et al. 1987), the play frame had changed: the Jubilee drama had become an official history, and its humor, the dominant discourse. As we have suggested, all could now laugh at their ancestors without, as far as we could determine, feeling compromised. Indeed, we argue, such a shift in the comic was virtually necessary given that no Europeans (apart from visiting anthropologists) were present and the honored guests included the prime minister of the independent nation of Papua New Guinea and a United Church bishop,<sup>5</sup> as well as local and regional clergy.<sup>6</sup>

In 1991 the Duke of York Jubilee was held not at Molot, George Brown's initial landing place, as was usual, but at the community of Mioko. Mioko was able to claim this honor because its parishioners had erected a cement marker—an *aim*—commemorating George Brown's arrival.<sup>7</sup> The prime minister, Rabbie Namaliu, whose constituency included the Duke of York Islands, was invited to unveil and place a wreath on the marker. Namaliu accepted the invitation, probably in part because national elections were impending.

We arrived at Mioko on the Jubilee day at about 8:00 a.m. to find that extensive preparations had been made. The main path was ornamented with palm-frond arches, flowers had been specially planted, and decorative sprigs fluttered everywhere. A mimeographed program, handed to us by the community government president, listed the events of the day as the Jubilee drama, a church service, speeches, lunch, and then a competition between village choirs.

We learned over a public address system that the prime minister would be arriving shortly by helicopter. However, as it turned out, he joined the program a few minutes after it had begun. A crowd of perhaps 400 had assembled on the lawn outside the church, near the newly erected *aim*. At one corner of the lawn, next to the *aim*, was a temporary shelter to protect the visiting dignitaries from the sun during the speeches. At another corner was a shelter (with coconut-frond walls but a sheet-metal roof) to house the savage ancestors during the drama. The latter shelter was referred to as a *marawat*, a word that had designated a ritual site of precontact cannibalism and sorcery. It housed some ten young men from Molot who, we were told, had participated in the drama before. They carried axes and spears, sported unkempt coconut-fiber wigs, wore leafy genital coverings (over underpants), and were covered in mud. A master of ceremonies (a former community government president), who provided a running commentary in Pidgin English over a bullhorn, described these savages as "having a strong tradition and preoccupation with fighting, killing, and eating people."

Meanwhile, a motorboat filled with pastors from various Duke of York villages slowly approached. Dressed immaculately in white and playing the roles of George Brown and his entourage of Fijian missionaries, they stood singing hymns as the boat—named the *John Wesley*—stopped just offshore in front of the crowd. At their appearance, the savages began to tremble in what seemed a mixture of fright and cannibalistic agitation. Described by the master of ceremonies as "hunters of people, like hunting dogs," they urged each other on in the Duke of York language with shouts such as "What are you waiting for? Your ax is here; let us kill



them." At this point "George Brown" tested the water, placing his hand in the sea. He found it hot, corresponding to the passions of those on shore.

But then the hymns began to work and the savages made tentative overtures to the missionaries. Several attempted to paddle to the *John Wesley* but, to the vast amusement of the crowd, were conspicuously unfamiliar with the operation of a canoe, facing the wrong way as they paddled, nearly tipping over, and sprawling over the sides in their clumsiness. In this slapstick manner, they eventually made it to the "ship" and offered a papaya for barter. But it was Sunday, and George Brown refused to transact. The master of ceremonies explained that the missionaries "wouldn't buy anything on this first day, but would only sing hymns, talk of the church, and call the name of God." (Indeed, the real Brown stated in a letter that he had arrived at Molot on a Sunday and forthwith held a church service on board the *John Wesley*. He mentioned that villagers paddled out, "eager to trade," which he refused to do—thereby indicating, we imagine, his superiority as arbiter of exchange. Later that day, during the church service he held, they came on board and watched the "proceedings with quiet, respectful interest" [Brown 1875:594].)

At this point occurred what the crowd found perhaps the funniest moment of all in the drama. On what was described as the second day of contact, the savages again paddled to the ship with a papaya for exchange. As they approached the ship, they exhibited what seemed the height of ancestral inappropriateness: They stood upright in their canoe and caricatured native dances to the music of the Methodist hymns.<sup>8</sup> The savages on shore were also dancing in this "traditional" manner to the hymns. Over the roars of amusement from the crowd, the master of ceremonies explained that the ancestors did not know about religious music but nonetheless "heard the hymns, which worked like the magic of attraction [*malira*]*—the music pulled them.*" (*Malira*, frequently conveyed in song, was currently used to attract lovers and, in the distant past, to lure enemies to become cannibalistic fare. Those under the influence of *malira* were described as smitten, as without volition. However, we have never heard of hymns being used to attract lovers or enemies.)

Then, compelled by the hymns and their dancing finished, the savages could be instructed. As the master of ceremonies explained:

You must understand, before [the missionaries' arrival] people didn't speak softly. They were angry, and all they thought about was eating other people. When these ancestors wanted to sell food to the missionaries, they wanted the food to be purchased quickly. If the missionaries wouldn't buy the food, they would be killed and eaten. But the missionaries kept saying "*kalou, kalou.*" [This became the local word for "God"; missionaries introduced the term from Fijian when they could find no equivalent term in the Duke of York and Tolai languages.] At this time, no one understood well about God. No one understood about money either, and Dr. Brown taught them all how to exchange the papaya for money.

Indeed, those enacting the missionaries stopped repeating "*kalou, kalou*" and began uttering "money, money" while holding up coins.

The crucial transformation from savagery effected and essential lessons learned, George Brown once again tested the water and, finding it cool, knew that the savage passions had been quenched. The missionaries then came on shore, still singing hymns and uttering "*kalou, kalou*"—for there was a bit of backsliding as the savages crowded around, smelling the well-fed bodies of the missionaries. But, in short order, the savages relinquished their weapons as commanded and were given a hymn book in return. They were also given steel tools and salt.<sup>9</sup>

In the last set of events depicting the conversion of the savages, Brown purchased land for his mission station. The master of ceremonies then related that Brown was approached by big men from throughout the region, each of whom wished to buy the church for his locality. They were told, however, that the church was "a free gift from God."

The drama ended there. Thoroughly enjoyed by all, it had portrayed events and employed rhetoric that were entirely familiar, not only from enactments at other Jubilees but also from frequently recounted stories about the precontact epoch known as the *momboto*. At least since

Errington's 1968 field trip, the *momboto* had been defined as a time of darkness when people could not see the path of proper conduct (cf. Shore 1982:158; White 1991:138–139). The *momboto* was abruptly transformed into the enlightened present as the immediate result of Brown's arrival (cf. McDowell 1985). Significantly, those who lived during the *momboto* were shown to be not only savage but precultural. They were presented in the drama and in stories about the *momboto* as being unable, for instance, to paddle their canoes properly. Their one area of competence lay in killing and eating each other; in fact, stories about the *momboto* often depicted a Hobbesian war of all against all. Moreover, major cultural institutions, such as moiety groupings and the use of shell money, were often attributed to the arrival of Brown (or his ostensible age-mate, the biblical figure Noah).

Thus, the *cultural* past presented in the Jubilee drama and in accounts of the *momboto* was a shallow, sharply truncated one: the *momboto* exemplified what might be called *the invention of a nontradition* (see Hobsbawm and Ranger [1983] for contrasting examples of the construction of a usable past). The savages enacting the *momboto* in the drama would be as much at home in Gapun performing for Kulick's friend as they were in Mioko performing for the prime minister.

The widely held assumption that a momentous change of state had taken place with Brown's arrival provided the basis of the 1991 Jubilee play frame: namely that members of the audience were fundamentally disconnected from their precultural ancestors and thus were in no way compromised by a depiction of the latter as bumbling, bloodthirsty savages. Indeed, the laughter both marked and guaranteed that the change of state had been complete. Hence, a spectator could tell us not only that the drama was humorous but that its message was important: "It showed what life was like before the church came, and it was a message about the arrival of the good news. People should watch the drama, think about it, and learn from it."

The significance of this Jubilee drama—what people should learn from it—concerned transformations not only from the past but from the present into the future. In the sermons and speeches that followed, its particular view of the past transformed—left entirely behind—and of cultural roots truncated became crucial to a nationalist vision of a future Papua New Guinea, a developed nation, united and prosperous.

### **The sermons and speeches: from savagery to citizenry in the nation of Papua New Guinea**

After the drama concluded, the master of ceremonies directed the by now almost 1,000 of us to the area next to the *aim* where the shelter had been constructed to shade the dignitaries. There a service took place, lasting over two hours. The service included prayers, sermons, and speeches by the bishop, by several Duke of York clergy, and by the prime minister. A central theme was change: change from savagery to civilization, as well as change from Australian domination to the political and economic autonomy of nationhood. And what was stressed as crucial to effecting such change was the unity that Christianity had brought to the country.

Thus, during the major sermon (in Pidgin English) we were told in images directly alluding to the change from the *momboto* to the present that

no matter where you go in Papua New Guinea, there is only one Bible. All people of the country are Christian people; George Brown [and other early named missionaries] came to us to turn the world upside down. . . . He came to change our lives, to bring us life. The missionaries eliminated our blindness; they gave us life. It is the life we will see when we go to heaven. . . . It is a new life. Our old lives are finished because the world has been changed; it has been turned upside down by these men who came here to live with us. . . . Today we have good lives because of these men.

But it was the prime minister, Rabbie Namaliu, who most explicitly linked the themes of unity and Christianity with those of nationhood and socioeconomic development. Also speaking in Pidgin English, he said:

It's been 116 years since the Methodist mission first came to our part of the country. . . . I think we are happy that George Brown came to bring us light. During these 116 years, many changes have occurred. It is true that some changes have not been too good, but many have improved our lives. . . . The government would not have been able to bring good changes into the country if these churches had not come first.

Namaliu elaborated on this theme in a subsequent speech, near the conclusion of the day's events:

Today the church is led by us; it is no longer led by Australians. In the same way, we are in control of the government. It was the church that handed over power first, then the government. We are happy to celebrate today because it was the church that opened the way and showed us . . . how to run our own government in this country. . . .

No matter where you go in this country today, the presence and influence of the church are strong; they are strong everywhere, particularly concerning spiritual development, community development, and the development of education and health programs. [I]n many ways, the church can effect better changes than can the government. The government has the resources, but the church has the knowledge to put those resources to good use.

Moreover, the church strengthens the unity of the country: the church doesn't know any boundary marks. No matter what part of the country you come from, if you are a member of the United or Catholic church and you go to the Central Province or to Bougainville, you will find members of your group there. . . . So the church is important in uniting the people, in uniting us here in Papua New Guinea, and in uniting us with the people of other countries as well. . . .

But I think there is another important role for the church. . . . It will not be long before there's considerable development of our gold, oil, and other resources. Soon the government will be receiving big revenues, and we will be seeking those who can help us spend them in order to improve the living conditions of all the people. There are not many groups that can help. Only the church has demonstrated that with just a little money it can bring development to improve the lives of the people in the villages. That is why this year and later, the church will be important in helping the government develop the country. The revenues from the big companies will open many things. I will be building many schools in villages where there are none now; I will be building many roads in areas which have none now. However, concerning all basic needs, such as education, welfare, and other needs, the missions will be able to help the government to strengthen development throughout our country. . . .

The influence of George Brown and the other missionaries will remain forever. That's why, 116 years after Dr. Brown first came, we spend a little time thinking about how it is we wish the church to continue to help us in the future. . . . And we think not only about the United church, but also about the Catholic church, the SDA [Seventh-Day Adventist] church, and the other churches of our country, because their teachings have been with us for a long time and will continue to be important because moral development and the development of ethics go along with education and health. We will not be able to improve our lives, to improve our customs, unless we strengthen our commitment to the churches in our various villages.

The themes of the past transformed—surpassed—were redundantly central to the Jubilee and to Namaliu's vision of Papua New Guinea as a united and prosperous nation. Namaliu was making an argument for unity in which church and state had to work hand-in-hand, and he did so not only because he was speaking at a church function. Papua New Guinea, in fact, defined itself in its constitution as a Christian country.

Namaliu appeared as an active participant in the enactment of what had become an official history. The imagery of the *momboto* transformed by the arrival of George Brown obviously reflected a view of history promulgated by the missionaries and framed in their language contrasting darkness with light. At some point between the 1929 Jubilee and the period of Errington's first research in 1968, these mission-motivated images of George Brown's arrival—that is, of the significance of the past and its relationship to the present—had become well established. No longer resisted by means of improvised appropriation, they had been performatively instantiated as truth. In 1929 the performers, deeply resenting the nonreciprocity inherent in European domination, had opened a resistance space by rereализing their relationship to the vehicles of colonial domination—coconut, ship, plane, and money. But by 1991,

neither resentment of nor resistance to the inequality of nonreciprocity was a salient theme in the Jubilee. The use of money, for instance, was noncontroversial and defined the transformation from savagery: both performers and audience accepted without contention the definition and manifestations of commerce.

With the instantiation of these images there had been, as we have said, a transformation of the play frame in what was now an official drama—a shift in what was funny. White has described what might have been a transitional case—were it to have occurred in East New Britain—in his analysis of somewhat similar comic conversion dramas performed on Santa Isabel in the Solomon Islands. He argued that although these dramas enacted a disjunction between the present and the past, they also depicted what were interpreted as important continuities. In fact, the dramas were funny because they traded “upon emotionally and politically loaded topics” (White 1991:143) concerning fundamental, ongoing ambiguities in people’s identities—as both Christian and customary, civilized and savage:

By constructing images of violence and aggression in the exaggerated persona of the heathen warrior, the play makes the covert overt, taking real ambivalences and subjecting them to symbolic resolution through re-enactment of the conversion process and its hopeful transformation of ‘dark’ passions.

In like manner, the patent asymmetries between Western technological power and *kastom* [customary] ways continue to be sources of ambivalent reflection in Santa Isabel today. [1991:143]

White’s performers, thus, might be seen as attempting and reattempting a self-transformation, a reconversion, as they have accepted, at least in part, the self-blame that accompanied colonial power relations.<sup>10</sup> Theirs was not the resistance of the 1929 Jubilee improvisation; nor was theirs the dominant discourse of the official history performed before Prime Minister Namaliu and other members of the East New Britain elite. Theirs, instead, was an intermediary position: ambivalently poised between anger at colonial inequalities and self-blame.<sup>11</sup>

By 1991, the Duke of York Islanders’ anger and self-blame alike had largely abated, and the mission-motivated images of the *momboto* past could be accepted during the Jubilee as no longer denigrating and as the foundation of a modern Papua New Guinea nation. These images were not only thoroughly familiar to the audience but also the basis of Namaliu’s construction of the future. This is not to say that Namaliu and the early missionaries had precisely the same agenda and historical position. However, both wanted to create structures and events that would incorporate disparate, contentious local groups into wider structures and events.<sup>12</sup> Such an incorporation saw the work of church and state as akin—indeed, one as the basis of the other.

This work, we suggest, asserted or assumed a number of politically useful and somewhat overlapping propositions: all Papua New Guineans had culture; there were many different cultures in the country; yet all Papua New Guineans possessed comparable savage pasts and therefore an “ur-equality.” In addition, differences among contemporary cultures were limited because they were to only a minimal extent primordial. Moreover, these (relatively) residual differences were ameliorated by the pervasive presence of Christianity—introduced throughout Papua New Guinea by Brown and comparable missionaries.

Thus, Namaliu’s speeches—and the events of the entire Jubilee—asserted what might be termed a *politics of nonculture*: they truncated particularist and primordial cultural roots by generalizing the savage past. As formulated in the 1991 Jubilee (and perhaps in the performance videotaped by Kulick’s friend), cultural differences had become sufficiently “underdetermined”—compartmentalized rather than pervasive—and sufficiently alloyed by Christian commonality as to provide no inexorable barrier to unity. In other words, the argument of the Jubilee events and speeches was that for Papua New Guinea to be a nation state, cultural traditions had to become equivalent through comparability. Because Gapun and Mioko, for instance, could be presented as having commensurate pasts, the differences between them could be presented as shallow. It might be said that for a Christian nation to be formed from a multiplicity of cultures (Papua New Guinea has over 700 linguistic groups), “All God’s

children's ancestors must have been bumbling savages." To resist this dominant discourse, this notion of an absolute disjunction between the present and the past, would be to run the risk of appearing anachronistic and peripheral, of appearing to be among the dwindling leafy-genital-covering crowd (perhaps one of East New Britain's ethnic minorities, studied by the Canadian anthropologists).

This is not to say that the hegemony of this discourse was complete. As all the participants at the Jubilee undoubtedly recognized, very substantial cultural differences remained in Papua New Guinea and formed the basis of distinct cultural identities;<sup>13</sup> the project of the Jubilee was far from being realized, and national unity was frequently subverted by (among other things) competitive struggles between local groups. Perhaps for this reason, the final event of the Jubilee, the choir competition, provided a vision of intergroup "harmony" as one of well-regulated and restricted contestation.

### **the choir competition as constituted equality**

After the church service and a break for lunch, the president of the Duke of York community government announced that the choir competition was about to begin on the school playing field. Nearly 2,000 gathered to witness the male, female, and mixed-voice choirs, from some 20 Duke of York villages, compete in the precision of their marching and the beauty of their four-part harmonies.

Each choir was decked in finery: the men of a particular contingent wore ties, white shirts, and *laplap* of the same color; women wore *laplap* and *meri blaus*. Some of the choirs were composed of ecumenical religious fellowships; moreover, no religion was excluded. One women's choir, for example, included members of both the United church and the New church (a recently established evangelical sect). Another was composed of those identified as the "Catholic mothers."

During the first part of the program, each choir marched around the playing field while singing two hymns, one prescribed for all and the other chosen by each group. During the second part, each choir appeared in turn to sing two additional hymns of its choice. The audience listened carefully to each of the performances. At least 50 people taped the singing, and several videotaped it. Our Karavaran friends were impressed: they thought that all the choirs were good—strong voiced, neatly attired, and well disciplined—and they could not decide which the judges should choose.

These Christian soldiers, as one of our companions explicitly characterized them, were very different from the motley savage warriors depicted in the drama with which the Jubilee had begun. Calmed by the hymn singing, the Duke of York Islanders had become the highly ordered hymn singers. The circumstances were no longer those of the Hobbesian war of all against all. The winners did not devour the losers. Nor was there either (substantial) gloating or grumbling over the judges' decisions. At least on this occasion, competition between groups was presented in highly structured and circumscribed terms as a process involving ontological equals.

### **the theft of deep history in the construction of nationalism**

Perhaps most generally, the Jubilee celebration, including the prime minister's speech and the choir competition, was addressing one of the central suppositions of contemporary nationalisms: that the nation must be composed of those sharing a particular cultural heritage. Handler (1988) has compellingly demonstrated, for example, that the demands of Quebecois separatists rested on the assertion that they had a distinctive cultural property, a heritage different from that of English-speaking Canadians. Such cultural property—often invented—was defined

through reference to a primordial and inalienable past, a deep rootedness. Creation of the nation (as opposed to the state) in such terms would become highly problematic in contexts, like Papua New Guinea, that were characterized by extreme cultural pluralism.<sup>14</sup>

We have suggested that one Papua New Guinea strategy for dealing with this problem involved articulating the objectives of nationalism with mission-induced—but pervasively accepted—views of the past (see Kapferer [1988, 1989] for convincing demonstrations that nationalisms build on locally held conceptions of person and polity). Those views of a sharply truncated past (crucial to the contemporary meaning of the *momboto*), which we have dubbed the invention of nontradition, had become the basis for claims of national unity.

During the period in which Jubilees had been celebrated, however, the meaning and political uses of the past seem to have changed. The available descriptions of the Jubilees in 1925 and 1929 suggest that the precontact past was directly remembered by a number of those still living. Despite the changes in life's circumstances after Brown's arrival, the present had real continuity with the precontact past. During this time of ardent colonialism, European depictions of the precontact past had as their most positive message that natives should be grateful to their colonial masters for having changed their lives for the better. As we have seen in the 1929 Jubilee play frame (including the events at other missionary meetings that Margetts considered comparable), natives resisted this message by appropriating colonialist images—the coconut, model ship, and airplane—in a limited but creative way. Indeed, in their comic improvisation they reconfigured social relations so as to emerge, however temporarily, the betters of their colonial masters.

By the time of Errington's first fieldwork and certainly by the 1991 Jubilee, the precontact past described as the *momboto* could no longer be contradicted by anyone's lived experience. The *momboto* had become a model of disconnection, either to be established through effort or assumed as given. The Santa Isabel case, if it can be extrapolated to East New Britain, suggests a later period of colonial penetration (subsequent to that of 1929). Rather than a mode of confrontation and resistance, the comic had become a means of symbolically resolving ambivalences and ambiguities concerning identity and worth in colonial contexts. As Karavarans came to blame themselves, the humor, it seems to us, became more painful than pointed. Eventually, by 1991, the humor had become easy and compelling. The drama celebrated a transcendent displacement of colonial conflicts; it had become the official and nonincriminating account of historical savagery, an anchor event.<sup>15</sup>

What this official history compelled—at least during the immediate time of its enactment—was the existence of a Papua New Guinea nation composed of equally cultured (or decultured) groups united through Christianity. The drama, of course, was a product of a specific (though not unique) ethnographic and historical context. Thus, the ideological constructions expressed in the contemporary formulation of the *momboto* would not “carry the force to become ‘real,’ to compel the imagination of community in a particular [nationalist] direction” (Foster 1991:254),<sup>16</sup> among, for example, the Quebécois, whose task was to assert unbroken continuity with the distant past.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the ideological constructions had themselves changed so as to reposition the present with respect to the past: in 1929, they both served European interests and impelled local resistance to colonialism; in 1991, they served national interests and provided the basis for intergroup commensurability.

In trying to ascertain why contemporary Duke of York Islanders portrayed their ancestors as ludicrous, we have been drawn (perhaps by some *malira* of “echoing images”) to illuminate and embody ethnographically not only the way in which a nationalist ideology disclosed its “ontological grounding” (Kapferer 1989:180) but also the way in which that grounding had itself been constructed.<sup>18</sup> The harmonies of the echoes, while derived from Western tonalities in many regards, were no longer employed in a Western melody.

By the end of the afternoon, the community government president was rushing the program along. It was nearly 5:00 p.m., the sun was beginning to set, and people had to start for home. The president suggested that we applaud God for having provided good weather. He then instructed us to bow our heads for a final prayer, in which God was thanked for having brought us from the darkness into the light so that now things were clear. As the audience dispersed—some on foot, some in motor boats, and some in canoes, paddling with considerable precision—Prime Minister Rabbie Namaliu rode off into the sunset in his helicopter, no longer only a model of a flying machine.

## notes

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1. We do not know when the term *momboto* was first used in the Duke of York Islands. The word did not appear in George Brown's 1887 *Vocabulary of the Dialect Spoken in the Duke of York Islands*. Nor did it appear in the emendations to this word list made during the next few years by Benjamin Danks.

2. As Bray suggests, the relative sophistication of Tolai and Duke of York Islanders is the product of "historical and geographical reasons" (1985a:191). Contacted earlier by Europeans than other Papua New Guineans, those on the Gazelle Peninsula (the Tolai homeland) and Duke of York Islands were "given a headstart in educational and economic development. This caused an initial imbalance, and although some steps are being taken to combat it, the imbalance is being maintained with time" (Bray 1985a:191). Indeed, in 1982, East New Britain had a higher percentage (31 percent) of students enrolled in grades seven through ten than any other province in the country (Bray 1985b:17). One must point out, however, that not all East New Britain children have had equal access to education. In 1983, Gazelle children fared better than Duke of York Island children, and the latter, better than Baining and Pomio youngsters. Thus, 81 percent of elementary-age children on the Gazelle Peninsula were enrolled in community school; 63 percent on the Duke of York Islands; 59 percent, in the two Baining census divisions; and 36 percent in the three Pomio census divisions (data extrapolated from Bray 1985a:189).

3. Our data confirm Thomas's (1992) finding that in their writings, missionaries in the Pacific avoided essentialisms that defined the differences between natives and Europeans as absolute. After all, if differences were absolute, true conversion would be impossible. Not surprisingly, however, missionaries might on occasions of discouragement slip into such essentialist comparisons, as in this confidential report.

4. White supremacy was not only assumed but actively defended. In January 1929, during what became generally known as the Rabaul Police Strike, native police and contract workers protested low wages and corporal punishment in orderly demonstrations near the Methodist and Catholic mission stations. Although the strike was suppressed in a few hours, the European community was thrown into a panic and rage. A citizen's committee was formed to ensure that the strike leaders be imprisoned and that efforts to improve native education be curtailed.

White supremacists remained on guard. Consider, for example, an excerpt from a letter from J. Hoogerwerf, the manager of the *Rabaul Times*, to J. Mouton, its owner, who was living in Australia:

Our friend, Wallace [a rival printer], seems to be in hot water with the Government. As I hear the Government has found out that Wallace and his mother are having a bad influence on the native chiefs. I know from old Miss von Ziegler that the luluais [government-appointed chiefs] visit the Wallaces, sit on

chairs with them round the table and are given tea and cigarettes and good advice as regards their work for the Government which should be paid for. Well, the Government may get sufficient reasons to perhaps deport the Wallaces. [Mouton 1936]

5. The Papua Ekalesia, Kwato Extension Association, United Church of Port Moresby, and Methodist Church of New Britain amalgamated to form the United Church of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands in 1968. For an excellent description of church history see Threlfell 1975.

6. We should mention that skits and comedies have become widespread across the Pacific, occurring at events such as school graduations, agricultural shows, cultural fetes, and sporting competitions, as well as on religious occasions such as Christmas. Typically, the audience consisted not only of locals but of indigenous officials and, sometimes, tourists or even anthropologists. In the case of the modern George Brown Jubilee, it would be unusual for the prime minister or Europeans to be present, but religious dignitaries and, perhaps, provincial leaders would attend.

7. Since the late 1960s, it had become increasingly common for the sponsors of mortuary ceremonies to erect a cement memorial—*aim*—sometimes to commemorate one particularly illustrious relative and sometimes to commemorate a matrilineal or cognatic line. The church had also encouraged erecting these to commemorate the early missionaries.

8. Handelman (1990:236–265) offered an excellent discussion of clowns as both markers and mechanisms of transition in life-cycle ceremonies. Clowns, he wrote, embody processuality and oscillation; they are reified paradox. However, we contend that in the case of the 1991 Duke of York Jubilee, the ancestors became funny in their clowning once an absolute—unambiguous—distinction between the present and the past was established, one that did not admit a betwixt and between.

9. Duke of York Islanders had traded with Europeans well before Brown's arrival. In fact, Brown's letter books indicated that they knew well how to comport themselves in trade when he first made contact with them (Brown 1875:574). In the course of this trade, they had encountered metal substantially prior to Brown's arrival. Bradley, for instance, mentioned trading iron hoops with Duke of York Islanders in his journal of 1791 (Bradley 1969:256–263). More puzzling in the Jubilee drama, however, was the reference to salt as a trade item. Salt could hardly have been a scarce condiment for coastal Pacific Islanders. However, one of our informants suggested a metaphorical interpretation: that just as salt made food savory, so too did the talk of the missionaries make the good news palatable.

10. Laughter in this context might be experienced as transformatory in itself. See Mosko (1992) who argued that ritually induced laughter served such a function among the Bush Mekeo.

11. The Santa Isabel Islanders resembled the Karavarans as Errington encountered them in 1968 and 1972. At that time, far more so than during 1991, Karavarans seemed preoccupied with keeping the *momboto* at bay (see Errington 1974a and 1974b). It was thought to be both a chaotic historical period that could abruptly return and an anarchical state of mind that could spill over into action. Unfortunately, for purposes of comparison, neither the Karavarans nor Errington attended the Jubilee at Molot in 1968. (At that time, the Karavarans were claiming that in the late 19th century the church had unfairly appropriated their land on the neighboring island of Ulu in order to make a plantation.) We would expect, however, that the dramatic ambience at that time would be more as White described than as we witnessed in 1991.

12. That Namaliu and George Brown had somewhat comparable objectives makes a suggestion by an anonymous reviewer of this article all the more provocative: that in the 1991 performance the prime minister might have been the George Brown referent. Indeed, some of those attending this particular Jubilee might have hoped that Namaliu would lead Papua New Guinea to a "brighter" future. Unfortunately, the prime minister's attendance at the annual Jubilee was a very unusual—unprecedented—event.

13. That cultural differences were, in fact, strong and important virtually goes without saying for anyone familiar with Papua New Guinea at this time. Among the Duke of York Islanders and the Tolai, for instance, the importance of the *dukduk* and *tubuan* ritual complex and the use of shell money were significant markers of unique cultural identity. For discussion of this ritual complex in the Duke of York Islands, see Errington (1974a); for the most recent discussions of it among the Tolai, see Neumann 1992 and Simet 1992. It would seem that at this time, it was virtually impossible for anyone to have an identity simply as a Papua New Guinean, without reference to a specific cultural group. Those using the nationalist strategy exhibited in the 1991 Jubilee were not trying to erase cultural differences; they were only trying to make them more commensurate and less exclusive.

14. The break-up of the Soviet Union was only one contemporary example.

15. In this regard, Strathern's (1980) criticism of Errington's (1974a, 1974b) discussions of the *momboto* for employing Western concepts, such as the opposition between nature and culture, was misplaced. An account could be ethnographically accurate in describing certain ideas as locally salient, even though those ideas might prove to have been introduced. Neumann's (1992) criticism that Errington (1974a, 1974b) and Sack (1985) ignored the voices of many Tolai who might deny the significance of the *momboto* (the *bobotoi*, in Tolai) was similarly misplaced. Official histories, as dominant discourse, may be both compelling and contested. To judge by the Mioko Jubilee—as well as by conversations we had with villagers in other contexts during 1991—the rhetoric of the *momboto* still comprised the dominant discourse in the Duke of York Islands. Both Strathern and Neumann failed to consider the sociohistorical processes that would have persuaded native people to adopt—or to contest—the view of the *momboto*. It must also be recognized, however, that Errington's analyses of Karavar (1974a, 1974b) might have benefited from a fuller consideration of historical process. It was not, however, this deficiency that Strathern (1980) and Neumann (1992) criticized. If it had been, their criticisms might have been more telling.



16. Foster alluded here to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), a work important to all subsequent discussions of nation formation. In it, Anderson explored the manner in which citizens, who will never actually know one another, come to "image their communion" (1983:15). Ploeg (1991) elaborated this topic specifically in relation to Papua New Guinea. For other recent considerations of nationalism in the Pacific, see Babadzan 1988, Feinberg 1990, Hirsch 1990, Linnekin 1990, LiPuma and Meltzoff 1990, Mangi 1989, and Thomas 1990. See Gewertz and Errington (1991:169–195) for an analysis of how the Chambri of the East Sepik Province negotiated with the state. Foster (1991) provided an excellent cross-cultural summary of the recent nationalist literature.

17. Handler recounted many instances of what he called "cultural objectification" (1988:14). In one, a performance at the Quebec City Coliseum about unique and indigenous ways of life, a "traditional if larger than life farmhouse interior [was constructed such that the] audience, willingly suspending disbelief, could imagine itself to be looking into an old-fashioned farmhouse parlor" (1988:12).

18. There may be further shifts in the meaning of the precontact past. For example, the notion of the *momboto* as precontact would be inherently implausible for those educated in a Western view of history and anthropology. As Tolai were probably the best educated group in Papua New Guinea, one might expect more Tolai than Duke of York Islanders to reject or challenge this positioning of the present with respect to the past. Thus, Neumann quoted a Tolai who said that such a view of the past was "bullshit" (1992:204).

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