

The Making of Global and Local Modernities in Melanesia

Humiliation, Transformation and the Nature
of Cultural Change

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Chapter 10

On Humiliation and Class in Contemporary Papua New Guinea

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In this essay about contemporary Papua New Guinea, we consider Sahlins' (1992) view that '[t]o "modernize," the people must first learn to hate what they already have, what they have always considered their well-being. Beyond that, they have to despise what they are, to hold their own existence in contempt – and want, then, to be someone else' (1992, p.24). We must, thus, examine whether the generation of a 'global inferiority complex' (1992, p.24) accompanies modernization, wherein a people must 'pass through a certain cultural desert to reach the promised land of "modernization": [wherein] they [must] ... experience a certain humiliation' (1992, p.23). In other words, we should consider whether humiliation, as this view suggests, is an 'important stage of economic development' (1992, p.24) such that a people must become 'sufficiently disgusted with themselves' (1992, p.24) to wish to become more like us.

Let us begin to answer these questions with some preliminary probing of Sahlins' position. First of all, it is important to note that the 'they/themselves' of whom Sahlins writes, while culturally various (including Mendi, Hawaiians, Fijians, Kwakiutl and Chinese), are all 'essentialized' in contrast with an 'us' in this significant regard: none, at least initially, subscribed to the Western cultural logic in which 'each person takes the betterment of himself as his life project, thus, [composing] a society of autonomous individuals preoccupied with private material satisfactions' (1992, p.12). Rather, at least when first confronted with the objects that the emissaries of such a Western logic came to offer, they rejected what Sahlins calls 'development' for what he aptly terms 'develop-man.' Instead of using these objects for private ends, they selectively incorporated them so as to enrich local ideas of 'what mankind is all about' (1992, p.14) – that is, so as to derive personal satisfaction through fulfillment of obligations (and thereby enrich relations with kith and kin). Unlike 'we,' therefore, who oppose private satisfactions and social obligations and believe that '[w]hatever we do for others diminishes our selves' (1992, p.12), 'they' – certainly the Pacific peoples cited – believe that 'in doing things for others people constructed themselves' (1992, p.12).

Sahlins notes that develop-man may in some cases last for centuries. During this time, numerous changes will take place, but these get incorporated into local terms. Consequently, he importantly argues that "'tradition" in modern times does not mean

stability so much as a distinctive way of changing' (1992, p.22). Yet, if develop-man does become development, Sahlins argues, it will be as a quantum leap, across a wasteland without meaning: rather than their own system subsuming the wider world, the wider world comes to subsume their own and, in so doing, discredits it as humiliatingly inadequate.

Continuing with our probing of Sahlins' position, it is also important to note that his 1992 perspective articulates with criticism he makes in an earlier, 1988 paper ('Cosmologies of Capitalism: The Trans-Pacific Sector of "The World System"') of Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History* (1982). Arguing against the 'Marxist-utilist theory favoured by many world systematists' (1988, p.3), Sahlins rejects the position that 'culture is a reflex of the "mode of production," a set of social appearances taken on by material forces that somehow possess their own instrumental rationality and necessity' (1988, p.3). Instead, he suggests that "a mode of production itself will specify no cultural order – unless and until its own order as production is culturally specified" (1988, p.4).

Sahlins, therefore, in his examination of history (especially of world capitalism), wishes to make variable, rather than automatic, significant changes in cultural systems (changes, as mentioned above, pertaining to modes of changing) relative to changes in productive systems. In other words, he wishes to account for the long-term perpetuation of local systems of develop-man, despite shifts (indeed transformations) in productive systems – especially shifts that elsewhere might be linked to development. Thus, if cultural changes are relatively independent of changes in the productive systems, one appropriately would look to cultural reasons for explaining those shifts that do take place between the cultural systems of develop-man and development.

We are now in a position to understand the significance of humiliation, a culturally registered experience, in Sahlins' model. 'Humiliation' not only fulfills the theoretical requirements of Sahlins' 'culture-centric' position – it is the 'right kind' of impetus – but it also seems appropriate as the 'right magnitude' of impetus. In this latter regard, it would appear sufficiently permeating of life and destructive of sense of worth so as to push people into and across the cultural desert – the wasteland between distinct systems of meaning; it would appear sufficiently galling as to impel people into the quantum shift inherent in entirely remaking themselves.

(Two parenthetical observations: It should be noted that Sahlins leaves relatively unprobed the reasons why humiliation comes about such that develop-man yields to development: other critiques aside, this necessarily becomes a problem for attempts to posit humiliation as generating process. It should also be noted that Sahlins' view – that people in each develop-man culture share relatively coherent cultural logics through which they see the world and that they must be made to see themselves as those already participating in development see them before they are willing to see the world anew – is consonant with positions as politically various as Fanon's [1968], about the colonization of consciousness and Rostow's [1971], about the conditions necessary for economic 'take-off'.)

It has, of course, become rather problematic, given contemporary discussions of mosaics, hybridities and the like, to view cultural systems, as Sahlins seems to.

in noun-like rather than in adjectival-like terms – as entities rather than as processes. Correspondingly, viewing cultural differences as fixed and absolute – as essentialized – has become equally problematic. Not only has there been criticism of characterizing whole societies through such all-encompassing essentialisms as Orientalism and Occidentalism (see, among others, Said, 1978; Carrier, 1995a) but of doing so through such (slightly) more particular ones as concerning gifts and commodities (Thomas, 1991; Carrier, 1995b). Indeed, since Sahlins' contrast between develop-man and development-focused societies appears to mirror that between gift and commodity-focused societies, the criticism already applied to the one set of contrasts would seem to hold for the other as well.

In the face of this criticism (much of which was, to be sure, developed subsequent to Sahlins' writings cited here and could have once been applied to many anthropologists, ourselves included), Sahlins' 'geography' – the idea of a wasteland between cultural systems which have remained fundamentally (epistemologically) distinct, although in long-term interaction – becomes troublesome. Consequently humiliation as a prime mover – a force sufficient to impel a desert-crossing – loses much of its theoretical imperative, its *raison d'être*.

Where does this leave us? It is still worth considering whether ideas of develop-man and development may remain useful, not for characterizing and distinguishing among actual and entire cultural systems, but for describing locally and situationally relevant reference points within systems. Might, thus, interacting individuals ('dividuals,' as Strathern [1988] would have it) be develop-man or development-focused simultaneously, or by turns? This, in fact, seems plausible: We have, for example, heard evangelically-oriented Chambri (with whom we have long worked in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea¹) criticize one another for being, unlike Jesus, too privately self-interested, thus equating true Christianity with the develop-man values of sharing and cooperation; on the other hand, we have also heard them criticize one another for being, (again) unlike Jesus, too backwards, thus equating true Christianity with development values of monogamy, nuclear families and an individual work ethic.

And, even if the perspective that humiliation has a/the causative role of impelling a shift from one essentialized system to another is flawed, might it still be worth considering whether 'humiliation' has useful ethnographic relevance – as, for instance, in describing how people evaluate themselves relative to others within systems in which develop-man and development are co-existing parameters?

It is true that humiliation does remain a continually relevant possibility in any system in which prestige is competitively based. (Thus, in an account that many Melanesianists could duplicate, Michael Young reported a Kalauna informant telling him of his anxiety that he might be presented with a famously large pig – a pig he feared he could never properly reciprocate [personal communication].) Yet, though humiliation (whether by calculation or miscalculation) is an occasional product of Melanesian life (otherwise it would not have the status of something to be strongly avoided), it seems to us that it is only infrequently invoked: that pushing competition to the point that serious humiliation becomes likely rarely serves anyone's interests.

This is the case not only with respect to develop-man objectives, as in systems of egalitarian redistribution. (Ongka may have wished to become the 'biggest' Kawelka ever by giving the biggest *moka* ever, but he did not wish to humiliate either his supporters or the recipients of his pigs and pearl shells – and of his Land Cruiser, motorbike and Australian dollars [Strathern, 1979]). It is also true with respect to development objectives, as in displays of affluence among Papua New Guinea's new elite. In fact, it seems to us that humiliation is rarely induced (much less accepted) because it is, in effect, so reducing – so diminishing – of self that people will be made to feel that they have nothing more to lose: among those with develop-man objectives, humiliation threatens to shift exchange into war; among those with development objectives, it threatens to shift admiration, perhaps tinged with envy, into (potentially violent) enmity.

Indeed, it seems to us that what Sahlins has glossed as development systems, namely the world systems of contemporary capitalism, would have no chance of becoming instantiated in places like Papua New Guinea if they depended on the humiliation of develop-man to do so: although in a caste-based system (like that existing during the colonial era in Papua New Guinea) it may prove useful for certain people to be defined as utterly 'other' through humiliation,² in a class-based one like that in existing contemporary Papua New Guinea, it is far more useful to disguise rather than accentuate differences in kind.

We could, in fact, provide many ethnographic examples of efforts to avoid inflicting humiliation – examples of how differences in kind are down-played or otherwise obscured by the affluent in contemporary Papua New Guinea (see Gewertz and Errington, 1999). Thus university-educated accountant, Valentine Kamburi – President of Chamber of Commerce of the East Sepik town of Wewak and the most development-focused Papua New Guinean we know – keeps many pigs back at home in his Boiken village for redistribution during traditional ceremonies and claims absolute continuity between what he calls the 'new economy' and the 'old one.' Proud of the fact he has been initiated, he describes initiations as just like school examinations. He told us that: 'The more brilliant – the tougher and more intelligent – emerge as leaders. They engage in the final dance and wear special decorations, holding special clubs and spears. These would be the ones better able to lead in gardening and hunting, fishing and trading – they would be big men. Traditional initiations are like going to university.' As a successful businessman Kamburi is (in his view) thus just like a successful big man. He speaks of the house he has built in his home village which, in a synthesis between the old and the new, looks like a native house from the outside, but has all the accouterments of modernity inside. And, in response to our direct questions, he has insisted that people aren't jealous of him for having such a house because they expect it of a contemporary big man. In fact, they call him '*kiap bilong waitman and kiap bilong ples*' (a leader among white men and a leader in the village). They say this without cynicism, Kamburi says, because they are proud of him – proud that one of theirs has done so well.

John Illumbui's story makes it clearer how such a businessman may actually interact with develop-man focused kin to affirm commonalities (see, also, Gewertz

and Errington, 1991, pp.111–115). John, also a university educated accountant, lives some distance from his fellow Chambri in their major settlements. Indeed, John rather rarely visits them because he wishes to avoid the torrent of requests he would receive for money. Yet periodically he does come home: at the time we met him, he was in Wewak to celebrate the first communion of his sister's daughter. On the night of his arrival in Wewak, John held an all-night beer party for the older men of the Chambri Camp. He began by thanking them for the help they had given him – in effect, attributing his development achievements to their develop-man assistance. It was this help, he said, that has enabled him to become a success. They responded that he was indeed acting as a young Chambri should by showing gratitude to the senior men of the community with his 'little present' of beer and by promising to repay them all for their considerable help. This way, they continued somewhat darkly with allusions to sorcery, no one would be angry with him. Several then made more specific statements about the help he must repay: one said that he had come to see John and give him baby presents when he was born; another enumerated the names of those who had died since John had last visited, implying that contributions to death expenses would be in order. John nodded dutifully at each reminder.

Near the end of his visit, John told us that his stay was costing him at least K150 (then, about \$200) per day. In fact, he had that morning missed his plane and joked that his saving account would be depleted by the time he could leave. His Chambri wife added (in English): 'These Chambri will finish you up entirely if you have any money.' We then asked John directly why he helped his relatives. He replied that they were his family and would become angry if he did not. When we persisted by asking what would happen if they did become angry, he said (also in English): 'They would kick me out of the family and if I did anything big they would not come and no one would see it.'

Despite John's Western education and business activities – despite a life that most Chambri regard as epitomizing the potentialities of development – he genuinely located fundamental aspects of himself in his interaction with develop-man Chambri. Yet, he was also careful to control the nature of his engagement with them.

Thus, as these two examples suggest, in contemporary Papua New Guinea, development-focused people can often arrange their lives so as to maintain develop-man connections and interests. While the reverse is, of course, less true – those whose capacities are primarily develop-man-focused would likely find it very difficult to establish significant development capacities – there is presently in Papua New Guinea considerable ideological effort to convince such develop-man-focused that they are far from literal non-entities. Indeed, many of them feel enhanced by caterings on the part of the development-focused to their interests. Thus, those develop-man-focused may be told by national politicians that Papua New Guinea's strength as a nation rests on the strength of its 'traditional' cultures. Moreover, in the context of tourism, they may be told that their 'traditional' cultures are income-earning resources – themselves, therefore, the path to development. Additionally, the develop-man-focused may also be told by advertisers that such fruits of development as Pepsi Cola and Arnotts Biscuits are

fully compatible with, and enhancing of, 'traditional,' village-based lifestyles (Errington and Gewertz, 1996; Gewertz and Errington, 1996). Finally, they may be told that if they have not achieved development, it is not because they are a different kind of people or are ill-placed in an unfair system, but, rather, because they simply have not fully applied themselves (perhaps relying too readily on hand-outs, as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have recently been suggesting concerning the Papua New Guinean 'grassroots'). Importantly, those who are less than fully convinced by, or are otherwise dissatisfied with, this rhetoric – and many may be – nonetheless are more likely to feel envious and disgruntled. (They may thus resemble the disaffected Fijians described by Kaplan and Kelly [1994] in their criticism of Gramsci: both may, in other words, occupy an intermediate position in what had been presented as a political divide between those with a revolutionary consciousness and those with a false consciousness.)

Conclusion

We certainly do not wish to argue that class – whatever the efforts to hide its injuries – does not hurt in contemporary Papua New Guinea. Many of our Chambri friends – especially those living in town for whom daily survival in a cash-based economy is an issue – are recognizing – and upset in that recognition – that their children are not going to be remotely competitive with those of Kamburi or Illumbui. The Kamburis and the Illumbuis of contemporary Papua New Guinea, after all, aspire to educate their children abroad so that they might learn (among other things) to speak – as one of our middle class informants explained – 'a non-Melanesian inflected English which would allow them to become competitive in a world market.'³ Yet these friends, though certainly wishing they could command more material satisfactions (to say nothing of necessities), still take solace – either as sustenance or as sop – in the values of their develop-man knowledge and practices. In this regard, we might suggest in conclusion that it is the increasing number of those who find both develop-man unsatisfying and development impossible who are residing on a cultural wasteland. Having very little to lose, some of these may, as rascals, find the humiliation of others inherent in crimes of often seemingly gratuitous violence, including rape, a useful resource.

Notes

- 1 Before we began to collaborate in our work with the Chambri, Deborah made two independent trips to live among them, in 1974–75 and in 1979. Together we have visited them five additional times: in 1983, 1987, 1994, 1996 and 1999.
- 2 Some contemporary Papua New Guinea phrasings of local desire do convey a sense of humiliation relative to Europeans. These phrasings, we venture, reflect the persisting effects of caste-like, colonial encounters, wherein Europeans established differences between themselves and natives through an oft-reiterated rhetoric of differential development. Indeed, so effective was this rhetoric that not only did Errington report Duke of York Islanders

describing themselves as backward (at least for the moment) during the pre-independence 1960's (Errington, 1974), but so did Kulick (1992) find relatively remote Gapun villagers doing so during the post-independence 1980's. One villager told Kulick:

[I]t's like we want to come up like all European countries. In the countries you've all changed ... In the countries everyone lives well ... And, too, you've got all kinds of factories to make all kinds of things: boats or ships or airplanes or cars or motors or money – whatever, all these factories are in the countries. There aren't any here among us in Papua New Guinea.

Importantly, however, even this Gapun statement, redolent as it is of colonial caste-like relationships, does not necessarily represent an indigenous condemnation of develop-man. Rather, at least to judge from the 1960s Duke of York Islands, this language likely stems significantly (if not wholly) from a frustration that develop-man has been unfairly curtailed. Certainly in the Duke of York case, the objective of equality with Europeans through the acquisition of their goods – boats, ships, airplanes, cars, motors, money – was one formulated in term of the embedded sociality of develop-man. This is to say, the frustration of the Gapun may be not that they are unable to become Europeans, but that they are unable to use European goods (as Ongka did) to further develop-man objectives.

- 3 Our ethnographically based argument that develop-man and development can readily coexist – as with Kamburi and Illumbui – raises the question of why development itself becomes appealing to such men. Certainly they (and many other Papua New Guineans) recognize that colonists and first-world others have long distinguished themselves as superior and justified their superiority, both on an individual and a collective level, through their affluent life styles (Gewertz and Errington, 1999). Such a recognition has fostered a view among the elite and others in Papua New Guinea that development can importantly augment develop-man – that develop-man without the resources associated with development may be insufficient in itself. However, this recognition does not support Sahlins' position that development becomes desirable to the extent that develop-man becomes (totally) discredited and repudiated.

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