I   A 'tombstone opening' and the problem of island custom

In the Christmas of 1976 more than one hundred Melanesian Australians returned to their home on Murray Island, at the easternmost end of Torres Strait. They had come from the towns and cities of north Queensland, from the pearl culture stations of the Northern Territory, and from the new mining towns of Western Australia to celebrate the interment of a kinsman. Gelam had died at Rockhampton, where his children lived, but he had spent most of his life on Murray and the family wanted him to be buried there. His ashes had to wait several years until the money could be raised and his far-flung kindred assembled to accompany him on his last journey. With them they brought an inscribed tombstone, the 'opening' or unveiling of which would mark the end of mourning. It was usual for several years to elapse between the death and the opening ceremony, leaving time for grief to abate. So there was nothing unseemly about the festive character of the occasion or the feasting and dancing that would follow. The kinsfolk would give the dead man his due and, with this 'last goodbye', return with easy minds to the business of living.

The family had quietly interred the ashes some days before and, in a private ceremony, had linked hands to form a chain behind the two men who mounted the tombstone in its cement base. Along with two other tombstones that would be unveiled at the same time, it was now draped with yards of bright cotton cloth and surrounded by a fence from which hung shredded palm leaves and paper Christmas decorations. The Anglican priest, himself a Meriam (as the Murray Islanders call themselves), led the company in prayer and blessed the stone. Then two elderly relatives of the deceased began to unwind the cloth which, together with the ten dollar bills pinned to it, would be their payment for this service. While they worked, the onlookers sang

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an old Meriam hymn such as the dead man would have heard from childhood.

This done, a cousin who had come up from Townsville delivered a short speech in a mixture of Meriam and English. He recalled the main events of Gelam's career, giving particular importance to his service in the Torres Strait Light Infantry during the Second World War and explaining how this had won for Islanders the 'wonderful freedom' they now enjoyed on the mainland. By the time he had finished night was falling, and we made our way to the other end of the village where a feast had been prepared. On long trestle tables under the trees were bowls of turtle meat and eggs, fish stewed in coconut cream, tinned meat, rice, damper bread cooked in an earth oven, and huge pots of tea. After a brief speech of welcome, some two hundred people sat down to eat, and an hour later we were all sitting around on mats, waiting for the dancing to begin.

The visitors were to compete against a home team, and we could hear the sounds of last-minute rehearsal not far off in the darkness, punctuated by the crack of beer cans being opened. But following the 'island time' of countless jokes, it was almost midnight before the drums began to sound and fifty men trooped into the circle of light and began forming ranks on the dancing ground. Dressed alike in short red waist cloths, called *lavalavas*, and white singlets, with coloured scarves around their heads, they moved into the first set of coordinated movements that characterize 'island dance' throughout Torres Strait. After an hour or so the dancers and audience were getting into the swing of things. The stamping grew heavier and the leaps lighter. The air was full of whoops and ear-splitting whistles. In the breaks, women went round the dancers with mugs of water, shaking talcum powder over their sweating shoulders till they turned white. Old women jumped up and clowned to gales of laughter. On any big occasion the dancers 'go for daylight', and these must make the most of their time for the boat was due to return the next day.

Among the visitors were a number who had not been back to Murray for many years. Their brief visit recreated for a few days the vital community that had existed up to the early 1960s, when the sons of Gelam and many others had emigrated in search of better economic and social opportunities. What they left behind was a rump, numbering a little over three hundred, with more than its share of the very old and the very young.

Plate 2. A tombstone is blessed: Father Seriba Sagigi

A short history of island custom

These events could have taken place with only minor variations in any one of the thirteen other Torres Strait Islander communities in the Strait, in the administrative and commercial centre on Thursday Island, or in urban settings such as Townsville, where Islanders were present in force. They were manifestations of what Islanders call 'island custom'. Asked to describe it, they would probably first cite their dancing and music, and their way of celebrating important occasions such as tombstone openings or Christmas. But they would also have in mind a certain ordering of relations among themselves, usually in the idiom of kinship. Island custom stands in a contrapuntal relationship to 'white man custom', something that is appropriate for Islanders and inappropriate for Europeans, as for example dancing. Alternatively, it may be something that is appropriate only in their own domain, like the *lavalava* men wear at home, in preference to the trousers they put on for town. There has long been a protocol for receiving visiting dignitaries 'island fashion', and nowadays Islanders on the mainland display what they call their 'culture' in festivals of multi-culturalism. There are a few who make their living as dancers. But this is not yet what Blanca Muratorio has called 'alienated folkloric consciousness' (1980:51); it is rather the outward aspect of a way of life that they maintain primarily for their own satisfaction. Island custom is a lived and living culture, strong enough to survive not only a succession of changes in its original environment, but also transplanting; a culture capable of taking on new meanings and functions.

· Like the *costumbre* of the Meso-American Indians[1] and much of the *kastom* of the Pacific Islands[2], island custom is traditional primarily in the sense of being distinctive to a stable, long established, closely knit and self-conscious society. Historically it is a thing of shreds and patches, many of which have come from other places over the last century or so.

This is not to suggest that nothing survives from the period before Europeans invaded Torres Strait. Judith Fitzpatrick-

[1] There is a voluminous literature on the *costumbre* of the Meso-American Indians. I have found Kay Warren's *Symbolism of subordination* (1978) of particular interest.
[2] For an overview of *kastom* in post-independence Melanesia, see Keesing and Tonkinson, 1982.

Nietschmann (1980b) has shown, for example, that the structures underlying the modern ritual of tombstone opening are those of the old mortuary rites. There is the same idea that the spirits linger about the living after death, and that their separation must be effected through ritual treatment of their remains, some time after the first disposal. The division of ritual labour is also unchanged, as are the gifts that conclude the affair. But the old mortuary rites included mummification on some islands and preservation of the skull on others, practices that were abandoned in the 1870s when the Islanders converted to Christianity. Some time later the rites were reconstituted in a form acceptable to the authorities, to be performed on consecrated ground with a priest officiating. However, the feasting, the singing and the dancing are all local adaptations of forms brought in by Polynesians and Melanesians who came to work in Torres Strait during the second half of the nineteenth century. According to Anna Shnukal,

> 'Torres Strait Broken' was brought to Torres Strait by the South Sea Islanders who spoke a pidgin that had developed in the Pacific region during last century . . . It was a lingua franca for the different language groups who worked in the marine industry in Torres Strait, but became a creole in Torres Strait around the turn of the century, first on Darnley and Stephen Islands and a little later on St. Paul's Mission, acquiring as native speakers the children of the South Sea men and their Torres Strait Island wives. (Shnukal pers. comm.; also 1983a, 1983b)

It is now the vernacular on Thursday Island and, in modified form, on the Australian mainland.

The foreign presence dates back one hundred and twenty years. Torres Strait was discovered for Europe as early as 1606, but contacts were brief and infrequent until the foundation of the Australian colony in 1788, when it became a regular seaway. Even then the passing vessels did not disrupt the established way of life, though they disturbed it violently on more than one occasion. During the 1860s, however, numbers of small vessels, owned by Europeans but manned by South Sea Islanders and Asians, came to exploit pearl shell and trepang (*beche-de-mer*). At about the same time the Queensland Government was bringing the region into its sphere of influence and under its jurisdiction. Then in 1871 the London Missionary Society began the work of conversion in this latest of unevangelized fields. By 1877 there

was a small but thriving settlement on Thursday Island, with a miniature official and military establishment, and a motley assemblage of peoples and nationalities, brought thither by the developing marine industry. When the Cambridge anthro-pological expedition arrived in 1898 the Melanesians, whose savage civilization they had come to study, were already devout churchmen, loyal subjects of Queen Victoria and participants in the international division of labour. Today, more than half the estimated 16,000 Torres Strait Islanders live (like Gelam's kinsmen) on the Australian mainland.

Emigration to the mainland is a development of the last twenty-five years. For the preceding century, the Islanders had lingered on the periphery of the modern world, providing its garment industries with the shell for making buttons, yet still planting bananas and hunting turtle for their food. It is this latter feature that differentiates them from most mainland Aborigines. Conquest was not for them a catastrophe that left them dispossessed of their land and deprived of their traditional means of livelihood. Rather, through a coincidence of com-mercial and government policies, they were confined to their islands as a labour reserve, dependent on certain commodities yet able if need be to maintain themselves by subsistence activities.

The Islanders, restricted in their movements, were not left alone. First missionaries and later government officials recon-structed and managed their communities along lines deemed appropriate to their new status as Christians and British subjects. They had no option but to go along with these changes, but they were not necessarily averse to them. Longtime traders, the good things of life had always come to them from faraway places, and white people had some very good things. Accepting one thing, however, committed them unwittingly to others that they might rather have done without, in a process that got increasingly out of their control.

They nevertheless attempted to reassert control, mitigating in some degree the effects of dependence and domination. According to the old myths, their ancestors subjected the fetishes brought in from other places to a process of 'domesti-cation', integrating them into the local structures without denying their exotic origins. In the same way, latter day Islanders domesticated not only the songs and dances they adopted from the South Sea people, but also the diving boats, the church and

government, weaving them about with customary practices and organizing them along customary lines. Thus island custom became, to adapt the title of Eugene Genovese's 1974 study of slavery, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*.

Colonial authority made no objection to island custom. While it suppressed practices it found offensive, it did not expect Islanders to become like white people, but rather to live in a manner appropriate to their presumed stage of cultural evolution. Thus government and church saw no harm in extending their patronage to island festivals.

Islanders at first found this patronage gratifying, but later they began to wonder if it was not rather patronizing. The island custom, by which they had lived without thought for so long, now became problematical. Was it not so much a statement of difference as of inferiority? Was this, after all, a way of life appropriate to Christians and Australian citizens who wanted to be considered 'civilized'? Yet how could people reject the practices that had formed the fabric of their daily lives? Could island custom not perhaps be reconstituted in such a way as to free it of its colonial associations? This was the conclusion that Gelam's kinsfolk had reached, when they made their way back to Murray – but only after a long period of uncertainty and painful experience.

Understanding island custom

Island custom also poses a problem for the social scientist, for it is amenable to two modes of analysis, which I shall somewhat arbitrarily designate as political economy and anthropology.

Anthropology began as the study of 'primitives' through the technique of intensive fieldwork. Dedicated to the understanding of non-Western peoples, its weakness was that it disregarded external linkages to isolate a 'culture' suspended in space and time. According to Eric Wolf's critique, 'a methodological unit of enquiry was turned into a theoretical construct by assertion, a priori' (1982:14). Anthropology has nevertheless tended to carry these constructions over into the study of 'ex-primitives', conceptually isolating peoples who are indisputably part of mass industrial society.

Political economy, in any case, has little use for the anthropologist's 'local knowledge'. It assumes a capitalist world system that penetrates into the remotest places and transforms all that

it touches. Institutions, however bizarre, are no longer ex-
pressions of other traditions but instruments of *force majeure*.
Other cultures, however exotic, are no more than false
consciousness, to be seen through but not seen.

Fieldwork does not absolve the anthropologist from con-
sidering global forces; rather should it provide a particular
perspective on them, as they are experienced by a particular
group of people in a particular socio-cultural setting. The task is
to analyse the ways, great and small, in which this setting
mediates the global forces that bear upon it, redistributing their
effects and transforming their meanings – even as it is itself being
transformed.

The highlands of Papua New Guinea provide a convenient
illustration. During the early years of colonization, highland
men were prepared to work for Europeans in return for shells,
which they used in ceremonial exchange. By suddenly increasing
the flow of shells, the employers created an inflation in the gift
economy and so, wittingly or not, secured a continued supply of
labour. Thus one might say that ceremonial exchange now had
the function of reproducing labour for the capitalist system. But
one cannot reduce it to this function, for it was simultaneously
part of another system of values and relations, with its own 'laws
of motion'.[3] This does not mean that the two systems were
locked in a frozen embrace. The imposition of peace and the
continuing inflation of the shell supply precipitated changes in
the indigenous political system, which in turn had consequences
for the conduct of colonial government (Feil 1984). Such
situations are better understood in terms of what John Comaroff
has called the 'dialectics of articulation', a process 'which not
only constitutes and transforms all the parties to it, but also
constructs the very boundaries between the "internal" and the
"external" ' (1984:574).

C. A. Gregory writes of the highlands, 'The essence of the
PNG economy is ambiguity. A thing is now a gift, now a

[3]   Some Marxist scholars have attempted to analyse such problems in terms of
     the articulation of modes of production (c.f. Foster-Carter 1978). In an earlier
     article (1977; 1982), inspired by Harold Wolpe's analysis of internal
     colonialism in South Africa (1975), I attempted to understand Torres Strait in
     these terms. However, while I was able to clarify the dynamics of the island
     economies, the articulation model did not enable me to make sense of the
     government intervention, which has been the all-important factor in Torres
     Strait. I now consider that a direct comparison of Australia and South Africa is
     not useful. (For another view, see Hartwig 1978.)

commodity, depending on the social context of the transaction'
(1982:116). Indeed ambiguity is the essential quality of the
institutions and ideas that articulate systems, and it is for this
reason that they become pressure points in times of change.

While colonial Papua New Guinea is readily understood as an
articulation of pre-existing socio-cultural systems, it must also
be understood as an emerging unitary system, characterized by
economic, political and cultural inequality. Viewed in this
frame, the indigenous system takes on an oppositional character
that is at least analogous to that of subordinate groups in more
homogeneous societies. The perpetuation of traditional forms
of sociality and meaning, and the improvising of new forms can
both be understood as means by which people without power
attempt to exert some control over their lives, even if it is only to
choose to do what they have to do anyway. Thus Genovese
writes of slaves in the Caribbean:

> The ways in which slaves, and later freedmen, cooked their
> food, reinterpreted received religious doctrines, organized a
> division of labor in the home, sang songs, worked hard or
> shirked – the ways, big and small, they shaped their own
> lives – provided them with reference points of their own.
> These reference points had strong African antecedents, but
> also drew on Europe, the colonial setting, and above all on
> the immediate plantation community. The slaves ruthlessly
> appropriated to themselves everything they needed and
> could use. The world view they fashioned in consequence
> allowed them to meet the demands of the economic and
> social system without fully becoming its creatures. (1975:73)

Through this astonishing creativity the slaves achieved not just a
corpus of satisfying and meaningful activities, but a domain in
which for a brief time they could be masters of themselves. It is
in this sense that Sidney Mintz speaks of the socio-political
significance of everyday life (1974:32). But while this may have
constituted resistance for the slaves, it could only do so as long as
it constituted accommodation for the slave owners, who
tolerated and even gave it their patronage on this assumption.
Indeed, many of the things out of which the slaves made their
world still 'belonged' to their masters, mediating, in Genovese's
terms, a 'hegemonic ideology' – hegemonic because it compelled
them 'to define themselves within the ruling system even while
resisting its aggression with enormous courage and resourceful-
ness' (1975:77). But meanings are harder to police than codes, so

that it is finally impossible to stop people from reinterpreting received doctrines in the drive to make sense of their experience. Thus while the slaves could look at themselves only in the mirror that their masters gave them, what they saw was not necessarily what their masters intended.

There is, of course, a world of difference between the highlanders, who still controlled the means of the subsistence production by which they mainly lived, surrendering only a narrow segment of themselves to the plantation, and the African slaves who controlled little besides their creativity, and even that only at their masters' pleasure. What they shared was the capacity to reserve an essential part of themselves outside the relations of production and consumption, which constituted the dominant order, and to defend this domain against encroachment. From this base they could project their own meanings and values onto this order, for example by their attribution of externally caused disease to sorcerers within the group, and the consequent search for healing within the same setting.

The highlanders' domain was based in their kin-ordered mode of production; that of the slaves and other such groups is harder to define. Gerald Sider, in an article on Newfoundland fisherfolk, has argued that the capacity of a people to resist domination

> lies, in part, in their cultural unity, and this unity is not based on a common depth of oppression or impoverishment nor, perhaps, even in a shared ideological commitment to oppose oppression, nor, definitely, in shared abstract images, such as ethnic identity. The core of culture lies in how people conceptualize their relations to each other, the claims people make on each other, the deferences towards each other's claims, and the concerns and caring people have for one another. (1980:21)

These relations, Sider explains, 'can be directly stated or denied, or they can be encapsulated in the symbols and rituals of daily life, the cycle of festivals, the ceremonies of birth, initiation, marriage and death, and the symbolic panoplies through which power and domination are imposed and supported or resisted'. However, despite surface appearance that the relations thus represented are abstract and static, they are rather based on 'the actual ties people develop with one another in the course of organizing both the labour of production and daily life, and the social appropriation of the product' (*ibid*.:22). In an earlier article (1976a), Sider describes the decline of mumming in