

Cambridge University Press

0521429315 - South Coast New Guinea Cultures: History, Comparison, Dialectic - Bruce  
M. Knauft

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# PART 1

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# GROUNDING

# 1

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## Theoretical and ethnographic context

How can anthropologists describe and compare ethnographic regions? Much information has been gathered since the nineteenth century that assumes a satisfactory answer to this question, but the problems that attend it are larger than ever. As emphasized from a politicoeconomic perspective, ethnographic regions are interwoven through trade, coercion, and economic dependence or political domination, particularly as states engage their ever-shrinking peripheries (e.g., Wolf 1982, 1988; Lomnitz-Adler 1991). As a result, the autonomy, divisibility, and uniqueness of ethnographic regions cannot be assumed.

From a postmodern perspective, the ethnographic characterization of culture areas and regions is an artifact – the result of a Western academic discourse that projects its own cultural biases and assumes incorrectly that these characterizations reflect other people's reality (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988; Boon 1990). Culture area comparisons thus neglect the irreducible authority of indigenous voices and collapse them into pigeon-holed categories deriving from the analyst's own time, place, and disposition. What becomes untenable from both the postmodern and the politicoeconomic vantage point is synchronic objectivism: the assumption that cultures have coherent, stable traits that render them comparable within the analytic space of a timeless ethnographic present.

In the current academic climate, few can deny the intellectual importance of these two critiques, much less their scholarly influence. How best to draw on their insights for purposes of regional characterization and comparison, however, remains problematic. Each critique, indeed, would seem to undercut if not eviscerate the other: the plurality of voices stressed in postmodern intertextuality is intrinsically opposed

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to the reductionism and homogenous perspective of both world system political economy and, to a slightly lesser extent, the *longue durée* structural history of the French *Annales* tradition.<sup>1</sup>

This tension underlines the uneasy confluence between postmodernism and critical or Marxist theory that has recently developed in American anthropology, as reflected in the journal *Cultural Anthropology* and in a number of influential recent works.<sup>2</sup> Though they are often melded together, these perspectives work from opposed premises: Marxist or politicoeconomic perspectives strive to identify underlying patterns through integrated analytic assertions, whereas postmodernism stresses fragmentation and disorder, both as an object of study and as a style of analysis. In recent works combining these perspectives, ethnographic authority is questioned by quoting diverse voices in a way that highlights their conflict, irony, and intertextual absurdity. This pastiche confounds the assumptions of received analytic categories and implies a highly critical analysis of social practices, particularly those of colonial or neocolonial agents, including ethnographers (e.g., Taussig 1987; Clifford and Marcus 1988). Restricted by its postmodern impetus, however, this criticism is often unable to progress beyond irony or parody and state a more positive alternative. The opposition often recognized between Marxism and postmodernism – postmodernism denying and Marxism embracing a vision of grounded criticism, transcultural humanism, and enlightened progress – makes them contradictory if frequent bedfellows in much current anthropological work.<sup>3</sup>

The problems posed by these competing critiques become increasingly apparent as more ethnography is considered for purposes of comparative regional analysis. The transparent factuality of ethnographic accounts cannot be assumed. Yet just how deeply and thoroughly must one question and contextualize their voices? (see Fardon 1990; Manganaro 1990). How and when does one stop analyzing the ethnographers and get on with the ethnographic analysis *per se*? If one ultimately refuses the objectivist leap, doesn't anthropology lose its center and become something else – intertextual art or representational criticism?

On the other hand, a dedication to political economy, Marxism, or history in the *longue durée* makes a move into objectivity, but ultimately with a vengeance. These approaches have a tendency to grind up local trends and events into a universalizing theoretical mill. This problem increases at more general and inclusive levels of analysis; cultures become reflexes of a hegemonic world system and are stripped of

distinctiveness.<sup>4</sup> At what point should one assert the importance of local structures over larger regional or global trends? How do diverse subjectivities and cultural propensities compete with political or economic rationality in determining action? If one fails to address these questions, cultural process becomes an epiphenomenon of politicoeconomic structure; anthropology becomes economics or political science.

This book engages the problems raised by postmodern and politico-economic theories with the spatial comparison of sociocultural formations. My goal is not to give up on comparative ethnographic analysis, but to drive it forward. In so doing, I draw heavily on the important work of Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1988a, 1990a–c, 1991a), Giddens (1979, 1984, 1987, 1989, 1990), Sahlins (1981, 1985, 1990), Ortner (1989, 1990a,b), and more generally on approaches that have been gathered loosely under the label of practice theories (Ortner 1984). At the micro-level or “on-the-social-ground,” these approaches (notwithstanding their many differences) emphasize the relationship between structural constraint and agency or event. Thus, for instance, Bourdieu (1977, 1990a) introduces the notion of *habitus*, in which structure is both constituted by and constituent of practice; Giddens’ (1979, 1984, 1987) notion of structuration<sup>5</sup> stresses the recursive nature of social life and encodes the mutual dependence of structure and agency; Sahlins’ (1981, 1985:ch.5) “structure of the conjuncture,” suggests that historical development occurs as the interface between structural disposition and contingent event; and Ortner (1990a) discusses sociocultural hegemonies, which engage dominant cultural orientations with the historical possibilities of social practice. In these approaches, cultural logics are kept in play with, rather than reduced to, political economy on the one hand, and the contingency of personal agency on the other. As such, these approaches are in a unique position to mediate some of the important tensions between politicoeconomic and postmodern orientations in anthropology.

To critically expand the theoretical relationship between culture and practice seems to me a promising avenue in anthropology at present. In theoretical work to date, the relationship between culture and practice has been less fully considered in its spatial than in its temporal dimension; theories implicating “practice” are not yet well developed for comparative ethnographic analysis.<sup>6</sup> To develop practice theories in this respect requires, as Bourdieu (1990c:49) himself puts it, “thinking *with* them *against* them” – drawing on their insights to transcend some of their limitations. Criticism here presupposes appreciation. The

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following discussion of practice theories draws on the postmodern and the politicoeconomic critique of comparative analysis mentioned above and underpins parts 2 and 3 of the present volume, respectively.

### **Research practice and postmodernism**

It is evident from the postmodern critique of ethnographic objectivity that theories of structure and practice have paid insufficient attention to the historical and cultural assumptions that inform the information they use. This tendency poses particular problems when the ethnographic net is widely cast and a detailed comparison attempted of different regions. The relativity of ethnographic reports written in different time periods and with different personal and theoretical aims needs to be actively considered. Though this concern need not take over the analysis, ethnography needs to be critically appraised in terms of its historical context before the objectivist leap can be made.<sup>7</sup>

Of those authors mentioned earlier, Bourdieu (1988a, 1990a–c, 1991a) is the most aware of discourse pragmatics, and he cogently reminds us that “in the social sciences, the progress of knowledge presupposes progress in our knowledge of the conditions of knowledge” (1990a:1). But though he is highly attuned to the academic politics of current disciplinary debates, Bourdieu is less concerned with how information has been encoded in the ethnographic and historical record. In this respect, practice theorists have not drawn sufficiently on the insights of Foucault (1984) and de Certeau (1988) concerning the archeological structures of our own *episteme*, and, particularly, the effect these have on how information is historically encoded as factual knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Part 2 of this volume, chapters 3–6, illustrates the biases that result from an uncritical use of the ethnographic record when making a comparative analysis. This problem is particularly evident in recent contrasts drawn between south New Guinea and the New Guinea highlands. But rather than pursuing a critique through impressionistic or intertextual pastiche, I remain committed to an objectivist account; I take seriously the analytical problems raised by postmodernism, but I don't adopt postmodern theory as a basis of presentation or argument. As I hope to show, a systematic and detailed review of ethnographic evidence is not incompatible with and, indeed, is central to comprehending the relevance of postmodernism for comparative regional analysis.

In the case at hand, the classic south coast ethnographies have been

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compared as if on a par with those about core highland areas. But the south coast ethnographies were based on primary fieldwork conducted largely during the 1910s, the 1920s, and the 1930s, whereas the classic highlands fieldwork was initiated in the 1950s and 1960s. Highland fieldwork was first configured largely by the concerns and critiques of British structural-functionalism, on the one hand, and American cultural materialism, on the other. (By contrast, the symbolic-interpretive impetus in interior New Guinea took root particularly in the late sixties and the seventies in fringe as opposed to core highland areas [e.g., Wagner 1967, 1972; Schieffelin 1976].) Unsurprisingly, the classic highlands monographs tended to focus on issues of politicoeconomic and socioecological organization – Big Man politics, competitive exchange, clanship, politicoeconomic intensification, and the causal ramifications of these for issues such as gender relations.<sup>9</sup>

The classic south coast ethnography, in contrast, was shaped by the Victorian anthropological legacy of Tylor and Frazer. Their interests engaged turn-of-the-century British and continental European concern with diffusionism, on the one hand, and ethnography as the comparative natural history of native customs and beliefs, on the other (see Urry 1972, 1984:44–48; Stocking 1984). Guided by figures such as A. C. Haddon at Cambridge and R. R. Marett at Oxford (mentor to F. E. Williams), as well as Dutch and German anthropologists, early south coast ethnography was particularly focused on spirit cults, totemism, moieties, magic, and material culture.<sup>10</sup> As discussed in chapter 4, evidence from south coast societies for highly developed systems of leadership and exchange was scattered and assigned to the background, despite the fact that politics was frequently rooted, among other things, in elaborate and competitive gift exchange, large-scale residential and military organization, and even systems of rank.

More generally, the polar contrasts often drawn between core highland and south lowland New Guinea are in significant part a function of synchrony in comparison – the uncritical comparison of accounts gathered at different times and with different ethnographic goals and theoretical assumptions. As discussed in chapters 3–6, most of the prominent characterizations made of south New Guinea are highly inadequate if not incorrect for the south coastal regions. Many of these comparative assessments treat ethnographic accounts in an ahistorical manner even though some of them focus on developmental transformation at the level of manifest ethnographic content.

Core highland areas of New Guinea are justifiably remarkable for

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their high population density and agricultural intensification; genuine differences existed and continue to exist between highland and south coastal New Guinea, as analyzed in chapter 10. There is also some truth to the self-fulfilling statement that societies deserve the theoretical orientations of their ethnographers; a dovetailing emerges between ethnographic approaches and the regions they best illuminate. Nevertheless, predisposing theoretical orientations and selective areal emphases tend to reinforce one another over academic time. This bias is magnified as the scale of analysis is increased and regional comparisons are attempted: it is all too easy to find polar contrasts between regions for which primary accounts were gathered at different times and/or with different ethnographic and theoretical agendas.

Critically analyzing this process allows us to see more clearly how key “traits” become associated with ethnographic “regions”: the New Guinea highlands become widely associated with Big Men, elaborate systems of competitive exchange, clanship, and heterosexuality, while the south coast becomes associated with Great Man leadership, restricted exchange, cross-totem affiliation, and homosexuality (Lindenbaum 1984, 1987; Feil 1987:ch.7; Herdt 1984a; Whitehead 1986; Godelier and Strathern 1991). As name and place become associated, characteristics thought to be “key” are inappropriately reified and then elevated as metonyms for ethnographic regions as wholes. This general trend has been critically exposed by Appadurai (1986).

There has been a particular recent tendency for south lowland New Guinea to become sexualized in anthropological discourse. Prominent archetypes have emerged, depicting the area as a “homosexual” region populated by “homosexual societies” (Feil 1987:ch.7; Lindenbaum 1984, 1987; cf. Herdt 1984a, 1991). The homosexual practices of a few constituent societies are taken as the primary lens through which many other customs and beliefs of the larger region are viewed. In fact, however, most of the south New Guinea population belonged to societies in which ritualized homosexuality was absent (see chapter 3). Along the south coast, ritual *heterosexuality* was far more prevalent than ritual homosexuality or boy-insemination.

As discussed in chapter 3, the important work of Gilbert Herdt (1981, 1984a, 1991, 1992) draws attention to Melanesian homoerotic customs and emphasizes their differences from customs and beliefs in the West. In terms of ethnographic history, it is quite understandable that Melanesian homosexuality was the focus of great attention during the 1980s, since this was the time that homosexuality came out of the closet

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in our own public and academic discussions.<sup>11</sup> To assess anthropological trends in the context of other social concerns is not to disparage them, and it is not possible for the analyst to escape history in any event. In this regard, I note reflexively that my perspective, which emphasizes the powerful diversity of extramarital heterosexuality as well as the more limited distribution of homosexual orientations in south coastal New Guinea, has been influenced by the postmodern feminist consideration of polysexuality, including its critique of eroticaphobia, phallogocentrism, and the uncritical attribution of discrete “sex” and “gender” categories.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, my perspective extends Herdt’s underlying impetus while at the same time targeting his approach for critical evaluation.

One point deserves emphasis: Herdt is fully correct that homosexual and homoerotic beliefs and practices are an important topic of anthropological investigation. His insistence is underscored by the fact that anthropologists paid little theoretical or comparative attention to Melanesian homosexual customs from the late 1800s to virtually the 1970s despite their intensive analysis of many other Melanesian customs and beliefs during this period. Nevertheless, I am wary of extending Herdt’s emphasis too far and assuming that sexuality is a “fictitious unity” or “causal principle,” as asserted generally by Foucault (1980a:154). Hence, I do not use sex as a privileged point of entry for the wider ethnographic analysis of south coast New Guinea. Instead, I consider variants of sexual practice and gender relations as dimensions of larger sociocultural formations. As Herdt (1992: forthcoming) states in his preface to the second edition of *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia*, “sexuality must be analyzed as part of a whole, contextual, social tradition.”

By putting the complexity of individual experience back in its social and political context, the postmodern critique should not prevent analysis from being systematic. That absolute objectivity is impossible is beside the point; the goal is to move in the direction of clearer, more explicit, and more refined understanding. In opposition to the excesses of postmodernism, then, its own insights may be appropriated to illuminate rather than obliterate the nature of ethnographic regions and the extent of their differences.

In Bourdieu’s (1990a; cf. 1988a) terms, this goal is achieved by objectifying the subjective dimensions of our own analysis as a critical tool. We need increased sensitivity to epistemic relativity – a reflexive awareness of our diverse ways of knowing – without succumbing to



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ontological relativism. The latter, which views “being” as relative and questions the existence of any coherent reality to know about, paralyzes the anthropological endeavor (e.g., Tyler 1990; contrast discussion in Shore 1988).

Though ethnography is always relative to the ethnographer’s concerns, ethnographic differences are not simply Western projections. Ethnographic relativity is one dimension of anthropology to be continually wrestled with (and never “resolved”), but it should not compromise an alternative moment in which critical objectivism is embraced.

**Practice theories and political economy**

The politicoeconomic critique of ethnographic comparison engages some of the important recent developments in theories of culture and practice. These developments will be presently discussed at a high level of theoretical generality to provide a broad basis for the empirical discussion that is developed in subsequent chapters. Readers more interested in ethnographic specifics or in middle-range theory may prefer to move on to page 16 and read the present section after considering the book’s ethnographic analysis.

In their various American anthropological formulations, theories of practice tend to champion the independent or at least the confounding influences of indigenous cultural structures *vis-à-vis* the political economy of an intruding world system.<sup>13</sup> For instance, Ortner (1990a,b) and Sahlins (1981, 1990) suggest that local developments cannot be subsumed in the spatial hegemony of Western political economy; local structures and indigenous agency must be kept in focus. Donham (1990) similarly stresses the tension between internalist “historical” and externalist “epochal” analysis. These approaches stress that local cultural influences are not simply confronted and transformed by politicoeconomic intrusion, they rebound on and shape these intrusions, both locally and regionally.

As if to provide more coherent resistance to politicoeconomic theory, however, theories of structure and practice tend to adopt a hegemonic view of indigenous structure itself. Structure in these approaches is generally held to be an all-encompassing “cultural logic” or “schema.”

Though the matter is one of relative emphasis rather than absolutes, practice theories do tend to rely too much on a Durkheimian notion of structural stasis at the expense of a more dialectical Marxist formulation.<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu’s theory, for all its interplay of structure, agency,

and domination, places surprisingly great emphasis on structural hegemony and surprisingly little on sociocultural development or transformation (see critique by Harker *et al.* 1990:216f.). Bourdieu attempts to respond to this criticism and to the charge of tautology, but it is questionable whether he sufficiently counters them either in his many substantive analyses or on a theoretical level, for instance, when he writes (1990c:118):

The problem of change. I do not see where my readers could have found the model of circular reproduction which they attribute to me (structure → habitus → structure). Indeed, I could show how the opposition between statics and dynamics, structure and history, reproduction and transformation, etc., is totally fictitious, in so far as it is the structure . . . which constitutes the principle of the strategies aimed at preserving or transforming the structure.

This assertion does little to alleviate the suspicion that structure, for all its internal dynamics and articulation through practice, remains self-fulfilled unless impacted from the outside. For Sahlins (1981, 1985), structure can be transformed, but more from the outside than from the inside; if anything, it is the persistence of structure that causes change; structural categories are revalued in the light of externally imposed economic and political contingencies. What needs greater complementary attention is how structures feed upon changes that they themselves generate. It is important to show not only the effects of structure as a synchronic entity, but how structures self-transform from the inside – how they respond dialectically to their own prior actualizations.

There is a corresponding tendency for theories of structure and practice to attribute change-inducing motivation to political and economic self-interest. In the process, the active and transformatory power of symbolic formations is relegated to the background; Weber's *Protestant Ethic* is forgotten. Thus, though theories of structure and practice give strong weight to agency, the subjective power of this agency tends, particularly in the theories of Giddens and Bourdieu, to be confined to “power”, “interest,” “strategy,” “schema,” and control over various “rules” and “resources.” Within such a conceptual armature, Western assumptions about motivation are easily accepted; interest is tacitly presumed to be self-interest, and it tends toward economic and political domination. Ironically, this assumption also smuggles itself into Sahlins' (1981:68–72) analysis of change, which transects indigenous cultural value with the somehow different “pragmatic” interests of actors when they apply signs in a world of political