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Robert J. Foster
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Introduction: history, alterity, and a new (Melanesian) anthropology

Soon after F. L. S. Bell, anthropologist and librarian, returned to Sydney from his fieldwork in Tanga, he told the readers of *Oceania* that: "With these people death is the leit-motif of their culture and their mortuary rites, which last for years and have endless social repercussions, are undoubtedly the most culturally satisfying and sustaining elements in the native life" (1934:291). Fifty years later, when I arrived to begin my fieldwork, Tangans themselves seemed to echo Bell's claim in glossing their mortuary rites with the word *kastam* – Tok Pisin (Melanesian pidgin) for "custom" or "tradition." I heard the echo frequently, in part because I inevitably elicited it with my own inquiries into "culture," and in part because the people with whom I lived most closely were themselves preoccupied with the garden making, pig raising, debt reckoning, song rehearsing, and myriad other doings associated with hosting a sequence of mortuary rites. But no matter how much these doings resembled the doings that Bell wrote about fifty years earlier, Bell did not describe *kastam*. For there is neither evidence to suggest nor reason to suppose that in 1934 Tangans imagined or labelled what they were doing as "customary" or "traditional."

The gloss of "custom" is a paradox, a claim about historical continuity expressed in a creolized form that bespeaks historical change. It is a paradox that raises a familiar question about the relationship between continuity and change, structure and process: how do things stay the same as they change, and change as they stay the same? This is a question of social reproduction and social transformation, of how people continuously produce their social relations amidst circumstances that they cannot always anticipate but must nevertheless engage. It is a question, moreover, that has received increasing attention with the conceptual shift

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toward "a time-oriented anthropology" (Moore 1986), an anthropology preoccupied with events, processes, and history.

Throughout island Melanesia, mortuary rites define the privileged site of social reproduction, the ensemble of activities through which people secure the conditions for their future existence. Mortuary rites in Tanga, a cluster of small islands off the east coast of New Ireland, are no exception. Death regularly triggers a series of feasts, sponsored by the deceased's matrilineal relatives, which accompany the wake over and burial of the corpse and the commencement of mourning observances for the living. The series climaxes but does not terminate years later with exchanges of wealth made in connection with the construction of a new men's house. In the process, feast makers constitute and display themselves as a discrete social entity, what anthropologists have long called a lineage. These feasts and exchanges, the collective action that brings them to pass, and the changing historical circumstances of that action, are the main subjects of this book.

The Tok Pisin gloss of "custom" (*kastam*) that Tangans put on mortuary practices suggests both historical continuity and historical change. Other glosses, rendered in the local dialect, suggest a different apprehension of unbroken temporal continuity amidst the incessant changes wrought by death. In particular, Tangans speak of mortuary practices as the means for "finishing" (*farop*) and "replacing" (*pilis*) dead matrilineal relatives. What sort of analysis is required to encompass the significance and interrelationship of these three different glosses? How, in other words, is it possible to relate the contemporary status of mortuary practices as custom or tradition to their locally perceived effects of ensuring matrilineal succession?

The answer that I present in this book requires juxtaposing two different analytical approaches that have emerged in Melanesian studies during the last decade. One of these approaches, which I call the New Melanesian Ethnography (after Josephides 1991), highlights fundamental differences between Melanesian and Western presuppositions about social reality; that is, it argues for the recognition of radical alterity, of cultural differences on a scale, say, of the Dumontian distinction between homo hierarchicus and homo aequalis. In so doing, it constructs an opposition between Us and Them in order to criticize a mode of anthropological inquiry unselfconsciously predicated upon Our presuppositions. The other approach, the New Melanesian History, highlights similarities between Melanesian and Western social realities, similarities generated

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out of shared histories of colonialism and commerce. In so doing, it deconstructs dichotomies between Us and Them in order to criticize a mode of anthropological inquiry that emphasizes (even essentializes) the otherness of the Other and de-emphasizes the contingent effects of time (history) and power (colonial and capitalist domination).

These two approaches, regardless of their common stance against ethnocentrism, have developed in tension with each other. This tension goes far beyond the obvious and inevitable disjunction between generalizing comparative exercises, on the one hand, and particularizing historical accounts, on the other. At stake is nothing less than what defines the legitimate practice of anthropological description. For example, New Melanesian Historians such as Thomas (1991), Carrier (1992a, 1992b) and Gewertz and Errington (1991b), renewing Said's critique in *Orientalism* (1978), have questioned whether anthropology ought to be or need be "a discourse of alterity, a way of writing in which us/them distinctions are central, and which necessarily distances the people studied from ourselves" (Thomas 1991:3). They eschew the attempt to explicate alternate cultural orders or social logics or any such unitary, organic conception of "other cultures" – what Thomas (1991:3) not unfairly characterizes as a project of endlessly elaborating on dense metaphors, key symbols, concepts of the person and agency, and indigenous views of time and history. Instead they urge anthropologists, Melanesianists especially, to destabilize the discourse of alterity with an affirmation of shared history, "the manifold and problematic engagements of various classes of Europeans, North Americans, or Australians with various colonized peoples, and the equally asymmetrical contacts and combats between Third World nation-states and tribal peoples within their borders . . ." (Thomas 1991:3). They thus call attention to the relationships between us and them, "those sociohistorical forces of systemic connection, those forces which *articulate* between, and *shape*, our lives and theirs in a world system" (Gewertz and Errington 1991b:81).

By contrast, the New Melanesian Ethnographers have self-consciously embraced the Us/Them opposition as a useful and, more importantly, a *necessary* analytic device for anthropological inquiry. Their methodological argument has been made most forcefully by Marilyn Strathern in *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), although earlier adumbrated by Roy Wagner in his essay, *The Invention of Culture* (1975). Strathern claims that "the strategy of an us/them divide" neither suggests "that Melanesian societies can be presented in a timeless, monolithic way" nor implies "some fixity in their state-of-being which renders them objects of knowledge"

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(1988:16). Instead, she argues, the strategy intentionally makes explicit "the practice of anthropological description itself, which creates its own context in which ideas drawn from different social origins are kept distinct by reference to those origins. Creating a kind of mirror-imagery gives a form to *our thoughts* about the differences" (1988:16–17, emphasis mine). In other words, the strategy of an Us/Them mirror imagery addresses the inescapable human condition that "our thoughts come already formed, that we think through images" (1988:16). The strategy exposes anthropological exegesis – indeed, all exegetical activity – as creative analogy: "an effort to create a world parallel to the perceived world in an expressive medium (writing) that sets down its own conditions of intelligibility" (Strathern 1988:17). Accordingly, then, the challenge of the New Melanesian Ethnography is to achieve critical awareness in deploying the images or metaphors (i.e., heuristics such as the too-familiar contrast between "gifts" and "commodities") that form our thoughts about how others think or might think about themselves. Not surprisingly, then, in a pointed response to Thomas, Strathern (1993:93) insists that attention to historical change will not "destabilise the idea of stable cultures" as long as anthropologists fail to relativize their concepts, that is, to explicate the assumptions entailed in the images, metaphors, constructs, and vocabulary *we* use to describe how other people conceptualize what *they* are or were doing.

Laid side by side like this, the perspectives of the New Melanesian History and the New Melanesian Ethnography easily accommodate each other; one certainly does not preclude the other. Keesing and Jolly (1992), in their epilogue to a volume of papers advancing the arguments of the New Melanesian History, draw the same conclusion. Although they question the very category of "Melanesia," and advocate "a more serious engagement with the transformations of the colonial period and the predicaments of the present," they do not regard an anthropology of Melanesia (qualifying quotation marks removed) to be impossible:

> We regard it as a quite legitimate anthropological enterprise to explore the human diversity of Melanesia. Indeed, as Marilyn Strathern (1988) has brilliantly shown, in examining that diversity we can interrogate our own assumptions and categories, subjecting Western conceptual systems to deconstructive scrutiny.
>
> *(Keesing and Jolly 1992:241)*

I agree, but I also wish to enlarge their observation. For if there is to be a New Melanesian Anthropology, then it must regard both the New Melanesian History and the New Melanesian Ethnography not only as legitimate anthropological enterprises, but also as inseparable anthropo-

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logical enterprises. In other words, the New Melanesian History and the New Melanesian Ethnography *must* provide frames of reference for each other. My claim is that only anthropological practice premised upon such a juxtaposition of frames of reference is in a position to apprehend the specific terms upon which Melanesians themselves premise their own actions. For the frames of reference in terms of which Melanesians act are separate in their historical and cultural origins, as the New Melanesian Ethnography would keep them, but conjoined in ways that inform how people think about, talk about, and do what they are doing in the present, as the New Melanesian History would stress. A New Melanesian Anthropology, then, must begin with the recognition that Melanesians understand themselves and act in terms – sometimes oppositional, sometimes syncretic – conditioned by the continuing encounter between agencies of (post)colonial states, capitalism, and Christianity, on one side, and highly localized practices for making meaning, on the other (see, for example, White 1991).

In this book, I demonstrate my claims about a New Melanesian Anthropology by arguing that *we* require both "historical" and "ethnographic" approaches in order to understand how Tangans understand mortuary rites as the means of social reproduction. A Tangan speaker might use the gloss of "custom" to describe mortuary rites in one situation and that of "replacement" in another; in this sense, the glosses are alternatives. Each gloss, however, conditions the meaning of the other; the connotations of one gloss furnish the background to the connotations of the other gloss. Both sets of connotations must be apprehended in order to register the significance of either one. But while the Tok Pisin gloss of *kastam* moves anthropological description in the direction of a history of colonial capitalism, the Tangga (see chapter 2, footnote 9) gloss of *pilis* moves anthropological description in the direction of an elaboration of local conceptions of personhood and agency (not to mention dense metaphors and key symbols). Consequently, the juxtaposition of "historical" and "ethnographic" approaches is necessary for placing local understandings of mortuary practices in the context of supralocal (global) political economic circumstances *and* vice versa. To do one without doing the other would be either to deny the links between Tangan mortuary rites and a larger world of social practices or to pretend that these links are the only frame of reference in which Tangans undertake mortuary rites. In other words, Tangan social reproduction must be regarded as collective action conditioned by changing circumstances of both endogenous and exogenous origins. It is the particular conjunction of these circumstances

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in 1984–85, the period of my main fieldwork, that I describe and analyze in this book.

The New Melanesian History draws upon arguments consolidated in the merger of history and anthropology during the 1980s (Cohn 1981). It endorses the wisdom of opening up ethnography to history, that is, of extending the context of ethnographic analysis beyond the space of "the village" and the time(lessness) of "the present." It uses the resulting awareness of regional and temporal variation as a corrective for naive essentialism, subverting ethnographic representations that ascribe to people authentic ontologies or mentalities which reproduce themselves inevitably, inexorably – beyond the influence of shifting social and economic conditions. At the same time, the New Melanesian History raises questions about the notion of society as a "sealed unit" of study, about the "very existence of a set of people, relationships, and practices sufficiently stable to justify being called 'a society'" (Carrier 1992a:19). As Carrier correctly asks: "After all, if what the people of X village do turns out to be historically fluid, malleable, then what are we to understand by the notion of X society or X culture?" (1992a:19).

These questions call attention to the long history of Western expansion and colonization in island Melanesia. Particularly relevant to my analysis of Tangan mortuary practices are the attempts of New Melanesian Historians to relate local situations to the development of a transnational web of capitalist social relations. I refer specifically to some recent subtle efforts to treat such ur-Melanesian practices as gift exchange and initiation rites as emergent products rather than resilient survivals of ongoing engagements with wage-labor, international tourism, and capital accumulation (e.g., Carrier and Carrier 1989; Gewertz and Errington 1991a; see also Gregory 1980). To this same end, I embed an ethnographic analysis of Tangan mortuary feasting and exchange in a history of "commoditization," the always variable and sometimes forcible process by which local people and their products enter into wider relations of commodity production and consumption. This strategy allows me to address the question of how Tangan mortuary practices both changed and did not change during the colonial and immediate postcolonial periods. It is through such a strategy, moreover, that I am able to trace the emergence of *kastam* as a Tangan cultural category.

There is convenience in beginning my interpretation of mortuary practices with the gloss of *kastam*: it more or less delimits the main object of analysis in this book. But there is also a point to be made: the mortuary

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practices that I observed in 1984–85 had acquired their coherence *as an object* – a set or domain of activities – only as the result of specific historical circumstances. I recount these circumstances through a chronology of commoditization that also traces the emergence of *kastam* as an explicit cultural category. This account yields yet another case of the "invention of tradition" in the Pacific (Linnekin 1990). My purpose, however, is not one of demystifying putative traditions. What I draw out of the Tangan case is its insistence that the objectification of "culture" and hence *heightened* cultural self-consciousness need not emerge only in circumstances of confrontation with an external (usually colonial) other (cf. Keesing 1992; Keesing and Tonkinson 1982; Thomas 1992a).[1] Nor, the case suggests, does cultural objectification depend upon the machinations of official elite cultural producers purveying romanticized (and generic) notions of the traditional past (cf. Keesing 1989; Philibert 1986). Instead, cultural objectification can occur as an aspect of transformations in local political economic relations. In Tanga, such a transformation entailed the generation of a categorical opposition between *kastam* and *bisnis*, the latter term denoting petty commodity production in the form of cash cropping. The emergence of this opposition, I argue, reconfigured the field of cultural categories in terms of which mortuary practices are locally undertaken and given meaning. My analysis of the cultural premises and social dynamics of Tangan mortuary rites starts from this recognition.

More than a century of entanglement between Tangans and a web of transnational capitalist social relations has transformed the practice of mortuary rites. What was arguably once an undifferentiated field of practice has now become divided conceptually and to a large extent practically into distinct domains such as *kastam* and *bisnis* (see Otto 1990). Nevertheless, a comparison of my description of Tangan mortuary rites in 1984–85 with the description composed by F. L. S. Bell after his fieldwork in 1933 suggests that the observable forms of mortuary feasting and ceremonial exchange have remained fairly constant. That is, the sequence of feasting and exchange, the overt symbolism of mortuary performances, and most of all the central place of the rites in public social life do not appear to have altered radically.

This combination of continuity and change invites explanation. There is, of course, no need to presume that modification let alone elimination of mortuary rites would necessarily occur (say, as a consequence of "modernization"). But there is equally no need to assume any continuity to ritual practices, especially given the manifest changes in the categori-

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zation of these practices. The issue then is to account for neither change nor continuity, but rather to account for the *specific combination* of continuity and change in Tangan mortuary practices. How?

Answering this question requires some conceptualization of what mortuary practices accomplish. In Tanga, I suggest, power (*mui*) is made manifest in mortuary ritual. But this is not the political power to command others so much as the potency to formulate collective identities, specifically, matrilineal identities or matrilineages (*matambia*). That is, mortuary ritual is the practical locus for social reproduction, the privileged site for producing and fixing, again and again, social identities and relations imagined as preconditions for future action (see Damon and Wagner 1989). It is this intermittent public process that Tangans gloss as "finishing" and "replacing" the dead.

In order to address the historical question of continuity and change, then, it is necessary to grasp how the production and reproduction of matrilineal identities and relations were organized in 1984–85. I therefore move from an historical account of Tangan mortuary practices to an ahistorical account of their processual structure. For, as I will propose in the conclusion, it was this structured process of social (re)production, in articulation with capitalist social practices, that precipitated a practical insulation of *kastam* from *bisnis*. And it is this insulation, in turn, which has apparently both conserved the symbolic form of mortuary practices and given them a set of connotations wholly unlike those attached to the mortuary practices that Bell observed in 1933.

It is through the propositions of the New Melanesian Ethnography that I attempt to outline the structure and effects of Tangan mortuary practices. Like the New Melanesian History, the New Melanesian Ethnography questions the notion of "society," but it does so through a model of "Melanesian" personhood and agency constructed in dialectical opposition to a model of "Western" personhood and agency. The strategy involved is one of sophisticated, self-conscious essentialism, the purpose of which is to enable a reconceptualization of "the social order" in terms other than those of relationships between "individuals" and between "individuals" and "groups."[2] Put differently, the conceptual aim of the New Melanesian Ethnography is to displace the static, morphological notion of "society" with the alternative notion of "sociality," the dual processes of constituting social relationships and precipitating social identities.[3]

At the center of the model of Melanesian personhood lies the notion of

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"composite persons," persons understood as nodes in a given matrix of relations. This notion mirrors its counterpart in the Western model, the notion of "individuals." Developed most fully by Strathern (1988), this key contrast has been formulated succinctly in relation to Orokaiva ideas by Iteanu, who derives it from Dumont:

> Among the Orokaiva, men and women, whom we call persons, are not seen as having been created differently or as being different in kind from the rest of the universe. For them, there is no special, universal category of individuals possessing unique, shared characteristics and placed above and in opposition to things. Consequently, society is not conceived of as being composed of an ensemble of such individuals, nor is there an ontological relation of identity between any two persons. Persons only exist because they are caught up in a network of relations . . .
>
> *(1990:40)*

This sort of mirror imaging has consequences, as the New Melanesian Ethnography would expect, for the way in which *we* describe what *we* take to be Melanesian notions of personhood. Neither the term "group" nor "individual" can be used to denote a preconstituted empirical entity, the irreducibly self-evident elements of "social structure." Similarly, as Iteanu remarks about the Orokaiva, "the notion of 'being a relation' takes the place of our idea of 'having' relations, in the sense of possession."

> When we say that men "have" social relations, we imply that men as such exist apart from their relations and that their "possession" of these relations is in some sense secondary. Precisely the opposite is true in Orokaiva logic.
>
> *(1990:41)*

The strategy of an Us/Them contrast, as Keesing and Jolly allowed, thus subjects certain assumptions of sociological inquiry, including its lexicon, to "deconstructive scrutiny."

Mosko's summary of Strathern's position extracts from the notion of composite persons the implications for conceptualizing agency:

> . . . each Melanesian person is a composite formed of relations with a plurality of other persons. The relations comprising any one person have or compose a history in the sense of a record of others' prior contributions. By the same token, the relations of which a person is composed constitute so many capacities for action, and so every person can be said to have a future. But in acting as agents themselves, persons externalize the parts or relations of which they are, or until then have been, composed. By acting, in other words, persons are "*de*composed." As agents in this sense, persons evince and anticipate the knowledge or recognition of their internal composition and capacities in the responses of others. Thus

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decomposing and externalizing their parts, relations, or capacities, persons stimulate one another to action and reaction.

(1992:702)

In other words, the notion of composite persons implies a notion of agency as "activation," that is, the activation or evincement of relations which compose the person (see Clay 1992). This notion of agency inverts that of autonomous self-determination associated with the concept of free and discrete individuals. Whereas composite persons conventionally act in terms of their relations, individuals act with reference to themselves as bounded entities, that is, individuals act as their own cause (Strathern 1988).

This model of Melanesian personhood and agency opens up the possibilities explored in this book for thinking anew about exchange and exchange-value. Exchange is conceived not as a means for making debts and credits – though it is surely this – but rather as the action whereby persons make themselves known (i.e., externalize "their internal composition") in the responses they elicit from others. Likewise, exchange-value is conceived not as the measure of the things exchanged – a ratio of congealed labor, a determination of relative utility – but rather as the specific relationship between persons that the exchange of things evinces (see Foster 1990a). Exchange-value, in other words, refers to the double relation between persons and things as terms that define each other's significance. Like the New Melanesian Ethnography as a whole, then, this particular conceptualization of exchange and exchange-value exposes and dislodges some of the presuppositions of what Strathern (1988) calls the "commodity metaphor" – unspoken assumptions about Commodity Transactions that threaten to infiltrate Our understandings of what We describe as Gift Exchange.

Strathern furthermore notes that relationships between composite persons rest on two different grounds: interdependency and difference; and shared identity – Iteanu's "relations of identity." Exchange, as social action for making relationships known, can assert difference or similarity, or both simultaneously. This last possibility is especially a feature of collective action such as the ceremonial exchanges that are a staple of Melanesian ethnography. Collective action of this sort brings together disparate composite persons and "de-pluralizes" them or makes them "homologues of one another" (Strathern 1988:13). In so doing, composite or plural persons are conceptualized and represented as a "collective individual," what the model of Western personhood would recognize as a "group." In doing so, however, exchange agents enact a paradox. For the

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