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978-0-521-48332-2 - Social Reproduction and History in Melanesia: Mortuary Ritual, Gift Exchange, and Custom in the Tanga Islands

Robert J. Foster

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In much of Melanesia, the process of social reproduction unfolds as a lengthy sequence of mortuary rites – feast making and gift giving through which the living publicly define their social relations with each other while at the same time commemorating the deceased. In this study Robert J. Foster constructs an ethnographic account of mortuary rites in the Tanga Islands, Papua New Guinea, placing these large-scale feasts and ceremonial exchanges in their historical context and demonstrating how the effects of participation in an expanding cash economy have allowed Tangans to conceive of the rites as “customary” in opposition to the new and foreign practices of “business.” His examination synthesizes two divergent trends in Melanesian anthropology by emphasizing both the radical differences between Melanesian and Western forms of sociality and the conjunction of Melanesian and Western societies brought about by colonialism and capitalism.

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Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology

96

**SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND
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SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND HISTORY IN MELANESIA

Mortuary ritual, gift exchange, and
custom in the Tanga Islands

ROBERT J. FOSTER

University of Rochester



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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1995

First published 1995

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Foster, Robert John, 1957–

Social reproduction and history in Melanesia: mortuary ritual, gift exchange, and custom in the Tanga Islands / Robert J. Foster.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in social and cultural anthropology: 96)

Revision of the author's thesis (Ph.D.) – University of Chicago, 1988.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 48030 2 (hardback). ISBN 0 521 48332 8 (paperback).

1. Tanga (Papua New Guinea people).

2. Tanga (Papua New Guinea people) – Funeral customs and rites.

3. Ceremonial exchange – Papua New Guinea.

I. Title. II. Series.

DU740.42.F67 1995

995.3–dc20 94–30846 CIP

ISBN 0 521 48030 2 hardback

ISBN 0 521 48332 8 paperback

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Preface

On February 1, 1992, I returned to Tanga for five weeks. My welcome was both casual and dramatic: casual inasmuch as my position in local social relations was already given, dramatic inasmuch as that place required public definition before anything else could happen. It had been more than six years since I had lived there from about April, 1984 to July, 1985.

Partui Bonaventura, my friend, host, and patron, led the group of mostly men who met me at the airstrip. I recognized Negut, Tikot, Netang, Bingfiu, and Kiapsel – all of whom happily recognized me as fatter than they had remembered. Among them was Nancy, the tall seven-year-old daughter of my friend and collaborator, Somanil Funil. Nancy was born the day before I first arrived in Tanga; Somanil subsequently named her after my wife. Nancy was a toddler who preferred to be carried when I had last seen her – her growth measured the time that had passed.

Partui instructed me to stop at the parish tradestore and to purchase a 25 kilogram bag of rice and several tins of mackerel. He had a plan. We all climbed into Piskot's rusty Toyota pickup truck, miraculously still running, and drove slowly to Taonsip at the eastern end of Boang Island.

At Partui's hamlet, more greetings – this time from local men and women gathered inside and outside the men's house. Soon Partui called me into his house, where my old room had been readied. He explained the situation. Somanil and Timir, whom I had not yet greeted, were at Somanil's hamlet, preparing a feast to which we would repair as soon as the rain let up. I was to put on a black shirt and a black *laplap*, and wear an old filthy baseball cap. As I did so, we rehearsed the brief speech I would make to Somanil.

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The walk from Partui's hamlet to Somanil's was no more than one hundred yards. Off to the left was the large neighborhood cemetery. Tinaluklukar, Somanil's mother, whom I too called mother, was buried there. She had died after I left Tanga, not long after my own mother had died unexpectedly in Staten Island. My eyes filled with tears at the memories, as had the eyes of Tinaluklukar's old sisters, Tingkausi and Imbusil, when they saw me again.

We delivered to Somanil two cooked pigs: one from Nancy, for bringing me to her father, the other from Partui, for allowing me to see Tinaluklukar's grave. I presented the rice, tinned fish, and some coins to Somanil, and informed him of my mourning: I was not here when our mother died, and I was not able to help Somanil organize the necessary feasts. My voice cracked. Somanil, in turn, presented me with a one kina coin, acknowledged my help, and removed my black clothing and dirty cap. We then sat down, ate, and began to catch up with each other. Within two hours of landing, I was once again engaged in a flow of sociality conditioned by the exigencies of "finishing" the dead: my filial relationship to Tinaluklukar, and thus to all her relatives, had been evinced and acted upon.

The position that I came to occupy in the flow of Tangan sociality enabled and limited what I came to understand and what I failed to understand. Some comments are in order, perhaps more for Tangan than non-Tangan readers.

I slept in Partui's hamlet, Mokatilistunglo, on the night of my arrival in 1984 and remained there for the duration of my stay in Tanga. Many Tangans later told me that it seemed to them as if I had gone directly and intentionally to Mokatilistunglo, indeed, as if I had kin there. But my itinerary was determined only by a chance encounter with Nebutikorofi, who volunteered to introduce me to people in the part of the island where his mother's and father's relatives reside (see Foster 1988).

Partui was the leader or big man (*kaltu dok*) of Solsol lineage of clan Korofi. He was then a not yet remarried widower who slept in a house made of fiber-board with a corrugated iron roof, built during the early 1960s for Ngamnabo – an aged big man and prominent figure in F. L. S. Bell's pre-World War II ethnography of Tanga. I soon moved into a small bush-material house that we had constructed next door.

For the next month, Partui and Somanil, a Solsol lineage man of about my age, introduced me to their various relatives and friends in Taonsip and elsewhere. They helped me collect basic information on social organization and begin work on the local language. Although I became some-

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what proficient at understanding the language, my speaking ability never became impressive. I did most of my research in Melanesian pidgin, in which almost all New Irelanders are fluent, or through the mediation of an interpreter, usually Somanil, who became familiar with my ethnographic project.

It was from my position in the network of relations that enmeshed the men and women of Solsol lineage that I conducted my daily inquiries. Accordingly, my view of Tangan sociality is a particularly situated view. I learned the system of kinship through the various affinal and paternal ties to Solsol lineage. Likewise, I learned firsthand the details of preparing and executing a mortuary sequence by participating in the sequence hosted by Solsol lineage during my stay. My main informants and fastest friends were all residents of Taonsip. I did not visit western Boang as much as I would have liked and consequently I never learned in detail the internal organization and history of the clans which occupy this area. Nor did I do extensive interviewing and participant observation in the cluster of hamlets located near the Mission complex and airstrip at Amfar.

I would disagree with Tangans who find the following account Taonsip-centric. Instead, I maintain that the account given here is of general validity for the Tanga Islands, though I recognize that life is not lived exactly the same in all parts of the islands. In Amfar, for example, there seemed to be a different rhythm to activity, a pace conditioned by the presence of the tradestore, church, hospital, and other arenas for social interaction. In the outlying islands of Lif, Tefa, and Malendok, which I visited only for a total of two weeks, this is even more the case; these islands, sparsely populated and without vehicular roads, clearly constituted a periphery to central Boang. Nonetheless, Tangans recognize no local differences in the practice of mortuary ritual, and indeed people from various parts of the islands participate in each other's rites. The topics of mortuary ritual, gift exchange, and custom addressed in this book, I contend, do not require extended consideration of intra-island variations.

Other Tangans, and non-Tangans too, might find this account too silent on issues of gender. My wife, Nancy Foster, spent the last six months with me in Tanga. The two of us lived in Partui's house while Partui moved into my house, an arrangement that suited all of us. Nancy befriended many women and accompanied them in their daily routines. Her presence afforded me some access to the non-public world of women; but her presence also closed that world to me by establishing in the eyes of many Tangans a gendered division of labor for our inquiries. Much of the

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information reported in this book was gathered from men; similarly, the focus of the book (and the accompanying plates) on the publicly dramatized aspects of mortuary rites highlights the activities of men rather than women.

Finally, some specialist readers might wish that more sustained comparisons were made in this book with recent ethnographies of New Ireland. I have tried to indicate connections, where space allowed, between my interpretations and data, and those of other New Ireland ethnographers, particularly Roy Wagner and Brenda Clay. Although not explicitly a regional comparison, this book nevertheless complements existing New Ireland ethnography inasmuch as the paramount concerns of New Irelanders with “finishing” and “replacing” the dead have shaped that ethnography.

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Acknowledgments

This book is a revised version of my doctoral thesis (Foster 1988), the research for which was funded by the US Department of Education (Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Grant No. 600–83–008510) and the National Science Foundation (Doctoral Dissertation Research Grant No. BNS–8312747). Two brief trips to Tanga in 1992 (one for a week during the polling period of the national elections) were made financially possible by the Australian–American Educational Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the University of Rochester.

I thank the New Ireland Provincial Government for its generous permission to conduct field research and for its advocacy of the value of anthropological studies. I have received help in facilitating my work at various times from: C. S. Rangan, Esikiel Waisale, Ephraim Apelis, and Ben Kamil.

During my trips to Papua New Guinea, I was affiliated with the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies (now the Cultural Studies Division of the National Research Institute). I thank the Institute, especially its past directors, Professor Andrew Strathern and Dr. Jacob Simet, for advice and aid in securing research permits. A number of other institutions kindly allowed me access to their resources. I thank the library staffs of the Institute for Applied Social and Economic Research, the New Guinea Collection of the University of Papua New Guinea, and the National Archives of Papua New Guinea. I also thank Father Superior Norbert Birkman of the Catholic Mission at Vunapope, East New Britain, for allowing me to use the Mission library.

I thank Nancy Munn for her intellectual support and example over the years. At various stages, this book has benefited from comments made by

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Terence Turner, Marshall Sahlins, Jane Fajans, Scott MacWilliam, Deborah Gewertz, Anthony Carter, Aletta Biersack, and two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press. I also owe a debt of gratitude to F. L. S. Bell for the leads his work provided me in my own fieldwork.

Revisions of the manuscript were begun during a stay at the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University. I thank Professor James Fox and the entire staff of the Department of Anthropology for their warm hospitality and the use of their resources. I thank Margaret Tyrie for preparing the kinship figures used in this book and Marilyn Anderson for printing plate 1.

I thank the American Anthropological Association, the Royal Anthropological Institute, and Oceania Publications for kind permission to use in this book sections from my previous published articles.

On the road from fieldwork to thesis to book, I have accumulated as souvenirs more personal debts of more kinds than I can enumerate, much less repay. I wish to single out Roy Wagner and Phil Lewis for their interest and pre-field guidance. The late Professor Peter Lawrence gave me his time and consideration, as did Dr. J. Specht of The Australian Museum. The staff of the Rare Books Collection of the Fisher Library, University of Sydney, helped me in consulting the fieldnotes of F. L. S. Bell and arranged for me to reproduce by permission Bell's photograph of Ngamnabo and Bitlik. Dick Bryant, Deane Fergie, and Chris Morgan offered unselfish hospitality in Sydney and Canberra on the trip back to the USA in 1985.

In Port Moresby, three people sustained me with their companionship and intellectual stimulation: James and Achsah Carrier, and Scott MacWilliam. I thank them for their generosity and friendship. Numerous other individuals made life easier by showing concern for me and interest in my research: Peter Larmour, Herb Thompson, Marc Schiltz, Lisette Josephides and, on my 1992 trips, Mark Busse and Wari Iamu.

In Rabaul, Blaise Sumsuma and Mark Nebau and their families opened their homes to me and made me welcome in every way. I warmly thank them for their uncompromising hospitality. *Kone aro sing gam*. In 1992, Tom Barker and Marta Rohatynskyj kindly took me into their home.

Ben Kamil first helped me orient myself in Kavieng. Later, Roger Dixon assisted me immensely by introducing me to his wife's nephew, Nebutikorofi, who in turn introduced me to the people of Taonsip in the eastern end of Boang. I thank them all for their hospitality and confidence.

Ben Topikol of Muliama invited me to stay in his home and made

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possible a brief reconnaissance in southern New Ireland. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance he and his family gave me.

In Namatanai, I sometimes stayed with Aladin Sakias, who also opened his home to me without hesitation. Thanks are due as well to Fr. Joe Gloexner of St. Martin's Parish for his hospitality and advice.

I owe a great debt to the Catholic Mission in Tanga and, in particular, to Fr. Leon Weissenberger for permitting me to consult St. Boniface Parish records and to use parish resources and facilities when needed. I also thank the entire staff of Sisters at the Mission for their thoughtful gifts of fresh bread.

My greatest debt, of course, is to the people of Tanga, who showed me numerous kindnesses and accepted me wherever I went among them. All of the people of Taonsip with whom I lived deserve my gratitude. I must thank first of all Partui Bonaventura, for taking a chance on taking me in and then never renegeing on his offer. Somanil Funil, my companion and colleague, made much of my work possible through his ethnographic attitude. I am grateful for his friendship and for the material care given me by him, his late mother Tinaluklukar and wife Salome, and by Partui and his wife Likot. The men and women of Solsol lineage, *tanga tuaklik ma tang'indung*, and their spouses and children all shared with me their project of building a commemorative men's house. I thank them all for making me feel at home, especially Negut, Timir, Timfaim, Tingkausi, Nekwit, Fabian, Sebastian, Kiapsel, and Kapsa. I thank Tomai and Piskot for making the service of their trucks available to me, and Parbil, Pangang, Netang, and Fumpas for gifts of *sugka*, fish, *brus*, and food. I thank the late Manilbau for showing me what *kastam* means to Tangans. I thank all those who hosted me on excursions away from Taonsip, especially August Paptabil of Lif, Bulu of Fangwel, and Siaronatui and Beno of Fonli. I thank all of the families who participated in the household income survey, including the families of Bakok, Tading, Tikot, Nefu, Kiptes, and Neof. Many other people invited me to their feasts, shared their stories with me, answered my questions, asked me their questions, offered me drinks, betel nut, tobacco, and conversation. They all participate inextricably in this text. *A ti sangkifeni gam. Kone aro sigit.*

My wife Nancy sustained me with copious correspondence when we were apart; she assisted me as a colleague when we lived together in Tanga; and she has supplied constant critical appreciation and uncritical sympathy in writing this book. I dedicate it to her.

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Glossary

Note on orthography

In spelling Tanga words, I have used with some modification the orthography developed by Mihalic (1971) for Melanesian Pidgin (Tok Pisin) (cf. Capell 1977; Maurer 1966). The orthography is convenient; it is not phonemically complete.

Vowels:

- a as in “calm”; e.g., *fat*
- e as in “bed”; e.g., *en*
as in “hey”; e.g., *male*
- i as in “hit”; e.g., *pirpir*
as in “machine”; e.g., *bif*
- o as in “hot”; e.g., *kong kuen*
as in “or”; e.g., *mor*
as in “snow”; e.g., *bo*
- u as in “bum”; e.g., *gumgum*
as in “tulip”; e.g., *lulu*

Diphthongs:

- ai as in “find”; e.g., *kaik*
- au (ao) as in “mouth”; e.g., *taufi*
- oi as in “oil”; e.g., *poiem*

Consonants:

b d f g k l m n ng p r s t w Pronounced as in English, except:

- g is always hard, as in “get”; at the end of a word it becomes more like a /k/ sound; e.g., *fasuigk* (Bell’s spelling, which I retain)

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- ng one sound, as in “singer”
 r is flapped
 w sometimes interchanged with a /v/ sound

Selective glossary*Bia*: Men’s house*Bif*: Funeral house, commemorative men’s house*Bo*: Pig*Do*: Emblem, marker*En*: To eat, consume; a feast*En tike*: “Eat everything,” feast in which all food must be consumed at the site of the feast*Fang*: Nurture, care; particularly, paternal nurture; cf. *fangte*, to adopt, to look after*Farop*: To finish, complete, bring to an end; said of the deceased, memories of the deceased, and obligations to the deceased*Faswigk*: Redistribution of pigs made during major mortuary feasts*Fat*: Hard, rooted; stone; generic name for shell discs (*am fat*)*Fel*: Generic name for house; traditional Quonset style funeral house*Fen*: To feed, to give, to cause to eat (*fa-en*)*Fil*: To buy; *fil ffin*, brideprice (“to buy a young woman”)*Fimfil*: Temporary men’s house*Finailim*: Sign, omen, foreshadowing*Fumbarat*: Cluster of children, family, ancestral line*Funmat*: Matriclan*Furis*: Dramatic skit or monologue that accompanies certain mortuary feasts*Kaltu*: Human being, man; *Kaltu dok*, big man*Kemetas*: Valuable small red shell discs strung on lengths of twine and used in a variety of exchanges; *mis* in Tok Pisin*Kilis*: To replace; *kilis asa*, to replace (change) a name*Kinaf*: Short form of the reference term for cross-cousin; *fat kinaf*, “bound cross-cousins,” the relationship between two intermarrying lineages*Laplap (Tok Pisin)*: a waistcloth, a loincloth*Lulu*: To buy; *lulu am bo*, payment for the pigs, an important transaction that climaxes major mortuary feasts*Male*: place, hamlet; *waranmale*, origin place (*asples* in Tok Pisin)*Mangat*: Baked packets of scraped yam mixed with shredded coconut meat

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[More information](#)xxii *Glossary**Mapu*: To stink, rot*Matambia*: Matrilineage, “eye” of the men’s house*Mor*: Compensatory meal fed to collective work parties*Mui*: Power, strength; syn. *mia**Palang*: Garden in full bearing*Pief*: Ashes, sites formerly occupied by lineage big men*Pilis*: To replace; *pilis lo iau*, my replacement (e.g., said by a man of his younger brother)*Sangkulung*: To grieve; sorrow*Sangsang*: To think, to feel; *sangfi*: to remember; *sangkifeni*: to forget*So puek*: To bring or deliver a pig as a contribution to another lineage’s feast*Tafu*: Space, slot; *kep tafu*, to take the place of (said of an heir)*Tam en*: Dietary restrictions, assumed as part of mourning procedures by the affinal and paternal relatives of the deceased*Tang*: Purse, personal basket used to carry tobacco and betel nut chewing paraphernalia*Tara*: Spirits, associated with particular pieces of the landscape and particular lineages (*masalai* in Tok Pisin)*Tinge*: To buy; *ting bo*, to buy the pigs, describes the payment of one *tintol* for each pig donated to a lineage’s supply for redistribution at *fasuigk**Tintol*: Type of shell disc (*am fat*) most often used in all exchange transactions*Tu*: Bone; true; ridge post of a men’s house; *tutor*, a carved ridge post*Warangus*: Basket of food given to those designated to contribute and receive a large pig at the culminating feast of the mortuary sequence; literally, “base/source of the food heap” (*gus*)*Warantang*: The largest and most valuable type of shell disc (*am fat*), a lineage heirloom which never circulates in exchange; literally, “base of the basket” (*tang*) in which shell discs were once stored