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## Introduction

*Soga, before he converted to the Christian religion, offered a human sacrifice to his god, cutting off a child's head, and with his warriors drank the blood of the child to make his conversion to Christianity and renounce his allegiance to his god.*

*Excerpt from program to install a paramount chief, Sepi village, July 8, 1975*

In July of 1975 people from all parts of the island of Santa Isabel congregated in Sepi village for a ceremony to install a paramount chief and celebrate the independence of the Church of Melanesia. The status of paramount chief, which had lain dormant for two decades, was revived in a masterful ritual performance that saw the Bishop of Santa Isabel, Dudley Tuti, “anointed” as paramount chief. To observers accustomed to separating indigenous custom from Christianity, there would appear to be considerable irony in the melding of the two agendas: installing a paramount chief, symbol of local tradition, at the same time as marking the independence of the church – the institution that has had the most to do with transforming indigenous practices. However, for the actors involved, the Sepi ceremony was anything but ironic. For them the ceremony was but the latest, if most dramatic, attempt to realize models of identity and history that intertwine elements of “custom” (*kastom* in local Pidgin) and Christianity that run deep in Santa Isabel social experience.

The Sepi ceremony was ritual performance on a grand scale. Most of the island’s adult population participated in the planning, and about two thousand joined in the celebrations that lasted two days. In practical, political terms, however, the events at Sepi had little immediate effect. A paramount chief was installed, but the man given that title, Bishop Dudley Tuti, was already a kind of de facto paramount chief who wielded island-wide influence as the dominant spiritual leader and spokesman for community development. Furthermore the ritual installation effected no change in the government apparatus of the time that consisted of elected officials giving only rhetorical recognition to the role of “chiefs” in the colonial state. Why, then, the enthusiasm for an event that would seem to be largely symbolic in effect? The answers to this question lie partly in the

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significance of the “paramount chief” for cultural self-understanding, and partly in the longer process of colonial history that has given the idea both meaning and force through time.

By framing the Sepi ceremony with allusions to the conversion of the first paramount chief, Soga, the organizers located the occasion within a historical perspective extending one hundred years into the past. One of the remarkable aspects of the status of paramount chief on Santa Isabel is that it is avowedly an invented tradition, a product of colonial and missionary experience. But far from detracting from its value, the mission origins of the paramount chief give the status much of its significance as a symbol that enlivens and combines just those meanings that originate in the conjunction of *kastom* and Christianity. By engaging in a ritual performance that revives a “traditional” status by harking back to its mission origins, the participants in the Sepi ceremony remind us that traditions and the social identities that embody them do not consist of discrete essences or dichotomous oppositions such as pagan/Christian or indigenous/Western, but are always relational, creative and emergent (cf. Clifford 1988: 10).

Whereas the resurgence of self-conscious notions of tradition or *kastom* throughout island Melanesia is often framed in terms of exclusionary oppositions and struggles for power (see Keesing and Tonkinson 1982), cases such as Santa Isabel exemplify attempts to fashion identities that combine oppositional themes in novel syncretic formulations. The contemporary Pacific is full of such syncretic or “creolized” forms – forms that challenge simplistic or dichotomous notions of tradition and modernity. As Pacific Islanders in all parts of the region grapple with exogenous forces of colonialism and world capitalism, symbols of the indigenous, of tradition, have emerged as a central idiom of self-definition and political action (Linnekin 1990). Inevitably, the proliferation of self-conscious images of the pre-Western past in the speeches of national politicians, in art festivals and in church ceremonies has evoked commentaries of inauthenticity from observers who balk at the juxtaposition of Christian hymns and custom songs in national ceremonies or at chiefly statuses created for modern purposes (e.g., Babadzan 1988). However, these apparent ironies are more a problem for the observer than for people involved. Debates about these issues are producing a greater awareness of the inherently creative and processual quality of culture, challenging our implicit separation of unchanging “tradition” from changing “history” (Handler and Linnekin 1983; Hanson 1989; Jolly 1990; Toren 1989; and cf. Wagner 1975). What seems clear from this interpretive wrangle is that anyone interested in the study of cultural traditions must pay close attention to the processes through which local understandings of tradition and history are constructed and valorized. A finer appreciation of the ways in which the past is

conceptualized and put to use in people's lives is showing that questions about what aspects of culture are "indigenous" or "authentic" do not tell us much about either culture or social process. As stated by Jolly, "... let us look more carefully and comparatively at the encoding of past-present relations in the variety of symbolic constituents of tradition. Then our questions might cease to be those of persistence versus invention, or whether tradition is genuine or spurious" (1990: 19).

Students of ethnic and cultural identity have often suggested that self-conscious constructions of identity emerge under conditions of contrast and opposition; that only with an awareness of difference do reflexive understandings of culture become externalized and objectified. For example, one of the postulates put forward in a collection of essays on "reinventing traditional culture" in Melanesia is that the experience of colonialism induces people to view collective identity in more self-conscious ways than ever before, with indigenous traditions that were once taken for granted becoming objects of reflection and evaluation (Keesing and Tonkinson 1982). It seems clear that the colonial encounter challenged local forms of meaning and power to a degree never experienced before. But to what extent externalizations of local culture in the colonial context are qualitatively different from precolonial constructions remains an open question, especially in a region as acutely aware of microcultural differences as Melanesia (Jolly 1990; Linnekin and Poyer 1990). To answer such questions we must examine the contexts and practices in which self-conscious understandings of tradition are formulated in relation to broader social, political and personal concerns. As illustrated by the Santa Isabel paramount chief ceremony, one of the most potent modes of externalizing understandings of culture and difference is historical reflection – often used to recall moments of contact and change that link a modern or "new" present with a traditional or "old" past (Thomas 1991).

### **Person, self and history**

The 1975 installation of a paramount chief was a somewhat larger and more dramatic version of the storytelling and ritual practices that villagers commonly employ to recall the past. Histories told and remembered by those who inherit them are discourses of identity; just as identity is inevitably a discourse of history. Recent anthropological studies, especially in the Pacific, have drawn attention to the pervasive *use* of history within local frameworks of meaning and action (e.g., Biersack 1991; Borofsky 1987; Carrier n.d.; Parmentier 1987). Moving away from earlier views of oral history or ethnohistory which saw local recollections as distorted representations that could be useful only if cleansed of biases and inaccuracies, these approaches look to historical narration precisely because it is

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ideological. Parmentier, who acknowledges the place of actors' intentions in historical ethnography, puts the matter succinctly: ". . . the historical study of other cultures is always the study of historicizing activities within those cultures" (1987: 7).

With a growing number of ethnographies that are explicitly historical (e.g., Gewertz 1983) and histories that are culturally informed (e.g., Dening 1980; Hanlon 1988), there is increasing interest in the problems of representing transformative processes in culture on the one hand, and assessing the role of cultural meaning in history on the other. One of the most influential statements to emerge from this nexus of culture and history is the work of Marshall Sahlins, based on careful analyses of early Hawaiian, Maori and Fijian contact history (e.g., 1985). Sahlins has sought to identify semiotic structures that give meaning to events, at the same time as the structures are themselves transformed by time and circumstance. Framed in this way, a central problematic becomes the reconciliation of cultural "structure" and historical "event," so that culture can be put in motion, and history can be reinvested with local significance. But formulating the problem in this way tends to reify culture by locating meaning in abstract relational structures that must then be reconnected with the politicized and emotionalized world of experience. In this book I am also concerned with finding threads of cultural continuity and discontinuity through time, but rather than seek these in textual histories, I look toward the meaning-making activities of people who live and remember a past that leads unerringly to the present.

The theoretical formulations that emerge from Sahlins' structural history are driven in large measure by the nature of his data: observations from afar of historic, even heroic, figures whose actions and motives must be divined from documentary sources long since removed from the contexts in which interested actors seek to negotiate matters of feeling and power. While Sahlins says that historically significant signs take on meaning according to their "instrumental value to the acting subject" (1985: 150) (as well as from their relations with other signs), he does not pursue the implications of this formulation. Without contemporary islanders included in the analysis, the possibilities for exploring cultural understandings from the vantage point of reflexive selves are distinctly limited. In this book, where the historical events of interest continue to be remembered and negotiated by those involved (or their descendants), culturally constituted histories express the social concerns and motives of local actors. Particularly in small island communities where individual and collective identities are so tightly bound, historical discourse locates both self and community within a nexus of relations between past and present, self and other.

In a recent commentary on “the ease with which it is argued that people represent ‘society’ to themselves,” Strathern (1988: 9) argues that ethnographic accounts of Pacific cultures frequently impute global modes of self-reflection that falsely homogenize and systematize the inherently diverse and emergent quality of social process. This critique leads to the questions “What *do* people represent to themselves?” and “For what purposes, and in what contexts do self-conscious formulations of identity emerge?” For, as Strathern notes, it cannot be assumed in this kind of cross-cultural endeavor that “their” contexts and “our” contexts are so easily mapped. In this volume I focus particularly on practices of collective self-representation, and ask how certain forms of understanding obtain intersubjective meaning and force. “What are the cognitive, social and political processes that make certain types of discourse meaningful and compelling as representations of collective identity?”

One of the broad themes to emerge from historical ethnographies in Pacific societies is that people in small villages inevitably orient to, and struggle with, powerful encapsulating forces of colonialism and modernity. Typical of the broad shift in ethnographic writing during the 1970s and 80s toward themes of colonialism and resistance (Bruner 1986), recent studies in the Pacific have focused upon “the resources Pacific islanders have for the active and creative reproduction of their social identities in face of the enormous material and meaning-making power of an expanding ‘world system’” (Lederman 1986: 3). One of the major resources islanders have in these efforts is history-making. Island peoples everywhere are producing narratives of colonization and acculturation that forcefully shape the social realities of contemporary life.

Stories about the past are an important, universal vehicle for self-definition (see Gergen 1990; Miller et al. 1990). Whether we call them “social history,” “life history” or “personal stories,” retrospective narratives create the present through idioms of remembrance. It may seem odd to lump together social history and personal stories, given our predilections for regarding the former as collective, societal and distant, and the latter as individual, psychological and immediate, but the differences are more a product of our (Western) concepts of the person than any given quality of social reality.

Despite the view articulated by symbolic interactionists that self-understanding emerges from *dialectic* processes of “internalization” and “externalization” (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Mead 1934), most theorizing has tended to split these processes and to turn the study of the self into a study of “what gets internalized” in individuals (cf. Kondo 1990). What gets lost, however, is the obverse process of externalization whereby cultural mean-

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Excerpt

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ings are socially constructed and valorized. Charles Taylor notes the loss of “common meaning” as one of the silences in social theory maintained by these dichotomizing tendencies in our language:

Common meanings, as well as intersubjective ones, fall through the net of mainstream social science. They can find no place in its categories. For they are not simply a converging set of subjective reactions, but part of the common world. What the ontology of mainstream social science lacks is a notion of meaning as not just for an individual subject; of a subject who can be a “we” as well as an “I.” The exclusion of this possibility, of the communal, comes once again from the baleful influence of the epistemological tradition for which all knowledge is reconstructed from the impressions imprinted on the individual subject. (*Taylor 1979: 52; cited in Shore 1991: 10–11*)

Anyone who has been in Pacific villages has become accustomed to hearing people speak in the voice of the communal “we,” whether inclusively toward comembers or exclusively toward listening “others.” Rather than assume that these usages simply indicate a plurality of individual “I”s, we might ask what they say about forms of subjectivity and experience. These pronominal forms find parallels in a great many representational practices that center agency and identity in collectivities and relations rather than (or in addition to) individuals. And, conversely, other historical practices turn individual actions into metonyms of communal experience. In the tightly interwoven and constantly public arenas of village life where persons are conceptualized as enmeshed in interdependent relations of all sorts (Read 1955; Leenhardt 1979; Shore 1982; Kirkpatrick 1983; White and Kirkpatrick 1985), social and moral thought frequently de-emphasize the individual as the primary locus of experience.

One of the most effective means for reproducing communal selfhood is historical narration. The approach taken here seeks to avoid reducing historical discourse to either the sociological abstraction of Durkheimian collective representations or the psychological reduction of inner selves. Much of the sociological research on collective identities has proceeded on the basis of assumptions about ethnicity that bundle together such “primordial sentiments” of shared ancestry, language and religion (cf. Linnekin and Poyer 1990). However, presuming the existence of ethnic groups or uniform folk concepts of ethnicity has diverted attention away from the contexts and processes that actually produce shared identifications during the course of everyday social life. In studying a case of somewhat ambiguous, emergent “ethnicity,” Karen Blu concludes:

Collective identities that can be seen as irreducible tangles of concepts, emotions, and motivations can be found in many areas of the world, but it is far from clear that all of what have been labeled “ethnic groups” have the same kind of identity. Some or even much of what has been designated in the literature as ethnicity might better be considered as varieties of politicized self-identification. (*1980: 234*)

The history of Christianization and colonization in Santa Isabel has seen the emergence of new collective identifications at the level of the island as a whole. Notions of a shared island-wide identity shaped by Anglican Christianity and government institutions have emerged in counterpoint with the island's linguistic and regional microtraditions. While it is tempting to draw parallels between these developments and attempts globally to build national identities that contend with prior ethnic affiliations, the mix of creolized identities in Santa Isabel is not well represented by rigid distinctions between primordial ethnic identifications and the more inclusive forms of an incipient state. Rather, the recent history of Santa Isabel offers an opportunity to explore the emergence of syncretic political forms that interpenetrate and compete with the standard orthodoxies of Western style democratic government. Whether these novel forms succeed or not, they emanate from, and find legitimacy in, local discourses of tradition and history.

**Conversion narrative**

Historical narrative is widespread in the daily life of Santa Isabel villages, and is particularly prominent during occasions of feasting and celebration when people engage in exchange practices that define social and political relations. Such occasions always involve speeches, songs and/or dramatic performances that recall past events constitutive of relations among participants. The most prominent and frequently repeated topics in these local histories are moments of first contact with missionaries and subsequent conversion to Christianity. Although World War II and national independence are also significant junctures in temporal consciousness, the events of Christian conversion are uniquely important in the organization of sociohistorical memory. Indications of this salience are to be found in the many regional variants of conversion stories throughout the island, and in their repeated performance on ceremonial occasions. When I first began to work in Santa Isabel, I had not anticipated the significance of these mythic histories. It was only in digesting the stories that were repeatedly volunteered for recording, and in observing numerous re-enactments of mission history, that I began to realize their importance.

For societies whose recent history is one of accommodation with colonial institutions of mission and government, stories of past encounters with "outsiders" reproduce understandings of community structured by oppositions of "inside" and "outside." In the process of producing images of community, narratives of early Christian contact and transformation also use oppositions of "old" and "new" to revitalize contemporary Christian identity. In doing so, such narratives do more than represent a calculus of identity types; they also constitute moral parables.

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As an example of the overtly moral tones of some historical narration, consider the following excerpt from an essay written by a Santa Isabel schoolboy. At my request, a class of junior high school children (standard seven) in Santa Isabel wrote essays on the topic “What was life like in Santa Isabel before the church came?” Allowing for the fact that simply posing a question in this way tends to elicit highly stereotypic answers, most of the essays formulated their image of the past by inverting ideals of the present. An excerpt from the beginning of one essay written by a sixteen-year-old boy is typical of many responses (my translation):

Beginning in the past, our ancestors, our fathers and mothers did not understand the love (*nahma*) that we know today. And they didn't know about the togetherness (*fofodu*) of the present time either. They did know about killing people, about eating people and about fighting . . . But life in the past was extremely difficult. People did not live in happiness (*gleale'a*) or love. Nor did they sleep calmly (*blakno*). If they were traveling or sleeping, they could not forget their clubs, their axes or their spears. They would always prepare so that if they went and saw another group they could attack them . . .

This excerpt crystallizes the manner in which images of past and present define one another in historical narrative. By beginning his essay with the remark that his ancestors “did not understand the love that we know today,” the author makes explicit what is often left unstated: characterizations of the past presume a culturally constituted present. In this instance, the ethos of pre-Christian life is portrayed in terms of contemporary understandings about persons, emotions and actions associated with Christian identity. The past life is imaged in terms of violent activities (killing and cannibalism) and personal experiences that are the antithesis of Christian “love” and “togetherness.” The essay is notable for its use of negation: the narrator’s pre-Christian ancestors are characterized as living without “love,” “togetherness” or “happiness.” No shadings of ambiguity or syncretism here: the features of past and present are sharply drawn through a series of contrastive oppositions. In its overdrawn simplicity the boy’s portrait echoes the rhetoric of early missionary writings throughout the Pacific that consistently phrased their project in terms of polarized images of “light” and “dark,” “kindness” and “cruelty,” “knowledge” and “ignorance.”

Indeed, missionary writers also found in Santa Isabel a story of transformation that was easily appropriated to narratives of missionary progress. At the time missionaries first began to work on the island in the latter part of the nineteenth century, most of the population had been victimized by headhunting raids emanating from the western Solomons where enterprising groups had armed themselves with new weapons acquired in a thriving trade with Europeans (Jackson 1975; White 1979). The resulting killing and



disruption depopulated some regions and forced many Isabel people off their land. As one missionary writer described pre-Christian life on the island:

Fifty years ago Santa Isabel in the Solomon Islands must have been anything but a pleasant place of residence. Head hunters came down from New Georgia and Roviana, or the chiefs raided among themselves. No man could have felt his head securely fixed, and the only tolerably safe dwelling places were the forts on the hills and the houses in the trees. *(Wilson 1935: 6)*

This author's characterization of unrestrained violence and fear is the ground against which the figure of Christianity was often drawn in mission accounts, much like the schoolboy's account of a past in which people "could not forget their clubs, their axes or their spears." The parallel suggests that missionary discourse has shaped local understandings of the past. For evidence of this one could point to the widespread use of missionary metaphors of "light" and "dark" to refer to "heathens" and Christians ("heathens" as *bongihehe* or, literally, "dark mind" and Christianity as *Khilo'au*, "call out of darkness"), as evident in the uniforms of the Melanesian Brothers, an evangelical group of young Solomon Islands Anglicans formed in 1925 who wear black shirts and shorts with a white sash and black waistcloth symbolizing "the light of Christ, shining in the midst of the heathen" (Whiteman 1983: 238). But the hegemony of mission rhetoric is by no means complete. When used within the contexts of local social and religious practice, terms that originate in missionary language are assimilated to local frameworks of meaning and modes of understanding.

The overriding feature of locally produced histories that distinguishes them from European mission history is that they are reflexive – about people's own ancestors and communities. In this sense, they are also about the self. In the school essay, like the many stories and songs that portray mission history, historical figures are often extensions of the self. When the boy begins his statement by referring to "our ancestors, our fathers and mothers," he links himself to the past (and the narrative that represents it) through bonds of descent, land and "custom." Present and past, self and other are joined in mutually defining relations. Even where the relations are posed in an idiom of opposition or difference, they presuppose a sense of self-continuity through time. Where the subjects of recollection are connected to the narrator, the significance of historical narrative as self-commentary is inescapable.

The moral dimension of the schoolboy's portrait emerges in the emotional language used to characterize the past as a certain kind of *ethos* – a way of being or feeling. Evocative words such as *nahma* ("love"), *fofodu* ("togetherness"), *gleale'a* ("happiness") and *blakno* ("calm") portray an

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imagined past in terms that resonate with personal experience in the present. Taking note of such resonances, this book explores the emotional as well as political uses of stories of common history – stories which are about change, but which also bring potent subplots of continuity to bear on the creation of identity. Particularly when considered in their contexts of performance, one may see the capacity of narrated histories to construct identity in more complex, textured and layered terms than the abstract and polarized images of mission journals or school essays.

**Chiefs**

It may seem unusual for a work on a Melanesian society to talk about “chiefs” rather than “big-men,” the hallmark of Melanesian styles of political leadership distinguished by personalized, achieved forms of power. My preference for the usage of “chief” (commonly used by local speakers of English and Melanesian Pidgin) is an attempt to sidestep the problematic typology of chiefs *versus* big-men, and to give local conceptions of chiefship their full due. “Chiefs” in Santa Isabel have long occupied center stage in the dramas of colonial history. Given their prominence in this respect, conceptions of chiefs have been crucial sites for contending ideas about identity and power. The latest instance of island-wide (paramount) chiefship offers an important opportunity to learn firsthand about processes of identity-making as they unfold.

As ideal types, “chiefs” and “big-men” (Sahlins 1963) have been useful reference points for comparative discussion of legitimacy and power in Oceania. But the greatest liability of this typology has been the underlying evolutionary model that sees chiefdoms growing out of big-man polities as societies in eastern Oceania achieved greater forms of political and economic integration (see Douglas 1979). Rather than freeze descriptions of leadership in Santa Isabel in terms of political types, it is preferable to view local leaders as working to create and legitimate forms of power and influence within the constraints of material and symbolic resources (cf. Allen 1984).

The colonial history of Santa Isabel is characterized by the rapid aggregation of scattered populations into Christian villages and the rise of Christian chiefs and catechists with unprecedented political influence. This story of consolidation presents its own microcosm of political evolution that has seen the transformation of local descent-based polities into larger and more inclusive forms of social integration, even anticipating the more expansive institutions of a modern nation state. However, rather than appropriate these events to a narrative of “modernization” that sees small-scale personalistic forms subsumed by large-scale bureaucratic ones, we might examine the dialectic relations between indigenous realities and the