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978-0-521-56435-9 - Mangrove Man: Dialogics of Culture in the Sepik Estuary

David Lipset

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This is the first modern ethnography of the Murik, a relatively small but important community settled on the Sepik River estuary in Papua New Guinea. It is also the first full-length account of a non-Western culture to make comprehensive use of the conceptual framework of the Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin. Among the Murik, as in other Pacific societies, women are conceptualized as the source of nurture, generosity and love. However, this conceptualization creates a kind of existential problem for men, who have political power, and their claim to sustain and reproduce society requires them to appropriate the nurturant qualities of women. So they must, in some sense, feminize themselves or model certain aspects of themselves after women. A “maternal schema” or “poetics of the female body” therefore underlines the sociocultural patterns of these societies. Lipset shows how this schema or poetics expresses itself in a number of different domains of Murik life: in kinship relations, life-cycle rituals, the men’s cults, and in disputes and processes of conflict resolution. These issues are important for Melanesian anthropology more broadly and tie in with some of the major contemporary debates in the social sciences: the relationship between ideas of male and female power.

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Frontispiece: A firstborn child, decorated with heraldry, is carried through Darapap by her mother's brother

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DAVID LIPSET

University of Minnesota



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To
two brothers
Max and Michael
and
their mother
Kathy

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Acknowledgments

This account of men's dialogues with images of womanhood in Murik culture has received many gifts. It has benefited, in the first place, from multiple periods of conjoint fieldwork undertaken by Kathleen Barlow and myself. Funding for the initial sixteen months of research (1981–2) came from the Graduate School of the University of California, San Diego, the Wenner-Gren Foundation and Sigma Xi. In 1985, Barlow and I organized "The Sepik Documentation Project" and got the opportunity to return to spend two months on the Murik coast with funds provided by the Australian Museum in Sydney and the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota the following year and then again in 1988. I made a brief visit by myself in 1993 under the auspices of the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at UCLA and the National Endowment for the Humanities. My tenure as a McKnight-Land Grant Professor at the University of Minnesota and the receipt of a Bush Foundation sabbatical grant there also contributed resources and release time which allowed me to prepare this book.

While the ethnographic present which I present is the 1980s and early 1990s, secondary sources upon which I have been able to draw go back to about 1913. When they are listed, indeed, these sources condense much of the twentieth century of Papua New Guinea into a paragraph. I have used Barlow's translations of three rich, ethnographic essays (1922/3; 1926; 1933) written by an Austrian Catholic missionary, P. Joseph Schmidt (SVD) who lived among the Murik for thirty years beginning just prior to World War I. At Margaret Mead's suggestion, Louis Pierre Ledoux, who was then a young Harvard college graduate, spent five months in a Murik village in 1936 and took about 600 pages of fieldnotes as well as an equal number of splendid photographs, both of which he made available to

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Barlow and me in 1982. In the late 1960s, Frank Tiesler, the ethnology curator at the Staatliches Museum für Volkerkunde in Dresden, did an exhaustive review of missionary and anthropological literature on maritime and regional trade along the North Coast which cast the Murik as major players (K. Barlow, trans. 1969/70). During the 1970s, as the pace toward Papua New Guinea statehood began to quicken, indigenous Murik voices were heard for the first time. Sir Michael Somare's autobiography (1975) discussed the relationship of his statecraft to his membership in Murik culture. And Matthew Tamoane, a linguistics graduate of the University of Papua New Guinea under the sway of Seventh Day Adventism, wrote a nostalgic piece (1977) about his father's sister, who was one of the last household shamans.

Upon our arrival in Darapap village, Barlow and I immediately encountered the complexities of the Murik system of adoption, a system in which custody claims in children are negotiated and disputed on through adolescence. One particularly salient claim in this process is the personal names by which a child is called, the name being the property of the donor, which is a gift in an ongoing series of exchanges which define identity and therefore loyalty. As we were married, Barlow and I were adopted by two separate families, assigned genealogical positions in them and given local names (as were our two boys after they were born). Through these adoptive identities, and the Murik insistence that we behave "properly," we attempted to learn what was entailed in maintaining them and slowly entered into an increasingly elaborate field of obligation, entitlement, courtesy, disrespect and avoidance, the very stuff, in short, of Murik personhood.

We did the best we could with the demands of Murik kinship. Perhaps our most effective tactic in this regard was learning to eat the Murik diet, which largely consists of seafood and sago jelly, concluded by areca nuts and tobacco. In so doing, we presented ourselves as culturally human, that is to say, as people who were ready to risk subordinating ourselves to the many implicit sociopolitical claims that are made through foodgiving among the Murik. We went along to work occasionally, but being unskilled canoeists, we could not but interfere with the day's catch. We assiduously presented ourselves at public events, rituals, village meetings, outrigger canoe departures and so forth. We spoke Melanesian Pidgin English (Tokpisin), the lingua franca which is widely used throughout the Murik Lakes and is becoming a first language to some children. We used the grammar of the Murik vernacular worked out by Stan and Jodeine Abbott, formerly of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (1978). While the level of our fluency in Murik may have satisfied the fancy of many Murik

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people, by the end of our third fieldtrip, we were continuing to learn to understand and speak the language, and still had to rely on translators, when the pace of discourse quickened.

Our debt to the Murik, who looked after us, bore with our cultural stupidity, occasionally took advantage of our clumsiness (see Chapter 6) and, above all, helped us to understand their lives, is irredeemable. Sir Michael Somare, “the father” of his country, and “native son,” favored our interests from the very first week we arrived in Papua New Guinea, but his pride of place and hospitality were of a piece with that which we received from people in each of the five Murik villages in which we eventually worked. In Darapap, to which Somare sent us for logistical reasons, Minjamok and Murakau adopted me as Abu, Murakau’s younger brother. Dakuk, Kiso and Sauma adopted Barlow as their daughter and me as their son-in-law. By no means did this work become key informant ethnography, however. I was in constant dialogue with many people. In Darapap, I want to mention the names of Lydia, Frankie, Tabanus and Daniel Wambu, Kangai, Pame, Sivik, Ginau, Marabo and Tamau, Bate and Kanjo, Tamoane, Yarong and Saimbu, Mwaima and Jameru, James Kaparo, Joel Gobare, Kaibong, Gidion Mwagon, Tekla, John Sauma and Luke Manambot. In Jangaimot, Pita Kanari and Komsing helped me. In Wokumot, Bai and Mwandekama were generous with their time. In Aramot, Wangi and Manag and Patrick Komba’u were my main informants. In Karau, Bujir and Jaja Kanung, Darai, Maiwa and Sarakena, Raphael Maiwa, Saub Sana and Anna, Akam and Maia were always willing to discuss their views of ongoing events with me. In Mendam, Boita and Kubisa, Aris and Nangumwa, Yamuna, Bate and Gobare were of particular help. Finally in Kaup, I spoke mainly with Sakara and Vincent Tanep. Several urban Murik were extremely forthcoming: Clara and Sailus, Paul Kangai, Ginau Mowe, Aupai, Sarewa and Matthew Tamoane.

While we were living in Darapap in 1981–2, the Summer Institute of Linguistics gave us permission to live in the house which the Abbotts had abandoned in the village. Jock Campbell, then the Coastal Fisheries Officer for the Department of Primary Industry in the East Sepik Province, provided information about the history of the Murik fishery. Several members of the Catholic clergy resident in Marienberg, Father Louis Kovacs, Sister Marianne Peer and Father Joseph Pierskall, gave us data about religious change and illness as well as lodging for several months in 1988. And, Wallace “Mac” Ruff, a landscape architect, has given me permission to reproduce the remarkable line drawings of the Murik buildings and village plans he did in 1981.

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Although the moral status of anthropology in Papua New Guinea was in flux during the 1980s, Barlow and I had nothing but the most gracious dealings with our sponsors in the country: the East Sepik Provincial government, the Departments of Anthropology and Politics at the University of Papua New Guinea, the Institute for Papua New Guinea Studies and the National Museum and Art Gallery. The hospitality of Barry Craig, then the anthropology curator at the National Museum, and Pamela Swadling, its prehistorian, introduced us to the art and geomorphological background of the region. Siroi Marepo Eoe, its head, gave us unqualified support and seconded John Salau, then an assistant curator, to work with us in 1986 on a regional survey of exchange.

Since this book remains a palimpsest of the doctoral dissertation it once was, I would be remiss to omit mention of my teachers from those distant days: F.G. Bailey, Gregory Bateson, Raymond Fogelson, Anthony Forge, Gananath Obeyesekere, Fitz John Porter Poole, Donald Tuzin, Ted Schwartz, Mel Spiro, but, most of all, Michael Meeker. Each of these men helped me, whether wittingly or not, to understand how I did and did not want to do anthropology.

My colleagues in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Minnesota, Stephen Gudeman, John Ingham, Mischa Penn, Gloria Raheja, and especially Eugene Ogan encouraged me with dialogue and more material forms of support. My students, Eric K. Silverman, Paul Spicer, Lori Jervis, Susan Schalge, Antonia Schluter and Jolene Stritecky listened to, and also argued with, me about things Murik, as did Jamon Halvaksz, who also prepared the index.

The clarity of the argument I have achieved in this book, such as it is, has benefited from criticism by Simon Harrison, Paul Roscoe, Jessica Kuper and two anonymous readers at Cambridge University Press.

I simply cannot reduce the complicated contribution that Kathleen Barlow has made herein to a clause. All I can say is what I always say in one way or another, which is that this minimal acknowledgment and expression of gratitude is wholly inadequate, for which I am sorry.