Chapter 5

Sepik River Selves in a Changing Modernity: From Sahlins to Psychodynamics

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In 1994, I returned briefly to the Eastern Iatmul village of Tambunum in the middle Sepik River of Papua New Guinea.[1] Tambunum is a large and prosperous, fishing and horticultural community that is well integrated into the Melanesian marketplace, and a central tourist destination in the region. My two village brothers had converted the rear room of my house into a modest tradestore. On the door was a cardboard sign that read in Neo-Melanesian Pidgin or tokpisin, '*No ken kam askim moa long dinau. Yupela mas sem.*' In colloquial English, 'Don't ask for any more IOUs. Have some shame.'

What shame? On the surface, the answer to this question is fairly straightforward. Modern individualism is erasing the moral bonds of kinship and traditional sociocentric or relational identity. Tradestores represent the modern aspirations of commerce, cash, capitalism and commodities, in a word, development. Tradestores are also about egocentric identity. They are owned by individuals, not kin groups, who hope to do quintessentially modern things: make a cash profit, deposit the money in a bank, and go shopping. Tradestores accommodate and enable individual consumption. To ask for an IOU is to disrupt these modern assertions of individuality through appeals to an out-dated sense of personhood that is rooted in relationships and reciprocity. Such requests shame proprietors with subtle accusations of selfishness, and they shame the requester by exposing a profound ignorance of how a modern person should act. What is shameful, in other words, is the stubborn retention of 'tradition' that thwarts the individual citizen's right to development, capitalism, commodity consumption, and choice. In short, the tradestore sign corroborates Sahlins's (1992) thesis that a humiliating repudiation of 'traditional' subjectivity precedes the adoption of 'modern' individualism.

But to explain the 'shame' that so incensed my brothers solely on the basis of a modern rejection of tradition is a partial truth. We need also to understand local conceptions of shame, selfhood, and the conventions for asking. When we do so, I will show contemporary humiliations in Tambunum appear to arise from the disjunctions between tradition and modernity, as per Sahlins, and also from disjunctions within the traditional self. Personhood in Tambunum was always

pluralistic and often discordant rather than unitary. This complicates the suggestion that modernization requires one sense of self to replace another. Instead, I will modify Sahlins's thesis and argue that modernization re-configures aspects of identity already present in traditional subjectivity. Modernity *is* humiliating, in large measure due to an emphasis on individuality. But some of this humiliation arises from traditional experiences with normative selfhood.

My essay begins with a brief overview of Sahlin's argument concerning the modern belittling and then replacement of traditional personhood. I next corroborate Sahlins's thesis with a brief historical overview of the village, in which I offer several anecdotes of past and present humiliation. But then I begin to revise Sahlins's thesis. After discussing tensions in traditional identity, I anchor the tradestore sign to local notions of shame. I also show the play of contrary yet traditional psychological drives in the context of tourism. Then I introduce an explicitly psychological dimension to my argument, thus attempting to synthesize psychodynamics with the study of historical process. My goal, to repeat, is not to refute Sahlins, but rather to enhance his thesis by linking cultural transformation with a consideration of personhood. Psyches, both traditional and contemporary, and not just modern social worlds, are sites of contradiction and change.

Developman and Development

In the postcontact Pacific, argues Sahlins (1992), intercultural engagement and massive social transformation entail a twofold shift in personal identity. Initially, Pacific peoples utilize novel European things 'to increase society as such: the scale, density, and pageantry of its relations. Foreign commodities are thus harnessed to the evolution of traditional culture' (1992, p.17). Sahlins calls this form of identity develop*man*, whereby extramural objects and ideas motivate local people to hyperbolize tradition. Yet dependence on a world market to fuel traditional cultural grandeur is unsustainable in the long run. Develop*man* inevitably yields to develop*ment*, at which time the adoption of Western desires eclipses indigenous goals. Develop*man* overstates tradition. Develop*ment* rejects it.

Between develop*man* and develop*ment*, argues Sahlins, lies a 'cultural desert' of self-disgrace and humiliation. The trappings of modernity remain a fantasy, yet the aspirations of tradition are now derided. In order to modernize, writes Sahlins (1992, pp.23-24), 'people must first learn to hate what they already have, what they have always considered their well-being ... to despise what they are, to hold their own existence in contempt.' This grim process, aggressively promoted by missionaries through Christian notions of misery and sin (Sahlins, 1996), nonetheless fosters a 'self-consciousness of the indigenous culture' which local people can harness and recreate as a form of 'value' (Sahlins, 1992, pp.24-25). But the reinvention of culture as 'culture,' too, must succumb to repudiation and self-loathing. Indeed, only when thoroughly-humiliated local people fully dismiss their traditional identity, continues Sahlins, can they embrace the forward-looking

promise of modernity. Towards illustrating the partial truth of Sahlins' thesis, I now turn to the Sepik River.

Humiliated Selves

Since the late 19th century, Sepik lives have experienced dramatic upheavals. The litany of historical transformations is typical: colonial governments, labor recruiting, out-migration, ethnological expeditions, new technologies, inflation of traditional valuables, erosion of bridewealth, disruption of trade networks, new lingua francas, *Pax Australiana*, missionization and the demonization of indigenous religion, cessation of male initiation, capitalism, literacy, citizenship, tourism, and so forth (see Gewertz and Errington, 1991; Smith, 1994; Tuzin, 1997; Silverman 2000a, chap. 1; 2001). Many of these changes were, and remain, disempowering. Yet historical transformations also foster novel modes of local creativity and agency, as I discuss below in regard to tourist art (Silverman, 2000b; 2004). For the moment, though, I want to focus on the issue of humiliation.

Without question, Eastern Iatmul sometimes reflect contemptuously and cynically on their premodern culture and selves. In this sense, Sahlins is vindicated. Indeed, my two village brothers had no interest in mastering traditional ritual and esoteric knowledge.[2] They were far more interested in outboard motors and the tradestore.[3] Likewise, when young men drink beer, they dramatically abjure traditional modes of adult comportment through excessive boasting, blasting cassette tapes of *lokal musik* till dawn, 'disco' dancing, exaggerating Western etiquette, speaking English, and maligning their less savvy companions as '*bush kanaka*' (see Ogan, 1966; 1986; Marshall, 1982). Later, the very same men would often bemoan their inability to drink, as do Europeans, in pleasant company. Whether sober or drunk, they were unable to measure up.

Contemporary instances of self-imposed humiliations build on the historical legacy of colonialism. Spears were no match, men say, for the guns of Imperial Germany. Even today the local European priest derides village spirits and magic. During World War Two, Eastern Iatmul experienced compulsory labor from the Japanese occupation troops, who shot the father of one of my research assistants, a noted sorcerer who could allegedly transform himself into a parrot, but not apparently when it mattered most. Some men, too, report with bitterness how Australian patrol officers tempted them like children by discretely leaving money around the camp. Eastern Iatmul, however, reacted like adults. They never filched the misplaced coins.

The aftermath of World War Two was similarly humiliating. Agumoimbange, a senior elder of the Shui Aimasa patriclan, may don his Australian military cap and boast of martial exploits after a few bottles of South Pacific Lager. Another man, Wangowi, was awarded a medal after the War, which still hung around his neck some 45 years later. Wangowi was proud of his military service, as is the village in general. In the last years of his life, Wangowi mostly sat outside his small ramshackle dwelling. He was frail, and hobbled with a cane. Unlike the younger

generation of Papua New Guineans, Wangowi was timid around Europeans. But his son and younger men in the village readily voice their rage at his treatment after the war. He risked his life for the Australian army and what did he receive in return? A small medallion. It was a token neither of develop*man* nor develop*ment*.[4] Wangowi died, embittered and silent, in the early 1990s.

I rarely interacted with Wangowi. His acquiescence towards me, and use of the phrase 'masta,' was humiliating for us both, although for different reasons. He seemed, like many men of his generation, resigned to watching the cultural norms he once valued slip away like so much detritus that endlessly floats down the Sepik River.[5] But did Wangowi's humiliation, as Shalins might suggest, translate into a repudiation of traditional selfhood? Do villagers today who belittle tradition assert a modern self that opposes indigenous personhood? It is to this question that I now turn.

Traditional Selves

Before we can speak about a historical clash between modern and premodern identity, we need first to understand the traditional self. To the extent that we can generalize, indigenous personhood in Tambunum encompassed two opposing motivations. On the one hand, Eastern Iatmul were, and largely remain, classically sociocentric. They pursue maximal personhood and renown by furthering their 'social beings' (Sahlins, 1992, p.12). Eastern Iatmul, as Marriott (1976, p.111) wrote for Hindu Indians, are 'dividuals' rather than bounded, private, autonomous individuals. The person contains 'a generalized sociality within' (Strathern, 1988, p.13; Wagner, 1991; Weiner, 1995). From this angle, persons are not self-made on the basis of acquisitions and voluntary, contractual relationships. The person does not choose his or her social relations and group affiliations. Rather, pre-existing descent groups and social relations define the person and delineate the horizon of entailments that he or she should pursue.

On the other hand, the premodern Eastern Iatmul self was, and again remains, also defined on the basis of motivations that are commonly associated with egocentric selfhood. Eastern Iatmul respect deeply the integrity of *individual* thought and agency. Even the unborn, Mead (1949, p.83) reported, 'can hurry or delay as it wishes.' And as Bateson (1936, p.91) wrote, 'It was nobody's business to say him nay in this individualistic culture.' A person's own desires, arising from the heart (*mauwi*), have an inviolate sense of autonomy.

Marriage exemplifies the customary clash between sociocentric and egocentric personhood. The sole matrimonial rule is for a man to wed a woman from his father's mother's lineage, a woman called *iai*. The premier *iai* spouse is the father's mother's brother's son's daughter (FMBSD). In Iatmul culture, men are named after paternal grandfathers; women receive patronymics from fathers' fathers' sisters (Silverman, 1997; 2001a). This way, the highly-valued *iai* rule ideally replicates prior marriages every second generation. But *iai* marriage can only fulfill

this cultural expectation when men and women abdicate their independent 'wills and identify with grandparents, thus choosing a sociocentric identity.

Marriage also reveals a remarkable degree of individualistic personhood in which the self refuses subordination to social expectations and a merged sense of identity. However much Eastern Iatmul praise the rule of *iai* marriage, they still validate all unions enacted on the basis of private choices. Individual desire whether economic, political, or romantic, trumps the weight of tradition and social pressure. Eastern Iatmul are loathe to contest marriages that transgress the rule More than that, they refuse even to speculate on the spouses' private intentions My point is that the notion of a bounded and autonomous agent who abrogates social norms to act on private desires is a valid aspect of traditional personhood (Silverman, 2001a). The opposition between egocentric 'satisfaction' and sociocentric 'obligation' (Sahlins, 1992, p.12) is premodern and modern. Today youth may elope, despite years of careful planning by their parents and kin. Yet modern ideals of romance and individual freedom do not necessarily entail the humiliation of traditional marriage and sociocentric identity.

A similar dynamic is revealed by totemic names. Each clan-based patronymic is bestowed onto one living individual. Thus names emphasize the person as a unique totemic entity. But each individuating name, because it is part of a wider cosmogonic 'path' across the mythic-historic landscape, also ties persons through magical 'consubstantiality' (Harrison, 1985) to other bodies, names, places, and phenomena. Human lives are sociocentrically iterative and egocentrically creative (Weiner, 1991, pp.196-98). Moral personhood in Tambunum has always tacked uneasily between expansive 'dividuality' and bounded individuality.[6] This is not, of course, to deny the role and force of history. It is merely to suggest that historical transformations become locally significant in terms of, as much as against, traditional concepts of personhood.

Another aspect of the totemic system reveals the contrariness of traditional identity. Men in the nearby societies of Chambri (Errington and Gewertz, 1987) and Manambu (Harrison, 1989; 1990) are hesitant about divulging esoteric wisdom to junior kin. The loss of names hastens the onset of old age and death. But totemic disclosures across the generations are necessary for the reproduction of descent groups. In the end, social morality eclipses the desire to retain names. Totemic inheritance in Tambunum manifests a different tension between self and society. Although men voice deep concern with totemic continuity, they may still decline to reveal their magic to sons and agnates. It is, as they say, 'their problem.' Concerns for the future of society thus clash with a man's individual autonomy. I want to stress that I am not implying the existence of a traditional subject in Tambunum who, when shorn of his cultural clothing, resembles Western Man, driven by utilitarian calculations, the relentlessly selfish pursuit of individual grandeur, and a universal sense of practical rationality.[7] Instead, I am offering a more modest proposal: many traditional cultural practices in Tambunum, as Eastern Iatmul themselves acknowledge, are motivated by an egocentric, oftentimes selfish, mode of personhood that conflicts with, yet does not demean, the sociocentric virtues of tradition.

In sum, the Eastern Iatmul self is dissonant rather than unitary, attuned both to kin and individualism. The self was plural, driven by contrary motivations, often leading to ambivalent resolutions. People in this or any sociocultural world work with a multiplicity of models about personhood. There is no single script about how the self should constitute itself, formulate desires, and create the world. Consequently, the interpretation of historical transformation must take into account the existence of multiple traditional identities, or discordant 'subselves' (Gregg, 1998). In this sense, the sign on my brothers' tradestore admonishing villagers to refrain from requesting IOUs was as much about the clash between modernity and tradition as it was about a tension within the traditional self.

Shameful Selves

The tradestore sign did not merely scold Eastern Iatmul. It made a statement about modern personhood with reference to shame. This raises an important question. If Eastern Iatmul are supposedly ashamed in the context of capitalism and tradestores, then how is shame locally conceived? The answer to this question will further contextualize the humiliations of modernity in traditional conceptions of personhood.

Eastern Iatmul abhor situations in which they must request things, especially food, from other persons. Requests diminish the self through insinuations of childish dependency and inadequacy – the precise opposite of maximal personhood. But it is perfectly appropriate for someone *else* to voice your desires. It is not dependency *per se* that is shaming but, rather, its unmediated public admission. Before my visits to Wewak, the capital town in the East Sepik Province, I was frequently approached by pairs of Eastern Iatmul – both men and women, separately and together. One person wanted me to buy something, say, aspirin or fish hooks. The requestor, moreover, was usually prepared on the spot to give me cash or something else in exchange. These were not petitions of poverty. But the desiring self remained mute while the other person actually voiced the request. For the most part, Eastern Iatmul cannot directly assert individual autonomy and speak their minds, or 'hearts.' Instead, persons must conceal some aspect of their identity, usually their voice but sometimes, as when they speak through a ritual mask, their face. I have elsewhere discussed this aspect of 'partible' identity in Tambunum (Silverman, 2001a). What I want here to stress is the cultural fact that Eastern Iatmul do not ordinarily show their faces and speak on their own behalf when making requests.

Let me offer two further examples of shame and desire. First, polygyny often foregrounds a man's individuality and agency, especially since this aspiration often opposes the will of other men and descent groups. But a man can ameliorate the potential conflicts of polygyny if he asks someone else, particularly a type of partner called *tshambela* but also a sister's child, to act on his behalf. If the suitor himself walks to his beloved's domestic ward, he may encounter a violent

reception. But should he send someone else to escort the woman back to his house I was told, other people can do little or nothing. In pidgin, '*ol i no ken tok.*'

Second, Eastern Iatmul men rarely arise in public and praise their ow exploits. Often, they contrast this sense of public decorum with Highland Ne Guinea big-men who, as Eastern Iatmul see it, delight in recounting their feat before an audience of rivals. Eastern Iatmul seldom speak on their own behal during public events, including modern courthouse proceedings (see also Erringto and Gewertz, 1987b, p.87 note 20). In Tambunum, self-assertions are problematic infrequent and muted. They are, in the main, performed by others.

Now we can return to the tradestore sign. I have already suggested that th humiliations of modernity are only partially reflective of a clash between a moder and traditional self. Cross-cultural differences in self-making are not essentialistic Rather, modernity heightens a tension between egocentric and sociocentric identit that was itself constitutive of tradition. Now I suggest that the shame of modernit is not individualism *per se* but assertions of individualism that, contrary to th norms for adult comportment, require or encourage unmediated displays of self awareness and self-presence. We need to understand the experience of historica transformation, I am suggesting, in terms of, not despite, local notions o personhood.

Modern Selves

Having discussed two important aspects of traditional personhood through whicl Eastern Iatmul engage historical transformation, I now highlight those aspects o modern identity that build on or intersect with, but do not outright replace traditional personhood.

Capitalism in Tambunum foregrounds the traditional axis of individuate personhood. This occurs in several ways. In the competition for the sale o art/artifacts to dealers and tourists, men express an egocentric self by striving t create unique objects (Silverman, 2004; 2001; 2000b; 1999). These wood carving are not reflective of sociocentric identity or membership in a descent group. In fac carvers often inscribe these objects with their Christian rather than totemic names.

To be sure, capitalism motivates the design of individual artistic expressions and even the very idea of explicit aesthetic innovation. But these objects do no repudiate tradition. Rather, they often represent a visual dialogue between traditio and modernity. Men recombine anew motifs from the customary repertoire wit various contemporary insignia, such as writing, dates, references to God and Mary and the national emblem. Carvers may harness traditional social processes t enhance the range of their artistic novelties. They may seek permission from non Iatmul affines to reproduce art styles from other language groups, and modif imported necklaces and masks, much as Mead (1938; 1978) noted long-ago, onl now for sale to tourists. These processes differ from Sahlins' notion o develop*man*. Eastern Iatmul are not expanding the pageantry or logic of traditio

per se. Rather, they are drawing on tradition in order to modernize their society and selves.

Several Eastern Iatmul maintain private bank accounts in Wewak.[8] These financial assets, like the ability to manage a small village tradestore, emphasize the boundedness of egocentric personhood. This sense of identity, it is true, conflicts with sociocentric selfhood and the moral norms of reciprocity, thus leading to disavowals of tradition as per Sahlins and others (e.g., Tuzin, 1997). But recent studies of commodity consumption in Papua New Guinea (e.g., Foster, 1996/1997; Errington and Gewertz, 1996; Gewertz and Errington, 1996) also indicate that modernity transforms, rather than replaces, local logics, values and ideals.

In the late 1980s, a guesthouse called the Tambunum Lodge was erected with Australian financing across the river from the main village. It has become a local symbol of develop*ment* and modernization. In its construction, men utilized skills which they learned in vocational schools. The guesthouse also encouraged the provincial government to cut a bush path that connects the village with the dirt Sepik Highway that winds to Wewak, across the Sepik Plains, over the Prince Alexander Mountains.

Two Australian men were successively hired as managers for the Tambunum Lodge. But now, two villagers, Linus Apingari and Henry Gawi, oversee the operation. They have traveled to Australia, speak excellent English, and interact confidently with Westerners. Previously, Linus worked at the Bougainville Mine whereas Henry served on a merchant ship. In Tambunum, these two men embody local develop*ment*, not develop*man*. Yet Linus and Henry do not themselves believe that their participation in the guesthouse and tourism more broadly conflicts with traditional aspirations and activities, or denigrates their *kultur* and *kastom*. I detect little in the way of humiliation on the part of Linus and Henry concerning the traditional Eastern Iatmul self. Those aspects of local identity and practices that they do occasionally forswear represent traditional social conflicts and tensions within the self, and not just the collision between culture and modernization. If they denigrate their less-modernized rivals, these statements often concern local politics rather than global worldviews.

The Lodge occasioned a complex totemic dispute (Silverman, 2000b; 1997). The feud was triggered by a young man named Njumwi who was excluded from the guesthouse negotiations and the eventual legal contract. His goal was simply to be recognized as the legitimate totemic title-holder of the ground, which he asserted by arguing in the cult house that his ancestors alone first named and thereby created the lodge location. But it is vital to note that this dispute did *not* center on economic wealth, access to the building and its associated facilities, and cash employment.[9] Instead, the dispute centered on totemic identity and the prestige hierarchy of the particular clan that claims proprietorship over the relevant tract of ground. In this regard, the guesthouse precipitated a dispute that in structure and substance resembled the countless other totemic quarrels that punctuate everyday village life. Nevertheless, the significance of this dispute is precisely that a development project reproduced rather than replaced or eroded traditional politico-ritual process.

Njumwi lost the debate largely as a result of his marginal political status. As a youth, Njumwi trespassed on a sexual taboo, after which he drank kerosene and wandered aimlessly through the region in a state of dementia. Upon reaching the Wewak Catholic Church, Njumwi was miraculously cured of his derangement. Since then, he looks to Catholicism and the Bible for authority and guidance rather than totemic myth and ritual. As a result, Njumwi professes nonviolence, brotherhood, thrift, and devotion to God. Despite these eminently modern personality traits, he lacks a truly legitimate voice. Numwi's flaw, as locally assessed, is his refusal to synthesize Christianity with the traditional religious system. Ironically, the tourist lodge, as a token of modernity and development, triggered a traditional totemic dispute that undermined the political aspirations of a man who otherwise represents many of the ideals associated with success in *bisnis*, tourism and development.

Njumwi notwithstanding, capitalist desires and Christianity in Tambunum do not necessarily foster a self that is opposed to, and humiliates, traditional personhood. In another Sepik society, Ilahita Arapesh, millenarian Christianity promised a modern paradise yet delivered only the total breakdown of social norms for gender and an alarming rise in domestic violence (Tuzin, 1997). By contrast, Tambunum has been spared devastating Christian revivals, indigenous annihilations of ritual and religion, and abrupt attempts at dramatically redefining personhood in order to foster spiritual modernization.

Indeed, men in Tambunum who ally themselves too closely with Christianity, we have seen, may forfeit their political voice. As a result, they are denied success in totemic disputes, which remain integral to village social life and, in the case of the Tambunum Lodge, develop*ment*. In general, there are no exclusions in Tambunum on the basis of baptism or totemism. Most people embrace both cosmologies without the anguish of theological incongruity (see Gewertz and Errington, 1991, p.156). Eastern Iatmul, too, interpret economic success or failure in terms of traditional religious idioms rather than, as on Kairiru Island (Smith, 1994), Christian morality.

In Tambunum, there is no unitary self about which the modernizing person can be ashamed. (If anything, men of develop*ment*, should they leave the village for urban employment, will later yearn to return.) This hybrid, shifting self is able to incorporate, rather than results from, historical disjunctures. Contemporary personhood accedes to and resists modernity, both localizing global forces and transforming local cultural practices into global value.

A Brief Historical Excursus

My arguments were somewhat presaged by the classic Culture and Personality outlook of Mead and Bateson. Mead noted that Iatmul villages have 'an absorptive and retentive ability in excess of their powers of integration' (1938, p.163). Later, she commented on the 'great deal of flexibility' in Sepik Tokpisin ethno-categories: 'artifacts, ritual usages, musical instruments, taboos, and so on, may

easily be moved from one category to another without, however, destroying the generality of the thematic relevance' (Mead, 1978, p.70). This cultural and cognitive system of fluidity and contradiction, where objects and ideas shift between categories as they dissolve and redefine the boundaries between them, portends *some* success in the clash between tradition and modernity. Since Sepik cultures and selves are highly flexible, they are unlikely simply to shatter from the allure of modern goods and aspirations.

Bateson identified a highly divisive mode of social interaction among Iatmul, which he famously termed schismogenesis.[10] The Iatmul polity was highly quarrelsome. All norms and rules were to some degree under threat of contestation. Bateson, too, brilliantly outlined a common structure to the hypertrophic quality of Iatmul cognition, or eidos, and social process (1936). As far back as the 1930s, then, Bateson and Mead understood the Iatmul self as contrary rather than unitary, drawing its wholeness not from consistency, but from multiplicity.[11] They also sketched the ethnographic features of Iatmul and Sepik cultures in such as way as to suggest a predisposition to cognitive, psychological, and cultural hybridity rather than historical replacement of the traditional by the modern. True, Bateson (1936) remarked that Iatmul 'were fatalist before the decay of their culture.' But the outlook of my essay, and that of much of Mead's work, is more in line with Clifford's (1997, p.176) recent formulation of culture as the 'normalization of inventive impurity.'

The Desiring Self of Lacan

Let me briefly recapitulate. I began the essay by endorsing Sahlin's thesis that modernization entails humiliation. In Tambunum, this humiliation often hinges on a heightened expression of individuality. However, I also suggested that the tension between relational and egocentric modes of personhood is also traditional. Psychological conflict is *not* the exclusive product of historical upheaval. Additionally, I proposed that contemporary humiliations must be understood at least partly in terms of traditional notions of shame. All this suggests that modernity does not merely replace one type of self with another. No self is quite so unitary. Rather, historical transformations act on, and through, multiple models of personhood. Now I am in a position to offer my final, perhaps most controversial, analytic move: a synthesis of Sahlins with Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of desire.

My anthropological entrée to Lacan's concept of desire (e.g., 1968/1953) is Trawick's (1990, pp.142-48; 1992) elegant discussion of Tamil Nadu social life. Trawick and the Lacanians characterize infancy as a state of tender, sensory and affective wholeness. But the intimate oneness of the mother-child bond is inevitably ruptured by cultural norms and social structure.[12] Through this rupture, though, and the concomitant experience of loss, the infant gains a true sense of selfhood. The child, now driven by desire, learns to seek fulfillment through cultural conventions. The child becomes a cultural subject. And what does the child, and all of us, desire? Primary symbiosis. That is, the self seeks to regain originary wholeness by reaching out, as it were, to cultural symbols and ideals. But primal unity is illusory – the result of Lacan's famous mirror stage – and so is the promise of regaining wholeness.

Lacan's symbolic code of culture, as Trawick (1990, p.144) writes, resembles Derrida's notion of "trace" (e.g, 1978). Culture 'perpetuates desire, sets up the illusion that there is something on the other side of what we perceive that will complete us.' If our desires were truly fulfilled, 'if there actually were closure – a perfect culture – and if the self felt itself to become whole, then human life would end, everything would stop' (Trawick, 1990, p.144; relatedly, see Lemaire, 1977, p.162; Smith and Kerrigan, 1983; Elliott, 1992, p.132; Nuckolls, 1996; Weiner, 1995; Wikan, 1995). Culture, in this psychodynamic sense, is not a repressive constraint on instinct as per Freud. Nor is culture a sublimating defense mechanism against anxiety as per Róheim (1943, p.106). Rather, as Trawick (1990, p.152) accentuates, culture 'creates longings that can *never* be fulfilled.' In essence, human life is fueled by foiled desire.

Trawick's Lacanian approach is befitting of traditional Melanesian social life and personhood. 'At the heart of the person,' writes Weiner (1995, p.13), 'is not some inviolable self-identity but the deposited or introjected traces … of the others who constitute that person.' After all, as Weiner (1995) stresses, the experience of sociality in Melanesia often entails exchanges of personified substances and objects. Local people typically understood these exchanges through various bodily idioms, including feeding, sexuality, birth, excretion, detachment and incorporation. Weiner (1995, p.4) correctly invokes Freud (1917, pp.243–58) to summarize Melanesian selfhood as 'attachments that are established and then abandoned.'

What does Lacan's theory of desire have to do with Sahlins and modernization? In my view, a Lacanian approach to self and sociality complicates the idea that modernization disrupts the 'wholeness' of traditional society and selfhood. I am well aware of the perils in building on Sahlins's work with a psychodynamic, seemingly ahistorical view of the self. I endorse *in general* Sahlins's overall thesis on the humiliations of modernization. Yet I also endorse *in general* the utility of a psychoanalytic framework for illuminating the entanglements and frustrations of social life.[13] My use of Lacan, as refracted through Trawick, intends only to suggest that at least *some* of the dilemmas and shames experienced in Tambunum through the broad process of modernization are rooted in the essential processes of Melanesian social life and selfhood.

Like Levi-Strauss and Bakhtin, each in their own way, Lacan offers a way of thinking about social life and culture as irreducible, frustrating, and often ambivalent. The unfinalizability of culture, moreover, and the impossibility of attaining psychological wholeness, suggest an avenue for usefully exploring human motivation, whether traditional or modern. What I seek, in other words, is to enhance Sahlin's project of understanding the complexity and anguish of historical transformation through consideration of the role played by psychodynamic process and desire in shaping culture.

Conclusion: Is Modernization Irrelevant?

I must repeat an important qualification. I am *not* denying or belittling the force of history and the changes wrought by modernization. Today, Eastern Iatmul experience different desires and subjectivities than they did in the 1930s, never mind the 1890s. I began this essay, after all, with reference to two brothers who link their aspirations to the success of a tradestore rather than the efficacy of totemic recitations.

Many contemporary yearnings are framed by a political-economy that dramatically differs from the precontact era. Traditionally, as Gewertz and Errington (1991) astutely note, Sepik persons interacted in a world of 'commensurate differences.' Most forms of inequality were unable to eclipse the potential for relative social equivalence. Moral personhood presupposed an essential sameness.

Now, however, Eastern Iatmul confront a world of 'incommensurate differences.' They must cede some cultural autonomy to the nation-state and its central institutions (Foster, 1997; Gewertz and Errington, 1991; Linnekin and Poyer, 1990; Nash and Ogan, 1990; Maclean, 1994). They recognize emergent class inequalities despite the promise of citizenship to offer wide-ranging equality, regardless of kinship and gender. And Eastern Iatmul routinely struggle against the economic asymmetry between themselves and Europeans as they desire objects and amenities that will surely remain beyond reach in the foreseeable future. No totemic debates can level these hierarchical relationships. Like it or not, Eastern Iatmul must now accept a widening vision of moral personhood that entails indelible disparity.

Hence, modernization *does* matter, as both a global processes of incorporation and a subjective state of selfhood. Yet historical transformation *must* be analyzed in terms of the complexities of local cultures and especially local modes of personhood. At least *some* of the conundrums and humiliations that Eastern Iatmul experience today pertain to traditional identities. The customary self was no less contradictory and multiple than the contemporary self, despite the fact that the terms and symbols of identity have become altered (see Weiner, 1995, Chapter 7). Notwithstanding the many pains and indignities of recent Sepik history, modernity has not entirely debased, replaced, or destroyed the traditional worldview, ethos and eidos of Tambunum (Metraux, 1976), and its plural construction of selfhood. To some degree, we can understand the local pathos of modernization in the Sepik on the basis of conflicts within the premodern self and a broad view of human motivation as theorized by Lacan. To be sure, these conflicts are played out in the coin of the day. Modernization matters. But the study of modernization requires us to attune our analytic frameworks to the creativity of culture, the complexity of psychodynamic motivation, the power of agency,[14] and the plurality of models through which people create their sense of self, and thereby derive meaning from their actions.

What, then, to return to the beginning of this essay, did my brothers mean when they appealed to '*sem*' on the door of their tradestore? I remain uncertain.

This literary exhortation is far too complex to be reduced to a single statement. Surely, my brothers wanted other villagers simply to offer cash for rice and soap rather than primordial sentiments. Yet the shame of borrowing from a tradestore exemplifies paradoxes of desire and identity that require consideration of more than a specific historical era in the Sepik. We need also to think about tensions within the traditional self as well as the broader psychodynamics of human experience. The tradestore sign represents neither develop*man* nor develop*ment*. Instead, the sign offers us a glimpse into the dialogicality of culture and history, pointing to contrary moralities and identities within the self as well as between different historical forms of what it is to be a person.

Notes

1 Fieldwork in 1988–1990 was graciously enabled by a Fulbright Award, the Institute for Intercultural Studies, and related support from the Department of Anthropology and the Graduate School, University of Minnesota. The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and DePauw University generously supported a return visit in June-August 1994. This essay was initially written at the kind invitation of Holly Wardlow and Joel Robbins, who organized a session at the 1998 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association. They also furnished several perceptive comments on the original draft, as did an anonymous reader. Of course, I extend my gratitude to the people of Tambunum.

2 I acknowledge, along with Sahlins (1992, p.21), the difficulty in using the terms 'tradition' and 'modernity.' Nonetheless, I do so heuristically, without a strong distinction or reification.

3 But many of their peers actively study clan-based esoterica.

4 The film 'Angels of War' movingly depicts the plight and pathos of Papua New Guineans who served the Australian military.

5 Lest this phrasing seem intrusive, I note that river currents and driftwood are salient images of change and time throughout Eastern Iatmul culture (Silverman, 1997).

6 My intention is not to essentialize two modes of selfhood that Shweder and Bourne (1984) call 'egocentric contractual' and 'sociocentric organic' (see also Hollan, 1992; Spiro, 1993).

7 I evoke, of course, Sahlins' (1995) response to Obeyesekere's (1992) critique of the Cook-as-Lono thesis (Sahlins, 1985).

8 For the expectations and plight of Sepik villagers in Wewak, including an emergent middle class, see Errington and Gewertz (1991) and Gewertz and Errington (1999).

9 Village men and women are employed at the guesthouse as grass cutters, canoe drivers, security, cooks, and so forth. These jobs rotate through each clan every fortnight.

10 Bateson defined this neologism, as 'a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behaviour resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals.' In light of Sahlins's essay, it seems noteworthy that Bateson (1935) first presented his notion of schismogenesis in a discussion of culture contact.

11 In her review of Bateson's 1936 book *Naven*, Powdermaker (1940) discerned a resemblance between schismogenesis and Harry Stack Sullivan's theory of interpersonal relations. Bateson's Iatmul work influenced his later collaboration with Mead in Bali (Mead and Bateson, 1942), and his contributions to communications

theory, cybernetics, and the double-bind theory of schizophrenia (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, and Weakland, 1956). Naturally, I am *not* arguing that inconsistencies within Iatmul personhood, or the lack of wholeness, is tantamount to a personality disorder (see also Ewing, 1990).

12 Lacan labeled the cultural order that shatters originary wholeness Other, Language, Culture, Father, and, most troubling, Phallus (see Rubin, 1975; Gallop, 1982; Flax, 1989). My use of Lacan here makes *no* claim to the universality of this androcentrism.

13 Some readers might object to the anthropological use of psychoanalysis. Yet, at this point in the history of the discipline and modern social thought, most casual dismissals of psychoanalysis (e.g., it denies the role of culture and history) have long since been addressed, resolved, or refuted (see, for relevant citations, Silverman, 2000a).

14 For a type of modern humiliation as a form of 'recessive agency,' see Knauft (2002).

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