



From *Cannibal Tours* to cargo cult: On the aftermath of tourism in the Sepik River, Papua New Guinea

Tourist Studies
12(2) 109–130
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DOI: 10.1177/1468797612454511
tou.sagepub.com



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Abstract

This article challenges the moral parable of the film *Cannibal Tours* by drawing on long-term ethnographic research in a Iatmul-speaking village along the Sepik River, Papua New Guinea—one of the very communities featured in the film. In this article, first, I argue that *Cannibal Tours* silences indigenous agency and thus contributes to the very symbolic violence the film-maker aims to critique. Second, I interpret Sepik River tourist art not as meaningless trinkets, as the film implies, but as complex aesthetic expressions of postcolonial identity. Finally, I discuss the recent emergence of cargo cult ideation in a Sepik society as a response to heightened fiscal marginalization after the sale of the tourist ship in 2006. The moral force of *Cannibal Tours* leads most viewers to wish that the tourists would simply leave. And they have. Local villagers, however, desperately yearn for the return of tourism—and now enlist the dead in this effort.

Keywords

art; *Cannibal Tours*; cargo cult; Papua New Guinea; Sepik River

Introduction

Dennis O'Rourke's widely hailed 1988 film *Cannibal Tours* masterfully portrays all that is wrong with tourism in the global periphery. Who can watch the movie and not squirm—even after many viewings? The film continues to generate scholarly interest (e.g. Burns and Lester, 2005; Huang and Lee, 2010; Palmer and Lester, 2007; Yamashita, 2003). It remains a staple in many classrooms, including my own. But the near apotheosis of the film has long troubled me as an anthropologist with extensive experience in a Sepik River community. The iconic status of the film rests on the elicitation of powerful

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emotions, not on richly textured insights into the desires and experiences of Sepik people or the full spectrum of their touristic entanglements. True, such was never the filmmaker's intention. After all, O'Rourke aimed to focus on tourists' desires *in* Papua New Guinea (PNG). The film is not, from this angle, *about* Papua New Guineans.

Nevertheless, Sepik River dwellers are central to the narrative of *Cannibal Tours*. Indeed, the film lends local people a visual and vocal presence at least as prominent as that of the tourists—often, more so. But O'Rourke's cinematic parable denies local people any true voice or agency. With the exception of one irate woman, Sepik inhabitants generally appear confused, awkward, often mute, and always disempowered. Thus, the film inflicts the same symbolic violence onto local people as the tourists it so relentlessly critiques. In this regard, *Cannibal Tours* serves as a cautionary tale about representations of tourism that reduce the complexity of the encounter to an uncomplicated moral fable. The compelling ethical plot of the film resonates with the critical stance of Western viewers attuned to the plight of indigenous peoples. But it bears little resemblance to local sensibilities. The film burlesques Sepik people even as it seems to rehabilitate their humanity.

In this article, I first seek to place Sepik tourism in a broad historical context. I then highlight what the film fails to show: artistic creativity. Men, women, and even children in one Sepik community, Tambunum, transform a rich traditional repertoire of basketry and woodcarving into souvenirs.¹ But monetary motivation does not imply the absence of meaning. To assume otherwise is to yet again silence local voices and outlooks. Indeed, I will argue that Sepik tourist art conveys intricate messages about contemporary personhood and sociality in the Melanesian postcolony.

My second, more timely and ultimately tragic, argument is that the local experience of tourism today is perhaps best illustrated by what happens when the tourists stay home—that is, do *not* visit Sepik. Such is the case today, at least in Tambunum. The tourist vessel featured in *Cannibal Tours*, called *The Melanesian Explorer*, was replaced in 1988 by a plush catamaran cruiser, *The Melanesian Discoverer*. The latter vessel regularly plied the river for many years. But the owners of *The Melanesian Discoverer* sold the ship in 2006. Since then, Tambunum rarely receives visitors. Large-scale tourism to the village faded. And with no tourists, as many people told me in 2010, there is no money. The unease we may feel when viewing *Cannibal Tours* pales in comparison to the local experience of economic woe in the post-touristic Sepik.

Even in the heyday of tourism from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, however, Tambunum villagers voiced discontent with the local level of “development.” Yet, they viewed tourism as a regular, reliable source of revenue. But with the absence of tourists, which corresponds to an overall degradation of “basic services” offered by the national and provincial governments, my Iatmul friends rightly feel increasingly disenfranchised, despondent, and utterly dependent on the vicissitudes of a modern world system over which they exercise little power. The men I know well still reach for their chisels. But men and women today also reach for something I never expected to hear in this once prosperous community: narratives about deceased kin, voyaging back to the village like ghostly tourists on a numinous ship, striving to bring local people wealth and commodities, only to be barred by the Europeans. What happens after *Cannibal Tours*? The answer, in short, is the ideology of a cargo cult.

It is not my intention to defend or condemn tourism in the global periphery. Rather, I seek to enlarge our analytic and moral purview, focusing on a now-classic case study. A full understanding of Sepik River tourism, I will show, requires us to consider moments of local agency, creativity, and yearning. We must, furthermore, attend not merely to the presence of visitors, but also, at least in Sepik, to their absence—that is, to how local people in this postcolonial polity imagine their post-touristic plight.

Beyond *Cannibal Tours*

I begin not with *Cannibal Tours* but with another film, the 1986 award-winning British drama *The Mission*. In a moving moment toward the end of the movie, the papal emissary, ruing the plight of the indigenous Guarani who are caught between the Church and Jesuits in eighteenth-century South America, writes: “I had to wonder whether these Indians would not have preferred that the sea and wind had not brought any of us to them.” This, I take it, is the reigning message of *Cannibal Tours*. Indeed, my students see the tourists in the film as arrogant, rude, voyeuristic, patronizing, often racist, and always astonishingly naive. They also tend to react angrily when the tourists haggle with villagers over a few dollars—especially after I report that the total cost of a cruise along the river, including various airfares, hotels, and layovers in Australia, might reach upward of US\$10,000. *Cannibal Tours* forcefully dramatizes the economic inequalities inherent in tourism along the global periphery.

That said, would local people fare better without tourism? That is to say, does the film-maker’s moral critique correspond to local desires? The answer is ‘no’. I ground this response in long-term, ongoing ethnographic fieldwork since the late 1980s in Tambunum, an Eastern Iatmul community of about 1000 horticultural gardeners, fisherfolk, and petty capitalists located along the banks of the middle Sepik River. My ethnographic insights thus serve as a rejoinder both to *Cannibal Tours* and to the many theoretical discussion of tourism anchored to the film that similarly elide over local experiences and desires (e.g. Bruner, 1989, 1991; MacCannell, 1990, 1992). Serendipitously, the beginning of my initial period of fieldwork in 1988 corresponded with the maiden voyage of *The Melanesian Discoverer*. Conversely, my most recent visit occurred several years after the final departure of the vessel. My analytic purview, then, uniquely allows me to place *Cannibal Tours* and Sepik tourism in a broad context that includes, perhaps most importantly, local perceptions of the height of tourism and, more consequentially, its aftermath.

Europeans first prowled Sepik in the 1880s, then called *Der Kaiserin Augusta fluss*, during the German colonial administration of New Guinea or *Kaiser Wilhelmsland*. *Cannibal Tours* prominently features black and white photographs from this era—as well as a German tourist much besotted with imperialist nostalgia. He is an easy target—a caricature, really. As a flip evocation of Nazism, he readily embodies the banality of touristic evil. But the historical narrative of the film is misleading.

To illustrate my claim, let me focus on money. I do so in response to a scene in the film wherein O’Rourke asks a Iatmul man, “Why do you want money?” It seems like a reasonable question. But it absurdly implies that money is a recent novelty in Sepik or, worse, some frivolous accessory to everyday social life. The question ignores the fact

that local people need—and I choose that term deliberately, for it mirrors local statements—to purchase petrol, outboard motors, kerosene, flashlights, radios, batteries, clothing, medicine, school fees, fiberglass dinghies, footwear, food, fishing nets, and passenger truck transportation to Wewak, the capital town of the province. Sepik lives are inextricably enmeshed in the flows of global capitalism—and they have been so for over a century.

German colonial administrators and returning indentured laborers, working on coastal copra plantations, introduced into the region vast quantities of shell valuables and European-manufactured porcelain imitations. Through inflation, and the rise of the cash economy, shells became valueless by the end of World War II except as sources of decorative nostalgia, worn mainly for touristic dances, and as cash when sold to visitors. But even earlier, local people were thoroughly familiar with coins and bills. Indeed, no living Sepik person has any memory of a pre-monetary era.

The Imperial German government established administrative posts along the river. Missionaries linked well-being to heavenly salvation—an enduring notion throughout Melanesia (e.g. Robbins, 2004; Smith, 1994). This religious concept, we will see, gained added imperative in Tambunum much later with the cessation of tourism. Labor recruiters, anthropologists, and museum expeditions steadily steamed along the river. My point here is that the local people featured in *Cannibal Tours* have been using currencies for well over a century. Money, in fact, much like tourist art, has mediated many significant social encounters between local people and visitors since contact. Why do Sepik inhabitants need money? Because they have no desire to regress to premodern subsistence farming and fishing, and no desire to cast away their modern desires and identities. They need money because they inhabit a thoroughly postcolonial and globalized world, not some Rousseauistic primitivist fantasy.

After World War I, the League of Nations transferred the colonial administration of New Guinea to Australia as a Mandated Trust Territory. Local people now took up Australian currency as part of a wider colonial project of moral education and slow economic encompassment. During World War II, villagers suffered a cruel Japanese invasion, which included occupation money, another in a long series of imposed currencies. These notes, I add, like earlier bills and coins, are often offered for sale to tourists.

During World War II, some Eastern Iatmul men served in the Australian army, a common occurrence throughout the territories of New Guinea and Papua. At the armistice, local people expected some degree of racial equality, monetary remuneration, and modernization. Alas, they received trivial medals and commendations. Indeed, the collective Eastern Iatmul memory for much of the twentieth century can be summarized as the failure of the world system to compensate properly for services rendered—or, in the case of the Japanese army, for local people murdered—and for promises made. Not surprisingly, Eastern Iatmul slot tourism into this same conceptual framework.

In the post-World War II era, Eastern Iatmul experienced rapid innovations and new institutions, including formal schooling, participatory democracy after independence in 1975, vocational training, and the increasing availability of prestigious consumer goods. Tourism emerged in Sepik in the 1970s and took off a decade later with the introduction of *The Melanesian Explorer*, the vessel featured in *Cannibal Tours*. This ship was replaced in 1988, as I noted earlier, by *The Melanesian Discoverer*. In the late 1980s, the

ship visited the village several times a month. Both local perceptions and my own data agree that the community earned a sizable income from the sale of tourist art—especially in comparison to nearby villages. To be sure, many Eastern Iatmul lamented the lack of “real development.” Yet, local people in that era constantly participated in commercial transactions. Moreover, many Eastern Iatmul maintained active bank accounts in Wewak. No other local endeavor was deemed as lucrative as tourist art.

For at least a decade, tourism was the largest source of cash in the village. There was no shortage of radios, petrol, cassette recorders, acoustic guitars, beer, kerosene lanterns, bicycles, dartboards, sacks of rice, tins of mackerel, satchels of sugar, and other such petty commodities. Yet, the village lacked electricity, plumbing, modern-style housing, access to paved roads, suitable health care, regular transportation to town, and, needless to say, fortnightly paychecks. As one man said in 1990, chisel and hammer in hand while hewing a crocodile-shaped coffee table, “we carve for tourists because we have no real development here” (cf. Jiang et al., 2011). I heard the very same sentiments in 2010. But the recent absence of tourism enormously compounds the local sense of malaise. In *Cannibal Tours*, villagers routinely appear immobilized by touristic cameras. But the *real* immobilization, I argue, occurs through fiscal impoverishment, which local people in large measure trace to the lack of tourists.

Iatmul people, as Bateson (1936) noted long ago, valued strong-headed individualism. But young male agency was traditionally constrained by the male cult and the omnipresence of various taboos and spirits. Not so today, remarked my friend Gamboromiawan. Any kid can now grab a chisel, fetch a hunk of wood, and set off for the town or city to flog tourist art. Despite the fact that this enterprise is locally seen as “not development,” many Sepik people understand tourism as enabling young men—and also women with their baskets—to craft a modern sense of identity that pivots on economic self-reliance, personal autonomy, and the pursuit of adventure. *Cannibal Tours* portrays tourism as an encounter between passive Sepik people and active tourists. But in truth, as this Melanesian variant of the Horatio Alger tale evidences, the locus of agency is far more complex.

During the late 1980s, Tambunum was the most prosperous village along the river—a vibrancy entirely the consequence of tourism. People from nearby communities regularly trekked and canoed to Tambunum to vend produce, betel nut, and pottery, and also to peddle their own wares to tourists. The village viewed itself as an *entrepôt* that garnered regional envy and international renown. But a little over a decade ago, tourism in PNG plummeted due to a series of factors, including post-9/11 jitters about overseas travel, increasing fuel prices, high airfares to PNG, and the global recession. Moreover, PNG is often perceived as a “failed state,” plagued by perennial problems with “law and order.” The upshot was that *The Melanesian Discoverer*, berthed at the Madang Resort Hotel by the Melanesian Travel Services (see: <http://www.mtspng.com/>), was sold in late 2006 and ceased operation.² Tourism to Tambunum all but ended. And with no tourists, as local people say, there is no money.

In 2010, I saw virtually no cash transactions and petty capitalism in Tambunum. Adults and children in the late 1980s often wagered coins during card games. Today, people play with twine tokens. The village once contained several small trade stores. They are now shuttered. Many parents could not afford school fees. The village lacks

even the most basic health services. Modernity has ground to a halt. Worse, as many people said, “we are going backwards.”

The loss of tourism heightened the local sense of dispiriting marginalization. It also altered gender relations. In the open-air markets in Wewak, Eastern Iatmul women sit and sell baskets. Men occasionally display their woodcarvings. In the past, men earned more income than the women since woodcarvings fetched higher prices than baskets. The decline in tourism, however, deprived men of this revenue. Papua New Guineans themselves find little appeal in local woodcarvings. They are far more likely to adorn their homes with posters of Bob Marley and Michael Jordan, as well as lacquered plaques of Jesus and biblical quotations, than with Sepik artifacts. But Papua New Guineans often purchase and carry baskets, and so Eastern Iatmul women who reside in town generally earn more money than their male kin. “Were men embarrassed?,” I asked a group of women in 2010. “They should be!” A few weeks later, the wife of one of my village brothers, Dangi, derisively compared men to dogs: “All they do is laze around and eat.” But as the men see it, the decline in tourism has denied them any possible opportunity to sell their artworks. Indeed, several men privately admitted to feelings of spousal and paternal inadequacy in just this regard. Having assimilated into their gendered identity the Western *qua* Christian notion that the man is the “head” of the household (e.g. 1 Corinthians 11:3), many men now find themselves in the awkward position of only partially enacting that authority.³

Tourism in Sepik is a complex phenomenon, I showed, rooted in a long history of encompassment and cross-cultural encounters that resists any reduction to a simple moral tale. Increasing numbers of Eastern Iatmul today pin the viability of their culture as a legitimate postcolonial polity on their ability to once again attract tourists and, thus, money and fame. From the comfort of the classroom, most viewers of *Cannibal Tours* surely wish that the tourists would simply go home. But the inhabitants of Tambunum village beg to differ. For them, the pressing moral issue is not the touristic gaze or invasive camera but, rather, the absence of tourists. Any nuanced moral and theoretical view of tourism in the global perspective must honor this local perspective.

“As Nating”

Each year, the Sepik River floods during the rainy season. Typically, the waters rise only a few feet. In 2009–2010, however, the annual flood proved to be the highest in a generation, inundating the region for months. It was, as my friends repeatedly said, a “disaster.” Almost everybody in the village fled to the higher surrounding grasslands—tragically, in some cases. The young son of my village brother, while playing in the tall grass, was set upon by a venomous snake. His mother held him as he died.

The flood destroyed gardens and fruit trees. When I arrived in Sepik in July 2010, villagers were subsisting solely on sago starch, river fish, and greens, with no fruits, vegetables, or tubers. In the late 1980s and 1990s, Eastern Iatmul regularly supplemented their horticultural and riverine diet with packaged foods; but no longer. For one, as I noted earlier, all village trade stores closed. Escalating prices of petrol, food, and transportation in the province and throughout PNG rendered any such endeavors, let alone profits, impossible. For another, as former proprietors remarked, villagers have no money

to spend; a new-found poverty local people largely associate, we have seen, with the decline of tourism. As a result, the community has regressed to subsistence farming—much like, as they often said, their premodern ancestors. “Our clothes are tattered and dirty,” said many men, “we cannot even afford soap.” This is why, to invoke O’Rourke’s troublesome question, local people want money and, in consequence, yearn for the return of tourism.

The annual flooding of the river, it is crucial to note, thwarts efforts to grow coffee or rubber, two typical Melanesian cash crops. A vanilla boon erupted in 2002, affording some Eastern Iatmul men momentary dividends. But the market crashed in 2004, largely due to a global glut. The only other possibility for sustained cash-cropping in the village is cacao. Some men did plant trees after the flood, but it will take several years for the plants to grow pods. Even then, the trees are susceptible to flooding. Crocodile farms also hold some promise, but they require substantial investment in water pumps and other equipment, and so remain inaccessible. All we have, said one man, is “fish, water, and carvings.” In other words, the only local resource that can generate money is tourist art.

The town of Wewak lies on the north coast and serves as the commercial hub of the East Sepik Province. Wewak thus contains the nearest banks, wholesale stores, post office, shops, hotels, and other commercial enterprises. All commerce along the river inevitably begins and ends with Wewak. To reach the town, in 2010, villagers first traveled by a canoe or dinghy downriver to the district headquarters of Angoram. In a dugout fitted with a 25 horsepower outboard motor, the trip required four hours and 8–10 gallons of petrol, then another 10–15 gallons later for the return voyage upriver. In Angoram, one paid for transport to and from Wewak on a passenger truck, lasting another four hours (75 km), as well as a fee for each large sack or carton. Most villagers today lack sufficient funds for any such travel, especially with baskets and woodcarvings. So costly is the trip that, much to my astonishment, in 2010, some people walked to town, taking several days, and floated downriver on rafts to Angoram. No such activity ever occurred in the late 1980s. It was unthinkable.

In 1938, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, flush with success from their famous “culture and personality” study of Bali, steamed up Sepik for a six-month project in Tambunum. Prior to my departure in 2010, I reproduced several hundred of these photographs as a gift. The images elicited a contrary discourse in the village. On the one hand, the people portrayed in the photos were described as “wildmen.” They threw spears, killed their enemies, and traded shell valuables. “*Ah, sori tumas,*” remarked one man in *tokpisin*, the *lingua franca* of PNG, “*ol i no gat plenti samting.*” “How sad,” to paraphrase. “They had few possessions.” Indeed, he continued, to much laughter, they were “*as nating man,*” that is to say, “butt-naked.”

On the other hand, my friends viewed their forebears with profound respect, admiration, and awe. Modernity aside, Iatmul people today see themselves as an unhealthy shadow of their ancestors:

We follow a different path. They were strong; we are cowards. They were healthy; we are thin. They were initiated; we are not. They possessed powerful magic; we have none. Our customary law (*kastam lo*) is broken (*bagarap*), and so we languish.

These comments sever the past from the present. Nonetheless, each time I discussed the 1938 photos with a crowd, someone inevitably remarked on their post-touristic misery, declaring “we are so poor today that, like the people in these photos, we are close to walking around *as nating*.”

Sculpting self and society

The tourists in *Cannibal Tours* endlessly photograph local people and bargain for objects. They personify European avarice (Clifford, 1988; Thomas, 1991). From this angle, the film construes tourism as the latest stage in a long history of exploitation and trauma.⁴ And I myself here implied as much. But Sepik people, however, largely swept along by the tides of a history not of their own making, nonetheless strive to exercise agency in creating their contemporary identities, especially in the context of tourism. In this sense, as Errington and Gewertz (1996) argue for the nearby Chambri, Tambunum villagers defy the simplistic yet persistent dichotomy often perpetuated in the West between a “pure past” of noble savagery and a “fallen present” of ignoble inauthenticity. Indeed, while *Cannibal Tours* critiques the touristic stereotype of the primitive, the film also reproduces that very same caricature by rooting cultural legitimacy in what Clifford (1987: 126) dubs a “salvaged past” rather than a “local present-becoming-future.” I contend that Sepik societies are best envisioned through the concept of “cultural hybridity.”⁵ As one Sepik man remarked in *Cannibal Tours*, “We now live between two worlds.” How apposite! And nowhere is this doubled, if not liminal, worldview better illustrated than on tourist art.

Iatmul people were, and remain, prolific artists, ornamenting virtually all forms of material culture. Iatmul people first started to whittle objects for external consumption as early as the era of German colonization. If tradition extends beyond the horizon of memory, then tourist art is a thoroughly traditional practice. When the tourist ship arrived in the 1980s and 1990s, Eastern Iatmul displayed hundreds and hundreds of objects along the main village path. Visitors strolled past masks, figures, animals, canoe prows, pottery, baskets, netbags, shell necklaces, and myriad other items. I agree that one could bewail this touristic bazaar as little more than cultural prostitution, whereby Iatmul people seem willing to sell just about anything, and there is much to support this view. But it is, at best, a partial truth. Upon closer scrutiny, we can perceive genuine aesthetic creativity.

One tourist in *Cannibal Tours*, the self-professed “exponent of primitive art,” laments that local artisans might “work for tourism as such.” The film itself tacitly endorses this view. I, however, prefer to see tourist art in Tambunum as a visual expression of emergent, often contrary, facets of self and ethnicity that pivot between “tradition” and “modernity” (see also Silverman, 1999, 2001, 2004).⁶ The competitiveness of the market, for example, encourages carvers to innovate. The men self-consciously combine traditional motifs and forms into idiosyncratic styles. They paint novel patterns and color schemes. Touristic carvings do not represent the totemic ancestors of particular patrilineal descent groups. Instead, the men now carve on their own behalf. Touristic objects thus reflect the self as an autonomous, inventive agent.

The men also now carve on behalf of their family. The *tokpisin* term “*famili*,” however, does not refer to a traditional kin group—say, the patrilineage “branch” (*tsai*)—but, rather, refers to the nuclear family. This still-novel social unit in Sepik is locally understood as a locus of tender sentiments and shared domestic chores. Spouses, for example, should strive for the ideal of collective tranquility, much promoted by the Church, known as *wanbel*, literally “one belly” (see also Gewertz and Errington, 1999: 71). These emotions diverge significantly from the primordial ties that local people associate with the solidarity of traditional social groups.

Not only does a man now carve to support his individualism and *famili*, but he also assumes creative ownership over his objects. Formerly, descent groups never fashioned their own sacra. Instead, a group provisioned the lineages of their sisters’ children (*lauanyanggu*) and hereditary ritual partners (*tshambela*), who reciprocated by creating or primping the necessary spirit. To hew your own ancestral totems, even today, dangerously violates “customary law,” resulting in the infliction of mystical retribution (*vai*). It is not done. Mystically potent woodcarvings, then, represent the foundational trope of Melanesian sociality, namely, reciprocity. Sacra are inherently collective. By contrast, touristic woodcarvings represent the labor, aesthetic genesis, and ownership of individuals. Magical spirit figures benefit the group. Tourist art allows one to pursue the magic of modern self-making.

The men’s touristic woodcarvings, I just argued, express a more narrow sense of personhood than typically associated with traditional art. By the same token, women’s baskets represent a greatly expanded sense of identity. Women often weave Christian crosses into their baskets as well as the initials “PS,” which represent “*pikinini Sepik*,” the *tokpisin* phrase for “Sepik child.” In 2010, baskets proclaimed “Sepik Souls” (see Figure 1).⁷ These baskets express neither lineage, clan, or village affiliation nor pan-Iatmul ethnicity, but, rather, a regional concept of identity that initially arose during the colonial era.



Figure 1. Baskets with the phrase “Sepik Souls.”

The phrase “Sepik Souls,” moreover, blends this (post)colonial attachment with monotheistic eschatology. In the context of tourism, we can also interpret the Christian and literate iconography as an attempt to negotiate a relationship of equality rather than dependence, and to affirm a common ground of similarity despite the obvious cross-cultural differences.

Many touristic woodcarvings depict two faces, sometimes more, a style unknown prior to the 1970s. I interpret these sculptures as visualizing the psychological experience of multiple, shifting, often competing forms of personhood. Perhaps my friend Linus Apingari said it best in 2008: “We have many paths we can now follow. The path of custom. The path of the Church. The path of business. The path of the new.” The multiple faces on these touristic woodcarvings simultaneously “look” along the “many paths” that Iatmul people may choose when fashioning self and society.

Tourist carvings often blur the everyday boundaries between inside and outside and human and animal (see Figure 2). To some extent, these works illustrate traditional aesthetic values. For example, an effective ritual display should evoke the concept of *woli kapmagarl*, which I gloss as “floral surf.” Similarly, many traditional patterns simultaneously conjure aquatic, avian, and terrestrial realms—a leaf motif, say, may also recall waves and feathers. But images of transmutation seem especially sharp and common on touristic objects. Gaping jaws, for example, simultaneously appear to devour and birth various creatures such as fish and birds, but especially crocodiles. These massive aquatic reptiles, once symbolic of senior clan-specific spirits called *wai-wainjimot*, now serve as the *de facto* mascots of pan-Sepik identity.



Figure 2. Woodcarving that transforms the interior body of a man (e.g. tongue) into the exterior of a snake spirit.

On a new genre of woodcarving, crocodiles appear to crawl out of the surface of the mask (see Figures 3 and 4). This imagery is partly rooted in the local ontology of totemic and magical esoterica, common across Melanesia and Aboriginal Australia, whereby an “outer layer” (*aiwat nyangiit*) of knowledge always conceals more powerful secret or “inside” knowledge (*atndasiikiit*). The emerging touristic crocodile, then, represents a fundamental and enduring outlook on reality, specifically, the disclosure of important



Figure 3. Touristic woodcarving with a crocodile crawling out through the surface of the mask; side and exterior view.



Figure 4. Touristic woodcarving with a crocodile crawling out through the surface of the mask; reverse and interior view.

knowledge. But the crocodile, too, symbolizes the emerging, unfinished configuration of what it means to be a Sepik person today. The object enfolds, in a sense, the postcolonial future within a premodern epistemology.

Much as women weave crosses into their baskets, men frequently carve variations of the national emblem of PNG (a bird of paradise, hand drum, and spear), often with

slogans such as “I Love the Lord My God,” “God Bless Our Home,” and “Hail Mary Pray for Us” (see Figure 5). This iconography likewise expresses the Sepik self (or “soul”) as a literate, Christian citizen. Here, again, I suggest that *mere* tourist art, as it is often understood, is not so mere at all. Rather, tourist art represents a complex dialogue about contemporary personhood.

Sometimes, this conversation addresses Western aesthetic tastes. In 1994, a group of Sepik men, including a trio from Tambunum, were flown to Stanford University for several months to carve and paint the New Guinea Sculpture Garden (Silverman, 2003). The campus boasts one of the original bronze casts of Rodin’s *The Thinker*. My friend Gamboromiawan, who worked on the garden, thought he could do one better, and so sculpted a Iatmul version of *The Thinker* (see Figure 6).

Two decades later, Gamboromiawan’s son, Peter Marus, packed a large canoe with woodcarvings, paddled to Angoram, and sold the canoe for 300 kina (approximately US\$100). He paid for the truck transport to Wewak and then booked steamship passage



Figure 5. National emblems of Papua New Guinea with Catholic phrases.



Figure 6. Simon Gamboromiawan's version of *The Thinker* at the New Guinea Sculpture Garden, Stanford University.

to the coastal city of Lae. There, Peter sold some carvings and used the proceeds to fly to Port Moresby, the capital city of the country, where he continues to peddle woodcarvings to foreigners. Much to my surprise, *The Post-Courier*, a PNG daily, ran a brief story in April 2011 about a sculpture by Peter titled "Mr. Thinker," modeled after his father's version.⁸ Peter was selling the enormous carving outside a supermarket. The sculpture was purchased the next day and placed inside a Korean restaurant. This object wonderfully embodies the touristic transformation of Iatmul art from what Clifford (1997: 3) dubs "roots" to "routes."

Clifford's metaphor unwittingly resonates with local concepts. Eastern Iatmul lineages and clans understand their totemic sacra, including spirit carvings, to represent the "roots" (*angwanda*) of the group. These "roots" anchor society amid a river that annually floods during the rainy season, threatening to regress the world to the watery nothingness of the originary cosmic sea (Silverman, 1997). But in the context of tourism, the river that threatens to wash away the "roots" of society forms instead a "route" to transnational encounters that ideally sustain, in local ideation, the economic viability of the village.

Sometimes, the aesthetic response to modernity chiseled as tourist art turns aggressive. In the nearby Iatmul village of Timbunke, which hosts a Catholic mission station, a dirt road to Wewak, and a grass airstrip, a man in 1989 displayed a small male figure with an enormous erect phallus (see Figure 7). This playful pornography, expressing a traditional idiom of Sepik masculinity, sought to intimidate the tourists to challenge, if only symbolically, a wider inequality (see also Gewertz and Errington, 1991: 71). The sculpture also commented on the position of Western (read: White) women in the Melanesian imaginary—itsself the product of images that globally circulate.

Iatmul art, phallic and otherwise, displays a pronounced symmetry. This patterning, one could argue, pertains to the broader prominence of dualism in the structure of conventional Iatmul thought or *eidōs* (Bateson, 1936). But every now and then, a Iatmul carver creates a touristic object that displays a rare asymmetry. This style visually disrupts the normative expectations of Iatmul art—as if tourism is an opportunity not merely to reproduce established cognitive schema, albeit in novel form, but also to rethink that schema. Some objects, though, do both (as with Figure 8): replicate dualism while exhibiting asymmetry. Indeed, this particular woodcarving seems to acknowledge asymmetry at the same time that it strives to contain that inequality, as it were, within a wider frame of balance.

The motivation for tourist art is unmistakably pecuniary, born, in fact, from sheer frustration at the lack of "real development." But monetary motivation, I showed in this section, does not necessarily imply meaninglessness; quite the contrary. Tourist art materializes emergent, postcolonial forms of self, society, and sociality.

Ghostly tourists and cargo

In myth, the first person to die was a female spirit named Avawundumbu. In the late 1980s, I extensively studied funerary ritual and thus listened to this myth many times. But in 2010, I heard something new: that Avawundumbu would someday return to the village with the dead. The deceased, however, will look different and speak another tongue. They will not resemble living Iatmul.

Avawundumbu established the village of the dead (*wundumbu ngai*). She then barred the living from visiting their deceased kin by blocking the road with a broken canoe, stuck in the ground and arranged in the shape of an "X." At the ghostly village, the newly deceased are boiled in water to slough off their black skin so they appear white. This transformation befits local conception ideology, wherein the soft, fleshy parts of the body gel from maternal blood and eventually decay, leaving only white seminal bones. This postmortem transformation, too, explains the affinity, commonly believed throughout Melanesia, between White people and the dead.



Figure 7. Small carved man with an enormous erect phallus.

In 2010, many Eastern Iatmul reported dreaming about the place of the dead—a place that resembles a vibrant city, full of cars, packaged food, technology, commodities, and money. “Now we think the dead live in America,” said one man in the men’s house to much agreement. When Avawundumbu returns, my friends continued, she will remove the broken canoe, thus opening the “road,” so villagers can finally visit the dead and obtain the goods and cash they so desperately seek. I had never heard anything like this before.



Figure 8. Woodcarving that displays both dualism and asymmetry.

I also learned that the dead sometimes visit Tambunum. They appear in the swamp behind the village in the form of odd sounds and bright lights, traveling, I was told, on an evanescent, shimmering vessel—a ghostly ship that resembles, people said, the tourist boat, laden with goods. But if you try to grab something, it all disappears—an allegory, I suggest, for the state of desire and development in the post-touristic Sepik.⁹ Deceased kin, in other words, fill the conceptual category left vacant by the departure of tourists and *The Melanesian Discoverer*. Moreover, deceased kin do what living villagers cannot: enjoy the material plentitude of modernity.

Some former tourists, I was also told, were not really tourists at all—or not in the conventional sense. They were dead kin, returning to the village for a quick reunion, dressed in their new skin and speaking a new language—*just as the myth foretold*. Most strikingly, I learned that ghosts are now trying to bring money and goods to their living kin. But missionaries block the “road,” then visit gravesites at night and steal the cargo. Some of my interlocutors specifically accuse Australia of this nefarious subversion of reciprocity. America, I was told, knows about all this. If White people did not block the road, then Eastern Iatmul would finally enjoy cash and goods. “We would be okay. Instead, it is hard to find money.”

For proof, I was told that an ailing woman in Timbunke village briefly lost consciousness several years ago. For a few minutes, she was dead, and her soul espied Father Liam, the local expatriate priest, who recently departed the mission station for a visit to Ireland. Or so he said. “But he never went there. He lied.” Rather, as the woman reported upon awakening, Father Liam traveled to the village of the dead to obtain an outboard motor. “He got the motor for free! He didn’t pay! This is how the missionaries obtain their goods and money!” And lo and behold, Father Liam returned from his “vacation” with a new motor.

In the late 1980s, one of my village mothers, Mundjiindua, presented me with a basket. She suddenly died a few months later. In 2010, while chatting with a large group of men inside an all-male ceremonial house, I was asked matter-of-factly, as if such encounters with the dead happen all the time in America, if I returned the basket. “Did I see her?”

Did I give her back the basket?" I was then told that I *must* ask the people who funded my research to unblock the road so that Eastern Iatmul can also, like myself, enjoy access to money. "You see us now. It is hard for us to purchase food, soap, laundry detergent, school fees. We are dirty. You must tell them to release the road."

Upon hearing this cargoistic innuendo in 2010, I was dumbfounded.¹⁰ I was also terrified. I kept my eyes on my notebook, where I was furiously scribbling, hoping my gaze would not reveal my true feelings. In that sense, I suppose you could say that I lied at the precise moment when my anguished friends were so desperately seeking some truth about the nexus of tourism, money, and development. But in the absence of any forthcoming truths or fairness from the wider global system, never mind from their own government, my friends could only concoct a dreamscape of post-touristic modernity to which I could offer no comment without violating my own morality or appearing to perpetrate the very duplicity Eastern Iatmul were trying to uncover. It was a moment far more tragic, I believe, than any scene in *Cannibal Tours*.

Conclusion

At the peak of Sepik tourism, Tambunum lacked not only "real development," to be sure, but also cargo cult ideation. I see the recent rise of cargoistic or millenarian sentiments as a last resort, crafted by Eastern Iatmul from Christianity, tourism, and traditional mythology, much like tourist art, to somehow address their post-touristic plight. The ethereal tourist ship is another example of Melanesians borrowing the symbols, technologies, and practices of Europeans in order to explain and redress postcolonial inequality (Lattas, 2000). The departure of the tourists is seen as another episode in a long history of abandonment and deceit by White people. The tourists thus join missionaries, Australians, Asians, Americans, the dead, and even myself in an exclusive conclave of selfish sociality that refuses to yield the secret to the affluence of modernity. What happens after *Cannibal Tours*? Ghosts, that is to say, phantoms of prosperity.

The revised myth of Avawundumbu powerfully illustrates the woeful predicament of a small community on the fringes of the world system seeking, through tourism, a degree of development rightly deserved. It was hard to listen to this myth in the sweltering heat of the men's house and not feel profoundly sad. But just as clearly, it was hard to avoid hearing in this earnest, distressing myth a powerful critique of global inequality. To Eastern Iatmul, tourists both living and dead simultaneously block and open the "road" to development. Tourism along the Sepik, in other words, is far more complex than the parable of *Cannibal Tours*. Tourism, I argued, offers local people an opportunity to aesthetically comment on their postcolonial identities, to seek and receive a measure of validation from the modern world system, and to gain a necessary, if insufficient, income. Tourism, too, affords my Eastern Iatmul friends a window onto an alien moral system and a form of antisociality that explains, however tragically, their post-touristic predicament.

The new myth of Avawundumbu clearly links whiteness to an inherent inability even to acknowledge the suffering of others. At one level, my village friends seem, by locating riches in the netherworld, to pathetically place the material wealth they seek ever further out of reach. But on another level, they seem to be saying that nothing in the world as

they know it could possibly explain or justify their plight after the tourists all go home. In viewing *Cannibal Tours*, we in the West may feel haunted by the specter of our own neocolonial ideologies that we wish had long ago faded like an old, tired apparition. But local people in the Sepik River now find themselves haunted by far more frightening post-touristic ghosts.

Funding

The fieldwork was graciously supported from 1988 to 1990 by the Fulbright Foundation, the Institute for Intercultural Studies, and the Graduate School and Department of Anthropology at the University of Minnesota; in 1994, by the Wenner–Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and DePauw University; in 2008, by Wheelock College; and in 2010, by Wheelock College and the Institute for Money, Technology, and Financial Inclusion at the University of California at Irvine.

Acknowledgements

I remain, as always, indebted to the people of Tambunum and apologize for any misrepresentations. I accept full responsibility for this article.

Notes

1. My use of the term “traditional” is heuristic, not essentialized. The terms also mirror local understanding.
2. See the official announcement at: <http://www.mtsdiscoverer.auz.it/>; see also Malum Nalu, “The Day Tourism Died in Papua New Guinea.” Available at: <http://malumnalu.blogspot.com/2010/07/day-tourism-died-in-papua-new-guinea.html>
3. For masculine inadequacy in another postcolonial Sepik society, see Lipset (2009).
4. Publications on Sepik and Melanesian tourism over the past decade include Senft (1999), Halvaksz (2006), Muke et al. (2007), West (2008), Martin (2010), Wearing et al. (2010), and Stasch (2011).
5. For reviews of the contested term “hybridity” in postcolonial theory, see Kraidy (2005), Burke (2009), and Amoamo and Thompson (2010).
6. For similar recent arguments concerning tourist art elsewhere, see Coiffier (1992), Otto and Verloop (1996), Dougoud (2002, 2004), Adams (2006), Adams and Sanchez (2008), Chibnik (2003), and Causey (2003).
7. These baskets sell for 12 kina. In February 2010, 1 kina = US\$0.48, down from US\$1.15 in 1988.
8. See: <http://www.postcourier.com.pg/20110407/headlines.htm>
9. Bell (2006: 229) reports a similar idea in the Purari Delta on the south coast of PNG.
10. For nuanced discussions of the concept of “cargo cult,” see Hermann (1992), Lindstrom (2000), and Otto (2009). For Westerners allied with the dead, see Leavitt (2000).

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