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# POLITICS, GENDER, AND TIME IN MELANESIA AND ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA



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**This article interprets the symbolism and politics of Iatmul time (Sepik River, Papua New Guinea). Social life is structured by different forms of time (e.g., totemism, myth, Omaha terminologies, ritual). Furthermore, mythic history is a mode of ritual politics. Finally, Iatmul time symbolizes paradoxes of gender. The article concludes by comparing the temporality and gender of Melanesian cosmology with the Aboriginal dreamtime. (Time, politics, gender, Iatmul, Melanesia, Aboriginal Australia)**

Anthropologists since Durkheim have argued for the social generation of time (see Gell 1992: ch. 1). Evans-Pritchard's (1940) analysis of Nuer "structural time" is particularly striking. Not only did Evans-Pritchard argue for a determinant relationship between social organization and time, he implied that Nuer temporality was radically different from our own Western conceptions. This dual emphasis on social determination and cross-cultural variation has shaped the anthropological study of time with few exceptions (see Fabian 1983; Gell 1992).

Bourdieu (1977) and Munn (e.g., 1992) challenge the notion that time is simply a structure of social life that differs around the world. They focus on the phenomenological experience of time (see also Wagner 1986: ch. 5) and the use of time as a symbolic resource in the pursuit of social strategies. This article draws on their perspectives to analyze history and temporality in Tambunum, an Eastern Iatmul village along the middle Sepik River in Papua New Guinea.<sup>1</sup> I offer three related ethnographic and theoretical arguments.

First, the pace of social life is structured by multiple forms of history and time. Each temporal modality corresponds to a particular social context. Second, the society lacks a static and objective mode of history, particularly mythic history, because Eastern Iatmul often construct their past in accordance with contemporary politico-ritual strategies. Eastern Iatmul tend not to recollect the past for its own intrinsic value. To borrow from the language of Sahlins (1985), past "happenings" become historical "events" only when they are socially and politically relevant in the present. Likewise, "events" must fit into one or more culturally specific temporal frameworks. The third argument is that local concepts of time symbolize paradoxes of Iatmul gender and cosmology. If, along with Levi-Strauss, we understand culture to be unresolvable problems that arise from the imposition of order onto nature, then gendered time in the Sepik River is a symbolic response to the problem of a riverine environment that is locally phrased in a reproductive idiom.

In developing these themes, I begin with the relationship between totemism, mythic history, and contemporary politics. I next present data on spatiotemporality and narrative discontinuous time, followed by repetitive and cyclical time and a

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debate on the temporal dimensions of Omaha kinship terminologies. Subsequent sections analyze parallel history, chronology, ritual time, and gendered temporality. The article concludes with a comparison between Eastern Iatmul mythic history and the Aboriginal concept of the dreamtime. This, I believe, is the first attempt in the literature at comparing the temporal dimensions of these two cosmologies.

### TOTEMIC NAMES AND THE POLITICS OF HISTORY

With a population of about 1,000, Tambunum is the largest Iatmul-speaking village. Patrilineal descent groups (clans, lineages, and branches) correspond to cosmological categories that are defined by hereditary totemic names (*tsagi*). These names encode a mode of history and temporality that is crucial for village social life (Bateson 1932, 1936; Harrison 1990; Wassmann 1991; Silverman 1996).

In what is one of the few uncontested elements of mythic history, the original state of the world was aquatic (Swadling 1989). At an undeterminable moment, the water was stirred by wind, and land surfaced. There was a totemic pit (*tsagi wangu*) that is often envisioned as the center of the world; it is said to be located in the Sepik Plains, near the Sawos-speaking village of Gaikarobi. Male ancestors emerged from the pit, separated the sky from the earth with forked branches, and created the perceptible world through toponymy or naming. History and time effectively began with the migrations of these ancestors, who, by conferring totemic names to phenomena, created the "paths" (*yembii*) of the world. Each path is a cosmic category that corresponds to a descent group. As a collective memory, the physical referents of totemic names, especially the landscape, enable Eastern Iatmul to know their distant past.<sup>2</sup>

Totemic names determine ritual prerogatives, land rights, and custodianship over ceremonial objects such as masks and bamboo flutes. For this reason, the ownership and knowledge of names can be fiercely contested. Although totemic specialists (*tsagi numba*) and the hereditary "father" (*nyait*) of each patriclan vigilantly safeguard and remember clan names, disputes are common (Bateson 1936:125-28; Silverman 1996:39-41).

From the etic perspective of anthropological analysis, human action can be said to alter (and determine) the totemic system and mythic history. But at the level of local ideology or emic self-representation, the status of names and mythic history is less apparent. Sometimes totemic categories or paths are said to exist immutably beneath (*attndasiikiit*, or underlying truth) the surface (*aiwat*) of humanity. Men will appeal to this timeless cosmology in order to lend their version of history a supposedly real rather than political justification. Although men say that their totemic system is timeless, they also privately agree that political actions such as debates and disputes alter mythic histories and totemic paths. In this way, all totemic configurations of the past are contestable (Harrison 1990; Silverman 1996:42-45). Indeed, so concerned are men with the politics of totemic history that they become noticeably uneasy when asked about the names and migrations of rival descent groups. They do

not want to appear guilty of stealing names and trying to restructure the past in accordance with their own politico-ritual strategies.

### CONTESTED SPACE AND HISTORY

In 1988, the village had nearly completed a guest house that stands across the river on a point of land called Agumurl. Agumoimbange, the hereditary father of the Shui Aimasa patriclan, claims that his ancestors created the location. Along with other senior men from the clan, Agumoimbange placed his name on the guest house contract, which was cosigned by the Sydney tourist company that funded the project. But Njumwi, a junior man from a different lineage within the Shui Aimasa clan, protested the agreement since he was neither consulted during the negotiations nor invited to sign the document. This caused a series of totemic debates inside the cult house. Njumwi attempted to assert totemic authority over Agumurl by arguing that his lineage ancestors and not those of Agumoimbange named and “gave birth” to the location. As a contemporary “happening,” the lodge became an “event” through the politics of mythic history and totemism.

Since Njumwi’s lineage is demographically and politically minor in the village, his claim over the guest house’s ground was unable to become orthodox history. In a broad sense, Njumwi’s goal was to reorganize the totemic and politico-ritual hierarchy of the patriclan by challenging the dominant mythic history. His protestations, in fact, rekindled a series of totemic disputes that reputedly extend back to the mid-nineteenth century, prior to European contact. The feud concerned not only the jural arrangement of the clan but the very legitimacy of lineages. Material wealth or money was not a primary concern, since the guest house employs men and women from all descent groups as night watchmen, grass cutters, carpenters, house cleaners, etc. Instead, men were competing for the symbolic power of names and mythic history.

The totemic name of the disputed ground, Agumurl, is cognate to Agumoimbange’s patronymic. Since personal names are totemic names, Eastern Iatmul intimately identify with totems through “consubstantiality” (Harrison 1990:48). Njumwi denied that the name of the ground was Agumurl; however, he also claimed that its real name had been forgotten. In this sense, Njumwi’s protest was less of a claim to ownership and more of a thinly veiled threat to Agumoimbange’s personal identity, political authority, and totemic erudition.

This debate illustrates that the Eastern Iatmul past is memorable within the framework of totemism only in so far as it pertains to contemporary politics and totemic identity. Through his own version of history, Njumwi sought to reorganize the clan hierarchy and sever Agumoimbange’s personhood from an important location in the mythic history of the village. But Njumwi’s lineage has few members; most have migrated to the cities of Papua New Guinea. Furthermore, his political status has been marginal ever since he became an ardent Christian after violating a sexual taboo. For these reasons, gerontocratic consensus was able to mute Njumwi’s version

of history and expunge its fictitious happenings from the collective and totemic memory of past events. Although Njumwi and Agumoimbange both argued for the existence of an objective past that is unaltered by human politics, the practice of Eastern Iatmul history allows for no lasting sense of historical realism.

Another incident also reveals the importance of totemic history for defining present events. The lineage ancestors of Gamboromiawan, a totemic specialist and one of my key research assistants, migrated to Tambunum along the Korowari and Korosameri Rivers, southern tributaries of the Sepik. Several years ago, while he was visiting Korowari villages, Gamboromiawan saw a lake that was absent from the totemic geography of his lineage. The lake existed in the phenomenal realm of human experience but it lacked a totemic name. To solve this dilemma, Gamboromiawan himself gave the lake a name and thus totemic existence in the Eastern Iatmul cosmos. He selected a Korowari rather than a Iatmul name. But this was irrelevant. The important issue was simply that, because it existed, the lake required a name. In the discourse of totemism, contemporary happenings require mythic-historic justification to become real.

#### SPATIOTEMPORAL MYTHIC HISTORY AND CONTINUITY

Munn (1977, 1986, 1992) and others (Burman 1981; Damon 1990) repeatedly emphasize the relationship between cultural constructions of time and space in Melanesia. In the case of Eastern Iatmul, this is particularly true for mythic history. Although empirical evidence often supports local migration accounts (Wassmann 1990), I am more interested in the symbolism of these movements. During their primordial migrations, ancestor heroes, among other accomplishments, planted trees, built cult houses, and inaugurated rituals. Each mythic-historic event corresponds to one or more totemic paths. Individual names refer to points in space and time (see also Wassmann 1990, 1991). Taken together, all the paths of a descent group evoke "ancestral, creative place-to-place travel involving increasing extension from an origin place" (Munn 1992:101). This form of totemic time is spatial and directional, nonrepetitive, successive, and continuous. In short, it is a vector.

Internally, totemic chants evoke another sense of spatiotemporality. A chant begins with the public, visible, or surface names of a group's totem, which refer to its creation at a specific node in ancestral space-time. As the chant proceeds, its names "move" to another ancestral location. But unlike spatiotemporal vectors, which are formed by a series of totemic paths (a path of paths, one could say), a single chant always returns to its original space-time.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, totemic chants evoke three types of spatiotemporality. First, each name is a point in space-time. Second, individual paths shift between two locations, beginning and ending with the space-time of a totem itself. Finally, a set of totemic paths is a vector that defines a descent group and recalls its primordial migrations. Totemic forms of time enable Eastern Iatmul to know their past. But they also arouse deep emotions in men and women concerning their ancestors, recently deceased kin, and their children's future.

Since totemic names are personal names, the village population at any moment can be said to embody history. This embodiment is also spatial since Eastern Iatmul build their houses in descent-group wards, which are dispersed throughout the village. Similarly, as we have seen, the local landscape is delineated into zones that are claimed by descent groups on the basis of ancestral names and migrations. The spatial grounding of time also influences the local perception of seasonality. Tambunum patriclans roughly correspond to the four Iatmul directions mentioned by Bateson (1932:254-55; see also Wassmann 1991:10-11, 203). Shui Aimasa (Pig Clan) oversees the world that lies north of the Sepik River, which Bateson spells *mevambut-agwi*. Mboey Nagusamay (Sago Clan) claims *kubalanggowi-agwi*, the world that lies south of the river, including the New Guinea Highlands. *Woli-agwi*, the eastern world of the Lower Sepik and the Bismarck Sea, belongs to Mogua (Fish Clan). The Sepik River (*Avusett*) itself is the totemic domain of the Wyngwenjap patriclan (River Clan). Finally, west is called *iambun-agwi*, which refers to the Upper Sepik region that begins with Yambun village, a traditional terminus of the Eastern Iatmul world. This direction is not, however, claimed by any one clan in Tambunum.

Eastern Iatmul also associate winds (*mut*) with totemic regions. Shui Aimasa claims the *pwivu-mut* wind that blows from the northern Prince Alexander Mountains during the rain season. Mboey Nagusamay owns *mabiinjua-mut*, the cool breeze that drops from the Highlands in the early morning. Mogua's wind is *woli-mut*, the dry-season wind that flows down the river from Bismarck Sea. Lastly, Wyngwenjap claims *baralagwa-mut*, the northwest monsoon wind that originates in the Upper Sepik.<sup>4</sup> Overall, then, Eastern Iatmul have multiple forms of space-time: names, paths, sets of paths that correspond to ancestral migrations, directions, and winds.

### NARRATIVES OF THE PAST AND DISCONTINUOUS HISTORY

Time in totemic paths is continuous and spatiotemporal. Yet Eastern Iatmul also portray the past with myths of discontinuous, largely atemporal events. Although these events occurred during ancestral migrations, mythic representations are separate from the successive space-time that organizes totemic paths. The history of the Mboey Nagusamay clan, for example, is a series of patrilineage migrations along the Korowari-Korosameri river system. Eastern Iatmul can recall this history as a continuous temporal sequence of paths and chants. Alternatively, they can depict it as disconnected narrative myths that detail separate events such as the creation of sago and a primordial flood.

Each temporal form "remembers" a different sense of history.<sup>5</sup> When Eastern Iatmul want to emphasize continuity and direction, they appeal to spatiotemporal paths. In a totemic dispute, men often recount paths of space-time in order to demonstrate that a contested name fits into their own ancestral migration and descent-group history. In fact, the entirety of the world, from cosmic creation to the present, can be summarized with a few sweeping paths of totemic history. However, Eastern Iatmul refer to mythic narratives when they want to recollect in detail specific events

and locations. Totemic paths and myths, we could say, are inverse figures of the same historical trope. Both contain totemic names. But temporality and direction are in the background of myth, yet in the foreground of totemic paths. In this way, the meaning of myth is largely narrative, whereas the meaning of totemism is spatio-temporal.

Both types of historical thought and temporality are unrelated to chronology (see below). As Bateson (1936:223-24) notes:

[W]hen a Iatmul native is asked about some event in the past, he can as a rule give an immediately relevant answer to the question and does not require to describe a whole series of chronologically related events in order to lead up to the event in question. The Iatmul indulge very little in the sort of chronological rigmarole which . . . is characteristic of those primitive people who have specialised in rote remembering.

This observation remains true today. Bateson (1936:224) also notes that totemic debates are “handled by the speakers not as a continuous narrative, but as a series of small details.” This requires clarification. When totemic debates include chanting, men recount the past as a continuous spatiotemporal sequence that lacks, strictly speaking, narrative structure. But men also recite discontinuous mythic narratives. In other words, Bateson did not differentiate temporal continuity from narrative per se.

Discontinuous history, like spatiotemporal time, is political. In fact, my own presence in the village prompted the creation of a potentially new myth (what may be termed a “fake myth”<sup>6</sup>) that allegedly accounts for the origin of ritual art by a pig spirit of the Shui Aimasa patriclan. According to its author, the fake myth details a legitimate past “event.” But it exists only as narrative since the event does not fit into any spatiotemporal or totemic path. Although the fake myth lies outside the consensual gerontocratic view of the patriclan’s past, its author will soon inherit the position of patriclan “father,” whereupon he may try to use his new authority to anchor the fake myth into a totemic path. It would then become an actual myth and its historical “event” would be commemorated in several temporal forms. The invention of the fake myth was a clear attempt by its author to demonstrate his totemic erudition to the anthropologist who was recording village mythology. Thus it illustrates once again that the past is shaped by different modes of time which are shaped by sociopolitical concerns and contexts.

#### REPETITIVE OR CYCLICAL TEMPORALITY AND OMAHA TERMINOLOGY

Eastern Iatmul group personal names and genealogical levels into two alternating “lines” (*mbapma*). A male Ego and his FF, SS, etc., belong to one line; the other line includes Ego’s S and F (see also Bateson 1936:244). Thus a man inherits the names of his FF, and gives them to his SS, in perpetuity. The system is identical for

women, who receive names from FFZ and bequeath them to BSD. On the basis of shared names, persons identify with the living, dead, and future agnates in their line.

These identifications generate a sense of repetitive or “iterative” history (M. Schuster 1990; see also Panoff 1969:160-61). A person’s actions are often said to replicate those of paternal grandparents precisely because they have the same names. This is especially true for the FMBSD or *iai* marriage preference, where Ego and his wife ideally have the same patrines as their FF and FFZ respectively (Figure 1). Should the exact names differ, these alternate-generation kin are still identified with each other since they and their names belong to the same line within the lineage. Through the naming system, then, the past becomes noncumulative and cyclical, repeating every second generation.

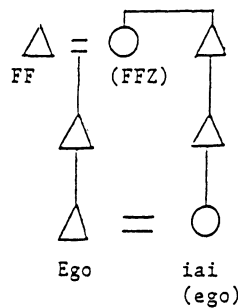


Figure 1: *Iai* Marriage and Names

Living people may even be held accountable for the actions of their past namesakes. Illness is often attributed to mystical retribution (*vai*) that resulted from a lineal grandparent’s sorcery or ritual transgression. This sense of time is particularly salient when Eastern Iatmul divine the cause of death, sickness, and misfortune. By choosing or refusing to identify kin in alternate generations, they transform calamity into a means of evaluating and acting on existing social tensions. It is not that Eastern Iatmul are unaware of temporal distinctions between generations; after all, temporal sequences are inherent in mythic history and spatiotemporality. Furthermore, circular or repetitive time “does not logically exclude ‘linear’ sequencing because each repetition of a given ‘event’ necessarily occurs later than previous ones” (Munn 1992:101). I am simply suggesting that circular time coexists with linear time and is a political strategy as well as a structure of social life.

A sense of nonincremental and cyclical temporality also emerges from the kinship terminology. A typical Omaha kinship system has some combination of the lineal equations  $MBD=MZ$ ,  $MB=MBS$ , and  $FZD=ZD$ . In Tambunum,  $MBD=MZ$ , but there are also the alternate-generation equations  $MB=MBSS \neq MBS$  and  $FZD=DD \neq ZD$ . Furthermore, not all women in the mother’s patriline are termed “mother” (*nyame*); only for M, MZ, MBD, and MMZD, but never MM and MMZ (cf. McKinley 1971a:246, n. 4). Finally, Eastern Iatmul do not lump all men in the mother’s patrilineage under the same term. Instead, they call them either MF or MB in accordance with the two intergenerational lines. With these variations in mind, the



Eastern Iatmul system is often considered to be an Omaha terminology (Ackerman 1976; Williamson 1980).

Levi-Strauss (1963:74) suggests that Crow/Omaha systems contain three different "time continuums." First, there is intergenerational time that is "progressive, non-reversible" (Levi-Strauss 1963:301). For example, women in Tambunum use separate terms for MM (*mbuambu*), M (nyame), Z (*nyanggae*), D (*nian*), and DD (*na, kaishe-lagwa*). Second, time is "stable and reversible" (Levi-Strauss 1963:301). Consequently, Eastern Iatmul men call all women in the father's mother's patriline *iai* regardless of generation. Third, time is "undulating, cyclical, reversible" (Levi-Strauss 1963:301). Hence men use alternating terms for agnates that correspond to the two lines: the terms for father (nyait) and son (*nian*) are interchangeable, whereas FF and SS are both *nggwail*. Levi-Strauss's analysis thus seems consonant with my argument that different modes of time structure the tempo of Eastern Iatmul social life.

McKinley (1971a, 1971b) argues that Crow/Omaha societies disperse marriage alliances, thereby preventing the regular renewal of affinal links. Yet they maintain the value of affinal bonds through ritual exchanges. Crow-Omaha terminologies resolve this contradiction by perpetuating the original marriage alliance through a terminology that freezes the passing of generational time (McKinley 1971a, 1971b; see also Sahlins 1985:53). Barnes (1976:392) criticizes McKinley's failure "to distinguish properly between lines in a terminology and empirical lineages." Although Ego in an Omaha society calls men in his wife's lineage one kin term, his son calls them another, and so on. In this manner, according to Barnes, Omaha terminologies actually emphasize rather than suppress generational succession. But this is true, I suggest, only from the diachronic or intergenerational perspective of any one lineage reflecting on another. From the perspective of a single Ego, generational succession appears frozen down the maternal or affinal lineage.

This is also the case for the Manambu of Avatip, a non-Iatmul Sepik society, where a "patrilineage is known by the name of the genealogically most senior sister's child (preferably a sister's son) of its senior living generation" (Harrison 1984:398). As perceived by this sister's child, same-sex members of the avunculate lineage are terminologically equated; the lineage acquires corporate identity through the abolition of generational distinctions and incremental time. When the next generation ascends to prominence, the lineage is named after the new senior nephew. Intergenerationally, the lineage is a series of distinctly named strata that emphasizes incremental temporality. But to a single person, the lineage appears to freeze time.

My point is that social action in these so-called Omaha societies seems to involve a dual sense of time, one serial, the other static. The difference is merely a matter of perspective. Analytically, one can try to extract a singular mode of time from Omaha kinship systems. However, we can better apprehend the multidimensionality of culture and social strategies when we view these terminologies as containing multiple temporalities that are structurally significant in different contexts.

## PARALLEL HISTORY

Iatmul villages are disputatious and fissile. Totemic disputes are common since, at some level, each descent group boasts to be the "*fons et origo*" of the universe (Bateson 1936:127). Yet it is not the case that these cosmogonic assertions are necessarily opposed, for in many instances they generate multiple, almost parallel, historical truths. This allows each group to affirm its primacy and autonomy, yet also to recognize the legitimacy of adversaries. If it is in their interest to do so, men from different lineages and clans will agree on one totemic cosmology. Yet on other occasions, men state explicitly that "we have our own history, they have another. Ours is for us, theirs is for them." This sense of pluralism is often evoked when people refer to villages that have the same primal ancestors but different mythic histories of unrelated events and migrations.

This is not to say that Eastern Iatmul envision their past as a unitary framework with parallel segments. Rather, there are multiple or parallel histories. For example, the myth of Mendangumeli, a senior crocodile spirit who flooded the world, parallels the biblical account of Noah which was introduced into the Sepik by Catholic missionaries earlier in this century. However, the two floods are not combined into a single event. They refer instead to different yet analogous histories, each truthful in its own context. There is no contradiction, since this view of the past does not presuppose a unified historical reality (see also McDowell 1985; cf. G. Schuster 1990; Pomponio 1992:51).

Parallelism influences not only time and history but also a more general view of the cosmos in which there are separate roads (*yembii*) or "planes of existence" (Bateson 1936:237) inhabited by humans, witches, tree spirits, and other mystical beings. Similarly, the totemic system consists of public or surface (*aiwat*) names which conceal a hidden essence of reality called *atndasiikiit*. Thus truth is always layered for Eastern Iatmul.

## CHRONOLOGICAL TIME

Chronological time is linear, incremental, and progressive. It is emphasized by Western institutions and such things as calendars, government, employers, and the ubiquitous wristwatch. Eastern Iatmul had two traditional notions of incremental time. One, akin to hours, was determined from the position of the sun. The other was delineated on the basis of lunar phases. The traditional months or "moons" (*mbop*) were:

1. Mandarimbo: shortage of food (January).
2. Tshiimbuniimbiit: fish largely dormant (February).
3. Kuganniimbiit: fish plentiful (March).
4. Kambowanmbo: good moonlight, increased fish (April).
5. Wundaniimbiit: little food (May).

6. Kambokwurlniimbiit: partially cloudy nights (June).
7. Tumbokwurlniimbiit: overcast nights (July).
8. Tskinwolimange: moon rises in the early evening (August).
9. Avawolimange: strong moonlight (September).
10. Lananmbo: completely clear nights (October).
11. Lumbanevimange: crescent moon "turns on its side" (November).
12. Pagunimmbiit: cloudy nights (December).

Bateson (1936:254) observes:

Nominally the year consists of *twelve* moons, of which five are moons of high water and five are moons of low water. Between each of these groups of five moons, there is an intermediate moon. But inasmuch as the rising and falling of the river is very irregular, my informants were generally doubtful as to what month it was at any given time. The astronomical year of 365 days contains of course approximately *thirteen* lunar months, so that with their theory of twelve moons in the year, the Iatmul could never be precise in the identification of the moons in their calendar.

But chronological precision is not particularly useful since the timing of gardening, ritual, and most other activities is dependent almost entirely on river flooding. Western months only determine the school year, Easter, New Year's Eve, elections, and so forth. Even when Iatmul traditionally scheduled events such as rituals in advance, they often postponed them until the flood season (Bateson 1936:254-55), which they expressly try to avoid. I suspect this occurred because of village disputes. Social practices, then and now, often thwarted chronological precision.

Since temporal and seasonal distinctions were traditionally determined on the basis of a perceived continuum (e.g., the movement of celestial bodies), there was considerable chronological fluidity. Temporal units were not accorded a numerical quantity. Like the Tiv (Bohannon 1953), Eastern Iatmul tend to "indicate" rather than "measure" time, despite an extensive counting system. Their lunar calendar did not progress numerically, quantitatively, or even cumulatively. Years were unnumbered. The passing of days was organized only referentially: today (*mbambra*), yesterday (*naramba*), day-before-yesterday (*nangayt*), tomorrow (*kinya*), day-after-tomorrow (*ma*), three days hence (*nangaytmboey*), four days hence (*wainya*), and five days hence (*satngvande*). Eastern Iatmul occasionally tie knots, usually five, on a cord of twine to indicate the number of days that must elapse until markets. But this, too, is a relative rather than absolute series.

There is magic that can hasten the passage of lunar phases. But idioms such as "losing time," "saving time," and "racing against time" are quite alien. A sense of temporal scarcity doubtless pre-existed contact. But it is exacerbated today when persons must occasionally choose between a wide range of activities such as repairing the school water tank, awaiting the arrival of tourists, or traveling to town (see also Smith 1982). Still, the experience of temporal scarcity is relatively infrequent for most villagers. For example, nearly all men carve tourist art. But, to use Western idioms, nobody has developed a uniform pricing scheme that systematically accounts for the amount of time spent carving different types of objects.

Ironically, the clash between European chronology and indigenous temporality has given Eastern Iatmul a sense for the social generation of time. I heard statements such as “Europeans eat lunch at 12:00 noon” or “drink a cup of whiskey at 11:00 p.m.” They recognize the Western practice (and power) of assigning nearly all activities to a set chronological interval. A more flexible sense of time governs the pace of indigenous social life (Bateson 1936:254). Men will sometimes drink beer in the morning without feeling that this time should be devoted to other activities. A devotion to time, however, is in their eyes a hallmark of Westernization, and thus “native time” becomes a local means of resisting the domination of Western work and schedules (see Rose 1992:216). But when the Western temporal gaze becomes internalized, chronology becomes a means of ethnic self-denigration. Time, in this sense, symbolizes postcolonial transformations (Smith 1994: ch. 8).

### RITUAL TIME

Although Eastern Iatmul time can be incremental and linear, the naming system and totemic identifications seem to merge the present and past (see Bateson 1936:35, n. 1; Harrison 1984:400-01). To some degree, so does the cyclical temporality of the kinship system. This form of time is also present in Eastern Iatmul rituals such as curing rites, which often enact primordial events as if they were occurring in the present.<sup>7</sup>

Persons become ill when they violate, directly or through kinship identifications (see above), ritual and social taboos that maintain the world and social life as they were created by mythic-historic ancestors. Illness in this sense is a somatic response to the moral violation of a person’s ancestral paths, which are created anew by totemic chanting during a curing rite. By compressing time, chants empower totemic specialists to act simultaneously in the primordial past and the present.

In another ceremonial context, the present actually alters the temporal order of the past. Cosmic creation was followed by *mai* spirits (Hauser-Schaublin 1983) and then humanity. Later, according to a common Melanesian myth, men stole ritual sacra from women. However, Eastern Iatmul nearly reverse this temporal sequence when they dramatize these events during ritual in the order of *mai*, theft, and creation. The “voices” of the *mai* spirits, men report, evoke sadness in women, who recall their loss of sacra. The ritual inverts the temporal sequence of the primal theft and the *mai* in order to cast the entire ceremony in a sentiment that emphasizes masculine ceremonial prestige.

Umeda ritual is relevant here. For the Umeda, Gell (1975:334-46) argues, time has two everyday forms. Diachronic time progresses sequentially as duration and organic process (e.g., aging). But synchronic time is constituted by static oppositional categories (e.g., senior and junior generations). The *ida* rite resolved this temporal contradiction. First, it regenerated society by “reversing” time (Leach 1961), which was still sequential or diachronic. Second, the rite mediated between time as “a

continuous process and a synchronic opposition between young and old" (Gell 1975:343).

Recently, Gell (1992: ch. 5) revised his interpretation. Instead of reversing time in order to regenerate society, *ida*

represents a process undoing itself in normal, forwards-running time, not a process going forwards normally in backwards-running time. . . . [W]hat the Umedas want to do is regenerate their world in real time, not have it continue inexorably on its degenerative course, but in inverted time. (Gell 1992:51-52)

Furthermore, Gell (1992:52) now argues that synchrony and diachrony are the same form of time, since synchrony is a "classificatory mechanism which arranges entities according to the real or putative events in their histories." The *ida* ritual does not, therefore, mediate between two different forms of time. Rather, *ida* reinforces "the Umedas' confidence in the viability of their society" by mediating between cultural "classifications" and some external "reality" (Gell 1992:53; see also Werbner 1989:160).

While Gell (1992 *passim*) is concerned with reducing the cultural variation of time into basic, universal forms, the Eastern Iatmul data suggest that social life in the Sepik occurs through multiple and often contradictory forms of time. Time is not just a classification system that attempts to order reality. It is also a structure of social life no less a symbolic resource. But time in the Sepik River also has gender, and thus connotes a fundamental yet unresolvable cultural paradox, to which I now turn.

#### HERACLITUS IN THE SEPIK: WATER, TREES, AND GENDERED TIME

Eastern Iatmul have a gendered concept of time that juxtaposes stasis and change through idioms of trees and water. Totemic chants commonly substitute the word *tupma* (coconut palm) for *ngepma* (village), and migration accounts often focus on male ancestors planting trees (*mi*) and establishing villages (Gell 1975; Tuzin 1992:110-11). In ritual, moreover, coconuts symbolize the heads of homicide victims, whereas myth associates coconuts with testicles in addition to heads. In the local discourse of kinship, patrilineages are like trees that are connected by vines and birds, which symbolize women and marriage alliances. Lineages are akin to sprouting seedlings that dropped from an ancestral tree; the meaning of lineage branches is here self-evident.

The symbolism of mortuary ceremonies supports these associations. Outside the cult house, men construct a *nyait mi* (father tree) from totemic bamboo and flora. Totemic specialists gather around the father tree and chant totemic paths that are associated with the primary ancestors and spirits of the sponsoring lineages or clan. In spite of death and the impermanence of human life, the father tree signifies the perduring growth of these descent groups and the vitality of their ancestral or totemic power. Overall, there is an arboreal metaphor in the culture that signifies masculinity, male fertility, social life, patriliney, and permanence.

Furthermore, Eastern Iatmul expressly associate water and the Sepik River with female fertility and reproduction, in particular the womb (*nian wut*; lit., child's string bag). As Eliade (1958:188-215) and Douglas (1966:161) emphasize, water symbolizes formlessness and timelessness (see also Tuzin 1977). But water enables the creation of form, substance, and temporality, or social life. The Sepik River is continuously changing and flowing, forever eroding the terrestrial realm of trees and villages. Drawing on the masculine idiom discussed above, trees in this framework signify the male desire for genealogical, social, and historical permanence in a world that is forever transforming and threatening to return to the original state of the primordial feminine sea (Schuster 1985). As a terrestrial symbol, the father tree contrasts strikingly with the final aquatic image of the funerary rite: the expulsion of recent ghosts (*wundumbu*) down the river on the back of crocodile spirits, out to sea, and to the place of the dead.

Like the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, Eastern Iatmul recognize the flow of change and the possibility, in their case, that the majestic, flooding Sepik might someday prevail and encompass the world. In an idiom of gender, the female-like river threatens to engulf male history (e.g., land, trees, and villages) into its waters. Eastern Iatmul do not have a tragic eschatology like the Umeda (Gell 1992:38). Symbolically, though, gendered images of Eastern Iatmul kinship, time, change, and stasis hint at a sense of aquatic destiny, as do men's emotional responses to the erosion of the village and their houses. As the Sepik flows, so does Eastern Iatmul history. But the river flows in two metaphoric directions: forward toward the future of society, yet backward toward dissolution and undifferentiation; that is to say, the feminine and aquatic state of the world that existed prior to masculine and totemic creation. All men can do to stave off this watery fate is to rebuild houses, stage rituals, and chant totemic names. The masculine illusion of and yearning for stability is ultimately awash in female contingency.

This gendered sense of time is related to the human lifecycle. In local ideology, conception results from sexual intercourse and the mixture of semen and menstrual blood. Semen becomes bones that form a stable core for the growth of delicate organs and flesh, which originate from menstrual blood. At birth, the child begins a lifetime of exchanges with matrikin, especially mother's brothers (Bateson 1936). Like flesh, maternal identity is fragile and thus requires constant attention. But paternal identity, like bones, is fixed and permanent. It needs little or no care. Hence fathers and sons rarely interact, but the avunculate and his nephew have a close and active relationship.

At death, maternal flesh decays, leaving only paternal bones. Although the desiccated corpse is male, the ghost or soul of the deceased travels under its matriname to the place of the dead, inhabited by maternal ancestors. The termination of the human lifecycle is a metaphor for the relationship between, on the one hand, men, trees, villages, and land, and on the other, women, water, and the river. For the former, time builds and shapes social life. For the latter, it disrupts and dissolves

it. Both forms of time, like land and water, bones and flesh, are necessary yet antithetical.

Trees and villages are masculine; so, too, is dry ground, especially when compared to the river. However, we hear in one myth that land is the creation of maternal ancestresses in the guise of floating islands or *agwi*; as seen above, this word is also the suffix for the names of the four cosmic spaces. Furthermore, domestic houses symbolize the mythological *agwi* that form the terrestrial world, which men continuously build in order to assert the primacy of human society as opposed to riverine erosion. These mythological *agwi* are sometimes said to rest on the backs of male crocodile spirits. But these creatures float atop the feminine sea. Furthermore, one of my research assistants noted that in Tambunum, as throughout all of Papua New Guinea, men fight over two things: land and women. Thus, he confided, land is really feminine. As I argue elsewhere (Silverman 1996), the gender of the Eastern Iatmul cosmos is androgynous in the sense conveyed by Strathern (1988). This androgyny mixes male and female dispositions in a mutually contestable and contradictory way so that gender and cosmology as well as time are ultimately paradoxical rather than solidary.

Gendered temporality is found in other Papua New Guinean societies (e.g., Strathern 1992:199-200) and even in the West (Macey 1987). The Foi have a sexual division of space along an upstream-downstream axis (Weiner 1984). The male source of the river is associated with pearl shells which move in a downstream or female direction during marriage exchanges for women. In a somatic metaphor, the front of the body (mouth, eyes, ears) is masculine and west, whereas the anus is feminine and east. Foi temporality manifests two directions: upstream toward masculine life and sociality, and downstream toward feminine death. Much as for Eastern Iatmul, Foi time is embodied time (Weiner 1995:56).

#### AFFINITIES WITH ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA

Many characteristics of Eastern Iatmul totemism resemble temporality and (pre)history in the dreamtime cosmologies of Australian Aboriginal cultures. Dreamtime refers to a prehuman yet atemporal era in which ancestor spirits, anthropomorphic and otherwise, created the cosmos by shaping the landscape during migrations and formulating the moral rules that govern social life. On these points, the dreamtime resembles Eastern Iatmul cosmogony. Dreamtime tracks or “strings” (Rose 1992:52) correspond to the totemic paths of mythic history.

In their emphasis on ancestral spatiotemporality, both the dreamtime and Eastern Iatmul totemism (*tsagi*) privilege spatial rather than temporal order (Rose 1992:207-07; Morphy 1995). Relations in time are largely understood in terms of spatial location. For the dreamtime, however, “the only temporal co-ordinates from which one could define a before or after are major disjunctions” such as the sudden appearance of ancestors. Between “disjunctions,” Rose (1992:106) claims,

“synchrony prevails”; a concept that is not apparent in the temporal thought of Eastern Iatmul.

Both Eastern Iatmul and Australian Aborigines memorialize the past through myth, narrative, and names. Ritual commemorates these memories and recreates the past, especially ancestral movement through and creation of the landscape and various spatially anchored events (e.g., Morphy 1995:201-03). People in both regions believe that ritual insures natural, cosmic, and “spiritual renewal” (Berndt 1984:198-201).

The dreamtime and tsagi are associated with the creative or generative power of the early cosmos. They concern both “noumenal” and “phenomenal” reality (Myers 1986:49). But Australian Aborigines have a more profound sense of reverence toward the manifestations of dreamtime ancestors than their Sepik River counterparts. For Eastern Iatmul, topographic features are important links to the past only insofar as they have totemic names, which themselves embody ancestral power. For Australian Aborigines, the landscape itself has “spiritual charisma” (Berndt 1984:177; Rose 1992:46). Since the distant past for Eastern Iatmul is signified first by names and then only secondarily by the landscape,<sup>8</sup> the dreamtime is more “grounded” (Rose 1992:57) than mythic history. Perhaps this explains why the past is so contested in the Sepik River: names are more diffuse than topographical features. Moreover, Australian Aborigines seem to understand the dreamtime to be fundamentally unalterable by humans for deeply rooted, almost existential, reasons rather than for overtly political concerns.

Aborigines believe that an “indestructible essence or life force” links a person with a totem and spirit-child (Stanner 1965:232; Tonkinson 1978). Eastern Iatmul also identify with totemic names and their referents. According to linear and incremental time, the ancestors lived in the past. However, they are also active in the present through the actions of living namesakes (as in Tambunum) or people who identify with ancestral spaces (as in the dreamtime). Indeed, dreamtime spirits and Eastern Iatmul totemic crocodiles are said to influence if not determine human pregnancy (see above; Tonkinson 1978; Myers 1986:50). Thus the ancestral power of the past in both regions remains a vital force in the world today. Indeed, Layton (1995:229) suggests that we compare the landscape in Aboriginal thought to an “abacus on which people are beads whose ‘value’ (cultural identity) is determined by their position on . . . a board whose structure is in turn determined by the places and journeys” of the dreamtime. Furthermore, Australian Aboriginal cultures, like Eastern Iatmul, compress time during ritual (Munn 1969:199-200). They also tend to condense European religious mythology and their own cosmology into a unified temporal scheme (Rose 1992:208), whereas Eastern Iatmul, we have seen, tend to envision parallel times.

Dreamtime ancestors seem to have created the world in such a way that a specific social group is associated with a natural species (Bateson 1936:244-45; Maddock 1972:28; Berndt 1984:177). This form of cosmological essentialism is alien to Eastern Iatmul, who believe in a pluralistic past of parallel paths rather than a single unified past. Lots of ancestors created groves of sago, but none created the species



in a single act. There are always other ancestors, from other groups, even within the same village, who will have created their own ancestral saga. This, too, tends to result in a greater incidence in feuding over the past than in Aboriginal Australia.

Many anthropologists have noted that the dreamtime implies a conservative worldview:

[T]he structure of the world and life was fixed once-for-all at a remote time in the past. . . . The possibilities for men's life were determined. (Stanner 1963:253-54)

Maddock (1972:129) echoes this view: "There is among Aborigines a profound resistance to crediting themselves with their own cultural achievements. . . . Aborigines claim credit only for fidelity to tradition." Aborigines believe in two cosmic eras: the atemporal dreamtime and the present (Munn 1970:144; Williams 1986:49-51). The dreamtime itself lies outside the brackets of incremental and linear temporality. It is a "single, unchanging, timeless source" (Myers 1986:52) that surrounds or exists behind or below the present era of time per se and humanity (Rose 1992:205). It is, as Stanner (1956:52) so aptly puts it, "everywhen." Although mythic-historic or ancestral power also suffuses the contemporary era in the Sepik, this belief is salient mainly during ritual rather than everyday activities.

Both Eastern Iatmul and dreamtime cosmologies are opaque about "first causes" (Stanner 1963:266). But the Aborigines believe in a profound sense of cosmological stasis. Prior to ancestral creation, the dreamtime contained what Stanner (1960:113-18) calls "existence-classes." Ancestors merely placed entities into these pre-existing categories. For Eastern Iatmul, by contrast, mythic-historic ancestors and spirits created all cosmic categories through naming.

The timeless era of the dreamtime consisted of a featureless landscape until the appearance and creative migrations of ancestors. After the ancestors created the land and Law, there was a dramatic cosmological break that separated the dreamtime from the present-day era of history wherein humans discover dreamtime creations and follow the Law. Eastern Iatmul also believe in a pretemporal era; namely, the primordial sea. It, too, was followed by a period of ancestral creation and migration—the era of totemism. But the cosmological break between mythic history and today, or ancestors and humanity, is less distinct and disjunct than it is in Aboriginal cosmology. This may explain why Eastern Iatmul do not assert the Aboriginal credo that "to be human is to reproduce forms" (Maddock 1972:129). Instead, they assert identifications between persons and mythic-historical personages.

According to Munn (1970:144), Aborigines are "freed from their 'historicity' or 'mortality' by integration" with dreamtime objects and landforms; objects that, because they exist in both the past and present, are no longer anchored to a specific time. Eastern Iatmul do likewise through identification with totemic phenomena and the alternate-generation naming system. Many Aboriginal cultures also organize names and kinship terms as well as subsections with alternate-generation and cyclical structures (Meggitt 1962; Levi-Strauss 1969 [1949]; Berndt and Berndt 1970, chs.

4-5; Rose 1992:74-79, 111-12). But historical or temporal cyclicity is rarely noted explicitly in the literature (but see Stanner 1956:60; Williams 1986:30).

Both the dreamtime and Eastern Iatmul totemism understand cosmic creation through idioms of gender and reproduction (Munn 1969, 1970; Hiatt 1975; Rose 1992:42; Morphy 1995:197). However, anthropologists have not for the most part elucidated explicitly the genders of Aboriginal times. The Murinbata Dreamtime, Stanner (1963:270) poetically writes, "could not deny Chronos but gave Adrasteia the triumph." Here, implicitly, masculine time is an illusion of historical stasis that ultimately gives way to feminine temporal flux. Similarly, Eastern Iatmul signify dissolution and change with a metaphor of female riverine erosion. Politically, men in Tambunum try to transcend temporality and assert a timeless cosmos in order to support claims to totemic entitlements (Silverman 1996:43-45). Cosmologically, they do this in order to assert masculine primacy in a world of riverine fluidity. Like the dreamtime, Eastern Iatmul totemism "denies the erosions of time" (Myers 1986:52). But it does so in a wider discourse concerning the gender of the cosmos.

For Yarralin cosmology, dying is likened to "washing out" (Rose 1992:209). It is akin to the seasonal rains that cleanse the maternal earth, "erasing the marks of ordinary time . . . preventing the accumulation of past events" (Rose 1992:217). Ordinary life, which begins and ends in a short, linear, and incremental time frame, is merely temporal noise when compared to the eternity of the dreamtime and its vast cosmological cycles of floods (Rose 1992:217).<sup>9</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

In a much-noted yet criticized passage, Levi-Strauss (1966:233-34) boldly divided the world into "hot" and "cold" societies. Hot societies, such as our own, internalize history as the prime mover of sociocultural development. Cold societies, Eastern Iatmul and Australian Aborigines included, subsume history and time under all-encompassing classifications (Stanner 1963:139-48). According to Harrison (1990:73-76), Levi-Strauss failed to distinguish between ideology and practice. Hence the coldness of culture, one could say, is opposed by the hotness of society and politics.

But Levi-Strauss was also aware that some so-called cold societies have multiple forms of time. This understanding, rather than his hot-cold distinction, is the most insightful place from which to analyze time and history in the Sepik River and beyond. It is not the case that people simply live their lives within a temporal and historical frame that admits or denies change. Rather, people act in meaningful and strategic ways; in short, people have agency. Furthermore, culture is not a seamless web of significations: it contains paradoxes or problems. The pursuit of solutions to these predicaments is a source of the passion of culture. Time and history are important for anthropological analysis not simply as structures that govern social life. Rather, they are symbolic resources and semiotic systems.

I argued that Eastern Iatmul have different forms of time and history that are related to distinct arenas of social life. Within the realm of totemism, there is no

neutral history. The present cannot be explained on the basis of an apolitical and fixed sequence of mythic-historic events. Instead, the contemporary political configuration of the village validates the totemic and cosmic organization of the universe. History and time are symbolic resources used by agents who construct and alter their world. Yet at the same time action is constrained within the normative temporal frames of institutions such as totemism and kinship. Finally, time and history are a semiotic system through which Eastern Iatmul confront fundamental cultural and moral paradoxes concerning gender, stasis, and change.

## NOTES

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2. Sometimes Iatmul will erect stones, which are rare in the Sepik floodplain, to commemorate historic events such as successful raids on rival villages (e.g., Bateson 1970 [1937]:133; Silverman, *In press*; Jorgensen 1990; Kahn 1990).
3. A similar concept is reported by Lewis (1980:61-62) for song cycles among the Gnaou of the West Sepik.
4. Ecological and seasonal modes of time are common in Melanesia (e.g., Panoff 1969; Scaglione and Condon 1979; Burman 1981). The common anthropological practice of representing this form of time with diagrams is criticized by Goody (1977: ch. 4) and Bourdieu (1977:105-07).
5. This is similar to the concept of a "chronotype" (Bender and Wellbery 1989), which is derived from Bakhtin's (1981 [1937]) "chronotope."
6. Fake myth, like Dundes's (1989) "fakelore," can be attributed to an identifiable source and differs, in the case described here, from Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) "invented tradition," which uses images of historical permanence as ideological justifications for social institutions.
7. Leach (1961), Gell (1975:329-46, 1992: ch. 5), Bloch (1977), Harrison (1982), and Werbner (1989), among others, discuss the concept of ritual time.
8. As a result, perhaps, Eastern Iatmul cosmology lacks a sense of ecological unity between humanity and nature that is associated with the dreamtime. Indeed, recent accounts of Aboriginal cultures often conclude with a moral plea for Europeans to heed the ecological wisdom of Aborigines (e.g., Rose 1992). Nothing in Eastern Iatmul cosmology, to my knowledge, would engender such a plea, however much I might wish to do so in this era of unrestrained logging.
9. Although some readers might be dissatisfied with my generalizing the Aboriginal case and then comparing it to Melanesia, this exercise was able to suggest the presence of gendered idioms of time in both regions, a suggestion that has not been offered or demonstrated until now.

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