3 Moderate expectations and benign exploitation

Tourism on the Sepik River, Papua New Guinea

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MTS Discoverer. PNG's Ultimate Travel Experience . . . designed and built specially to suit the unique conditions along the Sepik River and north coast of PNG . . . can cruise for 30 days without the need to take on fuel and water. It is fast, comfortable and is equipped with five tenders and a helicopter (subject to conditions). The vessel is entirely air conditioned and its facilities include a library, in-house television system, cocktail bar, luxurious lounge, covered deck space, a dive shop, laundry, gift shop and restaurant. Satellite telephones are located in each cabin and all twenty-two cabins have private bathroom and PA system.

(www.mtsdiscoverer.com/)

The SEPIK SPIRIT accommodates 18 passengers in 9 deluxe and spacious twin bedrooms each with private bathroom. Facilities aboard also include a dining room, lounge, bar, video and covered upper observatory deck. The entire vessel is airconditioned. Because the SEPIK SPIRIT is the ideal size for exploration, it provides intimate exposure to the area without the mass tourism often experienced elsewhere.

(www.pngtours.com/lodge4.html)

Introduction: the obvious

The luxurious *Melanesian Discoverer* cruise ship regularly sets sail from the coastal town of Madang in Papua New Guinea (PNG) to meander along the Sepik River, one of the premier and exclusive tourist destinations in Melanesia. The popular allure of the Sepik is at once mysterious, artistic, scenic, and tribal. Like the Amazon and Congo, the Sepik has long served as a metaphor for Western desires and conquests. The river offers a legendary glimpse of raw, pristine nature and, especially, simple villagers unsullied by the conventions and conveniences of the modern world. Not incidentally, the Sepik is also valued by the West for the many opportunities it provides for purchase of souvenirs along this journey into the mythic infancy of humanity.

Typical American tourists who visit the Sepik fly from New York to Sydney, then on to Port Moresby, the capital city of Papua New Guinea, and finally to the coastal town of Madang. There they board the *Melanesian Discoverer* ship for a

characteristic five-night cruise, then climb into a small charter airplane on a grass airstrip beside the river at Timbunke village and visit Mount Hagen or Goroka, the two main towns in the PNG Highlands. After a few more days sightseeing, they return to New York, perhaps stopping at Cairns or Sydney. The fare for the five-day cruise is US$1925. (The total cost of the entire journey is approximately US$6000.) Maximum capacity on the *Melanesian Discoverer* is 42 passengers. A full voyage thus represents a minimal collective expenditure of about $80,000. Although this figure pertains solely to the river portion of the entire trip, and so excludes airfare and any other sightseeing, it nonetheless probably exceeds the typical annual income of any village along the Sepik.

The American Museum of Natural History in New York City offers an extensive programme of upscale adventure travel throughout the world. The 18-day 'Faces of Melanesia' voyage in October–November 2006 is scheduled to charter the *Clipper Odyssey* expedition vessel to visit Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia. The fare for the trip is US$8780 per person for the least expensive berth. Those preferring more sumptuous accommodation can spend as much as $15,880. The pre-trip expedition to the Sepik and Highlands costs an extra $2780 per person (with a surcharge of $480 for a single supplement).[1] The 'Faces of Melanesia' brochure estimates roundtrip airfare from the United States at US$2685. Flights for the Sepik and Highlands excursion will add an additional $850. Minimally, then, a US tourist interested in the entire package can expect to spend about $15,000. A full ship of American passengers would represent a total amount of disposable income in excess of $1,770,140. Thus framed, Sepik River tourism unquestionably expresses and sustains the marginal position of local Melanesian communities in a grossly unequal global economy.

By almost any standard, Papua New Guinea plays a peripheral role in the world system. The World Bank, for example, ranks the United States as fourth of 171 countries in terms of gross national product (GNP). The rank of Papua New Guinea is 133. In 2004, the GNP per capita for PNG was US$550; the US exceeded this figure by a factor of 75, or $41,400. Here, again, the presence of Western tourists in the Sepik would seem best analysed in terms of vast inequalities in wealth and power.[2]

Typically, social scientists and theorists construe tourism in peripheral communities as essentially a form of post- or neo-colonialism that forces local folks into self-humiliation and cultural prostitution for the lurid gaze of wealthy Westerners. What is so attractive about marginal communities is precisely their marginalisation (Azarya 2004). Local people are said to transform themselves into little more than commodities. Staged performances and tawdry trinkets pass for cultural authenticity. To add insult to injury, many tourists feel good about themselves for having so magnanimously passed a few dollars on to the poor primitives for their dances and souvenirs.

In an earlier era, dark-skinned savages were displayed for the almost pornographic pleasure of a gawking Western public. Visitors at the 1904 St Louis World's Fair stared at dog-eating, head-hunting Igorots. The Monkey House at the Bronx Zoo encaged a young man, Ota Benga, from the Belgian Congo. Sarah

Baartman, otherwise known as 'The Hottentot Venus', was paraded across Europe, even in death. Contemporary tourism is simply a more palatable form of the same brutality. Tourists often justify this dehumanising exploitation as a simple-minded curiosity about the world. But there is no dignity here; it is tourism, to draw on Ness (2005), as terror.

The celebrated 1987 film *Cannibal Tours*, directed by Dennis O'Rourke, offers the most vivid example of touristic gall and immorality for Melanesia (Silverman 2004). Most tourists who visit the Sepik, as *Cannibal Tours* so powerfully portrays, yearn to connect with the naked essences of humanity that the West long ago swapped for civilisation. They wish, in other words, to rejoice in how far we have come since our meaner days, or to celebrate those who still live in simple harmony with nature. Tourists also seek brief refuge from the angst of modernity – a key draw of ecotourism (West and Carrier 2004). MacCannell (1992) interprets the motivation behind contemporary tourism as the popular search for an antidote to the artificiality and superficiality of Western culture. Tourism offers tourists something real – a reality, of course, entirely staged. But despite the image of escape, tourism is thoroughly implicated in the ongoing colonial project by virtue of its relentless drive to inspect and scrutinise the natives. Tourists, argue MacCannell (1992) and Root (1996), and not the proverbial natives, are the true cannibals who consume the Other.[3]

This chapter does not seek to diminish the moral intent of those who view tourism through the lenses of colonialism, economic exploitation and racism – lenses ground to focus on the cruelties of the contemporary world system. Instead, it aims to complicate this view, not to apologise for tourism, but to illuminate what is far less obvious: the ways that local people harness tourism for their own subjective purposes. An analytic framework that focuses *only* on the exploitative aspects of tourism, however ethically virtuous, further contributes to the erasure of indigenous agency by preempting the possibility of identifying authentic creativity and genuine meaning in a world that is ineluctably hybrid – a hybridity partly formed and often exemplified by tourism.

The ethnographic focus is the Eastern Iatmul village of Tambunum, a fishing and horticultural community of about a thousand people, most of whom are now engaged in part-time entrepreneurship or petty capitalism. Tambunum is the largest Iatmul-speaking village in the middle Sepik. It is also one of the most successful tourist destinations in the region, in large measure thanks to its bustling size, spectacular architecture and extensive repertoire of art. And it is in the area of tourist art that we can identify what is perhaps the most authentic aspect of contemporary culture in the Sepik.

Sepik tourism

Tourism is no new phenomenon in Melanesia. As far back as the 1880s, Burns Philp was advertising full-scale 'excursion trips' to New Guinea (Douglas 1996). In the same era, Sepik villagers were producing wooden shields for external consumption (D. Newton, personal communication 1987). Tambunum villagers concur, and claim that their great-grandparents carved all sorts of objects specifically to exchange for steel tools with the earliest German colonists and traders.

Although tourism in the Sepik did not begin in earnest until the 1970s, Western interest in local art remained as strong as it was nearly a century earlier. One of the initial purveyors of tourist houseboats along the river, Wayne Heathcote, is today a key participant in the upscale tribal art market in Europe, the United States, and Australia – albeit someone recently implicated in the illicit trade in 'national cultural property' of Papua New Guinea (Dalton 2006). The sale of tourist art and artifacts remains, as it was in the 1970s (May 1977) and perhaps earlier, a central source and promise of income along the Sepik. At the very least, art continues to mediate many, if not most, interactions between Sepik villagers and Western travellers.

In gross economic terms, the tourism industry in PNG remains underdeveloped, but whether to applaud or deplore this situation pivots on perspectives. Industry supporters such as Levantis (1998) bemoan that PNG is 'by far the worst performing nation in the region in terms of tourist growth'. The Papua New Guinea Tourism Promotion Authority (www.pngtourism.org.pg) reports only 69,250 visitors in 2005, most of whom arrived primarily for business. The holiday or leisure-oriented component amounted to a paltry 18,115. Not surprisingly, most of these visitors hailed from Australia (approximately 7100). Japan ranked second, with about 4300 tourists, followed by the US (approximately 2800). Despite the allure of the Sepik, the East Sepik Province itself is not one of the premier destinations in the country. Nevertheless, tourism is a vital and often vibrant aspect of contemporary life along the river, though one which hinges on a world system over which local people can exercise little control.

Today, three general categories of tourists visit the Sepik. The first and most affluent group enjoys the comforts of two lavish vessels that dominate the touristic landscape of the river. Melanesian Tourist Services operates the *Melanesian Discoverer*, a plush and state-of-the-art catamaran cruiser (complete with helipad) that in 1988 replaced the *Melanesian Explorer* steamship featured in the film *Cannibal Tours*. The ship often visits Tambunum and is berthed at the Madang Resort Hotel. A rival tourist craft, the *Sepik Spirit*, arrived on the river in 1990 and is operated by Trans Niugini Tours. The two competitors generally ply different regions of the Sepik. They also maintain their own chains of resorts, hotels and lodges throughout the country.[4]

The second and third groups of tourists, or 'travellers' as they prefer to be called (Errington and Gewertz 1989), seek adventure rather than comfort, or simply have smaller budgets. They tend to arrange tours with small operators, such as Sepik Adventure Tours, or travel solo with no fixed itinerary. They, too, gain access to the river through small, regularly scheduled airplanes that land on grass airstrips. More commonly, 'travellers' climb aboard the ubiquitous PMV (public motor vehicle) at the provincial capital town of Wewak and suffer (or enjoy) a long, uncomfortable, sometimes dangerous ride on a potholed dirt road to the river. These travellers sleep in village homes, small tourist lodges and their own tents.

Most tourism companies in PNG are relatively small and nationally owned or co-owned. The major global hotel chains and resort companies have not invested significantly in touristic ventures in the country. Unjustly or not, Papua New Guinea has a pervasive reputation for lawlessness. The single greatest hindrance to the growth of tourism in the country is a 'colossal crime problem' that, using data from the United Nations, Levantis (1998: 100) deems perhaps the worst in the world. This, coupled with the remoteness of most places in the country from the accoutrements of modern life (which represents both a draw and a hindrance to many potential visitors), severely curtails the tourism industry.

Indeed, the US and Australian governments issue frightening warnings on their foreign travel websites about violent crime in PNG. Visitors are hardly encouraged by these reports of carjackings, armed robberies, pickpockets, bag-snatchers, robbery and gang rape, and admonitions against using public transportation, hiking in remote areas, travelling alone and visiting isolated beaches. So severe is the perceived (or real) law-and-order situation that the US State Department offers a 'Primer on Personal Security in Papua New Guinea' that mentions a weak police force, urban gangs, tribal fighting and rape (http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1757.html). One can read these cautions as a sober warning about travel to a so-called 'failed state' or an exaggerated rendition of colonial anxiety over 'native rule'.

Periodically, news items about tourism and crime appear in the Papua New Guinea dailies. In a well-publicised incident, a group of Australian tourists were mugged while hiking the Kokoda Trail in late December 2000 (see also Foster 2002). Numerous op-ed pieces, policy statements and letters to the editor appeared over the next few months in *The Post-Courier* to berate the criminals and bewail the adverse effects of crime on the fledgling PNG tourism industry. The then-Minister of Culture and Tourism, Andrew Bain, pointed to a broader need for the entire nation to engage in moral self-reflection, and introduced 'a force of tourist police' in 2005. But some writers accused the Australian media of exaggeration and pandering to stereotypes about PNG lawlessness. Throughout this incident, tourism emerged as a window for assessing the overall civic and economic status of the country.

A different sort of moral evaluation

Upon greeting tourists, who typically arrive on the *Melanesian Discoverer*, the Eastern Iatmul people make no effort to conceal the paraphernalia of modernity, despite their recognition that tourists travel to the Sepik precisely to view a different culture and custom. Nor do villagers simulate activities. What does happen is that many people cease their everyday activities to paint tourists' faces, to prepare for a brief dance performance and, most significantly, to fetch art and artifacts. Additionally, the few elder women who sometimes forgo shirts will quickly don a blouse.

Neither audiences nor performers in Tambunum seem especially enthralled by the dances. They appreciate them for what they are, namely, staged performances imbued with an ethos of vague obligation rather than genuine or sincere authenticity. They are something that must be done and seen in order for everybody to adhere to a broader, unstated and vague script of tourism or expectation. Still, as Otto and Verloop (1996) discuss for the famous Asaro Mudmen of the PNG Highlands, even the most obvious of touristic performances in Melanesia often entail complex histories and notions of local ownership that are invisible to the audience. Tourist performances, too, often symbolise local and national identity precisely because they are enacted and highlighted during the touristic encounter. Additionally, it is important to realise that the tourist operators along the Sepik exercise little formal or informal authority that overrides local initiatives and agency. Quite the opposite. Tourism is one of the few arenas of cross-cultural interaction in the Sepik where local people do not feel silenced and pacified by Western power.

Of far greater importance to tourism along the river than the dance performances, and to the thesis of this chapter, is the huge, impromptu bazaar of art and material culture that is quickly assembled on either side of the main village pathway. This somewhat spontaneous marketplace offers the greatest possibilities during the touristic setting for Westerners and local people – men and women, youth and elders – to interact freely. Some Eastern Iatmul are passive, refusing to speak or gesture until first approached by a tourist; others, especially younger men, assume playfully aggressive and animated postures. Conversation, questions, comments, banter, laughter and a great deal of miscommunication are common. The encounter is largely enjoyed by all present.

The economic inequalities of this market, as in Melanesian tourism more generally, require little underscoring. But an economic perspective alone fails to offer a full understanding of tourism in the middle Sepik River. An alternative or complementary framework begins with Pratt's (1992: 7) notion of a 'contact zone,' defined as 'the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect'. The idea of the 'contact zone' stresses not simply hegemonic forces of 'conquest and domination,' or Western power, but also the 'interactive, improvisational dimensions' of the encounter, that is, local creativity. It is this idea that is so useful for analysing Sepik tourism.

Dialogues with the wider world

Among the Chambri, another Sepik society, men modify ceremonial spears for sale to tourists. Chambri peddle these souvenirs inside the village as well as outside a hotel in Wewak. Some modifications to the spears are practical: smaller items are more appealing to tourists since they can stuff them in their suitcases. But, as Gewertz and Errington (1991) discuss, the transformation from ritual object into souvenir involves far more than physical appearance. For example, whereas men imbue ceremonial spears with a totemic spirit, tourist spears are mystically inert.

A similar process occurs in Tambunum. Eastern Iatmul, like Chambri, attribute both personhood and mystical agency to ritual objects. This magical animation

partly arises from the social organisation of artistic creation. A clan's sacred objects gain spiritual efficacy when carved by hereditary ritual partners or sisters' children in exchange for food. Then, too, the owners must sponsor a totemic chant that intones the name and spirit into the ceremonial object. Neither practice applies to tourist art. In this sense, ceremonial art is group-oriented, or collective, and named. By contrast, tourist art is largely individualistic, or carved by one man, and nameless. Men often sign their tourist objects; but the objects fail to possess, in a traditional sense, any significant identity.

Gewertz and Errington (1991) discuss another difference between ritual and touristic objects among Chambri. Ceremonial objects entail social obligations within a wide-ranging moral system of exchange. Tourist spears adhere to the logic of capitalism, not reciprocity. They elicit no long-term relationships, much to the dismay of the Chambri, who see the tourist trade as the only viable means of creating enduring bonds with Westerners. Additionally, ceremonial spears circulate among men and groups who see themselves as more equal than not. Local political and ritual hierarchies are 'commensurate', that is, unstable, negotiable, and potentially reversible. They are also defined by knowledge rather than material wealth. By contrast, differences between tourists and villagers are 'incommensurate'. For all practical purposes, these differences are insurmountable, permanent and marked by a dramatic inequality in access to wealth and commodities.

Gewertz and Errington report that Chambri modify male initiation ceremonies in order to accommodate a paying audience of tourists. From one angle, this commodification dilutes the authentic meaning of the rite and further evidences how local Melanesian societies must submit to a more powerful world system. From another angle, however, this transformation maintains the relevance of the ceremony. To the extent that masculine competence among the Chambri today entails successful interaction with the agents and forces of modernity, a traditional initiation rite would fail to transform boys into capable men. The contemporary authenticity of the ceremony thus arises partly from the inauthentic presence of tourists. Through tourism, in other words, Chambri ritual 'dialogue[s] with the wider world', to borrow a phrase from Adams' (1993: 70) study of Tana Toraja tourism in Indonesia, and helps forge a sense of local identity that neither wholly ignores nor wholly embraces the dominant global system.

The economics of tourist art

Tambunum villagers – men, women, and children – probably create a greater quantity of tourist art, in a wider range of styles, than any other community along the Sepik. In the late 1980s, upwards of 5000 objects were sometimes displayed for art dealers and tourists. Additionally, several men in the village regularly send small consignments of carvings to dealers and shops in Port Moresby, Australia, America and Europe – often through local middlemen who migrated to town. These commercial affiliations wax and wane with considerable frequency, and it would be false to portray the village as some sort of 'factory' that exports large quantities of art in return for immense sums of cash. But other Sepik communities see Tambunum as an affluent village arising from a high traffic in tourists and dealers who purchase large amounts of art. Eastern Iatmul generally agree with this assessment, while nonetheless aspiring to a richer level of material wealth and 'true' development that tourism is unable to provide or sustain. In the heyday of tourism in the late 1980s, art sales grossed the village approximately 30,000 kina (about US$25,000) per year. It is reasonable to assume that this sum was unmatched elsewhere along the river. But this status offered little consolation to Eastern Iatmul who yearned for greater material comforts.

The relationship between tourist art and local economic aspirations is decidedly ambivalent. The creation of art is fuelled by the desire – really, the need – for money to pay for, among other things, outboard motor fuel, clothing, health supplies, radios, school fees, batteries, food and public transportation. At this point in history, it would be nothing short of absurd to view money as enabling Sepik villagers simply and solely to purchase prestige items. The local economy is now thoroughly monetary. Eastern Iatmul would greet the question 'Why do you need money?' – a question asked by the filmmaker in *Cannibal Tours* – with the same bafflement as would most Americans or Australians. Eastern Iatmul have no interest in regressing to premodern subsistence horticulture.

That the sale of tourist art is unable to satisfy the full spectrum of modern desires was made clear by one man who grumbled, while finishing a crocodile-shaped coffee table, 'We carve because we do not have real development here.' His anger also belied resignation. No amount of artistry, he continued, would bring to the village electricity, modern housing, and the other material and symbolic privileges associated with the rising middle class in the towns of PNG. This urban elite, as Gewertz and Errington (1999) show, often defines itself against less sophisticated village kin – the very folks tourists wish to see.

Most Eastern Iatmul, it is worth noting, attribute their monetary plight to bureaucratic incompetence and petty corruption rather than global history and the rise of the modern world system. Village men regularly exclaim that Papua New Guineans, but not tourists, languish under an inept government. Eastern Iatmul, to draw on van Beek (2003) in relation to Africa, view the arrival of tourists (like that of anthropologists) through two lenses. For some, the presence of external visitors shows evidence of local cultural vitality and significance. To others, however, tourism betokens a profound marginality.

In the late 1980s, many people in Tambunum pinned their hopes for the elusive goal of development on the construction of a tourist guesthouse (Silverman 2000). A decade later, this enthusiasm waned for two reasons. First, tourism itself declined with the rising perception of PNG as a dangerous country with severe law-and-order problems, a view partly fuelled by the crisis on Bougainville. Second, most people in Tambunum and throughout the region had tied their aspirations for economic success on the 'vanilla boom' that swept the Sepik. In local perceptions, cash-cropping replaced tourism as the economic strategy most likely to succeed; the village guesthouse contained drying vanilla beans rather than tourists.

Tourism only partly satisfies modern desires; likewise tradition (Silverman 2005). Elder men complain that most youth are far more interested in money than

ritual skills and esoteric knowledge. But it is precisely local perceptions of the village as economically viable that prevent the degree of out-migration that has depleted many other villages in the Sepik. Tourism, in this sense, enables tradition as much as it erodes it. Tourism, too, contributes to a wider sense of uncertain identity in Tambunum. Villagers know well that they are, as one man said in the film *Cannibal Tours*, 'living between two worlds'. They are not fully Eastern Iatmul in the mould of their grandparents, but neither are they fully modern in the cast of the tourists. Eastern Iatmul identity today is one in transition.

The rise of the individual

The popular understanding of tourist art as in some sense meaningless or valueless is illustrated by a recent search of eBay, a venue for the sale of Sepik objects, that yielded 72 items (30 March 2006). Most of the labels and descriptions were inaccurate; a few seemed downright deceptive. For example, an 'antique' wooden lime container, sculpted to resemble a bird, was labelled Iatmul. This attribution is correct, but its antiquity was dubious, and hardly warranted the shocking 'Buy It Now' price of US$2300. A more accurate description of the object would place its date of manufacture within the past 15 years or so and perhaps indicate an original price of about $10. These objects, moreover, are now made exclusively for sale to tourists and dealers; villagers prefer to store their lime powder for chewing with betel nut in discarded plastic rice bags, tobacco tins or photographic film canisters. But none of the Sepik objects on eBay were described with any hint about their touristic nature.

The label of another object, 'Powerful Iatmul Mwai Mask 1970s; Oceanic Tribal', presented an honest date of manufacture. But, lest this attribution deter potential buyers, the item was further described as 'powerful . . . a great mask with real presence'. But why not a great *tourist* mask? The answer is obvious: tourism to most dealers, buyers, collectors and museums nullifies aesthetic authenticity. Tourist art, in other words, is not art but something less significant, such as mere craft, an exhibition of skill but not genuine aesthetic creativity.[5]

This view is naïve, ethnocentric and erroneous. Several genres of tourist art in Tambunum express the complexities of contemporary identities in the Sepik and Papua New Guinea. Many touristic works diverge considerably from traditional styles, motifs and forms. Tourism promotes the emergence of a hybrid aesthetic or what Causey (1999a) dubs, writing about Toba Batak wood-carvers in North Sumatra, 'conflation'. Aesthetic conflation in Tambunum reflects various aspects of modernity, especially a heightened sense of individualism.

In the Sepik, as Gewertz and Errington (1991) show, young men and women who embrace the modern ideals of romantic love and self-destiny often flee to towns such as Wewak to escape traditional marriage expectations and the authority of elders. Similarly, capitalism fosters a more heightened sense of the individual than normally permitted by traditional village morality. An effective capitalist must shun reciprocity and kinship obligations and embrace marketplace values of autonomy and self-reliance. The mundane act of shopping, Foster (2002) shows, stresses free choice. So, too, does the Christian notion of the afterlife, whereby each person is ultimately responsible for the fate of their soul. In multiple ways, then, modernity in Melanesia is inextricably linked to individualism.

Tourist art and identity

Tourist art in Tambunum aesthetically expresses the profound shifts in personhood and identity that now shape Sepik lives. Most obviously, tourist art evidences what might be called aesthetic individualism (Causey 1999b). Eastern Iatmul carvers clearly state that they aspire to create unique objects that will attract the attention of tourists and buyers. Consequently, individual styles have emerged over the past decade or two within the village, and there is considerable competition to create distinctive objects.

Traditional art also evidenced some degree of individual creativity and innovation. But the intent behind traditional artistry is to reproduce faithfully a spirit or motif that represents a collective descent group. Carvers thus act on behalf of their clans or lineages rather than self-interest. Tourist art dramatically differs. The goal is individual innovation, not fidelity to tradition and the representation of collective identity. Otherwise, men say, nobody's works would stand apart. In tourism, too, men carve for themselves or for a small number of kin, usually wives and children. They also carve for money and commodities, not totemic power and ritual prestige. All told, tourist art represents several key institutions of modernity, including the individual, capitalism and the nuclear family.[6]

A typical tourist artwork exhibits motifs and forms that were once consigned to distinct objects and displayed, moreover, in unrelated settings. This stylistic blurring befits the contemporary context in which traditional features of social life are often blurred with modern aspirations. Some art dealers counsel village men to carve only within the traditional repertoire. But Eastern Iatmul resist this request. They also carve styles that fail to sell with any great regularity. The local appeal of these objects cannot therefore be explained with reference to market forces. Rather, they resonate with local sensibilities, specifically the expression of modern individualism.

Two types of aesthetic authenticity are evident through tourism. On the one hand, unique works that diverge from tradition seem genuine precisely because they are plainly novel and therefore do *not* copy tradition. Yet, as Steiner (1999) argues for Africa, stylistic redundancy based on traditional forms and styles communicates an opposite but equally valid sense of authenticity. These works are genuine precisely because they *do* copy tradition. If some tourist works evidence the authenticity of modern individualism, others evidence the authenticity of an enduring heritage.

For all of its conformity with modern individualism, tourist art in Tambunum also sustains traditional modes of identity. Men generally say that they refrain from carving the totemic creatures of other lineages and clans without receiving permission lest they capitalise on, and consequently transgress, another group's esoteric patrimony. Most men also claim to disperse any income from the sale of

tourist art within the kin group. Such comments reflect moral principles rather than actual practice. Nonetheless, the evidence in Tambunum shows that tourist art, however much it recreates identity, fails to erase entirely the force of traditional sentiment.

Sepik tourist art also reflects the prismatic, transformative and emergent aspects of contemporary identity. Many masks confound the distinctions between inside and outside, figure and ground. Three-dimensional animals recede into two-dimensional faces. Works exhibit no clear visual focus. The viewer is unable fully to see the object and its motifs from any single angle or perspective. Animals curve beneath masks and crawl through the surface. Mouths ambiguously devour and expectorate – give birth or even excrete – fish, frogs and snakes. This genre of tourist art defies any stable imagery and so reflects the instability of contemporary social life in Melanesia.

The most common creature to crawl through a maw or mask is the crocodile. Traditionally, crocodiles represented senior, clan-specific spirits who governed, among other processes, human fecundity. These spirits were, and remain, impersonated by men during ritual through the musical guise of bamboo flute melodies. But in the context of tourism, crocodile motifs and figures represent something entirely different. They signify the relatively new form of regional identity – 'Sepiks' as opposed to 'Islanders', say, or 'Highlanders'. This sense of regionalism was non-existent prior to the colonial era and the development of long-distance travel between disconnected places.

Literacy communicates the same message about regional identity, and also expresses individualism (Silverman 2004). Eastern Iatmul men commonly sign their tourist carvings with their Christian and sometimes totemic names. They may incise or paint the acronym ESP or its referent, East Sepik Province. Women similarly weave 'PS' into baskets, an alphabetic slogan for *Pikinini Sepik* (Sepik Child). Although these slogans by themselves might appear somewhat insignificant, they constitute yet further evidence for the overall thesis of this chapter that tourist art visualises wide-ranging processes in Melanesia that are profoundly reshaping what it means to be a person.

For many persons and communities in PNG, the idea and ideal of the nation-state remains tenuous and inchoate (Gewertz and Errington 1991; Foster 2002). The concept of anonymous citizenship, too, as a foundational legal principle that must replace kinship in order for the state to endure, is no less challenging. Eastern Iatmul carve myriad variations of PNG's national emblem, often accompanied by Christian phrases such as 'God Bless This House' or 'Mama Mary'. These objects represent efforts by individual local people to 'think through' the elusive notions of nationhood, citizenship and Christianity. The latter slogans also communicate the message that success in capitalism and modernity is inextricably linked to Christian morality (Smith 1994).

Woodcarving and artistry more generally is a traditional Sepik practice. For the tourist trade, these skills are frequently applied to modern materials such as shoe-polish and writing. Similar cross-cultural heterogeneity is in evidence throughout the village. Every now and then, a battery-operated clock ticks away the modern hours next to the wooden figure of Tuatmeli, the originary ancestor of the cosmos, inside the men's house. A garish print of the Holy Family was tacked atop, but unable to conceal, the painting of a spirit on a house-post. These visual cues point to the inter-cultural hybridity of contemporary personhood and culture in the Sepik.

Tourist art in Tambunum often exhibits a proliferation of multiple, sometimes hidden, faces unknown in premodern art. Several Sepik societies traditionally emphasised the self as a multiple construction. In some contexts, the self was masked by a spirit or magical preparation to avoid direct responsibility for certain kinds of social action, especially now-extinct homicide vendettas (Harrison 1993). Even today, Iatmul ritual partners (*tshambela*) may act on a man's behalf in situations likely to result in a quarrel – as when acquiring a second wife – or when someone demonstrates certain forms of clumsiness (Silverman 2001a). From one angle, the multiplicity of faces on tourist art expresses the traditional 'partibility' of the self. From another angle, this recent style portrays a dialogue between traditional and modern identity that is unlikely to achieve resolution. Indeed, we can identify a type of debate over personhood within the genre of tourist art itself. Whereas some works, as suggested above, represent the modern individual, works exhibiting multiple faces cast this contemporary ideal into doubt.

Anxiety and cognition

The 'visual redundancy of tourist artworks', suggests Steiner insightfully for Africa, communicates an intent to rise above the 'noise' of cross-cultural exchange and interaction (Steiner 1999: 101). From this angle, when a man carves and displays ten copies of the same object in Tambunum, he seeks to create a sense of aesthetic equilibrium amid the usual cacophony of cultural clash. Artistic reduplication thus offers visual stability and security to Westerners, who are more likely than local people to experience some unease in the unstructured, sometimes chaotic and noisy touristic encounter. Stylistic redundancy also allows carvers to create an illusion of permanence within, and control over, an era of extraordinary historical change and cultural dissonance. From this angle, tourist art soothes anxiety.

From another angle, tourist art induces anxiety. Often, contemporary artworks in Tambunum evidence a type of *horror vacui*, the avoidance of empty spaces. Most touristic works are filled with ornate patterns and motifs; there is little in the way of what might be called touristic minimalism. The lack of unadorned spaces on tourist art is often noted (for example, Abramson 1976). In Tambunum, though, this ornamental exuberance tends to remain ordered and restrained rather than chaotic and hectic. Several scholars have attempted to identify an unconscious relationship between the organisation of artistic designs, patterns of cognition and the underlying structures of social life (for example, Abramson 1990). Fischer (1961) saw isolated motifs as representing individual persons, and thus artistic style correlated with political organisation. Adams (1973) tied the growing intricacy of Attic vase painting – specifically the complexity of styles,

the reduction in empty spaces and the use of enclosed figures – to the evolution of the Athenian city-state. From this angle, tourist art in the Sepik would seem to reflect the increasing complexity of social life and the basic features of the local worldview. It might also represent an effort by local people to challenge the Western assumption that Sepik societies are simple rather than complex. Tourist art in Tambunum conveys a sense of dynamism rather than sociocultural stasis. In other words, some genres of tourist art in the village refuse to accede to the touristic expectation of a simple primitivism.

From another angle, however, one that builds on Bateson's (1973) brilliant analysis of a Balinese painting, some touristic styles in the Sepik cognitively 'correct' the chaotic pattern of contemporary PNG culture. Male discourses about crime, politics, youth, the male cult, women, the state and post-contact history tend to emphasise cultural disorder and the erosion of authority. Events no longer abide solely by a localised, admittedly masculine, logic. Consequently, the restrained quality of the touristic *horror vacui* can be seen as an aesthetic effort to impose or re-impose local, male control over the upheavals and conflicts of everyday life. Stylistic complexity induces, but then contains, social anxiety.

Touristic art objects tend, much more than traditional works, to display prominent symmetries. This style may correlate with traditional cognitive patterns: the binary organisation of social structure, a layered view of reality and knowledge, and the use of pairings to organise phenomena (Silverman 1999, 2001b). Alternatively, and in line with prior interpretation of *horror vacui*, the proliferation of symmetries in tourist art may express the duality of contemporary life in the Sepik as a clash, synthesis and disjunction between the traditional and the modern.

A traditional hybridity

It would be mistaken to ascribe cultural hybridity or conflation in the Sepik, whether in art or any other cultural realm, exclusively to recent decades. Long ago, Margaret Mead (1938) flagged the tendency of Sepik societies to continuously traffic in objects, magic, ritual and other forms of culture. Iatmul villages in particular, she continued, were so saturated with external ideas and objects that many alien cultural forms never achieved full integration into the local system. Tourism builds on the scope and scale of these premodern processes. Indeed, the cultural fluidity noticed by Mead probably predisposed Iatmul to their innovative success with touristic art.

Today, Tambunum villagers procure various items such as shell necklaces and masks from nearby villages and town markets. After slight modification, they peddle these wares to tourists for a slight profit (Silverman 1999). Tambunum therefore sometimes serves as a small-scale, spontaneous entrepôt for villagers from remote communities in the area who wish to ply the tourist trade, but are too far away, despite their yearnings to attract tourists (Smith 2002). The touristic marketplace is not limited, as in more traditional commerce, just to men. Women offer their own touristic items, namely, baskets, netbags and rattan animals.

Often, as Mead might have predicted, Eastern Iatmul model their tourist objects

after artwork associated with other regions of the country. Yet Tambunum villagers always seem to vary slightly these exogenous forms, styles and patterns, thus effectively making them their own. Many dealers and some tourists view these objects scornfully as forgeries, and in some sense they are correct. But, as Mead observed, the authenticity of Sepik art and objects often arises from precisely this process of importation. It thus seems far more accurate to view tourism as reproducing rather than destroying the process of traditional artistic creation.

Rediscovering and reinventing culture

The tourism trade in Tambunum, especially the drive to create distinctive objects, encouraged one local man to draw on marriage ties with a non-Iatmul group to obtain 'copyright' permission to reproduce their art for sale to tourists. In this instance, traditional morality joined rather than clashed with tourism. Other men reproduce objects they view in art catalogues, buying guides and books that circulate in the village. That is, they rely on Western institutions such as museums to provide examples of what tourists expect from traditional Iatmul art (see also Causey 2000; Chibnik 2003).

In the 1970s, the village of Kambot, located on the Keram River, a tributary of the Sepik, devised one of the most distinctive styles of Sepik tourist art, the storyboard, and this style is now said to be traditional (Dougood 2005: 260). Storyboards are even used to teach myth to youth. In Kambot, the boundary between the touristic and the indigenous, between the authentic and the fake, blurs. A similar process occurs in Tambunum.

In the late 1980s, a middle-aged man named Gamboromiawan was viewing photographs in Tambunum of Sepik art collected long ago during the era of German colonisation. These objects are now stored and displayed at the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel. So captivated was Gamboromiawan by one forgotten mask from the village that he personally set about reintroducing the style into the repertoire of village art, only now for sale to tourists rather than ritual display. Nevertheless, the discovery of this object filled Gamboromiawan with no uncertain pride in the artistic achievements of his ancestors and allowed him to enact a small instance of cultural revival. In the absence of tourism, the photo of the mask would have passed with little notice or relevance.

Local resistance

Sepik men concoct imaginative tales about the antiquity and ritual significance of objects hewn recently and expressly for external sale. On the surface, these men are simply telling lies to earn the equivalent of a few dollars, thus illustrating the immorality of capitalism and tourism. But anthropologists have argued for years that Melanesian epistemologies differ significantly from Western ideas about truth, falsehood and the fabrication of knowledge. The veracity of an assertion in Melanesia often pertains more to the social implications of the claim than to some abstract notion of ultimate right and wrong (Weiner 1995). Consequently,

a false belief may be true when it serves, at least for some people, a positive and often practical social function. Inventive creativity is often valued over convention. Fictions of touristic authenticity are thus culturally truthful.

Touristic performances in the Trobriand Islands often mock tourists through verbal barbs and threats, but these challenges are veiled since tourists obviously lack competence in the vernacular (Senft 1999). Tambunum villagers too mock tourists, while also joking with them in the vernacular as well as in a fast-paced rendition of pidgin (*tokpisin*). The joking seeks both to challenge asymmetries of power manifest in tourism and to create a sense of shared understanding and experience.

In Tambunum, too, men refer to their touristic carvings as *tumbuna*, the *tokpisin* word for ancestor. This linguistic convention accedes to Western expectations since tourists and art dealers usually look to purchase objects that adhere to stereotypically generic notions of primitive religion. But if tourist art is contextualised in the pervasiveness of the totemic system, wherein the sensible world is the materialisation of an invisible reality constituted by ancestral spirits, then the classification of tourist art as *tumbuna* rings true. This assertion, too, like the joking, can be seen subtly to challenge Western hegemony by endorsing a local reality even as it seems to adhere to touristic expectations.

During one touristic encounter in Tambunum, a young man, perhaps in his twenties, displayed to female tourists a small wooden replica of a vulva (Silverman 2000). With unabashed cheekiness, he called the object a '*tumbuna* cunt'. Later, several women from the group of tourists were visibly unnerved by the young man's brashness and aggressively sexual gesture. The decorative carvings on the tourist guesthouse that sits on a spit of land across the river from the main village similarly display exaggerated genitals and a serpentine act of intercourse (ibid.). Many touristic figures likewise display large, erect penises, images that refer to moments of mythic sexuality, although these referents are unknown by nearly all Westerners. Additionally, artistic sexuality represents how local men understand one side of modernity – namely, the overt eroticism of Western advertisements. (The other side, of course, consists of Christian notions of renunciation.) More importantly, though, these sexual images offer muted challenges to Western economic and cultural dominance through a traditional framework that might be called the erotics of rivalry (ibid.). Touristic renditions of sexuality might also exemplify the internalisation of Western fantasies about savage eroticism. Local people, in this view, adhere to a Western script about what 'natives' are supposed to do. But it is far more likely, at least in the Sepik, that these images intentionally seek to unnerve tourists and thus to subvert an encounter that, in many respects, favours and sustains Western power.

Conclusion

At DePauw University in the United States, it is common to show the film *The Mission*, starring Robert De Niro and Jeremy Irons, to students who elect to participate in three-week-long 'service' trips to the developing world. The main historical narrative of the film focuses on a tragic clash in South America after the

Treaty of Madrid in 1750, when Spain agreed to cede part of its Latin American claims to Portugal. In the film, Spanish Jesuits endeavour to protect innocent Christianised Indians against a brutal alliance between the Catholic Church and Portuguese slave traders after the papacy orders the closure of the Jesuit missions. But the Jesuits are no match for the Portuguese military, and the missionaries and Indians are slaughtered. Ultimately, the film is a tale about the wanton destruction of indigenous peoples as a result of Europeans' pursuit of god, gold and glory. 'Though I knew that everywhere in Europe the States were tearing at the authority of the Church', writes the Cardinal in the film to the Pope, 'and though I knew well that to preserve itself there, the Church must show its authority over the Jesuits here, yet I still couldn't help wondering whether these Indians would not have preferred that the sea and wind had not brought any of us to them.' Most viewers agree.

Likewise, most anthropologists and scholars tacitly endorse the same view of tourism. It would be better if the natives were simply left alone. There is much truth in this view. But moral condemnation, however vital and ethical, does not enable a full understanding of the local experience of tourism in the Sepik or beyond, because moral disgust often and ironically denies the very type of 'voice' to local people that critics so often attribute to tourists. This is not to justify or defend tourism. But simplistic claims about economic benefits and moral apprehension are often naïve and, precisely because they are simple, devoid of nuance and sensitivity. As this chapter showed, there are numerous moments of genuine creativity, aesthetic expression and meaning in the touristic encounter. Moreover, as Adams (1998) argues for tourism among the Toraja of Indonesia, several aspects of tourist art in the Sepik serve as a mild form of resistance to Western hegemony. Tourist art does, to say the obvious, cater to tourists and represent the gross inequalities of the modern world system. But tourist art also evidences the vitality and validity of local cultures and the strivings of Sepik people to make sense of their lives by transforming global processes into local experiences. Through tourist art, Eastern Iatmul villagers literally carve meaning out of plight imposed from afar. Tourism may be unjust. But it is no less meaningful.

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Notes

1 See www.discoverytours.org/tours/search.php?sear=103 and www.discoverytours.org/tours/uploads/103custom4melanesiafinal.pdf.

2 Tourism receipts in Papua New Guinea hover at around 2 per cent of GNP or 6 per cent of GDP, although the World Travel and Tourism Council forecasts that tourism in 2006 will account for 9 per cent of GDP (www.wttc.org/2006TSA/2006individual%20pages/papuanewguinea.htm).

3 For a criticism of the common metaphor of cannibalism in cultural critique see King (2000).
4 In late 2006, Melanesian Tourist Services announce the sale of the *Melanesian Discoverer*, partly because, according to the company website, of 'increases in the cost of fuel, the reduction of tourist arrivals to PNG due to lack of competitive airfares', and competition from foreign-owned vessels that occasionally visit Papua New Guinea.
5 For further elaboration of the problematic High Art/Tourist Art dichotomy, focusing on the New Guinea Sculpture Garden at Stanford University, see Silverman (2003).
6 This is not to deny the presence of individualism in traditional personhood (see Silverman 2001b).

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4 'Everything is truthful here'

Custom village tourism in Tanna, Vanuatu

Prue Robinson and John Connell

Tourism is of enormous importance in the Pacific island state of Vanuatu, as the most important sector of the economy. Much of it based on small-scale resort tourism centred on the capital, Port Vila, on the main island of Efate, but promotional literature, guidebooks and the in-flight video on all incoming Air Vanuatu flights emphasise the presence of more traditional cultures in other islands and especially those in 'custom villages' on the island of Tanna. Almost all tourists who visit Tanna intend to see Yasur volcano and most also visit a 'custom village'. Although expectations vary, they usually expect to witness a distinctive cultural way of life, which has been portrayed as unique and authentic. This chapter examines how tourist needs and expectations are mediated by tourism operators, how villagers portray different versions of 'tradition' and 'authenticity' and how attitudes of tourists to the performance of visual culture in the villages vary. It traces the constant fluctuation between tourists', entrepreneurs' and villagers' objectives and expectations as each group seeks interrelated objectives.

Custom villages in Tanna perform 'traditional' dances, and demonstrate other facets of 'traditional' knowledge, based upon *kastom.* The Bislama (Vanuatu pidgin English) word *kastom* is widely used to refer to a larger meaning in the Vanuatu context as 'not merely an odd collection of dances and rituals but a whole way of life which dictates almost all of one's actions' (MacClancy 1981: 20). In a contemporary sense, it tends to be used by the people of Vanuatu (ni-Vanuatu) to 'characterise their own knowledge and practice in distinction to everything they identify as having come from another place' (Bolton 2003: xiii). Custom villages are widely advertised as having these distinctive *kastom* attributes, and so provide authentic representations of ni-Vanuatu culture; hence tourists visit them to have an authentic experience of that culture. However throughout Vanuatu, including Tanna, what is claimed as *kastom* embodies epistemological and practical changes that have occurred since contact.

The problematic concept of 'authenticity' has been addressed from a diversity of perspectives. Even at its simplest, the tourist quest for authenticity is the search for difference, exoticism, the 'other' and 'real' cultures and context. This involves both a search 'grounded in the belief that what we have lost can be found in Others more "primitive" and therefore more natural than ourselves' (Shepherd

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