Introduction

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Anthropological Strategies

It might sound absurd for a social anthropologist to suggest he or she could imagine people having no society. Yet the argument of this book is that however useful the concept of society may be to analysis, we are not going to justify its use by appealing to indigenous counterparts. Indeed, anthropologists should be the last to contemplate such a justification. Scholars trained in the Western tradition cannot really expect to find others solving the metaphysical problems of Western thought. Equally absurd, if one thinks about it, to imagine that those not of this tradition will somehow focus their philosophical energies onto issues such as 'the relationship' between it and the individual.

This has, nonetheless, been among the assumptions to have dogged anthropological approaches to the peoples and cultures of Melanesia. One may think of the kind of attention that has been paid to their rich ceremonial and ritual life, and in some areas as rich a political life. Observers have taken initiation rites, for example, as essentially a 'socialization' process that transforms the products of nature into culturally molded creations. And this process is understood from the actor's point of view: in the case of male initiation, it has been argued that men complete culturally (the growth of boys and their acquisition of adult roles) what women begin, and may even accomplish for themselves, naturally. Equally, it has been argued that political activity is prompted by a need for cohesion, resulting in social structures of areal integration that overcome the refractory centrifugal inclinations of indi-

viduals. Thus social control, the integration of groups, and the promotion of sociability itself have all been read into people's engagement in ceremonial exchange. Far from throwing out such frameworks for understanding, however, I argue instead that we should acknowledge the interests from which they come. They endorse a view of society that is bound up with the very impetus of anthropological study. But the impetus itself derives from Western ways of creating the world. We cannot expect to find justification for *that* in the worlds that everyone creates.

For many purposes of study, this reflection may not be significant. But it must be highly significant for the way we approach people's creations. One of the ethnographic interests of this book will be ritual of a kind often regarded as quintessentially constituted through 'symbolic' behavior. In the process, I propose that political activity be apprehended in similar terms. It becomes important that we approach all such action through an appreciation of the culture of Western social science and its endorsement of certain interests in the description of social life. That affords a vantage from which it will be possible to imagine the kinds of interests that may be at stake as far as Melanesians are concerned. There is, moreover, a particular significance in keeping these interests separate. For much symbolic activity in this region deploys gender imagery. Since the same is true of Western metaphysics, there is a double danger of making cultural blunders in the interpretation of male-female relations.

The danger stems not just from the particular values that Western gender imagery puts upon this or that activity but from underlying assumptions about the nature of society, and how that nature is made an object of knowledge. Only by upturning those assumptions, through deliberate choice, can 'we' glimpse what 'other' assumptions might look like. The consequent we/they axis along which this book is written is a deliberate attempt to achieve such a glimpse through an internal dialogue within the confines of its own language. There is nothing condescending in my intentions.

THE COMPARATIVE METHOD

No doubt it is an exaggeration to say that the comparative method has failed in Melanesia, though there is a special poignancy about the suggestion, for the region as a whole, and especially the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, has long been regarded as an experimental par-

adise. The close juxtaposition of numerous diverse societies, it was thought, could register the changing effect of variables as a gradation of adaptations. Yet few writers have individually attempted systematic comparison beyond the scope of a handful of cases.

Notable exceptions include Brown (1978), who addresses the interconnections between social, cultural, and ecological systems in the Highlands, and Rubel and Rosman's study (1978) of structural models of exchange relations as systemic transformations of one another. Gregory (1982) subsumes the comparison of economic and kinship systems under a general specification of a political economy type: each variant established as a member of a general class or type also validates the utility of the classification. All three works deal with Papua New Guinea. The only general attempt to cover Melanesia remains Chowning's (1977) ethnographic overview. Island Melanesia, beyond Papua New Guinea, has been treated comparatively by Allen (1981; 1984) through a focus on political associations and leadership. His procedure overlaps with the more usual strategy of taking up individual themes for investigation, such as kinship terminologies, male initiation, ritualized homosexuality, trade and exchange, and the institution of *kula* exchange.[1] Collected essays have appeared on all these topics (Cook and O'Brien, eds. 1980; Herdt, ed. 1982c; 1984a; Specht and White, eds. 1978; Leach and Leach, eds. 1983).[2] Here, stretches of ethnography are laid side by side, analytical categories being in part derived from and modified by the examination of each case. This now frequent practice invites contributions from separate authors: the collected-essay format allows each unique case to be presented through the vision of a unique ethnographer.

If there is a failure in all this, it lies in the holism of the original ethnographies. These comparative exercises necessarily draw upon particular ethnographic monographs, and one reason, I think, for their paucity is faintheartedness at both the richness and the totality of these primary sources.

Melanesia is blessed with much good work, not a lack of it. The situation is almost like the one that faced Lessing's perpetrators of *The Sirian Experiments*: the ends of inquiry are already known and what must be found are the reasons for pursuing it.[3] We have considerable information about the distinctiveness of these particular cultures and societies but much less idea why we acquired it. For the holism of the monograph rests on its internal coherence, which creates a sense of autonomous knowledge and of its own justification. Consequently, the

terms within which individual monographs are written will not necessarily provide the terms for a comparative exercise. It is of interest, in fact, that Melanesianists are currently turning to the possibilities of historical accounts, for history connects events and social forms while simultaneously preserving their individuality. Perhaps historical understanding will yield a plot to fix the relations between phenomena.

This last phrase comes from Beer's (1983) dual investigation of, on the one hand, Darwin's narration of the connections he perceived among life forms and, on the other, the contrivance of nineteenth-century novelists to make fiction, as deliberately conceived narrative, a commentary on life and growth. She writes of Darwin's desire to specify complexity without attempting to simplify it. He conserved, in the profusion and multivocality of his language, the diversity and multiple character of phenomena. For, as she puts it, his theory "deconstructs any formulation which interprets the natural world as commensurate with man's understanding of it" (1983:107).

> The complexity of interrelation is another reason why he [Darwin] needs the metaphoric and needs also at times to emphasise its transposed, metaphorical status—its imprecise innumerate relation and application to the phenomenological order it represents. The representation is deliberately limited to that of 'convenience' and does not attempt to present itself as a just, or full, equivalent. (1983:101)

It is not to history that I myself look, then, but to the way that one might hold analysis as a kind of convenient or controlled fiction.

However provisional and tentative anthropologists are about their findings, the systematic form that analysis otherwise takes is its own enemy:

> We apply the conventional orders and regularities of our science to the phenomenal world ('nature') in order to rationalize and understand it, and in the process our science becomes more specialized and irrational. Simplifying nature, *we* take on its complexity, and this complexity, appears as an *internal* resistance to our intention. (Wagner 1975:54, original emphasis)

This is especially true when the phenomena are human subjects. Analytical language appears to create *itself* as increasingly more complex and increasingly removed from the 'realities' of the worlds it attempts to delineate, and not least from the languages in which people themselves describe them. Making out how diverse and complex those worlds are then seems to be an invention of the analysis, the creation of more data to give it more work. There is thus an inbuilt sense of artificiality to

the whole anthropological exercise—which prompts the apparent solution that what one should be doing is aiming to simplify, to restore the clarity of direct comprehension. But this returns us to the very issue that in his narration of the development of life forms Beer suggests Darwin was trying to avoid.

The organicist fiction in its nineteenth-century mode was strong because it operated as "both a holistic and an analytical metaphor. It permitted exploration of totalities, and of their elements, without denying either, or giving primacy to either" (Beer 1983:108). There are other metaphors today on which the anthropologist draws: communicational field, ecosystem, social formation, even structure, all of which construct global contexts for the interconnection of events and relations. Their danger lies in making the system appear to be the subject under scrutiny rather than the method of scrutiny. The phenomena come to appear contained or encompassed by the systemics, and thus themselves systemic. So we get entangled in world systems and deep structures and worry about the 'level' at which they exist in the phenomena themselves.

Here I resort to another mode by which to reveal the complexities of social life. One could show how they provoke or elicit an analytical form that would not pretend to be commensurate to them but that would, nonetheless, indicate an analogous degree of complexity. It is to this fictional end that I contrive to give the language of analysis an internal dialogue.

This is attempted in two ways. First, I sustain a running argument with what I identify as the premises on which much writing on Melanesia (though not of course restricted to it) has been based. These premises belong to a particular cultural mode of knowledge and explanation. Second, I do not imagine, however, I can extract myself from this mode: I can only make its workings visible. To this end, I exploit its own reflexive potential. Thus my narrative works through various relations or oppositions; to the we/they axis I add gift/commodity and anthropological/feminist viewpoints. Let me spell this out. The difference between Western and Melanesian (we/they) sociality means that one cannot simply extend Western feminist insights to the Melanesian case; the difference between anthropological/feminist viewpoints means that the knowledge anthropologists construct of Melanesia is not to be taken for granted; the difference between gift/commodity is expanded as a metaphorical base on which difference itself may be apprehended and put to use for both anthropological and feminist purposes, yet remains rooted in Western metaphysics. While all three are fictions, that

is, the oppositions work strictly within the confines of the plot, the cultural reasons for choosing them lie beyond the exercise, since the exercise itself is no more context-free than its subject matter.

Comparative procedure, investigating variables across societies, normally de-contextualizes local constructs in order to work with context-bound analytic ones. The study of symbolic systems presents a different problematic. If theoretical interest becomes directed to the manner in which ideas, images, and values are locally contextualized, de-contextualization will not work. Analytic generalities must be acquired by other means. The task is not to imagine one can replace exogenous concepts by indigenous counterparts; rather the task is to convey the complexity of the indigenous concepts in reference to the particular context in which they are produced. Hence, I choose to show the contextualized nature of indigenous constructs by exposing the contextualized nature of analytical ones. This requires that the. analytical constructs themselves be located in the society that produced them. For members of that society, of course, such a laying bare of assumptions will entail a laying bare of purpose or interest.

To take the third of the fictions: one possibility of acquiring distance on anthropological constructs lies in critiques of the kind afforded by feminist scholarship. Such critiques incorporate clearly defined social interests, and thereby provide an indirect commentary on the contexts of anthropologists' ideas and on their interests. These comprise both the accepted premises of social science inquiry and the peculiar constraints of scholarly practice itself, including its literary form. It is as a constant reminder of such Western academic interests that I juxtapose anthropological concepts with ideas and constructs drawn from a domain of a scholarly discourse with which it both overlaps and is at odds. The difference between them is sustained as a fiction if only because I separate and objectify distinctively 'feminist' and distinctively 'anthropological' voices. A rather limited range of material is presented on both sides. But that limitation is partly determined by the attempt to provide some kind of history of the way anthropological and feminist ideas are intertwined, although there is nothing linear here. In the crossings-over and blockages between ideas, we shall encounter repetitions and contradictions of all sorts that emulate not only social life but also our haphazard methods for describing it. In addition, their proximity is also sustained as a fiction within the narrative form ('analysis') of this account. A strong feminist tradition, especially on the

Continent (e.g., Marks and de Courtrivon 1985), would see this as subverting feminist writing's distinctive aims (see also Elshtain 1982). Indeed, although many axioms of feminist scholarship appear to have continuities with anthropological ones, its different aims indicate the different purposes that motivate inquiry in the first place. Its debates are not grounded in anthropological terms—making them at once awkward and interesting. Thus the significance of feminism is the relative autonomy of its premises as far as anthropology is concerned: each provides a critical distance on the other. Ideally, one would exploit the extent to which each talks past the other.

Ideally one would do the same for the cross-cultural exercise, for it cannot be assumed that 'their' contexts and 'ours' will be recognizably equivalent. What has to be analyzed are precisely 'their' contexts for social action. This is the subject matter of those holistic monographs which present such self-contained, self-referential worlds. To go beyond them is to proceed in the only way possible, to open up 'our' own self-referencing strategies.

For much anthropology, including that of a Radcliffe-Brownian kind, symbolic systems are intelligible within contexts apprehended as a social order or society. Radcliffe-Brown himself separated '(social) structure'—the roles and positions that make up a society—from 'culture', the tokens and signals by which its members know about themselves. Gellner suggests that Radcliffe-Brown's particular formulation allows one "to ask what kind of structure it is which does, and does not, lead to a self-conscious worship of culture" (1982:187). One may ask the same question of 'society' as a conceptualized whole. In what kinds of cultural contexts do people's self-descriptions include a representation of themselves as a society? Yet the question is absurd if one assumes that the object of study is "all that is inscribed in the relationship of familiarity with the familiar environment, the unquestioning apprehension of the social world which, by definition, does not reflect on itself" (Bourdieu 1977:3, emphasis removed). It would be like requiring characters linked by an author's plot to entertain the idea of that plot. What becomes remarkable, then, is its taken-for-granted status in much anthropological inquiry into symbolic forms, the ease with which it is argued that people represent 'society' to themselves. This assumption on behalf of others is, of course, an assumption on behalf of the observers who 'know' they belong to a society.

Runciman underlines the paradox. After all, it is the characteristic

of sociological explanation (he argues) that "it requires the invocation of theoretical terms unavailable to those to whose behaviour they are to be applied" (1983:53). For instance,

> [t]o understand in the tertiary sense the social theory of the writers of ancient Rome, it is necessary to be aware that they themselves were *not* aware of the need to describe the society in which they lived from any other than what we would now regard as a limited and unrepresentative point of view. (1983:53, original emphasis)

Runciman inverts the accepted priorities by which social scientists often imply that the end of their endeavors is explanation. After reportage and explanation comes description. This is what he means by understanding in the tertiary sense: conveying as much as can be conveyed about an event to give a sense of what it was like for those involved in it. Indeed, in his view, the distinctive problems of social science are precisely those of description, not explanation. Good descriptions in turn have to be grounded in theory, "that is, some underlying body of ideas which furnishes a reason for both readers of them and rival observers of what they describe to accept them" (1983:228). This is the reason why "the concepts in which descriptions are grounded are unlikely to be those used by the agents whose behaviour is being described" (1983:228). Yet that knowledge of unlikeliness has itself to be contrived in order to be conveyed. Tertiary understanding includes its own sense of difference from its objects. If my aims are the synthetic aims of an adequate description, my analysis must deploy deliberate fictions to that end.

   I am concerned, then, not to elucidate specific local contexts for events and behavior, but to elucidate a general context for those contexts themselves: the distinctive nature of Melanesian sociality. Taken for granted by Melanesians, this general context can only be of interest to 'ourselves'. Evidence must rest with the specificities, but the use of them is synthetic. This being the case, the comparative procedure of laying out the relations between different social systems cannot be an end in itself. At the same time, it would be obviously self-defeating to turn aside from greater systematisation into greater ethnographic detail. Rather, I hope that the exogenous intervention of feminist-inspired scholarship will contribute towards an understanding of general Melanesian ideas about interaction and relationships which will be evidently not reducible to those of Western social science. These contexts are to be contrasted, not conflated. At the least, confronting the premises of

feminist scholarship should prevent us from apprehending those in any axiomatic way.

All that can be offered initially is a prescription: one cure to the present impasse in the comparative anthropology of Melanesia might be to indulge less in our own representational strategies—to stop ourselves thinking about the world in certain ways. Which ways will prove profitable will depend on our purpose. Simply because it itself, as a metaphor for organization, organizes so much of the way anthropologists think, the idea of 'society' seems a good starting point.

NEGATIVITIES: REDESCRIBING MELANESIAN SOCIETY

This is no new strategy. In recent years, I have made an easy living through setting up negativities, showing that this or that set of concepts does not apply to the ethnographic material I know best, from Hagen in the Western Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea.

One set centers on the unusual status Hagen enjoys vis-à-vis other Highlands societies. It is among the few that do not define the sexes through general initiation into cults or through puberty rituals.[4] In reflecting on this absence, I was led into other absences: for instance, that Hageners do not imagine anything comparable to what we would call the relation between nature and culture. This is a negativity of a different order. The former case draws on a comparison with other Melanesian societies where initiation ritual exists; the latter on a comparison with constructs of Western society,[5] for the circumstances where the categories seem applicable have to be defined by exogenous criteria. Now when Leach (1957:134) remarked of Malinowski that he would "need to maintain that, for the Trobrianders themselves, 'Trobriand culture as a whole' does not exist. It is not something that can be reported on by Trobrianders, it is something that has to be discovered and constructed by the ethnographer," his sarcasm was directed at the extent to which Malinowski underplayed the ideological significance of what the Trobrianders did say and report upon. "He appears to have regarded the ideal construct of the native informant as simply an amusing fiction, which could at best serve to provide a few clues about the significance of observed behaviour" (1957:135). But my intentions were the opposite—not to fill in the terms that indigenous conceptualizations lacked but to create spaces that the exogenous analysis lacked. It is not that Melanesians have no images of unities or whole entities but that

we obscure them in our analyses. The hope here, then, is for something more comprehensive than simply demonstrating the inapplieability of this or that particular Western concept.[6] It is important to show that inapplicability is not just a result of poor translation. Our own metaphors reflect a deeply rooted metaphysics with manifestations that surface in all kinds of analyses. The question is how to displace them most effectively.

I approach the artifacts and images—the cultures—of Melanesian societies through a particular displacement. We must stop thinking that at the heart of these cultures is an antinomy between 'society' and 'the individual'.

There is nothing new about this admonition. The history of anthropology is littered with cautions to the effect that we should not reify the concept of society, that the individual is a cultural construct and an embodiment of social relations, and so on. They derive, by and large, from reflexive scrutiny of Western categories of knowledge and from radical positions on their ideological character. Indeed, one of my intentions in introducing feminist debate is to point to a contemporary critique autochthonous to Western culture. However, of all the various cultural propositions that one could upturn, I choose this displacement for three reasons. First is the tenacity of its persistent appearance as a set of assumptions underlying a whole range of approaches in anthropological thinking about Melanesia. Second is its usefulness as a focus for organizing how one might think about Melanesian ideas of sociality. I wish to draw out a certain set of ideas about the nature of social life in Melanesia by pitting them against ideas presented as Western orthodoxy. My account does not require that the latter are orthodox among all Western thinkers; the place they hold is as a strategic position internal to the structure of the present account. Finally, it is germane that the proposition is framed as a relationship between terms.

Society and individual are an intriguing pair of terms because they invite us to imagine that sociality is a question of collectivity, that it is generalizing because collective life is intrinsically plural in character. 'Society' is seen to be what connects individuals to one another, the relationships between them. We thus conceive of society as an ordering and classifying, and in this sense a unifying force that gathers persons who present themselves as otherwise irreducibly unique. Persons receive the imprint of society or, in turn, may be regarded as changing and altering the character of those connections and relations. But as indi-

viduals, they are imagined as conceptually distinct from the relations that bring them together.

While it will be useful to retain the concept of sociality to refer to the creating and maintaining of relationships, for contextualizing Melanesians' views we shall require a vocabulary that will allow us to talk about sociality in the singular as well as the plural. Far from being regarded as unique entities, Melanesian persons are as dividually[7] as they are individually conceived. They contain a generalized sociality within. Indeed, persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them. The singular person can be imagined as a social microcosm. This premise is particularly significant for the attention given to images of relations contained within the maternal body. By contrast, the kinds of collective action that might be identified by an outside observer in a male cult performance or group organization, involving numbers of persons, often presents an image of unity. This image is created out of internal homogeneity, a process of de-pluralization, manifested less as the realization of generalized and integrative principles of organization itself and more as the realization of particular identities called into play through unique events and individual accomplishments.

It is not enough, however, to substitute one antinomy for another, to conclude that Melanesians symbolize collective life as a unity, while singular persons are composite. Such a distinction implies that the relation between them might remain comparable to that between society and individual. And the problem with *that* as a relationship is the Western corollary: despite the difference between society and individual, indeed because of it, the one is regarded as modifying or somehow controlling the other. At the heart of the antinomy is a supposed relation of domination (as in our contrasting ideas about society working upon individuals and individuals shaping society). Whatever they are concerned with, key transformations of Melanesian cultures are not concerned with this relation. While collective events do, indeed, bring together disparate persons, it is not to 'make' them into social beings. On the contrary, it may even be argued that such de-pluralized, collective events have as much an amoral, antisocial character to them as do autonomous persons who go their own way.[8] The relations at issue involve homologies and analogies rather than hierarchy.

In one sense, the plural and the singular are 'the same'. They are homologues of one another. That is, the bringing together of many

persons is just like the bringing together of one. The unity of a number of persons conceptualized as a group or set is achieved through eliminating what differentiates them, and this is exactly what happens when a person is also individualized. The causes of internal differentiation are suppressed or discarded. Indeed, the one holistic condition may elicit the other. Thus a group of men or a group of women will conceive of their individual members as replicating in singular form ('one man', 'one woman') what they have created in collective form ('one men's house', 'one matrilineage'). In other words, a plurality of individuals as individuals ('many') is equal to their unity ('one').[9]

The suppression of internal differentiation occurs, however, in a pluralized context of sorts. This is the plurality that takes the specific form of a differentiated pair or duo. 'Many' and 'one' may be homologous, but neither is to be equated with a pair. When either a singular person or a collective group comes into relation with another, that relation is sustained to the extent that each party is irreducibly differentiated from the other. Each is a unity with respect to or by analogy with the other. The tie or alliance between them cannot be subsumed under a further collectivity, for the dyad is a unity only by virtue of its internal division. Consequently, paired entities cannot be brought together, as we might be tempted to suggest, under the integrating rubric of 'a wider society'.

Single, composite persons do not reproduce. Although it is only in a unitary state that one can, in fact, join with another to form a pair, it is dyadically conceived relationships that are the source and outcome of action. The products of relations—including the persons they create—inevitably have dual origins and are thus internally differentiated. This internal, dualistic differentiation must in turn be eliminated to produce the unitary individual.

Social life consists in a constant movement from one state to another, from one type of sociality to another, from a unity (manifested collectively or singly) to that unity split or paired with respect to another. This alternation is replicated throughout numerous cultural forms, from the manner in which crops are regarded as growing in the soil to a dichotomy between political and domestic domains. Gender is a principal form through which the alternation is conceptualized. Being 'male' or being 'female' emerges as a holistic unitary state under particular circumstances. In the one-is-many mode, each male or female form may be regarded as containing within it a suppressed composite identity; it is activated as androgyny transformed. In the dual mode, a male or

female can only encounter its opposite if it has already discarded the reasons for its own internal differentiation: thus a dividual androgyne is rendered an individual in relation to a counterpart individual. An internal duality is externalized or elicited in the presence of a partner: what was 'half' a person becomes 'one' of a pair.

As there are two forms of plurality (the composite and the dual), so there are two forms of the androgyne or, we might say, two forms of the singular. To say that the singular person is imagined as a microcosm is not simply to draw attention, as observers repeatedly do, to the extensive physical imagery in Melanesian thought that gives so much significance to the body. It is to perceive that the body is a social microcosm *to the extent* that it takes a singular form. This form presents an image of an entity both as a whole and as holistic, for it contains within it diverse and plural relations. The holistic body is composed in reference to these relationships, which are in turn dependent for their visibility on it. The two modes to which I have referred may thus also be described as stages in body process. To be individuated, plural relations are first reconceptualized as dual and then the dually conceived entity, able to detach a part of itself, is divided. The eliciting cause is the presence of a different other.

The singular person, then, regarded as a derivative of multiple identities, may be transformed into the dividual composed of distinct male and female elements. But there is a difference between the two constructions or modes. In the first, plurality can be eliminated through difference being encompassed or eclipsed, while in the second case, elimination is achieved through detachment. These operations are basic to the way in which relationships and the productivity of social life are visualized. Because gender provides a form through which these visions are realized, it is also formed by them. If we must stop thinking that at the heart of Melanesian culture is a hierarchical relation between society and the individual, we must also stop thinking that an opposition between male and female must be about the control of men and women over each other. Realising this ought to create fresh grounds for analyzing the nature of that opposition and of intersexual domination in these societies.

BEYOND NEGATION

We do not, of course, have to imagine that these ideas exist as a set of ground rules or a kind of template for everything that Melanesians