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***Moni, Marginality, and Modernization in
Postcolonial Papua New Guinea***

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FROM CANNIBAL TOURS TO CARGO CULT

On the Aftermath of Tourism in a Sepik River Society

“What are we doing wrong that we live this way?” Kamboi Yambuken, 2011.

If anybody from the Eastern Iatmul village of Tambunum in Papua New Guinea should have regular access to cash, and a bank account in which to reap a modicum of interest, it would be Henry Gawi. Educated, fluent in English, endless optimist, financial schemer, and twice traveler to Australia, Henry has all the qualities we would associate with fiscal inclusion in the global periphery. What’s more, Henry served as quasi-manager of a guesthouse in Tambunum built in the late 1980s by an Australian artifact buyer and a small tourist company. Indeed, if any community in the global periphery should be thriving, it should be Tambunum, the largest village along the Sepik River, renowned for its art and ritual.

Yet only recently did Henry send me a text message from Wewak, the capital town of the East Sepik Province, requesting the equivalent of \$50 for transport back to the village. It was one of many such requests I have received over the past few years. The arrival of inexpensive mobile phones in Papua New Guinea, while promising the innovation of mobile banking, actually seems in this community to link folks mainly to me. They remain unbanked, cash-impooverished, and ever marginal to global economic and financial institutions. Indeed, Tambunum village today is shockingly far more penurious than two decades ago. My earliest writings about this community exuded a sense of optimism. No longer. Not only has the community declined, but local folks are

now reaching for a cognitive framework to explain their plight that I once never dreamed I would hear in the village: cargoism.

Dennis O'Rourke's 1988 film *Cannibal Tours* seeks to portray all that is wrong with tourism in the global periphery. Who can watch the movie and not squirm—even after many viewings? But the near-apotheosis of the film to scholars and students alike has long troubled me as an anthropologist with extensive fieldwork experience in one of the Sepik River communities featured in the film. As I argue elsewhere, the iconic status of *Cannibal Tours* rests far more on the elicitation of certain, admittedly powerful emotions than on any sustained or richly-textured ethnographic insights into the lives of local Sepik inhabitants, specifically, the Iatmul people, and their touristic entanglements (Silverman 2004). True, that was never the filmmaker's intention. After all, O'Rourke foregrounded Western visitors in order to expose touristic desires *in* Papua New Guinea. The film is not, from this angle, *about* Papua New Guineans.

Nevertheless, Sepik people are central to the narrative and gaze of *Cannibal Tours*. They are hardly peripheral to the diegesis of O'Rourke's parable. Indeed, local folks have a visual and auditory presence at least as prominent as that of the tourists—often, more so. But *Cannibal Tours* affords local people no true 'voice' or 'agency.' The film thus commits the *very same* symbolic or dialogical violence to local people as the very tourists *Cannibal Tours* relentlessly critiques. Perhaps the best way to understand the local experience of tourism in the contemporary Sepik is to glimpse what happens when the tourists go home. And they have. Almost all of them. At least as far as Tambunum village is concerned.

The tourist vessel in *Cannibal Tours*, called *The Melanesian Explorer*, was replaced in 1988 by a luxurious catamaran cruiser, *The Melanesian Discoverer*. The latter vessel regularly plied the Sepik River beginning in 1988, and was locally seen as a regular source of cash income. By regional standards, I'd wager, Tambunum was the most prosperous village along the river—a vibrancy entirely the consequence of tourism. People from nearby communities regularly trekked and canoed to Tambunum to set up produce markets, to sell betel-net and pottery, and to peddle their own trinkets to tourists. But about a decade ago, tourism in Papua New Guinea (PNG) started to decline precipitously due to a series of factors, including post-9/11 jitters about international travel, increasing fuel prices, high airfare expenses to PNG, the 2003 worldwide outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome or SARS, and the global recession. Additionally, Papua New Guinea, then and now, was often perceived as a failed state, plagued by perennial problems with “law and order.” The upshot was that the tourist boat, berthed at the Madang Resort Hotel by the Melanesian Travel Services (<http://www.mtspng.com/>), was sold in 2006 and ceased operation.¹ Tourism to Tambunum all but ended. And with no tourists, as local people again and again told me in 2010, there is no money. In this article, I probe different ways that local people now confront their newfound sense of fiscal impoverishment.

A Woeful Economic History

Tambunum, a community of about 1000 horticultural gardeners and fishfolk located along the banks of the middle Sepik River, consists of three patrilineal descent

¹ See the official announcement at <http://www.mtsdiscoverer.auz.it/>; see also “The Day Tourism Died in Papua New Guinea,” Malum Nalu, <http://malumnalu.blogspot.com/2010/07/day-tourism-died-in-papua-new-guinea.html>.

groups, subdivided into lineages and “branches” (Silverman 1996). Traditionally, men competed for prestige on the basis of ritual competence and knowledge of magic, names, and myths (Harrison 1990; Silverman 2001s). This esoterica, called *tsagi*, also served, along with various shell valuables secured through down-the-line trade from the coast, as special-purpose currency that could variously secure land, brides, and services. But *tsagi*, like everything else in Sepik societies, was gendered, and so men alone had access to the local prestige hierarchy.

Europeans first prowled the river in the 1880s, during the German colonial administration of New Guinea (*Kaiser Wilhelmsland*), seeking ethnological curios and especially indentured laborers to toil on coastal copra plantations. Colonial administrators and returning laborers introduced into the Sepik unprecedented quantities of shell valuables—and also European-manufactured porcelain imitations that you can still occasionally purchase today as souvenirs in villages and markets. There was pronounced inflation. Exchange networks were disrupted; most have faded altogether. Shells became valueless as local currency by the end of World War Two.

The Imperial German government established administrative posts, thus tying the region into the modern world system. Missionaries linked modernization to salvation—a powerful notion even today (Robbins 2004; Smith 1994). European steel knives and axes supplanted a neolithic technology; many of these metal implements remain in use and evoke bitter-sweet stories of culture contact. Additionally, Eastern Iatmul were introduced to general-purpose currency—specifically, German coins and bills which villagers today peddle to tourists.

After World War One, the League of Nations transferred the colonial administration of New Guinea to Australia as a Mandated Trust Territory. Local people now took up Australian currency as part of a wider colonial project of moral education and slow economic encompassment. During World War Two, villagers suffered a brutal Japanese occupation and devastating allied bombing raids. They were forced to feed and labor for Japanese soldiers, for which they were recompensed with occupation script—yet another in a long series of imposed currencies. This script, too, is offered for sale to tourists.

During World War Two, too, some Eastern Iatmul men served in the Australian army, a common occurrence throughout the territories of New Guinea and Papua. At the armistice, local people—the very folks who portaged and often cared for Australian soldiers—expected some degree of equality between whites and Papua New Guineans. Alas, they received trivial trinkets and paltry commendations and not, as they expected, monetary remuneration, racial equality, and modernization. Indeed, the collective Eastern Iatmul memory for much of the 20th-century can be summarized as the failure of the world system to properly compensate for services rendered, and promises made.

In the post-War era, Eastern Iatmul experienced rapid innovations and new institutions, including formal schooling, literacy, numeracy, participatory democracy, vocational training, beverage alcohol, canned foods, cash employment, tourism, and the acquisition of prestige consumer goods (see Knauft 2002). In the 1980s, tourism was the largest source of cash in the village (Silverman 2000). But Sepik tourism, to repeat, has faded. In 1994, the village contained outboard motors, radios, cassette recorders, kerosene lanterns, bicycles, dart boards, trade stores, even the occasional VCR. Still, the

village lacked electricity, plumbing, modern-style housing, access to paved roads, health care, regular transportation to town, and any stable sources of income. As one man said in 1990, chisel and hammer in hand, hewing a crocodile-shaped coffee table, “we carve for tourists because we have no real development here.” I heard the very same sentiments in 2010: no development, no money. But I also learned that there were no tourists, which enormously compounded the local sense of malaise.

Tourism emerged in the Sepik in the 1970s, and took off a decade later with the introduction of small tourist rafts and then *The Melanesian Explorer*, featured in *Cannibal Tours*, itself replaced in 1988 by the luxurious catamaran cruiser, *The Melanesian Discover*. In the late 1980s, the ship visited the village several times a month, such that in local perception and in actuality villagers were able to earn a sizable income from the sale of tourist art. To be sure, as noted, many villagers lamented the lack of “real development.” Still, the village was nonetheless fully enmeshed in the global economy, and many people maintained active bank accounts in Wewak, the provincial capital town. In fact, Tambunum villagers largely eschewed cash cropping because they could derive comparable profits from tourist art. But with the cessation in tourism, the local cash economy collapsed. For as I was told, people living along the river have no gold or rice that could bring in money and development. They only have “fish, baskets, and carvings”—hence, “underdevelopment”

I saw virtually *no* cash transactions in 2010. Indeed, adults and even children in the latter 1980s often wagered coins during card games. Today, people play with twine tokens. The material landscape of the village remained almost exactly the same in 2010 as it appeared in 1988 with the sole exception, really, of mobile phones. Modernity has

ground to a halt. Worse, as many people said to me, “we are going backwards.” I hardly blame them for this dismal sentiment. I saw almost no flashlights and radios—since these technologies require expensive batteries. Kerosene lanterns seem to be a thing of the monied past. Women now wear trousers. But I saw no overall increase in the quantity of clothing or shoes. The standard of material or modern living has dramatically declined or, at best, remained unchanged: the same personal possessions, cooking utensils, tools, plastic tarps, vinyl floor mats, mosquito nets, dingy towels, and so forth. Actually, I saw many of the very same objects in 2010 as I did in the late 1980s—only in a much degraded condition. Fewer “families”—I use the word intentionally, as I discuss later—can afford to pay school fees, and the village lacks even the most basic health services. “We got independence in 1975,” said one man. “But we didn’t get development.”

Après le Déluge

Tambunum once contained several small tradestores that stocked a range of commodities: cigarettes, warm beer, tins of mackerel, cooking oil, sacks of rice, batteries, kerosene, aspirin, tea, coffee, powdered milk, sugar, biscuits, and soap. Successful tradestores required complex negotiations of profit, savings, borrowing, credit, stock, and record-keeping (Curry 1999). Other intermittent sources of income over the past few decades included the sale of tobacco, betel-nut, fruit, fish, chickens, cacao, and vanilla beans as well as, to repeat, tourist art. Over the years, a few village men and women have secured employment in towns and cities as teachers, merchant ship crewman, army personnel, provincial labor officers, policemen, store clerks, and prison guards. But cash

remittances are rare since wage-labor is barely sustainable in the towns and cities. In 2011, only four Eastern Iatmul were regularly employed in Wewak, none of whom had fully entered the middle class.

Amid the many open-air markets in Wewak, Eastern Iatmul women sell baskets while men peddle woodcarvings. In the past, men earned more money than women since woodcarvings fetch a higher price than baskets—sometimes upwards of \$50-\$100. (Despite inflation for commodities and devaluation of the national currency, men and women today both sell their handicrafts for essentially the same prices as twenty years ago.²) Men dominated the totemic and monetary economies. With the decline in tourism, however, men lost the major source of their revenue. Papua New Guineans find little appeal in decorative woodcarvings. But they do eagerly purchase and carry baskets, and so village women today who dwell in, or travel to, town now earn more money than their male kin. Were men embarrassed by this, I asked a group of female kin in town? Barked an elderly woman from the periphery of the conversation, “They should be!” A few weeks later, one my brother’s wives, Dangi, derisively compared men to dogs: “All they do is laze around and eat.”

A number of women from Tambunum travelled to Wewak in order to work in the South Seas Tuna loining plant. But the backbreaking, difficult work—eight hour shifts, standing up, Monday through Saturday with a paltry lunch—resulted in only K60-70 per fortnight. Within a few months, they all quit, and now peddle baskets in the informal economy. However, the choice to leave the loining plant must not be seen as in some sense contravening a practical form of bourgeois rationality. Quite the contrary. A very rational effort to join the most modern of institutions—factory wage-labor—failed as a result of the very same logic: the women felt, accurately I might add, that they earned more per hour of effort from the informal economy, and

² In 1988, 1Kina = \$1.15. In 1990, it was down to \$1.00 and in 1990 \$0.40.

sacrificed less individualistic autonomy. The logic of modernity, we might say, thwarted modernization.

Eastern Iatmul struggle against the rising tide of globalization. They also struggle against very real tides. Each year, the Sepik River floods during the rain-season. In most years, the waters rise a few feet. In 2009-10, however, the annual flood proved to be the highest in a generation, inundating the region for months on end. It was a true natural disaster. Almost everybody in the village fled to the surrounding grasslands—tragically, in some cases. The young son of my village brother, while playing in the tall grass, was set upon by a venomous snake. His mother held him as he died.³

The flood destroyed *all* food gardens and fruit trees. When I arrived in the village this summer, I was stunned at the shortage of food. Villagers were subsisting *solely* on sago starch, river fish, and green leaves. There were no fruits, vegetables, tubers, or any crops—just sago and fish. It felt as if the community has only recently emerged from a famine.

In the past, as noted earlier, villagers supplemented their diet with packaged foods. But no longer. Over the past few years, the price of petrol, food,⁴ and transportation has skyrocketed in Papua New Guinea. *All* tradestores in the village have shuttered. There is, indeed, little petty capitalism in evidence anywhere in the village. Eastern Iatmul have regressed to subsistence farming—much like, as they often said,

³ Papua New Guinea has some of the highest rates of snakebite and envenomation fatalities in the world (see, e.g., <http://www.snakebiteinitiative.org/png>).

⁴ Some relevant statistics: the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for urban PNG was 822 in 2007 (base year 1977)—an enormous change; in the US, it was a little over 200 (base year 1982-1984). But PNG prices were relatively stable until 1994, when the kina was floated. In this sense, prices have risen by a factor of 9 since 1977—in a country where . The price of a kg. of rice has increased from K0.25 to K3.00; the price of a ltr. of kerosene has risen from K0.10 to K1.80. (Source: Andrew McGregor and R. Michael Bourke, 2009, “The Broader Economy,” in *Food and Agriculture in Papua New Guinea*, R.M. Bourke and T. Harwood, eds., pp. 271-82. Canberra: ANU Press).

their premodern ancestors. “Our clothes are tattered and dirty,” said many men; “we cannot even afford soap.” As far as I could tell, I was the only person in the village in 2010 who dined on store-bought food (which, of course, I shared with my family.) This is a village not so much trying to develop as trying to prevent further decline.

The annual rising of the river preempts the possibility of growing coffee or rubber, two typical Melanesian cash crops. A vanilla boon in the 2002-04, in which some Eastern Iatmul participated, crashed due to declining prices from a global glut.⁵ Unscrupulous growers, moreover, improperly dried their beans and also padded the sacks with other materials to increase the weight. As a result, few bean buyers travel the region. The only other possibility for sustained cash cropping in the village is cacao (cocoa). Some men did plant these trees, but it will take several years for them fully to carry the pods. Even then, the tree are susceptible to flooding. Crocodiles farms also hold some promise, but they require substantial investment in water pumps and other equipment, and so remain inaccessible.

The nearest town, and hence the nearest banks, petrol stations, trade stores, supermarkets, large markets, post office and other administrative offices and commercial enterprises is Wewak, about 60 kilometers away.⁶ In the late 1980s, several dirt roads linked Tambunum and nearby villages, especially the mission station at Timbunke, about two hours upriver, to Wewak. Today, these roads are impassable. As a result, the community has effectively become further detached from the globalized world. One must now take a canoe or dinghy downriver to a small town, the district headquarters of

⁵ Vanilla beans plummeted from a high of \$450 per kilo in 2003 to \$26 in 2007 and the \$10-12 in 2009.

⁶ The son of my good friend paddled his canoe, laden with carvings, to the nearby town of Angoram. He sold his canoe for k300, paid for transport to Wewak, and there purchased a ticket for ship passage to the city of Lae. Sold some carvings there, and then flew to Post Moresby, where he remains, peddling woodcarvings.

Angoram. This trip takes about 4 hours in a dugout canoe fitted with a 25 horsepower outboard motor. In the late 1980s, a gallon of petrol in the village cost about K4.5 or \$5-6; today, it is K35, or close to \$15. Passage to Angoram requires 8-10 gallons, depending on the type of vessel, motor, and load—and another 10-15 to return. Once in Angoram, you must then pay K20 per passenger each way for public truck transportation to and from Wewak. Any trip between the village and town, then, is prohibitively expensive—especially to local folks who lack any access to income generating schemes or endeavors. So costly is travel between Tambunum and Wewak that, much to my utter astonishment, some people are *walking* to town, taking several days, and *floating* downriver on rafts to Angoram. No such activity every occurred in the late 1980s. It was unthinkable.

In 1938, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, flush with success from their famous study in Bali, steamed up the Sepik for a six-month project in Tambunum. In 2010, I brought several hundred photos from that study—Bateson snapped about 10,000 black and white images in 1938—to elicit local comments. On the one hand, the photos evoked a primitivist discourse. They were “Wildman,” throwing spears, killing men, travelling to obtain shells from the Murik Lakes. “*Ah, sori tumas, ol i no gat plenty samting.*” They were, to much laughter, “*as nating man.*” That is to say, they walked around butt-naked.

On the other hand, contemporary villagers looked up to this earlier generation with profound respect and admiration—even awe. They were strong, brave, well-fed, even fat. We today may have modernity, but we are a pale shadow of their bodies and culture. They had respect; we do not today. They were healthy because they abided by tradition (*kastom*) and maintained all ritual prohibitions while people today follow

another path. They were strong; we are cowards. They were initiated; we are not. Women then did not cook while menstruating; now they do. Today, customary law (*kastam lo*) is broken, and so we are not as healthy. They possessed powerful sorcery—even magic to fly, to become invisible, to transform into a crocodile. They had knowledge. Today, we do not. But every time I showed the photos, someone made one comment that indicated a striking, ironic, and tragic similarity: We are so poor today that we are almost, like them, walking around “as nating.”

Roads and Cleanliness

Eastern Iatmul, as they say, lack a road to town. The idiom of a “road” is now central to local visions of development. The community want a road—to renewed tourism, to Wewak, to modernity. The cultural salience of a road arises not merely from a realist geography. It also pertains to the totemic system.

The Iatmul cosmos is Platonic (see also Wassmann 1991:218). The world of appearances, which comprises one “path” of existence, bears little relation to the world of essences encoded in the traditional totemic system (Silverman 1997). Most totemic names are public, and so abbreviate a consensual history. Yet this history is unreal or, at best, a partial truth. To truly comprehend reality, one must learn secret names that lie “beneath” the surface of public knowledge. These names refer to hidden relationships between primal ancestors and events known only a few erudite, elder men. Secret names reveals that the notorious complexity of Iatmul totemism belies the existence of only a few ancestral beings. Nonetheless, these spirits magically transform themselves into the myriad forms of the sensory world (Wassmann 1991:169; see also Bateson 1936:235; Harrison 1990:56).

These originary spirit beings slip on outer appearances much as men don costumes for ritual.

The Iatmul world is also layered. Humans dwell on the “surface” (*aiwat*) of reality—a world, I was told, consisting of distinct “paths,” including male, female, traditional, modern, and church. Each path, at best, affords a partial view of reality and offers a partial set of moral tenets for human action. When Iatmul today seek a “road” to Wewak, they are at once making a wide-ranging statement about finding their way, literally and cosmologically, amid a fast-changing local modernity. They are seeking to connect their traditional ontology into the world system.

Eastern Iatmul are also making a statement about the source of modernity itself, and the seemingly endless wealth of the Western world. Spirits dwell beneath the world of forms and appearances. There is a hidden realm (*atndasiikiit*). In the 1930s, Bateson (1936:237) similarly wrote that Iatmul believed in separate “planes of existence” for humans, witches, tree spirits, and other numinous beings. This ontology influences the local epistemology, especially a broad inside/outside conception of knowledge that is common throughout Melanesia and Aboriginal Australia (e.g., Jorgenson 1980; Barth 1990; Weiner 1995b; Silverman 2001b). The inner is always more valid and truthful than the outer. In consequence, disclosure always proves politically problematic. First, any exposure of esoterica dilutes the magical potency of that knowledge, especially in regard to totemic names. Second, the exposure sets up an epistemic opportunity for rivals to affirm the ownership of new secret information. After all, what was once hidden is now public and hence, by definition, conceals a more fundamental and hidden truth. In this ontology, there is no bottom line. The world consists of baskets (*kumbi*), to use a local idiom often

employed in regard to totemic knowledge, concealing only more baskets. From this perspective, Eastern Iatmul want to do more than merely travel to Wewak: they seek a path to the still-undisclosed source of the wealth of white people and modernity. And they now believe they have found that path, we will see shortly, in a new eschatology.

In many respects, the local yearning for a “road” offers an implicit critique of the local, provincial, and national governments as well as the global system and the West. That Eastern Iatmul lack this “road” is due to the fact that others, more powerful than they, refuse to make it visible. But Eastern Iatmul also bemoaned their impoverishment through an internal moral discourse. Again and again, I was told that their clothing, and their own bodies, are “dirty.” I see this filth as communicating several notions. Eastern Iatmul are admitting to their own ethical failure to live up to the ideals of hygiene so important to colonial regimes (Burke 1996). But as it turns out, Eastern Iatmul use the very same moral statements to insult their bush-dwelling neighbors, who are seen as filthy because they do not regularly bathe. When Eastern Iatmul turn the same slur onto themselves, they are really saying that we are no longer true Iatmul. We no longer know, as we once did, how to keep clean—that is, possess a pure culture. Yet we have yet to become fully modern, and so dress in clean clothes, laundered by soap.

In this sense, the idiom of filthiness recalls the famous dictum of Freud, wrongly attributed to Mary Douglas (1966), that “dirt is matter out of place.”⁷ Yes, Eastern Iatmul do wear soiled garments. Yes, they do not have money for much detergent and new outfits. All this is true. But concern with dirt also conveys the broader self-assessment that the community is “out of place.” The people in the photographs from 1938 lacked

⁷ Freud inserted the English phrase “Dirt is matter in the wrong place” in English in his brief 1908 essay, “Character and Anal Eroticism.” The phrase originally derives from the 18th-century statesman, Lord Chesterfield.

modern accoutrements. But they were clear. We today, my interlocutors implied, dress in clothing—but we are filthy, tattered, and dishevelled. A “road” to “cleanliness,” in its richly textured and local rendition, would re-position Tambunum in the landscape of modernity, and ideally connect to their own cosmological or totemic landscape. Alas, as many said, they are instead “going backwards.” Sadly, I concur.

Problems with Personhood

Traditionally, wealth was regional. Communal efforts yielded real and metaphoric fruit that remained in the local setting. But in the cash economy, money flows out of the village and, more significantly, often results in the purchase of commodities that benefit only one or a few. Fiscal individualism, coupled with the ideological ascension of the nuclear family through Western ideologies, fragments the moral cohesion of kin groups. As Gamboromiawan remarked, any guy today can grab a chisel and a hunk of wood, and set off for town to do as he pleases. The same is true for younger women and their baskets. Earlier eras did not permit, or allow, such promise of economic independence—partly because of the sway of the kin group. Today, however, the group is morally problematic in the context of money and financial institutions.

Men and women in Tambunum both bemoan that everybody today looks after their own needs—or the needs of their “family.” Indeed, the “family” is the central locus of modern desire. By “family,” Eastern Iatmul refer to spouses, children, and perhaps siblings. The “family” does not consist of the dozens and dozens of other kin—kin who lack, moreover, even a basic term of reference in English or tokpisin. Additionally, said one of my village brothers, houses no longer shelter an entire lineage “branch.” Rather,

Eastern Iatmul today prefer to dwell within the nuclear family. Why, I asked? Because this is the only way to avoid jealousy, theft, false accusations of immorality, and general discord. The moral imperative of reciprocity that once enmeshed a wide network of kin has collapsed into the bounded ideological foundation of modernity: the nuclear family. Selfishness, in other words, requires containment.

Once, to invoke Durkheim, social boundaries were clear. At least that is what my brother implied when he enlisted the locally-salient and wholly traditional metaphor of a canoe. Formerly, strict rules governed the seating arrangement of a canoe according to clan, age, gender, and birth-order. Today, however, people sit wherever they wish.⁸ The rules of social comportment, my brother and others declared, are vague. The boundary around the nuclear family has strengthened; but social boundaries in general seem porous and unclear. Formerly, for example, hats were barred in the men's house; no longer. Formerly, women never called aloud to specific male kin resting in the men's house; now they do. Formerly, fathers avoided contact with their firstborn, and menstruating women abided by various taboos; no longer.

On the one hand, the dilution of traditional categories and comportment is often seen as positive. In particular, I was struck by the many men who engage tenderly, even lovingly, with their children. They self-consciously rejected an earlier model of fathering, in which paternal interaction was tense, scripted, lacking tender emotions, circumscribed by taboos against intimacy. By contrast, many fathers in the village now understand fathering to entail an emotional commitment and connection. At the same time, men and women together report embracing Christian notions of matrimonial

⁸ To this, I add that many women now paddle while standing. Formerly, only men stood in canoes; women paddled while sitting or kneeling.

sanctity, personal responsibility, introspection, sin, salvation, and the nuclear family (see Gewertz and Errington 1996). Today, Eastern Iatmul speak about marriage as a private, affective union between husband and wife who unite as *wanbel*, or a “single heart.” Proper childraising, as in the West, is now deemed the exclusive responsibility of parents, not other kin and institutions such as mothers’ brothers and the men’s house. Parents, too, must share the tasks of childraising, and find purpose and joy, as Kamboi told me, in watching their children grow.⁹ In all this, Eastern Iatmul feel more or less content.

But the absence of clear social categories and attendant rules of comportment render problematic, or potentially divisive, any social activity. In other words, the moral force of kinship and descent, as well as those ritual relationships predicated on kinship and descent, are no longer sufficient to motivate collective or personal action. Moreover, I could discern no clear, one-on-one mapping of traditional social groups, ritual partnerships, and kinship categories onto paths of money loaned, refused, and pooled. The system is clearly in flux. What people do report, however, is shame in asking for money—and a sense that lending money is far different than, say, sharing food or lending a hand.

Earlier, I mentioned the demise of village tradestores. All former proprietors, as it were, offered the exact same explanations for ceasing the enterprise. First, the price of fuel, and the impassibility of the local dirt path to Wewak, made the transport of cartons of goods too expensive to reap any profit. Second, the rising price of food made the endeavor no longer viable. Third, villagers no longer have money. They are simply

⁹ Because childraising now costs money—for school fees (primary education is neither compulsory nor free), clothing, medicine, etc.—some Eastern Iatmul practice “family planning.” But many do not, and it is not unusual for some families to have upwards of eight children.

unable to make purchases at the tradestores. Last, everybody admitted to extraordinary difficulty in maintaining a small capitalist enterprise amid a kinship-based society. It was exceedingly difficult to resist the moral claims of reciprocity and relationships. As my brother said, “you can’t say no to a brother or uncle.” Every week, said another, simmering resentment would arise (in tokpisin, “liklik hevi”). Most tradestores had signs warning against requests for IOU’s. But such requests were ongoing and relentless—the “poison,” said my brother, of the tradestore.

In the main, Eastern Iatmul treat money as a private matter. In fact, I propose that the category “money” has in many respect slotted into the conceptual category of totemism. (Several men confirmed this proposal.) People hide their money much as men continue to hide their totemic knowledge and especially their “secret” names. Generally speaking, Eastern Iatmul speak about money in vague terms—almost in the abstract—rather than divulging specific amounts.¹⁰ Metaphorically, totemic names are stored in “baskets.” Before certain rituals, actual baskets are hung from the roof to visualize the hope that the memory of totemic specialists will open, so the names will come forth. Money, too, is stored in baskets—only baskets rarely opened in public.

While Eastern Iatmul store money in baskets, netbags, and even bamboo stalks slipped into the roof of their homes, they do not store cash in banks. Nobody in the village has used, or even contemplated, applying for a bank loan, partly out of lack of relevant information, partly out of the absence of any collateral or “security,” and partly out of a generalized and pervasive mistrust of banks. In the late 1980s, many local villagers had savings accounts in Wewak. Today, everybody bemoans the “hidden” fees

¹⁰ Interestingly, Eastern Iatmul devised a system for counting money that is distinct from other forms of numerical accounting.

that banks deduct from accounts. Linus Apingari, one of the most well-educated, articulate speakers of English in the village, with enormous familiarity with modern institutions, deposited K200—all of which allegedly disappeared due to periodic bank fees. Others told similar tales. Again and again, I learned that banks “kutim, kutim, kutim moni.” Linus, moreover, professed no understanding that these fees existed when he opening the account—nor did he know exactly the purpose of the fees or even, really, what happened to his money. And this, I stress, from a man as likely to engage with formal financial institutions as anybody in the village.

Eastern Iatmul display have a poor understanding of relevant fiscal information—“relevant” in the sense that this information does, and could, impact directly on their financial well-being as they themselves phrase it. They lack a consistent or accurate understanding of loans, interest, bank fees, the price of cash crops, the dates and deadlines for the submission of forms, how and when to pay school fees, and where about new financial services such as microcredit. Moreover, I could find nobody in the village who knew the precise name and contact information for a carvings buyer they all eagerly hope, and expect, will return. They say his name is Benedict, and he lives in New Caledonia. Among themselves, Eastern Iatmul can scrupulously recall how much they loan to whom. But when interacting with the centralized institutions of modernity, they practice what might be called a type of non-accounting. They often lack agency and voice.

The erosion of the authority of traditional spirits provides, as many imply, little “kastam lo” to ensure communal cooperation. Formerly, sorcery and magic ensured a certain level of accountability and collaboration. Eastern Iatmul are uniformly thrilled at

the demise of sorcery and related practices. But they also lament the absence of supernatural sanction for everyday cooperation. The community, I was told, can no longer govern itself. The traditional spirits have less efficacy—and ‘modern’ behaviors seen as disruptive, such as drinking homebrew at all-night discos, is rampant. Even those who participate in these activities themselves lament or acknowledge the unruliness. Linus Apingari criticized young people as the “wokabaut generation,” wandering aimlessly, following no rules, unwilling to engage in hard work and so resorting to theft from gardens. As another man put it, there was plenty of food in the olden days—plenty of land, and not too many children. Today, the village suffers from over-population of kids, shortage of land, and thievery.

In fact, villagers now charge interest when loaning money to kin—something I never witnessed in previous fieldwork stints. The going rate is something on the order of K3 interest per week for every K10 loaned. Nobody seemed pleased with this practice. “Profit,” as they say, makes one less likely to lend money, and introduces an element of competition not previously so prominent within the kin group.

Problems with Social Life

My village brother’s daughter, a teenager, suddenly took ill in 2008 and tragically died. The medical cause remains unknown. She is buried in the front of my brother’s house, adjacent to his former and now-empty tradestore, which served as my house in 2010. Perhaps, said Linus Apingari, the community failed her? Perhaps we should have pooled our money to take her to the hospital in Wewak? Perhaps we should all feel guilty? But culture or *kastom* persists, Linus essentially said, and if she died due to some

transgression, then those who contributed to any such fund would likely suffer poor health themselves, perhaps even die.

Linus referred to a local notion called *vai*, which I gloss as “mystical retribution.” Eastern Iatmul generally explain death with reference to from some moral, social, or ritual trespass, intentional or otherwise. These transgressions catalyze a fatal, contagious, and capricious form of mystical retribution called *vai*. Typically, the cause of *vai* is determined long after the fact; perpetrators are generally unaware of their wrongdoing. Eastern Iatmul rarely know for certain what specific transgressions, and by whom, caused any particular death. The infection from *vai* spreads circuitously, and often slowly, through the local kin network. Contiguity is omnipresent and omnidirectional. Everyone is potentially connected to every transgression. The contagion dwells “in the ground,” and moves equally through agnatic, matrilineal, and affinal ties. Much like death and snakes, *vai* respects no boundaries.

The concept of mystical retribution enforces social rules, and serves as a cognitive and emotional framework for making sense of death and tragedy. Despite the pervasiveness of *vai*, Eastern Iatmul suffer no paranoia or sense of moral failure (*cf.* Schwartz 1973; Robbins 2004:208-09). They do not generally and directly connect *vai* to their current fiscal marginalization. But they will look to *vai* to explain, say, the absentminded loss or misplacement of money. Moreover, modern aspirations and endeavors do not overwrite *vai*. Just the opposite: belief in *vai* thwarts the moral imperatives of modernity and money, and makes it difficult for the community to come together for collective action. The violation of a distant violation of a homicide taboo is

precisely why Linus himself refused, despite his own moral unease, to offer assistance to my brother when his daughter took ill.¹¹

The clash between “kastom lo” and the aspirations for development seemed particularly acute in 2010 as the village prepared—or tried to prepare—for an upcoming regional culture festival that would include, or so it was hoped, a visit to Tambunum for the ceremonial opening of a new men’s house. Papua New Guinea consists of some twenty provinces, divided for administrative purposes into districts and local-level government or LLG areas. Tambunum resides in the Angoram LLG.

Some months prior to my visit, a “culture group” from Tambunum, called Moikuadu, formally registered as a “business” with the national Registrar of Companies, Investment Promotion Authority, through the Division of Commerce & Tourism Industry of the East Sepik Provincial Administration. The name of the group, a neologism, serves as an acronym for three lineages of the Mboey Nagusamay or Sago clan: Moim, Kwassa, and Dimiri. Men from these three descent groups paid the K50 registration fee. The express goal in registering as a formal business was to enlist financial support for village-based culture and tourism activities.

One of the leaders of the group approach the Angoram LLG to announce the completion and formal opening of the new men’s house, called Wyngwariimbiit. Since the promotion and retention of traditional culture is a national priority, the Moikuadu group wanted to extend an invitation to provincial and national politicians to the opening ceremony of *singsing*. This event, it was hoped, would open a “road” to tourists, money, and village renown—a “road” to governmental support in rekindling the now-

¹¹ The cause of her death, according to Gamboromiawan, was the marriage between her parents, whose paternal grandfathers murdered a man from a non-Iatmul village, Maramba, but never offered compensation. As a result, the marriage united, in a sense, or activated, the unreciprocated anti-social act.

extinguished tourist trade. During my stay in 2010, the ceremony took on the tones of a classic cargo cult. Not only would the *singsing* result in governmental officials helping to return tourism to Tambunum, but the event would also somehow bring about all-expenses-paid invitations to Tambunum for villagers to travel to other culture shows throughout the country and even overseas. The singsing would so impress governmental visitors that the Local Level Government would fund the construction of a “traditional art gallery” in Tambunum, and this, too, would “pull” tourists as well as, I was repeatedly told, other “anthropologists” and “geographers.” They, too, through their writings, speeches, and universities, would bring the village renown, tourists, and “development.”

On July 15, representatives from the Angoram LLG—men only, I add—arrived in the village by dingy. They converged into an already packed men’s house—which foiled, of course, the participation of local women—to report good news. The upcoming “Sepik Cultural Diversity Show” would formally include the opening ceremony for the new men’s house. The showgrounds in Angoram would also feature traditional handicrafts, a sago making display, “master carvers,” traditional “string band” competition as well as a “rock band” competition, and a “Ms. Sepik quest.” Local and national politicians would arrive in the village for several hours on August 6 to watch the festivities. In return, the village had to ensure an “authentic” traditional festival—no “whiteman clothing,” for example. Even the Prime Minister of the country might attend. This would be Tambunum’s moment.

One of the spokesperson’s for the Moikuadu registered culture group then announced that that the opening ceremony would include two traditional dances, representing two major clans of the village. Immediately and predictably, dissenting

voices arose from within the men's house. Would the opening program for the new men's represent the entire community, some asked, or just the culture group? Others posed a more basic question: What culture group? We never heard about this! Who gave them the right to broker on behalf of the entire village? Why not include all the clans? Why are we excluded? Modern aspirations for tourism, development, money, centralized institutional authority, and global fame vocally clashed with traditional, egalitarian sentiments.

The Moikuadu culture group, as noted, consists of a score of men from three lineages in the Mboe Nagusamay clan. This clan claims, as part of its totemic patrimony, custodianship over two eagle costumes that embody or house the "soul" (*kaiek*) of a pair of avian spirit brothers. As such, the care and use of these costumes accords considerable prestige and responsibility. They are, after all, spirits, not mere costumes. The lineage that oversees the elder-brother eagle joined the culture group and eagerly awaited the singing. The lineage that owned the younger-brother eagle, however, threatened non-participation on the basis of an earlier touristic performance several years ago to an audience that disembarked from *The Melanesian Discoverer*. The proceeds from that event were not apparently distributed evenly to all performers. Consequently, the slighted lineage, not wishing to suffer another fiscal deception that, worse, insulted and invalidated their totemic heritage, saw no reason to prepare for the upcoming ceremony during the Culture Show. Not only did their non-participation threaten the pageantry of the show, but the two eagles, featured prominently in myth, must generally dance together. They form a duet that should not be cleaved. More than mere aesthetics was at stake. After all, any ritual innovation, incompleteness, or disruption, as well as any

divisiveness within a clan during a ceremonial performance, might arouse the ire of the very spirits the performance celebrates. As a result, people may grievously suffer from “mystical retribution” (*vai*). Tradition here seemed destined to block the “road” to modernity.

Additionally, the Moikuadu culture group wanted to deposit some of the money from the August 6 singsing into a still-unopened bank account in Wewak. At this point in time, it was generally believed that a sizable sum of cash—tens of thousands of Kina, the national currency—would be given to the village on the occasion of the ceremony by the local level, provincial, and national governments. The exact source of the funds was never clearly articulated in the village. But few doubted the fact. Some money would assist with the preparations; some would be given afterwards as a gift. It would be, few doubted, a lucrative event.

At any rate, the Moikuadu group would oversee the funds, they said, but reserve the proceeds for village-wide activities. Few men outside the group were convinced. Indeed, many men saw this tact as yet another deceptive maneuver that would simply replicate the earlier touristic inequity. To this, the culture group angrily berated the other lineages and clans of the village for their laziness. *We* took the initiative to organize the event, Moikuadu claimed. *We* registered with the government. *We* walked to Wewak—yes, walked—to meet with various officials. *We* used our own money to pay for license fee, and to *gris* the palms of the man employed at the district commerce office with tobacco and betel-nut. And *we* built the new men’s house the *singsing* will celebrate! Given all this, *we* earned the right to oversee the communal proceeds from the ceremony—a claim, of course, that rankled the feathers of every other group in the

community. Eastern Iatmul are leery of any such centralized management of communal funds lest the person who “holds” the money “eat” it. And there was surely some truth to this weariness since the Moikuadu culture group also added, almost as an aside, that since they did the lion’s share of the preliminary work, they would reserve some of the proceeds for their desires.

The issue was money, to be sure, but also validation. One of my key research assistants, a man named Gamboromiawan, insisted that he was the point man for the entire affair. In 2009, a new passenger, cargo, and health supply steamship was launched by a collaboration of the Asian Development Bank and Lutheran Shipping Agency to travel along the river and out to the coastal towns of Wewak and Madang.¹² At various stops along the way, the inaugural voyage was greeted with a celebration. A group from Tambunum travelled to the nearby village of Timbunke to help dance a greeting. My friend Gamboro happened to dance at the front, and for this reason was interviewed by a newspaper reporter. In the course of the conversation, the reporter learned that Gamboro spent several months at Stanford University in the 1990s helping to carve the outdoor Papua New Guinea Sculpture Garden (see Silverman 2003). Intrigued, the reporter arranged a subsequent conversation in Wewak, wherein he suggested that registering as formal culture group might prove an effective way to tap into governmental funds to sustain traditional cultural practices. On this basis Gamboro insisted that *he* was *singularly* responsible for the entire event, and thus was entitled to control, through the culture group, funds from the *singsing* that others wanted to disperse throughout the

¹² For news reports of the ship, the MV Sidy, see <http://malumnalu.blogspot.com/2009/08/mv-siddy-to-serve-sepik-river-people.html>; http://www.communitywatertransport.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Ships_on_unusual_mission.pdf; and <http://www.postcourier.com.pg/20090715/lae01.htm>.

community. For Gamboro, the event was more than a source of cash: it was a means of self-affirmation.

But likewise for the dissident lineage. They, too, I sensed, desired recognition by the rest of the village as a legitimate voice and stakeholder, as it were, in local communal events. The threat of non-participation served as a means of resisting marginalization from the local community. The same is true of Henry Gawi, the quasi-manager of the now-defunct guesthouse. In the 1980s and 1990s, when the guesthouse was up and running, Henry had some prominence in the village as a nexus for tourism. He regularly interacted with the Australian co-owners of the guesthouse, the resident Australian manager, and tourists. And, as mentioned earlier, Henry travelled to Australia. He certainly fashioned himself as far more worldly than most others in the village. Now, however, Henry has lost his physical space—the actual guesthouse has tumbled into ruins—and also his position as a key player in local tourism, a position now seemingly occupied by the registered Moikuadu culture group. Hence, Henry had every *personal* reason to try and thwart the August 6 *singsing*. He was also suspicious of the ulterior motives of the culture group, rightly accused them of failing to consult with all groups in the community, and reminded myself and others that Moikuadu failed equitably to distribute a touristic windfall in the past. Why should they do so now? What's more the, groups seeks falsely to position itself as the official spokesmen of the village when, in fact, they wish only to represent their own self-interest.

We must also take into account totemic primacy in order fully to understand the unfolding events that rendered a seemingly straightforward effort to organize a touristic ceremony utterly complex. In mythic history, so I was told, one of the lineages inside the

culture group (Kwassa) gifted the younger-brother eagle spirit to the dissident lineage (Kavelage).¹³ Over time, however, the Kavelage lineage began to assume ownership over the totemic names associated with the eagle spirit, not mere custodianship, especially the names Yimbiandangi and Aimiingawi. Kavelage, too, on the basis of this totemic patrimony, started to assert unwarranted authority within the clan and over certain parcels of land. But this is the dominant view of the feud, wherein the Kavelage lineage usurped potent totemic names. From their perspective of Kavelage, these names were originally theirs, created by their originary ancestors. They stole nothing; they simply reclaimed their rightful ancestry!

Several years ago, the Mboey Nagusamay clan staged a debate inside the men's house to resolve this dispute. But oratory turned to blows—an almost unthinkable offense to the cult house spirits. The Kavelage lineage suffered further ostracism—which, from their perspective, was utterly unjust. As a result, Kavelage withdrew from public life, and relocated across the river from the main village. In consequence, they did not assist with the construction of the new men's house. By refusing to enter the men's house, said my brother, “they behaved like women and children.” The upshot of all this is that the Moikuadu culture group has no intention of recognizing Kavelage as full partners in the ceremony—and Kavelage has every good reason to fear that, if they do participate in the August 6 *singsing*, they will be inequitably compensated. A contemporary event, aimed at the most ordinary and obvious of modern achievements,

¹³ The Kavelage lineage was constructing a men's house in the village of Timbuke, from whence Tambunum migrated sometimes, likely, in the 18th century. Traditionally, the finial of a Iatmul men's house is topped by an eagle. Kavelage, though, possessed no such ancestral or totemic eagle, and so the Kwassa lineage presented them with one of their mythic eagle brothers.

namely, perusing money, suddenly reached back to the shadowy depths of the irresolvable mythic past.

We need also to consider gender. My brother dismissed the Kavelage lineage as mere “women and children.” When men become angry, he said, they state their concerns outright and openly during a public discussion in the men’s house. They share betel-nut, and resolve the matter. But the Kavelage lineage allowed their concern with the previous *singsing* to simmer and fester, then to surface not directly but indirectly as resistance to the upcoming event. Only women, he said, hold a grudge—an absurd claim, I thought at the moment, given my familiarity with masculine disputes that reach back over two decades, and longer. One of my brother’s wives agreed, saying “they [the men of Kavelage] do not think about their wives and children,” only their own pride. She referred both to the money the event would raise, but also the general joy of the spectacle. Indeed, pride might very much have been at stake since, as I noted earlier, the absence of tourists denies men the largest source of their income. Yet women continue to sell their baskets to other Papua New Guineans. From a purely fiscal perspective, the decline in tourism has threatened manhood.¹⁴

The Mboe Nagusamay clan oversees or “owns” the new men’s house. They themselves constructed the ritual edifice. This unusual innovation—and a perilous one, say some—violated traditional protocol. Normally, Eastern Iatmul lineages and clans never stage their own rituals, carve their own sacra, and build their own ritual enclosures. To do so will assuredly result in dangerous, perhaps fatal “mystical retribution” (*vai*).

¹⁴ A woman is much more likely than a man to save money, women told me, or to purchase practical things such as food, medicine, and clothing for her children. Men are far more likely to spend their earnings right away on something “big.” Men think about themselves; women, their families.

Instead, a group provisions the other clans of the village, who reciprocate with labor.¹⁵ Since a men's house literally houses powerful ancestral spirits, some men saw this novelty as imbuing the entire *singsing* with potent peril or, at the very least, moral uncertainty.

One night, Henry Gawi revealed to me another, equally foolish transgression during the construction of the new men's house. The Mboey Nagusamay clan attached an eagle carving atop the building—a normal cultural practice in the middle Sepik. But in this instance, it was a taboo act since this clan accidentally torched an earlier men's house during a fight, well over a century ago. Ever since, as I knew from my earlier fieldwork, the clan was unable to perch an eagle atop their men's houses. But they did, and thus anybody who thinks about participating in the opening ceremony, declared Henry unambiguously, is “stupid.” Linus Apingari agreed, but for another reason. He was concerned about the use of ancestral dance costumes which serve, we have seen, as what Linus called “spiritual containers.” Linus had little confidence that the ritual performers would properly adhere to ancestral protocols. He was especially concerned about the order of animal sacrifices—that performers might kill a dog to open the ceremony, and a pig to conclude, and not the other way around as it should be. And any contravention, to repeat, would result in “mystical retribution.” Not only were the organizers “careless,” said Linus, but he and Henry had little desire to serve as their “tools” or “stepping stones” to monetary gain that would unlikely be enjoyed by all.

¹⁵ In local ideation, the performer of ritual work are drawn from classificatory sisters' children (*laua-nyanggu*) and hereditary ritual partnerships (*tshambela*). In practice, these two groups comprise the other clans of the village. The Mboey Nagusamay clan forsook this convention for the sheer sake of expediency—a very Western value, I add.

Eventually, the Kavalage group was coerced into cooperation—by my own lineage, in fact. We crossed the river in a few canoes, and presented Kavalage with a large cluster of betel-nuts. Every lineage in the village has one or more hereditary ritual partnerships, called *tshambela*, with other groups. Within this moral relationship, which we had with Kavalage, a formal gift of betel-nut is not easily refused. Nonetheless, Kavalage still refused to enter the new men’s house.

As the weeks unfolded, some meeting or another was convened in this or that men’s house to deliberate the August 6 *singsing*. Men discussed how to prepare, who should participate and what roles, when to practice the chanting, what decorations to create, and so forth. And through each meeting, the event became ever invested with greater hopes and dreams to open a monetary “road.” Towards the end of July, news arrives from Angoram that the festival is delayed until Independence Day, or September 16. A month later, as I learned by email, the event was yet again postponed. A full year’s time has passed, and the festival has yet to occur. The “road” to prosperity promised by the festival, at least in the local understanding, remains sealed.

Earlier, I mentioned my long-standing friend and research assistant, Gamboromiawan. In his opinion, for which he claims unparalleled validity in Tambunum given his own trip to the United States and his interviews in a Papua New Guineans newspaper, a newspaper reporter will attend the opening *singing* and post photos on the internet. People and institutions from other countries will then see these photos, and send for Tambunum villagers to perform. After hearing Gamboro publicly declare this certainty many times, I asked him in private if he had ever seen the internet. “No.” Still, the “internet” emerged as a key leitmotif throughout the debates and

deliberations. In local thinking, cyberspace is yet another modern “road” to development and affluence.

Money and Magic

One night, while chatting with my brother Kamboi, I learned about the moral critique of under-development preached by the local catechist. If you raise your “spiritual side,” and join with Jesus, then everything else will follow. But if your “spiritual side” goes down, everything will fall to ruins. Raising your “spiritual side” requires cooperation, respect, regular church attendance, and the expulsion of your evil spirit in the name of Jesus. And, my brother added, you needed to stop “believing” in the traditional woodcarvings said to embody ancestral spirits. These are “false gods,” made by humans, and so “dead” or inanimate. Worse, these carvings embody “bad spirits” that inhere in the “ground.” They are not, in this sense, merely false—they are the source of ill tidings. Instead, the catechist preached that villagers must unite their hearts---live “wanbel”—with Jesus. When that happens, Jesus will return with the dead—an image that conveys far more to Eastern Iatmul than otherworldly tranquility.

Earlier, I alluded to recent cargo cult-like ideation in Tambunum. I now elaborate with another, more poignant example. In myth, the first person to die was named Avawundumbu.¹⁶ In the late 1980s, I extensively studied funerary ritual, and listened to this myth many times. But this summer, I heard something new. Allegedly, Avawundumbu said that she would someday return to the village, accompanied by all other dead Eastern Iatmul. Moreover, they will speak a different language, have a different appearance. They will neither talk nor look like local people.

¹⁶ Her full name was Woliwundumbudmi-Avawundumbudmi.

In all versions of the myth, Avawundumbu established the village of the dead (*wundumbu ngai*). She then barred the living from visiting their deceased kin by blocking the road with a broken canoe, stuck in the ground and arranged in the shape of an X to signify a forbidden location. At the ghostly village, the newly deceased are boiled in water so their black skin dissolves and they appear white. This transformation befits local conception ideology wherein the soft, fleshy parts of the body gel from maternal blood, and eventually decay, leaving only white seminal bones. However, this episode in the myth also establishes some affiliation between Europeans, or white people, and the dead. This is an old association, dating to the era of contact in the latter 19th century. But it has taken on new meaning.

In dreams, I learned in 2010, Eastern Iatmul sometimes see the place of the dead—and it resembles a vibrant city, replete with cars, packaged food, all sorts of technology and commodities, and plenty of money. So much does this vision locally conjure modernity, I was told, that “now we think the dead live in America.” When Avawundumbu returns with the dead, she will remove the broken canoe, thus opening the “road” so living Eastern Iatmul can visit the village of the deceased. And there, they will find the goods and cash they now so desperately seek. This, and what follows, was all new to me.

What’s more, the dead sometimes visit Tambunum. They appear in the swamp behind the village in the form of odd sounds and bright lights, travelling, I was told, on an evanescent, shimmering vessel—a ghostly ship that recalls the tourist boat. When someone is about to die, moreover, you can hear the ship behind the village but, of course, not fully see it. Inside the ghostly ship are goods. Sometimes you can see the

commodities. But when you try to grab something, it all disappears—a clear parable for the state of desire and development in modern Papua New Guinea. Deceased kin, in other words, do what no longer happens: visit as tourists, travelling on a numinous ship that recalls the very vessel villagers are trying to make return. And deceased kin, too, do what living villagers cannot: enjoy the material plentitude of modernity.

Some real tourists, moreover, are not tourists at all—or not in the usual sense. They are deceased kin, coming back to the village for a quick reunion, dressed, as the myth foretold, in their new skin and speaking a new language. You can tell the difference between a regular tourist and an Eastern Iatmul ghost masquerading as a tourist because the latter will pause at their own gravesite in the village.

Perhaps the most striking new element of the myth of Avawundumbu was this: the ghosts of deceased villagers are trying to bring their living kin money and goods. But missionaries block the road, visit gravesites at night, and take the cargo for themselves. Some specifically accuse Australia of this nefarious subversion of reciprocity. Worse, Australia sells the cargo—the very goods that rightfully belong to Eastern Iatmul—to Asian companies, who in turn vend the goods to penniless Papua New Guineans at exorbitant prices.¹⁷ America, I was told, knows about all this. If white people did not block the road, then Eastern Iatmul today would enjoy cash and goods. “We would be okay. Instead, it is hard to find money.”

Several people offered proof of this scenario. In 2005-2006, I was told, a woman in the nearby village of Timbunke momentarily lost consciousness and died—for a few

¹⁷ Anti-Asian sentiment is rife in Papua New Guinea, albeit rather recent, and partly reflects the increasing prominence of Asians in the retail sector. There was a lot of talk in the village, at least to me, about the blackness of Barak Obama. I also heard fears about Al Qaeda “terrorists” slipping into the Sepik from Indonesia, and the immanent arrival of the war.

minutes. In this liminal state, her soul espied Father Liam, the Irish priest stationed at the Timbunke Catholic mission station, who was allegedly visiting Ireland. At least that was what he told local people. *But he never went there. He lied.* Rather, Father Liam travelled to the village of the dead, specifically, to a marketplace where he obtained a 35 horsepower outboard motor—*for free! He did not pay! This is how the missionaries obtain their goods and money!* When the woman regained consciousness, she foretold Father Liam's return with the outboard motor. Lo and behold, Father Liam did shortly return to the mission station—toting a new outboard motor!

Cherubim Alfred Dambui, the late Bishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea, was born in Timbunke. Many years later, when Bishop Dambui was visiting Rome, a man died in his home village. When the Bishop was informed of the death by telephone from Wewak, he allegedly responded that he saw the deceased man in the Holy City. When he returned, folks in Timbunke questioned him about this incident. But Bishop Dambui became afraid, and hastily left. *He, too, knew the truth.*

In the late 1980s, I was apparently given a basket by one of my mothers, Mundjiindua. (I add that I was given myriad baskets by many, many women, so it is probably true.) Mundjiindua suddenly died in 1989. In 2010, while chatting with a large group of men inside a cult house, I was asked, *matter-of-factly as if such encounters with the dead happen all the time in America*, if I gave her back the basket. I was then told that I *must* ask the people who gave me money to return to the village to unblock the road, so that the Eastern Iatmul can also have cash. “You see us now. It is hard for us to

purchase food, soap, laundry detergent, school feeds. We are dirty. You must tell them to release the road.”

Upon first hearing the new version of the myth in 2010, and its cargoistic innuendo, I was dumbfounded and speechless. I was also terrified. I kept my eyes in my fieldnotebook, where I was frantically writing, hoping my gaze would not give away my true feelings. In that sense, I suppose you could say I lied at the precise moment when my anguished friends were so desperately seeking a truth. But in the absence of any truths and fairness from the wider global system for over a century, never mind their own government and local agencies, my friends could only concoct a dreamscape of modernity to which I could offer no comment without violating my own moral center or appearing to perpetrate the very same lies Eastern Iatmul were trying to unmask.

Never before in Tambunum had I heard such cargosim. I was assured that this myth predates not only tourism but also the introduction of Christianity in the 1930s. Indeed, I was told on many occasions in 2010 that the missionaries and the New Testament mirror local beliefs, not vice versa. I am skeptical, however, given the enormous amount of data on funerary ritual and death I collected in 1988-1990. No, this was something new, not something I earlier missed. I see these cargoistic motifs as a last resort, in a sense, woven by Eastern Iatmul from Christianity, tourism, and traditional mythology to somehow address and explain their contemporary monetary crisis or, conversely, the crisis of modernity.

Conclusion

Linus Apingari explained to me the cause of the recent, devastating flood. Somebody from an upper-river village, a “hardworker” said Linus, earned money in town from selling sweet-potatoes he had grown in his gardens. A “lesman” or lazy man, jealous of his kinsman’s success, brought on the through magic.¹⁸ I see this explanation as a powerful parable about the anxieties aroused by the cash economy.

Money goes quickly, say Eastern Iatmul. Like capsizing a bamboo tube of water into the river, or a quick sip, money swiftly vanishes. Money is not like the small fruit of a tree, I was told, which you pick one day, and it regrows over night. No, money goes fast. And when it does, my friends recognized, it might not return.

The revised myth of death powerfully illustrates the woeful plight of a small community on the fringes of the world system, seeking not only validation but also a modicum of development they rightly believe they deserve. It was hard to listen to this myth in the sweltering heat of the men’s house and not feel profoundly sad. But just as clearly, it was hard to avoid hearing in this earnest, distressing myth a powerful critique of Western selfishness and the gross, painful inequities of globalization. Clearly, this tale links whiteness to an inherent inability even to acknowledge the suffering of others. At one level, my village friends seem, by locating riches in the netherworld, to pathetically place the material wealth they seek ever further out of reach. But on another level, they seem to be saying that nothing in the world as they know it could possibly explain or justify their plight.

¹⁸ Some people in the village do claim to know magic to “pull” or seduce money. Henry Gawi recites love magic.