

Culture, Mind, and Society

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David Lipset

Yabar

The Alienations of Murik Men
in a
Papua New Guinea Modernity

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Cover illustration: Murik men's carvings at a sale for tourists.

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For Diana, the huntress

SERIES EDITOR PREFACE

Psychological anthropologists study a wide spectrum of human activity: child development, illness and healing, ritual and religion, personality and political and economic systems, just to name a few. In fact, as a discipline that seeks to understand the interconnections between persons and culture, it would be difficult to come up with examples of human behavior that are outside the purview of psychological anthropology. Yet beneath this substantive diversity lies a common commitment. The practitioners of psychological anthropology seek to understand social activity in ways that are fitted to the mental and physical dimensions of human beings. Psychological anthropologists may focus on emotions or human biology, on language or art or dreams, but they rarely stray far from the attempt to understand the possibilities and the limitations on the ground of human persons.

Professor David Lipset describes men of the Murik Lakes region of Papua New Guinea, who find themselves caught in a sort of cultural limbo, suspended between their older ways and the wider world of a modern nation-state, a global economy and accelerating climate change. In particular, Dr. Lipset looks at the challenges of realizing masculinity in an environment in which neither precolonial culture nor modernity possesses an indisputable authority. In this cultural cacophony, men find themselves alienated not only from their social world but from their very selves. Yet—and in contrast to many studies of the march of modernity—Dr. Lipset does not depict his subjects as scrambling to adapt to a new hegemony.

In rich detail, he describes a number of social realms characterized by a multiplicity of cultural possibilities. While these possibilities leave no comfortable resting place, at the same time they provide opportunities for expression, dialogue and humanity.

Peter Stromberg

PREFACE

By way of introducing the topic of this book, I want to begin with a word about the meaning of its title and my relationship to it. As an American cultural and psychological anthropologist who is interested in various aspects of the relationship of tribal men to modernity, I have been doing fieldwork on this issue in Papua New Guinea (PNG) since I was a young man in the early 1980s. My research has primarily focused on men and masculinity among the Murik Lakes people, a rural society of coastal fisherfolk and traders who have been living with economic, religious and sociopolitical change since early twentieth century. Now from what I have come to gather, the *yabar* were venerated and feared as their most powerful ancestor-spirits in their precolonial Murik cosmology. Of all of the many ancestors in that archaic world, the *yabar* were attributed the greatest capacity to change the environment and persons. For example, two of them travelled widely in the coastal region, presenting people with outrigger-canoe technology, scattering mangrove propagules and leaving relics of their escapades along the coast. In Murik society even today, *yabar*-spirits use magic to make people terminally ill or just to cause a nagging cold.

Today, many Murik call white people *yabar goan* and *gnasen*, the “sons and daughters of *yabar*-spirits.” I had always assumed that the extension of the term originated as a kind of a first-contact, millenarian association of Western wealth and agency with the ancestors of the kind that has been reported elsewhere in PNG and throughout the Pacific region. But upon occasion, I also heard rural Murik referring to middle-class Papua New Guineans as children of “*yabar*.” During a casual conversation about the moral qualities of life in town in 2013, a senior widower offered up a

rather unexceptional contrast, which nevertheless startled me for his use of the term *yabar* in noun form. Although it was late in the morning, Sailas had just gotten up, having spent the predawn hours out fishing in the bay in a little outrigger canoe his deceased wife had used. “You people,” he remarked, “who live in *yabar* are all right. You are paid salaries. We have to [do subsistence] work in order to eat.”

Not until that moment had I drawn the obvious inference. If PNG nationals were no less “sons and daughters of *yabar*” than expatriate whites, then *yabar* had become a vernacular term for a “modernity” that was indifferent to race or cultural background. *Yabar* had become a vision of modernity that referred to a bureaucratic market economy in which paychecks and salaries were distributed every two weeks, as well as, more generally, to a time and space in which people and the environment were subject to massive moral and technological transformations. Of course, Sailas was also criticizing life in *yabar* on ethical grounds. It was for him an immoral economy, a time and space lacking in love, nurture and support. More specifically, it was a time and space of masculine alienation where Murik men lacked the desire that might once have been felt and expressed for them.

The thesis of this book is that such ideas as “*yabar*” are part of a dialogue of masculine alienation from modernity which preoccupies Murik men. However, I take this notion of “dialogue of alienation” a step or two further. That is to say, not only do Murik men speak of and act in terms of their disaffection from modernity in PNG, their estrangement also extends to their own culture, which I will call their “archaic.” Clearly, in Sailas’ comment, *yabar* no longer denotes the ancestors at all. The term has been emptied out of all its former cosmological meaning. In this sense, “*yabar*” expresses not a single but a dual alienation. I want to make a stronger point, however, which is that even before its contemporary expressions of deprivation, and so on, masculinity was already an alienated subject position in and from the Murik archaic.

This argument arose from long-term fieldwork in dialogue with comparative and theoretical analyses; I must also acknowledge, however, that the concept of alienation is one in which I have a bit of personal investment. It is true that the Ashkenazi Jews from whom I descend found themselves on the margins of a Euro-American modernity to which they fled, while Murik men, like men throughout the developing world, find themselves on the edges of modernity, not because they were forced to relocate to them, but rather because the political, economic and cultural

grounds of their lives shifted beneath them. As John Murray Cuddihy diagnosed in his extraordinary book *The Ordeal of Civility* (1987), Jewish intellectuals, having to conform to ambient expectations for emotion and thought that were foreign to them, answered creatively by making various kinds of social and theoretical “scenes” that kept the Gentiles at bay. But what is interesting is that—and this is the crucial point of overlap between them and the alienation of Murik men—modernizing Jewish intellectuals *were no less estranged from themselves* than they were from modernity. Thus Cuddihy observes that Jews were “caught between ‘his own’ whom he had left behind and the Gentile ‘host culture’ where he felt ill at ease and alienated” (1987: 4). Oddly perhaps, I share this sort of dual alienation with the Papua New Guinean men of the Murik Lakes who are the focus of this book. My ordeal as a man in the Diaspora and theirs in the *Yabar* are not identical of course, but I think the latter has helped me appreciate the former and *vice versa*.

When Murik men create new folk drama or debate rising sea levels, they speak of a time and space not of the self but of the other; however, following Simmel, Freud and Lacan, I view alienation, whether singular or dual, not as a position of helplessness and moping but as productive, if haltingly so. Certainly, composing this book has not been obvious or pleasant. But let me acknowledge the help and support I have received while doing the research for and writing it.

The fieldwork, which I began with my ex-wife, Kathleen Barlow, and the support of the Anthropology Department at UC San Diego, continued into the following decade with the support of the Australian Museum in Sydney, where Lissant Bolton and Jim Specht were then its primary sponsors. It went on in the early 1990s, now with the support of the Fowler Museum of Cultural Studies at UCLA, where Doron Ross supported a useful fieldtrip that became Chap. 5. I then did not return to the field until 2001, when, at the encouragement of my Minnesota colleague, Steven Gudeman, I undertook the first of seven fieldtrips, data from which informs this book. These received financial support from the Firebird Foundation of Portland Maine as well from the Anthropology Department at the University of Minnesota, specifically the Wilford Fund for Anthropological Research, the Imagine Fund in the College of Liberal Arts and from Travel Grants administered by Global Programs and Strategy Alliance.

A few incidents of fieldwork that primarily took place during 1993–2014 are scattered through this book. Practicing the Malinowskian method of long-term participant-observation, I appear in the villages, at meetings

and feasts in Men's Cult Houses or breakfasting in peoples' houses. I appear standing with Murik informants in the parking lot of a hotel in the national capital as well as sitting behind a betel nut stall along a road in a provincial town. Perhaps, pulling together a coherent narrative from these events might prove somewhat interesting. But the overriding sentiment to which I want to call attention here is the generous cordiality of Papua New Guineans, fictive Murik kin, and many others in that great nation.

Too numerous to mention, I would like at least to make call attention to a few of the more important people. In Port Moresby, I regularly met with Elijah and Anna Ginau and Andrew and Anna Emang as well Stalin Jawa, Andrew's brother. Prof. Steven Winduo and the Right Honorable Sir Michael and Lady Veronica Somare were helpful. In Wewak town, the provincial capital of the East Sepik Province, I was a routine guest of the late Wanuk and Bonoai and their family among whom I spent many happy hours sitting, eating and talking beneath the shade of the Starfruit tree in their yard. There, and elsewhere in town, I also had conversations with Maia, Nelson Kaiango, Sailas, whom I mentioned above, Jacob Ginau, Makus Murakau, Tom Sauma, Wangi and Nick Matui, among others. In the sister Murik villages of Darapap and Karau, I benefitted from dialogue with Andrew Komsing, Jameru, Yaase, James Kaparo and his wife, Regina, Joshua Sivik, Wapo, John Jawa, Smith Jakai, Mata and Errol, Frankie and Tabanus Wambu, Johnny Sakara and Evelyn, Noah Pame, Reuben Wapo, the late Luke Manambot and his second wife, Tekla, the late Joe Kabong and his two wives, Paulina and Du, Simon Baik, the late Willie Koki, his wife, Samoya, and their daughter, Aggie and her two sons, among many others.

I have been a faculty member of the Anthropology Department at the University of Minnesota during the entire time I did the research for, and wrote, this book. It has been a supportive intellectual and social environment. I thank the following colleagues at Minnesota: Mischa Penn, Timothy Dunnigan, William Beeman, John Ingham, Hoon Song and Steven Gudeman.

Of my little stream of Minnesota students and former students who contributed to this project, whether or not they knew they were doing so, I want to acknowledge Katherine Boris Dernbach, Joseph Esser, Jamon Halvaksz, Bridget Henning, Steve Kensinger, Eric K. Silverman, Amir Pouyan Shiva and Jolene Stritecky-Braun.

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While the Introduction and the Afterword were written specifically for this volume, each of its ethnographic chapters first appeared as journal articles between 2004 and 2011. I thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their support but more importantly for their criticism. And I strongly dispel any suspicion that what have now become chapters in this book are merely republications of these earlier pieces. Not only have they been thoroughly revised in terms of a new theoretical argument which each serves to illustrate, they have also been updated where relevant.

Chapter 2 draws from two articles: “Modernity Without Romance: Masculinity and Desire in Courtship Stories Told by Young Papua New Guinean Men,” *American Ethnologist* 31(2): 205–224 (2004), and “Women Without Qualities: Further Courtship Stories Told by Young Papua New Guinean Men,” *Ethnology* 46(2): 93–111 (2007). Chapter 3 was partly published as “Tobacco, Good and Bad: Prosaics of Marijuana in a Sepik Society,” *Oceania* 76: 245–257 (2006). Chapter 4 draws from “Mobil: Moral Ambivalence and the Domestication of Mobile Telephones in Peri-Urban Papua New Guinea,” *Culture, Theory and Critique* 54(3): 335–354. Chapter 5 draws from “A Melanesian Pygmalion: Masculine Creativity and Symbolic Castration in a Postcolonial Backwater,” *Ethos* 37(1): 50–78. Chapter 6 draws from “‘Skirts-Money-Masks,’ and other Chains of Signification in Post-Colonial Papua New Guinea,” in D. Lipset and P. Roscoe (eds.) *Echoes of the Tambaran: Masculinity, History and the Subject* (Canberra: ANU E Press). Chapter 7 is based on “The Tides: Masculinity and Climate Change in Coastal Papua New Guinea,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (NS) 17: 20–43.

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