

ARTEFACTS OF HISTORY: Events and the interpretation of Images

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It has been something of a surprise for Europeans to realise that their advent in the Pacific was something less than a surprise. A number of accounts give the sense that their coming had been expected; that they were previously known beings “returned” or manifest in new form. Such ideas certainly fuelled the millenarism of cargo cults in Papua New Guinea. A further return was indicated in the future. So the one event encapsulated both past and future time; indeed the two were conflated in so far as the second coming would bring not the generations unborn but generations already deceased, in the form of ancestors. Or if not the ancestors themselves, than their “cargo”.

What triggered this recovery of the past in the future was the actual advent itself: the appearance of Europeans, and the stories that circulated about them. In this chapter, I argue that at least as far as much of Melanesia is concerned, and especially Papua New Guinea, Europeans initially presented a particular kind of image. Images that contain within them both past and future time do not have to be placed into a historical context, for they embody history themselves. It follows that people do not therefore have to “explain” such images by reference to events outside them: the images “contain” events. And here we have a clue to the mixed reactions which early Europeans reported greeted their arrival in New Guinea. They were met with surprise, but the surprise was

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also tempered by nonchalance. As Lederman (1981) reported of her own arrival at Mendi in the New Guinea Highlands, people were eager to assure her that they had not been caught off guard. Their own accounts of themselves already contained these otherwise unexpected newcomers.

Images are presented through artefacts, and in cultures where artefacts are highly personalised (cf. Battaglia 1983) also through persons in their bodily form (O'Hanlon n.d.), and where it is equally the case that persons are objects of the regard of others, through performances of all kinds (Schieffelin 1985). People objectify or present themselves to themselves in innumerable ways, but must always do so through assuming a specific form. I suggest that Melanesians may have seen the advent of Europeans in the form of an artefact or a performance. The interesting question then becomes who the Melanesian thought was the maker of the artefact, the producer of the performance.

However, I do not present an ethnographically argued case. Rather, my intention is to raise some queries against anthropological perceptions of historical process. In evoking Melanesian "images", I present a set of perceptions which poses problems for the still current division of labour between social/cultural anthropologist and those concerned with material culture of the kind that finds its way to museums. The result of the division has been that we have hidden from ourselves possible sources of insight into the processes by which people such as the Melanesian of Papua New Guinea deal with social change, and change themselves.

Events—two views of time

There is a connection between the study of artefacts and the study of time, and between the idea of historical context and of cultural or social context. A certain perception of event is implied in the way that Western anthropologists have often understood the work of historians which mirrors in the way they have also understood museologists and those interested in "material culture".

Contrary to the aspirations of many practising historians, anthropologists often take them to be interested in "events". The idea of a concrete, incidental event holds much the same place in the anthropological world view as does the idea of a concrete, incidental artefact. Events may be understood as the inevitable and thus "natural" outcomes of social arrangements, or even more

poignant, the chance encounter that has not been anticipated by those arrangements. These are the two forms of event with which Sahlins (1985) is concerned in the Pacific. They are taken as items which must be brought to account in our system of knowledge, like so much raw material, like so many facts to be systematised.

No account can recover the past, argues Lowenthal (1985: 215), “because the past was not an account; it was a set of events and situations”. But the account may well create a relation internal to itself between “events” and the organising process or “systems” which link/explain them. Indeed, Sahlins’ study of Cook’s sojourn in Hawai‘i exemplifies the interest of social/cultural anthropology in locating events as the raw materials of their systematising endeavours. For Sahlins approaches the interaction between the people of Hawai‘i and the adventurer Cook in terms of the alteration of meanings that occurs in the cultural interpretation of historical events and the impingements of history on culture. He dwells on the antinomy between “the contingency of events and the recurrence of structures” (1985: xiii), expanding “event” into a relation between happening and structure. Structure and event are then mediated by a third term, “the structure of the conjuncture”. A structure must be seen to coordinate events: he dismisses the “pernicious distinction” between them in favour of the realisation of structure in event and vice versa. There is no event without system, he proposes (1985: 154) and this, of course, has to be how anthropologists make knowledge for themselves. If Sahlins has displaced the pernicious distinction between event and structure with their irreducible relationship, this irreducible relationship can only be that between the knowing subject and the objects of knowledge.

Sahlins suggests that an event as such should be seen as a *relation* between a certain happening and a symbolic system, it is the “happening” which takes the place of a natural fact in his scheme. A happening is domesticated through cultural interpretation. “The event is a happening interpreted” (1985: 153). This definition of event replicates for Europeans and anthropologists what is also imputed to the people of Hawai‘i. Sahlins’ analysis of events turns on the manner in which the Hawaiian people interpreted and contextualised, placing concepts in correspondence with external objects. Hence his remark that

Everything happens as if nothing happened: as if there could be no history, as if there could be no unexpected event, no happening not already culturally provided for. (1985: 30–31.)

Social action is an “actualisation” or “realisation” of the relationship between the concepts of the actors and the objects of their existence (1985: 154). Hence Sahlins’ focus on the events as interpreted action, which utilises (I suggest) the idea of event much as anthropologists habitually think of artefact. It is cultural construction which our systematising interests force us to subsume under a further relation which also includes its social context, *viz* structure. “Structure” is a frame metaphor, so to speak. Thus an event is seen as a culturally interpreted happening; in the same way an artefact is said to have meaning, this meaning requiring anthropological elucidation by reference to the system which produces meanings. Happenings stand in an intransigent rather than reflecting or expressive relation to structure, but are nonetheless not explicable to the observer (Hawaiian or European) without reference to a context. A cultural event is thus perpetually created out of a natural happening. In turn, the anthropologists’ elucidation of structure takes *these interpretations* (culture) as the proper facts, the raw material, of systematic anthropological knowledge. Anthropology out-contextualises indigenous (Hawaiian or European) contextualising efforts.

Whether or not we can use Melanesian material to comment on Polynesian, this excursus suggests one caveat in the opening up of historical investigation into culture and history in the Pacific. What do we intend to recover as ethno-history? Thus we can, as I think Sahlins does, regard people’s interpretations as “their” history, a kind of ethnohistory: their version of what we do lies in their referential codes and contextualising practices. I do not know if this would work in Melanesia. To recover the knowledge which comes from perceiving structural relationships between events, we might have to seek the counterpart of our systematising endeavours in people’s artefacts and performances, in the images they strive to convey, and thereby in how they present the *effects* of social action to themselves. And this would not look like our “history” at all.

And it would not look like our history, because a quite different sense of time is at issue.

These two views of time, European and Melanesian, can be apprehended as two ways of “explaining” or “making manifest” the nature of things. An event taken as incidental *occurrence* in nature, chancy and idiosyncratic, particular to the moment, is to be explained by being into its historical (cultural) context. That is, its relations with other events is laid out, so that events are often seen in progression, one following another. An event taken as a *performance* is to be known by its effect: it is understood in terms of what it contains, the forms that conceals or reveals, registered in the

actions of those who witness it. A succession of forms (cf. Wagner 1986b: 210) is a succession of displacements, each a substitution for what has gone previously and thus in a sense containing it, as it contains the effects it will have on the witness. Every image is in this sense a new image. Consequently, time is not a line between happenings; it lies in the capacity of an image to evoke past and future simultaneously. If this is the case, then in so far as they are concerned with their own uniqueness, the problem the makers of such images set themselves is how to overcome the recursiveness of time: how indeed to create an event that will be unique, particular, innovatory. What is true of time is also true of space. Analogously, we might say, space is not an area between points, it is the effectiveness of an image in making the observer think of both here and there, of oneself and others. The problem becomes how people can grasp the other's perspective to make it reflect on themselves; artefacts are displayed and circulated in order to return that knowledge (Munn 1986).

The advent of Europeans

Despite the uniqueness of the event in the European record, Miklouho-Maclay's initial experiences on the Rai coast of New Guinea were to be repeated elsewhere. Whereas only certain Melanesians came to develop cargo cults, it seems that everywhere they expressed a pragmatic interest in transactions with the newcomers, and Lawrence notes the extent to which Miklouho-Maclay had to satisfy local demand for his goods. He established his position by gift-giving, among other things, and "his gifts were always returned" (1964: 60). At the same time, his biographer gives dramatic emphasis to Miklouho-Maclay's surprise at being taken for "some kind of supernatural being" (Webster 1984: 72). The man who gave gifts was also a local deity (Lawrence 1964: 65; Webster 1984: 104).

On the part of many Europeans, both those involved at the time and anthropologists afterwards, common assumptions have been that (1) the coming of Europeans was a unique event; (2) it therefore stretched people's credulity, so that they had to find a place for the exotic strangers in their cognitive universe; so (3) it is no surprise that Melanesians regarded the first Europeans as spirits of deities; and (4) no surprise that in order to make sense of this untoward event, people reacted by trying to change their own lives and thus tap European power. Underlying these is the final assumption that

(5) the Europeans really were the powerful ones, not least because it was *they* who were the occurrence, who arrived in the Melanesian's midst. In short, within anthropological analysis, the advent of Europeans has the status of a historical fact. The people of Papua New Guinea were bought face to face with a unique moment in history.

I am sure people were taken by surprise. But should we interpret their reactions by assimilating that event to an event in history? Suppose it were not a unique moment, that it was not the case that only the Europeans had power, and that it did not require that people create new contexts for coping with the untoward. Let me produce a set of counter-suppositions, synthetic in that it is drawn from what we know of many times and places, but nonetheless potentially helpful in considering specific times and places — such as the exploration of the Highlands documented by Connolly and Anderson (1984). Suppose, then, we assimilate that event, the arrival of Europeans, to something that Melanesians were in fact already making. Uniqueness, power and context can all be put into a rather different light.

First, uniqueness. The Melanesian world is one where people constantly take *themselves* by surprise. And what takes them by surprise are the performances and artefacts they create. One thinks here of figures and carvings, and also of landmarks held to commemorate past events (Rubenstein 1981), tools taken as evidence of divine creation (Battaglia 1983), or shell valuables which carry a record of their exchange with them (Damon 1980). Accomplishment itself is celebrated. Melanesian politics are typified by the achieved nature of prestige — but the idea of achievement goes beyond politics, and inheres in the very constitution of collective activity such as ceremonial exchange, spirit cults or whatever. People amaze themselves by their capacity for collective action, as the men of Mt. Hagen are amazed when they decorate on exchange occasions. Their presentation evinces the power they hope to have encompassed, at once a divination of past success and an omen for the future (Strathern and Strathern 1971). We may borrow Kapferer's (1984: 193) observation from elsewhere, that rites are never mere repetition: acts and utterances constantly reassemble meanings. So however standard or traditional ways of doing things may be, the final configuration allows for the unexpected: a performance cannot be anticipated, for an image cannot be presented till the moment it is composed.

Moreover, on many occasions, Melanesians present themselves as other than their appearance normally suggests. One may instance the disguise of self-decoration that hides the outer skin

of the dancer by bringing his inner qualities to the surface (M. Strathern 1979); or the ambiguous displays of clans on the dancing ground that at once conceal their internal differences and reveal that no such conflicts exist (O'Hanlon 1983). Play may be made with man-spirit and other identities. Gell (1975: 243) observes of the Umeda that the identification of a masked dancer with the figure of a cassowary is only a disguise for the profounder identification of the cassowary with the man. The secret of the cassowary is that he is a man. Schwimmer encapsulates this dualism in his comment on how often Melanesian dancers play in pairs, both parties representing spirits, masked or in mask-like attire: "Each knows himself to be a man, but when he looks at his partner he can see a spirit" (1984: 253).

If they felt they were in the presence of an accomplishment of some kind, then Melanesians would not necessarily have to interpret the advent of Europeans as uniquely untoward. They were beings disguised: a surprise, but not a special surprise. And the identification of the men with spirits would be no more a special identification than the subsequent revelation that these were men.

Second, power. Specific to Melanesians' reactions is the way they sought out transactions with the Europeans. They appeared practical, even mercenary, despite the wonder and marvel with which Europeans frequently *reported* they were received. Indeed, some of the Europeans (though this could hardly be said of the sober Miklouho-Maclay) seem to have been taken by their own image as a cause of wonder. The extent to which they subsequently dwelt on the apparently irrational elements in the indigenous response (as evidenced in "cargo thinking") was a prop to this.

Yet what must be explained on the Melanesian side is people's simultaneous construction of Europeans as spirits and their nonchalant acceptance (also reported by Lawrence 1964: 233) of what Europeans regarded as technological marvels. Their capacity to interact with these beings and get things out of them became evident very early on. It was that interaction which revealed these beings were (also) human. In the example which Clark (n.d.) gives, the two perceptions existed side by side. People thus appear to have assumed that the Europeans' personal attributes, like other things they brought, were transferable, and the only problem was how to make the encounter work. Thus the Highlanders of Mt. Hagen sometimes think of themselves as turning "European" or else as remaining "Hagen", as though these were choices between domains of personal efficacy.

One might suppose it was the Melanesians who had a sense of power. If the advent were treated as performance, akin to that of the

masked dancer, then who was the producer of it? It cannot be the dancing assemblage of the mask itself. Performances are the artefacts of persons (whether human or not), contrivances, displays of artifice, even tricks. Indeed, it is arguable that many kinds of events we regard as historical contingencies in Melanesian's eyes have the character of improvisation (Wagner 1975). The makers of a performance are those who conceive it, fashion it in their diverse minds and finally accomplish the display. A performance becomes an index of people's capacities; an enactment of a feast "is an accomplishment, a kind of coup" (Wagner 1976b: 193). The inhabitants of the Rai Coast may well have been in terror when the Europeans first appeared, as Miklouho-Maclay's diaries (1975) attest.¹ But we cannot assume that it was simply terror of the powerful Europeans. My guess is that an initial component of people's terror may well have been at their own power — at what they had done to bring about an enactment of a quite extraordinary kind — or power they perhaps attributed to particular big men or neighbouring peoples (J. Liep, *pers. comm.*). *Someone* must have produced them.

There is a sense in which a witness is also an agent. A performance is completed by the audience (Schieffelin 1985), who may play an alternately passive and active role. In Melanesian cosmology, the agent or doer of an activity is often separated from the person (or happening) who compels the action. Thus under many patrilineal regimes, maternal kin are the "cause" of the prestations which flow to them as recipients by virtue of the health they bestow on their daughter's/sister's child; the active agents, those credited with the prestige which comes from taking action, are the paternal donors of the gifts. Donors show their power in accomplishing a prestation. In the same vein, to the extent that Europeans presented themselves as a cause for the people's response, then capacity to act lay on the side of those who responded. The Europeans would be an inert cause for all this activity.

Third, context. It is this question above all which dominates anthropological analyses of cargo cults. The assumption is that cults show people trying to adjust the cognitive disorientation, or psychic disturbance in Siikala's critical (1982) phrase, created by the unexpected arrival of strangers in their midst. Yet their unexpectedness was, as it were, of an expected kind, merely a strange artefact. Initial difficulties in talking may have played a part in this. Europeans came hardly as enemies or allies would, with talk and ambiguous motivations, but confronted the beholders with, if not an unintelligible, an ineffable visual presence. Motivation had

to be located in someone. I have suggested that the witnesses might know themselves as in some way the producers of the spectacle: if not themselves the makers of it, then themselves as the cause of their neighbours or enemies' actions directed at them. But the point about a spectacle is that it is disconnected from everyday events, is the result of motivations hidden until the moment of revelation. It is in this sense also to be taken for itself. It only works if it is untoward.

There is more here than simply the fact that there can be no happening that is not culturally provided for, that cannot be "coded" as a recognisable event of some sort (Sahlins 1985: 31). And more thus than simply the assimilation of the newcomers to an existing pantheon of supernatural beings. The point about the sequence I have described is its self-contained nature. We do not have to imagine the event as an "interpreted happening".

An artefact or performance grasped for itself is grasped as an image. An image definitively exists out of context; or, conversely, it contains its own prior context. The problems all lay in what was to be the future outcome of the performance, its consequences for the future, what would be revealed next, in short, its further effect. Consequently, the European advent did not have to be put into its "social context". Melanesians did not have to "make sense" of it: they did not have to evoke the wider cultural and social milieu from which the Europeans came since they were under no compulsion to "explain" them. And ignorance of this context did not put the Europeans beyond reach, as the Europeans may well have thought it did. (No doubt *they* would have liked to have felt beyond reach, till education had taught people about Western society and the historical significance of the moment of contact.) On the contrary, the very act of presentation constituted the only context that was relevant — if Melanesians were also inclined to open the image up to explanation, then the question would be concerned with motivation, to be elicited or tested by the kinds of relationships into which the strangers could be enticed to engage with the Melanesians themselves.

In short, we do not have to suppose a cognitive disorientation because we do not have to suppose that Melanesians thought they were dealing with beings whose decontextualisation presented a problem.

Image and contexts

Melanesian responses are unlikely to have been stable. Indeed, what I have sketched here probably occupied only a point in a longer process which would turn these constructions inside-out, locate power on the Europeans' part and Melanesians as the inert causes of it, and eventually dismantle the constructions altogether. I imagine them merely in order to give pause to the kinds of constructions that Western anthropologists have in the past so easily imposed on historical events and the clash of cultures. It was suggested that such Western constructions often play on an analogy between putting artefacts into their social/cultural "context" and laying out events as sequences which appear as points "in time" to be connected up to one another. Let me advance the argument with reference to the Melanesian construction of artefacts perceived as images.

I draw on Wagner's analysis of artefacts created by the Barok of New Ireland (1986b) as well as his theorising on obviation (1986a and elsewhere). The artefacts include the spatial structure of their men's house, performances such as feasting, and in general the metaphors by which people construe ideas about power. In the minds of the Barok, such items evoke commonly held images. By "image" Wagner intends us to understand a particular type of trope. Perceptual image (or "point metaphor") exists in relationship to referential coding (or "frame metaphor") (Wagner 1986a: 31). Coding opens out a symbol with reference to its constituent parts and thus its relation to other symbols: it expands and obviates an image by interpreting it, by setting it within a context which thus becomes part of its meaning. An image on the other hand condenses or collapses context into itself in the sense that all points of reference are obviated or displaced by its single form.

The constructions at issue may be illustrated through an example of an artefact that circulated all over Melanesia: the ceremonial stone axe. Battaglia (1983) presents an illuminating exegesis for axes used on Sabarl in the Massim. The triangular shape provided by the angle of the blade and haft may be perceived "as image of action and directed movement" (1983: 296). It at once evokes past actions and foreshadows future ones. Sabarl comment that it has the shape of mortuary feasts, that is, a lateral movement of wealth items from the father's side (the left arm of a person) to the mother's side (the right arm), which commemorates the support that kin gave a person in life. The elbow thus represents "the joint in the socially vital movement of reciprocal giving...[and] the ideal route of valuable objects away from person, clan or village and...back again"

(1983: 297). But that explanation also covers (obviates) others. On the joint itself is the figure of a bird with a snake in its mouth, an image of a mythical challenge presented as sexual opposition. Battaglia argues that the ideal support relations between kin are transformed at death into individualistic conflict between them (over inheritance and such). Yet the simultaneity of ideas about support and conflict contained within the axe cannot be matched by the explanations which people give, for these must always place one perception in relation to another. An image is distinct from an element in a comprehensive coding or exegesis.

It is less the privileging of one interpretation over another that is pertinent than the relationship between interpretation (frame metaphor) and the apprehension of something that is only itself (point metaphor). An object at one juncture taken for granted, as an image “standing for itself”, at another may be coded through reference to further images (whose meanings must at that point be taken for granted). The bird-elbow intrinsic to the Sabarl axe has a shape that may also be explained as a map for kin relations; when these become points of reference for the axe, they take on assumed qualities of their own (are images of support, point metaphors). But the kin relations may then be opened to explanation, as happens in the give and take of the mortuary exchanges of which the axes are a part, in which case they cease to be taken for granted; and so on. The process of explanation by referencing or decoding deprives the image of its power to elicit taken-for-granted meanings. Conversely, by itself, the Sabarl axe is not a simple illustration of meanings describable in other terms: rather, it presents to perception a particular *form* that is its own. What the Sabarl Islander grasps in handling the axe that can be verbally explained as “the same as” kin relationships activated in exchange is not those kin relationships in fact. For when *they* become the focus of attention, kin are able to do things with their exchanges of valuables — including the axes themselves — which reinterpret the ideal route that valuables should take. In effect, in “explaining” or “acting out” their relationships to one another, kinsfolk subvert the taken-for-granted status of paternal support in the bird-elbow image. One relationship substitutes or displaces another.

An artefact, or a performance such as an exchange, perceived as an image, is not reducible to the coding explanations that accompany it, or vice versa. Albert (1986: 241) makes the point *apropos malanggan* for which other New Irelanders are famous: their expressivity “is to be found in the organisation of forms in the carvings, and not in some relation between particular forms and their referents”.

Referential coding is not only found in people's verbal explanations: Wagner's sequence between point metaphor and frame metaphor, between image and code, can be realised in the contraction and expansion of any kind of artefact. Images may substitute for one another in a succession of analogies. At the same time, images both contain and elicit interpretations. Any one image, he argues, may synthesise several meanings, and in provoking response elicits this synthesis in the perceiver; the synthesis is taken apart when those meanings become expanded (coded) in reference to other images. Thus the meanings of the Sabarl axe are de-synthesised when they are acted out with respect to the maternal and paternal kin who exchange axes as valuables. The coding is accomplished through further performance or assemblage of artefacts, as well as through verbal exegesis. It is significant, however, that exegesis is accorded a special place by Barok. The effect of description may be taken as contrary to the effect produced by an image (including a verbal image such as a metaphor), so image in turn is understood by Barok as a distinctive means of construing power or effectiveness: "An image can and must be witnessed or experienced, rather than merely described or summed up verbally" (1986:xiv), and if it must be experienced in order to be understood, "the experience of its effects is at once its meanings and its power" (1986b: 216). Barok remain suspicious of talk. Talk is always part of an effort to manipulate events and relationships, making motivation ambiguous, whereas — like the revelation of gift (Biersack 1982) — in producing images, people produce the effects by which they know what they themselves really are. For "producing an image" means that an artefact has assumed a specific form (the image) in the mind of the viewer.

Images are reflected self-knowledge. The way in which a person responds to a taboo or an injunction shows that person to be the kind of kinsman or kinswoman he/she is; similarly the visual figure of the men's house Barok build contains men's feasting activities and ancestral power in such a way as to make manifest their legitimated relationship with the dead. When the advent of Europeans created an affect similar to such "images", it would also provoke self-knowledge. It would present a particular form to the observer, known by the response it thereby elicited. As the carrier of bearer of its effects, the observer (in whose mind the image forms) was also in this sense, like all audiences, a producer of them.

I deliberately refer to the process of coding and referentiality in verbal explanation in order to draw a comparison with certain Western practices of knowledge. When Melanesians construct knowledge about themselves and their relations with others, they

may well draw on perceptions that have the status of image where a European scholar would deploy verbal concepts in a referential, coding manner. A European is likely to explicate any one relationship through reference to others, through his or her description creating systems by bringing different concepts into connection with one another. Above all, he or she will “make sense” of individual incidents by putting them into their social or cultural context: an encounter with strangers requires understanding in terms of the society from which the strangers come, as a happening must be interpreted as an event in history. One might imagine, however, that the Melanesian would understand encounters in terms of their effects. It is the effect which is created, and effects (images) are produced through the presentation of artefacts. A concept of “society” is not an explanatory context for people’s acts; rather sociality, as Wagner (1975) argues, consists in the implicit conventions against which people innovate and improvise. They construct further artefacts, such as cargo cults or wealth transactions to see what the further effects will be. And the revelation will always come as a surprise.

A division of labour

The comparison throws light on certain assumptions held by social and cultural anthropologists over a recent period in anthropological history.

Ever since the 1920s, much of Western anthropology has been concerned with approaching “others” through the elucidation of “their” world views. Part of our knowledge about material artefacts, for instance, must be our knowledge of their knowledge: it is taken for granted that we study the significance which such artefacts have for the people who make them, and thus their interpretations of them. Anthropologists, therefore uncover meanings by putting people’s own meanings into their social and cultural context. One might call this the phase of modernism in English-speaking anthropology (Ardener 1985; M. Strathern 1987).

It gave rise to a division of labour in which the study of material culture became divorced from social or cultural anthropology. On the one hand were experts who looked at artefacts (museologists), while on the other hand were specialists in the study of society or culture (social and cultural anthropologists). Over this period in anthropological history, the latter explicitly conceived themselves as experts in the elucidation of social/cultural “contexts”. Items of

all kinds (not only artefacts but events and relationships) were to be understood by seeing how they related or referred to others. The compulsion applied equally to the artefacts of contemporary peoples and the remains or exemplars that found their way to museums. Indeed, I have suggested that there are strong parallels between anthropologists' attitudes towards history and towards the study of material culture. "Material culture" came to designate a kind of technological substrate by contrast with the abstraction "culture", which designated the values and modes of social life.

There were always notable exceptions, and current interest in the culture of consumption (see, for instance, Miller 1987) suggests we can refer to this period as a past epoch. Nevertheless, for the time to which I refer, much anthropological analysis was almost exclusively concerned with the elucidation of "systems" — making sense of items by relating them in a coherent manner. The meanings of artefacts were elucidated by their context, whether the context was open to indigenous reflection, to be contextualised in turn, or was presented as a model on the ethnographer's part. Making social (or cultural) context the frame of reference had one important result. It led to the position that one should really be studying the framework itself (the social context = society). The artefacts were *merely illustration*. For if one sets up social context as the frame of reference in relation to which meanings are to be elucidated, then explicating that frame of reference obviates or renders the illustrations superfluous: they are become exemplars or reflections of meanings which are produced elsewhere. It was in this sense that social anthropology could proceed independently of the study of material culture. Material culture became perceived as background information. Even when art forms were foregrounded for study, it was usually because they were made visible by some social process such as "ritual". In the many analyses of art or decoration undertaken in Melanesia, anthropologists often took as their task simply locating these objects within a frame *already described* in other terms (in terms of values and principles generated by the politico-religious system or embedded in kinship structure or gender relations or whatever).

Frames of reference are intrinsic to the modernist anthropological exercise. These are the relationships within which we place our discoveries about people's cultural lives. The reason that material objects appear so intransigent is precisely because they are not the framework itself. Rather, they occupy a dual position, both its raw material and illustrative of its principles and values (at once "nature" and "culture" in relation to system). This creates a problem for the understanding of Melanesian perceptions.

In supplying social context, the enquiring ethnographer does not merely translate other people's referencing into his or hers, but weights the perception of an object. An axe "explained" as the elbow of exchange partnerships is re-located within a framework which occludes *both* other frameworks *and* its significance as a synthetic image in itself. If decoding the meaning of an object makes certain presumptions about its referentiality, then putting them within their social context becomes a symbolic move analogous to the expansion of a frame metaphor from a point metaphor. Referentiality always introduces a further set of tropes. The whole perception is now the object *plus* its explanation, the interpreted happening indeed.

Keesing (1987) has commented on Melanesians' frequent reluctance to give exegesis — to explain things by expanding frames verbally. Professed agnosticism is a kind of double resistance — first to altering meaning by making out one image to be another and secondly to privileging one frame that would exclude others. For talk always creates its own versions and transformations of what is being discussed (e.g. Goldman 1983; Rumsey 1986). "Translation" from one medium to another (as giving literal explanation for a metaphor, or describing an object in words) alters the significance of what is being presented.

We might reflect again on the self-proclaimed distance of Western social and cultural anthropologists from their material- cultural counterparts. If anthropologists are specialists in social contexts, in constantly apprehending items through frame metaphors ("society", "culture") which provide points of reference for the meaning of artefacts or art productions, then what are museologists but conservers of images? The exploration of internal design, the attention to artefact *qua* artefact, the relating of one style to others, the preservation of exemplars, suggests a self-contained, self-referential universe. The move from classification to aesthetics in museum displays could be seen as one attempt to present a perception that consciously minimises reference to wider social or cultural contexts.

This is a controversial assertion; much museology is devoted to putting objects into their cultural context, producing functional and interpretative displays, objects as artefacts not art (Clifford 1985a; Williams 1985). At the same time, we may note Stocking's observation on the space in which museum pieces exist. Encompassing both object and viewer, it has a "complex three-dimensionality that distinguishes the museum archive from essentially two-dimensional repositories of linear texts" (Stocking 1985: 4). Because they are removed from their original contexts in

time and space (which can never be recovered), and recontextualised in others, the meanings of material forms preserved in museums are problematic. But, as a result, there must always be a perceived discontinuity between the image and its new context (cf. Clifford 1985b). We thus imagine that the material artefact cannot be domesticated in quite the same way as texts, verbal descriptions of events, are subordinated in anthropological accounts to an overall analysis of society or culture; it is after all the objects themselves that appear to be on display, not the analysis of society. Consequently, they command attention “in themselves”. In so far as we perceive this to be the case, they remain figures against the grounding “social context”. Thus Westerners apprehend the responses they evoke as inevitably having an element of the aesthetic to it. Whatever battery of meanings and uses are ascribed to the museum object, display draws attention to form, explicitly confronting the observer with his or her own perceptions, and thus his or her act of appropriation in looking at them.

Perhaps the museum that looks like an art gallery presents us with a certain analogy to the Melanesian construction of image. It is, of course, only a *partial* analogy. The objects both elicit a reaction on the part of the observer — in a manner analogous to the presentation of a Melanesian image — and as like as not will elicit an idiosyncratic reaction: that is, the self-knowledge so produced will necessarily be the self-knowledge of a Western kind, the aesthetics of personal appreciation. To recreate the elicitory power that Melanesian images had for the people who made them, one would have to be able to take for granted the cultural values and social relations of which they were composed. The paradox is that if it is taken for granted, such Melanesian knowledge of sociality is not referenced and coded. But *we* can only grasp that dimension through *our* referential and coding procedures.

This paradox is intractable, because for us there can be no resolution in favour of one kind of presentation over the other — our aesthetic and referential strategies bypass one another and all we can do is move between the two points and know that each is inadequate. But that movement is essential. The “trick” would be to make that movement itself at once an image and a code in the anthropologist’s mind. That might be approximated in the way we control our own metaphors in writing.

I have argued that we should extend our concept of artefact to performance and to event. We might get a closer approximation to Melanesians’ idea if we deliberately use that extension to switch metaphors. If we are prepared to see artefacts as the enactment of events, as memorials of and celebrations to past and future

contributions (cf. O’Hanlon n.d.) — if the axe blade really is an icon of exchange relationship — then we must be prepared to switch the metaphors the other way too — to empty our notion of history as the natural or chancy occurrence of events that present a problem for structure — to talk about people using an event the way they may use a knife, or creating an occasion the way they create a mask or demonstrate personal efficacy in laying out the phases of a feast according to strict social protocol. And that is why I chose the most *event-full*, *chance-full* occurrence in our own eyes as illustration, the arrival of Europeans. For we can extend the same metaphor — talking about events as artefacts — to visualise how people act as though they had power when confronted with the untoward.

Perhaps the elucidation of possible Melanesian responses to such historical events will throw light on the changeability of these cultures. Melanesians’ readiness to accommodate novelty and the unexpected has long been commented upon. A significant feature, and one that might have been important in processes of cultural differentiation, is that the *enactment* of social life was always a little unexpected. It was not the ground rules of sociality that people were concerned to represent to themselves, but the ability of persons to act in relation to these. This ability to act was captured in a performance or an artefact, improvisations which created events as achievements. In this sense, all events were staged to be innovatory. Melanesians’ own strategies of contextualisation necessarily included themselves as witnesses of such spectacles. If they sought explanation, it would be to account for motivation (who produced the spectacle and with what intent). That would then let them know who they themselves were, for in entering into relations with Europeans, they would interpret the European presence through the only meaningful reference possible, in terms of its effects upon themselves.

Let me rewrite an ethnographic vignette. A. Strathern (1971 :xii) reports the words of an old man from Hagen who told how his neighbours had reacted to the appearance of the first administrative patrol in the area. The white man was thought to be a pale-skinned cannibal ogre, but “then he gave us shell valuables in return for pigs, and we decided he was a human”. The unspoken side of this statement might read: “Then we gave him pigs in return for shell valuables, and we realised we were human still”.

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Notes

1. However, any reader who wishes to pursue the details of Miklouho-Maclay’s reaction is advised to consult the translation published in Moscow 1982 (Progress Publishers). I am grateful to Daniil Tumarkin for his comments on the accuracy of the Madang version.

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