

Description, difference and history, in Melanesia, for example

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Abstract

This article is about the relationship between common history and specific cultures. Specifically, it seeks a resolution to the ongoing problem of which of these should be given logical priority in anthropology—that is, which should be given the status of first cause. This problem is exemplified in the 1990s debate between proponents of the so-called ‘New Melanesian Ethnography’ and those of the ‘New Melanesian History’. Thinking through the Parliament House sculptures controversy that erupted in Papua New Guinea in 2013, we draw an analogy between the work of Marilyn Strathern and Dipesh Chakrabarty to argue that difference can be located in practices of *description*. Drawing on the ideas of Elizabeth Anscombe and Ian Hacking, we suggest that descriptive practices are inextricably linked with intentional actions—that is, intentional actions exist ‘under a description’. On this basis, we argue that neither culture nor history can be a first cause, since both are created by specific descriptive practices—history and ethnography as accounts of the world, for example, but also indigenous accounts embodied in state-building, Pentecostal Christianity, or gift exchange. We close by suggesting how anthropologists might allow the times and differences of others to flourish in their own descriptive practices and avoid the

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kind of metaphysical impasse that marked Melanesian studies in the 1990s.

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1 | THE PARLIAMENT HOUSE SCULPTURES

Completed in 1984, Papua New Guinea's (PNG) Parliament House is an unapologetically modernist piece of architecture, composed of sweeping curves formed of concrete. However, its overall design is based on the traditional architecture of a ceremonial *haus tambaran* from the Sepik River region, decorated with traditional carving and artwork from different areas of the country. Its design was explicitly intended to symbolise national unity. The first Speaker to preside in the new Parliament House, Timothy Bonga (quoted in Rosi, 1991, p. 1), expressed this clearly when he said:

The new National Parliament is far more than just a building or even just a parliament. It is for Papua New Guinea, a symbol of political independence ... Its sweeping lines impress, while signifying essential aspects and parts of our nation.

Unity was an issue of concern for a linguistically and culturally diverse country, which had only achieved independence in 1975. Nor were symbols of the unified nation limited to government architecture. The design of the Parliament building was contemporary, with government sponsored attempts to create a *national* artistic aesthetic, based on 'traditional' designs, but embodied and presented in a bold, modernist idiom (Raabe, 2019).

Such attempts to incorporate distinctively Melanesian forms of life into the modernising project of the state were typical of early post-independence politics. Immediately post-independence policy was based on the notion that 'Melanesian' forms of social organisation, economic relations, and decision making could be incorporated into the governance of the developmental state. This project was most notably articulated in Narokobi's (1983) *The Melanesian Way*, which influenced Michael Somare's founding administration to incorporate some of its principles in the National Constitution and as Eight Aims, again based on supposedly 'Melanesian' principles, to govern national policy making (Connell, 1997; cf. Bashkow, 2020; Otto, 1997a). As in the design of the Parliament building, they had the effect of incorporating 'Melanesian culture' into a project of modern statehood, citizenship, and economic development—an incorporation that entailed the modification and generalisation of 'culture' as a property of Papua New Guineans imagined as citizens (or 'nationals') in general, and only uneasily as distinctive features of particular, located sets of people.

This project proved to be unsustainable, however, and by the early 2000s was in disarray. PNG's 'indigenous' development strategy had been underwritten by the colossal Panguna gold and copper mine on Bougainville, which was closed in 1989 due to separatist violence on the island (Connell, 1991; Filer, 1990). In the early 1990s, heavily indebted, PNG was subjected to a series of structural adjustment policies, both home-grown and imposed by the World Bank. The idealism of a grass-roots, village economics of equitable distribution was effectively abandoned in favour of a growth-led policy, based on large-scale resource extraction (Connell, 1997), in



which local people's lands and interests were more or less explicitly sacrificed in favour of national economic growth (Banks, 2019).

At the same time, the demands of structural adjustment shone a spotlight on state expenditure, and especially on issues of corruption. Corruption appeared exactly at the interface between 'traditional' rural life and the apparatus of state and government (Dalsgaard, 2019). Parliamentarians and officials were seen as acquiring their posts through locally-based 'wantok' networks. MPs bought votes from linguistic, cultural, or kin-based groups, and distributed development projects and funds to their supporters. Political parties were ephemeral and unstable, serving mainly as vehicles for influential men to access state resources to underwrite local political ambitions. Local people, in turn, were accused of regarding government as a source of unearned benefits, which could be accessed simply by backing the winning candidate.

In this context, in 2013, the Speaker of the House, Theodore Zurenuoc, removed wood carvings from the Parliament building's interior that he and others saw as 'ungodly images and idols' in a stark reversal of Bonga's position of 1984. Zurenuoc, and his supporters, the Unity Team, contended that the political and economic difficulties of PNG were the result of poor governance, which they understood as the result of a lack of unity that resulted in nepotism, corruption, and self-interested decision making. Their views were shaped by an evangelical Christianity that seeks to create a Christian nation, where diversity is potentially transcended and replaced by the body of Christ (Timmer, 2024), and Melanesians will take up a place in a church that extends to all peoples without distinction. Zurenuoc aimed to replace the carvings in the Parliament house with symbols of Christian unity and had already installed a historic King James Bible in the Parliament chamber (for more recent analyses of this controversy, see, Pickles & Santos da Costa, 2021; Santos da Costa, 2021).

How should we understand how the state, *kastom*, or culture, and Christianity play out in this controversy? From the point of view of post-independence politics, Melanesian culture was a factor affecting the modernising project of citizenship and state-formation. The point of *The Melanesian Way* is exactly that PNG could be inwardly Melanesian, while outwardly enjoying recognition as a sovereign state, equivalent to others. The shift in political emphasis of the 1990s, towards World Bank orthodoxy, retained the modernising aspirations of the post-independence generation, but excluded *kastom* from this project. *Kastom*, and rural forms of life in general, ceased to be an engine of history and had become a drag on PNG's forward movement through time. Across this whole period, politics in PNG was governed by an explicitly modernising agenda devoted to notions of historical progress. This is reflected in the fact that ultimately, Zurenuoc failed to have the carvings removed from the Parliament House and was compelled by a court order to replace those he had damaged or destroyed. The basis for this judgement was that the carvings represented 'cultural heritage', which is protected by the constitution. The positioning of culture as *heritage* in this context clearly marks it as epiphenomenal to the secular life of the modern nation, a life that accords culture an essentially artistic value.¹

Zurenuoc's actions themselves, however, are not comprehensible within this secular,² historical register. The politics of the Unity Team were heavily influenced by Christianity, particularly in Pentecostal and other Charismatic forms. There is little doubt that Zurenuoc intended to provoke a sharp break in PNG social life and politics by his removal of 'pagan' imagery from the Parliament. The rupture he sought was almost certainly deliberately modelled on the dispensational time of Christianity itself and has strong resonances with other evangelical projects elsewhere, for example, the English Reformation (Duffy, 1994; cf. Santos da Costa, 2024, p. 113). His actions were thus *faithful* rather than secular. His project would be radically misinterpreted if

it were read as some strategic deferral or appropriation of Christianity for other ends as Comaroff and Comaroff (1991) might argue.

At least one other reading of these events is potentially available, namely that of ‘ordinary’ Papua New Guineans—for example, those people for whom carvings of the sort destroyed by Zurenuoc are not primarily public sculptures, but objects deployed in ritual and interacted with in everyday life. From this perspective, Zurenuoc’s removal of ‘pagan’ images from the Parliament has a strong aesthetic affinity with other forms of action, focused on destruction as a means of renewing social life (Hermkens, 2019; Wagner, 1975). For example, Timmer (2019) highlights Clark’s (2000) account of how Wiru people from the highlands of PNG attempted to come to terms with the ways in which Australian colonials conducted exchange. Finding that their conventions for conducting exchanges were ineffective in accessing white people’s wealth, Wiru suddenly and systematically destroyed their shell wealth and pig herds. This perspective would make Zurenuoc’s apparent intent to reforge PNG as a Christian country defined by Christian teachings comprehensible in a Melanesian (i.e. *non-Christian*, but also *non-secular*) frame of *kastom*.

2 | OUTLINE OF THE ARGUMENT

In this article, we take the case of the Parliament House sculptures as an icon of an apparently perennial problem for anthropology, the origin or first cause of human difference. In our reading, this problem consists in a choice that anthropologists must make. Does difference arise from historical processes, in which case cultures are secondary phenomena, effects of a set of actually existing relations in a universal time (compare Sahlins, 1985 and Strathern, 1990)? In the account above, the perspective of the developmental state stands in for this position. Alternatively, do we take difference to be the primary phenomenon, in which case temporality itself is a product of culture, and therefore both a second-order phenomenon and multiple (Pedersen & Holbraad, 2013)? We take the difference between Christianity and *kastom* as a way of figuring the multiplicity of cultural forms and their associated times (we are, of course, aware that both of these terms are in fact diverse in themselves). The ways in which Christianity and *kastom* differ from the modernising project of the state stand for the distinction between historical (state) and non-historical, divine, or ‘cultural’ times.

Seen in this way, the choice between culture and history as first cause is unavoidable if we want to provide a unified account for the events of the Parliament House controversy. This is because to frame such an account it is necessary to take a perspective on how the events are connected and what motivates those connections. In the process, such an account inevitably has to take one narrative possibility more seriously than the others: an account that attempts to deal even-handedly with modernity, *kastom*, and Christianity as species of culture has to define a neutral space in which they can interact, and, as a result, will fail to take their particular metaphysics seriously.

Our first move, then, is to situate this problem in the 1990s debate between proponents of the so-called ‘New Melanesian Ethnography’ (NME) and those of the ‘New Melanesian History’ (NMH). We argue that, seen in light of this scholarship, the distinction between history and culture is commonly rendered not only as a theoretical difference, but an ontological one about the kind of thing the world *is*. History and culture, from this perspective are alternate metaphysics. In the remainder of the article, we seek to examine this metaphysical problem in a new light.

Our second move is to undermine the status of cultural difference as it has been deployed in Melanesia. We do this through a reading of Marilyn Strathern’s *The Gender of the Gift*. This is a



book often read as an account of ‘Melanesian alterity’ and a charter for ontological difference. Our reading, however, highlights the role that the activity of description plays in producing that difference.

Our third move is to draw an analogy between Strathern’s use of the notion of description and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2008) critique of historicism in *Provincializing Europe*. Chakrabarty argues that historical, chronological time—as opposed, for example, to divine time—is the product of specific forms of narration. Here, the common, chronological time of history is the product of description—not a feature of the universe—just as much as cultural difference is in Strathern.

Based on this reading of history and culture as the products of descriptive practices, we go on to explore how the relations between descriptions might be understood. Here, we take an image from Chakrabarty, of time that is ‘knotty’, containing within itself things that it cannot assimilate. We use this image to re-read the Parliament House sculptures scandal as a way of sidestepping the choice of culture or history. Instead we see the controversy as a contest between descriptive practices that make their own, often contradictory, metaphysical claims. Stepping back from this particular case, we then suggest how anthropologists might allow the times and differences of others to flourish in their own descriptive practices by avoiding the kind of metaphysical impasse that marked Melanesian studies in the 1990s.

3 | DIFFERENCE AND HISTORY IN MELANESIAN STUDIES

The tensions between culture or difference and that of history has been a feature of the anthropology of PNG since at least the 1990s. The issue appears with remarkable clarity in the contrast between what came to be referred to as the ‘New Melanesian Ethnography’ (NME) and the competing ‘New Melanesian History’ (NMH).³ Robert Foster (1995, p. 32) provides a succinct gloss of these ‘analytical approaches’.

[The New Melanesian Ethnography] highlights fundamental differences between Melanesian and Western presuppositions about social reality; that is, it argues for the recognition of radical alterity, of cultural differences on a scale say, of the Dumontian distinction between homo hierarchicus and homo aequalis. In so doing, it constructs an opposition between Us and Them in order to criticise a mode of anthropological inquiry unselfconsciously predicated upon Our presuppositions ... The New Melanesian History, highlights similarities between Melanesian and Western social realities, similarities generated out of shared histories of colonialism and commerce. In so doing, it deconstructs dichotomies between Us and Them in order to criticise a mode of anthropological inquiry that emphasises ... the otherness of the Other and de-emphasises the contingent effects of time (history) and power (colonial and capitalist domination).

As Foster’s characterisations of each of these approaches makes clear, the NME is a kind of mirror image of the NMH. The NME has been most closely associated with the writings of Strathern among others (see, Josephides, 1991), especially her book *The Gender of the Gift* (1988). The NMH has been most closely associated with many of the contributors to Carrier (1992) among others (Knauff, 2002; Patterson & Macintyre, 2011; cf. Hviding, 1993; Scott, 2007).⁴

The divergence Foster highlighted between the NME and NMH in 1995 evidently traces the intellectual division outlined in the previous section. Especially important is the way Foster locates the problem in ‘our presuppositions’ on the one hand and ‘contingent’ history or power on the other. These are metaphysical concerns. Dumont’s (1970 [1966]) notions of *homo hierarchicus* and *homo aequalis*, which Foster references as a model for the presuppositions he has in mind, are first principles (i.e., metaphysics). Dumont understands them as the principles from which Hindu Indian and European worlds are derived. Similarly, the notion of history and power as ‘contingency’ indexes a reality underlying particular events—contingencies being ‘dependent on the existence or occurrence of something else’, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. This ‘something else’ can only be a common space–time that provides the ontological ground for events.

Outside the narrow confines of Melanesian studies, the questions Foster articulates continue to be of central importance to the discipline. Most obviously, Strathern’s work especially exerted a profound influence on scholars of the ‘ontological turn’, for whom, in many respects *The Gender of the Gift* provided a template for thinking radically about radical difference (Holbraad, 2020; Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017; Viverios de Castro, 2012). Although that particular turn is largely played out, the scholarship that has succeeded it often continues to make use of conceptual repertoires developed within the NME, and at the very least faces the same intellectual problems as those defined by the NME/NMH dichotomy.⁵

4 | RE-READING STRATHERN

Let us consider more carefully Foster’s brief accounts of the NME and NMH. In a certain sense, the contrast he points to is overdrawn. Strathern, for instance, does not use the term alterity, let alone radical alterity in her book. Unlike Dumont (1970 [1966]), Strathern suggests the contrast she draws between Melanesia and the West, describing the former as a ‘gift economy’ and the latter as a ‘commodity economy’, are ‘controlled fictions’ (cf. Gregory, 1982).⁶ However, Strathern (1988, p. 342) also argues that the ‘fiction’ of comparing Melanesia and Western society—the Us/Them divide—of her narrative ‘is its most concrete aspect’. In other words, this is a real difference in forms of life that prior to Western expansion of the last several hundred years had existed for thousands of years.⁷

Nonetheless, Melanesia has been profoundly influenced by Western forms of incursion, including missions, colonial and post-colonial institutions, and capitalist commerce of various sorts. The similarities between Melanesian and Western social realities highlighted by the NMH, following Foster’s gloss, are made apparent from a Western perspective. There is therefore no guarantee that those similarities are equally apparent, or appear identical, from a Melanesian perspective. In fact, it is Strathern’s concern to describe something of that Melanesian perspective so as to better understand its similarities and differences with its Western counterpart.

The anthropological strategy she deploys takes inspiration from an observation made by Runciman (1984, p. 53). He argues that sociological, and by implication anthropological, explanation ‘requires the invocation of theoretical terms unavailable to those to whose behaviour they are to be applied’. He goes on to speak of understanding in what he calls the ‘tertiary sense’: that is, expressing as much as can be expressed about an event or action so as to provide a sense of what it was like for those concerned. So, for example,

[t]o understand in the tertiary sense the social theory of the writers of ancient Rome, it is necessary to be aware that they themselves were not aware of the need to describe

the society in which they lived from any other that what we would now regard as a limited and unrepresentative point of view (Runciman, 1984, p. 53).

Runciman argues on this basis that the unique challenges of social science are not explanation but those of description. All good descriptions, though, need to be based in theory—‘some underlying body of ideas which furnished a reason for both readers of them and rival observers of what they describe to accept them’ (Runciman, 1984, p. 228). It is for this reason that ‘the concepts in which descriptions are grounded are unlikely to be those used by the agents whose behaviour is being described’ (Runciman, 1984, p. 228). In light of this, Strathern (1988, p. 10) argues that if her ‘aims are the synthetic aims of adequate description, my analysis must deploy deliberate fictions to that end [e.g., the gift economy/commodity economy fiction]’.

An aspect of the theory underlying these descriptions is the distinction made between the ‘person’ and ‘agent’, ideas that render the singular Western subject in the form of a pair. The person is understood from the viewpoint of the relations that comprise them; they actualise and are revealed by those relations. The agent, by contrast, is the one who acts and is made known through those relations (see Strathern, 1988, p. 273). Theoretically, then, persons and agents inhabit stances described by distinctive points of view. The same figure is an entity (a person) perceived by others and the one who acts in relation to those others (as an agent) (see Strathern, 1988, p. 274).

As a result of the explicit separation of person and agent in Strathern’s account, Melanesian persons can be understood differently from the individuals of orthodox Western understanding. That is, Melanesian persons are ‘dividually’ as much as they are individually conceived; such persons are seen as ‘the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them’ (Strathern, 1988, p. 13).

With these ideas in mind, consider the following brief example from the Maring people (New Guinea highlands) described by LiPuma (1998, p. 69):

Yingok has three wives, the middle wife having been with him for several years and the youngest wife two years. The kin of the youngest expect a payment of cooked pork from Yingok and indeed Yingok seems to have intimated that two of his larger male pigs are destined for them. However, he slaughters the animals as part of a ceremony for his second wife’s clansmen, in payment, he says, for her children. The relatives of the youngest wife are miffed at the outcome and threaten to take him to court. Yingok readily acknowledges the claims of his youngest wife’s clan, but disparages them as greedy and says that they did not ‘hear him properly’.

Yingok is a person composed of multiple relations, some of which are indicated in the description above. These relations are coercive and potentially cause Yingok to act in particular ways, as LiPuma describes. In the situation described here, Yingok becomes an agent: the overlapping and conflicting relations that compose his (dividual) personhood have collapsed into a particular (individual) choice to the consternation of the other relations to whom he is indebted. This interpretation of what has occurred is informed by Strathern’s ‘theory’ of the person and agent in the Melanesian context. These concepts are not available to the actors involved (i.e., Yingok and his relations) but the intention is, as Runciman urges, to ‘provide a sense of what it was like for those concerned’.

Strathern’s analytical strategy enables not just description of Melanesian social life: her interest is to understand the particular nature of Melanesian forms of action: ‘What has to be analysed

are precisely “their” contexts for social action’ (Strathern, 1988, p. 9). The value of this move over, for example, the structural-functional (Meggitt, 1965, 1977), second wave feminist (Ortner, 1974; Weiner, 1976) and neo-Freudian (Herdt, 1987) approaches that are her particular targets, lies in the way that the descriptive frame for ethnography is derived from within the corpus of ethnographic material with which Strathern works. Essentially, Strathern develops descriptive concepts in Runciman’s sense from ethnographic details, rather than applying exogenous notions—society, women, identity—to scaffold her account of Melanesian social life. Of course, as ideas internal to Euro-American social science, Strathern’s ‘tertiary’ concepts are not ‘Melanesian’ in any simple sense. However, they are designed to trace both the aesthetic dimensions of Melanesian (or Highlands Papua New Guinean) accounts of relationships and their causal effects in social life (cf. Merlan & Rumsey, 1991), and the Maussian theory of the gift as articulated by Gregory (1982). The point is to shift the boundaries of descriptions made in terms of conventional social scientific concepts. The upshot of this strategy is to open a descriptive space in which Melanesians’ interests can be seen to diverge from the interests of social scientists—they are not, for example, interested in social integration, patriarchy, or masculinity—while retaining the distanced, comparative power of tertiary concepts in description.

This descriptive shift is significant for the way in which it allows action to appear as such, and for agents to be defined and located. More generally, descriptions are embedded in forms of conduct and social lives—they form the ‘contexts of action’ in which Strathern is interested. In short, people act under descriptions. This is the philosophical idea developed by Elizabeth Anscombe in her book *Intention* (1957), where she argues that intentional actions are actions ‘under a description’. Descriptions are an account of person, object, or event; they are an account of what exists and what is possible—whether it be a wink or a twitch (see Geertz, 1973). Anscombe provides a well know example. This is of a man’s action where he is moving his arm up and down while holding a handle. His action can be understood as intentional under the description ‘pumping water’. But it cannot be understood under other descriptions such as ‘contracting these muscles’ or ‘beating out a noticeable rhythm’ (Anscombe, 1957, p. 37). Closing one eye up and down rapidly will have one description as a wink and an apparently similar action will have a different description as a twitch.

The thesis, enlarged by Hacking (1995, pp. 235–236), has important logical consequences for the future and the past:

When I decide to do something, and do it, I am acting intentionally. There may be many kinds of actions with which I am unacquainted, and of which I have no description. It seems to follow ... that I cannot intend to perform those actions ... I cannot feel limited by lacking a description, for if I did, in a self-aware way, feel limited, then I would have at least a glimmering of the description of the action and so could think of choosing it.

What Strathern is aiming to evoke in her accounts of Melanesian social life are the different forms of description that make possible forms of action in that context. In discussion with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro she emphasises this point about description:

... we traffic in descriptions and therefore, absolutely, I would stand by the fact that we produce different descriptions of ourselves from the kinds of descriptions that Melanesians produce of themselves. This has nothing to do with comprehension or cognitive structures or whether I can understand a Melanesian or whether I can



interact or behave or whatever. Those things are not problematic. The issue comes [at] the point at which one starts producing accounts of the world (Viveiros de Castro & Fausto, 2017, pp. 52–53).

The notions of dividual or partible person are part of the repertoire of theoretical terms she uses to provide an account more in tune with indigenous perceptions. The interpretation of the incident with Yingok described above is a case in point. By distinguishing person and agent, as suggested by Strathern, possibilities for description are altered. Insofar as those possibilities are similar to the kinds of description under which the action was undertaken, the analyst is able to capture something of how the incident is perceived ‘from the inside’ as well as the logic that motivated it and its repercussions.

It would be a mistake, though, to view these ideas about personhood, such as the dividual or partible person as only applicable to Melanesia—to essentialise Melanesian persons—or as *necessary* to an adequate description of Melanesia. This is because Strathern’s account of Melanesian personhood does not define a thing or action in itself, but a mode of description. Yingok’s decisions regarding his pigs happen in the context of descriptions of his obligations that cut off certain claims on them in favour of others, closing down some futures in favour of others and remodelling and revaluing his relationships. Strathern’s is thus a description of description (a ‘tertiary’ description). As a result, it can only be provisional because of the relation that must exist between action and its descriptions, or more broadly between word and world (Appadurai, 1996; Chakrabarty, 2008; de Pina-Cabral, 2014). This is equally true in gift exchange and customary legal cases such as Yingok’s, in which the question of who transacted with whom and why is always open to reinterpretation (Demian & Rousseau, 2019).

5 | PROVINCIALISING ANTHROPOLOGY, PROVINCIALISING EUROPE

It could be said that the intention of *The Gender of the Gift* was to provincialise anthropological modes of description. Describing a person, for instance, as provincial is to suggest that the person is limited or narrow in outlook. To provincialise a discipline is to attribute a limited or narrow outlook to that subject. By deploying the ideas of society, patriarchy, or identity to the description and interpretation of peoples around the world anthropologists assumed that such ideas were readily applicable to other social contexts. This was a narrow or limited outlook underlining something of the provincial nature of anthropology. As a provincial rather than universal mode of description, it follows that anthropology will have difficulty accounting for forms of action, and thus social life, that take place under different descriptions; much of *The Gender of the Gift* is devoted to developing alternate descriptive resources in order to model the ways in which Melanesians articulate their own lives. By making this explicit, Strathern highlighted some of the limits of anthropological understanding and suggested methods for approaching the study of social difference that were not so provincial and how such difference is described by both anthropologist and native.

It is the provincial nature of description that motivates the cleavage between the NME and the NMH noted above. The NME takes Strathern’s account of the provincial quality of anthropological thinking, together with her modelling of Melanesian accounts of social life, and uses them to produce a strictly limited—and equally provincial—set of tools specifically for doing Melanesian ethnography. The weakness of this approach, which the NMH highlights, is that the relation

between the equally provincial forms of anthropology and 'Melanesian sociality' can never be encompassed by a single account, or one set of descriptive principles, such as would be required to talk about material inequalities between Melanesia and the West as real locations. The NMH, by focusing on the apparently material connections between Melanesia and the West embodied in colonial and post-colonial political relations, attempts to provide such a singular context—one in which descriptions of inequalities between Melanesians and Euro-Americans could appear.

The difficulty with the position taken by proponents of the NMH, however, lies in the provincial quality of history itself, which is exactly analogous to the provinciality of anthropological description. In his book *Provincializing Europe* (2008 [2000]), the historian Chakrabarty is concerned with the limits of historical understanding. Europe needs to be provincialised, he argues, because its dominant approach to the study of historical difference, often referred to as historicism, is narrow in outlook. Chakrabarty argues that history as a form of narrative or 'consciousness' depends on the arrangement of things and happenings in a chronology. This chronological arrangement takes things that exist in the present (archival records, memories of past events, relics of former times, etc) and distributes them in a linear fashion along a continuum. This continuum *represents* time in a particular way: namely, following Benjamin (1968), as empty and homogeneous. The time of chronology is of only one kind, a neutral medium in which objects, persons, and events can be arranged and related as causes and effects. Because of the neutral, secular quality of its time-representation, Western history cannot ascribe to so-called 'supernatural' ideas, for example, any actual agency in historical events.

Consider the Indian Santal rebellion of 1855 briefly discussed by Chakrabarty. The leaders of the rebellion said they carried out their actions as ordered by their god Thakur. Such ideas can be acknowledged by historians, but to attribute any actual agency to the god in the events that transpired would 'go against the rules of evidence that gives historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past' (Chakrabarty, 2008 [2000], p. 104).

Just as in the NME/NMH controversy, no third voice or perspective can integrate the views of the Santal with that of Eurocentric history.⁸ Each has distinct ideas of causality and of the relations between past, present, and future. For the Santal rebels, historical causality importantly involved the agency of Thakur, whom they regarded as causing the rebellion. Their vision of time and causation was, therefore, not secular: the rebellion happened in a *different kind of time* to the empty homogeneous time of historicism. One result of this difference is that the reason that motivated the rebellion (the relation the rebels supposed between actions and consequences) is inevitably betrayed by its translation into a conventional historical narrative. This betrayal, Chakrabarty argues, usually takes the form of rendering the subaltern as *backward*, as not part of the contemporary, modern world. Correspondingly, recognising divine agency as coeval with modernity disrupts the authority of historical time. Chakrabarty (2008 [2000], p. 111) takes issue with Jameson's (1981, p. 9) injunction that one should 'Always historicise!', which Jameson views as 'the one absolute and we may even say "transhistorical" imperative of all dialectical thought'. The problem is not the historicising but the 'always'. For Chakrabarty (2008 [2000], p. 111, quotation marks removed), the 'assumption of a continuous, homogeneous, infinitely stretched out time that makes possible the imagination of an "always" is put to question by subaltern pasts that makes the present ... out of joint'.

Can one speak, then, of 'shared histories'—as in the case of the NMH? Melanesians often do not understand themselves living in a world where past is radically separated from present or of having an empty, homogeneous time. The time defined by myth, ritual, or exchange, for example, is commonly regarded as being of an entirely different quality to the time of Christianity (Robbins, 2007). This distinction has often been marked by the elaborate destruction of exchange



valuables (Clark, 2000) or ritual objects, or the theatrical revelation and abandonment of cult secrets (Tuzin, 1997). Often, Melanesian people appear deliberately and systematically to create such epochal change, for example, in funerary practices that elaborately ‘unmake’ histories of relations (Battaglia, 1992), and in their treatment of material culture (Hermkens, 2019). Having a ‘shared history’ of missionisation, or of colonisation, or of capitalist enterprise, therefore says nothing about how that ‘history’ was ‘shared’, if at all. A history of relations with missionaries, for instance, following Christian conversion can be interpreted as a shared history but does such sharing recognise the different temporalities evident in such relations? As Chakrabarty argues with respect to Indian pasts, Melanesia constantly puts the assumptions of history ‘out of joint’.

Both writers, Strathern and Chakrabarty, are addressing a similar problem from the standpoint of their respective disciplines in the sense that they are both concerned with the adequacy of descriptions, of social action and the past respectively, and seek to draw attention to the metaphorical or conceptual bases of conventional Western narrative forms. What descriptions are adequate to capture the descriptions informing actions in other social worlds? Without knowing those indigenous descriptions, it is not possible to adequately grasp local forms of social action.

This is the case, regardless of social context. As noted, Strathern has been designated a key representative of the NME and as such a representative, is said to ‘highlight fundamental differences between Melanesian and Western presuppositions about social reality’ (Foster, 1995, p. 2). This rather misses the mark. Strathern’s point is not that there is anything intrinsically different between Melanesian and Western social life, but that the ways in which Melanesians conventionally describe their lives do not fit easily into Western conventions. Since Melanesian and Western peoples act under different descriptions, Strathern is not so much highlighting fundamental differences, as the provincial character of previous scholarship in relation to Melanesians’ own descriptions.

From the point of view of *Provincializing History*, the idea of ‘Melanesians’ own descriptions’ presents further problems. (cf. Thomas, 1991). In Chakrabarty’s account, the imbrication of European historical consciousness in the project of Indian development—in defining the problem of ‘what needs to be done’ to achieve development in India—prevents Chakrabarty’s analysis from settling, as Strathern’s does, on a model of ‘indigenous’ modes of description. This avenue is not available to Chakrabarty because of India’s colonial and post-colonial past. The middle-class Bengalis on which Chakrabarty focuses were themselves invested in ideas of modernity and history as a means to rationalise Indian life. Indeed, it is exactly Indian deployments of Marxist historicism, and its effects on historians’ ability to account for Indian pasts, that motivates Chakrabarty’s analysis. History, as such, may be *provincial*, in the sense that it comes from somewhere, but it is not *foreign* to India, any more than British colonialism was after 190 years. Narratives of divinity or spirits and historical narratives are equally part of Indian social realities. As in the case of the Santal rebellion, it is impossible to ascribe divinity historical agency within a historicist framework, and vice versa. Accounting for Indian social life therefore depends on keeping multiple incompatible forms of description in play simultaneously.

The effect of these points for the historical issues analysed by Chakrabarty is that time is *knotty* in the sense that historicism, as the dominant form of historical narration, includes within itself patches or sites where the linearity of events within empty, secular time is put ‘out of joint’ by people or happenings that cannot be accounted for in historical terms, as we saw in the case of the Santal rebellion (cf. Tsing et al., 2019). The presence of such ‘knots’ means, simply, that India is neither modern nor non-modern in any simple sense. If we apply the same reasoning to Strathern’s analysis, following the analogy that we have been pursuing so far, then we would be forced to argue that Melanesian social life is not, contrary to the position taken by scholars

of the NME, identical to its own 'aesthetics' and modes of description, and thus radically different to Euro-American social life. Nor, however, would we be in a position simply to arrogate the Melanesian experience to a universal experience of historical colonial domination. The Melanesian present must be as knotty, as 'out of joint' as any other.⁹

It follows, in turn, that the provisional nature of description that we saw in the case of Yingkok and his pigs is no accident, or merely internal to local social life. It must also apply to scholarship. Melanesia *can* be historicised or rendered as a distinctive form of social life in the manner of the NME. By the same token, Melanesians *today*, in the aftermath of colonialism, must have the capacity to conceive of and articulate their lives 'socially' or 'historically'—that is in a Euro-American idiom—just as well as they can in a 'Melanesian' idiom. This means that the pasts in which Melanesians find themselves enchained, and which constitute the raw materials from which their lives are constructed, must equally be the product of multiple forms of descriptive articulation.

This surely accounts for the stubborn cleavage between 'new' ethnography and history in Melanesia: an avowedly 'Melanesian' ethnography cannot digest everything to be found in a Melanesia that is importantly produced elsewhere; likewise, a historical perspective on Melanesia will engage unevenly with lives that correspond only intermittently to the chronological assumptions of historicism. And insofar as the claims of the previous sentence identify something of the character of Melanesia as the site of actual human lives, we should expect to find Melanesians wrestling with the knottiness of their own presents. To put the issue in a nutshell, not everything in Melanesia is unproblematically Melanesian, *and Melanesians recognise it*.

6 | TOWARDS A KNOTTY MELANESIA

This observation provides a new perspective on Zurenuoc's destruction of the Parliament House sculptures. Recall that we left this incident with the problem of the divergent descriptive frames that appear to be in play in these events, namely state development, Christianity, and *kastom*. Although we cannot resolve the difficulty they present, we are now in a position to make use of that difficulty as a way of addressing anthropology's metaphysical dilemma—culture or history—in a new light.

Zurenuoc's actions can now be seen to display the kind of knottiness Chakrabarty highlights in his Indian material. While indigenous culture, or *kastom*, is often thought of in Melanesia as an effective mode of action or way of doing things, its use does not preclude others, such as law or, in the case at hand, different varieties of Christianity. Indeed, as Demian and Rousseau (2019) suggest, Melanesians commonly experiment with the relationship between law and *kastom* as a resource for making social relations explicit. From this point of view, it is worth observing that Zurenuoc's attack on the Parliament sculptures requires *kastom* as the ground against which his Christian nation can take shape. The point here is that neither the logic of 'Christian culture', nor *kastom* governed Zurenuoc's action, but that the *relationship between* Christianity and *kastom* as its necessary alternative lent his project force as a way of moving PNG into the future. In each instance, however, taking one perspective involves internalising others, which are not compatible with it. Zurenuoc's Christian take on *kastom* presupposes the actual existence of *kastom* but does not and cannot integrate it as a mode of life. Similarly, the post-independence modernisers adopted *kastom*, but only as a secularised ghost of itself, detached from its actual, local enactment. Correspondingly, *kastom's* take on politics registers as corruption from the perspective of good governance, but that negative framing does not allow us to understand the real moral obligations



underpinning the colonisation of the state by kinship. Each descriptive frame is 'knotty' in Chakrabarty's terms in the sense that it contains others which it cannot absorb.

Such tensions between descriptive modes can be seen as fundamental to Melanesian social life. Strathern's most general observation about Melanesian sociality is precisely that the character of any given relation is uncertain and must be defined or framed every time it is called upon. The point here is not to return to a position in which Melanesian social life is viewed as radically distinct from its Euro-American counterpart. These features of social life, as Hacking (1995) contends, are, in fact, general, not ethnographically specific. To recognise that all intentional actions are 'under a description', of course, is also to recognise the hold that descriptive practices have over anthropology. This means, on the one hand, that the distinctions between history and ethnography, or commonality and difference, that are so marked in Melanesian studies, are effects of a set of provincial descriptive forms. On the other hand, understanding difference in terms of the descriptive conventions that form it suggests a more general problem. The contrast between the NME and NMH as descriptions of Melanesia can serve as a model of and for human difference in general.

The anthropology of Melanesia tacks between history and ethnography because these are the descriptive frames available to it, and it is limited by their incompatibility. However, the all-or-nothing relation between the two—either history *or* ethnography—is undercut by the recognition of the knottiness of Melanesian life. Melanesians operate in contexts that are formed by the state, by Christianity and by *kastom*—among other things. Formed and institutionalised in line with these various descriptive resources, a Parliament building can be an icon of unity, a nest of idolatry, and an instance of material culture, and will participate in different, incompatible accounts and meaningful action as a result. Similarly, the availability of multiple descriptive idioms is itself the result of prior political contests—especially those surrounding missionisation and colonisation. However, as the case of Zurenuoc demonstrates, there is no sense in which *only* history, or *only* ethnography will adequately and without violence account for the actual play of events in a way that approximates the perspective of the actors.¹⁰

The effect of these observations must be to restate Strathern's contention that there is no such thing as a Melanesian sociality 'based on premises in an inverse relation to our own' (Strathern, 1988, p. 16), but also that the alternative to that position is not a shared frame of common history based on premises *identical* to our own. This is because neither pole of the dichotomy is based on any stable set of premises at all. Rather, they are both provisional, knotty descriptions. History depends on the erasure of God to create its secular time, but constantly picks up and carries with it forms of action that are explicable only in terms of the divine. Melanesia is knotty in the same way, since the actions of Melanesians are not accountable in only one descriptive mode, and the descriptive principles that contextualise their actions cannot be articulated in each other's terms. Neither 'history' nor the 'Melanesia' of ethnography is identical with itself, because both carry with them things they cannot account for, and both are connected to definite politics of domination and colonialism.

If all accounts of social life are 'knotty' in the way suggested here, then adequate description in a single descriptive framework is indeed impossible. This 'politics of despair' (Chakrabarty, 2008, p. 46), however, is nevertheless extremely useful in localising Melanesian difference outside the culture/history dyad. Firstly, it highlights the sense in which description is best 'taken as an *activity*, the creation/implementation of difference as a *social act*' (Strathern, 1988, p. 96, note omitted, emphasis added). Descriptions, in other words, represent the various terms under which action becomes possible (Hacking, 1995). If this is true, then the concreteness of Melanesian difference, alluded to by Strathern (1988, p. 342) represents the result of a cumulation of 'action under (diverging) descriptions'.

From this perspective, the distinctiveness of Melanesian social life, as well as its likeness to other lives, is traceable to the ways in which it is articulated in and by description. By the same token, the breaks and aporias, the points at which description stops working, are products of the relations between the varied descriptive registers under which action in Melanesia appears.¹¹

This observation tends to break down the distinction between what came to be known as the NMH and the NME. The NME attempts to account for the observed form of Melanesian social life by modelling the ways in which it is conventionally described by the people involved in it. That project ought to be taken to be temporally expansive in the sense that how Melanesians conventionally describe their social lives is an emerging phenomenon. It proceeds from the way in which all manner of things are involved in social life—the state, Christianity, law, witchcraft, and so on—and the contests over the appropriate frames for their description. Those frames are themselves attached to certain institutions, such that Christianity brings an account of temporality that is different from that of secular governance or ceremonial exchange. In other words, grasping the distinctiveness of Melanesian—or any other—social life in its modes of description cannot be done only once. Treating difference as a self-identical, ontological fact is therefore as much a mistake as assuming the neutrality and appropriateness of empty, secular time as a metaphysical basis for describing people, such as the Melanesian peoples, who have been the focus of this paper.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data openly available in a public repository that issues datasets with DOIs.

Endnotes

- ¹Opposition to the removal of the sculptures was led by Sir Michael Somare, independent PNG's first Prime Minister, senior figures in the established or 'mainline' churches, and Andrew Moutu, director of the National Museum and Art Gallery. Their case to the Supreme Court against the destruction of the carvings was that the carvings represented national cultural heritage, protected by law, and that Zurenuoc's destruction of them was therefore illegal. Ultimately, the court upheld their claim that the carvings Zurenuoc destroyed were national cultural heritage that ought to be preserved. Zurenuoc was ordered to cease their destruction and make good the damage that had already occurred.
- ²Narokobi's vision supposed 'Melanesians' to be Christians, as does the constitution of PNG. 'Secularity' here refers not to the absence of religion, but to the character of historical time. Following Benjamin (1968), we regard time as 'secular' when it is not messianic or apocalyptic in character (see, also, Robbins, 2007).
- ³In the introduction to the volume devoted to Melanesia (Hirsch & Rollason, 2019) we contrast Melanesia as both a distinctive world and 'Third World'. By drawing this contrast, we suggested the following: substantial scholarship had described, on the one hand, the singularity of Melanesia as compared to other regions of the world especially when compared to that region known as the West or Euro-America. On the other hand, it is also well documented that the societies of Melanesia have many of the characteristics of so-called Third World societies, that they have a form of 'modernity' and are 'developing'—outcomes of both colonialism and capitalist incursion. We argued that the dichotomy is 'not simply an artefact of scholarly perspective, but of local and trans-local interests; how people are positioned in the world is integral to the undertakings they pursue and that affect them' (Hirsch & Rollason, 2019, p. 32). We further argued that it was through that contrast that we tried to understand the Melanesian world. What



we did not address in that introduction, which is taken up here, is how to account for the difference documented in Melanesia, both its 'distinctiveness' and its history, which was previously glossed as 'Third Worldness'.

- ⁴To an extent, the anthropology of Melanesia has moved on from these debates. Contests over the reality of radical difference no longer seem to be the motivating force they once were. A new generation of scholars, many from Australia and Europe, are as likely to be concerned with 'practical' issues of development (see Filer, 1999), resource extraction (see Golub, 2014; Jacka, 2015), or climate change mitigation (see Crook & Rudiak-Gould, 2018) as they are with questions of kinship, personhood, or *Weltanschauung* (but see Cox, 2013; Schram, 2018; Damon, 2017; Demian & Rousseau, 2019). However, this turn to 'practicalities' is, in a sense, only another turn of the screw, a version of anthropology's post-colonial turn away from the exotic and towards a shared history of political struggles (see, Robbins, 2013). Melanesian difference is still there in the scholarship, although less often the explicit focus of analysis; it is often 'priced in' in the form of uneasy acknowledgements that people in the region understand property, personhood, and exchange in radically different ways from, for example, Western-derived law or Western NGOs (e.g., MacCarthy, 2016).
- ⁵Commentators on the Anthropocene (Haraway, 2016; Tsing et al., 2019), as much as decolonial scholars (Shange, 2019; Simpson, 2014) are as dependent as an earlier generation of Melanesianists on the construction of 'opposition[s] between Us and Them in order to criticise a mode of anthropological inquiry unselfconsciously predicated upon Our presuppositions' (see, also, Jobson, 2020; Povinelli, 2016).
- ⁶As she notes, 'the difference between gift/commodity is expanded as a metaphorical base on which difference itself may be apprehended and put to use for ... anthropological ... purposes, yet remains rooted in Western metaphysics' (Strathern, 1988, p. 7).
- ⁷This reading of *The Gender of the Gift* makes Strathern's argument more concrete than it is in the original text, where she refers only to the necessity of rendering Melanesian life in a language that was not designed for the task. We feel justified in our reading, however, since the divergence of language in question can only be a symptom of such an actual—and very concrete—difference.
- ⁸Although Foster (1995) attempted an integration of these perspectives in his monograph, the integration was not felt to be compelling at the time. For example, Otto (1997b, p. 532) points out that 'a proper integration of the NME and the NMH would require an analysis of the (changing) practice of a cultural logic, and, in particular, an analysis of competing cultural logics and their mutual effect in the practice of daily life'. In Otto's view, Foster did not succeed in achieving this integrating analysis.
- ⁹Note in this context Strathern's insistence in *The Gender of the Gift* that to make her self-consciously virtual analysis really satisfactory, 'one needs to inject a *real history* into our comprehension of Melanesian gift economies' (Strathern, 1988, p. 341, emphasis added)—although she gives no indication of how this would be possible.
- ¹⁰The same considerations apply to the cleavage between NMH and NME. If the historical perspective aligns most neatly with the governmental, nation-building, and political economic elements of the account of the Parliament controversy above, and if the ethnographic perspective corresponds most closely to the reading of Zurenuoc's actions as distinctively 'Melanesian', then where is the Christian perspective? Why is there no 'New Melanesian Divinity'? The answer is surely historical and can be traced to political contests over the validity of forms of description at the dawn of the European Enlightenment, which excluded divine action as a legitimate historical cause. It is only on condition of this localised erasure of God that history and ethnography can appear as the only valid ways in which to parse Melanesia.
- ¹¹One could, of course, attempt to frame a 'description of the descriptions'—a metadescriptive frame that would attempt to map and account for the totality of descriptive practices operating in the region. However, as Chakrabarty recognises, this solution is illusory beyond a generalised gesture to the human condition as *fabulous* in the sense of 'storied' (Haraway, 2016). The relations between narrative framings exist because those framings are incommensurable. There is no single mode of narration, however speculative, that could give equal weight and value to God and secular causation. The juxtaposition of narratives that cannot be reduced to a single account is in many ways an act of good faith.

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