

Modernity, Keywords, and Historical Authenticity in Melanesian Ethnography: A Response to Mimica

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I want to thank the editors of *Oceania* for initiating this new discussion forum. Rarely does one get a chance to engage with one's critics and reflect on previous arguments and I look forward to the productive and significant scholarship that ensues from such encounters. There are three main themes that I want to address in Jadran Mimica's analysis of my and others' works that I feel can contribute to important discussions in anthropology (both Melanesianist and beyond): (1) the conceptualization and theorization of modernity and modernization, (2) the strengths and shortcomings of using 'keywords' (Williams 1985) in ethnography and their application to non-Western histories and cultures, and (3) the use of comparative ethnographies and historical change. In the remainder of my response, I treat each of these in their respective order.

Modernity, writes Mimica, 'figures as a projection by those who seem to fancy themselves as belonging to not just an altogether different epoch of thinking and being, but . . . are [also] conceptually clear as to what "modernity" and various other "post"-epochal conditions are.' . . . Continuing on, he argues, 'the would-be "multiple modernities" are local refractions of one and the self-same world-system developed, master-minded and co-ordinated by and in the course of the development and expansion of the Western civilisation of capitalism.' In these quotes, Mimica highlights two important aspects of how the term modernity can be used. In the first example, modernity represents a form of temporal and social difference in which Western anthropologists are modern, while those we study are *not* (i.e., traditional), or are *not yet* (i.e., modernizing). In the second statement, modernity is a form of economic difference within one global capitalist system. Elsewhere he notes that modernity can also be understood simply as reflections on contemporary circumstances. The question we have to ask, is it useful to consider 'local refractions' of global capitalism experienced by people as 'multiple' or 'alternative modernities' (Knauff 2002)?

In a chapter entitled 'Decomposing Modernity', James Ferguson (2006) addresses this very issue by stressing the need to understand modernity as an economic status based on global hierarchy. He asks us to envision how modernity was conceptualized in post-WW2 development discourse and presents a simple graph with status on the y-axis and time on the x-axis. The developmentalist vision was teleological; societies moved from a traditional status to a modern one as 'developing countries' or 'emerging nations' through an evolutionary sequence of stages. Ferguson writes, 'The effect of this powerful narrative was to transform a *spatialized* global hierarchy into a *temporalized* (putative) historical sequence' (2006:178, emphasis in original). Of course, much social science literature has debunked this developmentalist paradigm as decades of development aid and expertise have not created global socioeconomic parity (Cooper and Packard 1997; Escobar 1995; Sachs 1992). Moreover, as Ferguson (1999) and others have documented, many regions of the so-called developing world, particularly regions where resource development has occurred, have experienced

economic decline (for a PNG case, see Gewertz and Errington 2010:80–84). The best times have come and gone for many of the people in these areas. Modernity, in this framework, ‘appears not (as it does to many contemporary anthropologists) as a set of wonderfully diverse and creative cultural practices, but as a global status and a political-economic condition’ (Ferguson 2006:187). To decompose modernity, Ferguson delinks the two axes of the simplistic developmentalist vision. The first axis, time, is not the teleological progression of societies through hierarchical sequences, but is simply history. As to Mimica’s argument in his essay that ‘the world-historical trajectory is one and the same’, I think it is critical to realize that in terms of Ferguson’s decomposed axis of time we are all coeval (see Fabian 1983). However, if modernity is not the endpoint of this progression, then, indeed, contra Latour (1993), we are all modern, yet different societies ‘negotiate modernity in different ways, through a variety of coeval paths’ (Ferguson 2006:188). Why there are multiple trajectories is related to the decomposition of the second axis: status. With temporal sequence removed, status (i.e., one’s experience of modernity) is no longer a movement through a series of progressive advances, rather it is ‘a standard of living to which some have rights by birth and from which others are simply, but unequivocally, excluded’ (Ferguson 2006:189).

As an anthropologist interested in the impacts of resource development on the society and environment of people in Porgera (Enga Province, PNG), I have attempted to detail in great measure how, both within Porgeran society and between Porgerans and the larger world, there are significant variations in levels of exclusion that people experience in their everyday lives. If there were a single (‘one and the same’) trajectory to the experience of gold mining in Porgera, then why are people so differentially impacted by it? In Jacka (2001a; 2001b), I highlighted the politics and often violent measures that ‘non-landowner’ Porgerans who are excluded from the mining development benefit streams engage in to seek recognition for their claims. In Jacka (2005; 2010), I examined how participation in different Christian denominations, especially those with a millennial focus, configures Porgerans’ attitudes about the land and conservation practices vis-à-vis their non-millenarian Christian and non-Christian kin. Recognizing that I am experiencing the same world history as those I write about, I have discussed Porgeran understandings and commentaries on climate change (Jacka 2009), multinational companies and urbanization (Jacka 2007b), Christianity and mining (Jacka *passim*), and even the International Space Station (Jacka 2005). In sum, if Mimica asks if I believe that landowners and non-landowners, millenarian Christians and non-Christians negotiate coeval, yet different, paths of modernity, based on my discussion above, then the answer is unequivocally ‘yes’. Does that mean that I have any clear conceptions of post-epochal conditions or that I inhabit a different epoch of being? Then, again, based on the need to disentangle the temporal dimension of modernity from its status dimension, then the answer is ‘no’.

At the heart of Mimica’s critique of modernity is the concern that it is ‘a particular academic framing of Western self-cosmo-ontologisation.’ Ferguson (2006:177) shared this same concern if the term is used as ‘an analytic term to be defined and applied’ by anthropologists and not if it is presented as a ‘native category’. Numerous ethnographic works on Melanesia, including my own, have attempted to demonstrate that it is an important native category to understand contemporary Melanesian life-worlds. Paige West (2006:xvi) writes of the Gimi of Eastern Highlands Province, PNG, ‘Some people, young men usually, . . . want cars and bars and markets and businesses. They want access to electricity and schools. They want to be able to go eat lunch at the Bird of Paradise Hotel every day. They want capitalism and modernity writ large.’ Among the Orokaiva of Oro Province, PNG, Ira Bashkow (2006:9) presents a compelling ethnography of how modernity – ‘development, as they conceive it’ – shapes and is shaped by Orokaiva understandings of race. Among the Duna of Hela Province, PNG, Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern (2002:xv) describe Duna modernity as being ‘deeply but indirectly affected by mining, in which rumors and narratives about the

possibilities of gaining money through development regularly crisscross the ambits of everyday life, subtly influencing events, perceptions of the past, and aspirations for the future. As such, the Duna people probably exemplify the situation of many other peoples around the world.' These three examples, and there are too many to include more, posit modernity in the sense in which Ferguson defines it, as a critical awareness by some Melanesians that they are in a different economic category than people in developed countries, and even in terms of other Melanesians (see also Gewertz and Errington 1999).

Is modernity a native category, though, in the sense that Melanesians use it? If not, why not just call it 'social change' as Mimica notes, or 'economic difference' as Ferguson depicts it? A distinguishing feature of the three terms, modern, modernity, and modernization, is that in some ways they capture people's self-awareness of change and difference, not just the fact of the existence of social change and economic difference. To a significant extent, this awareness has been brought about by the conditions of globalization as through popular media, international travel, and mobile capital people are able to juxtapose their own lives against those of others. For an especially telling example concerning education and modernity, Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington (1999:132, 134) discuss a legal ruling from Justice Salamo Injia of the National Court in which Justice Injia writes of (a) 'ordinary modern' Papua New Guineans, (b) PNG's 'modern national laws', and (c) being 'educated and . . . exposed to modern ways of living'. The only time I heard a Porgeran use 'modernity' was from my research assistant, Ben Penale, which surprised me as even though he was fluent in English we spoke almost exclusively in Tok Pisin, so I don't think I was the source. Ben went into a store in Lae to buy some shaving razors, he came outside after making his purchase carrying pink razors. I asked why he had bought the pink ones since they were women's razors. He looked chagrined but then laughed and said, '*Mipela no klia tumas long modernity*' (We [Porgerans] don't understand modernity all that well).

Other ways that people reflect on issues of modernization surround a series of short tales that I've heard numerous times in Porgera that have some aspect of urban legends to them as no one knows exactly who the protagonist is, although it is always an old man. In one of these stories, an old man buys a torch (flashlight) at a trade store and then goes on a hunting trip. Several days later he walks into the store and places a battered and smashed torch on the counter and asks for his money back. 'What happened to it?' asks the bewildered store owner. The old man replies, 'I got everything ready to make a fire, and repeatedly "lit" the torch and put it against the wood. But no matter how many times I did this, the wood never caught fire. The torch is useless so I smashed it with a rock.' In another story an old man smashes a radio his son has brought home after working at the Bougainville mine because he thought it was a box of spirits. In another one, an old man tries to mumu rice, another old man thinks that laundry soap bars are cooking grease and mumus pig meat along with soap bars. After telling or hearing these stories, people howl with laughter about the naivety of the old man's encounters with modern goods, reflecting their own sense of awareness about social change and economic difference and the disempowering bewilderment that can come from these encounters.

In this same vein at the national level, one merely need look at the PNG comedian Kanage, who has made his name playing a bumbling bushman in the midst of a modern society, yet has featured in national clean coastline campaigns and has music videos recorded with CHM Supersound. Kanage, as such, is a perfect exemplar of Papua New Guinean populist statements on modernity. At a more serious level, the PNG scholar Simeon Namunu has also reflected upon these issues, in an essay entitled 'Melanesian Religion, Ecology, and Modernization in Papua New Guinea', he writes, 'My contention is that spirits and ecology are part of a single complex Melanesian vision of life. Today, Melanesians themselves try to adapt their concept of life to a foreign model of life, namely, modernization' (Namunu 2001:49, also

cited in Jacka 2007a:41). Additionally, one need merely read the plethora of popular writing from Melanesians to see how concerns about modernization permeate these scholars' works (see Beier 1980; Wendt 1995).

With the examples above, my goal is not to reduce the concept of modernity to people's encounters with modern goods. Rather, it is to capture the way that the reproduction of culture is articulated within larger systems of meaning. In their book-length treatment of the concept of modernities, Kajsa Ekholm Friedman and Jonathan Friedman (2008:5) highlight the same problems with the analytical concept of modernity that Mimica discusses. It can: (1) be 'a mere gloss on the contemporary'; (2) refer to a hierarchy of regions postulated in terms of centers and peripheries in which the modern is 'postulated' and those in the periphery 'are defined and then define themselves in relation to the modern', and; (3) be a 'set of modern products, or the products of capitalism'. Nevertheless, Friedman and Friedman (2008:6) argue that there is something important about the term modernity, not as a concept, but 's a word that refers to a cluster of phenomena' that warrant further scrutiny as to how they are configured in local contexts as part of the larger world system. Some of these phenomena they mention are: individualism, the nation-state, capitalism, the global economy, and developmentalism. Modernity, in this framework according to Friedman and Friedman (2008:5), is 'a cultural space, a regime of social experience' that is not 'a specific historical phenomenon associated with Europe', but one that has a 'specific structure' that arose in Europe and in other places and other times.

This was one of the two reasons that I engaged with Foucault's work in the chapter (Jacka 2007a) addressed by Mimica. The overarching question I was concerned with examined the ways that social attitudes about the body transform (or not) as an aspect of modernity. Foucault's argument for Western Europe was that modern bodies were increasingly circumscribed by disciplinary practices, new forms of surveillance, and power-knowledge regimes. The main reason that I invoked Foucault was to articulate a counter-trajectory to his claim by showing that it was the demise of disciplinary practices oriented toward the body that defined contemporary Porgeran life. As I demonstrated, the conditions of modernity, as depicted by Friedman and Friedman (2008), such as the partial dissolution of collective social orders ('incipient individualism', see Wardlow 2006), involvement in new religious practices (*cf.* Robbins 2004), and environmental degradation wrought by mineral resource extraction, significantly altered Porgerans' ideas and practices regarding the efficacy of a suite of social and individual magico-religious proscriptions oriented toward their bodies.

Here's the irony: my second reason for engaging with Foucault was that I was tired of reading anthropological works which seemed to be formulaic demonstrations of Foucauldian power-knowledge practices and discourses. With the Porgera data, I realized I had a powerful corrective to what seemed to me at the time (2004 or 2005 as a freshly-minted PhD) an overly uncritical acceptance of Foucault's work. So I find myself being largely in agreement with Mimica's critique regarding Foucault, while also being excoriated as one of the leading instigators of the 'academic *foucaultization* of Melanesian life-worlds'! In fact, Jacka (2007a) is the only published work in which I have ever even cited Foucault, much less engaged critically with his theories, or applied them to Melanesian life-worlds.

But to respond to Mimica's criticism: Are researchers like myself, the late Jeffrey Clark, and Richard Eves truly unable 'to formulate credible historicist interpretations of human existence in Melanesia or elsewhere' through the use of Foucauldian notions like discipline, surveillance, and panopticism? Mimica has a valid point that we should not rely on theoretical terms that are currently in vogue to represent the complexity of social life found around the world. However, this could be extended to any of the 'keywords' we write about – fetishism, alienation, hegemony, modernity, globalization, agency, the list goes on. The point is that such keywords help us to coalesce diverse life-worlds and experiences into

organizational frameworks. Anthropology often feels like a science of the specific, the challenge is to highlight the specific without abandoning the general concepts that underlie cross-disciplinary relevance.

The final comment I want to make is about historicity, not the historicity of other peoples' worlds, but the historical authenticity of ethnographic research. In a 2002 article in *Oceania* (Jacka 2002), I argued that historical consciousness in Porgera was dynamic and reflective. I used ethnographic writings from research conducted between the years 1957 to 2000 on a cult that Porgerans participated in during the 1940s to examine Porgerans' changing perceptions of the cult based on their increasing incorporation into larger-scale political and socioeconomic processes (see also Biersack 1996; Biersack 1998; Biersack 2011a; Biersack 2011b; Gibbs 1977; Meggitt 1973). The critical point of this article was that peoples' explanations of the cult, its efficacy, and its link to Christianity and world historical events differed depending upon when the research on the cult was conducted. Note that I am not claiming any kind of 'invention of tradition' argument here, the major themes and details were similar in each case, what differed were issues of salience – what was important at that particular historical moment and what was not.

I bring this up in reference to Mimica's analysis of the different ways that Aletta Biersack and I depicted the role of the sun for Ipili speakers in the Porgera and Paiela valleys. My goal is not to argue that one or the other of us is right. Biersack was my PhD advisor, spent three years in Paiela in the mid-1970s, since 1993 has been to Porgera and Paiela every few years, and has a vast knowledge of Ipili cosmology especially as it relates to gender and ritual. As I am an environmental anthropologist interested in development and resource management, we conduct different, albeit complementary, research. Therefore, the sun conversations that Biersack and I had with Ipili speakers occurred roughly a quarter of a century apart under vastly different socioeconomic circumstances. By the time I started research in Porgera (December 1998), Porgerans were almost a decade into having a world-class gold mine in the midst of their homelands. Violent clashes between locals and the police (funded by the mine) and locals and mining security forces shaped some of the contours of daily life for Porgerans (see Amnesty International 2010). Stories of beatings and rapes by the police circulated through the informal gossip networks. That no one mentioned the 'aesthetic-gnostic' qualities of the sun, focusing instead on the punitive and disciplinary aspects of it, should not come as much of a surprise to anyone. In conclusion, when we conduct comparative ethnology, we must recognize the historical nature of ethnographic research itself, and the need for common theoretical keywords, if we hope to better represent Melanesian life-worlds. To fail to recognize that comparative ethnographic research has its own historicity is to deny Melanesians coevality and to repeat the same errors that are central to Mimica's critique.

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