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### **Masculine Dilemmas**

Silverman offers this synthesis of psychoanalytic theory and cultural dialogics, applied to a Sepik River society, as a conceptual and ethnographic tool to advance our understanding of the meanings and misfortunes of masculinity and, more profoundly, of what—if anything—masculinity is (2, 177). Certainly, this erudite and fluid work, which parallels Lipset's (1997) approach to masculinity among the Murik, near the Sepik mouth, provides a coherent and innovative angle from which to view Sepik River social and ritual life. It makes a lot of sense, for example, out of the ubiquitous appropriation by lowland New Guinea male cults of female—especially, maternal—procreative qualities and powers. And Silverman's analysis of naven is especially valuable, since it shows a Bakhtinian interpretative framework to be *at least* as successful in understanding this refractory rite as the several earlier analyses that have been attempted since Bateson's initial attack on the problem.

To be sure, Silverman's general analytical framework provokes perennial questions of validation that face all psychodynamic analyses: Why should we prefer this particular analysis to others? Like any binomial framework, a Bakhtinian analysis seems especially absorbent of any and all ethnographic detail. If humans entertain two images of the body, the moral and the grotesque, if Iatmul male culture is dialectically generated by idealized images of motherhood as nurturing, sheltering, cleansing, fertile, and chaste and as defiling, dangerous, orificial, aggressive, and carnal, then virtually any statement or behavior can be analytically parsed as reflecting one aspect or the other of the resultant emotional ambivalence, existential contradiction, or normative behaviors that bespeak chaotic primary processes. Of course,

human responses indeed may be constructed precisely from such dilemmas. Moreover, such phenomena are far more complex and subtle in their workings than can readily be probed and confirmed with currently available data. Given that, Silverman's concern to substantiate his analysis ethnographically and in detail is to be applauded, and it is especially successful in its close attention to affectivity. The description of the emotional climax to the *nggariik* rite, for instance, in which a classificatory mother's brother slides his anal cleft down the leg of the rite's subject, is acutely drawn, capturing a remarkable affective dissonance, and Silverman's analysis of the act's complexities is thought provoking and persuasive.

Since I do not pretend to a shred of expertise in psychodynamic analysis and I can claim only modest command of the burgeoning literature on cultural dialogics, it would be fatuous if, beyond these introductory comments, I were to attempt a critique of what Silverman offers. Rather, I should prefer to pose a couple of queries concerning historical contingency and cultural permutation that, I hope, will provide him an opportunity to expand on the strengths and limitations of the framework he educes.

Silverman refers to the "upheavals of the past century" that the Eastern Iatmul have experienced, but this is perhaps an understatement of the effects of their colonial engagement. Tambunum probably had its initial contact with the western world well over a century ago, when four German scientists steamed through Iatmul territory in 1886 en route to a four month stay in the upstream villages of Chenapian and Malu (Schrader, quoted in Anon. 1887; Anon. 1888). Over the next 30 years, at least 20 more European expeditions traveled up the lower or middle reaches of the Sepik River (Claas n.d.). Since surviving records are generally sparse, it is easy to underestimate the scale of this traffic, but Claas (n.d.) estimates the number of foreign visitors to the Sepik River during this period to be well over a thousand, implying an extensive encounter rate between visitors and villagers. Following World War I, the scale of contact accelerated: Iatmul "pacification" was sufficiently advanced by the mid-1920s for the Australian administration to begin tax and census patrols. By the 1930s, when Bateson began his Iatmul work, labor recruiters and oil prospectors were everywhere, sometimes detonating dynamite sticks to impress the locals into submission and abducting their young men when this failed (e.g., Beazley n.d.). The 1940s, as Silverman notes (24), saw Japanese occupation, forced labor, Allied bombings and strafings, and the predatory activities of local men who had been appointed auxiliaries in the Japanese Army. The post-War years then saw yet further expansion of foreign presences with the advent of "thoroughly modern modernity."

This early history of the Sepik is rather poorly known, and its effects on local people even more so. The evidence strongly indicates, though, that they were both dramatic and traumatic. One hesitates to use the term "Holocaust,"

since the outcome was the result more of indifference than design, but middle Sepik peoples lost a substantial proportion of their population to this early Western contact. The eastern half of the Iatmul language group suffered so greatly from introduced diseases, declining birth rates, and killings in the Second World War that its population was no higher in the early 1950s than it had been in 1930. Without these losses, available census data indicate, the population would have grown by 30–40 percent over those twenty years (Woodman 1928, census register; cf. ANGR [Angoram Census Registers] 1946–1961, census registers). Tambunum and its adjoining settlement of Wombun may not have fared quite as badly as their neighbors: from a censused population of 794 in 1928 (probably nearer 850 in actuality), they numbered 1,001 in 1954. But Timbunke, the next village upriver, went from a censused population of 516 in 1928 to about 409 in 1954, partly as a result of the infamous Timbunke massacre, in which the Japanese executed 96 villagers for suspected collaboration with the Allies (McCarthy 1963: 216–17). Almost certainly, the region had suffered similar demographic losses in prior decades: earlier estimates routinely put Tambunum (including, presumably, Wombun) at 1,000–1,200 residents (e.g., Christian 1974, 527; Townsend 1968, 142)—but for lack of adequate census data these effects are difficult to gauge with any precision.

As middle Sepik populations were hit by the plagues of modernity, their settlements also underwent significant distortions in gender balance as young men left on indentured labor contracts—some returning after three to six years, others, as Silverman notes, never returning. As early as 1928, almost a third of adult males in the Eastern half of Iatmul territory were absent as indentured laborers; the figure for Tambunum was about 36 percent (Woodman 1928, census register). The result was a substantial gender imbalance in local settlements. Among the Eastern Iatmul in general, there was 1.13 females to every male—1.31 adult females to every adult male; in Tambunum and Wombun, though, populations were more skewed, with 1.3 females to every male and 1.36 women to every man.

It need hardly be emphasized that historical data—especially census data for early years—must be viewed with some caution. But clearly the engagement with colonialism had considerable consequences for the Eastern Iatmul, raising questions about the relationship between historical change and Iatmul male psychodynamics. Following a lead from Mead, who spent some time in Tambunum, Silverman hints (23–24) that Iatmul society was sufficiently elastic to assimilate these upheavals. And perhaps—the situation is unclear to me—this is his warrant for using data collected throughout Iatmul history to buttress his arguments: Bateson's field notes and publications from the early 1930s, Mead's published comments from her later research with

Bateson, the work of the Basel expedition in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and Silverman's own fieldwork over the last fifteen years or so.

I should like to query, though, whether it is realistic to suppose that the phenomena Silverman probes would have been essentially unaffected by contact with the colonial and postcolonial worlds. I do not wish to suggest that Iatmul society was somehow in stasis or equilibrium prior to contact or that the Iatmul simply reacted to the changes Europeans instituted. But we might imagine that Iatmul masculinity and the semiotic dialogs its dilemmas provoke were at the very least affected and quite plausibly transformed by their engagement with these events. "Pacification," for example, surely had especially poignant repercussions for images of masculinity? Iatmul men have an unusually limited role in subsistence. Prior to contact, women and their fishing activities provided the protein mainstay of the diet; every few days, they exchanged a portion of this catch for sago at traditional inland markets; and to the extent villages procured their own sago, women undertook the major labor demands in processing it. Men's subsistence tasks were limited to felling sago palms, sailing them to the village, and pounding the pith; to some comparatively limited hunting; to some spear fishing; and to gardening. They were also responsible for canoe making and, of particular importance in times of heightened hostility, they provided vital defensive functions for women at their fishing grounds, in the barter markets, and in the sago swamps when it proved impossible to float logs back to the village (e.g., Bateson 1958: 142–44, 147; Hauscr-Schäublin 1977: 21–25, 39–47, 67–68, 71–72; Silverman, *passim*).

To an unusual degree, though, Iatmul women fed their menfolk, so to speak, and perhaps this casts some light on the latter's marked preoccupation with the maternal figure and with distinguishing themselves from it. But pacification would have heightened this dilemma markedly. With their protective role gone, stripped away in the space of a very few years, men suddenly depended on women for food in a way they never had before. Prior to contact, moreover, it was Iatmul men's conceit that village prosperity depended on their headhunting activities. Successful head hunts meant plenty of children, good health, and a productive environment (104). With pacification, though, an important element of masculine identity and justification vanished. No wonder perhaps, as Silverman notes, women nowadays laugh at men's ritual pretensions (167–68)?

Then there are the white males who set these events in train—the empowered newcomers who, according to the phrasing of men in several parts of the Sepik, "made women of us." G. W. L. Townsend, who was primarily responsible for the pacification of the middle Sepik, had a particular effect on the region's males in the way, on several occasions, he presided over public

hangings of men convicted of headhunting. As Harrison (1993) has detailed for the neighboring Manambu, local belief held that men were incapable of killing unless they had been prepared by rituals designed to heat the body, block the ears, and so induce a temporary inhumanity, so to speak. In Townsend, however, Sepik men confronted a horrifying being, one capable of killing in cold blood, as it were: little wonder that they stopped their headhunting almost overnight (Bragge 2002, pers. comm.). The point for our purposes is that Iatmul men surely could hardly have avoided redefining their traditional images of masculinity in the terrible mirror Townsend unknowingly furnished.

In sum, how justified in a psychodynamic and dialogical accounting is it to set history aside, as Silverman implicitly does in drawing together data from many points along its trajectory? At least to me, it seems probable that the dialogics of masculinity responded in significant ways to such events, and I am interested in learning how they might be encompassed within Silverman's account. Guidance on this issue could simultaneously resolve what, in some ways, might be considered its spatial transformation. This related issue is urged upon us by Silverman's use of ethnographic data from other Iatmul villages. As he notes, there are many differences between Eastern Iatmul culture and that of villages and dialects farther upstream—sufficient, indeed, to justify him in distinguishing Tambunum and Wombun as a cultural entity in their own right. But this strategy raises questions concerning social-cultural processes and boundaries. At many points, Silverman extends or buttresses his analysis of Tambunum culture with data from ethnographic work conducted in a string of Nyaura- and Palimbei-Iatmul villages up and down the river: Malingai, Mindimbit, Kandingei, Kanganaman, Kararau, Palimbei, and Yentchan. At the same time, though, often in footnotes, he remarks on but does not account for cultural differences between Tambunum and these other villages. Where, then—or what—are the contours, so to speak, that define the limits of the processes evident in Tambunum? Silverman's synthesis of Bakhtin and psychoanalytic theory has very considerable promise, and he is to be congratulated on forging this new framework, but if we are to use it for understanding ethnographic instances and trajectories, how might we better locate it in the specifics of ethnographic space and historical time?

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