

Response:

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Responses from the Field

In this postmodern world of information overload (a colleague in philosophy recently mentioned to us that the average number actually reading any article appearing in the major journals in his field was 2.3

persons), it is a privilege to have such thoughtful responses to *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts* as those from Nelson Graburn and Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin. Both have read our work with care and have, from somewhat different perspectives, given us much to think about concerning ways to modify, extend, or elaborate our argument. Both call for (among other things) additional contextualization: In particular, Graburn asks us to position ourselves more completely as ethnographers, while Hauser-Schäublin asks us to position the Chambri more fully as historical agents in long-term processes. (In these circumstances, we realize how useful a “turbo-merge” program would have been, enabling information included in previous publications to appear in one’s latest, in a manner both informative and not unduly distracting!)

A possible way to answer their criticisms would be to engage in “rhetoric of motives” (Burke 1969), familiar to all academics. To the extent that we could make the case, we might well argue that our work was, in fact, not properly read and evaluated: that we did not omit adequate coverage of specific areas; that we did not make any but trivial errors of detail; that we should not be criticized for not doing what we did not intend to do; that the criticism derives from an antiquated-or otherwise unsound theoretical position, and so forth. It is, of course, familiarity with such rhetorical devices that marks us as practitioners of an academic field. That we engage--that we vex--each other in this manner as colleagues is possible because the differences among us are essentially commensurate. That is, we can (largely regardless of our various academic positions) all be playing the same game. Indeed, the presence of such conventions-- and the assumption that they lead to intellectual progress-- underlies the existence of such scholarly institutions as this Book Review Forum. a

Yet, in this instance, taking seriously [editor] Rob Borofsky’s offer of “considerable leeway” in framing our reply, we wish to move the debate forward in a somewhat different way. We wish to answer Graburn and Hauser-Schäublin by joining their reviews, especially as they call for increased contextualization, to another response from the field. We find this latter response challenging to deal with, in part, because it comes from colleagues of a different sort than Graburn and Hauser-Schäublin: It comes from those for whom differences so great as to be incommensurate often characterize their relations with those of the “first world” --whether mining engineers, tour operators, tourists, or anthropologists. We reproduce below (in translation) a recent letter from Francis and Scola Imbang, two Chambri who ‘appear in *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts*. The Imbangs were our closest neighbors at Chambri

and among our best friends there. Francis--the uncle of a young woman who was beaten to death in the town of Wewak by the jealous wives of police-- confronted the Papua New Guinea state in the "story" we tell about him (pp. 178-188); Scala--the mother of the three boys who taunted our elderly friend Yorondu as anachronistic--attended the course about nutrition in the "story" we tell about her (pp. 198-199).

The Imbangs' initial response to our book arrived recently:

Here now, Francis and Scola Imbang would like to tell you about everything that you sent to us. The book, letter, and three keys [sent so that they could open the patrol boxes we had left in the field and use the enclosed gear] we received at the time we went to Madang when Godfried [Godfried Kolly, the "indigenous ethnographer" who also appears in the book, pp. 154-168] gave them to us. When we go back to the village we will open the two boxes and we will take care of everything you asked us to in your letter.

We are all OK. Tia and Angela [their daughters] are married and each has one child. Donald is in school, but he doesn't have enough money for his school fees. The box containing things and the money for Donald was lost; we didn't receive it. [They refer here to gifts and money we had earlier sent.] Later, we will hear about why they were lost. Desmond is in Grade Three and Leopold is in Grade One. Rudolph [their eldest child, who graduated from Technical College] is at the Dami Oil Palm Project. His phone number is 93

Here now, I, Francis, would like to ask you to give me something because I gave you good understanding. I am asking both you and Rudolph to help and I have given you his phone number. You two should buy me an outboard motor or a fifteen-seater bus: this is instruction to you, Deborah, and to your son, Rudolph. As well, you must answer this letter concerning your thoughts.

We have left Chambri and have gone to Madang. The clock you sent to us stopped. You must send batteries for the clock and also send a flash camera. We will be happy to see your reply. Goodby and God bless.

Yours faithfully
Scola and Francis Imbang

Most anthropologists working in the "third world"--certainly in

Papua New Guinea--have, we venture, received communications rather like this upon returning home. It is, in some regards, an "ordinary" letter, evoking the reciprocal entailments on which long-term fieldwork usually depends. We have, over the years, often received requests from Francis and others for such items as outboard motors. However, at least in our reaction to it, this letter is a bit different than previous ones because it refers explicitly to our book--they received the copy we sent them and take credit for having given us the "good understanding" without which we could not have written it. Their reminder that we owe them has, under these circumstances, a particular sharpness that highlights the complexity of our position as ethnographers--as those who are writing about the Chambri in a world system.

As we have said, we know the conventional structure of response to academic critics that marks us as collegial equals. But how do we respond to the Imbangs, given the complexities--especially the relative economic and political inequalities--of our relationship? Do we consider that their request for a fifteen-seater bus is exorbitant: that, for instance, the information they gave was very helpful, yet, without our analytic and literary skills, would have amounted to little? Do we conclude paternalistically that a fifteen-seater bus would not make their lives much better? Do we assume that their request was largely rhetorical and that they do not actually expect a very substantial recompense--that, as is frequent in Papua New Guinea, they were only testing us? In other words, do we send the clock, perhaps the camera, and forget the rest? Or, do we, in fact, owe them (or Chambri collectively) a fifteen-seater bus?

We mean this example as instructive not only of the political complexities of positioning ourselves, as Graburn wishes us to do more completely, but, also, of the degree to which one may, in focusing on these complexities, become self-indulgent. The Imbangs' letter is revealing of real dilemmas concerning the social and economic inequalities often inherent in the position of the ethnographer in relation to his or her indigenous colleagues. However, the nature of our eventual response to the Imbangs, as well as our continued emotional agonizing over that response, would likely have limited anthropological significance: whether, for example, we mortgaged our house to buy them the bus, or simply sent a clock, would not ultimately be, for our professional colleagues, more than a matter of curiosity and gossip. After all, our ethnographies of (e.g.) the Chambri should be far more about them than about us. (We worry, in this regard, about the possibility of self-indulgence for those who might wish to pursue Reddy's [1992] fascinating

suggestion that a truly historical ethnography must take into active consideration the academic politics that gives rise to our research agendas.)

This is not to say that we should be absent from our writings: We should, to be sure, delineate the politics of our writings and thereby assume responsibility for them. Beyond this, the primary justification for talking in detail about our ethnographic presence among the Chambri concerns the effects we have on a social field. As we elaborate at length in *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts*, our ethnographic presence becomes significant in that we may embody certain sorts of significant power relations: that we, like the tourists who visit Chambri, can come and go as we choose, send or not send clocks and cameras and buses, evinces differences between ourselves and the Chambri that are incommensurate. We should, in other words, try to take into account the implications of these power differentials, including the possibility that, for example, the Imbangs regard us, as they regard the tourists, with ambivalence. They might, thus, have engaged with us in part because they hoped we would send them something they very much wanted but would probably not be able to acquire on their own.

That the Imbangs view as desirable the acquisition of a fifteen-seater bus brings us to Hauser-Schäublin's concern with long-term historical processes. We agree, of course, that the more historical context that can be provided the better. We do think, though, that a *focus* on long-standing assumptions and concerns about knowledge, power, and material goods might predispose one to overlook important colonial and postcolonial transformations that have shaped local peoples' agendas and their capacities to pursue their agendas. Indeed, we argue in *Twisted Histories* that many of the Chambri we knew were *preoccupied* with the increasing degree to which their regional system was being encompassed by national and international ones. In particular, Chambri were enthusiastic about the possibilities associated with "development" as well as distressed by some of its aspects, including the possibility that they might be left behind: that they might become anachronistic or backward.

This changing world--to which Chambri react with both excitement and misgiving-- is the one the Imbangs inhabit and disclose in their letter to us. Not only does their letter reveal the complex position anthropologists assume with respect to local people, but it demonstrates that these people are participants in an equally complex and rapidly transforming historical context. Without denying that important continuities with the past exist--and are analytically important--contemporary Papua New Guineans like the Chambri are also absorbed by

matters such as phone numbers, school fees, college educations, out-board motors, buses, trips to Madang. If Chakrabarty is correct that the idea of "history" and its concomitant concept of "anachronism" were "absolutely central to the idea of 'progress' (later 'development') on which colonialism was based and to which nationalism aspired" (1992:57), then an *emphasis* on long-term continuity might be to misconstrue social process--especially as that process is shaped by contemporary social concerns.

The Imbangs' letter clearly suggests that positioning ourselves as ethnographers while making sense of this changing historical context is extraordinarily problematic. Moreover, we must emphasize, both this positioning and this making sense should also be understood as significantly political. As we stress in *Twisted Histories*, at least at this historical juncture those of the "first world" affect Chambri lives more than the reverse: Certainly what we as "first world" anthropologists write about the Chambri currently has (even with limited readership!) more weight in the world than their responses to us. Although we have grappled with these issues in *Twisted Histories*, the formulations concerning positioning and historical context raised in Graburn's and Hauser-Schäublin's perceptive reviews suggest that these topics are well worth further consideration.

In *Twisted Histories*, we sought to write a politically grounded ethnography of change: to take adequate account of the past, yet catch the moment; to relate local preoccupations (both long- and short-term) to world processes; to contextualize ourselves as anthropologists in the field (ethnographically, disciplinarily, and politically), while still conveying the lives of others as they are caught up in rapid change. Such an ethnography remains, we think, a valuable, but obviously a difficult, project.

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