Review: Roger M. Keesing
McGill University

I am dazzled by Strathern's analytical virtuosity in interpreting the symbolic structures of gender and connected issues of bodily substance, growth, and reproduction. I find many aspects of her interpretation compelling, both in disclosing hidden logics of Papuan symbolism and in connecting as transforms of one another symbolic structures that seem superficially disparate and unrelated. Her sustained unpacking of the conceptual baggage Western scholars have brought to New Guinea will force us to rethink many of our assumptions. Her interpretations of particular systems-- such as her explorations of androgynous symbolism and partible elements of personhood--will provide themes for further exploration and debate long after the peoples and cultural practices she examines have changed beyond recognition. I have elsewhere (e.g., Keesing 1989) deplored the way, year after year, new ethnographies of New Guinea are produced, with very few attempts to analyze comparatively and systematically the masses of material already available. Strathern's analytical *tour de force* shows what is possible.

All that said, there is much about the book that troubles me. I should note that my perspectives on *The Gender of the Gift* reflect the unusual place in which my second and more careful reading of the book was done: in a Kwaio settlement in the mountains of Malaita, Solomon Islands. I compared what I was reading with what I was seeing and hearing, and this dialectical tension is reflected in my comments.

There is no reason why Strathern's interpretations of Hagen (and her extrapolations from them to other Papuan peoples) should ring true for the Kwaio. The Kwaio speak a language quite closely related to Samoan and Trukese (and replete with familiar, key Oceanic concepts, such as

mana and *tabu*), and not at all related to those of mainland New Guinea. On close examination, what superficially resemble Papuan concerns with pollution are very different, and parallel the ones now being debated by Polynesian specialists. There is no plausible connection historically or archaeologically between Malaitans and mainland Papuans. But why, then, does she cling to the category of "Melanesia," and incorporate the Oceanic-speaking peoples of the Massim and of Vanuatu (the latter, close linguistic relatives of the Kwaio) into an old-fashioned category whose only basis, as far as I can see, is darkish skin pigmentation? True, "Melanesians" have been typified anthropologically in terms of exchange and big-men and all that; but the serious distortions entailed in such typifications (the hereditary chiefs liberally scattered through "seaboard Melanesia," the centrality of exchange to the west, north, and east of "Melanesia" as well as in it) have long been visible. I am impressed by Strathern's ability to find persuasive transformations of Papuan patterns in the Massim and Vanuatu, but I have no doubt that her analytical ingenuity could find equally compelling continuities in the ethnographies of eastern Indonesia or "Micronesia."

Having difficulty with the unexamined essentialism of "Melanesia" (especially from my vantage point on a Kwaio mountain), I also had difficulty with the insufficiently examined essentialism of Strathern's "gift economy." I find this to be a misleading label for the sorts of economy she is characterizing; but the problem goes beyond labels. Her use of the distinction between gift and commodity, drawn from Gregory (1982), polarizes almost to the point of caricature the differences between (say) the contemporary Australian economy and sociality and that of (say) the Kwaio: many aspects of social relations in Canberra seem to me to fit within the idealized patterns supposed to characterize "Melanesia," and many aspects of the social relations in which my Kwaio friends were engaged seem to me to fit within the idealized "commodity" economy. All empirical economies and modes of sociality are, I suspect, complex mixes of Strathern's ideal types. I intend a serious and nontrivial point here. From Marx's time onward, we have been told that a logic of commodity economy pervasively and systematically colors our mode of thought (and distorts our understanding of worlds equally pervasively and systematically colored by quite different logics). Such a claim may be rhetorically persuasive, but I believe it runs counter to so much that has been learned in phenomenology and in the study of everyday cognition and folk models in the cognitive sciences, and indeed to our own intuitions, that it can no longer be sustained.[1] In our everyday cognition, universes of expectation representing "econo-

mies" of barter and of reciprocal gift and ongoing mutual obligation happily coexist with seemingly contradictory universes of expectation representing the commoditization of the market economy. There is every reason to believe--and my Kwaio friends were enacting this before my eyes, in buying and selling everything from areca nuts to woven bags and taro crops, using strung shell beads--that tribal peoples, in "Melanesia" as elsewhere, similarly move from conceptual universe to conceptual universe, from "commodity" to "gift" economy and back, a dozen times a day, as we do. The balances and dominations are obviously different, but characterizing these as mutually unintelligible thought worlds or opposite poles of human possibility is no more than a rhetorical exercise.

My further concerns about this book have to do with the nature of anthropological "explanation." One of my major interests in tribal societies is with the processes whereby cultural symbols--cosmological notions, myths, ritual procedures, rules imputed to ancestors--are produced and reproduced. Social theorists of various persuasions have searchingly interrogated the sociology of knowledge in complex societies, the nature and force of ideology, and the relationships between class, gender, power, and meaning. These questions are systematically hidden by the conceptual systems developed in both the British social anthropology tradition and the American cultural anthropology tradition. In and around anthropology, questions about the dynamics and politics of the production of cultural symbols have belatedly been raised --sometimes well, sometimes crudely--in feminist (and Marxist) cultural critique.

Strathern seems to me to take an extremely conservative position--however bolstered by analytical argument and rhetorical sophistication --in regard to the dynamics and politics of cultural knowledge, and therefore to the scope of anthropological analysis. Despite all her disclaimers, she ends up as a defender of and apologist for a local cultural status quo, by arguing against the philosophical admissibility of any external challenge to it. It is true that any such challenge must be culturally situated, exogenous, and hence in some sense alien. But in an era when universalist conceptions of human rights, justice, dignity, and liberation that historically derive from the European Enlightenment are being invoked all over the world, do we anthropologists really want to retreat into local cultural relativisms that legitimate Gimi mortuary practices or Sambia brutalizations by defending them against the possibility of external critique (especially when contemporary Gimi and the Sambia are so busily extricating and liberating themselves from their

own dark cultural pasts)? If feminist critiques of the exploitation entailed when Papuan women do the bulk of work in pig rearing and surplus food production and men appropriate the products (by an external standard) of women's labor (by an external standard) do violence to local conceptions of work and production, are we really to assume that these local conceptions are innocent and unmotivated, themselves philosophically impervious to cultural critique? When Kwaio men tell me that the hard work they do communicating with the ancestors and planning feasts is the counterpart of the hard work women do in gardens and households, are we to accord more cultural reverence to this than we would to characterizations of the division of labor by businessmen in Manchester?[2]

Where does the stuff of cultural meaning--rituals, myths, cosmologies, ideas about the body and reproduction, rules about men and women, rights and duties-- come from? Does it simply cumulate in local traditions by thousands of minute accretions, collectively laid down, in a process I have elsewhere (Keesing n.d.) likened to the formation of a coral reef? In the small local populations that have characterized the region Strathern examines, historical accretions of ideas and practices are mainly undocumented and untraceable. But the largely hidden nature of this process is precisely what poses a challenge to anthropological analysis.

In such small-scale populations (and especially those of the size of the Gimi or Sambia or Kaluli or Umeda, in contrast to the post-Ipomoean Enga or Hageners), two mechanisms for the production of cultural symbols can operate in a more direct way than in much larger scale and more internally complex and differentiated social formations. One is the transformation of the productions of individual fantasy (in dream, trance, etc.) into collective symbols. I have discussed how, among the Kwaio (Keesing 1982a: 202-205, 212-215), interpretation of dreams is a daily occurrence; fantasy material feeds directly into plans for collective action and into ritual procedures. Among the Kwaio, and very probably among the Gimi and other Papuans, last week's dream may become this week's myth or ritual sequence: and by a very political process. A dialectic of consciousness and unconsciousness is continuously crystallizing into cultural symbols. The symbolic stuff Strathern examines for such peoples as the Gimi bears the clearest possible stamp of origin in the unconscious depths of individual fantasy (and tormented fantasy stuff it is, too; Gillison's depiction [1983] of the Gimi view of a forest filled not only with dangerous beings but with threatening, hairy vulvas strikes me as coming quite directly from the realm of psychic murk, not

the realm of intellectual gymnastics in which Strathern situates it). I place no great faith in classical Freudian psychoanalysis or recent (e.g., Lacanian) reinterpretations of the psychodynamics of the unconscious. But where better to work toward a more anthropologically enlightened depth psychology than interior New Guinea, where the stuff of the unconscious mind has come so directly to the collective surface?[3] Yet Strathern systematically dismisses (under the rubric of "sex-role socialization") attempts by anthropologists to explore the complex circuitry whereby psychological orientations are culturally shaped and reproduced, and whereby in turn they produce new cultural material. This is particularly ironic in that, according to my reading, the elaborations by Papuans of systems of initiation and theories of growth rest on their cultural theories of psychodynamics, of how gentle boys are turned into fierce men.[4]

The New Guinea with which Strathern presents us is a world filled with complex, ambiguous, multivalent and contextually shifting images --of flutes, bodily fluids, exchanges of substance and essence. But it is a world without terror, without violence, without pain, without psychic turmoil, without pleasure. (For eleven pages [210-218] we learn more than we ever wanted to know about transactions in semen, but we find nary an orgasm.)

The New Guinea with which she presents us is curiously devoid of history, and that is part of the problem. True, she touches on *wok meri* and some aspects of changing gender relations under the impact of cash economy. But the Hageners and Gimi and Sambia and others we find here, and their supposed cultural cousins in the Massim and Vanuatu, mainly live in a never-never land of the ethnographic present, outside time and the world system (cf. Fabian 1983). As I have pointed out elsewhere (Keesing 1982b), the ethnographic accounts of New Guinea produced in the colonial and postcolonial periods have almost all been carried out in a climate of externally imposed pacification; yet the cultural traditions we have described cumulated in climates of extreme violence, the threat of sudden death, and collective extermination. The populations of fringe Highlands zones, in particular (and it is in these that the symbologies at issue are most fully--wildly--developed), were competing violently for sheer survival; and hence their cultural traditions were locked into a kind of symbolic armaments race. The concerns with growth, strength, bravery and psychological toughness and brutality around which male cultism and many facets of gender relations are constructed make sense in this climate of threat, terror, and collective danger (and under circumstances where physical size and strength[5] as well

as psychological toughness were deeply problematic and where fertility of women [6] and hence the reproduction of populations was equally problematic). Producing "men"--and women, as their complement--was, in this world, a desperate, competitive challenge, with survival as the stakes. These cultural traditions do not make sense, Strathern's interpretive virtuosity notwithstanding, in the New Guinea with which she presents us, a timeless world where killing is symbolized and talked about but not practiced, [7] the New Guinea of modern ethnographers.

Strathern's New Guinea, devoid of terror, is likewise mainly devoid of power. Another potentially fairly direct path for the production of cultural symbols is their motivated (if not necessarily entirely conscious) creation as instruments of political interest. A considerable body of social theory (in the Marxist, Mannheimean, Frankfurt, Gramscian, Foucaultian, and diverse feminist lineages, among others) has engaged the question of how ideologies are cumulatively produced that advance and reinforce the interests of particular segments of society that collectively have the power to impose them, without positing conscious conspiracies and manipulations. I do not believe that, to see the hegemonic force of cultural symbols, anthropology must take a crude and simplistic view of men in New Guinea men's houses sitting around discussing rules and cosmological schemes that would subordinate women and extract their labor. Nor do we have to imagine that it is only men who have produced the cultural traditions we record ethnographically. In much of New Guinea, men and women lead lives fairly widely separated in terms of quotidian regimens of work and other activity, in terms of experiences and perspectives. The symbolic stuff that crystallizes into cultural material is produced on both sides of this gender boundary, and material emanating from one side is reshaped through commentary and response from the other. Yet in this complex dialectical process, the cultural patterns that cumulate come (it would seem) preeminently to represent the interests (and the fears, anxieties, hostilities, envy) of the male side of the gender divide, and to serve men's political interests.

Even within the men's side, or the women's, there may be structures of political interest manifest in cultural constructions; we need not assume that each side is unitary and coherent, devoid of contradiction and interest. (Do we really want to analyze semen transactions and notions of growth among the Sambia without observing that the cultural ideologies about growth force young boys to perform fellatio, on their knees in deference and submission, to serve the orgasmic pleasures of their seniors? Young Sambia have noticed; and now that they have a choice, they go off in droves to Port Moresby instead.) In this dialectic

of culture production and reproduction, concepts of maleness and femaleness, of essential nature and genderedness, but also of work and responsibility and the products of labor, emerge; these conceptions are inescapably expressions and reinforcements of power, not simply of meaning.

Where the most basic notions about personhood and being-in-the-world are themselves products of this ongoing dialectic, no cultural critique can be internally situated. That is, any interrogation of the most basic takens-for-granted of a cultural system must be external to that system (and hence, inescapably, situated in some other one). My response to this conundrum, with which post-Marxist and feminist challenges confront us, is to try to be relentlessly self-reflective (as Strathern is) without becoming disempowered (as Strathern seems to be, especially in her penultimate chapter on "domination").

If cultural critique is to be possible vis-à-vis our own tradition, I do not believe we should abdicate the possibility of such cultural critique vis-à-vis other peoples' cumulated (and often equally patriarchal) traditions. The Enlightenment-derived concepts of universal justice, humanity, and dignity, if applied across divides of culture and sex and race, have much to recommend them, in contrast to practices of widow-strangling or gang rape or dowry murder or the stoning to death of adulterers. While I am aware of the potential imperialism entailed in their export abroad, I feel no need to apologize for their European origins, especially in an era where women all over the world are seeking to liberate themselves from cultural pasts, and where these ideals provide a flicker of hope for political prisoners, starving peasants, bonded laborers, and others desperately marginalized and threatened by local systems of power, cloaked in local cultural symbols.

Cultural critique based on Western values has often been carried on crudely without adequate appreciation either of the cultural complexities or the imperialism involved-- feminist condemnations of clitoridectomy and *sati* (Spivak 1989) provide cases in point, as do Marxist critiques of exploitation. But what is needed is less crude and more culturally and politically sensitive critique, not an abandonment of the field to cultural relativism. The frame Strathern places around her book suggests that what she intended was precisely such a critique, that simultaneously interrogated and played off against one another Western takens-for-granted and those of "Melanesia." My reading is that the balance she strikes is less than balanced; there is a lot of New Guinea culture here, and very little critique.

There is much to be learned from the questions Strathern poses, and

answers, so brilliantly. There is much to be learned, as well, from the questions she leaves unasked and unexplored.

NOTES

1. In my view this is a manifestation of what James Carrier has called "Occidentalism": a caricaturing and gross oversimplification of Western modes of life and thought so as to exaggerate their contrasts with those of non-Western peoples.

2. My point, at the risk of sounding like Marvin Harris, is that we would learn more about who is working how much by measuring caloric expenditures of energy across time than by asking local ideologues, whether in England or Malaita (or New Guinea). I accept Strathern's empirical point that in New Guinea such expenditures of labor are often less imbalanced than has been surmised in characterizations of "exploitation"; moreover, the imbalance has probably grown with the use of steel tools.

3. Sadly, only Herdt, Tuzin, and a handful of other ethnographers of New Guinea have had serious grounding in depth psychology, and could be qualified to contribute to such an exploration. Strathern's reading of Herdt systematically expunges psychoanalytic interpretations in favor of symbolic ones.

4. Strathern, incidentally, misreads (p. 128) my observation (Keesing 1982b:22) that "what men produce--as women cannot--is men," I meant "men" in the sense of fierce warriors capable of enduring pain and trauma and inflicting violent death, who are created out of boys.

5. In her years at the University of Papua New Guinea, Strathern regularly saw students from nutritionally marginal fringe Highlands populations add six inches or a foot in stature at the end of the adolescent growth period with a regimen of cafeteria food.

6. Data from Buchbinder (1973, 1977) and others indicates that under traditional dietary regimes, the age of menarche in fringe Highlands populations was often upwards of eighteen years, and ovulation was apparently sporadic and limited in time span.

7. The resurgent warfare in some parts of the Highlands is quite different in character than precolonial warfare, which often had population survival (rather than clan lands) as the stakes.

REFERENCES CITED

Buchbinder, G.

1973 "Maring Microadaptation: A Study of Demographic, Nutritional, Genetic, and Phenotypic Variation in a Highland New Guinea Population." Unpublished Ph.D. diss., Anthropology, Columbia University.

1977 "Nutritional Stress and Postcontact Population Decline among the Maring of New Guinea." In *Malnutrition, Behavior, and Social Organization,* ed. L. S. Greene. New York: Academic Press.

Fabian, J.

1983 *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Gillison, G.
1983 "Cannibalism among Women in the Eastern Highlands of New Guinea." In *The Ethnography of Cannibalism,* ed. P. Brown and D. Tuzin. Washington: Society for Psychological Anthropology.

Gregory, C. A.
1982 *Gifts and Commodities.* London: Academic Press.

Keesing, R. M.
1982a *Kwaio Religion: The Living and the Dead in a Solomon Islands Society.* New York: Columbia University Press.
1982b "Introduction." In *Rituals of Manhood: Initiation in Papua New Guinea,* ed. G. H. Herdt. Berkeley: University of California Press.
1989 "Research in Oceania: Problems and Prospects." *Oceania* 60:55-59.
n.d. "Theories of Culture Revisited." In *Assessing Developments in Anthropology,* ed. Ft. Borofsky. New York: McGraw-Hill, forthcoming.

Spivak, G. C.
1988 "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* ed. G. Nelson and L. Grossberg. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.