FISHING CAMPS AND TOPIARY TREES: PLACE, AFFECT, AND MORAL AGENCY IN A PAPUA NEW GUINEA MODERNITY

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Despite being regarded as a founding father in sociology and as no less canonical in anthropology (Merton 1934; Horowitz 1982), the overall theoretical framework of Durkheim's arguments with respect to place, affect, and agency in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1933) and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995) are too often ignored or unwittingly reinvented (Stewart 2007; Berlant 2008). I therefore want to begin this essay with a brief outline of how I understand his main points in order to lay a theoretical groundwork for my analysis of the shifting relationship of place, affect, and agency among the Murik Lakes people who live on the political and economic margins of postcolonial modernity in Papua New Guinea.

Durkheim's View of Place, Affect, and Moral Agency

In Durkheim's view, place, affect, and agency are socially defined. Therefore, the key features he attributes to "the social" must be appreciated. They are as follows. First, embodied people are morally undisciplined and subject to individually based desires and feeling that make them disregard moral norms and obligations. Second, at the same time, people live in moral solidarities, which consist of orderly, interconnected units or associations of relationships. Third, representations (or signs) of the collective interests and sentiments of these solidarities are projected onto sacred symbols, such as objects, places, and ancestors, which are seen to have powerful affective significance and are sources of moral agency. Fourth, these representations are understood as objective—they

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appear as external and concrete "things" (Horowitz 1982, 60) that are sui generis rather than man-made—dimensions of life (Durkheim 1933, 106). In other words, the Durkheimian view of the relationship of moral order to place, affect, and agency is paradoxical. Good and bad are inextricably intertwined. Collective life is seen to give rise to the good, while individual embodiments that make up collective life inevitably undercut it.

Durkheim went on to draw an important analytical distinction. For him, there are two kinds of moral order and therefore two kinds of moral persons who possess contrary kinds of affect and agency and live in contrary kinds of places. In the one, which he called mechanical solidarity, moral interests, beliefs, and sentiments are uniformly held to such an extent that social resemblances or likenesses prevail according to which persons and things become "the object of common sentiments" (Durkheim 1933, 127). A central feature of persons who live in mechanical solidarity is that they are directly bound to society "without any intermediary" (Durkheim 1933, 129) because collective life "completely envelops . . . [their] whole conscience and coincides in all points with it. . . . [A]t that moment,...individuality is nil" (Durkheim 1933, 130). The group is therefore "the heart, the center of . . . [a] common" moral being (Durkheim 1933, 112). They thus "love their country. They will it as they will themselves, hold to it durably and for prosperity, because, without it, a great part of their psychic lives would function poorly" (Durkheim 1933, 105). The key concept of the relationship between self, society, and place is that it is unmediated by specialized, nonlocal institutions. The ancestors are part of the land, no less than their descendants. And their relationship does not need to be legitimized by the state.

By contrast, in organic solidarity, individuals do not resemble each other (Durkheim 1933, 131). On account of a more specialized economy, in which labor is more differentiated, individualism prevails in society and persons become indirectly linked or bound to one another in ways that require the certification by morally neutral third parties, such as obstetricians or coroners. Mechanical solidarity, he posited, gives way to organic solidarity (Durkheim 1933, 174), which is to say it gives way to modernity and its differentiated institutions, a stage of social life that Durkheim viewed not as progress but as little more than "moral mediocrity" (Durkheim 1995, 321).

Now, I want to revise and extend Durkheim's distinction a little. In contexts of mechanical solidarity, my view is that the moral self is part of rather than separate from the other (Meeker, Barlow, and Lipset 1986). People, animals, plants, manufactured objects, and places, the whole environment in short, may be understood as collective representations (or signs) of moral integration, which is to say they constitute practices and activities through which moral society is reproduced. Thus, contacts with people, objects, and places do not only signify the moral integration of self and other, they contribute to an "ethos" (Bateson

1956; Nuckolls 1995) that is suffused with a sense of well-being and satisfaction because social relationships have been cared for and will go on.

In a famous section of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim (1995) observed that the ritual calendar was divided in half in an Australian Aboriginal tribe. In the ceremonial part of the cycle, families stopped hunting and gathering and divided into moieties to celebrate a *corroboree* that honored their totemic ancestor Wollunqua, the Rainbow Serpent, and initiated male youth. On the fourth day, late at night, the two groups were "in a state of obvious excitement" (Durkheim 1995:219):

> With fires flickering on all sides, . . . the Uluuru [group] knelt in a single file beside [a] . . . mound . . . [of sand], then moved around it, rising in unison with both hands on their thighs, keeling again a little further along, and so on. At the same time, they moved their bodies left and then right, at each movement letting out an echoing scream . . . at the top of their voices, Yrrsh! Yrrsh! Yrrsh! Meanwhile, the Kingilli [group] . . . sounded their boomerangs. . . . When the procession of the Uluuru [group] had circled the mound twice, they rose from their kneeling position, seated themselves, and took to singing. . . . At the first sign of day, everyone jumped to their feet; the fires that had gone out were relit; urged on by the Kingilli [group], the Uluuru [group] furiously attacked the mound with boomerangs, lances and sticks, and in a few minutes it was in pieces. The fires died and there was profound silence.

Durkheim arrives at a theoretically staggering conclusion about affect from this scene: the power of collective sentiments experienced in these kinds of "effervescent social milieu" is cosmologically and morally generative. Indeed, it is from that "very effervescence that . . . the religious idea seems to have been born" (Durkheim 1995, 220). Emotions aroused in "such a state of exaltation" might make a man feel he has taken on a new identity, especially because everyone else seems similarly transformed at the moment. Singing, shouting, and carrying on, the celebrants may all have entered an extraordinary world inhabited by beings and powers that differed from persons in everyday life. In other words, Durkheim derived a concept of the supernatural from ecstatic ego-alien states of being in which the moral self, which was otherwise part of the other in mechanical solidarity, now became transformed into the other. To what end? Affective experience was the undisguised center of society. It infused people with agency and gave them to feel a "joyful confidence" (Durkheim 1995, 225). Here we arrive at the crux of Durkheim's view of place, affect, and moral agency: "the faithful are not mistaken when they believe in the existence of a moral power to which they are subject and from which they receive what is best in themselves. That power

exists, and it is society" (Durkheim 1995: 226–7). The significance of the site of the corroboree, which fades into the background of the scene, should not be overlooked, particularly for the purposes of this essay. Why do the Warramunga assemble? To celebrate their social origin, which goes back to their ancestor, the Rainbow Serpent. The significance of the location of their corroboree does not derive from its material features but from the two groups of men who decorate the participants, ready the instruments, and pile up a little mound of sand on which they paint a red image of Wollunqua. In other words, the place is nothing other than a site of moral agency through which society reproduces itself.

Place, Affect, and Agency in Melanesian Societies

In mechanical solidarities—in which identity is not merely assumed to resemble the other but in a stronger sense it is understood to be an unmediated part of the other—place is thus conceived as a spatial center for moral reproduction to which strong affective attachments are felt and from which agency accrues. If so, we should not be surprised to learn that in Melanesia, where societies were certainly made up of moral relationships of this very kind (and continue to be, in modified forms), place is indeed understood as a social and moral signifier. "Personhood . . . and . . . kinship is geography" in Melanesia to which people feel sentiments of "topographic belonging" (Telban 2019, 488) and derive power. I shall present a couple of brief examples.

Along the middle Sepik River, Iatmul men refer to specific features in a landscape that the totemic ancestors created by naming them or to paths along which they walked. Living men identify with these locales and movements, not only because they share their names but also because they understand themselves to be part of the same body of their ancestors and these places. "Thus a man's name might refer to a river . . . [and] the names of his siblings, parents, grandparents, and other relatives, including his children, have been drawn from features and events that occurred in the area of that river" (Silverman 1998, 428). In this part of the river, in other words, "names mediate . . . identity and the landscape" (Silverman 1998, 2001: 190–1; Harrison 1990:48, Wassmann 1991).[1]

In Durkheim's terms, the Iatmul case illustrates an unmediated relationship between self, environment, and place in a mechanical solidarity. Other accounts foreground links that tie affect to moral agency and place more explicitly. Take, for example, the Gisaro dance staged by the Kaluli people of the Papuan Plateau, which serves as the climax of Edward Schieffelin's (1976) ethnographic masterpiece, *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers*. In a longhouse performance hosted by resident clansmen, a handful of resplendent young dancers are serenaded by a chorus of men singing songs referring initially to places in the countyside and then to more specific locations on their property. Aroused

by memories of deceased kin who lived and worked in these locales, a senior member of the host clan was overcome by grief, loneliness, and abandonment and "burst into loud wails of anguish . . . [and] grab[bed] . . . a torch . . . and jam[med] . . . the burning end forcefully into . . . [a] dancer's bare shoulder." Other youth yell and brandish axes, while the burned dancer moved slowly, as the senior man fled the scene "to wail on the veranda." Next morning, the dancers gave food to members of the audience, whom had been brought to tears, these gifts being construed as inadequate but which nevertheless renewed moral relations with the mourners. Their loneliness for the dead having been momentarily forestalled, they are left reinvigorated. "Since many people wept, the ceremony was felt to have been a good one" (Schieffelin 1976: 21–4). Features of the landscape along the Sepik River are named for the totemic ancestors whose living descendants receive their names from patrilineal kin, thus to reproduce place and society through moral agency. Although the Kaluli performance differs in the sense that it dwells upon death and feelings of loss, the relationship of moral agency to the reproduction of place and society could hardly be more pronounced.

A third example, this one from the north coast of Papua New Guinea (PNG), features affects aroused when Reite kin groups build *palem* platforms. The Reite see the platform as a "body,"[2] which also refers to a coresident kin group who build it with the help of their ancestor-spirits as well as to the Male Cult. The platform is named for the place on which it is built, and it is decorated with a pig, taro, and other foods. Amid many subsidiary exchanges that occur, an important one is given to an affine in return for the ritual work he has done or will do on behalf of a child. "The making of a palem . . . is the moment par excellence of the efforts Reite people make to show themselves and their places of origin as social entities" (Leach 2003,156fn9, 162). In other words, the palem platform expressed the collective identity of a kin group's moral agency in place. The hosts then beat "an enormous roll on their slit-gongs, by which the recipients are 'chased' out of the hamlet." They race away, "whooping and shouting as they carry the pig back" home (Leach 2003, 175). Host women will sometimes follow after the dancers, "falling in love with the smell, sight and most of all, the resonant voices . . . of the visiting hamlet singing together with their animating spirits . . . of the land from which the[y] . . . come" (Leach 2003, 182). No less than the totemic landscape along the Sepik River and the Kaluli mourners, the case of the Reite platforms shows us a concept of moral agency in which collective identity and place are reproduced amid expressions of affect (see also Meiser 1955; von Poser 2014).

Place, Affect, and Moral Agency in the Murik Lakes

I introduced a Durkheimian view of place, moral agency, and affect in contexts of mechanical solidarity. I then applied his framework to three ethnographic

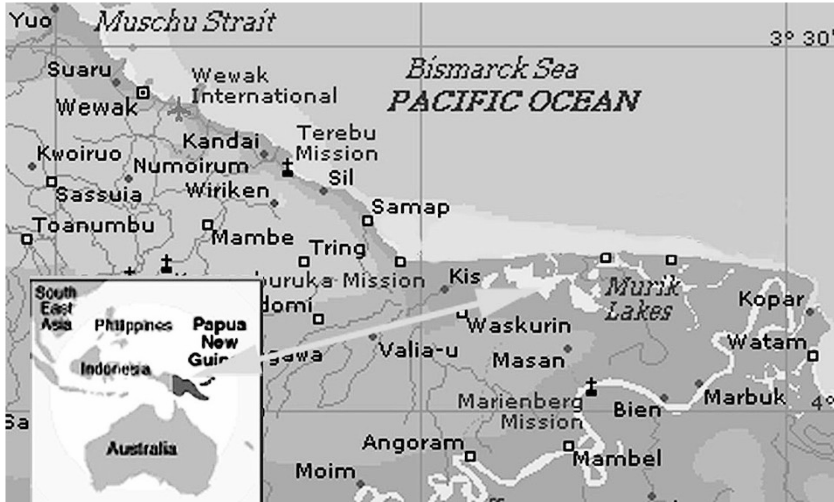

FIGURE 1. **The Murik Lakes, North Coast of Papua New Guinea.**

examples drawn from PNG societies. Now I turn to the relationship of place to moral agency and affect among the Murik Lakes people, with whom I have done longitudinal research (1981–2014, Fig. 1). These data shed light on how PNG modernity has begun to impact this relationship.

The Murik Lakes are a system of inshore brackish lagoons (about 160 square miles in size). They are separated from the Bismarck Sea by narrow barrier islands and intertidal mangrove forests that stretch along the coast for about 40 miles west of the mouth of the Sepik River. From 2010 to 2014, I conducted a Global Positioning System (GPS)–based survey of the social geography of this vulnerable intertidal environment. One goal was to elicit normative dimensions of what "place" meant and how those meanings might or might not be shifting in the time of sea-level rise during the early Anthropocene (Lipset 2011, 2013, 2014). As it was based in a participatory model of GPS-related research practices (Rambaldi et al. 2006, 2), I recruited small groups of men to travel around the Murik Lakes with me and map such dimensions of the lakescape as mangrove tenure and topographic features, discuss mangrove ethnobotany, and recite ethnohistorical narratives. Inevitably, I collected accounts of and observed labor associated with the mangroves in the contemporary moment. What was unexpected, however, were the signifiers of place, affect, and moral agency that I encountered in the lakescape. This article shall discuss two of these, fishing camps and a topiary figure that appears above the mangrove canopy, in order to argue that place-based affect not only expresses agency but also expresses the relationship between mechanical

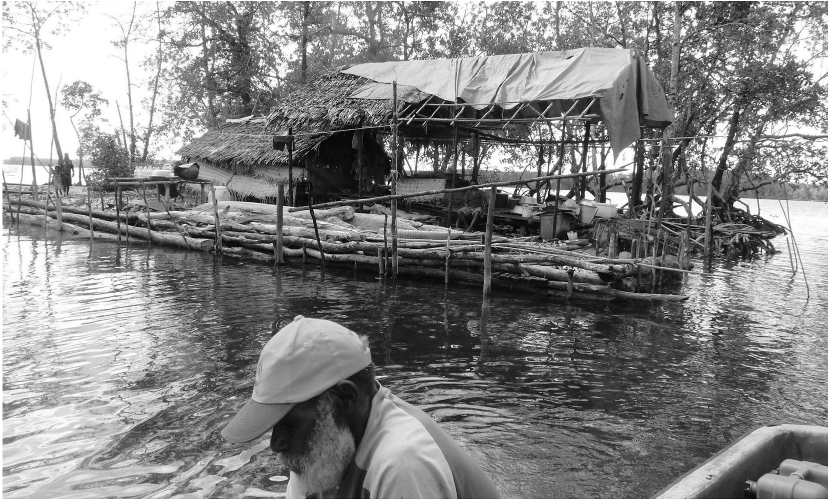

FIGURE 2. **An Islet Fishing Camp (2014, Photo by Author).**

and organic solidarity or, to put it in a more contemporary phrasing, the balance between Murik identity and the modern individual in the historical moment.

There are five village sites (*nemot*) located on the barrier islands, either on the beaches or along the lakeshore.[3] The villages are divided up into little named hamlets that consist of related households built by adult siblings and their children. These tiny bits of property are part of the estates of named lineages. Each household in a village has its own private docking space on the lakeshore (*mogev*) for their dugout canoes, and each village has its own private channel through which its citizens may paddle into the lakes to go fishing or to harvest shellfish from their hand-cut "meat channels" (*garap yangan*) that are lineage constructed and lineage owned.

Fishing Camps

Alternatively, extended families with several adults, young children, and the occasional dog go to stay and work in their fishing camps (*bar iran*) located in lineage-owned mangroves at great distances from the coastal villages. Many are built on tiny islets of reclaimed ground made up of little more than flattened mounds of lake sand, shell middens, old coconut husks, and wood shavings. Some camps are surrounded by the lake, but their owners have left a few trees standing for shade, while others abut the mangroves. One could generalize that these camps epitomize the tenuous grip of Murik society on their intertidal environment. Held

FIGURE 3. **Domestic Groups Live and Work in Fishing Camps Located on Lineage Property (2014, Photo by Author).**

in place by a series of vertical sticks, their edges, along which dugout canoes are moored, are shielded from lake tides by narrow barriers, the widths of which are little more than a log or two or perhaps the sideboard of an old canoe (Fig. 2).

Remote as they are from village society, not to mention their isolation from PNG modernity, the fishing camps present an abiding image of mechanical solidarity. There are no intermediaries here, just the domestic group (Fig. 3). Their social identities thus derive from the senior family member who instigated their construction or on whose property they sit, such as Joseph Koki'na bar iran or Wapo'na bar iran. But like the domestic group itself, these camps have an incompleted look. They both appear to be in process places, but yet if weathered bush material is any indication, they also appear to have a kind of longevity. They are made up of several small pile buildings: a sleeping house for each family living there, a kitchen house, whose bark floor is covered with pots and plastic water containers, workstations, and low-standing roofed platforms to sit down on for a meal. As often as not, the buildings are unfinished and lack walls or even roofs and may be covered by large blue tarpaulins that have been thrown over them like a blanket on an unmade bed. The fishing camps contrast with the village

FIGURE 4. **Two Boys Near Their Family's Fishing Camp (2014, Photo by Author).**

houses. Unlike the latter, which are built with the help of a larger labor pool, the rumpled quality of the former reflects the smaller size of the labor that built and use them as well as their narrower purpose.

Located near lineage-owned meat channels from which sandcrabs and clams are harvested, extended families subsist on the traditional Murik diet, fish and sago, at their fishing camps. School-age children are left behind. So, for the most part, the kin groups who take up residence at the fishing camps consist of an adult couple, perhaps a grandparent or two and young preschool children. What do they do there? They work or learn to work. Little boys can be seen standing in juvenile-size canoes with spears at the ready should a fish become visible at the surface of the water, and girls go with their mothers to gather shellfish (Fig. 4). The shellfish and smoked fish that adults harvest are taken either to biweekly cash/barter markets with their sago suppliers and horticultural neighbors or to meetings with hereditary trading partners for exchange days (*parub*). With increasingly less frequency, they might also pay the freight fee to send sacks of smoked clams to urban kin to sell at the cash-only market in Wewak Town, the provincial capital, which can be reached only by motorboat. Signs of labor, wooden paddles of both adult and child sizes stand propped up against the frameworks of the houses, new canoes are being carved, old canoes ready to be pushed down into the water lay grounded, and balled up nylon drift nets, are thus visible everywhere (Fig. 5). In other words, the agency enabled and exerted in fishing camps has to do with domestic relations of production, subsistence fishing, barter, and market exchange. The fishing camp is a site of the moral reproduction of the domestic group: it is a site of unalienated labor that remains in control of the means of production.

What affect, or ethos (Bateson 1936), characterizes these little places? Many Murik people extol the quality of fishing camp life. It is "quiet" (*siisi*), a sentiment

Figure 5. **Fishing Camps are Sites of Unalienated Labor (2014, Photo by Author).**

that does not distinguish it as a site of moral superiority or a natural utopia, à la Walden Pond to which Thoreau (1854) repaired to find an inner reality by rejecting modernity via self-reliance and simplicity. Rather than referring to a general nonspecific sort of peacefulness, going to the family fishing camp is often an assertion of self-help; it was part of what Sally Falk Moore (1973) once called a "semi-autonomous social field" (see also Goodale 2017) wherein customary forms of dispute resolution operate more or less independently of state law. Again, the fishing camp is understood as a site of mechanical solidarity. Some, although not all, families take off for their fishing camps to avoid local-level conflict in which one of their members has become entangled. If not about self-fashioning, the fishing camps express several important dimensions of the Murik relationship to modernity: they foreground the unmediated reproduction of the kin group through unalienated labor by means of their artisanal fishery based in property they own, and it may involve conflict avoidance, which is part of the normative and customary process of Murik social control (Lipset 1997). Let me offer a few ethnographic examples of these points.

In 2014, Joshua Sivik and Lilly Mojanga were living in a fishing camp located in a section of the lakes associated with hereditary landowners that immigrant Murik ancestors encountered upon first arriving on the Murik coast from the

FIGURE 6. **"This is My Land," Said Lilly Mojanga, "My Water!" (2014, Photo by Author).**

middle Sepik River, which is where they say they came from at some point in the not too distant past. Husband Joshua was a member of the research team. We came and picked him up on an August morning in 2014 to continue mapping mangrove property claims. As we left, the outboard motor of our little fiberglass boat instantly died, and we drifted just offshore. Lilly stood in the shallows in front of her fishing camp, along with several grandkids. With a broad smile, she waved goodbye to us, and called out, "This is my land, my water!" (Fig. 6).

Lilly did not derive her property claim from postcolonial law.[4] It received no legitimacy from registration with the Lands Department of PNG. The Murik Lakes are not registered to constituent hereditary ownership groups. Legal representatives of PNG make rare appearances here. Rather, Lilly's claim was based in prestate ethnohistory and the cognatic lineage to which she belonged. That morning, we went on to map about 35 GPS waypoints of meat channels that named nineteenth century ancestors who had cut them for their daughters and wives and whose rights had then been passed down to contemporary descendants. We also came upon the site of another fishing camp, whose owners had made gardens nearby during a time before the tides inundated the land there and the mangrove forests expanded. But the main feature of the area,

Figure 7. **Wapo's Fishing Camp (2014, Photo by Author).**

Murik informants said, was not its environmental history but rather that it was a "Yowaton lagoon," the Yowaton having lived in and around the lower Sepik village (called Mabuk today) when the Murik ancestors initially reached the lakes region. The lakes, or rather a section of the lakes, belonged to them, and they accessed the area in canoes via a long, narrow channel that they had hand cut from their village. The Yowaton fished and gathered shellfish from little meat channels they also cut into the mangroves. But warfare broke out, and the magical powers of the Murik Male Cult killed many Yowaton men. In compensation for not beheading their victims and honoring burial rights of kin, the Yowaton transferred this part of the mangroves to individual Murik families. Lilly not only descended from them, but she also claimed kinship ties to Yowaton people, via subsequent marriages that had taken place. In addition to her ethnohistoric and genealogical bona fides, it is also notable how the Murik understand that the relationship of their society to the mangroves and the lakes differs from the view held by middle Sepik River peoples regarding their land. The Murik construct the environment in terms of ethnohistory and cosmologically enabled but nevertheless human agency. They do not reach back to a totemic view of land and society. In other words, the Murik embed place and society in a shallower past than do their upriver neighbors, and it is a past that does not feature the interventions of one colonial regime after another or the postcolonial state.

Another fishing camp, which belonged to Wapo, a senior man, consisted of five bush material houses, none of which had walls (Fig. 7). There was nothing particularly exceptional about the camp, except that it was not built on reclaimed land but rather on dry land at the end of a broad channel. Two canoes were moored, paddles stood propped up against a tree, old overturned canoes served as benches, and a fishing net lay in a pile on a tarpaulin. A freshwater spring bubbled up here, and we took a moment to refresh ourselves and fill up plastic containers to take back to the village. During a meal of sago pudding and smoked fish that Wapo and his wife served us, he introduced me to his "sister" from nearby Mabuk, the village inhabited by descendants of the aforementioned Yowaton people. She was staying with him while he and his family harvested and smoked fish for her to take home. Grinning broadly, he praised his fishing camp. "I am well off here. I have water. Life is good." The affect with which Wapo endorsed the quality of life at his fishing camp expressed his approval of the little place, to be sure. It was not just the freshwater spring that Wapo was admiring, however, it was also the abundance of resources there. Fish were plentiful, the sago suppliers were close at hand, and his families could thrive and be "big," which is to say they could offer generous amounts of fish and other goods to intertribal trading partners and village kin. It enabled him to possess moral agency, in other words, moral agency with which to reproduce society. Wapo's positive assessment of his fishing camp also revealed a relationship to broader sociopolitical circumstances. Not only did his smile convey a moral relationship to village and regional values, his fishing camp, remote and isolated as it was, also conveyed two things: (1) the extent of his relationship to capitalism and the state in PNG or, in Durkheim's terms, to organic solidarity and (2) his feeling and attitude about that relationship.

People do not just leave the village and take up residence at their fishing camps because life is good there, which is to say because of the positive affect they feel about how it facilitates subsistence production by and the moral reproduction of the domestic group. As I say, these camps are also understood as a site of another kind of affect, namely as islets of refuge and conflict management. Several families basically fled village society for their fishing camps under the shadow of sorcery allegations or in the aftermath of an unexpected death, long-term illnesses, or other disputes. They left in disgrace but also as an avoidance tactic. Avoidance, as I argued in an earlier monograph (Lipset 1997), is a stage in Murik processes of conflict resolution that may and should be concluded by reciprocal exchange of betel nuts and a meal and an open discussion of grievances by the parties by way of owning up to and forgiving them. Pipirana Wambu, for example, had gone to stay at the family's fishing camp. He had had an argument, according to what his younger brother

FIGURE 8. **An *Asimen* Tree (2010, Photo by Author).**

explained, with another brother over the magical treatment of a paralyzed leg of one of their sons and had fled in shame. "If a man was strong, he would know what to do and bring my brother home," Frankie added by way of implying that his brother should stage a reconciliation rite and bring the matter to a close. I mentioned earlier that fishing camps appear to have a work-in-progress rather than a completed look. For people like Pipirana Wambu, they are also unresolved and inconclusive sites in need of assertions of moral agency.

Topiary Trees

In addition to being a resource for the Murik fishery, the mangrove lagoons are also associated, especially among the youth, with the expression of private types of affect that do not result in the reproduction of moral order (Lipset 2014). Perhaps *asimen* trees, which are tall topiary figures that tower over the canopy of the mangrove forests, are the quintessential expression of this not-so-moral side of the mangrove affect and agency. The lower and middle branches of an asimen tree are sheared off (*o'sai asimen*) to expose the thin narrow trunk of the tree. Stick-like, it rises up to a rounded tuft of leafy branches that are left

Figure 9. **Twin *Asimen* Trees That Were Cut in Honor of Two Sisters, Clara and Lydia (2011, Photo by Author).**

uncut (Fig. 8). I recorded the GPS waypoints marking the spatial coordinates of asimen trees all over the mangroves.

What do asimen trees mean? They demark or commemorate the location of meaningful spatiotemporal events that are said to have taken place in the mangroves. Perhaps even more than the Murik fishing camps, these figures stand for unmediated expressions of affect that are independent of modernity. On the one hand, asimen trees explicitly and conventionally celebrate the id. Often, but not always, they are cut to commemorate a tryst, which is to say an affect-laden moment of intimacy during which a young man and woman met and made love. On the other hand, they are identity markers as well as place markers. That is to say, they are known to society both by the name of the young man who cut them as well as for whom they are named after. Although a few women are known to have cut an asimen tree, most of them were cut by specific named young men in honor of their lovers, after whom they name the asimen tree. For example, a pair of asimen trees were named for two girls, Clara and Lydia, who were actually on hand when their lover, Robert Paiter Jong, cut the two of them (see Fig. 9). Asimen trees

FIGURE 10. **A Senior Woman Harvesting Clams (2014, Photo by Author).**

may also be seen as an exchange object. One may indiscriminately shear the branches of any mangrove tree, either near the coast or deep in the lakes, it is said regardless of lineage property. "If you meet and have intercourse with one of your girlfriends," I was told, "you can/might cut an asimen [tree] and a meat channel for her. If a child is born, you can give the channel to him or her." In the latter instance, however, the channel should be cut into a mangrove where the man does claim lineage property. In other words, it seems that cutting an asimen tree is also understood as a reciprocal gesture to the lover. In return for her sexual services, the asimen tree becomes an object of value, a resource like a meat channel from which shellfish can be harvested. The lover, in this sense, is fulfilling the normative role of a husband or a father to a wife or a daughter.

A brief aside about courtship, sexuality, and marriage in precolonial Murik society is in order. Marriage and individual desire were locked in ongoing tension. Sexuality was front and center in the Male and Female Cult initiation rites. Both prepared youths to marry and become sexually active via magical agency. There were several marriage rules, sister-exchange, and matrimoiety exchange between the Male and Female Cults (Barlow 1995) but also, not least, simple

optation (Lipset 2004, 2008). In addition, members of both cults participated in what was also viewed as an occult form of marriage—highly secret extramarital wife exchange (*dago'mariin*). In compensation for several critical ritual services, such as installation rites for new outrigger canoes, authority in the Male Cult, and in return for a great many small privileges, women offered sexual access to themselves as ritual "wives" of their husbands' Male Cult partners (Lipset 1997). This practice, needless to say, was condemned as "fornication" by the Catholics, who missionized the Murik coast in the twentieth century, and the Male Cult as well as the meaning of sexuality had more or less became disenchanted by the 1970s. Although its meaning was reduced to personal initiative (Weber 1958), as a practice of course sexual intimacy certainly did not flag. Feelings of desire for girls, whom boys took to the mangroves and for whom they cut asimen trees, went on, however disconnected its meaning had become from cultic exchange.[5]

At one point during my 2014 field season, I took a boatload of agreeable Murik kinswomen out into the lakes to demonstrate shellfish harvesting and had an unexpected, rather intriguing encounter with a new asimen tree. We made our made into a small lagoon. Fully dressed, the women gingerly lowered themselves from the little boat and eased into the warm lake water. They proceeded to walk backwards. Feeling the sandy lake bottom with their feet as they did, the clams they found were quickly passed from toes to hands and deposited in shoulder bags (Fig. 10). The backward gait, which they likened to a dance step, was an essential part of the work, although I never understood quite why. The degree to which harvesting clams was plainly enjoyable surprised me. They smiled, laughed, and talked avidly as they moved about neck deep in the water.

In the moment of expansion, as it were, a young man who was watching the women work suddenly grabbed his machete and began to prune branches off an overhanging mangrove tree that was offering us a little shade from the equatorial sun. Until then, I exclusively associated asimen trees with the male commemoration of love and eros. Now, I understood them a little differently. Might they also commemorate moments and places in lacustrine time and space associated with positive affect more generally between men and women? In this instance, the women were harvesting shellfish from the floor of a lagoon while men were watching them work. This was of course no private moment of intimacy and as such; the asimen the young man was provoked to cut did not mimic or commemorate an erect phallus towering over the mangroves but just extended horizontally a little way from its lower branches. The asimen branch he trimmed nevertheless designated a place in the mangroves where a broadly favorable event between men and women had taken place (Fig. 11). Perhaps he was also lampooning the conventional meaning of asimen trees a bit. But unaltered was that his asimen remained an unalloyed expression of Murik affect.

FIGURE 11. **A Young Man Shears Off the Branches As He Cuts an *Asimen* (2014, Photo by Author).**

Fishing and Modernity

One more brief instance of mangrove-based affect that I repeatedly encountered during the Murik social geography project involved daily forays into the lakes. As often as not, one of the younger members of our group dropped a line as we crossed the lagoons to resume the cadastral survey of the lakes where we left off the day before (Fig. 12). When fish hit the bait, which they did one after another, the driver instantly cut the motor and swerved to a sudden stop. Amid excited woops, words of encouragement and guidance instantly cascaded over the man as he pulled the fish on board. Big trevally, mangrove snapper, and bonefish among others piled up beneath the floorboards of the boat. As I said, the Murik Lakes remain a site of relatively unalienated labor. Of course, the thrill and joy aroused by pulling in a fish may be interpreted in many ways, as the release of endorphins into the bloodstream, as an unmediated experience in a moment, as a contest, and as a mystery.

But I want to delve into the extent to which this affect may be viewed as another expression of the enduring detachment of the moral reproduction of

FIGURE 12. **Trolling for Fish in the Murik Lakes (2014, Photo by Author).**

Murik society from this larger political-legal and economic context. Perhaps the delight felt when catching a fish is also the glee of freedom, freedom from modernity. Or is it? The fiberglass boats from China, the Japanese outboard motors running on gasoline from who knows where, store-bought hooks and nylon drift nets, not to mention the problematic relationship of the Murik fishery to the town market, do index a degree of integration of the local economy into global capitalism. These commodities do not tip the scale, however. They have not transformed the relationship of Murik society to modernity or its moral reproduction as large-scale extractive industry has done elsewhere in PNG, where rivers have been transformed into sewers and communities have sold land and in some instances have been required to relocate (Jacka 2015).[6]

This is not to say that the construction of the Murik Lakes has been wholly sequestered from modernity. Under missionary pressure, the enchanted cosmological ground within which asimen trees used to be cut has shifted over the course of the twentieth century. No longer are sexual relations valued in the way they used to be when they were legitimized and predicated by the Male and Female Cult initiation, which bequeathed love magic and rights to marry to the initiates. In other words, while the fishing camps continue to privilege the reproduction of the domestic group, and asimen trees have come to denote individual love and individual identity, the pleasure of pulling in a fish from the Murik Lakes remains a relatively undiluted experience of autonomous being in the shifting, culturally plural world in which it takes place in the historical moment.

Conclusion: Place, Affect, and the Reproduction of Moral Society in the Historical Moment

This essay began with a return to Durkheim. I invoked the master's concept of society in which the worst excesses to which embodied individuals are prone are constrained by moral institutions, together with his distinction between relations between the person and society in mechanical and organic solidarity. I then related this framework to his sociocentric view of the relationship of cosmological places to affect and moral agency. In contexts of mechanical solidarity, where this relationship is unmediated and the self is assumed to be part of the other, place is a site of moral identity, expressions of affective attachment, and practices that reproduce society. Several Melanesian examples, of Iatmul place names, the Kaluli burning dancers, and the Reite palem platforms, were cited before my more detailed discussion of place, affect, and moral agency in fishing camps, asimen trees, and fishing among the Murik.

In the fishing camps, the legitimacy of the labor of domestic groups derives from bases on hereditary water rights that are not traced back to precultural

cosmological times but rather to ethnohistorical events among human ancestors. Fishing camp is a site at which ethnohistory, lineage identity, domestic productivity, and independence coincide with avoidance of conflict, tumult, and demands of village life, and the ethos of life in the camp is generally positive, if not plainly content. At the same time, fishing camp affect does not constitute or cause much at all. Because camps are sites of both abundance and poverty, I think the regard in which they are held results from a conjunction of cultural values and the peripheral relationship of the Murik economy and society with modernity.

Asimen trees, which stand over the canopy of the verdant mangroves that surround and divide the Murik Lakes, commemorate place and affect in them. But unlike the fishing camps, they are not sites of moral agency. The private sort of intimacy for which asimen trees stand does not reproduce moral society.[7] Moreover, as the institutional relationship between sexual intercourse and the Male Cult had largely broken down by the last third of the twentieth century, mangrove-love had become a matter of individual passion, and the asimen trees that commemorate it had become, as Weber (1946) would have said, disenchanted.

From the point of view of meanings, the relationship between place, affect, and moral agency in the Murik Lakes during the early twenty-first century differs from what the collective effervescence and confidence that the Warramunga people were said to feel as a result of participating during a corroboree. Instead, the lakes are where both collective and individualized affect are expressed and agency is asserted that is both aimed and is not aimed at the reproduction of society as a whole. In other words, they are in a state of becoming. As such, the relationship between place, affect, and moral agency must be seen as one of historical contradictions rather than sociopolitical autonomy (see Bauman and Briggs 2003; McElhinny 2010).

NOTES

1. Silverman (2001, 192) offers a case study that goes on to document the relationship of place to agency in contemporary terms. In 1988, a group of senior men in the village where he was working agreed with an Australian entrepreneur to the build of a tourist guest house across the river. A junior man contested the contract, and a totemic debate ensued during which he asserted that his totemic ancestors had created the site of the guest house and had given it a name that differed from the one it was known by according to the senior men who had signed the contract. The junior man effectively sought to "erase . . . the totemic identity" of his rivals by "denying . . . [its] topographic personification."

2. The platforms have tall "coconut masts" (Leach 2003: 156n9, 160, 174; see also Meiser 1955; von Poser 2014).

3. There is also an increasingly large Murik diaspora who live in Wewak Town or elsewhere in the country.

4. For indigenous views of property rights in Papua New Guinea, see Kalinoe 2004; Stella 2007; Moutu 2013; Rooney 2021.

5. In a relatively open context of optative relationships, marriage came to be defined as involving nothing more than having breakfast together in the company of one's parents after having spent the night in the same mosquito net or, in earlier days, the same tubular sleeping basket (*erub*).

6. Moreover, I imagine that this affect has also been influenced by the looming but resisted prospect of resettlement due to sea-level rise that has been going on intermittently since 2007 (Lipset 2013) as well as by the ban on the harvesting of beche-de-mer that the National Fisheries Authority installed in 2010 in order to protect the species from overharvesting.

7. Should a child be born from a tryst in the mangroves, then a man might cut a new meat channel on lineage property for his lover's child.

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