

*Fashion as Fetish: The Agency of Modern  
Clothing and Traditional Body Decoration  
among North Mekeo of Papua New Guinea*

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Many recent scholars have pointed out how contemporary Papua New Guineans' patterns of consumption have become critical components of modernization, globalization, and the creation of personal identities in alignment with the nation-state and other imagined communities.<sup>1</sup> My own observations in and around Port Moresby during occasional visits over the past three decades certainly bear this out. It is a commonplace observation by anthropologists and others, however, that signs are typically multivalent, possessing varying meanings in different contexts. And so it is among the North Mekeo of the Central Province—frequent travelers to Port Moresby, one hundred or so kilometers to the southeast—with regard to the wide range of commodities they nowadays consume. This paper explores the range of meanings belonging to a particular class of commodities in North Mekeo—namely, articles of manufactured clothing, particularly those that seem to be intended for the country's youth. Whether they are at home or in town, North Mekeo villagers express their more immediate personal relations through body decoration or display. These include stylish name-brand T-shirts, jeans, sneakers, knitted caps, sunglasses, and all the other paraphernalia of dress and fashion associated in the West and elsewhere with urban American black culture, reggae, surfing, sports heroes, martial arts, and youth culture generally (figures 1 and 2).

There is no denying that North Mekeo adornment with these garments embodies numerous meanings associated with modernity, thereby expressing processes of identity formation, urbanization, nation building, mass media, and globalization.<sup>2</sup> But whether worn at the village, in town, or



FIGURE 1. “New” *bakai* fashion, Maipa village bachelors, 1999. (Photo by Mark S Mosko)



FIGURE 2. “New” *bakai* fashion, Maipa village young women, 1999. (Photo by Mark S Mosko)

en route between the two, the same articles of finery have, since at least the late 1980s, carried meanings and produced effects in relationships for North Mekeo that closely resemble indigenous categories of ritual agency, particularly those associated with ceremonial courting, termed *bakai*—meanings and effects that would be ordinarily glossed by English speakers in terms of love magic, or even sorcery (figures 3 and 4). It could thus be posited that North Mekeo patterns of dress confirm a variety of recent anthropological arguments regarding change in the colonial and postcolonial Pacific: how tokens of late capitalism are being adapted and appropriated to local contexts of meaning; how indigenous agency is effective in resisting or transforming the forces of globalization (or both); how “traditions” persist in the face of profound change; how traditions are transformed even as they are perpetuated; and how products of labor are fetishized as a consequence of commodification, to name just a few.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed this article engages with all of these themes, but it does so from a rather unconventional perspective, at least with regard to orthodox analyses of historical change in the Pacific. I refer here to the so-called “New Melanesian Ethnography” (Josephides 1991), exemplified in the recent work of Marilyn Strathern (1988) and Roy Wagner (1977, 1981, 1991), among several others, who have explored in rather novel ways the modes of personhood, agency, and exchange distinctive to indigenous Melanesian sociality. This treatment of the historical adoption of Western clothing by North Mekeo thus seeks to illustrate for anthropologists and other scholars the utility of the New Melanesian Ethnography and several of its key concepts—“dividual” or “partible persons,” “elicitation,” “inner bodily capacities,” “outer effects,” and so on—for addressing situations of contemporary historical transformation. At the same time, this analysis of changes in North Mekeo clothing styles and body decoration touches on other current issues in the Pacific, such as commodification, the proliferation of ritual forms in the context of modernity, sporting competition, and the relation of tattooing and other body marking to political hierarchies.

#### CLOTHING, PERSONHOOD, AGENCY, AND MELANESIAN SOCIALITY

Many recent analyses of clothing trends in the contemporary Pacific have been cast in terms largely compatible with wider discourses over materiality, consumption, social change, and identity formation.<sup>4</sup> A case in point, Bente Wolff described the adoption of Western clothing styles by contem-





FIGURE 3. “Old” *bakai* courting fashion, North Mekeo men and women, Akufa village, 1975. (Photo by Mark S Mosko)



FIGURE 4. “Old” *bakai* courting fashion, North Mekeo school children, Maipa village, 2005. (Photo by Mark S Mosko)



porary East (or Central) Mekeo peoples—neighbors and close cultural relatives of North Mekeo—as exhibiting a strong continuity with traditional costuming (2004). With regard to youth fashions particularly, Wolff stressed how a person's appearance continues to be essential to his or her attractiveness to other persons. Like many of the aforementioned authors, however, Wolff fixed this traditional dimension of modern Mekeo dress in a more or less standard social-structural framework of relations of power, authority, and control, with persons situated as discrete points in relational networks. In this view, the recent changes in dress and fashion mark relocations of people's "nodal positions" (ie, social statuses or roles) vis-à-vis other persons and groups (Wolff 2004, 91ff).

While Wolff's account of contemporary Mekeo dress as an "extension of ancestral tradition" (2004, 89) is compatible with many strands of wider anthropological discussions over westernization, local-global articulation, and identity formation, it diverges in a fundamental way from much recent scholarship on Melanesian sociality, that is, the distinctive view of indigenous personhood and agency or power reflected in the New Melanesian Ethnography. For example, while Wolff's work hints at indigenous understandings of agency—how modern clothes involve the use of magic and "local ideas of making oneself strong" (2004, 94), and particularly how "personal beauty, splendour and the ability to astonish make up a shiny surface that protects and shields the person against other people's direct attacks, as well as the indirect attacks of sorcery" (2004, 96)—her account leaves unexplained the underlying cultural presuppositions and mechanisms that would render these processes ethnographically intelligible. In the view of the New Melanesian Ethnography, however, the analysis of indigenous practice focuses on persons as "dividual" or "partible" rather than "nodal" beings. I think it is fair to say that, although the descriptive and theoretical innovations associated with dividual or partible personhood have been exceedingly influential (and controversial) in Melanesianist circles, they have received relatively little attention from anthropologists interested in the analysis of social change or from investigators conducting research further afield (compare Strathern 1990; Foster 1995b). I therefore take this opportunity to introduce to a wider audience of Pacific scholars this new and rather distinctive perspective on personhood and sociality in the course of describing changing North Mekeo patterns of dress and ritual agency. My argument, however, could well be applied to other changing modes of consumer consumption among Mekeo and other Islander populations (Mosko 1999, 2001, 2002, 2005b).

## PERSONAL PARTIBILITY, AGENCY, AND CHANGE

Because the notion of dividual or partible persons tends to be counterintuitive for many English-speaking Euro-Americans, it is necessary first to summarize its deployment in recent Melanesian ethnography, at least as I understand it, stressing in due course its temporal and agentic potentialities.

Informed by classic treatments of gift exchange and reciprocity (Maus 1967; Gregory 1982), the New Melanesian Ethnography has been championed as more closely approximating indigenous understandings of personhood and relationships, especially compared to more conventional Western-inspired viewpoints, which presuppose persons or subjects (a) as fundamentally different kinds of entities from things or objects, and (b) as bounded *in*dividuals tied to other such nodal persons through the webs of power relations that are constitutive of society. The new view, rather, emphasizes personal partibility, that is, a person is seen as a compound product of the contributions (ie, gifts) of other persons, those contributions consisting in the detached parts of those other persons that are attached to the person to whom they are given. For example, in many Melanesian societies, a person is regarded as composed of gendered substances, such as father's bone and mother's menstrual blood, plus all the substantial and non-substantial embodied labors of other kin and relatives given to that person over the course of his or her life in the forms of food, magical knowledge, ceremonial wealth, land, and so on. Typically, every gift of these sorts that a person receives should be reciprocated. If I am composed partly of the womb-blood of my mother, as part of herself contributed to me in my conception, then at the appropriate later point I am obliged to give her analogous parts of my person that I would have acquired from still other persons. In this way, persons' internal composition changes through time as they both attach the contributions of others to themselves and detach from their person tokens of personhood that are subsequently passed on to others. Persons thereby consist in plural interpersonal detachments and attachments that compose a history, in the sense of a temporal sequencing of prior reciprocal transactions.

By the same token, the parts or relations of which a person is composed constitute a number of capacities for future action or agency. Here I draw on Alfred Gell's terminology for artistic agency (1998), whereby the "agent" is defined as a person whose effectiveness consists in changing the

dispositions of his victim or “patient” (discussed in more detail in a later section). By acting (ie, by detaching parts of themselves as agents that they earlier acquired from others as patients), persons externalize the parts or relations of which they are, or until then have been, composed. Through acting, in other words, partible persons are *decomposed*. As agents in this sense, persons typically evince and anticipate the knowledge or recognition of their internal composition and capacities in the responses of others. For me, for example, to detach the appropriate part of myself so that it will be effective in eliciting a desired part of another person (ie, his or her sister in marriage, shell valuable, or ritual spell), I must be able to conceptualize the internal capacities of both myself and my exchange partner so that I can strategically externalize that part of me which will be successful in eliciting the part of the other person which I desire. Through these sorts of reciprocal strategic externalizations and transactions, persons stimulate one another to action and reaction. Every action (or *transaction*) is in this way both conventional and innovative (figure 5; see M Strathern 1988; Wagner 1981).

There is a particular postulate of Melanesian partible personhood and the generalized model of gift exchange on which it is based that must be stressed: In such systems there is no necessarily rigid distinction between “persons” and “things,” or between “subjects” and “objects.” In this regard, the notion of partible persons differs fundamentally from the canonical legalistic formulations of persons as “*individuals*” often encountered in the West. This means that when people might appear from a Western viewpoint to be exchanging *objects*—portions of food, articles of material wealth, bits of esoteric knowledge, and so on—that are basically

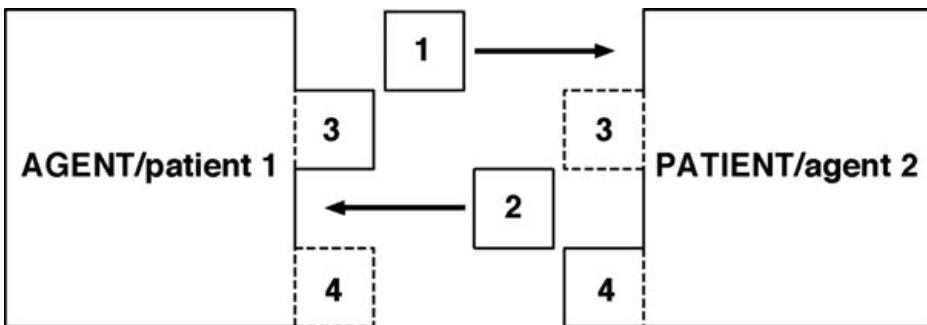


FIGURE 5. Melanesian “personal partibility,” agency, and mutual elicitation. Reproduced with permission from Mosko 2001, 261, and 2002, 91.



different in nature from them as bounded *subjects*, in indigenous perspectives they are instead transacting over bits of themselves as persons (compare LiPuma 2000).

It should be noted that the generic view of partible personhood presented here involves a number of departures from Marilyn Strathern's original formulation in *The Gender of the Gift* (1988); in particular, I do not assume that the gender distinction is the only dimension of contrast animating personal detachment and attachment; that the elicitory detachment and attachment of personal parts and relations is inherently synchronic; or that personal partibility is necessarily antithetical to numerous dimensions of Western culture and history, such as kin relationship, notions of ownership, Judeo-Christian ideology and ritual practice (see Mosko 2005b).

For the present case, North Mekeo villagers consider articles of apparel and body ornamentation not as mere things but as potent elements of their persons attached to themselves as a consequence of prior detachments from and exchanges with other persons. The wearing of a particular piece of apparel does not simply mark one's position in a web of power relationships but also signifies the externalized inner capacities of a given person to elicit particular reactions or reciprocal externalizations and detachments from another person or persons. And to the extent that these mutually eliciting transactions may involve changes or substitutions in items of dress worn or displayed over time, the North Mekeo case makes visible the capacity of the New Melanesian Ethnography to effectively analyze processes of historical change and transformation.

#### MANUFACTURED CLOTHING, MONEY, AND INNER CAPACITIES

From the viewpoint of Melanesian personal partibility, a key question is, how do articles of manufactured clothing as items of apparel and decoration worn on the exterior of people's bodies signify or effect *internal* capacities? It might be presumed that Western clothes as a distinctive class of commodities would incur dissimilar meanings in accordance with the specific cultural and historical contexts where they are adopted. In an intriguing 1996 paper, however, David Graeber has noted that items of bodily adornment such as trade beads have frequently been assimilated as money and currencies wherever they have been introduced over the course of capitalism's expansion. Among North Mekeo, for example, even seemingly mundane manufactured items of clothing are classified as "money

things” (*moni kamutsi*). But so are other non-apparel type commodities that villagers nowadays routinely consume: tinned foods, rice, steel tools, outboard motors, electrical generators, neon lights, chainsaws, cement, corrugated iron roofing, bicycles, vehicles, and so on. Graeber argued further, though, that items of adornment especially have been assimilated as money and currencies due to their ability to juxtapose and to connect the internal, invisible secret domain of personal capacity with the visible public external realm where those powers are exhibited. Contemporary North Mekeo practices regarding money and articles of dress and decoration similarly transcend internal and external dimensions of personal agency.<sup>5</sup>

Elsewhere I have described how the distinction of inside/outside is elaborated more broadly in North Mekeo conceptions and practices having to do not only with people’s bodies but analogously with their social relations of kinship, clanship, affinity and gender, institutions of chieftainship and official sorcery, mortuary feasting, the classification of space and temporality, and villagers’ conceptualization and ritual engagement with the total cosmos (Mosko 1985, 1992a, 1999, 2001, 2002). Quite systematically, North Mekeo notions of inside (*aongai*) and outside (*afan-gai*) are recursively crosscut to produce a four-fold pattern of bisected dualities including inside, outside, outside-inverted, and inside-everted (see next section).

It should be noted that this treatment of both traditional and contemporary North Mekeo bodily decoration and agency may well have important wider regional significance. The pattern of bisected dualities characteristic of North Mekeo clothing and body decoration is explicitly homologous with Gell’s portrayal of the four-fold (or four-folded) technical schema of the body represented in Polynesian tattooing, agency, and social hierarchy (1993, 39). I shall return to the North Mekeo–Polynesian comparison in this article’s conclusions.

In order to comprehend the contemporary North Mekeo adoption of modern clothing, it is necessary to grasp the preexisting cultural context, meanings, and effects attributed to ceremonial dress within the framework of inside/outside bodily zones and transactions. The relevant North Mekeo terms for what they regard as “traditional” ceremonial dress are *kaikai* and *bakai*. According to my interlocutors, and as confirmed by Father Gustave Desnoës’s dictionary of Mekeo, *kaikai* is the word or noun for ceremonial decoration, and in its verbal form—for first person singular, for example—*ekaikai* means “he/she decorates.” But the related causative form of *kaikai*—*bakai*, literally “to make decoration/decorated”—

has the additional, more generic meaning “to make, urge or prompt” (Desnoës 1941, 453, 904). In my experience these meanings are related, as *bakai* is most commonly used with specific reference to decoration for the purpose of courting or to the practice of ritual courting itself. Mekeo language thus expressly links the practice of ceremonial dress with the particular type of interpersonal agency: courting.

As a sphere of traditional agency and practice, Mekeo *bakai* has not yet been subjected to detailed ethnographic description. Although in many respects *bakai* decoration appears to have been relatively stable from pre-colonial times to the present, it has undergone a number of historical transformations, particularly with regard to the contexts of its performance. These I outline in the next section of the article. Against this background, in the subsequent section I describe the contemporary adoption of manufactured youth apparel, which has seemingly replaced *bakai* ceremonial dress and display in terms of personal partibility and agency as outlined above.

#### NORTH MEKEO CEREMONIAL DRESS IN CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The North Mekeo are Austronesian-speaking villagers living along the upper reaches of the Biaru River at the western edge of the Central Province of Papua New Guinea. Their language, culture, and social institutions are very similar to those of the neighboring West and East (or Central) Mekeo and Roro peoples (Hau‘ofa 1981; Monsell-Davis 1981; Jones 1998). Local Mekeo and Roro communities experienced their first direct contacts with Europeans in the period 1875–1890. Charles Seligmann provided the first ethnographic account of the overall form of Mekeo and Roro tribal and clan organization (1910), and despite many external influences under colonialism and national independence, this form of organization has remained relatively stable for much of the past century.

One feature of village life described by Seligmann involved the feather, shell, wooden, and barkcloth ornaments, emblems, and designs, termed *kangakanga*, owned as by copyright by distinct patrilineal clans (1910, 320–325).<sup>6</sup> Supposedly, only members of the clans that claimed particular decorations could incorporate them in their *bakai* dance costumes for courting performances at mortuary feasts. It seems, however, that the decorations and designs employed in *bakai* constitute just one subcategory of what has been regarded as *kangakanga* “custom” or “tradition”



more generally (Mosko 2002). Like all indigenous customary *kangakanga* practices, *bakai* courting is thought to have originated in mythical times through the actions of the creator-hero, Akaisa, and it has been transmitted through intervening ancestors to the Mekeo population of today. However, as Seligmann astutely observed, clans have been able to transact the *kangakanga* insignia of *bakai* dance apparel through the payment of pigs or other valuables (1910, 324–325).

As mentioned earlier, the most explicit purpose of *bakai* performance throughout the historical period has been collective courting. Dancers adorn their bodies with vibrant colors (yellow and red especially), which are associated with life, as distinct from the black (or white-on-black), which signifies death, danger, and sadness. Thus decorated, men employ their hidden *bakai* love magic on women, and women display their attractions to men.

As in many other parts of Papua New Guinea, *bakai* body decoration and courting display takes place with reference to at least two regions of bodily space: a dancer's skin (*fanga*), the visible surface of the body's exterior, and people's inner qualities and capacities.<sup>7</sup> To adequately describe the connection between outer skin and inner body capacity, it is necessary to understand the wider indigenous classification of inside and outside spaces.

Villagers conceptualize the world or cosmos as a totality comprising two distinct zones, the inside bush (*ango aongai*; literally, "land inside") and the outside village (*paunga* or *pangua*) containing people's dwellings along the periphery, with a croton fence (*fangapu*; literally, "skin-place") separating the two. The outside village, however, has at its center its own internal zone—the cleared village abdomen or belly (*inaenga*) where *bakai* is performed and where (except during colonial times) the dead are buried. Similarly, the inside bush contains its own external region: the zone of waste disposal that surrounds every village. These four crosscutting spatial distinctions are coordinated in daily temporal sequence as villagers extract the various raw resources for their lives from the remote inside bush, transform and consume them in the peripheral part of the outside village, gather the waste products of daily human existence in the central, outside-inverted village abdomen, and deposit those wastes in the inside-everted bush adjacent to the village (see Mosko 1985, 21–37).

North Mekeo classify the human body (*kumau* or *imaunga*) as a totality according to analogous distinctions. There is the inside of the body consisting of the bloody tissues separated by skin from the body's outside,

or the non-bloody rest of the world that has never been incorporated in any human body. There are also the ambiguous spaces of inside-out occupied by dirty (*iofu*) bodily residues (feces, urine, menstrual blood, semen, sweat, vomit, corpses, etc) and outside-in holes or cavities (*ine*) such as the abdomen, womb, or vagina that contain those ingested elements.

It may be helpful to visualize these spatial distinctions schematically as a balloon, which possesses an unambiguous inside, separated from the outside by the balloon's skin. Pushing one's thumb inward against the balloon's skin, or reciprocally pushing from the inside so as to extend the thumb beyond the balloon's otherwise spherical shape, produces two additional, ambiguous zones: a portion of space outside the balloon but protruding inward ("invagination") and an exteriorized space that is nonetheless enclosed by the balloon's membrane (figure 6).

As with the world composed of village and bush, the regulation of the flows of entities and substances between the body's four spatial zones has direct implications for human life and death, for the body's reproduction, and for people's skillfulness or agency in interactions with other humans. The cooking and exchange of food, for instance, allows the transformation of outside, raw, inedible substances into a form that enables them to be ingested and assimilated by the body's internal tissues, simultaneously reconstituting the relations between kin of sharing blood. Particularly potent, however, are those activities that involve the body's ambiguous outside-inverted and inside-everted spaces. To take an example that con-

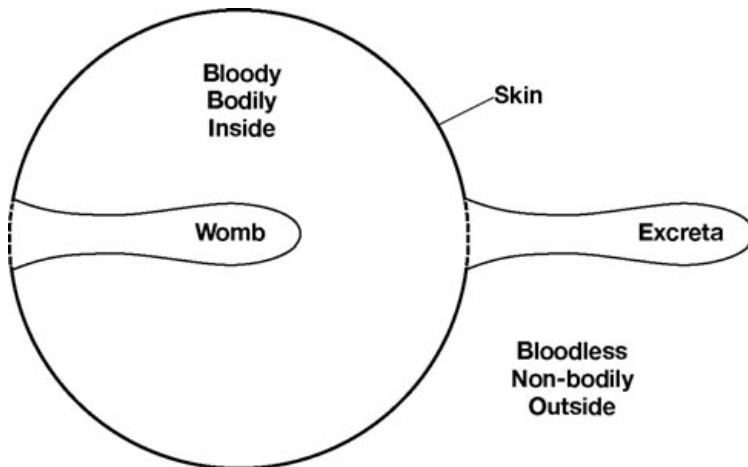


FIGURE 6. Classification of inner and outer bodily spaces.

joins both manipulations simultaneously, at the moment of orgasm a man and a woman are each understood to ejaculate small quantities of their procreative bloods (semen and womb-blood, respectively) from the inside to the outside of their bodies, but this place, the woman's womb (*ina*), is itself construed as outside space inverted, or folded inside. Structurally speaking, this double ambiguity of human procreative substances and spaces is typical of the extraordinary powers attributed to human procreation.

But this kind of structural ambiguity is not restricted to sexuality and reproduction as such. Much Mekeo magic and sorcery ritual involves analogous operations, sometimes in reverse and often intended to produce the opposite effect, that is, death rather than life. A practitioner must first obtain the internal body parts of already dead humans, thereby capturing their spirits (*tsiange* or *isange*). Then, with various operations performed on the extracted body parts outside his own body, the adept inserts the dirty bloody substances into the body of his intended victim, whereby the spirits are able to "change the victim's mind" as instructed in the practitioner's uttered spells and thus cause mischief. Importantly, magicians and sorcerers must themselves undergo rigorous preparatory rituals to close off the inside of their bodies from the outside, making their bodies strong and closed so that the bloody elements of their charms cannot penetrate. So the spaces of profound categorical ambiguity such as the human body's outside-inverted and inside-everted zones are sites of pronounced personal potency or agency (compare Douglas 1966; Leach 1976; M Strathern 2000). It should be noted as well that in most situations, sorcerers and other ritual agents do not publicly confess to having practiced their arts in any particular instance. It is usually only subsequent to events that villagers typically conclude that certain persons' minds and bodily dispositions must have been ritually changed.

*Bakai* ceremonial dress and the knowledge and skills associated with it are classified in the culture as a type of peace sorcery (*ungaunga*)—the realms of ritual agency devoted to interclan marriage exchange and reciprocal mortuary feasting that are controlled by official clan peace sorcerers and peace chiefs. *Bakai* ceremonial dress and ritual qualifies as peace sorcery inasmuch as it is staged at mortuary feasts and it constitutes a critical preliminary to clan intermarriage—activities where peace chiefs and sorcerers officiate. With the abandonment of arranged marriage after the arrival of missionaries, bachelors whose fathers lacked quantities of bride-wealth and knowledge of *bakai* could hope to attract a wife only if they



obtained love magic from peace sorcerers in exchange for their services as apprentices.

Like peace sorcery and other ritual skills, *bakai* was and still is considered to be “hot” (*tsiapu*), that is, capable of changing other people’s minds (*mino*) or bodily dispositions (*anina ani*), or both, from what they might otherwise want to what they do not want, or the converse. According to Gell’s terminology for artistic agency (1998; see figure 5), the *bakai* dancer is an *agent* whose effectiveness consists in changing the dispositions of his victim or *patient*. At mortuary feasts, the decorated *bakai* dancers collectively are hot for transforming the sadness and pain of the mourners to desires for happiness and life. Within the throng of dancers, agency is concentrated in those hot effective men who are capable of changing the minds of targeted women from perhaps initially disliking them to passionately desiring them. To a much lesser extent, elements of women’s decorations are viewed as hot for swaying men’s minds. Symbolically, traditional *bakai* performance is viewed as analogous to the courting ritual of the red-plumed bird of paradise (*Paradisaea raggiana*), wherein groups of male birds gather annually in the higher reaches of certain designated trees of the local forest and compete for the attentions of the females. In this regard, it is relevant that the supposedly hottest or most powerful kind of North Mekeo peace sorcery is “bird-of-paradise sorcery” (*opo ungaunga*)—supposedly even hotter and more dangerous even than the ritual used for killing human beings—which (prior to the introduction of shotguns) was used to capture the birds during their courtship displays.

Individual dancers’ performances are further evaluated as hot (or cold and impotent) if spectators at feasts spontaneously remark on their effectiveness (or lack thereof). Similarly, clans as units can be given praise and renown for the hot effectiveness of their collective performances, and they can be publicly ridiculed if they fail to make the desired impression on the assembled crowds.

These hot *bakai* capacities arise from various sources. Every visible detail of the decorated man’s or woman’s costume has a generic label, with stylistic variations indicating clan affiliations (figures 7 and 8). Young people, however, are not entitled to display these insignia automatically—that is, by mere membership in a particular clan—as they are expected to compensate their fathers, uncles, or other kin for the initial use of each separate item. The overall composition of *bakai* dancers’ costumes thus represents their hot internal capacity to mobilize and integrate on their skin a diversity of kin relations (M Strathern 1979; Mosko 2002).

Other hot elements of an effective *bakai* dancer's presentation are for the most part invisible and kept secret. These include mainly medicines (*fuka*) consisting of the actual bodily residues of human beings, or plants or animal parts that are regarded as detached bodily remains of mythical spirit beings. Typically medicines are incorporated into the materials of which costumes are manufactured or are hidden within them. Clean (*ikua*) medicines are hot for courting but cold for making people sick, so they can be used in courting and dancing by women and men alike. Dirty (*iofu*) medicines composed of the bloody body parts of humans are hot for changing people's minds but also for making people sick or die if physically ingested. Thus it is only men, through the strict regimen of bodily closing (*ngope*, that is, preparing their bodies by "closing" or "tightening" their orifices), who are able to include powerful, dirty medicines in their *bakai* costumes without causing harm to themselves (see next section).

Alone, uningested *bakai* medicines are ineffective in changing other people's minds or bodies. The soul or spirit thought to be incorporated in a medicine must be verbally directed to effect such changes, for it is ultimately through such spirit manipulations that dancers are hot or effective toward others. Thus every detail of preparing *bakai* medicines, tying back and combing the hair, applying coconut oil and face paint, donning garments and ornaments, and so on involves recitation of specific spells addressed to named ancestors, spirits, or deities, instructing them to change other people's desires in particular ways. Therefore, parts of the decorated dancer as agent, consisting in previous interpersonal transactions, are detached from his or her person to become attached to that of the patient. An impressive or successful *bakai* performance thus demonstrates that the dancer has been effective in eliciting desired actions on the part of spiritual beings as well as living kin and relatives.

#### FROM INNER CONCEALMENT TO EXTERNAL REVELATION

The visible decorations as signs of concealed, invisible medicines and spiritual and social capacities are displayed on the immediate outside of dancers' bodies, on their skins. In light of indigenous classifications of bodily space described above, it is legitimate to ponder how the decorations, medicines, and spells are considered to be or to reveal everted *inner* qualities. Clearly, the medicines extracted from human and mythical beings' bodies are regarded as inner capacities removed to the dancer's inside-out skin. When not in use, people safely store their *bakai* paraphernalia inside

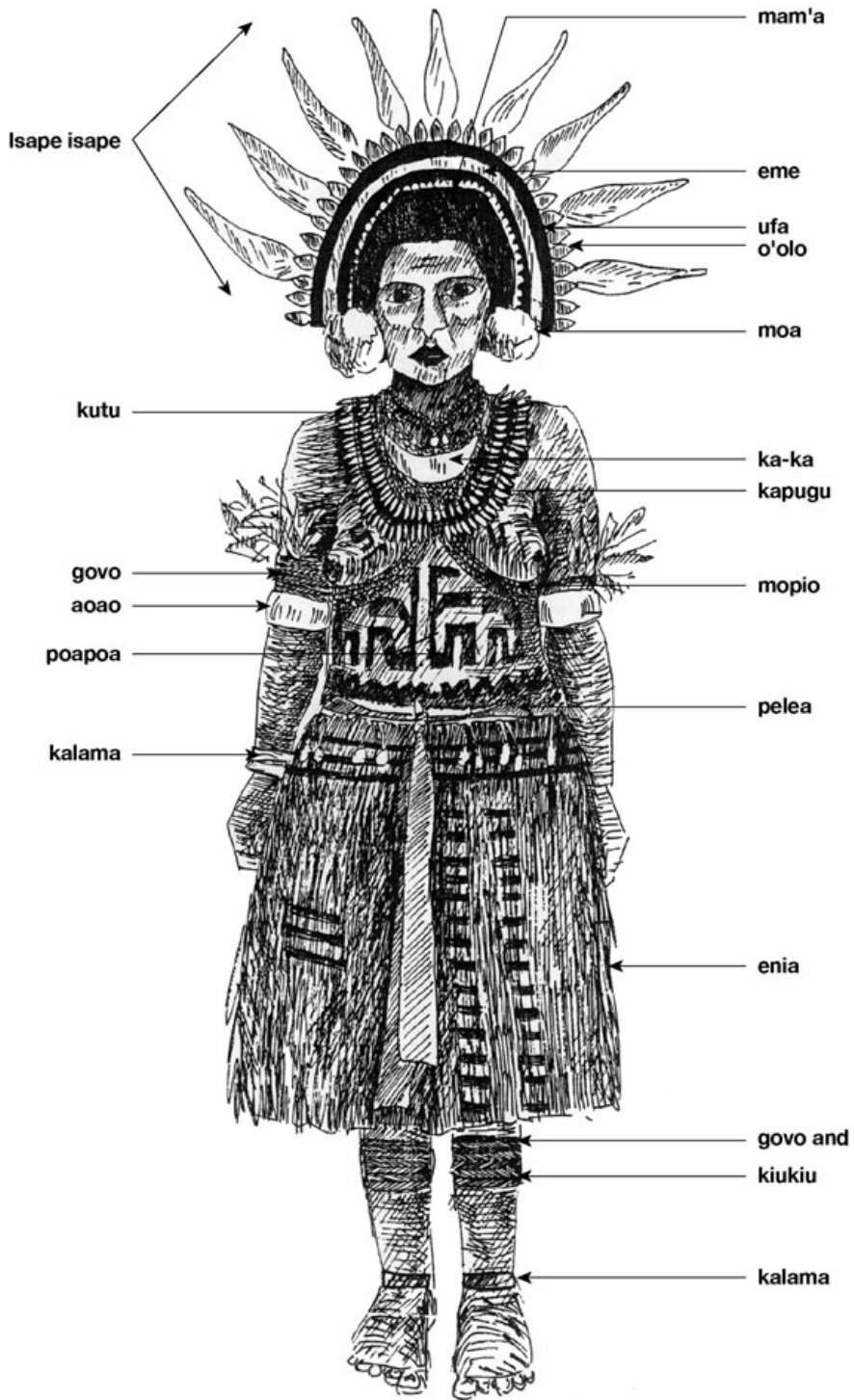


FIGURE 7. “Old” *bakai* female courting decoration. Reproduced with permission from Munce 1998, 113.

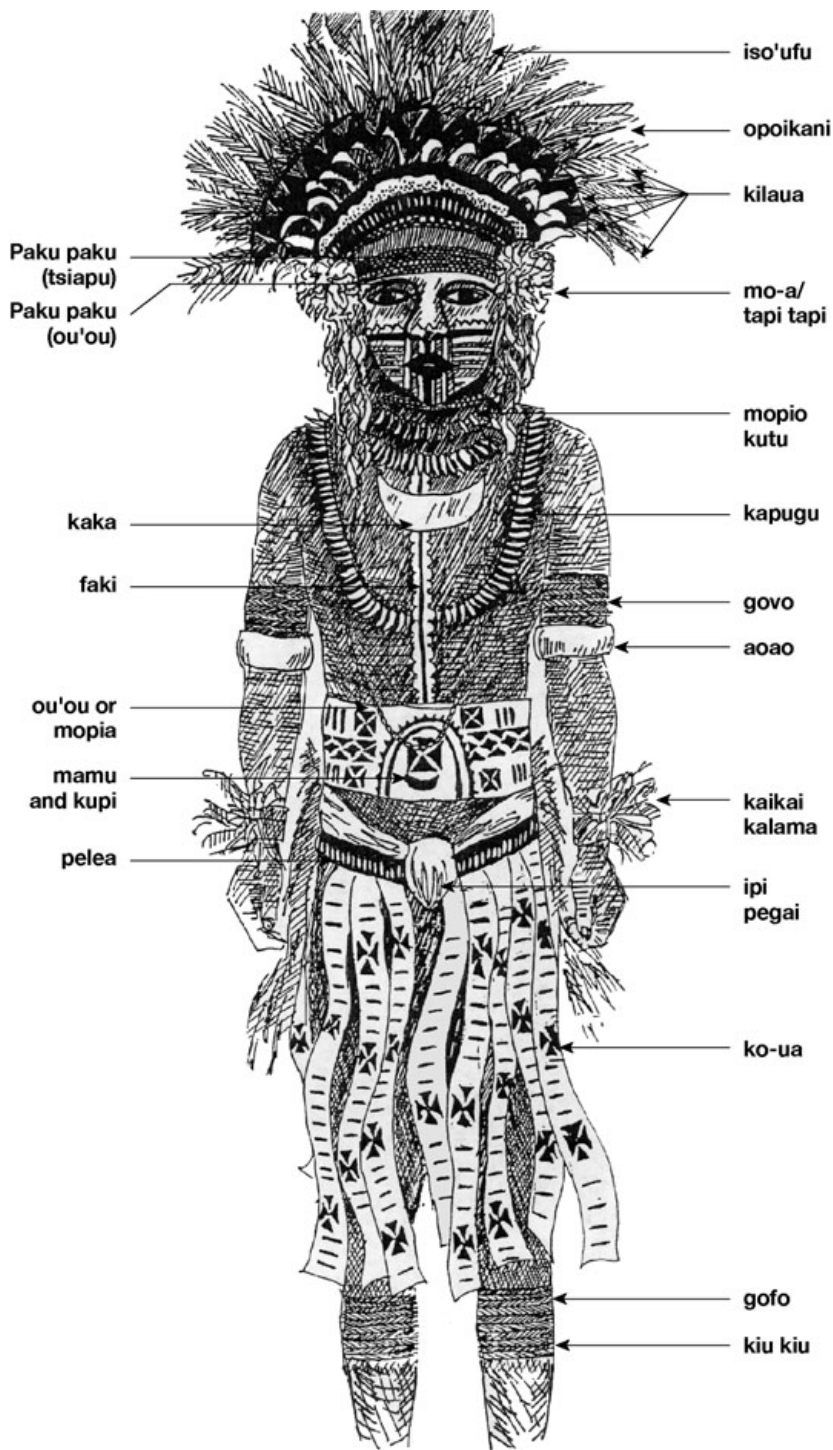


FIGURE 8. "Old" *bakai* male courting decoration. Reproduced with permission from Munce 1998, 112.

various containers located at different places in the village layout (Mosko 1985, 21–37). While performing *bakai*, however, men hide under their tightened waistbelts their most hot and dirty medicines in small, stoppered coconut-shell bottles or charms (*toli* or *polo*); nowadays these are replaced by small glass perfume vials. A man's charm containing the extracted parts of other bodies is thus re-enclosed in the outside-inverted folds of his costume. Incidentally, men use the dark dirty fluid of charms to draw the discrete blackened lines across their otherwise yellow and red painted faces. These markings are the only black coloration in men's *bakai* costumes. Supposedly, by silently reciting his spells when he establishes eye contact with his intended paramour, a man's desires are transmitted by allied spirits from his mind to pass through her eyes into her mind, where the spirits change her desires to accord with his.

It is frequently remarked of properly decorated men (but not women) of a clan that their mothers cannot visibly distinguish them. The external details of clansmen's decorations are strictly conventionalized in accordance with hereditary clan insignia and designs. This is similar to the way in which male birds of paradise look the same as one another. What will affect viewers' differing perceptions of two brothers' performances is their externalized but invisible hot inner capacities. Thus the knowledgeable brother who has properly closed his body and who has appropriately manipulated his medicines, spells, and charm bottle will be hot, appearing to everyone as beautiful (*velo*) or shiny (*eauanga*). People will praise him. While identically attired, the ignorant brother who has not properly prepared himself or who knows nothing of *bakai* spells and charms will be cold. People will exclaim that his skin looks bad, that his face paint is dull, that basically "he is lying." It is the invisible, inner true knowledge and capacities that, externalized to the skin, are hot and effective to others.

Still other categories of *bakai* display are construed as internal capacities revealed on the outside, but by additional devices. The shell, feather, and dogs' teeth ornaments that bear on their surfaces the skin-dirt from sweat and excreted oils of previous human owners (and thereby their souls or spirits) are regarded as hot medicines, capable of changing villagers' minds, as people will do things they ordinarily would not to obtain them. As with Massim kula valuables, these heirlooms often have attached to them the names of the persons who earlier possessed them. Most importantly, villagers can only acquire these items through successful agentive transactions with kin, in-laws, trade friends, or others. Outward display

of valuables in *bakai* thus reveals a person's inner knowledge and skill for dealing with other persons and relations. Similarly, knowledge of secret medicines, spells, and charms consists of inner knowledge that has been obtained through successful orchestration of numerous external relations. While villagers frequently observe that they can never know another person's inner thoughts merely by looking, they will concede that other persons' externalized inner thoughts have effects on their own.

As the discussion has thus far implied, a key aspect of Mekeo understandings of gender is that men and women are differentially equipped as agents in accordance with complementary inner and outer bodily capacities. In *bakai*, women's as well as men's hot practices involve both secret and public knowledge. While women cannot employ bloody, dirty medicines, they can include clean ones in their attire that are hot and attractive to men. Evidently, men's medicines and spells are hot for changing women's minds, and women's are correspondingly hot for men's. The croton leaves and flowers incorporated in the costumes of women and men are derived from different species so that the odors they project are complementary: those worn by men are hot and sweet or attractive to women, and women's are hot and sweet to men. It is my understanding that some women are knowledgeable of specifically feminine *bakai* courting spells. However, both adult male and female villagers insist that they would never allow their daughters or wives to employ overly hot or strong *bakai* ritual for fear of encouraging them to elope and run away.<sup>8</sup>

Interpersonal relations in addition to courting as such are involved in any *bakai* performance. Men especially are consciously engaged in competitive (*pipalau*) display before a wider audience to an extent that is not true of women. In any given dancing troupe, men vie with one another not just for the attentions of women accompanying them but also for the separate impressions they make on feast spectators (ie, changing their minds so as to elicit their praises). This works at collective levels as well. The total effect of a clan's or village's display of its customary decorations and designs by its members at a given feast is similarly evaluated as a sign of that group's inner hot capacities and strength (compare M Strathern 1979). Partly because women's participation in *bakai* requires far less rigorous preparation than men's and partly because women are assumed to be less desirous of achieving fame and renown, there is less opportunity for competition of a comparable order.

Even so, the effect of a clan's women performers is sometimes included in spectators' overall account of that clan's *bakai* hotness and strength.

This is because *bakai* performances by single dancers and clan groups of men and women are linked analogically, as both involve “bodies” with discernible inside and outside dimensions. Like the human body, the clan is a bounded entity defined in terms of a specific patrilineal blood that is retained by all members and is distinct from the bloods of other clans and persons beyond. One inner part of every clan, however, is simultaneously outside: its adult women. While men remain inside their clan their entire lives, a clan’s women are said to be its “skin.” On marriage, a woman “goes outside and into another clan”—a case of inside-everted from the perspective of the women as sisters, and outside-inverted in view of them as wives. Clans and bodies are thus conceptualized as self-similar. I stress this because, it is the *everted inner* qualities and capacities of both clans’ and constituent members’ bodies (and correspondingly the *inverted outer* qualities of other persons and groups) that villagers consider especially hot and effective. In this regard, I believe the North Mekeo example provides an important ethnographic elaboration or qualification of Marilyn Strathern’s analyses of Melanesian sociality generally and bodily decoration specifically which revolve around the simpler duality of inside and outside (1979, 1988).

It is significant also that *bakai* is traditionally staged in the cleared outside-inverted abdomen or womb at the center of every Mekeo village. During feasts, as people join and leave the dancing throng, for example, it is commonly remarked that so-and-so is “going in” (*isa ekoko*) or “going out” (*isa ebuulai*). Every *bakai* performance thus brings together, appropriately into a single womb, the diverse hot gender-differentiated procreative capacities of the several patrilineal clans of the intermarrying tribe, thereby securing its reproduction. During feasts, when the central womb is brimming with *bakai* singing, drumming, and dancing, people say “the village is hot,” that is, capable of effecting momentous social changes.

It should be noted that traditional *bakai* performance in the context of mortuary feasting fell within the range of authority of peace chiefs who, again, were supported by peace sorcerers. Typically at feasts, a clan’s decorated *bakai* dancing troupe would be led by its peace chief. In addition to the items of common people’s *bakai* apparel, chiefs (and only they) could wear certain articles distinctive to their extraordinary roles and capacities—chest ornaments of ground-down pig tusks, special string bag, flywhisk, and betel-chewing paraphernalia. As with pieces of ordinary *bakai* attire, chiefs had to acquire these special articles from their



predecessors through complex elicitory gift giving. In other words, chiefly fathers did not transmit their offices or the hot paraphernalia associated with them even to their heirs without compensation.

### NORTH MEKEO CEREMONIAL DRESS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Thus far I have focused on what villagers regard as the true or original context of *bakai*: mortuary feasting. In the postcontact era, *bakai* has undergone certain changes, particularly with regard to the contexts of its performance. Simultaneously, *bakai* has become something of an icon of Papua New Guinean culture to many people of the nation and the world outside—a status similar to that of the “mudmen” of Asaro (Otto and Verloop 1996). Mekeo in full *bakai* regalia have for decades been employed in accompaniment to major events in town, from boxing and rugby matches to musical concerts and the formal ceremonies declaring National Independence at Hubert Murray Stadium in 1975. Images of Mekeo *bakai* frequently appear on tourist brochures, calendars, postcards, and airline magazines to an extent far surpassing the contribution of Mekeo to the country’s other demographics. On several occasions, images of *bakai* have even ended up on international wire services. No doubt the proximity of Mekeo to Port Moresby makes it convenient to transport them to town in large numbers for welcoming visiting dignitaries such as Prince Charles or the Pope. Curiously, though, unlike the Asaro mudmen, the ethnic identity of *bakai* dancers as “Mekeo” is rarely acknowledged. This is due partly, I suspect, to most villagers’ intense desires for fame or renown (*auafangai*), even without proper attribution or remuneration, by allowing people who are not entitled to perform *bakai* to publish and disseminate photographs, films, and so on, of the people who are so entitled (see Mosko 2002). To grasp the significance of the recent adoption of Western youth apparel, it is necessary to outline these antecedent transformations.

In the precontact era, a mourning clan would host a large funerary feast where *bakai* was performed once every five to ten years. By the time of Seligmann’s observations in 1898, only eight years after the imposition of colonial control, whole villages were staging *bakai* celebrations more or less continuously, except for a few weeks in the aftermath of each new death out of respect for mourning kin. Returning from gardening, hunting, or fishing each afternoon, people would decorate at the edge of the

village before entering in all their finery, singing, dancing, drumming, and courting well into the night. This intensified pattern continued up to outbreak of World War II, when most young men were conscripted as carriers for the Allies.

It is from the earliest days of colonial rule, incidentally, that the first Mekeo appropriations of Western clothing have been noted. These involved for most villagers the incorporation of bits of (particularly red) calico in their *bakai* costumes, complementing the brilliant yellow of indigenous barkcloth and grass skirts. From the earliest days of colonial domination also, government officers allocated colorful cloth wraparound laplaps to the men they appointed as village constables. These men were typically clan chiefs or the sons of chiefs who supposedly monopolized the legitimate powers of peace sorcerers and, hence, *bakai* ritual. Significantly, the term back then for both the role of village constable and for the badge of that office—the laplap garment that initially only they could wear—was *tsiapu*, the same indigenous expression used for ritual hotness or potency including *bakai* knowledge and practices. Subsequently, the term *tsiapu* has been extended to refer to all manner of manufactured clothing, and the wearing of wraparound laplaps has been adopted by all men, not just village constables. Therefore, from the beginning of its incorporation into Mekeo *bakai*, Western cloth and clothing have been intimately connected with indigenous hierarchies and power, particularly those associated with men, and particularly the chiefly and sorcery agency monopolized by men.

All through the early decades of colonial rule, missionaries and government agents regarded the relentless *bakai* performances as indicative of both the precontact culture and Mekeo people's deep-seated cultural conservatism. Written and oral evidence indicates that *bakai*'s early intensification was part of a general escalation of chiefly authority and sorcery conditioned by European influences, most notably the introduction of foreign diseases against which villagers had little natural immunity, resulting in depopulation, and various overt policies of colonial administration (Mosko 1999, 2005a). Prior to European arrival, as separate villages were under a more or less constant threat of surprise attack by enemies, it was essential for as many able-bodied men as possible to remain in a state of war-readiness. Also, single warriors, clans, and villages competed chiefly for war renown. But rigorous war-readiness culturally precluded men from interacting with women and thus practicing extended *bakai*. Any community where adults were devoted to regular *bakai* courting would

have been incapable of effectively defending itself if attacked. Only with colonial “pacification” did *bakai* become extended daily practice, with men shifting their competitive energies accordingly. Single men, clans, and village units competed over whose *bakai* was hottest, or could attract the largest gatherings of people from other villages.

When the carriers returned home from World War II, villagers resumed the daily *bakai* regimen with renewed vigor. Over the period of 1950–1975 or so, the Catholic mission and Australian administration initiated several ill-fated cooperative development projects (Stephen 1974), but young people’s *bakai* dress and display continued. Cyril Belshaw observed that during this period bachelors would sit atop the tractors, planting and harvesting rice fully decorated in their feathers, ornaments, and paint (1951). In the case of the North Mekeo, during the mid-1960s three villages cooperated in clearing and maintaining a serviceable airstrip using mere hand tools, but every day’s early labors were followed by enthusiastic *bakai* performances at the nearest village, Maipa. I was told by some observers that people from all three villages showed up at the airstrip each morning fully decorated, with axes, picks, and shovels in hand.

As Port Moresby grew in the postwar period, Mekeo came to monopolize the expanding areca-nut and betel market, which drew villagers to town on a frequent basis (Mosko 1999; Bergendorff 1996). Visitors to Port Moresby in this era would have noticed Mekeo men’s flamboyant dress—brightly colored laplaps, singlets, puffed-up hairdos, woven arm- and leg-bands, dogs’ teeth necklaces, and so on—including elements of *bakai* display. Through the 1960s into the 1970s, *bakai* as daily village apparel gradually declined as people began to spend cash earned from betel on manufactured clothing. By 1980 or so, *bakai* proper was once again restricted to occasional mortuary feasts. Most villagers by this time had taken to wearing cloth skirts, short pants, shirts or blouses, and t-shirts as their normal daily apparel, but without the flamboyance that came later. They did, however, reserve their best articles of clothing for Sunday prayer and mass.

From the 1970s onward, contexts of *bakai* performance changed once again. Most interclan mortuary feasting was greatly attenuated with no *bakai*. Large celebrations including *bakai* of the old style have occasionally been performed but mostly on formal occasions such as the inauguration of clubhouses, chiefs, and priests, or on national holidays. Also, villagers residing near the Hiritano Highway since its opening in 1972 have sometimes been recruited to perform *bakai* at large gatherings and events

in Port Moresby. Finally, since about the year 2000, in coordination with changes in educational policy at the national and provincial levels, something of a revival of *bakai* has developed in parts of Mekeo and Roro. Now, however, knowledgeable village elders, parents, and teachers are instructing school children in *bakai* decoration, song, and dance (minus knowledge of secret love spells) for the sake of intercommunity competitions, which have also included sporting contests (see next section).

From 1974 onward I have been able to follow *bakai* preparations closely. Beginning in early 1975, people across North Mekeo began organizing a large feast to celebrate national independence. The highlight of this feast was to be a *bakai* performance of unprecedented scale, unifying the people of the two still-somewhat-hostile North Mekeo tribes, the Amoamo and the Kuipa. For many young adults, this was their first opportunity to perform *bakai*. Since only a few had previously acquired the necessary paraphernalia, there was a burst of manufacturing and transacting with elders to acquire barkcloth garments, feathers, shell ornaments, strings of dogs' teeth, skirts, spells, and charms.

Within a few days of each other, several of my close friends and research associates singly approached me or my wife, asking for bits of her black mascara to add to their charm bottles. European custom (*kangakanga*), they said, was "the same" as theirs to the extent that black paint applied around the eyes was especially hot for swaying the minds of intended lovers. By that time, many male Mekeo elders had spent periods of their youth employed in Port Moresby as houseboys, closely observing the habits of their patronesses. European women's eye paint, they argued, was hot to European men, and it was of course obvious during the colonial era that European men dominated village Mekeo men. Thus it was deduced that mascara was the hottest of all medicines for Mekeo men to use on Mekeo women. So until our next trip to town, my wife had to make do with lampblack to satisfy her vanities.

Changes in the Port Moresby betel market in the late 1980s resulted in further transformations of dress patterns back in Mekeo. Previously, betel pepperfruit and areca-nut had been produced on a household basis and transported to town for selling in small lots directly to consumers along the town's walkways and markets. The burgeoning population of urban unemployed resulted eventually in a forceful takeover of betel retailing by people from the interior Goilala and Highlands districts, leaving Mekeo with production, transport, and wholesale distribution. Family plantings were thus greatly expanded, with proportionate increases in gross earn-

ings and in the acquisition of a wide range of money things or commodities, particularly since the late 1980s or so (Mosko 1999, 2002).

It was mainly in this context that youths in some North Mekeo villages began to clear and plant betel pepperfruit plantations for their own personal projects, in particular to finance competitive courting displays infused with numerous elements of overseas youth culture. Money and manufactured articles of youth apparel have figured centrally in this transformation, sometimes called “new *bakai*,” incorporating many of the hot ritual capacities previously attributed to indigenous *bakai* body decoration and display.

### MODERN DRESS AS “NEW BAKAI”

*Moni* (money), my friends tell me over and over, is like your *toli*—the bottle or charm that men previously used (and sometimes still do) to contain the dirty medicines of their love magic. As such, they say, *moni* is hot; it has the power to change other people’s minds. If a person has lots of money, he or she will be known as a money man (*moni aunga*) or money woman (*moni papienga*). As villagers astutely observe, other people often tend to be persuaded to think and act in accordance with money people’s desires. Unlike the medicines of men’s earlier *bakai* courting, however, money—never having been inside of another person’s body—is clean. Whereas before, women and unprepared men were prohibited from handling dirty *toli* charms, there is nothing analogous to prevent them from manipulating clean money as hot *toli*. This is the explanation that villagers give for why women, even adolescent girls, can now use the new kind of *toli* on bachelor males, just as their fathers previously used dirty *toli* on their paramours.

*Moni* is like courting charms in another respect: people give it away in the form of cash only in a very narrow range of public contexts, such as bridewealth transactions (compare Wolff 2001). In the past, a young man would usually obtain his love *toli* and other *bakai* paraphernalia from his father or other close relation through a long series of elicitory gifts. While two brothers might seek the same *toli* and associated knowledge from their common father, they would supposedly never just hand it over to one another without engaging in the same kind of transactions (Mosko 2002). And so it is nowadays with hot *moni* between brothers. While kin are expected to share many other items—prototypically cooked food, the substance of kinship, and even commodities purchased with money—

people do not readily give *moni* in the form of cash to one another, even among siblings or other close family members. This is one reason, I suggest, that the apparent individuation of recent North Mekeo commodification as represented even in the unique configuration of each person's clothing should not be mistaken for the "individualism" characteristic of canonical economic agents in the West.

This point is reinforced in light of the uses to which people nowadays put their *moni*. *Moni* is hot, people say, but they sometimes add, "only when it is used." Like a man's courting *toli*, his money is cold when it is in his suitcase stored in his house or buried in the ground. A man's *toli* is hot only when it is taken out and carried concealed on his person so that he can invoke the spirits it contains to affect, for example, the mind of his intended girlfriend or other spectators. It is the same with *moni*. The cash a money person hides in a suitcase in the roof of his or her house or deposits in a bank account is cold; it has no ability there to change other people's minds. To be hot, the *moni* must be externalized and used. It must be brought out in such a form that it can be manipulated to change the minds of others—typically by giving a purchased money thing to another person. Only by this sort of transaction does the *moni* become hot. Giving someone a money thing—a token of one's own person—is expected to elicit from that person something desirable in return. Many of the commodities purchased in town that now enter relations back at the village are deployed like this as elicitory gifts in villagers' projects.

But *moni* is hot in yet another kind of transaction, namely, in display. It is this potentiality of *moni* that young people nowadays exploit in the adoption of manufactured clothing. Name-brand T-shirts, sports jerseys, denim jeans, sneakers, sunglasses, boom boxes, and bottles of beer or flasks of hard liquor held in one's hand or hip pocket are all commodity consumables, all *moni* things. Worn or displayed on the skin, they are hot for changing people's minds in ways directly analogous to the ritual agency of *bakai* ceremonial dress. The sight of someone draped in *moni* things inclines one to think of and praise him or her for precisely that revealed inner capacity of producing money and money things. And it is when the flows of *moni* and commodities into the village have been their most intense that the nightly promenading of young men and women along the length of the village womb in full *moni* regalia has been most marked. At these times as in earlier years, people frequently remark, "[Such-and-such] village is hot," changing people's minds from wanting to live elsewhere to wanting to live there.

This view of the meaning and agency of Western clothing among contemporary North Mekeo is supported by additional information. Previously when a man or woman was decorated in conventional *bakai* style, each step of the procedure involved a prayer directed toward ancestral or other spirits. When you combed and tied back your hair, you said one prayer. As you rubbed coconut oil with medicines on your face, you said another prayer. When you started to paint your face with colorful designs, you said another prayer. For every article of clothing or valuable worn, you said yet another prayer. An adept in the new *moni* courting ritual told me that nowadays when you comb out your hair, you say a certain prayer to the spirits, another as you put on each item of manufactured apparel, another as you pass through the door of your house, another as you descend the steps to the ground in front of your house (you have to go down, back up, and down again three times, actually), another as you enter the village abdomen, and so on. I was told by another new *bakai* expert that he instructs his novices to lay their newest courting clothes outside on the floor of the veranda during the full moon to absorb the moonlight (*ngaua*, the moon, figures as a mythical feminine spirit to Mekeo, closely involved in many men's *bakai* spells). This way, even during the daytime the shiny, brilliant hot light of the moon can be directed from the young man's clothes into the eyes of his girlfriend, thereby attracting her attentions and changing her mind. Since about the mid-1990s, women informants have told me that they also employ secret techniques of modern dress and display that are regarded as hot toward their boyfriends, although thus far they have been reluctant to go into details.

Even so, on the morning of New Year's Day 2000, several of these same young women surprised me, along with the rest of the village, by staging an even newer *bakai* performance. As I have described in greater detail elsewhere (Mosko 1999), a small group of these young women, some single and some married, dressed themselves in the manner of modern Mekeo bachelors, with jeans, sneakers, funny hats, and so on. With two cartons of beer and a blaring boom box in tow, they paraded up and down the village abdomen for several hours, dancing in step to popular string band tunes while they drank. Mekeo women had adopted the wearing of cotton cloth skirts to replace their everyday grass skirts sometime before World War II, roughly when men adopted the wearing of laplaps. Only in the decades afterward did they begin to wear blouses, T-shirts, bras, and *meri* dresses (the standard feminine attire in much of Papua New Guinea after being introduced by missionaries). Certainly throughout my



initial fieldwork in the mid-1970s I never saw a woman wearing men's pants, long or short. Even by the year 2000 village women were wearing short pants only in very restricted contexts, such as sporting competitions, although divided skirts had become common. So the young women's drunken performance on the dawn of the new millennium was a novel event. But the explanation offered by the women was that they were trying to "open up" the drinking of beer to women. Until then, and particularly during the 1990s, the public drinking of beer had been a strictly male activity, quite consistent with the agency of display of hot personal capabilities regarding money in terms of the new *bakai*. In fact, beer (*bia*) and its capacity to change people's minds—in its effects both on those who drink it and those who witness others drinking—had come to assume something of an iconic status with respect to the hot power of money and money things. My point is, over the previous decade, these women had established their own ritual competencies for earning money and acquiring money things to an extent comparable with men. The drinking of alcohol, however, was one aspect of personal agency that had been denied them. For their 2000 New Year's Day performance, then, they engaged in precisely those sorts of the elicitory public transactions that would enable them to display on their inside-out skins and incorporate in their outside-in bellies their newfound *bakai* ritual powers comparable to those men (see Mosko 2002, 102–105).

While it could be argued that these Mekeo mystifications of money and modern dress have arisen from Western-derived processes of commodity fetishism (Marx 1976, 163–177), conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1924), or Christian religious ideology (Weber 1958), there are several reasons why they might best be seen as recontextualized forms of indigenous ritual agency, personhood, and sociality of which *bakai* ceremonial is just one element. Young people's adoption of Western dress has occurred in the absence of any firm distinctions between persons and things, or subjects and objects, which are symptomatic of many Western constructions of the canonic individual. For example, garden foods are regarded as tokens of persons and their relations. People should not eat the food produced from their own labors but give it to kin for incorporation into their bodies, thereby realizing food's capacity for reinforcing the bonds of blood connectedness established in procreation and feasting. One's harvested pepperfruit and areca-nut and the money and commodities obtained from them, like one's garden produce, are similarly regarded as parts of one's person that possess hot capacities when used in exchange. Surrendering

one's money as a part of oneself for the "purchase" of *moni* things is thus understood as involving acquisition of parts of persons to whom they were previously attached (eg, storekeepers, manufacturers). Elsewhere (Mosko 1999, 2001, 2002, 2005b), I have discussed the general processes by which North Mekeo villagers have historically adopted a wide range of Western practices involving precisely these assumptions of personhood, agency, and transaction (eg, Christian beliefs and practices, architectural styles, gambling, various leadership positions, beer drinking, as well as cash cropping). In all of these contexts, villagers have not acquired the cultural practices of other people for nothing or without paying. As with elements of their own cultural legacy, people have appropriated them legitimately only through pertinent elicitory reciprocity. Much of what appears to outside observers as commodity purchase and culture change, in other words, has been enacted and understood by North Mekeo villagers in terms of transactions consistent with indigenous principles of personal partibility and exchange.

In this regard, it is interesting to note the extent to which many of the items of clothing, particularly T-shirts, have written words imprinted on them. The range of literal meanings that these messages convey has become familiar particularly over the last decades, as manufacturers now commonly display their own advertising on their products. In much of the developed world, by wearing a T-shirt with, say, the logo or slogan of the manufacturer, a person identifies not only with the item of consumption but also with the prestige and hence influence of the manufacturer. These symbolic embellishments of objects, however, constitute part of the very print advertising that Robert Foster has observed urban Papua New Guineans employ to identify with the emerging nation-state (Foster 1995a; see also Colchester 2003a). In the case of apparel bearing written words that North Mekeo commonly wear at the village, there is an additional dimension of meaning and agency, a further recontextualization, that is, the power or the hot of persons who have developed a command of the knowledge of writing, even if that command consists only in the acquisition of exogenously produced consumables that possess writing on their skin. In this instance, following Michael O'Hanlon (1989, 1995), I argue the display of bodily apparel bearing writing does not mistakenly impose a linguistic model that "subordinat(es) the object qualities of things to their word-like properties" (Miller 1987, 95–96), for the displayed objects embody the written word as a critical element of their effect.<sup>9</sup>

The significance of this view of the agency incorporated in modern

clothing is illustrated also in villagers' adoption of sporting uniforms. In recent years, sporting competition (*pipalau*)—mainly volleyball and netball, but also hockey, basketball, rugby, and boxing—has become a major if not dominant factor in intra- and intervillage relations. Teams are typically organized at the village level on the basis of contrasting gender, sometimes paralleling or sometimes crosscutting lines of clan membership. Competition takes place between teams of the same village, between teams of different villages on a rotating basis, or between village teams in all-Mekeo tournaments. A dramatic feature of these competitions is the importance accorded to the teams' colorful jerseys, shorts, high socks, shoes, etc. Not surprisingly, community elders sometimes remark on the similarity between *bakai* and the way that teams composed of young people now visit each other's villages.

Consistent with the rest of her analysis of contemporary Mekeo clothing styles, Wolff argued that the sporting costumes signify people's positions in networks of relationships, particularly between clans (2004)—this was her justification for representing the modern use of these uniforms as “traditional.” But extending my preceding analysis of the contemporary adoption of Western clothing as “new *bakai*,” additional implications of meaning and agency in the sports clothing are indicated, which may well extend to the place of sport elsewhere in the Pacific (see, eg, Harrison 1993; Gustafsson 1998; Wilde 2004). There has been a historical pattern among Mekeo, for example, for one sport such as volleyball to be considered hot and other sports cold for a period of time, followed by a period during which rugby or netball becomes hot and volleyball cold, and so on. Taking volleyball as an example, in many villages it is mainly knowledgeable war sorcerers (*faika*) who have been recruited to coach their local teams using ritual techniques such as fasting and bodily closing to help make their players swift, strong, and light, so that they can jump high to spike the ball, etc, and also so that they can resist the war sorcery of their opponents. These techniques are very similar to those of *bakai* courting as well as precontact ritual war preparation in the ways that inner capacities are externalized and transacted among players. The war sorcery coaches provide special medicines that players variously ingest or rub on their skins. Also, the coaches employ their sorcery charms to strengthen their team members and weaken the players on opposing teams. Many athletes conceal in their uniforms during play special volleyball *toli* charms to similar effect. Most significantly, coaches and players articulate ancestral war sorcery spells instructing spirits released from

their charm bottles to make their own team members brilliant so that their shininess enters the eyes and minds of rivals, to adversely affect their physical play. Thus opponents will not be able to see the ball properly or jump high enough to spike, they will mishit the ball or mistime their setups, and so on.

Also, the uniformity of costumes for members of a given team recalls the consistency of *bakai* decoration across members of a clan, signifying the internal capacities to the clan as a body. The overall effect of so many separate players is transformed into a cohesive and hot or powerful force, one that others will admire and praise.

But members of a village team just wearing the same sports costume is not enough to affect opponents' play or to force spectators to take notice. Villagers insist that it is the invisible hot inner capacities that arise from players' (and whole teams') differential knowledge and ritual preparations that produce divergences in game performance and effectiveness. Perhaps the most common criticism of single players during practice and tournament play is that their actions are not coordinated with those of the team as a whole, resulting in the team's loss of the game. The point is not merely that certain team members are not coordinating their efforts but that those out of step with the others have not taken the appropriate preliminary actions to acquire the inner capacities that effective play and display make visible. When players consistently miss their shots, for example, people do not merely remark on the mistakes or that their play is bad; more typically they say, "They are lying" (*Isa kepifonge*), meaning they give the outer appearance of having inner capacities for skillful play but have not actually undertaken the appropriate ritual steps to acquire them truly.

## CONCLUSIONS

Modern manufactured clothing is only one class of *moni* things that North Mekeo villagers regard as hot for changing other people's minds. By replacing an old house made of bush materials with a modern house of squared timber, corrugated iron roof, louvered aluminum windows, and so on, married couples nowadays are similarly perceived as *moni* persons able to influence community actions and relations in ways not possible otherwise. Analogous sorts of agency through elicitory processes of detachment and attachment have attended rivalry between whole villages over who can attract the most government or mission services, who can erect the finest chief's clubhouse or church made of modern building mate-

rials, who can make the largest bridewealth payments, who can attract the largest number of people from other villages to resettle there, who can best host or win regional sporting tournaments, and so on. Conspicuous display of clothing and other kinds of *moni* things is nowadays understood to reveal persons' inner abilities to produce more money and *moni* things, and thereby to elicit people's public recognition of those abilities. Kept secret and concealed, such capacities are unused, cold, impotent, and unrecognized. To be hot, they must be brought to the outside where other persons can be affected by them, internalizing them into their own bodies, thoughts, and persons, and responding accordingly.

It is partly for this reason, I argue, that the bodily skin of Mekeo persons is categorically a site of particular ritual potency. The surface of the skin is not merely an external aspect of the body, however. In many contexts I have described, the body's skin is conceived as *inner* space turned *outward*. Correspondingly, the potent knowledge that persons assimilate in a wide variety of transactions consists of *internalized* aspects of themselves that originated from other persons and relations *outside* the body. Internalized knowledge and external decoration thus occupy complementary structurally ambiguous, hence powerful, zones of bodily space: outside-inverted and inside-everted, respectively.

An obvious question to ask at this point is, how relevant might this treatment of change in North Mekeo clothing and body decoration be for other parts of the contemporary Pacific? Change in clothing styles has been portrayed as a particularly marked dimension of historical change in the region, and Polynesian cases seem to have received the most attention.<sup>10</sup> Also, many of the latter studies have emphasized the connection between bodily adornment with clothing, decorations, or both, and the signification and enactment of new dimensions of power, domination, and agency.<sup>11</sup> However, despite its obvious significance and relevance to changing clothing styles in the Pacific, I should think, the inside-outside dimension of bodies, persons, and relations, and especially their agentive implications, seem curiously unremarked in most of these studies. In recent treatments of Polynesian clothing, in other words, there appears to be a fairly profound gap between, on the one hand, Gell's widely cited portrayal of the basic technical schema for indigenous Polynesian "wrapping in images" in terms of inside and outside manipulations and, on the other, treatments of postcontact Polynesian adoptions of Western clothing where considerations of the inside-outside bodily dimensions and their agentive potentials seem to be elided. The 2004 studies by Anne D'Alleva

and Elizabeth Cory-Pearce on Tahiti and Māori, respectively, would appear to be rare exceptions in this regard (compare Keane 2004, 4). This incongruity could reflect either a historical change wherein inside-outside dimensions of meaning and agency have been subsequently replaced by others consequent to the arrival of missionaries or other representatives of Western culture, or merely a difference of perspective separating Gell from fellow Polynesianists.

While I am not in a position to explain this disparity either way, I do think that the North Mekeo material presented here is pertinent to it. The basic technical schema that, according to Gell, early on informed tattooing and other bodily adornment practices across Polynesia involves the classification of and transferences among inside, outside, outside-inverted, and inside-everted bodily spaces explicitly analogous to North Mekeo (Gell 1993, 39, 303–304). Mekeo are, after all, distant Austronesian-speaking relatives of Polynesians, with much in common culturally, linguistically, and socially. And although throughout the postcontact era Mekeo have not practiced institutionalized “tattooing” (*poapoa*—a doubling of *poa*, meaning “to hit” and “to shine”) on the order of Polynesian peoples, their immediate Austronesian neighbors, the Roro, with whom they have practiced much intermarriage and commerce, and other coastal societies of the area (eg, Motuans) have done so on the full bodies of their adolescent women as part of their *bakai* (Roro *batai*) ritual preparations until rather recently. I dare say also that I have yet to meet a Mekeo villager who by the age of late adolescence has not had his or her name or other personal sign tattooed somewhere on his or her upper or lower arm. Therefore, I put forward the North Mekeo case to illustrate how Gell’s portrayal of indigenous Polynesian tattooing might still bear on the dynamics and agency of contemporary Polynesians’ adoptions of Western clothing, and to suggest thereby that more cultural continuity might have been involved in Polynesians’ adoptions of Western clothing than has been apparent so far.

Nonetheless, Mekeo and Roro tattooing as well as the patterns of clothing and body decoration described here (along with several other contexts of personal agency that I have analyzed elsewhere [Mosko 1992a, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2005b]) appear to deviate from Gell’s tattooing formula in one important respect. For Gell, it is in “non-hierarchical” societies where inner capacities are typically externalized in markings on the body’s skin, versus the situation in “hierarchical” societies where “body markings are brands imposed from without, and signify the suppression of the deval-

ued body and what that body represents” (Gell 1993, 26). This suggests that, while the relevant agentive capacities in both ideal cases are spiritual in origin and qualify as kinds of “armature,” body markings and decoration in nonhierarchical societies tend to be offensive in function while in hierarchical societies they are primarily defensive. But Mekeo and Roro, who have been consistently portrayed ethnographically as hierarchical on the basis of possessing a complex system of hereditary chiefly officials, appear on the evidence presented here to have incorporated both of these potentialities in their clothing, decorations, and relations, that is, as projecting inner capacities outward and as assimilating external forces inward.<sup>12</sup> This suggests, on the one hand, that the analytical contrast of hierarchical to nonhierarchical societies in the Pacific may require careful reformulation, which Gell has initiated for Polynesia, and on the other hand that relations of domination even in patently hierarchical settings may be more usefully seen as also involving subtler nuances of reciprocal elicitation and transaction (compare M Strathern 1988, 309–339; Mosko 1992a, 1995). This might in turn lead to new insights regarding the processes implicated in Polynesians’ and other Pacific Islanders’ adoptions of Western clothing and other elements of modernity.

What might be the future of North Mekeo fashion and body decoration? One anonymous referee of this article has raised the question of the “extent Mekeo understandings will continue to inform the use of manufactured clothing in the long term, and to what extent the superficially similar ideas attached to manufactured clothing (ideas of being fashionable, etc) will gradually overwhelm the more subtle and complex indigenous ideology.” Fair enough. While I would disclaim any ability to foretell the future, the only plausible answer to this question that I can envision would have to rely on the theoretical perspective one adopts to explain processes of change and transformation of the past. For the sake of argument, Marshall Sahlins’s structural history framework (1981, 1985, 1991), at least in general outline, can probably be taken as the best, or at least the most familiar alternative at hand for anthropologists to explain both cultural continuity and change in the Pacific. From this vantage point, any future transformations of North Mekeo cultural practices involving modern clothing, the meaning of money, or other aspects of seeming commodification would likely depend on the sorts of perceptions, actions, and revaluations that villagers can generate from their encounters and experiences, always informed of course by the schemes of cultural values then in place. It is difficult to estimate whether this would ever



eventuate such that the till-now reproduced indigenous views of personal partibility, hot ritual power, inner capacities revealed on the outside, and so on give way entirely to very different but superficially similar ideas of “fashionableness.” But it can be said that so far in North Mekeo villagers’ postcontact experience of the events in which they have participated, exposure to exogenous influences have tended to reinforce rather than efface people’s attachment to many aspects of the indigenous modes of thought and sociality even while they are transformed.

In any case, there is no reason to regard the New Melanesian Ethnography, and the notion of personal partibility in particular, as flatly at odds with Sahlins’s general approach to the dynamics of historical change, that is, through analyzing “structures of conjuncture”—by which he means the “practical realization of the cultural categories in a historical context, as expressed in the interested action of the historic agents” (Sahlins 1985, xiv). On the evidence of historical changes in North Mekeo fashion outlined in this article, I would argue that the instrumental strategizing that supposedly characterizes structures of the conjuncture may take the form of mutually elicitory transactions between partible persons. In this view, North Mekeo change could be perceived as incorporating and refashioning new elements of Western clothing styles into the people’s relations (and thereby the cultural system) by detaching hot parts of themselves as persons (ie, money earned through the betel market) that are given and attached to wealthy and powerful others (ie, shopkeepers in Port Moresby), who respond by returning clothing articles that villagers subsequently attach to themselves. In this way, the New Melanesian Ethnography has the potential of contributing significantly to extant theories of cultural change in the Pacific and elsewhere with regard to contexts well beyond innovations of clothing and fashion (see also Mosko 1999, 2001, 2002, 2005b).<sup>13</sup>

But for me, the referee’s query triggers two additional, possibly unexpected responses. On the one hand, there seems to be an assumption that the model of personal partibility as it has been commonly deployed thus far by Melanesianist ethnographers is somehow inherently limited to analyzing synchronic or unchanging phenomena and relations, so other approaches must be adopted in order to address adequately processes of social change and transformation. Indeed this reflects fairly accurately the standard criticism that has been leveled against the New Melanesian Ethnography as well as the classic model of gift exchange on which it relies.<sup>14</sup> However, I have here and elsewhere tried to show that the New

Melanesian Ethnography has a considerable unrealized potential to comprehend processes of historical change, at least when the cultural premises of the people undergoing those changes are informed by understandings of obligatory gift exchange, personal dividuality, and elicitory agency. So in response it might be asked, what are the grounds on which it is presumed that sociocultural systems premised similarly to North Mekeo *must* inevitably give way to Western values of fashion, commodification, the distinctiveness of objects from subjects, and so on?

On the other hand, however, I am led to ask also, is there not perhaps in the Western world of fashion and the recognition of the power and attractiveness of fashionable objects something closer akin to the personal agency North Mekeo attribute to money and *moni* things? That is, is there in the sort of fetishism that Marx long ago attributed to the products of alienated labor something analogous to the indigenous North Mekeo case of *bakai*? It seems to me that there may be much in the North Mekeo experience of manufactured clothing and *moni* things that could elicit new conscious perceptions of personal detachability and elicitation in westerners' susceptibility to the attractions of "fashion" and "commodities," despite what many view as the canonical individualism of the West.

As someone interested in transformations both across time and societies, I return to the point that opened this article. Contrary to many presuppositions, the recent North Mekeo adoption of modern manufactured clothing does not necessarily indicate the abandonment of indigenous aesthetics or the triumph of Western market values. While in urban contexts the wearing of Western fashions may signify people's identification with nation-state or global collectivities, the same practices in village settings may evoke additional meanings more closely tied to preexisting cultural understandings of dividual personhood, agency, and ritual efficacy as well as clan membership and people's nodal positioning in networks of relationships. What Mekeo villagers nowadays reveal in the garments clinging to their skins is, perhaps more than anything else, their inner capacities for accommodating the forces of capitalism and globalization to their own forms of sociality.

The contemporary North Mekeo adoption of manufactured clothing as outlined here is relevant as well to several cognate theoretical tracts in recent Pacific ethnography and beyond—for example, Graeber's, Gell's and others' theorizing of bodily aesthetics; cloth and clothing as distinctively Oceanic resources of personal agency; critiques and refinements of Maussian gift exchange and reciprocity; discussions of embodiment, par-

ticularly the relation of internal to external influences; classic structuralist analyses of ambiguity, pollution, and power; processes of commodification; and the proliferation of ritual forms in the face of modernity, to name some of the more salient. These altogether suggest that within the corpus of thought involving elicitory gift exchange among partible persons there lies an inner anthropological capacity for explanation and comparison yet to be fully revealed.

\* \* \*

THIS ARTICLE WAS INITIALLY PREPARED for presentation at the “Body Arts and Modernity” workshop convened at the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford, in June 2002. I am deeply grateful to the organizers, Mike O’Hanlon and Elizabeth Ewert, and other participants for the stimulation provided. I have greatly benefited also from comments and criticisms offered by colleagues at seminar presentations at the Australian National University and the universities of Hawai’i, Heidelberg, Auckland, Otago, Canterbury, Waikato, and Victoria at Wellington, and by two anonymous referees. Funding for the field research on which this article is based has been provided by the National Institute of General Medical Sciences, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Marsden Fund of New Zealand, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. I am particularly indebted to my Mekeo and Roro friends and associates who have shared with me their understandings of their lives and included me in their relations. Chief among these with regard to the materials contained herein are Ameau Wagu’u, Martin Ae, Adolo Mangemange, John Ume, and Ernest Beatta. Karen Munce kindly allowed me to reproduce her drawings of male and female Mekeo dance costumes. Kay Dancey produced the remaining figures, Darren Boyd helped with the photos, and Fritha Jones provided research assistance and proofreading. Any and all deficiencies contained herein remain my own.

## Notes

1 For example, see Hirsch 1990; Foster 1995a; Knauff 2002; Colchester 2003a, 2003b; Gewertz and Errington 1999; Eves 2003.

2 See Knauff 2002, 226; Colchester 2003; Küchler and Were 2004; Hanson 2004; Schildkrout 2004.

3 For example, see O’Hanlon 1995; Thomas 1991; Sahlins 1985; LiPuma 1999; Hansen 2004; Schildkrout 2004.

4 See Bolton 2003, 2004; Keane 2004; O’Hanlon 2004; Taouma 2004; Addo 2003; Colchester 2003a.

5 To varying degrees, Graeber's perceptions converge with a number of other well-known treatments of embodiment and sociality: Marcel Mauss's techniques of the body (1979), Terence Turner's social skin (1980), Michel Foucault's internalization of state powers (1979), and Gell's recent treatise on artistic expression (1998). Melanesianists particularly will recognize Graeber's convergence with Marilyn Strathern's early account of how Hagen ceremonial dress reveals people's otherwise hidden capacities of personal agency (1979; see also Strathern and Strathern 1971), which she subsequently elaborated in *The Gender of the Gift*.

6 The Roro cognate term for Mekeo *kangakanga* ornaments is *ōāōa*, as confirmed by field research I conducted among Roro (Waima) in July–September 2005; see Seligmann 1910, 207–215, 232–248. Inasmuch as there appear to be only the faintest of differences between Mekeo *bakai* and Roro *patai* in both traditional and modern settings, it can be assumed that what I describe for Mekeo applies equally to Roro unless stated otherwise.

7 For example, see Strathern and Strathern 1971; M Strathern 1979; O'Hanlon 1989, 1995; Knauff 1989; Munn 1986.

8 It must be mentioned that prior to Christian conversion Mekeo and Roro men (but not women) were permitted to marry plural spouses.

9 North Mekeo nowadays inscribe words for display not only on clothing but also on canoes, clan clubhouses, and lorries. Interestingly, the owners or possessors of these latter items have characteristically painted the same name on a variety of these items, or as they replace each other one after another, and other people will commonly refer to so-and-so's lorry or whatever by that name. This written nomenclature system clearly replicates the way in which in earlier times clubhouses as well as *bakai* costumes bearing clan insignia (*kangakanga*) were distinguished by verbal names and conferred fame or renown (*auafangai*) on the persons with whom they were associated (Seligmann 1910; Mosko 2002).

10 For regional studies of clothing change, see, eg, Colchester 2003; Bolton 2003, 2004; O'Hanlon 2004; Sharrad 2004; Wolff 2004. For Polynesian cases, see, eg, Tcherkézoff 2003; Thomas 2003; Küchler 2003; Addo 2003; Taouma 2004.

11 See Küchler 2003; Addo 2003; Colchester 2003a, 2003b; Thomas 2003; Cory-Pearce 2004; D'Alleva 2004; Hereniko 2004; Taouma 2004.

12 See Seligmann 1910; Hau'ofa 1981; Monsell-Davis 1981; Stephen 1974; Bergendorff 1996.

13 I have in the past argued that Sahlins's detailed demonstrations of his structural history model are incompatible with the New Melanesian Ethnography, but these points of criticism have been aimed primarily at elements of his model, particularly those to do with the Dumontian notion of hierarchical organization, which tend to be culturally distinctive to Polynesia and may not thus be easily exportable to social situations structured otherwise; see Mosko 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 2005a; compare M Strathern 1990.

14 For example, see Bourdieu 1977, 6; Brown 1992, 126–128; Keesing 1992, 132–134; Jolly 1992, 146.

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### *Abstract*

Anthropologists and others have recently argued that Papua New Guineans' contemporary patterns of consumption including Western clothing fashions have become critical components of commodification, modernization, globalization, and the creation of individualistic personal identities in alignment with the nation-state. This paper suggests, however, that among North Mekeo the contemporary adoption of Western clothing styles also embodies additional meanings continuous with preexisting indigenous practices having to do with ceremonial body decoration, courting, and love magic. Personal adornment with items of manufactured youth apparel (T-shirts, jeans, name-brand sneakers, knitted caps, etc) is nowadays regarded by villagers as ritually "hot," or capable of changing people's minds similarly to the decorations and love charms previously employed in the colorful ceremonial dress and dancing performed at the conclusion of mortuary feasts. The view of personhood, agency, and gift exchange supposedly distinctive to "traditional" Melanesian cultures (ie, the so-called "New Melanesian Ethnography") is employed in a novel way to analyze the historical transformation of *bakai* ceremonial dress and display into the clothing styles and fashion of villagers today. North Mekeo ritual agency in both traditional and contemporary fashions is shown to consist in the exchange dynamics of "dividual" or "partible persons" involving bodily zones of inside, outside, outside-inverted, and inside-everted, analogous to Alfred Gell's basic technical schema for Polynesian tattooing and armature (1993). This paper thus brings together for a wide circle of Pacific scholars some of the more innovative theoretical developments in Melanesian and Polynesian anthropology of recent decades, highlighting particularly their suitability for the analysis of historical change and transformation.

KEYWORDS: personhood, agency, clothing, fashion, ritual, commodification, change