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Chapter 13.

## Livers and lives:

Organ extraction narratives on the Rai coast of Papua New Guinea

by James Leach

### *Introduction*

In this paper<sup>1</sup> I discuss concerns with the cash economy as they are expressed by people of the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea.<sup>2</sup> During my fieldwork, a number of rumours circulated which bore directly on local perceptions of white people, and of the market economy. These were epitomized by stories of organ extraction (*stelim leva*, 'liver theft'), by white people from unsuspecting local victims. The area has a reputation for resisting or subverting 'development', and for reinterpreting Christianity and colonialism (Lawrence 1964). This history, and the inaccessibility of the region due to geographic constraints, means it is one of the least 'developed' areas of Papua New Guinea, despite being the area of the mainland with the longest history of 'contact'.<sup>3</sup> As I will show, in apparent contradiction to their reputation, there is plenty of willingness on the part of the inhabitants of the Rai Coast to interact with, and gain knowledge of, what is still covered by the term 'white people' (*ol wetman*), (by which they mean the wider world).

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<sup>2</sup> Fieldwork (1994-1995 and 1999) was carried out primarily among Nekkini speakers, who live in the coastal hinterland of the Rai Coast in the Mot 1 census district. Nekkini hamlets lie between 5 and 10 km inland, and around 500m above sea level. The observations upon which this paper are based were gleaned from work and journeys undertaken in adjacent language groups (Ngaing, Neko), as well as in Nekkini speaking hamlets. The inhabitants of this limited area are those I refer here to 'Rai Coast villagers'. I refer to Nekkini speaking people where I wish to draw on specific data which relates to them.

<sup>3</sup> The Russian scientist, Miklouho-Maclay, landed at Bongu, in Astrolabe Bay, in 1871. He was followed by others, including Lutheran Missionaries in 1885 (Reiner 1986).

It is this apparent paradox, between interest and willingness on the one hand, and resistance to, or dissatisfaction with the manifestations of development, on the other, that is my focus. I take as my cue the need, as presented by Geschiere & van Binsbergen (1998) in their notes for the conference,

'to focus on the ambivalences and the enigmatic aspects of [the] apparently unilineal and global process [of commodification]'.

Rai Coast people bemoan the fact of their region's 'backwardness'. But they do so in a very particular way. That is, through making a claim to have instigated the social world and the production of objects for exchange. Current social practices, described in local idioms as regenerative of powerful ancestral activities (*kastom*), are evidence of this claim for them. Recognition of its validity is what they seek when bemoaning their peripheral situation. The truth of such a claim is of course highly contestable. I do not argue for it. Yet I am not sure that truth is quite the issue here. Theirs is an autopoietic rendering of the conditions of social life. As such, it can encompass the whole social world, of which white people are a significant part. Rai Coast people seem to me to be asking for recognition as another significant part. I examine the stories and questions Rai Coast people posed to me about my own background, and the workings of the global economy, as a part of their interest in establishing a route to claim a position within it. My further point is that the questions they posed may not be (as they could first appear), a critique of, or resistance to, the moral implications of the workings of the global economy.

I make these arguments with a specific purpose. I do not imply that Rai Coast people's perspective is powerful enough to change the workings of the global economy. However, does this mean that we should ignore them? Or worse perhaps, render their concerns as if they could be encompassed by familiar analytic languages, generated in a socially and historically specific critique of capitalist relations? My intention is not to produce alternative world views as if they existed independently of the processes of globalization. I do intend however to highlight through ethnographic analysis, the limits of the descriptive potential of commodification in this (particular, but 'globalized') situation. This is an area which has a long colonial, and now post-colonial, history. Yet even in this situation,

'[t]he words now being [...] borrowed to describe a new sort of world may turn out all too soon to be less useful, or less applicable, than they seem at this moment' (Mintz 1998: 119).

We know what a description of capitalism and its effects looks like. We also know what a critique of it implies. I am interested to understand in this paper what perspective Rai Coast people have on the post-colonial economy. In making such a description, I comment in turn upon the limits of a language our particular history, and relational positioning, generates in relation to the demands of such a description.

In what follows, I highlight the possibility that we bring an overdetermined understanding of the moral deficiencies inherent in capitalist modes of production, especially through an emphasis on the process of commodification, to our interpretations of such people's ambiguity about their place in the global market. That is, in romanticising the conditions of production and consumption in such places (Appadurai 1986b: 11), we are

in danger of pre-empting the context, and content, of their concerns. I will argue that in the case presented here, it is not the violent and extractive nature of colonial and neo-colonial market relations that Rai Coast people find troubling. In fact these elements have analogues (albeit based on very different premises) in contemporary indigenous relations of production and exchange. I argue that we must begin by examining these analogues as they appear in stories of organ extraction if we are to understand the meaning of such narratives. I then go onto argue that for this particular case, it seems that our focus on *things* (i.e. organs) as the unit of comparison, and therefore commensurability in exchange, carries with it the danger of importing the logic of a particular 'regime of value' (global commodity transactions under market conditions) into situations where objects themselves are of less interest than the capacities people are able to demonstrate through eliciting them from others. I conclude that it is this elicitation that interests Rai Coast people, not the violence or extraction through which it is accomplished.

## Cash

Margaret Jane Radin's book *Contested Commodities* (1996) takes a stance against what she terms, '[u]niversal commodification [which] implies that all value can be expressed in terms of price' (1996: 8). She argues that there is a general, 'worry about inappropriate commodification' (1996: 8) in contemporary society, and she uses an appeal to this almost visceral resistance to the extension of market metaphors into the domain of reproduction to support her position. Radin cites 'a leading economist' (Gary S. Becker) who she says 'is willing to conceive of everything (corneas for transplant, sexuality, babies for adoption) in market rhetoric' (1996: 7). The very opening of her book highlights the distinction that ought to be maintained:

'[t]his theoretical practice, unlike our habitual participation in literal markets, seems very strange to many people. Lovers and family relations do not conceive as their actions as trades...' (1996: 1).

Early on in my fieldwork, I walked over to a group of Nekgini speaking hamlets about 5 km away from my own. On this trip (and in general), I had very clearly in mind the need to show myself as a good character, willing to participate, for example, in the local obsession for the exchange of small items in greeting. (Betel nut and tobacco are the ubiquitous form of cordial greeting in this area.) To this end I took up chewing betel nut. In addition, I soon realized I had an asset in the interest caused by the novel kind of (loose) tobacco I carried. People in the hamlet I visited that day soon gave up with the absurd little cigarette papers I had with me, and reverted to rolling huge tubes from newspaper to smoke it in. I watched as the pouch disappeared, consoling myself that this was a small price for recognition of my humanity. It was disconcerting therefore, when in the presence of a large crowd of people all puffing away, one of the men (whom I name here as Sorang) asked me about how much I paid for the use of the toilet in my house in England. Did I pay my mother for feeding me, he went on, and how much did such transactions entail? What would happen if I did not have any money? Would I be left out on the street? The juxtapo-

sition of freely given tobacco and questions about how white people 'pay for everything' appeared insensitive to me.

In fact, I felt slightly insulted. It may seem absurd out of the context and immediacy of fieldwork, but I had previously been buoyed up by the praise of my neighbours for sharing tobacco and chewing betel with them. Their phrase, '*emi no wetman, em as ples*' (he is no white man, he belongs here), encouraged me to believe I was accepted and viewed, perhaps, as a person of sorts. (That is, someone who gave freely and therefore reciprocated the hospitality they were shown. I mean here a moral person, not in fact that I was trying to appear as a composite 'dividual', as one might wish to argue Rai Coast people's 'personhood' is best characterized (cf. Strathern 1988; Leach 1997). The questions about money in my family relations put me on the back foot. Here I was doing my best to appear sympathetic, and being tried with implications that white people were habitually calculating in all their relationships. I considered I had provided evidence to the contrary, that I was someone who knew how to behave in local terms (and of course my own, where the notion of paying for things in one's family is unacceptable). It was this last assumption that had fooled me.

Of course, in retrospect, my reaction was unconsidered. It remained so in fact until in thinking about commodification, I came upon Radin's discussion. It certainly seemed strange to me that Rai Coast people might imagine family life for white people should include money in reckoning family relations. Moreover, I feared there was an unfavourable comparison being drawn between 'my' lifestyle and 'theirs'. (People on the Rai Coast often explained to me that 'everything is free here'.) A critique, in fact, perhaps coming from some interaction with White people in the past, of the way our lives are dominated by commodity production and exchange. Yet my discomfort obscured the possibility that Sorang was in fact asking a genuine question, without the motive to insult or offend. Perhaps he was imagining a way that white men's lives might make sense?

The ubiquity of money, and how it is essential to everything white people do, is a commonplace wisdom on the Rai Coast. The phrase '*moniman*' (money man) applied to Whites speaks of more than just possession of wealth. Rather a substantial, bodily connection is implied. Was Sorang then participating in an imaginative construction of white people's social relations which had money and its circulation as central?

By compartmentalising economy, separating market from family relations, we set up different domains in which the same actions can have very different moral weight. Hence my discomfort (and Radin's). However, I later came to know that the first payment a male child is required to make on achieving adolescence is to his mother for the *hat wok* 'hard work' she put into his upbringing. This payment is called *kalawa*. Holding a plate of cooked pork, the boy says he pays his mother for the pain he caused in childbirth, and for the work she did in cleaning up his faeces. At marriage, the mother of a female child has a claim over the pig given to her kin for the same reasons.

Payments between kin (i.e. not 'exchange' partners (cf. Strathern 1988: 291-295)) then are not alien to Rai Coast villagers, or other Melanesians. Perhaps contrary to my presumption, Sorang's questions were making a stab at placing me firmly as human after all. The difference between us was plain, but investigating that difference in inquiring about

my kin relations was perhaps a positive affirmation. The problem then, was mine; money appeared where I thought it was out of place. I suggest here that money may have also been the problem for Sorang, but in a different sense. The appropriate place of money in white people's relationships is of great interest to Rai Coast villagers, and Sorang's questions were not unique by any means.

As I mentioned in my introduction, there is more to the underdevelopment of the Rai Coast than harsh terrain. Cash cropping was only sporadically attended to in the hamlets in which I worked. This may be attributed to the fluctuating price of coffee and cocoa on the world market (Gewertz & Errington 1995), or the trouble of transportation. I discern another aspect, however. Perhaps as a hang over from previous notions that white people were not telling villagers everything about the connection between Christianity, wealth and power (Lawrence 1964), Nekgini speakers who I know maintain an ambiguous attitude to the value of money itself. To put it simply, it is unclear to them what the origin of money is, and therefore how useful it really is. People complain that for all the effort that goes into producing cash crops, the money they get in return is unsatisfactory. It is an item which is consumed, people 'eat money' (*kaikai moni*) and hard work disappears without trace. Or rather, perhaps like garden food and pork (the make up of *kalawa* payments) on the Rai Coast, money was a consumable among white people, and not the durable object of exchange it had been presented as. Now in my very presence in his village as a physical entity, it was apparent to Sorang that someone else's hard work (in nurturing and feeding me) had not disappeared. Could it be that I had recognized these acts of growing and nurture with payments of cash? If so, perhaps there was less mystery involved in cash than Rai Coast people had been come to believe.

### Commodification

The renewed interest in commodities and commodification in anthropology has reinvigorated the investigation of the place of material goods in social life, (Miller 1995c: 270). Palsson & Helgason (1997) include Tausig (1980), Geschiere (1992), Verdery (1995), Price (1993) and Gudeman & Rivera (1990) in a list of those who have taken on the challenge of examining the politics and morality of commodification in diverse contexts. Citing Appadurai (1986) and Parry & Bloch (1989) as prime movers in this interest, they make the point that

'the scholars advocating this new approach argue for an expanded definition of economic life, emphasising and revitalising the significance of both social relations and individual and collective moralities for understanding human behaviour' (Palsson and Helgason 1997: 453).

This reinvigoration could also be seen in the work of those who have come to critique the 'occidental' construction of Western economies (Carrier 1995a, 1998), and those who examine material culture and consumption in diverse contexts (Miller 1987, 1995a, 1995e). Each author in their way emphasises the importance of culture, or the construction of identity, in differentiating the process of commodity production or consumption from one locality to another. As Armstrong (1999) puts it,

'economic change among small-scale isolated societies is shaped not just by the larger forces of globalization and modernity but by local aspirations and indigenous histories'.

It is in the conjunction, one might say, of these two elements that the authenticity and interest of contemporary ethnographies is established.

The reach of globalization is undeniable. Ethnographers are therefore obliged to include the process in their accounts of the societies they discuss. To not do so invites accusations of allowing established models, based on bounded social units or systems of meaning, to govern anthropological analysis (Appadurai 1991). It may even be seen as wilfully burying one's (scholarly) head in the sand to avoid the moral and political implications of global capitalism (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999a, 1999b).

A danger of this corrective emphasis on the process of globalization and commodification, however, is that it supplies a set of assumptions about the context in which people live their lives which comes to organize ethnography. Instead of new insights gained through that ethnographic analysis, familiar themes of rupture, dissatisfaction and resistance (Appadurai 1996; and see Englund & Leach 2000) in multiple and varied forms, appear time and again. In other words, one might say the dynamic or energising element of much contemporary anthropological inquiry lies in the notion of inexorable change fragmenting local cultures into multiple versions of 'modernity'. Commodities are everywhere. The analysts job is to set out how they are reinterpreted or resisted in each locality. The form of the dynamic produces its own results.

Keith Hart comments on the problems inherent in any globalising narrative to account for change.

'It is not usually difficult to find a word for something distinctive', he writes, 'But once we have found it, certain logical consequences normally ensue. The most important of these is that phenomena excluded by the term form a single category opposed to it in a dualistic negation (...) [I]f we label something "x", our discourse depends on supposing that its meaning will stay the same for long enough for a linguistic community to come to share it. This "x" then defines, at least residually, what it is not ("not x") (...) [W]hen "x" is a historically emergent feature assumed to be dominant in our day, it is not unusual for history itself to be represented as the restructuring of "not x" by "x" (...) [I]t is one thing to recognise this mundane aspect of our thought. It is something else again, however, to escape from its intellectual limitations' (Hart 1982: 38).

It is possible that the implications of 'commodification', however careful we may be to avoid the dualisms inherent in imagining that commodities exist only in capitalist regimes (Appadurai 1986b: 16), obviate the possibility for finding anything other than 'commodification', or a negation of it. In this case, a focus on things (as kinds of 'commodities') obscures Rai Coast people's interest in relations and capacities, as made evident in exchange. If there appears to be ambiguity towards representatives of capitalist exchange, this is not necessarily the 'negation' of commodification, elaborated as resistance to a particular mode of production.

It may be that despite intentions to the contrary, a focus on commodities obviates the possibility of analysing change based on different assumptions. In this vein, Turner (1986) writes that

'[t]o use capitalist value form categories for non-capitalist forms of production (...) is to imply that their differences from capitalist production can nevertheless be formulated in capitalist production itself, both as social activity and cultural construct, that separate them from capitalism' (1986: 106).

### Livers

In a prevalent narrative,<sup>1</sup> a horrific rumour of organ extraction was brought to my attention by Rai Coast people. Forcefully so, as I was apparently implicated, by association, with the people behind the these acts. The narrative, in its various transformations during the weeks of its popularity, had a core set of elements. A White man, patrolling the coast in a high powered speed boat, was said to be capturing local people. He had an unspecified number of New Guinean henchmen. They then extracted the internal organs (*leva*, 'livers, organs') of those they captured, it was said, in order to send them abroad for sale. My neighbours were fascinated by this ghoulis story, asking me over and over whether it was true, how this trade worked, and what would become of the organs that went abroad. They speculated among themselves about whether or not the police would stop the white man, how the organs were transported, and what use they would be put to. Gilbert Lewis (personal communication) describes much the same interest among Gnau speakers who were asked to 'give blood' while working on plantations in the 1970s in East Sepik Province. Gnau speakers were apparently fascinated to know what they would be given in return for their blood. People other than my neighbours showed the depth of interest in 'liver thief' narratives held for people on the Rai Coast, travelling long distances to consult me on them. They were not so much interested in my position on the truth, or otherwise, of the rumour, but rather in the mechanisms of extraction, of transport, and of final use. People were genuinely fearful, and I had the disconcerting experience of feeling suddenly unwelcome in villages on the beach.

Fear combined with fascination may often be associated with the workings of the occult (for example see Geschiere 1997: 1-2). While people recognise the destructive aspects of occult power, they are also attracted by the security or wealth that knowledge of organ extraction to the fear they have of initiation, or of affinal contact, rather than specifically to the realm of unseen forces (the occult) (Englund & Leach 2000). As Geschiere's opening suggests, the fact that fear is an element in people's understandings of power does not mean they necessarily make a moral judgement about its workings, or avoid seeking its source. The narratives of organ extraction drew my attention to certain concerns local people had. It was difficult for me, as it was when Sorang asked me his questions, not to feel both threatened and uncomfortable. The discomfort, I now believe, came from being perhaps too aware of the process of commodification, and too ready to interpret these narratives and questions in the light of that knowledge.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes, writing about the trade in human organs for transplant be-

<sup>1</sup> Also analysed elsewhere, see Englund & Leach 2000

tween rich and poor countries (Scheper-Hughes 2000) describes a growing academic awareness of the 'deficiencies of the global capitalist economy'. It is 'particularly the erosion of social values and social cohesion in the face of anti-social market values', that rumours of this trade exemplify:

'The dilemma is that markets are by nature indiscriminate and inclined to reduce everything – including human beings and their reproductive capacity – to the status of commodities, things that can be bought, sold, traded or stolen.'

Citing Appadurai (1986) on the unstable 'commodity candidacy' of things, she sees this trade as making real a long-held fear that human bodies themselves, rather than merely the products of their labour, are open to the exploitation of the market.

However, it seems that in citing deficiencies in the global economy as responsible for human bodies emergence as commodities, she misses one of the strengths of Appadurai's approach. That is, she links a moral commentary generated in one particular context, to all contexts in which 'commodities' might be found. Appadurai on the other hand, is unwilling to view commodities as aspects of only one form of exchange. Whereas Radin is explicit in pinning the word down, ('"commodity"', as I use it is a conception based in modern market society', 1996: xii), Appadurai leaves the definition open:

'Let us start with the notion that a commodity is anything intended for exchange' (1986: 9), and therefore avoid

'[t]he exaggeration and reification of the contrast between gift and commodity...' (1986: 11; and see 16 on 'indigenous social forms of commoditization').

The suggestion that commodities, (things intended for exchange), can exist in societies which are not fully capitalist, allows us to think again about the interest people on the Rai Coast have in narratives of organ extraction, without prejudging the moral context of their concerns. The concern Rai Coast people have with liver thieves may in fact be nothing to do with the erosion of social values and social cohesion, because, of course, things are produced for exchange there all the time. And these things are explicitly used as, and spoken of, as substitute bodies. That is, they are commensurate with persons and parts of persons. Bride wealth and child compensation payments among Nekkimi speakers take the form of a *palem* (see Leach 2000). This construction of food and wealth items is specifically referred to as a 'body', one which is 'eaten' by affines in return for their loss of a body in marriage, and the subsequent work they do in producing their sisters' children as social persons through recognition in exchange. The parts of this construction (*palem*) are named as body parts, and recipients state they have 'eaten' their sister, therefore relinquish claims upon her.

Scheper-Hughes describes a form of alienation in which violence is done to the producer, quite literally where organ theft is concerned. The 'producer' is devalued, emphasis being placed on the value of the thing they produce, or become, as commensurate with other commodities which are similarly extracted from their producers. Value, as the Lockian tradition assumes, passes from the labour power of the producer into the thing itself. It is this transmission which makes that thing commensurate with other physical

manifestations of labour power, and therefore a 'candidate' for commodity exchange. This is in turn based on a notion of the individual as possessor of him or her self, and thereby the products of their own labour. Strathern argues forcefully against the application of this concept of 'possessive individualism' in the analysis of Melanesian sociality (1988: 157 *passim*). Her argument is based on evidence that Melanesian persons are 'dividual' entities, who embody the work and substantial inputs of others. These others maintain a claim over the person, and often 'cause' then to act in recognition of these claims. Production is not simply the outcome of intention and labour by a single individual. And it may also be said that persons do not 'own' their own bodies in any straightforward sense.

At this half way point in the paper, I set out where I will take the argument from here. In what follows, a focus on two key terms in this process (violence, and extraction), demonstrate the logic of commodity production in *this* sense is inappropriate to an analysis of the meaning of organ extraction narratives on the Rai Coast. Moving then into the discussion of 'commodification' as a perspective on such societies, I will suggest that by locating value in relationships, and not in things, people on the Rai Coast, and in other parts of Melanesia, do not view the process of extraction as one which devalues or permanently removes subjectivity from the person who has been acted upon.<sup>1</sup> It is our focus on the object itself as the locus of value which confuses us here. I contend that for people on the Rai Coast, things are of little interest other than as the traces of what is valued – that is the capacity to extract things from others – or relationships. In fact, Hirsch (1995) suggests that Fuyuge people living in the Wharton Ranges of Central Province (Papua New Guinea) coerce others into extracting things from them, in order that their capacity to produce is recognized. I will suggest that in a similar sense, narratives which appear to be evidence of a horrific process of extraction based on an unequal power relation between peripheral Rai Coast people, and whites as representatives of global capitalism, may be interpreted in a different way by those people themselves.

I then look at the possibility that cash is viewed as something that needs investigation for what it can tell Rai Coast people about the productive relations white people have among themselves. Paradoxically, it may appear to them that money does not have enough extractive effect for them to believe it is really at the basis of white peoples' social and economic relations.

I conclude by suggesting that the questions Sorang put to me, and the narratives of liver thieves, demonstrate a continuity in the investigative strategies of these people. Rather than devalue these strategies as 'cargo cult', or talk them up as resistance to commodification, we might look at them as contemporary indigenous investigation, based in their own social theory, of the society and economy of white people. While, as Turner (1986) shows, this might amount to an expression of dissatisfaction with capitalism, the critique may not be resistance to what we consider exploitation, but rather of the unproductive nature of an economy where a focus on the value and exchangeability of things does little to achieve the purposes of social reproduction.

<sup>1</sup> Given that the extraction of livers causes death, it seems surprising that the questions I was asked did not take the form of 'why are our people being killed?' Instead the emphasis on the process of extraction, uses, and movement of the livers seems to lend weight to my argument.

### *Violence and extraction in Rai Coast kinship*

My objection to the position adopted by Scheper-Hughes is that violence and extraction are not just aspects of capitalist expansion and commodification. They are in fact a regular and necessary part of the productive and reproductive activities of many people in a variety of non-capitalist settings, including Rai Coast people. As such to view these aspects of global capital uncritically as 'anti-social', denies the specificity of the social context, and therefore the possibility of understanding the perspective Rai Coast people have on things, and relations of production and exchange.

In the hamlets where I lived, everyone agreed that no woman would ever marry a man unless she was forced into doing so. This coercion was possible through the widespread practice of love magic. The background to this practice is that marriage is virilocal in small, close knit, hamlet groups. Kinship, and therefore hamlet organization, are based on 'cognatic' principles. Ties of bodily substance are expressed in the idiom of siblingship. This is achieved through co-residence. Lawrence describes kinship in this area as 'double unilineal', or cognatic (Lawrence 1965: 200), establishing extremely complex principles, and exclusions from those principles, to account for the 'flexibility' and 'individual choice' in residence and association (Lawrence 1984). Complexity is apparently generated through an individuals choice between descent, co-residence, ritual co-operation, shared totem, bush god, and so on, in making the associations which Lawrence calls 'security circles' (*ibid.*).

The situation is perhaps not as complex as all that, with fairly simple principles based on co-residence and shared labour generating connection which are spoken of in idioms of kinship. Genealogical transmission of substance, however, is not a focus in this system (Leach 1997). Be this as it may, sibling sets are the archetypal kin group, connected through shared labour and drawing the substance of their bodies from a common named area of land (after which this social group takes its name). Marriage entails removal from this residential group. This movement is a source of anxiety to young women, who are unsure of their position and treatment in the marital hamlet, and a source of anger to young men, who through the process, lose a sibling, and her subsistence labour, from their collective identity.

Thus the practice of love magic is a fraught affair. Unmarried women avoid potential marriage partners who may be able to pass them some item containing the stuff. Despite its ubiquity, people do not accept other people's use of the practice. Married women will often swear bitterly, remembering their husbands trickery in causing them to come to his hamlet. Love magic is seen explicitly as an act of violence, an extractive process whereby a woman is moved by force from her kinsmen, against her will, but inexorably.

Violence is seen as the appropriate response to love magic as well. That is, a woman's brothers can be sure of the source of their sister's new desire to be with a man, for there are no circumstances under which she would want to be with him were it not for *his* use of love magic. It is customary then for brothers to vent their anger at what is perceived as a loss, on the perpetrator. Men always fight when a woman falls in love in the hamlets where I lived, the extension of this being the understanding that the fight gives the pro-

spective husband a right to marry the girl over whom he has suffered violence. The practicalities of the logic ensure that once recognition of the girl's desire is made, nothing could stop her removal anyway.

Now it may be argued that there are differences of kind in the violence associated with capitalist extraction, and the extraction which precedes marriage on this part of the Rai Coast. Violence has a different outcome, one might say. Capitalist relations of extraction remove things from their producers for a general market, rather than for specific incorporation. But my concern here is with the description of the process itself. Seeing all violence and extraction as part of global capitalism is to miss the specificity of particular social processes.

In a sense then, violence is an essential precursor to marriage, as is the case in many other places.<sup>1</sup> This is most clearly seen by the fact that this confrontation itself establishes the conditions for marriage even if they were not previously present. It is often the case that a man will perform love magic on (that is marry) a 'close' relative – someone who falls within the designated distance of 'cross cousin at the third generation removed'. In this case, marriage results in the physical separation of hamlets and the conceptual (terminological and practical) separation of siblings into affines. The violence and physical separation appear to provide the conditions appropriate to a relationship of affinity and exchange here. Marriage turns relations of co-operation and sharing into relationships based on extraction, distance, and exchange. That is, through marriage, reciprocal exchange relations are established, and wealth is produced to meet the demands of affinal kin. Children are an aspect of this productivity-through-combination, and while they gain their bodies and growth from their paternal kin and lands, they force social recognition of their development into adulthood through further exchanges with affinal kin.

It is in *this* context of separation and affinity that two aspects of my argument come into focus. The first is the now obvious point that violence and extraction are at the core of productive and reproductive relations of exchange. Production for exchange and procreative activity are not conceptually separable in Nekgini cosmology. Thus subsistence production in a sibling set specifically avoids cross-sex relations of production which use procreative idioms. These idioms are employed in production by married couples and their supporting patrilineal kin, (which have the nominal motivation of production for exchange rather than subsistence). Eating one's own pigs, like marrying one's own children here is described as *ne naki* (consumption of oneself). Garden food is of course grown for subsistence, but ideally, like producing children, ones' needs to consume these products will be met through exchange. There is certainly complaint at the coercion and loss involved in marriage. There is also an element of fear and hostility between affines. Neither of these amount to a critique of the practices to which they refer, they are not resistance to that process, but acknowledgement of the contingency and dangers of social existence to properly constituted. This makes the analogous processes described in organ theft narra-

<sup>1</sup> See Gow & Harvey (1994). Perhaps the best known from Melanesia is the account provided by Meggitt on the Mac Enga:

'We marry the people we fight'. (Meggitt 1965, 1977).

tives look rather less obvious in their meaning.

The second point to make here is that the origin of both *the form of relationship* we gloss as 'marriage' (the basis of production and procreation), *and* the separation from white people and their powers of creation, are constructed as the *same* moment by Nekgini speakers. This needs some explanation.

In a myth which Nekgini speakers describe as 'our most important and basic knowledge' (*as stori bilong mipela*), the origin of sexuality, marriage, and exchange, are linked to a violent separation in the original family. This occurred when a younger brother incised reproductive organs on his sister, angering his elder brother and resulting in a fight which eventually took the younger brother away. The result of this separation was the loss (to the Rai Coast) of the younger sibling, who became the ancestor of white people.

When people make the claim that this myth is their most basic knowledge, I believe they express the surety that the original mythical unity of an unproductive and ungendered sibling set was necessarily rent asunder by violence over a gendering act, an act of producing difference in itself. This is mirrored today in the practice of love magic and the fight which follows. From this initial difference flowed the other differences existent in the world. That is, between the genders, between animal species, and significantly here, between people of different places (including white people and Rai Coast people). My interpretation here runs counter to the more usual take on this story (see Pomponio 1994), that it is a story *about* the loss of western goods. It could only really be that if it was also about their genesis in the form of sociality that has resulted in a separation between whites and Rai Coast people. Social life is the process whereby persons are separated in order that they may reproduce through recombination in marriage and exchange.

The circulation of wealth in this context is all about the capacity one has to extract items from others. Things do not hold value outside the relations in which they are recognized. It is rather the traces that the movement of objects leave that speak of a relationship based on the capacity to produce and reproduce. It is, in other words, the relationships which demonstrate a capacity that are the focus of exchange, not the things exchanged. As Hirsch puts it,

'...we should realise that the display of wealth items [in Fuyuge] and their tallying are social acts which first and foremost make visible not an economy of value as such but the lineaments of a social field for which our term economy is a euphemism' (Hirsch 1995: 66).

Now if reproduction and exchange are based in a violent form of extraction, this is mirrored in other parts of Melanesia by the obvious gearing of productive activity to the demands made by others (A. Strathern 1971 for example, for overview see M. Strathern 1988). Yet it is not only production that may be viewed as an aggressive response to the extractive demands of others. *Consumption too* is, in certain areas, a matter of coercion. For example,

'In Hagen, the point at which food is consumed is the point at which work is recognized: what is significant is that recognition is a specific act. The consumer may be passive, in the sense that he or she is witness of another's agency, but becomes thereby a vital 'person' or reference point for that agent' (*ibid.*, 293).

Ethnography from the island of Tanga, off the coast of New Ireland, helps make the

point about the dangers of consumption, forcefully. Foster tells us that, [t]he Tanga word for 'giving' (*fen*) elides a causative prefix (*fa*) with the word *en*, which means, literally, 'to eat'. Giving thus evokes and analogises the act of causing (others) to eat (1990b: 438). While feeding has connotations of nurture for Tangans, it is also an act which puts the person in danger. For the connotations of eating itself are with being consumed.

'Causing others to eat (...) need not always evoke the positive connotations of nurture. From a different perspective, causing others to eat takes on an aggressive and agonistic dimension...' (*ibid.*).

In Tanga mortuary feasts, the lineage of the deceased is closely associated with consumption. This link is established forcefully by their dependence on others during the mourning rites where they are fed by other matrilineages. The association of consumable (food) items is one with potential decomposition. In Tanga myth, sex, death, and eating, are linked. They 'logically entail each other'. In the original matriline, there was no death, but asexual regeneration. However, much as in the Rai Coast myth outlined above, this changes when a male member of the matriline calls his 'grandmother', 'wife', establishing social differentiation, and also the beginning of sexual regeneration. By using an affinal term, he locates her outside the autonomous matrilineage. Sex and death are linked processes of consumption, Foster tells us, and are further associated with feeding. That is, gluttony (*en sak*) is seen as uncontrolled consumption, and those who exhibit this characteristic are seen as physically associated with impermanent, soft and decomposing food stuffs. It is the quality that the relationships give to the person, and not the stuff being eaten, that is the focus here. There is ambiguity then, in feeding others on Tanga. While the epitome of a nurturant relationship, it also potentially implies force feeding.

'Acts of donation modelled on this ambiguity define the relevant participants [in mortuary exchanges] equally as reciprocal nurturer, and as hierarchically related consumers and non-consumers.'

The process of mortuary feasting turns the deceased's lineage from consumers (constructed as 'consumable' relative to other lineages; Foster 1990b: 433) of the nurture of others, and from the association with death, into permanent 'collective individuals' who feed and thus potentially 'consume' others. This movement is achieved through exchanges progressively associating the lineage with durable shell wealth, and not with consumable food.

The exchange of consumable food for shell disks in this sequence of feasts allows the matrilineage to 'finish' their dead, and Foster argues, construct an image of the lineage as permanent, almost capable of asexual autonomous regeneration which involves no consumption, and therefore no decay and death. The word for shell disk, perhaps unsurprisingly then,

'refers to more than just shell valuables. *Fat* denotes stones and rocks. Similarly *fat* implies qualities of hardness, durability and rootedness (...) Eating food archetypally realises the idea of consumption, the related act of abstaining or not eating food realises the idea of perdurance' (Foster 1990b: 441).

I want to point out something obvious, but nevertheless important for my argument.

That is the fact that cooked food and pigs are only *contextually* substitutable for shell wealth. In fact, that substitution establishes an asymmetrical relation between lineages on Tanga. The fact that this is an impermanent situation, and that a lineage which has 'finished' its dead is obliged to help other lineages finish theirs, makes it obvious that it is the lineages themselves as 'collective individuals', oscillating between nurtured/consumed and nurturer/consumer, which are compared. The objects which the exchanges comprise are substitutable only in the wider context of ongoing social reproduction. To reintroduce the theme of commodification and money, I quote from Foster on the commensurability of these objects.

'[T]hese qualities [perdurance] are not simply fortuitous features of shells, the value of which rests on some other circumstance, such as scarcity. Instead, durability and permanence are inseparable from the recognition of the objects as valuable. I once asked a man to choose hypothetically among a pig, a shell disk, and cash. The man chose the shell disk on the grounds that cash would be 'eaten' or spent, and likewise, the pig would be consumed' (Foster 1990: 441).

Cash, then, is not necessarily substitutable for other forms of wealth on Tanga. That is, our ideas of money as congealed value, and therefore substitutable across contexts, does not hold. While pigs and garden food may be exchanged for shell disks in the context of affinal debt and mortuary ritual on Tanga, they are not equivalent in all contexts. Commensurability is dependent of the relationship in which the debt has been established. Their value as 'commodities' in Appadurai's sense (after Simmel, of being measured against other things) is only apparent from a certain perspective.

### Commensurability

While conducting fieldwork, I was asked to make a collection of contemporary artefacts for the British Museum and the National Museum in Port Moresby (Papua New Guinea's capital). This I undertook, after people in the hamlets in which I lived, agreed. I was unable to make a complete collection, however, as certain durable items (shells, dogs teeth ornaments) were refused to me. People would not accept the cash I offered for them.<sup>1</sup> Now I do own items of this wealth, but these were given to me in other contexts. I believe that people's unwillingness to sell *palieng/pe bilong timbuna* (ancestor's pay), as Foster suggests, was not a function of their scarcity, or even of some formal property of the things, as he may seem to imply. The difficulty was the incommensurability of what I had to offer. That is, cash, as on Tanga, is considered a consumable. Despite its obvious importance elsewhere (for whites and town dwellers), it was not highly valued by Nekkini speakers in 1994-1995 in the context of making a collection. That is, its ubiquity and impermanence made it, like garden food produced for substance consumption, something

1. It has been suggested (Paul Alexander, personal communication) that I was perhaps not able to offer enough cash for these items. However, on further investigation during 1999, Nekkini speakers I asked confirmed my interpretation by explaining that these items could not be substituted for cash because of their unique position in the highly valued initiatory practices which people undergo. Cash would just not serve the same purpose, it was asserted. It is apparently not constituted in the same relations at present.

which was necessary, but unsuitable for some kinds of exchange. This attitude was epitomized in a public meeting to dress down some young people who had been using bad language (*tok nogud*) in the hamlets in which I lived. In one case considered, a woman had addressed her father in law using foul language. At the meeting, the village elders and Government representative (*komiti*) 'charged' those responsible. In doing so, they stipulated that the payment would be made in *palieng*, that is, durable 'ancestral' items of payment. Cash was not 'strong enough', and 'too easily obtained', allowing young people to '*bikhed long moni*' (behave badly from [on the back of] money).

What perhaps becomes clear in considering these examples together is that

'[v]alue lies less in the objects themselves than in what the objects reveal about the acts of [the] people that are brought into focus.' (Hirsch 1995: 66).

If objects are defined as exchangeable or substitutable in the act of transacting them, then value is not necessarily agreed upon as commensurate. Rather acknowledgement is made of the other parties *ability* to produce an object, or succumb to a debt. The equivalence is in establishing capacities, not in the value attached to an object. *Palieng* then for Nekkini leaders are not 'more valuable' or 'scarcer' than cash, although they may be these things. What they 'do', is demonstrate an ability on the part of the donor to recompense another with equivalent value. Cash does not apparently demonstrate this capacity, it does not transfer anything which is produced through the kind of work which makes the capacity for extending relationships, apparent. But this in turn implies that valuables are not defined by their producers, their value is not agreed upon (my sister/your wife) but produced as a coercive act on the part of the person who desires them. Money itself was not capable of eliciting *palieng*. The fact that in other circumstances I was given *palieng* 'for nothing' perhaps demonstrates Nekkini speakers faith in their own elicitory capacity.

What all this boils down to is that equivalence is recognized in the capacity to produce, and therefore also to elicit production from others. It is this that is compared in Hagen *moka* exchanges (A. Strathern 1971), in the Fuyuge *gab* rituals which Hirsch presents (Hirsch 1994), in Tangan mortuary sequences, and in Nekkini marriage transactions. Extraction of the very conditions of life and social continuity (relationships and reproductive potential) is at issue in these practices, and they are all in their way, predicated on acts of violence and coercion.

Now in the light of this, 'livers' (organs) are no more 'valuable' to their possessors than anything else they might 'own'. What is clear is that terms such as 'ownership' are at best euphemistic. If a Tangan matriline is constituted as viable though coercing others into giving up their durability, that is recognising another as 'consumable, against their will and self definition, then the coerced matriline has a 'legitimate expectation that the hosts will acquiesce, in turn, in future similar projects' (Foster 1990b: 444). It is not the shells themselves that are valuable, but the capacity to elicit them when necessary in exchange for feeding. A Nekkini hamlet that is coerced into losing a sibling in marriage is in a similar position. By losing a part of themselves, they not only demonstrate the ability to produce, but leave the definition of the value of that production to others. In return they maintain the expectation that they will in turn extract from others things they might not

want to give. It is the relationships themselves that are valued, and the objects or persons that make them apparent. Power here is evinced in the extraction from others of the items needed to complete, however briefly, the image of the whole (person, hamlet, matriline).

Exchange makes an uneasy equivalence between persons or groups. I submit then that the interest of Rai Coast people in the narratives of organ extraction are the possibility that an equivalence is at last being made between white people and Rai Coast people. It is not the nature of the objects themselves that excites the imagination here. That is for the coercing party to decide. While it would be quite true to suggest the form of the exchange (violent extraction) catches their attention, it does so because it is correct to a productive relationship based on a form of equivalence. Equivalence between persons implies their substitutability, and also the potential to have an equivalent effect in the future. The fact that white people show themselves as susceptible to the productions of Rai Coast dwellers implies they ought in turn, be susceptible to their extractive practices.

In this light, it is hard to see how such narratives speak of 'commodification'. Rather, in pursuing the meaning of the narrative, Rai Coast people look to interpret the actions of white people as extractive. I doing so, they do not make the parallel move to imagining the object – the liver or whatever – contains the value that is sought in the transaction. Livers themselves can not be commodities in any sense here, because it is not their commensurability that is being judged.

[T]he object is less a unit of meaning and more a means of facilitating others to make capacities visible and thus constitute meaning in particular creative contexts' (Hirsch 1995: 71-72).

### Conclusion

Our concerns as social scientists looking at globalization are often with morality. The myriad refractions of modernity, and the now commonplace observation that commodification is not a unilineal or predictable process, has not yet convinced us that the process is not an inexorable one, nor that it is anything other than the imposition of a form of disembedded and exploitative economic relations on less robust (more egalitarian) moral economies. The shock we face in looking at the process in parts of Melanesia is in the realization that there is nothing unique in capitalism's emphasis on extraction, or on the potential detriment this extraction may be seen to do to the producer. In the material presented here, analogues of our moral commentary on market expansion and the relations of production in capitalism are to be found, not in plantations, or in labour camps, but in highly valued, highly developed, practices of social reproduction. If anything, it appears that the extraction inherent in wage labour and primary production of cash crops is insufficient to convince Rai Coast people that these things are the sources of white peoples wealth and power. In anticipating the time when 'real' demand will be made on them, they generate fear as to what those demands may look like. However, within that fear may be contained the anticipation that in return, they may start to make some demands themselves. And was this not always what 'cargo cults' were about?

Appadurai writes,

'[d]emand is thus the economic expression of the political logic of consumption and thus its basis must be sought in that logic' (1986: 31).

The demand here is not for consumption, or for things at all, but for relationships. Coercion is a condition for production here. Thus inequality in production for the market economy (manifest in the alienation of things from their source for use elsewhere) is unproblematic. One suggestion then might be that the narratives of organ extraction anticipate a convergence of 'value', that is of production and recognition-through-extraction, in the bodies of persons. This would be very familiar to Rai Coast people.

At the heart of the matter here is not only a particular conception of violent extraction among Rai Coast people with whom I have worked, but also their conception of the body as a concrete social product. They conflate the realm of production and reproduction (Weiner 1978, 1980), whereas our practice, and a certain language of analysis arising from it, works on the basis of keeping these realms separate. Our separation allows commoditized relations to rule over the productive realm, while the reproductive realm of the family is secluded from such commodification (cf. Radin 1996). My argument here revolves around the fact that in this instance, my language of description must take into account that for Rai Coast people in 1994-1995 and 1999, this distinction into two realms remains unacceptable. While we take for granted that this distinction is natural, a liberal fear equates its collapse with the diminution of human dignity, identity and self respect. Commodification threatens an attack on 'the inalienable humanity of persons' (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999a, cf. 1999b). But where the body is a concrete social product, others' claims may be made in terms of that very body, and using a currency which makes analogies between productive and reproductive processes, real.

Commensurability then may not be found between objects (as in wealth items for cash, or indeed garden food and pigs for wealth items) out of the context of particular relationships. Commensurability is between persons, one reflecting the other's capacities in their demands. As Hirsch shows for Fuyuge, making others demand something from one is not always to adopt the subordinate position. It is in itself an act of coercion, predicated on achieving a form which others find irresistible. When Rai Coast people look for commensurability, they find the form that white people offer to be unsatisfactory. How could money, as it is known to them, be commensurate with persons? In a sense then, by asking such questions, they are engaging in what Wagner (1975: 31) terms 'a reverse anthropology'. Wagner's argument depends on a contrast between 'our' desire to make sense through contextualising the unfamiliar, and what he sees as Melanesians' practices which deconstruct or open up unfamiliar forms to find the relations that compose (produced) them. In Melanesia, bride wealth makes apparent the relations which constitute the body of the bride as its distribution traces these contributions. Context is internal to the make up of forms, not supplied as external relations which place forms in a system of meaning. Exchange relations then make apparent a social theory. The processes which make social life possible are made explicit in the movements of wealth between, say matriline on Tanga, or hamlet groups on the Rai Coast.

The suggestion is then that cargo cults may be seen as 'reverse anthropology', precisely because they do not produce 'culture' as an explanation for white people's wealth.

What they try and replicate are the form of relationships which constitute white people themselves. One mistake in the analysis of cargo cults is to imagine that 'cargo' itself is the desired outcome. The practices are better represented as attempts to decompose and analyse the relations between white people in which cargo (money) figures so strongly. In this sense, Sorang's questions are consistent with the interest the people of this area have long had with analysing white people.

But the question would then become, what does money do for white people, does it lie at the heart of white peoples' relationships, and those that are part of the everyday life of people in towns? Perhaps this was the source of the questions which tried to locate the stuff at the heart of my family relationships. The mistake on my part was to view this as a criticism of the commoditized relationships white people establish in places such as the Rai Coast. Is it not equally mistaken to view the narratives and questions surrounding organ extraction as anything other than an investigation of the possibility that white people might actually open themselves to real relationships of coercion and extraction, to complete the circle started by the loss of the mythic younger sibling, and establish a new form of productivity which included what Rai Coast people do, rather than continuing to exclude them?

Of course, as Turner argues in relation to Taussig's analysis of devil beliefs among Cuaca valley peasants in Colombia, there is a critique of capitalism here. Rai Coast people are dissatisfied with their relations with white people. The role of cash may not be clear to them, they are yet to discover the context in which it has value. This could, from our perspective, be explained as a result of the alienation inherent in market relations, and its contrast in Rai Coast people's practices which acknowledge the sources of production through ongoing relations. But doing so would re-establish the kind of artificial dichotomy between embedded and disembedded economic systems which has been so criticized of late. Instead, one can look to the actual expression and context of that dissatisfaction, and thereby give some platform to a perspective otherwise obscured by our social, moral, and economic assumptions about commodification.

## Chapter 14.

# The commodification of King Chulalongkorn:

His portraits, their cultural biographies, and the enduring aura of a Great King of Siam

by Irene Stengs

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

King Chulalongkorn the Great, alias King Rama V, was King of Siam<sup>2</sup> from 1868 until 1910. In the past decade a cult has evolved around this King. Throughout the Thailand, but in particular in the urban areas, the King is extensively worshipped. The image of the King, mostly in the form of portraits and statuettes, is everywhere, in offices, restaurants, shops, private homes, temples, spirit shrines, railway stations and other public buildings.

King Chulalongkorn is famous for two major achievements in particular. Firstly, he modernized archaic Siamese society. Secondly, he successfully managed to maintain the country's independence in the era of colonization. For these two achievements the King is said to have determined Siamese history amidst contemporary processes of globalization. During the King's reign many of the changes associated with late 19th century modernization were introduced. He took the initiative for Thailand's railway infrastructure, educational system, telephony, waterworks, and a new judicial system. He introduced Western art, architecture and medicine. Government and civil service were drastically reorganized

<sup>1</sup> The material for this paper was collected during my PhD field research on the Cult of King Chulalongkorn the Great, which was conducted between September 1996 and December 1997, and in October/November 1998. The research was funded by the Programme on Globalization and the Construction of Communal Identities of the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO). I want to thank Jeroen Beets, Wim van Binsbergen and Jan Kerckhoven for their useful comments.

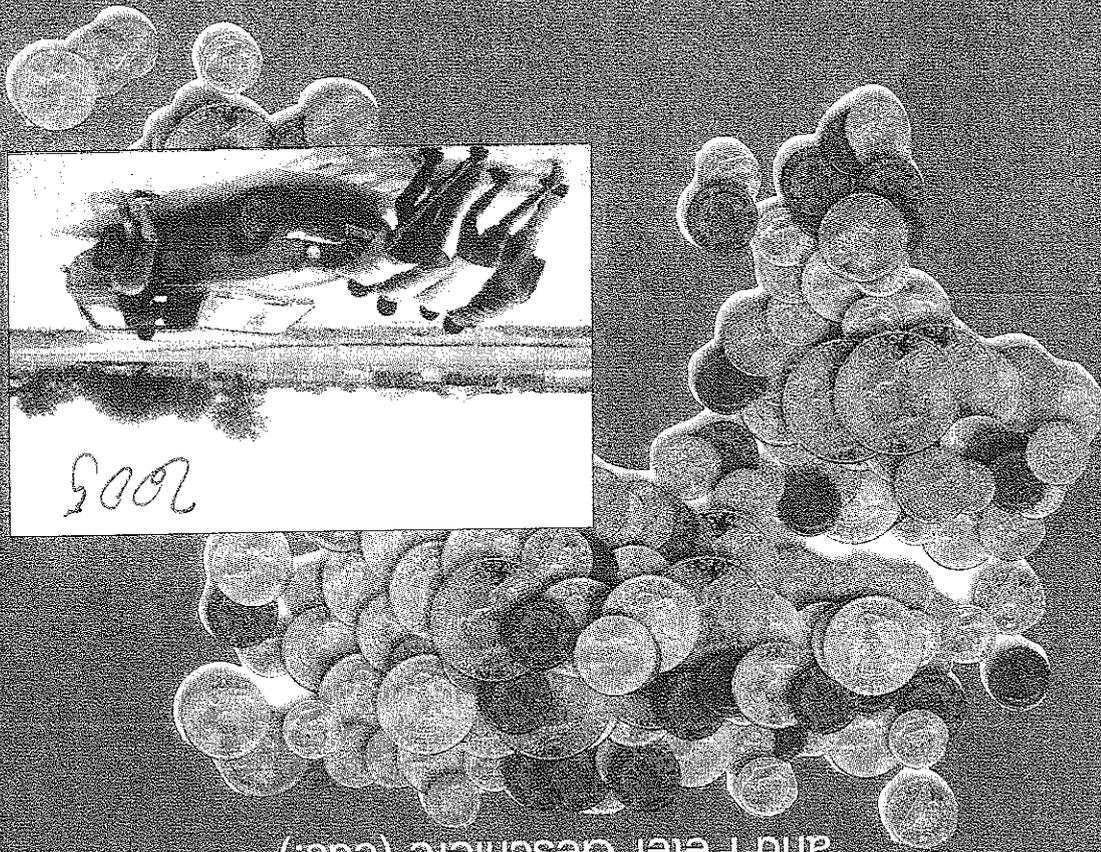
<sup>2</sup> Siam was formally renamed Thailand in 1939 when Phibun Songkhram was Prime Minister. The country became Siam again in 1944 under a new prime minister (Pridi Phanomyong). In 1947 Phibun Songkhram took over government again, and the country's name has been Thailand since.

# Commodification

Things, Agency, and Identities

(*The Social Life of Things* Revisited)

Wim van Binsbergen  
and Peter Geschiere (eds.)



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