BEING AND BECOMING:

RITUAL AND REPRODUCTION IN AN ISLAND MELANESIAN SOCIETY

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Accepted 18. 9. 87

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Adelaide
Department of Anthropology
May 1985
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In this thesis I have examined the corpus of public ritual performed on Tabar. In Chapter Two I explored the resilience of this ritual system. It is a resilience which is remarkable in the face of the extent of Tabar exposure to the West and in view of the demands which ritual production places on its participants. In the first weeks of my fieldwork I went on a tour of this island electorate with the newly elected Member for Tabar in the Provincial Assembly. Speaking to meetings of his electorate he spoke of the need for a commitment to Development, and he remarked in one speech:

'If you continue to hold festivals you will not have time to spend developing our place. Our school's, already delapidated, will fall down; our children will not pass the high school entrance exam; aid posts will stop working...People on Tabar spend too much time and energy on feasts'.

In this thesis I have sought to elucidate the importance of ritual in the lives of the people of Tabar. Ritual indeed is essential work in this society. For many people ritual is as necessary in their lives as gardening and the work of subsistence. Thus, whilst I argued in Chapter Two that the key to this ritual system's resilience lay in the flexibility of both costa and ritual production, it is important also to stress that the resilience is critically predicated on a high level of commitment to the premises which underlie the rituals themselves.

The base line is that the production and reproduction of this ritual corpus enables the reproduction of a cosmic order in which people can live and reproduce themselves as human beings, distinct from other animal beings. As it is, the impact of the taro blight, since
contact, is ascribed to the loss of taro magic. People see the arrival of Christianity as a positive development, on the whole, for it has curtailed (but not wiped out) the harmful utilization of supernatural powers in, for example, sorcery. Christianity and pacification are perceived to have made relations between people safer. As a neighbour once remarked,

'in the old days my son [then aged 7 years] would never have gone to a feast. The power and maliciousness of all those kalengo would have threatened him - anything could have happened to him. But now sorcery and malicious attacks have been reduced so I don't worry if he goes'.

Yet at the same time, as I have shown, sudden death or illness remain phenomena which are related to these very forces.

Such associations are predicated, as is this ritual system, on a particular understanding of the world and how (in general terms) it works. In that view human beings help to reproduce themselves and that world. They engage in this process not simply as embodied participants in the 'here and now' realm of mortal existence. After death the body may corrupt, but the metaphysical aspect of person survives to become an ancestor who can be engaged in the process of reproducing the material preconditions of human existence. Ancestral spirits and their nurturing powers are not lost at death, rather they are gained in the long and complex rituals I have referred to as the Death and Malenga sequences. They become one of the important resources which mortal people can tap in their lives to bring sun and rain, to help them engage the fertility of their land and the fertility of their bodies.

Whilst certain ritual experts (weather magicians etc.) may have clearer and more detailed conceptions of the nature of the cosmos and the forces at work within it, most Tabars view the world as
one in which a number of powers exist and have real consequences on their lives. The particular relationships between these forces is not precisely known by most people. The fabar cosmos is not, it appeared to me, a hierarchically organized one—except perhaps that, for many, the Christian God is God over all. Yet even he (for many), is seen as lord over a world of wild bush, shark, and ancestral spirits.

In my exploration of this ritual corpus I have given prominence to a number of themes. Here I wish to draw together important aspects in my discussion of these themes.

I have argued that each of the sequences in this ritual corpus is a rite of passage. At the most basic level beriberi is concerned with the coming into being of children. At the same time I have suggested that it is a rite of passage for the primipara, whose transition from preproductive to reproductive woman it celebrates and enacts. Adult, and reproductive, status was effected, for men, in the context of malanga ceremonies. The death sequence, I argued, is a rite of passage for the dead who are later also celebrated and transformed in malanga sequences. My view of the corpus as rite de passage was broader than this characterization suggests. I sought to examine the ontological transformations which these rituals effected. Thus I suggested that three broad states of existence were important. I suggested that in the 'here and now' realm of human interaction people live because of a critical nexus between their corporeal and metaphysical being. The beriberi festivals, among other things, celebrate the coming into corporeal and metaphysical being of the person. That sequence also celebrates and enacts their entry into the 'here and now' domain of human social interaction.
Death, I suggested, breaks the nexus between the metaphysical and corporeal aspect of person, and thus the basis of their ‘here and now’ existence. This nexus broken, the body decomposes and the person’s spirit is thus disembodied and freed. The Death sequence is not just concerned with the community work of repairing the breach in their ranks. It is also concerned with reconciling the dead person to the community and to their own disembodied metaphysical state. This is important because the spirits of the newly dead often remain in the vicinity of their corrupting body and the community. If unreconciled, they pose an implicit threat to the community. Yet, at the same time, ultimately the community needs their nurturant powers. It is the malleja, held after decomposition is finally achieved, which transforms these proximate named spirits into generalized ancestral spirits who will enable the community to engage the fertility of the land which has nurtured them all. Importantly, I showed that it is ritual which effects these crucial ontological transformations (upon which the reproduction of people and the cosmos are also contingent).

I suggested that the power of these rituals resides in their transformative nature. On the one hand these transformations are achieved in sacrifice. The crux of sacrifice, I suggested, exists in its transformations of the things which are sacrificed. What is crucial as well is the way in which such transformations encapsulate the ‘here and now’ domain and link them, in the context of sacrifice, to the cosmos and its forces more broadly. At the same time I examined the structure of ritual itself. I suggested that the structuring and restructuring of elements and relations within the ritual frame are powerfully engaged in the transformative task.
This can also be related to my second prominent theme: the media of performance and the ideas which dominate performance. For the ideas which dominate ritual performance are often presented through the organization of the ritual, in its form and re-formation. At the same time I related the media of ritual performance to the transformative task. I noted for example that comedy as the performative medium of beriberi, contingent as it is on the creative rearrangement of form, is an apt medium for the task of human procreation. Comedy in its form expresses the very transformative work that beriberi does.

Similarly, I examined both wailing and sacrifice in my discussion of the performance of the Death sequence. Wailing, I suggested, is expressive of the ontological transformations of the deceased person. At the same time it is a communicative medium between the living and the newly dead which is perceived to work. I also examined the media of malanga. In my discussion of malanga I went beyond the examination of these sculptures as 'plastic' forms. I suggested that they were reproductions which had reproductive power. Moreover I suggested that malanga are enlivened in ritual performance. Their 'sponsor' stands them up and gives them voice. The kalengo becomes 'the mouth' (mi nuz) and he and other performers animate these sculpted reproductions.

The success of all these ritual sequences is contingent on the performative involvement of both men and women. Tabar ritual is not the preserve of men, nor an area of life which men dominate. The transformative power of ritual is engaged only through the participation of both men and women. This is not to say that gender
disappears in ritual. On the contrary gender is critical in the structure and relations of ritual. Ritual and the engagement of its transformative powers are contingent on gender. In this work I have sought to elucidate how gender both structures and is structured in ritual. In addition I have sought to reveal how, in its form, media and concerns, tabar ritual entails reflection upon the nature of gender and the cooperative nature of the reproductive and transformative roles women and men play in the cosmological scheme of things.

This theme is in turn related to my exploration of the dynamic principles of social relatedness on Tabar. I have shown that social relatedness is established by two principal means. Procreative substances, on which conception is contingent, relate people. But at the same time relatedness is also 'rooted' in the land whose fecundity is engaged by ancestral spirits. It is food, produced on such land, which is a basis for the links of 'substance' which relate people to others. These two principles of social relatedness underpin a central dynamic of Tabar life. Until weaning, a persons closest links of substance are with their mother and her group. For, whilst conception was achieved by both male and female procreative substances, it is ones mother's own bodily substance which feeds ones growth from conception until weaning. This is why, say Tabars, at birth one becomes a member of matambu and kivavundi on matrilineal grounds. But should one be nurtured by food grown on ones father's land (or any other group) after weaning then one will, in time, become more closely related to them than to ones mother's group. It is under such circumstances that people may exercise their 'options' to the resources of ones father's group - to their ancestors, land, magic and malaga.
This dynamic tension is played out in ritual performance. In the beriberi sequence it is played out in the tug of war of the na pipyi. It is hardly surprising then that the na pipyi celebrates meaning. In other words this ritual tug of war takes place at precisely the time that the competition for relatedness begins. I showed that this competition for primary affiliation may persist until death. In Chapter Seven I discussed a 'tug of war' at the first feast in the death sequence of a woman who had never settled down for long anywhere. Her primary links of substance were thus not seen as clear cut. The 'tug of war' sought to resolve the issue of which group she was most closely related to. Underpinning the dispute was the larger issue of for which group would she become an ancestor and resource of power.

Thus though relatedness is a dynamic process for the duration of one's 'here and now' life, it must be finally reckoned at death. In malagga ceremonies one's ongoing relatedness to that group is reaffirmed in the reproduction of a sculpture which links one to the territory and people with which it is associated and reproduces.

The dynamic of these principles of relatedness has an impact both on everyday as well as ritual life. Kalengo for instance compete with others for co-residents. Their most important resource of attraction is land. Moreover, in ritual, changing calculations of relatedness are played out in performance. When a beriberi is held in one's 'neighbourhood' one must decide whether one is not (sufficiently) related to the primipara and her child; or related to them as 'Mother'; or as 'Father'. These calculations will determine whether one attends at all, and if one does, whether one cooks or decorates oneself to sing, dance and engage in its comedy.
Thus, whilst clearly gender structures everyday and ritual relations so too do distinctions of relatedness. Every Tabar ritual is predicated both on distinctions of gender and group affiliation. Thus this central dynamic of Tabar life is a prominent and dynamic aspect of the structure and performance of ritual.

I have sought through this analysis to elucidate central aspects of Tabar life. This has been contingent, I would argue, on the examination of the complete corpus of public ritual. Insofar as ritual, and the ideas it structures, stand in dialectical relation to the ideas and structures of everyday life, so too does any ritual and any sequence stand in dialectical relationship to all other rituals and sequences.

And whilst, as I noted at the beginning of this thesis, one's view of the world is arrived at piecemeal, ritual is a context in which one's gaze is directed through the emergent structure of the ritual, through its performative medium and through one's own engagement in it. As ethnographers cast their analytic gaze on ritual like light through a prism in order to elucidate broader aspects of cultural and human existence, so too are those engaged in ritual directed in particular ways to explore the multi-faceted prism of their culture and its world.