The Inversion of Tradition
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Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the American Anthropological Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/645034
Accessed: 16/03/2012 10:02

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Constructions of tradition that entail both claims about identity, nationalism, or ethnicity and renderings of history have become a central topic of anthropological and historical research. In the histories of rural Europe, the British Empire, contemporary Quebec, and the insular Pacific, and in many fourth world and minority movements, "inventions," "reinventions," or "objectifications" of tradition, culture, and community are now being identified and explored. In Pacific studies, the proliferation of work on tradition and custom shows no sign of faltering, and assumptions have clearly become more sophisticated. For instance, while some Pacific scholars and some of the contributors to the influential collection edited by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) often equated invention with inauthenticity, it is now emphasized that created identities are not somehow contrived and insincere, that culture is instead inevitably "tailored and embellished in the process of transmission," and that that process is "dynamic, creative—and real" (Linnekin 1990:161; cf. Jolly 1992). Following Wagner (1981), scholars have thus naturalized the artifice of invention.

While this shift marks a positive step, the debates might be productively extended in two further ways. It is still broadly presumed that objectifications of culture are likely to be affirmed and upheld by the peoples concerned; in contrast, in this article I draw attention to ambivalent and negative attitudes toward reified customary regimes. Second, despite the interest in colonial history that marks current work in historical anthropology, reifications of tradition have frequently been seen as cultural phenomena that stand essentially on their own. It's not that historical interactions with other populations, and particularly colonial experiences, are denied or left undiscussed; it is rather that these are not effectively integrated analytically. In this article I insist that self-representation never takes place in isolation and that it is frequently oppositional or reactive: the idea of a community cannot exist in the absence of some externality or difference, and identities and traditions are often not simply different from but constituted in opposition to others. Hence what is important is not so much the categorical fact that difference provides a foil for identity as the actual histories of accommodation or confrontation that shape particular understandings of others and thus determine what specific practices, manners, or local ethics are rendered explicit and made to carry the burden of local identity. There is no abstract sense in which certain features of a society or culture are important and will therefore be prominent in objectifications of that society or culture; rather, the process of choosing em-
blematic activities, dispositions, or material artifacts is indissociable from a history of encounters and from what is at issue in those particular encounters.

Hence I aim here not to review the diverse developments in the literature on tradition and identity but to draw these terms into a broad analysis of cultural objectification; I stress that cultural objectification is often a reactive process, and seek also to draw attention to a neglected dimension of the reifications of custom, indigenous ways, and tradition that have now been examined in such diverse contexts—from pagan enclaves in the otherwise Christian nations of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to assertions of minority identity in Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii. Despite the diversity of lines of interpretation, it has almost always been tacitly assumed that the people concerned have a positive attitude toward the reifications of indigenous tradition or custom that they present. That is, because emphasis has been placed on the role of such constructions in the affirmation or assertion of local identity, negative and ambivalent attitudes toward the customary or the traditional have remained largely invisible. For instance, Handler suggests that

\[\text{to meet the challenge of an outsider's denial of national existence, nationalists must claim and specify the nation's possessions: they must delineate and if possible secure a bounded territory, and they must construct an account of the unique culture and history that attaches to and emanates from the people who occupy it. [1985:211]}\]

The informing idea of many specific studies in the Pacific is similar: that political contest and affirmation have required an elaboration of identity. I do not dispute the correctness or the importance of this departure point, but it also seems crucial to recognize political contest within a national (or tribal) population, contest that is manifest not only in the process of selecting aspects of past heritage or present custom that are to be privileged in the construction of ethnic identity, but also in radical rejections of what is local and traditional. Once the scope of such valorizations has been recognized, their political and cultural significance seems considerable, both in apparently routine circumstances and in the politico-religious movements that have been of such interest to Pacific anthropologists and historians. My main point, then, is a very simple one: that if a set of meanings is objectified and named—as the custom of the place, or the Samoan way, for example—then it is possible to take a variety of stances toward that reification.

Much of the literature on tradition has, naturally enough, explored perceptions of the past and the significance of history for present identities. These issues are of less significance for the present analysis than the fact that formulations of contemporary identity are generally at issue; sometimes the intrinsic worth of local sociality, rather than its primordial or historical distinctiveness, is stressed. Placing constructions of custom, tradition, and local identity together may elide distinctions important in other contexts, but I suggest that it is fruitful insofar as the broader dynamics of such objectifications are exposed.

In this article I aim to sketch out some of these dynamics by ranging widely, and inevitably somewhat superficially, across examples from Pacific islands history; though I have described particular cases in greater detail elsewhere (Thomas 1991a, 1992), I aim here rather to establish the generality of the processes and to suggest something of their potential permutations. I argue that reactive objectification is a fundamental cultural process that proceeded in precolonial indigenous societies, facilitating mutual differentiation, but was transformed after those societies' contact with Europeans and underwent further development as the character of colonial encounters changed. I explore the ways in which the recognition of both others and selves made particular practices or customs emblematic; different encounters produced different referents for what was characteristic of a place or a people. The dynamic was thus at once particularizing and totalizing, in the sense that novel notions of whole ways of life or customary regimes were engendered, yet these ways or regimes were epitomized by certain customs or ethics, sometimes in the domain of economic or exchange practices, sometimes in sexuality and gender relations. The fact that these general constructions of customary ways can be in-
verted or negatively valorized as well as affirmed, I conclude, may have broad ramifications for the way anthropologists think about culture.

**objectification and opposition**

Posing these questions entails an interest in the investigation of culture that diverges from most received perspectives in cultural anthropology, in the sense that interpretation has until recently emphasized the position and resonance of particular meanings within totalities rather than the processes of explication provoked by cross-cultural contact and contest. That is, despite their great diversity, ways of talking about culture in anthropology have proceeded by relating particular metaphors enacted in ritual, mythic idioms, forms of behavior, and notions of relatedness to some more general sets of values, dispositions, key symbols, or structures. While the various forms of cultural analysis have clearly proved fertile in a number of ways, there is one form of difference that their theoretical differences have not refracted, one distinction that they have generally elided. In adducing a set of key tropes or structures, an interpreter perforce refers to diverse statements, acts, images, and narratives; cultural forms that have a certain implicit generality are analytically linked to enunciated propositions and intentional acts. There is a tendency, then, to suppress the difference between practices or ideas that are simply done or thought, that simply take place, and those that are set up as definite entities to be spoken of, reflected upon, and manipulated by people in the situation under consideration. The former—like any action or statement—always express, even if idiosyncratically, broader concerns, meanings, and social relations, but are not themselves regarded as symbolic entities or actors emblematic of a particular form of sociality. Practices that are substantivized or objectified do not necessarily have greater social effect, in some abstract calculus, than tacit constructions of agency and personhood or the deep structures of alliance and hierarchy, but they clearly do have quite different potential uses and implications.

In particular, objectified practices and social totalities can be seen to be manifest in each other. Outsiders and insiders alike may take an aspect of behavior, a dialect, a literary style, or a way of dealing with relatives to be emblematic of a way of life, a kind of locally distinctive sociality, the being of a people—a tribe, a migrant group, a colonized population, a class, the embattled peasantry of a region, or a gay subculture. The community that is imagined is not simply conceived of in its empirical complexity; its distinctiveness is understood, rather, through particular resonant practices and characteristics. In a dialectical process, the group and the particular practices are redefined as they come to connote each other.

We must thus understand objectification as a diacritical and indeed oppositional process: a variety of dominant and dominated groups reify the attributes of both others and themselves in a self-fashioning process (cf. Inden 1990:2–3 and passim). A concept of place, of here, of us, is thus likely to be what Reinhart Koselleck calls an "asymmetrical counterconcept." "With respect to individual names and forms of address, Koselleck points out that certain terms coincide with one’s self-recognition (mother/son) while others are applied disparagingly by one party to the other (old bag/layabout); similarly, collective names distinguishing “we” from “they,” applied unequally by one party to the other, “function to deny the reciprocity of mutual recognition” (1985:159, 160). Koselleck’s discussion of the semantics of oppositions of this kind focuses on well-known and fundamental instances from European history—Hellene/barbarian and Christian/pagan (see also Hall 1989; Hartog 1988)—but what he says also applies to formulations of identity on a more local scale in colonial contexts:

Concepts employable in a particularly antithetical manner have a marked tendency to reshape the various relations and distinctions among groups, to some degree violating those concerned, and in proportion to this violation rendering them capable of political action. [1985:162]

This argument draws attention to the cultural and ideological instability produced in particular encounters: a violating term of address (such as “primitive”) is, if its significance is recognized
by the party referred to, liable to be seized upon and inverted, or otherwise responded to, in a way that produces a new self-recognition and alternative construction of we-they distinctions.

If conceptions of identity and tradition are part of a broader field of oppositional naming and categorization, the question that emerges is not, How are traditions invented? but instead, Against what are traditions invented? Or, in general, how does the dynamic of reactive objectification proceed? In some contexts, the ways in which foreigners or colonizers are reified in indigenous vision may be influenced much more by existing local schemes than by the visitors themselves, if their presence and intrusions have been transitory; this tends to be true of early European contact in the Pacific. Where colonialism has had a more sustained and repressive impact, indigenous peoples may come to couch their identity and resistance in terms made available by the dominant: they celebrate and affirm what colonialist discourse and practice subordinate and denigrate (in Koselleck’s terms, they invert the values attached to the asymmetrical dualisms of the dominant [cf. Keesing 1987, 1989:25–30]). Even where the external impact has not drastically undermined local autonomy, prolonged and profound contact tends to generate a neotraditional culture that is organized primarily in novel and oppositional terms.

I will express these points more concretely through examples and will then proceed to show that the traditions or ways of life thus objectified are not uniformly affirmed: while the enduring value of the culture of the place may be asserted in the countercolonial practice of the dominant indigenous groups, this traditionalist discourse may itself be reactively opposed from within neotraditional society. As has been evident in European cultural critique at least since Montaigne, the facts of difference permit a relativistic and critical explication of one’s own culture, an explication that can take the form of a rejection of tradition. Such a rejection will consist, however, not in an absolute denial of a particular construction of identity, but rather in an inversion of the values attached to that identity—that is, in a valorization of what is other and foreign rather than of what is associated with one’s place.

**contact and externality: the conditions for objectification**

It seems quite appropriate to make the colonial process central to interpretive efforts in the history and anthropology of the Pacific, but we must also recognize the uneven and heterogeneous character of colonial entanglement and avoid the suggestion that cultural dynamism arising from intersocial contact occurred only after the Europeans arrived. To the contrary, there was clearly a great deal of local and long-distance exchange in Oceanic prehistory, and it is tempting to suggest that the striking fact of Melanesian cultural and linguistic diversity reflects some process of willful local differentiation and particularization. In certain areas neighboring groups have tended to develop and project values and practices that are mutually antithetical; while, for instance, the Baining in the interior of New Britain are often represented merely as the sort of extreme primitives one would expect to find deep in the jungle (see, for example, Klémersen 1965:142–190), their lack of ceremonial exchange, bridewealth, ranking, relatively formal leadership, and various other attributes might be seen as an oppositional response to the political complexity and elaborate shell money economy of the groups now known as the Tolai, who have encroached upon and threatened the Baining.

If argument about such processes in prehistory can never be more than highly speculative, reactive objectification can perhaps be identified more clearly in the case of the relationships between Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa. For at least the two centuries before Cook’s visits to Tonga in the 1770s, chiefly elites in these island groups exchanged spouses, various trade items, valuables, and skills such as canoe-building (for a characterization of these hierarchical exchange relations as an interisland prestige-goods system see, for example, Kirch 1984:237–242). While ethnohistorical documentation of the precise nature of early relations is insecure, Tongan influence appears to be manifest in features of Fijian political relationships as well as in many
material culture items, and there is no doubt that warriors, craft specialists, and others traveled back and forth (Clunie 1986). In this context, islanders developed the notions of fa’a Samoa, faka Tonga, and vakaviti—the Samoan, Tongan, and Fijian ways. Despite (or because of) the numerous cultural similarities between the three groups, particular practices mediated the expression of difference, and in the case of tattooing, the origin myths explicitly represent distinctions as a result of the inversion of the other:

Fijians account humorously for the Tongan practice of tattooing being confined to the men instead of the women. They say that the Tongan who first reported the custom to his countrymen, being anxious to state it correctly, repeated in a sing-song tone, as he went along, “Tattoo the women, but not the men; tattoo the women, but not the men.” By ill luck he struck his foot violently against a stump in the path, and, in the confusion which followed, reversed the order of his message, singing, for the rest of his journey, “Tattoo the men, but not the women.” [T. Williams 1858:1, 160]

Needless to say, Samoans and Tongans told various inversions of this story (Rivers 1914:II, 437). My point here is not that a reactive response actually produced the Fijian practice of female tattooing or the Tongan and Samoan practice of male tattooing; this is not impossible, but the historical causation of the pattern of variation is not known and might be explained in other ways. It does seem, however, that the myths make the opposition between Tongan and Fijian practices explicit and thus make those practices available as emblems for ethnic difference.

The Samoan historian Malama Meleisea has reacted sharply against the proposition (enunciated by Marxist sociologists) that constructs such as the “Samoan way” are merely reactive products of the colonial period (1987:16). He is justified, since the term fa’a Samoa was used precolonially, as he is in rejecting the broader implication that modern identities are inauthentic fabrications:

Because the Samoans conceived of fa’a Samoa as a framework for action based upon the social structure of the ‘aiga [descent group] and the nu’u [polity] and the authority of matai [titleholders] and fono [councils], new practices, ideas and goods could be accepted and incorporated into it so that either the system remained unchanged in its essentials, or else was not perceived to have changed fundamentally.

Meleisea is correct in stressing the incorporative character of local cultures, but his last two statements—which have quite different implications, obscured by the simplicity of “or else”—tendentiously pass over the fact that whatever meanings ideas like fa’a Samoa had in the 18th century are clearly very different from their meanings now: a way of phrasing and enacting identity in the interests of differentiating oneself (a Samoan) from others who are Fijians or Tongans perforce differs significantly in emphasis from an expression of difference from whites, who might be German colonists in the late 19th century or American tourists in the late 20th. The refiguring of content is apparent even in a passage Meleisea quotes from the missionary John Williams to establish that fa’a Samoa was a relevant concept in the 1830s: “The wives of the Tahitian teachers [Williams] had left in 1830,” Meleisea writes, “tried to teach the Samoan women to cover their breasts with cloth.” However, the women liked the cloth very well to put around their middles but they could not induce them to cover their persons of which they are exceedingly proud especially their breasts which are generally very large. They are continually wishing the teachers wives to lay aside their garments & “faasamoa” do as the Samoan ladies do, gird a shaggy mat around their loins, . . . anoint themselves beautifully with scented oil, tinge themselves with turmeric, put a string of blue beads around their neck & then faariaria [fa’alialia] walk about to show themselves. You will have, say they, all the Manaia, the handsome young men of the town loving you then. [J. Williams 1884 [1832]:117, cited in Meleisea 1987:16–17]

At issue in the encounter with the eastern Polynesian missionaries were the codes of dress and overt sexual restraint upon which the teachers and white missionaries had bestowed the burden of the difference between heathen and Christian. In this context, fa’a Samoa was not about Fijian tattooing or the permutations of Tongan and Samoan hierarchical etiquette. It was plainly about forms of dress and adornment and the license that those forms now appeared to signify. Similarly, in the precontact period the importance of kin group and polity, and of deference to
titular authority and traditional councils, could never have explicitly figured as Samoan custom, simply because a social world that appeared not to be structured by kinship, reciprocity, and hierarchy was not readily available or visible. Nor would a sense of the contingency of these forms of sociality have been prompted by the brief encounters with whites of the early 19th century; the manifest forms of hierarchy apparent in dress and authority on naval vessels (and to a lesser extent other ships) would, to the contrary, have encouraged the assumption that whites were ranked. Even if the Samoans recognized that there were fundamental differences between European customs and their own, these were obviously not salient to the encounter at the time of Williams' visits: local people did not tell the Tahitians to be fa’a Samoa by holding their own fono or installing their own matai. These shifts make it necessary to qualify Meleisea's legitimate rejection of the idea that tradition and identity are merely recent epiphenomena of colonialism: objectification and cultural juxtaposition did occur quite independently of colonialism, but their development over the colonial and postcolonial periods involved qualitative changes and distinct arenas of differentiation.

Colonial encounters were more consequential than precolonial contacts partly because differences between islanders and Europeans were far starker than differences from one Polynesian or Melanesian island to the next and thus prompted a more complex and totalizing recognition of indigenous ways as a whole, distinct from other possible wholes. Islanders encountered others not merely by being visited but also by traveling, opportunities which were provided by the earliest explorers and traders: on Cook's voyages islanders such as Tupaia visited other parts of indigenous Oceania (often assisting as interpreters and with barter arrangements), and while many of those who ventured into the temperate climates of Europe and North America died before returning, some, such as Omai, who caused such excitement in London, went and returned; once trade developed many others acted as crew and visited not only other islands (on which they occasionally deserted) but also places of white settlement such as Sydney and Asian ports such as Canton and Manila (Maude 1968:135). These travels heightened the consciousness both of similarities and specific differences among Pacific islanders and of more categorical differences from whites. While postmodernists have suddenly decided that we need to talk about cosmopolitanism and globalization, even in the 18th century many islanders had stepped outside their own societies and obtained vantage points upon their customary practices: their discourses if not their cultures were translocal and transposed.

Later, in the western Pacific, the ramifications of indentured labor (conducted from the 1850s on) were pervasive. Though some areas were virtually overlooked by recruiters, thousands of men and a much smaller number of women from various parts of Vanuatu (then the New Hebrides), the Solomons, and Papua New Guinea, among other places, worked on plantations within their own island groups, in Fiji, and in north Queensland. This experience evoked a sharp sense of contrast between “traditional” life at home and colonial relationships, wage work, and so on, on the plantations; it also permitted a new sense of supratribal fraternal male identity among (say) Malaitans or islanders generally, who would previously have seen themselves primarily in more localized terms (Jolly 1982, 1987; Keesing 1988; Otto In press). Plantations were crucial sites for the formation of neotraditional culture, as they were for the emergence of the pidgin languages that became crucial vehicles of nationalist discourse in the linguistically heterogeneous countries of the southwestern Pacific. Although indentured labor was never of such significance elsewhere in the Pacific, various forms of labor migration and circular migration provided islanders with direct experience of other societies.

In the earlier phases of contact, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, individuals traveled and worked overseas sporadically, but such contact as took place nevertheless fostered certain oppositional constructions of existing and introduced ways. As the Samoan example shows, these ways were frequently juxtaposed in the encounter with Christian missionaries, who were often indigenous teachers rather than whites. If earlier encounters tended to be structured by preexisting terms in indigenous culture, later 19th-century colonial relationships engendered a
more deeply “neotraditional” culture, one made on plantations and in opposition to the tangible domination of plantation experience.

**historical phases, shifting emblems**

Through the various movements of colonial history, objectifications of custom and tradition assumed various forms and had various significances. As Jean Comaroff has noted in quite a different context:

Tshidi tended to perceive the structural contradictions of their predicament in terms of the opposition between an idealized and objectivized setswana, “traditional Tswana ways,” and sekgoa, “white culture.” The referents of these reciprocally defining categories, however, had shifted since their specification in the nineteenth century. [1985:192]

Similarly, in the Pacific the key emblems of indigenous practice were altered over time, and dramatic economic changes were conducive to an increasing emphasis on the juxtaposition of whole modes of life. The oppositional element apparent in the neotraditional identities associated with plantation work and formal colonial domination was not, however, novel: even in early cultural confrontations European perceptions of the discrepancy between civility and barbarity were resisted, inverted, and played upon; islanders seem to have registered foreign perceptions of what was horrifying and to have paraded the horrifying practices in a taunting manner. For example, Bruny d’Entrecasteaux’s voyage in search of La Pérouse followed Cook in visiting both Tonga and New Caledonia; the resulting publication magnified the invidious ethnographic contrasts already noted between their populations. D’Entrecasteaux did not suggest in particularly evolutionary terms that the people of New Caledonia were more primitive than the inhabitants of the central Pacific, but he did reveal them to be cannibals, a “fact” which had escaped the attention of participants in the Cook voyage. The “fact” of their cannibalism was attested to by an artifact, an “instrument which they call nbouet,” that was used to cut up those killed in battle:

One of them demonstrated its use on a man belonging to our ship, who lay down on his back at the other’s request. He first represented a battle. . . . [He shewed us that they began by opening the belly of the vanquished with the nbouet. . . . He shewed us that they then cut off the organs of generation, which fall to the lot of the victor. . . . It is difficult to depict the ferocious avidity with which he expressed to us that the flesh of the unfortunate victim was devoured by them after they had broiled it on the coals. (de Labillardière 1800:11, 224–225)

It is likely here, and clear in other cases, that these were performances of cannibalism that responded to the sailors’ manifest preoccupation with the topic and intentionally and effectively produced shock (Cook 1955:236–237, 1961:818–819). Although islanders at this stage had a very limited knowledge of European interests in and perceptions of the Pacific and its inhabitants—just as Europeans were ignorant of islanders and their perceptions of contact—one key trope of the European discourse of savagism had been disclosed to them, and since this was one that empowered savagery while placing it outside European sociality, we should not be surprised that the “savages” so rapidly seized upon the image themselves. A late revival of cannibalism in the Marquesas, divorced from its original ritual contexts, can also be interpreted as a reactive display, but the balance of power was very different in the 1860s and 1870s; unlike the confident mockery of 18th-century islanders, this flaunting of savagery seems instead to have been a gestural protest at a moment of despair in one of the most destructive of Pacific colonial experiences (Dening 1980:287).

The movement entailed in these performances typifies the explication that the notion of cultural invention conveys only inadequately. The Maori, like other Pacific islanders, may well have practiced anthropophagy prior to European contact, and no doubt represented it in various ways, but they were not cannibals. The topos of cannibalism and the idea of the cannibal as a species of human being emerged from Columbus’ encounter with the Caribs and cannot
be extricated from European expansion and its attendant representations (cf. Hulme 1986:14–17). Hence, something already present becomes explicit or is made explicit in new terms that alter its content, valorization, and ramifications. The process to be looked at, then, entails articulation rather than invention. Being able to articulate something entails the use of language, but in colonial circumstances the notion of competence within a single language was inappropriate. Instead, in such circumstences numerous insecure contexts for cross-cultural speech were created; commands of language were often partial and secondary, but the articulation of novel claims was both possible and necessary, and what was enunciated had ramifications within the home communities of both colonizers and colonized, as well as in the peculiar and transitory situations of interaction.

These situations of course became less transient; while the visits of mariners in the late 18th and early 19th centuries were usually brief (even if contact with deserters was fairly continuous), the establishment of mission stations, consulates, trading bases, and (in the cases of territories once annexed) colonial administrations of course resulted in a permanent intrusion. The details of these histories need not be entered into here. What is of interest are the ramifications of the presence of external forces that sought to transform or at least modify indigenous religion, domesticity, exchange, and production and (in the case of colonial administrations) to make, out of the flux of indigenous history, visible societies or polities that could be mapped and regulated.

To refer to the transformation that is often now the most significant in indigenous historical imaginings, conversion to Christianity was frequently a drawn-out process, entailing a good deal of badgering on the part of missionaries and shifting perceptions on the part of indigenous authority figures. What those authority figures had to think about repudiating was not indigenous religion, as an anthropologist might have construed it, but the particular array of practices and beliefs that the encounter had made constitutive of heathenism. (Needless to say, when Christianity was finally adopted, it was adopted because of a new congruence with indigenous strategies and imagined futures, rather than because the missionary agenda was accepted in any simple sense.) In the field of gender relations in particular, disjunctions between indigenous practice and what missionaries (or administrators) saw as natural, moral, or fitting produced flashpoints at which the capacity of the latter to intrude and impose was directly tested against the assertion of local autonomy. In Fiji the widows or female servants of chiefs, and in Aneityum (in southern Vanuatu) all widows, were strangled when their husbands or masters died; this, like sati in India and cognate practices elsewhere, prompted peculiar horror in European minds, not least because the deed was frequently performed by female kin and because the women themselves often protested against intervention to save their lives (Jolly 1991; Spriggs 1981; Wallis 1851:67–69, 254). Widow strangling capitalized (whether consciously or not) on what was not only horrifying but also nearly unintelligible to the missionaries: the willfulness of those they wanted to construe as victims of heathenism and idolatry. In Fiji missionaries and more particularly their wives frequently attempted to prevent stranglings, and there was clearly a great deal more than this specific practice at issue. Shortly after the Methodists John Hunt and Richard Lyth arrived in Somosomo (northeastern Fiji) in 1839, the king’s son Ra Mbithi was lost on a canoe voyage:

The ill news caused terrible excitement in the town, and, according to custom, several women were at once set apart to be strangled. The missionaries began their work by pleading for the lives of these wretched victims. The utmost they could effect was to get the execution delayed, until the schooner should have gone to search for the young chief. . . . The vessel returned, but not with any more favourable news. Now a greater number of women were condemned, and again the missionaries pleaded hard that they might be spared; but the old king was angry with the strangers for presuming to interfere with the affairs of his people, and indignant at the thought of his favourite son dying without the customary honours. . . . Sixteen women were forthwith strangled in honour of the young chief and his companions, and the bodies of the principal women were buried within a few yards of the door of the missionaries’ house. (Calvert 1884:252–253)
When Fijians later adopted Christianity, widow strangling and a variety of other practices that had been emblematic of heathenism, as well as behavioral markers such as long hair, were abandoned. The *lotu Wesele*, or Methodist church, which had all along been interpreted in indigenous terms (Sahlins 1985:37-40), rapidly ceased to be represented as something antithetical to Fijian custom: from an early point, the interwoven character of the ways of the land and the ways of the church was manifest. Methodism was thus rapidly indigenized, and the distinction between paganism and Christianity ceased to map the contest of the Fijian-missionary encounter or the rivalry between native Christians and heathens; it was historicized to mark the Fijian transition from the epoch of darkness to that of light. The contrast between Fijian and white culture in religious terms was thus superseded, but other dimensions of the colonial encounter continued to engender juxtaposed reifications of indigenous and foreign ways. From the 1860s onward, questions of the extent to which Fijians should engage in plantation labor and cash-cropping were hotly contested in administrative, settler, and indigenous circles, especially after cession to the Crown in 1874, and the apparent threat of capitalist modernity to the traditional polity stimulated much discussion of what indigenous society and customs consisted in.

This work of imagination was not an autonomous indigenous effort but a process that involved both British colonial administrators and Fijians, particularly the Fijian men, mostly of chiefly status, who were actively involved in the bureaucracy of indirect rule that was rapidly established in the 1870s. Like many British colonial administrations, especially those where government was seen to proceed through some form of indirect rule or otherwise delicate social management, the state in Fiji voraciously sought ethnographic, geographic, and demographic knowledge, and the mass of information was rigorously set out, minuted, and filed. If Bali was a theater state, the Crown Colony of Fiji was an archive state, or rather one in which order was theatrically evoked through rituals of itemization and hierarchical transmission. The work of documentation and regulation proceeded in many specific domains: as Peter France (1969) has described, native social organization and corporate landholding were codified, with considerable difficulty and with much violence to local variation; as I have outlined elsewhere (1990), inquiries into health and sanitation among the Fijians permitted an elaborate mapping of customs thought to be associated with high mortality and a lack of stamina. Though the connections made between general well-being and particular practices, such as aspects of the division of labor and offerings to chiefs, were extraordinarily nebulous, these efforts produced an image of a communal social order in which responsibilities to kin and to the chiefly hierarchy stifled individual effort. There was much debate within the administration about the desirability of imposing changes that would break up communal village society in the interest of promoting native commerce and industry, but the policies tended to favor the conservation of tradition.

Although the images of Fijian society produced by means of the government’s surveys and inquiries might be regarded merely as mystifications, many Fijians rapidly came to share the reformulated conceptions of custom, and it would be wrong to understate their contribution to the process of objectification in the first place. As Bernard Cohn has stressed:

> Central to the process of objectification have been the hundreds of situations that Indians over the past two hundred years have experienced in which rights to property, their social relations, their rituals, were called into question or had to be explained. ... [In particular,] the census ... touched practically everyone in India. It asked questions about major aspects of Indian life, family, religion, language, literacy, caste, occupation, marriage, even of disease and infirmities. Through the asking of questions and the compiling of information in categories which the British rulers could utilize for governing, it provided an arena for Indians to ask questions about themselves. [1987:230]

Similarly, the Fijian process is best understood not as crude fabrication or invention (pace Clammer 1973) but as an imaginative process in which Fijians creatively refashioned the relationships that they had the opportunity to articulate. But while we should eschew wholly negative views of this moment of collaborative objectification, we should also recall that the
situation of dialogue was constituted in a field of power relationships in which certain Fijians were far more capable of responding to questions than others; in general, chiefs and senior men were authorized speakers, while women, younger men, and traditional priests were not. It is thus no surprise that customs of rank and chiefly respect were codified, as were “rules” restricting the movement of women, while a variety of cult activities, usually practiced by younger people and particularly warriors, were stigmatized and delegitimized (Kaplan 1989).

In general, the proximity of particular groups to colonial authorities and the particular legitimacy the administration bestowed on chiefs made it possible for relationships that had previously been fluid or reciprocal to be transformed into fixed and hierarchical ones in reinvented Fijian custom. Objectification, though not a matter of mystification or political manipulation, is irreducibly political.

From the late 19th century onward, there was extensive debate in Fijian forums such as chiefly and provincial councils, as well as in British administrative circles, about the degree and nature of Fijian involvement in commerce and the ways in which indigenous customs were thought to inhibit such involvement. Ironically, the notions of custom and commerce became highly energized rhetorically, but often glossed over the actual interpenetration and some compatibility between the neotraditional kinship economy and certain forms of cash-cropping. The beginnings of the reification of the communal order are apparent in the objectification of the practice of kerekere, a “custom” that figures extensively in the literature on rural Fijian economic development and in anthropological studies more generally. The former has tended to represent kerekere as a form of begging among kin that depleted any wealth accumulated by more enterprising individuals. The latter, exemplified by Sahlins’ Moala (1962), emphasizes that kerekere was not like begging at all, but amounted to a mechanism permitting the soliciting of goods, services, resources, use rights, and so on; more significantly, it presents kerekere as “the prevailing form of economic transaction among kinsmen as individuals”—kerekere expressed an “essential kinship ethic” and at the same time worked to produce material equality, donors gaining in prestige what they lost in goods or labor (1962:203).

In characterizing Fijian society as a kinship order exemplified by reciprocity, redistribution, and such practices as kerekere, Sahlins and others have overlooked the fact that there is no evidence of this “famous custom” in 19th-century Fijian society before about the 1860s. The Fijians certainly exchanged resources and services with one another. Unlike the later literature, however, the extensive, ethnographically rich sources of the early period rarely mention kerekere (Thomas 1992). Kerekere only became significant during the investigations into the Fijian customary order that were conducted over the first decades of colonial rule; for example, the commissioners investigating the decline of the native population charged themselves with specifying exactly what Fijian society consisted in, and they followed others in emphasizing the “system” of chiefly requisitions (lala) and kerekere: “After lala—or perhaps before it—kerekere (the mutual appropriation of property) is the principal feature of the communal system” (Government of Fiji 1896:45). In the commissioners’ influential report, and in many subsequent regulations and provincial council resolutions, the suppression or abolition of kerekere was recommended; the fact that the indigenous understanding of this “famous custom” postdated the administrative efforts is apparent from cases in which natives sought clarification from white colonial officials as to what was and what was not kerekere. A. M. Hocart, who was conducting ethnographic research in the first decades of the 20th century, noted in correspondence with W. H. R. Rivers that the government’s effort to proscribe this form of reciprocity was futile and rested upon the misapprehension that it was “a well-defined custom” like circumcision (Hocart 1912).

Kerekere was not, of course, invented. Even before the period of expanded white settlement, in which the antithesis between hierarchical communalism and free commerce began to be elaborated, the word could probably refer to mutual giving. The 19th-century dictionary references are brief and do not privilege this meaning over others; in 1941, however, the New
Fijian Dictionary (Capell 1941:112) could describe kerekere as “a recognized system in Fijian society.” In Hocart’s time, the recognition was inchoate and partial; subsequently, the inhibiting force of this custom upon enterprise was reiterated not only in administrative and scholarly reports but even in the summary ethnographies that prefaced tourist guides. As in the case of widow strangling, a practice that was already present acquired a new meaning as an emblem of Fijian identity and tradition. Later in the 20th century, the emphasis on “the Fijian way” seemed to shift from kerekere to large-scale customary ceremonies (solevu), particularly those conducted at betrothals, marriages, and various other life-crisis events. Today, in the parts of rural Fiji marked by strong and continuing commitment to “the way of the land,” these require substantial amounts of garden produce, cattle, cash, and labor. These are the occasions when dedication to Fijian custom is most conspicuously displayed, but in local accounts the manner of the land is also manifested in more quotidian ways: hospitality, frequent reciprocity among kin and co-residents, and an array of respect usages regulating movement within houses, especially in relation to persons who are senior in terms of age, rank, or gender (for example, it is quite wrong to stand up and reach over a senior person for a hanging object, or to light a lamp, without seeking permission and respectfully clapping afterward). Men’s kava drinking, which can take up an enormous amount of time, is a ritualized activity that embodies the commitment to sociality and the observance of respect.

It is not necessary to go into great detail about this idealized but nevertheless enacted version of Fijian customary life (but see Thomas 1989, 1991b:189–200; Toren 1984, 1989). Suffice to say that the social attributes are the inverse of those attributed to Fiji Indians and that in this instance the oppositional character of cultural objectification, alluded to above, enters into interethic rivalry in a conspicuous manner. Of greater interest here is the instability that cultural explication makes possible, an instability that arises from a transformation of the equation between communalism and what would now be called underdevelopment; though rural Fijians constantly affirm the moral superiority of the Fijian way to the customs of Indians and those of white foreigners, they also lament that Fijians are “poor,” and they often accord the negative side of the equation greater emphasis.

From the 1870s onward, the local representation of the Fijian way privileged communalism, a hierarchical social order entailing respect and chieftainship, and a ceremonial life manifested particularly in kava drinking. Given that this way was upheld as virtuous yet also seen as a disabling and constraining customary system that inhibited social advancement and commercial success, the fact of objectification always permitted a rejection of what was customary in favor of its antithesis: this rejection can be described as the inversion of tradition. In practice, the modified forms of subsistence and exchange-oriented production were not necessarily incompatible with farming for cash or taxes, but they tended to be represented as such; and thus it is not surprising that when Fijians did not become wealthy, the dichotomized structure of neotraditional culture consistently generated ambivalence toward, and occasionally outright rejection of, tradition.

Hence there was a continuum between indigenously organized agricultural cooperatives and movements that the administration regarded as millennial and seditious. The most famous was Apolosi R. Nawai’s Viti Kabani (Fiji Company), which sought during the First World War to displace white middlemen and market native produce more effectively; it also, however, had a distinctly antichiefly and anti-British agenda (Macnaught 1978). Movements of this kind can be seen to have embodied an indigenous modernism that repudiated the custom-bound past and various forms of obligation and constraint that epitomized it. In the Bula Tale movement of the early 1960s, for example, four villages on the western island of Viti Levu essentially
seceded from Fijian custom. The villagers had been dispossessed in the late precontact period and were thus highly marginal to the neotraditional regional political order. The leader of the movement was a former medical clerk named Apimeleki Ramatau Mataka; according to news reports, the villagers adopted a “new way of life,” doing away with “traditional Fijian customs and with orthodox Christianity”; in fact a Fiji Times article described a program of reform that very precisely inverted all of the key symbols of Fijian tradition. Marriages were not arranged and were not to be large communal events structured around kava presentations and ceremonial exchange: “when a couple [wish] to marry it is their doing, and only their parents should be there.” Similarly, major mortuary ceremonies were abandoned, and the use of whale’s teeth in honorific presentations and transactions was rejected. Kava drinking in general was abolished, as were rank and precedence in eating (Mataka was quoted as saying, “When I eat, my wife and children must also eat”); equality, not hierarchy, was the rule (Fiji Times 1961).11 In addition, Western medicine was embraced (in a nearby area 27 years later, on the other hand, I found the commitment to the use of traditional remedies to be almost dogmatic; women gave birth in hospitals only if complications were anticipated).

While the Bula Tale was perhaps unusual in its categorical rejection of the Fijian way, more selective negations of tradition were apparent in many contexts. Certain breakaway churches and cooperative movements either permitted restricted kava drinking in certain formal contexts or altered the practice so that everyone drank at once, rather than in rank order (cf. Spate 1960:175). Given the centrality of the kava-drinking ritual in both 19th-century polities and the neotraditional chiefly regime of the colonial period, these apparently slight modifications had resounding implications. District officers’ reports from early in this century often refer to abstention from kava drinking, possibly registering an earlier form of this ambivalence with respect to tradition.

Given that the Methodist church was very closely identified with the traditional hierarchy, it is not surprising that some dissent was also expressed in the changing of religious affiliation, a phenomenon that has provided a major context for political conflict throughout the South Pacific during the Christian period. I have elsewhere attempted to reconstruct the significance of the Seventh-Day Adventist church in the shifting field of cultural and political objectifications of the colonial period (1991a). Without venturing into an extensive discussion here, I might note that Adventism seemed “preadapted” for an oppositional role by the doctrinal emphasis upon health, which led to an equation between kava and the alcoholic beverages prohibited by the American and Australian branches of the church; hence, Fijian adherents repudiated not only the traditional ritual drink and the enacted deference to hierarchy but also pork, an important component of customary feasts. Because Adventists celebrate the Sabbath on Saturdays, their social routines differ conspicuously from those of Methodists and Catholics; this was (and still is) extremely divisive in small villages that tend to be rigorously Sabbatarian; defection to Adventism thus served as a powerful way for disaffected factions in particular villages to express their rejection of the rest of the community.17

Elsewhere in the Pacific, too, the Adventists have tended to be more “modernist” than the Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, and so on. A survey revealed that Adventists in the western Solomons were far more positive about extractive development in their province, and about tourism, than were near neighbors affiliated with other churches (Sonia Juvik, personal communication). In Fiji, the new fundamentalist churches that are attracting many urban Fijians often have a negative or qualified attitude toward “the way of the land.”18 Members of the Assemblies of God, for example, prefer trousers to the Fijian sulu, a sarong-like garment introduced by the missionaries that has become the standard local male garment and (being marked as Fijian rather than foreign) the appropriate wear for ceremonial contexts, despite its bright color and apparently casual appearance. In rural areas, Assemblies adherents often live outside villages (the paradigmatic locations of customary sociality) and engage in individual cash-cropping, avoiding the communal economy. There is thus some coincidence between the specific
form of individualism that these denominations champion in Western countries and what could be seen as a historically necessary reaction to the codification of indigenous society primarily in collective and communal terms.

This cultural dynamic is not peculiar to Fiji. A wide-ranging review of phases of traditionalism and modernism in the diverse histories of Pacific islands societies would obviously require much more space than is available here, but I will refer to one case that manifests a similar oppositional dialectic of cultural objectification, and to another that illustrates some further aspects of these dynamics. The Paliau movement in Manus (in the Admiralty Islands, Papua New Guinea) was a well documented but not otherwise atypical Melanesian politico-religious movement of the kind that has often been misleadingly labeled a "cargo cult." While movements of this kind were often conspicuously preoccupied with European wealth and manufactured articles, they also had political agendas and pragmatic projects of social reform that have been distorted and diminished by such labeling (Kaplan 1990; Keesing 1978). In a recent analysis Ton Otto has shown that the objectification of tradition was a central element: "the radical changes pursued by Paliau and his followers were structured according to a logic of antithetical transformation thereby creating an opposition to the colonial culture as well as to their own tradition" (In press:1). Otto notes that the contract labor experience gave men a knowledge of other indigenous cultures and white society that permitted cultural dichotomization of the kind referred to earlier. Moreover, the health, wealth, and power of whites led to negative perceptions of local culture, which was seen as something received from the ancestors and presumed somehow to be responsible for native poverty and backwardness: "thus, indigenous cultures were generalized, related to the past, and critically assessed in one conceptual move" (In press:3–4). Given the importance of the external vantage point for social critique, it is significant that the leader of the movement, Paliau (born c. 1910), worked as a contract laborer and then as a native constable before and during the Second World War. As in other parts of the Pacific, the experience of the war catalyzed much discontent with colonial dominance (see White and Lindstrom 1989): islanders (whether in actual theaters of battle or in contact with bases and other support facilities) were exposed to Western wealth and strength on a scale far greater than anything they had previously seen; they had extensive dealings with American soldiers, who seemed generous and did not observe the colonial etiquette and status differentiation characteristic of relations between the British or Australians and the Papua New Guineans; and the presence of black Americans, which Pacific islanders interpreted in various ways, suggested that black people were not intrinsically dissociated from wealth or the various powerful machines introduced during the war effort.

The broader encounter with Europeans and Americans made it clear that colonial dominance, as experienced up until then, was not the inevitable or necessary shape of relationships between islanders and developed societies; in many regions the ramifications included both secular and millennial reform movements. Paliau’s was better organized and more successful than many others, but the details of its history are not relevant here. Otto’s analysis of the reform program instituted by Paliau after his postwar return to Manus stresses that the message, embodied in the “Long Story of God,” a historical charter myth drawing both on indigenous forms and on biblical narrative, was structured by negations applied to "the colonial system from the native point of view." Otto notes that the negations of Paliau’s political program were threefold: it was “anti-tradition, anti-mission, and anti-government.” He adds, however, that there was a distinct disparity between the negation of tradition and the other two negations. The “way of the native” was valued as inherently negative. The only way to attain equal footing with the white man was to abolish tradition completely. This meant breaking the chains of the past but also implied the end of the leadership of the older generation. Paliau’s quest for emancipation was not just from the white people but also from indigenous leaders, whose dominance was based on the institutions of the past. . . . The negations of government and mission (were) of a different order. Unlike tradition these institutions were not seen as inherently bad. What was wrong with them was their use by white people who, led by their selfishness, maintained an unjust inequality. . . . Paliau’s negation concerned the white man’s corrup-
tion of both mission and government aimed at deceiving the natives and depriving them of the real benefits of these innovations. [In press: 21–22]

The Paliau movement thus resembled some Fijian movements and no doubt others in the sense that tradition was blamed for the poverty and backwardness of indigenous people. Progress necessitated not only concrete economic projects, such as cash-cropping and the pooling of resources, but also new forms of social organization and leadership that would displace traditional institutions. In general, such movements rejected institutions emblematic of the traditional order, such as bridewealth payments and major feasts. Clearly, such shifts and revaluations amount to something other than a gradual process of acculturation: instead, they attest to a willful strategy, an exploitation of novel cultural and political possibilities.

Inversions like those effected by Paliau have counterparts in the history of European dichotomized counterconcepts. In his exploration of the semantics of the Hellene/barbarian distinction, Koselleck notes that the standard antithesis between civility and crudity that these terms carried could be reversed,

forming an underlying and continually reemerging tradition which was cultivated in particular by the Cynics. “Barbarian” here served as a positive contrast to a cultivated existence and its consequences. Features charged with utopianism were twined around these simple, genuine beings who were close to nature and removed from civilization: the antithesis was turned on its side, its terms were changed, and it was put back into use. The characteristic asymmetry was thus maintained within the same experiential space, except that the counterconcept now performed the function of critique and self-criticism. 1985: 170–171

In general, primitivism is a negation of civility or modernity on the part of those who are “civilized” or “modern,” modernism a negation of traditionalism on the part of those inhabiting “traditional” societies. In custom and kastom movements, the indigenous “we”—figured through communalism, kinship, rootedness to place, and the like—is affirmed, and white foreigners are characterized in terms of their transience and their lack of solidarity, mutual care, reciprocity, respect, and so on. Like the non-Cynical Greek, those in such movements represent the other primarily in terms of a lack (of the civility of the polis); it is on this representation that the literature on custom and identity has generally focused. But indigenous constructions can also negate the “we” and valorize the other, in the fashion of the Cynic, though obviously for quite different reasons. In the present, traditionalism in peripheral societies corresponds to Western modernism in the sense that in each case the values specific to the place are affirmed; “we” are on a higher plane than “they” in terms of technological refinement and sophistication from the point of view of the West, and in terms of morality, social ethics, and tradition from the perspective of the periphery. In a formal sense, too, Western primitivism corresponds to indigenous modernism. Endogenous values are rejected in favor of what is taken to be the condition of the other: from the perspective of the jaded urban dweller, a natural, located life; from the perspective of the tribal person or peasant, modernity, individualism, and wealth. Cultural critique, enabled by the example of the other, proceeds through a kind of negative self-fashioning, and in each case permits the enunciation of a project of reform.19

Of course, there is no unitary field of discourse within which all of these identities are constructed. Traditionalism in peripheral societies does not affirm the same thing that Western primitivism has presumed to be the essence of those societies. Nor does it merely assert the value of what oppressive colonizing discourses denigrated. The process of mutual recognition has always been much more partial and uneven, and colonized populations are not so unimaginative or unoriginal as to draw only upon colonizers’ constructions. In the case of Fiji, for example, institutions already present were revalued and reinterpreted in a manner that depended on the efforts of both colonizers and colonized. Where local culture has resisted white intrusion most effectively, and where indigenous dynamism retains its own relative autonomy, there will clearly be much greater continuity and flexibility in what is represented as traditional.20 Where contact has been most destructive, as in many settler-colonial nation states (such as Australia,
New Zealand, and Hawaii), resistant discourse may be structured by the discourse of the dominant to a much greater extent—and that produces its own singular tensions.

conclusion: a succession of explications

I noted earlier that common anthropological approaches were not conducive to the study of cultural objectification. Anthropologists have not denied the significance of contact under colonial circumstances, but in accounting for particular situations, they have tended to emphasize a society or a culture as the unit of study, and as a result, abstract reflection upon the dynamics of contact has been restricted to inadequate theories of acculturation and adjustment. These have never dealt directly with cultural objectification, which seems only to have emerged as an anthropological topic with the synthesis of historical and cultural perspectives (see, for example, Comaroff 1985).

Perhaps because the idea of inquiry privileges the disclosure of things that are not already visible, anthropology has long been oriented toward implicit or tacit meanings, toward deep structures that are only exposed through interpretive work and virtuosity; explicit meaning has been considered analytically uninteresting. Along with the interest in practice that became significant in the late 1970s and 1980s came recognition of the fact that structuralist interpretations, among others, tended to treat actors as dupes who merely passively reproduced or enunciated cultural codes. As one critic in another discipline put it, “Barthes’s failure, in Système de la Mode, to consult either fashion designers or fashion wearers, as a check to his analysis, vitiates and discredits all the generalizations he proposes . . . though the bracketing out of competence as a criterion can be taken as symptomatic of the structuralist strategy” (Bryson 1983:72). In anthropology, as well as in other forms of cultural inquiry and history, it indeed seems that “the screening out of practical and operational determination within cultural life” has been theoretically inhibiting (1983:73).

Though “practice” has since become a trendy word, it is not clear that the undoing of totalizing models of implicit cultures has proceeded as far as it might. The processes of oppositional reification and inversion discussed here suggest a different way of talking about particular cultural expressions and their meaning. A fact such as tattooing, reciprocity, or sexual “license” may certainly still be explained or interpreted in a variety of ways, but from the perspective of practice, an emphasis on positional meanings might be displaced by an emphasis on the process of explication and reinvention. Hence an allusion to a point of sexual ethics might seem meaningful not because it reflects a particular ethical grammar but because it is emblematic of some objectified tradition that is differentiated from others and affirmed or negated.

We take it for granted that modern art, literature, and music often innovate by rejecting previous styles and traditions and often draw on foreign and exotic models in fashioning new projects for the present and the future. But a theorist of ethnicity can state as an axiom that “the preservation and the continuity of tradition is enjoined on its carriers” (Nash 1989:14). Tradition is not just a burden that must be carried, but also a thing that can be acted upon or deployed to diverse ends. If we apply our common sense about change in art to other peoples’ reifications of custom, sociality, and the past, we will see that tradition can be an objectification of the heritage one has but wants to be rid of; as a resource it is as necessary to progressivist projects of nonconformity as it is to those of cultural affirmation and preservation, which, naturally enough, have attracted more anthropological attention and sympathy thus far.

Of course, the domains of self-conscious cultural production in Europe and America have more often than not privileged innovation, and it would perhaps be ethnocentric to regard the production of difference from a received array as a compulsion present in particular other cultures or cultures in general. While it would indeed be unjustifiable to universalize any will to change, an interest in the explication of culture seems called for by the circumstances of co-
lonial and postcolonial histories: the pervasive facts of cultural contact make reform and reformulation a persistently available and immediate strategy for dealing both with what is inadequate in intersocial relations and with what seems unsatisfactory or backward in one’s own situation. Using the other as a foil for internal reflection and revolution has never been exclusively a Western privilege—and in that sense the recent scholarly emphasis on the naturalization of invention might preclude some ethnocentric claims about the unique capacities of Western civilization. It would be wrong, however, to see objectification as merely something cultures have always done to one another in the course of inventing and refashioning themselves. Such truisms would disguise the continuing ramifications of colonial asymmetries, asymmetries in which many of the contradictions and contradictory possibilities of nationalist, modernist, and minority discourses may be traced to the fact that they invert, rather than transcend, the identities and narratives created by colonialists, traditionalists, and nation states. What exactly is “post” in the postcolonial cultural scene remains to be revealed.

notes

Acknowledgments. This article arises from the research project “The Politics of Tradition: Ethnicity and Gender in the Pacific,” based at Macquarie University (the participants include Stewart Firth, Margaret Jolly, Jocelyn Linnekin, Robert Norton, and Caroline Ralston). Discussions with Toon van Meijl, Robert Foster, Roger Keesing, and Ton Otto were also helpful.

1Though various antecedents might be identified, the wave of recent scholarship on these themes in the Pacific dates particularly from a special issue of *Mankind* edited by Keesing and Tonkinson (1982); its studies focused on the western Pacific and were complemented by Jocelyn Linnekin’s articles on Hawaii (for example, 1983). A wider geographic range is reflected in the contributions to Linnekin and Poyer (1990); both Keesing (1989, 1990) and Linnekin (1990) have provided broad surveys, but with the exception of Jolly’s examination of Fiji and Vanuatu (in press), there has been little systematic comparative analysis. Other important studies include Handler’s work on Quebec (1984, 1985), Moore’s history of Chagga customary law (1986), and McDonald’s book on Brittany (1989).

2Though Hanson (1990) carefully qualified his article “The Making of the Maori” to avoid attributing inauthenticity to the “invention” of Maori culture, the reaction to his article in New Zealand shows that theoretical subtleties are easily lost in journalism and political debate (see, for example, Freeth 1990 and Nissen 1990; thanks to Toon van Meijl for the relevant cuttings).

3Compare Benedict Anderson’s criticism of Gellner’s comment on nationalism: “he assimilates ‘invention’ to ‘fabrication’ and ‘falsity,’ rather than to ‘imagining’ and ‘creation’” (1983:15). Parallels between debates on nationalism and debates on tradition might be explored further.

4The main exceptions in the scholarship on Oceania are discussions of missionary-influenced reconstructions of the past (such as Errington 1974) and some accounts of millenarian movements, but these tend not to have been linked with the issues raised in the custom literature in the way I attempt below.

5In the context of debates on ethnicity rather than tradition, I would thus reject the views of writers such as Nash, who tend to stress recurrent features in the “basic or core elements of ethnic group formation” (1983:13), features that appear to be postulated by observers independently of particular differences and encounters.

6As will be apparent from the discussion that follows, I am not using this term in the phenomenological sense of Munn (1986) or Miller (1987), though their interests in the projection and substantialization of identity in artifacts, among other social forms, are by no means irrelevant to the questions raised here. My use of the term, which owes more to Cohn (1987) and Handler (1984), is simply literal, in that I am interested in the rendering of culture as an entity that can then be codified, appealed to, stolen, lost, conserved, or taught. In an earlier article (Thomas 1992), I used the term substantivization, which for present purposes can mean the same thing.

7Since one reader of this article assumed that I aimed to base a general, integrated, nonstructuralist cultural theory on Koselleck’s work, it should perhaps be made explicit that I am not interested in “theory” of this kind at all; rather than pursuing such grand chimeras I am interested merely in finding terms in cultural analysis that seem adequate for arguing about issues that appear politically and intellectually salient at the moment. My use of Koselleck is thus partial and strategic; in fact, his larger projects (such as the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* [Brunner, Conze, and Koselleck 1972]) happen to be rather foreign to my own agendas.

8In the literature on nationalism, Chatterjee’s important analyses—which, together with other Subaltern Studies sources, have influenced Keesing’s formulations—must be mentioned here:

The problematic in nationalist thought is exactly the reverse of that in Orientalism. . . . There is consequently an inherent contradictoryness in nationalist thinking because it reasons within a framework of
knowledge whose representational structure corresponds to the very structure of power that nationalist thought seeks to repudiate. [1984:155–156; see also 1986]

I am grateful to Gananath Obeyesekere, who drew the highly theatrical dimension of these encounters to my attention.

Ivan Brady recently alerted me to this aspect of Marquesan cannibalism.

Of course, anthropophagi was not originally a neutral descriptive term, but in present usage it may be contrasted with "cannibal," which is clearly more emotively laden.


"Rabici" in conventional orthography.

"Now known as na lotuvakatevoro, "the devil’s religion."

This discussion of kerekere draws on a longer analysis (Thomas 1992).

The Bula Tale is discussed further in Thomas 1991a. Though the newspaper’s particular biases might be taken to problematize my use of this source, Mataka’s quoted statement resonates too deeply with similar accounts and persisting Fijian preoccupations to be dismissed as a journalistic distortion. On the other hand, the allegation that the movement was “Communist” in character, which was also debated in the Fiji Times, is extremely misleading.

In any particular case of religious change, factors related to local rivalries are mixed up with larger ideological questions. Whatever the reasons for particular changes, which are often very difficult to reconstruct through field inquiries, Adventists do tend to be dissociated from tradition and more interested in commerce than non-Adventist Fijians, though the contrast is less conspicuous among second- and third-generation adherents, who of course did not actually take the conscious step of changing their denominational affiliation.

In a confidential memorandum for the British Colonial Office (prepared at the same time as his influential and controversial report of 1959, which essentially advocated the dismantling of the neotraditional order [Spate 1959]), Oskar Spate alluded to the fact that certain churches had a modernizing orientation. In relation to the conservatism of the Methodist church, Spate wrote, “there is much more constructive social realism and hope for the future among the Catholics, even perhaps the Seventh Day Adventists, than in the Church which is in effect the Establishment in Fiji” (1990:112). I would expand on his observation and suggest that it is precisely their disconnection from the chiefly hierarchy and the tradition it represents that has made the other denominations attractive to discontented Fijians. Though in many instances families and groups who are now Catholic or Adventist may not be radically antitraditional, examination of the reasons why changes of affiliation were made nearly always establishes that some combination of local rivalries and broader ideological factors was at issue; specifically, abandoning Methodism almost always entailed at least hostility to particular chiefs, if not chiefs in general, and some antitraditional stance.

It might be added here that the non-Western examples I have used need not have been restricted to Pacific or other “tribal” or rural societies. Jun’ichiro Tanizaki’s novels about the twenties and thirties in Japan (especially The Makioka Sisters [1957]) work over, with enormous subtlety, dilemmas between tradition and modernity, between a highly objectified construct of the West and an equally reified Japan—dilemmas that are associated, for instance, with individualistic freedom on one side and constraint and normality on the other. As is often the case, the contrast between the West and tradition is reproduced internally in a contrast between modernized and backward domains, in this instance Tokyo and Osaka. It is also significant that, as in the Pacific, the contexts in which foreign and domestic values are reified and subsequently clash have paradigmatically to do with sexual ethics and forms of marriage (“My tastes ran to the chic and up-to-date, and I imitated the Western style in everything. . . . If I’d had enough money to do whatever I pleased, I might have gone to live in the West and married a Western woman; but my circumstances wouldn’t permit that, and I married Naomi, a Japanese woman with a Western flavor” [1986:58]); similarly, the frustrated Kaname in Some Prefer Nettles, confined by the failure of a traditional marriage, finds sexual freedom in dealings not with a geisha but with a Western-educated Eurasian prostitute (1955:159–171). Presumably because its ambivalence about tradition was taken to be antinationalist, The Makioka Sisters was banned during the Second World War.

Klaus Neumann’s comparison of customs among the Tolai and the Tami of Papua New Guinea illustrates this very clearly (1986:194–208).

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submitted 3 December 1990
accepted 10 February 1991