

*Sleights of Hand and the Construction of  
Desire in a Papua New Guinea Modernity*

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We have been working for some time on a project in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea that explores the effects of global processes on local realities (Errington and Gewertz 1996, 1997; Gewertz and Errington 1996). As anthropologists committed to ethnography, our goal has been to understand the engagement of those Papua New Guineans whom we have come to know well with that complex of social forms and forces called “modernity.”<sup>1</sup> In earlier publications we have documented a locally acknowledged shift in the nature of inequality in Papua New Guinea; it was a shift whereby differences in life’s circumstances and prospects were increasingly understood in class terms.<sup>2</sup> No longer seen as relatively transitory, these differences were shifting from degree to kind, commensurate to incommensurate (Gewertz and Errington 1991). Simply put, there was general recognition that an indigenous urban elite was both well established and self-perpetuating, largely as the product of a highly restrictive western-style education (Moore 1990; Johnson 1993; Romaine 1995).

Fearing structural exclusion, many ordinary Papua New Guineans were angry. They were afraid that they or their children (as, for instance, children who wanted western-style education but had failed their exams or could not afford the costs) were no longer in the game, no longer even potential contenders.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, they—the “grassroots” (as they have come to be known)—often spoke of their “jealousy” and their desire to “bring down” to their level those who, in an increasingly unfair system, had been able to acquire significantly more than they.

At the same time, many of these same grassroots Papua New Guineans, righteously angry about developing class differences, would also acknowl-

edge—sometimes ruefully, sometimes resentfully—that they and their occasional meager accumulations were also frequently the subject of jealousy and subsequent leveling demands. Even those who resided in rural villages or in urban squatter settlements often remarked how difficult it was to fulfill kin (and linked ritual) obligations in an increasingly cash-based world,<sup>4</sup> and how hard it was to save money for such virtual necessities as clothing and school fees, to say nothing of saving for such “goods” as radio-cassette players.

In this paper, we present a case study of certain processes at work to deflect this anger, jealousy, and resentment—on the one hand, between the grassroots and the emerging elite, and on the other hand, among the grassroots—in such a way that individual accumulation came to appear not only practically feasible but also morally justified. These processes, reflecting middle-class expectations, were based on a modernist claim that almost everyone could gain access to a certain quality of life. Almost everyone had the *potential* opportunity and capacity, indeed the right and virtual obligation, to work and save in order to consume self-evidently desirable goods and services.<sup>5</sup>

Correspondingly, according to this formulation, those unable or unwilling to accumulate and thereby acquire these goods and services would have primarily themselves to blame. Any ensuing and persisting inequality would thus be understood as less the product of unfair exclusion or repudiation of kin obligations than of personal failure to fulfill reasonable expectations. Such a perspective, focusing on personal responsibility for failure in what was being defined as an open and just system, undercut the idea that categorical exclusion was even a systemic possibility. Thus, in a modernist faux-revival of egalitarianism, differences would appear, once again, to be based on degree and not kind, to reflect a relatively fluid continuum of personal attributes rather than a relatively closed set of categorical differences. Hence, through virtual sleights of hand, what were—and we strongly suspect would remain—the slights of class exclusion were being presented as reflecting less social injustice than individual failure.<sup>6</sup>

Our ethnographic focus here is on Sepik Women in Trade (called SWIT by its members), a private organization begun by middle-class women—those of the indigenous urban elite—in East Sepik’s capital of Wewak during our 1996 field research. SWIT’s explicit objective was to assist impoverished women living primarily in Wewak’s squatter settlements to

market their handicrafts—baskets, string bags, clay pots, and shell and bead jewelry. The ensuing income would help them meet their families' basic subsistence needs, including school fees. Significantly in the course of weekly meetings, SWIT's initial focus shifted from exploring ways to assist women struggling to make ends meet to exhorting them to work harder and save more so they could attend an international trade fair in Jayapura, Indonesia. Attending this trade fair was presented as a great opportunity: not only would it be enjoyable, but it would facilitate establishing lucrative markets and would ensure future prosperity. Many of the hard-pressed women who became active in SWIT because they recognized themselves in the organization's rhetoric—as “the poor women sitting long hours at the market or by the side of the road waiting to sell their handicrafts”—came strongly to believe that going to Jayapura was both highly desirable and an eminently reasonable expectation. Conversely, to miss this business opportunity came to suggest that their poverty was deserved.

To understand this transformation and its systemic effects, we explore how people, in an effort to maintain the relative equality of commensurate (rather than incommensurate) differences, came to accept the (supposed) justice of the capitalist market. Crucially, although this market was described in SWIT's rhetoric both as requiring self-regimentation and as providing vast (hitherto unimagined) opportunities for self-augmentation, it was said to enhance rather than decrease social equality. SWIT's rhetoric was thus an effort to present capitalism in a way that would enhance rather than detract from the lives of Papua New Guinea's grassroots. However, our ethnographic exploration of SWIT's arguments and effects has led us to a somewhat anthropologically awkward position—awkward because we must background cultural relativism if we are to foreground social critique (compare Scheper-Hughes 1995)—that, while global realities do get locally instantiated, capitalism as a (Papua New Guinea) cultural system is still capitalism.<sup>7</sup>

## THE BEGINNINGS OF SWIT

We, like most of some fifty women who initially responded, became aware of SWIT and its first public meeting from notices taped to the door of the Wewak post office and displayed at various churches. According to the notices, the meeting was called by the provincial government's Department of Commerce and Industry; its purpose was to help women

by promoting the sale of their handicrafts. During the five months that Deborah attended weekly meetings, participation grew to include some two hundred women, many of whom we spoke to concerning their interest in the group and their life circumstances more generally.

SWIT's first public meeting followed almost a year of planning.<sup>8</sup> Claudia Rui, the owner of a local dress shop, Viola Siab, the owner of a tourist guesthouse, Theresia Jambon, the owner of a small betel-nut plantation and the director of the Department of Commerce and Industry, Nessaria William, the owner of a nursery providing potted plants for interior decoration and a staff member at a nongovernmentally funded women's organization, and several other well-educated (in some cases, to a tertiary level), relatively affluent, English-speaking women had frequently met during 1995 to discuss the need for such a group.<sup>9</sup> According to the minutes of these early meetings and the "information paper" eventually submitted to the Provincial Executive Council, these "leading businesswomen" wished to promote market opportunities at home and abroad. In addition, as part of their "initiative," they wished to "assist grass-roots women to promote and advance their creativity skills" and to "strengthen and maintain Sepik's traditional designs and art work" (PNG DCI 1995, 1-2).

The first and subsequent meetings began (and ended) with a prayer. At the first meeting, Claudia Rui explained that SWIT's project was a Christian one, to help Wewak's "less fortunate" women. It had several dimensions. As "an organization to help local producers," SWIT would provide Sepik women with a guaranteed market; it would buy their handicrafts and resell them to national and international markets, for example, to hotels, museums, and artifact shops. For this to be possible, anyone who wished to join SWIT and have her handicrafts bought by the organization must pay a K25 yearly membership fee to provide the organization with operating money prior to receipt of resale revenues. (One kina was equivalent to eighty American cents.) As well, SWIT would buy and resell the materials from which the handicrafts were made—the grass for the baskets, the bark for the string bags, the shells and beads for the jewelry. In addition to selling items at a central location in Wewak, SWIT would actively seek out national and international markets. Several of these had already been located, as would be explained at future meetings. Finally, SWIT would help women attend international trade fairs. Women made many beautiful and useful things, yet only men went to the fairs to sell their artifacts. That should be changed.

After SWIT's essential mission was explained, representatives were selected from Wewak's nineteen major church groups. These representatives were emissaries to introduce SWIT to their social circles. The selection of church groups was altogether consistent with the organization's Christian ethos as evidenced by the invocation of God's assistance, the concern in helping the less fortunate, and in the use of often explicit Christian rhetoric.

The meeting was then opened for discussion. A woman from one of Wewak's squatter settlements, though clearly moved by SWIT's vision, had an important question:

Women's work has always been hard. Up until this point no one has considered it. No one has helped us plan and develop so that we might be able to earn money to help our families. The government has ignored us. At last this road has opened so that each woman can spend money [on the SWIT membership fee]—yes—but that money will help her find markets to earn more money to bring back to her house. I want to thank God for letting Mrs Jambon and the others open this road for us. Sepik baskets and *bilums* [string bags] have a particular look. I am from Yangaru and am sorry when I see people from there wear Highlands *bilums*. I take this as my challenge to promote Yangaru *bilums*. I also take it as my challenge to open people's eyes to what Sepik women make. No one knows our work. When there are fairs, it is always men who go. We don't know why—maybe to find other women. We will succeed because we are challenged. We work hard in our houses and make beautiful things but it is always our men and our children who have the “numbers” [recognition]. Let us pray for those here who are leading us. They are working for us. They have their own families but are taking the time to help us.

But I do have one question. Why can't groups join SWIT so that women can pool their money together? K25 is a lot.

Her question focused directly on what came to be a major and continuing theme of SWIT meetings: Why couldn't kinswomen help each other with membership fees and benefit as a group? SWIT leaders, however, remained adamant that “businesswomen” must be personally responsible for their economic failures and successes. If others were to have access to their business as shareholders or as claimants, the business would likely fail. SWIT's leadership could testify to this from their own struggles to create, and protect, successful businesses. (Indeed, as Rui later told us, she had failed several times when in business with her husband because he was ruinously generous to their kin. However, her present business under

her sole control was doing well. She stressed that she felt largely absolved from future kin claims, especially since these kin, who had been happy to take her money, had not helped her when her businesses were in trouble.)

Moreover, SWIT's leaders continued, if several women did join together to buy a single membership, further problems would ensue. Jealousies would break out when, for instance, one worked harder than the others and, as well, when funds would allow only one to go to a trade fair. Money earned from the sale of handicrafts would have to be divided, and no one would earn very much. Also, no one would earn very much if a member allowed herself to be talked into selling for another; in such a case, she would "only be cheating herself."

Although one could imagine ways to deal with all of these potential problems, the association of good business practices—that which would result in enhanced income and status (as a leading businesswoman who had a "number")—and individual responsibility became the unchallengeable premise of the group (at least in public). Although SWIT leaders recognized a commonality among poor women who lacked business opportunities, they always defined SWIT as constituted on behalf of individuals. It was (like urban religious affiliation<sup>10</sup>) to be a freely entered association benefiting unrelated women who had joined together out of generalizable self-interest. Accordingly, SWIT's dominant discourse soon featured as its dominant theme the right and responsibility of an *individual* woman to work sufficiently hard to attend the forthcoming trade fair in Jayapura, where her handicrafts could be seen and purchased by international buyers. This trip was repeatedly described as a great opportunity; conversely, if missed, a woman had only herself to blame because she had had more than five months to save up for it.

### HANDICRAFTS IN THE SETTLEMENT

The sale of handicrafts, particularly brightly colored baskets, had long been important to the several hundred Chambri women who, in 1996, lived in Chambri Camp, the largest single-ethnic squatter settlement in Wewak. (We, too, in our many years of work with Chambri had lived in this squatter settlement.) The economic viability of their families largely depended on basket sales, which brought more money to the camp than any other activity. Although a few squatters had jobs with fortnightly salaries or received remittances from those elsewhere who did have sala-

ries, and some earned money selling black-market beer, the vast majority depended on the sale of handicrafts to get by. And they did get by, but just. In fact, if Chambri settlement women did not make baskets, they probably would not themselves have been able to use them; few could afford the K15 that such a relative luxury would cost.

Life for most of these women involved a routine of drying the basket reeds sent from Chambri Lake (where they grew in profusion during the dry season), of dyeing them with store-bought pigments in large tins of water placed to boil on open fires, and of weaving them into baskets of various sizes and shapes. Women frequently shared their reeds and dyes with sisters and other kinswomen living in the camp. But it was in the weaving where a community of women truly took shape. Affines and agnates sat long hours on mats, legs stretched out in front of them, as they deftly turned their reeds into baskets. They chatted about life in the camp, about news from home, and about innovations they planned for their work. The innovation might be a heart-shaped basket or perhaps a backpack.

Interestingly, most of the women knew little or nothing about the historical precedent to their activity. These same reeds had been woven by Chambri women into mosquito bags—called *arenk*—and traded throughout the Middle Sepik region before they were replaced by the mosquito nets introduced by Europeans. Many of these women had been born in Wewak; several had never visited their home villages; a few spoke little of the Chambri language. Consequently, lots had never heard the term *arenk*. Among those who had heard the term, or had been told about these mosquito bags, only one or two had ever seen one. Yet they all claimed basket weaving as a quintessentially Chambri activity and objected vociferously and ethnocentrically to those Sepik upstarts (and children of dogs) who had stolen the monopoly that was rightly theirs. They were fortunate, they said, that their settlement fronted the main road from the airport. The two stands constructed to display Chambri handicrafts were more accessible than those built by these other Sepiks. (Both stands were shared with men who exhibited carved masks and spears. One was constructed and used by Chambri from the home villages of Indingai and Wombun; the other, by Chambri from Kilimbit.) A buyer sufficiently affluent to acquire such items could just pull up in a car (itself a mark of considerable affluence) to make a purchase—and there would always be several women around to take the money, not only for themselves but for others.

However, this money, if more than a few kina, as with all money known or thought to be entering the camp, would become immediately subject to redistribution, as kin and others would ask to borrow money or be compensated for past injury or repaid for past help. While Chambri enjoyed being able to redistribute to their kin, they also found it very hard to do so when the portion they could reserve for themselves dwindled to virtually nothing.

From these women, whose production and revenues were embedded in networks of support, sociability, and entailment (compare Weiner 1992), SWIT was drawing its prospective entrepreneurs. They were to work hard and save in order to further their individual self-interests by attending the Jayapura trade fair with other, like-minded, nascent businesswomen.

### JAYAPURA: THE NORMALIZATION OF DESIRE

The weekly SWIT meetings followed a standard format. Framed by prayers, they also included reading, discussing, and approving the minutes, as well as considering new business. In part because the early minutes focused on the creation of SWIT, deliberation about them provided a context for women to express lingering concerns about the conditions of membership. Women still balked at the amount of the annual K25 fee and at the necessity of single rather than group membership.<sup>11</sup> However, SWIT's leaders remained adamant. Indeed, they augmented their argument by insisting that fostering individual enterprise was not only inherently desirable but accorded with recent shifts in governmental policy. This policy (partly driven by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund<sup>12</sup>) was designed to wean Papua New Guineans from reliance on "handouts." Such a reliance on handouts, or an expectation of "something for nothing," was, they insisted, generally understood as responsible for a multitude of widely recognized Papua New Guinea ills: economic stagnation, corruption, and general moral decline (especially of youth). In this regard, it was made clear that the help offered by the Commerce and Industry Department would be limited to business advice and display space and that its role would be to help SWIT members help themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Women also inquired during these early discussions of the minutes whether they could continue to attend meetings without joining. They wished to see if SWIT proved sufficiently successful to be worth their K25.



In particular, they wondered when it would start buying things from them. Leaders responded by reminding these women that SWIT could only begin buying when it had accrued sufficient funds through membership fees. Moreover, SWIT could only display what had been purchased once the Commerce and Industry Department, convinced of its success, provided space. Thus, SWIT could only wait for a limited time and would have to implement a cut-off date after which they could not join. In addition, a cut-off date was necessary because the Jayapura trade fair was approaching and leaders had to know who and how many would be attending.

Significantly, by the third meeting, arrangements to go to this trade fair were becoming the primary agenda item. As such, these arrangements came to be the focus of subsequent minutes—and the discussion of the minutes. Consequently, the concerns about conditions of membership, which were ongoing, had little opportunity to be formally addressed. Moreover, these concerns—the exigencies of the mundane present—were increasingly dispelled as women, members and leaders alike, became increasingly dazzled by the vivid elaborations of the brave new world that could be theirs through the trip to Jayapura.

Not only would the trip be an exceptional business opportunity for women to probe international markets by showing their handicrafts, but it would also be a wonderful excursion—entertaining as well as educational—especially for the majority of the members who had traveled little, much less outside their country. SWIT members would be outfitted in what had become the traditional uniforms of modernist Papua New Guinea: *meri* blouses and *laplaps* (voluminous blouses and wraparound skirts, introduced by missionaries) in the yellow, red, and black of the Papua New Guinea flag (to be purchased at K30 per outfit, or made for oneself). They would travel in a group by air and stay at several guesthouses. SWIT leaders had negotiated special rates with Air Niugini (K350 per round-trip ticket) and guesthouse managers (K15 per person, per night).

Women could cook in their accommodations. However, they might decide to try local foods. These were delicious and just like those found in Papua New Guinea, but prepared very differently—with lots of hot spices. Although it was possible to cut costs by, for example, going overland and by boat, it would be far better if SWIT members traveled together as a delegation—as “ambassadors” representing their country in a foreign one. This foreign country, in contrast to their own, was one in which “security

was tight”; police had a great deal of power and were very efficient. Consequently, because there was little criminal activity, women could feel safe. Indeed, if it were not for a relative absence of religious freedom, life in Jayapura would be much better than life in Wewak, particularly for businesspersons who would not have to worry about break-ins and other robberies. Safe as it was, children should not be taken because the women would be very busy selling their handicrafts and performing “traditional” Sepik songs and dances at the fair. Therefore, the women should make certain that someone would look out for their children during the eight days of the trip. It would be exciting to be away from families. There was, of course, the problem of getting permission from husbands. Regrettable as this might be, it would be foolish for someone to go or attempt to go without her husband’s permission. Women should, therefore, start early to broach the subject with husbands, explaining what a great opportunity the trip would be and one that would ultimately benefit the entire family.

To be sure, some women did wonder aloud whether the practical difficulties of making the trip, however appealing, would be limited to getting husbands and families lined up. One clearly affluent woman asked for a “detailed budget,” saying that as far as she could see the trip “will be at least K500 and not everyone can afford this.” SWIT’s president replied, reflecting (quite sincerely, we think) her sense of what it took to be a businesswoman: “This is your own initiative. There are no free handouts. If you have an interest in going, you will just have to work hard to get there. If inside your heart you want to go, and with God’s help, then you will achieve your aim. You must budget your money. That way there will be fewer problems for everyone. We aren’t forcing you to go such that we have to pay your way.”

Within the first several meetings of SWIT, going to Jayapura had become presented as an entirely reasonable and, for those who were properly motivated, achievable desire. “The poor women sitting long hours at the market or by the side of the road waiting to sell their handicrafts” had become national “ambassadors.” From grassroots women, whose difficulty in making ends meet was such that payment of the K25 SWIT membership was an acute hardship, they had been transformed into those whose major concerns were the ubiquitously gendered—not specifically class-based—ones of arranging child care and assuaging husbands.

SWIT’s rhetoric thus substantially elided the facts of class (and gender) differences in Papua New Guinea such that the obviously desirable (epito-

mized by the trip to Jayapura) would be readily accessible to local women. No longer need any woman with initiative (and, one might add, the basic skills of domestic management) remain peripheral or excluded from the action.

In addition, SWIT's rhetoric soon came to suggest that the nature of and the reasons for existing structures of exclusion were themselves shifting, whether exclusion stemmed from the peripherality of Papua New Guinea in general or from these women in particular. According to the revelation SWIT's president was shortly to present, in the near future one would not even have to travel to places like Jayapura to be connected to the wider world, though such trips might still be enjoyable and useful. Instead, the wider world was about to become entirely accessible on a daily basis. Her elaboration of what SWIT as an international marketing organization might offer was climaxed by an enthralling vision. It was not just about being a more effective operator in the mundane world, nor was it just about leaving the mundane world behind for the magic of Jayapura. It was about transforming that mundane world itself.

### ALL THAT GLITTERS

Before calling the meeting of 10 May to order (SWIT's tenth), the president announced that, because the women present were interested in marketing, she had invited a special guest whom many probably already knew. He was Theo Masandoi, the national director of Overseas Product Traders. After introducing himself as a former government patrol officer who, though from Madang, had worked in the Sepik for over thirty years, Masandoi spoke for about forty minutes. Since retiring from the government service he had done research in order to learn how he might best "help all the little people." Thus he came upon "network marketing." Using his own money, he had traveled to England to learn about Overseas Product Traders, a network-marketing enterprise. Begun in 1989, "OPT" had become a worldwide operation that, through its collaboration with an organization called Australian Gold Bullion, was "like a bank investing in gold." Both individuals as well as groups could join OPT. He himself had become a member and had sponsored SWIT's president when she wished to join. She joined, as had he, by paying a K150 fee.

Masandoi explained further by unrolling a chart titled "network growth." This chart depicted a pyramid of boxes with sums next to each

row. The first row of boxes represented those individuals one had sponsored; for each one who had paid the K150 fee, the sponsor got K20. The next row represented members signed up in their turn by those one had sponsored, along with the fee the immediate as well as apical sponsor received. This continued through four generations. Although the details of who got how much became very hard to follow, the idea of one's initial investment and recruitment efforts paying off generously with little additional work was compellingly presented. Moreover, the money earned was invested by OPT, through Australian Gold Bullion, in the "safest investment there was" and one you could draw on at any time.

At this point Masandoi pulled from his attaché case a gold coin. "This could be yours," he said. "It is an ounce of gold worth 500 dollars. [Sharp intakes of breath from the audience.] Eventually [taking out a much larger coin] you could have this, a kilogram of gold worth 19,000 dollars—a primary product."

To a truly rapt audience, he continued:

I am going to tell you now a story from my own life. I began to distrust paper money when Papua New Guinea devalued its currency [in 1994]. Then an old woman I know lost her entire savings when her house burned down. But my money in gold is safe. Nothing can happen to it. When you join OPT you must sign a purchase agreement like this [pulling one from his attache case] which would allow the company to buy and sell gold for you, any time, any place around the world. Then later you could, if you wanted to, become an international marketing associate at which point you must sign this form [taking out another one]. This is how it works. For K500 you buy units: 20 percent of your money goes into blue-chip stocks which are the best; 20 percent into big projects like the [Papua New Guinea] Lihir gold mine or a South African gold mine; 20 percent of your money gets invested in banks; and 20 percent of your money is in a pool from which you can borrow. You get interest every day.

Once you join, you have other benefits as well. I am at the moment finding markets for yams, taro, sugarcane in Lae, Australia, New Zealand. I have just come back from Port Moresby to work out the taxation, financing and contracts. And I am going to help women market string bags—I think there is a big market here. There is a European, Australian, American market for string bags and also for coconut-fiber brooms and grass baskets. People all over the world are recognizing the superiority of these products over whitemen's ones. . . .

The United Nations knows about our company. And we are going to be on

the Internet. It is one of my accomplishments to provide Papua New Guinea with a “trade point” on the Internet. I am working on getting Nestlé’s to buy coffee and cacao and there are going to be markets for vanilla and seafoods. Sometimes I am asked whether the Papua New Guinea government knows about OPT. Let me tell you, both our government and the United Nations know about it. It is internationally recognized and operates in sixteen countries.<sup>14</sup>

In the following question-and-answer session, the principal and considerable interest was in OPT’s plan to buy and sell yams and taro. Masandoi elaborated in answer to the many inquiries of a highly responsive audience. Though small yams would suffice for the Papua New Guinea trade, he would buy only big yams for overseas distribution, each at least 500 grams. And none should have holes because whitemen are afraid of insects. Concerning taro, he would buy only native taro, not the “Singapore” variety. He expected eventually to handle 5 tons a week. Although there were professors at universities trying to create better strains, he thought they were wasting their time because taro was already a salable product. He and OPT had confirmed the commercial viability of four already-common types. As he listed these types, the women became even more engaged, whispering to one another in recognition and assent. He would buy “big” taro, and apologized for knowing its name only in his native language, which he gave. He would buy the sticky white taro. And the yellow taro. And the pin-spotted taro. The women knew all of these types and began to call out their names in their different native languages. One woman then asked, “Will you be interested in the kinds of yams that have nails?” Yes, he would be. And he would eventually buy coconuts, sweet potatoes, sugarcane, and betel nut (but, remember, nothing with insects). When he told the women that they could make lots of money from selling betel nut because there were many uses for it, they beamed with pleasure. (It could be soaked and its extract put in toothpaste; what was left could be ground up and put in a tablet as a mild stimulant.)

After SWIT’s president thanked him for coming, he promised that he would be seeking national and international markets in which to sell SWIT’s handicrafts. He knew that it would be impossible for every member to spend K150 to join OPT, but perhaps the entire organization might be registered.

Masandoi as well as Rui and the other leaders of SWIT (all of whom we spoke to at length on occasions other than SWIT meetings) were sincerely engaged and excited about the ways in which the ordinary hard-working

people—women in particular—could continue to do what they normally did, yet transform their lives by more effective marketing. They envisioned a just world in which virtually any diligent Papua New Guinean exercising normal skills, whether in weaving baskets or growing taro, would be well rewarded. This would be a world in which differential access to educational advantage no longer excluded most from the good life. This would be a world in which one did not have to be a Lihir Islander (literally, sitting on a gold mine) to benefit from the national and international economy. For example, with OPT and its linkage to Australian Gold Bullion, anyone could profit from the Lihir mine. This would be a world open to anyone alert to opportunity and willing to work hard. In this newly moral world, where everyone had ready access to ample opportunities, one could with equanimity attend to one's own interests without being continually wrenched by the claims of kin for financial help. Such claims, if still encountered, could be charitably dismissed as both illegitimate and as fostering a disabling dependency—a handout mentality. One might, of course, choose to live among one's kin—much as Rui did in one of Wewak's squatter settlements. But life would be different as people got their priorities straight, as they worked hard and saved their money (for example, to convert their houses from bush to permanent materials—again, as Rui was doing—and, perhaps, put in electricity). And one might, as indeed one should, still engage in initiatives to help the less fortunate. But this would be freely given (Christian) charity. Neither a world of unfair, arbitrary, and categorical exclusions (of incommensurate differences), nor of initiative-stifling redistribution (nor, one might add, of dog-eat-dog capitalist competition), it would be one in which Papua New Guineans, whoever they were and wherever they lived, could, if they made the right choices, lead lives of industry and comfort. Put another way, they could lead lives of prosperous, disciplined Christian equality.<sup>15</sup>

In effect, it would thus be as the vanguard of a prospective Papua New Guinea petit bourgeois revolution that SWIT's ambassadors would enter Jayapura to claim their rightful place in the global economy.

#### SLEIGHTS OF HAND AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF DESIRE

The women who continued to attend weekly SWIT meetings were presented with a beguiling vision of a transformed future—a vision evoking something of a reversed “cargoism.” Unlike those “natives” who had sought a

transformed future premised on (among other things) the conviction that their own indigenous goods were vastly less desirable than imported, manufactured ones, and unlike those who had sought a restored past premised on the conviction that their old ways were, after all, their ways, these women were encouraged to believe that their traditional skills and products were fully modern, fully marketable.<sup>16</sup> Because, for example, their indigenous coconut-fiber brooms were highly valued on an international market (as attested to by the United Nations and as soon to be advertised on the Internet), they could pick and choose in a postcolonial world to which they were fully connected—a world that had at last gone their way.

As it turned out, 88 SWIT women (including 16 government employees)—about forty percent of those who initially had signed up to go—attended the Jayapura trade fair. (Because we left the field before the trip, our evidence here is based on correspondence with Rui and others and on a summary report submitted to the provincial government [PNG DCI 1996].) Though many traveled by the tiring but less expensive sea and land routes, and some found the food too spicy, all enjoyed the trip. Yet none covered her costs. As the summary report to the provincial government stated:

For the first three (3) nights, most of the items were not sold out due to pricing. Most items were priced according to PNG rate which was too high for Indonesians. However, the women lowered their prices and sold out their items towards the end of the event. . . . [Moreover] nothing was for nothing. Women had to make numerous financial contributions towards the services provided by interpreters, escorts and bus drivers. These caused a lot of inconveniences to their budget after meeting airfares and other travel expenses. (PNG DCI 1996, 5, 7)

Nonetheless the trip was experienced not only as pleasurable but as auspicious because it provided an opportunity to learn “the language of trade”—the terms and concepts of international marketing.

So impressed did Rui herself remain with the prospects of international marketing, in part confirmed by the Jayapura trip, that she planned to purchase a laptop (as advocated and marketed by OPT) and be among the first in Wewak to monitor prospects—“find markets”—on the Internet. Given the cost of the laptop—certainly more than K2,000—and the cur-

rent unavailability of phone lines in Wewak suitable for Internet access, Rui was certainly exhibiting a robust confidence in the future.

Of the eight Chambri women who had signed up for the Jayapura trip, only three actually went: a nurse who lived in housing provided for her at Wewak's hospital, her sister who lived at Chambri Camp and ran a black-market beer business, and the wife of a schoolteacher who with her husband had (like Rui) nearly completed a permanent-materials house at Chambri Camp. Although all three women did weave and sell baskets, none was a poor mother dependent on the sale of her handicrafts. In fact, none of the grassroots Chambri women who had been targeted by SWIT "to promote and advance their creativity skills" could afford to attend. While we do know they were disappointed and frustrated because they could not manage to go, we can only speculate (at this point in our research) about whether they blamed themselves for their inadequacy. Certainly, to repeat, the entire logic of SWIT and the recurrent theme of its rhetoric was to effect a sleight of hand whereby poor women who continued to sit by the side of the road or the market would become transformed from the less fortunate into those responsible for their own failures.

Significantly, even those who were not slighted by SWIT's rhetoric were, we think, vulnerable to other, linked, deceptions. For example, several women who did go to Jayapura attended SWIT meetings wearing colorful hats, woven from reeds very like those used in Chambri baskets. Such hats, although imported from Southeast Asia and doubtless passing through various intermediaries, were sold in local stores for the very reasonable price of k2 each. One can only imagine how the Sepik producers of baskets, yams, and betel nuts would fare if prices for their products were to be consistently orchestrated in such a global market—worked out in "the language of trade" whether at Jayapura or over the Internet. (In fact, as the summary of the report just cited indicated, Papua New Guinea women did have to lower their prices at Jayapura.)

This language of trade was already generating transformations in Wewak that suggest that displacement, rather than connection, would be more likely for most. All of those living in Chambri Camp—especially the schoolteacher and his wife with their permanent material house—have been made vulnerable to plans ostensibly designed to make Wewak more appealing for outside investors. These plans focused on a project, jointly funded by the Korean and the Papua New Guinean governments, to drain



and then bulldoze much of the land where squatters lived (including Chambri Camp) in order to provide business or industrial sites. Such a project could be blocked only by collective and militant action. Indeed, such a project would be a kind of leveling that would make those tempted to repudiate the (leveling) demands of kin (and others) calling for mutual support, perhaps reconsider the wisdom of such a repudiation.

### CONCLUSION: LEARNING CAPITALIST CULTURE IN A PAPUA NEW GUINEAN MODERNITY

This paper is part of a broader project to document the effects of global processes on local realities in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea. We have here described a shift in the nature of inequality from differences based on degree to differences based on kind—from differences relatively transitory, to differences relatively fixed. Organizations like SWIT have contributed to this shift by neutralizing and deflecting righteous indignation concerning socioeconomic exclusion. SWIT has done so by defining the pursuit and attainment of a middle-class lifestyle not only as inherently good, both materially and morally, but as inherently available. It thus presented such a lifestyle in egalitarian terms, as within the reach of everyone sufficiently productive and disciplined to work hard to supply what the global economy demanded and to resist dependency-perpetuating claims from less enterprising kin and others.

By defining what it meant to be a member of the middle class, SWIT was simultaneously constructing and justifying the existence of a lower class.<sup>17</sup> Through SWIT's construction of the world, being poor—or at least remaining poor—became a matter of choice, not of inescapable circumstance. In effect, SWIT served to redefine the broad category of grassroots women into those who were deserving and those who were not. Poverty (at least as it was continuing rather than temporary) hence became not simply an overwhelmingly difficult and unfair life circumstance with which most women must somehow cope, but it became a matter directly reflective of personal character and worth. In effect, SWIT promulgated at least a variant of a capitalist ideology that held that “inequalities of income and wealth [were fair because they] measure[d], however roughly, the economic contributions of men and women who embark[ed] their energies and resources in the productive process” (Lekachman 1988, 107).

This particular capitalist doctrine of social justice, as disseminated and given a Christian inflection by Wewak's "leading businesswomen," created a lower-class "other" whose anger about developing class inequalities became neutralized into petty (and thereby easily dismissed) complaints about the lack of "free handouts." Conversely, given the presentations of Jayapura and OPT as undeniably alluring and evidently accessible, it was not easy for those who remained stuck at home (without gold bullion) to evade a certain definition of themselves. By wasting their God-given talents and the opportunity provided them by SWIT's community-minded Christian businesswomen, they had only themselves to blame for remaining poor women without prospects.

That SWIT members were receiving a sentimental education in self-blame did not, of course, mean that they fully accepted the lessons presented to them at their weekly meetings. Although some were clearly let down and embarrassed when they could not make the deposit necessary for the Jayapura trip, we do not doubt that they, and others, might nonetheless think their way out of SWIT's particular rhetorical snares such that they would still feel unfairly disadvantaged in an increasingly inequitable system. But we also have little doubt that the dominant discourse of SWIT (and comparable organizations) was undermining the political legitimacy of oppositional thought and sociality. Already vulnerable to the bulldozers of drainage projects, "the poor women sitting long hours at the market or by the side of the road waiting to sell their handicrafts" would, we venture, command increasingly less public concern. That Wewak's leading businesswomen might also find themselves left by the side of the (yellow bullion-brick) road by the exigencies of capitalist development and competition attests to the fact that what they presented as a socially just, Christian revival of egalitarianism was, in fact, faux. It also attests to the fact that capitalism, even with this Papua New Guinea spin, is still capitalism.

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## Notes

1 The meaning of “modernity” (or “modern” or “modernist”) must be understood as multifaceted and situationally contingent. In Papua New Guinea especially we have found it to involve a significant shift in views—indeed experiences—of self and sociality. Many Papua New Guineans have been exposed to and engaged in a variety of discourses conveying and reflecting the sense that they would have “ever more responsibility for self-creation” (Miller 1994, 71): for the creation both of freely choosing selves and of corresponding social contexts focused on personal choice—whether in entrepreneurial economic activities, marriage partners, brand name goods, or religious affiliations (compare Foster 1995). Of the vast corpus of works available on modernity, the ones we have found the most anthropologically germane to our present study are Thompson 1963; Berman 1982; Harvey 1989; Taylor 1989; Giddens 1991; Jameson 1991; Sklair 1991; Lash and Friedman 1992; Garcia-Canclini 1993; Miller 1994.

2 In Papua New Guinea, processes of class formation had not yet resulted either in sharp polarization between workers and owners (Amarashi, Good and Mortimer 1979; O’Faircheallaigh 1992), or in virtual identification between an objectively defined set of economically derived positions and a subjectively held sense of identity—between class “of itself” and class “for itself” (Fitzpatrick 1980). Nevertheless, these processes had led to the development of new forms of inequality. Many Papua New Guineans experienced this shift in terms of relative status, which was determined by their capacity to make lifestyle choices (see especially, Weber 1968; Parkin 1979). Class position was significant to Papua New Guineans primarily because it either provided or restricted access to a coveted lifestyle marked by the capacity to consume and to display.

3 All of Papua New Guinea’s four major newspapers (the English-language *Post Courier*, the *National*, and the *Independent* and the Neo-Melanesian *Wantok*) would frequently publish letters to the editor with titles such as “Blame the Crime on Wide Rich–Poor Gap” (Mai 1996) or editorials with titles such as “Families Caught in a Vicious Wage Trap” (*National* 1996) also expressing this anger. Here is an example of a typical text:

WHY does the law and order problem increase despite the government’s declaration of 1996 as law enforcement year?

Asking the WHY question and using a bit of reflection would [cause one to] realise the root cause of the law and order problem . . . as the cancerous sickness eating away at the fabric of our society.

The [poor] people use criminal elements as a means to attain an end. That is, the people kill, rob, etc. to signify their frustration over the government’s management of the country’s affairs to meet their basic needs and services like food, shelter, water supply, health services, education, roads, electricity, employment which are not pro-

vided by the government or if provided, not made accessible to all the people out of ignorance or imposition of high fees on the services which are supposed to be free. (Taka 1996, 10)

4 These obligations ranged from mundane assistance with such expenses as subsistence costs and school fees, to ritual contributions to, for example, bride-prices and death ceremonies.

5 For informative analyses of comparable instantiations of modernist claims concerning middle-class expectations, see McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1985; Earle 1989; Carrier 1995; and Hunt 1996.

6 For reviews of the literature on class as it has been used (and misused) in analyses of Pacific societies, see Hooper (nd) and Ogan (nda, ndb).

7 On the different ways in which capitalism may become locally instantiated, see, especially, Kelly 1992; Miller 1997.

8 SWIT's initiative had originally begun as a project of the East Sepik Council of Women (ESCOW), one of the more durable and successful women's development organizations in Papua New Guinea. Significantly, there had been a falling-out among those who eventually led SWIT and other members of ESCOW concerning, among other things, whether ESCOW should remain in large measure rural-focused. SWIT's leaders thought not. They all were supporters of a former and eventually deposed ESCOW president who had wanted a more urban engagement, one that would draw national, even international, attention and assistance.

9 All persons referred to in this paper have been given pseudonyms.

10 In rural and urban contexts, but especially in the capitalistically transformed urban ones, religious affiliation was increasingly described and experienced as a matter of choice, as any reader of Weber 1956 would have predicted. Thus, although the majority of Chambri remained true to what they considered their Catholic "mother" church, each year more were joining other congregations. For an analysis of the rhetorics of religious choice as they came to form and transform Papua New Guinea allegiances and commitments, see Errington and Gewertz 1995.

11 As frequent victims of ill-conceived if not fraudulent "development" schemes, many Papua New Guineans had become wary of "membership fees."

12 As the condition of further loans to the Papua New Guinea government, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund had insisted on the implementation of a number of "structural adjustments" (which included slashing the bureaucracy and imposing "user-pay" policies for medical and educational services).

13 This handout mentality would, from the perspective of SWIT's leadership, be well illustrated in Taka's letter to the editor, cited in note 3. This letter blames the law-and-order problem on lack of government services.

14 We were concerned that OPT was a pyramid scheme, more interested in raising money through membership fees than in providing a service. Our inquiries about its reputability to the Australian High Commission in Port Moresby were unanswered. However, in response to questions we later put to Theo Masandoi, we were phoned and faxed by OPT representatives from their Australian office. We eventually concluded that OPT probably would provide some service to some Papua New Guineans, but doubt that most would receive value for their membership fees.

15 Some of our more prosperous Chambri friends shared this image of a life merging the traditional with the modern. They fantasized about retiring to their home villages where, with advanced telecommunications, they could remain comfortable and connected. Indeed, the state-run telephone company advertised its services with posters depicting such villages fairly sprouting with antennas, solar panels, and satellite dishes.

16 There were some international markets for Papua New Guinea handicrafts, but not, we think, for the quantities and prices producers were imagining. Moreover, though various nongovernment organizations, including the World Wildlife Fund, purchased small numbers of net bags—recognizing that a market existed for the natural products of remote rainforest dwellers—such schemes were not directed at urban producers.

17 As Ossowski (1963) and Thompson (1963) argued, one must talk about classes relative to each other as part of a system.

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### *Abstract*

This paper is a case study of processes at work to deflect the anger and jealousy many grassroots Papua New Guineans felt toward an indigenous urban middle class that had increasingly monopolized positions of influence and affluence. We focus on the activities of Sepik Women in Trade, a private organization begun by middle-class women whose explicit objective was to assist poor women living primarily in Wewak's squatter settlements to market their handicrafts. Through this organization's activities, individual accumulation came to appear not only practically feasible but also morally justified. These processes, reflecting middle-class expectations, were based on a modernist claim that almost everyone could gain access to a certain quality of life. Almost everyone had the potential opportunity and capacity—indeed the right and virtual obligation—to work and save to consume self-evidently desirable goods and services. Correspondingly, those unable or unwilling to accumulate and thereby acquire these goods and services would have primarily themselves to blame. Any ensuing—and persisting—inequality would be understood as less the product of unfair exclusion or repudiation of kin obligations than of personal failure to fulfill reasonable expectations. Such a perspective, focusing on personal responsibility for failure in (what was being defined as) an open and just system, undercut the idea that categorical exclusion was even a systemic possibility. Through virtual sleights of hand, what were the slights of class exclusion were being presented as reflecting less social injustice than individual failure.

KEYWORDS: capitalism, class, individualism, inequality, modernity, Papua New Guinea, women