In Memoriam

Colonial and Counter-Colonial Discourse in Melanesia

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Introduction

Colonial rule has entailed not only economic and political control, but ideological domination. The hegemonic processes of ideological domination were first clearly explicated by Gramsci. Their operation in colonial situations, and the psychological, social and political costs and consequences for colonized peoples, have been explored – mainly with reference to Africa – by such writers as Fanon (1963, 1965, 1967) and Mannoni (1956).

One of the more subtle manifestations of ideological domination is the way categories and structures of thought framed in opposition to subjugation are shaped by and modelled on the very ideological systems they challenge. Gramsci himself wrote, in the Prison Notebooks, of how ‘the lower classes, historically on the defensive, can only achieve self-awareness via a series of negations’ (1971: 273). Recasting this in more currently fashionable language, we can say that the discourse of the dominant shapes and structures the discourse of the dominated.

The patterns of ideological domination and counter-hegemonic response with which I will be concerned are by no means confined to colonial situations. They occur much more generally, under conditions of domination and subordination: in complex social formations marked by pronounced social hierarchy, class differentiation, and/or domination of minorities; they occur in all forms of revolutionary struggle and in the cultural production of subaltern groups. Colonial domination and anti-colonial struggle hence constitute historically particular – though particularly revealing – settings for phenomena that, as Gramsci’s work indicates, are pervasive and general.

Here, I will explore how colonial discourse has imposed categorical structures and specific forms on the counter-hegemonic discourse of
resistance and decolonization in the southwestern Pacific. I focus most
closely on the Solomon Islands, and particularly on the island of Malaita,
but many of the phenomena I describe have also been recorded in other
parts of Melanesia, such as Tanna and Pentecost in Vanuatu.

The themes and contradictions on which I shall focus can be introduced
by shifting back a quarter of a century, to the Kwaio of the mountainous
interior of Malaita as they were when I first began fieldwork in 1963. The
contradictions and puzzles that confronted me at that time can then be
unpacked with reference to historical processes that at the outset were
hidden from my view.

Straightening out kastom

Shortly after installing me in the house they had built for me at
Ngarinaasuru, a thousand feet up the mountain wall rising above Sinalagu
Harbour, the Kwaio commenced construction of a large ‘Committee
House’ adjacent to mine – in what I foolishly then imagined was an adjunct
to my project. In the subsequent eighteen months, what Kwaio called the
‘Sub-District Committee’ met at Ngarinaasuru every Tuesday – entailing a
gathering of scores or sometimes hundreds of people. The Kwaio leaders
of Koumitii (‘Committee’) devoted themselves to ‘straightening out’
kastom, ‘custom’, through endless discussions, debates and sessions of
litigation. Kastom – centrally comprising genealogies, lists of lands, and
lists of ancestral taboos – was to be written down, and I was cast as a
primary agent in this process.

Although initially I had thought that the ‘Committee House’ was
constructed as an adjunct to my ethnographic project, I eventually realized
that I had been incorporated into their project. Indeed, my coming to work
for them (rather than the rival ‘Are’are down the coast, with whom I had
initially planned to do fieldwork) had, in their eyes, been secured through
their prayers and sacrifices (they had enlisted the support of their ancestors
to divert to them the American they had heard was coming to ‘write down
customs’).³ For reasons that had to do with Second World War experience,
not with me, Malaitans had a strongly positive and indeed millenarian view
of Americans, a misapprehension all but those out of touch with the
contemporary world have since corrected.

But why were they concerned with writing down and ‘straightening out’
kastom on Tuesdays, when the rest of the week, they were living their
ancestral customs, in their scattered forest settlements? Kwaio social life
was strikingly anachronistic, in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate of
the 1960s, in that the peoples of the interior were still sacrificing pigs to
their ancestors and exchanging shell valuables, women and girls still virtually or completely nude and the men frequently armed with clubs or bows and arrows (Keesing, 1982b). Why talk endlessly about kastom when ancestral ways still prevailed (see Keesing, 1982a, 1985)?

There were further puzzles. The Kwaio leaders, on Tuesdays at Ngarinaasuru, were referred to as sifi ‘chiefs’; and they were sometimes contrasted with kouman fiifulu ‘common people’. Yet outside the meeting area, Kwaio society was strikingly and fiercely anti-hierarchical (Keesing, 1968). Furthermore, the ‘lines’ over which (in this context) the ‘chiefs’ were supposed to have authority were not the small descent groups I was mapping sociologically the rest of the week, but were the units that had been used since the 1920s by the colonial government for tax collection purposes (units that had no correspondence with indigenous groups or categories).

To add to my puzzlement, there were other movements devoted to writing down kastom under way, among Malaita peoples to the north and south of Kwaio, who were Christian, and were beginning to participate directly in cash cropping and petty entrepreneurship (Keesing, 1982a). Sometimes this ‘writing down the kastom’, to which thousands of ruled exercise books were dedicated around the island, meant creating incredible syntheses of Malaita origin myths and Old Testament accounts of wandering tribes of Israelites.

So there was the double contradiction, of some Malaita peoples devoting great attention and energy to writing down and ‘straightening out’ the customs they were following anyway (and in the process, enacting and recording spurious forms of custom); and other Malaita peoples devoting great attention to writing down and ‘straightening out’ the customs they were in the process of abandoning, in favour of Christianity and capitalism.

Twenty-five years ago, I was in no position to understand the Kwaio project, or the surface contradictions it entailed. My deepening understandings have come both from a wider view historically and from a clearer view theoretically.

Malaita neotraditionalism in historical perspective

Eventually, I came to understand how the Kwaio project as I encountered it was part of a struggle against colonial domination, a struggle which has been sustained in something like the form I had seen in 1963 for some forty years, before and since my first fieldwork. This mode of struggle in turn is part of a longer history of resistance against European invasion and domination, spanning more than a century (see Keesing and Corris, 1980).
The earlier phases of Kwaio resistance successively entailed three attacks on recruiting ships in the 1880s (see Keesing, 1986); the assassination of the first white missionary to work in the area, in 1911 (another missionary was killed by a Kwaio assailant in 1965); and the assassination of W.R. Bell, the District Officer who imposed the Pax Britannica and a head tax, and the massacre of his cadet and entourage, in 1927 (Keesing and Corris, 1980). In the late 1930s, with resentment still smouldering in the Kwaio interior in the aftermath of a devastating punitive expedition, a Kwaio cult leader prophesied the arrival of the Americans and the expulsion of the British; and mass arrests were made at palisaded cult villages (see Keesing, 1978, 1980, 1981; Bennett, 1986).

In the 1940s, Malaitans working with the American forces on Guadalcanal in the wake of the Second World War began to crystallize anti-colonial sentiment into a political doctrine. The movement surfaced in 1946 as Maasina Rule, 'The Rule of Brotherhood', with its center in the 'Are'are district of southeastern Malaita (Keesing, 1978; Laracy, 1983). Maasina Rule ideology focused on community reorganization, economically and politically, forging a unity that transcended lines of religion and language; on collective bargaining to end the oppressive pre-war style of colonial rule and economic exploitation through plantation labour; and on governmental recognition of customary law. Maasina Rule chiefs were chosen, at clan, Subdistrict and District level, to lead in community reorganization and to negotiate with the colonial state. Demands that Malaitan customary law be recognized through the operation of indigenous customary courts were accompanied by an ideology that customs were to be written down.

Eventually, repressive steps by the colonial administration, including arrest of the Maasina Rule chiefs, mass detentions, destruction of palisaded villages, intimidation and campaigns of disinformation splintered the movement and drove it underground. However, by the late 1950s local movements carrying on the Maasina Rule project – with its mystical overtones – were pursuing the ideology of codifying kastom in local forms: local in representing a particular version of Malaita culture as authentic, and in reconciling kastom doctrines with Christianity (or, in the Kwaio traditionalists' case, anti-Christianity). It was this fragmented scene, with all its contradictions, that I encountered in the 1960s.

**Colonial structures in anti-colonial discourse**

What is striking in all this, for our present purposes, is how through the forty years of politico-religious activism the discourse of anti-colonialism has been framed in terms of the discourse of colonialism.
One manifestation of this ideological hegemony is the way administrative units created within the colonial state – entities with no salience in pre-colonial life – provided the conceptual and organizational categories in terms of which resistance was structured. What Maasina Rule represented, politically, was a counter-structure. Former Kwaio Maasina Rule Head Chief Jonathan Fif’i recounts how the American soldiers asked him and his fellow Labour Corps volunteers, ‘Who are your chiefs?’ They had none: but when they created them, at each level they represented units – tax collection ‘lines’, subdistricts, districts – created by the colonial state: and they were the counters to the functionaries of that state, in the form of Village Constables, Headmen and District Officers. Both ‘chiefs’ and the units they led were creations of colonial sociology (see Keesing, 1992).

Hegemony at a conceptual level and political strategies operated together to produce a kind of equivalent to a Westminster shadow cabinet, with the organization of an anti-colonial political movement a mirror image of structures of Protectorate administration.

The hegemonic force of colonial discourse was reflected in other ways. The conceptualization of ‘custom’ (or ‘law’) as both the quintessential embodiment of a people’s way of life and as a domain contested through the imposition of colonial law was itself a product of colonial experience and European categorization. Prior to colonial rule, Malaitans had ancestors and their rules: but they did not – could not – have kastom. I have suggested (Keesing, 1982a, 1985) that conceptualizing one’s custom as an entity, a symbolically-laden ‘thing’ toward which one can take a stance – whether positive (as in the Kwaio case) or negative (as in the iconoclasm of the ‘Vailala Madness’ of the Papuan Gulf Division; see Williams [1976]) – is possible only under a situation of domination. Kastom does not represent simply the customary practices of Malaita peoples, but represents a hypostatization of customs as a body, the elevation of custom into an externalized political symbol. What comprises kastom from the Kwaio point of view partly corresponds to or is extrapolated from indigenous conceptions about ancestors and the sacred. However, the project of ‘writing down’ or ‘straightening out’ kastom – and the power of the written word – reflect European, not indigenous, modes of representation.

The power at stake may not be immediately clear, but here lies the key to understanding. In terms of Melanesian experience of colonial rule, the written word – canonically, in the form of the Bible and the colonial legal statutes – was a powerful instrument of subjugation. Citing chapter and verse, missionaries challenged and condemned ancestral precepts; citing colonial laws, District Officers arrested and hanged men acting according to the ancestral ways, enforcing jural rights and preserving morality. To
demand recognition of ancestral ways by the colonial state, it was necessary to provide an indigenous analogue of Bible and lawbook – just as it was necessary to provide indigenous analogues of Headman and District Officer. Kwaio leaders speak of loa, ‘law’, as well as of kastom in their discourse of resistance.

When Maasina Rule leaders presented their demands to the colonial government, when they defended themselves against arrest and trial, the forms and language they used – given their subaltern perspective on European administrative structures and their limited access to education – often emerge as (unconscious) parodies of British legalism and Colonel Blimpism. So, too, the styles and structures of leadership and organization Maasina Rule had as their models the plumes and swords and rituals of Empire and the semiology and rituals of the American military; scant wonder that Maasina Rule had at times something of the theatrical quality and parodic cast of Chaplin portraying The Great Dictator.

The Kwaio project into which I was unwittingly incorporated, with its spurious ‘chiefs’ on Tuesdays, its ideologies of ‘straightening out’ and writing down kastom, was then part of a long-term political struggle. Both the millenarian aura of this project (see Keesing, 1978) and its more directly political challenge to colonial rule in the form of a ‘Committee’ that settled legal disputes according to ‘custom’ to prevent their being referred to and resolved by the government’s legal structure, have continued into the post-colonial period.

**Contemporary struggle by Kwaio traditionalists**

All the major issues crystallizing Kwaio discontent in the 1950s – the threat to ancestral ways represented by Western-derived laws (particularly with regard to such culturally-charged issues as adultery), the threat to ancestral lands and ways posed by invasive Evangelistic Christianity (see Keesing, 1989), taxation without visible return – had been clearly articulated by Kwaio leaders in the 1920s, in their confrontation with Bell and the early missionaries (Keesing and Corris, 1980). Strikingly, they represent major issues in the confrontations between Kwaio Fadanga (‘Council’) – successor to Koumitii – and the post-colonial provincial and central governments in the late 1980s. Kwaio Fadanga have insisted on collecting tax themselves, and not paying revenue to Malaita Province. They continue to resist the application of national law within their area, insisting on settlement of disputes according to kastom. To their longstanding grievances, they have added a claim for US$341,941,000,000 in compensation from gafamanu – no one is quite sure which government, but it
seems not to make much difference – for the acts of wanton killing and rape, destruction of property and desecration committed by the punitive expedition of 1927 (Keesing, 1992: 161).

Kwaio Fadanga organized armed confrontation to force abandonment of a federal parliamentary election in late 1986, resulting in the East Kwaio seat being declared vacant. In the face of warriors brandishing clubs, spears and bows and arrows, the Adventist Mission Hospital on the Kwaio coast at Atoifi was evacuated. Some seven months later, the election was held in the coastal Christian villages under heavy police guard, and the resulting violence led to mass tear-gassing of the traditionalists of Kwaio Fadanga. The latter were led into the fray by their ‘Paramount Chief’ Folofo’u – a man of little political or ritual importance in ‘real’ Kwaio life. Yet this man, occupying a ‘chiefly’ status totally meaningless in pre-colonial (and everyday) Kwaio society, is recognized by the government as the legitimate customary political leader of the Kwaio people. Indeed, this Gilbert and Sullivan discourse of invented customs and non-existent chiefs culminated in a demand that the Christians who voted pay compensation for violating a ritual injunction invoked by a chief: ‘In Kwaio custom, when the chief taboos something, no commoners can disobey.’ For a people living at the margins of anarchy, this is heady stuff.

The claim for billions of dollars as compensation for the depredations of the Bell punitive expedition is presented as based on ‘Kwaio custom’. It itemizes the amounts sought in terms of indigenous categories (compensation for inflicting death, compensation for spilling blood, compensation for defiling a woman’s purity, compensation to purify the desecration of a sacred place or object). The total number of 1250 victims whose death is attributed to the punitive expedition is meaningful only in indigenous terms, in that it includes hundreds whose deaths in the intervening decades have been attributed to the wrath of the ancestors as a result of the desecrations in 1927. Despite this customary orientation, the framing of the demand is – unintentionally – cast in a kind of Black Mass parody of British legalism. Here once more, we find the discourse of anti-colonial (and anti-post-colonial) resistance pervasively structured by the discourse of colonial domination, as it was locally perceived and understood. When I advised Folofo’u in 1984 that the claim was not valid in terms of European or international law, his response was ‘It’s valid in terms of our law!’: but Kwaio loa, so conceptualized, is constructed in opposition and correspondence to that which has historically been invoked to end Malaitan autonomy.

In all this, the discourse of colonial domination has been implicit. We need to look more closely at the way the conceptual structures of colonial
rule shaped the experiences and perception of Solomon Islanders and hence provided categorical structures and symbols in terms of which counter-colonial struggle was framed.

The conceptualization of sovereignty

Europeans in the Pacific, as elsewhere on the frontiers of imperialist expansion, systematically denied sovereignty in a European sense to indigenous peoples. To have done otherwise would have been to define as acts of military invasion and occupation what in colonial discourse were cast as acts of civilizing, protecting, controlling. Where it suited European purposes, as in obtaining lands for plantations or settlement, governments or individuals staged rituals (or mock-rituals) of purchase, from what they construed to be local ‘owners’: in that sense, lands were acknowledged to be owned. But political rights were systematically denied to the indigenous occupants.

Thus, when these peoples responded to acts of invasion with acts of armed resistance, these were defined by Europeans as ‘outrages’. In the Solomons, attacks on recruiting ships or military vessels or planters or missionaries were acts of savage murder, outrages that had to be punished. At the outset, in this process, indigenous peoples incorporated the Europeans into their categorical structures and cultural principles (as Sahlins [1985] has shown for Hawaiians and Maori). Thus Malaitans seeking vengeance for young men who had died in Queensland defined any white man engaged in recruiting as a suitable target for revenge: blood bounties were put up and paid following cultural principles of categorical equivalence (Keesing, 1986).

When British colonial rule was imposed on the Solomons, as elsewhere it was clothed in the symbols of sovereignty, European style: the flag, the King, the plumes and swords of Tulagi. (It was also clothed in the symbols of caste domination, in a world of white supremacy where ‘natives’ served, worked and obeyed and ‘white men’ ruled and commanded; see Keesing, 1992). With European power secured and extended into the ‘bush’ through Headmen and ‘native’ Constabulary, with a head tax imposed as a form of tribute to force subjugation and as a mechanism to force young men into plantation labour, with local political autonomy crushed through the hanging of those who perpetuated blood feuding, Solomon Islanders could no longer incorporate Europeans into their categorical structures and cultural projects.

We gain insights into the political and ideological confrontations entailed by pacification if we focus on the crucial early period when the
discourse of sovereignty and colonial legitimacy confronted the discourse of cultural autonomy. In 1911, two years after the establishment of a Government station on Malaita, the British High Commissioner of the Western Pacific, Sir Frederick May, suggested that the cycles of blood feuding in the Malaita interior could be broken if a ‘combined force’ including Panjabi Sikhs or Pathans ‘visit the villages of the Bushmen’ and ‘explain to them’ that the ‘Government will punish them if they do not desist from their lawless practices’ (Keesing, 1992: 228–9). There is a direct conceptual line connecting this 1911 view of customary blood feuds by the indigenous occupants of an island one has invaded and conquered as ‘lawless practices’ and the imprisonment of the leaders of their anti-colonial struggle thirty-seven years later for violating British sedition laws of 1798. On the other side, there is continuity as well. One of two men who assassinated the first missionary in Kwaio country in 1911 became, thirty-five years later, a prominent Maasina Rule chief; so did the son of Basiana, Bell’s assassin.

When, in the 1920s, Kwaio strongmen were eventually faced with a direct challenge to their autonomy by the formidable District Officer Bell, in the form of taxation and arrests and hangings for culturally legitimate homicides, the stage was set for a desperate confrontation. One 1926 incident gives revealing insights into the way, even at this early stage, acts of resistance were structured by the categories and symbology of domination. The most feared of the Kwaio warriors, Basiana, appeared at the tax collection; Bell demanded that he, like others, pay his five shilling head tax, acknowledging his subjugation. Basiana presented Bell with four shillings. ‘Bastard!’, shouted Bell. ‘Where is your fifth shilling?’ Basiana promised to pay his fifth shilling in the morning. Walking miles back to his mountain hamlet, Basiana smashed a goldlip shell pendant consecrated to his ancestor, and through the night he ground a fragment of shell down until it was the size and shape of a shilling piece. In the morning, he handed it to Bell: ‘The other four had your King on them; this one has my ancestor on it!’ A year later, Basiana smashed Bell’s head with a rifle barrel.

When in the late 1930s a Kwaio cult prophet preached resistance to British authority in the name of the ancestress La’a’aka and foretold the destruction of Tulagi, a key symbol of resistance was a flag (*fulake*) said to have flown above the palisaded cult centre (Keesing, 1978, 1980, 1981; Bennett, 1986). My evidence suggests that this flag may never have existed physically; but it became a symbol of a challenge to colonial authority, again using the semiology of the Europeans.

This *fulake* and Basiana’s fifth shilling strikingly illustrate how acts of counter-colonial resistance were framed in the language and symbology of
colonial domination. Malaitan experience – and hence Malaitan identity – has been shaped in more global ways by the institutions of colonial state and economy.

**Categories of colonial sociology**

I have written elsewhere (Keesing, 1992) of how the conceptual structures of colonial sociology have acquired a reality within colonial and post-colonial states largely independent of any salience they may have had in relation to pre-European society. ‘Tribes’ in Africa, ‘castes’ and ‘tribes’ in India, were constructed conceptually and institutionally out of highly complex pre-colonial social forms. In the Solomons as elsewhere in Melanesia, both the administrative structures and the plantation economy of the colonial state operated so as to create new categories – districts, tribes – and ethnic stereotypes – ‘Malaitaman’, ‘Man Tanna’. Men from particular ‘tribes’ or islands were assigned appropriate places in a colonial division of labour according to essentialist notions of their character. What I find most striking here is not the way Islanders were led into false consciousness in attributing salience to non-existent categories and identities; but rather, the way the social, political and economic structures of colonial domination and plantation economy made these non-existent entities *real*, in terms of the experience of the Islanders. In the world of plantations, Malaitans became a relevant social unit; Malaitans were forced to live together, work together, fight together vis-a-vis other Islanders, resist together vis-a-vis Europeans. Their enemies and rivals – the ‘Westen’ (Western Solomons) or ‘Solomone’ (Guadalcanal) people – similarly constituted colonially constructed entities (Keesing, 1992). A similar categorical unity was created among ‘Waetemane’, the Europeans, whose only ultimate solidarity lay in their caste separation and superiority.

The reality, economic and political, of such colonially constructed categories for those who lived in and through them allows us to understand how, in Maasina Rule and subsequently in regional separatism, the unities and identities proclaimed in political struggle have been those created by and in the colonial state.

The Malaitans who proclaimed their collective resistance to the British administration in Maasina Rule appealed to a pan-Malaitan identity that had historically been crystallized within the plantation world (Keesing, 1986, 1992). We have seen how Maasina Rule leaders organized their political structure to correspond to and counter the structure of colonial control (in the form of Headmen, Districts and Subdistricts). The Kwaio I encountered in 1963, trying to codify and legitimize their version of
kastom, and with ‘chiefs’ organized according to tax ‘lines’, represent a stage in this process. As we will see, the process continues, with the various language groups on Malaita codifying and legitimizing their versions of custom, in a dialectical process of denying and resisting the capitalist transformation of their society while at the same time seeking to control resources, patronage and political power within the post-colonial state.

The discourse of Christianity and racial supremacy

A Manichean conceptual structure is embodied in contemporary political rhetoric regarding ‘custom’ and ‘the Melanesian way’. Most contemporary Solomon Islanders have grown up within one of the main versions of Christianity – South Sea Evangelical Church, Uniting Church, Seventh Day Adventist, Catholic, Anglican – and have deeply internalized not only Christian doctrine but Christian representations of their own ancestors and customs. The ancestors are manifestations of the Devil;¹² the past was a time of fear, murder and superstition. Metaphors of light and darkness, of conversion, of rebirth, and depictions of Islanders as children are deeply internalized (Keesing, 1992).

In my own work among diehard pagans who have fought for almost a century to keep Christianity out of their mountain fastnesses, and who sacrifice still to their ancestors, who hold sway and enforce their taboos in a shrinking and embattled universe, I have been struck by the ways in which this struggle is conceptualized in the terms of Christian discourse. My friend Bita Saetana (Peter Satan) and his fellow pagans refer to themselves as wikiti, ‘the wicked’, or as ta’a i ’itini ‘heathen people’ (see Keesing, 1992).

European ways of talking about race have been similarly incorporated into the discourses of resistance. Like those who – from the negritude of Senghor to the Black is Beautiful of Cleaver and Carmichael – have adopted the conceptual structures of racism in fighting against it, the Kwaio resist racist domination by counterposing ta’a bobola’a, ‘black people’, to ta’a kwao, ‘white people’.

More sinister than this preservation of categorical structures while reversing the valences is the way the semiology of racial superiority – European cultural construction – has been incorporated into Melanesian discourse. We find this even among the most defiantly traditionalist Solomon Islanders, in relation to one another. I have heard young people assess one another’s, and their own, desirability as lovers on the basis of how dark or light their skins are. Such racialist discourse enters the political arena as well. One of the most inflammatory incidents a decade ago, when
hostility between ‘Western’ and ‘Malaita’ people was running high on the eve of independence and secessionist rhetoric was in the air, was a poem written by a Malaita public servant alluding to the black skins and bad smell of Western Solomon Islanders. This can well lead us to the political present.

**Colonial structures in contemporary political discourse**

The paradox with which I began, of both fiercely traditionalist pagans and westernizing Christians idealizing their ancestral culture and committed to codifying kastom, can be broadened if we look at the uses of kastom in contemporary Melanesian political rhetoric.

For we find Melanesian politicians waxing eloquent about ‘the Melanesian way’, and rhetorically idealizing custom and village life, even though they are hell bent on development and westernization; and even though they have never lived in villages or followed traditional cultural ways. Many of them grew up in towns and were educated overseas. This new Melanesian elite is generally committed to thoroughly Western and materially affluent lifestyles. Moreover, most of those who idealize the past in their rhetorical moments pursue in their political careers policies that marginalize and pauperize hinterlands villages and erode their subsistence orientations and social values.

We can be cynical about the way the appeal to ‘traditional cultures’ and the simple virtues of village life, and the attachments of the urban elite to their ancestral heritages, is most clearly articulated and dramatized at election time. But less cynically, the sense of alienation among the new Melanesian elites is, I think, deep and in some instances agonizing; a preoccupation with cultural roots withered and lost, or never grown, can at a psychological level be genuine even where, at the level of rhetoric, it disguises economic and political realities.

I have noted elsewhere that the elevation of kastom as political symbol – ‘culture’ in an idealized and reified form – is not only relatively devoid of content; it can be invoked for seemingly contradictory political purposes. Thus kastom can be a symbol of national or even pan-regional unity, in appeals to ‘the Melanesian way’; or it can be a symbol of separatism or ethnic rivalry. And of course, the loyalties and identities to which Melanesian ideologues now appeal – ‘Solomon Islands’, ‘Vanuatu’, ‘Western Province’, ‘Melanesia’, ‘The Third World’ – are themselves Western creations.

‘Custom’ as symbolic construct represents, for the new Melanesian elites, a process of fetishization (in Marx’s sense) as well as idealization.
Material tokens (costumes or artifacts), decontextualized performances of music or dance devoid of the religious meanings with which they were once infused, myths or (especially in the Solomons) 'custom stories', have come through a process of metonymic representation and fetishization to represent the whole of a people's cultural tradition: so that by wearing 'traditional dress' once a year or holding an occasional 'custom dance' or supporting the museum, one can imagine that one is preserving ancestral cultures while one's political action is in fact eroding them. (This process is by no means confined to Melanesia: the cultural integrity of ethnic minorities all over the world is being obliterated while the external tokens of cultural diversity are being ritually displayed and dramatized.)

Even if we narrow our view to peoples invoking a 'tribal' identity, kastom has a spurious ring. When Kwara’ae ancestors are connected through Malaita origin myths to the Lost Tribes of Israel (Burt, 1982), or the Kwaio 'Paramount Chief' invokes taboos, the 'custom' so hypostatized and externalized as political symbol need have very little to do with the actual ways of the actual ancestors. But perhaps this is to take too naive an anthropological view of cultural authenticity. The 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1982) is by now a fairly well understood process; and perhaps all customs and political systems have ultimately suspect historical credentials, as Hobbes suggested.

In the present context, what interests me more is the way the conceptual structures of colonial discourse are preserved in this symbolic elevation of the ancestral past. One of the compelling tropic structures of missionary discourse and white supremacy was what JanMohamed (1986: 80, 82) calls the 'Manichean allegory', which defines 'a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between black and white, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and other, subject and object'; this allegory effects a 'transformation of racial difference into moral and metaphysical difference'.

Both in their rhetoric of kastom and their rhetoric of modernization, the discourse of the new elite is strikingly shaped by the discourse of colonial domination. The phenomenon is again a more general one. If Black is Beautiful, then the world is still a world of black and white. Leo Kuper (1974: 91) has recorded a similar Manicheism in the conceptual structures and ideologies of anti-hegemonic struggle in Africa: 'One of the resistance songs of the African National Congress . . . carried as a refrain, the missionary perspective, “While We Were Still in Darkness”.'

What makes these phenomena important and theoretically challenging is not, then, the particularities of their elaboration in Melanesia: they are
not, like Cargo Cults, a special feature of our region. We need to step back and take a wider perspective.

Conclusions

As Gramsci suggested, and others writing in a Gramscian tradition such as my colleague Ranajit Guha (1983a) have further documented, the cultures and politics of subalternity are inherently oppositional. They are, to use Gramsci’s phrase, structured by a ‘series of negations’. And, indeed, they may be structured by ‘affirmations’ as well: that is the classic hegemonic process, in which subalterns are deeply implicated in their own subjugation.

Although European colonialism provides striking manifestations of this general phenomenon, it is essential not to depict colonialists as the world’s first villains. A view is all too often expressed in rhetorical literature of the Third World that colonial invasion constituted Original Sin. (In many cases, a direct lineage can be traced from pre-colonial elites oppressing lower classes and cultural minorities to the comprador classes of the colonial state to the elites of the post-colonial era – who lay all ills at the feet of the colonial masters.) Colonialism has provided important variations on themes old and common in human history, and clearly represented in Europe itself as well as in the non-Western world.

One of the dynamics in the colonial situation has been the deep internalization by the colonized of the discourse of domination, with regard to race, cultural inferiority and the ancestral past. The indigenous Fijians now imposing ‘Fijian customs’ on Indo-Fijians in the form of Sabbath Laws are even more striking than the Solomon Islands politicians persecuting Kwaio traditionalists for continuing to practice a Melanesian religion – the worship of ‘devildevils’ – in a Melanesian country.

But equally important, as the Kwaio case shows, is that in a situation of subjugation, confrontational politics are inherently structured in the terms and categories of the dominant. In part, as Stuart Hall has reminded me with regard to the struggles of West Indians in the urban UK, this is because of a strategic realization that one must meet the enemy on his own turf. The Kwaio case shows how deep and subtle this process is. If one wants to challenge colonial assertions of sovereignty, one must do it in a language of flags and ancestors-on-coins, in place of kings. If one wants to challenge colonial legal statutes and biblical rules by asserting the legitimacy of ancestral rules and customary codes, one must do so through codification, through writing a counter-Bible/counter-lawbook. The ‘series of negations’ through which counter-hegemonic discourse is framed
is oppositional both in the hegemonic impress of the discourse of domination and in the politics of resistance.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Paul Cohen, Annette Hamilton, Margaret Jolly, Nick Modjeska, Kalpana Ram and others who contributed to discussion of the paper when I presented it in a seminar at Macquarie University on 19 April 1988, and to Ranajit Guha for many insights regarding the cultures and conceptualizations of subaltern groups.

2. I use 'groups' loosely here, to avoid long explication of what constitute subaltern elements in complex social formations. The work of Ranajit Guha and his colleagues (Guha 1983a,b, 1984a,b, 1985, 1986, 1987) provides necessary theoretical guidelines on this point.

3. My initial plan had been to work in the east 'Are'are ‘passage’ of Takataka. This, although I did not know it, was a center of 'Are'are neotraditionalism; this project of codifying 'Are'are custom and recording descent group genealogies, sanctified by major shell valuables from each group, had been extended into southeastern Kwaio – where a rival movement to codify Kwaio custom had emerged. Both 'Are'are and rival Kwaio had heard, through the District Officer, of the American coming to 'write down the custom'. I changed my plan at the last minute, and sought a new fieldwork site, when I met French anthropologist Daniel de Coppet – also bound for Takataka – in Sydney on the eve of my departure for the Solomons.

4. Or alafa, the Kwaio equivalent of an 'Are'are/Small Malaita word for a hereditary leader, a term almost never used in other contexts.

5. The Kwara'ae cult leader Sisimia, who had converted from the South Sea Evangelical Mission to the Jehovah's Witnesses and was preaching not only a syncretic doctrine of Old Testament and Kwara'ae origin myths but biblically-sanctioned refusal to pay tax, periodically sent messages to the area where I was working denouncing me as a false prophet. For this and later Kwara'ae custom movements, see Burt (1982); the movement led by Dolaiasi in northern Malaita is (badly) described by Cochrane (1970), and discussed in Keesing (1982a).

6. In a sense not marked for gender.

7. In his unpublished autobiography, which I am translating from Kwaio.

8. And general Western cultural ideas, to which the Americans subscribed, about polities and political leadership.

9. In 1979, Kwaio leaders refused to allow police to take custody of two men who, in separate assaults, had attempted, and almost succeeded in, murder – voicing the view, dating back to Maasina Rule, that indigenous custom worked better than European law in resolving what the latter would class as criminal as well as civil cases, through payment of compensation.

10. He is, however, a respected diviner.

11. Some 55 to 70 people were actually killed during the punitive expedition, and
some children and old people died of exposure while hiding in the bush. A further 31 died while in prison, as a result of a dysentery epidemic; and 6 were hanged (see Keesing and Corris, 1980).

12. And are called ‘devildevils’ in Solomons Pidgin English.

13. It should be unobjectionable to use sexist pronouns when talking about ‘the enemy’, although with reference to the land of Margaret Thatcher it may not be totally apt.

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