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**DIALOGICS OF THE BODY:
THE MORAL AND THE GROTESQUE IN TWO SEPIK RIVER SOCIETIES**

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Abstract

This article is a comparative study of two rituals practiced by the Eastern Iatmul and the Murik Lakes people of the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea. Specifically, we focus on the relationship between meanings of the body which, on the one hand, naturalize the status quo and, on the other, transgress it. Our dual purpose is 1) to instance a theoretical relationship between ritual and society that centers upon ambivalence about, rather than support for, sociopolitical order and 2) to propose a hitherto unacknowledged theme in Sepik regional ethnography.

This is a comparative study of two rituals, *naven* practiced by the Eastern Iatmul and *noganoga'sarii* performed by the Murik Lakes people of the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea (1). Our particular focus is on the relationship between meanings of the body which, on the one hand, naturalize the status quo and, on the other, subvert it. The purpose of our project is twofold: 1) we want to illustrate a theoretical relationship between ritual and society that centers upon ambivalence about, rather than support for, sociopolitical order and 2) we want to foreground a theme in the ethnography of the Sepik region that has not been previously discussed.

To begin, we introduce the theoretical genealogies of the two categories of the body, which we call the moral and the grotesque, that have guided our analysis. We then document tensions that are raised by these contrary categories as they are played out in the two rites celebrated by Eastern Iatmul and the Murik. In these two rites, startling sequences of mock-aggression, defilement and ribaldry take place. These embodiments of misrule and indecency, we argue, contest the respective norms and standards in each society. While differently shaped, they are nevertheless hewn from a similar cultural ideal, namely, a maternal body. In the Sepik River region, we conclude, the maternal body is the subject of an ambivalent forum in which men and women take solace, but also confront, and, to a certain extent, defy, the mysteries of their gender identities and the reproduction of culture herself.

1. The Body, Moral and Grotesque

1.1 *The Moral Body:*

In the anthropology of ritual, the vision of the body we call moral can be traced to the early modern functionalism of Emile Durkheim (1995), Robert Hertz (1960) and Marcel Mauss (1979). Here, two concepts of the body prevail: individual and collective. The individual body, viewed as pre-social or natural, is stigmatized as the source of egocentric emotions and behaviors. By contrast, the collective body is rule-bound and, above all else, differentiated into groups. If the individual body lacks all restriction and decorum, then the collective body is an exemplar of order itself. In this view, which has framed so much of the analysis of ritual, culture consists of "collective representations" or "social facts" that control the physiological and psychological impulses to which individuals must inevitably fall prey (Durkheim 1995; Douglas 1970: vii). Eccentricity, passion, and crime are all muted by the authoritative values of religion, the obligations of labor, the sanctions of law, and the leadership of political authority. Through the triumph of "the collectivity," the body becomes more than just a symbol of social organization: it becomes a naturalizing instrument that perpetuates the status quo. The collective body, in short, dresses the individual body in a moral sensibility.

Take hair, for example. Hallpike (1969) argued against Leach (1958) that hair length symbolizes the proximity of the individual to the centers of moral order. "Cutting hair," as Hallpike put it, "equals social control (1969:264)." Here, the moral and somatic bodies were fused. What is more, careful monitoring of its classifications and distinctions--between male/female, life/death, pure/polluted, formal/informal, inside/outside, front/back, and upper/lower--becomes a paramount obligation performed by the masters of culture (see also Laporte 1993). As Mary Douglas wrote:

A complex social system...uses different degrees of ...embodiment to express the social hierarchy. The more refinement, the less smacking of...lips when eating, the less mastication, the less the sound of breathing and walking, the more carefully modulated the laughter, the more controlled the signs of anger, the clearer comes the priestly-aristocratic image (1973:101-02, see also Elias 1994).

We call this teleological construction, in which bodily boundaries function to naturalize socio-political order, the “moral body” framework. Our notion of morality does not necessarily or exclusively refer to justice, but only to the ways that the body has been constructed to support, and otherwise legitimate, hegemonic institutions in culture.

Studies of the body in ritual have tended to privilege the maintenance, rather than the contestation of, collective life. This bias is most conspicuous in classic discussions of “rites of reversal.” Here, the body suffers disfigurement and disarticulation in order, so it is said, to revitalize political order (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1968). Zulu “rituals of rebellion” allegedly alleviate tensions in the body politic by periodically profaning the king (Gluckman 1963). Disrespectful joking among the Dogon stabilizes affinal animosity (Radcliffe-Brown 1965a and b). During initiation rites, the nakedness of Ndembu novices disarranges everyday cultural reality for the purposes of moral education (Turner 1967). And so forth.

Without necessarily endorsing his view of the mind, we take Freud’s famous conclusion in *Totem and Taboo* (1952): the relationship of the body in ritual to collective life is, and must remain, inherently troubled. Ritual order arises from, and remains indivisibly linked to, ambivalent violence, rather than to a renewal of the status quo. To be sure, the “moral body” framework has made important contributions to ritual studies. This, we do not dispute. However, it has hindered analysis of how representations of order relate to subversive, tragic, and comic imagery of the body. In our view, culture is not only contained or constrained by rules and authority. That is, it cannot be reduced to a moral body. Instead, we see culture as made up of unmerged, independent voices contesting plural, or equivocal, visions of the body. Where closure was, polyphony shall be. Our two Sepik River rituals, as we intend to show, constitute an irreducible dialogue, scripted in a bodily language. Here, we find Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque, and the framework of dialogism in which it is conceptually embedded, to be theoretically valuable.

1.2 *The Grotesque Body:*

Among other things at stake in Bakhtin’s celebrated study of Rabelais (1984a) is nothing less than a history of selfhood in the West. In the Middle Ages, Bakhtin finds two worlds represented by two politicized bodies. But, instead of seeing an instrumental relationship between them as might Durkheim, Bakhtin is primarily concerned to sustain an exegesis of bodily exaggerations and ambivalences, the discourse that he terms “grotesque realism” (1984a:18). In medieval cosmology, reigning figures of moral authority gazed upward towards the heavens. The values of this ecclesiastical body were ascetic, its behavior repressed, its demeanor somber. It was a differentiated body, directed by contemplation, rationality, and moderation. Orifices that threatened its integrity were effectively shut. This moral body was all surfaces.

Below the upper reaches of church and state, however, the gay and triumphant, yet degrading, folk comedy of carnival prevailed. In carnival, birth and death were united in such images as laughing, pregnant, old women.

There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its twofold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body (Bakhtin 1984a: 25-26).

During carnival, orifices and protrusions reached exaggerated proportions. A ‘head’ full of thoughtful restraint and contemplation did not control the carnivalesque body. It was ruled by the “lower bodily stratum” (Bakhtin 1984a: 21). Not only did carnival ridicule the sovereign order, but also it was all encompassing. No one was spared its mockery. Degrading images of church and state were simultaneously directed at the merrymakers themselves.

The ambivalent, inclusive bodily gestalt of carnival mostly faded by the Renaissance. The Enlightenment destroyed its comedy. Grotesque realism gave way to an atomized concept of the

individual, as liberal humanist subjectivity fixed the formerly fluid boundaries between self and other, inner and outer. Ridicule, irony, and sarcasm became simply negative, rather than ambivalent and inclusive. "The renewing earth was lost with the rise of rationalist science" (Bishop 1990:50). These changes reduced the world and its objects to a single system of meaning, set in a single tone of voice: rational objectivity and dogmatic seriousness. By the 18th century, the interior psyche became little more than a private repository for whatever remained of the grotesque body. Within modern subjectivity, it is true, the grotesque had its theoretical moment within the Freudian unconscious. By mid-20th century, though, monsters within and without the self were largely understood either as symptoms of insanity or as plainly evil. Comedy had become sublimated aggression. The comedian was no longer immersed in, but had become alienated from, his audience, an audience he wants "to kill" with jokes.

Its decline in the West notwithstanding, carnivalesque comedy remains an analytically powerful tool for understanding ritual, particularly where subjectivity remains submerged rather than individuated. Carnival is a theory of ritual writ ambivalent, at once transgressive as well as iconoclastic and utopian (Stallybrass and White 1986). Rather than ruled by the official, or canonical discourse of the sovereign, the fundamental condition of carnival is heteroglossia, an irresolvable play of contrary moralities. In carnival, punning, oxymoron, parody, ridicule, and vulgarity rule discourse. In such a world, we find no cybernetic governors, or class struggles. Here, "the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken" (Bakhtin 1984a:166) (2). The unity of culture in carnival is delicate, but telling; it is said to be rupture-prone *and* unfinalized, open to the "double-faced fullness of life" (Bakhtin 1984a:62).

The relationship between the grotesque body of carnival and the moral body of collective order is indissoluble as figure to ground. Da Matta (1983) underestimates the grotesque by contending that it revitalizes a sense of what humanity is not. Any construction of the grotesque merely as moral antithesis fails to capture its dialogicality. The grotesque body revitalizes a sense of what humanity both is *and* is not. In other words, it espouses contradictory sentiments that never achieve closure, or dialectical synthesis. According to Bakhtin, the dialogics of the grotesque neither support nor resist the moral body in any unilateral way. The laughing, pregnant hag, then, does not resolve anything in favor of anybody. The grotesque disruption of everyday relationships, its dialogized assault on single-toned systems of meaning and a single-voiced regimes of authority interrogates the moral body. What is the outcome of this inquiry? Ongoing critical reflexivity that never strays from its subject.

For our ethnographic purpose, which is to compare the grotesque body in analogous rituals performed in two Sepik River societies, the import of the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism resides in the alternative it offers to the moral body framework (3). That is to say, it presents a nonreductive view of the ritual body which does not insist that abuse, profanity, impropriety, and similar tropes of licentiousness, inevitably lead back to conformity, etiquette, civility or political authority. Through dialogism, the grotesque body appears as what it is: one voice in a great, prosaic system of ambivalence through which decentralizing and disunifying discourse combines and goes forward together with legitimate representations of the body.

We are keenly aware of the shifting sands of contemporary meaning in the postcolony and we acknowledge the historicity of all subject positions. Ritual practices in Papua New Guinea (PNG) are undergoing and have undergone continuous alteration. But the data to which we now turn are nevertheless based in ongoing fieldwork, in participant-observation, in debate and discussion with informants (4). We thus make every effort, as we have done elsewhere, to distinguish and separate the contemporary from the historical (see Lipset 2004a and b; Silverman 2001). Still, we must insist that our exegeses depict living of ritual practices whose significance cannot be reduced to and understood as a dialogue with modernity. The grotesque bodies enacted in the Sepik do not primarily comment upon their encompassment by capitalism and the state, but rather serve to disrupt and distort the prevailing moral bodies in their respective communities, and thus to express a wide-ranging ambivalence about masculinity, motherhood and culture as a whole. And one image that recurs in these transgressive discourses combines feces and aggression with regeneration.

2. Intimations of the Grotesque in the Eastern Iatmul Moral Body

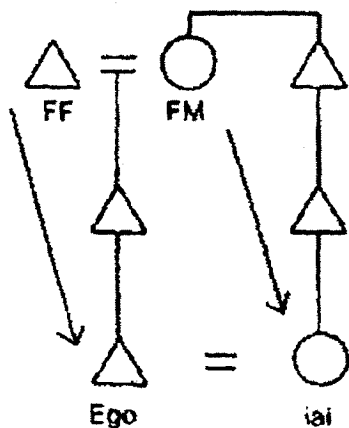
Tambunum is a fishing and horticultural, Iatmul-speaking village located along the lush banks of the middle Sepik River. Extended families tend ample gardens full of tubers, vegetables, fruits, and groves of sago palm, from which men and women cooperatively process the local starch, or sago. The surrounding grasslands contain wild pigs as well as various small mammals and birds. The river, of course, offers a

fairly reliable supply of fish. Eastern Iatmul also participate in regular markets with inland, Sawos-speaking hamlets. Formerly, they exchanged fish for sago and meat. Today, they pay cash. A fairly reliable tourist and art trade allows Eastern Iatmul to indulge in modern tastes for rice, flour, tinned mackerel, and so forth, which they purchase in village and town tradestores.

Tambunum is made up three, largely exogamous, patrilineal clans. Each clan consists of lineages, segmented into “branches.” A group defines its collective identity on the basis of an exclusive corpus of totemic names that refer to mythic-historic migrations and events. Primogeniture organizes succession to clan and lineage authority (Metraux 1978). But men reinforce, and sometimes contest, hereditary status through the male prerogatives of ritual prominence, totemic knowledge, magic, and, long ago, warfare (Harrison 1990; Silverman 1996, 1997). The moral body is incarnated through what Godelier (1986) has called “great men” (see also Godelier and Strathern 1991). Unlike Melanesian big men, for whom power arises from organizing large-scale competitive exchanges and making compensation payments, Iatmul “great men” win or lose prestige through the management of totemic esoterica within the male cult. Despite the ubiquity of consumer goods and the trappings of modernity, leadership remains totemic and masculine.

Yet this androcentric and patrilineal body is offset by a deeply felt attachment to motherhood (Bateson 1958). For men and women alike, mothers epitomize uterine creativity, nurture, and selfless generosity. Eastern Iatmul men are emotionally attached not only to their own mothers, but also to the *ideal* of motherhood, which arouses in them a combination of nostalgia and longing. As they say, “my mother, therefore I am,” adding that only mothers bore you, fed you, cleansed your body, and carried you about the village (see Figure 1). Two images of the body dominate moral-political discourse. One body, likened by men to a skeleton, is constituted by patrilineal inheritance. Sons receive the totemic names and cosmic identity of their paternal grandfathers, and “take the place” of their fathers in the politico-ritual system. The other body is represented by the flesh and is personified by women and mothers’ brothers who, as mother figures, feed children and “birth” men through wombs and male rituals. We see these two moral bodies, the authoritative and the sentimental, as dialogically united into a single, ambivalent, mutually relevant whole.

The equivocal relationship between these two bodies appears in several settings. In the semiotics of marriage, for example, Eastern Iatmul profess one prescriptive rule: a man should marry his FMBSD, one of many women he calls *iai* (see below).⁽⁵⁾ The preference for marrying second-generation cross-cousins explicitly arises from the emotional attachment of men to their mothers. In *iai* marriage, a man weds a woman his father calls “mother” (*nyame*). This way, it is said, the father “gets his mother back.” Indeed, the focal image in the vernacular phrasing of *iai* marriage is that of a father reuniting with his mother—a phrasing that, when actually enacted by the son, borders on incest. Men and women are passionate about *iai* marriage. Only for *iai* marriage do men instigate bridewealth exchanges long before the actual union, thus insuring that a “mother” will return as a son’s bride. Sometimes, the men and women of a lineage will even barricade their houses with a bamboo fence to prevent young women who are not the prospective groom’s *iai* from seducing him at night.



For all of their valuation of FMBSD marriage, however, the relationship between matrikin and patriliney is more problematic than moral. This is evident in the role of the mother’s brother, a contrary figure who combines maternal nurture and male antagonism. Normatively, the avunculate relationship instances maternal values of tenderness and devotion. Nephews ought to support their uncles during disputes, even if they must oppose their own fathers by doing so. Reciprocally, uncles should console their nephews during the painful process of male initiation. Uncles may also protect them by tying decorative charms onto their sisters’ children in order to stave off illness. And, the mother’s brother should feed his sister’s children, feed them to advance bodily growth,

strength, and their overall vitality. In turn, they should give him valuables. To all outward appearances, these exchanges are preeminently moral—and they are conceptualized as such in the culture. But the gifts are also competitive, as Eastern Iatmul silently admit, since mothers’ brothers and sisters children each

strive to outgive the other both in material goods and expressed sentiments. Hence, some uncles will quietly, slyly try to hinder their nephews' goals, and some nephews will even try to avoid their uncles. Still, Silverman is unaware of any instances when an uncle or nephew ever expressed the slightest annoyance about one another. At the same time, his nephew, the only man who could approach him without posing a threat, murdered a great mythic hero. The avunculate relationship, then, does not simply mimic the nurturing, emotional ideals of motherhood. Rather, the mother's brother brings "her" moral idealization into contact with the world of masculine aggression.

A similar revision of motherhood occurs between fathers and sons. Filial relationships are tense and Oedipal (6). Sons, we noted above, politically "replace" their fathers. They also inherit the houses their fathers built, and in so doing consign them to live out their days in small, oftentimes dilapidated, shelters. Symbolically, dwellings 'are' mothers. Large houses, erected by fathers at enormous material and emotional cost, are ornamented with female breasts, face, woven hood, and earrings (see Figure 2). Like vigilant mothers, they watch over the domestic ward. The interior of a house, meanwhile, is called the "belly" or *iai*—the very same term Eastern Iatmul use to designate a man's ideal bride, as we have seen, and she is a woman his father calls "mother." All in all, men see houses as a positive image of mothering: a personified source of food, shelter, and warmth.

But domestic houses, no less than maternal uncles, defy moral harmony. A man who tarries about the domestic ward may deplete his body of its masculine strength. And with many houses, a man can only enter the shelter of its "belly" through a doorway that is positioned to resemble a vagina, and called as such, a vagina that might even be decorated with paintings of crocodile teeth. From this perspective, the house threatens to pollute men, who view any encounter with female bodily fluids as a threat to their bodily integrity.

While fathers are fervent about obtaining matrimonial "mothers" for their sons, sons dislodge their fathers from the architectural "mothers" they build. But this process of filial succession does not distress fathers, despite its maternal symbolism, since it occurs at a point in the life-cycle when fathers and sons engage in little or no contact. Fathers quit living in their houses. Should a father continue to inhabit his mother's architectural body, the fear is that he might hear the sounds of lovemaking between his son and daughter-in-law, a woman he calls, to repeat, "mother." The moral body of motherhood, then, poised delicately between longing and sexuality, effectively divides the filial bond between fathers and sons into ambivalence.

The relationship between the two most significant moral bodies in Eastern Iatmul culture, the maternal and the agnatic, is profoundly ambivalent, rather than solidary. The father yearns for "the return" of a young maternal body—the *iai*—to marry, not himself, but his son. The son, with whom the father identifies, and to whom he eventually delivers the maternal body in which he takes such pride—his house—he avoids completely. Moreover, we suggest that motherhood itself, as revealed by the official symbolism of doorways, is also a threatening construction. Now, having introduced several dimensions of this ambivalence, we turn to their deformity created during the famous *naven* rite.

3. The Grotesque Body in Naven

Iatmul people, as we learned from Bateson (1958), celebrate a child's initial performances of selected acts through a rite they call *naven*. Today, premier deeds worthy of honor still include the spearing and trapping of fish. Honored feats, too, are by no means confined to childhood. Thus modern pursuits are also fêted, such as the purchase of an outboard motor and airplane travel. A central actor in *naven*, the maternal uncle, is meant to cheer the growth and developing autonomy of his nieces and nephews. Thus *naven* rites mark and remark upon the increasing mastery of skills associated with the classic definition of maximal, or full, personhood, that Fortes defined as "a microcosm of the social order, incorporating its distinctive...norms of value" (1987:286).

Bateson, of course, was no Fortesian. But he did view *naven* primarily through the moral body framework. Bateson recognized that Iatmul politics were conflict ridden. The men he knew were endlessly rivalrous and self-assertive. They ignored all their rules, especially marriage prescriptions. The *naven* rite, he argued, served a key sociological function: it regularly renewed affinal ties between the mother's brother and his sister's children. That is, *naven* held society together. The rite also reversed normative gender: women became publicly raucous, or masculine, while otherwise contentious men assumed a maternal persona that enabled them to rejoice at the achievements of others. In our terms, Bateson was arguing that *naven* preserved the boundaries of the moral body. We do not seek to refute