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Working out abjection in the Panapompom bêche-de-mer fishery: race, economic change and the future in Papua New Guinea¹

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Abstract

This is a paper about how men from Panapompom, an island in Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea (PNG) understand how they relate to white people and imagine the future. Until recently, men from Panapompom understood themselves to be engaged in a project of 'development', in which they would become more and more similar to white people. This was a desirable future. However, changes in the way Panapompom work for money has resulted in a very different imagination of the future – one in which Panapompom people are not getting whiter, but blacker, and hence more and more excluded from the lives to which they aspire. Men now dive for bêch-de-mer, work which they regard as being particularly hard and dangerous. Diving has profound effects on the skin, blackening and hardening it, leading Panapompom men to liken themselves the machines that create the wealth that white people use. These 'mechanising' effects that diving has on the black body lead men to see white people as the sole beneficiaries of the bêch-de-mer industry, and black people as mere tools or extensions. For bêch-de-mer divers, value and desired forms of life are lodged in Australia, Europe or America, while they find themselves excluded from this future by their growing blackness.

Introduction

This is a paper about how men from Panapompom, an island in Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea (PNG) understand how they relate to the world and imagine the future. Until recently, Panapompom people understood themselves to be engaged in a project of 'development', in which they would become more and more similar to white people. This was a desirable future for Panapompom people, mainly because they aspired to the wealthy, easy life that white people appeared to them to enjoy. However, changes in the way Panapompom work for money has resulted in a very different imagination of the future – one in which Panapompom people are not getting whiter, but blacker, and hence more and more excluded from the lives to which they aspire.²

In a similar vein, it has recently been suggested by several anthropologists of Melanesia that indigenous people indulge in 'negative nationalism' (Knauff, 2002; Robbins, 1998b, 2005). This entails local people devaluing themselves relative to others, often people from America or Australia – places associated with white people.

These perspectives are clearly closely related to an earlier literature on cargo cults (Burridge, 1995; Lawrence, 1967; Lindstrom, 1990, 1993; Worsley, 1968). In their attention to a nexus between race, place and imagined futures, the world is imagined as a field of racially defined positions between which judgements can be made

² Most broadly, this paper's argument depends on a perspective that I adapt from Moore's (Moore, 1999, 2004) analysis of the global as a sort of imagination by which people subject themselves in terms of others who are, in the last analysis, imaginary (Appadurai, 1991). Examples include (Foster, 2002; Jackson, 1999; Wilk, 1995).

and relationships established, ultimately with the aim of securing a utopian future. Lattas has termed this kind of deployment of others to imagine the self a mode of 'mirroring' or of 'specularity' (Lattas, 1998).

From the perspective of negative nationalism, Melanesians are seen not as the endlessly hopeful adherents of cargo cults (Lindstrom, 1993), nor, it must be said as people pursuing the separatist politics of culture (Kasaipwalova, 1974; Keesing, 1992; Narakobi, 1983) as a route to utopia. Rather, local people find themselves one way or another outside the pale of the world they wish to inhabit, either through sin (Robbins, 1998a, 2007), poverty and class division (Gewertz & Errington, 1999; Smith, 1994), race (Bashkow, 2006), or other tropes of boundedness and identity, which serve to figure valued projects and subjects. The upshot for local people is exclusion from the futures which they desire, futures which seem constantly to be happening *somewhere else*.

Obviously, if Melanesians come to despise themselves on the basis of their backgrounds, race or history, this is in itself a political problem. Anthropologists have generally been slow to engage with it, not because of an abundance of evidence for feelings of this sort, but because our models of culture as a self-contained context of meaning-making make it very hard to engage with self-hatred, which requires an 'outside' perspective. Joel Robbins has perhaps gone furthest in dealing with this conundrum in a series of works that describe the ways Urapmin people from the western highlands of PNG revalue themselves in terms of Christianity (Robbins, 1998a, 1998b, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2007; see also contributions to Robbins & Wardlow, 2005).

Robbins' starting point is Sahlins' treatment of culture, which, in the bulk of his work is a theory of integration and cultural continuity (Sahlins, 1981, 1995, 2000). Robbins wants to understand how

Urapmin people come to reject their culture, as he sees it, and adopt another, Christianity, which compels them to regard their 'own culture' as backward and sinful. To this end, Robbins makes use of Sahlins' notion of 'humiliation' (Sahlins, 2005), by which people might come to hate and reject the people they are, and wish to be other people, thus bringing about the sort of cultural shift Robbins wishes to describe. Humiliation clearly requires grounds from which to be humiliated, and Robbins suggests that the 'paramount values' (he cites Dumont, 1980) embedded in different cultural complexes offer these positions for self-reflection.

The difficulty with Robbins' account is that ultimately, the idea of shifting 'between cultures' makes the relationship between culture and consciousness problematic. People who represent their culture to themselves either must be conscious wholly independently from their culture, or they must have another, prior culture 'inside' the one they critique. This is a general problem of thinking through the question of 'culture change'.

In this paper, I examine similar processes of alienation and exclusion. My perspective is different to Robbins', however, in that I reject the concept of culture; rather, I pose an alternative account, based on praxis rather than representations. In this paper, my aim is to work through the historical process of humiliation. However, I intend to employ the notion of work³ to suggest how exclusion and alienation become forceful in the embodied, emplaced praxis of Panapompom men, as opposed to their cultural representations. I am particularly interested in how the work of men from the north

³ Marx observes that "it is in the working over of the objective world that man first really affirms himself as a species-being ... and thus can look at his image in a world he has created" (Marx, 1977, p. 82). Work in this conception is consciousness (c.f. Searle, 2004).

coast of Panapompom makes them appear as the detritus of someone else's project of power or value – a position which, following Judith Butler's usage, I term 'abject' (Butler, 1993, 1997).

Panapompom is a small island in the Louisiade Archipelago of Milne Bay Province – a chain of islands running roughly northwest-southeast, somewhat to the south and east of the infamous 'kula ring'. Panapompom people speak Panapanaeati, a language they share with the inhabitants of nearby islands. The island's population is some 500 people at any time. North Panapompom has a population of about 360, of whom about 150 are adults and 40-60 are active men.⁴ A typical island community for the region, Panapompom people live from shifting horticulture, cultivating yams, cassava, bananas and sweet potatoes, and fish the lagoon that surrounds the island.⁵ In addition to subsistence activities, Panapompom people are keen participants in the money economy. Almost all of the money in circulation on Panapompom today comes from the collection and sale of *bêche-de-mer*, dried sea cucumber (Foale, 2005 gives a good overview).⁶ It is this industry and its implications for Panapompom men's identifications and understanding of their place in the world that forms the subject of this paper.

⁴ A highly mobile population makes definitive estimates problematic. These estimates are based on the local church records.

⁵ General ethnographic details for Panapompom and the region are provided in (Battaglia, 1990; Berde, 1974; Rollason, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c).

⁶ Panapompom people also call *bêche-de-mer* *pisi*. In order to limit the proliferation of terms, I do not use this expression here. The term *bêche-de-mer* is strictly used only for the boiled and dried flesh of these animals, however, local people, as well as conservation and government agencies, use *bêche-de-mer* interchangeably to denote both the live or raw animal and the processed flesh. I follow this latter usage.

Sea cucumbers are found in the lagoon, dried and sold to the agents of buying and exporting companies working out of Alotau, the provincial capital. Prices of *bêche-de-mer* have increased rapidly over the past two decades. Between 1991 and 2001, for example, the price of a large white teat-fish, a high-grade variety, locally known as *mama*, increased 733% from a US\$ price of \$7.20 to \$20.00 (Kinch, 2002 Table 1). Prices have stabilised somewhat: in 2005-6, during my fieldwork, the same variety was being bought at K100-110 (\$30-40) per kilo, with large 'fish' weighing in below the kilo mark. Some men make considerable sums of money by local standards from *bêche-de-mer*, with the highest earners receiving K1,500 or more in the course of a season, although most men make sums in the K200-300 range.⁷ The industry has expanded rapidly in the last thirty years, partly as a result of the liberalisation of PNG's business environment (Kinch, 2002). In this region of PNG, that expansion was more or less contemporary with the collapse of the copra industry in the 1990s, a fact which is of great importance for this paper.

I am going to begin by talking about Panapompom ideas about development and race, imagined in terms of white and black people. Development – a valued project that Panapompom people aspire to as the key to a better future – belongs to white people. This section explains how this project emerges from the colonial past, and how it has changed in recent times. It sets the scene for the analysis of work and exclusion that follows. I am then going on to talk about

⁷ Kinch (2002) estimates average household income for the province at US\$130 (around K300-400); disregarding the difficulties of assessing what counts as a 'household' in an extensive system of kinship obligations, survey data for the 2005 and 2006 *bêche-de-mer* seasons indicate that this estimate is high in the Panapompom case.

the *bêche-de-mer* industry, and the way in which local people think of it as making them blacker, and more excluded from development as a project. Finally, I shall return to the idea of race and suggest how work makes excludes Panapompom from the futures they desire.

Development and race

The context here is a discourse of *development*, which is absolutely central to Panapompom politics (Rollason, 2008b). Indeed 'politics' as it exists in formal institutions of local government – and in many other contexts in the wider community – consists in disputes over how best to bring 'development' about. In this section I describe how this discourse operates today, and suggest its genealogy in the colonial history of the region.⁸

Development is a racial concept, a comparison which operates between people who have different types of skin and geographical origins: natives, who have black skin and come from PNG, and *dimdims*, white people, who have white skins and come from most other countries in the world, archetypically Australia. Social and economic outcomes are thought of as promoting development when they cause Panapompom to appear to be more like the 'homes of white people', *dimdim panuwana*, and Panapompom people to be more like white people. Conversely, outcomes which evoke local custom or blackness are felt to be regressive and are despised as 'primitive'. Thus an urban life of luxury can be referred to as *lodimdim*, 'working [like a] white person'. This is opposed to the

⁸ I stress the *genealogy* of the notion of development so as to stress that I am not attempting to describe 'culture' here, but to establish a baseline of current political realities on Panapompom.

hard 'struggle' *logasisi* of 'native' life. I shall return to this contrast as I further analyse Panapompom notions of race.

Given the geography of race and development as an unequal distribution of skins and ways of life, development is thought of as a political means for securing a future in which PNG will be more like the homes of white people, especially in Australia and America, *and to make PNG people progressively whiter*. 'Whiteness' here is both a physical feature to do with the skin, and a marker of particular values and attributes, especially of an orderly or lawful, affluent, urban-style life. This sort of life is often opposed to 'native' life 'in the village', which is marked by disorganisation, lateness, conflicts, quarrels and poverty. Native life from this perspective is 'primitive', of the past.

The discourse of development is therefore one which is based on a perspective from the vantage point of an imagined other – white people, who are identical with Panapompom people of the future. Panapompom people imagine the ways in which they suppose that white people must see them, and value themselves in their terms.⁹ Development is aimed at making Panapompom people into equivalents of white people, in terms of colour and of wealth, and on terms that Panapompom people imagine to belong to white people. In other words, the idea of development depends on an outside perspective on Panapompom life. The issue, then, for Panapompom people, is to be recognised in these white eyes and to become part of *their* project of value.

Development as an idea has its roots in the colonial period, and the future that the Australian administration promised. Colonial

⁹ As such, it is a type of *ethical* work, as highlighted by Laidlaw (Laidlaw, 2002) as an application of Foucault's notion of 'the care of the self' (Foucault, 1994a, 1994b)

development efforts were explicitly aimed at raising the 'standard' of local people. In the period of the Second World War, colonial governance of the Louisiades became systematic as administrators found it necessary to recruit labour and monitor the communities affected by recruitment (Nelson, 2000). The documentation relating to administration patrols in this period marks out an increasingly ambitious process of 'rehabilitation' (see for example Misima No. 2, 1944/45) and 'advancement' of the native population, a turn of phrase current from the early days of the post-war civil administration (Commonwealth of Australia, 1948, p. 14), and still in use immediately before self-government (Misima No. 6, 1971/72).¹⁰

'Rehabilitation' marks a common perception amongst both military and later civil officials that the demands of the armed forces for labourers had severely diminished local communities' ability to sustain themselves, a concern that is clear in patrol reports from 1943 onwards. An intensive and systematic pattern of governance arose in the post-war period. The efforts towards development that it entailed were intended to mitigate the depredations of the Allied war effort. As such, governance became tied up with a new interest in, and feeling of obligation towards, the native population of Papua on the part of colonial administrators.

Colonial policy rapidly developed from efforts to ameliorate the wartime suffering of the local population to more and more ambitious attempts to engage natives in complicated economic

¹⁰ Colonial patrol reports are referenced here by Patrol Station, Report Number, and Government Year. Page numbers refer to the body of the report. Additional folios with comments by senior officers, usually appended in order of rank, are referenced by the rank of the commenting officer, e.g. the District Officer's comments are referenced 'DO's comments'.

ventures and social reforms. During the war, and especially in the immediately post-war period, we therefore see Patrol Officers distributing compensation for war damages and deaths to locals as the most immediate expression of the administration's care and attention to the native population. However, in the post-war period, the emphasis moves away from reparation to new economic ventures, especially cash-cropping (Commonwealth of Australia, 1951).

The most important cash-crop in the region is copra (dried coconut). Prior to the 1950s, this industry was almost exclusively in the hands of expatriate planters. However, by 1951, the administration was working to increase the proportion of the Territory's copra produced by locals (Commonwealth of Australia, 1952), and to convert what had been the back-bone of the plantation economy into the basis for a local money economy, ready for eventual independence. The strategy for achieving this goal was for the administration to support the foundation of copra producing co-operatives (Commonwealth of Australia, 1948). By 1955, officially registered co-ops were operating on the Panapanaeati-speaking islands of the Louisiades (Misima No. 3, 1954/55), and local copra production steadily increased relative to expatriate production, reaching 20% of the total in 1953-54 (Commonwealth of Australia, 1954, p. 30) and 30% in 55-56 (Commonwealth of Australia, 1956, p. 29).

This period was very favourable to copra production, as Britain found herself starved of fats for cooking. In 1946, London signed an agreement with Canberra to purchase all of the copra Australia produced at a protected rate for 9 years (Commonwealth of Australia, 1949, p. 31). This agreement mainly benefitted the Territory of Papua and New Guinea. When the agreement expired in 1957, the Administration agreed to continue to stabilise prices through a purchasing monopoly, the Copra Marketing Board

(CMB).¹¹ The effect of the colonial sponsorship of copra production was an increase in copra production and with it, a rise in cash incomes. This led to desires for educational opportunities and mobility on the part of locals (Misima No. 2, 1955/56 a/ADO's comments), as well as visible forms of consumption which became central to local attempts to replicate the social life of white people. A future as white people's partners and counterparts seemed within reach in this period.

Panapompom people's engagement with these colonial policies resulted in a particular historical consciousness or imagination of the future relative to Australia and other 'homes of white people', and the sorts of links that articulated them to these centres of power. This perception of the link between natives and white people strongly reflected the paternalism and obligation that motivated colonial development policies.

This imagination was encapsulated in the story that Bwake, a senior man, told me in explanation of the operation of the CMB. He explained that when coconuts had been gathered, husked, dried, shelled and rammed into bags, the person whose copra it was would write a special number onto each of the ram-bags. A different number was given to each person or co-operative with an account with the CMB. The copra was loaded onto a boat, which headed

¹¹ The CMB continued to market copra, under the authority of the newly-formed Papua and New Guinea Copra Industry Stabilization Board, which replaced earlier Production Control Boards. It was underwritten by the Copra Fund (Commonwealth of Australia, 1957). Like most institutions of the Territory, the operation of the copra price stabilisation mechanisms also depended heavily on the annual grant from Canberra which constituted the bulk of the Territory's budget.

north-west ('down', *pai*) to the provincial capital.¹² Once there, the copra would be unloaded, graded for quality and weighed. The weight and grade of the copra would be recorded on a piece of paper, which, like the bags, was marked with the producer's number. The copra, in numbered sacks, was then shipped south ('towards the sea', *nolaa*), for sale to Australia, while the money accompanied by the numbered paper, returned south-east ('up', *nati*) to Panapompom. Bwake remembered his CMB number, and quoted it as an achievement – a way of retrieving his success as a copra producer.

The sort of articulation that this system of distribution and exchange allowed Panapompom people to imagine was one in which the product of their work, sponsored by *dimdims* in the administration, was taken in a direct exchange for cash and the wherewithal to be developed. Indeed, the organisation that produced this cash – the orderly circulation of numbers, paper and money – in itself suggests the visible orderliness that indexes development in the Panapompom political imagination. The dream was that natives could attain the same level of development as white people, exported to them as payment for their copra. White people and their proxies in the government of the independent state of PNG were seen openly to assist Panapompom people in their whitening development goals (for example, through the CMB).

This has all changed today. Since the 1990s, the copra industry in the region has collapsed, to be replaced with the largely unregulated harvesting of *bêche-de-mer*. The reasons for this collapse in the Panapompom case are complex. In 2004-06, copra production in the Louisiades was very low, only beginning to recover

¹² Until 1968, this was Samarai. The expanding capital was then moved to the new town of Alotau, site of a major military base during the war.

after a general collapse in the market in the mid to late 1990s (Foale, 2005). Copra production ceased on Panapompom in 1992 before the decline in copra markets became acute. The proximate cause was a major land dispute involving the community plantation, which was the source of the bulk of suitable coconuts. This dispute 'closed' copra production, which was probably never restarted owing to the prevailing market conditions. Copra was tentatively being produced by mid 2005.

This change has resulted in a shift in local imaginations of race, especially in terms of the ways in which the homes of white people and of natives are articulated. Whereas in the past, cash cropping appeared as a sort of 'whitening' work that made Panapompom people more like dimdims, the *bêche-de-mer* industry seems to make them blacker, not whiter, and more, not less excluded from development. It is this shift in the way Panapompom people experience themselves as articulated to the rest of the (white) world that I will be exploring in the remainder of this paper.

Work, blackness and machinery

In recent years, the way Panapompom people imagine themselves to relate to white people has changed dramatically, with profound effects on their imagination of their future. This change, linked closely to the collapse of the copra industry and the rise of *bêche-de-mer* as the basis of the cash economy, has resulted in new understandings of the geography of race and its implications for development amongst Panapompom men. Panapompom men now understand themselves to be getting more, not less black. In this section, I am going to look at the *bêche-de-mer* industry, and investigate how the work that it entails makes natives blacker and more excluded from development.

A note on the authority of my account is required here.

Development as an idea and discourse is well developed and very widespread in the community, although mostly deployed by men. Many of the ideas and discourses that I am going to be relating in the following sections have nowhere near the same pedigree. First, they are highly sectional, being used mainly by a class of young, active men with some experience and expertise in diving. From north Panapompom, this represents a group of about 60 people. Second, they are very recent developments. Bêche-de-mer diving is old, dating to the late nineteenth century in this area. However, organised as it is today, as an intensive, seasonal activity, undertaken independently by a large group of young men, it dates only to the 1990s. Previously, diving was opportunistic and organised first through the copra plantations, then the co-ops, and finally a few major trade-stores, before individual divers began selling bêche-de-mer independently. The material I present here therefore represents a politics *self-consciously* prospecting for interpretations (Battaglia, 1995).

Bêche-de-mer diving takes place in an open season imposed by the PNG National Fisheries Authority (NFA) since the publication of the National Bêche-de-Mer Fishery Management Plan in 1998 (PNG National Fisheries Authority, 1998). This season runs from January to October, or until a Total Allowable Catch, determined for each Province, is met. In Milne Bay Province, the fishery normally closes in June or July.

Between January and June, young men from North Panapompom leave the island to camp out on the cays that line the lagoon reef, in order to exploit the relatively rich stocks of bêche-de-mer to be found there. This pattern of diving is recent, and relates to depletion of sea cucumbers in shallower waters closer to the island

coast.¹³ Out on the cays, the men are organised into crews for large outrigger sailing canoes, *sailau*, or else they dive alone from paddling canoes and attach themselves to friends and relatives for help with housing and cooking.

When the weather is suitable for diving (which it often is not), men wake early, eat, and launch their canoes. Sailing out from their camps, boats go out to areas where the animals are expected to be found. The crew then swim about looking for them and collecting them by spearing them with a lead – a short, spear, massively weighted with lead ballast, and attached to a shark-line.

Once the diving day is over – which most often happens when divers are feeling tired and ill from their long struggles with the sea, the boats return to camp. The raw sea cucumbers are then processed, a laborious and time-consuming process in which the animals are gutted, boiled, and placed on a rack over a slow fire to dry, often for several days, before being boiled again, and dried in the sun.

Processed *bêche-de-mer* is sold to the crews of boats, chartered by one of the companies granted an export licence by the NFA. These boats cruise the islands purchasing *bêche-de-mer* and selling goods, both staples like rice and tobacco, and more exotic commodities like soccer strips and underwater torches. When a boat arrives, divers with produce to sell present their *bêche-de-mer* to be graded and weighed, and receive their money. Canoe crews divide this money equally between them.

¹³ Indeed, in 2004, partly in response to a major coral reef conservation project headed by Conservation International (Conservation International, 2001), Panapompom people had closed waters up to 100m of the shoreline to diving and spear-fishing of all kinds under the authority of their Councillor.

How do natives become black?

Why is the process of producing *bêche-de-mer* make Panapompom people imagine themselves to be black? Central to the Panapompom discourse of development is natives' starting point as *black people*. In Panapompom terms, being black suggests connotations of primitiveness, backwardness and an uncouth life – the inverse of the white sociality which is the object of development. Being black takes on a particular salience during the *bêche-de-mer* season; this is a time in which men feel not merely that they are black relative to white people, but that they are becoming blacker. In this section, I explore the logic of this process of identification and alienation.

In the context of *bêche-de-mer* diving, men say that the blackness of natives comes about because of the work that people do in the fierce tropical sun and the saltiness of the sea. These two agents are thought of as being 'hot' and powerful, *kalakalas*. *Kalakalas* can also refer to the power of magic or preaching, or the force of a person's temper. The term seems to denote the power to alter a person: magic and preaching affect states of mind or spirit (Kuehling, 2006; Weiner, 1983), which, like the changes wrought by the heat of the sea or sun, manifest themselves as alterations in the outward aspect of a person.

Together, sun and sea modify the skin through prolonged contact, causing it to darken and harden. In other contexts, people avoid the sun by sitting in the shade as much as possible. Swimming is not encouraged, and those who do take to the sea are careful to rinse their skins afterwards to avoid the darkening effects of the salt.¹⁴ As

¹⁴ Only those who are felt to be particularly weak and vulnerable are encouraged to heat themselves with these dangerous agents: old and sick people, and

bêche-de-mer diving involves sustained exposure to both sun and sea, it is therefore clear to divers that their skins get darker during the diving period.

The quality of the native skin is a result of the environment of the work people do in diving and of its physicality. Closely associated with the colour of natives' skins, and also distinguishing them from white people, is their toughness and muscularity, qualities that Panapompom people gloss as *gasisi* – hard, strong.¹⁵ Hardness or strength is a way of speaking about both a task and a worker. The work of bêche-de-mer, in the dangerous, hot sea, is thought to be a very hard sort of work. It entails sailing and swimming for many hours, as well as enduring extremes of heat and cold. Endurance of all types is often attributed to visible qualities of the skin. Indeed, diving for bêche-de-mer is often described as a 'struggle', the gloss that Panapompom people put on their indigenous expression, *logasisi*, 'doing the work of hardness'. In the struggle to make money, the hardness of the work repeats itself in the hardness of native bodies.

The hardness of natives leads them to liken themselves to machines: hard, black bodies are like metal and, as I shall explain, invoke the implacable strength of mechanical devices. The expenditure of strength that diving involves strips away the soft fattiness from the skin, and replaces it with a lean hardness, which is, people say, like

pregnant women sun themselves and consume salt water respectively (Battaglia, 1990).

¹⁵ Skin, *kunis-* is often not distinguished from muscles *piyawin-*. The muscles and skin together are thought of as an enclosure for the heart/liver *aten-*, stomach, *sinen-* or *tinen-* and other internal organs.

metal.¹⁶ Otto, proud of his ability as a captain, card-player, and outrageously successful lover, put his success down to his abilities as a 'computer': he was, as he explained to me 'Otto-matic'. In a similar vein, the crew of the huge, heavily built canoe *Son's*, boasted about its strength and hardness – and their own like qualities. 'This canoe,' crowed one, 'is metal, pure metal. It's hard to sail. To sail you have to be metal too – we are metal!'

Hard, metallic skins are not properties that Panapompom people share with white people. In contrast to Panapompom people, I was very white and endowed with a very soft skin, which reacted badly to insect bites, got red and painful when exposed to the sun, and which scraped and cut easily. Hardness and 'mechanism' distinguish natives from white people along the same axis as skin colour.

Why are white people white? Most people simply accepted that thin and soft skins such as mine were a feature of dimdims and left it at that. A few, however, were keen to press the matter further. Moabi, an older man with considerable experience with both white people and machines from his time working on cargo ships in the 1970s and 1980s, suggested an explanation that found general agreement. He said that the reason that white people in general had such different bodies was that they did not work – they only worked with machines. Panapompom people imagine that white people work only inside fully automated factories or offices, never walk anywhere, and avoid any kind of physical effort. The strength and hardness of the machine – its (native) *gasisi* – prevent the dimdim operators from feeling the strength of work, so it has no effect on

¹⁶ People referred to themselves as *metol*, a corruption of the English with stress placed on the second syllable. Panapanaeati has no word for metal.

their skins, preventing them from becoming hard and black.¹⁷ He put the quality of my body down to the technological environment in which (he presumed) I lived. By working with technology in a particular way I had acquired a particular sort of body – a white soft one as opposed to the black, hard one of someone who works long hours in the hot sea and merciless sun.

Natives become black as they work. As they blacken, they seem further and further removed from the homes of white people and the development that they constitute. The hardness of *bêche-de-mer* diving is inscribed on the native as the **hardness of black skins** in unmediated contact with hard work, whereas it is the **hardness of mechanical devices**, their potential to take the strain of work, that appears figured in the skins of white people.

What does it mean to be a machine?

The implication of bodies in machines and machines in bodies in Panapompom discourse points to a possible slippage between these beings.¹⁸ In this section, I am going to explore that slippage further, and examine its implications for Panapompom men's understanding of their articulation to the homes of white people.

¹⁷ Although I cannot discuss the issue here, it is worth noting in this context that Panapompom people are intrigued by black Americans, who they term *nega*. *Nega* appear to be an anomalous and troubling sort of being, and they are attributed enormous strength and possibly magical powers. During my stay on Panapompom, *nega* became a way of expressing approval, as in, *nega ya i gasisi hot* – that nigger is really strong. Other people drew parallels with the Panapanaeati *neganega*, sinful or wicked.

¹⁸ Such slippages are, of course, common in Pacific ethnography, perhaps most notably in Gell's analysis of the homology between skin and carved objects in Polynesia (Gell, 1993), themes highlighted in a different context by Gow (1999).

For Panapompom men, the slippage between machines and humans is thoroughgoing. Being a machine does not stop at the mechanisation of humans, but extends to the humanisation of machines. This is shown in Panapompom people's treatment of their diving gear. The technology for collecting *bêche-de-mer* is simple. A diver needs a pair of goggles or a mask, called generically *glass*. Secondly, divers looking to take a serious catch of good quality sea cucumbers in deep water require a *lead*. Lead is, as the name suggests, a short spear, massively weighted with lead, that is let down on a long line to spear sea cucumbers lying on the sea floor in deep water. Finally, divers need access to a boat. Boats are either small dug-out paddling canoes, suitable for one or two people, or else larger outrigger sailing canoes, which can accommodate crews of up to twenty.

When Panapompom men speak about the technology they use in gathering *bêche-de-mer*, they humanise it. Rather they speak explicitly about the nexus between technology and the body as forming a whole with enhanced abilities for the production of money. The treatment of body decorations, money and other forms of wealth as components of the skin or the body is widely reported in Melanesia and the Western Pacific more generally. Important material from the Highlands, for example, treats body decorations as constitutive of specific forms of (kinship) agency (O'Hanlon, 1983, 1989; Strathern, 1975, 1979, 1991), while Harrison's Sepik ethnography considers the attachment of 'technologies' of masking and ritual to the body as a means of altering action and emotion (Harrison, 1993).

Otto, an expert diver and good friend, explained to some less experienced divers about the importance of lead and glass, treating the tools as people: 'these **men**, they are the ones who get money' (*tau bolo, heliya mani hi pamasal*). The anthropomorphism was

explicit. Otto went on to explain that it was they who were capable of extending bodies, so that they could penetrate waters that were impossible to reach by swimming, and thus reach the sea cucumbers to be found there. The idiom that Otto invoked was the 'limit' or 'measure' of a person, *wana luvi*,¹⁹ we might say 'his capacity'. This is a typical way in which Panapompom people – both men and women – discuss technology. I collected numerous stories of the use of SCUBA gear, aircraft, submarines and so on, all of which played on the ability of technology to allow a person to 'overcome his measure' – *wana luvi i hawa-likan*. This extension permits a person to work productively.

In this way a specific 'diving agency' (Gell, 1998) is concocted through the cyborg combination of elements as the extension of black natives to the sea floor as they collect *bêche-de-mer*; it is the technological body-extension that is productive of money.²⁰

This understanding of the extensive role of technology is in fact institutionalised in Panapompom diving practice. People often borrow glass, lead and other equipment such as torches, but they

¹⁹ *Wana luvi* (3rd Person Possessive), taking the most distant form of possession, refers to a person's abilities or capacity. Taking the next nearest form of possession, *ana luvi*, refers to that which is equivalent to, satisfies, or is sufficient for something.

²⁰ These ideas are drawn most proximately from Gell's argument on the 'agency' of art and non-human actors more generally (Gell, 1992, 1998, 1999b). It should be noted in this context that Gell's analysis is strongly linked to theories of the person that have Pacific, and often Melanesian ethnography behind them. Crucially, Gell draws on Strathern's image of the partible person (Gell, 1999a; Strathern, 1988, 1992a, 1992b). Most compellingly, however, his argument is intimately linked to his analysis of tattooing in Polynesia as a technology of the skin that constitutes personhood and agency of a particular kind (Gell, 1993, 1998).

must always pay a certain amount, a cut of the money that these things have produced. Similarly, where divers form part of the crew of a sailing canoe, the owner of a boat usually takes an extra share of the takings in recognition of the foundational role of his canoe in extending the divers' reach into the diving grounds. This last example demonstrates the role of extension in producing money: old men who cannot dive, yet who own canoes, can make as much money in the season as their young, able-bodied relatives.

The extensive potential of technology has implications for the politics of race and development, tied up as it is with forms of work and the appearance of the skin. On one occasion, I made a canoe trip with a few friends, including Otto. On board was Monkey, the local headmaster. On the trip I was embarrassed because at that time I did not know how I should help the sailors. They were embarrassed as well because of my desire to work, which seemed to them to disturb the order of hierarchy that they were attempting to maintain with me as an honoured foreign guest and a white person. Monkey gently refused to let me use the bailer. 'Look,' he said, 'you whites aren't used to this. If you try to work like us, you'll only hurt yourself. We don't want you going back to your home with back problems.' Otto, jumped into the bottom of the boat and, vigorously scooping water, yelled out, 'Man-power! Man-power! We use man-power!'

Man-power is a crucial idiom here – one that I heard often when people contrasted the work and lives of dimdins to their own. It was an expression that people deliberately opposed to using machines, stressing the physical deployment of the body as a means of achieving a task. Here: the hard power of a black body defending a white one from the hardening effects of work.

Thus, in some contexts, Panapompom people indulge in a systematic equation of human and machine. The extension by humanised technology balances technologisation of the human. Yet, crucially, in other contexts there is an imbalance: in their use of *man-power*, black bodies alone sometimes appear as machines, whereas white bodies, because of their softness, require machines to work.

How do black people get excluded when they work?

I'm now going to return to the idea of exclusion in terms of racial geography, and show how working for *bêche-de-mer* excludes Panapompom people from development, putting them 'beyond the pale' of the developed world of white people.

As I have suggested, many Panapompom divers thought that my whiteness was an effect of my working in a world actuated by hard, mechanical devices. It was this process of extension that protected my body at the same time as it imposed a life of Man Power on Panapompom people, making them blacker. I suggest this interpretation because of the way in which Panapompom people perceived the inequity of the way that the proceeds of the *bêche-de-mer* industry were distributed.

Panapompom people understood how inequitable this distribution was. Most *bêche-de-mer* produced in Milne Bay Province is bought by one of two companies: Kiwali and AsiaPac.²¹ These companies purchased the *bêche-de-mer* and shipped it off to the Far East to be sold. This, everyone was sure, must be a hugely lucrative business.

²¹ Kiwali is owned by nationals, having at one time been a part of the locally important Masurina family of companies. AsiaPac is owned by far-eastern entrepreneurs living in Alotau.

Some Panapompom men felt that China, because of its huge population, had run out of *protin*, meat and fish. People were desperate for *protin* of any kind. Others assured me that Chinese people simply held *bêche-de-mer* to be the best of all foods, and would pay high prices for it, just as PNG people would spend hundreds of kina on a pig. In either case, I was told fanciful tales of the convoys of trucks that rushed down to the wharves in the ports when the *bêche-de-mer* was delivered, and the millions that changed hands.

The problem, as Panapompom people saw it was that the mark-up between the price that they, the producers, could command for *bêche-de-mer*, and the prices that it sold for overseas, was enormous. Unorganised and essentially unable to control the price that they sold for, they found themselves at the mercy of the exporting companies. This had obvious implications: if only Panapompom people could export the *bêche-de-mer* themselves, they too could be as developed as white people! In fact, however, the ability to trade in *bêche-de-mer*, and thus to swap the measly amounts of money made on Panapompom for the really big bucks of international commerce, always seemed to be at one remove. Quite apart from local people's lack of capital, training or appropriate organisation, the regulation of the fishery by the NFA limits the number of export licences available for Milne Bay Province to three; the industry is structured around the assumption that it will be urban capitalists, not grass-roots villagers, who will dominate the *bêche-de-mer* trade.²²

²² Quite apart from Panapompom people's perception of the re-arrangement of global economic linkages, this regressive shift in policy contrasts markedly with the colonial and post-colonial effort to give villagers a major stake in the copra industry. This change is symptomatic of the recent 'disciplining' of PNG's economy.

Development therefore seems impossible to achieve through bêche-de-mer harvesting because Panapompom people have no access to far-off foreign markets. To return to the language of extension, their 'measure', which they have no opportunity to exceed, restricts their activities to the local, the un-extended – and thereby excludes them from the wealth that is produced by extension. On the other hand, white people, who are thought to be the beneficiaries of the trade, clearly *do* have the capacity to extend themselves so far – even to use black people as their actuators in the hot salt sea of the lagoon where bêche-de-mer originates. Here is a basic exclusion that would account for why Panapompom people get blacker when they dive for bêche-de-mer. I pursue this idea further in the concluding section.

Subjects and their objects

In this section, I am going to conclude and rehash why I think that bêche-de-mer diving, unlike copra production, makes Panapompom people black, and therefore into the object detritus of someone else's project. Looking back at the account I have made of race, technology and bêche-de-mer diving as constituents of a racial field, it seems that there are two closely related points:

- 1. The ability to extend themselves from their homes in China, Singapore and other 'dimdim countries' even as far as PNG, seemed to be the preserve of white people, unavailable to their black counterparts.*
- 2. In diving, it is links that make money, extensions. Lead and glass, as well as boats – they are the men who make money appear.*

Panapompom people get blacker during the bêche-de-mer season, and their skins are hardened by the work that they do. At the same time *dimdims' skins remain exactly the same* while they make

money. They inhabit a technologised world that takes the hardness out of life, and which extends them outwards into the places where money is to be found, and brings it back. The money that they bring back is created at exactly that point at which the dimdim companies acquire PNG *bêche-de-mer* and sell it. In other words, exactly on the technological model of lead and glass, dimdims create wealth at the point that they link to some other person, at the point that they are extended.

However, that extension is not a machine as such, but the body of a black person, exposed to the hot sun and the hardness of his work. It is the 'metallic' black body that becomes the extension of the white one, and which produces its whiteness by taking the strain of the work through its application of machine-like *man-power*. That 'mechanised body' marks, in fact, the unspoken outside of a way of being wealthy and valued that accrues to being white. This is a future of wealth to which natives aspire, and of which their blackened, hardened bodies are a mere by-product.

The relations that the *bêche-de-mer* industry evokes are wholly different from those imaginable under the copra economy. The relations that governed copra were unequal, to be sure, but they were fundamentally inclusive. There was a continuous motion from Panapompom to Australia and back again, with copra moving outwards and cash and 'development' moving inwards. This movement through space suggested a continuity in terms of value: Panapompom did not appear to be excluded from the valued project of development. Quite the contrary: the way in which Australia was articulated to Panapompom made it quite apparent that these two locations were linked in a wider community of places progressing along the path of development. The tendency of these relations was a certain equalisation by which value accruing to Panapompom people would in the future erase Panapompom as a distinctive site

that could be mapped in terms of relative backwardness and blackness.

Thus in the colonial period, it was the clear project of white people to make natives their equal counterparts. Speaking of development included Panapompom people in the remit of those who might one day speak in its terms. The whole point of the exercise was the elevation of black PNG people to the level of citizens of an independent nation-state (Rollason, 2008b; Sharrad, 2005). The outside of this discourse – the deformed and devalued (abject) substrate that motivated it – was the past of primitive, backward life, from which PNG people were moving towards progress.

In the discourse of development, the speaking subject has always, in one way or another, the voice of a white person. This is not because actual, historical white people enunciate this discourse, rather, because it is a discourse which occupies the racial politics of the Panapompom imagination. As Fanon recognised, discourse in a racist world is racist discourse and always speaks in terms of the Manichean split of the colonial encounter (Fanon, 1967, 1982; Rollason, 2008a). Imagining the values implicit in the project of development – raising the standard of Panapompom life to that of the homes of white people – to be the authentic values of white people, locals elevate those imagined others to the level of authorities on Panapompom life.

In the post-colonial period, Panapompom people appear to be abjected and excluded from the future of development they aspire to. This movement has taken place as Panapompom people have come to understand themselves not as the objects of a benign movement of valued ways of living from the centres of power and value, but as mediators or effectors of a reverse movement – the arrogation of value in the hands of white people. *Bêche-de-mer* moves from the lagoon floor, through the hard labour of

Panapompom people and into the hands of white people. As this spatio-racial movement takes place, Panapompom people discover that they are outside the valued project of development as such – abject machineries of others subjective expansion, mapped onto a changed distribution of race, and out of a future of whiteness.

Thus, the movement that is fundamental to the economy of *bêche-de-mer* is interrupted at the racial divide. The movement of black people as they extend themselves in diving is not continuous with the movement of white people as they export *bêche-de-mer* and make money. Rather, there is a fundamental difference of perspective or interest: for Panapompom divers, their work represents the extent of their autonomous movement; for white people, black people's diving is merely an extension of their longer-ranged work.²³

Insofar as black people's work actuates profoundly unequal economic outcomes, these perspectives appear irreconcilable as opposed interests in *bêche-de-mer*. As such, they institute a rift or discontinuity between white and black people's futures, such that Panapompom people cease to be included in white people's future of development. Changing patterns of work have left them abject.

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²³ Compare this comment from Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*: "The worker becomes poorer the richer is his production, the more it increases in power and scope" (Marx, 1977, p. 78). Panapompom consciousness of exclusion represents, perhaps, a particular articulation of a general contradiction between technology and the reproduction of labour.

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