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CHAPTER FIVE

INVENTING THE RULES

Redefining Moral Agency among the First Post-Independence Generation in Papua New Guinea

Karen Sykes

Zizek (2010) wrote that political maturity in the last days of Western capitalism comes with the moral awareness that it is possible to break the rules in order to create a democratic society, rather than to follow its rules. This valuable insight links culturally specific ideas about political agency and moral maturity for citizens in Western democracies, and it allows us also to unhinge ideological assumptions used to evaluate adulthood as political maturity. I do not want to further Zizek’s argument in this chapter so much as to examine its underlying assumption that the people of some nations fail to achieve political maturity, while others find it through breaking its rules. In the case of post-independence Papua New Guinea (PNG) national and kinship politics coexist as citizens and wantoks (speakers of the same language) create critical commentaries on assumptions about their political maturity (Sykes 2014, 2001). The experiences of the first generation born after PNG independence in 1975 are not recognized in the nationally homogenizing quantitative records produced by international and national agencies. Closer ethnographic study shows that adulthood, or its nearest equivalent in PNG, is not associated with contributions to a national political maturity, nor with individual and psychological states of development. Adults are recognized when they are moral agents, whose maturity is realized interactively in newly emergent households.

Although many anthropologists would contest Zizek’s vision that capitalism is in its last days in postcolonial nations, they might recognize that capitalism is in a later stage than it was in the late nineteenth century, especially given the
rise of a neoliberal ideology that places personal responsibility for political action center-stage (Gershon 2010; Macpherson 1963; Sykes 2007). Since the 1970s in Europe and North America, late capitalism as neoliberalism has married post-Fordist ideologies of managerialism with democratic political processes for the delivery of social services to citizens. During the same decades in the postcolonial nations, late capitalism in the form of decolonization has married young democratic institutions with the robust institutions of offshore, multinational corporations. As a postcolonial state, democratic PNG relies on investments by offshore extractive industries operating within its borders. Yet its citizens are subject to international and national judgments of a failed political maturity that confound national politics with the morality of generational relations of the household.

It is not so much that the independence generation “cannot grow up,” a frequent global complaint Deborah Durham queries in her introduction to this volume, but that they are not especially concerned with childhood or adulthood as stages of personal or political development. Nor are they all pursuing traditional markers of the lifecycle, even when their elder generation, born before independence, wishes they would. In several chapters of this book, especially those by Jacqueline Solway and Anna Kruglova, we see the challenges of recognition faced by those growing up in the first decades after major political transformation. In PNG they are crafting new ways of acting as moral agents for a collective future, which is what all adults do. The problem is that as adult moral agents who take care of others’ needs their activity does not register in official records of educational and economic growth in the nation. In PNG the official records of international development agencies and national departments are concerned with the progress of the PNG nation, whereas the members of that generation frame their understanding of moral agency in terms of their household, which escapes the eye of the demographer. In this regard they are not caught “between adolescence and later life” as their post-Soviet counterparts might be. Neither are they a generation caught in a protracted adolescence-cum-“unstable adulthood,” as are the Ugandan graduates described by Claire Dungey and Lotte Meinert in their chapter in this volume, who learned in school to wait to accomplish the goals they set for personal development.

One way to recover the ethnography of this generation from the prejudices and presumptions of international experts and even the PNG nationalists, who can only see failure, is to identify and critique the nationalist categories of analysis, in much the same way as historians of the last part of the twentieth century critiqued the analytic tools of sociologists as too nationalist, and impoverished by the theory they deployed (Thompson 1978). Instead, the aim is
to know this generation as “present at their own making,” to paraphrase Thompson’s famous study of *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), which provides a scintillating reappraisal of the social class of artisan weavers known as “Luddites” who opposed the new technology in an industry that turned their craft into unskilled jobs in mechanized labor. As a unit of analysis the post-independence generation is fundamentally a group circumscribed by the extended kinship relations of the household, and its shared experiences of the historical circumstances of independence; its morality is neither that of a social class whose logic is a deep structure reaching across centuries, nor is its agency formed only in a short-lived social event, or political revolt. Instead, the post-independence generation is a social cohort that perceives itself most clearly in relation to the previous generation of nationalists that fought for independence and won it. Over two decades of research with the first generation born after independence, I have learned to make use of what is their characteristically generational thinking, rather than rely on their work skills and labor relations, or their homeland and culture to ground their shared concerns. I have reported on the preceding generation of nationalists who brought Papua New Guinea to independence, and subsequently have judged the independence generation as failing to act as adults and not furthering the cause of the nation. What has been lacking in accounts of the independence generation is the independence generation’s perspective on their moral agency, which I report here through a set of case studies that resituates their lives in the context of the emerging modern extended households that they now make with spouses, parents, and siblings.

In order to understand the PNG perspective on adulthood as a condition of moral agency, rather than a form of political maturity, I found I needed to grind new lenses in order to see the post-independence generation’s behavior in the round. One lens borrows Zizek’s concern with political agency and how late capitalism exerts a particular kind of moral pressure on its citizens to accommodate to a liberal ideology of personal responsibility for individual action (Gershon 2010). A second lens is focused at a closer level and challenges his use of the concepts of moral agency and political maturity (see also Maclntyre and Patterson 2011; Sykes 2007). I came to see that Papua New Guineans demonstrate their moral agency and their political maturity in the way they form new households that connect people with commitment to making their lives work together. In so doing, I follow the vision outlined by Durham’s introduction to this volume to reconsider adulthood as an intersubjective experience, and I thereby challenge the idea that rule breaking as political maturity is an ideal goal for the post-independence generation. In this chapter, I show that “inventing the rules” in order to create new ways of living together
in new forms of the household is quite different from breaking the rules to achieve adult political maturity in the postcolonial nation. Asking “when,” “why,” and “whose” idea of adulthood was at stake pours doubt on the freighted meanings of adulthood and maturity, and clarifies the missing theoretical distinction between moral agency and political maturity. This chapter aims to outline, and thereby recognize, the moral agency of people who are unconcerned with the achievement of their political adulthood.

The Moral Agency of the First Generation Born in an Independent PNG

The first generation of Papua New Guineans born into political independence, are known among their peers and juniors as the “independence generation.” They developed a critical perspective on the whole PNG nation and their place in it that sets them apart from their parents’ generation, who founded the new government and style themselves as the fathers of PNG independence. Oddly, adulthood became problematic for the independence generation when some state officials and international aid agencies judged PNG’s national independence to be a success because their state education system had fostered political maturity (see Foster [2005] and Weeks [1976] for different documentation of this moment). They then identified moral shortcomings in the next generation to benefit from the new nation’s institutions (see Lipset [1988] and Robbins [1998] for different evaluations of the political and moral meanings of independence). Pre-independence ethnographies of political leadership and the life cycle in Melanesia deepen the puzzle, as they do not agree with the assumptions of developmental psychology (Strathern 1988). According to these accounts, Melanesians of all ages had lived as political adults, simply by inventing ways of living together and taking responsibility for each other.

Papua New Guinea’s independence generation enact their moral agency by “inventing the rules,” or more colloquially “giving it a try.” Both are English translations for a neo-Melanesian idiom triam tasol (in Tok Pisin, one of PNG’s three major languages). Among Papua New Guineans, triam tasol is used to refer to new or innovative social action. It is uttered by people in everyday life for the pragmatic effect of helping others discern how they should react to each other. After the end of a contested claim to business ownership, a young Papua New Guinean will tell his family that he plans now join those who first had contested his claim, in order make the new business arrangements work for a while, in order to give the new plan a try, which is to say, they will triam tasol. It is uttered modestly and good naturedly, protecting the speaker against the threat of the failure of important goals and perhaps grand plans. When
setting up a new timber business with a “walkabout” saw mill, a man said that he was just giving it a try, with the hopes that the venture could prove to be lucrative in nontraditional ways. The words “triam tasol” are not uttered as if they were a rule, or a social norm that interprets otherwise unspoken conventional or customary behavior. Indeed, in the first example, by calling on his young nephews to triam tasol as business partners, the speaker knew that he was innovating upon social norms rather than breaking the rules, and thereby turned his obligations as an uncle of younger boys into a business arrangement.

I use the Tok Pisin phrase as a corrective lens to bring into focus the face of a generation that is by far the largest proportion of PNG’s seven million citizens.¹ This generation’s face is distorted by claims in the national and international press that they are politically immature because they lack the moral agency to shoulder the work of national development. The generation’s character is often obscured because so much attention is given to the few who commit violent acts against political leaders and businessmen. The press describes the perpetrators as raskols, a word evoking the colonial past when the behavior of a “work boy” might be reprimanded good-naturedly as immature (Goddard 2005). The image of the raskol has come to define the whole generation as participants in a broadly felt culture of raskolism (Sykes 1999, 2000), even though they lack the means to or organize as a group and to articulate a political vision. Even more effectively, metaphors of raskol activity erase the independence generation as a cohort from international records of economic growth and estimations of the nation’s social capacity for it. From this external perspective on the (non)agency of the post-independence generation, they might be thought to be breaking the rules just by appearing in public, especially as unemployed men and women in town or the village, failing to develop the nation. However, once we can see the moral agency of this first generation born after PNG’s independence through a different lens of their everyday life, then it becomes clear that their activity of “inventing the rules” is not evidence of their failure and that the reports of their violence do not extend to the entire cohort. A closer analysis of their moral agency shows something different than political maturity. Rather than breaking the rules to find a new social justice in the independent state, as Zizek calls for, this cohort invents rules, giving it a try, for living together in the household.

I also use the phrase “triam tasol” to challenge ethnocentric assumptions deeply embedded in Western social theory. Notably, the capacity to act as moral agents has been recognized in Melanesia for all people, including very young and elderly relatives. Quite simply, adulthood as a capacity for moral action is not a state isolated in the life cycle in PNG. Life cycle rituals (whether these are initiation or marriage rituals) do not produce adults by aiding the
transition from childhood to adulthood. This critical point is made in the ethnographic record (Foster 1995; Lutkehaus 1995; Munn 1996; Robbins 1998; Weiner 1980), which gives a rich account of generation and gender, showing the Melanesian individual exists in an androgynous condition and emerges as male or female through participation in a gender ritual. Gender rituals works to divide androgynous beings into male and female, and thereby set up the conditions that make it necessary to reunite as spouses and parents. Gender rituals neither effect transition to a permanent condition nor a movement into a stage of life, and for this reason they are not comparable to life-cycle rituals. For example, at any point a man might decide to carry a basket on his head and work in his wife’s father’s garden, as if he were just like her. He might next transact yams from his wife’s gardens with her brothers as if he were not the same person who had been weeding the land they (his wife’s brothers) might also garden as the sons of his wife’s father. While analyzing household interactions in this chapter, I conclude that such inventive acts of social differentiation constitute moral agency in PNG today, leaving adulthood (as political maturity) neither a stage, nor a political problem, but something realized across and between people throughout their lives.

In this chapter I develop these critical theoretical points for twenty-first century late capitalism, and note three features of the post-independence cohort’s moral agency that dislocate it from national ideologies of maturity, and instead relate it to the contemporary household as the most salient social and political form of everyday life. First, I show that this generation has a shared moral vision toward their future. Second, I relate how its members are also concerned largely with their relationships to other generations in the future, and, by way of this intergenerational moral agency, have been released from the burden of keeping Melanesian traditions or furthering the interests of the older generation in the present. Finally, I show how they prioritize their obligations to sustain and reproduce relationships in their households over their responsibilities to the clan, village, or nation. I conclude that the moral agency of the first generation born after independence is expressed by inventing the rules, and pertains largely to the household, by which I mean the household as a decision-making unit concerned for the future of its members who might not live under the same roof while they go about their everyday work of providing for each other. Such geographically extended, multicted households are composed of moral agents, who enable each other’s social economic and spiritual lives as spouses, parents, brothers and sisters in Papua New Guinea. Gudeman (2005; see also Gudeman and Hann 2015) and Gregory (1997, 2009) define the household as a jural, economic, and affective unit whose members are joined by primary concerns with everyday moral and political governance,
with the provision for their shared needs and sustenance, and with mutual regard for the affective bonds between them. Gudeman and Hann (2015) turn to classical political theory (oikos) to better capture the meaning of household to the PNG independence generation, than to the popular rendering of household as those people who share the same physical residence.

Just as the independence generation’s understanding of household as a political, economic, and affective unit escapes census takers’ use of the term, so too does their understanding of political maturity and moral agency escape psychologists’ theory of human development. Adulthood for Papua New Guineans, as noted, is less a life stage than a situated and intersubjective form of action. The independence cohort’s understanding of their moral agency upends most external organizations’ assumptions that this generation should support economic growth in the post-independence state, and at the same time asks us to critically engage with Zizek’s challenge to think about maturity in the age of late capitalism.

(Not) Recognizing the Moral Agency of the First Papua New Guinean Generation

Unlike the generation that has been praised for bridging the colonial and post-colonial era and thereby fathering independence, the independence generation has been critiqued as subjects of rapid and frequent changes in national education policy simply because their actions are unrecognized as distinctive of an entire generation. They have been through a period of radical change, beginning with structural adjustment in 1991, and continuing with the Millennium Development Goals for 2015. In the course of these changes, this generation’s contributions to the growth of the new nation do not fall into conventional categories of educational and economic analysis. Instead, national and international assessments tend to discuss their role in shaping the future of the nation in moral terms, rather than economic and social ones. The national press holds them responsible for the growth of the economy and the sustenance of the spirit and social life of this small Pacific Island nation, but they apparently fail at these challenges. PNG’s major donor, AusAID, in its country report, states that they are a “mis’educated generation who pursue an immoral lifeway as raskols and thereby thwart the flourishing of the local economy and impede the progress of national infrastructural change. Accordingly, the entire generational cohort is known as the “greatest threat to the future social and economic development of the nation” (AusAID 2005: 30). Moral rhetoric focuses on the generation, but national and international measures focus on the success of educational institutions and also on individual employment
records. It is hard to elicit the diverse features of an entire generation when it is not the primary unit of analysis. The largest reason for this generation’s invisibility in the official record lies with the way the data is collected. In education, the school as an institution is the unit of record taking, and in economic reports, records of employment are not easily correlated meaningfully with age and educational achievement. The generation is not a unit about which official data is usually collected. Where it is collected, and analyzed, the data must first be extracted from other bases, such as the census, school enrollments, and some age-specific records of employment and taxation of eighteen-to thirty-five-year-olds. The records do not include an account of the livelihoods of the extended households, where the generations do count in the moral reckoning about their shared political future.

Most reports simply omit discussions of this generation’s education and work, apparently giving it no moral value at all. At first glance, the Human Development Index (HDI) and the UNESCO country reports show they did not contribute to economic or social growth. In otherwise comprehensive accounts of national growth, such as the World Bank Reports (e.g., 2008), the first generation of Papua New Guineans are economically invisible. The majority of individuals of this age group have failed to find formal sector employment, and therefore have no place in the records of taxation, or of registration with government services, and do not constitute themselves as job seekers, as they might in other nations. The national records show that only five percent of those who paid income taxes were between twenty and thirty years old in 2000, although paying taxes is not a true measure for those who are working in unskilled labor or for those receiving the lowest wages in the country. It is as if they were dropped from the record of the country’s economic development. In effect, while the press is concerned with the moral role of an entire generation in the development of the nation, the elision of most of the cohort from the education, employment, and work records creates its own moral picture, with implications for public rhetoric. National development agencies and their consultants come to see this generation as comprised of unproductive citizens, that is, as members of a nation who do not contribute to its growth.

Were the HDI concerned with the extended household, rather than the household as a single residence then this generation’s many innovations in making a livelihood might find an easier way into the record of social and economic development. Admittedly, the extended household is famously hard to define and to capture in statistics (Netting 1984; Yanagisako 2002; see also Bear et al. 2015). Its classical definition relies on the confluence of three features, provision-
ing of the necessities for its present and future members, moral governance of its members through demands on their obligations to their kin and other household members, and the bonds made by mutual affection as a source of emotional and social sustenance. The aggregates of national and international agencies cannot comprehend the scope of such knowledge and practices mobilized by households and used by them to foster their well-being into the future. Overall, it is perhaps unsurprising that this generation’s moral agency has escaped notice in most political and economic reports on national growth.

A different approach to understanding the moral agency of this generation can illuminate more than the assumption of their immoral or amoral character and social contributions. Aid agencies, including those from the United Nations and the World Bank, provide suggestive details in their own records. There is evidence of the independence generation’s burgeoning numbers in education despite their invisibility in records of employment and work. Since the 1990s, secondary school enrollments in PNG have increased, rising from roughly 25 percent of fifteen year olds in 1990, to 75 percent in 2005 (AusAID 2005). In addition, more students have been staying in school longer. For example, in New Ireland Province, secondary school enrollments totaled two thousand in five high schools in 1991, and the same number in 2010. However, in 2000 the enrollments spanned ages thirteen to fifteen, whereas in 1991 they spanned the ages of fifteen to eighteen, with village-based, primary schools providing education up to the age of fifteen. The secondary school enrollments provide concrete evidence of both proportional and aggregate growth over a decade and a half.

Next, I draw on long-term fieldwork in Papua New Guinea during which I worked with a cohort of secondary school students and graduates who had been born in 1975, the year of PNG’s independence. My work expanded over the years, to include their spouses, coworkers, and members of their generational cohort from other parts of the country. As they grew older they would habitually identify their generational cohort, not by face-to-face relations, but by inferred similarity based upon their personal knowledge of secondary education under the period of structural adjustment, when the school curriculum was rewritten and the arrangements for the payment of school fees became a matter of political debate, sometimes a fraught one. To them, their moral agency is demonstrated in experimental undertakings in which they triam tasol. And, rather than suggest that there is a shared key value, or a common moral norm, I will argue that the moral agency of this generation is immanent in social actions that aim only to invite a response, and are undertaken to see how others respond.
Recognizing Experiments in Inventing the Rules (Triam Tasol)

Triam tasol captures a sense of moral agency fitted to the era of late capitalism, yet escaping the mid-twentieth century assumption that theories of an individual’s experience of personal moral development might converge smoothly with theories of national development as a pathway to modernity. These assumptions were embedded in many postcolonial education systems, just as they had been in the education systems of many early twentieth-century European nations that treated education as a moral institution for the creation of a secular society. Critical research on South Asia (Gellner 2015) has shown that national social studies curricula could shape neither students’ nationalism nor their criticism of nationalist goals. The sentiments of nationalism have sprung from different wells than the nation. In PNG, villagers showed great enthusiasm for state-planned national education in the earlier period leading up to independence, and in the first decades following it by paying for primary and secondary education. Despite free tuition since 2006, education is no longer accepted as a given of family and village life. The shift of interest in education foreshadows a change in the possibilities open to the next generation of young Papua New Guineans.

As moral agents, members of the independence generation aim to open up possibilities within social relationships during this time of rapid growth. They triam tasol just to see what happens, and in so doing they invent the rules in each moral act. To say that someone is triam tasol suggests a morality that is implicit, or even immanent, in social action and creative of it (see also Das [2006] and Lambek [2015] who make this claim as a general theoretical argument). Alfred Gell (1999) considered moral agency to be implicit or immanent within a nexus of social relations, and never an abstraction from them. Gell’s key point drew on Melanesian ethnography to show how a subject’s agency is only realized by another’s experience of it, which might or might not be the object of the actions of the subject, as when a gift is known as a gift only when it is received and acknowledged as such. From this point of view, refusing the gift denies the moral agency of both those who give and receive from each other by denying the relationship itself. Gell, like Das (2006) and Lambek (2015), also develops classical philosophy’s argument that agency can be imagined only within a nexus of relations, and in dialectical relation to what those classical philosophers called a “patient.” Somewhat different from Zizek’s rule breaking as creative action, where moral agency must be informed by a decision to break the rules of the state for the abstract causes of wider humanity, Gell’s study implies that moral agency might emerge within a nexus of social relations, wherein people try out new ideas of how to live together.
Perhaps it can be fairly said that most attempts to redefine moral agency pose larger moral questions for social science than to provide narrower definitions of the concept of agency. Among philosophers, debates arise around the measure of individual culpability for just or unjust acts, as when heroism is rewarded or vandalism is punished, or around the recognition of an individual’s capacity to provide care for others (as when parents and guardians are honored or condemned). A different legacy can be found in the discipline of social psychology, where the theorist Kohlberg (1981) recognized three stages of moral development. The stages account for an individual’s increasing sense of selfhood in relation to exacting justice for the family, the state, and, ultimately, the world. This theory of moral development has been reworked by Gilligan (1982), who argues that moral agency is a quality of personal relationships rather than the achievement of a sense of selfhood, and that some values such as caring rather than justice might orient participation in moral relationships. However, moral agency for philosophers and developmental psychologists alike presumes that morality is consciously enacted, and that moral action is focused toward singular outcomes. Anthropology shows that neither singular outcomes nor conscious choice can be assumed to be the conditions for any moral agent’s acts.

An ethnographic focus on morality, by comparison to philosophical argument or social psychology’s empirical studies of degrees and domains of social commitment, asks first how the researcher knows when, and for whom, it matters that political acts be examined as moral ones (Sykes 2009). In this case, that means asking what can be said about the primary importance of triam tasol to members of a generation who share a sense that the future could be different than the past, even if that future bears no resemblance to notably Western forms of modern life (Gewertz 1988; Gewertz and Errington 1991). Many accounts of intergenerational exchanges in Melanesia also parallel the belief, shared by English speakers, that “the child is the father of the man,” something like the experiential wisdom that the passing of time is relational and perspectival, rather than unilinear and marking an absolute pathway with the unfolding of history.³

The notion triam tasol, so important to the independence generation, also captures how Papua New Guineans of the nationalist era think of their moral agency in bringing about political independence, rather than as an act to preserve their traditions. Reflecting on questions like these, Bernard Narokobi, who served as Minister for Justice in the post-independence era, wrote of how the experience of growing old peacefully cannot be transacted simply and directly across generations. His account of his consultations with elderly men from his home region reminded him that he, as the next generation, not they,
as the past one, would enjoy the outcomes of his support for the new nation and the efforts in building it and so they shifted responsibility for independence onto the shoulders of those who sought it for themselves. However, his fathers’ generation urged him to consider how his acts would change his life, and the lives of others, and used a vernacular analogy of generational time. Describing a lifetime as akin to the passing of the sun in the sky, they told him that they, as older men, “belonged to the evening”: they had done their best and their day was done. They would not see the future now. However, they could sit on the banks of the river and think about their youthful days with pleasure. By comparison, as a member the younger generation, the young Narokobi “belonged to the morning,” and this meant he would have to do what he thought was right in the day that stretched before him. He was charged with taking the only advice they had, an insight from their experience of growing old. Like them, Narokobi would have to live with the knowledge of what he had done when he was old. Their advice was not an answer, and it fell only somewhat short of an admonishment for asking the question because independence had nothing to do with them, whose days were done.

In these stories, I explore the idea of triam tasol, and also the value of nationalist commitments to the relationships that theorists typically assume to confer cultural patrimony, as did Margaret Mead (1956) in New Lives for Old, when she analyzed Melanesian desires for full and radical change toward a dignified future. Narokobi finds the elders to be disinterested in national development and its incumbent notions of social modernity, but not because the older generations adhere to a Eurocentric idea that traditions are passed from one generation to the next, and bind men and women to repeat the past (in what has been called cold history, or even ahistorical politics). Instead, they rephrase changing times in the Melanesian idiom, honoring the inventiveness of that political act that resituates the passing of time in the dynamic unfolding of intergenerational relations that allows for the new generation to make their life as they wish, to “just give it a try” from their point of view.

The story is more than a personal remembrance and a morality tale told by Narokobi, a politician of the nationalist era, for politicians of the post-independence period. It shows how Narokobi’s moral agency was made interactively for him by his clan elders, who attributed the capacity to act to him. They first urged him to find the process by which he could learn to live with who he is, a younger man with a future ahead of him. Then they reminded the young political candidate that he might need to invent the rules, not because the times are new, but because that is how his compatriots seek and have always sought their livelihoods. Once that was done, he would live out his old age in the company of others. Narokobi learned from his elders how nationalist
categories of analysis simply privilege a nationalist and individualist point of view, rather than an intergenerational perspective from which to understand moral agency interactively. They raise key questions for a better understanding of inventing the rules, which is an interactive practice of moral agency in PNG.

Moral Agency as Fulfilling One’s Responsibility to Others

In my fieldwork records there is a life history of a member of the independence generation that shows most clearly how this generation’s experiments in moral agency are directed toward others, and away from adherence to state laws, even away from the criminal courts. The case is complex, but Sudo’s story clarifies the moral agency of many members of this generation.

During my first fieldwork, I recorded how the twelve-year-old boy Sudo teased me about my fears in the field, suggesting that I feared there might be cannibals in Melanesia. He told me cannibalism stories, and taught me a song about Lasi, a loyal pet, that rescued a girl from the *tambaran* (an anthropophageic bush spirit or anthropophagic legend that is still told today in order to teach the limits of moral human behavior as taking responsibility for others’ well-being). We made it part of a singing game that we played together on long walks through the bush, when it was not always possible to see each other clearly. By whistling one line at a time to each other, it was possible to stay connected as we walked. The spirited final line, *hun de, hun de, hun de* (which is translated as “come quickly”) kept the sense of the occasion as well as ended the story of the dog’s rescue of the girl from the cannibals. He thought it was a great joke, and the game gave rise to hours of laughter about the absurdity of such fear. We both knew he was testing my ideas about his humanity by challenging me to see his cultural habits and beliefs as complexly related to either my fear of savages or his fear of the cannibals, named in tambaran.

Years later Sudo tested me again. Not just using the song as a trick to establish that we had a relationship in the village, this time Sudo used it to test my involvement in the drama that his life had become, which he then went on to tell me. Sudo’s story described a course of events that had developed over several years. First, Sudo was jailed for an attempted rape, and released after three months when the trial determined there was not sufficient evidence to convict him. He recounted this story to me, highlighting his mistaken intentions and his attempt to escape the scene of the crime without his trousers. Without them, there was no way of hiding his identity as the perpetrator of the crime from the quickly assembling crowd, and the police arrested him to stop
vigilante action that would surely have led to his death. Later, a second event marked Sudo out as a troubled figure yet again, when Sudo’s younger clansman was expelled from school, after trying to set the school generator ablaze. The headmaster made a few derisive comments about the younger boy’s clan, which had already gained renown from Sudo’s noted actions as a raskol man who had been acquitted of the crimes of rape and attempted rape. Something had to be done, and Sudo was warned by his older clansmen to protect his reputation and that of the clan, while his aunties belittled him with gossip about his deeds.

He shared these problems with me, and as we talked more, I failed to help him to forgive himself and put the two events behind him. To do that he first needed the forgiveness of his relatives, and that had not been forthcoming. Although he had opened the conversation about his problems by recalling and playing the game we once knew, he left abruptly in a downcast mood as the sun was setting on the hills. That night Sudo burned down his house and pulled up his crops in a spirit of abject despair.

Sudo’s self-abasing response would normally have reconciled him with his clan; instead, his uncles, as his clansmen, battered him very badly. No relative came to his aid during the weeks of his recovery in hospital. The member of Parliament took him to the hospital; I (the anthropologist) brought him back when he was better. All the while his kin withheld pity, as well as any indication of their readiness to allow him to return peacefully to the village to live with them. After a month, which he spent in my house, he was accepted finally in the village as the caregiver to his aging father. During that time I began to wonder what to make of the ethos of village relationships. Was his destruction of his house and crops a mature form of moral agency, or not? But, I have learned that that was not the right question.

The decision to destroy one’s wealth as a response to others’ anger is not peculiar to Sudo or this story. The fear of jealousy that economically successful villagers feel might cause them to take a good quality truck off the road, and park it in the village as if it were broken and beyond repair. Such practices have a legacy in Melanesia more widely, where debasement of one’s own wealth has been used to signal either a request for pity, or an apology for an inadvertent offence. By destroying his wealth, Sudo, like other Papua New Guineans before him established his moral agency, as he showed that he was thinking of others’ well-being ahead of his own.

In this situation, Sudo’s uncles went one step further than simply leaving him to the more usual cultural practice of publicly destroying his wealth. They challenged him to act, rather than remain a victim of their castigation. In this exercise of mortification, carried out by Sudo and his male clansmen, he put
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his livelihood into the hands of others and they made clear to him that his recovery depended on their help, should they choose to give it. The story of Sudo’s fall from grace and his unhappy path to redemption in his father’s house is far from unique. His experience follows a well-known narrative that ends when the hero finds his kin or old friends in a household they come to share.

Moral Agency in the New Extended Household

Most people in this generation are making choices that prioritize their work to sustain large, extended households. Extended households are the central form of daily social association in contemporary PNG, even when their members live at great distance. The extended household is also the means by which people provide a livelihood for each other, by sharing what they have, combining their labor, and pooling their resources for larger, one-off undertakings. In this section, I recount Wilson’s and Gerard’s personal narratives as examples of the many members of this generation who do that.

Like others who do not appear in national records, and fail to contribute statistically to the GDP, Wilson makes a living by combining skills he acquired in school with those he found in his many different temporary and short-term jobs. Many, including Wilson, are also owners of impermanent yet surprisingly long-term businesses that open and shut, as their proprietors need. Reports on the forty thousand registered businesses in Papua New Guinea show that only four thousand submit tax returns, and of those that do, fewer than three hundred actually pay tax. The reasons for this vary, but it is thought that most business profits fall below the taxation line, and many are not stable over the year. Many businesses are “family groups” that are registered as companies for the economic advantage. Relatives share the investment in a small enterprise, such as haulage and cartage, trade stores, or in “labor groups” that organize either for seasonal agricultural work or to produce a traditional art or craft for sale to tourism companies (personal communication, member of a Lae business association). Most businesses registered in Papua New Guinea are enterprises that are creatively organized, centered on family and friends who simply want to work together for a time, and are temporary.

For example, Wilson worked with his father and brothers in a family haulage and cartage business, and left that when he decided to try his luck in the world—much to their consternation. It had been an unhappy working relationship with his brothers. Despite his abilities in both truck driving and in accounts keeping, he was told to “daunim laik bilong em yet,” or to “constrain his self-interest.” Instead he should practice some humility about his good luck in finding
an education, and take a secondary role in the family business as *boskru*—as if a “sailor” who was part of a “boat’s crew” in neo-Melanesian, which in practice meant running errands for the brother who had been given the job of driving that day. After a few years in this role, he was entreated to show his book keeping skills to another brother, who was publicly reported as the business manager. Despite the fact that Wilson’s brother never learned to keep the books, he carried the job title *bos* or “boss,” and more often *kuskus* or “clerk” or “accountant.”

Wilson took a job on a plantation, where he learned to manage a work crew, lining them up every morning in order to give them their day’s work orders. His family enjoyed his stories of his new household, which included his *house meri* (housekeeper) and his gardener, and tales about his evenings spent learning the guitar. With that experience, he then sought a better salaried job in what he called “retail management.” He became a store manager of a large shop on a mining site on Lihir Island and also owned and operated his own small delivery business from there. He provided deliveries of goods for the families of associated businesses on the island, and managed the transport for other small enterprises that had grown up around the principal operations of the mine. It was there he met his wife, and from there he made an attempt to settle a small sum of money on a house in his home village so that he could lay claim to gardens by routinely returning to work them in a traditional manner.

Wilson’s experience of making a living in the last two decades is an example of the general habit by which people readily triam tasol in the course of making a living. His time in education was completed, and after ten years working on Lihir Island at the mining site he ended his employment working for the owner of a large store there. It was always his plan to go back to his home village where he could live well, and not live only off an employee’s paycheck, which would entail that he must “eat money all his days.” In 2005, at the age of thirty he bought and opened a trading store close to his home village. Sometimes it was closed for a month or two, while Wilson went about some work in horticulture, or prepared for a major traditional ritual, but for the most part, the large trade store is still his livelihood. This time he both managed and owned the business, which meant he lived on the business profits and not a staff salary. However, because of its yearly closings, Wilson never needed to pay tax for the registered business, and he is officially an unemployed worker, living by subsistence in the village. Nonetheless, his business has operated for over ten years as a supplier of household goods for local villagers, and has offered sales of drinks and snacks to bus passengers who stop at his store, partway on their journey between Kavieng, the provincial capital and, Namatanai, the second most important administrative center on the island.
Wilson’s obligations to his household, which included his clansmen as well as his wife and children, have been a priority in all of his business decisions, even while he seeks to limit his obligations to some of his cousins and even some siblings who fail to recognize their obligations to him. Because he married a woman who is not from his home village, Wilson has found that the responsibilities that he keeps to her natal family has been subject to ongoing negotiation. One of his wife’s brothers is a matter of special concern, and while Wilson has given bridewealth to him and her other brothers, many discussions continue about the duration of that debt. In this, Wilson is not alone, as many Papua New Guineans who live in cities that are distant from their home villages also report their desire to restrict the numbers of affinal obligations that they meet (Sykes 2013). Keir Martin (2007) has shown that some Papua New Guineans who have retired to their home villages now also seek to limit their debts to relatives there with stricter household rules on how to ask and receive gifts from relatives. My own research shows that the independence generation leads in forming such households as an emergent social form, within which the members meet various forms of obligations and responsibilities to each other, and thereby come to define the terms of a good life.

Another life history shows how men and women in good jobs or with successful businesses create an extended household of new relationships, over the observance of traditional relations. I consolidated my understanding of this feature of the lives of the independence generation when a member of the cohort of people who graduated from secondary school in 1991 contacted me by email. No longer a schoolboy, he was by then working as an accountant for an international coffee company operating in Lae. Gerard wanted to show me his success, but first made an overture to me that highlighted our common concern for his clansmen. I had known his sisters, as well as his parents. He reported on their current situation, reminding me that I too had called his grandmother, pupu (“our grandmother”), and he effectively called on me to stay part of their household. In so doing, Gerard showed me that the extended household could stretch across time and space, perhaps in ways that the nuclear household could not.

Gerard’s email addressed me as his sister, and told of the death of “our” grandmother. Gerard’s use of kin terms to address me is indicative of a widely known habit in Papua New Guinea of calling out to someone as a relative or as a friend as a way of creating a closer relationship with another person and reminding each other what they share. For example, in our email exchange, Gerard addressed me as a respected sister, and then reminded me that we have common interest in the wellbeing of many of the same people. He wanted to
know if I would help him with a small loan to care for his sister’s needs for her new baby’s first year. Gerard, like others living in town for work or advanced education, calls on relatives and close friends from the same village for support. Like other urban residents, he calls on those who are ambiguously related as if they were his relatives, and thereby calls on them to find common ground with him. In general, as a spoken term of address, the use of kin names such as “aunty” or “grandmother” can be understood as ways of recognizing kinship between people, and also as the very making of kin, as when a person effectively becomes a brother of the family, after years of being addressed as our brother. This latter practice is common in contemporary Papua New Guinea, and Gerard was using it with me to assert the continuing importance of our relationship to each other and my place in his extended household. My experience underlined that triam tasol features in kin and household relations, as much as in new friendships forged through education and work.

Wilson and Gerard came from similar kinds of extended households, a kind that became increasingly familiar among the rest of this generation as they confronted the moral choices ahead of them. Wilson and Gerard had each met his future wife while employed at work undertaken after graduation from secondary education. As Papua New Guineans whose closest relatives were spread across several provinces, they expressed their anxiety about keeping up the many commitments created by marriages that were not made according to the traditions of their home village. It is common in this generation to marry and constitute new households that effectively cross provinces, language groups, and cultural groups, and also remain geographically dispersed. By contrast, their parents’ generation married within the language group into which they were born, and largely remained in their home region.

Both Wilson and Gerard usually resolved their problems by coming up with new living arrangements, yet they often called on their relatives in more traditional ways. Although Gerard had continued to post-secondary education, and gained several accounting certificates before entering his employer’s staff training program, the dilemmas that he faced every day in his household were not so different from those that Wilson confronted as a graduate of secondary school in his various work and employment sites. Both Wilson and Gerard were responsible for selecting which relationships they would keep up from the many they each had, with many relatives through marriage (their affinal relations), and with clansmen (their consanguine relations). As was also the case for Wilson, the frequency of contact demanded as much of Gerard personally, as the actual financial commitments demanded from his paycheck. Recurrent visits from members of the extended household, most often from kin who were less well-off and in need of financial and emotional support, are
a constant source of stress for members of the independence generation. They say they are challenged to sustain so many relationships at one time. They are less concerned with how much of the household budget goes to relatives, and more worried about how long the relatives will stay. The principal tension experienced by both men lies in their struggle to reconcile their commitments to kin from their home village and their wife’s village, managing the demands these commitments make on the everyday budget of their household and the social life of its members.

The independence generation of Papua New Guineans describe themselves as moral agents when their actions are directed toward facilitating the achievement of a better future for other people. They do this by prioritizing care for known others, rather than working toward economic and political justice in the abstract, or toward specific political ideals and values that are perceived to serve the nation directly. While international agencies judge them a failure for not contributing to a greater national good, theirs is a moral economy, focused on the present well-being of the members of the extended household, a group that is described in a traditional idiom, but made up of people who would not traditionally be considered “kin” or “clansmen.”

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In elaborating the point of view of the first generation born after independence in PNG, I have focused on those deliberations about social relations that external agencies and international organization find hard to recognize. This generation is economically and statistically invisible in international measures of political agency simply because the analysis of their contributions to national development does not measure their work and relationships as economically productive. Neither has this generation created their own account of an ideal form of social life, or the value of the kin relationships by which they live, instead being labeled raskols by others. For them, social relationships are experiments in living with others in creatively formed extended households that might produce nothing except the immediate care that they provide to each other. Their morality is implied; it exists intersubjectively in social actions directed at testing the other for a response, an exercise in giving it a try together, as when “mipela triam tasol.”

Perhaps it helps to recall that other critiques of productivity in Melanesian societies have raised questions about agency and political economy, as I have here. Gell (2000) revisited an earlier inquiry by Malinowski (1935) into the nature of yam gardens, their magic, and the collective work they involved, and in doing so illuminated the aesthetics and ethics of human creativity in economic
production. A yam garden for Gell, and for Malinowski before him, is a work of art, one in which the nature of moral agency is as clear as the nature of creative agency. Gell reminds readers that Malinowski presents the case for Trobriand gardening as a function of wide networks of people involved in exchange relations, rather than as a simple set of individuals engaged in horticulture or subsistence farming. The technologies of enchantment that matter are not magical spells used to bring wealth to humans in return for their work. They are those that have the pragmatic effect of making the yam garden visible to all, so that they might share their lives. Gell reminds us that for Malinowski, yam gardens are grown neither magically nor by Trobriand agricultural science: they are experiments in making a livelihood with others and caring for them.

As part of the independence generation, the Papua New Guineans I have described are not alone in redefining moral agency. In addition to anthropologists who have theorized moral agency as an intersubjective relationship, as did Gell (1999), twenty-first-century continental social theorists also challenge the assumption that political maturity captures the definition of moral agency. In asking about the nature of moral agency and political maturity in postindustrial developed nations, Zizek (2010) joins a long line of continental political philosophers who have argued against the assumption that morality, moral relationships, shared values and the good life, all can be the outcome of productive activity. The problem is that production is a highly elaborated form of social activity (Baudrilliard 1981), which is obscured by an ideology of the heroic individual as moral agent. Some scholars argue that the emphasis on the rational economic actor debases knowledge of social life (see, e.g., DeBord 1995). This feature of moral agency pre-determines what can be desired and hoped for in the contemporary political economy of the postindustrial state (Lyotard 1993). Much of the work of these continental political philosophers is concerned with a critique of human agency as a key concept of political economy more broadly. However, in an intellectual departure from this vast literature on political agency, Zizek (2010) outlines the parameters of moral agency in a lawless, perhaps stateless, economy wherein a restless collective consciousness of social difference shares no one sense of the good. While he advances a theoretical debate that posits that a stateless economy is the desired moral outcome for late capitalist, developed nations, this chapter proposes that moral agency of people living in the late capitalist, postcolonial nation is deeply intersubjective and aims to invent the rules.

Without a corrective lens to see the independence generation in their own terms, some scholars fall into the same trap as those who explained the eco-
nomic irrationality of cargo cultists as breaking the rules of colonial control, when they were better understood as long-term projects in social transformation (Worsley 1956). Refinements of those analyses showed that examples of how Pacific Island people invent the rules together are timeless. Marshall Sahlins (1964) acknowledged the long history of social innovations by Oceanic societies as an inspiration to rethink comparative political histories of the Pacific. A decade later Roy Wagner (1974, 1981) focused on Melanesian creativity and warned against studying ossified culture by searching for culture as a thing. Later Andrew Lattas (1998) and Holger Jebens (2004) warned anthropologists of the risks entailed in making the same errors as their predecessors who mistook cargo cults as failures of immediate economic aims. They thereby replicate the very knowledge practices that James Scott (2004) once defined as “seeing like a state.” In this chapter, I have shown that when an entire generation does not produce livelihoods in terms that the state can see, the nationalists’ terms of evaluation fail, and therefore the nationalists cannot even see the very generation they sought to produce. Seeking to understand adulthood, as a political form that converges with as a stage of life, blinkers scholars to recognizing the interactive forms of moral agency. However, scholarship improves with corrective lenses, ground with a measure of the point of view of the independence generation.

Most people in PNG speak of their moral decisions, and elicit distinctive models for living together in the present, as members of emerging extended households. In them, they meet their obligations to each other with care and think of their generation as inter-subjectively related to the generations that begat them. Although external evaluations find failure with adulthood as a stage of life on the stage of national political life, the elusiveness of their individual moral agency is not a current concern to the independence generation in PNG because they know and experience it interactively. Neither has this been a matter of angst in the past. In this chapter, I account for the moral agency of the independence generation in its own terms. My ethnography of moral agency as inventing the rules aims to bring into view a cohort that has been largely invisible to nationalists’ accounts of them as failures, but can be known otherwise, even in the terms of the households they are making as the first post-independence generation.

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NOTES

1. The 1990 census records 50 percent of the population of five million people as born after 1975, and then under the age of sixteen. With a population of seven million in 2010, the proportion born after independence has grown to 68 percent, and four million and five hundred thousand people are as of 2010 under the age of forty.

2. As regards moral agency (which admittedly Gell’s [1999] study of creativity in art does not explicitly address), we can say that for Gell the agent knows how to act because he or she imagines what it means to be a patient of the earlier actions of other agents.

3. My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety. (William Wordsworth, “The Rainbow,” 1807)

4. Zizek’s writings do not extend to the ambiguities raised in such concrete situations.

5. Recent scholarly attention has turned to discuss the dispersal of agency through social relations, rather than to presume the outcomes of the intentional agent’s actions are meaningful products of his or her consciousness (see Candea 2010, and for comparison, see also Thrift 2010).

6. Notable earlier anthropological research into noncapitalist societies had similar goals (see especially Godelier, 1996; see also Evans-Pritchard 1937 [1974], 1940; Malinowski 1922).

7. There is a scene in the award winning ethnographic documentary, Koriam’s Law and the Dead Who Govern (dir. Kildea and Simon 2005) that exposes the hopes shared by Papua New Guineans to create different relations with others, as they invent the rules for a cargo cult that will change their lives, or at least give it a try. Residents of rural West New Britain hope that the custodianship of money will bring them equality with white men, and a roadway to the kind of wealth and lifestyles that only international company executives hold. Late in the film, an elderly woman asks the ethnographer, Lattas, “when will the wealth come, what is the secret?”—although she knows well enough that she has participated in a village-wide experiment by inventing the laws for bringing white man’s wealth to West New Britain and he has not. Lattas, who has contributed significant works in the study of cargo cults in Melanesia, walks away without a word, and we do not know if his character feels shame because he knows and cannot say that they never will hold the secret of white man’s wealth.

REFERENCES


