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A FISH TRAP FOR CUSTOM
How nets work at Matupit

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> Went along to Raulai this afternoon. Turpui was helping his son ToKaul to make a second or spare a varkia as the one now at sea is old. TurPui himself belongs to the matonoi[1] of ToUraulai, but as he remarked, we old men wander everywhere so as to see that the youngsters are doing it properly. As they worked ToKaul, a young man of about 30, said: from this much tambu[2] will emerge. Young lads who spend their time just wandering idly about and leading a useless existence don't know how to make a basket. But from this comes the tambu with which one marries. I pointed out that a man did not buy his own wife. TurPui said it was only if they saw a young man busy on a fish trap that they would help him by buying a wife for him. Many men had never found wives because they were too idle to make baskets.[3]

Matupit in East New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG), has a well-documented history.[4] It is one of the largest villages of the local Tolai people, and is still recovering from the volcanic eruptions of 1994, merely the latest episode in over a century of natural disasters, war, political upheavals and radical cultural change that mark its unique status as one of the most 'developed' villages in PNG. One respect in which Matupit is not unique is the manner in which many of its residents are convinced that there is less respect today among the young. Although such complaints are common in most communities, I was struck by the frequency of their repetition at Matupit. I was also struck by the frequency with which the ending of the construction of traditional fish traps at Matupit was linked to this loss of respect.[5] What was clear from such stories was the way in which fish traps (Kuanau: *babau*) were seen not just as a technology for the catching of fish, but also as a tool for the making of certain kinds of desirable social

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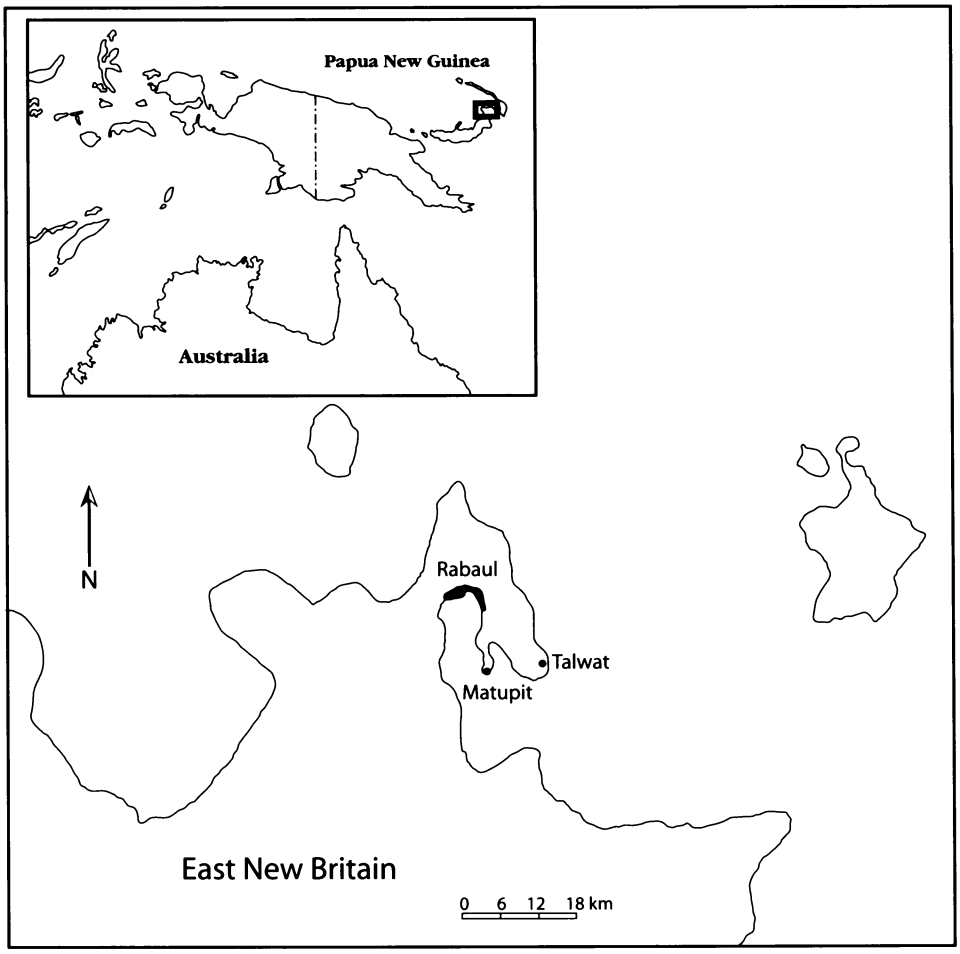
1 The *motonoi* or *matonoi* (Kuanau) is a piece of beach reserved for fishing activities, only open to adult men. It is also the name of the group where '[t]he necessity for co-operation', for tasks such as launching the fish trap, 'finds structural expression' (Epstein 1963:189). Members are expected to help each other and often check each others' traps (Epstein 1963:190).

2 *Tabu* (or *tambu*) is the local Tolai shell-wealth, used in different contexts as both indigenous currency, and also as an item of ceremonial display and exchange. Epstein refers to Tolai 'shell money' as *tambu*. In common with most of my informants at Matupit, I prefer to write the word as *tabu*.

3 Epstein (n.d.). This incident, recorded in Epstein's field-notes as having occurred in 1960, is also reported in Epstein (1991:88–89).

4 See Epstein (1969), Martin (2005).

5 Kuanau: *variru*. The Tolai commonly use three languages: vernacular Kuanua, Neo-Melanesian Tok Pisin and English.



Matupit, East New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea (Map: G. Hampel).

relations, in particular marriage and other kinds of relations built upon reciprocity and respect.[6]

6 I conducted fieldwork at Matupit between February 2002 and February 2004, with an additional month's fieldwork on a return visit from December 2004 to January 2005. I would like to acknowledge assistance from the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC Research Studentship R42200134324), and the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (Grant Number 6860) as well as financial assistance from the Friends of the Mandeville Special Collection at University of California at San Diego Library for visits to their archived material, and an additional Overseas University Visit grant for this purpose also made by the ESRC. I would like to thank Mattia Fumanti, Karen Sykes, Donald Tuzin, Emily Walmsley and the two anonymous reviewers for comments on an earlier version of this paper. I would also like to thank those present at the session of the sixth conference of the European Society for Oceanists (ESfO) held in Marseilles July 2005, at which this paper was first presented, for their comments.

Tolai fish traps in the ethnographic record

Fish traps have long been important to the economies of Matupit and other coastal Tolai communities. The technical details of their manufacture and use have been described by Richard Parkinson (2000), and A.L. Epstein (1969). Richard Salisbury (1970:151–154) in his discussion of fishing at the nearby Tolai village of Vunamami, draws a distinction between labour that is provided between equals on a basis of reciprocity and labour that is paid for. According to Salisbury, the manufacture of fish traps provides an 'instance of non-reciprocal labour'. Each skilled adult man nominally makes his own trap, but he often

> makes only the most difficult part of his trap – the springy central core through which fish enter, but through which they cannot escape. He then gets a less skilled person, often one of the youths [...] to do the tedious job of tying hundreds of cane strips to the spacing rings to make the basket. Food is provided while a youth is so working, and usually a final present equivalent to about half a fathom of tabu for a day's work. Reciprocity is again possible, for the skilled man may eventually make a core for the youth, but it does not necessarily occur (Salisbury 1970:153).

At other points fish traps are operated on a more overtly reciprocal basis, with the anchoring of fish traps in the ocean providing 'the occasion of reciprocity par excellence' (Salisbury 1970:152–153). The large group of men who anchor the basket are made up of those whom the owner has helped in the past or who hope for his assistance in the future. They receive only a meal for their efforts (although the owners of the canoes that are used must receive a little *tabu*). The collection of fish from the traps is one in which '[r]eciprocity is involved to some extent' (Salisbury 1970:152). Among the regular fishermen there is reciprocity, as people use each other's canoes and check each other's traps. There are also, however,

> casual visitors at the beach, or young men not yet owning a canoe and still learning how to weave fish traps, who are only too willing to work for a morning with the near certainty of a meal, and the expectation of half a fathom of tabu as well. Reciprocity is unlikely for such young men, who form a labour pool (Salisbury 1970:153).

Salisbury's distinction between labour that is conceived as being embedded in networks of reciprocity and non-reciprocal labour, that is more akin to wage-labour is an analytically useful one, helping us to avoid Western essentialisms that presume the universal predominance of commodity exchange. However, the distinction between different moments during the manufacture and use of fish traps in terms of whether they are occasions of reciprocity or non-reciprocity does not tell the whole story. The larger network of social relations within which these moments occur also needs to be taken into consideration. For example, we do not know if the youths who tied the cane strips to make the basket tended to be kin of the skilled trap-maker, or reciprocally obligated to him in other ways. When it came to learning how to make traps, it is true that the old men tend-

ed 'to wander everywhere', to check that the youngsters were making the traps properly. But my informants also tended to describe one old man to whom they were related (such as Eli's grandfather described below, or ToKaul's father Turpui, described at the start of this paper) who took particular interest in their progress and from whom they learnt much, not least respect. It is important, more generally, to consider the wider context in which moments of reciprocal or non-reciprocal exchange occur. Karl Marx (1976:182) stresses that non-reciprocal exchange, or what he refers to as exchange based on 'reciprocal isolation' (i.e. commodity exchange), is not unique to capitalist society. What distinguishes capitalist society is a tendency for production to be organised according to the needs of generalised commodity exchange. This wider social context, in which we acknowledge the immense power of non-reciprocal economic relations over our lives, is important in defining the meaning and importance of the moments of reciprocal or non-reciprocal exchange that we live by from day to day. For Marx, the tendency for commodity transactions to reify social relations by virtue of their non-reciprocal nature (commodity fetishism), which is only embryonic in societies in which commodity exchange is of marginal importance, reaches its apex in capitalist society.[7] By virtue of this wider social context, Marx sees commodity exchange in a capitalist society as acquiring an immense social power to influence the ways in which people imagine their relationships and involvements with others.

The perceived importance of the wider social networks within which fish-trap manufacture and use were embedded is illustrated by Epstein's (1991:87–93) discussion of fishing technologies at Matupit. During his first fieldwork in the early 1960s, elder men were keen to stress the importance of fish traps as a means of acquiring *tabu* (as opposed to Australian money), which was 'not to be frittered away on everyday purchases' (Epstein 1991:89). Instead, individual trap owners held the *tabu* collected through sales of fish, but only so that it could be pooled in an account held at the *motonoi* from which the trap had been launched. At the end of the fish-trap season, the amount of *tabu* collected would be publicly counted at an occasion known as *vevedek*.[8] For the elders this was imagined to be a means by which they could display their ritual prowess. Epstein describes how Turpui, the elder mentioned at the start of this paper, announced at one *vevedek* how the people of the nearby village of Talwat had organised an impressive display of *tabu* that they had earned from trap fishing, and how this should be a role

7 See Marx (1976:172, 176).

8 See Epstein (1991:89, 1963:190). At Vunamami, Salisbury informs us, the fish-trap owner acquired all the fish in his own traps, unless someone else checked the trap on his behalf, in which case the catch was split. At Matupit during the 1960s, the proceeds of both trap- and net-fishing were displayed in the collective *motonoi* account, at Vunamami the proceeds of the trap went directly to the individual owner, whereas net fishing proceeds were collectively organised by the clan, rather than the *motonoi*. See Salisbury (1970:239), and Epstein (1963:189–190). By the time of my own fieldwork at Matupit, profits from the net went to its owner, whether an individual or a collective group. One owner whom I interviewed told me that one would have to pay the landholder of the *motonoi* where one stationed one's net, but at the moment it was unclear who had jurisdiction over the *motonoi* that he was using.

model for Matupit. Turpui is quoted as saying: 'Then our young men will see and begin to understand the ways of our forefathers. This is the road we are talking about through which a lot of *tambu* will arise. There is no work like the *babau*' (Epstein 1991:89). In working hard to acquire *tabu* that could be displayed in this manner, young men proved themselves worthy of the assistance that they required from elders in making a bridewealth payment. Hence ToKaul's, Turpui's son's, assertion that from the fish traps would come the *tabu* with which one married, even if one did not directly pay for one's wife with the *tabu* that one earned fishing. Rather than pay for one's wife oneself, a variety of related kinsfolk, in particular members of one's matrilineal clan (Kuanua: *vunatarai*), would contribute. Rather than an act in which one 'bought' a bride, marriage became an event in which one's reciprocal interdependence with others was demonstrated and mobilised. Hence the importance of being seen to learn how to make a trap: in doing so one demonstrated that one was willing to fulfil one's end of the bargain and to work hard to produce *tabu*, not necessarily for immediate individual gain, but to assist with moments of ritual display. In return, the elders would help the young man with his needs, such as acquiring a wife. Instances such as the display of *tabu* described by Turpui and bridewealth exchanges became instances in which the powers of this ongoing reciprocity were publicly displayed. The display is a moment of great power, as Turpui demonstrates, when he imagines that, when the *tabu* is displayed, the 'young men will see and begin to understand the ways of our forefathers'.

Man holding *tabu* already cut in preparation for distribution at a mortuary feast, Raluana village, near Rabaul, 2003 (photo: Keir Martin).

Woman distributing *tabu* at a mortuary feast, Raluana village, near Rabaul, 2003 (photo: Keir Martin).

However, even by the time of Epstein's first fieldwork in the early 1960s, this picture had been complicated by a fear that social changes were dislocating the wider networks of reciprocity within which fish-trap manufacture and use occurred. Epstein reports that, 'Turpui knew in his heart that he was talking into the wind' (Epstein 1991:89). In private he told Epstein that '[o]ur fathers used to beat us so that we paid heed and learned the customs [...] *Pa ave nunure boko* – We no longer know about these things' (Epstein 1991:89). Turpui's vision was proved to be correct. When Epstein returned to Matupit in 1986, he found that 'the *babau* had become a thing of the past' (Epstein 1991:90). Yet nearly twenty years on, there is a sense in which it is still a technological item of importance at Matupit, since it remains one of the most popular illustrations of and explanations for a perceived lessening of respect. Why did the fish trap die out, and why is its demise still considered so significant?

Contemporary discussions of the fish trap

One afternoon I was discussing with my host family the behaviour of a young woman who frequented nightclubs in town. Although I was told that the clan had an interest in her behaviour, this was not as strongly enforced as in the past, as now young people were more 'individualistic', and 'Westernised', and 'followed the life style of white people'. In the past they would not have got away with it, but today the attitude was 'this is my life, not the clan's'. Both my hosts laughed at the thought of someone putting forward that argument when they were young. When I asked why things were different now, there was initially no clear answer: education, greater freedom of movement and the impact of television were all put forward as partial suggestions. But what was really felt to explain what had changed was an illustration of deeper social changes that I was already becoming familiar with. Eli, one of my hosts, described how, when he was young, he sat down every morning with his grandfather as he made fish traps. It was there that he learnt about the past, and about the correct way to show respect. 'Young people today don't have that. There aren't', he told me, 'any old people any more!'

Clearly there were still old people at Matupit. But why were today's old people thought incapable of passing on habits of respect, and what did the end of the traditional fish traps have to do with it? Eli was one of my informants who returned to the topic of the fish traps more than once. As a Seventh-day Adventist, he often told me of his opposition to 'custom' (Tok Pisin: *kastom*), which in these conversations largely meant ritual obligations that he considered to be wasteful and backward. Yet sometimes he discussed *kastom* in a more positive light. One afternoon, I mentioned to him something that I had heard about men's houses in the nearby province of New Ireland, and how, when the old people there say that the young people don't want to learn, what they really mean is that the young people are not showing the correct respectful demeanour.

Eli enthusiastically agreed, saying that that was the 'real' meaning of *kastom*, not following a set of rules for the preparation of a ritual performance. And where you learnt this 'real' *kastom* was not at the *tariau* (the secret place in the bush of the male *tubuan* cult), but on the beach, making fish traps with the old men. It was where you learnt to put others before yourself, not to eat before others were ready, and that one only got food once one had displayed good behaviour to the satisfaction of the old men. It was where one learnt to open one's ears and close one's mouth.[9] Men such as Eli were comparatively uninterested in describing the technical details of fish-trap manufacture,[10] but they were more keen to stress the general point that, in being seen to learn how to manufacture the fish traps, one learnt, and earned, something of more fundamental importance: respect. The hours spent on the beach making the traps with the old men has thus come to be seen as constituting an archetypal social relationship by which elder Matupi[11] such as Eli describe how they demonstrated respect to their elders when they were young.

This insistence that respect was learnt on the beach, not at the *tariau*, might be expected from a member of a denomination that denigrated customary rituals. But this illustration was also made by others who were enthusiastic supporters of such practices, especially in the course of conversations about why they sometimes failed to produce the respectful behaviour in the young that they were supposed to. One advocate of customary ritual told me that, in the past, the feasts themselves were almost like an anti-climax – it was the work of doing the feast that was important. 'Now we rely on the feast to be the actual glue. [...] It's getting harder and harder to work *kastom*'. Clearly moments of public ritual performance such as feasts were of importance, Turpui's admiration for the display of *tabu* at Talwat being a good example of this. But these moments of display only made sense as moments in ongoing networks of reciprocity, important and perhaps indispensable to those networks though they may have been. This informant's comments referred to a widely expressed fear at Matupit that *kastom* had become 'commercialised', suggesting that many felt that public displays of *kastom* had become divorced from the reciprocity that gave them meaning and that the capacity and power that they now displayed was of a new order. Rather than display the culmination of hard work in the village, it was now often feared that what they really displayed was, for example, the power of a new indigenous elite who were able to sponsor customary events with their 'money-power'.[12] For this informant, what had changed was the increased economic self-sufficiency of individual households. It struck me that changes in technology and

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9 Similar complaints that young people today do not display this correct demeanour are increasingly commonplace throughout PNG. For example, Donald Tuzin (personal correspondence) reports how people among the Ilahita Arapesh, Sepik Province, complain that the young 'close their ears'.

10 Unlike the older men of the early 1960s, who 'seemed to take particular pleasure in explaining the finer technical points and in instructing me in the terms for the various operations I was observing' (Epstein 1991:87).

11 That is, inhabitants of Matupit.

12 See Martin (n.d.).

the new kinds of sociality associated with them, such as the ending of the long periods of time spent with the old men making fish traps on the beach were also a part of the often expressed fear that the underpinning of *kastom* in day-to-day social relations was being removed.

One particularly strong example of this feeling is the distrust of the role of the new indigenous elite, or 'Big Shots'. Their participation in customary ritual is often derided, as they do not live in the village like the idealised Big Men of previous generations, and the shell-money or *tabu* that they use in ritual is bought with the money they have acquired in the cash economy rather than being earned by paying careful attention to the ongoing shifting reciprocal obligations of everyday village life.[13] And the fish trap, again serves as a powerful metaphor for this development, as the following statement from one of my informants makes clear:

> The Big Men before were Big Men in the gardens or in making fish traps, it's not like ToNgala with his big belly pulling the men to get *tabu* for himself. Before Big Men became Big Men with their own strength – it's not like JK[14] or ToNgala, you can't see their big garden. How many gardens have they got, how many pigs have they raised? Before men became Big Men in the *tubuan* through their work, and people recognised the Big Men. How did ToNgala come up? He hasn't got a garden, he hasn't got a fish trap for *kastom*.[15]

Why did the fish trap disappear at Matupit?

A number of explanations are advanced for the decline of fish-trap technology at Matupit. The most drastic is that after the war an increased volume of large ships using Rabaul Harbour destroyed traditional fish traps that were made out of wood and kept permanently in the water once they were set up. One evening I had a conversation about compensation claims with two Matupit men in their mid-forties. Both men were grass roots villagers, and as such I was not surprised to discover that they were more sympathetic to compensation claims than economically successful Big Shots, who, like the expatriate business community, often tended to be dismissive of compensation claims as being the last resort of the lazy and unsuccessful, as well as a deterrent to investment and development. These men complained that expatriates, the Government and Big Shots often dismissed claims without taking into account the damage that occurred on their land. They explained how the building of roads and the expansion of Rabaul Town

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13 See Eves (2000:461) for a description of a similar denigration of customary valuables being purchased with money. See Martin (2004:7) for a discussion of how this kind of denigration may reflect the differing 'capacities' that store-bought customary valuables and knowledge are seen to enact.

14 John Kaputin, a Matupi who was the former Member of Parliament for Rabaul

15 I deal with this aspect of socio-economic differentiation in Tolai society in more detail elsewhere (Martin 2004).

before the eruption had made it harder for them to get to their gardens, a problem that seemed invisible or irrelevant to the more economically powerful. Then one of the men became animated and said that it was like the fish traps. He knew that I had heard a lot about the fish traps, but did I know that the reason for their extinction was the number of big foreign boats that ploughed in and out of the harbour, moving close to the Matupit coastline despite repeated requests from the Matupi not to do so?[16] Had I not noticed that, once I got away from Rabaul, I could still see poles marking the fish traps sticking out of the water at other villages? But they didn't care about our fish traps or us. We were just an irritation to be brushed aside while they made money.

This description acted as a kind of metaphor for one view of economic and political changes, casting them as an invasive force that callously ripped up previous ways of life. This was not the only way in which economic development was described, but it was one that I had come to associate increasingly with Tolai of this socio-economic status. And it also tied in with a view sometimes expressed by Matupi that the rapid development and social change that their village had experienced had been a double-edged sword. As one Matupi put it to me, 'In a way, you could say, the Tolai have been victims of their own advanced development'. This informant was talking about the perceived partial unravelling of traditional patterns of respect and authority in general, and he then went on to claim that such trends had a longer history and were more pronounced at Tolai villages near Rabaul like Matupit. The case of the fishing boats destroying the fish traps at Matupit almost acts as a Tolai parable of such changes. The Matupi had had benefits but there was a price to be paid as well in terms of a perceived disintegration of traditional cultures, whether the technology of the fish trap, or the traditional culture of respect that was created in the course of their manufacture.

This way of discussing economic change also had implications for how one viewed the plight of men who had not achieved great economic success or laid down secure roots for themselves and their families. Just as the option to build the fish traps had been ripped away from them by large foreign fishing boats – meaning that they could not be held morally accountable on grounds of 'laziness' for their failure to learn their construction with the old men – so it was not reasonable to infer from this description an implicit claim that they are to be blamed for their failures either to succeed financially or to follow old customary practices of respect to the satisfaction of others. The conditions that would have made it possible for them to do this had (according to this story) been ripped asunder by an overwhelming outside force. This is the sense in which Matupit had become the victim of its own progress, being forced by its proximity to the town into radical cultural discontinuities, whether desired or not.

16 This claim seems to be corroborated by Epstein's fieldnotes, which refer to a meeting of councillors for the Rabaul area in 1960, in which ToGoragora, a Matupit councillor, asks what has happened to the letter that they sent the Rabaul Harbour Master on January 15th asking for the Matupit fish traps to be protected.

Another reason given for the end of fish-trap manufacture was a lack of materials. The population of Matupit had grown faster than those of other villages and much customary land had been developed, either by outside business interests with the expansion of Rabaul Town or by the Matupi themselves planting their own coconut plantations for cash cropping. It was therefore claimed that the materials necessary for the construction of traditional fish traps were no longer available. In this narrative, rather than being a direct result of externally imposed economic exploitation, here the material inability to continue making fish traps, and by implication the inability to continue with the old way of doing things, is seen as an unintended but equally inevitable side effect of Matupis' own involvement in development – a process that was always bound to have benefits and drawbacks. A similar tale is told by some about the replacement of bush material housing with permanent housing at Matupit, which is presented as much as a response to the increasing difficulty in obtaining bush materials at Matupit as the result of a positive desire to modernise among Matupi.

But the most common explanation is that young men began to abandon the making of fish traps out of 'laziness' or 'big headedness'. What sense are we to make of this seemingly circular argument that because the young men were big heads they stopped making fish traps, which in turn made them big-headed? On one level this can be explained by the fact that the introduction of new technologies was co-temporal with other changes that were perceived as loosening the ties of customary village authority.[17] This is an argument that seems to place far more moral responsibility for the decline of this practice and the culture of respect associated with it on recent generations of young men at Matupit themselves. New technologies such as store bought fishing nets[18] theoretically relieved one of the need to spend hours with the old men on the beach in the time it took to hand over a few bank notes at a store in town. As one man told me, 'Fish traps: who wants to do that? All the work is in the bush. You just use a net', before going on to tell me that people don't have the time to work *kastom*, being primarily concerned with 'quick money'.[19] In doing so, this new technology provided an added opportunity to cut

17 Such as wage labour, money, education, increased mobility and distrust of the perceived increasing corruption of village Big Men. See Epstein (1968).

18 Kuanua: *umbene*. The same word is used to describe both contemporary store-bought nets, and their hand-made predecessors.

19 Epstein (1991:92) describes how the different techniques for collecting fish could also lead to the nets being associated with laziness. The trap was not too time-consuming – a small group simply paddled out in a canoe to check it – whereas the net required large amounts of time sitting around waiting for a large school of fish to arrive before a sudden, frenetic and co-ordinated attempt by a group of at least twenty men to catch the fish. It is the enforced hours of idleness associated with net fishing that lead to disapproval. Epstein describes one old man, who partly owned a fish trap but preferred to work in his garden, telling him in the mid-1980s that the net, was for those '"who did not know the meaning of real work. See, they will sit there", he would add, "from morning to night just waiting"' (Epstein 1991:92). Epstein goes on to add that from his perspective he understood why the net might be more attractive in the changed economic climate of the mid-1980s 'to many of the younger people who could no longer find jobs around Rabaul' (Epstein 1991:92), for whom a fishing technology that could be fitted in

oneself out of certain kinds of extended face-to-face social relationships at a time when wider socio-economic changes were already thought to be promoting such tendencies. Money is not merely obtained quickly by virtue of the nets: money and modern technologies such as the nets are considered to be 'quick' technologies that enable one to shortcut certain dependencies on other people. But what was the nature of the networks that people are sometimes imagined to have freed themselves from with this simple commodity transaction?

Fish traps, reciprocity and respect

The extract from Epstein's field notes that opens this paper gives a clue. When the men talk about being seen to make a fish trap and assisting with bridewealth, they are describing a familiar Melanesian culture of reciprocity in which one has to act in a certain manner and acknowledge one's obligations to others, just as one is dependent upon them acting in the same manner by acknowledging their obligations to oneself.[20] They agreed with Epstein's observation that a man does not buy his own wife, but they also added that it is only by showing himself willing to work and acquire the *tabu* that is needed to buy a wife that he proves himself worthy of others' assistance. A young man demonstrated the willingness to be respectful of his ongoing obligations to others, which would be the precondition for them assisting him, by showing the discipline to sit down with the old men and learning how to make fish traps. He demonstrated his worthiness of receipt of the *tabu* required to buy a wife by showing his willingness to learn the techniques that would enable him to fulfil his reciprocal obligations to others in the years to come.

The situation today, however, is in many ways very different. Today it is not unknown for men with the means to do so to organise their own bridewealth payments. This is a development that has been observed in other parts of PNG, along with its effect on the respect shown to elders and customary norms.[21] Even when they do not, especially in the case of families with the money to buy enough *tabu* it is often the

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around the demands of paid employment was no longer a priority. One might also add that the chronic shortage of land for gardening or cash cropping at Matupit, which young men in particular might have had a hard time to gain access to at this time, would have had a similar effect.

20 Being seen to behave in a manner that publicly acknowledges one's reciprocal obligations to others is also important to Tolai in many other contexts. Take for example the common practice amongst many Seventh-day Adventists of providing hidden assistance to relatives preparing for customary ritual, in order to fulfil their obligations without provoking disapproval from the church. This practice was disparaged by some of my informants who took a keen interest in *kastom*, as the fact that you could not see the person giving the assistance invalidated it. It was felt by these informants that to 'send one's hand', rather than to 'send one's face', was not showing respect.

21 See Carrier and Carrier (1989:91), and Tuzin (1997:46–49).

parents alone or an individual Big Shot sponsor who pay the bridewealth, instead of the payment being the compilation of a large number of offerings from a variety of individuals, in particular matrilineal clan relatives, with whom the groom is entwined in ongoing networks of reciprocal obligation. Although it would be wrong to say that this organisation of bride-wealth payments no longer takes place, during my fieldwork I was often told by informants that in the past *kastom* was for maternal uncles and the clan to pay bridewealth, whereas now the new *kastom* made it the parents' responsibility. In addition many young men live with partners for years, even building houses with them and raising children, without organising bridewealth payments. Although these actions provoke some anger, it is not always considered possible to force bridewealth payments from them. It may have been the case in Epstein's day that 'many men had never found wives because they were too idle to make baskets', but if that is no longer the case today, it is not merely because fish-trap basket technology is obsolete, but also because many people are no longer consistently respecting the particular networks of reciprocity that were encapsulated in relationships mediated by that technology.

We are, of course, now familiar with the multiplicity of meanings and effects that money can have in different contexts. In this context, when by acquiring *tabu* it makes marriage possible, it is clearly seen as a kind of social technology that has the potential to make different kinds of social relations from the customary marriages that were ideally made through the circulation of *tabu* in fish-trap construction. They are both marriage-making technologies, but they are seen as having the potential to make different kinds of marriages in different ways, and with different social effects. Rather than tying a man into an acknowledgment of reciprocal interdependence, it is feared that in certain circumstances *tabu* purchased with money can remove him from relations of interdependence by demonstrating his ability to buy a bride for himself, or his reliance on a single patron who uses his 'money-power' to acquire *tabu* for a client.[22] Money, in some contexts at least, appears to have become a technology for the shortening of certain networks of social relations.

The respect whose loss is so frequently lamented is, in essence, the measure of attention to a multiplicity of ongoing reciprocal obligations. This is a trope that will be familiar to any student of Melanesian ethnography.[23] Respect as a marker of attention to reciprocal obligations among the Tolai is well illustrated with regard to discussions of marriage, and in particular the collapse of marriage prohibitions. All Tolai belong to one of two moieties, marriage within a moiety supposed to be strictly prohibited.[24] Yet over the past thirty years these prohibitions have been increasingly ignored, with allegedly

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22 In the 1960s, 'once the shells have been prepared as tambu, they cannot be purchased for cash' (Epstein 1963:207). Today this is no longer the case, as *tabu* itself has become a cash commodity.

23 See, for example, Gregory (1982:52–53).

24 The term 'vunatarai' is used to refer to the two moieties as well as smaller units that are associated with various pieces of land.

catastrophic social effects. As one Tolai political leader put it to me, the collapse of what he referred to as 'the incest law' caused 'death because you spoil the life of the Tolai society and the relationships within the clan. If we had that in today's society we wouldn't have law and order problems [...]. You bring back respect to society'. The respect that is lost is the failure to respect one's obligation to reciprocate the exchange of spouses between moieties that made one's own existence possible. One has not so much broken a law by marrying within one's own moiety, but shown disrespect to one's father's moiety by not acknowledging the obligation to reciprocate the spousal gift made to one's own mother and clan. Marriages ideally express and constitute this ongoing reciprocal exchange and interdependence between clans, a respect that is also made explicit in the exchanges that occur around marriage, in particular the exchanges of *tabu*. As we have seen, it was in acquiring *tabu*, particularly in the course of learning how to build fish traps, that young men in the past ideally demonstrated the demeanour that showed their willingness to respect reciprocal obligations that made them worthy of a bride.

Yet at Matupit today, not only do many young people find ways around reliance on networks of respect with regard to finding a mate, but it is commonly complained that when they do need assistance, this is demanded as of right rather than earned by demonstrating respect for the principle of reciprocity. Reciprocity is not a 'one-way street'. Yet the phrase 'one-way street' is frequently used to describe the attitude of young men at Matupit towards the famous Melanesian 'wantok system'. Without the economic opportunities that were available before the collapse of the PNG currency and the volcanic eruption of the early 1990s, many young men seem to wander aimlessly, 'house to house' or as 'local tourists', as the sayings go, demanding food and money from anyone they can claim a relationship to. What angers many is not the requests for help, but the expectation of help without reciprocal demonstrations of assistance or respect. Stories of this attitude abound, from a myriad of mundane, day-to-day complaints, to tales of young men showing up at customary events that they have no right to attend and have not assisted in the preparation of, demanding to be fed. One example typifies these complaints. A young man allegedly showed up at his mother's house one evening after having aimlessly wandered around the village for several days. Angry that there was no food ready for him, he picked up his bush knife and cut a cup of tea out of his mother's hand. In the past, I was assured that he would have been severely dealt with, but now people were too scared of young men to take action. With the decline of traditional Big Men, there was felt to be no power to contain them. What angered people in the telling of this story, almost as much as the dangerous assault on the young man's own mother, was the perceived arrogance of his demand for unearned and un-reciprocated assistance. Yet the anger was mixed with resignation, and the story was told to me not merely as a horror story of a particularly bad family situation, but as an illustration of a general trend. Indeed the story was told in the context of a wider discussion of the tendency of young men to grab things from others on the basis of an alleged *wantok* connection, yet to offer very little in terms of assistance or respect in return. The contrast with Eli's de-

scription of the respect that he and others of his generation learnt on the beach making fish traps could not be clearer.[25]

Conclusion: nets, bigheads and the fetish of the commodity

Complaints about the big headedness of youth are not a new phenomenon. The extract with which I started this paper acknowledges the existence of 'young lads who spend their time just wandering idly about and leading a useless existence [and who] don't know how to make a basket'. But the inability to influence their behaviour is felt as a worrying change. Of course the situation is not simply one of the corrosive power of commodities freeing those with the money to buy them from reciprocal obligations. For example, large fishing nets are often purchased today with loans from kin or in-laws, tying the owner into obligations to those who have helped.[26] Debts may have to be repaid or school fees contributed to. Relatives of the lender may be employed in working with the net, or assistance may be provided at the performance of some of their customary obligations. Perhaps *wantokism* may affect the price at the shop or influence who obtains nets from government assistance schemes. Often those whom the owner recruited to help in using large nets were close young kin, in particular members of their own clan, with whom they would have the closest customary relationships and mutual reciprocal obligations.[27]

One fish-net owner whom I spoke to at Matupit told me that all the young men he paid to help with the fishing were members of his *vunatarai*, i.e. brothers or cousins: 'I chose them because if I say something they will listen. If I got another group of people, maybe they'd get other work. Other people would give excuses'. His fear was that if other, perhaps more rewarding work came up at the last minute, other people would desert him at times when there were plenty of fish to be caught. He felt more confident that his own junior clansmen would be less likely to desert him in this manner, as for them, working on his net was not so much a stand-alone labour transaction, but instead conceived of more as a moment in a history of mutual entailment than it might

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25 Just as, at the opposite end of the social spectrum, the stories of the Big Men of earlier days, who acquired customary prestige and *tabu* through their careful attention to the reciprocal give-and-take of everyday life, contrasted with the modern Big Shots, who allegedly try to short-circuit such reciprocity by buying *tabu* in bulk with money.

26 According to Epstein (1991:91), most fishing-nets at Matupit in the mid-1980s were owned by groups. Although I did not have time to conduct a full survey of every net at Matupit during my fieldwork, I found that although group ownership was still common, there were also many nets that were individually owned.

27 Although not always, as there were a few people who were known to be specialists in using these nets who worked on nets belonging to people with whom they had no, or only the most distant kinship connection.

be for non-clan members. This man had bought his net second-hand for around 2600 Kina[28] with money that he had borrowed from an in-law, a debt that is itself the result of a previous history of exchange, which in its turn also reinforces these relationships. Although net fishing is not possible all year round at Matupit, it is possible for several months of the year, and on a good day he reckoned that the net could make 500 to 600 K (although much of this money would have to go to his relatives working on the net). This individual had also opened a trade store in mid-2004, around the same time that he launched his fishing net. He told me: 'A net is better than a store. The fish net is a very good business. A store you have to run with money, but not a net. The thing with the store is credit. I worry about credit'. Any business is prone to demands from those who feel they can claim from the business owner on the basis of a history of mutual involvement. But a fishing net, once bought, does not need replenishing. Even if *wantoks* claim his entire catch for a week, he can still fish again the following week. If they claim his trade store profits for a week, then the business is finished, as he cannot afford to replenish his stock. What this small businessman is saying, in effect, is that businesses that only require a single fixed capital outlay at the start are more resistant to the *wantok* system than those that require ongoing capital reinvestment. Demands made on the basis of ongoing reciprocal obligation will continue to be made, but certain kinds of business are better able to survive those demands.[29] Epstein (1991:91) describes how the large numbers of men required to operate a net as opposed to a trap can encourage the public affirmation of reciprocal interdependence. The culmination of the launch (Kuanua: *popoai*) of a new net is the distribution of food and *tabu* to those present, 'not so much for past assistance in the preparation of the net but to secure their future help in "working" the *umbene* and helping to bring in the catch'.[30] Clearly nets made in Japan did not have the power magically to transform those Matupi who bought them into

28 The PNG Kina (K) was worth between £0.15–0.2 at the time of my fieldwork.

29 Salisbury (1970:239) describes net fishing as 'more clearly a business in the European sense' than trap fishing, as 'more than mere investment is needed if a good yield is to be returned. Not only must a substantial labour force be organized but the net must be dried and repaired after each use'. This is true, but compared to the need to buy goods from a Chinese or Australian wholesaler in Rabaul, this is a comparatively easy hurdle to negotiate. If the *wantoks* bleed a fish-trap owner dry, he can still convince young men to work for him on the basis of future expected returns. A trade store owner who goes to a wholesaler in town and explains that his relatives have eaten all of his profits, so that he needs to get stock on credit to make up the difference, is not likely to receive quite so enthusiastic a response.

30 Epstein (1991:91, 1963:190). Epstein (1963:190) even claims that the large numbers of men required to operate and maintain a net as opposed to a trap means that net fishing 'has a corporate aspect lacking in the case of trap fishing'. This is true with regard to fish collection, though as we have seen, at other moments in the career of a fish trap, such as its launch, the co-operation of large groups of men is required. More significantly, events such as the *vevedek* demonstrate a corporate aspect of fish-trap use that is not simply determined by the kind of material technology being used, but is also partially the consequence of its position within wider networks of exchange. Fish nets at Matupit today, in which the net owner simply keeps the financial profit after paying those who have worked on the net, give the appearance in this respect at least of being less 'corporate' than the traps of the 1960s described by Epstein and my older informants.

the fantasy bourgeois individuals of certain Western economic theories. But equally we should beware of simply observing that the purchase of 'Western' commodities acts as a spur for the recreation of Melanesian networks of clan and kin and leave it at that. This would not take into account the way in which kinship relations that were mobilized in the purchase and operation of store-bought fishing nets are not described as having the same power to create respect as the long days sat learning how to make fish traps with the old men on the beach. After all, 'big-head' youths also exploit the terminology of kin relations and *wantokism* in order to couch their aggressive demands – yet in the eyes of many Matupi these uses of kin relations to compel others to assist them materially are so objectionable precisely because they do not embody an ethic of reciprocity. Maybe reciprocity is always held up as an ideal that people worry about living up to sufficiently. Yet it is also abundantly clear that Matupi themselves worry that recent social changes have created a situation in which demands for assistance that are ideally based on reciprocity are increasingly being abused. And Matupi clearly recognize at least the potential for money to act as a social technology that is corrosive of certain kinds of social relations yet constitutive of others in their discussions of the demise of the fish trap.

Of course much of Matupit social life still centres around cultures of reciprocity. By concentrating on one aspect of Matupit social life, therefore, this paper may give the impression of their total breakdown. This is clearly not the case. Yet it is important to trace, in the never ending flow of sociality, those points at which reciprocity is fore-grounded or placed in the background; where its role is accepted or contested. And moments in which reciprocity is fore-grounded or dismissed themselves occur within wider contexts in which reciprocity and non-reciprocity are of differing importance, are held to have a greater or lesser cultural significance, a context that gives additional meaning to those moments. Hence, while Salisbury may be correct in describing certain moments of fish-trap manufacture at Vunamami as being largely non-reciprocal when taken in isolation, Epstein's description, and the memories of my older informants, make it clear that the cultural significance of the fish trap lies in the wider network of reciprocal relations within which it is considered to be embedded. Changing social relations, including technological relations, are inevitably, amongst other things, a process in which reciprocity and non-reciprocity are increasingly or decreasingly stressed in different social contexts. We have already seen that both net fishing and trap fishing have the potential to be the means for the creation of what can be viewed as both reciprocal and non-reciprocal relations. However, it is a shift in the broader cultural context, the perceived relative importance of reciprocity and non-reciprocity, that is of importance here, rather than simply, for example, whether the moment of non-reciprocal fish-trap manufacture described by Salisbury has become more or less reciprocal. Marx's analysis of the changing importance of commodity exchange in a society where production is now organised primarily for the purposes of generalised commodity exchange is one description of this kind of phenomenon. Matupis' analysis of the cultural significance of the decline of fish-trap technology is another. Only a quarter of the fish caught in traps in the early 1960s

at Matupit were sold for the *tabu* that was displayed at the *vevedek* (Epstein 1963:192). Yet it is the *tabu* that publicly displayed reciprocal interdependence and obligation that is highlighted in contemporary accounts, as well as when older people today recall the fish traps. This is because it is this *tabu* that displayed and helped to constitute the wider context that gives significance to the fish traps when Matupi of the 1960s like Turpui, as well as those of today, talk about their importance.

Reciprocity has clearly not disappeared, either in Western capitalist societies or at Matupit, but its scope and its cultural significance are sources of doubt. It is felt not to be the force that it was earlier at Matupit, and the decline of fish-trap manufacture, given the networks of reciprocal obligation into which it was perceived as being tied, has become emblematic of that fear. Whatever the extent to which the decline of the fish trap at Matupit is described as cause or effect or both, it is clear that for Matupi it was deeply tied as a technology into cultures of reciprocity and respect, its replacement with new technologies, in the Matupit imagination, being associated with wider radical cultural discontinuities. And it is also clear that such discontinuities have a village-wide implication that goes beyond those directly involved in fishing. Whether it is fish traps or store-bought nets, women have never been involved in the production or use of fishing technologies at Matupit, yet for Eli it was a small leap from a discussion of the behaviour of a 'Westernised' young woman going to nightclubs (see above) to a discussion of the demise of fish traps and respect in general.

There is, of course, a seeming contradiction here, as the money and nets that seem to shorten social relations simultaneously tie Matupi into networks of commodity exchange that extend across the world. But the issue is what kinds of relations are foregrounded at different contexts. With money and nets as social technologies, what is more immediately relevant to Matupi it is not the labour of the factory workers and dockers in Southeast Asia who make and transport the nets to them, but the perceived effects of the ways in which these social technologies have displaced earlier ones. The ways in which people at Matupit describe the impact of the new fishing technologies thus serves as an ethnographic demonstration of both sides of Marx's analysis of the fetishism of the commodity (Marx 1976:163–178). The tendency of large-scale commodity exchange to remove certain kinds of social relations from the forefront of consciousness is demonstrated, but it is also complemented by its logical corollary, a tendency for these commodities to be ascribed certain kinds of moral agency with regard to other, more local, social relations.

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