Colonial and postcolonial museum collecting in Papua New Guinea

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This essay contrasts early and later colonial collecting by anthropologists and museum scientists in Melanesia with the postcolonial collecting in which I participated in the 1980s under the auspices of the Australian Museum (1987). My contention is that museum collections made during early colonialism took place in a relatively hierarchical and androcentric context of moral difference. In subsequent phases of the colonial era, as well as in the ongoing postcolonial period, anthropological collecting sought, and continues to seek, egalitarian and gender inclusive dialogue with vendors; in part by drawing from local metaphors and idioms to express status inclusivity.

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With the establishment of the German state in New Guinea in the late nineteenth century and through the onset of WWI, all kinds of collectors began to compete on the colonial frontier; missionaries, sailors, traders, colonial officials and scientists, to such an extent that George Dorsey, working on behalf of the Field Museum in Chicago in 1909, observed that ‘practically every German in the colony is a collector . . . [and e] very man’s house here is a Museum’ (Dorsey quoted by Welsch 2000: 164, see also O’Hanlon and Welsch 2000). If there were an ‘obsession’ in the colonial era with marking status difference in material form (Gosden 2000: 233)—the white colonial clad from head to toe standing next to the half-naked, black kanaka—early colonial collecting made an important contribution to this obsession. Transactions of artefacts confronted Melanesians with irreducible signs of moral discontinuity and lack (Manderson and Jolly 1990). But the early colonial context of collection—racism, hierarchy and misunderstanding—also called into question the ethical status of the objects that were shipped off to Euro-American museums (Buschmann 2000, see also Welsch 2005).

This essay develops an historical overview of collecting by museum scientists and anthropologists, beginning in the early colonial period prior to WWI, and extending into postcolonial collecting, the latter period being illustrated by a project Kathleen Barlow, Lissant Bolton and I led on behalf of the Australian Museum in 1986–88. I
argue that generally speaking, objects made for use-value were bartered in return for objects manufactured for exchange-value during early colonialism, and these transactions took place in an androcentric context of hierarchical difference. In later colonial times, and then in the postcolonial era, the moral compass of anthropological collecting shifted and became increasingly egalitarian, gender inclusive and removed from the regime of use-value. At the same time this exchange became subordinate to the state and modern value, the developing dialogue between buyers and sellers drew upon Melanesian metaphors and idioms for exchange.

EARLY COLONIAL COLLECTING (1886–1914)

The year after Finsch ‘discovered’ the Sepik River in 1885 and named it in honour of Augusta, his Empress, two German scientists, Schrader and Hollrung, did the first academic collecting in the region (see Buschmann 2009). They ‘bought’ spears decorated with human vertebrae, among other things, for which they ‘paid’ clothing, bottles, beads and shells. In one unnamed village, ‘the natives killed a dog on their arrival . . . and specially decorated spears were stuck point down into the ground’ (Schindlbeck 1997: 32). In 1908, almost twenty-five years later, the recruitment of young men for plantation labour had been officially established as the purpose of German expeditions along the river. Dorsey was aboard the Siar when it stopped at the lower river village of Magendo for a day. At first, Dorsey was not allowed to barter with eager and excited men who wanted knives and were ready with feathered spears, carvings, pottery, etc. ‘for fear it would interfere with recruiting’ (quoted by Schindlbeck 1997: 33). But, later in the afternoon, after the effort to recruit men had come to naught, Dorsey was given permission to trade. Doing so was

the busiest thirty minutes I ever spent in my life . . . I made eighty-six individual purchases, my most prized possessions being several wonderfully decorated and carved sculls . . . [In return, the Magendo men] wanted steel and wanted it badly, especially small axe. Their contempt for beads, fish hooks, fish lines, looking glasses and especially calico was simply superb (quoted by Schindlbeck 1997: 34).

Clearly, the reference to Schrader and Hollrung’s collecting, and what is conveyed by this scene of early colonial barter, juxtaposed use-value and exchange-value. It also depicts a site of intense mutual desire. That is to say, it illustrates that colonial hierarchy which constituted collecting was not exactly unilateral. Both sides had voices. Both sides had agency. But the spears stuck point down into the ground, the scorn for anything other than steel axes, and Dorsey’s pride in his ‘purchases’ also reveal another detail of the context: it was entirely male (see Welsch 2000: 166).

As I mentioned, Dorsey’s collecting was just secondary to the main, but no less masculine, purpose of the expedition: the labour recruitment of young men. Schindlbeck described how Roesicke, a German anthropologist, was involved in January, 1913, in persuading a group of men to leave their Sepik village and go work in a coastal town. The men apparently agreed in order to stage an ambush from the
German ship against a rival. Upon reaching the mouth of the river, they wanted to know whether the vast ocean would flood their upriver village. In town, they were given big knives and were shown a large cache of weapons, the sight of which duly impressed them. At a celebration in honour of the Kaiser’s birthday, the men were feted with a pig. Over the next few days, Roesicke led them on plantation tours. A week passed this way by which time Roesicke concluded that the men had become ‘homesick and ... weeping . . . [some of them] crawled under his legs’ (Schindlbeck 1997: 38–39). Begging to be allowed to return home, they vowed to send their children to work on the plantations. Two days later, they all went back up the Sepik. Stopping off en route, they traded the goods Roesicke had given them as departure gifts for necklaces and armbands, clay pots and rain capes for their women. Upon reaching home, shouts of ‘Kin!’ greeted them as canoes paddled up to the ship. In the Male Cult House, youth danced while men beat slit-drums and played wooden trumpets. While the returnees told stories about their adventures among the whites, women allowed that, for their part, they had also shed tears for their sons and brothers. The labour recruiters/anthropologist thus created a context, according to Schindlbeck, that was to serve as a basis for future recruiting. And they also provide us with the unscrupulous backdrop of scientific or anthropological collecting during this period (see also van der Linden 2008).

Now other than to illustrate its overall ethical quality, by no means am I claiming that in this period all missionaries collected in order to demonstrate the success of their campaign against savagery and heathenism back home (Thomas 1991; Douglas 2001) or that all colonials had little more than instrumental interests in the barbaric Melanesians. Of course, the work and careers and the likes of George Brown and Richard Parkinson (Rubel and Rosman 1996; Rosman and Rubel 1998; Eves 1998) belie and complicate what this brief little section seems to suggest.

For one thing, several other scientific expeditions took place. A.B. Lewis collected no less than 14,000 objects from more or less the whole of coastal Melanesia for the Field Museum from 1909 to 1913 (Welsch 1999; Welsch 2000). A word about Lewis: he did his most intensive work along the Sepik north coast of New Guinea, the same region my Australian Museum team studied 75 years later. Unlike his boss Dorsey, Lewis not only sought to document objects in situ, but did his best to collect relevant cultural data as well. For Lewis, his collections and ethnography were primary data for a research problem he developed about how the exchange of objects integrated the north coast region (Welsch 1999: 457–8).

He hired local assistants, travelled by outrigger canoe, ate local food, made an effort to learn Pidgin English and stayed in villages for several days at a time, where he asked about and photographed the manufacture, as well as the uses and symbolic meanings of, the great variety of the things for which he bartered. Visiting the coastal community of Awar in 1909, his diary reports a rare attitude.

In morning got together trade (14 large axes, 30 tomahawks, 4 claw hatchets, 1 doz. 12 inch knives, 1 doz. 6 inch knives and sheaths, 2 doz. Planting irons, 1 doz. razors, and
some red cloth) ... and started in boat ... to see if I could buy one of the masks. Took my trade into the village and spread it out for the natives to look at, but they declared the masks were not for sale (quoted in Welsch 1998: 287).

Several points are depicted here. First, Lewis was clearly expecting to trade with men, thus all the tools and razors. Second, he felt confident that he was dealing with men who would negotiate in predictable ways. He thus showed his cards to them. And third, he regarded the men of Awar as possessing the moral authority to repudiate his offer. All of which is to say that, notwithstanding the early colonial moment, Lewis was already beginning to represent aspects of an egalitarian view of self and other.

**INTERWAR COLLECTING (1920–40)**

Scientific and anthropological collecting became increasingly preoccupied with markers of status equality during the interwar period. One thinks of Gregory Bateson reassuring Sepik River men from whom he was trying ‘to buy’ a pair of flute ancestor-spirits that should any foreign women see them, they would certainly not recognise them for what they really were (1946). But, for the most part, the literature about how anthropologists went about collecting during the interwar period is sparse. Alfred Bühler went to the Admiralties in the early 30s on behalf of the Museum der Kulturen in Basel, Switzerland (1998). Margaret Mead and Reo Fortune collected for the American Museum of Natural History in New York during their Sepik fieldwork (1935, 1978; Thomas 1980). Camilla Wedgwood and Ian Hogbin collected in their respective Schouten Islands research sites on Manam and Wogo. Perhaps the exemplary figure of this period was the British anthropologist, Beatrice Blackwood.

Working for Henry Balfour, curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford, Blackwood collected at various sites in New Guinea. First in Buka and Bougainville in 1929–30, she returned in 1936 to Rabaul where Balfour wanted her to collect skulls, decorated barkcloths and blowpipes in order to complete a typological series in the museum. Blackwood went to the Arawe Islands off the coast of New Britain. There, the colonial scene had become more complicated than in the earlier period along what had been a new frontier. Catholic missionisation was well underway. Twice yearly government patrols took place. Wealthy dilettantes showed up once in a while. Labour recruiters and an established plantation not only made for a fairly constant expatriate population, but also emptied young men out of their communities. Another anthropologist, John A. Todd, had even worked in Arawe for several years (1932–36) and had collected in the region, albeit unenthusiastically. Todd had not bartered but paid vendors in shillings (Gosden and Knowles 2001: 134). He bought up most everything offered him, dogs’ teeth valuables, weapons, bowls, utensils, attire, and musical instruments. Of particular note is that Todd also collected women’s skirts. Gosden and Knowles, in their examination of colonial collecting in New Britain, speculated that
perhaps he ‘may … [have] had goods relations with local women … as many of the women’s skirts and clothing … were new and therefore probably [were] … made especially for him’ (2001: 136).

Blackwood, accompanied by district officers and a native official, arrived in the Arawe area in May 1937, about a year after Todd had left. During her four months there she employed servants who ran her household. With the assistance of one of them, a local leader called Magnin, she collected what Balfour wanted for his museum series. Magnin also sold her valuables made of shells, teeth and stone, the latter of which apparently contained substantial power (Gell 1998). Perhaps the extent of Blackwood’s success in collecting was abetted by the degree to which she entered into moral relations with Magnin and managed to move beyond the prevailing colonial hierarchy. About a pig’s tusk, for example, she recorded in her field diary that ‘Magnin brought an … ornament which he let me buy for 10/—a small one and not a full circle . . . . It has two of his father’s teeth attached to it’ (Blackwood quoted in Gosden and Knowles 2001: 152). By parting with such an heirloom, one might suppose that Magnin wanted the money but may have also been trying to consolidate his relationship to Blackwood.

Blackwood made one of the first collections of children’s toys, (see also Haddon and Rivers 1902; Maude and Wedgwood 1967). She collected incomplete objects, as well as the raw materials and tools used to make them. She copied the designs on some ninety canoe paddles into a sketchbook. And like Todd, she collected women’s skirts and bags. Unlike Todd, she bartered. She traded stick tobacco and manufactured goods, such as razor blades, cloth, knives and harmonicas. At one point, some inland men arrived with barkcloth to sell to her.

Blackwood initially tried to make the purchase with tobacco … though … barkcloth … [was] usually paid for in gold-lip shells. When this … was refused, Blackwood had to reveal her other trade items, the only one of which that was accepted as an alternative … being knives (Gosden and Knowles 2001: 150).

Of course, barter is said to combine disparate, in this case unequal, regimes of value, or ways of life (Gregory 1982: 47; Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992: 5; Strathern 1992). But as Dorsey and A.B.Lewis had done before her, Blackwood’s barter practices evidently allowed for discrimination of value and negotiation by inland men, and thus presumed a degree of trust. She conceded their right to calculate self-interest and thus to this extent, saw in them attributes and moral standing that was more or less equal to her own.

So what appears to have distinguished interwar collecting from the early colonial period? A shifting moral climate, for one, and the impact of the state had expanded, for another. Payment now included both money and barter exchange. Collecting also became more heterosexual. Female researchers entered the picture. Both men’s and women’s things were acquired. I think that the named servant/broker/local-level leader, who appears to play an important role in Blackwood’s collecting, also indicates decreased moral distance between anthropologists and donors.
PRE-INDEPENDENCE COLLECTING (1950–75)

Collecting expeditions during the post WWII period, leading up to PNG Independence in 1975 were few, if not far between. The Basel Museum for Folk Art sponsored an expedition to the Sepik in 1955–56. Under the leadership of Alfred Buhler (1960), René Gardi, the journalist and photographer, was also on board (Gardi 1958, 1960). The Forbenius Institut in Frankfort and Basel Museum for Folk Art sponsored Sepik expeditions during the 60s that involved Elke Haberland and Meinhard Schuster (1968). Mention must be made of the two outstanding Anglophone figures of the era, namely, Anthony Forge and Douglas Newton. Forge began to collect artefacts in Abelam communities in the North Wosera area during the late 1950s also on behalf of Basel Museum for Folk Art and did so again in 1962. Most notably, he commissioned and documented the production of paintings and drawings by Abelam artists during the latter field trip (1967). I do not know anything about Forge’s collecting practices, although perhaps he discusses them in fieldnotes. Meanwhile, Douglas Newton did a number of mobile projects (1964–73) among upper and middle Sepik River peoples, during which he elicited oral history and mythology while making collections for several North American museums. Newton’s fieldwork resulted in major exhibits and publications (see 1963). Like Forge, he published nothing about collecting methods, other than to acknowledge the help of local informants by name and venue in forewords (1971: 7; 1997: 385). One can only speculate what their late colonial silence expresses about relationships with sellers, although having known both of them personally, I can hardly imagine that their collecting practices were at all arbitrary or one-sided.

POSTCOLONIAL COLLECTING (1975–TO DATE)

Michael O’Hanlon, the director of the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford, began a discussion of the collecting he did in 1986 and 1990 in a former field site in the Wahgi area of the PNG Highlands with an odd experience.² He recounts feeling dizzy upon seeing the performance of a visiting troupe of Highlands dancers in London just prior to departing for the field. Was his disorientation a kind of postcolonial uncanny (Freud 1919)? Did it arise from seeing that which shouldn’t be visible, a morally ambiguous presence at once familiar yet strange? Was the dance a kind of ghost? A kind of matter out of place, like Mary Douglas’ dirt (1966)? Did O’Hanlon’s dizziness register another inequality flattened, the boundaries of the encounter between collector and seller being no longer limited to the space of the other? O’Hanlon goes on to reflect upon the new ethos of collecting in postcolonial fieldwork, a little abstractly I think. But clearly he recognized the egalitarian quality of its dialogue.

I did not find myself . . . assembling a collection according to my own whim. I discovered that my collecting was constrained by local processes and rules, with the upshot that the collection I made partly mirrored in its own structure local social organization (1993: 55).
Perhaps this symmetry partly resulted from a project that had a stationary, rather than a mobile format (O’Hanlon 2000). He and his wife moved into a house that Kinden, a former key informant, built for them. Kinden organised vendors into a system of turn-taking, based on social proximity to his clan. Tensions, stemming from local-level politics, arose. Nevertheless, people gathered at O’Hanlon’s house by the dozen to sell artefacts. Unlike negotiations reported by earlier anthropologists, the prices O’Hanlon set were met with no complaint. According to the Wahgi model of exchange, value was gauged on the basis of a face-to-face assessment of ongoing social relationships, which could not be determined in advance. For his part, O’Hanlon priced things on the basis of what Wahgi people were selling either at road-side markets or to tourists at the airport. Other things he priced out of consideration for his adoptive kin.

O’Hanlon concluded that his fieldwork created a ‘growing sense of interpenetration between Wahgi frames of reference and . . . [his] collecting’ (1993: 76). As Wahgi men began to understand what O’Hanlon wanted to buy, they started making things that had become obsolete and were willing to explain their fading meanings. They made stone axes ‘often collaps[ing] in laugher’ as they did (1993: 74). At one point, men re-enacted how shields were used in warfare although they had never fought in battle. A woman confided to O’Hanlon what carrying a netbag in a certain way might reveal about her sexual morality. Upon his departure, Anamb, a ritual expert, staged a rite of beautification for the collection, a rite that might otherwise be performed by a bride’s kin as she was sent off to live with her husband. O’Hanlon, having paid for the collection, was thus likened to an affine and the artefacts were his new ‘bride’, in whom he was taking possession, having donated bridewealth gifts that were expected, needless to say, to go for the foreseeable future. The point of O’Hanlon’s research is that although postcolonial collecting remained marked by the masculine idioms of its colonial predecessors; early, interwar and late, the trajectory of change is clear. It was becoming more egalitarian, if only slightly less masculine, and it was drawing from local metaphor.

THE FIRST FIELD SEASON OF THE SEPIK DOCUMENTATION PROJECT (1986)

Barry Craig, who was Anthropology Curator at the PNG National Museum in the early 1980s, had done quite a bit of fieldwork on the material culture of the lower and middle Sepik during his tenure there. He subsequently proposed to do a mobile documentation project to the Australian Museum (AM), which housed some artefacts from this region, only later to conclude that he did not have the time for it. At his suggestion in 1984, Kathleen Barlow and I then offered to do what became known as the Sepik Documentation Project (SDP) for the Museum. This was a mobile project with three goals: (i) to take photographic albums of the AM’s Lower Sepik and north coast collections to the field and elicit information by showing them to villagers in the region, (ii) to collect contemporary artefacts made for any and all purposes, whether to use, trade or sell to tourists and (iii) recalling the topic A.B. Lewis developed during his time along the north coast, we proposed to study the changing intertribal trade
network of the Murik Lakes people, among whom Barlow and I had done our doctoral research in 1981–82, who were, and remained, among its principle actors. Our theoretical *cum* ethnographic issue was to investigate the articulation of their trade network, which extended along the north coast, up the lower river and out to the offshore islands, to state and capitalist penetration in multiple sites and from multiple points of view.

Research for the SDP took place during a pair of two-month seasons in July-August 1986 and 1988. Like O’Hanlon’s Wahgi research, selection of local project personnel was influenced by relationships we had begun during our earlier fieldwork. It included two senior Murik men, my adoptive elder brother, Murakau Wino, and another one of our key 1981 informants, Tamau Game, who were to liaise with their hereditary partners in villages known as production centres of particular goods. We were also joined by our son, then a toddler, and by Lissant Bolton, who was Pacific Collections Manager at the AM at that time.

The postcolonial state of PNG granted us research visas under the sponsorship of the Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery, which seconded John Saulo, then an Assistant Anthropology Curator, to join our team. Upon arrival in Wewak, the capital of the East Sepik Province (Fleetwood 1984), we immediately went to pay respects to Jonathan Sengi, its premier at the time.

Our 1986 field season began with visits to the Murik camps in Wewak town where Bolton was filling out official AM ‘artefact documentation forms’ as she made some initial purchases of tourist art, such as little spirit-figures (K2), walking sticks (K6) and hooks painted with shoe polish (K8), masks large (K10) and small (K1), and, not least, Murik baskets (K10). For each purchase, Barlow and I encouraged her to offer vendors twice what they initially asked for. For example, Soni Bate, another one of our 1982 informants, sold her three ceremonial spears he had made for tourists for K4 each. He discussed the objects with Barlow and told me that he had given Bolton a ‘good price’ because she was our ‘trading partner’ (Murik: *asamot*). Subsequently, feeling he had been underpaid, we decided to go back and give him another K25, or a little more twice what was originally paid. We also circulated through all the authorised and informal markets in town where women serve as vendors, sitting with each other, some kids and perhaps a few husbands lurking behind their stalls. Foodstuffs, raw materials and artefacts are all sold there, and we collected skeins of nylon thread, bundles of *nassa* shells from the Murik Lakes (K5), necklaces (K1-2) decorated with these same shells, seeds and store-bought beads sold by Chambri women, necklaces decorated with snake’s vertebrae, crocodile teeth (K1), nylon netbags decorated with crucifix designs (K10), and again, Murik baskets, the emblematic object in (and of) the regional network. Apart from the baskets, purchases were from anonymous vendors who labelled their goods with prices and obliged us with little documentation, other than vernacular names of objects and sometimes the personal names of manufacturers. We also visited the little artefact markets that men and women set up outside hotels in Wewak in those days. In these settings, where prices were again set by vendors, we purchased more tourist art.
In the meantime, Barlow and I were renewing relationships with urban and village-based Murik people. We discussed the prospect of surveying their trade network and took suggestions about which villages would best represent goods still exchanged in the contemporary period. As a result of these consultations, we devised an itinerary made up of six communities. Then, during the first three excursions we made to coastal villages, we adopted a useful local metaphor for our collecting practices.

In each location we tried to mimic what we understood of the moral format of overseas, Murik trade relations, which is ‘visiting trade’ (Lipset 1985). In this kind of exchange, intertribal relationships are modelled after ‘the most intimate, familistic relations within a society’ (Heider 1969: 462). Although we arrived unannounced, the Murik liaison person who accompanied us to each village either resided there or had some kind of kin there. If our relationship did not completely arise from these connections, its legitimacy certainly benefitted from this connection. Like trading partners, we brought gifts, gifts we purchased in town with input from our Murik field assistants. Upon arrival, one of them explained our purposes and then we divided up by gender for open-ended discussions about the topics and goals we had set for ourselves. Purchases of things that villagers offered to sell us, and which Lissant Bolton selected to buy for prices she set, usually began to take place in the context of going through the AM albums with villagers. I do not recall any rejected prices. Barlow and I occasionally did venture an opinion, particularly if we thought that ‘the number one price’ was too low. What now follows is a narrative of the first three of these encounters when this methodology developed.

Premier Sengi helped us rent a Toyota Land Cruiser from the provincial motor pool and off we went on a day-trip to But village, an Arapesh-speaking community, located about 40 miles up the coast from town (see Fig. 1). We had added one more person to our little party. Barlow and I hired Ruth Wangi, the daughter of two more of our 1981 informants, to watch Max, then two years old, in the (naive) hope that having a babysitter along would free us up to focus on research. If our little son rejected Ruth Wangi’s attentions, she did arouse our hosts’ attention in a helpful way. Arriving in But village, one of Ruth’s maternal kin reached into the truck and took her hand. He had married there and had seen us making fools of ourselves during a feast in 1981. He led us off to his affines’ house where we were given fresh coconuts to drink. Some kin gathered to find out who we were and what we wanted to do. Ruth Wangi’s kinsman, together with Tamau Game, one of our Murik liaisons, immediately took over and, speaking in Tokpisin, explained why we had come and that we were dividing up by gender. Together with Murakau Wino and John Saulo, I interviewed men while Tamau Game assisted Barlow, Bolton and Ruth Wangi with the women.

Margaret Mead made Beach Arapesh ethnographically famous in her book Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies for importing dance-complexes from the Murik and then exporting them to their inland kin (1935; see also Lipset 2009). So after tracking goods traded between Murik and But, largely tobacco in return for Murik baskets and various kinds of ornaments, I asked about the trade of dances. In 1963, one But man recalled, the Murik did come for this purpose. People assembled
106 pigs and approximately 200–300 sheaths of tobacco to which neighbouring villages contributed. A huge departure feast was also prepared with the help of these same communities. Discussion went on to touch on local social structure, changing exchange rates, mythology, the defunct Male Cult and relations with the nearby village of Smain. Lipset also made an attempt to document photos of objects in the AM’s collections (Fig. 2).

Meanwhile, But women were holding forth about their role in trade-related activity, culture heroines and marriage exchange. Lissant Bolton also tried to elicit documentary information about AM objects, but was rebuffed because the albums were said to contain no images of things from But village itself, and the women felt reluctant to comment on them. A few photos did provoke a woman to go and fetch a headband decorated with beads and some nassa shells imported from Murik. She also brought out three stone tools, a sago pounder, knife and pestle. ‘No objects were offered . . . for sale’ was Bolton’s terse, perhaps disappointed, conclusion about our visit to But village (1986: 10). As we walked back to the truck to return to town, Ruth Wangi picked basil and other scented leaves to bring home to urban Murik women to wear in their armbands for a Female Cult initiation rite they were rehearsing.

Two days later, we made our way a few miles further along the coast to Matapau village (see Fig. 1), another tobacco-exporting, beach-Arapesh community that interested us because in pre-colonial times it had been the western-most boundary in the Murik trade network. Appreciating the rapport and legitimacy gained from having had a contact living in But village, we stopped back there to pick up Ruth Wangi’s kinsman who had offered to help us in Matapau. And in a deliberate effort to mimic the ethos of visiting trade, we also decided not to arrive empty-handed like we had in
But village. We took hostess gifts. We bought a bag full of one kilogram bags of Tru-Kai rice from a Chinese trade store, as well as sticks of smoked, Murik clams from the town market. Despite my dim-witted, ‘coals-to-Newscastle’ objections that the village in question was a tobacco exporting community, our two Murik field assistants, Murakau Wino and Tamau Game, insisted that we also bring a sheath or two of locally grown tobacco, so as to show that our intentions were honourable.

Upon arrival in Matapau, Ruth Wangi’s kinsman explained what we wanted and we again divided up into groups of men and women. The men spoke of weapons, wealth and power. Apparently, Matapau had marked a boundary in weapons manufacture on the coast, a point A.B. Lewis had discovered (see Welsch 1999: 460). In addition to weapons trade, we were also given to understand, that the Matapau exported, and still export, tobacco and pigs to the Austronesian speakers living offshore on the islands of Tarawai and Walis in return for shell rings, a three-year-old pig having been worth about 100 rings roped on a long piece of bamboo (see Fig. 1). If Lewis had argued that trade integrated the region across linguistic differences, the regional trade of shell-rings, so we now learned, funded local-level rivalries. Big men, for example, used shell rings for homicide compensation. In addition, *nassa* shells were imported from coastal villages to the west, roped clusters of which men added to shell rings as bridewealth for their sons’ marriages. Men also traded for Murik baskets.

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Figure 2  David Lipset eliciting data about a photograph of a necklace in But village. Photo: Lissant Bolton.
and ornaments. In return, they exported tobacco, bird feathers and cassowary bones to them. Only one shell ring was left in the village, which had been imported from Ali Island offshore. But it was a powerful ring, he said, having been involved in the deaths of several people. He made no offer to sell it to us.

A Matapau man called Morai let me record an account of how relations with the Murik began and why Murik people traded no further west than Matapau in the pre-colonial era. His story turned out to be in plot and detail the very one I heard from Murik informants in 1982. The Matapau version ended the same way, with the castration of a cannibalistic ogre who had been assailing children, and with the petrification of his testicles that remained visible just offshore a short distance from the village (see Schmitz 1960: 417–18). As Morai finished his story, he offered to take us to see them before we left. He then produced a little wooden betel nut mortar that a Murik trading partner had given him.

The women speaking to Barlow, Bolton and Ruth Wangi covered much of the same ground as the men had, but also discussed restrictions following first menses and their role in tobacco production. A woman took Barlow into her house to show her how tobacco is dried in its eaves. Bolton once again tried to spark interest in photographs from the AM collections, but, as in But village, few objects in the albums were said to have been manufactured in Matapau village, which left people feeling that they had little to say, other than to identify where some things used to come from or to remark upon which object types were no longer in use. Nevertheless, the photographs did prompt a few people to get some pots, ornaments and fishing equipment to show us. Bolton, upon being offered, elected to buy a few things: a sago stirrer the vendor was currently using (K2), a nylon fishing net the vendor’s mother made for her little, three year old daughter, to whom she insisted that the K3.60 be given, a child’s bark basket (40t) and a fishing basket made in a neighbouring village (60t). According to notes in the Artefact Documentation Forms, the prices for these things had been doubled at Barlow’s suggestion. The sun was setting when a woman asked Ruth Wangi who her father and grandfather were. Upon hearing her call the names of the two men, another woman offered that her husband had known Ruth’s father in the colonial police in which they had both served. What might Ruth want to take home with her? She asked for basil and other scented plants, which the two women went to pick.

We got ready to go and presented everyone with the gifts we had brought. Our hosts then told us to go see the boulder-testicles, insisting we return to the village after doing so. We drove off with some kids who had been instructed to lead us down to the beach, where we saw the two boulders in the breakers (Fig. 3). Meanwhile, a few coconuts were picked for us and a pair of big bunches of bananas were cut, on top of which were set some taro and sweet potatoes (Fig. 4). We returned to the village, displayed a suitable degree of gratitude at the sight of the departure-gift, loaded the stuff in the back of the Land Cruiser, bid everyone goodbye, and drove back to town, feeling pleased that the quality of our second attempt at mobile collecting seemed to have
surpassed the first one, and that an effective research method, the mimicry of visiting trade, was emerging.

An aside: Homi Bhabha once drew attention to the value of mimicry of authority by the colonised subject as a form of domestication that benefitted the British Raj (1994). By contrast, like O’Hanlon’s collecting, and for that matter, like that of Malinowski, Bateson and Blackwood, our mimicry, or what has usually been referred to as participant-observation, was meant to signal our acceptance of a moral order in which ‘the ancestors’ maintained authority together with the postcolonial state. Our use of kin ties and gifts voiced our acknowledgement, rather than disavowal, of its legitimacy. If nothing else, perhaps the counter-gift expressed a message of moral equality.

Three days later, we drove to Yakamul village, a post-contact extension of the Murik network in the neighboring Sandaun Province, for which place and society the Murik hold remarkable affection (see Fig. 1). By contrast to the maritime skills for which Austronesian-speakers throughout the insular Pacific are renowned (Horridge 2006), the Yakamul possess no outrigger technology to speak of; rather they are Austronesian-speakers who specialise in hosting guests rather than voyaging. The Murik

Figure 3  Ogre’s petrified testicles offshore Matapau village. Photo: Lissant Bolton, 1986.

Figure 4  Max Lipset, aged 2, explores departure-gift given by Morai of Matapau village to Sepik Documentation Project. Photo: Lissant Bolton, 1986.
consider the Yakamul to be a generous, outgoing people. They view them as living large without having to cope with any of the shortages to which the intertidal environment of the Murik Lakes makes them chronically prone. The Yakamul own large tracts of land, north of the seashore, on which they make extensive gardens as well as cash crop coffee and cocoa. They have coconut groves and sago stands. They own a small mangrove lagoon and recently learned to build little, fishing outriggers in which they fish near shore. A freshwater stream in which people bathe makes its way out of the foothills to the road adjacent to the village. They eat well, like to dance and perform Bakuk, the dance-complex for which they are regionally famous.

Tamau Game, one of our Murik liaisons, escorted us to Yakamul, having reacted eagerly several weeks earlier when we invited him to go with us. Given the lengthy 70 mile drive from Wewak, along a road in unpredictable shape, we decided to overnight there. Arriving in the middle of the afternoon, after Tamau introduced us in each of its five hamlets, we ended up in #1 Yakamul, where we deposited the five big bags of rice and smoked, Murik clams we brought; local men stood around for a long time dividing it into piles to distribute to our hosts and their families (Fig. 5). Tamau then directed us to #4 Yakamul, where his trading partner, Aisil, his sister Josephina and two more brothers lived with their spouses and children. We were shown a large room in the sister’s house to sleep in. A couple of senior men were chatting on the beach. We sat down with them and, after Tamau’s lengthy introductions, they offered us a snack of taro and bananas which had been roasting in a palm spathe bucket. Little did we know what the snack meant. An exquisite performance of the bounteous values of visiting trade in all their unconditionality began to play out. Several times a day we were treated to taro soups with greens, pumpkin soups, sago grubs, fish, pork and sago pancakes. Tamau Game and John Saulo joked that Yakamul hospitality was a kind of ‘warfare’. But they ‘attacked’ and ‘killed’ bowl after bowl, plate after plate and ‘won’. 

Figure 5  Yakamul man divides arrival gift from the Sepik Documentation Project. Photo: Lissant Bolton, 1986.

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With no less generosity, our hosts also plied us with data (Fig. 6), data that started out with an account of a ritual greeting to new guests. When new trading partners, both men and women, arrive by canoe, it was explained, Yakamul women rush up and toss them back into the ocean. It was to our good fortune, so our hosts allowed, to have arrived by car. The men went on to catalogue what goods once flowed through Yakamul along the coast, as well as what was traded with the islanders (Fig. 1). They accounted for how trading partnerships with the Murik had begun during German colonialism. They spoke of social change, the demise of the Pariak cult, of changes in village endogamy and local-level leadership, as well as in mortuary rites. They recounted the story of Bakuk, their trickster hero, whose magic infused the clay around the hole into which his flesh and blood mixed where he died and was buried. The clay enhanced men’s abilities to hunt and fish, but most of all, it made men irresistible to women. So powerful was the substance, it remains stored outside a dwelling house and away from women, in a chicken coop, to this day.

In due time, Barlow, Bolton and Ruth Wangi separated from the men and began interviewing women about women’s work, the changing organisation of marriage, affinal respect relations with spouses’ kin, first menses rites and their culture heroines. They discussed a netbag (rir) women knitted, which are displayed and exchanged during mortuary and rites of passage. The women made up a departure song for Bolton and Barlow. They told them about Bakuk’s magic, about their experiences with Americans and the Japanese during WW II and on and on.

Of the 16 objects Bolton bought for the AM, most were locally made and in daily use. She was offered six nylon or wool netbags, two headrests with dog motifs, two wooden dishes, two bark baskets, two small, nylon fishing nets, a sling bag made of coconut palm leaves for use while fishing, a limbum palm whisk broom, a head ornament and a dance wand, both of which were decorated with cassowary feathers.
Bolton paid about 30% more than the nine vendors, seven of whom were women, asked of her.

The absorption of our hosts in our visit should not disguise the point that its fervour was a measure of the morally charged atmosphere that informed its drama. This was made clear on the day of our intended return to Wewak. As we offered our hosts some small gifts, such as cigarette lighters and pipes, three full breakfasts appeared for the six of us. After finishing the second one, a few men presented me a decorated net-bag and a bow associated with their culture hero, Bakuk. Ruth Wangi received a clay pot. Our host’s wife, Josephina, gave Bolton a nylon and wool rir netbag, explaining that it was a customary gift to a first time guest. Barlow was given four flying fox bone needles to take back to the Murik Lakes, where they are prized by women who use them in basket weaving.

More people began to turn up with departure gifts for us, including sheaths of tobacco, parcels of sago flour and quantities of sweet potatoes, taro, pineapples, coconuts, bananas, sago breads, sugar cane and betelnuts (Fig. 7). We loaded up the Landcruiser as onlookers complained about its size. Driving off, a man waiting by the side of the road flagged us down. We were barely able to squeeze the garden produce he wanted us to take to one of his trading partners in town and had to leave some sago flour behind. He completely lost his temper. A second man also appeared with a pile of fruit and sago flour to give us. He also got long-faced because the vehicle was overstuffed to its brim. Tamau Game and John Saulo were still carried away by the three breakfasts.

Once back in Wewak town, we distributed what the Yakamul had given us to our Murik liaisons and to Ruth Wange, the babysitter. She gave her share to her father, together with the pot she had carried back on her lap. In return, he gave our son a personal name from his lineage because, as he put it, he had been ‘mothered’ by his daughter.

Figure 7  Departure gifts from Yakamul villagers. Photo: Lissant Bolton, 1986.
We visited four more communities during the 1986 field season. But this subsequent itinerary does not concern us here. Our experiences in But, Matapau and Yakanmul persuaded us that the method of mimicking visiting trade as best we could was an effective means to achieve the goals we had set for the SDP. In the 1988 phase of the project we visited half a dozen more sites in the lower Sepik region and continued to refine and put this format to further use.

**POSTCOLONIAL MUSEUM COLLECTING AS MORAL DIALOGUE**

At the same time as colonial and postcolonial museum collecting may be experienced as a simple dyadic, exchange relationship in which the desires of institutionally supported buyers and indigenous sellers encounter each other, the state must nevertheless be seen as an absent third party. The state, after all, has a kind of invisible hand in bringing about the encounter through its relationship to museums, by its provision of currency and by its very territorial sovereignty. Museum collecting thus involves moral/political relations, small and large, relations that involve hierarchy and equality or combine them. If so, what kinds of relations have I portrayed in this brief survey of collecting practices of some anthropologists and museum scientists in Papua New Guinea?

In the early colonial period, relatively stateless Melanesian men desired what they lacked, namely, Western goods and relationships with Euro-Americans, and were willing to part with sacred objects manufactured for use-value to satisfy these desires, the exemplary artefact of this exchange being human skulls (Harrison 2012). For their part, the barter practiced by early and interwar colonial anthropologists involved relationships with indigenous vendors that were somewhat more inclusive than other kinds of buyers on the colonial frontier were willing to engage in. Of postcolonial collecting, it is tempting to conclude that the gender of collectors and their collections has become less masculine. But obviously Blackwood contradicts this point. Perhaps we might say that what was already heading in a more gender inclusive direction continued to do so in the postcolonial era. In addition, relations between buyers and sellers begin to become more egalitarian (see also Price and Price 1993: 13). On the anthropologists’ side, that is to say, they involve an effort to conceptualise the collecting process in terms that combine indigenous idioms with modern forms of exchange. On the indigenous side, the satisfaction of desire has become almost exclusively signified in and through money, the state’s tokens of abstract value, rather than through bartered goods. Although the latter change, from the point of view of artefact purchase, is total, it is not the case that the shift to possessive individualism is nearly as complete (Silverman 1999). This was clear in our 1986 collecting for the AM, in which the more we participated in visiting trade and gift exchange, and thereby sought to embed ourselves in relationships as equals, the more we were able to collect objects and discourse.

So in addition to objects and discourse, what does postcolonial collecting by PNG anthropologists and museum scientists desire? It desires to create a moral
dialogue about the mutual sovereignty of buyers and sellers. Should such a conclusion raise doubts, I would refer readers to *Melanesia, Art and Encounter* (Bolton et al 2013) which details the great efforts the British Museum made to create and sustain just this kind of dialogue between anthropologists and Melanesians (2005–2010). This project’s stakes, needless to say, were nothing less than the postcolonial redemption of the museum’s collections from their morally ambiguous origins in early colonialism.

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**NOTES**

1 Haddon and other members of the Torres Strait expedition collected in 1898 (Herle 1998; Edwards 2000; Byrne et al. 2011). Thurnwald collected in the lower Sepik in 1913–15 on behalf of the Berlin Museum fur Volkerkunde (Craig 1997; Juillerat 2000).

2 O’Hanlon wanted to make a comprehensive collection of Wahgi material culture, traditional and contemporary, for the British Museum, his funding agent.

3 1986 rates, 1 PNG kina = A$1.58

4 Bolton and I argued about whether we had the right to cross into this province because our research visa was for work in the East Province. We telephoned the Sandaun offices to no avail and decided to proceed, having made that good faith effort.

5 Their fellow Austronesian-speakers living on the offshore islands of Ali, Selio and Tumlio used to bring clay pots and shell rings to them to trade for garden produce, tobacco, sago and canoe logs (see Figure 1).

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