The personification of social totalities in the Pacific

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Abstract
Marshall Sahlins derives his account of Polynesian 'heroic history' in part from the fact that Maori and Fijian chiefs used the pronoun 'I' (first person singular) in reference to their entire tribe or lineage. But similar usages are also attested from Melanesia. The Ku Waru region of the New Guinea Highlands provides one such case, from which I develop a set of comparative dimensions that allow us to see what is similar and different among versions of 'heroic I' attested from around the Pacific. A description is offered of a Ku Waru oratorical event in which it was used in a radically new way, and by women at that. I argue that this mode f pronoun use is best understood not as an aspect of specific cultures or cosmologies, but rather as a referential practice allowing for the projection and contestation of an open-ended range of social identities and forms of agency.

Introduction

In our book *Ku Waru* and in other publications based on fieldwork in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG), Francesca Merlan and I have explored the politics of what we call 'segmentary' uses of personal pronouns. An example would be the use of the first person singular 'I' in reference to the entire clan or tribe with which the speaker is identified

The Journal of Pacific Studies, Volume 23, no. 1, 1999, 48—70
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(Merlan & Rumsey 1991; Rumsey 1986, 1989). Marshall Sahlins (1981, 1985a, 1991) has capitalised on similar pronoun use among Polynesian peoples, taking it as evidence for a particular mode of practice that he calls 'heroic history'. This paper compares Ku Waru usages with the Polynesian ones cited by Sahlins and briefly discusses some other attested Melanesian cases, before proposing some additional dimensions of comparison that are needed in order to specify what is common to the Polynesian and Melanesian usages and what is specific to each. The paper proceeds to discussion of some startling new ways in which the Ku Waru segmentary forms have been adapted for use in contemporary Papua New Guinea, and draws out some conclusions for theories of culture and social change.

Heroic history and the 'kinship I'

In support of his claim that 'Polynesian cosmology may lend itself in an especially powerful way to stereotypic reproduction', Sahlins cites the fact that he has 'heard a Fijian elder narrate the doings of his ancestral lineage over several generations *in the first person pronoun'* (Sahlins 1981:13, emphasis in original; cf. Sahlins 1962:254). Similar usages among the Maori had been noticed and discussed by J Prytz Johansen under the rubric of 'the kinship "I" '. For example, Johansen cites a Maori oral account (and Sahlins Johansen) as follows:

> According to our knowledge the reason why the Ngatiwhatuwa came to Kaipara was a murder committed by the Ngatikahumateika. This tribe murdered my ancestor Taureka. The tribe lived in Hokianga. This country was theirs, the tribe's. My home was Muriwhenua, it was my permanent residence because my ancestor lived there. Later I left Muriwhenua because of this murder. Then I tried to revenge myself, and Hokianga's people were defeated and I took possession of the old country. Because of this battle the whole of Hokianga was finally taken by me right to Maunganui, and I lived in the country because all the people had been killed.
>
> All the events described [Johansen comments] took place long before the narrator was born. (Johansen 1954:36, cited in Sahlins 1981:13–14)

By 1985 Sahlins had worked up his interpretation of such examples into the concept of 'heroic history'. Drawing again upon Johansen, and upon Dumont's (1970) notion of hierarchical 'encompassment', Sahlins says:

> ethnography shows that the Maori chief 'lives the life of a whole tribe,' that 'he stands in a certain relation to neighbouring tribes and kinship groups,' and that 'he gathers the relationship to other tribes in his person' (Johansen 1954:180). The chief's marriages are intertribal alliances; his ceremonial exchanges trade; as injuries to himself are cause for war. Here history is anthropomorphic in principle, which is to say in structure. Granted that history is much more than the doings of great men, is always and everywhere the life of communities; but precisely in these heroic polities the king is the condition of the possibility of community. (Sahlins 1985a:35–6)

Now Johansen's 'kinship I' becomes Sahlins's 'heroic I'. Sahlins cites other examples from Tonga and as far afield as Luapula, Northern Rhodesia. He concludes that '[b]y the [use of this] heroic I—and various complements such as perpetual kinship—the main relationships of society are at once projected historically and embodied currently in the persons of authority' (Sahlins 1985a:47). He comments that '[t]he "heroic I" is found in Maori, Tonga, Fiji, among Yoruba as well as Luapala, and probably numerous other hierarchical orders' (Sahlins 1985a:47, n.19).

In a later publication Sahlins adduces a Fijian example from the transcript of a government hearing on fishing rights in 1947. The disputants are 'the sacred ruler of Verata (Na Ratu)' and a spokesman (*mata*) from Bau 'representing the war king (Vunivalu)':

> The Ratu of Verata (responding to question by the Bau representative [*mata*]): I never heard of our meeting at Naivonini in 1750 . . . I don't know any Tunitoga [Bau herald] named Sainisakalo that you say I killed at the beach at Walu [late 1830s] . . . I don't know when you burned Natavatolo [this was in 1839: Cross diary, 30 October 1839] . . . I know of no such set of 10 whale teeth that you say were offered on my behalf by Nagalu to Ratu Cakobau and Ratu Mara [probably in the 1850s]. I only know we are true kinsmen, myself and both these chiefs [Cakobau and Ratu Mara]. (VQ 1947:243–4, as quoted with parenthetical remarks by Sahlins, in Sahlins 1991:65)

> The Bau *mata* (responding to questions of the Verata ruler): 'From long ago until 1750 you were the owner of all the reefs we are disputing here, but I seized them from you in 1750 when I defeated you in our war at Naivonini . . . I know that I destroyed you [literally, 'clubbed you', *mokuti iko*] the third time I took your town . . . I never heard that you were able to take or destroy a single land in all of Fiji. You never captured a single place in Fiji because of your weakness: the reason you never made war on another state is not [as you say] because you are the first born [i.e., the senior line of Fijian ruling aristocracies . . .] (VQ 1947:284–8, as quoted with parenthetical remarks by Sahlins, in Sahlins 1991:65)

Before comparing Sahlins's heroic 'I' with Ka Waru usage in the Papua New Guinea Highlands case, I would make four general statements.

First, as Sahlins (1981:14) realises, this form of person reference is used not only for recounting history but for speaking of present and future events as well. For example, the Maori chief Kairangatira is quoted in White's *Ancient History of the Maori* as having said, when alone and surrounded by his enemies: *Ma koutou, ko au; ma taku iwi, ko koutou, a maku te whenua* 'You will kill me; my tribe will kill you and the country will be mine' (White 1887–90:vol. 6, p.43, cited in Johansen 1954:36). Johansen comments: 'in this "mine" he [Kairangatira] is the tribe, not only now, but in future after his death' (Johansen 1954:36).

In another account Te Rauparaha, when travelling with a small party consisting mostly of women and children, met with an enemy army. He bluffed them into thinking his party were warriors instead; but the plan was nearly spoiled when a small child began weeping. Seeing that it was a question of life and death Te Rauparaha said to the child's father, 'My friend, you must strangle the child, for this child is I (*ko au hoki tenei tamaiti*)'. The child was strangled and the others were saved (Johansen 1954:37). Johansen comments:

> The words used here by Te Rauparaha give cause for reflection . . . 'I' is both Te Rauparaha and the kinship group. His words 'This child is I' have two aspects. They partly mean that the fate of the kinship group at the moment is concentrated in this child; but they also mean that even if the child is killed, or rather, exactly by its being killed, its kinship I will survive the others. (Johansen 1954:37–38)

Second, as Sahlins also realises (1985a:47, n.19), chiefs were not the only people who used the first person singular in reference to noted ancestors or entire clans. Best (1924:397) notes this regarding the Maori, and Johansen cites a case where it is even used by a woman—a chief's sister who in lamenting his death says, 'I wish I could encircle the river at Ahuriri / and my food, Te Wera, be caught' (Johansen 1954:36). Sahlins's own Fijian example (reproduced above) shows one of the contestants, a *mata* or 'representative', himself using the heroic 'I' in such a way as to set up a complex relationship between himself as spokesman, the Bau chief for whom he is speaking in the first person singular, and the social totality that the chief personifies.[1]

Third, the 'kinship I' and the personal 'I' are not entirely distinct from each other, but often shade imperceptibly into one another:

> 'You were born in me' says a Maori. 'Yes, that is true,': admits the other, 'I was born in you.' Here there is an interplay between the kinship I and the individual I, and the same interplay—to us a little shimmering—is also seen [in Johansen's examples cited above]. But this shimmering appears from the fact that in each case we shall attribute to *au* 'I' either the meaning 'I' (the individual) or 'the tribe'. Actually the difference is not very great, the stress being laid on the qualitative, not on the quantitative element. 'I' always means 'kinship I', sometimes as represented by the whole tribe, at other times colored by the special personality of the individual; but the greater a man is, the stronger the kinship I is in him. Therefore we particularly hear 'I' with the whole fullness of the kinship group when spoken by the chief. (Johansen 1954:37)

Fourth, although both Sahlins and Johansen in their exegetical remarks talk only about totalising uses of the *first person* category, it is clear from their examples that there are reciprocal totalising usages in the *second* person as well: 'I was born in *you'* says the Maori; 'I destroyed *you'* says the Fijian *mata*, '*You* never captured a single place', etc.

Ku Waru 'segmentary person'

In the Ku Waru area where Merlan and I have done fieldwork it is common in the oratory used at inter-group events for the orators to use the first person singular in reference to their entire 'tribe',[2] even in reference to events they have not personally participated in, just as in the Polynesian cases discussed above. Examples occur in the text fragment below, which comes from a speech given by a big man, Kujilyi, at an inter-group exchange event where compensation was being presented in connection with an incident of warfare in which his group had been involved (for the full context, see Merlan & Rumsey 1991:122–55; 245–321):

> pilyikimil el turum-uyl topa-kin epola-alya-sil lyirim-a
> you know that when there was fighting Epola-Alya [tribe-pair] took (sg.) it up
>
> pi tepa oba na-nga kangi-na nosinsirum
> then 'he' came and put it on my skin
>
> jika-kungunuka sirid
> I gave it to Jika-Kungunuka [tribe pair]
> (Merlan & Rumsey 1991:290)

Here, Kujilyi is talking not about the recent fighting from which the present exchange transaction arises, but about a much earlier war that happened when he was a small boy. Nonetheless, he refers to his entire tribe, the Midipu—or possibly to Midipu together with its paired tribe Kusika—in the first person singular. (This occurs in the last line, where the verb '*si*-' 'to give', referring to the act of recruitment whereby his tribe-pair brought Jika-Kungunuka into the fighting, is marked for first person singular subject.) The orator also refers to his entire tribe or tribe-pair in the first person singular in the previous line, where 'put it on my skin' is used to mean 'make me liable for', Kujilyi's tribe (or tribe pair) (Kusika-)Midipu having been recruited as allies (*na-nga* is the first person singular pronoun *na*, followed by genitive postposition *–nga*[3]).

A second text fragment produces the following, this time a second person example:

> midipu kujilyi nu-n yi kare aki-yl-nga suku tekin turun-kiyl
> Midipu Kujilyi, you (sg.) have killed some of the men within [this tribe] (Merlan & Rumsey 1991:304)

This example is from the same exchange event as the previous one, and alludes to the same earlier bout of warfare. The man who was the speaker in the first example, Kujilyi, is here the addressee, referred to by the second person singular pronoun *nu* (followed by the ergative marker *-n*). The referent is not only Kujilyi, but his whole tribe—in fact a whole congeries of five fairly small tribes within which Kujilyi is one of the leading big men. Kujilyi himself could not have actually killed anyone in the fight alluded to since he was just a young boy at the time.

Furthermore, in Ku Waru, the use of singular person for entire social units is not confined to the first and second persons: third-person examples occur as well. For example, in the first line of the first text fragment presented above, the expression *epola-alya-sil* 'the pair of Epola and Alya' occurs as the singular subject of the verb *lyi-* 'take', describing the recruitment of those tribes into the war. In the second line, where this tribe pair is again the grammatical subject, all the verbs agreeing with it (*te-* 'do', *o-* 'come', *nosi-* 'put') are again explicitly marked for (third person and) singular number.

Elsewhere (Merlan & Rumsey 1991; Rumsey 1986, 1989) we have shown that these 'segmentary' uses of the singular and dual number are a regular feature of Ku political oratory, correlated strongly with certain other prosodic and paralinguistic features of the genre. Similar usages are attested in published transcripts of oratory among the neighbouring Melpa people (A J Strathern 1975:199) and the nearby Huli (Goldman 1983:134, line 294), and also reported for the Enga (Larson 1970), and Wahgi (M O'Hanlon pers. comm. 1996; cf. O'Hanlon 1989:94–6).

In these Ku Waru examples it is fairly clear that the individual orators who are referred to cannot be identified as the sole referents of the 'I' or 'you'. More commonly, however, it is ambiguous whether the speaker is talking about himself or a whole segmentary unit. This can be illustrated from the following (for the full context, see Merlan & Rumsey 1991:139–41; 271–2):

> el ya naa telybolu i kupulanum ilyi, ime-nga pansip tep, imenga pansip tep
> we two do not fight on this 'road' [i.e., within the Kopia-Kubuka-Poika-Palimi alliance]; we do it together all over the place

na nanu poika-palimi-sil-kin molup telyo
I myself stay with Poika and Palimi
(Rumsey & Merlan 1991:271)

These lines come from a speech by a Kubuka man who is trying to justify not paying any compensation to Poika-Palimi people for the blood they have shed fighting alongside the Kopia-Kubuka. The underlying idea is that it can be taken as a matter of course that Kopia-Kubuka and Poika-Palimi will fight together as allies rather than against each other, since they live together. When the Kubuka orator, Tamalu, says 'I myself stay with Poika and Palimi', it is a moot point whether he is referring to himself alone, his entire tribe the Kubuka, or Kopia and Kubuka combined. For in his role as an oratory-wielding big-man, he is projecting himself *as* a segmentary identity on the order of Kubuka or Kopia-Kubuka—personifying a social totality while amplifying his own person—so that precisely insofar as he stays with Poika and Palimi, Kopia and Kubuka stay with Poika and Palimi.

In other words, here in the New Guinea Highlands, just as in Johansen's account of the Maori kinship 'I', the Kubuka orator presumes to live 'the life of a whole tribe', and to 'gather the relationship to other tribes in his person'. But if the Ku Waru 'segmentary person' thereby resembles Sahlins's heroic 'I', the example shows that it would be wrong to identify the latter exclusively with 'hierarchical' social orders of the kind discussed by Sahlins in *Islands of History*. In the general model of 'heroic history' developed there (and in Sahlins 1991) it is seen to be related specifically to forms of divine kingship:

> The historical implications [of the idea of 'heroic history'] follow from the presence of divinity among men, as in the person of the sacred king or the powers of the magical chief. Accordingly, the principle of historical practice becomes synonymous with divine action: the creation of the human and cosmic order by the god. (Sahlins 1985a:35)

But in Ku Waru there is certainly no such notion. The segmentary order, the units within it, the transactions among them, and even the human bodies that people the world, are all seen as the products of arduous human labour (Merlan & Rumsey 1991:41–5; 221–44). As argued most famously by Sahlins himself (1963), leadership of segmentary units in the highlands as elsewhere in Melanesia contrasts with Polynesian chieftainship in being a personal attainment rather than a political-structural privilege of position.

'Segmentary person' meets the heroic 'I'

How then are we to understand the deployment in these very different social regimes of what seem to be such similar rhetorical devices? In order to answer that question it is useful to be as precise as we can about what the commonalities actually are. In all the Polynesian (cum Fijian) cases cited above, as well as in the Ku Waru one, the first person singular category, which is normally used to index the speaker as referent, is in certain contexts used in reference to a larger social totality with which the speaker is identified. In Ku Waru, Fijian and Maori at least, there are parallel uses in the second person, and in Ku Waru at least, in the third person and in the dual number as well. But the contexts and protocols for the use of the Polynesian 'heroic' or 'segmentary' forms are very different from the Ku Waru ones.

One of the differences seems to be in the degree of restriction on who may use such forms. Notwithstanding the exceptions noted above, the Maori sources agree that the kinship 'I' was used more commonly by chiefs than other people. Sahlins (1985a:47, n.19) implies that this is even more the case for Tonga and Fiji, but the evidence is inconclusive, since in only one of the relevant ethnographic examples he adduces (the Fijian land dispute quoted above) is a user of the heroic 'I' explicitly identified as a chief (and even there the other user of it is not). But if we can generalise from the Maori case, it seems that for every segmentary unit, at least at a particular level of segmentation, there was one specific person, the hereditary 'chief', for whom the use of the heroic 'I' was most appropriate.

This is decidedly not the case in Ku Waru. At nearly every segmentary level there are multiple aspiring big men, each of whom feels fully qualified to speak at inter-group exchange events using segmentary person forms. For example, at the exchange event from which the above examples are taken, fulsome speeches (as opposed to short procedural interjections) were made by eight Kopia men (out of a total Kopia population of 443) and eight Kubuka men (out of a total Kubuka population of under 400). Most of these speakers made at least some use of segmentary person forms in reference to the whole of Kopia, Kubuka, or both together (a full transcript of the oration is presented in Merlan & Rumsey 1991:245–321).

If Ku Waru segmentary person forms are thus less restricted than the Polynesian heroic 'I' with respect to who may appropriately use them, they are apparently more restricted with respect to other aspects of the contexts

in which they are used. None of the Polynesian sources I have found mentions any such restrictions, and the examples given include:

- for Maori: a request by one chief to another for permission for his tribe to come and live with the other's (Johansen 1954:36, citing White 1887–90 vol. 6:33); a lament song sung by a woman (Johansen 1954:36, citing Tarakawa 1900:136); a remark by a chief to his enemies when he was alone and surrounded by them and they were about to kill him (Johansen 1954:36, citing White 1887–90, vol.4:43); a chief talking to one of his own tribesmen when they were surrounded by enemies (Johansen 1954:37, citing White 1887–90, vol.6:20); a chief recounting 'old tribal history', presumably to his Pakeha amanuensis Percy Smith (Johansen 1954:36, citing Smith 1897:48);

- for Fiji: in the 'narration of tradition' (Sahlins 1962:254) by a an 'elder' concerning 'the doings of his ancestral lineage over several generations' (Sahlins 1981:13); in evidence by contestants arguing their case before a government land tribunal (Sahlins 1991:65);

- for Tonga: in an account to an anthropologist by a man of a chiefly lineage concerning the doings of his great-great-great-grandfather (Bott 1981:23); in a kind of speech event called a *fakamatala,* in which men with titles recount the history of the title and its holders (Heather Young Leslie, pers. comm. 1996).

In Ku Waru by contrast, none of the oral historical accounts we were given contains segmentary person usages. Nor did we ever note instances of them in everyday conversation among Ku Waru people, or in any kind of discussions among fellow clansmen. The only contexts in which we noted them being used at all were in speeches at inter-group events where the kind of social units indexed by segmentary person forms were involved as a basic dimension of the social interaction that was taking place. These events were of two kinds, which are closely related in Ku Waru social life (as elsewhere in the New Guinea Highlands; see A M Strathern 1985), namely, ceremonial exchange and warfare. In warfare they are used in harangues shouted from just behind the battle line to taunt the enemy side. We have published elsewhere a transcript of such a speech (Merlan & Rumsey 1991:345–6): it opens with a series of insults concerning the enemy tribes, which are addressed throughout in the second person singular.

Segmentary identities are every bit as strongly in focus (albeit in a less deadly way) at ceremonial exchange transactions, the main items in which are pigs and nowadays money. Most such transactions have an inter-personal aspect to them as well, in that they depend upon, and can be seen to comprise, multiple subsidiary transactions among particular trading partners, who are often related as affines or matrilateral kin. 'Inter-group' exchange is always liable to shed that particular aspect of its significance and be construed as patently or primarily a matter of inter-personal exchange.

Elsewhere, we have argued that what ceremonial exchange events are largely about is the construction and contestation of the meaning, and therefore the material consequences, of exchange along these two distinct dimensions of significance (Merlan & Rumsey 1991). Many aspects of the staging of these events and the speech genres used at them are finely adapted to three purposes: the reproduction of forms of pairing, which we have argued is the most basic schema in terms of which the segmentary order is structured; the representation of the transactions as inter-group ones; and, accordingly, the construction of segmentary-level social identities as the relevant actors at play in the events. Segmentary person forms play a key role in this process, more subtle and more powerful than any of the many linguistic devices that explicitly refer to segmentary identities, precisely because they *presuppose* such identities as a ground for the present interaction, rather than bringing them into focus as explicit subject matter.

Besides these differences in their typical contexts of use, there is another difference between Ku Waru segmentary person usages and Sahlins's heroic 'I'. In using them, Ku Waru orators do not thereby invoke, personify or refer to any specific ancestors identified with the segmentary identities, as they do in Polynesia. The Kopia orator Tamalu may, for example, say 'I stay with the Poika and Palimi' to mean 'The Kubuka tribe stays with Poika and Palimi'. Yet if, in an otherwise equivalent clause, he uses a segmentary person form with a remote past tense verb to talk about a state of affairs obtaining before he was born, the 'I' would never, as far as I know, conflate the identity of the Kopia tribe with that of any specific ancestor. (Indeed, genealogical memory among Ku Waru people is quite shallow and their social segmentation is not even notionally based on descent (see Merlan & Rumsey 1991:36–8)). Rather, the reference would

be to past Kopia in general, construed as continuous with the persona of the present orator Tamalu in particular.

In sum, the Polynesian heroic 'I' and Ku Waru segmentary person usages are interestingly similar in that first and second person singular forms are used in reference to a social totality with which the speaker or addressee is identified. In neither case is there any explicit formal marking of the difference between the totalising usages of these person categories and the more usual individuating ones. Indeed, in both cases there is a considerable grey area between the two, as I have exemplified above for Ku Waru, and as Johansen makes clear regarding the Maori case. In the Ku Waru case at least, the ambiguity of these usages is not just a matter of whether or not they refer to social totalities, but in the scope of the totalities being invoked: tribe, tribe-pair, larger alliance, etc.

But the Ku Waru and Polynesian cases also demonstrate important differences in the kinds of social totalities being invoked and in the relation between the particular 'hero' and the social whole for which he stands. If Sahlins's interpretation is correct (but see Rumsey (forthcoming)), this relationship is, in the Polynesian case, a matter of hierarchical encompassment whereby certain persons are literally 'entitled' to stand for a specific group.[4] In the Ku Waru case, on the other hand, men vie with each other to amplify themselves in the act of personifying a social totality of more-or-less inclusive scope based on the logic of segmentary pairing.

Forms of personification and the socio-cultural order

Given these similarities and differences, what are we to conclude about the generality or specificity of the phenomenon in question—the personification of social totalities—and its relation to other aspects of the sociohistorical settings in which it is found?

One thing we can conclude is that if, like Sahlins, we take the uses of totalising 'I' as evidence for a form of life in which it is possible to 'include the existence of others in one's own person' (Sahlins 1991:64) then we cannot identify the latter exclusively with Dumontian forms of hierarchy, as Sahlins seems to do (ibid.; cf. Sahlins 1985a:35; 47, n.19), since, as the Ku Waru example shows, the use of totalising 'I' is not limited to what Sahlins and Dumont would consider to be 'hierarchical orders' (ibid.; cf. Rumsey (forthcoming)).

A second conclusion is that, in order to understand what is specific to the Polynesian cases, we need to distinguish in principle between the use of personal pronouns to personify an ancestor, and their use to personify a social collectivity. I have demonstrated that the Ku Waru use does the latter but not the former. Conversely, there are other cases reported from elsewhere in Melanesia in which 'I' is used to speak as an ancestor without thereby invoking a social collectivity.

One is among the Telefomin (Mountain Ok Region, PNG), of whom Dan Jorgensen reports that there are narrative situations in which:

> a man shifts to first person when describing the actions of an ancestor ('I killed them all and chased them through the bush,' for example) and is clearly identifying himself with the ancestor's deeds, rather than merely reporting them. A sort of grey area involves what we often view as genealogical telescoping, as when the deeds of a number of different individuals are all credited to a single prominent ancestor (whose putative activities, for example, span what is demonstrably a period covering several generations). (D Jorgensen, pers. comm. 1996)

Another variant occurs among the Iatmul (middle Sepik, PNG), of whom Eric Silverman reports that they:

> often use the first person pronoun in reference to totemic ancestral namesakes; 'I did such-and-such' (created this or that feature in the landscape), where 'I' refers to the person and also the mythic-historic ancestor who had the same totemic name. In some cases, this 'I' (totemic name) is also the name for, say, a lineage or descent group. At the same time, any threat to the totemic referent (e.g., the group) is at once a personal threat on that particular individual's identity. For Iatmul, however, this system pivots on the role of totemic names rather than, say, a particular political organization (other than totemic descent groups). (E Silverman, pers. comm. 1996; cf. Bateson 1958:43–4)

First-person personification of ancestors is also attested from the Trobriands by Malinowski (1922:412; 1935) and from nearby Kalauna, where its use in the telling of myths has been sensitively explored by Michael Young (1983), in what is perhaps the fullest treatment of ancestral personification anywhere in the ethnography of the Pacific. About one such performance Young says that the teller in identifying with his ancestors 'represents himself as embodying [his] clan as an entity' (Young 1983:188), but in most

of his other examples of ancestral personification there is no 'group' reference, or it remains in the background.

Further afield, in Tanna (south Vanuatu) people speak in the first person in reference to a specific ancestor whose name they bear. This has a collective dimension in that '[i]n its titular aspects a name conjoins a person with others and endows him with resources, situating him in the midst of a larger structure of group/land relations. The entitling appellative, however, serves also as a name identifying singularly a particular individual, disjoining him from others' (Lindstrom 1981:32–3). In a discussion that is interestingly complementary to the present one, Lindstrom distinguishes the Tannese ancestral usage of the first person as the 'everyman's I' as opposed to Sahlins's 'heroic I' (ibid.), and Tanna by contrast to Polynesia as a 'panheroic society'.

By comparison with all these Melanesian cases, the most distinctive feature of the Polynesian ones discussed by Sahlins seems to be the fact that the personification of ancestors with 'I' and the personification of social totalities with 'I' are so thoroughly bound up with each other as to constitute one and the same act. This combination, rather than either characteristic alone, would have to be taken as definitive of the category of heroic 'I' if is it is not to become too general a category to be useful for comparative purposes. If so, then the heroic 'I' is not unique to Polynesian polities, as Sahlins acknowledges with his African examples. It may well not be ubiquitous among Polynesian polities either, even in their ancient form: there is, as far as I know, no such usage reported from Hawaii, and it is doubtful whether there could be. For even if examples did come to light of 'I' being used by Hawaiian ruling chiefs in reference to a collectivity of their subjects, it would not necessarily also refer to an ancestor, since the chiefs were not tied to their lands in such a fixed way (Sahlins 1985b).[5]

More generally, I think it would be a mistake to try to relate totalising pronominal reference *per se* to any particular type of social order, culture, or polity[6] (cf. Rumsey (forthcoming)). For at least in the Ku Waru case, the totalising person forms have proven amazingly adaptable to new uses, from new sorts of speaking position in radically changed sociopolitical circumstances.

All the Ku Waru examples I have used were from speeches by men at an inter-group exchange event of a fairly traditional sort, where compensation was being paid by one tribe-pair to another for coming to their aid in a battle

that had been fought a year before, in 1982. But if that battle—fought with bows and arrows and wooden shields—had taken place along fairly traditional segmentary lines, what ended it was a startlingly new historical development: the intervention on the battle field, between the opposing sides, of a women's cooperative work group (*wok meri*), who presented gifts to both sides and enjoined them to stop fighting. Both sides accepted, the men went home, and the Kopia-Kubuka have not been involved in any tribal fighting since.

At two subsequent exchange events where each of the principal combatant sides gave compensation to their allies, payments were also presented to the women's group, in return for the ones they gave to either side when stopping the fight. Thus accepted as an actor within the previously all-male realm of segmentary level transactions, the women's group was entitled to be heard on the display ground when receiving the payments. Examining the women's speeches in detail, Merlan and I (1991) have shown how they drew upon both the newly established rhetorics of 'government law' and 'business', and upon features of traditional male oratory. In this way they created for themselves a new, hybrid speaking position, one that was both subversive of the segmentary order and complexly entangled with it. One of the features of traditional oratory drawn on was the totalising use of personal pronominal categories, as in the following lines from one of the four speeches by women from the group:

> elti el tiringl-kiyl-o kanilka-o
> you two fought, and I, seeing it
>
> kapola naa mel tirim kanap-o
> seeing that it was a good thing
>
> el kani-yl yi te-n mol-o
> that fight, no man [ergative case]
>
> na-ni gai punya-na konturud-o
> but I in the sweet potato garden stopped it
> (Merlan & Rumsey 1991:186)

Remarkably, these lines and the entire speech from which they come were delivered in the special prosodically marked *el ung* style, with line terminating vowel *-o* (Merlan & Rumsey 1991:98–102), a style which, as far as anyone

could recall, had never been used by a woman before this occasion. Merlan and I have demonstrated statistically that in men's speeches the style is strongly correlated with segmentary person usages, for which it serves as a keying device (Merlan & Rumsey 1991:100–02, cf. Rumsey 1986). Indeed, the excerpt above contains, in the first line, a segmentary second person dual reference 'you two fought', referring to whole tribes, and in the second and fourth lines, first person singular forms that can be taken, in the characteristic segmentary person manner, as referring both to the speaker and to the social totality with which she is identified.

But exactly what is the social totality of identification here? In this case the indeterminacy is not just a matter of the scope of the social identity in question (tribe vs tribe-pair, etc.), but of its very nature. To be sure, the woman's group has a segmentary identity, Kulka, but not because the women themselves are of the Kulka tribe. They are not. Rather, it has that identity because all of the women are married to Kulka men and, residence in the Ku Waru area being predominantly virilocal, live in Kulka territory, where their work group's operations are also based. The group's action on the battlefield was possible in part because the Kulka tribe as such was not involved in this particular conflict, and was neutral with respect to it. In that limited respect, the Kulka identity could momentarily be aligned with the new voice of 'government law' (*gabman lo*). This voice opposes 'tribal fighting' in general as inimical to national unity and economic development—the very values promoted by the women's group and displayed by them on the battlefield in the form of produce from their cash-cropping ventures, the PNG national insignia, which they all wore on their tee-shirts, and the national flag, which they planted between the opposing armies.

The work group's action also drew upon aspects of the traditional position of Hagen/Nebilyer women in general. This is well described by Marilyn Strathern in her (1972) book *Women in Between* (and in the common Melpa/Ku Waru expression from which its title comes): women are links between men in chains of cross-sex exchange relations. Nevertheless, their interests in the inter-group aspects of exchange are more muted, and they tend to perceive themselves as more strongly opposed to fighting than are men, and less interested in the issues that give rise to it.

Given this range of interests and identities in which the Kulka women's group's action is grounded, Kopil's totalising 'I' 'shimmers' (as Johansen would put it) between at least the following sorts of identifications:

- I, Kopil, a leader of the Kulka women's group
- We the Kulka women's group
- We, the forces of 'government law'
- We women

The fact that there was an established Ku Waru genre in which segmentary person reference was a standard feature provided a way for Kopil to cast her person references as totalising ones. Yet the fact that the references were being spoken by *her* in these particular circumstances meant that the social totalities being invoked could not be of the usual segmentary sort: they must instead be construed in novel ways such as the above.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we may ask what are the implications of these new usages for our general understanding of sociocultural orders and how they change.

Responding to what he calls 'poststructuralist litanies about the contested and unstable character of cultural logics', and to 'the currently fashionable idea that there is nothing usefully called "a culture" . . . since the limits of the supposed "cultures" are indeterminate and permeable', Sahlins wrote:

> In order for categories to be contested at all, there must be a common system of intelligibility, extending to the grounds, means, modes and issues of disagreement. It would be difficult to understand how a society could function, let alone how knowledge of it could be constituted, if there were not some meaningful order *in* the differences. If in regard to some given event or phenomenon the women of a community say one thing and the men another, is it not because men and women have different positions in, and experience of, the same social universe of discourse? Are not the differences in what men and women say expressions of the social differences in the construction of gender? If so, there is a noncontradictory way—dare one say, a totalizing way?—of describing the conditions, a system of and in the differences. (Sahlins 1993:15)

> Every society known to history is a global society, every culture a cosmological order. And in thus including the universe within its own cultural scheme—as the Maori or native Australians include the order of nature in the order of kinship—the people accord beings and things beyond their immediate community a definite place in its reproduction. (ibid. 16)

Elaborating on the latter proposition, Sahlins (n.d.) argues that it is wrong to see indigenous cultures of the world as disappearing before the onslaught of the world system. Rather, the colonised have adapted to the impositions of colonial regimes by 'motivated permutations of their cultural traditions':

> And how else can the people respond to what has been inflicted on them except by devising on their own heritage, acting according to their own categories, logics, understandings? I say 'devising' because the response may be totally improvised, something never seen or imagined before, not just a knee-jerk repetition of an ancient custom. (Sahlins 1993:18)

I heartily agree with the main thrust of these remarks, and especially with Sahlins's injunction not to throw out the baby of 'system' with the bath water of 'boundedness' and 'stability'. Nevertheless, I think he has in some ways set too strict a threshold requirement for what can count as 'system'. To see why, let us reconsider the heroic 'I' and the Kulka women's actions in relation to these claims by Sahlins.

To the extent that totalising pronominal usage played a part in the reproduction of a particular social order in the various Polynesian cases discussed by Sahlins, it did so not as a cultural 'category', or form of 'understanding', but as a *practice.*[7] What makes it specifically an aspect of Polynesian *cultures* for Sahlins is what we can call, following Bill Hanks (1992; cf. Hanks 1990, 1996), the implicit indexical *ground* against which its deictic reference is figured: an interactional space in which the relevant actors are certain kinds of segmentary social identities, which are susceptible of being summed up in the personae of the chiefs and their ancestors.

What appear on the face of it to be similar forms of person reference among the Ku Waru people and other New Guinea Highlanders have traditionally been used against a somewhat different implicit ground. In this, the relevant actors are also segmentary social identities, which can be summed up in the person of a single (male) speaker, but without his thereby

identifying himself with any specific ancestral personage. To an apparently greater extent than in the Polynesian cases, these totalising Ku Waru usages are limited to certain specific interactional contexts in which the relevant kinds of segmentary actors are present not only as speaker but as addressee. Further, in these contexts, other formally marked genre features of the utterance provide clear metalinguistic cues for the special totalising values of the singular and dual number categories of the language.

In adapting these Ku Waru practices of totalising segmentary reference to circumstances in which she was placed at the Kopola exchange event of 17 August 1983, there is no doubt that Kopil engaged in a brilliant improvisation—'something never seen or imagined before' among Ku Waru people (cf. Merlan & Rumsey 1991:192–7). But in doing so, she was not merely 'devising on their own heritage, acting according to their own categories, logics, understandings', but doing something that she and other Ku Waru people understood to be a *departure* from their own heritage—something that, as one of the (nonetheless approving) male speakers pointed out, could in traditional terms only be described as 'mad':

> now we are living in changed conditions
> in new and different conditions
> now we are changing the law and doing things differently
> 'mad women', along with you before we did something different and put the flag up
> and now we people, according to your different way of proceeding
> we are coming in bringing the flag
> (from speech by Kulka Pokea, in Merlan & Rumsey 1991:170; cf. pp. 28–30, 210–14)

The sentiments expressed by this man—the contrast between *bo* (indigenous) and *kewa* (exogenous) ways of doing things and the sense that *bo* people should and must engage with and adapt to the new and different—were ones we heard many times from men and women alike, even in speeches at the exchange events of the most 'traditional' sort (Merlan & Rumsey 1991:152–5).

In the form of mediation between the *bo* and the *kewa* engaged in by the Kulka women's group, they were able to draw upon established segmentary person usages, not as an element of a 'cosmological order', or

even of ‘culture as constituted’. Rather, it operated as a kind of referential practice that was well suited to the projection and instantiation of novel forms of social identity and agency while leaving open for further exploration a considerable area of indeterminacy as to how they might fit into any existing scheme of things. In this respect these referential practices meet Sahlins’s basic requirement of providing grounds and ‘means . . . of disagreement’ while showing that the pursuit of it need not presuppose a whole ‘cosmology’ or ‘universe of discourse’ as common ground.

Perhaps further research in light of this Melanesian example might reveal similarly interesting transformations in the use of the erstwhile ‘heroic’ forms of person reference elsewhere in the Pacific and beyond.

Acknowledgments

The argument of this paper has benefited greatly from comments received on an earlier version presented at the 1996 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, and from responses to my internet queries, by Dan Jorgensen, Elizabeth Keating, Heather Young Leslie, Eric Lieber, Lamont Lindstrom and Eric Silverman. For their helpful comments on earlier drafts, I also wish to thank Steve Feld, Bill Hanks, Les Hiatt, Francesca Merlan, Michael O’Hanlon, Marshall Sahlins, Andrew Strathern, Marilyn Strathern, Borut Talban, Greg Urban and MichaelYoung.

Notes

1 In response to this formulation Sahlins (pers. comm. 1997) has commented to me that 'A Fijian *mata* . . . is a voice of the chief. Your use of the Fijian example to show other people than chiefs can use it is structurally misleading.' This would certainly be true if I were claiming that the *mata*'s use of 'I' directly instantiates the social totality. But I am not. For me the relevant fact is that the *mata*, even while speaking as the voice of the chief, is also a *mata*.

2 To simplify the exposition I use the term 'tribe' here in accordance with standard ethnographic practice for the region, to mean 'named segmentary social identity of the most inclusive order'. This usage is quite problematical, for reasons discussed in Merlan and Rumsey (1991:38), where we generally use Ku Waru terms instead, but it will do for present purposes.

3 For an account of these postpositions and other aspects of Ku Waru grammar, see Merlan and Rumsey (1991:322–43).

4 Compare Bott (1981:23), who says that in Tonga a title is 'the embodiment of its people'.

5 In response to a query I put to him about this Sahlins has said that he has never seen any examples of 'heroic I' from Hawaii, 'and since there were no corporate groups, one wouldn't expect any heroic I. The Hawaiian equivalent would be to call any constellation of people constituted for a longer(e.g, a household) or shorter period (say, a fishing party) as So-and-so *ma*, So-and-so being the leading person present or the constitution of the group, *ma* a bound suffix meaning something like "people of", thus "people of So-and-so"' (M Sahlins, pers. comm. 1998).

6 From Micronesia, Elizabeth Keating (pers. comm. 1996) reports a pattern of pronoun usage in reference to paramount chiefs that is very different from the ones discussed by Sahlins, but common elsewhere in the world (cf. Brown & Gilman 1960), namely the use of the third person plural in reference to a single person. 'Consultants say this is because he represents the entire group of ancestral deity/ chiefs.'

7 Compare Sahlins (1991:65), who speaks of the heroic I as an aspect of a 'certain mode of historical production, a kind of historical practice'.

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