CHAPTER 10

The Conclusion of the Past and the Making of the Present

The scent of kastam. Like smoke from the cooking fires, it lodges forever in the most ordinary things. Especially there. In house rafters. In bananas of all degrees of ripeness. The shape of animals and the color of yams. In the absence of war. And of course in the thoughts of the ancestors.

From the perspective of the worlds not yet Westernized, the twentieth century is the age of encompassment. Like the inexorable rise of the oceans during periods of global warming (when monsters inhabited the earth and much of the island of New Guinea was underseas), the West has inundated its others so that no corner of the globe has been left untouched by capitalism, the nation-state, and internationalized Western culture. The commodity form and state politics, the rule of law and the promise of science, the discipline of the school and the wealth of biomedicine, the hallelujahs of Christianity and the rhythms of rock, and with this the forms of knowledge and desire inscribed in Western practice, have all flowed across the Highlands landscape. In the tradition of my people, I have tried to explore how giant processes became manifest in specific instances. My understanding is that, if God now dwells in the mediations, so must our ethnography. The Highlands of New Guinea are exceptional only in that they have been covered by this Western tide after the second of the world wars. And so I have been able to tell an episode of this long story when the memories of the transformation are still fresh, when it is possible to tell the story from the beginning because still alive and sentient were those who witnessed the initial encounter between Melanesians and Westerners. For this reason, the Melanesian story is memorable and resonates with a larger history. In terms of the number of people affected it hardly appears on the radar screens of history; in terms of its proximity to the present it could not be of more importance. That we, as creatures of the modern, inhabit a kind of perpetual present, easily forgetting both our own past and that of others, further amplifies its import. If the march of the West began with the direct domination of colonialism, it is continuing with far less transparent and much more nuanced forms of domination. If the march began
in the age of self-confident imperialism, it is continuing in a time of uncertainty as to how these nations—or any nations—will fare in the face of the conjuncture of local and global forces.

Encompassment was not, of course, born full-size—though it is sometimes so imagined in local ideologies that re-present the past as the antechamber to a modern future. Listening to some of the junior generation speak socially, one would have thought that the Maring past was dissolving like a clump of red ochre tossed into the rage of the Jimi River. So, for example, members of the junior generation described violence as extinct, though there were signs that it was more like a sleeping volcano over which had grown a crust of cold gray ash. What there has been is more like an ideological civil war between generations, a contestation of power and epistemology. It pitted those who were raised before the modern against those raised in the shadow of its advent, and both against a junior generation that could not conceive the world in any other way. As the evidence speaks, the process of encompassment is not smooth, immediate, or transparent. Encompassment was episodic in that the influx of Westerners and practices obeys no logic other than the many scattered logics of evangelical operations, state policy, and business interests. Encompassment was gradual in that the relative isolation of the Maring—both geographically and in the vision of the West—meant that the weight of encompassment has been brought in small measures. Encompassment was nonconscious in that its greatest effects were at the level of knowledge, desires, and dispositions toward the world. Where Maring history previously was always defined by change within fixed horizons, encompassment has burned down the doxic world and fired the conception and possibility of change without limits. Modernity is a conversation between past and present held in the space shaped between the indigenous and Western worlds. We cannot underestimate the effect of moving from a cyclical and circumscribed history to a nonlinear and indeterminate history, that is, local history becoming a chapter of capitalist, nation-state, Western-driven world history.

I have used the term encompassment to register the dimension of power inherent in globalization. While local agency is alive and vibrant, as so many examples have illustrated, it is still the West that is imposing itself, not the other way around. The Maring have been compelled to deal with wage labor and the commodity; they have not and cannot compel us to adopt the philosophy of gifts. They have become Christians even as we have forsaken not only their ancestors but our own. I also use the term encompassment to register that what is now happening is part of a longer process and bears critical continuities with the past. In reality, globalization is the name of the process in which all the forces that the West unleashed to encompass others are now encompassing the West. The
forces of capitalism, culture, and nationalism that the West unchained in the nineteenth century—when the encompassment of others began in earnest—have taken on a life of their own, now confronting their author as quasi-autonomous processes that seem to have no address. The encompassment of Melanesia begins at the end of the last century, though the missionaries, traders, colonial officials, and also anthropologists who came had long been schooled by their African and Indian experience.

To grasp what is happening in all its colors and complexities leads not only to an anthropology of encompassment but a recognition that the frontier between disciplines has been breached. When, for example, the concept of citizen implicates that of the person, the frontier between anthropology and political science is, to draw upon a now discarded anthropological terminology, a “survival” from the enlightenment. When our history and that of Melanesia become mutual, the divide between anthropology and history and politics betrays a logic without a home in reality. As socially mediating labor defines the citizen, and the IMF the policies of the state, the distinction between anthropology and history, politics, and economy becomes immaterial to the project of understanding. And so on and on. On the surface, I mean this to underline that the progress of future understandings of Melanesia depends upon a conjunction of perspectives. On a deeper level, I have argued that grasping the character of encompassment is inherently comparative, meaning that there is no way to comprehend Melanesia without comprehending the West itself, without traveling beyond the forms of self-misrecognition and disguise that are the West’s gift to world history. On a deeper level still, I have argued that we require a combined and comparative perspective whose logic is the same as that of encompassment. Because, as I have tried to show, encompassment is the context of its own understanding—the ethnographer an inherently double agent in that respect—it is necessary to focus on local details and mediations. Only this will allow us to grasp the contradiction that it is only from a culturally and historically specific perspective that we can determine the apparently transcultural and transhistorical construction of the world—what in another language is called globalization.

From the same standpoint, we must consider modernity a part of an emerging social imaginary whose shape is determined by the interplay between local and global circumstances. In Melanesia, Africa, and the world of Others generally, the appearance of the modern is simultaneously over- and underdetermined. As an impulse of transformation, modernity has an air of universality and inevitability yet is irremediably rooted in the concrete and particular existence of a cultural community. Further, because modernity is contested and opens up new horizons for actions, critical collective movements, such as the armed rebellion on Bougainville...
or a great conversion to a new religion, always contain the possibility of seizing the present and transforming the trajectory of the modern. Occurring in the breach between the local and the global, the outcome is determined and predictable neither from the structure of local circumstances nor from the impositions of the world community. But rather from their indeterminate interplay in determinate sociohistorical circumstances. Ethnographically, the objective must be to understand how the images of modernity circulating in a particular cultural community acquire multiple meanings, meanings that overlap, contradict, and contest for the same historical space. Here the story underlines the ways different generations struggle, forge coalitions, and pursue their own visions about what social reality is and the future should be. What matters is the (re)construction and circulation of the meaning of the past as well as the future among and across groups whose concepts, desires, and dispositions are no longer on the same path. So leaders of the junior generation clash with their seniors over the very nature of social relations and the forces that animate the world. Does sorcery still exist? Do gifts still make people? Do the ancestors count? The Melanesian example underlines the extent to which modernity has emerged as a universal form of society and also as a site of cultural particularism. Recognizing that modernity lies at the confluence of locality and encompassment is more than just another observation because it compels analysis to take account of the plurality of local concepts, desires, and dispositions without losing sight of the reality that encompassment as a global structure produces new and powerful similarities among the peoples encompassed. The argument and evidence from Melanesia expressly repudiates those theories that assume that globalization and increasing locality are antithetical phenomena. They are more like brothers-in-arms.

What makes theorization difficult is that an account adequate to its object must both make a space for the large scale epochal transformations in these societies and be sensitive to the reality that these transformations are local and indeterminate. The methodology must presuppose and take into account discursive changes in the foundations of social life and simultaneously center around intensive local ethnography that reveals the strategies and plurality of meanings inscribed in any event. This does not mandate, and I emphasize, that every account include a full analysis of all these levels. It does imply that our analyses should start with the understanding there is an intrinsic relationship between levels, even if all of them are not foregrounded simultaneously. In other words, an anthropology intent on giving an account of the globalization of modernity must be self-conscious about its search for a nonreductionist, multilevel notion of social change; it must be willing to give up some of its founding ethnographic strategies; and it must be able to award intellectual capital to those who study change, not only in the hinterlands of Papua New Guinea and
the other famous anthropological haunts, but also in urban centers and other less “primitive” places, such as Port Moresby, Honiara, and downtown De Moines.

This book tells one moment of the larger story of the meeting of the West and Melanesia, the story of the West’s contact with the Maring people of Highland New Guinea and the social changes shaped by this encounter. The story unfolding in these high valleys has happened before; it is a variation on a theme played out in the land of the others. This story is at once a history of the encounter and a sustained attempt to challenge the concepts that have shaped the study of modernity. By examining the agents and processes of pacification and first contact, the work of the Anglican missionaries, the infiltration of Western medicine, the advent of a system of schooling, and local response to capitalism and nationhood, it argues that the most critical and generative effect of modernity has been the transformation of the local social epistemology and the structures of desire and disposition. The evidence shows the Western practices embody Western designs of knowledge and desire, and that these structures interact with indigenous practices to generate new and mediated forms. These changes have most profoundly touched the generation coming of age in the late 1970s into the 1980s. The account traces ways in which modernity has promoted the individual aspect of personhood, led to the reshaping and enlargement of the public political sphere, authored new forms and functions for time, invented and defined a human nature, animated the use of money, created a carnival of new goods and services, and begun to establish labor (as opposed to kinship) as a critical means of social mediation. The account also shows how the encounter has led to a transformation in the way people grasped the nature of language (written and oral), their consciousness of themselves as a people, and their representation of their past and future. I have sought to tell the story from both sides, to illustrate the rationalities and motives that drove the Westerners as well as the Maring. I have sought to reinsert the anthropologist into the encompassing process. Arguing that the encounter between the Maring and the West is never a one-way street, the account testifies that the engagement of Westerners with people such as the Maring has indigenized the institutions and practices of these Westerners. In order to accomplish this, the book continually draws contrasts between the West’s own understanding of itself and the way that it grasps the understanding of others.

The Maring and Melanesia have been encompassed by the West. The peoples of the islands we call Oceania have been “othered” by capitalism and Christianity, the nation-state and internationalized Western culture, interstate organization and new social movements. The West exports itself relentlessly in what has now become an old story. What is new is an understanding that honors the complexities of this process, that begins to tell
both sides of the story in a nonmechanistic and nondeterministic way, so that the lives and people caught up in these processes retain their spirit. The quest to see peoples as they are and as they are becoming by virtue of their mutual interactions, must move along several fronts at once. To be adequate to its object, our analyses must connect the local level, life, and lives in village and hinterland, to the larger processes of encompassment—to nation and state, exploring the hyphen that draws them together, to the progress of capitalism and Western culture. The initial step in so contextualizing ethnography must be to locate it within the processes of encompassment. And to do this absent the postmodern conceits, especially the narcissism that takes the fieldworker’s medical biography and emotional carriage as critical ethnographic data, or the false humility in which the anthropologist takes on and confesses for all of the sins of encompassment. For in the end, the postmodern conceits are also only part of our collective defense mechanism. The analysis must flesh out the mediations, the contestations, and the trepidations that bring these levels into conjuncture. It is, following a tide of recent ethnography, a call to rise above the local, the syndrome and security of talking about “my people,” and address the mediations linking (now inextricably so) life in the village with world history. The conversation must be triangulated, embracing in the same theoretical sentence local structures and histories, the characters of the encompassing processes, and the mediating agents and institutions. Constructing this conversation inscribes the paradox of a science of Others in the age of encompassment. The greatest virtue and limitation of modern anthropology is its attachment to the local; positively, its knowledge of local life allows it to draw out these mediations in a way that no purely global perspective can ever achieve. Anthropology is essential to the construction of an adequate theory and history of the globalization of modernity because anthropology alone has the material and methods to mount a comparative account of localities. Let me reiterate this point because it gets to the essence of the matter. This triangulated conversation necessitates a comparative understanding of locality and community that is the hallmark of anthropology. Its tradition of a deep appreciation of local cultures and communities—embodied in ethnography—is indispensable. But it is also not enough; the mediations must be drawn out and they must be done so in the framework of a theory of encompassment.

Critical to understanding the process of mediation is an analysis of the transformation in the structure of knowledge and organization of desire inspired by the encounter between the Maring and encompassing institutions and agents. To do this requires that we locate with some precision what Melanesians and Westerners have in common and have in difference. This enterprise is difficult because it requires as much self-analysis, of moving beyond our own ideological vision of ourselves, as it does
analysis of Melanesia. I have argued that one of the main problems with anthropological comparisons lies not in its understanding of Melanesia, but in our own self-understanding. Thus I have made, perhaps belabored, the point that economy, polity, and culture (of personhood, for example) are ontologically united, through separable in appearance, with this distinctiveness of social appearance intrinsic to the character of this ontological unity. Furthermore, to see the West in terms of the terms in which it wants to misrecognize itself—not least by separating economy from culture, the fetish of the commodity from our notions of the person—leads to an overemphasis of the differences between the West and Melanesia. There are cultural universals, which is why we can practice the religion we call ethnography, the well-grounded faith that we can grasp the intentionality of others through the instrument of our own mind and body. Once we have located ourselves in relation to Melanesia we can begin to fathom how encompassment transforms the character of knowing and desiring, how it animates changes that generate other changes that change the very nature of subjectivity and peoplehood. That allow the cassowary to fly.

Finally, I have argued for the construction of a theory of generation. Without one, an account of transformation will be inadequate. To do this requires that we construct the relational and dynamic space of generations in relation to other modes of sociality (such as gender and clanship). It requires that we detail the forms of collaboration and contestation between generations and within a generation. What was critical about the Maring junior generation was that it stood precisely at the conjuncture between the forms of knowing and desire immanent in their parents and those that were instilled partly by these parents and partly by a world that played no part in the creation of their parents’ habitus, and that moreover must respond and adjust to the demands of a prevailing situation that increasingly exalts modern forms of knowledge and desire and disparages customary ones. In sum, what was (and still is), at stake in the tension between generations was the power to impose a vision and division of the social universe, to construct the reality that shapes the trajectory of Maring society as it pushes into its future. A future that is vastly different, objectively in its structure and subjectively in the forms of knowledge, desire, and dispositions inculcated within agents.

A key concept and stake in the contestation between generations, within a generation, and between the Maring and their Western encompassers, was the nature of kastam. This was played out as a struggle over the signs and substance of modernity: how the Maring signify and practice peace; the ways commercial goods, especially foods, become integrated into the economy of everyday life; what it means and entails to be a Christian, educated, and/or trilingual Maring. The current of exchanges, the polarity of tensions, between the encompassing agents and the local popu-
lace were defined by prior and determinate forms whose conjuncture was, however, unpredictable and open to all manner of serendipity and creativity. The shallow understanding that the missionaries and kiaps had of the Maring, and the Maring of the inflowing Western agents, all but guaranteed that communication would travel along the slenderest of threads. But, the fact that the Maring had to confront Western practices, practices that were presented to them as a challenge to their own, forced them to crystallize, objectify, and totalize their own customs. Western religion, medicine, and lifestyles became the ground and mirror against which the Maring began inventing themselves as a people. They began to see their own practices self-consciously, as distinct from those of others, as bearing a true coherence, as being coterminous with the Maring language and the emergent public political sphere. A new generative scheme took shape based on the categories of kastam, civilization, and bisnis in which the Maring began to reflect back to Westerners a transformed vision of the Western vision of them.

The junior generation’s conception of its own past was a mixture of cultural vinegar and historical revelation, as they sought to both distance themselves from their own past, its incarnation in the elder generation in particular, and in the same breath invoke that past to define themselves against the West. Their encounter with modernity reconfigured old memories and inspired new forms of forgetting—the past becoming an object, a history that people both wanted to remove from their bodies and at the same time reclaim. Their uneven and contingent exposure to Western agents and institutions complicated the process, modernity at times seeming to possess all the stability of a windsock. Nonetheless, the junior generation quickly came to embody and lead the crusade for development. The mission and motto of the local government councils that they led was “to develop our place.” The junior generation began to articulate development as a self-conscious category and program for how their once indigenous world was to be transformed, civilized, and uplifted into a new stratosphere of goods, services, and open-ended life trajectories. They acquired the notions of development and the great leap toward modernity inscribed in the discourse and dispositions of the clergy, educations, medical community, bureaucrats, urban capitalists, and others they came into contact with. Their worldview became an increasingly important social organizing force, particularly so through the image of progress as a ladder that would permit them to climb up out of their own past. The path of progress was structured according to languages learned, Christian affiliation, life experiences, modes of livelihood, technical know-how (that ranged from driving a truck to telling time), and much more. In this respect, the junior generation negotiated two frames of identity: the first based on kinship and community and obedient to the principles of social-
ity, the second focused outward to a modern, urbanizing, national world in which technical knowledge, individual initiative, capital savings, modern sector employment, and displays of accumulated wealth make the person. By 1980, a kind of moving, malleable, hybrid identity had begun to emerge, an identity forged in the space between an indigenous world that the junior generation could no longer want and a modern world that was not anxious to accept them, between an indigenous world they were pulling away from and a modern one that was pushing them away.

The Maring had a theory that what defined humans were their acts of self-control and resolve. Where pigs and dogs gorge on whatever food is set before them, humans eat slowly and carefully, never finishing and always sharing their meal. The same holds for our understanding of encompassment—it requires our analytical resolve and self-control. We must resist that romantic desire to believe that, against the tide of history and the awesome asymmetries of power, the Maring or any other people can truly resist. We must ward off the sentimentality that believes that somehow what is traditional can survive—that there is a preservation of practice and meaning that an archaeology of practice can recover. We must remove ourselves from the nostalgia for our own past and the demonization of our own present that imagines that Melanesians value their past in the same way that we do ours, as a counterweight to a modernity that values things over relations, the present over the past, the individual over community, and gratification over responsibility. This nostalgia forgets that this vision of the past is itself a necessary feature of and presupposes a Western conception of modernity. An anthropology of encompassment must also overcome the tendency to see colonialism, capitalism, and culture as machines of domination that simply steamroller other societies. Westernization has never been a monolithic process, but rather one that is characteristically contradictory and fragmented. The intentions of Christianity are not those of capitalism, and neither line up perfectly with those of the nation-state, in either its colonial or contemporary form. The agents of the Almighty, business, and the government seldom see eye to eye on the proper relationship between Westerners and Melanesians. Moreover, capitalism and Western culture embody their own forms of seduction, carnival, enchantment, and novel possibilities. In this context that will escape all reductionist readings, people come to desire things Western, to know them as their own, and to develop the dispositions to use them. The result is that the transformation of the Maring and Melanesia more generally wrought by encompassment is not simply the result of the importation of things Western or even a logical combination of indigenous and imported practices. Rather what results is the simultaneous appearance of a new form of indigenous-Western society, a hybrid, an indigenous modernity. Whatever the name, the Maring will never be the same, nor Western.
Being othered and being modernized is no easy task. Not for the Maring, nor for Melanesians generally, and not for Westerners when it was their turn earlier. One has only to recall the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Spain and Germany, the fight against capitalism and its factories in England, the civil wars in Italy and the United States over the making of the nation-state, and the suppression of social movements (those advocating civil rights, universal suffrage, etc.) to realize that the West made itself modern in fits and starts, hip-deep in its own blood. Yet, the West has little trouble imagining that “others” are more primitive than the West ever was, and that those others will transform themselves into capitalist, democratic, God-fearing nation-states faster and more smoothly than we ever did. But, of course, their stars are better than ours. They have our help to instruct and jump-start them down the road to modernity. That, at least, is the tale the West told itself and used to justify the colonization of places like Melanesia and people like the Maring.

But the road to modernity could not help but be a struggle. The Maring, like Melanesians generally, had to make a space for identity and pride within the framework of encompassment, to create moments of self-definition and value so that they would not have to either capitulate or lose their identity in the crush of capitalism, Christianity, and internationalized Western culture or resist the modern whatever the consequences. To capitulate would lead to an effacement of identity; to resist would condemn them to economic and political marginalization. And so “combined strategies” of accommodation and self-creation began to emerge.

The consequence of all of this, I suggest, is that while the globalization of modernity is becoming increasingly critical—the “traditional” anthropological object is itself disappearing at an accelerating rate—and though globalization involves peoples that have stood at the core of ethnographic discourse, anthropology is but a minor player in the study of the globalization of modernity. The reason for this, I have suggested, lies in a marginalized and undertheorized notion of encompassment, a resistance against contextualizing ethnography in the complex set of mediations that link global processes to local transformations. Particularly in Melanesia (but by no means only in Melanesia), any turn to the study of encompassment signals a fundamental change in what anthropologists do and the way that they go about it. Analyzing encompassment requires more sophisticated theories of mediation and the state as well as a seachange in our concept of the anthropological subject. At the very least it determines that an anthropology adequate to its mission must come to terms with the interrelationship between structures of different genesis, internal organization, and orders of magnitude.

Encompassment has provoked a confrontation between an anthropology that joins their history to ours and an anthropology of Others which
claims that the relationship of their encompassment can only be known if we first grasp their differences, an act of cultural transcendence that requires us to relativize our concepts. I have argued that a reading of the evidence tells us that neither the historical nor ethnographic approach is sufficient unto itself. Each refers back to the other. But their referral unfolds as a mutual borrowing on the condition of a mutual exclusion. On the one side, we can take up the interrogation of history only by bracketing the indigenous conditions for the production of what, to us, is their “otherness” or culture. This is a one way street. There is no way that by investigating the convergence of histories we can discover their otherness that confronts the West, and indeed motivated colonialism in the first place, nor can we climb toward some self-reflexivity concerning our epistemology of description. On the other side, the exploration of their cultures or otherness has always been on condition of encompassment. And there is nothing about these other cultures or even their response to encompassment that by itself explains the terms of the encounter. What is more, the very circumstance by which the fine-grained ethnography of local culture and community advances must be based on such an encounter whose vacant place is evident in every step of the relativist argument. If we leave the argument as a confrontation between those who favor history and those who favor relativist ethnography, anthropology quickly reaches an impasse. Metaphorically, breaking the impasse entails strategies that allow us to hold the coin of knowledge up to a mirror in such a way that we can see both sides at the same time. So the only way to resolve this impasse is to dissolve it. The referent of ethnography cannot be the internal logics of totalized sovereign cultures, rather our objective must be a comparative ethnography that unfolds historically. Not least a temporal ethnography of the agents and institutions of encompassment in respect to an ethnography of local life-ways. In this way it is possible to restore agency and subjectivities, experience and emotion, without forgetting that all of this is taking place under determinate sociohistorical conditions.

The Maring’s encounter with the West transformed the terrain of meaning. In arguing with the mission over rights in land or what constituted a legitimate marriage in the eyes of the Church, in dealing with the demands of the kiaps about proper sanitation and the treatment of women under the law, in engaging in business negotiations with coffee buyers and also labor recruiters, the Maring could not avoid invoking, endorsing, and submitting to Western forms of discourse and logic. Whether they liked it or not, the Maring were engulfed into these forms of thinking. Especially members of the junior generation were apt to enter into rational argument about marriage and other issues; this rationality was worn as a kind of emblem of modernness and was in sharp contrast to the oldest generation that appeared immune to Western reason and sound argument. Local
attempts at resistance also watered the seeds of seduction because they were unable to avoid internalizing the very terms by which they were being challenged. The assertion of “kastam,” from the constitution of the category to some of the signs and images used to extol it, was, after all, done in modern terms. What the Maring would learn is that there is no way to escape the encompassing process; there are only more or less better ways to survive it. If anthropology has a meaning and mission in this context, it is to help preserve the force of their most elementary words by creating a stage on which we can learn to hear and understand them.

In Melanesia, it is as if the river of language and culture, overreaching its banks, flowed to the present down a thousand tributary channels, each unique, yet each of common water. The effect of modernity is to rejoin these tributaries into the common flow of the capitalist nation-state, to reverse the course of the nature of these cultures. One only hopes the project has some merit.