

Abstract:

In the remote highlands of West Papua (Irian Jaya), women of the Moni tribe have become the primary agents of transformation in their community—adopting new economies and ideologies brought by the Indonesian State and the Catholic Church much more readily than Moni men. Though the actions of Moni women appear to be effective strategies of self-empowerment with respect to their indigenous milieu, they also serve to draw their community into larger orders, engendering hegemonies dangerous to the Moni—and in particular to Moni women.

The following essay suggests that a feminist anthropology with activist aspirations will have to develop new tools of analysis in order to engage and support the women of indigenous communities. Specifically, it must emancipate itself from the preservationalist logic of “indigenism” (Ramos 1998) and from the crudely oppositional categories of discourse (locality/globality) and practice (resistance/domination) upon which indigenism is founded. Instead, feminist anthropology must evaluate its activist engagements through analyses of an indigenous milieu that are sensitive to both the *hybridities* of discourses and to the *contingencies* of practices. Such a commitment to subtle knowledge of the field will not erase the self-doubt of feminist anthropology as it assists indigenous women in authoring the transformation of their communities, but it will unite theory and activism in such a way that self-critique does not become paralysis.

Lawrence says, “life was better then”; Agnes says, “life is better now”:

The lessons of “indigenous” women  
for theory and activism in feminist anthropology

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Among my photos from Sugapa is a peculiar image of Agnes Belau. Her eyes, bright within the broad dark planes of her cheeks, flash with laughter. But surrounding her face is a strange collage of colors and text—a sort of frame—formed by labeled goods stacked on shelves behind her. The baby on her shoulder is crying. I recall the conversation we shared on the day that photo was taken. We discussed the problems of Moni women, the changes she has witnessed in her life, and her hopes for her children. At one point I asked her the question I had posed to the male employees of the mining company: “is life better now, or was life better then?”. She paused, then answered confidently, “life is better now...for me”.

Introduction/Overview: The problem of “indigenous” women for a feminist public anthropology.

Despite appearances to the contrary, so-called “indigenous” women are troubling figures to a feminist public anthropology. They are troubling not because their doubled identity renders them more complex as objects of analysis—though that is true—but rather because their actions point to unsettling conclusions about how to reconcile the logic of feminist anthropology with its activist aspirations.

Of course challenges to feminist analysis have been leveled over the figures of the doubly marginal before (Mohanty 1991, Spivak 1989), and as a result feminist anthropology has come to confront its intersections with other axes of difference. But the dilemmas and lessons of indigenous women diverge from those of their third-world sisters in important ways, and in so far as they do, the discussion that follows is in large part a meditation on the peculiar category which distinguishes them: the indigenous.

The transformation of a modern discourse of primitivity (Barkan and Bush 1995) into an internationally-recognized legal and political identity (Kingsbury 1995) has been a strange process, having peculiar effects upon the communities that now find themselves cast as indigenous. Alcita Ramos (1998) in particular has traced both the discursive underpinnings and the realpolitik that has driven the development of this globally-circulated ethnic politics—which she has named “indigenism”. But for all its complexities, indigenism seems reducible to an ethic and a logic of *preservation*.

Indigenous women, however, are troubling figures to feminist public anthropology because their actions often defy the preservationist logic of indigenism. Not only are indigenous women content to transform their own communities, but do so by drawing upon what seem to be globally-circulated discourses of hegemony. Thus the feminist anthropology that seeks to join indigenous women in their projects of self-empowerment must not only yield its indigenist aspirations of preservation, but may even have to support the reproduction of discourses that make other forms of domination possible—even dominations directly threatening to central tenets of feminism. Feminist theory must account for these kinds of interventions. Indeed, in the case of indigenous women, the unsettling position that stands at the fulcrum between analysis and activism seems particularly insecure.

As we will see, the reconciliation that indigenous women demand of feminist theory and activism is essentially a call for more subtle analysis of the field in which they act. This analysis entails a rearticulation of Manichaeian categories of discourse (globality/locality) and practice (domination/resistance) upon which much feminist and all indigenist analyses are founded. Instead, we find the milieu of indigenous women to be one of discursive *hybridity* (Comaroff 1992, Spyer 1998, Tsing 1993), and we find their most strategic practices to be deeply *contingent*.

It is for this reason that the transformations indigenous women seek to author will almost certainly forfeit as much as they gain. While a feminist public anthropology has no choice but to join this process, only subtle analyses of the field in which indigenous women act can provide a guide for activist engagement. Of course, a commitment to subtle knowledge of the field will not erase the self-doubt of feminist anthropology as it assists indigenous women in authoring the transformation of their communities, but it will unite theory and activism in such a way that self-critique does not become paralysis.

## II. The Moni of Sugapa: an indigenous community with “outside influences”.

In June and July of 1996, I lived and conducted field research in Sugapa, a village in the highlands of West Papua (Irian Jaya), Indonesia. This village, and the network of ridges and sharply cut valleys that surround it, is among the most remote places on the temperate earth. To this day, there are no roads to Sugapa, and all transportation into or out of the area is conducted by aircraft.

Despite its remoteness, Sugapa lies in the heartland of a culturally and linguistically distinct human population. These people, who call themselves “Moni” and number around 25,000, have experienced a history of radical isolation. Indeed, only since the arrival of Catholic missionaries in 1959 can they be said to have had appreciable relations with what the Moni ethnographer Elias Japugau calls “outside influences” (46:unpublished). But while the geographic isolation of the Moni explains the persistence of local practices into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, outside influences—which include the missions, the Indonesian State, the cash economy, and a multinational mining company—were having tremendous effects upon the people of Sugapa at the time of my research.

While my primary task in 1996 was to study the social impact of mineral exploration by the company Freeport Indonesia, I was also interested in other modes of

change in Moni society. Since my studies in feminist theory had taught me that gender relations are often an important index of continuity and transformation in societies, I began to investigate relations between Moni men and Moni women. As it was, the state of gender relations in Suagapa at the time of my research proved more indexical than I could have imagined.

### III. *Indigenism* : the logic of a modern obsession.

“Indigenous” is a peculiar term, and dense with meanings. Its contemporary usage as a category of radical human alterity invokes its primary reference to a site of genesis, but elides the difference between the two meanings to naturalize the relationship between a group of people, their lifestyle, and the territory in which they dwell. Drawing upon the antecedent discourse of “primitivity” (Barkan and Bush 1995), the indigenous ultimately becomes a ridiculous, almost cartoonish figure in the representations of popular media and much academic literature—the final bastion of a crude culturalism.

But these garish representations are crucial to the construction of indigeneity. Through them, indigenous people come to assume their most essential—and essentialized—role, the embodiment of local particularities threatened by so-called “globalizing” forces. And thus, as mascots of locality and human diversity, indigenous people acquire, ironically, a shared transnational identity. This general equivalence of peoples is ultimately sustained through marked forms of practice and material culture—including dress, subsistence strategies, beliefs and rituals (Conklin 1997)—that become fetishized as signs of local particularity. And it is through this fetishization that indigenist politics finds its fundamental form—as a global project of *preservation* (or “salvage” Morris 1994). But what gives this project of preservation its surprising power is its enhancement through political linkages and critical affinities with other marginalized movements that are imagined to be represented in the practices of indigenous peoples—particularly environmentalism (Brosius 1997, Gedicks 1993), but also anti-consumerism, spiritualism, and even feminism (Jacobs 1994).

With this we have begun to identify the peculiar ethnic politics that Alcita Ramos (1998) calls “indigenism”. While this politics can offer a great deal of political and economic leverage to people who have been historically marginalized, what is less obvious is that this leverage also contains risks, and demands sacrifices. To understand these risks and sacrifices it is essential to unpack the logic that drives indigenism.

*Indigenism is an effect of an insecure modernity that is convinced of its totalizing destiny and yet suspect of its origins, its modalities, and thus, its birthright. In the indigenous, modernity finds a powerful obsession, the specter of a vanishing alterity—at once more moral and more authentic—that must be preserved and somehow incorporated.*

The logic of this modern obsession is characterized by a crudely Manichean analytics in which oppositional categories of discourse (“local/global”) and practice (“resistance/domination”) are the tools for investigating and intervening in the lives of indigenous people. Thus, in indigenist formulations, the indigenous milieu is cast as a site of besieged alterity, where local particularities—i.e. authentic traditions—are threatened by the powerful economies and politics of a modern global order. Interventions and

representations of this type tend to enact either the culturalist enframements of a salvage/preservationist project (Morris 1994), or the “romantic” search for—and magnification of—resistant practices by local actors (Abu-Lughod 1991).

But while these kinds of projects imagine themselves in sympathetic affinity with their local subjects, the crude logic upon which they are founded actually prohibits efforts to understand, or to empower those individuals who live in “out-of-the-way” places (Tsing 1994). Invariably, indigenism forces communities into the role of front line troops in battles with powerful orders, and too often it rejects them when they do not conform to the image of the “untouched” and resistant native.

Of course this critique of indigenism does not deny that the radical transformation of isolated communities is a profoundly distressing process, inflicting much suffering upon the transformed. The point instead, is that the crude analytics of indigenism can understand neither the modes by which this process occurs nor the real strategies that indigenous pursue in attempting to control their transformation. Herein lies the responsibility of public anthropology and the possibility of meaningful engagements with indigenous communities.

#### IV. Sugapa in 1996: “Life was better then”.

Among the first initiatives of my research in Sugapa were interviews with the 36 full-time Moni employees of Freeport—all of whom were male. As part of my larger investigation into transformation and continuity, I asked questions about life in Sugapa today and in the past. One such question was, “is life better now, or was life better then?”. Almost unanimously, employees answered that life was better then. This wasn’t surprising. Before the missions, the government, and the company, everything was, they said, “as we wanted”. These outside influences contained new authorities that superseded local orders under the control of Moni men.

As another goal of my research was to identify major tensions in the area, I asked a different question: “what is the biggest problem in the community now?”. And while these responses were not so uniform, a surprising answer kept coming back: bridewealth. Apparently, deforestation caused by the company, and the rapacious practices of the Indonesian military, were considered secondary to problems associated with bridewealth. While one would expect frustration among the men of societies that have this form of kinship exchange (Collier and Rosaldo 1981), it was clear that Moni men were not upset about the standard difficulties of affording a wife.

In the past, I was told, Moni bridewealth consisted of a sum of pigs and shell belts known as *kigi*. This sum was agreed between male relatives of the groom and the bride. In recent years, as imported goods became available and desirable, cash was also expected in bridewealth. Unfortunately, these large sums of Indonesian rupiah (sometimes in excess of US\$1000) were extremely hard to get. Wage-paying jobs were almost non-existent in the area. But problems ran deeper still. Prices, I was told, were increasingly difficult to negotiate, and refusals to pay agreed-upon debts were becoming common. Men in every position were extremely angered by these developments. Why then, the sudden breakdown of the system? This answer too, was unexpected.

In the past the threat of violence always drove the terms of negotiation. But since fighting was outlawed by the Indonesian government, the police and military provided the only recourse for families whose debts were not paid. Not surprisingly, the police and military—made up largely of immigrants from the distant islands of Java and Sumatra—rarely resolved these disputes to the satisfaction of Moni men. I even heard that the military accepted bribes to settle disputes favorably. It was clear that I was witnessing a profound transformation. The “outside influences” of the Indonesian State and the cash economy were catalysts for the disintegration of the bridewealth system.

But to understand why the disintegration of this system was so troubling to Moni men it is imperative to grasp the significance of bridewealth. For this I defer to the Moni ethnographer Elias Japugau. The final chapter of his major work begins as follows:

“The mode of life for the Moni tribe in the area of Dugindoga-Kemandoga is pigs, Kigi, bridewealth, the yield of the forest and the yield of the land. The five objects above constitute the foundation of life for the Moni tribe as long as the Moni people have been on the earth in these two areas.” (44:unpublished)

What Elias calls the “mode of life for Moni people”, is principally the exchange—between men—of women, pigs and kigi. It is a system that links into a single order the reproductions of kinship, status, politics and economic exchange. Further, it is this order which, according to Elias, defines and produces their identity as Moni men (44). Setting aside the problems of casting male practice as the essence of culture (Ortner 1996), the fact remains that the bridewealth system was crucial to the men of the Moni community. Its collapse, due to a particular constellation of outside influences, was proving deeply traumatic.

#### V. *Hybridity* and resistance in feminist theory and activism.

In seeking alternatives to indigenist analysis and its crudely oppositional categories of discourse (locality/globality) and practice (resistance/domination), recent scholarship on ‘out-of-the-way’ places has turned to a model of “hybridity” (Comaroff 1992, Spyer 1998, Tsing 1993). *In a hybridized space the discursive terrain is layered* (Moore 1997), *and unfixed. Here, signs and practices are in simultaneous dialogue with exogenous and indigenous discourses—breaking down the distinction between locality and globality.* While processes of hybridization might be universal, nowhere do they seem so clearly expressed as in indigenous communities. In fact, it may be that radical hybridity—not radical alterity—is the true hallmark of indigenous communities.

But if the terrain in which indigenous women act is powerfully hybridized—which is to say that their actions are in dialogue with multiple discourses—the possibility exists that their practices can simultaneously be strategies of resistance and reproducers of disempowering hegemonies. If so, how can an activist feminism join such projects with any confidence? The effort to reform the indigenist model through a concept of hybridity simplifies neither the descriptive nor the activist aspirations of feminist anthropology. This is a call to develop more subtle analytical tools with which to describe and engage these communities as feminists.

Over the past twenty years feminist anthropologists have made strides towards accommodating the concept of hybridity. In particular, the deconstruction of ‘women’ as a singular conceptual category (Ortner 1996, Mohanty 1991), and the elucidation of systems of “partial hegemony” (Ortner 1996), have set the stage for further reconciliations. But to understand the implications of hybridity for feminist studies of indigenous women it is essential to reevaluate feminism’s commitment to the categories of domination and resistance.

Although many of the most pointed critiques of so-called resistance studies have come from feminist perspectives (Abu-Lughod 1991, Ortner 1994), it seems that feminism—particularly in its activist mode—remains deeply invested in the Manichean logic of resistance and dominance. What is a project of liberation without a clear discourse of oppression and a belief in the possibility of resistance? What are the implications for activism if its engagements also serve undesirable ends? It is clear that indigenous women are troubling figures to a feminist public anthropology, and that the issues they raise be explored.

## VI. Sugapa in 1996: “Life is better now”.

In July 1996, nearly twenty stores selling imported goods stood along the main path between the market and the government offices in Sugapa. All were owned by western Indonesian immigrants, primarily Javanese and Sulawesans. One store however, was decidedly smaller than the others; it stood separately, up the hill and adjacent to the Catholic Church. This store was owned by Agnes Belau, the woman of the photo I described. But Agnes was not only a storeowner; she was a founding member of the “Social Women’s Group”.

The Social Women’s Group was based at the Catholic Church and had about ten regular members. Every Wednesday they convened to develop projects that ranged from Church-sponsored events, to training programs, to investment opportunities such as handicrafts or imported goods that could be sold. While Agnes was the only member that owned a store, the other women sold goods at the semi-weekly market.

Besides the mission planes, the only aircraft servicing Sugapa were operated by the government and the mining company. Since air-cargo space was limited, and western Indonesians had privileged access to these planes, the smaller and less-frequent missionary planes were the only option for Moni people. But of the Moni, it was the Social Women’s Group—through their association with the Church—that had privileged access to these planes. Thus these women were the only Moni with regular access to imported goods.

Certainly the biggest event in Sugapa was the semi-weekly market, held on Tuesdays and Fridays in the center of town. Most individuals within a five-hour walk would gather on these days—often forming a crowd of more than seven hundred. The market was a bustle of enterprise, with a myriad of produce and handicrafts available for purchase with Indonesian rupiah. The few individuals selling imported goods at the market were members of the Social Women’s Group.

Given its centrality in community life, and the specialization of many of its entrepreneurs, I was shocked to learn that the market was barely twenty years old.

Apparently it started when the Indonesian government introduced cash exchange and built the covered space beside the municipal offices. Before then, I was told, families farmed, gathered and created what they needed for themselves alone. The only system of exchange was bridewealth.

But certainly the most peculiar aspect of the market was its apparent domination by women. Men were rarely involved in transactions—and in particular the act of selling seemed to be women's work. It seemed this peculiar phenomenon had its root in local practices predating the market. According to Moni tradition, only women harvest crops and make handicrafts. Now women could take their produce and crafts directly to the market to sell. While men could demand cash earned by their wives, I found that women could usually keep it from their husbands by spending it immediately on other goods. Savings were more difficult for women to protect, and in fact one of the Social Women's Group's most important functions was as an institution of collective savings—a strategy observed elsewhere in New Guinea (Nash 1984). Ultimately, the majority of cash in the region seemed to move between the hands of women. Men were interested in acquiring cash through employment, but due to the scarcity of jobs in remote Sugapa, this was rarely an option.

But the market was not the only new public forum that women seemed to dominate. The other major event of each week in Sugapa was the Catholic Mass held on Sunday. Much like the market, women greatly outnumbered men at Mass—by a ratio usually exceeding 3 to 1. Most notably missing were *sonowi*, Moni men of the highest status—individuals with multiple wives and large numbers of kigi and pig debtors. But most shocking was the performance of the Mass itself. Under the unobtrusive supervision of a Dutch missionary, the unorthodox ceremony of processions, hymns and sermons was conducted almost entirely by a group of women. These women, among them Agnes Belau, were the members of the Social Women's Group. It seemed the church—both as social performance and as instrument for collective action—was theirs.

## VII. *Contingency* and resistance in Sugapa.

While an ethnographic setting yields many of its truths reluctantly, the images of Sugapa's church and market filled with women while men sit on the margins tell a very clear story. An indigenous order in which men had controlled the forms of exchange and the discourses of authority was being transformed, and women were key agents of this transformation. Indeed, if one has any respect for the notion of agency—even an agency deeply shaped by discourse (Bourdieu 1978, Ortner 1996)—then any analysis of Sugapa in 1996 must account for these observations as strategic efforts on the part of Moni women.

However, given the extreme hybridity of a community like Sugapa, one can assume that the church and the cash market have effects other than those of strategic advantage to women. Indeed, without delving into a feminist critique of Catholicism (Daly 1985), it seems likely that the Church could also have disempowering effects for women. In the case of cash exchange the detrimental effects are more obvious. Indeed, what chance do Moni women have of moving from the secondary economy of the market into well-paid positions with the government or the mining company? In 1996, the few

positions that did exist for Moni people were all held by Moni men. To understand the strategic actions of Moni women, we must acknowledge and theorize the ways in which the Church and the cash economy also produce hegemonies disempowering to the Moni community as a whole, and to Moni women in particular. Can these strategies still be called resistance?

Since Foucault's radical reconceptualization of power, much work has sought to flesh out the nature of resistance, a project which Foucault (1978) largely deferred. In particular, Scott (1985) showed the subtlety and significance of everyday forms of resistance, while Abu-Lughod (1991) and Ortner (1994) further enriched the theorization of such practices by emphasizing the contexts in which they are enacted, as well as by exposing the "romance" and poor ethnography that characterizes most so-called resistance studies. Even so, the fact that seemingly resistant acts can also serve forms of domination that are directly subversive to the goals of actors begs one to consider abandoning the category altogether. Most feminist anthropologists have been loath to come to this conclusion and instead seem content, like Ortner (1994), to call resistance "a reasonably useful category" (283). It is clear then, that to salvage the concept of resistance requires analytic tools that can account for the fact that strategic acts often occur in milieus of discursive hybridity.

Herein lies the need for a concept of "contingency". *Practices that resonate at multiple discursive registers are best understood as contingent. Contingency opens both the possibility of a multiplicity of strategic domains and the reality that actors can have only partial control over the meanings and effects of their most strategic acts.* Nowhere is this more true than in the hybridized terrain of indigenous women.

For Moni women, the hybridities of exogenous and indigenous cut both ways. It is both the source of their opportunities (women traditionally control the crops, hence they can now sell them for cash) and the reason that their most strategic transformations—indeed their project of generating hybridities—is at best a contingent resistance.

#### VIII. Conclusion: Indigenous anti-indigenism and the possibilities of assisted transformation. What Moni women demand from a feminist public anthropology.

Ultimately, the demands that indigenous women make of feminist anthropology seem to be the inverse of those made by third world women (Mohanty 1991, Spivak 1989). Indigenous women do not ask feminism to acknowledge, or be superseded by, another axis of difference (e.g. race, class), but instead demand that feminism join them in the transformation of that axis (indigeneity). Indeed, it may be feminism's special responsibility to emancipate the analysis of indigenous people from the logic of indigenism. In turning this project of emancipation into activism however, feminist anthropology will have to participate in troubling processes of transformation. Indigenous women, of course, will pursue their strategies regardless of whether feminist anthropology has the stomach to join them.

Such is the case with the Social Women's Group in Sugapa. These capitalist Christian women are revolutionaries on a number of fronts. They are transforming their own community, and they challenge feminist anthropology to join them. Indeed, their

project might best be called *indigenous anti-indigenism*. But it is a mistake to imagine that these transformations are ever total. Even as Moni women promote exogenous discourses for strategic effect, they also draw upon and strengthen indigenous discourses—such as the female ownership of garden products—to do so. In this sense Moni women are seeking to be the authors of their hybrid milieu—though of course these very hybridities are what render their strategic acts forever contingent.

In the end, joining indigenous women in authoring the transformation of their community is the mode of activist engagement for feminist anthropology. But because the only way to evaluate these interventions is through intimate knowledge of a site, the challenge to feminist public anthropology is clear. In a sense, indigenism's call for attention to particularity must be heeded, but in another way. Instead of seeking to preserve the imagined particularities of an authentic local, it is the dynamic constellations of a hybrid and contingent milieu that feminist anthropology must seek to know and to engage meaningfully.

*Thus Sugapa's Social Women's Group stands as a call for a rigorous ethnography that can understand and critically engage the complex strategies of female actors within their hybridizing community—even as these strategies are understood as powerfully contingent.* Such a commitment to subtle knowledge of the field will not erase the self-doubt of feminist anthropology as it assists indigenous women in authoring the transformation of their communities, but it will unite theory and activism in such a way that self-critique does not become paralysis. And indeed, insofar as hybridity and contingency are not phenomena exclusive to indigenous communities, these lessons should inform the activist aspirations of all feminist anthropologists.

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