JASO 26/2 (1995): 155–162

WYSISWYG: WHAT YOU SEE IS *SOMETIMES* WHAT YOU GET; AND SOME FURTHER THOUGHTS ON THE SKIN, THE BODY AND DECORATION IN MELANESIA

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TAXONOMISTS sometimes classify themselves into 'lumpers' and 'splitters'.[1] This applies particularly to botanists, dealing as they do with the relatively plastic world of plant speciation where arguments can be made both for an inclusive approach, which lumps plants together, and for an inclusive approach that splits them into multiple classes. The nature of the present exercise forces me in the direction of 'lumping', and I identify as common Melanesian themes what in a longer presentation I might wish to split—though I do claim local Melanesian licence in refusing to make a rigorous distinction between the skin, the body or its adornments. Part of the discussion that follows was precipitated by Peter Rivière's (1994) neat formulation that 'What You See in Amazonia Is not Necessarily What You Get'. As he makes clear, in the 'highly transformational' Amazonian world

1. This article is a modified version of a paper given at a colloquium of Amazonianists and Melanesianists held at Manchester University's Satterthwaite Conference Centre in 1994. The format of the colloquium paired Amazonianists and Melanesianists, each pair addressing a topic of common interest. I was paired with Peter Rivière on the topic of the skin, adornment and clothing. Peter Rivière's paper was published earlier in *JASO* (Vol. XXV, no. 3, pp. 255-62) and this paper should be read in conjunction with his. I am grateful for comments both to my fellow participants and also to Lisette Josephides and Marc Schiltz. Jimmy Weiner deserves all our thanks for his energy in organizing the colloquium.

'it is never entirely safe to believe the evidence of your own eyes.... Behaviour is a better guide than appearances' (1994: 261). My discussion, however, will not be confined to this; in particular I shall try to mitigate essentialist tendencies inherent in 'lumping' by paying some attention to the changes associated with modernity.

In his recent book on tattooing in Polynesia, Alfred Gell (1993) has noted that while enough data on the role of skin as a symbolic form has been amassed to make it an enticing research project, anthropological theory in this area 'is still somewhat inchoate' (p. 23). Long ago, Read (1955) drew attention to the salience the skin has as an idiom among the Gahuku Gama of the New Guinea Highlands. He attributed this to a Gahuku outlook that 'does not recognize any sharp distinction between the physical and psychic constituents of man's nature' (pp. 267–8). In what is perhaps the best-known account of the symbolic role of the body and skin in Amazonia, Terry Turner (1977) stresses for the Kayapo of Brazil the extent to which the skin symbolizes the boundary between the biological, presocial aspects of the person and exogenous cultural norms: 'more simply...between the physical individual and his society' (p. 170).

What these and other pieces of literature point to is the possibility of a more general formulation of the symbolic role of the skin and of the ornaments and garments which may clothe it. I suggest that together they constitute a natural symbol, not merely for the continuity between physical and psychic selves noted for the Gahuku, nor just for the difference between biological individual and society observed by Turner but more broadly *for the possibility of difference and continuity themselves*. That is to say, the skin—as something that is at once the inside of an outside and the outside of an inside—potentially embodies both the possibility of difference (which, locally may be between 'biology' and 'culture', or 'individual' and 'society', or psychic and physical selves) and the potential for continuity between apparently disjunct realms. In short, the skin is a natural symbol for both disjunction and continuity. Whether it is used for one or the other and the differences and continuities it expresses, will vary according to culture and circumstance.

I have already referred to Turner's Kayapo work. In a similar analysis Seeger (1975) gives an account of the role of ornaments among another Brazilian people, the Suya. Ear ornaments, he notes, are inserted at an age when Suya adolescents are expected to begin to 'hear', to internalize society's demands. Men's elaborate lip discs, in contrast, are inserted about the time that young men are expected to begin to make a contribution to local political life through speech-making. In both the Kayapo and Suya cases the skin is, in part, being used to symbolize and manipulate the boundary between unbridled individual biology and social requirements. To pursue Rivière's electronic analogy, it would seem that the skin here operates as a 'close-' (as opposed to a 'remote-') control, by means of which 'society' is able to get a grip on individual biology.

In Melanesia, by contrast, much of the emphasis in accounts of adornment has been the other way around. It has been less upon how 'society' shapes 'the

individual' (concepts which have themselves been criticised as ethnocentric) than upon the perceived revelatory capacity of the decorated body in a world in which words, while potent, are also distrusted. In a much-cited article, Marilyn Strathern (1979) analyzes the way in which the condition of the skin of dancers displayed at *moka* prestations is felt to disclose whether they indeed possess the economic resources their performance lays claim to. This is also a tack I have taken myself (O'Hanlon 1989) in analyzing the equally elaborate decorated displays of the neighbouring Wahgi people. Among the Wahgi, however, the emphasis is more on the locally perceived capacity of the decorated skin to authenticate one of the many rival versions of the true state of moral relations prevailing within and between clans. A glossy, glowing, glinting, burnished appearance validates dancers' claims that their exchange debts have been fully honoured, while an ashy, flaky, dry skin testifies to concealed treachery or undisclosed anger within the dancers' ranks.

Do we then have a global contrast between Amazonia, where appearance is deceptive and often conceals further forms, and Melanesia, where the condition of the decorated skin provides the only sure guide in a duplicitous world? By no means.

First of all, as I have also tried to show for the Wahgi, the cultural emphasis that 'seeing is believing' is not necessarily borne out in practice. Wahgi expectations that the quality of a given display will at last produce an unambiguous and impartial verdict of the true state of moral relations within and between competing groups seem rarely to be met. Individuals assessing displays bring different background knowledges to the process. Nor is there any forum for arriving at shared conclusions after a display, and people may remain uncertain of their judgement until they hear it confirmed by others. Any judgements they do make may be tentative and susceptible to reversal in the face of strongly voiced opinions to the contrary. It is in this lacuna that forceful Big Men manoeuvre, asserting self-interested links between what they claim to be the quality of a display and their own activities.

Secondly, Melanesia too is rich in myths of bodily transformation. One of the most detailed analyses of skin-changing myths has been undertaken by Leroy (1985) for the Kewa people, whose mythology he describes as 'a kind of auto-anthropology, a home-grown social science' (p. x). In the archetypal Kewa skin-changing myth, a girl on the way to a dance encounters a notably ill-favoured man with poor and ashy skin whose attempts to assist her across the river she rudely rebuffs. Subsequently, at the dance itself, she finds herself attracted to an especially well-favoured youth, splendidly decorated. During the ensuing episodes, she comes to suspect that the two men, outwardly so different, are in fact one and the same. Slipping away from the next dance, she discovers the poor and ashy skin and burns it in an effort to freeze her lover in his beautiful mode. In parallel myths, the skin changer is the girl rather than the man.

What you see, then, is not necessarily what you get in Melanesia either—behind the leprous-skinned rubbish man a gorgeous dancer lurks. Leroy

goes on to point out, however, that although two skins are in play, the true skin, according to the myths, is the beautiful one. It is the ashy skin which is donned and shed. Furthermore, the skin changer discloses his or her true self on ceremonial occasions and conceals it in domestic life, which says something both about the way the Kewa view these two social spheres (people realize themselves most fully in the public sphere) *and* about the necessity of both roles (ibid.: 181ff).

A final example where what you see is not always what you get in Melanesia occurs in Simon Harrison's appropriately titled volume *The Mask of War* (1993). Harrison argues against the application of a particular tradition of Western political thought—one he traces back to Hobbes—in understanding Melanesian warfare. In the Hobbesian style of analysis, territorial political units are taken as givens; warfare is seen as naturally liable to erupt in the interstices between political units where neither law nor moral norms hold sway. However, this does not apply in the Middle Sepik, where Harrison worked—rather the reverse. In these societies the global scheme of totemic clanship binds all individuals to each other with diffuse ties of sociality. Here the problem is not that such ties falter at political boundaries but that political boundaries are difficult to draw in the first place. Warfare, Harrison argues, is one of the ways groups extract themselves from the entropic ties of sociality which threaten to dissolve them. Engaging in warfare necessitates subordinating one of the components from which the person, locally, is thought to be constituted—the internal 'Understanding' through which individuals recognize mutual claims upon each other by virtue of their common humanity—to its opposite: 'Spirit', the aggrandizing, autonomy-seeking self.

It is here that masking, in the form of warfare decoration, comes in. Harrison remarks upon the frequency with which the charcoal and ornaments worn for warfare are said to anonymize and conceal their wearers in Melanesia. Synthesizing a range of ethnographic evidence, he argues that the anonymizing, concealing qualities claimed for warfare decoration reflect the subordination of the entropic ties of sociality to group ends. Of the claims (made also by Hageners and Wahgi) that charcoal renders its wearers unrecognizable, he notes that 'what seems to be implied here is that it is specifically *groups* that are hostile, while individuals themselves are sociable...it is, in a sense, [the] clan itself that is acting' (ibid.: 114). Citing Asmat data, he notes: 'again, aggression is, as it were, something on the outer surface of the self that can be worn or shed' (ibid.: 119).

Here too, then, what you see is not quite what you get. Concealed beneath the charcoaled warrior who has temporarily suspended his capacity for affect lies a peaceable human being. While the condition of the skin in Melanesia *is* widely regarded as revelatory, what I think these three cases indicate is that there is a situational and political dimension to whether what you see really is what you get. For the Wahgi, what you 'see' may reflect the persuasive verbal talents of a Big Man. For the Kewa, the dull skin of the domestic hearth cloaks the public figure. Behind the Avatip warrior, high on 'Spirit', lies a heart of gold.

In many Melanesian societies the term for skin is the same as that for body, and I now want to look at a further idea that seems to crop up widely in

Melanesia. This is the notion that the body, in Alfred Gell's (1987) graphic phrase, is a 'portfolio' composed of elements or constituents from different social sources. Frequently, the hard or bony parts are felt to derive from agnatic sources, while blood and skin have maternal origins. As Bruce Knauft (1989: 205) shows, however, procreative symbolism does not correlate in any simple way with matrilineal or patrilineal regimes, and in practice local beliefs are quite complex. Thus Clark (1989), for example, describes how the patrilineal Wiru think of men as initiating foetal development and of women as producing out of female substance a succession of physical bodies which in turn receive the impress of male individuality. For the Wiru, male individuality is therefore 'on the "outside" of the body, which is why the skin, dress and decorations are important markers of male identity' (ibid.: 123).

Linked to the 'portfolio' concept of the body is the notion that bodily growth and appropriate development into adulthood depend both on maintaining relations with the agencies whose contributions originally gave rise to the body, and on manipulating the elements from which it is constructed. The Melanesian body, then, is not regarded as 'deep-sealed at the moment of conception' (Knauft 1989: 201) and inhabited by an autonomous owner-occupier (as it is regarded in at least one Western folk view) but as externally influenced and transacted through the course of life. Male growth may be thought to require the injection of energizing semen or the expulsion of weakening maternal blood. At the same time, maternal kin may be regarded as the ultimate owners of the body, requiring payments to buy off their claims during the course of life and compensation in the event of the injury to the body. Correspondingly, the end of life can sometimes be regarded as a process of 'de-conception' (Mosko 1985: 177), with payments—in the form of brides, food or valuables—being returned to the sources from which the deceased individual was originally composed.

Elsewhere (O'Hanlon 1992), I have suggested that the processual dimension to all this may be played out in the manufacture and manipulation of specific body adornments. This is so with the elaborate wigs in which certain Wahgi individuals are adorned at the height of their Pig Festival. In many ways, the Pig Festival is a clan's ideological claim to be the source of its own corporate well-being. It is a denial of what is otherwise acknowledged—that a clan actually depends upon the social matrix of other clans from which wives come and where maternal kin, recognized as the source of individual well-being, are located. In this sense, the Pig Festival performs something of the same role that Harrison ascribes to Avatip warfare, of 'precipitating' a political group from the claims of wider sociality. What is distinctive about Wahgi wigs is that they are made by, or with materials donated by, the maternal kin whose claims are otherwise being repudiated. I have suggested that these wigs, gradually built up as they are to encase most of the upper half of the wearer's body, constitute a second, maternally derived skin—a momentary acknowledgement, at the height of what is otherwise a celebration of autonomous clanship, of alternative sources of well-being. Clan values, however, have the last word during the Festival, for at its close, the wigs are removed and

stored beneath the clan cult house which models exclusively agnatic values in its construction.

If skin and body are thus widely regarded in Melanesia as constituted from the contributions of a surrounding social matrix, then changes to that matrix will have repercussions. The most far-reaching of these changes has, of course, stemmed from colonial contact and post-colonial state formation. I want to end by looking first at some effects of missionization in this regard, and secondly at the potential for the emergence of styles of body decoration as a kind of ethnicity. Both seem to me potentially to have Amazonian parallels.

A provocative if impressionistic analysis of the former is provided by Jeffrey Clark (1989), who relates missionary proselytization in the Wiru area of the Southern Highlands to Wiru men's perception that they are physically shrinking. Clark suggests that this relates to Wiru procreation beliefs, mentioned earlier, according to which the outer surface of the body is thought to receive the impress of male individuality. This male product is compromised both by missionary injunctions that the Wiru should cover their bodies and not adorn themselves in traditional decorations, and by the fact that Wiru men are now dependent upon money from the encompassing state.

Local understandings of the Bible may also contribute to a devaluation of both traditions of body decoration and indigenous worth. For example, Wahgi accounts of the Fall that I recorded have the serpent promising an apparently black Adam and Eve that their skin will become white if they eat the forbidden fruit (see also Kempf 1994 for an account of the effect of colonial domination on local ideas relating to skin colour). Noah is portrayed as having a pleasure-bent brother named Aramek whose existence I have been unable to confirm in the biblical reference books I have consulted. Where Noah is said to have had 'ashy' (*sewol se*) skin and to have busied himself making the Ark, Aramek 'went around performing Pig Festivals, decorating himself in Sicklebill and Princess Stephanie bird-of-paradise plumes, had "good" skin, and attracted numerous girls' (*konggar ere ka tu-mek bolo, nganz ka sem, ambel puli kes sim*). When the waters rose, Noah refused to let his hedonist brother aboard.

In contrast to Wiru, the Wahgi are as likely to present their encounter with the forces of modernity as having had a beneficial effect on bodily size as the reverse. They may say, for example, that since they have shunned sorcery and a variety of other practices (this is hyperbole), men have increased in body size and numbers. This more positive view of the encounter with modernity may correlate with the fact that objectively, Wahgi coffee production has meant that they have not been peripheralized in the way the Wiru have been.

Finally, it is worth raising the issue of what happens when indigenous practices and distinctions of body decoration are recontextualized in the framework of the state and of a wider world in which it is necessary to 'have' a culture in order to be acknowledged as a people. Today in Melanesia, people probably adorn themselves as often for national and provincial government celebrations, international cultural shows, tourist visits and church events as they do for purely

'traditional' occasions. Of course, at one level, decorative styles have long stood for differences between groups. Goldman (1983: 67), for example, records the formulaic sayings which express differences between the Huli and their Duna, Enga and Dugube neighbours substantially in terms of their appearance:

> The Huli with hair bound with rope/decorated with yellow everlasting flowers/with purple everlasting flowers/arrows with decorated shafts/pan-pipes/double-stringed musical bow/jew's harp/with aprons of pigs' tails/with drum....
>
> The Duna with their form of axe/with their aprons made of this species of string/feather worn in the hair/string cap....
>
> The Enga with this dance style/salt/small cowrie shells/spear made from a *Lai* tree....
>
> The Dugube with their tree oil/axe/bow/species of cane/dogs'-teeth necklace/bamboo through their nose/hair style/shouting style/killing stick....

But Huli-ness, expressed through decoration, comes to have a different meaning in the context of Papua New Guinea as a state. Timmer (1993: 121), for example, has recorded the development of an enhanced Huli consciousness of their decorative style and of their confidence in winning the intergroup dancing competitions often held on national and provincial occasions. Barker and Tietjen (1990) give us a further example of the shift in meaning promoted by such encapsulation in their account of the changing significance of Maisin women's tattooing in Oro Province (Papua New Guinea). Overtly, women's tattooing practices have altered remarkably little during the century over which they have been documented. Yet Barker and Tietjen argue that beneath this stability of surface form, the significance of tattooing has been transformed by the wider national context in which it now takes place. Where once the practice marked the transition to Maisin womanhood, it is now an external marker of being 'Maisin', of being members of a group who have recently achieved commercial success in another artistic endeavour, the production of decorated barkcloth.

In this respect it is appropriate to conclude with a comment on my book *Reading the Skin* (1989, on Wahgi adornment) made to me by Andrew Aipe, a Wahgi man. He said that he thought it was an excellent volume, adding, before I could mentally pat myself on the back for this local endorsement, that what was good about it was that it showed which decorative practices were Wahgi ones, so that in future other groups who made money from tourists by copying Wahgi decorative styles and courting practices could be taken to court and made to pay compensation.

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