

# FOOD AND BODILY FABRICATION AN ALIMENTARY APPROACH TO PERSONHOOD IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper exposes the integral role of food within the production of social configurations and the persons who constitute them in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The critical appraisal of current perspectives on food in PNG reveals the necessity of providing a theoretical framework that allows its exchange and consumption to be analysed simultaneously. In order to achieve this, a reconceptualisation of the body as fabricated is undertaken, which in turn, evokes recent attempts to translate 'ontological perspectivism' into Melanesia. Drawing upon this theoretical manoeuvre, an ontologically significant relationship is elucidated between the ingestion of food, bodily transformation, and the production of different 'types' or 'kinds' of person in PNG. The reanalysis of data from existing ethnography reveals how persons throughout this region manipulate both external and internal relations through the exchange and consumption of food in order to activate crucial differentiations between persons. These arguments suggest that food should be elevated as a critical focus in anthropological studies of social processes in PNG, specifically those concerned with the activation of personhood.  
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Keywords: food, ontological perspectivism, bodily transformation, social processes, personhood

## *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

The shallowest foray into the ethnography of Papua New Guinea (henceforth PNG) reveals a longstanding engagement with food as an integral element of social processes throughout the region (Munn 1992; Battaglia 1990; Foster 1990, 1995; Schieffelin 2005). Considered in its entirety, ethnography concerning food in PNG reveals an entanglement of the social and the material within the processes of exchanging and consuming food. Strathern (1988) presents food in Melanesia as mediatory, linking the physical and the social: "there is an intimate equation between the food one eats and one's bodily and social state" (81). Through the reanalysis of data embedded within PNG ethnography, an interrogation of Strathern's exposition comprises the main body of the argument presented in these pages.<sup>2</sup>

The opening section of the argument establishes two general analytical trends within the existing anthropological literature concerning food in PNG. The more predominant of these lends priority to the social domain at the expense of the material by placing food within the ebbs and flows of social relations of exchange. The second analytical line engages

with the physical elements of food consumption and implicates the body at the expense of a focus on social relations. I contend that the bodily effects of food consumption must be elevated alongside an analysis of its properties as an object of exchange. A theoretical framework is thus required that allows these aspects to be considered simultaneously with each being given equal analytical weight. Towards this end, the argument reassesses the intimate relationship between food and the body that exists in PNG. In light of this discussion the body is reconceptualised as fabricated rather than naturally given at birth: food emerges as a crucial transformative instrument within these processes of bodily fabrication. These transformations, given their grounding in the body, are most productively cast as ontological rather than symbolic.

In order to expand the contention that the relationship between food and the body in PNG is ontologically significant, I critically engage with a recent trend in the ethnography of this region (Strathern 1999; Kirsch 2007) that offers a Melanesian version of Viveros De Castro's theory of Amerindian perspectivism (1998a, 1998b). Perspectivism's formulation of the body as a locus of ontological differentiation is underemphasised in the engagement of Melanesian scholars with this theory. Instead, differentiation is rooted in the particular relations that constitute social persons. The argument below rests upon the contention that the prioritisation of relations over bodies, evidenced initially in the ethnography on food in PNG and crystallised in anthropologists' attempts to transpose Amerindian perspectivism into Melanesia, can be corrected by presenting food as a tool of ontological transformation. To achieve this, three cases are discussed. Taken individually, each case comprises a detailed reanalysis of ethnographic data on food derived from particular PNG societies. Cumulatively however, the three cases illuminate the role of food exchange and consumption across an expanding scale of relationality, starting at the locus of individual persons and moving out to the interaction of collectives. The argument establishes food in PNG as a transformative medium that operates to activate fundamental differentiations between the social units that populate PNG sociality, forcing us to take seriously the contention that throughout PNG people can come *to be* through food.

### *Problematising the interface between exchange and consumption*

A vast section of the existing ethnography of food in PNG lends analytical priority to its transmission over and above its consumption. This perspective, in attending to the symbolic potency of food, confines it to a representational domain, obscuring any possibility of its ontological properties. As an example of this type of analysis, Nancy Munn's (1992) exegesis of the phenomenological aspects of Gawan cultural reproduction is the most compelling. Munn (1992) isolates food as a foundational template of value that forms the basis of spatio-temporal expansions of the intersubjective relations that obtain between social actors. For Munn, the tension that exists between consuming and transacting food—between incorporation and separation—lies at the heart of the Gawan “system of value production” (1992: 51). In Munn's analysis, the act of eating one's own food epitomises a contraction of intersubjective spacetime wherein an actor's capacity to enter into productive relations with others is obliterated. In contrast, turning food away from the body through giving initiates “a spatiotemporally extending process” wherein food becomes a source of fame: an

“extrabodily component of the self” (Munn 1992: 50) that travels far beyond the immediate locus of the self constrained by the body.

The instrumental role of transacting food within processes that constitute the self in relation to specific others is evident in other PNG ethnographies. Giving and sharing food actualizes potential relationships, making them, in Schieffelin’s terms, “socially real” (2005: 62–63). Food thus becomes a way in which people in PNG societies work at creating new relationships or making visible the relationships of which they are already composed (Strathern 1988: 180–182). Such processes mark what Foster describes as “the instrumental role of giving food in practically constituting social persons” (1990: 431). Giving food undeniably plays a part in constituting social persons. However a complete focus on giving ensures that the constitution to which Foster refers can only be metaphoric and, as a corollary, ignores how food may actually *constitute* persons in the strict sense of the word.

The presentation of food as an effective vehicle of social relations forces a particular conception of consumption as an act that secures the end of food’s transformative properties. Strathern argues that the consumption of products aligns the donor and consumer into a particular relationship which has ramifications for identity: “the consumer as a container is reduced to a *single* identity by encompassing an object produced by another” (1988: 292; emphasis added). This observation implies an element of finality inherent in consumption when it is subordinated to a paradigm of exchange and recalls Munn’s presentation of eating as an act that entails the end of productive transformations of the self. Eating draws food out of the transformative domain of exchange toward an unproductive and final stasis inside the body. In this context eating has, as it were, “no future” (Munn 1992: 53).

Other ethnographic data suggests that such a prioritisation of feeding and giving relationships misses the fundamental significance of *consuming* food in PNG. Throughout indigenous classifications, food is frequently categorised from the perspective of consumption, ordered according to the effects it has on the human body when eaten (LiPuma 1988: 75). Meigs writes of the Hua of the Eastern Highlands that the human body is seen to encompass an “inner landscape” (1984: 127) that can be modified by the consumption of food. Wagner describes how Daribi men of interior Papua must consume meat to compensate for the loss of seminal fluid that occurs during sexual intercourse (1977: 628); LiPuma describes the same practice among the Maring (1988: 76). Such observations suggest that throughout PNG there exists a homology between different foods and certain bodily substances.

The bodily changes induced by consumption documented by these ethnographers indicate that consumption may not secure the end of a food’s transformative properties. Rather, incorporation could be seen as a further means of transformation. In this regard Battaglia’s (1990) ethnography of the Sabarl Islanders is germane. She describes the relationship between persons and things in Sabarl as a “ranked list of edibles”: the triad of people, food and objects “subsumes the relationships: people:food :: food:objects” (1990: 191). For the Sabarl food appears to carry a distinct meaning that is contingent upon its ‘edibility’ in comparison to objects and persons. Battaglia’s astute analysis locates food as a unique object of exchange because it is ingested. It is therefore not only the movement of food between persons—traced by a focus on giving or feeding relationships—that is important, but also its movement inside persons and as a corollary, a *necessary* focus on eating and the bodily effects of ingestion.

The dual perspective that I am suggesting is offered by food in PNG holds both relations and bodies—to borrow from Strathern—“in view” (1999: 259). This suggests that it may be possible to speak about food and the constitution of persons in a way that takes us beyond the metaphoric sense of the term. So as to mediate such a leap, I will now argue that the body/bodies with which food consumption in PNG is concerned are not those pertaining to the universal domain of biological sameness, but rather those that are fashioned by particular persons in order to access a domain of ontological difference.

### *The fabricated body*

Meigs emphasises that for the Hua, modification of the body through consumption is concerned only with internal physiological differences: transfers of food effect changes in persons’ physical rather than social status (Meigs 1984: 127, see also Meigs 1997). A recent critique of this stance is offered by Valeri (2000) that suggests a different reading of her analysis and provides a springboard for my contention that the relationship between food and the body in PNG is ontologically significant. By recasting the body as the seat of identity, Valeri is able to attend to the ways in which certain bodily processes such as eating are “omnipresent” in social relations (2000: 346) and thus become entangled within the articulation of self. Valeri asserts that the “attributes of bodiliness” that Meigs identifies as so integral to the Hua belief system surrounding pollution—and I would add food—cannot be purely that which relates to physical processes (2000: 103). Rather, as Valeri (2000) argues:

It is the inherent and unique ability of these substances, with their flows in and out of the body, to reflect the contradictory relationships of abandon and resistance, permeability and impermeability, through which the self is constituted in its relationship with others. (104)

For Valeri, Meig’s analysis misses what is actually “at stake” in Hua practices relating to pollution, namely the “integrity of the subject” (2000: 105). This critique should be contextualised by reference to a distinction, fundamental to Valeri’s account of taboo, maintained between the “universal human body implicated by ordinary dangers” and the “embodied identity” that is implicated by taboo-related dangers (2000: 152–153). Where the physical body is the sole concern of the former, the latter involves a conspicuous mixing of the physical and moral.

For the purpose of the present argument, Valeri’s account uncovers two distinct ‘orders’ of bodiliness. In the first, the body remains a fixed canvas of physiological uniformity: in the second, the body is a “constantly (...) transforming” locus of inarticulateness that serves to threaten or reinforce a given subject’s identity (Valeri 2000: 110). This insight can be extended by considering a recent account of the bodily significance of food in PNG. Bashkow describes how for the Orokaiva “the human body is primarily made, not born” (2007: 175). The indigenous concept of *hamo-ari*, described by Bashkow as “body fashioning” (2007: 164), entails the process by which the body comes to assume certain qualities of foods that are habitually eaten. For Bashkow “the concept of *hamo-ari* suggests that (...) *the body and its dispositions* are formed and reinforced by the nature of the specific

food eaten” (2007: 164; emphasis added). What is crucial in this description is that it presupposes a definition of the body that does not merely signify its physiological constitution. Indeed, the internalisation of a quality that is described by the concept of *hamo-ari* is, according to Bashkow, “in many contexts (...) not considered a substantive constituent of the [physical] body, but rather an influence on its dispositions” (2007: 164).

Bashkow’s ethnography has direct ramifications for understanding the significance of the homology which I have argued exists in PNG between food and bodily substance. If this homology pertains only to the physical domain—and this must be true in some cases—then there is little more to say on the matter. However the insights of Valeri (2000), coupled with Bashkow’s (2007) illuminating ethnography of the Orokaiva suggests another possibility: the homology between food and bodily substance can, in some cases, implicate particular dispositional capacities that are grounded within the body but are not simply reducible to its substantive components.

#### *Cosmological perspectivism in Melanesia: the absented body*

In light of the above, one crucial question remains unanswered: how can the processes of food exchange and consumption, brought together within the locus of a fabricated and transforming body, be described as ontological? An answer can be found within a recent trend in PNG ethnography that attempts to transpose the questions of ontological differentiation raised by a theory of cosmological perspectivism into a Melanesian context.

With unyielding clarity, Viveiros De Castro’s (1998a, 1998b) theory of ‘cosmological perspectivism’ shifts its emphasis from questions of epistemology to those of ontology (Holbraad and Willerslev 2007: 329; Strathern 1999, 2005). For Strathern, Viveiros De Castro’s (1998a) formulation works to expose the “primitive ontological base on which (...) much anthropological exegesis rests” (1999: 251). This ontological base comprises a division between the external world that is objectively real and the multiple ways in which this world can be known and internally (read subjectively) represented (Strathern 1999: 251). The questions generated by this ontological paradigm of Euro-American academia pertain to the diversity of epistemologies: knowledge becomes an end in itself (Strathern 1999: 252, 2005: 140). In Amazonian perspectivism however, questions about what one *knows* are subordinated to those concerning “how one is” (Strathern 2000: 140) because a perspective, in the Amazonian sense, is in no way reducible to a representation.

To grasp Viveiros De Castro’s (1998a, 1998b) distinction between a perspective and a representation it must be understood that where the latter is a property of the mind or spirit, the former is contingent upon the type of body you have. Where Western intellectuals may ask “what can the mind do?” in perspectivism, “what can the body do? (...) is always *the* question” (Holbraad and Willerslev 2007: 329; emphasis in original). Integral to this element of perspectivism is a distinct definition of the body that requires it to be seen as a “bundle of affects (...) dispositions and capacities” (Viveiros De Castro 2004: 474). It is the unique potential of these fabricated bodies to undergo transformation, a process defined by Viveiros De Castro as “the redefinition of its (...) capacities” (1998a: 64), that makes them the supreme source of differentiation in Amerindian cosmologies.<sup>3</sup> When redefined

in this manner, the body occupies an intermediate plane between the “formal subjectivity of souls” and the “substantial materiality of all organisms” (Viveiros De Castro 1998b: 478). This conceptualisation of the dispositional body understood as separate from its substantial materiality, invokes a phenomenon which, based on the work of Valeri (2000), I have called different ‘orders’ of bodiliness. In the case of perspectivism, a focus on the dispositional rather than substantive components of the body allows it to become a site of ‘ontic’ differentiation rather than simply a problematic locus of human subjectivity as it remains for Valeri.

Perspectivism’s ability to move anthropological exegesis away from the “safe (...) ground of epistemology” (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007: 16) turns directly upon the location of the body rather than the mind as the origin of alterity. This elevation of the body as the crucial differentiator has been rendered conspicuously absent when scholars have attempted to engage with perspectivism in PNG societies.<sup>4</sup> In Strathern’s (1999, 2005) Melanesian version of perspectivism, an ontological axis of differentiation exists between different “types” or “kinds” of person (Strathern 1999: 253). As we have seen, in the case of Amazonian perspectivism “the body makes a difference” (Viveiros De Castro 1998a: 54): “modified bodies bring new capacities” (Kelly 2005: 112). For Strathern (1988, 1999), capacities lie in the activation of relations through exchange rather than in bodies as such. This is clearly illustrated when she argues “In Melanesian exchange transactions, it is holding the gift that creates the viewpoint” (1999: 254). It appears that wealth items rather than the body are the cause of differentiations between persons.<sup>5</sup> Although differentiations may be “manifest” in the bodies of donors and recipients (Strathern 1999: 255), the exchange relation between them is the source of this differentiation. In such a rendition, the body remains a passive register of difference rather than an active participant as *the* origin of differentiation. This point is made forcefully by Kirsch for the Yonggom of PNG, where he asserts it is not the body but “social relations [that] determine what one sees” (2007: 75).

At such a juncture, Holbraad and Willerslev’s (2007) claim that Viveiros De Castro’s theory of perspectivism lends itself to being ‘stretched’ by ethnographic differences is apposite. In attempting to move anthropology away from the empiricist premise that locates ethnographic data as a ‘testing-ground’ for current theorems, these scholars formulate a more productive comparative scenario wherein ethnographic data is cast as the origin of theoretical transformation. In such a formulation, ethnographic diversity does not present obstacles to theorems but becomes the environment in which they are redrawn with a view to their expansion. If this concept of theoretical ‘stretching’ is to hold, we might be tempted to say at this stage that PNG is simply a stretch too far. Melanesian scholars are adopting its ontological terminology whilst ignoring the very entity upon which such theorisation rests, namely, the body. If a kind of *bodily* perspectivism does exist in PNG, whilst it may be dependent upon the ‘immanent’ quality of social relations for its existence, it cannot be completely reduced to those relations in the absence of attention to particular bodies.

To elaborate, cosmological perspectivism operates within an Amazonian “universe that is 100 percent relational” (Viveiros De Castro 2004: 473). The “immanent” sociality that typifies the Melanesian societies presented by Strathern (1988: 188, 1992a: 74) could also be described as 100 percent relational. In both cases relationships are given. What becomes important is how to differentiate, separate, and particularise (Viveiros De Castro 1998a: 67; Wagner 1977: 624; Strathern 1988: 298, 1992a: 74). Following Strathern’s (1988,

1992a, 1999) exegesis, the operative logic of gift exchange underpins the activation of personhood across Melanesia. As Viveiros De Castro argues, this “exchange model of action supposes that the other of the subject is another subject, not an object; and this (...) is what perspectivism is all about” (1998a: 17). Perspectivism, and Strathern’s model of relational personhood, rest upon what Holbraad and Willerslev describe as an “‘immanentist’ premise”: Strathern’s relational persons, like the beings of Amazonian perspectivism, are constituted *as such* by their “very potential to become something else” (2007: 330). Further, in both theories, transformation, understood as “making manifest an already present state of being” (Strathern 1999: 304 n. 23), rather than creation is paradigmatic.

On the basis of this comparison, I insist that perspectivism can be stretched to PNG, but only if the body is elevated to an analytical position alongside the consideration of social relations. I have argued, following Battaglia (1990), that food in PNG should be understood as an edible object of exchange that travels both between and within persons. In this sense it recasts the body as a direct participant in the flow of social relations. I have also argued that the body should be reconceptualised as encompassing different orders of bodiliness, and that food consumption in PNG is predominantly concerned with the dispositional body. Understood thus, food presents itself as an apt vehicle for introducing a corporeal emphasis that remains problematically absent in “Melanesian perspectivism” (Kirsch 2007: 74) as it currently stands. The discussion below explores how throughout PNG, specific foods ingested in specific contexts, induce particular capacities in the body. By altering the dispositional makeup of the body, food plays an integral role in the transformation of relational entities into differentiated forms of social persons. A series of cases are provided offering cumulating evidence for the transformative effects of food upon persons’ differentiated bodily capacities. The arguments therein suggest that the relationship between food and the body in PNG can be recast as ontologically significant. Firstly, it is necessary to reveal some structuring principles of the analysis.

### *Differentiating relations*

Strathern argues that an ontological axis of differentiation in Melanesia exists between different “types” or “kinds” of person (1999: 253). Again, following Strathern (1988), such persons must be understood as “composite” (Foster 1995: 11), consisting of “relations *per se*” (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007: 19; emphasis in original). Throughout PNG then, neither isolated persons nor a group of individuals that constitute a clan exist independently of relationships: both operate as composite social units and are alike in their relational constitution. The distinction between these particular and collective units finds its source in the specific constellation of relationships of which they are composed. Differentiation thus becomes a consequence rather than the cause of social activity, revealed and temporarily fixed through the manipulation of relations, rather than assumed *a priori*.

Relations can be concentrated within one individual, can occur between sets of persons, and ultimately between groups of persons. These levels have been effectively described by Kelly as “intrapersonal, interpersonal and intergroup” (2005: 109): each manifests a locus of relations at a point on an increasing scale.<sup>6</sup> At each level, the locus of relations corresponds to a singular body: throughout PNG clans, like persons, have skins (Mosko 1985: 195; see

also Strathern 1988: 291). It thus becomes possible to speak not only of an ontological axis of differentiation between distinct ‘types’ of singular persons but also between different ‘types’ of collectives. Each case, both particular and collective, corresponds to a bodily form that is the origin of a unique capacity to act within, and relate to, the surrounding world.

I turn my attention first to the intrapersonal relations that obtain within particular persons, analysing the processes whereby persons gradually become gendered, their sexual capacities being ‘drawn out’ by modifying the body through the intake of food. Next, the discussion shifts to the interpersonal relations that constitute kinship networks. Kinship positions are presented as grounded in distinct bodily conditions established through the transmission and consumption of food. This alimentary perspective reveals how the principles of external relatedness that structure kinship in PNG are contingent upon the intrapersonal relations that obtain within persons, namely the activation of gender differences. The analysis thus heightens the significance of insights from the first section by weaving them into an expanding web of relationships. Finally the discussion moves out to the level of intergroup relations, attending to the ways in which food consumption gives rise to a bodily form that is attributed to a plurality of social persons. Following Foster (1995), the ‘collective individual’ of a ‘matrilineage’ is considered wherein numerous individuals operate as a single bodily entity.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Inducing gendered bodily capacities among the Bush Mekeo*

The Austronesian-speaking (North) Bush Mekeo inhabit the Central Province of mainland Papua New Guinea (Mosko 1985, 1992). Mosko’s (1985) detailed account of Bush Mekeo culture is governed by structuralist logic. Food figures in his analysis as one part of an integrated set of ideas that comprise Bush Mekeo culture as a “synchronic whole” (Mosko 1985: 1; emphasis removed). Mosko illustrates how the relations that govern Mekeo food practices operate through a symbolic logic of bisected duality and thus are homologous to those that order other domains of Bush Mekeo culture. In an entirely different analytical vein, the argument below attends to the transformative properties that the Bush Mekeo attribute to food. The analysis isolates the manipulation of food as a part of Bush Mekeo culture that deserves attention in and of itself.

Embedded in Mosko’s ethnography is a “homology between food categories and categories of sexually differentiated human bloods” (1985: 77). Meat provided by the hunting of game is distinguished from plant food (sweet potato, taro and banana). This opposition corresponds to the distinction between male blood and female blood respectively (Mosko 1985: 77). There are two types of male and female ‘bloods’: procreative bloods (male semen and female womb blood); and contraceptive bloods (male body blood and female body blood). These procreative and contraceptive forms of sexually differentiated blood are homologous to the procreative and contraceptive forms of sexually differentiated food: male meat is either small (procreative) or big (contraceptive); plant food is cooked (procreative) or uncooked (contraceptive). Such indigenous formulations demand a link between the consumption of specific foods and the synthesis of specific forms of blood within the bodies of males and females which in turn influence their capacity for action within different spheres.



Semen and womb blood must be accumulated inside the woman's abdomen in sufficient quantities and combined in order for conception to occur (Mosko 1985: 64; 1992: 702). The diet of a new bride is modified to ensure the transformation of her body into a 'sweet', 'wet', and 'open' procreative state allowing the synthesis of large amounts of womb blood. This refashioning of the body is described by Mosko as "engorging", wherein the bride is force fed huge amounts of boiled plant food by the kinswomen of the groom (1985: 74–75). The bride is not allowed to consume raw plant food due to its contraceptive qualities. Similarly she may eat only minimal quantities of procreative small meat: the consumption of contraceptive big meat is utterly forbidden (Mosko 1985: 76). This strict diet is seen to increase the bride's fertility and occurs alongside frequent acts of sexual intercourse with her husband; these activities comprise a "procreative configuration" that induces within the bride's body the capacity to conceive (Mosko 1985: 79). Prior to conception, during pregnancy and when nursing, the woman's body is necessarily 'open': in this state she is vulnerable to the malignant influences of male ritual sorcery (Mosko 1985: 84). The consumption of plant food plays an integral role in ensuring this 'open' bodily state. Accordingly the groom must also alter his consumption in order to counteract the vulnerable, open body of his bride.

During the regular acts of intercourse prior to conception, the groom eats a balanced diet of both big and small meat, and cooked plant food. This renders his body sweet, wet, and open like that of his bride. Therefore, like the bride, he too is vulnerable to ritual sorcery attack. A huge alteration in the groom's consumption patterns occurs after conception has been affirmed. He then undergoes what Mosko terms "tightening procedures", eating one type of meat and one type of plant food. This food is never boiled but always roasted, roasting, moreover, being an exclusively male culinary practice; he cannot drink water from free flowing sources but must sip the juices of roasted coconut. By strictly controlling his consumption the man effectively closes his body, allowing him to safely perform ritual sorcery. This 'closing' of the body is undertaken throughout his wife's pregnancy; ideally the moment of birth should correspond to the moment when the father's body is completely closed (Mosko 1985: 88). The closed body of the groom enables him to keep vigil over his family who in their wet and open states are vulnerable to sorcery attack. A balance is thus achieved through the coordination of male and female ritual cycles.

Among the Bush Mekeo, specific types of food induce bodily transformations. Altering the capacities of the body in this manner enables the pursuit of specific activities. Fertility in the female and efficacy for sorcery in the male are not fixed attributes but induced, temporarily bounded bodily states, suggesting that the Bush Mekeo utilise food as an instrument for inducing gendered bodily states. This is further illustrated by the fact that prior to marriage a girl's male relatives provide her with large amounts of contraceptive big meat, ensuring she does not conceive outside of wedlock, (Mosko 1985: 76). Upon her marriage this provision stops entirely and the engorging ensues. In a similar vein, the initiation of bachelors involves the removal of young men from their female relatives and the commencement of "tightening in the company of other men" (Mosko 1985: 89). Food is thus not only integral to bodily transformations within marriage, but also to transformations which punctuate the life cycles of both male and female, demarcating the spheres within which the two sexes can operate.<sup>8</sup>

For the Bush Mekeo, the regulation of consumption achieved by increasing the intake of certain types of food and avoiding others has transformative effects upon the bodies of both males and females. Indeed such transformations are necessary in order to activate the boundaries between genders by causing differences between the bodily capacities of the sexes to proliferate. Such differentiation can be cast as ontologically significant. The differences between genders that are activated through the manipulation of food in turn generate, within persons, unique capacities to relate to their surroundings. For those involved, the gendered states point to distinct states of being, inasmuch as the activated spheres of influence dictate how persons can act within and upon the world.

Strathern (1988) assigned gender a paramount place in her symbolic analysis as *the* aesthetic convention through which forms appear. My analysis, concerned more with ontological differentiation than aesthetics, does not prioritise male and female over other forms. Gendered bodies are considered as two among many different ‘types’ of persons that arise from a particular constellation of bodily capacities. With these observations in hand, the argument now moves out from the locus of individual bodies to investigate the role of food as a mediator of interpersonal kinship relations. This alimentary perspective on kinship exposes how the external transformations of relations between persons—the more apparent operating principles of kinship—are in fact contingent upon the more subtle transformations of internal states. Food manifests itself as a crucial mediator that allows these internal and external transformations to occur simultaneously.

*The problem with shared substance: edible exchanges and the activation of kinship among the Kamea of the Gulf Province*

In a compelling critique of contemporary anthropological understandings of relatedness, Bamford (2004) locates an inherent bias shared by both the constructionist and conventional models of kinship. This bias lies in the assumption that kinship is “grounded in shared bodily substance” (289) either transmitted biologically at birth (conventional model) or transmitted socially over time through feeding relationships (constructionist model). As Bamford rightly asserts, kinship does not always depend on “substance-based link[s] between people (...) [and the] lineal transmission of substance is not a primary determinant of kin relationships” (2004: 289–290). Drawing from the work of Bamford (1998, 2004) and Leach (2004), the argument below substitutes metaphors of transmission for ones of containment and revelation in an attempt to show not that people passively grow but rather that they are actively “*grown*” (Leach 2004: 29; emphasis in original). Food and eating play a fundamental role in the ‘growing’ of people in PNG by initiating the bodily differentiations that are necessary for producing particular matrixes of kin relations.

The Kamea are a Highland people of the Angan ethnic group who inhabit the interior of the Gulf Province, PNG (Bamford 1998: 159, 2004: 290). The Kamea describe a sibling set as ‘one-blood’. Crucially however, this concept has very little to do with biological notions of shared substance. One-blood siblings are described as such due to their shared origin in the same container, namely, the womb of their mother. This is a horizontal mode of relating that connects persons of the same generation whilst simultaneously separating them from members of the ascending and descending generations (Bamford 2004: 291).

Sibling sets described as one-blood are undifferentiated into genders. In a similar manner to the case discussed in the preceding section, gender differentiation is activated rather than assumed. This activation is integral to the further differentiations of gendered persons into their respective kinship positions.

Among the Kamea it is expected that the children of cross-cousins marry. Affinity “unfolds over time” through a system of matrilateral payments made between cousins: the prospective groom’s father and the mother of the bride. These payments are given in order to separate the girl from the containment of her mother and create within her that similar capacity to contain: fertility is not paid for through these bridewealth presentations but is created by them. The Kamea hold that a single girl will not become pregnant even if she repeatedly engages in sex; unless bridewealth is paid in her name she *cannot* conceive. Payments actually create the capacity to become pregnant because food—both meat hunted by the kin of the prospective groom, and plant food grown on the land of his kin—form the bulk of the bridewealth released. (Bamford 2004: 296.) The food is given to the mother of the bride who distributes it to her female children. Bamford’s (1998) discussion of this process is worth quoting in full: “By eating brideprice, a girl’s body comes to contain items of male production (...) A girl’s capacity to act as a ‘container’ is gradually *drawn out* through these presentations.” (1998: 167; emphasis added). Regulation of the consumption of bridewealth comestibles activates gender differentiation between one-blood siblings by ‘drawing out’ the containing capacities of young girls prior to marriage. Due to the taboo on ‘smelly game’ in young uninitiated boys (Bamford 1998: 161) the girl’s brothers cannot eat the bridewealth meat and are denied this bodily transformation from contained to container. These fundamental changes in the sibling group are entirely dependent upon the payments of meat from affines. Interestingly, the affinal status of the givers of bridewealth, like the gendered state of siblings, is actually secured through the act of making payments.

As the children of cross-cousins are expected to marry, the giver and receiver of bridewealth are actually cross-cousins before payments. Affinity is therefore a difference constructed to allow appropriate marriage rather than ‘given’ difference that must be bridged by marital relations (see also Wagner 1977). In the Kamea case, gender differentiation of siblings and the changes in kinship relations are mutually entailed within the same process of producing, exchanging, and consuming bridewealth payments. Payments continue after marriage but they are now made with the bride’s newly born child in view. The transmission of food to the maternal kin of the child is necessary for his/her healthy growth: if adequate payments are not made the child will be stunted or may even die. The “childgrowth” payments thus incur an “endless stream of obligations to maternal kin” (Bamford 2004: 297).

It has been illustrated that the very making of bridewealth payments transforms a consanguinal relationship into an affinal one. The transition of bridewealth payments into childgrowth payments extends this differentiation over time and removes the possibility of reversal back to the consanguine state. Insofar as the male cousin is concerned, through his provision of food to his son’s prospective wife and her family, his female cousin becomes the maternal kin of his daughter-in-law. The transmission of food from the male cross cousin transforms his female cousin into an affine and her kinship position changes as a result of his transactional presence. The necessity for repeated childgrowth payments ensure the position does not change back. Accordingly for the female cousin, the receipt of bridewealth and childgrowth payments from her male relative transforms him into the

paternal kin of her son-in-law. These are reciprocal perspectives that are co-dependent. They are also ontological shifts that are affected not only by the *presence* of another relative (Strathern 2005: 149; emphasis added), but also by the provision of specific types of food over time.

Following Bamford (2004, 1998), kinship for the Kamea has nothing to do with the manifestation of physiological similarity and difference based on flows of substance. Rather, it is contingent upon externally contrived spatio-temporal relations based on exchange. For the present argument, this juncture manifests a familiar problem: a complete focus on exchange—one that prioritises relations over substance—effectively writes bodily phenomena out of the equation. In this respect my argument diverges from Bamford’s conceptualisation of “non-embodied” kinship relations (2004: 287). I have emphasised how food taboos and consumption punctuate kin-based exchanges, instigating altered bodily conditions from which new relations proliferate. Such arguments render an emphasis upon “what bodily substances fail to do” (Bamford 2004: 290) insufficient, demanding instead a more specific focus on what *shared* bodily substances fail to do. It is only when particular substances (i.e. game meat) can be isolated in particular bodies and kept separate from others that the necessary bodily transformations occur and kin relations become productive. In order to add depth to this contention I shall now consider principles of relatedness among the Nekgini-speaking people of the Reite Coast, PNG.

*Achieving discrete social identities: toward an alimentary perspective on kinship*

For the Nekgini speaking people of Reite, the importance of the actual birth of a baby from the mother’s womb is subordinated to a second ‘birth’ as he/she emerges from the containment of the “body” of the parent’s house (Leach 2004: 147). The mother’s role as container of the child during pregnancy is encompassed by the container provided by the father—the house. Accordingly a child so produced ‘at one door’ does not bear the imprint of maternal substance at its initial birth. This denial of the maternal role in the physical production of the child is balanced by his/her parents’ dependency upon the mother’s brother to supply social recognition for the child. Due to their encompassment within the container of the house, mother, father and child appear as one entity. The separation of this conglomerate body is entirely dependent upon an other, a role that the mother’s brother is paid to fulfil. These payments structure the life cycle of a growing child (see Leach 2004: 129 for a detailed summary) and in a similar manner to the childgrowth payments discussed in the Kamea case, are necessary for the successful development of the child and its entrance into social life as an independent person. Again, food forms the bulk of these payments and acts of eating punctuate the ritual relationship that develops between the mother’s brother and the child.

Immediately after birth, the parents of the newly born child are subject to strict taboos on food described as heavy, such as long yams and ‘female’ taro (Leach 2004: 132). If eaten, these foods are said to cause sickness in the baby. The parents must carefully monitor their food intake so as to protect the health of their child as if the baby were consubstantial with their bodies. But of course this is exactly what the Nekgini-speaking people imagine for the mother, father, and child triad without the eliciting role of the mother’s brother. It

therefore follows that all these dangerous heavy foods must be first fed to the mother's brother of the child in order to "take away the 'weight'" before the parents and child may eat them again. The parents cannot eat the foods due to their shared containment with the child in the body of the house. In exactly the same manner the uninitiated Kamea boy may not eat smelly game because he is still 'contained' by his mother. They too are seen as a single entity; what he eats influences her health (Bamford 1998: 165). In both cases tabooed food marks off the similarity of bodies, anticipating the intervention of others in order to achieve the necessary differentiation.

In Reite, the initial reliance upon the mother's brother to differentiate the child-parent triad continues. The transmission of food and wealth compels the mother's brother to elicit the form the child takes, ensuring his emergence as a "social presence" (Leach 2004: 145–146). The payments do not substitute for a lost relationship but operate to differentiate the involved parties into new kinship positions, creating socially effective persons. Akin to the Kamea case, wherein cousins are transformed into affines through bridewealth and childgrowth payments, in Reite, the payments "are the relationship between affines" (Leach 2004: 147, emphasis in original). Such payments ensure the affinal status of the relationship by continuing the initial separation from her brother that the woman was forced to undergo at marriage. The birth of the child and the ensuing payments secure the continuation of this separation over time and prevent regression to a consanguinal sibling relationship. The payments "re-embed a woman as a member of a new place" (Leach 2004: 149): wealth flows back in the direction from which the women previously moved at marriage, ensuring that the separation is maintained.

Bamford contends that "it is only through human effort that discrete social identities are achieved" (1998: 165). One element of this human effort is the transaction and consumption of food in order to fabricate new persons and reconfigure relationships between them. Understanding kinship positions as induced bodily forms that alter the ways in which persons relate to particular others adds further support to the ontological significance of food in PNG. Relatedness is conceived in context-dependent relational terms that are infused with quasi-physical notions of the containment and separation of particular bodies. Food from specific sources that is consumed by particular persons activates the bodily differentiations upon which kin ties are constructed. It is only through continued acts of exchange and consumption that such differentiations are maintained over time and the unique perspectives to which they give rise are prevented from collapsing back into one another. As a uniquely 'edible' object of exchange, food mediates the internal and external transformations that are simultaneously required to activate differentiations between kin and align them into productive configurations.<sup>9</sup>

*Transformative feasts: the fabrication of groups into single bodies*

The above analysis has demanded that both gender and kinship positions are not 'given' but rather 'fabricated' through external inputs to the body or through the interaction of bodies in time and space. These processes of fabrication utilise the unique capacity of food to mediate both the internal and external relations that obtain within and between particular persons. Drawing from ethnography of mortuary ritual in the Tanga Islands we will now

consider the role of food exchange and consumption in the transformation of groups of persons into a singular bodily form.<sup>10</sup> Through the ritual transaction and consumption of food, the Tangan Islanders instigate a transcendence of relationality in order to constitute a form of collective identity that is understood as a self-reproducing matrilineage. The manipulation of food within mortuary practices is integral to producing this collective body and the alterations in the fabric of social reality that it instigates.

The work of Robert J. Foster (1990, 1995) on the Tanga Islands—situated north east of mainland PNG in the New Ireland Province—provides possibly one of the most accurate symbolic analyses of mortuary ritual to be found in the ethnography of PNG societies: my coarse summary belies the complexity of his original formulation. However, in light of the argument proposed by this paper, certain elements of the analysis are selected at the expense of others; in doing so I have endeavoured not to misconstrue his argument. Foster describes the indigenous opposition between *en* and *fat* as the “central axis of a conceptual scheme that orientates [Tangan] mortuary rites” (1995: 178). *Fat* is a descriptive term relating to qualities of hardness, fixity and durability; in direct opposition to this, *en*—meaning ‘to eat’—relates to those things typified by their consumability or non-permanence (Foster 1995: 176–177, 1990: 440–441). A further level of meaning is attributed to the *en*—*fat* opposition so that, where *en* epitomizes the act of eating, *fat* epitomizes the act of not eating. Foster argues that the opposition drawn out in mortuary exchanges between eating and not eating is mediated by the activity of giving: *fen*, which is defined “causatively as ‘making [others] eat’” (Foster 1995: 179).

The act of causing others to eat is central to the construction of the collective body of the matrilineage as an autonomous entity. This is exemplified in Foster’s (1995) discussion of what he terms “eat everything” feasts. The performance of the hosts’ durability is achieved through their abstention from eating at these feasts whilst the receivers must eat everything. Foster argues that in making others eat, coupled with the collective abstention from eating, the hosts display themselves as non-eaters and perform their “durability (...) their resistance to consumption” (1995: 192). The guests on the other hand, by succumbing to the enforced eating, collectively perform an act of unrestrained consumption. In Foster’s analysis of the force feeding at these feasts, the guests are also constructed as food themselves. The “metaphorical equations” implicit in the Tangan stories of the trickster Nea disclose a symbolic equivalence between being fed and being cannibalized (Foster 1995: 189). The enactment of certain elements of these stories in the eat everything feasts transposes this symbolism into the context of the mortuary rituals.

Mortuary feasting can be seen to lock lineages into a continual oscillation between the performance of their durability as feast givers (non-eaters) and of their consumability as feast receivers (the eaten) (Foster 1995: 192–193). The reciprocal feasts are punctuated by the exchange of pigs that flow out of the host lineage for shell discs that flow back in return. Foster asserts that pigs only enter exchange with the view to their being eaten: live pigs at the time of Foster’s fieldwork did not enter exchanges (1995: 177). In Foster’s analysis the exchange of pigs for shell valuables is in fact “an act of feeding” that allows the host lineage as the givers of food—the non-eaters as opposed to the eating/eaten—to attach to its collective body the “objective qualities of the shell discs that come into their possession” (Foster 1990: 443–445). Through their participation in collective feeding, the disparate members of the host lineage are transformed into a collective durable body.

The transformative nature of Tengan mortuary ritual is entirely contingent upon the edibility of the pigs that enter the exchanges and the acts of enforced eating to which they give rise. What is encountered in Foster's analysis is a type of feeding that is the opposite of nurture, an "action taken not in the view of relations (...) but in pursuit of autonomy" (1995: 216). The pigs, which embody the productivity of the host lineage, are forced upon the guests in an action of feeding that produces a collective individual that asserts its autonomy over others: its non-reliance upon social relations for its own reproduction. The continuity of the lineage achieved by collective force feeding is explicitly asexual; discrete persons (who in their state outside of the collective body rely upon the interdependence of sexual reproduction) are transformed into a single body that is the agent of its own regeneration (Foster 1990: 437). Such a transformation would be impossible without the mediating processes of force-feeding and group consumption that result in the simultaneous fabrication of the collective bodies of the 'not eaten' and the 'eaten' within feasting activities. The asexual capacity for reproduction that is produced within the collective body of the host matrilineage is activated by its attainment of durability in comparison to the 'consumability' of the collective body of feast receivers.

In the Tengan case, the mortuary feasts provide a ritual arena in which each collective body participates directly in the transformation the other. The "long term cycles" of feasting (Foster 1995: 218) display that such participation is governed by a logic of reciprocity so that one lineage acquiesces to the others' autonomy only with the view that this acquiescence will be reciprocated. Relationality then, is never truly negated but rather eclipsed at moments within an overarching and enduring relationship of feeding and eating between lineages. The temporary existence of the autonomous, self-reproducing collective body in no way undermines its significance as a bodily form that gives rise to a distinct—albeit fleeting—perspective upon the world. For the participants of the ritual, reality is transformed as they depart from the social relations that govern everyday, inter-lineage transactions into the autonomous realm of their matrilineage. The social reproduction of the collective body thus cycles in a reality distinct from mundane spheres.

In Foster's (1995) analysis the transcendence of sociality attained by the collective body of a matrilineage is merely a "mirage". Relationality is thus only periodically denied rather than destroyed.<sup>11</sup> This element of his argument can be turned towards a different end, one that is related to the proposals forwarded in this paper. Discrete persons are transformed into an individual body through processes of force feeding and collective consumption. The collective body of 'the feeder' achieves a transcendence of sexuality that provides a unique, albeit temporary, perspective on relationality in that the latter becomes unnecessary for social reproduction. The respective bodies of the 'not eaten' and 'eaten' in time transform into the other: the positions switch. This is in fact the key to understanding the transformative elements of perspectivism and its links to exchange theory: one is only what one is by virtue of what one is not (Strathern 2005: 159). The idea that transformations are reversible has underpinned the entire argument advanced here about gender and kinship as bodily forms: people actively work at ensuring such reversals do not occur. The ontological changes that persons work at by manipulating food in all the PNG cases discussed so far are not about creating something that is *essentially* new, they are about creatively transforming what is already there into new *configurations*: infertility to fertility; reproduction into sorcery; consanguinity into affinity; dependence into autonomy. The instability of these

configurations becomes a preoccupation for the persons involved; their maintenance, reversal, and transformation comprise the essence of particular social processes.

*Conclusion: food as an ontological tool*

Throughout PNG, food is not merely a conduit for social relations but an instrument of transformation, which by inducing particular kinds of bodies with particular capacities, makes their very entrance into social relations possible. Following Strathern (1999) it has been argued that an axis of ontological differentiation between ‘kinds’ of persons exists in PNG; different bodily forms give rise to different kinds of person. Drawing directly from Viveiros De Castro’s (1998a, 1998b) theory of perspectivism, I have termed this bodily difference *dispositional*, in that it pertains to different capacities with which to act upon the world and to interact with others within it. Foster has described Strathern’s ‘composite persons’ as “nodes in a given matrix of relations” (1995: 9): persons manifest where particular relations intersect. I would argue that differentiated bodies with different capacities to act are also produced by the intersection of relations, by the interaction with others in time and space. Therefore, the kind of person/collective one becomes—a fertile female, an affine, an efficacious sorcerer, an autonomous matrilineage—is contingent not only upon relations, but upon the kind of body one can fabricate by manipulating its capacities through the consumption of food.

Strathern argues that it is the “feeding relationship” that must be analyzed rather than “the food as such” (1988: 251). Contra such statements, I have illustrated how the transformative effects of certain types of food are contingent as much upon the properties of the food itself as upon the specific relationship between the feeder and the fed. Through an appeal to a notion of ontology, I have endeavoured to focus upon what food *does to* persons in PNG rather than what it means, signifies or represents for them. By elucidating a relationship between food and the body, I have attempted to expose how in their dealings with food, people throughout PNG may not be simply operating upon relations within a purely symbolic domain, but are in fact concerned with accessing levels of ontological difference.

The consideration of ethnographic data regarding food in PNG inspired a conception of the body as fabricated, in turn suggesting an insertion of the body as the site of ‘ontic’ differentiation into Strathern’s (1988) relational model of personhood. This theoretical manoeuvre has allowed gender, kinship positions and the collective body of a matrilineage to be understood as *simultaneously* “bodily conditions and social orientations” (Strathern 1999: 253). Further, establishing each as a differentiated bodily form has exposed the ontologically significant processes that tie people together as they work at transforming their bodies to become distinct kinds of persons. Food plays an integral role in these processes because it draws together relationality and corporeality—the body as it is socially and materially constituted—into a single experiential domain. In light of these conclusions, we are forced to take seriously the contention that throughout PNG, persons come *to be* through food.

The lack of reference to historical processes perhaps renders the ‘PNG sociality’ of my account an anthropological edifice rather than an ethnographic fact. In response to such a



claim I offer but one small clarification. My aim throughout has been directed towards interrogating the conceptual tool kit that Melanesian scholars often bring to bear when confronting their data. Food in PNG appeared to demand reconciliation between a notion of the body and a necessary focus on relations; toward this end I—like many others—have employed the now conventional language of ‘relational persons’ (Scott 2007b: 351). I have analysed food as an instrument of bodily transformation across an expanding level of relationality from the locus of individual persons to the interaction of collectives. The structuring principles of the discussion are therefore entirely dependent upon the insights of the ‘Melanesian model of sociality’ (Scott 2007a, 2007b) for their effectiveness. I have purposefully operated within this theoretical framework, utilising food as an ethnographic lens to highlight some of the model’s shortcomings, and perhaps reveal potential solutions. In this manner, I propose that food in PNG holds significant potential for further enquiry and perceive the arguments presented in these pages as a beginning. If it is viewed critically as such, rather than as a false start, I will be satisfied.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Martin Holbraad for his critical engagement with my ideas throughout the writing of this paper. I would also like to thank Susanne Keuchler for her inspiration and support. Anonymous reviewers have been instrumental in shaping and clarifying the article in a number of ways. Finally my thanks are due to the editor—Marie-Louise Karttunen—for her assistance and encouragement.

<sup>2</sup> From the outset, this paper offers an eclectic treatment of anthropological literature related to food in PNG. The continuities so established are not intended to be absolute but rather are contingent upon what Strathern (2004 [1991]) has described as the “level” of comparison (xxi). The entire argument rests upon the efficacy of establishing ethnographic connections that force an interrogation of some of the concepts that populate Melanesian anthropological literature. I shall return to some of the problems inherent in such a project in the conclusion, at this stage I hope it will suffice to emphasise the “partial” nature of my description of food in PNG (Strathern 2004 [1991]: xx) and proceed.

<sup>3</sup> The idea that certain PNG societies also hold a similar understanding of the body is noted by Viveiros De Castro (1998a) in his discussion of the Kanak anecdote made famous by Maurice Leenhardt (1960): “We have always acted in accord with the spirit. What you’ve brought us is the body” (cited in Viveiros De Castro (1998a: 55). I follow Viveiros De Castro’s reading of this comment (1988a: 55 n. 49).

<sup>4</sup> Strathern does begin to engage with bodily differentiation as the source of distinct perspectives held by different social persons in her discussion of “reproductive diversity” (2005: 141). In this part of her argument “Temporality, or stage of growth, introduces crucial distinctions” (ibid). The body is heavily implicated in this line of argument, which unfortunately, remains tantalisingly underdeveloped.

<sup>5</sup> In a later comment that likens “gifts in the hand (...) [to] Amazonian eyes” (Strathern 1999: 254), Strathern appears to contradict her assertion that wealth items are the source of differentiation. If gifts, like eyes in Amazonia, are part of a generalised capacity—the ability to hold a point of view in Viveiros De Castro’s formulation of eyes, or to “extend oneself” in Strathern’s (1999: 304 n. 22) rendition of the gift—they cannot simultaneously be the origin of a distinct viewpoint. The complexity of Strathern’s writing makes it difficult to tell if such an apparent contradiction may in fact be a misunderstanding on my part. However the lack of clarity suggests, at least at this stage, Strathern’s formulation of Melanesian perspectivism is not completely watertight. I hope to undertake a fuller investigation into these questions, but sadly this is beyond the scope of the current paper.

<sup>6</sup> Here I am utilising part of Kelly’s definition of fractal personhood wherein he emphasises the “replication of relations between selves and alters at different scales” (2005: 109). I do so in an attempt to reconcile

the notion of a relational person with perspectivism's insistence upon a single bodily form as the origin of differentiation. Kelly's astute formulation allows relations to be contained by a single body regardless of the scope of the unit under consideration (person/ sets of persons/ groups etc).

<sup>7</sup> The concept of a collective individual rests on the fractal principle that many is the same as one. A "multiplicity of units can always be represented as a single unit in so far as its unity is elicited in turn by other social identities" (Strathern 1992b: 183; see also Kelly 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Male tightening ritual such as that described for the Bush Mekeo is undertaken in many PNG societies. Many such rituals involve sexual avoidance, the strict regulation of consumption and are linked to male sorcery practices and the accumulation of magical power (Eves 1998: 57; see also Leech 2004: 189). In all these cases a negation of consumption masculinises and empowers the body, transforming the men's capacity to perform sorcery, to manipulate and perceive the world around them in new ways.

<sup>9</sup> An example of my concept of alimentary kinship with its critique of 'shared substances' as the productive basis of kinship can be found in Strathern's (2001) rendition of Gow's analysis of kinship amongst the Amazonian Piro: "Thereafter the child will grow into a series of relationships through the food it is given by its kin, and it is the feeding that subsequently defines kinship, rather than any wider notions of 'shared substance'" (Strathern 2001: 235, following Gow 1991: 263). This illustrates perfectly the importance of food as a crucial mediator in the production of kinship positions.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly (2005) in an article on fractality and exchange argues this point cogently: "A person can refer to many individuals united by the sharing of a common position opposed to another similar group (...) Wari' consubstantials think of themselves as one body even though there are several participating of this unity" (114).

<sup>11</sup> Scott has offered a compelling critique of this element of Foster's (1995) thesis. His argument is worth quoting in full: "The problem is not that Foster interprets Tangan rituals as the sites of symbolic inversions of what Tangans regard as the conditions of normal human sociality. The problem lies rather in the way Foster appears to allow the Melanesian model of sociality to trump Tangan representations" (Scott 2007: 29). The evidence from Foster's work suggests that Tangans do in fact see the autonomous matrilineage as "natural", by arguing such identities are only produced through ritual denies this element of what the Tangans themselves see as most fundamentally real about their sociality. The relational model is given priority over indigenous understandings. On the whole I agree with Scott's argument, I use Foster's argument regardless to make some tentative conclusions concerning the nature ontological transformation in general rather than the specificity of Tangan ontology as such.

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