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LOST TRIBES: INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY

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How should one make sense of contemporary sightings of "lost tribes" in the marginal spaces of the world system? The European myth model (Obeyesekere 1992) of the "lost tribe" is drawn from accounts of the ten lost tribes of ancient Israel. It was invoked by colonial powers and missionaries in their efforts to remake the histories of indigenous peoples, and is the basis for continuing efforts to locate descendants of the missing ten tribes. When applied to remote and relatively isolated indigenous populations, however, the European myth model of the lost tribe obscures differences in their histories and ignores their agency in current social interactions. In the Amazon lost tribes are the product of centuries of retreat and resistance against colonizers and nation states. In Melanesia disenfranchised groups contribute to the process through which they are designated "lost tribes" in order to increase their access to resources. These intercultural encounters mark the expansion of the world system into the final corners of the Earth. [lost tribe, indigenous people, myth model, Melanesia, Amazonia]

The Politics and Poetics of Being Lost

How should one make sense of contemporary sightings of "lost tribes" in the marginal spaces of the world system? In this article I argue that lost tribes do not exist until they are invented. The concept of the lost tribe is an example of what Gananath Obeyesekere called a "European myth model," described as "an important or paradigmatic myth [which] may serve as a model for other kinds of myth construction" (1992: 10). A myth model is also "an underlying set of ideas (a myth structure or cluster of mythemes) employed in a variety of narrative forms" (p. 10). Obeyesekere argues that when political and economic conditions favor a particular myth model, it is likely to appear in a variety of contexts and forms.

A structure of the "long run," the myth model of the lost tribe began with the ten "lost tribes" of ancient Israel, persisted for several thousand years, and is still influential today. The model has been invoked by colonial powers and missionaries in their attempts to remake the histories of indigenous peoples and in contemporary accounts of rediscovered Jewish lost tribes. In this essay I begin with a discussion of the origins of the myth model, and consider several ways in which it has been employed. In the second half of the essay I focus on the invention of lost tribes among indigenous peoples today.

My intention is to demonstrate how the application of the myth model of the lost tribe to contemporary indigenous populations is misleading. It conceals the contribution of historical processes to

contemporary circumstances and ignores the agency of the people identified as members of lost tribes, particularly their influence on social relations with members of other societies. "Lost tribes" are treated as if they exist independently of historical time (Fabian 1983), whereas they are created through interaction between societies. The paradox of the myth model is that lost tribes cannot be understood in isolation.

The myth model of the lost tribe acts as a counterweight to the integration of remote and marginal populations into wider political and economic systems. The continued expansion of the world system is marked by encounters with relatively isolated communities that are identified as lost tribes. The ability of the model to obscure the fundamental relationship between world system dynamics and the invention of these lost tribes illustrates what Obeyesekere calls the "mythic power" of such ideas (1992: 11).

The popular appeal of lost tribes has several dimensions. Indigenous peoples occupy what Trouillot (1991) has called the "savage slot" in Western conceptual thought. As pristine versions of the indigenous, lost tribes are seen in opposition to modernity, providing a potential antidote to its discontents. They evoke nostalgia for a simpler past, suggesting the redemptive possibility that we could learn from them forgotten but fundamental truths. A 1991 *Time* magazine cover story entitled "Lost Tribes, Lost Knowledge" used the concept of the lost tribe to refer generically to all indigenous peoples, arguing for their protection because of the valuable environmen-

tal knowledge that they possess (Linden 1991). In a letter to the editor regarding this story, one reader argued for a broader accounting of the value of indigenous people: "Lost tribes mean not only knowledge of language, medicine, plants, and other matters of interest to scientists, but also knowledge of our deeper selves..." (Keely 1991: 4).

Tales of lost tribes allow people to imagine places in the world where western society and technology have not yet had an impact, therefore absolving them of political responsibility for their fate (see Lutz and Collins 1993: 214-215). By invoking the European myth model of the lost tribe to describe indigenous peoples, power and history are displaced from the encounters through which such groups attract attention.

The Original "Lost Tribes" of Ancient Israel

The origin of the European myth model of lost tribes lies in the history of ancient Israel. In the eighth century BC the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and sent its ten tribes into exile. These tribes were resettled elsewhere within the Assyrian empire, where they either assimilated or disappeared from view (Hoppe 1992: 565). The two tribes of the Southern Kingdom, Judah and Benjamin, were exiled to Mesopotamia two centuries later following a defeat by the Babylonians. Eventually restored to their land by the Persians, the tribes of Judah and Benjamin are popularly considered to be the ancestors of the contemporary Jewish community (Carroll 1992: 569).

The ten lost tribes are of particular significance to Jewish populations living in the diaspora outside of Israel. There are no scriptural references to the ten lost tribes, only didactic teachings about them. They are said to live in exile beyond the mythical river Sambatyon. An extra-Biblical double-bind explains why they have been unable to return: the waters of the Sambatyon churn furiously six days a week, preventing the lost tribes from crossing back into Israel. On the seventh day the river grows quiet, but they are forbidden from venturing abroad on the Sabbath (Kaye 1991). Rabbinical scholars have debated the fate of the ten tribes: Rabbi Akiba claimed that the lost tribes would never return, while Rabbi Eliezer disagreed, predicting that "they shall move from darkness to light" (Charlesworth 1992: 372). The ten lost tribes of ancient Israel have become a metaphor for the fate of the Jewish diaspora.

Historical events, mythical reality, or Biblical

allegory? The twelve tribes of ancient Israel and the ten lost tribes correspond to the nationalist histories presented in the Bible from Genesis to II Kings. These texts were composed in the aftermath of defeat and exile at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians, leading scholars to question whether the descriptions of tribal organization were more ideological than historical (Lemche 1992: 527-528). The myth of the ten lost tribes was forged during a major political crisis, when exiled populations returned to reclaim their membership in the reconstituted state.

The trope of the ten lost tribes invokes longing for a simpler past, before the Jewish people were forcibly incorporated into a series of expansionist empires. It connotes lost identities and the experience of social isolation. The promise of lost tribes on the horizon between myth and history implies the possibility of recovering that which has been lost. These basic themes are present in contemporary discourse about lost tribes even when they have no connection to Israel or the ancient world.

Colonialism, Conversion, and Lost Tribes

The myth of Biblical lost tribes figured significantly in early cross-cultural encounters between indigenous people and European explorers, colonists, and missionaries (Eilberg-Schwartz 1990: 31-48). Like the mapping of European place names onto foreign landscapes, the identification of indigenous people as lost tribes of ancient Israel involved the attempt to remake their past according to the European myth model. This task was supported by academic efforts to trace people and inventions back to a single Middle Eastern cradle of civilization, a practice legitimized by theories of cultural diffusion. Linking the inhabitants of distant lands to the Old Testament also provided support for Biblical accounts of monogenesis (Burt 1983: 339). These endeavors systematically ignored the histories and cultural achievements of non-Western societies (p. 334). For many Christian missionaries, the identification of indigenous peoples as lost tribes of ancient Israel also provided a convenient starting point for conversion.

Mormon exegetical traditions, for example, treat the autochthonous populations of the Americas and the Pacific as descendants of ancient Israel, although not as members of the ten missing tribes. According to the Book of Mormon, the New World was populated by Semites who migrated from the Middle East to Mesoamerica (Gordon 1988: 84). They were later

converted to Christianity by Jesus Christ, who visited North America during the three days between his crucifixion and resurrection (p. 94). This population subsequently split into warring factions, known as the Nephites and the Lamanites. The Nephites reverted to savagery and defeated the Lamanites in battle, causing God to curse the victors with dark skin (p. 84). The putative link between ancient Israel and North America is used to support claims of common origin, although not necessarily equality. The text also describes how a group from the Americas was "lost to the isles of the sea," setting the stage for the conversion of Polynesians by Mormon missionaries who "operated with a notion that was widely prevalent at the time: that Polynesians seemed to resemble Israelites in their appearance and customs" (p. 127).

European colonizers of New Zealand similarly sought to emphasize the similarities between the Maori and the lost tribes of ancient Israel. Their assimilationist agenda led early scholars to exaggerate the significance of the monotheistic Io cult, and to synthesize independent myths about Maori immigration from eastern Polynesia into a diffusionist account of a single great fleet that settled the island several centuries earlier (Hanson 1989).

Today's Biblical Lost Tribes

The search for the lost tribes of ancient Israel is far from over. Lost tribes and the Marranos, descendants of Sephardic Jews who converted to Christianity during the Inquisition and migrated away from the Iberian Peninsula, are believed to be dispersed throughout Africa, the Mediterranean, the Caucasus Mountains, the Indian subcontinent, and South America (Brown 1995: 1). A number of large ethnic groups, including the Pathans of Pakistan, the Kashmiris of India, and the Ibo of Nigeria, have been identified as possible lost tribes of ancient Israel (Kaye 1991). Other groups from Tibet, Zimbabwe, and eastern India have made similar claims on their own behalf (Kaye 1991). In the Caucasus Mountains a group of people who survived decades of Soviet anti-Semitism by posing as members of a local Muslim tribe, renewed their claim to be one of the lost tribes of ancient Israel after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Hiatt 1994: A25).

What makes the "lost tribe" designation desirable? Where politics is dominated by ethnic competition, historical connection to ancient Israel may set a group apart. For converts to Christianity, identifica-

tion with the lost tribes of ancient Israel may be a means of turning the power of their adopted religion "against its original proponents as part of the wider anti-colonial struggle" (Burt 1983: 345). For peoples who have long followed Jewish tradition, but have not been officially recognized as members of the religion, status as a lost tribe may be their only means of authenticating their claims about the past.

Identification as a lost tribe may also provide access to a new life in Israel, as the airlift of forty thousand Ethiopian Jews in the 1980s demonstrated. With as many as thirty million claimants of descent from Biblical lost tribes, however, the modern state of Israel has become increasingly vigilant about monitoring requests for legal recognition. In 1994 the Israeli Supreme Court refused to hear a petition made on behalf of the two million Ibo of Nigeria, some of whom claimed to be members of the lost tribe of Ephraim (Agence France Presse 1994). Israel may deny visas to claimants of lost tribe status, but a millenarian resolution to their predicament is offered in the myth that all of the descendants of the ten lost tribes of ancient Israel will be united by the Messiah (Broadway 1994: C7). A corollary to the myth suggests that the identification of the ten lost tribes will hasten his advent (p. C7).

Lost Tribes on the Margins of the World System

Even though the "lost tribes" found on the margins of the world system have no connection to ancient Israel, the European myth model continues to influence how they are perceived. The Tasaday are the most celebrated example of a contemporary indigenous lost tribe. In 1971 a band of cave-dwelling foragers was found in a remote part of Mindanao Island in the Philippines (Nance 1975). They rapidly became media celebrities. Their non-violence was a powerful symbol of peace during the Vietnam War, their ignorance of plant and animal domestication was a sign to environmentalists of the primordial closeness of humans to nature, and their simple technology was an affirmation of popular ideas about cultural evolution (Sponsel 1992). Fifteen years after their discovery, however, the whole affair was alleged to have been a hoax perpetrated by politicians seeking control over the natural resources of the region. The current anthropological consensus regarding the Tasaday is that they were a group that separated from their neighbors and lived in relative poverty and isolation until several Filipino politicians sought to take advantage of the situation

(Headland 1992). Raul Pertierra has described the Tasaday as "not noble but merely struggling savages" (1996: 75).

Commenting on the Tasaday controversy, Michael Goldsmith has argued that representing the events as a hoax perpetrated against anthropology ignores the participation of the Tasaday themselves, who took an "active role in fooling the outside world" (1993: 4). Under such circumstances it may be difficult to evaluate claims made about lost tribes, as scholars reviewing the Tasaday material attest (Headland 1992).¹ The subjects themselves may be reluctant to relinquish their new status: in 1988 several Tasaday filed a lawsuit against two Filipino anthropologists who questioned their authenticity (*The Sunday Telegraph* 1988: 2; Lee 1992: 169). The Tasaday response to charges of fraud underscores the stakes involved in such cases, which often include political control over territory and resources (Bodley 1992: 199; Lee 1992: 170).

Writing about the public response to the Tasaday, Jean-Paul Dumont (1988) has suggested that their mass-mediated fame was independent of their standing as *poseurs* or primitives. The broad appeal of the Tasaday was based on the symbolic system in which stories about them were embedded, as well as the political-economic forces that shaped the events and their interpretation (p. 263). Reflecting on the process by which the Tasaday became recognized as a lost tribe and the subsequent debates about their identity, Dumont argued that "anthropology does not 'discover' any truth, but invents—or constructs—a reality" (p. 272). His radical relativism may have been prompted by the fact that the authenticity of the Tasaday, like that of other groups identified as lost tribes, cannot be readily validated or disproved by scientific evidence, because their standing as a lost tribe is derived from the European myth model.

The irony of the Tasaday case is that their fame brought credibility to the myth model in return. Far from being an isolated and anomalous case, and irrespective of questions about their authenticity, the Tasaday have become the archetype of the contemporary lost tribe. The resulting template for lost tribes is remarkably uniform regardless of where they are found: they speak an unknown language, wear little or no clothing, and are ignorant of the outside world, which has very little impact on their lives. Their technology is simple, often limited to the tools necessary for hunting and gathering, and they face few of problems affecting the members of

complex societies today. The only significant variable is whether they are "peaceful and gentle" or "fierce and warlike," although this characterization is related directly to the historical circumstances through which they became a lost tribe.

For example, oil explorers reported finding a lost tribe in western China's Xinjiang region in 1990 (*The Independent* 1990: 9).² Two hundred members of the Uygur tribe live in a forty-square mile oasis in the Taklimakan desert, subsisting on game and wild plants. Initial accounts suggested that they had "no idea of the existence of the outside world" (p. 9). Their ancestors were said to have settled there 350 years before. They were described as having no "governmental organizations, no schools, no markets, no military units, no written languages and no taxes to pay" (p. 9). In 1995 an international television crew secured the rights to make a film about the lost tribe of China's Taklimakan desert (Lim 1995). The filmmakers described the Uygur as "a gentle culture living a primitive life in extreme isolation in a microcosm of peace" (p. 9). Their name is reported to mean "those who go in, never come out," but their language has not been identified. Although they are said to have an "integrity of a spiritual kind that is quite unknown in Western society," they are also believed to be Muslim (p. 9).

Although stories about lost tribes are strikingly similar in structure and content, radically different historical processes underlie their creation. In the remainder of this essay I focus on two different ways in which lost tribes are produced. In the Amazonian case lost tribes actively avoid contact with other societies. In Melanesia the pattern is reversed, with remote groups intensifying their contact with their neighbors and the state in order to increase their access to resources. Comparison of these two historical profiles reveals the flaws of the myth model, which obscures differences in colonial histories as well as contemporary power relations.

The Meaning of Isolation in the Amazon

In 1995 the Brazilian National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) announced the discovery of a lost tribe in Rondônia (D'Oliveira 1995; for a similar account, see McIntyre 1988). The five adults and two children were located with the help of a group of Canoé Indians, who were contacted by FUNAI anthropologist Marcelo Santos a month earlier. According to a press release, the new group speaks an "unknown language" and wears "no clothes" apart from penis

sheaths and bracelets. In contrast, the neighboring Canoé are described as wearing straw shorts and skirts, with necklaces made from plastic discarded by gold miners. Vincent Carreli, the filmmaker accompanying the expedition, claimed that it is "practically a miracle that the two groups have survived so close to one another with their different lifestyles and languages" (D'Oliveira 1995: n.p.). The discovery came amidst violent clashes between peasants and landowners over property rights; the landowner response was to claim that the members of the lost tribe were not really Indians, or to allege that FUNAI brought them to the area in order to gain control over the land. A judge set up a reserve of three square kilometers for the group (n.p.).

Remnant groups like the one found in Rondônia by FUNAI anthropologists in 1995 are referred to as "isolated Indians" by the Brazilian government. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1992: 56-57) described how several people became separated from a larger group, which accepted contact, and was discovered only decades later:

In September 1987, the Kayapó-Xikrin of the village of Cateté ... attacked a small group of unknown Indians, killing a man and a boy and capturing two women and another boy.... An elderly man remained hidden in the forest ... [and was eventually contacted as well]. They were the survivors of ... [a] group ... which had split off thirty years ago.... During a Kayapó attack ... [the man, whose name was Iwarawi,] escaped into the forest with an adolescent girl (his sister, MZD) and two little boys (his nephews, ZS). They were given up as dead or captured. In fact, they had gotten lost from the rest of the group, which had gone in the opposite direction.... Iwarawi and his sister had two daughters, who married the two boys, and all lived together for thirty years as a miniature Araweté society. A hard life, always on the run from enemies....

The story of Iwarawi is not uncommon.... How many other small bands of fugitives still wander in the forest of the Xingu-Tocantins, *lost survivors* of so many once numerous peoples? (Viveiros de Castro 1992: 56-57; emphasis added).

In the Amazon lost tribes cannot be separated from the process by which they are created. Ailton Krenak, one of the leading Indian spokespersons of Brazil, describes how lost tribes are often discovered by Brazilian road crews working in remote areas:

As they penetrated more deeply into Amazônia, any time they cut a road Indians would leap out of the way. Thousands of Indians would be running out of the way of bulldozers. People didn't realize that the area was full of Indians.

So when someone managed to contact a tribe that had never been heard of before, this was heralded with much applause ... and those Indians were viewed [by the Brazil-

ian public] as residue of some stone-age past, whether this bore any relation to cultural reality or not.... So what one saw was the savage and the exotic (Hecht and Cockburn 1989: 212).

Amazonian communities have been subject to centuries of pressure, direct and indirect, from encroaching settlement. Maybury-Lewis (1992: 6), for example, described how the Xavante migrated to central Brazil in the nineteenth century to avoid contact with settlers. "Lost tribes" are found with regularity in areas which serve as *de facto* zones of refuge for displaced groups; these regions have greater cultural and linguistic diversity than anywhere else in South America. The upper Xingu basin is one well-known example; the low mountains of Rondônia between western Brazil and eastern Bolivia is another (Conklin, 1995 personal communication). In contrast to lost tribes found elsewhere, which are usually described as gentle and peaceful, the people living in these refuge zones are often hostile towards outsiders. They have been known to carry out raids against loggers, miners, and settlers who threaten to encroach on their territory. For example, when the Parururu of Northern Brazil, a lost tribe contacted by FUNAI in 1994, performed a skit for Carreli's cameras, they chose to depict how they would attack and kill any gold miners who ventured onto their land.³

The lost tribes of the Amazon are the product of centuries of colonial relations. Their discovery is made possible by virtue of their long history of retreat and resistance; their isolation is a social creation rather than a natural condition.⁴

The "Misplaced Tribes" of Melanesia

Media reports of lost tribes are regular fare in Melanesia (see Filer 1994).⁵ I discuss two relatively celebrated cases of lost tribes in Papua New Guinea—the Hagahai and the Liawep. The Hagahai are a highlands fringe group who live in a remote and rugged portion of Madang Province.⁶ In 1983, after being visited by a team of patrolling missionaries, several representatives of the Hagahai walked into the town of Mount Hagen in search of medical care (Boyd 1996). According to an early media account, "Papua New Guinea's latest tribe of people ... [have] never seen a dog, didn't engage in tribal warfare, place their dead on stilts [exposure platforms] and sometimes ate the deceased in exchange ceremonies" (Koroma 1985: 65).

Jo Mangi, a Papua New Guinean member of a

team of anthropologists who visited the Hagahai shortly after their trek to Mount Hagen, approached claims about their isolated history with skepticism, asking, "Were they really the 'lost tribe' of the Schrader Mountains?" (Mangi 1985: 52). His answer was that "these people were not a 'lost tribe,' but a group which has kept very much to themselves for reasons other than ignorance of the world around them" (p. 60). Carol Jenkins, a medical anthropologist who has worked with the Hagahai since 1983, concurred: "Even the remotest people [in Papua New Guinea] have a notion of what the outside [world] is like. They know that there is medicine, cash that buys things in stores, and a government that is a power to be reckoned with" (quoted in Fishlock 1993: 20). David Boyd, an anthropologist who later worked with the Hagahai, reached conclusions similar to those of Mangi: "What is apparent is that the Hagahai, protected by physical and social barriers, remained relatively uninfluenced by outside forces until the 1980s" (1996: n.p.).

Despite their relative isolation the Hagahai did interact with the other societies in the region. At least one man had worked on a nearby cattle station, several women had married outsiders, and the Hagahai had regular contact with their closest neighbors, the Pinai (Mangi 1985; Boyd 1996). Based on comparable accounts from elsewhere in Papua New Guinea, the other people in the region probably viewed the Hagahai as a hillbilly tribe, rather than a lost tribe (Joel Robbins, 1995 personal communication).

Mangi (1985) suggests that the "lost tribe" label was initially attributed to the Hagahai by the missionaries who visited them, and was later amplified by local news media.⁷ He explains that the Hagahai were indeed "lost" as far as the missionaries were concerned, for they regard all people who do not belong to a conventional Christian Church as being lost. Mangi concludes that this is more properly a case of lost sheep, rather than lost tribes (p. 57).

When the Hagahai came to Mount Hagen, they were interested in trade goods in addition to medical treatment. Mangi reports that they had "no means of securing any of the goods that other groups can acquire with cash" (1985: 59). They had steel knives and axes, but other manufactured goods were scarce. Mangi quotes a man named Kom saying, "Before the mission came, we thought that we were the only people that existed.... Now we come to Mount Hagen and we see all the things that people have here,

and we know we have nothing" (p. 59).

Kom emphasizes the relative poverty of the Hagahai by claiming to be ignorant of the other people living in the region. Jenkins reported a similar phenomenon:

The Hagahai said "We didn't know there were outside people." They literally said that to me and we couldn't believe what they were saying. When we questioned [them], they'd say, oh, they saw smoke from fires over the hills and it was literally untrue [that they knew nothing about their neighbors]. They were simply lying. They had been marrying their neighboring groups off and on for quite a while, but it is an attempt to get attention, it is an attempt to get the government to pay some attention to them, and people like patrol officers or others, missionaries, jump to this and create a ... media frenzy... (Jenkins quoted in Hansen 1993: n.p.).

The media and the missionaries were not alone in promoting the image of the Hagahai as a lost tribe. The Hagahai themselves purposefully contributed to the process.

Cut off from markets and consumer goods, and in need of medical care, their new-found status as a lost tribe helped the Hagahai to overcome these problems. This path towards the creation of a lost tribe is considerably different from that taken in the Amazon, where groups identified as lost tribes actively avoid contact with other societies.

Another Papua New Guinea example of a lost tribe is the Liawep case. Seventy-nine Liawep live in a small settlement, high in a remote part of the Star Mountains in western Papua New Guinea (Martin 1993a: 15). In 1993 a government patrol visited the area after "one of the tribesmen got lost and stumbled into Oksapmin [a government station]" two years earlier (Agence France Presse 1993: n.p.). The Liawep were said to speak an "unknown language" and were naked apart from a few "leaves and twigs" (n.p.). Apparently they were fascinated by steel axes and knives, which they had purportedly never seen before. Nor had they ever tasted tea, salt, or sugar.

"Missionaries," the reporter Fishlock wrote, "sensing that there were sick to be cured and souls to be saved, ... set off with Bibles and antibiotics to reach [the Liawep]" (1993: 2). Headlines in the *Daily Telegraph* read: "Christians in race to win 'lost' tribe's soul" (Martin 1993b: 13). "Up until now," the account continued, "the Liawep have apparently avoided contact with the outside world, content to live a near-naked existence working with stone-age tools in the jungle where there is abundant food" (p. 13). Reverend Wayne, the visiting pastor,

and himself a Papua New Guinean, added: "The Liawep are just wild people" (p. 13).⁸

What lies behind the isolation of the Liawep? Colin Filer suggests that most of the societies in Papua New Guinea described as lost tribes have actually been on government census rolls at some point in the past (1996 personal communication). Following the independence of Papua New Guinea from Australia in 1975, financial constraints sharply reduced the number of administrative patrols into remote areas, leading the government to lose track of many small populations. In other cases seminomadic tribes living near a provincial boundary have disappeared from one census only to reappear in the census of the neighboring province, where they are greeted as members of a lost tribe.⁹ As a result, Filer maintains that such peoples "have been mislaid rather than lost" (unattributed quote in B. Goldsmith 1994: 180). One answer to the question of how the Hagahai and Liawep became lost tribes, therefore, is that they had been forgotten by the government (Jorgensen 1993).

The Liawep were doubtless delighted that the evangelists had taken an interest in them, reestablishing their link to the world around them. They were not so much a lost tribe as a neglected one. Their exuberant reactions to gifts of tea, sugar, salt, and steel tools were more likely governed by the scarcity of these commodities than by their novelty. In addition, the government team that discovered the Liawep and identified them as a lost tribe was urgently seeking additional funds and personnel for work in remote regions (Shears 1993). Their agenda in describing the Liawep as a lost tribe cannot be overlooked.

In the cases described above, the media in Papua New Guinea played an important role in validating the status of the Hagahai and the Liawep as lost tribes. Driven by popular fascination with images of the past, tabloid style reports of recently located lost tribes are commonplace in Papua New Guinea (see Filer 1994). Andrew Strathern has suggested that urban Papua New Guineans often feel a romantic nostalgia for such marginal groups, who represent how they imagine their ancestors must have lived (quoted in Hansen 1993). Colonial stereotypes of the "primitive" are sometimes employed by Papua New Guineans to mark, by way of contrast, their progress towards modernity (Kulik and Willson 1992; Errington and Gewertz 1994).

In Papua New Guinea, then, the relative isolation of rural groups prompts repeated invention of

new lost tribes. The government, missionaries, anthropologists, and the media and their urban audiences all contribute to and intensify the process. The members of these groups are also active participants in the formation of these intercultural dramas. In Melanesia lost tribes contribute to their own creation so that they can be found, and can benefit from their discovery.

Conventional Politics

There are societies which, on a daily basis, remain effectively outside the influence of the world system. In the Amazon such groups actively defend their autonomy and isolation, whereas in Melanesia they seek to increase their participation in regional affairs. In both cases, however, societies that are identified as lost tribes may gain advantages from their new-found status. Non-governmental organizations may trade on the special position of these societies in order to help protect their rights or to acquire benefits on their behalf. Such assistance may include legal title to land and resources, or better access to health care, education and the cash economy, depending on the circumstances. If the "lost tribe" label is discredited, these societies stand to lose access to the special privileges that this status can confer.

While the argument that there are no lost tribes may have practical consequences for some indigenous societies, it is of political significance for all of them. Political rights should not be limited only to those populations designated as "lost tribes." Many societies in the Amazon are currently threatened by outsiders seeking access to their land and resources. These groups have the same need for recognition and protection as societies identified as lost tribes. In Melanesia aid to remote communities should not be contingent upon their claims to historical isolation. I have already shown how the lost tribes myth model obscures the histories of marginal peoples. Arguments about the special status of lost tribes ignore the universality of the rights at stake.

The Lost Tribe as Intercultural Encounter

Set in motion by the expansion of the world system into the last marginal spaces on Earth, the invention of lost tribes reveals as much about the global as the local. The myth model implies that the discovery of a lost tribe is also a first contact encounter (see Connolly and Anderson 1983; Schieffelin and Crittendon 1991). Yet first contact and the discovery of lost

tribes have a specific chronological relationship to one another, first contact is the initial position along a continuum that ends with lost tribes.¹⁰ In a historical sense the last lost tribe marks the expansion of the world system into the final corner of the world, as well as the end of the completely autonomous society. The continued invention of new lost tribes staves off recognition of these conditions.¹¹

The trope of the "lost tribe" originally emerged in response to the experience of conquest and exile in the ancient Near East. The European myth model of the lost tribe was later used as a means of orchestrating colonial projects and missionary endeavors. Contemporary accounts of lost tribes draw on the myth model to explain encounters with remote and relatively isolated groups of indigenous peoples which seek to resist or accelerate their incorporation into the world system.

The invention of lost tribes masks a variety of

power relations. In the Amazon isolation is the result of social relations, not a natural condition. Centuries of retreat and resistance on the part of the indigenes, accompanied by expansion and aggression by colonizers and nation states, paradoxically provide the conditions that make possible the discovery of Amazonian lost tribes. The dynamic is reversed in Melanesia, with isolated groups contributing to their own invention as lost tribes.

Contemporary sightings of lost tribes are enacted allegories of our time, marking the integration of marginal societies into the world system. Yet by positing societies that exist out of history and without knowledge of their neighbors or the world around them, the myth model obscures the fact that lost tribes are actually the *product* of a complex history of intercultural encounters. Lost tribes are illusions that exist only in the meanings created between societies.

NOTES

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¹See also Clifford's (1988) discussion of United States court hearings to determine whether the Mashpee of Cape Cod were eligible for federal recognition as a tribe.

²The Uyghur may represent a remnant community once involved with the silk trade (Gaynor, 1997 personal communication).

³In another celebrated case of an Amazonian lost tribe, McIntyre described the Uru-eu-wau-wau of Rondônia "perform[ing] a victory dance" to "celebrate the killing of a rubber tapper who encroached on their indigenous lands" (1988: 802).

⁴The Amazonian pattern has rough parallels elsewhere. For example, several "runaway" tribes were identified in the Gashi Hills of northeastern Nigeria during the late 1980s (Xinhua General Overseas News Service 1990). A group contacted in this area in 1990 claimed that their ancestors fled to the mountains a century before, after their traditional ruler was taken captive by British colonists. They agreed to resettle in the lowlands after the government promised to supply them with water, electricity, and other basic services.

⁵International media may exploit these circumstances for their own purposes, as *l'affaire Toulambis* illustrates. In 1993

Belgian filmmaker Dutilleux claimed to find a lost tribe in the Angan-speaking region of the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, whom he called the Toulambis. The resulting film of his experiences, "Sur la piste des Papous," was screened in France in January 1996. Anthropologists from CNRS, several of whom had been working in the region since 1985, criticized the film, with its scripted scenes showing people allegedly seeing their first steel tools and mistakenly trying to eat paper matches. Archaeologist Pierre Lemmonier faces legal hearings in France regarding public comments that he made about the film (Lemmonier, 1996 personal communication).

⁶For an comprehensive review of Hagahai contact history, see Boyd (1996).

⁷Michael Alpers, director of the Papua New Guinea Medical Research Institute, also rejects the claim that the Hagahai were a lost tribe, attributing that label to publicity: "The Hagahai were known about for a long time, but chose to abstract themselves from administrative services in their large tract of largely uninhabited forest," he said. "But then they decided a few years ago to make contact with the missions to get health services and so on but were then widely publicized as a 'lost tribe.' Most of it was just hype" (quoted in Hiambohn 1993: 179).

⁸These media accounts of the Liawep prompted Edward Marriot's (1996) travelogue *The lost tribe*.

⁹Some lost tribes are fated to be discovered more than once. In response to publicity about the Liawep in 1993 a spokesperson from the Institute of Medical Research was quoted as saying, "Oh no, not them again.... This tribe was first 'discovered' in 1990 and even then there was a great deal of skepticism..." (Shears 1993: 13).

¹⁰Greg Urban and Joel Sherzer made a related observation about the incorporation of tribal peoples into state systems, describing "a continuum from isolated uncontacted Indian populations to full-fledged ethnic groups, on a par with other recognized ethnic groups within the nation-state," locating the recently identified Uru-eu-wau-wau at "the extreme Indian end of the continuum" (1991: 5).

¹¹The lost tribes that result from this process are vulnerable inventions, for the act of recognition dissolves their privileged

status. As Michael Goldsmith has observed, "once discovered, such groups are no longer what the myth requires them to be, that is, undiscovered, untouched, uncontaminated" (1993: 7).

This may be the source of the sadness that often accompanies accounts of lost tribes, which are destroyed at the moment of their creation.

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