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# THE COMMERCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF 'NEW NATIONS'

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## *Abstract*

This article considers the instrumental role of commodity marketing and mass consumption in producing nationality as a dimension of personal and collective identities. It asks: if nation-ness and nationality no longer necessarily refer to political identities, then to what sort of imagined communities, if any, do they refer? It addresses this question in part through a discussion of commercial images from Papua New Guinea, one of the 'new nations' of the South Pacific.

*Key Words* ◆ advertising ◆ mass consumption ◆ material culture  
◆ national culture ◆ Papua New Guinea

## INTRODUCTION: FROM CITIZEN TO CONSUMER?

Almost all the questions and issues that I explore in this article were raised, as is often the case, by a cartoon in *The New Yorker* magazine. A man in pajamas lays propped up in bed, a companion sleeping soundly at his side. He stares ahead with glazed eyes at a television set, one finger poised on the remote control. The caption reads: 'Ladies and gentlemen, our national commercial.'

I read the cartoon two ways, but to the same effect. In the first reading, the viewer is watching the start of a late night baseball game; the stadium announcer alerts the crowd not to the singing of the national anthem, but rather to the playing of the national commercial. In the second reading, the viewer is watching *late* late night television; the station is about to sign off, but with the national commercial instead of

the national anthem. This alternative reading, however, seems less likely, or at least less available to all readers. How many young Americans, I wonder, having grown up in a world where there is no end to the broadcast day, simply don't get the reference to the old convention of opening and closing television transmission with the national anthem?

Both readings nevertheless suggest that a series of aligned shifts has taken place in contemporary American society. The substitution of advertisement for anthem implies a move from political ritual to commercial ritual that, in turn, betokens an eclipse of the state by the market as the reference point for national belonging. In other words, viewers who were once appealed to as citizens are now addressed as consumers; their sense of national belonging derives less from common membership in a polity and more from common participation in a repertoire of consumption practices. *The New Yorker* magazine, again, offers apparent confirmation. A recent article, about marketing efforts to identify innovative trends in 'cool' sneakers, reports that among youngsters in Philadelphia, 'Reebok Classics are so huge they are known simply as National Anthems, as in "I'll have a pair of blue Anthems in nine and a half"' (Gladwell, 1997: 84).

How should we take the following claim: 'We are witnessing the swift debasement of the concept of "citizen" – the person who actively participates in shaping society's destiny – to that of "consumer", whose franchise has become his or her purchasing decisions' (Ewen, 1992: 49). What might such a displacement of agency tell us about the production of nationality as a dimension of collective and personal identity? If nation-ness and nationality no longer necessarily refer to political identities – to a state legitimated by a people – then to what sort of imagined communities, if any, do they refer?

I want to address these questions by considering the instrumental role of commodity consumption in nation making, that is, in the production of nationality. In this regard, I follow but one of the many leads offered by Benedict Anderson's (1983) discussion of print-capitalism as a force that enabled, through the activity of reading, the imagination of an unseen but delimited community of fellow readers; for Anderson's discussion is first and foremost a discussion about mass consumption. Printed books were among the earliest mass-produced commodities, the purchase and consumption of which provided the vehicle for the formation of national consciousness. I want to think here in a preliminary way about how other such commodities, in their marketing and consumption, might or might not likewise enable the imagination of national community. I will use for this purpose commercial images from Papua New Guinea, the most linguistically and culturally diverse Pacific island nation-state created in the last generation – created, I should add, not by

anti-colonial revolution but rather by a ragged decolonization process instigated largely through the United Nations. In Papua New Guinea, as with a slew of other nation-states from Italy to Indonesia, the independent state unambiguously preceded the nation to which it was allegedly coupled.

Accordingly, I also locate my questions about the production of nationality in the space held by the hyphen in the word 'nation-state.' As Arjun Appadurai (1991) has neatly remarked, this hyphen today seems to signal disjunction as much as conjunction, to separate nation from state as much as to connect them. I want to suggest therefore that my questions about nationality engage the issue of sovereignty – both the contested sovereignty of the nation-state and the embattled sovereignty of individual persons in the famous new world order. On the one hand, effective governmentality now emanates from agencies other than territorial nation-states – such as the complex agencies of 'structural adjustment' that impinge upon the daily lives of ordinary citizens in Papua New Guinea as elsewhere. At the same time, global diasporas and translocal solidarities continually challenge the nation-state's capacity to mobilize let alone monopolize allegiance and loyalty. On the other hand, more and more people seem to be promised ever more possibilities for freedom and autonomy through their consumption choices. Global flows of media images incite people living in the most remote villages, such as those of Papua New Guinea, to new and powerful fantasies of self-fashioning through consumption. The ideal of personal efficacy achieved through consumption everywhere rivals the ideal of citizens determining their collective existence.

The meaning and fate of nationality in these conflicted circumstances are, of course, uncertain. It is hardly the case, however, that nationality as a collective identity is destined to dissolve in an acid bath of global consumerism. Indeed, in some obvious instances consumption choices appear to form the basis for nationality as a collective identity – as when an American family chooses to vacation at Colonial Williamsburg or some other outlet of the national heritage industry. Thus, even if the nation-state is no longer autonomous and self-determining, and even if the citizen's autonomy as a political subject is continually compromised, nationality is still made available to autonomous consumers: one affirms an identity as a Papua New Guinean or as an American by buying particular goods and services. Nationality, in this view, is not simply appealed to as a quality pre-existing on other civic grounds and transferable to commodities; nationality emerges, if at all, as a commercial construction, a by-product of public efforts to render commodities and their use meaningful. This is particularly the case when transnational corporations conjure up 'the people' to whom they attempt to legitimate themselves: witness the recent television advertisements for Toyota Camrys that



FIGURE 1 Advertisement for Coca-Cola, 1945. *The Coca-Cola Bottler*, October 1945

bit of America' and 'the happy symbol of a friendly way of life') and the identification of that way of living with *modernity*, an identification made self-evident by the contrasting presence of primitive South Pacific islanders bewildered by the soldiers' radios. If we concentrate on the way in which Coke consumption implies participation in a distinctively American way of living – a way of living characterized by its material modernity and abundance – then we must admit that this ad exemplifies a commercial technology of nation making with a long history. Similar technologies were at work, for instance, in the early part of this century, effecting the transformation of immigrants into Americans. The historian Andrew Heinze (1990) emphasizes the way in which Eastern European Jews, in particular, were able to use consumer goods as tools for forging an American Jewish identity. Heinze writes:

Acquiring American speech, participating in American institutions, and making economic advances were important to the search for a new cultural identity, but vast numbers of people with little sense of the language and

depict the diverse American workers who build the cars; or, as I will discuss presently, the ads for Coke and Pepsi in Papua New Guinea that define a 'new nation' of soft-drink consumers.

### COMMERCIAL TECHNOLOGIES OF NATION MAKING

What would a 'national commercial' of the sort evoked by *The New Yorker* cartoon look like? Consider this paradigmatic possibility, a print advertisement of the World War II era for the soft drink Coca-Cola (Figure 1). Of all the many things going on in this ad, semiotically speaking, I focus only on two: the assertion that Coke symbolizes an American way of living ('a

limited exposure to institutions were engaging, virtually from the moment they entered the streets of the city, in a new cycle of consumption that defined a uniquely American approach to life. (1990: 10)

For these immigrants, unremarkable consumption practices – drinking Borden's condensed milk, cooking with Crisco vegetable shortening, bathing with Ivory soap – were the most easily accessible elements of the process of nationalizing themselves.

Commercial technologies of nation making, then, are not that new; there is something misleading about the suggestion of an historical trajectory from citizen to consumer, from political rituals to commercial rituals. Indeed, the familiar political technologies of American nation making – pledge of allegiance, national anthem, and Memorial Day parade – are coeval with the late 19th-century commercial rituals of nation making, such as shopping through nationally distributed mail-order catalogues for nationally advertised brands of products. Nor is the use of commercial technologies in identifying the nation with a modern way of life uniquely American. For instance, virtually the same effect that Heinze describes of nationalizing immigrants through consumption practices was consciously promoted by the Australian government during the 1950s and 1960s. The post-World War II influx of European immigrants was enticed with 'the suburban ideal of the middle-class family with its house, garden, whitegoods and television, all fruits of the nation's industrial expansion' (MacDonald, 1995: 28). Becoming Australian meant having a bounteous Christmas Day barbecue on the shores of Sydney Harbor, complete with two 'Eskys' – Australian slang for portable beer coolers (Figure 2).

A quick trip from Sri Lanka to Spain by way of the Cook Islands suggests some of the various ways in which consumption enables if not enjoins people to think the nation by, to use Steven Kemper's phrase, 'blurring the line between a political act and a consumption decision' (1993: 393). In the case of 'new nations,' where the project of the nation-state is often prominently identified with modernity, the adoption of certain consumption

FIGURE 2 Image used to promote immigration to Australia. *MacDonald, 1995*



practices can especially function as a sign of national progress. Such is the case, Kemper argues, of the Development Lottery in Sri Lanka. Lotteries – including the same Lotto game played in the US – began to be introduced in Sri Lanka in 1977, making the country one of 79 where \$154 million dollars was gambled every day as of 1989. The Development Lottery, known for its large jackpots, is a government enterprise, the proceeds of which are used to sponsor development projects that in principle benefit the Sri Lankan citizenry. Gambling is thus by definition practical patriotism. In addition, the Development Lottery's weekly drawings for large cash prizes are staged for television, such that viewing the lottery creates the exclusively shared space-time that Benedict Anderson – citing the daily consumption of newspapers – saw as a prerequisite for imagining the nation.

Kemper's argument about the Development Lottery in Sri Lanka capitalizes on a suggestion that I, following Appadurai, have made elsewhere, namely, to treat nations as imagined communities of consumption: 'large-scale, non-intimate collectivities, unified by the ritualized fantasies of collective expenditure' (Appadurai, quoted in Foster, 1991: 250). However, when the development that the state seeks is the development of tourism, it is not inappropriate to wonder whose fantasies and expenditures are at issue. Jeffrey Sissons (1997) has recently posed this question in regard to the Cook Islands, a small Pacific island nation 'freely associated' with New Zealand, where since 1988 state-sponsored ethnic nationalism has stimulated and been stimulated by the expansion of a tourist economy. Through the vigorous operation of the Ministry of Cultural Development in preparing to host the 1992 Festival of Pacific Arts, Cook Islands national identity became equated with a commercially oriented cultural tradition, 'an essential resource for tourism-led economic development' (Sissons, 1997: 184). Sissons writes:

The rhetoric of nationhood, which formerly emphasized the values of togetherness and progress, increasingly celebrates a more marketable ethnic pride and cultural heritage. Television advertisements encourage Cook Islanders to show friendly, smiling faces to their visitors in the national interest. National dance competitions are sponsored by international airlines. Local *vaka* [canoe] carvers are featured in tourist brochures.

Participation in nationhood has come to mean participation in the tourist industry. As a result, Sissons argues, a new sense of nationhood is emerging among Cook Islanders: 'a sense of living in an increasingly commodified space, of belonging to an imagined community for others' (1997: 186). An imagined community *for others*, the Cook Islands is increasingly being shaped through the consumption practices of tourists as a *desti-nation*.

Here again we encounter a contemporary instance of a phenomenon

with 19th-century antecedents, that is, the phenomenon of offering displays and definitions of the nation-state for public consumption by foreigners. The most striking context for such displays and definitions, judging by the amount of attention received from cultural critics of all sorts, is the world exhibition or universal exposition, the last official one of which for this century was Expo'92 held in 1992 in Seville, Spain. Penelope Harvey's (1996) intriguing meditation on the Seville exposition, *Hybrids of Modernity*, suggests that the exposition was in many ways produced and received as a mass presentation of over one hundred national commercials. That is, nation-states were objectified in a comparative and competitive environment that recalled the marketing strategies of the transnational corporations – Panasonic, Fuji, IBM – who made it financially possible for the Spanish state to host the event in the first place. I will come back to this point presently, but for now I mention only a couple of Harvey's observations of how visitors effectively treated nations as brand-name commodities.

Harvey points out that all visitors could acquire an Expo passport which could be stamped upon exit from the different national pavilions. Some visitors apparently made the accumulation of these stamps an end in itself, entering exhibits with great speed and looking immediately for the place where they could get their passports stamped. In extreme cases, visitors collected stamps from pavilions that they had not even visited. Occasionally, a distraught visitor would inquire of pavilion workers about a lost passport. One 'pavilion hostess' reported to Harvey that a supply of found passports was kept on hand for such occasions. Thankful visitors would express great excitement if their replacement passport already had a significant number of stamps. In addition, the visitor's strategy would incorporate the recorded visits of the passport's previous owner, there being no point in visiting pavilions for which stamps had already been obtained. The transformation of citizens into consumers seems virtually complete: passports – the unique and singular validations of political identity – become rendered as transferable commodities between unknown visitors, as consumable signs detached from material referents.

Harvey also relates a story of how, in the shop at the exit from the Israeli pavilion, a box of bookmarks stood next to the cash register: 'As I was casting an eye over what was on sale I noticed someone walk over and help themselves to one of these. Others immediately followed until dozens had been carried away. The shop assistant, who noticed too late what was happening, was horrified' (1996: 159). Harvey's point is that the visitors were innocently if automatically collecting mementos, accustomed to how pavilions often provided leaflets and paper mementos (and passport stamps) which visitors collected as they left. The difference between the national pavilion and the souvenir shop (much like the



difference between national museums and their gift shops) is thus erased: visitors act as and are addressed as consumers in both spaces. Like tourists in the Cook Islands, at least some visitors to Expo'92 treated the imagined communities of others not as nation-states but rather as destinations, that is, as objects and experiences available for consumption.

This convenience sample – Sri Lanka, the Cook Islands, Expo'92 and turn of the century America – allows me to observe three things about the place of commercial technologies and consumption practices in producing nations. First, consumption practices have the capacity to operate as powerful vehicles for materializing nationality, although with ambiguous or indeterminate consequences. On the one hand, the ordinary or mundane nature of certain consumption practices attaches nationality to everyday experience in a way that more extraordinary practices – celebrations of national holidays, once in a while elections or irregular military contests – simply do not. On the other hand, the materialization of nationality in the form of consumable objects and experiences leaves the nation vulnerable to the market. What if nobody buys? Or what if national consumer goods – take Vegemite, for example – become the property of foreign corporations? Or what if mainly non-nationals buy – and so demand nationality in the forms that *they* prefer?

It is these questions that Harvey's discussion of Expo'92 and Sissons' discussion of Cook Islands tourism pose. From this perspective, national affiliation is a matter of individual and private purchase decisions rather than an irresistible social fact. It is clear, moreover, that when these purchases are made by non-citizen tourists, the result is hardly affirmative patriotism for anyone – although, perhaps, alienated nationality for the local citizens and ironic nationality for the tourists. But even for locally based citizens, it is clear that the consumption of national brand goods or participation in national lotteries or even watching national sporting events need not produce civic consciousness. Consumption, as anthropologists such as Daniel Miller (1987) have persuasively demonstrated, is an activity through which people can appropriate and recontextualize commodities as instruments for creating differentiated, particularized and sometimes resistant identities. At best, then, common consumption might engender a diffuse and diluted sense of collective affinity – the sort of recognition, if any, that someone affords someone else who drinks the same brand of beer or gambles at the same roulette table.

I will take up this perspective on consumption and nationality in my conclusion, but not before suggesting what this perspective marginalizes. Orvar Löfgren (1996), among others (see Linde-Laursen, 1993), has encouraged us to pay attention to what he calls 'the microphysics of learning to belong,' that is, the ways in which the nationalization of routines and trivialities – including routine and trivial consumption

practices – produces feelings of belonging. These feelings often only register when the routines and trivialities in question are violated or brought into juxtaposition with alternatives. Heinze (1990), for example, recounts a story from *My Mother and I*, the 1916 memoir of Elizabeth Stern, whose family came to New York City from Poland in 1891. Stern recalled the embarrassing moment when she first opened her lunch at school – a mass of fried potatoes and a crushed tomato wrapped in newspaper. By contrast, 'the American students had precisely packaged meals – neat, regular-sized sandwiches, square paper napkins and lunch boxes' (Heinze, 1990: 168). The fearful symmetry of these lunches, along with the criticism of her peers, shamed Stern into throwing her lunches away. Nor is it irrelevant to add that many of these students were probably using as lunch boxes the distinctive packages of Uneeda Biscuits – lowly soda crackers heavily and successfully advertised by a chain of bakeries stretching from Maine to Louisiana and Colorado and incorporated in 1898 as the National Biscuit Company. Thus, the American way of presenting lunches in public made Elizabeth Stern feel, and feel deeply, that she did not belong.

Consumption practices have the capacity to link personal and collective identities in compelling fashion. It is precisely this capacity that the Sri Lankan state seeks to mobilize in its Development Lottery. As Kemper points out, the lotteries elicit the agency of the bettors, requiring bettors 'to take action, make choices, and keep their eyes fixed on the prize' (1993: 393). The effectiveness of the trope of development thus lies in how it connects the (modern) individual's imagined self-development with the development of a collective individual, the nation. Entering pedestrian consciousness by way of sidewalk loudspeakers and ticket booths with vivid posters, the Development Lottery makes the nation thinkable or imaginable. Buying a lottery ticket then becomes the practical means for engaging the nation with the desires and dreams of individual consumers.

Of course, like Kemper, I am not suggesting that consuming Development Lotteries or Uneeda Biscuits instantly, automatically, or permanently makes Sri Lankans or Americans. But I am suggesting that we take such consumption practices seriously if we want some purchase on the way that nations become entangled with lived identities. I suggest that by doing so we are in a position to address the question about nations that Anderson raises but ultimately fails to answer in *Imagined Communities*: why do (some) people die for such limited imaginings? That is, how do nations become aspects of everyday embodied being? In this regard, I refer to the letters that American soldiers – presumably like the ones depicted in Figure 1 – wrote to their families during World War II. Selections from these letters appear in Mark Pendergrast's (1993) informative history, *For God, Country and Coca-Cola*. Here are two:

It's the little things, not the big, that the individual soldier fights for or wants so badly when away. It's the girl friend back home in a drug store over a Coke, or the juke box and summer weather. (Pendergrast, 1993: 210)

To have this drink is just like having home brought nearer to you; it's one of the little things of life that really counts. I can remember being at Ponce de Leon Park, watching the [Atlanta] Crackers play baseball as I filled up on Coca-Cola and peanuts. It's such things as this that all of us are fighting for. (Pendergrast, 1993: 210)

Commodity fetishism with a national inflection, perhaps. But this sort of fetishism, it seems, enabled people not only to die for but also to kill for the nation. Pendergrast (1993: 211) thus notes the delight of the Coca-Cola Corporation when 'Colonel Robert L. Scott, in his best-seller *God is My Co-pilot*, explained that his motivation to "shoot down my first Jap" stemmed from thoughts of "America, Democracy, Coca-Colas."

Colonel Scott's invocation of democracy leads me to a second, more straightforward observation about consumption and national identities, namely, that consumption practices offer the promise of realizing the principle of equivalence given in the idea of nationhood. This point has been made often enough, if mainly in the process of demonstrating the promise to be superficial or downright false; I merely stress here that the point has two dimensions. First, mass consumption offers to individuals the sort of agency and equality manifestly denied them in the realm of capital and labor. Certain inexpensive consumer items – Uneda Biscuits, Coca-Cola, lottery tickets – imply that the challenge of self-determination is open to all at the same price (or at the same cold odds). When such consumer items are nationalized, then their consumption engenders an ephemeral sort of mass enfranchisement; each consumer replicates the consumption of his or her anonymous but equal co-nationals.

Second, mass consumption provides a vocabulary and model for communicating the equivalence of nations, for just as each bottle of Coke or package of biscuits replicates every other one, so too are individuals within the nation latently alike and equal. Similarly, just as Coke and Pepsi are equivalent but different brands of colas, collective individuals or nations are equivalent polities that differ only in their constituent elements. Löfgren (1989) has called attention to this phenomenon by identifying an internationally recognized grammar in terms of which national identity is validated and differentiated. In addition to flags, anthems, museums and so forth, valid nations are now available for presentation through an array of national brand consumer goods. Where I live in Rochester, NY, there is a store called Beers of the World. The displays of beer, and only beer, are arranged by nation-state of origin. One can buy beers not only from Australia or France, but from their former colonies,

Papua New Guinea and Niger. There is a formal equivalence to these displays, much like the formal equivalence of nation-states achieved in the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games or the official self-representation of Expo'92. Indeed, as Harvey (1996: 54) points out, universal exhibitions are time-tested technologies for 'distinguishing nation-states through representational practices which simultaneously render them equivalent'. It is not at all surprising, then, that some of the African pavilions at Expo'92 displayed their own brands of beers and soap powders.

My third, final, and briefest observation concerns the way in which consumption practices enact various relationships between tradition and modernity, relationships that figure variously in all national narratives. Elizabeth Stern, for example, yielded to her peers' classification of the lunches that her mother made as remnants of an anachronistic tradition out of place in modern America. Consumption in this case defined the split between a dead Polish past and a living American present. Almost a century later, once novel consumption practices constitute American traditions – such as drinking Classic Coke – the modification of which would qualify as sacrilege. Consumption in this case allows the past to live in the present, and thus to qualify the nation as both enduring and innovative. Such a resolution of past and present is particularly desirable in those 'new nations' opened up to the wholesale import of modern but unmistakably foreign consumption practices. In such situations, the task of nationalizing modernity is liable to criticism as selling out local traditions and heritage. The national narrative must negotiate between the twin demands of the state to represent itself as progressive and as protective of the indigenous way of life. Such a resolution, I suggest, requires the collusion of consumerism with the project of the nation-state.

## THE COMMERCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

It is with these observations in mind that I now turn to the role of commercial technologies in making the nation, Papua New Guinea. Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a place known to most Americans, if at all, through the work of anthropologists, from Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead to Marilyn Strathern and Roy Wagner. In these works, PNG emerges as the home of the authentic cultural Other or, more precisely, the home of about 800 different authentic cultural (and linguistic) Others. Its vast diversity has delighted anthropologists with a cornucopia of myth, ritual, cosmology, and social organization, all duly made the objects of an impressive body of ethnographic analysis. What is less generally well known is the recent political history of the country and

the enormous transformation of social life in the country's major cities brought about by the expansion of wage-labor, commodity consumption and mass media. Since 1975, when Australia ended its role as Administrator of the UN Trust Territory, the independent state has deployed all available technologies for rendering Papua New Guinea a *nation-state*. But the PNG state is, unlike its neighbor Indonesia, for instance, a weak state; and its capacity to impinge upon the consciousness of its constituent strong societies has been limited; the results of its projects in the area of political socialization have been both uneven and tenuous. Nevertheless, certain mass consumption practices have spread throughout the country or are accessible to anyone visiting any major town. These consumption practices now provide advertisers with vehicles for imagining the nation as the market that the advertisers aspire to address.

What, then, might a national commercial in Papua New Guinea look like? Here is one possibility, a print ad for Pepsi Cola (Figure 3). The text reads: 'Pepsi. The favourite drink of the land of the unexpected. Pepsi brings out the best in Papua New Guinea's diverse culture. Pepsi. The choice of a New Generation. The choice of all Papua New Guineans.' The accompanying image juxtaposes a product consumed by 'all Papua New Guineans' with an instance of PNG's diverse culture – three young women dressed similarly in unambiguously traditional garb. Text and image thus accomplish two things. First, they suggest (to me, I want to be clear) that the *new* generation of Papua New Guineans, perhaps like PNG itself, embodies a conjunction between (local) tradition and (global) modernity (see Foster, 1997). That is, tradition and modernity are represented as compatible rather than antagonistic. This compatibility is more than just posited, for the local bottlers of both Pepsi and Coke in Papua New Guinea lend material and financial sponsorship support to the various cultural

festivals organized around the country to celebrate PNG's cultural diversity (Figure 4). Such sponsorship is one of the main ways in which transnational corporations deflect criticism from themselves as foreign and exploitative (see Guss, 1996). It is also one of the ways in which these corporations are complicit in

FIGURE 3 Advertisement for Pepsi-Cola, 1995.  
*Hiri Moale Festival 1995 Official Programme*



the construction of PNG as a multicultural nation in which 'diversity' means benign stylistic variation in dance routines and ceremonial costume.

Second, and by the same token, the Pepsi ad presents 'the choice of all Papua New Guineans' as cutting across the diversity that Pepsi allegedly 'brings out'. Perhaps the relative uniformity of the three women's dress and the simultaneity of their drinking reinforces this claim. In any case, I infer that Pepsi is being likened to the nation, and vice-versa, inasmuch as both encompass and transcend diversity – the diversity of individual consumers, on the one hand, and the diversity of unique cultural traditions on the other. This inference is made more plausible by the following two Coke ads.

The first ad (Figure 5) depicts an individual consumer whose hat marks him as *not* generic; for this particular hat is not only his favorite hat, but an article of clothing associated with a particular region of Papua New Guinea (though also an item of emergent pan-PNG indigenous material culture that includes betel nut and string bags – *bilums*). He is thus one of the diverse consumers from the diverse cultures all of whom drink Coke in PNG. Similarly, the second Coke ad (Figure 6) suggests a diversity of decoration styles and facial phenotypes encompassed within the singularity of a common commodity/brand: Coca-Cola.

Consumption goods that transcend diversity and perforce constitute the nation as a totality also have the capacity to link consumer-citizens and their diverse traditions to a wider world. This is the claim, at least, made by the following advertisement which, although for the National Bank of Solomon Islands Limited (the Solomon Islands being PNG's closest Melanesian neighbor), could easily run in PNG. The text of the ad (Figure 7) gives voice to an 'us' and a 'we' that are none other than the nation itself:

Money matters are nothing new to us . . . For hundreds of years we Solomon Islanders have used traditional money like the examples above. But times do change and although the use of 'Kastom Mani' is still a very important part of our culture, at times we need special services and expertise in our dealings with a wider world. The National Bank of Solomon Islands can provide such services and expertise – we know the importance of sound financial management. After all, we are carrying on a tradition centuries old.

The services of the National Bank thus function as the means to articulate (not to eradicate) local and ancient traditions with changing times and expanding horizons, that is, with modernity.

This same identification of consumption practices with modernity can be achieved with less respect for or recognition of tradition(s). Thus another ad for Pepsi (Figure 8) suggests that the soft drink does more than bring out the best in PNG's diverse cultures; Pepsi also brings out the



FIGURE 4  
Advertisement  
for Coca-Cola,  
1995. *Hiri  
Moale Festival  
1995, Official  
Programme*



FIGURE 5  
Advertisement  
for Coca-Cola,  
1995. *UBD  
Papua New  
Guinea Business  
and Trade  
Directory*



FIGURE 6  
Advertisement  
for Coca-Cola,  
1992. *Port  
Moresby Show  
1992, Official  
Programme*



*Money matters are nothing new to us ...*

*For hundreds of years we Solomon Islanders have used traditional money like the examples above. But times do change and although the use of "Kastom Mani" is still a very important part of our culture, at times we need special services and expertise in our financial dealings with a wider world. The National Bank of Solomon Islands can provide such services and expertise - we know the importance of sound financial management. After all, we are carrying on a tradition centuries old.*

**NATIONAL BANK OF SOLOMON ISLANDS LIMITED.**  
Head Office: Mendana Avenue, Honiara  
P.O. Box 37, Honiara, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands.  
Tel: (677) 21874. Fax: (677) 23478.

Photo © Mike McCoy 1992

FIGURE 7 Advertisement for National Bank of Solomon Islands Ltd, c. 1995. *Solomons (inflight magazine of Solomon Airlines)*

modern qualities of PNG's new generation. (Here I add parenthetically that the models in this ad include a former Miss PNG and two current television/radio personalities; all are recognizable as members of PNG's growing national/cosmopolitan elite. I am uncertain, however, if consumers would recognize this ad as genetically related to a Pepsi ad of several years ago that featured the singer Ray Charles.) A less risky way of identifying the nation with modernity through consumption practices





FIGURE 8 Advertisement for Pepsi-Cola, 1995.  
*UBD Papua New Guinea Business and Trade Directory*

involves linking products with athletes and, more particularly, international sports competition. I say less risky because this strategy usually involves, once again, corporate sponsorship of national sports teams. This sort of sponsorship complements the sponsorship of cultural festivals, the former promoting the nation-state's modernity while the latter affirms its traditional basis. A television ad for Shell gasoline, which I have analyzed elsewhere (Foster, 1996/97), serves as an impressive instance not only of this strategy, but also of the semiotic merging of nation and corporation through the fortuitous manipulation of the colors in PNG's

flag – red, black and gold – with the colors in Shell's corporate logo.

The identification of nation and consumer product is achieved in more homely fashion in a television ad for a brand of tinned beef called Ox and Palm. This ad was produced by an agency located in PNG and staffed by PNG nationals, but owned and creatively managed by an Australian man (see Foster, 1996/97). It is my candidate for the title of National Commercial of Papua New Guinea inasmuch as it consolidates many of the general claims that I have made about the commercial construction of nations. It presents Ox and Palm tinned beef as a product whose consumption mediates geographic diversity – mountains and islands – as well as the social diversity represented by town and country. Ox and Palm is, moreover, a domestic product in both senses of the term – made in PNG and used in the homes of all Papua New Guineans – or even brought from home to school for lunch in a routine that conjures up the ghost of Elizabeth Stern. It is, like Uneeda Biscuits and Pepsi Cola, democratically inexpensive enough to be available to almost everyone. And it is, finally, the perfect blend of tradition and modernity, an

originally foreign product that arrived over 40 years ago in PNG, but has since become domesticated and familiar enough to qualify as a national tradition: Corned Beef Classic.

## CONCLUSION: NATIONALITY WITHOUT NATIONALISM?

What does tinned beef have to do with nationalism? My colleague Nicholas Thomas might say that the question itself testifies to 'the failure of a project of modernity in the South Pacific' (1997: 211). In the introduction to their recent edited volume, *Narratives of Nation in the South Pacific*, Thomas and Otto suggest that in places like Papua New Guinea, it is not nationalism but rather nationality that develops through consumption practices: 'The distinction is that between affirmative patriotism on one side and a collective imagining on the other . . . People may perceive themselves as members of a nation, and as essentially similar to other nationals, without necessarily possessing a loyal or civic consciousness . . .' (1997: 1). Drinking beer or eating corned beef that bears a national signature engenders collective affinity, perhaps, but surely an affinity too politically dilute to call nationalism.

Thomas develops this claim in part by alluding to the way in which many consumption practices relate 'to non-national identities or identities that positively subvert nationality' (1997: 217). Consumption practices enable people to participate in both sub-national identities and international identities at the same time, thus making national identity enacted through consumption a contingent choice rather than an irresistible social fact. Furthermore, one might wonder if the attempt to identify consumer products with the nation doesn't have the whiff of the attic about it. The tag line 'It's Pepsi in PNG' reflected a moment when transnational corporations thought it in their best interest to collude with the fledgling state's attempts to imagine a nation. That moment has passed, and Pepsi can now forget the nation and address the consumer directly, indeed, directly identify the consumer with the product, as in its most recent ads. This ad (Figure 9), for example, is one of the first in Pepsi's coordinated worldwide campaign, the centerpiece of which is the redesign of the can to emphasize the color blue. 'Break Free' has replaced 'It's Pepsi in PNG' as the slogan – a realization of Stewart Ewen's nightmare of consumer democracy in which freedom and autonomy refer to purchase decisions.

I am led to the conclusion that as nations are uncoupled from territorial states, nationality will live on as an idiom for some weak form of collective identity, one identity among others available in the global marketplace. If current events contradict this conclusion, it is only because, as Appadurai suggests, no other idiom 'has yet emerged to



FIGURE 9 Advertisement for Pepsi-Cola, 1997. *Papua New Guinea Post Courier*

from this distance certainly look like the collective action of people in the name of a nation hitherto regarded as only weakly imagined. The revolt was triggered by the public disclosure of a deal made by high ranking government officials, including the prime minister, to hire an outfit of South African-based mercenaries. The mercenaries were to intervene in a long-standing civil war in Bougainville, one of PNG's island provinces. The refusal of the military to cooperate with the mercenaries, in conjunction with several days of mass protests in the capital city, led to the expulsion of the mercenaries, the stepping aside of the prime minister, and the institution of an inquiry into the multi-million dollar deal. The PNG state was effectively charged with betraying the nation whose will it ideally expresses.

Here is one reaction to the events, a letter written to a PNG daily newspaper, *The National*, from a citizen studying in Australia:

It's great to be Papua New Guinean.

After 10 days of anxiety and distress during the Government-Defence stand-off, the final outcome makes me proud to be a Papua New Guinean. I will never compromise my nationality or pretend to be someone else which I am not.

capture the collective interest of many groups in translocal solidarities, cross-border mobilizations, and postnational identities' (1993: 418). And this conclusion is tempting, moreover, because I could then invert the old evolutionary conceit of seeing a European past in the Melanesian present and argue that PNG anticipates Europe's future. I could suggest, with Thomas (1997: 219), that while Europe struggles 'to obliterate the memories that stand in the way of a posthistorical, postnational, postmodern market and superstate, Pacific societies apparently possess no national identities that need to be forgotten'.

But I prefer not to conclude so for now. In March of 1997, a series of remarkable events unfolded in PNG, events that

Here in Australia, the newspapers, TV programs and people enjoyed the sensationalised reports about the events in PNG. The Australian media, particularly television, were getting into each other's way in their quest for higher ratings.

And inevitably the result is every other Australian I met felt that PNG was going down the tube and we were doomed for hell.

I never lost faith and I told those Australians we could solve our problems.

I submit that these words are not a postmodern instance of what Appadurai (1993) calls 'Trojan nationalisms' – nationalisms that contain transnational links and non-national aspirations – but rather a familiar modern instance of nationalism incubated abroad. What is perhaps postmodern about the letter is the fact that it was emailed from Canberra to the newspaper's office in Port Moresby and made available to me through the World Wide Web on the newspaper's home page (<http://www.wr.com.au:80/national/>). But my point is that the author's nationalism was elicited and communicated by the same mass-mediated means through which nationality has been and continues to be disseminated in Papua New Guinea. Many of these mass mediations are commercial – advertisements for gasoline and corned beef – and many of the consumption practices that they seek to nationalize are mundane to the point of being banal. Nevertheless, I submit that these images and their effects in creating personal and collective identities warrant close scrutiny before we deem the prospects of 'new nations' to be closed.

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