

“But Aren’t We All Mixed Race?”: The Politics of Mixed-Race Identity and Belonging in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract: Mixed-race people in Papua New Guinea (PNG) have long been socially acknowledged as a distinct ethnic group—a group whose individual members sometimes also oscillate between being subsumed by, included within, or excluded from other racial categories like Asian, Black, Brown, Indigenous, and White. It is perhaps this ability to shift between what are often perceived as fixed racial categories that leaves some mixed-race people having to justify, negotiate, or explain the breakdown of their ethnic heritage to strangers, friends, and colleagues, some of whom think it is enlightened to say things like, “But aren’t we all mixed race?” or “Are you sure that’s what you are?” or the far less benign “You’re nothing but a mixed-race bastard.” This article examines historical and contemporary ideas about mixed-race identity in PNG in terms of both the privilege and oppression that members of this category experience. It stresses that racial identity in PNG is strongly connected to notions of *peles* (one’s place of Indigenous origin)—a reliance that is beyond the influence of colonialism—and is further shaped by language, behavior, and social relationships. Drawing on the work of Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, Epeli Hau’ofa, and Irma McClaurin, the article decolonizes data collection and analysis techniques and sets Black, Islander, and female perspectives at the core of the methodological approach. In addition, the author’s own socialization as a mixed-race woman of New Zealand Pakeha and PNG descent adds further insight to the topic.

Keywords: Papua New Guinea, mixed race, identity, Indigenous anthropology, *peles*, belonging

Introduction

In 1977, William Schulze—who in my interview joked that he is “pure mixed race” by account of both his mother and father being biracial—was the portfolio member for education in New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea (PNG). That year, he stood for a regional seat in the national elections, and, at one of the rallies in Namatanai, one of his opponents had paid someone to heckle him. William explained: “He got up and said, ‘You’re nothing but a mixed-race bastard. What would you know? *Yupla ol hapkas ol man blong giaman*. [All you mixed-race people are liars.]’ I responded, ‘Thank you for what you just said, but I didn’t ask God to make me a mixed race. If all your New Ireland women didn’t marry all the Europeans or Chinese or whatever other foreigners, there would be no mixed-race people in this province. You mean to tell me you are against our Black mothers also?’”¹ The crowd turned in William’s favor, confronting the heckler, who turned away in shame. He had disgraced himself. It was insulting. Not just for me but for all the women there. He bit off more than he could chew, so he took off and he never came back.

¹ William Schulze, interview by author. Unless surnames are provided, pseudonyms are used throughout this article to preserve the anonymity of informants.

So many points of analysis spring up from this vignette, some of which will be discussed later in this article. Of immediate interest is the fact that William's experience is neither an isolated incident nor one that is relegated to the past. In August 2018—some forty years after William's account—parliamentarian Bryan Kramer claimed that, among a barrage of antagonistic statements directed at him during a telephone conversation with then police commissioner Gary Baki, he too was called a “mix[ed] race bastard.”² The revelation caused a stir among Papua New Guineans (mixed and non-mixed alike), not least because, by extension, it was assumed that Baki felt the same way about his boss (and the man who appointed him), then prime minister Peter O'Neill. The question of why this kind of racism was still going on was also a major topic of conversation. In fact, it was Kramer's experience that prompted William to share his own story with me.

In this article, I examine historical and contemporary ideas about mixed-race identity in PNG in terms of both the privilege and oppression that members of this category experience. In doing so, I argue that racial identity in PNG is strongly connected to notions of *peles*.³ More than “village,” *peles* encompasses landscape, seascape, starscape, and spiritscape and denotes a person's place of Indigenous origin. Regardless of birthplace or migration, people often view *peles* as being “home,” and many speak about time spent in *peles* having the ability to strengthen ethnic identity and “recharge your energy supplies.”⁴ The concept is similar to *tūrangawaewae* in Aotearoa New Zealand or *kantri* in Australia.

As I have argued elsewhere, if your descent from *peles*—and all the things that implies: social relationships, kinship obligations, language, behavior—is what makes you Papua New Guinean, then your ability to draw descent from both *peles* and non-*peles* locations is what defines you as being mixed race.⁵ For example, my cousin's mother is Papua New Guinean, while his father is African American, and my cousin is classified as being mixed race, even though he draws heritage from two distinct groups who are both considered to be Black. To reiterate, what makes him a mixed-race Papua New Guinean is his ability to draw descent from both *peles* and non-*peles* locales. This simultaneous belonging and non-belonging not only defines a mixed-race person's identity but, for some, also permeates others' understandings of mixed-race people's knowledge, behavior, and attitudes. That is, while a mixed-race person might have spent time in their *peles*, if they are not fluent in *tokpeles* (vernacular language) or do not know how to do *kastom wok* (traditional practices and rituals), it is generally acknowledged that for some mixed-race people, this is a common aftereffect of colonialism when this group had to fight to attain the same rights as their parents and as a result may have experienced some separation from both.⁶

² The parliamentarian is currently PNG's minister for police. Bryan Kramer and Alexius Sengi, “So Baki Calls Me a Mix Race Bastard,” *Kramer Report*, Facebook, August 31, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/kramerreportpng/posts/1369355889867380?comment_id=1370294363106866&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R%22%7D.

³ As per Johnson and McGavin, “Constructing and Interpreting ‘Mixed Race,’” 103–15; McGavin, “Where Do You Belong?,” 57–74; McGavin, “Measuring Mixed Race,” 729–39.

⁴ McGavin, “Where Do You Belong?,” 69.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 57–74.

⁶ See McGavin, “Measuring Mixed Race,” 731.

It is my contention that this reliance on peles in the construction of PNG racial categories has proven to be beyond the influence of colonialism; that is, it survived annexation and colonial administration and continues to thrive today, almost five decades after the country's independence. Indeed, the concept of peles provides an important avenue for analyzing three important topics that arise from William's opening vignette: the perceived prevalence of mixed-race people having Black/Indigenous mothers and foreign fathers; a socially interpreted hierarchy that positions mixed-race people as somehow lacking the power, knowledge, or abilities of non-mixed Indigenous Papua New Guineans; and the categorization of mixed-race people as separate from their "parent" races.

Throughout this article, I draw on the work of Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, Epeli Hau'ofa, and Irma McClaurin to decolonize data collection and analysis techniques and to set Black, Islander, and female perspectives at the core of my methodological approach.⁷ In addition, I draw on my own socialization as a mixed-race woman of New Zealand Pakeha and New Guinea Islands descent to add further insight to the topic.⁸ Using these frameworks, I acknowledge my genealogy and its role in my work and use story and narrative as a tool not only to demonstrate or launch arguments but also to continue in the way of the oral traditions that permeate Pacific Island cultures. My data has been drawn from ethnographic interviews and participant observation conducted in mixed-race communities in PNG and Australia, with the most recent bout of specific fieldwork having been conducted in Kimbe, West New Britain, in December 2019 and January 2020.⁹ In March and June 2020, I also conducted a series of follow-up informal telephone interviews.

This article is divided into three sections. In the first, I present a brief history of race and migration in PNG to illuminate the social dynamics of the mixed-race experience and to provide context for the sections that follow. In the second, I explore the impact of gender and perceptions of race "hierarchies" on mixed-race identities. Here, I reinforce the idea that mixed-race identity in PNG is often multigenerational and has long been perceived as being a category separate from its "parent" races. In the third section, I examine the circumstances under which mixed-race people oscillate between racial categories.

Race and Migration in PNG: A Brief History

According to oral tradition in central New Ireland, Soi and Tamor—two brothers of distinct phenotypes and abilities—were hero-ancestors who gave the world, in various iterations of the tale, fish traps, fishing nets, magic, coconuts, pigs, and items of stone construction. The brothers are known by many different names throughout the New Guinea Islands and the greater Pacific, but it is

⁷ Tuhiwai-Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies*; Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean*; McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology*.

⁸ The New Guinea Islands region within PNG consists of East and West New Britain, Manus and New Ireland Provinces, and the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (historically referred to as the North Solomons). This area is largely consistent with what is sometimes referred to as the Bismarck Archipelago. I draw descent from Ranmalek in Lavongai, New Ireland, and social heritage from East and West New Britain.

⁹ I mark this fieldwork as "specific" because, arguably, as a mixed-race person who is part of a mixed-race and Papua New Guinean community, participant observation occurs on an everyday basis.

generally agreed that one brother came from or had mastery over the sea while the other was linked to the land.

This creation story highlights a historical connection between people, cultural practice, and place, and implies the cultural mixing of two groups, both of whom we Papua New Guineans call “ancestor.” Indeed, some academics suggest that this tale of two brothers is analogous to the two great human migrations that originally populated what is now PNG.¹⁰ Linguists refer to these groups as non-Austronesian speakers and Austronesian speakers, who arrived (respectively) around 40,000 and 1300 BCE.¹¹ The result of these migrations lend further testament to the importance of peles: extreme ethnocultural diversity, with over eight hundred different Indigenous languages in place. Traders, missionaries, planters, teachers, agriculturalists, and seamen—whether transient or long-term residents—came to PNG from all over the world. In this way, people from Australia, the Caroline Islands, China, Germany, Guam, the Philippines, New Zealand, Samoa, and the United States (among others) further complicated the country’s already much-varied ethnic makeup.

In 1884, Germany annexed the New Guinea Islands and the northern part of what is now mainland PNG. This area became known as German New Guinea or, more commonly, New Guinea, and its capital was Rabaul in East New Britain. In response, the Australians claimed the southern part of PNG’s mainland as a protectorate (for the British Empire) named Papua. Its capital was Port Moresby. The existence of these territories has had an enduring impact on people’s identities today, with local use of the terms “New Guinea” roughly corresponding with German New Guinea, and “Papuan” referring to anyone from the former protectorate.¹² Soon after World War I, Australia took over administration of both the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, and German planters and other workers (my great-great-grandfather among them) were forced to leave the country. Their departure was rapid, so many families were not able to say goodbye. Even so, the German influence remained strong, especially for their mixed-race offspring.

William, now in his late seventies, recounted the story of his mother’s father—a German—having to leave PNG:

My mother was about seven or eight, she was a boarder at Vunapope when he left. He owned Kalili Plantation on the west coast of New Ireland, but the government told him to leave so he got on a ship and, on its way back to Germany, it stopped in at Angola. He must have seen that it was a nice place and maybe he met some of his *wantoks* [countrymen] there, so he jumped ship and stayed. Those two [William’s mother and her father] used to write to each other, communicate back and forth, all the time. She was floating on cloud nine to receive his letters, a daddy’s girl, very, very close to her father. She never forgot him and always made sure we

¹⁰ For example, see Riesenfeld, *Megalithic Culture of Melanesia*, 258–59.

¹¹ Benton et al., “Complete Mitochondrial Genome Sequencing,” 2; O’Connell and Allen, “Dating the Colonisation of Sahul,” 835; Matisoo-Smith, “Tracking Austronesian Expansion,” 13432. Some archaeologists believe the migration of non-Austronesian speakers could have occurred as early as 60,000 BCE (O’Connell and Allen, “Dating the Colonisation of Sahul,” 835).

¹² The term “New Guinea” usually refers to the New Guinea Islands, as described earlier.

knew him too, but she never did have the opportunity to see him again after he left, and I'll never forget the day I came home from school and found my mother in tears, crying, sobbing. She said, "I think my father is gone." I asked her why she thought that, and she responded, "Because the letters have stopped coming."¹³

Many mixed-race children across the New Guinea Islands went to school at Vunapope, the German-run mission at Kokopo, near Rabaul in East New Britain. Indeed, many informants told me that while the Germans provided education, the Australians did not see the need for it—not surprising when, at the time, Australia viewed its own Indigenous population as inherently inferior and in need of "protection."¹⁴ With German being the language of instruction at Vunapope, it was arguably here that the German presence nurtured its most unique legacy: the world's only German creole, Unserdeutsch, still spoken today by my grandmother and her mixed-race contemporaries.¹⁵ Even when the mission arranged for American teachers to come and teach the children English after World War II, German was often still spoken at home.

Racial segregation, though not officially sanctioned, was certainly socially practiced in the Islands, with people—including those of mixed race—denied service or goods based on their race.¹⁶ Further, it seemed the practice of the day to only take seriously the needs of mixed-race people if they were seen to be living in the manner of the Europeans, actively dissociating themselves from their Papua New Guinean roots. In Rabaul, many mixed-race people lived in an area known as Malaitaun, until its destruction in 1994's volcanic eruption. While some may describe mixed-race people as being socially and culturally removed from notions of peles, I argue that Malaitaun serves as an important example of the emergence of quasi-peles locales, from which people even today draw heritage and assign social and kin relationships, alongside those that arise from "traditional" understandings of peles.

The Territory of Papua and New Guinea together gained independence in 1975, then becoming PNG. In the lead-up to political self-determination, the topic of citizenship was discussed by the Constitutional Planning Committee, with input received from various groups of community members across the country. Understandably, Indigeneity was an important factor, and some viewed this as a chance to correct the failed race relations of the colonial period. However, the question of whether mixed-race people were Indigenous enough to be granted automatic citizenship was a common one, with most groups seeming to prefer we be relegated to the status of outsider.¹⁷ In the

¹³ William, interview.

¹⁴ In many cases, "protection" involved the removal of children defined through legislation as being "neglected" based on the fact that they had Black mothers. Swain, *History of Child Protection Legislation*, 7; Reynolds, *Nowhere People*, 117.

¹⁵ On Unserdeutsch, see Holm, *Pidgins and Creoles*, 616–18.

¹⁶ McGavin, "Measuring Mixed Race," 732–33; Thomson, *Enquiry into the Social Conditions of the Mixed-Blood Population*, 28–33.

¹⁷ Ritchie, "Defining Citizenship for a New Nation," 149–52; Will Weng, "Papua New Guinea Facing Problems," *New York Times*, October 20, 1974, <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/10/20/archives/papua-new-guinea-facing-problems-deplores-racism.html>.

end, it was the debate on the proposed exclusion of mixed-race people that led many to immigrate to Australia around the time of independence.

Sherman, a mixed-race man in his eighties explained: “We [mixed-race people] were getting a lot of threats. They [non-mixed Indigenous Papua New Guineans] didn’t want us there. We didn’t have much choice [but to leave]. But I didn’t want to. None of us wanted to. But it was more a question of safety.”¹⁸ Despite having moved to Australia in the 1970s, Sherman still considers himself to be Papua New Guinean and, most years, visits the country to see relatives for months at a time. Karl, a mixed-race man in his forties whose family remained in PNG, described his parents’ experience:

There was a lot of discrimination. I mean, there still is, but it was really bad back then. We [mixed-race people] would get a lot of shit. They’d [non-mixed Indigenous Papua New Guineans] call us “drifters,” or *samting nating* [something of little consequence, nothing], or tell us we didn’t belong anywhere. But they didn’t realize we were getting that from the Whites as well, so we gave it back to them, stood up for ourselves, and it [the discrimination] slowed down a lot. At one big *pasim maus* [funeral ceremony involving the exchange of goods] my mother organized everything, shocked everyone, because they all looked at her like, “She’s mixed race; she knows nothing,” but actually she was the only one who knew all the right things to do for the *kastom* [“traditional” cultural work]. Now they know—about the *kastom* and not to look down on us.¹⁹

Interestingly, PNG’s recent approval of dual citizenship also positions mixed-race people at its center—not through analysis of whether or not we are Indigenous enough but rather by ignoring our existence altogether. Many mixed-race people told me things like Valerie, a mixed-race woman in her forties, did: “I had to give up my PNG citizenship when I was eighteen [under former rules that did not allow dual citizenship] and I was devastated. Now, I might have a chance to get it back, but they don’t even make allowances for whether we’re from there or not. I have PNG blood. Shouldn’t that be enough?”²⁰ Peles has always been important to PNG identity, although since foreign groups began visiting the region, it has become a racial marker as well, signifying not only Indigeneity but also whether or not someone is mixed race (able to draw descent from peles and non-peles), of mixed parentage (drawing descent only from two or more peles locations), or a foreigner.²¹ Karl’s story, like William’s and Sherman’s, highlights the idea that some non-mixed Indigenous Papua New Guineans view mixed-race people as lacking “traditional” knowledge and connection to peles. There is a sense that mixed-race people therefore have to fight for acceptance, a right to belong, in the wider community. Valerie’s story is testament that, in certain areas, this struggle continues.

¹⁸ Sherman, interview by author.

¹⁹ Karl, interview by author.

²⁰ Valerie, interview by author.

²¹ “Mixed parentage” will be discussed further in the following section. See also Johnson and McGavin, “Constructing and Interpreting ‘Mixed Race,’” 103–15; McGavin, “Where Do You Belong?,” 57–74.

Black Mothers and Race Hierarchies

I have already mentioned that, in terms of peles, a type of race-based hierarchy exists in the minds of some Papua New Guineans that places non-mixed Indigenous Papua New Guineans at its apex. If mixed-race Papua New Guineans follow, then foreigners are at its lowest level—although some non-mixed Indigenous Papua New Guineans might attempt to conflate these two categories. Such a hierarchy has, at its core, the idea that peles has power: to ground ethnoracial identities; to mark ancestry, descent, and belonging; to establish land ownership and inheritance; to determine clan membership; to provide language; to define social relationships and kinship obligations; and to establish authority.²² Urbanization, globalization, and domestic and international migration may have altered how some people connect with peles, but it does not mean that the relevance of peles is in any way lessened.

Much of the New Guinea Islands region is matrilineal, so a person's peles affiliation is acquired through the mother. This is an important factor in the identity of many mixed-race people (i.e., those of us with Black mothers) because it means that we have legitimate claims to peles through simple "traditional" channels. However, even when peles is traced through the father's line in a matrilineal region, children can still claim affiliation and full clan rights, usually through payment by the mother's family to the father's, which then facilitates an agreement of belonging.²³ This is not something that arose out of the needs of mixed-race people but something that aligns with "traditional" practices. The reverse is also true in patrilineal areas.

In outlining the scope of his research, R. Thomson clearly stated in his 1952 report that it would be a fallacy to believe that the term "half-caste," though frequently used by mixed-race people and others, actually referred to someone who was half race x and half race y. He conceded, "From the time the first Europeans settled in colonial areas [racial] mixtures have taken place and it is around European communities that the majority of mixed-blood folk are found today."²⁴ That many mixed-race people in the first three-quarters of the twentieth century had foreign fathers and Papua New Guinean mothers was not a surprise, given that the bulk of foreign visitors and residents were men. Even so, the idea that mixed-race people had Black mothers and White (or Asian) fathers was somewhat symbolic, given that marriage between mixed-race people has been common for over a century.²⁵ Thomson's report backs this up, acknowledging that the multigenerational nature of their identity meant that it was generally accepted that mixed-race people were a distinct group.²⁶ Indeed, as mentioned at the opening of this article, William often joked that he is a "pure" mixed race, citing the fact that both of his parents are from that category, and he is far from alone in that assertion. Despite this apparent unification, mixed-race people seem to have historically been associated with dual

²² McGavin, "Where Do You Belong?," 63–66.

²³ *Ibid.*, 68–69.

²⁴ Thomson, *Enquiry into the Social Conditions of the Mixed-Blood Population*, 4.

²⁵ McGavin, "Measuring Mixed Race," 730–31.

²⁶ Thomson, *Enquiry into the Social Conditions of the Mixed-Blood Population*, 79.

potential: the ability to “save” PNG through improved socioeconomic standing and the ability to “destroy” the country through not offering adequate leadership in that regard.²⁷

As mentioned previously, the period between World War II and independence saw society look with continued socioeconomic favor upon mixed-race people who actively distanced themselves from their Papua New Guinean ties and attempted to align themselves with European ways of life. For some mixed-race people, this has led to multigenerational distancing from “traditional” notions of peles and is especially evident in families who have immigrated overseas. For example, today, many mixed-race Papua New Guineans whose parents immigrated to Australia know little of their actual peles and, when describing the minutiae of their ethnic backgrounds, refer solely to places like Malaitaun, provincial capitals, or provinces at large. Despite this, they access peles in other ways, for example, through acquiring patriotic tattoos, learning Tok Pisin, citing PNG blood, nurturing kin and social relationships, and journeying back to PNG for the specific purpose of reconnecting with ethnic roots.²⁸ This last point seems to be the method of most value, both for the returnee and for those in PNG who interact with them.²⁹

Nevertheless, mixed-race people who do not know exactly where they are from or who have not been to their peles are usually accepted as being in that predicament as a consequence of historical circumstance. As a result, they are generally afforded more leeway and social acceptance in attempting to access their claim to peles-based (or quasi-peles-based) identity than would a non-mixed Indigenous Papua New Guinean with the same “affliction.” Even so, such instances still work to reinforce the peles-based hierarchy.

More recent times have seen the emergence of a “mixed-parentage” identity, whereby the person draws heritage from two or more peles locations in PNG, with no claim of foreign descent.³⁰ Usually, the person’s peles affiliations are in different regions, although aligning with peles in two different provinces might also allow them this title. The existence of this identity grouping not only further highlights the importance of peles but also provides an example of the elastic nature of peles itself. For example, a person with two different peles affiliations in the one province is unlikely to claim mixed parentage. Why? Because these peles are likely perceived as being too similar to create any spark of duality—unless perhaps they were from peles so distant within the province that the vernacular languages were mutually unintelligible. As a result, provinces sometimes emerge as quasi-peles. Interestingly, in certain circumstances, the entirety of PNG may be seen as peles (i.e., the place with peles). This is exemplified in the case of one informant (among several) whose mother was from Rabaul and whose father was African American. Despite having two Black parents, he was still seen as being mixed race.

People who claim mixed parentage sometimes use the term “mixed race” to describe themselves. To my knowledge, this act of “passing” is not very common, but it is usually combined

²⁷ Ibid., 21–27.

²⁸ See McGavin, “Representations of Pacific Islander Identity,” 273, for other methods employed for remotely connecting to Island identities.

²⁹ McGavin, “(Be)Longings,” 135–37.

³⁰ Johnson and McGavin, “Constructing and Interpreting ‘Mixed Race,’” 104.

with changes in accent or language, dress, and behavior, and irritates many mixed-race people.³¹ Ethan, a mixed-race man in his thirties, explained: “They know the difference, 100 percent. They’re just doing it to try and be more like us [mixed-race people]. They don’t understand we’ve had our own struggles. It makes me so angry on so many levels for so many reasons. And it’s not right. Locals shouldn’t have to pretend they’re something they’re not. We’re all equal.”³²

Why would mixed-parentage people feel the need to “pass” as mixed race? During my PhD research from 2003 to 2005, I discovered that, especially in more isolated and rural areas of the Islands region, there was a perception that White people—any White person—were rich. To a certain extent, the idea of race indicating someone’s socioeconomic class also applies to mixed-race people. That is, there is a perception that mixed-race people have decent access to formal education, well-paid or stable jobs, and the ability to readily travel domestically and internationally.

Such privileges are perceived as being experienced by mixed-race people through the country’s second, race-based hierarchy. In an informal opinion piece, Philip Fitzpatrick, a self-described “old bloke,” who currently lives in Australia and was presumably in PNG before or around the time of independence, describes this hierarchy as having been strictly adhered to and consisting of, from its apex to base, “European, Chinese, Mixed Race, Educated Papua New Guinean, Bush Kanaka.”³³ Although Fitzpatrick’s account implies some leeway for social advancement through formal education, this was rarely the case, especially given continued inadequacies in access to essential services and the lack of schools. In the lead-up to independence, White people were the administrators, the managers, the teachers—those in positions of power, who controlled the economy and oversaw infrastructural development. Besides which, Fitzpatrick’s account clearly names race groups—difficult boundaries to breach, even when you are mixed race.³⁴

The fact that mixed-race people had to fight for the right to access the same privileges as their foreign parents (largely unsuccessfully) and were subject to White Australian government workers making decisions about the future of their group provides further evidence of this hierarchy.³⁵ In many ways, the hierarchy still exists today, with (often White) expatriate workers filling highly paid management roles in which they are supposed to train Papua New Guinean workers to replace them, but rarely do. Indeed, I heard from many informants the saying, “If you’re Black, get back. If you’re Brown, stay down. If you’re White, you’re right.” This phrasing is often used to lament the financial inequalities experienced by different race groups in the New Guinea Islands. Such disparities were and are not confined to the Islands. Burton Bradley also described the European-apical race hierarchy in the Papuan region.³⁶

Even today, these opposing race- and class-based hierarchies exist in PNG. In a country where we have dual court systems, dual monetary systems, and three official languages, perhaps this shows we

³¹ Johnson and McGavin, “Constructing and Interpreting ‘Mixed Race,’” 111–12.

³² Ethan, interview by author. In this case, “locals” refers to non-mixed Indigenous Papua New Guineans.

³³ The term “Bush Kanaka” is highly derogatory. While it refers to a non-mixed Indigenous Papua New Guinean who lives a “traditional” lifestyle, it also implies a sense of unsophistication and ignorance.

³⁴ Fitzpatrick, “Those Gorgeous and Unattainable Ladies of PNG.”

³⁵ See Thomson, *Enquiry into the Social Conditions of the Mixed-Blood Population*.

³⁶ Burton-Bradley, *Mixed Race Society in Port Moresby*, 10–11.

are well equipped to navigate the differences of two (albeit conflicting) hierarchies as well. However, a race-based hierarchy linked to socioeconomic class is surely a systemic leftover of our colonial history that we must work to eliminate.

“Are You Sure That’s What You Are?”: Tales of Oscillation

When I was a child, near my dad’s house in Queensland there was a yogurt shop my brother and I used to go to for flurries—a cup of soft-serve frozen yogurt blended with our choice of fruit and/or candy. The store was run by a Greek woman who asked us, after a few visits, where we were from. Our initial answer was “Australia,” to which the woman smiled and said, “No, I mean where are you really from?” Then we told her, “Papua New Guinea and New Zealand.” She shook her head and asked, “Are you sure that’s what you are?” I remember thinking at the time that it was an odd question; after all, we were old enough to buy our own flurries, surely, we were old enough to know where we were from, *what we were*. It soon became clear she thought we were her *wantoks*, as that visit—and for many afterward—she gave us free flurries. Later, perhaps as her certainty in our ethnic background waned, it changed to only free mix-ins, but the benefits of our racial ambiguity were still there.

Over the years, I’ve been asked those questions many times, and, despite my honesty, such interactions have led to other free products—from Indian restaurants, Moroccan cafes, Iranian food vans. My experience is far from unique. Marcel, a mixed-race man in his forties, first described his ethnic background and then explained the benefits of the way he happens to look:

I’m PNG/Chinese. And some other things, but “PNG/Chinese” is the bulk of it and that’s what I usually say. People don’t need to hear all the rest. They usually think I’m Samoan, Maori, Filipino, Indonesian, Malaysian, Hawaiian—anything but what I am. It doesn’t really bother me. It’s kind of cool to be thought of in all those different ways. I’ve gotten a free haircut or two because the barber thought I was an *uso*.³⁷ But one of the best things is when Papua New Guineans are around and they don’t recognize you and start speaking Pidgin, thinking you don’t understand. That’s fun, especially when they’re talking about you. You have to make a decision, “How long am I going to let this play out?” “When am I going to do the big reveal?” or whether you’re going to do the reveal at all.³⁸

Note Marcel’s refining of his ethnic background to just two groups (PNG and Chinese) rather than listing the specific intricacies of his descent. This is common. For some informants, doing so served to preserve an element of sanctity or privacy about their identities, while for others, it was the idea that nobody would be interested in actually hearing a long list of ethnicities once they had already been given reason for their Blackness or Brownness.

³⁷ “Uso” is the Samoan word for a same-sex sibling (i.e., brother or sister, depending on the speaker’s gender).

³⁸ Marcel, interview by author.

During the first meetings, for many, their racial ambiguity most often triggered what some have labeled the “‘What are you?’ game,” as I’ve described at the beginning of this section. Rosa, a mixed-race woman in her sixties, described how such questions usually play out for her: “In PNG, yes, they know I’m mixed race but they also call me White, even though I’m clearly not. In Australia or New Zealand, suddenly I’m Black. People make assumptions all the time about where I’m from. I don’t really mind, especially because I’m so mixed that a lot of the guesses they make, I’m actually part that anyway. But some of the wrong guesses make me think, ‘Do I really look like that, or is it just that people don’t really know?’”³⁹ Shellee, a mixed-race woman in her thirties, had a similar experience. She said:

If I’m in PNG, it’s usually okay. People here are used to us mixed races so they don’t really bother asking where I’m from—unless it’s to figure out which peles or province, stuff like that. That kind of question people ask every day, whenever you meet someone new, no matter if you’re mixed or not. But when I’m in Australia, it’s so different. It’s like people there can’t comprehend mixed-race people exist. It’s all, “Are you sure that’s what you are?” or just like blank stares. Generally, I’m seen as Black or Brown when I’m there. There were a couple of times when I was younger [in Australia] when these idiots in the neighborhood were calling my sister and I the N-word. Do you know how weird it is to be Black enough to be called the N-word but not Black enough to be able to say it? Not that I’d want to say it anyway. It’s hideous.⁴⁰

Shellee’s comments on the racism she has received in Australia remind me of what one of my friends, Laura, a mixed-race woman in her forties, told me: “I love Meghan Markle. I’m so excited she’s part of the royal family. It’s so awesome to see a Black, mixed-race woman in there. Doesn’t it kind of make you feel ... I mean, she’s one of us! I saw this thing on the internet about how she’s barely Black—made me so angry. She’s Black enough to have all this racism thrown her way, by the media or ... didn’t she also get some threatening letters or something ridiculous?”⁴¹ Together, Laura’s account and later conversations I had with Shellee highlight what is true for many young mixed-race Papua New Guineans: an affinity for and an alignment with the experiences of Black Americans. This type of global Blackness is not new and, I argue, is a natural part of Melanesians’—as Black Islanders—navigation through international media (in its broadest sense).⁴² For example, the movie *Black Panther* (2018) probably sparked more dialogue on identity, power, and representation among my group of mixed-race Papua New Guinean contemporaries than did *Aquaman* (2018) or *Moana* (2016). And that is so, even despite *Aquaman*’s barrage of “half-breed” commentary throughout.

In this section, I have highlighted some of the perceived benefits enjoyed by people whose appearance allows them some leeway in being placed into multiple ethnic categories. However, this

³⁹ Rosa, interview by author.

⁴⁰ Shellee, interview by author.

⁴¹ Laura, personal conversation with author.

⁴² On global Blackness, see McGavin, “Being ‘Nesian,’” 138.

ambiguity does not always lead to pleasant outcomes, with the results ranging from slight irritation to being on the receiving end of blatantly racist acts and speech. As Black Islanders, many mixed-race Papua New Guineans associate their identities in the same ballpark as Black Americans, as well as with other Pacific Islanders. This is our lived experience.

Conclusion

Sometimes, when I talk about mixed-race identity at conferences or seminars, (usually) White people ask me, “But aren’t we all mixed race?” I understand that the people who ask me this question are probably coming from the relatively benign position that racism is bad, color-blindness is good, and the existence of mixed-race identity might reinforce the dangerous idea that there are “pure” races.⁴³ This last point, of course, screams of the fact that Western science has—relatively recently—acknowledged that race is more a social construct than a biological reality and, throughout history, its concept has been created, politicized, and then misused to deliver enormous injustice to human populations across the globe (e.g., slavery, apartheid, genocide). Such atrocities have been historically endorsed by governments and legitimated by Western science and are today looked upon with great horror by most people—some of whom fearfully believe that talking about people’s lived experiences vis-à-vis race may lead us all back down that terrible path.

Conversely, I suggest that in examining the permeability of racial boundaries and analyzing the experiences of those of us whose positions fluctuate at those margins, we can better understand, dismantle, and critique race-based systems of injustice in all their forms. As G. Reginald Daniel, Laura Kina, Wei Ming Dariotis, and Camilla Fojas attest, examining nuanced mixed-race experiences facilitates the critical examination of “local and global systemic injustices grounded in social processes of racialization and social stratification based on race.”⁴⁴

The question “aren’t we all mixed race?” has been a common challenge, touted for decades now by critics of the field of multiracial studies.⁴⁵ While it is true that any random person’s traced lineage may reveal ancestors from various continents, ethnic categories, and cultural backgrounds, being mixed race is about lived experience and identity—not just ancestry. The suggestion that “all people are mixed race” works to delegitimize my lived experience and that of my mixed-race forefathers.⁴⁶ It strips my community of an identity that we have both endured and nurtured and, today, self-deterministically claim as our own.

Those who ask, I argue, confuse ancestry with (and prioritize it at the expense of) lived experience. They do not understand the history of our group nor our continuing struggles. Mixed-race people in PNG have been the subject of identity politics—at both the state and social levels—since

⁴³ The term “color-blindness” is used in its social sense, whereby “color” is associated with “race.” Some academics argue that color-blind ideologies are unable to address racial discrimination because they risk not being able to acknowledge it. See Daniel et al., “Emerging Paradigms,” 22; and Harvey-Wingfield, “Color-Blindness Is Counterproductive.”

⁴⁴ Daniel et al., “Emerging Paradigms,” 8.

⁴⁵ Daniel, *More than Black?*, 11.

⁴⁶ Fozdar and McGavin, “‘Mixed Race’ in the Australo-Pacific Region,” 2.

long before the country's independence in 1975. We have been seen simultaneously as having the potential to save and destroy our country, and we have had to fight for the right to belong—to our fatherland, to our motherland, to clans, and to peles. Others make judgments on our level of “traditional” knowledge or our educational savvy based solely on perceptions of our “mixed blood.” Each day seems to bring a new opportunity for us to justify, reinforce, explain, or renegotiate our ethn racial identities, whether to strangers, friends, colleagues, *wantoks*, or family. That is the mixed-race privilege: multiplicity—the ability to oscillate back and forth between what are, for others, more rigid categories and to simultaneously exist in a third space. So, my simple response to those who ask whether we are all mixed race is, “No, we are not.”

In PNG, the reliance on peles as a marker of race serves to override “traditional” race categories, whereby someone with two Black parents may still be considered mixed race if one parent can draw descent from peles and the other cannot. Therefore, despite its enormous ethnocultural diversity, despite its strong regional identities, the whole of PNG may be considered to be a racial category unto itself (i.e., the place with peles). Furthermore, mixed-race people in PNG have long been acknowledged as a distinct ethnic group. Indeed, endogamous marriages have meant that mixed-race identity is often multigenerational, and, even in cases where terms like “half-caste” are used (even as far back as the 1950s), it does not actually mean “half race x and half race y.” In a way, these factors work together to delegitimize the existence of race itself.

Finally, it is important to note that, while I am a mixed-race Papua New Guinean and have presented herein the personal accounts of others within that same grouping (basing my work on over twenty years of anthropological research and a lifetime of socialization as a mixed-race girl/woman), this article cannot speak for all of us. There will be other mixed-race Papua New Guineans whose experiences diverge significantly from those detailed within this article. It is my professional and personal hope that this article provides some space within the discipline of anthropology, and in academia generally, for these others to speak their truth as well.

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