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Engendering Gesture: Gender Performativity and Bodily Regimes from New Ireland

Richard Eves

Following Marcel Mauss, who argued that the way people move and position their bodies is socially learned and culturally specific, I examine the ways that bodies move in one particular culture in Papua New Guinea, namely the Lelet. I extend Mauss' insights by drawing on the work of Judith Butler, who suggests that gender is a performance rather than instinctive. Looking at the kinds of actions Lelet women perform, I argue that these play an important part in constituting them as gendered beings. Lelet women's bodily movements, comportments and dispositions are heavily circumscribed by conventions that define what sorts of movements are appropriate to their gender. This process of engendering is quintessentially about power and shows how particular forms of power produce particular subjects. Although these gender conventions are sometimes enforced by punitive means, women largely come to embody them as a process of self-government. Although the Christian church has upheld such conventions in the past, the Pentecostal Christianity the Lelet now practice has produced departures from them, which I analyse.

Keywords: Body; Gender; Movement; Papua New Guinea; Pentecostal Christianity

Introduction

After observing that the Polynesians did not swim in the same way as Europeans, Marcel Mauss came to realise that the way people move and position their bodies is not simply natural. Rather, people sit, walk, run, swim and dance in different ways in different cultures, for 'each society has its own special habits' (Mauss 1934/1992, p. 457). The movement and placement of the body, Mauss concluded, is learned behaviour that is culturally sanctioned through 'a set of permissible or impermissible, natural or unnatural attitudes' (Mauss 1934/1992, p. 462). To make the point that

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people learn socially how to use their bodies, Mauss coined the term 'techniques of the body', indicating that movement is an acquired form of embodied knowledge (Mauss 1934/1992, p. 457).

Mauss' work is an important precursor to much of the contemporary anthropological interest in the body, significant because it calls attention to the complex relationship between culture and the body, in particular to the distinctive ways that a culture becomes embodied. His work is antecedent to the question posed by Thomas Csordas: 'Why not then begin with the premise that the fact of our embodiment can be a valuable starting point for rethinking the nature of culture and our existential situation as cultural beings?' (Csordas 1994, p. 6). This draws attention to the ways that the body and its gestures are engendered, a point Mauss had already recognised when he noted that these techniques of the body are conditional upon sex and age (Mauss 1934/1992, p. 462).

One significant theorist who revisits Mauss' focus on the social nature of embodied action is Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1977; Farnell 2000, p. 401). In its focus on habituated practices, Bourdieu's conception of habitus, that system of durable transposable dispositions that functions as a generative system for action, bears some similarity to Mauss' 'techniques of the body'. Habitus comprises an organising principle for action and is the basis for regular modes of behaviour without determining the specific practices that take place.

However, despite Mauss' insights having been taken up in such ways, the specific gender dimensions of his work have not been equally pursued. Here, I offer a corrective to this by examining how gesture is engendered through techniques of the body, those dispositions, comportments and movements that characterise different cultures. By far the best way to comprehend the ways that people act in the world is to turn to careful ethnographies where local conceptions that are not always verbally expressed are made explicit (Morris 1995, p. 575). Taking my lead from Mauss, and informed by the work of Bourdieu and Judith Butler, I examine how women in one community in Papua New Guinea are socialised to move their bodies in certain ways.

Ethnographic Context

My ethnography comes from fieldwork with the people of the Lelet Plateau, a region in central New Ireland (see Eves 1998). A rural community of approximately 1,000 people, the Lelet live in widely dispersed hamlets centred on four main villages that form the nucleus of their social, political and religious life. They have a long history of contact with Western social forms, practices and ideas; the many influences and pressures they have experienced in the past century have come mainly from the cash economy, Christian missionaries, colonial governments and the 'postcolonial' nation-state. However, life continues to be dominated by the rhythms of subsistence agriculture, cash cropping and regular attendance at church. Like many in Papua New Guinea, the Lelet practice shifting cultivation and, wherever possible in the rugged karst landscape, gardens occupy the sides of hills and the valleys, producing crops such as the culturally

important taro, sweet potato and Western and Asian vegetables for selling in the provincial capital, Kavieng.

The Lelet cultural world is largely refracted through the lens of gender and conceptualisations of the gendered body. This is not to be understood as subjugating the bodily to the semantic (Csordas 1994, p. 11). Rather, the semantic describes the bodily engagement with the world. I would argue, much as in the work of Mauss, that the body is the original tool with which humans shape their world and, at the same time, the original substance out of which the human world is shaped (Csordas 1994, p. 6). As Csordas points out, when the body returned to centre stage in the early 1990s, many anthropologists were using the term 'body' without much sense of 'bodiliness' in their analyses—rather, it was little more than a synonym for 'self' or 'person' (Csordas 1994, p. 4). This tended to dissipate the force of using the body as a methodological starting point and to objectify bodies as mere things without intentionality or intersubjectivity (Csordas 1994, p. 4). Against this, my standpoint is that although the body is a source for representations, it is also a ground for being in the world (Csordas 2001, p. 1273).

The semiotic use of the body, of drawing images, metaphors and tropes from it, is an example of what Michael Jackson refers to as 'thinking through the body' (1989, p. 139). However, this is only one aspect of a much broader corporeal mode of engagement with the world, for in its movement through space, the body is integral to the process by which the world is known, valued and inhabited by the Lelet. Indeed, as I have argued more fully elsewhere (Eves 1997), for the Lelet bodily movement is integral to the transformation of space into lived place.

Discourses about the gendered body structure the different actions of men and women in the world, including the way that different bodies are positioned in relation to space, time and power. These discourses define what is permissible and what is not in bodily movement for both men and women. For example, general sociocultural understandings of women's bodies and their powers define the types of labour women can engage in and the spaces they can occupy.

Images, metaphors and tropes drawn from the body pervade and constitute the Lelet world, how it is conceptualised and how it is inhabited. The bodily comportment of sitting or being seated is widely used by the Lelet to express notions of harmony and abundance, as well as rootedness or being firmly located in place, as I have described in detail elsewhere (Eves 1998). The idiom is commonly used in relation to the social harmony existing within the community—for example, the place, *lemenemen*, is said not to be seated properly if there are conflicts over land or over various social transgressions, such as adultery. Hence, during a period of discord, when an accusation of sorcery had been made, the place was referred to as 'the seating is broken' (*lixis epeseves*), evoking connotations of a community that was dispersed and fragmented. Seating is also widely used in garden and feast magic to ensure the production of ample food. Thus, a magician invokes the most culturally important food, namely taro, to sit down here (*kis de*) when performing magic in a garden. This comportment is also associated positively with sociality; the importance of calling out to people as they walk

past—'*unde kis de*' or 'you come and sit down here'—was emphasised to me on many occasions. Not only does this trope convey a warm welcome, but it also conveys the commensal sharing of food because Lelet etiquette has it that food should be offered to anyone.

Performing Gender

The approach of Judith Butler has much in common with practice theorists, such as Bourdieu. Both stress that actions may occur through processes that are beyond the conscious control or awareness of the individual. Butler places emphasis on the ways that culture is embodied and reproduced through participation in social practices and rituals and in day-to-day activities. Similarly to Mauss, Butler provides a useful way of understanding the different forms that gender can take, proposing that gendered being is not a natural condition but a continual production, or 'performance'. Rather than taking gender to be a core identity prior to its expression, Butler (1990, 1993) considers it to be a social construct, created through the relational practices that occur between people (Weston 1993, p. 5). Gender is a doing, although not a doing by a subject who may be said to pre-exist the deed: 'There is no gender identity behind expressions of gender' (Butler 1990, p. 25). As she writes:

> Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler 1990, p. 140, emphasis in original)

Drawing on Michel Foucault's understanding that forms of power produce particular subjects, Butler observes that 'power works in part through discourse and it works in part to produce and destabilise subjects' (Butler 1994, p. 33). Performativity, then, is an aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names or enacts (1993, p. 13, 1994, p. 33). 'Acting', as in performing an action, does not have to mean playing a feigned part as on the stage; it can mean simply 'doing'. When a person performs an act such as sitting, sweeping or walking, this is not usually a contrived or conscious performance; similarly, performing the feminine is usually an equally uncontrived, but nevertheless a learned, act. We may say that gendered behaviour is not natural, but becomes naturalised.

It is important to note that Butler's theory does not propose a passive subject, entirely moulded by external social forces. Indeed, one of the major criticisms directed at Bourdieu's concept of habitus is that it is overly deterministic and lacks an adequate conception of the nature and location of human agency (LiPuma 1993, p. 24; Ortner 1996, pp. 11, 133; Farnell 2000, p. 403). For Bourdieu, although there are actors who strategise, 'their strategies are drawn from an internalized habitus that

is itself a virtual mirror of external limitations and possibilities' (Ortner 1996, p. 11). Conversely, for Butler 'performativity offers the possibility of restyling [the] body in non-normative and occasionally subversive ways' (Morris 1995, p. 573; see Butler 1993, p. 10, 1994, p. 33). Opportunities sometimes become available that allow people to step outside or transgress the norms, acts that can lead to those norms being reconstituted or redefined. However, it is also important to recognise that the freedom of choice of any agent is limited by the possibilities that are practically available in their situation. People are not completely free agents, 'not only in the sense that they do not have the freedom to formulate and realize their own goals in a social vacuum, but also in the sense that they do not have the ability to fully control those relations toward their own ends' (Ortner 2006, p. 152). As social beings, Sherry Ortner argues, 'they can only work within the many webs of relations that make up their social worlds' (Ortner 2006, p. 152). This is particularly apparent in the case of Lelet women, whose possibilities for action are often severely circumscribed.

For the Lelet, the feminine is especially associated with the bodily comportment of being seated or sitting.[1] This is partly a consequence of women's particular connection with the land in their matrilineal system, but it is much more a consequence of the more limited movements women are allowed according to culturally defined norms of femininity. Such norms were reinforced by the exposure of the Lelet to the pedagogical regimes of Methodist missionaries for many years, from early in the twentieth century. When converting New Irelanders to Christianity, the missionaries and their coworkers put great emphasis on the body as a definitive marker of conversion and moral reform. As I have suggested elsewhere (Eves 1996), the Methodists saw the reworking of the consciousness of the converts as integrally bound up with a recasting of their bodies. Moral reform, and indeed social reform, in the eyes of the missionaries was dependent on bodily reform (Eves 1996, p. 89). This required that the converts learn, through pedagogical regimes such as drill, mat making and sewing, the embodied habits, dispositions and comportments of the missionaries (Eves 1996). The conjuncture between local bodily practices and the missionaries' bodily reforms has undoubtedly given the Lelet techniques of the body a greater impact. The kinds of proscriptions for women evident in local kinship etiquette, with its emphasis on circumspect movement and docility, fitted very well with the missionary practices, which also sought to produce docile bodies, especially among women.

Lelet women's names reflect the immobile state that they are perceived to embody relative to men and should ideally embody, and this is why the verb to sit or to be seated, *i kis*, is often used. Some of the names given to women include Kisauat, to sit down steadfastly like a stone; Kiskot, to make one's home in a place that is not a traditional hamlet site; Kisbin, to sit down [live] in a place without people; Kisgomat, to live in the place Lavatgomat; Kismiding, to sit on [own] shell valuables; Kiskarun, to sit down [be] without parents; Kisina, to sit down on [owe] a debt; and Kismarua, to sit down in the half light. Men's names contrast with women's names, tending to be derived from more active states or from things that connote mobility or power, such as pigs, fish or wealth. The verb *i kis* is never used for men.[2]

Because naming has the capacity to produce what it names, the bestowal of names with gendered meanings produces Lelet norms of femininity and masculinity. Paramount in the creation of normative gender categories is the ethos of shame, *lamamang*, which applies especially to matters of sexuality, but also to kinship and affinal relationships more generally. Shame embraces what English speakers call embarrassment and shyness and manifests itself in a great reluctance to speak about sex. Shame is experienced in the everyday in the relationships of avoidance that apply to certain categories of relatives. Women's bodily movement and placement is heavily circumscribed and this applies both to the vertical and horizontal space they can occupy. Not only is women's movement hedged by more kinship rules, and particularly stringent avoidance relationships, but it is more generally inhibited. An example from my most recent fieldwork in 2008 illustrates this. Before the regular Monday morning community meeting, at which announcements are made, issues debated and decisions occasionally reached, the men generally sit around and chat while the women weed and sweep the cleared area where the meeting takes place. One Monday, while I sat chatting with a group of men waiting for the meeting to begin, a woman I knew quite well approached us closely with her sweeping, taking care to repeatedly say the word *lokngao* (respect). Although she was not in avoidance relationships with any of these men, she felt it necessary to signify to them that she was being deferential as she approached.

The heaviest restrictions on the movement of women pertain to the avoidance relationships they must observe with their male cross-cousins, their brothers and a particular category of affine, the *nasong*. These include strictures on all forms of familiarity, such as physical or notional contact, the mention of personal names and any kind of knowledge pertaining to sexuality. Should a brother and sister meet on a path, for example, they should avoid coming close to each other, but the onus is on the woman to move out of her brother's way. This usually means that the woman turns and moves into nearby bushes or she may simply look in the opposite direction. A woman's sexual life must be kept hidden from her brothers—to the extent that a brother must not go near his sister's bed or walk under her clothing hanging out to dry. If a woman's illicit sexual relationships are divulged in a public context, she may even go so far as to commit suicide out of shame.

Similar avoidance rules pertain to constructions such as houses and seats. For example, if a man has carried flooring materials for a house, women in avoidance relationships with him must not enter that house because he has carried these materials on his shoulder. A woman entering the house is seen symbolically to be surmounting his shoulder, thus positioning herself above him so that he can see her genitals. Because the Lelet strongly link seeing and desire, he will be unable to control his desire for her and the incest prohibition will be breached.

However, the rules about the positioning of bodies are concerned with far more than the avoidance of incest, because there is a universal rule concerning their vertical positioning irrespective of kinship and affinal relationships: women's bodies must never be positioned above men's, because in placing their genitals where they may be

seen, they are inciting sexual misconduct. The scope of women's freedom to act in the world is severely limited by such proscriptions.

Dancing Bodies

The routine feminine mode of circumspect movement and docility also dictates the form of women's dances, which generally consist of line formations, with slow movement and minimal leg uplift, in unison. The dancers may hold some flowers or croton leaves that they wave languidly in front of themselves. Men's dances, in contrast, involve great exertion and extremely vigorous movement, often of a disorderly kind. Except for the *tubuan* masked figure, men's dances are also in line formation and some of the movements are not unlike the women's, but they exhibit much more speed, vigour and leg uplift. Moreover, women do not use some of the powerful magical paraphernalia, such as the magical dance objects *langarol*, that male dancers hold. Using these means having contact with powerful and dangerous substances and spirit beings that causes violent and uncontrollable shaking in the dancers. Such disorderly bodily movements indicate a male dancer's supreme effort to withstand these dangerous forces, and his ability to do so (see Eves 2004, 2009a, 2009b).

Women, particularly those who are of a reproductive age, are believed to embody the quality of heaviness, *laram*. Rather than as a form of pollution, associated with dirt and disorder, this is more accurately seen as a form of power that is antithetical to the power of magic, masculine vigour and capability. This opposing force applies particularly to dances because, through contact with women, men are believed to become slow and lethargic, their bodies weighed down like women's, unable to move in the vigorous, vibrant and buoyant way desired. Not only does *laram* undermine the efficacy of men's use of magic, it can also have effects on other beings, such as dogs used for hunting wild pigs. Under its influence, the dogs become lethargic, passive and lazy about chasing pigs. Again, as with male dancers, the dog embodies the quality of heaviness, which is antithetical to the most desirable bodily state for hunting—speediness and lightweightedness.[3]

The vigorous and buoyant movement of the body is not merely an aesthetic preference, but displays power and self-assertive personhood, a highly valued masculine state of being. Because heaviness is a quality dancers do not want, much effort goes into making their bodies lightweight. This is achieved by ascetic regimens that regulate contact with women and the quantity and quality of substances consumed. Should a dancer not follow such strictures closely, he may be given substances to consume that will make him lose weight through diarrhoea. Movement may also be enhanced by the use of magic, such as rubbing the knees with bespelled leaves to give them more flexibility and bounce.

The heaviness that women are said to embody is one of the reasons the *tubuan* dance is now performed only by men. According to myth, this masked figure and dance were originally revealed in a dream to a woman of the Lamawan clan in the coastal village of Katanden. This woman constructed the mask revealed to her and

performed the dance for her husband, but her movement was considered slow and lacking vigour, and this justified men in taking the masked figure from her (cf. Valentine 1961, pp. 40–1). From that time on, women were forbidden to dance or to see the *tubuan* prior to its display.[4] These dances, the most powerful of the magical contests and displays held at Lelet mortuary feasts and other events, are displays of masculine power that pit men against men in competitive battles (Eves 2004, 2009a, 2009b; see also Nachman 1981). A great deal of magic and sorcery is associated with men's dances in general, and the *tubuan* dance in particular, and the seclusion and fasting regimens ensure the dancers are protected against attacks of sorcery as well as against the heaviness of women. Powerful sorcery limepowders are used to paint the mask or are placed in the decorations that sit atop the mask to spill out during the dance. During a *tubuan* performance, any debris that falls from the masked figure as it moves is carefully collected. Should this not be done and some unsuspecting man or woman steps over it, they will suffer ill effects. These effects are greater for women; a man would merely develop a sore on his body, but a woman would give birth to a snake or a tortoise. Similarly, it is said that if a woman were to step over the pinnacle of the *tubuan* she would give birth to a snake or a lizard.

Women's power to act is curtailed not only in obvious practical ways, such as being barred from dancing the *tubuan*, climbing trees to pick fruit or hunting game, but, more importantly, powerlessness is impressed upon women's bodies and they perceive themselves through this imprint. By controlling and directing movement through the strictures of kin and affinal etiquette, as well as through discourses about the gendered body, women come to incorporate the qualities of movement that are culturally favoured and permissible. As Butler puts this, 'subjects regulated by such structures, by virtue of being subjected to them, are formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures' (1990, p. 2). Learning to monitor, regulate and change their behaviour, initially to avoid censure and blame, they become instinctively self-governing. Thus, although the regulation and discipline of the individual is achieved partly through external imperatives, it is the extent to which individuals come to embody the prescribed behaviours as matters of course that are central to their effectiveness as a form of governmentality (Petersen & Lupton 1996, p. 12). Over time, particular bodily comportments, gestures and dispositions, or 'techniques of the body', become habituated, producing a corporeal style associated with gender as the 'natural configuration of bodies' (Butler 1990, p. 140). These 'techniques of the body' and the types of behavioural and practical fluency associated with them become so ingrained in the body that they constitute embodied memories. The mnemonics at work here are not necessarily reflected on, nor can they be explained or described to others. Once habits have become embodied, it is not necessary to think about them any longer because they automatically come into effect. This is especially well developed theoretically by Bourdieu, who comments that 'principles em-bodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and, therefore, more precious,

than the values given body [sic]' (Bourdieu 1977, p. 94). Such embodied memories become ingrained as habitus through the 'hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy' (Bourdieu 1977, p. 94). '[T]he agent does what he or she "has to do" without posing it explicitly as a goal—beneath the level of calculation and even consciousness, beneath discourse and representation' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 128). The way a person walks, throws a ball or performs some other habitual action does not require conscious thought, but is usually performed unreflectively. This kind of gendered behavioural facility is especially apparent when observing women and men performing their different roles under the division of labour: the adeptness with which women can peel root vegetables, such as taro and sweet potato, with a deft flick of the wrist using an oyster shell or the way that men out hunting can observe a possum high in the treetops or the way they can move so surely and rapidly along wet, slippery and rock strewn paths.

Jumping Women and Disorderly Bodies

Although it is entirely appropriate for a man to exhibit a wilful, assertive and boisterous demeanour, women who move their bodies in undisciplined, overvigorous or boisterous ways are liable to be labelled *sosolom*, a term of disapproval for women and of approval for men.[5] Significantly, this term goes beyond the Tok Pisin gloss *bikhet* for a stubborn and wilful person to encompass movements of the body, especially those that flout the culturally sanctioned normative feminine bodily comportments. The label of *sosolom* was applied to one young unmarried woman who, after numerous sexual encounters, fell pregnant, a state that some saw as a consequence of her overjoyous and boisterous demeanour, or what in Tok Pisin is called *hamamas*. Two women discussing the matter with me remarked that this young woman was still very *hamamas* and it was only a matter of time before she fell pregnant again, the implication being that the unrestrained agency this woman exhibited inevitably had negative consequences.

Considerable social opprobrium is attached to women who get pregnant outside of wedlock. Such women are referred to in the gossip that inevitably circulates as prostitutes (*pamuk meri*) and their children are referred to pejoratively as children of the road (*pikinini bilong rod*). As is the case with bodies more generally, sexuality is strongly associated with shame. Not only is it shameful for the woman who has been found out, but great shame attaches to her lineage and clan. The shame is so great that in the past she would have been given the rope from her basket for carrying food and other items, to hang herself. Today, if a woman's pregnancy outside of marriage, or even her sexual exploits, become known to her male lineage and clan (especially her brothers), she may be badly beaten and will be required to compensate the shame through the payment of a pig.[6]

The issue of women's use of their bodies was also highlighted during my doctoral fieldwork during January 1991, when in the late afternoons the young men and women of Limbin gathered to play volleyball, taking the opportunity to relieve the

boredom of village life with some energetic fun as the day came to a close. However, this time of collective enjoyment was short-lived because it was banned at the next weekly community meeting, having been objected to by some of the men, including those on the village committee. In an effort to understand why the volleyball had been banned, I raised the issue with a close informant:

> In this type of sport if someone jumps up and there are men and women standing on the sides, they can bump into each other. No good comes up from this. We don't know what each man is thinking ... This kind of sport is alright in town, they can mix and whichever man or woman wishes to play can play. It is something which happens in town. Here there is *kastam* and shame is present. That is why the committee stopped the playing of volleyball. Men can play with other men and women can play with other women. But this kind of sport where they both stand together isn't allowed. If women stand on one side and men on the other and a woman jumps up after the ball and she falls down, her sarong can become loose or the clothes around her breasts can become loose. If a man sees this, he will think no good. A man will inevitably think those kinds of thoughts ... Arguments arise between married couples over such things and marriages can break up as a result. If a man sees another man looking at his wife jumping up he will get angry. There were some married couples who fought over this.

A central concern of my informant in this discussion was the maintenance of the ethos of shame (*lamamang*), which, as noted above, must be maintained in relationships between a woman and certain of her male relatives. Invoking the image of the temptress Eve in the Garden of Eden, he remarked that women are a form of sorcery, which, once seen by a man, can ruin him: '*Meri, em i got poison, God i putim. Man i lukim, em i bugerap pinis*' (Woman, she has sorcery. God put it. Man sees her [and] he is ruined).

The anger a husband shows if he sees another man looking at his wife may simply be construed as jealousy, but for the Lelet the issue is decidedly more complex. As I have mentioned, the very strong association between seeing and desire means that if a man sees a woman's body, particularly her genitals or breasts, it is believed that sexual intercourse will be the inevitable consequence, whether she consents or not. This even extends to a man seeing the clothed form of a woman's body, not just parts of it naked, as in the quote above. This was the reason why, in 1997 at the regular Monday community meeting, the community leaders successfully proposed a ban on women wearing T-shirts in public, with a fine of five kina for those who disobeyed the rule (as a number did). In 2008, during the formulation of a village constitution as part of broader community-level government and development initiatives promoted by the New Ireland Provincial Government, the village of Limbin developed a specific constitution for women to govern their behaviour in the community. This included a rule that women who wore T-shirts or trousers were liable to be fined fifty kina.

A woman's failure to conform to gender prescriptions can result in more than fines or angry arguments, because she is likely to be beaten severely by her husband if he considers she has been too transgressive. Indeed, this occurred prior to the community

meeting about volleyball and was probably the catalyst for the ban being proposed. One man was so enraged at his wife's participation that he beat her badly and cut up all her clothes as a final act of humiliation. The woman, who was pregnant at the time, miscarried and ran away to live with relatives on the coast, only returning some weeks later.

Thus, although the bounds of the normative gender categories are sometimes overstepped, this involves considerable risk, eliciting sanctions and often violence. This is most clearly evident in examples of women being beaten by male kin for exhibiting excessive sexual agency, but the threat of violence also applies to other more general instances of women not realising the ideals of their gender. This was made clear in an incident that occurred on the night prior to my and my partner's departure from the Lelet after my doctoral fieldwork, when we were given a send off by the people of the village where we lived. While the other men and I sat around chatting in the men's house, the women had a party in the women's meeting house. The women were dancing to loud music in an uncharacteristically flamboyant and uninhibited manner, young and old alike. Some were humorously manipulating plastic crates and rocks as they danced, waving them above their heads, possibly parodying men when drunk and the kinds of dancing men do, when they often wave their radio-cassette players around. Although the women were enjoying themselves hugely, after an hour or so they called an abrupt halt to their party because they feared the men would become angered at their exuberance and would break up the party violently, as had occurred previously. Such uninhibited bodily movements are a form of transgressive power in which gender norms are called into question; hence, the men's likely reaction.

Such behaviour may be categorised as resistance, but it is not clear whether this is accurate. Although the women were certainly exercising agency in transgressing the gender norms, they were not necessarily consciously resisting or consciously trying to change the gender rules. Many scholars erroneously equate agency with resistance; some even reject the use of the term 'agency' if the conscious intention to resist is not present (see Ortner 2006, pp. 44, 134, 144). As noted already, conscious intention is not necessary to the definition of agency, which simply refers to the action of a person or thing. Oppositional agency, as Laura Ahearn points out, is only one of many forms of agency (Ahearn 2001, p. 115; Ortner 2006, p. 137). As Ortner says, most social outcomes are, in fact, unintended consequences of action (2006, p. 135).

However, Lelet women do sometimes consciously resist the norms imposed on them. For example, when the ban on wearing T-shirts was first introduced, a number of women simply refused to pay the fines levelled at them. When I discussed the latest incarnation of this rule with some women in 2008, they argued that not only were the garments prescribed by the new constitution—the loose-fitting Mother Hubbard blouses (*meri blaus*)—very expensive, but it was not up to the community to decide what a woman should wear. This, they thought, was something to be determined by a woman and her husband. As an example of women's agency, this differs markedly from some of the other examples I have given. More unquestionably than the agency of the women who exhibited boisterousness, whether individually (such as the woman

labelled *sosolom*) or collectively (such as the women at the going away party), the agency here is consciously oppositional. This oppositional agency does not simply invoke individual freedom or women's rights, because the women saw their actions as properly circumscribed by their marital relationship. This suggests that the enactment of human agency is a social act, 'a mutual process of consideration whereby persons consider how [other persons] will, can or could act in response to their own act in order to direct themselves to act in such a way that a joint or social act is accomplished' (Varela & Harre 1996, p. 323; cited in Farnell 2000, p. 405).

In this connection, I shall now conclude by describing a recent innovation that seems to indicate that the norms governing feminine movement are not completely unyielding to change. This is an example of the gaps and fissures that sometimes open up in the cultural norms of gender, creating instabilities that escape or exceed them (Butler 1993, p. 10).

Conclusion: Dancing for Jesus

As I have noted, the earlier mission-run Christianity reinforced and upheld local conceptions of modest and restrained feminine comportment. In contrast, the Pentecostal Christianity now being practised by most Lelet sometimes provides an opportunity for women to disregard these norms, allowing the body to be restyled in non-normative, and possibly even subversive, ways.[7] At some of the Pentecostal services and rallies, the demure bodily movements of the everyday and of traditional women's dances are given over to flamboyant and ecstatic dancing by women. Although the traditional dancing of women can be read as a public demonstration of what women are ideally supposed to be—docile, conforming and obedient—the ecstatic dances in church seem to confound these ideals. However, such public performances are a sign that another ideal is being sought: the virtuous Christian being touched by the Holy Spirit. Under this powerful influence, the dancers lose control of their bodies. Providing evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit, ecstatic dancing acts as a moral barometer of the congregation. Although such heightened states are by no means restricted to women, because men too can experience them, it is the women who appear to revel in the situation and even perhaps take advantage of the opportunity to act in ways not normally permitted.

This highly animated dancing usually occurs after the periods of choral singing that punctuate a church service. Although they possess hymn books in the vernacular Mandak language, pastors usually choose songs from the Tok Pisin repertoire, which, because of their much faster tempo, are more apt to inspire intense fervour. Songs such as *Liftapim bikpela Jisas* (Exalt the lord Jesus), *Nau mi hamamas* (Now I am happy), *Yumi mas givim prais long God* (We must give praise to God) and *Jisas yu nabawan* (Jesus you are number one) are all popular. These are often accompanied by guitars and drums, sometimes with amplification and, occasionally, even electric guitars. Usually, the preacher urges (*strongim*) the singers on with much finger waving and shouting, sometimes exhorting the congregation to '*danis for Jisas*' (dance for Jesus). There is

even an action song that sets out a sequence of vigorous bodily movements that the congregation perform as they sing.

The dancing may be contained between the wooden pews or may occur in the space at the front of the church after the pastor has asked for women to come forward. The congregation may be asked to bring some croton or other decorative leaves that they can flail about as they dance. More often, however, things that are close to hand are waved about more spontaneously. Women, particularly those with young children, may wave a cloth nappy vigorously above their heads, whereas others may simply wave outstretched arms. Sometimes a woman may be holding a sleeping baby, but this fails to stop her vigorous participation.

Such dancing is far more akin to the frenetic dancing of the *tubuan*, or to the dancing at the going away party, than to traditional women's dances, which, with their slow and decorous body movement, epitomise conformity. This extravagant dancing is not under threat of violence from disgruntled men, but is readily tolerated and, indeed, is actively encouraged by ministers and pastors, being seen as a sign of the intense religiosity of the born-again Christian and of the presence of the Holy Spirit among the congregation. As the Lelet minister remarked during a particularly intense service during the year 2000, it was the Holy Spirit that was shaking people's bodies during the dancing: 'If you want the Holy Spirit,' he said, 'you must work the body'.[8]

Simon Coleman and Peter Collins have argued well that sharp distinctions should not always be drawn between formal ritual action and everyday practices (Coleman & Collins 2000). Against this, it is clear that, for the Lelet, the types of bodily movement permitted in church contrast sharply with those permitted in everyday life. Given the generally conservative nature of the church, it is paradoxical that it advocates behaviour that contravenes a very significant way that gender norms have been realised for the Lelet. Indeed, the cultural norms that regulate the conduct of the body are being contravened by another practice advocated by the church: members of the congregation are frequently asked to shake hands with others, which sometimes entails people in avoidance relationships touching each other. Thus, the norms for safeguarding the established social order, in this case the avoidance rules that aim to control desire, are undermined. When in church, Lelet women are now enacting contradictory norms of gender performativity; they are experiencing a 'resignification' of gender relationships within a different framework (Butler 1994, p. 33). These changes are significant because they run counter to the learned and habituated bodily practices that have characterised the feminine body so far. Such innovations are radical, because they potentially open the existing embodied practices to change; as I wrote earlier, when opportunities occur that allow people to transgress the norms of behaviour, those norms may be redefined. In Butler's terms, if gender performativity produces what it enacts, femininity is already being transformed.

It follows that these different types of performance inside the church have quite a revolutionary potential to alter gender performativity outside the church. Whether this will be realised remains to be seen. That the Limbin village constitution

decreed what clothing women could wear seems to suggest that the policing of gender norms continues undiminished. In the future, attempts to regulate women's bodily movement and comportment may be challenged on the grounds that what is acceptable in church should be acceptable outside of it. This is not unlikely because, having learned a new style of gender performativity, women have changed themselves: having incorporated new 'techniques of the body' into their cultural repertoire, their gender identity is no longer quite the same.[9]

Notes

[1] Of course, this is symbolic. In fact, women's movement in working is expected and valued, whereas laziness is heavily deprecated. Those who do not work hard are chastised by close kin or gossiped about by others. Lelet men say they prefer to marry locally because, they say, the women of the Lelet are more accustomed to work than the women of the coast, who are considered lazy. Lazy people are despised as being inadequate to feed their own children or to use their *lolos* or *strong* (bodily power) to produce items of value, such as pigs or cash crops, and ultimately to produce wealth and fame.

[2] Examples of men's names include Marasungaon, a large pig worth ten pieces of shell money; Lumamau, having 'fight' like chilli; Lavatboorong, a good pig; Septupe, to kill something and take it to the forest with you; Bungunen, a school of fish; Sorong, to try to spear something; and Lavasibo, a bone.

[3] To remedy this, there is magic to remove the *laram* from the dog.

[4] Stories like this are sometimes referred to as myths of 'matriarchy' and concern the invention or discovery by women of important rituals and art objects, which are then stolen by men. Such myths are ubiquitous in Papua New Guinea and have been widely discussed (see, for example, Gewertz 1988).

[5] A form of magic performed on male babies promotes wilful, assertive behaviour. The magician tugs on the testicles of the child while incanting a spell, which includes a verb that invokes the child to 'stand', a bodily comportment that is commonly used to evoke self-assertive and powerful personhood. This contrasts with the passive, but nevertheless still valued, act of sitting.

[6] The pig is referred to as *lobokawuk* or *lobomamang*. *Lobo* means pig and *kawuk* is derived from one of the types of tree often used to make the rope (*loxonma*) for women's baskets.

[7] For more detail on Lelet Christianity than I can offer here, see Eves (2000, 2003, 2007, 2010).

[8] This bears some similarity to the *spirit disko* (Tok Pisin) or spirit possession dances of the Urapmin of Sandaun Province, described by Robbins (2004, pp. 281–8), because both types of dancing entail encounters with the Holy Spirit. However, there are significant differences that make this example extraneous to my discussion, and Robbins largely avoids any analysis of the *spirit disko* in the context of habitual bodily movement and practices.

[9] This has already been argued by other scholars of religion and embodiment, such as Csordas, who describes the process of dissolving the boundaries between the church and the everyday as the 'ritualization of life' (1997, p. 74; see Coleman & Collins 2000, p. 318). Drawing on Bourdieu's conception of habitus, Csordas suggests that 'practices of collective and individual worship can become techniques of the body and embodied dispositions that cannot simply be shut off once the believer leaves a service' (Csordas 1997, p. 108; Coleman & Collins 2000, p. 318).

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