

***Ethnographic Horizons:
Time and the Ethnographic Horizon
in Moments of Crisis***

**Marilyn Strathern
2018 Balzan Prize for Social Anthropology**

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Participating Institutions: Centre for Pacific Studies, with Centre for Amerindian, Latin American and Caribbean Studies, both of the Department of Anthropology, University of St Andrews; Centro Incontri Umani, Ascona.

Period: 2019-2025

Website: <https://cps.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/ethnographic-horizons/>

Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology and Life Fellow of Girton College, University of Cambridge, Dame Marilyn Strathern is also Honorary Life President of the Association of Social Anthropologists of UK and Commonwealth (ASA).

Strathern's Balzan Research Project explores a conundrum at the heart of the practice of social anthropology. First-hand research is central to the fashioning of ethnography through fieldwork, yet always brings with it a specific temporal horizon. The ethnographer's present is not always the best vantage point from which to apprehend the nature of contemporary issues, notably with respect to perceptions of life in crisis. Capitalizing on current anthropological debate over notions of time and the future, the project will turn this conundrum into a set of research questions about the diverse relationships among the temporal frameworks being deployed at moments of perceived crisis – the ethnographer's time horizon included – thus creating space for young anthropologists to advance their discipline's contribution to current concerns. The questions may be explored with respect to gender (old and new inequalities), embodiment (agents of transformation), environment (including climate change/horticultural futures) or governance (the future of the social contract/legal innovation), with the stipulation that in the first instance the investigators address materials from either Melanesia or Amazonia. The project envisions enabling promising scholars from the Pacific or from Brazil to undertake first-hand research on these issues.

**End of Project Report
Supplement to Final Overall Report: 2022 –2023**

This is a supplement to the Final Overall Report dated March 2023. The financial duration of the Balzan Research Project was extended in order to accommodate the final phases of work of the Balzan PhD student and defray certain publication costs in connection with the project's collective volume.

PhD student (Bablis)

Successful completion of PhD thesis

Gregory Bablis's thesis, entitled *Ghosts and ancestral spirits as witnesses of World War II in Papua New Guinea*, was submitted in June 2024, the viva being held in October 2024. The thesis was passed with minor revisions, and the doctorate awarded in February 2025.

Thesis abstract:

My thesis explores relationships with the 'ghosts of war' – foreign war dead from Australia, Japan, and the United States – in former World War Two (WWII) battlefield sites in Papua New Guinea (PNG). I focus on two sites prominent in PNGs WWII history: the Wide Bay area 100 km south of Rabaul on the New Britain island, site of the infamous Tol Plantation Massacre of 160 Australian POWs by the Japanese Army in February 1942; and the Gorari area of Oro Province, where Japanese forces suffered a resounding defeat in early November 1942. Both sites are believed to hold many unrecovered war dead, with local people experiencing complex relationships with the legacy of WWII and the ghosts of war.

The former combatant nations are actively searching for their war dead in their old theaters of war. Additionally, thanatourism and war tourism have increased in popularity for the people of these countries. For people in the former battlefield sites I work in, their relationships to the bones of the foreign war dead, and ghosts of war, become important ways through which they extend historical connections and pursue present relations with foreign others who go to their places.

I firstly analyse local idioms through which people remember, interpret, and reinterpret their war histories. In the accounts, some people become aligned to a side during the war, but their rationale is framed according to their own cultural modes and ways of thinking. Many of my interlocutors have postulated that WWII was a foreign war and that they, or their parents and grandparents, were simply caught in between. On the other hand, a politico-religious group in one of my fieldsites have their own cosmological framing of WWII that totally disregards the ideological orientations of the former combatant nations. Their worldview re-evaluates notions of 'origin' and 'foreign' and flips the narrative of WWII being a foreign war.

My analysis of Papua New Guinean perspectives of their WWII history and heritage has required a blended approach of New Melanesian Ethnography and New Melanesian History, constantly trying to produce appropriate ethnographic descriptions yet contending with the enforced nature of the change that is central to the anthropological account. I put into conversation mainstream military history, local oral histories, conflict archaeology and national heritage management, leavened with ethnographic writing and analysis.

Gregory Waula Bablis has resumed his position as Principal Curator at the National Museum and Art Gallery of Papua New Guinea (NMAG), Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. The work undertaken for his PhD thesis has direct relevance to current issues in museology, heritage management and repatriation, all of present concern to the NMAG.

Postdoctoral researchers (Amaral, Guimaraes, Kenema, Santos da Costa)

Publication of collective book, in English and Portuguese

English edition: Crook, Tony and Marilyn Strathern (eds) 2024. *Crises in Time: Ethnographic Horizons in Amazonia and Melanesia*, Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston Publishing. Thanks to support from the Balzan funds, the book is published on an Open Access basis and in paperback.

Contributions from Amaral, Crook, Guimaraes, Kenema, Moutu, Santos da Costa, Strathern, Vilaca, all Balzan project participants.

Book description:

This is a book about some of the configurations by which time appears through – and seemingly does it work through – moments of crisis. What can different concepts of time and diverse temporal frameworks tell us about how crises are configured and apprehended? First-hand research is central to the fashioning of ethnography through fieldwork yet always brings with it a specific time horizon. Recognizing that the ethnographer's present is not always the best vantage point from which to grasp contemporary issues offers a fresh entry into current debates on how both past and future stimulate social action and thus reveal its temporal multiplicities. These essays turn to present-day Amazonia and Melanesia to examine in detail the production and reproduction of specific crises and the time horizons they mobilize.

The ethnographic themes explored include the transformation of crises prophesized in the past and their implications for the future; what it means to explore perceptions of crisis from the aftermath of recent armed conflict; the multifaceted nature of future horizons precipitated by changing economic policies, when these have bodily as well as social impact; and the amelioration of governmental crisis through initiatives that rely on specific temporal understanding of effective change. Such trajectories are set variously against a background of continuing colonialism, environmental calamity, overt hostility, the absent or over-present state and perceptions of moral degradation. Further analytic reflections extend and frame the way in which crisis holds the imagination through subsisting on time; figure international temporal frameworks through depictions of the climate crisis as the 'tragedy of the horizon'; and highlight a perspective from which to compare the diverse temporal frameworks presented in the preceding chapters.

Portuguese edition: in press. Direct translation of the above. Same publisher and also Open Access. Our Portuguese colleagues have assisted in the translation work. Publication is expected later in 2025.

Dr Maria Virgínia Ramos Amaral is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the National Museum of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro; **Dr Bruno Nogueira Guimarães** is an Advisor to the Public Prosecutor's Office on support for vulnerable people, Minas Gerais, Brazil, and a coordinator of the Working Group on Traditional Peoples' and Communities' Demography, Brazilian Association of Population Studies; following his work with the World Bank in Port Moresby, **Dr Simon Kenema** is now lecturing at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji; **Dr Priscila Santos da Costa** is Assistant Professor, IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark, currently exploring use of digital technologies in the Brazilian Amazon.