



STYLE AND MEANING

*Essays on the
anthropology of art*

ANTHONY FORGE

edited by

ALISON CLARK &
NICHOLAS THOMAS

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PACIFIC PRESENCES 1

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BIOGRAPHIES

Editors

Nicholas Thomas is director of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge. He first visited the Pacific in 1984 to research his PhD thesis on the Marquesas Islands. He has since written extensively on art, empire and related themes, and has curated exhibitions in Australia, New Zealand and the UK. His early book, *Entangled Objects* (1991) contributed influentially to a revival of material culture studies. He went on to publish, among other works, *Oceanic Art* (1995) and *Islanders: The Pacific in the Age of Empire* (2010), which was awarded the Wolfson History Prize.

Alison Clark is a Research Associate at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge. She currently works on the ERC funded Pacific Presences project. Her current research is tracing the dispersal of the Admiral Davis collection made aboard the HMS *Royalist* between 1890 and 1893. Her PhD (2013), conducted jointly with the British Museum and the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, King's College London, reassessed two collections of Indigenous Australian material culture in light of changing Indigenous/settler relations. She has previously worked on projects at the British Museum, and the October Gallery in London.

Contributors

Lissant Bolton is Keeper (Head) of the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the British Museum. Her research focuses on Vanuatu, where for many years she has worked collaboratively with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre in the development of programmes to document and revive women's knowledge and practice. Her publications include the monograph *Unfolding the Moon: Enacting Women's Kastom in Vanuatu* (2003) and contributions to *Art in Oceania: a new history* (2012) and *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation* (2015).

Ludovic Coupaye is Lecturer at the Department of Anthropology, University College London and teaches Anthropology of the Pacific Arts at the École du Louvre in Paris. He conducted fieldwork in 2001-03 in the Nyamikum village of the Maprik area and from which he has published his monograph, *Growing Artefacts, Displaying Relationships* (Berghan Books, 2013). His research focus is on Pacific arts and visual culture, as well as on the role and place of technology in the contemporary world.

Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin is Professor of Anthropology at the Georg-August-University, Göttingen (Germany). She was previously curator at the Ethnographic Museum in Basel, Switzerland, (between 1971 and 1988) has carried out fieldwork among the Iatmul and Abelam people in Papua New Guinea (between 1972 and 1985,

revisit 2015), in Bali, Indonesia, (since 1988) and in Cambodia (since 2008). Many of her publications focus on the ritual and political organization of space on the one hand and on material culture and cultural heritage on the other. Her most recent book (co-edited with Lyndel V. Prott) is *Cultural property and contested ownership. The trafficking of artefacts and the quest for restitution* (Routledge, 2016)

Christian Kaufmann was curator at the Museum der Kulturen in Basel between 1970 to 2005, responsible for the Oceania department. From 1975 onwards, he linked up pre-existing museum collections from the Sepik area of Papua New Guinea with contextual ethnographic data. He also joined curatorial and editorial teams on international exhibitions projects on topics such as the arts of Vanuatu, Indigenous Australian painting and Sepik arts. From 1998 to 2005 he taught on Melanesian art at the University of Basel and later also at the Sainsbury Research Unit (SRU), University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK where he is a Research Associate.

Howard Morphy is a Professor of Anthropology at The Australian National University. Anthony Forge supervised his PhD. He spent ten years at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, as curator and University Lecturer in Ethnology. He has written three monographs: *Journey to the Crocodile's Nest* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 1984), *Ancestral Connections* (Chicago, 1991) and most recently *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Categories* (Berg, 2007). He has also authored a general survey, *Aboriginal Art* (Phaidon, 1998). He was awarded the 2013 Huxley Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute.

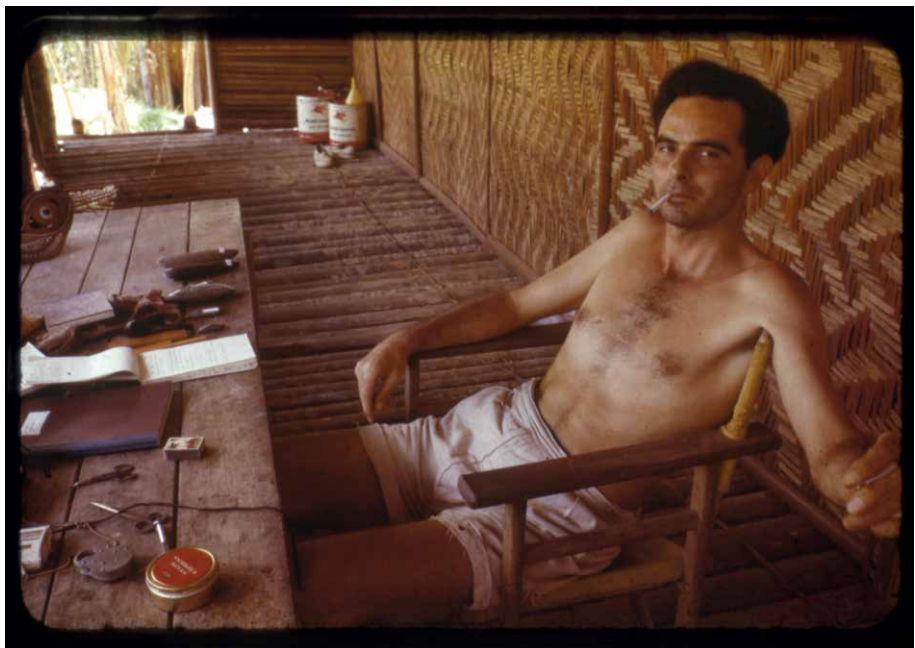
Michael O'Hanlon is an anthropologist, and a former curator at the British Museum and Director of Oxford University's Pitt Rivers Museum. His long term fieldwork has been with the Wahgi people in Highland New Guinea. His most recent book is *The Pitt Rivers Museum: a world within* (Scala, 2014).

PREFACE

This book, as is explained more fully in the Introduction, republishes and assesses major contributions to the anthropology of art by Anthony Forge (1929-1991).

It has had a protracted genesis. One of the editors, Nicholas Thomas, was an undergraduate student from 1979 to 1982 in the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology, later renamed Archaeology and Anthropology, that Forge established and led, jointly with the archaeologist, John Mulvaney, at the Australian National University (ANU). In 1998, as Director of the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, a cross-disciplinary institute with a focus on comparative studies of art, Thomas and ANU colleagues established an Anthony Forge Memorial Lecture; the inaugural lecture was presented by Howard Morphy and is reprinted in the second part of this book, which is made up of responses to Forge's writings and consideration of his legacies.

At the same time, consideration was given to the republication of some of Forge's influential essays. Though these plans lapsed, new research on the Sepik region and renewed wider academic, curatorial and public interest in Melanesian art underscored the sense that Forge's writings were relevant again. 'Pacific Presences: Oceanic art and European museums', a project funded by a European Research Council Advanced Grant, provided the context and support for a small-scale workshop which reviewed Forge's contributions to the anthropology of art. Hosted by the Museum of Archaeology



Anthony Forge. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411, Box 27. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

and Anthropology, Cambridge, it took place at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in November 2013. Initial versions of most of the papers published in the second part of this volume were presented then.

We are grateful to the participants at that event, and, wish also to thank the following people for advice, information and help regarding aspects of the project: Maggie Clark, Kathryn Creely, Stephen Harries, Sean Kingston, Howard Morphy, Maia Nuku, Abi Saffrey, Heather Smedberg, and Virginia-Lee Webb. We must also thank Don Gardner, Forge's literary executor, for his formal permission to republish Forge's writings here.

AC, NT

February 2017

INTRODUCTION

NICHOLAS THOMAS

~

...ultimately the key question must remain the production and use of what we call art. Why is there so much and why is it so important?

Anthony Forge, 'Draft Introduction' (Chapter Eleven, this volume)

It is a commonplace of the history of anthropology that, following a period in which the founding figures of modern anthropology, such as Alfred Cort Haddon in Cambridge and Franz Boas in New York were deeply interested in artefacts and art, material culture was marginalised, as the discipline turned (in Britain and north America, if not in Germany and Switzerland) to functionalism, kinship, and social analysis, from the 1920s on. Though some of the most influential and eminent figures of twentieth century anthropology, among them Claude Lévi-Strauss, Raymond Firth, Edmund Leach and more recently Marilyn Strathern, engaged with art in various writings, the field has remained perplexingly marginal, despite, on the one hand, longstanding, considerable interest among artists and the wider public in the arts of Africa, Oceania and native America, and, on the other hand, the more recent, global ascendancy of art as a field of cultural production.

This book acknowledges, makes accessible, and re-assesses the contributions of one ethnographer and anthropologist to the anthropology of art that were of decisive importance to the remaking of the field in the 1960s, and that have, we consider, renewed importance in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Their author was John Anthony Waldo Forge, called Anthony by colleagues and friends, whose career spanned three institutions – the University of Cambridge, the London School of Economics and the Australian National University. In respect of place and culture, however, Forge's work is deeply associated with the Abelam of Papua New Guinea, and to a lesser extent with the Balinese who became a focus of interest later in his working life.

Forge was an undergraduate in Cambridge; he frequented the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology; he is said to have been inspired by the collections made by Gregory Bateson from the Sepik River region (and elsewhere) in what became the independent nation of Papua New Guinea, gathered in the course of three periods of fieldwork between 1929 and 1938, which provided the basis for Bateson's remarkable investigation of Iatmul ritual, *Naven* (1936). Forge, who later proved a gifted field photographer, apparently photographed works collected by Bateson in the Museum's collections – which include important mwai masks, malu boards, and sacred flutes, among other genres – though the present locations of

these photographs are not known. Anthony Forge went on to work at the London School of Economics with Raymond Firth, and travelled to the Sepik to undertake the field studies that were the vital stimulus to his thought and the basis of the essays republished here, as well as others on topics unrelated to art which are not included in this volume. In the course of this research, he developed a close relationship with the Basel ethnographer and curator, Alfred Bühler, whose dedication to the art of New Guinea no doubt reinforced Forge's commitment to the field. At the same time, Raymond Firth's anthropology – rigorous and analytical but vigorously empirical, always closely grounded in Firth's truly great ethnography – clearly influenced Forge profoundly, if his writing also reflects Edmund Leach's preparedness to provocatively engage with open-ended, maybe ultimately unanswerable, questions.

The first part of this book republishes Forge's essays on art, ranging from his early texts of 1960 through more extended ethnographic essays and those which foreground the widest conceptual challenges – "The power and culture and culture of power" – which engaged him throughout his career. Among later chapters, "The power and culture and culture of power" responded to the challenge of Marxist anthropology, vigorously debated in the 1970s. We have opted here not to include unpublished writing. Notably omitted is an ethnographic monograph Forge completed in draft form, on the Abelam – he notoriously found writing difficult and was evidently far more comfortable with the essay form than the book (and was maybe overwhelmed by the daunting book-writing of his mentor Firth); this has been edited by Jordan Haug of the University of California, San Diego. We have permitted ourselves one exception, the introduction to a volume of essays arising from the second of two major Wenner-Gren funded conferences dedicated to the Sepik (the first took place, appropriately, in Basel in 1984, the second in Mijas, Spain, in 1986). This lengthy, but question-raising and informal overview has the flavour of a first draft, but also paradoxically both that of a summation of Forge's profound intellectual commitment not just to the Abelam but to the wider Sepik region as a field of study, and of a charter for a programme of future inquiry, inquiry that he perceived had barely begun. This quality of powerfully suggestive, but unfinished, investigation pervades much of Forge's writing.

Despite, or perhaps rather because of, this, it is hard to overestimate the enduring importance of Forge's studies. At a recent Paris symposium, marking the opening of the landmark exhibition *Sepik* the eminent curator Philippe Peltier remarked that two spirits presided over the discussions, those of Gregory Bateson and Anthony Forge. Much work done since has notably included the studies undertaken by Andrew Moutu, himself from the region, until recently the Director of the Papua New Guinea Museum and Art Gallery. But Forge's questions remain important and unresolved, in ways considered in the studies and briefer reflections of Melanesianists and anthropologists of art that constitute the second part of this book.

The texts republished in the first part appear in the order in which they were published or written, with the exception of the first, which provides an orienting perspective, as Forge could envisage one, in the early 1970s. *Primitive Art and Society*, which he edited, appeared in 1973. It derived from a Wenner-Gren conference, a London – New York collaboration convened primarily by Raymond Firth and Douglas Newton. Despite the unfortunately dated term employed in the title, the volume has

since rightly been considered formative for the anthropology of art then emerging, exemplified not only by Forge's own essays but also by Andrew and Marilyn Strathern's *Self Decoration in Mount Hagen*, and James Faris's equally remarkable *Nuba Personal art*, published in 1971 and 1972 respectively, and by Nancy Munn's central Australian ethnography (1973). Of all these texts, the "Introduction" to *Primitive Art and Society* offered the most wide-ranging theoretical statement, now a document of the state of play at the time. Forge began by observing that "the place of the arts in anthropology" had the "curious history" referred to at the outset of the present introduction. He referred to the split between museum-based artefact studies and the mid-century's growing and ambitious social anthropology of the university departments.

From the 1920s to the 1960s [he wrote] social and cultural anthropology were making great advances in theory and analysis... but virtually ignoring art, while the museum-based studies were concerned with documentation and stylistic comparison but made no theoretical contribution. (Forge 1973b)

Over the same decades, the hallmark of the modernists, the canonical figures of twentieth century art, was their interest in tribal form, their latterly notorious primitivism, hence, as Forge put it, social anthropology ignored, ironically, "precisely that aspect of non-European culture which the anthropologists' own culture found most stimulating".

Yet, by the early seventies, Forge considered that anthropologists, prompted particularly by the new linguistics, were rediscovering art, and beginning to analyse visual material both as an "independent" system, and one that could be related to other "cultural systems". This fresh view of art "as a symbolic system" moreover departed from the traditional focus upon artefacts and motifs to consider the aesthetics of "natural objects". He was thinking of the features of the landscape cited in Nancy Munn's exploration of Walbiri iconography, among the chapters in *Primitive Art and Society*, and agricultural products such as the long yams that loomed large in his undergraduate lectures. Equally or more importantly, Forge rejected an interpretive reductionism. "In primitive art," he wrote, "art objects are rarely representations of anything, rather they seem to be *about* relationships". This move away from what he called "simple translation" made art revealing and surprising, but it also made its anthropology peculiarly difficult, since the indigenous artefact ceased to possess natural legibility. A work could no longer just be named, for example, an "ancestor figure"; instead, the relationships that it was "about" awaited analysis.

Forge concluded his introduction with the suggestion that "with the reawakened interest in art among university anthropologists the split between them and the museum men [sic] will be reduced". Over forty years later, we might say that it was, and it wasn't. Museum-based anthropologists have made major contributions, and the writings of James Clifford, Sally Price and others have given histories of collections and museums a certain cross-disciplinary prominence. More particularly, Forge's students, colleagues and successors, such as the contributors to the second part of this book, have produced varied and powerful contributions to a new field energised above all by a renaissance of Indigenous art in Australia and elsewhere, and by a new

sort of scholarship in which the voices of Indigenous artists, curators and community members themselves loom far larger than they did in the 1960s and 1970s. In other respects, art's "place" in anthropology remains "curious". Indigenous art traditions are exhibited, interpreted and celebrated for wide publics at some major museums; elsewhere ethnographic collections suffer continuing marginalisation. Some outstanding books, such as Fred Myers' *Painting Culture* (2002), are acknowledged as major contributions to contemporary anthropology. But art is not widely taught in anthropology programmes, it is a "specialism" rather than a major field, still primarily oriented toward Africa, Oceania and native America, with important but still relatively sporadic attention to Western art history, to Asian and European art, to the global contemporary, even as anthropology has been powerfully influential, in varied ways, for many "mainstream" art historians, critics and artists. Whatever "the anthropology of art" exactly may be, it falls between the stools of anthropology and art history, between universities, museums and the art market; between the interests of scholarly curators, the public, dealers, connoisseurs, and Indigenous artists, curators and communities. We have probably reached a stage where this "curious", interstitial situation is not so much problematic as positive, enabling fertile engagement across milieux, institutions and debates. In this context, in which the "art writing" and commentary associated with major exhibitions of all kinds has assumed a predictable quality, bringing well-established postmodern critiques to bear upon heterogeneous practices and histories in not always illuminating ways, Forge's distinctively ethnographic and anthropological questions have an "outside the box" quality, and renewed interest and importance. What might it mean to ask, *now*, how art is "about relationships"?

PART I

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**ANTHONY FORGE ON ART,
1960–1990**

CHAPTER 1

*Introduction to Primitive Art and Society*¹

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The place of the arts in anthropology has a curious history. For the pioneers in the actual observation of non-European peoples, such as Haddon and Boas, the plastic arts not only had a substantial place in their reports but also came, especially in these two cases, to be objects of intensive specialized studies. Yet with the next generation of anthropologists the study of art virtually ceased, the development and intensification of fieldwork techniques, particularly associated with Malinowski, led paradoxically to a narrowing of the field considered suitable for investigation. Further, as the emphasis on the importance of fieldwork for those studying social anthropology grew, the study of the arts and technology came to be considered a museum preserve and little or no funds were available for field investigation. At most, all that was considered necessary was a collecting expedition of a few months. This split between the developing social anthropology of the university departments and the museum-based study of objects was certainly most acute in England, but was also very influential in America, France, and Holland. It hardly affected the German speaking countries because social or cultural anthropology had no impact there until after the Second World War. In Austria particularly however, art, was studied as an index of presumed past diffusion rather than as a subject in its own right, fieldwork was not much emphasized and most studies were based on museum collections. The assumptions behind these diffusionist studies were, of course, that the motifs and styles of an art were enshrined in ancestral practice and were somehow unchanging so that similar or identical motifs and stylistic resemblances infallibly indicated some past contact between the cultures concerned. This tradition survives in a much more sophisticated form in the work of Schmitz (1963) and of Fraser and his students (1968). Other museum based studies, including comparatively short but frequent field investigations, were concerned with the problems of the artist, both from the point of view of his technique and more especially with the extent to which he could be said to have a style of his own or was merely the skilled executant of an ancestral tribal style. Himmelheber (e.g. 1935 and 1960) and Fagg (e.g. 1963) have both contributed distinguished work in this field for many years; their work and that of others, mainly in West Africa, have left no doubt that individual artists do have personal styles and that these involve change in the tribal style. Gerbrands' work on the Asmat (1966) shows clearly that such individual variation is by no means restricted to complex stratified societies such as are common in West Africa but also

occurs among very small-scale unstratified Neolithic communities such as those of New Guinea.

From the 1910s until the 1960s social and cultural anthropology were making great advances in theory and analysis as well as in the techniques of investigation but virtually ignoring art, while the museum based studies were concerned with documentation and stylistic comparison and made no theoretical contribution. During this period the consciousness and appreciation of primitive art in Western Europe was rapidly expanding both indirectly through the works of modern artists, such as Picasso and Braque, who had been early influenced by it and directly through exhibitions of primitive art and the interests of the surrealists. The impact of primitive art on the artists and the change in taste and vision in Europe and America is definitively documented and analysed in Goldwater (1938) and cannot be treated here. What is interesting is that social anthropology, with the notable exception of Firth (*e.g.* 1936), was ignoring precisely that aspect of non-European culture, which the anthropologists' own culture found most stimulating. Much of the writing about primitive art of this period, and indeed later, was concerned with meaning. Critics and dilettantes freely recorded their own reactions to pieces, assuming, often without question, that the pieces must have been made to produce that reaction. Since most anthropologists were uninterested, they were able to produce no alternative set of meanings and such procedures were accepted without opposition. The modern artists were on the whole not concerned with meanings. They accepted the carvings that came their way as interesting and exciting in terms of form, basically as *objets trouvés*, on the same level as driftwood and other naturally occurring interesting shapes.

The question as to how far it is possible to discern the meaning attached to a work of art produced by another culture, or even by a distant epoch of our own, remains subject to debate. Most anthropologists would suggest that it is impossible for a member of culture A to know with any certainty the meaning of a work produced in culture B unless he has had considerable experience of that culture. There seems little evidence of genuine universal symbols in the plastic arts or indeed in any other medium of communication. Although it is obvious that the human body, its parts, and its functions are a source of many powerful symbols in ritual as well as art in most human societies, and that this may provide a basis for impact cross-culturally, the beholder will interpret what he sees in terms of the body symbolism of his own culture, which may be very different from that of the creator's culture except at the crudest level (see Leach, Chapter Twelve [in Forge, 1973a]). If this pessimistic conclusion is justified there seems little chance of establishing for prehistoric or now destroyed primitive cultures any iconography that will enable the meanings of these long dead masters to be accurately translated into verbal terms.

The studies of style in primitive art have naturally tended to draw on the techniques developed by art historians. Since the Second World War there has been a time dimension added to such studies. Most particularly in West Africa and the Americas, but eventually no doubt all over the world, excavation and detailed studies of old material preserved by the on-going culture have led to studies of stylistic change through time exactly similar to those of European art history. This extra concern with the past has in some cases had the unfortunate effect of intensifying the division

between stylistic studies on the one hand and social anthropological concern with the society as a total and existing system on the other.

While the study of style, both individual and "tribal", continues to remain, in the main, museum based, certain workers are developing from these studies into other fields, e.g. the personality of the artist (Fischer, 1962), and the stereotype of the artists held by the society (d'Azevedo, 1966), while an on the whole successful attempt to measure and quantify stylistic variation, in terms of the dimensions and proportions of the works themselves, has been undertaken by Schefold (1966), although the author interprets the variation he establishes in terms of a rather crude diffusionist model. Despite this large amount of varied activity and the increasing detail and precision of the studies, purely stylistic studies have so far failed to find any new theoretical framework. They seem often to be concerned with reducing the material on primitive art to the terms made familiar by art historians in western European civilization, using categories such as sculpture, masks, painting, *etc.*, as if these were automatically the categories, which all artists must use. Further, although the swing from the old idea of rigid tribal styles absolutely maintained to the realization of the contribution of individual artists has undoubtedly been most productive, there is a tendency to ignore the problems of the relationships between the individual and collective styles. It seems obvious from the evidence available that all art systems, no matter how tied up with ancestral sanction and ritual functions and practice both stylistic limits, culturally determined but capable of change through innovation, and at the same time considerable freedom in selection of elements and in stylistic variation available to the artist working within these limits. Holm's (1965) excellent study of the techniques of style on the northwest coast of America shows clearly the range of available choice to each artist working within what is, at first sight, a very formal and rigidly controlled style, as well as documenting diachronic stylistic change.

If the only continuing tradition of the study of primitive art, that based in museums, has recently emphasized the importance of the individual artist and rejected to some extent the concept of art as a standardized production of the culture, the reawakening of interest in the rest of anthropology in the subject of art has been very largely linked to just that standardized component that the museum men have tended to reject in their own studies. There have been, since the war, several approaches from different points of departure, mostly by social anthropologists or those familiar with and capable of handling social (or cultural) anthropological techniques and methods; these various approaches all owe something to the recent impact of linguistic theory on anthropology, but nevertheless they remain to date separate in the sorts of material they study and the aims of their analyses. At this early stage it is sometimes difficult to see how they could possibly ever be reconciled, yet between them there are clearly the outlines for an analysis of visual material as independent systems and of the relationship between such systems and other cultural systems.

In America there has grown up a group of analytical techniques, largely so far used on archaeological material, often referred to as iconic. There does not seem to be any agreed definition of this word, certainly it sometimes carries a heavier load of meaning than the straightforward use made of it by Nancy Munn. Analyses of this type often apply methods not unlike those of componential analysis to classes of objects

or graphic signs with a view to discovering the principles on which their ordering is based. Sturtevant, for instance, has used it to describe the manufacture and design of Seminole clothing (1967). The aim of the analysis is to produce a “grammar”, often presented as a flow chart, which provides complete instructions on how to produce the class of objects under consideration; the analogy being with rules for sentence production in a language. Sturtevant and others have shown that such an analysis can provide an orderly description of change by the introduction of new stages, and by reordering the relationship between stages. But as yet most of these models remain descriptive, the element of meaning is not included.

The success of iconics in demonstrating that classes of human production can be analysed and shown to be systematic, has also aroused interest among certain archaeologists, as well as those concerned with material culture. These studies not only eschew any concern with the meaning of the objects they consider, but they also ignore any aesthetic aspect. Indeed, the whole iconic group has a somewhat puritanical approach. Nevertheless, with the amount of work being done in this field it seems likely that these problems will have to be faced. W. Watt, although not being concerned with aesthetics, is embarked on a fundamental study of the problems of translation between a visual system and a verbal system language. His interest is in the theoretical problem rather than the class of objects he is analysing Texas cattle brands. Only two of a planned three volumes have so far appeared (Watt, 1966 and 1967), but the issues raised and the questions of correspondence between the two systems are of importance in the analysis of any system of graphic signs and how it is generated.

In systems such as those of cattle brands, the reduction of ambiguity is an obvious prerequisite if the system is to perform its limited functions effectively. But however important reduction of ambiguity may be in sign systems that are required to communicate specific information, one needs a more complex linguistic model, one capable of coping with poetry and puns, if linguistic analogies are to be successfully used in the analysis of art. Of the contributors to this volume, all those concerned with the analysis of meaning in the context of the art of a single culture (Munn, d’Azevedo, Bateson, Forge [in Forge, 1973a]) emphasize the essentially ambiguous nature of the symbols they discuss (words such as polyseous and multivocal have been used by other authorities) and it seems clear that the impact of art and its effectiveness as communication particularly perhaps in a ritual context depends very much on precisely this ambiguity. The power of the symbols or groups or symbols to make reference to contexts and rituals other than the one in which they are presently appearing is perhaps the most vital part of their effectiveness, especially when reinforced by beauty and mystery. That there is no necessary cross-cultural connection in ranges of meaning of even the simplest graphic elements is also apparent. Compare for instance the meanings of the circle in Walbiri art reported by Munn (1962 and Chapter Eleven [in Forge, 1973a]) and the meanings of the same element in Abelam art (Forge, Chapter Ten [Forge, 1973c]). There is virtually no overlap between the two ranges of meaning.

The study of ritual as well as of myth has been revolutionized within the last decade by the idea that the content of ritual, and indeed of many other items of culture, can be analysed and shown to have structure and, further, that this structure has meaning in terms of the cosmology of the society concerned and correspondence with other

structures of that society. So far the analysis of ritual acts and verbal usage has progressed further than has the analysis of the visual components of ritual, but such evidence as there is suggests that visual systems used in ritual contexts are not just illustrations of what is being said or done, but are self-contained systems of communication acting directly on the beholder (d'Azevedo and Munn, Chapters Eight and Eleven [in Forge, 1973a]; Forge, 1966). Such art systems are not subordinated to language, giving a simple graphic presentation of what is being said. They appear to act independently from, but in combination with, words, ritual acts, myth, *etc.*; if this is indeed so, the failure of some experts for instance Mountford in his study of Arnhem land ritual paintings (1956), to find a secure iconography in their analyses, that is, a complete and one for one correspondence between the visual system and words, becomes understandable. It has also been realized that in considering art in non-European societies not only may our categories be inapplicable, but that body decorations, face-painting, head-dresses, and all sorts of ephemeral constructions, may well form an essential part of the cultural visual system that includes works of art in our more narrowly defined terms. Indeed, some cultures devoid of art in the sculpture and painting sense possess rich visual systems of great aesthetic powers, such as the complex system of body-painting from the Nuba hills described by Faris (1972) or the face-painting and head-dress styles of the Mount Hagen region (Strathern, 1971). There seems every reason to suppose that such systems are, in indigenous terms, every bit as important aesthetically and ritually as objects that fall within the traditional classification "art" of civilization. This whole question is tackled by Paulme (Chapter Two [in Forge, 1973a]).

The view of art as a symbolic system involves two changes in traditional approaches to art. First, what is included in the body of material to be considered has greatly expanded, often including natural objects as well as man-made products. Second, the search for meaning is no longer a matter of simple translation, each object standing for one thing, "being" a statue of a war god or a painting of a tree spirit, this scene illustrating an episode in a myth. In primitive art, art objects are rarely representations of anything, rather they seem to be about relationships. Even single figures or masks carry on them attributes, some in themselves ambiguous, whose interrelationship provides "meaning" additional to that of the object itself (*e.g.* d'Azevedo, Chapter Eight [in Forge, 1973a]; Thompson, 1969).

The symbolic system approach has in its analysis of art itself much the same objective as the iconic. A coherent body of art from a single culture is analysed into its basic elements of form, with the aim of discovering the rules of their combination and apposition, but meaning is recorded at every level from a wide range of informants both artists and beholders of the art. On this view art becomes a system of multiple reference, not only relating disparate things but increasing the supernatural power of the focus of a ceremony by referring in visual terms to other occasions when the same elements are used in different combinations.

The problem of how people internalize such systems and hence can be affected by them has hardly been tackled, although Munn (1962) is an exception and shows clearly that the sets of meanings for each graphic element are, among the Walbiri, learnt by children watching them tell stories which they illustrate by drawing in the sand. The accessibility of such systems to the anthropologist or other outside observer remains a

problem. Most work so far, as indeed much of the work on the interpretation of myth and ritual, has been based on the explanatory power of the proposed analysis (Occam's razor) and indeed, since for the systems to work effectively it is supposed that their operation is not totally conscious to members of the culture concerned, it is difficult to see what other sorts of proof are available (see Bateson and Jones, Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen [in Forge, 1973a]).

A similar approach, although deriving from other sources, has been tried on the analysis of western European cave art by Leroi-Gourhan (1965). His method is fundamentally structuralist in that he considers the meaning of the cave paintings and engravings to reside in the relationship between the various elements, in this case animals, signs, humans, *etc.*, rather than in each element itself. Although his suggestions have led to some controversy they seem to offer the most hopeful approach yet to bodies of art devoid of social context, or even the vaguest hint of meaning. Problems of "proof" are, of course, even more acute in such studies.

The training of the artist has long been recognized as a subject of the greatest importance in the anthropology of art, the factors that influence him and the choices or lack of them left to him by the society of which he is a member have been far too sparsely reported (but see Firth, Dockstader, d'Azevedo, and Bateson, Chapters Three, Seven, Eight, and Thirteen [in Forge, 1973a]). Similarly the importance of materials and techniques has often been emphasized but little reported (Kooijman, Chapter Six [in Forge, 1973a]). The economic aspect of art production and use and the creation of exchange value (Firth, Dark, and d'Azevedo, Chapters Three, Four, and Eight [in Forge, 1973a]) also requires much more extensive recording. All these tasks are basically anthropological.

The information required can only be gathered by extensive fieldwork and the use of anthropological techniques setting the art in its social context and viewing the art as an essentially social product, for which there is a demand from the society as a whole. The problem of the relationship between the artists and their societies, between the individual and the collective constantly came up in discussion at the conference at which the papers in his volume were first presented. It was obvious that the freedom of the artists to innovate, the width of the band of permissible stylistic variation, was greater in some societies than others. It also varied within societies according to the use to which the object was to be put. For instance art used to express high status might be freer in its attempt to convey magnificence and power than art used as a focus of an ancestrally sanctioned ritual. Whatever the degree of variation however both the individual and collective factors were present in all societies. Even at the borders of art, in the making of Tikopia headrests, for example (Firth, Chapter Three [in Forge, 1973a]), although the maker may do what he likes, he knows that appreciation of his fellows will be gained by producing certain types.

Architecture is, of course, the art in which the artist as an individual ceases to exist, at least in the sort of societies we were considering, and it is unfortunate that we had no paper specifically on the subject, although it is mentioned in Dark, Firth, and Forge. This art, often very highly charged with value and meaning for the society concerned,

is essentially a social art truly devoid of artists yet none the less an effective form of communication (Cunningham, 1964; Forge, 1966). Architecture without architects is one pole of the continuum, the other being our own culture's conception of the completely free artist communicating through the intensity with which he expresses his own individual values. In the conference discussions it was apparent that the art of the societies under consideration was concerned precisely with points of tension both in the conceptual schemes of the society and in terms of its political and religious structure. Art seemed not only to be used to show the possession of power, as in regalia, but actually to be a source of power in itself, both individual and collective. Leach makes these points taking art to be a special case of that ritual concern with inter-categories, the analysis of which has done so much to transform recent anthropological approaches to religious phenomena. One of the simplest but most universal sources of power in the supernatural sense seems to be the combination of male and female symbols.

Another question that constantly recurred in our discussions was whether there could be any way of delimiting art from other productive activities. It was obvious that any sort of gallery based conception from our own culture was inadequate and that there are, in fact, no "artless" societies. The transformation and elaboration of the human body is certainly universal and must surely be relevant to any system of visual communication such as art (Paulme, Chapter Two [in Forge, 1973a]). Firth's paper discusses the whole question of the boundaries of art in the detailed consideration of a coherent body of material, a unique and extremely important contribution to this basically insoluble problem. We were again forced back on to an empirical method; the analyst of any art had to take into account and include in his analysis anything that was visually relevant to the art producers and consumers concerned, and disregard, as far as he was able, any of his own ideas about what is or is not art. Although it was intended that the conference should include only anthropologists and should be about specifically anthropological approaches to art – there were, for instance, no psychoanalysts – we were very fortunate in having Will Jones at first as a listener and then as a contributor. His paper records some of our difficulties and confusions, and although we all agreed that it was not possible or even desirable to try to define art, there is little doubt that our basic assumptions and preconceptions about the subject we were discussing were various, but that we came to a much clearer and conscious understanding not only of each other's assumptions but also of our own.

It is of course impossible in an introduction such as this to summarize all the discussions. As they proceeded they opened up more and more subjects for consideration, so that the conference ended with more questions than it had had at the beginning, undoubtedly the sign of a successful conference. One major issue that most of the participants approached very gingerly was aesthetics. There seemed general agreement with Goldwater's view that the aesthetic is concerned with power, with the heightened impact of a perfect object whether it be beautiful, ugly, or frightening. But whether there is a universal human aesthetic remained a matter of faith, those who believed in a basic, presumably genetic, set of responses to certain forms, proportions, and so on were as unable to prove their case as those who did not were able to disprove it.

There is no doubt that with the reawakened interest in art among university anthropologists the split between them and the museum men will be reduced. Encouraged by the recent successes in the analysis of myth, ritual, cognitive systems, and the like, social and cultural anthropologists are turning their models ultimately derived from linguistics on the whole range of human expressive behaviour. It seems certain that we may expect new theoretical approaches to the study of plastic arts, some preliminary hypotheses for these developments are indeed to be found in this book. I, at any rate, shall be very surprised if the anthropological study of art does not in the next decade take an important place in social and cultural anthropology, and certainly, if the analysis of art as systematic communication is successful, affect not only anthropological theory but also psychology and linguistics.

CHAPTER 2

Three Kamanggabi Figures from the Arambak People of the Sepik District New Guinea²

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The Kamanggabi seem to have been the property and responsibility of the senior clan of each half of the dual organization.

At Tshimbut, a village which has only moved to the river and accepted government control in the last few years, the Kamanggabi figure was surrounded by decoration, mainly leaves, and had hanging beside it a net bag, of the type usually carried by men, decorated with feathers of the Goura pigeon, and containing various magical substances and objects associated with fertility of crops and prowess and success in hunting and war. Small offerings of food were made to the figures to ensure their benevolence and the prosperity of the group and whole village. They were also especially consulted about any projected raid on the traditional enemies, the decision to attack or not being given by a shaman believed to be possessed by the spirit of the Kamanggabi. The Arambak also have small carvings a few inches long, but in the same style as the large figures, with a face, a system of “opposed hooks,” and usually a leg at the bottom. Known as Yi’pon (figure 2.1), these are the personal property of an individual, being passed from father to son. They are hunting charms, and are normally kept in the bag always carried by adult men.

Apart from the Kamanggabi and Yi’pon all the other objects made and decorated by the Arambak—such as garamuts, shields, spears, and daggers of human thighbone—are indistinguishable in art style from similar products made by their neighbors; most of them in fact are typical of the work of a large number of groups on the middle Sepik and its tributaries.

The formal elements of the Kamanggabi style would seem to be first a head, sometimes (though not in any of the three present examples) with an extension to the chin giving the effect of a pointed beard.³ The short loop coming out from the base of the neck to the chin, almost certainly represents the arms. Arms grasping the chin or an extension of the nose are a very common feature in lower and middle Sepik art.

Second is the only other obviously anatomical feature, a single leg and foot. In most of the specimens only the lower leg is represented, but in a Kamanggabi from Tshimbut a small boss halfway up the leg represents the knee.⁴

Third is the most obvious and distinctive feature of the style, the beautifully executed and balanced set of “opposed hooks”. While among the Arambak I was entirely unable to obtain any meaning or even name for this feature, being continually told that they



Figure 2.1. Hunting charm (Yi'pon). Arambak. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, E 1930.536A.

were just decoration that the ancestors had used and valued, although it was obvious from the replies to my questions that this motif played an essential part in the potency of the figures for magico-religious purposes. "Opposed hooks," although reaching their most elaborate and sophisticated development among the Arambak, are to be found in many parts of the Sepik basin. They can be seen in a rudimentary form in a head from the Ramu River in the British Museum, and their influence is obvious in a large carving, from Yessan on the upper Sepik, now at Basel.⁵ The ancestral style of the Eastern Abelam, in the Torricelli Mountains to the North, also makes great use of pairs of opposed hooks. Here they are identified as hornbill's beaks, or as the bone daggers, which are objects of ritual importance throughout the Sepik area. Nearer to the Arambak, the main Kara-wan group employ a similar motif as part of the decoration of their enormous crocodile figures, which perform much the same ritual function as the Kamanggabi.⁶ Deriving directly from the Kamanggabi are old figures from villages, on Guvanamas Lake and the Blackwater River, which claim to have originated farther up the Karawari than the Arambak. These villages have since abandoned this style in favor of figures in a style imitated from the Iatmul tribe, of the middle Sepik River, with whom they seem to have been in alliance. An extremely crude but large figure serving a similar purpose to the Kamanggabi

was also collected by Professor Bühler and myself from Watakatowi on the Korosomeri River to the west. At Wagu in the Hunstein Mountains are found small carvings consisting entirely of opposed hooks with a circular motif in the centre, all elements of human representation having disappeared unless the central motif can be regarded as an eye.⁷

The central projection of the hook system might be regarded as a phallus, a common symbol of aggression and fertility in the Sepik area as elsewhere, but I was unable to obtain any information to support or oppose such an interpretation. The hook over the head might be regarded as part of the general hook system, but in the majority of Kamanggabi known to me it is not balanced by a hook from under the chin so one may be justified in regarding it as a separate motif. Again this is a common feature throughout the Sepik; sometimes as a single hook, as in some Iatmul and Tshwosh flute heads of Abelam carved figures, though in all these cases the motif represents a bird. Sometimes a series of hooks rises vertically behind the head, often culminating in a bird or other



Figure 2.2. Hair ornament (Manyan) for flute figure. Middle Yuat River, Mundugumor. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979.206.1458.



Figure 2.3. Figure (Kamanggabi). Arambak. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978.412.732.

animal. Fine examples of this use are to be seen in a canoe shield from Tswagab,⁸ and a hair ornament (figure 2.2), for a large flute-stopper figure, from the middle Yuat River.

The hook over the head has, in about half the examples known to me, a serrated crest. Again I was entirely unable to get any identification of this from Arambak informants, but it is possible that this represents the crest of some bird (cockatoo?) or animal, or perhaps a decoration of cassowary skin and feathers, worn by important men, and certainly fastened to the heads of some Kamanggabi figures.

This attempted stylistic analysis, and the evidence about the wide distribution of the motifs that are used in the Kamanggabi style, are not intended to suggest that it originated anywhere but among the Arambak people. The Arambak, using common motifs in their own way, developed a distinctive and beautiful style, which was in turn copied by some of their neighbors. That the style is an Arambak development is, I suggest, shown by the size, quality of workmanship and balance of Arambak work as compared to that of their neighbors in a similar style. Further evidence comes from a smaller figure found associated with two Kamanggabi figures at Tunggowi, the

only Arambak hilltop village still used. This piece is said to have created itself at the mountain named Mandjok (it is named after the mountain) and floated down-river to be retrieved by a Tunggowi man. Mandjok is said to be the ancestor of the Kamanggabi. It is shorter, thicker and of the face has many elements of the later style. The serrated crest is present, but only a single pair of opposed hooks rise just below the face, their shape and ornamentation very much suggesting the common conventionalization of hornbills' beaks. Below the hooks a curious lapped ornament descends to the base of the figure, which is without legs. This lapped ornament is similar to that at the top of the leg in figure 2.3 and other Kamanggabi figures. As far as I could gather from the Arambak no new Kamanggabi had been made within living memory, though a few Yi'pon of inferior workmanship are still made.

The Kamanggabi figures were produced by a small group. It is unlikely that the Arambak ever numbered more than six or seven hundred in all, living between the uninhabited foothills of the central mountain ranges and cut off from easy contact with the main Sepik River tribes by a semicircle of hostile villages. They were produced mainly for magico-religious purposes and provided symbols of unity, fertility and war making ability. With the advent of Europeans, the cessation of intervillage fighting and the opening up of opportunities to earn cash incomes through the timber trade, the conditions under which the Kamanggabi were created ceased to exist. Today the Arambak have simply abandoned what they have no further use for.

CHAPTER 3

Notes on Eastern Abelam Designs Painted on Paper, New Guinea⁹

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The paintings in this exhibition were collected as artistic documents to supplement field notes and photographs. Initially I had the greatest difficulty in persuading Tsigula, the most knowledgeable painter of Bengragum, the Eastern Abelam village in which I spent the majority of my stay, to undertake even one painting. The intention was to get him and other skilled artists from Bengragum and nearby villages to paint one example of each of the traditional designs. However, the idea of paintings that would be taken away, and admired by interested whites who were unable to visit New Guinea and see the magnificent facades of the haus-tambaran (ceremonial houses) for which these designs would normally be painted, proved very appealing to the whole village. Before Tsigula had finished his second painting small groups were arriving and demanding materials to show their own virtuosity. Almost all the paintings shown here were made in three days, by some thirty men working in groups of three to four. At the end of each day I provided the traditional vegetable soup, other food, tobacco and betel nut.

Unfortunately, the only paint available at the time did not correspond with the red and yellow ochres made and used by the Abelam, so that orange and a very bright yellow had to be used instead. Paint ordered from Australia arrived after three months, only a few days before I left Bengragum, so that Tsigula used them for only one painting. Again, the Eastern Abelam paint on a black ground, outlining the design in white and adding red and yellow. (The black is later “glazed” with a tree sap.) I could only offer grey paper, so that black had to be added as a separate color. The paint used was mixed with water in which wild limes had been steeped. The Abelam practice with earth paints. All painting was done with native materials: brushes made of feathers or chewed fibre, dots being applied with leaf stems of a certain tree.

All Abelam painting is executed by groups of men under the direction of a master artist who paints the white and supervises the painting of the other colors. Apart from Tsigula, few of the Bengragum men were sufficiently expert—or rather they were not believed by their fellows to be sufficiently expert—to undertake the direction of a complete design, so that in some of these examples even the painting of the white lines is the work of a group. While painting on rectangular pieces of sago spathe is frequently used for panels to decorate the interior of the haus-tambaran, the pieces of paper used were considerably smaller than the sago spathe panels. Consequently, many of the paintings show the difficulty experienced in the correct “scaling down” of the designs, the headdresses often being cramped and distorted because insufficient room has been left for them.



Figure 3.1. *Mindja-nyan* by Tsigula.
Suitable for *haus-tambaran* façade.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
1992.408.6.

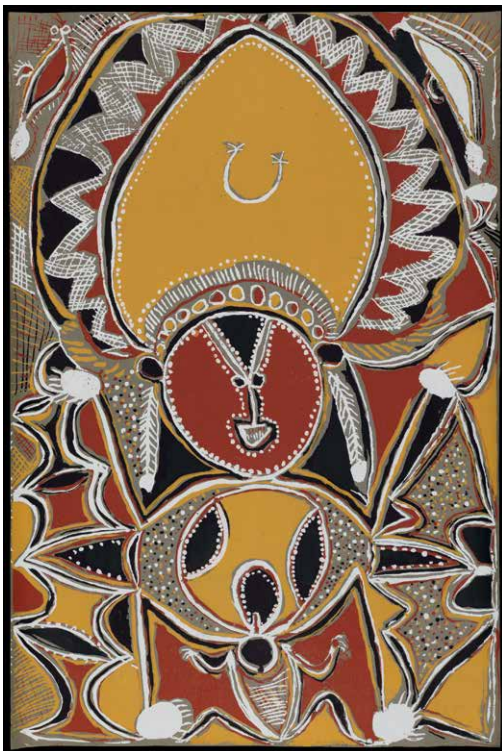


Figure 3.2. *Tchakindu* by Tsigula.
Wakan. Black side pieces on forehead
said to be *wanggile* or *gangganggile*
(ear-hair, side burns). Small bird at
bottom right. The Metropolitan Museum
of Art, 1992.408.7.



Figure 3.3. Ndu-nyimbi by Gilembel of Wingei village. Traditional East Abelam haus-tambaran façade style. Also yi-gwu (lizard). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992.408.4.

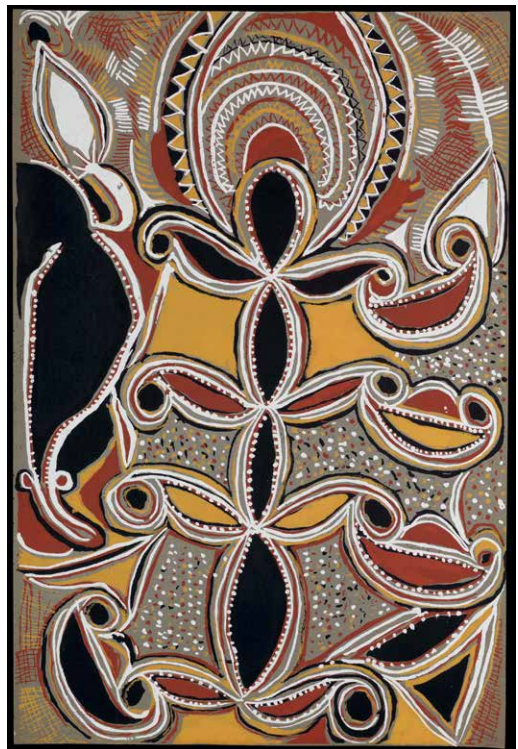


Figure 3.4. Nggwukwami by Tsigula. This design has many names, most of them associated with meat, each section being identified with a leg of pork. The whole design is given human form by the addition of a headdress and ornaments, although none of the facial features is marked. The other main motif is malgombei, apparently a caterpillar. On the left are cassowary and a cockatoo. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992.408.4.

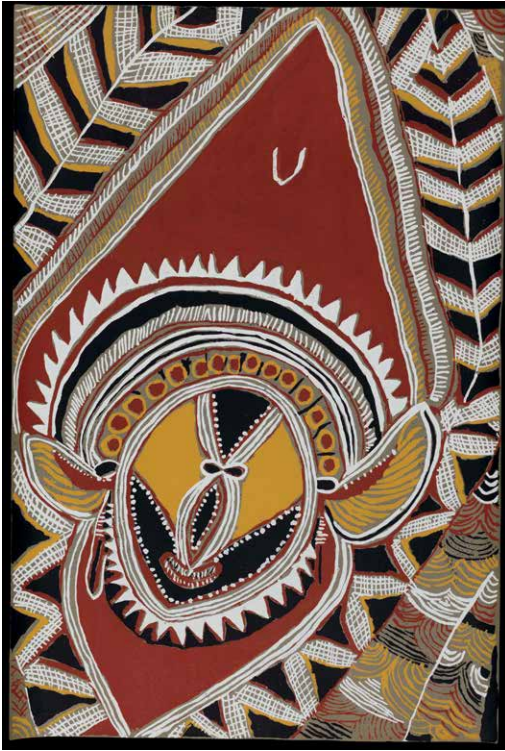


Figure 3.5. Mindja-nyan by Aki'mas of Sagasi village. Suitable for haus-tambaran façade. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992.408.3.



Figure 3.6. Kwandjitagwa (flying fox) by Wakunde and Banggwinyan. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992.408.5.



Figure 3.7. Crocodile, two lizards, snake and bird by Tsigula. Non-traditional. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992.408.8.

CHAPTER 4

*Paint: A Magical Substance*¹⁰

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Paints, usually mineral in origin, for example the ochres, but sometimes also derived from vegetable material, are widely used throughout New Guinea. Painting on the flat and of carvings is common, but paint is also used for decorating houses and human beings. Its use may be solely decorative, but in most of the New Guinea tribes from which reliable information is available, it is also used for religious ceremonies and in magical practices. Here I intend to describe the use made of paint in one New Guinea tribe, the Abelam, amongst whom I lived for fifteen months in 1958-9. The general attitude towards paint and its magical character shown by the Abelam would seem to be typical of much of New Guinea, but the detailed beliefs and customs to be described refer only to them.

The Abelam are a tribe of about 30,000 living on the southern foothills of the Torricelli Mountains in the Sepik District of the Trust Territory of New Guinea. They live in hilltop villages of 300 to 800 inhabitants. Each village is an autonomous political unit, and before the imposition of control by the Australian government, inter-village fighting was common; the old alliances and enmities between villages still persist and, although fighting with spears has virtually ceased and there is no longer any danger of ambush or attack to travellers, the hostility between villages is now expressed mainly in the form of accusations of sorcery. Since the Abelam believe that virtually every death is due to sorcery, mutual suspicions and accusations of sorcery are frequent and continue to form an important part of the relations between villages.

The Abelam, although they were brought under control in 1937 and were subsequently occupied by the Japanese who were only expelled with heavy and destructive fighting, are remarkable among New Guinea tribes for the tenacity with which they have clung to their ancestral culture, particularly their art and architecture, which in so many other parts of New Guinea has disappeared soon after contact with the white man's technology and the establishment of missions. The art is on a large scale, and magnificence and display are purposely sought, so that it serves as an obvious focus of hostility for the various missions that operate in the area but so far their influence has not been effective.

Each village consists of a number of hamlets strung out along the top of a ridge, each hamlet has as a centre a large fiat ceremonial ground on which dances and ceremonies are held and where yams are displayed. Dominating the whole hamlet is

the “ceremonial house” whose painted facade often sixty feet or more in height faces onto the dancing ground. It is in these ceremonial houses and in their contents, the clan figures and other sacra, that the use of paint among the Abelam finds its most striking and obvious expression. Before considering the use of paint for artistic and ceremonial work, where it forms only one of the many elements of a sacred and magical character, it will be as well to mention other fields of Abelam activity and interest where paint by itself is considered to be the powerful magical substance par excellence. The Abelam, as are most of the New Guinea tribes, are entirely without chiefs or any form of inherited leadership. Leadership is exercised by men of high prestige who attract supporters and keep them only so long as they retain their prestige and share the benefits of their actions with their followers. These leaders, known as “big men”, gain their position by showing prowess as warriors, orators, and artists but chiefly by their skill as yam-growers. Yams grown by the Abelam are of two kinds, firstly the ordinary yams grown for food in gardens which may be entered by women and children; secondly the long yams, these are grown in special gardens to which only men observing strict taboos on sex and meat have access, and it is the cultivation and display of these long yams that forms the principal focus of Abelam values. The long yams are circular in cross-section and have been recorded to a length of over twelve feet for a single tuber, although 6 to 9 feet is the more usual size. They are credited with some human capabilities, they can, for instance, hear but not speak, although spirits associated with them may speak to a man in a dream. Shortly after the harvest the yams of a village section will be displayed on the dancing ground and villages from miles around will come and inspect them. For the display they are decorated and each yam has a mask in painted wood or basketry attached to its head. After the assembled yams have been inspected, each yam grower presents his yams to his exchange partner receiving in exchange the yams grown by his partner. These exchanges are competitive, and accurate tallies are kept of each yam exchanged, the higher prestige goes to the man who gives his partner longer yams than he receives. Success in yam growing is the main ambition of every man, and although it is recognised that good horticultural technique is an essential pre-requisite, the Abelam firmly believe that success or failure is due to the magical and ritual practices employed. What may be loosely called the ritual side of the yam cult is the same for all men, that is the sacred gardens and the taboos on sex and meat and other minor foods observed by all yam growers, similarly the public ceremonial invocations and the rituals to ensure success in which the whole village participates. The magical side, however, is individual and consists of spells inherited or purchased from noted yam growers and the use of certain substances considered to be very powerful or “hot”. The most important of these substances is paint which each big man imports from outside his village and for which he is prepared to pay large sums in the shell rings that form Abelam wealth. Success in producing the longest yams is attributed almost exclusively to the “strength” of the paint employed, and each big man keeps the source of his paint a jealously guarded secret. The paint, which in all the examples seen by me was an earth paint or mixture of earth paints of varying colours, is actually applied in small quantities to the growing tuber, each yam mound being specially opened two or three months after planting for this purpose. The supposed action of the paint was described to me as follows; the paint is so “hot” that it irritates the sides of the yam (my informant

compared this to the rubbing of the ribs of men with stinging nettles during initiation ceremonies), and the yam squirming and stretching to relieve the irritation drives itself further into the ground thus getting longer and longer.

Paint as a “hot” or magically powerful substance is again central to Abelam ideas about sorcery. As already mentioned all deaths after infancy are believed to be due to sorcery and although I have never met an Abelam who admitted having practised, or seen anyone practise, sorcery, every man knows exactly what sorcerers do and what they need for their black art. The basic idea is simple, the bringing together of something intimately connected with the person it is desired to harm, a lock of hair or a morsel of food, with a powerful magical substance, in the case of the Abelam special paint, under the prescribed circumstances and with the correct spells will cause the person to sicken and die although he or she may at the time be many miles away. Paint for sorcery is believed to be widely traded throughout the Abelam area and with neighbouring tribes. As with the paint used in yam magic it is believed that paint from further away is more effective. The most powerful paint is a red paint made by the Arapesh tribe in the mountains to the north of the Abelam. This paint is so powerful that even the sorcerers have to take special ritual precautions before handling it. It is said that the Arapesh having made it test its efficacy by packing a bamboo container with the newly refined material and putting it into an old hut covered with other pieces of bamboo, the hut is then set on fire, should the paint be really powerful there will be a loud explosion and the bamboo container of paint will fly out from the collapsing hut and glowing like a shooting star will land some distance away to be recovered by its preparers who can now be sure that they have a really dangerous and therefore valuable paint for sorcery. It should be noted that this story has a considerable empirical basis, since green bamboo in a fire will explode and jump around in a very violent fashion. Since the imposition of government control and the recruitment of Abelam for labour in the coastal plantations, it is believed that previously unknown paints from other distant tribes have been brought into the area by returning labourers. The only two cases of aircraft crashes known to the Abelam since the end of the war are both attributed to the carrying by labourers on board the aircraft of paint for sorcery so powerful that it triumphed over the white man’s technology and caused disaster and death to all concerned.

In the cases of yam growing and sorcery paint is believed to be a substance full of power, to be traded in secrecy over long distances and to be used in small quantities. One could suggest that the secret of its potency lies in the secrecy with which it is acquired and used and the fabulous power of its distant and scarcely known preparers. The paint used for artistic and ceremonial work is in contrast prepared locally or openly traded in large quantities over short distances and while the activity of painting is sacred, the paint used is not itself considered to be sacred or powerful, although it may serve as a medium for distributing the beneficent power of the ceremonies and figures with which it has been in contact.

I went to New Guinea as a social anthropologist to gather material for a sociological study of primitive art and was extremely fortunate in finding among the Abelam the last tribe in, at least, the half of New Guinea under Australian administration, who still maintain their traditional art and continue to produce and use it for the same

reasons and almost to the same extent as their forefathers. For the Abelam all plastic art is concerned with ritual and even the decoration of utilitarian objects such as the netting bags used extensively by both men and women and the right to wear certain personal ornaments is determined by the ritual status of the owner, that is the number of ceremonies of the ceremonial cycle in which he has participated. For the artist it is only in the context of village ceremonial that he can display his creations to the public. Paintings and carvings are an essential part of all Abelam ceremonial, and the regular performance of ceremonial is believed to be essential for the prosperity of the village. The artistic work must however be within the fairly narrow limits of the ancestral style, and be done at the prescribed time and in the prescribed manner, so that the artist becomes something of a ritual technician. This is not to suggest that the aesthetic aspect is not important; skill in painting and carving is highly regarded and the aesthetic merits of each ceremony are debated and compared with other ceremonies and buildings from the surrounding villages. Certain men have reputations as "master artists" over large areas and are invited to assist and advise in the preparation of ceremonies in many different villages.

Abelam art is always polychrome, the facades of the ceremonial houses, the figures they contain, the basketry masks, the faces and head-dresses of the men during the ceremonies are all brightly painted with red, yellow, black, and white. These are the four traditional colours and the only colours recognised for ritual purposes; in some areas where European colours have been used, they are subsumed into the traditional system, blue counting as black and green as yellow for instance. Yellow and white occur naturally, the first as small nodules of yellow ochre in the clayey soil in certain well-known sites; the nodules are broken up, washed, and strained and the resulting fine powder dried and stored. The white occurs either in the form of a chalk-like stone in the beds of streams or as patches of earth in boggy ground, and is likewise powdered, washed, and stored. Red ochre is produced by heating a lignite-like substance that is found in certain parts of the Abelam area. It is placed on a pottery crock with some vegetable matter, including red flowers, and heated over a strong fire for some hours; the residue is washed and filtered and stored in the form of a fine powder. Black paint is neither stored nor traded, but made as required. Scrapings from the bottom of cooking vessels are chewed with sap from a tree related to the breadfruit and some edible leaves, the resulting material is spat out into containers and has to be used at once since once it dries out it cannot be reused. Painting on the flat is done on sheets of flattened sago spathe sewn together to the required shape and size on a cane framework. Before either sago spathe or woodcarvings are painted, they are thickly and evenly coated with a medium which will absorb the paint and cause it to adhere to the surface. Special muds are used for this purpose; they are carefully worked over and all lumps removed until they reach the right consistency. They are then smeared on by hand, sometimes with magical spells to ensure that they will not flake when dry. Most of the Abelam use a mud that dries to a grey colour, but in the eastern part of the area they use a black mud which makes it unnecessary to use black as a separate colour in the painting; when the red, yellow, and white have been applied the remaining black areas are brushed over with the tree sap previously mentioned, and this gives them a "glaze" that is both protective and decorative.

For the Abelam painting is a sacred activity. The preparations for a big and important ceremony involve building a new ceremonial house and the washing of old carvings and the carving of new ones, and take two or three months, involving not only the village that is holding the ceremony but also requiring the help of nearby villages. The actual painting of the facade and other decorations of the ceremonial house and the figures and panels that will be displayed inside it, take only a few days and form the finale of the period of preparations. The period of painting is preceded by a cessation of all work for a few days; this starts after the dance held to mark the completion of the preliminary stages. During this pause, stocks of paint and of the mud medium are checked and further supplies acquired by trade. On the afternoon of the last day the men go down to a stream and purify themselves by bleeding and other rituals, from then until the completion of the ceremony they observe stringent taboos on sex, meat, and many other things, taboos similar to those for growing yams. The next morning the painting starts and continues from dawn to dusk every day until it has been finished. The paints are mixed into a thin paste with water, in which extremely acid wild limes have been steeped, and the mixture is kept in a half coconut shell lined with pieces of the magically powerfully wild taro leaf. The paint is applied to the dry mud with feathers and brushes made of chewed fibre or soft wood. All painting is done by groups of men, each group being led by a "master artist" who outlines the entire design to be painted in bold white lines, then follow semi-skilled men who following the master's instructions double his lines with lines of red or yellow, lastly the unskilled men who are only allowed to fill in already delineated areas with solid colour. The work proceeds at astonishing speed; during the painting of the facade of the new ceremonial house at Kwimbu hamlet Wingei village in 1958, each of the five "master artists" involved with their teams painted about sixty square feet of the facade in one twelve-hour day, with only short rests for food and chewing of betel nut, (smoking is also taboo during painting). The designs are traditional and well known to all concerned, but there is a good deal of scope for originality in the selection, form, and arrangement of the designs. The "master artists" engaged on painting a triangular ceremonial house facade of forty-five feet height and twenty feet across the base will plan the whole composition in a brief conference without making use of preliminary sketches or any other visual aid.

As already mentioned, in the context of the great ceremonies the paint itself is of little magical importance, but it is felt that the painting, especially of the great clan figures, is a sacred and dangerous activity. It is impossible here to give an account of Abelam ritual and symbolism, but the painting of the great figures which may be ten to fifteen feet long and represent the principal ancestral spirits of each clan in the village, is thought to ensure the benevolence of these spirits for the future. When the painting has been finished, the actual ceremony can begin; this consists of two principal elements, firstly a parade of decorated and painted men who can be loosely regarded as impersonating the spirits; secondly the showing of the display of the newly painted figures inside the ceremonial house to the young men who are to be initiated into the particular ceremony being performed. The face paintings of the decorated men are reproductions of those of the figures inside the ceremonial house, and the men are thought of as partaking to some extent of the nature of the spirits; while wearing the paint they are subject to a whole series of taboos and may not wash for three days; at



Figure 4.1. Head of a decorated long yam, showing painted basketry mask and decorations of feathers, fruits and shells. Bengragum village. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411, Box 27. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.



Figure 4.2. A “master artist” at Wingei village painting the base of a ceremonial house façade. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411, Box 20. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

the end of this period the whole group of painted men wash together with many ritual precautions. The initiates, who are shown the display inside the ceremonial house, are afterwards made to crawl down a low narrow tunnel running round the display inside the house. This tunnel is lined with paintings, which the initiates never see, since the tunnel is pitch dark, the paint however rubs off on their bodies and they emerge streaked with colour; this is rubbed into their skins and is considered to transfer to them some of the magical benefit of the ceremony. Similarly the basketry masks worn by men in the later stages of the ceremony are washed with bespelled coconut milk, in which magical herbs have been steeped, and the resulting mixture of paint and liquid is preserved and scattered over the gardens so that the effects of the ceremony in terms of fertility and general well-being are distributed to the gardens and crops as well as to the individuals who participated.

To describe adequately the importance of paint to the Abelam would take a large book, because, as I hope to have shown, it is an essential element in three of the areas, which the Abelam regard with the most concern. Death, which to the Abelam means sorcery; long yams, which mean prestige and thus influence over one's fellows, as well as their obvious implication for the food supply; and ritual, with the highly valued magnificence of the painting and carving, and the parades of decorated men, which confer general success, fertility, and prosperity on those concerned with them.

CHAPTER 5

*Art and Environment in the Sepik*¹¹

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The Sepik river basin has long been recognised as an area producing some of the finest art in the primitive world. Since the big German collections formed before the First World War, it has been realised that the various tribes in the area, although differing in the individual styles of their art, had many stylistic features in common. In short, the Sepik as a whole is a genuine stylistic area and pieces from it are easily recognisable as such.¹² These common features have been the focus of much speculation about the derivations of the styles and their possible connection with other cultures outside New Guinea.

The interest aroused by these similarities has not been limited to ethnologists. For instance, one of the features of Sepik art, very commonly discussed, is the frequency of long noses; noses with extensions ending in animal heads, or human faces with noses like bird beaks. A favored suggestion is that these derive from representations of Ganesa, the elephant-headed son of Siva and Parvati and the Hindu god of wisdom. An alternative theory was advanced to me by a group of Iatmul in Kararau, who had found a picture of Thoth the Ibis-headed Egyptian god of wisdom—used as a trade mark by an Australian book distributing firm—on the back of a mission school book. This, and the accompanying advertisement, they had copied out and showed it to me as conclusive proof that the whites had also sprung from totemic ancestors. My translation of the text, which was irrelevant to the origin of man and the nature of the cosmos, convinced them that I, like the other whites, was determined to deceive them, to deny our common origins, and continue the pretense that whites were a different sort of being to blacks.

In this lecture, however, I shall not be concerned with any possible stylistic links outside the Sepik area, nor shall I be concerned with any questions about the aesthetic merits of particular pieces or styles within the area. My interest will be: How far is the art of the Sepik a means of communication, and if it is what sort of communication does it make? By what means can we find out what it communicates? Underlying these questions is the bigger one: How far does the art form a system *suigeneris* or, in other words, to what extent can we take carvings and paintings as things in their own right relating to each other and the beholder, and not as mere manifestations of some other order of cultural fact such as mythology or religion. Does the plastic art of a group have its own rules, not just of style, but also of meaning and interpretation, or

is its apparent unity illusory being based only on style, while “meaning” can only be discovered by relating each individual piece to a rite in which it has a function, a myth that it illustrates, or a decorative purpose it fulfils?

I shall consider these questions with material from two closely related Sepik tribes, living in strongly contrasted environment, the Iatmul and the Abelam, drawing most of my detailed material from the latter with whom I have had much more field experience.

But before proceeding it is necessary to delimit briefly the aspects of the cultures I shall be considering, as well as the groups from which the material is drawn.

If we are to consider a system of visual communication, it obviously cannot be restricted to carvings and paintings but must include all visual symbols; architecture, gesture and dance are obvious examples.

For instance, in the course of an Abelam debate, a man jumps to his feet and, holding his arms out from his sides, turns slowly round to face all the participants in turn, glaring ferociously at them, and then sits down. There is no difficulty about this gesture, he is being his totemic bird defending its young from an aggressor, that is, he is expressing unqualified support for his sister’s children in the debate. Such a gesture is a message immediately understood by all, and easily accessible to the ethnographer. When, however, it is the significance of the form of the ceremonial house, or the reasons for including certain animals or birds in the carvings of the clan spirits, then the answers to questions are always in the form—“It is the way to do it”, or “This is the way our ancestors did it” or “This is the powerful (supernatural) way to do it”. Similar questions among the Iatmul elicit similar answers but often with the addition of a myth, one of whose characters is said to be represented in the object in question. Both the gesture and the ceremonial house can be regarded as visual communication. But it is in the ceremonial house, the carvings of the important clan spirits, and the decorations and face painting of rituals and displays that communication, reinforced by aesthetic appreciation appears to be most intense: while it is in these areas that the “meaning” is most obscure, and I shall be concentrating on these phenomena in this lecture.

The relation of art to myth is a much discussed question. In Arnhem land, for example, art, myth and ritual appear to be completely interlocked and interdependent; but it seems unlikely that one is justified in taking myth to be primary and the art to be just an expression of it. It seems rather as if they were all three different ways of expressing aspects of the same thing in words, in action and visually, none of them being complete without the other, and none of them being the entire expression on their own. There is nothing like this integration among the Iatmul.

Although there are specific pieces illustrating specific myths—a mask at Timbunke village of a grotesque face eating a child refers to a myth about cannibalism—such pieces are not, on the whole, the important ones. The main sacra of an Iatmul clan, carved figures, large hooks, flute heads and masks, rarely incorporate references to a specific myth, and although they frequently do have animal totems of their clan, these totems are not personages from myths but attributes of the clan. Furthermore, Iatmul totems are not necessarily specific; for instance, all clans have a crocodile totem, all have a fish eagle totem and most a pig totem, all commonly represented in the art. There is no visual distinction between the crocodile of clan A and the crocodile of clan B except their names; in this case it is the names that are specific to the clan rather

than the natural species itself. In fact, important Iatmul figures and masks tend to be very similar, and such diacritical features as they show are usually connected with clan totems, which do not figure in the myth that is associated with the name given the figure by the owning clan.

With the Abelam the case is much simpler since there is hardly any mythology at all, and none connected in any way with the most important figures, those of the clan spirits *nggwalndu*. Such myths as are known seem mainly to be borrowed from the Arapesh to the north and are regarded merely as amusing tales. Of the three myths that can be found (with variations) throughout most of the Abelam area, two are concerned with the origins of long yams and the *wapinyan* (long yam spirits), and the third is about a primal female who created fire. None of these are ever referred to in connection with the art. Although carvings of *wapinyan* are important in long yam cultivation, there is no myth explaining how each clan acquired its particular named *wapinyan* or indeed how the original single *wapinyan* of the myth came to produce so many present *wapinyan*.

This great shortage of myth and lack of regard for, and knowledge of, such myths as they have is so unusual that it is particularly useful that Phyllis Kaberry, who lived among the Abelam about two years after government control was established, similarly found almost no mythology.

I shall, then, be considering Iatmul and Abelam art, not as illustrations of myths or as myths expressed visually, but as expressions of the culture that produced them, and as expressions related directly to the culture, not through the intermediate stage of myth.

I have chosen these two groups because they seem to me to present an excellent opportunity to compare two cultures that are extremely similar in language, social structure, the importance they attach to art and ceremonial, and yet have totally different economies and modes of livelihood based on their respective environments: the Iatmul, the huge Sepik river with its floods, fens and swamps; the Abelam, the steep ridges and fertile earth of the foothills of the P. Alexander mountains. The outward forms of their art and architecture are very different, and yet it seems possible that the processes by which their systems of visual symbols have been formed are similar. The selections made from Nature—their environment—to be visual symbols in their Culture—their art—are made on the same principles and for the same purposes, the obvious disparity between the results is primarily due to the differences in their environments, that is, the raw material available for symbolism.

The Iatmul live on the banks of the middle Sepik and in lagoons connected to it; they are primarily dependent on fish and sago for their livelihood. At present they number about 8,000. Immediately to the north lives a closely related group known as the Tshuosh, living from five to fifteen miles from the river but not subject to its flooding; they also rely mainly on fish and sago. Their culture and art are generally similar to that of their nearest Iatmul neighbours, while their language is really a dialect of Iatmul. Although the Iatmul speak of them as a group, they vary in culture and social structure, any Tshuosh village having more in common with its Iatmul neighbours than with Tshuosh villages further away. To the north of the Tshuosh lie about thirty miles of grass plains, flat, virtually sterile land covered by high, tough grass (mainly *imperator*), intersected by small watercourses on whose banks the sparse

population make their small gardens. As the plains give way to the foothills of the P. Alexander mountains the grass is replaced by bush, mainly secondary growth, with a few stands of virgin tropical rain forest. The Abelam who live on the ridges of these foothills number over 30,000 and the population density is high, averaging over 100 per square mile overall, but rising to 400 per square mile in some parts of the Wosera.

There can be little doubt about the relationship between the Iatmul and the Abelam. The whole Ndu linguistic family¹³ to which they belong would seem to be intrusive, viewed in the context of all the Sepik cultures. It seems certain that the Abelam have moved up from the river into the P. Alexanders, pushing the Arapesh and other groups back, some of them right over the mountains and down to the coast.¹⁴ The grass plains themselves that separate the Iatmul and Abelam are apparently man-made rather than natural. Robbins (1961) suggests that groups practicing slash and burn garden culture would quickly exhaust soils of the type found on the plains and move on until, in the more fertile foothills, they achieved something approaching a balance with their physical environment. This hypothesis, based entirely on botanical and ecological studies, fits perfectly with the ethnological and linguistic data.

The picture of the Abelam moving gradually north from the river, consuming the original vegetation on the plains and displacing the previous inhabitants, is made more likely by the fact that up till imposition of government control this process was still going on, especially in the west of the Abelam area, where the Abelam of the Wosera were pushing back the Arapesh to the north and the Gawanga to the west. As recently as the late twenties or early thirties the village of Nuugwaia, under pressure from its neighbours, surprised and massacred most of the inhabitants of a Gowanga-speaking village and took over their village site and land. There is a good deal more of such evidence of similar recent expansion, particularly in the Wosera, where dense population seems to have meant almost continual, gradual change of village sites. This expansion was not, of course, a planned invasion by a centralised state, but the result of the jostling together of large, fairly densely packed Abelam villages, fighting each other and gradually moving as a whole in a northerly and later westerly direction.

Further evidence in support of this conjectural history comes not only from the similarities and identities between Iatmul and Abelam but also from dissimilarities. One of the important Abelam spirits is the wala, and this is the only one, which has no parallel, known to me, among the Iatmul. The wala are spirits, usually living in streams or springs but always attached to a definite tract of land; they often appear as large pythons and are believed to be responsible for conception. These are the only supernatural beings of the Abelam who have a firm, absolute territorial base; small patches of virgin tropical rain forest or water holes are sacred to them. They are also the only part of the Abelam cosmology where there is any correspondence with the Arapesh. The Arapesh also have wala and their specification is almost identical as well as their name. Since I know of only half a dozen words, which mean the same in Arapesh and Abelam, this coincidence seems most unlikely to be accidental.

I propose to consider the content and functions of art among the Abelam and the Iatmul, on the assumption that both groups had a common origin and that their art stems from common impulses originating in a one-time common culture. It seems to me that most of the differences and divergences between them can be attributed

to contrasted environments and economies and that in the field of symbolic systems apparently disparate objects may serve very similar symbolic functions in the two societies. I cannot here undertake any systematic large-scale comparison between the two societies. My theme will be drawn from the Abelam material, with selected Iatmul examples brought in where they help the analysis. I am not interested in attempting to reconstruct any past common culture or society. But it seems to me that if any system of symbols is to be found in the art, it does not lie at the level of overt symbolism. For example, one finds that a certain face design is called butterfly by the Abelam, and further enquiries meet only with the statement that the ancestors had always painted the face that way and that it means butterfly. Any systematic symbolism must be at the level of the relation between symbols, and at this level may not be consciously perceived by either the artist or the beholder. For this sort of analysis the overt meaning of any symbol is not of great importance. What matters is the arrangement of symbols and the significance of that arrangement. I suggest that at this level similarity or identity between Iatmul and Abelam occurs, and that by comparison between the two one is protected from being blinded by the first level details to the underlying structures that are the object of the analysis.

The Iatmul live in large villages either on the banks of the Sepik River or on oxbow lagoons just off the present course. Their villages are subject to floods for about six months of every year, and their large houses have floors ten to fifteen feet from the ground. These floods make such houses on massive posts essential, but they also make the construction of the houses easy, since posts and other main timbers can be floated into position during the flood instead of being laboriously dragged from the bush to the site. The houses themselves are usually decorated with a face under each gable and with decorative bands worked in white and dark grey leaf thatch on the end walls. The village is organised round a long, ceremonial dancing ground running like an axis through the village; the sides of the ground are formed by earth ridges on which are planted coconut palms. In the ceremonial ground are the ceremonial houses. Usually one great house is used by all the clans, with high gabled peaks surmounted by carvings of a man (or woman) with a fish eagle perching on their shoulders. On the facade of each gable is a huge face that is the face of the house itself. The houses are all female. The dancing-ground with its ceremonial houses forms the main axis of the village and the focus of its interests. It is here that ceremonies are performed and the great displays and parades take place. Captives were formerly slaughtered on the mound in front of the ceremonial house on which were planted magical plants.

If we compare this house with an Abelam ceremonial house, the differences are striking—the Abelam has one facade not two, and it is set on the ground, not raised on posts, and so on. However, if we look more closely the similarities start to emerge. Firstly, both types of ceremonial house are basically larger and exaggerated forms of the ordinary dwelling house with certain added features. The ordinary dwelling houses themselves are very obviously a product of their environment. The floods make it necessary for the Iatmul to build substantial houses with floors raised ten feet or so on posts, as well as making the assembling of the large and heavy timber easy. The houses also have to be large since during the flood all members of the family spend their only time on “dry land” there, and many household and other tasks are done

there; cooking space has also to be provided for each wife. The Abelam live on the top of ridges, where flooding never occurs, and where all timber must be laboriously dragged or carried from the bush where it is cut. Most household activities take place in the open air or under the porch of the house if it is raining, and a polygamist can easily build one house for each wife; in fact, most Abelam households have two or three houses used for various purposes. An Abelam house is made for storage and for sleeping in, while a Iatmul house is made for living in. A similar distinction applies to the ceremonial house. For the Iatmul the house itself is the focus of male interests; both debates and less formal male gatherings take place on the lower level, while the upper floor is reserved for the storage of ceremonial paraphernalia and for preparations for rituals and displays. With the Abelam the house itself is used for the storage of figures and the preparations of ceremony, while the debating, informal gatherings and displays take place on the ceremonial ground (*amei*) in front. Like the Iatmul, the Abelam ceremonial house is also female and, as among the Iatmul, the interior may be referred to as the belly of the house. The entrance is low and one has to crawl to enter or leave; the inside is completely dark and unless an initiation display has been prepared, it contains only the large figures of the spirits of the clans who use it. These large figures sometimes have a bird included in the carving which will be identified as the totem of the owning clan, but it is not unusual for the figures to be indistinguishable one from the other in style, or attributes; identification is simply a matter of knowing the name. The ceremonial house is regarded as female, and enquiries about its meaning and symbolism elicit no response beyond that it is the house in which the *ngwalndu*—that is, the major clan figures—sleep, and where the *maira*—a general term for sacred objects, including all carvings—are displayed.

If, however, one follows the actual construction of a ceremonial house, a rather different picture emerges. The house itself is, as has been said, structurally the same as an ordinary dwelling house; a ridge pole resting on several pairs of crucks supports a large number of rafters whose ends rest on the ground. There are no central posts. For the ceremonial house the ridge pole is very long and rises very steeply to the height of 50 or 60 feet, whereas in a normal dwelling or storage house the ridge pole only rises to 10 feet or even less and is nearly parallel with the ground. The ridge pole is the first permanent part of the house to be erected, and its length and position determine the rise and shape of the house that is built around it. Its cutting, dragging to the *amei* and placing in position are surrounded by a whole series of taboos and invocations. All these operations have to be carried out by members of every clan in the village. In this the ridge pole is unique, since every other part of the house structure and its later decoration is distributed among the clans and carried out by each in a spirit of rivalry with the others.

I propose to consider the ridge pole and its appendages in some detail because, although rarely referred to by the Abelam once the house has been completed, the symbolism revealed during the construction and the associated ceremonies shows a rather different aspect of the house from the conventional female container for the *ngwalndu* and other sacred objects. The ridge pole is always of the same species of tree known as *manga* and is personified as *mangandu* (*ndu* meaning man). The species is a hard wood that grows long and straight, and is also used by the Iatmul for the ridge

pole of their ceremonial houses; the Iatmul too personify it with the same name, and much of what follows about the Abelam also applies to the Iatmul.

Manga also appears as a sacred object in one of the Abelam initiation ceremonies, when each clan sets up a trunk to which are fastened dried yam vines; the initiates are then told that these are the ngwalndu. The Abelam initiation cycle is a series of displays of various objects each of which is said to be the ngwalndu, and culminates when the real figures are displayed.

The mangandu, after being dragged to the amei without being seen by the women or children, has a projecting boss pierced with a hole carved out of the base. The boss is then wrapped up in bespelled herbs and leaves. This boss is called the dama-nose-of the mangandu, and almost invariably is placed at the top forming the peak of the house. The mangandu is raised on a scaffold running down the centre of the future house and lashed to the top of it. After it is in position the crucks are placed underneath it and the rafters on top. When the structure is complete the central scaffold is cut away and removed, leaving the interior of the house entirely clear.

The mangandu is raised just before dawn by men who have purified themselves from sexual contact with women, by bleeding their penes and observing certain other taboos. It is an extraordinary sight to see the men in the misty gray half light struggling inch by inch up the swaying scaffolding carrying the mangandu mainly on their shoulders, all the more impressive since in contrast to almost any other Abelam activity quiet is essential, and instead of the usual shouts and arguments that typify Abelam collective endeavour, there are only hoarse whispers and the strained panting of the men. The operation is tricky, especially as the mangandu has to be in place before the women wake; they and the children are told that the mangandu came and placed himself on the scaffolding although no one seems to expect them to believe it.

Once the mangandu is securely lashed in place it receives further decorative and magical treatments while the rest of the structure is built and the thatching completed. The most important of these is the passing through the hole in the nose of the mangandu of a length of rattan of the species called mbal. Mbal is frequently identified with pythons and hence wala. The mbal follows the wall on each side of the house and is buried an inch or so in the ground at the bottom. It is said to anchor the mangandu to the ground and prevent it moving in high winds, although it cannot do this in any utilitarian fashion. At the same time a small basket of split rattan containing a few stones is fastened just underneath the nose of the mangandu—these stones are called eggs and the basket a nest. I have not been able to get any further information as to their meaning or purpose.

Various constructional stages, each with minor ceremonial follow, the last being the thatching. When the thatching has been finished there follows a ceremony to mark the completion of the structure of the house, as opposed to the carving and painting of its facade and decorations, and reveals clearly the symbolism of the mangandu. Every Abelam ceremonial house has a peak, very occasionally this is formed out of the end of the mangandu allowed to project beyond the thatch. Usually, however, another piece of wood is securely fastened at a more upwardly tilted angle to the end of the mangandu and this forms the armature for the subsequent addition of a series of graded pots, the largest at the bottom, placed one on top of the other to form a boss with a smoothly

rounded top. The placing of the last of these pots is an affair of great ceremony, again performed in silence at dawn. The head of the house is hardly visible in the mist, and the waiting men who crouch just off the edge of the ceremonial ground are silent and shivering in the cold, no fires or smoking being allowed. The man who places the final pot is alone on the thatch, only dimly seen as he rises from behind the head to place it in position. As soon as it is secure he shouts out the spearing cry of his clan, used in spearing men or pigs, *Mitserambunn da ti yu* (literally *Mitserarnbun*, the wala bites or stings) and hurls a coconut down into the middle of the ceremonial ground; the waiting men converge on it howling and smash it to pieces with slit-gong beaters, which are specified for this occasion. At the same moment another man who has climbed up the inside of the structure to the head, where he is completely invisible, lets fall the tassel and chain of split rattan loops by which it hangs from the nose of the mangandu. The tassel should contain two skulls of killed enemies, but nowadays wild pig skulls, that is, pigs killed by the spear, are substituted since skulls previously used for the same purpose would not be acceptable. Even when one knows what is going to happen the effect is startling and rather horrifying, leaving an impression of a real killing rather than a symbolic one.

This ceremony is closely paralleled by the symbolic transfer of the credit for a kill in war from one village to another. This occasionally occurred when a village had asked for help from a distant ally who had no feud with the enemy concerned, and was rewarded for its aid by the purchasing with the highly valued shell rings of the credit for any kills they achieved. The testicles of the victim were hung up over the amei on thin cords, and after a satisfactory payment had been made, the purchasers threw sticks at the cords until they broke and the testicles were pounded to pulp, again with slit-gong beaters.

The tassel is decorated for the ensuing dance with spear points from which may hang a tally in orange seeds of kills claimed by the village, or small manikins made of burrs secretly named after kills, or a helmet basketry mask of the type associated with the wala; all very definitely references to the village's success in war. The tassel itself has a name, but is often referred to by the older men as the testicles of the mangandu.¹⁵ This symbolic identity between heads, coconuts and testicles can be seen in other Abelam ceremonial, but I shall not produce further evidence here.

After the throwing down of the coconut, the empty shell of the house is sealed off and the amei decorated for an all night dance to which all neighbouring villages, both friend and enemy, are invited. The decorations for this dance consist mainly of the orange seeds which are a symbol of dead enemies and of a device made from portions of white palm efflorescence and red leaf, a symbol of the successful sexual conquest of women of other villages. The decorations therefore not only refer to the unity of the village and its distinctness from and enmity towards other villages, but also concentrates on the phallic aggressive aspects we have been considering in connection with the mangandu.

The mangandu itself would seem to be not only masculine but also phallic. The spear-phallus identification is very common in Abelam, and spears are usually fastened beside the head of the house as decorations, while real spears and sharpened stakes

with their ends smeared with red ochre are an integral part of the sides of the house, their points being angled down towards the ceremonial ground.

We have then a female house, the most important part of which is masculine and phallic, and is closely associated with warfare and the success of the village in killing its enemies. The head of the house with its peak is the focus of the masculine aggressive aspect of the house, and its construction is the job of the whole village as a unit, while the dark interior is feminine and is created by the amalgamation of the separate work of each clan.

This dual nature of the house is exactly similar among the Iatmul. Whereas the interior of the feminine house is its belly¹⁶, the two gables crowned by eagles are concerned essentially with warfare. Bateson records that the eagles are spoken of as “our warfare, our anger”, and gives a song in which the eagles look out and see the fish and birds that they will shortly swoop down on; fish and birds being men and women of enemy villages.¹⁷

I have discussed the symbolism of the structure of the Abelam ceremonial house at some length as an example of what I mean by visual communication. Nothing I have said about it is particularly obscure, indeed it may well be considered painfully obvious, and yet hardly any of it was told me directly by the Abelam. To them the methods of construction and the ceremonies and taboos associated with it were the only way to do the work. They were done because they were correct and ancestral; no one seemed to know, or care, why they were done this way, yet the mangandu and the house itself inspire considerable respect and even awe. To have a large and fine house is necessary for the self-respect of the men of the village: they feel their welfare and prestige to be bound up with their house.

It seems to me that the Abelam house is not just a decorated structure which serves as a setting for ceremonies and displays, but a statement about Abelam culture and society made in architectural terms; a statement that could not be just as well said in words or told in a myth. I once suggested to a group, building a ceremonial house, that the carved end of the mangandu might be a penis. This was rejected on the grounds that it was called dama (nose), and as was suggested, one would hardly bore a hole in one's penis, although one did in one's nose. My objections that the tassels were testicles, and therefore there should also be a penis, were countered by the assertion that that was just a name (tfimalei). This attitude is very typical of the Abelam, especially with regard to their art. Designs and patterns and their respective parts have names, but this is the only level of meaning about which they can or will verbalize. This, of course, is hardly any meaning at all, since it leaves so many questions unanswered. Why should a painted band of flying-foxes be a virtually universal feature of Abelam ceremonial house facades? True, it frequently occurs as a clan totem, but none of the other major totems occurs on facades. If we are to regard the art and “visual communication” as a whole as something more than a decorative icing on the heavy cake of social, economic and linguistic structures—and the time, energy and enthusiasm that the Abelam put into such work and the strict rules and taboos under which it is carried out suggest that such a hypothesis is extremely unlikely to be correct—then we must try to discover what sort of communication is taking place. In the example of the Abelam ceremonial house, it is not my purpose to try to relate Abelam symbols to sex. I do not regard any

statement about the ridge pole being in some sense a phallus as anything more than the first step in an analysis. Certainly it is hardly a more meaningful statement than the Abelam naming of designs. Much of the imagery and symbolism of the Abelam, as of many societies, is concerned with sex, but this cannot be helped. As I hope to show, the phallus among the Abelam is not a simple unitary aggressive symbol, although this aspect predominates in the ceremonial house. What I am really trying to establish is what the Abelam are saying about themselves and their culture and society in their art. Sex may well be all-pervasive in many societies, if not all, but this is all the more reason for not being content with identifying something as a phallic symbol and leaving it at that. The most obvious question to ask next is what does the phallus mean to the Abelam. Here, again, most of the evidence comes from the art, and some of it can only be found in the art or from "visual communication".

For the Abelam, long yam growing is the essential way of obtaining prestige. These yams, single, straight, cylindrical tubers, sometimes reaching fantastic lengths—12 ft. has been recorded, and eight or nine ft. is usual for the good specimens in an average year—are grown in sacred gardens only to be entered by men who have purified themselves by bleeding their penes and abstained from all sexual contact since then. They also observe a taboo on meat and on a whole list of leaves and other edibles. The rituals and taboos of long yam cultivation are all of male strength and avoidance of contamination, abstinence from sex, and avoidance of any danger of contact with anything that might be contaminated; men light their cigarettes only from their own fires, take food only from their own wives who also have to observe a taboo on sex during this period—the Abelam definition of a good wife is one who does not commit adultery while her husband is growing yams. Men no longer eat together, except for the individual gardening groups who sometimes cook in the garden itself. The rituals are performed in a cycle based on the lunar month, and consist mainly of spells and the use of magical paints, which are considered to irritate the yam and drive it deeper and deeper into the ground, and herbs whose smell excites and encourages the yam. It would be true to say that long yams are the dominant things in the male Abelam's life; to be a successful yam grower is the prerequisite of a big man or of any, indeed, who is not to be despised as a worthless, unimportant fellow. The length of yams, presented to ceremonial exchange partners at the competitive displays that follow harvest, are the measures of the prestige and influence of the individuals of the hamlets and ritual groups into which the villages are divided. The main species of long yams are obviously phallic symbols.¹⁸ When displayed they are profusely decorated with many of the attributes of the carvings in the ceremonial houses, principally with carved wood or basketry masks that are identical in form to those of the carved figures or the basketry masks that are the foci of the major ceremonies. The largest yams are named, usually after the ngwalndu of the clan of the grower. They are believed to be alive, having the faculty of hearing and smell but not speech or movement, at least in the waking world; yams in more or less human form occur frequently in dreams. As to whether they have sight there is some doubt since, although they cannot see actions going on around them, they appreciate the decorations they are given at the display and a very long yam that was not suitably adorned would certainly produce badly next year. As Kaberry (1941: 356) has remarked, there is a great deal of identification between a man and his

yam, but there is also a great deal of identification between yam and the supernatural. This indeed is one of the two areas in which man and spirit come close to uniting, a union very clearly expressed in the painting and decorating of yams, of the carvings and of the human performers in ceremonial displays. There exists a class of spirits called wapinyan (literally—long yam child) who are primarily responsible for the long yams; they seem to be manifestations of the ngwalndu rather than supernatural beings in their own right. Among the central Abelam minor figures are carved and sometimes named with clan-owned wapinyan names, but in other areas figures set up in the yam shrines, although in other respects similar, are called by ngwalndu names or “child of the ngwalndu”, in all parts of the area yam cult spells are full of ngwalndu and ancestral names, and Abelam frequently say that ngwalndu are ultimately responsible for the long yams. Ngwalndu’s other special responsibility is for the health and size of pigs, and in general for human welfare and fertility. Pigs are virtually the only other form of production of any importance in Abelam life.

The ngwalndu themselves are represented by long ten to fifteen feet carved figures, basically of male human beings, the proportions approximating to nature except for much larger and more impressive heads. The figures have straight legs with their arms to their sides and slightly flexed, with the hands resting on the groin. They have very obvious penes, large but pointing down towards their feet with the glans exposed—although the Abelam do not practice circumcision—with a drop of semen painted on the end. The penis is not in the erect position but neither is it detumescent¹⁹, (this position may well be due to aesthetic preference since, seen in profile, the penis echoes the curve of the belly.) Whatever the reasons on technical and aesthetic grounds for the position, its function in this position becomes obvious from a study of carvings of copulating couples, which are quite common among minor figures throughout the Abelam area. In these figures no attempt has been made to solve the difficulties of a naturalistic representation—however, there can be no doubt as to what is being portrayed, and the penis is represented in the same way as it is on the big ngwalndu figures. Many ngwalndu, especially in the east of the Abelam area, depart only from the normal Abelam representation of the spirit/human being, in having perched on the legs and facing up towards the trunk either a bird (in which case it will be identified as the totem bird of the clan owning the ngwalndu) or a pig. The animal’s head is an inch or so from the end of the penis; the invariable reply to questions as to what it was doing there, is that it is smelling or sniffing the semen. Texts collected in various villages leave no doubt that this sniffing is considered beneficial to the clan, particularly to its pigs, for whom ngwalndu are especially responsible. This association of semen with nourishment, particularly of pigs, fits with magical practice in which white is especially suitable for pigs. All Abelam magical substances are classed as paint, various colours being suitable for various purposes; red and a sort of purple, the colours of the substances used for sorcery and long yams, are regarded as the most powerful. White, however, is almost completely restricted to pigs, and certain white muds when dried and pressed into balls are traded throughout the area at high prices for use as magical pig fatteners.

The phallus as an organ of nourishment occurs elsewhere in the art. As already mentioned, almost all Abelam ceremonial house facades have a band of flying-fox faces. These are represented by a black diamond-shaped face with eyes, nose and mouth of the human type; the nose showing a one-sided feather ornament that is specifically female. Below this there is usually a row of roughly triangular decoration containing a central white stroke; this central stroke is identified as the single breast of the flying-fox. Discussion leaves no doubt that what is represented as and called the single breast is, in fact, the penis of the male flying-fox. This rather extraordinary statement needs to be set in its context of Abelam cosmology and social structure, and I hope to show that it fits in with various other features of Abelam life. Abelam clans all have a bird totem as their principal totem. They also have a whole list of other clan specific natural species—birds, insects, trees and leaves—which may be loosely classed as totems, but I shall be concentrating on the principal bird totems. These have attached to them specific log gong calls, special names referring to the totems that may only be used by members of the appropriate clans and other linked plant species. It is these totems that are constantly being referred to in speech and gesture, especially on ceremonial occasions or during debates, when it is literally impossible to follow what is being said without a knowledge of the principal totems of the participants. As I have said, these totems are all birds, and flying-foxes are included in this category: they are all female, not just in gender, but in fact. As the totems are women they are also thought of as mothers, and when they are referred to in oratory it is usually support for the sisters' children of the clan that is being expressed. The Abelam general word for totem is *djambu*; a person's *djambu* include the whole list of totems belonging to his clan or sub-clan. His maternal totem is, however, called his *mbambu na apwi*—Mother's Father's bird or, often, simply *mbambu*—by this is meant only the principal bird totem of his mother's natal clan. This bird is completely taboo. An Abelam may not touch his mother's totem, let alone wear its feathers or eat it. There are no similar restrictions on his own totems. This essentially maternal aspect of totems supports, in the case of the flying-fox, the identification of the very large and obvious flying-fox penis with a single female breast.

The obvious question, do the Abelam really believe this? Is one that can only be answered Yes and No. Such a question raises another problem closely linked with the totemic belief, that of physiological paternity. Abelam constantly say, and particularly in debates and ceremonial contexts, that children are not conceived by men but by the *wala*. A woman is believed to be entered by the *wala* of her husband's clan when passing near his water hole or patch of bush; she is unaware of the intrusion but conception takes place; copulation has nothing to do with it. Copulation is, however, necessary to promote the growth of the child in the womb; once a woman has conceived husband and wife should copulate vigorously and frequently for some months to ensure a healthy, strong child and an easy birth. However, despite this emphatic denial of any connection between copulation and conception, men returning from years working at the coast and finding their wives with babies, tend to beat them and in some cases repudiate the baby and are regarded as justified in doing so. It would seem then that Abelam do not always believe that copulation and conception are unrelated. A similar duality is to be found in the beliefs about birds. Domestic fowls, which are admitted

to be birds of a sort, are recognised as having two sexes, and it might be that this is part of the explanation why fowls are the only commonly occurring bird species that is never found as even a minor totem. Bird species in which the male and female have different plumage are classified by the Abelam as different species, but it is known that they tend to associate with each other. In general, although in ceremonial contexts Abelam will insist that all birds are female and that conception is not connected with copulation, in more everyday contexts they are not always so rigorous. It would seem, therefore, that such statements are not merely the result of faulty classification but are socially essential.

Eastern Abelam informants have occasionally told me that some hornbills are male, while one said that hornbills were sometimes one and sometimes the other. Kaberry found that in Kalabu village in the north central Abelam area, hornbills alone among the birds were classified as male. The case of the hornbill is a special one, however, because although like the flying-fox it is fairly common as a totem, it is virtually omnipresent in the art where its occurrence, as is that of the flying-fox, is totally without totemic significance. In carving, the hornbill's head and neck are an integral part of the ornamentation of all major and many of the minor figures. Its huge beak makes it easy to carve and identify. This characteristic shape has been completely integrated into Abelam carving. It may be so important because of the phallic shape of its bill, which is sometimes equated with the cassowary bone dagger, *yina*, which plays a vital part in ceremony, where it is very definitely a symbol of male aggression. This identification may be relevant to the classification of the hornbill as masculine in some parts of the area. Where the hornbill is represented alone and as the complete bird and not just as the head and neck, it is always in the same form—as a flat carving with a round body on which is painted the symbol of the moon which is most unequivocally feminine. This form of carving has a specific place and purpose, being used as an essential decoration at the base of the facade of the ceremonial house, where its combination of male and female symbols echoes that of the house itself.

In this necessarily selective account of some aspects of Abelam art and architecture, I have tried to follow through the symbolism related to the phallus. It has three main forms: first, as the ridge pole of the ceremonial house which stands for violence and warfare and is associated with the spear; second, as a nutritive organ, in paintings on the facade of the house and in carvings of the vital clan spirits; and thirdly, combining both aspects in the cult of the long yams, whose display and presentation are the occasions for the hostility and rivalry by which prestige is obtained; but which is also the cult of nourishment and fertility.

It seems to me that ceremonial houses, carvings, paintings and decorated and displayed long yams are making implicit non-verbal statements about such matters as well as others, such as the ultimate identity of man, long yam and spirit. These statements are only made through the art and not otherwise except, possibly, in dream-interpretations.

I would like to suggest that such statements are relevant to the social structure. For instance, the flying-foxes on the facades of the ceremonial houses seem to be statements about two different things: firstly, the phallus as nourisher rather than conceiver, and secondly, the essentially feminine nature of totems. Both these statements might well be

relevant to the invariant nature of matrilateral kinship ties compared to the weakness of patrilateral ties characteristic of nominally patrilineal Abelam society.

It may also well be that the cult of the long yam, which provides such a perfect symbol of male prestige and expression of male values, is linked with the norm of female sexual aggression among the Abelam. Bateson (1935) has argued along these lines for the Iatmul with regard to the male cult of flutes which are also phallic symbols and expressions of male pride and prestige. These flutes, although not of course cultivated, are otherwise surrounded by much the same taboos and attitudes as the Abelam long yams. They are also called by the same name *wapi*, the Abelam name for long yams, is also the name for the long male flutes, at least among the Eastern Iatmul. This identity of name can hardly be a coincidence, especially as many other words used to refer to sacred things are also the same in the two languages. One appears to be left with the supposition that *wapi* means, in some fundamental sense, a symbol of male prestige in phallic form, and that the Abelam, finding the long yam in the P. Alexander foothills, developed its cultivation (they produce far longer yams than any of their neighbours from whom they must originally have learnt the art), and elaborated a cult round it. While the Iatmul gave similar prominence to their often equally long sacred flutes.

In the comparison between Iatmul and Abelam, I have tried to show that, in the small sector of the art I have been considering, outward differences in the forms of houses and the choices made from the environment, as symbols, conceal great similarities in the “messages” that these objects are transmitting. These “messages” I believe to be statements about the nature of man and his culture, statements that may not be totally conscious in either the creators or the beholders of the art—who do these things because they are correct—but which are relevant to and essential for the existing social structure. I also hope I have shown that at least in Abelam society these statements are not usually made, and possibly even cannot be made, by other means of communication.



Figure 5.1. Ceremonial House at Yentschanmangua village, Nyaure group, western Iatmul. The dancing ground is lined with banks on which coconuts and trees grow. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

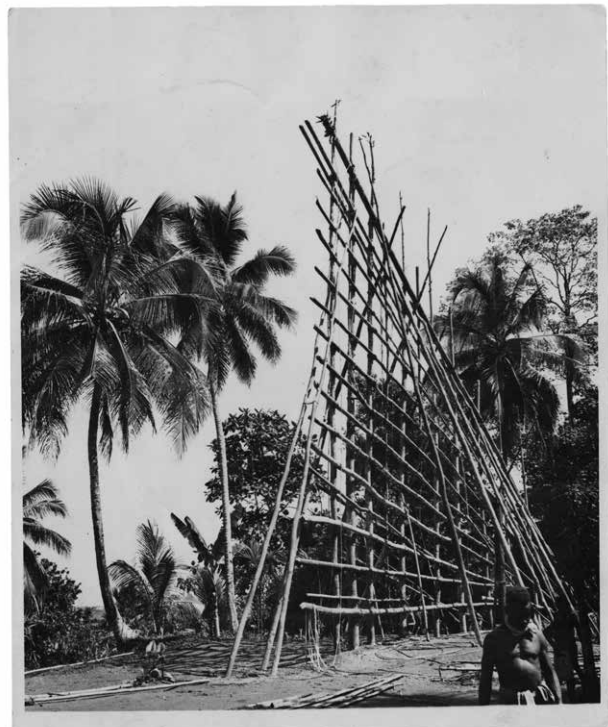


Figure 5.2. The *mangandu* in place at the top of the scaffold, the crucks that will eventually support it are being put into place. The *dama* at the peak is completely concealed by its wrappings of bespelled leaves. Kwimbu amei, Wingei village. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.



Figure 5.3. Mangandu as tambaran. Each trunk with its body of dried yam vines and creeper fronds is said to be a ngwalndu. The screen with its paintings conceals an area where the preparations for the parade take place; the performers emerge down the ramp on the left.
Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.



Figure 5.4. The completion of the house structure, Kwimbu/Wingei. The tassel has a cord attached running to the screen; by pulling this cord a concealed man makes the tassel swing back and forth in time to the music during the all-night dances that follow the ceremonies of completion. On the right of the house is a post decorated with the skulls of 12 pigs that have been ceremonially exchanged and eaten during the various phases of construction so far. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

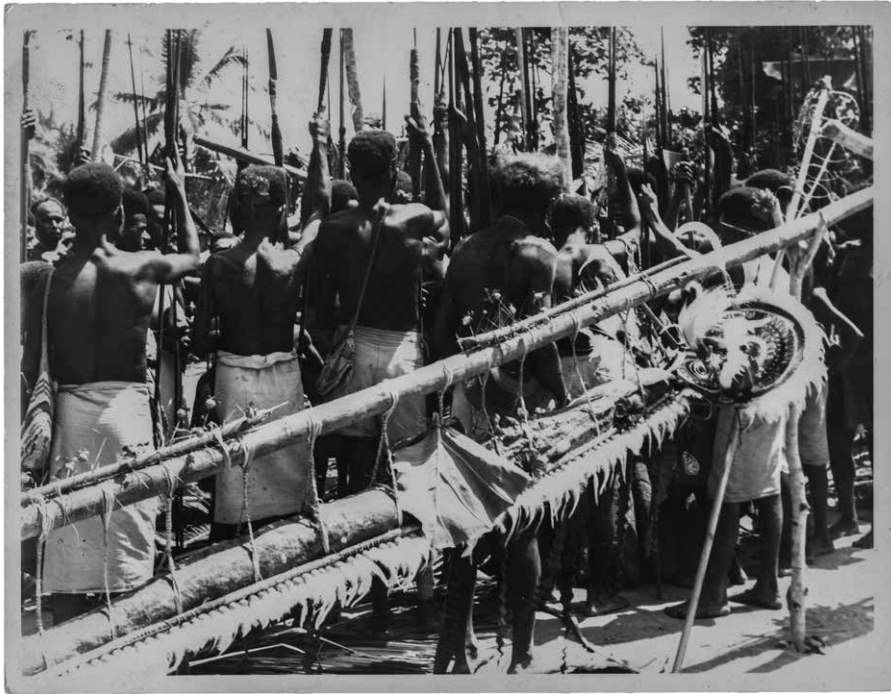


Figure 5.5. A long yam ceremonially displayed, decorated with a basketry mask. Visitors from an enemy village having filed in are indicating their peaceful intentions by drawing their hands down their spears. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

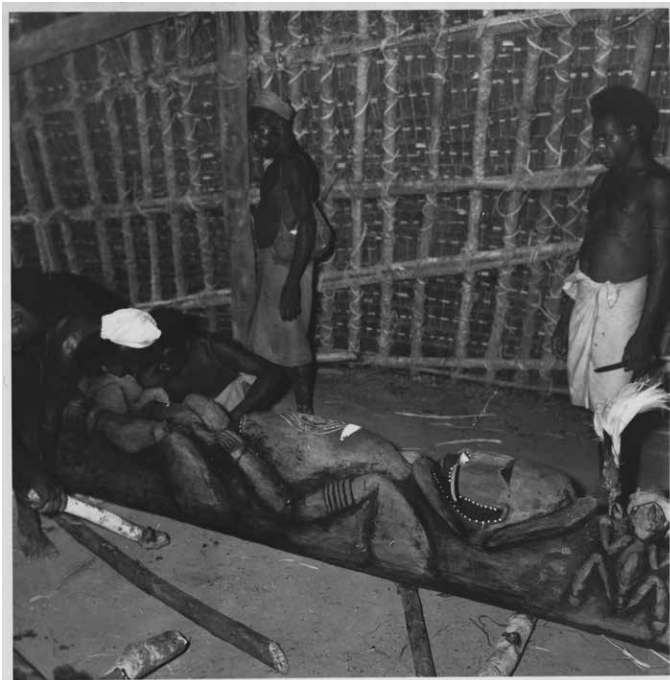


Figure 5.6. A new ngwalndu at Djiginambu village. After being carved in the bush it has been carried into the ceremonial house. At this stage only the eyes, facial and pubic hair, shell breast ornament and drop of semen are painted; the bird between the legs is a cassowary, principal totem of the owning clan. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.



Figure 5.7. Top of the façade of the ceremonial house at Bugiaura amei, Yanuko village. From the top; single face of a flying witch; seven black faces of flying foxes, immediately below a row lozenges showing their 'single breasts' as central white strokes; row of faces with diamond pattern round eyes, identified as butterflies. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

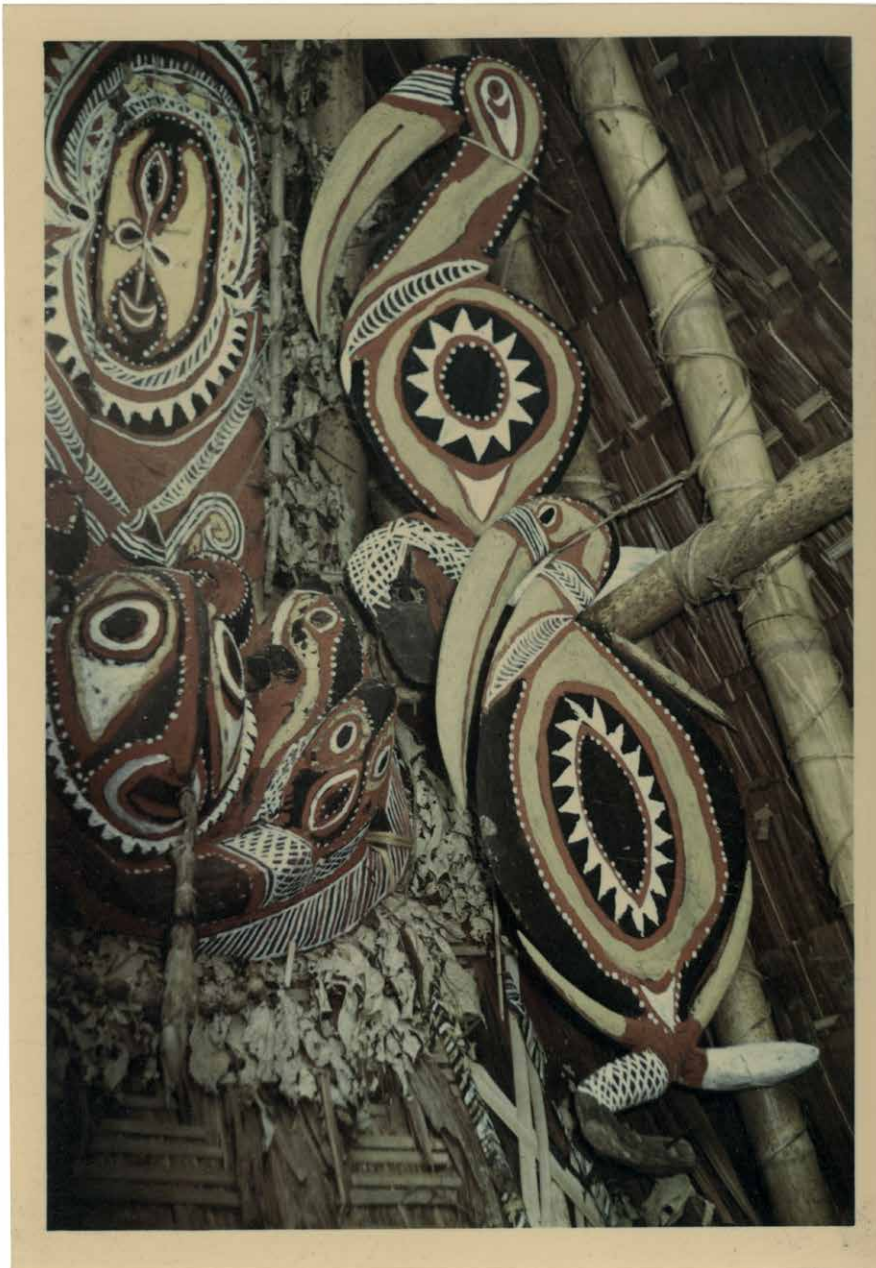


Figure 5.8. Hornbill carvings at the base of the façade of the ceremonial house at Kundagwa amei, Waigagum village. The slightly different styles of the two birds, particularly the eyes, is typical of the order of variation between villages. The upper bird comes from Kalabu village about three miles to the north and a traditional enemy of Waigagum. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

CHAPTER 6

*The Abelam Artist*²⁰

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One of Raymond Firth's earliest articles, "The Maori Carver", published in 1925, testifies to the early formation of that interest in art which has remained with him ever since. It is an enthusiastic piece, establishing the right of the Maori artist to be judged by his own standards and not merely as a primitive whose attempts to reach the style and vision of the Greek artist are vitiated by his dull and brutish nature. That such arguments do not have to be repeated today is due to the change in attitude, which Raymond Firth has had a part in shaping. Although he would hardly have called himself a social anthropologist in those days, his approach to the problem of the artist in society was basically sociological, and that it was also ahead of its time is amply demonstrated by the several officious and carping footnotes inserted by the editors of *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*. A quotation shows his approach well and might be taken as a text for the present essay in his honour. "It is important to know what kind of a person the carver was, what position he and his work occupied in the social scheme, and the seriousness with which both he and his labour were regarded." This attitude, which was elaborated and refined in his later publications (Firth, 1936, and "The social framework of primitive art" in Firth, 1951), has always distinguished him from his contemporaries and immediate successors on social anthropology. He has always made it clear that to him art it is not only a fit subject of study by social anthropologists but also a field of human activity, which they ignore at their peril. Always opposed as he has been to any narrowing of the field of social anthropology, this attitude stems both from his interest in and appreciation of art, and from his view that it is in such highly regarded and deeply felt activities as art that human societies and their members express their values.

This essay is rather heavily ethnographic. I wish it could be more analytical, but despite Firth's advocacy we have still not developed the necessary concepts to be able to handle the relation of art and its creators to their society at anything above the descriptive level. However, it is at least now realized that such concepts are necessary, not only for plastic art, but for music, dance, architecture, and poetry as well as ritual and myth.

The truism of art history, that art reflects the society that produced it, is usually expounded with reference to some period of history in which known artists expressed their view of their culture and times in terms of the acceptance or rejection, and

subsequent modification, of the art of the period immediately before their own. The artist is envisaged, as is the poet or musician, as expressing himself and his times in two main ways: first, by developing and perfecting forms and techniques used by his predecessors; second, by expressing in his art different conceptions and values, either by modification of the available styles and forms, or by the introduction of new ones. In short, the artist is seen as an individual receptive to his social environment and capable of mirroring his view of it in his art. The artist also codifies change; he starts with the conception of beauty common to the society of his childhood, and if he is great, he leaves the society with a modified conception of beauty, with new standards—a changed aesthetic. This view of the artist in his social setting presupposes change both in the society and the art; not just actual change, but also a conception of change, frequently, but not always, of progress. What the artist really expresses is not the values of his culture in any direct way, but the change in those values. A study of the art can therefore tell us nothing about the artist or even his values unless we also know something of the society and culture in which he operated, as the reflections of aestheticians on prehistoric and ethnographic art have frequently demonstrated. Just as it is impossible to have history without some concept of change, so art history and its techniques, being concerned primarily with change, cannot be used in any simple way on the sort of material presented by New Guinea societies. These societies have no concept of history or indeed of change, although since the advent of various European administrations they have become aware of the effects of change. In the view of members of these societies, they had always been the same since they came into existence and should ideally remain the same forever. Similarly, the art of these societies had magico-religious value for them precisely because it re-created the art of the ancestors; its whole social function consisted in being unchanging. What then becomes of the artist as the super-sensitive receiver and distiller of the essence of his culture and times? Does he become merely a craftsman skilfully reproducing traditional objects in the traditional style to satisfy social demands whose springs are in concepts of magico-religious efficiency rather than any ideal of beauty? Someone must have created the art, and to judge from the favour many, though by no means all, of the highly prized objects have found with European artists and critics, the creator or creators were artists rather than craftsmen.

I shall not be able to give final answers to the problems outlined above, but hope at least to clarify some of them. In this essay I shall be examining the artist in his society with reference to the Abelam tribe of New Guinea.²¹ The Abelam number about 30,000 and live in the southern foothills of the Prince Alexander mountains to the north of the Sepik River. They live in large villages from 300 to 800 in population, and have a vigorous art. They are also distinguished for a cult of long yams; single yams of up to twelve feet long have been recorded.

The context of Abelam art

As in most New Guinea societies, all art among the Abelam is basically cult art and can only be displayed in the context of the ceremonials of the tambaran cult.²² Decorative art, of course, exists, but its motifs are entirely drawn from the art of the tambaran cult; and it carries with it overtones of status from that cult. Half coconut shells, polished

black and beautifully engraved with designs filled with white, are among the finest small objects produced by the Abelam; they are used for drinking soup, but may be carried only by big-men or men fully initiated in the tambaran cult and successful in the yam cult; young men can and do inherit them but cannot use them until they have the full ceremonial status of organizers of ceremonies. Similarly the engraved pottery bowls, holding anything from one to four gallons of white soup, made by women but decorated by men, can be used for serving soup only when ceremonial exchanges are taking place. Such examples could be multiplied to cover the whole field of decorative art, showing that not only is it stylistically derived from the cult art, but that the use and display of decorated objects are limited, by virtue of their decoration, to prescribed contexts and statuses also stemming from the cult. There are therefore no artists who produce decorated objects who are not also cult artists, and it is in the context of the cult that they acquire and perfect their skills. There is one exception to this statement: the women who make netted string bags (wut) using red, yellow, white, and a sort of dark purple string, in various excellent designs. The use of the bags by the men is determined by their ceremonial status, one design being reserved for fully initiated men, another for those who have only one ceremony to go, and so on. The small bags used by young men gradually increase in size with the age and status of their users. The production of the bags, however, is regarded simply as a skill, which a woman learns from her mother or mother's or father's sister, and the ability to produce any design, although highly prized, is no indicator of status.

The tambaran cult shares its basic features with such cults throughout New Guinea. In essence it is a series of ceremonies at each of which the initiates are shown art objects of one sort or another and are told that these are the sacred spirits, tambaran. At the next ceremony they are told that the last one was just pretence but that this time they are going to see the real tambaran, and so on until the last of the ceremonies when they are in fact shown the most sacred objects; and as fully initiated men they may go through the cycle again, this time as staggers of the ceremonies and themselves initiators. Each ceremony is performed by one half of a dual organization, called ara, who initiate the sons of their exchange partners in the other ara; the initiators are fed by their partners while they prepare the ceremony, and after the initiation are presented with pigs. Ara perform ceremonies alternately: one will perform ceremonies one, three, five, and seven, the other two, four, six, and eight, going on then to one, three, five, and seven, so that two full cycles have to be performed before an individual has been initiated into all the eight ceremonies.

All ceremonial activity is regarded as balanced exchange between ara and the individual partners who compose them. There is three-way reciprocity with increasing exactness of return at each level. First the food and the live pig are regarded as a return for ceremonial services in preparing the ceremony, acting as initiators, and providing decorations for the initiate (the son of the donor). A man will reproach his partner if the decorations are not up to standard, asking whether he has been eating all the food provided just to produce this. Second, the next ceremony of the cycle will be performed by the other ara and the donor will now be recipient. Rough equivalence is expected in size of pig between each pair of ceremonies, one and two, three and four, etc.; the scale increases until seven and eight, which may require three months each to prepare,

a very large drain on the resources of the ara responsible for feeding the initiators, and demanding the most enormous pigs for presentation at the end. The third and final form of reciprocity, at which exact equivalence in the girth of the pig presented is essential, comes with the next cycle, when the ara who initiated at ceremony 1 last time are now paying for their sons to be initiated into the same ceremony. The lapse of time involved in the completion of a cycle can never have been less than ten years, and is nowadays, and probably always was, considerably longer. Although this is not the place for an analysis of the social structure, it is worth noting that these inescapable reciprocal obligations, stretching over the decades covered by two full cycles, are a potent factor in maintaining the stability of the component groups of the ceremonial organization, since to default imperils the ceremony and exposes the culprit to sanctions from the whole village and not just from his own clan or ceremonial partner.

The preparation of tambaran ceremonies provides the context in which all Abelam artists work, and the ceremonies themselves the only opportunity for them to display their work to any large group of people. It is also during the preparations that the training, if it can be called that, of future artists takes place. All the ceremonies have as central features the display of some series of objects, which stand for the *nggwalndu*, that is, the major clan spirits. The earliest of the sequence are said to be very simple, but I have never seen either of the first two in any part of the Abelam area, and it would seem that they have been dropped from the repertoire, at least since the war. To go by the descriptions of older informants, the tambaran consisted of patterns on the floor of the ceremonial house made with the four earth paints (red, yellow, white, and black) with the addition of flowers, particularly the scarlet single hibiscus, and certain leaves, those with a silvery grey back being present in all tambaran ceremonies. While these patterns are the focus of the initiation and the representation of the *nggwalndu*, and give little scope for artistic expression, they are surrounded by painted panels of sago spathe which line and provide the ceiling for the initiation chamber constructed inside the ceremonial house—the painting and arrangement of which provide ample opportunity for the artists to display their skill, and which are the basis on which visitors from other villages evaluate the success of the ceremony. These paintings on the flat are sacred in that they are associated with the *nggwalndu* and the ceremonial house, whose façade is decorated with similar paintings, but the designs are not tambarans, being open and visible on the façade to women and uninitiated males. When used inside the house the designs and the panels on which they are painted are called *wut*, and referred to as the beautiful string bags of the *nggwalndu*. *Wut* has, however, many other meanings and is one of the most emotionally loaded words in Abelam. In this instance the most obvious symbolic referent is *nyan wut*—womb (*nyan* meaning child)—the initiation chamber being a small dark room built inside the large female house with its low entrance through which the initiates crawl when entering and leaving. The women are not supposed to know that *wut* is used for the painted panels which they, of course, never see in place, and I have heard artists, as they paint, laughing at the women's illusion that only they can make beautiful *wut*.²³

Wut panels are to be found at all eight stages of initiation into the tambaran cult, but in later ceremonies the tambaran itself has a larger and more elaborate structure. There is a great deal of variation within the Abelam area in what is displayed at each

stage, although there is far less variation in the names of the ceremonies, the same name being used for very different displays in different parts of the area. Much more is involved than simple woodcarving and painting on the flat in all parts of the area. For example, there is the setting up of fifty ft. poles with great masses of dry and thorny yam vines, and leaves of the spiny lawyer cane fastened on them to represent nggwalndu; bamboo roots are made into bird heads; and larger than life-size seated figures with extended arms and legs, covered with brightly painted patterned matting and stuffed with fibre, have to be constructed on armatures of wood and palm, themselves difficult to construct, with only split cane lashings to fasten the pieces together. Of such a figure all that is saved after the break-up of the display is the carved wooden head. The fact that much of the work of the artist for such ceremonies is ephemeral does not mean that the demands of the public are less, or that a high degree of both technical skill and aesthetic sense is not essential in the artist.

Each ceremony of the tambaran cycle has as its core a specified tambaran with a definite name and a prescribed form. The form is traditional and highly valued because it is believed to be that used by the ancestors and therefore the most powerful in a supernatural sense. Abelam tambaran ceremonies appear to the casual attender. The fathers of the initiates are watchful that all should be correct, but when they do complain it is on the grounds of value for the food and pigs they are providing rather than out of concern for the proper instruction of their children. In general, the initiates, the ostensible purpose of the ceremony, get scant attention, the parts of the ceremony that concern them are often rushed, and they are hustled off and told to wait until wanted again. In most ceremonies a few initiates get lost at some stage, either because they have run away or have simply wandered off; their fathers may protest, but the rituals continue without them and they are considered fully initiated, whether they were there or not, as long as the father has fulfilled his exchange obligations. Nor is there any sort of instruction of the initiates; they are told what to do but never why to do it. There are puberty initiations, which involve seclusion and a certain amount of instruction of youths, but these are usually separate from the tambaran ceremonies and the instruction is not about these ceremonies.

The initiates have to observe some minor food taboos and a period of sexual abstinence before and after the ceremony, but it is on the initiators that the burden of the ritual restrictions falls. It is only during the preparations for a ceremony that the observer becomes aware of the magico-religious elements of the whole: elements that are represented during the ceremony by a brief invocation almost drowned by the noise of the audience, or the fumbling of the bewildered initiates as they try to perform some ritual actions of which they understand nothing. The supernatural benefit of the ceremony to the community, the other communities that assist, and the individuals concerned, accrues during the long and careful preparations, and the observance of a whole series of taboos and ritual performances by the initiators, some continuing for three months before and six months after the ceremony. All the artistic and other work of preparation is performed in the name of the nggwalndu, and their benevolence is assured, first by the performance of ritual and the observance of taboos, and second by the skill of the artists in creating the objects to which the nggwalndu names are given, and the magnificence of the ancillary wut and other decorations both of humans and

objects. The magico-religious benefits of the ceremony may be released during the noisy and crowded public climax, but they are created by artists and organizers working in small groups during the preceding months behind sago palm frond fences which may not be passed by women, uninitiated men, or even initiated men of the other ara.

There is a clear necessity for artists in Abelam society. Every ritual group has to be able to draw on artists with the varied skills necessary to produce displays adequate to please the nggwalndu and other spirits, maintain the prestige of the group vis-à-vis other ritual groups and villages, and keep up the ceremonial exchange system within the group. The ara dual organization and the exchanges between partners, which provide the social framework for ceremony, also act to restrict the availability of artists from within the group. Each ceremony is prepared by one ara for the other, and members of the initiates' ara, whether fully initiated or not, may not take any part in the preparations, or even see the raw materials used, until all is ready and displayed at the ceremony itself. Thus any artist, no matter how skilled, may only work on alternate ceremonies within his own ritual group. It is very rare for one ara of any ritual group to be able to supply all the necessary talent from its own ranks, and recruitment from outside is the rule.

Peace is anyhow necessary for the performance of a ceremony, but neutrality is not enough; active co-operation is necessary between enemy villages for any of the more elaborate ceremonies. Peace ceremonies involve the exchange of men of equal age and social status between villages; each pair so exchanged become waunindu and call each other brother, and it is through these relationships that help is mobilized. Usually the work is sub-contracted, that is, so many painted panels of specified sizes and so much patterned matting are prepared in the enemy village and ceremonially carried in when the whole job has been done. The party bringing such contributions appears as a war party in full war paint, preceded by a screen of spearmen. They cut down young trees and lop branches off bigger ones, destroy banana plants, and generally leave a trail of licensed destruction in their wake. As they approach the ceremonial ground the spearmen advance and throw spears at warriors from the recipient group. These warriors are especially selected for their ability to dodge; no reciprocation is allowed and casualties are said to occur—certainly on the occasions when I have been present, great skill in dodging was very necessary. The rest of the party throw armfuls of rubbish and the remains of the ruined breadfruit and banana trees into the doorways of the dwelling houses. The demands of hostility are then superseded by the demands of hospitality, and the visitors are stuffed with the finest soup and yams, and laden with yams and pork to take away with them; but uneasiness prevails on both sides until the visitors are safely on the way home, having promised to attend the final ceremony and a further and major food distribution after it.

Aid from friendly and allied villages is obtained in more informal ways, but again only by the activation of specific pre-existing interpersonal relationships. Help, whether for general labour or from a specific artist, can only be solicited through established relationships, and for a big ceremony every possible link, through kinship, clanship, and the various forms of quasi-brotherhood and exchange relationship, is utilized. From the point of view of the artist, the ara system means that although he may be debarred from half the ceremonies of his own ritual group, if he has any sort of reputation he will be in demand for the ceremonies of others, and his rewards are not only in the immediate

return for his work in food, honour, and prestige, but in the activation of remote and otherwise dormant ties with men in other villages. Wide-spreading ties are of benefit to him in everyday life and enhance his prestige within his group. In short, a successful artist is sought after both within his ritual group and outside it, and if he can speak well in debate and grow reasonably long yams for presentation to his partner, he is assured of high prestige. An artist of considerable experience will often be called a big-man, but very rarely are artists big-men in the aggressive entrepreneurial sense—they are not leaders in secular affairs and manipulators of public opinion as are the real big-men. Although I am neither competent nor possessed of adequate systematic material to make any generalizations about the temperament of Abelam artists and big-men, my entirely subjective impression from acquaintance or friendship with several dozens of each is that the artists are nearly always comparatively modest men (no Abelam could be called modest tout court!), not given to violent expressions of emotion; their debating style tends to be quiet and authoritative but not excessively controversial, and they can usually expect a respectful and attentive hearing; the practice of their skills gives them general prestige and particularly a reputation for understanding and knowledge of the supernatural which invests their opinions with something of wisdom. These differences have some social concomitants; successful carving and painting are believed to be incompatible with the practice of sorcery, whereas the entrepreneur big-man is usually believed to be an adept at sorcery. Furthermore, the artist's reputation may be expected to grow until he is literally too weak to hold an adze or a paint brush, while the big-man is in constant danger of being displaced by more energetic rivals from the moment he achieves his position, and is virtually certain to have lost his position by late middle age. Whether it is due to an increased sense of security or a manifestation of the artistic genius, artists, in my experience, claim fewer homicides, their adulteries are more discreet, and they quarrel less flamboyantly with their wives and clansmen. In fact, the Abelam expect their artists to be good men (*yigenndu*), and by and large the artists conform to those expectations.

The materials and techniques of Abelam art

Although the tambaran cult demands the use of many materials for its ceremonies, an artist's reputation is based primarily on his ability as a wood-carver and painter; skill in engraving on coconut shell, bone, and pottery is also highly valued, but is considered to go with ability as a carver, while the making of basketry masks, and shell decorated manikins from string by a sort of crochet technique, are important, but much more widely distributed, skills. The traditional equipment for carving was thoroughly Neolithic: polished stone adzes, pig, dog, and flying fox teeth mounted as awls, gravers, and chisels, certain lizard skins and even a rough-surfaced leaf for smoothing. Fire was used for hollowing out drums or the backs of large figures. Softwoods were used green and the splits that tended to occur were deplored but disregarded unless they seriously distorted the figure. Current tools, although vastly improved by the use of steel, have hardly changed; the steel plane blades are mounted in exactly the same way, with the same angle between blade and handle as before. Indeed, some of the handles, beautifully carved, were originally made for stone blades and have been inherited from the preceding generation of artists. Cheap trade knives or large nails replace the teeth,

but the method of mounting and use is traditional; sides of tins full of nail holes make a sort of rasp, but finishing work, now less necessary because of the superior edge of steel tools, is often done with the old materials. European adzes may be used for roughing out, but never for carving. The adze is always used with short rapid strokes towards the carver, removing only very small amounts of wood at each stroke. Modern carvers using four or five graded adzes often carve so finely that no further smoothing is needed. The backs of figures and masks are usually left rough, or hollowed out to reduce the weight, but in the case of pierced plaques and wood headdresses both sides are carved and engraved with equal care.

All Abelam carvings are painted in polychrome and engraving is often added round the eyes, penis, and navel so that the effect of the paint is enhanced by low relief.

Paint itself is highly valued by the Abelam, and almost all magic involves some form of coloured mineral substance that is classified as paint; a form of paint is also the active principle of sorcery and long yam magic. The paint used for tambaran ceremonies is not, unlike the other types, inherently powerful; it is obtained locally or in open trade, and large quantities are assembled, whereas the powerful paints are always obtained in small quantities in secrecy from distant villages. Red and yellow ochres and white and black are the only colours used, the first three being stored in the form of powders; the black, however, has to be made as required by chewing scrapings from the bottoms of cooking pots, sap from a species of shrub, and leaves from a tree, and spitting the result into a paint pot as needed. This rather unpleasant task is delegated to young assistants, and forms a part of the apprenticeship of the would-be artist.²⁴

Although the paint itself is not intrinsically powerful, painting is a sacred activity, and after the paint has been used on tambaran carvings, or wut, or on the initiators themselves, it becomes the principal vehicle by which the benefit of the ceremony is transmitted to the participants. Carving, although carried on in seclusion either in the bush or in an enclosure near the ceremonial house, is hardly a ritual activity; some artists have their own spells to stop the unseasoned wood splitting, but carving has no communal ritual connected with it. It is only when the artist has finished the carving and put in the eyes and pubic hair with a piece of charcoal that the figure becomes an object of concern to the whole ritual group. If the charcoaling is done in the village, the log gongs are beaten to announce the arrival of the tambaran. This call also serves to warn everybody that the final phase of preparations is about to begin. Stocks of paint are checked and augmented, and the final food distribution before the ceremony takes place. The work of painting is carried out under taboos similar to and almost as stringent as those of the long yam cult; men who are going to participate in the painting bleed their penes and must abstain from all sexual contact until after the ceremony; meat and certain vegetable foods are forbidden, but they can and do eat large quantities of the yam soup and finest steamed yams provided by their exchange partners. Painting is done at great speed, usually all the workers sleep within the ceremonial enclosure and work from dawn till dusk with frequent but short breaks for food and betel nut. To begin with, any old figures that are being re-used have to be washed, and this is done in running water, the standard Abelam way of disposing of potentially dangerous material. Then both wood and the sago spathe wut have to be coated with the mud base on which the painting is done. A good deal of technical expertise is needed to get just

the right sort of mud mixed to the right consistency, so that it will provide a smooth absorbent surface and adhere to the material. Sago spathe, which has a very shiny surface, is particularly difficult and is usually rubbed down before the mud is applied with stinging nettles and the bulb of a species of wild ginger, both substances which, in the Abelam view, bite and therefore improve the adhesion. The mud base used is black throughout the southern and eastern Abelam but grey in the north. On the grey mud, black has to be applied as a separate colour, but with the black mud those portions of the design calling for black are usually left unpainted, simply being glazed with tree sap when the painting is finished.

Abelam painting technique is extraordinary because it combines great speed with firm control by the artist. All the preparers of the ceremony join in the painting and all are found employment regardless of their lack of talent. The artist outlines the design to be painted in thin white lines. He may use lengths of split cane to help him work out the proportions of the design relative to the panel, or cane tied in rings to give him a guide for a smooth curve or circle; but he usually just starts from one edge and builds up the design as a series of elements as he works across the panel. With carved figures, artists usually start with the head, which is the most intricate part; the proportions are of course given by the form of the carving, but otherwise the techniques for figures and panels are identical. As soon as the artist has painted a few white lines for one part of the design, he instructs an assistant to paint a red or yellow line just beside it. Abelam art rarely uses a single line, multiple lines of varied colour, often further emphasized by white dots on one of the colours, are the rule. The artist now moves on to the next part of the design but keeps an eye on his first assistant. When the white lines have been satisfactorily doubled or trebled by the assistant or assistants, a second grade of assistant is employed to fill in solid areas of a single colour: subordinate grades of assistant are employed to put on the lines of white dots and glaze the black mud with tree sap or chew up black paint if the painting is on grey. Other men will be employed powdering and mixing paints and coating objects and panels with mud. An artist at work on painting usually keeps from eight to ten men more or less busy while still maintaining complete control over the design and its execution.

The paints are mixed with water in which certain very bitter species of wild lime have been steeped; again the idea of bite is produced as an explanation. The containers are usually half coconut shells, but they must be lined with a portion of wild taro leaf; wild taro is an important plant in all Abelam ceremonial, intimately connected with the ancestors, it is also a symbol of the *ara* and their rivalry, and is much used in tambaran ceremonies. Brushes are made from fibres tied to the end of a splinter of wood; small feathers or the chewed end of a fibrous twig are similarly used. For the drawing of white lines a long narrow single chicken feather, made pliable by bending, is drawn along with about two inches of the feather flat on the surface. This technique, which properly used produces a narrow line but manages to keep a reasonable charge of paint on the brush, is employed with great boldness by experienced artists and enables them to draw the sweeping curves characteristic of Abelam design with speed and accuracy.²⁵

Although supplies of mud base are kept handy in case of mistakes, artists rarely need it; they refer to no model or sketch and appear to lay out the whole design in their heads. When several artists are painting together, as happens during the painting of a ceremonial house façade, they share out the available width between them and each paints his own section of the bands of identical motifs that stretch across the façade. In such a case they agree in advance on the proportions and number each is going to paint; while working they watch one another's progress to ensure that the styles are reasonably matched and that the meeting of their respective zones will be harmonious, but there is nothing like copying involved; no artist who is not known to be capable of producing the required designs in isolation would be employed on a façade.

At the conclusion of the painting stage, when the display has been completed, the log gongs are beaten to announce the fact to the entire area, and the artists are honoured by having the log gong calls of their totems beaten immediately after the announcement. The initiation chamber is now sealed and final arrangements are made about face paint, feathers, headdresses, and other decorations by the initiators, and about pigs by their exchange partners. The ceremony follows in three or four days.

The artist in society

Every initiated Abelam man aspires to be an artist in some way or other. All, in the context of the tambaran ceremonies, have a place in the process of artistic production. The amount of time they spend helping with the actual painting and carving, as opposed to the many other activities necessary in the preparation of ceremony, is largely a matter of choice. A rebuff to a middle-aged man for bad work from one of the directing artists can be expected to disillusion him with artistic activity for the rest of that ceremony, but younger men are less conscious of their dignity and stay and learn.²⁶ The training and selection of artists are completely informal. A youth who shows aptitude will be encouraged and allowed to perform increasingly difficult tasks under supervision until he is allowed to try the painting of a minor figure and later a small wut panel for himself. The artist will correct and guide him, taking over now and then when difficulties occur. A young man will have to do all stages of the painting himself, unless a friend will help him, since the various grades of assistant are attracted only to artists of established prestige. A young man with interest in becoming an artist is not restricted to his own village for tuition, nor does he attach himself to one artist as an apprentice; he can of course attend all the ceremonial preparations in his own village for which he is qualified as an initiator, and assist and learn from all the artists who are at work there. He can also, through ties of kinship or clanship, help in ceremonies at allied villages or with contracted-out work which his own or allied villages are performing for enemy villages, always provided he has been initiated into the ceremony concerned. In this way a young man may well be able to work every year on some preparations or other, and come into contact with artists from villages five or more miles apart. Since considerable variation in style and type of production is to be found it follows that youths of fifteen or so appear among the initiators even in such short distances among the densely packed Abelam, a would-be artist will acquire a wider range and understanding of tambarans and their production than would be possible if he were confined to the set traditional to his natal village.

What has been said about training applies to the painting and constructional phases of ceremonial preparation; to obtain instruction in carving is more difficult, while a reputation as a carver is essential if an artist is to have prestige. Every Abelam male claims to be able to paint, and painting is a semi-sacred activity, the responsibility of personnel laid down by the social structure (particularly the system of initiation grades and the dual organization), performed at a prescribed time during the ceremonial preparations, preceded and closed by essential ritual, and governed by a series of taboos which apply to all the initiators whether in fact they paint or not. Carving, on the other hand, is a much more personal activity and not subject to the formal prescriptions of painting. All carving is undertaken either for the clan of the carver or as a commission from another clan or village, and except for the head board that goes across the base of the painted façade of a ceremonial house, a carving is the responsibility of a single artist. "Commission" does not imply a contract with a stated reward. Carvings are occasionally produced in return for a stipulated payment in shell rings and pigs, but usually only under exceptional circumstances for a major undertaking such as the carving of new nggwalndu when the village and its immediate allies lack sufficient talent, or in the introduction of new types of figure or tambaran where what is being bought is not just the carvings but also the right to display them and to reproduce them in the future. In general, however, carvers are recruited with the promise of no more than good food, as much betel and tobacco as they need, and, of course, the prestige that will accrue to them. All the work of preparation is divided up among the initiators according to their clans and sub-clans; each sub-clan owns its own figures and assumes responsibility for them as well as its share of the wut panels and other decorations. Large clans have one nggwalndu and are split into sub-clans divided between the ara so that there is always a group among the initiators to care for the nggwalndu; clans too small to have sub-clans have to form pairs, one in each ara, and look after two nggwalndu at any ceremony. It is the responsibility of the clan to provide the necessary artistic talent, and it is through the social relationships of individual clan members that the artists are recruited. In addition to the panels or figures necessary for the particular ceremony, each clan has minor figures, often unnamed, which it also includes in the display. Their number and beauty reflect the prestige of the clan, although in many cases they are so numerous that they have to be placed on top of one another and sometimes even obscure the tambarans that are the focus of the ceremony. A big-man would usually commission at least one minor figure at an important ceremony as a mark of his prestige. Such a new carving would become the property of his exchange partner at the end of the ceremony and exchanges; the exchange partner of course would provide all the food for the artist, and reciprocation would be expected at the next suitable opportunity.

A carver selects his timber on the land of the commissioning clan, and they cut it and drag it to his studio, also doing the cutting to size and other unskilled tasks. The studio may be on the ceremonial ground. If so, it will be away from other activities; more frequently it is in a secluded patch of bush near the artist's house; it will always be in the shade to minimize the risks of splitting. The artist does not welcome company or conversation, and spends a good deal of time sitting in silence and looking at his work, this is in great contrast to normal Abelam activity, and especially to painting, where

speed, movement, and noise are predominant. An assistant is usually present, but some artists carve entirely alone; anyone else, such as the curious ethnographer, is regarded as a pest. Young men who cheerfully help in the painting do not always care to spend days in silence and inactivity doing occasional minor tasks, and it is only the minority who persist and start to acquire carving skills. These gradually undertake more and more skilled parts of the work until they try some small simple object themselves, showing it to the artist at each stage and relying on him to give the finishing touches. When such a piece is accepted for inclusion in a display the apprenticeship phase is coming to an end. It is here, in the carving and the acceptance of their work for display, that the relationship between the artist and his society can be seen most clearly.

From the view of the Abelam as a whole the tambaran cult and the art associated with the long yam cult are means of creating and releasing magico-religious power and benefit; the art is essential for the performance of ceremonial, and the artist is a technician whose chief virtue is his power to reproduce exactly the powerful patterns and designs used by the ancestors. The tambarans and their benefit are traditional; to be effective they must be re-creations of the original tambarans, and, furthermore, the fathers of the initiates are anxious to ensure that the ceremony they are paying for is full and correct. These are both forces opposed to innovation, but at the same time the ceremonies are opportunities for display and the acquisition of prestige by the village, ritual group, ara, clan, and individuals concerned; magnificence is consciously sought; magical bundles are fastened to the newly painted figures and carvings, not connected with the ritual but solely so that the eyes of the beholders shall be dazzled by the brightness of the paint and the beauty of the workmanship. Obviously this aspect of the ceremonial allows an element of fashion into the art, but since the benefits of the ceremony extend beyond the village, innovation that has not some good magico-religious justification or precedent will be subject to wide disapproval.

The Abelam artist works within fairly narrow stylistic limits sanctioned by the total society in which he lives; any work he produces cannot be shown outside the tambaran cult, and will only be accepted for that if it satisfies the criteria of magico-religious effectiveness. A young man of Malmba village who had found a growth on a tree that resembled in general shape the human head, had taken it home and carved on it eyes, nose, and mouth and painted it in the traditional style. When he produced it during the preparations for a ceremony at which he was an initiator, the organizers refused to display it or allow it in the ceremonial house; although the painting was in the correct style, the shape of the head was nothing like any of the head shapes of tambaran figures. His plea that it was the shape of a human head carried no weight and he was forced to wrap it up and hide it in his hut until he sold it to me in 1959. In 1962, at Yanuko village a mile or so to the south, two artists painting the façade of a new ceremonial house introduced a very narrow band of stylized leaf decoration similar to a traditional form but with important differences. There was some doubt about it, and some of the older men were against it; the two artists and their helpers were adamant, they were both of high reputation and no alternative artists were available; in the event this innovation was much admired in the surrounding villages. The artists were courted by people from other villages who wished to be able to call on them for houses in the future, while the ritual group whose house it

was won more prestige than the other ritual group of Yanuko village whose new house, without any innovation, opened at much the same time.

A much more important example of innovation occurred at Wingei village in 1959. While a new house was under construction the organizers and the six artists involved decided to abandon the traditional style of façade-painting in favour of one that was used around Kalabu, a village about ten miles to the west; the reason for the change was the superior length of long yam grown in Kalabu. The experiment was not a great success—the bottom row of huge nggwalndu heads, which was the principal innovation, was badly painted, mainly because of the unaccustomed style. That Wingei changed the style of their ceremonial house façade to get longer yams, rather than change the planting season which is three months earlier in Kalabu, indicates the confidence the Abelam have in the power of art, and brings into focus the position of the artist who, if not exactly a mediator between man and the supernatural, is in contact with it and able to influence it through his skill as a carver and painter. The latter point is reinforced by the explanation offered for the bad painting: one of the artists died a week after the painting had been completed; the sorcery that killed him had obviously been working in him and prevented him and his fellows from correctly releasing the supernatural energy inherent in the design. Since this explanation was accepted even among traditional enemies of Wingei it was presumably sincerely believed and representative of Abelam thought on these matters.

The Abelam language has no vocabulary of aesthetics; there are two words of approbation used about art; one means “good” and can be used about almost anything; the other appears to mean primarily “correct”, that is, traditional, powerful. Neither has any necessary connotations of beauty and I know of no word that has. The social demand for art is concerned with its magico-religious power. This is said to depend on the correct placing of the elements of any design with no prescription of a harmonious relation between them. Criticism of art is always in terms of correctness and effectiveness. Artists, particularly when carving, discuss among themselves such things as the shape and size of a limb and its relation to other parts of the figure, but these things are not appreciated by the non-artist. I have heard carvers reproached for holding up the beginning of the painting by fiddling about, taking a piece off here and there, when the figure already had all the necessary attributes, legs, penis, navel, arms, and head. The artists, although they lack any specific terms, do talk about such things as form and proportion, and derive considerable pleasure from carving and painting things satisfying to their aesthetic sense. They carefully examine and discuss works by other artists and rate one another as more or less talented by criteria that are primarily aesthetic. Although not capable of, or not interested in, discussing art in the same terms, most non-artists asked to rate a group of figures or paintings in order of effectiveness, both in ritual power and secular prestige, rank them in the same order as do the artists and the ethnographer. Since, with Raymond Firth, I believe in a universal human aesthetic, this is not surprising; what is important, I think, is that the skilful artist who satisfies his aesthetic sense and produces beauty is rewarded not for the beauty itself but because the beauty, although not recognized as such, is regarded by the rest as power.

Apart from conscious innovation seen as such by the whole community, there also occurs a gradual change in style which is much more difficult to document. Several villages possess very old nggwalndu, and at least two villages have a series of nggwalndu obviously made at various dates. How far back these specimens go it is difficult to say, but genealogical information about their carvers suggests that the oldest might be eighty to a hundred years old. These old figures invariably show a different style from that of the present; those in series show a consistent change in style, the development of the recent style from the antecedent one. The differences are much greater than could be attributable to a change from stone tools to steel—there are definitely changes in the way the human form has been conceived over the period. This situation leads to some difficulties, since the present style is the correct style, that is the ancestral style, yet it is different from the style in which the old nggwalndu were actually carved by the ancestors. When such nggwalndu are washed and repainted, as they are for the final ceremony of each tambaran cycle, the current style of painting does not fit happily on the old style of carving; the surfaces and their relationship to each other are different and the painted designs sit uncomfortably on forms intended for different designs. While the painting is going on such difficulties are recognized. Normally, however, the stylistic difference does not worry anyone; it is simply ignored; only when the impertinent ethnographer holding an artist firmly by the wrist has pointed out all the differences, will he admit their existence; otherwise, the insistence is firm on all sides that the present style is the ancestral style. In discussion with me, artists have speculated on the change in style, wondering whether their style or the old style is the right one, ending by saying that anyhow they know how to carve only in their present style and could not re-create the old style if they wanted to. It is interesting to note in passing that the older figures invariably have much more definite sculptural form—the features are boldly carved and in general they do not seem to be merely pleasant surfaces for painting as much of the present Abelam carving is. Their forms, though varied, are often more reminiscent of the latmul styles of the Middle Sepik to the south. It seems possible that the very high development of polychrome painting so much admired among the Abelam may have resulted in the declining interest in sculptural form evident in the figure sequences. With its conscious desire for ostentation and display it has to be confessed that some Abelam sculpture tends to be rather vulgar by European standards.

This gradual stylistic change makes it obvious that whatever they believe, Abelam artists do not slavishly reproduce the work of their predecessors. It would be surprising if they did since, as already mentioned, they never copy one another or any model. A famous artist of Kalabu, asked by a village across a dialect boundary to produce a type of figure that was used in their ceremonies but not at Kalabu, was given a two-foot-high carving to work from. This he studied but kept in his house, never taking it to his bush studio until the ten-foot carving was finished, when he satisfied himself that he had done it correctly. As everything an artist produces comes from his picture of what the object required should look like, every artist must to some extent impose his own vision of a “good” piece on the work in hand.

The artist is free to express himself within the stylistic limits prevailing at the time, and by so doing may marginally change those limits. There is of course a feedback here; the society may impose stylistic limits on what is acceptable for a tambaran ceremony

and so control the artist, but the artist creates all the art and therefore forms the society's conceptions of what is acceptable. In such a situation gradual change is probably inevitable. It offers the artist self-expression, and keeps the art vital and capable of expressing the changing values of the society, while at the same time ensuring that it can continue to fulfil its main function of being the traditional and powerful mode of access to the supernatural. I have argued elsewhere (Forge, 1966) that Abelam art is intimately connected with the values of Abelam society, and that it makes statements about Abelam society that are not made by other means. If this is so the artist must be the essential link. Up till now the contact with the Australian administration and the missions has not affected the art in style or content. The war and its aftermath virtually stopped artistic activity, but it has been taken up again, at least in the north, with great vigour. This revival has coincided with, and been a symbol of, a withdrawal from excessive contact with European values and a reaffirmation of traditional values. In fact up to now, the art, far from changing, has been reinforced in its conservatism by taking on the additional value of acting as a symbol of Abelam culture in the face of colonial culture.

CHAPTER 7

*Style and Meaning in Sepik Art*²⁷

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The Sepik river area has long been recognized as one of the finest art producing areas of the primitive world; the art of the various cultural groups, which live there, have many stylistic features in common. There is in fact a whole series of stylistic features in common groups, but some of these features are developed and exploited in one area while remaining latent in others. For example the Yi'pon figures of the Arambak peoples of the Upper Karawari and neighbouring groups on the southern tributaries of the Sepik stretching as far as the Hunstein mountains, have a style dominated by series of opposed hooks. These are beautifully carved and balanced and the rest of the carving is totally subordinated to them. The Moon carvings have virtually no frontal aspect, being made to be seen from the sides; the only anatomical features clearly represented are the face and the leg, again dominated by the sideways view (only one leg is necessary), the face in profile is recognizably "Sepik".²⁸ The opposed hook motif can also be found in undeveloped form in other parts of the area, for instance in the Middle Ramu, the Yuat, and the Eastern Abalam, very considerable distances from the Karawari. I have no suggestions as to why the Arambak should have selected this opposed hook element from the repertoire of Sepik motifs for special development, but it seems obvious that they did, and that they must have attached some special significance to it. In other parts of the area where opposed hooks occur the hook is identified as birds' heads and beaks (particularly hornbill), bone daggers, noses, and so on. There are two preliminary points I want to make. First, that within such a style area the various cultures, whatever may have been the "origins" of their stylistic repertoire, develop their own styles for their own purposes. Second that between cultures there is no necessary connection between motif and interpretation; whatever the opposed hook element means in Arambak it would seem certain that it is not now birds' heads or noses. A stylistic element or motif is developed because it means something to the culture that produces it and we can only find out why by a study of the culture concerned. But we should not dismiss the association of a style with a culture as something that just happens until we have exhaustively investigated other possibilities. I want in this paper to make a few tentative suggestions as to what these possibilities might be.

In most of the Sepik cultures there is one fairly coherent style, at least in carving that is used throughout the art and a makes a piece identifiable as a product of that culture. Style may vary geographically within a single culture, but within a village there

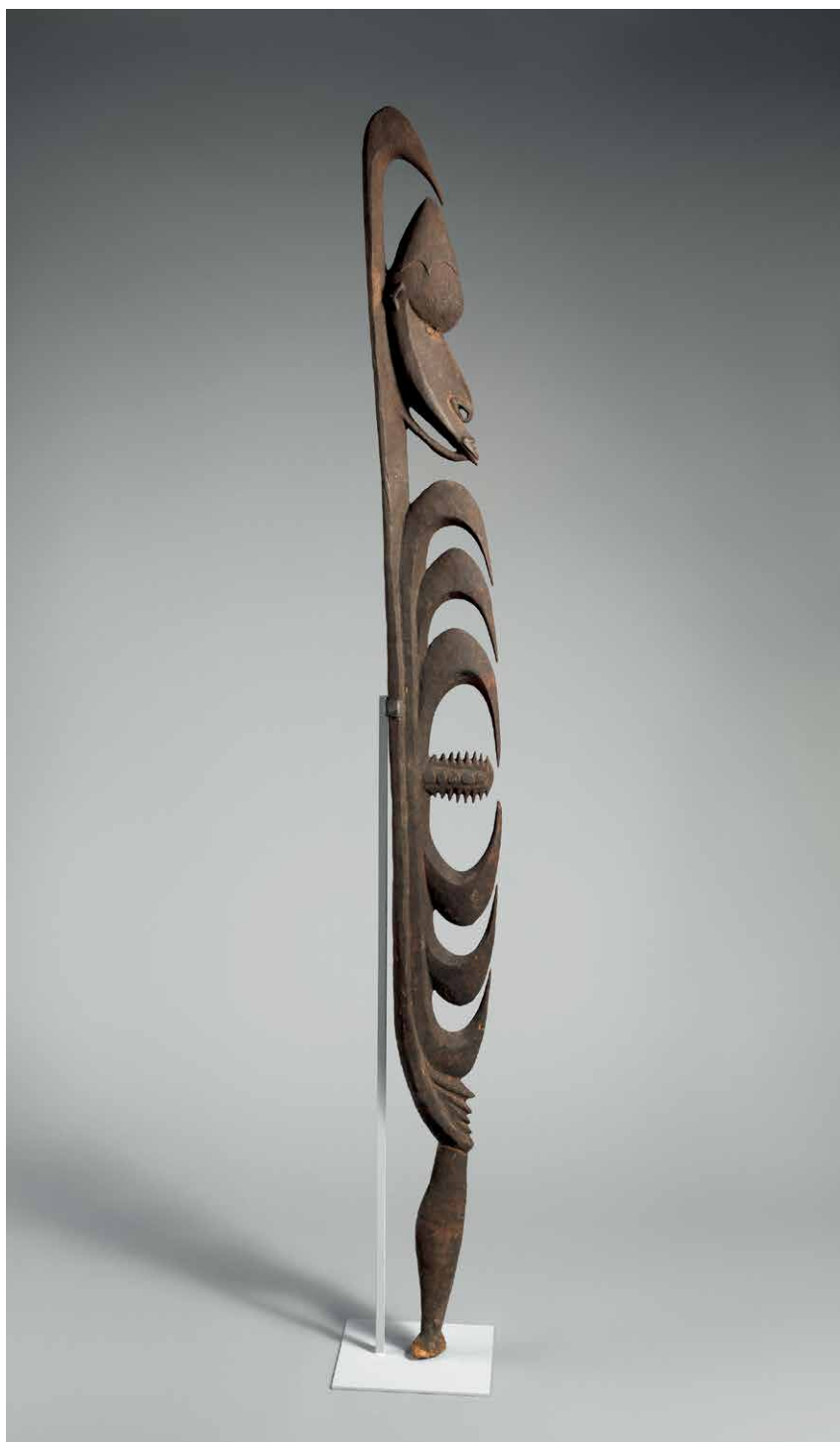


Figure 7.1. Yi'pon figure, Upper Karawari river. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978.412.732.

is basically one style. Among the Iatmul of the Middle Sepik River, however, there are at least three major styles used in representing the face of humans or spirits with human-like faces. All three are to be found in all Iatmul villages and although the style of each of them varies geographically, the stylistic distinction between the three basic types is maintained in all villages. These three major styles are all represented in ritual objects, made and manipulated by initiated men, but these objects are also public in that all three forms are displayed to women and children at some stage during ceremonial. They are therefore in the middle-sacred range of art. They are not mundane for daily use, but they are not so sacred that they can only be seen by a restricted group within the total society.

The three types of face are:

1. "Naturalistic" modelled skull type, actually modelled on skulls of dead ancestors and enemies; also reproduced in light wood and worn in the "tail" of certain ritual performers.
2. A flat broad face used in most wood carvings and on the awan masks.
3. Mwai type masks, very long and narrow elliptical face with upswept eyes and long nose extensions ending in a totemic animal.

There are several other styles of face to be found in Iatmul art, especially when painted on the flat, but these three are numerically the most frequent and the most important in public ritual contexts.

Although the distinction between the styles is maintained throughout the area there is also a universal expression of the essential unity of the three types, in that each style of carved face is painted in the same style of face painting, with its sweeping spirals and black circles. This face painting, which contrasts markedly with the "herring bone" pattern of face painting used by the Lower Sepik groups, is applied to all three styles of face and to the faces of ceremonial performers. The facial features, eyes, nose, mouth, *etc.*, have different forms and different spaces between them in each of the three styles, but the face painting pattern is applied to each so that its main lines fall in the same relationship to the facial features in all cases. Various authorities (Wirz, Speiser, Schmitz) have postulated different origins external to the Sepik for these styles. Be that as it may, postulated origins are not sufficient to explain why the Iatmul maintain these individual, clearly distinct styles at the moment. It seems not unlikely that one could demonstrate some naïve functionalist hypothesis of the order of these three styles would not persist and be sharply differentiated unless they served some function in the society. All three appear and are used in different ritual and social contexts. The awan masks as such are very clearly associated with the clan as a provider of other people's mothers and the function of male clan members as mother's brothers to non-clan members. The more aggressive and masculine aspects of the clans would seem to be expressed in the mwai masks which, with their long nose extensions and totemic animals, are the public representatives (junior analogues is Bateson's term) of the secret and sacred flutes and wagan heads, with obvious phallic associations. The modelled skulls are clearly linked to individuals, man as victor or victim. These three views of man are echoed in names, each Iatmul receives an awan name from his mother's brother, accumulates and then

loses a series of patrilineal clan names as his powers as a man wax and then wane, and is also reputed to have a secret individual name.²⁹

It is interesting that the separateness of styles is perfectly maintained only at the level of sacred objects that are nevertheless shown to the public; at a more sacred and secret level objects sometimes draw on more than one style. For instance a pair of fine carved wood wagon heads at Korogo village have faces of basically the flat face style, with a band starting at the forehead and ending at the chin, linked to the nose, and ending in totemic animals, which echo the mwai style. Similarly a mask of awan type, now at Basel, has a typical awan face at the bottom, but the top face is a modelled skull in which the jaw has been displaced downwards so that the face is long and narrow with a huge nose³⁰ this object, in fact, has elements of all three styles. The skull is reputed to be that of Mwaim the elder brother of the fraternal pair of founders of Kararau village from which the mask comes. Although the mask was classified as awan its use was very restricted compared to that of the normal awan. This sort of material suggests that the three face forms may be correlated with Iatmul concepts of aspects of man in society, so providing a system that is codified and maintained by traditional sanctions at the level of a public ritual, but which can be manipulated to express essential unities and esoteric fundamentals at a higher level of sacredness.

A recent study by Schefold (1966) of suspension hooks from the Middle Sepik in the Basel Museum, apart from its introduction of mensuration and statistics as a means of quantifying and objectifying the study of stylistic variation, shows that some sort of, what we might call, the dynamics of stylistic variation also applies at the mundane level of utilitarian objects. Schefold also finds three main styles of face (since his sample is not restricted to the Iatmul, direct comparison is impossible) and he somewhat reluctantly comes to the conclusion that the styles must have had different origins. However, his pioneer study makes it quite clear that in the secular context of hook production artists draw with great freedom on the contrasting styles, combining and recombining elements to produce variety without losing reference to traditional and ritually sanctioned forms. It would seem that such freedom to vary and experiment is essential if any art, whether it be required to maintain ancestral forms for ritual purposes or not, is to remain vital and satisfying to the artist and his public. But among the Iatmul the secular carvings not only provide a source for the slow change in ritual style, but also may serve to represent other facets of Iatmul theology. For instance it would have been possible in any Iatmul village to produce a collection of suspension hooks which could in sequence show the gradual transformation of a human head with nose extension of the mwai type, through a bird's head with human nose, and ending with a bird's head devoid of human reference. It would seem likely that such carvings are statements about the relationship between man and the supernatural, particularly ancestors and totems. Similar subjects are the preoccupations of myth, invocation, and ritual generally, but there is no reason to suppose that they are all saying the same thing, or indeed that Iatmul culture gives the same primacy to verbal forms that we do, influenced as we are by our long tradition of writing as a means of communication. It is indeed the carvings, masks, and other ceremonial paraphernalia that persist and are the objects passed from generation to generation as the concrete embodiment of Iatmul culture in much the same way as books are in our own.

I have used the Iatmul material in outline above, though I do not have enough information to complete such an analysis, mainly because the art is well known and provides a clear example of what I have called the dynamics of stylistic variation. The main part of this paper is concerned with the less strikingly differentiated material from the Abelam, with whom most of my time in the field has been spent.³¹ The Abelam are one of the largest groups speaking mutually intelligible dialects of a common language in Lowland New Guinea. They number over 30,000, live in large villages (300 to 800) and have a very high population density for their slash-and-burn horticulture (100 to 400 p.s.m.). The Abelam live on the foothills of the Prince Alexander Mountains about thirty to forty miles north of the Sepik River and the closely related Iatmul. They have a vigorous and still maintained art, dominated by polychrome painting; all carvings are painted and in cult situations acres of painting on flat sheets of sago spathe are also produced. They have two distinct cults, that of long yams and that of tambarans. The ceremonies of the tambaran cult are held after the long yams have been harvested and displayed, and before the sacred gardens are prepared for their replanting. Both cults attach a great deal of importance to paint. It is the essential powerful magical substance of the yam cult, indeed all magical substances are classed as paint; and although the paint used in the tambaran cult is not intrinsically sacred or powerful, the final phase of tambaran ceremony preparation which is devoted to painting involves the observance of a whole series of taboos for the initiators. Painting in short is a sacred activity and the paint, although mundane before its use, under ritual conditions becomes the main means by which the benefits of the ceremony are transferred to the initiates, to the village as a whole, and to the villages of those who have assisted and attend the ceremony. It is not only the paint applied to objects that takes on this character, the face and body paint applied by the initiators to themselves becomes similarly charged by the ceremony and may only be removed after a due period with elaborate ritual precautions.³²

Within the Abelam area there is a great deal of stylistic variation particularly in painting on the flat; there is also evidence, plentiful in the east, that there have been considerable stylistic changes over time. The neighbours of the Abelam have been heavily influenced by Abelam art and form a sort of fringe extension to the various Abelam styles. In passing it is interesting to note that those neighbours actually in contact with Abelam villages tend to copy in a rather slavish manner, but that further away elements deriving from Abelam styles are to some extent reordered and integrated into new styles. Thus eastern Abelam ceremonial house facade styles are "abstract" in that they have no recognizable faces or indeed any element that by its form refers to any shape outside the closed system of painting. The Nugum groups immediately to the east copy these facades in every detail, but if one penetrates ten miles or so into Nugum territory the facades, although obviously related, show subtle changes, most noticeably the broadening of some of the "abstract" forms so that small faces can be included, thus reintroducing an anthropomorphic element where the "abstract" forms no longer have even the meaning, "this is the way the Abelam do it". The evidence for the Abelam being the exporters rather than the importers of style can be summarized thus: the process is still going on; the names attached to art objects are Abelam ones even though such names have no meaning in the language of the neighbours; the styles tend to be

unskillfully used and their component elements misunderstood within about five miles of the Abelam border while they often peter out altogether within ten to fifteen miles. The process is mainly but not exclusively one way; the huge southern Arapesh confederation of villages, Ilahita, which seems to have formed a bulwark against Abelam expansion to the north and west (most southern Arapesh villages average 150 population, while Ilahita is well in excess of 1,000), has elaborated an individual style of figure painting on the flat which is called ggwal (that is an Abelam word without Arapesh etymology) which is now being re-imported into some parts of the Abelam territory.

The geographical distribution of stylistic variation within the Abelam area has been somewhat modified by the imposition of peace following the founding of a government post at Maprik in 1937 (although there was Japanese occupation from 1942-5 and no real re-establishment of government control until 1948), free travel throughout the area is now totally accepted and big men or men ambitious to become big men have ties of friendship with villages that were unknown even by name to their ancestors. In this broadening of horizons, the northern Abelam round the government station have a considerable advantage, they have benefited most from agricultural extension activities and have the most cash, while mission hostility to the traditional cults was in this area limited to argument and exhortation rather than the more extreme forms it took elsewhere in the region. In fact the area close to the station seems to have been the only part of Abelam where the orderly performance of cult ceremonies has proceeded without faltering since the war. But these non-traditional reasons for northern superiority are overshadowed to the Abelam by the fact that the long yams of the northern Abelam are longer than those of the east, south, or south-west. There are various factors which explain this difference, terrain, quality of soil, length of fallow, planting season, *etc.* To the Abelam, however, although differences of cultivation technique are not discounted, such consistent success implies superior supernatural techniques, and, since the success is general as well as individual, the superiority of the general ritual as well as the individual magic is believed to be responsible. This has led to a general move towards the style typical of the Maprik area more particularly in the east. In general then the northern and eastern Abelam are moving at the moment towards a single style both in facades and all painting on the flat, and in carving, the old eastern carving style, which only had heads of "human" form, has given way to carving of full anthropomorphic figures.

Before recent stylistic changes the "abstract" style of the east, although to Abelam and our eyes totally different from that of the north, had in fact some formal similarities. The ngwalndu heads, which form the dominating bottom row of northern facades, are made up of pairs of elements which, taken separately, are very similar in formal structure to the units which strung together make the bands of painting on the eastern facades, and are identified as either man's hair or cassowary. In the east it is quite clear that no form of figurative intention is present; any suggestion that the central feature might be eyes was vigorously repudiated by easterners, they were mbia (belly, or alternatively the whole trunk); how man's hair could have a belly they were unable or unwilling to explain.

Such formal similarities can be demonstrated between other motifs of eastern painting and the northern “figurative” style. But the dichotomy between north and east that I have been making is basically misleading. I call the northern style “figurative” solely because among the elements included in virtually every painting are certain ones which the Abelam consistently identify as the eyes, nose, and mouth, of whatever is being represented; ears are less frequently included, but perhaps the most important and constant of all is the *wakan*, a huge red feather head-dress with a white U-shaped mark near its peak, which is an inevitable feature of any northern painting of anything in anthropomorphic form. Both styles are arrangements of elements in satisfying patterns, there are in each style constellations of elements that are named *ngwalndu*, man’s hair, flying fox, *etc.*: other constellations with some of the same elements have different names. Each constellation may be used in series to form a band on the facade of a ceremonial house, or separately as panels of the initiation chamber inside the house. These identifications are little more than a handy reference system used by the Abelam themselves, there is no attempt to explain why things are represented in a particular way, nor is there any attempt to express stylistically any relationship between the two-dimensional paintings of *ngwalndu* on the facade with the three-dimensional carvings of *ngwalndu* inside the house. As I have argued elsewhere (Forge, 1970), two-dimensional painting for the Abelam is a closed system having no immediate reference outside itself and certainly not to the three-dimensional painted carvings; except in the essential theological point, also made by the Iatmul in the same manner, that whether painted on the flat or on three-dimensional carvings, and regardless of the relative disposition and size of nose, mouth, and eyes, the face painting style used is basically

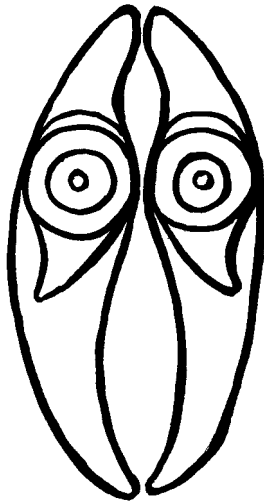


Figure 7.2. Basic elements of the centre of a single *ngwalndu* face from a façade at Maprik village, north Abelam. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

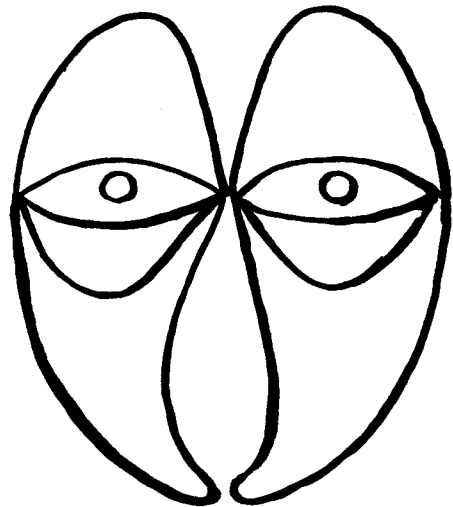


Figure 7.3. Basic elements of two “man’s hair” motifs from a façade at Wingei village, east Abelam. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

the same; and identical to that used by initiators during ceremony, and that used on the carved wooden masks attached to the heads of the displayed long yams. This single face painting style provides an expression of the fundamental unity of the trinity, man, yam, and ngwalndu. Apart from this theological point it is also obvious that any closed communication system must have in addition to diversity and opportunities for manipulation, certain unities to mark it off as a system.

In painting on the flat, except for the well known and ritually essential motifs of the ceremonial house facade, artists frequently refuse to identify what they are painting until it is finished. At first I thought this was just bloody mindedness, but for various reasons became convinced that they frequently just start with a few of the forms of their two-dimensional “language” and see what it suggests. I have also recorded cases of artists who, having decided half way through that they were painting X changed their minds and made it Y at the end. In other cases artists who have co-operated on a painting argue about what they have painted even after it is finished. The point here is simply that the names are not of importance to the artist. What it seems to me is important is that a whole series of elements, collectively and individually charged with sentiments associated with ritual, secrecy, and power are manipulated to make effective communication, the impact very definitely being enhanced by the aesthetic effect.

The presence or absence of figurative elements in contemporary Abelam styles is possibly misleading for another reason. In many areas now using figurative designs there is evidence that, not very long before, the style may have been less figurative. Such evidence is to be found mainly in engraved objects, bone daggers, and coconut shell bowls. Engraving throughout the area is in the flat painting style and not the three-dimensional carving style. Engraved objects last on the whole much longer than paintings, this is particularly true of the treasured bone daggers. In most villages, if one can see twenty or thirty bone daggers, one can find quite wide variation between figurative and abstract styles. Daggers from the same village show engravings of ngwalndu in exactly the style to be seen on the facade, as well as daggers totally covered by three sets of concentric circles, said to be eyes and mouth, and also unhesitatingly identified as ngwalndu. In fact, even though the concentric circle degree of abstraction is not found anywhere nowadays, much abstraction is to be found even in those areas where the ceremonial house facades appear to us totally figurative. Among the northern Abelam, where the red wakan head-dress forms a part of almost every design, it is used to “anthropomorphize” and relate to the world of spirits, objects of ritual concern that are not themselves spirits. Plate three [Figure 7.5] shows such a painting. In it the volute element has been repeated and manipulated to form the eyes, nose, and mouth of a ngwalndu-like face, topped with a row of hibiscus blossom, a dog tooth ornament, and the wakan head-dress. The body of this being is almost circular, the arms and hands, legs and feet are clearly marked, the rest of the panel is filled with a pattern of volutes. This element was identified by the various holders of the ceremony at which I saw it as an immature fern frond, legs of pork, or swirls in a river, the artist when appealed to said any one or all of these were correct as far as he was concerned.

The use of a head-dress and accompanying ornaments to indicate membership of a class, is a simple iconographic device, similar to identity of face painting style in both Abelam and Iatmul art, but is restricted to the northern part of the Abelam

area. In the east heads as we have seen are almost unknown in the flat painting style and there is a corresponding rarity of head-dresses. In the south-west, an area of very high population density containing about half of the Abelam and always called the Wosera, heads occur but not with any great frequency. Head-dresses are however more common, often appearing on their own without any sort of head or facial features shown, or as in with the head totally absorbed into the head-dress and only partial facial features indicated.

In these areas the omnipresent feature is the pointed oval identified in the east as mbia-belly, in the Wosera either as mbia or more directly as asa-mother. The mbia is also universally present in the northern style, but tends to be overshadowed by the representational character of the paintings. In Plate three [Figure 7.5] two mbia forms can be seen joining the elbow and knee on each side of the figure. It is quite clear from many discussions with informants that mbia has connotations of the fecund maternal belly even in areas where the alternative name “mother” is not applied.

I have already made it clear that our dichotomy, abstract versus figurative or representational, is misleading at the very least in Abelam terms and I now wish to analyse a set of paintings from one village which includes both types in one corpus. My aim is to show how Abelam artists handle the elements of their flat painting style and manipulate the different bits and their relationships to create association and relationships between disparate valued aspects of their culture.

The paintings to be considered are on paper provided by me, using tempera water mixed paint in the four colours that correspond to the basic earth paints. The recording of traditional designs was a problem that I tried to tackle on a large scale during my second field trip; the details cannot be given here, but the method was basically to provide artists with materials as close as possible to their traditional materials—black

paper for sago spathe coated with black mud, and powder tempera colour instead of powdered earth paints—and leave them to mix the colour to their preferred consistency (very thick), and provide their own brushes. The shapes of the pieces of paper were also traditional—oblong and triangular. Although they were smaller in size than traditional surfaces used for ritual purposes, few artists had any problems with scaling down the designs. All the paintings illustrated here come from the village of Kwanimbandu in the north Wosera and are part of a group of more than one hundred and fifty paintings from that village which I collected in 1962–3. As far as I can tell this collection exhausted the traditional repertoire of all the artists in the village. As there was no

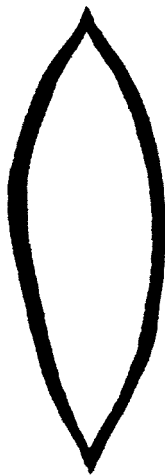


Figure 7.4. Bottom of ceremonial house façade ngwalndu faces. Bugiaura ceremonial ground, Yanuko village. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

ceremonial house in the village they were all painted on the veranda of my house with barricades placed at each end to exclude women and children. These precautions were taken seriously and I had to promise to show the paintings to none but fully initiated men while in the Abelam area. When a young man dropped one of the brushes used to paint fine lines, which are themselves secret, through the slats in my floor, there was an outcry and a demand that he should provide a pig as a fine for having created a situation in which a woman or child might have seen part of the male secrets. Although there were no sanctions available to enforce the demand, the young man concerned stayed away from the painting thereafter. The painters did not observe the taboos associated with the painting stage of a tambaran ceremony, but there was virtually no meat eaten during the period and although none of them bled their penes to purify themselves from sexual contact, several mentioned that they painted better after avoiding intercourse for a few days. These painting activities were spread out over a few months, some days whole groups coming to paint, other days only one or two men, rarely were more than two or three days a week devoted to painting. While men were painting in my house I provided generous supplies of tobacco and a certain amount of betel nut, as would the hosts during preparation for a ceremony, but I did not provide any food, instead I made a small cash payment at the completion of each painting.

The ten paintings to be discussed below are all, except the last, designs suitable to be used in ceremonial contexts, they are also competent examples of Kwanimbandu painting, all of them were passed on both counts by the twenty-two major artists involved at various times in the painting sessions. Such designs would either be used in bands across the facade of a ceremonial house, or else singly or in small groups on triangular or oblong panels of sago spathe sewn to a cane framework and coated with black mud. The panels, called wut are used to line the initiation chamber inside the ceremonial house. Wut refers also to the only female artistic activity, decorated string bags, and also to nyan wut–womb–(Forge, 1967). In some areas men painting wut use the female colour names, those for the string dyes, instead of the male colour names, for the paints (Forge, 1970). The fact that the Abelam artistic form most capable of manipulation, and therefore of communication, is so predominantly feminine accords well with their traditions of women as creators of the vegetation and discoverers of both yams and tambarans.

I shall give a description of the main formal elements of each painting first with the identifications of elements provided by the artist and discuss them later. I have no space in this paper to discuss the significance of the different types of cross-hatching employed or the bands of polychrome triangles. They are all classified as various forms of wut-string bag, and their almost ubiquitous presence in the various designs strengthens the feminine association of these panels. I shall also be ignoring the difference between thin and thick line techniques since most of these examples show the use of both.

Plate five [Figure 7.7]. Ndu “man” by Nyagara; a straightforward design, the body with a bailer shell ornament on a black trunk outlined in polychrome cross-hatching, the same technique used for the arms and legs, which with black joint marks at elbow and knee are in the so-called “hocker” position, the head without nose or mouth is

absorbed into the head-dress. There is a band of polychrome cross-hatching across the bottom, at the sides, in yellow, *aggwa-mbabmu*—the crescent moon.

Plate six [Figure 7.8]. *Ndu* “man” by Tagwo ngwu; basically the same, but the head has disappeared and a band of white hatching separates off the top of the triangle which is filled with a black triangle representing the female sexual organs (*kitnya*). The W formed by the arms has a pair of white circles in it, as do those formed by the legs. These may be identified as either eyes or stars.

Plate seven [Figure 7.9]. *Wama yui* “sulphur crested cockatoo’s feather” by Tagwo ngwu; the feather of the title takes the place of the head. This feather is the prerogative of men who have been initiated into all the *tambaran* ceremonies except the last. The penultimate ceremony, at which they acquire the right to wear this feather, is associated with war and killing. Only one pair of circles in the upper position, identified by the artist as eyes. There is no polychrome cross-hatching in this design and the bailer shell breast ornament is missing.

Plate eight [Figure 7.10]. *Kwarumban* by Anga; a class of head-dress which I have never seen in use, associated with the hornbill, whose stylized head and neck always form the top inverted W shape, the lower W is in this case also a pair of hornbill heads, but is sometimes shown as arms, whose form they clearly replace in this example. The rays on the white circles beneath the legs make the identification stars. The top feature springing from the junction of the W forms is, in carved examples, always a head on a long neck.

Plate nine [Figure 7.11]. *Lapanga* by Anga; a leaf with a silver back used in *tambaran* ceremonies of every level. The tree species *Lapa* (*nga*–leaf, also house) is said to be the preferred species for making the light throwing spears used in warfare. The trunk with its bailer shell ornament is much reduced and the legs, although still present, are single white lines, the W of the arms has, however, been extended in elaborate polychrome cross-hatching to form a dominant *mirtnga* (literally *mirt*–*Ficus* species, *nga*–leaf), the classic form of ceremonial head-dress in the north *Wosera*. The *lapanga* takes the place of the head and is totally absorbed into the head-dress. Two *kitnya* (female pubic triangles) occupy the bottom corners.

Plate ten [Figure 7.12]. *Kulamba* “large owl” by Djangara; all the elements are familiar except that the W form of arms and legs has been replaced by paired loops. The artists and others refused to identify these loops and suggestions about eyes, wings, etc. were all rejected. The elaborately decorated black circles at the bottom were specifically identified as *Wasaman*, a group of stars in the constellation of Orion. (The word literally means “dog’s leg”).

The next three paintings are all by the same artist *Tsiratsitban* and were all identified by him under pressure from me as *Ndu* “man”; Plate eleven [Figure 7.13] is familiar and basically the same as Plate six [Figure 7.8]; in Plate twelve [Figure 7.14] the layout is similar but the *mbia* element has been rotated through 90°, while the two circle segments usually in yellow at the sides have maintained their orientation with respect to the central *mbia* by being transferred to the bottom edge, but being black they were identified as “half-bellies”. At the top the oval in a diamond is clearly related to the centre part of the large design, but again rotated through 90° with respect to it, this form was identified as “flying fox” whose conventionalization it closely resembles.

Plate thirteen [Figure 7.15] was painted on the same day immediately after finishing the previous painting, Tsiratsitban converts the opposed Ws into zigzag lines with the mbia alternating in orientation, and three pairs of “eyes” in the V-shaped forms left. The design was abandoned because of poor light before all the white dots had been added. He also explained that he was dissatisfied with it since he had not left enough room to include a large mbia at the bottom and therefore was unable to take the enclosing Vs to the edges of the paper, leaving himself with large blank areas in the bottom corners and a top heavy composition.

Plate fourteen [Figure 7.16] was produced by Toto in response to a request for innovation, the borders on the three sides are well executed and totally traditional and he did them first; having limited the space available he then did a thoroughly traditional figure with rather more attention paid to the head, in size and detail, than is usual. Having used almost all his space he then started to innovate: at the top are four letters—when asked what they were, Toto replied “olsem baibel long skul” (pidgin English) “as in the Bible at school” (mission school was all that was available in that area). On the head is a motif which had me flummoxed for some time much to his joy, but he eventually identified it as the hilt of the sword used as a trademark by “Dettol” (an antiseptic much in use in the medical services) which he had copied off a gallon can standing on my verandah. Finally the figure holds in his right hand a white circle, overpainted on the red ground (overpainting is unknown in the traditional art), this he identified as a shell ring, which is indeed a white ring but which is never represented in the art of this area and rarely elsewhere. This last innovation is particularly instructive since shell rings are the most highly valued objects known to the Abelam. While Abelam painting from all areas abounds in white ring shapes, yet with the exception of this one case of conscious innovation and its use as female ornament on some northern facades, no ring of any colour was identified as a shell ring, nor was any other sign or element so identified.

This set of paintings from one village illustrates some of the processes that are used in all Abelam flat painting systems, but, they also make some general points as well. The most obvious is that there is no line to be drawn between representational and abstract (or non-representational) at least in Abelam terms. Plate five [Figure 7.7] is clearly anthropomorphic albeit highly stylized. Plate thirteen [Figure 7.15] is a pattern and little else to non-Abelam eyes. Yet both rely on the same set of simple graphic elements—Vs, Ws, circles, pointed ovals—to build up the main design. Both designs were called Ndu by their composers, but this was in response to my questioning and especially in the case of Plate thirteen [Figure 7.15] with some reluctance, really to humour me since Tsiratsitban had learnt by then that I always asked for a name for the final design. All the information I obtained suggests that no difference in ritual effectiveness or acceptability is involved. All, except the conscious innovation, would be used for wut designs, although, judging from the few ceremonial houses from this area that I have seen, there may have been a preference for the more “representational” designs for use on the facades.

The constant element in all these paintings is the pointed oval, the universal of Abelam painting; usually it has the bailer shell chest ornament, this ornament is a sign of masculinity and the identification of the pointed oval as mbia (belly) rather than asa

(mother) can be expected; nevertheless the topmost pointed ovals in Plates twelve and thirteen [Figures 7.14 and 7.15] as well as the central one in Plate ten [Figure 7.12] were all identified as *asa*. The chest ornament and its supporting strings often take on a form very similar to that used for the nose and mouth of a face when they are shown. This is best seen in Plate six [Figure 7.8]. Indeed most of the chest ornaments have the upturned crescent or straight line form in painting, thus echoing the mouth, although the actual bailer shells look like the version shown in Plate five [Figure 7.7]. As this particular set of paintings has been chosen to demonstrate other features this particular homology—nose and mouth: chest ornament and strings—does not come out very clearly, but is striking in the full corpus of north Wosera paintings. The tendency in north Wosera paintings to suppress the head, absorb it into a head-dress, or omit some of the facial features if it is shown, is one of the most obvious characteristics of the sub-style. The eyes as we have seen often appear as pairs of detached circular forms, the nose and mouth as chest ornament, but there is another facial feature that also makes a transmuted appearance in many of the designs. The traditional hairstyle of adult Abelam men was a fan of hair across the top of the head from ear to ear with ringlets down the back; in front the hair was shaved, or plucked, to leave a triangular piece of hair on the forehead. This, called *kitnyambe*, was explicitly identified with the female pubic triangle (*kitnya*).³³ This motif occurs in four of the reproduced paintings, where it is explicitly identified as such. Of course the W lines of the arms and legs in the “hocker” position automatically tend to produce triangular forms, which if they are filled in in black are visually equivalent to *kitnya* whether so identified or not. Plate six [Figure 7.8], therefore, although it lacks a head in our representational terms, has eye forms, nose and mouth forms, and forehead hair forms as integral parts of the design.

The next most obvious features of this set of paintings are the arms and legs forming two opposed Ws. They are present in all the paintings except Plate ten [Figure 7.12]; in Plates eight and nine [Figures 7.10 and 7.11] they are transformed, in the case of the top W, into part of some other sacred object, while in Plate thirteen [Figure 7.15] and the top of Plate twelve [Figure 7.14] they are extended into a zigzag in the first case and their essential enclosure (the diamond) in the other. The replacement of the head by a feather, which is worn in the hair, and by two different forms of head-dress, one containing sacred leaves, is obviously a similar process of visually stating relationship between various classes of sacred object by transformation, creating homology of form as the northern Abelam example using face and head-dress in Plate three [Figure 7.5]. The three paintings by Tsiratsitban show the artist really playing with the basic forms of pointed oval and opposed Ws with a freedom totally unhindered by any canons of representation and adding eyes/stars wherever his composition has created the V shape to contain them. In Plate twelve [Figure 7.14] his choice of yellow to fill in the bottom Vs means that the crescent moon shapes at the bottom edge must be a contrasting colour if they are not to be lost, Tsiratsitban's choice of black and identification as half bellies makes explicit an important identity of form very common in the north Wosera style. Ngwa-mbabmu (the crescent moon) is the identification of any yellow curved area less than a semi-circle. Such forms are very often used at the edges of both triangular and rectangular compositions, almost always the straight line is parallel with the long axis of the pointed oval regardless of what the rest of the design may be;

Pls. five, six, seven, eight, ten, eleven, and twelve all show this very clearly. The crescent moon shape is basically half of the pointed oval and indeed is bound to occur when any band of ndu figures comes to the end of the sago spathe panel which forms the painting surface and always has straight edges.

The customary identification with the crescent moon reinforces the belly shape as essentially feminine. The moon is quintessentially female, the Abelam consider that it menstruates, retiring for three nights every month into its menstrual hut. More importantly, all male ritual activity and the magical cultivation of long yams is not only regulated by the moon, as is the holding of all ceremonial, but involves direct invocation of her and the use of objects, white stones, *etc.*, considered to be manifestations of the moon. The moon in fact represents the ultimate in female creativity and the tapping of some of its supernatural power a main objective of male ritual.³⁴

The colour of the crescent moon is always yellow; when, however, the full moon is shown, it is in the form of a disc of solid white, a solid yellow disc being, apparently, the sun, but both these are rare motifs. I only have two examples of the sun in the three hundred plus Abelam paintings I collected and have never seen anything like it on sago spathe. The full moon is almost as rare in flat paintings. It seems possible that yellow is used for aesthetic reasons, since areas of white, particularly at the edges, tend to be dominating, certainly no artist or bystander has ever identified a yellow crescent as the sun or any part of it.

The conscious attempt at innovation has some points of interest; first it is obvious that there is in no sense any stylistic innovation, it is very obviously a north Wosera painting and this was true of all the other innovations I managed to obtain, even those on white paper. Second, although there are two new motifs, one of the innovations is the attribution of a new meaning to a white ring, one of the commonest motifs in the corpus, and the placing of the motif in a non-traditional position. The motifs chosen for inclusion are significant, the writing is specifically said to be from the Bible, an obvious link with European supernatural power, while the Dettol sword hilt, significantly enough converted into a head-dress, was copied from a tin that the artist knew I used in treating sores and cuts and so was associated with another aspect of European supernatural power–medicine, some aspects of which are much appreciated by the Abelam. The shell ring held in the right hand of the figure is the wealth item of traditional Abelam society, essential for brideprices and buying pigs to fulfil ceremonial obligations; it is highly valued and control of many shell rings is still essential for moderate prestige and any chance of becoming a big man. The motives of Toto in including this in a painting so obviously concerned with tapping new reserves of supernatural power, present little problem. He was an ambitious man and seems to have taken my request for innovation as an opportunity to paint something that would be powerful in benefiting him in the present world rather than a traditional design designed to benefit the community by recreating the power of the ancestors and spirits. One problem that this painting raises is why does so important an item as a shell ring not appear to any large extent in the traditional repertoire? Especially as white ring forms abound why are so few of them ever identified as shell rings?³⁵ No Abelam could give an answer to such a question, but it seems likely that part at least of the reason is that the rings are always physically present in the context for which the paintings are

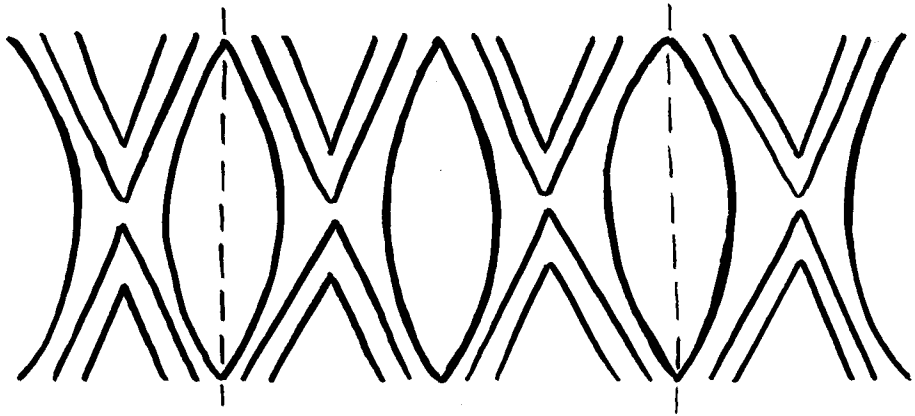


Figure 7.5. Painting displayed at mangandu ceremonies, Wambundu ceremonial ground, Kwambikum village. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

made. All Abelam painting on the flat is made either for the facade of a ceremonial house, or for the wut panels that line an initiation chamber or form the background for some tambaran ceremony. At the opening of a new house the owners and all the visitors bring their finest shell rings which are hung in lines just below the facade; similarly at every tambaran ceremony the ritual group concerned and all the visitors bring shell rings which are laid before the centre of the display and stay there for the three days the display lasts. In both cases the shell rings become the carriers of some of the supernatural benefit generated by the ceremony. When they are withdrawn they are washed in bespelled coconut milk on the ceremonial ground of their owners and the milk sprinkled on the ceremonial house and stones associated with the ancestors.

But there is another reason, or so it seems to me, for not including such an obvious identification between a white ring shaped object and a painted white ring and this is relevant to my whole hypothesis about the function of the flat painting system among the Abelam. White rings are almost always stars or eyes as we have seen, in the northern Abelam they are also used for the navel and sometimes for the breasts, although most northern painters use the pointed oval for female breasts.³⁶ Eyes, stars, and navels are all associated with the ancestors and with sacredness in the human body. In this set of meanings shell rings have no place since they are very clearly associated with male aggressiveness and competition. There is no space to pursue and exemplify this point here, but what is important is that the identifications of their motifs by the Abelam have a definite arbitrary element.

It seems to me that Abelam flat painting is a system in which a limited number of motifs, some themselves simple graphic elements, most with several alternative meanings, are combined and arranged in harmonious designs, ancestrally sanctioned, and believed to be intrinsically powerful. The total design may or may not have a name or "represent something" in our terms, what is important is the expression of relationship between the parts and the meanings of those parts. Similarly, although in a design such as Plate seven [Figure 7.9] one competent Abelam may identify the pair of rings as eyes and another equally competent as stars, this is not important, stars/eyes are a sort of

visual pun, both are implicit in each other, it is not a question of choosing a meaning in a certain situation—both meanings are always present, Abelam themselves I do not ask for these meanings to be made explicit, it is only the ethnographer who commits such a solecism. The ethnographer of course comes from a culture in which from the earliest years pictures are meant to mean something in words, and ethnocentrically assumes that secure iconographies, absolute translatability between verbal and visual systems, is a feature of human culture. There is, of course, no a priori reason why this should be so, indeed no one suggests that all or any music should be translatable into words, why should such an assumption be made about visual communication? I am, of course, aware that there is a great deal of non-representational work in modern art, but this is a conscious turning against art as illustration and representation which still is the basis of advertising, children's book illustration, newspapers, etc. and as such forms the basis of attitudes to visual/verbal translation. Anyway, the point I have been trying to make in the context of Abelam flat painting is that the representational/abstract dichotomy is meaningless, to identify a "representation" is not to find out what the painting means, it is merely one element in a complex web of meaning which is to be found in the relationship of the parts that compose them.

To take a simple example, a very common element on the facades of northern Abelam ceremonial houses is a band of female figures, which come immediately above the bottom band of huge ngwalndu faces. When I started to collect information about the art and its meanings these presented a problem, no one identified them with any sort of spirit or totem, they were frequently referred to as Mandji-tagwa (foreign women), although I often found that some were jocularly identified with prominent women of the village. There are no female spirits involved in the tambaran cult and although female ancestors may be important in certain contexts, everyone agreed that they were not ancestors, indeed no ancestors male or female are portrayed at all. For the time being I had to be content with just the name of a prominent set of facade paintings that had no apparent reference to any part of the Abelam cosmos or any of the other parts of the facade. It was only when I came to analyse the way the paintings were composed that I realized that the function of this band of females was most likely to be the emphatic statement of the essential femaleness of the pointed oval. In figure four [Figure 7.6], taken from a facade in Yanuko village but representative of all such bands, the head-dress and the arms and legs are standard and could as well be for a male figure. The head and body of the figure are made up of the following elements: the outline of the head itself, the eyes, and the navel are all circles making four in all; there is one mouth and one pubic triangle, the rest is totally composed of pointed ovals, eleven in all. The ovals are as follows: the trunk, and in the north it is only the female trunk that appears on facades, all the spirit representations are of face only or of face and attributes;³⁷ the vulva, within the pubic triangle; two breasts; the nose; the two lower pointed ovals on the face, said to be the area under the jaw, but only shown on female faces; the two upper pointed ovals on the face said to be hair; and the two pointed ovals on each side of the trunk, said to be the small of the back. It is of course arguable that I am trying to read too much into this band of females, that their function is aesthetic or simply for fun, but in the context of all northern Abelam ceremonial house facades they are so regularly present and so different from all the other facade

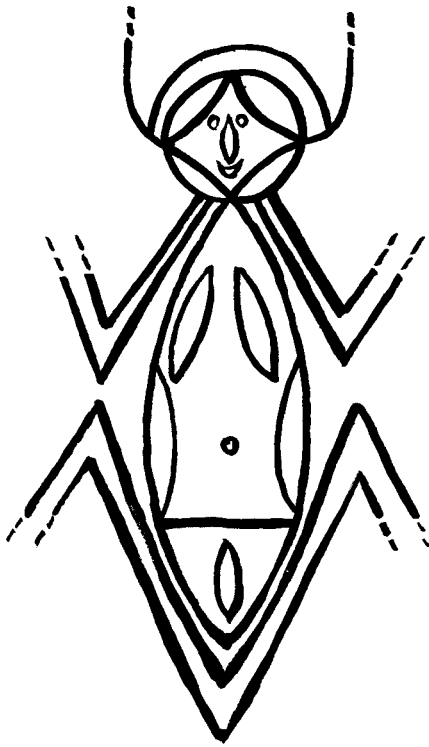


Figure 7.6. Female figure from a façade in Yanuko Village, north Abelam. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San.

designs in their lack of obvious symbolic reference, that there would certainly seem to be something to be explained. Immediately below the band of females are the huge ngwalndu heads, the visually dominant and lowest design on the facade; these are the major spirits and the focuses of all the tambaran cult ceremonies, they also influence the long yams, the pigs, and the general fertility and success of the clans to which they belong. They are the high point of all male values and the women are not even supposed to know that these faces, which of course they can see, are those of the dreaded ngwalndu. As was noted above when considering some of their basic elements, they do not display pointed ovals as a major element in their design. Yet on examination their design presents some peculiarities, e.g. in Plate two at the top is the huge red head-dress with its white U-shaped ornament, which is mandatory in the northern style of painting, but at the bottom there is an echoing pointed shape also in red that has in it the bailer shell suspended from elaborate

shell encrusted strings But why that shape? No informant was able to volunteer any information other than that was the correct way to do it. There is plenty of width at the bottom of the triangular facade and indeed so much space is left by the design that large areas of “string bag” design filling have had to be used. The pointed shape makes the design symmetrical about a horizontal axis, but then all the other bands on the facade have pointed red head-dresses but none of the others have tried for such symmetry. It seems to me inescapable that the ngwalndu is encapsulated within a pointed oval; the essentially female maternal character of this symbol being emphasized in the band of figures immediately above. At the bottom of two of the enveloping pointed ovals in Plate two [Figures 7.2 and 7.4] are small black pubic triangles, a feature, which is painted on the carvings of both, sexes, but in painting on the flat is restricted to females. Abelam informants never agreed that this was a correct interpretation, the younger men particularly were fervent in their denials, some of the older men looked knowing but said nothing.³⁸ If my hypothesis is right, what the ngwalndu faces are expressing is the primacy of female creativity, which in Abelam terms is natural, over male creativity, which is cultural in that male access to supernatural power is through ritual. Ritual from which the rival female power, mainly sexuality and maternity,

must be excluded. It also accords well with the tradition that it was the women who originally discovered the ngwalndu who were then alive and became their lovers, it was only when the suspicious men discovered them that the ngwalndu turned to wood, to become the focus of male ceremonial. This encapsulation of the most potent male spirit within a female form fits too with the nurturing aspect of the carved ngwalndu inside the ceremonial house (Forge, 1966).

What I am suggesting is that in an art system such as Abelam flat painting, elements, in this case graphic elements modified by colour, carry the meaning. The meaning is not that a painting or carving is a picture or representation of anything in the natural or spirit world, rather it is about the relationship between things. The meanings may well be at several levels, thus the bands of paintings on a northern Abelam facade are paintings of things, but they also have a more important meaning not immediately accessible or contained merely in the name of a class of spirits; such meanings as the nature of man and the nature of woman, relevant to the access to supernatural power, these lower level meanings are, in short, cosmological and theological. Woman as prime creator and man as nourisher come clearly out of much of the Abelam art I have so far analysed. Such themes are common throughout New Guinea and Australia, but sometimes they are expressed in myth, sometimes in ritual, not necessarily in art. Such themes are not talked about openly by the Abelam, they may even be denied if suggested to them in certain contexts and indeed some of the messages that the art is putting across do not seem to operate at a conscious level at all. Abelam art acts directly on its beholders, properly socialized and initiated Abelam. They learn the various meanings of the elements while acting as helpers in the preparation of ceremonies, but I suggest that the arrays of paintings with their constellations of elements, never named or expounded in any way during the ceremony, communicate directly to the Abelam not as an illustration of some spoken text. If this is so there should obviously be a grammar of painting, certain combinations of elements should be meaningless or objectionable in meaning and therefore should not occur in any corpus. There is no more need for this to be a conscious process, than there is for a native speaker of a language to know consciously the whole grammar in order to detect an ungrammatical sentence. If there is such a grammar it should be detectable by the analysis of a large corpus of paintings. All the evidence I have collected and analysis I have done to date suggest that there are definite regularities in the way elements are combined and the colours used for certain elements, and that these are meaningful in terms of Abelam cosmology and values.³⁹

The ambiguity involved is, in such a system, part of the communication; it is the ambiguity of poetry, not the lack of clarity of poorly written prose. That stars are also eyes is a basic assumption at one level of Abelam cosmology. Abelam deny that they portray their ancestors and this is literally true, yet the great white circles of the ngwalndu eyes staring down on the ceremonial ground from the facade, catch the moonlight and any firelight available, and seem to dominate the night ceremonies. The ngwalndu are not the ancestors yet the association of the white circles with stars (kwun) is the beginning of a sort of punning chain—kwun are also fireflies, which in turn are specifically identified as ancestors come back to observe their descendants, so that in a sense the ngwalndu eyes are also those of the ancestors.

The styles of Abelam flat painting are, I believe, systems of meaning, the various styles are related and have in fact elements in common, particularly the most important mbia shape; they are in fact dialects of a single language, and vary within the Abelam area in the same way as do the spoken language itself, the social structure, emphases in ritual, and so on. This language of style is as much a part of the culture as the spoken language and neighbours who borrow may well misunderstand the system, as do some of the southern Arapesh who in carving, add to a typically Abelam figure with its normal arms and legs, the two Ws used for arms and legs in the Abelam flat painting style, thus in Abelam eyes the figure has eight limbs, but to the Arapesh the Ws are meaningless, except in so far as they embellish the figure and therefore make it more potent.

Style in cultures such as those of the Sepik is essentially a communication system. A system that, unlike those to which we are used, exists and operates because it is not verbalized and probably not verbalizable, it communicates only to those socialized to receive it. The constantly invoked ancestral sanction or magical correctness which is all the explanation the Abelam give, are true precisely in so far as the paintings do transmit across the generations concepts and values and their interrelationships that are fundamental to Abelam society and do fit with the society as it is when they are received. Change in style, in the elements and the combinations must be meaningful to be accepted, even though the changes are not consciously evaluated. In this paper I have not mentioned aesthetic aspects of art, not because I do not believe them to be important, I have indeed argued elsewhere that I believe them to be equated with supernatural power (Forge, 1967), but because I wished to concentrate on the aspect of style as a system, a visual system, but also a system of meaning.

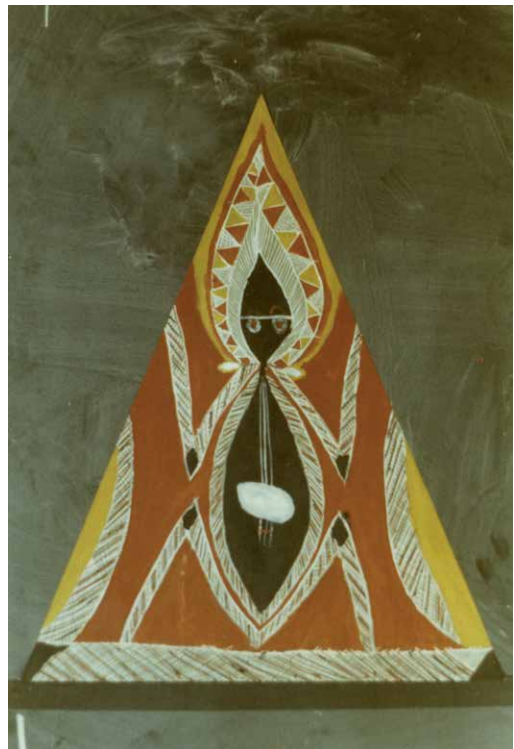


Figure 7.7. Ndu, "man" by Nyagara.
 Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411.
 Special Collections & Archives, UC San
 Diego.



Figure 7.8. *Ndu, "man"* by Tagwongwu. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.



Figure 7.9. *Wama yui, "sulphur crested cockatoo's feather"* by Tagwongwu. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.



Figure 7.10. *Kwarumban* by Anga.
Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411.
Special Collections & Archives, UC San
Diego.



Figure 7.11. *Lapanga* by Anga.
Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411.
Special Collections & Archives, UC San
Diego.

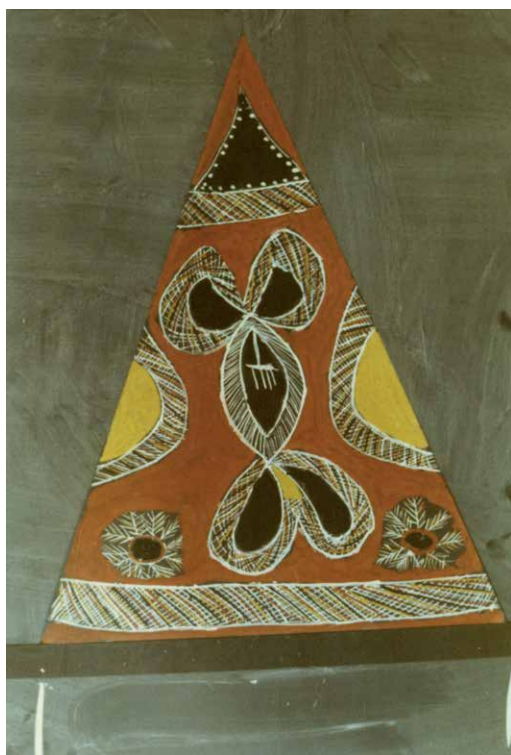


Figure 7.12. Kulamba, "large owl",
by Djangara. Anthony Forge Papers.
MSS 411. Special Collections &
Archives, UC San Diego.



Figure 7.13. Ndu, "man" by
Tsiratsitban. Anthony Forge Papers.
MSS 411. Special Collections &
Archives, UC San Diego.

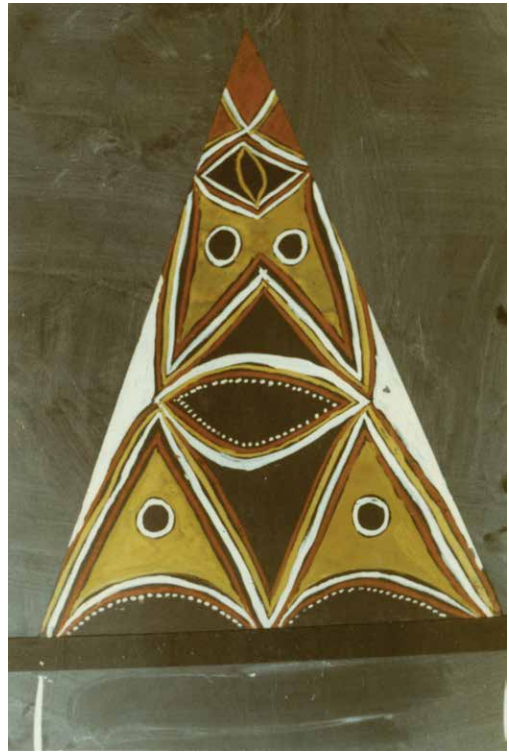


Figure 7.14. Ndu, "man" by
Tsiratsitban. Anthony Forge Papers.
MSS 411. Special Collections &
Archives, UC San Diego.



Figure 7.15. Ndu, "man" by
Tsiratsitban. Anthony Forge Papers.
MSS 411. Special Collections &
Archives, UC San Diego.



Figure 7.16. *Painting by Toto. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.*

CHAPTER 8

*The Problem of Meaning in Art*⁴⁰

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The problem presented here is common to a varying extent to all or most arts, but I discuss it mainly in the context of New Guinea art. There are some special factors in New Guinea society that have a bearing on the use, function, and meaning of art in that area, but the arguments I develop are so general that, although based mainly on my own New Guinea experience, they must, if they have any validity, apply at least in part more widely.

From the earliest reports of explorers, missionaries, and government officials, New Guinea has been renowned for its elaborate and colorful ceremonies and, more particularly in the coastal and lowland regions, for the ceremonial houses and the numerous carvings and paintings, as well as the many masks and headdresses that were to be seen at rituals. This profusion of both permanent and ephemeral art is one of the ethnographic facts that is, I suggest, special to New Guinea. That much of this art, mainly in the permanent form of carvings and masks, was found interesting and even aesthetically exciting when it was brought back to museums is not as totally irrelevant as it might appear to be at first sight. It was also evident from the early days that the amount of time and effort invested in the preparation and performance of these ceremonials was immense and involved total communities and their neighbors for considerable periods of time. These basic facts about the social context of New Guinea art have been amply confirmed by later and more thorough work, and although there are certain obvious differences in the Highlands, particularly in the sort of art that gets into museums, I believe that these differences are more apparent than real and that much of what follows could also be applied to Highland societies. For the rest of this study, however, I shall be mainly concerned with the richer and on the whole better reported lowland material.

If we look at the accounts of these ceremonies and the art they involve (and which is produced for them) we find very little in the nature of indigenous exegesis. Statements about the meaning of what is produced and the actions performed are usually very general—the ceremonies are good for crops, for human fertility, and for success in war; the details of what is prepared and performed are “correct,” “the way to do it,” and so on. This is usually summed up by the observer as being ancestrally sanctioned. Frequently, certain sacra are owned by clans or other segments of the group performing the ritual and have segment-specific names; these, and sometimes designs, are property whose copyright is to be defended with violence if necessary. But just as the segments or clans

of the ritual group which own their copyrights are essentially the same—equal members of the class “clan”—so their copyrights are all of the same class of property differentiated solely in terms of names or designs, not as being a different sort of thing. The division of symbolic property is mechanical rather than organic, to use Durkheim’s distinction. The clan-owned designs on the hevehe masks of Oroko are a classic and well-known example of this type of division of property (Williams 1940).

Beyond these very simple levels of information, informants tend to restrict themselves to naming totalities and bits of designs, using class names: “this is a cassowary,” “this is a hornbill beak,” “this is a man.” If pushed, they may give further names—either secret names, as many everyday things have special names in ritual contexts, or specific names to the actual example under discussion. Often the name is linked with, or specifically owned by, one of the segments of the group and only to be appropriately used or communicated by a member of that segment. Questions such as “Why do you use a hornbill’s beak here?” or “What does a cassowary mean in this position?” rarely, if ever, get an answer that satisfies our idea of an explanation, although the answers seem perfectly satisfactory to those who are giving them: they see no problem and often regard the question itself as meaningless. In addition, facts about a class of objects may be elicited: that they are ancestors (or in some cases very definitely not ancestors), that they are of spirits with certain powers, or who enjoy certain rituals, or need certain offerings if their benevolence is to be assured. But such information, while keying the objects to some extent into the theology or cosmology of the culture, does not really advance us very far in understanding the art. If one asks whether the object looks like the spirit (is a representation of it), one again usually draws a blank; certain features of the object may correspond to those attributed to the spirit and indeed may serve as markers helping identification. But there is, as far as I know, no example where it is said that the spirit “looks like this,” except insofar as most spirits are believed to manifest themselves in human form, at least occasionally.

At this stage the information available from informants about objects per se or as design items may be summed up as identification in terms of (1) overt name of class, (2) secret name of class (sometimes), or (3) name of specific example.

Information about the attributes and responsibilities of the class can be obtained if it is a class of beings considered supernaturally efficacious in some way—but not any translation from the spoken description of their attributes into a “representation” in visual terms, although there may be attributes identifiable visually that correspond to those described verbally. While some specifically named pieces may have the name of characters from myths, there is no portrayal of any scene from a myth, at least in New Guinea, or indeed any “action” scene. Kaufmann (chapter eighteen [in Mead 1979]) reports that certain characters from myths are portrayed but their interactions are not. This is all very obvious and has been remarked on before. But it is important to clarify in verbal terms, the kind of information about the “meaning” of art objects, which is considered sufficient and even ample within the culture—and hence is available to an investigator with the proper skills and time to elicit it.

Verbalizing about art, in short, is not a feature of New Guinea cultures. All the identifications, which are, or may be, available, are in terms of names. Names, and particularly proper names, are a peculiarly intractable source of information; in fact

they do not give information about meaning at all and are merely a set of referential labels. Knowing that someone's name is John is only of use if you want to address him or refer to him; it tells you nothing about him. The museums of Europe and other parts of the world are full of pieces from New Guinea, mostly carvings of which the catalog card says "ancestor figure," sometimes followed by a name. I regard this identification as dubious, since I suspect that few New Guinea cultures actually carve figures of their ancestors. If the figure is feminine, the card often reads "fertility figure"—an even more meaningless identification. As it is no doubt clear by now, I regard the information as to the meaning of art objects available from the culture itself, in direct verbal terms, as virtually no information at all. Should we then pack up the objects, take them home, and admire their aesthetic qualities and perhaps, after a good dinner, speculate about what they convey in terms of whatever set of doubtful human universals we may individually affect? I think not. I think we can do better than just recording names and leaving it at that.

Before going further, it would be as well to indicate the "meanings" we would like to find in our investigations. I cannot here go into what we mean by "meaning," even if I were competent to do so, but surely we should look for the answer to at least some of the following questions:

- What satisfaction do the creators and beholders of the art objects get out of looking at the objects?
- Why do mundane materials, after having been transformed by various art processes, become sacred and powerful objects in their own right, or at least foci of rituals, which are themselves sacred and powerful?
- Why is the form and composition of many objects "ancestrally sanctioned" and why, whether they actually do so or not, do artists and others assert that they are recreating what the ancestor did?
- Why do they see no necessity for, and in many cases appear incapable of, verbalizing about objects such as those in question three?
- How do "art" objects relate to other aspects of the rituals in which they figure and to other parts of the culture in general?

It will be obvious that I have concentrated on art as it manifests itself in ritual; this is because ritual is the main stimulus to art production and use in both quantity and quality in New Guinea. Indeed many forms of art are forbidden or inappropriate outside a ritual context, while the totally mundane arts either derive their decorative forms from ritual contexts or are probably trivial in meaning. To answer these questions we must have some idea of what we expect art to do and what effect it has on human beings. It is a truism that art communicates, but what does it communicate? Here the philosophers and historians, and indeed all students of art, seem to become evasive, trivial, or unintelligible, and no doubt I shall be the same, yet this is the question, which must be attempted.

There are several characteristics of art, which can be taken as starting points. First, most analysts seem to agree that art is highly structured—not just in simple geometrical ways, such as the "golden mean," but in the interrelationship of its parts. Second, it uses

contrasts and similarities of form, and of color in painting, as part of its structuring, as a means of creating visual relationships within a single work and in some cases between works. Third, it is generally assumed to be expressive in some way; a good work gives satisfaction to its creators and induces pleasurable emotion in its beholders, neither of whom can adequately express in words the emotions induced. Fourth, there is a phenomenon usually called style. Path, a work is created and initially beheld in the context of an existing style (even if it consciously tries to transgress its limitations) and is building on that style, with which the beholders are assumed to be familiar (Gombrich 1961).

No doubt there are many other points one could make, but these five are more than enough to begin with. None of them, except possibly the third, has anything to do with the giving of names to the art objects. All of them, including the third, are concerned with art as part of a visual system—that is, with the selection, from a theoretically limitless universe of shapes and colors, of limited sets of both that are appropriate in terms of technique, purpose, aesthetics, and so on.

It is this limited set that is called a style. Its limits can be very wide indeed but not, I should think, infinite; they can also be in our terms fairly narrow, and that is typical of the vast majority of human arts in past and present cultures and certainly applies to the arts of New Guinea. Although Western industrial society has as a culture virtually abandoned conscious style, its artists are all assiduously cultivating their own individual styles. There can be little doubt that there is as a whole more stylistic unity even in our present times than is apparent to us; future generations will have little difficulty in dating works to our present decade.

Style, in this sense of a limitation of choice, is, of course, very useful to art historians, archaeologists, and others faced with the problems of dating and placing works of art. Indeed the defining and localization of styles have occupied a great proportion of the time and effort so far spent on the arts of Oceania and other “tribal” regions by anthropologists and others interested in art, but it seems unlikely that the sole or even principal function of style is to be of convenience to future analysts. That styles can travel seems undeniable, and fashion is undoubtedly important in all forms of art, yet unless total identity of artistic style is to be found in widely separated areas, partial similarities, although interesting, answer none of our questions. In general, the underlying assumptions of such studies—that small-scale societies just naturally preserve styles by automatic copying—are factually incorrect and anyhow constitute no sort of explanation.

It would appear that there is no escaping the fact that styles have social functions and are maintained because they are useful to the members of a society and to the preservation and transmission of their culture. Ancestrally sanctioned styles, or what are believed to be such, undoubtedly have a function as markers, and as being ancestral, but is that all we can say? Surely the vast quantity of art produced and the time and trouble taken in a typical New Guinea ceremony, by people who in general show little reverence for their ancestors, suggest that they must be getting something else out of the process. There is obviously a great deal of implicit or explicit competition for prestige with other groups who are attending and have in the past, or will in the future, stage a similar ceremony. But neither of these forms of competition explains the

maintenance of style—indeed, the competitive aspect may act as an incentive to change by setting the new fashion. This has been recorded for some New Guinea societies. It seems likely that there is something more to be found in style.

It is worth remembering that in contrast to the eclectic strollers round *Le Musée Imaginaire* of all the world's art, the members of New Guinea cultures had very rarely seen any art except in the style of their own culture. It must be obvious that I have been trying to exhaust alternative hypotheses before coming to the conclusion that style is maintained because it is necessary for style to be maintained, within fairly restricted limits of variation, if the art is to function as a system of communication. Like all communication systems, which communicate through the combinations of sets of a limited range of bits, distinguished from each other by clear criteria, art systems have to look right (be recognizable) before they can start communicating. And they have to be made up of elements that are recognizable and distinguishable, at least in some contexts, so that their combinations can carry meaning.⁴¹

There are, of course, various levels of meaning involved in all art. The name given to an artwork by its creator or its users is the simplest, most overt level. There is another overt level—that this object, having a certain design that is the property of a clan or similar group, acts as a sign of the group. Thus the carrier of a hevehe mask in Orolo shows that he is related to the group that owns the design. A work of art may also act as a sign that a certain ceremony is being performed or that an individual has reached a certain status or passed so many initiation ceremonies. These “meanings” are all overt and basically sociological; they do not explain why certain forms are chosen or elaborated. Such functions could be adequately performed by any sign system, even the simplest; they do not necessarily have anything to do with art.

The naming or identification of works of art may also have a symbolic function. A sculpture, for instance, may stand for a certain god or spirit or be known as specific to a certain ceremony. As such, it becomes a symbol of that god, spirit, or ceremony and so may arouse appropriate emotions. But this aspect again has no necessary connection with art as such, with the forms used, or with the harmony striven for. Many examples from other cultures show that objects arousing strong emotion and performing such symbolic functions do not seem to be works of art in our terms. While many Polynesian god symbols are art objects of great aesthetic power, others to the outsider look like bundles of string—tidy and ordered, but nonetheless essentially bundles of string. Such objects were nevertheless objects of great importance, the focus of ritual and hedged about with taboo. They certainly served their function as a symbol of a god very adequately, but their comparative lack of clear form suggests that they were not integrated into any system of art based on plastic form.

All the levels of meaning so far considered do not require works of art, although works of art can and do carry such meanings. There are other levels of meaning no doubt in many arts and art objects. The level I am concerned with here is deeper and less conscious than any of those discussed above; but it in no way excludes them. It is simply that insofar as cultures have artistic styles, and the styles are systematic, there are, I suggest, meanings at the systematic level. These meanings are not overt or easily accessible but are nonetheless present and should be a target for our analysis.

If this is granted, then these questions remain: What do such systems communicate? How do they do it? And worst of all: How can we, the outside observers, find out what is being communicated? Before these problems can be tackled we need to look for a moment at our own culture and its assumptions about the nature of communication. First, we live in a culture dedicated to the proposition that language, and more particularly the written word, can encapsulate all knowledge. This notion is very striking in the case of universities, where one sometimes gets the feeling that if only there were enough Ph.D. students, the whole of human knowledge and experience could be safely tucked away in the library in the form of their theses and the books written by their teachers. Yet even our society does not really practice what it preaches. Program music—that is, music in which what is communicated is believed to be easily translated into words—has been positively a term of abuse since the death of Queen Victoria, while the rest of music frankly slips from the grasp of our all-dominating literacy, despite the valiant efforts of our music critics. In non literate cultures the situation is very different. It has been said that before writing there was nothing but poetry. Be that as it may, it is certainly true that until the development of writing, nobody expected words to stand alone as a form of communication, unaccompanied by other forms to convey information or anything else.

Thus language was just one of a number of means of communication, possibly *primus inter pares*, but not in the tyrannical position it occupies in our present culture. In our civilization art capitulated early; Roman portrait busts were perhaps the earliest example of that pursuit of the illusion of reality that Gombrich has so magnificently documented. Pictures may speak louder than words, but the implication is that what pictures say could be said by words. We are dedicated to the idea of the picture “of” something: from children’s books to the daily newspaper, we expect the pictures to illustrate what we read; they give an illusory reality to what the words tell us. We are now reduced to the position of worshipping the perfect seeing device and believing that the camera cannot lie or that what is fed to our eyes by “science” is more reliable, more true, than what our eyes tell us directly. This deplorable state of affairs did not exist outside Europe until recently, although it now seems to be sweeping the world. Other literate civilizations (such as China and India) seem to have avoided or mitigated the demand for art to become true illustration, at least on the part of the consumer, so typical of our own. If we allow art to be a communication system independent of words, indeed essentially separate from words, the inability or reluctance of our informants to verbalize about what they have produced becomes immediately understandable, but it does not help us with our problem of meaning, which, in our Western industrial terms, equals translating art into words.

To return for a moment to language, the way it is used in New Guinea seems almost totally expressive; what surprises the anthropologist in New Guinea is how little of speech is used to convey information in any simple way. Language use tends to be highly stylized. There are, for instance, elaborate rituals of greeting, which seem totally unnecessary because everyone can see that the man has arrived. There is also the enormously florid and elaborate oratory, again highly stylized and allusive, so that a mere transcription reads meaninglessly and debates seem more concerned with demonstrating command of the medium than with conveying information. Even in

contexts such as this, where skills rise to Ciceronian heights, the man who cannot understand the language can read the message of support, opposition, or middle ground surely enough by watching the gestures made by the speakers.

It is true, for instance, that in domestic brawls vulgar abuse of often breathtaking imagery flows freely, but again it seems to be command of the medium that is being displayed. The existence and ostensible cause of the dispute are usually revealed in the first few seconds, while the exchange itself may go on enthrallingly for hours. What we have in all these examples is exactly what we have in art: the concern for elaboration far beyond the point justified by the functions of conveying mere information, the concern to display mastery within the rules of the medium, the concern for endless repetition of a simple message in ever more elaborate, ever more beautiful terms. This desire for repetition, for redundancy, is, it seems to me, fundamental to all arts in New Guinea (and no doubt many other cultures, too). But what social function does it have?

Certainly fine speaking—even in a virago wife-like fine painting is much admired. But what are these elaborations in oratory and in art that are so admired? They are, essentially, the ability to say the same thing in many different ways or to elaborate the message, which is structural and concerned with the interrelationship of “facts,” in terms of various modes or styles. And although in our terms the message is never clearly stated (the style prevents it), mastery of the medium means that an orator conveys what he means in puns and allusions in a way that only fully adult socialized members of the culture can read, because only they have sufficient experience to understand what he is saying (or painting, or carving, or singing).

Others can read from gestures and from emotional tone the crude message—opposition, support, or whatever—but the speaker may be deceiving them and communicating only to those who can read him in full. Oratory and poetry cannot be translated into prose without sounding dull and flat. If one asks “What is the man really saying?” the straightforward answer is always disappointing—it is the performance that counts, not the message. Yet the performance tends to communicate a different message, one that conveys mastery of the chosen medium and ability to express understanding—an ability to comprehend and manipulate the basic pattern.

Here then is the virtue of repetition, the value of redundancy. The wisdom of the old men consists of their experience; they have been through the ceremony so many times, they have experienced it from all the different roles that are available, that despite themselves they must be influenced by the pattern. The underlying structure (if there is one) has reached them; consciously or not, it is there and influences their decisions and their behavior.

Here a major problem is encountered: If men are receiving communication, who is communicating to them? I might have given the impression that there was some outside superintelligence that understood all and comprehended all and was trying to communicate to those sufficiently trained to understand. Obviously, there is no such being. In many mythologies there were once such beings—the ultimate ancestors, the founders and shapers of the society and culture, who, because they created the system, were all-powerful, but a man understands little at the conscious level, nor did his father or father’s father, nor for that matter his mother’s mother. What is transmitted intergenerationally, that is, what is learned by a child, is not just what is consciously

provided for the child. What the child learns as it becomes an adult includes patterns and structures of interrelationship that are never consciously conveyed to it or consciously received by it. The obvious example is, of course, language. Children learn to speak grammatically without explicitly learning the grammar as a set of rules or even knowing that there is a grammar that shapes their language. They can detect ungrammatical statements as “wrong” without necessarily being able to say why it is wrong in terms of their internalized set of rules. Similarly, relations between individuals are molded by the social structure, but only rarely can individuals be said to be conscious of their social structure as a structure. Techniques and manipulative skills are usually taught—that is, consciously communicated—but they too become internalized by the competent apprentice. The oratorical style of a New Guinea culture may well be consciously passed on, but the meaning of what is said depends finally on structures of grammar and semantics that have never been conscious.

Similarly with art, the techniques of carving and painting and the overt rules of style are transmitted in a conscious master-apprentice situation, but the meanings depend on nonconscious structures that may not yet be totally present in the pupil and possibly not even in the master. I realize that I am in danger of being accused of reifying culture, of making it the transmitter of patterns and structures which influence its members but of which they are not consciously aware. If this is reifying culture, I must plead guilty. But I must emphasize that members of the culture have available to them all the bits that make up the patterns and structures. What they will not or cannot or at any rate do not verbalize about are the structures themselves. Our questions about the interrelationship of the bits are met with assertions of correctness—“it is good grammar,” which implies structure—not with what we want: a glimpse of the structure itself.

If we are prepared to grant that art systems are systems in their own right and not just illustrations of something expressed in words, and that such systems have structure, or a grammar, which need not be conscious in the mind of the artist or the beholder, then we are in a position to look at our five initial questions again. The first two, which are concerned with satisfactions and the association between art objects and sacredness and power, are considerably helped by such hypotheses. Works that successfully embody major portions of the structure of the system in terms of the interrelationships they contain are likely to arouse pleasure and a sense of fitness, even of perfection, that, because the criteria of appreciation are not conscious, may manifest itself as a sense of the presence of the supranormal, of more power than humans alone can achieve. I have so far made no mention of aesthetics, but it must be clear that whether or not one believes in a universal human aesthetic, the actual aesthetic of any culture will be very closely linked to the prescriptions of correctness in terms of the style and ideas of power. Aesthetically excellent works, in our terms, in which the forms are harmoniously related and so on, have a greater charge, perhaps are nearer perfection, than those that are merely correct.

The third question relates to the ancestrally sanctioned maintenance of style. In my Sepik experience, it is clear that styles do change—it would be very surprising if they didn’t—but even where there was irrefutable evidence of change, artists and ritual experts denied that change had occurred. They maintained that what they did was a re-

creation of the original and, therefore, most powerful form of the art. It is obvious that if structures are to be communicated between generations, there must be little change; and indeed such change as I have been able to document has been slow. Ritual experts have even refused to include, in the display that was to form the focus of a ceremony, objects that were too different from the traditional.⁴²

Thus, although change takes place, its rate at least is subject to control. Further, although I have been talking about intergenerational transmission, this does not happen as a single event. As pointed out at the beginning, ceremonies are constantly repeated, so that one individual will have seen and participated in many during the course of a life. The repetition of ceremonies has two implications. First, you do not get the “message” on one occasion—it is gradually built up by repeated exposure to ceremonial; the more you see, the more complete the internalized pattern. Second, there may be slight changes in the set of ceremonies that any one person witnesses, but these are likely to be minor compared to the repeated elements. Change, of course, should, by the basic hypothesis, occur in art style if the meanings that are being conveyed change. But this must always be happening, even in such apparently static societies as those of traditional New Guinea. Presumably the pressure on the boundaries of the style exerted by artists, for whatever reasons, means that small changes and innovations are constantly being offered; if a change “makes good sense” of the present situation of the society and culture, it will induce the right emotions and, therefore, be sacred and powerful, thus proving that it must be ancestral. Note that the innovation is perceived in terms of the existing structure, which its acceptance may ultimately modify.

Slow, small change in art style, then, is beneficial. It keeps the “meaning” of the art in step with changes in other parts of the society, and because it works, it confirms the members’ assumption that it is the correct ancestral style. Unchanging style would presumably result in a slow divorce of the facts of the current society from the structures of meaning contained in the style; the satisfactions in producing and looking at the art would diminish until the style no longer communicated at all in the way I have outlined.⁴³ Revolutionary change in style makes the new productions “meaningless” in terms of the old structure, while a new stability for a considerable period of time would be necessary before the society at large could be socialized into internalizing the structures offered by the new style.

The fourth question relates to refusal to verbalize about the meaning of art in New Guinea societies. Since I am postulating that the structures and the interrelationships that make them up are internalized and not conscious, the simple answer is that they cannot verbalize about these matters. But there is a more important aspect to this question. Basically, if they could and did make explicit the meanings, the systems would no longer work—the extra emotional charge received in creation and beholding in the ceremonial context would be dissipated in a conscious decoding of a visual message. The style would become allegorical in the worst way: it would lose all charge of sacredness and power. Any member of a culture who, fully socialized and possessing all the data, worked out the system and discovered the structures (and I have little doubt that many of them could do it) would be cutting himself off from his culture by the process. I suspect that at least some of my informants were aware of this. They did not like my probings and questions, and some of my attempts at analysis made them

shy away and retire into denials.⁴⁴ It is these men, who have seen many ceremonies and are artists or ritual experts, who seem to me to have the most complete patterns and to be the most influenced by them. They have qualities of knowledge and experience, but their fellows recognize something more: wisdom and understanding are perhaps close to it. I suggest that this is because of their successful internalization of the complete array of patterns available in their culture. It makes their words and actions, like the look of a fine carving, appropriate to the culture; they approach perfection.

The final question on the relationship between art and other aspects of ritual and the culture in general can be taken with the subsequent questions—about what such systems transmit and how we, as outsiders, can obtain knowledge of what is being transmitted. Although I have confined myself to art in this chapter, similar structures operate in other forms of communication, particularly those concerned in ritual. Many are special forms of language, such as myth, invocation, and oratory, where special codes ensure adherence to certain forms and patterns, often involving much repetition, and also making plentiful use of proper names. Music, song, dance and movement (see Schwimmer, chapter sixteen [in Mead 1979]), costume (see Steager, chapter twenty [in Mead 1979]), and gesture in general are other fields where it seems likely that similar systems operate. In the ritual context all these forms come together and reinforce each other in the effect they produce on the participants; but the effect is circular, and what is experienced in ritual contexts is thereafter associated with the excitement and mystery of the ritual, even if not understood.

What is being conveyed are fundamental assumptions about the bases of the society, the real nature of men and women, the nature of power, the place of man in the universe of nature which surrounds him. These subjects are short and simple to list, but such basic assumptions ramify throughout the total society and influence all the classic fields of anthropological investigation: kinship and marriage, economics, politics, law, and so on. Further, they are not subjects in which dogmas and rationalizations, however intellectually respectable and logical, are adequate for human beings. Each subject has a deep emotional component which influences human action in real situations and, therefore, must be taken into account in any attempt to analyze human behavior. Some of these assumptions are not verbalized because they are in conflict with less fundamental principles on which the society overtly conducts itself.⁴⁵

For instance, women are generally considered the inferiors of men throughout Australia and New Guinea, but analyses of ritual systems from both areas—and this includes the art—suggest very strongly that men, in fact, understand women to be truly creative and naturally powerful. Themselves they conceive to be intrinsically devoid of power but able, through their learned cultural means (that is, ritual and art), to tap some of the power and creativity that is natural and intrinsic to women. They can do this only if they preserve their techniques from the danger of contact with the superior and innate powers of the women. But even if such good reasons as avoiding contradiction are not present, and it is arguable that all human life involves contradiction, there is still the emotional side of human activity that must be socialized and which is not reachable through the fundamentally intellectual approaches of overt socialization and teaching. Here we come to the initiation ceremony, which through the use of ritual not only marks changes in status and inculcates appropriate knowledge through overt

schooling techniques but also, I suggest, starts the process, which probably is never complete, of giving fundamental comprehension of the culture at the emotional as well as the intellectual level.

It may well be objected that this is all highly speculative. Since no informants say this is what the art means, how can we prove that it operates in the way I have suggested or conveys messages of the type outlined above? For someone who believes that if he is told something it may be right, but that if he is not told, it cannot be right, there is no proof. The proof I would offer to more open minds is the power of the hypotheses to explain observed facts, the principle of elegance also called parsimony or Occam's razor. Further, some of the disentangling of the structures from the readily available facts—art works, ethnoclassification, language, mythology—is easy or even obvious to someone knowledgeable about the culture but not of it and hence not endangered by the analysis. Yet such an outsider gets little of the emotion; one may well miss many of the finer points; and, after the first easy successes, there is much still to be explained. There are, moreover, homologies of form which one's own socialization may make one blind to; there are chains of puns that seem to lead nowhere; there are all the other untidy bits that indicate inadequate fieldwork and defective comprehension. Yet the patterns are there. They relate to each other and to other patterns in other media from the same culture, and their existence, their interrelatedness, their coherence as meaning, and their coming together in behavior constitute the proof.

CHAPTER 9

Learning to See in New Guinea

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This paper concentrates on one small aspect of the socialization process among the Abelam of the Sepik District, New Guinea. It suggests that through their early experiences, particularly in the context of the tambaran cult, boys and young men acquire a set of fixed expectations about what they will see in two dimensions, that is on the flat; and hence that polychrome two-dimensional paintings become a closed system, unrelated to natural objects, or to carvings and other three-dimensional art objects, or, indeed, to anything outside the paintings. These expectations act to prevent them “seeing”, that is making sense of, anything in two dimensions that is not part of the closed system; they also enable Abelam flat painting to act directly on the fully initiated adult as a system of communication and not as a representation of any other communication system such as myth. I shall not here be concerned with the problem of what is communicated, nor, indeed, with the fundamental problem of whether anthropologists have the techniques to discover what is communicated by such systems, but only with showing that such a system exists and operates.

The Abelam

The Abelam are a group of more than 30,000 living on the southern foothills of the Prince Alexander Mountains in the Sepik District, New Guinea. They speak mutually intelligible dialects of a language of the Ndu family and as such are one of the largest language groups in lowland New Guinea. Their population density is high by New Guinea standards, averaging 120 p.s.m. for the Northern and Eastern Abelam and 200 p.s.m. for the South-western Abelam. Villages are the basic political and war-making units and have populations of between 300 and 800.

Yams form the basis of the diet, supplemented by taro, coconuts, breadfruit, and sago; pig-raising provides virtually the only source of animal protein and a useful means of acquiring the highly valued shell rings which constitute Abelam wealth. Ceremonial exchange relationships are of great importance and, together with the exchange relationships set up by marriage, which continue for three generations, provide the main means of distributing produce within and between villages. The exchange system is also the organizing principle for all ceremonial.

Ceremonies are performed by one-half of a dual organization, who initiate the sons of their exchange partners in the other half and receive pigs from their partners in payment. The next ceremony is performed by the other half and the arrangements are reversed. Throughout most of the area, eight ceremonies of increasing importance and elaboration form a cycle. A man may be initiated only at a ceremony performed by his exchange partners; it therefore takes two full cycles to complete his initiation.

The Northern and Eastern Abelam have shown remarkable tenacity in retaining their traditional cults, and in resisting the temptations of the cargo cults that have swept in waves through the Sepik ever since the end of the Japanese occupation and have affected all their neighbours. Cult activity seems to have gone through a low point in the early fifties, but by 1958, when I first went there, it was reviving, and in 1963, when I last left, was in full spate. Mission activity throughout the area has been intense since the Second World War; various varieties of Christian faith are represented and all were, at least initially, opposed not only to the cult but also to the art that formed the focus of the various ceremonies of the cult. The persistence of cult activity among the Northern and Eastern Abelam is so remarkable in the context of general New Guinea experience that some idea of its scale may be helpful. During two and a half years of fieldwork I attended more than twenty ceremonies, each involving considerable artistic work, and missed at least twice as many. In the six-month ceremonial season of 1958-59, fifteen new ceremonial houses were built within five miles of my base village, and in 1963 there were over 100 ceremonial houses in the Northern and Eastern Abelam villages whose total population is about 15,000. The same area is also comparatively prosperous in cash terms, selling coffee and carvings and washing gold dust from certain streams, and it is, furthermore, the area in which the first Local Government Council in the inland part of the Sepik District was set up. It is an interesting contradiction of the stereotype of development in New Guinea that this small part of the vast Sepik District, which has so strongly maintained its traditional cults, should also be one of the most "developed" and the only part to have resisted cargo cults. This paper is no place for an attempt at explanation, but two factors that are probably relevant are, first, the peculiarly satisfying nature of the long-yam cult, a cult of fertility and nourishment of a decidedly phallic nature, and the high road to male prestige; and, second, the function of frequent performance of ceremonial in crystallizing and reordering relationships between individuals and groups, thus enabling large-scale enterprises, including those producing cash, to be undertaken among a people normally characterized by a profound and aggressive individualism.

The material considered in this paper comes mainly from the two Eastern Abelam villages of Bengragum and Wingei, and the Northern Abelam village of Yanuko, but most of the discussion would apply to the whole Abelam area.

For convenience, Abelam ritual can be divided into two cults, the long-yam cult and the tambaran cult; the Abelam make the distinction themselves and the rituals for each are performed at different times. The long-yam cult involves the cultivation of certain varieties of *Dioscorea alata* in special gardens which are forbidden to women, and may only be entered by men observing a whole series of taboos, of which the most important are those on sex and eating meat. Long yams require a great deal of ritual and magic at every stage of their cultivation from planting until harvest about

six months later; they are then elaborately decorated, including being provided with a wood or basketry mask, displayed, and subsequently presented to the exchange partner of the grower. Prestige depends on the length and number of such yams grown by the individual (single tubers up to twelve ft in length have been recorded, but any village will usually have a few of nine ft or so in any one season).

The tambaran cult ceremonies are held after the yam displays and all the subsequent exchanges have been completed, by which time the yams are safely in their store houses. Any tambaran ceremony requires large quantities of food, and the main harvesting of the non-sacred yams (mainly *Dioscorea esculenta*) and taro has to take place before the preparations for the ceremony can begin. The tambaran season must end when the work of clearing the long-yam gardens is due to start; it is, therefore, limited to about four months. No ceremonies of any kind can be held while the long yams are growing. At the symbolic level the two cults are united, both being concerned with aspects of the nggwalndu, the spirits associated with the nominally patrilineal clans which are the basic units of the ceremonial structure and of village and hamlet organization. Both are cults of fertility and male prestige and aggression (Forge, 1966).

The tambaran cult involves a series of displays of things all loosely classifiable as art. At each ceremony the initiates are told that they are being shown the nggwalndu; then at the next ceremony they are told that they were tricked last time but this time they really will see it; and so on until the final ceremony when they are in fact shown the huge carved figures that are considered to be the real nggwalndu. Since an individual is ineligible for an initiation staged by members of his own half of the dual organization, it takes from twenty to thirty years, two full cycles, for any man to see all eight displays.

Both the yam displays and the tambaran ceremonies take place on the amei (ceremonial ground) that forms the centre of the hamlet; the village itself has no centre, being a collection of hamlets. The ceremonial house, inside which the majority of the displays of the tambaran cult are staged, is at one side of the amei; its high triangular façade (sometimes sixty ft high) is raked forward and dominates the amei, the hamlet, and the village; it can be seen for miles around. The façade has a base of decorative matting in which the entrance is set, then a carved board usually of heads, but the bulk of the façade is taken up by bands of polychrome painting on sago-spathe. The largest and most important of these paintings are those at the bottom—a huge row of nggwalndu heads whose large round eyes look down on the amei (Plate one [Figure 9.1]).

Childhood

Abelam children are treated with great indulgence, although they may be scolded when older. They are very rarely beaten in secular contexts, with the exception that girls, both just before and after puberty, may be beaten by their brothers or father for secret contact with boys other than their betrothed or those approved by him. Boys are encouraged to accompany their fathers in gardening activities and will be given a corner of the father's mundane yam garden as their own and urged to tend it, but it is usually the mother who does the bulk of the work. Boys roam around in gangs, turning up to help at any communal activity where soup is likely to be distributed, often only just in time to do a little work before the distribution; but even in these circumstances

children are never grudging food and are always being urged to eat more. Girls by and large accompany their mothers everywhere and start to carry burdens and perform other female tasks as soon as they can walk. A girl will usually be betrothed at about ten, and from then on will divide her time between her mother and her mother-in-law; it is the latter who should teach her to cook and perform other domestic tasks.

Children of both sexes call their mother's brother "mother", and their father's mother's brother "father's mother"; these relatives are not only especially indulgent and are turned to at the first sign of a cross word at home, but are specially associated with feeding. The mother's brother, in particular, has the right to provide a large proportion of the food eaten by the child—a hungry child is as much a reproach to the mother's brother as to the father. This provision of food establishes the right to perform ceremonial services for the sister's son, particularly during initiations, services which have to be paid for in the highly valued shell rings. Disputes occasionally occur about who is entitled to act as mother's brother in ceremony; on such occasions to have consistently fed a child is the strongest form of entitlement, even overriding genealogical proximity, although the blood tie can never be absolutely excluded.

Girls should be betrothed well before puberty and most of those without obvious defects are. At first menstruation girls go through an initiation ceremony involving seclusion and a series of exchanges and displays of wealth by father and father's exchange partner, followed by a beating and nettle-rubbing performed by the men. The main part of the ceremony is, however, in the hands of the women and occupies a whole day. The girl is scarified at dawn; she is held by her mother's brother, but it is the senior women who cut the patterns on her breasts, belly, and upper arms. The men are then frozen off their ceremonial ground, and the women perform their own secret ceremonial involving, among other things, transvestite women who magnificently imitate and mock the swaggering of their husbands and brothers. I have attended only the early stages of a female initiation but believe that I have seen more than any Abelam male. I understand that pantomimes of sexual intercourse and advice on the conduct of love affairs are included, and there is certainly feasting and much riotous laughter. The women abandon the *amei* only at nightfall when it is elaborately and ostentatiously cleansed from the effects of "all those vulvas" by the returning men.

The initiated girl is then beautifully decorated and begins an idyllic period during which she is not expected to work, is welcomed everywhere within the village and in neighbouring villages, and offered the finest food. It is at this time that a girl wears a small string bag of special design covering her genitalia; traditionally, this was the only time any member of either sex wore any form of clothing. Its removal about a year after scarification is a sign that the marriage has been consummated and the girl has started on the hard life of a married woman. As no art except for face-painting is involved in female ceremonial I shall not be considering women further in this paper.

Tambaran Initiations

Since the tambaran cult with its cycle of ceremonies requires twenty to thirty years before a man is fully initiated, a child will "attend" every ceremony performed by his father's exchange partner from birth. All that is essential is that he is physically present for at least part of the time and that his father presents a pig to the partner who acts as

initiator. Babes-in-arms are to be seen at all ceremonies, held by their mother's brother, and four- and five-year-olds are expected to form part of the band of initiates and go through the whole ceremony. Children are often frightened and run away, particularly if there is a beating in prospect; the only sanction applied is the mockery of their fellows; they will be credited with the initiation even if they never set eyes on the display.

There is no form of instruction of the initiates at tambaran ceremonies; they have to undergo certain ordeals, usually beating and/or rubbing with stinging nettles, during which they are carried or held by their mother's brother, who takes a good proportion of the punishment. Men with a reputation for bravery tend to stroll down the gauntlet line of initiators and back again, scorning to dodge even though their charges suffer in consequence far more than do those of cowards, who scuttle along with as much speed as is decent. Beating is an essential part of some of the ceremonies and has to be performed for that reason alone; rubbing with nettles is, however, considered beneficial in itself to the initiate, and great efforts are made to catch every eligible child. Initiates have also to observe some taboos for a few days, and have to participate in certain rituals during the ceremony, but nothing is explained to them; they are hauled out, told to perform certain actions, and then to keep out of the way until they are required again. Although the ceremonies are ostensibly put on for their benefit they are the least important people present and their reactions vary between bewilderment and terror.

In some parts of the area there is a separate puberty seclusion for boys; in others, this is amalgamated with a tambaran ceremony but involves only those initiates of the correct age. Beatings and nettle-rubbings at the beginning of the period of seclusion are more than usually severe, and are followed by instruction in cleansing from sexual contact with women by penis-bleeding. This operation is performed by the father's exchange partner on the first occasion and thereafter by the young man himself or by some mutual arrangement. The foreskin is rolled back and the glans rubbed with nettles; after a minute or so the glans is slashed with a piece of broken bottle (previously a bamboo knife), and the blood allowed to fall into the stream on whose banks the operation must be carried out. The seclusion follows during which the initiates are stuffed with the finest food and given general instruction on the role of men in Abelam society and on the danger of sexual contact with women to long yams and sacred things in general. Instruction during seclusion does not include any interpretation of the meaning of the various tambaran ceremonies or any learning or even telling of myths, of which the Abelam know remarkably few. Seclusion lasts from three weeks to two months, depending on the part of the area, and is ended with the ceremonial reentry into the village of the initiates, gorgeously painted and wearing huge feather head-dresses. The face-painting is in the style used for yam masks, nggwalndu, and initiators, except that the eyes are closed and painted over entirely and very thickly with the yellow paint that covers the cheeks, so that the returning initiates appear not merely blind, but creatures who have no provision for eyes at all.

Apart from attendance as initiates at tambaran ceremonies, boys of between about eight or nine and puberty have a vital role to play in the ceremonial life of their elders. Abelam have very strongly held beliefs about the dangers of sex to sacred activities. Although the dangers are expressed in terms of vulvas it is not women as such who

are dangerous, but the sex act and the aroused vulva; thus, for the six months the long yams are growing, a man observing a sex taboo will happily take food from his wife, but should she have committed adultery the food would contaminate him and hence his long yams. Young men are considered too susceptible to the charms of their wives and paramours to be trustworthy in the strict observance of the six-months' taboo on all sexual activity. In general, a man is not considered adult until about thirty, when he should have got over all his childish enthusiasms, had a few children and many affairs, and be prepared to settle down to the really serious business of life, growing long yams. In these circumstances most young men entrust their long yams to older men, usually big men with high prestige who recruit adherents by taking charge of their yams.

In the cultivation of long yams boys before puberty are of great importance; not only are they incapable of breaking the taboo but they have never had any contact from which to be cleansed. These virgin boys are used to break the ground with digging sticks and dig the holes over which the yam is planted, although adult men usually clear away the loosened earth. Virgin boys, under the close supervision and direction of the expert, frequently perform many of the operations in the actual preparation and distribution of the magical substances used at every stage to encourage the yam. Virgin boys are also used to avoid danger of contamination in distributing the benefits of a tambaran ceremony. Villages that have helped in the preparation bring a few very large and valuable shell rings which are laid in front of the display for the three-day period of the actual ceremony. These rings, with a cassowary bone dagger stuck through the middle of them, are a symbol of peace and participation, but they have also been at the heart of the display and the focus of the sacredness of the ceremony. They are brought out and laid on banana leaves, then carefully taken home where they are washed on the *amei* in bespelled coconut milk by virgin boys, who subsequently sprinkle the mixture onto the ceremonial houses, the *nggwalndu*, and the long yams of their village, thus transferring the benefit of the ceremony.

Boys, then, are socialized very slowly, not being expected to become fully adult until they are about thirty. Few, if any, men can feed their new households by their own production for the first years of marriage. At the same time, they are exposed to a whole series of ceremonies at which they are shown paintings and carved objects under conditions of great tension and associated with various rituals of which they understand nothing but which have the recurring theme of pain. It is significant that the last and most elaborate of the ceremonies, at which initiates are shown the actual *nggwalndu*, is said to be a "good" tambaran, and involves no beating, and rubbing only with dead nettles. This fact is concealed from the initiates and the younger ones would be unable to scream more vigorously were the nettles "live".

After the display and parades are over the ceremonial house and its initiation chamber are sealed and the long-yam planting season begins. The payment of pigs by the fathers of the initiates to their exchange partners is said to "buy" the display, and after the following long-yam display the chamber is reopened and dismantled by the initiates and their fathers. It is at this time that the initiates learn how the display was constructed, and see the component parts of what was previously just a confusing mass of colour, with faces looming out of the background, when seen by the flickering light of flares made from dry coconut-palm frond. Men learn about ceremonies not

during their actual initiations but while dismantling the display, and ten years or so later, when the ceremonial cycle brings the ceremony round again, the initiates are now qualified to act as junior initiators and learn how to prepare the ceremony under the direction of the “fathers and elder brothers” of their half of the dual organization. Every Abelam man participates in four performances of each ceremony of the cycle, first as initiate and later as father of an initiate when the ceremony is performed by the other half of the dual organization, also as junior and then as senior initiator when the ceremony is performed by his own half. After these four attendances, which may involve a period of fifty to sixty years, a man can be, and often is, excluded by his juniors from any further participation.

Thus boys are expected gradually to assume mundane responsibilities until, at about thirty, they should be able to produce sufficient food for their families and be able to start in yam and pig exchanges. In ritual life they are expected to show, and by and large do show, a great deal of responsibility and secrecy about the operations they perform as virgin boys. As soon as they reach puberty they are excluded from the long-yam cult and are not readmitted fully until fifteen years later when they have a settled married life and a desire for prestige, which can be satisfied only by growing and presenting long yams.

The Art

All art among the Abelam is fundamentally cult art; decorative art exists but its motifs and usages are derived from cult art and from statuses associated with the yam and tambaran cults, and it does not involve any painting. Painting, as opposed to sculpture, engraving, and other activities that are performed by artists but are difficult to classify in our terms, is a sacred activity. Although charms, spells, and invocations may accompany other sorts of artistic work, these are solely the affair of the artist and mainly utilitarian, i.e. to prevent the timber splitting in carving or the bone breaking in engraving. Painting is an essential part of the ritual, carried out by the whole group of initiators as the final stage in preparing a ceremony. The painting phase is opened and closed by feasts and food distributions; the initiators cleanse themselves from past contact with women and observe taboos on sex and meat while the phase lasts. The taboos are almost identical with those necessary for the cultivation of long yams.

All magically and supernaturally powerful substances are classified as paint by the Abelam. Although the paint used in tambaran ceremonies is not intrinsically powerful it becomes the medium by which the benefit of the ceremony is conferred on those participating. The use of paint in the long-yam cult and for sorcery is surrounded by similar taboos and ritual restrictions.

Abelam art relies very much for its effects on the brightness and magnificence of polychrome painting. Carving is ritually less highly valued; it is a specialist activity carried on in secrecy, but not as an essential part of the ritual, and the majority of men do not participate in carving in any way whatever, whereas all men take some part in painting if only in mixing the colours. Painting is applied to all carvings but in addition is done on the flat, not only on the façade of the ceremonial house, but in very large quantities on sago-spathe panels which line and form the ceiling of the initiation chamber built specially inside the ceremonial house for each initiation ceremony. In

the painting of carvings the painters of course have to follow the lines and surfaces presented by the carver. With new figures the carver will usually supervise the painting himself, but for many of the more important ceremonies old figures have to be washed and repainted and there is some room for variation, particularly since some of the oldest figures are carved in a style different from that current.

In general, carvings tend to be of beings of human form, although some, especially the *nggwalndu*, have very much larger heads in proportion to their bodies than are found in the human model. The faces of the carvings are painted in a prescribed style built up of a series of elements (forehead ornaments, nose decorations, *etc.*) and definite areas of colour (eyes–black, cheeks–yellow, *etc.*) that make all painted carved faces stylistically the same as each other, and also the same as the carved faces attached to the heads of the displayed long yams, and the same as the painted faces of the initiators as they emerge from the ceremonial house and parade round the *amei* during the actual ceremony. The identification of man, yam, and *nggwalndu* provided by the stylistic unity of their several faces is one of the most important “theological” functions of Abelam art. The unity of this trinity is given various other forms of symbolic expression, for instance in names, but it is perhaps in the exciting and highly emotional atmosphere of *tambaran* ceremonies and yam displays that the identification has the greatest impact. But the *nggwalndu* has more than one face: although in three dimensions on carvings *nggwalndu* faces are always the same, when painted on the flat the elements that make up the face and their arrangement are different; there are some similarities—the forehead ornament is the same and in the same place—but the eyes, nose, and mouth are represented in a completely different manner. This is not due to the problems of representing a three-dimensional object in two dimensions. The eyes, for instance, in the carving are black, triangular, or semicircular, and in about the natural proportion to the rest of the face; in flat painting they are huge—a series of polychrome rings that dominate the face. Similarly, the arms of the carvings come from the shoulders and the hands rest on the groin, whereas in flat-painted *nggwalndu* heads they are represented by three or more white lines springing from beside the nostrils, describing a graceful arabesque round under the mouth where they nearly meet (the elbows being indicated by black lunate shapes), then turning up again to finish with white diagrammatic hands beside the ears. The hands often have more than five fingers, and on the ceremonial house façade, where these faces form a band right across, each hand is shared by the adjacent *nggwalndu*, their arms uniting just under the palm (see Plate two [Figure 9.2]).

It is perhaps as well to make clear at this stage that neither the three- nor the two-dimensional versions are representations (in the literal sense) of the *nggwalndu*: they are not attempts to show what *nggwalndu* look like, but different manifestations of the *nggwalndu*. The actual carvings called *nggwalndu* are the most sacred of Abelam objects and provide the closest contact between man and *nggwalndu*. They have on occasion been used to manipulate the *nggwalndu* to the advantage of the owning clan, as in the case of the clan that replaced its *nggwalndu* with a freshly carved one, which was given the name and place of the old one in the ceremonial house, thus halting a run of death and misfortune that had been afflicting the clan, and starting the period of fertility and prosperity that it was still enjoying when I was told of the incident and

shown the rejected carving. But nggwalndu manifest themselves in other forms: as vicious wild boars, as a whole series of noises, and in dreams as tall, strong men in full war paint; an entirely different style of face-painting and ornamentation from that of the carvings or the flat paintings.

The point here is that neither the carving nor the painting on the flat shows what a nggwalndu “looks like”; they are both arrangements of stylistic elements that mean nggwalndu in the appropriate context only, the carving among carvings, the painting among paintings. There is no sense in which the painting on the flat is a projection of the carving or an attempt to represent the three-dimensional object in two dimensions; the two systems are unrelated. The question “Why, if nggwalndu have arms springing from their upper lips in flat painting, do they have arms coming from their shoulders in carving?” is meaningless in Abelam terms, arising as it does from the supposition that both forms are meant to be representations of something originally outside both three- and two-dimensional art, that they are meant to “look like” something in nature. There are common aspects that bridge the two styles—for instance, the face-painting is identical, given that the faces are different shapes; again, the same decorations are to be found in the head-dress and on the arms although the arms are, as we have seen, completely different in form and placing in the two styles.

Similar considerations apply to all the spirits and natural species included in the Abelam ceremonial flat-painting style; they form a code built out of a finite number of stylistic elements; various arrangements of these elements signify nggwalndu, butterfly, flying fox, *etc.*, in a way that is closer to our use of the elements to signify a member of the genus *sus*, than to any drawing, however schematic, of a four-legged snouted animal. Although the examples discussed so far are fairly straightforward, all coming from ceremonial house façades, the flat-painting code has an essential ambiguity in that varying interpretations of collections of elements are possible and all are equally legitimate. The main point, however, is that in two-dimensional painting there is no desire or attempt of any sort to establish any visual correspondence with either nature or three-dimensional art.

What do the Abelam see?

Quite obviously there can be no absolute answer to this question: it is impossible literally to see through the eyes of another man, let alone perceive with his brain. Yet if we are to consider the place of art in any society, especially one such as the Abelam where the art is so highly valued and vigorously preserved, we must beware of assuming that they see what we see and vice versa. Since much of the information must be derived from what Abelam say, cognitive categorization is involved as well as perception.

Abelam have no word for colour as such, but they have a word for paint in which they recognize four colours: white, black, red, and yellow; all these terms have a much wider reference than colours. There is also another set of colour names employed by women to refer to the vegetable dyes used for the string bags, but these are specific and are not used to indicate the colours of anything else. All other coloured substances are subsumed into the four paints—thus a pale-green powder, apparently used by the Japanese army for treating skin infections, is called yellow, and blue, either from

Reckitts or in the form of cheap powder paint sold by trade stores, is called black. In some villages these non-traditional colours have been used for painting the tambarans. In such cases they are used interchangeably with the traditional colour whose name they share. In rare cases both colours have been applied to the same object so that a patch that should be all black is half-black and half-blue with an irregular boundary totally meaningless in terms of the design, and indeed to my eyes completely ruining it. Painters of such works, when remonstrated with, deny that there is any difference or that there is an inharmonious boundary. I am not suggesting that they cannot distinguish between black and blue, only that the distinction is meaningless in terms of the ritual system whose servant the art is. In fact, one façade where such mixing occurred was widely judged a failure, but although I collected some dozens of opinions on the façade, none of them mentioned the mixing of colours as a factor.

All Abelam painting is done on a mud base that is either black or grey; when the base is grey a little of it is left showing, but there is no name for grey, the name for the mud base applying to both kinds; thus although the contrast of white next to grey and white next to black is quite consciously exploited by artists for aesthetic effect, the colour grey cannot be spoken about directly.

All Abelam, whether initiated or not, can see the façades of the ceremonial houses, although children do not go on the amei without special reason. The façades are in fact all they do see in the form of two-dimensional representation of anything, and the only other flat surfaces in an Abelam village are the earth of the amei and the grey thatch sides of the houses. Façades are brightly painted and one of their main stylistic features is the multiple polychrome lines that are used to outline all the principal shapes of the design. It is this feature that children seem to pick up. Whenever I have seen children drawing with their fingers in the dust the shapes are given multiple outlines. When I gave children paper and paint to work with, they produced pictures of humans and animals with round heads, oval bodies, and stick limbs as children apparently do in all cultures, but always the heads and bodies, at least, were given multiple polychrome outlines. There is no attempt to copy or reproduce the designs of the façade but the technique is taken directly from it. Many of the motifs chosen by children are not represented at all on the façade, for instance snakes, a favourite with children, are simply parallel sinuous lines of colour. Children when painting are quite happy with white paper; indeed, they positively preferred white paper because the colours showed up better, whereas their elders, the real artists who did many excellent paintings on grey and black paper for me, were unable to tackle white paper; their technique involves outlining the whole design in white on the black or grey mud, and they cannot cope with black on white. The ability of children to use white paper confirms that they paint with multiple polychrome lines because that is the way they see marks on flat surfaces and not because they have been taught to do so in the cult context. Children never normally have any access to paint of any sort, and since painting is a ritual activity, only to be performed by purified initiators observing strict taboos and carried out in secrecy, it is not considered a suitable activity for children; they draw in the dust only when no adult is around. They also play at initiation ceremonies, again when they think themselves unobserved, and I suspect that such mimicking of adult ceremonial forms an important part of children's secret activities.

In general, colour (or strictly paint) words are applied only to things of ritual concern. This can be seen very clearly in the Abelam classification of nature. Tree species are subject to an elaborate classification, but apart from the quality of the timber for practical purposes, the criteria used are seed and leaf shapes. Whether the tree has flowers or not, and the colour of flowers or leaves, are rarely mentioned as criteria. Broadly speaking, the Abelam had use only for the hibiscus and a yellow

flower, both of which served as decorations for men and yams. Small flowering plants of any colour were of no interest and were classified merely as grass or undergrowth. Similarly with insects: all those that bite or sting are carefully classified, but butterflies form one huge class regardless of size or colour. In the classification of bird species, however, colour is of vital importance. Male and female hornbills are classified into two different species on the basis of the different colours of certain feathers, but then birds are totems, and unlike butterflies and flowers are central to the ritual sphere. Not only are colour words used in the description of actual plumage, but the word for black is used in several compound forms in the names of bird species, and the word for white is also the name of the sulphur-crested cockatoo. It would seem, therefore, that colour to be describable has to be of ritual interest. The words for the four colours are, as we have said, really words for paints. Paint is an essentially powerful substance and it is perhaps not so surprising that the use of the colour words is restricted to those parts of the natural environment that have been selected as ritually relevant. The use of different names by the women for their vegetable dyes would fit such a hypothesis.

The association between colour and ritual significance can also be seen in Abelam reactions to European importations. Coloured magazines sometimes find their way into the villages, and occasionally pages torn from them are attached to the matting at the base of the ceremonial house façade. In all such cases I have seen, the pages selected were brightly coloured, usually food advertisements of the Spam and sweet corn, and honey-baked ham type. Inquiries revealed that the Abelam had no idea of what was represented but thought that with their bright colours and incomprehensibility the selected pages were likely to be European tambarans and therefore powerful. Similarly, younger artists, encouraged to innovate while painting on paper, included as new elements the hilt of the sword that forms part of the "Dettol" trademark, copied from a large tin of the antiseptic with whose medical use they were familiar, and the Christian cross, believing both to be powerful tambaran like design elements.⁴⁶

The inability of people in cultures not used to them to see photographs is of course well known (*cf.* Segall, Campbell & Herskovits, 1966), and the comparison of inabilities is a difficult task for which I have no systematic material. Nevertheless, the Abelam's lack of understanding of photographs after more than twenty years of contact remains almost absolute, and provides possible support for my hypothesis that they have very definite and limited expectations about what they will see on any two-dimensional surface made to be looked at. In other words, their vision has been socialized in a way that makes photographs especially incomprehensible, just as ours is socialized to see photographs and indeed to regard them as in some sense more truthful than what the eye sees.

Photography has been known to the Abelam since the first contacts with Europeans in 1937. Nowadays, when all young men go away for at least a two-year stint of labour on the coast, they bring back photographs of themselves in all their modern finery, usually taken by Chinese photographers. The subjects stand rigidly at attention facing the camera, either singly or in groups, against a background of either a white sheet or a wall. No Abelam have any difficulty today in “seeing” such a photograph and in recognizing and naming the individual concerned if they know him. But when shown photographs of themselves in action, or of any pose other than face or full figure looking directly at the camera, they cease to be able to “see” the photograph at all. Even people from other villages who came specially because they knew I had taken a photograph of a relative who had subsequently died, and were often pathetically keen to see his features, were initially unable to see him at all, turning the photograph in all directions. Even when the figure dominated (to my eyes) the photograph I sometimes had to draw a thick line round it before it could be identified, and in some cases I had the impression that they willed themselves to see it rather than actually saw it in the way we do. Photographs of ceremonial houses and objects were easier, although in black and white people could identify a house as a ceremonial house rather than say which house it was. With colour they were happier, partly because they looked into a viewer, which itself was three-dimensional, instead of staring at a flat sheet, but they could rarely identify individuals and had a tendency to regard any brightly coloured photograph with no outstanding form as a tambaran display. Since I needed identifications from photographs of yam exchanges, brawls, ceremonies, and debates, I trained a few boys to see photographs; they learnt to do this after a few hours of concentrated looking and discussion on both sides.

Conclusions

The Abelam boy, indulged in secular contexts and violently treated in ritual ones, is proffered no explanation of the ill treatment he receives or of the ceremony of which it is a part. Abelam culture is very deficient in myth: most young men not only do not know any myths but can never remember having heard any. Ceremonies are performed because they must be, and are intrinsically good, but no one can offer much in the way of an explanation of the elements that make them up. Certain parts are self-explanatory, invocations to spirits and such like, but on the symbolism of the objects displayed, or the ritual actions performed, no one has anything to offer. The powerful substances used in yam magic are called paints, and from his experiences as a virgin boy, as well as his experiences as an initiate, a boy learns to regard paint as something associated with supernatural power, and painted objects as of great and mysterious importance; they are the foci of the ceremonies and he has to suffer before he is shown them. Just as it is only for objects or species of ritual concern that the Abelam language uses colour names, so anything painted in polychrome must be powerful and a focus of ritual attention. Colour, and its use in painting, is separated both by the way it is presented and by the attitudes displayed towards it from any connection with nature.

The experiences of Abelam boys tend to make them regard paintings as something of great importance, intrinsically powerful, but as a closed system not referring to other natural or social phenomena and a closed system the meaning of which is not

explained beyond the naming of designs. It seems to me that Abelam painting could be regarded as a form of language operating on its own rules and communicating things that are not communicable by other methods. The very fact that the paintings are not described and analysed by the Abelam would, I suggest, strengthen such a hypothesis. It was, I believe, Isadora Duncan who was reported to have replied to someone who asked her the meaning of a dance she had just performed, "If I could tell you what it meant there would be no point in dancing it." I am not suggesting that the Abelam youth puzzles out for himself the answers to a sort of trick questionnaire set by his elders; rather, it seems to me that neither the initiators nor the initiates are totally conscious of the significance of the designs they paint; to them they are essential parts of the ceremony and their form is dictated by tradition.

I have argued in another paper (Forge 1966) that the art communicates some fundamental values of Abelam society, and that this communication is not fully conscious to anyone concerned. In painting on the flat one can see how a whole series of objects and animals of interest and concern to the Abelam are integrated into the ritual system by being painted in a series of elements that they share with paintings of spirits. For instance, "legs of pork" is one interpretation of a spiral arabesque motif that occurs fairly commonly in Abelam painting. In some cases this motif will be repeated and manipulated so that many such motifs make up a face of roughly *nggwalndu* type; to this face are added the head-dress and other decorations of the *nggwalndu*, and it thus becomes a sort of personification of legs of pork. Not that the Abelam believe that there is any spirit exclusively concerned with legs of pork, but painting in this way is used to integrate legs of pork, which are extremely important in the exchange system, into the ritual sphere and to direct the attention of men to them.

There is, however, no secure iconography; the design elements and their combinations are essentially ambiguous, in the sense that translation from the language of flat painting to the language of words is not a matter of simple one-to-one correspondence. Interpretation of elements and whole compositions often varies according to the artistic and social contexts and according to the informant. Thus, although a painting of a *nggwalndu* face will always be so identified, the arabesque "legs of pork" cited above could equally well be named as immature fern frond or a swirl in the water of a flooded river; if the element means anything in terms of words it probably means all three with all their connotations as well. But the Abelam do not ask what a painting means. The design elements all have names and they are assembled into harmonious compositions, which appear to act directly on the beholder without having to be named. Abelam art is about relationships, not about things. One of its functions is to relate and unite disparate things in terms of their place in the ritual and cosmological order. It does this, I would suggest, directly and not as an illustration to some text based in another symbolic system such as language. One of the main functions of the initiation system with its repetitive exposure of initiates to quantities of art is, I would suggest, to teach the young men to see the art, not so that he may consciously interpret it but so that he is directly affected by it.



Figure 9.1. Ceremonial house at Kinbanggwa village, N. Abelam. The huge nggwalndu faces form the bottom row of the painted façade; in front is the amei. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.



Figure 9.2. A section of the chamber containing a tambaran display in a ceremonial house at Kinbangwa village. The main display of large and small painted heads, is to the left. The two styles of nggwalndu representation are seen in the centre: the carved and painted wooden figure to the left and the flat painted head and arms to the right. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

CHAPTER 10

The Power of Culture and the Culture of Power⁴⁷

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Are some cultures more successful than others? Apologizing in advance to the affected peoples and their ethnographers, I suggest that the Abelam have been more successful than their neighbors. The first question to be addressed is, of course, what is meant by success. Historians who write on the grand scale speak, if an invasion is successful, of the strengths of invaders and the weakness of the invaded, but of course they have the advantage of hindsight. In history there seems to be no criterion but survival. In the Sepik we have little recorded history, but the broad outline of the major population moves over the last few hundred years is fairly obvious. Wherever they originally come from, Ndu-family groups, among them those now known as the Abelam, came up from the Middle Sepik, probably creating the kunai plains by inappropriate cultivation methods. It seems likely that the groups now known as the Boiken, in the east, and the Kwanga, in the west, came up earlier and the Abelam later. Both Boiken and Kwanga live at lower density than the Abelam and are less closely related in language and culture than they are to the Sawos and the Iatmul. The Boiken went over the ranges down to the coast, but the Kwanga only approached the southern fall of the coastal mountains. Tuzin (1976) reports that some Kwanga clans were incorporated into Ilahita, which again suggests that such groups preceded the Abelam as inhabitants of that area. The Abelam stopped in the southern foothills of the Prince Alexander Range, leaving the Plains Arapesh with a thin band of villages on the upper southern fall of the range, very thin populations in tiny villages in the unpromising environment of the mountaintop (Mead's Mountain Arapesh), and larger villages on the northern fall of the range down to the coast. This latter group (Mead's Coastal Arapesh) seems to have made very little use of the seaside environment, turning the backs of its houses to the sea, disliking the sand, and so on (Mead 1938). Although the northern Abelam villages do not seem to have been making any further major attempts to expand higher into the mountains, the southwestern Abelam, known as the Wosera, were still expanding to the west, into relatively lightly populated Kwanga areas. During the first decades of this century, they were also maintaining a degree of expansionist pressure on the Ilahita Arapesh and associated groups. The village of Ilahita, with a population density similar to that of the Abelam area to its south, seems to have formed a successful redoubt against further expansion in this direction (Tuzin 1976).

The crudest of the criteria of success is biological survival. Not only have the Abelam survived, but there seems to be reasonable evidence of population increase despite the fact that they inhabit the only confirmed area of holoendemic malaria on the island of New Guinea. Their infant mortality rate, before malaria control, was of the order of 450-500 per thousand (Peters 1960), a figure confirmed by the more extensive research of Schofield and Parkinson (1963). No doubt the holoendemicity was created by their population size and density, but the point is that there seems no sign that the population was declining; in fact, the opposite was the case. Kaberry (1957) gives the population of Kalabu village on the basis of her own total survey as 489 in 1940.⁴⁸ After a very hard time during the Japanese occupation and subsequent liberation, during which the Japanese executed a group of Kalabu men, the same collectivity of hamlets was enumerated at 633 in November 1958, before there were any effective malaria control measures or much in the way of local medical services. This is a very high rate of increase, but Kaberry's census is certainly accurate, and the 1958 census patrol was more likely to get a low figure than a high one because taxation was known to be in the offing. This one village figure is the only one I know of from before the war. Kaberry's estimate of the total Abelam population in 1940 of twelve thousand is impossibly low, although the number of Abelam villages she gives ("about sixty") is about half the correct figure. In 1958 there were approximately thirty thousand Abelam, and with effective malaria control and gradually improving medical services the annual population growth rate averaged four percent, as opposed to the 1.8 percent suggested by the Kalabu figures before medical services were available. I have no intention of generalizing statistically from one village, but its experience is consistent with the history of villages known to me. Despite malaria and very severe warfare, the Abelam population as a whole was increasing before any effective colonial intervention, which took place for the northern Abelam in October 1937 with the founding of Maprik station.

The Abelam preferred the yam as a staple, although it was not usually available year-round. They devoted a great deal of energy and ingenuity to the growing of cultivars of the two main species *Dioscorea alata* and *D. esculenta*. These species were also cultivated by their neighbours, although the Arapesh villages to the northeast gave more attention to certain taro varieties. However, the Abelam were generally acknowledged to be supreme cultivators of the yam in the area. They had also discovered or developed a cultivar of *D. esculenta* called *asagwaka*, which will tolerate saturated ground and even survive quite long periods under flood, thus enabling villages in the Wosera to make use of the fertile river flats to cultivate yams with very high returns. This appears to be an original development; I am not aware of any other reports of water-tolerant yams of any species. The botanical wisdom is that yam tubers rot when they come into contact with saturated soil, and indeed most Abelam cultivars do; elaborate techniques are used to drain the holes in which the long yams are planted. Lea (1964) has reported on the highly developed technology of yam cultivation and some measures of its very high productivity. The point I wish to make is that the Abelam, it would seem, must have initially acquired both the genetic material and the basic techniques of cultivation of yams from their neighbors but then developed both to a superior productivity and adaptability that enables them to live at a higher population density on not particularly

good soils.⁴⁹ Not only was Abelam productivity greater, exceeding the FAO's standard figures (based mainly on West African and West Indian data), but according to Lea's figures some of their cultivars may have substantially higher protein content than the generally accepted values for yams.

Abelam cultivation practices for yams were under continuous pressure for refinement because of the vital role of exchange in the overall political economy. Up to 80 percent of a man's production would have to be publicly displayed and initially presented to exchange partners, affines, and matrilineal kin, and subsequently yams were included in village presentations to other villages, both allied and enemy. The public evaluation of each man's abilities in a series of competitive arenas undoubtedly contributed both to the overwhelming interest in yams, involving ritual and aesthetic factors, and to the development of a very intensive yam cultivation technology.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, there has been no published follow-up research on either the technology or the nutritional status of Abelam yams. Specimens collected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture are said to have yielded very promising results (Martin 1974), while other specimens taken to the Department of Agriculture, Stock and Fisheries test gardens in Lae were, after the director suffered a heart attack, mainly eaten by the convicts employed to cultivate them, though promising results had been obtained before this unhappy event.

Although, of course, the Abelam had no political unity, they were conscious of their culture as distinct from those of their neighbours. They recognised several dialects within their area and an almost continuous variation between villages, mainly conceptualized as differences in ritual, art, and yam-growing practices but also including what anthropologists would regard (although Abelam did not) as major differences in marriage practice and even kinship terminology. Their distinctness from the Arapesh, called by them Bugi, was always very obvious in their radically distinct languages, but they also distinguished themselves very clearly from other Ndu-family groups, regarding both the Kwanga and the Boiken and most of the Bugi as having only partial and inferior versions of Abelam ritual.

To the south the population density falls very sharply, and the widely dispersed villages of the kunai plains form a very wide transition zone between what we call Abelam and what we call Sawos, with, as far as I can make out, substantial variation between villages. The language too seems to change gradually, and Abelam going south for trade had little difficulty in making themselves understood even as far as the river. Even Sawos villages such as Aulimbit, within a few miles of the Sepik River, used Abelam motifs mixed with those of Iatmul origin for the decoration of their tambaran houses and displayed a healthy interest in yams and their cultivation. Thus Abelam influence could now be said to extend right across the plains.

From the distribution and sizes of villages in the Abelam area and its surroundings, it is obvious not only that the Abelam were living at a higher overall density but also that their villages were in general larger than those of their neighbors. I have argued (Forge 1972) that there is a normative factor operating in such egalitarian cultivating societies that tends to produce a group of around a hundred fifty to two hundred as the basic political unit. Therefore these large villages require explanation. Among the Abelam the "ritual group," the prime unit of social intercourse and cooperation as well as the group, which staged all ritual, was of this size, but most of the large Abelam

villages consisted of two or three such groups. This amalgamation was clearly an artifact of warfare, the village being a defensive but not necessarily an offensive unit. In the Mumble region northwest of Maprik station, most of the Abelam population was in a valley running up into the mountains and unthreatened by enemies except from the valley entrance, where the large villages of Apangai and Chiginangu stand. Inside the valley all the villages were single ritual groups and of the appropriate population size. For the rest of the Abelam, however, a single ritual group as a residential and defensive unit was in grave danger and either joined another village or was soon dispersed by warfare.

The large defensive units and high overall density undoubtedly made the Abelam efficient in warfare. The ability of ritual groups to live in the necessary close proximity for shared defense, without any form of centralized organization, was dependent on relationships expressed by vast exchanges of yams. There were also rules that allowed the expression of aggressive passions within the village by brawling between groups with clubs but not with spears. The distinction between aggressive yam exchange, which allowed alliance to continue, and war or feud is summed up in the Abelam contrast between *wi cambera* "those with whom we exchange spears," and *wapi cambera* "those with whom we exchange yams." The villages of the immediate neighbors of the Abelam are also sometimes larger, the most outstanding example being Ilahita, although Yamil to the northeast is also large. Ilahita is the only one for which we have a detailed study, and it is clear that here at least the principles that hold together the six wards are somewhat different from those typical of Abelam (Tuzin 1976). The point here is that the whole Abelam social organization contained elements, which allowed several different groups to live in close proximity, thus forming a continuing large group effective for defense and often offense as well. Village warriors would collectively sweep the areas of gardens and the routes to them every morning to forestall ambush, and every man would turn out for a formal fight following a challenge by another village. This latter was, however, a public event and called for several days of preparation. The majority of casualties were inflicted by ambush, dawn raids on single hamlets, and other small-scale actions that required small groups recruited from only segments of a village and were carried out in great secrecy, sometimes against the interests of other members of the same village (Forge 1970). All kills were, however, totaled and balanced on the basis of the village alone.

Abelam thus were in a better posture for war than most of their neighbors, and even though the majority of Abelam fought only against other Abelam, at the borders the pressure on neighbors to withdraw from the dense area of fighting Abelam, and thus allow expansion, must have been great and continuous. This process was still continuing until the late thirties and resumed as soon as the Japanese withdrew in 1945. In the Wosera, in particular, the densely packed central villages were putting great pressure on the western ones, which were in turn forcing back Kwanga groups to the west and the north. Areas of high density were expanding and areas of low density being compressed, producing a general redistribution of population density. It was always the Abelam who generated the high density which their social organization and exchange system could accommodate effectively and their yam and other productive technologies, as they gradually developed, permitted. Abelam villages therefore, if they

did not have any advantage in warfare among themselves, had a decided advantage over their non-Abelam neighbors.

Effectiveness in warfare and skill in growing yams, particularly the phallic long yams, were in local terms merely the material manifestations of a more fundamental Abelam domination, that of power conceived essentially in magical and ritual terms. The Abelam were admired and feared for what was believed to be superior access to supernatural power in all forms and the concrete expression of this command of power in rituals, buildings, and an immense range of objects, decorations, and styles loosely classifiable as “art.” In Sepik terms, it was the Abelam’s superior access to supernatural power that made their long yams longer, their gardens more productive, and their occupation of land previously the undoubted property of others so conclusive. All their neighbours copied Abelam styles in ceremonial houses, decorations of man and yam, and overall ritual performances. For ten to fifteen miles from the western, northern, and eastern borders of the Abelam, all villages, whatever their language and culture, build ceremonial houses that look like Abelam houses, carve figures that look like Abelam figures, and so on. Farther from the border, the Abelam influences die away, although other aspects of the local cult remain. For instance, around Yangoru, Boiken have cults whose fundamental content is similar to those of Boiken on the Abelam border but whose figures, decorations, wealth items, and so on, are very different in form. Transfer of forms is undoubtedly significant, but transfer of names too presents an interesting pattern; almost all Abelam words are very closely related to Iatmul words and have the same range of meanings. Thus wapi/wabi refers in Abelam to long yams but in Central Iatmul to long flutes—not the sort of identity of meaning that linguists like, but since both objects are the central phallic objects of a cult from which women are excluded, an anthropologist can claim an identity of sense at least.⁵¹ The only major ritual word I know in Abelam that has no cognate in Iatmul is wala. The word wala is used for a class of spirits conceived of as living in and controlling a specific territory, the only Abelam spirits with an essentially local tie. All other Abelam spirits are owned by a group of people, a clan, and go where the clan goes. Wala are also owned by a clan—indeed, there are no spirits that have a larger field of operation than a clan among the Abelam—but only by virtue of that clan’s control of the land they inhabit. Wala are not represented in art (although they are associated with some of the basketry masks), but among the Arapesh immediately to the north of the northern Abelam (Mead’s Plains Arapesh) the major spirit of each clan is called walihas and is represented in painting and carving exactly as are the Abelam nggwalndu. The wala of the Abelam are, I would suggest, possibly taken over from previous Arapesh occupiers of the land (see also Mead [1933-34] the ending has is a plural form [Fortune 1942]). Among the Ilahita Arapesh, however, the major spirits have not only the Abelam form but the Abelam name nggwal, a name cognate with the Iatmul nggwail, both meaning “father’s father”; in Arapesh the word has no meaning apart from the class of spirit (Tuzin 1980).

Abelam ritual dominance of their immediate neighbors was not only a matter of copying, although that was certainly prominent particularly in art styles. Rights to hold ritual, objects to serve as the focus of secret ceremonies, ritual paraphernalia, spells, and instructions for ceremonies were sold to neighbors for many pigs and shell-ring wealth items. The sales were sometimes outright, but more usually attempts were made

to “lease” ritual complexes and claim payment each time they were staged. Abelam were very cynical about this process. They did not consider that they were selling anything of real supernatural value, since they always left out parts that they considered vital but that were not publicly visible and, most important, they never parted with the secret formulae by which the nggwalndu were addressed or their secret names.⁵² In fact, since all spirits are clan-related it would be impossible in theory for those not in the patriline to have access to such spirits. However, in contrast to Abelam theory, both my figures from 1958-59 and Kaberry’s (1957 [see footnote 1]) for 1939-40 show that only just over half of the adult men were actually members of the same subclan as their fathers, and patrilineality was by no means sacrosanct in practice. In sum, the access to the spirits to which Abelam attribute all prosperity and success cannot be said to be dependent on being born into the correct patriline. Attitudes toward this trade and export of ceremonial perhaps best illustrate Abelam views of their neighbors. Before considering the export of ritual, however, we must look at the internal trade.

Certainly during this century, a period for which I feel I have reasonably good documentation, the Abelam have been in a ferment of creation in ritual and art. New forms of ritual and hence social organization have spread across the Abelam area, along with changes in art style. For example, a kumun/kwain moiety system spread from the east, becoming fully assimilated in the Wingei/Bengragum/Sagisi area but only partially assimilated (being used to refer to groups that could be otherwise defined) in the Naramko/Yank region. This moiety system probably originated farther east and is reported by Mead (1938) among the Arapesh, although here again it does not appear to be of much importance. A new organization of the half-generation grades in the initiation system had been accepted in Gallop about the time of white control and was tried out for the first time in Wambundu in 1959 at a ritual that I was able to attend. This new system, considered a great success, was regarded as rather “kinky” in that it involved sons’ beating their fathers at one stage of the initiation. Again, the northern Abelam marriage system, permitting sister exchange and based on a six-shell-ring bridewealth, seems to have been slowly spreading to the southeast and southwest, replacing the asymmetrical system and the twenty-four-ring bridewealth. In art, the eastern style of sculpture changed radically around the turn of the century from one in which major carvings were essentially assemblages of elements with many pairs of opposed hooks (Forge 1973a) to one that was essentially anthropomorphic. This change seems to have come from the west. In Kalabu village, now, at least, the home of the anthropomorphic style in its most classic form, Brigitta Hauser-Schaublin has recently been shown a carving in an old style which, while not the same as the old style in the east, is much more like it in conception than it is to the current style (personal communication). The flat-painting style of the east apparently did not change at the same time as the carving style. Some tentative changes were tried in the late fifties, but when a whole facade of a ceremonial house badly executed in what was meant to be the northern Abelam style was judged a disaster, further innovation in flat-painting style was discouraged.

Other changes were also taking place, though they are difficult to document in detail. What is certain is that a great deal of change in ritual and social organization was typical of the Abelam in the period of my informants’ memories and no doubt

long before that too. Much of this was fashion, the spread of more elaborate initiation systems at least in part motivated by a desire not to have a simple system while one's neighbors had a more complex one. It seems to me that there was also, however, a good deal of purposive change and microadaptation of the cultural and social apparatus available to the Abelam, who at the same time were expanding territorially and growing in numbers and in the number of their settlements—all processes that naturally tended to produce diversity. These changes passing between villages within the Abelam took place regardless of the state of warfare or alliance between contiguous villages. Ritual required truce, and enemies were essential participants (Forge 1966); further, the "roads" through which the big men obtained magical paint for yam growing and sorcery passed through enemy villages as well as those of allies (Forge 1962, 1970). The process of transfer involved several factors. The major clan spirits, the nggwalndu or cakindu (nggwal is the public name) have, across the whole Abelam territory, only a very limited number of names which constantly recur, and consequently neighboring villages will always have several clans that have the same major nggwalndu names. Whether nggwalndu that have the same names but are associated with clans in different villages that trace no sort of connection with each other are in any sense ultimately the same nggwalndu is a knotty problem to which neither I nor the Abelam can offer any definitive solution; basically some sort of identity is assumed if the occasion suits and denied if it does not. However, the same basic system of clan-based supernatural powers and the frequency of the same names undoubtedly helped in the transmission of ritual knowledge and esoteric practice between Abelam villages. Further, the initiation system allows youths and men to be initiated in ritual groups other than their own provided that their sponsors pay. This payment in itself confers rights in the ceremony on the initiated, who can initiate others in subsequent ceremonies. In these ways virtually perfect transmission of ritual innovations can take place.

In the export of ritual, either as items or as whole complexes, to members of other cultures mundane matters are very different. In addition, the conceptions of the spirits themselves and their relationship to the groups that claim them are unlikely to be the same.⁵³ The arrangements are made between villages and have a contractual form requiring long negotiation between big men. The sums demanded were very high, including large quantities of high-quality food while the work was being undertaken and a large number of pigs and shell rings of the finest type at the end of the ritual. Abelam attention centered on the preparation of the display, usually consisting of carving and painting but also including such things as basketry masks, headdresses, and other ornaments. Before contact most of the work of preparation was done in the selling village itself; this not only was safer but also helped to strengthen the sellers' view that what was being sold was the actual objects, not the right to reproduce them or the techniques and ritual of their manufacture. When all was ready the maira (a general Abelam term that corresponds to tambaran) were carried to the purchasers by an immense war party that devastated property along its way, cutting down young trees, raiding gardens, damaging fences, and even, according to some accounts, burning houses. At the outskirts of the receiving village the spearmen would throw their spears at a selected group of recipients chosen for their ability to dodge. The whole party would then sweep up to the ceremonial ground, throwing the remains of their pillage

into the houses as they passed. These ritualized aggressions are typical of all ritual cooperation and aid between villages and occurred between Abelam villages as well. They were, however, intensified by the importance of what was being transported and in the case of the export of a whole major ceremony would have been very marked. The delivery having been made in a way that impressed everyone with the power of the objects being transferred, the whole party might stay and participate in the following ceremonials and dances, eating copiously and seducing its hosts' women, or simply collect its payment and leave.

In these transactions the Abelam did not consider that they were losing control of any supernatural power or giving anyone else control of any. Although all the preparations were done under full Abelam ritual conditions and taboos and in the name of the nggwalndu of the preparers, to whom the pigs they received were also dedicated, the release of the supernatural power engendered by the process of preparation took place outside the sphere of the nggwalndu operations, and it was inconceivable that one's nggwalndu could benefit strangers; they were in fact much more likely to do them harm. From the Abelam's point of view, they made objects which, when complete, were charged with power, but the recipients did not know how to use the power and were more likely to be damaged than blessed by the result. Some Abelam ritual experts conceded that in time Arapesh would learn how to use Abelam art and ceremonies to strengthen their own spirits and thus in the long run would get real benefit from their purchases. Yet because not all the spells and invocations had been transferred, they were certain that the full ceremonial power of their own rituals could not be equaled outside their own village.

I have endeavored to show that the Abelam have been not only successful but more successful than their neighbors. I have done this mainly in terms of the ability of the Abelam to maintain higher population density and larger villages, which requires a flexible social organization that uses equality-seeking exchange in preference to lineal principles (Forge 1972). It also requires a more efficient productive system. With these materialist virtues the Abelam were able to push back their neighbors, who also accepted from the Abelam a view of Abelam ritual as intrinsically superior. These features combine to produce what one might call a form of cultural domination that perhaps also manifests itself in another example I have not mentioned. Abelam wealth items were polished shell rings cut from huge shells of giant clam (*Tridacna gigas*) (Bühler 1957, Gardi 1958). The whole system of exchange and marriage, as well as payments for ritual services, depended on these shell rings, for which every Abelam, male or female, had an unending and insatiable lust. The rings were produced exclusively by a group of six small Arapesh villages and traded down to the Abelam in exchange for pigs. These Arapesh villages, which were not on the border with the Abelam, obtained the raw materials by means of long trade routes over the mountains and down to the coast and offshore islands. These villages had developed a ring-cutting and polishing technology that gave them an effective monopoly. The villages, however, considered themselves totally dependent on the Abelam, and when I visited them at a time when they were having difficulties with shell supplies, they bemoaned their fate, seeing themselves as in danger of never eating pork again because of their inability to make enough rings. They nevertheless continued to behave very deferentially to those Abelam they visited

with such rings as they could make and never suggested that because there was a shortage of rings the “price” of rings in terms of pigs should rise. This behavior is in our economic terms a complete misunderstanding of the “true” situation. These Arapesh villages and their ring production were essential for the long-term maintenance of the whole Abelam political and economic system. (Rings were also used as wealth by some of the immediate Arapesh neighbors of the Abelam but not by the Boiken, Sawos, or Iatmul.) The ring makers, however, could almost certainly have eaten more pork if they had diverted their labor into pig-food production and pig rearing and abandoned rings altogether. This failure to make any attempt to exploit their monopoly situation seems typical of the effect the Abelam had on their neighbors.⁵⁴

If we admit that some cultures are more successful than others, in whatever terms, how are we to explain this? I have said that Abelam yam cultivation was more productive and efficient than that of their neighbors. Yet that cannot be due to anything they brought with them in the material sense, since they came from areas that were unsuitable for anything but the most amateur yam cultivation and could not have supported anything like the recent Abelam numbers. It is worth emphasizing that Abelam population expansion must have been very large and must have taken place more or less where they are today. We have no accurate idea of how long all these movements took, but I would guess that Abelam occupation of their present area is only a matter of a few hundreds of years, with an absolute maximum of a thousand. Whatever the time period, it was within this limit that the Abelam took what their neighbors had and improved it. Similar considerations apply to the form of houses both ceremonial and domestic; nothing like the Abelam form of house occurs to the south, either on the river or along the southern tributaries and in the hill country right up to the mountain wall. Abelam houses look like their neighbors’ houses, yet Abelam ceremonial houses are bigger, often much bigger; they are more daringly raked forward and better built, but in construction they are just a better version of the local type. In the case of houses we can say that the Abelam brought something with them, as I have argued before. Although Abelam and Iatmul ceremonial houses do not look alike, they are homologous at a more abstract level; that is, their symbolic functions and ritual forms are virtually identical (Forge 1966). One can also assume that in general outline the forms of social organization that I have argued were crucial to Abelam success came with them, as in many respects they were very similar to those reported from the Iatmul and other Ndu-family riverain groups. The major difference in social organization was the great intensification of exchange activities, obviously related to the development of the yam cult and the use of yam growing as a major means of acquiring and expressing prestige and hence political influence. I suspect that the Abelam’s lack of respect for patrilineality as practice while they maintained it as ideology, found by both Kaberry and myself, is also more in evidence than among river groups. This certainly also contributed to the flexibility of Abelam on-the-ground dispositions and hence, I would argue, to their success.

In looking for possible explanations I shall start with a selection of materialist types. It would seem that any based on a simple conception of ecological systems as determinant are not very promising. The Abelam were occupying land previously used by those they displaced. The tool kits were identical, and the ancestors of the

yam cultivars the Abelam used must have been initially acquired, together with the techniques of their cultivation, from the expropriated. I have of course assumed that the Abelam were under considerable "pressure" from rising population and, perhaps, degraded garden lands to their south to intensify their horticultural practice; but surely the pressure must have been at least as great on the original occupants, who were losing ground as well as suffering increased population density as the displacement proceeded. As to political structures, it is difficult to see any substantial difference in the ability of big men to mobilize and control effective groups when comparing the Abelam with any reports of their neighbors. My impression from visits to many Plains Arapesh villages is that Arapesh had fewer big men per capita and on that measure may be presumed to have had a more effective leadership system. Certainly during the Japanese period and the postwar colonialist period, the only leaders in the area who had influence beyond their villages were Arapesh (individuals such as Loui, Simogun, and Pita Lus).

Again, although this must be subjective, it is difficult to see any particular group within Abelam society that could be said to have been exploited by anyone else on any consistent basis. Young men, after the ending of fighting, were in daily life a conspicuously leisured group, but in the preparation of ritual they worked very hard and consistently. It is, again, true that women did more work than men on the cultivation of domestic gardens and the rearing of pigs. If, however, one includes work in men's ritual yam garden, which contributed almost nothing to food but a great deal to technology, and men's huge ritual activities, the balance is restored. Whatever external authorities may think, there is no doubt that Abelam, both men and women, regarded these ritual activities as essential. Any attempt at numerical accounting in comparison between men and women can, in any case, only be indicative at best. Abelam male/female relations seem on the whole complementary and not markedly exploitive, and I have the impression that Arapesh women were more dominated. Events, I would suggest, even if dismissible as anecdotes, may tell us much. For instance, Tuzin (1980: 21-23) gives an account of the honeymoon after Ilahita marriage which I do not question; yet on January 26, 1963, two freshly married Ilahita couples arrived in the northern Wosera village of Kwanimbandu, where the husbands set up a brothel in the empty government officer's patrol shelter and for three days their wives accommodated all the young bucks from the surrounding villages at two shillings a time, collected by their husbands. Such behavior by Abelam husbands was unthinkable. It may, of course, be just one of the benefits of civilization that the Abelam will eventually acquire; but certainly at that time Abelam women's bodies were their own to dispose of, sometimes in spite of their husbands. Another incident from the same village at much the same time illustrates this: A Protestant schoolboy caught in flagrante delicto by a husband was ordered by the village councillor to compensate the husband by the payment of three pounds; the wife openly gave her lover two pounds toward this on the ground that she had encouraged him and much enjoyed herself.

In short, I doubt that any case can be made for the Abelam's being more "advanced" in any Marxist sense than their neighbours; in fact, probably less real power over others in economic or political terms as vested in any individual or group among the Abelam than among their neighbors. The Abelam ritual system, as does the Iatmul,

specifically excluded old men who had completed a full cycle as initiators from further ritual activity, thus preventing any chance of development of a gerontocratic system (Forge 1970). The Abelam system of balance at every level, from the often very small subclan of a few adult men up to an alliance of villages capable of mobilizing three or four hundred men for a massive hostile exchange, staging an important ritual, or fighting a set battle, both limited the ability of any one big man continuously to hold together a large group of followers and permitted flexibility in responding to changes and opportunities in both ecological and social spheres. This flexibility was manifested in the many ways in which subclans could combine in different activities; for instance, a subclan would share landownership with other subclans of the same clan but be in opposition to them and allied with others in the ritual organization, presenting yams to each other in some exchange contexts but uniting to present yams to other groups in other contexts. In addition, the very free view taken of the patrilineal principle in recruiting group members and the use of exchange at every level to establish, maintain, or terminate relationships also promoted a responsive form of social organization. However, all was not anarchy; in the performance of major ritual the normally fluid organization crystallized, and the whole of the ritual group assumed, for the ritual season, the appearance of a textbook segmentary lineage system, with every man's actions determined by the purest of agnatic principles. Nor was this pretense; the fact that a man had been born into a particular subclan was irrelevant in comparison with the fact that he was at this major ritual behaving as a full member of that subclan, called by a name owned by the subclan, and working in the name of the subclan's *nggwalindu*. The practice of Abelam social organization was highly flexible, with the redistribution of men to exploit the available resources and maintain balance ensured by constant exchange. Major ritual, however, made the practice coincident with the ideology, and the sociology of that ritual group became perfect in terms of Abelam's beliefs about what their society should be. Major ritual could be successfully organized only if the component groups were more or less in balance at every level. In a real sense, such ritual returned Abelam society to a renewed original ideal state, and since the ritual would always have included the building of at least one new ceremonial house, the newness was physically expressed in a manner that dominated the settlement.

I mean "original" in the sense of "perfect," including, for instance, the absence of death. In 1959, a few days before the ritual climax of the most important ceremony at Kwimbu *amei* (ceremonial ground), Wingei village, I left the ritual ground, for once comparatively quiet, at dawn and met a man all alone dragging the body of his wife to the cemetery. She had died the previous evening, and the fact was simply not being acknowledged by anyone; there was no mourning, and her natal kin had refused to have anything to do with her burial, which they would ordinarily have performed, even though by so doing they abandoned all possibility of receiving the very substantial mortuary payment that was theirs by right. A death, as a sign of spiritual disfavor, should in fact have aborted the whole ceremony, but at such a time the momentum of the months of preparation and the immense stock of spiritual power waiting for release at the final ceremony made an interruption impossible.

The Abelam and their neighbors had no doubt where the secret of Abelam strength lies, and I have only looked at materialist theories in deference to their current popularity as explanatory mechanisms. With the Abelam, I believe that the secret of their success can only be ultimately located in that complex of beliefs, classifications, rituals, attitudes, and social relationships that we call their culture and, more particularly, in their ritual, which I take to be in much of its content a commentary on and distillation of the culture as a whole, a sort of metaculture. I have already made various attempts to analyze the “meanings” conveyed by or implicit in various parts of the art and ritual. Two of the very fundamental themes are the essential nature of men and women and the relation between violence and peace, and I shall concentrate on those.

The Abelam were an extremely violent people; warfare was chronic, and casualty rates appear to have been very high. Although such measures are full of danger, it appears that about thirty percent of deaths in the first ascendant generation from that of my mature adult informants in 1958 were killings by enemies. Such deaths are very likely better remembered, but even so the rate of killing must have been very high. This figure is based on the complete genealogies of Bengragum village, and there is no reason to suppose that fighting was more frequent or intense there than anywhere else. Training boys to violence was considered essential, but this necessity started from the assumption that the will to kill had to be induced by cultural practice. Initiations into the various stages of the tambaran cult involved very little overt instruction in anything, although the initiates were beaten and rubbed with nettles at most stages. Puberty initiations for both boys and girls involved severe beatings, running the gauntlet carried by a mother’s brother, and seclusion. Boys’ seclusion was said to have been for up to two months, but nothing like the continuous bullying reported for the Iatmul took place (Bateson 1936), nor was there any scarification (although there was for girls). Boys were taught to bleed their penes and received instruction in a wide variety of male behavior including warfare, but the main purpose was to impress on them the importance of observing sex and other taboos and to fatten and strengthen them for their triumphant return to the village and reintegration into society. Actual training to kill was given in more secular contexts, both in pig hunting and in the actual killing of an unarmed refugee within the village. If it was decided to kill such a person, a group of unfledged young men would be assembled and instructed by older men. Usually the attack would take place in a garden where the refugee was working for his host. The attackers were expected to be horrified by what they had done and were treated with bespelled ginger and other magical substances to strengthen them and “heat their bellies” so that they could kill again.

The tambaran cult was full of symbols of male aggression and explicit and implicit identification of spear and phallus, but it also identified the phallus as a nutritive organ, while the long-yam cult reinforced this identity on a vast scale by equating the phallus, the yam, and the nggwalndu (Forge 1966). In the east, at least, the penultimate ritual of the tambaran sequence was considered the most violent, and beatings and nettle rubbings were severe. It is said that for this ceremony a dead enemy was painted and decorated like the carvings and set up with them. The last ritual of the cycle and the most important was, however, referred to as *yigen maira* (good tambaran), although this fact was concealed from the initiates, who to their amazement were not beaten

and were rubbed only with dead nettles. Although in this final ceremony of the series they had various tricks played on them, there was a marked absence of aggression and no violence. This was the climax of the whole cycle of rituals and the point at which a man became fully adult and qualified to attend any ritual anywhere. The initiates were led to expect exactly the opposite of what they actually received. They had experienced increasingly dramatic, prolonged, and violent rituals during the rest of the cycle. At the end they found that the true nature of the *nggwalndu* was “good”—that violence, while necessary, was not an essential part of the ultimate nature of spiritual power.

The physical presence of women or their emanations was considered inimical to the performance of all *tambaran* ritual and to the cultivation of long yams; the reasons, however, were rather different in the two cases. In growing long yams, men were producing immense phallic symbols with which they identified very closely; to transfer their own virility successfully, it was believed, they had not only to preserve their own sexual power but also to scrupulously avoid any contact with aroused female sexuality. (An adulterous wife who served her husband food would ruin his yams.) In *tambaran* ritual, however, the men were in a “female” phase; they were imitating women’s reproductive role, constructing a womb, which contained their deepest secrets from which the initiates emerged streaked with the blood of rebirth. Until the initiates were reborn, the men observed a rigid taboo on sexual contact; in this case the rationale appears to have been that natural female sexuality would destroy the males’ cultural creation of female sexuality. As soon as the initiation display had been seen, the all-night dances started, and vigorous sexuality was very much in evidence. Abelam men were not taught to be frightened of women, nor did any of their cults induce initiates to treat women with contempt, as Tuzin (1980) has reported for *Ilahita*. It is true that mothers sometimes warned their sons that leaving their semen in strange women rendered them liable to a devastating form of sorcery, but men did not seem to take this danger very seriously, and it certainly had no effect on their actions. Further, although women were physically excluded from ritual, I was told by senior men everywhere in Abelam territory that women knew all about the rituals because at least the senior ones attended them in the form of invisible flying witches (*kutagwa*). It is perhaps worth pointing out that to achieve their object, the male sex taboos required that women observe an equally stringent sex taboo for the same period, and it appears that they did.⁵⁵

If we compare these aspects of Abelam ritual and art with Tuzin’s admirably detailed reports from *Ilahita*, several points of interest emerge: the Abelam *nggwalndu* never required any killing within the village and was in the end revealed not to be essentially violent; the *Ilahita nggwal* does require intravillage killing and in the end is associated with death not just by physical violence but by sorcery as well. Abelam rituals imitated female reproduction and excluded women but did not even play at setting up womanless societies or encourage a low valuation of women; *Ilahita* rituals centrally promote sexual antagonism and do not appear to be based on the imitation of female reproduction, even though their overt forms and displays are very similar to those of the Abelam. In short, if for a moment we take *Ilahita* ritual as an imitation of Abelam, it has all the external form and little of the inner substance; the real core of Abelam ritual “meanings” has not been transferred but has been replaced by a new core

that is an extrapolation from the apparent implications of the overt actions shared by both Abelam and Ilahita rituals.

I have argued that the Abelam symbolic system was peculiarly satisfying both in terms of social function and in the identification it provided for individual men, and it is at this level, I suggest, that we should look for the reason for Abelam success: their moral ascendancy over their neighbors and their superior morale. The symbolic system is efficient in directing aggressiveness outside the group and controlling aggression both between the sexes and between the component groups of the villages. My analysis and knowledge unfortunately apply only to the men; from what little I know of women's rituals, which really are effectively secret, they are certainly concerned with the management of sexuality and reproduction and are in that respect successful, since women show a great deal of confidence in the management of their sexual lives and no particular fear or hatred of men.

Abelam culture is in my view highly creative and innovative in both art and ritual; yet at a more abstract level, there are forms that Abelam share with other Ndu-family groups, notably the Iatmul and Sawos, which suggests that they brought into their present territory the basic orientation and beliefs about the fundamental nature of humanity that enabled them to respond more efficiently and with greater expressive vigor to the opportunities they found as they moved north. In this case, at least, precisely the members of the society that invests the most time, energy, and resources in ritual and art who are the most effective in materialist terms (the same might be said of the Iatmul), and it is in that society that we must look for the explanation. The conclusion that not all cultures are equally effective seems inescapable. We can add perhaps that if ritual and its expressive aspects can be regarded in some essential sense as an indigenous analytical process that combines perceived truths about the actual environment with fundamental beliefs about humanity, then it is understandable that the development of expressive systems that strike deep into the individual as well as serving the needs of society effectively embeds the individual in the culture, and if the symbolic systems remain both responsive to the changing situation and coherent to those who employ them, the culture will be more powerful than cultures that fail in this respect. In short, using the power of culture can produce a culture of power.

CHAPTER 11

Draft Introduction to Sepik Culture History, the Proceedings from the second Wenner-Gren conference on Sepik Culture History 1986, Mijas, Spain⁵⁶

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This book is based on a conference held in Mijas, Spain, under the auspices of the Wenner-Gren Foundation in February 1986. One of the main aims of the conference, and of this book, was to investigate the interactions between various orders of social and cultural phenomena in fact often separated in anthropology. Although acknowledgment of their interdependence are always made, such gestures tend to be confined to the first and last page of published works rather than worked out in the central analytical and descriptive sections. The two main phenomena we sought to inter-relate were ritual and its associated expressive activities, especially what can be loosely called art on the one side, and the exploitation of the human and physical environment and its resulting political and economic systems on the other. To some extent these themes came out of a previous symposium on the Sepik held in Basel in 1984. This was an excellent and extremely large affair undoubtedly successful in its aims, but its very size and complexity, while conferring many benefits, to a large extent prevented the detailed consideration of the importance of the Sepik and the problems of interpretation that it presents to anthropological theory. It was this question that the later, much smaller conference in Spain sought to consider in detail.

Why the Sepik?

This is the obvious question and was indeed asked by some of the participants so it must be squarely faced. Since I was eventually the sole organizer of the conference, it must fall to me to describe what, I at least thought, were the major reasons for suggesting the conference to the Wenner-Gren Foundation. The most fundamental problem presented by the Lower and Middle Sepik is that the cultures of this area appear as a set of variations without a theme or at any rate without a theme that will submit to convincing description in the term of current anthropological analysis. The conference and this book are concerned with the characterization of this theme.

The earliest visitors to the area commented on both the quantity and quality of the art they saw while travelling up the Sepik. In itself, however, the existence of large ceremonial houses with much carving and monumental sculpture, numbers of masks, huge and spectacular ceremonies and elaborate paraphernalia was not unusual at that time. These features were general in New Guinea lowland and coastal cultures and were not as such surprising, although there did seem to be more of everything in the Sepik. In one sense then the Sepik stands for all the lowland cultures, in that vast amounts of productive labour in time and resources were devoted to the elaboration and physical expression of "X". How we should characterize "X" was part of the function of the conference and I do not wish to prejudge the argument at this stage by using such words as "values", "world view", "conceptual scheme", "basic structures", "mystification of systems of exploitation" and so on: any of these phrases carry with them a theoretical load that must distract from the presentation of the facts of how these societies conducted themselves, and what use, in a simple-minded functionalist sense, they made of the vast number of objects and the extensive rituals that they produced and evidently valued.

The Sepik and Ramu basins have long been known for the widespread trading systems within the river system and along the coast. Crossing boundaries of culture and language many products now seem to be almost perfectly distributed within their areas; for instance, Aibom fireplaces, sago storage jars and frying pans as well as Kwoiwut bowls are found throughout the middle Sepik. Both trade and war seem to have ensured effective transfer over considerable distances of at least objects, ritual complexes and art, if not necessarily of persons. The main lines of intensive trade contact were along the coast and the river, these two meeting in the Murik Lakes area, and along the southern foothills of the Torricelli and Prince Alexander mountains. These mainly east/west routes were intersected by many north/south routes across the ecological zones running over the mountains from the coast to the river and in the south running up from the southern tributaries to the highlands. Stone axe heads and pearl shell valuables seem mainly to have entered the Sepik basin by these routes (Swadling [1986, unpublished]). Despite often ferocious warfare the area had very effective communication of material and non-material items; if, however, one tries to list similarities the list looks rather peculiar. For instance, although there are local styles of art there is undoubtedly an overall Sepik style that encompasses the area under consideration. It is instantly recognizable, although if one has to define it in words one comes up with statements like "a tendency for long noses". Similarly, there is a clear relationship between the forms of ceremonial houses, which also has analogies outside the district and indeed the island (Hauser-Schaublin [1986, unpublished]). Related to that are triangular paintings, but as Mead (1938) pointed out these do not have to be part of a house but assume a life of their own. In the field of social structures too there are tendencies that seem independent of linguistic or other boundaries, marked distinctions between elder and younger siblings of the same sex, the great elaboration of descent group symbolic property especially, for instance, in names of "totems", ancestors and objects, the importance of exchange both affinal/matrilateral and competitive, between individuals and between groups of every size. But the question of

to what extent we are justified in regarding the Middle and Lower Sepik as a region in which the comparisons illuminate the individual cultures is what this book addresses.

The historical circumstances of colonial penetration and the nature of the environment, except for the coast, considered uniformly unpleasant, even dangerous by Europeans, also contributed to the special reasons for the Sepik remaining the last whole area in New Guinea suitable for a study such as this. Long known as the “Cinderella” District under Australian rule it had no resources suitable for exploitation except labour. Although the Germans sent out many expeditions and patrols only the Lower River and the coast were under administration at the time of the Australian take-over in 1914. The river area up to Ambunti was brought under effective control by the early thirties, but the high population areas of the foothills were only included in the controlled area in the late thirties. The whole area actually under Australian administration was abandoned to the Japanese early in 1942; during this evacuation there were a number of extraordinary incidents involving some killing of Europeans mainly by Native Police and in some areas a resumption of inter-village fighting.

The very substantial Japanese forces in the interior, originally intended for the invasion of Australia, were later cut off from all supplies by the occupation of the coast by the allies. They were still in the process of being cleared up by Australian forces coming up from the river when the war ended. This involved a lot of hard fought local encounters with starving Japanese who suffered very high casualties and considerable losses among the villagers of the foothills whose hilltop sites were chosen by the Japanese as defensive positions. The war therefore produced a great deal of destruction of settlements and resources on the coast and the river, where a massacre of Timbunke villagers was a particularly grisly episode. In the foothills area, particularly in the Maprik and Yangoru sub-districts where the high population densities of Arapesh, Abalam and Boiken had led to many troops being billeted, a great deal of fighting for food took place between local populations and Japanese soldiers.⁵⁷ Effective control by the post-war government of the inland areas previously administered does not seem to have been resumed until 1948, although there was extensive recruiting for labour to rebuild the coastal plantations and industry. During this period too, inter-village fighting re-started in some parts and many cargo-cults seem to have been tried throughout the Sepik. Considerable chaos and a very marked shortage of both domestic and feral pigs, which persisted much longer than the comparatively easy reconstruction of the gardens, seem to be the chief memories of this period. By 1950 the missions were back, with the Catholics, previously the only mission in the area, being challenged by a variety of fundamentalist Protestant missions and later by the Seventh Day Adventists. During the fifties the administration cautiously started to extend the area under its control, nevertheless many areas in the middle Sepik area were only “brought under control” in the later 1960s (*e.g.* the Bahinemo of the Hunstein Mountains).

Under these circumstances the Sepik basin compared to other lowland and even highland regions had on the whole rather late contact with Europeans, whose headlong flight before the Japanese did little for their prestige. Nor when it did return was the administration presence very obvious compared to that of the missions and recruiters. To take the Maprik sub-district as an example, this area of the highest population density which previously had less contact than the coast or the river below Ambunti, but

much more than the Upper River or foothills populations areas to the west, had in 1958 an enumerated population of over 80,000. At that time there were three government stations: Maprik and Yangoru, which each had one white kiap; the third Dreikikir was run by a sergeant of the Native Police. In addition, there was an agricultural station at Bainyik with two white officers: in contrast there were over thirty missionaries counting families of a variety of denominations and numerous recruiters and traders.

Although circumstances varied in other sub-districts some with longer pre-war contact, others with none, there was little, except on the coast, in the length or quality of contact with Europeans to make the inhabitants feel that their own cultures were inherently inferior to anything offered by the newcomers. The experiences of the war included not only destruction but a very wide expansion of their experience of both types of humanity and of systems of organization; there were Indian prisoners of war who escaped the Japanese, and whose idea of a day's work amazed the Japanese with its intensity and duration, and those who were recruited for work on the coast saw black soldiers in the American forces; but it was the forms of authority to which they were subjected that had the most profound effect. Their experience of the Japanese and of the Australian Army, regarded as an inherently different sort of white from the administration officers and missionaries, gave the Sepiks the view that contacts between them and outsiders did not have to be one form, dictated by one side only. This very brief historical sketch may give some idea why many of the population preserved much of the pre-contact ritual culture and were everywhere able to revive it when they so desired. The failure of virtually every attempt to introduce "development" in the area helps also to explain why indigenous rituals were believed to be not only more suitable than those introduced but also more efficacious. The Sepik is therefore arguably the most coherent area of the lowlands in the whole island where the old patterns of interaction and the production of ritual and its accessories remained, if not intact until the 1960s, at least of considerable importance to the lives of its inhabitants who had retained everywhere an excellent knowledge of ritual and the details of its performance.

The area chosen for study consists of the Lower and Middle Sepik, north to the crests of the coastal ranges and south to the mountain wall of the Highlands. Much of the west Sepik (Sundaun) province is excluded and the whole of the Upper Sepik including of course all the mountain Ok groups. The whole coastal area, very largely effected by prolonged contact, and very little studied recently is unfortunately also excluded, but the people of the Murik Lakes and the off-shore island of Manam both being very differently part of the Lower Sepik culture area are included.

Another feature that is fairly constant throughout the area considered by the conference is the very substantial revival of cultural activity particularly ritual in the past decade or two. Where it had been abandoned, initiatory activities have been widely resumed and the adaptation of traditional rituals to new forms of celebration as well as old seem common. This is the more remarkable as the activities of a broad spectrum of missions had concentrated their disapproval on precisely those activities, ritual and art that have in many areas survived so well.

It seems likely that the very factors that made the Sepik unattractive to European colonization and development remain effective and the inhabitants still feel that there is little for them in the modernization of the current post-colonial era. At the same time the development of the trade in art objects in the mid-sixties gave them a very different view of white attitudes to their art than the one previously purveyed by the missions. In fact, the Roman Catholic mission in the early sixties became the biggest dealer in Sepik art both old and new. This re-evaluation of their art by Europeans, and later the independent government, has certainly increased the local feelings of the worth of their own cultures both as systems of life and in terms of direct financial return.

The Sepik is thus the last great area diverse within but presenting coherence in trade and communications to preserve many of the characteristics of the originally reported New Guinea lowland cultures especially in art and ritual, in which even in the early days of exploration it was notably prolific. It has also been the scene of much recent anthropological research, as well as important research in the thirties by Bateson, Mead and Fortune; earlier it was the scene of several large German expeditions whose most lasting importance, apart from collections in Museums, is the work of Thurnwald and Behrmann. Happily, in the eighties members of some of the cultures are themselves undertaking research with due pride in their past and present.

Ecology

The area under consideration falls into two very markedly contrasted ecological zones. First, the river or water system, consisting of the main Sepik River with its major southern tributaries, the Keram, the Yuat and the Karawari, the latter with its own system of tributaries. This whole area is notably flat and the canoe makes transport easy, the rivers are surrounded by ox-bow lakes, lagoons and swamps, which provide the major part of the subsistence, sago from wild palms and fish, both produced to an overwhelming extent by the labour of women. If it were not for the planting of coconuts, and other useful or decorative plants in the villages and the keeping of a few pigs, some of these groups would technically qualify as hunters and gatherers. The second zone is the hill system to the north of the river on the southern fall of the Torricelli and Prince Alexander mountains, here root crop cultivation in swiddens dominates subsistence production, although bananas and the exploitation of planted sago are of considerable importance and pig raising and hunting form the principal source of animal protein. In the hill systems, men take a substantial share of the labour of food production. The two zones are separated by a width of grass plains with almost sterile soil through which run a few small and non-navigable rivers. The valleys of these rivers provide support for some scattered villages, but this intermediate area is overall of very low population density. The same is true of the small populations on the hills bordering the higher reaches of the southern tributaries, in the Hunstein Mountains and in the foothills of the highlands mountain wall. The scattered populations of these areas of high rainfall and indifferent soil never developed techniques of intensive cultivation or of major exchange and although they had extensive art and ritual they differ in almost all other respects from the populations of the hill systems to the north of the Sepik.

Although it would seem that the contrast between the water and hill systems could hardly be more complete, there are similarities. Both are highly seasonal, the water system being dominated by the annual flooding of the Sepik River, while the hill system has a seasonality of the crops, most marked where yams are important, but also apparent with taro cultivation, which some hill cultures treat as a seasonal crop. These cultivation systems produce a time of greater dependence on sago while the main gardens are maturing. Both zones therefore share a seasonality with clearly marked periods for major ritual, in the dry season for the river cultures and after the major harvest and displays and exchanges of garden produce in the hills. These seasons may not correspond, even within the hill zone. Nevertheless, the whole area has a clear year with demarcated periods of comparative plenty when time and resources are available for ritual, which recur on a regular and more or less annual basis. The importance accorded to rituals, particularly those associated with male initiation, and the social forms that both underpin the performance of ritual and are expressed and modified as the ritual cycle proceeds, are again very similar in the two zones.

History

The linguistic picture for this area of the Sepik still has many unknowns but certain features seem clear. In the water zone the Middle Sepik is occupied by speakers of the very closely related Iatmul and Sawos languages of the ndu family, while around them to the south and east are the totally unrelated languages of the Lower Sepik family. To the north it would seem likely that there were two waves of expansion of ndu speakers from the river in the first of which older occupants of the foothills were pushed back or absorbed first by the Boiken to the east and the Kwanga to the west. Subsequently the group now known as the Abelam, more closely related to Iatmul/Sawos linguistically, came between the Kwanga and the Boiken. The Abelam were still in the process of occupying Arapesh and Kwanga land during this century. I must make it clear that one is talking of movement of languages and cultures not necessarily of immense numbers of people. Obviously we have no way of knowing how many of today's Boiken or Abelam speakers come from ancestors that spoke Arapesh or other pre-existing foothill languages. However, the languages and the developing systems of environmental exploitation and culture must have been carried by humans whose language and way of life, as they developed, eventually eclipsed that of those they found there. The evidence published for blood group distributions appears to suggest that there is considerable uniformity throughout the area and no movement of genetically coherent populations can be supported on that evidence.

Iatmul and Sawos traditions agree that they had their origins somewhere in the region now occupied by the Sawos and, if for the moment we assume that this part of the region was the place from which speakers of the ndu language group dispersed, a coherent but not necessarily correct picture emerges. From the Sawos area which we can assume stretched further to the west than its present limit and ran just inland from the north bank of the Sepik, the Kwanga moved north and to the west into parts of the Wosera and areas further west which they now occupy at very low density. The Manambu must also have moved west but they stayed in the river zone. Whoever was in the hills beyond Ambunti, now occupied by the Kwoma would also have received

some of the considerable ndu influence they now display. To the east the Boiken moved north across the plains probably in small numbers since if the plains were always sterile grass lands as now appears likely (Allen [1986, unpublished]) the inhabitable routes across them in this area are not large.⁵⁸ At some later period the second phase of dispersion began with the Iatmul moving down to occupy the actual river banks, pushing back lower Sepik speaking groups to the south, a process still continuing in the routing of Chambri in this century, and the attempt to establish a Iatmul village on the Karawari. As they went the trade in fish for sago with the Sawos they left behind developed (Gewertz [1986, unpublished]). At much the same time from the area of the western Sawos groups moved north along the course of the Sepik and associated rivers, gradually occupying the Wosera and the present northern and eastern Abelam areas in the foothills of the mountains. These areas were certainly taken from other groups who were absorbed or driven back, in the case of the Arapesh right over the mountains and down to the sea. Mead reports that in the thirties the “coastal Arapesh” were still unhappy about living on the coast whose resources they made very little effort to exploit. It is quite possible that the Abelam eruption also caused the Boiken to move further to the east and down to the coast, but they seem to have been better accustomed to coastal life than the Arapesh, and may therefore be presumed to have arrived at the coast earlier.

Whatever happened it is clear that the Abelam were the most recent invaders of the foothills area and that the Arapesh were the likely previous occupants of most of the land the Abelam now possess. They are the northern neighbours of the Abelam from the north-western end of the Wosera,⁵⁹ to the most easterly Abelam villages on the border with the Boiken. All along this frontier there are stories of Arapesh land being taken over, mostly but not only in the North Wosera; for instance, Kaberry (1941) records that Kalabu had dispossessed a small Arapesh settlement in this century. The group called by Mead (1938) “Mountain Arapesh” are not linguistically different from her “Plains Arapesh” and were living in an extremely hostile environment in which very small groups led a precarious existence, unlikely to have been freely chosen. Indeed, their settlement proved only temporary; since the war, they have abandoned the mountains and moved to the coast, protected by the government maintained peace.

The current numbers of population and hence the density of population have undoubtedly risen very substantially since the war. In particular, the introduction of malaria control in the late fifties and other later health measures have had an enormous effect. Yet, while the current absolute densities provide little information about the pre-contact situation, it seems reasonable to assume that comparative densities should be a more or less reliable guide. On this assumption the highest densities would therefore have been in the North Wosera, the area from which, if the hypothetical history above is correct, the last wav of ndu speakers would have spread into the foothill zone. The next highest density areas are those of the northern and eastern Abelam and their immediate neighbours to the north and on the short western and eastern frontiers in the fertile foothill area. This is again consistent with the comparatively recent occupation of these areas by the Abelam. To the south of all foothill groups, except in the Wosera, population density falls way very markedly as the hills flatten and the less productive plains are reached. To the west beyond the

Ilahita Arapesh and their immediate neighbours, population density is low with a large number of small linguistic groups fairly evenly spread over the desirable foothills but with a decreasing importance of yams and less suitable climate for their cultivation (Allen [1986, unpublished]) and a very much increased importance of bananas, sago and hunting. Nevertheless, it appears that yams were cultivated and their production ritualized throughout this area.

It is very difficult to calculate reliable population densities in a riverine environment (Roscoe [1986, unpublished]); should one use length of river bank, area of lagoon, area of dry land or overall area? But the large Iatmul villages all on the main river are close together, suggesting a high population density, certainly when compared to groups to their west and south and even in comparison with the Lower Sepik river groups to their east. The Sawos too, although they live on dry land, present problems in estimating density but their villages are also large and in a comparatively restricted area and it is again reasonable to talk of high density compared to other groups in similar environments.

From this speculative consideration an overall picture emerges of population in the area under study of high densities centred in ndu speaking groups and their immediate neighbours. The obvious exceptions are the Kwanga and some Boiken. It would be more strictly accurate to speak of high density in the Iatmul/Sawos/Abelam central area (ignoring the grass plains) and dropping away everywhere as distance from this core increases. This is of course a very rough and ready picture and there are many problems, but it is consistent with the outline history of at least two waves of ndu radiating from the general Sawos area. In terms of the linguistic picture it fits with the crescent of Lower Sepik languages running from west to east, south of the Iatmul and right out to the river mouth at the Murik Lakes; and with a northern crescent of mainly Arapesh speakers round the Abelam penetration, which actually splits Arapesh territory into two and divides the southern Arapesh dialects from Mountain Arapesh.

A crucial question is of course what sort of timescale could be involved in these events. Foley suggests a period of 2,500 years for the dispersal of the Lower Sepik group and 1,500 years for the Ndu, the latter figure would be for the original (first wave) movements, the second wave would have been considerably later. There are of course other factors to consider that cannot be so easily turned into numbers of years however approximate. One is the absolute size of the populations. If we assume that the Abelam were in the order of 20,000-25,000 at the time of contact⁶⁰ it is impossible to imagine such a number sweeping up from the river at all let alone in a short time. This substantial population must have grown very largely in the foothill zone itself and, developed there the productive technology to support their high density and absolute numbers. This argument applies whether the current population are all descended from a small number of "invaders" or has grown by absorbing other pre-resident populations; the most likely is some blend of these sources of growth. The fact that at the time of contact most of the Abelam were in a holoendemic malarial area with a very high infant mortality must also be taken into account. Although it is highly likely that this holoendemic state must itself have been a product of high population density it does not inevitably imply that the high density was recent. Since it impossible to know what proportion of the present Abelam came from immigrant ndu speakers and what

from transformed occupants of the land, it does not seem that any formula of “natural” population growth can be of value.

Another major factor to consider is the productive system itself, although most of the food sources in the Sepik are similar to or the same as those found throughout the lowlands, part of the Abelam ability to live at high density in the North Wosera is dependent on the existence of a water-tolerant variety of *Dioscorea esculenta* known throughout Abelam as Asagwa-ka, this variety can survive and flourish on the very fertile river flats that are typical of the Wosera. Almost certainly the corridor through which the Abelam and possibly others before them moved up from the river. No other variety of yam from any species has been reported from New Guinea or elsewhere in the world that can survive flooding, we must therefore presume that Asagwa-ka is an Abelam development since a similar variety is not reported from Abelam neighbours. Other Abelam in the north and east have Asagwa-ka among their repertoire of ka varieties, but do not exploit its tolerance of water nor use it for so large a proportion of their food as do the Wosera (Lea 1966). Unfortunately we have no idea how long such changes in the genetic character of yams takes nor how long humans take to develop and spread the technology to exploit what was presumably a chance discovery.

In the north and east Abelam, men grow long yams under highly ritualized conditions, although the actual tubers make very little contribution to the food supply. The highly developed technology of growing long yams and the very vigorous and competitive exchanges which follow their harvesting has clearly produced the intensive and very productive technology of yam cultivation for food which again sustains high Abelam densities in this area. In contrast to the case of Asagwa-ka, the varieties of *Dialata* that produce these long yams are not unknown elsewhere. In the Trobriands for instance, long yams of this species are famous. Yet the northern and eastern Abelam produce longer yams than any of their neighbours, possibly equalled in some immediately adjacent villages, on land that those neighbours previously occupied, it seems clear that here again is at least an Abelam improved technology. It surely must be that some hundreds of years are necessary for these horticultural technologies to develop and spread. Further the Abelam must already have been within the “yam zone” and in the case of the *Dialata* varieties, which are very definitely not water tolerant, on ground of a suitable slope for the process to start, while any figure is a guess, the time for such complex interactions between human culture and natural species must be a factor in any cultural history of the region. I am not aware of any other hard data that can shed any light on the problem of time depth.⁶¹ Although there has obviously been some selective breeding of replanted sago all along the foothills, even less is known about this most important palm than is known about yams.

There is one final but very important point to make about crops in this section. The Wosera river flats with their high water table and periodical flooding are undoubtedly very suitable for intensive taro production and there are a wide range of taro varieties known and planted throughout the area, the fact that it was a unique yam variety of a single species that was developed to be the major crop plant in this environment must therefore be attributed to cultural choice rather than to purely ecological considerations.⁶²

Art and Ritual

In the 1950s and 1960s a visitor to the Sepik would have been justified in regarding the distribution of art production and the performance of ritual as very markedly uneven, mainly concentrated in the ndu core of Iatmul/Sawos/Abelam. This was however an effect of specific developments and not a direct reflection of the pre-contact situation when ritual involving much art was to be found all over the area. Even in the sixties, when previously uncontacted small groups living at very low population density such as the Bahinemo were visited for the first time, very large quantities of carvings kept in ceremonial houses were reported. The historical record, scrappy though it is, makes it incontestable that all the cultures in the area under consideration had large quantities of what we call art, the more permanent and transportable examples now mainly residing in museums and private collections throughout the world. All also staged rituals in which art was used and displayed, and these rituals were major in terms of the employments of a large proportion of the resources available to the particular group. The question that arises from the observations of our sixties visitor is not therefore why some cultures have quantities of art while others apparently do not, but why some cultures have retained art production and ritual performance to a greater extent than others. The obvious naïve answer is that the ritual, and the art that it needs and produces, performs a vital function in the maintenance of the sort of society that these people wished to preserve. Other societies had a different view of their present and future for which the maintenance of ritual and initiation was no longer essential. While this answer is adequate in some cases and partially so in others, it cannot immediately explain the quite widely reported revival of rituals, particularly of initiation, that took place in the Sepik in the 1970s around the time of independence. There were other factors important in preservation or abandonment, for instance the visibility of rituals and their paraphernalia. Among the Gnau and other groups in the Lumi area, ceremonial houses, while extensively decorated with carvings and paintings on the inside when ritual was performed, were not strikingly visible from the outside being undecorated and only slightly larger than the normal house. In this area there seems to have been no decline in healing rites, some of which involved the construction and use of masks and figures, essentially ephemeral by the nature of their construction.

The dangers of importing our own preconceptions of art into the non-western world is another factor in such comparative estimations. This is nowhere better illustrated than by the Waina-Sowande, although they are outside our area they are exceptionally well documented, and exemplify the point to perfection. Their Ida ritual – undeniably beautiful, spectacular and certainly “art”, in the sense of being a system of visual communication based on aesthetic considerations – has nothing that can be preserved and put in a museum or sold to a visitor. Within a week or so this magnificent ceremony has left no trace but some rotting vegetable matter and no doubt some ochre traces in the local streams. To a varying degree all Sepik cultures used “non-collectable art”; what reaches the word collections is overwhelmingly “sculpture”, a major category in our own concept of what is art. Collections therefore should not be used in comparative evaluations of the importance of art production in any particular society.

The presence of very large and obvious ceremonial houses, clearly distinguished by their form and ornamentation from living houses, provided a clear target for mission hostility in the immediate post-war decades. Groups for which such houses were essential for the performance of ritual had to use, and therefore preserve, the traditional social structure that mobilized the labour to make their construction possible. They also clearly had to decide to defy the very forcefully expressed and frequently reiterated opposition of the local mission. In some cases, they in effect reconverted through initiation their young, who had been to the mission school, and braved sanctions which were not merely verbal but included such things as the denial of all medical aid. This forced and absolutely conscious decision amounted to a rejection of the whole of the new life offered by the white intrusion. Missions, traders and governments were very poorly distinguished in the immediate post-war period and all were perceived as opposed to the performance of ritual. Building a house or holding a successful ritual also meant the rejection of the many varieties of millennial movement that were tried and quickly abandoned by various groups in the Sepik at this time. This decision making was of course a dynamic process, with many changes of view, much debate and factional struggle within villages. It also always involved politics between villages; nevertheless, the high density of new houses and the frequency of the performance of ritual in some areas can leave no doubt as to the overall outcome. From the late sixties various government agencies, whose personnel became much more plentiful, made clear their tolerance and even enthusiasm for ritual and art production, an attitude which spread as independence drew closer. Slightly earlier the Catholic mission, but not the fundamentalist Protestant missions, encouraged the decoration of churches with traditional art, often labelled with the names of saints. The Catholics also moderated their view of local rituals sometimes seeking syncretic developments with the addition of Christian elements. At this time the development of the art trade, fostered by the new local councils and the government, as well as by the Catholic mission and private traders, became the main source of cash earnings for many of the villages of cultures that produced "collectable art". By the sixties a clear separation had been recognized between government agencies, traders now including many art buyers and the missions. Within the missions the difference between the newly art and ritual tolerating Catholics and the rest was unmistakable.

The question of why some cultures clung so defiantly to their rituals in face of all the forces that might have been expected to cause them to be abandoned, is of course related to one of the central questions of this book – what are the cultural, social, economic and psychological correlates of the intensity of ritual and art production widely found in the pre-contact Sepik? Why they were retained in some cultures and not so obviously in others must be a factor of relevance to the explanation of their original function. These questions are considered again below.

Diffusion

Before considering the actual situation in the various cultures under discussion there is one further point about the proposed history of the area to be made. If we look at the Hill zone and the recent intrusion of the Abelam, then a classical diffusionist view would suggest that the Abelam culture influenced that of its neighbours and that the effects of

this influence would die down as the distance from its source increases. Indeed, the facts in so far as we know them would seem to support this idea and it is certainly true that the fringe of villages immediately adjacent to the Abelam show very clear Abelam influence in their art and ritual. Mead's writings (1938) on the "Mountain Arapesh", which she characterizes as an "importing culture", first presented the Abelam as the major source of ritual and art in the area. There is nothing wrong with this view as an account of the recent past and the material on post-contact change is also consonant with it. However, such a view of the more distant past requires a fully formed Abelam culture from which diffusion can take place. I want therefore to present a version of how Abelam culture may have become what it is, out of what mix it was generated.

If the account of the spread of ndu speakers given above is accepted the migrants who has a major influence on the genesis of contemporary Abelam culture has a way of life similar to that of the Sawos/Iatmul, that is they were fish and sago based with some minor cultivation of unimpressive yams. I have argued before that the Abelam must have learnt most of their basic yam technology from the people they displaced. What were these populations like? Tuzin (1976) argues that the Ilahita Arapesh before the Abelam arrival were living in a sort of garden of Eden wandering peacefully about hunting and acquiring food without too much stress or effort. I find this picture unconvincing⁶³ – there is, for instance, evidence that there was at least some ritualized yam cultivation in the area before the Abelam arrived.

Dr Gilbert Lewis [(1986, unpublished)] presents the Gnau as a comparatively stable and little changing society; they have no history of major movement or fights over land, they have unusually long genealogies and one or two other features that suggest they may have been for some time in comparatively undisturbed occupation of their area and had at least no obvious need for major change in their culture and social structure. Lewis has noted:

I shall begin with a mixed list of things the Gnau lack that certain other Sepik societies conspicuously have or had: the Gnau lack dual organization, initiation moieties, totems, a Crow-Omaha system of terminology, competitive exchanges, trade-partnerships, a Tambaran cult, sacred flutes, head-hunting. I have not listed a few other items (e.g. the elaboration of naming and secret names leadership by big-men, a yam cult,) that I hesitated about when I found it hard to decide how much must be lacking to call them absent.

This list is extremely interesting because it represents, with the exception of the yam cult about which more below, what is typical of the Sawos/Iatmul and what one might reasonably have expected the proto-Abelam to have brought as cultural baggage up from the river into the hill zone. Apart from head-hunting, a practice the Abelam seem to have abandoned fairly recently, this list added to the features of the Gnau culture discussed by Lewis would produce a reasonable profile of Abelam culture and society.⁶⁴ A possible formula to consider is therefore:

Gnau + (Sawos/Iatmul) = Abelam

But what of the yam cult? From later parts of the paper it becomes clear that Lewis is too modest on behalf of the Gnau. Before contact, only the men planted yams, they used spells and invoked their ancestors, they secretly bled themselves from their penes as part of the preparations for yam cultivation and “they sprinkled or painted on the yams” fluid from “a special bamboo filled with prepared scented water”, which apparently contained some of their blood. They could not consume yams they had so anointed, no new season yams or taro could be eaten till the first wadagep (a yam variety) had been harvested, and there were “exchange gifts in connection with the yam harvest”, certainly of meat but also of yams. Further wadagep are “important exchange items”, yams are given to matrilineal and affinal kin who return meat. The Gnau are not in the yam zone and their yam production is apparently not impressive, yet they have all the features of the Abelam long yam cult albeit in a very undeveloped and non-elaborated form. Gnau practice also includes elements that are present among the Abelam but not particularly elaborated, such as playing cat’s cradle and staging competitive games between top throwing teams at certain times in the yam growing cycle.⁶⁵ Lewis inclines to a diffusionist view, “Are these faint echoes of the yam cults found to the east among the Ndu speakers?” Possibly, but the attitude of the Gnau towards yams plus a more favourable yam growing environment, providing fertile soil for Ndu capacity to elaborate, systematize and integrate into systems of meaning could easily produce the modern Abelam yam cult.

There is a further feature of the Gnau that is relevant to the relation between river cultures and hill cultures. It is generally agreed that Abelam women produced the most complex and elaborately decorated bilums of traditional Papua New Guinea. This is an all-female technology that involves up to sixty-four floating threads at any one time handled without the help of any frame or loom; the patterns produced have always been much admired, particularly that called jikne, and are now well known and copied outside the Abelam area. Although the Iatmul apparently did not make any kind of string bag, they were considerable importers of Abelam bilums. The immediate neighbours of the Abelam in the hill zone also made string bags, but did not claim to make such fine or effectively patterned ones. Gnau women, however, used to make, with the same basic single element looping technique, an “arrow shield” for their husbands which consisted of a long and comparatively narrow piece of single looped material with a small band at the top to go over the shoulder. These capes protected the left side of the body as a man fired arrows. The material is extremely finely looped, and many examples are decorated with very complex patterns of great beauty. The techniques are no longer used and rather strangely never seem to have been used in their most refined and beautiful form by the Gnau for string bags, which are notably coarser in both construction and patterning. The use of the bow and arrow in war stops well short of the limits of Abelam penetration and there is no evidence that they have ever been in direct contact with the Gnau, yet the existence of a female art of high technical development in the hill zone, probably before the Abelam arrival that could have been adopted and developed by Abelam women may also be evidence against the classical diffusionist hypothesis.⁶⁶

I have concentrated on the Gnau mainly because they are well reported, but I take them to stand for the many small linguistic groups in the Lumi sub-province. This area of moderate population density has apparently been free of major incursions of alien people at least in recent times. The various initiation and curing ceremonies found throughout the area are very similar and their distribution does not correspond to linguistic boundaries. Under such circumstances the propriety of equating cultures with linguistic groups is very dubious. Even though such comparisons are fraught with problems, it would seem that this area could present a good model of pre-Abelam foothills life.

It is obviously impossible to be certain what happened and I am only concerned to suggest that the known facts are capable of more than one interpretation. That the Abelam and other Ndu groups became exporters of culture, art and ritual is certain, that their cultural systems had a tendency to elaboration and intensification of all means of production and communication seems undeniable, but it also seems likely, at least in the Abelam case, that what they were exporting in its elaborated form has as part of its raw material what the new purchasers had originally provided in an unelaborated form. A refined type of cultural imperialism comparable to the production of raw materials by third world countries, which they then buy back in manufactured form to the immense profit of the manufacturers. However, what the central core of Ndu groups were adding, to their own benefit, was not only technical expertise in our sense of more refined productive technologies but expertise in the technology of knowledge. Through ritual and its paraphernalia, they offered access to the means of controlling, by supernatural means, the prosperity of village, individual, animal and plant. What was added was immense elaboration, dazzling art, and complex ritual sequences that took a whole lifetime to complete, in short a cultural effervescence and efflorescence that accompanied the improved technology.

Population density and politics

The density of population varies widely within the area under consideration; by and large it is highest in the areas inhabited by groups who seem likely to have recently moved onto the land they now occupy. As Roscoe [(1986, unpublished)] demonstrates in his review of the Sepik data, the areas of high density are the western and central Iatmul, the northern Abelam and the north Wosera and the areas immediately surrounding them, Ilahita and certain Boiken groups. Roscoe co-relates high density with the relative power of big-men, also considering what he calls ecological factors. Following Carneiro, he suggested that high density and political complexity go with resource-rich areas. The argument on the whole is convincing, although it is not ecology as such that would seem to be the influential factor but the political and technological means available to exploit the resources. Thus on the higher reaches of the southern tributaries, the exploitation of the river resources by the small villages such as those of the Inyai-Ewa was rendered less effective by the need to live back from the river on defensible hilltops because of the threat of raiding by larger villages from down the rivers. Similarly, as has been argued above, it was their developed technology of yam cultivation that enabled the Abelam to live at high density not just the more suitable rainfall pattern or soil.

Nevertheless, Roscoe's overall point is valid, large settlements and high density demand more politics and hence "hierarchy", than small settlements and low density.⁶⁷ But before considering this point further there are also examples of hierarchy, without the quote marks, in the area to be considered. The example in this book is the island of Manam, but similar systems are found on other islands such as Wogeo. Here we are dealing with an institutionalized form of leadership with defined powers, both political and economic and a clear system of succession, in short with an office accepted by all, for which the word "chief" is clearly suitable. These systems are only found among Austronesian speaking groups, but where they are found they are apparently not influenced by settlement size or population density. This is a different form of hierarchy from any big-man system, being based on the concept that some people are born different in essence from others. On the mainland of the Sepik no such system survives intact even among those speaking Austronesian languages. In these cases, there can be little doubt that the systems of "true" hierarchy have been destroyed by the challenge to prestige inherent in the equality exchanges so typical of mainland New Guinea as a whole. Where, as in Manam, hierarchy survives, virtually all exchanges go through the tanepoa who by right of succession organize major ritual and perform a range of political functions. The difference is of course analytically an old one, that between ascription and achievement. In both types of society single individuals are present through whom go the majority of exchanges that are made on behalf of their group, who organize the major ritual and have a large part in decisions about war and other matters concerned with foreign policy. In one case, however, the individual is recruited by birth and in theory at least unchallengeable by any of his followers through the use of equality-seeking exchange. In the other case the individual has risen purely by success in precisely that sort of exchange and is under continual threat of being displaced by the same means. In ethnographic fact of course the contrast is not so clear.

In much of the lower and middle Sepik the position of the eldest son, in Murik the eldest child, is one of advantage. This is clearly institutionalized in such systems as the Banaro, but seems to be present almost everywhere. In Abelam as in some other languages the word used for big-man is the same as that for elder brother (nemandu literally "big man"), it is said that every sub-clan has its nemandu but this is a courtesy title. The actual big-men have a faction much larger than a subclan and may not even be the genealogically senior man in their own subclan. In the Murik case discussed by both Lipset and Lutkehaus [(1986, unpublished)] it seems that, although the elder sibling element is strongly emphasized, there is no element of ascription beyond the small descent group. Within the village suman gwan compete with each other for prestige for themselves and their groups, further they are replaced by internal challenge. In Manam there is a second level of hierarchy beyond the immediate group and senior tanepoa exist; all these Manam offices in theory pass only at death. As in all hierarchical societies there exist historical accounts, termed by Lutkehaus "subversive", that suggest that the present ranking of descent groups has not always been the same. These accounts are however not subversive of the system of ranked groups only of the current state of play.

To return to the theme of Roscoe's paper [(1986, unpublished)], in low density areas especially with dispersed settlement one might expect to find courtesy big-men, such as in Bun. In high density areas, one would find the real political animal; big-men whose competition for their own prestige plays an important role in organizing and mobilizing their local groups, thus enabling them to live at high density. The supporters of such a big-man do not necessarily come from a single clan or subclan but will be recruited on principles of which descent is only one. So that such cases differ from chiefs not only in the nature of the title of their office but in the undefined and open nature of their potential support group.⁶⁸ In the Sepik area then although there is no neat dichotomy of political systems, the two ends are both very fuzzy; one can still differentiate between those societies where there is ascription by birth but only within the sibling group and those that have beliefs that allow ascribed office to be effective more widely.

The importance of sibling ascription in Murik has no doubt been encouraged by hierarchical ideas among some of its trading partners, just as its vital position in the coastal and island trade served to drastically simplify its grammar (Foley [1986, unpublished]). This coastal and island trade brought into contact and interdependence Austronesians, both those who retained chieftainship such as Manam and Wogeo and those who lost it such as Suain and Ulau, and a variety of non-Austronesian speaking coastal and island groups including both the Arapesh and the Boiken (Tiesler 1969). Our knowledge of the whole north coast and the Schouten Islands remains very patchy, but it seems likely that Murik with its far-reaching trade was an important centre for the spread of cultural material all along the coast, which in many ways appears culturally comparatively homogeneous although linguistically and socially very diverse. As an example, the importance of pigs tusk ornaments as symbols of authority appears to be a common element throughout this area. Yet there are clearly a wide variety of political systems, produced one would think by the mingling of essentially hierarchical Austronesian settlers and equality-seeking exchange dominated local populations. As far as the groups with which I am primarily concerned, both the Arapesh and the Boiken who live on the beach appear to be assimilated into the coastal culture, although the latter at least retain an interest in yams to an extent not normal on the coast.

The fact that coastal Arapesh and Boiken take on coastal cultural coloration certainly different in many respects from their inland co-linguists, should warn us yet again of the dangers of taking linguistic boundaries as cultural boundaries. As in Lumi there are many small linguistic groups whose cultural repertoire varies village by village but each village seems to share much with their neighbours regardless of language boundaries; so in widespread but not high density groups such as the Arapesh and Boiken the culture seems immensely variable although the language remains mutually intelligible. Of course one can only be dealing with the more superficial and obvious manifestations of culture here, forms of houses, of masks, means of subsistence, style of carving, marriage systems, and so on; the underlying systems that give these outward forms meaning to those that live them may well be the same. To determine if this is so, however, one needs very detailed ethnography which is not available for a sufficient numbers of sub-groups in either of these two examples. As I have argued for the Abelam and Iatmul, certain cultural fundamentals may be same despite apparently totally different manifestations (Forge 1965). I have also argued more recently that closely

related outward manifestations may connote fundamentally different meanings in different cultures, in this example the Ilahita Arapesh and the Abelam. There can be no certainties in such matters without the most detailed ethnography but in comparative studies we must be aware of the range of possibilities. The relationships between language, culture, political system and so forth are complex and it is important to remember that the labels on the map are language names, the boundaries were drawn by linguists⁶⁹ – what else is bounded apart from humans speaking one language they can all understand remains to be determined.

Despite these essential cautions there are certainly differences in what might be called “cultural coherence” between some of the Sepik groups and we cannot ignore them. This again is very tricky ground and, as I am not aware of any published data on this topic, I shall have to argue from my own personal experience.

I have visited every Iatmul and most Sawos villages at one time or another, always accompanied by mature and intelligent Iatmul, often from Timbunke, with whom I discussed what we had seen and heard during the long hauls between villages. They were always struck by the differences within Iatmul culture that they found, but they were never disturbed by them, the variations seemed totally comprehensible, neither nonsensical nor dangerous. In the case of the Abelam I cannot claim to have visited every one of the 120 villages, I have, however, travelled the length and breadth of their territory and resided for at least weeks in all of the major sub-divisions that they recognize. On these visits I was often accompanied by Abelam sometimes from far away, and they and I continuously discussed the variation within the territory with senior men; it was indeed one of their favourite topics of conversation. Here again there is immense internal variability, and despite mockery of accent, turns of phrase and such things as styles of painting, everything was not only comprehensible but of immense interest. To mature and experienced Abelam, what other Abelam did always seemed to be just the realization of a potential from within their own repertoire of practice. A twenty-four ring bride-price instead of 6 sounds hard work but gets better affines. Giving netbags as part of the bride-price, of course we give netbags but not so many or so formally. Using upended painted pots as a tambaran looks good, frog’s spawn you call it, very good, of course we don’t have so many decorated pots as you but we could try it, where would it fit? Sister exchange, no we don’t want to do it, it might help with the affines, but what about the next generation when you can’t expect a woman back? and so on. In many cases, Abelam with me were visiting villages that would be classed as their enemies, so they were most concerned to preserve all their betel quids and cigarette butts and very wary of any proffered food.

Their attitudes to Arapesh, even to close Arapesh allies, was markedly different. Bugi don’t understand, they don’t know how to carve, their rituals are all wrong, Arapesh women are all pamuks, you can buy anyone you want from her husband, and so it continues. Of course much of this was cultural/linguistic snobbery, but these remarks were often about groups from which the Abelam concerned drew wives, attended each other’s rituals which in outward form were identical or very similar. “Mountain Arapesh” visitors (and I had excellent relationships with several senior men from Alitoa who visited me in my eastern Abelam village, and I later visited them down on the coast), although they spoke the same dialect as the “plains Arapesh”, regarded

them as almost as bad as the Abelam, all sorcerers, whose rituals were dangerous to even glimpse. They were not in the least curious about what was happening when they visited, merely frightened, and their attitude to the “plains Arapesh” villagers was the same – they were only safe with their trade partner.

I would claim that the Iatmul and the Abelam had cultural coherence, while the Arapesh and no doubt the Boiken had immense diversity that amounted to a lack of cultural communicability within the same linguistic area. Much the same seems to be true of the Kwanga who are widely dispersed and resemble Lumi, in that every village seems to have a different culture. It also seems to me that this cultural coherence is a feature of a “new” culture, one that is actively creating and systematizing itself. While the non-communication is what one might expect from a dispersed group that had not grown much in population and had a diversity of neighbours in the immediate vicinity of each component part. The “new” culture is a system of potentials that are being explored, all the potentials are available to everyone, the “old” cultures have long made their choices, their meaning systems are formed and to some extent closed. They react to external change and internal pressures but they do not seize them creatively.

Chambri, which had a precarious existence on the edge of the Iatmul world, seems both an “old” and “new” culture. Linked to its co-linguists on hilltops well back from the lake, it nevertheless seems in ritual and art to be a sort of rather frivolous Iatmul, doing all the things the Iatmul do but with a light touch and little suggestion of the heavy “world organizing” meanings that grind through Iatmul ritual. A sort of Offenbach “Orpheus in the Underworld” to the original tragic myth of the Iatmul. Neither Mead nor Gewertz [(1986, unpublished)] seem to have been able to find much of deep significance in Chambri art or ritual. In the present age they do very well as the production of light and beautiful carvings in a Iatmul style which they seem to enjoy. I would say they have adopted the forms of Iatmul ritual and art as performance without perhaps even concerning themselves with what it could all mean.

Gender relations

On Saturday afternoon in Mijas, the conference discussed gender relations. To an outside observer, it appeared to be a totally discursive discussion, not focused and with nothing very much emerging, yet it certainly achieved effortless unanimity. It was anecdotal in form and the anecdotes were all about sexual relations. Everyone present spoke and everyone agreed that in the society they had studied relations between the sexes were fairly relaxed, that women had almost total control over their own bodies and an immense say in marriage, that free pre- and post-marital sexual relations were common and that, whatever the official line, in fact such affairs were treated with great tolerance. This was something of a breakthrough since we now had a characteristic of the Sepik that cut across ecological zones and language boundaries, and further contrasted markedly with what is sometimes taken as typical for New Guinea, the sort of gender relations recently reported from the highlands. It was apparent that most of us had published little or in some cases none of our material on these matters and in fact any recent picture of New Guinea gender relations except from the highlands had gone by default. The exception is of course the “Isles of Paradise”, the Trobriands, but in that case there was a tendency to link women’s sexual freedom to matrilineality, not

found in the Sepik. It is like the Sunday newspapers, rape and murder are news, free love beneath the waving palms make the supplements, but more harmonious family life and complementarity do not get any press at all.

The nature of the evidence on the Sepik was of course largely impressionistic. It is less easy to count the incidence of non-violence than the incidence of violence, but there is one fairly objective measure of the degree of male/female co-operation in sexual matters. Scaglione's material [(1986, unpublished)] on the patterning of births among the Abelam suggests very clearly that Abelam women, agreed by all their ethnographers and by themselves to be far from averse to adultery, do in fact observe the same sex taboos as their husbands during the long yam growing season. Apart from this hard evidence, the assessments were subjective but in their totality convincing. Not that all was bliss, certainly not that men did not try to manipulate women into marriages to serve their own ends, but that most of what happened was with the full consent of the women concerned and often initiated by them. Several people reported that husband beatings were as frequent as wife beatings, but the level of inter-sexual violence was on the whole low compared to recent reports from the highlands.

There are two points to be made about this complementarity: first, that it is symbolically elaborated not just in different modes of behaviour and activity, but in the major rituals. Here it underlies and informs the fundamental symbolism but also tends to be acted out in performance, transvestitism and the presentation of bisexuality have a substantial role. The second is that this complementarity is not any simple expression of the mode of subsistence or the division of labour. It is just as apparent on the river where women produce virtually all the food by themselves, as it is in the hills where much more of the labour of food production is done by the men. Nor of course is it anything to do with matrilineality.

Relations between men through women are everywhere very important and form the basis of much of the exchange of produce, especially among low density groups where large scale competitive exchange is not developed. The same is of course true of the highlands but there in high density areas there is a tendency to convert matrilinear exchanges into large scale equality-seeking exchanges of an inherently competitive complexion. This conversion of inherently complementary non-competitive exchanges into highly competitive exchanges is not found in the Sepik. Nor is the balance and harmony of inter-sex relations a feature of the lowlands as such; for instance, the Marind-anim and other groups who have ritualized and institutionalized homosexuality as a substitute for heterosexual intercourse in their conceptual schemes of growth and fertility, seem to have a low level of expressed complementarity. The highlands are, of course, no more homogeneous than the lowlands – Simbu for instance is notably relaxed in these matters. It is clear, and hardly surprising, that simple co-relations in gender relations have no explanatory power. However, one factor that must be taken into account in considering gender relations in the Sepik is the huge investment of time and energy in ritual, in which both the complementarity and the separation of the sexes is constantly emphasized and presented as the means of access to supernatural power.⁷⁰

The absence of obvious exploitation of women, however, does relate in part to the basis of male prestige in the various societies. In the Sepik, although a successful man must have access to adequate staple food resources to provide food for others on ceremonial

occasions, it is women who to a greater or lesser extent produce food. It is only the men themselves who produce the coin of their prestige discourse. This may be hunted meat, long yams, totemic and mythical knowledge, carvings and masks, initiations, large rituals, strings of names, human heads, but whatever it is, it always is an exclusively male product. Domestic pigs, for which women are very largely responsible, are of course exchanged, but pigs never initiate a relationship; they always follow as an expression of some prime relationship that has been started by male action without pigs, however implicit their future transfer may be. In other words, pig production is important, indeed essential, but a huge herd of pigs as such will do nothing for a man's prestige, they are only deployable as part of a relationship that has much wider implications and rests on exclusively male production, material or symbolic, for its initiation and continuation. Much the same could be said about valuables, with the exception that they do initiate marriage, but as has been noted above marriage in the Sepik does not become a straight competitive exchange on which a man's prestige in relation to his fellows directly depends. This of course is very different from the high density highland's societies where pigs and valuables are the dominant way to male prestige and influence over one's fellows, and great pressure is put on women to produce pigs. It seems that in at least some areas of the highlands the change from initiation as the major ritual and a substitution of pig exchange is comparatively recent. Such a change has recently arrived in the Sepik – competitive pig exchange has been adopted by some of the Boiken, after the abandonment of rituals centred on ceremonial houses, as Roscoe reports. Perhaps this is the royal road to modernism and the introduction of the necessary impersonality of economic relationships, but it seems hard on the women.

The difference is perhaps well expressed by the pigs tusk ornaments whose possession is the symbol of chieftainship or descent group leadership on the coast and islands. It is not the quantity of these objects that is important, it is the non-material qualities of individual pieces, their names and histories, who owned them before, where and when they have been exhibited, in what house the basket containing them now hangs that confers rights and that at the same time continues their histories, thus increasing their prestige and that of their future owners. This seems to be typical of the whole area, even such material things as long yams lose their material properties, they are not even food, they are given names, dressed and ornamented as major clan spirits and credited with human, or superhuman, powers and emotions. Each is identified very clearly with its grower and they are presented as essentially a manifestation of the individual, his masculinity and his access to supernatural power, to a partner who responds with a similar manifestation of himself. The essence of the competition is each man's access to supernatural power.

Women both support their husbands and the male rituals by the production of food and also usually have their own rituals from which men are effectively excluded. Women's rituals do not have a counterpart to that most necessary part of male ritual, a display of themselves to the hopefully admiring women. Women also carry on exchanges and trade in female products and in some areas in valuables as well, but since they do not produce the major tokens of male competition there is little appropriation of their labour and not much incentive for polygyny by ambitious males. Indeed, polygyny puts a considerable strain on specifically male resources without providing a

corresponding increase in production that can readily be converted into the tokens of male exchange. So polygyny while a sign of male success and prowess is not a means to it. Sexual diversity for all but the most hideous and decrepit males is amply provided for by the general attitudes to sexual intercourse discussed above.

It is not only the nature of men's exchange and competition that relates to gender roles but the very conceptions that underlie the whole basis of political and religious society. That is that true power is supernatural in origin, the material is only an expression of access to the supernatural level and this is gained only by knowledge, which in turn comes from the experience of ritual. Superior knowledge in the individual is expressed by success in exchange, material and immaterial, and the influence over his fellows that results. For the village it is expressed by the magnificence of ritual, the beauty of the carvings, the masks, the ceremonial houses and of the elaborately decorated performers who always appear in public, despite the formal secrecy of the ceremony. The audience consists of women, children and of visitors whose role it is to be impressed, to be seduced by the beauty they are shown. I have argued in considering Abelam art that what we call beauty is seen by the Abelam as a direct manifestation of supernatural power. This formulation is appropriate more generally, the ceremonies in all their complex manifestations and accoutrements are immensely impressive and beautiful, as such they are in themselves a visible and tangible expression of the access to supernatural power of the performers. Such an approach goes some way to explaining both the very apparent cultural dominance of some cultures in the Sepik and the also very obvious tendency to elaboration of ritual and artistic creation within those same cultures. However, I must emphasise again that there is no lack of evidence that a high importance was given to ritual and its arts throughout the whole area. The ndu core are merely the latest to exemplify to a heightened degree and therefore succeed in exploiting, a basic belief that what we may call beauty in all its forms it not just the sign of power but actually power in itself.

What then is "X"?

Power and beauty as such are obviously part of the answer but there is something else as well, and I suggest that it is the coherence of what I have called a "new" culture. A culture that is in a stage of active creation that is developing certain basic conceptions and applying them to the material and human world by which it is surrounded. The members of such a culture are full of self-confidence, everything they do works, fits with what they have already, they experiment, they systematize, they create not only objects, ideas, technologies and so forth but also coherence. The creative individuals in such a culture – big-men, master artists, ritual experts – are not cynical inventors of something to sell or to use to dominate their inferiors; they without doubt believe that they are dealing with very powerful forces and the coherence that they create confirms that belief. Any innovation that is a logical extension or variant of what they already do is proved to be potentially powerful because it fits. The very fact that a high value is put on expressive activity provides not only a criterion for the evaluation of what is created, beauty, but also puts a value on creativity itself. This is a fact about art, it is impossible to simply reproduce what has been done before and still maintain a vital and communicating effect. Even if the theology that guides the art demands

absolute re-creation of some ancestral model, as most ritual art systems of societies such as the Sepik do, to literally follow such a prescription is deadening, the product is unimpressive and unbeautiful. So in any system that needs a lot of art, creation is always taking place as each artist slightly changes the boundaries of the style that exists. This is of course vital for the satisfaction of the artist, and without it, art as such, that is the creation of beauty cannot exist. Copying or exact re-creation is not art, does not have the quality of beauty and therefore cannot be ritually effective.⁷¹

These necessities apply to all the arts, to music, dance, song and literature as well as to the plastic arts, but in cultures where the plastic arts form the main way to capture supernatural power and make it available to humans, the importance of this unacknowledgeable creativity is more all-pervasive. The plastic arts are visible to all or most of the population for long periods of time and are less transient, in the sense of having to be perceived in the moment as are the other arts. In such a culture when faced with something novel, if it appears to be coherent with the system it can be rationalized as part of the system that was perhaps forgotten or lost. This intellectual attitude enables such systems to be highly innovative, but at the same time maintain the belief that everything that they do is a re-creation of the original ancestral creation and thus inherently powerful.⁷² Coherence is thus a positive value in itself and, as I have argued for the plastic arts, non-verbal communication can only work, be effective, if it is part of a coherent art system.

Incoherent rituals that do not relate to others in their beholder's experiences, that do not act as an analytical commentary on normal experience and belief, may amaze or even dazzle but they do not have any lasting effect on the attitudes of those who participate in them, that is they do not give a convincing sense of the presence of supernatural power. Mead's description of Mundugumor rituals sounds like this, incoherent and ineffective; so certainly were many if not all of the millenarian rituals that were tried in the Sepik. The intellectual and analytical aspects of ritual are not expressed or expressible in words, let alone the forms of logic in our civilization. They are pursued in paint and in movement and dance, in the structure of rituals and of chants and songs. They emerge in the individual as knowledge and contact with the supernatural beyond that of their fellows, recognized within the society as a sort of wisdom. As this creative process is essentially individual, it creates diversity, but for all the creations to be acceptable, they must fit with the pre-existing system, and the diversities are, for at least a time, recognizable alternatives to each other and in that sense coherent. Old cultures have presumably been through some such phase in the past, but they become reactive not active, they accrete but not create, so that they lose cultural coherence not only within the boundaries of their own language area, but within the very culture itself. As the culture has lost a single system as its base, coherence can no longer be either a test of cultural validity or indeed be valued at all. The recent discussion sparked off by Ron Brunton exemplifies this sort of difference well. Brunton attributes the systematics to importation by the anthropologists themselves; he is driven to this conclusion because of his (unstated) assumption that all cultures must be equally coherent. I can see no reason for this assumption; in fact this Sepik volume seems excellent evidence against it.

Old cultures can of course become new; the case of Chambri has already been mentioned but the case of Ilahita is even more instructive. Forced together by Abelam expansion, the Ilahita Arapesh not only forged a new social structure to allow them to live in a large composite village that could stay effectively together as a defensive unit, but they are in the process of developing a “new” culture in my sense. Although in their current ritual system the elements were originally borrowed mainly from the Abelam, the “meanings” that Tuzin (1995) finds in this coherent system are different from those of the Abelam from whom the elements were originally taken. In the course of this creation they have for instance developed a new variant of the painting style, which was in the fifties being eagerly imported by Abelam villages in central and northern Wosera. At the time of my observations this style had only been taken up by Abelam villages, and had not spread to other Arapesh villages. Ilahita, I would argue, is synthesizing a new Arapesh social structure and culture, under conditions very similar to those that produced contemporary Abelam culture.⁷³ To what extent this “new” culture exemplifies fundamental principles that all southern Arapesh share, as I have argued that of the Abelam does relate to the fundamentals of second wave ndu, is more problematic.

Conclusion

The Sepik is an area important for anthropology, even though it does not possess the uniformities of language and social structure which in Indonesia led J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong in his famous inaugural lecture to proclaim that region as “a field of Ethnological Study” (1935). In contrast to Indonesia, the Sepik is extremely diverse both in language and in at least the formal systems of marriage that link the loosely structured descent groups, and though dualistic systems are widespread they do not seem to be universal. Nor is it as culturally homogeneous as the South Sudan, which Evans-Pritchard (1940) suggested as a prime area for comparative study. Yet it does have unities that are inescapable on the ground but difficult to pin down in accepted anthropological terminology. A better comparison might be the north-west coast of America where groups from diverse languages were involved in an extraordinary cultural efflorescence. The north-west coast of course formed a single and rich ecological zone, which is not true of the Lower and Middle Sepik where the ecologies are sharply differentiated, although a marked seasonality is common. In what sense then can the Sepik be claimed as a region of meaningful cultural inter-relation?

Is a great investment in art and ritual and a relaxed attitude to gender relations all we can say that this region has in common? I would say that these two factors going together already provide a substantial unity, in that they indicate the existence at a fundamental level of basic beliefs and attitudes of which the social structure and ecological systems of the moment are only transient manifestations. For instance, relaxed gender relations are informed by the fundamental beliefs about the nature of man and woman and the nature of their conjunction; these beliefs are also expressed in a variety of marriage systems. Each of these marriage systems is however a compromise between the beliefs and the political and economic systems within which the actual marriages are taking place. There are of course other similarities across much or all

of the area, dualism, not just male/female although that seems important everywhere, but elder sibling/younger sibling, and others. But ultimately the key question must remain the production and use of what we call art. Why is there so much and why is it so important? Anthropologists to whom these are trivial questions can stop reading now, but I would contend that “rich” cultures present problems that anthropology has so far largely ignored.

Before we go further let us look at the place of the Sepik in the art of Melanesia as a whole. The Sepik is of course one of the great art producing areas of the “Tribal World”. Sepik works are now very popular in our eclectic world civilization, prices for fine old pieces have gone up by factors of ten and twenty times in the last decade, and exhibitions of Sepik masterpieces are becoming commonplace. But it is not the value to us that is of interest here but the value to the producers, and how far the Sepik is typical of or distinct from other famous art producing areas. If we look at New Guinea itself for a start there are many areas renowned for their art: the gulf of Papua, Asmat, Mimika, the Massim, the Huon Gulf and all along the north coast to the Vogelkop, New Britain and New Ireland. All these areas produce art of recognizable styles, but almost all are much more homogeneous either in language or in ecological system or both than that of the Sepik. This is true of the Asmat, Mimika and New Ireland. The gulf has a series of sub-styles along the coast united to some extent by trade, including the hiri, but even a few miles inland although there is contact and trade, art becomes of minor importance. In New Britain, the Baining in the mountains have a completely different art from that of the Tolai who surround them on the coast, while the Sulka, though their art is related to that of the Tolai, are different again. In such areas one art one culture appears to be the rule. In the Massim and the Huon Gulf art objects, almost exclusively secular decorated objects, are important items of trade, so that wooden bowls and other trade items are widely distributed among the various cultures, as is pottery in the Sepik. There is however little trade in ritual objects or sacred art and therefore no necessary similarities between rituals or conceptual systems. Only on the north coast, certainly in the Sepik, probably the Lake Sentani area and possibly right along to the Vogelkop, does one get ecologically and socially diverse areas with related art styles and many art using cultures spread across a large area.

Throughout island Melanesia, art is also most important but the level of production and hence the sheer quantity of art is not comparable to that found in the major areas of New Guinea. There is a fundamental point about the function of art in these societies that goes some way to explaining the difference. One of the most important aspects of ritual art is the expression of the relationship between the individual or group and the supernatural. In hierarchical societies, and most of island Melanesia is hierarchical in some sense, these relationships are managed by a chief or a small group at the top of some merit system, the collectivities are larger and often the possession of ritual paraphernalia is in itself a sign of rank, so in general there is less need for art in quantity. Without hierarchy every tiny group must handle its own supernatural relations and compete with every other; every individual has to assert his own prestige within the group and outside it, and all use art for these purposes so there is a very large amount of art. In general, then, one would expect very much less art in hierarchical

societies than in those that are, conceptually at least, dedicated to equality. Of course there are many societies with mixtures of hierarchy and egalitarianism, but by and large this distinction holds both worldwide and within Melanesia.

Hierarchy then demands less sheer quantity than equality but what about quality? In hierarchical societies there is a more obvious tendency to specialization with the required objects being produced by experts whose skills were usually of a high order. In egalitarian societies every man is sometimes required to and usually wishes to have a hand in art production for ritual and this can lead to a great deal of variability in quality.⁷⁴ Nevertheless the involvement of all in the process of production reinforces the high expectation of meaning and power in the art produced. Quality of workmanship is of course related to, but not determinant of, aesthetic impact. The finest sculptures from the Yuat, Lower Sepik and Iatmul are in our aesthetic judgment undoubtedly among the most effective and beautiful art of mankind. Such an evaluation does not carry through into the Sepik region itself, there cultural style, that is meaning, dominates aesthetic reactions and comparison between cultures is pointless. Nevertheless, within any one culture comparison is possible, the aesthetic judgment of its members, expressed in terms of which object is the more powerful, coincides with those of interested outsiders. But our preference for example for an Iatmul hook over an Abelam nggwalndu must be totally without meaning in either society.

So the Sepik is unusual, but possibly not unique, in the wide spread of art and in the vital importance attached to it over a large and diverse area. It also presents a remarkable phenomenon in the importance of art in the spread of what I have called the second wave ndu. Shirley Lindenbaum [(1986, unpublished)] in her comments referred to them as cultural factories and there is much truth in that image, the Iatmul culturally dominate the middle river and the Abelam the Prince Alexander foothills. The reasons for this cultural dominance and political success are not only linked but ultimately identical. They are not just producing cultural items for export, they are creating culture itself using basic conceptions to tame new territory, intellectual as well as physical, elaborating and expanding their symbolic and conceptual systems as quickly as they expand their territory, taking great pleasure in their dominance over their neighbours but also in the intensification and perfection of their own ritual systems. How long such an explosion of cultural energy can last is a question for which I have no answer, presumably only for two or three hundred years, nor can I suggest why it started at any particular time or why it would end. Yet it seems a phenomenon comparable to, but on a much smaller scale than, the renaissance or L'an Mil periods in European history that saw the emergence of new types of society and of ideas about society, which were also notable for the vigorous production of great art, that affected Europe for centuries after the energy that had initially created it had died away.

In the ndu I believe this burst of creativity was maintained by intense individualism and hence competition, working inside a culture with a pre-existing set of beliefs in the necessity of art as a way of communicating with and controlling the supernatural, common to the whole area. It may indeed have arisen as an alternative to hierarchy in the face of increasing population. In short, if one must choose, then ideology, including the ability to analyse, synthesises and ultimately to create one's own culture,

rather than politico-economic factors narrowly considered is the prime resource for an explanation of the cultural history of the Sepik. But whatever the explanation it seems to me inescapable that anthropology must face such phenomena. That means undertaking comparative studies of related areas, without the assumption that all cultures at any one time are equally coherent or effective in training their members' energies into socially productive channels.

PART II

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ON FORGE

CHAPTER 12

Anthony Forge and Alfred Bühler: From Field Collecting to Friendship

CHRISTIAN KAUFMANN

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The preliminaries

On 21 November 1957 Anthony Forge travelled from England to Sydney on the SS *Orion*, the final destination being Maprik in the Sepik District of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, then still under the control of the Commonwealth of Australia. How did he find out where to do fieldwork? Anyone would guess that Dr Phyllis Kaberry, having spent nine months of fieldwork in the Abelam area in 1939-40, would have suggested the site, but no. A letter Forge wrote on 28 May 1957 to Professor Alfred Bühler, museum director and professor of anthropology in Basel, provides the clue:

Dear Professor Bühler,

I am writing to you on the advice of Mr Charles Julius, who, I believe has mentioned my name to you, in a letter he sent to you on the 9th of April, or thereabouts. I would be very grateful if you could give me some advice.

I am working under Prof. Firth, at the London School of Economics, for a Ph.D. degree. The project that I am interested in, [sic] is one concerning the relation between art and society. The social function of art in an existing 'primitive society', and its part in initiating or expressing change. The study would be by the methods of British Social Anthropology (I was an undergraduate at Cambridge under Prof. Fortes) with special reference to art – production, use in ritual, symbolism, etc. – and I hope to spend at least a year in the field. Prof. Firth and I have agreed that New Guinea presents the best field for such a study, and that probably the Sepik river area, within New Guinea [sic]. But it is extremely difficult to get accurate information on the present state of affairs in the Sepik river area.⁷⁵

No trace of Alfred Bühler's answer was to be found in the museum archives, but we know from a different source that in July 1957 he met Anthony Forge in London while on a tour through museums in England. In a letter addressed to Father August Knorr SVD in Ulupu, Sepik District, Bühler informs the missionary about Forge's plans, including his suggestion to Forge that within the Maprik area a village could probably be found, and asks Father Knorr what he thinks of the Ulupu-Yamil area. Knorr did not object – yes, the student from England should come to see him – but he did not seem too pleased about the idea.⁷⁶ In early November Forge acknowledges a letter from Bühler (not on file) and informs Bühler about his travel schedule, hoping to reach Maprik by early February.

From there I hope to look around for a suitable village and would very much like to meet Father Knorr and get his advice. Shall I write to him from Sydney?

...

Prof. Firth and Dr. Kaberry ask to be remembered to you, with my deepest gratitude Anthony Forge⁷⁷

Bühler writes back to Forge, provides Knorr's postal address and, apart from Prof. Firth and Dr Kaberry, asks to be remembered to "my many friends in New Guinea if they should ask about me", mentioning two of them by name. Forge answers in handwriting from the SS *Orion* on "Friday, 22 November, Off Ushant", and thanks Bühler for

the magnificent catalogue of your exhibition, you certainly do things in style at Basel. Thank you also for your kindness and help ever since I wrote to you in June, your support and encouragement played a large part not only in selecting an area, but in getting me there.

Prof. Firth agrees with me that a trip to Basel is essential, ... I am looking forward to seeing you in 1959, or will you be on a trip to some exotic part of the world?⁷⁸

The next message concerning Forge reaches Bühler from Father August Knorr, based at the mission station in Ulupu. Bühler had visited Knorr in 1956, following the death of Paul Wirz, another Swiss anthropologist. Wirz, a major field collector in the Sepik area and other parts of New Guinea, in general, and a member of the Board at the Basel museum, had died on 31 January 1955 during a field trip near Ulupu. In his letter of March 1958 Knorr first talks about an art dealer who had begun buying objects of artistic value on a large scale, and then goes on to say that, a few weeks ago, he had had a visit from the English anthropology student, Mr Forge, who was in search of a village west of Maprik to do fieldwork in. Unfortunately, their meeting lasted only two hours as other matters were waiting. The discussion seems to have centred on the necessity to

study artworks at close hand on site. Forge told Knorr that he had also been assigned to collect for the British Museum, but that he felt under no obligation “as time was short and money even shorter”. Knorr was convinced that the work would result in a good PhD thesis and mentions that Forge, “once the research had been done”, intended to visit Bühler and submit his results.⁷⁹

As a matter of fact, on 31 July 1958 Anthony Forge wrote a letter to Alfred Bühler from Maprik from which I quote the main paragraph.

Dear Professor Bühler,

...

The more I learn about the art and the iconography the more essential I find it to master the language. I am rather slow at this sort of thing, and it is holding me up a bit. I am practically certain that there is a higher level of esoterica known only to a few old men, which I have only started to skirt so far. I suspect that it consists of, among other things, “true” interpretations of certain symbols, “true” versions and explanations of myths, and the place of man in universe in relation to the yams and the tamberans. However that lies in the future. For the moment I am hard put to it, following the building of a couple of house tamberans.⁸⁰

How did Bühler’s idea of a joint field trip with Anthony Forge evolve from this point onwards? What did an English PhD student have to offer a Swiss museum director, and what did Alfred Bühler have to offer Anthony Forge? And anyhow, who was Bühler?

Alfred Bühler, museum director and professor of anthropology in Basel

Alfred Bühler, born in 1900, obtained a PhD in Geography in 1928 with a thesis based on fieldwork in a remote Swiss alpine valley in which he covered aspects of physical, social and economic geography. As a student Bühler read Geography and Anthropology at the University of Basel, disciplines which in those days were based at the intersection of Natural Science and *Geisteswissenschaft* (that is, the Humanities, at Basel University with a strong historical bias). Bühler also trained as a secondary school teacher, a job he loved.⁸¹ Alongside teaching he began working freelance at the Völkerkundemuseum Basel under Fritz Sarasin and Felix Speiser.⁸² Speiser had returned from a field trip to New Britain, New Ireland and the Sepik River in 1930 where he had recorded an initiation ceremony on film with the help of his fellow traveller, Heini Hediger, a zoology student. The collection Speiser brought home, which included a number of significant artworks from the Sepik, formed an important basis and stimulus for later Basel collections in the Sepik area.⁸³ However, in 1932 Alfred Bühler was first sent by the Basel museum on a twelve-month ethnographic collecting tour to the Admiralty Islands, the Western Islands, New Hanover and New Ireland, well before his official appointment as museum curator in 1938. On this first trip, Bühler travelled and worked alone, a circumstance he disliked very much, even as an experienced fieldworker in

later life.⁸⁴ Further periods of ethnographic field collecting took Bühler to Timor, Rote and Flores in 1935 as well as to Sumba in 1949. On both occasions he arranged for companions to travel with him, a dentist and an ornithologist, respectively – it was a time when Basel museum anthropologists were expected to also collect for the Natural History Museum, especially for its Zoology Department, Fritz Sarasin's original domain. Obviously it was believed that two trained scientists would accomplish the task much more efficiently. However, by 1955-56, when Bühler first left for mainland New Guinea, this sort of sharing was no longer wanted. In spite of the new policy, René Gardi, a Swiss photographer, filmer and travel writer, immediately decided to join Bühler upon receiving a phone call.⁸⁵

Planning this 1955 trip had basically been triggered by the unexpected death of Paul Wirz (mentioned above). Wirz had worked as a freelance ethnographer for a number of museums in Europe and was closely associated with the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam to which he ultimately bequeathed his private Sepik collection. Following a PhD under Felix Speiser based on pioneering anthropological fieldwork among the Marind-anim of south-western New Guinea between 1916 and 1919, Wirz in his long career had also worked in the Lake Sentani area, had travelled up to the Highlands of western and eastern New Guinea, had collected and done research in the Papuan Gulf before turning his attention to the Sepik River area in 1950 and 1953 (Schmidt 1998).⁸⁶

Having succeeded Felix Speiser in 1950, Alfred Bühler had well established himself as museum director by the mid-fifties. Bühler had launched the first exhibition on Sepik art at the Basel museum in 1954 in collaboration with Paul Wirz who contributed a concise text to the German catalogue. Wirz also wrote an article about the exhibition in English which was in press when he passed away (Wirz 1959).⁸⁷ This first Sepik exhibition was part of Bühler's programme to intensify museum activities as regards research into the material aspects of culture (in connection with his commitment as a professor of anthropology at the University) as well as to put on regular temporary exhibitions with the intention of attracting more audience (remember, we are still in the pre-television era). One of Bühler's distinctive hallmarks was his proximity to the community of artists and art teachers in Basel and beyond (his first daughter was already married to an artist-cum-teacher at the Basel art school, and Meret Oppenheim, the artist, was his sister-in law).

Going back to his earlier fieldwork in the 1930s Bühler's focus was on work processes (or operational chains, according to André Leroi-Gourhan original, restricted definition) in different crafts. He was able to draw on his field experience in documenting the work procedures of potters, wood carvers and particularly of weavers and producers of reserve-dyed textiles in Timor, Rote, Sumba and Bali. His second wife, Kristin Oppenheim, held a PhD in anthropology based on a pioneering study of primary textile techniques in which she had analysed artefacts collected by Fritz Sarasin and Jean Roux in New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands in 1911-12 (Oppenheim 1942). In 1948 Alfred and Kristin Bühler-Oppenheim published a first version of the structural-analytical catalogue *Textile Techniques*, based on the collection of Fritz Iklé-Huber, a textile industrialist from St. Gallen (Bühler and Bühler-Oppenheim 1948). Alfred's special concern was with reserve-dyed textiles – in popular Indonesian terminology *ikat* (or tie-dyed fabrics), *batik* (resist-dyed fabrics), and *plangi* (where

parts are isolated by folding and stitching) – as well as with the cultural functions of these textiles and the history of related, complex techniques and crafts.⁸⁸

However, ever since documenting the Malagan ceremonies and displays he had happened to come across in northern New Ireland and Tabar Island in 1932, the arts of Melanesia were Bühler's other main field of interest and competence. This brings us back to the Bühler's interest in New Guinea art. After jointly publishing a photographic monograph on Sepik culture based on the field trip in 1956 (Gardi and Bühler 1958), René Gardi and Alfred Bühler started preparing for a second field stint in 1959, this time focusing explicitly on art, and with the help of funding by a group of museum sponsors. By the end of 1958 Bühler had secured funds amounting to the equivalent of then approximately £4,400.⁸⁹ But then René Gardi opted out of the project and turned his attention to Cameroon in West Africa.

Preparing a follow-up trip on behalf of the Basel Museum of Ethnology

While planning an extended survey of art forms and practices in the Sepik area in 1958, Bühler remained in contact with Anthony Forge. In a letter of 12 May 1958 from Maprik (now apparently lost), Forge sent information on a mask made of sago spathe, on wooden "phallus pieces", as well as on a stone mace (or club head), but also mentioned the problems he was having with funding. Bühler answered on 12 June 1958, addressing the subjects mentioned by Forge, including the funding problem:

I do hope that you will find money to continue your work long enough. If you think I might be able to help you and if you see a way, please let me know. I shall gladly do whatever I can.

He goes on to say,

If you should come across these items [the Tumbuan made of a curved shell of sago spathe], I should appreciate to have one (if possible).⁹⁰

Forge replied on 31 July 1958 with the letter (quoted from above), thanking for the photographs and remarking about the mace: "It is a very well worked piece, certainly vastly superior to the Chimbu example [in Basel]."

In November a Swiss art dealer sought Forge's support for a collecting trip. Bühler raised a cautioning voice, arguing that the dealer would be interested only in the object and not care about documentation and providing contextual information, so that the collection would be of no use at all for future research.⁹¹ The news about the art dealer made Bühler intensify his own preparations. When writing to the Director of Native Affairs in Port Moresby on 2 October 1958 about his planned collection tour, René Gardi is still listed as his travel companion.⁹² His answer to Forge (19 November 1958) ends with the following paragraph:

May I mention in this letter, that I have plans to go to N.G. and to the Sepik District once more? If I succeed in raising money, which is quite probable, and in getting export permits promised in principle, I should start next April. It might even be possible that I could finance your coming with me for a while. Would you still be there and like to join me? Where would you like to go? Have you any ideas about good collecting places in Maprik, Lumi or other places? Please write to me soon about your plans.⁹³

Forge replied from Maprik in a letter of 8 December 1958 in detail:

I am extremely interested in hearing of your plans to revisit this area and would be very happy to come with you if it were at all possible. My plans are still a little uncertain, but the position is as follows. My year ends in March and I will have exhausted my finance by then. I wanted to get an extension grant to stay here for another six months, but it was not possible. Professor Firth now thinks that my material is good enough to warrant an application for a second expedition in 1960. I am not very happy about this because of the uncertainty of the money being available. So far I have worked almost exclusively on the villages of Bengragum (eight miles S.E. of Ulupu) and the Wingei group (six miles E. of Ulupu). As you know my study has been mainly sociological and I have watched the building of four haus-tambarans, together with the tambran [sic] ceremonies held at three of these. This has provided me with a vast amount of material which I haven't been able to digest fully as yet. It has also kept me in this area longer than I had originally planned and as a result I will have to curtail my projected survey of the whole "Maprik" (Abelam) art area, which I had hoped to make to plot stylistic and symbolic variations and to try to co-relate [sic] these with variations in social organisation, and influence from neighbouring peoples. The social structure of Bengragum is much more complex than I had expected from Kaberry's Kalabu material; and the sociological as opposed to artistic enquires [sic] have taken more time than I had hoped.

... From the collecting point of view, an area such as mine where the belief in the tambarans is as strong as ever might be difficult because they [the men] would be unwilling to part with the more important pieces, however, there is a vast amount of minor material, some old and stone cut, that could probably be bought for a reasonable price.⁹⁴

Apart from the mutual benefit, Forge evidently regarded the idea of a joint project with Bühler as a great chance and adventure:

In general I should very much like to come with you; if you think I can be of use I shall be happy to do anything. ... Yuat, Chambri, Murik, Korewore are all names of magic to me and to visit them would realise long held hopes, I know little about Lumi and Aitape but I am eager to learn. To

return to Paragraph two [Collecting]: I had intended to end my stay in the Abelam area with a quick survey trip, to plot stylistic areas within the tribe and try and correlate them with varieties in the social structure. ... [I]f it suits you I could make it into a long collecting trip doing useful work for both of us all the time.⁹⁵

Here *in nuce* are all the elements that determined the future cooperation between the two anthropologists, belonging to different generations, and coming from different corners of the discipline.

By the time Bühler and Forge reached a formal agreement about the modalities of their joint project, Forge was aware that his PhD supervisor, Raymond Firth, only approved of his extended stay in New Guinea as long as Bühler was prepared to cover the costs. Finally, Firth sent his approval by cable from California. Bühler also secured funding for Forge's collecting work between March 1959 and their meeting in May, as funds from the British Museum were not to be had.⁹⁶ The two men eventually met on 4 May 1959 at the airport in Wewak⁹⁷ from where they continued to Angoram on the Sepik River.

The letters exchanged between January and late March 1959 indicate that Forge's experience in and knowledge of the current situation in the Sepik district proved useful to Bühler for developing an efficient plan for their joint collection-cum-research project.⁹⁸ It shows that, from the start, the collaboration between the PhD student from Britain and the experienced Swiss museum director and professor was based on deep mutual respect, which gradually then matured into a profound friendship. In many ways they had more in common than meets the eye. In the following I shall focus on the scientific results of their cooperation, while only hinting at the personal dynamics of their friendship and the influences it had on other people as well as on other institutions; this aspect would deserve a separate account.

Anthony Forge on the Sepik – a PhD candidate as an expert on outboard motors

What was a field assistant expected to cope with? Looking back on his trip to the Sepik in 1956 with René Gardi, Bühler once described himself as follows: over optimistic and almost negligent.

From Sydney I brought along one of these wonderful outboard motors, useful for our travels on the river. Pulling the rope to get the thing working was all Gardi and I were capable of doing, not more. It did not even occur to me that one would have to repair the engine – I had with me neither tools nor spare parts. ...Or, that we needed two motors, not just one.⁹⁹

The self-assessment does not do Bühler justice but, going by the entries in his field diary, it helps us to understand how and why Anthony quickly won Bühler's approval:

After an hour of repair work [inserting a hand-cut gasket] the motor is running again. How lucky I am that Anthony has so quickly become familiar with the motors. If on my own I would have been stuck. In whatever he does, [Anthony] is a most helpful companion – he does everything while I can lay back and enjoy the trip.¹⁰⁰

By getting the outboard motors to run on a regular basis, Forge helped to make travel by double-canoe efficient and, within limits, comfortable. A little house had been built on the platform that joined the two canoes. The houseboat served as base camp, store for provisions and fuel, office, as well as a transport vessel to carry the collected artefacts. However, they avoided using it as a sleeping quarter as the first boat they been using had, only a few weeks earlier, sunk during the night, almost drowning its passenger, a Dutch curator. The idea of travelling along the main river and up its tributaries was to visit areas frequented less regularly by traders and kiaps, that is, government officers. As the whole trip was funded by money gathered by friends of the museum in Basel, Forge did not have to worry about the financial side of the matter. Reporting to an old friend and mentor, Bühler describes the atmosphere on their trip as follows:

My fellow-traveller, a young English sociologist, is looking after his 'old man' to the best of his abilities. Moreover, there are still a few Brissagos [long, thin Swiss cigars] around which helps to make the evenings more pleasant. We lie back in our big mosquito nets, safe and sound, with myriads of mosquitoes buzzing around us outside. Animated dialogues help to shorten the long evening hours. You can well imagine that an English sociologist and an anthropologist who focuses on cultural history have a lot to argue for and against, challenging each other seriously, or just for fun. And, of course, we let many of our colleagues pass in review, not always entirely to their advantage...¹⁰¹

Forge was not to compete with Bühler in collecting, as they had formerly agreed upon in their correspondence. On the other hand, in terms of research Bühler encouraged Forge to go his own ways. The pre-voyage correspondence already reveals how akin their interests were – in Forge's case clearly social context oriented, as far as Bühler was concerned, more object oriented. Yet both men had a vivid interest in the question of how local art styles developed and what this meant to the artists, that is, the people who produced the objects the two anthropologists considered to be art, as well as to the people who made use of the artworks, selling them or giving them away included. Both men need additional data from other areas and groups in the wider Sepik area. And this is what the two men did in Bühler's own words: "three months research i.e. documented collecting, two months packing".¹⁰²

The following sketches labelled either roughly by Bühler (Figure 12.1) or by the same hand in a more careful manner, perhaps drawing on the help of Forge (Figure 12.2) show how they travelled first up the Sepik to the rivers Korosemeri, Blackwater and Korewori – all tributaries to the south of the main river's mid-course, also visiting

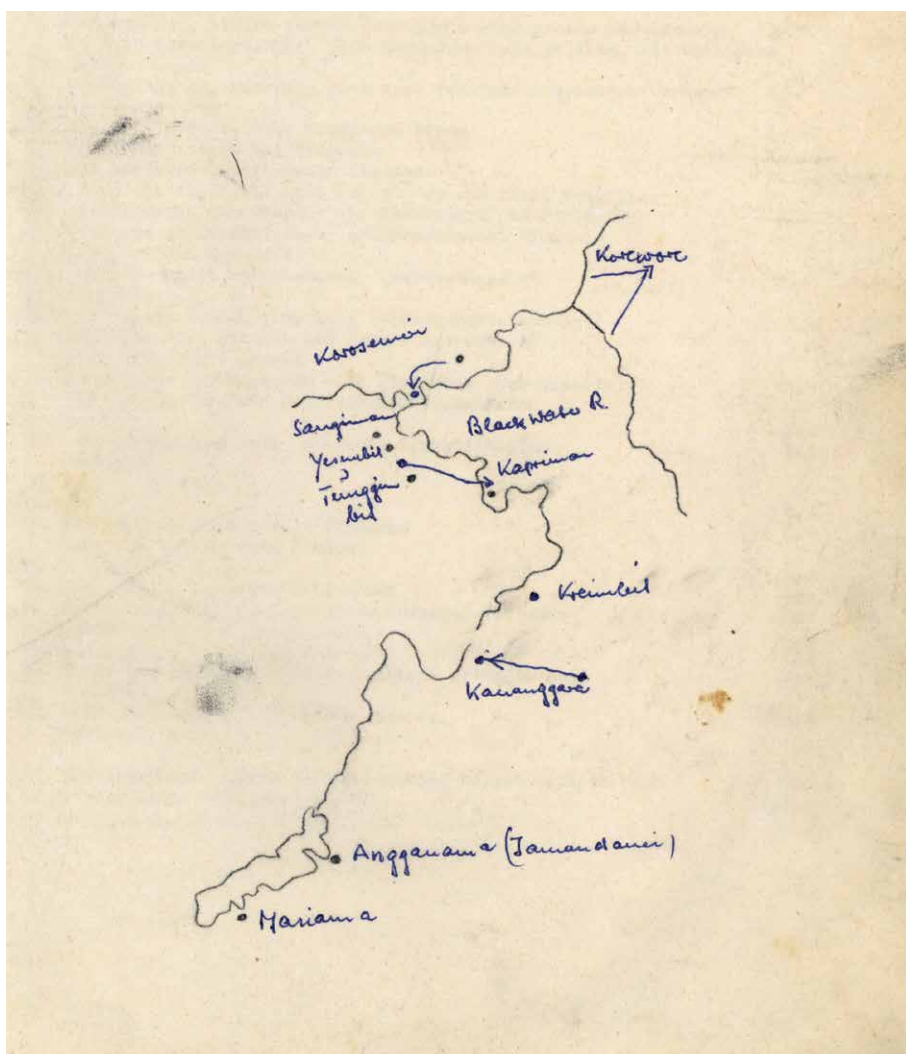


Figure 12.1. Sketch drawing of Blackwater River, a tributary to the Korewori River, all names by Alfred Bühler. From Bühler, *Field diary 1959*: not paginated at end of volume. Archive Museum der Kulturen Basel, folder 08-0038.

the Lake Yimas area. They then travelled upriver along the two lowland sections of the Sepik, first on the middle course between Timbunke and Yambon, and then onwards from the Yambon Gate as far as the Yellow and the Green River (Figure 12.3), the upriver travel alone adding up to roughly 1,000 kilometres. They managed also to visit a few villages in the river's hinterland, such as Yamok, Torembi, Wagu and Swagup (Ngala). However, on the upper Sepik, many areas along the southern tributaries, e.g. the May River, were still restricted areas which meant that Bühler and Forge needed a special permit for "Engaging in Ethnological Field Work" there.¹⁰³

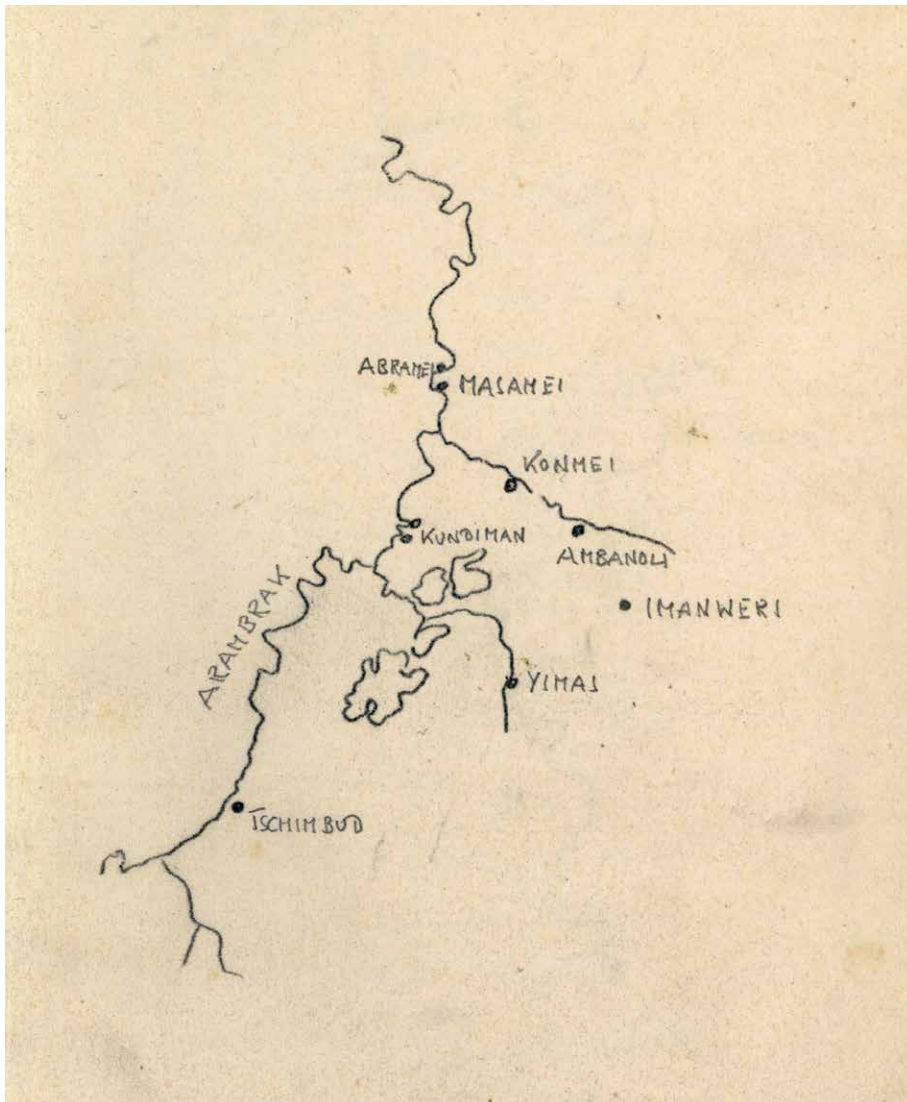


Figure 12.2. Sketch drawing of middle course of Korewori (or Karawari) River. From Bühler, *Field diary 1959*: not paginated. Archive Museum der Kulturen Basel, folder 08-0038.

From field assistant to discussant and writer on the ethnography of art

Travelling up the Korewori (or Karawari) River and its tributaries, the two ethnographers arrived at a newly established village on the upper Sarome River on 15 May 1959, populated by people from Watakatowi who had moved down from the hills. Bühler notes that he bought in a simple men's house a "strange, flat openwork figure", meaning a flat wooden carving done in openwork, which looked completely different to the style of middle Sepik carvings which by then had reached even this remote

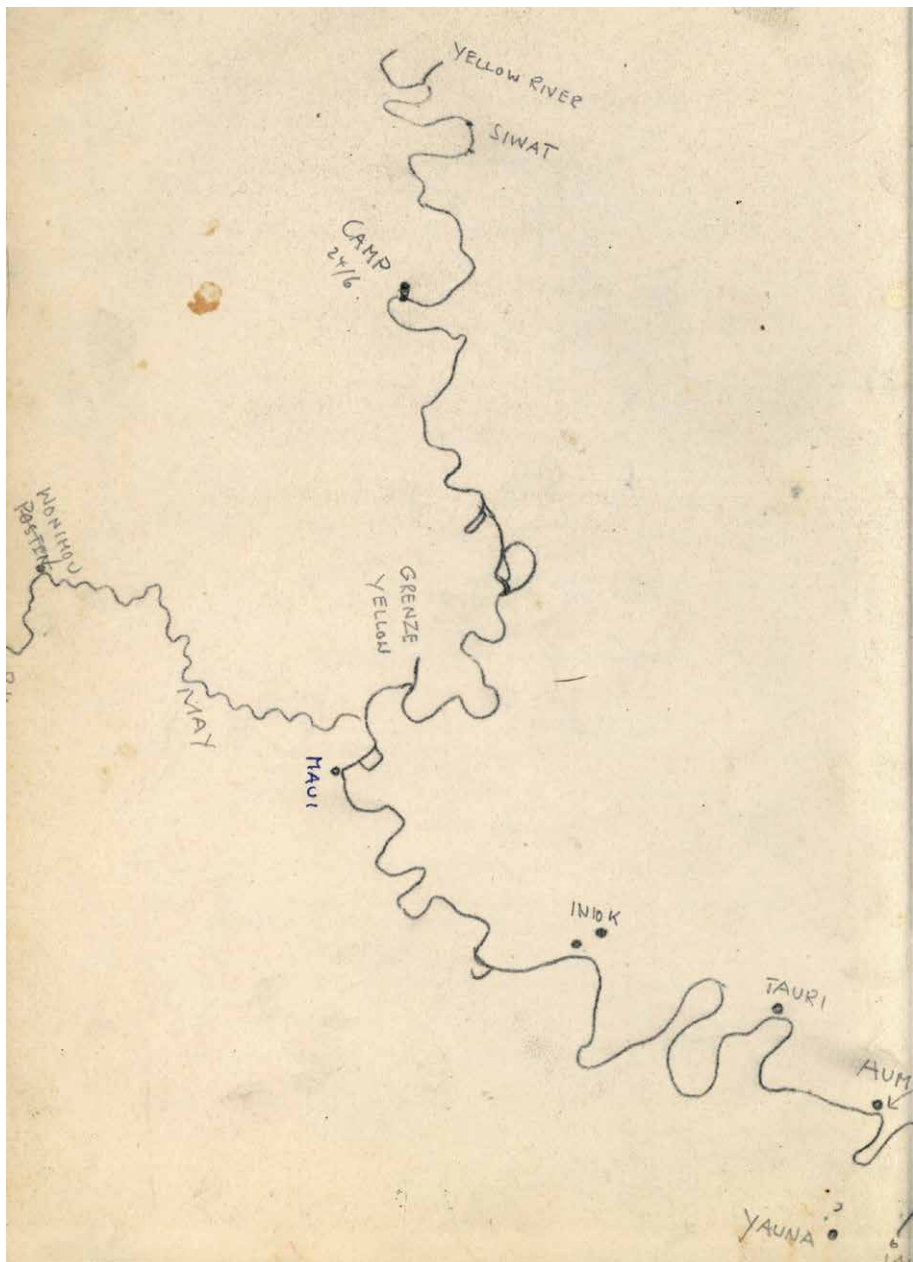


Figure 12.3 Sketch drawing of Upper Sepik River from mouth of Yellow River down to Aum village, with lower May River as far as Wonimou [Wanimoi]. According to the map the zone of influence of people from the Yellow R. extends downriver almost as far as the mouth of the May River. From Bühler, *Field diary 1959*: not paginated. Archive Museum der Kulturen Basel, folder 08-0038.

village. The unusual figure was vaguely referred to as a tambaran (a secretly kept figure representing a supernatural or spirit being).¹⁰⁴

A few days later, travelling up the main Korewori River, Bühler and Forge reached a point where, forty-six years earlier, the official German Kaiserin Augusta-Fluss Expedition had turned back on their exploratory trip by steamboat. Bühler and Forge went ashore at New Tschimbut, or Chimbuto, again a recently established village, in this case by Arambrak speakers (Alambrak, Yimam). Here, in a small rectangular building on flat ground, which served as a men's house (in absence of a more sacred tambaran house, as Bühler noted), they found a large figure featuring a cassowary headdress and affixed to the wall, called Kamenamgabi (in Bühler's transcription). It was secret and sacred (a tambaran), yet served as a maselai (Tok Pisin "masalai" for spirit being), especially for success in hunting and warfare. "For this purpose offerings were made to these figures [sic], which were kept secret from women."¹⁰⁵

The following day, on 25 May, at Tungowi, after traversing a "terrible swamp full of wild sago palms with sharp thorns" and ascending a hill to the hamlets Witonabat and Döve, situated on separated hilltops, they found erected stones at one of the two former ceremonial house sites and more wooden figures, including a small one, toonn, possibly a sculptor's playful test model, notes Bühler. He continues:

[We saw] large idols, Jguimari, Jaguimari, middle-sized ones [called] gurapmak, [and a] smaller one [which was] the most interesting, in fact an object of ritual importance, by the name of Mandjok [Mandyok, Bühler uses the German 'j'], which is also the name of a mountain nearby. He [Mandyok] came "into being by himself, arrived [here] floating on water and was named after the mountain. Functions like all the other idols. (Forge 1960a: 6, fig. 2 left)¹⁰⁶

The following day (26 May) in Mangganda they picked up the generic term "iwon". So far nobody had identified these yipwon figures, which ironically both Forge and Bühler first called Kamanggabi figures, although Bühler had noted in his list of acquisitions at Amanggabi the terms iboon or ivoon for a small yipwon version used as an amulet.

This collection was further enhanced by the discovery of large carved crocodiles in the area of the middle Korewori River, of which they had probably already heard through Father Jop Heinemans SVD in Timbunke. From 27 to 29 May the two travellers visited the imposing villages of Ambanoli and neighbouring Imanmeri (on a hill). They learnt about four sacred-secret crocodiles carved from wood at Ambanoli – one already acquired by Father Heinemans and removed from the village – and three still in the village, of which two had been reserved for Father Heinemans and one for a kiap. The crocodile sculptures were all considered male and kept hidden from the non-initiated on elevated platforms inside the ceremonial house. Bühler and Forge inquired about the clans and the clan founders – only two local clans owned crocodiles, immigrant clans did not. One of these immigrant clans from Tjimbaniuk Hill, the hill south of Tambunum on the Sepik, owned a ceremonial chair and the ceremonial right to display it. They also acquired information about the wickerwork mask costumes with their wooden face masks which are linked to dangerous female bush spirits.¹⁰⁷ One cannot

avoid the impression that the detailed information on names, clans and the village structure of Ambanoli in Bühler's notes reflects Forge's input, at least to some extent.

The idea of establishing the history of the people who created these art forms – so different from each other in style, yet so close in distance – became a very promising project. One should remember that in those days the focus was on getting a grip on the manifold aspects of regional or even Melanesian history by studying the artistic expressions of local peoples only in conjunction with the peoples' material culture and oral traditions (an idea advocated by Felix Speiser twenty years earlier; Speiser 1936 and 1941). The idea that art forms might have a trajectory of their own, independent of social history, had not yet been accepted as relevant in the New Guinea context. Transformations of art within the context of local history (histories) would no longer have to correspond in a one-to-one relationship with social change. This refined approach involved tracking down individual artists and their works as well as elements to be identified in their social context as pointers to, or indicators of, village or sub-regional styles present at any specific point in time. According to entries in Bühler's diary, this was a subject the two men discussed during the long hours of travel up and down the rivers in their double-canoe.¹⁰⁸ Other topics discussed included: paint as magic substance; how to describe the interplay between society and art; artist and Urbild, that is, the image and its role seen from a psychological perspective; and how to design books on art.

From the examples given above it becomes evident that Forge's assistance in fieldwork was doubly important to Bühler. On the one hand, Forge helped him to get a better grasp of the local ethnographic context – crucial for the idea of mounting a comprehensive Sepik exhibition based on an updated assessment of local art styles. Whether or not Forge attended the opening of the exhibition *Kunststile vom Sepik* on 10-11 June 1960 in Basel, to which he had contributed so much, is not known. On the other hand, in the field Forge also served as a good intellectual sounding board on the subject of art and anthropology, especially considering that Bühler had recently been commissioned to write a general introduction to Oceanic, particularly Melanesian art. While still in the field on the Sepik he was asked to hand in a list of the artworks he wished to have displayed in the publication in colour, in those days a completely new approach at bringing attention to these art forms.¹⁰⁹ One may also assume that these discussions helped to spur Forge into publishing his first three papers, one on the so-called Kamanggabi figures of the Korewori River, one on Abelam paintings on paper, and one on paint as magical substance (Forge 1960a, 1960b, 1962). The latter was published by the Basel pharmaceutical company Sandoz, a leading producer of dyestuffs, in four languages.¹¹⁰ Bühler in turn published, apart from the exhibition catalogue, a paper on the crocodile sculptures from the Korewori area (Bühler 1961).

When writing his first comparative paper on art and environment, the 1965 Curl Lecture, Forge duly paid his respects to his elder Swiss colleague, stating that, "[the author] is also greatly indebted to Professor Alfred Bühler whose generosity in 1959 enabled him to visit many Sepik cultures he would otherwise have missed" (Forge 1965: 31, footnote 1).

Collecting among the Abelam, on the Keram River and in Iatmul and Sawos villages for the Basel Museum

While the two men were packing the material collected for the Basel Museum in Angoram, Bühler sent Forge to Imbuando and the Porapora region on the Bien River to the south of the lower Sepik. Not surprisingly, he did not get very far by double-canoes as the passage was blocked. Forge reported about ongoing carving activities in the area and that he managed to acquire a few items such as two old tambaran pots, a wooden plate and a beautiful rectangular axe blade, not least with the help of the resident SVD priest at Marienberg.¹¹¹ The plans to visit the pottery village of Koiwud, north of Timbunke, let alone the Lumi Sub-district had to be cancelled since time was running short.

With the arrival of the appropriate export permits pending, the two men parted on 19 August 1959.¹¹² Forge flew to Sydney while Bühler set off to pack the Abelam collection Forge had assembled in March 1959 between finishing off his field study and meeting up with Bühler on 4 May. Forge had made arrangements for packing with the local Assistant District Officer (ADO) in Maprik. Unfortunately, the ADO had been transferred to another posting so that when Bühler arrived in Maprik he only found two huge crates waiting for him. They were so enormous that Bühler only used one of them, which alone required the help of sixty prisoners from Maprik jail to load on to a trailer!¹¹³ Bühler had other crates of a more suitable dimension made, but it still took two hauls and the help of willing drivers to get them down to the Sepik River. In Pagwi the mission boat MV *Marova* took the crates on board and carried them down to Angoram, picking up the material previously deposited at Timbunke on the way. In Angoram Bühler busied himself with the final round of packing.

The list Forge apparently compiled at the museum in Basel at the end of 1959 or early in 1960 totals more than 220 entries.¹¹⁴ It reads almost like a minute report of his collecting tour and reflects his plans to “plot stylistic areas within the tribe and try and correlate them with varieties in the social structure”, as outlined in his letter of 22 January 1959 quoted earlier.

In his introduction to the list he specifies his grid of reference for locating style elements when describing items. He starts by distinguishing a Northern, an Eastern, and a Southern style area. In the north he makes out four sub-groups: a north-western sub-group (N.W.), from Aupik in the west to Kimbangwa and northwards from Bainyik, including a few Arapesh villages; the Mamblep group (M.); the central sub-group comprising (from west to east) Kalabu and Waigagum to Ulupu, Aunyelim and Kwambigum (K-U.); and finally the Wora area (W.) characterized by a mixture of elements from the north-western group and the Wosera. In the Eastern area Forge differentiates between the Old Eastern style (O.E.), no longer applied in carving at the time of his fieldwork in the Bengragum villages, but to be found in works from Gwalip as far as the eastern boundary with Nugum, including some Arapesh villages, and extending south as far as Sagasi and Yuenjungei. According to Forge, the New Eastern style (N.E.) was imitating the Northern style, a development which might have set in even before government control was first established pre-Second World War, making free travel possible. In the Southern area Forge distinguishes between the Wosera sub-group (Wos.), not yet clearly defined stylistically, and the southern villages in the

grassland towards the Sepik Plain (S.), which do not practice a yam cult although yam was cultivated.

The actual list of objects is preceded by the two following paragraphs:

Types of figures and paintings.

The big division is between those works that are public, that is external house tambaran decorations, yam masks etc, and those that are secret, the objects of the tambaran cult and figures for yam magic. In the Mamblep and the N.W. there are figures that are of a form and in a style exclusively for yams. But in most of the areas figures for yam magic are not distinguishable from tambaran figures on any intrinsic grounds. In fact it is usual for yam figures to be painted and included in a tambaran display (which would always take place between the harvesting and replanting of the long yams) at least in some areas.

The tambaran cult

This always consists of a series of ceremonies, usually six or eight, that are held in a regular order, every man should see all of them before he can claim full adult status, although the initiation aspect of these ceremonies is rarely important. The names of the ceremonies and the types of sacra made for each of them vary from area to area and even from village to village. In all cases however the final one of each series concerns the Nggwalndu (called Tchakindu in the South and East). These are the largest and most important of the Abelam carvings and almost impossible to collect in the Northern and Eastern areas. All the other tambarans are merely inferior forms of Nggwalndu or are sometimes described as their children. Most of the inferior figures are unnamed but will be described here by the local name of the ceremony for which they were made. In general figures with the arms and legs flexed are inferior, while those with straight legs and hands resting above the genitalia are more important. Paintings were included in almost all tambarans displays but are not specific to one or another, except the paintings on large curved sago spathe constructions, always depicting heads, which are the main feature of one of the ceremonies in some areas. There are none of these in the collection.¹¹⁵

Whenever possible, Forge recorded in the detailed entries, who had made the item, and where, and for which ceremony at which site the object had been produced. The information reveals a lot about small-scale inter-village and intra-village cooperation. The first item on the list concerns a Nggwalndu sculpture from Saulik (Mamblep sub-group), an important, yet not the principal Nggwalndu of the clan in question. Many of the entries also contain information on style as well as social context, as a few examples, privileging series over specific objects, go to show.

19.A&B.Baba-tagwa (Tumbuans) from Malemba. K[alabu]-U[lupu]. The small size[,] the heavy rattan used and the lack of mouths are typical for this area.

20.A,B&C.Tschilnggu-tagwa (Basketry yam masks) from Malemba, typical of one type of yam mask from K-U. Although the name implies that they are feminine, they are also used on the male yams. They have mouths. The headdress of 20A is unusual [Figure 12.4].

21.A, B&C.Tschilnggu-tagwa (basketry yam masks) from Malemba, typical of other type from K-U. Their use seems to be restricted to the female yams; 21A [Figure 12.5] und 21B represent the two sub-types found.

106.Baba, yam mask [Figure 12.6]. In the East baba applies to all basketry masks for men or for yams. This one from Kaunauru [hamlet]/Bengragum [village] O.E. [Old Eastern style area] the pointed headdress wakan is unusual for yam masks in the east.

107.Yam mask. The long face, large round headdress and 2 cowrie shells are very typical for Sagasi and nearby villages in the south of the O.E. area [for north of O.E. area no. 109 provides an example].

110.7 Babitamo (Basketry yam masks). All from Bobmagum area of N.Wosera. All have integral headdresses. Typical of the wide variation found in the area. One headdress is surmounted by a Maingge [black cockatoo] beak in basketry. Another of unusual shape has a pair of pa:l [hornbill] heads and buttons for ears, nose ornaments and the eyes of the pa:l.

111.Tchilnggu-tagwa from Malemba K[alabu]-U[lupu]. The lack of a headdress is unusual for this area.

112.Ndote (basketry headdresses of basically round type, the more important pointed ones are usually wood or panggal and are called Wakan) These have small babitamo heads at the top, fairly rare. 2 examples both Wos. [Figure 12.7]

195.Balsam wood yam masks from the N. Wos. All that is typical here is the great diversity of style. Although all the headdresses seem to be made up of Pa:l motif. An analysis of the headdresses of these masks, made in an easy to work material might throw some light on the “fretwork” (so called Malangan style?) over the heads of the large Wosera figures. 15 pieces.

203.Spoons, Kalabu; Kalabu-Ulupu [area]. All old, these are not made anymore. Designs Waramom, 1 made from broken bowl shows Nggwalndu face. 5 pieces.¹¹⁶



Figure 12.4. Tschilnggu-tagwa mask for decorating yam from Malemba, the first of two typical types from the Kalabu to Ulupu style area, collected by A. Forge in 1959, original no. 20A. Museum der Kulturen Basel. Vb 16638. Photo Omar Lemke.



Figure 12.5. Tschilnggu-tagwa mask for decorating yam from Malemba, the second of two typical types from the Kalabu to Ulupu style area, collected by A. Forge in 1959, original no. 21A. Museum der Kulturen Basel. Vb 16641. Photo Omar Lemke.

Some of the entries single out specific objects offering potentially valuable information:

94.Nggwal made for Bobmagum ceremonies '58 in Ilahita (Arapesh). After the ceremony it was taken by the ceremonial exchange partner of the carver to his own village of Djiginambu. Very typical Ilahita style.

119.A&B. Typical Ilahita (Arapesh) painted sago spathes, imported for the '58 Bobmagum ceremonies. A. shows at top a stylised human (?) figure in which the whole head has assumed a wakan shape with only the eyes marked. The subjects and general style are typical Wos.[era] the fine brushwork typical Ilahita.

142.Bowl made by Gilembel of Kissimbeuk [hamlet of] Wingei [village] and given by him to his M's.M's.B. at Miamboru. Main figure Tchakindu complete with body. The pronounced shoulder decorations can be taken for eyes making the whole body a Tchakindu face. Concentric circle ornament said to be Mbandjipmo.

148.Comb. With baba [i.e. eastern wickerwork or yam] mask. Made for himself by Akimas of Sagasi (a well known artist). Idiosyncratic.

154.Bowl, from Bengragum, owned by Yesola of Tchwangaköm, probably made [at] Sagasi or Yuenjunggei. Owner said design is Tchakindu [eastern term for Nggwalndu], with turtle patterns, snakes and mbandjipmo. (Tsapi?).¹¹⁷

One also comes across the items mentioned in the first exchange of letters between Forge and Bühler:



Figure 12.6. Baba mask for decorating yam from Bengragum, Old Eastern style area, showing an unusual wakan head dress, collected by A. Forge in 1959, original no. 106. Museum der Kulturen Basel. Vb 16630. Photo Omar Lemke.

Figure 12.7. Ndote headdress for men, Wosera area, showing a small babitamo head at the top, collected by A. Forge in 1959, original no. 112. Museum der Kulturen Basel. Vb 16526. Photo Omar Lemke.



Figure 12.8. Stone mace head, used in magic for taro plants, Sagasi, eastern Abelam, collected by A. Forge in 1958, original no. 122. Museum der Kulturen Basel. Vb 16552. Photo Omar Lemke.



Figure 12.9. Fragment of stone mace head, found in secondary forest near Bengragum, collected by A. Forge in 1958, original no. 123. Museum der Kulturen Basel. Vb 16553. Photo Omar Lemke.

122.Stone mace head [Figure 12.8]. Use completely unknown but considered made by marsalai, used in Taro magic. Sagasi.

123.fragment of ditto [stone mace head; Figure 12.9], found during my stay in the bush near Bengragum.

124.Fragment of mace head of different type. These are more common, at least in the east, and are believed to be the marsalai versions of the shell rings now used. They are kept with other stones in the yam shrines and are almost impossible to obtain.¹¹⁸

This last item receives the ethnographer's special attention for the power inherent in its specific yet fragmented form due to which it became a highly potent tool for yam magic.

In short, still today this list represents a treasure trove for future research. Back in 1962 it was proof of Forge's skill as a highly competent collector. Following this, Forge was commissioned, most probably by C.A. Schmitz, the new curator for Oceania at the Basel museum, to assemble further collections for the museum on his second trip to the Sepik district in 1962-63. As three of Forge's letters from the field addressed to Alfred Bühler (not to C.A. Schmitz, the acting curator) have survived, we are able to reconstruct what the plan was. One idea was to allow Forge visit the lower Sepik, especially the village of Kambot and the Keram River area for collecting, including a trip upstream along the Keram and its tributaries towards the Schrader Mountains, as far as possible. The second aim was to assemble a collection among the western and south-western Abelam – mainly in Kwanimbandu and the adjacent Wosera villages – for the purpose of obtaining material required for a comparative analysis with the eastern and the northern Abelam. The third aim was to collect items of great artistic and social value, either on the upper Sepik, especially in remote districts far from the main river, such as along the Leonhard Schultze River or Green River, where collecting



Figure 12.10. *Baba-tagwa* mask for mask performance from Malemba (Kalabu to Ulupu style area), collected by A. Forge in 1959, original no. 19A, inv.no. Museum der Kulturen Basel. Vb 16636. Photo Omar Lemke.

Figure 12.11. *Baba* mask for mask performance from Wosera style area, the nose and the torsions were admired according to the collector, collected by A. Forge in 1959, original no. 105. Museum der Kulturen Basel. Vb 16626. Photo Omar Lemke.



Figure 12.12. *Ka'mbaba* type mask, individual name Tshwambu; attached is a nose projection, *yina*, representing at the same time a bone dagger and a hornbill beak, for the crowning head ornament, *kwarumban*, collected in 1963 by A. Forge in Kwanimbandu, original number 343. Museum der Kulturen Basel. Vb 21281. Photo Omar Lemke.

still promised to be rich, or else in the middle Sepik area, including the Sawos villages. As regards the third aim, after carefully screening all the available information, only the latter option made sense to Forge.¹¹⁹

Again, the museum provided the funding in advance and covered the costs of shipping the material back to Basel. This second Forge collection substantially enhanced Basel's overall Sepik holdings.¹²⁰ First, it added roughly 350 objects from the Keram area to the collection, including over fifty clay pots from the Gorogopa area and shields from the upper Keram River and its tributaries, as well as paintings from Kambot by Yamei and – probably – by Simon Nowiep. Secondly, more than 500 objects were integrated into the Abelam and Arapesh collection, among them forty-seven decorated pots from the Wosera area and more than 190 yam masks – 144 made of wickerwork – and forty-nine additional baba masks, not to mention a number of true old masterpieces, for example, the Kararau awan mask, a gable figure from Timbunke, and a significant Sawos figure from the village of Gaikorobi. This last item provoked a serious crisis between Forge and the Basel museum, as we shall see in a moment.

The comprehensive list documenting especially his second Abelam collection again offers a highly valuable source of ethnographic detail. Two of the three sections are headed by notes providing general information. The most detailed information concerns the Abelam basketry masks and a specific type of headdress from the Wosera sub-section:

Baba (Tumbuan). Throughout the Abelam area and the bordering areas of neighbouring tribes are found helmet basketry masks called by the general name Baba [-] outside the Wosera they are called baba tagwa (tagwa = woman) and are always female. They play a vital part in every tambaran ceremony but are not very numerous or complex in design. [Figure 12.10]

In the Wosera they are differentiated into several classes and in addition to playing a similar role at all tambaran ceremonies, have a ceremony all to themselves at which large numbers of all types appear. [Figure 12.11] These big *baba* made to be carried by men occurred in all Wosera villages even those where the small basketry yam masks (babitamo or babamini) were not made before contact.

The 4 main Wosera types are as follows:

- Nara'mbaba, (*Nara* = beautiful, highly decorated), the largest and most ornate. These masks walked about the village with lime gourd and stick eating betel nut, they behaved in a dignified way and were given yams and small pieces of meat. Each village should only have two or three.
- Ka'mbaba, these[,] often ornate but smaller, would carry lengths of cane or Wambé, stems of a jungle plant, which they would throw at people [-] they would run but still behave in a fairly dignified way. Comparatively rare. [Figure 12.12]

- Vi'mbaba, (Vi = Spear) these carried real spears and threw them, usually to miss, but at the time of the tambaran ceremony named baba, initiates and other young men were expected to dodge spears directly aimed at them, wounding sometimes occurred. These baba were by far the commonest each household might have three or sometimes more, they are of medium size and good vision from the inside was a necessary quality. In the south Wosera the nose sometimes becomes very ornate but elsewhere they tend to be of simple design.
- Tagwambaba, these female masks are small and plain, they were worn with a decorated string bag hanging down the back. They behaved demurely and usually only appeared as 'wives' to a Narambaba. There would only be a few in each village.

Mouth forms. Mouths are rare on baba from the N.Wosera and the rest of the Abelam. But occur in the central and southern Wosera. Those that 'smile' occur only in the S.Wosera.

Kwarumban, this the name of a certain sort of head-dress only found in the Wosera. Its basic form is of a central oval or circle, from which project four 'limbs' or horn-bill heads, at the top centre projects a human head on a long neck or sometimes a bird. It is found in extremely elaborate forms on some of the older tambaran carvings of large size where it forms a sort of filigree above the head of the main figure. Kwaru means a brightly coloured small parrot and ban is a termination meaning ['man?'] but this etymology is not helpful and locals always said it was just the name of the type of head ornamentation. [Figure 12.13]¹²¹

With the help of five items listed below I would like to illustrate once again the focused quality of the information provided by Forge. Worth noting is the way he successfully packs the reference to the multiple functions and meanings of one and the same item into a short note. With regard to the first object his text clarifies why the digging stick that reached the museum came painted (normally digging sticks, of course, require no paint), while the second artefact shows that the local terms often refer to more than one signified element:

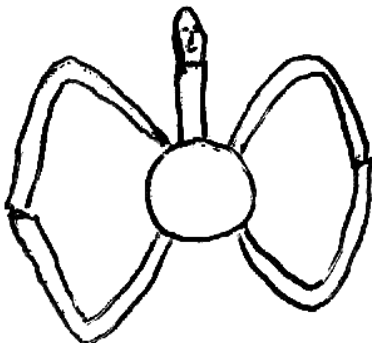


Figure 12.13. Sketch drawing by A. Forge of kwarumban head dress for men found in the Wosera style area only, also represented on traditional carvings and masks (see Figure 12.12 above). From a central circle emanate laterally four limbs or pairs of hornbill beaks, while a human head (or a bird's head) sits on top of a long neck in the centre, as described by Forge in his "General remarks about the Wosera", 1 page. Museum der Kulturen Basel, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0392, acquisition lot folder.

339.Kurki, digging stick for use in digging up sacred yams, these sticks are painted and stood up on the ceremonial ground at the time of the yam displays. From Seragum, Central Wosera.

343.Basketry mask, of Ka'mbaba type (see notes on *Baba*). This one's name is Tshwambu, the nose projection is Yina that is a bone dagger but is also a hornbill beak. The ornament on top is part of a Kwarumban. It [the mask] belonged to Djokum clan of Kwanimbandu and was said to have been made by the Father's father of the present owner.¹²²

The next two entries deal with artistic innovation “before” and “after contact”:

401.Vimbaba from Kwanimbandu, N.Wosera. Name: Dijirakumun. Made by elder brother of present owner Ndubagwu of Djokum clan, before contact. The form is experimental and unique, it has a single central eye (mbaba mini) and on each side representations of Mbandjip, an edible immature fern frond of spiral form which figures frequently in Abelam painting but rarely in other forms of art.

406.Wapi tsanggwurei, from Kwanimbandu, N.Wosera. These basketry disks are the traditional ornaments for long yams (wapi) in those parts of N.Wosera where yam masks were not known. In Kwaimbandu both wood and basketry yam masks have only been made for two generations, Some informants say the disks represent the moon. Still used for smaller yams.¹²³

The quote below vividly shows that the term yina is not only used to associate the nose of the Ka'mbaba (no. 343) with the pointed beak of a hornbill and the sharp tip of a bone dagger but that also serves as a designation of other pointed objects such as a specific category of small carvings used in ceremony as well as bone spatula or yam knives:

476. Yina, carved cassowary bone daggers are very important throughout the Abelam having a vital symbolic function to play in the tambaran cult as well as being used in the yam cult (see 464, [wooden scraper for inspecting sacred yams]). In the S.Wosera small thin carvings with pointed bases so that they can be stuck into the ground, are freely used in important tambaran ceremonies and are called yina. All the following [8 items] are from Wombisa.¹²⁴

The documentation of acquisitions from the Keram River and the central Sepik area is – with a few exceptions – much less detailed. Of the detailed tape recordings made in Gaikorobi and in Kararau, referred to in a letter Forge wrote to Bühler on 24 June 1963, the museum holds a copy and a transcription produced by Markus Schindlbeck. The taped information concerns above all Forge's serial numbers 316, “Two headed tumbuan (Awan)”, the most prized mask from Kararau, and 301, “Male sculpture”.¹²⁵

When reporting on his latest acquisitions at the end of his second stay in New Guinea, Forge considered the Keram trip to be “hardly worth the trouble and expense”, downplaying the fact that he had actually covered the area as planned in terms of collecting and that he had travelled upriver as far as Annenberg, the Catholic mission station (SVD) on the nearby Ramu River.¹²⁶ The trip to the upper Sepik he cancelled before even starting it. Two of his four excursions from the middle course to the north had also been useless, while the two others, one to Koiwud (Kwaiwut) and the other to Gaikorobi, had produced some valuable results.¹²⁷ At this point Forge does not mention the yield of his collecting tour among the Abelam, which was quite substantial and had yet to be packed in crates in Maprik using timber brought up all the way from Angoram.¹²⁸

Forge fully realised that the time of collecting was over. For him the time had also come to interpret his experiences and “digest” the rich evidence he and others had gathered. In fact, three major exhibitions had already been launched in the meantime, starting with the *Art Styles of the Sepik* show of 1960 in the Museum für Völkerkunde Basel, followed by the comprehensive *Art of New Guinea* exhibition at the Basel Kunsthalle (a public art gallery, not a museum) in 1962, and finally the *Kunst vom Sepik* exhibition of 1964 at the Staedel Museum in Frankfurt am Main, featuring the collection established by Eike Haberland and Meinhard Schuster on behalf of Frankfurt’s Ethnographical Museum (today Museum der Weltkulturen) in 1961. Taken together they brought to the light of the exhibition rooms much to think about, apart from making visitors marvel at the creativity of artists whose names they could hardly pronounce.

“Art and Environment in the Sepik Area” provided Forge with a first platform to develop his ideas, going over his field experiences in the wider Sepik area but also opening new perspectives on the rich material he had collected (Forge 1965). “Style and Meaning”, a lecture he held at a conference organized by Raymond Firth at Burg Wartenstein in 1969, was the second text to deal specifically with objects, including material collected for the Basel museum (Forge 1973c). One can fairly say that Forge’s contribution to Basel in return for Bühler’s initial trust was more than substantial.

At the same time there is no doubt that both Bühler and Carl A. Schmitz were influenced by Forge’s approach to Abelam artists using a sociological approach, as for example Schmitz’s monograph on Wantoat art and ritual goes to show (Schmitz 1963). Simultaneously Anthony was preparing with Peter Ucko a new venture, a series of monographs on art and society in collaboration with the publisher G. Duckworth in London, as Eberhard Fischer remembers.¹²⁹

The roof on fire – an unresolved conflict, or why museums should never sell objects or do away with visual archives

Eberhard Fischer also recollects that Forge was outraged when he heard that the Basel museum had sold several items – especially one – he had collected for the house, believing they would be safe there for further study. He felt personally hurt, a feeling he still voiced strongly during the 1984 Sepik conference in Basel.¹³⁰ What had happened? In early 1965 Forge found out that the very special Sawos sculpture he had acquired in Gaikorobi village for the then very substantial sum of AUS\$100 was gone.¹³¹ It

had been sold by C.A. Schmitz, the future museum director (who, however, moved to the Frobenius Institute at J. W. Goethe University in Frankfurt by March 1965), and unbeknown to Bühler (as far as we can reconstruct). Unfortunately, the sale was an indirect consequence of the Basel museum's decision in 1962 to purchase a large collection from the Sepik area assembled by Franz Panzenböck, an Austrian carpenter who worked for the TPNG Administration, and whom Bühler and Forge had met in 1959 in Angoram. The museum bought the collection with money that the cantonal government had only assigned as a loan, which meant the museum was obliged to repay the loan. The idea was to sell off so-called duplicates (doublets) held in the often poorly documented Panzenböck collection. Bad management led to a number of under-value sales. What was worse, the sales included several items from the Bühler collection of 1956 which had already been listed in the museum's inventory.¹³² It is now believed that Forge's Sawos sculpture became also a victim of this sale practice; considering the piece's quality and style – closer to Iatmul than to Sawos – Schmitz should have at least taken a second look before going ahead with the sale and first enquire what Forge's intentions had been when acquiring the sculpture.¹³³ The figure is identified by a photograph, supposedly taken by Forge in Basel in 1964 and later sent to Markus Schindlbeck. The figure's whereabouts remains unknown.

One can easily understand why this sale was seen as a breach of trust. Yet, the idea of passing on some of the recently acquired objects to another institution was not completely unknown in the museum world. In fact, it was a widely accepted practice in the 1950s and 1960s, always with the general proviso that the objects exchanged or sold would be safely kept by the purchasing institution, including the respective documentation.¹³⁴ Other museums elsewhere, notably the Linden Museum in Stuttgart, even exchanged with art dealers and art collectors. Even in Basel the rules were at times loosely applied.¹³⁵

A missed opportunity in 1986 – Forge's sabbatical in Basel

Despite Forge's comparative approach to the study of artworks in their context, the corpus of the Abelam material he had collected in 1959 and 1963 for Basel had to wait for a detailed analysis equivalent to the enquiry on the rectangular and triangular paintings on paper Forge had commissioned from local artists. Studying the 150 paintings had led Forge to the conclusion that Abelam painting constituted a closed system which, to be understood, required strict formal analysis.¹³⁶ What would and could the analysis of the three-dimensional masks reveal? These objects were produced by means of a technical process which was even more formalized than painting. Would the Forge material eventually allow a better understanding of the dynamics of local invention, re-interpretation, rejection, manipulation?

Following the 1984 Sepik Symposium in Basel, sponsored by the Wenner Gren Foundation, Forge decided to spend his next sabbatical in Basel and prepare a publication on his Abelam collection. All looked promising. By the time he arrived in Basel in 1986 the museum had made office space ready for him. He brought his own laptop and a small portable needle printer, then still an unusual piece of equipment. The second Wenner Gren Sepik Conference, for which he had served as convenor, had just been held at Mijas in Spain, from 15 to 23 February 1986. In Basel, Forge

first concentrated on writing the introduction to the symposium publication. To be precise, he wrote several versions, or updates, making me (along with others) read and comment on each one of them. The Abelam collection remained just about untouched. He left for Canberra and had Xerox copies of the catalogue cards sent to him. Not too long afterwards, we heard that Forge had been diagnosed with cancer.

As far as I can remember from our discussions, Forge, critical of Bühler's strategy of selecting suspension hooks from all over the Sepik lowlands as a basis of comparison – an analysis which Reimar Schefold carried out between 1959 and 1964 – argued for concentrating on a sociologically and geographically more restricted area (Schefold 1966). Bühler believed “hard” facts could be established by means of a sort of statistical analysis.¹³⁷ As his detailed notes on the objects show, Forge intended to outline a kind of art idiom as found in groups of artefacts representing a single type, ideally produced or used by a defined group of people acting together, for example, Abelam men participating in long yam ceremonies in specific villages (Forge 1973a: 177-9, 190-1).¹³⁸ For Forge, it was important to show that style as expressed by form did not simply follow function, that artists made their own choices based on aesthetic and/or canonical preferences, or that they wanted to express a creative (idiosyncratic) idea, or simply demonstrate power, but in a different way (Forge 1990: 163-6, 169).

As of today, we can only regret that in Basel Forge never got round to analysing the whole series of baba and yam masks using his own set of reference points, despite his intention to do so.¹³⁹

Unfortunately, the volume of the second Sepik conference “Sepik Culture History: Innovation, Variation and Synthesis” also suffered, despite Forge's efforts. Sadly, it remains unpublished to this day. As a glance at the Find list of the Anthony Forge Papers in the Special Collections and Archives at The Library of the University of California San Diego reveals, at least some of the contributions to the second Sepik Symposium volume considered lost are lying quietly among the Anthony Forge Papers, in particular Forge's various versions of the introduction (see Chapter eleven for what appears to have been the most advanced draft).¹⁴⁰ Most of the other texts seem in the meantime to have been published in anthropological journals (but not – as the Wenner Gren website claims – in the volume *Sepik Heritage. Tradition and Change in Papua New Guinea*, which contains the results of the first Sepik conference of 1984 only).¹⁴¹

Indonesian textiles in Basel – more than one love story

Basel in the late 1950s and early 1960s was more than Bühler and Sepik art. Forge was vividly impressed by Bühler and the Basel students' interest in collecting and studying Indonesian and Indian textiles, as well as by the substantial Indonesian collections in Basel which by far consisted of more than only textiles. Paintings from Bali also figured among them. Of course Forge was aware of Bateson and Mead's work on Bali. And he became an expert in his own right on Balinese painting. He seems to have especially honoured Bühler's passion for Indonesian textiles – in 1978 he donated to the Basel museum a beautiful old sarong from Bali.¹⁴² Roughly at the same time he encouraged the National Art Gallery in Canberra, where he served as a Trustee, to build up a truly representative collection from this area, as I learnt in 1983 when visiting the National Gallery with him.

Conclusion

Reconstructing how and why Forge first met Bühler in London in 1957, and then joined up again in 1959 to collect in the Sepik area has thrown an unexpected light on his career in anthropology. As the documents show Forge became a meticulous collector himself. In his early letters to Bühler, reaching back to 1957, Forge was able to convey to the professor in Basel insights from his field experience among the eastern Abelam. He also argued on the basis of his considerable academic knowledge. Once they met up in New Guinea, Bühler must certainly have appreciated Forge's frankness, his cogent way of arguing as well as his humour. In turn, one feels how Forge was deeply impressed by Bühler's immediate approach to material culture, behind which he always recognized the individual with his technical competence as the producer, thus bringing life to the objects. Sculptures and paintings from New Guinea or double-ikat textiles (to name but one of the special research interests in textile studies) from eastern Indonesia were craft products, objects meaningful in a social or a religious context, and, at the same time, artworks full of creativity. Through Bühler, Forge gained immediate access to a continental museum tradition based on building up reference collections from across Melanesia and eastern Indonesia by field collecting. As a source for research these collections were systematically studied along two lines: art and textile techniques. As much as we may regret this today, Forge never produced the in-depth study of the Abelam artistic expressions of the objects he had collected for the Basel Museum, among them numerous wickerwork masks and a few exceptional carvings. His detailed study of the objects and his interpretation of the richly documented context would have added a new dimension to his published studies on the social dimensions of art among the Abelam and beyond. During fieldwork and later, a very personal friendship grew between Bühler and Forge. They agreed that conveying views based on anthropological facts to lay audiences had high priority, be it by way of exhibitions or by publications in popular series; the students got their share in seminars and lectures anyhow. Both audiences were very fond of Bühler (who had also been a very popular school teacher in younger years) and, may I guess, also of Forge. Both were convinced that Sepik art existed on its own, independently of the eye of the European beholder. They both realized that they had experienced Sepik societies at a time of deep structural change, which would eventually put their findings to the test. Would Sepik art survive? Forge was deeply impressed by Bühler, his senior by a generation, and I often got the impression that Forge was striving to surpass his mentor-friend in terms of anthropological knowledge and achievement. He also took over Bühler's special like for the long and thin Brissago cigars. It certainly was not a healthy habit; the two friends ultimately suffered from cancer of the respiratory tract, dying only ten years apart.

CHAPTER 13

*Style and Meaning: Abelam Art through Yolngu Eyes*¹⁴³

HOWARD MORPHY

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It is significant that the concepts of style and meaning figured prominently in Forge's anthropology of art. In the 1960s style was a concept strongly associated with art history. Although it had its brief life in the grand theoretical schemes of Kroeberian¹⁴⁴ anthropology in America, it had hardly entered British anthropological discourse. But style was a key term in the study of non-European art, linking its study to the fields of art history, archaeology, cultural history and equally to connoisseurship. Style enabled the anthropology of art to engage with art history. Meaning on the other hand was what allowed art to be seen as relevant to anthropology itself at a time when the structural functionalist paradigm as a whole was under challenge from many different directions. By focussing on style and meaning Forge brought together the concerns of the two disciplines – anthropology and art history – and pointed the way to a more challenging and interdisciplinary anthropology of art.

Although style and meaning are key concepts in Forge's anthropology of art, nowhere are they rigorously defined. Forge uses style in two different senses, both of which are familiar uses in art history, without clearly differentiating between them. Style is used for the formal description and categorisation of objects which enables them to be allocated a place in space and time, and style is used in the more metaphysical sense of reflecting a coherent element in the production of objects. In the second sense Forge is concerned with the reason behind the particularities of form: with the idea that style is the product of a particular way of conveying meaning, expressing ideas, or marking status. It is this concept of style, as the result of a process for producing meaningful forms, that I will focus on here and apply to two geographically distinct artistic systems, that of the Abelam of the Sepik River Province of Papua New Guinea, which was studied by Forge, and that of the Yolngu of Eastern Arnhem Land in Northern Australia, which was the subject of my own research. The choice is not an entirely arbitrary one. On the surface at least there appear to be some similarities of form between Abelam flat painting and Yolngu bark painting. Moreover, Forge himself thought that there were similarities in the underlying structure of the systems. While formal similarities do not necessarily mean that the systems that produce them have

anything in common, they provide a focal point for comparative analysis. However, an additional motivation for the comparison was the visit of two Yolngu artists, Narritjin and Banapana Maymuru, to the Australian National University and their willingness to take part in a discussion with Anthony Forge and me over Abelam art.

To understand Forge's analysis of Abelam art and recognise its originality, it is necessary to see it in the context of its times. It was influenced both by the problematics of western art history and by recent analyses of non-European art, in particular Australian Aboriginal art. These provided comparative perspectives on the Abelam and influenced the terms in which he was to present his analysis of their art. He was concerned in both cases with the difference of Abelam art as well as the similarities. As an anthropologist Forge approached Abelam art with a number of questions in mind: what the art represented, what its meaning might be and how the Abelam interpreted it. In comparison with Arnhem Land art, as analysed by Charles Mountford (1956), Abelam art seemed to lack external referents (Forge 1966: 23). In Eastern Arnhem Land and Australia in general art appeared to be closely integrated within the Dreamtime and the myths of world creation. Art could be interpreted at least in part as the representation or illustration of myth. For every painting there appeared to be a "story" that was part of the meaning of the art. Among the Abelam Forge had found few myths, and the meaning of the art appeared at first to be elusive. People had names for individual elements of a painting and often had a gloss in English – "flying fox", "eye", "breast", or "leg of pork" – but this did not seem to get him very far. The meanings were not organised syntactically to illustrate myths or stories but seemed almost arbitrary. Moreover, the same element could have a variety of different meanings which again did not appear to vary systematically with context. The same element could represent a leg of pork, immature fern fronds, black palm cockatoo and swirls in a river. In some cases he notes that often the artist refused to say in advance what he was painting, and sometimes changed his mind half way through; and if there were two people collaborating they might disagree.

From Western art theory Forge drew on the distinction between abstract and representational forms of art. Forge defined as "abstract" cases where there was no clear relationship between form and meaning. Representational paintings were ones in which the parts were organised to represent a more encompassing whole, which at one level might be a face, or a person, and at a second level might be a mythic episode. Representational art covered similar ground to terms such as figurative or iconic. He was able to apply the distinction to contrasting Abelam images, some of which were more representational than others. He drew a contrast between two paintings of the same ancestral figure "[Figure 13.1] is clearly anthropomorphic albeit highly stylized. The other [Figure 13.2] is a pattern and little else to non-Abelam eyes. Yet both are called *ndu*, both comprise the same elements and both are equally effective in ritual terms" (Forge 1973a: 183). Forge notes that the important thing is not what the paintings represent but that they are comprised of the same set of elements. To Forge the fact that they share an identity despite apparently being structured on different organisational principles challenged the opposition that was often drawn between representational and abstract art. The point he is making, that in Abelam art "there is no line to be drawn between representational and abstract" (*ibid.* 183), is a fundamentally important one.

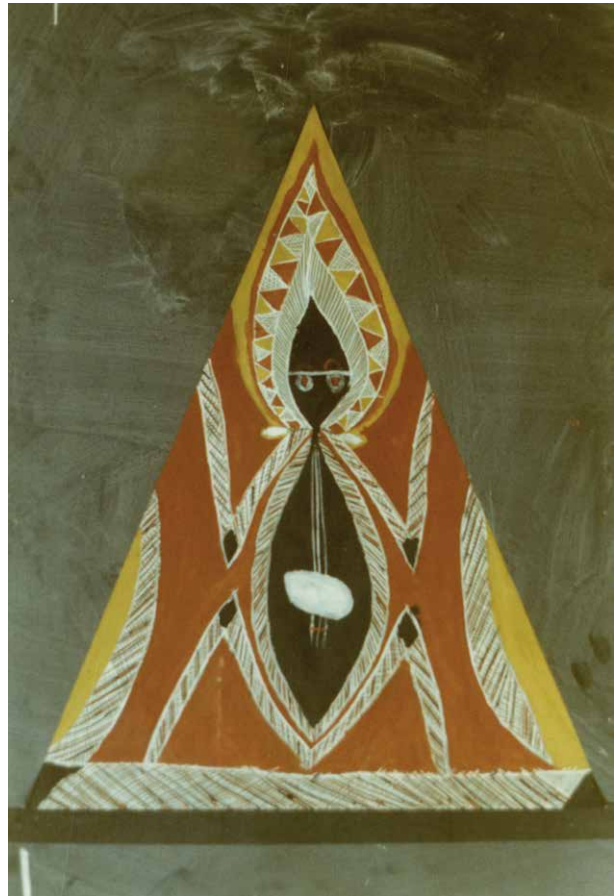


Figure 13.1. Ndu, "man"
by Nyagara. Anthony
Forge Papers. MSS
411. Special Collections &
Archives, UC San Diego.

However, Forge somewhat overstates the case because the distinction between more representational and less representational forms is central to his argument. Forge's analysis at times lacks clarity because he uses a very generalised concept of meaning and as a consequence fails to do justice to the brilliance of his ideas about the meaning creation process in Abelam art, in which the meanings of the individual elements play a significant part in producing meaning in the system as a whole.

The paintings use a restricted range of elements which can be combined in many different ways. Forge implies that there is a basic set of designs which make up the repertoire of a particular community, but elsewhere suggests that the designs themselves are subject to individual variation. The design elements often have names and meanings associated with them.¹⁴⁵ Forge does not list many of the names so it is impossible to analyse them in detail, nor does he provide an inventory of meanings. However, from the examples he gives it is possible to say that the relationship between form and meaning is patterned by iconicity at least as much as is the case with Central Australian graphic signs.¹⁴⁶ In Abelam art circles have ranges of meanings – from eyes to stars – that are consistent with a circular form and even in the case of more specific designs, such as the leg of pork, other meanings associated with it such as fern fronds



Figure 13.2. Ndu, "man"
by Tsiratsitban. Anthony
Forge Papers. MSS
411. Special Collections &
Archives, UC San Diego.

and swirls in the rivers course seem motivated by formal considerations. That does not of course mean that every meaning is attached on the basis of iconicity, in particular abstract meanings such as male power or ancestors. Even in such cases, however, iconicity may be one factor in complex metaphorical and semantic processes. Eyes are represented by circles and have close associations with stars (kwun) and by way of fireflies (also kwun) with ancestors (Forge 1973a: 190).

The paintings as a whole are associated with certain spiritual entities and express Abelam ideas and values. In many cases they represent nggwalndu, clan ancestral spirits. These are present in the cult houses in the form of figurative wooden carvings and are the most powerful spirit known to exist. Some nggwalndu can combine human and non-human features and some paintings represent animal forms but Forge does not elaborate on the cosmology of the Abelam. Each painting of a nggwalndu has a series of elements associated with it. At one point Forge draws an analogy between the elements of a nggwalndu and the letters of a word: "they form a code built out of a finite number of stylistic elements: various arrangements of those elements signify nggwalndu, butterfly or flying fox" (Forge 1970: 282). He then qualifies this by continuing "the flat painting code has an essential ambiguity in that varying interpretations of elements are

possible and equally legitimate" (*ibid.*: 282). However, here he is in danger of opening up the interpretability of the system too much.

There is no question that Abelam representations are ambiguous at all levels of the system, and that Abelam designs are highly productive semantically. It is quite wrong to look for a single representational meaning for each design and every design element. Nonetheless, the range of meanings associated with particular design elements is limited and the range of meanings is often unique to that element. Certain design forms such as that for flying fox have a referential meaning as a core meaning, even though it contributes only partially to the overall meaning of the design. In such cases it is unlikely that the flying fox design will be used if the design as a whole has no reference to flying foxes. The meaning of Abelam designs is both the product of the system of design generation and of the meanings it is possible to encode within it, and the product of interpretative processes that extend far beyond the design system itself. Forge attempted to deal with the properties of the design system by labelling it as a closed system, emphasising its independence from any external system of referential meanings. However, this merely creates a logical problem of where the meanings associated with the closed system come from and how the meanings conveyed by this closed system articulate with those associated with language or ritual. Abelam flat painting as a system has properties which, he argued, are independent of verbal language or ritual action and cannot be reduced to those other systems. Nonetheless, one might argue that its semantics could only be understood in the context of more general social and cultural processes. Anthropologists seem to have had tremendous difficulty with the fact that meaning is relatively independent of form but that form is necessary to convey meaning. Once this relationship is grasped then all systems of encoding meanings can be seen to be both relatively restricted and relatively open ended, depending on the nature of the system and the way it is used. Abelam flat painting is more ambiguous than verbal language used in a certain way and some Abelam images are more ambiguous than others.

So far I have been focussing primarily on the elements out of which Abelam paintings are composed. As Forge noted, the elements can be combined together to produce representations that are on the surface figurative or abstract. Abelam flat painting involves a number of complementary principles of selection and organisation of elements. A picture of an ancestral figure has to contain a certain set of elements associated with that figure. Once those elements are selected then they can be organised into a whole in a number of different ways. In some cases the picture as a whole represents an image of the animal or ancestor concerned, in other cases it is impossible to discern any such relationship. Forge calls paintings of the first type representational and of the second type abstract (Forge 1973: 174). However, quite rightly he does not wish to imply that these are discrete alternatives, that the painting is either one or the other.¹⁴⁷ The ordering of elements in the case of those that appear abstract is clearly related to the way elements are ordered in other paintings, including the representational ones, and vice-versa. Likewise the meaning of the paintings is not determined by the representational order since the other relationships between the elements may also be significant. In contemporary jargon there is no one way of reading an Abelam painting.

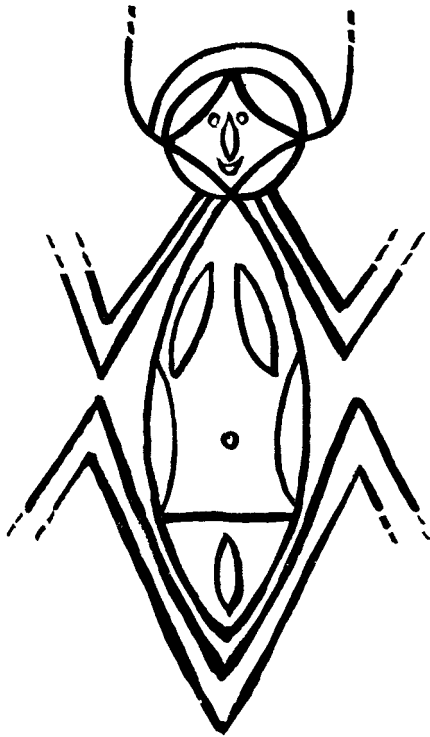


Figure 13.3. Female figure from a façade in Yanuko Village, north Abelam. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

Abelam paintings are frequently organised to represent a human face or human body, usually the face and body of a nggwalndu ancestor. In representing a face appropriate elements will be chosen to represent the eyes, nose, mouth, body and limbs. A characteristic W- or M-shaped design is used to represent the arms and legs, and the body itself is frequently represented by a pointed oval. The designs for limbs produce triangular shapes which express meaning independent of the M-shaped outline itself, and can indeed be part of other figures within the painting as a whole. The interplay between different bases of ordering the elements gives a great deal of freedom to the Abelam artist, and artists create multiple representations of the human body by exploiting the

ambiguity inherent in the representational system.

My account so far suggests that Abelam paintings consist of elements that can be combined on a number of different bases. The elements have a set of meanings that are intrinsic to them but which can also be defined, specified or extended in context. In combination with certain other elements they are part of nggwalndu, or a butterfly, or a flying fox; in the context of certain representations they are an eye, a vulva, a body, or a leg. The meanings are cumulative and more than one can apply in a particular case. Multivalency acts as a channel of connection within a painting and between paintings and contexts of interpretation: “to identify a representation, is not to find out what the painting means, it is merely one element in a complex web of meaning which is to be found in the relationships of the parts that compose them”(Forge 1973a: 187). This much is clear from Forge’s analysis of the system, which at all points is supported by some limited exegesis from the Abelam.¹⁴⁸

The next stage of Forge’s analysis involved following these pathways of connection, and it is here that Forge seems to find meaning for the first time, to his own satisfaction, in Abelam art. It is this level of meaning that excites Forge and it is the hardest level to confirm from exegesis. Meaning in this case refers to what might be termed the symbolic meaning of Abelam art in opposition to its referential meaning. Forge gives relatively few examples of what these symbolic meanings might be, but one theme that he considers



Figure 13.4. Bottom of ceremonial house façade nggwalndu faces. Bugiaura ceremonial ground, Yanuko village. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

important is the nature of the relationships between men and women, in particular with reference to spiritual power and fertility. He argues that art uses images of sexuality and female creativity to produce images of ancestral power, and provides a context for expressing the ambivalent nature of the relationship between men and women.

He gives as an example the relationship between two sets of designs on a house façade (Forge 1973a: 187-9). The top line consists of a frieze of women. The representations clearly indicating breasts and vulva making an emphatic statement of the femaleness of the pointed oval (Figure 13.3). Underneath is a frieze of nggwalndu heads. Initially there is no reason to suppose that these heads are constructed on the same basis, but on further inspection Forge realises that the overall head design is contained within a pointed oval (Figure 13.4). The nggwalndu heads express the primacy of female creativity. Forge then links this association between female figures and nggwalndu heads to a tradition that it was women who discovered the original nggwalndu ancestors and became their lovers. When jealous men discovered this the nggwalndu turned into wooden form. We can see here why Forge regrets the relative absence of myth among the Abelam since in this case myth appears to confirm the insights that he gains through analysing the form of the art.

Indeed this has been a recurrent problem in the anthropological analysis of symbolism in societies which have limited traditions of exegesis and in which there are no parallel systems of song or oral tradition that add conviction to the interpretations derived from the analysis of art and ritual action. Analyses such as Forge's have often been criticised precisely because there is no verbal confirmation of the conclusions drawn.¹⁴⁹ This was another reason why Forge emphasised the closed nature of Abelam art, arguing that the ideas may not have been expressible in other ways. "Such themes are not talked about

openly by the Abelam, they may even be denied ... [the forms] communicate directly to the Abelam not as an illustration of some spoken text" (Forge 1973a: 190).

There are striking similarities between the art of the Abelam and that of the Yolngu of eastern Arnhem Land. Both use the same range of colours, and employ a similar technique of crosshatching. While the distribution of colours and infill varies overall, it is possible to find paintings in the two cases that look remarkably similar. Some Yolngu art also consists of a limited number of geometric elements that can be combined together in an almost infinite number of different ways.

I do not want to provide my own analysis of the relationship between the two systems because I have the opportunity to present a more dialogic analysis. In 1978 Narritjin Maymuru and his son Banapana from the community of Yirrkala in northeast Arnhem Land spent three months in Canberra with their families as visiting artistic fellows. They spent most of their time painting, but they also helped to teach classes on the anthropology of art and on one occasion spent the day with Anthony Forge and me going through Anthony's collection of Abelam paintings and commenting on them.¹⁵⁰ That moment, that lasted for a whole afternoon, was a very special one for both Anthony and me. It was mediated discussion between two anthropologists about the art of societies in which they had worked with the questioning being partly directed by artists from one of them. It is what Diane Losche perceptively refers to as a hybrid moment:

particular moments of question and answer, which sometimes occur randomly, that differences and difficulties of comprehension become clearest and most tangible often signalled by responses of puzzlement, irritation and unease. It is at these points that one faces knowledge of difficult, perhaps intractable, questions that won't go away. These same moments also point towards a path of further research which may lead to some important understanding only barely glimpsed amidst the feelings at the moment of encounter (Losche 1997: 37).¹⁵¹

The interpretative process that Narritjin and Banapana engaged in was interesting for a number of reasons. We might have expected them to interpret the art according to the properties of their own artistic system, as if it were Yolngu art, and to interpret only those paintings that were formally similar. I think it is fair to say that this was Anthony's expectation. Instead they entered into an ethnographic and analytical process, interrogating Anthony about the structure of Abelam society and the ways in which art was incorporated within social process. Towards the end they were beginning to interpret Abelam art as a system very different to their own, along lines that showed remarkable similarities to Forge's analysis. However, their view of Abelam art was not quite as distanced as his and they were able to incorporate Abelam paintings within their own social universe.¹⁵²

If Anthony's analysis of Abelam paintings was influenced by his own historical position and by the questions and categories of his culture, so too was Narritjin's and Banapana's analysis. In both cases the analysts reveal much about their own culture through the act of interpreting that of another people. The very questions that Anthony


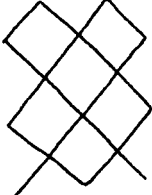
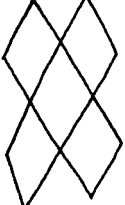

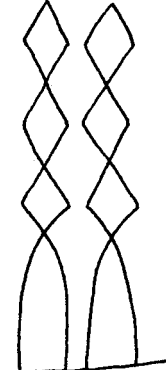
Clan Design	Owning Clan	Description
	Dharlwangu	Equilateral diamond, smaller than the Munyuku one.
	Munyuku	Equilateral diamond, larger than the Dharlwangu one.
	Gumatj 1 and 2	Elongated diamond, shorter than the Gumatj 3 one.
	Gumatj 3	Elongated diamond, longer than the Gumatj 1 and 2 one.
	Mardarrpa	Separate strings of elongated diamonds, ending in <u>u</u> .

Figure 13.5. Variants of the diamond design type (Morphy 1991: 172).

posed about the relationship between representation and abstraction lay at the heart of modernist discourse. The questions Narritjin and Banapana posed were closely related to the place of art in their own society. Interestingly, both parties found some of the same aspects of Abelam art puzzling.

Anthony as we have seen was puzzled by the fact that Abelam paintings had no myths associated with them, a concern that came up several times in Narritjin's questioning. Narritjin's first comment to Anthony was "did you get a story about this?" About half way through he commented "they have got names but they have got no stories. They have got no myths." And at one point he asked almost incredulously "Couldn't the artist understand what they are meaning?" This line of questioning thus produced precisely the conclusion that Anthony had made, and affirmed the contrast he drew between Yolngu and Abelam art.¹⁵³

The next topic that Narritjin took up was the relationship between art and social organisation. In Yolngu art there is a very precise relationship between designs and group organisation. Yolngu society is divided into two patrimoieties, Dhuwa and Yirritja. The moieties are exogamous and patrilineal so that Dhuwa people marry Yirritja people and vice-versa. People's primary attachment is to smaller groups within the moiety, which I call clans. The clans are landowning groups. They play a role in structuring marriage relationships and they have rights in the sacra associated with their clan lands.¹⁵⁴

Northeast Arnhem Land is criss-crossed with the tracks of ancestral beings. In the ancestral past they stopped at particular places on their journeys, they created features of the landscape and left behind the people who were to succeed them in the land. Each area of land is associated with a distinct set of paintings, songs, dances and objects that represent the clan's sacred inheritance and derive from the actions of the ancestral beings who created the landscape. Designs may mark the relationship between groups along an ancestral track. For example, the fire/wild honey complex of the Yirritja moiety is associated with variations of the diamond design. The Djan'kawu designs of the Dhuwa moiety are associated with different combinations of circle-line motifs. Each clan has its own particular version of the design that unambiguously marks it as the property of a particular group. The system of clan designs as a whole enables a precise mapping of the relationship between land, ancestral beings, and social groups (Morphy 1988).

The Yirritja moiety diamond designs are associated with a number of clans linked by the fire/wild honey ancestral complex (Figure 13.5), and each clan has its own variant of the design. Starting geographically in the west, the Dhalwangu design is associated with fresh water inland (Figure 13.6). The diamonds are small and equilateral, incorporating within their sequence pointed ovals representing billabongs. Munyuku diamonds are similar but larger and infilled differently (Figure 13.7). The Madarrpa diamonds are more elongated and often end in a shield-shaped figure. They are associated with the coastal region of Yathikpa in the east where the crocodile ancestor was caught in the conflagration and dived into the sea to escape the flames, carrying the fire with him (Figure 13.8). North along the coast at Caledon Bay the Gumatj design is associated with a second crocodile who carried the fire inland.



Figure 13.6. *Dhalwangu diamond design*, copyright the artist, reproduced courtesy of Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.



Figure 13.7. *Munyuku diamonds*, copyright the artist, reproduced courtesy of Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.

This sociological level of interpretation is only one component of the meaning of the design. In each case the design has other meanings encoded in it that relate to the actions of the ancestral beings, and the designs have enormous interpretative potential. I will briefly consider the Munyuku design to show some of the directions in which interpretation can go (see Figure 13.7). The design represents wild honey and fire; it originated in ancestral action when the diamond pattern was burnt into the surface of a ceremonial object. The designs encode many elements of the wild honey complex. Yirritja moiety wild honey is associated with paperbark trees in the swamps. From this perspective the diamonds represent the wet season floodwaters. The white crosshatching is the foam on the raging waters, the cross pieces are logs being tossed around in the current and the red and black crosshatching represents weeds being dragged along in the water. The honey is ready in the mid dry season when the land has dried out and the country is burnt by fires lit by the hunters. The diamonds now represent the passage of the fire. The red diamonds represent flames, the white ones smoke rising, the red and black ones are sparks flying and the cross bar represents a log left behind by the fire edged with ash. The honey is now accessible and the diamond pattern represents the beehive itself. The white diamonds represent grubs, the red ones are cells filled with honey and the crosspieces are sticks inside the hive. In the case of each clan's diamond pattern the interpretations of the diamonds will vary slightly according to the mythological events that took place in the country concerned. In the case of the crocodile, for example, some of the meanings refer to the pattern burnt into its skin by the fire.

On the surface Abelam art could represent a very similar system, consisting as it does of geometric elements that look remarkably similar to north-east Arnhem Land designs. This apparent similarity provided an initial basis for Narritjin's interpretations (Figure 13.9). Geometric clan designs are present in all Yolngu sacred paintings. Sometimes the painting is comprised only of the clan design. The design may simply be outlined, the segments may be painted in red, yellow white or black pigment, or each segment may be infilled with elaborate crosshatching. The design signifies the clan and ancestral being associated with the painting and acts as a constraint on the interpretation of other elements. Both Narritjin and Banapana initially drew analogies between the geometric patterns in Abelam art and Yolngu clan designs. Narritjin unsurprisingly interpreted an Abelam diamond design as a wild honey/fire design similar to those associated with the Munyuku and Dhalwangu clans. Indeed designs looking almost identical to this occur as Yolngu body paintings.¹⁵⁵ Another painting (Figure 13.10) characterised by zigzag patterns was interpreted as a design that his own clan, the Manggalili, shares with the Munyuku for salt and fresh water coming together.

The most frequently occurring design element in the paintings Anthony collected were pointed ovals and sequences of triangles. The pointed oval is a central element in many of Narritjin's paintings. It is not strictly speaking a clan design but the shape of a sand sculpture used in mortuary rituals (see Morphy 1991, chapter eleven). The sand sculpture represents one that was made in the ancestral past (wangarr) by female ancestral women called Nyapililngu. The sand sculpture can be used to represent the bodies or parts of the bodies of the ancestral women in an analogous way to the Abelam tradition.

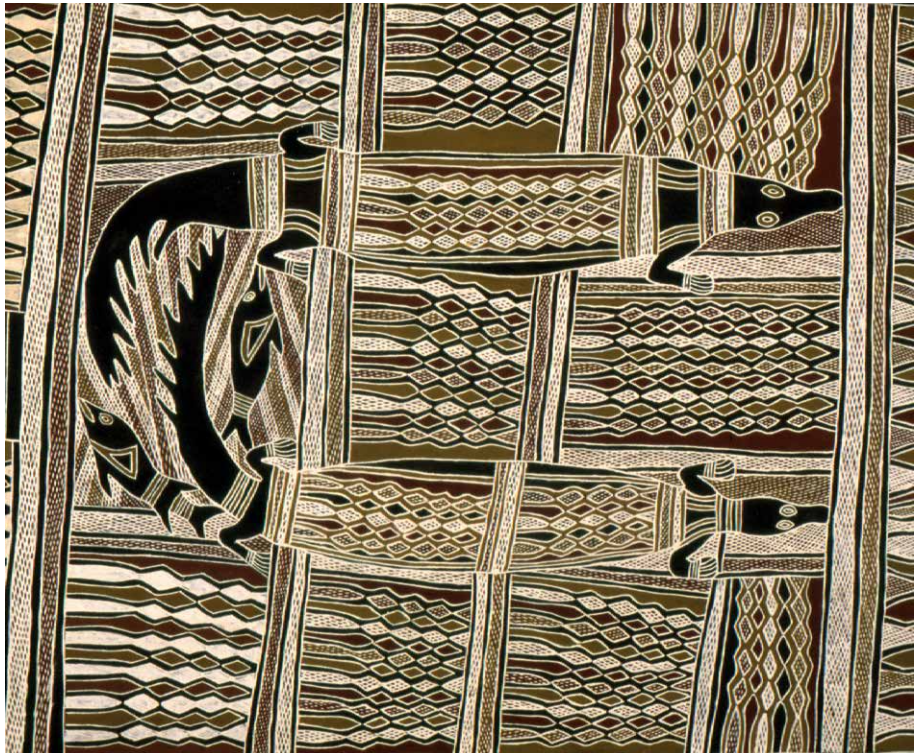


Figure 13.8. *Madarrpa diamond design*, copyright the artist, reproduced courtesy of Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.

Triangular patterns are closely associated with a group of Yirritja moiety clans that include the Yarrwidi Gumatj clan of Narritjin's mother's mother and a set of clans associated with the mythology of a race of ancestral hunters who came from overseas to visit the Arnhem Land coast. They can also occur as a design element in Manggalili clan paintings. One of the first paintings that Anthony Forge showed to Narritjin and Banapana contained both a pointed oval and a complex of triangular designs (Figure 13.11). The painting was initially interpreted by Banapana as looking like a butterfly. Narritjin on the other hand associated it with the lake at Djarrakpi made by the ancestral Nyaplililngu, with sand dunes on either side. He identified the yellow semicircles and the triangular patterns as sand dunes and the central feature as a yingapungapu sand sculpture, which in turn represents the lake. He thought that they might also represent the clouds that rise up above the lake and are associated with the symbolism of mortuary rituals. The bottom two figures were seen as triangles within triangles and from a Yolngu perspective were appropriately interpreted as clouds and sand hills associated with a Yirritja moiety clan. The central feature was said to represent a string girdle that the women wore around their breasts. Narritjin and Banapana had both entered into the spirit of things. It might be argued that Banapana, in interpreting the figure as a butterfly, was responding simply to its formal properties whereas Narritjin began by looking at it in terms of his own iconographical tradition.



Figure 13.9. Geometric elements in Abelam art, photo by Anthony Forge. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

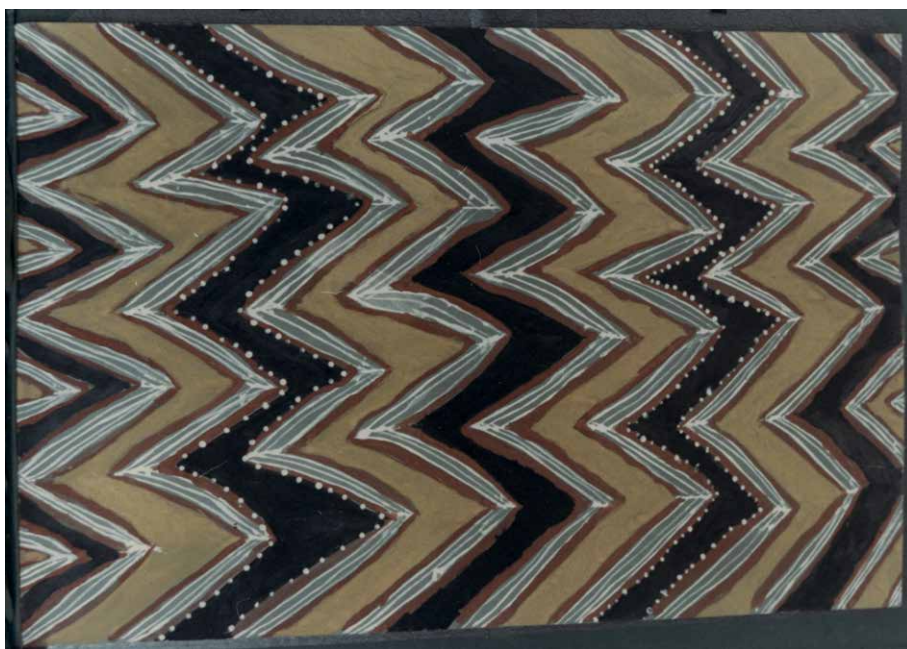


Figure 13.10. Zigzag patterns in Abelam art, photo by Anthony Forge. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego

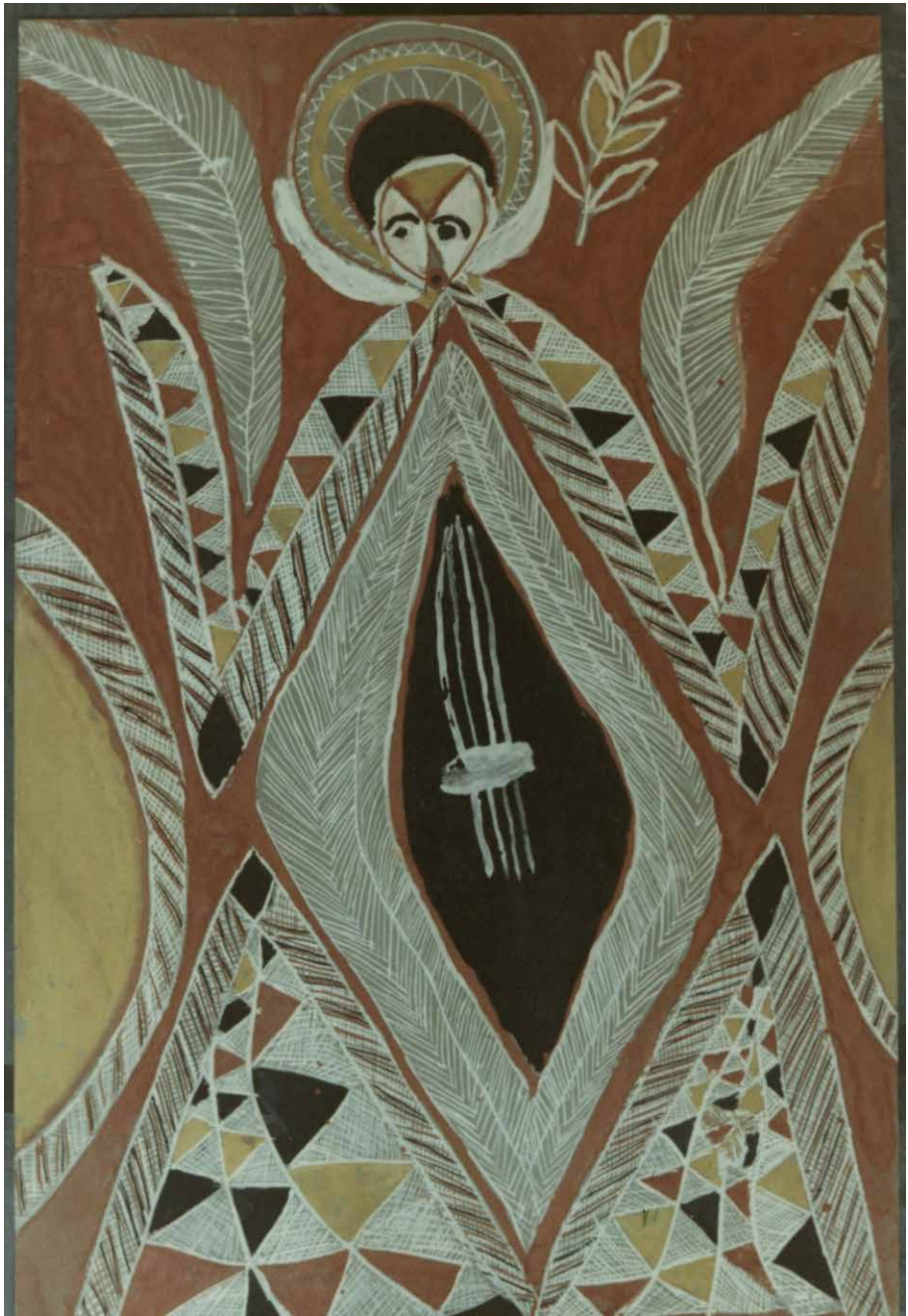


Figure 13.11. Pointed oval and triangular designs in Abelam art, photo by Anthony Forge. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

The dialogue between butterfly and Yolngu clan design continued as a theme for the next set of paintings.

Narritjin began to emphasise more the possible connection with the whale hunters, “to us it means sand dunes but to them from New Guinea, they are putting out cloud like the spout from the whale – connected to Balanda¹⁵⁶ dreaming”. In Narritjin’s iconography the diamond design as cloud represents the distant horizon at the beginning of the wet season, the time when the mythical whale hunters would visit the Yolngu country. Narritjin interpreted a later painting as the home of the Balanda people, picking up on a structural feature of Yolngu painting in which a central feature surrounded by clan designs is seen as a representation of the djalkiri or foundation place of a clan. Banapana again however thought that it “might be a butterfly”. At which point Anthony intervened, saying that this was precisely the meaning given by the Abelam and that indeed they interpreted the whole painting as butterfly. Banapana then said that the triangular pattern must represent the colours and pattern on the surface of the wings. The presence of the butterfly, however, contradicted the interpretation as clan design. Butterflies are Dhuwa and the triangular design is Yirritja. Yolngu paintings almost never combine Dhuwa and Yirritja elements together. So Narritjin concluded in this case that the painting as a whole might be representing Dhuwa and Yirritja people living together.

A critical difference between Yolngu and Abelam paintings was beginning to emerge. They could not be interpreted on the same basis. Realising this Banapana asked Anthony: “Do they have anything like Dreaming tracks?” Anthony replied: “They are not really about places, they are about spirits. But they don’t think the spirits are ancestors, they are different.” At which point I intervened: “So you are not connected to them”, and Anthony continued: “So there is no clan ownership. They have moieties and one moiety paints the other and then they reverse this next time. But they paint the same pictures”. Narritjin laughed and said “Yes I can see that.” While Anthony was out of the room Narritjin expressed concern about Abelam marriage practices “Very good paintings, but no story. How are they born? Into the same group of people like a clan? How do they manage themselves?” I repeated that they did have two moieties, which Narritjin interpreted to be exogamous (as in the Yolngu case) continuing: “As long as they do that then they are good for marriages, if they were married according to their own blood then that would not be good for them.” When Anthony returned I said: “we were talking about if they were exogamous”, and Anthony replied “Well yes at the level of clan not moiety, but they don’t marry into the same blood”. “That is good”, said Narritjin.

Narritjin had thus identified fundamental differences between the Yolngu and Abelam systems which influenced the ways in which paintings were interpreted and also the ways in which art articulated with social organisation. Yolngu art is integral to the dynamics of moiety and clan organisation and the identification of clan designs is part of the interpretative process. Much of the content of paintings is determined by the mythology of the place represented. Yirritja moiety paintings will only have Yirritja moiety animals and vice-versa. The correct identification of the clan design thus provides guidance to interpreting other elements in the painting whether they are represented by figurative or geometric representations. Crocodiles, for example, are only associated with Yirritja moiety clans while certain kinds of sharks are associated

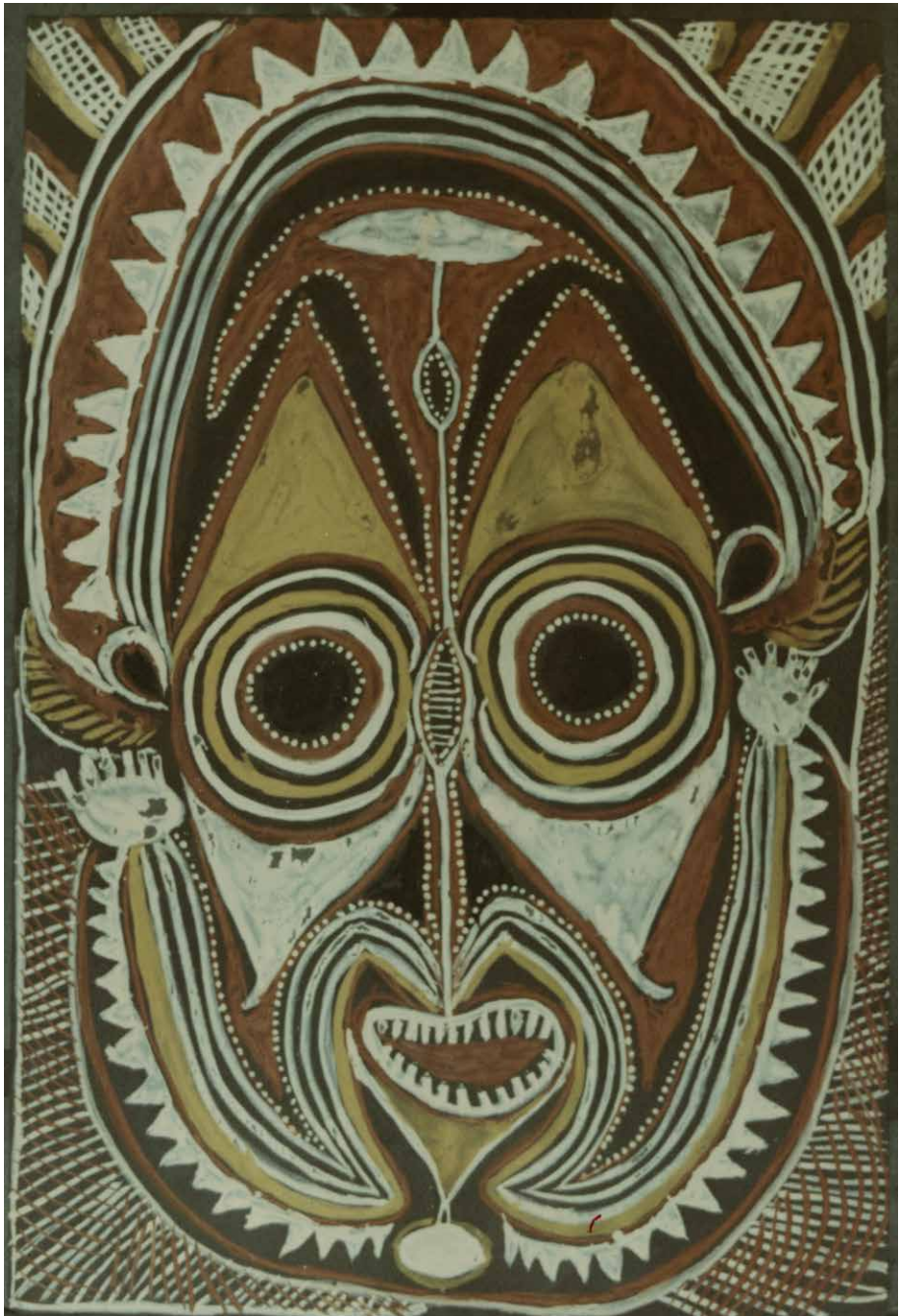
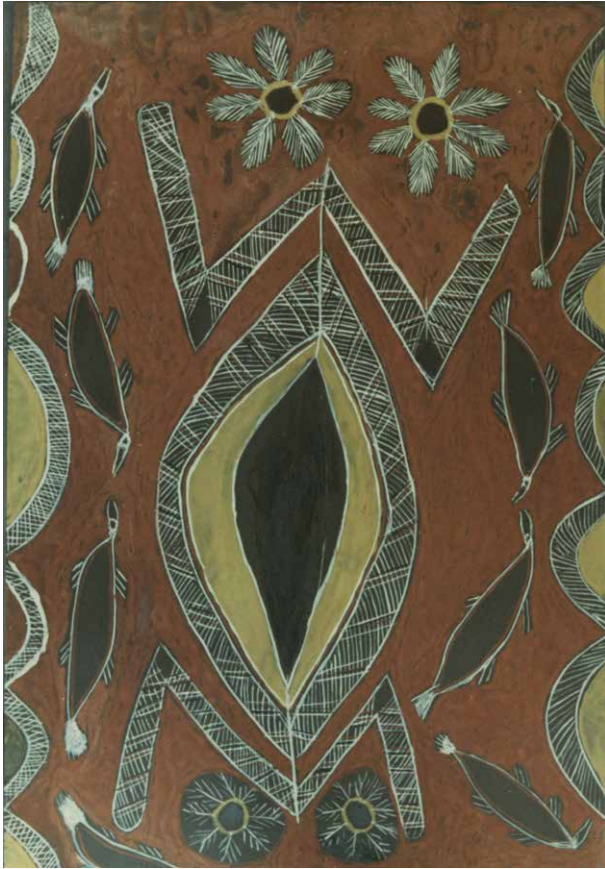


Figure 13.12. Abelam face motif with lizard skin pattern, photo by Anthony Forge. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.



*Figure 13.13. Body motif,
photo by Anthony Forge.
Anthony Forge Papers.
MSS 411. Special Collections
& Archives, UC San Diego*

with Dhuwa moiety clans. While Abelam paintings look as though they might be organised on such a basis, it does not take long to discover that they are not.

When Narritjin and Banapana began looking for representational meaning in Abelam designs their interpretations were often quite close to Anthony's and reflected principles used by Abelam in producing them (though from a Yolngu perspective). Many Abelam paintings include within them paintings of human figures and faces, often distorted and reorganised. Banapana, in Anthony's words, became expert at identifying Abelam figures. Figure 13.12 was the first image identified by Narritjin and Banapana as a face. They initially identified the mouth, teeth, and eye but also thought it might have the features of a butterfly. Anthony then said that the pattern around the outside was said to represent a lizard skin and Narritjin said that he could use a similar pattern to represent a Yirritja goanna. Narritjin then turned the image upside down and pointed out that it also looked like a head the other way up.

The next image we looked at represents a whole body rather than a face (Figure 13.13). I tried to interpret it in Yolngu terms as a representation of landscape, suggesting that the central feature was a waterhole. "No", said Narritjin, "they think it is a body and those are the arms and legs. And we can see that they are hunting for fish." "And", said Banapana, "those are eyes up there". This interpretation greatly pleased Anthony:



Figure 13.14. *Abelam face motif*, photo by Anthony Forge. *Anthony Forge Papers*. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

“But if you ask the Abelam they say they are stars, but according to Forge they are eyes and you can see Banapana picked it in one”. Narritjin then noticed that the motif seemed to repeat itself at the bottom and continued: “They say they’re eyes here but what is in the bottom looks like eyes too! But which way up is it? – very tricky”.

Narritjin quickly grasped the idea that many Abelam paintings could be interpreted as faces and tended to identify the elements at one level with similar meanings to those Forge recorded from the Abelam. As we looked at another painting (Figure 13.14) Anthony said to Narritjin: “You are the expert on finding things – you pick out bits of faces which are true”. Narritjin identified the painting initially as a face with two eyes and a nose in the centre. When Anthony confirmed this identification Narritjin continued to develop further interpretations. He switched his reference point and suggested that the figures on the outside represented the person when he was alive and the central figures a whole lot of bones. The white circle that had previously been identified as the mouth became the skull and the white lines bones. He also said that the outside figures represented two faces looking in towards each other. Perhaps he saw the figures as combined eyes and mouths looking inwards. In Narritjin’s own paintings dead animal and human figures are painted in white in contrast to living ones, and the transformation from life to death is a major theme of his art.

The next one that Anthony presented (Figure 13.15) again provoked an interesting discussion. Narritjin identified it as a human figure. Anthony suggested a face with three eyes and Narritjin qualified it as really three people with three eyes. He thought that the pointed oval was probably a ceremonial ground and the semicircles on either side were sand dunes. He went on to suggest that the painting was deliberately designed

to obscure meaning and to confuse the interpreter: "What they are giving you is a trick, they are putting a person but on the inside they are putting little bits of people [cut up] so you can't decide".

A number of interesting points arise out of this process of interpretation. Narritjin and Banapana find the principles of Abelam bodily de-construction easy to grasp. They interpret the ambiguous and multiple images partly according to the underlying principles of their own artistic system. The figures are transformational human figures which can have the characteristics of animal forms. But the interpretations came equally out of the structure of the paintings, the information they elicited from Anthony Forge about their meanings, and reflections on what significance the paintings might have in the context of Yolngu culture. They saw the paintings as comprising elements of animals and humans cut up and reassembled to contain elements of both. They used Anthony as an informant to identify meanings of elements when he knew them. And they reflected on what the significance of the particular combinations might be. One conclusion that they came to was that the paintings represented spirit beings and that many alluded to transformations between animal forms, in particular butterflies and human beings. The idea of transformational spirit beings is salient to Yolngu artists since their own system of representation is centrally concerned with representations of transformational ancestral beings (see Morphy 1989). The connection with butterflies suggested a particular association with the Dhuwa moiety land of the dead of Buralku since butterflies abound there and have resonance with human spirits.

The dissected human or animal body is a familiar theme of Yolngu culture. The bodies of ancestral beings are distributed throughout the landscape where they have been transformed into features of the environment. In mortuary rituals and initiation ceremonies across Arnhem Land images of the divided body abound. It is also significant that Narritjin in this context and on other occasions suggested a way in which Abelam art might function as a system of restricted revelatory knowledge. The three eyes might be there to suggest three people but maybe this was deliberately misleading. Certainly Narritjin's view of Abelam art would be consistent with Forge's that "there is no line to be drawn between representational and abstract art".

I suggested at the beginning of the paper that Narritjin's and Banapana's interpretations of Abelam art were never as distanced as Anthony's. Although they were able to identify key differences between the structure of Yolngu and Abelam art, their interpretative process nonetheless attempted to incorporate Abelam art within their own system of meaning. Art is one of the ways in which Yolngu have incorporated outsiders in their world, they use their own structures to transform outsiders into insiders. I have shown elsewhere how the Macassan traders became incorporated within the Yolngu universe by being projected into the ancestral past as ancestral beings of the Yirritja moiety (Morphy 1991: 140-41). People from New Guinea are linked with the same mythology, and the ancestral world from whence they come is said to be the Yirritja moiety land of the dead.¹⁵⁷ To Narritjin and Banapana it was no coincidence that designs from coastal clans of the Yirritja moiety figured prominently in Abelam art. This mythology became a reference point for interpreting many of the paintings. Narritjin used the term Balanda to refer to the New Guineans (Abelam) a term which today is used mainly as the polite word for Europeans.

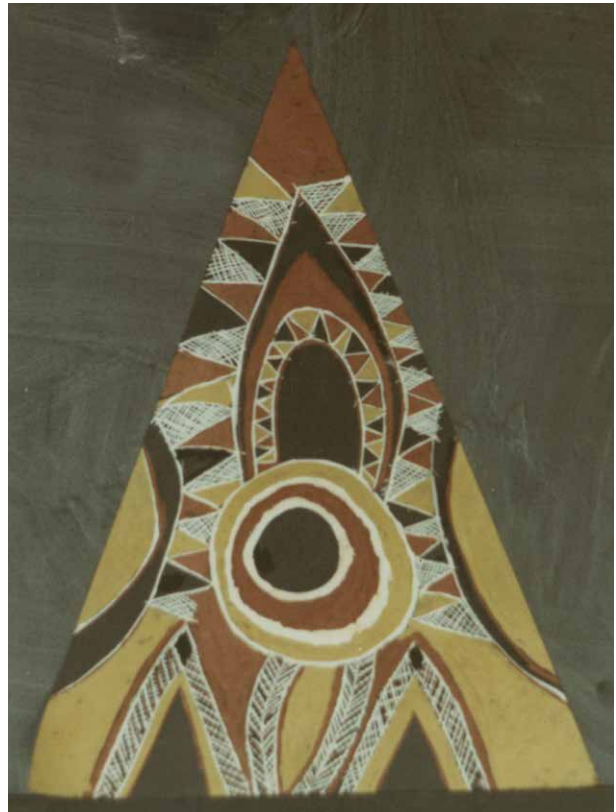


Figure 13.15. *Human figure, photo by Anthony Forge. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.*

This came out clearly in the interpretation of one painting (Figure 13.16) where Narritjin and Banapana refused to adopt Anthony's interpretation as the most relevant one. The painting is another representation of two human figures, on this occasion headless. Discussion of the painting began a little embarrassingly. Narritjin reasonably thought that the representations were of two flying foxes. Anthony said: "No it is not flying foxes". I then said "I couldn't even guess", which elicited the cutting response: "You haven't been to any of my lectures have you? – No it is the human body again and this is the big ornament made out of baler shell." And then Narritjin took over: "They are looking for whale, that is the sea grass and this is the fire place here and here for cooking up the whale". In later paintings Narritjin identified the baler shell ornament as a representation of the knife used to cut up the whale, the coloured segments as pieces of whale, or the spout of the whale. On another painting he identified the diamond designs as representing one of its other meanings: the flags put up by the Balanda people and which Yolngu use today in mortuary rituals.

The mythology of the Balanda is associated with whale hunting. Yolngu paintings focus on the cutting up of the whale into various parts for division among relatives. The paintings represent the skin, flesh and blubber and often include the knife used to cut it up. The whales are connected with the wet season. The spout of the ancestral whale is thought to create rain clouds represented by the anvil shape of the tail. In Yolngu paintings the triangular patterns represent the wet season clouds lined up on the



Figure 13.16. Two human figures, photo by Anthony Forge. Anthony Forge Papers. MSS 411. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego.

horizon and the effect of light reflected through them. The whale is rarely represented figuratively and the paintings usually comprise geometric elements. Figure 13.17 is an example of a Lamamirri clan painting of the whale by Deturru Yunupingu. In Deturru's painting the triangular patterns in red, yellow, black and white represent the wet season clouds on the horizon. The knives represent ones used to cut up the whale, the central zigzag pattern is rough water covering a rock that is a transformation of the body of the whale. The tail of the whale is shown floating in calm water at the bottom and at the top the figure alludes to the tail, the spume of the whale and storm clouds. In other paintings of the whale bands of colour are interpreted as cut up pieces of the whale.

Neither Narritjin nor Banapana thought that they were interpreting the paintings as Abelam themselves would have. Rather they entered into a process of interpretation and comparison that moved them towards an interpretation of Abelam art and its relationship to their own. In interpreting paintings as representations of human faces and bodies they adopted Forge's "Abelam" perspective. They attempted to see the paintings as Abelam saw them. They de-emphasised the placedness of Yolngu art, its reference to landscape and its close association with a system of clanship.

In other cases, such as in the case of the whale hunters, they developed avenues of interpretation that on the surface moved some of the paintings well away from Abelam experience. The association of a number of the paintings with the mythology of Balanda whale hunters that belongs to a set of Yirritja moiety clans, came more out of the form of art rather than any information that they could elicit from Anthony. They knew that the Abelam did not hunt whales and had established that the designs were not directly linked with patrilineal clan organisation. Yet a number of things about the paintings persuaded them of the salience of their interpretations. The whale hunters who visited Yolngu country in the past were associated with New Guinea and eastern Indonesia. The whale hunters were associated with spirits of the dead as they understood the Abelam paintings to be. In Yolngu myth the whale hunters themselves were transformed eventually by fire into flying foxes – the form in which they return to Yolngu country to this day – and flying fox was given by Anthony as a meaning to elements on the same set of paintings. But more than anything else it was the formal elements of the paintings that kept bringing them back to the whale hunters – the triangular patterns of the wet season clouds, the knives that were used to cut up the bodies of the whale. The strips of whale that they saw in the paintings, the crosshatching that referred to whale fat and flesh, and the black curved forms that hinted at the whale's tail and cloud, made the interpretations hard to resist. In the paintings Narritjin saw whale. But it was a mythical whale that is characterised as much by its absence as its presence. Of the Abelam paintings Narritjin said: "You never put out the picture of the whale. But every time you show me one of these paintings I know it is still on the whale side". He was referring to the whale in Abelam art but he could equally have been referring to the whale in Yolngu art. Deturru's painting of the whale is as literal a representation of a whale as one ever gets in Yolngu paintings and it is usually much more hidden than this.

The Balanda mythology as a whole is concerned with transformation and passage across the seas, positioning Yolngu cosmology in relation to the wider world outside. The mythology provides a basis for the symbolism of Yirritja moiety mortuary rituals in which different elements are associated with different stages of the ceremony. The cutting up of the whale meat for example is associated with the division of responsibilities of kin in the ceremony and is also a metaphor for the process of bodily decay and disintegration following death. The process of interpretation Narritjin and Banapana were engaged in here runs parallel to the more analytic approach they adopted to other aspects of Abelam art and is part of the process of incorporating outsiders on the edge of their known social universe within an existing though changing framework of understanding.

Conclusion

What have we learnt about the relationship between Abelam and Yolngu art? Perhaps as important, what have we learnt about the properties of each system from adopting a comparative perspective? Anthropologists have always been aware of the implicitly comparative nature of their discipline, of the fact that the concepts and concerns of the anthropologists' own culture have influenced the questions posed and the way they are answered. Gradually over time the questions and methods change as part of



Figure 13.17. *Lamamirri clan painting of the whale by Deturru Yunupingu, copyright the artist, reproduced courtesy of Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.*

the process and become more sensitive to the cultures studied. In this paper I have described a mediated discussion in which Abelam art was analysed in relation to Yolngu art. Anthony Forge approached Abelam art with two key questions in mind. One, derived from the history of western art, concerned the significance of form in art, in particular, the relationship between representation and abstraction. The other came out of the symbolic anthropology of the 1960s and concerned what the art “meant”. Forge concluded that the distinction between abstract and representational art was unhelpful in analysing Abelam art. As far as meaning was concerned Abelam art was a closed system in which meaning was generated

internally by the relationship between formal elements. He came to this conclusion partly because the Abelam did not provide the kind of answers to the question of meaning that he anticipated. While they gave meanings for individual elements and sometimes a name for a whole painting, they did not come out with detailed exegesis of their art – they appeared to have no stories.

Narritjin’s and Banapana’s interventions in Anthony Forge’s analysis of Abelam art are of interest partly because they challenge the assumption that questions about meaning in art are in themselves somehow eurocentric. Forge’s question, “what does it mean?” was an entirely reasonable one to Narritjin and Banapana, and they found the absence of myth or story just as puzzling as he did. And like Forge they drew conclusions that moved interpretation in a different direction, towards transformation, towards restricted knowledge, directions in which Diane Losche’s analyses of Abelam art also turned. They responded to the “aesthetics” of Abelam art seeing the brilliant surface forms reflected in the designs, the colours of the butterfly’s wings and the lizard’s skin. And they also began to learn Abelam conventions of figurative representation. While Narritjin and Banapana had been exposed to my own line of questioning about meaning I believe that the questions they posed about Abelam art were very much their own and reflected in turn differences between Yolngu and Abelam art. They also suggest that the puzzles of the anthropology of art are not solely a western concern.

The simple answer to the difference between Yolngu and Abelam art might be that the Yolngu do have stories. However, this is misleading since Yolngu stories are not what the painting represents but a parallel genre which articulates with art. Yolngu

paintings are also a product of the fact that Yolngu use art as a general system of communication and have a tradition of exegesis. Yolngu art, in comparison with Abelam flat painting, is a highly differentiated system. In Yolngu art many different kinds of meaning can be encoded and art can be used for different purposes in different contexts. Narritjin's interrogation of Abelam art revealed some of the key features of the Yolngu art. Yolngu art contains within it a system of clan designs which precisely identify the relationship between people, place and ancestral being. The system is a flexible one that can accommodate changing relationships and is integral to the ongoing politics of Yolngu society. However, it is important to stress that in the system of clan designs it is possible to encode complex messages with a minimum of ambiguity. This level of specificity is absent from the Abelam system.

However, in other areas Yolngu art is every bit as open ended and ambiguous as Abelam art. Yolngu geometric art is multivalent and many different meanings can be condensed in the same form, as in the case of the wild honey/fire design. This multivalency is exploited to make connections between things and to create metaphors in the Yolngu case, as it is in the Abelam case. In both artistic systems, however, it is necessary to recognise that there are different ways in which the same meaning can be encoded and that different ways of encoding influence the way the meanings are understood and interpreted. In the Yolngu case there is, in addition, a tradition of figurative representation which can encode many of the meanings of the geometric art. In both the Abelam and Yolngu case, however, meaning is conveyed by the relationships

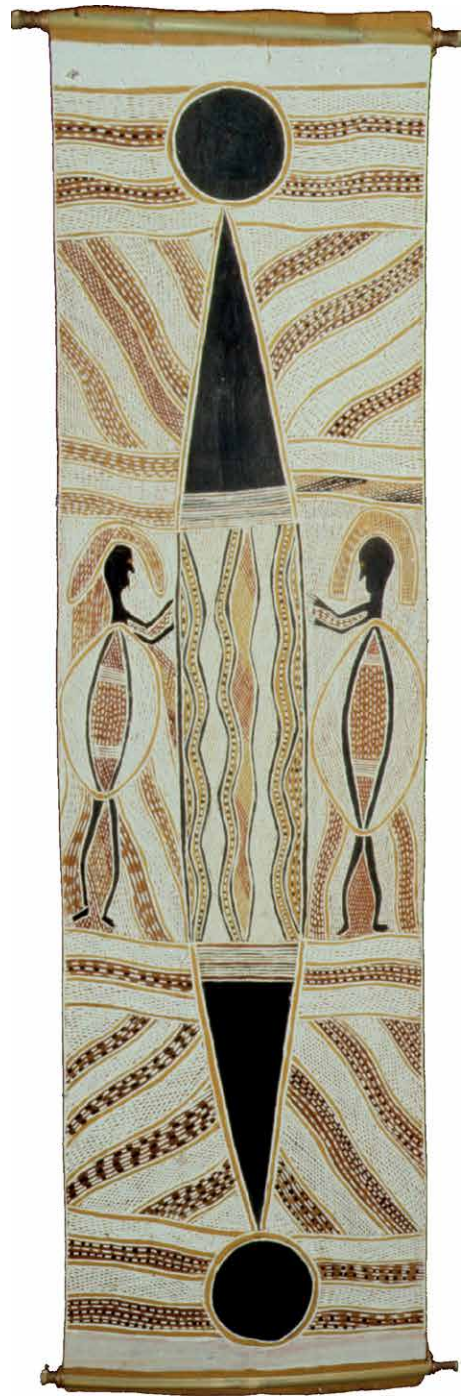


Figure 13.18. *Yingapungapu*, Narritjin Maymuru, copyright the artist, reproduced courtesy of Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.

between representations as well as by the representations themselves. The fact that a nggwalndu ancestor can be represented in human figure form or deconstructed into various component parts is an integral feature of the Abelam system. In Yolngu art this type of deconstruction is exploited in many different ways. The capacity to represent ancestral beings in different forms, ranging from figurative representations to particular combinations of geometric forms, enables the transformative nature of ancestral beings to be conveyed (Morphy 1989). It also enables them to be understood as abstractions that are only partially manifest in any one representation.

Yolngu art is also concerned with those fundamental themes of human existence that Forge identifies as the real “meaning” of Abelam art. The issue which he comes back to again and again is that of the relationship between men and women and the fact that “women are generally considered the inferiors of men throughout Australia and New Guinea but analyses of the ritual system in both areas ... [reveal] women to be truly creative and naturally powerful” (Forge 1979: 286). Forge argues that art and ritual exploit and articulate such fundamental contradictions, “giving fundamental comprehension of the culture at an emotional as well as an intellectual level”. But he also goes on to say that such meanings are unlikely to be articulated verbally perhaps precisely because they are not fully worked out or fully expressible in a simple sentence, and hence the absence of stories in Abelam art. While I do not entirely agree with Forge’s conclusions there are many areas of Yolngu art too where meanings remain implicit, and often they are concerned with the nature of things, with relationships between things, and of course with relationships between men and women. I will conclude with a painting by Narritjin (Figure 13.18) which delighted Anthony when he saw it, and which would have communicated well to an Abelam interpreter.¹⁵⁸ It shares a key iconographic element with Abelam art: a pointed oval. We may remember that the pointed oval on the frieze of women in the house façade became, lower down, the contour that outlined the face of the male nggwalndu figures. The implicit meaning being the male face incorporated within the ancestral vulva. In Narritjin’s painting we have an analogous set of incorporations. In the centre is a sacred object, a digging stick, representing an ancestral being. It is acknowledged to have a phallic reference. The figure is repeated within two human figures on either side. The figures are ancestral women and the digging stick is included within an outer ellipse which represents her pregnant stomach. Narritjin said the digging stick is her baby. What could the meaning be of a woman being pregnant with a penis? Ask Freud or Forge, an Abelam or a Yolngu. But don’t expect a straight answer.

CHAPTER 14

Anthony Forge and Innovation: Perspectives from Vanuatu

LISSANT BOLTON

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In the introduction to *Primitive Art and Society*, Anthony Forge begins by acknowledging that, historically, models for understanding non-western art included assumptions about its unchanging character. Thus the theory of diffusionism assumed that “the motifs and styles of an art were enshrined in ancestral practice and were somehow unchanging” while studies focussing on the artist asked whether “he could be said to have a style of his own or was merely the skilled executant of an ancestral unchanging tribal style” (Forge 1973b: xiii; reproduced in this volume, Chapter One). Forge reports that at the conference from which that book derived “the problem of the relationship between ... artists and their societies, between the individual and the collective” was constantly discussed (Forge 1973b: xx).

The issue is one that Forge himself raised regularly: the issue of the relationship between artistic autonomy, stylistic constraints and cultural proscription, that is, the issue of innovation. As he observed elsewhere in that same introduction:

all art systems ... provide ... stylistic limits, culturally determined but capable of change through innovation, and at the same time considerable freedom in selection of elements and in stylistic variation available to the artist working within these limits (1973b: xvi)

and

the freedom of the artists to innovate, the width of the band of permissible stylistic variation, [is] greater in some societies than others. It also [varies] within societies according to the use to which the object [is] to be put (1973b: xx).

If Forge raises the question of innovation regularly he generally does so only briefly: each discussion adds a little to the subject, tantalisingly none address it directly. The abstract for a missing paper presented at the Australian National University in 1982

suggests a fuller focus on the subject on that occasion. The abstract says “The Abelam ... place an enormous value on an unchanging society and culture ... yet ... the best works of Abelam culture show a vitality and aesthetic tension that shows them to be ... not just copies of long vanished prototypes” (n.d., MSS 411 Box 10 Folder 26). Nevertheless, as in so much of his work, Forge’s oblique comments on innovation are significantly insightful and stimulating. His thinking about on the topic helps in addressing the very substantial transformations visible across Melanesia in both the past and the present.

The reality of ongoing change in material (and indeed social) forms in the region is now much more widely acknowledged. Thus the underpinning understanding of the 2012 survey *Art in Oceania: a new history* (Brunt and Thomas 2012) is the recognition that the art of Oceania has undergone continuous change – not only as a result of European arrival and of colonisation in all its forms, but long before. As Nicholas Thomas observes in the introduction to that volume, it is vital to understand the cultures those Europeans encountered “as the outcomes of longer-term histories, of Islanders’ voyages in literal and metaphoric senses” (Thomas 2012: 13). The question which Forge’s comments raise, that continues to need considered analysis, is how such changes occur. For me, his comments on the issue provide a way to think about contemporary material innovation in Vanuatu.

Forge reports in several contexts on successful and unsuccessful innovations in Wosera art. In “The Abelam Artist”, for example, he counterposes the story of a young man who carved and painted a tree growth in the shape of a human head, but who was not allowed to display it (because although the painting was in the correct style the shape was wrong for a tambaran figure) with several stories of a successful innovations. One concerns a detail in the painting of the façade of a new ceremonial house: after some debate and uncertainty, the innovation was accepted and was then much admired. Forge reports that in this case, the men concerned were of high status, and that there were no alternative artists available at the time. Later, the ritual group who commissioned the house won much prestige from it (1967: 118; reproduced in this volume, Chapter Six). In another paper Forge discusses innovation in flat-painting style in eastern Abelam, reporting that “when a whole façade of a ceremonial house badly executed in what was meant to be the northern Abelam style was judged a disaster, further innovation in flat-painting style was discouraged” (1990: 164; reproduced in this volume, Chapter Ten). At the same time, he reports that “a great deal of change in ritual and social organisation was typical of the Abelam in the period of my informants’ memories and no doubt long before that too” (1990: 164). It seems that while innovation was a regular phenomenon in Abelam, for it to be successful the work had not only to be well-made, but much depended on the reputation and political flair of the individuals concerned.

In his paper for *Primitive Art and Society*, Forge described his own initiative to elicit innovative art works. In Plate 14 of that volume he publishes one such piece. This painting incorporates unusual symbols of supernatural power, incorporated into an image that is consistent with the standard form for wut paintings, the palm spathe paintings that decorate the façade of a men’s cult house in the Wosera area. Describing the innovations, Forge comments that the artist, Toto, was an ambitious man who

took the request for innovation as an opportunity to paint something that would be powerful in benefitting him, rather than a traditional design designed to benefit the community (1973b: 186; reproduced in this volume, Chapter Seven).

The question of how much innovation is possible in orthodox ritual and practice is addressed in other writing based on fieldwork in the same period. Michael Allen, who also started field research in 1958, commented about ritual systems in Ambae, north Vanuatu, that “just as strict conformity with precedent is highly lauded ... so too are daring innovators the most admired of men” (1981: 108). Allen identified three different such forms, which he characterised, respectively, as innovation, inversion and revolution, namely minor cultural innovations, rule breaking, and making the marginal into a new form of orthodoxy (*ibid.*: 109). He contended that “such non-conformist tactics are an integral, widespread and much ignored feature of Melanesian politics” (*ibid.*: 109). The innovations Allen discussed are all to the conduct of the Ambae male status alteration system or graded society. He reported a series of cases where men sought to enhance their own political power and achievement, arguing that in each case success is a matter of political acumen. The ability of an individual to pull off an innovation depended on the accuracy with which he assessed his chances of doing so. In both Wosera and Ambae, men working within a proscribed frame sought to achieve individual merit through making more or less daring initiatives.

The famous “blue man” figure from Savkas, Malo, north Vanuatu, now in the Louvre, may well have been such a politically ambitious innovation. Used to mark a man’s achievement of one of the highest ranks in the status alteration system, this grade figure is painted all over with Reckitts Blue, the laundry whitener sold in trade stores in Melanesia from the late nineteenth century. The figure was collected in 1935 by the *Korrigane* expedition. In that laundry blue was an introduced material, using it as a paint on such a high-ranking figure must have been an innovation. No other blue-painted figure from north Vanuatu now exists, which suggests that the use of the blue colour was not widely taken up. The figure may have been sold because it was no longer wanted, but it is possible that it was sold because the innovation had been deemed unsuccessful. Certainly, since it is recorded as having stood outside a men’s cult house, albeit presumably under deep eaves, it cannot have stood there very long given that the highly soluble paint still covers the figure: a tropical thunderstorm could have washed it all off.

Forge’s focus in discussing innovation in Abelam art was always on the art that Abelam men made. He was not interested in the less dramatic creations of women, observing in “The Abelam Artist” that there are

no artists who produce decorated objects who are not also cult artists, and it is in the context of the cult that they acquire and perfect their skills. There is only one exception to this statement: the women who make netted string bags (wut) using red, yellow, white and a sort of dark purple string in various excellent designs (1967: 110-11).

Forge argued that the production of wut is “simply a skill” adding that the “ability to produce any design, although highly prized, is no indicator of status” (1967: 111). He did not discuss the netbags in any detail, except in acknowledging the critical connection between them and men’s art that is made explicit in their name. Inside the men’s cult house the term wut is used to refer to the palm spathe panels that decorate it and also to the designs painted on them, which are referred to as the beautiful string bags of the cult spirits *nggwalndu* (1967: 112)(see figure 14.4). The term for womb is *nyan wut*, meaning the netbag of the child. Forge remarked upon the metaphoric importance of the term wut, describing it as one of the most emotionally loaded words in Abelam, and argued that the use of the term within the men’s cult acknowledges men’s recognition of the essential participation of women in Abelam social reproduction. Forge often referred to netbags in relation to the men’s cult and the palm spathe paintings, but did not write much about the netbags themselves (1973b: 189; reproduced in this volume, Chapter 7).

Maureen MacKenzie, in her study of netbags brought a further perspective to bear on the significance of wut, demonstrating that they are even more closely tied to the men’s cult than their metaphoric use suggests. MacKenzie says

In Abelam, the bilum is also used as an insignia of hierarchical stages of achievement for men. The tri-coloured *tsaanyip wut* (decorated bilum) may only be carried by those men who have been introduced to the *ngwaal* (ancestors) in the *sakindu* stage of male initiation. While male initiates are being shown the *maira* (carvings of the ancestors) by their *anui* (initiator), their wives are being instructed in how to make the complex *tsaanyip* designs by the wives of the initiators. Fully initiated men who have seen the last of the *maira*, and their wives, may carry the *kwanje wut* (flying fox bilum) which is not decorated with tri-coloured designs but with a distinctive texture in the looping known technically as *taakwi wut* (MacKenzie 1991: 15).

MacKenzie added that

among the Abelam in Wosera, the highly decorative *ngaal na wut* (bilum of the ancestors) can be carried only by those men (and their wives) who have completed initiation and therefore received the full complement of knowledge from the ancestors who are always represented (in carvings and paintings) with one of these bilums (MacKenzie 1991: 185-6).

It is clear that netbags, women’s products, were intimately entangled in the men’s cult. MacKenzie also published a 1984 photograph of a façade of an Abelam men’s house which figuratively depicts a string bag. She commented that whereas traditionally wut designs were geometric, façade paintings in the early 1980s were making a very explicit realistic reference to the source of the designs, the women’s string bags. In other words, innovations in men’s painting made the reference to wut explicit on the outside of a men’s house, for all to see. In the context of such constant innovation in men’s art it seems likely that women also made innovations in the netbags themselves, although there are no records of those changes from either Forge or from MacKenzie.

Textiles were also important in the principle Ambae status alteration system, *hungwe*, which Allen described. The most important textiles to this system were the clothing textiles known as *singo* which men wore to demonstrate their achieved rank in the status alteration system (see figure 14.3). These textiles, made from processed and plaited pandanus leaves, were, like *wut*, made by women. Their complex designs indicated the specific ranks achieved, as MacKenzie describes the different *wut* as doing in Abelam. The different *singo* designs were said to derive from different places: the design *singo tamarino*, for example, is said to have originated from Malo island (the home of the blue man figure). *Singo* designs comprise a series of riffs on combinations of diamonds and surrounding lines – the distinction between the different named textiles generally turns on how the lines surround the diamonds. Different districts on Ambae often named these designs differently, also varying the relationship between the ranks and the designs. While there is a clear rule of thumb in the Longana district of east Ambae that enables people there to identify and name the designs, it is hard to apply the distinction when looking at the many Ambae *singo* in museum collections. When Jean Tarisesei, from Longana, east Ambae, came to look at the collection in the British Museum in 2009, she found that the more textiles she looked at, the less confident she became that she could identify and name the different *singo* designs.¹⁵⁹ She was not confident from which part of Ambae each textile originated, and attributed her uncertainties to the confusions of regional variation across Ambae, but the difference may very well also reflect design innovations over time.

In reflecting on innovation, Forge observed that Abelam men's art production was in part directed to the acquisition of prestige – that as a result “magnificence is consciously sought”, and thus that “this aspect of the ceremonial allows an element of fashion into the art, but since the benefits of the ceremony extend beyond the village, innovation that has not some good magico-religious justification or precedent will be subject to wide disapproval” (1967: 118). As the strength of religious precedent has been eroded over time – and in the case of Ambae, as the power of status alteration ceremonies to significantly enhance political and economic power has waned – innovation has become less risky. At the same time there is a tension between the consistency of the system and innovation – too much change erodes the whole edifice of practice.

The contexts in which innovation happens are also changing. If women are not making innovations in making *singo* they are making innovations now in other forms of fibre art. In particular, one area of constant innovation in Vanuatu over the last fifteen or so years, has been in relation to baskets. People do not make netbags at all in Vanuatu. Netbags seem to have been a characteristic product in what was once Sahul, that is in both Australia and New Guinea (Bolton 2012: 29), whereas plaiting dominates as a fibre technique in the parts of the Pacific settled by Austronesian speakers. In Vanuatu people make baskets, plaiting leaves – principally coconut and pandanus – to make a wide range of different basket types. Ambae women identify about thirteen different coconut leaf baskets that they would plait, often made on the spot when needed to carry produce, but only five plaited pandanus baskets. The principle pandanus basket Ambaeans made, and sometimes still make, was a special large basket, *tang bunnir*, which was used to store textiles kept for exchange. This basket appeared in public only at marriages and other major exchanges when the major parties to the

exchange would appear carrying a tang bunnir containing a substantial gift of textiles. There were several different kinds of tang bunnir, but I know of no Ambae small baskets. It seems that on Ambae people did not traditionally carry personal baskets: indeed, when I discussed baskets with some women from Ambae, they it made very clear that plaited pandanus textiles came first, and baskets came later. The designs plaited into tang bunnir were derived from those used on plaited pandanus textiles.

Other islands in the archipelago, notably Pentecost, Tanna and Futuna, have always made smaller baskets. In the first decade after 1980, when Vanuatu achieved independence, ni-Vanuatu started to live in town and began to need to carry baskets in which to keep keys, money, *etc.* At this point, Pentecost and Futuna women cornered the market in making baskets for sale to their fellow Port Vila residents. Initially made from undyed pandanus, the beauty of these baskets lay in the traditional designs plaited into their sides. By the late 1980s, Pentecost basket-makers had started to plait in decorative stripes of dyed pandanus, and by the turn of the millennium makers had developed all kinds of designs using dyed pandanus. Going to Vila every year, I noticed that year by year, different designs would be the most fashionable, as the star design was, for example, in 2006 (see figure 14.1).

Somewhere around 2005, an entirely new kind of basket was developed in north Ambae, probably in Lowainasasa village. The new style has a plaited pandanus base, but at the base of the sides the ribbons of pandanus are twisted together to create two ply string, which is then plaited to create an open weave like a net. These baskets are generally called “string baskets” in Vanuatu. I heard it said at the time that the design was inspired by netbags from Papua New Guinea. Certainly, netbags were increasingly visible in Vanuatu through the first decade of the twenty-first century as ni-Vanuatu went to Papua New Guinea to study or for other reasons, and brought them back, so that there may well have been such an influence. The specific details of the string basket vary – long or short handles, plain or patterned pandanus – but all are small baskets, the size determined by the length of the pandanus leaf ribbons from which the body of the basket is made. In subsequent years, further innovations in the form were devised, like the 2009 introduction of seams along the four corners of the basket (see figure 14.2).

I have not yet had an opportunity to go to north Ambae and track down a story or stories about the development of the string basket, but I would hypothesize a number of points about this innovation. Although making baskets is not proscribed by magico-religious significance, to use Forge’s term, it is constrained by the strong Vanuatu assumption that practices belong to place. A certain style of basket (or of carving) comes from a specific island, sometimes from a specific district, and generally speaking, only those people who come from that place have the right to make it. In Port Vila, over the last two decades, this kind of thinking has come unstuck: people speak about “stealing with the eye” – meaning to copy something one has seen without having permission to do so – and more and more people are copying other people’s innovations in craft products to enhance their sales in the various markets in the centre of town. However, this kind of casual theft continues to be frowned on. Ambaeans had no characteristic basket style to call their own, and thus nothing to make which they could sell in the new context of artefact markets. I think that the string basket was developed in response to that lack, and perhaps partly out of the sheer pleasure of invention and innovation.



Figure 14.1. Star Design basket made by Eileen Bebe. © The Trustees of the British Museum. 2007,2011.1.

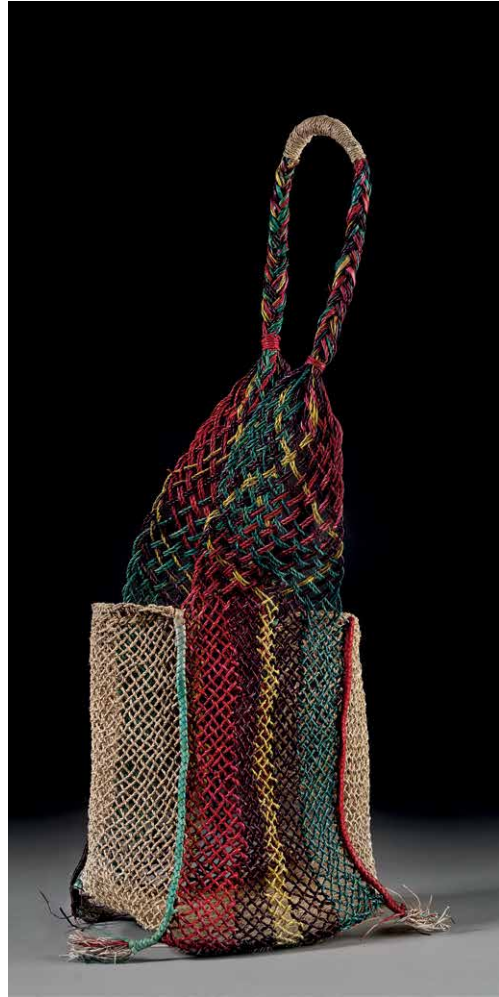


Figure 14.2. String basket made by Deborah Tari, Ambae. © The Trustees of the British Museum. 2009,2037.1.

As Forge implied to be successful an innovation has at some level to appeal to other people's aesthetic sense: string baskets, with their echo of netbags, have appealed greatly. By 2009 they were the most fashionable baskets for sale in the artefact markets of Port Vila – bought as much by ni-Vanuatu as by expatriates and tourists, and continuing to be one of the popular basket types selling in the artefact market along the waterfront for several years. They were still made and sold in 2016, after Cyclone Pam destroyed the artefact market building, and, no doubt, many pandanus palms. They have lasted in a way that innovations in pattern (like the Pentecost star basket design) have not. String baskets have proved to be a highly successful innovation created not in the context of ritual proscription, but rather in the context of new commercial opportunities. Innovation for women from Pentecost involves the development of new patterns within the context

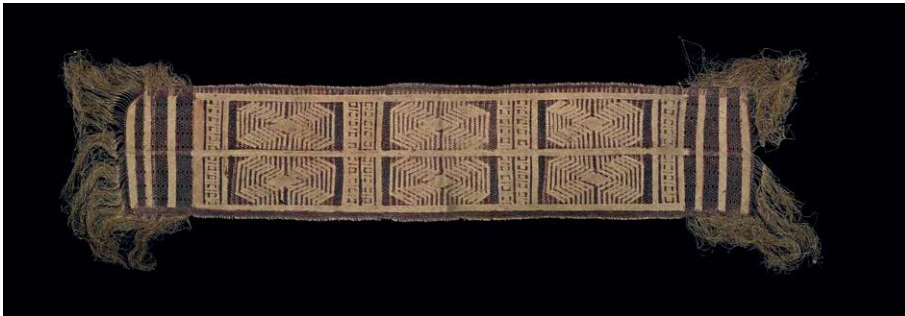


Figure 14.3. Textile *singo tuvegi* Ambae. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Oc1913,1115.309.



Figure 14.4. Palm spathe painting with *wut* crosshatching. Wosera, East Sepik Province, PNG. Noel McGuigan collection. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Oc1987,05.3.

of their own acknowledged style. Without their own orthodoxy to exploit, Ambaean women have needed, but in that sense have also been free, to develop an innovative plaiting technique, and thus make a new form of basket that can be regarded as their own style.

Forge was in Wosera, as Allen was on Ambae, at a critical period. Both places were significantly affected by the Second World War but by the late 1950s, in both places people were re-asserting their cultural practice – getting back to regular life. It may be that the encounter with the Second World War exaggerated innovation as a practice – certainly the innovations Allen discusses are very much influenced by the war, but innovation was and is a constant in Melanesia. The point of interest, the one to which Anthony Forge attended, is the tension between innovation and conservatism: just how much innovation can be permitted, what is its relationship to the ground of orthodoxy. As so often, Forge in addressing the conditions and operation of innovation, raised questions, which, over forty years after *Primitive Art and Society*, continue to challenge us today.

CHAPTER 15

*The problem of agency in art*¹⁶⁰

LUDOVIC COUPAYE

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Paradigm shifts, which lead to profound methodological and theoretical transformations of a field of study, rarely spring out of the mind of a single genius. As these often emerge out of debates and controversies, their consolidation can often conceal the giants on the shoulders of whom they are built. Such has been the case in the anthropology of art, in which the now classical book by Alfred Gell (1998) has spurred a series of discussions and debates over recent decades.

Gell's "Parthian arrow" was an efficacious, rigorous, and at times humorous, critique of classical approaches to "primitive art" which, until then, had been anchored in the search for meaning in art; instead, Gell invited a shift from a hermeneutic stance to a pragmatic one. Yet, the posthumous fame acquired by Gell's emphasis on agency, through its critiques and its praises, overshadowed in its brilliance previous studies on the topic, and in particular the work of Gell's own supervisor, Anthony Forge.

There is little room to revisit the whole of Forge's theoretical contributions to the question of "art" from an anthropological perspective, but his analysis of systems of representation of the Abelam of the Maprik area (in the East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea) undeniably foregrounded some of the most fertile ensuing discussions about "visual culture", and managed to address themes still at the core of wider current anthropological discussions. This paper is but a very short attempt to use these theoretical developments and recent ethnography and develop some of these paths.

The dramatic drop in production in the Maprik region, due to the abandonment of initiations under the influence of diverse Christian confessions, hardly offers the same ethnographic possibilities as in the late 1950s and 1960s.¹⁶¹ Thus, my suggestions have to remain only hypotheses, some of which, however, have been at least confirmed through discussions in 2001-03 and 2014 with Nyamikum painters and people interested in the topic.

The relationality of Abelam "art"

Though encountered by Richard Thurnwald (1914) before the First World War, the first proper ethnographic study of the Abulës-speakers¹⁶² was conducted by Phyllis Kaberry just before the Second World War (Kaberry 1941). The specific ethnographic

setting of the Maprik area chosen by Forge, was a region with a remarkably rich visual production, which attracted the attention of Western museums from early on (see Smidt and McGuigan 1995; and Kaufmann, Chapter twelve in this volume).

While being a recurrent feature in the Melanesian area, it could be that it was the sharp contrast between, on the one hand, the lack of a specific exegesis provided by Abulës-speakers and, on the other hand, a particularly spectacular visual domain which invited Forge to raise the question of “meaning”.¹⁶³

Forge’s approach to art was remarkable in two ways. First, his analysis of Maprik visual style drew elements from history, the environment, gender, exchanges and politics. In these respects, it was one of the first studies which demonstrated the capacity for an investigation of material and visual culture to not only breach and bring together sub-fields, but also to obtain analytical results that could not be obtained through a single approach. Second, his search for the identification of style and meaning was based on a careful analysis of the Abulës-speakers’ representational system. Through a thorough iconographic investigation, Forge concentrated his efforts on the structural relations between the different scales of designs, documenting smaller units identified by Maprik painters and seeking their relations with whole images.

It is perhaps important to remember that, at the time, Saussurian semiology (*i.e.* a linguistic-based approach to get at the meaning visually conveyed) was the dominant model of investigation of modes of representation. However, it became increasingly challenged by the multiplication of ethnographies of indigenous visual productions (*e.g.* Munn 1973, O’Hanlon 1989, Morphy 1991, Roscoe 1995, Tuzin 1995).

While his analysis of visual hierarchy was undeniably inspired by linguistic models, Forge was also wary of any further comparison between art and language, often quoting the famous sentence from Isadora Duncan: ‘If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it’ (Forge 1970: 289; Bateson 1973). As already noted by Morphy (1992: 146), it is perhaps precisely the limits of relationships between visual system and language which led him to formulate some ground-breaking ideas, in the form of the two following related premises:

- Abelam painting is a self-referential system of communication – that is, with no reference to an oral tradition;
- in relation to the first premise, Abelam painting is not “a representation of something in the natural or spirit world, but rather was *about* the relationship between things” (Forge 1973a: 189, original emphasis).

Reached before the concept of “relationality” gained its fame in Melanesian ethnography, this double conclusion, though concerning the link between style and meaning, could also be seen as a remarkable manifestation of a wider understanding of one of the central concerns of Melanesian societies: to render relations visible (*e.g.* Strathern 1988).

Forge’s analysis undeniably foreshadowed some of the major discussions on visual culture: the non-verbal dimension of visual arts, the modalities at play in the relation between a visual sign and its referent(s), as well as the relation between these modalities and a general cultural-specific understanding of the world and its metaphysics. One indeed can wonder where these premises would have led him, had Forge been able

to engage with some of the ensuing discussions on representational systems. His conclusions opened some paths that Gell himself followed in his first monograph (1975) and developed further in one of the crucial chapters of his last work, which – though engaging with a Polynesian context – dealt with the relation between style and culture (Gell 1998: 155-220).

In these respects, Gell's provocative posthumous opus itself opened the path to a wider inclusion of Peircean semiotics, which offers potentially fertile ground to push further Forge's findings. Among these, one can mention several related approaches: the resort to indexicality; the outlining of a vernacular conception of the nature of signs; the distribution of images through different media; the fundamental role of the technical process of image-making; as well as the relation of images with language and secrecy; finally, on a larger scale with the nature and constituents of knowledge.¹⁶⁴ In this paper, I intend to briefly outline some of these threads.

Iconography and the capture of properties

Forge's methodology was classical in the sense of rigorously documenting the iconography of the kurabu façade, the ceremonial house. In the Northern area of the Abulès-speaking territory, figures were usually arranged in horizontal registers (see Figure 15.1). For Nyamikum,¹⁶⁵ on the bottom, the Gwaldu, sometimes associated with named clan ancestral entities, with an emphasis on their huge faces; above a series of female beings, the kutakwa; then a series of figures identified as kwajë-takwa, the

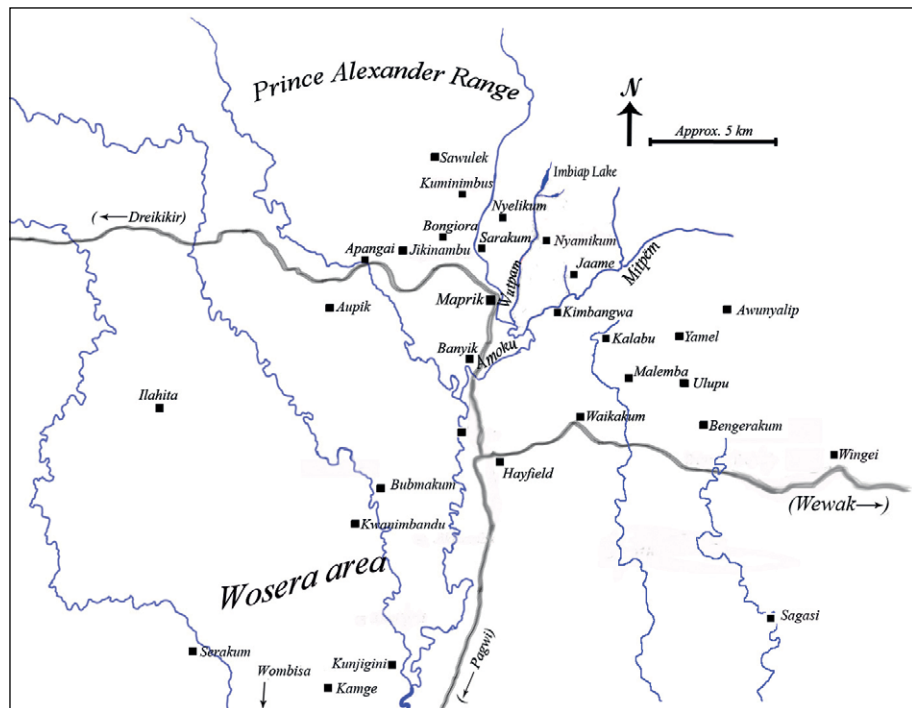


Figure 15.1. Map of the Maprik area, Papua New Guinea. © Ludovic Coupaye.

flying foxes; and finally on the top, the narrowest part of the façade, a series of motifs identified as nyawurëk, butterflies. The entire ceremonial house itself is¹⁶⁶ described in Nyamikum, to be associated with the mythical cassowary from which came all food,¹⁶⁷ and who migrated from East to West.¹⁶⁸

The basis of Forge's analysis was the identification of the formal elements constitutive of overall figures and a discussion about their relations with referents provided by the painters. Whether motivated or not (de Saussure 1983 [1916]: 130), or continuous or not (Munn 1973), these relations present all the characteristics of being of an iconic nature. However, as both Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin (1995, 2011: 61) and Howard Morphy (2005) discuss, Abelam iconicity manifests not only a rich polysemy, but also a formal ambiguity which complicates any interpretation only based on physical resemblance or verbal referent. Though one motif can refer to a range of referents based on actual resemblance, the combination of several identified motifs to form a larger composition – such as a human body or the face of an ancestor – resists any straightforward semiological interpretation of “meanings”. Hence, a circle identified in itself as the “moon”, baapmu, can be used to make the “eye”, mëni, of the whole Gwaldu, but the shift of referent does not follow, as Gwaldu do not have “moons” for “eyes” (see Korn 1974). Such denomination of shapes was indeed logical as, while Western artist and art historians can resort to a taxonomy of forms such as “circle”, “triangle” or “square” coming from a scientific discipline known as “geometry”, Maprik people (and most non-Western languages) might not have such a distinct and specific domain of knowledge and have to resort to a pre-existing nomenclature, necessarily based on shapes already known through their phenomenal manifestations in the world. Hence, Maprik people would say “moon” when we say “circle”.¹⁶⁹

It is possible to suggest, at this stage, that one of the difficulties Forge faced came from a conflation between his conception of “meaning” – the cultural reasons and signification of the paintings – and the ways in which meaning at the time was restricted to a semiological understanding of signification processes. Had Forge been able to work with what Webb Keane defined as “semiotic ideologies” – that is the “basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world” (Keane 2005: 419), indicating a particular ontology of signs – maybe some of the issues might have been easier to deal with.

This is where one can interpret the ambiguity, or “multi-referentiality” of motifs as also stemming from their semiotic properties, specifically the blurring of the boundaries between iconic and indexical relations. Such merging of iconicity and indexicality was already signalled in Roman Jakobson's discussion on how the relations between factual/imputed similarities or contiguities (notably when it comes to symbolic relations) indicate that “learned, conventional connections [can be] copresent ... in indexes and icons” (1971: 700). It is, one can suspect, these connections in the Maprik representational system which make the clean cut between the different types of inferences at play difficult.¹⁷⁰

Indeed, while iconic relations are based on resemblance with their referent, this resemblance is in no way restricted to a physical or visual one, Keane recalled (2005: 187-9). Iconicity can indeed represent the qualities and properties that a particular ontological regime attributes to things and entities. More importantly, when

iconicity or Jakobson's contiguity occurs, it can actually go beyond a mere resemblance to reach the level of actualization, where a motif does more than referring to, but *actually makes its prototype/referent present*. One of the examples, existing at the time Forge was still active, was brought up by Nancy Munn's discussion of qualisigns (1986); but closer to us, Shirley Campbell's remarkable work on Trobriands canoe-splashboards and prow boards, showed how specific motifs capture and encapsulate abstract – though tangible or at least perceptible – capacities attributed to existing things (Campbell 2002: 94-109). Both these ethnographies open new ways in which to think about the modalities of iconic relations and leave enough analytical room to encompass the pragmatic dimension of Peircean semiotics. Thus a given motif becomes an actual manifestation (index) of its prototype, giving it, in turn, a capacity to act upon both the medium (e.g. the painting) and its audience (e.g. the initiates). A more recent example is provided by Sandra Revolon's remarkable ethnography of Aorigi, in the Solomon Islands, (2007, 2014) where iconicity and indexicality of black and white contrasts contribute to the artefact's power to attract the ancestors.

Hence, whether at the smallest level of individual motifs or perhaps even more at the level of whole figures and compositions, the design of specific Maprik motifs can be based on iconic resemblances with, as well as the capture of, properties attributed to the actual referent. The shining of stars and fireflies, the unfolding of fern fronds, the W/M shape of arms and legs of initiates resting between dances, holding their imposing headdresses,¹⁷¹ or the capacity of the female to bring forth human beings – all these motifs could have been used to encapsulate within wider figures some qualities attributed to the referent. This capacity was also mobilised by Trobriands carvers to capture the perseverance of the egret or the uncanny efficacy of the sea-eagle on canoe prow boards (Campbell 2002: 93-109). The efficacious role of these motifs (or part of them) thus suggests a particular semiotic relation – a “semiotic ideology” – between a sign and its myriad of referents that, indeed, go beyond the Saussurian model, by mobilising an indigenous theory of likeness, based on its many guises.

The distributed efficacy Abelam iconography

Forge's interpretations according to which artefacts, or the kurabu as a whole, are rendering the power of the ancestors accessible to the human's senses, need only be taken one step further. As we have seen, likeness, in the shape chosen by Maprik painters (or Trobriands' carvers) does not necessarily exclude an instantiation of capacities or intentions. Representation can also be a “re-presencing”, leading us back to Gell's agency, in particular in relation to the effects Abelam painting can have on their audience. It is the very multivalency of Abulës-speakers' semiotics, grounded on various combinations between resemblances, causalities and associations, which obviate any direct verbal exegesis, leaving “meaning” implicit, embodied and integrated at a level of subjective experience.

While the source of the agency of the motifs can thus be found in the particular “semiotic ideology” they resort to, their pervasiveness across media also plays a role in their efficacy. In addition to these semiotic properties, or one could say reinforcing them, the vernacular efficacy of Maprik images on the audience (be they Abulës-speakers or not) also stems from the fact that it is highly recognisable. Indeed, as

Sheila Korn (1974) and Hauser-Schäublin (1989) remind us, Abelam visual production possesses (in spite of regional variations) a strong visual identity, be it motifs, names or indeed whole figures, circles, etchings, stars, fern frond or other pointed ovals which could be seen on ceremonial houses, facial painting of initiates, yams or carvings. Pots, sculptures, paintings and even body ornaments thus formed a stylistic whole through motifs and themes that repeated themselves across media.

Choosing paintings as the main medium for his analysis definitely allowed Forge to not only collect and document designs, but to also point out how, as a corpus, it could not be considered as referring to another domain such as language, carved figures or shapes, or even body ornaments. It is on this basis that Forge chose to demonstrate that it constituted an independent representational system, worthy of study in itself. However, while also analysing other artefacts, such as masks or bone daggers, his focus on designs could have gone further in analysing the cross-referential effect (the agency) that the repetition of designs across materials and media would have on its audience.

The systematic use of designs across media (kurabu façade, initiation chamber walls, carvings, engravings on potteries, coconut bowls or even cassowary bone daggers, face paintings, body ornaments, *etc.*), created a wider visual context. As Hauser-Schäublin argued (1989b) this could allow the spectator to (re)create relations, which, by resonating between and across media, did not need to be explicit.¹⁷² Thus, the visual register would indeed be about the relationship between things, including the *relationships between media*.

The self-referential nature would be then, as Gell demonstrated in two of his chapters on decorative art and style (Gell 1998: 73-93; 155-220), between the different motifs, their combinations and their media and a “style” – a modality of part-whole relations or a set of rules of transformation, germane to Christian Kaufmann’s notion of “canon” (1997: 278-9; 2005) or Susanne Küchler’s definition of a “prototype” (2010).

Techniques of enchantment

Forge, however, also pointed out other aspects which could not be found in the sole analysis of the iconography, nor even be visible in the finished product itself. Investigating the actual process by which the images were made led him to bring two other levels of explanation.

First, following his own supervisor Raymond Firth (1925), Forge explored the position and role of the “artist” (Forge 1967), as well as his training and the ways he operated. Not only did he describe the socialisation process by which one becomes recognised as an image-maker, and how social values had to be inculcated and performed alongside the practical skills required, but he also offered a way to see the painter himself as a major component of the success of the operation. Indeed, for the process to be successful, the painter had to follow a strict set of prescriptions and proscriptions, which in Nyamikum is called Yakët, aimed at transforming his body, “sharpening” it (Coupaye 2013: 119), and ensuring the success of his endeavour.

Second, Forge was also aware of the importance of specific operations performed, and of components used, by the painters. In one of his first papers (1962) entitled “Paint, a magical substance”, he described the role of pigments in both painting and long yam cultivation. In Nyamikum, according to Vitus Kwajikë, such substance is

called *sakiwura* and is one of the most powerful materials of secret origin, so rare and so potent that only a pinch was enough to give the paint its “shininess” (*kutkawutak*). Confirming Forge’s findings, the same substance can be either applied on the tip of the growing tuber, or placed inside the ground on its growing “path” to make it grow long and fat. This usage reinforced the pre-existing analogy (or semiotic likeness) made between long yams (*waapi*) and painted carvings (*wapinyan*, “child of the long yam”), positioning the substance in between paint and fertiliser, as the Nyamikum people themselves described it in Tok Pisin.¹⁷³

However, neither the paint nor the act of painting seemed sufficient to Kwajikë. Instead, he insisted on the fact that the power of brilliance brought by *sakiwura* on a painting had to be stabilised, through the opposition of a hibiscus flower next to the painting, along with the naming of the figure, once the painting was finished. In addition, the overall success of the process as well as the efficacy of the image were said to be dependent on the painter following a proper *Yakët*.

These ethnographic details, which could not be inferred from the finished painting itself, equated the act of image-making to a magical one, resonating with Marcel Mauss’ argument that both technical and ritual processes presented similar characteristics (1973: 75). Following his famous “formula” (Sigaut 2003), the act of painting, then, has to follow certain rules to be “efficacious” (according to the actors) and is transmitted, sanctioned and recognized by the group – that is, in Mauss’ wording, “traditional”. Such a similarity in modalities of action, indeed makes it difficult to distinguish between technical phenomena, ritual and aesthetic ones (Mauss 2007: 67) – a proximity which Gell himself would explore in two of his famous texts on the relation between art, magic and technique (1988, 1992).

This is where the notion of “style” comes back in, but in its translation in Abulës under the term *paatë*, both defining a way of doing things, a lineage and a yam vine (Coupaye 2013: 286-91). The semantic field here refers to the specific ways a generative capacity for re-production – or re-presenting – manifests itself in a particular form. In other words, one could say that “likeness” is the result of an efficacious, sanctioned and appropriate process of reproduction. Thus, Maprik images operate their power and agency from the particular semiotic ideology, reinforced by the very materiality of the images, beyond its appearance. The image, then, becomes a complex index of several agencies: of the prototype and of the materials, as well as of the image-maker and of the realisation.

Devices and containers

The display of unspeakable values is thus reinforced by the capture of effects through likeness, substance and techniques. In fact, this multiplicity of aspects of Maprik representational system testifies, if this were needed, to the sophistication of Melanesian visual cultures. The dynamic relations displayed between different scales and forms of re-presentations play a central role, as I suggested above, but among these forms, the ceremonial house *kurabu* as a whole is one of the main manifestations, visible by all from the outside. It concentrates in itself several properties of Maprik representation, in particular as an actual apparatus in itself, in relation with initiations.

It is Diane Losche (1995), in a brilliant article, who allows us to add this additional level of interpretation, which does not exclude previous ones, but perhaps obviates them in its metaphorical process. By relating the ceremonial house and a myth recounting the origin of the physical capacity of women to give birth through the mythical opening of their vagina, Losche concludes that the kurabu is a device, a container inside of which people are transformed.

While not directly dealing with the iconography, Losche's interpretation points out one of the pervasive tropes of Abulës speech: dynamic relation between inside and outside, and above and below (see Hauser-Schäublin 2011). In discussions with the people involved in the building of a small version of the kurabu in Nyamikum in 2014, explanations of the façade mobilized yet another set of associations, slightly different from the ones described by Hauser-Schäublin (2011, 2015) on the analogies between the register and initiation stages. The different registers of the paintings, according to the group of men involved in the construction, were called *gaay*, a term which refers to "places", but also to "layers", as in layers of soil. If I am correct, then, as one "reads" the façade from the top to the bottom, one also goes more "in-depth" – and closer to the ancestral powers.

These spatial relationships, as I have suggested elsewhere (Coupaye 2009), extend the network of metaphors, the kaleidoscopic nature as Hauser-Schäublin coins it (1995), of Abelam construction and use of images. Acting as non-verbal resonances, or perissologies as Pierre Lemonnier calls it (2012), these form a wider context of container-like forms in which yam tubers, garden mounds, ceremonial houses, ceremonial spaces (the kurabu, and the public ground in its front), yam storage houses, the Gwaldu on the facades, or human bodies (particular female ones), present us with indexes of potentiality (or affordances) and which, through their iconicity, also become inherently spaces of germination, reproduction, growth, and transformation. The *puti* figure inside the kurabu, an old man which is empty, is the index of this power, hidden in the ground, and from which lineages (*paatë*) as capacity sprout, emerge and divide, like the vine (*paatë*) from the mound and the ground. All these spaces are inside, below, hidden, in which things are transformed and matured, through the combined work of both humans and non-humans (Coupaye 2013), to re-emerge in a renewed shape – or in a Strathernian (1999) sense, a renewed form.

This is perhaps where it is possible to suggest that Abelam images present us with a particular semiotic regime – that is the actual ontological nature of images and their component. Not only can small components (stars, pig legs, *etc.*) act as icons of properties which need to be captured, becoming indexes of fertility and power, but whole compositions then become iconic representations of ancestral power as the source of human and non-human reproduction and growth. Initiates, thus, emerge out of the ceremonial house (kurabu), as the long yams emerge out of the mound (*kutapmu*), as lineages emerge out of ancestral entities, equating humans and non-humans, lineages and yams, people and ancestors.

Secrecy that reveals

The question of “meaning”, as posed by Forge, thus merged two analytically different aspects of visual culture. First, the logic which allows the relation to happen, that is, the particular Abulès-speaking “semiotic ideology”; and second, a local ontology of designs. A third one pertains to the interpretative process triggered by this representation, and thus the relation between the making of the image and the active participation of an audience, or “patients” in Gell’s term. That is, how the semiosis process at play in Abelam images is more than associating a design to its referent(s) through iconic or indexical relations, but rather, indeed, about relations.

The relationality of Abelam imagery is not limited to the visual domain, and the very principle of its relation-making mechanisms can be located within the verbal domain, though not at the level of the language, but rather at the level of speech. Indeed, one of the most prized Abelam forms of public speeches is the Aaja kudi, the “veiled speech” (Huber-Greub 1988: 254-66; Hauser-Schäublin 2011: 55-7; Coupaye 2013: 281-6), used by prominent men during addresses to the public. It usually resorts to a defined (though not documented) corpus of images, comprising of vegetal and animal species associated with specific clans, and makes an abundant use of metaphors (thus of iconic relations), synecdoches and metonymies (thus of indexical relations). This use of tropes plays a fundamental role in the politics of secrecy, which governs Abulès-speakers’ relationship with knowledge.

Similarly, Abelam art has often been associated with secrecy, concerning the association of images with local-specific meanings. However, while part of images can indeed refer to esoteric knowledge (initiations), the public nature of its display visible on the outside part of the kurabu façade, the main feature of the ceremonial ground, also mobilises a form of exoteric level, as Hauser-Schäublin (2011) defines it. The particular importance of the relationship between inside and outside, revealing and concealing, is in fact one of the basic principles of Abulès-speaking aesthetics, as Hauser-Schäublin recently discussed (2011). But one could go further by suggesting that, while only a few people are aware of the actual links between the public and the secret parts, *everybody* knows *the existence* of the secret dimension – activating thus the enchanting power of the occult.¹⁷⁴ For a secret to be potent, one has to know that there is a secret – doubling the effect of the enchantment of the kurabu’s façade.

Both verbal and visual ambiguity thus, deal – as Tuzin (1995) and Forge advocated – with serious topics. But one can suggest that images are rendered highly “trope-like”, not only because they deal with secrecy or danger, but also because they explicitly require an interpretative process from the audience – a form of agency in itself, involving inferences, mobilization of knowledge and, indeed, semiosis. Rather than the mere content of the discourse, then, it is this cognitive agency that could be the central concern of Abelam painting – a form of visual Aaja kudi (Hauser-Schäublin 2011: 58). In these respects, this specific faculty of images to *make* things present, both visually and in the mind of its audience, make it much more efficacious (in a Maussian sense) than straight formulation, particularly in a Melanesian context in which, “speech too readily lends itself to deception to be a reliable carrier of accurate information about the speaker’s intentions, thoughts, or feelings” (Robbins 2001: 596).

Thus, the public display on the façade of a ceremonial house, visible by all and towering above the bush, is also part of a wider political economy of “visuality” and knowledge, in which what is displayed outside relates fundamentally to what is inside, invisible and hidden (Hauser-Schäublin 2011: 61-4). The agency then, not only comes from the nature of efficacious designs or the type of aesthetic effects they produce, but also from the intentional display (or revelation) of the complexity – about what is partially concealed – of the interpretation processes they demand and trigger. If my hypothesis is correct, then it becomes possible to relate Abelam painting to the oral domain, though perhaps not as the direct source of signification or as presenting a similar structure, but also as possessing the capacity to use images to convey *both knowledge and how knowledge works* – a topic discussed notably in relation to the Melanesian use of tropes and attitude to orality (e.g. Wagner 1986; Robbins 2001).

Our analysis of meaning has thus to include the process of indigenous non-verbal interpretation that allows members of a community to identify and/or relate a phenomenon observed to something like an origin, or a cause or an effect. It is from this type of inferential processes that Gell was able to build his theory of agency. This is where the Gellian concept of style – and its agency – could also be taken as being part of a wider pragmatics of “representational economy” (Keane 2003: 410). Maprik iconicity, then could be construed as being a specific form of representation aimed at performing several tasks; at one level, the displays of non-verbal values and, at another, the actualization of particular properties à la Gell, as well as the triggering of inference processes that relate the “presencing” power of images to a multi-layered imaginary. But, as Forge’s demonstration lead us to think, this direct interpretative process is rendered even more complex in that it is not only about fully disclosing its contents, but might also imply a fundamental *vernacular metaphysics about the relationships* between things.

Vernacular epistemologies?

This relationship between the dialectic of hidden/revealed which Hauser-Schäublin discusses (2011) became for me even more important in the light of the few moments during which I witnessed Nyamikum people make verbal commentaries. The clue came during a 2002 Waapi Saaki, the annual ceremony during which decorated newly-harvested long yams are displayed on the ceremonial ground, to be seen and evaluated by all. The audience was, as usual, composed of people from the village, but also of delegations coming from other villages. I have described elsewhere in detail the course of the ceremony (Coupaye 2013: 207-48) but the step which mobilises discourses was the one during which visitors assessed the tubers presented and speculated on the – by now concealed – process used by the gardener. The whole audience, women included, knows how to grow yams, and most men know the complexity of growing long ones. Thus, secrecy here was not about the general model of waapi cultivation, but about a specific result, an actual manifestation, a particular instantiation of the process, both revealed and concealed by the individual tuber (Coupaye 2013: 284-91).

In such occasions, while the decorations, length, regularity, smoothness and circumference of the tuber are evaluated, it is the (now invisible, encapsulated within the tuber) “history”, of the actual long yam being evaluated which is the centre of much

comment. As Michael O'Hanlon brilliantly elucidated regarding Wahgi performance (1989), it is what is known and what is not known about the relationships that led to the harvesting of the particular specimen – the process – which corresponds to a form of exegesis. In other words, assessments of social forms – long yams, discourses and other displays – are set “against a background of uncertain and contested knowledge” (O'Hanlon 1992: 605) about the social relationships from which long yams emerge (see Coupaye 2013: 227) and are then seen. People talk indeed, but they discuss (past) relations, (now) encapsulated and concealed within the waapi, but (here) revealed by the indexicality of its shape.

The inherently – one might say necessary – public nature of such a display hence allows us to bring together these assessments and the fundamental role that displayed images play, in particular on the façade of ceremonial houses. This is also perhaps the moment when the “agency” of Maprik “art” plays its most prominent role, as providing people with the methodological tools necessary to analyse and interpret material forms, be they verbal and/or visual.

If so, then, Forge was right: Abelam images are *literally about the relationship between things*. And motifs, distributed across different media, and visible by all on the façade, thus provide its audience (men, women and children) with the fundamental rules to understand the nature and scope of knowledge and the necessity of assessing the validity of any statement made on the basis of the relationships it instantiates.

The façade, the focus of Forge's analysis, is actually conceived by Abulës-speakers as contributing to the creation of hierarchies of knowledge, as Hauser-Schäublin demonstrated (2011). But at a meta-level, it could also have been there specifically to remind people themselves, *how likeness and presence work* (be it of an iconical or an indexical nature), in particular their inherent ambiguity. Inference processes of deduction, abduction and deduction, all becoming inherent components of the image's efficacy, were thus mobilised to create a powerful, because uncertain, feel of what was manifested.

As hinted at by Forge, the figures on the façade then could well have done both. First, they give people the means to feel the presence of the generative capacity of containers to bring forth renewed, but similar forms. Second, the painting would have been then made to show to all *the very ambiguity of meaning*, the fundamental multivalency and contextuality of knowledge, and the difficulty of interpreting the ontic level. In other words, the façade could well be corresponding to a form of vernacular epistemology.

CHAPTER 16

Looking back: Abelam art and some of Forge's theses from a 2015 perspective

BRIGITTA HAUSER-SCHÄUBLIN

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Introduction

It was a moving and, in many respects, illuminating encounter in July 2015 when I met my Abelam “father” again (he had provided us with a house he had originally built for his son in the late 1970s) in Kalabu village after 30 years apart. After so many years in which time I had written my publications on the Abelam, especially those on their ceremonial houses (1989a, 1990, 2015) and art and aesthetics (1989b, 1994, 1996, 2011), major topics of my previous works resurfaced during this brief reunion. They made me reconsider how my work had been influenced by Anthony Forge, the theory of art he had developed in his articles and the many talks we had had together at his home in Canberra, in Basel and also at the Sepik Wenner-Gren Conference in Mijas. On the other hand, I realised how the living world of the Abelam had changed, with major consequences regarding the very issues Forge and other later anthropologists, including myself (Losche, McGuigan and Coupaye), following partly in his footsteps had researched. In this short essay I will reassess some of the issues of his theory of art in relation to my own work from the perspective of the 2015 meeting in the Maprik hills.

On the power of art

Our “father”, Kambe, now an old man in his late 70s, was sitting on a *panggal* near a living house when we entered his hamlet. He was sitting in the middle of the place where formerly, the ceremonial ground and, a bit further away, the elegant and tall ceremonial house (*korambo*) had stood when I carried out fieldwork between 1978 and 1985. I saw some slit gongs in an open shelter nearby. These were the only remains and testimonies of the former rich architectural and artistic expressions of the village, in which Phillis Kaberry had first carried out extensive fieldwork and in which Antony Forge had talked many times to artists. There had been eleven *korambo* in Kalabu at the time of my fieldwork. The former *korambo*, at the place where Kambe was sitting when we met him, had served my husband and I as a model for the construction of a sixteen metre high ceremonial house that we built in the Ethnographic Museum in Basel in 1980 (it is still there); we had bought all the building material for this reconstruction in Kalabu.



Figure 16.1. The gables of several ceremonial houses of Yambusaki, Kalabu village on the top of ridges and overlooking coconut palms created an artistically designed landscape. Photo: Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin 1978/79.

On our way to Kalabu, I had noticed that there were only two small and architecturally less elaborate ceremonial houses standing in the whole Abelam region; one was immediately offered to us for sale (AUS\$20.000, the initiation chamber included) when we stopped at the site.¹⁷⁵ The other was guarded by a senior man who

emphasised that this building was the result of his successful ability to mobilise people from his own and other villages and to raise a lot of money for the construction material and the work. If we wanted to take a picture of his ceremonial house, we would need to pay 100 Kina. On the way from Wewak to Maprik, we had seen a number of buildings, most of them on stilts, which had painted gables consisting of motifs in the figurative style of the central northern Abelam. Most of these buildings were either churches, meeting houses or schools.¹⁷⁶

I remembered that Anthony Forge had described how the Second World War and its aftermath had “virtually stopped artistic activity” in the 1950s (1967: 84; reproduced in this volume, Chapter Six), but this activity had “been taken up again [...] with great vigour”. He interpreted the revival he witnessed during his stays (1958-59 and 1962-63) as a “symbol of a withdrawal from excessive contact with European values and a reaffirmation of traditional values”. “Art had not changed”, he concluded, “but had rather been reinforced in its conservatism and acted as a symbol of Abelam culture in the face of colonial culture” (*ibid.*). Forge had always emphasised the “social functions” of art or rather “styles”; such styles were “useful to the members of a society and to the preservation and transmission of their culture” (1979: 281; reproduced in this volume, Chapter Eight). I wondered: could the current halt of elaborate Abelam art be followed by a further revival – and if yes, in the same way as experienced by Forge in the mid-20th century?

Kambe gave me a clue to this question; he proudly informed me about his religious affiliation to a rather fundamentalist Christian church; some of the bystanders quickly endorsed that they belonged to the same congregation. Others mentioned the names of further Christian churches, and it became clear that membership of different churches had produced new differentiations and alliances within the social life of the village (Figure 16.2). Moreover, all the Christian churches that the bystanders had mentioned are rather conservative or even fundamentalist, since they consider the visual expression of rituals linked to ceremonial houses and initiations as “pagan”.¹⁷⁷ Thus, even if a revival of Abelam art was to take place, it would probably not imply conservatism in the sense Forge had noticed, but rather a qualitative change. A revival would imply a new form of dealing with culture, namely its separation from “religion” and its objectification in the form of *kalsa* (culture) or *kastom* – the heritagization of culture – and related to movements in search of the visual expressions of identity, as they already exist in other regions of the Sepik. Moreover, the revival of former ritual beliefs and practices – the basis for corresponding performances for an outside audience – could also become “art” and “culture” in a Western sense; such as the Crocodile Festival in Ambunti.

However, what about “style”, understood primarily as painting style, with regard to social transformation, one of Anthony Forge’s major concerns? He had put the question the other way round and asked what happens when a radical change of style takes place. He came to the conclusion that a

revolutionary change in style makes the new productions ‘meaningless’ in terms of the old structure, while a new stability for a considerable period of time would be necessary before the society at large could be socialized into internalizing the structures offered by the new style (Forge 1979: 285; reproduced in this volume, Chapter Eight).



Figure 16.2. Already in the 1970s, the Catholic priest held a mass for his then small community at the inauguration of a ceremonial house, which he called “a house of God”. Kimbanguwa village. Photo: Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin 1978/79.

His conclusion is the result of one of his major theses, namely the fundamental “role played by aesthetics in the making of cultures” (Wenner-Gren Foundation 1989); moreover, he attributed the power to change to the artist as a member of society. However, I was able to document the contrasting process: the art style may continue in spite of

serious socio-religious change – but then the artistic production becomes classified differently, as *kalsa* or heritage, thus with a different social “function” and “meaning”.

My thoughts returned to the present when Kambe's grandson, a man in his thirties, after having looked at the photographs of the ceremonial houses we had documented and published (Hauser-Schäublin 1989a, 2016), said that none of the younger people had ever seen a ceremonial house standing in his village. He was amazed at the size and the splendour of these houses. He seemed to look at pictures which for him were rooted in a different era and had little to do with him and his life.¹⁷⁸ Obviously, these images – or art in general? – have lost their power over him and society. He asked us to display these images on his laptop; they would appear much brighter and could be looked at whenever he and others wanted. While I was still thinking how to react to this proposition, he added that, unfortunately, his laptop was not working properly and would need to be replaced, as did his smart phone, but that he had no money. Since mobile phones, tablets and laptops are also widespread in rural areas, it seems that these new visual media and the pictures they transmit – new digital objects – have substituted the former “traditional” art as a “means of communication” (Forge 1965: 23; reproduced in this volume, Chapter Five); moreover, they link young people, such as him, to new, virtual communities with diverse interests and goals in many parts of the world; it is a new way of communication.

Art, artists and regional differences

When I asked Kambe about the whereabouts of the three most prominent artists at the time of my fieldwork, I learned that all of them had died; moreover, there were no successors, he explained, since initiations had already come to a halt in the 1980s. Consequently there was no need for artists in an encompassing way and no ceremonial houses: no rituals, no art – at least not in the “traditional” sense. One of Kalabu's most renowned artists, Waulemoi, came to my mind.

He had been invited by a number of other villages to act as the main artist leading the team of painters who decorated the gable front of ceremonial houses with the rows of figurative motifs typical for Kalabu (Figure 16.3). By painting facades in other, neighbouring, villages, he contributed to the spread of the Kalabu style. As is well known, one of Forge's major lines of inquiry concerned regional stylistic variations within the Abelam area; he wanted to find out how one regional style could “travel” and influence or even change the other and why (1979; reproduced in this volume, Chapter Eight). Thus, it was the question of how and when the power of art achieves “magico-religious effectiveness” (1967: 81; reproduced in this volume, Chapter Six). He discussed a case from Wingei village: people had been impressed by the long yam Kalabu men had grown. They therefore decided to have the gable of their new ceremonial house decorated in the Kalabu style in the hope of thereby increasing the success of their yam growing. The six artists involved finally produced a gable painting with a “principal innovation”: the lowest row was decorated with huge *nggwalndu* heads; typical of the Kalabu style, but not of Wingei, where a rather “abstract” style is practised. However, as Forge stated, this unusual row “was badly painted” (Forge 1967: 82; reproduced in this volume, Chapter Six). The anticipated benefit failed and Forge suggested this was due to the “bad painting”. However, people in Wingei explained it to Forge differently



Figure 16.3. Teaching design layout. When façades for ceremonial houses were painted, there was always a master painter (here, Waulemoi) who taught his colleague painters how a pattern should look. Kalabu village. Photo: Jorg Hauser 1980.

in retrospective; they did not see the reason in a “failed” painting: rather, one of the artists died a week later due to sorcery, which had already infested the artist during the painting process. We learned a slightly different version of the story from Waulemoi a couple of years later: it was he whom Wingei had invited to teach the other artists (all from Wingei) the Kalabu style of painting. However, the team of artists did not really agree about how motifs had to be composed and argued continuously about it. Waulemoi, a rather quiet and modest man and not one of the great orators of Abelam, lost his patience: he took his utensils and returned back home before the gable painting was finished. For him, it was a “failed” painting due to the disagreement over style.

Kambe is a respected “big-man” and yam grower; he began to whisper. He asked my husband (who had always accompanied me on my fieldtrips) whether he wanted to take a long yam with him back home again.¹⁷⁹ My husband declined, but Kambe began to tell us about his successful yam growing activities, which he apparently was still carrying out. He proudly narrated how he had given one his longest yams to be displayed in Port Moresby during the Melanesian Art Festival in 2014. He fantasised about the still invisible yam in his garden. He was sure that it was still growing to an immeasurable size, waiting for him to unearth it. This reminded me of the technology of yam growing which Coupaye described extensively (2013). Kambe did not speak of the “nggwalndu’s poach”, the former metaphor for a long yam garden, and of the invocation of the spirits that were once a precondition for successful long yam growing. Instead, he emphasised his personal skill and his knowledge – the technology of yam growing and his corresponding knowledge. A shift of emphasis had occurred, not least due to the Abelam’s conversion to Christianity: a shift away from religious contextualisation to an accentuation of technology and its social implications, especially with regard to competition and prestige.

Constituents of Abelam aesthetics

Concealing and revealing

However, the still hidden yam of which Kambe was speaking suddenly reminded me, in a new way, of what I had previously identified as one of the basic constituents of Abelam aesthetics.¹⁸⁰ In agreement with Schomburg-Scherff (1986), I understand aesthetics as a culture-specific, all-pervading principle or rather a way of expression that is not limited to “art”, but is met in different cultural expressive practices. This approach differs from Forge’s when he wrote “that polychrome two-dimensional paintings become a closed system, unrelated to natural objects, or to carvings and other three-dimensional art objects, or indeed, to anything outside the paintings” (1970: 269). My studies showed that the same basic aesthetic principles apply to all arts (and beyond) and are, therefore, constitutive for the Abelam’s aesthetic system.

I have identified three constituents of Abelam aesthetics: 1) the principle of concealing and revealing, 2) the principle of openwork compositions or assemblages, and 3) a number of what I consider as basic form-generating elements. The principle of concealing and revealing is not limited to visual expressions, but is also applied in ritual speech (Hauser-Schäublin 2011: 55-7). This principle and its correlate, the changeover between exterior and interior, was at the core of initiation rituals and the knowledge



Figure 16.4. Bilum (netbag) with baby. Netbags (wut) representing one of the basic principles of Abelam aesthetics: the principle of concealing and revealing. Kalabu village. Photo: Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin 1978/79.



Figure 16.5. Inauguration ceremonial house Kimbanggiwa 1978. Shell rings and netbags, the latter newly made by women, were used for the decoration of the front side of a ceremonial house on the occasion of its inauguration. Kimbanggiwa village. Photo: Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin 1978/79.

about these secrets. The netbag can be taken as a paradigm of concealing and revealing (*ibid.*). Netbags, wut, are produced by women who apply the looping technique with a single thread. The netbag's soft character allows a partial view of the bag's contents, a fact that Abelam men and women also made use of in daily life, for example by visually and tactily checking whether a relative's netbag still contained some tobacco or betel nuts of which one had run out (Figure 16.4). Additionally, wut denotes, as Forge had already pointed out (also see Losche 1995), a number of things, among them most prominently, a woman's womb on the one hand, and men's ritual secrets on the other; both are closely interrelated. I argued that men's knowledge is organised on the same two principles and the interplay between revealing and concealing. The inter-looping of the two modes characterise the hierarchically structured body of knowledge. In particular, it is what Abelam men call "the stringbag of the tambaran", or rather nggwalandu, that alludes to the painted initiation chambers into which the novices had to crawl, through the low tunnel-like entrance and between a female sculpture with spread legs, in order to see the brightly painted secrets of the initiation scene. However, in male contexts, the wut becomes stiffened, its softness is eliminated or replaced, such as by sago panels. Nevertheless, wut, in this context, is associated with a womb in which the novices are transformed into higher-grade males.

Wut also relates to the men's cultivation of long yam when they speak of the germinating yam seedling (the sprouting top cutting of an old tuber) as placenta or tagui to be planted on top of the yam mound.

However, only when Kambe began to fantasise about the expected growth of his yam did I realise that, in the case of yam growing, the process of concealing and revealing was something that happened outside of men's control (although they do their best to achieve control). If there is a "source" of this continuously performed alternation between concealing and revealing as it is done in ritual life and by means of human-made artefacts and assemblages, the long yam and its mysterious growth could be considered the prototype for all other forms. To the best of my knowledge, neither the Sawos nor the Iatmul – none of them predominately yam growers – have this elaboration of concealing and revealing and its correlate, the conjunction of outside and inside. One of my closest and most expressive research associates, the artist Kwandshendu, taught me about this conjunction and its interrelatedness with concealing and revealing. I felt helpless when I had collected different terms for the artefacts for the Basel collection, of which I had shown photographs to a number of men. He explained: all the artistically elaborated artefacts on the outside of a korambo's front – visible to everybody – have their equivalents in the initiation scenes set up only for the staging of a particular initiation ceremony in the interior. Depending on the place where these artefacts are located – outside or inside – they are called by a different name.

Anthropologists specialising in Melanesian art have usually assumed, as Losche summed up, that it is up to the anthropologist to unravel such a system and its working order, "but [that it] does not involve the conscious corroboration by or intent of the users of the system" (Losche 2001: 158). Kwandshendu's explanation clearly showed that – notwithstanding anthropological qualms and speculations – some indigenous artists (and other "big-men") are fully aware of the linkage between motif and object,

and between denotation and function. With this, he also provided an answer to one of Forge's leading questions: meaning is defined by context, and terminology is, therefore, not determined by the object or the motif. When Kwandshendu went through the visible signs on the ceremonial house with us, it became clear that Abelam men "read" the front of a cult house as a system of signs, which, at the same time, serves as a mnemonic device to register the single grades in initiation (2011: 62). Looking back with my experience from my long-term fieldwork in Indonesia, especially in Bali, I would say that Forge's surprise about the lack of what he was somehow expecting, namely a verbalised exegesis, is not a typical Abelam "problem". I have come across it in many places, though not to the same degree; the "problem" exists where there is no standardised canon of explanations (such as, for example, Brahmana scriptures in some Hindu-Balinese villages). However, as my experience with Kwandshendu showed, knowledgeable artists were able to talk about the "meaning" of artefacts and paintings on the gable front. However, what he told me was not an illustration of what was painted or carved, but was about interrelationships.

My former work on netbags and their properties made me look around among the many bystanders, many of whom were children and young adults, during our talk with Kambe. Most of them indeed still carried their belongings in a wut, men and women alike, though in different wearing styles. While women still put the strap around their forehead, most men carried their wut with the strap across the chest, and no longer over the shoulder.¹⁸¹

Openwork composites and assemblages

The second principle of Abelam aesthetics is a fundamental feature which I have assessed as a quality encompassing Melanesian aesthetics and is clearly different from those prevalent in Polynesian or Southeast Asia. I called these different aesthetic traditions non-cloth and cloth-cultures, respectively (1996). Abelam and many other New Guinea cultures prefer openwork composites or assemblages. The Abelam combined man-made decorative pieces, such as knotted or plaited bands and wickerwork, with leaves or trimmed stripes thereof, palm fronds, flowers, plumes, *etc.* They used (and apparently still use, especially for yam displays) a kind of appliqué technique by creating such composite works out of a number of single elements. It is the implementation of the semi-translucent that, at the same time, partly hides and partly reveals, but rarely completely veils in the sense of "wrap art". Marilyn Strathern already pointed out in 1979 that among the Hageners, "decorations are not costumes, sets of clothing to be donned in entirety, but assemblages painstakingly arranged and rearranged for each major event!" (1979: 245). Abelam art consists, in many respects, of assemblages. Even seemingly single pieces of art, such as a sago spathe painting, is constructed in a similar way: the white leading line is applied, like a string, on the black primed surface and other colours are added gradually (comparable to ephemeral pictures composed with flowers and leaves on a white vegetative foam floating on a water hole). Therefore, I argued that in Abelam art and aesthetics, the line, the strip, the string and the frond are conceived as the basic constituents of designs and are perceived from the perspective of the line, or "visual openwork", rather than from that of the homogeneous plane (also see Ingold 2007: 57-9).



Figure 16.6. Waulemoi and his team. Painting a façade is team work. The masterpainter, here Waulemoi of Kalabu village (with the shell ornament), painted the white lines; these were those which determined the patterns (here, the nggwalndu motifs). Photo: Jorg Hauser 1980.



Figure 16.7. Nggumaira. The white line in black coated paintings, the pale string in netbags and trimmed stripes of leaves and flowers (here lying on a layer of foam on top of a water hole) are conceived as analogous means of constructing patterns, more or less following the idea of "openwork". This scene is called nggumaira, "the marvel from the water"; it was used in the first-grade initiation scene. Kalabu village. Photo: Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin 1978/79.



Figure 16.8. Yam festival. A number of basic geometric forms constituted the repertoire of Abelam formative elements. These are, among others, the triangle (see front of the ceremonial house), the circle (circle of coconuts around the yam heap in front), the cylinder (yam heap), and the slanting position (long yam tied to poles). Wapinda hamlet; Kalabu village. Photo: Jorg Hauser 1978/79.

This applies most strikingly to ceremonial body decorations (see also, for example, Strathern 2013) and the decoration of yam.

Basic form elements and their repetition

The third principle of Abelam aesthetics consists of a number of what could be called – due to a lack of abstract indigenous terms – fundamental geometrical and three-dimensional form elements that are implemented in many of the Abelam's expressive practices. They are repeated over and over again, as Forge had already emphasised for the two-dimensional gable paintings, where such single motifs are applied in rows or bands.¹⁸²

The repertoire of the basic form elements consists of the triangle (Hauser-Schäublin 1994), the circle (like a shellring, but also the concentric eyes of the *nggwalnggwal* faces on a gable painting), and the tetrahedral (or three-sided pyramid), most prominently represented in the ceremonial house. A further basic form element is the slanting position, such as the slanting ridge pole of ceremonial and also dwelling houses, the sleeping position of *nggwalndu* carvings, and the slanting position in which long yam tubers are tied to a pole for display.¹⁸³ These three principles constitute, I suggest, the main characteristics of Abelam aesthetics.

Conclusion

The fact that people in Kalabu have given up the construction of a *korambo* and the performance of initiation rituals, but still practice yam growing, as Kambe vividly demonstrated to us, raised again one of Forge's questions: how is the yam cult interlinked with the initiation ceremonies, including the ceremonial house? He came to the conclusion that there is a fundamental correspondence between the long yam, *nggwalndu*, and man (Forge 1973b: 177; reproduced in this volume, Chapter Seven). My own research confirmed this unity, which was expressed, among other ways, in calling each of these manifestations (an exceptionally long yam, a beautifully decorated male ritual dancer, a brightly repainted huge *nggwalndu* carving in an initiation display, but also the secret yam stone, the "bone" of the yam, secluded in a special hut) by identical personal names. In each case, senior men invoked the *nggwalndu* spirits to leave their place in a water hole and to visit the ceremonial ground and witness the rituals held there.

Nowadays, people no longer believe that the cultivation of long yam and its display makes the building of a ceremonial house and the performance of initiations necessary. They emphasise more the importance of long yam cultivation for food production in general. Coupaye thinks that the yam cult and the initiation rituals/ceremonial houses were two separate complexes of practices that might have been even "more independent than one would have believed at first" (see Coupaye 2013: 180-81). This suggestion seems plausible, since initiations and *haus tambaran* (men's houses) among the neighbouring Sawos and the Iatmul were not linked to the growing of yam (or cultivation in general). However, oral histories clearly document that the Abelam, when they moved into the Prince Alexander Mountains, brought yam (and taro) cultivation with them and taught the Arapesh how to grow these tubers (Hauser-Schäublin 2016: 9-10). Thus, yam was not "new" to them. It was the shared conceptual background behind ceremonial houses and initiations on the one hand, and the long yam cultivation on the other, that led Forge to the conclusion of unity. McGuigan has also confirmed the interrelatedness of the yam cult and the spirit cult in the Wosera; it is based on shared myths, rituals and beliefs. Moreover, yam digging sticks were key elements in the fifth-grade initiation display (Mc Guigan 1992: 282-9).¹⁸⁴ He was able to show that "the yam cult is integrally bound into the Tambaran Cult" (*ibid.*:429). Forge considered yam cultivation as the "more effective system of production" the Abelam had developed compared to their neighbours (Forge 1990: 165; reproduced in this volume, Chapter Nine). He assessed it as one factor (among others, such as the flexible social organisation) of why the Abelam had developed such a ritually and artistically rich – and what he thought, dominant – culture.



Figure 16.9. Roman Catholic Church, Kaindi Teachers College, Wewak. A nggwalndu motif has replaced the representation of Christ's body on the cross. Photo: Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin 2015.

Today, at least in the areas I revisited in 2015, the shared conceptual background (yam and korambo rituals) has dissolved. Nevertheless, some Abelam artistic expression lives on, be it in the decoration and display of yam, or in new contexts and with new “meanings”, as representations of nggwalnggwal motifs instead of Christ's body in Roman Catholic churches, or as cultural performances for tourist shows.

CHAPTER 17

Communicating with Anthony Forge

MICHAEL O'HANLON

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The notion of communication lies at the centre of Anthony Forge's writing about art. Communication issues, in a slightly different sense, were also at the heart of the first and last occasions on which I met Anthony.

The first such occasion was in the mid-1970s when, as a graduate anthropology student in London, I endeavoured to interest Anthony (then visiting from his Canberra base) in supervising the fieldwork I hoped to undertake in New Guinea's Sepik region. Like many others, I had been inspired by Anthony's articles analysing artistic production among the Abalam. This was particularly so as I had recently held a temporary position working in the British Museum's ethnography store, where I had been struck simultaneously by the great richness of the Museum's collections but also by the relative poverty of anthropological approaches to understanding such collections.

Learning that Anthony was to be in London, and to be found post-seminar at the *Mortimer* (the mid-1970s watering hole for University College London's anthropology department), I took myself there, anxious to impress him as someone whom he might wish to supervise. In his obituary of Anthony, Gell (1992: 18) – whose own Sepik fieldwork was supervised by Anthony – refers to Anthony's masterful presence as being like that of a "friendly lion". In this first encounter with Anthony, the "lion" dimension was much more obvious to me than the "friendly" element. Anthony's communication with me that evening in the *Mortimer* took the form of a series of powerful and sceptical grunts. I found these intimidating and thought that if he was prepared to support me undertaking Sepik fieldwork under his supervision it wasn't immediately obvious.

I will come later to the final occasion on which I met Anthony. But what was it about Anthony's articles that made them so exciting and led to them being as influential as they were in the field of the "anthropology of art"? For me – then, at least – it was his insistence first that indigenous art forms constituted a system of communication, one that was transmitting powerful messages to fully socialised members of the society in which the art forms operated; and second, that what was being communicated wasn't necessarily immediately accessible through verbal channels, where the bareness of

indigenous exegesis (“our ancestors did it this way, and so we do so now”, *etc.*) contrasts so starkly with the richness of the art forms in question.

Shorn of its deftness, Anthony’s argument is that if people, who commit massive resources to the construction of art forms at crucial points in ceremonial, have as little to say about them as they appear to, this is because the art form in question must necessarily be communicating its significant messages at a nonverbal level. In this approach, the content of what is being communicated is contained, not in some accompanying verbal code, but rather within the structure of the art form itself, which must be analysed to disclose its messages. How then does the ethnographer get at what an art form is communicating? In the hands of Anthony Forge (and many of those he influenced), analysis typically involves dismantling the art form into its component elements – which might prove to be particular shapes, or elements of shape, colours or the constituent substances from which the art form is made. These, their arrangement, inter-relationship, the sequence and context in which they appear are then scrutinised for their broader significance in terms of the culture as a whole.

In essence, what this allows is – as it were – an informed reassembling of the art form, in which what it might be communicating becomes apparent – in the Abelam case, for example, the primacy of female creativity, regarded by the Abelam as natural, over male creativity which is conceived as cultural and achieved through ritual (Forge 1973(c): 189). In the process, indigenous interpretation may be incorporated if it proves to be available. Local endorsement of the end result is not however required. This is because it is further hypothesised that the process of verbalization might itself discharge the potency of what is being communicated non-verbally; or that the



Figure 17.1. Yimbal, a prominent Wahgi leader, inspects the effect in a mirror as a fellow clansman adds Princess Stephanie bird of paradise plumes to Yimbal’s headdress for Pig Festival dancing. Photo: Michael O’Hanlon.

fundamental messages being conveyed through the art might be at odds with other less profound and already verbalised cultural meanings (Forge 1979: 285-6). As Isadora Duncan is said to have said: "If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it": suggestively, a quotation that Bateson (1973: 242) says was drawn to his attention by Anthony Forge.

In due course, I went on to undertake fieldwork in New Guinea, though in the Highlands not the Sepik, and it was ideas like these that I attempted to bring to bear on the range of aesthetic forms of the Wahgi people, with whom my wife and I lived on and off for three years. The principal Wahgi aesthetic forms were elaborate decorated displays, put on for a variety of occasions, whether in connection with food exchanges, pig festivals, compensation payments or warfare (Figure 17.1).

These displays offered the typically rich sets of materials which Melanesian forms often provide. There were suggestive colour contrasts (often between red and black), variations in shade (generally darker for warfare, brighter for festive displays), in decorative materials (for example, paints as against charcoal), in moistness (rear coverings made from fleshy cordylines or from dried grasses), and in the range of bird plumes deployed, *etc.* Additional grist for the interpretive mill lay in the set of geometric graphic elements used in Wahgi face paint designs, on battle shields, and on *geru* boards (the latter associated with fire taboos and averting illness and are passed down within particular families). The individual elements of the decorative repertoire can combine in different forms in ways that invite systematic analysis taking into account the gender, age, and clans of the wearers and the different types of occasion on which they are worn.

However, my attempts to arrive at "the meaning" of Wahgi displays in this way – what elsewhere (O'Hanlon 1989: 17ff) I have called meaning at the "level of structure" – never produced anything more than banal conclusions, painfully arrived at. Certainly, direct Wahgi commentary didn't take me any great distance. Of their displays in general, Wahgi would tell me that it was important that displays should overawe rivals and enemies, and thus help secure a clan's hold on its territory. Men would say that they hoped girls would be attracted to them in their finery. Otherwise, direct questioning as to the meaning of materials and designs merely tended to elicit assertions that this was the way things were done. I recall sitting down with one close Wahgi friend going endlessly through the names and possible significance of face paint designs, ultimately for him to comment that such designs were no more than *wal ngimbngo*: just unimportant odds and ends, in an effort to convince me that this was a fruitless line of enquiry.

But while engaged in trying to wring communicative significance out of this kind of material, other ways in which the Wahgi do talk about displays, and their significance, were forced on me. Displays of all these kinds are major public spectacles. People crowd round, minutely inspecting the performers. Sometimes the drama is increased by the performers bursting out of an enclosure, onto ceremonial grounds or other cleared space (Figure 17.2). This kind of calculated exposure, and the public attention it attracts, is of course quite common in New Guinea. And this, it struck me, was a lacuna in writing about "art" there. While anthropologists might have unsuccessfully pressed performers for the "meaning" of what they were doing, I had never seen much



Figure 17.2. Dancers burst onto the ceremonial ground from behind a shielding screen towards the climax of a Pig Festival. Photo: Michael O'Hanlon.



Figure 17.3. Decoration of Wahgi shields made for 1980s warfare was sometimes quite explicitly motivated. Photo: Michael O'Hanlon.

recorded about what spectators at such events said to each other, or how they talked about appearance at such events as they planned them or reflected on them afterwards.

To cut a long story short, this is where I found that the Wahgi *did* talk about their “art” as a communicative form, but in a specific way. In brief, there is an extensive Wahgi vocabulary for evaluating appearance and displays: whether appearance is glossy, glowing, shiny, dazzling, compelling, iridescent, *etc.*, all qualities which are sought and admired; or whether, in contrast, appearance is dull, dry, flakey, matt, ashy, pale, pallid, limp, *etc.* Equally, the number of those displaying is assessed, as is how dancers or warriors move, and the extent to which their complex decorative assemblages physically hold together: feathers or other items dropping to the ground being a poor omen (see O’Hanlon 1989, Chapter Six). Furthermore, such assessments were also the vocabulary in terms of which the state of crucial moral relationships is proposed, contested, explored. These relationships are those between and within clans – relationships whose true state is thought to reveal itself in various ways, including, in particular, in the quality of appearance on grand public occasions.

Wahgi saw themselves as living in a turbulent social environment, with high levels of warfare, considerable suspicion as to treachery on the part of fellow clansmen, and with marriage patterns which over time repeatedly linked each clan to a limited set of others. There was an extremely strong ethic of reciprocity in all this, with deaths requiring deaths to revenge them, support in warfare or to refugees to be reciprocated, girls given in marriage with girls returned in marriage. At the same time there were multiple accounts, and underlying uncertainty, as to what actually *had* gone on in the past. Had X, several generations ago, secretly betrayed his clansman Y to the enemy? Had Clan A adequately reciprocated Clan B for their support while clan A were refugees with them? What was the true balance in terms of brides given and returned between Clans C and D? The effect of past failures is thought – while unaddressed – to ramify down the generations, causing infertility here, illness there, the loss of a battle elsewhere. People would return from deathbeds with fresh accounts as to what they had learned had *really* gone on in the tangled social past. Voices would drop low round the fire, as the matter was discussed, as this knowledge could be put to use in future conflicts. In this situation, people turned to supposedly authenticatory signs: to fertility and especially to the decorated appearance as assessed when people appear penem: on an open space, in public, where hidden things are revealed for all to see. Indeed: penem is the term for the display ground itself.

So where are we? Anthony Forge argues that “art” is a communicative form but what it communicates is not consciously recognized, perhaps because the impact of the profound truths it communicates would be undermined if verbally glossed. For him, ascertaining what is being communicated entails breaking the art form down into its various elements, trying to understand their relationship, using local exegesis where available. As I have tried to convey, if meaning is to be found at this “level of structure” in the Wahgi, I could not locate it. Instead, what I did find was that the decorated appearance was explicitly recognized as a communicative form, one which was indexed through talk, but talk taking the form of assessments of appearance which were felt to be the outcome of, and to authenticate, the state of crucial inner moral relationships. Significance lay at the level not of structure, but of evaluation.

I would add only a brief subsequent development, as it relates to shield design in particular. Traditional Wahgi shield designs were composed mainly of geometric elements – ovals, triangles, crescent shapes, zig-zags, *etc.* There are indigenous terms to refer to the individual design elements – “head”, “waxing moon”, “spider’s web”, *etc.* – but I found these to be simply rough and ready mnemonics, not clues as to some underlying symbolic meaning at the “level of structure”. Rather, as with face paint and geru board designs, the significance of shield decoration lay at the “level of evaluation”: did the shields (whatever their designs) appear to spectators as glowing, glinting and burnished, or did they appear dull and ashy, their condition being thought of as indexing the state of relationships within and between clans.

Shields largely fell out of use during the colonial period for the best part of four decades from the 1940s. But when they were revived for renewed warfare in the 1980s, their designs were often novel (Figure 17.3). They frequently included elements that were not simply names for design elements but were quite explicitly motivated in relation to the warfare in which they were used (see O’Hanlon 1995). Thus, the figure “7” was used as a design, because it resembled the axes used in warfare; a hawk featured on another shield, to reflect the fact that the shield bearer was from the hawk sub-clan. Fish designs featured to repudiate an enemy boast that the shield carriers would be pushed back into the river Wahgi (the same message was conveyed on other shields by the Tok Pisin words “Wagi pis”). In one sense, then, this later Wahgi development falls into line with Anthony Forge’s original proposition: “meaning”, at least of one kind, *is* now apparent at “the level of structure”, though the messages communicated are quite explicit rather than un verbalized.

But at the end let me return to my final meeting with Anthony. He was in bed, in hospital in London. His throat was badly affected, and he could himself no longer communicate by speaking, only through writing brief notes from a pad and handing them to the people at his bedside. But, as when I had originally met him in the *Mortimer*, he was half surrounded by visitors, engaged, keenly interested in others, not defeated. It is very nice to be able to acknowledge here the important stimulus he was to me, as to so many others.

APPENDIX

Anthony Forge's Collections

The purpose of this appendix is to provide a brief indication of the range of manuscript, photographic, art and artefact collections arising from Anthony Forge's fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, and otherwise connected with his work. Those interested are referred to the institutions concerned for fuller information.

Archives, field photographs and art works are held primarily in three institutions. As Christian Kaufmann's chapter in this volume explains, Alfred Bühler was a mentor of Forge's, and through him the latter developed a strong connection with what was formerly the Museum für Völkerkunde, now the Museum der Kulturen, Basel; he was also close to Douglas Newton and what was at first the Museum of Primitive Art in New York, which became a department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1978. After Forge's death, his papers were deposited at the University of California San Diego, where Donald Tuzin, also a distinguished Sepik ethnographer, had established an archive of Melanesian anthropology. In addition, Forge donated material to both the Australian Museum in Sydney and the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra.

Special Collections, University of California, San Diego

The Anthony Forge Papers constitute MS 0411 and consist of thirty-nine archive boxes, five cartons of records, thirteen film cans, and thirty-six oversize folders. They include biographic material, correspondence, teaching material, photographs and wider records of publishing and research activity as well as field notes and field records in the strict sense. The holdings include 363 paintings on paper by Abelam artists dating from 1962-63; large numbers of photographs, audio recordings and moving film. The collection also includes materials associated with the two Wenner-Gren Foundation Sepik conferences, in Basel in 1984 and in Mijas in 1986. An online listing of these papers is available at: <http://library.ucsd.edu/speccoll/findingaids/mss0411.html> (accessed 24 February 2017).

Museum der Kulturen, Basel

As Christian Kaufmann outlines, Forge assisted Bühler and made subsequent collections on his own. Material gathered during the first field trip, mainly in March 1959, was described in a list of 220 Abelam items, some of which referred to more than one artefact. The second trip brought back more than 350 Keram objects and 500 from Abelam and Arapesh areas. The Museum der Kulturen's catalogue gives a total of 1383 Forge records. Many of the artefacts are documented in considerable detail.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

We are extremely grateful to Virginia-Lee Webb, formerly Research Curator in the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), for detailed information. Forge made contact with Douglas Newton following his first field trip and contributed photographs and an essay, reproduced here, to the catalogue of the 1960 exhibition, “Three regions of Melanesian art” at The Museum of Primitive Art. At that time, Forge sold the Museum of Primitive Art a collection of 184 silver gelatin prints of field photographs of sculptures and house facades. Somewhat later, presumably after his second field trip, he deposited 296 colour slides of field settings and artefacts. The MET also holds a lower Sepik male figure (1978.412.840) and a Iatmul ceremonial plank (1978.412.841) given by or bought from Forge, in 1964 and 1965 respectively; and eight Abelam works, described in the collections database (at the time of writing, February 2017) as paintings on paper (1992.408.1-8). They were presented by Lita Osmundsen, who worked for the Wenner-Gren Foundation in various capacities from 1947 until her retirement in 1987; she was President of the Foundation from 1963 on and no doubt supported the Sepik conferences in which Forge was closely involved; he may have given her the works as an expression of gratitude. These are, however, not paintings but screenprints, which Forge had made in May 1962 after paintings by Tsigula, Aki’mas, Gilembel, Wakunde and Banggwinya; he apparently intended to publish the set, but never did so. The records are ambiguous, but the prints appear to have been made in the United States, by one Michael Black of Riverdale, New York, from whom a separate set was acquired in 1962 for what is now the Robert Goldwater Library of the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the MET. This set includes an additional ninth, double-sized print. The works were exhibited in “Magnificent Facades: Architecture and Painting by Abelam Artists”, a 2009 exhibition at the MET curated by Virginia-Lee Webb.

Australian Museum, Sydney

Forge worked in Bali first in 1972-73 and made further visits later in the 1970s and 1980s. He made a richly documented collection; 160 works were deposited in the Australian Museum, Sydney. Said to constitute “one of the world’s most significant collections of Balinese paintings”, these have been further studied in recent years by Siobhan Campbell (Campbell 2014; see also <https://australianmuseum.net.au/the-anthony-forge-collection-of-balinese-paintings-early-19th-century-1970s> [accessed 24 February 2017]).

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

The National Gallery of Australia was institutionally established in the late sixties but built over an extended period and opened to the public only in 1982. Through the 1970s and 1980s Forge acted, probably informally, as an advisor regarding Asian and Pacific collections. In 1977 he sold the Gallery an outstanding Sawos malu board (NGA 77.799); it is likely but not certain that Forge collected it in the field. In 2006 Cecilia Ng presented 172 objects in memory of Anthony Forge, mostly Abelam and Wosera artefacts including coconut whistles, cups, bilums (looped string bags), yam

masks, sculptures and bone daggers, all collected by Forge over 1958-62. The gift also included twenty-seven prints by artists such as Akis and Kauage, associated with the National Art School at the University of Papua New Guinea, and a few printed exhibition posters. There appear to have been additional purchases and donations, mainly of Balinese works. Many thanks to Crispin Howarth for this information.

ENDNOTES

Introduction

- 1 Originally published in Anthony Forge (ed.) 1973a. *Primitive Art and Society*. Republished with permission from Oxford University Press.

Chapter 2

- 2 Originally published in Anthony Forge (ed.) 1960. *Three regions of Melanesian art: New Guinea and the Hebrides*, 6-11. New York: Museum of Primitive Art. Republished with permission from the Estate of Anthony Forge.
- 3 Kunststile am Sepik. Führer durch das Museum für Völkerkunde und Schweiz. Museum für Volkskunde Basel. Sonderausstellung vom 11. Juni bis 30. November 1960. Pl. 4.[Sepik art styles. Guide for the Museum für Völkerkunde und Schweiz. Museum für Volkskunde Basel. Special exhibition from 11 June to 30 November 1960, plate 4.]
- 4 *Ibid.* Pl. 4.
- 5 *Ibid.* Pl. 4.
- 6 *Ibid.* Pls. 16, 17.
- 7 *Ibid.* Pl. 4.
- 8 *Ibid.* Pl. 9.

Chapter 3

- 9 Originally published in Anthony Forge (ed.) 1960. *Three regions of Melanesian art: New Guinea and the New Hebrides*, 12-15. New York: Museum of Primitive Art. Republished with permission from the Estate of Anthony Forge.

Chapter 4

- 10 Originally published in *Palette* (Basel) 9, 9-16. Republished with permission from the Estate of Anthony Forge.

Chapter 5

- 11 The material discussed here was gathered in two trips 1958-59 and 1962-63. The author gratefully acknowledges the scholarship from the Emslie Horniman Anthropological Scholarship Fund of the Royal Anthropological Institute, and the Fellowship from the Bollingen Foundation, New York, which enabled him to make these trips. He is also greatly indebted to Professor Alfred Bühler whose generosity in 1959 enabled him to visit many Sepik cultures he would otherwise have missed, and to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research for assistance between the two trips.
- 12 See Wirz (1959). Miller discusses the Sepik stylistic area and its subdivisions in Bühler (1960a) and in Bühler, Barrow & Mountford (1962).
- 13 Laycock (1961; 1965) using glottochronology suggests 1880 ±180 years ago for the split between north Abelam and Iatmul. However, the relationships suggested by his techniques within the Ndu family do not completely agree with the similarities in culture and social structure. These suggest a closer connection of the Abelam with the Iatmul than with the Boikin, whereas Laycock suggests the reverse.
- 14 Mead (1938) makes it clear that the Beach Arapesh in 1931 had by no means adjusted to their coastal environment.
- 15 On the rare occasions when a ceremonial house is built with the mangandu reversed—that is with the butt end with its carved projection downwards, ending at the back of the house—it is jammed into a recess cut in a short thick hardwood post, absent in the normal house. This recess is called the vulva of the house, and the mangandu is said to be copulating with it.
- 16 The symbolism of the Iatmul ceremonial house is discussed in Bateson (1946).
- 17 Bateson (1936: 140; 1932: caption to plate VIII).

- 18 Long yams are believed to produce invisible secretions while in their gardens; these are often compared to semen, but are harmful, producing painful although not dangerous swellings, particularly of the joints, in men who come into contact with them.
- 19 Fully erect penises are rare in Sepik art as a whole. There are considerable difficulties in carving them; where they do occur, they tend to be “over erect”, that is, they are represented as an integral part of the belly, carved in relief on the lower portions of the belly itself.

Chapter 6

- 20 Originally published in M. Freedman (ed.) 1967. *Social organization: Essays Presented to Raymond Firth*, 65-84. London: Routledge. Republished with permission from Taylor and Francis.
- 21 I am grateful to the Emslie Horniman Scholarship Fund of the Royal Anthropological Institute and to the Bollingen Foundation, New York, for financing two trips to the Abelam, in 1958-9 and 1962-3 respectively. For a general description of Abelam society see Kaberry, 1941 and 1966.
- 22 The Pidgin English (Neo-Melanesian) words *tambaran* and *big-man* have become part of anthropological terminology, so I use them here without italics. *Tambaran* corresponds to the Abelam word *maira*, while *nemandu* is exactly translated as *big-man*.
- 23 In view of the anomalous position of *wut* as an artistic production of both sexes, it is worth noting that for a man to use the words *nyan wut* in the presence of a woman is a formidable insult, certain to result in a quarrel, and possibly leading to a hostile exchange relationship with her protector, or even to a complex village-wide ceremony of cross-sex hostility.
- 24 For a fuller discussion of the manufacture and use of paints and their magical character, see Forge (1962).
- 25 In the Wosera area, S.W. Abelam, a further type of brush is used, made of a single short feather, found between the tail plumes of the lesser bird of paradise, mounted in a grass stem. This will produce exceptionally fine lines, which are used mainly in polychrome cross-hatching. Bands of such cross-hatching are typically used to replace the polychrome multiple lines of the northern Abelam, and as an embellishment to certain other patterns otherwise common to both styles. The technique is laborious but aesthetically effective. Painting with these brushes cannot be delegated to the less skilled, and the number and size of the *wut* panels so painted were a sure index of prestige. Although painting with the fine line technique was visible on the façades of Wosera ceremonial houses, the means by which these results were produced was secret, the brushes themselves being regarded as a *tambaran* and very carefully concealed; they were called *vi* (spear) and were integrated into the spear/penis symbolic complex. Brushes elsewhere in the Abelam area are not specially regarded and are abandoned without concern.
- 26 Since the only two essential qualifications for initiation into a ceremony are that the initiate be alive and that the father or guardian be prepared to pay, babies are frequently initiated; it follows that youths of fifteen or so appear among the initiators.

Chapter 7

- 27 Originally published in Anthony Forge (ed.) 1973. *Primitive Art and Society*, 169-92. Republished with permission from Oxford University Press.
- 28 See Forge, 1960a, Haberland, 1964, and Newton, 1964 and 1971. I accept Haberland's correction that *Kamanggabi* is the name of an individual figure and not the generic term.
- 29 The *Iatmul* material is drawn mainly from Bateson, 1932 and 1936.
- 30 It is likely that the *mwai* effect of this modelled skull was intensified by the use of a nose extension made of cowrie shells on a string base. There are such extensions in the Bateson collection at Cambridge and they were used by men as well as skulls.
- 31 For a general description of the Abelam see Kaberry, 1940-1 and 1966. My own field work among the Abelam was in two trips, financed by generous grants from the Emslie Horniman Anthropological Scholarship Fund of the Royal Anthropological Institute and the Bollingen Foundation, respectively. I am most grateful to both of them, and to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for assistance with technical expenses between the trips.
- 32 For the magical character of paint and the organization of artistic production, see Forge, 1962 and 1967.
- 33 The alternative form of forehead ornament, and the one most frequently used in carving and painting, consists of an embellished pointed oval (See *ngwalndu* in Pl. 2) thus maintaining a clear feminine reference.

- 34 Further material on the Abelam attitude to the moon is in Forge, 1969.
- 35 There also exists a class of shell rings not used in transactions at all but preserved as heirlooms by those clans that possess one. These are called Walamini (Wald – an earth linked spirit responsible for conception and much of creation, mini – eye). They are believed to have been made by the Walo, certainly not by man. Their ancestral reference and eye aspect may link them with the white ring as eye in the painting style.
- 36 On carvings in the northern style the navel is frequently shown as a circular boss, often this is enclosed within an engraved design having as centre the pointed oval, again with embellishments, sometimes the same as the forehead ornament. Cf. n. 6.
- 37 For further discussion of the ceremonial house facades and their designs, see Forge, 1966.
- 38 Yet the ngwalndu figures themselves, the most sacred and secret material manifestation of the supernatural, and the focus of both male cults, are kept in the female ceremonial house and when they are displayed to initiates are put into a chamber, lined with wut, which has clear womb associations. See Forge, 1966 and 1967.
- 39 This hypothesis is about to be tested by a formal analysis of the entire body of paintings on paper collected by me and of all properly attributed photographs of Abelam flat painting to which I have access. The project will take two years and the analysis of form is being carried out by Miss Sheila Korn, who represents a “naive eye” in that she has no Abelam-like preconceptions; her analysis of the elements and their combinations will therefore be objective. The rules and regularities she uncovers will then be translated into meanings on the basis of my collected material on the identifications given to elements. If the grammar of graphic form and colour makes sense when translated into cosmological terms I shall consider the hypothesis supported. At the completion of the formal analysis it should be possible to paint ungrammatical paintings, that is with traditional elements but in nonsensical or objectionable combinations. It would be extremely interesting to get the reactions of Abelam artists and ritual experts to such paintings. I am most grateful to the Nuffield Foundation Small Grants Project for providing funds to fix the paintings on paper and for photographic expenses; and to the Social Science Research Council for financing the two year analysis.

Chapter 8

- 40 Originally published in S.M. Mead (ed.) 1979. *Exploring the Visual Art of Oceania*, 278-86. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. Republished with permission from the Estate of Anthony Forge.
- 41 Style in this sense is essentially perceived by an outside observer who uses it as a label for the apparent coherence of the products of the internal system. With the cessation of fighting and the consequent greater freedom to travel, many artists in the Sepik have become aware of different styles and can use them for identification and localization as do other outside observers. Even in traditional times they were also aware of local stylistic variation.
- 42 For an example of this maintenance of stylistic limits, see Forge (1967).
- 43 Much of the current tourist production on the lower and middle Sepik River, for instance, has only one meaning: “This will sell.”
- 44 The following quotation (Wheldon 1962) from an interview with Henry Moore illustrates well what may be perceived as the danger of too much consciousness in art:
“Recently there was a book published on my work by a Jungian psychologist; I think the title was *The Archetypal World of Henry Moore* (E. Neumann, London, 1959). He sent me a copy, which he asked me to read, but after the first chapter I thought I’d better stop because it explained too much about what my motives were and what things were about. I thought it might stop me from ticking over if I went on and knew it all. If I was psychoanalyzed I might stop being a sculptor. I don’t know, but anyhow I don’t want to stop being a sculptor.”
- 45 For an example of how I see such systems actually working, see Forge (1973b). Munn (1973) analyzes a basically similar art system from a slightly different viewpoint.

Chapter 9

- 46 The leader of the local branch of a fundamentalist mission had recently publicly denounced the cross as a ‘catholic tambaran’.

Chapter 10

- 47 Originally published in N. Lutkehaus *et al.* (eds) 1990. *Sepik Heritage: Tradition and Change in Papua New Guinea*, 160-70. Durham: Carolina Academic Press. Republished with permission from Carolina Academic Press.
- 48 Kaberry completed a reanalysis of her Abelam data in October 1957 for a projected book to be edited by K. E. Read. She very kindly gave me a copy of this mimeographed paper before I left for my first visit to the Abelam later that year. As she says, this paper was based on “a detailed analysis of genealogical and residential material” and in some respects superseded her earlier report. The published version of this important paper was revised to take into account census and other data I had brought back from my fieldwork. I prefer to use the 1957 preprint of this paper, since all the data are clearly based exclusively on the material available to her in 1939-40.
- 49 Tuzin (1976, 1980) assumes that the Axapesh learned yam cultivation from the Abelam. While it is possible, even likely, that the ritualization of yam production in Ilahita owes much to Abelam practices, the initial technology and the cultivars must, I argue, have come from the Arapesh.
- 50 Another area where the yam production is very largely displayed and presented is the Trobriands, also famous for the quality of their yams and the quantity of their production.
- 51 D. C. Laycock (personal communication) believes the two words to be etymologically unrelated. Bateson (1936), however, cites a Iatmul myth in which the sacred flutes are invented by a man blowing on a yam, and there is much similar evidence to support this identity.
- 52 Some nggwal names listed by Tuzin are the same as Abelam names, of which there is not a large stock, but this transfer of the open names does not occur in the east.
- 53 The following material is based mainly on my experience of eastern Abelam relations with Plains Arapesh and Boiken.
- 54 The Abelam also had to import virtually all the volcanic stone needed for axes (another similarity with the Trobriands) and, similarly, to maintain the economy trade was more important than war and therefore cultural domination more vital than domination through violence. Abelam exports were mainly products of their culture, men’s ritual and women’s string bags equally admired by their neighbors and highly valued both on the coast and on the Sepik River. Non Abelam women apparently believed themselves unable to produce such complex string bags, some with as many as forty-eight floating threads. The skills for their production were closely guarded secrets of Abelam women and had magical as well as technical elements; only the completed objects were traded (MacKenzie n.d.). More mundane and less important Abelam exports were hunting dogs and tobacco, both reputed to have extra bite and power. There is no space here to go into Abelam stone dependence or string bags, an essentially female product symbolically related to human fertility. But bags were both “imitated” by men in their ritual painting and an essential item for inauguration of a new ceremonial house, clearly expressing the male Abelam view that complementarity of the sexes was at the root of all success (Forge 1962, 1966).
- 55 Losche, elsewhere in this volume [Lutkehaus *et al.* 1990], on the whole confirms this view of the balance between male and female in Abelam life.

Chapter 11

- 56 Unpublished. Provided with permission from the Special Collections and Archives, University College San Diego Library.
- 57 In this area about one platoon of Japanese (30 adult men) seem to have been billeted on each village, populations mostly in the 300 to 400 range, say 80 to 100 adult men. The strain of feeding such large numbers soon became intolerable.
- 58 It does not seem likely that the Boiken went north by the more obvious route through the Wosera and were pushed out of what is now the Abelam area by their later arrival. There are few traditions of Boiken – Abelam fighting except on their present boundary and Abelam talk of displacing Arapesh and Kwanga but not Boiken. Further, had the Abelam and Boiken been in continuous contact, it seems unlikely that such a clear language boundary would exist between them.
- 59 See, for example, Tuzin on the history of Ilahita, a large village produced by Abelam pressures, which formed an effective bulwark against further expansion in that immediate area, although Abelam expansion took place to the west of Ilahita and to its south even in the period between the Japanese defeat and the re-establishment of effective Australian control.

- 60 The Abelam now number substantially more than 40,000. Kaberry's estimate two years after the establishment of control is consistent with 20-25,000, given that she underestimated the number of Abelam villages.
- 61 Kaufmann (1986) has put forward a hypothetical time sequence based on the comparison of pottery techniques, mainly in the Sepik region. His proposed datings are consistent with the timescale for population movements suggested here.
- 62 The Wosera Abelam also grow long yams although their interest in them seems to have diminished recently as declining soil fertility makes production of outstanding specimens more difficult. However, they 'transform' asagwa-ka into display and exchange worthy single specimens by cutting all the tubers from each plant except one, which grows exceptionally large as a result. This is typical Abelam behaviour: they are taking one natural species, *D. esculenta*, and culturally giving it one of the principal features of another natural species, *D. alata*.
- 63 I also find his suggested dating impossibly recent as will be obvious from the earlier parts of this introduction.
- 64 Abelam have long flutes that they sometimes play during ritual preparations; they are secret and should not be seen by women but have little part in tambaran ceremonies. I have argued (1966) that the Iatmul flute complex has been assimilated to the Abelam long yam cult. Perhaps a better formulation would be that they are structurally equivalent.
- 65 Although Abelam men bleed their penes before starting to plant long yams, they do not use the blood on the yams, and they apply dry paint rather than wet mixture to the tubers – otherwise every feature mentioned by Lewis, not all of which are repeated here, is to be found in the Abelam yam cult.
- 66 The looping techniques concerned are those used by women to produce classes of object only made by them, although the finest examples are often given to husbands and sons. Abelam men also use very closely related looping techniques to produce completely different objects, of which the most important are the *kuro*, manikins made of boar's tusk and shells on a very tightly looped string base. These are held in the mouth in time of war and symbolic aggression, or worn down the back as an ornament. Similar male products are made by the Iatmul and indeed all Lower Sepik and coastal groups into the Madang area and beyond. Since one is a male product and the other a female, the Abelam do not consider the techniques to be related.
- 67 The argument is rather 'chicken and egg' – like most convincing statements about causality in human affairs, you cannot have large settlements till you have political complexity, and you don't need political complexity till you have large settlements. In this case there seems to be a preference for political complexity, given the ndu talent for complexity in all forms this would seem convincing.
- 68 In the Abelam area the arrival of the colonial administration and the appointment of luluais gave certain ambitious men the taste of ascription and the consequent immunity from exchange, which they used very skillfully to dominate whole villages and in some cases, mostly government appointed paramount luluais, whole networks of villages. Such men used their position to control all ritual performance, gardening timetables, marriages and sorcery accusations in fact the whole of village life, using the government courts to suppress opposition. These experiences impressed the Abelam with the vital role of equality exchange in preventing the emergence of an unacceptable level of hierarchy.
- 69 More accurately, one linguist, the late Dr Don Laycock of the A.N.U. – his boundaries correspond well to the earlier, but unfinished, work of Kirschbaum, and have been confirmed in work by a number of S.I.L. linguists.
- 70 It is obvious, but sometimes appears to be forgotten, that the greater the cultural separation of the sexes, the greater the potential for symbolizing their relationship. Separation can be used to express a hierarchical difference, but it is also essential for emphasizing complementarity – one sex is not complete without the other, and for the process of the ritual elaboration of sexuality and fertility. Every move toward 'uni-sex' in hairstyle, clothes, *etc.*, cannot but diminish the possibility of symbolizing sexual relationships at all.
- 71 Much of the work produced for sale now takes this form, that is, it must look like things in the books if it is to meet the demands of the market. There are however a few artists who are making and selling innovative work, and some communities have taken to holding a ritual and then selling off the display, so that the art is not yet totally dead. In the few Abelam examples of the latter known to me, there are clear changes of style evident in the now thirty years since I first went there.
- 72 I have made basically the same argument with regard to changes in art style that are nevertheless confidently asserted to be nothing but re-creations of the original ancestral style.

- 73 It is of course logically possible that it is 'becoming Abelam', as other villages must have done in the past, for instance Gwalip, now completely Abelam but according to Fortune (1938) considerably Arapesh in 1932, and Ulupu still with substantially Arapesh elements and effectively bilingual. I do not think so, however, because of the lack of shared fundamental assumptions about the nature of humanity and of the world.
- 74 The methods of art production in such societies in the Sepik are discussed by both Kaufmann and Forge.

Chapter 12

- 75 Forge continues: "Although I realise that an 'untouched' society cannot now exist, I hope to find one where there is still a considerable production of art, and where art still plays an important part, in ceremonial activities and the day-to-day life. As I know that you have a wide experience of the region, I hope that you can [deleted: could] give me some advice on the choice of a village or group of villages, where this project could be carried out. Also any comments, or advice, on the whole project would be very welcome. I hope to visit Basel during the summer but until the finance for the expedition has been settled, I do not want to leave London. I must apologise for not writing to you in German, but although I am learning the language, I cannot yet express myself in it. I hope this will not give you a lot of trouble and would be very grateful for any information you can give me. Yours faithfully, [signature] Anthony Forge. M.A.", typed letter by Anthony Forge, 6 Grey Close, London NW11, to Alfred Bühler 28 May 1957 [no direct answer from Bühler on record]. Archive Museum der Kulturen Basel [in the following: Archive MKB], folder 688/04. Charles Julius was the Government Anthropologist of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea.
- 76 A. Bühler to A. Knorr, Chipping Campden, England, 26 July 1957, carbon copy of handwritten letter in German. Bühler describes Forge's research plan in the following terms: „...für ungefähr 1 Jahr mit einem Stipendium nach Neuguinea. Er will im Sepik-Gebiet arbeiten und speziell die Kunst in ihrem Zusammenhang mit dem Leben der Dorfgemeinschaft untersuchen. ... [im Sepikgebiet zu spät]. Meiner Ansicht nach könnte aber Forge in Maprik noch einen geeigneten Platz finden. Was denken Sie zum Beispiel vom Gebiet Ulupu-Yamil?“ – A. Knorr seemed not too pleased, he answered from Ulupu on 6 Oktober 1957 with a rather ironic undertone. Archive MKB, folder 08-0007, sub-folder 1957.
- 77 Anthony Forge to Alfred Bühler, 2 November 1957, small-typed letter recto and verso; Alfred Bühler to Anthony Forge, Basel 8 November 1957, carbon copy; Archive MKB, folder 688/04.
- 78 Anthony Forge to Alfred Bühler, 22 November 1957, SS *Orion* (Orient Line), off Uffshant, handwritten letter recto/verso; Archive MKB, folder 688/04. The exhibition catalogue mentioned is "Heilige Bildwerke aus Neuguinea"; the exhibition held in 1957 at the Museum für Völkerkunde Basel presented paintings and sculptures from the southern Abelam and the Kwoma areas, respectively, collected and documented by Alfred Bühler and René Gardi in 1955-56.
- 79 A. Knorr to A. Bühler, 9 March 1958, typescript letter, 3 pp., quoted passage on p.1; Archive MKB, folder 08-0007, sub-folder 1958. The art dealer mentioned was Oscar Meyer.
- 80 A. Forge to A. Bühler, 31 July 1958; typescript letter, signed Anthony Forge, posted from Maprik; Archive MKB, folder 08-0007, sub-folder 1958.
- 81 In the absence of a comprehensive biography of Alfred Bühler the reader is referred to the following biographical and bibliographical notes: Meuli (1965) and Erni (1981).
- 82 Under the guidance of the two Sarasin cousins, Paul and Fritz, both zoologists, the original Ethnographic Collections of 1893 became the Völkerkundemuseum (Museum of Ethnography) in 1917, featuring a section on prehistory (Palaeolithic to Bronze age), a section each for the continents of Asia, Africa, the Americas and Australia-Oceania, as well as an already significant section on European folk culture, and a section on physical anthropology (transferred to the Museum of Natural History in 1968). The Museum became the Museum für Völkerkunde und Schweizerische Museum für Volkskunde Basel in 1944, and was renamed Museum der Kulturen Basel in 1996. The first full-time curator was employed in 1932 while the sections remained headed by members of the steering committee, among whom, next to Fritz Sarasin, Felix Speiser, professor of anthropology, was the most prolific.
- 83 For a biographical note on Felix Speiser, see Postscript in Speiser (1991: 411-15), and Kaufmann (2000); on Fritz Sarasin, see Kaufmann (2009).
- 84 Personal communication Alfred Bühler, January 1972.
- 85 Bühler in his introduction to René Gardi's film, typescript, undated [early October 1956], 4 pp., here p. 1, my translation from the German original; Archive MKB, folder 09-0042.

- 86 Schmidt's biography of Paul Wirz (1892-1955) focuses on his research in New Guinea. Paul Wirz is not be confused with his son Dadi Wirz (b. 1930), who also collected in the Sepik area shortly after his father's death.
- 87 Titled "Kunstwerke vom Sepik" (catalogue title), the exhibition, designed by the art teacher Lenz Klotz, lasted from 1 October to 30 November 1954.
- 88 For a later edition of Bühler-Oppenheim's *Systematik der textilen Techniken* see Seiler-Baldinger (1994).
- 89 A handwritten list shows a total of 54,475 Swiss francs received by mid-December 1958, mainly from personalities convinced of the potential of the project for future research, see also the opinions expressed in separate letters by and to, e.g., Maja Sacher and Franz Werenfels; Archive MKB, folder 08-0007, sub-folder Presse/Finanzierung.
- 90 A. Bühler to A. Forge, 12 June 1958, Carbon copy of typescript letter; Archive MKB, folder 08-0007, sub-folder 1958. This letter closes with, "I hope I shall hear from you again soon. Please give my regards to Father Knorr and other friends of mine in Maprik."
- 91 A. Forge to A. Bühler, 6 November 1958 and A. Bühler to A. Forge, 19 November 1958, exchange of letters; Archive MKB, folder 08-0007, sub-folder 1958. The art dealer mentioned was Emil Storrer.
- 92 A. Bühler to A.A. Roberts, Director of Native Affairs, Port Moresby, Basel, 2 October 1958; Archive MKB, folder 08-0007, sub-folder 1958. For obtaining export permits according to Antiquities Ordinance 1953, see also A. Bühler to A.A. Roberts, 28 October 1958 and A.A. Roberts to A. Bühler, Port Moresby, 25 November 1958, along with J.T. Gunther, Assistant Administrator, to A. Bühler, Port Moresby, 28 November 1958.
- 93 A. Bühler to A. Forge, 19 November 1958, carbon copy of typescript letter, p.2, my emphasis; Archive MKB, folder 08-0007, sub-folder 1958.
- 94 A. Forge to A. Bühler, 8 December 1958, typescript Aerogramme, 2nd and 3rd paragraphs; Archive MKB, folder 08-0007, sub-folder 1958.
- 95 A. Forge to A. Bühler, Maprik, 22 January 1959, typescript Aerogramme, my emphases; Archive MKB, folder 08-0007, sub-folder 1959.
- 96 A. Bühler to A. Forge from Basel on 11 February 1959, "As to the collection [in the Abelam area]. ... You should decide what you think is the best...", and A. Forge to A. Bühler from Maprik on 3 March 1959, aerogramme, last paragraph added in handwriting: "Have now had a cable from Prof. Firth giving his full approval to our plans. I sent him a copy of your letter." Also A. Bühler to A. Forge, Basel, 20 March 1959, confirming the transfer of AUS\$300 and suggesting the acquisition of a complete façade of a house tambaran; Archive MKB, folder 08-0007, sub-folder 1959.
- 97 Wewak was the headquarters of the then Sepik District; later this district was divided into a western and an eastern part. Wewak is now the capital of the East Sepik Province.
- 98 A. Bühler to The Honourable, The Administrator of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, Basel, 5 February 1959, informing about his plans to visit the following areas: Chambri Lake – Karawari R. – Yuat R.; Upper Sepik (from Ambunti upwards); Bush tribes between Maprik Sub District and Sepik River people; Lumi Sub District, thus hoping to mobilize support from the Administration; Archive MKB, folder 08-0007, sub-folder 1959.
- 99 Bühler's introduction to Gardi's travelogue, p. 2, my translation from German original; Archive MKB, folder 09-0042.
- 100 Bühler, Field diary 1959: 13, my translation from German original typescript; typing was done continually during the entire field trip in New Guinea. Archive MKB, folder 08-0038.
- 101 A. Bühler to Prof. Karl Meuli in Basel, 25 May 1959, typewritten letter; Archive MKB, folder 08-0007, sub-folder 1959.
- 102 Bühler on collecting, report to crew and steering committee of the Basel museum, December 1959, report misplaced; Archive MKB, folder unidentified.
- 103 TPNG, Restricted Area Ordinance 1950, Schedule Form B, PERMIT: "Professor A. Bühler of Ambunti, Sepik District" is hereby permitted to enter the restricted area (description of area) "in the Sepik District, (a) from the confluence of the October and Sepik Rivers for a distance of 5 miles on the right hand side of the middle thread of the Sepik River, to its junction with the April River (b) from the confluence of the May and Sepik Rivers to the May River Patrol Post, an area of land three miles from the middle thread of the May River on each side of that river." And remain therein until the "31st" day of "October, 1959" for the purpose of "Engaging in Ethnological Field Work"

- Special Conditions: 1. That the permittee is only permitted entry to the area "In company with Mr. Anthony Forge with whom he must travel at all times. Travel on the May River must be on an Administration Vessel and must not proceed beyond the May River Patrol Post."; 2. to 9. [printed text only]; Archive MKB, folder 08-0007, sub-folder 1959. Three or four years earlier people from a village on the May River had attacked a village on the Yellow River, with fatal consequences.
- 104 Bühler, Field diary 1959: 15; the German original reads: "Neben einer merkwürdigen, flachen, durchbrochen gearbeiteten Figur aus dem kleinen Männerhaus kann ich drei Stühle [indicators of influence from the middle Sepik] kaufen. Name der Zeremonialschnitzerei nicht bekannt, soll ein Tambaran Sager sein..."; Archive MKB, folder 08-0038.
- 105 Bühler, Field diary 1959: 22; Archive MKB, folder 08-0038. The German original reads: "An seiner Stelle ist ein kleines bodenebenes Haus mit rechteckigem Grundriss ohne jede Verzierung. Im Innern eine niedere Plattform vorn, [am] Boden nur garamut [slit gongs], die roh verziert sind. Häuser haben ovalen Grundriss...Im Innern des Boyhauses [lit. men's house] eine grosse Figur mit Kasuarschmuck, aufrecht festgebunden, Name Kamenamgabi. Soll ein Tambaran sein, wird auch als maselai bezeichnet und eine seiner Funktionen – vielleicht aber bei weitem nicht die wichtigste –, war Erfolg auf Jagd und im Krieg zu geben. Zu diesem Zwecke opferte man diesen Figuren, die vor den Frauen streng geheim gehalten werden." [punctuation adapted and typos corrected].
- 106 Bühler Field diary 1959: 23, with rectification regarding the identification of Mandjok with the mountain on p.24; Archive MKB, folder 08-0038. The German original reads: "...Grosse Idole: Jguimari, Jaguimari; mittlere gurapmak; kleiner am interessantesten, war [für] sich ein grosses Kultobjekt, heisst Mandjok, wie man später auch einen Berg in der Nähe nannte. Er entstand aus sich selbst und kam mit dem Wasser heruntergeschwommen; Gebrauch wie alle anderen Idole. ... Der Berg Mandjok war zuerst da, nach ihm nannte man den Tambaran, der im Wasser herunterkam." [punctuation adapted]
- 107 Bühler, Field diary 1959: 26-29; Archive MKB, folder 08-0038.
- 108 Bühler, Field diary 1959: 41-43, 20 June, on the upper Sepik; Archive MKB, folder 08-0038.
- 109 Preparing thus the volume *Ozeanien und Australien. Die Kunst der Südee*, by joint authors Alfred Bühler, Terence Barrow (Polynesia) and Charles Mountford (Australia), published in 1961 by Holle in Baden-Baden.
- 110 As for calling the *yipwon* figures Kamanggabi figures, Forge in his "Style and Meaning" chapter (1973c) acknowledged his error in note 1 (p. 191).
- 111 The list is inserted at the very end of Bühler, Field diary 1959 and not paginated; reference to Anthony's collecting on 9 August 1959 in the Bien River area on p. 64; Archive MKB, folder 08-0038.
- 112 Bühler notes that Anthony's farewell was true to his person: "[Alfred:]Thanks for the trip." Bühler, Field diary 1959: 66; Archive MKB, folder 08-0038.
- 113 For this passage see Bühler, Field diary 1959: 66 of 30 August, for all the days from 13 August onwards; Archive MKB, folder 08-0038.
- 114 Museum der Kulturen Basel, Oceania department [in the following: MKB, Oceania], registered as acquisition lot V_0320/1962 and V_0320N, under inv. numbers Vb 16358-655, Vb 16658, Vb 29679, database TMS, consulted on 5 August 2015. The original list is in the yellow folder of the acquisition lot, PDF in the TMS database. According to the letter from A. Bühler to A. Forge of 20 March 1959, Forge was given the sum of AUS\$200 for collecting plus a contribution of AUS\$50 to the cost of living plus AUS\$50 for transport. The objects collected in 1959 by Bühler and Forge while travelling together were registered under different acquisition lot numbers, i.e. V_0380/1959-62 and following.
- 115 [Forge, A.] "Notes on collection of Abelam Objects"; typescript, original [1959-60], p.2; MKB, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0320/1962.
- 116 [Forge, A.] "Notes on collection of Abelam objects", pp. 4-17; MKB, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0320/1962..
- 117 [Forge, A.] "Notes on collection of Abelam objects", MKB, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0320/1962..
- 118 [Forge, A.] "Notes on collection of Abelam Objects", p.11; MKB, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0320/1962. The mace and the mace fragments under inv.nos.Vb 16552-54 in the database.
- 119 A. Forge to A. Bühler, letters of 19-24 June (4 pages), 6 July 1963 (2 pages, specifying the cost of the whole campaign) and 29 July 1963; MKB, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0392/1964.
- 120 Acquisition lot V_0392/1964, inv.nos. Vb 20239-338, Vb 20599-21114, Vb 21241-490, totalling almost 1000 items; MKB, Oceania, TMS database.
- 121 [Forge, A.] "General remarks about the Wosera", 1 page; MKB, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0392.

- 122 [Forge, A.] "Maprik section of Forge collection 1962-63", p.1; MKB, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0392.
- 123 [Forge, A.] "Maprik section of Forge collection 1962-63", p.3; MKB, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0392. On Vimbaba and their use up to the 1970s in personal and secret yam magic, see Gerrits *et al.* (2012: 334-6, 354).
- 124 [Forge, A.] "Maprik section of Forge collection 1962-63", p.7; MKB, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0392. On cassowary bone daggers collected by, among others, Robert MacLennan, MD, who had assisted Anthony Forge in 1962 in film-work with a second camera (personal communication, August 2010 in Brisbane), see Newton (1989).
- 125 A. Forge to A. Bühler, letter, 19 to 24 June 1963, p.2; MKB, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0392/1964. The text transcribed by Markus Schindlbeck from the tape recording identifies this mask as being a representation of Mwaim [or Moiem], the mythical hero of Sawos origin who opened the way for humans to use the pith of the sago palm (*Metroxylon sp.*) rich in starch, and who, by seducing the women of Kararau, opened the road to the exchange of sago against fish through barter; the hero became not only the founder of the Sago clan, but also, after dying in a fight, of the Iatmul village of Kararau, hence the *awan* mask is said to contain his skull. A copy of Schindlbeck's transcription from the Iatmul and Tok pisin recordings can also be found with the Forge list. The mask, inv.no. Vb 20714, is illustrated in Peltier *et al.* (2015: 333, no.223).
- 126 A. Forge to A. Bühler, letter, 19 to 24 June 1963, pp.1-2 (19 June); M KB, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0392/1964.
- 127 A. Forge to A. Bühler, letter, 19 to 24 June 1963, pp. 2 and 3 (22 and 24 June); MKB, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0392/1964.
- 128 A. Forge to A. Bühler, letter, 9 July 1963, p.1; MKB, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0392/1964.
- 129 After having published his study on master carvers of the Dan (Liberia) – Fischer (1963) – Fischer was invited by Anthony and P. Ucko at a meeting held for this purpose in London, probably in 1964, to contribute a volume on Dan artists to this series. Following Fischer's switch to research in Gujarat, India, after his PhD viva this project never came to life (personal communication, 2 November 2013).
- 130 Meinhard Schuster, personal communication, 27 October 2013 and 5 August 2015.
- 131 On the acquisition A. Forge to A. Bühler, letter, 19 to 24 June 1963, p.3 (22 June); MKB, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0392/1964. Forge says the sculpture "is from Gaikorobi, inland from Yentchan, a standing male figure 6ft high, certainly very old probably pre-steel, in perfect condition except for bomb damage to one buttock, and some crude white splotches on the face which can and should be removed. It is much more like the Iatmul figures than the two we bought at Yamok last time. ... I have over 30 minutes of recording about it including a performance of it's [sic] own song!" According to the tape recording transcribed by Markus Schindlbeck the name of the figure was Mandali (of the Yogum-Tuvi-Wuliap clan alliance in the Nyame moiety of Kumuimbit ceremonial house), it represented a "grandfather"-like benign being, belonging to the mother's clan of the owners, with a potential of curing and of further non-aggressive behaviour.
- 132 Two Abelam carvings collected by Bühler in 1955-56 and still carrying their original registration number were found in the Chambon collection, now at the Musée d'ethnographie/MEG in Geneva, inv.no. ETHOC 041683 and 041684.
- 133 As per A. Forge to A. Bühler, letter, 19 to 24 June 1963, p.3 (22 June); MKB, Oceania, acquisition lot V_0392/1964.
- 134 It was Bühler, however, who had mentioned in 1959 to the Chairman of the Board (Museums-kommission), J.R. Belmont, in a letter from the field that one should try to find additional funds for buying another series of objects from Father Jop Heinemans SVD, funds which could, if need be, eventually, at least partially, be paid back by selling objects. A. Bühler to J.R. Belmont, letter, Timbunke 17 July 1959, Archive MKB, folder 08-0007, sub-folder 1959.
- 135 Everything odd that happened in the 1962-65 period at the Basel museum was, in retrospect, blamed on Schmitz anyhow.
- 136 Forge, Anthony, "Style and Meaning", written up by 1969 and published in Forge (1973a: 169-92). The analysis of the over 150 paintings on paper from the village of Kwanimbandu also allowed for identifying individual and local variations in using, combining and transforming basic formal elements. Testing a hypothetical universal interpretation of form against local ways of linking form and meaning was a follow-up project by Sheila Korn, as Forge explains in "Style and Meaning" in note 12. See Korn (1974 and 1978).

- 137 As Reimar Schefold's analysis has shown, the artistic creativity of Sepik carvers increased the number of distinctive traits, thus reducing the numbers of suspension hooks showing a specific trait to a level statistically too low as to serve as an indicator positively linking an element of style to an area at least of manufacture, if not of origin. For a critique of the Schefold-Bühler approach, see Forge (1973a: 172-3). Bühler presented the methodology of his and Schefold's approach in a lecture on Sepik art styles he gave in Berlin, probably in 1960. Bühler refers under several aspects to André Leroi-Gourhan's ideas. Archive MKB, folder 09-0037.
- 138 One would observe that the study of the paintings did not yet reach a level allowing identification beyond the individual variations within Kwanimbandu village (or other local or sub-regional variations) by describing how basic formal elements were used, combined and transformed here and there. The corpus of masks mainly shown in public was chosen from a wider array of interrelated places, thus creating the opportunity to study a multi-centred closed system, a system less closely linked to the core sphere of sacred ritual.
- 139 Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin described the context of baba masks based on her own fieldwork, see Hauser-Schäublin (1983).
- 140 For the Anthony Forge Papers see MSS 0411, Special Collections and Archives, The Library, University of California San Diego, Find list under: http://libraries.ucsd.edu/speccoll/testing/html/mss0411a.html#biohist_ (consulted on 28 August 2016). The Introduction to the conference volume is signalled in boxes 13 and 14, folders # 24, 25 and # 1, 2 respectively.
- 141 See www.wennergren.org/history/conferences-seminars-symposia/wenner-gren-symposia/cumulative-list-wenner-gren-symposia/w-109 (consulted on 28 August, 2016). The Find list in San Diego also points to numerous colour photographs of items in the Basel Abelam collection sent to Anthony Forge. These photographs had been taken for Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin who was then producing her own study of the Abelam material collected for the Basel museum (see Hauser-Schäublin 1989a). The copy she once dedicated to Anthony now belongs to G.J.M.(Fred) Gerrits in Buderim Queensland, for whom I bought it in 2012 via Amazon. For the Abelam ceremonial house see Hauser-Schäublin (1989b).
- 142 MKB, Indonesia Department, acquisition lot IIc_1272, donation Anthony Forge, Sydney 1978, inv. no. IIc 18513.

Chapter 13

- 143 A version of this paper was given as the inaugural Anthony Forge Memorial Lecture at the Australian National University in 1998. It has been a long time in gestation and the next two lectures have already been published (Losche 2001 and Tuzin 2002).
- 144 See Kroeber (1957).
- 145 Diane Losche (2001: 160 ff.) emphasises the importance of names associated with design elements in Abelam paintings.
- 146 The classic work on iconicity in Central Australian sign systems is Nancy Munn's 1973 book *Walbiri Iconography* (see also Morphy 1980).
- 147 '[O]ur dichotomy abstract versus figurative or representational is misleading at the very least in Abelam terms and I now wish to analyse a set of paintings from one village which includes both types in one corpus. My aim is to show how Abelam artists handle the elements of their flat painting style and manipulate the different bits and their relationships to create association and relationships between disparate valued aspects of their culture' (Forge 1973a: 179).
- 148 The issue of exegesis is a highly complex one in New Guinea art since it depends partly on what the analyst's focus is and partly on the degree of verbalisation about paintings (see O'Hanlon 1992 for a relevant discussion).
- 149 While Forge's analysis of Abelam art has been very influential, it has also come under considerable criticism. He has been criticised for neglecting the affective dimension of Abelam art (Roscoe 1995), for being insufficiently concerned with what art does (Losche 1997), and for giving too much emphasis to the question of meaning (Roscoe 1995; Losche 1997). While such criticisms do draw attention to important dimensions of Abelam art that needed to be further explored, they do not in themselves contradict Forge's own analysis. As O'Hanlon (1995: 832) points out with reference to this critique, it is important 'to recognise the multidimensionality of art' where the semantic, aesthetic, affective and purposive dimensions all apply to the same object or event.

- 150 Narritjin and Banapana's visit is recorded in Ian Dunlop's film *Narritjin in Canberra*, which includes a sequence of Narritjin co-teaching students in Forge's anthropology of art class.
- 151 Loshce's comment is particularly salient since she was writing about hers and Anthony Forge's separate encounters with the Abelam. Indeed the section heading is 'The hybrid moment in fieldwork: Anthony Forge's question'. In a way this entire paper is about that question. One missing element is the absence of the Abelam from the discussion, though Anthony had entertained visiting Abelam to a feast in the same room in which we looked at the paintings (Losche 2001: 156). One can only speculate on what difference their presence would have made. The other missing element is Anthony himself. This was the paper we always intended to write together.
- 152 While I would not suggest any direct historical connection between Yolngu and the cultures of the Sepik River, Yolngu have their own indigenous 'ethnographic' tradition and their mythology and oral traditions link them closely to the people of eastern Indonesia and New Guinea. The annual visits of the Macassan fleet made people familiar with the indigenous cultures of eastern Indonesia (McKnight 1976, McIntosh 1996). Yolngu beliefs about the dead include an island of the dead, 'Badu', which is a semi mythical land associated with the Torres Strait Islands and New Guinea. Contact with outsiders is reflected in Yolngu ritual and art which includes detailed representations of their way of life and material culture (see Morphy 1998: 212 ff.) Mountford's book contains many references to art that reflect Macassan contact (e.g. Mountford 1956: 292, 409).
- 153 Forge noted this contrast in his first major article on Abelam art where he wrote, 'The relation of art to myth is a much discussed question. In Arnhem Land, for example, art, myth and ritual appear to be completely interlocked and interdependent; but it seems unlikely that one is justified in taking myth to be primary and the art to be just an expression of it. It seems rather as if they were all three different ways of expressing aspects of the same thing in words, in action and visually, none of them being complete without the other, and none of them being the entire expression on their own'. He contrasted the Arnhem Land case (where his reference point is Mountford's work on the Yolngu (Mountford 1956)), with the Iatmul neighbours of the Abelam 'where there is nothing like this integration' and the Abelam themselves: 'With the Abelam the case is much simpler since there is hardly any mythology at all, and none connected in any way with the most important figures, those of the clan spirits *nggwalandu*' (Forge 1966). Narritjin, who was one of the artists who painted for Mountford on his 1948 American Australian expedition to Arnhem Land alluded to this contrast when, with no prompting, he said: 'We have a story line with meaning that we did for Mr. Mountford'.
- 154 See Morphy (1991).
- 155 According to Forge, the Abelam interpretation of this was as string bag.
- 156 The word *balanda* literally means white people. It comes from 'Hollander' a word that entered the Yolngu language via the Macassan traders from South Sulawesi. In this context however it refers to a race of white sea hunters who preceded the Macassan visitors to Yolngu country and are celebrated in ritual.
- 157 Narritjin indeed interpreted one of the paintings in relation to a Yolngu story of a visit to the land of the dead. Narritjin said: 'The old people call this one here the spirit people been in New Guinea and the islands' and Banapana added: 'Aboriginal people they go as spirit people to New Guinea. They think all the coconut tree on the beach come from New Guinea.' Narritjin elaborated: 'Yalangura [a Gälpu clan man] travelled all the way to New Guinea by canoe and when he got there they asked him if he was dead or alive. Alive! Well you got to go back to your country and return when you are dead. And when he returned to the mainland he told the story that live people are not allowed to go to there, you have to die before you can go there.'
- 158 There is not the space for a detailed discussion of the iconography of this painting here. However, the meanings of the set of paintings of which this is a part are discussed in detail in the chapters on Manggalili iconography in my book *Ancestral Connections* (Morphy 1991).

Chapter 14

- 159 Jean Tarisesei wrote about this visit, see Tarisesei (2013).

Chapter 15

- 160 I am grateful for the convenors of the workshop on Anthony Forge for providing me with the opportunity to discuss some aspects of Abelam art. Recent ethnographic material used in this paper has been gathered during fieldwork in Nyamikum in 2001-03, and June – July 2014, thanks to the contribution of Robin Kitnyora, Andrew Apila and Nebiya. Reflections on this material also come from lectures delivered at the Course on Anthropology and History of Oceanian Arts at the École du Louvre in 2010 and 2015. My thanks also go to Christian Kaufmann, Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin and Philippe Peltier for their careful reading and comments. Any mistakes and errors are mine.
- 161 There was hardly any carving or painting during my own fieldwork in Nyamikum village in 2001-03. The last initiations took place in 1964, and then, strongly criticised by a local representative of the Catholic Church of Maprik, all practices ceased. Since then, kurabu have been built in three occasions in Nyamikum, but not a single one was standing during my own stay.
- 162 I am using here the denomination set by John Kundama and Patricia Wilson (1987). I have however slightly modified the transcription, following the wishes of Robin Galewara Kitnyora's recommendations, by using *ë*, to transcribe the sound corresponding to the *e* of "father". The "b" is pronounced mb, "d", nd; "g", ng and "j", nj.
- 163 Christian Kaufmann points out (personal communication) that Forge might have been aware of the existence of Abulës myths, but could have chosen not to collect them, perhaps to distinguish himself from his own supervisor, Raymond Firth, who was more interested in oral sources.
- 164 Though alluded to, other discussions on the role of cognitive modalities at play in interpretative processes and their relations to memory and knowledge or on ontological regimes of human and non-humans (Descola 2010) could not be elaborated in this paper for reasons of space. But the conclusion of this paper leads me back a position in which "meta-relations", discussed by Descola (2010: 165-82), indeed occupy a central role in Maprik modalities of figuration.
- 165 The Abulës-speaking area present many variations in interpretations, confirming if necessary the "multi-referentiality" of Maprik images. I am using here information collected during my fieldwork in 2001-03 and 2014 in the village of Nyamikum. For stylistic variations and other interpretations from other villages, see Forge (1973a), McGuigan (1992) and Hauser-Schäublin (2015: 67-77, 173-7).
- 166 My occasional use of the present tense, though all initiations practices had stopped in the whole area at the moment of my visits to Nyamikum, is for the sake of clarity.
- 167 See the myth about the cassowary woman who brought the yam varieties to the Abelam (Hauser-Schäublin 1983: 191-2); see also Losche (1995), for a different interpretation of the ceremonial house.
- 168 Interestingly, during my last trip to Nyamikum in 2014, the people who constructed a smaller replica of a ceremonial house originally planned for the Melanesian Art Festival in Wewak, indicated to me that the cassowary was at the origin of all ceremonial houses, and that the difference in shapes came from the way in which she travelled: in the east, because it was still night, she was hunched, straightening in the central Maprik area, and then arriving on the West, it knelt. See also Hauser-Schäublin (2015: 173, 180).
- 169 I am grateful to Christian Kaufmann for pointing this out. At times the simplest of explanation can be hiding in plain sight.
- 170 I am grateful here to Timothy Carroll, whose PhD thesis on Orthodox images deals with the "presencing" nature of Holy Ikons, for pointing this out.
- 171 This interpretation was given to me by several elder members of Nyamikum village, confirmed again during the Melanesian Arts Festival in Wewak in July 2014. Several communities of the Maprik area set up some dances presenting the imposing headdress *waken* worn by dancers.
- 172 This idea evokes Kris Hardin's discussion of redundancy (1993; see also Bateson 1973) or, more recently Pierre Lemonnier's discussion of perissology (2012).
- 173 Whilst *sakiwura* was often described as a red powder (the most powerful colour), my own ethnography of magical substances given to yam in 2001-03, only described it first as *kusbawu* ("magic"-ash) which could be combined with other ones, powder or liquid (Coupaye 2013: 22, 184-5), composing thus a powerful mixture.
- 174 I am using here elements drawn from the work of Beryl L. Bellman (1981, 1984) in Africa. See also Roberts and Abimbola 1993.

Chapter 16

- 175 Some people of this village were decorated as ritual dancers. They were waiting for a tourist group for whom they had been asked to perform.
- 176 Today's predominance of the figurative or "representational" painting style in modern buildings certainly has a lot to do with changed visual perceptions, heavily determined by "western" or rather globalised visual media, such as photos, film, video, TV and the internet in general.
- 177 They argue completely differently from the Roman Catholic Church, which seeks to fill traditional cultural visual expressions with new, Christian, contents or, to use another of Anthony's central notions, meaning. The fundamentalists attack the Speaker of the National Parliament concerning the decoration of the House of Parliament in Port Moresby (Geismar 2014). One of these decorations, a carved lintel, draws on the style of carved lintels of Abelam ceremonial houses, though without any religious connotation. The Speaker of Parliament declared this lintel as "satanic" and had it forcefully removed from its place.
- 178 As Coupaye reports, older men complained that younger men were no longer interested in kastom but preferred town and *whiteman* lifestyles (2013: 227).
- 179 In 1980, we took a long yam tuber with us to have a mould made so that we could set up a reconstruction of a yam display in the Basel Ethnographic Museum.
- 180 I cannot enter the complex discussion on aesthetics in anthropology, not even in relation to Abelam art. I understand Abelam aesthetics as a culture-specific way of giving preference to certain artistic ways of representation, comprising style, forms and the composition of art works, and attributing value to these particular properties. Aesthetics visualise art in the narrower sense of the word. For a summing up of the discussion, see Coupaye (2013: 264-84).
- 181 This wearing style has a lot apparently to do with safety – and hiding. Coupaye noted that, even during long yam ceremonies, men kept their wut close "to prevent theft" when they took a nap (2013: 227); today, younger men keep sought-after modern valuables, such as mobile phones, in their bags. In contrast to sharing the netbag's contents (tobacco and betel nuts) in the late 1970s, such valuables are now personal property.
- 182 He wrote of "the virtue of repetition, the value of redundancy" (Forge 1979: 283; reproduced in this volume, Chapter 8) and identified it as "fundamental" since they convey "fundamental assumptions about the bases of the society, the real nature of men and women, the nature of power, the place of man in the universe of nature which surrounds him" (*ibid.*:285).
- 183 There are further basic form elements typical for paintings with which I cannot deal here (but see Hauser-Schäublin 1989b: 25-48).
- 184 In the initiation ritual we were allowed to witness in Malmba village, one of the most important stages of the ceremony consisted of the teaching of the novices about yam and its sacred cultivation (and consumption) (Hauser-Schäublin 2015: 155).

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STYLE AND MEANING

Anthropology's engagement with art has a complex and uneven history. While material culture, 'decorative art', and art styles were of major significance for founding figures such as Alfred Haddon and Franz Boas, art became marginal as the discipline turned towards social analysis in the 1920s. This book addresses a major moment of renewal in the anthropology of art in the 1960s and 1970s. British anthropologist Anthony Forge (1929-1991), trained in Cambridge, undertook fieldwork among the Abelam of Papua New Guinea in the late 1950s and 1960s, and wrote influentially, especially about issues of style and meaning in art. His powerful, question-raising arguments addressed basic issues, asking why so much art was produced in some regions, and why was it so socially important?

Fifty years later, art has renewed global significance, and anthropologists are again considering both its local expressions among Indigenous peoples and its new global circulation. In this context, Forge's arguments have renewed relevance: they help scholars and students understand the genealogies of current debates, and remind us of fundamental questions that remain unanswered.

This volume brings together Forge's most important writings on the anthropology of art, published over a thirty year period, together with six assessments of his legacy, including extended reappraisals of Sepik ethnography, by distinguished anthropologists from Australia, Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom

Anthony Forge was born in London in 1929. A student at Downing College, Cambridge, he studied anthropology with Edmund Leach, and went on to undertake research with Raymond Firth at the London School of Economics. Over 1958-63 he undertook several periods of fieldwork among the Abelam of the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea, made major collections for the Museum der Kulturen, Basel, and went on to write a series of essays which were enormously influential for the anthropology of art and for studies of Melanesia. He was appointed Foundation Professor of Anthropology at the Australian National University in 1974 and taught there until his death in 1991.

