

Fig. 162. Totemic carved bird (hornbill), Maprik. Painted wood, cm 18x58. (WARA Archives).

TIMELESS PAST OR CULTURAL DYNAMISM? A SEMIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO SEPIK ART FORMS (PAPUA NEW GUINEA)

Eriberto EULISSE

The purpose of this essay is to explore the function and the meaning of some Sepik artefacts in relation to the transitional socio-cultural context of Papua New Guinea (1910s-1960s).

In traditional societies¹ art is not made for its own sake but mainly to “work”, that is to say to convey appropriate emotional values shared by members of a distinctive culture, and it is commonly part of a ritual context. If we want to know how “art objects” work in these societies, it seems essential to consider the anthropological context in which they are used and produced, because our cultural aesthetic categories rarely are useful to understand the nature of traditional indigenous art. The methods of semiology are particularly useful in ethnography when a particular socio-cultural context has to be decoded.

What is modified in the nature of art objects when a traditional context changes? Do similar or modified forms serve the purpose of expressing traditional values and beliefs? Which are the meaningful differences between the first Sepik artefacts collected by the Europeans at the beginning of the century and some others collected fifty years later? And, if the traditional context in which Sepik art objects were made and used in former times has changed definitely, to what extent are later artefacts “authentic”? My aim here, according to the available data, is to problematize such issues in order to discuss the meaning and the value of some art objects of the Sepik river area (figs. 162-169) collected in the 1960s, before the creation of a fully commercial art market.

Due to the lack of ethnographic surveys on specific art objects and on their use in rituals, I first will try to outline some structural concepts and values which are shared in different ways throughout the Sepik area. This perspective, as it will become clear, on the one hand gives a general background of the ritual context in which traditional artefacts were used; on the other, it stresses the urgency of undertaking a field work analysis to study in depth the whole issue of art in transition in Papua New Guinea.

Art indeed is a cultural phenomenon inherently dynamic, whose absolute “authenticity” can not be restricted to some first examples collected by the Europeans. With a particular notion of authenticity, I will argue that an “ethnohistorical perspective” enables to regard in the same positive manner the importance of “transition” in our culture as well as in other cultures.

The Sepik art style is quite easily recognisable from that of other areas in New Guinea, and certainly also it is possible to note that the arts of different Sepik groups have many stylistic features in common. However, if a whole series of stylistic features is fairly common to all Sepik groups, it is worth noticing that some of these elements

are developed and exploited in very different ways from group to group. Indeed styles or style elements are frequently borrowed in this area today as well as in the past, so it is actually difficult to determine the specific origin of particular motifs or styles (Forge, 1973, pp. 69-71).

The result of such a fluidity is a very complex web of shared and slightly diverse styles and meanings for similar artefacts. Each group in fact, whatever may have been the origin of certain repertoires, has developed its style for its own purposes.

It is also important to bear in mind that within a single group certain painted motifs constitute a sort of distinctive marker or “copyright” of a specific clan, which is the only one who can use it. In former times, the transgression of this copyright could also lead to killing.

Many scholars have noticed that a state of “constant stylistic fluidity” characterises the Sepik art, and this also was the situation during the period preceding the German expeditions at the beginning of the century.

In the following section I wish to outline some basic conceptual categories which emerge from a contextualisation of the local artistic production, and which are quite common in the Sepik area. Totem, ancestors, warfare and fertility are indeed very recurrent themes among different groups (Forge, 1966; 1973; 1979).

The analysis of A. Forge, though focusing on the Abelam group, tries to make some interesting comparisons with the Iatmul of the Middle Sepik, a group that he considers structurally related to the former, and whose artefacts I will mainly consider here. Forge’s analysis is important to understand, in particular, the symbolic identifications among men, ancestors and some conceptual categories such as power, aggressiveness, and fertility. These values and categories are chiefly expressed in the art.

Among the Abelam, important conceptual categories emerge from the rituals carried out in the late part of ceremonial houses’ construction (Forge, 1966, pp. 26-8).

From the Forge account the symbolic identity among coconuts (fruits), heads of

Fig. 163. War mask (House Tambaran’s gable mask), Blackwater River. Painted straw and wood, cm 54x90. (WARA Archives).



enemies killed in battles (skulls), and male testicles (seeds) is quite evident: all these elements are related to fertility and male power. Here I can not go into further details, but it is possible to elicit other important symbolic relations between aggressiveness (the killing of enemies) and fertility (the conquest of women), and between yam production (growth energies) and human reproduction (male reproductive power).

Among the Abelam, long yam cultivation is part of important rituals as well as an essential way of obtaining "prestige". When ritually displayed, yams are largely decorated with wooden carvings and basketry masks. The largest yams also are named after the ancestor name of the grower's clan, because ancestors are thought to be closely related to growth's energies. Yams are grown in sacred gardens only by initiated men who must take special ritual precautions before entering in them. Here the basic identification is not only between a man and his yams, but also between yams and ancestors (Forge, 1966, pp. 27-30).

The length of yams, according to Forge, has obvious phallic connotations and is thought to be closely related to the "influence" of single individuals and their reproductive power on the crop.

In sum, looking at this Abelam ritual context, we may note that ideas of aggressiveness, success in war, conquest of women, ancestors, fertility and social status are all closely related.

The cult of yams, which provides an ideal means for expressing male prestige and values among the Abelam, according to Forge would have its corresponding media in the male "cult of flutes" among the Iatmul. Flutes, according to Forge, also may be seen as phallic metaphors, and are surrounded by much the same taboos and attitudes as the Abelam long yams. Iatmul flutes and Abelam yams, very interestingly, are also called by the same name, *wapi* (Forge, 1966, pp. 27-30).

For my purpose, I have considered Forge's analysis only as a detailed ethnographic survey to show, in a particular context, the wide implications of some conceptual



Fig. 164. Ancestral standing figure, Kamindibit (Middle Sepik). Wood, shell, cowrie, straw, bone and feather; cm 30x91. (WARA Archives).

categories such as “ancestor”, “fertility”, and so on. Such categories are quite widespread in the Sepik river area where, nevertheless, they also may convey more specific associations for particular groups. Here I do not intend to generalise the validity of the Forge research to other villages of the Sepik area, but I only wish to elucidate some cultural concepts and values which are structural in this area, and which seem to be essential to understand art forms.

Artefacts are important media in every ritual related to clans, ancestors, and fertility throughout the Sepik river region and, in this sense, it seems reasonable to suggest an ultimate relation of art objects with men, the qualities they want to possess, and their totems or ancestors. These mythological associations and relations are re-enacted by men through rituals.

On the other hand, it is worth noticing that when I talk about ancestors, clan or fertility figures (see figs. 162-169) it is not difficult to project some ethnocentric concepts if we do not know the specific ritual context in which they were used. Recurring conceptual categories such as those I outlined before may be particularly useful to fill the present gap of ethnographic data about New Guinea artefacts, and to reconstruct the knowledge inherent to these objects.

Semiotics deals with the tacit knowledge which is created by local actors in a particular cultural context, and in order to get more information about one object it is not methodologically incorrect to elicit it from its ritual use, and from the theological and cosmological values of a particular society. Indeed in many artefacts what is usually conveyed are fundamental assumptions about the bases of society, the nature of power, and that of men and women.²

Fig. 165. Anthropomorphic basket hook, Nangusap. Wood, cm 31x105. (WARA Archives).



In relation to the nature of “representation”, Forge has also stressed that what matters in a figure is the “arrangement” of certain marker symbols, and the “significance” of this arrangement. Certain particular features, in fact, may correspond to those attributed to a spirit and may serve, in this sense, as “markers” of a spirit identification. This, however, does not mean that the spirits “look like this” (Forge, 1966, p. 25).

A mask or a carving, in other words, should not be interpreted simply as the “real representation” of a spirit or an ancestor: rather, in Forge’s words, they manifest “something about the relationship between things” (*ibid.*, my emphasis). In this sense, I think we may consider a sculpture which “stands for” a certain spirit as a “symbol” of that spirit³, because it arouses appropriate emotions in conjunction with particular ritual practices⁴.

Art, then, is a mean of creating meaningful “relationships” between graphic signs, ideas and local values. To identify and label a mask does not signify to find out what an object means. A “label” is only a name which does not describe the complex web of “associations” that, eventually, constitute the local meaning for a local actor in a local culture.

A mere art-historical approach would probably criticise the “authenticity” of some artefacts I am discussing here. Such a perspective, nevertheless, leaves many questions unanswered in relation to semiotics and tends to deny *a priori* any historical and artistic development of indigenous culture before the European contact.

Disciplines such as ethnohistory and archaeology have clearly shown that so-called “primitive” societies, though lacking of written sources, were not devoid of historical and artistic developments in pre-contact periods. A lack of consideration of the historical dimension in traditional societies, in addition, seems to lead inevitably to the stereotype of taking into account “traditional artefacts” (collected in New Guinea in the 1910s) as representative of a “timeless past” which indeed is merely conjectural.



Fig. 166. Ancestral mask, Kamindibit (Middle Sepik). Tortoise shell, feathers, clay, shell, bone and feather; cm 52x92. (WARA Archives).

In regard to this issue, according to D. Dutton, "what must concern us is the potential distortion of our understanding of tribal arts by an academic attitude that denies spiritual authenticity and even turns a blind eye to fakery" in considering some art objects (Dutton, 1994, p. 9). Dutton has proposed a philosophical reflection upon the concept of authenticity which recovers the sense of art embedded in its historical context. In fact, he takes into account the importance of art objects for local actors both in traditional and transitional times.

Dutton suggests an interesting distinction between what he calls "nominal authenticity" and "deep authenticity" (Dutton, 1994, pp. 1-6). The concept of nominal authenticity, according to him, requires "an accurate representation of the actual identity of an object". The ideal of nominal authenticity is one in which every object is identified and labelled with a correct description of its authorship and the circumstances of its origins and intended use. In this sense, however, only few "traditional" artefacts comply with this condition. Nominal authenticity, then, is also strictly related to the exigencies of the art market, because it is a crucial category to maintain the market value of art objects.

On the other hand, according to Dutton's distinction, a nominally authentic art object is not necessarily also a "deeply authentic" artefact. "Deep authenticity", in fact, may be considered the "object's status as a true expression of... values and beliefs". This category implies a "genuine intention which can only arise in a social context and at a historical time" (*ibid.*).

In this sense, each object which has been used in a ritual context is "deeply authentic", because it embodies some intensely felt cultural meanings and emotions. Such a category implies, in sum, a genuineness of expression which may be fully relevant in analysing both "traditional" and some more recent indigenous artefacts.

The analytical distinction between nominal and deep authenticity enables to look upon the problem of "representativeness" of indigenous artefacts in an ethnohistorical perspective. In this sense, most of the artefacts I am considering here do have a deep authenticity. Some stylistic features of these artefacts also may have been altered by European influences, but without reducing their local and genuine function, that is to say their "deep authenticity". According to Prof. Ross Bowden, among the Kwoma recent artefacts may be commissioned by art dealers, and nevertheless be used for a certain time in local ceremonies and for the needs of the group (Bowden: personal communication)⁵.

In summary, Dutton's distinction determines the particular status of "true authenticity" even for those objects which, although not produced in a pre-contact situation, have nevertheless been used in rituals, charged with deep emotions, and therefore represent a sort of transitional expression of traditional local values. Authentic and genuine artefacts may have been produced both before and after the European contact.

With a particular notion of authenticity, in this paper I have tried to criticise the presumed representativeness of some "traditional" objects which are often hypostatized as supreme and silent witnesses of a timeless past. This perspective reveals the weak bases of those analyses which have crystallized a particular historic situation (in conjunction with specific artistic forms) as necessary and absolute point of reference, and therefore claims a positive "authenticity" for local developments of art forms in the periods following the disgregation of the "traditional" society. In contrast, a very different art production started in the 1970s, as response to the increasing demands of a fully commercial art market (Abramson, 1976; Graburn, 1976; Schmid, 1990).



Fig. 167. Ancestral carved head, Yamok. Painted wood, white and brown paint cm 20x76. (WARA Archives).

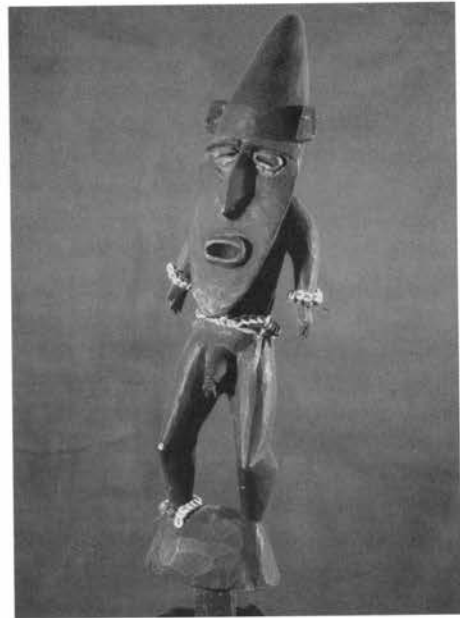


Fig. 168. Flute stopper, Yuat River. Wood, straw and cowries; cm 11x53. (WARA Archives).

In conclusion, I propose to consider the artefacts made after the 1910s and 1920s not as a degeneration of a supposed “timeless past”, a past which would be crystallized in the “nominally authentic” artefacts collected by the Europeans at the beginning of the century, but as a “genuine expression of a transitional context deeply authentic”.

To deny a notion of authenticity to artefacts made between the 1930s and 1960s would re-propose, in my opinion, the sterile stereotype that all artistic forms following the former European collections are merely inauthentic.

However, the generic tendency to treat the art of non-literate societies as representative of a sort of timeless past is historically incorrect, because it does not consider *a priori* the importance of historic dimension. Why, then, does Western society promote and reward “change” in its own contemporary arts, whereas it disapprove of the same in other cultures? Sometimes people frown on the notion of change in third world countries as if these cultures should not depart from the stereotype of “primitive/traditional art” without losing something. Such a loss, nevertheless, does exist only in these people’s minds.

Notes

1) An essential starting point is to realise that the world “traditional” implies a number of distinct and related perspectives. “Traditional” is used in very different ways by anthropologists, art historians, museum keepers, art dealers and even indigenous people. Hence, the use of this word always involves a certain degree of ambiguity. In

order to facilitate the discussion I will frequently refer to “traditional” to indicate the historic context preceding the first German expeditions (1910s). I am well aware that this is not a satisfactory use of ‘traditional’, and in the conclusion I will criticize those perspectives which consider some museum collections as representative of an “artistical

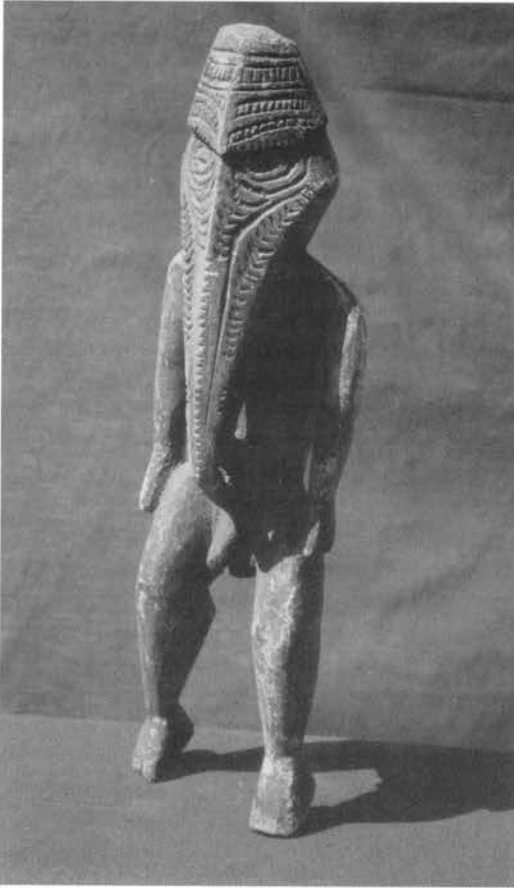


Fig. 169. Ancestral carved figure, Keram River. Wood, cm 13x39. (WARA Archives).

tradition" crystallized in a sort of "timeless past". Such perspectives, indeed, cancel the historic dimension of non-literate societies and, as a consequence, the same notion of cultural dynamism.

2) See, for example, the method followed by Forge (1979).

3) I adopt here the definition of "symbol of condensation" first suggested by E. Sapir in "Symbol", *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, 1932.

4) As Forge notes, meaningful relationships between objects and values may be elicited at different levels in the same society. Art indeed communicates only to those initiated to receive

it, and thus the meaning varies according to one person or another. In this sense Forge stresses the fact that nobody get the 'message' on one occasion: rather, this is gradually built up by repeated exposures to rituals; and the more one sees, the more meaningful the internalised cultural pattern becomes (Forge, 1979, p. 284).

5) This paper benefits by the most valuable assistance of Dr. Ross Bowden who is professor at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. Prof. Bowden specialised in the arts of the Sepik river area and has done extensive fieldwork among the Kwoma (see bibliography).

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Riassunto

Che differenza c'è tra i primi manufatti del Sepik raccolti dagli Europei all'inizio del Novecento e quelli raccolti sul campo 50 anni dopo? Se il contesto "tradizionale" d'inizio secolo in cui gli oggetti venivano utilizzati è mutato, fino a che punto i manufatti artistici prodotti successivamente e per un uso locale possono essere considerati "autentici"? Scopo di questo articolo è discutere tale problematica per indagare la portata e il significato di alcuni manufatti raccolti nell'area del fiume Sepik (Papua Nuova Guinea) negli anni '60, prima della creazione di un mercato dell'arte pienamente commerciale. L'articolo sottolinea l'importanza d'intraprendere un'analisi sul campo per considerare, in una prospettiva semiologica, la "profonda autenticità" e, dunque, il valore etnografico di certi oggetti utilizzati localmente nel contesto di transizione degli anni '60 e '70. Tale prospettiva d'analisi è essenziale per mostrare i limiti di quelle interpretazioni che, nella letteratura specializzata, hanno teso a cristallizzare i manufatti raccolti ai primi del Novecento come rappresentativi di una sorta di "passato atemporale" (un passato idealmente privo di sviluppi artistici e storici), oltre che come referenti unici del concetto di "autenticità". La tendenza generica a trattare l'arte delle società non-letterate come immersa in una sorta di limbo storico si rivela, tuttavia, un'interpretazione fortemente etnocentrica; posizione che impedisce *a priori* di considerare la transizione dei fenomeni artistici nelle altre culture allo stesso modo che nella cultura occidentale.

Summary

What is the difference between the first Sepik artefacts collected by the Europeans at the beginning of the XXth century and those collected fifty years later? If the "traditional" context in which Sepik art objects were made and used in former times has changed, to what extent are later artefacts "authentic" to? The purpose of this paper is to problematize such an issue in order to

discuss the significance and the ethnographic value of some art objects of Papua New Guinea collected in the 1960s, before the creation of a fully commercial art market. The article stresses the urgency of undertaking a field work analyses in order to consider the "deep authenticity" of the artefacts used by people in the transitional context of the 1960s and 1970s. This perspective enables to show the limits of those interpretations that have tended to crystallize the artefacts collected in the 1910s and 1920s as representative of a "timeless past" (a past devoid of history and art developments) and, eventually, of a sort of "absolute authenticity". Indeed, the generic tendency to treat the art of non-literate societies as representative of a stationary past is a deeply ethnocentric kind of interpretation; a position which a priori does not take into account the existence of art change and transition in other cultures as it does in western culture.

Résumé

Quelle différence y-a-t-il entre les premiers objets d'art ethnographique collectionnés par les Européens dans la région du fleuve Sepik (Papouasie Nouvelle Guinée) au début du XX siècle et ceux recueillis sur le terrain 50 ans après? Si le contexte "traditionnel" où ces premiers objets ont été fabriqués et employés a changé, peut-on considérer "authentiques" les témoins d'art produits dans la suite? Le but de cet article est de discuter cette problématique afin d'envisager la portée et la valeur ethnographique de quelques objets collectionnés au cours des années soixante, avant la création d'un marché commercial d'art "traditionnel". A ce propos, une étude plus détaillée sur le terrain est essentielle pour considérer la sémiologie intrinsèque et, pourtant, la "profonde authenticité" des objets employés localement dans le contexte de transition des années soixante. Dans cette perspective on met en évidence la limite de certaines hypothèses qui ont arbitrairement défini les exemples collectionnés au début du siècle comme représentatifs d'une sorte de "passé atemporel" (un passé virtuellement dénoué de tout développement artistique et historique) et, par conséquence, comme modèles de référence pour un concept "absolu" d'authenticité. La tendance général à traiter l'art "traditionnel" des sociétés sans littérature comme représentatif d'un passé immobile et sans histoire se révèle, toutefois, une interprétation fortement ethnocentrique; position qui d'ailleurs exclut *a priori* la portée du changement et de la transition artistique dans les autres cultures, de même que dans la culture occidentale.



Fig. 170. Pierre à cupule et à reticule trouvée au milieu d'une nécropole d'époque romaine dans le village de Makresh, district de Kumanovo, Macédoine.