

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

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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 societies<sup>1</sup> 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 wish 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. Methods of semiology are particularly useful in anthropology of art when a particular socio-cultural context has to be decoded.

What does an artefact mean and communicate? 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 thirty or forty 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 of some art objects of the Sepik river area (figs. 1 - 10).

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 us 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.

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 shall thus point out in an historical perspective the purport of change and 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

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<sup>1</sup> An essential starting point is to realise that the word '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 'artistic tradition' crystallized in a sort of 'timeless past'. Such perspectives, as I will suggest, cancel the historic dimension of non-literate societies and, as a consequence, the same notion of cultural dynamism.



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<sup>2</sup>.

The result of such a fluidity is a very complex web of shared and slightly diverse stylistic meanings for similar artefacts. Each group in fact, whatever may have been the original 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 certainly 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 (Bowden, personal communication; Forge: 1966, 1973 and 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 during the late part of ceremonial houses' construction (Forge, 1966: 26-8). From the Forge account the symbolic connection among coconuts (fruits), heads of enemies killed in battles (skulls) and male testicles (seeds) is quite evident: all these elements are related to fertility and power. Here I can not go into further details, but it is possible to elicit other important symbolic correlations between aggressiveness (the killing of enemies) and fertility (the conquest of women), and between yam production (growth energies) and human reproduction (human 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 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: 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 the 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 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* (*ibid.*).

For my purpose, I have considered here Forge's analysis only to show, in a particular context, the wide implications of some conceptual categories such as 'ancestor', 'fertility', and

<sup>2</sup> See: Forge, 1973:69-71.



so on. Such categories are quite widespread in the Sepik river area where, nevertheless, they also may convey more specific associations for particular groups. In so doing, however, I do not intend to generalise the conclusions of the Forge study to other villages of the Sepik area, but I only wish to elucidate some cultural concepts and values which are structural throughout this area, and which seem to be essential to understand art forms.

From ethnographic accounts we may notice that artefacts are important media in every ritual related to ancestors, fertility and male power (Bowden, 1992; Dinerman, 1981; Forge: 1966, 1973 and 1979; Kelm, 1966). Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest an ultimate connection of art objects with men, the qualities they want to possess, and their totems or ancestors. Visual and mythological associations are emotionally re-enacted by men through rituals.

Now it should be clear that when I talk about ancestors, clan or fertility figures (see figs. 1 - 10) it is easy to project in these names some ethnocentric concepts if I do not specify the ritual context in which they were used. In this sense, recurring conceptual categories such as those I outlined before may be particularly useful to fill the present gap of ethnographic data and to reconstruct the knowledge inherent to art objects.

Semiotics deals with the 'tacit knowledge' which is created by local actors in a specific cultural context. 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<sup>3</sup>.

In relation to the nature of 'representation', Forge has also noticed 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, thus, as markers of a spirit identification. This, however, does not mean that the spirits "look like this" (Forge, 1966:25).

A mask or a carving, in other words, should not be interpreted as the 'real representation' of a spirit or an ancestor: rather, in Forge's words, it manifests "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 spirit<sup>4</sup>, because it arouses appropriate emotions in conjunction with particular ritual practices. Indeed art, within a cultural pattern, is a means of creating meaningful relationships between graphic signs and ideas.

In sum, it is important to bear in mind that to identify and to label a mask does not signify to find out what the object means. A 'label' is only a name which does not describe the complex web of mythological and emotional 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. At any rate, a lack of consideration of the historical dimension in traditional societies seems to lead inevitably to the stereotype of taking into account 'traditional artefacts' as representative of a 'timeless past' which is merely conjectural.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the method followed by Forge (1979).

<sup>4</sup> I adopt here the definition of 'symbol of condensation' first suggested by E. Sapir in: 'Symbol', *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, 1932.



In contrast, 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.

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 ethnographic objects<sup>5</sup>. Dutton has proposed a philosophical reflection upon the concept of authenticity which recovers the sense of art embedded in its historical context.

Dutton suggests an interesting distinction between what he calls 'nominal authenticity' and 'deep authenticity' (1994: 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, it is interesting to note that not every 'traditional' artefact comply with this condition. Nominal authenticity, at any rate, is 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 as 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.*, *emphasis*). In this sense, every 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 is fully relevant in analysing both so-called 'traditional' and some more recent indigenous artefacts.

The analytical distinction between nominal and deep authenticity enables us 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 has got a deep authenticity. Even though some stylistic features may have been altered by European influences, this does not reduce their genuine cultural function, that is to say their deep authenticity. According to Ross Bowden, for example, 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)<sup>6</sup>.

Dutton's methodological distinction, in sum, enables to determine the particular status of authenticity 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 artefacts may have been produced both before and after 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 hypostasised as supreme and silent witnesses of a timeless past. This methodological perspective reveals the weak bases of those generalisations which have crystallised a particular historic situation in conjunction with specific artistic forms as necessary and absolute points of reference, and therefore it claims a positive authenticity for local developments of art forms even during the periods following the disgregation of traditional society. On the contrary, the art production which started in the

<sup>5</sup> Dutton, 1994: 9.

<sup>6</sup> 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).



1970s is very different, and it often may be considered as a response to the increasing demands of a fully commercial art market (Abramson, 1976; Graburn, 1976; Schmid, 1990).

In conclusion, I propose to consider New Guinea artefacts made between the 1920s and the 1960s not as a degeneration of a supposed 'timeless past', a past which would be crystallised in the 'nominally authentic' artefacts collected by the Europeans at the beginning of the century, but as a genuine expression of a historic context deeply authentic.

To deny a notion of authenticity to artefacts made after the 1920s would re-propose, in my opinion, the sterile stereotype that all artistic forms following the former European collections are merely inauthentic.

Nevertheless, the generic tendency to treat the art of non-literate societies as representative of a sort of timeless past is not only historically incorrect, because it does not consider *a priori* the importance of cultural dynamism, but also is an ethnocentric and prejudicial position. Why indeed does Western society promote and reward change in its own contemporary arts, whereas it disapprove of the same in other cultures?

Some people frown on the notion of artistic change in third world countries as if these cultures should not depart from the stereotype of 'traditional art' without losing something. Such a loss, nevertheless, certainly exists only in their minds.

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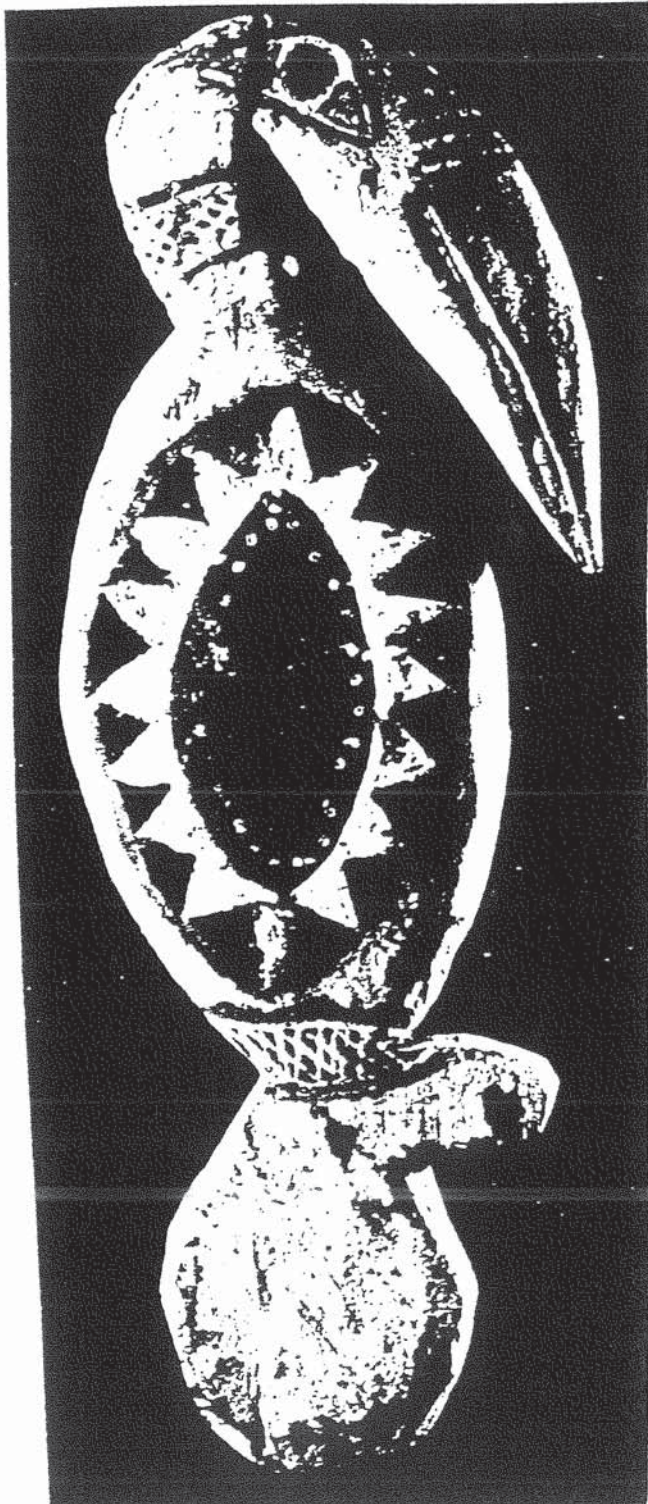


Fig. 1 Totemic carved bird (hornbill), Maprik. Painted wood, cm 18x58, private collection.

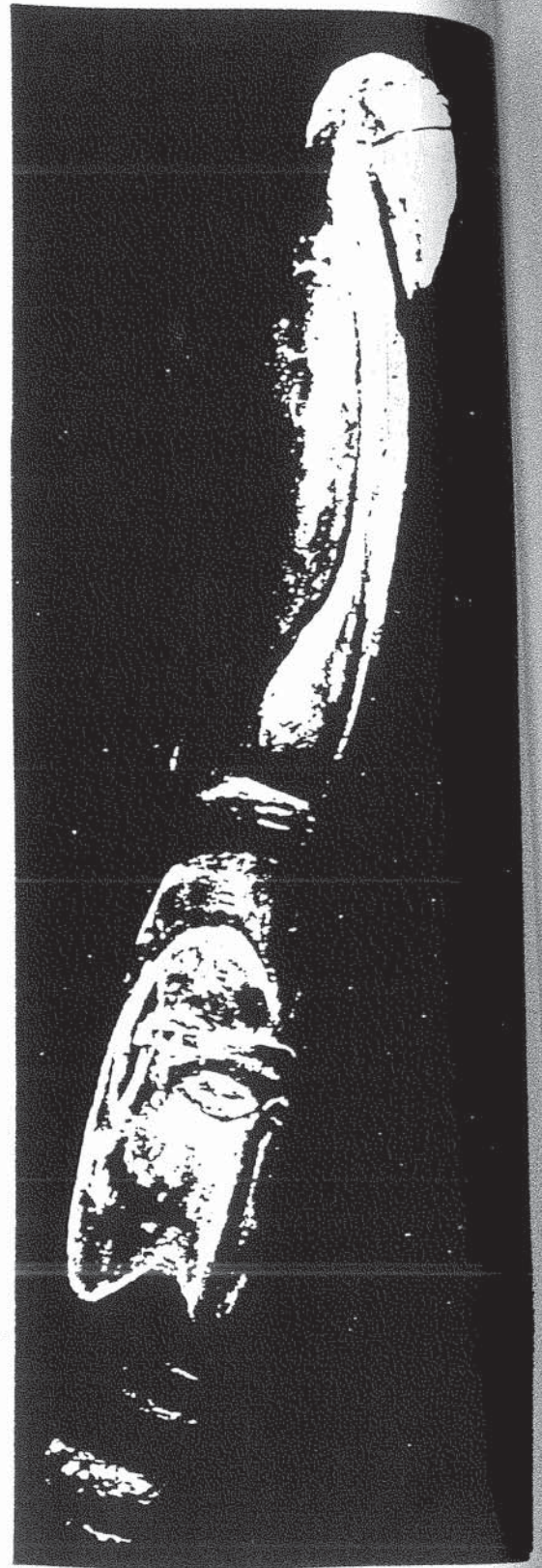
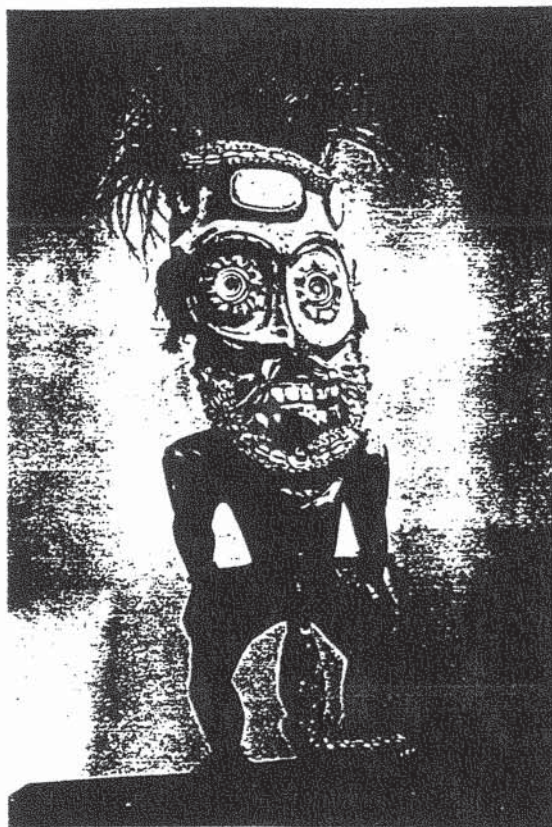


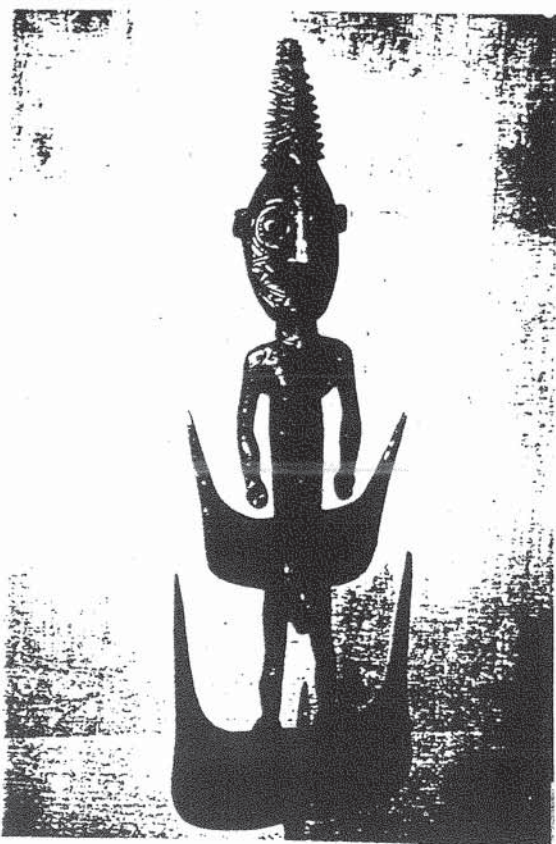
Fig. 2 Totemic yam stick (particular), Wosera (Abelam). Painted wood, cm 64x4, private collection.





- Fig. 3 War mask (House Tambaran's gable mask), Blackwater River. Painted straw and wood, cm 54x90, private collection.
- Fig. 4 Ancestral standing figure, Kamindibit (Middle Sepik). Wood, shell, cowrie, straw, bone and feather; cm 30x91, private collection.
- Fig. 5 Ancestral mask, Kamindibit (Middle Sepik). Tortoise shell, feathers, clay, shell, bone and feather; cm 53x92, private collection.
- Fig. 6 Ceremonial flute (particular), Korongo (Middle Sepik). Bamboo, wood, shell and straw; cm 75x9, private collection.





- Fig. 7 Ancestral carved head, Yamok. Painted wood, cm 20x76, private collection.  
Fig. 8 Flute stopper, Yuat River. Wood, starw and cowrie; cm 11x53, private collection.  
Fig. 9 Anthropomorphic basket hook, Nangusap. Wood, cm 31x105, private collection.  
Fig. 10 Ancestral carved figure, Keram River. Wood, cm 13x39, private collection.