

# Theory on the Sepik

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## INTRODUCTION

*The Papuan kills his enemies and eats them. Yet if modern man kills and devours someone, then he is a delinquent or a degenerate. The Papuan covers with tattoos his skin, his boat, his paddle, in short anything within reach.<sup>1</sup>*

The eating of the other is associated with cultures without writing and, according to Arens, the myth of cannibalism as the marker of the other sustains the discipline of anthropology.<sup>2</sup> It is always the other group, at some other time, who practice anthropophagy, which has consequently had shifting global locations historically. The twentieth century site is that singled out by Loos, namely Papua New Guinea where, if the practice occurred at all, it was confined to particular areas. Similarly it is only in some areas where paddles or skin are decorated and then it is only some people on some occasions.

*The thought of Mount Hagen women - and not men - going about their daily business with face paint on is culturally nonsensical: it is unthinkable for them ... The sexes are certainly sharply distinguished, and are separated by taboos that have no currency in the west; there is also an ideology of male superiority vis-a-vis women, but this does not extend to requiring women to carry the whole 'load' of artifice and sexuality, as is the case in the western cosmetics tradition.<sup>3</sup>*

Andrew Strathern in his theorising of body decoration uses analyses of the architecture and carving of a particular region, the area known as the Sepik, about which he says. "To my knowledge, the reasons for the astonishing efflorescence of this art form in the Sepik have never been thoroughly established by anthropologists."<sup>4</sup> There has also been an extraordinary efflorescence of theorising in this area, with an anthropological couple, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, as the founding ancestors. They also describe and theorise the architecture, and a particular building type can be associated with each of these figures. The Bateson building I will call the Iatmul house.<sup>5</sup> Mead also worked in the Sepik with people she called the Tchambuli and another group the Mundgumor ('a cannibal tribe').<sup>6</sup> However her favourites were a group she called the Arapesh, living in the mountains

near the town of Maprik. The house in this area I will call the Maprik house. These two sites are within 50 miles of each other and are physically geographically and environmentally distinct - the Maprik area being mountainous and the middle Sepik being a riverine environment.

## THE IATMUL HOUSE

Palimbei is a contemporary classic Iatmul house, but the most well-known house is that called Wolimbit from Kanganaman village where Bateson worked in the thirties, and he describes this house as: "a splendid building, as much as a hundred and twenty feet in length, with towering gables at the ends."<sup>7</sup> In 1980 an earthquake caused substantial damage and during the eighties the house was dismantled and is now being rebuilt. Bateson also compares the building to "the nave of a darkened church" but cautions against taking the analogy too far: "The ceremonial house serves not only as a place of ritual but also as a clubhouse where men meet and gossip and as an assembly-room where they debate and brawl."<sup>8</sup>

Alongside a photograph of Wolimbit, Bateson writes:

*The shingles of the sago leaf thatch are alternately yellow and brown, giving a decorative pattern. In the gable front four little windows are visible, with an enemy's skull in each. Above these windows there is a grotesque face of which only the teeth and crescent-shaped nose ornaments are visible in the photograph. In front of the building is the wak or ceremonial mound on which dead enemy bodies and captives are laid.<sup>9</sup>*

The building dominates the settlement and its life much as a medieval church is said to have done (the cathedral analogy), but a more apt comparison might have been with a Greek temple which is a similar gabled pavilion and which Hersey has argued is involved with sacrifice and anthropomorphic representation in much the same way that these buildings are.<sup>10</sup> However I find it difficult to associate any 'decorative' aspect with this house other than the banded wall coverings mentioned by Bateson.

On the other hand it is surprising that this house has not been given structural attention by anthropologists in spite of their preoccupations with 'structure'; but I have described this structure elsewhere so I will discuss only one aspect.<sup>11</sup> At the gable an upper ridge slopes up, supported at its outer end by the so called 'meri post' (meri = woman), which continues up through the roof and gives it the characteristic saddle shape. The meri post with a carving of a woman at its base is in turn sitting in the centre of a beam which is supported on the cantilevered ends of the wall plates - something like a trapeze artist on a bar - and in fact the whole assemblage is like a giant balancing act. The initiation of young men into the secret tambaran (spirit) cult which involves seclusion and bodily mutilation takes place in this men's clubhouse. These events take place behind the gable end screens which are hung off the roof - as are the side walls. Each gable has a mask that is the face of the female building. The woven mask hides the interior of the house from those outside, but like all masks the house reveals as it conceals and the mask attracts the gaze - even (or maybe especially) of those (women and children) who are forbidden to look. This is especially so when the Tambaran is present, acoustically revealed by the sounds of flutes and bullroarers.

#### THE MAPRIK HOUSE

The Maprik house is found in hamlets "laid out on hill-tops or mountain ridges, around the town of Maprik." Mead claims: "The *tamberan* [sic] house is so situated that its shadow wheels across the plaza square and the sun very seldom strikes full upon its facade."<sup>12</sup> Forge says that here everybody "whether initiated or not, can see the facades of the ceremonial houses."<sup>13</sup> Inside the house "is a huge space which with its half light, recalls a cathedral."<sup>14</sup> Once again the cathedral analogy; but others are disappointed with the labyrinthine interior and the extremely low entrance necessitating crawling on hands and knees for initiation purposes. "The *Tamberan* [sic] houses are not used as gathering places, but only to house sacred objects."<sup>15</sup>

The bark paintings which make up the facade are the distinguishing aspect of Maprik houses, and been used as decoration on postcards, banks and the Port Moresby National Parliament Building. These facades have a standard arrangement, having a large beam at about head height which is carved with a series of heads. Above are the bark panels on which the paintings are said to be flying-fox faces.<sup>16</sup> Here the structure might be seen as a mechanism to support

the decorative paintings in a classic Semperian manner but while both Tuzin and Forge have given detailed descriptions of house construction, some aspects of the structure remain problematic. The massive ridge which slopes down from front to back is erected, with much ceremony and secrecy, on a scaffolding of posts. There are plates on each side of the two posts, the structural role of which also is not clear, as the rafters of thin bamboo run from the ground up past the wall plates in a fine lattice work.<sup>17</sup> At completion the temporary scaffolding and ridge support is removed,

*leaving the interior completely open and giving the structure a pleasing, free-floating architectural character ... [W]ith the terrific weight of the ridgepole being borne entirely by the rafters the latter bow very slightly. The house takes on a slightly 'hunched' appearance, enhancing the enigma of weightlessness and converting what was a static image of mere support into one of dynamic self-support.*<sup>18</sup>

It seems that in fact the roof does support the ridge pole, which is presumably now held up by the roof planes. It appears to be suspended from the structure in a way reminiscent of the manner that the long yams grown in this area are supported when displayed.<sup>19</sup> Forge makes phallic connections between ridge pole and yam but distinguishes between the phallus of the ridge pole, standing for aggression and violence, and the phallus of the long yam as a nutritive organ. This opposition between fertility and violence is for many reasons not as clear as Forge wants us to believe.

The hooded peak is occasionally formed around the end of the ridge pole, called by the Abelam the *mangandu*. Usually another piece of wood is fastened at a more upwardly tilted angle to the end of the *mangandu*. This location is called the 'nose' of the house and contains a chamber and ritual items and is covered with a woven crown (amid some ceremony) at the end of construction. Forge says:

*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 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 was just a name (tsimalei).*<sup>20</sup>

But this is hardly the end of the story as this hood has female genital associations and the house is

female. "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."<sup>21</sup>

Beier claims that there are four distinct Maprik house styles.<sup>22</sup> However there are two main groups, already mentioned, who live in the Maprik area: the Arapesh said to be the original inhabitants and the Abelam whom Forge suggests (and it seems to be generally accepted) are later arrivals from the Sepik river.<sup>23</sup>

## DISCUSSION

What I want to now consider are attempts by anthropologists to connect the Maprik architecture of the hills with the Iatmul houses down on the river. To do this involves a number of transformations from a house on piles to a house on the ground, in an evolutionary sequence the validity of which it is impossible to assess. The proposal is that: "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."<sup>24</sup> Forge links the Iatmul and Abelam peoples in this way "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."<sup>25</sup>

This seems a perfect test for Rappoport's 'hypothesis' that house form relates to culture, but it also demonstrates some of the problems in this generalised proposition.<sup>26</sup> Equally (and oppositely) regionalism in its various versions is difficult to argue from this material. Filer concludes (the emphases are his): "There is *no* sense in which it can be taken for granted that *each culture in a certain region occupies a unique and exclusive space by virtue of belonging to a unique and exclusive local group.*"<sup>27</sup> However it has been proposed for the Sepik that while "settlement patterns vary with the environment, house structures show a continuity greater than that of any other cultural trait except language."<sup>28</sup> I want to explore this latter proposition.

Forge admits that in the houses of the two people "the differences are striking" and he actually tends to point out more differences than similarities.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless the similarities are: "Firstly, both types of ceremonial house are basically larger and

exaggerated forms of the ordinary dwelling house with certain added features." This could be said to be the case elsewhere. Secondly, "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."<sup>30</sup> Thirdly the ridge pole in both areas uses the same timber, but this also is probably true throughout Papua New Guinea.

In short we are being asked to accept that a house on the ground with a triangular ground plan no walls and a sloping ridge pole is the same as a saddle roofed rectangular house on stilts. The reason for this attempt to stretch our incredulity is that the Iatmul and the Abelam are part of the same language family. This identity of language seems to have provoked anthropologists to look for house form similarities. Language becomes the indicator of culture, so that the language map of the area becomes the cultural map with determined boundaries. However the architecture of the Maprik house straddles a major boundary of these cultural territories, so that while Arapesh and Abelam speak different languages, both occupy Maprik type houses.<sup>31</sup>

It turns out that Laycock who has drawn this linguistic-become-cultural map of the Sepik has also considered house form to argue for a particular configuration and direction of movement of cultural territory.

*A further cultural indication of northward migration from the Sepik is found in house-forms. The houses on the river, being built on stilts, cannot be adequately compared with those in the plains and mountains, which are built at ground level, although construction is similar ... Only in the Maprik mountain areas, where timber is again plentiful, do the spirit houses again approach the dimensions of those on the Sepik river.*<sup>32</sup>

I have no competence to assess the validity of Laycock's linguistic analysis, but the architecturally naive proposition of available materials is hardly sufficient explanation for the formal differences and similarities, and it is surprising that it is used to assist in the definition of cultural territories. This seems to be another case where architecture is invoked at a crucial moment and makes the argument somewhat circular.

Another way of looking at the architectural question is whether the Abelam is a development of the less impressive but similar Arapesh house; or is the Arapesh a lower (in the sense of height of front

elevations of the houses) version of the Abelam? The presumption is that: "In the case of houses we can say that the Abelam brought something with them."<sup>33</sup> Presumably this is based on the idea that the yet-to-be-invaded copied the invader because the invader is the more 'powerful' culture. Yet Hauser Schaublin gives a specific example of movement the other way.<sup>34</sup> And what did the Arapesh build before they are said to have copied the Abelam? The preoccupation with origins and language seems to blind the analysis.

Hauser Schaublin argues that:

*Buildings are not traded between villages as artifacts may be. It is not enough simply to see such a house on a trading or war party in order to copy it.*<sup>35</sup>

But we have to ask why not? Is it not possible that the Abelam have copied the form of the Arapesh house in the same way that they adopted the competitive growing of yams?<sup>36</sup> In turn the Arapesh could have adopted aspects of the improved Abelam house in the same way that they "have acquired a number of important cultural traits, including elements of Tambaran ideology and organization."<sup>37</sup> Hauser Schaublin argues that the Arapesh copied the shape but not the structure of the Abelam house.<sup>38</sup> Forge gives precise examples of copying of the Abelam styles of facade painting by neighbours, and also the reverse, where a style of figure painting at Ilahita (the largest Arapesh village) "is now being re-imported into some parts of the Abelam territory."<sup>39</sup>

Might it not be possible to trade and copy both building decoration and structure independently of language. Hauser Schaublin speaks of people in the area losing their language.<sup>40</sup> Clearly there have been complex movements which foil any attempts to establish a simple cultural or environmental determinism even in such 'authentic' and 'primitive' situations as the Sepik. Filer has said: "Would it not be less tendentious to begin with the idea that Sepik people saw their world as a collection not of 'languages' and 'cultures' but of cultural *distinctions*, reproduced and reinterpreted at many levels and in many ways without becoming 'things' associated with collections of communities."<sup>41</sup>

The assumption of the determinism of culture and the hegemony of language leads to yet further propositions by Hauser Schaublin which can be questioned, such as: "I have said that the Ilahita tambaran house has only the superstructure and not the internal structure (I would call it syntax) of the Abelam korambo." Later she concludes that the

"shape is similar but the basic structure is lacking."<sup>42</sup> This is to privilege structure over shape, technology over form, the persistence of syntax over semantic variability - inside as against outside. Like body decoration the outsides of these buildings are masks, and like all masks they are both socially inscribed and a statement of difference. This is a folding that makes an outside that is an inside. The inside is the rituals and presence of the secret Tambaran, but the secret is that there is no Tambaran - there is no secret inside. The sounds of the Tambaran are made by the men.<sup>43</sup>

This confounds the western assumption of the deep meaning inside against the superficiality of cosmetics. But cosmetics are not simple. The deep meaning is of course culture. Architecture is seen as an accessory of culture but as this Sepik material indicates, architecture as accessory confounds and confuses linguistic determinations of culture.

#### NOTES

- 1 Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime," (1908), *The Architecture of A. Loos: an Arts Council Exhibition* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1985).
- 2 William Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). "The so called nonanthropophagic cultures practice symbolic anthropophagy and even construct their most elevated socius, indeed the sublimity of their morality, their politics, and their right, on this anthropophagy." Jacques Derrida, "Eating Well," *Who Comes after the Subject?* ed. Edward Cadava (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 114.
- 3 Andrew Strathern, "Dress, Decoration, and Art in New Guinea," Malcolm Kirk, *Man as Art, New Guinea Body Decoration* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p. 39.
- 4 Thomas in his recent book, *Oceanic Art* uses the term 'proliferation' when speaking of the Sepik: "the causes of this degree of diversity present an intriguing, if somewhat intractable, problem." Nicholas Thomas, *Oceanic Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), p. 37; Strathern, "Dress, Decoration, and Art," p. 24.
- 5 The Iatmul number around 8000 people and live on the banks of the middle Sepik river and on ox bow lagoons formed by the meanders of the river which is fundamental to life here - it is the means of transport the source of food - even of building materials.

- 6 Mead has said that "this is my most misunderstood book." Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (New York: William Morrow and Company 1935), preface to second edition.
- 7 Gregory Bateson, *Naven* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. 123. The length of the Kanganaman ceremonial house is actually unusual with a length to width ratio of four to one compared to the usual ratio of two to one. Gordon Holden, "The Kanganaman Haus Tambaran," *Gigibori* (October 1975), v. 2, n. 2, pp. 47-58.
- 8 Bateson, *Naven* pp. 123-124. In an analogy that may not have been unconnected, Guiart called Wolimbit "a real cathedral." Jean Guiart, *The Arts of the South Pacific* (New York: Golden Press, 1963).
- 9 Bateson, *Naven* caption to Plate VIII. This conjunction of decoration and violence is not unfamiliar, and while violence cannot be overemphasised it has been discussed elsewhere. M. R. Austin, "The House Tambaran of Papua New Guinea," *Assemblage* (1993), n. 20, p. 10-11.
- 10 George Hersey, *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1988).
- 11 M. R. Austin, "The Gable End," *Traditional Construction Practices, Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Working Papers Series*, (California: Berkeley University of California, 1989), v. 17, p. 17-27.
- 12 Margaret Mead, *The Mountain Arapesh* (New York: The Natural History Press, 1970), v. II, p. 94.
- 13 Anthony Forge, "Learning to see in New Guinea," *Socialisation: The approach from social anthropology* ed. P. Mayer, (London: Tavistock, 1970), p. 283.
- 14 R. Gardi, *Sepik* (Baarn: Bosch and Keuning, 1958), p. 135.
- 15 Margaret Mead, *The Mountain Arapesh* p. 94.
- 16 "These faces are marked as female by the use of a feather ornament worn specifically by women, but beneath the face is a central white stroke called 'the breast of the flying fox.' The stroke represents the penis of the male flying fox, and the figures are therefore male-female composites, bringing together in a single body the separate ideas of male and female nourishment." Strathern, "Dress, Decoration, and Art," p. 27.
- 17 Hauser-Schaublin says the side plates are redundant.
- "I doubt that they are crucial to the statics of the korambo, and there would be more efficacious means of supporting the heavy roof." Brigitta Hauser-Schaublin, "In the Swamps and on the Hills: Traditional Settlement Patterns and House Structures in the Middle Sepik," *Sepik Heritage* eds. Nancy Luktehaus et al, (Bathurst: Crawford House Press, 1990), p. 474. Structurally the plates could both support and anchor the rafters - which otherwise would have to be buried into the ground to resist lateral spread.
- 18 Donald Tuzin, *The voice of the Tambaran: truth and illusion in Iahita Arapesh religion* (California: Berkeley University of California Press, 1980), pp. 151-152.
- 19 "It would be true to say that long yams are the dominant things in the male Abelam's life." Anthony Forge, "Art and Environment in the Sepik," *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies* ed. Carol F. Jopling, (New York: Dutton, 1971), p. 307.
- 20 Forge, "Art and Environment in the Sepik," p. 306. The anthropologist involved in the endless pursuit of the signified is assured that it is just a signifier. Finding out what the users (or the architects) of a building say does not solve the dilemma of architectural interpretation) Forge does not seem to connect all this with the fact that this particular culture is characterised by the practice of penis bleeding which, while it is not boring holes, is a similar mutilation. The Iatmul house has a hole in the upper ridge to take the Meri post.
- 21 Forge, "Art and Environment in the Sepik," p. 305. Strangely he neglects to mention that the hood at the gable could be seen as similar in both houses.
- 22 Ulli Beier "Haus Tambarans in Maprik Revival or Tourist attraction?" *Gigibori* (April 1976), v. 3, n. 1, p. 20.
- 23 "It seems certain that the Abelam have moved up from the river into the P Alexander Mountains pushing the Arapesh and other groups back, some of them right over the mountains and down to the coast." Forge, "Art and Environment in the Sepik," p. 295. "During the last century, and continuing into the early decades of this century, the Arapesh were encroached upon by warlike peoples migrating northward in a predatory expansion from the environs of the Sepik river." Tuzin, *The voice of the Tambaran* p. 11.
- 24 Anthony Forge, "The Power of Culture and the Culture of Power," *Sepik Heritage* eds. Luktehaus et al, (Bathurst: Crawford House Press, 1990), p. 166.
- 25 Forge, "Art and Environment in the Sepik," p. 294.

- 26 Rappoport discusses and illustrates New Guinea houses but in doing so he combines Iatmul and Maprik houses. To further confuse matters the plan he draws is from the Highlands while his description mixes in long houses and houses from the Papuan Gulf. Amos Rappoport, *House Form and Culture* (New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1969), pp. 44-45.
- 27 Colin Filer "Diversity of Cultures or Culture of Diversity?" *Sepik Heritage* eds. Luktehaus et al, (Bathurst: Crawford House Press, 1990), p. 117. Thomas has said that: "virtually no generalisation about Sepik art can be sustained." Thomas, *Oceanic Art* p. 42.
- 28 Hauser-Schaublin, "In the Swamps and on the Hills," p. 471.
- 29 For example: "An Abelam house is made for storage and sleeping in, while an Iatmul house is made for living in." Forge, "Art and Environment in the Sepik," p. 298.
- 30 Forge, "Art and Environment in the Sepik," pp. 298-299.
- 31 "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." Forge, "The Power of Culture and the Culture of Power," p. 166.
- 32 Laycock does admit in a footnote that the data could equally suggest southward migration. D. C. Laycock, *The NDU Language Family (Sepik District New Guinea)* (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1965), p. 194.
- 33 Forge "The Power of Culture and the Culture of Power," p. 166.
- 34 "Traditionally, Abelam ceremonial houses were not closed at the ends as they sometimes are today. My informants said that closing the back was a new thing that they had copied from the Arapesh (who had in turn earlier copied the shape of the Abelam korambo)." Hauser-Schaublin, "In the Swamps and on the Hills," p. 474. Her parenthesis remains an assertion and needs further explanation especially as she goes on to say that this closure would affect ritual procedures.
- 35 Hauser-Schaublin, "In the Swamps and on the Hills," pp. 470-471.
- 36 Forge, "Art and Environment in the Sepik," p. 313.
- 37 Tuzin, *The voice of the Tambaran* p. 11.
- 38 "the shape of Abelam ceremonial houses has been copied, although not the structure evolved step by step by the Abelam." Hauser-Schaublin, "In the Swamps and on the Hills," p. 471.
- 39 Anthony Forge, "Style and Meaning in Sepik Art," *Primitive Art and Society* ed. A. Forge (London: Wenner-Gren Foundation and Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 175.
- 40 "as I know happened with an Abelam group that migrated to Nagripaim) or outsiders adopted a so-called Ndu language." Hauser-Schaublin, "In the Swamps and on the Hills," p. 470. Bragge speaks of "ancient wandering clans travelling great distances and doing amazing things." Lawrence Bargee, "The Migrations," *Sepik Heritage* ed. Nancy Luktehaus et al, (Bathurst: Crawford House Press, 1990), p. 36.
- 41 Filer, "Diversity of Cultures or Culture of Diversity?" p. 127.
- 42 To argue this she makes several points. The first is that the wall plates and facade cross beam are not at the same level, (indicating an absent but once existing floor). Secondly the facade below the cross beam does not have sago thatch under the matting, (indicating that it is conceptually a roof), and "The little round roof at the peak of the house is not part of the main roof as it is in the Abelam korambo; instead it looks like a hat set on the ridge pole." Hauser-Schaublin, "In the Swamps and on the Hills," p. 476.
- 43 "The prominence of secrecy suggests that the widespread belief that art expresses broader cultural values is not quite appropriate for the Sepik." Thomas, *Oceanic Art* p. 54.