



## Conclusion

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jso/8992>

ISSN: 1760-7256

### Publisher

Société des océanistes

### Printed version

Date of publication: 15 July 2018

ISBN: 978-2-85430-135-9

ISSN: 0300-953x

### Electronic reference

Christian Kaufmann, Philippe Peltier and Markus Schindlbeck, « Conclusion », *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* [Online], 146 | 2018, Online since 15 July 2018, connection on 03 January 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jso/8992>

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*We thank Nora Scott for her copy-editing work.*

- 1 At the end of our exploratory mission, let us take a moment to look back and ask ourselves a few questions: How did the themes of the three symposiums dealing with anthropological research in the Sepik area evolve? And how did the materiality of artworks as well as the creativity of artists, in short, the subject of art, become intrinsically linked with the more general approach comparing cultural entities or phenomena across the region? And last but not least, how does the materiality of artworks relate to other registers of material culture in an anthropological perspective?
- 2 In the introduction to this volume, we evoked how anthropologists from 1910 onwards chose ways to describe and analyse varieties of cultural forms and structures found in the Sepik area with a view to identifying common traits. The findings of the 1984 conference were grouped under the title “Sepik heritage: tradition and change, opening a perspective for looking at new dynamics”. Of course, many contributions to the present volume deal with change induced by internal or external factors. By now, the influence of religious ideas originating in Christianity at large has become a widespread internal factor, especially there where fundamentalist movements have pushed for the creation of new rituals. Not only rituals, but also worldviews have changed fundamentally. Under these circumstances, traditional art practice and the creation of static works of art might be thought to have no future. Yet, we are told that this is not generally the case. Art has its own ways. If only, because individuals from different village aggregates continue to practice as artists. Interestingly, art festivals at foreseeable intervals seem not only to provide not only a good opportunity to demonstrate the vitality of art, but also to provide an occasion where Sepik participants from different backgrounds can compete with each other, something they always enjoy doing. Yet, art festivals, organised in a setting (or context) which differs from anything found in the village, also provide a space where village-based religious orientations are temporarily suspended.

- 3 While both the Sepik exhibition of 2015-6 in Berlin, Zurich and Paris, and the symposium held in conjunction with it focused on art in its manifold dimensions, speaking of materiality of art also forces us to consider artworks as representing but one aspect of material culture. Even the simplest tools of everyday life have their own dignity, their own significance, and their own aura. To bring these aspects of material culture back into focus would indeed demand a major effort to reevaluate the contents of museum collections.

## Why art matters

- 4 Despite the changes that have occurred, one question remains: What is the unifying quality that forms the backdrop to many cultural practices? It is a question asked by people from across the Sepik area as well as by observers from afar. This quality, which has been termed “Sepikness”, seems indeed to have been at the fore of the second Sepik symposium, held in 1986 in the Spanish town of Mijas, as we said in the Introduction. The results of that meeting, at least as far as the main introductory part is concerned, have never been published. For Anthony Forge (1929-1989), who was referring to the then latest results of Sepik research, the way the ritual system and its expressions in the arts interlock seems to be a fundamental aspect in most of the Sepik societies. Their social organization adopts a model of sex and gender relations that stresses complementarity across life spheres under the auspices of non-hereditary chiefs. It is this unrivalled coherence expressed in life-style, ritual life and the artistic expressions rendering beliefs visible that makes Sepik culture(s) across linguistic borders become so unique, especially by transgressing linguistic boundaries. Engaging with the artistic heritage of Sepik societies has, in his view, become a methodologically mandatory step.
- 5 Indeed, Forge provides us with clues to a deeper analysis both for examining single cases as well as for establishing a base for meaningful comparisons. He feels that, for the Sepik area, the base for its uniqueness was laid by earlier inhabitants. According to his hypothesis, they would have practised yam cultivation accompanied by specific rituals; but they were also hunters and gatherers, and made use of sago palms and other semi-wild plants. Only at a later time would the early-stage Iatmul-Sawos-Abelam and their pre-Boiken [?] neighbours develop a “new” culture, characterised by larger, more structured villages thus enabling a higher level of population density while being sustained by a satisfying mix of food from their gardens as well as from the bush and river sections of their environment. To Forge’s mind, the common ground for developing more specific types of village culture had been laid well before some Sepik societies adapted to life patterns focussed on the main river. Of course for the moment this view is an educated guess. Whether future research may help to substantiate it remains to be seen.
- 6 According to Forge the lowland ancestors of this triad of societies developed new ways of giving visibility to specific ideas that provided the base for their mostly hidden ritual practice. Putting their artistic creativity to use, these people likely established locally coherent systems of ideas, forms and practices. Each of these local systems would have to be seen as dynamic, open to on-going adaptations and transformations, and therefore were in no way static. The Big Men, who in the context of Sepik societies are clan leaders competing with their peers for prestige and knowledge as the source of their power, were local masters of their system; they were allowed and empowered to

constantly renew the coherence of the system. A major way to achieve coherence was by integrating changes induced by the creative achievements of artists. Their aesthetic power was considered to manifest a force rooted in ritual, indicating ancestral sources without verbalising their contents in detail. In short, according to Forge, Iatmul-Sawos and Abelam in particular created expressions of an overwhelming cultural power, which could also be read in part as validating military might. In Forge's view, it was this cultural power that reached far beyond linguistic borders, drawing into the Sepik sphere even Austronesian-speaking neighbours on the coast and the adjacent islands.

- 7 Taking into consideration the results of more recent fieldwork by, among others, K. Barlow, D. Gewertz, N. Garnier, D. Lipset, N. Lutkehaus, N. McDowell, P. Peltier and B. Telban, an equally important second centre of emergent artistic traditions is to be found among the Chambri-Karawari-Biwat-to Murik populations. The ritual centres of the majority of these lay to the south of the main river. In fact, competition between the Iatmul-Sawos (belonging to the language group of Ndu speakers) and the Chambri (speaking a Nor-Pondo language) over who controls the central Sepik area was still a source of conflict in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For this second centre of power, too, the link between artistic expressions of images deeply rooted in ritual practice seems salient. Indeed, all of Forge's four criteria also apply to the societies in this south-eastern arc, though yam cultivation seems less prominent. If these southern Sepik societies also developed traits pointing to a shared Sepikness, the question immediately arises: How did this come about? To put it succinctly, were the Southerners drawn into the Northerner's net of ritual-dominated power advocated by Forge, or were there other and equally powerful factors at work? For the moment, this question remains speculative; but it may serve to open new perspectives for further research.
- 8 It seems possible that man's interaction with the environment, too, may have led some of the Sepik societies to become more powerful than others in one way or another, e.g. by occupying strategically dominant hill-top sites all along the southern fringe of the Sepik basin or by controlling key natural resources like clay deposits. Thus, in the southern area, trade relations along an east (seaboard) – west (Hunstein mountains) axis, with, of course, local exchanges (e.g. of plaited textiles or of pottery for food products) always being practised in both directions, may have played a more important role than in the north. Therefore, competition and confrontation over spheres of control was likely to be more accentuated. For those less successful in enacting their military or cultural power, the history of interaction along lines defined by social contacts, including subjugation, abhorrence and warfare, would have produced less glorious effects (most of them not properly recorded by oral tradition), while trade, exchange and cooperation would have played more stabilizing roles. So in all, Sepikness may have resulted from varied processes of local and regional specialisation, based on a large grid of interlinked factors, not simply on one or two prevailing models.
- 9 It is by artistic expression that the ancestral world is rendered visible, thus creating the stupendous variety of Sepik art we are able to appreciate. Cherubim Dambui, the former Premier of East Sepik Province, pointed out in 1984 that, as Iatmul (or Sepik people in general),
 

“we are so diversified, and we tend to feel that each clan or village is an island. Perhaps we can somehow gain an inkling that we are of the same flesh and blood – that we have a common ancestry and because of it are in fact as close as blood relatives” (Dambui, 1990: IX).

- 10 At the 1984 Sepik conference, he particularly encouraged a new kind of historical knowledge, stemming from a deeper study of material remains from old village sites in conjunction with oral traditions relating to them. These wider perspectives bring the central role of the arts – as a complex reaching from static material to dynamic expressions such as performance, dance, music or speech acts – into focus. Thus, by their depth and complexity as well as by their unique splendour, the arts continue to exert their fascination.
- 11 Taking the investigation presented in the present volume a step further, we have also looked into the effects of the more radical transformations witnessed over recent decades. And, in returning to the overall theme of materiality, we have asked questions about the future of museum activities. What are we to do with the physical objects and all the documentary evidence about integrated traditional life-models and life-patterns which are being swept away by radical change?

## The impact of recent transformations

- 12 A gulf has definitely opened between what the things of old tell us and what people of today experience as their world. First of all, many aspects of the local ways of life have been fundamentally transformed as much by technical means as by intellectual or spiritual influences. Satellite-based Internet communication or broadly available motor transport have immensely enlarged the radius of activities. While still paddling their own canoe to gather their sago, for access to regional markets people need access to a motor canoe or a truck. And, no doubt, they make use of modern communication technology according to personal preferences. Yet, traditions transformed into acts of folklore in order to attract tourists as a source of cash-income demand keeping roads open for motorized access or transport, at least temporarily. And similarly, consensus about initiatives needs to be reached in order to participate in cultural gatherings such as arts festivals in Ambunti, Wewak or beyond. The ways people see their own world are fundamentally changing, as D. Silverman reports in this volume. The transformation of the local intellectual or spiritual worldview is even more dramatic, as D. Vávrová, B. Telban and T. Bartole clearly illustrate in this volume as well. And yet, as Telban shows, the link between the crocodiles as spirit-beings and their material vectors remains present. A recently acquired outboard motor became as closely linked to the spirit-beings as once were the carvings of old.
- 13 Furthermore, and this may come as a surprise to many readers, the 100-odd local languages spoken in the wider Sepik area are, one by one, being replaced by *Tok Pisin* for the majority of their speakers, and, for a rather active minority by English, which they use as a tool to access the wider world. The fact that the locally spoken language is being gradually supplanted, first among the children, then the youth, and that this development is quickly gaining speed, even in rather remote villages, is pointed out by three reports in this volume, A. Aikhenvald, R. Lambert-Bretière and T. Bartole.
- 14 All language-encoded knowledge is therefore under serious threat. Within a generation, the majority of songs, stories, legends and myths may either be lost or be reduced to impoverished *Tok Pisin* versions. As the tools and the items of ritual equipment are all linked in one way or another to oral traditions, documenting these links becomes even more urgent. Interestingly enough, such an approach may at the

same time uncover long-overlooked aspects of female creativity, as the texts of K. Barlow, A. von Poser and L. Bolton reveal. They all revolve around the mythical personality of Jari/Dzari/Daria/Zaria, of unrivalled importance to people in an area that takes in the lower Ramu and the lower Sepik estuaries and beyond, extending to the island of Manam. Despite earlier efforts to collect oral traditions present in songs, stories and the like, only sporadic attempts have been made to coordinate the study of material aspects of local cultures with that of their immaterial heritage. In paying tribute to Don Tuzin's original idea of a Melanesian Archive<sup>1</sup> as a repository of fieldworkers' unedited notes and texts, we would like to encourage the present generation of anthropologists to contribute to a large corpus of oral Sepik inventories based on such songs, stories, myths, speeches and debates. In many cases direct links to specific items of material culture could be documented.

- 15 In trying to sum up the present state of our knowledge of Sepik art and its materiality, a third point, not discussed in this volume, should be mentioned. It concerns the profound change in environmental conditions triggered by large mining and intense logging activities. While the site of the huge Frieda River mine already saw initial development in the early 1970s, the impact of mining activities began either to be felt only much later or still lies ahead (Barry, 2016). On the other hand, logging activities were already under way in the 1910s and 1920s, albeit on a comparatively small and controlled scale. Soon after the founding of Catholic Mission and Government stations on the Sepik, the first sawmills were established. More recently, radical logging methods have been introduced, as satellite pictures reveal. Their introduction was greatly facilitated by socially disruptive methods of gaining access to the lease rights on land for commercial use. These practices involve inducing local people to sign a lease for 60 to 99 years in exchange for a small sum of money. Although already in 2014 the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Peter O'Neill, had vowed to put a stop to this practice, such practices still go on, as a recently released report shows (Mousseau with Lau, 2016). There are also well-intentioned projects to protect large tracts of primary forest by marketing CO<sub>2</sub> emission rights globally through the REDD+ scheme (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation). For instance, on the April River in the Upper Sepik area, the Salumei project was started years ago. However, whether local effects live up to the promises of the idea remains more than doubtful, as the project seems to have been hijacked by ruthless racketeers (Knight and Leponce, 2015).
- 16 The combined side effects of these commercial practices, affecting mainly water quality and the life of animals living in the rivers and forests – two vital sources of livelihood for the populations in the riverine zone – are already showing their impact on an ecosystem which has existed in its present form for at least the past 2000 years. At that time, the Sepik inland lake, which thousands of years earlier had developed from a branch of the Pacific reaching like a fjord deep into the island, became filled-in by silt and mud (mixed with dead wood) deposited by the Sepik and its tributaries in the Sepik plain. Only Chambri Lake has remained a large, open and deep reservoir. As the tailings from mining activities descend the Frieda River into the complex system of rivers, ox-bow lakes and channels interconnecting the basins of the upper, the middle and the lower Sepik the entire freshwater, supply of the riverine population will be affected within less than a generation, as earlier developments on the Purari and Fly rivers have demonstrated.

## A plea for a new direction in museum research

- 17 As we observed earlier, anthropological field reports do not exist for some parts of the Sepik area for a number of reasons, and some of these gaps will never be filled. However, at least an attempt should be made to bolster the research on these areas, mainly through work in archives and in museum collections. Many objects collected in the Sepik area were never fully analysed or otherwise compared with objects having the same function or form; nor were they published in a decent form. A coordinated and systematic effort to fill at least this gap is needed. The basic workload consists in identifying and recording the objects individually. Though digital methods may render work more efficient, the basic work is the autopsy, i.e. inspecting and recording each item with an experienced eye and linking it to any contextual information directly available. If this were to be done, ensembles of objects could be identified and grouped according to their attributes, such as place of acquisition, date of acquisition, collector, recorded or assumed date of production, material they were made from, name(s) they were given, etc.
- 18 By analysing such ensembles or collections it would be possible, for example, to establish a relative chronological order of object types and of variations of object forms and functions. As Sepik people constantly adapted to changing conditions and opportunities, as shown by some essays in this volume, they produced new or altered forms in response to new ideas or to new demands. Objects of certain types, some hitherto unknown, were often produced in larger quantities than traditionally feasible. Many would become collectables thanks to tourism-driven developments. This diachronic view of Sepik material culture no doubt helps to steer away from an overly static view of regional culture.
- 19 We know since Margaret Mead (1938) that Sepik cultures were "importing" cultures. But, despite some coordinated efforts in the wake of the second Sepik conference at Mijas, we still need to work in more detail on specific cases in order to understand how this happened and under what conditions. The transformation or even replacement of objects and their functions, mentioned in a number of the essays in this volume, calls for follow-up studies looking into the details and conditions of on-going change.
- 20 As a more systematic analysis of museum collections from the Sepik area easily reveals, Sepik material culture covers much more than wooden images and the use of pigments for paintings and elaborately painted objects, more also than the production of nicely carved and ornamented objects for sale. Everyday objects are or were of immense importance for people's life. This includes the symbolic meaning inherent in many unspectacular tools or articles in daily use, such as netbags (*bilums* in *Tok Pisin*), cooking pots, fish traps, spears, planting sticks or adzes. While, in 1911, Felix von Luschan set a new agenda by encouraging field researchers to pay particular attention to aesthetically attractive objects, their meaning and their function – in short to art – we still have to remind ourselves that, in cultural practice, the modest tool used in processing daily food and the unspectacular gesture of a woman producing a netbag may well have even more significance than a brilliant work of art. We would be well advised to consider all aspects of material culture as an interconnected system that cannot be reduced to its aesthetically appealing parts only (Lemonnier, 2012). On the other hand, considering the aesthetic impact of any object is a fundamental factor in understanding its function.



- 21 Against this background of profound transformation on a historical level, keeping a record as comprehensive as possible of past achievements seems a valid approach. As does a combined research effort. If one element of the history of research deserves a special mention here, then it is this: Most of the progress made during more than a century of research activities stemmed from combined efforts on the part of museums and institutions devoted entirely to research. The present volume is no exception. It is also worth mentioning here that, precisely in parallel to the Berlin-Zurich-Paris exhibition, two initiatives by Australian museum colleagues provide the reader with added attractive works of art, and also excellent texts analyzing historical source material (Craig with Vanderwal and Winter, 2015; Howarth with Craig and Wilson, 2015). Hopefully, these efforts will stimulate further research. We also hope that future projects will see the Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery become a major player by joining forces with one of the country's universities.
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## NOTES

1. Now part of the Tuzin Archive of Melanesian Anthropology at the Library of the University of California San Diego in the Special Collections & Archives (<https://library.ucsd.edu/research-and-collections/collections/special-collections-and-archives/index.html>, consulted on 31 May 2018).

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