

CHAPTER 15

*The problem of agency in art*¹⁶⁰

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

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

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

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

The relationality of Abelam "art"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Iconography and the capture of properties

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

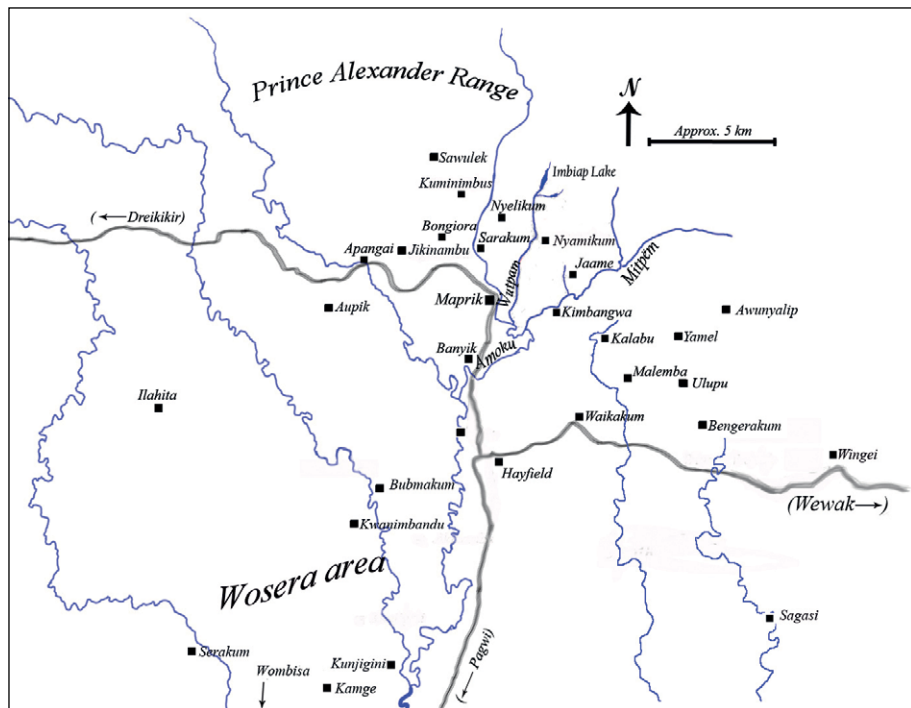


Figure 15.1. Map of the Maprik area, Papua New Guinea. © Ludovic Coupaye.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The distributed efficacy Abelam iconography

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

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

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

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

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

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

Techniques of enchantment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Devices and containers

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

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

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

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

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

Secrecy that reveals

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

The relationality of Abelam imagery is not limited to the visual domain, and the very principle of its relation-making mechanisms can be located within the verbal domain, though not at the level of the language, but rather at the level of speech. Indeed, one of the most prized Abelam forms of public speeches is the Aaja kudi, the “veiled speech” (Huber-Greub 1988: 254-66; Hauser-Schäublin 2011: 55-7; Coupaye 2013: 281-6), used by prominent men during addresses to the public. It usually resorts to a defined (though not documented) corpus of images, comprising of vegetal and animal species associated with specific clans, and makes an abundant use of metaphors (thus of iconic relations), synecdoches and metonymies (thus of indexical relations). This use of tropes plays a fundamental role in the politics of secrecy, which governs Abulës-speakers’ relationship with knowledge.

Similarly, Abelam art has often been associated with secrecy, concerning the association of images with local-specific meanings. However, while part of images can indeed refer to esoteric knowledge (initiations), the public nature of its display visible on the outside part of the kurabu façade, the main feature of the ceremonial ground, also mobilises a form of exoteric level, as Hauser-Schäublin (2011) defines it. The particular importance of the relationship between inside and outside, revealing and concealing, is in fact one of the basic principles of Abulës-speaking aesthetics, as Hauser-Schäublin recently discussed (2011). But one could go further by suggesting that, while only a few people are aware of the actual links between the public and the secret parts, *everybody* knows *the existence* of the secret dimension – activating thus the enchanting power of the occult.¹⁷⁴ For a secret to be potent, one has to know that there is a secret – doubling the effect of the enchantment of the kurabu’s façade.

Both verbal and visual ambiguity thus, deal – as Tuzin (1995) and Forge advocated – with serious topics. But one can suggest that images are rendered highly “trope-like”, not only because they deal with secrecy or danger, but also because they explicitly require an interpretative process from the audience – a form of agency in itself, involving inferences, mobilization of knowledge and, indeed, semiosis. Rather than the mere content of the discourse, then, it is this cognitive agency that could be the central concern of Abelam painting – a form of visual Aaja kudi (Hauser-Schäublin 2011: 58). In these respects, this specific faculty of images to *make* things present, both visually and in the mind of its audience, make it much more efficacious (in a Maussian sense) than straight formulation, particularly in a Melanesian context in which, “speech too readily lends itself to deception to be a reliable carrier of accurate information about the speaker’s intentions, thoughts, or feelings” (Robbins 2001: 596).

Thus, the public display on the façade of a ceremonial house, visible by all and towering above the bush, is also part of a wider political economy of “visuality” and knowledge, in which what is displayed outside relates fundamentally to what is inside, invisible and hidden (Hauser-Schäublin 2011: 61-4). The agency then, not only comes from the nature of efficacious designs or the type of aesthetic effects they produce, but also from the intentional display (or revelation) of the complexity – about what is partially concealed – of the interpretation processes they demand and trigger. If my hypothesis is correct, then it becomes possible to relate Abelam painting to the oral domain, though perhaps not as the direct source of signification or as presenting a similar structure, but also as possessing the capacity to use images to convey *both knowledge and how knowledge works* – a topic discussed notably in relation to the Melanesian use of tropes and attitude to orality (e.g. Wagner 1986; Robbins 2001).

Our analysis of meaning has thus to include the process of indigenous non-verbal interpretation that allows members of a community to identify and/or relate a phenomenon observed to something like an origin, or a cause or an effect. It is from this type of inferential processes that Gell was able to build his theory of agency. This is where the Gellian concept of style – and its agency – could also be taken as being part of a wider pragmatics of “representational economy” (Keane 2003: 410). Maprik iconicity, then could be construed as being a specific form of representation aimed at performing several tasks; at one level, the displays of non-verbal values and, at another, the actualization of particular properties à la Gell, as well as the triggering of inference processes that relate the “presencing” power of images to a multi-layered imaginary. But, as Forge’s demonstration lead us to think, this direct interpretative process is rendered even more complex in that it is not only about fully disclosing its contents, but might also imply a fundamental *vernacular metaphysics about the relationships* between things.

Vernacular epistemologies?

This relationship between the dialectic of hidden/revealed which Hauser-Schäublin discusses (2011) became for me even more important in the light of the few moments during which I witnessed Nyamikum people make verbal commentaries. The clue came during a 2002 Waapi Saaki, the annual ceremony during which decorated newly-harvested long yams are displayed on the ceremonial ground, to be seen and evaluated by all. The audience was, as usual, composed of people from the village, but also of delegations coming from other villages. I have described elsewhere in detail the course of the ceremony (Coupaye 2013: 207-48) but the step which mobilises discourses was the one during which visitors assessed the tubers presented and speculated on the – by now concealed – process used by the gardener. The whole audience, women included, knows how to grow yams, and most men know the complexity of growing long ones. Thus, secrecy here was not about the general model of waapi cultivation, but about a specific result, an actual manifestation, a particular instantiation of the process, both revealed and concealed by the individual tuber (Coupaye 2013: 284-91).

In such occasions, while the decorations, length, regularity, smoothness and circumference of the tuber are evaluated, it is the (now invisible, encapsulated within the tuber) “history”, of the actual long yam being evaluated which is the centre of much

comment. As Michael O'Hanlon brilliantly elucidated regarding Wahgi performance (1989), it is what is known and what is not known about the relationships that led to the harvesting of the particular specimen – the process – which corresponds to a form of exegesis. In other words, assessments of social forms – long yams, discourses and other displays – are set “against a background of uncertain and contested knowledge” (O'Hanlon 1992: 605) about the social relationships from which long yams emerge (see Coupaye 2013: 227) and are then seen. People talk indeed, but they discuss (past) relations, (now) encapsulated and concealed within the waapi, but (here) revealed by the indexicality of its shape.

The inherently – one might say necessary – public nature of such a display hence allows us to bring together these assessments and the fundamental role that displayed images play, in particular on the façade of ceremonial houses. This is also perhaps the moment when the “agency” of Maprik “art” plays its most prominent role, as providing people with the methodological tools necessary to analyse and interpret material forms, be they verbal and/or visual.

If so, then, Forge was right: Abelam images are *literally about the relationship between things*. And motifs, distributed across different media, and visible by all on the façade, thus provide its audience (men, women and children) with the fundamental rules to understand the nature and scope of knowledge and the necessity of assessing the validity of any statement made on the basis of the relationships it instantiates.

The façade, the focus of Forge's analysis, is actually conceived by Abulës-speakers as contributing to the creation of hierarchies of knowledge, as Hauser-Schäublin demonstrated (2011). But at a meta-level, it could also have been there specifically to remind people themselves, *how likeness and presence work* (be it of an iconical or an indexical nature), in particular their inherent ambiguity. Inference processes of deduction, abduction and deduction, all becoming inherent components of the image's efficacy, were thus mobilised to create a powerful, because uncertain, feel of what was manifested.

As hinted at by Forge, the figures on the façade then could well have done both. First, they give people the means to feel the presence of the generative capacity of containers to bring forth renewed, but similar forms. Second, the painting would have been then made to show to all *the very ambiguity of meaning*, the fundamental multivalency and contextuality of knowledge, and the difficulty of interpreting the ontic level. In other words, the façade could well be corresponding to a form of vernacular epistemology.

Chapter 15

- 160 I am grateful for the convenors of the workshop on Anthony Forge for providing me with the opportunity to discuss some aspects of Abelam art. Recent ethnographic material used in this paper has been gathered during fieldwork in Nyamikum in 2001-03, and June – July 2014, thanks to the contribution of Robin Kitnyora, Andrew Apila and Nebiya. Reflections on this material also come from lectures delivered at the Course on Anthropology and History of Oceanian Arts at the École du Louvre in 2010 and 2015. My thanks also go to Christian Kaufmann, Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin and Philippe Peltier for their careful reading and comments. Any mistakes and errors are mine.
- 161 There was hardly any carving or painting during my own fieldwork in Nyamikum village in 2001-03. The last initiations took place in 1964, and then, strongly criticised by a local representative of the Catholic Church of Maprik, all practices ceased. Since then, kurabu have been built in three occasions in Nyamikum, but not a single one was standing during my own stay.
- 162 I am using here the denomination set by John Kundama and Patricia Wilson (1987). I have however slightly modified the transcription, following the wishes of Robin Galewara Kitnyora's recommendations, by using *ë*, to transcribe the sound corresponding to the *e* of "father". The "b" is pronounced mb, "d", nd; "g", ng and "j", nj.
- 163 Christian Kaufmann points out (personal communication) that Forge might have been aware of the existence of Abulës myths, but could have chosen not to collect them, perhaps to distinguish himself from his own supervisor, Raymond Firth, who was more interested in oral sources.
- 164 Though alluded to, other discussions on the role of cognitive modalities at play in interpretative processes and their relations to memory and knowledge or on ontological regimes of human and non-humans (Descola 2010) could not be elaborated in this paper for reasons of space. But the conclusion of this paper leads me back a position in which "meta-relations", discussed by Descola (2010: 165-82), indeed occupy a central role in Maprik modalities of figuration.
- 165 The Abulës-speaking area present many variations in interpretations, confirming if necessary the "multi-referentiality" of Maprik images. I am using here information collected during my fieldwork in 2001-03 and 2014 in the village of Nyamikum. For stylistic variations and other interpretations from other villages, see Forge (1973a), McGuigan (1992) and Hauser-Schäublin (2015: 67-77, 173-7).
- 166 My occasional use of the present tense, though all initiations practices had stopped in the whole area at the moment of my visits to Nyamikum, is for the sake of clarity.
- 167 See the myth about the cassowary woman who brought the yam varieties to the Abelam (Hauser-Schäublin 1983: 191-2); see also Losche (1995), for a different interpretation of the ceremonial house.
- 168 Interestingly, during my last trip to Nyamikum in 2014, the people who constructed a smaller replica of a ceremonial house originally planned for the Melanesian Art Festival in Wewak, indicated to me that the cassowary was at the origin of all ceremonial houses, and that the difference in shapes came from the way in which she travelled: in the east, because it was still night, she was hunched, straightening in the central Maprik area, and then arriving on the West, it knelt. See also Hauser-Schäublin (2015: 173, 180).
- 169 I am grateful to Christian Kaufmann for pointing this out. At times the simplest of explanation can be hiding in plain sight.
- 170 I am grateful here to Timothy Carroll, whose PhD thesis on Orthodox images deals with the "presencing" nature of Holy Ikons, for pointing this out.
- 171 This interpretation was given to me by several elder members of Nyamikum village, confirmed again during the Melanesian Arts Festival in Wewak in July 2014. Several communities of the Maprik area set up some dances presenting the imposing headdress *waken* worn by dancers.
- 172 This idea evokes Kris Hardin's discussion of redundancy (1993; see also Bateson 1973) or, more recently Pierre Lemonnier's discussion of perissology (2012).
- 173 Whilst *sakiwura* was often described as a red powder (the most powerful colour), my own ethnography of magical substances given to yam in 2001-03, only described it first as *kusbawuu* ("magic"- "ash") which could be combined with other ones, powder or liquid (Coupaye 2013: 22, 184-5), composing thus a powerful mixture.
- 174 I am using here elements drawn from the work of Beryl L. Bellman (1981, 1984) in Africa. See also Roberts and Abimbola 1993.

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