PACIFIC STUDIES

Vol. 20, No. 2 June 1997

NETBAGS REVISITED: CULTURAL NARRATIVES FROM PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Pamela J. Stewart
Andrew J. Strathern
University of Pittsburgh

In this article we reconsider materials on netbags from the Highlands of Papua New Guinea and Irian Jaya, as well as other parts of Melanesia, arguing that understanding of them is best set into a framework of ideas regarding embodiment and processes of trope expansion. Starting from the equation of netbag and womb, we trace the ramifications of this object of material culture and its contemporary significance in a commodifying context. Main emphasis is placed on materials from the Melpa or Mount Hagen area of the Western Highlands Province in Papua New Guinea, with comparisons to the cultures of the Ok region. Although netbags have predominantly female associations, modem Highlands netbag styles are a hybrid of elements from the netbags used by men and women in the past. We argue that the netbag's chief significance is as a container of life and death, deeply bound up with the human life cycle, and that it gains its significance from its use in both everyday utilitarian contexts and highly charged ritual events.

NETBAGS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA carry a rich symbolic significance as markers of gender relations, the life cycle, and the cosmos. Maureen MacKenzie has made a pioneering analysis of their importance in the Ok culture area (1991), and here we extend the analysis to other parts of the Papua New Guinea Highlands, in particular Mount Hagen, drawing also on her wider ethnographic survey. Netbags are eminently worthy of study both for their role in life-cycle rituals and as the sites of individual creative activity in the context of contemporary changes in the social relations of production. As objects largely, but by no means exclusively, associated with the female sphere, they tend to play a muted role in the overall production of cultural

meanings by comparison with carvings, shell valuables, and pigs, for example. Yet their meanings are in fact central to overall cultural ideas of fertility and the cycle of life and death. It is this centrality that makes them apt also for further symbolic use as markers of gendered relations in the wider social and political spheres of life, as in male initiations among the Ok peoples.

In seeking to place netbags in their proper perspective, we have found it useful to use the ideas of embodiment and trope expansion (Csordas 1994; A. J. Strathern 1996; Wagner 1972). These concepts are suited to our purpose, because we argue that the netbag's primary significance is as a marker of the female womb, but this meaning is expanded in specific pathways to cover further social contexts, such as the attachment to land, the production of initiates, and the like. We suggest that the basic reason for this form of trope expansion is that the fact of birth from the female body and the immediate acts of caring associated with this fact form a powerful template for the expression of ideas about social transitions generally. The netbag becomes an elementary material form objectifying the powers of female fertility and making them accessible for further semiotic production.

This use of the netbag as a symbol corresponds to our decision to combine in our treatment two theoretical approaches that more often appear separately, that is, embodiment theory and trope-expansion theory. Embodiment in our usage here refers to the ways in which social and cultural values are encoded materially, either in the human body itself or in objects whose significance is related to the human body. The term also reminds us of the complex interrelationship between elements signaled as belonging to the realms of "mind" and "body," and the necessity to overcome the dichotomous representation of these categories in favor of a holistic and dynamic understanding of human experience. It also stands in a definite relationship to the concept of objectification, as Bourdieu has argued (1977): for example, a house that is divided into male and female gendered spaces can be seen as an objectification of the embodied relationships between persons. Put otherwise, an objectification is the product of trope expansion, and we could speak of the productive use of the netbag as a symbol in terms of either concept. Trope expansion is a relevant concept to use here, because beginning with the fundamental equation of netbag with womb we find that the netbag can stand as a container for life in wider contexts, for example, those of male initiation. Netbags, in other words, not only carry objects, they convey multiple sets of meanings that bear vividly on notions of the body, the skin, reproduction, nurturance, and female versus male social capacities (see also Turner 1980, 1994, 1995). They contain objects and an enormous potential for communication and self-expression. They are replete with social significance, including notions of growth, nurturance, ancestral transformations, generational

continuity, and land rights. These bags contain a record of human experiences and acquired meanings.

Netbags are also a functional component of dress and adornment that can be used to conceal or advertise certain facets of identity. They can be seen as convincing analogs for the regenerative and degenerative processes of life and as a great connector binding people to the ancestors of their past and the progeny of their future. They carry social and political significance in marriage bestowal and exchange contexts, they play a part in life-cycle celebrations and rituals of death, and they are used in bringing together kin groups and in the generation of political power through commitments of loyalty and obligation.

Netbags: The Overall Context

This section draws on the earlier work by Maureen MacKenzie (1991) and Annette Weiner (1976) in order to indicate the overall contexts of meaning that are generated from netbags and as a prelude to considering some specific matters in greater detail. Weiner has pointed to the significance of both netbags in general and specifically banana-leaf bundles and skirts among the Trobrianders as markers of female wealth and female powers of reproduction (A. Weiner 1976, 1992). Moreover, for the Trobriands, she argues that these objects stand for sociocosmic reproduction generally. MacKenzie has shown that netbags are important throughout Melanesia and often carry meanings having to do with female powers of reproduction and nurturance. Her materials also show the importance of netbags in the wider gendered cosmos.[1] Linguistic evidence supports this point.

Netbags are called ***bilum*** in Tok Pisin, or Melanesian pidgin. The word ***bilum*** also refers to natural objects including the marsupial pouch, the human placenta, and the afterbirth (Mihalic 1971:71-72). The lexical link between ***bilum,*** placenta, womb, and marsupial pouch is common to the vernaculars of many ***bilum***-producing cultures (Forge 1973: 180; Biersack 1984: 130; Bowden 1984:457). Cell notes that among the Umeda people the womb is called "spirit ***bilum" (uda midi)*** (1975:142-143); while Schieffelin reports that the Kaluli do not have a term for childbirth, and the term they use for "to give birth" means literally "to put (a child) in a netbag" (1977:124). In the North Wahgi Wall language, when a set of brothers offer a girl in marriage back to their mother's clan, the phrase for this action translates literally as "giving a skull in a netbag," and the "netbag" may also be used as a synonym for both "bride" and "womb" (O'Hanlon and Frankland 1986:181-198). The term in Melpa for giving birth, ***mei,*** means "to carry." The child is carried during gestation in the woman's bodily womb, and after birth it is carried in her net-

bag womb (cf. J. Weiner 1995:127 on the Foi). It is significant here that the woman manufactures the netbag as a cultural act and that many different kinds are produced, with both practical and ritual uses, as the next section discusses.

Manufacture: An Embodied Technique

There are many types of New Guinea netbags, but in general women carry large, open-looped work ***bilums*** from a tumpline (formed by tying the two long loose ends of the bag together) on the head, as well as small, more ornately decorated ones that are slung over the shoulder. Men wear small ***bilums*** either across the chest or slung over the shoulders, leaving their heads free. Among the Huli people of the Southern Highlands, whose men regularly carried netbags with handles knotted across their chests, the purpose of dealing with the netbag in this way was perhaps to ensure that the men could run, hold, and use weapons and look around for enemies in a way that women, loaded down and with their heads bowed, could not. But both types of bag can be worn and used by either sex.

Bilums are produced through a distinctive looping technique that differs from weaving or knotting in the looseness, flexibility, and elasticity of the product. They are employed to carry or contain diverse objects, including garden produce, firewood, arrows, betel nut, personal property, and infants: the latter use provides a hammocklike cradle. They are used as toys; Heider and Gardner report that children of the Grand Valley Dani in Irian Jaya played a game with their ***bilums,*** throwing one up into the air like a ball and shouting out "boy" as they caught it or "girl" if they missed (1974:68). They are pocket, quiver, attire, dancing regalia, ornament, amulet, trade commodity, wealth item, marker of identity, spirit catcher, and shrine. In addition to these multifarious uses, ***bilums*** are exchange items, elements of ceremonial clothing, bearers of ancestral power, and items of aesthetic value.

In the Telefol area there are many types of bags, ranging from large, expandable all-purpose ***bilums*** for women that are a basic item of domestic equipment to a variety of small "amulet" ***bilums*** constructed in a tighter fashion and containing charms or pieces of an ancestor's or warrior's bones. The Telefol distinguish twenty-seven named types and subtypes of ***bilums*** (MacKenzie 1991:46-50).

The technique of netting used to produce netbags is also employed to make headnets, aprons, cloaks, and fishing nets. Netted items are looped from a single thread rolled on the thigh, with new sections continually added as work proceeds. This process, which uses the thigh as a work station, invests each thread with hair, skin cells, body oils, and body odor from the manufac-

turer. Literally a part of the creator is incorporated into each netbag that she or he makes. In New Guinea, artifacts are often thought to be imbued with the personal "essence" and creativity of their makers, a fact that contributes to their meanings as gifts and is related to Mauss's concept of the "spirit of the gift" (Mauss [1925] 1990: 11). Although "skin cells" may not be a local notion, the idea of objects as embodiments of the substances and powers of persons is well known (see, for example, Gregory 1982). The entire spun thread is pulled through the body of the work during construction of each loop, resulting in a very strong bag in which a severed thread cannot unravel. The more tightly looped small ***bilums*** are worked with a bone or nowadays a steel needle.

The raw material for making ***bilums*** has traditionally been plant fibers (mostly ficus) or, more recently, imported wool or nylon or strands from unraveled garments, together with a pandanus or plastic strip. Along with the adoption of new materials in more recent times have come fresh multicolored designs.

Bilums are made individually rather than cooperatively, but women often work together at looping in casual groups and fit the preparation of string and the actual looping into any available time between other tasks. Children pick up basic techniques as they mature, acquiring first a basic competence in making standard ***bilums*** and subsequently, to a varying degree, an aptitude in more specialized looping techniques that enable them to make other kinds of bags and produce more aesthetically effective textures and patterns. Older women pass on their knowledge progressively as younger women acquire competence and responsibility. ***Bilum*** making is thus closely integrated with the flow of life and sociality. Among women the netbag is used informally to denote the passage through the life cycle. Almost universally, the looping and subsequent carrying of a large domestic ***bilum*** indicates that a young girl is accepting the responsibilities of being a productive adult member of the community.

Netbags, Creativity, and Cultural Efflorescence

Among the Daribi, the decorative motifs (stylized geometrical symbols) and the talent and skill involved in making netbags are thought to be acquired through dreams (Wagner 1972:77). The metaphorical character of the geometric patterns used in Daribi netbags is closely linked to the structural codification of dreams themselves. This attribution of acquisition of creative knowledge through dreaming is similar to that seen among some Australian Aborigines, for example, the Pintupi (Myers 1986:242). A Daribi who saw a poorly crafted product would conclude that the maker had not had a dream

providing inspiration to produce a well-made, functional, and attractive product. The knowledge that is accrued through dreaming comes from ***izara-we,*** spirit women living under the surface of the earth. These women live without men and have skins that are said to be slippery, coated with a whitish substance like saliva from which an unpleasant odor emanates. Through the interpretation of dreams, the Daribi bring the capacities revealed in dreaming to bear on the events of day-to-day life; the knowledge acquired through encounters with ***izara-we*** in dreams is creatively depicted through netbag design and decoration (Wagner 1972:72-77).

For New Guinea as a whole, netbags have undergone various alterations. Their role has been extended (for example, providing a source of income in the tourist market), new materials and designs have been incorporated, and their production has expanded into regions of New Guinea where they had not been made before.

In the contemporary context netbags also are used to make statements about personal desirability and worth, particularly by young women. In the highly colored and decorative netbags they make, young women stress beauty rather than utility, by contrast with the work netbags used for carrying foods. The decorative netbags are also often carried with shoulder straps rather than suspended in traditional fashion on the head. If they are worn from the head, in Mount Hagen they may have multiple pastel-colored lightweight scarves attached to them that gracefully fall to one side of the woman's face or flutter in the wind as she moves. Such scarves are "modem" and sold for wearing around the neck, but Hagen women have attached them to netbags in a blend of old and new forms of adornment.

Women in Mount Hagen nowadays also use artistic forms from the past in innovative ways through their selection of brilliant fabrics to be used as source material in their netbags. The use of these bright fibers, which are woven into flamboyant crisscrossing geometric shapes, is reminiscent of the explosive body coloring done by young girls and women before missionization condemned the practice as ungodly. The bright yellows, reds, and blues that women choose as the fibers for their netbag designs are precisely those colors that were predominantly "female" in body painting as it was practiced in the recent past. The base color for the female face was in fact red, signifying friendship, vitality, and female ties of marital alliance, while the base color for men was black, signifying male solidarity, aggression, and the power of the ancestors (A. J. and A. M. Strathern 1971:152-170). The transposition of these colors painted on the skin to the woven netbags also shows the tropic association of the netbag with the skin itself, as a covering that closely molds itself to the contours of the body. Previously, netbags were colored in the taupe and brown colors of the natural fibers and the dark blue of the dyed

fibers, When colored fabrics became readily available to Mount Hagen women and the practice of body painting as a form of making oneself more sexually desirable was criticized, women devised new ways to express their sexuality and pride that the Christian church did not condemn. These brightly colored, highly ornate bags are also appealing to tourists, who purchase them from women who come to airports to sell them. They have thus been transformed from gifts into commodities (Gregory 1982; Carrier 1995). The smallish, squarish bags, which may be slung over the shoulder or around the neck, are used by both sexes to carry personal possessions, while other kinds of bags, worn by men under the arm, serve as portable caches for war or love magic.

The names of the designs netted into the modern netbags capture something of the changing experience of Highlanders of New Guinea. Some designs, such as "Cross" and "Christmas" are influenced by the missionary presence; others, such as "One Ace" and "Diamond," reflect the popularity of card playing. Another, "Yonki Pawa," derives from technological change, Yonki being the site of a major new power-generating station in the Eastern Highlands, whose pylons are modeled in this netbag's design. "Skin Pik" suggests the roadside markets at which many of these new designs are worn (it is named after its resemblance to the lattice of squares into which pork is divided for sale at markets) (O'Hanlon 1993:71-72).

A prominent feature in the development of netbag manufacture and design in the New Guinea Highlands, then, has been the elaboration of designs for colored, tightly netted bags made by women. Several factors have combined to produce what can appropriately be called a cultural efflorescence in this regard. First, women are prime netbag makers, and this role has not been taken over by men or simulated by factory production (so far). Second, the movements of people between the coastal regions and the Highlands, and within the Highlands region itself, have brought knowledge of types of designs not previously available. Women have themselves traveled and observed designs, or they have made friends with people and exchanged netbags with them, or they have seen the designs brought in by others, in any case becoming able to expand their repertoires of knowledge. Third, women have found a way to use secondhand and discarded clothing bought from trade stores to supplement their access to different colors of thread, since they previously could employ only dark blue plant dyes and bark-thread, plus insets of marsupial fur wound into the surface of the thread itself. Such pieces of clothing are bought with money that women derive from their sale of vegetables in local markets or from their shares in money obtained from coffee sales. Fourth, women have been able to sell the new types of netbag to tourists as well as exchanging them among them-

selves in contexts of kinship and affinity. Fifth, and finally, women have adapted the style of netbag making that was previously used to manufacture bags for men to this wider context of production for their own use, for exchange among themselves, for gifts to men or boys, and for commercial sale. This widened context of production therefore represents an arena in which cultural innovation and social changes have met to stimulate a new cultural form. In this case the new form also represents a widening of the spheres of interest, experience, and capacity of individual women. The netbags a woman makes thus reflect her own individuated biographical experience and knowledge: places she has traveled to, contacts she has made, her capacity to earn money, and her own aesthetic choices in making bags with designs derived from various places. Simbu designs, for example, are borrowed and imitated by Hagen women, and it is likely that the reverse occurs also.

Netbags as Gendered Attire

In addition to netbags, men, women, girls, and boys wear caps, crocheted according to the traditional technique of netbag making. These items are made with the same sorts of materials and incorporate similar sorts of design elements. Men's aprons are made in the same way. In Mount Hagen the long, multiple-layered aprons ***(mbal)*** that men wear for ceremonial dances are all made by women with the same looping techniques as are employed for netbags. Women make these aprons for their male kinsfolk or spouses. Nowadays they may also make them for sale (at prices from US$100 upwards, twice the normal cost of a netbag of the new style). While netbags can be manufactured with various types of modem materials, such as plastic, and colored in almost every imaginable hue, aprons must be made only from traditional materials and colored with dark blue dye. A man tries to find two aprons to wear for a dance, in order to give his frontal appearance weight and to cover his legs and genitals comfortably. The apron is very much on display in the dancing line, as the dancers face outward to the spectators. They must learn to move the aprons gracefully in a swinging motion forwards and backwards, in time with their singing and the genuflection that accompanies both singing and drum beats in the prime dance for the ***moka,*** the ***mör*** (or ***mörl)*** dance. Often the woman who made a man's apron is known to the spectators, and they will comment on the level of her competence and skill in their evaluations of the man's decorations. The apron is thus a part of its maker's biography as well as of its wearer's standing.

Bilums are a standard element of female attire, and finely processed ***bilums*** exhibit a woman's productive capacities as well as often contain the results of her work and fecundity. This dual role is reflected in the Mount

Hagen and Wahgi areas by different terms for work and ceremonial women's netbags. The former are ***wal omb*** in Hagen (referring to the practice of tying the two free ends together in a knot for carrying the bag on the head), and ***wal kupin*** is the term for the decorative ceremonial netbags used in bridewealth. In Wahgi these terms are ***kon mengel*** for the work bag and ***kon kupn*** for the ceremonial bag (O'Hanlon 1993:69).

A properly manufactured ***bilum*** demonstrates the productive capabilities of a woman and serves as an indication of the care, energy, and love that she is likely to invest in all of her various activities as a wife and mother. The fact that the ***bilum*** is frequently used as a cradle makes its identification with the woman's body, and specifically her womb, unsurprising; its capacity to expand and its bulging position on her back make for obvious visual affinities between the full ***bilum*** and the pregnant body. ***Bilums*** can also project the desire for aesthetic expression by enhancing the form of the body. Females often wear brightly colored netbags that fall gracefully down their backs from an attachment point on the wearer's head, adorning their person. MacKenzie heads a section on the aesthetic value of netbags with the saying, "The bilums are our ***bilas*** [adornments]" (1991:133).

Such is the overall importance of netbags and their relationship to gender and personhood in everyday contexts. But they enter also into the realms of mythology, ritual, and the origin stories relating to major institutions.

Shells in a Netbag: Sexuality, Reproduction, and Politics

An examination of the uses to which netbags are put can illuminate women's contribution to social and political organization. Examples from the Mount Hagen area will exemplify this point.

Netbags appear regularly in passing in the collection of narratives from Mount Hagen published by Georg Vicedom (vol. 3) as well as in the other two volumes of ethnography that he produced along with Herbert Tischner (Vicedom and Tischner 1943-1948). In the first volume of this trilogy, the volume on material culture, the authors write about a myth as follows.

> The pearl shell acquires a marked religious and cultic significance through its use in the Female Spirit cult and in the closing scenes of a ***moka*** exchange ceremony. . . . According to a myth these valuables were at one time stolen by bad people of the Underworld. A brave woman, along with a few men, risked going down to the Underworld and brought the valuables back. This act is represented at the end of the ***moka*** festival. In order to display this return of the shells in a truly dramatic manner, they were first hidden from view

> in large, carefully prepared grass-filled netbags, with their shiny sides exposed. At the ceremony men with distinctive decorations carried the shells into the dancing place with many shouts and yells, and were received there with great jubilation. Later the shells were handed to the recipients of the ***moka.*** (Vicedom and Tischner, 1: 120; translated from the German)

The myth to which the authors refer here is a little more complicated than their own summary of it. The "brave woman" who went down to the Underworld was in fact the new wife of a polygynous man, and it was a pale-skinned cannibal woman who stole not the man's pearl shells, but his two sons Eklimb and Kuklup. The new wife was called Kopona Nde (perhaps derived from the term for ***kopong nde, Campnosperma*** sp. oil-bamboos used in decoration), and she made her way into the Underworld through a rock face and an underground lake. Kopona Nde burned the cannibal woman inside her house and rescued the sons, as well as other men kept captive there, and "took all her possessions, valuables, cassowaries and pigs and went home." After this the two sons made the ***moka*** shell festival with the shells brought back in this way (Vicedom and Tischner 1943-1948, 3:33- 39).

The myth gives a leading role to a woman, whose exploit is commemorated by hanging the shells in a netbag when they are brought into the dancing ground. The predominantly "female" associations of the netbag are thus conjoined with the "male" associations of pearl shells as forms of wealth into a composite symbol. In substituting pearl shells for the two sons in his summary of this myth, Vicedom was perhaps unconsciously recognizing the equivalence or substitutability of wealth and people that is a feature of the Hagen culture.

The netbag is a container that can contain a newborn baby (nestling in leaves within the bag) (Vicedom and Tischner 1943-1948, 2:241), the bones of a dead person, or items of wealth that stand for the person (pearl shells in this case). Carrying persons or objects in a netbag signifies their ***translocation*** from one place or one state of being to another. The pearl shells are first hidden, then brought into view in a revelatory sequence that is like the sequence of birth itself.

The female netbag as a container that may conceal and nurture life is exemplified in another Hagen myth, in which a human man discovers and captures a young woman of the Sky People (Vicedom and Tischner 1943-1948, 3:15-17). She then takes him and puts him into her netbag and climbs up a tree with him to take him to her home in the sky. Her kinsfolk say he cannot stay and she must go and live in virilocal marriage with him on earth. They descend to his place to receive the bridewealth payment for her, but

this time a piglet squeals in an old woman's netbag. They are startled (for they do not keep pigs, only marsupials) and return to the sky, taking their young woman with them. Since then there has been no traffic between the Sky People and the earth people.

The silent, mature man in the young woman's netbag being taken up to the Sky People's domain contrasts with the noisy, immature piglet in the old woman's netbag. Both netbags are containers of life, but they act as different operators, one as a promise of a heavenly alliance, the other as its destruction through the earthbound life in it. The netbags, then, play an important structural role in the overall story.

If netbags carry predominant associations as containers of life, their significance in gendered terms varies across the Highlands region. In Hagen, women's netbags ***(wal omb*** and ***wal kupin,*** "work" and "ceremonial" versions) are distinguished clearly from ***wal kumbana,*** which traditionally were carried only by men and had shoulder-strap handles. There is, however, no great symbolic elaboration of the ***wal kumbana*** category, whereas the female types of netbag are replete with associations of life support and nurturing.

Even the actions of making a netbag are associated with meanings that have to do with sexuality, reproduction, and in metaphorical form with the domain of politics. The action of pulling the long thread through each netted loop is described as ***walinga rui,*** "to strike backwards and forwards," the same term that is used for the sinuous inflection of the head by partners in the ***amb kenan,*** or courting ceremony for unmarried girls. In this ceremony the male sits cross-legged beside the female, who sits with her legs bent underneath her. The foreheads and noses of the two partners come together and roll rhythmically back and forth as their bodies sway, each sequence ending with a double movement of ducking the head down to the floor in a manner that mirrors the movements of sexual intercourse, although sexual intercourse itself should not take place during the courting. During this action the partners listen to courting songs sung by the spectators, which provide a beat to which their actions can be attuned. The girls are supposed to introduce love-magic substances into the oils and paints that they apply to their foreheads for the ceremony.

The needle employed for pulling the thread is traditionally made of flying-fox bone and is called ***ngal aipa,*** "flying-fox bone needle." The thread is called ***kan röngi,*** "manufactured rope." In a phrase used to express political alliance between male exchange partners, the sexual image of the union between thread and needle is transposed metaphorically into an image of the exchange bond facilitating a network: ***nim kan röngi, na ngal aipa,*** "you will be the thread, I will be the needle," and together we'll make the netbag, that is, the ***moka*** exchange.

This combination of sexual and political meanings can be seen in the context of widow's wear also, since the widows of war victims were supposed to wear piled-up netted materials over their heads to provide a house for the dead man's spirit until it was revenged by his clansmen. The widow's role here is both domestic and political, and the netbag again expresses both aspects, just as the netbag used for shells in ***moka*** did (Vicedom and Tischner 1943-1948, 2:225). The netbag as a home for the newly born spirit mirrors its role as the container for a newborn baby and also the term for the placenta, ***kunung wal,*** the "covering netbag," in the Melpa or Hagen language, a term that also applies to the netbag worn as head and back cover for protection against rain and excessive exposure to sunlight.

The netbags of bereavement in Hagen reflect the obligatory sentiment of mourning for the dead and perhaps also the widow's own feelings during the mourning period, when the spirit of the dead husband sits on her. The 'bags are not to protect her from the dead, man's spirit, but serve as a domain for the spirit to live in until the time when it can go to the spirit world to live. Approximately six months or a year after the death of her husband, a widow is traditionally freed from mourning if proper revenge for his death has been exacted (M. Strathern 1972:62).

In other parts of the Highlands the gendered dichotomy between types of netbags used by men and women found in Hagen does not play out in the same way. For example, among the Huli of the Southern Highlands Province, men also carried netbags like the Hagen ***wal omb,*** in order to transport their own supplies of sweet potatoes, kept "pure" from female menstrual contamination (Frankel 1986). And in the Ok region farther to the west, a rich set of male and female associations for netbags include their role in signifying male initiation stages. Here again the netbag acts as a "container of life," modeled on the womb, and is appropriately associated with the "rebirth" of boys and men into new initiation grades (see also below). Netbags can thus stand for gendered values in different configurations in these Highlands societies. All of the examples given here, however, illustrate our argument regarding trope expansion. Images and idioms having to do with birth, nurturance, and sexuality are transposed into wider social and political realms, and the netbag acquires meanings that belong to the domains of exchange and politics. The same point is illustrated in further materials, from Oro Province and elsewhere, relating to contexts of birth, death, and initiation.

Netbags and Life Cycle: Birth to Death

In the Orokaiva area of Oro Province, women carry their infants into the garden daily, putting the child in a netbag that is hung from a stick placed

firmly in the ground. As the child rests in this cradle, the ancestral spirit of the previous landowner enters into the child through the stick. The transmission of ancestral substances makes the child grow and imposes an obligation on the child to care for this particular plot of land in adulthood (Schwimmer 1973:92-95). Schwimmer does not specify in his ethnography whether both male and female infants are treated in this way. In any case, what is demonstrated here is the involvement of women in a process whereby land rights are transmitted and ancestral and generational continuity is maintained, and in which the netbag plays the crucial role of transducer between the ancestral owner and the present-day generation. The ancestral owner's power enters the child in the netbag in a manner analogous to the entry of the procreative power of the genitor into the mother's womb. In this analogical transposition the symbolic equation of womb and netbag enables the trope expansion to be effected.

Netbags may also contain the dead or parts of the dead, or conceal the bodies of bereaved persons. For example, in the Gulf and Western Provinces ***bilums*** are used by women in mourning to conceal the torso and veil the face (MacKenzie 1991:16-17; Landtmann 1933). Throughout the Gulf Province, and also in the Western Province, much of the Central Province, and parts of the West Sepik Province, a widow further wears her dead husbands personal possessions in or tied to a small amulet string bag around her neck. In the Gulf Province this sort of ***bilum*** is ceremonially burnt at the end of the period of intense mourning to ceremonially sever the widow's connection with her dead husbands spirit (Maori Kiki and Beier 1969:19; MacKenzie 1991:17).

In the Telefomin area of the Ok region, where there is a special elaboration of ideas and practices concerning netbags, the netbag itself is associated with Afek, the female creator figure. In one version of the myth, Afek "created all important cultural items from her vaginal secretions and menstrual blood" (MacKenzie 1991:45). These items would include the netbag itself, which is like an externalization of Afek's own womb. Telefomin women questioned by MacKenzie would only whisper the name of Afek and say they had always had netbags, passed down from mother to daughter since the origin times. One of the uses to which Afek put her own netbag was to wrap the bones of her husband/younger brother Umoim in preparation for his funeral. The netbag here appears again as the container of the body at all stages of the life cycle, in which death at least partly recapitulates birth (MacKenzie 1991:44-45). The type of netbag Afek prepared in this way is called ***olkupmen,*** "feces rotten taro ***bilum,"*** described as "an extremely sacred esoteric" netbag (MacKenzie 1991:223).

In the Ok region as a whole, men as well as women make and wear

bilums. Bird-feather ***bilums*** for initiation ceremonies are made by men in their roles as husbands and fathers, on the basis of a ***bilum*** made by the initiate's mother. Usually a man presents his wife with prepared fibers, from which she loops a ***bilum.*** The man then decorates this ***bilum*** with feathers (hornbill, eagle, or brush turkey, for example). These ritually important ***bilums*** are worn by their sons among the initiated men and connote maleness. Among the Telefol the ***uun kon men*** (bird-feather ***bilum)*** is made specifically for the particular male initiation ceremony with which it is associated as part of a rite of passage (MacKenzie 1991:113).

The ***bilum*** is used to mark male ritual status in many areas in East and West Sepik. In the Wewak Boiken area, young male initiates are given a special netbag by their maternal uncles that contains all the prerequisites of manhood in the form of powerful ingredients to make the boy strong, wise, and sexually potent (Aufenanger 1972:22). For the Mountain Ok people the netbag is a major focus of male initiation rites. The boys' first initiation ***bilum*** defines their newly acquired status and is a restatement of the existing social hierarchy among men.

Netbags and the Spirit World

Ritual and spiritual practices involving the use of netbags can be found throughout Papua New Guinea. The embodiment of ritual potency representing cultural knowledge, can be passed on through the medium of netbags. In the East Sepik Province, the Arambak provide their ***kamanggabi*** figures (carvings of ancestors) with their own netbags, which contain powerful substances associated with the fertility of crops and other knowledge of cultural resources (Forge 1960:7). Throughout the Star Mountains in central New Guinea, sacred netbags representing cultural knowledge hang on the back wall of men's houses (Zöllner 1988:130-134). Among the Mekeo a man of many bags appears to be a man with much ritual knowledge, and the passing on of this knowledge is to be preceded by the comment "I will show you my bag" (von Goethem 1912:795). Myths from many regions tell of spirit women who possess netbags (Biersack 1982:244; Brumbaugh 1980: 440). Witches may also capture people's souls in netbags and carry them off for consumption at cannibalistic feasts.

Among the Anga-speaking Baruya of the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, the initiation of new shamans contains a sequence involving netbags. The postulants place objects containing magical and spiritual powers they have found into their individual netbags, and these are then hung up overnight outside of the initiation house for spirits to enter and imbue with the requisite powers. A master shaman takes these bags down the next mom-

ing and inspects them to see signs of the spirits having entered them, in which case the initiate is permitted to advance in the ritual. The netbag here plays its familiar role as the container of spirit / life / power. (This sequence appeared in film footage by Jean-Luc Lory shown at a Wenner-Gren-sponsored conference on the Anga-speaking people held in Marseille, France, 20 September 1996. See Godelier 1986:112-126, where, however, this particular sequence is not alluded to.)

Heider tells how Dani men, in times of spiritual crisis, would conceal themselves from ghosts by draping a woman's netbag over their heads (1969: 382, 385). Small amulet ***bilums*** containing charms such as sacred stones or fragments of deceased ancestors' bones are common to almost every ***bilum***-making culture in the Highlands region (MacKenzie 1991:18). They are worn around the neck to strengthen the soul and conceal the upper sternum from the gaze of ghosts (Heider 1970:247). Depending on their secret contents and particular cultural context, small amulet ***bilums*** may be used as personal magic charms (Maori Kiki 1975). Among the Telefol, the ***men amem*** (secret, sacred ***bilums)*** contain individual ***usong*** (ancestor spirits) traditionally believed to be a source of spiritual and economic aid for the living. These bags are created by ritual specialists within the context of particular mortuary rituals.

Glasse records that the Huli of the Southern Highlands Province used string bags for divining (1965:39). Certain women had the power to attract the ghost of a recently dead relative into a tiny netbag, which, when animated by the ghost's presence, could answer questions put to it by the diviner owner. If the bag swayed to the right, an affirmative response was indicated; if the bag swayed to the left, a negative reply was implied.

Netbags in Exchange: The Mesh of Sociality

As a netbag is used to mediate between this world and the spirit world, so is it used, through exchanges within and between groups, to mediate between woman and man, parent and offspring, cognate and affine, and initiator and initiate.

The gift of a netbag may establish a relationship independently of kinship. In the Washkuk hills north of Ambunti, if a woman's son dies, she will loop a ***bilum,*** which is subsequently decorated with cowrie shell valuables by her husband. This elaborate ***bilum*** is offered to the best friend of their deceased son. The friends acceptance of such a ***bilum*** establishes a new surrogate child relationship with the bereaved parents (MacKenzie 1991: 12).

In all the ***bilum***-producing cultures of Papua New Guinea, women may signify the closeness of a particular friendship by informally exchanging net-

bags. Among the Foi of the Southern Highlands, this type of exchange, which expresses solidarity between women, is given a ritual formality. When a young bride transfers to her husbands longhouse, the coresident women of the wife's village accompany her. Each woman carries a netbag, or other object such as a sago-washing basket, containing female domestic items and apparel. The bride's mother receives these gifts and notes the identity of each of the donors. These gifts form the bride's dowry and express continuing support to the former coresident (MacKenzie 1991:12; J. Weiner 1988:98; 1995:138). The groom's father in return provides cowries (thirty-seven, probably representing the complete human body on a body-count system), and each woman who has brought a gift receives one (that is; male wealth for female wealth). The bride herself sits concealed in a new bark cloak beside her mother (awaiting her "rebirth").

When an Orokolo bride is led to her husbands house, she carries a special netbag that contains her coconut spoons, betel nut, and lime with which she will entertain in her new house. This ***avoa*** (conjugal ***bilum)*** is decorated by her parents with rows of shell valuables: the top row she will keep for her personal decorations; the rest she will distribute to her new affines (Maori Kiki and Beier 1969: 18).

In the Hagen area a bride came to her husbands kin with a dowry that included netbags. These bags were made specially for the marriage by father's and mother's sisters, her mother, and other wives who were married into her own lineage. All of these women would hope to receive a portion of the bridewealth in recognition of this support. The bride would distribute these netbags to her new sisters-in-law and her husbands married and unmarried sisters and his brothers (M. Strathern 1972:14-15). The giving of these gifts signals the friendly relations she hopes to establish with these women. In addition to these ordinary gift bags, the new wife would also have a specially fine one ***(wal kupin),*** which would have long tying strings. This bag she would have been using on special occasions since she was of marriageable age. She might give this bag to her husbands younger sister, who would wear it until she was married. Or the new bride might follow the custom of cutting the bag up and using part of the material as a bag, while converting the tying strings into a pubic apron for her husband (or sometimes her father-in-law) (M. Strathern 1972:14-15). In this example, as in those given previously and those that follow, by following the path or life cycle of a netbag, the relations and meanings that surround it can be explored. These objects have a life cycle of their own that weaves in and out of various situations and circumstances. Transformations in the form, function, and meaning of a netbag occur as it passes from one social context to another (cf. Kopytoff 1986 on the "cultural biography of things").

In the Goroka area during the betrothal ceremony, a netbag ***(owu,*** meaning womb) is symbolically displayed on a wooden post, the netbag being the primary symbol of the bride's womanhood. As the bride stands next to the post with its attached netbag, the girl's male relatives make speeches about her future marriage and the bridewealth they will receive. The bride is accompanied in this ceremony by one or two of her female relatives, who carry netbags filled with pork to be given as gifts to the groom's relatives. In addition, the bride's mother may also be given a netbag filled with pork or sweet potatoes (Sexton 1986).

The gendered symbolic significance attached to women's netbags is exemplified by the mortuary ceremonies of the Dugum Dani. On these occasions the women first exchange netbags among themselves. In later stages of the funeral rites, women bring their carrying netbags, which are spread out in the courtyard, and men's valuables for exchange (stones and shell bands) are placed on top of the rows of netbags (Heider 1970:161).

Woman, Netbag, Cassowary: Cosignifying Symbols

The association between the netbag, human skin, and the cassowary can be seen in several examples. The cassowary is associated with principles of femininity as well as masculinity. Gardner suggests that the cassowary is cosmologically significant to the Miyanmin, because it is associated with the procreative powers of women and because it is an embodiment of "essential characteristics of both men and women" (1984:141). The creator figure Afek is represented as the cassowary in one of her forms (Gardner 1981:201; Morren 1974:163). She is known as Fiitiir, "the cassowary," among the Miyanmin.

The ***bilum*** is often draped over the backs of women, where it serves as a raincoat and sunscreen. A visual similarity exists between a woman wearing a ***bilum*** in this manner and a cassowary. The ***bilum*** here is functioning as a skin of sorts. A story from the Sepik region, epitomized in Bernard Narokobi's play ***Death of a Muruk*** (1982), tells of a man who spies on cassowary-women while they are bathing. These women had removed their outer skins, which were cassowary skins. The man hid one of the women's skin to prevent her from turning back into a cassowary. The woman marries the man, but one day, after he has insulted her by stating that she is not a "real woman," she finds the old cassowary skin where it had been hidden, puts it on, and returns to her life in the forest as a cassowary (A. J. Strathern 1996: 93). This skin can be seen here as a marker of the. interface between what is hidden or inside and what is revealed or outside. This duality of skin is seen in the fact that the cassowary woman has two skins, one representing her

animal, the other her human self (cf. Turner 1980). Bark cloaks and netbags also function in this way.

One of the categories of Telefol ***bilums*** is the ***tiyaap men*** (cassowary ***bilum),*** which is a strongly made, squarish bag with an over-the-shoulder strap that has been decorated on the outer-facing side with cassowary plumes that form an elongated "tail" in the center. The Telefol refer to this "tail" part of their cassowary ***bilum*** as ***unam*** (women's grass skirt). This ***bilum*** can be owned and carried only by fully initiated men.

Netbags: Telefomin Reversals of Sexual Oppositions

In the myth of Afek, the mother of the Ok peoples, an explanation of the Telefol world and an account of its origins is given. A version of this myth is revealed to male initiates as they proceed through the stages of male initiation from boyhood to manhood. The ***bilums*** that the initiates wear mark their progression through their education in the male cult (MacKenzie 1991:224). A version of the myth follows: Long ago the couple Afek, the elder sister, and Umoim, the younger brother, had built Telefolip (the sacred cult-house). Umoim stayed in the ***unangam*** (family house, literally, "woman house") and Afek stayed in the Telefolip (the ***yolam).*** They stayed like this, but at night the pigs and the children in the ***unangam*** didn't sleep--they squealed and cried out. All the time it was like this, every night. Afek thought to herself, "Bah! This is no good. Things can't go on like this." Then she decided that she and Umoim should exchange places--she would sleep in the ***unangam*** and Umoim would sleep in the Telefolip. She decided this and then told Umoim about it. She told him she had left her feathers and decorations in the ***yolam*** for him. When the sun was about to come up, she explained, he should get up and go outside and wash himself with the dew she called "stars," then rub pig grease all over his body, paint himself, and put on her decorations. Afterwards Umoim was to return to the ***yolam*** and stand in the doorway in the light of daybreak so she might look at him. That night Afek slept in the ***unangam*** with the children and the pigs while Umoim slept in the ***yolam.*** For once all had a good night's sleep--the pigs and the children did not stir and all was quiet, and Afek slept soundly too. In the morning Umoim did as he had been instructed and made himself beautiful, decorated in paint and feathers with a boar's tusk in his nasal septum. Afek took one look at him and was delighted. Clapping her hands together she said, "That's it, that's more like it. It's really good." And so she decided that from then on men would have the ***yolam,*** and women would stay in the ***unangam*** with the pigs and the children (Jorgensen 1981:403). This cosmological myth details how Afek exchanges roles with her brother, reversing

the sexual roles. In the manufacture of netbags by male initiates, the basic bag is constructed by women and the feathers / decorative elements are incorporated onto the bag by males, a process that appears to mirror the basic creative role of Afek and the way in which she conferred decorations and ownership of the ***yolam*** on her younger brother / husband Umoim. The origin of Telefol society is represented in terms of a reversal of roles between Afek (female) and Umoim (male), which converts an unsatisfactory state of affairs into a satisfactory one or a state of incompletion to one of completeness, a theme that also appears in Melpa myths regarding social origins.

Netbags: A Melpa Symbolic Continuum and Cosmology

The symbolic continuum of womb to netbag is prefigured in Melpa images used to describe conception and also in mythical representations of the origins of sexual activity and reproduction. The basic ideas involved are those of actor / acted upon and container / contained, which can be described as having an analogous relationship. Interestingly, the gendered markings that go with these paired terms shift according to context. At the level of myth there is an idea that male and female coexisted, but the female was not cornpletely sexually differentiated, that is, she had no opening into a vaginal cavity. The male had observed that the female rubbed herself against a banana tree, and by a ruse he caused the female (or females) to cut herself open against fragments of shell and stone axe blades that he had inserted into the tree. The man then gave cooked meat to her. (The sexual imagery is twofold here: (1) the opening of the closed female is analogous to the breaking of the hymen during sexual intercourse, and (2) the giving of meat by a man to an unrelated female is often a metaphor for sexual intercourse.) Here, the male acts upon an unopened female to open her and thus make her into a potential container. Before being opened and reproductively complete, the female was not socially complete, being unable to perform her role as social female (Vicedom and Tischner 1943-1948, 3:25-28).

In another story an incomplete male (Pim) is featured: he has no mouth or eyes and eats through a hole in the top of his head (cf. J. Weiner 1995:135 for a similar Foi motif). The lack of a mouth and eyes symbolizes a lack of morality and sociality. This male is seen as a wild man who owns pigs but does not understand how to exchange his pigs properly with others and deserves to be treated differently from proper social males, even deserving to be stolen from.

The story of the man Pim is as follows: A young man living with his mother was the owner of a boar. One day he told her to look after it while he went out to the riverside. He found a garden beside the river and took some

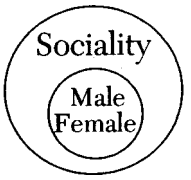
food from it. Then he found a pig's entrails on the path. He kept finding more entrails, and he washed them in the river to take home with him. He saw a man's footprints and came to an offering place, where the man Pim sat killing pigs. Pim cut up the meat with a bamboo knife and put the pieces in the top of his head--he had no eyes or mouth. As Pim prepared his meal, the young man quickly stole some meat and made off. His mother was amazed and on hearing his story praised him for a good young man. Pim himself was furious and made a pit for the thief to fall in, disguising the top with leaves. The next time, the young man fell in it. Pim had laid a netbag in the bottom, and he simply gathered it up and strung it between two trees with the culprit inside, telling him he could stay there and die. A flying fox came by and saw the prisoner. It flew back to the young man's home and began to eat ripe bananas in a garden where it heard the mother crying out for her son. It took bananas and fed the young man, rather to his surprise. The young man promised the flying fox his boar if it would free him, so the flying fox gathered up all the animals and birds to help free the young man. They took hold of the two handles of the netbag with their beaks and paws and gently conveyed him to the ground. His mother greeted him tearfully and fed him until he was fit again. The youth then went and set a hole trap for Pim with two sharpened spear-points. Pim fell in and was killed. The youth took his possessions and food, and divided them up among the animals and birds (Vicedom and Tischner 1943-1948, 3:143-145).

These two stories describe incomplete female and male forms and what is needed to transform them into complete social beings. For the female,, reproductive abilities and for the male, knowledge of appropriate exchange procedures and moral interactions with others are required. In addition, they show how sexuality and reproduction entered the world. The same kind of logic regarding the necessity for the sexes to be in a complementary relationship continues in the formal conception theory of the Melpa (see Figure 1). Here the male element (semen) is said to surround the female element (blood) to make a packet ***(kum ronom)*** or an egg ***(köi mukl)*** that later becomes a fetus. In this image the semen encompasses, constrains, or gives shape to the blood: the male element acts upon the female and contains it (although all this takes place within the female womb). In both the story of the opening of the female and this imagery of the semen encircling the blood, then, male agency is foregrounded. However, once the "packet" is complete, it is nurtured by female agency. The womb surrounds the fetus, feeds it, and makes it grow. Once the child is born, it is placed into the netbag, which is the equivalent of the womb--its material, extrasomatic "embodiment," and is taken care of by the mother.

The womb/fetus, netbag/child nexus provides the possibility for further

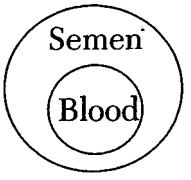
1. ***Mythical Plane***

Male:	***Female:***
not completely morally differentiated	not completely sexually differentiated



The female is opened after being tricked by the male into rubbing herself against a banana tree where the male has inserted sharp bits of shells and axe blades. Each is completed, however, by the complementary power of the other, and together they create the social world, depicted as the realm of "sociality" in which male and female generate their completeness.

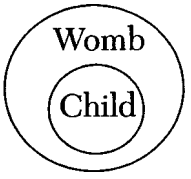
2. ***Conception Theory***



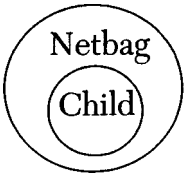
The male element (semen) surrounds the female element (blood) to form a packet ***(kum ronom,*** literally, "it wraps") that will eventually become a child if nurtured in the womb.

3. ***Nurturing Theory***

a. The female element (womb) surrounds the child to form its nurturing environment. It is at this point, during gestation, that the ***min*** (spirit/soul) enters into the developing fetus.



b. The netbag, a female element, surrounds the child after birth to form its nurturing, protective environment.



4. ***Embodiment and Objectification***

The netbag (objectified form of womb), a female element, surrounds the pearl shell (objectified form of person), an element that is ideologically male wealth (see "Shells in a Netbag" above).

FIGURE 1. The netbag as a container of life and the relationship of the netbag to the womb: a Melpa symbolic continuum and cosmology.

trope expansions, such as we find in the idea of pearl shells in netbags, where the shell is seen as a male valuable but also as equivalent to a (male) child. Netbags as containers gain their symbolic power in the cosmos from their contents as well as their power to contain. In the image of the netbag/shell relationship, we see the progression of a process of objectifications, from womb to netbag and from body to shell, corresponding to Pierre Bourdieu's delineation of the movement from embodiment to objectification (1977:87-95). In the netbag/shell image we also see the structural reversal of the semen/blood relationship, since in the latter male encompasses female, but in the former female encompasses male. Such reversals indicate that we are dealing with ideas of balance and pairing in symbolic thought rather than with one-way relationships, and the netbag plays a crucial role in the transformation sequence male/female to female/male. The netbag is also a necessary element in the movement from the incomplete to the complete, which both myth and practice inscribe.

Conclusion

We have been exploring some of the uses and meanings of netbags within several Papua New Guinea cultures, placing a particular emphasis on the Melpa speakers of the Mount Hagen area.[2] Through the exercise of examining the individually and socially expressive use of netbags as detailed in the ethnographic record, we have observed that netbags and their uses are frequently described in passing, but rarely is their cultural importance discussed at any length (MacKenzie 1991 is the obvious exception). So undervalued is the netbag that many ethnographic monographs do not even list the term "netbag" or its equivalent in their indexes. This lack of attention may have occurred because the individuals within the society did not highlight these objects in discussions with ethnographers. Also, the process of textualizing cultural themes is one that inevitably involves both conscious and unconscious choices by ethnographers, deriving from their perceptions during the field experience, as has often been pointed out (for example, Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986). It is sometimes diffcult to disentangle the voice of the ethnographer from the voices of different informants within the ethnographer's own seemingly seamless text. Netbags may perhaps be regarded as traditionally "muted" objects by comparison with "amplified" ones. Their values may not be verbalized yet may belong closely to embodied actions within the life cycle. They are just as "historical," as well as "cosmic," as other valuable possessions, even though they may appear to be out of the limelight of events (see also Jolly 1992). Although shells and pigs may be more publicly celebrated as wealth objects

in exchanges, netbags are important as a carrier of different and more nuanced values. Like the subtle shadows cast within a Georges de La Tour painting whose absence would change the entire equilibrium of the composition, the presence of the netbag in a ritual sequence places its own quiet imprint on the occasion, as when the female relatives of a bride among the Foi arrive with gifts including netbags that show their female solidarity with her--a sentiment not expressed overtly or verbally in the sequence otherwise.

As has been shown in this article, the netbag may on the surface appear to be peripheral to events, but on closer examination it can be shown to be quite central in establishing personhood within the life cycle and as a metaphor for gendered aspects of social and political life. The nuanced character of the symbolism involved here comes from the fact that the netbag belongs to both the utilitarian and ceremonial domains. Its ceremonial significance derives partly from its utilitarian functions, while its utilitarian functions are partly sacralized through its association with ritual. The two values are mutually implicated. In this regard we might further compare the netbag with the human body itself. The body is a part of everyday experience, it is "used" regularly, yet it is also the locus and origin of sacred meanings having to do with fertility, death, and regeneration. We have suggested that the netbag as a container is modeled on the womb, and in some contexts it also appears as a "skin" over the body. If this is correct, the comparison with the body does not depend on chance. Rather the meanings of the body and of the netbags spring from the same experiential roots. The netbag as a detachable "womb" that can transport values standing for the human body therefore makes good sense in phenomenological terms.

Historical change in the manufacture and use of netbags has partially shifted their status from ritual and utilitarian object to tourist item. This new aestheticization of netbags denotes a different form of personhood, one that is individualistic and commodified. In Mount Hagen the new netbags also stand in between the gendered forms of bags manufactured in the past. These new bags are the shape of men's bags but not as small as men's ***kumbana*** bags. They are not small enough to be suitable to carry the small, powerful possessions of a man nor are they big enough to carry a load of garden produce or serve as a baby cradle. The new shape is adapted to accommodate the urban context. Typically the netbag is carried simply as a colorful accessory. Although it can be used to hold money and small shopping items, it stands best as a kind of decoration or object of everyday display that draws its meaning from the fact of being empty rather than full, as is the case with the older style of bags. This empty quality is also a quality of multivalence. The bags can be carried by either sex and used for different

occasions as a sort of second best decoration. While in the indigenous context netbags could be decorations ***as well as*** having an everyday or ritual use, in their new form they can function as pure signs of decoration, separated from other contexts. It is this quality that we refer to as commodification. Cornmodification can also imply iconicity, as shown by MacKenzie in an illustration of an urban migrant from the Eastern Highlands at a Friday night dance in Port Moresby whose netbag was "the sole indication of his origins" (1991:13).

The multivalent uses and the expressed and implied meanings of these objects within New Guinea cultures signal their vital importance as items of material culture that could well be displayed in a museum case. They are as central to a set of focal values as the more commonly collected and flamboyant objects, for example, shells and plumes or carvings. Yet it is the shell valuables, the bird of paradise plumes; and the ancestral masks that tend to capture the attention of ethnographers and museum collectors. The foregrounding / backgroundng effect involved in ethnographic perceptions can be seen in the cover picture to the translation of Georg Vicedom's volume on Hagen myths published by the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies in Port Moresby (A. J. Strathern 1977). This picture was taken by professional photographer Paul Cox at a Mount Hagen cultural show. The highly deco--rated male dancer shown in it was standing in a display booth for tourists, wearing plumes, a pearl shell, a long netted apron, and a heavy "judge's wig" made of human hair, resin, and paint. In the background hanging from an interior wall can be discerned a very large netbag of the new type, on display but partially hidden. The focus is on the standing figure, yet the netbag is also there, a reminder of other values important in the same cultural milieu. Undoubtedly, the striking decorations and stance of the figure were the reasons the photo was chosen as a cover design; but ironically the netbag also made its way into the tableau, almost unnoticed at the time! In earlier times, as we have seen, the female form of the netbag played a more foregrounded part in exchange ceremonies (as distinct from cultural tableaux). In a scene from one of the myths recorded by Vicedom, a young wife visits her new husbands settlement and comes upon his ceremonial ground (Vicedom and Tischner 1943-1948, 3:37). Planted with a grass lawn, fenced off, and decorated with cordyline shrubs, it is a fine-looking place, showing that the husband is a man of high status. She sees hanging there netbags filled with pearl shells and baler shells, and these please her. The tableau she observes has netbags at its forefront, while the ceremonial ground provides a supporting background. The netbags must have been of the large, loosely netted kind used as ah-purpose carriers by women, and she would recognize them as such. Shells in a netbag: male wealth encompassed by a unique female con-

tainer of life and death, together a moment in the gendered processes of the cosmos. The image can serve as the summation of our argument here.

NOTES

We would like to thank Professor Terence Turner and Mr. Michael Scott for reading and commenting on these materials, which are adapted from an M.A. paper by Pamela J. Stewart originally presented to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago. We are grateful also for the comments of two anonymous reviewers for *Pacific Studies,* which have helped and encouraged us to make some revisions to the original version of this article.

1. MacKenzie has played a leading part in elucidating the significance of netbags throughout New Guinea by collating data from different ethnographies. In our own searches for materials and in checking on MacKenzie's references, we found it often frustrating to see that the term "netbag" did not appear in the index of a book, although it was clear from specific passages in the text that netbags were quite important. We also noted that authors adopt different rhetorical stances toward the topic of netbags, some implying that they are of little account, others granting them centrality as an expression of women's personal agency. One author, in addition to MacKenzie, has given the netbag sufficient prominence to include it in a book title (Hylkema 1974).

2. M. Strathern, in her article "Culture in a Netbag: The Manufacture of a Subdiscipline in Anthropology" (1981), argued that "woman-ness" is construed differently in different cultures, using the Melpa and Wiru peoples as her contrasting cases, and by implication arguing also that netbags, while signifying female capacities, must also vary in their meanings. The sociological contrasts she identifies may, however, be combined with certain cross-cultural similarities or overlaps in meanings such as we have delineated here. Melpa netbags do not, indeed, "function" like Trobriand skirts, but they enter into symbolic structures of life and death, and containment and revelation that do find parallels in other Melanesian contexts. (We are not concerned here with other aspects of the debate between M. Strathern and A. Weiner; see, for example, Weiner 1992.)

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