Maureen Anne MacKenzie, ***Androgynous Objects: String Bags and Gender in Central New Guinea.*** Chur, Switz.: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1991. Pp. xvi, 256, figures, plates, appendixes, bibliography, index.

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Given the intrinsic glamor of the rituals, ceremonial wealth displays, and dispute settlements that tend to fill ethnographies of New Guinea peoples, it may not be surprising that commonplace activities and objects seldom receive much notice. A case in point is the ***bilum*** (Tok Pisin for the looped string bag). Seemingly ubiquitous, if not truly universal, it is widely appreciated for its utility as a container for transporting almost any conceivable goods. However, this homely object has been largely ignored by scholars except when it becomes a thing of beauty, deemed admirable for a distinctive design, the sheer craft involved in its manufacture, or its service as a badge of group identity--used as such by anthropologists at conventions as well as by local people mingling at a marketplace.

MacKenzie is surely correct in declaring (p. 21) that "discussion" of the ***bilum*** "has been peripheral to the diverse foci of ethnographic research," whether or not for the two reasons she suggests: "Firstly, until recently the mainstream of anthropological inquiry has not been interested in studies of technology and material culture; and secondly it has for too long been male-dominated, focussing almost entirely on what men say and do." In my judgment, the first reason is sufficient; not only does the second entail an unresolvable debate, but with regard to the ***bilum,*** as MacKenzie acknowledges (pp. 108-109; emphasis in original), "in other bilum looping cultures throughout PNG [Papua New Guinea], women are ***not*** solely responsible for ***all*** looping techniques." Moreover, among the Telefol people upon whom her book concentrates, "while women monopolise looping technology and generate the principal form men take the bags produced by women as their 'raw material' creating types of bags which are differentiated from the female product by the additional features [especially bird feathers] which they apply" (p. 111). The ***bilum*** thus figures prominently in "production in the male realm" (chapter 4) and especially in male ritual activities. It seems likely, then, that Telefol string bags have been ignored until now by other Mountain Ok researchers (not all of whom have been male) because ethnographers tend to ignore such things, at least in their scholarly writings.

In any case, in ***Androgynous Objects*** we have a convincing demonstration of what and how much we have been missing, although production of a work as impressive as this one requires more than a simple resolve to pay atten-

tion to "material culture." MacKenzie's arts background combined with postgraduate training in anthropology at the Australian National University under the tutelage of the late doyen of New Guinea art, Anthony Forge, no doubt were essential ingredients in the process. On the basis of fieldwork in the 1980s including considerable "hands-on" experience and subsequent study of museum collections, her "intention is to show how analysis of an item of material culture ***as a complete social object*** can be of significant interest to the wider anthropological endeavour" (p. 1; emphasis added).

Perceiving "a need, in the study of material culture, for an analytic framework which can overcome the emphasis on either function, form or meaning and present more than a reductive partial view" (p. 24), MacKenzie opts to take a

> processual approach to the study of artefacts, and investigate the contexts and processes of manufacture, the ways in which the string bag is variously used and understood within differing social contexts, and the interrelated dimensions of value which this artefact has for the Telefol people. The focus of this study therefore progresses beyond a material inventory of forms to an understanding of the changing nature of objects within different social contexts. This in turn leads to a broader understanding of the complexity and ambiguity inherent in Telefol gender relations. (P. 1)

The result is indeed a portrayal of a ***"complete*** social object."

"Function" and "form" are presented in wondrous detail, with 25 figures and 125 plates complementing MacKenzie's painstaking and lucid description of the processes by which Telefol women, using only their fingers and a simple "tool" (a strip of pandanus leaf), transform natural fibers (plus, nowadays, woolen yarns and nylon thread) into what she calls the "principal form" of the ***bilum.*** The standard, everyday string bag--a product of "between 100 and 160 hours of productive labour" (p. 83)--has clear utilitarian value as a carryall, but in addition a "good bilum enhances the appearance of the carrier, and is essential for a walk to market, into town or a trip to another area to impress onlookers" (p. 133). Also, and perhaps more important to Mac-Kenzie's thesis,

> When a woman wears her finest looped bilum it does more than enhance her appearance. It simultaneously displays her looping skills, and thus indirectly advertises her productive capabilities by indicating the care and energy she is likely to invest in all her activ-

> ities. A well-made bilum must belong to a caring woman who knows how to work hard. Thus, for the Telefol, a good bilum is synonymous with a good woman. (P. 141)

More than "productivity" is symbolized by a well-made ***bilum,*** according to MacKenzie, since "the bilum becomes above all a symbol of nurturance and procreativity" (p. 146), reflected in a male informant's statement that "the bilum is our mother."

In what sense, then, is a ***bilum*** the "androgynous object" of the books title? MacKenzie's main interpretive argument is that "motherhood in Telefolmin is not simply bearing children, It is a question of continuous, protective care and nurturance," activities in which both sexes are involved, just as "completion of the bag involves the reciprocal and complementary efforts of both women and men" (p. 147). Thus the ***bilum*** is a product of "multiple authorship" (p. 158), attributable to neither sex alone.

MacKenzie weaves together various strands of evidence, though not seamlessly, to advance her view of the meaning of the Telefol string bag. "Multiple authorship" of the "principal form" of the ***bilum*** seems somewhat tenuously based: a product of women's exclusive knowledge of looping techniques and their arduous labor, such a bag's "completion" involves men only to the extent that "traditionally, women relied on men for the preferred bast fibres" (p. 192), obtained from the forest or through trade. A better case is made for the "elaborated forms," produced by men using bags received as gifts from kinswomen, to which are added bird feathers in the secrecy and privacy of the men's house, where they also will be bestowed upon younger males in ritual contexts, to be used afterward in everyday life. Men say "that their elaborations augment and improve the principal form by increasing its practical efficiency, for the feathers make their elaborated bilums waterproof," but MacKenzie regards this claim as "an essentially evasive statement" (p. 162), masking the "functional value of concealment which the feathers provide," for example, hiding meat whose revelation would require sharing (p. 167). While, exemplifying a general theme in Telefol society, "the outer appearance of the bird feather bilum overtly reflects a model of sexual opposition and separation, and within male discourse the superior position of the feathers is seen as an analogue of male superiority and women's structural inferiority," MacKenzie stresses its manifestation of complementarity, for "neither woman nor man can make their part without the contribution of the other" (p. 192). Not only is the "principal form" of the bag a product of female labor, but a particular woman's "authorship" is acknowledged continually, since "the bilum is invariably thought of in terms of who made it, for whom, and on what occasion" (p. 151). That is, whatever embellishments

may be added to the bag, everyone knows that the male elaborator is dependent on the gift-giving generosity as well as the hard work of a woman. Thus the elaborated ***bilum*** "cannot be exclusively identified with either producer or recipient, woman or man. A metonym of the ***relation*** between women and men, it is recognised as a product of multiple authorship" (p. 160; emphasis in original).

It is unclear to what degree MacKenzie's interpretations are shared by Telefol themselves, since she tends to adduce direct statements by informants only to qualify or refute them from her wider, schooled perspectives. The results are not always consistent; for example, the "androgynous" ***bilum*** is "a specifically uterine symbol" (p. 177) (as in "the bilum is our mother"?), yet the term ***men,*** which applies to both string bags and looping techniques and processes, "is not extended to refer to natural objects such as the marsupial pouch . . . nor the human placenta or womb" (p. 45).

Interpretive sleight-of-hand is common in ethnography and, so far as the Telefol and their Mountain Ok neighbors are concerned, preferred analytic frameworks have tended to privilege male rhetoric and ideology associated with male cults, both of which often resonate poorly with everyday life. MacKenzie's focus on the quotidian provides an important, if still debatable, alternative view:

> The separation and antithesis of the sexes ***is*** publicly expressed in the physical divisions of the village realm, and enforced by the male cult and the way in which women are artificially kept apart from some of the activities of men. Nevertheless, couples of women and men form the closest unit of cooperation in daily life. . . . The ideal situation is said by both ***sexes to*** be when women use their ***aam bal men*** ["principal form" string bag] to harvest taro and men reciprocate by using their bird feather bilum to bag game meat. It is the combination or integration of their respective contributions which provides the perfect meal. (I? 203; emphasis added)