THE TRACK OF THE TRIANGLE: FORM AND MEANING IN THE SEPIK, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin
University of Göttingen

THIS ARTICLE deals with the relationship between morphology and meaning in art, focusing on the triangle implemented as a preferred shape in visual art by Sepik cultures. It is an inquiry into how far the triangle conveys meaning that cannot be communicated by any other form, meaning thus determined through itself. By means of the triangle, fundamental values associated with gender, men and women, skull and vulva, killing/death/the creation of ancestors and women's sexuality, and women as in-marrying wives, as well as the generation of life, become expressed simultaneously, depending on the orientation of the triangle. Thus, what might be called dualism is in fact complementarity contained and united in a single form.

Moreover, in structuralist anthropological theory the triangle is often used as a model to visualize ternary structures and to explain the mediating process between dualisms and oppositions (Lévi-Strauss 1963:143-162, 251-266; Wagner 1986). I shall demonstrate that the Abelam (as well as other Sepik cultures) use the triangle as their own cultural expression rather than as a model created by outsiders, though the basic idea of the triangle or ternary structures as mediating between oppositions seems to be underlying both.

Anthony Forge was among the first who argued that "Abelam painting could be regarded as a form of language operating on its own rules and communicating things that are not communicable by other methods" (1970: 288). In a later article he elaborated this topic by speaking about cultural sign systems that may or may not choose art as a medium. However, all

Pacific Studies, Vol. 17, No. 3--September 1994

"'meanings' are all overt and basically sociological; they do not explain why certain forms are chosen or elaborated" (Forge 1979:281). Since Forge's pioneering article other scholars (also those working on the Sepik, like Bowden 1992) have taken up the notion of art as a communications system of its own. Hanson (1983), for example, has examined the organization of lineal space, its dual forms, and the principle of symmetry in order to reveal structural principles of basic Maori culture in general: Kaeppler (1978) has demonstrated that different categories of art (music. dance, and tapa decoration) have the same underlying structure as also seen in social organization. In both cases, art communicates something by using its own means of expression, though the way this communication is structured follows patterns found in other domains of the culture as well.

Recently, Forge's argument has been reconsidered from a new angle. O'Hanlon suggests that scholars working on Pacific art have too quickly accepted the conclusion that an absence of exegesis is the same thing as an absence of verbalization. "For while the Highlanders . . . do indeed offer very little exegesis of the significance of the wigs, they *do* talk about them" (O'Hanlon 1992:590).

In this article I shall take up, in a modified way, Forge's argument concerning art as a system of communications with a specific structure. Moreover, I shall try to answer the question he raised: Why have Sepik cultures chosen a specific form or morphological sign for a whole complex of meanings?

In a first main section I will present a detailed ethnographic study of the triangle, implemented with different materials, in Abelam culture. As already mentioned, Forge has pointed out that the Abelam give no verbal exegesis of the forms and motifs they paint or carve and of the artifacts displayed during initiations in the ceremonial house. Furthermore, indirect hermeneutics, in other cultures often supplemented by myths, are, with only few exceptions, lacking as well.[1] As a consequence, my approach includes hardly any verbal statements by the Abelam themselves because such statements are almost nonexistent. My analysis, therefore, is based on the study of the cultural context and the way in which the triangle is used both as a specific form and implemented with specific material.

In a second step I shall expand the study to other Sepik cultures in order to examine the use and context of the triangle and its inherent meaning there. It will be demonstrated that obviously similar concepts are expressed through this same conspicuous form and its specific orientation. In a conclusion I shall try to answer the question why Sepik cultures have chosen the triangle as a sign to communicate messages and thus cultural values.

Regional Studies and Art

Regional studies of New Guinea art have, since Haddon (1894), a long tradition of mostly focusing on questions of style rather than meaning. According to Tiesler (1990), analysis of styles and the attempt to delineate style provinces have, so far, failed because the more detailed the studies become the less possible it is that any clear boundaries can be drawn. Recently questions have been raised by several scholars relating to a specific form of art within a broader area not a priori defined as a cultural area or region and what this form "means," for example, Smidt in his article on one-legged figures (1990) and Strathern (n.d.) on the one-legged pearlshell. Such studies concentrate on form and meaning rather than regions.

However, the Sepik as a region has been considered a more or less homogeneous area by almost all anthropologists since Margaret Mead (1978). Without the fundamental assumption of "Sepikness" that all these cultures share (Lutkehaus and Roscoe 1987), the two Sepik symposia held in the eighties (in 1984 and 1986) would not have been possible.[2] Within the Sepik are areas of intense interaction, trade, and exchange with clearly visible effects on the cultures involved.[3] There are other areas with only occasional interactions; accordingly, similarities become evident only after prolonged and profound studies. Quite a lot of cultural elements, both material and nonmaterial, are shared by many Sepik societies. This does not imply that these elements (of which there are probably dozens or even hundreds) have the same structural position, importance, and meaning in one Sepik culture as they have in another. Nor does it suggest that they are embedded in, part of, or even producing identical cultural processes. It is surprising, however, that the Sepik as a region or even as a cultural area was not addressed at either conference but was rather implicitly assumed by participants. In contrast to "the New Guinea Highlands" (Hays 1993), the way in which "the Sepik" has been used in anthropological literature as a concept and the questions of what the Sepik and "Sepikness" *are* have never come into the focus of anthropological debate.[4]

It is beyond my aims here to answer such questions, although, indirectly, this study will reveal a certain basic "Sepikness" represented and contained in the triangle. I shall not follow any definite way through Sepik cultures but follow a kind of track of the triangle. Moreover, I shall limit myself to the outline of a "cultural complex" and its various transformations I consider typical for Sepik cultures, which I have extensively described in an earlier publication (Hauser-Schäublin 1989a: part 2): the ceremonial house. The triangle in one of its main aspects is closely associated with the ceremonial

house and its transformations. I shall give evidence of transformations of the triangle according to the different cultures with their men's houses, men's associations, and rituals. However, as Tuzin states, "given the ease with which cultural traits appear able to move through this general area," he must conclude "that transforms [are] related to one another at deep cultural and temporal levels" (1980:158n. 33).

I suggest that the triangle is one of these "transforms," a typical form met in different Sepik cultures, and, ultimately, a conveyor of the same meaning. Therefore, I shall deal with art as a metalanguage shared by many Sepik cultures; it defines boundaries of its own right.

The Triangle: Form and Orientation among the Abelam

In Sepik cultures the triangle is used in a wide range of objects, all of which can be classified as art. Sometimes it is the determining form of a whole artifact; sometimes it is only an element or part of a more complex whole. The best known of these artifacts, often represented in museum collections, are headdresses like the *wagnen* of the Abelam (Hauser-Schäublin 1989b:19, 62-65) or canoe shields and skull racks of the Iatmul (Kelm 1966, 1:237, 496; 1968, 3:501-503).

Obviously every culture has some predilections toward forms that clearly bear particular connotations. The triangle is not the only one that Sepik cultures constantly use.[5] There are many others, of course, such as the circle and rectangle and so forth, but they are less conspicuous. Similarly outstanding as the triangle as a two-dimensional form is the specific way the Abelam often present the form, which is, I think, less common in other Sepik cultures. This is the sloping position preferred in many ritual contexts.[6]

The triangle is the prevalent form element of Abelam spirit houses with their huge, triangular, painted facades (Figure 1).[7] The facade is constructed as a triangle by the Abelam before being affixed to the house. For this purpose, large amounts of *panggal* (sago spathe) are collected and sewn together on a frame so that they finally constitute this spectacular form. Only when the triangle is completed does it get painted and attached to the front.[8] Not only is the painted facade as such triangular, but also the whole front of the house, including the painted gable triangle and its lower part covered by a plaited mat, as well as the ground plan of the building. Together with the sloping ridgepole a three-dimensional triangle, a tetrahedron, is created. The Abelam, however, have no expression for this striking shape, only for the objects for which the triangle is used. Therefore, the tri-

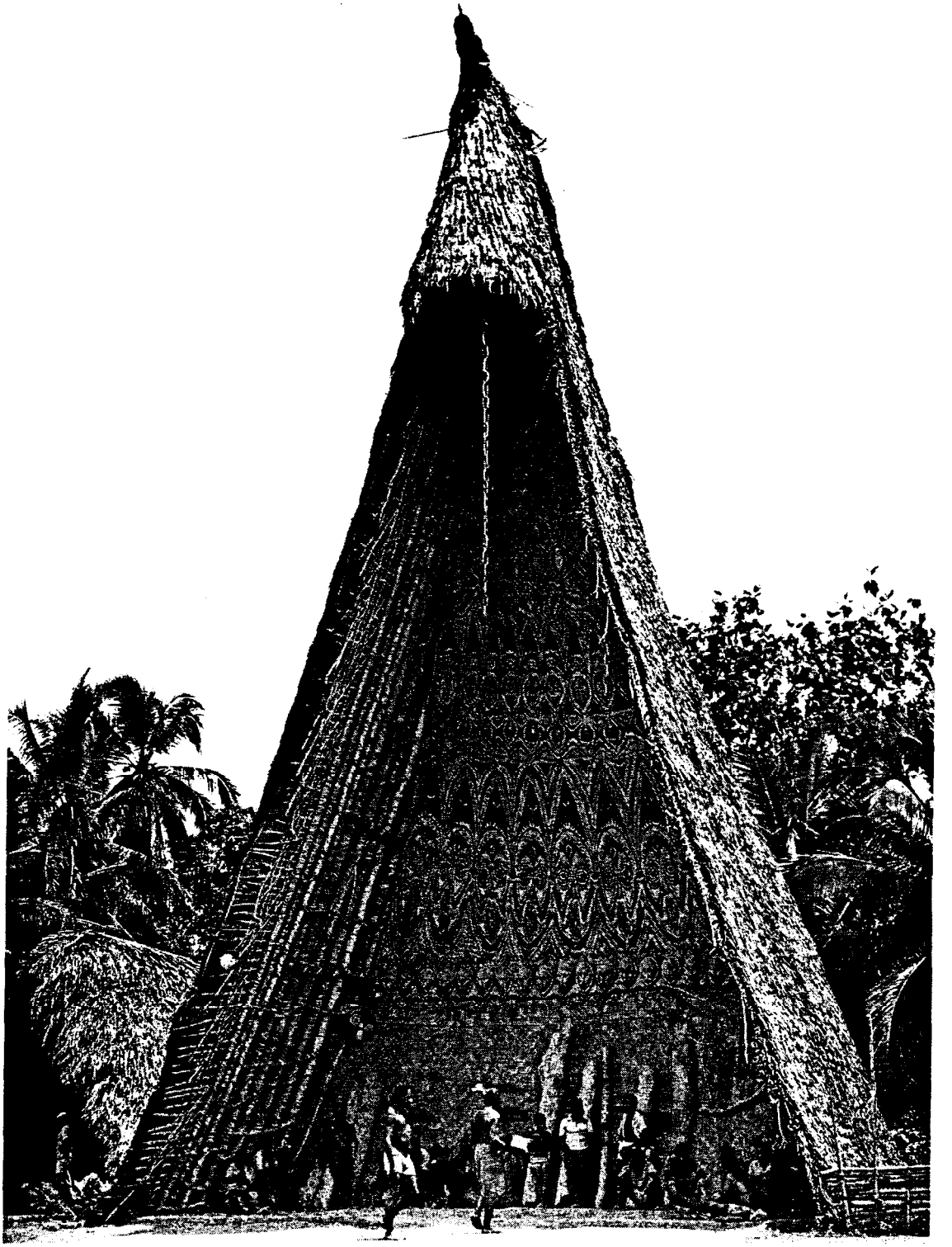

FIGURE 1. **Abelam spirit house with its triangular front, Kalabu village.** (Photo by Jörg Hauser, 1978-1979)

angle is an etic notion, one of geometry implying that a triangle remains one even if it is turned upside down.

In contrast, the Abelam do make a distinction between a triangle that has the base at the top and one with the base at the bottom. In the first case it is readily called a representation of the vulva and the pattern as such, if painted, is called *kitnya,* "vulva." It is almost always painted in black with white dotted lines along the edges. On flat paintings *kitnya* is used as a motif even for figures otherwise thought of as male. Penes are never represented on paintings, though they are prolifically carved on sculptures.[9] Sometimes the triangle called *kitnya* constitutes a part of women's body decorations for ceremonies, painted on their cheeks when ritual dances take place (Figure 2). Following puberty rites girls are painted with these distinctive marks for the first time. Old women never use the pattern. *Kitnya* for women is always a temporary body decoration, never permanent or one that could be removed and stored. *Kitnya* as women's facial painting is interpreted as a symbol not only of the vulva as such, but also of their active sexuality and fertility and, in the case of young unmarried women, the fact that they will soon become wives.

The same design is used as a specific form of men's body decoration, not as painting but as a hairdress. Forge mentions adult Abelam men who plucked out or shaved the hair above the forehead to leave a bold triangle (1973:184). This was explicitly identified with the female pubic triangle. Interestingly, *kitnya* as a painted motif either on ceremonial paintings or on women's cheeks is representing the pubic triangle, especially *hair,* whereas when used by men on their own bodies--the head--it is a triangle achieved by *eliminating* the hair. Therefore, it is boldness not frizzy hair, an opposition in material, that defines a significant difference.

Only with the base of the triangle at the top is it called *kitnya,* never when it is turned the other way round.[10] When the tip is at the top, the triangle completely loses its meaning of "femaleness." It is the orientation that defines the distinctive meaning and its quality as a gender attribute. The triangle with its base at the bottom is always used in the context of men's ritual lives, associated to varying degrees with sacredness and secretness. As already mentioned the Abelam ceremonial house, *korambo,* consists, if analyzed from the point of view of form and shape, of a whole series of triangles. There seems to exist a kind of hierarchical order of sacredness and secretness within the triangle. Concerning the triangular ground plan of the building, the base is linked to the entrance, giving space to the open (round!) ceremonial ground in front of it. The tip of the triangle is at the back where the two sides of the roof meet with the lowest point of the ridgepole about two meters above the ground. This is also the place where a small

FIGURE 2. **Young women with *kitnya* cheek painting (at an opening ceremony of a spirit house), Kimbangwa village.** (Photo by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, 1978)

exit leads to a small, secret ceremonial ground accessible only to initiated men, well hidden from women's sight. During the opening ceremony for a new ceremonial house, women take part in the cycle of singing and dancing (which lasts for weeks) in the building. Women's and men's space are well defined: Women may dance and sing only in the front part of the ceremonial house, the men in the center where hand drums are attached to ropes hanging down from the ridgepole. The slit gongs are kept in the back of the building, hidden by a screen that separates the rear third of the ceremonial

house from the front part. This rear area is--on the level of horizontal organization of space--the most sacred during the opening festival. It becomes obvious that the area near the front, that is, the base of the triangle, is definitely women's space; that in the center and the tip of it, men's Later, when the opening ceremony is concluded, the building is ritually cleansed. Women no longer have access to the interior. Access to the whole triangle as space is then the prerequisite of the men.

Similarly, on the front side of the ceremonial house the lower part covered by mats is considered less sacred than the upper painted part (which in itself forms a further triangle). The plaited mat and the way it is produced is shown to the initiates during a lower grade of initiation. The secret of producing the large *panggal* front, which is painted with standardized patterns, is revealed to them only later. The spot where the tip of the painted triangle touches the ridgepole is one of the most sacred places of the whole building. Even when the house is under construction, as soon as the ridgepole is put into place it is covered by cane wound around it and finally by big leaves.

A similar hierarchy of sacredness and secretness is present in the building's interior. The whole interior space constitutes a three-dimensional triangle. The whole upper part is more sacred than the lower. During certain stages of initiation an upper floor is built. There, initiators produce the sounds of spirits (by singing and playing musical instruments) while the initiates crawl into the building. These older men are the spirits during that stage of the ritual.

At other stages of initiation the upper part of the building is separated from the lower by a painted ceiling (also triangular in shape). The upper part remains empty; it represents the endless space of the cosmos inhabited by spirits only. In the lower part the huge *nggwalndu* sculptures are displayed, manifestations of ancestral clan spirits. They are shown to the initiates but the still more sacred part of the world of the spirits remains hidden above. It is a dark void in the form of a tetrahedron. This is revealed only during the last stage of initiation. Then an anthropomorphous ceremonial house in miniature, with its many triangles as constituting elements, is built in the center of the ceremonial house. At the highest point of the triangular front of this structure (to which bent "arms" and "legs" are added) a wooden mask is attached. It is the head of an anthropomorphous being. On its head it carries a huge headdress like an aura; it is a feather shield in triangular or slightly elongated form. The "body" of this figure is constituted by a kind of plaited basket in the shape of a ceremonial house. This multitriangular being that cannot be classified as male or female is the most important of all, otherwise clan-specific, spirits. It is, like the ceremonial house, a further, personified, representation of the cosmos. In this ultimate

revelation initiates learn that this body shaped like a *korambo* contains nothing, only a kind of endless void.

Triangular Headdresses for Spirits, Men, Yams, and Stones

Apart from the ceremonial house and its contents,[11] the triangle as a form is characteristic of a specific type of headdress called *wagnen*. It consists of painted *panggal* attached to a triangular, sometimes slightly elongated, frame. For the most precious pieces of *wagnen*, feathers (instead of paintings) are used (as for the figure of the most sacred spirit displayed during the highest initiation grade). Other headdresses are made from different kinds of material and in different forms; only *wagnen* may have the shape of a triangle.

Head ornaments are badges of the stage of initiation a man has attained. The simplest form, typical for the lowest stages of initiation, consists of unpainted fronds of the *bendshin* palm wound around the head. The most common headdress is made of plaited cane strips; it is roundish, disklike in form. Before a performance it is repainted and white feathers are stuck into the rim. These headdresses, called *noute,* are worn by initiators and initiates at varying stages of ceremonies as well as by older women when performing dances in certain sequences of the initiation. Headdresses of the *wagnen* type are typical for the highest initiation grade.

The canon of forms for headdresses and the context in which individual forms may be used is therefore clearly defined. I once witnessed a dance at an initiation in Malmba where one man had an elongated *noute* on his head; in its form it resembled a *wagnen.* After some quarrels about it the man had to leave the ceremonial ground and remove his head ornament because its form did not fit the event. The form was probably also a contradiction to the material, basketry work, usually used only for roundish *noute* headdresses.

Noute are also used to decorate outstanding *ka* yams displayed at festivals called *hipim mami* in pidgin. *Ka* yam is clearly inferior to *wapi* yam, both varieties of *Dioscorea.* For *ka* yam displays, long specimens of *ka* are decorated with a wooden, anthropomorphous mask and a *noute* above the "head." The tubers are parallelized to the human body and their parts are named after this model. The vine and new shoots are growing on the head of the yam, clearly the growing point. It is there that the *noute* is fixed. The middle part of the tuber is called "body" and the lower "legs." When the tuber end has split into two the yam is regarded as female; one compact body without protuberances is conceived as male. At *ka* festivals the yams are presented "like men" in an upright, "standing" position.

Noute headdresses are typical for a specific type of sculptures called *wap-*

inyan displayed in low-grade initiations. These relatively small, brightly painted sculptures are presented, like the *ka* yam, in an upright position.

Wagnen are always triangular in shape; sometimes they are a little elongated and do not fit the geometric definition in the strict sense. Nevertheless it is the same category of headdress; Abelam men consider the form that I have called a triangle as a set of possible variations within a frame of reference. *Wagnen* headdresses are preferably painted with the design of a huge face with staring eyes consisting often of concentric circles (Figure 3). This type of face is called *nggwalnggwal;* the name is given to the same design on facades of ceremonial houses, too. *Wagnen* are an emblem of a high-grade initiation in general as well as of senior initiators in particular. *Wagnen* are the most sacred of all headdresses, especially when they consist of feathers assembled into a huge feather image. A *wagnen's* size sometimes exceeds that of the man who is carrying it. A *wagnen* dancer carefully balancing the headdress is admired by everybody watching the ceremony.[12] His face is completely painted and he has to dance with his eyes shut tight. The headdress is fixed both to a horizontal pole the dancer carries on his neck and to his head. Owing to its size (up to two meters high) a *wagnen* can be extremely heavy, so special scaffolds are built at the borders of the ceremonial ground. There the dancers may deposit the main weight of the headdress by leaning against the scaffolds and resting before they continue their nightlong dance.

A dancer fully decorated and carrying a *wagnen* is called *narendu,* a term generally applied to a man with body decorations taking part in a ceremony, be it with a *noute* or a *wagnen.* More specifically, when a *wagnen* dancer appears from the initiation enclosure and dances in front of the spectators, it is said, "*Nggwal nde kyak,* The *nggwal* [*wagnen* dancer] dies." On one hand this is just an expression for his finery, considered to be so beautiful that it is assumed to have originated in the other world. On the other hand it means that the dancer himself with his eyes closed appears like a spirit from the other world--conceived as a world of utmost beauty and abundance--and is therefore as beautiful as a *nggwal.* These *wagnen* dancers are men's products, the production achieved by senior men during the initiation whereby they re-create the ancestors, namely the *nggwalndu.*

Wagnen are used as attributes of the most highly valued tubers, the *wapi,* the so-called long yam. These tubers are called "the child of men only" (implying without women's contribution, the products of only men's endeavors); they are considered humanlike beings, representations of the spirits, symbolizing men's utmost potency to create life. For festivals the longest tubers (sometimes over two meters long) are abundantly decorated with almost all the elements used as body decorations for male dancers

FIGURE 3. **Triangular headdress *(wagnen).*** (Photo by René Gardi, 1955-1956, Museum of Ethnography Basel)

during initiation ceremonies. Like *ka* yams, *wapi* tubers are compared to the human body and decorations are applied according to the same principles of body classification. *Wapi* yams are tied to poles and displayed in a slanting position. With their *wagnen* headdresses, the masks, and the shell ornaments the tubers look like beautifully decorated men tied to poles. To the longest specimens are attributed the name of clan spirits, *nggwalndu*. And, again, the large anthropomorphous sculptures also called *nggwalndu* that "sleep" on neck rests in the ceremonial house are decorated, too, but only with *wagnen.* These huge, wooden *nggwalndu* sculptures are displayed in the center of the ceremonial house with their feet pointing towards the front side, the heads towards the rear. Before they are put up for an initiation, the sculptures are newly painted and decorated with flowers, shell rings, and cassowary-bone daggers. For especially elaborate initiations they do not receive "ordinary" *wagnen.* Instead a big, triangular ceremonial painting, which in motif and form is identical with the painted facade (only smaller in size), is placed like a slanting ceiling above them. This ceiling with mostly *nggwalnggwal* faces on it is said to be the *nggwalndu's wagnen.*

There are also sacred stones kept in a separate "stone house"; the stones are cylindrical and used in rituals to promote the fertility and growth of the *wapi* yams. These sacred yam stones are also decorated with a *wagnen* before the planting season; they look "like a decorated man" then. Again, these stones, the most sacred of Abelam ritual paraphernalia, represent one further aspect of the kaleidoscopic picture of the *nggwalndu* (which literally means "grandfather"). The picture varies each time one looks at it but its elements are clearly recognizable by the way they are put together, according to the context. For the Abelam the most sacred aspect of the ancestral spirits is the decorated dancer carrying a *wagnen;* he is to some extent a living representation of the *nggwalndu* and a testimony of the existence of the spirit world. And it is through the spirits' assistance that men are able to procreate long yams, another form of reproducing ancestors and spirits.

Form as a Charter of Meaning

Wagnen headdresses thus seem to be an attribute that marks all facets of *nggwalndu*.[13] Or to put it the other way round: It is *wagnen* that embraces all aspects of these spirits, sculptures, stones, yams, and men. But why is it that the spectacularly shaped headdress is used to mark at least a partial identity between all these aspects?

I have already mentioned that the painted, triangular ceiling above the prostrate *nggwalndu* sculptures was explained to me as being the *wagnen* of these wooden clan spirits. But actually the painting is called *narut,* "orna-

mented netbag." This expression alludes to the fact that *nggwalndu* sculptures are kept in an initiation chamber decorated over and over again; it is this specially created room that is called "netbag." In everyday life netbags are receptacles produced by women. Among the most common patterns used for their decoration are lines arranged to create triangles of both sorts: those with the tip at the top and those reversed. Netbags are *the* containers par excellence, mostly associated with women. The metaphorical use of "netbag," though, alludes to one of the eagerly kept secrets of men's life.[14]

The esoteric name given to such a painting is *nyit tshui* or *nyit tshui yu*, "shooting star." This refers to the fact that the interior of the ceremonial house is a model of the cosmos. The painted ceiling, the *wagnen* of the *nggwalndu*, is like a shield dividing the world beyond the experience of man from that of the experienceable, at least during initiations. Shooting stars originate in the mysterious cosmos and come down to the earth. The same is true for the *nggwalndu* whose home is in the other world and who come to visit the village during initiations.

The exoteric name of the painted ceiling above the *nggwalndu* sculptures in the ceremonial house is *wagnen*. This implies that the ceiling is their beautiful headdress. These sculptures represent the more durable, material aspects of the *nggmalndu*. The spirits' permanent residence is located outside the village, in water holes and swamps. Before a ceremony takes place slit gongs are beaten and their names are sung. They are implored to leave their swampy place and to reside temporarily in the *nggwalndu* sculptures in the ceremonial house.

In another context closely linked to the ceremonial house the expression *wagnen* is also used. When a *korambo* is being built, erected first is a scaffolding called *nyangga* (literally, "child house"; the *nyangga* has the shape of a small ceremonial house). In front of the *nyangga* a huge ladder is put up. It serves as a base for the construction of the highest part of the house. The two vertical poles to which the steps of the ladder are attached are called *wagnen yaui* (*yaui* also has the meaning of a garden used for a first planting season). *Wagnen yaui* is an expression applied also to the construction of a big *wagnen:* the vertical sticks in the middle of the frame that stiffen the whole headdress along its vertical axis are called by this name also. The scaffolding of the ceremonial house thus seems to parallel the frame of the *wagnen* headdress. In fact, when the structure is completed the triangular, newly painted facade is hoisted into place and affixed, and the slit gongs are beaten to announce the big opening ceremony. The signal is called *wagnen ula*, "the *wagnen* is set in place." The term *wagnen* for the huge painting fixed to the front of the ceremonial house is used in ritual contexts only. A further parallel between ceremonial house and headdress can be seen at the

place where the plaited lower part of the ceremonial house meets the painted facade. There, a carved and painted crossbeam is fixed horizontally. Similarly, a decorated man carries a kind of "crossbeam" on his neck to keep his huge *wagnen* in place.

The most dominant motif on the ceremonial house painting is the *nggwalnggwal.* When asked what these large faces with the staring eyes represent the Abelam readily call them *nggwalndu.* But it is no individual spirit in particular that is called by the name but the category of *nggwalndu* in general. Their eyes are fixed to the ceremonial ground where almost all public events take place and where all rites of passage are held. The ceremonial house is the *nggwalndu's* space in a hamlet. In everyday life not even initiated adult men enter it; the interior is the place where spirits may dwell temporarily unseen by people. Nobody dares to disturb them by intruding into the building. Thus, a ceremonial house remains deserted for most of the time of its existence. The huge faces on the painting are intermediaries between the interior of the *korambo,* the space given to the spirits, mainly the *nggwalndu,* and the outside world, that of everyday life, of men, women, and children. The painting is a kind of border that separates the interior from the exterior. But it is also a threshold that unites both worlds. At the same time the world of the *nggwalndu* gazes into the world of the village life; thus, the Abelam are in continuous visual contact with them,

A *wagnen* dancer, therefore, is a man of the two worlds,[15] of the living and of the dead. He has been with the spirits and is on his way back by crossing the border. This is why people say *"nggwal nde kyak"* when he returns. He is carrying the other world into the actual one; the world of the past (of those who had formerly lived, died, and joined the spirits) invades the present. This is also true for all nonhuman representations--yams, sculptures, and stones--of *nggwalndu*. The man of the past is also of the present: He crosses borders not only of territories but also of time. Thus, *wagnen* communicate important messages concerning concepts of time and space and man's role in rituals during which all these borders are suspended, when the two worlds become one and the past is the same as the present.

A further question concerning meaning remains unanswered yet: Why are *wagnen* obviously linked to heads of men, sculptures, yams, and stones and how does the triangular, painted facade fit into this context?

A comparative study of spirit houses in the Maprik area revealed that pictures taken in the fifties give evidence of skulls displayed on the crossbeam below the facade (see Hauser-Schäublin 1989a: plate 227). On one ceremonial house photographed by the missionary A. Knorr, a row of wooden masks, one beside the other, was affixed to the front instead of to a crossbeam (see Hauser-Schäublin 1989a: plate 230). Nowadays the most com-

mon motif carved on crossbeams is *ndumagna,* "head of man." These heads are not associated with any living or dead person. Like the *nggwalnggwal* these heads stand for a whole category of beings, not individuals. The Abelam usually maintain that these heads represent "big-men" in general. In those cases where people still remembered skulls being displayed there, they recollected that the names of the big-men were called out when the skulls were discussed. Sometimes one or several skulls were trophies brought home from raids. Usually the skulls came from big-men of the village, though, important men of the hamlet where the ceremonial house was located.[16] Skulls disappeared from the *korambo* while gradual changes took place in Abelam culture. When the Maprik area came under the control of the Australian administration after World War II, warfare was forbidden as was the burying of corpses within the settlement and the removal of bones from graves. It appears that, generally speaking, an "evolution" took place in several steps. At its beginning was the display of skulls, gradually replaced by wooden mask substitutes, and, finally, by a fully sculptured crossbeam with heads on it.

Bedecked with skulls or individual masks, the painted facades must have looked like a huge *wagnen.* The analogy of the front of a ceremonial house to an anthropomorphous figure can be pushed even further. The lower part of a *korambo* consists of a plaited mat. The patterns on it are all named. The most prominent appear like two parallel rows of continuous bands of W's. This pattern is called "bent limbs," meaning arms as well as legs. It is also used in paintings and always serves to represent bodies. This would imply that the whole front of a *korambo* consisted of anthropomorphous figures with the bodies forming the lower part of the building, the skulls in the middle, and above them their *wagnen.* It demonstrates as well how deceased big-men and spirits are closely linked and how together they constitute the kaleidoscopic picture of *nggwalndu* in general.

This perspective leads to a congruence of meaning of the differing contexts in which *wagnen* are used: They are all linked to heads. Although the Abelam were not head-hunters like their neighbors in the south, the Iatmul, the cultural contexts where ideas about heads are important convey the notion that fertility is linked to the head. This is easily recognizable in the context of yams where the "head of the yam" is the growing point of the tuber; it is treated in yam-growing rituals as the source of life. And the "head" of the yam stone is "washed" with sacred water from spirit places in the swamps to promote the yam's fertility. For all beings, spirits, men, yams, and stones, the head is the most sacred of all body parts. The pointed *wagnen* emphasizes, like an aura, the singularity of the head, symbol also of the conversion of death into life and vice versa.

It is at this point that both types of triangles are identified with each other, that with the tip at the top and the other one turned upside down. In its broadest sense, the triangle is related to fertility. But there are two ways of attaining it, a "male" one, associated with the head, and a "female" one, associated with the vulva.

Circle and Sphere versus Triangle and Tetrahedron

The *korambo* has to be considered in a wider frame of reference than what has been explained so far. We have seen that the ceremonial house represents in itself half of the cosmos, the world of the spirits bound to the land of the dead. This is expressed in Kalabu also by the orientation of most ceremonial houses. With one exception that faced west, all were oriented with their facades towards the east. This is linked to the Abelam's concept of orientation, the notion of the sloping path of the sun from the zenith at noon towards the west, where the sun disappears in the evening. This path of the sun is represented by the slanting ridgepole of the spirit house. In the Abelam's conception of space the horizon "narrows" towards the west, that is, the "walls" or rather the "borders" of the cosmos meet in the west, at the point where the sun disappears--in order to rise, during the night, in the land of the dead. The ceremonial ground, *amei,* where all major social events take place, is circular. It represents the platform of actual life lit by the full sun and the full moon. This world of actual life has the shape of a sphere (unlike the tetrahedron shape of the spirit world), and it has a definite orientation, too: At the top is the zenith and at its lowest point the nadir (the notion of the latter is important only in specific categories of ceremonies).

This idea of different shapes of space representing two "worlds," separated but at the same time intrinsically connected, is ritually emphasized. For the opening of a new ceremonial house a sun painted on a round *panggal* is hung above the center of the *amei.* On the ceremonial ground, right in the center below the "sun," a round stone is placed. The stone is called "moon" and is classified, in contrast to the male sun, as female. This is the ritual focus of life in the actual world.

During the opening ceremony, when the sun is fixed in three directions to coconut palms and in the fourth to the ceremonial house, the men in the *korambo* seize the hand drums and start the initial singing. Then the sun begins to hop up and down; it is linked to the hand drums by a rope hanging down from the ridgepole. Thus, the sun wags as if being moved by unseen hands. It is the way the two worlds are bound together. Therefore, the tetrahedron of the *korambo* is the other world and the round, open ceremonial

Found--a space conceived as spherical with the zenith at its highest point --is the world of living men. The front of the ceremonial house facing the actual world is a border between the worlds, between life and death as well as between past and present.

Sepik Variations: Heads, Skulls, and Paintings in the Context of the Men's House

Having discussed the triangle as a characteristic form used by the Abelam in specific cultural contexts and conveying meaning concerning two kinds of fertility, a "male" and a "female" one, I shall now proceed to other Sepik cultures. I shall start by examining the context in which the triangle is most likely to be used: men's houses and men's rituals. As mentioned earlier, the Abelam ceremonial house is not a meetinghouse for the men but used almost exclusively for storing carvings and for the display of initiation scenes. In many other Sepik cultures the men's house is actually the focus of men's life, in everyday as well as in ritual uses. Men not only used to spend most of the day there but casually spent the night there as well. All major rituals were held on ceremonial grounds or within the men's house. Many of the rituals were related to head-hunting and warfare and the representation of ancestors as a moving force in the process of promoting the well-being and fertility of the village community, that is, of people.

Among the Iatmul who, in contrast to the Abelam, were regularly carrying out head-hunting raids, the human skull was prominent in many rituals; skulls were displayed in the context of the men's house. As will be demonstrated, this is also the context of the triangle in many Sepik cultures. There were principally two ways in which heads or skulls were displayed: (1) on the outside of the huge men's houses and (2) in the interior,

(1) On the front side, overlooking the large dancing ground, heads or skulls were put in small, windowlike holes, one beside the other, but each of them individually. Actually the skulls were put--from the point of view of the construction of an Iatmul men's house--at the same spot as on the Abelam ceremonial house: on the lower end of the gable triangle.

On some Iatmul houses masks were displayed instead of skulls but obviously their function was the same. The gables of traditional Iatmul men's houses had no large painting but only what is called a gable mask just beneath the top of the front. Sometimes this gable mask consisted of a triangular painting on *panggal* (Reche 1913: plate 31, 1) or of plaited fiber, sometimes covered with *panggal;* sometimes it was a carved wooden mask.

These elements are all present among the Sawos, too. But in addition to men's houses with "windows" and skulls or masks (e.g., in Torembi), others

have a carved crossbeam instead, resembling those of the Abelam. The triangular gable is sometimes covered with palm leaf bands cut into various patterns (as among the Iatmul) but others have a gable painting (see Hauser-Schäublin 1989a: plate 148). Most of the houses are additionally decorated with a gable mask. As only a few photographs of traditional Sawos men's houses are available and all of them were taken long after head-hunting had ceased to exist, nothing further is known about the display. of skulls there.

On several men's houses, mostly among the western but also among the central Iatmul, one can discover at the very top of the gable a human skull attached to the wall, sometimes immediately above the gable mask (as, e.g., in Kaulagu, photographed by Roesicke in 1913 [see Hauser-Schäublin 1989a: 403, plate 162]), sometimes on the little overhanging roof beneath the finial (e.g., in Kanganamun, photographed in 1930 by Speiser [see Hauser-Schäublin 1989a:388, plate 143], Shurcliffe [1930:242-243], and Bateson [(1936) 1958: plate 7a]). This highest part of the building was associated with homicide carried out during initiations (Hauser-Schäublin 1977:190).[17] The Manambu displayed a skull at the same spot as did the Iatmul (photographed in Awatip and Malu by Roesicke in 1913; see Hauser-Schäublin 1989a: plate 165). Unfortunately, I do not know if the Nggala or Kwoma, their immediate neighbors, also displayed skulls on their ceremonial houses. As these buildings share many elements with those of other middle Sepik cultures (one of their leitmotifs being ceremonial houses), one could expect such displays, though for Bowden head-hunting among the Kwoma is an open question (1983:165).

(2) The Iatmul and the Sawos had a second way of displaying skulls. In the interior of the ceremonial houses, coated with clay and painted, skulls were put on special racks. The racks consisted of a cane frame to which pieces of *panggal* were attached. These were painted mostly with big faces or whole figures. Quite a large quantity of racks were triangular in form with a skull put on the top (Figure 4). Others were rectangular, sometimes supplemented with a triangle on top to which arms and a skull were added, the triangle forming the body of the figure (see Kelm 1966, 1: plate 237). It seems as if the Iatmul had transferred the display of skulls on paintings into the interior of the house. Perhaps this has to do with distinctions between exoteric and esoteric as well as with different functions of Iatmul and Abelam ceremonial houses. Although at a certain stage of initiation a triangular painting is displayed among the Abelam, it has--at least nowadays!--nothing to do with the presentation of skulls as such. (As discussed previously, that painting is the headdress of the prostrate *nggwalndu* sculptures.)

Whether the skull racks were used among the Iatmul only for the display

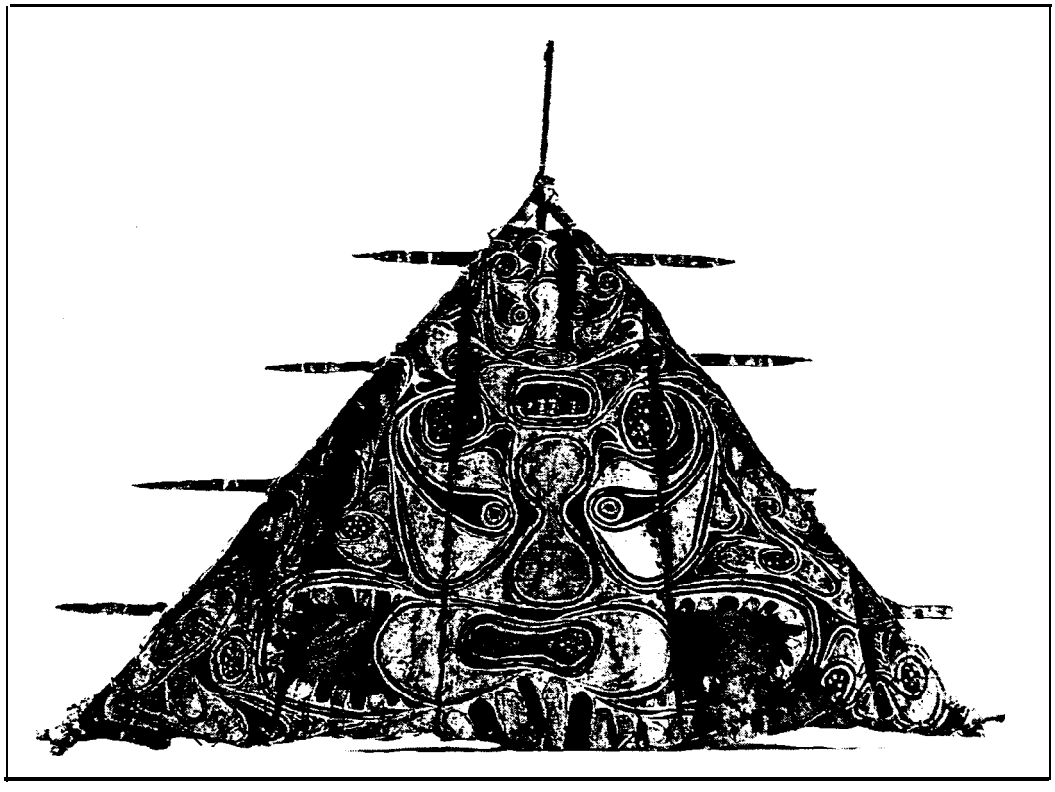

FIGURE 4. **Painted skull rack (Sawos).** (Photo by Peter Homer, Museum of Ethnography Basel)

of the heads of enemies or also for those of important men is unknown. At least in the "windows" it seems that, as a rule, heads of influential villagers were displayed, whereas on the gable top the skull of a victim was exposed.

I consider the combination of heads and paintings significant for Sepik cultures. I suggest that the triangular facades of men's houses--painted, plaited, or decorated with bands of leaves--and head racks are variations, or rather transformations, of the same theme. Many Iatmul and Sawos skull racks are triangular; they are painted facades in miniature transferred to the interior of the ceremonial house. There are also cylindrical skull racks (see Kelm 1966, 1: plate 238)--again, I would put them in direct relation to the ceremonial mound with megaliths in front of Sepik men's houses; they were often fenced and sometimes even decorated with carved masks. When the men returned from a raiding party, they first deposited the captured heads there.

For the Iatmul I know of only one document that shows a human skull with an elongated painted headdress similar to an Abelam *wagnen* (Reche 1913: plate 74). I take it as a proof that not only the form as such, but also similar ideas and meanings, exist among the Iatmul and the Abelam (and

most likely also among the Sawos). Among the Iatmul, there is no further evidence of headdresses similar to the *wagnen.*

Kelm has published pictures of two almost-triangular (what Newton calls leaf-shaped) Sawos "dance shields" collected in 1912-1913 (1966, 1: plates 141,142). Perhaps they were published upside down because as soon as one turns the pictures, they clearly appear as headdresses of the Abelam *wagnen* type (with some influence of *noute* in them).

Feather Pictures and Skulls in the Interior of Men's Houses

On the Keram River, a southern tributary of the Sepik, the Catholic missionaries Kirschbaum and Girards photographed the interior of a ceremonial house on piles in Geketen near Gorogopa around 1930 (see Stöhr 1971: plate 177). The entire interior upper side of the triangular gable is decorated all over with beautiful, mostly two-dimensional artifacts: In the center, reaching from the raised floor to the tip of the gable, is a huge, more or less rectangular image representing a copulating couple. The image is entirely made of feathers. On both sides of this elongated picture are dozens of smaller rectangular feather images of varying size. The lowest row of these feather images shows big human faces. Above it are several rows of smaller figures, one beside the other. The very bottom row, which runs horizontally from one wall to the other, seems to rest on a horizontal pole covered by a mat. This row consists of many skulls, each topped by a feather image (with a face on it). In fact, the vertical combination of the elements--a mat, a row of skulls with *wagnen*-like feather headdresses, and rows of faces and figures above it--are reminiscent of the composition of the front of the Abelam *korambo.* If we accept the idea of cross-cultural transformation of form and meaning, we also recognize the main elements of the front of the Iatmul men's house, although the gable painting there is nothing more (at least nowadays) than a gable mask.

Here, at the Keram River, we meet not only the combination of skulls and feather headdresses, but also that of skulls and a whole "facade'‘--all arranged within the frame of a huge triangle in the interior of the building. The decoration, as already stated, consists mostly of feathers. Probably all the "feather shields" from the Keram come from decorations like the one described. Kelm mentions that the feather shields collected during the German Sepik expedition in 1912-1913 at the Keram were used during dances but he does not give any further details (1968, 3: plates 355-363). The only photos showing the exterior side of men's houses from that time were taken in Kambot village. An analogy seems to exist between the long, central feather mosaic with a copulating couple in the interior of the Geketen men's

house and the huge, triangular exterior gable painting of Kambot (Figure 5). Whereas the male figure on the interior feather mosaic is much larger than the female, only a male figure is represented on the exterior gable painting. This certainly fits the distinction between esoteric (secret) and exoteric (public) aspects of ritual visualization realized in ceremonial houses.

While nothing is known of the display of skulls on the front of men's houses in Kambot, evidence of it exists in another region that belongs to the Sepik area as well: Höltker ([1966] 1975) has documented a spirit house in the Bosman (Bosmun) village of Wemtak that had a triangular facade made of *panggal* and painted with big faces. Just below the facade, above the entrance, was a crossbeam on which painted skulls were displayed. Although

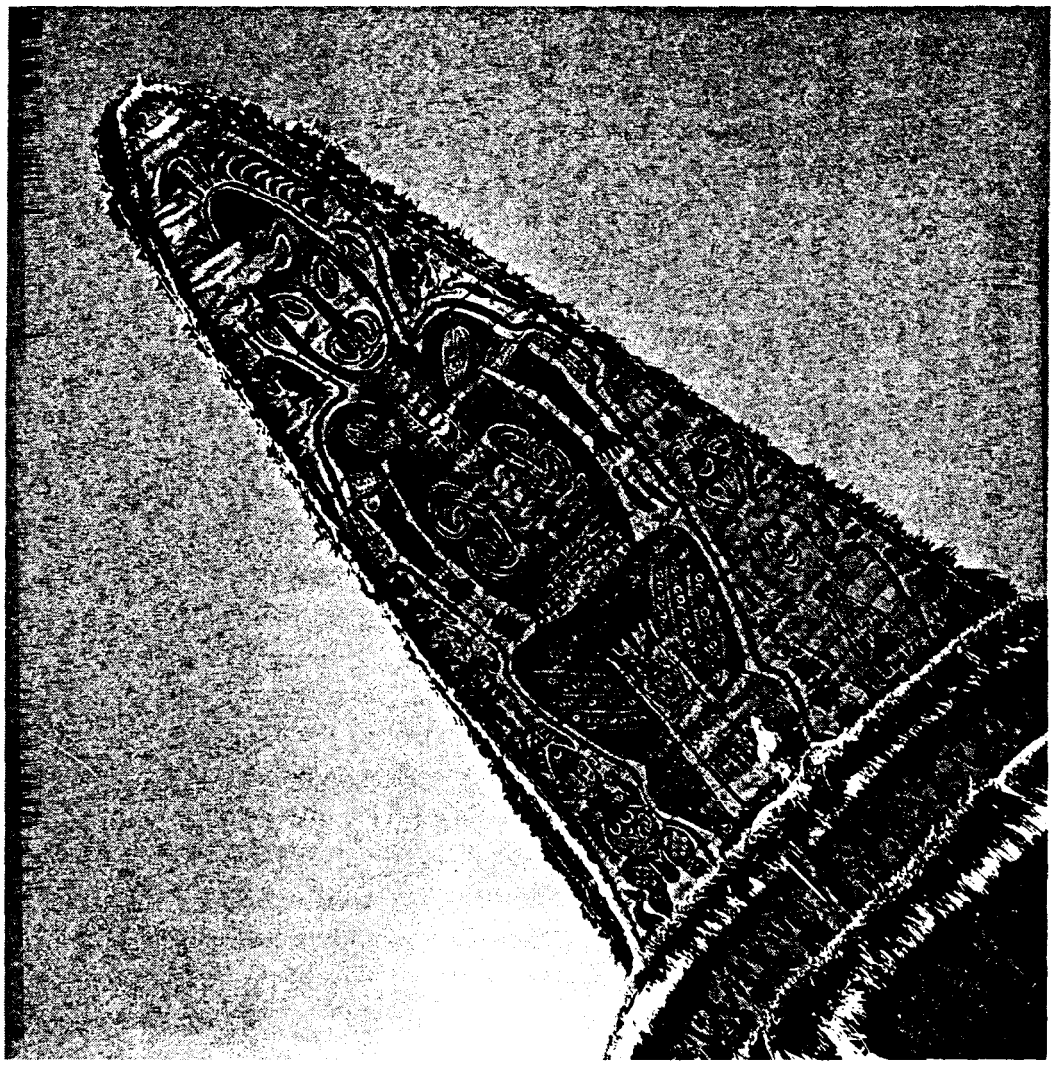

FIGURE 5. **Triangular gable painting representing a male figure, Kambot village.** (Anthropos Institute, Sankt Augustin)

Höltker has warned against drawing conclusions too quickly ([1966] 1975:245), he pointed out the similarities between Abelam painted facades and crossbeams with carved heads on them on the one hand and the paintings on the Bosman men's house and the display of painted skulls on the other. He called it an expression of similar ideas.

In the interior of the house Höltker saw and photographed a painting that was set up at some distance from the back side of the facade. The painting completely filled the triangle between the roof and the raised floor. In front of the painting some skulls overmodeled with clay were displayed. They were not deposited on a horizontal beam but were fixed on sticks leaning against a horizontal pole just in front of the painting. Höltker saw two skulls that were not only attached to vertical poles but also had crude anthropomorphous bodies. Some of the figures stood on a human or an animal skull. The display of skull figures in front of a large painting in the men's house interior reminded Höltker of the display of carved anthropomorphous figures among the Abelam. To support his suggestion he published a photograph of an initiation chamber of a *nggwalndu* performance where not only carved standing figures were displayed, but also a crossbeam with carved heads on it and above it the ceremonial painting.[18]

The Sepik region indeed seems to be not only an area of outstanding visual art, but also a region in which some fundamental ideas, though with variations created through transformations, have been realized across language borders. The ideas are expressed through similarity in form and material, the triangle being closely associated with the men's house and its rituals. A picture taken by Father F. Kirschbaum around 1930 shows the interior of a ceremonial house up the Korewori River, at Kaningra (Höltker [1966] 1975: plate 83; Stöhr 1971: plate 141). **A** row of large paintings with huge anthropomorphous faces, one beside the other, can be seen. They were displayed in the interior lower side of the gable. Directly above them was a painted crossbeam. Owing to the poor quality of the photographs no information is available concerning the display of skulls on the upper part of the gable triangle but, in fact, one could strongly assume it.

As among the Iatmul, the exterior facade of a Kaningra men's house was not painted. The front was covered with thatch cut into ornamented bands. There was only a large painted mask at the top of the gable; it had, below the actual face, three fingerlike extensions (which I will discuss below). These characteristics are identical with those of certain men's houses on the Sepik River itself. They are also typical for a building at a Korewori village that Kirschbaum called Moatschamai. There, in addition to the gable mask on the thatched facade, a skull was affixed just below the mask. This is similar to the ceremonial houses among the western Iatmul, Manambu, and the

Wosera village of Tjamangi. Thus, it seems that a display of skulls could also be expected in the interior of the buildings.

Since I have tried in this section to show relationships between facade paintings on ceremonial houses, skulls and feather mosaics, and paintings in the interior of the houses, I also have to mention the famous example of a huge, triangular painting that Mead described (1938:188, fig. 5): Among the Mundugumor (at the Yuat River) she saw a large, triangular painting used as a yam-feast decoration. She writes:

> It is impossible to say whether these triangular sheets of painted sago bark sewed on a cane background originated as decorative elements in a feasting scene, or were borrowed from the design of the house front. The Mundugumor yam decoration could, with equal ease, be a lifted house front, or could serve as a basis about which a house could be built. These yam-feast decorations are structurally meaningless as used at present. . . . After it is painted, it is set up against a scaffolding in the center of the village to serve as a display element and afterwards stored as a memento in the rafters of the house of the feast giver. (Mead 1938:189)

Transformations: Canoe Prow Ornaments and Gable Masks

As the Mundugumor live in the Sepik area and are more or less surrounded by groups that have huge paintings on their ceremonial houses, it is not surprising that the Mundugumor also had such paintings, although their use seems to be quite outstanding. It has to be mentioned that the Mundugumor did not have men's houses, as almost all other Sepik cultures did. Therefore, the painting was an element in itself, linked not to facades but to yam displays.

When we have a look at other Yuat villages we realize that the paintings are more loosely connected with houses there than elsewhere. In Antofogua an oval-shaped *panggal* painting was fixed to the front of the house. It indeed looked like a painted headdress that, after use, had been attached to the house front (Hauser-Schäublin 1989a: plates 122, 123). From there the painting could easily be removed again, as Mead has presumed. Again, we know nothing more about it but it also reminds me of the Abelam who, after a dance held at an initiation or after the display of long yams, sometimes affix their headdresses (or those of the tubers) to the plaited mat on the *korambo* front. There they stay for years until decayed. The houses of Antofogua show a further possibility: that an object could interchangeably be used as a headdress or an element of house decoration.

Tuzin has noted similarities between Umeda headdresses and Ilahita spirit houses, which are similar to Abelam ceremonial houses: "Gell's illustrations reveal a striking morphological resemblance between Arapesh spirit houses and Umeda headdresses . . . --or, at the very least, the crown portion of the former" (1980:158n. 33). I think that among the Ilahita themselves (as has been demonstrated for the Abelam), there is an analogy between the painted "tall, pointed headdress rising from its point of attachment at the back of the man's head" (Tuzin 1980:220, see also plates 23-26) and the painted facade of the cult house. Obviously in ritual, too, an association between "the dancer [who] is transformed into a being akin to the Tambaran itself" and the ancestral spirit is established.[19]

Newton discovered a similar transformational relationship concerning headdresses and decorations on men's houses between the Nggala and the Kwoma. He writes about the Nggala front side of a ceremonial house: "Above the mask, projecting beyond the roof, is a long, leaf-shaped board decorated with shallow relief carving. The mask and leaf-shaped finial are together called *niyim* . . . ; while no explanantion is given for the finial, both its form and placing are reminiscent of a Kwoma-Nuguma head ornament" (Newton 1971:34). From what has been described above, Newton's remark is quite correct and plausible.[20] Even Tuzin's conclusions fit the relationships discovered on the lower Sepik and its tributaries. However, the Umeda do not belong to the Sepik region in its narrower sense, often defined in terms of groups speaking a language of the Sepik Raum Phylum. The Arapesh do not either, though through the topos of their "importing culture" (Mead 1938) they have become included in "the Sepik." But as is well known, language borders are not impermeable to cultural elements, material as well as nonmaterial. The Arapesh presented Mead with an analogy between the facade decoration and a dancing shield that fits Sepik transformations very well. Mead writes: "Among the Mountain Arapesh the distinction between an imported dancing shield and a piece of sago bark used as a facade decoration for a *tamberan* house is very slight" (1938:189). Perhaps it is the Mountain Arapesh's skill of more easily incorporating new elements in the already existing patterns that led them to adopt dancing shields into the category of paintings. Perhaps another reason for this is that they took over the decoration of *tamberan* houses with paintings from their neighbors, the Plains Arapesh.

But the fact that in the Sepik generally there is a definite relationship between shields and facade paintings brings me back to the Abelam again. Perhaps the huge *wagnen* should be called a "dancing shield," too, rather than a "head ornament."

A special type of shield has to be discussed in this context, too. Most

groups dwelling at the shores of the Sepik River use "canoe shields," that is, prow ornaments for their war canoes. Newton has noted that the front screens of Nggala ceremonial houses were formerly covered with paintings and "the prow ornament *(utukwei)* of the ward's war-canoe was hung between the doors" (1971:34). In 1959, Bühler took a picture of such a house with a canoe shield still on it.[21] It consists of a wooden mask affixed to sago palm sheaths. Above the head is a narrow triangular extension. To the left and the right of it similar but smaller extensions are attached (see also Bühler 1960:9). The Kwoma, the Iatmul, and probably some of the lower Sepik societies also used prow ornaments of similar shape. In former times each men's house had its own large war canoe. A special name associated with the men's house was given to it. In the upper Sepik the prow ornament is a whole carved anthropomorphous figure with painted, winglike pieces of *panggal* on both sides (Kelm 1966, 2: plate 193, prow ornament from the Mai River, collected in 1912-1913). In Tsenap, a carved human figure constitutes the vertical axis of the prow ornament; from each side a painted triangular piece of *panggal* again protrudes (Kelm 1968, 3: plate 502).

In the entire middle and lower Sepik area a canoe shield consists mainly of *panggal* and a wooden mask. Sometimes the wooden mask is rather flat (e.g., Stöhr 19'71: plate 165), sometimes plastically carved so that it looks like a human head (e.g., Kelm 1968, 3: plate 501). There are many variations from the upper to the lower Sepik; however, certain characteristic features are typical for all these ornaments: the representation of a human face in the center with a pointed oval rather than strictly triangular headdress above it; and to each side, further extensions that are sometimes even higher than the central one, sometimes shorter. It looks as if the whole ornament depicts a decorated anthropomorphous being with raised arms (Figure 6). Sometimes this representation is hardly recognizable (e.g., Newton 1971: plate 185, prow ornament from Yasin; Kelm 1968, 3: plates 502, 503, from Tsenap).

But sometimes this obviously basic idea is implemented concretely. In 1930 Felix Speiser photographed an initiation ceremony at the lower Sepik in Kambrambo, where a crocodile-like monster had been made to devour the initiates (Figure 7). On the top of the crocodile's head a kind of a prow ornament was added, representing the upper part of an anthropomorphous body with an obviously overmodeled skull decorated with a painted headdress. To each side *panggal* paintings showing a shoulder, a raised arm, and a hand were attached (see Schuster 1968: plate 82). Although the crocodile was made for the initiation and the monster had movable jaws to "devour" the young men, the decoration on its head looked perfectly like a prow ornament of a canoe--and almost all Sepik canoes have a prow that ends in a

FIGURE 6. **Canoe shield, Kambot village.** (Anthropos Institute, Sankt Augustin)

carved crocodile head. Thus, there is not only a striking analogy in form between war canoe and initiatory crocodile but also a fundamental identity in meaning. The crocodile swallows the initiates as the war canoe "devours" (kills) the enemy.[22]The canoe prow ornament somehow reminds me--from the viewpoint of form, material, and decoration as well as of function and meaning--of an Iatmul skull rack. The prow ornament in this sense is the movable aspect of an object normally located in the men's house.

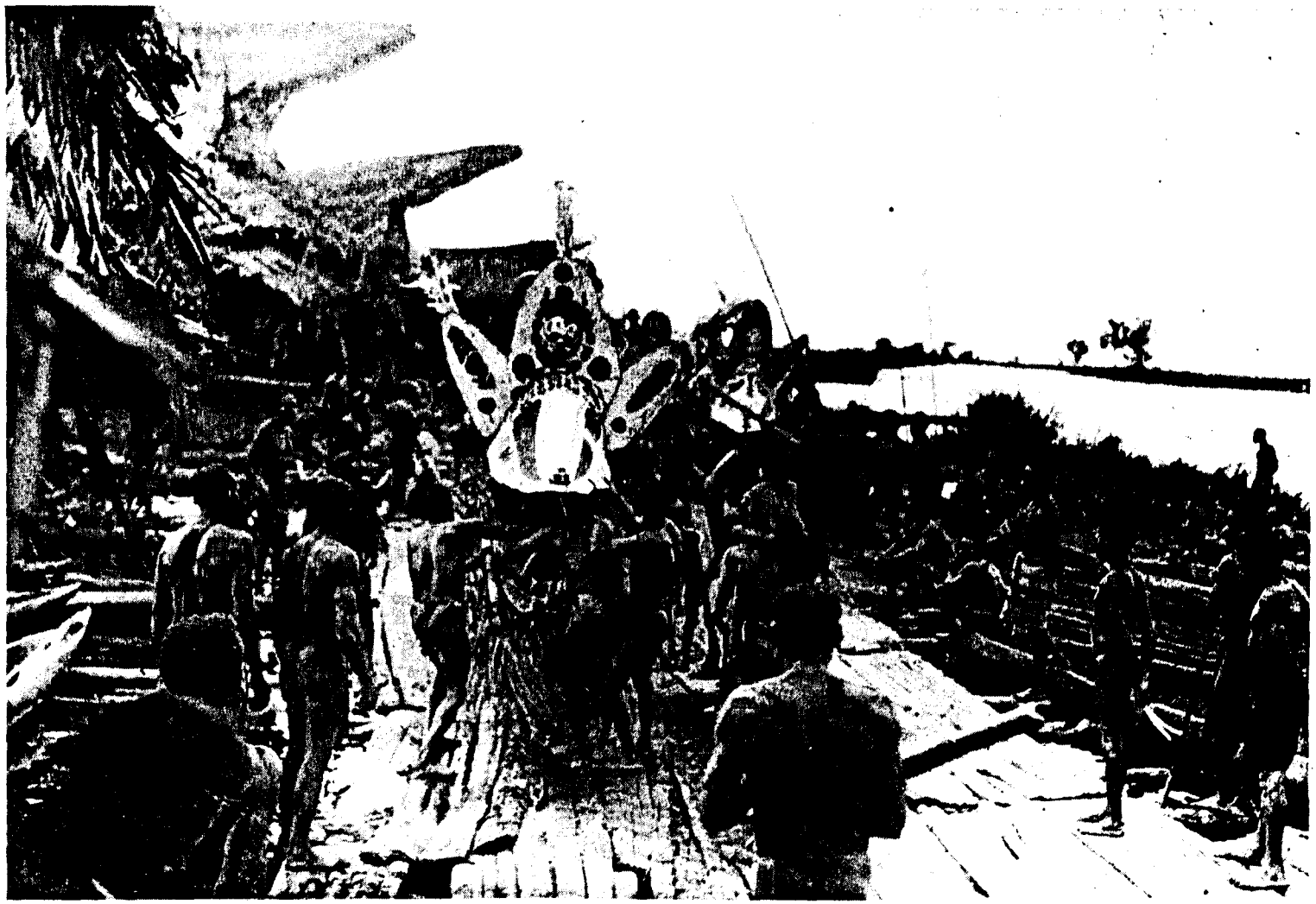

FIGURE 7. **Crocodile-like monster with a kind of canoe prow ornament on the top, Kambrambo village.** (Photo by Felix Speiser, 1930, Museum of Ethnography Basel)

On the lower Sepik in Kerker, Reche took a picture of a men's house interior where sacred items were kept (1913: plate 16, 2). The picture shows an object that looks like a prow ornament. As I mentioned above, there is a direct connection between a men's house and a war canoe; they are mutually interrelated. One could also say that the canoe is the movable (and aggressive) aspect of the men's house. The prow ornament is used to show the enemy how his head will end up. The skull atop the crocodile the Kambrambo used during an initiation ceremony expresses this idea clearly. At the same time it shows where the head will stay--in the enemy's men's house.

In several parts of the Sepik a similar relationship between the facade of a men's house and a canoe prow ornament can be found, in others between the facade and a headdress. I have already mentioned the case of the Nggala who actually put the prow ornament on the front of the men's house--and probably took it off again and fixed it onto their canoe when they went on a raid.[23]

Other ceremonial houses apart from those of the Nggala show something that has been labeled by anthropologists as house or gable masks. A look at their distribution shows that they can be found from Tanbunum all the way up the river to Yamanumbu, that is, the whole territory of the Iatmul. House masks are also represented on ceremonial houses of the southern tributaries and in the north, among the Sawos. Generally it can be said (with the exception of the Sawos) that gable masks exist on ceremonial houses that have fronts covered with sago thatch, not painted. Many examples of house masks have three fingerlike extensions below the actual face. Some of these gable masks consist of painted *panggal,* others of wickerwork, and again others of both materials. An early photograph, taken around 1930 in Kaningra, depicts--right at the tip of the gable that is protected from the rain by a small, overhanging roof--a flat, painted *panggal* mask that, in fact, looks very much like a canoe prow ornament--turned upside down. Whereas this is a visually striking example, the same principle of structure can be recognized in most house masks, even those of wickerwork. But, as already said, they just are attached to the house the other way around than to the canoes.

Conclusion

If we acknowledge a fundamental identity of form, material, context, and meaning existing throughout the Sepik cultures carefully examined so far, we have to consider again the question of orientation and form in this comparative study. Unfortunately, no systematic research has been done on body decorations in the Sepik; information on body paintings especially of women

is lacking. However, if we accept the notion of the Abelam situation as a possible clue to messages communicated through canoe prow ornaments turned upside down when displayed on house fronts, we are confronted with a completely different--opposite--concept associated with houses: that of displaying female connotations.

In fact, the idea of the house as a female being is not new. Forge has described it for the Abelam (1966:27) and for the Iatmul (according to Bateson [1936] 1958); Tuzin has confirmed it for the Arapesh (1980). It is the interior of the house, the belly, that is considered female. The sago fronds hanging down from the walls of the Iatmul men's houses and slightly hiding the sitting platforms the men use in everyday life are compared to women's pubic aprons. When crawling into the Abelam ceremonial house the initiates are reentering a womb from where they will be reborn. Ritual reproduction takes place in the womb of the ceremonial house. And the same is true for other Sepik cultures as well.

In former times some of the Iatmul and Sawos men's houses had triangular mats--with the bases at the top!--hanging down from the walls; on each side there were several of them, each at some distance from the other. The most beautiful example is the men's house of Kanganamun mentioned earlier and photographed by Bateson, Speiser, Shurcliffe, and others. I suggest that it does make sense to consider the triangle with its base at the top, not only in Abelam culture but in other Sepik cultures as well, as expressing "femaleness."

Therefore, the same dualism exemplified for the Abelam and the way it is contained in the triangle seems to be pervasive throughout the Sepik, though in different transformations. Plaited masks fixed on *panggal,* plaited mats, and *panggal* canoe prow ornaments turned upside down are the house elements associated with being female. Thus, we recognize also a limited range of material used for this aspect, though other material representations of triangles so oriented certainly have been neglected in documentions.

The representation of the "male" side of the triangle seems to be much clearer, as is the relationship between painted facades and equivalents in the interior of the house, made either of the same material (painted *panggal*) or another, more sacred one (feathers). This correspondence is primarily induced by the same shape and only secondly by the same or equivalent material. Feathers are ultimately associated with light, sky, maleness, and killing. Feather images as well as feather headdresses are considered, at least among the Abelam, more sacred and secret than the "equivalents" made of *panggal*. The relationship between exoteric and esoteric is expressed through shape and materials, too. It would be tempting to make a detailed analysis of the different materials used in relation to the form under

study. Shelton (1992) has demonstrated how certain materials and forms are associated with specific deities in Huichol society (Mexico). Similarly, a definite relationship between materials used for "male" and "female" triangles seems to exist. Basketry work, for example, seems to be restricted to female connotations, feathers to male. But, finally. much more data would be needed to pursue this track and would probably require substantial verbal exegesis from the people themselves.

The fundamental identity of material, form, and meaning of the triangle can also be traced in more movable forms: as ritual headdresses (painted or decorated with feathers) of dancers, of yams and yam stones, but also as prow ornaments of canoes, and then, again, as semipermanent decorative elements on ceremonial house gables. Most of these elements are associated with the complex of the men's house, head-hunting. and the meaning of the human head in general--be it that of a ceremonial dancer during an initiation, an ancestor, or a slain enemy.

But the question remains: Why the triangle?

It is, as noted earlier, a conspicuous form; it has three possible lines of symmetry, but they can be summed up as one: the one drawn from each tip right down to the base. All other two-dimensional forms predominantly used in Sepik cultures are multisymmetrical and fit the Sepik exigencies of (visually unmediated) dualisms or multiclassifications. Some forms produce other forms when divided symmetrically, for example, the rectangle. If a line of symmetry is drawn from one angle to the opposite, not a further rectangle is produced but a triangle. The triangle can be divided or split up into several equal and smaller units--but they all have the same triangular form. The triangle proves to be self-reproducing in form. In some Sepik cultures two further triangles have been added to the central one, thus creating a kind of dual laterality otherwise missing.

If form reflects principles of organization and structure on a broader level of culture than art itself--and I would strongly affirm that it does--the triangle as a form is not incidental. It is the only form that contains in itself one of the most fundamental dualisms existing in Sepik cultures. It is the direct material expression representing the dualism between men, killing, the creation of ancestors on the one hand, and women and the generation of life on the other. But the triangle encompasses the range of material objects it represents and the context it is used in. It communicates basic values of Sepik societies like men's exclusive associations, men's houses, rituals such as initiations, killing, and the procreation of yams. The triangle includes and contains notions not only about sexuality and fertility associated with women, but also about in-marrying women and wives, the domestic sphere

expressed in the female body of the house. Thus, it refers to an underlying pattern of Sepik cultures in general that is built on an opposition and complementarity among the genders but extends much further.[24] At the same time the triangle expresses complementarity of all these "opposites," complementarity in its basic sense, not division and separation, because all these "opposites" are within the same form. It is the orientation of the form that signals the distinction or even the opposition of the two, not the form as such.

Surprisingly, in anthropological theory since Lévi-Strauss (who relied on de Saussure's linguistic structuralism) the triangle has been widely used as a model to exemplify dualism and its cultural mediation. Writing about art, Lévi-Strauss has divided Caduveo facial decoration into four triangular sections in order to find its underlying symmetry achieved by two different axes of symmetry, a horizontal and a vertical one, creating a process of "double splitting" (1963:245-273). "Asymmetry serves the formal function of insuring the distinction between quarters, which would merge into two profiles if the fields were to be symmetrically repeated to the right and left instead of being joined by their tips" (p. 235). The most impressive demonstration of how this model is thought to work is Leach's description of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism (1970). He uses the example of a traffic light with its three colors as a metaphor. Moreover, it is the triangle Leach uses as a model to exemplify the process of mediation that lies in-between "green" and "red."

Many more scholars have resorted to the triangle because of its unique properties. In his latest book about tattooing in Polynesia, Cell presents "a synoptic picture of the nature of the relationship between a theoretical variable--the intensity of tattooing--and a complex of contextual variables relating to the political complexion of various Polynesian societies and their social scale" (1993:289-290). To visualize the relationship he has chosen the triangle and explains why: "First this is a matter of geometry, because this is the only arrangement which permits the representation of two (graphic) dimensions of the theoretical postulate that Polynesian societies do not fall on a continuum, but are mutually opposed along a plurality of dimensions" (p. 290). Wagner used the triangle, with its inherent ability to split into further triangles, to create three-dimensional combinations to demonstrate "how this framing [cultural or contextual frames] occurs as a consequence of meaningful construction--how the frames are invented out of one another, so to speak" and how "the trope, or metaphor, as the unit of self-reference . . . expands the frame of its self-referentiality by processual extension into a broader range of cultural relevance--a larger frame, and a larger metaphor. A trope is no longer necessarily an instantaneous flash, but poten-

tial process" (1986:9). He arrives at a multidimensional triangular model (p. 123) to show how medieval and modem tropes each replicated the other as an internal, motivating factor.

In fact, the triangle in Sepik cultures has this multivocality, one "trope" expanding into the next, too. There are, of course, several major differences between the triangle used in anthropological theory to represent *models* of dualisms and their mediation, and the triangle used by Sepik peoples to *express* something through art, though the model seems to be strikingly apt to explain Sepik cultures' expression. One of the differences is the display of various orientations of the triangle Sepik cultures make use of. And within the range of possibilities existing they have chosen only two: the one with the tip at the top and the one with the tip at the bottom. Never is the tip on the left or the right side. Thus, the triangle has a definite axis, that of verticality, producing or displaying always a left and a right comer, each opposed to the other, once at the top, once at the bottom, but always mediated in the third comer.

The "male" triangle points upwards, like the gable towards the ridgepole, the headdress towards the sky. The "female," associated with the lower part of a female body, the vulva, points downward, towards the ground classified as female. Therefore, the triangle reiterates all oppositions associated with gender by summing them up within this unique, single form.[25] However, the relationship between the male and the female orientations of the triangle is not static, definite, or unmovable. Rather it is in flux, ready to switch from one position to the other and back, or to fuse in order to split up again. Dynamism is inherent in the system of orientation and the way Sepik cultures make use of the triangle. The uses result in temporary reversals of cultural values and social conditions if the triangle "flickers." Such reversals are described, for example, in Iatmul myths about the primeval women who resided in the men's house and the men who had to look after the babies until the men overthrew women's rule, thus creating the social conditions of the present (Hauser-Schäublin 1977:162-166). The separation of the triangle into two basic forms of orientation represents the actual social order with definite domains attributed to the genders, though in danger of becoming reversed again owing to identical form. Basic cultural values culminate and fuse in the triangle: ritual life, initiation, men's association, head-hunting, and killing, the world of the ancestors, women's sexuality, fertility, women as wives, and the generation of life.

This is, I think, the final message of the triangle.

NOTES

1. Tuzin (1980:173) cites Scaglion, who suggested that the Abelam do have some myths, in contrast to Forge's statement. Compared to their neighbors in the south, the Iatmul, the Abelam in fact have only a few.

2. An earlier version of this article was presented at an international symposium of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research on "Sepik Cultural History: Variation and Synthesis," chaired by the late Anthony Forge in 1986 in Mijas, Spain.

3. On the large exchange and trade systems along the Sepik River, see Gewertz 1983; Harrison 1990; and Allen et al. 1993.

4. In his admirable work on the North Coast (nowadays implicitly and at least partially included in "the Sepik"), Tiesler has managed to substantiate the North Coast as a cultural area held together by manifold forms of exchange and trade relations and displaying, as a consequence, not only similar cultural traits, but also cultural diversity at the same time (1969-1970).

5. For a discussion of culturally preferred forms among the Abelam, see Hauser-Schäublin 1989a:290-294 and 1989b:32-46.

6. The sloping position is used, for example, for the presentation of long-yam tubers or shell rings tied to poles for exchanges. It is also the characteristic position of the ridgepole not only (but most impressively) of ceremonial houses but also of all other types of dwellings. The huge sculptures called *nggwalndu* are presented to the initiated always in a slanting position; they look as if sleeping on a neck rest (see Hauser-Schäublin 1989a: plate 3).

7. Sixteen months of fieldwork (between 1978 and 1983) among the Abelam was carried out in Kalabu village. Most of the time was devoted to the study of ceremonial houses and art. Fieldwork was made possible by the Swiss National Research Fund, Berne, and the Fritz Sarasin-Stiftung Basel.

8. In this respect the Kwanga and Ilahita, for example, differ. Their gable paintings consist of a large number of single *panggal,* individually painted and then affixed, one after the other, to the front of the building (see Tuzin 1980:175-180).

9. Similar evidence exists from the neighboring Ilahita (Tuzin 1980:176).

10. Forge gives the interpretation of designs painted at his request on triangular pieces of paper (1973:181). He calls a black triangle with white dotted lines a vulva. The paper was certainly painted in a horizontal position, but is reproduced vertically, with the tip of the triangle at the top. Thus the triangle is given a definite orientation, that of verticality. I am sure that the Abelam would oppose such a presentation, at least concerning the pubic triangle.

11. There was an individual triangular painting with a *nggwalndu*-like face on it put up during a *manggendu* initiation in Kwambikum (Forge 1973: plate 3), which was displayed in the open.

12. See, for example, the beautiful photographs by Forge in the calendar of the Australian Museum (1982).

13. Forge writes about the three-dimensional art: "The identification of man, yam, and the *nggwalndu* provided by the stylistic unity of their several faces is one of the most important 'theological' functions of Abelam art" (1973:280).

14. Forge gives a different interpretation, saying the initiation chamber parallels a womb (1967:70).

15. Forge pointed out that the red *wagnen* headdress (he writes it *wakan*) "is used to 'anthropomorphize' and relate to the world of spirits" (1973:178).

16. Roscoe mentions for the Boiken that heads and figures carved on the crossbeam represented either enemies slain in battles or ancestors of the house's sponsor (1995).

17. Bateson mentioned that the top of the building with its finial embodies the most aggressive aspect of the men's house ([1936] 1958:140).

18. Blackwood mentions painted barkcloth similar in form and design to painted elements on the Bosmun's men's house (1951:278). They were used as perineal bands or aprons by men on special occasions.

19. Tuzin mentions that details of a dancer's costume, "including the headdress, appear in simplified form in the adornment of long yams and are rendered graphically in the painting of cult spirits. The costume announces the presence of a spiritual essence which, despite its plural contexts of expression, is ultimately monistic" (1980:222).

20. In Kelm two "dance boards" ("Tanzbrett") from the Kwoma are depicted (1966, 2: plates 122, 123). They are 33 and 54 cm high respectively, leaf-shaped, made of a light wood, and decorated with carvings and paintings. Kelm writes "that it was said the boards were brandished during dance." If they were not used as headdresses they were used as dance shields.

21. In his publication "Kunststile am Sepik," Bühler called the object collected from a ceremonial house in Suagab a "house decoration" (1960: plate 8). He explains that its form is identical with canoe shields from the middle Sepik; in Suagab, he concludes, these objects were probably used in a similar way.

22. This correspondence is expressed also on the linguistic level: The Iatmul I worked with called the crocodile/canoe *wara,* the Abelam call the aspects of *nggwalndu* located in waterholes *wale.*

23. This idea of removing a painting from a ceremonial house or affixing an ornament that has been used in a ceremony on the front of a house has already been discussed for the Yuat (see above).

24. Forge has suggested "that art communicates some fundamental values of Abelam society, and this communication is not fully conscious to anyone concerned" (1970:289).

25. Forge has emphasized that Abelam art is not depicting anything but is conveying meaning "*about* the relationship between things" (1973:189).

REFERENCES CITED

Allan, B. J., R. L. Hide, R. M. Bourke, D. Fritsch, R. Grau, E. Lowes, T. Nen, E. Nirsie, J. Risimeri, and M. Woruba
1993 "East Sepik Province: Text, Summaries, Maps, Code Lists, and Village Identification." *Agricultural Systems of Papua New Guinea, Working Paper No. 2.* Canberra: Department of Human Geography, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University.

The Australian Museum Calendar
1982 *The Abelam, A People of Papua New Guinea.* Sydney.

Bateson, Gregory
(1936) *Naven.* 2d ed. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
1958

Blackwood, Beatrice
1951 "Some Arts and Industries of the Bosmun, Ramu River." In *Südseestudien: Gedenkschrift zur Erinnerung an Felix Speiser,* 266-288. Basel: Museum für Völkerkunde Basel.

Bowden, Ross
1983 *Yena: Art and Ceremony in a Sepik Society.* Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum.
1992 "Art, Architecture, and Collective Representations in a New Guinea Society." In *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics,* ed. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton, 67-93. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press.

Bühler, Alfred
1960 *Kunststile am Sepik.* Basel: Museum für Völkerkunde Basel.

Forge, Anthony
1966 "Art and Environment in the Sepik." *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland,* 23-31. London.
1967 "The Abelam Artist." *In Social Organization: Essays Presented to Raymond Firth,* ed. Maurice Freedman, 65-84. London: Frank Cass & Co.
1970 "Learning to See in New Guinea." In *Socialization,* ed. Philip Mayer, 269-291. ASA Monograph, no. 8. London: Tavistock.
1973 "Style and Meaning in Sepik Art." In *Primitive Art and Society,* ed. A. Forge, 162-192. London: Oxford University Press.
1979 "The Problem of Meaning in Art." In *Exploring the Visual Art of Oceania,* ed. Sydney M. Mead, 278-286. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii.

Gell, Alfred
1993 *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia.* Oxford: At the Clarendon Press.

Gewertz, Deborah
1983 *Sepik River Societies: A Historical Ethnography of the Chambi and Their Neighbors.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Haddon, Alfred C.
1894 *The* Decorative *At-t of British New Guinea: A Study in Papuan Ethnography.* Cunningham Memoirs, no. 10. Dublin: The Academy House.

Hanson, F. Allan
1983 "When the Map Is the Territory." In *Structure and Cognition in Art,* ed. Dorothy K. Washburn, 74-89. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harrison, Simon
1990 *Stealing People's Names.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hauser-Schäublin, Brigitta
1977 *Frauen in Kararau: Zur Rolle der Frau bei den Iattmul am Mittelsepik, Papua New Guinea.* Basler Beiträge zur Ethnologie, vol. 18. Basel.
1989a *Kulthäuser in Nordneuguinea.* Teil I: *Architektur, Funktion und Symbolik der Kulthäuser bei den Abelam.* Teil II: *Vergleichende Studien im Sepik-Gebiet und an der Nordküste.* Abhandlungen und Berichte des Staatlichen Museums für Völkerkunde Dresden, vol. 43, Monographien, vol. 7. Berlin.
1989b *Leben in Linie, Muster und Farben.* Basel/Boston/Berlin: Birkhäuser.

Hays, Terence E.
1993 "'The New Guinea Highlands': Region, Culture Area, or Fuzzy Set?" *Current Anthropology* 34 (2): 141-164.

Höltker, Georg
(1966) "Das Geisterhaus bei den Bosngun am unteren Ramu, Neu-Guinea." In *Men-*
1975 *schen und Kulturen in Nordost-Neuguinea,* 231-261. Studia Instituti Anthropos, vol. 29. St. Augustin/Bonn.
1975 *Menschen und Kulturen in Nordost-Neuguinea: Gesammelte Aufsätze. Festschrift.* Studia Instituti Anthropos, vol. 29. St.Augustin/Bonn.

Kaeppler, Adrienne
1978 "Melody, Drone, and Decoration: Underlying Structures and Surface Manifestation in Tongan Art and Society." In *Art in Society: Studies in Style, Culture, and Aesthetics,* ed. Michael Greenhalgh and Vincent Megaw, 261-274. London: Duckworth.

Kelm, Heinz
1966- *Kunst vom Sepik.* 3 vols. Berlin: Museum für Völkerkunde.
1968

Leach, Edmund
1970 *Claude Lévi-Strauss.* London: Collin.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude
1963 *Structural Anthropology.* New York/London: Basic Books.

Lutkehaus, Nancy, and Paul Roscoe
1987 "Sepik Culture History: Variation, Innovation, and Synthesis." *Current Anthropology* 28:577-581.

Lutkehaus, Nancy, Christian Kaufmann, William E. Mitchell, Douglas Newton, Lita Osmundsen, and Meinhard Schuster, eds.
1990 *Sepik Heritage: Tradition and Change in Papua New Guinea.* Durham: Carolina Academic Press.

Mead, Margaret
1938 *The Mountain Arapesh.* Vol. 1: *An Importing Culture.* Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, vol. 36, part 3. New York.
1978 "The Sepik as Cultural Area: Comment." *Anthropological Quarterly* 51:69-75.

Newton, Douglas
1971 *Crocodile* and *Cassowary.* New York: Museum of Primitive Art.

O'Hanlon, Michael
1992 "Unstable Images and Second Skins: Artefacts, Exegesis, and Assessments in the New Guinea Highlands." *Man* 27:587-608.

Reche, Otto
1913 *Der Kaiserin-Augusta-Fluss.* Hamburg: L. Friedrichsen & Co.

Roscoe, Paul
1995 "Of Power and Menace: Sepik Art as an Affecting Presence." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 30:1-21. London.

Schuster, Meinhard
1968 *Farbe, Motiv, Funktion.* Basel: Museum für Völkerkunde Basel.

Shelton, Anthony
1992 "Predicates of Aesthetic Judgements: Ontology and Value in Huichol Material Representation." In *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics,* eds. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton, 209-244. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press.

Shurcliffe, Sidney N.
1930 *Jungle Island: The "Illyria" in the South Seas.* New York/London: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Smidt, Dirk
1990 "*Kominimung,* One-legged Figures: Creative Process and Symbolic Function." In *Art and Identity in Oceania,* ed. A. Hanson and L. Hanson, 15-35. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Stöhr, Waldemar
1971 *Melanesien: Schwarze Inseln der Südsee.* Koln: Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum Köln.

Strathern, Marilyn
n.d. "The One-legged Pearlshell." Draft paper for workshop on "Material Culture, Anthropology of Art," European Association of Social Anthropologists conference, Prague, 1992.

Tiesler, Frank

1969-1970 *Die intertribalen Beziehungen an der Nordküste Neuguineas im Gebiet der kleinen Schouten-Inseln*. Abhandlungen und Berichte des Staatlichen Museums für Völkerkunde Dresden, vols. 30-31. Berlin.

1990 "Problem einer Darstellung der Kunst Neuguineas." Abhandlungen und Berichte des Staatlichen Museums für Völkerkunde Dresden, vol. 44, pp. 235-255.

Twin, Donald F.

1980 *The Voice of the Tambaran.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Wagner, Roy

1986 *Symbols That Stand for Themselves.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.