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The Thrill of the Line, the String, and the Frond, or why the Abelam are a non-cloth culture

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ABSTRACT

With few exceptions, weaving was traditionally unknown in Oceania. Yet soft, pliable bark cloth—often richly decorated—was produced, and used like textiles, especially in Polynesia. This cloth was artistically draped around objects and people and in turn ritually removed. These cloth cultures are based on a system of aesthetic values radically different from those of inland groups especially in New Guinea.

This article demonstrates that within Oceania there are two different cultural traditions with opposing aesthetic fundamental values. Taking as an example the Abelam (East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea) whose aesthetics is based on the principle of 'visual open-work', the fundamental aesthetic values of a non-cloth culture and the gender specific attributes associated with them are analyzed.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to demonstrate that in the Pacific region two different cultural traditions exist, each of them based on a distinct system of aesthetic values. Both systems of aesthetic values display features that are fundamentally in opposition to each other. These two different cultural traditions are cloth vs. non-cloth cultures. Each of them has a more or less clearly defined geographical expansion although occasionally they also overlap regionally.

Only after having experienced textile producing cultures (in Indonesia) using cloth with its properties as a soft and pliable plane in what may be called 'wrap art' (see Hauser-Schäublin 1992:171-176) did I realize how different the aesthetic values expressed in specific artistic principles of the Abelam (East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea) as well as of many other New Guinea cultures are. These cultures which prefer open-work composites I shall call non-cloth cultures.

In the first part of this paper, I shall outline the characteristics of 'wrap art' and briefly deal with cloth-cultures within Oceania. I am seeking the possible reasons for two basically different cultural traditions to exist with a specific 'positive' vs. 'negative' attitude towards cloth.

In the second part, I then turn to New Guinea, specifically to the Abelam and

examine the distinguishing features of their aesthetics¹. I shall describe and discuss Abelam art as a typical non-textile culture. As I hope to be able to demonstrate, their main visual art is based on what might be called 'anti-cloth' principles. Strathern has already pointed out that among the Hageners in the New Guinea Highlands 'decorations are not costumes, sets of clothing to be donned in entirety, but assemblages painstakingly arranged and rearranged for each major event' (1979: 245). Abelam art consists in many respects of 'assemblages' as well; even apparently single pieces of art like a sago spathe painting or netbags are constructed in a similar way by using individual elements as constituents to create a complex piece of art. Therefore, I shall argue that in Abelam art and aesthetics the line, the strip, the string, and fronds are conceived as the basic constituents of designs. All patterns are perceived from the perspective of the line, or 'visual open-work', rather than from that of the homogeneous plane so abundantly displayed and represented in cloth. Moreover, I shall demonstrate that the material used for the production of polychrome artefacts in the context of the ceremonial house and its rituals is chosen according to its explicit non-cloth properties: that of solidity and rigidity, sago spathe (Pidgin *panggal*) plaitings and wood being the preferred materials. Additionally, ephemeral elements originating from the Abelam's nearby as well as farther environment (like large varieties of leaves, flowers, fronds, and plumes) constitute a further important characteristic not only of Abelam art but of many other New Guinean cultures as well. Kocher Schmid has already drawn attention to the Yopno's attitudes towards plant material and the aesthetic qualities attributed to it when used in body ornaments² and in other contexts.

Based on these 'anti-cloth' principles, the Abelam have developed their specific art. This does not make use of the property almost universally assigned to cloth, its softness, fragility (Schneider and Weiner 1989: 2) and its ability to be draped and wound around bodies, statues, pillars, houses, trees, stones and animals. These characteristics of a material traditionally unknown to the Abelam have no place in the repertoire of their aesthetic values. As I shall set forth, this is one of the reasons why textiles have not become fully integrated into Abelam art but are disregarded. I would suggest that the fundamental principles briefly outlined so far even determine the way the Abelam deal with rituals and how they present secrets, mainly the material aspects of spirits and ancestors.

In many or even in most cloth-producing cultures, textiles are used in rituals to create ancestors (Feeley-Harnick 1991) or gods (Valeri 1985: 300-302; Hauser-Schäublin 1992: 195-198, Hendry 1993) by performing wrap art, the art of concealing and revealing. Accordingly, the Abelam apply similar ideas of disguising and revealing with their specific non-cloth means. However, Abelam women do produce a kind of cloth: beautiful net bags. But when used in men's ritual contexts, they are stripped of their soft quality and become stiff, assimilated to the rigid material otherwise given preference.

WRAP ART AND THE ART OF CONCEALING AND REVEALING

Almost without exception, cultures producing woven textiles or other cloth (such as bark cloth, finely plaited mats) have used the symbolic potentialities of cloth in its material properties as well as cloth as an essential agent in social and political contexts. Schneider and Weiner (1989: 3) mention four domains in which people use cloth 'to consolidate social relations and to mobilize political power': 1. cloth manufacture itself and the ritual and discourse that surrounds it, 'cloth as a convincing analogy for the regenerative and degenerative processes of life, and as a great connector of their past and the progeny who constitutes their future'. 2. gift-giving and exchange. Cloth used as a binding tie between two kinship groups, or different generations. 3. in ceremonies of

investiture and rulership cloth may transmit the authority of earlier possessors of the sanctity of past traditions. 4. manipulations of cloth as clothing, the use of dress and adornment to reveal or conceal identities and values. The first three points can be easily applied to other items or goods besides textiles and they will be duly discussed in the context of the manufacture and use of net bags and shellrings with which the former are contrasted not only from the point of view of material properties but also of meaning. But the last point Schneider and Weiner mention, the manipulations of cloth as clothing as a means of concealing and revealing refers directly to questions which prompted this article: how do cultures where textiles are virtually absent deal with these almost universal concerns?

Textiles are one of the most important means used in the dramaturgy of rituals, to transform the common into something else, the unknown and unknowable, to make visible spiritual processes and the power conferred onto initiates or ritual specialists (Valeri 1985; Linnekin 1992: 13-14, 44-46; Feeley-Harnick 1989). 'Indeed, the act of **removing** the object from the sight, of making it invisible' writes Valeri (1985: 300) regarding the wrapping of plants and statues in Hawaiian temple rituals,

favours the implantation of the belief in the god's invisible presence because it creates the experience of a passage from the concrete reality to an invisible one, from a thing of perception to a thing of mind, and therefore from an individual object to a general concept. In other words, wrapping has become a sign of consecration because it reproduces the process by which the mind reaches the ideas of the god.

This 'transformative function of the cloth' (Valeri 1985: 301) and the process it evokes are not only applied to 'objects' but to human beings in general, especially to human manifestations of gods and ancestors as well as to ritual specialists. Apart from the question of **what** becomes transformed by revealing and concealing there is also the question of **when** this is enacted, not only in the sense of what kind of rituals in general but also what kind of boundaries are created between different temporalities. As Hendry has suggested for Japan (1993: 138) 'the temporal wrapping ... is to be found in the way events are separated off from the time surrounding them by quite marked beginnings and endings. This is true of a wide variety of events, from mundane, everyday occurrences to the grandest ceremony.' As the wrapping (including all kinds of materials like paper, straw etc.) is 'a most pervasive part of Japanese life', she calls it 'a cultural design' (1993: 171-172). In many Southeast Asian cultures, wrapping with textiles is a 'cultural design', too, perhaps not in this elaborate and highly complex manner which, as Hendry has demonstrated, exists in all domains of Japanese culture. Rather, in insular Southeast Asia, textiles are the most powerful material used for temporal wrappings for and in rituals (Hauser-Schäublin 1992, Hinzler 1993). At times textiles are the sacred heirlooms themselves and are therefore per se imbued with power. At other times it is the actual act of wrapping which confers power on what is wrapped, on the person who performs it as well as on those who witness it (Weiner 1989: 52-54).

WRAPPING IN OCEANIA

Within the Indo-Pacific region, wrapping by means of cloth as a 'cultural design' is not restricted to Southeast Asia but extends right into Oceania, in fact throughout Polynesia to Easter Island but only peripherally into Melanesia. Typically enough, Lake Sentani and Humboldt Bay (Western New Guinea) where Austronesian as well as Non-Austronesian groups are living, seem to represent one of only a few exceptions, due to historical conditions: relations with textile producing cultures of Eastern

Indonesia have obviously existed since prehistoric times (as Dong Son finds in Western New Guinea indicate, Bernet Kempers 1988: 291). In the western tip of New Guinea, in the Bird's Head peninsula, *ikat*-cloth from Eastern Indonesia was imported, already in precolonial times; there they formed what is called the *kain timur* complex (Miedema 1986). According to the same author these highly valued textiles constituted locally two different classes 1) sacred heirlooms kept individually and displayed in cults only and 2) so-called 'wandering cloth' used in exchange and trade relations. These relations have, as far as we know, never included the Lake Sentani and the Humboldt Bay; nevertheless they seem to have influenced indirectly the way these cultures deal with cloth. There, as well as in the Bird's Head area and in most of Polynesia, no woven textiles as in insular Southeast Asia were manufactured but, instead, bark cloth. This material was not only produced (and decorated) as pieces of cloth for use as clothing in everyday life, but also as hangings and wrappings to mark ritual and sacred places (Hoogerbrugge 1993). In Polynesia, the material traditionally used for temporary wrapping changed in the course of colonisation. In former, pre-colonial times, bark cloth and finely plaited mats were used. Nowadays, industrially made imported cloth has, at least partially, replaced these, especially in Eastern Polynesia, and to a lesser extent in Western Polynesia (Kooijman 1973: 110, Teilhet-Fisk 1992: 45). There, any number of different qualities of *tapa* were manufactured with different techniques of ornamentation thus resulting in different patterns. In Hawaii and Tahiti there obviously existed a hierarchically organized classification of different types of cloth, colours and patterns (Kooijman 1973: 101-102). In Hawaii, where different categories of cloth were used as badges of social hierarchy as well, the most highly prized and the most sacred were the famous feather caps and cloaks, the privilege of chiefs (Kaepler 1979 and 1985).³ In some other Polynesian cultures, fine mats were used instead of *tapa* or combined with it for similar purposes.

'Wrapping' in bark cloth, or in fine mats ... is a basic element in the ritual system throughout the area which extends from Viti to Samoa-Tonga, and indeed beyond in central and east Polynesia --- wherever, one could say, suitable textiles are produced' Gell writes (1993: 88) in his book on tattooing where he also discusses the relationship between (temporary) wrapping in bark cloth and (permanently) 'wrapping' the skin by tattooing.

Unfortunately, on mainland New Guinea no systematic comparative study on bark cloth has been carried out so far'. While the art of wrapping and unwrapping by means of a long web of soft, pliant cloth is sometimes even enacted as a kind of ritual performance in Polynesia, a comparable use is almost absent in New Guinea societies. Similarly, in Polynesia tattooing and the way it 'clothes' the skin differs significantly from tattooing on mainland New Guinea. Gell has pointed out that there is a functional equivalence between wrapping the body in 'swathes of bark-cloth' and 'protective tattooing':

...bark-cloth and tattooing might seem to be functionally equivalent; the Vitian warrior is encased in swathes of bark-cloth, his Samoan equivalent is marked by protective tattooing. But tattooing and wrapping are also mutually exclusive, to the extent that if the body is wrapped it cannot ... be tattooed (1993:89).

Gell's aim is to investigate 'the differences between various Polynesian societies (plus Fiji) and ... correlate[s] these with differences in body art' (1993: 6). In his concluding chapter, he relates this correlation between tattooing and 'the different regimes of social reproduction' (1993: 289), in its broadest sense, to different types of Polynesian socio-political systems.⁵ He explains the absence of tattooing in some Polynesian societies mainly in terms of 'the disappearance' and 'lost arts' (p. 297). At the same time, he

relates it to sociological factors, mainly 'to the contraction of social horizons, the diminution of social distances, and in general to the collapse of that degree of difference and anonymity without which tattooing cannot display its person-enhancing properties' (p. 298).

A similarity in use and meaning of *tapa* and tattooing as well as in the social conditions of their existence, perhaps even an analogy between both of them, cannot be a priori denied; both of them are embedded in similar ways in the context and character of Polynesian societies. If Gell's arguments are taken beyond Polynesia and applied for comparative reasons to New Guinea societies, it does not come as a surprise to find that extensive tattooing is almost absent in the societies of mainland New Guinea where the social organisation significantly differs from that of Polynesia.⁶ Instead of tattooing, New Guinea tends to practice scarification; this points in a different direction and is mostly associated with rituals of the life cycle and membership of social groups based primarily on gender and age.

Regarding bark cloth, a completely different situation from the one in Polynesia (as well as from that in Indonesia) exists in Melanesia but especially on mainland New Guinea. As far as I can gather from the sparse material published, the production of *tapa* is known to many New Guinea cultures but rarely is it made into elaborate pieces of cloth comparable to those produced in Polynesia. Furthermore, rarely is it used as clothing per se⁷ with distinguishing characteristics in the context of social relations as it is in Polynesia (i.e. specific categories of *tapa* according to the wearer's social standing). If bark cloth is used as clothing either in everyday life or in rituals, the material is mostly stiff and covers the body rather like a hull or a shell.⁸ Thus, the properties and values attributed to *tapa* seem to be completely different too.

BARK CLOTH IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Historical reasons appear to be behind the regular distribution of *tapa* in Polynesia. As Kooijman (1972) has demonstrated, there is evidence of homology in the techniques and patterns used in the manufacture of bark-cloth in Eastern Indonesia as well as in those of Polynesia. This can be explained in terms of a common Austronesian heritage. Moreover, the raw material for the finest and most highly valued cloth in Polynesia usually stems from the paper mulberry tree which was not indigenous to the Pacific. The paper mulberry tree must have been brought to the Pacific from Southeast Asia by Austronesian settlers (Kooijman 1972: 1). In New Guinea often other plants such as hibiscus, ficus sp., gnetum gnemon, (see Kocher Schmid 1991: 150-151) were used generally resulting in a coarser cloth.

From yet another angle there is support for the hypothesis that the bark cloth traditions of the non-Austronesian speaking groups of mainland New Guinea belong to a different tradition from the ones of Polynesia. Green (1979) has demonstrated a close relationship between Lapita pottery, tattooing and bark cloth production as far as technology and motifs are concerned. He proposes that in the tattoos and bark cloth of post-Lapita Polynesia and Island Melanesia a Lapita (i.e. 'Austronesian') heritage can be discerned.

From the point of view of the social division of labour as well, there exists a significant difference from Polynesia: in those New Guinean cultures where detailed information on the manufacture of *tapa* (see Blackwood 1950, Lemonnier 1984, Sillitoe 1988, Kocher Schmid 1991) is available, it can be shown that this is often carried out by men or alternately by men and women⁹ while in Polynesia it is carried out by women.

In her outstanding book on string bags (called *bilum* in Melanesian Pidgin) in New Guinea, MacKenzie has published a map with the distribution of the *bilum* in Papua New Guinea. The map (1991: 3) reveals that, with only few exceptions, mainland New

Guinea cultures, most of them being Non-Austronesian speakers, are what MacKenzie calls '*bilum* dependent cultures'. In some areas (like the hinterland of Lae and Port Moresby as well as Milne Bay, i.e. areas where Austronesian as well as Non-Austronesian speaking groups are living) the looping technology has been (recently?) introduced. On the North Coast between Vanimo and Aitape, along the Madang Coast, in Southern New Guinea and the Massim area, there are no '*bilum* dependent cultures'. MacKenzie proves that most of these latter areas are inhabited by Austronesian speakers and concludes 'that the distribution of looping technology is concomitant with the distribution of basic language stocks' (1991: 3). She states that the coastal 'Austronesian speaking people do appear to have been fully conversant with **knotted** looping techniques (used for fishing and hunting nets) ...'. She stresses the fact that the quality of this fabric is very different from the interconnected looping used to make *bilum*. It would be interesting to have a similar comparative study of bark cloth producing cultures in New Guinea and their geographical distribution. I anticipate that, in contrast to the mostly non-Austronesian language speaking *bilum* producers,¹⁰ bark cloth is manufactured and used as soft and foldable fabric mainly by Austronesian speaking groups and their neighbours.

THE HANDLING OF BARK CLOTH AND CLOTHING IN NEW GUINEA

When bark cloth is used in the context of men's ritual life it is not because of its textile-like property of being soft, or because it can be folded, rolled up or tied and wound around all kinds of objects. Rather, it is spread and tied to frames and fixed so that the softness of the material is not obvious; sometimes *tapa* is tied to a frame and carried like a shield or board, as e.g. in Goroka (Birnbaum and Strathern 1990: 66) and in Collingwood Bay (Tiesler 1993:18 and plate 18). By stretching it over differently shaped frames, masks were also produced. The most fascinating and spectacular *tapa* masks in Melanesia are those of the Baining with their striking forms (Corbin 1986). On the New Guinea mainland, *tapa* masks are also well known, especially the *he-ehe* masks of the Elema (Williams 1940) in the Papuan Gulf. In the Highlands, masks made of bark rather than bark cloth were also used, as among the Asaro (Birnbaum and Strathern 1990: 96). 'Hats' or 'wigs' made of *tapa* seem to be more common in various parts of New Guinea (Birnbaum and Strathern 1990: 16-17, 106-110). Where wigs are concerned, bark cloth is just one component within an assemblage of different elements; often it is only used as fabric tied to a frame or as a base into which hair, flowers, feathers, and other ornaments were stuck. I would suggest that the prolific wigs produced in the Highlands can be regarded as a variation of masks. According to O'Hanlon (1992: 600) a Waghi wig is meant to disguise its wearer. In former times¹¹, the frame was covered with *tapa* to which clinging burrs were attached and then, finally, human hair was pressed onto them (O'Hanlon 1992: 599).

O'Hanlon concludes that such wigs are 'constructed second skins' (1992: 603) in the sense that the 'Melanesian body ... is typically signposted as 'under construction': a 'portfolio' ... of substances and flows from a number of sources, momentarily come together.'

Of course textiles, and tattooing, serve as 'second skins' as well but, as I shall outline, there exist obviously different concepts of the 'first' and the 'second' skin, as well as a different 'construction' of these 'skins'.

Strathern and Strathern (1971), Sillitoe (1988) and O'Hanlon (1992) illustrate how New Guinea cultures have developed totally different means of creating a 'second skin' from those of SE Asia or Polynesia. Kooijman has also pointed out that 'in Papuan societies, "clothing" usually consisted of body decorations' (1973: 12). Body decorations — to sum it up briefly before I cite the example of the Abelam — consist of body painting

(which I would call **the** fundamental means used for transformations) and, in addition, of all kinds of ornaments made from shells, teeth, feathers, fur, hair, and many ephemeral elements,¹² such as leaves, fronds, flowers, and fruits or nuts. Necklaces, belts, plaited bands and meshwork cloth exist in many variations and are often worn in multiple and prolific combinations. Under the technological category of 'meshwork' different types of objects are summed up which ought to be separated or rather first considered individually because some of them are produced by men and some by women; others are the results of efforts by women and men alike. String bags are among the most prominent meshwork elements. Generally speaking, they are made by women; as body decoration of men they are of minor importance unless they become transformed by men into objects of 'multiple authorship' by subjecting them to special treatment, for example, with the addition of feathers (MacKenzie 1991: 157-189). No doubt *bilum* are cloth with properties similar to those of woven textiles¹³ but with only few exceptions are they used because of their textile-like qualities. As I shall demonstrate in the next section, in my opinion this is due to principles of aesthetics typical of non-textile cultures.

THE NON-CLOTH CHARACTERISTICS OF ABELAM ART THE LINE, THE STRIP AND THE STRING: VISUAL 'OPEN-WORK'

In this section I shall outline the characteristics of the materials and the way the Abelam use them to produce art. In the introduction, I have outlined two characteristics on which Abelam art and aesthetic are based: 1) the line, the strip (of leaves, fronds etc.), the string (the Abelam are 'a *bilum* dependent culture'!) as the constituent of ornamentation and, from the point of view of aesthetics, the appreciation and the perception of the line rather than the plane. 2) The preference for rather unprocessed plant, solid and rigid material for sacred/secret ritual displays. I shall show that the principles underlying the different categories of Abelam visual art are basically the same and that, from this point of view, no division between cult art (figures, paintings and masks) on the one hand and decorations on the other (Strathern and Strathern 1971: 174-177) can be made. Forge has suggested 'that polychrome two-dimensional paintings become a closed system, unrelated to natural objects, or to carvings and other three-dimensional art objects, or indeed, to anything outside the paintings' (1970: 269). In contrast, I shall aim to prove that the same basic aesthetic principles apply to all arts and therefore form an aesthetic system.

In almost every category of Abelam art (except carving which as such is only an incomplete, interim stage in the creation of an artifact, unless it is painted) the line, the strip or the string is the crucial element or constituent. Though it may vary in shade, the colour of the most important line, which is considered to determine the pattern, is white. At the same time, this is the most highly valued colour; it is associated with light, sun, bones and shellrings, and is classified as male.

When starting to paint a *panggal* either for a headdress, a panel for an initiation room or the facade of a ceremonial house, the head artist starts by drawing a white line¹⁴ on the sago spathe that has been covered first with a layer of grey or black mud. He does it by means of a white feather dipped into white pigment. To use Kaeppler's terminology (1978), the white line is the 'leading part' within motifs and, from the point of view of the process of painting as well as from that of the composition, is applied independently of other colours, each of which is associated with definite values related to complex systems of classification (see also Forge 1970: 284-286), the most important being that of gender.

Only after the head artist has completed the first horizontal band of designs do his assistants draw red lines along the patterns pre-determined by the fine white lines (see

also Forge 1967: 76). In a further step, yellow lines are drawn. Finally, black is added to fill in the remaining unpainted parts. While the assistants are still busy with the first set of motifs the head artist continues to outline with white lines the next band of patterns. A painting being worked on looks very much like different coloured strings becoming intertwined with each other to form a pattern standing out against the dark background. Each completed section is then temporarily decorated with ephemeral elements, red flowers laid down on the painting.



In Abalam paintings, the white line is the most important constituent and relates one band of ornaments to the next. The head artist (left) determines the designs and the layout of complex paintings. Photographer: Jörg Hauser, Göttingen.

Basic differences exist in the way the individual 'strings' of colour are composed. The white line is continuous, from the top to the bottom of the painting. When, for example, a whole facade is painted, the artist starts at the top with the first design. As soon as he has completed it, he leaves a small white line like a string below it. He takes up this end as soon as he begins with the next horizontally organised row of designs, and so on. Consequently this results in a continuous white line linking each band of orna-

ments to the next. It is literally the white string that unites and holds even an extremely large and complex painting together like a web or a net. All other colours are applied intermittently in the sense that they merely follow and accentuate the leading white lines. The white continuous line is called *maindshe*.

There are many different Abelam carvings used in specific rituals (mainly for the graded initiation system). But as sculptures they are considered to be 'only wood'; it is through being painted in the same way as *panggal* that they come to life (Forge 1967: 75-76).¹⁵ The same expression, *maindshe*, applies to differently coloured leaves and flowers cut into narrow strips and used to create elaborate concentric patterns on a layer of froth floating on the surface of a waterhole. It is the ephemeral piece of sacred art that is produced by older men for the first initiation of small boys. The patterns as such follow those of the paintings and the same names are also applied to them. Instead of drawing lines with brushes and paint, strips of leaves and flowers are laid in a kind of appliqué technique onto the white froth (the latter produced by crushing and kneading certain leaves). There is, however, a significant difference between the painting and the froth image. Whereas the white lines on the black background are the dominant element in the paintings, in the froth image it is the white base on which mainly red, yellow, and dark green strips of leaves are set. The Abelam say that the white 'background' is in fact the foreground, i.e. the most important colour and part of the image created. It is the white froth and the way it links all bands of pattern arranged concentrically that is looked at first, and not the coloured *maindshe*.

Similar ideas are expressed in a further category of material where *maindshe* is the structuring principle as well: net bags. The basic colour of the undyed twined string produced from the bast of various trees and shrubs¹⁶ (depending on the type of *bilum* and its specific use) is considered to be white (though I would rather call it beige). It is the white *maindshe* that is the leading part, followed partly by red and black dyed strings in the composition of the patterns, though one is tempted rather to 'see' red and black lines and triangles¹⁷ first. The patterns used in these specific looping techniques are exclusively applied by women (without a needle or any other device). They are similar to those of the paintings though their number is more limited, consisting mainly of horizontal and zigzag lines, broader stripes, triangles and rectangles. The patterns are only applied to the front side of the string bag, not to the back.¹⁸ Moreover, men attribute the origin of similar patterns painted on the facades of the ceremonial houses to women's net bag patterns, and not vice versa.

Women manufacture net bags not only for themselves but also, if they are not yet married, for their brothers and, later, for their husbands. The patterns are related to the initiation grade the brother or husband has attained. The bags reflect his status within the men's community with its graded ritual hierarchy.¹⁹ Women as producers of the *bilum* identify themselves with their brothers or husbands by wearing the same patterns on their net bags. At the same time, by this means of visual identification, a woman's integration into clanship (her brother's or her husband's) is manifested;²⁰ however, there are no clan specific patterns. Nevertheless, men prefer *kimbi*, plaited baskets they manufacture themselves as badges for the highest initiation grades. *Maindshe* is the string to which women continually add — like the head artist who draws the white lines on a painting — a further piece by twining and rolling the raw material, fibres, on their thigh and joining it with the end of the string of the *bilum*. *Maindshe* is a strip from which finally, bit by bit, a whole net bag is produced. *Maindshe* expresses the same fundamental ideas in all the contexts described: namely the line, the strip or the string. *Maindshe* consists first of a single piece which is made longer by adding to it until a continuous composite work is produced.

A further type of composite work is the plaited seating mat (produced by men). These are made of a whole coconut palm frond. The individual leaves on both sides of

Different coloured leaves cut into strips are laid out on a layer of froth to form an ephemeral artifact for an initiation.
Photographer: Jörg Hauser, Göttingen.



the rib are plaited. In contrast to composite works mentioned so far which consist of many different elements, these mats always consist of two elements, horizontal and vertical which become intertwined, as is typical for plaitings. But again, it is not the flat surface produced by the process of plaiting which the Abelam stress when talking about them but the lattice-work character. Characteristically, they call the seating mats *ara*. The same term is used for the two ceremonial 'lines', the moieties (Forge 1967: 68), one of the basic elements of Abelam social organisation (Kaberry 1941: 239-240; Losche

n.d.). Each *ara* alternately prepares and performs the (graded) initiation ceremonies for the other. Food and pig exchange between the two *ara* are part of the initiations. The mutual performance of initiations, the giving and receiving of gifts — mainly the produce of gardens and animal husbandry — ‘knit’ the two *ara* together. Analogously, the two rows of coconut leaves protruding from the same rib are plaited to produce a mat with a definite structure.

The emphasis the Abelam put on maintaining the individuality and the separateness of the materials used to create a pattern or a composite work in the sense of an assemblage (rather than a uniform, homogenous plane) can be discerned even more clearly in the mats used to cover the lower part of the ceremonial house. Plant material of a completely different quality is used for them (these mats are called *kimbi*)²¹. Leaves of the sago palm are placed vertically and white strips of the inner side of bamboo are inserted horizontally. When these unusual materials are plaited, mainly lines of white and brown zigzag patterns, similar to lattice-work, are created. They look as if one material is superimposed in appliqué technique on the other.



A mat is being plaited by inserting white strips of bamboo into leaves of sago palm leaves.
Photographer: Jörg Hauser, Göttingen.

There are many more categories of artifacts²² such as polished, engraved coconut shell bowls, bone daggers and pottery: in all of them the predominance of the individual line, strip or string can be recognized in their decoration. Among them are the mannequin-like, knitted *kara-ut* (literally 'boar-net') decorations men hold between their teeth in aggressive situations, formerly in warfare attacks, nowadays mainly in the course of disputes. They are actually war ornaments when worn in this way; they symbolize the deadly grip or bite of the warrior (the 'boar'). On ceremonial occasions decorated men wear them dangling down their back. Onto this densely knit meshwork²³, *nassa* shells are attached one after the other so that white zigzag lines or stripes and triangles in a kind of appliqué technique are created. In exactly the same way, various types of men's headbands are decorated. Other examples illustrating the individuality and the prevalence of the line over the plane in Abelam art are the yam masks made of wickerwork. These masks consist more or less of stripes or bands of wickerwork, creating a kind of visual open-work. The main emphasis is on the large eyes which consist of several separate concentric (sometimes elongated) circles almost invisibly held together. The plaited headdress rising from the face consists alternately of zigzag bands and horizontal stripes, open-work again rather than solid plane plaiting. The effect of individual lines and strips is visually reinforced by the addition of paint.

This, what I would call the basic principle of Abelam aesthetics, can in fact be observed in the socialisation of Abelam children. As Forge has demonstrated, the line is the element of visual art children learn to see first and it is thus the main element they reproduce first when asked to do drawings (1970: 284-285).

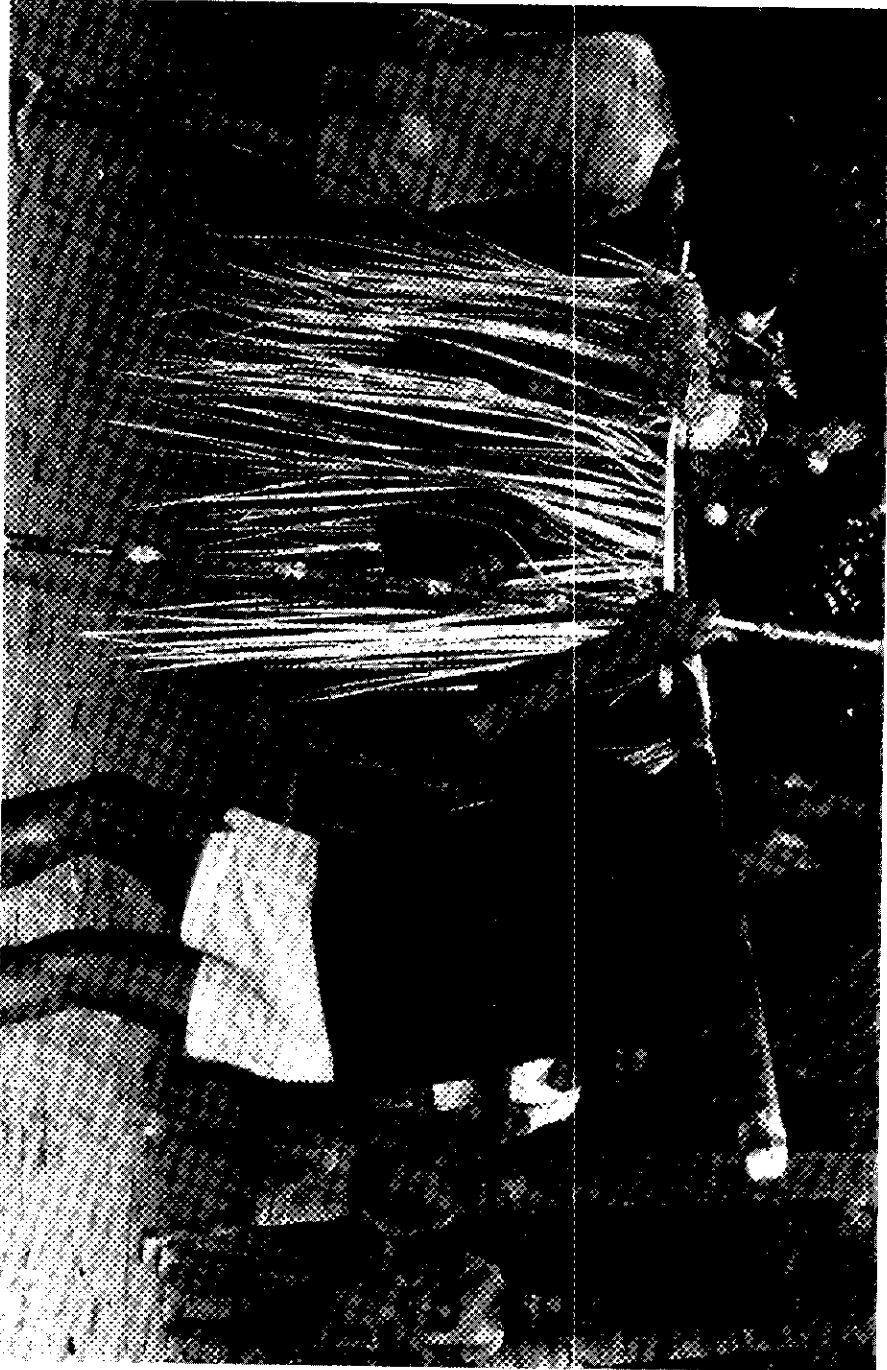
In another domain of art, in artistic displays, the same principle of emphasizing the single line set off in some way against a background and of putting together two or more different elements to create a composite piece of art also becomes apparent. For the display of traditional wealth — shellrings — dark green, glossy banana leaves are chosen. For marriage transactions the leaves are spread on the ground and the bright shell rings are carefully placed on top of them in a single line ranged according to their size, with the largest (called 'the head') at the top, the smallest at the bottom. From a distance, they look like a vertical line of white circles displayed on a dark green background. For the opening ceremony of a ceremonial house, the men of the village bring their most beautiful and highly valued shellrings to the ceremonial ground in order to have them displayed on the lower part of the newly completed building. The shellrings are laid out in the same manner on banana leaves first and then sewn onto them. The banana leaves with the rings are then fastened, one beside the other, to a horizontal pole set up immediately in front of the ceremonial house. The whole lower part of the house is finally covered with these beautiful rows of white shell rings on the dark green leaves.

PLANT 'CURTAINS' INSTEAD OF WRAPPINGS

I suggested earlier that the Abelam are a non-cloth culture in the sense that they do not appreciate cloth as flowing soft fabric because in their dominant (male) discourse of aesthetics, preference is given to 'open-work', the individual clearly defined line, strip and string. They disregard the properties of the flat surface as such, especially, as I shall demonstrate below, if it is soft and foldable material and tends to roll up.

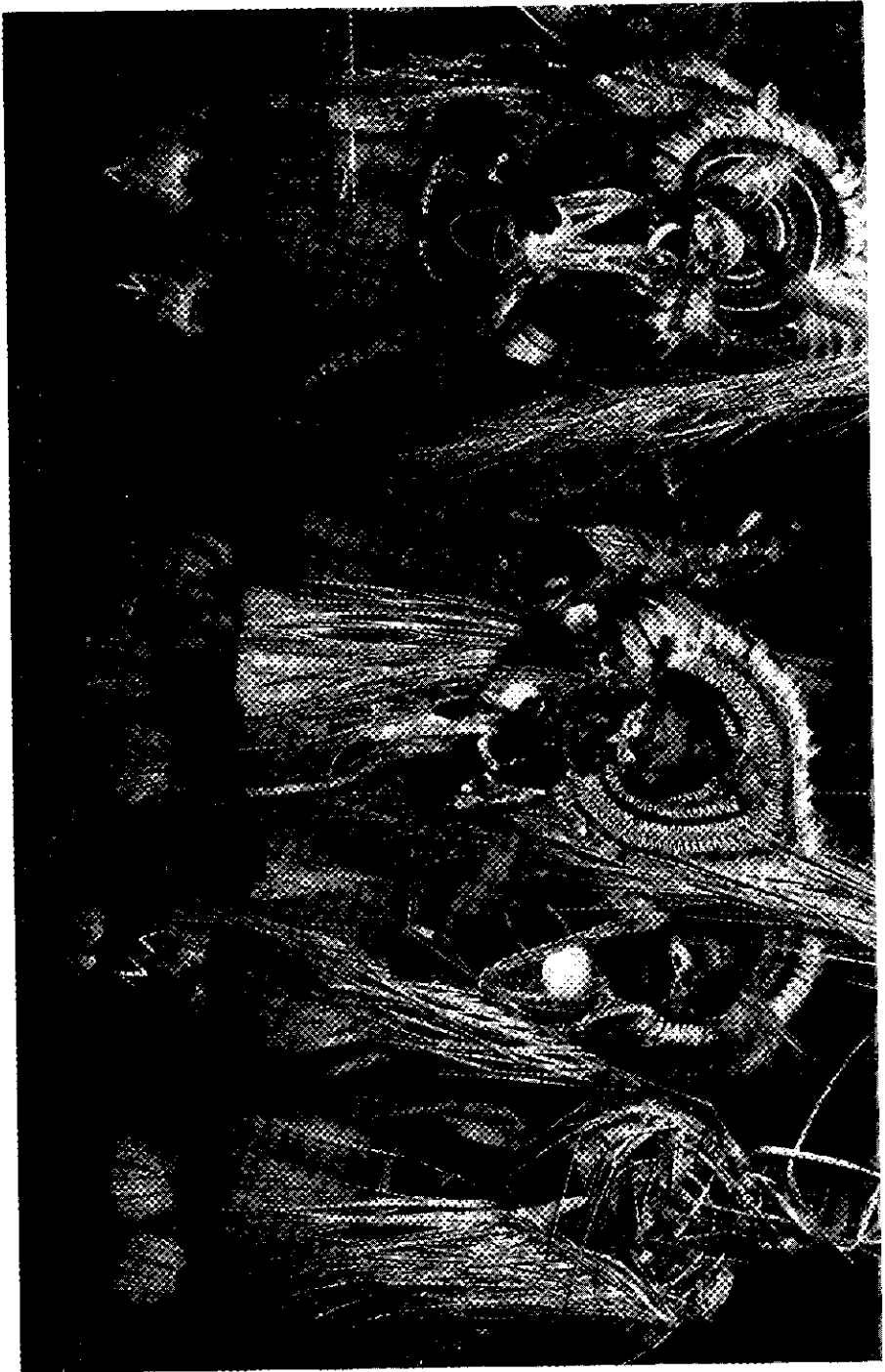
I shall now turn to the question of how Abelam culture deals with concealing and revealing as a means of actualizing and making power visible in ritual contexts and of how they define boundaries between the powerful, those who are able to produce and to handle sacred items, and the powerless, those who are allowed only to passively participate or who are excluded completely. This is the context in which many textile producing cultures make distinctive use of cloth either as clothing or as wrapping material (Hendry 1993: 109-113).

A pig destined for a sacrifice is partially concealed by a curtain of fronds. Photographer: Jörg Hauser, Göttingen.



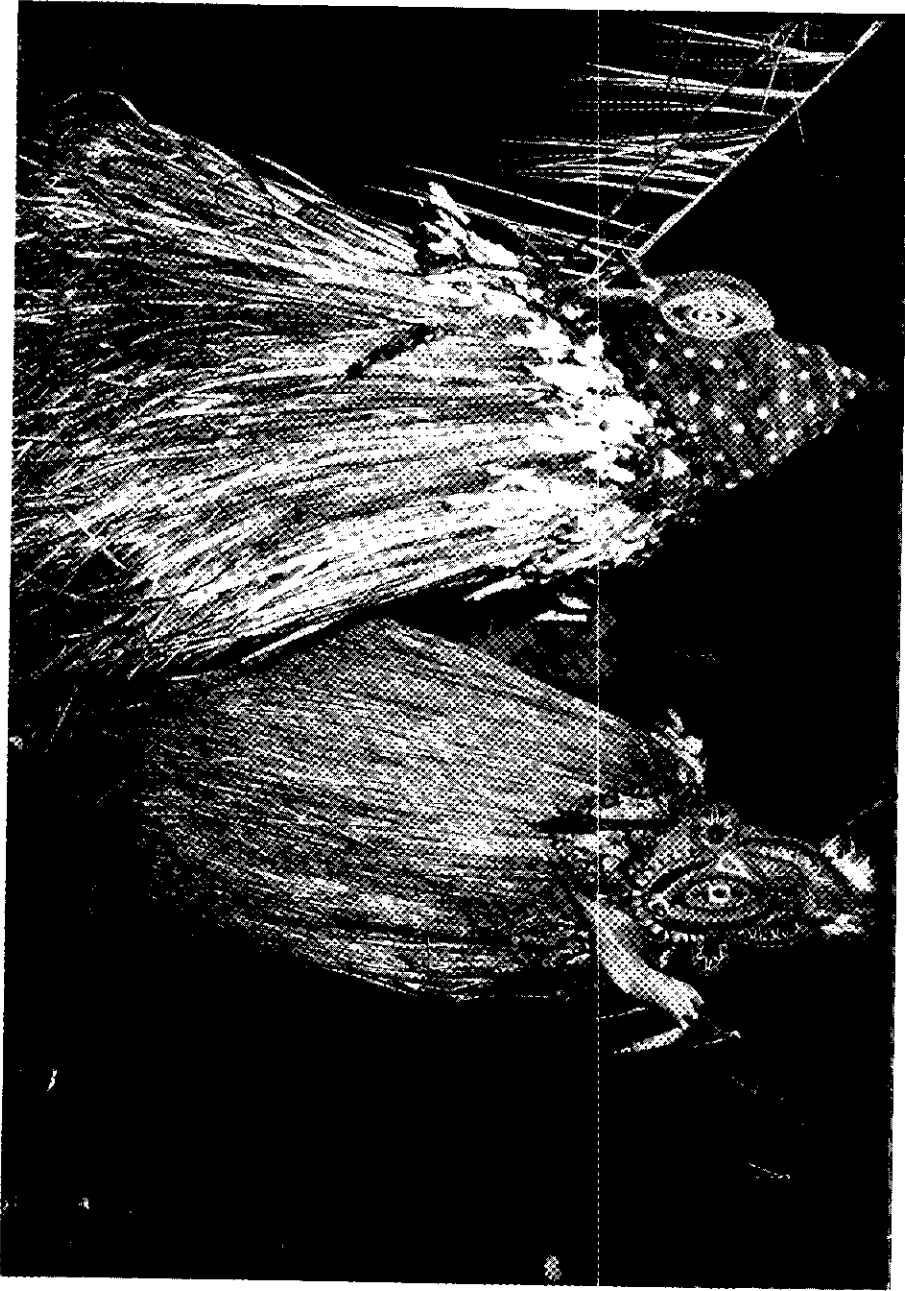
In most rituals — either initiations in the ceremonial house or rituals on the ground to promote the growth of the yam-tubers displays of sacred objects — the temporary abodes of the spirits responsible for fertility and well-being of people and plants are always fenced off. For this purpose the carvings displayed in the ceremonial house, the stones set up nearby to commemorate important men, and the round stone in the centre

Men decorated during an initiation dance. All ornaments are composite work based on the emphasis of the line the strip, the string and the fronds.
Photographer: Jörg Hauser, Göttingen.



of the ceremonial ground (called 'moon' and associated with spirits residing in water holes) are fenced off and thereby partly concealed by light green, i.e. fresh-cut coconut fronds fixed to a simple frame of sticks. Streamers of palm fronds are attached to the

Wickerwork masks (baba) with leaf costumes. Photographer: Jörg Hauser, Göttingen.



horizontal sticks and hang down freely like a curtain; in the slightest breeze, the fibres or strips move individually. Sometimes red *ban* fruits or ovula shells are added, depending on the nature of the display. Bands of silvery leaves are placed below the crossbeam of a new storehouse or ceremonial house. Young light-green coconut fronds are stuck like flags into the roof of a newly completed ceremonial house. Many more examples of such boundary markings by means of streamers of leaves and fronds could be given. The effect achieved is always the demarcation of a sacred place and at the same time the attraction of the participants' attention. Moreover, this is done, characteristically, by

means of some kinds of string curtains playing with the contour and the shapes of the objects behind; it is a play partly of concealing and also of revealing.

A similar principle applies in body decorations. In former times, the Abelam were virtually naked in everyday life (Forge 1970: 275). For ceremonies, different kinds of ornaments are used. Apart from body painting and shell valuables, men wear plaited belts and upper arm bands, as well as aprons of different vegetable material (depending on the ceremony): dried bast strips or fresh fronds wound around the waist. Some of these aprons reach down to the calf, others only to the thighs. Smaller bands of bast strips or leaves are tied below the knee and bundles of different fresh leaves are stuck into them. These decorations are ritual attire aiming – in combination with body painting (blackening of the whole body, additional facial painting in bright colours), bunches of fresh leaves stuck into the arm bands, necklaces, shell rings – at making the ‘ordinary’ body invisible, at estranging the individual body with its known shape and contour and transforming it into something else. The decorations emphasize the fact that it is not brothers, husbands, fathers or sons who are dancing²⁴ but spirits originating in the world beyond, a world conceived of as full of beauty, miracles – and power. At the same time, the spectators’ attention is drawn to the arrangement of the decoration as such, the combination of all these different elements and various materials creating a total image.²⁵

The composition of masks and costumes follows the same principles of assemblage in which concealing and revealing are by means of curtain-like elements. The Abelam have only one type of mask which they call *baba*. These masks are associated with mythical clan specific pigs and therefore display not primarily anthropomorphic traits (see Hauser-Schäublin 1984). The *baba* masks (worn like helmets) are made of wickerwork and are worn by men (in the context of initiations) along with a costume which covers the body completely. The costume consists of long fresh leaves reaching down to the ankles. When a *baba* appears, it bursts forth with wild jumps around the houses or the ceremonial ground. The whole costume with its dozens or even hundreds of leaves moves continuously; it is a play with revealing the legs of the dancer in one instant and concealing them in the next.

All these ‘decorations’ have some fundamental elements in common which, as I have suggested, form the principles of Abelam aesthetics. They all consist of individual fringes, strips, and leaves. It is not fabric²⁶ as a whole with a homogenous texture that represents the ideal material for the Abelam. They show preference for the individual strips, strings, and lines and their innumerable combinations, accentuated by decorations with similar properties and qualities.

THE USE OF IMPORTED TEXTILES AND COLOUR PRINTS

These basic principles of their art are, I conclude, also the reason why the Abelam have made almost no use of cloth in ritual contexts since it became available in the colonial and post-colonial era. I remember how shocked I was by the Abelam women who had asked me to bring back plain bright red and plain black cloth from a shopping trip to Wewak.²⁷ I had assumed that they would use it as cloth. But instead, they immediately cut it up into strips. Then the women started to unravel the fabric into individual threads. Subsequently they twined these and rolled them on their thighs, then joined them to the already produced yarn on a clew. Finally, they used the yarn to manufacture colourfully patterned net bags²⁸ instead of the locally dyed strings with their rather faint colours. The women did not, as I had assumed, use the fabric for bags which could be produced easily and quickly. Like bark and bast, the traditional raw material for *bilum*, the textiles were torn into strips, then separated into fibres and finally twined into strings.

Cloth has never replaced fronds, bands or leaves and the like.²⁹ The reason is that the requirements for such a replacement, the equivalence of material with a distinct quality, were not met since they did not exist.³⁰ There are many further examples which could be cited to demonstrate the anti-cloth nature of Abelam art. The bast and the leaf aprons have never been replaced by trousers or skirts. Modern articles of clothing are more likely to be worn **below** the string and bast aprons. However, I once brought back from a shopping trip to Wewak onions packed in a loosely knotted red nylon bag which I carelessly tore apart to open it. My Abelam friends who were with me when I did this were shocked; they immediately tried to stop me from ruining the whole string bag. One of them, thrilled by this nylon string bag, picked it up and took it with him. I rediscovered it much later as part of a man's head decoration.³¹ Apparently these bags which I treated with indifference, attracted the Abelam more than a piece of cloth of the same size.

It is important to note, however, that the Abelam did not disapprove of all new or foreign material they came into contact with. For example, they were initially fascinated by the bright shiny colours of the paint that could be bought in stores. In the 1950s and 1960s, these paints were used for the facades of ceremonial houses as well as for all artifacts which needed repainting. Thus, industrially produced colours quickly replaced the traditional ones, though in the late 1970s and 1980s, traditional paints made a comeback since they were not just colours but magical substances, e.g. used in yam growing rituals, initiations and for body paintings, properties which the oil-colours turned out not to possess.

Forge describes how the Abelam men eagerly took some coloured pages out of magazines he had brought with him. They considered them as sacred items, as 'European tamberans' (1970:286), as powerful sacra. Some of these coloured illustrations (sometimes the wrappers of tins of mackerel) were fixed to the plaited lower part of the facades of ceremonial houses and were integrated into men's headdresses at initiations up to the late seventies. By then, these scraps were no longer considered sacred or secret as they were when the Abelam were confronted with such glossy material for the first time. But the people obviously liked these intensely coloured pieces of paper and, even in the eighties, the wrapping paper of tins was not just torn off and thrown away but was either given to children to play with or was kept as decorations for purposes not yet determined.

The question therefore is: why did the Abelam readily integrate coloured paper in their ritual or ceremonial paraphernalia whereas they almost completely disregarded textiles which were at least equally colourful?

The main reason is, I think, that the colour prints of glossy magazines were considered a kind of equivalent to *panggal* paintings. It was not only the colour that attracted them but also the material, the rather rigid material with its glossy surface. In view of this equivalence (which does not exist for textiles and net bags), it is necessary to elaborate the specific nature of *panggal*.

THE CONTRASTING QUALITIES OF PAINTINGS, STRING BAGS, AND SHELLRINGS

Apart from the huge facade of the Abelam ceremonial houses, paintings are important in initiation displays and for head-dresses. Whole initiation chambers are constructed with *panggal*; inside them, the material representations of the spirits are prolifically displayed. Already Forge has mentioned that the Abelam use metaphors when speaking about the material contents of the rituals. One of the metaphors for initiations is 'the spirits manufacture *bilum* (*wut*)', whereas *bilum* in fact means the painted sage spathe panels (*mbai*) used for the initiation chambers (Forge 1967: 70) but also figures with



Young women with net bags filled with ovula shells during a ceremonial dance.
Photographer: Jörg Hauser, Göttingen.

plaited bodies as well as wooden sculptures. The phrasing, the spirits manufacture *bilum*, is used when men talk publicly about preparations going on in the ceremonial house. Forge argues that *wut* does not only mean net bag, i.e. women's product, in this context but also alludes to *nyan wut*, womb, and explains this in terms of the analogy of the female womb and the initiation room and the ritual rebirth of the young men. MacKenzie (1991: 143) has taken over his argumentation which culminates in the interpretation that this metaphor refers to 'the primacy of women's **biological procreativity**'.

Apart from the analogy of meaning, the initiation chamber being a kind of metaphorical womb, suggested by Forge, I shall try to analyse the metaphor by focussing on the material used for these artifacts:

The material properties of *panggal* and *bilum* are, as will be elaborated below, opposed to each other and they are far from being similar or even comparable. Nevertheless, to some extent the lines drawn in the paintings on *panggal* and on wood as well as the plaitings used for the bodies of the secret figures, are identical and are, as mentioned above, called by the same name as the pattern-creating strings of the net bags: the basic form principle of the line, the strip and the string integrates them into one single aesthetic canon although there exist some gender specific differences — not regarding the constitution of designs but with regard to material properties; to a certain extent one could even speak of a gendered aesthetics.

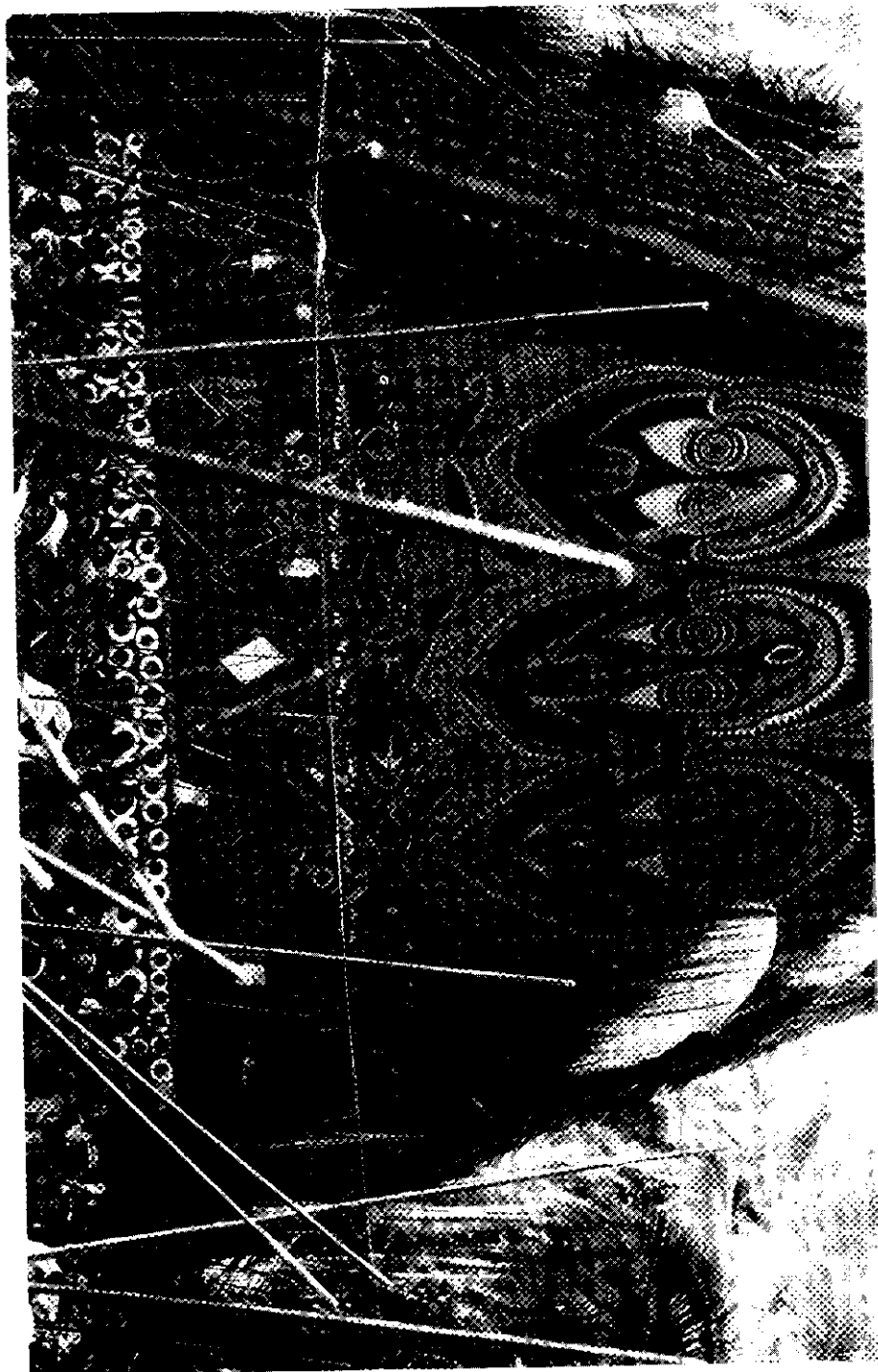
So far I have discussed women's artistic production, the manufacture of strings and *bilum*, only from a rather formalistic and materialistic point of view. To understand the metaphor of *wut* for *mbai*, it is important to understand how far women's products enter the domain of men, especially that of their ritual power.³²

Net bags as such, in their material property, are cloth and women roll them up when they are not working on them. The rolling up is always done slowly and carefully and women seem to enjoy the flexibility of their product during the making. They gently stroke it flat before they continue to work on it. When a *bilum* is completed but not yet put into use it is stored rolled up. As soon as it comes into use, a *bilum* is fully spread out since it is considered 'not nice' if its contents are not equally distributed and do not fill it properly. If the corners of the *bilum* roll up (which sometimes happens with small children and anthropologists), its owner is rebuked by the others and told to have the *bilum* spread properly.

As soon as *bilum* enter the domains of exchange and transaction or the context of men's ceremonial life, they become completely deprived of their natural softness and flexibility. These female goods form an important part of marriage gifts, especially in the Wosera region. There, net bags with complex designs (worked with up to 48 strings simultaneously) constitute a significant part of the bridewealth payments. As MacKenzie has noted (1991: 12), it is the main item of the female portion of the bridewealth, in which shellrings are identified largely with men and *bilum* with women.³³ To display the string bags, a cane as long as the lower width of the *bilum* is inserted which stretches out the bag from one bottom corner to the other. It then looks almost like a merely two-dimensional object.³⁴ Shellrings and net bags are considered complementary goods; the former are symbolically male, associated with bones, stones, the light, the sun and the claim to eternity, while *bilum* are considered female. They are associated with softness, transitoriness.

The cloth-like quality of the *bilum* is made use of in the first menstruation ritual performed exclusively by women. When the young girl emerges from the menstruation hut, she is decorated with a special *bilum* fastened around the waist with a string like a public apron (Forge 1970: 275).³⁵ The girl is decorated and provided with a new *bilum* filled with sea snail shells (ovula) and with a shellring on her breast. In men's ritual dances on the ceremonial ground, young women participate as sisters. They are presented as marriageable women and display some features typical for girls' decorations

The inauguration of a ceremonial house. Between the painted facade and the rows of shell rings, women's netbags are displayed in a flat, two-dimensional manner. Photographer: Jörg Hauser, Göttingen.



after the menarche. They all wear a *bilum* filled with ovula shells on their back. As far as I know, these roundish ovula shells — in contrast especially to the almost two-dimensional shellrings — signify womanness, or, more specifically, are associated with young

women³⁶ and their vulvae. As the young women dance with their *bilum* which are decorated with tiny shellrings (made from the tops of conus shells) otherwise used as wrist ornaments, the ovula shells in it jingle with each step. In no other ritual context is the three-dimensionality of the net bags, their ability to bulge and to smoothly follow and wrap the uneven roundish form of the dozens of shells, displayed in such a striking way. It is not the *bilum* as such but its bulging flexible form, its moving and jingling content which represents at the same time wealth and fertility; both of them are associated with femaleness — and wombs.

As far as I know, apart from the marriage ceremonies *bilum* are used in the contexts of the ceremonial house only on one other occasion. This is during the inauguration of a newly constructed building. For the ceremony, women hand their newly made *bilum* (either especially produced for the purpose or already completed some time ago and stored for some special occasion) to the men. The bags are used individually as decorations on the front of the ceremonial house. They are always displayed in combination with shellrings. As described above, the shellrings are fixed in vertical rows to banana leaves which are then tied to a horizontal pole in front of the plaited lower part of the house front. Above it, but below the painted facade, the most beautiful net bags are fixed directly onto the plaited mat. They are completely flattened, reduced almost to an absolute two-dimensionality. They are deprived of their cloth-like quality to fold up, to smoothly and softly wrap all kinds of items. They almost look like painted sago spathe panels although their material and the techniques applied easily identify them as women's products, as *bilum*. They are used as one of the most important components (not to mention further elements like leaves, flowers and orange coloured fruits) in the creation of a huge total image, a composite work, for the opening ceremony in which hundreds of people, men as well as women, take part.

Apart from the softness of the *bilum* as opposed to the hardness of the shellrings, other contrasting properties are represented by these different categories of objects. Shellrings are appreciated for their pure shining white colour while *bilum* used in ritual displays are also highly valued because of their brightly coloured patterns. Moreover, the *bilum* are always brand new when used in ceremonies and men's rituals. In contrast, the value of a shellring depends also on its age and its renown as an heirloom. Shellrings transmit the authority of the ancestors to the present owner who uses it as a testimony of his link to the realm and the time of the ancestors. Moreover, shellrings 'bind' different kin groups together when used as marriage gifts, each important shellring representing 'a bone' of the clan or lineage which is transferred to the wife-givers. As already mentioned, brand new brightly coloured *bilum* are used in marriage transactions as well but they have no clan specific significance (the patterns are not owned by individual groups but are common property) and they do not confer transgenerational authority either.³⁷ They do not contain 'history' in the sense that shellrings do. Their power lies in their qualities of 'freshness' and 'newness' symbolizing female fertility and transience but also the ephemeral aspects of life.

This is, I think, the crucial point: women's artistic products are associated with utmost femaleness (in the sense of fertility and sexuality) when their properties as soft cloth and bulging containers are displayed. They become transformed, 'masculinized', in men's rituals; they are flattened and therefore endowed with properties similar to those of *panggal*. They become stiff, provided with a rigidity favoured as a quality of artifacts in secret/sacred contexts. It is therefore a 'tempered' femaleness, one controlled by men, which is integrated into men's ritual life. The expression of 'multiple authorship' could be applied to *bilum* transformed by Abelam men as well, but I would insist that it is a 'hierarchical authorship' whereby men's authorship is superimposed onto women's.

The Abelam expression 'the spirits manufacture bilum' therefore does not imply,

as Forge's statement suggests, a kind of imitation of women's generative powers but, instead, an appropriation of them. The painted *panggal* panels of the initiation chamber are not simply 'equivalents' of women's *bilum* as such but only of *bilum* which have become 'stiff', 'masculinized' by men. In contrast to MacKenzie's view that when the string bag is separated from the women and enters men's domain, it 'is not reified, as in the Marxian notion of production, nor is the woman alienated from the product of her labour' (1991: 150), I suggest that it nevertheless is reified and alienated, at least to a certain extent. Net bags do not become *sacra* in the men's house as among the Kwoma (Kaufmann 1986: 162) and the Telefol (MacKenzie 1991: 122-125, 157-190). Due to their original 'soft' material and to the techniques applied by women to produce them, net bags, though deprived of their softness, ultimately do not meet the Abelam requirement of aesthetics in men's initiation rituals. Rather are plaitings (produced by men) preferred whose material qualities differ significantly from that of *bilum*. As pointed out earlier, men use plaited baskets also as emblems for the highest initiation grades. This is due to the fact that plaitings are manufactured by men with rigid and stiff materials contrasting to the softness of string bags. And this, finally, is the reason why textiles are not suitable in ritual contexts and wrapping is adverse to the aims of Abelam men's ritual and sacred/secret art as far as it is represented by means of a selection of distinct materials.

CONCLUSION

From this perspective, it becomes evident why Abelam men have adopted glossy prints but not cloth in their rituals. I have outlined what I think forms a substantial feature of Abelam aesthetics and visual art: the line, the strip and the string as the leading parts in the artistic compositions, and the preference for vegetable matter, more or less 'unprocessed', rigid rather than soft, as the raw material. I suggest that this aesthetic predilection has to do with historical traditions or conditions. As mentioned above, the Abelam are — like most of New Guinea inland groups — a Non-Austronesian speaking group to whom textile production — comparable to that of the Austronesians who obviously brought not only the mulberry tree but also refined techniques of cloth production and, accordingly, a cloth aesthetics with them to the Pacific — did not belong to their cultural 'inventory'.

All Abelam visual art is — and I would consider it typical for many other New Guinea cultures as well — in one way or another composite work consisting of the ad hoc assemblage of qualitatively differing material. And it is not only the final result, the completed homogeneous artifact, which Abelam aesthetics strives for but, I suggest, equally the process of putting together, mosaic-like, individual elements one after the other, whereby a gradual increase in their endowment with power is achieved. Moreover, a kind of dichotomy exists between base and surface. But prevalent is the opposition of the separate elements to each other. Through combination, these elements are integrated into a total image — which can be taken apart, dissolved again into its individual elements.

As mentioned earlier, cultural concepts of the 'first' and the 'second' skin cannot be disregarded in the context of Abelam decorations, neither the human body nor 'bodies' made from other materials. If we return to the basic idea of decoration as a general means of concealing and revealing, we also have to take into account the relationship between the two 'skins' (also in a figurative sense) and what they represent.

'The act of concealment', writes Strathern on self-decoration in Mount Hagen (1979: 249), 'is related to the concept of bringing things outside.' The ornaments used for decorating the body of the dancer, she concludes, should draw the spectators' attention not to the body itself but to the decorations as a separate entity (1979: 254). If trans-

lated into the terms of my rather materialistic analysis of Abelam aesthetics, this would mean the emphasis laid by the Abelam on 'relief' or 'open-work' is created through the line, the string and the frond rather than through a homogenous plane or fabric as a second skin. Strathern explains that the 'outer self, the skin, is ... decorated with the inner self, intrinsic attributes. This is done by taking objects from the outside world — feathers, leaves, shells — and attaching them to the body' (1979: 254). In this way, the elements and designs used bind the body to the external environment.³⁸ They 'indicate an idea of continuity between the source of potency (the ancestors, ...) and its manifestation (in fertility and the maintenance of life)' (p. 255). This relationship between an individual and the ancestors is transactional. Hagen ancestors are present only if the dancers' display is successful and this depends on satisfactory transaction with the ghosts. Similar ideas apply to the Abelam, their art and their underlying aesthetic principles as manifested in their handling of decorations. Though this perspective is outside the scope of my paper, it illuminates its main issues from a different angle by putting them into the cultural context of meaning. At the same time, it bridges the gap between aesthetics and meaning and represents a further answer to the question why things are done the way they are — and why the Abelam (as well as other New Guinean societies) are a non-cloth culture.

NOTES

1. On the discussion of Abelam aesthetics see Forge 1967, 1970, 1979, Schomburg-Scherff (1986) has tried to outline a comparative holistic approach to aesthetics. One of the examples she draws on is the Abelam. How aesthetics has been used as a notion by art historians recently is discussed by Coote and Shelton (1992:7-10).
2. Kocher Schmid was able to trace nearly 100 different plants used for body decorations (1991:252-255).
3. For a critical discussion of the question who the producers and the users of feather cloth were, see Linnekin 1992: 47-55.
4. There exist some monographic studies of the production of *tapa* and its use although they are not very detailed. Among the most thorough descriptions are those of Blackwood (1950:27-31) on the Nauti and Ekuti (Morobe Province), by Lemonnier (1984) on the Anga (Eastern Highlands/ Morobe Province), and by Tiesler (1993) on the Maisin (Collingwood Bay).
5. He relates, in his final conclusions, tattooing and its variations to three different types (and an additional 'mixed' type) of polities he characterizes for Polynesia: the conical system, the feudal system, and the devolved system (Gell 1993: 288-315).
6. This corresponds to the differences between the political systems in Melanesia and Polynesia first suggested by Sahlins 1963; for a recent critical discussion of this distinction see Marcus 1983.
7. One of the few exceptions are the bark cloth producing Maisin-speaking groups (the Maisin language is classified as an 'Austronesian-Papuan "mixed" language' by Wurm 1981): As photographs taken at the beginning of this century document (Tiesler 1993: plates 3-6), people used *tapa* as clothing in a 'textile-like' way. Among the Anga (Eastern Highlands) the women wear long coarse bark cloth capes (Birbaum and Strathern 1990: 102-105) in almost the same way string bags are used in other neighbouring groups in the Highlands.
8. E.g. among the Anga (Lemonnier 1990: plate 4 and 9; Birbaum and Strathern 1990: 102-105) or the Baruya (Godelier 1986: plates 8,11,20).
9. Tiesler (1993) notes with surprise the fact that *tapa* production and the decoration of the cloth with specific clan emblems is exclusively women's work in Collingwood Bay (on the border between the Northern and the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea).
10. Early anthropologists argued, from an evolutionist and diffusionist point of view, that the different 'waves' of immigrants into Oceania not only had different art styles, but also specialized in the use of different materials (Fraser 1962). Although from today's perspective Fraser's theory and methodology are untenable, his conclusions regarding bark cloth and palm spathes as well as other vegetable material as major working material for art production which he attributed to the 'old-Papuan style' show some surprising similarities with my own deductions. My approach and my theoretical conclusions are, however, completely different.
11. Nowadays store-bought fabrics are used.
12. For an impressive complete inventory of valuables and goods obtained from the environment or imported through trade also used in Maring body decorations see Healey 1990.
13. I therefore hesitate to agree with Weiner (1989:34) that materials with non-cloth properties like 'mats,

- bundles [of dried banana leaves] and skirts [women's fibrous skirts] ... can and should be analysed within this category [i.e. cloth].'
14. Forge (1967:76) writes that 'the artist outlines the design to be painted in thin white lines.' The white lines, in fact, constitute the basic design among the northern Abelam.
 15. Forge has pointed out (1967:83-84) that old *nggwalndu* figures have a much more sculptural form than recent ones. 'It seems possible that the very high development of polychrome painting so much admired among the Abelam may have resulted in the declining interest in sculptural form...'
 16. According to Lea (1964: 197-192), the bast of *Althoffia pleiostigma*, *Commersonia bartramii*, *Garcinia sp.*, *Abroma augusta L.* is used as the raw material for net bags.
 17. Triangles are one of the preferred patterns on *bilum*. For a discussion of the triangle as form see Hauser-Schäublin 1994.
 18. Schuster (1989:375) stresses the fact that the Kwoma as well as the Sawos apply the same principle of decoration, whereas the Iatmul women produce net bags patterned on both sides.
 19. MacKenzie (1991:15) gives some information on *bilum* patterns in relation to initiation grades obviously typical for the Wosera.
 20. However, the way men and women carry the net bags clearly signals gender difference: women wear the string bag suspended from their forehead while men carry it hanging from the shoulder.
 21. Baskets produced and used by fully initiated men instead of string bags are also called *kimbi*.
 22. For an excellent overview of an almost complete inventory of preservable Abelam artifacts, see Koch 1968; representative parts of the Basel Abelam collection are published in Hauser-Schäublin 1989.
 23. Meshwork of this kind, to which other ornaments such as forehead bands belong, is made by men using a needle made from a flying fox bone.
 24. Strathern and Strathern (1971:137-138) suggest that through the disguise 'the identity of the individual dancer is partly submerged with that of the rest of his clansmen in the creation of group display. It is the presence of the ghosts that links men together as clansmen and gives them a common identity.' In contrast to the Hageners, clanship is less important among the Abelam and subordinate to the ritual moiety division (*ara*) for all men's rituals.
 25. Strathern noted for the Hageners (1979:246): 'It is not that identity should be kept secret that the decorations should first be seen for themselves.'
 26. In Abelam/Arapesh border villages, pieces of *tapa* cloth are used in dances by women as aprons over the buttocks.
 27. Fieldwork in Kalabu village was carried out in 1978-1979, 1980 and 1983; it was supported by the Swiss Scientific Foundation Berne.
 28. O'Hanlon (1973:71) describes for the Waghi the new materials used as raw materials for the manufacture of net bags: 'extruded nylon or from unravelled and re-spun rice bags, or unpicked garments.'
 29. Strathern and Strathern (1971:129) mention that among the Hageners 'girls put on bright red trade-cloth in a variety of styles instead of net bags and head-nets - or together with these.'
 30. In almost all *tapa* producing cultures, bark cloth was quickly replaced by imported cloth.
 31. For ceremonics, men wear different types of forehead bands manufactured in a kind of mesh work technique to which nassa shells are fastened.
 32. For a discussion of this issue see Strathern 1981:673-674 and Weiner 1989: 61-64.
 33. Weiner speaks of 'hard wealth' (bones, stones and shells) made by experts, frequently from imported materials whereas 'soft wealth' (cloth) is often locally produced by women and is far more widespread (1989:62). Hoskins (1989:166) has noted a similar relationship between textiles (produced by women) and men's metal objects (gold valuables) in Sumba.
 34. Among the Kwoma, women manufacture a special type of string bag used for a similar but still distinct purpose. These are much longer than they are wide. For a *mindja* festival, a liana is inserted to spread them until they become two-dimensional. Women hold them upside down above their head when dancing in front of the men's house; they look like dance shields (Kaufmann 1986:134, plate 71, p.161). However, it is important to note that among the Kwoma these *bilum* displayed by the women themselves as their products are not alienated from them. These special string bags are ritual objects manufactured, displayed and owned by women.
 35. It is not surprising to note that cloth *did* actually replace the menarche *bilum*-apron. Nowadays a kind of simple mini skirt is used instead.
 36. I am not sure who really owns these ovula shells and how they are handed down from one generation to the next. Somehow I got the impression that a mother gives them to her daughter; unfortunately, I have no data on this.
 37. As Strathern has pointed out (1981:674), in Hagen net bags embody womanness which is not conflated with clan continuity and social regeneration.'
 38. The complexity of this relationship and the large variety of elements, raw materials from the natural environment, used for art and body decorations, has been exemplified by Sillitoe (1988: 26-40).

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