No one forgets the ŋwalndu:
Gendered creativity among the Abelam, circa 1960

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts

in

Anthropology

by

Jordan Ross Haug

Committee in charge:
Professor Rupert Stasch, Chair
Professor Joel Robbins
Professor Suzanne Brenner

2012
The Thesis of Jordan Ross Haug is approved and it is accepted in quality for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012
DEDICATION

For Anthony Forge and Tswamung. May they never be forgotten.

Figure 1: Anthony Forge at his desk in Bengragum, circa 1959. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.

Figure 2: Tswamung (left) posing as a ‘shotboi’ with his wife in front of Anthony Forge’s house in Bengragum, 1958 (Forge 1972a: 262).
EPIGRAPH

[W]e observe that everything loses substance, and we perceive that all things ebb, as it were, through length of day, as age steals them from our sight. Nevertheless the aggregate of things palpably remains intact…. The aggregate of things is constantly refreshed, and mortal creatures live by mutual exchange…. Generations…pass on the torch of life from hand to hand.


For the Abelam, the unexplainable has always been a part of everyday life: unexpected encounters in the garden, down at a stream or deep in the bush; a wild pig suddenly dashing out of the dense undergrowth a few feet in front of the hunter; a flying fox with outstretched wings gliding soundlessly over somebody returning from the garden in the twilight; a snake vanishing stealthily into an overgrown pool; shooting stars falling from the sky but never hitting the ground; small yam cuttings, almost withered away, growing to become magnificent tubers; a wife no longer issuing menstrual blood, and instead a child grows in her belly. Such and many similar phenomena are experienced as facets of a reality that, in the end, is not fathomable and will always remain a mystery. The people look upon it as a transcendental reality that shows itself only in bright but brief glimpses. Prism-like, the pieces join together to reveal a kaleidoscopic picture, an image, however, that keeps changing according to its innate properties as well as to the perspective of the viewer.

—Briggitta Hauser-Schäublin (2011: 65)

Figure 3: A man gazes into the void inside of the Haus Tambaran, circa 1950. Photo by Paul Wirz (1959, image 22).
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signature Page</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epigraph</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: The <em>walɔ</em> and the innovation of life</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: The <em>ŋwalnду</em> and the production of death</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interlude: Gendered creativity</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: The force of women’s creativity</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: The force of men’s creativity</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: The memory of the dead</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ndu language groups in the Sepik, Papua New Guinea</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Abelam territory</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Layout of an Abelam hamlet</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>A man inspects his yam</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>A cross-section of a planted long ceremonial yam</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Kinship diagram</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Dual organization of the Tambaran</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Diagram of a Haus Tambaran</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Diagram of the chambers of the Haus Tambaran</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Portrait of Anthony Forge ........................................ iv
Figure 2: Portrait of Tswamung ........................................ iv
Figure 3: A man sitting inside the Haus Tambaran ................ v
Figure 4: Young Tambaran initiates dressed like menarchal girls .... 9
Figure 5: Ariel view of an Abelam hamlet .......................... 11
Figure 6: Ancestral stones .............................................. 19
Figure 7: A dog eating offerings to ancestral stones ................ 20
Figure 8: Lower half of Haus Tambaran’s façade ................. 20
Figure 9: Moon stone on the central plaza .......................... 21
Figure 10: Women dancing on the central plaza ................... 21
Figure 11: Women’s feast on the central plaza ....................... 22
Figure 12: Women distributing food on the central plaza .......... 22
Figure 13: Women scarifying a menarchal girl ...................... 23
Figure 14: Menarchal girl immediately after being scarified .... 23
Figure 15: Men painting on paper ..................................... 24
Figure 16: Decorated woman ........................................... 24
Figure 17: Cassowary bone daggers ................................. 33
Figure 18: Maira figures inside the Haus Tambaran ............. 33
Figure 19: Men transporting a ngwalndu sculpture ................ 34
Figure 20: Maira figure with headdress inside the Haus Tambaran ... 34
Figure 21: Man stands in front of the Haus Tambaran .......... 35
Figure 22: Façade of a Haus Tambaran ............................... 36
Figure 23: Yam stone ......................................................... 36
Figure 24: Shell rings inside the Haus Tambaran ...................... 37
Figure 25: Men planting a yam seedling ................................. 37
Figure 26: Inside the yam house ........................................... 38
Figure 27: A man inspects his yam ........................................... 38
Figure 28: A parade of yam growers ....................................... 40
Figure 29: A pig trap .......................................................... 51
Figure 30: A trapped pig ....................................................... 51
Figure 31: A baba-tagwa ....................................................... 52
Figure 32: Two baba-tagwa with an initiator ............................. 52
Figure 33: A child dressed for initiation into the Tambaran ........... 63
Figure 34: Initiates fully dressed after their initiation ................ 63
Figure 35: The feeding of opposing moieties ............................. 64
Figure 36: An initiator .......................................................... 64
Figure 37: An initiate with full wakan headdress ....................... 65
Figure 38: The entrance to the Haus Tambaran .......................... 65
Figure 39: The exit to the Haus Tambaran ............................... 66
Figure 40: A chamber with figures inside the Haus Tambaran ....... 68
Figure 41: A ngwalndu figure at the last grade of the Haus Tambaran . 68
Figure 42: The figure’s “netbag” ............................................. 69
Figure 43: Initiates dance in the central plaza ............................ 69
Figure 44: The most beautiful thing in the world ....................... 70
Figure 45: The figure’s “netbag” ............................................. 70
Figure 46: Women mourning the death of a child …………………. 79
Figure 47: A skull used for divination …………………………… 79
Figure 48: A mother’s brother buries his sister’s son …………… 80
Figure 49: Men from an enemy village arrive for an exchange … 80
Figure 50: Two big-men fight during their exchange ………….. 81
Figure 51: A big-man sits alone …………………………………… 81
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank Professor Rupert Stasch for carefully reading through many drafts of this thesis. Professor Stasch’s continual interest in my project was inspiring. His patience with the many directions this thesis took proved that he is a scholar always open to new possibilities. His encouragement to continually refine my arguments also proved that he is a scholar who equally values clarity. I cannot think of a more intelligent and charitable scholar or advisor.

Professor Joel Robbins has held a keen interest in this thesis from its inception, and his comments were central to helping me focus the purview of this thesis. His talent for identifying the larger issues involved in social analysis is immense and his ability to communicate those insights is, in my experience, unparalleled. Furthermore, I would never have any of these opportunities if it had not been for Professor Robbin’s initial encouragement for me to come to the University of California, San Diego. I am very grateful for the faith that both Professor Robbins and Professor Stasch have shown in my ability as a budding anthropologist.

Kathy Creely was instrumental in encouraging my interest in the Anthony Forge Papers (MSS 411) held in the Donald Tuzin Archive for Melanesian Anthropology at the University of California, San Diego. Her vast encyclopedic knowledge of the history of anthropology in Melanesia is awe-inspiring. Without her assistance I don’t know if I could have possibly made sense of the vast collection that was before me. Although I changed the course of this thesis from being primarily based on the unpublished materials of Anthony Forge to the published material on the Abelam (with particular emphasis on Anthony Forge’s work), I could not have come to some of my conclusions without first
having read the grander unpublished manuscript by Anthony Forge titled *Abelam Exchange and Society* (n.d.a.). The much less complete and polished version of Phyllis Kaberry’s unpublished monograph, *The Yam Cult of the Abelam: A Study of Cultural Integration in a New Guinea Tribe* (n.d.), had similar effect of providing a holistic account of Abelam sociality and gender relations.

Professor David Pederson volunteered to supervise our department’s first student writing workshop during the very beginning stages of this thesis. Much credit is due to Professor Pederson and the dialogue I was able to have with fellow members of my cohort during those formative months. In particular, I benefited from comments by Hannah Smith, Ian Parker, Mikael Fauvelle, Corinna Most, Devin Beaulieu, and Leanne Williams.

I also benefited from formative exchanges when I shared brief outlines of this thesis’ material. The first of these exchanges was with the Signs in Society Workshop sponsored by the University of California, San Diego’s Center for the Humanities. Dr. Jon Bialecki, who acted as moderator and responded with his own prepared comments, proved once again how much can be learned by thinking outside of the box. Of those who were also participating in that forum, Professor Joseph Hankins, Waqas Butt, and Michael Berman were particularly helpful in their insights and critiques. I also benefited from the opportunity to share this material with the UCSD-U of A Linguistic Anthropology Exchange (Sandrizona) at the University of California, San Diego. Students and faculty from both universities were able to provide critical feedback on my project.
I also appreciate the communication from anthropologists who have either worked among the Abelam or knew Anthony Forge well. They include Don Gardner, Richard Scaglion, Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, Diane Losche, and Ludovic Coupaye. Each of these anthropologists gave me little insights or clues into Anthony Forge’s thoughts that were crucial for the development of this thesis.

Most of all I would like to acknowledge and thank my wife and son, Ashley and Kimball Haug, for their infinite patience. Ashley is my most important interlocutor. She has read countless versions of this thesis and provided the most critical questions I’ve encountered. Without her continual encouragement and help this thesis would have remained at its original length of several hundred disorganized pages. I’d also like to thank my in-laws who Ashley and Kimball lived with during the summer of 2011 when I lived in my office in San Diego laboriously transcribing *Abelam Exchange Society* (n.d.a.) along with Anthony Forge’s field-journal (n.d.b.) and fieldnotes.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

No one forgets the ngwalndu:
Gendered creativity among the Abelam, circa 1960

by

Jordan Ross Haug
Master of Arts in Anthropology
University of California, San Diego, 2012
Professor Rupert Stasch, Chair

Drawn from primary source materials found in the special collection libraries of the University of California, San Diego and London School of Economics, this essay seeks an understanding of gendered models of creativity among the Abelam of New Guinea during a particular ethnohistorical moment. In the late 1950s the anthropologist Anthony Forge lived with the Abelam, where he observed men giving disparaging comments about their own creativity. This was puzzling to Forge because Abelam men were world-famous as prolific artists. This essay seeks to better understand what was at the root of this disconnect between Forge and his informants.
Through an ethnohistorical reconstruction of Abelam cosmology and gendered activities, I argue that the Abelam understood creativity as something that was at once both innovative and reproductive of social forms. For the Abelam, creativity is a form of making and remaking the world. It’s not that Abelam men were uncreative; they created through a different process than what is generally recognized as creativity. By considering the case of Abelam creativity, this essay seeks to reclaim creativity as a valid and productive anthropological category that helps us understand how values are culturally born and reproduced.
Introduction

When Anthony Forge encountered the Abelam of New Guinea in 1958 he was almost immediately struck with a seemingly insurmountable problem. He couldn’t figure out why it was that Abelam men, who were world-famous for their prolific traditional arts, insisted that women were the creative ones and that men only mimicked their creativity. This was particularly puzzling because it seemed that women produced little discernible material or visual art. In his attempt to answer this problem, Forge argued that the creativity of Abelam men was bound up in their elaborate ceremonies that transform initiates from a state of “nature” to a state of “culture.”¹ Forge argued that Abelam “men, in fact, understand women to be truly creative and naturally powerful. Themselves they conceive to be intrinsically devoid of power but able, through their learned cultural means (that is, ritual and art) to tap some of the power and creativity that is natural and intrinsic to women” (Forge 1979: 286). Thus, the efficacy of ritual can only be realized in “capturing that fertility and plenty they desire by incorporating the intrinsic creativity of women” (Forge 1969: 88). Because of their procreative capacity, “true creativity [is the] prerequisite of women, which men can only imitate with the aid of magic and elaborate ritual” (Forge 1971: 141).

Anthony Forge’s basic observation that Abelam men consider women to be truly creative, even though they don’t take part in the famous traditional arts of the Abelam, provides the puzzle that is the basis of this discussion on Abelam notions of gendered modalities of creativity. This issue of creativity has been something of an enigma for

¹ For “men to be creative [they must] be so culturally, mainly by the performance of ceremonial, the use of magic and the observance of taboo” (Forge 1972b: 536). Their “access to supernatural power [is] through ritual” alone (Forge 1973: 189). The “primacy of female creativity, which in Abelam terms is natural” (Ibid) is found in the “powers of reproduction and creation” (Forge 1972b: 536).
anthropologists. The problem is two fold.

First, creativity does not lend itself to be easily defined. Like aesthetics, creativity is often seen as a subjective evaluative judgment on the inherent worth of a thing or person. This predilection for creativity is often the result of a valuing of what is innovative or novel in a thing. What is creative is generally understood to be something that is innovative, and the most creative acts are virtual events where categories themselves are transformed through an innovative process or agent.

The second problem stems from the first. This problem is in the location of creativity. Psychologists have profusely argued for the creative genius or creativity “flows” that enable innovative cognitive developments (Csikszentmihalyi 1996; Sawyer 2006; Taylor 1988). Sociologists have argued that creativity lies in the social action that creates meaningful life-worlds (Joas 1997; cf. Schutz 1967). Anthropologists have been the most keen to find creativity beyond subjectivities (Liep 2001). Some have taken cultural or social creativity as the enacting of cultural values towards their logical ends (cf. Graeber 2001: 117-149; Robbins 2004: 11-15). The “social drama” of such creativity may cause anti-structural events and produce innovative social realities (Turner 1972; Schieffelin 1993). Here anthropologists typically either account for this creativity within the agentive individual (cf. Rapport 2003) or structures of discourse and power alone. Thus, they reproduce an “anthropology of subjects without agency” (Sahlins 2004: 147) or an anthropology of subjects as agency (Keane 2003).

Hans Joas (1997) has effectively demonstrated what’s wrong with these approaches: they privilege a certain sense of creativity where the product of action is creative only if it is expressive or innovative. I believe that is only one part of the story of
creativity. Some of the most recent work on creativity has begun to acknowledge something that Anthony Forge would have benefited from immensely (cf. Leach 2003; Leach 2004). The argument is that creativity isn’t a unitary act of innovation, but instead something that manifests itself in multimodal acts of cultural creation. The invention of culture is not only about the innovative forms that cultural realities can take, but also how such life-worlds are coherently produced and reproduced (cf. Wagner 1981). This leads us to consider that creativity is not just the innovation of creation, but also its production. After all, if we take Fred Damon’s argument that the analysis of production consists of “how ‘this’ was turned ‘that’ by virtue of conceived human effort” (2002: 112), then it stands to reason that reproduction is the creative reiteration of that evental productive effort.

Marilyn Strathern’s critique of Forge’s understanding of Abelam creativity is that it essentializes gender dichotomies in such a way that it denies the possibility that the characteristics of a sex is itself an “achievement” of a performed reality (Strathern 1978; cf. Butler 1990). It does this by falling into a particular western mythos that essentializes femininity as being something unelaborated by culture (Strathern 1988: 125, 360-361; Strathern 1980: 212-213).

I still believe the Abelam provide a productive example of alternate ways of thinking about how creativity is modeled by society. What I wish to demonstrate in my analysis is that Abelam gendered models of creativity are less about this transformation from “nature” to “culture” and more about the particular modalities of creativity that are being figured by gendered models (cf. Rosaldo & Atchinson 1975). In my analysis, Abelam women are creatively innovative in ways to which men can only aspire, while
men creatively reproduce the essential categories of Abelam sociality through their work in yam gardens.

Looking at the relationship that Abelam men and women have to the production of the traditional arts associated with the men’s cult (Tambaran) would be an obvious route to take in the investigation of Abelam creativity; however, I believe that in order to understand how creativity works as a category for the Abelam, it is first requisite to understand the cosmological implications of how Abelam men and women think about gendered activities like female menstruation and the male cultivation of long ceremonial yams. My argument is that modalities of gendered creativity among the Abelam amount to processes of schismogenesis where women create complementary, and thus incommensurable, objects or events in the acts of birth and menstruation. In contrast, men create symmetrically commensurable objects or events in the acts of cultivating and exchanging long ceremonial yams (cf. Bateson 1958; Bateson 1972: 107-127).

Creativity and the Force of Commensuration

Once this creative schismogenesis of women, men, children, and yams is taken into account, we are able to understand the memory in Abelam sociality and semiotics. Each object, however commensurable or incommensurable, and each action, however centripetal or centrifugal it may be, finds its place within Abelam social memory (cf. Deleuze & Guattari 1987 312-314, 395; Bakhtin 1981: 272-272; Halbwachs 1992). Much of the reassessments of Forge’s theory of meaning and representation in Abelam art has focused on either the perspectival aspects of signification and meaning making (Hauser-Schäublin 1994; Losche 2001) or the ineffability and affect of Abelam art (Tuzin 1995;
Roscoe 1995). Few, with the possible exception of Howard Murphy (2005), have sought the underlying values behind Abelam art. While “meaning” may have been “Anthony Forge’s problem” (Gell 1999: 17; italics removed; cf. Forge 1973; Forge 1979), the value behind Abelam art objects as indexes of agentive creativity, such as yams, is still abducted in relation to a holist frame of social being (Gell 1998: 41). However, it may be worth thinking of Abelam art as less of a problem of representation, of either values or meaning, and rather as a problem of the creation of intersubjective realities where objects are themselves agentive and evaluated according to their effects (Leach 2007). I’m not ready to argue that representation is itself a flawed analytic (cf. Deleuze & Guattari 1987). I will continue throughout this thesis to refer to semiotic processes that occur in creativity. However, I do believe that in order for Abelam art to be fully appreciated we must first attempt to understand what creativity is actually doing for Abelam sociality. In doing so I believe we can parse at least one particular dyad of Abelam values, i.e. the incommensurability of fame and immediate commensurability of being consigned to oblivion.

As will be discussed later in the thesis, Abelam men participate in the exchange of equally commensurable yams across symmetrical ritual partnerships (*chambera*). In this circuit of equal exchange, Abelam men find the value of male sociality (Forge 1972b). The centripetal force of immediate commensurability produces segmentary wholes that are antagonistically opposed mutually commensurable others, i.e. villages against villages, clans against clans, exchange partners against exchange partners. These segmentations of social life (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1940; Dumont 1975) create recursive differentiations imbued with ideological or evaluative content (Gal & Irvine 1995;
Dumont 1980: 41-42). By obviating difference through the fractal production of equal 
commensurability, Abelam men are able to produce an image of a holistic social totality 
based on principles of equal exchange (cf. Wagner 1986). However, as Forge is apt to 
point out, some men are more equal than others (Forge 1972b).

As men excel in exchange, art production, and the social maneuvering implicit in 
the men’s cult (Tambaran), they become increasingly known as being particularly good at 
being equal. While I still leave much of the analysis of the implication of this 
phenomenon for the conclusion of this thesis, it does deserve reference that fame itself, as 
the result of successful obviation of difference, is the embodied state of 
incommensurability. For Nancy Munn, the value Gawan of relationality is the 
intersubjective extension of one’s space-time or spactio-temporal presence (Munn 1986: 
55-73, 111-118). For Michael Young, the value of Kalauna myths and magicians is their 
temporal expansion within the person as myth (Young 1983). Both authors see exchange 
and mythic action as creating the embodiment of incommensurable events in social 
memory (Young 1971; Munn 1995). The point that I wish to extrapolate from their 
analysis is that all persons are subject to the consignment of oblivion. Through their 
commensurability as ancestral dead, all are eventually forgotten (cf. Battaglia 1993; 
Lingis 1994). However, some persons are able to extend their mnemonic presence 
through the fame garnered throughout their mortal life. Through their fame they become 
embodiments of absolute incommensurability, immune to the great equalizers of death 
and memory (cf. Frazer 1913: 351). They are, in effect, outside the whole and no longer 
considered a part of the common ancestral dead (cf. Bloch 1971; Valeri 1990b).

This complementary differentiation of persons forgotten and remembered creates
objects of finite and infinite expansion (cf. Dastur 1996; Stasch 2009). The creativity of this process is iconic of that done in gendered differentiations where women are viewed as having all the centrifugal forces of incommensurability, while men seek commensurability as a means of creating segmentary oppositions and refractions that feed off one another through symmetrical schismogenesis (cf. Bateson 1972: 107-127; Bateson 1958). Gendered creativity isn’t about the male and female sexes, but about the dual differentiations in the creation of complementary or symmetrical others. Gendered creativity is something inhabited by actors, whether it is the complementary and centrifugal aspects of incommensurability (women’s creativity) or the symmetrical and centripetal aspects of commensurability (men’s creativity) (cf. Strathern 1988: 334-335). Thus, in my analysis some Abelam men will eventually inhabit the creativity of women. However, this performativity of gendered creativity goes far beyond the actualization and exchange of androgynous bodies that Strathern advocates. It is more than the mixing and exchanging of gendered symbols and metaphors as is the case in the transvestitism of the *Naven* ritual among the Iatmül (Bateson 1958) or certain initiatory grades among the Abelam (cf. Figure 4). The performativity of gendered creativity is the embodiment of a particular cultural logic that plays itself in the actualization of values of creativity through social action.

*The Background*

This thesis is grounded in a particular ethnohistorical moment among the Abelam in colonial New Guinea from the 1930s until the mid-1960s (cf. Kauft 1993; Stasch 1996). During this time the Abelam numbered approximately 30,000 people living in
villages spread throughout an area from the foothills of the Prince Alexander Mountain Range to the Southern Wosera Plains north of the Sepik River (Forge 1973: 173; cf. Illustrations 1, 2 & 3).² The Abelam are a diverse group with considerable cultural differences throughout their territory (Scaglion 1976; cf. Lutkehaus & Roscoe 1987). However, despite their heterogeneity, the Abelam have in common many values, ideals of material culture, and cosmological underpinnings to their myth and ritual. Most importantly, they share a common sense of possibilities. Inspired by anthropology’s recent engagement with Deleuze, I argue, much like others have for the anthropology of Christianity (Bialecki forthcoming), that the Abelam cosmology that I hope to outline in this thesis constitutes a virtual plane of heterogeneous instantiations or multiplicities yet to be actualized. The object of my study isn’t the ethnographic particularities of those instantiations, I’ll leave that for those who’ve done fieldwork among the Abelam, rather my aim is to understand what virtual image those actualizations drew upon (Deleuze & Parnet 1997: 148-152). That whole, as a virtual image of its singular parts is the object of my study (cf. Kapferer 2010).

During World War II, the Abelam experienced vast social upheaval (Scaglion 1983: 477-479; cf. Tuzin 1983). It took nearly a decade and a half for the East Sepik to recover from the ravages of war. When the Abelam were again able to produce a surplus of yams, the latent ritual system of the men’s cult swung into full gear and initiating a renaissance in Abelam art and ritual (Forge 1972a). It was at this time that Anthony Forge came to live with the Eastern Abelam to learn more about art, but he failed to

² Villages usually consist of at least two to three hamlets of which each has two to three patrivirilocal clans (cf. Figure 5 for an aerial photo of a hamlet in a typical village) (Forge 1973).
understand that Abelam art was so caught up in the cosmology around gender and death that he could not separate art and cosmology. What follows is an examination of how the Abelam thought of the creativity of gender and death so we can arrive at a greater understanding of the problem behind Forge’s puzzle.

Figure 4: Two Abelam initiates in the Tambaran are dressed like menarchal girls. On their cheeks is painted inverted triangle as icons of women’s vulvas (Hauser-Schäublin 1994). Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1961. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.


Figure 5: A view a hamlet’s central plaza in Dschame village. Photo by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin (1989a: 8).
Chapter 1: The walo and the innovation of life

The creativity of women in the conception and birth of children is paramount to the Abelam cosmos. Women’s vulvas and menstrual blood are thought to be “mystically dangerous” (Forge 1969: 88). It’s through them alone that the generativity of the generations is realized. Through their relationship with spirits (‘marsali’) known as the walo, they create children through birth. These children are unique beings in contrast to all other things: they have never previously existed and their presence is undetermined by the collectivizing action of male creativity (cf. Stasch 2006; Wagner 1978). In other words, childbirth is “a particular historical event” (Strathern 1988: 278) that cannot be fully obviated until death. The relation between women and the walo not only points toward the fecundity of their procreativity; it is indexical of their relationship with the spirit world of the “unseen” (cf. Leach 2003). Thus, women’s creativity is innovative as a novel creation of nascent possibilities. Although this modality of creativity is typified by the innate capacity to give birth to children, that does not necessarily mean that women’s creativity is indexical of a state of “nature”. Instead, the walo and women’s achievement of novel difference through the complementary and incommensurable births of children makes their creativity an innovative modality.

The walo is a “sacred snake species” (Forge 1969: 88) that is usually thought to live in ancestral stones3 or the beds of streams or water holes that are territorially bound to patrilineal clan lands (Forge 1966: 25; Forge n.d.a.: 9.34; cf. Tuzin 1977). No one living has ever seen a walo in its natural form, but the ancestors are said to have seen

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3 Cf. Figure 6. Food offerings made to the walo are usually almost immediately consumed by dogs and other animals, but the disappearance of the offering is usually stated as proof enough that the walo accept the offering (Forge n.d.a.; cf. Figure 7).
them (Schofield & Parkinson 1963: 4). \(W\)al\(o\) occasionally take the form of pythons,\(^4\) cassowaries, the moon, basketry masked figures (\(baba\)-\(tagwa\)), and strange men from other villages (Ibid; Forge n.d.a.: 9.34; Kaberry 1941\(b\): 360).\(^5\)

The \(w\)al\(o\) are perhaps the most fully cognized of all the Abelam spirits (‘marsalai’). They play an essential role in ritual, the growing of yams, and the health and fortune of clan members. However, all of these roles are subservient to their principle role— the conception of children. A continuous reflection in the Abelam cosmic-mythos is that “children are not conceived by men but by the virilocal clan \(w\)al\(o\) of the woman” (Forge 1966: 29). When a woman handles water from the stream or waterholes of her husband’s clan that the \(w\)al\(o\) causes her to conceive by climbing up her vagina without her knowledge (Ibid). Sometimes women will drink a magical soup to protect themselves from the attacks of the \(w\)al\(o\), but as the bearing of children is a sign of high status they usually welcome the presence of the \(w\)al\(o\) (Kaberry 1941\(a\): 253; Kaberry 1941\(b\): 360). Unlike men, who do their utmost to avoid water from a \(w\)al\(o\) place, women bathe themselves and children in the streams almost daily (Kaberry 1941\(a\): 238), are responsible for transporting water with bamboo containers (Ibid: 247), and may even sleep on the banks of \(w\)al\(o\) streams (Forge n.d.\(b\).: March 10, 1958).

Each person is conceived “afresh by the \(w\)al\(o\)” with a unique soul (\(\text{ŋgmbe}\)) (Forge n.d.a.: 9.34). A person’s blood is usually considered to be “derived exclusively from the mother” (Forge 1972\(b\): 536). Although copulation has no part in the process of conception, it does provide the necessary nourishment for the child to grow in the womb

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\(^4\) Carved pythons as physical embodiments of the \(w\)al\(o\) adorn many lower façades of Haus Tambarans (Figure 8).

\(^5\) The \(w\)al\(o\) may also be considered androgynous (Kaberry 1941\(b\): 360; Kaberry n.d.).
(Forge 1966: 29). Like the pig suckling on the phallus of the ritual carvings of the Tambaran (ŋgwalndu) or on the dried white mud clots of “magical pig fattener,” the “womb child” (mbiagɔnyan) is nourished in the womb by its father’s semen (Forge 1966: 29; Forge n.d.a.: 9.33).

By feeding the child of his clan’s walo, the father provides the child its bones and claims the child as his own and a member of his patrilineal clan (kɔm) (Forge n.d.a.; Hauser-Schäublin 1989b: 48-61). However, the ultimate act of conception and creation lies with the mother, whose menstrual blood flows from her clan. Thus, bones are associated with the patriline, while blood is from the matriline (Forge 1972b; Hauser-Schäublin 1989c: 191). Each person then belongs to a patriline, descended from a founding clan ancestor (ŋgwalndu) of their patrivirilocal hamlet, and to subclans belonging to the successive generations of clan blood transmitted by women through conception and birth (Forge 1971). In contrast to the collectivizing modality of male descent and agnation, conception and childbirth follow an innovative modality. Through the “particular historical event” of childbirth, new creations, full of polysemous possibilities and multivalent motivations, come into the world of the “seen” and “known.” They become a part of the new assemblage of relations that make Abelam sociality.

The novelty of the moon and menstruation

The moon is the primary index of time and “orders virtually all the Abelam productive activities. The planting and harvesting of...[yams] and taro, the hunting of wild pig, and the holding of ceremonies and displays are all decided with reference to the
moon and its phases” (Forge 1969: 87; cf. Harrison 1982). The moon (mbabmu-tagwa) is marked feminine through its suffix-tagwa and signifies fertility and menstruation (Kaberry 1941b: 346). This is because with its twenty-eight day cycle, “[t]he moon menstruates” (Forge 1969: 87).

During some ceremonies a temporary circular structure named after the moon is constructed in the center of the village or hamlet plaza (amei) (Ibid: 88; cf. Figure 8). Sometimes the structure closely resembles the menstrual houses (kalmbangai) temporarily inhabited by women (Kaberry 1941a: 244; Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 36). Either way it is built around a white stone called the “moon stone” (mbabmu-matu). During ‘sing-sings’, participants dance around this “moon stone” and its menstrual house (Kaberry 1941a: 243; cf. Figure 10).

In addition to the houses built for living and the storage of objects and food, many Abelam villages have communal menstrual houses (kalmbanga) where women live when they menstruate (Kaberry 1941a: 244; Kaberry 1941b: 361; Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 36; spelling altered). For Abelam women, this seclusion in “special huts and their withdrawal from normal activities provides the direct analogy with the disappearance of the moon” every twenty-eight days (Forge 1969: 88).

It’s believed that a “woman’s femininity is at its height, and therefore its most dangerous, when she is menstruating and when she is giving birth” (Whiteman 1966: 58). At these moments a woman’s vulva is the most exposed and she experiences the most

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6 The central plaza (amei) is thought to belong to men (Kaberry 1941a: 243), and “on pain of verbal abuse from the menfolk, women are not allowed to approach [the amei], instead, must follow a path that leads around the edge of the ceremonial ground” (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 38). However, during ‘singsings’ and other special ceremonies where the presence of women’s creativity is necessary, the central plaza (amei) is open to all ages, genders, and grades.
vaginal bleeding. Blood and sexual secretions are the most potent of women’s magical bodily substances (*jowai*). Fire, blood, pubic hair, the moon, and feathers are all elements associated with the fecundity of women’s creativity (Huber-Greub 1990: 283), and as such they play prominent roles in women’s menstrual cycles. Her food must be roasted by fire, her pubic hair is often shaved, she is thought to turn into a cassowary, and the moon provides the power for her transformation (Huber-Greub 1988).

A girl’s menarche “signals the onset of sexual maturity” and the “unpredictability” of women’s creativity (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 44). Soon after her menarche, a girl begins her ceremonial seclusion. This marks the beginning of the menarcheal initiatory (*wambusuge*), in which she is ritually marked as a menstruating and sexually mature woman (*naramtagwa*) (Ibid: 36, 39). While the menarcheal girl is still secluded in the menstrual house, the men abscond from the central plaza as the women “seize” it, holding an exclusively women’s feast (Ibid: 37-38; 44; cf. Figure 11). They feast on coconut, short yams (*ka*), long ceremonial yams (*wapi*), and other goods like tobacco and betel nut (cf. Figure 12). Many of the taboos surrounding the restriction of women’s movement around the hamlet are lifted. Even some gender roles, like the preparation and distribution of yams, are reversed (Ibid: 37-38). During the feast, women exchange gifts of food and soup. In contrast to the men’s exchanges, “[t]he exchanges follow no set clan or moiety (*ara*) lines.” The quality of the exchanges given at the ceremony is “‘free’ (i.e., unrestricted)” (Ibid: 39). The woman’s feast, with its anti-

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7 During this time various exchanges take place between the girl’s father and his ritual moiety exchange partner (*chambera*) (Forge 1970a: 274).

8 Although the long ceremonial yams (*wapi*) may be given to the women by a man in a sort of presentation similar to yam displays (*wapi saki*), they may also be stolen by women who enter the usually tabooed yam house and take whatever yam they prefer (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 37-38).
structural liminality, is nearly a mirror opposite of the feasts organized by men, where long orations, debates, and fights are common. The event is marked by the complementary incommensurability of women’s blood and sexual power.

In the menstrual house, the menarcheal girl is scarified as “female elders” hold her steady (cf. Figures 13 & 14). These scarification artists are highly respected as specialists whose technical knowledge is often passed through matrilineal descent (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 40, 53 n. 8). Their ability to transform a woman’s body into a work of art is compared to the work of male artists who paint the Tambaran ritual objects (maira) and sago spathe panels (paŋgal) that form the exterior façade and interior walls of the Haus Tambaran (Ibid: 40; cf. Figure 14). The cicatrices on the woman’s body (ramoni) are made with a shard of a white stone (ulma). This is the same stone used to demarcate on the central plaza (amei) “the length of tubers displayed there at yam festivals, and to cut the penis of a newlywed man to release polluted blood accumulated during his first intense period of sexual intercourse with his wife” (Ibid; italics added).

The women elders lead the menarcheal girl through an initiation including acts of transvestitism. They, swagger, sway, and mock the pelvic thrusting of men engaged in intercourse. During this time the women continue their feast with “riotous laughter” and instruct the newly initiated girl in the arts of love and sex. After she emerges from her seclusion she is beat with stinging nettles by men on the central plaza (Forge 1970a: 274).

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9 This white stone is probably quartz.
10 In the Southern Wosera the initiate is carried on the back of another woman and the whole group of women jump into a stream. Two women then wash “the girl’s hair and face and then the rest of her body with a special kind of earth” (Whiteman 1965: 116). This “earth” is mostly like the white mud drawn from the bed of ancestral streams used in the making of white ochre for pig magic (Forge 1962: 12; Forge 1966: 29).
After the ceremonial feast and subsequent rite, the women return to their dwelling houses and the men cleanse the central plaza of “all those vulvas” (Ibid). A day after the ceremony, the menarche girl is bathed in a mixture of stream water and pounded naram cane pith, her head is shaved, and she is given a new netbag decorated with ovula shells (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 40). Now begins an “idyllic period during which she is not expected to work, is welcomed everywhere within the village and in neighbouring villages, and offered the finest food” (Kaberry 1941b: 361; Forge 1970a: 275).11 After this liminal period the girl resumes her labors. Because of the machinations and political posturing of their parents, most girls are “betrothed well before puberty” (Forge 1970a: 274). Therefore, after this liminal period she is expected to consummate the marriage, start bathing in her patrivirilocal clan streams, and begin bearing children. From henceforth, each time she begins her menstrual period she will be referred to as a “woman of the naram cane” (naramtagwa) (Kaberry 1941b: 361).

The creativity of women

When women give birth it is a singular and “particular historical event” (Strathern 1988: 278). As a result of the relationship between a woman and the walo of her husband’s clan, each child is a unique soul, incommensurable with all others. However, the creativity of women isn’t confined only to the labors of childbirth. Rather, their menstrual cycles demonstrate that women’s blood acts as fulcrum in the Abelam cosmos against which time, yam harvests, kinship, and sexuality all pivot. The menarcheal girl is secluded and initiated not only because it marks the beginning of a transformative stage

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11 Cf. Figure 16.
in her life (the capacity to conceive and bear children), but because the flowing of her blood is a threatening event that disrupts and disorders the symmetrical equivalence and commensurability that exists between herself and others. The menarcheal girl redefines time around her body in such a way that it must be marked like the façade of a Haus Tambaran with a work of abstract art. However, while the art on the Haus Tambaran’s façade is ordered by the stylistic fidelity of male artists, the art on the body of a menstruating woman is singularly incommensurable. No two sets of cicatrices are the same. Women’s creativity is thus marked by the unpredictability of childbirth and the menarche, the uncontrollability of fire, and the cyclical ordering of time in both the waxing and waning of the moon, and women’s menstrual cycles.

Figure 6: Some wala ancestral stones (also called ŋgwoleiba matu) found at the edge of a village separating the “bush” from the relative safety of the village. Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.
Figure 7: A set of *wala* ancestral stones. Food offerings may be made to the *wala* and ancestors only for stray dogs to provide proof that the *wala* and ancestors consume the offerings (Forge n.d.a.). Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1959. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.

Figure 8: Carvings of snakes (probably *wala* serpents) adorn the lower façade of the Haus Tambaran in Kalabu village. Photo by Anthony Forge, 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.
Figure 9: The moon stone (*mbamu-matu*) is the gravitational center of activities during many ‘singsings’. Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1962. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.

Figure 10: Women gather together on the central plaza during a ceremony celebrating the completion of a Haus Tambaran’s decoration. It is one of the few moments that women are allowed unrestricted access to the plaza. Photo by Phyllis Kaberry, circa 1938. LSE Archives Kaberry Papers.
Figure 11: Women on the central plaza during a menarcheal feast. Photo by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin (1989b: 209).

Figure 12: Women distributing food during a menarcheal feast (Hauser-Schäublin & Hauser-Schäublin 1980: figure 71).
Figure 13: A menarcheal girl being scarified by elder women and supported by her mother’s brother (wau). Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.

Figure 14: A menarcheal girl shortly after being scarified by elder women. Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.
Figure 15: (left): Abelam artists carefully paint on paper a ritual design meant for the sago spathe panels that line the exterior and, sometimes, interior of the Haus Tambaran. Together they discuss the image’s fidelity to its stylistic totality rather than the meaning of individual parts (Forge 1970a; Forge 1973). Photo by Anthony Forge, UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.

Figure 16: (right): During some initiations, marriages, and other festivities women may be decorated with many of the same ornaments that male Tambaran initiates are. The triangles on their cheeks are said to represent vulvas, or women’s creativity, while the yellow leaves in their mouths signify peace or peaceful intentions (the anti-thesis of male symmetrical antagonism). Photo by Diane Losche, circa 1972 (1982: 55).
Chapter 2: The *ŋgwalndu* and the production of death

If there could be anything that best objectifies the relationship between Abelam male and female creativity it would be death. Death is the great equalizer of incommensurabilities. Even so, death is not always final. Those thought to be dead may come back to life shortly after being pronounced dead (Forge n.d.b.: July 17, 1958). In fact, a “shooting star is the marsalai [spirit] of a man unconscious or in a coma returning from the ‘marsalai place’ [walǝŋgai] after being rejected [by his clansmen] as not really dead” (Ibid: March 18, 1958; Forge n.d.a.: 9.34). Fireflies, the totemic emblem of shooting stars, are often thought of as “ancestors coming to look out for their children” (Forge n.d.b.: April 11, 1958). When men and women spend time in the gardens, communing with the spirits of dead ancestors through fireflies, yams, or stones, they are extending their temporal connection with a spirit world that has slipped into the unseen.

The paramount figures of death in Abelam cosmology are the *ŋgwalndu*. As the ancestral “life force” (Scaglion 1997: 12) of patrilineal clans, the *ŋgwalndu* are “the true repositories of the powers of creativity and production” (Losche 1990a: 13). They give life to yams and pigs, allowing clans to prosper. The *ŋgwalndu* are not only a “life force,” but are clan spirits that subsume the souls of all agnate dead. They are the central focus of all Tambaran activities, yam cultivation, exchange, and warfare.12 It’s their power that allows the Abelam to traverse between the worlds of the living and the dead, creating life through the assemblage of death.

The Abelam call patrivirilocal hamlets “bone hamlets” where the land’s spirits know residents as being part of a continuous clan (Huber-Greub 1990: 175). These clan-

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12 They are invoked in spells (Kaberry 1941b: 355), clan songs (Kaberry n.d.), and dance (Losche 2001).
owned “bone hamlets” are fastened to the ground like cassowary bone daggers (yai), houses, and the domesticated pig as icons of the rigidity and relative permanence of male relationality (cf. Forge n.d.b.: June 17, 1958; cf. Figure 17). When members of that “bone hamlet” die they go to live in the “spirit” hamlet (walǝngai) with other remembered dead ancestors and agnates (ŋgwoleiba). There they are materially linked to the living world through ancestral stones (ŋgwoleiba matu) used to communicate between the two worlds (cf. Figure 5). As soon as the names of the dead are forgotten, they no longer are independent spirits who reside in the spirit hamlet and ancestral stones (Forge n.d.a.: 9.34). Instead, they suffer a “second death” by being subsumed by the “soul substance” of the ŋgwalndu (Scaglion 1997: 14; cf. Frazer 1913: 351). As such, the ŋgwalndu “is considered both as founder of the clan and as the receptacle of the spirits of all the clan’s dead” (Coupaye 2007b: 73; cf. Forge 1962: 13). As a receptacle of the dead, the ŋgwalndu becomes the embodiment of the collectivizing power of descent and agnation (cf. Viveriors de Castro 2010). Through its erasure of difference, the ŋgwalndu produces an obviation of complementary incommensurability (cf. Wagner 1978).

The ŋgwalndu are thought to be semi-omnipresent with their substance, temporarily residing in different locales (Kaberry 1941a: 241). However, the primary locale of the ŋgwalndu’s presence is in the sculptures representing them inside the Haus Tambaran (Forge 1962: 13). These carvings may be ten to fifteen feet long and have enlarged phalluses pointing down towards their feet. Dripping from the phallus is a drop of pearl white semen from which either a totemic bird or pig is seeking nourishment

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13 In death, one is “surrounded by their agnates” in a spirit village (walǝngai) (Forge n.d.a.: 9.36). The spirit village “is the one clan village not in contact with any other, therefore there is no sorcery or death” Forge n.d.a.: 9.33). Because the spirit village is patrivirilocal, “there are no sisters and daughters only mothers and wives…free of the possibility of incest” (Ibid).
The ŋgwalndu may also appear as wild boars, noises in the bush, or painted warriors in the dreams of men (cf. Figure 20).\(^{14}\) Although the ŋgwalndu are omnipresent and unseen, they still have an imposing presence in Abelam daily life. The most prominent motif found in the façade of the Haus Tambaran is the ŋgwalŋgwal (Figure 10). It usually consists of the faces of the ŋgwalndu with their piercing eyes, often catching the glimmer of the moon, looking down on the central plaza (cf. Figures 21 & 22). From the Haus Tambaran’s façade, “the world of the ŋgwalndu gazes into the world of the village life; thus, the Abelam are in continuous visual contact with them” (Hauser-Schäublin 1994: 146, spelling altered; Hauser-Schäublin 2011: 63).

Reproducing the dead in yams

The ŋgwalndu assist in the cultivation of yams, as cultivators enable the ŋgwalndu to be continually reproduced in the body of the yam tuber (Hauser-Schäublin 1994: 144). Anthony Forge recorded that the long ceremonial yams (wapi) used in exchanges are inhabited by legendary “long yam children” (wapinyan) of the mythic past. Said to possess a soul similar to that of people, the yam’s soul can also become disembodied much like a witch’s (ku-tagwa) (Kaberry 1941b: 356). It can take the form of “a pig, a huge snake, or a fire-fly buzzing through the night, which always returns to the tuber—unless it is killed, in which case the tuber also dies” (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 42). However, these “yam children” are more a fragment of the ŋgwalndu spirit essence than their own species of spirit beings (‘marasali’) (Forge 1966: 28). Through the cultivation...\(^{14}\) This is very similar to the yam spirits (wapinyan) that appear the dreams of their growers (Forge 1966: 28, 30). In those dreams yam spirits (wapinyan) take the form of tall “strong men in full war paint” (Forge 1970a: 281).
of these sentient beings, men create “yam children” through synthetic reproduction (Rubel & Rosman 1978: 51-66).\(^\text{15}\)

To ensure success in the long ceremonial yam gardens (\textit{wapi yawi}), \textit{ŋgwalndu} carvings are deposited in the “garden houses” to oversee all stages of cultivation (Lea 1966: 11). Failure to maintain social harmony causes the \textit{ŋgwalndu} to withdraw their support and malevolent spirits to wreck havoc (Forge n.d.a.: 9.33). Living “together peacefully is an ideal that is always at risk” (Huber-Greub 1990: 276); therefore, village harmony becomes essential for the placation of the \textit{ŋgwalndu} and the assurance of their blessing (Ibid: 274).

The planting of the yams begins with a ceremony called the “blowing on the yams” where exchange partners “breathe life” into their yam mounds (Scaglion 1999: 214; Huber-Greub 1988: 122). Once the ceremony is finished the yam taboos are in effect and the growing season begins.\(^\text{16}\) The successful cultivation of yams is dependent upon adherence to these taboos and a grower’s ability to harness “the power of the perfect femininity and creativity of the moon” (Forge 1969: 88).\(^\text{17}\)

To encourage their blessing, \textit{ŋgwalndu} carvings are placed inside the long ceremonial yam houses where yams and ritual ancestral stones are kept to oversee all stages of yam cultivation (Lea 1966: 11). One of these special ancestral stones may

\(^{15}\) Long ceremonial yams have many of the sensory capacities of humans (Forge 1962: 10). They can hear and smell, but cannot move or speak, and can certainly be offended by the inattention of their growers (Forge 1966: 28; Lea 1966: 13).

\(^{16}\) These taboos are primarily devoted to food restrictions, fighting, or contact with the opposite sex (Lea 1966: 9; Scaglion 1997: 14; Koczberski & Curry 1999: 237-238). Any “hot” activity that could offend the \textit{ŋgwalndu} or “long yam spirits” (\textit{wapinyan}) is strongly prohibited through various taboos. The eating of meat (especially pork) is often equated with sex as both are “hot” activities and are surrounded by the same taboos necessary for long yam cultivation and sorcery (Losche 2001: 161).

\(^{17}\) Women are forbidden from the long ceremonial yam gardens because “any contact however indirect with the female genitals” is inimical to the long yam’s growth (Kaberry 1941\textit{b}: 356). This is primarily because the “long yam children” are offended by the smell of vulvas (Kaberry 1941\textit{b}: 355, n. 35).
include an oblong yam stone (*wapi matu*) used to promote long yam growth. The stone has carved grooves throughout its surface and is often washed in herb and cane juices (cf. Figure 23). Before the beginning of the planting season, an old man is chosen as a “guardian” over the stone and decorates it “like a ceremonial dancer.” Growers “who hope to grow outstanding long yams send shell rings (polished Tridacna shells) to the stone, which the guardian lays out on the ground before it so that they point in the direction of the owner’s yam gardens” (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 45-46; Hauser-Schäublin 1994: 144). By calling the names of the yam growers, the guardian is able to encourage the stone to send its power to the respective grower’s gardens, and thus increase the size of their tubers (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 46; cf. Huber-Greub 1990: 281).

Near the top of the mound, men plant a yam seedling that has been until now stored inside the Haus Tambaran or yam house and has already begun to sprout shoots (cf. Figure 26). In the final stage of cultivation, the growth of the tuber is magically coaxed through songs, yam paint, and mixtures of pounded creeper root (Lea 1966: 11, n. 15; Forge 1962). Throughout this last stage of growth there are two to four inspections of the tuber (cf. Illustration 4). During the inspection, earth around the lower face of the yam’s mound, which has been supported by a retaining wall (*tǝktǝ*), is removed and the yam is measured and special red yam paint (*wapi kwus*) is applied to its sides (Forge

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18 These shell rings may be bespelled with magic and used to ensure a favorable yam harvest (Smidt & McGuigan 1993: 133). Similar efforts to gain good fortune may be directed directly to the *ŋgwalndu* inside of the Haus Tambaran (cf. Figure 24), however, yam magic only works through the yam stone.

19 Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin has noted that this seedling is called the yam’s “placenta” (*tagui*) (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 41).

20 *Tǝktǝ* is the same word used for frieze of ancestral figures (*maira*) positioned just below the Haus Tambaran’s façade (Coupaye 2009b; Forge 1966: 27; cf. Figure 27).
Success or failure to produce long ceremonial yams is often attributed to the potency, or “hotness”, of the magic employed at this stage of cultivation. The “hotness” of the paint applied to yams “irritates the sides of the yam” like “the rubbing of the ribs of men with stinging nettles during [Tambaran] initiation ceremonies” (Forge 1962:11). The irritation causes the yam to squirm and stretch in its hole. Thus, the yam grows longer the more it’s coaxed by the “hotness” of its grower’s paint (Ibid).

Once a tuber has reached its full length, the “shriveled seedling,” still attached to the yam, is “spoken of as a ‘mother’ who has given all her vitality to her baby” (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 41; cf. Illustration 5). The tubers are dug from their hole with great care. Men will then assist each other as they transport yams to their yam house or to the Haus Tambaran in a long parade (cf. Figure 28). Once a long ceremonial yam is placed on the central plaza, men demarcate the yam’s body, head, arms, shoulders, and legs by slashing cuts into the tuber with the white stone shard (ulma) used in the ritual scarification of menarcheal girls (Ibid: 40, 42).

During the ceremonial season while the yams are on display, each long ceremonial yam is decorated like the carved sculptures (maira) held in the Haus Tambaran. They’re given miniature carved headdress (wakan or noute) or basket masks (baba) and are adorned with many of the same berries, fruit, feathers, and leaves that men wear when they dance during the ‘singsings’ accompanying Tambaran initiations (Forge 1966: 28; Forge 1973: 176-178). As they’re decorated they are given a name, usually that of a clan ngwalndu or ancestor (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 42).

21 Red ochre, the color used for most sorcery and yam magic, is considered “hot”, and is obtained through exchange with outside villages (Forge 1962: 12-13).
22 Long ceremonial yam displays (wapi saki) are usually held in front of the Haus Tambaran on the central plaza during a full moon (Forge n.d.b.: July 15, 1958; Coupaye 2007a: 266).
A long ceremonial yam is called “the child [sic] of men only” (Hauser-Schäublin 1994: 142). “Just as a mother’s (menstrual) blood is said to contribute to an embryo’s growth so, by his careful tending” of the tuber, the grower’s magical bodily substances (jewai) like sweat “go into the yam making it his offspring” (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 42; Coupaye 2009a). The resulting offspring, or “yam child”, are fragments of the ngwalndu. The seedling of every yam was once the head of a previous tuber, its sprouts being its headdress (Hauser-Schäublin 1994: 141). In Kalabu village the same expression is used for “planting a yam seedling” as “burying a corpse” (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 42). Through the planting of the seedling every yam cycle, the same yams, genetically and spiritually, become incarnate. As these yams are passed from generation to generation, the yams’ tubers provide the ngwalndu with a constant line of reincarnated bodies and fragmentations, always linking the living with their ancestral clan (Scaglion 1997: 11-12). “When a man grows a huge yam...he is in a sense involved in resurrecting or incarnating a being from the spirit world, the realm of the dead” (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 42). As such, men reproduce dead children as long ceremonial yams through “a kind of ‘androgenesis’.” Here men’s creativity does all the work of synthetic reproduction to the exclusion of any kind of women’s power to create novel possibilities (Ibid: 43).

When men exchange yams with their rivals from another ritual moiety (wapi chambera), they are in effect exchanging clan “yam children”. Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin (1995: 43) argues that “the analogy between yam and human being implies that long-yam givers are offering children who, though ‘dead,’ mute, and immobile, are nonetheless animate. And since the act of handing over the ‘hot’ yam to the exchange partner cools it so that it may be consumed, the givers thereby are offering children for the receivers’
consumption.” The endocannibalism, like that done by flying disembodied witches, is morally repugnant to the Abelam. However, by exchanging yams with rival ritual moiety partners (*chambera*), Abelam men are able to enact a symmetrical exchange while still consuming the fragmented substance of the *ŋgwanду*, thus powering their own magical bodily substances (*jǝwai*) (cf. Young 1971).

The key for understanding Abelam male creativity is that *it amounts to a recombination or new incarnation, of already existing forms*. Therefore, male creativity is the placement of parts, or fragments of the *ŋgwanду*, within an encompassing whole—the competitive exchange of equivalent yams. At each stage of the growing process men invoke creativity, through their communion with the moon and manipulation of “hot” substances like paint. They avoid any crossover that could be construed as the creativity of women by transforming the innovative modality of women’s creativity through the collectivizing modality of symmetrical schismogenesis. This is not just because of the fear of women’s vulvas, but because any kind of misfire in the signification of creativity into the realm of women’s relationality would essentially mistake the certainty and relative fixity of yam production (the recombination of fractal yam spirits) with the uncertainty and unpredictability of women’s creation.
Figure 17: Three cassowary bone daggers (yai) impaled in the ground. The intricate details of the carvings featuring ŋgwalndu figures is clearly visible. Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1961. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.

Figure 18: Tambaran sculptures and carvings (maira) representing legendary yam children (wapinyan) and clan ŋgwalndu. Several of the carvings have an elongated penis with a white tip and a totemic animal stretching to smell or suckle the figure’s semen. Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.
Figure 19: Men threaten an opposing moiety while they transport a ngwalnda sculpture to the Haus Tambaran. Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.

Figure 20: Tambaran sculptures and carvings inside a chamber within a Haus Tambaran. As initiates move from one chamber to the next freshly applied paint on the carvings rubs off on the initiates. Note the large headdress (wakan) resembling the decorations of initiates after receiving their final grades. Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1959. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.
Figure 21: Man stands on the central plaza (amei) while gazing at the nygalndu on the Haus Tambaran’s façade. Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.
Figure 22: The façade to a Haus Tambaran in Kalabu village. It’s the eyes of the ŋgwalndu that continually watch over the central plaza (amei) in front of the Haus Tambaran. Photo by Anthony Forge, 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.

Figure 23: A yam stone decorated with paint and given offerings by hopeful yam cultivators. Photo by Anthony Forge, 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.
Figure 24: Inside the Haus Tambaran cassowary bone daggers impale shell rings on display before ngwalndu and other (maira) carvings. Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.

Figure 25: Men assist a yam grower as he carefully plants the yam seedling on top of the mound. Photo by Anthony Forge. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.
Figure 26: Inside the yam house tuber are allowed to settle and sprout their shouts (Hauser-Schäublin & Hauser-Schäublin. 1980: Abb. 10.1)

Figure 27: A man inspects his yam. Photo by Ludovic Coupaye (2009c: 60).

Illustration 4: A man inspects his yam so that he may measure or apply magic paint to the tuber. Illustration by Ludovic Coupaye (2009c: 60).
Illustration 5: Cross-section of a planted long ceremonial yam. Note the yam seedling on the top of the mound. Illustration by Diane Losche (1982: 22).
Figure 28: As they transport their yams from their gardens men parade the long ceremonial yams (*wapi*) on long poles. Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.
Interlude: Gendered Creativity

If women’s creativity is indexical of the creation of unknown possibilities, men’s creativity is indexical of the production of assemblages of already existing forms. Even so, men’s creativity follows many of the same tropes of female creativity. For example, the yam stone (wapi matu) that is crucial to the success of yams is likened in song to a menarcheal girl (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 34). She and the yam stone become indices of the power of creativity (Hauser-Schäublin 1989b: 194-229). Both the yam stone and the menarcheal girl are secluded in special houses, ritually washed with the herb and cane juices, and have cicatrices on their “skin,” and “looking at the yam stone is compared to looking at a well-hidden vulva” (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 46). Like the menarche puberty initiatory, yam cultivation is primarily about creation and “increasing the power to generate life” (Ibid: 33). However, the kinds of creativity that the menarcheal girl and the yam stone index are quite different.

The yam stone is an index of the ngwalndu’s ability to be fragmentally reproduced in yams. The production of yams within the world of the ngwalndu is about the incarnation of fragments of the ngwalndu, not the creation of something new. Long ceremonial yam cultivation isn’t unexpected, unknown, or even done in reference to a virtual realm of possibilities. Instead, it’s about synthetically reproducing fragmented parts. Because yams are exchanged as equivalent gifts between partners (chambera) of opposing ritual moieties, each yam child is symmetrically commensurable with another.

The menarcheal girl is an index of the novel possibilities latent in women’s procreative powers. Women are believed to be able to manifest their capacity for procreation, through their menarcheal period, at any moment. Their menstrual cycle is
itself iconic of the moon’s temporal structuring of yam growing seasons (cf. Harrison 1982). Furthermore, as they conceive children through their interaction with wala, they embody the novelty of innovation. Each childbirth is complementarily differentiated as a “particular historical event,” incommensurable with all other births and children (Strathern 1988: 278).

The force of gender

In the creation of new possibilities in the historical events of children, women engage in centrifugal multivalency that draws upon the excesses of the intersubjective frame (Bakhtin 1990: 23). There is a certain opening up of the possible frame in the creation of new objects as events. In the production of symmetrical differentiations found in yam cultivation, there is certain normalization to the project of commensuration. If Bateson’s theory of symmetrical schismogenesis teaches us anything, it’s that each symmetrically defined and commensurable other becomes continually reified in relation to its mutually oppositional differentiation (Bateson 1958; Bateson 1972). Therefore, it consolidates and applies centripetal force on its given level of operation. The question for this analysis is what types of forces do these oppositional dyads elicit?
Chapter 3: The force of women’s creativity

The centrifugality of women’s creativity is on display in the relationality of witches, masked ceremonial figures, and affinal kin. The death of children younger than two yam cycles is most likely to be attributed to witches (ku-tagwa) who fly in the night and eat the souls of children. As Forge recorded that nearly half of Eastern Abelam children between the ages of 12 and 15 months died, the presence of the jealous ku-tagwa, an old woman desiring the souls and flesh of infants, was nearly always omnipresent (Forge 1970b: 267-268; Schofield & Parkinson 1963: 3; Koczberski & Curry 1999: 238-239; Winkvist 1996: 71).¹²³

Witchcraft is contrasted with sorcery by its innate qualities in certain women. In witchcraft there are no spells to be learned or esoteric knowledge to be gained in order for women to practice it (Forge 1970b: 259). Instead a little creature called the kwu resides in the vagina of a woman.²⁴ The kwu may be dormant throughout the woman’s childhood and puberty but will become activated, sometime later in life, when the woman exhumes and cannibalizes the body of a newly buried child.²⁵

From the moment the kwu is activated it endows the woman, now a witch (ku-tagwa), with the ability to be disembodied from her sleeping self and fly through the village, much like the old women present during the last stage of the Tambaran. As disembodied spirits, witches consume the souls of the infant children (Schofield &

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¹²³ Neonatal and intrauterine deaths that are not abortions but are thought to be caused by wala who have been for some reason offended by the child’s parents (Schofield & Parkinson 1963: 3).

²⁴ Most dangerous for men is their penile penetration of the vagina, as it entails entering the place inhabited by the kwu. To mark their conquest of the vulva (kitnya) or vagina (kwu ngai or kwu’s place) some young men will carve an inverted triangle on tree trunks, the home of witches, after a “successful [sexual] encounter in the bush” (Forge n.d.b. May 17-19, 1958).

²⁵ Whiteman (1965: 109) gives an account of male witches being taught to cannibalize the flesh of newborns and then being burnt alive within a hut. If the initiate witches stay in the hut while it goes up in smoke they are ready to be witches and will come back from the dead, a fully activated witch.
Parkinson 1963: 4; Forge 1970b: 259). These witches may also inhabit the bodies of wild pigs, cassowaries, flying foxes, poisonous snakes, tree trunks, or even centipedes during the night (Stöcklin 1990: 454; Kaberry 1941b: 348).26

The sun and the moon are thought to be complementary companions (‘poroman’) or husband and wife (Huber-Greub 1990). The sun and the moon, male and female respectively, are divided in their labor over time (Kaberry 1941b: 346). Once the sun has set, men and women almost always stay within their own hamlet (Forge 1969: 88). The night is a time of the formal ritual activity, group oratory, and visiting (Scaglion 1986), but it’s also a time of unexpected magic and events. Because of the danger of unexpected spirits and forces in the night, travel outside of one’s village is rather restricted. Although travel outside of one’s hamlet in the dark of night is considered too dangerous, a waxing moon may provide the light necessary for celebrations (‘singsings’), artistry, construction, and limited travel between villages (Forge 1969: 88). Therefore, it is the blessing of the moon that allowed such activities to take place.

The full moon also allows travel between villages at night when it would not be possible under a waning moon. The moon allows people to become like the menarcheal girl, unrestricted in their movements, able to wander from place to place while the rest of the world continues in darkness and taboo. This is actually a common motif for the Abelam. A primeval figure of femininity is found in the spirit of a wild wandering woman (mandji-tagwa), and flying fox (kwandji-tagwa). In these motifs the wandering woman and flying fox embody the listlessness of female relationality, the propensity to

26 To stop a witch’s soul from returning to her sleeping body, a person may place a croton leaf cross the entrance of her dwelling house as she sleeps. When her soul attempts to return to its body it will not be able to cross the croton leaf’s path and the witch will die (Stöcklin 1990: 454).
travel along dangerous paths and reside in the land of foreign clans (Huber-Greub 1990: 283; spelling altered; cf. Forge 1970b: 261; Forge 1973: 187). Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin reports that there is in fact a female version of the ŋgwalndu called the ŋgumaira (1989b: 252-255, 611). However, the principle difference between the two is that the ŋgwalndu reside in the village and become the receptacles of the souls of the dead, while the ŋgumaira are the spirits of the bush, forever centrifugal to the centripetal collectivization of death.

Although the movement of women is tightly controlled by men, all such gestures towards fixing women into a synchronic picture of relationality ultimately fails. The menarcheal girl, flying fox, wandering woman, and witch stand in a metaphorical relation to the “unfastened pig” that has yet to be tethered and anchored to the ground by the patrilineal cassowary dagger or its trap (wami) (cf. Forge n.d.b. June 28, 1958; Hauser-Schäublin 1984). Despite supposed sexual antagonism, division of labor, and strict gender taboos, the place of women in the Abelam cosmos is never fully determined. To do so would too fully instantiate a normative centripetalality to women’s creativity. Instead, they are disaggregated from the collectivizing power of male creativity through their very centrifugal incommensurability. They become a “vehicle of destructive power, and the destruction is unpredictable and illogical,” but none the less structurally relevant (Winkvist 1996: 72).

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27 It’s often said that young men “are giving away their lives when they succumb to the charms of “strange or foreign women” or wandering women (mandji-tagwa) (Forge 1970b: 261; Forge 1973: 187). “Sexual intercourse means for every man…a weakening of their vital essence and is seen indirectly as causing men to grow old” (Huber-Greub 1990: 283), thus threatening the centripetal force of men’s collectivizing creativity.

28 The pig trap (wami) is curiously iconic of the Haus Tambaran (cf. Figures 29 & 30).

29 The witches are thought to be responsible for many other kinds of misfortune besides the death of infant
This destructive power is perhaps best exemplified in the costumed figures said to personify the *walo* that emerge from the bush during the cyclical ritual season (Forge 1962: 16; Kaberry 1941b: 357). These figures, called *baba-tagwa*, wear basketry masks (*baba*) made of fern creepers (*nŋgw* (Coupaye 2007a: 261) and represent clan *walo* incarnate with long skirts of immature sago fronds covering their bodies from the mask down (Forge 1966: 27; Kaberry 1941b: 357; cf. Figure 31). Adorned with citrus fruits and often carrying a hand drum or spear, the *baba-tagwa* advance onto the village or hamlet’s central plaza (*amei*) to terrorize women and children, sometimes beating them, raping them, or even killing them (Kaberry 1941b: 357; Forge n.d.b.; cf. Figure 32). As the ceremonial season progresses the *baba-tagwa* become more and more aggressive, throwing spears at villagers, especially women and children, to an astonishing degree of accuracy. As the *baba-tagwa* become more aggressive, their victims become more defensive and women and children try to pelt them with stones (Forge n.d.b.). After ceremonial season has drawn to a close and the ritual appearance of the *baba-tagwa* is over, the masks are washed with “bespelled coconut milk…the resulting mixture of pain and liquid is preserved and scattered over the gardens so that the effects of the ceremony…are distributed to the gardens and crops as well as to the individuals who participated” (Forge 1962: 16).  

Although the wearer of the mask is a man who has been ritually initiated into the Tambaran, the suffix -*tagwa* implies that the *baba-tagwa* is, at least on a symbolic level, children. This may include misfortune in pigs, broken cooking wares, or any other host of misfortunes found in the principal domains of women’s labor (Forge 1970b: 268).  

30 The masks actually live with and belong to women. While not in use, the mask is “hung over [women’s] cooking fires inside the dwelling houses to smoke the split rattan, of which they are made, this preserves it and keeps the insects at bay” (Forge n.d.b.). If sold or traded, the woman whose fire preserves the mask must grant permission for the sale or exchange (Ibid).
considered female and may even be a clan *wal*ǝ incarnate (Forge n.d.b.). The *baba-tagwa* enacts the danger of women’s creativity, with all of its natal possibilities. It’s through mothers that the *wal*ǝ make life, and it’s through the *baba-tagwa* that they unhinge the social order. At every level, women’s creativity constitutes a process of providing the possibilities of order’s unmaking through centrifugal incommensurabilities.

**Marriage and Incommensurability**

If one were to look for “order” in the Melanesian context, one would expect to find it in the exchanges that define marriage. However, the “order” that the exchanges imply is built upon the very incommensurability of women that their circulation seems unable to occlude (Errington & Gewertz 1987; cf. Rubin 1975). Relations between men are created by women through their circulation in marriage (Lévi-Strauss 1969). From the very start, these relations are of unequal exchange (Forge 1972b: 536). Anthony Forge writes that, “each marriage sets up a relationship that subsists for three generations between a man, his sons, and son’s sons, and the sub-clan that provided his wife. The wife-givers becoming the mother’s brother’s sub-clan and father’s mother’s brother’s sub-clan and father’s father’s mother’s brother’s sub-clan to the two succeeding generations” (1971: 137). Thus, each “married man…has three sub-clans other than his own with whom he is in a relationship of unequal exchange” (Forge 1971: 138) Marriage is the source of unequal exchanges, and it is the balanced exchange of equally symmetrical and commensurable things between men of equal status that is thought to reconcile the inequality introduced to society through marriages (Forge 1971: 133). Wife-

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31 This is not all too surprising as “[b]asketry work…seems to be restricted to female connotations” (Hauser-Schäublin 1994: 162).
givers are considered to be in an “advantageous position” over the wife-receivers (Forge 1971: 136; cf. Illustration 6).  

There is no formal marriage ceremony but “simply a series of payments” (Whiteman 1965: 116). After the payment of the brideprice, valuables pass from the wife-receivers to, but never from, the wife-givers (Forge 1971: 135, 137). In exchange for these valuables the wife’s clan will provide the necessary ceremonial services to the next generation (Forge 1971: 135). Furthermore, wife-receivers will provide whole and uncooked yams, which can be used for prestige, food, or as seed, to wife-givers. Wife-givers, on the other hand, only exchange cooked or cut yams that can be used only for food (Forge 1971: 137). “These marital exchanges are recognized as inherently unbalanced” (Forge 1971: 135). The transfer of shell rings or other valuables in the form of brideprice is “an exchange of dissimilar things” (Forge 1971: 135). They differ by either nature, as is the case of valuables for ceremonial services, or by measurement, as in the exchange of yams (Forge 1971: 138). Because of this there is no possibility of the exact accounting usually associated with symmetrical exchange (Forge 1971: 135).

The impossibility of accounting means that a man cannot engage in symmetrical exchange between himself and any member of his affinal sub-clans. He cannot compete with these men for prestige, thereby providing “a community of interest and no danger of betrayal” (Forge 1971: 138). This community of affinal men provides positive relations for Abelam men primarily because the incommensurable debt involved leads to no

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32 Only through direct exchange of true sisters is there a method of establishing equality in the marriage exchange. To highlight the importance of equivalence and the ability of men’s exchange to obviate the inequality of marriage, men involved in the Tambaran may hold a nau ceremony that inaugurates the coming yam display and is “focused on violence and killing” (Forge n.d.b.). During this time, men of opposite moieties (ara) may form a naundu relationship with each other, temporarily swapping wives (Forge n.d.b.: July 22, 1958), thus figuring the ideal of sister exchange.
serious effort of accounting. However, this community of incommensurable relations is foundationally entropic as the centrifugal incommensurability of affines leads less to the normative commensuration of symmetrical parties, and more to the temporary alliance built on the impossibilities of equivalence.

The relationships between a man and his sub-clans, particularly those between a mother’s brother (wau) and sister’s son (rauwa), is marked by their link through blood, and blood is the creator of inequality (Forge 1972b: 537). The mother’s brother “and his clan sometimes literally own the blood or have a lien on the spirit of their brother’s sister’s son and do not release him to his patriline until they receive…[a] final payment of valuables at his death” (Forge 1972b: 537). With the exception of penile bleeding during initiations or ritual cleanings of the influence of women’s vulvas, any loss of blood requires a man to make a payment of shell rings to his mother’s brother or his clan as compensation for the loss of their blood (Ibid). Because of this “lien”, a mother’s brother may have considerable influence over the health, fortune, and even reproductive capacity of his sister’s children (Koczberski & Curry 1999: 236). If the funerary payment to the

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33 The only measured accounting that does take place is if a wife commits suicide. If the suicide is deemed to be due to the mistreatment by her husband, then the woman’s father and brothers will kill the husband for his unpaid debt and the loss of their clan blood (Whiteman 1965: 116).

34 The relationship is also marked by the sharing of food. The mother’s brother “in particular, has the right to provide a large proportion of the food eaten by the child” (Forge 1970a: 274). By sharing food publicly with his sister’s children, a man demonstrates that he is the proper mother’s brother (wau) and should be referred to as the child’s “mother” (aiya), therefore giving him the right of obligatory gifts given to mother’s brothers and matrilineal sub-clans. He also publically establishes that he has no ill will towards the children (Koczberski & Curry 1999: 242). This is an important factor as a mother’s brother is often a prime suspect for the illness of a child. A mother’s brother may cause the illness or misfortune of his sister’s children if the children or their parents fail to fulfill their obligations to him and his clan (Koczberski & Curry 1999: 239). He can take an ancestral stone (ŋgwoleiba-matu) and tell recently dead ancestors about the “misbehavior of their matrilineal descendant and ask them to take the appropriate action” (Forge n.d.b.). The curse is so powerful that it can result in the death of a child or extreme misfortune for the child’s entire clan. By publicly feeding his sister’s son, a man also establishes his right to perform ceremonial services for the child during Tamburan initiations. These services must be paid for in the form of rings by either the sister’s son or his father (Forge 1970a: 274).
mother’s brothers’ clan does not take place, then the mother’s brothers’ clan has the right to everything the dead possessed. They will claim the wealth as their own until the value of the debt has been met (Forge n.d.b.). Because of this stark inequality in the relationship between affines, the relationship between mother’s brother and sister’s son “is unequal in all respects in the items exchange in the impossibility of competition” (Forge 1972b: 536). Because they are “by definition unequal [they] cannot compete; their exchanges, being of different things, cannot be subjected to any exact accounting or comparison, they are the most reliable of allies against each other’s competitors” (Ibid: 537).

This is a form of social cooperation and creativity that is based upon the incommensurable complementary differentiation between affines. As such, it stands in stark contrast to the supposed permanence of patrilineal descent. While patriline are aggregated as permanent features of the Abelam cosmic-mythos, ultimately collectivizing agnates through the centripetal force of symmetrical schismogenesis, matrilines and affinal kin provide temporary respites from commensuration.
Figure 29: The construction of the pig trap is iconic of the shape and construction of the Haus Tambaran. Photo by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin (1989b: 80).

Figure 30: Pigs are the very first animals blamed for the destruction of gardens and ordered living. By their routine disruption of the order pigs become great icons of centrifugal creativity that is trapped and harnessed by men to make centripetal symmetrical productivity. Photo by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin (1984: 349).
Figure 31: Baba-tagwa on the village central plaza (*amei*). Photo by Anthony Forge, circa. 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.

Figure 32: Two *baba-tagwa* and a *bigara* initiator (far left) move on to the central plaza to terrorize women and children. Photo by Fred Gerrits, circa 1970 (Coupaye 2007b: 70-71).
Illustration 6. A diagram of the relationship between the sister’s son (rauwa) and his maternal sub-clan and mother’s brother as it persists for three generations. Valuables move from the sister’s son to his mother’s brother (wau) and his clan. Ceremonial services and gifts of food are given by the mother’s brother and his clan to his sister’s son (Forge 1971: 140).
Chapter 4: The force of men’s creativity

While women inhabit a creative relationality of complementary incommensurability, men seek to creatively produce relations of symmetrically commensurable equality. Just as the centrifugal force of women’s incommensurability is found in the roles of witches, wandering women, and baba-tagwa, men too have figures that objectify their metaphors of creativity. For men, this role is best exemplified in the sorcerer.

Anthony Forge defines sorcery as “a technique that requires no innate qualities, able to be learnt by any man, and involving the treatment of some ‘leavings’ of the victim” (Forge 1970b: 259). These “leavings” may consist of the remnants of uneaten food or drink, betel nut or tobacco, or any other host of things that have come into close contact with a person’s mouth. Even more dangerous are powerful substances (jǝwai) that are intrinsically indexes of one’s body. These substances are visible and tactical, such as sweat, blood, saliva, feces, hair, or nail clippings. The most dangerous are semen and the sexual secretions or vaginal discharge of women (Forge 1970b: 261; Koczberski & Curry 1999: 236; Coupaye 2009b: 100-101). Because of this the “Abelam are very careful about the danger of their leavings falling into the wrong hands when they visit other villages, whether friendly or enemy…[any substances which had] contact with their mouths are thrown into dense bush or even carried home for safe disposal” (Forge 1970b: 261; Schofield & Parkinson 1963: 3).

Even though these bodily substances are essential, the principle active substance in all sorcery is paint (Forge 1970b: 259-260; Forge 1962: 11), and all “magically and supernaturally powerful substances are [technically] classified as paint” (Forge 1970a:
Therefore, a sorcerer is called a “paint-man” (*kwis’ndu*) (Forge 1970b: 259). There are two kinds of magically potent paints used by Abelam men. However, they differ less in their ingredients than they do in their purpose. While yam paint has a particular quality of making the dead incarnate through the replication of the *ŋgwalndu* in yam tubers, paint used for other purposes is known as “sorcery paint” (*kabrei kwus*) (Forge 1970b: 263-264) and is always connected with the force and finitude of death and killing (Forge 1962: 16). Old paint used in magical spells or curses is often scraped off of *ŋgwalndu* sculptures and mixed with water from *walɔ* streams and magical herbs to create a powerful potion to be applied or ingested (Kaberry 1941b: 355; Forge n.d.b.). If the paint is fresh and unused then it almost certainly comes from the local big-man of the hamlet. Although the paint used in both yams and sorcery comes from the local big-man, who obtains the paint from an outside village, each yam grower, whither they are a big-man or not, keeps the source of their paint a closely guarded secret (Forge 1962: 11). The farther away a paint’s source, the more power it has (Forge 1962: 11).

A sorcerer will “cook” the “leavings” of the victim in a wrapped “cigar-shaped” bundle of specific leaves, red “hot” paint, and “supplementary noxious substances,” which often have a strong odor, in a large fire of old rotten wood. While the fire burns and the sorcerer utters the incantations bearing the name of the victim, insects flee from the bundle and old wood of the fire. Each insect must be captured and thrown back into the fire by the sorcerer or his assistants. If one insect escapes the fire, the potency of the

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35 For the Eastern Abelam the most powerful paint is considered to be the red paint produced by the Arapesh. It’s said that to test the potency of the paint the Arapesh pack the paint in a bamboo container and place it in an old hut. After setting the hut on fire, the men wait to see if in an explosion the container flies into the air “glowing like a shooting star.” If it does then men know then have made powerful red paint (Forge 1962: 12; Forge 1970b: 260).
fire will diminish, resulting only in minor harm or misfortune (Forge 1970b: 260, 262; Stöcklin 1990: 454). This kind of centripetal collectivization where all insects are held as commensurably equal for the duration of the incantation is profoundly iconic of the collectivization of men’s exchange of symmetrically commensurable things between symmetrically opposed parties.

Because of the highly visible nature of these kinds of fires, villages nearly always believe that a sorcerer is from another village, mostly likely a symmetrically oppositional enemy village (Forge 1970b: 260-261).36 Because of this most Abelam insist “we have no sorcerers in our village” (Ibid: 261).37 As demonstrated earlier, sorcery is an activity of intense attention to the externally symmetrical other, rather than the internally complementary other of witchcraft. In fact, much of the activities of men during the ceremonial period of the yam cycle are centered on the response of a collectivization of men to the threat of the external other. This can be clearly seen in the activities surrounding the Tambaran.

The Tambaran

The Tambaran, a Tok Pisin word for the male ancestral complex common throughout much of the Sepik, is referred to in Ambulas (the language of the Abelam) as “secrets” (maira) (Forge 1967: 67, n. 2; Losche 1990a). The Tambaran initiation is performed by ritual moieties (ara) that make up the dual organization of the Abelam.

36 When it comes to sorcery, even allied villages should be viewed with some suspicion as potential sites of aggression (Forge 1970b: 271). However, because the allies are complementary, they don’t have the same intensity of aggression found in the symmetrically oppositional enemy village.

37 However, successful sorcery often requires and involves the treachery of a fellow village member who wishes ill will on a victim. The ill disposed person will usually provide the ‘leavings’, the name of the victim, and a fee of shell rings in exchange for the sorcerer’s services (Forge 1970b: 262-263).
ceremonial groups (cf. Illustration 7). One moiety initiates the sons of their ritual exchange partners (*chambera*) of the opposing moiety (cf. Figures 33 & 34). In exchange, the partners whose sons are being initiated feed the initiators in the opposing moiety (cf. Figure 35). Each ceremonial cycle reverses the roles of the opposing moiety (Forge 1967: 68).

In Apan gauge village, the initiators (*bigara*) take on the form of ghosts of the recently dead (*gambandu*) (Losche 2001: 155; Losche 1982: 34; cf. Figure 36), while the initiated (*wakan ara*) take on the form of birds (Losche 1999: 217-218; Losche 2001: 162-163; cf. Figure 37). The dual organization that forms the ritual cycle of the Tambaran creates a self perpetuating system highly resistant to permanent disruption as any “default” on a debt incurred during the previous cycle “exposes the culprit to sanctions from the whole village and not just from his own clan or ceremonial partner” (Forge 1967: 69; Roscoe & Scaglion 1990).

In order to enter or leave the Haus Tambaran, initiates must crawl through the small entrance (*korkor*) below the front façade (Forge 1966: 26; Hauser-Schäublin 1990: 474; cf. Figure 38). As initiates crawl through the entrance, their bodies rub against the newly painted sago spathe panels (*pangal*) and carvings that line the building’s interior walls (Forge 1962: 16). Essential to understanding the role this entrance plays in the production of male initiates is one myth shared by Diane Losche where “a woman receives from a male spirit a spell that enables her to give birth through

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38 The Western Abelam also refer to these initiator/ghosts as “ashmen” (*mbautu*). Among the Eastern Abelam these ghosts of the recently dead are known as *ngambe* (Forge n.d.a.; cf. footnote 40).
39 This is the ritual “spirit house” (Tuzin 1980) of the Tambaran cult. It is usually five to six times taller than a normal housing structure (Forge 1966: 26).
40 Occasionally there is also a secret back entrance available only to initiators for the purpose of preparing initiations (Hauser-Schäublin 1990: 474).
the birth canal, infants previously having had to cut out of their mothers’ wombs”

(Losche 1990b: 399). The myth follows a basic outline of the following:

At one time women did not have a birth canal by which a child could be born. Rather, when a woman was in an advanced state of pregnancy and began to experience the pains of labour her abdominal cavity (called *wut*) was cut open and the infant is cannibalised. One day while people were away getting firewood in expectation of the immanent arrival of a child/food, a woman, in the late stage of pregnancy and thus a potential sacrificial victim, was left behind in the village. A gigantic male bird-spirit called Kwatbil, who is the spirit of the [Haus Tambaran], swooped down onto the village [*amei*] and covered the woman beneath its giant wings. With this covering the woman’s body was transformed, a birth canal was produced and the Haus Tambaran was simultaneously incarnated….Thus the [Tambaran] and giving birth occurred at the same time…The sides of the [Haus Tambaran today are the folded wings of this giant bird. From the time of this event children have not been cannibalised and women give birth via the vulva which the infant passes through in order to emerge from the *wut* (Losche 1995: 51; italics altered; with addition from Losche 2003: 38-39).

I believe the Kwatbil to be most closely associated with the hornbill, whose image is “virtually omnipresent” in Tambaran art (Forge 1966: 30). Although birds are generally classified as female, hornbills are considered masculine (Kaberry 1941a: 236; Forge 1966: 30). The hornbill’s beak is often referred to as a cassowary bone dagger (*yai*), and thus associated with creativity of men (Forge 1966: 30). However, inside the belly of the hornbill motif is painted the symbol of the moon with all of its signs of innovative and centrifugal creativity (Forge 1969: 88).41

If it is not already clear enough that the entrance to the Haus Tambaran operates as a kind of birth canal where initiates emerge as different beings than when they entered,

41 Diane Losche argues that Anthony Forge was right to point out the connection between the confluence of male and female symbology in the hornbill and Haus Tambaran, but she hasn’t gone so far as to identify the Kwatbil with the hornbill (Losche 1995; Forge 1966: 30).
it should be noted that at the entrance of many Haus Tambarans a giant carving of a woman with her legs draped over the entrance is visible from the inside of the building. Initiates literally crawl as if going out of her birth canal (Losche 1990a: 12; cf. Figure 39). The interior of the Haus Tambaran is identified as female (Forge 1966: 27; Hauser-Schäublin 1994: 161; cf. Tuzin 1980; Bateson 1958). Like a womb, the belly of the Haus Tambaran is a transformative space where its principal symbol is its fecundity (Losche 1997: 44; Losche 1999: 220). The myth of the Kwatbil as related by Losche (1995: 51; 1999: 219) demonstrates that inside the Haus Tambaran’s womb “a person is something or someone which possess the capacity to produce and reproduce” (Losche 1999: 220) and that Tambaran “reproduction takes place in the womb of the ceremonial house” (Hauser-Schäublin 1994: 161).

Unless ritual objects are being shown to initiates, the interior of the Haus Tambaran is usually enveloped in complete darkness (Forge 1966: 26; cf. Illustration 8). Inside the Haus Tambaran there are several long slit-gongs (‘garamuts’), carvings of mythic yam children (wapinyan), ñgwalndu sculptures, and other Tambaran ritual objects (collectively referred to as maira). It is in the Haus Tambaran they are thought to “sleep” (Forge 1966: 26). Each is a “symbol of a particular creative/productive force” that men seek to be harness (Losche 1990a: 12).

The interior of the Haus Tambaran itself is “divided into four chambers” (ring) (Smidt & McGuigan 1993:131; cf. Illustration 9). As initiates enter the chambers of the Haus Tambaran they’re shown either the yam carvings or ñgwalndu sculptures, depending on the initiator grade they are seeking (Hauser-Schäublin 1994: 141-142; cf. Figure 40). Each stage of the Tambaran cycle has a specific ñgwalndu or ritual object.
(maira) with its own name and “prescribed form” (Forge 1967: 70). Initiates are told at each stage that they are seeing the true ancestral spirits and that each representation seen by them previously was a lie and that they have now been presented with the “truth” of the Tambaran (Forge 1967: 68; Forge 1970a: 272-273). “Whatever occurs during this period is a gift, and a revelation” (Losche 2001a: 162). At the last stage of the Tambaran, where initiates are told they are seeing the last and “actual” ŋgwalndu, “it is said to be a ‘good’ tambaran, and involves no beating, and rubbing only with dead nettles” (Forge 1970a: 278). It is also during this last stage that old women are present in the initiation chamber in “invisible form” (Forge 1971: 142). Once again at each stage the “truth” of the Tambaran’s secrets is made commensurable with all other reality by denying its substance. It’s only at the last grade of the Tambaran do initiates realize that the interior of the Haus Tambaran is a “personified, representation of the cosmos” containing in its womb, or netbag (wut), “nothing, only a kind of endless void” (Hauser-Schäublin 1994: 140-141; Hauser-Schäublin 1985: 30; Forge 1967: 70; cf. Figures 41 & 42). The only “truth” contained therein is the old woman whose invisible soul has been disembodied like a witch (ku-tagwa). She is a personification of the incommensurability of women’s creativity (cf. Knauf 2004). Thus, it is understandable that men would reply to Anthony Forge that their creativity was not the true or real creativity.

But if the Tambaran is an ancestral complex, as Forge prefers to describe it (Forge n.d.b.), then one is left to wonder what exactly is being produced when initiates emerge from the Haus Tambaran’s birth canal. Is it a religious order based upon the circulation of epistemic claims (cf. Burton 1980), or can we glean something from what Abelam men produced with their ceremonial long yams? I tend to believe that this processes is
analogous to the cultivation and production of yams.

After initiates emerge from the Haus Tambaran, at the culmination of the Tambaran ceremony, artists paint the bodies of initiates and other ritual participants (Forge 1962: 13). While wearing the paint these men dance around the central plaza in front of the Haus Tambaran and are considered to be incarnations of the ŋgwalndu and share in their essence (Forge 1962: 13, 16; Figure 43). It’s the sight of these men that is “the most marvelous and beautiful thing of all” (Hauser-Schäublin 1985: 28; cf. Figure 44). Women may find cause to sing of the ritual soup exchanged between these incarnate ŋgwalndu and their ritual exchange partners, “Who eats the soup, the mai-ra eat the soup, the mai-ra have no mouths, the men eat the soup” (Forge n.d.b.: April 27, 1958).

Essentially, instead of continually cultivating the fragments of the ŋgwalndu within the ceremonial long yams, the Tambaran allows men to become temporary incarnations of the ŋgwalndu itself. They are in effect, reproductions of the dead, just like the ceremonial long yams.

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42 The men wear the paint, accessories, flowers, and feathers for three days and may only wash off the paint together in a stream under many ritual restrictions (Forge 1962: 16).
Illustration 7: The dual organization of the Tambaran initiation. Although the general structure of the initiation can be seen above, some anthropologists have questioned Forge’s account of the how many grades where in the Tambaran of the Eastern Abelam (Scaglion per comm.). Illustration by Anthony Forge (1970a: 270).
Figure 33: Some initiations begin when a child is very young. Here a father poses with his son whose initiation he’s sponsored (Forge n.d.a.; Forge 1970a). Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.

Figure 34: Initiates fully clothed at the end of their initiation, Kalabu Village. Photo by Phyllis Kaberry, circa 1938. LSE Archives, Kaberry Papers.
Figure 35: The moiety (ara) of the initiate’s father prepares food for the initiators (biagra). Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.

Figure 36: An initiator (biagra) takes the form of a ghost or “ashman,” Apangai Village. Photo by Diane Losche, circa 1972 (1982: 34).
Figure 37: As initiates (wakan ara) progress in the grade system of the Tambaran their costumes become more elaborate. Here a man carries a large wakan headdress and stumbles around the central plaza (amei) in front of the Haus Tambaran. He resembles both the bird and dead through his elaborate decorations and awkward walk (Losche 1999: 217-218; Losche 2001: 162-163). Photo by Phyllis Kaberry, circa 1938. LSE Archives, Kaberry Papers.

Figure 38: The entrance (korakorá) to the Haus Tambaran. Note the wala serpent resting on top of the entrance. Immediately above the entrance’s base there is also a carving of the hornbill motif. Both images acts as indexes of the fecundity of women’s creativity and its transformative power. This power is then transformed within the Haus Tambaran as a productive or reproductive creativity. Photo by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin (1989b: 123).
Figure 39: At the entrance of the Haus Tambaran initiates crawl through the legs of large sculpture of a woman. As they emerge from the Haus Tambaran, covered in the fresh paint of the sculptures within the building, they resemble neonates at the moment of birth, thus signaling their productive transformation. Photo by [unknown] (Maaz 1989: 20).

Illustration 8: This diagram gives a good representation of the interior of the Haus Tambaran and the spatial relations between persons and the darkness within the building (Smidt & McGuigan 1993: 128).
Illustration 9: Diagram of the chambers *(ring)* of the Haus Tambaran. As initiates progress in the Tambaran’s grades they move from room to room, starting with *Lu* and ending in *Gambawut*. At each stage they are shown figures (*Lu*) or a large *ŋgwalndu* sculpture (*Puti* & *Gambawut*) and told that each is the “real” image of the *ŋgwalndu* (Smidt & McGuigan 1993: 127).
Figure 40: This image of the Lu chamber inside the Haus Tambaran of Bongjora village provides a good representation of the polychromatic carvings and sculptures (*maira*) that fill the building. Photo by Fred Gerrits, circa 1975 (Coupaye 2007b: 84).

Figure 41: The *puti ngwalndu* figure inside the last chamber of the Haus Tambaran in Apangai village, 1987 (*gambawut*). Photo by Noel McGuigan (Smidt & McGuigan 1993: 132).
Figure 42: The backside of the above figure. From this view you can see the “netbag” (ngwalnduwut) of the figure. Inside its netbag the figure holds all the actualizations of a virtual and endless void (Hauser-Schäublin 1994: 140-141; Hauser-Schäublin 1985: 30; Forge 1967: 70). Photo by Dirk Smidt (Smidt & McGuigan 1993: 134).

Figure 43: Initiates (wakan ara) dance in the central plaza (amei). Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.
Figure 44: As they initiates dance they close their eyes to reveal nothing but the yellow paint over their eyelids. In this way they resemble the vision of the ŋgwalndu without eyes. It’s this image that is supposed to be the most beautiful thing in the world. Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.
Chapter 5: The memory of the dead

This leads us to my concluding point about the social memory of ancestral dead and the inhabiting of women’s creativity done by big-men. For the Abelam, the boundary between the dead and the living is permeable. Death is not always final. Those thought to be dead often come back to life shortly after being pronounced dead (Forge n.d.b.: July 17, 1958). In fact, a “shooting star is the marsalai [spirit] of a man unconscious or in a coma returning from the ‘marsalai place’ after being rejected [by his clansmen] as not really dead” (Forge n.d.b.: March 18, 1958; Forge n.d.a.). Fireflies, the totemic emblem of shooting stars are often thought of as “ancestors coming to look out for their children” (Forge n.d.b.: April 11, 1958). When men and women spend time in the gardens, communing with the spirits of dead ancestors through fireflies, yams, or stones, they are extending their temporal connection with a world that has slipped into the “unseen”. To make that world visible again men and women must continually adhere to the customs of their ancestors. 43

“For the Abelam, all old people, the dead (ancestors) and the living, are seen as originators of one’s own physical and social life” (Huber-Greub 1990: 284), so the intimacy the Abelam feel for the recently dead can be intense. 44 The deceased often appear to close kin in dreams (Forge 1970b: 267) and these dreams are understood as indexes of hidden realities (Hauser-Schäublin 2011: 65).

Following the death of a close family member, all the deceased relatives would

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43 The most frequent reason given to Phyllis Kaberry for doing whatever practice the Abelam were doing at the time was because the practice was a custom of the ancestors or ‘marsalai’ and that “We must do this…so that our sons will learn our customs and observe them when we die” (Kaberry 1941b: 360).
44 Ghosts of the recently dead (ŋgambe) are believed to be benign if deceased was old, while the ghosts of the young and unsuccessful are thought to stay in the village and frighten people (Forge n.d.b.).
sleep in the same house throughout the mourning period (Whiteman 1965: 118). Before
the introduction of the colonial government, victims of sorcery were interred under their
dwelling house (Forge 1970b: 267). Since the colonial government’s ban of such
practices, the Abelam have buried victims in a grave three to four feet deep in a
graveyard just outside of their village. It’s important to be buried in one’s patrilineal
clan’s land because the ground of the hamlet is the locus of the “spirit hamlet”
(walŋgai), a symmetrical, albeit completely agnate, version of a clan’s mortal hamlet. If
a clansman wishes to live with his agnates in the “spirit hamlet”, he must be buried in his

The deceased are laid in front of their dwelling house or the Haus Tambaran, both
facing the central plaza (amei) and surrounded with banana leaves decorated with rings,
netbags, and necklaces. The corpses of men are dressed like ceremonial dancers with
their spears broken in two, and those of women are dressed like menarcheal girls with
their netbags hanging next to them (Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 43; Kaberry 1941b: 354, n.
31, 362-363). For the next few evenings, a ‘singsing’ (ŋgambwa kwarɔ), or “songs for
the dead,” is held on the central plaza facing the corpse of the deceased. At this time,
ŋgwalndu songs are chanted to reaffirm the continuity between the world of the living
and the world of the dead (Kaberry n.d.). During this time women cry while stroking and
embracing the corpse, addressing it by kinship terms (Kaberry 1941b: 362). Women have
a marked relationship with the corpse during the time of mourning. It’s women who
touch the corpse during the ‘singsing’ and bury the body during midday (Huber-Greub
1990: 275; Scaglion 1983: 465-466; cf. Figure 46).

The tactical closeness to the dead experienced by women comes with risks. After
the mourning and burial, women purify themselves by striking their hands and body with stinging nettles and subsequently exchange soup at the graveside (Kaberry 1941b: 362-363; Forge n.d.b.: July 17, 1958; Hauser-Schäublin 1995: 43). After a year has passed, the women exhume the bodies of the men, and the “skull is painted with red ochre and placed in the yam house of a son or brother” (Kaberry 1941b: 362; cf. Figure 47). The humerus is used in some divination rituals and the phalanges are pounded and mixed with herbs for the purpose of yam magic (Ibid: 363). Not only are the spirits of female and male spirits watching over the cultivation of taro and yam gardens respectively, the bones of the deceased are used in their magic. Thus, “the dead are drawn once more into the circuit of the living” (Ibid).

During a man’s funeral, his mother’s brother (wau) is the only male who may touch the corpse. The mother’s brother holds the head of his sister’s son (rauwa) as his corpse is interred (cf. Figure 48). After the burial he observes strict taboos and his skin is considered dangerous to himself. According to Forge, “he has to be fed by others, may not smoke without using a cigarette holder, and so on. At the end of three days he throws away the forked twig he has been carrying, which represents the soul of the deceased, and washes” (Forge 1970b: 266). Eventual demise of this relationship between a mother’s brother and sister’s son is likened to “gold dust and fine black sand which can only be separated with great difficulty in the last state of panning” (Forge n.d.b.).

If the appropriate amount and quality of rings is given to the maternal clan of the deceased, then “the spirits of the mother’s clan would wash the spirit and look after it until it was strong enough to join its father’s ancestors” (Kaberry 1941b: 362). The eventual separation of a man from his matrilateral sub-clans and his movement into his
“spirit hamlet” is a bittersweet event. In the “spirit hamlet”, completely surrounded by agnates, men no longer have to fear the threat of inequality and the strife that it breeds through the circulation of women (Forge n.d.b.).

As discussed earlier in relation to yams and the ŋwalndu, we’ve learned that the ŋwalndu, as a collectivizing ancestral substance, subsumes the essences of the ancestral dead once their names are forgotten (cf. Frazer 1913: 351). Names, especially those acquired early in life, belong to one’s patrilineal clan and are highly polysemic. Kin terms are “rarely used” when addressing people, and it’s through names that people are primarily identified (Kaberry 1941a: 246). Names become “forms of memory, mnemonic devices that encode the history of and knowledge about particular initiations” (Losche 2001: 161). Each name may be indexical of a particular event or object (Forge 1972a).

Names are the principal domain in which the trinity of the unity between man, yams, and ŋwalndu is given form (Forge 1970a: 280). The ŋwalndu give ceremonial long yams (wapi) their names, the yams give men a “name” (fame), and men always remember their ŋwalndu, thus giving them material connection to the world of the seen and living. “No one can allow the history of the development of his own clan’s land to be forgotten. To maintain the peaceful coexistence of clans it is necessary for at least someone, perhaps even a member of another clan, to “know” [the history] (Huber-Greub 1990: 282). This gives attention to the fact that the value of any name is always found in its hierarchical value. Anthony Forge argued that “[d]ifference in names is a most cultural

45 They refer to birds, animals, particular ancestors, or objects. Although a man may receive many names throughout his life, he cannot take a name that was previously owned by another whose age and status was greater than his own until he too has reached those heights (Kaberry 1941a: 246). The long slit-gongs (‘garamuts’) are sounded during the giving of a new name, and they summon people by drumming out the rhythm of one’s name (Forge n.d.b.: June 29, 1958).
way of discriminating among descent groups in that it does not refer to any outside noncultural ‘reality’” (Forge 1972b: 531), but it’s cultural domain is not exactly what makes naming creative.

What makes naming creative is how it enables memory to transgress spatiotemporal boundaries by giving life to agents no longer present in among the living. In death, “Man is lost; the names remain” (Kaberry 1941a: 246). How these names remain among the Abelam follows the logic of alternating seniority, or hierarchy, across systemically balanced levels where agnates are equal but only hierarchically so. Thus, names are given from one partner in an age-grade to another in a technically inferior position.

In Ambulas, the word for big-man (nəmandu) is literally translated as “older brother.” Phyllis Kaberry writes that in Kalabu village the big-man is also referred to as the “trunk-man” (kumbu-ndu) (1941b: 358). Big-men gain and retain their influence and prestige through their initiation grade, prowess as warriors, seducers, orators, and yam growers, all of which are intimately tied to the Tambaran and yam cult and the manipulation of “items of power” (cf. Forge 1962: 10; Losche 1990a: 14). Only as they advance within the Tambaran and engage in the exchange of ceremonial long yams (wapi) with ritual exchange partners (chambera) are men able to demonstrate their oratory skills, best their rivals, and engage in warfare with the support of clansmen. Forge tells us that, “Oratory, courage in battle, knowledge of ceremonial, artistic skill, and a cool and calculating disposition are all aids to prestige, but the ability consistently to produce fine wapi is the sine qua non of high status” (1970b: 270-271). However, prestige cannot be derived from yams alone. Big-men must also demonstrate their ability
to mobilize large groups of men for Tambaran activity or yam exchanges (Kaberry 1941a: 240; Forge 1967: 67, n. 2). Their prestige extends to other villages, both enemy and ally, and their funerals are well attended by members of these villages (Kaberry 1941a: 240).

The big-man finds equality outside of the village with symmetrically commensurable others as exchange partners (chambera) (cf. Figure 49). “It is the big-men of different villages who exchange long yams with each other, drawing on the best of their group’s production to maintain the prestige of their village” with other villages (Forge 1970b: 264). By insuring the continual flow of traffic in persons and goods between villages, thus increasing the possibility of traffic in the ‘leavings’ used by sorcerers, a successful big-man puts his own village at risk for sorcery.\(^46\) For the Abelam, the big-man is a figure of transformation who becomes equal with his external symmetrical exchange partners only through the transformation of his internal relations with his own clansmen and fellow villagers. This entails a transformation from intense commensurability and centripetal rivalry to that of internal incommensurability that are centrifugal to the hamlet but collectively commensurable with external others. Big-men remain so “only so long as they can continue to serve as the channel through which their group expresses its external relations in the form of competitive exchange that they can retain their position” (Forge 1972b: 534; cf. Figure 50).

\(^46\) It is by “concentrating the external exchanges in their hands” that big-men are able to consolidate prestige within their own villages (Forge 1970b: 257). Because sorcery, the cause of nearly all deaths, originates in other villages, the travel of big-men is a source of great anxiety. This may lead people to reproach big-men for their careless travels by saying, “You important men, you walk about, who knows where you go? Who knows who you see? Who knows what you do? If you stayed in the village we would not die all the time. You should not kill us” (Forge 1970b: 271). To extend his influence and broaden his network a big-man may choose, as a political strategy, to have his wives live in several different villages, often with their consanguines or matrilateral kin. That way he is able to extend his relations to outside villages and maintain those relationships through his wives (Forge n.d.b.: July 21, 1958).
A big-man, or at least a man who aspires to be one, must imply that he has access to sorcerers who can offer “protection from, or revenge for, supernatural aggression”. Village members typically “hope and believe that their big-men have access to sorcerers well disposed towards them” (Forge 1970b: 258, 269). This association between big-men and the circulation and control of esoteric knowledge extends beyond sorcery (cf. Lindstrom 1984). Such knowledge is also necessary for the politics and oratory surrounding the Tambaran. All big-men have an expertise in the form of oratory known as “veiled speech” (andsha-kundi), where thinly veiled terms are alluded to in double entendres and metaphors. These fragmented speech acts seem to have little discernible referent. However, drawn together in the context of the esoteric knowledge of the Tambaran, orators are able to produce contextually layered discourses that are both visible and concealed to their audience (Hauser-Schäublin 2011: 55-57; Coupaye 2007b: 86). Thus, oratory plays on the fact that although “only the most knowledgeable can fully grasp the ramifications spun around metaphors, synecdoches, and metonymies, all those present are absorbed in working out their own interpretation of the discourse” (Coupaye 2007a: 271).

All political intrigue and influence carries with it a measure of prestige, and thus the big-man may be seen as “simply the end of a continuum” (Forge 1972b: 530). However, the “path” of the big-man is “endless; no one has secure authority” (Forge 1970b: 257; Losche 1990b). Those who actually do reach a level of social prestige and status where they have no equal effectively become socially dead, without exchange

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47 Big-men also have an unusually extensive knowledge of “plants and songs” necessary for yam magic and sorcery (Stöcklin 1990: 452).
partners or reciprocal social relations (Huber-Greub 1990: 284).

Some names have particular values of prestige attached to them and the gaining of such names is a process of changing one’s stance toward memory. Therefore, the names of big-men are often remembered, cited, and circulated by their descendants (Kaberry 1941a: 240). As the big-man is remembered, he becomes singularly incommensurable from the rest of his patrilineal agnates who have been subsumed through their consignment to oblivion within the ṇgwalndu. As such, kin and enemies alike continually recall him (Forge n.d.b.; Forge 1972a). Thus, the big-man sits apart from the rest of the clan as a transgressive figure that brings both death (through sorcery and paint) and prestige (through the successful symmetrically commensurable exchange between enemy villages) to his home village. In effect, the big-man transgresses the system from which he derives his fame and stands as the iconic figure of men’s exchange by becoming truly unequally incommensurable, therefore iconic of women’s creativity (cf. Burridge 1975).

On one occasion Anthony Forge recorded in his field journal that the big-man of Bengragum village “sat, as usual, just to the left of the H.T., no-one within 25 yds of him” (Forge n.d.b.: March 10, 1958; cf. Figure 51). Perhaps there was something more than awe or political reverence occurring in the spatial partitioning caused by the big-man’s presence. Perhaps what Forge was witnessing day after day was that the big-man was incommensurable to his fellow villagers. He embodied a modality of creativity dangerous for other men to inhabit. If he successfully created a truly incommensurable

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48 Women are usually given the name of their father’s sister and retain that name throughout their lives (Kaberry 1941a: 246). Men will usually have five to six names throughout their lifetime. However, big-men may have more than ten (Forge n.d.b.). Because it is the one with usually the highest hierarchical value, it is a person’s last held name before death that is remembered and coveted by peers, descendents, and enemies.
persona, he would be remembered as a unique event in and of himself, independent of the subsumption and commensuration of the \textit{ngwalndu}.

Figure 46: Women carry the corpse of a young boy to his grave. Covered in ash and mud the boy’s mother’s brother (\textit{wau}) holds his head. He is the only male touching the body. Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.

Figure 47: The bones of the deceased are often disinterred, cleaned, and painted for divination (Forge 1970b; Losche 1995). Photo by Diane Losche, circa 1972 (1982: 44).
Figure 48: A mother’s brother (*wau*) lays down the corpse of his sister’s son (*rauwa*) by holding on to his head. Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.

Figure 49: Men from another village rush into the central plaza for the purposes of an exchange with a village big-man. They are dressed for war and their exchange of is one of symmetrical aggression between two villages centered around big-men. Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.
Figure 50: Two big-men fight during an competitive exchange between their two villages. Photo by Anthony Forge, circa 1958. UCSD Mandeville Library, mss 411.

Figure 51: A big-man sits alone at the base of Haus Tambaran underneath its “retaining wall” (tɔkɔt). Photo by Fred Gerrits, circa 1970 (Coupaye 2007b: 76).
Conclusion

Our original problem was trying to find the root disconnect between Anthony Forge and his informants’ concepts of creativity. The puzzle of why men, who devote a great deal of their time to the production of traditional arts, would deny their own creativity is insurmountable if one believes that creativity is found only in productive expression. However, if we follow Han Joas’ advice (1997) and look beyond metaphors of expression toward a fuller theory of social action, it becomes clear that creativity is a multimodal process of making and remaking the phenomenological realities produced intersubjectively (cf. Shutz 1967).

Roy Wagner argues that “the whole force of human creativity lies in the ability to objectify, to identify symbolic elements as reality…and ‘mask’ their effects, what we ‘extend’ to these subject cultures along with our conception of reality is our own ‘masking’ of cultural creativity” (Wagner 1981: 144). The implications of this are rather straightforward. If we are to understand anything about culture, we must first seek to understand what the creativity of culture is doing for both anthropologists and their objects of study. We must ask what the “masks” of “cultural creativity” are and how they work to produce phenomenological realities as objectified states. For the Abelam, the “mask” of “cultural creativity” seems to have been gendered values. The Abelam recognized that these “masks” were constitutive of multimodal processes of creative attention. In contrast, Anthony Forge seems to have taken these “masks” as “culture” itself. Perhaps this was because of his limitation of creativity as a unitary process of expression and innovation.

Creativity isn’t only about innovation; it’s also about production and
reproduction. Abelam men weren’t denying their creativity to Anthony Forge. Instead, they were denying that their work was a certain kind of creativity—the one that was most readily available to Forge. Abelam men created social forms through a synthetic assemblage of already existing parts. Women most fully realized Forge’s category of creativity because they embody a novelty based on their complementary incommensurability. However, in order for socially coherent life-worlds to thrive, a certain sense of continuity and commensurability must exist between parts or events. Men create that sense of continuity and commensurability through their collectivizing cultivation and exchange of yams. Women disrupt it through marriage.

Furthermore, creativity isn’t merely confined to innovation and production (Joas 1997: 85-105); rather it constitutes a multiplicity of effects that are inherent in the necessary differentiation that occurs through creativity. What schismogenesis allows us to appreciate is that these differentiations and obviations work to make commensurable or incommensurable parts. I believe the ethnographic material of this thesis also supports what is the Dumontian argument that these parts are hierarchically defined across their different levels of schismogenesis (Dumont 1980: 239-245). What these levels of differentiation do is then have effects on the order of social realities. The commensurability of symmetrical schismogenesis demands certain normalization and centripetalality, while the incommensurability of complementary schismogenesis produces a multivalency that may have centrifugal effects.

What this demonstrates is that creativity is a useful category for anthropologists who seek to understand how phenomenological realities are caught up in cosmologies of difference. Furthermore, creativity and its connection to “nature” and “culture” is far
more complicated than what either Anthony Forge or Marilyn Strathern contended (cf. Valeri 1990a; McLean 2009). Neither is a state of being, but rather a process of modeling. Abelam creativity works as something that is both innovative and reproductive. The Abelam use gender as a model for understanding how these creative modalities are dialectically schismogenic. Gender isn’t essentialized; rather, it is a certain performance of a creative modality. Gender and creativity are evaluated as commensurable or incommensurable objects of differentiation. What anthropologists must do is understand the cultural logics that give value to these differentiations. Without attending to this multimodal concept of creativity, we miss the opportunity to see both the possible innovation of values and the means by which the reproduction of cultural values is intersubjectively created.
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