Netbags and masks: Containers

We have heard something about the role that exchange plays in the way we might depict how various people in Papua New Guinea depict seeing. The focus was on transactions: the kind of seeing that is involved in displays, primarily [but by no means exclusively] men’s. To recapitulate, what is at issue in the relationship between performer and spectator (donor and recipient) is what each can extract from the other and take within. People draw other people’s vision to themselves. At any one moment, like sending out valuables in gift exchange, the direction is one-way, but with the expectation for return, over time it becomes two-way and the positions are reversed. We might want to say that, like affinal [maternal and paternal] kin in bridewealth exchanges, donor and recipient in a gift exchange each has a perspective on the other, insofar as the transaction creates a distance between them. When the exchange is reciprocal we might then go on, as was suggested [in Lecture Two], to say that they exchange perspectives: the present donor is seen as a former recipient.

Now that process of emanation and absorption creates a difference between what is inside / outside a person. You might have thought that this difference is a quite simple one, worked upon in the contrast between what is hidden and what is revealed, between what recipients / spectators take into themselves as something seen and their evaluation or appraisal, which may come months, even years, later, perhaps not until the return gift, with a similar temporal movement from one position to the other. . . . But what do we do with those situations that visually present images depicting the possibility of seeing both inside and outside at the same time? Surely one can’t be hidden and revealed at one and the same moment!
It is obviously stretching the concept of perspective(s) to talk of them being “exchanged.” Indeed, “perspective” doesn’t seem the right concept at all if what is at issue is not the position of the beholder in relation to the world but a relationship between performer (presented to be seen) and spectator (who does the seeing). And surely we have reached the limit of the concept now to talk of seeing both inside and outside at once. Nonetheless, keeping in mind the [general, ordinary] English language notion of perspective [the appearance of objects as determined by their distance from the observer; an aspect or point of view] may help us approach the visual maneuvers here.

We have already encountered the figure of the [Euro-American] observer with a specific line of sight. Canonically, sight puts the observer at a distance from what is being viewed, or for that matter from what is experienced as surroundings, as in a room where the occupant creates perspectives that shift as he or she shifts. The observer is in the singular: you can do it by yourself.

Figure 51. Randolph Starn observes that the oculus in the Camera degli Sposi, from sixteenth century Italy, can be diagrammed as a diagram of a Renaissance analysis of pictorial space. “In one-point perspective, a ‘correct’ point of view is fixed, monocular, and focused from an arbitrary distance” (Starn 1989: 219). Drawing: Carolyn Van Lang. [Reproduced with publisher’s permission.]
This diagram (figure 51) of the “measured view” [as one of three modes of visual attention alongside the “glance” and the “scan”] elucidates an aspect of Renaissance perspective, illustrating the effect of what can be seen by gazing up at the oculus of a painted ceiling.

It was a Renaissance discovery that the position from which one looks affects the proportions of the perceived object, pointing to how one’s view changes as one’s position changes. Transposed to a technique in painting, the viewer was put into a position in relation to what was on display. [A complex geometry of sight as lines of vision / light was involved, and a curiosity about the effect in turn of looking and being looked at, gazing and being gazed upon, not dwelt on here. However, such perceptions were presented as abstract principles that could be applied to any hypothetical beholder; even when they evoked relations, as between superior and inferior in rank, these were understood generically—the visual principles were detached from particular relations between the actors.]

By contrast, a Melanesian exchange of perspectives needs another person, hence the duality, as in a dance display. But, as will emerge, there are displays where the single (male) dancer seems in himself a double, to be in himself two persons, or rather to be in two places, center and periphery, at the same time. The observer does not just elicit the performance (Lecture One), or see himself reflected in the performer (Lecture Two). In the rituals described at the end of this lecture (Lecture Three), those who watch the dancing are no longer constructed in the same witnessing, elicitory mode [as in ceremonial exchange]. It is as though there was a movement [between positions] that did not involve travel.

Of the four lectures, this is the one where I feel least secure [in the exegesis], partly because of the gross simplifications, partly because I do not think I have yet settled on the appropriate vocabulary, and partly because you have to take a lot on trust before we get to the last lecture. [And, I should have added, because considerable exegetical work has been done on some of these materials, generating controversies and debates over interpretations that are ignored here.] In the meanwhile, having knocked away the theoretical prop of “context” in Lecture One, I now in effect knock away the ethnographic prop provided by the material on “exchange” in Lecture Two, or at least indicate its limitation.
Backtracking

Let me backtrack a moment, because we have already encountered artifacts where one is invited to see two “sides” at the same time.

Figure 52. [As in figure 50.] Drawing of a ceremonial shell necklace (bak) from Sabarl, an island in the Southern Massim. Late 1970s. Drawing: Debbora Bataglia. [Reproduced with publisher’s permission.]

You have seen this before [Lecture Two: figure 50]: the bridewealth necklace from Sabarl in the Massim.

I was talking about the way we might think of vision travelling—the way that seafarers in the Massim compel others to turn their eyes onto them, by visiting and seeing their affines and exchange partners.

This happens in the kula as well, where the aim of men’s journeying is to be at the partner’s place and receive the wealth that is the effect of having come into the partner’s field of vision. The valuables embody the distance between persons; at the same time the valuables that recipients receive are already, so to speak, part of them insofar as the donor is compelled to yield them up. For the journey that brings the
one person face-to-face with the other is anticipated, has already happened, so to speak, in the expectations that each have. (Countless transactions have in any case already taken place.) Items that travel back and forth contain within themselves a depiction of travel. We can say that it as though in depicting the movement between origin and destination, these items encapsulate both donor and recipient in the same image. It is as though the artifact were *in two places at the same time*—at the beginning and end of the journey at once.

And look at this again [Lecture Two: figure 49]: the Sabarl axe.

![Figure 53](image)

**Figure 53.** [As in figure 49.] Drawing of a ceremonial axe blade (*tobwatobwa*) from Sabarl, an island in the Southern Massim. Late 1970s. Drawing: Debbora Battaglia. [Reproduced with publisher’s permission.]

Both the blades alone, and the blades and hafts together, may be treated as valuables. As we know, the difference between the arm (and the haft as a whole) and the hand (blade) points to the difference between matrilineal and paternal kin. Matrilineal kin provide bodily support for the person; paternal kin are like a hand that produces wealth that is an extension of the person. [The visual contrast is in the] wood of the handle and the detachable blade. The handle is the body of a person, and the hand its reproductive force: exchanges with paternal kin are essential for matrilineal regeneration. To depict both is
not just to depict “two parents” (a Euro-Americanism) but to depict donors and recipients of marriage exchanges. From paternal to maternal kin [as we might describe the affines from the perspective of the child], and vice versa. So we have an image of the very relationship between persons who also act as donors and recipients to one another.

Here the axe echoes the necklace, containing both parties or destinies at the same time in the one image of the person—the living person who is the outcome of those exchanges. So [to return to what, in Lecture Two, was mentioned in passing] these valuables simultaneously depict many persons, two matrilineages, maternal and paternal, and one person (the child that is the outcome of these transactions) and the movement (relationship) between them. Visually, it is as though one forever looks in two ways at the same time. If we go back to our “exchange of perspectives” here, we realize that the distance between displayer and spectator has collapsed, that is, you see both at once [as glimpsed in Lecture Two in the shells coming in / streaming out of the Hagen men’s house]. Hence the suggestion that what these items encapsulate is relationship itself; it is visualized in the form of a back and forth movement. The necklace that records movement back and forth is also the very object that compels partners to send it [its substitute] back to the kin of its first donor—and is the wealth that reproduces that relationship.

Nonetheless, this imagery of travel or flow—an exchange of perspectives, which makes seeing things crucial to communication between persons—depends on performances of a particular type. The examples have been of ceremonial exchange, and more briefly of mortuary and bridewealth exchanges; such exchanges [and their reversals] can only be effected over time as a sequencing of one-way transactions. [Added note: I left this formulation at this point, including the vocabulary of performer-spectator, for it came from and was thus extended from the exchange context. To have started with the artifacts presented in this lecture would have brought us to a different comparative juncture.]

The parallel I want to develop [in this lecture] is also a visual one. It rests on a contrast between what is supposed to be inside and what outside a person. As I have indicated, coming to the phenomenon from exchange practices it is as though the journey or distance between spectator / observer or displayer / recipient can also be revealed in an entity with two aspects. But do we need to stay with ceremonial [and
related] exchanges as the key? I don’t think so. Something similar is going on in what I now want to present. We shall approach these similar suppositions from different kinds of artifacts, and from two parts of Papua New Guinea where ceremonial exchange is not going to help us understand the visual effects people strive for—Telefolmin in the Mountain Ok region and Umeda to the north of there, in the West Sepik.

We start with another artifact that is associated with movement, in this case carrying bags worn over the body that travel with the body. They enable the body to be a carrier: a body plus what it carries, that is, the relational (extended) person—the person plus relations. Those relations may also be folded into the person. Like the axe and necklace, two identities appear at the one time. Both parts of the person are visible—the person as though it were composed of parts—as in the dovetailing of maternal and paternal kin. Or as [having the character of being both] male and female.

**Male and female: Mt. Ok netbags**

Suppose the principal visual technique were not the transposition of exchange relations, in which gender plays a part, but gender relations as such. I turn to a situation where one of the ways in which you see inside and outside at the same time—reversible identities—is effected primarily through gender imagery. An observer can see a person as both male and female, that is, see the same person twice—or on other occasions see the person as one.

If you read sexual innuendo [in the material that follows], you are meant to. More than that, sexual imagery is explicit, and is used overtly to refer to bodily capacity, including procreation, having sex, being born. [However,] the imagery occupies a different place [in people’s accounts] from what Euro-Americans often expect. When they [Euro-Americans] look for explanations they tend to stop if they come up with a sexual one, whereas these people are starting with sexual imagery, so to speak, and the question for the anthropologist is what *that* means.
The woman’s bilum, associated with the task of gardening, from Telefolmin.

Both men and women in the Mt. Ok area [Telefol-speakers, Western and West Sepik Provinces] wear bilums [Pidgin or Neo-Melanesian for “netbags,” strictly speaking looped string bags]. Telefol people make two kinds of bag, evident in contrasts between the undecorated / the decorated, between what women wear and what men wear. Making the bilum is women’s work—a valued skill—rendering the woman creative and an initiator of life (same word that is used for initiation). Here (figure 54) is a woman’s bilum, with its open weave for all to see. Maureen Mackenzie, whose fieldwork dates from 1981–84, argues that it is in relation to this “public” female form that a man’s bilum has significance.
Men’s bilum.

![Men’s bilum](image)

**Figure 55.** The reverse side of the elaborated, close-weave Telefol men’s bilum, Mountain Ok area. Australian Museum, Sydney. Photograph: Ric Balzan. From Mackenzie, Maureen. 1991. *Androgynous objects.* [Reproduced with author’s permission.]

A man’s bilum is initially looped by a woman, but this work is hidden underneath the feathers. Adult men and ritual specialists add the men’s feathers and decorations, and only they can do so (in “private”). The bilum is decorated as a face is decorated. In being carried, the part that women make touches the skin (it is worn on the back), while the feathers are visible on the outside.
Men’s bilum, feathers on top: being worn.

Figure 56. Men’s “bird feather bilum,” decorated with the shiny black feathers of the hornbill. The hornbill is one in a sequence of feathers that men wear, principally from species whose males incubate and / or nurture their young. Telefolmin, Mountain Ok area. 1981. Photograph: Maureen Mackenzie. [Reproduced with author’s permission.]

Decorated with hornbill feathers, this [such a bilum] is a source of male pride and an index of prowess. Only once youths have passed first stages of initiation can they elaborate their bags, there being a sequence of feathers (which may include wildfowl, hornbill, cassowary).

In the way men add items to a basic bag, one might be tempted to translate the process as a matter of “culture” being added to “nature.” [That the temptation can be quite easily avoided is implied.] In this
case, men acquire the female bilum as a gift from a female relative [e.g., boys from their mother, alongside feathers from their father]. The relationship remains active, and indeed [when women make the bilum for a specific male relative] is given visual cues: the bag is held to act as a reminder of the woman who made it, so the recipient will “see” her; while when she is looping the bag a woman “sees the face” of the person she has in mind.

Now a man’s work contributes to an analogy [see below] between male and female; it does not displace female input but enhances it. [Thinking of the Sabarl concepts of support and complementarity] there would be no frame on which men fastened the feathers if there were no women to loop for them; nothing for women to put in the bags if no men to fill them up. A reproductive image?

Yet there is a crucial asymmetry: while invariably people see the woman’s bag with something inside it, the men’s bilum hides one form by another. In the female bag, both genders are apparent at the same time; in the male bag, the genders alternate (the male covering is over the female bag underneath [when it is not being worn, now the wearer sees the back, now the front]). In other words, inside and outside appear though two different visual techniques—one simultaneous, one sequential.

Can we see a visual analogy between male and female? In the same way as men cover the bag with feathers, so women’s bags contain objects within. [The “male” bag created by a woman for a man is made in the context of relations between men and women, much as is whatever (food, babies) goes into the woman’s “female” bilum.] What you see is the effect of both women’s and men’s productivity or creativity. Insofar as the female bilum holds the outcome [as “produce,” “creations”] of men’s as well as women’s activities, can we say that it is male in female form? So what about the male bag? Is the feathered bag female in male form, then? A male mother?

Telefol say: “the bilum is the mother of us all.” So what does motherhood imply? The short answer is that it is not just about bearing children but about nurture, and both men and women do that [are nurturers]. Indeed, we can say that both mothers and fathers may act as a kind of mother. The three principal sets of feathers with which the male bilum is decorated derive from birds—the wildfowl or, as here (figure 56), the hornbill, and cassowary—whose males incubate
and / or nurture the young. Men see themselves as male mothers incubating boy initiates.

Figure 57. Mackenzie comments on the visual similarity between a cassowary and a woman wearing her bilum and skirt. [See acknowledgments section for reference.] Telefolmin, Mountain Ok area. Early 1980s. Photograph: Robert Mitton (and the Mitton Memorial Trust). [Reproduced with author’s permission.]

The woman as cassowary: Mackenzie’s perception of a visual similarity.
Now the cassowary is also identified with Afek, a kind of primal female ancestress (“Mother”). This [figure 57] is the anthropologist’s visual analogy: a woman like a cassowary. [A cassowary is a large flightless bird related to the emu.] And with the cassowary feather bilum, another kind of visual sequencing affects men’s perceptions. For the very feathers that younger men thought differentiated them from women are subsequently revealed to be versions of what women wear—these plumes include long tail feathers, and the tail is referred to as a woman’s skirt. Indeed, Mackenzie says that when elders add plumes of the cassowary to their bilums, they are creating a portable embodiment of Afek’s womb.

So the same artifact can be seen as male, or as female, or as both. Cassowary plumage in general is likened to women’s pubic hair; boys are carrying wombs on their backs. Fathers are indeed a kind of mother, but there is a contrast between the individual motherhood of women and the collective motherhood of men. The collective motherhood of men is enacted in the men’s house.
Telefol men’s house.

Figure 58. Telefolmin. The men’s house at Telefolip village, Mountain Ok area, its walls tightly woven and hiding what is inside, 1984. Photograph: Maureen Mackenzie. [Reproduced with author’s permission.]

The men’s house is where initiation occurs. [Telefol people offer many analogies to the elements of which it is composed.] The whole of the men’s house is likened to the nest of a wild fowl, which incubates
its eggs using heat from a mound made of vegetation. Initiates are said to be like nestlings. The house is called a “hornbill house”: at one point when the initiates are secluded they are passed food through the small aperture—just as a hornbill feeds its young from its long beak. (The beak of the hornbill is compared to a female breast: male nurture.) The small doorway to the men’s house is also called “the mouth of a bilum.” In fact there is a string of references between the initiation house / womb / bilum.

An analogy between the men’s house and men’s bilum.

Figure 59. An analogy between a man’s feathered bilum and the Telefolip men’s house [figure 58]. What kind of “bag” is a house—or what kind of “house” is a bag?

In summary [we could perhaps put it like this]. What men have or show on the outside, women have or show on the inside. Hence one may say that when men enclose something within—the initiates—they are female (mothers) in male form; the male form is made present in the imagery of the birds. Between the two forms of the bilum is a concomitant play on what is open and what is secret. Women’s bilums, with their open weave, are worn in public; everyone can see what the woman has inside [it is in that sense shown]. Men’s are made in secret, like the house, both enclosed and concealing, in the same way as
feathers completely cover the bilum [the visible feathers show the hidden secret]. If we say that one person contains another person (as mother with her child, or as men protecting women enclosed within the settlement) then it has to be in the sense that “containment” may refer not only to something within but to something—or that thing—brought outside. (The language is counter-intuitive here.) So as well as inferring a sequence from containment to elicitation (concealment / revelation) [or its reverse] we could talk of differentiated forms of containment (or differentiated forms of elicitation—the same thing). If we are looking at people’s artifacts from this part of the world, then, we have to ask what kind of “bag” a house is, or what kind of “house” a bag is. [Added note: And one answer is another question: what is on its outside and what is within?]

So what kind of “person” is a person? The Mt. Ok material shows one of the effects of gender imagery, that one can see a person as both male and female. And this [apperception] is mediated through visual orientation: the way outside and inside are made to appear in relation to one another.

Center and periphery: Sepik (and other) masks

With masks, the artifact in question is not at first sight a receptacle for carrying things, but a covering that people put over themselves. I said that the Mt. Ok bilum can [in gender terms] be analyzed as both male and female. It invites a view from the exterior, and the question of what is seen on the outside and what is being kept on the inside. Similarly the mask, but with masks—as with houses—we can also start at a different visual point, a view from the interior. In the examples I adduce, men carry the masks, but as will become evident there is a sense in which the masks carry the men. I have deliberately approached the mask through first looking at the bilum; thinking of the bilum, which is as much an article of clothing or adornment as a bag to put things in or on, helps us sidestep much of what Euro-Americans imagine masks to be about.

Now we could regard the mask as just a kind of enveloping or covering form of display of the kind we have seen before. (The wearers are all men.)
Figure 60. Hagen exchange donor with a tall headdress—the feather plaque (“bird bilum” or *koi wal*, see figure 30). Ndika, Mt. Hagen, Western Highlands, 1967. Photograph: Marilyn Strathern.

Hagen man—a feather plaque on top of the wig extends his decorations far above his head.
Figure 61. A pair of ornamented spirit figures made from barkcloth being carried by performers at a ceremonial festival; the bamboo poles may be 18 or 20 meters tall. Wantoat, Huon Peninsula. Mid-1950s. Photograph: Carl Schmitz. [Reproduced with publisher’s permission.]

Wantoat (Huon Peninsula, northern coast of Papua New Guinea): dancers are magnified and extended by the spirit effigies they carry.
**Figure 62.** A pair of *malanggan* (or *malagan*) from Madina, New Ireland, in the form of masks, danced after the cremation of an old lady. Made by Ahomarang of Madina. 1980. Photograph: Dieter Heintze. [Reproduced with publisher’s permission.]

*Malanggan* “masks” from New Ireland cover the head and shoulders.
Figure 63. A *malanggan*-related mask called *tatanua* used in a performance by a Northern Mandak dancer in 1979, Pinikindu village, New Ireland. Brenda Clay (1987: 69) says that once a mask has been lowered over a man’s head he must not utter a sound—he has “gone inside a malagan.” Photograph: Brenda Clay. [Reproduced with publisher’s permission.]

As with all these extensions, this one from New Ireland (Pinikindu) tests the strength of the man who carries it.

The fact that the wearer’s face is covered with a mask [in Figure 63] seems a self-evident demonstration of the Euro-American truism that persons play roles in society [the roles are contained by / elicited from them]. However, we should look at this visual sequence [Figures 60–63] not just as a series of styles but as a series of phenomenal forms: the images [as I have selected them] here run from (60) what is attached a performer, to (61) what is carried by him, to (62) the performer enveloping himself in the ornament, to (63) making the dancer appear inside the artifact. We might ask if the last two actions—enveloping or covering—are not effecting visual transformations of a particular kind.
We now turn to Umeda, West Sepik and the ida festival [for sago fertility]. The anthropologist’s (Alfred Gell’s) question in the 1970s [fieldwork 1969–70] was how to interpret a particular array of male dancing figures and sequence of events. [They formed] not a single display in a line (as in Hagen) but an unfolding of a sequence over about two weeks of ritual activity, much of it at night. [Added note: more could have been made of this, since the spectators seemingly glimpse or sense the dancers rather than being exposed to them in full view.] Several different decorations suggest many ritual figures, but Gell concludes that basically there is only one, in process of transformation over the generations [resulting, in his view, in the emergence of a young man, a “junior cassowary,” as an older-man-to-be; mature men, the “senior cassowaries,” appear prior in the sequence]. Forms appear within forms, or one form emerges out of another.

[Added note: The masks illustrated here come from those worn by dancers from the senior generation only; most of the masks are danced in pairs (two of a kind), indicating the two moieties (see next paragraph). Here, as elsewhere, I deal with no more than a minute portion of the material.]

Umeda people live in small hamlets that make up villages, residential not kin groups, which come together for these festivals. A crucial axis is that between center and periphery: each hamlet is split into two moieties, one regarded as center / male, the other as periphery / female. [Each of course includes both men and women.] The female periphery encircles or “contains” the male. Some hamlets join together in order to intermarry. [From ego’s point of view, these are also regarded as on the “periphery.”] Others do not exchange women but exchange masks, each hamlet exchanging masks with two or three other hamlets outside its village. Masks thus circulate—so men dancers will be wearing masks obtained from elsewhere; they can wear masks from other [“peripheral”] hamlets provided they do not marry from there. The mask is like the “center” of a hamlet—in effect a masked dancer is wearing someone else’s “center.” [From Werbner’s meta-interpretation,] “Men who are outsiders to each other’s territory exchange masks. In this way they turn themselves into insiders and gain access to one another’s inner space” (Werbner 1989: 156). Like women, the masks are containers for men.

The masked dancer seemingly takes the form of a tree. Across the Papua New Guinea Highlands, feathers worn at the head are likened to
birds flocking to [flowering] trees. Lowlands people draw on coconut and the sago palms. On analogy with sago, a man has a core that can be extracted, and is himself sprung from an ancestral coconut.

**Figure 64.** The “sago” dancers at the *ida* fertility ritual wear the same kind of mask (*ageli*) as the “cassowaries” [see figure 65], but with body-paint in strong contrast. Umeda, West Sepik. 1969–70. Drawing: Alfred Gell. [Reproduced with the permission of Simeran Gell.]

Dancer playing the sago role (*aba*), with distinctive body paint.
Figure 64 shows the masked dancer as a tree [palm]—at the core of the tree is the man. The dancer supplies the core and animates the tree, making the branches shake. So the man *completes* the mask so to speak: together they are a complete figure. But it is not a just a male figure, as we shall see.

To make the point again, masks, or “coconut masks” as they are called (some of them incorporate coconut fiber), are exchanged between hamlets (“coconut compatibility”) and where hamlets exchange masks they cannot marry. Those who marry cannot wear one another’s coconut masks; maternal (previously married) kin are known by contrast as “of the skirt,” a reference to women’s skirts that are made of sago fiber. Wearing the masks is reproductive in the context of a long fertility ritual cycle that plays on birth imagery; we might say the inter-mask hamlets behave as though they were inter-marrying hamlets, that is, [their relations] have similar reproductive effects. In any event, a man wears a mask that has come from another hamlet. As Werbner put it [above], this is entering another hamlet’s (another person’s) inner space [he went on to suggest that the mask worn by the cassowary dancer—see below—is worn as a male womb]. One person (hamlet) puts on another person (hamlet), so to speak.
The “cassowary” (eli) role.

Figure 65. One of a pair of “cassowary” men who perform all night, joined by many other dancers, with a special penis-gourd in reference to the intention of the *ida* ritual to foster fertility. Spectators are on the periphery. Umeda, West Sepik. 1969–70. Drawing: Alfred Gell. [Reproduced with the permission of Simeran Gell.]
The mask doesn’t hide the man so much as puts the man in the position of being inside it, making him the center of it, a body within a body. An alternative to “perspective?” [There are three elements here.] (1) Center and periphery: what is inside [the mask] is not further away from the spectator than what is outside [rather, it is like the outside’s inside, in the sense that the outside is given form and motion by the inside]. (2) The spectator is put in no single position, that is, there is no specific vantage point from which the figure is to be seen: the spectators are all around the masked dancer—he dances in their center. (3) What is made visible is outside and inside [the “mask”] at the same time. In gender terms, a male figure is composed of both male and female elements.

Diagram of the mask (ageli) worn by both the sago and cassowary dancers.

**Figure 66.** Schematic diagram of the ageli mask seen in figures 64 and 65. Umeda, West Sepik. 1969–70. Drawing: Alfred Gell. [Reproduced with the permission of Simeran Gell.]
[Although with different body paint, the *aba* and the *eli* dancers wear the same masks (called *agelî*)—in fact, in sequence, the pair of *eli* dance first, all night, and then at dawn hand over their masks to the *aba.*] This mask includes an inner layer of bark (*ehov sog*), the same kind of bark that women use to make barkcloth and [the string for] bilums [netbags], covered by a fringe of pandanus leaves (the *hubnab*). And in this case the mask incorporates sago fronds, on the periphery. Can we say that mask (that has come from an ally village, a coconut village) contains reference to those other villages from which wives come? However, the sago isn't worn like a container—it is “sago” in the form of “coconut.” Let me try to explain that!

Look at the sago fronds again: fibrous material from the sago palm is used in making women’s skirts, although women’s skirts hang down, [potentially] containing the child inside. Here, springing up on top of the mask, is that part of sago most like the sprouting branches of a coconut palm associated with men. So the man whose torso and legs appear underneath the mask, so to speak, also appears at the top, that is, as masculinized sago. You look at the sago fronds, but then you realize that the fronds remind you not just of coconut but of the cassowary plumes that men also wear (the term for sago fronds incorporates the term for cassowary). Sago appears masculinized in the way the fronds are worn.

We may say that the whole mask plus its figure, an image of male interiority and a female periphery, is also shown on the outside of the man / mask in the male and female elements of the mask itself. Of course spectators are only aware of the mask in its animated state—it isn’t “seen” when it is uninhabited. When the mask shakes and the fruits clack up and down—the band of fruit at top of the mask recall the daughters men give away in marriage—it is because it is animated by male presence.

As a consequence, as far as hamlet identity is concerned, places are assembled and reassembled: people can be “in” different kinds of places. Does a mask depict what a place looks like when it moves? “Peripheral” women move elsewhere or come from elsewhere and thus recenter the men of a hamlet, surrounding the men with different kinds of women. Daughters move away, mothers come in, the latter being from other hamlets where other men are the core. The masks are doing the same thing for those villages between whom there is no flow of women. You see at the same time one form in another: the woman’s
skirt and her daughters are everted into the springing fronds, and it is
the man who is within the mask. This is not an assemblage of materials
(culture, roles, society) that the person has put on, but a “person” that a
“person” has put on. Together they comprise those from whom and to
whom fertility flows.

Like kula wealth that in being given away magically compels its own
return, here fertility is given away (in those daughters who marry out)
and returns in the image of the hamlet “contained” by its mothers. For
the role men assume in this, promoting their own fertility is also to
derive it from others and bestow it on others. And the radical division
between sago and coconut that divides hamlets (villages) turns out to
offer the possibility [iconographically speaking] of hamlets occupying
one another’s central places. This is consonant with the fact that [on
the occasions of the ida festival] there is no single viewing point (no
single orientation) from which to see the dancer.

**On visual theory again**

We can now pull some of the elements noted in Lecture Two in
another direction. In general terms taking on board [the conclusion]
that “seeing” activates relationships (where things are made explicitly to
be seen, seeing is an act), we can add a couple of comments to the
exchange of “perspectives” (where performers and spectators each see
themselves in the other and thus from the other’s position [the
perspective, like a relationship, is “divided” between them]).

(7) Simultaneity and sequence. To see yourself from the view of the
other may be to comprehend both views at the same time; “at the
same time,” the simultaneous view may anticipate their
differentiation (sequence). It is also possible to imagine oneself both
in a place and occupying other places [“at the same place”]. [Added
note: Knocking away the prop of exchange relations gives us another
view of the temporality or spatiality inevitably implied in the two-way
movement between revelation and concealment.]

(8) Differentiation. It is possible, within the contours of an image, to
see persons within persons, through differentiating visual attributes
such as male and female, inside and outside, center and periphery.
Let me bring this back to masks. The Euro-American assumption that a mask covering the head and face is primarily a re-presentation of the head or face is no doubt based on the fallacy that what we are primarily dealing with is transformations of personal identity, actors and social roles (Lecture One: the person as an individual is seen above all in the face). The Papua New Guinean mask pulled over the head is not so much representing the head as such; rather, the head is part of the body that can both carry this appendage and go inside it. Now when the mask is regarded [in the Euro-American view] as a covering for the face beneath / behind, a specific perspective is implied. That is, the observer is placed at a distance from the wearer. This view of the mask requires the observer to be looking from a position in front of / outside of the figure, so that he or she looks first at the mask and then thinks about the figures behind the mask. (A simple two-step view of receding distance.) However, the “masks” we have been looking at are less like the masks of Euro-American theatricals or masquerades and much more like netbags or axe blades, or even pearlshells.

Hagen men bearing heavy mounted pearlshell valuables as part of their person.

Figure 67. The same occasion, and same dance formation, as in figure 42. Ndika, Mt. Hagen, Western Highlands. 1967. Photograph: Marilyn Strathern.
[To be added if time]. While the wealth that a Hagen dancer displays refers to other wealth or implies a general statement about wealth, it is also part of that wealth, is the wealth. It summons the relationships that compel its travel and exchange. So, too, we may say of the netbags or masks as parts of persons—what people carry on their bodies is what carries them in / across relationships, or [avoiding that particular construction] is their relationships.

If decoration is conceived for the body, the body itself exists only through decoration. We might say the same of persons and their relations. For the pearlshell / axe blade / bilum / mask is not so much an abstracted representation of the relationships between persons as their very presence, in the sense that when such a thing / person moves it reproduces relationships, and thus embodies its own effect. Both here and there at the same time [at the same place].

Finally, it will have escaped no-one’s attention that diverse equivalences, identities and associations have been made largely in the absence of any justification through exegesis [anthropological or otherwise]. We shall turn to something like Papua New Guinean exegesis next time.