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Author(s): Susanne Küchler

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Malangan: objects, sacrifice and the production of memory

SUSANNE KÜCHLER—*The Johns Hopkins University*

The documentation of gift exchange systems has an uninterrupted history in Melanesian ethnography. This is because exchange activities in Melanesia have not merely continued, but have effloresced during a period that has been increasingly dominated by a commodity based economy (Gregory 1982:166). This efflorescence of gift exchange systems took different forms at different times and places with various consequences for society and culture.

Evidence for the escalation of exchange activity derives mostly from ethnographies that show an increase in the frequency and the visibility of ceremonies in which gift objects and valuables circulate. Ethnographic collections tend to be neglected as comparative data, because of the prevailing tendency to classify objects with representational properties as art and as removed from exchange. With the help of the example of Malangan art and data collected during two years' research at the location of its production in northern New Ireland, Papua New Guinea, I want to point out that much can be gained from analyzing certain ethnographic collections as indexes of attitudes, beliefs, and practices surrounding the production of objects as gifts. The material gives evidence of a dynamic relation between a mode of representation and a mode of circulation and suggests the need to reconsider object collections whose representational properties lead to their exclusion from the ethnography of exchange.

The Malangan collections of northern New Ireland are famous for their size, which is comparable with those of the Northwest coast of America or of the Sepik River in mainland New Guinea. The size of these collections, however, is not proof of a vigorous "salvage" anthropology alone, but of gift production for transactions that usually culminated in the destruction of objects.¹ In northern New Ireland, sale has become an alternative to destruction, so that the size of the collections is indicative of a particular kind of exchange system and its efflorescence.

Exchange systems that feature the destruction of gifts are rare but are not restricted to specific cultures.² For example, the Melanesian material referred to in this paper could be compared with the potlatch of the Northwest coast. "Gifts to god systems," to use Gregory's term, have flourished and developed under the impact of Western money and Western goods (Gregory 1980:627), and have contributed to the development of new forms of ranking and of regional forms of social organization (cf. Wolf 1982:191). While the theory of gift destruction has tended to emphasize the relation between alienation and capital accumulation, and to focus on gift objects as tokens in an economic transaction (Gregory 1980:627), it has ignored the ephemeral

Certain museum collections are not the result of "salvage anthropology" alone, but of the operation of "gift to god systems," as sale became an alternative means of removing gifts from circulation. Objects that are made to be dismantled in a process of sacrifice confound time not through permanence, but through renewal, and create time not as history, but as memory. The production of memory, and the difference it creates in society and culture, is discussed with the example of Malangan art in northern New Ireland, Papua New Guinea. [northern New Ireland, representation, sacrifice, the production of memory, regional integration]

character of gifts and the specificity of their production as a source for the comparative understanding of the difference such “gift to god systems” created in the degree of ranking, in the nature of kinship, and in gender relations.³

This paper thus aims to develop a perspective on “gift to god systems” that takes as its starting point the nature of the objects sacrificed in the exchanges. Such objects characteristically feature representational properties that have led us to ignore them in the analysis of exchange systems. The representational properties are argued to be significantly embedded in exchange systems in which not objects, but the images they embody are circulated in transactions. The circulation of imagery is achieved through the destruction of gift objects and is made possible through processes of memory; mnemonically processed and circulated imagery enables the transcendence of kinship-based forms of organization by “ritual confederations” that imply a distinctive territorial mode of ranking (Wolf 1982:191). The ethnography of Malangan art is a particularly clear example of gift production for sacrificial exchange and the concomitant development of both a visual mnemonic system and a regional form of social organization with emerging new forms of ranking. For this reason it is discussed extensively in this paper with the hope of inspiring a fresh look at comparative ethnographies and collections that document the operation of those rare, but anthropologically interesting, exchange systems in which gift objects are produced to be sacrificed.

collections as data

Collections of objects that were made for destruction have remained an untapped resource of potential data for analysis, because we impose assumptions derived from Western art history on objects with representational properties and overlook the distinctive conceptions under which they are produced. We assume, for example, that the fact of their destruction has no relevance for how they are produced or for the form given to the objects in production. We therefore approach collections disregarding the relation between object and temporality and dismiss as irrelevant the tension between constancy and variation by interpreting this tension as a further reason to leave the responsibility for analysis to those who look at these objects as “art” and as removed from exchange.

Objects produced as gifts, however, confound time in specific and anthropologically interesting ways. In confounding time, they both visually and conceptually create the disinterested character of gift exchange (Bourdieu 1977:171). There are two ways in which the production of gifts can confound time. With gift objects that endure, time is literally inscribed as age into the gift as it continues to be circulated. Time, however, can also be confounded through renewal, which is the principle underlying the destruction of gifts. The sacrifice of the gift creates time not as history, which is visible as age in objects, but as memory, which as imagery is subjected to renewal.

The production of memory is characteristic of systems that feature the destruction of gifts. It is based on a conception of time that emphasizes its renewal and produces imagery subject to retention and recall. Malangan art is a well-documented example of gift objects whose imagery is repeatedly reproduced through deliberate recall from memory for successive gift productions (Figure 1);⁴ Malangan objects are sculptures that are both intricately carved and painted and that display a visual and conceptual complexity that is expressed in the tension between constancy and variation in the carved and painted motifs. The motifs and motif combinations are recurrent throughout the collections of Malangan art, with variations being introduced in the painted surface and in the number and selection of motifs. This pattern of constancy and variation is a product of a process of transformation that occurs in the recall of imagery for reembodyment in a gift object; the recall is not random, but is governed by the calculations of exchange. This systemic feature of transformation enables us to use certain of these collections

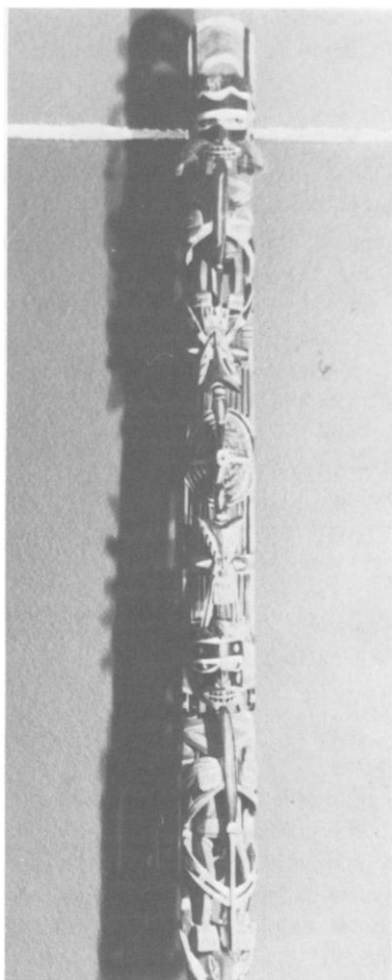


Figure 1. Museum Basle. Collection of A. Bühler.

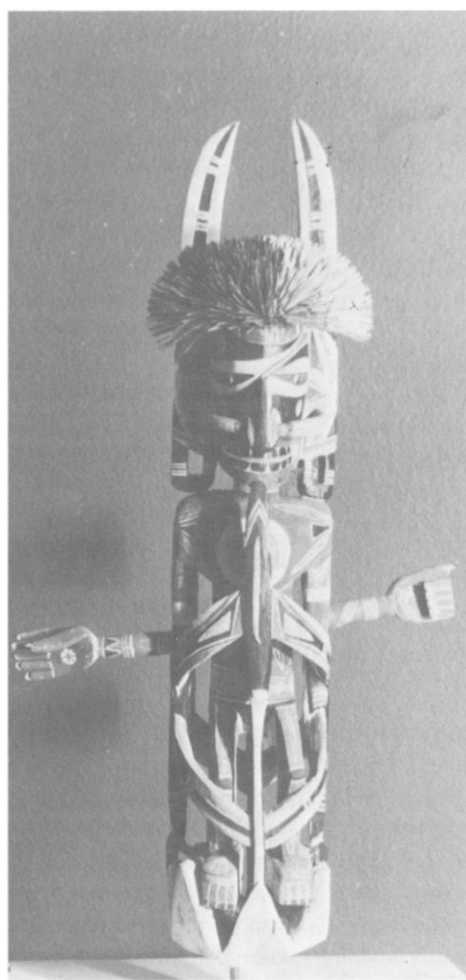


Figure 2. Museum Basle. Collection of A. Bühler.

as documentation for the efflorescence of “gift to god systems” and its consequences for political evolution.

Malangan sculptures are produced for transaction in the final ceremony for the dead, are symbolically killed in the exchanges, and are destroyed.⁵ What is circulated in the exchanges is not things, but the right to reproduce images that are remembered and recalled for reembodyment in ever new sculptures. The separation of imagery from a sculpture that is serving as a gift is effected through sacrificing the sculpture and releasing, as it is left to rot, what is called its “smell” (*musung*), which is the most important aspect of memory.

To clarify the distinctive character of objects in “gift to god systems” as exemplified in Malangan art, I want to make a brief comparison with another Melanesian exchange system, the Kula. In the Kula, shell valuables are passed from island to island; as they travel, they produce history that, as it accumulates, increases the fame of the shells and of the transactors (Weiner 1978; Munn 1986). The age of the shell and the path it forms as it is moved around the islands are two manifestations of the time without which there would be no notion of the gift as disinterested exchange. The concern with perpetuating the movement of the shells disguises the calculation of transaction. Transactors of Kula valuables are thus thought of as partners in the cooperative venture of producing the history of shells.⁶

In contrast, Malangan transactions do not create lasting partnerships and there is no sense of “marriages” between images as is said of the meeting of Kula shells. There is indeed no sense of two transactions being linked or separated through time. Malangan transactions are dramatized as sacrifice and the objective is the production of memory. In recounting transactions and relationships based on them, memory is represented as knowledge of how to reembody the Malangan imagery which is in circulation. This knowledge is the basis for ranking clans in expanded and territorially organized units that are activated in ritual situations.

These examples highlight the different ways in which objects that serve as gifts can confound time. Kula shell valuables thus change visibly as they continue on their path around the islands of the Massim. Through the handling of shells, their epidermis is removed and red striations are formed on the shell surface (Campbell 1983:236). Time is literally inscribed into the shells, which increase in value with age (Campbell 1983:237). The Malangan imagery, however, creates during its reembodiment a network of stoppages that freeze the passing of time and allow for the perception of what Bergson called the *durée*.⁷ The value ascribed to such objects concerns how much they retain and not how much has been taken away through time.

The complexity of the production of memory in general and its specific articulation in exchange is all too little explored in the anthropological literature. This is because it requires us to rethink our assumptions about objects that, on account of being embedded in memory production, embody imagery of an apparently representational character. For us, they are “art” and thus made to be remnants of individual and cultural creativity. It is not the status of “art” that needs questioning, but the conception of objects as original and nonrecoverable things.

rethinking Malangan art

Complex visual objects such as Malangan sculptures are problematic for anthropologists, who regard them with a sense of distance that appears appropriate for all things falling within our category of art. This distance is also imposed upon the analysis in that the relation between object and context is seen to be primarily one of representation. The assumptions of such an analysis are so contrary to the assumptions under which the sculptures were produced that hardly anything is known in the present literature about the form given to the objects, or about their relation to exchange in what I will call the *Malangan system*. The sad remark by one of the earliest anthropologists working on Malangan could have been made in the 1980s as well as in 1932, when it was written:

We have so little information about the Malangan. . . . Their exact significance is still not quite clear. We know that they are to honor the dead, that they are taboo to women, that they are surrounded by very elaborate dances and other ritual, that wealth is necessary to make the feasts accompanying them and that much prestige comes to him who holds Malangan. We know too, that they have come from the distant past [Powdermaker 1932:134].⁸

The Malangan system encompasses assumptions and practices that surround the embodiment of imagery in gifts. As gifts they are governed in production and consumption by conceptions of the relation between persons and things. I use the term “system,” because Malangan imagery has been scattered in a manner similar to the dispersal of the clans that now reside in five distinct language areas. The Malangan system thus integrates these language areas into a region that corresponds to the northern New Ireland subgrouping of languages.

New Ireland is located northeast of mainland New Guinea and is one of the islands of the Bismarck Archipelago, placed on the map during several explorations between 1527 and 1761. The island was frequented by traders as early as the late 18th century. Trading companies and plantation sites were established on the island by the 1840s. Reports of missionaries and explorers who followed in the footsteps of the trading companies give evidence of a culture that was, as it were, no longer “untouched.” Of large centralized villages in the northern part of the island nothing but their memory and traces in the landscape were left, their inhabitants scat-

tered through warfare across the island or decimated by disease. The culture thus encountered was thought to be doomed and so was its art, which was taken and brought back to Europe, first as treasures of curiosity and later as venerated fragments of a dying culture that had to be preserved at whatever cost.⁹

This assumption of the ancient character of Malangan art, which came to constitute one of the largest collections of non-Western art in the Western world, has never been questioned. The evidence that sculptures were produced in ever greater numbers (in 1930 six sculptures were produced for a single ceremony in Medina village) and at ever shorter intervals has not shaken this assumption. The efflorescence of production was merely interpreted as a sign of decadence and disintegration and thus as symptomatic of a culture in decline.¹⁰

The Malangan system, as it is known through collections and ethnography, however, is indeed a distinctive development of a period dominated by the imposition of Western trade and commodities. This is suggested first of all by the collections themselves and only secondarily by ethnography.

It is evident from the collections that between 1840 and the end of the 19th century alone, more than 2000 objects were produced for transaction.¹¹ Due to the inaccessibility of the interior, these objects were collected from a handful of villages situated along the east coast of the island. As the production of sculptures for ceremonies occurred only during the dry and harvest season and was a village affair, the collections indicate a boom in production, with more sculptures being produced for a single ceremony and ceremonies occurring at shorter intervals in the village. From the collections we also know that despite the almost unlimited variety in sculptures, certain elements continually recur with respect to shape, form, and the selection and combination of motifs. Such constancy in the formal properties of sculptures is not limited to particular localities within the region in which they were collected. On the contrary, this constancy is apparent primarily when we look at sculptures collected at different and frequently distant places in the region or at those collected at different times during the period in which sculptures came to reach the West.

The constancy in Malangan art suggests that the ability to retain and recall imagery was given increasing importance with the expansion of the ceremonial exchange system and thus placed constraints on the carving process. Only this interplay between the mnemonic processing of imagery and the technique of art making can account for the nonrandom transformation of Malangan imagery across the region and for its interpretation in terms of consistent distinctions upon which new forms of ranking came to be based (Bartlett 1932; Küchler 1987).

All sculptures that have been collected on the island are classified by the people who participate in the transactions of Malangan imagery into nine named templates, of which three are recognized in woven sculptures and six in wooden ones. Each template is associated with a stock of named images that are circulated within and between the linguistically distinct localities of the region.¹² The regional distribution of these templates corresponds to the networks of ritual confederations whose members act together in all matters concerning the work for the dead that climaxes in the production and sacrifice of Malangan. These ritual confederations encompass several clans whose relationship is not perceived in terms of a common history of intermarriage, but in terms of the memory of imagery and of the knowledge of how to reembody this imagery into Malangan sculptures. Memory has thus become part of the technology of image-making through activated recall and also governs the generation of new images through forgetting.

The production of memory in the form of mobile and objectifiable imagery documents a historically situated concern with temporality and with confounding it in ways other than its inscription into durable or aging things. With the escalation of warfare, following the imposition of foreign trade and the abandonment of central villages in the mountain, clans shattered into fragments and scattered across the region. Continuity could no longer be perceived in the relation between people and land, but had to be recreated at a place that epitomizes the arrest

of movement and of time; this place is the place of burial where memories came to be rooted and shaped into images of Malangan art.

The burial place as the location for gift production constitutes the significant difference in the nature of the gift object and in the mode of its transaction and circulation; this is because it introduces beliefs and practices surrounding immortality into the strategies of exchange. Malangan art reflects not only these beliefs and practices, but is the very means through which they can be ascertained as truth.

the body and the conception of Malangan

The term *malangan* is polysemous, its possible translations ranging from heat and abundance to likeness. It is the latter meaning, that of likeness, which refers to the making and to the form given to the gift object.

To say that Malangan sculptures are figurative and therefore strike a likeness with the human body is not sufficient, as this implies that the likeness is thought to exist between one *thing* and another. Malangan sculptures, however, are conceived to be the product of *processes* that are analogous to those underlying production and bodily reproduction more generally. The term for sculpting is *tetak* (literally, the making of skin), and applies also to the socially induced process of maturation and to the production of gardens. “Skins,” or “containers” of a force to which life is attributed, are created through heat (*malangan*). Glowing sticks or irons are thus used for the marking and drilling of holes into wood in the process of carving; newborn infants are held over the smoking and glowing embers of a fire as they are given a name by their father’s matriline, and new gardens are prepared by burning spaces into the secondary forest.¹³ Decomposition as a process of rotting (*hasu*, literally, the causing of smell), in turn, is a common treatment for sculptures after the ceremonial transaction of their imagery, for the bodies of deceased persons, and for the crops harvested from a garden that was planted for a ceremony.

Bodily processes of the development of outer form and its decomposition are perceived as inseparable aspects of renewal and as necessary attributes of things that contain life-force, whether it be gardens, sculptures, or people. The analogy between gardens, sculptures and people that is suggested by the sharing of processes of generation and renewal enables the transferability of life-force from one to the other. The transference of life-force from deceased person to sculpture occurs at the place of burial, where it is reactivated and rechanneled to the living. Life-force, however, is not just transferred from the deceased person to the Malangan sculpture and back again to the living, but is significantly transformed in the process. This is because life-force is not only captured, but also freed in a process that follows the scheme of sacrifice; in the form of smell and its associated imagery it is subjected to the force of memory in its recirculation among the living.

Malangan production as sacrifice

Sacrifice and the production of memory are thus intertwined in the New Ireland material.¹⁴ A sculpture is a product of a process of creating a container that can serve as replacement for the decomposed body of the deceased person. The term “ancestor-sculpture,” persistently used to characterize Malangan art, is misleading, however, because it ignores the process of capture and transformation whose product is memory. The production of Malangan is patterned not by “tradition” but by the logic of sacrifice; the sculpture is thought to come to life as a result of its production, its “killing,” and its decomposition in a manner similar to the three stages that structure the process of sacrifice.

Wooden sculptures are produced in three stages, of which the first and the last articulate the entry and the exit of a life-giving force into the medium. These three stages approximate the

stages of the process of sacrifice and culminate in the production of a renewable entity, that is, of an image subjected to memory.¹⁵

Wood is first cut in the forest and carried into an enclosure situated adjacent to the graveyard, and used as a resting place for the dead prior to burial.¹⁶ Both wood and the bodies of the dead are left to dry in this enclosure. The draining of fluid from the body between pregnancies is also a common practice among women seen not as a means to prevent conception, but as means to assure that a pregnancy will follow. The drying of dead bodies and of wood is thus thought to prepare for the conception of *noman* in a place and in material.

Noman can be translated as the life-force or energy, which is essential to thought and creativity (*lamonan*) during life. With death and the decomposition of the body, the force is gradually freed, attaining its full strength, which is associated with the heat (*malang*) of fire. The funerary ceremonies following the burial of the body dramatize the dismantling of *noman* by tracing the decomposition of the body. The final ceremony, which culminates in the production of sculptures, consists of four main stages. Linguistically and conceptually, these stages are presented as the "building up of a fire" from ashes to the intense glowing heat or "malangan."

In its liberated stage, the force is hot, polluting and dangerous to life, and has to be recaptured. Its new container in the wooden Malangan sculpture is gradually given form in the enclosure in which *noman* came to be situated.

During every stage of production the carver is paid with money and with food prepared in ways reserved both for this occasion and for the first meal eaten together by husband and wife. In the tripartite scheme of the ritual process, the carver acts as the sacrificer who is stripped of all the temporal aspects of his being during the period of carving. He ceases to garden or to undertake any activity that interrupts the daytime. He does not leave the house in which he is carving, except at night. The further he shapes the wood into an image, the more the rhythm of his waking and sleeping pattern is molded by the stages imposed on the production. The time in which he lives is quite literally transformed into the spatial form of the sculpture.

The carving itself is divided into two phases. The wood is first sculpted in the round until motifs appear in three-dimensional form. The bare frame of motifs is then covered with painted patterns. The patterns completely cover the carved planes like the skin of the body.

The "skin" of the sculpture is thus the visually nonpartible composite of motifs and painted patterns that comes to life with the inserting of the "eye" of Malangan, the art's most distinctive feature. This "eye" is the outer protection of the inner part of a living shell (*turbo petholaurus*). With its "eyes" fitted, the sculpture, now alive, looks back at the person who is viewing the sculpture. The "coming to life" of the sculpture initiates the second stage of the ritual process, in which the captured life-force is dramatically reclaimed.

On the subsequent night, the sculpture is transferred to the graveyard, which is surrounded by a screen. It is set on the grave of the deceased person whose mortuary cycle culminates with the production of the sculpture, and placed in a house that has been built for the occasion of its display. The night (*bot*) is known for the dances (*bot*) performed by hosts and guests in a circle around the slit-drum, which turn into transgressions and violence during the latter part of the night. The progression from dances, simulating nonpartibility through circular movements and the interlocking of dancers, to violence and transgressions enacts the reconquering of *noman* and its transformation into an object of retention through the death of the sculpture that is to take place the following day.

This reconquering, called "the killing" of the Malangan sculpture (*luluk a malangan*), follows instantaneously upon the sculpture's unveiling. It is a highly formalized process in which the hosts and guests form groups, each announcing through a speaker why they have come to participate. One by one, each is called up to throw money on the ground in front of the sculpture. The prestation is directed to the sculpture and is fetched by a child, who carries the money to the recipient. The prestation's effect the transferences of the image embodied in the sculpture as its "skin." This loss of skin results in the death of the sculpture.

The “dead” sculpture is now carried into the secondary forest to be left to rot. The process of rotting is the final phase of the ritual process, the exit, in which what has been absorbed into the sculpture is released. The decomposition completes the stripping of the image or skin from the medium and transforms the visual representation into memory, which connects those who partook in the sacrifice of the sculpture. The transformation of sculpture into memorized image is an active process that synthesizes other modes of consumption.

Those who share the memory of imagery as a result of such sacrifices call themselves “one skin” and can make claims to land and to residency irrespective of marriage or birth. The mode of address they use in relation to each other is based on affinal kin terminology. With respect to membership in the ritual confederation of “one skin,” however, they also conceive of themselves as a nonpartible entity.

The ranking of these ritual confederations is a process that is inseparable from the recall of Malangan imagery. They are like chains that can be fragmented and rejoined and are thus not static groups ranked internally or in relation to each other, but are governed by a process in which any distinction also simultaneously implies connectedness. As distinctions are imposed as patterns of cooperation and competition in exchanges, the confederation expands. This is because both sides come to share the memory of imagery through the sacrifice of a sculpture. When this imagery is recalled for reemodiment in a new sculpture, both are required to cooperate in competition with others who strive to attain rights over the imagery. The language of distinction is thus bound to the transformation of imagery during recall.

memory production and the development of a regional system

When we recognize that collections document a process of development, rather than a process of decay, assumptions governing the way we approach objects in these collections have to come under revision. In the ethnography of northern New Ireland it soon became apparent that there was no relation between myths and the imagery of sculptures, and that narrative was minimal compared with the abundance of visual imagery. The nontextual frame of Malangan art was initially explained by the breakdown of culture, and after its continuity became undeniable, by the context-bound character of Malangan sculptures (Lewis 1969:22; Brewer 1980).¹⁷ The imagery embodied in sculptures was thought to represent specific groups who cooperated in production and exchange. In a nutshell, so many constellations between groups require so many variations of imagery. Thus a recent analysis by Wilkinson:

Each Malanggan carving combines different elements in a fixed, as it were copyrighted, form: The pattern consists of this particular collection of units and rarely has an independent mythical or symbolic meaning. Only its owner can have it made for specific Malanggan ceremonies, when it will be displayed with other appropriate patterns to mark one of the important stages of life of a close member of a community” [Wilkinson 1978:227–228].

Every sculpture is thus thought to embody imagery that is copied as it is produced. Variations are not related to the transformation occurring during the recall of imagery from memory, but are thought to mark distinctions between kinship groups. Variations in imagery thus constitute a Malangan “family,” according to Wilkinson.

This conception of sculptures as originals raises problems when one shifts the focus of analysis from imagery claimed by a locality to the imagery of the wider region. It quickly becomes apparent that there is no correspondence between kinship-based distinctions and distinctions visible in the form given to sculptures. The nature of the distinctions visible in Malangan sculptures can be illuminated, however, when we consider that sculptures are destroyed after they have served as gifts in mortuary transactions.

The ways in which objects are destroyed show that there is a consistent relation between two different types of medium used in producing sculptures—wood and fiber—and two different

ways of dismantling the imagery they embody. Medium and destruction, in turn, correspond to distinct transactional practices and distinctive modes of imagery reproduction.

Sculptures carved in wood are left to rot, while sculptures woven into fiber are burned (Powdermaker 1932:134). Only wooden sculptures reached Western institutions, through a definition of sale as an alternative to leaving them to rot. Rotting sets imagery free in a manner thought to produce “smell” (*musung*). Wooden sculptures and the process of their production and destruction are thus responsible for memory production through their activation of “smell.”

Collections are overflowing with wooden Malangan sculptures, yet only two woven sculptures have ever reached the West. The sale of wooden sculptures came to be accepted as an alternative to leaving them to rot partly because the image carved into wood alludes to qualities of pollution and regenerativity that are ascribed to both smell and money;¹⁸ but it is also partly a result of the theme of connectedness that pervades both mode of representation and transaction and that facilitates the integration of both the region and the Western world.¹⁹

Connectedness is visible in wooden sculptures as part-whole relationships, each image being part of a more encompassing one and ultimately committed to memory with reference to a “template” (Figures 1 and 2). The allusion to part-whole relationships is absent in sculptures that are woven into fiber (compare Figures 1 and 2 with 3). The disconnectedness that is visible in the construction of fiber sculptures as nonpartible wholes is related to the use of fire for their destruction; fire deodorizes, and thus prevents or destroys smell and with it the most important means for recall (Bachelard 164:103). The image produced in the form of a fiber-sculpture is not recalled from memory and interpreted in terms of its variation upon motifs and their combination, but is understood as re-presentation of a myth of which each version is the original. The imagery of woven sculptures, moreover, is clan-specific and passed on as an undivided and nonfragmentable thing. Such sculptures are produced only for the final mortuary ceremony carried out for deceased women or adolescents and are passed on in such a way as not to leave the place of production.²⁰

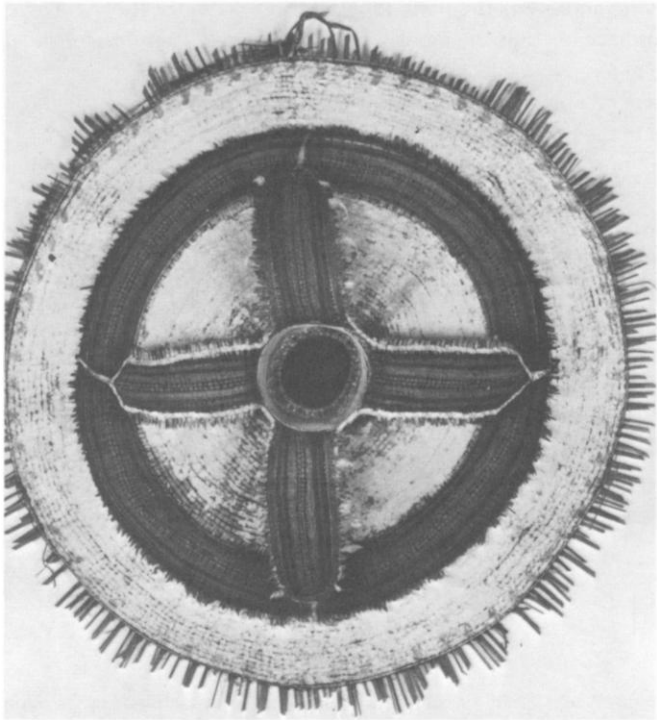


Figure 3. Museum Basle. Collection of A. Bühler.

The stationary and nonpartible character of woven imagery contrasts with the features of movement and assemblage that pervade the imagery of wooden sculptures. The distinction is only apparent, however. This is because the features of stoppage and of nonpartibility represented in woven Malangan sculptures are present as the principles of transformation in the reproduction of imagery carved into wooden sculptures. The images of wooden Malangan sculptures are shattered into fragments and scattered across the region in the course of their repeated reproduction for ceremonial exchange. Each fragment, however, continues to be identified with the path it traces as it moves from the place of the invention of the template (*wune*) to the place where it is reembodyed in a sculpture. Knowledge of how such a fragment could be reassembled by retracing its movement through the region is essential to the legitimation of its recall and production.

Each sculpture is thus seen as part of a more encompassing whole that can be further fragmented or reassembled without altering its relation to the whole. This relation between the fragment and the imagery as a whole is also significant for the conception of ritual confederations. They are not based on marriage or birth, but on "membership" (*raso*) in the Malangan complex, which is attained solely on the grounds of sharing the memory of a named image.

Forms of ranking evolved with the efflorescence of gift production, whose integrative capacity governs the expansive and regional character of present-day northern New Ireland; at all levels of complexity, these forms are subject to the conceptions of making and appropriating Malangan sculptures as "gifts to god."

conclusion

With the help of the particular example of Malangan art I have elaborated on the nature of gifts that are made to be destroyed. Such objects have characteristically representational properties that precipitate their incorporation in ethnographic museums as non-Western art. Object collections of this kind are particularly large, but not as a result of "salvage anthropology" alone. Museums have become the repository of "gift to god" systems, as sale became an alternative measure of removing gifts from circulation.

As gifts, ephemeral objects confound time not through permanence, but through renewal and are thus central to the production of memory in culture and society. They are made as objects of retention and thus display properties that are governed by the assumptions and practices surrounding the repeated recall of the imagery they temporarily embody. The production of gifts, in a system of exchange that features their extraction from circulation through an act of sacrifice, creates a difference in political organization; the transcendence of the technique of gift production by mnemonics allows its imagery to be spread over an expanding region, and to serve as means for the creation and apprehension of new forms of ranking. I have argued that such exchange systems, and the resulting object collections, must be historically situated and analyzed with respect to the dynamic interaction between gift production and changing fields of political and economic influence. As repositories of exchange activities, museum collections contain vital data that can illuminate our understanding of the historical dynamic of societies featuring object destruction. However, in order for these collections to be integrated into research, we have to rethink our conceptions of objects as singular and nonreplaceable things.

notes

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ics, funded by the Volkswagenwerk Research Foundation. I want to thank the faculty and students at the University of Virginia for their illuminating discussion, Gillian Feeley-Harnik for her insightful comments on a later version of the paper and Katherine Verdery for her editorial assistance.

¹This is not meant to be a statement about the history of early collections, which is certainly more complex than can be explained with the conceptions that govern object production in indigenous societies; these conceptions, however, play an important part in the constitution of collections.

²The example I am utilizing in the analysis appears to be a “special case” as it involves deliberate object destruction through exposing objects and leaving them to rot. It features the temporality of objects and a mode of representation that emphasizes the process of image reproduction. These features also have a bearing, though largely overlooked, on our understanding of objects whose ephemeral character is less pronounced. There is evidence, for example, that the art of the Asmat and the Sepik River region in Papua New Guinea was part of cycles of the production of ceremonial houses that had their own temporal dynamic governed by head-hunting raids, as among the Asmat, or by the seasonal influx of water among the Sepik River cultures (Gerbrands 1967; Hauser-Schaublin 1985); from the Mimika we know that sculptures called *mbitoro* were “brought to the sago marshes and left there to moulder and transmit *kapita* [impersonal life-force] to the sago palms” (Kooijman 1984:9). This paper is not about specific definitions of “ephemeral” versus “permanent,” but about the difference created in culture and society by a mode of representation that stresses the reproducibility of images, and its relation to a mode of circulation in which mobile images create new forms of ranking that have the capacity for regional integration.

³Weiner’s article on “inalienable wealth” represents a step toward the analysis of gift objects of the kind discussed in this paper (Weiner 1985). She focuses on objects that are not circulated or that, when circulated, never lose their identity and attachment to those who originally owned them (Weiner 1985:212). These inalienable objects, which are classified as “*immeuble*” according to Mauss’s classical scheme, index attitudes, beliefs and practices that revolve around social immortality as they represent “the capital stock of substance belonging to a family” (Weiner 1985:213). The material presented in this paper, however, provides an additional complication that might throw new light on the dichotomy between “alienable” and “inalienable” wealth, because gift objects that are subject to destruction embody imagery that is subject to repeated reproduction; while the gift object is indeed “*immeuble*,” the imagery reembodyed in a succession of gift objects is transacted and confiscated in a manner Weiner ascribes to things “*meuble*” and “alienable.”

⁴The term “Malangan” occurs in the literature as “malanggan” or “malagan” depending on the location of research on the island. I am using the Northwest coast pronunciation of the Kara language where I was based during the otherwise regionally focused research (Küchler 1985). See also Louise Lincoln (1987) for recent writings on “image” in northern New Ireland.

⁵In an article written during fieldwork, “Malangan of Nombowai,” I described sculptures that were found together with mummies in a cave on the edge of an overhanging cliff in the late 1970s (Kuchler 1983). I later recognized that it was not the preserving air conditions that led people to place sculptures into the cave, as presumed by museologists and also initially by me; the cave is a landmark for the most important magical performance (the “calling of smell,” *wangam a musung*), carried out on the edge of the rift of which the cave is the inland extension. The performance initiates the preparations for a Malangan ceremony and articulates the significance of “smell” and its relation to Malangan art, of which some account is given in this paper. Sculptures can be reused in successive transactions until the transference of rights to the reproduction of imagery, involving indigenous currency and money, has been completed.

⁶Weiner’s study of the transaction of banana leaves by women in the context of funerals points to the existence of another conception of space-time in the Massim that is complementary, yet opposed, to the inter-island space-time manifest in the circulation of Kula valuables (Weiner 1976). The comparison with the Malangan system is with respect to the inter-island or inter-locality construction of space-time as apprehended visually and conceptually in the objects of gift exchange (cf. Munn 1986).

⁷One is reminded of the reflection by a Dakota wise man, reproduced in Lévi-Strauss’s work on totemism, according to which things and beings are nothing but materialized forms of creative continuity (Lévi-Strauss 1973:171). I am grateful to Alfred Gell for pointing to this relation between the mode of representation and temporality in Malangan art; each production of imagery creates an imprint in memory that is recalled as part of a “road” connecting people and places which is located, so to speak, “outside” of measured time.

⁸Compare Lewis (1969:23); Wilkinson (1978:234); Brewer (1980:89). Others such as Lomas (1973) and Billings (1972) completely ignore the relation between Malangan objects and exchange.

⁹The earliest collection was by the missionary George Brown between 1840 and 1870. Later systematic collections concentrate on the period immediately following the advent of German colonial administration between 1884 and 1910. Traders and shipping companies had already brought a number of objects to Germany prior to 1884. The largest and best documented collection of this century was made by Buhler in the 1930s and is today in the ethnographic museum in Basel.

¹⁰This was supported by the sudden cessation of sculptures known as “Uli” produced in central New Ireland until the turn of the century (Gifford 1974). The third culturally distinctive area on the island is the south, which is both linguistically and culturally part of East New Britain (Wagner 1986).

¹¹In England, the collections are primarily by Romilly (1886) in the Museum of Mankind, London, and by George Brown (1840–1870), scattered today over several museums in England and Japan. In West and

East Germany, the main collections are in the museums of Berlin, Bremen, Hamburg, Stuttgart, Dresden and Leibzig (Finsch 1884–1885; Parkinson 1880s–1904; Schlaginhaufen 1906–1910). In America, the largest collections are in the Field Museum in Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Museum of Natural History in New York (collections primarily from the turn of the century).

¹²Compare with material on the art of Australian Aborigines, particularly Morphy (1977, 1985). A detailed analysis of Malangan templates, which would exceed the present paper, would reveal a scheme of classification that is analogous to the tripartite structure of the process of gift production, which culminates in sacrifice.

¹³The fire for baptizing the child (*bungen a lik*) is kindled in the secondary forest called *laten* (literally, the place of the skin).

¹⁴Following Hubert and Mauss, Valeri adds to the scheme of sacrifice an interpretation of sacrificial violence as creating “a strong impression and therefore a memory” (1985:69). Based on the ethnography of Malangan, one could add to the analysis of sacrifice as the production of memory the “death” and destruction of objects of mediation that characteristically display representational properties.

¹⁵The nature of “templates is not elaborated upon in this essay.” Six named templates (to which imagery carved into wood is assigned in memory) are grouped into pairs of two, of which each pair displays in its visual representation the feature of one of the three stages in the process of sacrifice (absorption, containment and ambiguous release/absorption).

¹⁶Cremation used to be a common technique of disposing of the dead; it ceased to be prevalent with mission influence. The transition from cremation to burial had an impact on the length of the mortuary cycle, as each step in the decomposition is marked with a funerary ceremony. The influence on Malangan production is indirect. A longer mortuary cycle corresponds to a more expanded network of debt relationships established through mortuary exchanges. Malangan imagery, concurrently, is known among expanding fields of influence.

¹⁷This relationship between object and context was phrased in more or less empirical terms. See for example Brewer’s extreme idealist position: “The relationship between men and the spiritual beings of the world is made concrete and visual in these objects through the form and properties of these objects. . . .” (1980:89).

¹⁸The carver of wooden sculptures is given both money and food with distinctive smell during the shaping of the image into material; the perceived relation between money and smell pervades the ceremonial and exchange system at all levels of complexity and provides the intellectual basis for the interrelation of commodity and gift economy.

¹⁹The relation between mode of representation and mode of transaction is explicated in Küchler (1985 and 1987).

²⁰Names associated with the imagery of fiber sculptures are place names and are not given to persons as is the case with the imagery embodied in wooden sculptures (cf. Küchler 1987).

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