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**DIALOGICS OF THE BODY:  
THE MORAL AND THE GROTESQUE IN TWO SEPIK RIVER SOCIETIES**

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**Abstract**

This article is a comparative study of two rituals practiced by the Eastern Iatmul and the Murik Lakes people of the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea. Specifically, we focus on the relationship between meanings of the body which, on the one hand, naturalize the status quo and, on the other, transgress it. Our dual purpose is 1) to instance a theoretical relationship between ritual and society that centers upon ambivalence about, rather than support for, sociopolitical order and 2) to propose a hitherto unacknowledged theme in Sepik regional ethnography.

This is a comparative study of two rituals, *naven* practiced by the Eastern Iatmul and *noganoga'sarii* performed by the Murik Lakes people of the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea (1). Our particular focus is on the relationship between meanings of the body which, on the one hand, naturalize the status quo and, on the other, subvert it. The purpose of our project is twofold: 1) we want to illustrate a theoretical relationship between ritual and society that centers upon ambivalence about, rather than support for, sociopolitical order and 2) we want to foreground a theme in the ethnography of the Sepik region that has not been previously discussed.

To begin, we introduce the theoretical genealogies of the two categories of the body, which we call the moral and the grotesque, that have guided our analysis. We then document tensions that are raised by these contrary categories as they are played out in the two rites celebrated by Eastern Iatmul and the Murik. In these two rites, startling sequences of mock-aggression, defilement and ribaldry take place. These embodiments of misrule and indecency, we argue, contest the respective norms and standards in each society. While differently shaped, they are nevertheless hewn from a similar cultural ideal, namely, a maternal body. In the Sepik River region, we conclude, the maternal body is the subject of an ambivalent forum in which men and women take solace, but also confront, and, to a certain extent, defy, the mysteries of their gender identities and the reproduction of culture herself.

**1. The Body, Moral and Grotesque**

**1.1 *The Moral Body:***

In the anthropology of ritual, the vision of the body we call moral can be traced to the early modern functionalism of Emile Durkheim (1995), Robert Hertz (1960) and Marcel Mauss (1979). Here, two concepts of the body prevail: individual and collective. The individual body, viewed as pre-social or natural, is stigmatized as the source of egocentric emotions and behaviors. By contrast, the collective body is rule-bound and, above all else, differentiated into groups. If the individual body lacks all restriction and decorum, then the collective body is an exemplar of order itself. In this view, which has framed so much of the analysis of ritual, culture consists of "collective representations" or "social facts" that control the physiological and psychological impulses to which individuals must inevitably fall prey (Durkheim 1995; Douglas 1970: vii). Eccentricity, passion, and crime are all muted by the authoritative values of religion, the obligations of labor, the sanctions of law, and the leadership of political authority. Through the triumph of "the collectivity," the body becomes more than just a symbol of social organization: it becomes a naturalizing instrument that perpetuates the status quo. The collective body, in short, dresses the individual body in a moral sensibility.

Take hair, for example. Hallpike (1969) argued against Leach (1958) that hair length symbolizes the proximity of the individual to the centers of moral order. "Cutting hair," as Hallpike put it, "equals social control (1969:264)." Here, the moral and somatic bodies were fused. What is more, careful monitoring of its classifications and distinctions--between male/female, life/death, pure/polluted, formal/informal, inside/outside, front/back, and upper/lower--becomes a paramount obligation performed by the masters of culture (see also Laporte 1993). As Mary Douglas wrote:

A complex social system...uses different degrees of ...embodiment to express the social hierarchy. The more refinement, the less smacking of...lips when eating, the less mastication, the less the sound of breathing and walking, the more carefully modulated the laughter, the more controlled the signs of anger, the clearer comes the priestly-aristocratic image (1973:101-02, see also Elias 1994).

We call this teleological construction, in which bodily boundaries function to naturalize socio-political order, the “moral body” framework. Our notion of morality does not necessarily or exclusively refer to justice, but only to the ways that the body has been constructed to support, and otherwise legitimate, hegemonic institutions in culture.

Studies of the body in ritual have tended to privilege the maintenance, rather than the contestation of, collective life. This bias is most conspicuous in classic discussions of “rites of reversal.” Here, the body suffers disfigurement and disarticulation in order, so it is said, to revitalize political order (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1968). Zulu “rituals of rebellion” allegedly alleviate tensions in the body politic by periodically profaning the king (Gluckman 1963). Disrespectful joking among the Dogon stabilizes affinal animosity (Radcliffe-Brown 1965a and b). During initiation rites, the nakedness of Ndembu novices disarranges everyday cultural reality for the purposes of moral education (Turner 1967). And so forth.

Without necessarily endorsing his view of the mind, we take Freud’s famous conclusion in *Totem and Taboo* (1952): the relationship of the body in ritual to collective life is, and must remain, inherently troubled. Ritual order arises from, and remains indivisibly linked to, ambivalent violence, rather than to a renewal of the status quo. To be sure, the “moral body” framework has made important contributions to ritual studies. This, we do not dispute. However, it has hindered analysis of how representations of order relate to subversive, tragic, and comic imagery of the body. In our view, culture is not only contained or constrained by rules and authority. That is, it cannot be reduced to a moral body. Instead, we see culture as made up of unmerged, independent voices contesting plural, or equivocal, visions of the body. Where closure was, polyphony shall be. Our two Sepik River rituals, as we intend to show, constitute an irreducible dialogue, scripted in a bodily language. Here, we find Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque, and the framework of dialogism in which it is conceptually embedded, to be theoretically valuable.

## 1.2 *The Grotesque Body:*

Among other things at stake in Bakhtin’s celebrated study of Rabelais (1984a) is nothing less than a history of selfhood in the West. In the Middle Ages, Bakhtin finds two worlds represented by two politicized bodies. But, instead of seeing an instrumental relationship between them as might Durkheim, Bakhtin is primarily concerned to sustain an exegesis of bodily exaggerations and ambivalences, the discourse that he terms “grotesque realism” (1984a:18). In medieval cosmology, reigning figures of moral authority gazed upward towards the heavens. The values of this ecclesiastical body were ascetic, its behavior repressed, its demeanor somber. It was a differentiated body, directed by contemplation, rationality, and moderation. Orifices that threatened its integrity were effectively shut. This moral body was all surfaces.

Below the upper reaches of church and state, however, the gay and triumphant, yet degrading, folk comedy of carnival prevailed. In carnival, birth and death were united in such images as laughing, pregnant, old women.

There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its twofold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body (Bakhtin 1984a: 25-26).

During carnival, orifices and protrusions reached exaggerated proportions. A ‘head’ full of thoughtful restraint and contemplation did not control the carnivalesque body. It was ruled by the “lower bodily stratum” (Bakhtin 1984a: 21). Not only did carnival ridicule the sovereign order, but also it was all encompassing. No one was spared its mockery. Degrading images of church and state were simultaneously directed at the merrymakers themselves.

The ambivalent, inclusive bodily gestalt of carnival mostly faded by the Renaissance. The Enlightenment destroyed its comedy. Grotesque realism gave way to an atomized concept of the

individual, as liberal humanist subjectivity fixed the formerly fluid boundaries between self and other, inner and outer. Ridicule, irony, and sarcasm became simply negative, rather than ambivalent and inclusive. "The renewing earth was lost with the rise of rationalist science" (Bishop 1990:50). These changes reduced the world and its objects to a single system of meaning, set in a single tone of voice: rational objectivity and dogmatic seriousness. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the interior psyche became little more than a private repository for whatever remained of the grotesque body. Within modern subjectivity, it is true, the grotesque had its theoretical moment within the Freudian unconscious. By mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, though, monsters within and without the self were largely understood either as symptoms of insanity or as plainly evil. Comedy had become sublimated aggression. The comedian was no longer immersed in, but had become alienated from, his audience, an audience he wants "to kill" with jokes.

Its decline in the West notwithstanding, carnivalesque comedy remains an analytically powerful tool for understanding ritual, particularly where subjectivity remains submerged rather than individuated. Carnival is a theory of ritual writ ambivalent, at once transgressive as well as iconoclastic and utopian (Stallybrass and White 1986). Rather than ruled by the official, or canonical discourse of the sovereign, the fundamental condition of carnival is heteroglossia, an irresolvable play of contrary moralities. In carnival, punning, oxymoron, parody, ridicule, and vulgarity rule discourse. In such a world, we find no cybernetic governors, or class struggles. Here, "the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken" (Bakhtin 1984a:166) (2). The unity of culture in carnival is delicate, but telling; it is said to be rupture-prone *and* unfinalized, open to the "double-faced fullness of life" (Bakhtin 1984a:62).

The relationship between the grotesque body of carnival and the moral body of collective order is indissoluble as figure to ground. Da Matta (1983) underestimates the grotesque by contending that it revitalizes a sense of what humanity is not. Any construction of the grotesque merely as moral antithesis fails to capture its dialogicality. The grotesque body revitalizes a sense of what humanity both is *and* is not. In other words, it espouses contradictory sentiments that never achieve closure, or dialectical synthesis. According to Bakhtin, the dialogics of the grotesque neither support nor resist the moral body in any unilateral way. The laughing, pregnant hag, then, does not resolve anything in favor of anybody. The grotesque disruption of everyday relationships, its dialogized assault on single-toned systems of meaning and a single-voiced regimes of authority interrogates the moral body. What is the outcome of this inquiry? Ongoing critical reflexivity that never strays from its subject.

For our ethnographic purpose, which is to compare the grotesque body in analogous rituals performed in two Sepik River societies, the import of the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism resides in the alternative it offers to the moral body framework (3). That is to say, it presents a nonreductive view of the ritual body which does not insist that abuse, profanity, impropriety, and similar tropes of licentiousness, inevitably lead back to conformity, etiquette, civility or political authority. Through dialogism, the grotesque body appears as what it is: one voice in a great, prosaic system of ambivalence through which decentralizing and disunifying discourse combines and goes forward together with legitimate representations of the body.

We are keenly aware of the shifting sands of contemporary meaning in the postcolony and we acknowledge the historicity of all subject positions. Ritual practices in Papua New Guinea (PNG) are undergoing and have undergone continuous alteration. But the data to which we now turn are nevertheless based in ongoing fieldwork, in participant-observation, in debate and discussion with informants (4). We thus make every effort, as we have done elsewhere, to distinguish and separate the contemporary from the historical (see Lipset 2004a and b; Silverman 2001). Still, we must insist that our exegeses depict living of ritual practices whose significance cannot be reduced to and understood as a dialogue with modernity. The grotesque bodies enacted in the Sepik do not primarily comment upon their encompassment by capitalism and the state, but rather serve to disrupt and distort the prevailing moral bodies in their respective communities, and thus to express a wide-ranging ambivalence about masculinity, motherhood and culture as a whole. And one image that recurs in these transgressive discourses combines feces and aggression with regeneration.

## *2. Intimations of the Grotesque in the Eastern Iatmul Moral Body*

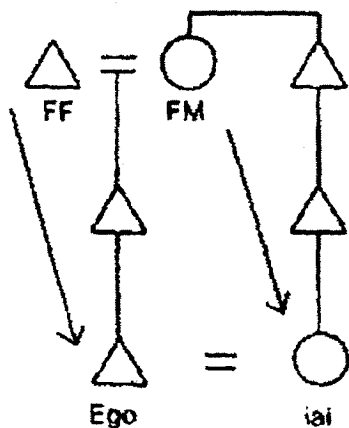
Tambunum is a fishing and horticultural, Iatmul-speaking village located along the lush banks of the middle Sepik River. Extended families tend ample gardens full of tubers, vegetables, fruits, and groves of sago palm, from which men and women cooperatively process the local starch, or sago. The surrounding grasslands contain wild pigs as well as various small mammals and birds. The river, of course, offers a

fairly reliable supply of fish. Eastern Iatmul also participate in regular markets with inland, Sawos-speaking hamlets. Formerly, they exchanged fish for sago and meat. Today, they pay cash. A fairly reliable tourist and art trade allows Eastern Iatmul to indulge in modern tastes for rice, flour, tinned mackerel, and so forth, which they purchase in village and town tradestores.

Tambunum is made up three, largely exogamous, patrilineal clans. Each clan consists of lineages, segmented into “branches.” A group defines its collective identity on the basis of an exclusive corpus of totemic names that refer to mythic-historic migrations and events. Primogeniture organizes succession to clan and lineage authority (Metraux 1978). But men reinforce, and sometimes contest, hereditary status through the male prerogatives of ritual prominence, totemic knowledge, magic, and, long ago, warfare (Harrison 1990; Silverman 1996, 1997). The moral body is incarnated through what Godelier (1986) has called “great men” (see also Godelier and Strathern 1991). Unlike Melanesian big men, for whom power arises from organizing large-scale competitive exchanges and making compensation payments, Iatmul “great men” win or lose prestige through the management of totemic esoterica within the male cult. Despite the ubiquity of consumer goods and the trappings of modernity, leadership remains totemic and masculine.

Yet this androcentric and patrilineal body is offset by a deeply felt attachment to motherhood (Bateson 1958). For men and women alike, mothers epitomize uterine creativity, nurture, and selfless generosity. Eastern Iatmul men are emotionally attached not only to their own mothers, but also to the *ideal* of motherhood, which arouses in them a combination of nostalgia and longing. As they say, “my mother, therefore I am,” adding that only mothers bore you, fed you, cleansed your body, and carried you about the village (see Figure 1). Two images of the body dominate moral-political discourse. One body, likened by men to a skeleton, is constituted by patrilineal inheritance. Sons receive the totemic names and cosmic identity of their paternal grandfathers, and “take the place” of their fathers in the politico-ritual system. The other body is represented by the flesh and is personified by women and mothers’ brothers who, as mother figures, feed children and “birth” men through wombs and male rituals. We see these two moral bodies, the authoritative and the sentimental, as dialogically united into a single, ambivalent, mutually relevant whole.

The equivocal relationship between these two bodies appears in several settings. In the semiotics of marriage, for example, Eastern Iatmul profess one prescriptive rule: a man should marry his FMBSD, one of many women he calls *iai* (see below).<sup>(5)</sup> The preference for marrying second-generation cross-cousins explicitly arises from the emotional attachment of men to their mothers. In *iai* marriage, a man weds a woman his father calls “mother” (*nyame*). This way, it is said, the father “gets his mother back.” Indeed, the focal image in the vernacular phrasing of *iai* marriage is that of a father reuniting with his mother—a phrasing that, when actually enacted by the son, borders on incest. Men and women are passionate about *iai* marriage. Only for *iai* marriage do men instigate bridewealth exchanges long before the actual union, thus insuring that a “mother” will return as a son’s bride. Sometimes, the men and women of a lineage will even barricade their houses with a bamboo fence to prevent young women who are not the prospective groom’s *iai* from seducing him at night.



For all of their valuation of FMBSD marriage, however, the relationship between matrikin and patriliney is more problematic than moral. This is evident in the role of the mother’s brother, a contrary figure who combines maternal nurture and male antagonism. Normatively, the avunculate relationship instances maternal values of tenderness and devotion. Nephews ought to support their uncles during disputes, even if they must oppose their own fathers by doing so. Reciprocally, uncles should console their nephews during the painful process of male initiation. Uncles may also protect them by tying decorative charms onto their sisters’ children in order to stave off illness. And, the mother’s brother should feed his sister’s children, feed them to advance bodily growth,

strength, and their overall vitality. In turn, they should give him valuables. To all outward appearances, these exchanges are preeminently moral—and they are conceptualized as such in the culture. But the gifts are also competitive, as Eastern Iatmul silently admit, since mothers’ brothers and sisters children each

strive to outgive the other both in material goods and expressed sentiments. Hence, some uncles will quietly, slyly try to hinder their nephews' goals, and some nephews will even try to avoid their uncles. Still, Silverman is unaware of any instances when an uncle or nephew ever expressed the slightest annoyance about one another. At the same time, his nephew, the only man who could approach him without posing a threat, murdered a great mythic hero. The avunculate relationship, then, does not simply mimic the nurturing, emotional ideals of motherhood. Rather, the mother's brother brings "her" moral idealization into contact with the world of masculine aggression.

A similar revision of motherhood occurs between fathers and sons. Filial relationships are tense and Oedipal (6). Sons, we noted above, politically "replace" their fathers. They also inherit the houses their fathers built, and in so doing consign them to live out their days in small, oftentimes dilapidated, shelters. Symbolically, dwellings 'are' mothers. Large houses, erected by fathers at enormous material and emotional cost, are ornamented with female breasts, face, woven hood, and earrings (see Figure 2). Like vigilant mothers, they watch over the domestic ward. The interior of a house, meanwhile, is called the "belly" or *iai*—the very same term Eastern Iatmul use to designate a man's ideal bride, as we have seen, and she is a woman his father calls "mother." All in all, men see houses as a positive image of mothering: a personified source of food, shelter, and warmth.

But domestic houses, no less than maternal uncles, defy moral harmony. A man who tarries about the domestic ward may deplete his body of its masculine strength. And with many houses, a man can only enter the shelter of its "belly" through a doorway that is positioned to resemble a vagina, and called as such, a vagina that might even be decorated with paintings of crocodile teeth. From this perspective, the house threatens to pollute men, who view any encounter with female bodily fluids as a threat to their bodily integrity.

While fathers are fervent about obtaining matrimonial "mothers" for their sons, sons dislodge their fathers from the architectural "mothers" they build. But this process of filial succession does not distress fathers, despite its maternal symbolism, since it occurs at a point in the life-cycle when fathers and sons engage in little or no contact. Fathers quit living in their houses. Should a father continue to inhabit his mother's architectural body, the fear is that he might hear the sounds of lovemaking between his son and daughter-in-law, a woman he calls, to repeat, "mother." The moral body of motherhood, then, poised delicately between longing and sexuality, effectively divides the filial bond between fathers and sons into ambivalence.

The relationship between the two most significant moral bodies in Eastern Iatmul culture, the maternal and the agnatic, is profoundly ambivalent, rather than solidary. The father yearns for "the return" of a young maternal body—the *iai*—to marry, not himself, but his son. The son, with whom the father identifies, and to whom he eventually delivers the maternal body in which he takes such pride—his house—he avoids completely. Moreover, we suggest that motherhood itself, as revealed by the official symbolism of doorways, is also a threatening construction. Now, having introduced several dimensions of this ambivalence, we turn to their deformity created during the famous *naven* rite.

### **3. The Grotesque Body in Naven**

Iatmul people, as we learned from Bateson (1958), celebrate a child's initial performances of selected acts through a rite they call *naven*. Today, premier deeds worthy of honor still include the spearing and trapping of fish. Honored feats, too, are by no means confined to childhood. Thus modern pursuits are also fêted, such as the purchase of an outboard motor and airplane travel. A central actor in *naven*, the maternal uncle, is meant to cheer the growth and developing autonomy of his nieces and nephews. Thus *naven* rites mark and remark upon the increasing mastery of skills associated with the classic definition of maximal, or full, personhood, that Fortes defined as "a microcosm of the social order, incorporating its distinctive...norms of value" (1987:286).

Bateson, of course, was no Fortesian. But he did view *naven* primarily through the moral body framework. Bateson recognized that Iatmul politics were conflict ridden. The men he knew were endlessly rivalrous and self-assertive. They ignored all their rules, especially marriage prescriptions. The *naven* rite, he argued, served a key sociological function: it regularly renewed affinal ties between the mother's brother and his sister's children. That is, *naven* held society together. The rite also reversed normative gender: women became publicly raucous, or masculine, while otherwise contentious men assumed a maternal persona that enabled them to rejoice at the achievements of others. In our terms, Bateson was arguing that *naven* preserved the boundaries of the moral body. We do not seek to refute

Bateson's brilliant, in many ways visionary, thesis (see Marcus 1985; Nuckolls 1995; Houseman and Severi 1998). What we want to do here is attend to other aspects, implications and outcomes of the *naven* ritual upon which dialogism sheds light. Specifically, we discover unfinalizable ambivalence about the moral body, not its renewal. To substantiate this conclusion, we now present four dramatizations of the grotesque body during *naven* that Silverman saw taking place in Tambunum village during the late 1980s: beatings, spitting of betel-nut juice, mud smearing, and the famous *nggariik* gesture, in which a mother's brother clefts his buttocks down the leg of his celebrated sister's son.

### 3.1 *Betel-Nut Expulsions, Beatings, Dancing, and Male Flight.*

During *naven*, women orally expel betel-nut juice into the faces, or over the heads of, their present or potential affines, who are usually the same age or younger. Their 'victims' are often men. The women belong to the maternal patriclan of the honoree's father. They are called *iai*, a kinship category that includes, so we have seen, a man's bride-designate, the woman his fathers call "mother" (*nyame*). Anatomically, the word *iai* means "belly," including the stomach and womb (*nyan wut*, or "child's string bag"). In the dialogized setting of *naven*, therefore, women who represent uterine motherhood during it chase younger men, and spit on them.

In addition, the *iai* women beat men about the head and torso with palm fronds. The thrashings and expulsions, to which Silverman was himself subjected, only take place during *naven*. Indeed, many *naven* rites just consist of these two antics: *iai* women beating and spitting on men who serve as their passive and begrudging victims. These playful acts of ritualized aggression always draw laughter, mainly on the part of spectators and perpetrators, and often bawdy joking, all of which contest men's nostalgic veneration of motherhood. During their verbal and physical assaults, the *iai* women also dance, setting their skirts asway, protruding their buttocks. To the maternal grotesque enacted by the *iai* women during the ritual, this sashay adds an element of seductive voluptuousness.

The ritual flirtatiousness of the *iai* women has other meanings. In ideology and language, only men assume the active role during sexual intercourse. (In actuality, women do take the initiative.) Indeed, the vernacular only admits the expression "he copulated with her," but not *vice versa*, thus construing women as passive recipients of male sexuality. Headhunting, once a quintessentially masculine pursuit, also ties masculine aggression to sexuality. The practice was thought to ensure "plenty of children" as well as "health, dances, and fine ceremonial houses" (Bateson 1958:140; Hauser-Schäublin 1977, 154, 160; see also Harrison 1993:86). But no man could succeed in warfare, it was believed, if his brawn and focus were corrupted by female carnality, especially vaginal fluids. The seductiveness of the *iai* women during *naven*, we suggest, challenges male prerogatives in sexuality and warfare, prerogatives that shaped the body, morality, and aspirations of manhood. Of course, headhunting has passed into history. But men still conduct themselves with an aura of martial prowess. Nostalgically, some elder men today lament the decline of masculine assertiveness and ritual, which they sometimes ascribe to the ascendance of female autonomy and the neglect of menstrual taboos. For such men, the mischievous frolics of the *iai* women during *naven* have become the reality of postcolonial manhood.

The women's betel-nut expulsions also comprise a grotesque rejoinder to the moral body of motherhood. Red-colored spittle is forcefully expelled at men who flee from, rather than yearn for, "mothers." Men flee from the beatings administered by the *iai* women, and the bawdy quips they hurl, such as "You have a small penis--what can it do?" These playfully humiliating images would seem to contradict the moral attachment of infants and adult men to motherhood. The betel-nut expulsions also respond to mother's milk. Instead of a white maternal fluid suckled into a body by a dependent and passive child, a red fluid during *naven* is spat by mother figures at the bodies of retreating adults. Mother's milk is smooth, while the betel-nut juice contains small chunks. Still, the expectorant does resemble the premasticated food mothers feed infants. But to swallow this substance is defiling rather than nourishing, often resulting in a bout of diarrhea. In short, *naven* expulsions and palm frond beatings regress the person whose maturation the ceremony is otherwise meant to praise. They turn adult men back to a filthy rendition of infancy.

The color of the expelled betel fluid evokes menstrual blood and the feminine part of the reproductive process. The female procreative substances deplete the ritualized "heat" (*kau*) that empowers men to act in ways that lead to the attainment of maximal personhood. Vitalized by *kau*, for example, men do not flee a fight but actively pursue it. Ordinarily, no man would tolerate the spewing of menstrual blood atop his head, even symbolically so. From this perspective, the *iai* women's *naven*

performance becomes a portrayal of motherhood as aggressive and enervating rather than moral and nurturing.

Another element of maternal travesty during the *naven* rite emerges when we consider the relationship of marriage to personhood. For men, marriage instances a successful negotiation between descent groups that leads to the fulfillment of bridewealth and brideservice obligations. It also results in the reproduction of children. These are stages of achievement of maximal personhood, of course, that presume the existence of discrete social or jural categories: categories which *naven* confounds. The ritual, as Bateson recognized, promotes solidarity between intermarrying patrilineages. But the *iai* beatings are aimed precisely at affinal bonds, and therefore seem to intensify the rivalries that continuously beset society. Female *naven* behavior also confounds moral motherhood, and give expression to the aggressive sexuality of wives. During *naven*, then, the maternal body becomes double-voiced, at once solitary but yet transgressive.

### 3.2. *Mud Smearing.*

The *iai* women who beat, dance, and spit also smear mud, sometimes even mixed with feces, into the faces of their alters. These ritual actions seem to us to be another dialogized response to the moral body. They do not affirm social order. Nor do they express any yearning for change. Rather, they travesty the mother's moral body because of her sway over life (see Figure 3).

Mud smearing, no less than betel-nut expulsions, recalls the helplessness of infancy and childhood. Symbolically, the *naven* ritual reverts Eastern Iatmul men to a presocial state in which they were unable to remain clean, to the time when their mothers bathed them. While men (and women) revere maternal care, the infantilizing imagery of dirt and dependency during *naven* contests the values of skill, growth, and autonomy-- the very ideals of adulthood—that the ritual supposedly celebrates. Since only mothers, but never fathers, should wash feces from children, mud smearing also answers the ideals of motherhood (7). The same is true for the betel expulsions, which make a loud sound that suggests flatulence and, by association, feces. In addition to transforming maternal nurture into aggression, the betel-nut expulsions also, in this respect, combine the defilement of excrement with the pure and generative nurturance of mother's milk. During *naven*, that is, masculinity is debased by a grotesque representation of the maternal body, a body that combines nurture with pollution, autonomy with dependency, and guardianship with aggression.

Having suggested that the ritualized mud smearing and betel-nut expulsions evoke shit, we now want to recall Dundes's (1976) psychodynamic interpretation of the bullroarer. Throughout precolonial Melanesia and Aboriginal Australia, men often twirled this oblong object during male cult initiation to produce a roaring vibrato sound. Women hear the bullroarer, but must never glimpse it. Indeed, the bullroarer is one of the few traditional objects that Eastern Iatmul still refuse to carve for tourists lest local women sneak a glance. Following Freud (1958), Dundes argued that the bullroarer represented a masculine co-optation of procreative force from women in the guise of a "flatulent penis." In addition, initiators in this region smeared feces and mud on the bodies of novices (see also Bettelheim 1954; Dundes 1987; Silverman 2001). Here, the symbolism of a masculine anal fecundity displaced uterine fertility. From this angle, the sound of the women's betel-nut expulsions during *naven* both mimics and mocks men's ritualized birthing idioms. Since the women become aggressive, moreover, their aural travesty takes on a masculine inflection.

Appropriately enough, Eastern Iatmul men assert that women should be forbidden from hearing their flatulence, although women themselves are unaware of this taboo. Why? Because, the men say, male flatus is a form of *wainjiimot*, a category of spirits that is readily identified with bamboo flutes whose sacred voices "speak" and "cry out" (*wakundi*) during the rituals in which men claim control over fertility and reproduction. (In myth, the flutes were stolen by male ancestors from their female custodians after frightening the women with the sound of the bullroarer! This theft allows men, as they admit, a counterpart to birth.) The *wainjiimot* spirits, men claim, are ultimately accountable for human pregnancy. In this regard, *naven* allows women as mother-figures an opportunity to respond audaciously and derisively to fictions of masculine fertility. In so doing, however, the women challenge the worth of their own bodies, and the worth of their motherhood. From this standpoint, *naven* seems doubly dialogical, contesting the values of both manhood and mothering.

From another angle, one side of *naven* imagery debases the reproductive organs as excretory while another turns defiling substances into sources of regeneration. These oxymoronic expressions of nurture



and aggression, breast-milk and betel-nut juice, feces and fertility, anonymity and identity, spirits and spittle, we argue, disfigure the ideals of maximal personhood and moral order. Often, the grotesque takes the form of inversions during which opposed values meet and combine. Thus, interior and lower bodily substances are smeared upon the exterior, upper body. More generally, we can discern the following series of inversions taking place in *naven*:

white : suckling: interior body: yearning : growth  
::  
red : expulsion : exterior body : fleeing : atrophy.

These inversions do not resolve sociological contradictions in favor of the moral body. Rather, they manifest and exacerbate dissonances in Eastern Iatmul culture.

When confronted by the grotesque display of open, feminine orifices during *naven*, some men flee and hide. They do not want to be defiled, beaten, and spat upon. In fact, men speak about the *naven* ritual with marked reticence. In the moral body framework, such behavior is difficult to understand without recourse to some sort of “ritual of reversal” thesis. Yet *naven*, we have repeatedly stressed, does not vent ongoing tension, at least not according to the women with whom Silverman spoke. Nor does *naven* renew social order. Finally, *naven* fails to repair affinal alliances; this sort of renewal occurs in other, less carnivalesque, settings. Instead, *naven* interrogates the moral body. In so doing, the ritual affords women and men a chance to grapple with the values of cultural existence herself.

### **3.3. *The Dissolution of the Ritual Focus.***

The *naven* rite formally begins with participants dancing and singing around the sister’s children: At this moment, society does indeed possess a literal “center” (Shils 1972). But, as the dancing gains momentum, the celebration expands outward, omnidirectionally, dissolving its focus and all distinctions between center and periphery (see also Bateson 1958:17). In preparation for a large *naven*, a tall pole may be thrust in the ground in order to try and counteract the all-inclusive, centrifugal force of the rite. But this gesture is rarely successful. Everyone becomes eligible to receive *naven* merely by virtue of their participation. And they often do! Celebrant quickly becomes celebrated. The rite expands until it includes the entire community. The ritual focus of *naven*, initially trained on the sister’s children, becomes dispersed. No longer do the honorees stand in the middle of the ceremonial attention: they are lost amid the swirling mass of barely coordinated activity. The movement of people between center and periphery, that is, the transformation of inside to outside, and *vice versa*, collapses all social categories (see Figure 4). This chaotic sociological answer parallels the transformations of mother’s milk into menstrual blood and feces. That is, the ritual imagines society as it might be, should the sentiments underpinning it be ignored.

If, like Bateson, we focus upon the sister’s children and their mothers’ brothers, then *naven* does appear to celebrate achievement and restore social bonds between hostile patrines. But the ritual, as we argue, has other meanings. As it begins, the collectivity assembles about its heroes, the sister’s children. But the dissolving focus of *naven* erases their emerging personhood. Society disassembles, and turns against its own intentions. At this point, *naven* appears to disrupt all distinctions, to level, or literally muddy, the fixed order of roles, differences, and categories that make society possible. The *naven* ritual creates a world in which honorees, celebrants, and guests--rivals and alters alike--are equally subject to the degradations and humiliations it creates, a world whose relationship to society is dialogical and contrary.

### **3.4. *The Nggariik Gesture and Tragic Pathos.***

Many *naven* rites climax when a classificatory mother’s brother performs the gesture called *nggariik* upon the leg of his honored sister’s son. As men quietly stomp their feet and mutter a slow chant (“tsh, tsh, tsh, tsh...”), the maternal uncle nimbly dances around his nephew, shuffles backwards towards him, and quickly eases the cleft of his buttocks down the nephew’s leg, from upper thigh to ankle, before leaping to his feet (see Figures 5 & 6). The sister’s son stands in silent embarrassment; immediately afterwards, he may sob. No other moment in the lives of Eastern Iatmul men provokes a comparable range of emotions as *nggariik*.

What does *nggariik* mean today? First, it connotes masculine anal birth. No man in Tambunum would—or could—express this view publicly, but several men *did* agree with it in private. Silverman was told (but did not witness) that while performing the gesture the uncle might say to his nephew “I give anal birth to you, my son.” The conventions of everyday masculinity, as Bateson pointed out, did not allow men to celebrate the achievements of others. Instead, men react to accomplishment competitively, with their own swagger. Only mothers can express selfless—that is, loving—sentiment. The mother’s brother, then, wishing to celebrate his nephew, only has one cultural option available to him: to mimic motherhood. But the uncle’s pantomime remains boastful. *Nggariik*, then, is a dialogical form of praise in which male machismo takes a feminine voice. It makes birthing excremental and competitive.

*Nggariik* is at once honorific and self-denigrating. The mother’s brother lowers himself until he is virtually squatting upon the feet of his sister’s son. Worse, in this culture, only women and children sit in the dirt; adult men rest on wooden stools (8). Despite the passivity of the sister’s son, he nevertheless appears to gain in stature at the expense of his uncle. For his part, the uncle boastfully births his nephew. But the uncle also becomes smaller, infantile, and feminine at the feet of his towering nephew who, to repeat, remains immobilized by the uncle’s gesture. Thus *nggariik* dramatizes an irresolvable masculine tension between submission and equality, a drama enacted through an idiom of uterine fertility.

The affective experience of *nggariik* discloses still other dialogized meanings. Among Eastern Iatmul, the emotions it arouses might be likened to what Northrop Frye has called “low mimetic” tragedy.

The best word for...[this kind of] tragedy is, perhaps, pathos, and pathos has a close relation to the sensational reflex of tears. Pathos presents its hero as isolated by a weakness which appeals to our sympathy because it is on our own level of experience...in contrast to high mimetic tragedy, pathos is increased by the inarticulateness of the victim (Frye 1957:38-39).

For the mute “heroes” of *naven*—the mother’s brother and sister’s son—*nggariik* is anything but comic. In Frye’s terms, it is a moment of pathos. If the flustered expressions of *naven* participants reflect “inner” states, then *nggariik* is a public expression of something terribly shameful and private: the mother’s brother, standing now for the weaknesses of everyman, is exposed for attempting to do that which every man desires yet abhors and to which he would never admit: to give birth.

The sister’s son, in turn, experiences an emotional slide from elation to despair. During *naven*, men experience “happiness” (*wobun tiiga*). But their delight adheres to a strong sense of “sympathy” (*miwi*) for the uncle who feels compelled to perform *nggariik*, and for the nephew who must receive it. Indeed, men report that it would be too overwhelming for the sister’s son should a “real,” rather than a classificatory, mother’s brother perform *nggariik*. This abhorrence is matched only by the dread that a nephew might engage in sexual joking with his uncle. However, the celebration of achievement during the *naven* ritual and the ethical transgression it licenses has a telling connection. A nephew who insults his mother’s brother may be penalized, as Silverman was told, having to view his uncle trussed naked like a pig to his own house ladder. But that is not the worst of it: a bright red leaf or Malay apple may be inserted into the uncle’s anus (see also Bateson 1932:278-79; 1958:20). For some men, though, such a mortifying image directly recalls *nggariik* and conveys the message, as one man said, “my ass is red as if I just gave birth to you.” This ‘defloration’ evokes the local male fantasy of the “anal clitoris,” which Bateson also reported (1958:20), and so hints, as does *nggariik*, at the violation of another taboo, that which forbids homoerotic desire.

After *nggariik*, a shamed nephew used to present to his mother’s brother a spear decorated with dangling shell valuables. This token combined wealth with a phallic image of aggression. The nephew’s gift, interestingly enough, was also viewed as a kind of bridewealth. Eastern Iatmul make two kinship “identifications” that Bateson observed (1958: 35); the one associated brother with sister while the other associated father with son, in the sense that they were construed as jural duplicates of each other. This way, the mother’s brother “became” his sister, or the nephew’s mother. At the same time, the nephew “became” his own father, or the maternal uncle’s husband, whom the rite has transformed into a mother-figure. By this logic, *nggariik* expressed Oedipal rivalry in the sense of two men competing for the affections of one woman, the sister/mother. The nephew’s gift, in short, subverted the incest taboo and bridewealth exchange that otherwise define the exchange of mothers between men.

The significance of *nggariik* is therefore *not* its performance by a classificatory relative. The gesture does *not* announce a distant uncle’s intention to create a closer alliance with the nephew’s lineage (cf. Houseman and Severi 1998:207). *Nggariik* does not preserve categories. No. The import of the gesture, as Juillerat (1999:168-71) rightly understands it, lies in the horror at the thought that a “real uncle” might

have to suffer such a degradation. From the affective perspective of men, then, *nggariik* confesses to the insignificance of masculinity in the reproduction of society, a confession men make to themselves as well as, shockingly, to women.

Bateson wrote that in the 1930s *nggariik* meant “to groove” or “grooving.” A half-century later, the men to whom Silverman spoke did not disagree with Bateson’s translation. Nonetheless, they tied the verb exclusively to the *naven* gesture and, more significantly, to wiping the anus along a small tree after defecation. Now we are able to view the uncle’s celebration of his nephew as dialogical. That is, the senior man at once births the boy and shits on him. Moreover, *iai* women may use the word in their sexually aggressive joking as when, for example, they taunt a man to “go defecate and *nggariik* on this tree,” referring to the FMBSD *iai* woman herself (9). This utterance, between potential spouses (recall that a man’s ideal bride is a particular *iai* woman), occurs in a heterosexual context. But the *nggariik* gesture only takes place between men. Unlike other areas of Papua New Guinea, Eastern Iatmul men deny that homosexual relations, ritualized or otherwise, ever took place (cf. Knauff 1987:158; Herdt 1984:43-47, 62). Nonetheless, public allegations of male homosexuality, especially passive anal intercourse, are shameful to men (see also Mead 1949:113; Bateson 1958:291; Silverman 2001). *Nggariik*, then, suspends the sexual norms of masculinity since the mother’s brother offers to become the “mother” and “wife” of his sister’s son (Bateson 1958:81-82, 203). The uncle births his nephew, and presents himself as a passive, willing, female sexual partner. But the uncle during *nggariik* also retains his identity as a man. This way, *nggariik* mimes anal intercourse, with all of its culturally-specific overtones of feminine submission and scatological degradation. An ambiguous threat which men may utter to challenge rivals is “*ya wungat mogwimbe wangii*,” or “fuck me up the ass!” And, indeed, this is one of the messages the uncle communicates during *naven*, a message that manifestly contravenes the achievement of adult sexual identity that the rite seemingly extols.

In a ritual that celebrates the achievement of masculinity, *nggariik* might seem oddly out of place. As an image of birth, it should enable the mother’s brother to honor his sister’s son. But it fails. The uncle is shamed, and so is his nephew. The adult identities of both men are called into question. More than that, *nggariik* debases birth through its fecal imagery, and therein threatens the cultural ideal of motherhood. But the grotesque body is only misplaced or, worse, entirely neglected, when analyzed through methodologies that privilege the moral body. To us, *naven* is a form of autocriticism (Perlmutter 1990), a parody of Iatmul culture to which it is simultaneously devoted yet derisive. The ritual transforms maternal attachment and nurture into an image of aggressive, grotesque mothering. It masks gender identity through acts of defilement. It erases social categories, obscures personhood, and confounds sexual orientations and procreative forces. And, during *nggariik*, the heroes of *naven* become tragically and deeply ashamed of their masculinity.

Bateson’s 1936 monograph viewed *naven* as a ritual that protected Iatmul villages from the omnipresent threat of political division and conflict, the threat that he called symmetrical schismogenesis. He also implied that *naven* enabled men and women to achieve a degree of emotional integration by experiencing the ethos of their alters. From a dialogical point of view, however, *naven* does not effect sociological and emotional integration. Rather, *naven* is a rejoinder to the moral body in Iatmul culture, a rejoinder that questions the claims men and women make about the reproduction of society. The ritual critiques the conventions, and the ideals that inform everyday reality. In so doing, *naven* exposes these assumptions by means of its defiant impunities.

Ambivalence about motherhood, as it turns out, also preoccupies the mood and subject of ritual practices among the Murik of the Sepik estuary. Down river, however, the maternal grotesque responds to different categories, categories that are created through a similar yet different understanding of motherhood and reproduction. We shall now turn our focus onto the relationship between this moral body and the ritual that answers her.

#### **4. Intimations of the Grotesque in the Murik Moral Body**

The Murik Lakes are located at the mouth of the Sepik River. The five Murik villages occupy a narrow shoreline which divides the lakes from the Bismarck Sea. Like the upriver Eastern Iatmul, the Murik are a canoe people of fisherfolk and sago importers. But the virtually landless environment in which they live is rather poorer and is subject to devastating weather, relentless tides, and chronic shortages of drinking water. As such, there are important differences in their respective adaptations. First, Murik do not supplement their economy with swidden horticulture, hunting, and the processing of their own sago.

Second, Murik men are seafarers. Today, they buy fiberglass dinghies. They used to build and use large outrigger canoes for overseas travel to market in the provincial capital and on trade expeditions (see Barlow and Lipset 1997). Before the mid-20th century spread of petty capitalism began permanently and deeply to reduce the value of indigenous goods, the Murik were the leading traders along the North Coast. Murik men and women were the premier artists, basket weavers, and exporters of ornamental wealth throughout the coastal and lower Sepik regions. But, in spite of a locally conceded superiority, they lived, as they continue to live, in a deficit-riddled world of aquatic foraging supplemented by trade (Lipset 1985; Barlow 1985a).

The middle-river people and the estuary-dwelling people speak languages that are only very distantly related to each other. Murik sociology and cosmology differ in several ways from Eastern Iatmul. While Tambunum is composed of three patrilineal clans, the coastal Murik villages are loosely divided into many small, overlapping cognatic descent groups. These groups consist of genealogically-ranked sibling sets. If a persistent difficulty in Eastern Iatmul society is maintaining relationships between patrilineal clans, then one of the key difficulties in Murik society is maintaining the separation of constituent groups. Of course, being reckoned bilaterally Murik descent groups overlap. Neither the descent groups, nor the sibling sets, are exogamous (like patrilineal clans in Tambunum). Although the Murik observe an incest taboo beginning with second degree collaterals, marriages within descent groups frequently occur between classificatory siblings. Ubiquitous affinity pervades villages. Sister exchange is a vague norm and bride- as well as groomservice is expected of both husband and wife. There are no marriage prescriptions or bridewealth payments required in Murik, as there are among Eastern Iatmul.

Instead of totemic names, Murik groups are differentiated by ceremonial heraldry which consists of woven baskets, shell, and teeth ornaments. Murik elders seek to bestow their heraldry upon firstborn children during life-cycle rites in order to recruit them into their particular lineages. Moreover, access to ceremonial leadership in Murik communities is not the exclusive prerogative of "great men," it is available to all firstborn elders irrespective of gender.

Before about 1900, each Murik community was defended by one or more male cults. Actually, there was a pair of coordinate secret societies: the secret warrior society of the men, and the secret women's society (see Barlow 1995; Lipset 1997). These groups are no longer preoccupied with warfare, but they nevertheless continue to recruit youth, erect buildings, and fulfill ceremonial obligations. While the female cult defines relationships through the classificatory father's sister, the male cult pivots upon the avunculate relationship in which the classificatory mother's brother plays a role of ritual guardian.

The moral body in Eastern Iatmul and Murik cultures has both male and female attributes. But, speaking broadly, the gender of the moral body in Murik seems less exclusively masculine and single-sexed than its Eastern Iatmul counterpart. Upriver, jural citizenship is reckoned patrilineally rather than cognatically, and access to positions of ceremonial authority is limited to 'great men.' Upriver, there is no secret society into which women are initiated and thereby receive full cosmic and jural citizenship in society. Upriver, the androcentric moral body is challenged by nostalgia for the bodily virtue of the mother. And upriver, the focus of the male cult centers on the men's co-optation of uterine fertility. In Murik culture, the moral body assumes different qualities and shapes that are defined by two related images:

1. The "canoe-body" (*gai'in*). 'He/she' is a hollow, personified vehicle that is ritually purged of feminine sexual substance and human passion during its construction (see Figure 7). This body is a symbol and product of a male owner, his descent group, and the male cult. 'He/she' is also a symbol and product of the owner's wife and the female powers of birth, nurture and the women's cult. Canoe-bodies are thus understood to possess a combination of both masculine and feminine attributes (see Barlow and Lipset 1997).
2. The "mother" (*ngain*). 'She' is idealized as an indulgent, abundantly nurturing, custodial figure surrounded by helpless, dependent children demanding to be fed. A "good mother," according to the Murik aphorism, "always has children clinging to her skirts because of the many good things she keeps dangling there." To her children, a mother is a chaste figure. She teaches and protects them, keeps their bodies clean, and maintains peace among them (see Barlow 2001). Her presence is associated with reproductive force, dependency, and age-hierarchy. Like the image of the canoe-body image, the 'mother' has also been purged of sexual desire, aggression, and uterine fertility. But unlike the nautical vessel, the mother is more feminine than androgynous (see Figure 8).

Melanesians are widely viewed by anthropologists as tending to construe society through enchanted metaphors of the interior body: somatic substances, and growth that are oftentimes made manifest through material culture and exchanges of food (Appadurai 1988; see also Stewart and Strathern 2001, 2002).

This is an appropriate enough concept of the body for parsing much of the dialogue about the reproduction of society among Eastern Iatmul. In Murik, however, the moral body is understood somewhat differently. This is particularly evident in the contexts of ceremonial exchange and adoption. Mystical substances inhering in goods or transmitted through services are not said to affect the identity of the recipient in any positive way. Here, ceremonial exchange creates indebtedness but not consubstantiation. In an important rite of early childhood, for example, the firstborn is spoon-fed a sweet, ceremonial porridge that has been prepared by the male cult. But the avowed purpose of the rite is for men or women who personify their cult spirits “to teach” the child “to eat” the sacred food. The point is that the body of the child is *not* said to benefit from consuming the porridge. Ingestion of the ritual food does *not* augment bodily substances that determine cosmological gender identity or stimulate physiological growth, as it is understood to do among Eastern Iatmul. The meal of porridge fails to create any mystical link between the child and the cosmic body of the cult. Instead, the child incurs a ceremonial debt. In adoption, to cite the second example, the birth mother is given food during her pregnancy. But the substance of this food does not transform the bodily identity of the baby and thereby provide a somatic basis for the adoption (cf. M. Strathern 1988:25). Instead, the gift is understood solely as an act of exchange. By feeding the birth mother, the adoptive parents create a debt that obliges her to give away the newborn baby (see Barlow 1985b; Lipset and Stritecky 1994).

If the inner body does not compel the Murik moral imagination, as elsewhere in Melanesia, the shape of the moral body in Murik is understood through metaphors drawn from the local technology and means of production. Murik still depend on dugout canoes to fish the lagoons, and formerly traveled in them to conduct regional trade, and to import foreign pigs and garden produce, in order to create or reinstate local relationships (see Lipset 1997). And the moral body in the culture is still spoken of as a ‘canoe-body.’ This is a hollow vessel, a vehicle that possesses both masculine and feminine qualities, but is constructed rather than ‘grown’ through physiological processes. How this hollow vehicle combines with the ideal of motherhood to form an image of a ‘maternal canoe-body’ appears very clearly in the contexts of siblingship, affinal relations, and ceremonial exchange.

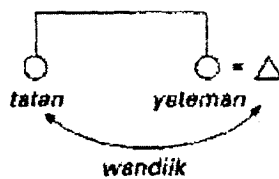
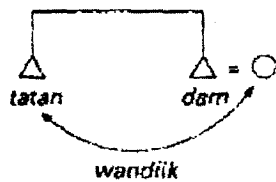
While five children are sometimes called “one canoe,” the sibling group as a whole, together with its collaterals, is more commonly referred to as a “creeper vine”. The term connotes the lashings used to bind outrigger floats to their hulls (10). The firstborn of either sex may inherit property and ought to possess authority in and over his or her sibling group. He or she may also be called the group’s “prow.” Alternatively, a father may boast about his son’s initiation into the male cult by claiming “Oh! My canoe has come ashore!” But at the same time that sibling groups are metaphorically presumed “to be canoes,” the moral duties of the firstborn are likened to that of a “mother,” as her role is culturally shaped.

Sahlins might as well have been describing the ideal relationship between elder and younger siblings in Murik when he defined “generalized reciprocity [as] a sustained one-way flow...[during which] failure to reciprocate does not cause the giver...to stop giving: the goods move one way, in favor of the have-not, for a very long period” (Sahlins 1972:194). The cultural expectation is that elder siblings specialize in generalized reciprocity. They should at all times be ready to provide unlimited resources for younger brothers and sisters and other junior kin. At the same time, elder siblings are forbidden from making requests upon their juniors (Barlow 1990). An elder sibling, moreover, should not “see the tears” of his or her younger kin or express emotion in front of them. In addition to replicating age-hierarchy and the ethos of interdependency, Murik elder siblings should espouse the virtues of quietism and generosity that are associated with motherhood.

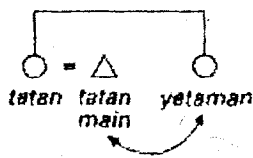
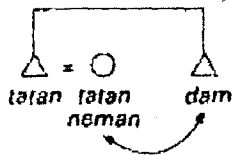
The ‘maternal canoe-body’ image not only informs metaphors of siblingship but also the relations between siblings and affines. As mentioned above, the Murik associate marriage with sister-exchange and brideservice. The asymmetrical norms of exchange and emotion that characterize siblingship extend to affinal relations. A wife may be addressed as a “mother” by her husband. As such, elder brother and younger brother’s wife, and elder sister and younger sister’s husband, ought to avoid each other and engage in as little direct communication as possible. They should not use each other’s personal names and should avoid bodily contact. They substitute a respect term of address (*wandiik*) for personal names. An elder brother should make no direct requests of his younger brother’s wife just as an elder sister should make no requests of her younger sister’s husband. Thus, an elder brother should never enter his younger brother’s house, where his younger brother’s wife might “mother” him. Publicly, a strong sense of shame ought to inhibit their relationship. Since a younger brother’s wife is ‘junior’ to her affines, it is her responsibility to maintain the avoidance relationship between them. Should they meet along a path, the younger brother’s wife should flee. If she absolutely must enter his house, she should remain

kneeling, shuffling, even, across the floor on her knees. In other words, affinal shame comprehensively inhibits relations between the moral body that emerges between the wife-mother and the husband's younger brother. It arrests maternal nurture and gives rise to an emotionally repressed, hierarchical body.

Respect/Avoidance



Joking



But another category of affinal relationship enacts a grotesque, rather than the moral, body. Joking relations are called for between a wife and her husband's younger brother, and between a husband and his wife's younger sister (see Figure). The elder brother's wife is termed a "cowife" (*tatan neman*) by her husband's younger brother; and the two are expected, so long as they do not regularly eat together, to engage in mock flirtatious, aggressive comedy. In a mode of bawdy satire, they may tease each other. When the younger brother calls this woman "cowife" and, reciprocally, when she addresses him as "cohusband," they

parody conjugal rights to each other's sexuality. In this rendering, the elder brother's wife becomes an "immoral woman" whose vagina is "too big" for any one man, but remains unavailable to the the younger brother. She is a woman who walks alone in the bush "to get water" (water, being a Murik euphemism for semen). From the viewpoint of elder brother's wife, the orifices of husband's younger brother are no less closed; his huge, inexhaustible phallus, as she may exclaim, leads his eyes from woman to woman. This lecherous kind of debauched humor reveals and expresses a contradiction (Douglas 1975:98). The younger brother's 'unlimited claim' on his elder brother's resources ought to include the sexual services of his "cowife." But it does not. Elder brother's wife and husband's younger brother are affines rather than spouses. The travesty of their joking—in which the body appears to be open, its passions inflamed, demeanor comic and assertive—answers the quietist, 'maternal canoe-body' that expresses relations within domestic and jural settings. The family resemblance of this joking discourse to the Eastern Iatmul women during *naven*, dancing erotically, their skirts asway, is striking.

No doubt, the most elaborate expression of the 'maternal canoe-body' in Murik culture takes place during ceremonial exchange. Firstborn elders in the genealogically most senior sibling group in each descent group possess rights to sacred heraldry (*sumon*), which are ensembles of ornaments and other personal accessories. The *sumon* heraldry condense the ancestors, property, collective identity, and the ethics of the sibling and descent groups. A gender-neutral pool of firstborn heirs seeks succession to title over these regalia. Titles are won, and lost, through sponsorship of a major feast that is provisioned by means of overseas trade.

Incumbent titleholders, and their male or female heirs, are sometimes called "canoes" for their heraldry. The primary right and duty of these ceremonial leaders is to "decorate children" during life-cycle rites. In so doing, the *sumon*-holders seek to claim firstborn youth as their heraldic sons or daughters (11). The boundaries between cognatic descent groups, of course, are extremely ambiguous. Multiple titleholders therefore compete to claim rights to initiate a single child or a whole sibling group simultaneously. The victor sponsors a great banquet and furnishes other gifts to representatives of the male or female cults who fulfill wide-ranging roles as courtiers of the individuals receiving heraldry. The ceremonial sponsor will honor a child who, for example, is ritually to be taught to eat ceremonial porridge, or who is to be initiated into the descent group, by decorating the youth with *sumon* ornaments, boars' tusks regalia, etc., most importantly, by giving the youth an heraldic basket adorned with a hereditary design. The child, bedecked in the regalia, is paraded through the community as a member of one particular descent group but not other, rival, ones (see Figure 9). Initiates are instructed by heraldic *paters* to proceed carefully, showing no emotion as they walk. Such ritual offspring are called "heraldic sons" and "heraldic daughters." But they are also called the "canoes" of their sponsors. The adornment forms a beautiful, unemotional exterior that is a sociologically differentiated, dependent "canoe-body." This aesthetic facade, though, also provokes emphatic images of the maternal breast, symbolically associated with coconuts in Murik culture. As the procession passes by, kin will anoint their heraldry

with a spray of coconut milk that is orally expelled.

In all, two embodiments appear in Murik domestic groups, sibblingship, and ceremonial exchange. Mothers, elder siblings, insignia holders, and the children they decorate possess hollow, maternal “canoe-bodies.” They are emotionally empty bodies, which uphold the values of interdependency, generosity, and nurture. Notice that both men and women personify this moral body. The body of affinal joking partners, by contrast, is single-sexed. It is not hollow but full. Its interior brims over through unclosed orifices and huge protuberances. If the moral body is all facade, the grotesque body is all interior. The dialogue between the beautiful, bountiful ‘maternal canoe-body’ and its passionate alter reflects a permanent, festering condition in society. The escalation of rivalry into violence, which is inevitably motivated by sexual jealousy, presents a constant challenge to the heraldic leaders who must try to persuade society to accept sanctions of one sort or another. In so doing, they espouse the quietest tenets of the ‘maternal canoe-body’ they uphold. If the first duty of ceremonial authority is “to decorate children” with heraldry, then the second is to “to keep the peace of the *sumon*” in society. Both the emblems and the body of heraldic leaders are said to taboo conflict when displayed in public. Thus, as adherents of the maternal canoe-body, heraldic leaders are meant to be generous foodgivers who sponsor glorious feasts, as well as ceremonial patrons of children and icons of moral intervention.

Heraldic leaders should also abdicate their titles. A ritual of succession may be staged on a pre-mortem basis. It culminates in a *tableau vivant* in which the retiring incumbent sits together with his younger brother’s wife on the platform of an outrigger canoe, thus drawing their avoidance relationship to a close. This scene represents the succession of the heir which concludes the incumbent’s seniority. The link between body and status is thereby severed and the relationship of one to the other is, once again, understood as being eminently transactable rather than consubstantial (cf. Read 1955). Following his or her death, the only relic of a ceremonial leader that is venerated is the heraldic basket. Nevertheless, the death of a titleholder may transform the moral body into a grotesque version of ‘herself.’ The exemplars of society, her proponents, inevitably fail to eliminate or banish all passion. The relationship between the two bodies, the one beautiful but hollow, the other satirical, degrading, and so full of life, is dialogical, not opposed. Now, we turn to a Murik ritual, a counterpart of *naven*, in which several elements of the grotesque—beatings, mud smearing, and universality—are remade with a characteristically Murik slant.

### **5. The Grotesque Body in Noganoga’sarii**

In 1982, an initiated woman, named Muru, died of old age. As she lay dying, Muru had received firewood (12) from her classificatory brother’s daughter. This gift was said to secure the outbreak of “the fight of the sibling groups” (*noganoga’sarii*) in the Murik village of Darapap where Barlow and I were living and working (13). In precolonial times, war parties used to leave the male cult house; the men hefted long spears on their shoulders, and made their way through the village to their canoes. The day after the burial of Muru, an initiated woman crossed the village with a spear hefted on her shoulder and threw it into the male cult house. Elder brothers’ wives immediately began to fight their husbands’ classificatory younger brothers, while elder sisters’ husbands began to scuffle with their wives’ classificatory younger sisters. Darapap village, in short, became divided by gender. Women stalked men, and men chased women. Both groups carried coconut halfshells--filled with a concoction of animal feces, mud, and ashes--behind their backs (cf. Figure 10). Men and women wrestled each other down to the ground and tried to smear the defiled mixture onto the faces of their joking partners, and stuff it into their mouths.

Our impression, which was confirmed by the opening act of the ritual sequence, was that women attacked men more aggressively and with more relish than the men assaulted the women (see Figures 10-11). One of us saw a middle-aged man return with his wife from an inland trading expedition across the lakes in the middle of *noganoga’sarii*. Three of his wife’s younger sisters forced him into the mud and stuffed the fetid stew into his mouth. His brothers came to his aid and fended off the women. Nonetheless, the man fled to find safety in his mother’s house. A crowd assembled in an uproar. Carrying fishing spears for which they otherwise had no use, women taunted men. Holding ropes, standing with arms akimbo, they beckoned their ‘brothers’ to come and try to fight them. Another senior man, standing by his canoe, was discussing a pig he had failed to obtain from a trading partner when his wife’s younger sister walked up to him and wiped his face with ash. He scooped up mud from beneath the shallow tide and wiped her face with it. They smiled at each other, and the woman walked away. Fighting went on in fun, but with no little vehemence, for three days, until virtually every adult in the

community had been wrestled to the ground and given to taste the filthy mixture (including Barlow and Lipset). In subsequent days, some 'antagonists' exchanged meals.

Soon after the *noganoga'sarii* fighting ended in 1982, I sat with a group of men who had gathered informally in a cult house to repair a fishing net. They talked about which people got what kind of animal feces rubbed in their faces. "The women beat us up," they conceded with a kind of ironic dismay. "They won." The ridiculousness of *noganoga'sarii*, its mock-heroism among mock-adversaries, provoked an enduring and endearing reflexivity. Women laughed and men, in particular, shook their heads for years afterwards, fondly recalling, but also puzzling over, the indignities to which they had subjected themselves during the event.

Eleven years later, in 1993, several generations of men were still marveling at how I myself had been defiled, degraded, and humiliated by one of my elder brother's wives who had hung a skirt around my neck in 1982. A flood of memories burst forth. One man recalled having been tied to the houseposts of his verandah, arms and legs akimbo. A large group of women had trussed up another man like a pig and dumped him beneath a house (14). One woman beat and tied up her elder sister's husband with thin cane. When he tried to flee, she had pulled him back "like a [sand]crab." As their bemusement began to subside, a senior man shrugged and wondered, "why do we do this? Why do we make this bad fight, a fight that is so bad but [now, smiling] so very good?" I asked whether *noganoga'sarii* had broken out in the past few years, or if it had even been set in train for any one else who had just died or was now ailing. Alas, they replied in a nostalgic tone that was consistent with the positive side of their feeling, there had been no more fighting, not even for two leaders who had only recently died. No firewood or coconuts had been given them during their final illness. A senior man, they added, who was currently quite ill, had not been an active feastmaker and therefore did not qualify to receive the requisite gift.

In January 2001, having returned once again to Darapap, I watched a New Year's celebration begin in national style: men and women gently rubbed each others' faces with char and mud. Suddenly, a few Darapap youth assimilated this image of Papua New Guinea into an utterly gleeful re-invention of *noganoga'sarii*. Young men and women, belonging to the appropriate affinal categories began to wrestle each other (see Figures 13-15). As crowds of onlookers laughed uproariously, middle-aged and more elderly men sought refuge in a nearby cult house. In the event, a small group of women actually broke into the building. The next day, these same women sent plates of sago pudding and crab to the meeting hall in compensation for their infraction. I had not misread or exaggerated the longing for *noganoga'sarii* in Darapap. "Next year," one man announced while eating, "we will plan [the fight] well!"

Now, I certainly cannot report whether or not *noganoga'sarii* has become an annual fixture in the New Year's celebrations of this community. That is, I do not know whether or not its rationale has shifted in the past couple of years to celebrate the rotation of the Western calendar, and its quantified concept of time. Until January 2001, I can say with confidence, *noganoga'sarii* had been viewed as a rarely performed phase of mortuary ritual for a person, a deceased insignia holder, male or female. It was viewed as a mock-fight between elder siblings and their junior, cross-sex affines who otherwise trade mock-insults in everyday life. The Murik do not recognize that the grotesque debasements permitted during this rite invert the 'maternal canoe-body' they otherwise take for granted within domestic and ceremonial relationships. They do not see *noganoga'sarii* as a rejoinder to their culturally-constructed images of motherhood, or to mother-surrogates (elder siblings and insignia bearers). In their view, what takes place during *noganoga'sarii* is simply a consequence of living in one of the three eastern Murik-speaking villages and having had a ritually suitable individual make an appropriate gift to a dying titleholder. But, even so, they do recognize that something else is at stake in these peculiar events. Thus they ask to paraphrase, 'Why does this bad fight feel so good?'

There has been ongoing theoretical debate about the moral opportunities presented to people who find themselves in such situations as *noganoga'sarii*. Does this broad ritual genre, for example, permit an authentic freeing-up of intrapsychic repression, as Freud (1960) argued about jokes? Or, do these rites merely provide a license for mischief that is ultimately rule-bound, and hence pursuant to the *status quo ante* (Gluckman 1956; Eco 1984)? We might put these questions a little differently: To what degree is the actor in these ritual circumstances possessed by, or does he/she possess, the moral body? That is, to what degree does the moral body control the actor, or *vice versa*, to what degree does the actor, embodied grotesquely, control it?

Past or present versions of *noganoga'sarii* certainly did and do not permit defiance of the moral body in any revolutionary, or even in an unfettered spontaneous, way. Particular obligations had to have been fulfilled to a specific category of person. In 1982, a classificatory brother's daughter presented a gift



of firewood to a dying woman, Muru, who had staged a successful career as a feastmaker. *Noganoga'sarii*, in short, may not and does not follow the death of each and every Murik titleholder. Indeed, in 1982, the rite had only erupted twice before in living memory. Likewise, adversaries do not attack one another at random during the occasion, but only seek out affinal partners whom they tease in daily life. In the midst of the 1982 fighting, some young people, lacking affinal joking partners, called for a "free fight," an open battle of the sexes. Yet cooler heads rejected the call. And then in 2001, after it broke out in an improvised way during New Year's celebrations, even though affinal joking partners, rather than random men and woman, had fought each other, the call was for "better planning," if it were to become an annual event. In themselves, then, the filth and ritual violence of *noganoga'sarii* would seem to be possessed by, rather than free of, the moral body. Still, the ritual clearly offers up different moral opportunities to Murik men and women. On the one hand, *noganoga'sarii* does not present men, in their rather baleful passivity, with the chance to make a complete exit from the normative world. But, women, in their mock-aggressiveness, *do* become much more morally transformed. In either case, the threat *noganoga'sarii* poses the moral body is carefully crafted: its vision is neither subversive nor 'free' in any sort of Marxian sense. But neither is *noganoga'sarii* merely authorized and rule-bound, as it might appear at first glance, presenting no alternative except an ineluctable return to the *status quo ante*. The precise and careful ways in which Murik ritually distinguish acceptable, or perhaps fantastical, *noganoga'sarii* aggression from real hostility and belligerence suggests something else. *Noganoga'sarii* is not exactly a story that the Murik tell themselves about themselves, like the cockfight in the Bali of Geertz (1973). But we would say that *noganoga'sarii* soon enough *becomes* such a story. What then is it about?

It is not about the pathos of E. Iatmul men being humiliated by having to confess in public to their femininity and taboo desires, carnal and cosmic. During the pre-2001 version of *noganoga'sarii*, the ambitious, pure, and earnest project of titleholders who seek to decorate junior kin, thus completing their identities through the staging of beautiful and serious tableaux in the center of the community, is rejected. Instead, marginal kin during *noganoga'sarii* seize the day and aggressive horseplay has its moment. Instead of celebrating the mastery of proximity by children or the conferral of jural identity upon youth, women and men scuffled 'like children.' Instead of literal or figurative mothers serving pure foods, the sexes fought each other by serving defiled 'food' that was associated with death rather than vitality. All told, the startling story of women and men wrestling, smearing and force-feeding each other mud, ashes, and animal feces momentarily dispossessed the 'maternal canoe-body,' albeit in precisely contrary terms, from 'her' position as the metaphoric center of Murik culture.

Apart from their bemusement, Murik men and women say practically nothing about the significance of the fetid nurture to which *noganoga'sarii* gives license, nothing about either the degrading activity or its befouled concoction (cf. Panoff 1970). The meaning of substances, to repeat, does not absorb the cultural imagination of Murik men and women as it does in Eastern Iatmul culture. Nonetheless, elsewhere in Melanesia similar imagery has been reported that is suggestive for present purposes. Marind Anim novices, for example, emerge from a rotten world smeared with dung, mud, and ashes, which are said to be the remnants of their passage through the "posterior parts of the male god" (van Baal 1966:480; see also Williams 1936:29). Then, they suckle mud at the breast of an aggressive male mother (Roheim 1942:371). From one standpoint, the Marind Anim material seems to represent a masculine appropriation of procreative powers through images of anal fertility (Dundes 1976, 1979). From the standpoint of dialogism, as Bakhtin would certainly have recognized, these images belong to the material, lower bodily stratum of a Melanesian grotesque body that is at once decomposing yet fertile. But do wrestling, force-feeding and smearing feces, mud, and ashes during the Murik *noganoga'sarii* depict or render a form of anal fertility? Not exactly. The mock-aggression and the filthy concoction are *not* a claim to androgenesis (cf. Bettelheim 1954; Ortner 1974; Bloch 1982). The comedy of *noganoga'sarii* is not about womb envy like the low mimetic tragedy of *naven*. Its subject offers no challenge to, or symbolic co-optation of, either a pregnant mother or a birth-mother.

Rather, *noganoga'sarii* answers a maternal ideal of a different sort, the beautiful, beneficent, indulgent, albeit powerful, mother-figure of early childhood. It answers 'her' nurture and love, to her discipline that children stand up, and avoid stepping on excrement as they learn to walk. It answers an image of mother-child symbiosis, oneness, dependency and self-sacrifice, rather than the phallus, sexuality, separation, rules and birth. It answers a mother-figure that Freud, later in life, might have called preoedipal (1963, see also Sprengnether 1990) (15). In 'her' ceremonial guise as a renowned titleholder, 'she' bestowed beautiful heraldry upon her 'children' and gave food to the community--but will do so no

longer. By dying, it has lost her ceremonial guardianship. In 1982, the *noganoga'sarii* fighting was staged "for Muru," the initiated woman who had died after a lifetime of hosting successful feasts. Instead of the loss of her uterine force, the death of a titleholder constitutes the loss of an important 'maternal canoe-body' who was, again, a key vehicle of nurture in society. With 'her' loss, the moral body was thrown back to reenact a pre-social time when the boundaries between inner body and outer body remained incomplete, when orifices were open, uncontrolled, and unrestrained.

The loss of such a pre-oedipal mother prompts a transformation of society into an archaic state, at once pleasurable yet sadistic (Chodorow 1978) (16). Thus, the central element of the rite, namely its mock-aggressive nurture. The Kleinian (1975) projection of 'the bad breast,' represented in the fighting with feces, mud (17), and ashes, might as well be viewed as a kind of grotesque rage at the loss of a 'good breast'(18). The separation from a maternal and feminine figure of successful sublimation gives rise to oral-sadistic impulses, fecal force-feeding and mud-smearing. The self, writ relational and collective, becomes partly infuriated (19). With the death a member of society who avidly had provisioned the community so well, the Murik do not punish the new ghost for stinginess (cf. Epstein 1979: 172-3; Clark 1995). In a comic mood, living women and men attack each other, at the loss of the "mother" who adorned, fed them sumptuously, tamped down their emotions and kept them clean. If their horseplay constructs a grotesque maternal other, splitting off the bad from the good breast, *noganoga'sarii* also gives rise to two further splits, not within the individual, but within the whole community. On the one hand, men and women divide against each other and fight, not as equals, but passive men attempt, and fail, to take on more or less phallic, that is to say, overwhelming, mothers (see Figure 16). On the other, hearing by rumor that *noganoga'sarii* is taking place, outsiders temporarily suspend visiting the community either to trade or see kin, visits during which they would otherwise expect to be fed graciously by hosts. So both within and without, the social landscape, which is otherwise so very full of indulgent, good breasts is transformed into a world full of pseudo-dangerous, grotesque mothers, whose breasts, made of coconut halfshells, contain mud, feces and ashes, not milk.

Lastly, there is the ethos of the rite, which is that of scatological horseplay. The fighting is not fighting. The nip is not the nip. Giving and taking the bad breast is putrid but pleasurable. And nothing is exactly as it seems. As the years pass, recollection of *noganoga'sarii* remains a disturbing, yet nostalgic, moment in individual memory and collective discourse. For men, retelling incidents become an ironic source of camaraderie. The 'antiheroic tales' men tell each other about being tied by relentless, phallic women to the pilings of houses, or when I myself had a defiled skirt draped round my neck, expose humiliations suffered at the hands of forceful, overwhelming women. Among women, by contrast, such fantasies are trophies. In bemused conversations among men and women together, *noganoga'sarii* discourse creates a lively and thoroughly ambivalent image of gender relations. The 'bad breast' on which men and women force-fed each other remains conceivable in humorous and entertaining conversation.

To argue that *noganoga'sarii* creates a temporary 'release' from ongoing conflicts within affinal relationships, a release which affirms and reinvigorates the moral body would be inaccurate, not to mention, incomplete. The grotesque incarnation of the maternal canoe-body enacted during *noganoga'sarii*, moreover, is no unequivocal critique of the moral body (cf. Mitchell 1992:19ff). We would say that it gave and continues to give Murik men and women an opportunity to reflect upon and rehearse both sides of their ambivalence about 'her' ideals. The storytellers inflect their experiences differently, according to their gender, either as comic antiheroes, who are possessed by culture, or as powerful heroines, who possess it through their transgressions (20). In either voice, what both men and women take away from such recollections is their differing relationship to the maternal value-system with which they are both so completely identified. Dialogically, as we say, their voices combine to comprise an otherwise unacknowledged ambivalence about the powers and contours of 'her' body.

## **6. The Rites Compared**

Social institutions, Evans-Pritchard once remarked, "have to be similar in some respects before they can be different in others" (1965:25). Not to be needlessly contrary, we would suggest that the reverse is equally valid: in what respects, we might then ask, do the grotesque bodies in *naven* and *noganoga'sarii* differ from each other? An initial set of contrasts concerns the expressed reasons why they take place. On the one hand, *naven* is said to be an honorific response by mothers' brothers and elder *iai* women to virtually all first-time cultural achievements of women and especially men. On the other hand,

*noganoga'sarii* is part of a larger mortuary process. It may or may not follow the death of an initiated ceremonial elder. Its outbreak, moreover, is understood to be contingent on the performance of a designated service during the final illness of the leader: a gift of firewood or coconuts. Since *naven* 'celebrates' the development of cultural competence in all Iatmul speaking villages, the rite has the potential to be performed quite frequently, and it is, especially during large-scale ceremonies when many young men don ritual costumes for the first time. By contrast, at least until 2001, *noganoga'sarii* was an exceedingly rare occurrence, occasioned by particular deaths, and then just in the three eastern, but not the two western, Murik-speaking villages. Both *naven* and *noganoga'sarii* are rituals of social reproduction. But they celebrate opposite ends of the life-cycle.

Another cluster of contrasts appears in the relationships between the female assailants and their victims. During *naven*, *iai* women--the "wombs" of the father's mother's clan--physically and sexually fight current and potential affines who, if male, are rendered passive. In the Murik rite, women also attack and sexually mock men whom they classify as affines. However, the affinal 'assailants' are related through collateral rather than lineal categories. One Murik sibling "creeper vine" (*nog*) attacks (*sar*) another "creeper vine" (*nog*) to which it is married (thus the name of the rite, *noganoga'sarii*). The collateral-lineal distinction accords with sociological differences between Eastern Iatmul and Murik cultures, according to which the patriclan rather than the sibling group is foregrounded.

The two rites also differ in what men and women may do. In *naven*, women beat men with palm fronds, spit red betel-nut juice at them, and smear their faces with mud. Although Eastern Iatmul acknowledge that men can do likewise to women during the rite, this is not what usually happens. In *noganoga'sarii*, both genders may and do fight with great delight. Women and men smear mud on each other's faces. As they wrestle each other down to the muddy ground, they try to stuff a mixture of animal feces, ashes and mud into the mouths of their foes, a mixture they carry in coconut halfshells. We will contrast the different practices below. Suffice it to say at the moment that this greater gender equality and inclusiveness in the grotesque body in Murik than in Eastern Iatmul accords with a similar construction of their respective moral bodies.

The largest *naven* rites may go on for the better part of a day and spread out to include the entire community--or at least to all of those who have not fled. Their scope and extent vary greatly: they can be momentary, small, and spontaneous, or they can be carefully planned, lengthy, and massive. *Noganoga'sarii* necessarily spreads out 'to serve' everyone in the community a taste of the filthy concoction. In 1982, the fighting with 'food' went on for several days. This may reflect the different rationales according to which the rites are undertaken, the one being to honor a largely commonplace achievement, while the other being quite rare.

In the outcomes of the two rites, exchanges take place, although for different reasons. In Murik, men and women (as sisters' husbands and brothers' wives) trade dishes of seafood and sago pudding or rice in order to *renew* their relationships. In Iatmul, the patrikin of the sister's child present valuables (likened by Bateson to bridewealth) to their matrikin, which *compensates* them for staging particular acts and gestures during the *naven* (21). This difference accords with contrasts in the organization of marriage in the two cultures.

We have contrasted the rationale, relationships involved, actions permitted, and consequent exchanges in the two rites. Now we want to point to the different reflexivities to which the play of grotesque bodies subsequently gives rise. *Noganoga'sarii* is a carnivalesque genre of heterosexual mock-fighting that leaves men beset by bittersweet bemusement about the indignities to which they submitted themselves. The rite leaves Murik women, by contrast, with triumphant stories to tell. In Tambunam, *naven* also begins in a comic, heterosexual ambience, but may then turn into a mood of male tragedy, never to be mentioned or discussed in public, at least by men. Women do mention *naven* in other settings, but mainly when, as *iai*, they seek to humiliate men during everyday joking. Since the frequency of *naven* in Eastern Iatmul daily life contrasts with the rarity of *noganoga'sarii* in Murik, the recollections of the latter concern an extraordinary setting rather than the commonplace. But the commonplace of *naven* is, above all else, slightly shameful to men, and thus censored from everyday discourse. We might say, then, that the reflexivity of *naven* is performative and immediate, at least for men, occurring within the rite itself as it unfolds and expands. Or, to put it another way, male reflexivity concerning *naven* is, after the rite, the silence of shame. For women, though, it is the continued mockery of manhood. The reflexivity of *noganoga'sarii*, however, is largely narrative, censored from the conversations of neither men nor women. It evokes continuous, conscious, and explicit *ex post facto* reflection. These differences notwithstanding, the attitudes to which both rites give rise brim with answerability.

*Naven* and *noganoga'sarii* clearly dialogize the values, actions, and embodiments of motherhood. But they respond to different maternal bodies. As Murik women and men try to force-feed mud, ashes, and feces to each other, and wrestle each other down to the ground, *noganoga'sarii* debases values associated with preoedipal motherhood: nurture, purity, hygiene, an upright body and, above all, dependency. This rite does not contemplate or interrogate either the phallus or uterine reproduction. It is true that *sar*, the metaphor for the ritual, also means "stomach/womb," like the Iatmul word *iai*. But *sar* also means "conflict" in Murik. In this ritual setting, *sar* connotes the stomach as the locus of emotions that are aroused when people get angry. *Sar* does not, as do the *iai* women in *naven*, refer to uterine fertility. One of the more striking symbols of the world turned upside down during *noganoga'sarii* is the coconut halfshell filled with a soggy, brown substance that is carried with a barely hidden intent. Superficially, the halfshell is an image of death and hostile nurture. More specifically, it connotes an inverted breast—a breast from which no pure, maternal fluid flows. This bad breast is no gift that makes children passive and happy. Instead, it is nurture befouled, and it is aggression that is sweet and satisfying (especially to women) (22). In *noganoga'sarii*, women chase and wrestle men to the ground while men seek to do the same to women. The ethical possibilities for the self depicted in this mock-abuse do not play upon a special relationship of death to the birth, regeneration or renewal of biological life, or even to the growth of the social body, as Bakhtin, Dundes, and Bloch might expect. Murik men do not seek to co-opt women's fertility. Men and women attempt to win another kind of victory. Through laughter in the face of death, their play restores society to what Bakhtin (1984b: 123) called an "ambivalent wholeness."

As in the Murik rite, the grotesque, ribald comedy performed during the initial acts of *naven*--the *iai* women beating men, aggressively expelling red liquid at them, and the smearing of mud over their faces--transforms a maternal presence. The rite turns the celebrated maternal values of nurture and hygiene inside out, and thus calls into question the cultural valuation of motherhood herself. The red spittle is no less of a grotesque rendering of the good breast than is the Murik coconut halfshell filled with fecal, ashen mud. But *naven* references to alimentary decomposition--the impurities of flatulence and the aural evocation of feces--are nowhere found in the Murik rite. The grotesque red fluid sprayed out of the mouths of *iai* does degrade a preoedipal maternal figure of moral exchange and collective interdependency. But the color of the expulsion also refers to the culturally-situated impurities of woman's menstrual blood and "her" procreative force, the mystical temperature of which, through sexual intercourse, is said by men to deplete male agency.

*Iai* denotes the "maternal womb and the stomach," as does *sar* in the Murik vernacular. But the Eastern Iatmul term does not refer to conflict or the seat of emotion. It refers to a category of marriageable women who, as "mothers" to their potential husbands' fathers, are Oedipal objects of desire and intergenerational rivalry. By smearing mud on the faces of men and women, *iai* hide the identities of those persons that they might otherwise help endow and sustain. Having given these men a grotesque "drink" of "milk," the *iai* women infantilize and degrade them. In a sense, they remind the men of the dependent children they once were, children who were unable to keep their faces and bodies clean of mud and feces. The men, reduced to such helplessness, barely fight back. Instead, they flee, eventually offering to compensate the women in return for their abusive 'mothering.'

All told, both *naven* and *noganoga'sarii* are ritualized rejoinders to the cultural embodiments of motherhood with which Eastern Iatmul and Murik identify their moral universes. In both, women attack and smear mud on the bodies of designated men amid an ethos of aggressive, lewd play. The women's aggression, moreover, overwhelms the men, who assume a passive role they would otherwise abhor. Both rites expand universally, aiming to involve everyone in the community. Both end in exchange. Both rites prompt, particularly among men, ambivalent attitudes and sentiments. What is more, both exert considerable influence upon moral imagination in their respective cultures. Most importantly, the grotesque images of motherhood that are performed in both *naven* and *noganoga'sarii* answer the moral embodiments in which 'she' may appear in domestic and jural contexts. In so doing, they both constitute a transgressive voice in a wider dialogue about the reproduction of culture.

### 7. An Oxymoron, A Dialogical Conclusion

We began this essay by questioning an enduring mode of analysis in ritual studies: the moral body framework. In our view, its teleological emphasis has narrowed understanding of the dynamic relationship between moral order and the forms of embodiment that we, after Bakhtin, have called the

grotesque. Under the sway of dialogism, the unit of comparison to emerge in our own dialogue was not an institution *per se* but an ambivalent relationship between these two culturally constructed bodies. This allowed us to distinguish between differing forms of maternal boundedness, differing forms of maternal rigmarole, and, most importantly, differing dialogical relationships between the moral and the grotesque. Thus, we arrived at the view that the Eastern Iatmul *naven*, in celebrating emergent personhood, responds both to preoedipal and Oedipal images of women. *Noganoga'sarii*, by contrast, commemorates the death of a feminine and maternal figure of generosity and prestige--be 'she' male or female--by answering a preoedipal image of motherhood, with a bad breast.

Our investigation, we emphasize, did refer to contrasts in modes of production, social structure, cosmology, and gender, which we related to differences between the two rites. But we do not view grotesque figurations of the maternal body--the mud smearing and comic aggression, for example--as serving the purposes of economy, gender, religion, and political order. Instead, we stressed that the body in *noganoga'sarii* and *naven* constitutes one-half of an ambivalent discourse, a grotesque symposium, as Bakhtin might have said. This colloquy loosens up, subverts, and, in a way, resists men's and women's identification with the maternal sentiments, categories, and processes through which they live their lives and strive to attain their cultural aspirations. But Marx will not do here any more than Durkheim. Dialogism is neither revolutionary nor conservative.

*Naven* and *noganoga'sarii* are not male or female initiation ceremonies, for which the Sepik is rightly renowned. In this respect, the imagery common in these two rites cannot be explained instrumentally. The ceremonies do not effect formal changes in social status, personhood, or society. *Naven* and *noganoga'sarii* do not 'do' anything--that is, they serve no teleological 'function.' Therein, we believe, lies the most important aspect of their similarity.

The two rites violate the moral body. They create a gestural and oral discourse about 'her,' a discourse that appropriates, reflects, and disrupts 'her' tone and sensibilities, and, therefore, disrupts the tone and sensibilities of male and female in these two cultures. *Naven* and *noganoga'sarii* dialogize the maternal body and, in so doing, both honor and degrade 'her.' The raunchy stylizations of the maternal body that emerge during these two ritual melodramas parody their respective moral centers, exposing as they do 'her' hold over the conventions and mood of gender relations. The topic of the grotesque symposium convoked by *naven* and *noganoga'sarii* is the reproduction of the moral body in these two cultures. The tension-filled relationship between the perpetrators of grotesque antics and the mothers they mock and deride cannot be isolated and must remain inseparable, irreducible, and irresolvable, in a word, dialogical. The grotesque mothers of the Sepik distort the ethical voice of motherhood, at once violating 'her' coherent ideals, while remaining loyal to 'her' ubiquitous nurture.

### Endnotes

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2. Many readers simplify or reduce Bakhtin's concept of culture by seeing him as a Marxist theorist of resistance, antagonism, contradiction, and so forth (Jameson 1981; Connor 1989:203; Kelly and Kaplan 1990).

3. Other uses of dialogism in the analysis of ritual and society have been made by Davis 1975; Abrahams 1968, 1983, 1989; Sahlins 1985; Da Matta 1983; Karp 1987; Stam 1987; Gottlieb 1989; Limón 1989; Trawick 1988; Mumford 1989; Battaglia 1990; W. Weiss 1990; Boyarin 1991; Bruner and Gorfain 1991; Briggs 1992; Hereniko 1994; Barlow and Lipset 1997, Durham 1999; Lyons 2001; Lipset 2004a and b. On Bakhtin, more generally, see Dorst 1983; Bauman 1986; Bauman and Briggs 1990; Kelly and Kaplan 1990; Tedlock and Mannheim 1995.

4. Silverman studied the Eastern Iatmul village of Tambunum in the late 1980s and Lipset studied the Murik village of Darapang beginning in the early 1980s with K. Barlow and then intermittently through the early 1990s and lastly in 2001.

5. Sister-exchange and, most commonly, elective-marriage are matrimonial options but not, at least in local ideation, rules *per se*.

6. While we acknowledge the problematic status of psychoanalytic concepts in cross-cultural analysis for many (but not all) scholars, we deem it prudent to refrain here from engaging this methodological debate. Our use of these terms admits to no essentialism, much in line with Obeyesekere (1990) and Paul (1987).

7. For a connection between falling to the muddy ground and exuvial witchcraft, see Silverman (2001:126-27).
8. Not only do men sit on wooden stools, but also male leaders can be called "stools" (*tugiit*). However, the enstoolment of manhood is called into question when men report that *women* are the "true" stools of the society since they give birth, feed children, and were the original custodians of the ritual sacra currently held by men.
9. The main joking relationship in the culture is between a female *iai* and her alters, called *ianan*.
10. Eastern Iatmul also use tether metaphors. During funerary rites, the cult house, here figured as a canoe, is fastened to a "father-tree" in order to prevent the artifice of the masculinity from symbolically floating down the river with the ghost, out to sea, to the place of the dead (Silverman 2001). Trees, furthermore, are stationary objects that contrast with feminine water, denote patrilineages that are connected by "vines" or women who are exchanged through marriage (Silverman 1997). In Murik, it is the sibling group itself, rather than the patrilineage, that is bound together.
11. Elders also may bestow the *sumon* heraldry onto personified buildings or boats.
12. Firewood is given to a woman. Green coconuts are given to a man.
13. *Noganoga'sarii* only takes place in the three eastern Murik villages of Mendam, Karau, and Darapap. It is not said to be customary in the two western Murik villages of Big Murik and Kaup.
14. Evoking a particularly humiliating form of punishment among the Iatmul, as we have seen, and the *nggariik* gesture.
15. Of course, we need not accept or endorse the universality of the Oedipus complex, in order to appropriate Freud's category for purposes of our own exegesis.
16. Juillerat (1992) has analyzed the West Sepik Yafar *yangis* rite in similar terms, namely as a yearning for a pre-Oedipal mother who is dead and decomposing (see also Silverman 2001:175-76).
17. In Dani myth, a snake and a bird argue about whether to introduce the possibility of reincarnation: the snake is in favor while the bird is against. "'I don't like...[the idea of reincarnation],' the bird tells the snake...[People] 'should stay dead and I'll smear mud on myself in mourning'" (Heider 1979:144). Gimi widows still blacken their faces and smear their bodies with clay and mud to "hold the spirit of the deceased" (Gillison 1993:96).
18. Arapesh mothers, by contrast, wean children by smearing mud on their nipples. They tell the child, "with every strongly pantomimed expression of disgust," that the mud is feces (Mead 1963:38). The filth of *noganoga'sarii*, however, like the use of mud during *naven* (see also Silverman 2001:147-48), does not encourage autonomy. If anything, it counteracts the processes of growth sustained by maternal care.
19. F. Weiss (1987:169-75) offers a related analysis for a Iatmul myth from Palimbei in which an elderly "anal" couple, who refuse to share food, end up ankle-deep in their own shit—a myth that a Palimbei woman actually associated with *naven*.
20. Why the difference? The women, as mothers in daily life, are more closely identified with the role than men.
21. In the biggest rites, the value of this prestation is so great that the recipients themselves reciprocate with gifts of their own—say, money and clothing.
22. This coconut also contrasts the moral image of green coconuts which, when given to newly arrived trading partners, begin a process that turns visitors into dependent and subordinate children (Lipset, 1985).

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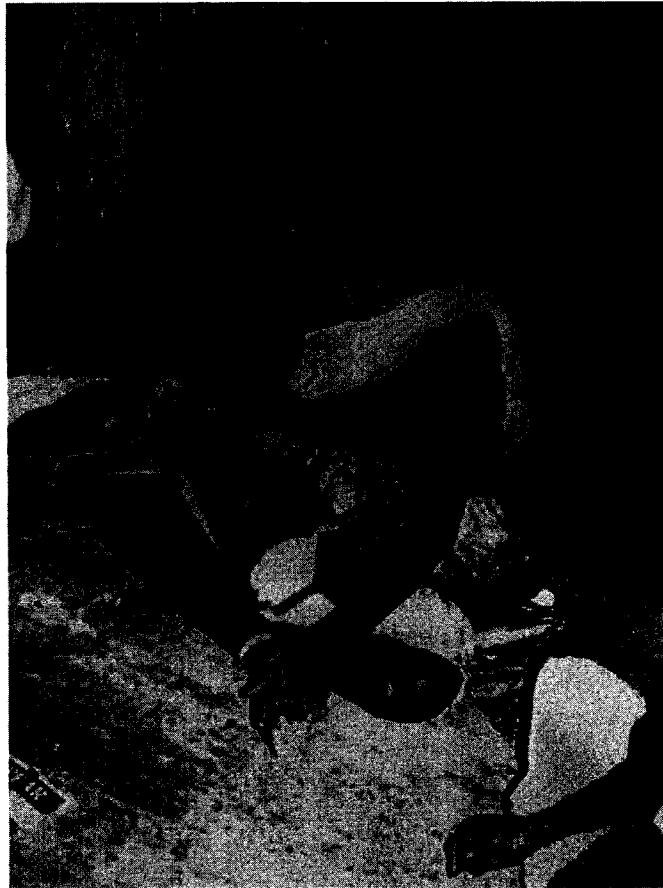
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**Biographical Sketches**

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**Figure 1: Although politically, the moral body is male, Eastern Iatmul men and women alike view mothers as embodying the virtues of selflessness, fertility and nurturance upon which they rely (E.K. Silverman, 1994).**



Figure 2: Symbolically, houses take on the appearance of a maternal body; they are ornamented with female breasts, a face wearing earrings that is covered by a woven hood (E.K. Silveman, 1988)



Figure 3: During *naven*, mud smearing, beatings and the spitting of betel nut juice violate corporeal distinctions in order to permit a grotesque display of open, feminine orifices (E.K. Silveman, 1988).



Figure 4: The ritual focus of naven may disperse. The sister's children cease to be in the middle of ceremonial attention: they are lost amid the swirling mass of activity (E.K. Silveman, 1988).



Figure 5: For many men, naven rites culminate when a classificatory mother's brother performs nggariik: he slides the cleft of his buttocks down the leg of his sister's son (E.K. Silveman, 1988)

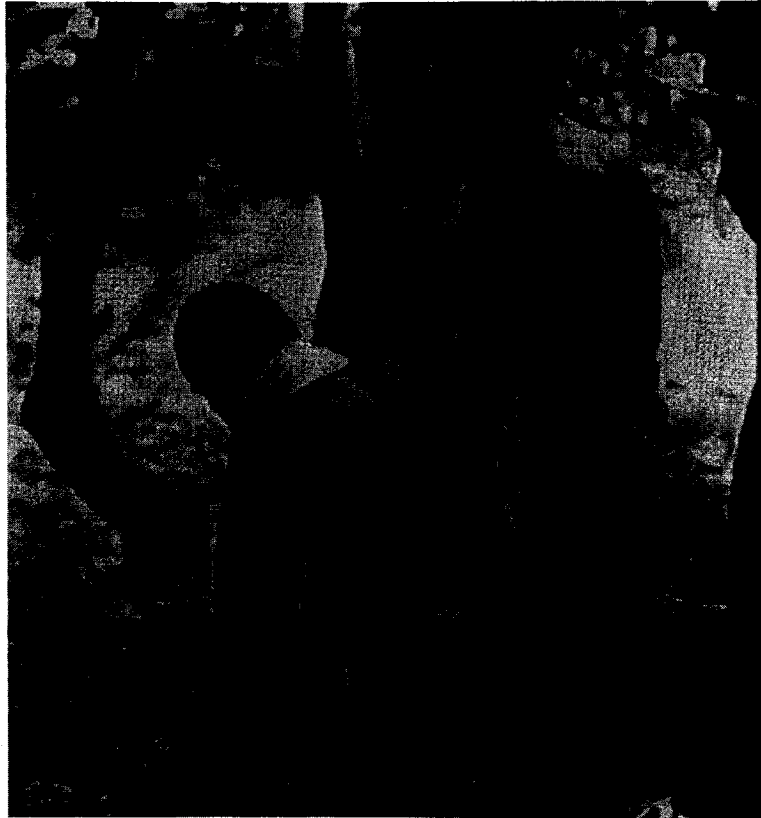


Figure 6: The maternal uncle shuffles backwards towards him, and quickly eases his buttocks down the nephew's leg, from upper thigh to ankle, before rapidly leaping to his feet. (E.K. Silveman, 1988)

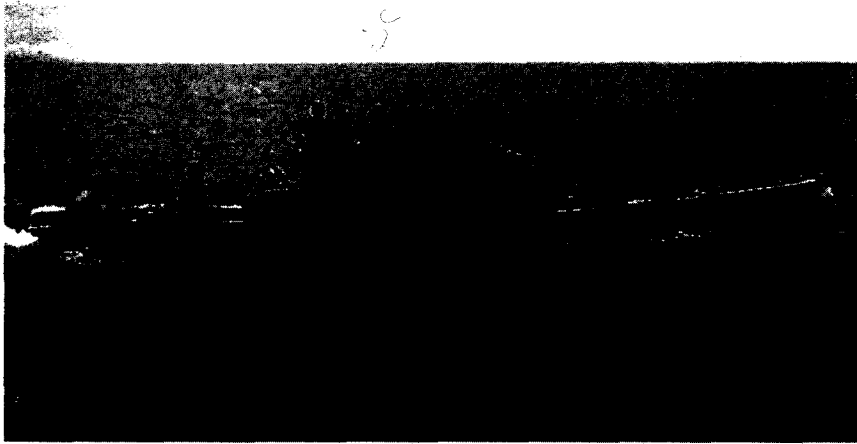


Figure 7: The canoe is a body in Murik thought and vice versa, the body is a canoe (D. Lipset, 1988).

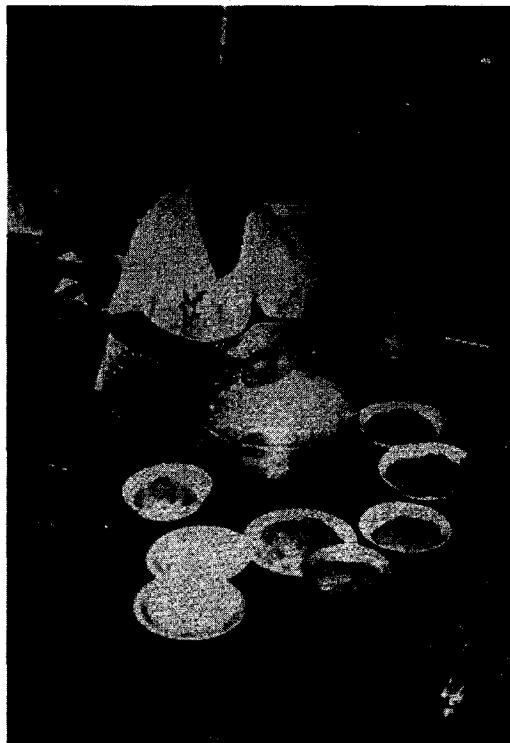


Figure 8: The image of motherhood in Murik is associated with nurturance, protection and so forth but not with uterine fertility (D. Lipset, 2001)





**Figure 9: Ceremonial leaders seeks to decorate children in order to reproduce the descent groups they head (D. Lipset, 1982)**

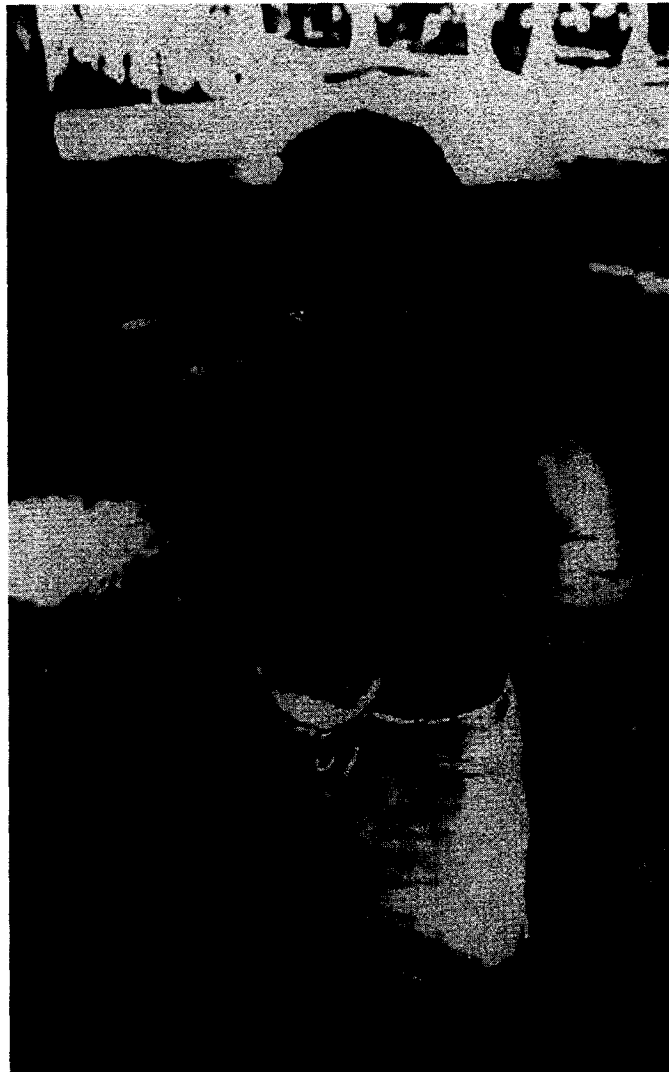


Figure 10: In a comic mood, Murik men and women arm themselves with coconut halfshells they fill with a mixture of animal feces, ashes and mud during *noganoga'sarii* (D. Lipset, 1982).

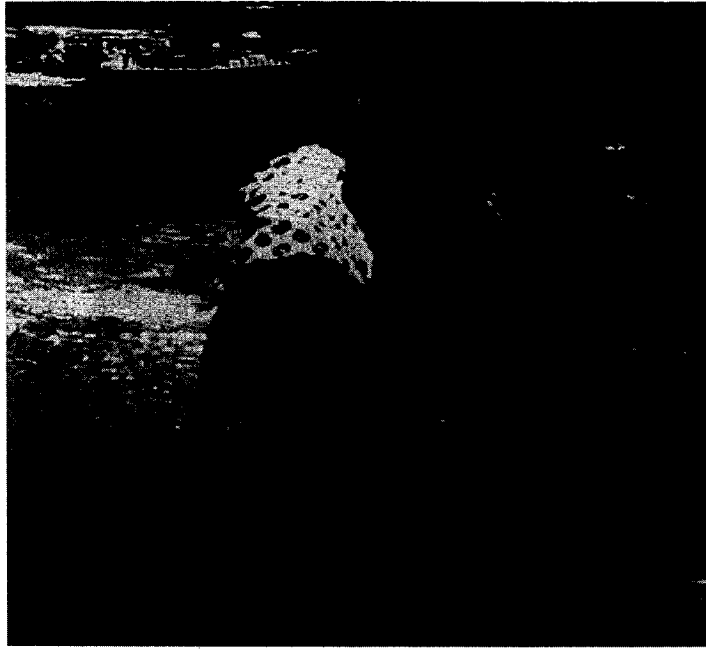


Figure 11: Men and women mock-fight during *noganoga'sarii* in 1982, Darapap village (D. Lipset).

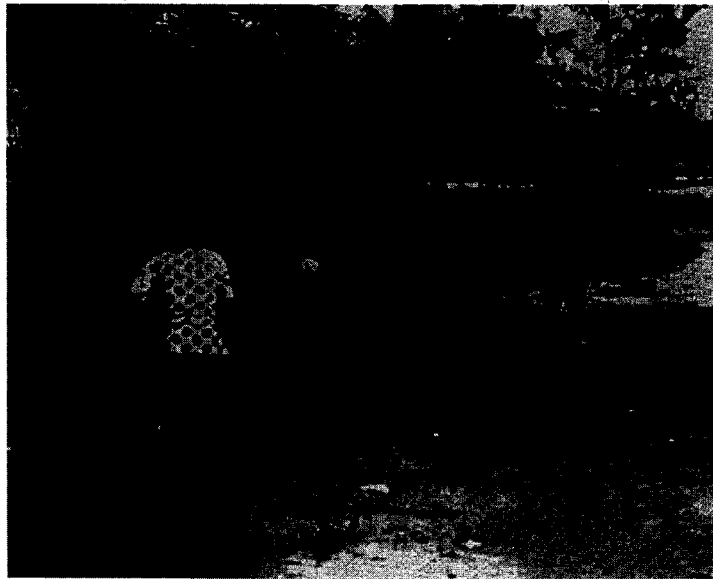
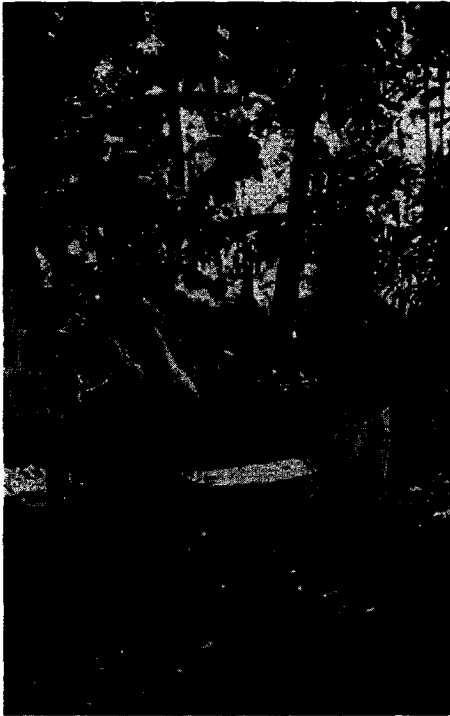


Figure 12: *Noganoga'sarii* seems to afford Murik women more power than men (D.Lipset, 1982)



Figures 13: During New Year's celebrations in 2001, *noganoga'sarii* was reinvented by Darapap youth. In this photograph, two young women attack their elder sister's husband (D. Lipset).



Figure 14: Subsequently, the elder sister's husband counterattacks (D. Lipset, 2001).



Figure 15: The wife's younger sister tries to flee (D. Lipset, 2001)

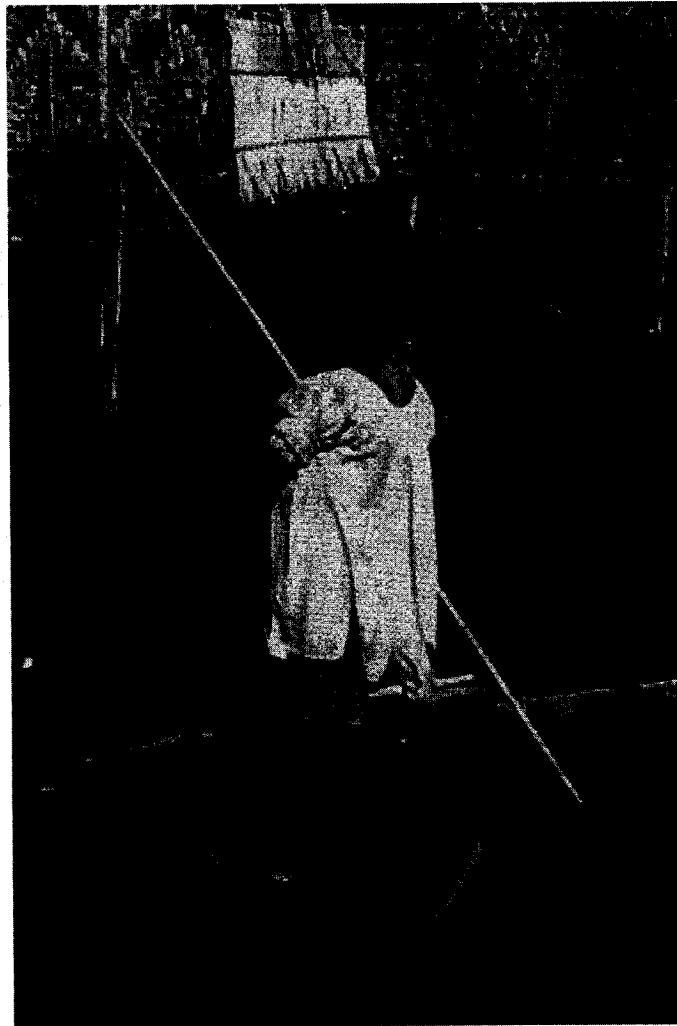


Figure 16: *Noganoga 'sarii* creates a world of pseudo-aggressive, phallic mothers  
(D. Lipset, 1982)