

TOTEMISM, TOURISM, AND TRUCKS. THE CHANGING MEANINGS OF PAINT AND COLORS IN A SEPIK RIVER SOCIETY

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Totemism, tourism, and trucks. The changing meanings of paint and colors in a Sepik River society

Totémisme, tourisme et camions : les changements de sens de la peinture et de la couleur dans une société du Sepik

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Totemism, tourism, and trucks. The changing meanings of paint and colors in a Sepik River society

by

Eric K. SILVERMAN*

ABSTRACT

Iatmul art from the middle Sepik River in Papua New Guinea is well-known worldwide, but little understood. This article therefore offers an ethnographically-grounded, long-term study of the changing meanings of artistic paint and colors as used and seen by the Eastern Iatmul people of Tambunum village, whom I have studied since the late-1980s. I analyze how colors and paint evoke the landscape in terms of mythic history, totemism, the aesthetic value of movement, an irreducible dialogue about cosmic generativity, and the ontological principle of watery change. I also interpret touristic paintings and how Eastern Iatmul see recent decorations on passenger trucks and vans, drawing on the outlook of landscape realism in the Western tradition. The traditional worldview still infuses paint and colors with ancestral meanings. But Eastern Iatmul today also color their art with aspirations for development, romantic views of nature, and anxieties over globalization.

KEYWORDS: Art, aesthetics, Iatmul, Papua New Guinea, tourism, postcolonial Melanesia

The typical mode of transportation between rural communities and the urban centers of modern Papua New Guinea (PNG) is the Passenger Motor Vehicle or PMV. I have travelled in these rugged trucks with people and pigs, betel-nut and smoked fish, copra and coffins, and, perhaps the most modern cargo of all, tourists. The vehicles are loud, clunky, often unreliable, and always bone-rattling uncomfortable as they hurl along the dirt roads of the Sepik River region. They are also prone to

RÉSUMÉ

Si l'art du moyen Sepik en PNG est notoirement connu dans le monde entier, il est en revanche peu compris. Cet article présente les résultats d'un long terrain ethnographique mené depuis 1989 et dont l'objet fut la signification des changements de sens liés à la peinture et la couleur tels qu'ils sont perçus par les gens de Tambunum, un village de l'est de l'aire Iatmul. J'analyse comment la peinture et la couleur évoquent le paysage en terme d'histoire mythique, de totémisme, la valeur esthétique accordée au mouvement, le dialogue irréductible sur le pouvoir générateur cosmique et le principe ontologique des changements du monde aquatique. J'interprète aussi les peintures touristiques et comment les Iatmul de l'Est perçoivent les décorations de style occidental récemment produites sur les camions qui transportent des passagers. Chez les Iatmul de l'Est, la perception traditionnelle du monde irrigue toujours d'un sens ancestral les couleurs et les peintures mais, de nos jours, les Iatmul colorent leur art d'une aspiration au développement, d'une vue romantique de la nature et d'une anxiété face à la globalisation.

MOTS-CLÉS : art, esthétique, Iatmul, Papouasie Nouvelle-Guinée, tourisme, Mélanésie post-coloniale

ghastly accidents, which are luridly featured in the newspapers. For aesthetic contemplation, nothing would seem more jarring than a PMV.

Visually, each PMV is known for its distinctive color scheme, a name chosen by the owner and painted on the vehicle, and an assigned number. In the late 1980s, for example, solicitors working in Port Moresby, the capital of the country, purchased a PMV for a village of Iatmul speakers along the middle Sepik River. No other PMV in

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the region was dark blue, covered by a yellow tarp, numbered 35 and named “Dass Mangi” or “dusty rascal.” The truck had no other decoration; its colors communicated no agency or meaning. The vehicle basically came that way.

PMVs have changed little over the years with one exception: naturalistic paintings, mainly landscapes, that now decorate the vehicles. The PMV has become a canvas for intentional aesthetic communication. But these paintings resemble no traditional styles. They are said to be “modern,” and thus represent a new way of artistic “looking” in the Sepik that also informs touristic woodcarvings. In this paper, I trace the changing meanings of color, paint, and painting among the Iatmul, especially in regard to a shift in symbolism from local ontologies to something similar to Western realism.

One of my goals is to argue for the importance of history in the analysis of Melanesian art. Some 10,000 Iatmul speakers dwell in two-dozen horticultural, fishing, and petty capitalist villages along the Sepik River and, today, in the towns of PNG. Iatmul were prolific artists, and remain so largely due to tourism (Silverman, 1999). At major auction houses, old Iatmul “masterpieces” fetch staggering sums. Yet most connoisseurs and curators ignore or deride recent works as worthless souvenirs. For them, the past is the present, or the present is non-existent. I aim to correct this primitivist fallacy.

Focusing on Tambunum, an Eastern Iatmul community, I explore paint and painting from four points of view. As a totemic phenomenon, paint signifies mythic-historic locations created by ancestors during primal wanderings. Aesthetically, paint connotes movement through social and topographic spaces, and expresses the ontological truth that reality is akin to watery instability. Semantically, the traditional palette maps gender and bodily substances onto the landscape. Last, ritual painting allows men to mirror human and cosmic creation, thus dialogically sustaining and subverting masculinity.¹ I conclude by interpreting landscapes on trucks and tourist art as representations of modernity.

Forge's Puzzle

Tambunum, the site of my own fieldwork, has a rich history in anthropology. The community was visited by Gregory Bateson in the late-1920s, who returned with Margaret Mead for six months in 1938. In 1967, the village was again studied, this time by Rhoda Metraux, Mead's protégé, who returned two more times within the next few years. With the exception of an exhibition review by Bateson (1946) and a comparative essay by Mead

(1934), however, these three anthropologists published little about Sepik visual art. They collected objects for museums, but largely left it at that.

In fact, the great puzzle of Sepik aesthetics was established not along the river but by Anthony Forge during his research among the Abelam people of the nearby Prince Alexander Mountains (e.g., 1966). Abelam readily identified motifs and forms but rarely offered any elaboration about symbolism and meanings. Additionally, wrote Forge, Abelam art exhibited “no stable iconography” (Forge, 1970: 289). Both statements remain true today, and both equally apply to Iatmul. And so Forge concluded that Abelam art formed a closed or self-referential system that was not directly translatable into language.

Moreover, Forge (1973: 189) argued that Abelam art signified not “things,” or clearly-defined signifieds, but unspoken “relationships,” especially about gender. Abelam iconography conveyed the message that male cosmological power, enacted culturally through ritual and art, was secondary to the grander and natural primacy of female fertility (Forge, 1970: 189; 1973). Bateson (1946: 120) made a similar claim for Iatmul. This way, Sepik men painted a declaration they felt compelled to make but which they could not plainly state without calling into question their own manhood.

Today, anthropologists who study Sepik art still address Forge's puzzle about non-verbal meanings. Three approaches stand out. One continues to explore aesthetic messages about creativity, fertility, and the relationship between male and female (e.g., Tuzin, 1995). Another approach sees Sepik art primarily as a system for eliciting emotions; the art is about feeling, not thinking (Roscoe, 1995). A third framework refutes the older assumption that Melanesian gender is binary and stable. That supposition, which underlies the first approach, led Forge to distinguish between the real vulvas that women “have” and the symbolic vulvas painted by men in envy, as I detail shortly, that is, between the “truth” of anatomy and the “fiction” of art. Instead, argues Losche (1995: 54), drawing on Strathern (1988), Abelam paintings symbolize not male versus female but rather a single “model of generativity” that gives rise to all sorts of culturally salient differences, including but not limited to gender.²

My own analysis of Iatmul art draws on these approaches. But missing from each of them, with the exception of Losche's others writings (1996, 1997), is an accounting for historical change in the colonial and postcolonial eras. In this sense, I veer in a new direction, one that opens up the art of the present to the same serious consideration given to the art of the past.

1. Lipset and Silverman (2005) elaborate on the theory of cultural dialogism, deriving from Mikhail Bakhtin, that informs this paper.
2. Hauser-Schäublin (1994) offers a similar argument for Sepik triangles: pointing up, the shape represents maleness; pointing down, femaleness.

Alfred Gell and the “Real-world”

A similar lack of historical context weakens Gell's (1998) theory of art as a system that moves people not to think or feel but to act. In his framework, art exhibits “technical virtuosity” that cognitively ensnares viewers. These “mind-traps” create a social relation between artist and audience that, in turn, elicits other relations. By his own admission, Gell's theory intentionally disregards “symbols and meanings” and places

“all the emphasis [...] on agency, intention, causation, result, and transformation.” (Gell, 1998: 6)

Gell's theory has widely captivated anthropologists and others (e.g., Rampley, 2005; Osborne and Tanner, 2007; Campbell, 2001; Kuchler, 2001). But I am skeptical about the range and types of insights afforded by any theory of art that ignores historically-embedded local meanings and cultural context. Many of Gell's critics agree (e.g., Bowden, 2004; Lipset, 2005; Morphy, 2009). At best, any such theory will prove woefully incomplete. Worse, it may blunder.

For example, Gell claimed that the swirling decorations on Iatmul lime powder containers “do not obviously resemble real-world objects.” In fact, they do. These and similar patterns recall river waves, snakes, crocodile teeth, marsupial tails, and clouds, among other “real-world” things. Aesthetically, this convergence of multiple identities reflects two premises of Iatmul reality. The first principle is that the world is in transformative flow. The second premise is that reality consists of surface differences. After all, trees are not cassowaries are not fish. These distinctions make everyday life possible. But underneath the differences of everyday life is a unseen unity. The world of appearances is public information, which Iatmul call “outside” knowledge. By contrast, the secretive “inside” realm of esoterica is carefully guarded. The swirling motifs on the lime powder containers not only “obviously resemble real-world objects” but they also offer a glimpse of the reality beneath the real world.

In Iatmul aesthetics, bamboo flute melodies, which are named after flowing streams, swift fish, and other idioms of watery movement, parallel the curvilinear motifs that predominate in visual art. The flute tones are also likened at times to bird songs. But this level of meaning is secondary. The tunes acoustically convey the understanding that everything in the world, as one of my village fathers confirmed in 2014, is a material reflection of water ripples (see also Bateson, 1936: 230). Wavy motifs communicate the uncomfortable message that the “real-world” is not some stable ground of social life, a view that glimpses only the surface of reality. Rather, the hidden truth of the “real-word” is watery motion.

Eastern Iatmul link the river with women, mothers, and uterine fertility. In myth, the world began as a huge sea. Wind stirred waves, and land appeared. A “totemic pit” opened and male ancestors emerged out of it. As they stepped on the water, more land hardened beneath their footsteps. In this way, the ancestors created and also named the cosmos into existence along migration “paths.” During ritual, men recall these ancestral journeys by chanting totemic names and displaying ceremonial art. These rituals also, men say, “build up” the ground, much like their everyday work. Men, in other words, like to brag that they shore-up the foundation of social life against the threat of feminine regression to the originary sea. But the wavy patterns that are so ubiquitous on Iatmul things, and which Iatmul hear in their music, give lie to these labors and boasts. All this is nothing if not the “real-world.”

Today, the swirling artistic patterns are perilously real. The rain-season flooding of the river has recently eroded huge tracts of village ground, including dozens of houses. Some people attribute these destructive floods to magic; almost everybody mentions global warming. Many Eastern Iatmul now talk about relocating the village. In doing so, men would “plant” ancestral law in the new community by reburying supernatural soil, which originated in the “totemic pit” and now lies beneath the current cult house, in the ceremonial plaza of the new village. In the late 1980s, I was honored to spend time with some of the elderly men from the last generation in Tambunum to use the gourds discussed by Gell. They have all died. Younger people now prefer plastic bags and metal tins. But the omnipresent curvy motifs continue to convey meaning as a reminder of the unpredictable tides of history which seem today to wash the community “backward,” as local people say, rather than forward to modern prosperity.

Let me be clear that I am not faulting Gell for omitting from his discussion of Iatmul gourds any insights he had no way of knowing. Rather, I fault his theory for neglecting history and local meanings. I now offer a different perspective.

The shame of Migaimeli

To understand paint in Tambunum, we should begin with the origin of art, which requires a quick overview of gender. Among Iatmul, male initiation expelled maternal blood from boys' bodies through hundreds of painful cuts made by bamboo blades. This blood-letting ensured their bodily growth into adult men. Today, the rite is dormant in Tambunum except for cursory cutting done with razor blades during funerals (Silverman, 2016a). But the resulting scars are still said to resemble the scales of ancestral fish

and crocodiles that assisted with cosmic creation. The latter spirits, too, govern human pregnancy. The patterns are also said by men to recall women's breasts and genitalia. The initiation rite thus transforms boys into reproductive adults who embody masculine and maternal capacities (Silverman, 2001a: chap 4).

Marilyn Strathern (1988) argued famously that Melanesian gender is not a fixed binary defined by exclusive bodily "possessions." Rather, Melanesians shift between same-sex (all-male or all-female) and cross-sex (androgynous) identities. But while this thesis is true in general for Eastern Iatmul, it also needs some refining since men in Tambunum find it far more necessary than women to affirm cross-sexed capacities. For this very reason, I propose, women have no need for initiation scars.

In the mythic past, men say, women not only gave birth but also held all ritual objects in hiding. "Men had nothing," I was told, until they stole all the ceremonial objects, especially bamboo flutes. Ever since, men dearly define masculinity largely on the basis of their exclusive ability to channel ancestral power to maintaining the world. But men never confess to the primal theft to women. Nor do they admit that much of male ritual seeks to emulate female fertility. For their part, moreover, women ridicule any hint that men are the "ground" of society. Privately, men agree (Silverman, 2016b: 195).

Failure is precisely how some men speak about the genesis of art. In private, several men from more than one patriclan talked to me in 1989 and again 25 years later about a lonely culture hero, Migaimeli, who tried to chisel a wooden wife. But the carving remained lifeless. Worse, Migaimeli was shamefully caught *in flagrante delicto* with his sculpture. This tale suggests that men's artistic creativity is a fruitless effort to emulate uterine fertility.

During major rituals, in a general sense, spirits appear to women and speak. The spirits, of course, are woodcarvings and costumes manipulated by men, who also produce the sounds. Women must hear the spirit voices but they can never glimpse the flutes and noise-makers. Similarly, women must view the spirit but only briefly, in a glance, and never "hold" the spirit in their gaze. Thus men camouflage sacred woodcarvings with various ornaments. Both deceptions, men say, prevent women from taking back their sacra and thus, as I see it, returning men to an empty identity. Additionally, men liken the decoration of spirit carvings to pregnancy, whereby skin, which arises from maternal blood, grows over bone, which hardens from semen. Here, again, male artistry erases women by asserting a cross-sexed or masculofeminine identity. But, much like Migaimeli, men are ashamed to admit so to women.

Painting totemic space

For the most part, Eastern Iatmul prepare artistic paints by mixing water with certain stones and clays, sometimes after heating, found in specific locations created during ancestral migrations. When a clan or lineage stages a ritual, the sight of paint evokes those locations and associated totemic places, travels, and ancestors.³ Colors form a map of the mythic-historic landscape.

Each patriclan in Tambunum asserts proprietary rights over a portion of the regional, even global landscape that was created by the group's primal ancestors. The realm of the Sago Palm Clan (Mboey Nagusamay) spreads south of the river, including the Highlands. That of the Pig Clan (Shui Aimasas) lies to the north, across the Sepik Plains and the Prince Alexander Mountains, ending at the Bismarck Sea. The Fish Clan (Mogua) owns the ocean, and everything overseas. Each clan, too, claims several sources of paint.

The traditional Iatmul palette consisted of four colors: yellow (*kamwin*), white (*saun*), red (*biisiik*), and black (*ngi*).⁴ Yellow pigment is obtained at Avangrum, a lower Sepik location once inhabited by the Fish Clan. Yet the place is situated in the totemic domain of the Pig Clan, and so yellow maps two groups onto the Sepik landscape.

There are three distinct sources of white pigment. A stone called *ouli* is collected at Chambri Mountain, several hours upriver. In myth, an earthquake dislodged the hill from the land of the Pig Clan. The hill wandered, eventually settling at Chambri Lake, claimed by the Sago Clan. Hence, this color, too, like yellow, maps a pair of clans onto the Sepik region.

Another white pigment, *mayviimblandi*, is mixed from rock and loam found on Mambari hill in the land of the Pig Clan. The third white paint derives from a fragrant clay, *moimban*, dug at Kowat, a spring near the lower Sepik village of Kambrok, claimed by the Fish Clan. During the German colonial era (1884-1914), indentured laborers from Tambunum also discovered *moimban* at Rabaul, a town on the island of New Britain. This pigment, like all colors from overseas, defaults to the Fish Clan.

Each clan owns black paint, found throughout the region. Black therefore signifies the totemic system in general as well as the unique past of each group. Last, Eastern Iatmul produce red paint by heating yellow ochre which, as noted above, is shared by two clans.⁵ In sum, the four traditional colors of paint form a type of map that plots myth and history onto the landscape.

When viewing paint, Eastern Iatmul report thinking about specific clans and ancestral paths. But they also feel various emotions, such as pride

3. For paint elsewhere in the Sepik, see Forge (1962, 1967, 1970, 1973), Hauser-Schäublin (1996: 87), and Bowden (2006: 30-32).

4. The traditional color terminology, however, was far more expansive, and included shades of blue, green, brown, orange, and so forth.

in group achievements, grief over deceased kin, and anxieties about the future, especially underdevelopment. The experience of viewing paint and color during ritual is a bittersweet moment.

Coloring movement

Specific clans, we saw, claim pigments as their totemic property. Rarely does an artist need permission to use another group's colors. Still, in this sense, paint visualizes the flow of social life, specifically, exchanges between different social groups. But paint also conveys a wider sense of movement.

Eastern Iatmul create traditional art using a variety of media, including wood, shells, feathers, leaves, and flowers, in addition to stone and clay pigments. Few if any of these materials are found inside the village proper. The same is obviously true for the shoe polish, plastic beads, synthetic paints, and other modern materials purchased today in town. Thus aesthetic value partly arises from movement across regional and global socio-spatial boundaries, a process seen as dangerous, transformative, and powerful (see also Forge, 1962). This explains, for example, the substitution of enamelware for Melo shells on spirit displays (photo 1; Bateson, 1936: Plate xxxvii). The plate conveys the same meaning as the shell: mastery of movement across different spatial zones.

Eastern Iatmul value another sense of artistic movement. During a ritual display, the decorations on a spirit carving should shake and blur like the rainforest in a gale, ocean waves crashing on the shore, a whirlwind, and the river churning in a storm. This visual effect is intended to provoke a mood of awe. Each individual ornament represents a distinct animals – bird, fish, pig, etc. Together, all the fluttering ornaments on any one object, mask, or costume conveys a sense of disorder, which also elicits feelings of danger. The message is that everyday categories are illusory or impermanent; reality is, like water, in a state of swirling change.⁶

The color of paint

In Tambunum, red symbolizes two types of blood (*yerokwayn*). First, red denotes menstrual blood, which men say cools the magical heat (*kau*) of their tools, weapons, sacra, ritual, and brawn. Red also signifies the soft parts of the body which, as mentioned earlier, grow from maternal blood – the very fertility men desire yet avoid. Second, red represents the blood formerly shed by men



PHOTO 1. – *Mai* mask spirit costumes, 1999
(© E.K. Silverman)

during warfare, which is especially noticeable on spirits called *mai* (photo 1).⁷ Red paint therefore expresses three types of blood: maternal and generative, menstrual and defiling, and masculine and aggressive.⁸ That these clusters of meaning are contradictory attests to the irreducible complexity of Iatmul gender. There is no stable way to either think about or paint male and female.

White symbolizes bones (*ava*) and semen (*ndumbwi*). Together, white and red are often complementary symbols of the reproductive body. White connotes a hard and lasting male substance; red evokes female fragility and impermanence. Mourners smear white paint on their bodies; women add red. To triumph over death, in other words, men assert paternity and patriliney while women paint heterosexual reproduction. Indeed, the pregnancy of a widow is attributed to the white paint she daubed in mourning. Paint, in this sense, again conveys contrary voices in a cultural dialogue about gender.

Black conjures the masculine qualities of aggression, mystical power, and magical heat, mentioned above. Black is associated with fire, anger, powerful spirits, *Dracaena* ginger leaves used

5. Seeds from the Annatto tree (*Bixa orellana*) yield another red paint (*nya-kupma*).

6. The shaking of ornaments, too, men say, prevents women from trapping the spirit's masculine power within their gaze. Women who view spirits "too strongly" may go mad or harm their fertility.

7. Other Iatmul villages paint different patterns on these masks (e.g., Bateson, 1936, Plate xxviii B; Hauser-Schäublin, 1983). The word "*mai*" refers to small nassa shells.



PHOTO 2. – *Awan* spirit costume with children; the writing on the costume abbreviates the personal name Mayviimbandi, 1989 (© E.K. Silverman)

in ritual, and the phallic stones standing before many cult houses, beneath which warriors long-ago buried enemies. After homicides, men in Tambunum blackened their *mai* masks. Five days later, they repainted, hence, rebirthed the spirits in red and white, or blood and semen. Black is also associated with rum and whiskey.

Iatmul tend to layer their cosmos into “planes of existence” (Bateson, 1936: 237). Humans dwell on the “surface” (*aiwat*) of reality. Spirits and other magical beings inhabit an unseen, inner realm (*attndasiikiit*) accessible only to a few totemic experts (see also Silverman, 2001b).⁹ Knowledge that exists on the “outside” is public and therefore only partially true and often deceptive. By contrast, men carefully regulate access to the realm of truth they call “inside” knowledge, which often reveals that the differences we see in everyday life actually conceal some underlying unity. Red and white fit into this dichotomy. An interior, hence, truthful core of bones (or white maleness) supports external and fragile blood and flesh (or red femaleness).

Although black is linked to death, the color does promote growth in one setting. When a boy first encounters the *mai* spirits, his face is smeared with dark pigment to magically boost his growth. Similarly, Iatmul once believed that homicides, which they colored black as I just mentioned, promoted “prosperity” (Bateson, 1936: 140). Here, again, paint served, and continues to serve, as a masculine form of generative agency.

Yellow, the fourth and final traditional paint color, tends to adorn feminine things such as baskets and the rain/sun hoods once worn by women. Yellow also signifies a feminine dimension of some object or being. Thus we find yellow on spirit costumes called *awan* (photo 2), which enclose the body, like skin, and thus oppose in substance the masculine “bone” of woodcarvings.¹⁰ Female objects such as canoes and houses, when new, are painted red, white, black, and yellow – as if femininity encompasses the full cultural (and chromatic) spectrum.

Yellow also encircles the eyes of men who impersonate female spirits during a ritual I describe in the next section. These motifs are named after yellow-plumed birds of paradise. These birds, like originary women in one tale, hatch their young from yellow clay. Birds in general connote women. Thus, mothers are like hens that spread their wings to shelter hatchlings threatened by eagles, and women are “bird people” (*vabi nyanggu*) who fly in marriage between patrilineal trees (see Silverman, 2001a: chap. 6).

In this section, I interpreted Eastern Iatmul colors as visual voices in a wide-ranging cultural conversation about gender. But paint also, I showed earlier, maps ancestral migrations and totemic spaces across the region. Combined, the landscape is gendered and embodied, and bodies are mapped onto the landscape.

Painting cosmic creation

In the past half-century, Tambunum has performed every decade or so the *tshugukepma* or “fine-lined paint” ceremony that reenacts the creation of land atop the primal sea. (The ceremony was more common when Bateson arrived in the 1930s and, presumably, even earlier.) The name of the ritual highlights the importance of color and painting. The ceremony, too, dramatizes the bodily and topographic dimensions of paint.

The rite begins in the “belly” of the cult house, which men liken to a maternal body, as they do to domestic dwellings. Inside this mother, men paint the faces of ritual partners to resemble primordial male and female spirits. They lay down red paint that symbolizes maternal blood, and then carefully apply white patterns to signify semen and bones (photo 3). From within a uterine shelter, that is, men paint conception and gestation. This ritual allows men, yet again, to assert a cross-sexed or male-and-female identity that singularly creates life. But the absence of women argues against this image of manhood.

8. Barlow and Lipset (1997: 15-16) similarly interpret red ochre on new outrigger canoes among the Murik of the Sepik estuary.

9. Today, some Eastern Iatmul similarly probe the Bible for the hidden truth of Western affluence (Silverman, 2015).

10. The flattened nose of the *awan*, too, contrasts with the long snout of *mai* masks. The suffix of matrilineal names, I note, is *-awan*.



PHOTO 3. – Painting red and white, or menstrual blood and semen, for the *tshugukepma* ceremony inside the “belly” of the cult house, 1999 (© E.K. Silverman)

Some painted men slip on ancestral crocodilian costumes. Others, adorned with yellow bird-like patterns around their eyes, dress in grass skirts, woven hoods, and coconut shell breasts (photo 4) – sometimes substituted by World War Two artillery projectiles – to portray primal women. Another costumed man depicts an ancestral floating island (*agwi*) spirit. The ritual troupe, accompanied by totemic songs, bursts through a frond fence in an image of birth, and dramatizes the creation of land on the originary sea. The maternal island spirit tries to dodge the crocodilian creature as he seeks to steer, using a canoe paddle, her fertility around the primeval ocean. Periodically, the island squats, laying “eggs” of ground. The ritual thus portrays the cosmic birth of the landscape as a joust in which female fertility strives to escape masculine control and confinement. Here, the dialogicality of Iatmul gender, encoded in colors, is mapped onto the landscape.

Painting the Sepik landscape modern

The traditional meanings of paint, colors, and painting largely persist, either in memory or practice, and thus continue to frame the viewing and creating of art in the middle Sepik. Today, how-



PHOTO 4. – Man impersonating a female ancestral spirit; note the multicolored grass skirt and the coconut shell breasts, 1990 (© E.K. Silverman)

ever, Eastern Iatmul also paint modernity. Here, it is helpful briefly to shift to Europe.

In the mid- to latter-19th century, the Romantic movement’s aesthetic reverence for intuition, idealism, and the inner life gave way to a type of realism. This genre gazed outward to the ordinary and the

“engagement with the immediate world of the senses in an attempt to understand it, fix it, and even to change it.” (Boime, 2008: 77-78)

Since the 1960s, Eastern Iatmul have slowly expressed a similar outlook in tourist art. Men and boys carve and paint wooden animals such as birds, frogs, and crocodiles; women and girls plait basketry pigs, cassowaries, and chickens. These naturalistic figures depict animals as verities of the local environment rather than as cryptic signposts to mythic history, totemic knowledge, or ancestral migrations. To fully see the colors of the *tshugukepma* ceremony, as we just saw, requires the viewer to embed red, white, and yellow in the local gendered cosmology. But to see the same colors on a touristic woodcarving demands only the obvious recognition that the object depicts a bird. Indeed, the artist expressly intends this recognition to be obvious to anybody.

The prototype for the naturalistic bird carvings, I learned in 2014, was the bird of paradise printed



PHOTO 5. – Touristic landscapes and the national emblem of PNG for sale in the Wewak town market, 2010 (© E.K. Silverman)

on cans of South Pacific Export Lager, a beer introduced in 1985. Although the bird-of-paradise had long been used on various modern insignia, such as the national flag and even colonial-era coins, it was the design on the beer can that men specifically imitated in their tourist art. To Eastern Iatmul, the picture on the cans of South Pacific Lager is “nice” to view. Indeed, it is *only* nice to view, and so lacks “inside” meaning. It is what it appears. The meaning of naturalistic paintings is transparent and self-evident to anybody; these works are all “surface.”

People from Tambunum rightly or wrongly associate this style, what might be called naturalistic realism, specifically with Western conventions taught at the National Art School in Port Moresby, established in the 1970s and now the Division of Creative Arts, University of Papua New Guinea. The actual curriculum is not relevant. In fact, I know of no person from Tambunum who ever enrolled in the school. What I want to stress instead is that, as Eastern Iatmul today understand it, the recent creation of naturalistic artworks – animals and landscapes that are “nice” to view – is something learned by Sepik people who wished to mirror and even rival a modern, hence, Western way of art and seeing.

To Eastern Iatmul, the meanings of naturalistic paintings and carvings (e.g. photo 5) are not just transparent or “exterior.” These meanings are also finite, that is, semantically narrow or precise (see also O’Hanlon, 1995). By contrast, as I noted earlier, traditional designs evoke multiple and indeterminate associations. I am not suggesting that tourist art has replaced older styles of aesthetic messaging (Silverman, 1999, 2001b). Rather, I claim that naturalistic realism in the Sepik adds a new level of artistic “seeing” to an already complex, layered aesthetic outlook.

Eastern Iatmul continue to live in a world where humans and nonhumans often share a common

“interiority” or sense of self, despite their physical differences (see Descola, 2006). But Eastern Iatmul today are also committed to a naturalistic worldview in which animals, as seen through the lens of realism, are *just* animals, lacking any kinship with human subjectivity. No surprise, they now carve and paint to reflect this relatively new ontology.

In the West, the rise of realism reflected the democratizing ideal of modernity. Realist art sought to appeal to broader audiences through more accessible content (Morris, 2003). Tourist art in Tambunum does likewise since it is unhinged from social and ritual constraints. Western realism also insists that art

“cannot turn away from the more sordid and harsh aspects of human existence.” (Morris, 2003: 3)

Tourist art in Tambunum does not directly represent postcolonial struggles. Nonetheless, these works portray the Sepik as a global backwater. After all, Iatmul create “nice” objects for the gaze of others, especially tourists, despite the decline of international visitors along the river (Silverman, 2013). In fact, the middle Sepik today is more impoverished than two decades ago. Ironically, as tourism and fiscal wellbeing decline, Eastern Iatmul paint livelier panoramas in new and brighter colors – as if to better attract notice of an indifferent global audience. Tourist art represents the natural world in order to change the social world.

New colors, too, allow Eastern Iatmul to represent aspects of their contemporary life not easily expressed through the traditional palette. These hues also signal the yearning to participate in the wider world from which the new colors derive (see also Mélandri, 2012; after Rovere, 2008; Young, 2011). Modern colors also build on older meanings. For example, the eyes on the Sea Clan’s *mai* masks are now outlined with bright blue to visualize the group’s traditional claims over the ocean, including Australia, Asia, and other places associated with “development.” The new color, in other words, allows a traditional mask to map both a totemic and modern landscape.

Eastern Iatmul also associate bright colors, especially on clothing, with women. For this reason, some men do not like to wear colorful garments. Modern painting, then, may aesthetically position male artists outside the norms of masculinity or, alternatively, feminize modernity. From this angle, tourist art communicates not just “surface” meanings but a complex symbolic layering.

There are many historical strands and regional variations to landscape painting in the so-called West-

ern tradition (e.g., Turner, 1966). I do not wish to paint a monolithic portrait of the genre. In general, however, the modern rise of landscapes corresponded to European imperialism and American westward expansion (Novak, 1980; John, 2001; Mitchell, 2002). Many landscape painters ignored railways, factories, roads, and suburban sprawl and instead retreated to nature and the “innocent felicities of country life” (Rosenblum and Janson, 1984: 179, 274-78).¹¹ These landscapes denied the colonization of the land even as they paralleled the bureaucratic mapping and scientific description of the natural world (Bedell, 2001: 15). Tranquility calmed modernist angst.

Painted Sepik landscapes and animals made by Eastern Iatmul today represent similar contradictions. They depict lush nature but neither totemic “paths” nor, more importantly, the locally-perceived benefits of “development” such as trucks, mobile phone towers, schools, trade stores, money, and medical aid posts. Nor do these works hint at local anxieties over deforestation, mining, pollution, sex workers, urban loneliness, and crime. This art ignores globalization even though it is created for a global audience or market. These painted carvings, too, arrange the natural world into pleasing, contrastive scenes that recall the “picturesque,” a visual style that came to dominate travel brochures and postcards (Carlson, 2008, chapter 1). Indeed, the vivid colors, pastoral scenes, and pleasant greetings of Sepik landscapes (photo 5) recall no traditional or indigenous styles.¹² In the Western art world of the 18th and 19th centuries, various conventions came into focus for visual and literary representations of nature, including the picturesque and the sublime. Many of these canons sought to sever painting from viewers’ personal concerns. In recent decades, however, growing environmental awareness has renewed interest in an engaged aesthetics of nature (Carlson, 2008). Sepik landscapes appear to appreciate nature “on its own terms.” But as I am arguing, this emotional detachment is deceptive. For although Sepik paintings today omit signs of modernity, the men who paint them largely live in the rough settlements of Wewak, not in rural villages. Thus, they paint for and against the globalization they desire and lament. In the setting of traditional totemism, painting and colors anchored the present



PHOTO 6. – Clock and landscape by Salaway, 2008 (© E.K. Silverman)

to the past. Today, Eastern Iatmul use paint to stake claims to the future. No longer do they only paint a world made by the ancestors. They now also paint to create their own future.

We can see this on a touristic work made by my village brother’s son, a young man named Salaway (photo 6). The clock exemplifies the mechanized, unnatural routinization of modernity. But the timepiece is framed by birds-of-paradise and a tangle of trees that stand for no specific or totemic location but rather the Western ideal of nature. And although Eastern Iatmul deploy arboreal and avian metaphors for kinship, this painting implies no such sociality. The landscape here is a generic portrait of natural Melanesia created for foreigners to behold. As the antithesis of modernity, the birds and trees represent what Westerners have lost, why they travel to PNG, and what they might “develop.”

Salaway often posts on Facebook. His education includes a Certificate in Tourism & Hospitality as well as a Diploma in Primary Teaching. He was hoping for a scholarship to study accounting overseas. From my computer, I occasionally send him and other Eastern Iatmul international money transfers through Western Union, which they retrieve at the Wewak branch of the Bank of South Pacific. Yet Salaway’s painting portrays none of the global communication or financial networks in which we are all enmeshed.¹³ Still, the timepiece disrupts the rustic scene to communicate the message that Papua New Guineans also live according to the pace of modernity – includ-

11. When American landscapes did show railways, it was to illustrate the “transcendental optimism known as progress” (Novak, 1980: 166).

12. Eastern Iatmul did not emulate the “storyboards” of the Kambot people, which developed in the 1970s (Colombo Dougoud, 2005). Nor did I see any evidence that the development of artistic new styles was fostered, intentionally or not, by the two Iatmul men who helped carve the New Guinea Sculpture Garden at Stanford University in the early-1990s (see Silverman, 2003).

13. For Abelam responses to the Australian Museum, see Losche (1996; relatedly, Morphy, 2005).



PHOTO 7. – Landscape painting on the door of a PMV, 2014 (E.K. Silverman)

ing Facebook – even as they have little to show for it. Salaway's realist painting is thus a yearning, a lamentation, and a fantasy. His landscape, while self-evident on the surface, also offers a glimpse of the inner, layered ontology of contemporary Melanesia. There are no overt waves or swirls in this painting. But the landscape shows a world in unstable, uncertain flow.

Conclusion: A new vehicle for painting and seeing

In 2014, nearly every passenger truck and van driving between Wewak and rural communities throughout the province appeared to be decorated with landscape paintings. There were hills, trees, streams, oceans, parrots, flowers, villages, roads, and even mermaids (photo 7). Similar panoramas were also painted on the walls of many small shops and take-out food bars. None of these scenes were painted by men (or women) from Tambunum. At present, the village owns no vehicles or shops in town. But my Eastern Iatmul companions were of one voice in describing these “nature” paintings as a “new” way of “seeing” that imitated European conventions.

Traditionally, as I showed, Eastern Iatmul mapped the Sepik landscape cryptically as names, myths, and paint colors. Only those who had mastered the totemic system after years of training – mainly men – could properly “see” those maps. And no matter how many times one looked at them, there was always, per the inside/outside structure of Iatmul knowledge, another layer of meaning.

Today, however, Eastern Iatmul assess modern landscapes as mere decoration, “only drawings” that lack “inside” meaning. Most of murals displayed on PMVs depict the scenery along the route travelled by the vehicle. The paintings are akin to postcards, visual advertisements, or pictorial maps. The

meaning is intended to be public, immediate, and self-evident rather than restricted to some particular community, clan, gender, age, initiation cohort, and the like. In fact, the drivers of PMVs were all forthcoming in identifying the places. A few paintings depicted locations of ancestral importance. We were not told the esoteric knowledge to understand the totemic significance of the place; but the location was always revealed. In large measure, all one needs to decode these paintings is passing familiarity with the places they portray.

To Eastern Iatmul, the paint colors on the trucks and vans do not encode ancestral migrations

or tales. They are not artistic vehicles that convey male claims to prestige in ritual, social, or totemic hierarchies. They do not communicate the unspoken fragility of manhood. These paintings correspond to the world as seen through the lens of Western empiricism and realism: nature as all “surface.” They are, like the bird of paradise seen on cans of South Pacific lager, “nice” to view. Indeed, modernity in PNG is nothing if not brightly colored. Red plastic buckets, floral-patterned foam mattresses and pillows, blue tarps, yellow sacks of rice, orange Fanta soft drinks, and the landscapes on tourist art and PMV are part of the same visual cacophony of globalization. In a sense, as we saw earlier, the ephemeral decoration on ritual art hides the colors on sacred wood-carvings. Modern paints and hues, however, are all about being noticed. To Eastern Iatmul, these paintings are not about concealment, but about public recognition.

As Eastern Iatmul see them, recent PMV paintings, like touristic panoramas and animals, are mimetic (see also Losche, 1997). As such, they exhibit none of the male agency encoded in ritual art, with the possible exceptions of the privilege to traverse boundaries, to expand the self in social space, and to master the vehicles of modernity. But none of these privileges today are the sole prerogative of men. Similarly, PMV landscapes and tourist art are intended to communicate the same meaning to men and women equally. These paintings, then, both restrict and expand male agency. In this sense, they are mimetic but also, in unintended ways, multilayered.

Earlier, I interpreted the local meanings of Eastern Iatmul paint, colors, and painting in regard to totemism, mythic history, movement, an irreducible dialogue about gender, and the regional topography. In this section, I argued that we can glean insights into the globalized, postcolonial meanings of recent Iatmul and Sepik paintings by drawing on Western realism and 19th-century landscapes.

Taken together, my analysis showed that both traditional and modern artistic compositions, uses of paint, and ways of seeing show the landscape in ways that lack any singular or stable meaning.

The prismatic quality of local paint illustrates the tenacity of the local, multi-levelled ontology. The world of appearances, even when glimpsed and painted through the empirical lens of realism, never fully portrays social and cosmological truth. Traditional Sepik art, Forge (1967: 76) noticed, “rarely uses a single line.” Why? Forge offered no answer. But I suggest that the use of multiple lines is intended precisely to convey this layered worldview (see also Severi, 2003). Even when meaning seems obvious and singular, as when viewing realist landscapes or birds, the ontological density of the local worldview persists. The transparency of realism is illusory. In this sense, the painted landscapes of tourist art and passenger trucks deny the very visual truths they affirm.

Indeed, the romanticized, colorful beauty of recent panoramas masks dire socioeconomic marginality forced upon local people by the modern world system that engendered these new aesthetic stances towards nature. Tourist paintings look backwards, we might say, to critique postcolonial failures even as they seek to paint a more prosperous future. Similarly, PMV murals depict lush landscapes despite the fact that these trucks and vans are associated with urban development, including sealed roads, polluting diesel exhaust, noise, and horrific accidents. For most Papua New Guineans, the PMV is the only access to modernity. There is no other way. And yet the decorations on PMVs today mainly glance to a pre-modern era. Aesthetically, then, PMVs paintings, like water ripples on traditional Iatmul art, convey a contrary message about human endeavor, at once striving forwards yet often flowing backwards.

We can interpret these paintings from yet another perspective. The self-evident or transparent meanings of Iatmul artworks today obscure the increasing complexity of social life. Postcolonial Sepik artists, as I emphasized earlier, tend not to dwell in the landscapes they paint. They largely live in towns and cities. Yet they have not fully forsaken their village roots. Thus they shift back and forth, again and again, between a totemic topography and an empirical one, between rural and urban, between tradition and modernity. In this sense, a wholly different and still-relevant world and worldview lurks beneath the lush nature of recent touristic and PMV paintings. Eastern Iatmul continue to communicate as much by what they do paint as by what they do not.

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