



THE STORY OF STORYBOARDS FROM EAST SEPIK, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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ABSTRACT: This study analyzes and interprets East Sepik storyboards, which the authors regard as a form of cultural continuity and instrument of cultural memory in the post-colonial period. The study draws on field research conducted by the authors in the village of Kambot in East Sepik. The authors divide the storyboards into two groups based on content. The first includes storyboards describing daily life in the community, while the other links the daily life to pre-Christian religious beliefs and views. The aim of the study is to analyze one of the forms of contemporary material culture in East Sepik in the context of cultural changes triggered by Christianization, colonial administration in the former Territory of New Guinea and global tourism.

KEY WORDS: carving, culture change, culture memory, East Sepik, storyboard

Introduction

This study describes and interprets storyboards made by local woodcarvers in several East Sepik villages for tourists.² The study attempts to prove that, in addition to being a financial resource, they are a form of cultural continuity, serving as an instrument of cultural memory in the post-colonial period. East Sepik has long drawn the attention of ethnographers, anthropologists, museum curators and tribal art collectors. Many types

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² The study is based on field research conducted by the authors in East Sepik on the Keram and Sepik rivers in March 2018, the research was conducted in Tok Pisin. We cooperated with four key informants in two villages. They were middle-aged men who finished their primary education. One of them was a community leader, the rest of them were local artists. We also interviewed an experienced tourist guide; he was in his fifties and based in Angoram with ancestry from the Biwat ethnic group.

of East Sepik artifacts made in the pre-contact period and in the early contact period³ are highly valued and sought out by collectors and museum curators, whether they be from Maprik, Boiken, Chambri, Karawari, Keram or Yuat (see e.g. Horwarth 2015, Peltier – Schindlbeck & Kaufmann 2015). Modern carvings which target tourists and maintain a continuity of style draw less attention.

The purpose and function of the objects is depicted in the anthropological research. Some of the research projects rank among the classics of anthropological literature: research among the Bánaro people by Richard Thurnwald (1916), the Iatmul people by Gregory Bateson (1936), the Arapesh people by Margaret Mead (1935, 1938– 1949), and the Kwoma people by John Whiting (1941) to name but a few. Anthropologists often ignored the influences caused by contact with Christianity and the colonial administration. The texts are marked by exoticization and “othering” of the communities being studied. The study by Margaret Mead (1935), for example, fails to inform the reader that the Arapesh were in frequent touch with the colonial administration and spoke Tok Pisin,⁴ as is evident from her assertion of the existence of a cult associated with the spirits of *masalai* (*marsalai*). In reality, ‘masalai’ in Tok Pisin means ‘place spirit’. It is not a term specific to the Arapesh language. Similarly, Bateson (1936) wrote about the Iatmul people as if they lived on Chambri Lake and in the adjacent regions in isolation from the colonial administration. The new cultural phenomena that have emerged in the context of cultural changes caused by increasing global connectivity are often overlooked even today. This is also the case for the storyboards, which Kambot woodcarvers began to produce in the 1970s to sell to tourists and on which few sources are available (Dougood 2005). This paper contributes to the literature by presenting, among other outputs, the finding that the form and content of new products made for commercial sale to tourists (material culture) built on the male cult linked to the *haus tambaran*, characteristic of the region in the pre-contact period. Storyboards illustrate what some authors describe as the invention of tradition (Hobsbawm – Ranger 1983, Otto – Pedersen 2005). Tradition sells not only in Sepik but across all the Pacific islands (Linnekin 2004).

Male Cults and the *haus tambaran*

The Sepik River, formerly the Empress Augusta River, attracted the attention of the colonial administration and scientists in the 1880s, when the ornithologist Otto Finsch sailed along the river. Finsch was instrumental in the founding of a German colony in the northeast part of the island. It took more than fifty years to explore and map the entire course of the river. Champion and Karius were the first to cross the island from the delta of the Fly River up to its springs and from the Sepik springs down to its mouth (Champion 1932). Reliable ethnographic data about the Sepik cultures began to emerge after the First World War.

In terms of religion, the cultures of East Sepik were characterized by male cults associated with sacred flutes. These were typically the Biwat people (Mundugumor), whose villages line the Yuat River, a tributary of the Sepik. The sacred flute cult was common among local cultures. Flutes were made in pairs and stored in men’s houses.

³ Until about the mid-twentieth century.

⁴ The lingua franca of Papua-New Guinea, formed in the New Britain plantations run by the German New Guinea Company.

Women and children – people who were not initiated – were never allowed to see them; all they could do was to listen to their sound. If they ever saw the flutes by accident, they were killed. In addition to East Sepik, the cults of sacred flutes were also found on Wokeo Island, selected parts of the Bismarck Archipelago, such as New Ireland, New Britain, and Bougainville (Gourlay 1975), as well as the Southern Highlands where the sacred flute cults involved ritualized homosexuality (Herdt 1981, 1999, Kelly 1977; see also Hays 1986).⁵ Gilbert Herdt (1984) is convinced this could be proof of a migration wave which settled selected parts of New Guinea in the past.

Access to men's houses was conditioned by initiation, which (among other things) required the novices to have their back scarred in a pattern that resembles a crocodile's hide. The crocodile was an important mythical creature. This is why the flute stopper of the Biwat and other Sepik cultures had a human shape, but was actually a crocodile. Cult-related objects were stored in men's houses, the centres of the community's religious life, and the actual dwellings for men. The interior of the house, particularly its walls and ceiling, was decorated with Sago bark paintings depicting the natural spirits of the bush (*marsalai*). This is important for the present study, as storyboards serve as a new form of preserving the cultural memory, even though the content is desacralized by the transition to Christianity.

Colonialism opened the way to the spreading of Christian denominations in Papua and New Guinea. As a result, about 95% of the country's population profess Christianity based on the latest available census data. Missionaries adopted different attitudes to local cults depending on their denomination. According to Sillitoe (2000), Catholic missionaries were more tolerant of animistic cults in the territories. Christianity and local cults therefore co-existed in some locations for a long time, as in the case of Arapesh Iahita (Tuzin 1976). Gradually, the local religious cults declined, giving way to Christianity. Yuat is a typical example of such developments, as the Yuat River was one of the major areas of the cult of sacred flutes. The local people currently profess the Catholic Church and only farm the land, which provides them with a certain income as they sell part of their crops in Angoram markets. The prevalence of Christianity has led to the elimination of much of the knowledge and skills associated with local animistic cults. Christianity introduced a new concept of universality which was not based on clan membership but on universal equality before God. The original religious myths have consequently been transformed into secular stories recorded, for example, on storyboards. The stories are no longer grounded in worship practices and have lost their religious dimension.

The Keram River Storyboards

Silverman (2005) argues that storyboards evolved in Kambot (with a population of 440 based on the last census of 2011), a village sitting on the left bank of the Keram River, about two hours by boat from the district town of Angoram. It was a simple way to generate economic profit by selling these items. The production or sale of storyboards has spread to other parts of East Sepik, outside the immediate vicinity of Kambot. They are also sold, for example, in the village of Kaminimbit on the Sepik River, which is close to Chambri Lake and is home to Eastern Iatmul people. The authors of this text noted the sale of storyboards in markets as far from East Sepik as Madang.

⁵ Ritualized homosexuality is also described in the southwestern part of the island, specifically in Marind-anim people and in other societies where it is not linked to the sacred flutes (see Knauff 1993).

Storyboards are made from kwila (*Intsia bijuga*), whose timber is very hard.⁶ This kind of tree grows over seventy metres high and has a large trunk, allowing for the production of very large storyboards. The men's *haus tambaran* (Image 1) and their interior decoration are built from the same wood. Rodney, native to Kambot, learned woodcarving from his father. He runs a culture house in the village, which is a replica of the local *haus tambaran* called Bonjo, the ruins of which have been preserved in the village. Part of the front decoration of the house is now available in the collections of the Port Moresby National Museum and Art Gallery (Image 2). This facade was painted around 1970 by the Sepik renowned artist Simon Nover. It was restored, prior to being transported to the museum, by the same artist (Craig 2010).⁷ The work depicts the mythical figure Mopul, who features in the folklore of the entire East Sepik under different names. He was a culture hero who taught people to make sago and build the *haus tambaram* (see Huppertz 1992).

He makes storyboards in the culture house which was once dedicated to ritual purposes and the social life of men. The storyboards are available for sale, along with a modest selection of other carvings (particularly wooden figures and bark paintings). The production of one medium-sized storyboard (about 70 × 40 cm) takes about three to four days, while large storyboards (about 120 × 70 and more) are carved in about a week. Storyboards were initially painted on sago bark, but since the buyers found it difficult to ship them (they were fragile and large), local artists switched to storyboard carvings, mostly small ones, which are easier to transport by air. The storyboard stories can be divided into two basic groups. The first includes scenes from the daily life of the community, typically stories about fishing and sago production, the basis of their subsistence. The other group includes stories associated with the religious beliefs of ancestors (*tumbuna taim* in Tok Pisin). Some themes are nearly universal for storyboards, be it carvings referring to *tumbuna taim* or to the everyday life of the community. The stories often feature a crocodile, which is ubiquitous in Sepik culture. The crocodile motif is on the pillars of houses or on fence posts. The crocodile head carving also decorates every bow of narrow canoes, which are the basic means of transport on the river and which children learn to paddle from an early age. The river itself is also often portrayed in the carvings. It is therefore not surprising that waves depicting the Sepik often appear as motifs on the elements of the material culture, both in Eastern Iatmuls, studied by Silverman, and elsewhere. Another motif is hunting (of boar and cassowary), fishing, and the production of sago,⁸ a staple food of the Sepik population. The storyboards either associate these motifs with *masalai* or they do not. The difference divides the storyboards into two main groups. In other words, individual storyboards tell stories related to everyday life and events which some carvings explain or interpreted in the context of religious and ritual beliefs and views held prior to the Christianization (missionization) of East Sepik. We were told the stories by woodcarver Rodney in *Tok Pisin*. The river is always the central motif. The interpretations rendered by Rodney

⁶ Kwila is one of several dozen tree species extensively mined in this state and delivered to markets in Southeast Asia and China. (Elevitch 2006).

⁷ It is worth noting that the facade of the entrance to the National Museum and Art Gallery is a reproduction of Simon Novep's painting.

⁸ Sago flour is sourced from the pulp of the sago palm, which is dug out of the tree trunk and soaked and strained until starch is extracted. This is then dried, and the flour is used to make porridge, a variety of pancakes and other foods.

were always schematic, focusing mainly on the main events of the story, leaving the side scenes without further explanation. Below follows a detailed description of six storyboards related to the religious and mythological tradition of the Sepik.⁹ (Image 3) We collected more than 20 stories depicted on the storyboards. In order to avoid excessive detail in this paper, we selected six examples which illustrate the way of storytelling via carving. It is worth noting that there is also other way how to retell a traditional design or story—drawing. An artist from the village Kambot is depicting with a traditional design using pencil and paper.

(1) *The fishing story* (Image 4). The main theme of the storyboard is the river. A fisherman sets off from the village to go fishing in the river. He is, however, prevented from fishing by the spirit of *masalai*, half-woman and half-snake. The spirit does not let him go any further and tries to drive him back to the village. The village continues with its everyday life.

(2) *The story of a man-crocodile-parrot* (Image 5). A mythical figure is the central theme of the drawing. At the bottom left of the storyboard are three women on their way to prepare sago. The men to the left of the mythical being are leaving to hunt a wild boar. Everyday activities such as sago production and hunting are complemented by carvings of sago palms, a dog, a cassowary, as well as a cockatoo, a frequent motif of Sepik art. Men and women are separated by a river embodied in a mythical being (*masalai*), which is in part a crocodile (*pukpuk* in Tok Pisin), a human being, and a cockatoo. It changes into the first, second or third entity. In this case it changes into a cockatoo and flies away.

(3) *The Origin of Sago* (Image 6). The story relates to the ancestral time (*tumbuna taim* in Tok Pisin) and explains the origin of sago. Once upon a time, no one knew how to make sago. A mighty man, probably Mopul, told the women on the right side of the scene that he would show them a place to harvest sago which no one had heard of until then. They went away in a canoe, chopped down a sago palm, loaded it into the canoe and took it back to the village. A snake emerged from the tree trunk, spewed out sago into the canoe, and crawled back in again, making no noise. Humans have been preparing a sago ever since, and no one has seen the snake any more.

(4) *A crocodile attacking fishermen* (Image 7). The story is about the big crocodile attacking people in a canoe; it is a story with no mythical aspect. Two passengers are overboard. One man is rescuing his wife from the Sepik river. Men on the bank of the river are fighting with the crocodile which is going to swallow a man on the board. The story ends by killing the big crocodile.

(5) *Hunting in the bush* (Image 8). This storyboard represents everyday activities from village life. It narrates about hunting kuskus in the bush and fishing in the Sepik River. The men are hunting the kuskus dwelling on the tree surrounded by other animals like a cassowary and a flying fox. A fisherman is going to fishing accompanied by his dogs and equipped by bamboo fishing trap; he is sitting in a canoe leaving the village.

(6) *The half-bird and half-human* (Image 9). This storyboard does not tell a story per se. It is probably closest to the original art associated with the *haus tambaran*. The storyboard is roughly estimated to date back to the 1980s, perhaps the 1990s.¹⁰ There is no storyline.

⁹ Although the following storyboard descriptions are not a faithful translation of the woodcarver's narrative, they follow it closely.

¹⁰ A rough estimate based on the condition, patina and make.

It shows a mythical being, unspecified by the carver, which is half-human and half-bird (cockatoo?). The ambiguous nature of the creature is underlined by the fact that it has one eye, and two beaks, one on each side. It has a *bilum* around the neck,¹¹ and its private parts are covered with a loin cloth (made from *tapa*) with a picture of a human face. Its hands and legs are adorned with a *paspas* (knitted body ornament). According to the carver's interpretation, it is in fact a crocodile, a highly tricky being, again a Mopul. The shape of the storyboard is closest to the original sago bark art.

Sepik River Tourism

The storyboards are primarily made for tourists visiting the Sepik River. The river is one of the tourist attractions of Papua New Guinea. Statistics show that tourism is a significant source of economic growth in the country, where travel and tourism are estimated to generate 2.9% of GDP. The country is popular with tourists mainly because of the wide range of diving and surfing options. Another tourist destination is Mt. Wilhelm, the highest mountain in the state, and the highest mountain in Oceania due to political boundaries. Yet another tourist attraction is the Kokoda trek. It is especially popular with the Australians naturally, as this is where a major battle of World War II took place in which Australian troops resisted Japan.

The question is, however, how many tourists would visit East Sepik if they were not part of a group which booked a tour. Such tourists are portrayed in Denis O'Rourke's renowned documentary *Cannibal Tours* (1988). It shows the interaction of tourists who want to see the authentic Papua, and the local people who want to profit from the tourists. O'Rourke documented the passengers of a cruise ship which anchored in Madang and sailed to East Sepik. Silverman (2018) reports that the *Melanesian Discoverer*,¹² which used to carry tourists into the area, was sold and does not voyage to East Sepik any longer. East Sepik tourism deteriorated significantly as without a comfortable cruise ship, the trip to East Sepik is challenging and uncomfortable due to poor infrastructure. The destination can be reached by public transport from Wewak to Angoram,¹³ which, however, is not very tourist-friendly as there are currently not more than three very basic guesthouses there.¹⁴ Those interested in travelling along the Sepik River need to hire a boat in Angoram, which is fairly expensive – they need to pay not only the boat and the fuel itself, but also the local guide who knows the river, its tributaries and shortcuts, which help navigate the intricate river.¹⁵ The question is how many tourists will visit the Sepik. Our informant Francis maintains that many people have abandoned the carving as a source of income since there were no sales. There seem to be individual tourists, but not masses.

¹¹ A bag made with the knotless netting technique, used to carry items of daily use in New Guinea.

¹² This ship has replaced the older Melanesian Explorer, which carried tourists in O'Rourke's film.

¹³ The trip from Wewak takes four to five hours by bus. The bus goes back from Angoram after midnight.

¹⁴ Typically there is no electricity.

¹⁵ The daily price of a boat is about 350 PGK (= about 100 USD) and 1 gallon of fuel = 25 PGK (= about 8 USD) A trip to Kambot costs roughly 300 USD.

An Interpretative Framework – Storyboards as Part of Collective Memory

The study of any element of material or spiritual culture raises the question as to why such an element develops, what function it has, and how it relates to other elements of the given culture. It is viewed from a theoretical perspective, which means that its analysis is anchored in a certain interpretative framework (a theory or a theoretical concept), which also serves as the basis for other analyses. The authors are convinced that the concept of collective memory is a suitable analytical framework for the needs of their research of storyboards created in several East Sepik villages of PNG.

The concept is relatively new to research in the humanities and social sciences, despite the fact that its beginnings emerged much earlier. Explicitly constituted by the work of Maurice Halbwachs (1980 [1952]), it gained wide popularity in the European intellectual tradition only after World War II. Its analytical potential lies in a clear distinction between “memory” and “history”, where “history” is a summary of events (believed to have occurred in the past) which may or may not become part of “memory”, i.e. a period idea of the past. The distinction between memory and historicity is key, where memory is a socially and culturally constructed image of the past created for the needs of the present and possibly the future. It is therefore impossible to confuse memory (individual and collective) and its contents with historicity. Although memory always appears objective (an objective description of the past, an unbiased description of historicity), it is always a deliberate view of the past, a selective set of ideas of a particular group about the past. It is a set of notions, ideas, attitudes, and behavioural patterns serving to explain and legitimize the current attitudes of a given group (or individual).

This points at one of the most significant functions of memory, which is the formation, maintenance and strengthening of identity, both a collective and an individual one. Memory allows for grouping events into a compact, meaningful whole, which establishes continuity over time. Individualities and particularities, including individual or group “destinies,” thereby become part of a great historical story, allowing the group members and the group as a whole to share a common past.

Collective memory can be divided into communicative and cultural memory (Assmann 2011). The former contains a “living” contemporary memory of three to four generations, i.e. “the recent past”, within which individual autobiographies take place and to which they relate. Cultural memory, on the other hand, contains mythical history taking place in an ancient mythical or historical past. It is often an absolute past or events occurring in a mythical primordial time. While the narrative of the past in communicative memory tends to involve legends, stories presenting generalized lessons or patterns of behaviour, cultural memory rests on mythology, namely stories of major themes, where the main characters are (divine, human or animal) beings. The stories exercise an extreme influence over its proponents (Segal 2004).

As mentioned above, memory is based on a concept and the presumption of continuity, which in the case of collective memory includes collective sharing of a continuing past. The continuity of collective memory emerges, however, against the backdrop of discontinuity; the idea of a continuity anchored in the past develops in confrontation with the real and currently experienced discontinuity. In other words: the shocks, turning points, conflicts, and ruptures of the present generate the urge to construct continuity, and this need is due to the efforts to maintain collective identity.

Collective memory and the instruments for its construction, maintenance, and collective sharing emerge in situations of questioned continuity, expressing the endeavour and instrument to maintain or restore (a broken) continuity.

Conclusions

Following the general notes above, the concept of collective memory is applied to storyboards – East Sepik wood carvings. Storyboards thereby represent:

- A. a part of the cultural memory conveyed through mythological narratives containing stories about the origin of the cultural phenomena and lifestyle of villagers and their explanations; they are largely related to the central mythical figure of Mobul and his younger brother Wain.
- B. a part of the communicative memory where legends and stories about daily life facilitate the sharing of common everyday experiences such as canoeing, fishing, crocodile hunting, boar killing, sago making, crocodile or snake attacks on people, and protection of women and children from dangerous crocodiles;
- C. a method of linking everyday reality (through legends and stories comprising communicative memory) to the mythical past (the content of cultural memory), and thereby effectively interconnecting different levels of time and systematically integrating events (types of events) into the continuity of collective time. This linking of the mythical past and the recent past leads to a more effective reinforcement (preservation, re-creation) of collective identity.

The principal contribution of the present study is the identification of the transformation in the functions (and forms) of the storyboards. The authors of the present study argue that the changes are the result of a profound and radical cultural change introduced in the context of colonization and Christianization in the recent past (the twentieth century), over the course of several, still-living generations. This is a unique opportunity to investigate the processes which took centuries in other regions, while in this region they took place, in their radical form, over the course of a single century. Christian missionaries tried to break the cultural continuity of the local population and remove the original (“pagan”) traditions to replace them with a new tradition and a new collective and group identity. Both Catholic and Protestant missionaries (various denominations) were involved, although the Protestant missions were more radical and successful in breaking the original traditions.

One of the most important (in a space inhabited by the given community – composed of one or more clans) and the most visible steps in breaking the original traditions is the destruction of the men’s house (*tambaran*). The original sacral buildings have been replaced by new ones – a Catholic church or, in the case of Protestant denominations, an open-air (sometimes roofed) area for common prayers. Of significance for the material culture preservation is the fact that the demolition of the *tambarans* removed the space where a variety of visual elements of the original culture could have been displayed. The carvings of the traditional house (*tambaran*), which once played a pivotal role in the community and was the centre of the religious cult, began to be used in another context. The art has undergone a radical transformation: when lining the *tambaran* ceiling it used to visualize abstract motifs which were accompanied by mythical narratives

(stories). The cultural change has removed the carvings from the tambaran (tambarans have mostly disappeared or have been reduced to ruins, e.g. several load-bearing pillars sticking out abandoned in open space) and “transferred” them outside the sacred space. The desacralization of the storyboards has modified their content and their design. There is a clear departure from abstract motifs to motifs portraying a specific story or scene, which need to be interpreted by a specialist. (The village only has a few such specialists – mostly woodcarvers themselves or other “elders”.)

Since the households (often very poor houses standing on wooden poles, without permanent walls) have no decorations (paintings, etc.), the need and capacity for the production of material culture such as storyboards have disappeared. Accordingly, there is currently no reason to create these visual elements for the needs of the local community. The original traditions and associated skills, such as wood carving, which the Sepik region was (and still is) famous for, are thereby at serious risk of becoming extinct. Tourists are the only reason why the said elements of material culture continue to be made. This completes the vicious circle, which locks the original traditions in the grip of globalization and whose points include: original traditions – colonialism – Christianization – and global tourism.

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Image 1 – the Bonjo haus tambaran in Kambot. Photography: Martin Soukup.

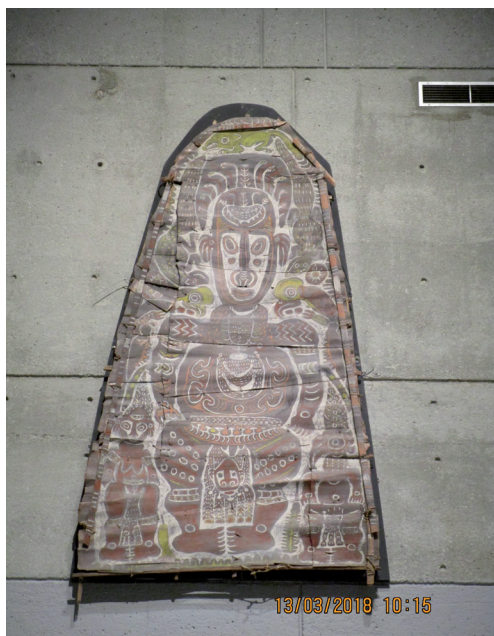


Image 2 – the decoration of the facade of the Bonjo haus tambaran on display at the Port Moresby National Museum. Photography: Dušan Lužný.



Image 3 – Artist from Kambot village. Photography: Martin Soukup.



Image 4 – storyboard. Made by: Rodney. Photography: Martin Soukup.



Image 5 – storyboard. Made by: Rodney. Photography: Martin Soukup.



Image 6 – storyboard. Made by: Rodney. Photography: Martin Soukup.



Image 7 – storyboard. Made by: Rodney. Photography: Martin Soukup.



Image 8 – storyboard. Made by: Rodney. Photography: Martin Soukup.



Image 9 – storyboard. Private collection. Photography: Martin Soukup.