

**Every Picture Tells a Story:  
Visual Alternatives to Oral Tradition  
in Ponam Society**

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Those concerned with recording the history, the culture, and the tradition of village societies seek the sources of their information in the spoken word. Historians, folklorists, and anthropologists have sat down with their informants, pencil and paper in hand, and have urged them to *talk*. After all, these are the people and societies without history, the people and societies that do not produce written accounts that might contain the answers to the questions posed by investigators. These researchers have benefited from a change that has been taking place in western scholarship, unevenly in different disciplines, over the past quarter-century: the revaluation of the sources of tradition and local knowledge, a revaluation that elevates oral sources and oral traditions in relation to their written counterparts. In our own field, anthropology, evidence of this change is found in the growing interest in ethnohistory and ethnopoetics, part of a general turn toward more cultural concerns. This shift shows an increasing awareness that oral studies have a logic and validity of their own, that they are not merely inferior cousins to the study of written sources. Indeed, some scholars who espouse this viewpoint have theorized that the emergence of writing was not an unalloyed good, a leap out of the darkness (e.g. Goody 1977; Ong 1971). Instead, it comes to take on elements of a fall, as the spread of writing is associated with the growth of an oppressive state.

Such reconsideration of the centrality and privileged position of writing has, however, not moved to the next important step, a reconsideration of the centrality of words themselves. The idea that the Great Transformation was from speaking to writing is a statement of how much we focus on words, how much we see words as the key form of expression, the key to mentality, and even the key to humanity itself. The spoken word may be different from the written word, but there is nothing more. The gap between writing and speaking is but a small leap compared

to the chasm between words and everything else.

One might object that such a judgment of the centrality of words is self-evident. And so of course it is. One cannot, we suspect, seriously imagine human existence in the absence of words. How could people make themselves known to each other? How could experience and knowledge pass from person to person, much less from generation to generation? But to say that the centrality of words is self-evident does not mean that the topic is closed, that words are all there is. The unthinking acceptance of this centrality of words has an unfortunate consequence that surely is unintended: other forms of communication are lost to view. Because we take the oral and written forms to exhaust the ways in which words can exist, we often take them to exhaust the ways in which communication can exist, that history and tradition can be maintained over time and passed from one generation to the next. But when this notion is stated explicitly, its falsity is apparent. We all know of many ways in which meaning can exist and be transmitted other than in written or spoken words. And when we reduce these other ways to inconsequence, we unthinkingly reproduce and impose on the people we study the western valuation of verbal communication.

Our purpose in this paper is to demonstrate the partiality of the concern with words. We will do so by showing how one group of people described to themselves their history and organization and sense of themselves in a nonverbal way during the period we studied them. That nonverbal means is the arrangement of the display of gifts in exchange, and the people are villagers from Ponam Island, in Manus Province, Papua New Guinea.<sup>1</sup> In stressing the importance of nonverbal communication, however, we do not mean that an investigator could look at Ponam gift display and derive from it alone any sort of adequate knowledge of Ponam society or history. Certainly we had to undertake extensive oral work to elucidate the meanings embedded in the displays, and certainly Ponams themselves talked about their displays. We are not, in other words, arguing for the exclusivity of these displays in Ponam culture. Similarly, we are not arguing that they are self-contained. In fact, they were always accompanied by speech.

Such qualifications do not mean, however, that these displays were secondary to the speech that accompanied them. They were not some fumbling attempt at sign language, a poor effort to convey with nonverbal markers a meaning that actually resided in words. Neither were they

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<sup>1</sup>Since our concern here is not ethnographic, we will dispense with the usual brief description of the society concerned. Those who are interested should consult J. and A. Carrier 1985, 1989. Ponam display in exchange is described in detail in A. Carrier 1987, and the relationship of Ponam ceremonial exchange and display to islanders' self-conception is discussed in J. Carrier 1987.

derivative of some body of words that was culturally prior or more valued. They were not second-best, mere figures or embellishments that accompanied the real verbal work of transmitting Ponam history and tradition. Instead, it would be more accurate to say that the reverse was true: the displays were primary, they told the story. The words that accompanied them were secondary, deriving from and embellishing the displays. The *words* were second-best.

### **Nonverbal Representation of Social Relations**

Although nonverbal communication is not a popular topic, it has attracted some interest among anthropologists in Melanesia, particularly people's use of display and decoration as a means of making statements about themselves. For example, in *Self-Decoration in Mount Hagen* (1971), Andrew and Marilyn Strathern describe the ways that Hageners paint and dress themselves as part of ceremonial displays. Also, they show that this decoration is a system of communication, more or less explicitly articulated by the people themselves. What Hageners usually communicate is their strength and solidarity as a group in relation to other groups; while this concept can be communicated verbally, spoken assertions do not carry the force of visual demonstration. More generally, such self-decoration serves Hageners as "a medium through which people demonstrate their relationship to their ancestral spirits, express certain ideals and emotions, in short make statements about social and religious values" (1).

Michael O'Hanlon (1983) also has described the use of display in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, although his concern is less the symbolism of specific elements of decoration that attracted the Stratherns, and more the overall effect of the appearance of massed dancing clansmen. O'Hanlon says that the Wahgi groups he studied are concerned with their strength, especially their internal unity and amity. This strength is always threatened by the chance of betrayal from within the group, brought about by hidden anger among clansmen. The manifestation of this betrayal is in the appearance of the clan's dancers: instead of a mass of strong, unified, young, and shiny-skinned men, the betrayed appear to be few, weak, out-of-step, and dull-skinned. For the Wahgi, the appearance of the dancers communicates their moral state: "A group displaying its numbers cannot be regarded as displaying the neutral consequences of fertility and survival rates but must be seen as implicitly revealing the existence or absence of decimating fratricidal strife within the displaying group" (327). For O'Hanlon, then, as for the Stratherns, the physical appearance of ceremonial dancers is a nonverbal medium through which people tell each other about themselves, their histories, and their places in the traditional

order. And thus these dances represented a way in which lore about the groups that constitute the society was passed from person to person and from generation to generation.

Just as some anthropologists have been attracted to the idea that there are nonverbal channels of communication, so too some have been attracted to the specific nonverbal channel that concerns us, the organization of space. Perhaps the best example of this is Pierre Bourdieu's analysis (1973) of the Kabyle house, put forward as part of his concern to show how traditional social arrangements are maintained over the course of time. Bourdieu demonstrated that the Kabyle house is constructed, divided, and organized in such a way that it makes concrete and immediately apparent some of the key concepts of Kabyle cultural lore: the distinction between and meaning of the two genders; the relationship of human, animal, and agricultural worlds; and fecundity and fertility. Another example is Alfred Gell's description (1982) of the Dorai market, in which the spatial arrangement of sellers and their various products maps the geographic origins of the sellers, their status in the local social hierarchy, and the status of the goods they sell. The market thus provides "an indigenous model of social relations" that "gives tangible expression to principles of social structure" (471).

### **Display and Ponam Lore**

The social model provided by the Dorai market and the cultural code contained in the Kabyle house, however, appear to be unconscious. In this paper we will investigate something different, the way that Ponam Islanders produced conscious, intentional representations of their history and social order. In the process of ceremonial exchange, islanders arranged gifts in displays that diagrammed the relations among the contributors or recipients, and so represented Ponams' conceptions of the existing relations among individuals and kin groups and the historical basis of these relations: the traditions that explain who Ponams are and how they are related to each other.<sup>2</sup> And these displays were important to Ponams:

In May of 1979 Demian Selef-Njohang was in his late 50's, short, heavy and hale. He was at the culmination of the ceremonies commemorating the death of his younger brother, Camilius Pari, six months

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<sup>2</sup> This representational, storytelling potential is inherent in the arrangement of gifts, and hence may be important anywhere else that the exchange of gifts is frequent. In Melanesia some anthropologists have suggested a vaguely representational aspect in the gift displays they describe (e.g. Foster 1985:192; Young 1971:200). However, there are no reports of the sort of explicit representation by gift exchange of the sort that existed on Ponam.

earlier. The death was sudden, and rumors had it that the ancestors had killed Pari because of unresolved bitterness among Pari, Selef-Njohang and their close agnates. Selef-Njohang was renowned for his ability to perform ceremony, and because he was indirectly implicated in Pari's death, this was a crucial ceremony.

Over a hundred adults, just about everyone on the island over 16 and not senile, formed a large semi-circle, as they sat in what shade they could find at the edge of the cleared area in front of Selef-Njohang's low, thatched house. Selef-Njohang himself sat on a bench under the eaves of his house. Next to him was a bony old woman who was his advisor on the fine points of kinship for this display. His wife stood in shadow just inside the doorway of his house, looking out.

Watching villagers chatted amongst themselves until Selef-Njohang began the hardest work of the funeral ceremonies, arranging the display that was the core of the distribution of cooked food to the dead man's relatives. He directed a young nephew to get three dishes from the mass of over eighty that were at Selef-Njohang's left at the edge of the cleared area. At the man's direction, his nephew laid the first dish about ten feet away from the door of Selef-Njohang's house. The second dish was placed about six feet beyond the first, the third a like distance beyond the second. The nephew got three more dishes and laid them beyond the first three, making a line of six. By this time the only noise from the watching villagers was mothers murmuring to their infant children to quiet them.

Selef-Njohang sat looking at the line. He leaned to talk quietly to the old woman and to listen to her when she, after some deliberation, answered him. Then he stood up and walked to the third dish. Hesitating and still considering, he picked it up. He then walked to the fourth dish. He picked it up as well, and looked quickly back at the old woman. Then he placed the third dish on the ground where the fourth had been, and the fourth on the ground where the third had been. He walked back to the bench and sat down.

For almost two hours, Selef-Njohang continued. The nephew brought out two or three dishes and placed them singly on the ground where he indicated. At times he would direct him to move one to a new spot. At times he would heave himself up from the bench to move a dish or switch two.

The watching semi-circle of Ponams remained silent. This was the hardest work of the funeral ceremonies, and Selef-Njohang was a master.

A common theme of traditional lore is that core issue of social life: what are the groups that make up society? This theme is important because it deals with two significant matters: who are we and how ought we to deal with each other? On Ponam, the displays that attracted so much attention, like the one Demian Selef-Njohang was arranging, dealt with these matters by portraying the key sorts of groups in society and their relationships.

One of these sorts was the *ken si* (*ken* = base or origin, *si* = one), and each Ponam belonged to several of them. These were cognatic stocks, the descendants of a given person, reckoned without regard to sex. Thus, all the great-grandchildren of a person were members of the cognatic stock bearing that person's name, regardless of whether they were descended through sons or daughters, grandsons or granddaughters. These cognatic

stocks were important economically, for they were a significant channel through which wealth passed from person to person. They were also important socially, for they provided the framework that defined how people identified their relationships with each other, and hence identified how they ought to act toward each other. Relations between cognatic stocks, and thus between members of them, were shaped not only by kinship and marriage but also by past acts of patronage, adoption, or defense that were remembered and passed from generation to generation.

The other important kind of group was the *kamal* (*kamal* = male), and each Ponam belonged to only one of these. These were property-holding, agnatic descent groups, which we will call clans. Membership in a clan, and the right to use clan property, passed from a man to his children. On marriage, a man's daughter would lose her rights to his clan's property and gain rights to her husband's clan's property holding. Clans were important economically in the past, especially before World War II, but since then the significance of the property they controlled had decreased, so that by the time of our fieldwork, clans and their property were significant primarily in terms of social identity within Ponam society. Although clans were much more autonomous units than were cognatic stocks, nonetheless some of them were related in different ways, relations that modified their formal equality and autonomy. In some cases the founders of clans were brothers, in others a man from one clan had been adopted to strengthen a failing clan, and in yet others one clan had acted as protector and patron of another.

What were the cognatic stocks? Who was in them? How were they related to each other? These were the issues that Ponams addressed when they produced their displays; thus these displays were social diagrams. As such, they were, for those who knew how to read them, visual presentations of the record of birth, marriage, and death, of patronage and alliance, that constituted Ponams' conception of their past and the present organization of their society. They were a view of one aspect of Ponam history. They were visual alternatives to oral tradition.

These displays were not restricted to infrequent, highly ceremonial occasions. Instead, the arrangement of gifts in genealogical diagrams was the central activity of almost all Ponam prestations—a term we use to mean the accumulation, giving, and distribution of objects, predominantly cooked food, raw food, indigenous and western valuables, and minor household goods. And these prestations were a frequent occurrence. During our period of continuous fieldwork, a prestation involving essentially all adult Ponams took place about once every four or five days. On a few occasions of particular importance, such as bride-price, marriage, and occasionally funerals, people decorated, danced, and did things that were not merely instrumental to the process of gift accumulation and distribution; but in

most prestations the accumulation and distribution of gifts constituted the focus. In other words, these displays were not rare or peripheral events involving arcane lore. Rather, they were common and attended by most islanders, and they provided an important means by which Ponam tradition was reinforced.

As one might expect, Ponams talked a great deal about the arrangement and meaning of the displays that people made. However, this does not mean that these nonverbal displays were subordinated to the talk that accompanied them. Instead, they dominated the talk. The displays, and the exchanges that informed them, were themselves the occasions that sparked the talk and gave it a focus and a content. Usually the talk did not bypass the display and refer to the social relations that it described or the position or interests of the person arranging it. Rather, the talk focused on the display itself, on the nonverbal representation of social relations and social history. Certainly we could make no sense of the talk until we saw that it was about the displays, and Ponams themselves understood the relationship in the same way.

### **Distributions to the Community**

The first form of distribution that concerns us is to the community, to the island as a whole without regard to individual kin relationships with the person making the presentation. We describe this form before turning to distributions to kin, because it is the easier way to introduce the principles that islanders used to produce and interpret their displays. Distributions to the community always used dishes of cooked food and occurred whenever an individual or group wanted to give to others on grounds other than those of kinship. For example, this type often repaid people who had helped with some enterprise like house- or canoe-building, and was used as well whenever the intention was to distribute to the island as a whole, as occurred at public festivities and at weddings and mournings, when all Ponam was presumed to be involved. Most of these distributions took place in front of the dwelling or clan men's house of those making the distribution. Typically, the door of the building in front of which the arrangement was being made gave the arrangement an orientation. The gifts were arranged in parallel lines leading away from the door. The end of each line near the door was the base of the line, the more prominent position, and the end farther away was the crown, the less prominent.

Once the dishes of food were arranged, a public speaker (*sohou*), almost always a man, would address the crowd. He would stand near the base of the display and speak briefly, thanking people for attending and perhaps making some humorous or pointed remarks, but the overall tone

of his speech was always sober. However, this address was not stylized or marked in any way that distinguished it from any other public address. *Sohous* tried to speak loudly and clearly, but so far as we could tell they used no special vocabulary, grammar, or style.

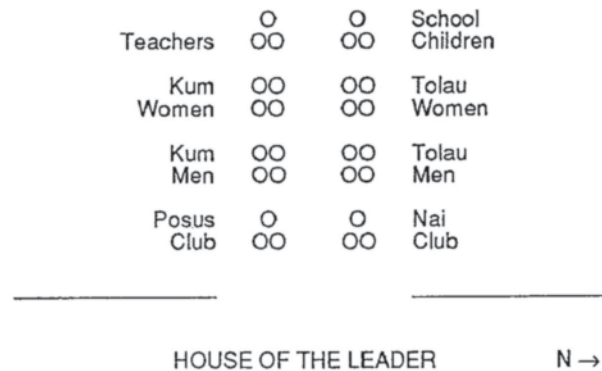
After the initial remarks, the speaker would walk through the arrangement. He would point to each set of dishes in turn and call the name of the category of people who should come to collect it. Like the opening remarks, this activity was not ritualized or formalized in any way. He then retired to the edge of the display. In a very small, informal, or hurried distribution the speaker did not always bother to walk among the dishes. He might simply shout out the names of the recipients and leave people to sort out for themselves which group was to get which dishes, something they could do by matching the pattern of dishes and the sets of recipients. As will become clear, with some forms of prestation this was not difficult. When the speaker stepped away from the display of food, a few members of each of the recipient categories would come forward to collect their shares and move them away from the center of the clearing for redistribution, or for eating on the spot.

Distribution to the community could take one of two general forms, but in each one the food to be distributed was arrayed as a map of the sets of people who were to receive them. The more complex form of distribution and display, *sahai*, was to clans. The simpler form was to moieties, to the residents of the northern (*Tolau*, North) and southern (*Kum*, South) halves of the island. Islanders had no special name for moiety distributions, and we call them simply Kum-Tolau distributions.

## KUM-TOLAU DISTRIBUTIONS

In the simplest Kum-Tolau distributions items given to the North moiety were laid out to the north of the items given to the South moiety. If there was enough food, the portions for each moiety could be subdivided into shares for men and women. Here the array was a simple map of the two island moieties. Similarly, different categories of people could be added. Shares could be given to off-island visitors or the island's foreign schoolteachers or schoolchildren, or to sets of people who had contributed in some special way to the work being celebrated. Gifts for these sets of people were smaller than those given to moiety men and women, and their position in the display reflected the relative significance of their place in the occasion of the presentation. Figure 1 shows a distribution in which four shares were given to non-moiety groups: teachers, schoolchildren, and the young men's and young women's clubs, Posus and Nai.





Note: The relative size of a gift is indicated by the number of circles shown next to the name of the recipient, which represent objects given (dishes of food in this case).

Figure 1. An arrangement of gifts distributed to the men and women of the Kum and Tolau moieties and to other categories

### SAHAI DISTRIBUTIONS

*Sahai* was the distribution of items to each of the island's fourteen clans, and it was seen as a difficult distribution: it normally took half an hour to arrange and was entrusted only to mature adults. Like the Kum-Tolau display we just described, this type of display was intended to produce a map of the village: shares for each clan were laid out in two lines almost exactly in the manner in which their men's houses were arranged in the village, perhaps with a few extra shares for others laid out at the head of the display. This distribution was difficult because the map had a social as well as a geographical aspect. Because clans were more complex and more sensitive politically than were moieties, they were more difficult to represent. Consequently there were differences of opinion about how *sahais* should be arranged and variations in their actual arrangement. These differences help to illustrate the way in which these displays recreated an important answer to the question, "who are we, and how are we related to one another?"

The *sahai* in figure 2 is illustrative. The man who arranged this distribution began by laying out one row of eight sets of dishes and then another row of six, one for each clan. Above these he placed a few sets for foreigners. Then, acting as speaker, he announced how they were to be distributed. He began by pointing to the set at the base of the North line (number 1) and calling out, "For Lamai," the westernmost North clan. Walking toward the crown of the line, he designated shares for each of the North clans in the order in which their men's houses appeared along the northern shore of the island. Then he designated the few shares at the head of the arrangement for special groups before announcing the clans of the

South, beginning with Puyu in the east (number 12) and proceeding to Kayeh in the west. The speaker announced the clans just about in the order in which he would have encountered them had he made a circuit of the village, starting with Lamai in the northwest and finishing with Kayeh in the southwest. By arranging and announcing the clans in this way the leader produced an accurate representation of village geography.

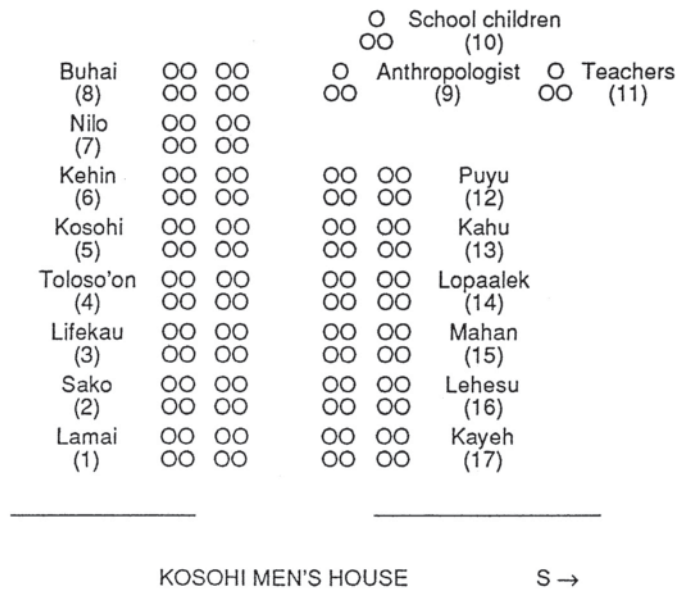


Figure 2. *Sahai* held for Pe-Nja Kapen, a Clan Kehin man, October 1979 (including separate shares for men and women)

If these displays were simply mechanical representations of agreed-upon facts about which men's house was where, there would be no significant variations among them. They might differ because the people arranging them erred, but they would not differ because the people disagreed. However, this was not the case. These displays were part of the continuing re-creation of Ponam tradition, the ongoing effort by islanders to recreate and redefine the social groups and social relations that constituted their society and the history that shaped those groups. This regenerative aspect of displays and the lore they present is apparent when we consider variations in *sahai* displays. These variations revolved around two related contentious issues: what are the Ponam clans, and where are they located in space? Although we present these as contemporary issues, issues of the state of society at the time the arranger laid out the display, such a perspective is somewhat misleading. What the clans are and where

they are located in space clearly were contemporary questions, but at the same time they were historical matters, for they referred back to events in the past that shaped Ponam society, events that were recreated and perhaps given new valuation in the display that the arranger was to organize.

*What are the Ponam Clans?*

During the time that we have known Ponam the clans recognized in *sahai* did not change, but Ponams did not think that they were unchangeable. Island history records that new clans emerged by breaking away from existing ones; existing clans weakened, were absorbed as dependents, and ceased to build men's houses of their own; and sometimes these dependent groups regained strength and reappeared again. Earlier in this century, for example, Buhai, Kahu, Lamai, Lifekau, and Puyu were dependents of other clans. When a group of agnates had the land and strength to build a men's house, they could claim recognition in *sahais*. If they ceased to be able to do so, they could no longer claim recognition. It was when groups stood at the point of transition that there was room for dispute.

When the brothers of the sub-clan Molou attempted to declare themselves independent of Clan Nilo in 1985, they announced that one of the buildings in their hamlet was henceforth to be a men's house. However, as a small, impoverished group they did not raise a new men's house building, and consequently did not distribute the *sahai* that was part of men's house-raising, both being important markers of clan identity. Ponams reported that in the *sahais* distributed during 1985, no shares were designated for Molou. Molous, however, did not accept part of the *sahais* given to Nilo as they had done in the past. This was not, however, merely a marker of passing dissatisfaction. The position of Molou in Clan Nilo was historically anomalous, a fact signaled by the displays of Nilo sub-clans that accompanied distributions within the clan: Molou always went uncertainly at the most distant spot. In trying to induce a change in *sahai* display, then, Molou members were trying to redefine Ponam traditional lore about their link with Nilo.

Just as Molou was poised to emerge as a newly independent clan, so Toloso'on stood on the brink of extinction; the last man of Clan Toloso'on died in the 1950's and only women remained. The two surviving Toloso'on women kept control over their clan's property and recruited the descendants of previous generations of Toloso'on women to maintain the men's house and sponsor prestations. As a consequence, this clan continued to be represented in *sahai*. For the time being, then, Toloso'on continued to be a part of Ponams' understanding of who they were and how they

were related to each other. For the time being, the absence of Toloso'on men was a minor inconvenience that would be overlooked for as long as the order of *sahai* included them.

Thus the fact that the clans included in *sahai* did not vary during our stay does not mean that producing a *sahai* was automatic, simply a repetition of the names of men's houses. Molou claimed to have a men's house, although everyone arranging a *sahai* ignored its existence; Toloso'on had no men's house, although everyone arranging a *sahai* ignored its non-existence. In every case someone had to decide how to handle the potentially tendentious clans, whether or not to be the first one to put Molou in or leave Toloso'on out and so on—in short, whether to be the first to redefine Ponam society.

#### *Where are the Clans Located in Space?*

Although we said that a *sahai* display represented the spatial arrangement of Ponam clans' men's houses, it was not always obvious just where the men's houses *really* were located. There were ambiguous cases, in which men's houses were perceived to be in the wrong place; they really should have been built somewhere else. In these situations the person laying out the *sahai* had to decide where to place the share for the clan in question: should it be placed according to where the clan was, or where it ought to have been?

For example, this conflict between geographically and socially correct positions appears in the placement of the share for Clan Kahu. Some put it to the east of that for Clan Puyu and some to the west. This reflected ambivalence about the proper location of the Kahu men's house. In the mid-1970's Kahu's leader decided to move his men's house and hamlet back to their precolonial site on the eastern end of the island. His clanmates formally supported him, but tended to remain in their old village houses except when the leader came home from work on his holidays. Most Ponams followed their lead, and thus when the leader was absent *sahais* gave Kahu its old village site rather than its new one, a maneuver that the arrangers of these *sahais* found amusing.

The case of Clan Buhai is more complex. The Buhai men's house stood in the South, Kum, although its ancestral land was in Tolau, and Buhai members acted as Northerners when moiety membership was important. In the *sahai* Buhai's share was normally put in the North line, reflecting its moiety membership. However, because Buhai had no men's house in its proper moiety, people were not sure where in the line it belonged. This allowed a certain latitude in the placement of the clan's share in *sahai*, and some Ponams arranging displays used this latitude to make assertions about the history and identity of Buhai. As we noted

already, earlier in this century Buhai had no independent existence, but was a client of, and to some extent incorporated in, Clan Nilo. After World War II, Buhai began to reassert its independence, and by 1980 it was recognized once more as a fully active clan. Those who sought to commemorate (or reassert) this historical tie to Clan Nilo placed the Buhai share immediately after the Nilo share, while others commemorated its independence by placing it at the crown of the North line.

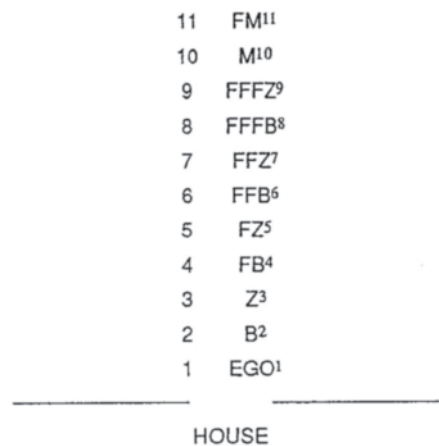
We said that clans were important as an element of Ponam identity, and these *sahai* displays were important for understanding Ponam clans. Islanders talked from time to time about their clans and their histories; however, this talk was not an important part of Ponam life. Islanders did not tell and re-tell these stories as part of an active body of oral tradition. (Indeed, as J. Carrier [1987] has pointed out, Ponams had relatively little *oral* tradition of any sort.) Instead, they presented and represented the nature and relationships of their clans in these displays. For it was in these physical arrangements of dishes of cooked food that islanders focused on and honed down their understanding of one aspect of who they were and how they were related to each other, and that understanding referred back to events in the past as much as it reflected events in the present. This same focusing and honing down occurred for family groups, Ponam cognatic stocks, in the individual-focused displays that we want to describe now.

### **Individual-Focused Displays**

In the preceding section we described the way in which Ponams represented two types of social groups, moieties and clans, in the course of the distribution of gifts in ceremonial exchange. We did so to introduce these displays as a feature of Ponam exchange, to demonstrate some of the principles that govern the organization of display, and to show how display presents and recreates key elements of Ponam lore. We turn now to the representation of the relatives of the individual making the distribution. Instead of Ponam social organization taken overall, these displays represented that organization from the point of view of particular individuals—those making gifts to their relatives or receiving gifts from them.

Such displays used genealogy instead of geography as their theme, with the piles of gifts representing *ken sis*, stocks of people descended from a common male or female ancestor, rather than clans and moieties. The arrangement of piles represented the relations among *ken sis* as the stocks of an individual's kindred. Ponams could read these displays just as anthropologists can read genealogical diagrams, seeing in them relationships of ascent, descent, and sibblingship.

There were a variety of possible ways of arranging these displays, as we shall show. However, they all had a common structure. Figure 3 is an idealization of one common pattern for the display of gifts being contributed by or distributed to an individual's kindred (treated here as a display of contributions). The gifts are arranged before the main door of the leader's house in a single line, made of piles, each contributed by a separate stock, or *ken si*, within the leader's kindred. The display of gifts for kindreds such as this one was thus completely different from those we described previously in this paper. Clans were not represented in these prestations, except as maximal *ken sis*; moieties did not appear at all, and no distinction was made between male and female recipients.



Note: The large numbers refer to the numbers in the genealogy in Figure 4, the superscript numbers are the order in which the speaker would announce the piles.

Figure 3. Hypothetical display of gifts for or from a person's kindred

The line begins with gifts from the *ken sis* that are most closely related to the leader through his or her own patriline, starting with the leader (number 1) and proceeding to ever more distantly related stocks: first the leader's siblings, then the father's siblings. Often the latter were long dead, the gifts having been collected from the father's siblings' children and possibly affines. Next came gifts from the father's father's siblings, and so on, for as many generations as necessary to reach the founder of an individual's own clan, and occasionally to reach beyond to include other clans affiliated through ancient ties of patronage or common origin. After all of the gifts from patrilineal kin came those from people who are the leader's maternal kin, father's maternal kin, and occasionally

father's father's maternal kin.

A single line was used only when the number of gifts was small or during bride-price prestations (when gifts were hung on a long rope). On other occasions the display was usually broken into several different lines. However, items were still announced by the speaker in the order in which we show them here, proceeding through the leader's patrilineal kin from closest to most distantly related, and then to his or her matrilineal kin.

The genealogical relations among these groups are illustrated in figure 4, the numbers on the genealogy corresponding to the numbered gifts in figure 3. The manner in which the genealogy is illustrated here is different from the bilateral branching-tree genealogy appropriate for representing English kinship, for example, since it is derived from the representations that Ponams made in their gift displays. And as this genealogy illustrates, displays were not simply muddled codifications of oral lore. The relationships that these displays celebrated were not passed down orally as a series of Biblical "begats" which were crudely translated into lines of dishes. In fact, it was difficult to elicit genealogies orally from Ponams. Instead, when islanders talked about these webs of kinship, they talked about them in terms of the spatial dimensions of their gift displays.

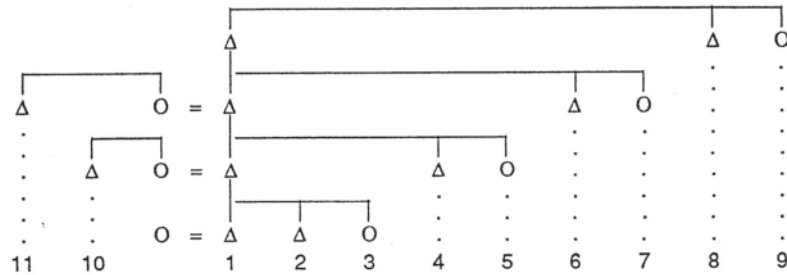


Figure 4. Genealogy of *Ken Sis* in Figure 3

*The Return Prestation for an Engagement*

We want to illustrate these displays in a real example, the accumulation and distribution of a single prestation, a *kahuwe tabac*, the return prestation for an earlier gift of tobacco and money that had marked an engagement. This prestation was not a complex one, nor was it trivial. On the contrary it was ordinary, illustrating what most prestations looked like most of the time.

In the first week of January 1986, Philip Kemou's family brought a gift of tobacco and money to mark his engagement to 18-year-old Sowahanu Tapo, who had given birth to his son just three weeks before.

Sowahanu's parents discussed the distribution of this gift privately that evening. They proceeded the next day to divide the money and tobacco among their kin. Because of a dispute with his son, Michael Tapo gave him nothing, and as a result several of his closest agnates refused to accept the shares offered to them.<sup>3</sup> Despite admonitions from the rest of his kin, Tapo stuck to his original decision and announced that he would go ahead and make the return prestation without their help. This took place about three weeks after the initial prestation.

16	Kuluah Pakou (FMB) <sup>7</sup>				
7	Sowapulo (FZ) <sup>6</sup>	13	Aluf Ndrakolok <sup>13</sup>		
6	Asaf Ndrau (FZ) <sup>5</sup>	12	Mwaka <sup>12</sup>		
5	Aluf Ndrau (FZ) <sup>4</sup>	11	Sapakol II <sup>11</sup>		
4	Sakati (FBD) <sup>3,a</sup>	10	Sapakol I <sup>10</sup>		
2	Sowahanu (Z) <sup>2</sup>	9	Kihian (FFF) <sup>9</sup>		
1	Michael Tapo (ego) <sup>1,b</sup>	8	Ndrau Salin (FFB) <sup>8</sup>	15	Pisa'oh (M) <sup>14</sup>

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MICHAEL TAPO'S HOUSE

Note: The large numbers refer to the numbers in the genealogy in Figure 6, the superscript numbers are the order in which the speaker announced the piles.

a Michael Tapo's FBS's descendants refused to accept tobacco, so that there was no single contribution from his FB's descendants. His FBD's descendants took their place.

b The bride's brother should have led this prestation and his gift should have gone at the base of the display. The bride's mother's gift was included with Michael Tapo's instead of being placed separately as it would have been if her son had led the work.

Figure 5. Accumulation of *Kahu* for engagement prestation

At about mid-morning on the appointed day, gifts were accumulated and displayed in front of Michael Tapo's house. He announced to the assembled company the names of the *ken sis* that had contributed to him by walking through the display, pausing briefly beside each pile as he called out the name of its contributor. He began with his own gift and concluded with his mother's. Figure 5 gives a schematic illustration of the display and figure 6 a genealogy of the groups involved.

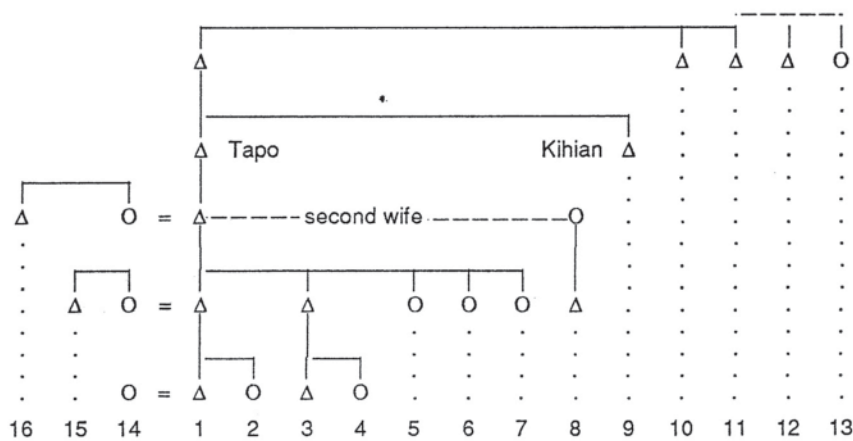
Michael Tapo's clan, Mahan, included three sub-clans, descended from Mahan's two sons. One was Kihian, and one sub-clan bore his name. The other son was Michael Tapo's great-grandfather Tapo, whose only son Ndrau had two wives. Therefore, Tapo's descendants were divided into two sub-clans: Ndrau Salin (right Ndrau), the descendants of the first wife;

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<sup>3</sup> The son and daughters had different mothers (one from Ponam, one not), a fact which made it possible to exclude the son from his sister's affairs.



and Ndrau Kamau (left Ndrau), the descendants of the second. The display of this contribution included in the left line the gifts from his own sub-clan, Ndrau Salin, and from Ndrau's first wife. The center included the gifts of Ndrau Kamau and Kihian, the other two sub-clans. At the end of that line were gifts of other groups associated with Clan Mahan: Clans Sapakol I and Sapakol II, which shared origins with Mahan, and two other groups that were once Mahan's dependents. The third line included only a gift from Michael Tapo's maternal kin. In other words, by means of this display of gifts Michael Tapo presented a graphic, nonverbal representation of the structure of his kindred and the state of relations among them: not just a record of who married whom and who begat whom, but also the old alliances and associations that had been created in the past and were remembered and celebrated in the contribution, display, and distribution of objects in exchange.



Note: A line of dashes represents a connection other than one of true siblingship.

Figure 6. Michael Tapo's genealogy

When Michael Tapo finished his announcements, his kin took apart the display and carried the gifts to the groom's house. After their arrival they retired into the shade, and the groom's father, Chris Pelekai, came out of his house to speak. He thanked Michael Tapo and his kin for the gift. Then the bride's relatives brought out a gift of cooked food for the groom's relatives. A little while later, Philip Kemou's family began their redistribution of the gift. They started by placing single items on the ground, each to mark a pile of items, as they experimented with different arrangements. Once they had decided that they liked the arrangement, they

began to distribute the remaining food appropriately among them. Figure 7 shows the arrangement of the distribution and figure 8 the genealogy of the recipients.

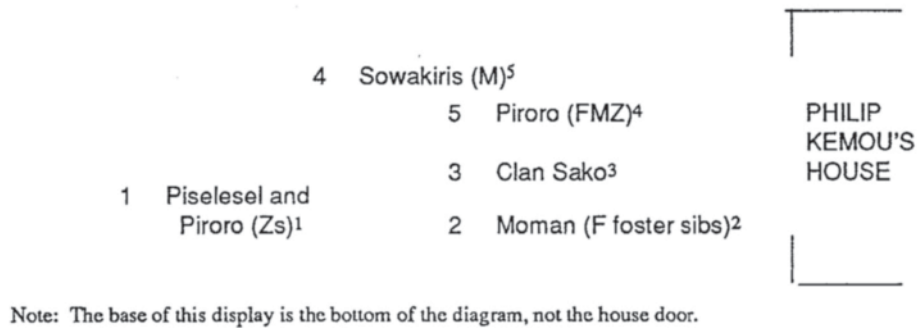


Figure 7. Distribution of *Kahuwe Tabac*

Philip Kemou’s sisters led this distribution, although as women they did not speak. The left line included their gift only, for aside from Chris Pelekai (Philip Kemou’s father) they were the only adult members of their sub-clan within Clan Sako. The right line included gifts for other groups of Philip Kemou’s kindred: first, a gift for the sub-clan that had fostered his father when he was orphaned as a child; second, a gift for the remaining Sako sub-clans; and third, a gift for his father’s mother’s sister, his father’s mother’s only sibling. Philip Kemou’s mother’s gift was placed rather indeter- minately between these two lines.

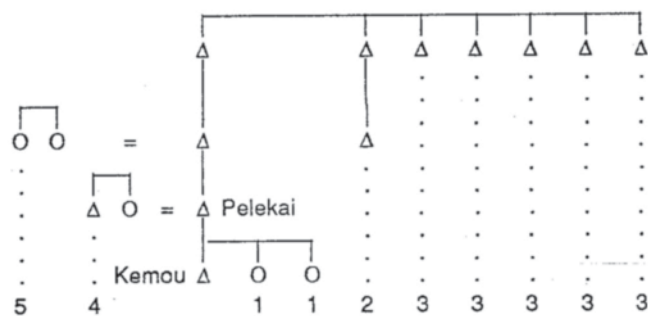


Figure 8. Philip Kemou’s genealogy

Philip Kemou’s genealogy was remembered in a simpler form than that of Michael Tapo, and the display accompanying the distribution of the

gift was correspondingly simpler. But as was the case with the more complex genealogy, here display is not merely a way of distributing gifts. Instead, it recreates a history of the relations that constitute a kindred and so defines for one set of people who they are and how they are related to each other. And again, the display did not recreate merely some agreed-upon succession of births and marriages. To be sure, the sisters who arranged the display recorded the genealogical relationships that were involved. Equally, however, they celebrated and recreated the fostering of Chris Pelekai, Philip Kemou's father, by Moman, a sub-clan within Clan Sako.

### **Display as Social Commentary**

In our discussion of *sahai* we noted that displays were something more than neutral representations of the geography of Ponam clans. The same observation applies to individual-focused displays, which were shaped not only by the agreed-upon history of marriage and childbirth, alliance, patronage, and fostering that became the structure of a person's kindred. In addition, they were the means of presenting, and thus inevitably commenting on, the state of social relations among the people who were the living representatives of the dead ancestors whose names were called out when the display was announced.

This function is illustrated by the arrangement of the contributions to the return prestation for Sowahanu Tapo's engagement gift (figure 5). Under normal circumstances, this prestation would have been led by Sowahanu's elder married brother, whose gift would have been placed at the base. Sowahanu's mother's contribution would have been placed separately, probably in the far right line next to Sowahanu's father's mother's gift. But because Sowahanu's father, Michael Tapo, was in dispute with his son, he refused to allow him to participate in the exchange and he arranged the display in such a way as to make this situation very clear. Michael Tapo's display suggested that he, Tapo, was Sowahanu's brother: his contribution was placed at the base of the line, and Sowahanu's mother's contribution was included with his rather than being placed separately. He and his wife could have chosen to place his gift at the base and her gift in the line with his mother's, an arrangement that would have implied some sort of openness to compromise. But instead, by contracting the genealogy and placing her father in her brother's place, they laid out an arrangement that completely eliminated Michael Tapo's son from the bride Sowahanu's kindred.

Although this display deviated from the genealogical rules we have described, and although it did not accurately portray the kindred according

to convention, it was not in any sense wrong. No one made an error or a social *faux pas*. In fact, given the circumstances of the prestation, the arranger would have been wrong to put together the display in a conventional manner. Ponams could, and did, use display in this way because it was its own form of cultural transmission with its own rules and conventions. It was an independent way of passing information, of making statements about who Ponams were and how they were related to each other.

### Conclusion

We have had one simple goal in this paper: to show that people can communicate significant parts of the past and present—and so transmit and recreate what could in a sense be regarded as one form of oral (unwritten) tradition—in ways that do not use words. Although Ponam prestation required talk, we have demonstrated that its core was the visual display of gifts that occupied so much time and attracted so much attention in Ponam exchange. Possibly Ponams could have simply heaped their gifts into a big pile as they were accumulated and then taken apart the pile again gift by gift for distribution.<sup>4</sup> But such a simple procedure would be tediously uninformative when compared with what gift displays actually provided. The arrangement itself conveyed considerable information about the structure and composition of Ponam society generally and, more particularly, about individuals' kindreds, about who was related to whom and how, and about the actual state of social relations among kin and clans.

We do not mean that these displays were in any sense self-contained representations of social organization and social relations, and certainly they are not self-evident. It took the two of us almost six months of fieldwork to come to realize why so many villagers spent so much time attentively and quietly watching other villagers set out piles of gifts or dishes of food, pause, think, change their minds, and set them out in a slightly different way. And in spite of close study over an extended period, we never mastered enough knowledge of Ponam kinship and gossip to be able to decipher and understand, without help, any but relatively simple

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<sup>4</sup> They did not think that they could. They said that the process of arranging displays is, in addition to being expressive, an essential step in figuring out how distributions should be made—figuring out to whom and how much to give. In view of the complexity of these distributions, some sort of procedure such as this one does seem necessary. Pre-planning with pen, paper, and calculator had become more important, but working out distributions on the ground in the way that they did will probably always be easier than planning them on paper. It would be interesting to know how other people who make complex distributions like these manage to keep track of what they do without such forms of display.

displays. We suspect that the most complex and subtle displays even bemused some of the less attentive villagers. In other words, we always needed to be told, we always needed the medium of words to clarify what was being related visually. However, this discrepancy does not invalidate our point. Ponams understood themselves and their past through nonverbal representation. The word, spoken or written, that figures so strongly in what we know and in how we go about getting others to describe themselves in no way exhausted the ways in which Ponams described themselves.<sup>5</sup>

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