

## Knowing What Has Been Done:

### The Techniques of Ritual ‘Objects’ among the Abelam (East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea)

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#### Foreword: a scene

The scene is set in the *ame* (public place) in the hamlet of Kumim, Nyamikum Village (in the district of Maprik, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea). It is 16 June 2003, the day of the *Waapi Saaki*, the ‘lining-up of the long yams’, (see Figure 1); it is about four pm. About 20 elongated tubers, ranging in size from 1.7 to 2.4 metres, are being presented, hanging on wooden poles which rest against vertical structures. These structures have been erected at different positions around the *ame*: one inside each of the two ‘reunion’ houses (which face each other), and one on the *ame* itself.

The *waapi* (long yams, *Dioscorea alata*) are all decorated with a highly colourful set of composite elements, such as sticks wrapped with red and yellow leaves (sometimes replaced by the plastic packaging from Chinese noodles, or by soda-bottle labels), bailer shells, painted wooden masks, feathers (from cassowaries, cockatoos, roosters and birds of paradise), pieces of white cardboards or odoriferous leaves. Some of the tubers have been painted, their reddish-brown skin enhanced by a feast of yellow, red, white and black, often forming strong visual contrasts.

The lining-up of the yams on the *ame* is visually striking (for the best part of the year, the space is left empty, apart from a central heap of stones). Their presence cannot even be completely concealed by the crowd of some hundred people – men, women children – some from other Nyamikum hamlets, others from neighbouring and distant villages, such as Nyelikum, Kimbagwa, Kalabu or Apangai.

The yams were brought out some 30 minutes earlier, each carried by two men. Once set against the wooden structures, people have moved closer, in groups of two to five, to have a closer look. I could not stop myself comparing this scene to those at many agricultural fairs, such as the Salon de l’Agriculture in Paris, where farmers present their most prized products – cheeses, tomatoes, wines, bulls, stallions – for a huge crowd of French and foreign visitors in the Parc des Expositions near the Porte de Versailles.

Groups of men are moving from one *waapi* to another, talking softly among themselves, touching the tubers, looking at their undersides, and pointing at protuberances that sometimes deform the straightness of the *waapi*. Indeed, these are Maa<sup>m</sup>butap, the cultivar considered as the epitome of long yams, the best variety of the 30-odd other cultivars grown in Nyamikum, and they are supposed to be as long, smooth and straight as possible. When satisfied with their examination, the men take some lime (used for betel-chewing) with their fingers

out of the baby-food jar that has replaced the once-customary gourd, and put a white spot on the tuber, while letting out a short cry ('woo-ah') to express their appreciation. Then they move to another *waapi*, and are replaced by another group of men.

Being here to study the making of yams, I (again) asked one of my *Nēma<sup>n</sup>du<sup>i</sup>* friends, Ganbakiya, how one evaluates the Maa<sup>m</sup>butap. I have to confess that my intention was to cross-check the use of the formal criteria I had been told of in previous discussions. Instead, Ganbakiya asked me to follow him to a tuber, and surprised me by crouching down to show me how to evaluate the yam: 'See, you first look at the length, then you put your hands around its belly to see how big it is, then you touch the skin and see if it has not too much hair on it, and then...' He was showing me the actual physical techniques used in such evaluation. Either because my question was formulated in Tok Pisin (not trusting skills in the A<sup>m</sup>bulēs language) in a way that indicated my desire to know the procedure, or because it was Ganbakiya's spontaneous response to such an enquiry, the moment was for me a kind of 'productive misunderstanding'.

The following night I was told more about what the groups of men had been discussing, *sotto voce*, while evaluating the yams. The main topic was not in fact focused on the dimensions or sensorial characteristics of the yams, but rather on their cultivator and on their origin (such as who provided the original tuber to be planted, and who was involved in the cultivation process). While the nature of the groups' discussions pointed to another way of considering the yams, Ganbakiya's answer directed me towards a specific aspect of yam evaluation, which can be read in different ways: phenomenological, for instance, as demonstrating the ways in which one can actually get to know (about) an object through sensory engagement with it, during which vision is complemented by touch and smell (the different plants used for the decorations having a strong odour). But, to me, it also pointed to something essentially different from the Parisian Salon de l'Agriculture; unlike most visitors to such an exhibition, every single person in the *ame* can be considered as knowing how to grow yams. They all know what has been done to produce them, because all have some degree of expertise and can thus relate to what such a display of spectacular results, framed within a ritual setting, implies in terms of processes. Indeed, the different groups of men were themselves yam cultivators. For some, their own ceremony had already been held, while for others it had yet to come. Women and children, because of their everyday role in the garden, also have a good knowledge of how to plant yams, their general characteristics and what is required to obtain such impressive results.

### **Productive misunderstandings and revelatory processes**

In retrospect, this 'productive misunderstanding' directs my focus, not towards the content of the evaluations (which is another topic in itself), but rather to how the material presence of *waapi* on the ground, during the ceremony, was connected to forms of embodied (i.e. non-verbal) knowledge about the complex process of making yams.

From the perspective of the project tackled by the editors of this volume, analysing the ceremony through the *waapi* places my discussion at the intersection of three interrelated aspects of the particular setting I am dealing with. The first deals with the field of analysis of rituals, one of the constitutive domains of anthropology. In

Melanesia and particularly in the area I am dealing with – where initiation rituals have provided abundant ethnographic material – discussions have tackled, either separately or together, the constructivist, cognitive, psychological, non-verbal or knowledge-related dimensions of such phenomena (Bateson 1936; Barth 1975; 1987; Gell 1975; Lewis 1980; Wagner 1984; Juillérat 1986; 1992, Houseman and Severi 1996). However, as pointed out in the introduction, most of these analyses have seldom considered the analytic value of things and artefacts for an understanding of religious phenomena.

The second aspect relates to the fact that, in the same settings, rituals and religious practices are also major occasions for the production and exhibition of a rich and visually striking material imagery, ranging from body ornaments to elaborate temporary or permanent constructions, all in relation to complex performances. In many cases, such productions have occupied an uneven methodological or analytical role in the study of rituals. The people known as the Abelam have been anthropologically notorious for their elaborated initiation system (Kaberry 1941; 1941–42; Forge 1967; 1972; 1990; Heerman 1983; Hauser-Schäublin 1989a; 1989b; 1995) involving the creation of temporary elaborated images. They were also made famous in the field of the anthropology of art by the founding work of Anthony Forge, who demonstrated the non-verbal and cognitive dimensions of Abelam forms of visual representations. In many ways, Forge's analysis of the Abelam material prepared the ground for further development, such as in Gell's approach (1992; 1998), one of his students.

The third aspect deals with absence. In Nyamikum village, as in many other Abelam localities, people indicate that no such initiations have been conducted for the past 20 years, seeing this as a consequence of both a scarcity of certain appropriate resources (especially pigs) and conversions to the diverse forms of Christianity in the area. As a result, the main part of this richness of ritual visual and material production is today mostly visible in Western museums (cf., Heerman 1983, Hauser-Schäublin 1989b, Smidt and McGuigan 1994). However, the cultivation and decoration of long yams seem to have endured as the main contemporary ceremony, along with new forms such as occasional gatherings in Maprik town, where delegations of villagers decorate and display themselves, and perform dances similar to those which conclude initiations. During the period of my stay, such ceremonial events took place in support of the candidacy of a local MP, or (in May 2002) to celebrate the start of the asphaltting of the Maprik-Wewak road.

These three aspects of my own field research relate to the multi-layered and multi-dimensional roles of artefacts explored in anthropological studies of art and material culture. Concentrating on the part played by decorated yams, I am attempting to investigate whether, being framed within a ritual setting and enhanced by the impressive display of long yams, yams could be somehow connected to a local wider cosmological understanding of the world, through the embodiment of technical practices.

In this chapter, I first place my vignette into the wider frame of a yam ceremony, and then discuss the visual productions made for initiations to outline how verbal exegesis is made redundant through the relations that visual and conceptual connections instantiate in other forms. In the second section, I discuss how recent analytical reversals (for instance Holbraad 2011: 17) allow for rethinking the relationships between techniques and rituals through the perspective of the

artefact produced/displayed. In my particular case, yams, as central artefacts of the Waapi Saaki, instantiate the effective success of a year-long process. The analysis of the *chaîne opératoire* (operational sequence) of this process shows a series of connections that link garden, society, landscape and cosmology through the type of materials, substances, sociality and agents that pervade everyday routines, across domains of experience. It is, I suggest, this process-made-thing that is exhibited during the Waapi Saaki. The last part of the chapter hints at how yams, and their particular botanical properties, could correspond to a form of ‘Abelam sociology’ that is, in part non-verbal discourse on social forms and their reproduction. It could be that the revelation of such ‘sociology’ seems then to have a double effect. On the one hand, it provokes people’s responses to the type of relationships materialised, fixed for a brief moment, in order to be engaged with. On the other hand, the ceremony, by revealing in this fugitive moment the fundamental fluid nature of sociality (I am tempted to write ‘yam-ity’), enchants both past and future relationships. I conclude by suggesting how this sociologically-constructed yam could help us to understand and comment upon past initiation ceremonies and contemporary rituals.

### **Yam ceremonies and initiations**

#### *A Waapi Saaki ceremony at Kumim hamlet, Nyamikum village<sup>ii</sup>*

While our focus is on the things that play a role within ritual, I would like to start by summarising briefly the sequence of the Waapi Saaki that took place on 16 June 2003. Indeed, as Eric Schwimmer suggests (1990), rituals in anthropology of art – or material culture – can be considered as proper ‘objects’ in their own right, rather than only as categories or ‘subjects’ of anthropological enquiry. The multi-dimensional nature of ritual constructions could indeed render the isolation of a single artifact – here the yam –, even for the purpose of analysis, fundamentally contradictory to the entire endeavour of understanding the phenomenon. The point here, of course, is not to extract *waapi* from their ritual framing – as Gilbert Lewis puts it (1980) – but rather to follow them through the course of the event.

While preparations start months before the actual day (with negotiations between the different members of Nyamikum communities, the gathering of supplies – of which the purchase of a pig is perhaps the most problematic one – and the harvesting, selection and preparation of the tubers to be presented), the work on the *ame* itself only started on the 14 of June, with the sweeping of the ground by women and children, and the making by men of the different fences and wooden structures surrounding the ceremonial area. The ground was cleaned and some decorations of leaves and flowers were placed on the heap of stones (*baapmu-taakwa*; the ‘moon’ or ‘spider’) in the centre of the *ame*.

The *waapi* harvested between April and May, decorated in the course of the previous weeks, were to remain out of sight until the moment of their revelation. Thus, most had been brought at night from their different locations by the various participants, and placed in a special enclosed area, near the *ame*, just behind the western-most reunion house (*putë*). Most of the men of the Kumim hamlet then came then spend the night in the *putë*, to keep a watch on the yams and their decorations that had already been moved there.

The following was the programme of events on 16–17 June<sup>iii</sup>:

1. Arrival of the audience: on the morning of the 16th, from about 9:00 to 14:00, the *ame* was first populated by men from other hamlets of the village itself, then by delegations from other villages. Children and women remained on the periphery of the ground, while others were still preparing the food for the feast. Arriving visitors all followed the same routine, entering the ground in silence and circling the *baapmu-taakwa* counter-clockwise, then coming to a halt and letting out a single cry, before dispersing to greet local friends and relatives. The *ame* became steadily busier and the atmosphere merrier.
2. The *puyaa* dance: around 3.30 pm, two men, each holding a spear, wearing a forehead ornament, and holding a *manuwi* ornament in his mouth, ran silently into the *ame* from the side and circled the *baapmu-taakwa* in opposite directions for less than a minute, menacing the crowd and each other every time they crossed, and then left, running from the *ame* by one of the exits.
3. Arrival of the *waapi*: right after this dance, a procession of five men (mostly *Nëma<sup>n</sup>du*) beating hour-glass shaped drums and singing, entered the ground, followed by a line of five women, wearing their string bags on their heads, and responding to the men's song. Following them, there came a succession of 21 decorated *waapi*, each pole carried by two men. The procession circled the central stones clockwise, before installing the yams on the three standing structures.
4. Evaluation of the *waapi*: once the yams were installed, the audience (including women and children) moved forward to see them. At the same moment, food, mostly ordinary boiled yams (*Dioscorea esculenta*), was brought and set at one side of the *ame*. Simultaneously, areca nuts and tobacco were distributed among the audience by groups of young men. Once presented, the food was then distributed to the groups, and immediately consumed.
5. Speeches: 4.30 pm there began a series of speeches from the different *Nëma<sup>n</sup>du* present. All of them were conducted in A<sup>m</sup>bulës, addressing current topics such as recent conflicts, and the necessity of mediation, between villages, and commenting on future or past public exchanges. Yam cultivation was central to the exchanges, in the form of metaphorical references, using images such as national politics, war in Afghanistan, or football teams.
6. Start of the *Kaagu* dance: around 18:30, as night was falling and fires were being lit, all the women left from the *ame*.<sup>iv</sup> Successive groups of four to five men (from Nyamikum or from other villages) performed a series of short songs, called *Kaagu*, each song lasting about one minute, all based on the same rhythm, and telling three types of stories: past war deeds, ceremonial exchanges, or love. In the two reunion houses, younger men were beating horizontal slit drums, coordinating their rhythm with the voices and the hour-glass drums, and the singers were joined by a crowd of dancers. Meanwhile, the audience was sitting together in groups according to their various affinities, talking together, eating, sometimes sleeping, getting up to dance, or moving between groups, or beyond the fence in the hamlet. Outside the *ame*, beyond the fences, under the moonlight and in the light of petrol lamps, the entire hamlet was very active, either around kitchens, where women were cooking food, or in the surrounding area where younger men gathered to drink alcohol, or to listen to contemporary PNG pop music on tapes, much to the disapproval of older generations. The *waapi* exhibited had a silence presence, with people moving around, dancing around or sleeping close to them.
7. Distribution of pork: about midnight the distribution of meat began, accompanied by rice and vegetables, all wrapped in leaves. The hosts swiftly distributed portions of this food according to status and to political alliances.

8. The rest of the night was spent dancing, with men moving in and out of the *ame*, joining in the animation in different parts of the hamlet.

9. Final speeches: at dawn (around 6 am on 17 June), the singing and dancing stopped, and more food was brought. This was the moment of the last public speeches, about future ceremonies to come.

10. Small groups started to leave to go back to their villages or hamlets, while the remaining people slept in the *ame*, under the shade of the *putë* or the neighbouring trees, or chatted.

During the entire ceremony, the looming presence of the decorated *waapi* formed a general background. Later on during the day, they are carried back to their owner's storage house.

In previous times, the Waapi Saaki was followed by competitive exchanges of the decorated tubers between ceremonial partners (see below) within the village itself or from other villages. Today, in order to avoid conflicts that could result from these exchanges (cf. Forge 1990), such exchanges are said no longer to occur between villages, and rarely between fellow male cultivators. Nowadays, decorated *waapi* circulate between groups, mostly in relation to disputes, marriage or funerals. Once exchanged, they are usually cut into sections, some for eating, others for replanting.

### **Initiation ceremonies (*in absentia*)**

The literature on Abelam initiation ceremonies (Forge 1966; 1967; 1970; Kaberry 1971; Hauser-Schäublin 1989a; 1989b; 1995; Smidt and McGuigan 1994) allows us to draw a general picture.

Every village is composed of patrilineal, virilocal and exogamous clans, and is divided into two ceremonial moieties that cross-cut the clan organisation. Each man has an official ceremonial partner (*saa<sup>m</sup>bëra*) in the opposite moiety, in the either within the village, but also in another village. These two moieties were materialised particularly during initiations, when men from one moiety would prepare and supervise the initiation of their partners' sons. In the following installment, their own sons would then be initiated by their partners. Initiations were organised in sets of four stages over the life of an individual, the entire cycle (eight stages in total, four for each moiety) covering several decades. Only a few older men (who have managed to gather the required influence and resources) underwent the final stages.

Initiations involved the isolation of the initiated during several weeks (up to a month or more), and then putting them, in the final stages, in the presence of temporary images conceived in secret by the opposite moiety. For the higher stages, these images were built inside the ceremonial house, forming an overwhelming visual complex said actively to transform the uninitiated into initiates (cf. Smidt and McGuigan 1994; Losche 1995). At the end of the initiation, the men were richly decorated, and released during a dancing ceremony on the public *ame*. Their decoration visually and materially had strong echoes with paintings on the façade of the ceremonial house, sculptures of the initiation chambers, and decorated yams themselves.

The subject of images and ritual objects particularly attracts one's attention because of their roles. As discussed by Forge (1970) and more recently by Losche

(1995), none of these images, be it the colourful paintings on the ceremonial house façade, the carved figures presented within (Hauser-Schäublin 1989b), or the composite figure of the *puti* (Smidt and McGuigan 1995) that formed the most elaborate construction of the initiation environment, were subjects of elaborated verbal exegesis. To make matters more difficult for a traditional iconographical analysis, the oral tradition among the Abelam is considered comparatively poor in comparison with neighbouring groups, who possess some very complex mythological cycles. This made impossible the provision of sufficient iconographic clues to help in the analysis of these modes of representation; but this disconnection from any verbal narrative led Anthony Forge to develop some of the most fertile and groundbreaking anthropological analyses of art and of the ritual role of images. Forge insisted in particular on studying ‘carvings and paintings as things in their own right relating to each other and the beholder, and not as mere manifestations of some other order of cultural fact such as mythology or religion’ (1966: 23). Contrasting with the then-dominant representational approach to ritual objects and figures, Forge’s investigations of ‘meaning’ led him to suggest that, in the Abelam case, ‘the meaning is not that a painting or carving is a picture or representation *of* anything in the natural or spirit world, rather it is *about* the relationship between things’ (Forge 1973: 191, original emphasis).

Forge’s final interpretation was that the ceremonial house paintings were in fact dealing with male-female relations – a theme that was then recurrent in the analysis of Sepik rituals. But, beyond this interpretation, Forge’s insights also allowed thinking through how Abelam artefacts (especially those with strong visual characteristics) played an active role in rituals. Indeed, the rich visual dimension of initiation rituals seems overtly to have been the major component of the entire aesthetic experience – even to the extent that the performances themselves (dances, songs, etc) sometimes appear to fade into the background in favour of understanding ritual as a complex artefact in itself (see Schwimmer 1990; Hobart and Kapferer 2005).

If this is accepted, both initiations and the Waapi Saaki have to be conceived as a single ‘object’, with many interlocking and interrelated components forming a kind of sense-scape, directed to the active creation of an experience meant to transform its audience. Indeed, it is as if the fact of simply being put in the physical presence of the ritual images was in itself sufficient to operate the transformations of initiates into initiated.

This particular functionality of Abelam images has been discussed on several occasions (for a recent example, see Morphy 2005), and notably reformulated in a very evocative way by Diane Losche:

Asking the Abelam what this particular design means is akin to asking, ‘What does your refrigerator mean?’ or, to reverse the issue, ‘What does your painting do?’ For the Abelam this separation between meaning and function is an inappropriate basis on which to ask a question (Losche 1995: 59).

This echoes strongly Gell’s position regarding the agency of certain visual productions, perhaps less in his last publication (1998), than in his work on the relationship between enchantment and technology (1988; 1992). The role of images, in the Abelam case, can indeed be conceived as enabling a transformative experience, as well as the materialization of forms of dispersed cosmological knowledge, at the limit of the speakable, or even the conceivable (cf. Tuzin 1995).

The absence of initiation ceremonies, of course, relates to phenomena such as conversion to the various forms of Christianity, migrations (Roscoe and Scaglione 1990) and, in Nyamikum, to discourses where hopes and representations about modernity are intertwined with mixed feelings of nostalgia and fear about earlier days. This begs another question, too vast to be treated in this chapter, but worth mentioning, which is to what extent Waapi Saaki rituals carry modes of values-reproduction, similar or different to initiations. However, what initiations tell us is that the socially active role of images is well established in this domain, not as iconic representations of a higher order but rather as a double tool: on the one hand, an actual technical apparatus, or device, aiming at a form of social efficiency; on the other, and perhaps connected, as a form of commentary on past, present and future relationships. This is, I believe, exactly the point made by long yams in Waapi Saaki.

To unpack this double nature, I suggest reaching for the source and origin of long-yam materiality, not from the angle of aesthetic or cognitive processes, nor as valuable, food or images, but from how they actually came into being. This requires bringing in discussion of techniques and objects.

### ***Rituals, techniques and objects***

Over the last 40 years, the field of material-culture studies has done a great deal to unveil the non-verbal, cognitive, social agency of objects and things, and one of the main strategies used to overcome divides and essentialisations has been to operate what could be called epistemic shifts, from essences to relations, from entities to processes.<sup>v</sup> These shifts emerged particularly from the resistance of indigenous categories to fitting into Western frameworks, and from the growing resistance from anthropologists themselves to engage in the cultural translation (treason) of these categories into new ones.

In this light, from a Melanesianist perspective it has almost become a truism that one of the dominant paradigms of indigenous ontologies is about fluidity, relationality and processes. While this has been explored in domains such that of persons (e.g. Strathern 1999), and myth (e.g. Goldman and Ballard 1998), the phenomenological level of artefacts and landscape is increasingly being submitted to the same analytical treatment (in addition to Forge's insights, see also for instance Henare, Holbraad and Wastel 2007, Leach 2002, Jeudy-Ballini and Juillérat 2002, Bell and Geismar 2009). The challenge – in many ways, culturally counter-intuitive to Western scientific endeavour – is thus to overcome the apparent givenness, static and finite nature of things (percepts) in order to address them as potentially processual entities, that is things in movement through time and in stages, as potentialities made thing, or as movements given shape and form or indeed concepts in themselves (cf. Holbraad 2011). Discussions on the biography of things, their social lives and their agency have contributed a great deal to this understanding of artefacts. In other words, one could easily say that these transformations in interpretative frames of things have both come from and confirmed the challenge to static categories used to analyse indigenous cosmologies.

The analysis of techniques has also benefited from these shifts (Mauss 1973; Schlanger 2006; Douny and Naji 2009; Ingold 2000, Warnier 2001; 2007), and brought back the question of physical engagement with materials and of their



relation to cosmology, environment, history or society. What Ganbakiya's response brings attention to – encompassing the phenomenological level – in fact provides one of the entries into the question asked by the editors of this volume, when it comes to artefacts in ritual themselves. Combined with discussions on people, this points to the processes from which artefacts originate.

Investigating what long yams are and how they are cultivated – or materialised – provides some fundamental elements in understanding how they manage effectively to occupy a central position within Nyamikum life. For this, I resort to the French anthropology of techniques, which emerged at the intersection of archaeological and anthropological questions (see Lemonnier 1993). Having changed since its original Marxian angle, which contributed to constrain 'technology' to the study of the loaded conception of 'processes of production' (Warnier 2009; Lemonnier in press), the analysis of techniques, following Mauss's programme (Schlanger 2006), can unpack the interrelated role of body, knowledge and substances in the making of the social life in artefactual forms. Using the methodological tool of the operational sequence (*chaîne opératoire*, cf. Lemonnier 1992: 25–32; Schlanger 2005), in particular, allows the observation and recording of the combination of procedures, materials and knowledge in the actual order (sequence, thus, following the local logic) in which they are performed, where and by whom. In other words, the analysis of how yams come into being provides the necessary empirical complement to analyses of the ways in which they appear and are used as substitutes for persons – that is, for relationships. It might also provide us with a better understanding of why yams (and not pigs, or shells) are the subjects of such elaborated display and of what is actually given to see, and why people make Waapi Saaki.

### *The efficacy of yam ceremonies*

The first level of interpretation, which I have discussed elsewhere (Coupaye 2009c), follows from people's own accounts. Local explanations<sup>vi</sup> of the Waapi Saaki ceremony are particularly clear about the fact that celebrating long yams, and particularly Maa<sup>m</sup>butap, opens the way for all food. Indeed, if long yams are not harvested and celebrated, then no other food can 'come out of the gardens'. In other words, the reason why all Abelam villages hold their yam ceremony is that this is required for them to be able to produce any food. While a functionalist analysis could well interpret this statement in the same way that Malinowski (1978) did in his study of Trobriand gardens, this could lead to a utilitarian vision of the ceremony, confining *waapi* to a ceremonial role, i.e. 'symbolic', a category that has too often been opposed to efficacious, thus putting long yams apart from what also make them proper food.

The rejection of functionalist premises, however, should not lead to a dismissal of the ethnographic fact that Waapi Saaki rituals carry intentions – which in turn brings in the notion of 'efficacy'. However, efficacy and intentions, instead of being only used to qualify the active nature of ritual in processes of social formation, could also be considered as more fundamental underlying principles, giving an access to indigenous conception of materiality and of metaphysics. In addition, from an analytical point of view, it is intentionality and efficacy which allowed Mauss, in his insights about rites and techniques, to move beyond classical understanding of rituals, and to point out that both share the common

features of being ‘traditional’ (i.e. transmitted, in other words as part of what a community shares and sees as somehow connected to its identity), and effective (Mauss 1968: 404; 1973: 75). The notion of efficacy, as perceived by the actors themselves, opens up the necessary conceptual space to reconsider objects as a particular entry point for an analysis of ritual. For what the ritual display of artefacts such as yams invites us to think is not only how rituals and techniques merge in a single artefact, but also how the ceremonial display pertains to processes that extend beyond the particular instance of ritual itself.

This possibility is made easier through Gell’s idea of the agency of visual things, and their capacity for enchanting (i.e. socialising, cf. Gell 1988; 1992; 1998) – in this case, decorated yams as part of the magical enchantment which the ritual imposes on the audience. However, what interests me, in this chapter, is how Gell’s notion of the technology of enchantment helps to combine the discussion of the agency of things with materiality and ritual, as well as allowing a discussion of the efficacy of ritual artefacts, without falling into the old trap of functionalism. The idea of enchantment here could be taken in a more emic sense than Gell’s cognitive slant allows us to think. As we shall see briefly, yam cultivation is made of technico-ritual actions, that is, following Mauss’s definition, both intentionally efficacious and traditional (appropriate): work, *jě<sup>m</sup>baa*, is made of a precise combination of actions on materials, substances, relationships (Coupaye 2009b, 2009c), and shrouded in *mayëra* (secrecy/sacredness/power). The display of the material result of such process is necessarily potentially powerful, especially when framed within a ritual.

I take for granted that ritual is a transformative device, which resorts to kinaesthetic and cognitive processes geared to memories, knowledge, sociality and power. In Nyamikum’s case, it means that the framing of yams in an exhibition and in a performance of ritual (re)activates forms of embodied and non-verbal types of knowledge. Shared knowledge is what connects the ritual experience to wider domains of everyday life, and transforms it into a cosmological regenerative moment that brings together body, memory, sociality, landscape and time. While this is the case in most rituals, the particular ways in which yams seem to operate, as I have claimed, rest on the fact that everybody in the audience *actually knows how to grow them*. While their size creates the necessary displacement and enchantment (i.e. frame) to bring the focus on that particular instance, everybody knows what has been done to bring them into being. In other words, the long-yam ceremony, because of the techniques the massive tuber instantiates for their audience, does not deal with the revelation of anything particularly secret;<sup>vii</sup> but it does suggest something about the metaphysical nature of what is at work behind the gardening practices from which they emerge, which in themselves have a ritualistic quality that is not confined to the ceremony itself. The regenerative process of the ritual might be more about creating new relationships with old ones, using this very ceremonial moment as a point of contact between domains (human, non-human, dead, living, initiates/non-initiates, and so forth) in order to “fuel” this regeneration, than about creating new knowledge or cosmology. It is more about recombining than creating. This, I suggest could invite us to consider the entire technical system as being a year-long ritual, of which the Waapi Saaki is but one stage – though a crucial one that resonates throughout the entire cycle –, coalescing into a specific artefact: the yam.

### *Techniques as social relationships: yams in the garden*

As mentioned above, the study of technical processes ('technology', cf. Sigaut 2002; Coupaye 2009b; Schlanger 2006: 2-3), has often been reduced to the study of 'processes of production', in which the second term came with a long historical, economical and anthropological past. While the Marxian terminology has been useful for developing an analysis of indigenous relations of production, it is fair to say that its contribution to our understanding of things in themselves is more directed towards how the social value of artefacts is conditioned by the social relations of production, rather to what their materiality is composed of, and what the emic logic is governing this process. That yams are objectifications of relations of production is hardly questionable. But this still leaves at least three other questions largely unanswered: why people choose that particular object to be imbued with such an important role, as well as how do they actually imbue it, and of course, what with.

Yams are the plants that receive most attention over the agricultural cycle (cf. Lea 1964; Coupaye 2010, forthcoming). Two main species of yams are cultivated: *Dioscorea esculenta*, 'short' yams, called *ka* (or 'mami' in Tok Pisin), and *Dioscorea alata*, 'long' yams, *waapi* (or 'yam' in Tok Pisin). Each is associated with a particular type of garden. Small yams are cultivated in opened gardens, planted by a work party of the hamlet's inhabitants (often from the gardener's clan), and associated with a host of other intercropped species (such as taro, beans and peanuts). The crops are cared for by the gardener and his wife. Long yams are cultivated in fenced and more secluded gardens, away from major footpaths, along with a smaller number of intercropped plants. Officially forbidden to women, only the gardener himself and his male allies, are normally allowed to enter the garden. As already mentioned, among the dozens of cultivars used by cultivators, the most valued is the Maa<sup>m</sup>butap.

There is no space here to describe the entire operational sequence,<sup>viii</sup> but to investigate how *waapi*, as finished products, instantiate past relationships requires one to modify slightly the conventional use of the *chaîne opératoire*. In its original use, and for archaeologists, the notion has been mostly helpful in revealing technical variations and choices (cf. Lemonnier 1992; Schlanger 2005). The documentation of these choices was a way both to debunk narrow perceptions of technical facts and to illustrate how the question of differences between techniques and society was a moot one. In the English-speaking domain, this intertwining has been attributed to the combined work of science and technology studies and actor-network theory (ANT – see for instance Latour 1993B). It must be said, though, that at the end of the 1980s proponents of ANT such as Bruno Latour were engaged in collaborations and discussions about technology with anthropologists such as Pierre Lemonnier, along with other members of the French group *Technologie Culturelle* (stemming from the work of Leroi-Gourhan), (cf. Coupaye and Douny 2010), leading to ANT largely benefited from anthropological insights (Latour and Lemonnier 1994).

In the case of yams, I used operational sequence to document the processes that led to the making of an artefact, while following not a positivist, agronomic line, but rather dimensions and processes that cultivators consider essential to their success. As a result, the ethnography of yam cultivation reveals the complex

intertwining of several elements of the gardeners' reality (cf. Coupaye 2009b; 2009c) occurring over the agricultural cycle.

Some material dimensions of the techniques differ depending on the types of yams. Short yams are planted in relatively shallow holes, covered by a small mound of soil; one tuber set (the germinated tuber) will produce several others. The yam vine is a single climber staked on a vertical pole. The long-yam sett, on the other hand, is planted on top of a large mound, built up from a deep hole which has been previously dug and then refilled with soft soil, in order to create a bed of softer soil. The set produces a long vine which will branch out into several more, all carefully laid on a horizontal trellis and checked every day as they grow. Reaching the end of this trellis, they are trained up a vertical one.<sup>ix</sup> In addition, precautions are taken to ensure that the plant will yield only one new tuber, which will grow down through the softer soil of the mound and into the bed.

Nevertheless what the analysis of the operational sequence shows is that, in spite of some differences, the cultivation and display of long yams cannot be entirely separated from the cultivation of short ones. The classic ethnological label of 'ceremonial yams' has in fact been highly problematic, in not only reproducing a Western-like form of opposition between ceremonial and functional (i.e. ritual and technical), but also concealing the web of technical and spatial – in other words empirical – relationships between the two species of short and long yams, and the places, crops and techniques of their cultivation.

These relationships are exemplified in different ways. Some long yams are planted within the short-yam garden (and vice versa), implying the same type of devices and processes but also following local conceptions of plant sociality – no plant can grow alone, and requires the support of others. Obviously, elements such as body techniques (in which I would include not only the gestures and actions concerning materials, but also the set of behavioural prescriptions and proscriptions aiming at controlling the cultivator's body substances) are used in both gardens. Even more so, these techniques are part of other types of operation, pointing out the systemic nature of technical processes (see Gille 1979; Lemonnier 1992: 8–11); <sup>x</sup> it also means that certain values and properties attributed to particular operations on materials in yam cultivation are at play in others. For instance, penis bloodletting, as a way to get rid of bodily substances nefarious to the gardener's efficacy, is said to be among the first operations to take place before planting long yams, but it is also required for initiation, as well as before painting, hunting or a football game. But less dramatic techniques are used in both gardens, such as using a digging stick, starting a work session in a garden by lighting a fire in the garden shelter, sleeping or eating periodically in the garden, or joking with friends and family while taking a break from garden work, are also considered as an integral part of the process, influencing the success of the harvest.

Some materials, such as seeds, shoots and sets planted within the long-yam garden in fact originate in the short-yam gardens, of which they are explicitly construed as material extensions. The land itself provides a pervasive and dominant paradigm in Abelam sociality (cf. Huber-Greub 1988; 1990), substantially, conceptually and spatially connecting the gardener and his clan with its reproductive capacity, as land itself is said to recognise its owner and to allow him (or not) to grow things in it.

Other connections with domains outside the long-yam garden involve visible or invisible substances (such as those used as fertilisers, cf. Forge 1962) and agents (such as water-spirits, ancestral figures and earthworms), as well as sociality (relationships between opposite sexes, and between and within hamlets and villages, exchanges with the living and the dead – for instance, verbal exchanges during regular public gatherings are said to provide the ‘heat’ necessary for the procreative power of garden, cf. Coupaye 2007a). Such connections are also elicited in the material decorative elements used on displayed *waapi*, presenting a general composition (in a material and visual sense) which associates long yams, initiates, figures painted on the front of the ceremonial house, carvings used in initiation settings, called *wapinyan* (‘children of the yams’, cf. Forge 1966: 24).

All these different components draw in, originate from or connect with sets of relationships and domains that gardeners consider as technically efficacious – delineating a form of metaphysics. Although these components are required in order to obtain a satisfying result in the form of a long, straight yam, it is only through the cultivator’s knowledge and ability to manipulate, negotiate and mix them that the required specific agencies coalesce, and are objectified in the form of the harvested tuber. Because yam-cultivation techniques are about merging substances, agents and sociality, matters that connect to local cosmological, material and social understandings, they indeed have the capacity to invoke powerful emotions in the Waapi Saaki audience – but in turn this makes a strong statement about society.

What the *chaîne opératoire* renders visible to the researcher is thus the mixing of different domains, relations established through body techniques and social relationships, which are not visible in the finished product but which nevertheless underlie its further use. It also shows that operations conceptualised by Western analyses as either exclusively ‘material’ or ‘non-material’ are in fact tightly interwoven within the social fabric of the artefact. This strongly evokes ANT’s approach, even more so that the yam could be construed indeed as an hybrid between Society and Nature, between a ceremonial artefact imbued with symbolic values – making it a valuable – and a botanical species requiring certain climatic conditions and agronomical techniques – imbuing it with nutritive qualities.<sup>xi</sup> So, the next question could be: is a yam a materialised network, perhaps?

### ***Cutting the network in order to give it to see***

In a famous paper that tackles the ANT concept of network, Strathern (1996) provides me here with the necessary imagination to outline what is given to see during the Waapi Saaki. Long yams are particularly beautiful, efficacious to display, and good to think, because, in fact, they are – and *not only* in the mind of the anthropologist – social (technical) relationships, or a network of humans and nonhuman domains temporarily brought to a halt. For a brief moment, the fluidity, the uncertainty, the contradictions are stopped, concretised and make things, in order to be glimpsed by those who experience them during the course of their everyday life.

In other words, yams originate from the technical combination of different social, spatial cosmological sources, and thus form condensed images of procreativity. Stemming from human agency, sociality and negotiations, they allow the transference of the invisible power of ancestors (procreativity) into an immanent

and detachable (thus consumable) form. This is, I suggest, what is revealed during the Waapi Saaki, to be seen, and ready for being exchanged, consumed and replanted. Being the vegetal result of procreativity, they are thus the epitome of all food, celebrating the efficacy of all gardening processes and the future harvests.

But this could be said of many artefacts, and my demonstration would only have a methodological value, if I was not also bringing the attention to the fact that, for the Abelam, the choice of yam is far from being incidental.

The agronomist, linguist and anthropologist André-Georges Haudricourt (Ozanne-Rivierre and Rivierre 1995), in two articles that have become famous (at least in French circles), brilliantly pointed out two important features of relationships with plants, and how these relationships are relevant to the understanding of social forms. First, he pointed to the correlation between how people interact with plants and how they interact with each other, notably through processes of domestication but also through agronomic techniques (1987a). Second, Haudricourt demonstrated how, in Melanesia, yams constitute a form of paradigm for clans, social relationships and human beings (1987b), which is confirmed by the pervasiveness of yams in Abelam metaphors and sociality (Tuzin 1972; Scaglione 1999; Coupaye 2007a). The iterative nature of the agricultural year – of which the ceremonial part is but one operation within the entire sequence – re-instantiates over time the paradigmatic nature of human/plant relationships, based on ontological constructions (see Descola 2005: 145–62). This dynamic procedure, anchored in material relationships, allows for processes of trialling, inventing and/or discovering old and new forms of conceptual *bricolage*, for comments, and for passing from agronomic techniques to social processes, and vice versa.

This is made possible, Haudricourt pointed out, because yams, as botanical species, have a mode of reproduction, differing from many other vegetable species within the Melanesian environment. It is through vegetative reproduction, that is the cutting (or dispersal) of a germinated tuber, that new tubers are produced. Each of these new tubers of the same cultivar are, in fact clones of the original sett, and of each other (Burkill 1951, Haudricourt 1987b: 288). All are, in fact extension of the same individual vegetal. This particularity is shared by a number of other cultivated plants, most with some symbolic dimensions, such as the taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) or the cordyline (*Cordyline fruticosa*). Because all the specimens presented are clones of the same vegetal individual, they also make visible variations, no longer as the result of some invisible uncontrollable process, but as material instantiations of the gardener's skill, capacity and sociality. It implies that the cultivator – as is not the case with other types of crop – knows that in case of a bad harvest, only the soil, his cultivation process and the weather can be considered responsible, Haudricourt remarked (*ibid*).

Thus, during the Waapi Saaki, the audience's attention and evaluations goes through the material result, towards the technical process – not as production process but as ways of recruiting, engaging and combining relations –, now invisible but known to all. While yams as clones and their mode of reproduction have been interpreted as a fantasy of male parthenogenesis (Tuzin 1995: 300), I feel that over-emphasising the a-sexual reproductive capacity of cloned yams would miss another part of the ontology they manifest: the botanical property of the vegetal species itself. Cloning is not only a materialising process of

multiplying and diversifying the same original. It could also be providing a sort of ‘neutral ground’ to make visible the fact that social reproduction also requires long-term human agency.

Yams, displayed so as to be seen, as a conflation of relationships, evaluated and commented upon, can thus be seen as a form of Abelam non-verbal comment on society – a form of sociology. This is made possible not only because of the ceremonial context in which they appear, but also because they instantiate, within the garden, a process at work within society. It is also made possible because both initiations and Waapi Saaki rituals work by equating, and placing on the same conceptual plane, yams, clans, human beings, ancestors, hamlets and villages. Through the collapsing of these fluid entities through ritual display and performance, it shows how everything reproduces and is made material through the manipulation of cosmological forces – potentially dangerous and opposed, but brought together through the agency of human beings and their capacity to negotiate passageways, bridges between different cosmological domains.

In other words, the yam indeed provides what could correspond to a form of Abelam sociology, not only because of the pervasiveness of its metaphorical dimensions, but also because its socio-technical grounding throughout the agricultural year provides people with the means they need to interpret and to comment on the value of the sociality-made-thing displayed during the Waapi Saaki. In the end, yams, clans, human beings, carvings, ancestors can all be considered as clones, whose particularity is to emphasise how it is techniques – in their most mundane forms (and not only through beautiful objects) – which constitute sociality through matter, essential to social reproduction. It is this centrality of technical processes, as a comment on yam metaphysics, which I believe is displayed in the Waapi Saaki.

In turn, long-yam rituals can be seen as recreating in their audience metaphysical bridges or channels, not only at the particular moment of the ritual but throughout the entire operational sequence of yam cultivation, that allow people to produce food during the entire year, and to regenerate society. This is possible because techniques are embodied socialisation, while also calling to cosmological domains constantly reactivated, checked and readjusted in order to maintain their efficacy. The intertwining of representations with acting on the material (whose reality and efficacy is to be seen, eaten and shared through yams) can be seen as an emanation of technical practices (in a Maussian purest senses) throughout the agricultural year, and as spilling over into domains of existence through the multiple passages (materials, substances, agents, sociality) created by the technical system.

### ***Conclusion: an attempt at putting initiation and yam ceremonies in perspective***

Like in the initiations, the display of *waapi* does have a revelatory power. By tying up together (giving it shape) a “snapshot” of past relationships, the potential to create other ones (exchanges, compensations, new tubers, new food, new cultivation processes), and the embodied knowledge of how these have already occurred and will happen again during the next cycle, Waapi Saaki offers a fugitive but holographic glimpse of the complexity of social processes. As with initiations images that reveal the tuber-like nature of humans, clans, hamlets, villages (in a fractal way), it could be that yams enable the revealing of the human-

made nature of social relationships, and the possibility of their enduring agency through time.

What exhibiting *waapi* does is bringing to light, in a framed circumstance, images of sociality, as well as providing people with specific social forms to think through. Instantiating ('made in an instant') processes that are known, even if experienced in a messy, fluid and fuzzy way, it simultaneously makes present what has been done before, and announces what will happen: the harvesting of the food made possible by human agency on, and commerce with, the world and the nurturing of the community with the social relationships they are able to recreate. If the audience is transformed, it is through the renewal and confirmation of its capacity to generate social relationships. Ultimately, it is not so much ancestors or supernatural entities who create society but rather human beings themselves.

And what of the initiations? While it is difficult to interpret the absence of initiations within the scope of this chapter, I would suggest some kind hypothesis of how to relate them to the Waapi Saaki. Both rituals carry similar commentaries about sociality, through formal and conceptual echoes of yam cultivation and display. Both are processes of social reproduction; both equate human beings and yams, but also work by adding ancestors, clans and the dead to the process. The appearance of yams – like the appearance of decorated initiates – corresponds to the recursive coming-into-being of ancestral entities whose materialisation is in fact the result of mixed agencies: humans themselves as an instantiation of these non-human entities, and the distributed forms of those powers in the physical and social landscape. Thus both ceremonies make manifest ancestral powers, which are summoned to participate in this cosmo(re)genesis, by reaffirming simultaneously their transient nature, and their enduring temporality – as yams are the same (in)dividual repeated over and over each cycle. In the case of initiations, the materialisation of ancestors leads to the making of elaborate images and figures, notably inside the ceremonial house. At the end of the initiation, once they had been put in the presence with these images, initiates were released into the world, dressed as ancestors themselves or as yams. In the Waapi Saaki case, long yams are also, at one level, images of ancestors, made manifest through the use of iconographic clues (such as masks, colours and the general structure of the decoration), and at another level are the actual manifestations of ancestral procreativity through their nature as 'relations-made-things'. In both cases, the return of ancestors has to be made temporary by human agency – as exemplified by the aggressiveness of *puyaa* dancers welcoming both the yams and, I was told, the initiates, which act both as a warning and a welcoming of these powerful entities.

Again following Forge's suggestions, initiations and the Waapi Saaki ritual are mostly about the relationships between things. But the transformation of relationships into things does not happen only at a dramatic moment of the ceremony. What the ceremonies show is that it has occurred before that, over the course of the agricultural year, through the everyday *routine* (operational sequence) of garden work and social engagements that it requires, and it also carries the hope that it will remain so.

What the Waapi Saaki ritual do – following what Gilbert Lewis demonstrates (1980: 30) – is to isolate the yams and focus attention on them. It surrounds them with special features that 'frame' them, and that alert the attention of the spectators. In turn, the ritual invites them to discover aspects and relationships that



are 'otherwise too ordinary to see', but whose nature as 'ordinary' is the actual stuff of everyday life. Through the ritual enchantment of yams during the Waapi Saaki, the entire technical process is enchanted too, making yam cultivation a whole-year ritual. The ritual enchants the technical process in both directions, past and future. The past, as it confirms what everybody knows about the ways yams – as society – come into being; the future, as yams contain potential relationships that can only be released once the display has been done. In between, the Waapi Saaki can be seen as a sort of turning point, which brings attention to yams as the fugitive instantiation of the transient and fluid nature of past and future sociality.

Yams frame the ritual as much as ritual frames yams.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Literally ‘Big Man’, but also ‘big brother’. These are older men who have a preeminent position in the village’s collective decision-making processes (cf. Godelier and Strathern 1991).

<sup>ii</sup> This ceremony is further described and illustrated in Coupaye 2007b and in Coupaye, forthcoming.

<sup>iii</sup> The division is mine, based on comparison between 10 different venues.

<sup>iv</sup> There are different types of *Waapi Saaki* dances, not all of which exclude women. The *Kaagu*, though, is said to be specific to *Maa<sup>m</sup>butap* yams, while ceremonies for other types of cultivars can involve different types of dance.

<sup>v</sup> While this can be traced back to Lévi-Strauss’s adaptation of Roman Jakobson’s phonology to kinship (Lévi-Strauss 1974: 46), among many recent instances of such analytical shifts one remembers Latour’s (1993), from society/nature to the semi-objects that proliferate in between, or Melanesianists’ shifts from individual/society to sociality (Strathern 1988)

<sup>vi</sup> Such explanations, I believe, would benefit from taking seriously Wittgenstein’s discussion of Frazer’s interpretation of magic (Wittgenstein 1982; de Lara 2005).

<sup>vii</sup> As Barth (1975) points out, secrecy is less about an actual content than a form of cloaking device, in itself a symbolic-creation process.

<sup>viii</sup> Cf. Coupaye 2009a; 2009b; 2010 for partial descriptions.

<sup>ix</sup> In fact, because the gardens are set on slopes, the entire structure is more oblique, than horizontal, including the vertical one. The shape of the long yam trellis has some formal (and architectonic) echo in the famous ceremonial house described and analysed in the literature (cf. Hauser-Schäublin 1989a; Coupaye 2009a).

<sup>x</sup> For instance, using a hammer to drive in a nail can be seen in the processes of building a barn, fixing a painting on a wall, or crucifying a human being.

<sup>x</sup> This repartition – or as Latour would say, ‘purification’ – is particularly visible when doing a literature review the particular topic of yams in Melanesia. The review shows a clear distinction between works concentrating, on the one hand, on geographical, botanical and agronomical aspects of yam cultivation and, on the other hand, anthropological investigation of their symbolic, social or, ritual dimensions, with little passage between each (Coupaye, forthcoming).

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