

TRICKERY AND SACRIFICE:  
TAMBARANS AND THE APPROPRIATION OF FEMALE  
REPRODUCTIVE POWERS IN MALE  
INITIATION CEREMONIES IN WEST NEW BRITAIN

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Examining sacrifice in male initiation rituals in West New Britain, this article analyses the relationship between art and power and in particular that cultural ontology and sociality inscribed and emergent from a use of artistry. Criticising an exclusive reliance on the transcendental truth ontology of the West with its notion of the sacred, this article explores the construction of social relations within an immanent culture which recognises the necessity for fictions. These fictions, this art of tambarans, is seen to have its mythical origins in women; with male rituals now celebrating the theft and usurpation of the ordering and generative power of these artistic illusions.

*We have need of lies* in order to conquer this reality, this ‘truth’, that is, in order to *live* – That lies are necessary in order to live is itself part of the terrifying and questionable character of existence ... To solve it, man must be a liar by nature. He must be above all an *artist* ... In those moments in which man was deceived, in which he duped himself, in which he believes in life: oh how enraptured he feels! What delight! What a feeling of power! How much artists triumph in the feeling of power! – Man has once again become master of *material* – master of truth! – And whenever man rejoices, he is always the same in his rejoicing: he rejoices as an artist, he enjoys himself as power, he enjoys the lie as his form of power ... But truth does not count as the supreme value, even less as the supreme power. The will to appearance, to illusion, to deception, to becoming and change (to objectified deception) here counts as more profound, primeval, ‘metaphysical’ than the will to truth, to reality ... that if there is anything that is to be worshipped it is *appearance* that must be worshipped, that the lie – and *not* the truth – is divine! (Nietzsche 1968: 451-3, 523).

*Illusion and the politics of ritual form in any immanent culture*

In this article my focus is the male tambaran *Varku*, belonging to the bush people of the Kaliai census vision of West New Britain (cf. Counts 1968: 181). Through *Varku* I explore how the concept of sacrifice is constituted in an immanent culture where procreation provides the symbolic language of power (Weiner 1978; 1980; Eves 1988). I begin by analysing the myths surrounding *Varku*. They provide the cultural schemes formative of a lived reality with a particular experience of power (Kapferer 1988). Mythic narratives disseminate in a condensed form an ontology of social relatedness which is constitutive of the meaning of sacrificial ritual practice. Here I follow Kapferer who

argues that the structure of events in myths contains an ontology 'which governs the constitution and reconstitution of being in some rituals' (1988: 79). By ontology I mean the cultural schemes (the logic of the categories and narratives) through which people orient themselves to the world and organise the horizons of their experience of existence. To the extent that an ontology shapes forms of human engagement it operates ideologically. My firm conviction is that (in any analysis of an ethnography) sacrifice should be grounded in indigenous ontologies rather than in some ahistorical transcendental schema or 'grammar' of sacrificial ritual form (such as in Hubert & Mauss 1964). Only then can we explore the constitutive meanings people give to sacrifice rather than incorporating them into our formalistic or everyday metaphors of sacrifice and the foreign ontologies implied by our metaphors (de Heusch 1985: 1-6, 17,23; Valeri 1985: 64; Van Baal 1976).

Utilising some of the insights of feminist anthropology, this article seeks to undo some of the culture-bound assumptions of present anthropology (*cf.* Strathern 1985; 1987). My major argument is that only by first understanding the culture of ritual form can proper sense be made of what occurs within that form – such as a symbolic death or sacrifice. To analyse ritual form is to analyse the functioning of the imaginative in society. More specifically, ritual form in the Kaliai bush is part of a culture of male trickery formative of the asymmetrical nature of all social, especially gender, relations. Male deception and trickery against women are central to nearly all major Kaliai rituals. Establishing the 'reality' of these lies spills over into everyday life, creating a cynical conspiratorial solidarity between men (*cf.* Herdt 1982; Langness 1974; Read 1952; Tuzin 1974: 338; Van Baal 1963). Deception is a pervasive feature of everyday life. Older men articulate their dominance over younger men by telling them false or abbreviated origin myths or jumbled combinations of many stories that do not contain the correct secret names. Adults often trick children into believing that certain bush spirits will eat them if they misbehave. Trickery is especially directed at people from other villages and government officials. Deception also features prominently in magic, the efficacy of which often operates by tricking evil spirits away from objects or persons they may harm by providing them with deceptively real substitutes. In general, trickery is not devalorised but is celebrated for its ordering properties, for its life-promoting nature. Trickery represents the cultural articulation and production of power and sociality through the imaginary.

This empowerment of present sociality through fictions is also the work of tambarans. By tambarans I refer in this article to those illusions of monstrous being produced by men during initiation rituals. Ritual tambarans take a variety of forms. Some take the visible form of masks (*i.e.* tumbuans), others take the form of loud sounds, but all are produced secretly by men. Men view ritual tambarans as tricks. Secret male mythology assigns their origins to women, with men forcibly acquiring and depriving women of the knowledge of their production. During initiation rituals, women are told by men what men perceive as a lie, namely that a tambaran ate their children but because the tambaran had previously been given a pig to eat it had overeaten and had vomited out the initiates. Initiates are swallowed into the tambaran's stomach, some also say into his womb.

Much discussion of Melanesian ethnography has focused on whether women are taken in by such male trickery. This is a complex issue that requires a paper all of its own. For the time being I point out: (1) that often the formulation of the problem as one of

whether women know or do not know participates in western rationalist formulations of the problem of knowledge. It creates a binary, mutually exclusive, relationship between knowledge and ignorance, truth and falsity, reality and illusion, which does not do justice to cultural ontologies within which power is acknowledged as producing both the 'real' and itself out of fictions. It also ignores: (2) that women do not know all the secret operations of male rituals; (3) that this cult of secrecy articulates a cultural positioning of men as superior to women by articulating an ideology of women as foolishly naive; and (4) that what is important with respect to power is not so much 'actual' full secrecy, 'actual' knowledge, as the ideology of knowledge and secrecy as a social and cultural relationship.

When we treat knowledge as an abstract and absolute state we ignore the wider ontological issues bound up with deception, which have to do with the meaningful constitutive role of images in social relationships; that is, we ignore the constitutive nature of appearances in relationship to social reality. Male deceptions assume a reality within the context of social relationships. They are culturally responded to *as if* they were real. Though male deceptions are often dismissed and trivialised by the men who produce them, nevertheless they are viewed to be a significant constitutive part of ritual form. Indeed, a ritual would have no significant form without the meaningful content of male lies. These provide the ritual with its narrative structure. Lies provide the exegesis for ritual form, shaping and informing the ritual experience of men who in other contexts assert the deception and illusory nature of that ritual form. Illusion is never dismissed as non-meaning (Van Baal 1976: 177). In mask-burning ceremonies for example, men (along with women) will cry for the tumbuan masks they expel, which men often assert secretly are nothing but a deception. At the same time as men assert the hegemonic power through trickery, they are also incorporated into the public meanings of the lies they tell. I want to emphasise this, for reality and illusion are not mutually exclusive opposites as in our ontology of truth, but two interdependent domains of meaning for interpreting ritual form. Their dynamic operation opens up an indigenous cultural space of *double readings* through which I re-examine the concept of sacrifice and its relationship to political power.

#### *Sacrifice and the politics of ritual form in an immanent culture*

Sacrifice is generally defined as a relation between humanity and the sacred mediated by the transformative properties of death (Cassirer 1955: 219-31; Hubert & Mauss 1964; Lienhardt 1961: 291-7; Stanner 1963: 4; Valeri 1985: 62-70). In cultures such as our own where the sacred is absolute and transcendental, positioned as outside and over and above the secular, then the *mediating* properties of the sacrifice relative to the sacred are easy to establish conceptually. But how does one deal with or can one even talk about sacrifice in immanent cultures, such as those in the bush Kaliai area, where one finds no privileged transcendental realm alongside the present? If there is no sacred outside the cosmos then how can sacrifice play a mediating role to the sacred: what would it mediate with? Can one talk about sacrifice in cultures where religion is grounded and constituted through the immanent; can one even talk about the sacred? Moreover, how does one think about a sacrifice directed towards illusory beings which are often dismissed as tricks? What does the sacrifice realise in an immanent culture where it is not addressed to a positioned absolute outside truth but to the immanent social reality of fictions?

Such questions raise the general issue of how religious ontologies are ideologically constituted in immanent cultures. They also raise the related issue of how power is produced and circulated in a context where it lacks the sanctioning referential realm of a privileged sacred exterior which is prior to and the moral precondition for all power. Such privileged and privileging referential realms are instead posited as existing immanently within the formative processes of the world. What is striking about the bush Kaliai area is that the original time of mythic creation is perceived by men as one of the origin of deceptions, namely the creation of tumbuan masks and tambarans. The art of this culture (in particular its painting, dancing and music) revolves around the manufacture and circulation of these illusions. Those illusions operate as a privileged and privileging realm of reference for male political power, linking it intimately with the form-giving powers of artistry. Indeed, I would argue that these sublime tambaranic lies are an artistic instantiation of the form-giving operations of the mythic time of cosmogenesis. Mythic cosmogenesis is collapsed into artistic trickery, and this is why lies and origins are so strikingly linked together in mythology and ritual. The deceptive reality of art is positioned as inseparable from the cosmogonic creation of social reality.

Lies have the same liminality which characterises the original mythic time of creation. Mythic time inaugurates the present world, it stands not so much outside as on the borders, the threshold of the existing world. It can never be fully identical with the time that follows it, that of the present world, because it is its source, its transformational point of origin. Its uniqueness lies in its form-giving nature. Likewise, lies also are not of the world and yet of it. To the extent that lies suggest a falsification of the world, lies give the semblance of surpassing the world in an imaginative positing of its possibilities. They articulate a denial of the world, yet lies have to be circulated in the world if they are to intervene and have any effect upon the world. Through the ordering power of fictions and their ability to shape the actions and intentions of the individuals, lies are able to give form to the world. Bush Kaliai myths concerning the origins of ritual lies are asserting the cosmogonic nature of lies, that lies are originary and constitutive of social reality. Inscribed in the mythic genesis of sociality out of the lie is also perhaps a recognition of myths as generative fictions. Myths involving the genesis of sociality out of the lie are perhaps making reflexive statements about the formative and compositional nature of their own imaginative operations. Often a knowledgeable old man would begin narrating his myth of cosmogenesis with the opening phrase: 'This is a little lie belonging to me'.

Bush Kaliai myths revolve around the origin of profound deceptions, deep lies: their depth being in part an effect of their historicisation in myth. Though the lie is no doubt a fiction of the present, it must be nevertheless through myth primordialised to have power as a fiction. Its location in the past is the ideological process of constituting it as originary, as generative of the present. The lie is positioned as a 'primordial' force at work in the present which men are condemned to repeat in order to sustain its being, its 'history'. Unlike a 'real' being which might have an unproblematic reproductive existence in and of itself, an illusory being requires continual enactment, repetition and representation. Its monstrousness resides in the continual labour of simulation required to stage and sustain its ordering power.

Bush Kaliai religions weave together these two originary powers of the imagination, that of mythic cosmogenesis and that of the generative power of lies. Only through reference to these originary powers is it possible to understand what sacrifice

addresses in the immanent cultures of the Kaliai bush. Sacrifice becomes a symbolic death whose *enactment* and *stimulation* is what is important. The death it involves is transformative through being an *artistic* summoning, a *fictitious* resurrection of primordial form-giving forces. These ordering generative form-giving forces of sociogenesis are within mythology bound up with women's procreative powers. Her trickery is both an instantiation of her procreative powers and yet also a way of surpassing the immanent corporeality of the world and of woman in the generative powers of artistic illusion-which women created.

Through artistry women disembodied the process of procreation, allowing it to escape the materiality of her own procreative being and to enter the world of fictions. This disembodied procreative power is the cosmogenic power (i.e. form-giving power) of the imaginative lies she created.

This is what tambarans represent. They artistically enact and symbolise these form-giving procreative powers of woman and to that extent tambarans assume a sublime form. The ritual killing and eating of pigs and taro in bush Kaliai tambaran rituals is not a sacrifice to a sacred outside, to a sacred transcendentalism, or to a God, but to illusory beings, to male deceptions located inside the world, which have the power to mime the original primordial powers of procreation. These tambaranic illusions are imaginary wombs, which are artistically fashioned in the image of the original cassowary creator. Through a cult of sacrifice directed at tambaranic beings men articulate a unity with the cassowary creator and can become reborn in its imaginary likeness.<sup>1</sup> They symbolically lay claim to its procreative powers via the procreative powers of simulation which women created.

Through sacrificial rituals with the imagery of death and rebirth men can escape the spectre that in the everyday it is women who give birth. Through these initiation rituals men lay artistic claim to the primordial procreative powers of the original act of creation, which men now mimetically reproduce as the secret deceptions and lies of ritual form. Initiation rituals operate as rites of usurpation, representing a sexual struggle over the act of procreation as the primordial act of power which must be artistically usurped by men. Initiation rituals as sacrifices are 'key' texts to this ontology of immanent religions where procreation and trickery are the sites and idioms of gender power.

According to myth, women and not men originally held all tambarans and were their artistic origin. That and women's procreative capacity in childbirth haunts men with the spectre that it is women that emblematically embody true creative procreation, men being merely the appropriators within the imaginary of that procreative power (cf. Ortner 1974; Young 1987: 229). It is this ontology and aesthetics of power, this cultural relationship of male power to female artistry and trickery, that is to the procreative powers of simulation women created, that I want to explore in the next sections via the ideas and myths surrounding the tambaran Varku.

### *Stealing women's wombs: the gender politics of mythology and ritual form*

In the bush Kaliai area, Varku is composed of a bullroarer and a painted wooden mask. His role is to avenge breaches of custom. He ritually punishes and restores transgressors back to the social order they violated (Counts 1968: 181-15). Varku is one of the most secret and powerful of that pantheon of tambarans which men's houses are capable of invoking as the basis of patriarchal power. He is identified with and responsible for

ritually erecting the men's house's central post, which is said to be all that will be left standing of a village that reveals his secret to women.<sup>2</sup> Varku often cries menacingly in the bush at the edge of a village, warning women to fetch wood, water and food for the men's house they might have neglected. Men often say that without their possession of Varku, women would become *bikhet* (i.e. stubborn and disobedient), lazy and sexually promiscuous. Similar comments are also made about young men. Social order is asserted to rest on Varku's terror, his monstrous threat to consume transgressors (Counts 1968: 152; cf. Tuzin 1974: 324, 331).

Despite the fragmentary, often contradictory, and unevenly distributed nature of male mythic knowledge, most bush Kaliai men share the secret myth about tambarans' female origins. It is centred on the male ancestor Kowdok. He is named after a bird called *Kow* in pidgin. Kowdok is also the name and totemic symbol of a matrilineal clan belonging to the moiety of *Liklik Pisin*. In some myths Kowdok discovers and groups together all the other totemic matri-clans belonging to *Liklik Pisin*.

Significantly, *Liklik Pisin* moiety is gendered female. Its complementary opposite, *Bikpela Pisin*, is gendered male. Nearly all the major male mythic heroes of this culture belong to the female gendered moiety. Their symbolic femaleness resonates with the generative nature of the transformations they enact. Kowdok is one such mythic operator. He is not the original creator, the cassowary, but a second-order creator who some say came up from the cassowary's left-hand wing. His totemically ascribed femaleness accords with the left-hand side in general being gendered female as opposed to the right-hand side which is male. The right-hand side *odoung* or *lokono* also means something correct or straight, and within this symbolic gender coding of spatial opposition female left-handedness becomes irregularity, that which is different or opposite to orthodox normality. In everyday life men often trace disputes between themselves to women, seeing women as mischievous disturbers of established order and correctness. Kowdok's symbolic femaleness and left-hand origins extends upon this construction of woman with him being yet another great reverser of an original created order. Not accepting the established order of things, referred to often in pidgin as *man bilong sakim tok* (i.e. as a person who disobeys and goes his/her own way), Kowdok gives birth to a new age.

Kowdok's symbolic femaleness is iconic with his great mythological fame, which is to have stolen from women and given to men the tambarans through which men in initiation rituals give rebirth to themselves. Kowdok thus represents the original male appropriator of female reproductive powers. Physically male, he is symbolically female, his very person representing a unity of gender opposites. He gives embodied strength to the symbolically, female aspects of personhood.

Kowdok's ancestral role of inaugurating a new order has its poetic or metaphorical equivalents in everyday life where Kowdok is the small bird which 'marks time' singing just before dawn and night. Its voice symbolically prefigures those major transformations in the perceptual experience of time which are the basis of major changes in human activity as people wake up to go to work or go to sleep. Kowdok is also the bird which foretells the future, conveying information and warnings before things happen. It foretells rain, death, messages, the killing of pigs, the coming of visitors and possible danger. In short, its meanings open out onto a time and a state of affairs other than the immediate present. This bird is said to be the *ano* (a word meaning shadow, reflection, spirit, totem) of Kowdok, with some saying Kowdok became this bird when he died.

In ancestral time, Kowdok was the person who got rid of all the original trees which had narrow trunks; he also got rid of human immortality. Before humans had webbed feet and hands; it was Kowdok when building the first men's house who separated the fingers and toes. However, Kowdok is best known by men for their secret knowledge that he reversed gender control over tambarans. According to male mythology, originally men and not women had breasts. Women gave birth to children but men assumed the now maternal role of breast-feeding and looking after them. Women in turn originally had beards which men did not grow (cf. Young 1987: 229). This original time is androgynous: characterised by certain physical and role reversals through which men are feminised and women assume a more masculinised form.<sup>3</sup> Men talk about this time as privileging women, for men assumed the more menial role of caring for infants subject to the debilitating polluting effects of their urine and faeces. Women consolidated the subordinate position of men through tambarans, establishing the rule of matriarchy by gaining the privileging knowledge of trickery as the basis of power.

Secret male mythology assigns the origin of tambarans to Kewak, who is either the wife but more often the sister of Kowdok. According to myth, Kewak was breaking firewood with a stone axe when a piece of wood flew off making a humming noise. It occurred to Kewak that if she bored a hole and tied a string to this piece of wood she could reproduce its sounds, thus creating the tambaran Varku.

Women kept men ignorant of the illusory reality of Varku, telling men that Varku was a real being which belonged exclusively to women. Men hearing the tambaran's cry would run fearfully away holding children to their breasts. Hiding in the bush men breast-fed children, whilst women claimed the exclusive ritual right to occupy the village plaza where they 'fed' the tambaran pig and initiated children. One such day Kowdok was running away awkwardly holding his child in one hand and his limepowder container in the other when he tripped. He broke his lime powder container and its *damu*, which is the long thin cassowary thigh-bone that goes inside to collect the limepowder. This container is shaped like a phallus, having a bulge at one end where the limepowder collects which is said to represent its testicles. Moreover, lime powder is often spoken of as semen. Symbolised in this is the humiliation of women breaking the male phallus and spilling onto the ground male 'semen' (i.e. limepowder), the source of male strength and identity. The breaking of the cassowary bone limestick is the symbolic breaking of the bone inside the penis, for in this culture bone is seen as formed from congealed semen and is a euphemism for something essential or permanent. Kewak broke the essence, the 'bone' of male masculinity.

Kowdok angrily demanded to know why women held the tambaran whilst men ran off nurturing children. He walked to the tabooed area of the village plaza where he saw Kewak working the tambaran (i.e. whirling the bullroarer). He proclaimed that henceforth women were to rear small children whilst men would hold and feed the tambaran. He took the breasts from men's chests and gave them to women. In return men received the beards of women. Still angry with his sister, Kowdok chased Kewak into the sea. In one version of this myth Kowdok killed his sister Kewak with a fighting stick (*bow*) after she climbed out of the water (cf. Tuzin 1974: 338). This was said to be the ancestral origin of the widow-killing ceremony. Abandoned under white rule, in this ritual a widow would be shown the trickery underlying Varku and then killed by her brothers; this re-enacts

Kowdok's killing of his sister to preserve Varku's secret for men.

The fear caused by Kowdok killing his sister led women to renounce and forget their secret knowledge. Present sociality is here mythically constituted through a massive act of forgetfulness. It is precisely this act of forgetting that women must currently simulate back to men in rituals. Though many women are aware of men's trickery they must re-enact this mythic act of forgetfulness when the ritual begins. They must run off in terror, as though Varku were a real being. The traditional punishment for a woman who discovered the tambaran's secret was death. The cassowary-shaped footprint of Varku was cut into her hair and the head severed and thrown through a hole in the top of the men's house to the women gathered in the village plaza. Men buried the body secretly in the bush or in the men's house, telling women the tambaran ate it. Though this ritual punishment ended with white colonial administration, men continue to circulate stories of such punishments and their continued willingness to resort to them. Terror is still very much a part of everyday life, it prevents women publicly voicing the scepticism many secretly share over whether tambarans are real. Many men are aware of women's scepticism and are primarily concerned that it not be publicly voiced. Terror plus a proud allegiance to custom leads to a complicit participation by women in reproducing publicly the ascribed female naivety on which male ritual power depends. They are forced to enact and validate the ideology through which they are dominated. This political simulation of herself is iconic with and ideologically inscribed in the myth of her being the origins of the powers of simulation. Women must enact and become subject to the powers of the illusions she created.

This secret myth of the female origin of tambarans also participates in a general cultural understanding that: *olgeta samting i gat as long meri* (i.e. everything has its origins with woman). In the cultural ontology of the bush Kaliai, women are ideologically acknowledged as an originating force *par excellence*. This is so much so that men can only constitute their own power back to themselves as creative by constructing it as originating in and symbolic of women's power to create. This appropriated generative power is the power of self-constitution provided by the imagination. Men gain political control of this symbolic power of imaging through a masculinisation of themselves that is consubstantial with them disembodiment themselves from a domestic sphere now defined as feminine. Women's current full corporeal involvement in and subordination to nurturance and childrearing enables men to assume control of ritual artefacts. Whereas previously men claimed, women not burdened with childrearing were able to create the tambarans.

This myth of Varku's origin asserts the incompatibility of childrearing with tambaranic power. Men sometimes joke among themselves that should women rediscover and thus again control the secret of Varku, men would once again receive the breast. One must either assume the subordinate everyday task of feeding children with one's own body, or the superordinate one of ritually feeding the imaginary tambaran with the bodies of others. The tambaran symbolically consumes initiate children or transgressors, swallows them into its stomach or womb (*aghrne*) and then vomits them out as its own father – the cassowary. This sacrificial feeding of initiates to the tambaran takes place in all initiation rituals involving the stolen tambarans Varku and Mookmook. In this fiction what men have stolen from women are wombs for giving rebirth to themselves. Those imaginary wombs are the socially positioned and constituted wombs of a cultural imagination.



What tambarans represent is the emergence of a sexual division of labour in procreation. They represent the fragmentation of female procreative powers, their bifurcation into superior and inferior forms whereby men come to control the more superior and disembodied form of female procreation via the tambaran, that is via the imagination. What tambarans also represent is the politicisation of procreation via the cultural myth that political power is made possible only through the fragmentation and mediation of female procreative power.

*Mythic narrative, female procreation and the ordering power of illusions*

This origin of male power and male cults in ritual artefacts stolen from women is a widespread mythic theme in Melanesia (Dundes 1976: 224-5; Hays & Hays 1982: 232-7; Herdt 1982; Read 1952: 14; Tuzin 1974: 338-9; Van Baal 1963: 205). Bamberger has interpreted myths involving such reversals of an original matriarchy as being iconic with the transformational processual form of initiation rituals. They in their early stages isolate and sever boys' ties to their mothers whilst later on conferring the privilege of adult status to boys ceremoniously regrouped and now part of the society and power of men.

This regrouping of adolescent boys with adult men is prefigured in some societies in myths foretelling the demise of female power and the concomitant rise of male privilege. The myth of the Rule of Women in its many variants may be regarded as a replay of these crucial transitional stages in the life cycle of an individual male (Bamberger 1979: 277).

I interpret such myths as the ideological construction of male power as a stolen form of reproduction from women which must then be folded back upon women so as to encompass female reproductive powers. Male mythology is asserting that male power can never be simply the denial or negation of female reproductiveness, but must instead be derived from female reproductive powers if it is to subsume and encompass female reproductiveness. What I am arguing is not simply Bamberger's point that female reproductiveness is ideologically constituted as only being able to flourish within male dominance. Rather, I am arguing more that female reproductiveness is displaced into an objectified form (i.e. tambarans) and that in this reconstituted reified form female reproductiveness envelops itself, is unknowingly made to confront and subsume itself via the instrumental mediation and manipulation by men. In Varku's ritual a mother gives over her child, she must subject it to being reborn through this mediating appropriated figure of herself – the tambaran. She in effect subjects her own reproductive power of birth to a process of rebirth, to an alienated masculinised figure of her reproductive self. Her subordination is realised paradoxically through herself, through the elevation (in its masculinisation) of this alienated maternal figure of herself.

Bamberger rightly perceives that inscribed in myths of matriarchy is a moral critique of women (Bamberger 1979: 267, 271, 279). In the bush Kaliai area this is a critique of women's reproductive powers, that men have stolen from women a burdensome falsification which men experience themselves as unable to relinquish. This ideology constructs women's generative powers as the origin of a powerful deceit which men now must guiltily bear and celebrate as the generative social source of their power and identity. Not surprisingly, women in everyday life are perceived as creating disputes by spreading false information through gossip. The myth of tambarans' female origins encodes and resonates with this everyday perception, with tambarans emerging as

women's supreme lie. In effect, male secret mythology is claiming that it was women who ended the utopian age of equality and peace between the sexes by creating the monstrous tambaran.

For men, their current possession of this monstrous lie separates out the space of ritual. Indeed, illusions are a means of demarcating ritual space in religious cultures of the immanent where there is no sacred outside, no transcendental religious space to confer a sacred otherness to ritual. For a long time now anthropologists have emphasised ritual as detached from mundane reality, yet simultaneously being a reflexive commentary upon the everyday (cf Kapferer 1983: 3-4, 175-7, 180-1, 240). It confronts audience and actors with a sense of otherness, of being separate and outside the flow of everyday life so as to make reflexive statements about the ordering of everyday life. In the bush Kaliai area ritual gains its otherness for men through the 'unreality' and 'otherness' of the illusions it creates and must preserve. Lies operate to position men outside the structures of everyday public talk, providing in the realm of knowledge the effect of an outsidership to women. This distancing constitutes and positions men in a reflexive understanding of the formative powers of artistry. It places men in a reflexive space where they are aware of the necessity for fictions and that deception lies at the heart of ordered reality. For men ritual asserts the necessity of illusion, of the lie, as the basis of the immanent ordering of reality. What is very much at play here is a Nietzschean conception of everyday life as immanently grounded in masks, a cynical view of power as grounded in socially necessary illusions.

Male secrecy has been too readily equated by anthropologists with the sacred, that is as representing the privileging of some real hidden absolute truth. Barth provides more insight when he points out that truth and the sacred are not so much real contents as effects which emerge out of the press of being hidden (Barth 1975; cf. Derrida 1979; Nietzsche 1968). This is what is occurring in the bush Kaliai area; there is an effect of a privileging of meaning going on through the process of concealment. For most men the meaning of the ritual is the simulation of the possession of some reality rather than the 'actual' possession of some 'real' absolute outside truth which the concept of the sacred conveys. Men strongly denied my suggestions that there was a spirit or ancestor behind tumbuan masks or tambarans and laughed at my suggestion of someone wearing a mask becoming possessed. The notion of a reality contained in the mask, I was told, was a fiction of women.

In all tambaran rituals men eat secretly the sacrificial pig offered to the tambaran. During this part of Varku's ritual men emphatically told me:

Us men are the real tambarans, we eat the pig. Varku is a krai nating [i.e. an empty cry], but us men are the true tambaran.<sup>4</sup>

What these tambaranic illusions represent is a structure of distancing for positioning men as possessing a privileged surplus of meaning. Lies and secrecy create the effect of a meaningful remainder outside the restricted economy of public talk – a reserved realm of privileged meaning. What it is important for men to reproduce is not so much the contents of those reserved meanings, which most men either deny exist or do not know or are not agreed upon, as the process of concealment which creates the effect that those contents exist. For most men rituals are about trickery, they participate not in the meaning of some absolute truth, as in the creation of the effect that there is some real remaining truth. For most bush Kaliai men that truth is lost, if it ever existed, and what remains for them is the necessity of fabricating a social reality out of illusions, out of the illusion of possessing

some real truth. Within the logic of their mythic ontology, men position themselves as the creators of reality out of illusions, the objectifiers of illusions. They create the concrete as an effect realising its monstrous possibilities through the appropriated powers of simulation they took from women. Men must produce the semblance of Varku as a real being; they must through deception simulate him as a living being. Whereas women create real life, men now create and nurture the simulations of it. They create Varku as an independent being who cries, leaves impressions of his large footprints and testicles lying around, who picks up large stones and places them in trees to symbolise his extraordinary physical strength, and who must be fed. Here the illusions men create mark out and symbolise their power over the imaginary, their creative power in and through culture, albeit a culture of trickery.

As yet I believe sufficient account has not been taken of the generative role of deception in immanent religions. In a culture where the very existence of the sacred is problematic, where there is no transcendental outside, here the generative ordering 'otherness' of ritual and mythic time is the social space occupied by lies. Lies must be hidden from some and available to others, and as such lies are ordering phenomena, constitutive of groups in their opposition to others (Barth 1975: 217-22; Simmel 1950: 330-76; Tuzin 1974: 339). Lies in particular are the essence of gender politics and power. They are compositional forces, composing order out of the asymmetries they imply and institute.

A Christian ontology of evil experiences the lie as disordering, as a destructive decomposing force. This is not the ontology of truth and the lie operating in the Kaliai bush. The view of the lie as orderless, as chaotic, can be sustained in the Platonic, Christian worldview of the transcendental as the ultimate real world of true and perfect forms and enduring ahistorical truths. In Western metaphysics, truth is transcendental, outside reality and a source of perfect order, whilst the world is full of the disordering otherness of deceptions. Bush Kaliai religions of the immanent ground themselves not in transcendental outside truths, but in the immanent ordering reality of the lie. There is no social order outside the lie, order is immanent in the lie; it embodies and produces a hierarchical order out of itself. The lie becomes the primordial ordering act, this being reflected by its incorporation into myths of cosmogenesis. Underpinning the fragmented mythic space of bush Kaliai men's existence is the ontological coherence offered by illusion, the ontology of the lie operating as the consensual mythic basis for an ontology of reality.

In bush Kaliai religious culture the creative is grounded not in an outside sacredness positioned as male but in the immanent procreative powers of women (Lattas 1987). Whereas Christian transcendentalism celebrates the masculine outside ordering powers of truth, bush Kaliai mythology celebrates the immanent ordering powers of lies which woman created. The lie itself partakes of her procreative powers, itself being procreative, begetting order.

During Varku's ritual initiates are schooled in generosity and obedience. They are also schooled in the secret names of the body by Varku's wooden mask, which is known as *Omroo* or 'Varku's mother'. Despite Varku being a male tambaran who is said to have testicles, during the initiation ritual an initiate refers to the tambaran as mother. Varku's initiates are called *dimirhmirh* or *dimirh*, which is said to be a derivative of the word for birth *debirh*. The initiate has oil rubbed onto his skin. This oil is likened to the birth fluid

of a newborn child and is said to result from the initiate being swallowed into the tambaran's womb (*aghrne*) from where he is reborn by being vomited out of the mouth which schooled him in knowledge (cf. Dundes 1976: 224; Van Baal 1963: 211). The initiate acquires a new name to mark his new identity as a man of knowledge who now has the power to enforce the laws of a village.

After the ritual an initiate is no longer the tambaran's child but Varku's father, *Varku ilau*, someone with the power to summon him. A cassowary is also referred to as *Varku ilau*. This common fictive positioning allows the power of symbolic birth which initiated men possess in rituals to be symbolically equated with the cosmogonic power ascribed to the cassowary. Initiates at the end of Varku's ritual are painted in the colours of the cassowary (black, red, blue and white) and Varku's cassowary footprint is cut into their hair.

During the course of the ritual, it seems that Varku becomes progressively feminised as the ritual increasingly becomes focused on the mask, the maternal aspects of Varku, and on rebirth imagery. Some men claimed that if Varku's wooden mask was unavailable then a wooden *tavila* bowl could be substituted. Its elliptical shape is perceived very much as the shape of a vagina. This possible substitution accords with and highlights the procreative imagery whereby initiates are said to be reborn through the mouth of Varku's mask (mother).

This symbolic reconstitution of the self through being swallowed and disgorged by a supernatural being is a widespread motif in initiation rituals in Melanesia and Australia (cf. Dundes 1976: 224-5; Eliade 1958: 35-7; 1960: 218-23; Hage 1981; Hiatt 1971; 1975; Mead 1940: 1963). Many bush Kaliai men equated the tambaran's swallowing of initiates with a cassowary swallowing food in a whole form. A cassowary has no teeth so it does not break or tear up the food it consumes. Objects may pass through a cassowary's interior in an intact whole form. This is important, for the tambaran Varku is cassowary-like, he has cassowary feet, but more importantly he embodies the notion of the reconstitution and transformation of a corporeal whole through its interiorisation.

One Kaliai bush origin myth narrates how cassowaries and humans came up from a *tallis* nut. Its red fleshy exterior was said to represent the origin of female procreative blood and its white interior kernel was said to represent the origin of male semen (nowadays men sometimes eat the nut to replenish their stock of semen). Cassowaries often eat *tallis* nuts, stripping off the external red flesh as they pass through them. Inside the hard shell the white kernel remains intact and germinates with the cassowary faeces where it is dropped. Passing through the creator, the female part is removed leaving the pure male part.

The consumption of initiates by Varku is equated by some with the cassowary process of swallowing seeds and as one can see this is a process of corporeal purification based on the incorporation and consumption of primordial femaleness. Indeed the symbolic destruction of the primordial maternal materiality of one's being through the shedding of female blood seems to be a common feature of male purificatory rites in New Guinea (Allen 1967: 91; Gell 1975: 277; Hage 1981; Hogbin 1970; Mead 1940; 1963: 62-3; Read 1952: 15; 1980: Tuzin 1980: 21,43, 65-71,74-7). During Varku's ritual an initiate is said to 'eat' not only knowledge but also limepowder which is highly symbolic of semen. Passing through the tambaran's interior is a transformative process for a man who emerges as a more potent male with greater power over women and uninitiated men. Just

as the red skin of the *tallis* is removed by that analogue of tambarans – cassowaries – so an initiated boy acquires a new ‘painted’ skin, one which symbolises not the everyday procreation of women but an original procreative being – the cassowary.

After men complete their decoration of initiates, the women gather outside a fence erected across the path leading from the village to the women’s camps. Here women dance with a mixture of aggressiveness and happiness, each carrying about three or four ‘spears’. They are angry over Varku’s and men’s imprisonment and punishment of their children. Varku’s ‘tongues’ stop crying and the maternal mask, Varku’s mother, brings the initiates to the fence. This mask is also the initiates’ mother and it restores them to their original mothers. Through the alienated part of their procreative powers women are reunited with their offspring. Through the ritual they enter into a somewhat strained symbiotic relationship with this rival mother, which had its origins in one of the very first mothers of humanity (Kewak or Ali). This primordial mother, this alienated motherhood, is for men an artificial mother they enact through artistry and trickery: it represents the monstrous otherness of that alienated procreative power within which men inscribe patriarchal authority.

During this part of the ritual, the initiates’ hands are thrust through the fence towards the women who try to grab them. As women progressively rescue the initiates they become angrier and start throwing spears over the fence. They are characterised as saving their children from the tambaran, who runs off into the bush. The women, under the instructions of men, then break down the fence, chasing and throwing spears at the men for their collusion with Varku. This phase of the ritual marks the end of women’s subordination to a motherhood she has been dispossessed of. The ritual begins with women being chased by a tambaran and ends with them chasing him away. As the tambaran becomes progressively feminised in the ritual women assume a more masculinised form, threatening in effect a mythic reclosure by recapturing the tambaran and returning to that primordial mythic state where masculinised women chased men away.

Informants emphasised that only women can expel (*raus*) the tambaran. They made things *kam ap klia* (i.e. ‘come up clear’) by pulling initiates into the open and destroying the fence, that radical disjuncture in the social and in procreation which the tambaran realises. Emerging from the bush, women swap places with the tambaran, recapturing the public space of socialised procreation (the village) from men and the tambaran. Women in their role as mothers end men’s possession of a birth process which had its origin with women. The public re-assertion of women’s everyday reproductive powers and rights brings to an end the historical-mythological usurpation of those powers by men and their tambarans in rituals.

The ceremony concludes with men compensating women. They are given shell money, which is often symbolically referred to as bone or semen. One gives ‘semen’ to women in their masculinised form who in a male war-like posture rescued their children. The largest payment goes to the initiates’ fathers’ sisters (*illababu*), that is to women who share the same semen origin as initiates and their father. It is they who must pull the initiates through the fence. These women are the opposite from their brother’s children. The ‘pricing’ is said to be an exchange of ritual services between the moieties, emphasising the ritual interdependence and complementarity that exists alongside their symbolic opposition. Men emphasise that all women participating in the ceremony should

receive some payment. Men compensate women for the injury done to their offspring, but perhaps also for men's usurpation and claim to reproduction through tambarans and wombs which originally belonged to women.

These tambaranic beings, like Varku, which men nurture in the wombs of their men's houses, are the means by which men give rebirth to themselves outside of the wombs of women. Not surprisingly, men stole this form of disembodied reproduction, this reproduction through fictions, from women. The tambarans men stole from women become in the ritual context privileged wombs, displaced from women's bodies, which allow masculinised procreation (cf Bettelheim 1955: 199-200; Dundes 1976; Hiatt 1971; 1975; Roheim 1945: 198). This theft allows men to appropriate and to subsume the symbolic power ascribed to female reproductive processes, transforming female reproductive power into a means of reproducing male power. These tambaranic wombs allow men to give rebirth to themselves as ritually purer and more superior beings. They are vomited up covered in the colours of the cassowary creator.

This higher form of rebirth which men stole from women is symbolically rendered as men giving rebirth to themselves through the mouth, through a purer orifice not contaminated by the polluting and sickness-causing vaginal smells of women. This notion of the mouth as an alternative orifice for giving birth, as a purer alternative form of vagina, is encoded in mythology: in (a) stories that the mouth used to lie the same way as the vagina until two female ancestors, whilst teaching a male ancestor sexual intercourse, cut the mouth sideways as it is now to be found; and (b) in fragmented mythic accounts that the earth or the egg of creation were spat or vomited out of the creator's mouth. Tambarans' mouths are male vaginas which mime and metaphorically re-enact these mythical primordial procreative processes.

Ritual specialists claimed one reason why Varku's mask is referred to as mother, despite Varku being a male tambaran with testicles, was that initiates were reborn through the mask's mouth. The mouth lies above the vagina, further off the ground; in doing so it partakes of a general spatial symbolism where things higher up are male and purer than those down below (Lattas 1988). Lying higher up than the vagina it gives rebirth to humans in a transformed superior form – in the image of the cassowary creator. Men in giving birth not through the vagina down below but through the mouth above give birth in a metamorphosed, non-repetitive form. Present female procreation is rendered repetitive – it reproduces the same kind. Male procreation is transformative – it moves things hierarchically up through a process of death and rebirth (Ortner 1974: 75-82).

In the present world men displace the site of procreation upwards and in doing so give birth through that medium which is the source for articulating and distributing knowledge. This brings us to another form of procreation associated with the mouth, for at the same time as men are ritually reborn through the mouth they are being schooled and reconstituted through a secret language. Swallowed into the tambaran's womb, men are incorporated and reordered through the ordered interiority of the secret nomenclature through which the tambaran cosmologically orders society and the world. They are morally reborn through a mouth that offers schooling. Being reborn through the mouth is metonymic and metaphorical of being reborn through a new language the initiate learns. This ritual association of the process of birth, of procreation, with the learning of secret names is nothing less than an assertion of the procreative powers inherent in the ordering

powers of language. That language gives birth to social order seems to be the major informing concept. It does so secretly and through the control of men.

This association of the mouth with procreation is played with continuously in everyday life. The mouth is often jokingly regarded as a vagina with the tongue being the male penis: so much so that the act of speaking is said to mime the act of sexual intercourse. Men make suggestive allusions to women by moving the tongue sexually back and forth inside the mouth. When chewing betelnut, the act of putting betel pepper and limepowder into the mouth is said symbolically to mime a penis and semen entering a vagina. Moreover, men and women continuously associate chewing betelnut with talk, saying that without it talk does not emerge. The point I want to make is that the mouth is a space where the act of sexual intercourse and the act of speaking become closely identified and that this is a metaphorical assertion of the procreative powers of language, its ability to beget order.

However, the mouth is also the site for disseminating lies, one of which is recognised to be that initiates are reborn through the tambaran's mouth. One is reborn through a lie (the tambaran) that one becomes the father of Varku (*Varku ilou*). Reborn through the mouth initiates are reborn through the medium of the lie. They are reborn through the site that creates their lies. The imagery of rebirth is a lie told to women. Men become the fathers of a deception through which they are born.<sup>6</sup>

### *Conclusion*

This article questions the conceptual necessity of treating sacrifice as mediating between the sacred and the profane. Applying this kind of Durkheimian distinction to bush Kaliai language cultures is extremely suspect. I therefore have avoided using the concept of the sacred throughout this article. I believe it is highly problematic to talk about processes of sacralisation and desacralisation as necessary phases of sacrifice in immanent cultures outside transcendental religious ontologies. Here I agree with Van Baal that Western theological and liturgical concepts have far too long dominated the anthropology of religion:

Among the distinctive features of offering and sacrifice I do not include their sacred nature ... (Van Baal 1976: 161)

Van Baal argues that what sacrifices and offerings have generally in common is 'that of being gifts', for the 'gift is an attractive and persuasive form for establishing contacts and ameliorating relations' (Van Baal 1976: 161, 167). The sacrificial aspect of Varku comes from the pig being an offering and a gift to the tambaran. What is perhaps crucially definitional is that the pig's death operates to transform social relations, changing the relationship of society to the transgressor. Indeed, the pig assumes the classic sacrificial form of operating as a substitute for the human victim. For these reasons one can talk of Varku as an expiatory sacrifice and as a sacrifice of redemption. The pig's death expiates for the crime and redeems the transgressor, reconstituting him as moral. One does not have to posit theologically an outside sacredness to the cosmos to have these types of mediations and transformations.

This ordering tambaran form which society must appease and seduce with gifts is not a sacred transcendental truth but a necessary fiction; a fictitiously produced necessity. The sacrifice in this immanent culture occurs not to a transcendental outside but to the reality of a monstrous illusion within which men fabricate, their identities. Through consuming the sacrificial food of the tambaran, men experience themselves as a demonic

lie. The sublime nature of men's power is socially objectified and constituted in a lie. Through illusions men ascribe to themselves the ordering power of tricksters who move outside and surpass the structures of knowledge assigned to women.

This ordering power of fictions came from women: it is part of men's ambiguous relationship to female sexuality. Female sexuality represents for men creative origin, but in its immediate corporeal form of vaginal smells, menstruation and childbirth it represents pollution. Female sexuality represents both the mythical source of male power and yet that which threatens male strength in the present. Expressed in this is the profound ambiguity of female sexuality at once valorised as the historical source of all things powerful and of multiplicity and yet in its present immediate form a potential threat to male power, capable of sapping its health and vitality. The creative power of female sexuality has to be reified so as to be incorporated via a theft by men as the foundation of their own power. In its immediate embodied form of vaginal procreation, female sexuality is threatening, polluting, but in its symbolic transformation into an imaginary womb female sexuality is the basis of male power's desire to procreate. Only in a symbolically reconstituted form, only in the objectified form of an illusion, of a pure apparitional form in its own right can female sexuality be safely appropriated. Only in the disembodied form of a tambaran womb can female sexuality become a male possession, the foundation and source of male power. Only in the form of a ritual lie whose meaning gives form to ritual practice can female sexuality be claimed by men. Only once female sexuality has been disembodied and re-embodied in the mimetic power of the tambaran can it be usurped, appropriated by men as their power. The reconstitution of female sexuality into the imaginary, into a deception removed from real corporeal being renders female sexuality purer and more powerful.

The tambaran embodies and reifies the social power of female procreation. Men cannot appropriate the dispersed plenitude of female procreation as this manifests itself in everyday life, in childbirth. This has too much of dispersed multiplicity to be appropriated in one act, its decentredness resisting a ready incorporation. Only in mythic time is there the unitary structure through which men can appropriate definitively the supreme emblematic products of female procreation in one clear-cut gesture. Only by hypostatizing and condensing female procreation into an original act of supreme procreation can men steal the plenitude of that act. This is the space of male rituals where men celebrate a usurpation: that procreative power they stole from women. Men can only valorise the power they gain from tamarans by first valorising and celebrating women's ability to create, only by celebrating female procreation can they now celebrate the fact that men now hold women's supreme procreative products – tamarans – the beings through which men socially procreate themselves outside women's bodies.

In bush Kaliai immanent religions, procreation is the site and language of ritual power. Here sacrifice is addressed not to a fixed sacred outside, but occurs within a symbolic order of procreation which is itself the site of a power struggle because it is the ideological means of reproducing power. Sacrifice here does not have the 'grammar' of mediating between the sacred and the profane which is itself a reflection of the mind-body dichotomy of the West with its transcendental ontology of truth. Instead the sacrifice is addressed to the 'profane' world, celebrating for men not the dissemination of a transcendental truth but the dissemination of a 'profane' lie which women created and which marks their power to create.



More forcefully, tambarans and masks are part of a pragmatics of power which recognises the lie as a generative strategy. In stealing the emblematic product of female procreation, men also stole the generative ordering power of illusions, the procreative power of illusion as the language of power. In other words, what men have stolen from women is the formative powers of artistry, the procreative ability to fabricate a reality out of fictions. It is this generative structure of the illusory, this form-giving nature of the imaginary that is celebrated in rituals.

## NOTES

This is an abbreviated version of a longer paper which analysed Varku's ritual in greater detail. Melanesian Pidgin words have been italicised, whilst words from the indigenous language of Moke have been underlined. For 12 months during 1986 I enjoyed the hospitality of the bush Kaliai villages of Bolo, Salke, Onamanga, Aikon, Doko Sagra and Molour. Special thanks for the insights they provided into their culture are owed to Awal, Nakala and Bowle. In terms of my own culture, I owe a special intellectual debt to Tom Ernst and Jadran Mimica, who inspired me to work in Papua New Guinea, and to Judy Harrison whose imaginative approach to feminist issues sensitised me to the specific ideological constitution of gender relations as part of a cultural ontology. I would also like to thank Marilyn Strathem, Ana Marko, Julie Marcus, Richard Eves and Sandra Pennel for their valuable comments and support. Bruce Kapferer's hard work and outstanding intellectual input to the Adelaide University Anthropology Department requires special mention. This article owes much to his encouragement of original research and his own radical questioning of anthropological assumptions.

1. Before Christianity and the introduction of western anthropomorphic notions of the creator as God, there was a view (which is still widespread) of the cassowary as an indigenous creator.

2. I was told men from other villages would destroy such a careless village and claim it as an act of Varku.

3. In personal correspondence Marilyn Strathem has made the important point that if giving birth empowers women 'Are not women the "real" men in this act of theirs. I think this is symbolically codified in the myth of an original situation of androgyny where men are feminised and women assume a more masculinised form, possessing beards and the monstrous objects of power. Woman in her supreme creative moment is masculinised.' Marilyn Strathem has also perceptively pointed out that female power here gains its value on the prior or reciprocal model of an already valued male power. The mythic feminine past is a projection inscribing the power of present masculine forms.

4. What men feed is a fetishism of themselves. Men do more than simply confer a being-in-itself quality upon their artefacts, they actively integrate themselves into the quasi-demonic personas those artefacts isolate and objectify. Tambarans are not simply an object of consciousness, a symbolic equivalence detached from the world, but part of a praxis of objectification, of giving an externality, an outsideness, to male identity and power. Operating under the name and identity of the tambaran, men are conscious of the value of being able to displace the responsibility for the actions men carry out onto the tambaran. Tambarans thus refract and reify male power: they disembody or rather re-embody it giving it the socially advantageous mystified form of existing outside men. This process of ideological displacement is ideologically reinforced by and is iconic with tambarans being bush creatures who exist outside villages, inhabiting those primordial spaces which society has not cultivated or domesticated. Men situate and nurture the imaginary tambaran

as the uncultivated ordering power of themselves: as a pre-social visitation of this aspect of their identities.

5. This pervasive culture of trickery can operate in the colonial context as a language of resistance for subverting the colonising absolute truths of Whites and their cultural representatives. It can also become a symbol of colonial domination, a symbol of fallenness: that one's culture only possesses the illusions of power, an image of a powerful creative being rather than the actual presence of that being.

6. I owe this insight to Marilyn Strathern.

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