Incised Bamboo from New Caledonia: A Visual Analysis

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Les vieux portent le bambou grave en guise de bâton et redisent en les expliquant, les hauts faits et les malheurs des ancêtres.
(Lambert, P.1980:66-7)

The intricate artwork that adorns bamboo artefacts from New Caledonia is made up of a restricted range of basic elements. By combining and recombining these elementary shapes—chevrons, triangles, pentagons—the artists have produced narratives of a potentially high documentary quality. Before these narratives can be incorporated into the history of the country, however, it is necessary that the polysemic richness of the visual motifs and their transfigurative power be understood. This article is a small step in that direction.

The engraved or incised artwork on New Caledonian bamboo tubes (*kare u ta*)[1] comprises geometric and figurative elements of design with ample visual punning to suggest congruences and correspondences between significant aspects of the social and natural worlds. The juxtaposition of individual motifs and their relative size and scale carry intimations of power, of conflict and of complementarity. Given that the basic materials are cylindrical bamboo tubes 'naturally' divided by their notches, the question of whether these framing devices play a semantic or accidental role is tantalising. The artwork can be 'read' in many different orders and from a variety of perspectives. Meaning can be determined only in the context of telling, and then perhaps only for the duration of the telling. It matters greatly whether one starts from the social or the formal aesthetic in seeking to understand the art. Both approaches are valid, and the privileging of one over the other is a matter of epistemic choice. What is important to remember is that there are epistemic consequences to the different perspectives scholars assume.

As the above epigraph suggests, there is an intimate link between the visual engravings on bamboo and the vocal recounting of ancestral events. This in itself indicates the dynamic nature of the art. The enchantment of art brings the visual imagery under the spell of language, what Gell calls 'that most fundamental of all technologies' (Gell 1992:60). The visual analysis that follows is therefore tempered in its claims by an ever-present sense

of a lived context of display, movement and utterance as each animates the other. However, within the visual imagery there is a heightened sense of movement, since so much of it is concerned with scenes of intense activity, such as ceremonial dances, fishing parties and various encounters with Europeans, some mounted on horseback, others depicted in more pedestrian postures. These activities, although they are often spread over large tracts of historical time, owe their potency to the linkages they establish and maintain with ancestral power, whether this be ostensibly through kinesic, vocal or visual means. As the discussion unfolds it will be seen that there are several orders of movement or dynamism animating these art forms. The kinaesthetic traces of these different orders of movement are the main focus of this brief paper.

The bamboo tubes in question measure on average one metre in length.[2] As the discussion below indicates, there is much uncertainty surrounding their exact range of functions, but it is more than probable that they were especially important in ritual contexts (*inter alia*) as they formerly contained magical herbs for protection.[3] Furthermore, Luquet (1926:24) noted that they were the focus of certain passage rites: *ka-kela-pa iale* (to hold the cane) or *ba-ou-lait* (for the elders), when a young man attained elderhood. Not all bamboo objects were engraved. A small number were nasal or mouth flutes (Boulay 1993:14), while others were used to strike the ground and produce muffled sound to accompany certain dance movements (Boulay 1993:11).[4]

The graphic material on which this paper is based can be found principally in Luquet (1926),[5] Dellenbach and Lobsiger (1951 and 1967), Boulay (1993), and in the catalogue of a recent exhibition of Kanak art titled *De jade et de nacre* (Boulay 1990).[6] The parallel work of Bogliolo (1994) on New Caledonian literature also contains brief discussions of the engravings, drawn from the earlier works, where they are placed alongside petroglyph motifs and treated semiologically as visual signs.[7] On the anthropological front, Metais (1973) provides an ethnographically-informed thematic and stylistic analysis of the Musée de l'Homme collection of engravings in which she emphasises the personal agency of the artist and the dynamism of the art.

The analysis that follows is framed not only by its visuality, but also by the vocabulary of art discourse, where I retain the notions of figurative and geometric because of their usefulness. Although these terms are highly charged in aesthetic contexts they provide subtle points of linkage with art from the wider region[8] and are valuable for this reason. Another important consequence of continuing to employ these terms is the link they maintain with the older literature. A kinaesthetically inflected acoustic sensibility is required to even begin to do justice to the aesthetic complexities of the art. A sensitivity to sound and movement also informs levels of framing.

Earlier accounts of the art *qua* art showed that it combines abstract and optical/visual factors where the intellectual knowledge of the subject is coupled with the visual image.[9] In some approaches to the art, these intellectualised, abstract features are played down and somatised through a discourse of motoriality that does only partial justice to its overall social aesthetic meanings.

The older works, those by Luquet and Dellenbach and Lobsiger, contain descriptions and formal analyses of the art, the latter concentrating mainly on the geometric designs. There are scattered references to these engraved bamboos in some of the early ethnographic and historical literature that indicate that they were first collected in the Wagap, Touho and Canala regions of the mainland or Grande Terre from the 1860s onwards. There were also some from the Isle of Pines to the south of the mainland that could be obtained only after the death of one of the most senior chiefs of the island (Luquet

1926:26). Boulay's discussion of the art published in 1993 provides an illustration of an early engraved bamboo obtained in this part of the country, where the geometric designs are explained in military terms. An earlier work of Boulay (1990) on Kanak architecture also contains distillations of some of the key features of cultural activities and protocols that inform Kanak social ceremonial life, and provides additional insights into the artwork. These later socially-inflected works counterbalance the psychoanalytical emphasis in some of the earlier accounts.

This alternating tendency to focus on the psyche of the artist and on the social ceremonial life of the group is evident in the written accounts of the engraved bamboos where they are treated either as examples of 'non-Western' art or as part of a larger complex of ceremonial objects.[10] At the level of aesthetic content, they are treated primarily as expressions of a Melanesian worldview or as documentary evidence of contact with various outsiders. The narrative content of the bamboos as art objects cannot be read in the fullness of meaning if only one approach is taken. The collection and circulation of these objects, as well as the discourses of the art world that have sought to analyse and relate their aesthetic narratives, need also to be taken into account in order for a more rounded appreciation of the many-stranded relationships between the different creative processes to emerge.

In the literature on New Caledonia there has been until recently an overall tendency for anthropologists to deal with Melanesian culture and for historians to pay most attention to the Caledonian side of the post-settlement period. This is reflected in the language of scholarship: Melanesian myth and Caledonian history. With the quickening of interest in art in the region generally, there is likely to be an ever greater crossing over of interest between these epistemic domains and a revising of earlier accounts of the past in the light of what visual narratives can reveal of the inter-animation of different discourses. These revelations in themselves will require the utmost care. Luquet's work indicates a tension between aesthetic and documentary interpretations of the designs and the art objects when he was writing in the 1920s, and the work of Metais some fifty years later draws the emphasis away from the documentary aspect to what she sees as the non-abstracted persona-centred perceptions of the ideal Kanak engraver: *le dessinateur canaque ne savait pas encore s'abstraire de lui-même et improvise* (1973:1). Her phenomenologically-inflected work reinscribes the art motifs in the hand movements of the designer and the motorial impetus to perception. The artist's hand in turn metonymically evokes bodily movement in general as this informs the traces of cosmological and social life animating the engravings and through them the perceptive responses of the ideal beholder. Many of the illustrations of engravings as they appear in the literature do bear out this motorial tempering of perception but, I would contend, they do not preclude altogether what are often strong suggestions of improvisation and abstraction on the part of the designer(s). These are discussed below.

Another order of movement inheres in the exchange of these bamboos as art objects and their often lengthy sojourns in foreign places. Many of the circumstances of this estrangement are as yet untold stories.[11] Along with other Kanak and Melanesian art in general, the engraved bamboos were the subject of considerable interest to art collectors and scholars in the early decades of the twentieth century. It is possible that some of the interest was catalysed by the 'Colonial Exhibition' held in Paris in 1932 in ways similar to the recent millennial interest in art of the Pacific region. Known items of Kanak art are currently housed in a number of museums in France[12] but there are also some in Australian keeping,[13] as well as in Basel and Geneva.[14] Most of these were formerly in private

collections. A number remain in New Caledonia itself and in recent years many have been returned from private collections to the new Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Noumea. Discussions of the similarities and contrasts between older patterns of exchange and those that inhere in contemporary touring exhibitions and the parochial and universal art markets are beyond the scope of this brief paper but they too deserve critical scholarly attention.[15] Marie-Claude Tjibaou (1990:21) provides a moving account of the predicament facing Melanesian people *vis-à-vis* their artistic heritage, where she contrasts the more familiar, emotionally closer '*choses*' with the more distant, alienable and alienated '*objets*'.

According to early accounts, the 'traditional' position of Kanak engravers in New Caledonia was hereditary. As with the practice of other art forms, there were lineages of engravers (Metais 1979:3). At the technical level, the bamboos were engraved by either a scorch-marking process or with sharp quartz flints, pieces of shell or other similar instruments. These accounts tell us that the artist underwent a period of fasting prior to carrying out his work and that his art was considered to be inspired by an ancestral assistant who gave him the design and guided his hand.[16] Information such as this suggests a noetic context of apprenticeship where the energies of the fasting body could be directed towards the absorption of technical skills unhindered by the mundane chores of chewing, swallowing and digesting food. Body fasts redirect self-other and self-self relationships in ways that serve to desocialise fleshy physicality and renoeticise or recharge creative inspiration at a deeper level of receptivity.[17]

Figurative and geometric styles

The art itself, which is two-dimensional and flattened in perspective, can be divided readily into two main styles: figurative and geometric. These conceptual terms in themselves are subject to different interpretations. Luquet (1926) qualifies his sense of the figurative as essentially visual representation, in the optical *cum* perceptual sense of visuality, whereas he sees the geometric representation as embodying intellectual meaning in a more abstract, stylised sense of ideation. His is a language of Kantian aesthetics and his work suggests a desire to have the engravings considered as art. This idealised project of art-making *(faire de l'art)* is wholly in keeping with some of the formalist tendencies of the 1920s when he was writing about this material. Dellenbach and Lobsiger (1951) divide the art itself along similar lines, but talk instead about realist designs and symbolic motifs, and therefore employ a more socially inflected discourse of analysis which reflects the changing vocabulary of European art criticism throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. This changing vocabulary also signals an implicit acceptance of these objects as art in the later literature, even if they are housed in ethnographic rather than in gallery collections. Thus, while the perceptual line of distinction remains the same for these commentators, the conceptual demarcations made verbally differ in significant ways.

These shifts from percept to concept deserve critical attention since it is here that any new ways of understanding the art in aesthetic terms may be found. By dislodging the visual elements from the language of European art criticism, it may be possible to get closer to Melanesian perceptions of visual narrative but, given the history of cultural contact with various outsiders over the centuries, there is no reason to discount the probability of outside aesthetic influences entirely. Concomitantly, although these engraved bamboos with their ensemble of motifs, geometric and figurative, have come to light after contact with various outsiders, there is no reason to assume a lack of continuity with older Kanak forms, and the available material leaves ample room for piecing together a more

comprehensive understanding of the art if it is studied in conjunction with oral traditions and ritual ceremonies of various kinds.[18] This depth of study, however, is beyond the scope of the present paper and will but be touched upon.[19]

The two visual styles appear interchangeably on the bamboos. The geometric designs incorporate schematisations and/or stylisations of motifs which appear also in petroglyphs and, according to Luquet (1926:96), in tattoos. The motifs shared by the petroglyphic art include circles, cruciform shapes, star motifs and herringbone patterns. In his analysis of these forms, Luquet traces their ultimate derivation to anthropomorphic origins, notably facial features, but this assumption should be queried in light of the discussions of some of these motifs below. Within the context of these engraved bamboos such patterns and shapes arranged in serial form often serve as frames for certain sections of the art image, and these would appear to reflect in turn social and/or cosmological senses of belonging to an order set apart from the everyday. Given the connection with verbal Melanesian narrative, this order would appear to be that of the living past of ancestral myth.[20]

The very richness of the material and the relative paucity of space available here for discussion demand selection of some stringency. Throughout this analysis an attempt will be made to focus on bamboo designs which feature Kanak subjects and scenes and to refer to petroglyphic art and European motifs only in so far as they are directly relevant to the former. However, there is no sure-proof way of distinguishing the three areas absolutely. The figurative art, in addition to portraying a rich variety of Melanesian subjects contains many motifs that are easily distinguishable as representing Europeans and their various attributes. Images shaped and influenced by European presence include guns, horses, dogs, boats and, of course, the Europeans themselves. In 'traditional' scenes such as the *pilou*,[21] for example, the fishing party appears alongside European human figures and horses which, along with dogs, are considered to have been unknown in New Caledonia before the advent of the Europeans.[22]

Perspective

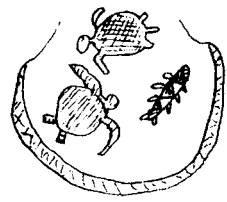
Luquet points out that the art is frequently executed by different artists on the same bamboo, and this raises the question of the appropriateness of conventional Western aesthetic canons to Kanak art. This question is also linked in interesting ways to received ideas of perspective and the centrality of these ideas to much of the modernist Western aesthetic sense. Metais' work draws heavily on European discussions of various perceptual perspectives most of which are enmeshed with drawing an implicit boundary between the intellectualised abstractedness of 'Western' artworks and what she perceives as the motorial inflectedness of the work of Melanesian artists.

Before proceeding further with this discussion of perspective, it is necessary to comment on the term 'flattened' used above. This term *(rabattement)* is taken from Luquet (1926:51), as employed in his discussion of the *pilou* scene (in Fig. 72), for example, in which the houses and the humans appear as if flattened against the ground. This issue of perspective and the attention it receives in artistic circles says more about European (military) assumptions concerning art and the trained gaze of the ideal gallery art-viewer than about Kanak aesthetics. The geometric designs are executed with differing degrees of regularity (this is no doubt attributable in part to the surface base: cylindrical bamboo batons[23] with a naturally somewhat irregular shiny surface); the figurative art is

Luquet Fig. 72

characteristically angular and shares many elements with the geometric designs. This shared repertoire of forms is, I would argue, one of the main aesthetic justifications for arguing for a strong sense of continuity in Kanak art. Some elements, however, are marginally curvilinear, for example the central part of Luquet's Fig. 46 *bis* featuring turtles and fish in a net. This is an extract from Luquet's Fig. 45 where it is shown, in reduced scale, in a context of Kanak/European contact in a placement that also suggests a liminal position between sea and land. Given the coastal provenance of most of these engravings, it is almost certain that the artists were already familiar with a range of types of boats, not only those constructed locally but also those from other Pacific islands, and others from South and South-east Asia. These links with the ocean that can hardly have escaped even the most inland inhabitant of such a slim stretch of terrain may yet be the most telling when it comes to understanding the notion of journey.

The cleared avenue between the ceremonial houses discussed in the ethnographic literature could well be a symbolic sea, especially when it serves as the site for offerings of various kinds of seafood. The turtles in the nets in some of the engravings reinforce the marine context of much of the subject matter as do the shells that adorned the roof spires of the chiefly ceremonial houses. The art forms themselves deserve readings that are simultaneously



Luquet Fig. 46 *bis*

earthbound and linked to the nourishing oceans and rivers that fertilise the land and sustain human and animal life. The rich polysemic nature of Kanak languages, some intricately entwined with Polynesian vocabularies, testify to these congruences of acquatic and terrestrial meaning.[24] Conversely, some iconic motifs are arranged quasi-geometrically, where rows of human figures are aligned in regular patterns. Here subject becomes style. I shall return to this issue of stylisation since it contradicts the 'grounded' concreteness currently being emphasised in Western accounts of 'art from elsewhere'.

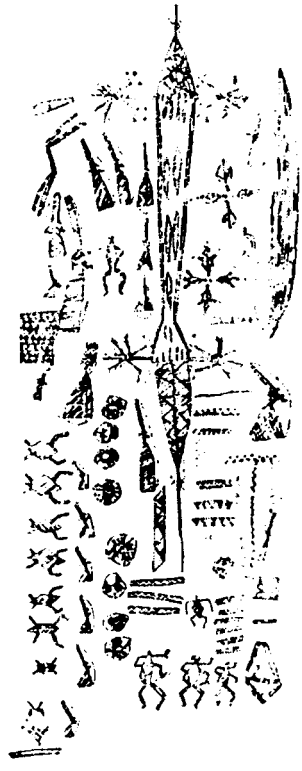
All the images mentioned so far depict scenes from communal life through richly varied motifs which in themselves are densely detailed and hence call for careful and reflective analysis. Amongst those features of the art which are deceptively 'realist' are a subtle play on relative size, an imaginative deployment of various nuanced framing devices and intricate juxtapositions of motifs which long predate the now-celebrated montage techniques usually traced to Eisenstein and credited to cinematic innovations in image making.

Symbolic proportionality

Disproportionality is rife in this art. The most striking examples are the anthropomorphic images depicted in some of the examples featured in the work of Metais (1973:237) where she names them the 'god of fishing' and the 'god of birds' respectively. The play of relative scale in these images would suggest a sense of differential power. It is interesting to note also the relative size of men and women in those drawings that feature Europeans: possibly the European women were considered to have greater power than men. In Luquet's Fig. 35, and more conspicuously in Fig. 20 (see next page), as well as in Metais' illustrations, the guns are as big as the humans. There is no way of knowing definitively if this is arbitrary or intentional, but it should not be at all surprising if the might of Europeans was considered to reside primarily in their guns. In the art there is a strong suggestion that a metaphor calqued on the idea of female generative power is being invoked in images such as these since the skirts of the women and the butts of the rifles share the somewhat conical triangular shape that gives rise to a range of possibilities for visual punning.

The designs appear mostly in panels and, due to the nature of the surface base, it is hardly surprising that vertical panels are much more frequent than horizontal ones. Directionality in visual narrative may signify important temporal and other dimensions of meaning. The cylindrical shape of the bamboo itself is a highly significant feature of the artwork. Some of the engraved figures encircle this base thereby obviating a notion of beginnings and endings in their narrative interpretation, and highlighting instead a sense of process and movement. Unless and until visual, kinesic and verbal narratives can be considered in socially informed ways, scholars can but discuss potentialities based on formal criteria. The transformation involved in the shift from one material base or context to another is something which needs to be borne in mind in considering the meanings of the designs, and in teasing out what is motivated and what is arbitrary. Luquet attributes the density of detail in the panels where virtually no empty space is left on the surface to an *'horreur du vide'*, but there is no reason to assume that this is some compulsion inherent in the artists rather than a matter of aesthetic or epistemic choice. This kind of assumption was widespread in earlier approaches to non-Western art styles, and quickly became part of the psychological baggage applied to critiques and analyses in the scholarly literature.

Luquet Fig. 35

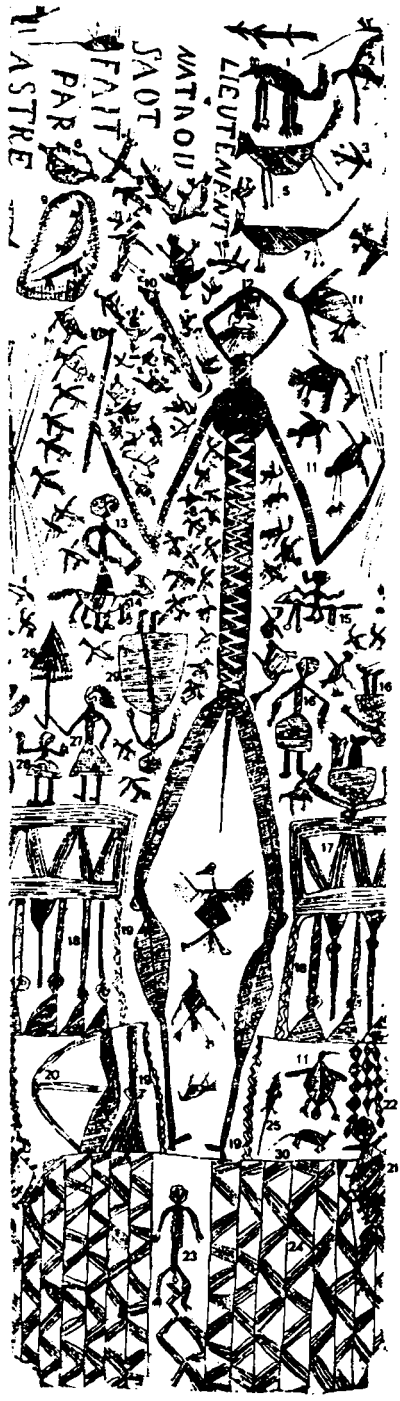


Luquet Fig. 20

Framing

Only some of the designs are framed and Dellenbach and Lobsiger (1951:326) point out that '... *encadrement* [est] *toujours présent dans les gravures à sens figuré et jamais trouvé dans les miniatures de la vie courante*'.[25] It is important here to remain attentive to the descriptive discourses used and to distinguish between what commentators refer to as figurative art (as opposed to geometric elements) on the one hand, and figurative meaning in a more 'symbolic' or metaphorical sense, on the other. These different senses of figuration require careful reflection. They also require taking a synaesthetic rather than a purely formal aesthetic approach to the artwork.

In discussing the issue of framing it is important to recall the remarks of Ortega y Gasset (1957) with regard to the differences between focusing on the frame as opposed to attending to the subject matter which is simultaneously beyond and within the frame. These framing devices in turn relate not only to aesthetic subjects and art objects in themselves, but also to the perceptual frames viewers and participants bring to the enjoyment of art. The kind of aesthetic liminality discussed by scholars such as Victor Turner (1986:115-20) could be a rich source of new ways of perceiving and articulating some of the complexities



Metais Plate 03.6.1 (upper register)

involved, especially in intercultural contexts. In the case of artworks such as these engraved bamboo which are apprehended in such varied cultural contexts as re-enactments, exhibitions and museum displays, it is also important to pay attention to how they partake of their varied surroundings.

If we take one of the bamboo featured in Metais' work (1973:73, Fig. 03.6.1), one which features intricate scenes of hunting and fishing, we can immediately attest to several orders of framing within the image. The engraving is divided into an upper and a lower register. The scene depicted in the upper register is dominated by a towering figure that dominates the surface space and which Metais (1973:237) calls the master or god of the birds. As the notation *'registre du haut'* suggests, this is the upper part of an extremely rich and complex set of images and presumably is that occupying the spaces between the notches on the surface of the bamboo tube. This 'upper register' is marked in turn by a contrast in imagery between the upper half, which coincides roughly with the upper 'body' of the deity, and a lower portion composed of panels framed by different orders of stylised motifs. Some of these motifs are figurative: they include the lower limbs of the deity and, descending the scene as 'imaged' on the page, four (dead?) birds, garden stakes-*cum*-rifles, a small round house, a lizard, a dog, and in the lower framed space, the image of a deceased elder framed on either side by cultivated land. This land is represented by an intricate geometrical patterning and the 'elder' is linked to it through the continuity of geometric motifs that extend from his loins and merge with the larger patterned context.[26] The relative size of the deity and the earth-cradled elder give a sense of the power differential involved, but the 'body' of the deity, in a *purusa*-like way, also provides a key to reading the image as a whole.

Metais Plate 03.6.1 (lower register)

Although the figure of the deity is at the centre of the overall image, it could be argued that this is the most significant 'frame' for interpreting potential orders of significance. Spatially, the image appears to operate on an up/down, sky/earth axis and this sets the directionality of reading. Significantly, the rifles-*cum*-garden stakes point in both directions, and some of the human figures are likewise inverted, suggesting fatalities. Features such as hooves and paws, rather than say relative size, distinguish animals, in the upper portion of the image where fish and birds abound.

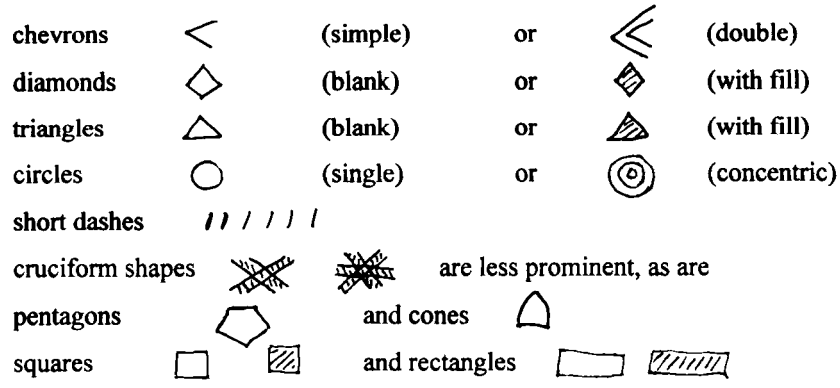
The lower register of the same bamboo is divided evenly between figurative and geometric motifs. The transitory space between the two is a panel of rifles in a regimented style that mediates between the abstractness of the geometric motifs and the representational qualities of the figurative. Here the rifles all point in the same direction, away from the geometric patterning (which, if we follow Metais's interpretation, represents the ocean and the beach).

The rifles point towards the figurative images, here comprising 'the master or god of fishing' (he is roughly half the size of the bird deity but relative size here may depend on whether the upper registers of the bamboo in question are to be read in tandem),[27] humans (Kanak and European), birds, cattle (or dogs), fish, yams and piles of Melanesian skirts.

Design elements [28]

Dots ∴: appear on human figures and in some geometric designs. There is a clear visual distinction between the two types of dots featured in the artwork: the former are very definite, and motivated and could be said to form in themselves an individual motif, while the latter need to appear in multiple form in order to convey meaning, and also in random distribution possibly to indicate colour. The sails in Luquet's Fig. 42 are similarly dotted.

The designs—both figurative and geometric—are composed of a limited number of basic elements:



The shapes of the individual design elements form a continuity across the geometric and figurative art and this feature of ambiguity enables much of the polysemic richness of meaning to operate. The shapes themselves can operate at the level of silhouette, at a recognisable figurative or representational level, or as an element of design. The close similarity of different forms may be due to aesthetic intention or may be the result of working on a particular surface base. The conical shapes used for houses (or rifle butts) can be seen either as a separate individual form or as slightly curved triangles. The curving effect may have been dictated by the surface of the individual bamboo. Some conical houses bear patterning composed principally of chevrons, others of triangular shapes. A sequence of smaller conical houses lining the main passageway between the two larger constructions suggests an optical image of dentation, which can be found also as a framing device in the geometric art.

Form of design units

In Luquet's illustrations, the human figures have two basic forms:

oblong:
(as in Figs. 19-22, 24, 44, 46 *bis*, 53, 61-2)

diamond shaped:
(as in Figs. 18, 24, 30, 39, 41, 43 and 63)

These rectangle and diamond shapes are located in intricate juxtapositions of form throughout the artwork, and can be significant at both the formal aesthetic level and the social level. The shapes suggest linkages with both the Kanak social and cosmological world and with the spatial context. In the designs studied there is a roughly even distribution of rectangles and diamonds. In Luquet's Fig. 44 both shapes appear and in Fig. 45 mentioned above, the European women are composed of two triangle elements instead of the single oblong or diamond usually used for the human body. It is likely that the lower, smaller triangle is a skirt. In some of the engravings this kind of double image is also used to depict conical houses. The rectangles and triangles also depict the negative space of the entrance to the various conical houses. The rectangular entrances are bordered by sculpted door frames and raised thresholds, which the triangular ones lack.

The head element of the human figure is:

(a) blank (as in Luquet's Fig. 62),
(b) with fill (diagonal lines),
(c) has facial features (mostly eyes and nose, occasionally with mouth also, or simply with one of these features alone).

Luquet Fig. 62

Luquet Fig. 19

It is important to bear in mind the possibility that some of these faces are those of masks, in which case the meanings may be quite different from those of everyday images. Again, the link with the living past is a key to understanding meaning here. Feet and hands appear in rough morphological form (Luquet's Fig. 19) or, like animal paws, as straight dashes (Luquet's Fig. 62).

Motion

In many of the engraved scenes, the poses of the human figures suggest motion, possibly dancing, with one arm raised, the other hanging. Likewise the legs are often depicted as chevrons, again suggesting dance. A fuller appreciation of the dynamism of this artwork can be gained if one views it in tandem with photographic images such as those featured in Tjibaou and Misotte (1978). Throughout their book *Kanake* there are several images of bamboos, some quite small musical instruments, others fitting the description of scale encountered in the older literature on the bamboos themselves. If the deeds of ancestors are re-enacted in dance as well as through the verbal medium, it is important to entertain the possibility that sensory modes other than the visual may be crucial to a full understanding

of meaning. Formal discussion of such features as symmetry may be important in relating artwork to the material base of the art object, but can hinder perception of the vitality that animates Melanesian perceptions. A hint of this kind of animation is suggested in the comments contained in Boulay's work on Kanak architecture where he quotes Kanak explanations of the significance of the relationship between inside and outside the ceremonial house. In a succinct example of Melanesian protocol, for example, the messenger carries the word that announces the defining events of existence along the clear avenue that links one ceremonial house to another:

> *La grande case ne se vit pas sans ses allées car ce qui est fait dedans doit ressortir, doit éclater à l'extérieur....*[29] (Boulay 1990:47)

In Pacific iconography and gesture alike, this proclamation of the word is enacted in the protruding tongue. The facial features in most of the engravings are insufficiently distinct to suggest semantic variations calqued on the image of mouth or tongue. This exteriorisation of meaning is a form of revelation, one that makes it witnessable in a visual sense. It is a public manifestation of the word.

At a synaesthetic level, when figures are shown in profile, the viewer's attention is drawn more to the activity than to dialogue or communion. In the sphere of sound, this kind of positioning also construes the ideal 'beholder' as a third-party listener-*cum*-observer rather than as a direct participant. Full-face confrontation between subject and ideal viewer invites participation either as a silent listener to an authoritative voice or as a partner in a dialogue. Degrees of intimacy and distance can be signalled by a play of relative size and scale, and by the accentuation of different facial features. In masks and in engraved images the absence of mouth or ears can suggest a context of silence and reflection, whereas facial images that incorporate these features or draw attention to them in various aesthetic ways point to contexts of utterance that are framed, not by an outer visual device strikingly accessible to the eye, but by subtle absences and presences at the level of seemingly minor elements of the artwork.

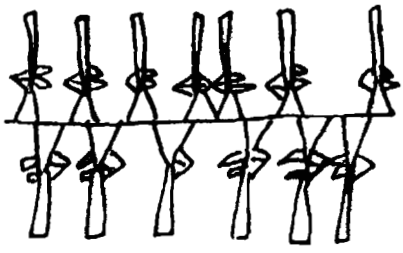
Other traces more suggestive of stasis are to be seen in Luquet's Fig. 43 where the arms are symmetrically opposed and the hands appear to rest on the hips: a characteristically European pose? Or one perhaps provoked by European presence? This kind of image is replicated in some of the rifle motifs, where the trigger guard is isomorphically displayed, and a similar visual pun is sometimes used to evoke other notions of power through the isomorphism of the vulva motif.

Luquet Fig. 43

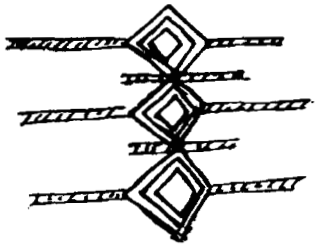
Repetition

The art displays a high degree of repetition. In Luquet's Fig. 39, for example, the juxtaposition of the rifle motifs is quite similar to the geometric design of Fig. 55. Within the geometric designs, repetition involves successive horizontal or vertical sequential linkage of motif and depending on shape, juxtaposition of certain motifs also. In connection with this repetition, Luquet points out: *'... si ... les motifs ont une destination surtout magique, leur efficacité s'accroîtra avec leur nombre'* (Luquet 1926:32).[30] Although plurality may indeed be an indication of power, on a purely aesthetic level the pattern-making wish is overtly present (in Luquet Fig. 40, for example) and this is a clear example of subject becoming style. As Torgovnick points out in her discussion of

modernist art criticism, 'repetition can give fictions or hypotheses the status of truths' (1990:96). It is possible that intensity of repetition whether in visual or verbal form, suggests an epistemic kernal in any cultural medium.

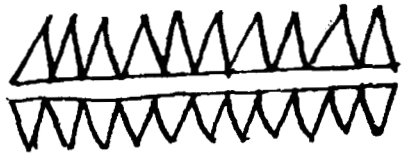


Luquet 39



Luquet 55

Luquet 40 and 41



Luquet 54

Fill

The diagonal line-fill appears invariably in the same direction, ie, right to left (top to bottom). In other anthropomorphic designs the fill is constituted by straight horizontal and vertical lines and the bodies are elongated and rectangular. In the absence of colour, fill is one of the principal differentiation markers in this art.

Munn's concept (1973) of continuous and discontinuous meaning ranges is pertinent here, and the following chart is designed to show the various uses of the different basic elements in both the geometric and figurative art. This chart could, of course, be reduced to even more basic elemental levels: the diamond is made up either of two triangles or two chevrons juxtaposed. All the elements could be reduced finally to dots and straight or curved lines, but this radical operation would be unlikely to elucidate the ways in which the semantic components are related to encode meaning and to generate aesthetically pleasing designs. The shared repertoire of elements across the figurative and geometric forms suggests a polysemic continuity based on shape. I shall return to this issue in the discussion of visual puns below.

Triangle

Abstract
Patterns (4 deep horizontally and 2 or 3 deep vertically)
Taro (according to Dellenbach and Lobsiger)
Head
Ears
Nose
Headdress
Trigger-guard of rifle
Pubic triangle
Fish
Sails
House

Rectangle

Mats
Handles and heads of clubs
Barrels of rifles
Abstract yams

Circle

Piles of yams
Club
Base of hut (as if seen from above)
Bodies of turtles

Dots

Eyes
Nose
Ash (on mourners' bodies)
Fill on sails

Dash*

Hair
Beard
Body hair
Penis
Hands
Paws
House decoration
Palm leaves
Belts
Facial features

Oval

Yams
Palm branches
Animal bodies
Fish
Beetle

Cone

Houses
Poles
Rifle butts**

Chevron

Abstract design on huts
Legs
Arms
Body of dog
Single and double in vertical panels

Cross

Piles of yams
Tops of palm trees

Diamond

Human body
Human head
Vulva (according to Dellenbach and Lobsiger)
Abstract cloud
Abstract trellis

Pentagon

Club
Coconut

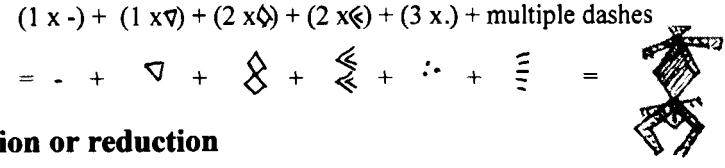
Single straight line

Belt

• The rich multivocality of the dash shows how important positioning is to the interpretation of meaning. In most instances, dashes are deployed for features peripheral to the core motifs.
** Traditional sails were also conical.

The following is an example of the range of disparate elements from which a human female figure may be composed:

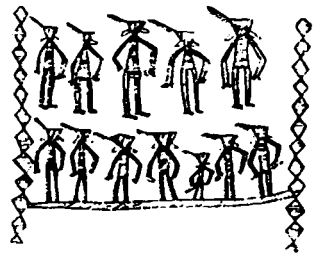
(1 x -) + (1 x▽) + (2 x◇) + (2 x≪) + (3 x.) + multiple dashes



Simplification or reduction

Repetition frequently involves simplification of the original motif, taking only certain aspects and leaving others out. One characteristic form of reduction is hemi-section, where one half of the original motif is repeated over and over again to produce a new design. Of course, it could be argued that the 'half' was the original and that in fact 'doubling' was taking place.

Throughout the art there is also evidence of concern for distribution of weight and balance. The concern for overall balance overrides the concern for exact symmetry in the individual design units. In Luquet's Fig. 40, for example, some of these units are 'lopsided': in the second row from top, the human figures have their guns, clubs (?) and headdress all on the same side, whereas the attributes of the figures in the top row are more evenly spread. The overall impact of the total design is, however, one of balance. It could then be argued that the asymmetrical lopsidedness suggests movement and directionality. Almost total use of the given surface space requires adaptation of the subject matter to this surface, notably in the adjustment of form. This is most obvious in the geometric designs. Although from a 'realist' perspective this could be seen negatively as deformation of the original subject matter, it is more likely that it is due rather to an aesthetic concern to produce a visually pleasing result.



Extract from Luquet Fig.40

Visual puns

The artwork is replete with puns that play on the shapes and silhouettes of individual motifs. The silhouette of the rifles in Luquet's Fig. 40 (as also in Figs. 31 and 32), for example, has been chosen as the house motif (as in Fig. 52) and the lower part of the coconut palms in Fig. 41. Thus, at this level, as well as at the level of basic elements, there is a continuous meaning range, ie, the different constellations of the elements modify and/or change their meaning in each individual instance. The range of permutations thus opened up provides scope for further nuances to be introduced to the text of cognitive, conceptual messages carried by the elements. As with words in a language, the context modifies the meaning, and in this way the art functions also as a system of knowledge, much of the epistemological richness of which lies in the very economy of form.

This may be an appropriate juncture at which to digress for a brief hypothetical example of how a range of meanings could be reduced to a common semantic denomination based on shape. One meaning of the triangle, according to Dellenbach and Lobsiger (1967), is the taro field. Taros are, to the New Caledonian Kanak, wet and female. Taro fields may be women's fields because they are irrigated or because they are owed to or worked by matrilateral kin or a combination of both these factors. In the figurative art, triangles are used *inter alia* for heads, noses, ears and vulvas, all of which produce wet substances: tears, mucus, saliva, wax, menstrual blood or urine. It may be, of course, that only their visual aspect prompts their representational form, or the fact that they are key bodily orifices and have a link with power and growth. Yet again, it may be an aesthetic concern for symmetry that prompts, say, the depiction of the vulva as protruding from the body. The basic outline of a human head and body is then quite symmetrical and can be made by two juxtaposed chevrons with closed ends. The u se of the pubic triangle is, of course, very widespread in art systems and it may be that the head is to be explained as balancing the female public triangle. Many of these motifs have continuous meaning ranges. As well as denoting taro fields and entrances to houses, the triangle with a short dash inside, for example, can be a human face with nose, a vulva and/or a trigger-guard and a trigger of rifle.

If, however, one starts from the taro itself rather than from the geometric shape, the picture becomes more complicated. As Metais (1973:21-22) points out, the taro is an enormous root with many branches.[31] She goes on to explain that these branches or arms *(bras)* are represented in the art by a dense intersection that takes the form of a cross. The artist encircles this cross with a line to mark it off as significative. In Metais' words, the cross is no longer all those intersecting arms, but becomes volume and taro. The rhizomatic nature of the root stands as an ideal metaphor of the interlacing of affinal relations woven by the lives of women.

In social and cosmological terms, some tentative clues to the complexities of the changing relationships between aesthetic form and social content may lie at the level of kinship and alliance, as these institutions serve to mediate between any abstract, aesthetic features of the art on the one hand, and somatic configurations of physical and terrestrial realities on the other.

To return to the visual aspect of this art, we have seen that although the shape of the individual design elements is simple, their arrangement is relatively complex and lends itself to many possible permutations. This is, therefore, a graphic system that does not need a verbal accompaniment absolutely. The various combinations and recombinations of these elements, moreover, give rise to several orders of movement within the art, and the images owe much of their dynamism to an intricate play of form at the hands of the engraver. The forms of these manipulations are varied and suggestive in themselves.

Given the basic elements listed in the chart above, some of the main mechanisms by which their manipulation in the various designs would appear to be achieved are as follows:

sequence (either vertically or horizontally).
framing (so that the elements appear as if on a panel).
bordering (in which the original motif is repeated in outline).
juxtaposition and/or alternation of elements.
hemi-section.
various types of fill such as
- dots,
- straight lines,
- diagonal lines,
- herringbone pattern,
- cross-hatching.

Finally, the interplay of the two main styles, figurative and geometric, as well as incorporating various levels of meaning, reveals the artists' capacity for versatility in assimilating new subject matter and in expanding or constricting the semantic dimensions of the basic elements. Formal analyses of the art have a depth of richness to offer, particularly if these are accomplished in the light of both the older cognitive insights and newer approaches that transcend mind/body divisions. It should be recognised, however, that in somatising consciousness in the person of the individual artist, it is possible to overlook some of the advantages of examining social inflections in the artwork.

Design complexities are inflected by cultural knowledge and a purely visual approach to the art is likely to restrict beholders to relatively superficial levels of appreciation. This cultural knowledge is not beyond reach, however, and a careful scholarly approach to the wealth of detail that is embedded in oral traditions, coupled with ethnographic and historical texts, will no doubt yield important insights into the richness of the art.

Culturally-sensitive approaches to the art recognise several orders of movement: within and between design elements; within and between the scenes depicted; across the changing and interacting Kanak and European social spheres of action; as well as geographic and temporal movements as the art objects changed hands and social contexts across the decades. These physical movements are matched on the ideational level by the movement of ideas as different levels of comprehension and different social sensitivities are brought to bear on the subject. The earlier accounts show a preoccupation with having the engravings, both as images and as objects, accepted as art. The complexities of interpreting the juxtapositions of different sets of imagery should not be underestimated. The implications of design and stylistic features of the engravings *qua* art are shaped not only by the intentionality of the engraver, but by those who have chosen to transmit understandings of this work to later generations. Transmission media in themselves as well as the cultural expectations and knowledge of the various beholders all play a part in shaping the aura of the artwork. As Banks and Morphy point out 'people are often unaware how different images become as they cross boundaries' (1997:28). Later commentators who have contributed to the literature have taken the artistic merit of the engravings for granted and have drawn the focus away from visuality in the optical sense towards broader motor sensibilities.

In the case of these engraved bamboos, there is a rich body of song, chant, story and gesture to nurture their reanimation as *bâtons sonores*—as the resounding phenomena that they are. The kinaesthetic traces of the different orders of movement within the artwork engraved on bamboo that have been a focus of this brief paper lead not to a solid body of scholarly knowledge but only to a greater range of questions. Melanesian and other interested actors will undoubtedly approach the art in a variety of ways, some stressing iconographic leanings, others confronting the artworks as ancestral heritage. The bamboos themselves will be *objets* to some and *choses* to others.

With the re-animation of *soirées contes* (stories told around the campfire) in New Caledonia, there is likely to be a mutual enriching of word and image that may shed further light on the history and meaning of these engraved bamboos. The interanimation of contexts of display, movement and utterance will be one dynamic factor in the ongoing changing lives of Melanesians and their significant others.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Michael Allen, Editor of *TAJA*, for inviting me to submit this article for consideration. I would also like to acknowledge the very helpful comments from the anonymous reviewers who took the trouble to read my earlier draft, and to thank Jennifer Mand of Mouton de Gruyter for permission to reprint Plate 03.6.1 from Metais (1973).

My thanks also to Gillian Bottomley for her many insightful and perceptive comments on things artistic and anthropological, and to Lissant Bolton for encouraging me to seek publication. The overall thinking that informs this article owes much to the late Anthony Forge's lectures on art. Any errors and inconsistencies that remain in the text are my own.

Notes

1. Leenhardt (1932:90 and 125) comments on a legend from Kanak oral tradition, 'The Two Sisters of Moaxa', where the tubes are mentioned both as art objects and as containers for magical herbs.
2. Luquet 1926:22 includes them in his category of 'decorative arts'. He mentions also engraved combs, which are far fewer in number than the canes or *bâtons* which he discusses at length.
3. Notably when one was on a voyage or journey (Leenhardt 1932:125).
4. Luquet's early discussion of the engraved bamboos centres on the notion of a voyage or journey which he seems to take as signifying a literal physical displacement outside the village. He himself argues against this interpretation and 'grounds' the bamboos (and their aesthetic subject matter) firmly within village life. The polyvalency of the notion of voyage or journey would appear to be critical here, and warrants further research in the light of more recent linguistic and ethnographically-informed work, such as that of scholars like Bensa (1990, 1995), Bonnemaison (1979, 1985), Douglas (1980) and J-M Tjibaou (1976, 1996). The abundant literature addressing this theme in the wider region is also relevant here. By this I mean the rich, oral, anthropological, literary and historical material pertaining to the region.
5. It is important to note that some of these designs were copied by Luquet and therefore we have to rely on his fidelity to the originals. Where appropriate I give indications of scale.
6. I am grateful to Nicholas Thomas for drawing my attention to this work.
7. An earlier precedent for this kind of approach was the work of Leroi-Gourhan and Poirier (1953).
8. See Bonnemaison et al. (1996).
9. In a Husserlian sense.
10. The distinction between objects and things is significant. See comments by Marie-Claude Tjibaou below.
11. Interesting research is currently being undertaken at the Australian Museum in Sydney on the various collectors and collections of art from the wider Pacific region.
12. These include the *Musee des Beaux Arts* in Chartres, the *Musée d'histoire naturelle* at La Rochelle and the *Musée Calvet* in Avignon, as well as the more widely known collection at the *Musée de l'Homme* in Paris.
13. At the Australian Museum in Sydney. My study of this small but significant collection will be the subject of a future article.
14. Notably at the *Museum für Volkerkunde* and the *Musée d'ethnographie* respectively.
15. My article does not, for example, deal with Chinese, Russian, German or other interest in these artefacts.
16. A question arises as to whether there were only male engravers. The available sources indicate that this was so. Another important consideration is whether it mattered what kinds of material women and men worked with in producing art forms generally, but again there is no indication in the literature on the engraved bamboos that would allow us to discuss this question. The issue of whether the designs came from matrifocal kin is also relevant, but as yet no such detail is forthcoming.
17. The significance of the body fast was brought home to me during my research into techniques of memorisation and is discussed in my forthcoming work, *Language is a Mobile Home*.
18. See in this respect the contemporary works of scholars such as Bensa (1990, 1995), Bensa and J-C Rivierre (1994), Bogliolo (1994), Douglas (1998), Gorode (1996), Rivierre et al. (1980), J-M Tjibaou (1976, 1996) and others, as well as the older works of Guiart (1963, 1966), Lambert (1980) and Leenhardt (1930, 1932, 1977).
19. The engravings are also the subject of my forthcoming work on metaphor and the arts, tentatively titled the *Music of What Happens*...
20. The present article does not allow space for a thoroughgoing exposition of the notion of myth. The subject is treated in illuminating ways in the work of Tjibaou (1976, 1996), Bensa (1990, 1995), Leenhardt (1930, 1932, 1977), Clifford (1982) and others, while the related subject of

masks can be found in discussions by Leenhardt (1933) and Guiart (1966). These works deserve to be studied alongside those from other parts of Melanesia and the Pacific. The influences back and forth between anglophone and francophone ideas and the discourses of various missionary, military and mercantile institutions would also provide grounds for reassessing the mythology of European and other scholarship of the region.

21. *Pilou* (or *pilou-pilou*) appears in the literature as a generic Europeanised term for the ceremonial dances performed to effect the lifting of mourning, particularly that marking the passing of a chief.
22. See Fig.45 in Luquet's work. A large but nevertheless incomplete section of this image forms part of the cover image of Boulay's 1990 work, mentioned above, where it is placed alongside images of ceremonial houses replete with various decorated roof shafts. Together these two contexts of documentation provide a salutary example of the subtle effects of various instances of juxtaposition in the scholarly literature.
23. Issues of nomenclature are important here. In the francophone literature, these objects are referred to as either *bâtons* or *cannes* and in the anglophone literature the dominant term is tube. All these terms suggest slightly different ideas about the function(s) of bamboo, but Boulay (1993) gives quite precise details of those which are engraved and those which are not. In the earlier literature Metais (1979) comes perhaps closest to a Melanesian sense of these *'choses'* with her reference to 'resonating batons' *(bâtons sonores)*.
24. According to Tjibaou and Misotte (1978:57), it was the responsibility of the chiefly clans to prepare and kill turtles, which were regarded as the noble offering. On the complexities of the subject of clans and chieftainship, see the works of Bensa (1995), Guiart (1992) and others.
25. Literally translated: 'Framing is always present in the figurative engravings, but never found in the [miniature] images of daily life'.
26. A potent visual example of Joyce's 'corpse'.
27. Metais herself, for example, does not see any apparent connection between the personages depicted in this lower image and those in the upper one (1973:237).
28. In the current global mercantile system, the notion of design has taken on a heightened economic significance which extends beyond the aesthetic and industrial senses it held in the pre-computer age. Designs are now eagerly sought after in all information-based areas of life and this includes the economically charged arts industries.
29. Literally translated: 'The ceremonial house cannot exist apart from its avenues since what happens inside it must be brought out, must be proclaimed outside...'
30. Translation: 'If the motifs have a destination above all magical, their efficacy increases with their number'.
31. For an ethnographically-informed discussion of the importance of taro in another part of the Melanesian world, see the work of Eves (1998).

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