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Bark capes and severing the initiate's link to his mother in Baruya male rituals (Papua New Guinea)

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The ritual use of tapa among the Baruya of Papua New Guinea illustrates both the erstwhile central place of pieces of beaten bark among the Anga and new developments in the study of material culture brought to light by 'revised' *technologie culturelle*. This renewed orientation in the study of techniques, objects, gestures, and material actions in general adheres to the 'technologist' Marcel Mauss' views (Schlanger 2006) in that it demonstrates that the materiality of certain objects, their physical attributes, and the way local populations perceive them participate in social life and relations in a specific way. In particular, as the anthropologist Annette Weiner (1983) puts it, in relationships between individuals and groups, objects do what words, or words alone, cannot (see as well Tambiah 1968).

It has been established that material actions are central to practices (and a form of communication) and constitute a kind of unspoken statement about ways of living, but this is not simply a matter of 'reading' forms, contexts, or even matter by means of identifying symbols, icons, or indices, which would suffice for semiologists (for example Hutchins 2005, Knappett 2005, Malafouris 2013, Monnerie 2010). In the minds of the people doing something and in the minds of those observing them, the way materials are made and used draws on convergent references to multiple domains of their social lives, each having its own system of inference (Lemonnier 2012). As they pass through various sensory channels, these composites generate unspoken messages about essential aspects of the way people live, and in particular the attendant tensions and contradictions that at times go unvoiced. As a result, cultural technology says things about social organizations and systems of thought that could not be said other than by describing observed technical acts and by specifying the materials used, the way things are put together, and the principles of use inherent in these objects.[1]

It is equally clear that, according to recent work, what objects 'do' in people's lives is not – at least certainly not *only* – a function of the usual business of power, status, gender,

[1] For example, see Coupaye 2013, Keane 2003, Lemonnier 2012, Mahias 2002, MacKenzie 1991, Revolon 2018, Santos-Granero 2009, Warnier 2009, Wayland 2014.

contradictory realities**,** and reception theory, as many Material Culture Studies would have us believe. However, objects do have a crucial role in social relations, strategies, and change: indeed, by their very physical dimension, they play an irreplaceable role in the wordless rendering, perpetuation, or transformation of social relations. And it is not surprising that acts, objects, and techniques aid us in conceptualizing social relations. In all events, that is the idea the late François Sigaut (2012) advanced in his last work.

In a statement that will surely become a milestone for the discipline, he said that 'we model our beliefs and conventions on successful acts' and went on to add, 'our beliefs hold together because we attribute to them the effectiveness we constantly experience in dealing with the "system of necessity"' (Sigaut 2012: 68)[2] – 'system of necessity' being the material limits of the world, according to Simone Weil (1998 [1955]).

Further on, Sigaut noted that 'an act carried out with tools, a technical act (which is the same thing) involves not two but three elements: a person, matter (the matter worked on), and a tool' (Sigaut 2012:100). In other words, acts that involve objects are prototypes of successful acts, which is to say of an objective and immediate relation between an act and its result. Moreover, an act that involves objects can have a visible outcome only because it simultaneously brings into play *several* relations. It is always a matter of the relations between relations: one between the person holding the hammer and the nail he is pounding in, one between the hammer and the nail it strikes, and one between the nail and the matter it penetrates. If one of these relations or one of these elements is absent (if the nail isn't held straight, if a match is being used instead of a nail, if the wooden plank is replaced by a length of steel) nothing will happen.

In short, acts that involve objects provide us with an immediate experience of what constitutes an effective system of relations. The uses of barkcloth in Baruya rituals exemplified below will illustrate how material actions are at the core of the transformation and reorganization of specific relations.

The Anga of PNG, barkcloth, and male initiations

In the form of bark capes, together with sporran-like aprons made of reeds or strips of beaten bark, Anga tapa cloths have long contributed to the distinctive appearance of the

[2] Author's translation from French : « … c'est sur le modèle de l'action efficace que nous construisons nos croyances et nos conventions ». Et « si celles-ci ont quelque solidité, ajoutait-il aussitôt, c'est parce que nous leur prêtons une efficacité sur le modèle de celle dont faisons l'expérience à chaque instant dans nos rapports avec le 'réseau de nécessité' » (Sigaut 2012 : 68).

people formerly known as 'Kukukuku'. 'Killers in bark capes' was among their derogatory designations up to the 1950s. Beatrice Blackwood, the author of one of the very first monographs on material culture and ethnobotany in Melanesia, studied the making of barkcloth during her fieldwork in 1936-37 (Blackwood 1950:27-31, plate V, VI), and in the 1960s Hans Fischer also wrote on tapa-making in *Negwa* (1968: 339-340). Until the mid-1980s or early 1990s, bark capes (made of *Ficus* spp.) and women's loincloths (made of *Ficus spp*. or *Broussonetia papyrifera*) were common in most Anga groups and can still be seen in some. In any case, tapa is occasionally used for ritual occasions, as among the Baruya in November 2010 for women's *sanginie* rituals (Nunguya 2014) or in December 2013 for the last (ever?) performed male *muka* ritual (Nunguya pers. comm.). By contrast with other regions of New Guinea where tapa is highly decorated, all Anga barkcloth products are undecorated – although some may receive a discrete mark of identification, as I discuss below.[3]

Except for the Baruya – who traded their locally made prestigious salt bars for pieces of beaten bark produced by the neighbouring (non-Anga) Aziana people (Godelier 1971, Lemonnier 1984a, Weller 2006) – all Anga groups used to produce their own tapa (Lemonnier 1984b) and several still produce some on a small scale for special occasions (for instance, a 'show' in Menyamya). The only place where *maro* (barkcloth in Tok Pisin) have been produced by the hundreds until recently are the Ankave valleys, where some people still wear tapa on a daily basis. Until around 1990, 95% of Ankave men still wore bark capes and loincloths, and then suddenly half switched to shorts and shirts. At the same time, very few women adapted to blouses.

From the late 1970s until 2005, in addition to their own usual use of beaten *Ficus* bark in everyday and ceremonial life, many Ankave men produced tapa because this was the only way to get cash, mostly for bride-price and (in very recent times) in order to pay school fees. In contrast to other places in PNG, no *maro* made in Ankave country has ever been produced to supply the tourist market (**Illustr.1**). And for decades, each time Pascale Bonnemère and I visited the Suowi Valley, we saw regular trading expeditions to Menyamya, where until recently tapa was often a substitute for Chinese-made cotton blankets (**Illustr. 2**). When the production of barkcloth became a speciality of the Suowi Valley, thousands of *Ficus* trees were planted in the 1970s around the hamlets, that is at 1050 meters altitude, some two or

[3] For a range of comparative cases, see Barker 2016; Brianchon 2017; Charleux 2017; Fajans 1997, 2017; Garnier 2011: 461-463; Hermkens 2005; Hermkens & Barker 2017; Krotoff 1985:53-56; Lüerssen & Lueb 2017; Thomas 2013.

three hundred meters higher than where *Ficus* usually grows (500-800m above sea level in the Ankave territory).

Needless to say, the Ankave have adopted plastic materials as soon as they could, and a nice big piece of plastic sheeting or a plastic bag may prove more waterproof than a tapa – but certainly less comfortable if used as a mat, as it is the case in most houses. By no means, however, would they use such a material when the time comes to initiate a man (who has just fathered his first child) into the *suwangen* third stage of male initiation (Bonnemère 2017, 2018) – which is still organized one to three times a year, although some men try to escape it. Indeed, from the initial moment when a young boy joins his future co-initiates on the eve of the ritual cycle, he is given a bark cape, which he will wear every day for years, his head covered under the hood. Years later, the first thing a man does when he discovers his wife is pregnant is to cover his head with a bark cape (Bonnemère 2018). These roles for bark capes, and barkcloth more generally, are (or were) general in all Anga male rituals. For instance, when I asked what kind of physical actions had been performed on the Baruya *muka* novices of 2013 – in which the young boys' nasal septums had not been pierced, although this is supposed to be the most conspicuous aspect of the first stage of *muka* – the immediate answer was: 'They got covered with a new bark cape'.

I am presently documenting and analysing the various ways in which materiality is involved in this Baruya *muka* ceremony (**Illustr. 3**). The *muka* is the first in a cycle of four ceremonies covering a period of almost ten years that performs all sorts of transformations: the transformation of the boy's relations with other persons, his mother, his co-initiates, his ritual sponsors, and older initiates; the construction of a hierarchy of men; the construction of a solidarity between young men initiated at the same time; the capture of particular spirit familiars (of a shaman, fierce warrior, or great hunter); the production of strong, fearless warriors; and the reproduction of male-dominant gender asymmetry.[4]

In line with the new formulation of *technologie culturelle*, my questions about the materiality of that ritual may be formulated as follows: What do objects, gestures, and material actions in general do in the ritual process that words (or words alone) cannot do? Or: Why is it that the initial stage of the Baruya rituals, the *muka* comprises 90 steps, all named

[4] The Baruya *muka* I refer to in this paper took place in June 1979 in Nungwasan, a village in the Wonenara valley (Eastern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea). I observed and photographed this ritual at length at the time, and later, I have enquired year after year about it, but my present work would not have been undertaken without the film (13 hours) made by Ian Dunlop and Maurice Godelier. In particular, it relies heavily on the comments and translations reproduced in Dunlop (1992). The importance of the contribution of my repeated work sessions with the Baruya filmmaker Kumain Nunguye over the years is equally beyond words.

and focused on particular material actions ('beating in corridors', 'running the gauntlet', 'piercing the septum', 'giving salt mixture', 'cutting the loincloths', etc.)? Why are there more than 100 objects or material devices involved? Why more than 100 plants? Why dozens of marked 'ceremonial' gestures, ways of walking, body postures, and attitudes? In particular, I am trying to understand the crucial role played in ritual action by a sort of materiality-centred, non-verbal communication that has long been identified and is usually called ritual 'condensation' (e.g. Houseman, Severi 1998: 279; Grimes 2008: 385; Leach 1976: 37-41; Lévi-Strauss 1971: 671; 1973: 588-592; Turner 1967:39-43) – which is itself a particular case of this type of non-verbal communication (Lemonnier 2012:145-147).

For convenience's sake, I will focus on the use of barkcloth, and more precisely bark capes, in the *muka*. However, it should be noted that, despite this focus, those hoods, with which the novices become one for years, exemplify a single aspect of the involvement of materiality in the ritual actions forming the *muka*. Similarly, that aspect of the *muka* on which I concentrate below – the mother-novice link in its manifold forms – is only one in the series of relations transformed over the course of that ceremony. Barkcloth, too, belongs to a group of at least ten 'crucial' material devices or material actions that appear in the *muka*. Others are the sacred objects possessed and used by the ritual experts (Godelier 1986:81-84); but also spirit traps and spirit beacons, corridors, platforms and propitiatory decorations, magic doors, the bone awl used to pierce the nasal septum, and so on.[5] In each case it is possible to explain what role the materiality in question plays in the ritual transformation at hand.

Barkcloth per se is utilized in more than a dozen different material actions during the *muka* ritual. In the form of long ribbons – *ipmulje* – pieces of tapa are first of all 'the road of the Sun' for the Baruya, i.e. the path followed by an ancestor when he brought down to earth the sacred object *kwaimatñe* given by the Sun to the first ritual experts[6] (Godelier 1986:95). An *ipmulje* also signals which future initiate is the first of his sons a father brings to the ritual. Quite crucially, among the Sambia**,** whose initiations are 'the same' as the Baruya ones (according to the Sambia – Herdt 1987:149), such an *ipmulje* tied to the leaves of a huge tree provides the mechanical link between the Sun and the novice's head, actually with his fontanel, so that the Sun's force enters and transforms him (no symbol here: a true physical link).

[5] My research has revealed that there are at least one hundred different objects involved in the *muka* ritual.

[6] The political aspects of the objects owned by ritual experts have been at the heart of a number of publications by Maurice Godelier.

As I mentioned above, the Baruya tailored their capes from pieces of beaten *Ficus* bark imported from the Aziana. Therefore, what is at stake is not the making of those pieces of barkcloth – described in Lemonnier (1984b) – but only their handling and function during the ritual in question. All the foregoing carefully phrased remarks being made, let us enter the core of the matter: the particular use of tapa in the ritual steps of the *muka* that severs the mother-child bond.

Bark Capes and Severing a Boy's Link to his Mother

Among the Baruya, the separation of the mother-son pair goes far beyond the time of the rituals itself and takes years (and two other ritual stages) to be achieved, but it starts at the very beginning of the *muka*, the early sequences of which are mostly dedicated to 'removing women's influence'. Those first ritual operations – summarized here – bear mainly on the boys' skin, as the material upon which physical action must be applied to obtain the desired ritual transformations, and they take place simultaneously with the donning of a new bark cape (simply called 'bark cape' *yEvEta*) that covers the novice's entire body down to his ankles.

At the start of the ritual, the boys are gathered into one village house, and some women spray chewed ginger on their bodies (a mother does not do this to her own son). This is explicitly to cover the initiates' old skin, and thus cleanse it from the impurities of the female domestic world. They still wear their old bark cape.

The next day the boys' new bark capes are painted with strips of orange marks using ginger once more, both in order to be able to hand back the right cloth to the right boy when necessary, and in order to identify the boy hidden under a given hood. The ritual experts place the capes on the boys' heads while their mothers take back the old bark capes. The boys are then led into the forest to a place where they will go through a series of man-made trellis-work tunnels in which they are beaten.

By means of this terror, the boy's spirit is 'loosened' so that it can be put in contact with the powers of the Sun through the conduit of a huge areca tree, onto the trunk of which a 'spirit trap' is fixed; the boy's body is then rubbed with stinging nettles – the Baruya do not comment on that, but the neighbouring Sambia say that it is done to remove the 'fluff' that remains from childhood; that is, from contact with the women (Herdt 1987:144). Ginger is spat on their body to hide the traces of the beating (**Illustr. 4**). This ritual operation in the forest is also the first (but not the last) time that a dirge, a funerary song, is sung. For the

anthropologist, this initial stint in the forest is the beginning[7] of the process by which ritual actions bring the boys into proximity with death; or, rather, it starts a process of dying – the culmination of which is the piercing of the nasal septum, the next day.

When they return to the village, the boys are led to a garden to sleep for a few hours; then they are taken near a huge bonfire around which they are obliged to circle, firmly held by their ritual sponsor. The heat of the fire, it is said, makes them sweat a lot, once more in order to cleanse them of their mother's influence and 'dirt from the female world'. Then each boy is given back to his mother, who takes him to a spot near the door of the ceremonial compound, where she utters his new name. The boys are then beaten upon entering the ceremonial enclosure. At that moment, they do not yet hide their face under the hood of the *maro*; this is the last time the mothers can see their son's face. The boys spend their first night in the ceremonial house, that is: in a men's house.

The next morning at dawn, they are handed back for a few minutes to their mothers, who themselves bring them to the place where they will run the gauntlet and be thrashed by warriors (**Illustr. 5**). While she walks, the woman carefully holds the bark cape closed so that it hides her son entirely. Then the boys are taken one by one from their mother by their ritual sponsor, who perches the boy on his back and runs between two lines of warriors. Before the arrival of Europeans, it was the mothers themselves who thrashed the boys with thorny branches, explicitly to rid them one more time of maternal blood and influence.

Afterwards, the future initiates are taken to the high forest for the second time before the eyes of the mothers and sisters, who know that it will be years before they talk to the boys again. A few hours later, their nasal septum will be pierced; this is said to 'kill the novices'. And indeed, the risk of the sore becoming infected is so high that the piercing of the septum is an actual – not merely symbolic – potentially lethal gesture. The close encounter with death is real, and the dirge briefly sung by the men immediately after the piercing acknowledges this proximity with death. Years later, the young men will be 'reborn' as *tsuwañe* initiates, but that is another story. Whatever the ordeal, on each occasion the cape covering the future initiate's head and body is only removed while he is being beaten and then immediately given back to him. His mother, too, has received a new bark cape, which she wears on top of her old one. Indeed, the mother and son continue to demonstrate their earlier symbiotic relationship prior to their radical separation; Bonnemère (2017) has discussed this necessary prerequisite to the

[7] Interestingly, G. Herdt (1987:135) remarked that, in a similar situation – when the boys come back to their mothers for a few hours after a first series of ordeals –, the novices already "self-consciously cover their faces" with the cape they have just donned.

transformation of a relationship and demonstrated that, in order to be transformed, the previous state of the mother-boy bond has first to be reenacted.

Clearly, at this point in the ritual, the novices' skin has been mistreated several times. This insistence on skin is not surprising, for the idea of 'changing the boys' skin' is central to the whole process of the initiations[8]. As one commentator said to me, 'How many years they spent with their mothers! Men want them to become *muka*, to change their skin; to have them get a new body!' In the Baruya language the word *kelaaka* means at the same time 'skin' and 'body' (and tree *kelaaka* is the skin of the tree, that is its bark). As in many New Guinea societies, here the skin itself is the analogical and physical equivalent of the person. During the *muka* ceremony, the boy's skin is both the external envelope upon which actions are performed and an index of his physical and moral state; it is his interface with the outside world and is treated as such. Throughout the ritual, all sorts of actions are performed upon the boys' skin and at the end, the initiates' skin is said to 'shine' as a result of the transformations accomplished (*kelalasi' bakabele*: skin luk white/shine in Tok Pisin).

As we have seen, in the first days of the *muka*, the supposed pollution of the boys' skin with female-related substances is equated with the general negative influence of the women's world they have accumulated since their birth. Cleansing their skin with ginger, urtication or sweating means getting rid of the 'damage' and bad influences accumulated during all those years. But acting on the novices' skin is a general process throughout the ritual. Efforts are made to make it smell good; it is mistreated and wounded by various blows, whipped and rubbed with nettles.

Clay (and paradoxically, some nettling) is said to alleviate all sorts of pain endured by the boys; for some days they are not allowed to scratch their skin with their fingers but must use a stick instead, on pain of the sore of their pierced septum becoming dangerously infected; their skin is also hot as a result of the entering of various powers and spirits into their body and person. This is why their fingers will have to be 'cooled' by nettling before they cook their own food; and last, at the end of the *muka*, it is by covering the skin of the men and the initiates with clay that their persons will be 'cooled' so that the powers they have encountered do not make the women and children sick when the men come back close to the village and domestic life.

The skin of the future initiate is the obvious medium through which his body and person are altered, and the long bark cape he wears acts as an artificial skin that protects him while

[8]. On the importance of skin in an other New Guinea initiation, see Eggertsson 2003.

his own skin is weakened and altered. Yet, for the anthropologist, something more complex is also taking place. The new cape installed on a *muka* not only acts as a temporary, artificial protective skin: it is also a physical device aimed at hindering viewing – he must not and cannot look at women, and his mother, in particular, cannot see her son, although she can recognise him (by his gait and his bark cape). In other words, acting on, with, and through the boys' skin is only one aspect of what the ritual does in order to disrupt the mother-son bond. And this leads us to remark that what the Baruya actually do materially to sever the bond between the initiate and his mother deals very precisely with those forms of relations that form the basis of the infant's attachment to his mother in basic psychological terms – let's say according to John Bowlby's work: attachment is a 'lasting psychological connectedness between human beings' (Bowlby 1958, 1969:194).

The infant-mother bond is constructed first and foremost through sight, touch (contact, fondling), caregiving, and reliability, and it is remarkable that during the first days of the *muka*, those forms of relation are precisely the ones that are negated by the physical interventions on the boys. Eye contact between the mother and her son is prohibited by the new teaching enforced as soon as the boys enter the *mukaanga*, the ceremonial enclosure, as well as materially prevented by the *yevite* bark cape[9].

The destruction and negation of the emotional bond established through touch, fondling and cuddling is self-evident as well. The boys realize that not only their mothers do nothing to prevent them from suffering, but it is the mothers who bring their son to the site of the ordeal. No need to explain why the relation of faithfulness and protection is also annihilated within minutes.

During the first three days of the *muka*, the positive attachment relationship with the mother is very suddenly and brutally denied, attacked, and suppressed. And it is not abolished by words, or by words only: it is abolished by material practices that wipe out, one by one, the central dimensions of the mother-child bond. It is also noteworthy that, whereas there could be and there are alternatives to the thrashing (e.g. nettling nowadays [December 2013], or nose-bleeding and then nettling before contact with the Europeans), the hindering of the vision by the hood cannot be replaced. It is a necessary material action, and once this material action has taken place – by donning the long bark cape and carefully closing it tightly in the

[9]. In the same vein, the ceremonial flutes of the neighbouring Sambia people have been rightly interpreted as "transitional objects" by G. Herdt (1987b). The Baruya played such flutes until they abandoned their own boy-inseminating practices in the early 1960s.

way it should be – the relational network, body, spirit, etc. of the person on which this material action is performed appears to be radically transformed. The *muka*'s bark cape is what I call an *operator* – one of the five different forms of involvement of material actions in ritual I have distinguished so far.[10] Yet, as I have already stressed, it is hardly necessary to repeat that it is only one of dozens of other more-or-less necessary material actions, all of which have to be described and analysed to understand the various kinds of involvement of materiality in ritual. As already mentioned also, despite the significance of the role of bark capes in the severing and transformation of the relationship between the future initiate and his mother, I do not mean to imply that the mother-son relationship is the only or main relation modified during the *muka*. Nor do I imply that barkcloth and the material actions performed with bark capes take precedence over other material items and actions. Materiality similarly plays its irreplaceable role, for instance, in the building of an eternal solidarity between initiates, in the securing of spirit familiars, in the production of a hierarchy among adult men, or in wordlessly expressing the contradictions at the heart of the initiation rituals (Lemonnier 2012:77-98).

Analysis of the use of barkcloth during the first days of the *muka* nevertheless demonstrates that, by paying attention to materiality – that is, to the physical dimension of material actions and not only to what can be read or deciphered from objects as indexes, symbols, icons and the like – we discover clues that the ritual process itself is a way to add important anthropological information that could not be added otherwise. In the present case, the way materiality focuses expressly on the kinds of attachment relations identified by psychologists gives a more complete anthropological view than a mere statement such as 'the boy is extracted from the female world'.

In passing, one also realizes the progress made in only a few years by taking into account the very materiality of what people do. Not long ago, one would have been content with repeating after Alfred Gell (1998) that objects contain all kinds of 'intentionalities' or, even worse, as in dozens of ritual studies, that they are 'polysemous' which, given all there is to understand, was distressingly inadequate.

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[10]. The four other modalities of intervention of material actions and devices in the *muka* (and all rituals?) are: as mere "noise" (that has of course its own cognitive function); as non-obligatory or optional actions; as "resonators", i.e. a special category of operator; and as neutral remains of a previous ritual system (Lemonnier in progress).

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