

| R e p r i n t |



Figure-ground reversal among the Barok

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What is the relation of art, of thinking and feeling in images, to the form and being of a human culture? We in the modern Western cultures often say that our greatest art transcends the age and cultural surroundings in which it was created. But of course Shakespeare, Vermeer, and Mozart were very much persons of their own times and cultures, and their art, however transcendent, must manifest a significant part of the creativity of the age and culture. My experience in studying the Usen Barok people of Central New Ireland has convinced me that their culture is very much a matter of thinking and feeling in images. This means that the conception and motivation behind the malagan and other New Ireland art styles manifests something very basic in the cultures of this remarkable island. The fact that the Barok do not participate in the malagan tradition may serve, through the examples I present, to give the reader a broader and more varied sense of the possibility of a culture organized around art principles — around thinking and feeling in images.

Let me first clarify an important point. By “image” I do not simply mean “visual image,” though New Irelanders often show a predilection for the visual. A cultural image can be verbal, as in the tropes, conceits, and other word pictures that carry much of the force of Shakespeare’s expression; it can be expressed in the nonrepresentational forms of music; or it can be kinesthetic or architectural, as it often is in New Ireland. An image has the power of synthesis: it condenses whole realms of possible ideas and interpretations and allows complex relationships to be perceived and grasped in an instant.

I shall illustrate this by using a common Barok verbal image as an example. Like other New Irelanders, Barok trace clan membership through the mother’s

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line (though blood connection, traced through the father, is also very important). The Barok term for “clan” is a *bung marapun*, literally “the gathering in the bird’s eye.” The image is in constant, daily use, though most of those who use it will claim, when asked, that they have no idea what the image means. Older men, knowledgeable about ritual, will often say that the bird involved is the *sek*, a bird that ornithologists call the colonial starling. This bird is distinctive for its ruby-red eyes, perhaps suggestive of maternal blood (since paternal “blood” is semen, and white). But the *sek* is also distinctive for its habit of making its domed, thatch-covered nests in large communal colonies in trees above human gardens or villages. Since the Barok word for “eye,” *mara*, likewise connotes “clearing” or “focal epicenter,” the “gathering in the bird’s eye” might also image the human clearing placed “in view” of the birds’ “village.” There are other possibilities as well, each bringing its own nuance or creative insight to the understanding of the image. It is, of course, possible that all of these interpretations of *mara* are implied. But it is also possible that the ambiguity itself, the similarity among various interpretations, is more important than the specific interpretations. And there are those who say that the “eye” really refers to the spot of blood in the fertilized egg of another bird, not the *sek*.

The fact of the matter is that whatever interpretations we make, whether specific or general, naïve or subtle, and whatever authority we may base it on, it will always be open to doubt. Only the image itself is certain, and therefore the image itself is all that is needed. It has the power of eliciting (causing to perceive) all sorts of meanings in those who use and hear it, as well as the power of containing all the possible meanings that may be so elicited; for the image itself, [57] and only the image itself, is equal to all of them. By holding images in common, rather than the interpretations of images, Barok culture makes the synthesizing power of its collective images into the power of culture itself. Interpretation is an individual matter.

Because we can only experience the world through the images of it that we perceive, the Barok culture of collective images exists on the scale of human experience, rather than that of human talk about experience. Thus Barok say that words can trick you, that the only real knowledge is that which is directly experienced — knowledge, that is, of the images of culture or the world around us.

In a world where reality is image, and true knowledge can only be acquired by experiencing images, the ultimate power is power over images and perceptual effects — the power of image-transformations. Barok call this power a *lolos*, and it is the source of all things in the world and all actions in the world, including human action. When it occurs spontaneously, it is identified with form-changing place-spirits called a *tadak*. *Tadak* have no essential form, for their essence is their ability to change forms; they have no names, other than those of the several forms they habitually assume, and they are immortal, for the *tadak* whose form is threatened or dying need only change into a less evanescent form. *Tadak* are associated with specific locales, and also with specific human clans, whose members are at least nominally under their protection. The spirits are also jealous, willful, and capricious, and those whom they attack do not die, but are “swallowed,” to live “within” the *tadak* and do its bidding forever. They are contained, so to speak, within the *tadak*’s immortality.

Any sort of natural anomaly — unusual rock formations, strange behavior of plants or animals, the birth of a hydrocephalic child — is attributed to the activities of *tadak*. The *tadak* of Wutom Clan is said to animate the depictions of animals

drawn by human beings on the walls of a particular cave, bringing them to life by transforming itself into the creatures depicted. *Tadak* in this case is something like the force of artistic creativity acting spontaneously in the world. But of course the human artists who originally drew the cave pictures were, like the human artists who carve, paint, and prepare *malagan*, also engaged in image-transformation. Hence, their talent, their creativity, is an instance of a *lolos*, of the power over images.

The great image-transformers of the Western tradition, Michelangelo, Leonardo, Shakespeare, Milton, Beethoven, Rodin, Rilke, may well be *our tadak*. They are unpredictable or antisocial in their spontaneity, impinging upon our conventional forms from the outside, as it were, containing, perhaps, our imaginations within their immortality. This unpredictability arises because Western tradition emphasizes verbal and rationalistic (linear) procedures and identifies itself with the predictable. But the main point of this essay is that the essence of artistic creativity, image-transformation, serves as the conscious center and effective constitutor of Usen Barok culture. It is the power of human ritual, in other words, rather than codified law, group solidarity, individual self-interest, or physical coercion, that guarantees property rights, moral status, and public standing of any kind.

Usen Barok call the power of their public ritual (*kastam*)¹ by the term *iri lolos*, meaning finished or manifest power, qualifying the noun with the perfective verbal affix (*-iri-*). It is power that has been wholly fixed or contained in customary usage. We do not normally think of our public rites, however moving they may be, as rites of power, though we might be persuaded to describe Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, a portrait by Rembrandt, or the integral calculus as "finished power." And so the question arises of just how the Barok consider their *kastam* to embody power.

In my earliest conversations with the Barok, they would often use the borrowed English word "meaning" (many Barok have at least a passing familiarity with the English language) to describe the importance of a ritual object or usage ("You see this tree? It has a big *meaning* for us.") At first I assumed they were simply using an important-sounding word for emphasis, without paying much attention to its more specific sense. But after I came to know something of their ritual life, I realized that the meaning referred to here is in fact that profoundly synthetic, condensed sense of the word that we might use to describe a great work of art or a significant triumph in mathematics.

Iri lolos is power, then, because of its ability to elicit the essential cultural meanings in people, an ability that is inherent in the self-demonstrating, synthetic character of its images. Taken as a whole, it contains, or synthesizes, the ranges of significance in Barok culture, which, in this respect, is self-analytic.

Because it is articulated through images, Barok social structure also reflects, reciprocally, the properties of image itself, elicitation and containment. It contains, and it also elicits, the totality of life and life-process. All the claims that human beings can make regarding one another, and all the claims they can make to property, come down to two things: the male act of conception and of giving food

1 This word, actually quite widespread as a synonym for "culture" in modern Melanesia, is a loan-word, borrowed from the English "custom."

and nurturance to others — the elicitation of life; and the female act of contain- [58] ing the body in the womb, finalized by the ultimate containment of the body in the ground — the containment of life. The legitimation of all social statuses or claims must be realized through the ritual enactment and resolution of these principles, via feasting and containment.

Because they are matrilineal, tracing group membership and descent through the maternal line, Barok depict the image of group membership through the containment of the body in the mother's womb, and eventually in the ground of the group's territory. All Barok people, and all Barok clans, belong to one or another of the two halves, or moieties, of society. The moieties are designated *malaba*, the sea eagle, or "greater bird," and *tago*, the fish hawk, or "lesser bird." They are exogamous; members of one moiety can only marry those of the other, on pain of universal ostracism for those who do not comply. Each moiety claims both the containment of its own and the animation — the elicitation of life process within — of the other. Thus each moiety contains the proffered nurturance of the other and also nurtures the containment of the other.

The *iri lolos*, or public ritual, of the Barok has, therefore, two main components: feasting and containment. Every major event or social transition (including, for instance, a day spent in preparation for a major feast) requires a feast, and every death requires a cycle of them. With one significant exception (which will be described later), every feast must be held in a men's house, or *taun*, according to a strict protocol.

The *taun* is in fact an enclosure, a large, rectangular, dry stone wall, a *balat*, surrounding an open space. More or less in the center is the men's house proper, a *gunun*, a highly stylized edifice that divides the *taun* space in two. The forepart of the *taun* is the *konono*, or feasting space, with a display table for food in the center and low benches for feasters along the edges. At the front of the *konono* is the only entrance to the *taun*, the *olagabo*, or "gate of the pig." This takes the form of a stile carved at the base of a tree-fork, with the extending branches projecting outward on either side like a giant V. The rear space of the *taun* is the *ligu*, or clan burial ground. Barok say that the forepart of the *taun* is like the upper part of a tree, the branches (imaged by the entrance stile) that "feast" others with fruit, whereas the rear is where the ancestors, like roots of the clan, lie fixed in the ground.

The *taun* is both the image and the enactment of containment, enclosing both the elicitation of feasting and the encompassment of burial. Any male person is welcome to sleep and take refreshment in a *taun* at any time, or to stay there, and all men, regardless of affiliation, are welcome to attend all feasts and are entitled to an equal share of the foods and refreshers served there. By the same token, the *taun* is sacred space, pervaded by the ethic of *malum* — respect and forbearance out of compassion for the deceased; and *malili* — the ethic of good fellowship and generosity in feasting. And the *taun* itself, container of feasting, is literally made out of feasts, for every step in its construction, every few feet of *balat* finished, every detail of the structure, must be solemnized with a feast and with the killing of pigs.

Just as the *taun*'s enclosure is divided between feasting and containment proper, or burial, so the organization of the feast itself includes an initial phase, when the assembled food is contained within the hollow rectangle of seated feasters within the *taun*, and a second phase, when it is distributed and eaten. The first phase includes speeches explaining the purpose of the feast, the purchase and cutting of the cooked pigs, and any criticism (usually vociferous and scathing) the assembled

“big men” may wish to make of the protocol followed on the occasion.

Thus the format of the feast itself is an image no less than the layout of the *taun* that contains it. But the *taun* and the feast in the *taun* together make a coordinate image, linking feasting and burial, and Barok say that all important *taun* feasts should follow the sequence of mortuary feasting. This sequence extends the imagery of containment and elicitation featured in the format of the individual feast to a schema involving a succession of kinds of feasts.

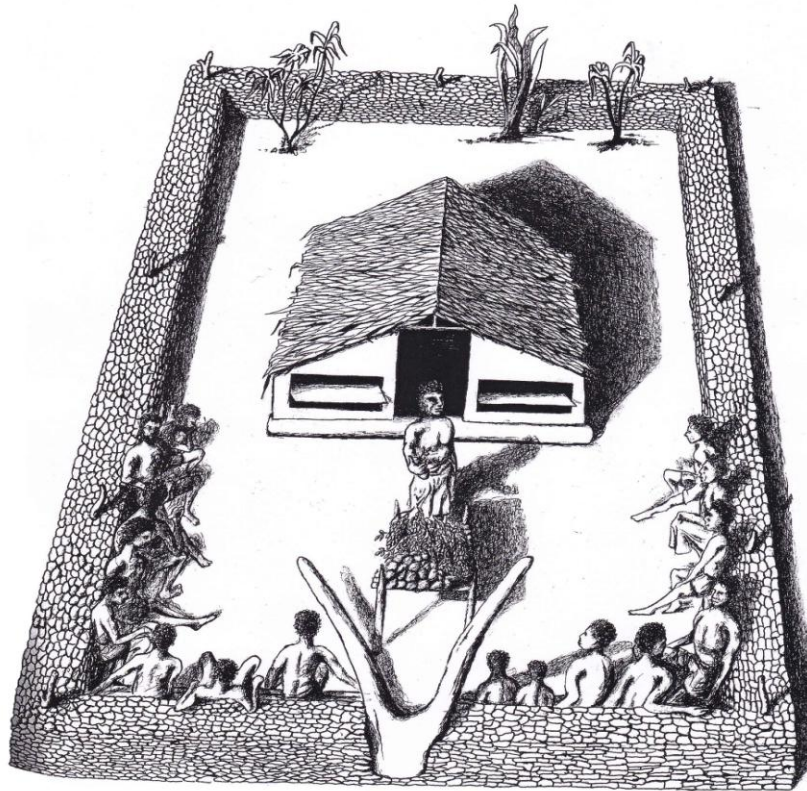


Fig. 1. *Taun* enclosure with *olagabo*, or gate of the pig in foreground
(Drawing by the author).

When any Usen Barok person dies, the whole Usen area goes under a mortuary interdict called the *lebe*, in which loud talking, displays of anger or unseemly behavior, and the lighting of large fires are prohibited. The *lebe* effectively extends the ethic of *malum* to the whole region; it remains in effect until the imagery of kinds of feasts is realized. Until that time, the feasts that are given (two or three, at the least) are closed feasts, imaging *malum* and containment. The body of the deceased is still in process of being absorbed in the ground; all food for the feasts must be nurturance brought in by the opposite moiety, no food (or even refuse) may be taken out of the *taun*, the pigs are placed facing inwards, toward the burial area, and distribution of the food proceeds from the front toward the rear.

Afterward, ideally when the body has totally decomposed and has been absorbed into the clan ground (but nowadays much sooner, in deference to

schedules), the first open feast is held, ending the *lebe*. The moiety has now encompassed the deceased and can turn to nurturing the other; it supplies the food in [61] such plenitude that all can (and may) take some home afterward, the pigs are placed facing outward, toward the gate, and distribution of food proceeds from the rear toward the front of the feasting area. When the sequence is applied in a context other than mortuary, two successive feasts, a closed and an open, are sufficient.

Apart from its curious holography — the fact that the ways in which it works (elicitation, containment) are the same as the ways in which it is structured, in other words, that component elements replicate in detail the larger structures that contain them — the system — of *iri lolos* described thus far does not differ radically from more familiar forms of organization. Allowing for the peculiarities of image (e.g. holography), it suggests a social order based on certain premises that are translated into nonverbal means, on the principle of the rebus. It looks, in short, very predictable, as we might fondly imagine our own system is. Where, then, is the *tadak-like* creativity, the power of image-transformation that I spoke of earlier?

The answer is given by a final, and most unpredictable, twist of the holography. The distinction between elicitation and containment, feasting and burial, paternal and maternal role, keeps the Barok world in order. The ancestors, buried at the “root” of the *taun*, are guarantors of that world, and the trunk and branches (actually the branching V of the *olagabo*, and a trunk-section, known as *bagot*, that serves as a threshold-log of the men’s house proper) contain its feasts. But in the great culminating mortuary feast, the *kaba*, performed on behalf of all who have died over a number of years, or of a very distinguished person who has died, the Barok world is overturned and negated. In the *kaba*, *the feast contains the tree*. A tree is set up *outside* of the *taun* amid great ceremony and numerous feasts, and the *kaba*, at which a great many pigs are slaughtered (over 60, at one I attended in 1979), is held around it.

Of the two kinds of *kaba*, that of the branch (*agana ya*) and that of the rootstock (*una ya*), the latter embodies the imagery at its fullest and is regarded by the Barok as the greater and more important. In this version, a huge forest tree is lopped off six feet from the ground and all the roots are dug out of the soil, one by one; a feast with pork is given for the uncovering of each major root, and an especially large feast for the taproot. The roots are then trimmed to a six-foot radius, and the huge rootstock is raised and taken into the village, with the *winawu* (ideally an *orong-to-be*: a “big man” initiate) standing atop it, crying out the invocation of the *kaba*: “*asiwinarong!*” (“the need of a big man”). It is erected upside-down in the village, with the roots in the air. After days of preparation and subsidiary feasting, during which the tree is decorated, the rite reaches its culmination: The roots of the tree are made into a platform, with the aid of poles, and the pigs slaughtered for the feast are piled on it. Around the base of the tree nubile young girls sit on *dawan* chairs (seating frames made in the shape of branch-fork); on top of the pigs stands the *winawu*, invoking the *kaba* with a standardized formula: “*Asiwinarong! . . .*”²

2 The complete text is given in R. Wagner, *Asiwinarong: Ethos, Image, and Social Power among the Usen Barok of New Ireland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) pp. 204-205.

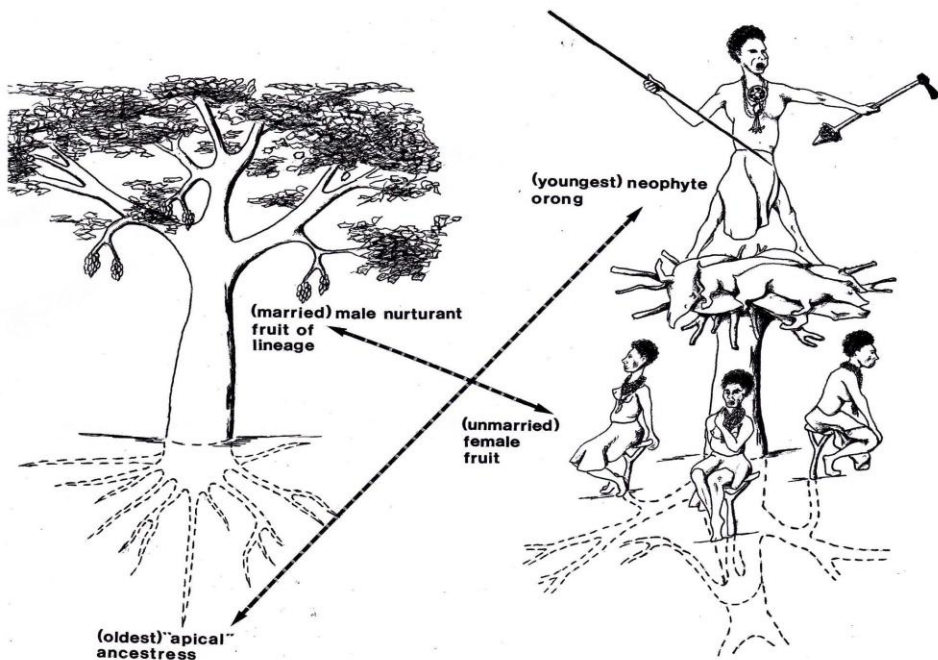


Fig. 2. Diagram of feasting display as an inversion of *una ya kaba* image
(Drawing by the author).

Not only does the feast contain the tree, then, but the main course, the pigs, are placed directly atop the “burial” section of the tree, supported by the upper (“feasting”) section, which is buried in the ground! Feasting and burial are collapsed together and shown to be one and the same thing in an act that Barok refer to as “cooking the pigs on top of the ancestors,” “cooking the souls of the dead,” or “finishing all thought of the dead.” Since feasting and burial are equivalent to elicitation and containment, paternity and maternity, and thus also to the ways in which the moieties interrelate and are constituted, the *kaba* accomplishes the negation of gender and of the moiety distinction — indeed, of all social categories in Barok culture. This is especially clear in the positioning of the *winawu*, a man, atop the pigs, for he takes the place of the tree’s taproot, which before had been identified with the original ancestress of a clan. The nubile young women seated around the base of the *kaba* on stylized “branches” correspondingly take the role normally ascribed to men, marrying into other clans and giving them nurturance. The young women at the *kaba* are in fact spoken of as “food,” as if they were fruit dangling upward from imaginary branches of the inverted, underground tree.

The *una ya kaba* is thus no simple inversion, but a methodical and consistent figure-ground reversal (*pire-wuo*) of the meaningful imagery of Barok life. It does

not simply negate, it consummates its denial by demonstrating also that the inversion makes as much sense as the order it inverts — that a feast on tree roots is indeed a feast (as well as the burial of all burials), that a man can be taproot of a maternal line, that young women, who constitute lineages, can also be seen as nurturance bestowed elsewhere. Like my earlier example of the image for clan, *a bung marapun*, the significance contained in the *kaba* image is larger and more intense than any verbal interpretation could encompass.

Its implication, however, is perfectly clear. If feasting and containment are completely interchangeable, and there is no difference between the moieties or the gender-roles they manifest, then the force behind so- [62] ciety cannot simply consist of categories or substantives such as arbitrary social distinctions, human body functions, gender, or nurturance. These are but images, society's illusions, to be projected or dispelled at will by the power of image-transformation, *iri lolos*.

The *kaba* is the revelation of a transcendental power *over* society, rather than a statement of the things society is about, its principles, forces, ideals, or goals. The parallel with art is apt, for, as with a significant work of art, the true power of the *kaba* lies in the transformations of meaning that it elicits in its audience. Barok say that figure-ground reversal, *pire-wuo*, is “the way in which power is put into art,” for it elicits a change of perspective within the viewer — an image of transformation formed by the transformation of an image. If so rarefied a basis for human social order seems a bit too far removed from everyday affairs for easy credence, then consider a definition of mankind offered by the Tolai people of Rabaul, speakers of a language closely related to Barok. The Tolai say that man is a *tabapot*, a figure-ground reversal, forever desiring that which is outside of his form (body), only to hunger again for the human form once the external has been attained.³

Iri lolos and malagan

What analogies can be drawn between the Usen Barok transformation of *a lolos*, power in the world, into the *iri lolos* of cultural form, and the malagan of peoples to the north? A suggestion can be found in the work of Dr. Elizabeth Brouwer, who lived among the southern Mandak people of Panatgin Village. In her thesis,⁴ Dr. Brouwer speaks of the spirit forms of malagan (as well as those of plants, animals, insects, and birds) being contained *within* the *randa*, the *masalai*-spirit of a clan. The southern Mandak *randa* is thus like the Barok *tadak*, which is said in some cases to animate certain depictions on the walls of caves. Images of the malagan within a *randa* can be communicated to clan members in dreams,⁵ then carved, decorated, and revealed (together with a “meaning,” or lesson) at a mortuary feast. By analogy, the spirit-forms or images of malagan are like Barok *a lolos*, power in the world, which become human power (*iri lolos*) when carved and presented by human beings at a mortuary feast. Individual malagan are like Barok *pidik*, “mysteries” whose presentation is at the same time a revelation of knowledge.

3 Discovery of this concept in Tolai is credited to Roselene Dousset-Leenhardt; see R. Wagner, *Asiwinarong*, p. 100n. In a somewhat different sense, the modern discovery of brain-laterality tends to make man a “figure-ground reversal.”

4 Elizabeth C. Brouwer, “A Malagan to Cover the Grave: Funerary Ceremonies in Mandak,” Ph.D. diss., University of Queensland, 1980, pp. 80-81.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 165 ff.