

Papuan Gulf Spirit Boards and Detecting Social Boundaries: A Preliminary Investigation

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ABSTRACT. This paper is an exploratory investigation of Papuan Gulf spirit boards. These ceremonial items and their designs were owned by clans and other patrilineal groups and comprised an important aspect of traditional ceremonial life. During the early contact period, they were intensively collected by Europeans and now appear among world-wide museum holdings of Papua New Guinea material culture. The Australian Museum has an extensive collection of spirit boards that provide the primary data for this study. Here spirit board design elements are analysed to understand how they are distributed between or only retained within cultural groups living in the east-central Papuan Gulf. The paper also examines ways to analyse spirit board designs.

PROLOGUE. During 1983 I carried out fieldwork in the Orokolo villages, Papuan Gulf, on behalf of the Australian Museum. Most days over almost two months I interviewed village elders who provided me with a wealth of critical information about their cultural heritage. The information I collected about the relationship between their social system and the designs appearing on their traditional ceremonial material culture is significant, especially given more than 50 years had passed since the major ceremonies ceased being performed. The elders were both candid and patient, and I am greatly indebted to them for the trust they showed in me. By mutual agreement, I promised to begin all publications that used the cultural information they passed on to me by recognising these holders of community wisdom with their photographs (Fig. 1).

Introduction

Social identity, social structure, intergroup boundaries and interaction, social networks and migration patterns are key objectives of much current archaeological research (e.g., Chiu, 2015; McDonald and Veth, 2012; Rigaud *et al.*, 2018; Stone, 2003; Torrence, 2011). One common interpretative framework relies on social behavioural models, mostly borrowed from critical research in other disciplines such as anthropology, evolutionary biology or behavioural science (e.g., Appadurai, 1986; Barth, 1969; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Lipo and Madsen, 2001; Wobst, 1974). More information comes to hand in the form of direct observations (Graves *et al.*, 2016; Wiessner, 1984), comprehensive historic records (McBryde, 2000) or well-documented museum collections (Torrence and Clarke, 2016).

Using ethnographic and historic records, this paper

explores the social symbols found on Papuan Gulf spirit boards (Fig. 2). These artefacts were collected in substantial numbers during the early stages of the contact period from the late 19th century to just prior to World War II (Welsch, 2015a: 22–26) and important holdings are in the Australian Museum, as well as other world-wide institutions. Spirit boards are attractive and frequently occur in ethnographic art compilations (e.g., Welsch *et al.*, 2006).

F. E. Williams, Papua New Guinea's first Government Anthropologist, documented Papuan Gulf cultures between 1923 and 1937, spending 16 months with the Elema and eight with the Purari, their western neighbours, recording their traditional cultures (Williams, 1924: vii, 2015: xi). He noted (2015: 246–247, fig. 11, plate 28) that some designs carved on *hohao*, Elema spirit boards, as well as those portrayed on other ceremonial items, communicated their ownership by particular social groups—clans (*birā'ipi*) and patrilineal

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