Insights gained through a systematic catalogue of objects: BICO, the Basel Iatmul Catalogue of Objects

*Catalogue systématique des objets et accroissement des connaissances : le
Catalogue des Objets Iatmul de Bâle (BICO)*

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Insights gained through a systematic catalogue of objects: BICO, the Basel Iatmul Catalogue of Objects

by

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the Basel Iatmul Catalogue of Objects (BICO). It traces its origins and evolution, as well as the difficulties encountered. The principal strength of BICO lies in the co-ordination and evaluation of data from different sources and gathered by different methods. Artefacts kept in museum collections serve as firm guideline and focal point. BICO aims at covering the whole range of relevant information linked to Iatmul material inventory in order to gain new insights not only into Iatmul iconography but also to recognize links between material expressions and other cultural domains. The objects assembled in BICO span about a century and allow therefore tracing their evolution and adaptations. Further, BICO demonstrates that materials used for the manufacture of distinct objects are highly relevant. This leads at the one hand to mythological connections and on the other hand to questions regarding the purpose and/or the durability of an object.

KEYWORDS: Artefacts, Iatmul, materials, co-ordinated evaluation of research data

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente le catalogue des objets Iatmul du musée du Bâle (BICO). Il retrace son origine, analyse son évolution et les difficultés rencontrées au cours de son élaboration. L'intérêt principal de BICO est de réunir et d'évaluer des données provenant de sources différentes et recueillies suivant différentes méthodes. Les objets de musées servent de guide ; ils sont au centre de l'attention. En réunissant toutes les informations sur les objets Iatmul inventoriés dans les collections, BICO permet d'acquérir une connaissance nouvelle non seulement de leur iconographie mais aussi de montrer les liens entre expression matérielle et différents domaines de la culture. La production des objets s'étendant sur environ un siècle, le catalogue permet de retracer leur évolution et leur adaptation. BICO démontre de plus que l'emploi des matériaux lors de la fabrication de différents objets est significatif : il éclaire d'une part des connections mythologiques et pose, d'autre part, la question de l'usage d'un objet et de sa permanence.

MOTS-CLÉS : objets, Iatmul, matériaux, évaluation coordonnée des données de recherche

History

The origins of BICO date back to 1972/3 when nine researchers¹ based at the Ethnological Institute of the University of Basel under the direction of Professor Meinhard Schuster undertook field-work with Iatmul and Sawos people of the Middle Sepik area. Upon their return, the Oceania curator of the Basel Museum, Christian Kaufmann,

who himself had conducted research with neighbouring Kwoma people, designed a project to follow up the cultural significance and embedding of the objects kept in the Basel Iatmul collections. Objects serve not only their intended purposes but encode and transmit knowledge, feelings and thoughts. It is therefore most important to reconstruct the visual and material record of a culture in order to understand its iconography. On the

1. In alphabetical order: Brigitta and Jörg Hauser-Schäublin, Markus Schindlbeck, Jürg Schmid, Meinhard and Gisela Schuster, Milan Stanek, Jürg Wassmann, Florence Weiss.

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other hand, as Thomas (1991) and O'Hanlon and Welsch (2000) have detailed, most objects were collected in a colonial context and therefore reflect these cultural and political dynamics and thus not only document some continuity but foremost also change and adaption. BICO aims at covering the whole range of relevant expression linked to Iatmul material inventory (see Kaufmann, 1990: 587) as well as its historical and political dimensions. The initial idea to assemble all relevant information in a then modern format, the microfiche form, was owed to Bernard Juillerat. He assembled his field information on a collection of objects he had obtained from the Yafar, in the upper Sepik area on behalf of the Musée de l'homme, Paris (Juillerat, 1975). Further inspiration BICO owes the earlier work of Welsch and Terrell who examined the material culture of a relatively uniform north coastal area testing the correlation between language and culture (see Welsch, Terrell, Nadolski, 1992; Lewis and Welsch, 1998).

From 1978 to 1984 the initial phase of BICO included a systematic review of the collections of the Basel Museum (acquired by Felix Speiser in 1929-30, Paul Wirz in 1953-54, Alfred Bühler and René Gardi in 1955-56, Alfred Bühler and Antony Forge in 1959, Antony Forge in 1962, Meinhard and Gisela Schuster and Christian Kaufmann in 1966-67 and others amongst them members of the university research team in 1972-73). These Basel collections of around 1200 objects were complemented by reviews of the collections of Gregory Bateson (1930, 1932, and 1935) kept at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge (see Lovelace, this volume). In addition whenever necessary, reference is made to those parts of the collection of the 1912/13 Berlin expedition which were published by Kelm (1966). This compilation of objects kept in museums was complemented by texts written by members of the university team. These follow the lines of materiality, for instance they deal with ritual, masking or everyday uses of objects. In addition unpublished material by several authors was added. This first, initial phase of BICO resulted in a pre-print paper edition combining all available text information in German with photographs of the objects. The original was photographed for the microfiche publication of sections 1 to 8 of the 17 sections of the catalogue (Obrist *et al.*, 1984).

Description

The objects which had been recorded in the above mentioned collections as well as in the field are assigned for convenience to 17 initially etic categories² and within these to 376 types (Kaufmann, 1990: 589-590). Each type is represented by a brief description, its name in the vernacular; materials used, manufacture and function is described in detail (wherever these were available). This information is followed by a listing of all individual objects assigned by the editors to the type in question, with a photograph, data on dimensions, the name of collector, date and location of collection, and the museum inventory number being provided for each individual object. Where appropriate, types and their cultural context are illustrated by field photography spanning the time between the pictures taken by Adolf Roesicke (kept at Berlin) in 1912-13, then by the Basel researchers and collectors between 1930 and 1967, and finally by the university research team in 1972-73. Reports on movie film records when available complement the documentation. The latter were produced by the university research team from Basel, mainly in cooperation with Hermann Schlenker, and edited by the Institute for the Scientific Film at Göttingen in 1973-74. The main catalogue is complemented by texts on various topics related to the artefacts.³

Difficulties

BICO is an ambitious undertaking which faced difficulties along two major lines:

First, Iatmul material culture is not only immensely rich and complex but also fraught with intrinsic and multiple meanings. One and the same object may serve as humble household item or means to procure food but may have a pivotal function in one of the many different rituals.

"Physical objects, mainly every day gear of a gendered character, do carry additional, yet transformed meaning when handled in a ceremonial context." (Kaufmann, 2010: 188)

While this is characteristic of the material inventory of many Melanesian cultures, Iatmul take it to the extremes. The sheer number of types of artefacts is simply mind-boggling: in 1984 upon termination of the first phase BICO contained 376

2. Clothing, portable objects used in everyday life, bags and baskets, canoes and paddles, weapons, tools for food production, tools for craft, furniture, pottery kitchen and household utensils, cooking utensils and dishes, the men's ceremonial house, ritual accessories, masks and dance paraphernalia, accoutrements of an initiand, musical instruments, personal adornment.

3. Two texts by Milan Stanek, on the role of artefacts in everyday life, and on the ritual system; three texts by Florence Weiss on, craftwork performed by children and adolescents, on masking, and on women and ritual (all included in the microfiche catalogue, fiche 3-01-3-05); further descriptions and information on film records by, Florence Weiss, Meinhard and Gisela Schuster, and Jürg Schmid and Christin Kocher Schmid, all included in the catalogue, fiche open).

types (defined by function) and major subtypes (defined in terms of form), not included recent replacements of obsolete materials. This richness is exceptional as compared for instance with Kwo-ma (95 types), Arapesh (110 types), Melpa (108 types) or Eipo (80 types) as compiled by Kaufmann (1990: 590). Since then more types have either been documented by additional research or have evolved as new adaptations to changing social, economic or environmental conditions. Thus, creating even an incomplete catalogue of Iatmul objects is indeed quite an ambitious undertaking.

Second: in 1984 the first Iatmul catalogue of objects was published in the now largely obsolete but durable format of microfiche. At this time information technologies had just begun to make an impact on scientific work while until after the turn of the millennium an interactive online catalogue was still considered an ambitious and daring undertaking. In order to make the information amassed in BICO available even to those partner institution where microfiche reading facilities were not available, printouts of the catalogue were sent to museums holding Iatmul objects in their collections. It is not clear how and to what extent the information contained in the catalogue was used by the respective institutions – this is most certainly due the publication being restricted to its original German version.

Meanwhile the catalogue has been translated into English and considerably extended, for instance it proved necessary to devote an additional category to raw materials which constitute the material base of Iatmul creativity. Further the detailed botanical data contained in an ethnobotanical PhD thesis (Coiffier, 1994) have been incorporated and offer in combination with the already existing information new insights. However, there are still categories which require attention and further input (for instance masks where iconographic and diachronic complexity is especially high).

Applications

With its detailed approach to the materiality of Iatmul culture BICO is more than just a catalogue of objects. It offers a comprehensive view on Iatmul culture as reflected by its material expressions.

While in 1984-86 the data compiled in BICO played a major role in the design and realization of museum exhibitions incorporating Iatmul materials at the Basel Museum, Sylvia Ohnemus used BICO results in the design of the Iatmul part of the then new permanent display at the Uebersee-Museum Bremen (opened in 2003).⁴

PHOTO 1. – Overmodelled skull. Beginning of the xxth century. Bone, wood, modeling past, shell, fiber, pigments, hairs. 16 x 18 x 30 cm. Collected during the Korrigane expedition from the village of Tambanum, East Sepik Province, 1934-1936. Acquired in auction in 1961 (© musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, n°71.1961.103.318)

In the temporary New Guinea exhibition on “Uses and Interpretations of the Environment” presented in 1987 at the Kunsthalle Schirn at Frankfurt, Iatmul objects – some of very large dimensions – played an important role. The knowledge accumulated in BICO proved to be particularly valuable and inspiring for developing the concept of this exhibition. In the recent joint exhibition on Sepik art in Berlin, Zurich and Paris (Peltier *et al.*, 2015), Iatmul artefacts played a significant role. Here BICO served as an additional knowledge base for appreciating the function and iconography of corresponding objects kept in further collections.

In a similar project Sylvia Ohnemus established a systematic catalogue of the Admiralty Island material inventory collected in 1931 by Alfred Bühler. She used the BICO approach as a model, starting with field research in selected communities where Bühler had originally passed as a collector (Ohnemus, 1998 [1996]). Again, a temporary exhibition at the Museum Rietberg in Zurich profited from this comprehensive approach (Ohnemus, 2002; see Kaufmann, Kocher Schmid, Ohnemus, 2002).

More recently information contained in BICO has been used in articles on selected aspects of

4. While working as an assistant curator at the Basel Museum Sylvia Ohnemus (1961-2014) served as a collaborator on BICO.

PHOTO 2. – Ritual money. Talipun. Shell, fiber, pigments. 33 x 19 x 22,5 cm. Gift of Alfred Muller, 1976 (© musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, n°71.1976.79.1.1-2)

Iatmul culture (for instance, Kaufmann, 2004, 2010; Kocher Schmid, 2004, 2005, 2009) by authors who had been to a higher or lesser degree involved in setting up BICO.

Insights

BICO offers new insights into Iatmul material culture in different regards: it allows tracing evolution and adaptations of objects, thus it can be used – wherever possible – to establish a temporal sequence. BICO also makes the point that materials matter, this means that it is highly relevant to know which materials were used to create a given object, for instance which timber or fibres were chosen by the manufacturer and why. Such a choice is never arbitrary, it follows either technical considerations or environmental constraints, or it is governed by mythological, that is ideological, or other cultural values (see Lemonnier, 2012; Coupaye, 2013).

Evolution and adaptations of objects

In the case of overmodelled skulls a temporal sequence can be traced over almost a century. It shows how Iatmul constantly adapted to new circumstances and possibilities:

According to Reche (1913: 362-372) head-hunting trophies were never overmodelled but only

ancestors' skulls underwent this treatment. The German Sepik Expedition also collected bare ancestors' skulls; however, Reche suggests that these had lost their overmodelling. He further notes that most of the bare skulls sold as headhunting trophies showed injuries in the area of the foramen magnum, injuries typical for decapitation (Reche, 1913: 367). These conclusions are supported by information obtained by Meinhard Schuster in 1966 at Malinge when acquiring a skull made for sale (BICO category 13.3.1). The informant explained that skulls for overmodelling and subsequent sale were acquired by barter from so-called *wailman* (Tok Pisin for wild men) in the upper Sepik. The skulls originated from the village of Shotmayin at the mouth of the Nigsak (April River?), a tributary of the Sepik, where they were buried at the bases of trees. Salt, cloth and bush knives were exchanged for the skulls. The transaction between the people from Malinge and the people of Shotmayin seems to have been a hurried one because of the allegedly dangerous character of the trading partner from the upper Sepik. Other sources report that in the early years of contact considerable numbers of overmodelled skulls were sold to Europeans. Bragge *et al.* (2006: 103) estimate that at least 466 overmodelled skulls were collected by Europeans between 1909 and 1915 that is in only six years. It seems that to satisfy foreign demand Iatmul turned to overmodel their head-hunting trophy skulls. When in 1912/13 the German Sepik Expedition visited their area, Iatmul people had already experienced several years of intermittent contact with German traders and members of the administration. The Iatmul, like their fellow Melanesians, have a tremendous potential to adapt to changing situations and to grasp new possibilities. For such agile minds, several years seem to be plenty of time to develop a new economic strategy. Roesicke reports in his field diary (1912: 186) overmodelled skulls to be amongst the goods offered for trade by Iatmul. As trophy skulls were stored in the men's houses, there must have been a good supply of raw material available. In 1972/3 informants reported this situation as traditional practice to members of the Basel Sepik expedition (Schmid, 1972/73; Stanek, 1982: 154). After 1930, with head-hunting abolished but foreign demand for overmodelled skulls still high, supplies must have dwindled. Iatmul then most probably turned to importing skulls from other Sepik groups (Kocher Schmid, 2009: 120-122). After 1945 with full pacification of the area, such a trade was made easier.

Later, after independence of the state of Papua New Guinea, when the new legislation eventually banned the export of human remains, Iatmul people adapted to the new situation by overmodelling turtle shell bases with human faces (BICO category 13.3.4), thus creating a new type of artefact to satisfy tourists' demand for grisly curios (see also Coiffier and Guerreiro, 1999: 43).

In former times large snail shells, *yua* (Iatmul language, *Turbo marmoratus*, BICO category 13.5.1.), were used as payment in barter transactions (for instance as payment for Aibom pottery products) and also for bride wealth and in rituals. They are combined with plaited attachments (BICO category 13.5.2). These snail shells are traded in together with the attached plaited ornaments from the neighbouring Yangoru-Boiken who seem to be the manufacturers of the ornaments. In 1965/67 Meinhard Schuster was told at Aibom that these snails were fished by the Yangoru-Boiken in the lakes of their territories (BICO category 13.5.1; Schuster collection Vb 23367-23371a). However, the nocturnal *Turbo* snails only occur in sea water and the adults with large shells only in depths of around 20 to 25 metres (Kikutani, 1996: 16). They are therefore only rarely attainable by traditional fishing techniques. Thus, it is likely that only after European occupation of the North coast and the subsequent introduction of Western and Asian fishing techniques large shells of adult *Turbo marmoratus* were available in higher numbers. During the 20th century they were an important item in the global trade of mother-of-pearl and therefore commercially fished (Encyclopedia of Life: 3050360). In pre-European times these shells must have been rare and consequently of quite high value. Certainly they would have bought more than just a small Aibom fire bowl made from clay as in 1965/67.

Plaited head masks in the form of crocodiles constitute a more recent example of an adaptation to new economic possibilities: Iatmul have a tradition of plaited head masks representing animals (BICO category 14.3.5) However, there are indications that – at least with Central Iatmul – plaited head masks representing crocodiles do not have a long tradition. Masks representing saw fish and pigs (see Kelm, 1966, figs. 84-87) were part of traditional rituals. We have no detailed information on the use of saw fish masks but the use of pig masks is documented (Schmid and Kocher Schmid, 1992: 37, 39-40): a ritual where a masked dancer representing an ancestral pig appears is central to the most junior ritual group occupying the ceremonial men's house *bole*. Weiss and Stanek (2006: 58) mention the use of a pig mask during a *naven* ceremony.

On the other hand since at least 1972 there exists at Yensan a dance making use of plaited head masks representing crocodiles (Schmid, 1972/73 and Schmid, 1990: 243). It is only designated with a Tok Pisin name, *singsing pukpuk* (dance/crocodile), and has no name in the vernacular. However, there is a traditional crocodile dance with a vernacular designation: *waal bagu* (crocodile/dance) which does not make use of crocodile masks. Here the bodies of the dancers form the dancing crocodile when they move in a long line across the village, the first dancer representing the head and the last the tail. This dance is part of the

PHOTO 3. – Debating stool, wood, pigments, 47 x 104 x 45 cm. Jean Guiart acquisition travel, 1963. Acquired from the Mark Lissauer Gallery, Melbourne (© musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, n°72.1963.5.33)

beginning of an initiation cycle and is meant to call the ancestral crocodile into the village to be present during initiation (see Schmid and Kocher Schmid, 1992: 103-106). The more recent crocodile dance, the *singsing pukpuk*, is only performed on request for the tourists visiting the middle Sepik, first on board of the Melanesian Explorer and more recently the Melanesian Discoverer and is paid for by the tourist company. This new crocodile dance and its paraphernalia are described in detail in an article (Coiffier, 1992). For an Eastern Iatmul village, Silverman (2013) presents and discusses the economic and social impact of tourism as well as its links to millenarianism and cargoism.

Materials matter

Materials count – they are important indicators to the purpose an artefact is meant to serve. Under certain circumstances Iatmul craftsmen and artists will select softer, less durable but easier workable timber than the usual hardwood. For instance, men are under considerable pressure to manufacture canoes for every female or juvenile member of their households. When time is scarce or a canoe urgently needed they will use less durable softer wood. However, larger boats are best made from dense and durable hardwood since it

is anticipated that, with good care, they will last up to ten years. Boats of softer wood are good only for one to two years (BICO category 4.1; see also Kocher Schmid, 2004). There is a considerable range of trees from which canoes are made, Coiffier (1994: 1123-1125) recorded 29 trees that yield timber suitable for canoe building.

There are indications that the same applies also to artefacts made for sale not only to tourists but also to collectors. Ceremonial chairs (BICO category 12.1.11) for instance are usually made from durable and strong timber, often from *miamba* (*Vitex cofassus*) or *kwarep* (*Intsia bijuga*) (identifications by Coiffier, 1994: 960). The mythological connections of the tree yielding the timber and the respective lineage who owns a chair is also important. However, replicas (made as early as 1912/13 and then in higher numbers from the 1960s onwards) which are usually quite large if not hypertrophic are normally made from lighter timber, for instance from White Cheesewood *kambu* (*Alstonia scholaris*) (Coiffier, 1994: 973). Ceremonial chairs are long-lasting items of paramount significance to the Iatmul. Upon completion and before being put to use they have to be consecrated in an elaborate ritual. Placed in the highest-ranking men's ceremonial house, *gego*, they are the focus of political-religious discussions, *pabu*, where major decisions concerning a community are made. In 1974 Milan Stanek and Hermann Schlenker were able to film a *pabu* in Palimbei and thus capture on celluloid the aspects of the dramatic hyperbole: speakers pull out all the stops of their showmanship and sometimes stage a scene from mythological events which is comparable to a sketch (film E 2293 of the rwf Göttingen: "Iatmul (Neuguinea, Mittlerer Sepik) - Mythologische Diskussion im Männerhaus in Palimbei", BICO Category 12.1.11). Thus ceremonial chairs are temporal abodes of the most powerful *vaken* spirits. People place offerings (areca nut, chicken, and dogs) in front of the ceremonial chair and offenders pay their fines in its face (Schmid, 1972/73; Coiffier, 1994: 979-80). It is therefore hardly conceivable that Iatmul would sell consecrated chairs to collectors. Rather they would produce faithful copies on the prospective buyers' demand. Thus, amongst the considerably large number of more than 100 ceremonial chairs (figure by Coiffier, 1994: 973 who draws similar conclusions) nowadays kept in museums might well be such indigenous copies made for sale.

Links between material expressions and other cultural domains

The posts of the highest ranking ceremonial men's house *gego* (BICO, category 12.1.) are richly carved, most frequently with a human face on the upper part. The lower part shows animal figures

which are often directly linked to the human face depicted above them. All these depictions represent scenes or figures taken from the myth of origin held by the clan or clans who own the respective men's house. The investigations of Meinhard Schuster have focussed on the layout and significance of the huge *gego*:

"The stout posts carrying the ridgepole in the longitudinal axis divide the house into two halves, corresponding to the mythological bipartition in that, on the ground floor, the sitting platforms of the Nyauai clans are arranged on one side and those of the Nyame clans on the other, one behind the other lengthwise along the edge and usually in fours. As befits the logic of the system, the Nyame side is turned towards the water, i.e. the Sepik, and the Nyauai side towards the land. Thus each men's house accommodates both moieties at the same time. However, each house 'belongs' to one moiety only; i.e. it is either a men's house of the Nyauai or the Nyame. In addition, it is especially associated with individual clans in the moiety, whose benches are therefore located behind the front gable-end of the house [...] In the classical men's house the great house posts [...] were carvings of consummate artistic skill. Wrought in relief and sometimes also in the form of carved work wholly detached from the ground except for narrow stems, these mighty roof supports constituted a comprehensive pictorial sequence of the important figures in the primal mythology of various clans, especially those dominant in that particular men's house. Although often in human form, they might also represent animals with additional attributes alluding to and recalling specific mythological events such as, for example, wave-like motifs indicating the primal seas as the locale of the myths, or eye-shaped symbols standing for water lilies and having the same reference. This vast and multitudinous world of images is also reflected in the shapes – crocodiles, pigs, fish and other animals – given to the great slit gongs, whose sound is supposed to represent their call, in the ceremonial chair on the ground floor, and in the smaller drums and the wooden stoppers of the ceremonial flutes on the upper floor. It is also represented in the gable masks and in the carvings on other architectural features of the men's house, e.g. in the ends of the round crossbeams supporting the sitting platforms, or the posts which in the gable ends terminate at the top in the ridge finial, frequently representing an eagle set over a female figure. Depicted here are the emblematic bird of the Nyauai moiety – occupying the place of the son and not the husband in the underlying mythological structure – and the main female figure appearing in various guises and interpreted as mother." (Schuster, 1985: 23-24)

Thus, the *gego*, the spiritual focus of a village, is built on the pictorially represented figures and events of primordial times which established the social groups, the clans, as well as introduced important cultural elements into people's lives. The uppermost ancestors' faces depicted on the men's house posts are distorted in the same way as a mother distorts her face when she performs a private *naven* for her child, as reported by Weiss and Stanek (2006: 66-67). Kaufmann (2010)

takes this connection as a starting point to explore the links between ceremonial acts of women and men in the context of *naven* rituals and iconological representations enshrined in initiatory knowledge. These reflections include the meaning of objects handled in a ceremonial context, bring together discussions about *naven*, and stress the importance of visual knowledge to Iatmul people.

Mythological dimensions of materials

The *gego* is not only built symbolically onto primordial beings and events but also physically: usually the lateral posts are made from *miamba* (*Vitex cofassus*) and the central posts from *kwarep* (*Intsia bijuga*) (Coiffier and Orliac, 2000: 149). In Iatmul mythology *miamba* and *kwarep* are conceived as the ancestors Miamba and Kwarep, the sons of a mythical pair of sisters married to a mythical pig and are thus ancestors of the living occupying the respective *gego* (Coiffier and Orliac, 2000: 156). Given the fact that Iatmul conceive wood and bones as equivalents, a *gego* thus firmly rests on posts made from ancestral bones: its framework corresponds to the ancestors' skeletons (Coiffier and Orliac, 2000: 158). Kwarep and Miamba are elder and younger brother respectively (Coiffier and Orliac, 2000: 156), a concept of paramount importance in Iatmul cosmology (see Herle and Moutu, 2004; Moutu, 2013).

Other objects of high ritual significance are also made from either *miamba* or *kwarep*: water-drums (BICO category 16.1.5.1, identification following Coiffier, 1994: 861) used during initiation and in Yensan called *guldu/man* (water/man/ending of a name). This is supported by Kelm (1966: 153/154) stating that such a drum was made from very heavy wood. At Yensan a myth tells how the ancestral tree brothers asked to be decapitated, their legs cut off and their intestines removed to be then thrown onto the water in order to answer each other with loud bangs (Schmid and Kocher Schmid, 1992: 55). It remains to be seen whether the use of wood for these paired artefacts corresponds to the pattern detailed for the ceremonial house *gego*, that is, whether both trees *kwarep* and *miamba* are used to represent elder and younger brother respectively.

PHOTO 4. – House post from a men house. Wood. 336 x 44 x 37 cm. Jean Guiart acquisition travel, 1963. Acquired from the Mark Lissauer Gallery, Melbourne. Kanganamun village, East Sepik Province (© musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, n°72.1963.5.9)

Especially *miamba* but also *kwarep* seem to be regarded as prime timber for the manufacture of ceremonially used artefacts. There are exceptions: for natural suspension hooks (BICO category 8.1.4) *bandsu* (identified as a *Rubiaceae* by Coiffier, 1994: 1076) is considered the appropriate material. This is in accordance with a myth about the first carving of suspension hooks collected in 1972/73 by Schmid (Schmid and Kocher Schmid, 1992: 17, 54), where five generations ago in Sotmeli these hooks were carved from the branches of a *bandsu* tree. Schmid (1972/73) was further told that the branches of the *bandsu* tree bifurcate in exactly the correct angle for the manufacture of suspension hooks from them. Apart from these natural suspension hooks, BICO distinguishes the categories flat hooks (8.1.1) and round hooks (8.1.3) with six subtypes each, plus the rare board-like hooks (8.1.2). The editor of the respective categories, Antje Denner, comments that this typology represents doubtless the limit of possibilities. Lack of information about the respective ceremonial context inhibits a full appreciation as to where the freedom of choice enjoyed by the carvers begins and where preset motifs

determine their designs. She continues by stating that the formal richness seen with Iatmul suspension hooks cannot be explained by internal evolution alone but is most probably due to mutual interaction with neighbouring groups (e.g. trade, alliances, inter-marriage). As we do not have information on the material used for these hooks we cannot draw any further conclusions until their wood is identified.

Relations and connections

BICO allows precisions, albeit small but important, especially on the materials used. It also allows showing relations to neighbours and connections within a wider region. The following example is presented here to demonstrate that even when combining small if not tiny pieces of evidence new insights may result.

The oily exsudate of a tree (*Camposperma* sp., Coiffier, 2002) called *gwaat* (BICO category 0.4) was (still in 1994) produced by Sawos people and

traded with Iatmul people. These put it to multiple uses; body ointment mainly for men during ceremonies, medicinal uses (most prominent for soothing the wounds inflicted at scarification during initiation), and most important: ingredient of a paste used to overmodel carvings, masks, and skulls. Further Iatmul conceive *gwaat* exsudate as a unifying and connecting substance which ties objects and beings to each other (Coiffier, 2002: 198). The use of this oily exsudate for medical and ritual purposes – but hardly for overmodelling – is widespread in the Sepik basin and in general in the lowlands of New Guinea. It remains to be seen whether its function as a connective substance is shared by other groups or is a concept exclusively characteristic of Iatmul culture.

Future perspectives

BICO is still work in progress, although considerably advanced work. When tackling BICO almost forty years ago (in 1978!) the first contributors gathered that they were up to a huge task. However, none of us could at that time imagine how time-consuming and complex this exercise would prove to be.

During years, devoted collaborators painstakingly amassed data, and established links between objects, visual documentation, published sources, and field notes. As far as we know BICO was one of the first attempts to set up such a catalogue of objects which systematically links museum artefacts with other source records and further cultural information. However, just this early beginning of the project was responsible for some of the following difficulties. The publication on microfiche proved to be a cul-de-sac while in the meantime information technologies have considerably advanced. This means that in the future BICO has to be set up as an interactive online catalogue, allowing access to all researchers and institutions concerned with Iatmul culture. This includes of course access by Iatmul people themselves.⁵

Such a continuation of BICO requires labour as well as funds. It remains to be seen, whether and which resources are becoming available. The participation of other institutions as well as individuals concerned with research on Iatmul – and on Sepik cultures in general – is crucial. Only when all interested parties agree to concentrate their efforts, the catalogue can be brought to a level where it may become directly accessible. This will certainly help to prove its usefulness.

Long-standing synergies already exist with the “Bateson documentation project” which is presented and discussed in this volume by Antonia Lovelace (*infra*). Further there are possible synergies with “The Upper Sepik-Central New Guinea Project” set up in 2004 by Barry Craig (South Australian Museum). It

“aims to explore the relationships between material culture on the one hand, and language, geographical propinquity, population, subsistence and environment on the other, in two adjacent regions of Papua New Guinea – the upper Sepik basin and the highlands of central New Guinea – during a relatively narrow time span before major impact by foreign cultures.” (<http://uscngp.com/about/>)

This project is in turn – as BICO – inspired by the earlier work of Welsch and Terrell focussing on the material culture of the North Coast of Papua New Guinea (see Welsch, Terrell, Nadolski, 1992; Lewis and Welsch, 1998).

What was already said more than two decades ago is today still valid: insights gained through detailed research by a variety of contributors and over a long period of time will make Sepik societies a very important example for worldwide comparison. Moreover, every document of Sepik traditional life preserved in museums, whether abroad or in Papua New Guinea itself, adds to future generations’ knowledge of their past and the roots of their identity (see Kaufmann, 1990: 593). In a globalised world with resource extracting industries making inroads into the Sepik basin and new communication possibilities available also in formerly isolated areas, these reflections are even more topical than before.

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5. There are recently set up projects making use of relation databases but concerned with other areas and people, e.g. the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN – www.rrncommunity.org) focussing on the Northwest Coast of British Columbia and launched 2014, or the Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Culture (GRASAG – grasac.org) founded in 2004 (both sites consulted 18/02/18).

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