

Beyond Aesthetics

Art and the Technologies of Enchantment

Edited by

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The Captivating Agency of Art: Many Ways of Seeing

Shirley Campbell

It is not by chance that art captivates. It is by design. Just what the captivating agency of art is and how it, still a largely ill-defined genre, succeeds in mesmerizing its audience continues to present philosophical quandaries that have occupied the minds of those who care to look beyond art and ask the questions. Because human beings, as a collective species, seem to have a desire to embellish objects, themselves, and the environment, as well as to create sounds, word and movement patterns which allure select audiences, anthropologists too have become drawn to the captivating effects of art.

Alfred Gell's enduring interest in art as a meaningful yet elusive human activity is well known to all who knew him. In his latest work, and sadly the swansong of his 'oeuvre', he has constructed a significant treatise on art, or as he more boldly declares, on the 'anthropology of art'. In the context of constructing an 'anthropology of art', he has argued for the revival of old tenets distinguishing anthropological theory from other lines of enquiry which delve into human activity. In so doing, few among those who knew him could fail to see the impish grin and bedevilled glimmer in his eyes as his words would, he well knew, taunt those who have written on the subject of art within an anthropological context. He knew that many of his arguments would raise the proverbial 'hackles'. I suspect one of his lingering regrets was that he would not be with us to watch the hotly contested debate he so knowingly would engender.

In *Art and Agency*, Alfred sets out to define what an 'anthropology of art' would look like. In constructing an anthropological theory of art, Alfred's argument steadfastly takes as its point of departure the tenet that 'Anthropology . . . is a social science discipline, not a humanity' (1998: 2-3), albeit, as he admits, an 'elusive' distinction but none the less the sine qua non of an 'anthropology of art'. That is, the focus of any such sub-discipline of anthropology would of necessity be on the 'social context of art production, circulation, and reception . . .' (1998: 3). An 'anthropology of art' then is 'the theoretical study of "social relations in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency" . . .' (1998: 7). This definition does not immediately seem a radical departure from most anthropological analyses of art

systems, particularly those analyses developed in the last thirty years of the twentieth century. What is a striking, and to me an exciting genesis of Alfred's thinking about art and its relationship to people within a social context, is Alfred's thesis that the art object (or one presumes 'art experience' if we include non-material artistic expression) becomes a social actor, merging with and standing for human agents and/or other supernatural 'agency' given anthropomorphic vitality by significant human actors. In this sense, Alfred treats art as more than a static object or act, eliciting some kind of response from a public and encoded by whatever means with information pregnant with often obscure inferences. As a genre, art becomes for the anthropologist an 'actor' positioned within a sea of social activity; at times the passive recipient of activities impressed upon it by human agents with specific ends in mind, while at other times the embodiment of a far more aggressive agency 'acting' upon a passive audience.

In working towards this position, Alfred considered previous intellectual territory anthropologists writing about art have visited. Apart from the early forays into other people's 'art' by anthropologists, which overwhelmingly provided detailed descriptions of material culture, more recent enquires have taken two directions; 'cross-cultural aesthetics' and 'semiotic' approaches (1998: 5-6, 9). Both these approaches Alfred takes exception to on the basis that the theoretical foundations of both have been formulated outside the discipline of anthropology. Therefore these two approaches cannot form the raw material from which an 'anthropology of art' can be struck. 'The aim of anthropological theory is to make sense of behaviour in the context of social relations. Correspondingly, the objective of the anthropological theory of art is to account for the production and circulation of art objects as a function of this relational context' (1998: 11). Alfred's intent is to jettison any approach to the 'anthropology of art' that takes as its starting point anything other than the 'social processes surrounding the deployment of candidate 'art objects' in specific social settings' (1998: 5). Could this prescription for an 'anthropology of art' be too restrictive?

It is doubtful that anyone would contest the fact that art has meaning only within a social environment. Artistic production occurs within a social group, following specific patterns of form and style, encoding intelligible meanings, and judged to be doing so by a rehearsed group of consumers. To restrict any anthropological study of art to a simple description of the craft, to the evaluative processes that may be applied to an art object or act, to the system of signs and symbols that seem invariably to be 'attached' to works of art, or to discussions of the social relationships identified, defined, sustained or mediated by art objects or performances is, if any one approach is preferred over another, to only view part of the whole. More appropriately, it is the 'building up of context' (Kroeber, 1953: 362) utilizing a variety of methodological enquiry that provides the fertile grounds from which art and the people who are captivated by such productions are understood.

Art operates in different ways and at different levels within a single context. Its role within the wider social context extends the complexity of its captivity, and requires a flexible approach that enables various lines of enquiry to be followed. Even the ways in which individuals view, interpret, and are moved by art objects or actions provide few insights into the complexity at which art functions within a sea of social relationships. The levels of efficacy to which we instinctively 'know' art operates can only be revealed by a variety of approaches seeking to understand not only the levels themselves, but also the manner of their efficacy. The means by which anthropologists arrive at any level of understanding of the place of art within a social context requires a variety of programmes for interrogating the material. Cross-cultural aesthetic investigations and semiotic analyses are but two of these programmes. Although Alfred does not entirely relegate these to the rubbish bin, he dismisses them as inappropriate points of departure in any anthropological investigation of art.

The incorporation of a people's evaluative processes, for example, within anthropological discussions of art is not, for Alfred, grounded sufficiently in social interaction, which to his mind, is the stuff of anthropology. '... I do not think that the elucidation of *non-western aesthetic systems* constitutes an 'anthropology of art ... such a programme is exclusively cultural, rather than social' (1998: 2). Alfred argues that any anthropological theory of art must fit within the guidelines that inform anthropological enquiry. 'Distinctively "anthropological" theories have certain defining characteristics, which these accounts of evaluative schemes would lack. Evaluative schemes, of whatever kind, are only of anthropological interest in so far as they play a part within social processes of interaction, through which they are generated and sustained' (1998: 3). But Alfred doubts that, to date, discussions of indigenous aesthetics have been successful in locating indigenous systems of evaluation in the processes of social interaction. In *Art and Agency* Alfred unveils his most cherished of principles, that anthropology is fundamentally about social relationships, resolutely planting the British flag, boldly emblazoned with 'social anthropology' upon the contested ground of what would constitute an 'anthropology of art'.

To Alfred's mind any discussion of aesthetics, be it Western or non-Western, is more appropriately left to other disciplines, who traditionally have laid claim to such intellectual territory. Indeed, Alfred wonders whether the attribution of a non-Western system of aesthetics reflects more upon our own 'quasi-religious veneration of art objects as aesthetic talismans' (1998: 3). He puts the boot in by accusing any such desire to incorporate 'indigenous aesthetics' as misguided attempts to make indigenous art 'meaningful' to Western sensibilities. Certainly there continues to be a demanding public in the West who are ravenous for 'ethnic' or 'primitive' art. Perhaps there is some justification in the accusation that some of what has been written about non-Western art, not always I hurry to add from the pen of

anthropologists, has been directed at the contextualization of non-Western art so that Western connoisseurs can 'appreciate', and see 'beauty' in an object, for example, where the intended response by the artist may be something quite different. Western consumers of others' art need the 'stories' behind the works so that they too can 'feel' its captivating effect. This is not, however, why I, and I dare say others are interested in the ways in which other people's art captivates the audiences for which the pieces are constructed or performed. I would argue that the emergent 'anthropology of art', generated by those who have contributed in various ways to descriptions of artistic production, developed systematic and sophisticated analyses of form and style, engaged in the discourse of meaning and context, analysed the social interplay of actors and agency, as well as attempted to elucidate indigenous aesthetics, is not merely directed to a Western audience caught up in its own veneration of art. Those anthropologists who have contributed to discussions of art in non-Western societies, particularly in the last thirty years of the twentieth century, have, I would argue, done so because art is recognizably a part of a people's lives; part of the social and cultural fabric that anthropologists in particular find fascinating. The various ways in which anthropologists have submitted art systems to analysis have provided a variety of means for understanding human society within an anthropological framework.

While I have some sympathy for Alfred's position, there are examples of anthropological analyses of art that successfully utilize aesthetic and semiotic investigations, massaging them along the way to more appropriately and accurately reflect what is happening in an anthropological context. By way of example let us look at some of the analyses of cross-cultural aesthetics or 'evaluative schemes' that have emerged over the last few decades.

Indigenous Aesthetics as a Programme of Enquiry

Generally speaking, the sentiments expressed in discourse connected to Western aesthetics are concerned with 'beauty'. As was the case with early endeavours to write about economic systems in tribal societies from the analytical basis of Western economic theory, the early forays into non-Western aesthetic evaluations grappled with indigenous notions of 'beauty'. Perhaps we should loosen the stays somewhat and break free from the culturally bound context of aesthetics as defined within a Western framework. Much as the Substantivists reformulated economic theory to more accurately describe non-Western economic behaviour, discussions of non-Western aesthetic sensibility have found ways of better reflecting the essence of cross-cultural aesthetic responses. For example, '... African aesthetics opens onto African sensibility. Aesthetic criticism suggests the relation of art to emotional ideals. These ideals, in turn, reveal the hidden unities which impose meaningful design upon the face of a culture' (Thompson, 1973: 19).

'feelings' and 'sensibility' by means of focusing his discussion with Yoruba carvers and consumers on the formal lines carved into Yoruba sculpture (1973). The clarity of line, the depth of incision, the path the line takes on the sculptured surfaces all elicit responses from a discerning Yoruba public which are more than expressions of awe at the technical feat mastered by the best of the Yoruba carvers. This does not negate the extremely seductive thesis Alfred develops for the 'technology of enchantment' (1992). This too, I would suggest, operates at a different level for Yoruba viewers. Simultaneously, however, in Yorubaland the line is also the focus of Yoruba critical assessment. As well as the formal analysis of line in Yoruba sculpture, Thompson delineates a complex terminology to describe various kinds of lines and the feelings they invoke. It emerges that the Yoruba are interested in marking all manner of surfaces with lines. In pursuing the value of linear accomplishment in a carving genre, Thompson is able to successfully demonstrate the pervasive use of the line in Yoruba design and thinking, finally extending Yoruba intellectual conceptions which connect lines to the existence of civilization. Could Thompson have arrived at this level of comprehending the significance of lineal markings in Yoruba philosophy had he not pursued the evaluations applied to Yoruba sculpture? Taking as he did the 'aesthetic' responses of his Yoruba guides and plotting through the system by which art is assessed beyond its technological proficiency and its social context, Thompson may have unveiled a level at which the sculptured art of Yorubaland has significance within the Yoruba social and cultural contexts not immediately achievable by any other method of enquiry.

Evaluative schema, in other societies, is likewise well articulated. Thompson's analysis of Yoruba artistic criticism comprehensively documents the contexts in which it occurs, the kinds of evaluations made in relation to Yoruba sculptures, and the meanings derived from these evaluative contexts. Strathern and Strathern described the aesthetic criteria applied to body decoration among Hageners of highland Papua New Guinea (1971), demonstrating for the first time that completely different concepts of quality are applied to colour, for example, than that which is generally held by those used to Western colour aesthetics. Their findings heralded a new line of enquiry into how people evaluate their world, opening up perspectives once locked within Western boundaries delineating possible ways for 'seeing'. O'Hanlon too analyses the evaluative discourse used to assess Wahgi body adornment as the most significant means of understanding the ways in which this art communicates and encodes meaning (1989). Vakutan aesthetics likewise boasts an evaluative scheme by which negative and positive criticism considers the 'face' of a carving. Categories of criticism define the quality of a line, the relationship between lines, the balance of specific features according to internal organization, the balance of colour, and the overall 'strength' of colour are all associated with Vakutan artistic criticism (Campbell 1983; see also Beier 1974; Beran 1996). But

only one line of enquiry and can lead us away from consideration of other relevant aesthetic responses which evoke cultural constructions of idealized values; idealizations of 'good' and 'bad', 'order' and 'disorder', perfection and human shortcomings.

... that to study an art form is to explore a sensibility, that such a sensibility is essentially a collective formation, and that the foundations of such a formation are as wide as social existence and as deep, leads away not only from the view that aesthetic power is a grandiloquence for the pleasures of craft. It leads away also from the so-called functionalist view that has most often been opposed to it: that is that works of art are elaborate mechanisms for defining social relationships, sustaining social rules, and strengthening social values (Geertz 1983: 99).

Enquiry into a people's aesthetics cannot be banished to the 'back benches' as these may be defined by anthropological analyses of art which choose as their 'front bench' line of enquiry the social relationships mediated by and through art. In the production of art, people are not merely mastering the technology, nor incorporating motifs, designs, movement and/or speech patterns at whim. Those regarded as artists in any given society are working to supply an audience of consumers who are well 'educated' in the process of assessing works, determining whether they meet the requirements, as these are defined by 'tradition'. These assessments may be based upon ideas of 'beauty', but this quality may be more related to the depth and clarity of lineal incisions, flow of body parts in precise movement patterns, or even a reasonable expectation that the correct magical treatment has been incorporated into the work. Alfred's objection to the 'indigenous aesthetics' programme' (1998: 4) is its tendency to reify that part of art which is associated with culture and its use as a vehicle for cultural transmission which plays down the structural role of art within a social context. While this may be so, and *Art and Agency* goes a long way to rectify any perceived reification of the 'cultural' over that which is deemed 'social', I suggest that there is a danger in throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Could both approaches be equally revealing?

Anthony Forge, to my mind a significant figure in the anthropology of art (not to mention a supervisor and mentor to Alfred himself), argued that the value of art lay primarily in its ability to communicate that which was not communicable in any other way (1966, 1967, 1970, and 1973). Art communicates not only through elaborate symbolic systems but also through emotive stimuli. Although that which is communicated is not too difficult to discover, given exhaustive and detailed discussions with both artist and audience, it is the emotive stimuli that are more elusive in an analysis of art. Hence descriptions of form and style analysis are pervasive in the literature.

value to an 'anthropology of art' is how these 'feelings' reflect wider sentiments which reflect patterns for behaviour. At this point I feel the scorn radiating from Alfred's argument, questioning the value of patterns for behaviour to anthropology when what is really relevant are the patterns of behaviour. But the ideals set within a cultural context for social interaction remain, to my mind, fertile escarpments from which to view the ways in which people strive to meet those ideals. Surely what lies between ideals and the actualization of these provides information that can deepen our understanding of social and cultural processes. An analysis of aesthetic sentiments in any given society extends our understanding of 'feelings' lineally along a path leading to culturally significant philosophies reflecting social values which ultimately propel the enquirer towards social behaviour and the social processes which circumscribe that behaviour. Art is not merely 'enjoyed', or displayed in non-Western societies. This phenomenon is partly why Alfred seeks an 'anthropology of art' grounded in social significance. Art has a role within a defined social and cultural context. A people's 'appreciation' of an artwork, whatever form that may take, is inherent in its ability to perform that role adequately as well as to connect people to their ways of thinking about the world. Can an 'anthropology of art', developed within a scheme promoting investigation at the level of social interaction as its *primary* line of enquiry provide us with enough of the picture to assist us in placing the captivating agency of art within its social and cultural context?

Among Vakutans aesthetic value is based upon the way in which a carving, a skirt, a dance, a voice, or a person's face achieves its defined role, its 'work' as it is expressed by Vakutans. The 'feelings' evoked are related to being able to draw attention to a skirt, for example, so that people are mesmerized by its magnificence. But its magnificence has more to do with other social values than merely its 'beauty'. As Alfred eloquently argued in the construction of his model for 'the technology of enchantment', a significant captivating engagement which art extracts from its audience is based upon the mere knowledge that the object or act has been conceived in magic or that there is some supernatural power which is the font of its existence (1992). Alfred makes extensive use of the Vakutan material to demonstrate his point that the act of transforming a natural substance, for example, into an embellished object emanating formal properties designed to capture the attention of others is the 'technology of enchantment'. If magic is then layered into the transformative process, in some contexts becoming the active agent in its transformation, an 'enchantment of technology' casts a spell over those who would 'see the real world in an enchanted form' (1992: 44). The technological expertise required in the construction of Vakutan skirts provides a certain 'halo' of enchantment. But it is the knowledge that the woman who has made the skirt was able to achieve such magnificence through magical inculcation of substances and utterances

Vakutans participate in a system of art production which is not only esoteric in its training of 'artists', but is also highly selective. Particular aspects of the Vakutan environment are chosen to be represented according to perceived qualities. Only certain men are endowed with the skills that qualify them as master carvers (Campbell 1978, 1983) while particular women are given the magic to promote their skills in the construction and design of skirts. These skills are not only based upon the technical knowledge and ability to transform the wood of trees, for example, into culturally rich icons, permeated with magical substances and incised with lines that represent particularly 'knowledgable' animals. The carvers and skirt makers have also undergone stages of magical transformation so that valuable qualities of 'wisdom', 'knowledge', and 'precision' become part of their very essence.

Vakutans have chosen to represent certain elements of their environment based upon perceptions that these elements embody particular qualities which Vakutans idealize. By representing these elements on carvings destined for specific ends, they are not only appropriating those qualities for their own purposes (that is, there is a functional purpose in their representation), but they are, in essence, assimilating those qualities to personify the ideal Vakutan. It is the emotive stimuli of these icons on the sensibility of Vakutan personhood that people respond to at a conscious and unconscious level. My intent is not merely to make the art produced by a select group of Vakutan carvers more meaningful to non-Vakutan consumers, to assist them to 'see' through Vakutan eyes, but to pursue a better understanding of Vakutan emotive responses to their art work. By so doing, an opportunity emerges for us to come closer to an understanding of the captivating spell Vakutan carvings have for Vakutans and how this operates within an informed social context.

As stated above, the designs carved on the canoe prow and splash boards of Kula outrigger canoes are part of a system which incorporates particular elements of the Vakutan environment, real or imagined, which embody key features associated with ideal qualities of Vakutan personhood. Identifying the relationship between form and meaning is, for my current purposes, a separate task. In attempting to demonstrate that an analysis of Vakutan aesthetics is not only appropriate to any anthropological investigation of their art, but inseparable from it, I will gloss over the formal elements of Vakutan carving for Kula, although certain formal elements will creep into the discussion from time to time.

The human body is divided into spatially distinct areas which are further associated with and responsible for different aspects of human sensibility, feelings, and behaviours. These associations are transposed onto the boards, endowing them with perceived anthropomorphic qualities, which are further enhanced by those elements of the environment which are chosen for representation (see Figures 6.2

that imbues the skirt with another level of enchanted power, from which the viewer is unable to escape. While the exact technical and training processes may be known only to a select group of Vakutans, the effect of the skirts to enchant does not require any further knowledge other than that magic is involved and its aim is to render the viewer incapable of escaping its powers of attraction.

Although there are many contexts in which Vakutans embellish their world with art through design, song, dance or construction, in this chapter I will turn to the production of art for the purposes of undertaking Kula expeditions by Vakutans, who live on a small island of the Trobriand Islands within the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea.¹ Leaving aside the formal analysis of form, I will present the data as an example of the intellectual processes underpinning the choice of elements within the Vakutan environment and argue that the representations are more than a desire to imitate characteristics of that which is represented (see Figure 6.1).

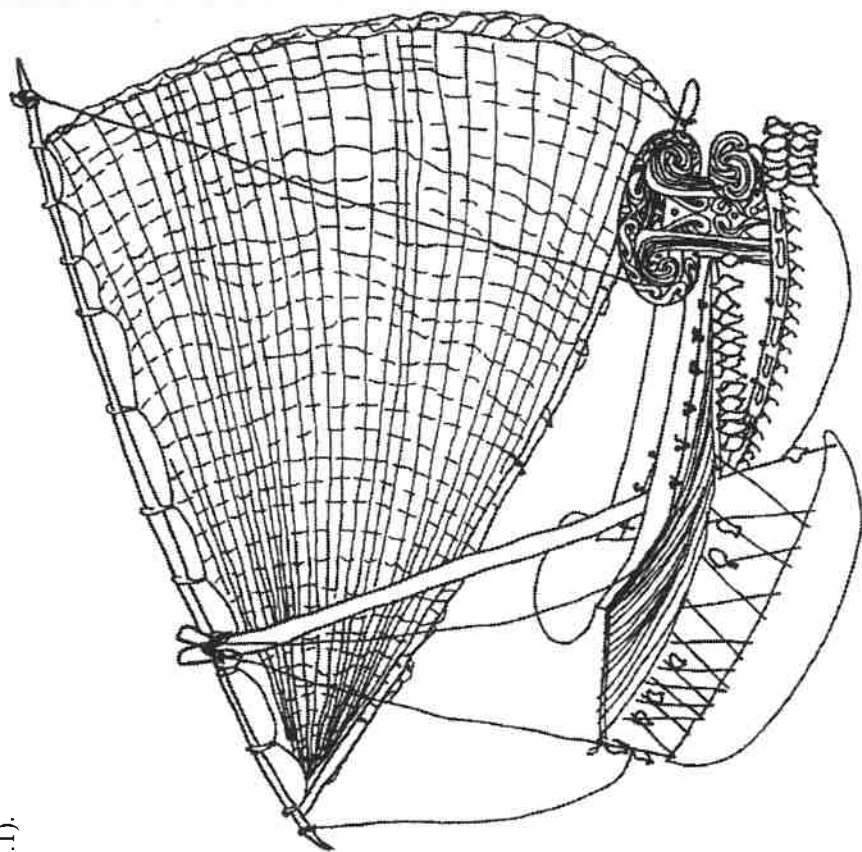


Figure 6.1 Vakutan *Masawa*. This drawing depicts the full sail and outrigger together with the two end boards; the prowboard and the splashboard

...an concepts that underpin vakutan values. My purpose is to bring forth those aspects of their art which activate Vakutan responses and thereby captivate within a Vakutan cultural context. The value of this line of enquiry to the social context of Vakutan life will partly emerge from this.

The repertoire of Vakutan design is made up of a variety of visual components (form and colour) and ordered in accordance with structural principles dictating design organization; the depth and angle of carved line, delineated planes, repetitions and orientations. The corpus of form is limited by prescribed Vakutan principles for generating designs which must ultimately comply with a Vakutan style. The forms have associated meanings which are generally derived from the physical environment. The range of potential, representational elements within the environment is extensive. The nature of the relationship between form and representation is not, in the Vakutan context, necessarily based upon likeness. Rather, there are specific qualities thought to be represented by particular 'animals' in the Vakutan environment which receives formal representation in the carved lines and embellished surfaces of the board assemblages. Form and colour provide the visual iconography to which body parts and 'animal' representations are attached.

The foremost part of the board assembly to present itself to an audience of potential enemies (Kula partners) and to potential rivals (other Vakutans) is Section 1 of the prowboard (see Figure 6.2). The animal represented here is the osprey, and all forms in this Section are related to the head, neck and beak of this bird of prey. The representation of this particular bird in this Section is no coincidence to Vakutans. This fish-eating raptor personifies highly valued qualities. It embodies an innate 'knowledge' of the skills necessary to be successful: its fishing ability exemplifies precision and with it, perpetual victory. The osprey is perceived by Vakutans to sit at the tops of trees (also associated with value in relation to success) waiting for just the right moment to make its direct strike at a seemingly inconspicuous spot on the water's surface. It enters the water without fuss, only to re-emerge with its prize securely displayed. Vakutans believe that the osprey's sagacious behaviour is sustained by his embodied knowledge and experience. The osprey is, to Vakutans, beyond failure because it embodies the magic of perpetual victory. This quality is the ultimate goal of Vakutan men in their pursuit of Kula specifically, but also in their goals to achieve status vis-à-vis other Vakutan men, and renown beyond their lifetime.

The central focus in Sections 1 and 2 of the prowboard is the head and contains within it all that this body part represents in Vakutan thinking. The head is thought to be that part of the body which generates wisdom, knowledge and intelligence. The animal associated with designs in Section 2 of the prowboard is the *doka*. Although spoken of in the same manner as all the other 'animal' representations

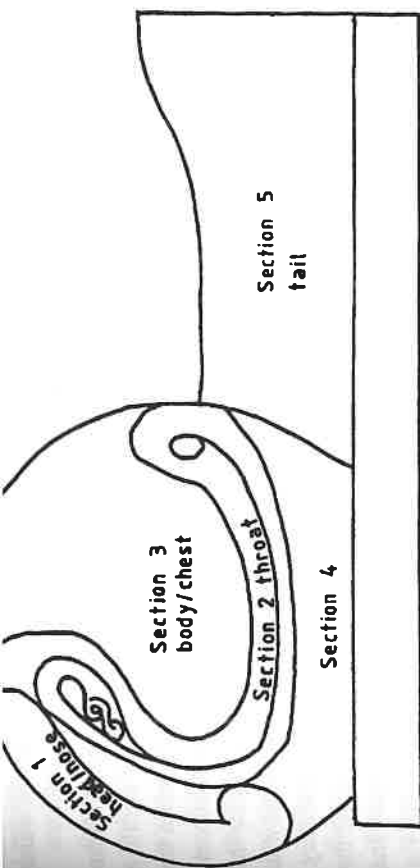


Figure 6.2 Delineated sections of the prowboard, with body-part associations

in the repertoire, the *doka* is not an animal of the real world. Instead it represents human fallibility. Unlike that of the osprey, the *doka* head represents achievable human intelligence and human rational knowledge. Whereas the osprey's wisdom is sustained by internalized magic, human intelligence is achieved by an active and creative mind. There is a distinction between wisdom and intelligence in Vakutan thinking: on the one hand, wisdom is innate, while on the other, intelligence is achieved.

Although the wisdom of the osprey is conceived as unachievable by humans, there is hope in the more attainable qualities represented by *doka*. The word itself is morphologically similar to the verb *-doki*, to think. This relationship was pointed out to me by a Vakutan man who, during the course of our discussion, went on to deliver a Vakutan philosophy on the nature of human intelligence. Men, it was argued, can think and assimilate, through experience, knowledge which can be put to future use. A man can think out the ways by which he can attract a woman, make a successful garden, or persuade a Kula partner to give up a shell valuable; all significant achievements in a Vakutan social context. A man can rationally calculate the effect of specific behaviours and modify these accordingly so as to achieve a desired outcome. Whereas man, as he is represented by the *doka*, must think and thereby employ all the knowledge gleaned through experience before he acts to achieve specific goals, the ideal, as represented by the osprey, need not think but simply acts as a response to internalized knowledge and wisdom.

Section 3 contains within its boundaries the Vakutan representation of a bat. While Sections 1 and 2 focus attention on the head, it is the head, wings, and tail that are given schematic representation in Section 3. The specific quality addressed in Vakutan sentiment is the exceptional 'wisdom' displayed by these animals in their effortless nocturnal flight. Other animals can fly, but they are aided by the

light of day. They can see where they are going, while the bat is said to *know* its direction. As well as the positive nature of this animal, there is a darker side which invokes fear both on land and sea.

Colour attributes have qualities that provide further recourse into Vakutan evaluative schemes. The space which the bat occupies on the prowboard affords a relatively large surface area for the black paint representing the bat. Whereas the osprey symbolically, as well as in fact, carries magic associated with success (magical bundles are placed under the 'nose' of the prowboard, directly under the osprey), the black of the bat represents malevolent magic. Black is associated with human ageing, and some older men are thought to utilize the magic of sorcery. The activities of sorcerers, as well as those of witches, are carried out under the protection of night. Bats too are creatures of the night. The magic of sorcery and the activities of witches pose the greatest threat to men on Kula expeditions. For Vakutan men, success in Kula has a substantial effect on success within the Vakutan social milieu. The activities of sorcerers and witches threaten a man's success in the garden, in matters of the heart, as well as posing threats to one's physical and emotional health. The white and red displayed in conjunction with the black are said to provide 'relief', both visually and conceptually, from the black of Section 3, counterpoised in a relationship between victory and failure.

Section 4 of the prowboard, while incorporating various arrangements of form associated with other sections of the board assemblage, is the area where the artist is given greater freedom to demonstrate his creative abilities. While symbolic associations are generally tied to various forms delineated in the other sections, in the context of Section 4 these become disassociated so that the carver is relatively free to arrange the forms in his own way.

Although there are several identifiably separate forms displayed in Section 5 of the prowboard, the entire complex is perceived by Vakutans to be one unit. The animal associated with the design complex is the *weku*, an unidentifiable animal. It is most often described as a small black bird. Several Vakutans claimed that this animal truly existed and that they had heard it calling to them in the bush. It always succeeds in disappearing, however, providing a perpetual frustration. Its song is heard in the forest into which people venture with the sole purpose of catching a glimpse of this alluring animal. It is significant that its 'voice' not only is 'heard', but also entices its listener to seek it out.

A voice, if valuable according to Vakutan standards, is associated with eroticism and the enticement of one of the opposite sex. Malinowski records, 'As the natives put it: "The throat is a long passage like the *wila* (cunus) and the two attract each other. A man who has a beautiful voice will like women very much and they will like him"' (1935: 478). When asked what was important about *weku*, nearly all informants were ambiguous about its habitat, 'work', and colour, yet all spoke of the attraction its voice had on people.

There are five delineated planes on the splashboard which similarly contain recurring forms associated with specific 'animals' and drawing upon particular sentiments reflecting Vakutan values (see Figure 6.3). Section 1 outlines the upper form of the splashboard. The important representations in this Section are the egret/*doka* and *tokwalu*, or human figure(s). These two forms are the visual focus of the entire board.

Although the *doka* is represented alone on the prowboard, its place on the splashboard is associated with the egret. According to Vakutan conceptualization of animal behaviour, the egret is a master of fishing technology. But unlike the osprey, who is the embodiment of its own wisdom and technological achievement, the egret, like a man, has to turn to the bush when its fishing techniques fail, resorting to the agencies of magic to rejuvenate its ability. Men also have to perform magic to succeed in their work. A master carver has to resort to 'refresher' magic if, when carving, he finds it hard for the design to 'flow' from his mind through his hands. When it is at its best, the egret is seen to stand perfectly still in the shallows, waiting for the right moment and, knowing when to strike, it snaps up its prey with speed and precision.

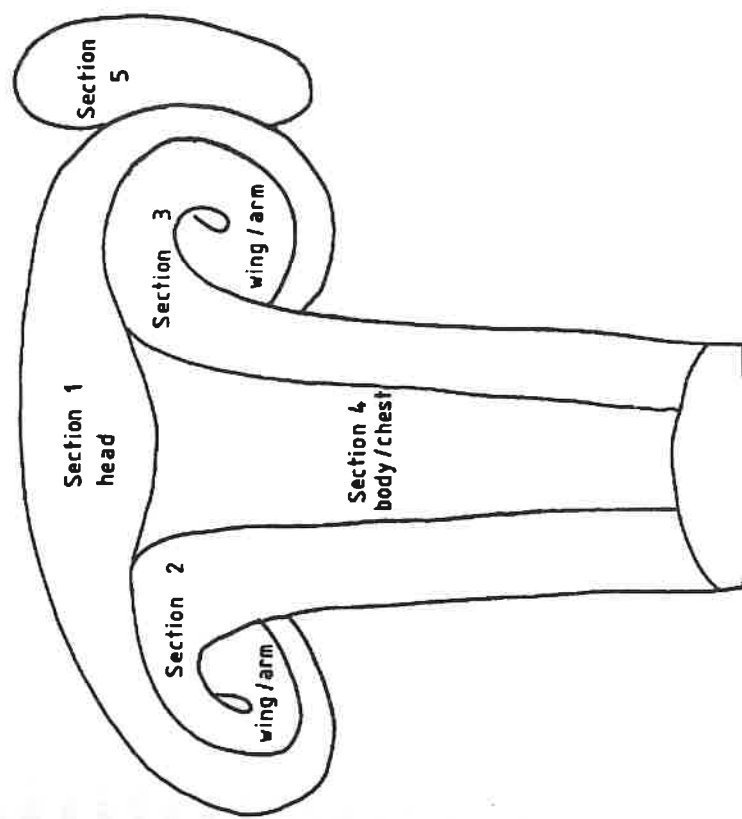


Figure 6.3 Delineated sections of the splashboard, with body-part associations

other 'animals' are given abstract or limited graphic representation, the human figure receives complete figurative treatment. There is no second-guessing the prototype of this design.

The conceptual likeness between the egret and mankind is given symbolic persuasion by their close proximity on the splashboard and their spatial relationship with *doka*. The central theme of Section 1 recalls the human mind and the process of thinking which, not being infallible, must be reinforced by magic. Mankind, as described in various mythological events, lost many of his previous powers: powers such as rejuvenation (Malinowski 1922: 307–11 and 322–6) and the knowledge of the magic to make a canoe fly (Malinowski 1922: 311–21). Through experience, humans remain vulnerable, devoid of the heroics of the mythological past. Alfred makes much of this contrast in his argument identifying the 'halo-effect of resistance' enhancing the value of an object or an action (1992: 48). Similarly, although from a different perspective, Malinowski develops his theory on the use of magic as an indicator of situations where there are perceived dangers and difficulties or when an outcome is uncertain (1925).

Sections 2 and 3 contain the design elements associated with the egret/*doka*. The designs of all three sections are associated with the head, invoking important body parts such as the eye, beak/mouth, neck/throat, mind and its associated intelligence. This region of the body is, for Vakutans, the locus of human power on the one hand, and human frailty on the other. It is the face which is the visual focus of beauty and the key to a person's potential for success. Others cannot refuse a beautiful face, offering up whatever is desired. It is thought that beauty stuns the beholder and in this state the hapless victim unwittingly gives over his or her wealth, magic, and knowledge thus securing status, fame, and with this the greatest prize, immortality (Campbell 1983). Although spirits are reincarnated, individuals die. Through fame Vakutan men can achieve immortality beyond their biological death (see also Weiner 1976). The eyes, too, are a means of enchantment and are the orifices through which desire is channelled. The mouth is the gate through which magical substances are taken and magical chants are spoken. Before a man dies he instructs his relatives to gag his mouth so as to impede the passage of magic from his body. The head is the receptacle of all acquired knowledge and the locus of desired wisdom.

Section 4 is unlike all other delineated planes on the board assemblages. There are no fixed design representations nor any conventions governing design patterning. There is a palette from which master carvers choose design form and representation, but this area is by and large a carver's space within which to identify his own prowess in design utilization and innovation. While Sections 1, 2 and 3 are said to 'steal' the eye of the beholder, more discerning eyes may roam to Section

apparent.

Although the head and its attendant body parts are the focus of Sections 1, 2 and 3, the chest is associated with Section 4. The chest is an important part of the body in that it is where the emotional centre of consciousness is located. The chest is where pain, love, sorrow and loss are felt. These feelings result from accumulated experiences that represent the ageing process, a process which moves people from white (infancy) to red (youth) and to black (elderly). As with Section 3 on the prowboard where the bat appears in the assembly of 'animals', the association of Section 4 on the splashboard with the chest has a darker side. There are relatively large areas where black is given more visibility. As already noted, black is conceptually linked to the ageing of humans. Those who have lost the beauty of youth, particularly visible in the head, develop strengths in other ways, through accumulated knowledge, magic and sorcery. Not only does Section 4 provide a surface upon which master carvers, imbued with lots of magic and generally not carving in the prime of life, display their individual talents, but there is also reference to the life cycle of men and the inevitable process of ageing following upon the inevitable loss of youthful beauty.

Section 5 may or may not be included on the splashboards. When it is incorporated it is in the form representing either a reptile or a butterfly.² Reptiles possess the ability of shedding their skins, enabling rejuvenation from 'old', non-glossy and unattractive surface beauty to 'young' glossy and attractive images. So too the butterfly whose metamorphosis from a caterpillar, unmistakably attached to land, into a beautiful butterfly enables a new, acquired ability to become detached from land and fly.

The preceding analysis suggests a relationship of tension between the 'animals' embodied within the boards. Those with inherent 'wisdom' who, because of their perceived qualities, represent the quintessential success desired by other 'animals', are juxtaposed with those who must resort to magic to enable even a sniff at the successes they seek. Also sharing space on the boards are elements which impede success, representing the precarious nature of human endeavours (see Table 6.1). These tensions men experience in their efforts to achieve the significant successes in life deemed essential to a satisfaction with life as well as with the afterlife. Ultimately, success in gardening, fishing, attracting the opposite sex and Kula partners, as well as rebirth, remain elusive in the face of the competition with others and the vagaries of nature.

Conclusion

In considering the Vakutan evaluative scheme through which the value of certain 'animals' informs us of a Vakutan blueprint for behavioural strategies in practical

Table 6.1 Aesthetic qualities associated with the board assemblage

'Animal'	Qualities	Evaluative Characteristics
Prowboard osprey	innate wisdom	innate magic idealized skill successful
<i>doka</i>	achieved knowledge	achieved magic intelligence fallible
bat	innate wisdom	innate magic idealized skill successful dangerous threatens success
<i>weku</i>	innate wisdom	innate magic idealized skill successful elusive alluring frustrates success
Splashboard egret	achieved knowledge	achieved magic intelligence fallible dangerous
<i>tokwalu</i>	achieved knowledge	achieved magic intelligence fallible dangerous

affairs, the enquiry demonstrates the application of indigenous aesthetics as a system of evaluation which, at one level, underpins processes of Vakutan social interaction. I did not approach this analysis taking as my starting point the relationship of the carved Kula canoe boards to the Vakutan (and their Kula partners') social context, although I could have. Rather, the point of departure was the system of symbolic representation associated with the formal characteristics circumscribing Vakutan carving traditions. From there my methodology focused on the evaluations made by Vakutans of the 'animals' represented so as to reach

an understanding of why certain 'animals' are chosen over others in a process of aesthetic reasoning. This line of enquiry led me to a Vakutan preoccupation with success and failure. From here it is apparent that Vakutan aesthetics is intimately related to fields of behaviour within the social context of Vakutan life. It identifies ideals to be pursued and patterns for behaviour which inform Vakutan social interaction.

In building up the contexts associated with Vakutan Kula carving we can achieve a greater understanding of the role art has in the social and cultural fabric of Vakutan life. The relationship between the formal elements utilized by carvers to represent a select set of natural elements is iconographic. The process by which specific animals in the Vakutan environment are perceived as embodying particular characteristics deemed to possess ideal qualities is mimetic. The system by which form and meaning converge is symbolic, and the means by which the images invoke in their audience feelings that are laden with cultural significance is aesthetic. Vakutan aesthetics is ultimately about the search for success, and by that means, immortality.³ The range of qualities associated with certain animals and represented on the carved assemblages of Kula outrigger canoes have meaning within the Vakutan construction of ideals. These in turn stimulate emotive responses among those who can 'read' the messages. Not everyone is likely to know the full range of meanings encoded on the carvings, but every child knows that the egret is a very intelligent bird and that, when its fishing is a bit off the mark, it has recourse to powerful magic to improve its success. Likewise, every child knows that the osprey is the personification of wisdom and that it can achieve its goals without fail. As a master carver points to an image on the prowboard and says, 'That animal, that's the osprey. That animal is very wise', the sum total of the knowledge his listener has of the osprey is invoked, and an emotive response brings forth feelings recalling that, like the osprey, Vakutans desire effortless success.

A question arises when considering Alfred's proposed programme for an 'anthropology of art' as to whether I can discover anything more than what I could have discovered had I subjected the material to an analysis of the boards as social agents, participating in a scheme reflecting Vakutan social interaction. Alternatively, by following an analysis which first elicits the semiotics of the design complex, and working towards the relationship between that which is symbolized and Vakutan's more general evaluation of the symbolized, am I able to probe a Vakutan social context in a way that is different from that directed towards the social embeddedness of the art? It seems to me that such a course does provide another, complementary view from which to pose other questions. On the other hand, what would an analysis of the system reveal if pursued from the perspective suggested by Alfred? Looked at as part of a system of social interaction, the Kula boards may well reveal layers of social efficacy hitherto undiscovered. My inclination, however, is to interrogate the material in a variety of ways.

Clearly, Alfred's cautioning hand justifiably warns against any attempts to 'see' through the eyes of another, to 'feel' in a way that replicates another's experience, or to 'understand' from the same perspective as someone else. The pursuit of these is fraught with difficulties. The ability for us to adequately remove our cultural lens so that we can view the world through another's is, admittedly, problematic, and just grounds for us to scurry for the known terrain that already encompasses 'sound' anthropology. Attempting to venture into territory which may lead us to embark upon further paths of enquiry and furrow deeper levels of understanding is, I submit, a worthy endeavour. To turn away is to shut the door and limit the possibilities. Anthropology is arguably the most eclectic of the social sciences, taking up the insights offered by other disciplines and shaping them to better enable us to address the questions posed by the complexities found in human societies.

While I doubt that many would disagree with Alfred's thesis that art is produced within a social context by social actors with social ends in mind, I suspect that some are likely to resist his tantalizing suggestion that it is only through an investigation of the social interplay between art and human actors that an 'anthropology of art' can emerge. It may well be that this line of enquiry provides the springboard for anthropological investigation, but I wonder if it offers the only point of departure. Indeed, while the development of Alfred's argument in *Art and Agency* springs from a brilliant argument outlining the social interplay between artist, art object, and audience as agent, index, and recipient respectively, proceeding to an elaborate analysis of the various intentions and permutations of potential interplay between these, he later develops an analysis of specific artistic systems as layers melding a rich tapestry constructed of interwoven lines of investigation, incorporating varying levels of function, interpretation, evaluation, and meaning. He too cannot escape the lure of multiple lines of enquiry.

Notes

1. Field research was undertaken on Vakuta Island between August 1976 and February 1978. I gratefully acknowledge the Australian National University's support of this research, and in particular, that of the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology.
2. The structural elements circumscribing Sections 2 and 3 of the splashboard can also be referred to as 'butterfly wings'.
3. The focus of this chapter has not allowed for an extensive discussion of the range and breadth of meanings associated with the art developed to enhance Kula activities. It is hoped that this will ultimately be discussed in future publications (see Campbell 1983).

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