A Melanesian Pygmalion: Masculine Creativity and Symbolic Castration in a Postcolonial Backwater

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Abstract In the early 1990s, a piece of folk theater was created by a Sepik male cult. A kind of Melanesian Pygmalion story, the new show brought a beautiful woman to life, a woman who answered the desire of which “her” creator had been deprived. Like Pygmalion’s woman, “she” acknowledged her creator’s emasculation while celebrating the enduring spectacle of “his” art. The new show exemplified that in the Sepik, some marginalized, or subaltern, men were imagining their gender around a void that I argue took the symbolic shape of the Lacanian signifier, a castrated phallus. Attachment to waning enchantments of, and entitlements afforded by, precapitalist masculinities, and the diffidence this attachment entailed about modernity, precipitated an ambivalent subject. Men longed for their signifying virility, mostly lost, but never really possessed in the first place, by inventing objects of desire. These objects simulated the continued presence of the symbol of their wounded masculinity, a symbol whose meanings were contradictory. The objects embodied disaffection and disconnection from modernity as well as a pleasure men took from what they created. “Woyon’s Mother” was a mode of masculine creativity that constituted one-half of an ambivalent answer to postcolonial modernity in Papua New Guinea. [creativity, masculinity, Lacan, postcolonial Papua New Guinea, Sepik, Murik]

When Pygmalion saw these women, living such wicked lives, he was revolted by the many faults which nature has implanted in the female sex, and long lived a bachelor existence, without any wife to share his home. But meanwhile, with marvelous artistry, he skillfully carved a snowy ivory statue. He made it lovelier than any woman born, and fell in love with his own creation. The statue had all the appearance of a real girl, so that it seemed to be alive, to want to move, did not modesty forbid. So cleverly did his art conceal its art. Pygmalion gazed in wonder, and in his heart there rose a passionate love for this image of a human form, issuing from the semblance of a woman. [Ovid 1955:231]

In the early 1990s, a piece of folk theater, called “Woyon’s Mother,” was created by a Sepik male cult. A kind of Melanesian Pygmalion story, the new show brought a beautiful woman to life, a woman who answered the desire of which “her” creator had been deprived. Like Pygmalion’s woman, “she” acknowledged her creator’s emasculation while celebrating the enduring spectacle of “his” art. The new show exemplified that in the Sepik, some margin-
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To begin, let me return to the moment in August 1993 when I first saw this Melanesian Pygmalion. Much of my research has focused on the male cult in Darapap, Darapap being

Figure 1. Yanda “the author” of Woyon’s Mother sitting with the mask and headdresses of his show. Credit: D. Lipset, 2001.
one of several villages located on the coast just to the west of the mouth of the Sepik River, between the Pacific Ocean and the lagoons, called the Murik Lakes. With each arrival, I return to its sanctum, where I greet the assembly, explain my purposes, and begin to take stock of the community. In 1993 I found a rather garishly decorated mask surmounted on a pole in the middle of the hall (see Figure 1).

Remarking about it, I learned that the mask, called “Woyon’s Mother,” was the eponymous centerpiece of the new show mentioned above. Two young men instantly vowed to stage a performance to honor my departure a month or so later. Eagerly, people said that performances were pending in several other villages. As we were sitting amid the excluded presence of women, beneath the shadow of this maternal spectacle, I could not help but ask how “she” had come on the scene. I must wait, I was told. Peter Kaango, brother-in-law of Yanda, the man nominated as the show’s “author,” must come and tell the story. In mourning, Yanda was confining himself to his house. As a personality, moreover, Yanda was said “not [to be] a man given to very much talk.” Although the author was alive and named, a characteristic notion of the Melanesian artist was evidently in play that dispersed the voice of the subject (Leach 2004; Lévi-Strauss 1966). The artist’s story was to be told by a substitute. But before entering into a line-by-line exegesis of this proxy narrative, I shall introduce the Lacanian framework I want to use by while doing so.

**Part 1: Symbolic Castration, Postcolonial Culture and the Steersman’s Paddle**

On the one hand, Lacan (1977a) erects the phallus, not as a genital, or even as the center of masculine id, but as a dominant (Jakobson 1971:82), or master signifier. Of what? The Lacanian phallus signifies difference. It signifies language, the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. It signifies the social covenant, the intersubjective domain he calls “the symbolic.” On the other hand, however, the Lacanian phallus is Durkheimian (1982): it is not an autonomous, or self-determinative dominant. The phallus, and the libido, are constituted by the social: by the desire of the other, and not vice versa. In the Lacanian Oedipus complex, the phallus comes into being first as the object of the mother’s desire and then by the paternal no! The taboo does not ban desire for the mother, but bans the desire to be desired by her. Deprived of “recognition” by the other” (Lacan 1977a:58), the phallus is not merely cast out of Eden, it is symbolically castrated. For Lacan, culture is a masculine wound in which desire is constituted by amputation, not erection. Or, as he himself put it, “the phallus is . . . the signifier of [man’s] alienation through signification” (1977b:28). The appealing contradiction in this otherwise melancholy metaphysic is that, as de Certeau (1983) pointed out, it embraces comedy, fictions of indestructibility, rather than death. Although wounded, the phallus abides. It cannot stop longing to bathe in the desire of the other. Yet it cannot do so.
Several anthropologists, it is encouraging to note, have used Lacanian theory. For the most part, they have done so to gain purchase on studies of gender identity conceived in static terms (e.g., Moore 2007; Trawick 1990; Weiner 1995; see also Mimica 2007; Strauss 2006). My project differs. Its inspiration draws from Fanon’s earlier discussion (1967) of the Lacanian mirror stage in the context of colonial emasculation in the francophone Caribbean. As the relationship between postcolonial masculinity to modernity in which I am interested is at once emasculated but also creative in a visual sense, I also find this Lacanian disfiguration of culture apt, the moment when a mother holds her infant to a mirror, and he gets an initial glimpse of his body (1977a). The baby gets a false impression of its coordination and autonomy, a gestalt by which it is delighted as if the image were someone else. Again, Lacan locates desire in the other. This illusion is captivating but it creates a false sense of subjectivity in the child, and institutes an irresolvable gap between that which is desired, namely, bodily unity and mastery, and that which is, namely, a lack of bodily control. The ego is born from an identification with an “Ideal I” that is not-self. A “gestalt . . . statue” of the self masks its dismemberment and disintegration (Lacan 1977a:5). Subsequent images of wholeness, permanence, and autonomy sustain this illusion. I do not evoke the old evolutionary saw: postcolonial men are not babies. My conceit is rather that the Lacanian mirror-stage offers a useful, but of course skewed, concept of a devastating, but relatively thematic, dimension of their subjective and political predicament.

The mirror of modern desire, the illusion of the male self as employee, Christian, consumer, constitutes a new jeopardy, a new castration set atop the old one. The new illusion of a modern gestalt does not castrate men by cutting them off from a precolonial immortality. It castrates men from a symbolic in which they were both castrated, yet privileged, and then castrates them again into a new symbolic in which they would be citizens in their own nation-state. In both symbolics, the masculine subject is given to suffer a rude awakening when confronted by the inescapable question: who is the object of desire, if not me? A crisis of separation is precipitated by the loss of the desire of the other. Nevertheless, postcolonial masculinity, both fulfills and frustrates desire.

For Lacan, the original castration is replayed again and again in the symbolic order, so object loss per se becomes epiphenomenal to structural lack. This is the crucial difference between Lacan’s concept of culture and my view of postcolonial culture: the Lacanian phallus is ahistorical, whereas the symbolic castration of men in PNG is precisely a result of loss arising from colonial subjugation and now global process. True enough, men respond to their archaic lack, the desire of the feminine other, but also to a new lack, that of modernity, whose gaze and desire is also fixed elsewhere. Still, masculine creativity may not be reduced to loss, either personal or institutional. Its meanings must be understood less teleologically. I would say this: like Ovid’s Pygmalion, the new piece of folk theater in the Sepik answered the elusiveness of desire by creating fictions that simultaneously incarnated a dying yet living signifier.

From a Lacanian perspective, Pygmalion’s vilification of women, is not motivated by feminine “wickedness.” Instead, it arises from his dependency on the desires of women who do
not desire him. Pygmalion is subjected to the signifier of their errant desire—the phal-
lus—until he is able to fashion a life-size statue of a woman out of a slab of white ivory (his phallus?). Such is Pygmalion's impossible creativity: the statue, inanimate and lacking de-
sire, is an object who can desire him like no other, and vice versa, he is able to desire it more
than “any woman born.” Subsequently taking pity on such a pathetic man, the goddess of
love intervenes—as the statue’s mother and the artist’s wife—to bring Galatea, the statue, to
life. But Galatea is more than an image of Pygmalion’s castration. That is to say, the desire
embodied in his art is created by and creates a burning, yet unattainable, fantasy that can
never restore the phallus, even though Ovid esteems Pygmalion’s skill, the skill that made
Galatea “lovelier than any woman born” (Ovid 1955:243). Lovelier, in other words, than
woman born of a real woman. Pygmalion’s art, his signifier, created a substitute for the lost
object, a real woman, only to recreate the loss of “her” desire and his castration.

I take Pygmalion’s impossible creativity as a trope for working out my ethnographic prob-
lem in this article: the enduring cultic phallus in rural PNG. Like his statue-woman, male
creativity in this part of the Pacific also arises from symbolic castration. In prestate mascu-
linity, men were aroused to create signifiers of what they did not possess. Masculine
creativity arose from lack, or perceived lack, of its constitutive object, the desire of women.
Men were chronically incensed, but also chronically wounded, by an expectation that wo-
men desired other men, rather than themselves. They were quick tempered, prone to
domestic violence against women and had to magically augment their attractiveness and
virility. In this jealous register, the phallus—in both individual and plural forms—immersed
“himself” in the work of creating substitutions for the desire “he” lacked, however empty
these signifiers turned out to be. And while doing so, what did men require themselves to do
in order to concentrate their agency? They had to sequester themselves from the immoral
and impure desires of women. They had to reenact their symbolic castration, the castration
by which they had become men.

For example, in the prestate construction of Murik overseas trade, when outrigger canoes
plied the region, should the wife of the steersman cuckold him while he was at sea, the prow
of the outrigger canoe was understood to mimic the rhythm of her body during intercourse
and bob up and down in the water. If the crew quickly replaced the man before his wife
finished having intercourse, they could save the canoe. On returning home, the original
steersman would disembark and, without bothering to investigate, beat his wife, certain of
her adultery, certain that she had desired a rival. Preventing the castration of his phallus/
canoe was understood (in part) to depend on her staying “quietly” at home during the voy-
age. Or, as Marilyn Strathern put it: “the image of the active agent at the creative or created,
center of relations is missing” in Melanesian manhood (1988:269). In Lacanian terms, Mu-
rik voyagers as much as acknowledged the vulnerability of the phallus to the desire of the
other.

Ostensibly “unmanned” by the wantonness of sentient women, Pygmalion creates a “pure”
woman. Prestate Murik likewise desired “to cure” their phallic emptiness by substituting, or
insisting on, a “pure,” or chaste, woman to make them men. In PNG today, a constituency of men, both urban and rural, are entangled in a contradictory web of modern and Melanesian desires, values, and objects that is sedimented, or sublated, on its predecessor (see Wardlow 2006). Pygmalion’s creativity, impugned by agents of modernity as “Satanic” or “a waste of time,” is neither resolved, nor effaced. Instead, the phallus that was dependent on feminine desire has now become dependent on global desire. To start to put a face on my argument, I now discuss some thematic dimensions of the historical and cultural background out of which Woyon’s Mother, the new woman, was created.

Part 2: The Murik Phallus, A Brief History

In one sense, the relationship between the symbolic phallus and colonialism in this region—replete as it is with patriarchal interventions—both did and did not rehearse Oedipal castration. All over PNG, institutions, like the Murik male cult, were dismembered in the name of law, the father, or the son (Tuzin 1997). But this did not cut off the cultic phallus from an imaginary in which it was desired. It rather cut off the phallus from a world in which it already lacked the female other and ushered it into a new symbolic where it was desired even less. For Lacan, the relationship of the phallus, as empty signifier, to the phallus itself, as penis, was always unclear. In prestate Murik, however, the link between the two, although occult, was indisputable. Initiation into the cultic phallus—an enchanted domain of warrior-spirits called Kakar—required an astonishing penetration.

In the dead of night, the initiates’ wives entered the cult sanctum through a small service door, in desire of their husbands’ initiators (Lipset 1997:187ff). This gesture was understood in several ways. In one sense, the sexual intercourse they offered was a form of reciprocity, an erotic return for initiating the husband. The wives “gave” their husbands’ partners the same service that the partners’ wives had given their initiators when they were admitted into the cult. In another sense, this was a scene of exile into the Lacanian symbolic, which cost nothing less than that “pound of flesh which is mortgaged in . . . relationship to the signifier” (Lacan 1977b:28). The women personified Arake, the mother of the spear-spirits. The men who received her desire deprived it from “her” sons, who suffered, or were meant to suffer their jealous rage in silence, to get it back in the form of the cultic phallus, and literally at some time in the future, when a new cohort of initiates sought to join the cult and had to send their wives to have sex with them. The castration to which the husbands submitted did and did not go unheeded. They received status, power, and prestige in the symbolic order, however wounded they were by the process of its bestowal.

In the 20th century, however, these sexual exchanges, the military–political autonomy, and the symbolic phallus for which they stood, declined in frequency. Condemned by missionary Christianity (as fornication) and by the state (as illegal), cultic intercourse ended by the 1970s. Today, the male cult does not go to war. Today, instead of giving wives’ sexual services, men pay money. The influence of modernity, moreover, has led to the abandonment
of the cult’s great floating signifier (Mehlman 1972), the outrigger canoe, whose overabundant meaning was a powerful expression—for men, if not for women—of the phallus (Barlow and Lipset 1997).

In the 1990s, little, fiberglass banana boats replaced the big, dugout outriggers that the male cult used to launch as if it were initiating a young warrior (thus involving ritual intercourse). The safety of the latter vessels from shipwreck had depended on the chastity of the steersman’s wife. It had depended, in other words, on the control of her desire for a rival phallus. The fiberglass dinghies (and outboard motors) that replaced outriggers are understood as little other than commodities, remittances, gifts from politicians and as a mode of transportation. Women’s desire does not affect them. Meanwhile, the spread of petty capitalism has given rise to new forms of symbolic castration. Murik men view themselves as impoverished, isolated, and comparatively disconnected from urban life. The provincial capital is a hard won port, expensive to access. There are no roads to market, other than by sea, several hours voyage. The Murik continue to practice aquatic foraging, exploiting the vast stretches of the brackish lakes, through domestic work groups. Their fishery, although productive, will never reach the industrial levels of production. Moreover, what their environment lacks, as they themselves observe, is exactly that which is plentiful elsewhere in the region, namely, land, land to garden and raise coffee or other cash crops, land to raise cattle, land to clear cut timber from, land to make money from to subsist on, pay school fees and so forth. Today, rice bags pour into the Murik villages, leaving behind a sense of inadequacy rather than a full stomach.

Whatever else Murik men may see lacking in their agency, society, and environment, like other Sepik peoples, dwellings, and cult houses in the villages are full of objects that we in the West would call intellectual property (Coombes 1998). In the 1930s, cultic men leading these “maritime trading peoples” were impresarios of folk theater throughout the region (Mead 1963:8). They exported shows to trading partners who desired them to advance political influence and regional repute. As sublime, unique entertainments, performances were meant to arouse guests, or perhaps reduce them to a state of desire. On the one hand, that is to say, these folk theatricals were rare. Rights to a single show were carefully guarded by the big man or chief in his village. On the other hand, leadership of each of the multiple lineages domiciled in every Murik village own one or several shows. Folk theater, because it created desire, was a measure of the potency of men’s symbolic phallus and pride of place. Even as recently as the late 1980s, I returned to the Murik Lakes from Yakamul village, just east of Aitape, touting “Bakuk,” a show regionally renowned for the love magic associated with its eponymous hero. While granting the power of the charm over women, an enchanted clay from a hole from which Bakuk emerged, one Murik man dismissed it as little more than “another show from a village.”

In the late 19th century, with the intrusion of the first of several colonial states, cultures in the Sepik–North Coast became more integrated than perhaps they already were. The trade in folk theater may be viewed as a political response by men to symbolic castration, the loss
of sovereignty and cultic agency that resulted from the banning of warfare imposed on
them. Most, but not all, of the shows are said by Murik men to have been imported at one
point or another during this period of German, British and then Australian colonial rule,
while others were imported from regional trading partners prior to first contact. But,
clearly the pace of exchange picked up in colonial settings, on plantations, mines, or in
mission stations, where men from multiple tribal backgrounds were thrown together
while doing contract labor. However they reached the Murik coast, the shows are viewed
as created by spirits; the role of the “author” is reduced to that of dream spectator at a
performance. If the object of desire is not created by a human subject, what presence does
this absence signify?

In 1993, I had been seconded to the Murik Lakes by the Fowler Museum (at UCLA) to
canvass local opinion about the prospect that the show might mount a show of Murik

Figure 2. A senior man at his retirement, decorated in the insignia of his lineage and the male cult. Note
the snake’s head motif on the apron of his loincloth. Credit: Photo by Helen Dennett, 1984, reprinted with
permission.
art, some of which remained sacred. I visited all the villages and broached the plan. Men eventually put together their response: I ought to be initiated into the male cult. In Lacanian terms, the idea was that I would need to be symbolically castrated, thus to be permitted to see, and begin to learn how to play, the sacred flute spirits. The men were making two points. First, they did not reject the project and wanted to facilitate it. Second, the appropriate metaphor for the agency necessary to install a museum exhibit was male initiation. Specifically, elders teach spells (timiit) to initiates that arouse women, afford military success, and, amongst other things, ensure the success of the stage management of shows. In return, I would host a feast. Basically, this same model is applied to the intertribal trade of shows. The trade of folk theater is no alienation of intellectual property. It is an act of lineage reproduction and male cult initiation. On the one hand, the recipient of a show is incorporated into, and endowed with, the ancestor-spirit of the donor. He becomes a jural member of the donor’s lineage, more or less at equal rank, and may thus go ahead and trade the show at his own discretion. On the other hand, he becomes, from the point of view of male cult, a man endowed with its signifier, given an ornamental loincloth (see Figure 2) and receives training in the mode of preserving phallic potency from the impurities of feminine sexuality.

Shows are rather like Lacanian mirrors. They reflect a self-referential, libidinal image of the self as other, by dramatizing a cosmology, coherent but fictional. They tell the story of how the show came to be, or at least episodes from the tale. In the event that a show was imported, they are sung in the original vernacular that may not be fully, or even partially, understood by either the donors or the recipients. A show’s primary, performative meaning is, as I say, as a visual object of desire. Although not all shows feature the fantastic, masked effigies (murup, or gaingin; Tokpisin: tumbuan), all have libidinal associations, particularly for men. In many, only a choreography is performed by a troupe of magnificently adorned young dancers, each of whom has been bespelled to enhance the power of their dancing, and whose whole bodies have been rubbed with red ochre and profusely decorated in shell and teeth ornaments, to arouse the gaze of opposite-sex spectators. This is the presence that the absence of the author signifies: the symbolic phallus, castrated as it is.

**Part 3: The Creation of Woyon’s Mother**

Many other performative genres flourish in Murik culture, besides folk theatricals. The one called Woyon kor, or “Mangrove Songs,” consists of sorrowful laments. Lyrics are said to be made up by men (and women) as they paddle alone in their canoes in the privacy afforded by the lakes’ expanses (cf. Harrison 1986). These songs, a maudlin genre of autobiography, are exclusively composed in the Murik vernacular and are sung in a single melody. They commemorate how the self became separated, whether from kin or lover, although usually the latter. They commemorate the limits of desire for desire. Sentiments like these, of human authorship, and being entirely made up of local reference and language, used to qualify Woyon songs as “merely,” or, no more than, a domestic form of expression that was “just”
performed at home, and never exported. What is more, whereas folk theater is corporate property of individual lineages, Woyon, qua melody, are considered to be the common property of everyone living in the five Murik villages. Individual composers are acknowledged during informal, late-night gatherings of small cohorts of age mates, or as part of end-of-mourning celebrations, when kin gather in same-sex groups in the men’s (and women’s) cult houses and remain in each others’ company, eating and singing together until dawn. In such contexts, a Woyon song might be started by its author, or his sibling, whose voice is then joined by the company, although some songs become so popular that they enter the general repertoire.

As this musical genre is a vernacular expression of desire, as well as a commonly owned melody, it is notable that the Murik devalued Woyon songs. They did not convey essential information. They were not a means of ancestral power. They were not, like Aboriginal songs, “the authoritative guide to social relationships and to relationships with the land” (Wild 1987:106). They were not a link to a great past, mythic or historical. They were not even a necessary part of ceremonial performances. Nor were they said to be part of an emerging Murik ethnicity in the new nation. They were just domestic music. If the folk theatricals were regionally desired, Woyon songs were merely subject to local desire, that is, until the early 1990s, when Yanda, the shy, grieving artist, created their beautiful mother.

Sitting with Peter Kaango, Yanda’s brother-in-law, I recalled knowing the former man in the 1980s. A deacon in the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) mission in Darapap, he observed the church’s rules banning participation in the Kakar cult, folk theatricals, or any ritual that includes dancing. Although the church condemned such activities, I never got a sense that Kaango himself did so. Still his Christianity might be expected to have distorted his brother-in-law’s story, but I have no sense that it did so (any more than the story may have been distorted in its original recital). True enough, he would not perform in the show. But there was no tone of condescension or reproach in his account of his affine’s story. On the contrary, he told it as a matter of fact in the mix of Tokpisin and Murik that senior people speak with me. To orient readers, let me quickly summarize his narrative.

In a dream, Yanda saw the new show in which ancestor spirit-men were dancing and singing Woyon songs. In the middle of their promenade, two spirit-women danced with his recently deceased grandson. Next morning, Yanda got up and began to carve masks of these two spirit-women and to teach the songs and the new choreography to the male cult.

Like Ovid’s Pygmalion, Yanda’s story accounts for “his creation” of a woman. But unlike Pygmalion, the story derives Yanda’s creativity, not from a sentient artist, but from the dead. Moreover, the artist does not seem to have been motivated by symbolic castration, the loss of feminine desire for desire, but from the loss of a different kind of attachment, the premature death of a child. I shall argue that this latter difference is more apparent than real. The more significant difference between the two stories arises from the ambient circum-
stances, contemporary and historical forms of castration, to which Yanda’s new show responded. I now develop this argument in a close reading of his brother-in-law’s narrative.

Many people tried to invent a dance step to Woyon, but all they could do was sing the . . . songs with a handdrum. Darapap went to Manam [Island] and tried to do it. But it did not look good. [Kaango, field notes, August 10, 1993]

For some, if not most, young men, dancing is competitive. Through their skill, style in, as well as stamina for, the dance, they try to assert and distinguish themselves; likewise for singing. During gatherings, when everyone might prefer to break for a chew of betel or a cigarette, a single voice may suddenly be heard to start a new refrain. The creation of a new choreography for Woyon may have also motivated men to compete to make one up. I do not know who first tried to devise a show around the Woyon songs. But clearly, critical attention being paid to the project dismissed initial attempts for failing to meet standards: “It did not look good.” It was not desired, that is to say. Yanda set his sights on this empty mirror, a visual field, and political prize, not by admiring his own reflection, but by going to sleep.

Yanda had a dream. One of his grandsons, a 12-year-old, named Porer, had just died. Yanda was in mourning. [Kaango, field notes, August 10, 1993]

Here, Peter Kaango embeds his brother-in-law’s creativity within a particular sociomoral field. First, he associates the new show with the collective space, not of the living, but of the dead, the Murik afterlife being encountered through dreams (aga’orub). Then, he points out that the dream took place in the aftermath of a premature death. In Murik terms, Yanda was living in the presence of his grandson’s spirit (nabran), had death pollution, and was observing mourning taboos until he celebrated the Washing Feast (Arabopera gar).

Although the SDAs did not establish their mission in Darapap until the early 1950s, the Catholic Church began serving Murik communities during the first years of the 20th century. Even so, in the 1980s and 1990s, people, both in Darapap and elsewhere in the Murik Lakes, still viewed dreams as part of a loosely integrated, ancestor-based cosmology in which the relationship of culture heroes and the spirits of the recently dead to everyday, human society (noramot) is little differentiated. One’s spirit, or spirit-self, is visible as a reflection in water and as one’s shadow. This relationship is distinctive for its concept of embodiment. The Murik use a canoe metaphor (gai’iin) for the body, and vice versa, they use a body metaphor for canoes (Lipset 2005). Together, both might be glossed “canoe-bodies.” The canoe-body transports human spirits through daily life. Human spirits “disembar” from their canoe-bodies at the onset of sleep or loss of consciousness to move about in dreams where they meet spirits. Although the moral engagement of the latter with each other and with human beings is largely seen to be identical as those of human beings with each other, two differences between spirits and people obtain. For one, the spirits are known to travel through the waking world, and the afterlife in more kinds of “canoe-bodies,”
human, marine, and aviary, than the living. For another, unlike men, the libidos of the spirits are inexhaustible. Or, perhaps one could say that they are less symbolically castrated than men.

In contemporary life at least, few rules limit discussion of, or reference to, dreams in daily conversation. However, dream reports may sometimes be afforded a special kind of legitimacy. Through dream-based stories, the dead offer tutelary portents and omens, divinatory information about the sick and the dying and, as in Yanda's case, creativity. Dreams, in other words, are saturated with desire, and an elaborate code of symbolic equivalences is used to interpret them. Although psychological anthropologists and others have often discussed dreams (Stephen 1979; Tedlock 1991; Lohmann 2003), they have overlooked a paradoxical point about their privilege as a source and form of power/knowledge. Dreams may fulfill desire otherwise frustrated in waking life, but in so doing they express the limits of the sovereign discipline of the state (Foucault 1977). That is, where the law cannot reach, there we find a more detailed—or, less castrated—revelation of desire. Perhaps the degree to which the fulfillment of desire becomes possible is a measure not only of its impossibility under the sun, but also of the overall context of political authority. I will return to this point below. For the moment, I want to expand on the ambivalent representation of desire in dreams and mourning.

In Murik dreams, desire is sometimes depicted as fulfilled, loss overcome. For example, a spell I came to learn enables the spirit-self to dream-travel to kin living at a distance and (secretly) check how they are doing. For the most part, however, the spirit-self travels to the afterlife, where the dead go on living. Here, it becomes contaminated with mystical dirt. A morning bath in the sea is not just part of a regimen of physical hygiene, it cleanses the canoe-body of the impurities by which the spirit-self has been profaned during the night. Like a dream, mourning is also understood as a polluted state of embodiment. Death opens up a disturbance in the symbolic order that exposes the inadequacy of the phallus. A swarm of images of vulnerability rush in to take its place. To wit: the mourning taboos Yanda and the other close kin of his grandson were observing diminished and inhibited them socially and jurally. They did not wear new clothes. They stopped doing their hair. Men did not shave (note Yanda's beard and hat in Figure 1). Women cover their heads with towels or bandanas when outside the house. They may not remarry, if widowed, or participate in ceremonial exchange. That is, access to the symbolic phallus is suspended. They submit to a term of castration. Why? In defense against death. Not to observe the mourning taboos is to arouse suspicion mystically linking ego to the causes of the death that may provoke sorcery vengeance. And withdrawing from society also conceals mourners from the desire of the dead who, in their own loneliness, want to lure the living to join their company, killing them as they do.

Yanda and his kin were lingering about their houses. They would quit this liminal state by ritual passage, the Washing Feast, that culminates at dawn when mourners squeeze inside a cone-shaped, faceless effigy made of coniferous branches, run across the beach, cast off the
effigy and take a plunge in the sea (see Figure 3). Ritual and daily life then coincide: the end of mourning is an awakening from a dream (and vice versa), both end with immersion in seawater, an act of ablution. Mourners are then plied with food and drink, given gifts of new clothes and get a haircut (Leach 1958). They may then return to their jural rank. In other words, they return from the symbolic castration of mourning to the symbolic castration in everyday life.

No doubt Victor Turner’s thesis (1974) that structural liminality may provoke the moral imagination is relevant to Yanda’s dream (see also Lavie et al. 1993). Mourning may prompt collective action in Murik, such as the Washing Rite. Sentiments of loss and longing are also understood to cause the self to seek privacy on the lakes in order to compose Woyon songs. But Turner’s sociological argument ignores an important dimension of liminality, namely the threat of violence. In the Murik ethnotheory of how a person ends up in such isolated circumstances, sexual jealousy is universally tipped as the ultimate cause. Never, or very rarely, is illness, misfortune in love, or premature death, deemed accidental, “natural,” or otherwise free of human intension; loss is perforce understood to be the mystical consequence of conflict over infidelity, that is, as retaliation. The victim may be the consort himself, or, more likely, one of his kin. An untimely death, such as that of Porer, Yanda’s grandson, would therefore have resulted from vengeance by sorcery attack. There is a close relationship between loss/desire and conflict. In Woyon lyrics, however, conflict is repressed, or sublimated, in favor of an elegiac ethos. In mourning, it is transformed into fear, perceived as persecutory threats to the moral boundaries of the self and society.
Although Yanda’s original act of fancy was deemed cohesive and whole by its putative audience, Kaango’s version of the story, he did not quite single out his brother-in-law’s imagination as its author, its phallus. Woyon’s Mother was said to originate from him, true enough, but not by means of his autonomous creativity. Yanda attributes his innovation to a sleep-induced vision of collective and external relationships revealed to him in a dreamscape to which he traveled. Having identified the landscape of dreams as the afterlife that remains part of, rather than separate from, human agency and desire, I now return to Kaango’s narrative of Yanda’s dream. In both, creative action results from peril and insecurity that symbolic castration has provoked.

[Yanda] . . . saw some trees and spirits . . . [Some] . . . came as fish, others came as birds, others came as butterflies. The fish went ashore and left their canoes and joined the show. All the spirit-men dressed up [offstage, in secret] on top of a talis tree and when they were ready, they came down from the tree with two masked spirit-women, one with a butterfly on top of her head and the other with a fish on top of her head. [Kaango, field notes, August 10, 1993]

If the living and the dead occupy the same almost indistinguishable world, it is not surprising to note that the setting of, and the agency represented in, Yanda’s dream are decidedly ordinary in Murik terms, at least. Travel occurs. An arrival scene takes place. Yanda’s vantage point, whether arriving with, or simply watching the approach of, the spirits, is left ambiguous. In any case, trees on the shoreline are visible to him. Perhaps the space is not Murik territory, talis trees being relatively uncommon on the Murik coast. Moreover, senior people, such as Yanda and his Kaango, do not think that Murik culture originated in the Sepik estuary. Rather, they see their relationship to space, which is, in their case, a relationship to water, to have resulted from their ethnohistory. They view themselves as immigrants and refugees who came together in precolonial times from different parts of the Lower Sepik–North Coast region. The newly deceased are expected to return to live with the ancestor-spirits of their lineage who continue to reside in the spirit-communities (pot kaban) from which they migrated to the Murik Lakes. It is therefore not unusual to dream of them living in nondomestic space, outside of ego’s village of residence. This raises one last identification between the living and the dead evoked in the dream, that between visiting trade and the exchange of folk theater.

In Yanda’s dream report, the spirits appear to be trading the new show. They disembark from zoomorphic canoe-bodies and enter humanoid ones. When they do, they proceed to get ready for the show. They climb up a talis tree so as to hide behind its thick and leafy foliage. Their reasons for wanting privacy are entirely human. They do not want to be seen by the women and the rest of the audience before their entrance, thus to keep their secret spells under wraps and not diminish the spectacle of their entrance. Their concerns for privacy and their desire to dramatize themselves belong to the realm of ordinary human stagecraft, not to mention, ordinary masculine desire. The spectacle, and the magic, are expressly phallic: they are meant to attract the gaze and desire of young women.
If the scene was familiar, so were the fish, bird, and butterfly motifs original to Yanda's dreamwork. These same images appear throughout Murik art; for example, they are carved as mastheads on the prows of Murik canoes in intricate, self-referential designs of the phal- lus (Lipset 2005). The performance Kaango went on to describe then featured the dead boy's spirit standing in between a pair of groups, each of which was totemically associated with either the fish or the butterfly spirits.

Two spirit-women . . . danced in the middle of the show. They sang [the Woyon songs] and danced and then returned to the water. They approached the water and then all the dancers went inside the two spirit-women. The woman with the fish on top of her head received all the fish spirits inside her. The woman with the butterfly on top of her head received all the spirit-dancers who were butterflies. The two spirit-women went down into the water with all the dancers. The dancers went into water inside of these two effigies, like an effigy during the Washing Feast. [Kaango, field notes, August 10, 1993; see Figure 3]

Elements in this image, the two dancing masks, the two groups, and the way in which they organized their departure, were informed by the anxieties with which Yanda had gone to bed. Let me explain. Sir Michael Somare, PNG's first prime minister, and the man widely regarded as the “father” of the country, is a Murik native son. A pertinent scene takes place in his autobiography (1975) when he recollects the first time he was taken to the male cult house as a child. “During the height of the festivities, . . . masks were dancing, [and] my father picked me up and placed me between the [masks] . . . The masks lifted me up and, between them, carried me over to my Uncle” (Somare 1975:2). According to Somare, this gesture signified his jural adoption by Saub, his father’s brother. My point here is that the death of his grandson seemed to provoke a normative apprehension in Yanda: who would adopt the boy’s spirit, his own kin, or one of his mother’s lineages?

The spirits then conclude their performance and return to the water. Here, Kaango himself likened their exit to the moment when mourners don an effigy as they perform ritual ablutions that bring this liminal period to a close (see Figure 3). There are other culturally self-evident associations to the dual division in which they depart: the male cult is divided into rival moieties, and several other shows use sibling terms as binary designators, for example, elder brother–younger brother terms, to divide performing groups into pairs. In other words, Yanda dreamed solutions to his waking concerns in terms of prestate ritual processes, prestate social structure, and prestate male institutions. He derived the Woyon masks and choreography from pre-Christian Murik cosmology. Subsequent analysis of the lyrics of the Woyon songs, and the performance that I saw, bear out this conclusion. What is more, the end of the narrative makes it clear that the night’s experience left Yanda feeling no uncertainty about the source or import of his creativity. On the contrary,
Yanda got up in the morning and set to work making the headdresses of the two spirit-women. And then he began to carve the mask with breasts that is used for the Woyon’s Mother figure today.

Although this is obviously a decisive moment, note that the attribution of authorship is carefully delimited. Yanda “got up in the morning” and copied images from what had appeared in his dream. Despite being represented as no more than the spirits’ broker or medium, Yanda is also said, quite explicitly, to have begun work on three figures, although he had just seen two in his sleep. That is, although the representation of their origin is situated elsewhere, the sculptural act of making the third figure—the mask of Woyon’s Mother herself—is more than less located in him. Apparently combining the two images in the third headdress, “he began to carve the mask with breasts.” Yanda’s individual agency, in other words, is restricted or confined to this latter act of craft. As for the rest, it is represented as not having been derived from his own individual inspiration but from “private” relations between his spirit-self and his deceased kin. His creativity, in this sense, was an act of shamanic communication between living and dead spirits: as such, the new show was the corporate property of his lineage (see Figure 1).

If the creation of the “mask with breasts” apparently resulted from disenchanted and independent agency, I must add a word about the mask’s relationship to the Murik work of mourning, which, in my view, mobilized and shaped its maternal imagery. Mourning in Murik is a response to a loss, not only of a specific loved one, but simultaneously of the idealized bearer of care and love (cf. Klein and Riviere 1953). According to the cultural logic of this response, norms of cross-generational kinship are shaped by a single moral ideal.

On the one side is the figure of a doting mother of the Murik imaginary, the figure of generous nurture and caretaking, a young, full-breasted beauty. On the other side is the dependency, vulnerability and tyrannical incapacity of infancy, her little object of desire, or, as Lacan would say, her phallus. Although the mother’s desire is intensely focused on her baby, the father is absent, having been exiled into postpartum obscurity. Rather than differentiated or individuated from her, the little phallus remains cathected as part, or as an extension, of her beautiful, maternal presence. Every death therefore invokes “another scene,” the loss of her desire. In this sense, death rehearses the paternal injunction that severs the child’s total relationship to his mother. What ensues? A boundary preservation problem. Impure and unkempt, mourners take refuge in the house, whose spirit is said to be maternal. Mourning regresses the self to a dilapidated, archaic state, not just in appearance, but also by enfeebling it (cf. Gell 1999). This is not quite the Oedipal castration that launches the self into the emptiness of the symbolic; it rather launches the self into a liminal emptiness offstage. In mourning, artistic creativity may repair the self, fragmented, deprived, and depressed as it may have become, by reintegrating it with the lost ideal (see Klein 1929; Kligerman 1980). As a response to grief, the work of art then becomes a bid to recover the original desire for, and restore unity with, the lost object, in part by seeking social approval. Yanda’s imagination, bringing forth a steadfast, maternal image as it did, may
indeed have been motivated by a longing to restore, or incorporate, the good mother—or rather, her desire—particularly in the aftermath of the sadness, anxiety, and rage that the death of his grandchild may have aroused in him.

This interpretation raises a related question. What does the water from which the spirits emerge to perform and to which they return on the show’s conclusion, signify, if anything, in the context of mourning? Elsewhere, I have argued that immersion in seawater is a metonym of the birthing process (Lipset 1997:167f). In Yanda’s dream, the spirits travel through water, go ashore, turn into men, dress up, dance, and go back into the water, to return to their zoomorphic bodies. That is, the spirits who were reborn as men are reborn as spirits. They are subject to multiple births, and thus to the desire of the (m)other, which might account for the inexhaustible quality of their libidos.

In Yanda’s dream, we can now see that several kinds of symbolic castration—the loss of desire for desire—were answered. In the community, Woyon’s Mother signified that the grandchild remained accounted for, not only among the spirits, but the living. However, by turning this musical genre into regional folk theater, I would argue that Yanda was simultaneously recuperating the masculine symbolic, that is, the male cult’s ability to be desired in terms of the prestate cosmology. Partly for this reason, I suggest, Woyon’s Mother was judged beautiful. I say “partly” because the new show also responded to desires frustrated by the broader sociopolitical setting, namely, the ongoing postcolonial trauma (Eng and Kazanjian 2003). The songs that serenade Woyon’s Mother and two of its performance contexts make it plain that the show answered larger losses, together with local ones.

**Part 4: Theater against Modernity**

Although the lyrics seem to refer to the immediate circumstances in which Yanda created Woyon’s Mother, they do not narrate a plot that begins and ends. Nevertheless, I was given to understand that the following three songs are each named and sung in order during performances before giving way to anything else in the Woyon repertory. The first one is entitled *Gamairo*, Gamairo being the name of a hamlet in the Murik village of Wokomot. Here, a voice, likely that of Woyon’s Mother herself, possibly addresses Porer, Yanda’s deceased grandchild. If so, “she” is honoring the boy’s father, by drawing his attention to the name of this hamlet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ai, ai Gamairo</th>
<th>Ai, ai Gamairo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O’o a o abai awaro</td>
<td>O’o a o from there your father comes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ai yo oi</td>
<td>Ai yo oi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ai, abai awaro awaro</td>
<td>Ai, from there your father comes, from there</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why must the child’s spirit know his paternal origins? Because death, again, like waking life, is riven by desire. Among the living, divorce, adoption, and ceremonial exchange all give rise to a steady hum of custody disputes. No less death. Although the lyrics of Gamairo appear to
privilege an agnatic relationship, I must emphasize that they do so as a claim, and a desire, in the context of a cognatic, actor-centered social structure, rather than a patrilineal one (Lipset and Stritecky 1994). The voice confides to the grandson’s spirit: Gamairo is the name of the father, or at least the name of his hamlet of origin. “When you go there, that is, when you go to this spirit community, you will be recognized and accepted by the spirits of your father’s kin who will make space for you.” At death, the spirits of the relevant lineages contest custody of the new arrival. The lyrics of Gamairo express this lack that arises from a differential interplay of relationship, without a fixed, guarantor of a unilineal kin group.

The second song, called “Silau!,” or “Sail-ho!” in English, does not seem to bear any explicit narrative connection to the first. It does not develop the politics of death, but it does extol a fantasy of prestate visiting trade, as appeared in Yanda’s dream. A young man’s voice calls out on sighting a boatload of trading partners. This message to the community, nothing more than a word, is nevertheless a signifier of desire for the desire of an unobtainable object. The guests are not identified. They may be the spirits in Yanda’s dream traveling as birds, butterflies, and fish. They seem to be generic men and women. They may be the former having turned into the latter. They are said, however, to be approaching the shores of a village, and the prospect of their visit arouses both desire and the expectation of loss.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Silau-o! Silau-o!</th>
<th>Sail-ho! Sail-ho!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Samanga numbange ‘te’ara</td>
<td>They see us as they arrive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A ai Silau-o!</td>
<td>A ai Sail-ho!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silau-o! Silau-o! Silau-o! Silau!</td>
<td>Sail-ho! Sail-ho! Sail-ho! Sail-ho!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ipuro ipuro ipuro</td>
<td>Girlfriends and boyfriends come</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nononga nimbange twara c’ai-i-pro</td>
<td>They will think of us as they depart for home</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Like the first song, “Silau” recalls an ethos of desire for desire that displaces the gap in social relations that preoccupies it, the question of the moral identity posed by the arrival of the stranger. “They see us,” sing the hosts, “as they arrive.” Guests disembark, recognize their hereditary trading partners, and anticipate the bounty that they hope will accrue from their visit. They go to their hosts, call out names of ancestors, and present big sacks of garden produce to them, as well as other gifts in whose manufacture they specialize (e.g., clay pots, tobacco sheaths). In return, the Murik hosts are obliged to guarantee their safety, feed them bounteously, and keep them entertained until everything they have come for—the bags they have brought refilled with shellfish, smoked fish, imported lower Sepik sago starch, and Murik baskets—has been assembled. A few days, or a week, may pass, like a holiday for the guests. The night before their leavetaking, this lavish hospitality should culminate in a departure feast.

The gaze of trading partners, in other words, is expected to impose a burden of hard work for the hosts, their kin, which basically radiates out to the whole community. For youth, however, their gaze has a different implication. For youth, the subtext of this Maussian ethos is not the threat of mystical redress but desire for desire. Visiting trade they imagine as an
opportunity for trysts. Thus the excited call, “Silau-o, silau-o!” may as well be understood as a call to the phallus, a call to the signifier of desire. From their viewpoint, the lyric would mean, “They [young women] see us [male youth] as they arrive,” which translation is confirmed by the subsequent line. Visiting trade is here imagined to give rise to intimacy not just a circulation of goods. So a more literal translation of “Ipuro, ipuro, ipuro!” might then be “Sex! Sex! Sex!” (see Balme 2007). If so, the hosts’ expectations that the guests “will think of us” when they go also has double reference to attachment and loss. It refers to the shame the visitors are meant to feel on departing because of the extraordinary hospitality to which their hosts have treated them, a sentiment that will loom over them and motivate them to reciprocate in kind later on. But the line is bittersweet too. The transience of visiting trade becomes tinged with the impossibility of desire. This latter register is drawn out more personally in, “You Depart,” the last song of the trilogy.

Here, a young man’s voice imagines or recalls his rendezvous with a girl in the trading party. The space of their desire is left unmarked. Did they arrange to meet in the lakes, or in some secluded spot on the beach? Or, did the young man just venture over to meet the girl in the house where she was boarding, having returned from fishing on her behalf? He explains to her (adoptive, or fictive) “mother” that he is calling at her daughter’s request, which is to say, for honorable reasons, perhaps to bid her farewell. The ruefulness of the whole Woyon genre is given voice here, by the dejected feeling of abandonment in which the song ends. What begins in excited desire ends in a horizon of departure, a signifier of “alienation in signification.”

However ineffectively, another voice has implicitly imposed itself on this emptiness. In the second two songs, desire is given local inflection. Yet the era when laying out canoe-rollers signified that guests’ security was guaranteed by hosts is no longer. Protecting their safety has now become a function of the state (ideally, at least). Murik men persist as regional exporters of prestate valuables—woven baskets, shell ornaments, carvings, and the shows—in the context of visiting trade. For many, its reciprocities have become a nuisance, and an index of the degree of their failure to turn their fishery into a lucrative cash crop. It is a distraction, yet another castration. In reference to this context, a context that is integral, albeit implicitly, to the contemporary meanings of the Woyon songs, the elegiac image of a girlfriend’s departure is not only that of loss, of desire once fulfilled, but now lost. “She” may rehearse the archaic castration and entry into the symbolic. But “she” has also come to express ambivalence about the ethos that the song invokes, the ethos of canoe-rollers, the ethos in which Murik men had more phallic agency, were the subject of regional desire, and had more resources and reputation, than today. In this sense, the departing woman, stands
for Murik men’s abiding attachment to the worlds of gifts and commodities, both of which were, and go on being, elusive, eluding the phallus, as signifier, of course, but also as organ. This double sense of loss is not named in the lyrics. But it is audible in the contexts in which the show was performed. Woyon’s Mother becomes a defiant response, a weapon of the weak (Scott 1985) used against modern castrations.

Let me go back to the original scene of my return to the male cult house for evidence of this political interpretation of the new show. Why was the Woyon’s Mother mask not in storage? Why was it on a pole in the middle of the cult house? Why was it decorated in full regalia? Because the show had been staged just a few weeks earlier. It had been staged to celebrate the release of three village men from prison, after murder charges against them had been dropped for lack of evidence. In this setting, that is, Woyon’s Mother had been the male cult’s expression of moral vindication against the postcolonial state. It also expressed another, related attitude about modernity.

Despite the suspicions that some may hold about anthropology in the Pacific (Trask 1991), in Melanesia it cannot persuasively be argued that this discipline has represented the state’s sovereignty or interests, in any, but the most superficial senses. There is, however, a way in which fieldworkers and anthropology have stood, and continue to stand, in the thinking of globally marginalized, but thoroughly engaged, communities like Darapap for the equivocal charms of modernity (cf. Rodman 1991). All our attempts to appear as normative equals to the contrary, we remain privileged, not wholly other, or exotic, but still superior in the degree to which we are so modern, so effortlessly literate, mobile, and wealthy. Although adopted as kin, given names and therefore subject to moral claims, for example, to requests for remittances, we remain different, a difference that rubs local actors, men in particular, the wrong way, showing them up, entirely by example, as kanaka, or, now, as grassroots, that is, as lower class, inferior and backward (see also Gewertz and Errington 1999).

The day before my leavetaking, a small, departure feast was held for me in the male cult house. The meal was to feature the brief demonstration of Woyon’s Mother that my kin had pledged to perform on my arrival. I was feted, not as a departing American, much less a departing anthropologist, but as a “son of the village” (nemot goan). Nevertheless, the event was instrumental. These kinds of gatherings, as I mentioned above, are part of a strategy of attachment. The guest of honor is meant to be endowed with a sense of well-being that will motivate him “to worry” about those left behind, and generously fulfill obligations incurred in the future. The departure feast was a desire for desire, a claim on me, in other words, as someone with modern resources, that I “not forget” my hosts and be sure to desire their approval, and repay them, at a later date. If one performance of the new show celebrated the male cult’s triumph over the state, in this context, Woyon’s Mother sought to domesticate me, a sign of modernity. That is, it was a gift, an icon of attachment and indebtedness. In these performances, the male cult asserted, “his” phallus was potent, despite its encounter with the signifier (e.g., the state).
Some plates of food were brought into the cult house. Clusters of men gathered about each of them to eat. Speeches followed crediting my adoptive status in particular families in the community . . . A young man then donned the Woyon Mother’s costume. From the waist down, “she” was covered by thick, hot pink, raffia skirts. The wooden mask, with its brown torso and perky breasts were exposed without Christian shame. A headdress, decorated with feathers and the butterfly and the fish motifs, set on top of it. “She” danced, flanked by my sister’s sons. The two young men were also decorated with teeth and shell ornaments, as well as the headdresses made up of the Woyon’s Mother motifs, one with a butterfly and a bird image and the other with the figure of a butterfly and a fish. At first, senior men serenaded the three inside the hall. Subsequently, the junior men took their turn to sing the Woyon songs. The show was then taken outside, so women, who kept their distance, could see it. [field notes, August 25, 1993; see Figures 4–5]

This performance dramatized an enduring, resplendent form of masculinity, which bristled with desire for desire. When I asked the two dancers why they clenched nautilus shell

Figure 4. Woyon’s Mother being prepared to perform outside the male cult house. Credit: D. Lipset, 2001.
mouthpieces between their teeth, one of them answered that it was a way not to smile. Being endowed with love magic, they believed that the enchanted glamour of their look so charmed the female gaze that it was hard not to respond (cf. Mulvey 1975). In a state of being desired, they occupied a single-sexed state of canoe-embodiment. They were virile, or at least expected to be. Of course, in another sense, the double entendre of a man disguised as Woyon’s Mother with a phallus hidden beneath her extravagant skirts, and her two sons trailing behind her, could hardly fail to recall nggariik, a kind of pantomime of symbolic birthing that upriver Sepik men perform for sisters’ sons during the culmination of naven rites. Initially reported in the 1930s, it was analyzed in terms of local processes and gender categories (Bateson 1956; cf. Silverman 1999; see also Lipset 2008; Lipset and Silverman 2005). Here, I would only restate my point that some 60 years on, Woyon’s Mother did not just denote local desire, it was a denationalizing gesture, a figure of home, cultural patrimony, gender that defied modernity (cf. Foster 2002:16–17). “She” was a figure right out of the prelapsarian, Lacanian imaginary, when the phallus, sans father, was still possessed by maternal desire, and not yet castrated. Woyon’s Mother was a spectacular revival of the fancy that the cultic phallus could create women’s desire, rather than vice versa. It was a spectacle, in other words, of Pygmalion’s desire.

**Part 5: The Cultic Phallus in the Postcolonial Moment**

The state’s crusade to extinguish Pygmalion’s desire is and has been a nightmare of castration for the male cult. In the precapitalist economy, Murik men funded ceremonial exchange through a loosely organized system of overseas trade. They relied on intermoiety rivalry to derive the magical agency on which all successful action was thought to
depend. Under the weight of modernity, the requisite taboos have been abandoned, and the most significant cultic transaction, the provision of sexual intercourse to senior patrons by the wives of the junior ranks, has come to an end. In the region, meanwhile, the decline of ceremonial exchange has reduced the importance of overseas trade, and then, in the 1990s, the substitution of store-bought fiberglass dinghies for outrigger canoes, formerly manufactured by the male cult, cut men off from their great, floating signifiers.

The men of Darapap village have answered this castration in two ways. On the one hand, they have replied with a commitment to its universalisms, through adopting Tokpisin (and English), as well as by teaching their children these national languages at the expense of the Murik vernacular, and, of course, by sending them to school. They have started business groups. They hold endless micromarkets. They worship in the SDA church. Youth go to town to find work. They value wristwatches and other signs of rationality. On the other hand, they have answered modernity in terms that recuperate the cultic phallus. If I were to compile a list of the latter sort of ritual actions, objects, and relationships that have been created in the past decades, such as the revival of customary modes of social control (Lipset 1997), the invention of new folk theatricals, or the introduction of new metaphors in the rhetoric of joking relations (Lipset 2004), two types of masculine creativity would come into view. In the one, new instances of old types of masculine agency and expressive genres were created, or recreated. In the other, men incorporated state-based institutions into locally constituted forms of cultural discourse. My point is simply that, either way, Yanda’s new piece of folk opera was no anomaly. It was not an answer to a specific change that was taking place in the wider postcolonial scene. It was part of an intermittent, but persistent, answer to modernity that has been ongoing for at least the past 25 years, if not much longer. Rather than a mournful, or a melancholic, phallus (Freud 1960), this answer consists of new, or renewed, signs of desire. That is, the new show was part of an ongoing gesture by the male cult, a gesture in festive defiance of modernity.

Woyon’s Mother, sung in the vernacular, danced by young men adorned in prestate valuables, resisted the authoritative, universalizing voices of the state. What is more, the implicit relationship of Yanda’s creativity to the state might be likened to a kind of weak legal pluralism (Griffiths 1986). His dream took place in unofficial space (see Lattas 1993). The territory, the dreamscape in which the spirits staged their show, was within yet without the state. His ancestor-spirits were not citizen-subjects of the Eurocentric postcolony. They neither vote nor pay taxes. The state does not guarantee their equality or security. Yet the spirits were context generative (Appadurai 1995:64). Their spectacular agency subverted one of the crucial projects of the state, which is to standardize the moral action of its citizenry and gain their consent to govern. If the creativity of the spirits and Yanda, their voice in the community, did not explicitly repudiate or at least impugn this project, it was surely athwart it in several ways, all of which concealed in a single image. The dream performance of the new show was not offered through the market, on a pay-per-view basis; it was a gift the spirits made to Yanda, their kinsman.
As theater of resiliency, Woyon’s Mother portrayed the Murik male cult as indestructible and entertaining phallus. The new piece, as well as the rest of the folk theater genre, particularly when performed for and exported to intertribal trading partners, celebrated prestate language, prestate masculinity, as well as the icons of prestate desire, shell, and teeth valuables. Its fantasy of a beautiful mother and her sons was thus, in formal terms, comedy. The heroine survives and escapes impossible obstacles without the slightest scratch, much less pain. But Woyon’s Mother must be simultaneously understood as tragedy, as theater in which the work of detachment is being done. Yanda’s mourning frames it in the anxieties to which Murik people feel prone during this liminal phase of life: the problematic exit of the spirit-self from the symbolic order of living kin and entry into the symbolic order of the ancestors. In a broader sense, perhaps, Woyon’s Mother was simultaneously an elegiac commemoration of the passing of the male cult.

Thus the show was performed as half-fiction–half-reality. In 1993, it was performed “as if” its masculinity was autonomous, or independent of, the state, at the same time that this could never again be the case. Of course, the ambiguity of “as if-ness” evokes our concept of spectatorship of Western art, Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief,” in which the boundaries of the self are loosened to appreciate the aesthetic object. And having to manage such a split is symptomatic of the enveloping modernist subjectivity with which Murik theater must also contend. But another, related metaphor of spectatorship entailed by the performances of Woyon’s Mother also comes to mind. The show is a reflexive distortion, a reflection in a Lacanian mirror. It offers a gratifying fiction of an integrated self-image that audiences sympathetic to the male cult may embrace and identify with. But Woyon’s Mother may as well be seen as a second reflection, a modern one. In this distortion, audiences misconstrue the show as a tragic trace of an archaic, irrational, increasingly irrelevant

Figure 6. The Woyon’s Mother masks hung in the male cult house in 2001 along with props from other shows. Credit: D. Lipset, 2001.
masculinity. The combination of these two disjunctive reflections comprise a tragicomic masculinity.

Disgusted at the shamelessness of women, Ovid has Pygmalion sculpt a beautiful woman, as if to allegorize the very impossibility of male desire. Pygmalion substitutes his art for feminine absence by turning this lack into a figure whose presence filled his heart and gaze. Like Pygmalion, Woyon’s Mother also makes a statement about the impossibility of male desire. Both answer castration, although of different kinds. Like Pygmalion, Yanda and the male cult in Darapap created an illusory object of desire, maternal completeness, and aesthetic continuity. As such, Woyon’s Mother was an act of masculine denial. Not a recuperation, of course, or even a deferral, but a desire nevertheless, a persistent longing for the lost desire of the feminine other. The allure of Woyon’s Mother in the Sepik during the early 1990s seems to have reflected the great moment of this desire amid a turbulent, troubled present. The dialogics of rural men and postcolonial modernity being unfinalized, one cannot know the extent to which Woyon’s Mother was nothing more than a crepuscular dream. As recently as 2001, however, I did take note of two of “her” distinctive torso masks hanging from the rafters in the male cult house in Darapap, along with props from older shows (see Figure 6). Pygmalion’s creativity, the masculine dream of creating feminine desire, evidently continued to have appeal for “him.”

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Notes

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1. For example, “Aimaru,” which is a widely traded show that features two fish set on poles, as well as masks of their parents, dancing through and about rows of festooned dancers, is said to have originated near Aitape, prior to World War I. The story of this show was recounted to me in 1982 by Marabo Game. “A Tumleo Islander had a dream. A kidnapped spirit, imprisoned in a cave, showed him the four effigies and taught him the music. Some years later [during the 1920s], the show reached the Murik Lakes as a gift from this man’s sons to the children of their sister who had married a Murik man whom she had met while he was employed at the Catholic Mission in Tumleo. The couple later moved to lived in the Murik Lakes. Aimaru was performed for the first time during the interwar period, after which the family traded it elsewhere the Sepik region.”

2. The songs inevitably tell of the landscape. By contrast to Biangai songs (see Halvaskz 2003), the landscape in Woyon songs are background to the elegiac recounting of specific incidents, and sentiments provoked by, the lost other.

3. Terminalia catappa, a common tree in PNG, grows on foreshores and similar wetland environs and bears edible fruit.

4. See Rosaldo 1984, not for its contrary Ilongot construction of mourning, but as an example of the point that creativity may recuperate loss, in this case of the author’s wife, M. Rosaldo.

5. Wokumot in turn is one of three communities that make up the village of “Big Murik.”
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