In Vanuatu, addressing his newly independent nation, former Prime Minister Walter Lini urged that God and custom must be the sail and the steering paddle of our canoe.

—Lamont Lindstrom and Geoffrey M. White, Cultural Policy: An Introduction

Our epigraph indicates that contemporary Pacific Island peoples make metaphoric use of canoes, but this is an old phenomenon. Maori tribes were loosely confederated into groups they called “canoes” and named for the vessels on which their mythical ancestors were said to have migrated to New Zealand (Firth 1929:115–116; see also 90). Yapese spoke of marriageable women as “navigators of canoes” in search of ranking men, the immobile “mooring posts” to which they might tie themselves (Labby 1976:16). In this article we develop issues implicit in the metaphoric use of canoe imagery. We take up the general view that material culture gives rise not only to metaphor, or even to polysemy, but also to a contrapuntal dialogue between men and women about agency in the reproduction of society. To apply this perspective, we analyze gender imagery in premodern outrigger canoes of the Murik, a people living in the estuary of the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea.

We begin by situating our view of dialogue expressed through material culture in relation to three sources: the Sepik River ethnography of Gregory Bateson (1958[1936]), symbolic anthropology in Melanesia (Forge 1962; Munn 1977, 1986; Wagner 1986), and the dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). First we discuss the role of outrigger canoes in the Murik ceremonial economy as the means by which Murik society reproduces itself. Second, we go on to trace the relationship between male and female views of five phases of the vessel’s construction rites. In each phase, Lipset focuses on how, for men, canoe building was understood through metaphors of initiation as jural citizen and cultic warrior. Barlow argues that, for women, canoe production was framed in metaphors of physiological reproduction and nurture, as well as in terms of the seductive powers conferred upon female-cult initiates. Subsequently, in a joint exegesis of canoe iconography, we analyze how combined images convey crucial social dilemmas that are animated by voyaging and trade. In conclusion, we propose that the dialogicality of Murik outrigger canoes introduces a new refinement to the semiotic analysis of artifacts and we direct

We interpret material culture using a Bakhtinian model of dialogicality. Metaphoric differences in male and female perspectives of the building rites and iconography of premodern Murik outrigger canoes are adduced. Men view the vehicle in terms of initiation and their war cult while women view it in physiological images of pregnancy, birth, and nurture, as well as in terms of the seductive powers conferred upon female-cult initiates. We take these two points of view to constitute a contrapuntal dialogue about gender and agency in the reproduction of Murik society. [male and female discourse, art and material culture, dialogism, Bakhtin, Melanesia/Sepik, social reproduction, canoes]
our readers' attention not merely to the multiple authorship” (MacKenzie 1991:192) of such artifacts, but also to interrelationships between, in this case, male and female meanings.

the Sepik, symbolic anthropology, and dialogism

Emphasis on the multivocality of male and female in processes of social reproduction is not without precedent in Melanesian anthropology. Much of Bateson's classic functionalist account of ritual among the latmul people of the middle Sepik is devoted to the different emotional dispositions (ethos) of men and women (1958[1936]:123–217). "The most important generalization which can be drawn from the study of latmul ethos is that . . . each sex has its own consistent ethos which contrasts with that of the opposite sex” (Bateson 1958[1936]:198). Latmul men were harsh, spectacular, and proud, but emotionally repressed, while the women were private, quiet, cooperative, and, in certain contexts (e.g., when they grieved), more emotionally expressive. To Bateson these differences underlay complicated transformations of gender identity that took place during rituals of reproduction. Our concern with the different voices of men and women in another Sepik River society follows upon his observations.1 We did not find among the Murik, however, the same gender differentiation that Bateson found among the latmul. In Murik the relationship between the male and the female ethos is one of complementarity and equivocality rather than of differentiation and opposition. Similarly we found differing institutions in each society. In Murik the ritual reproduction of society serves to recruit firstborn children into cognatic descent groups, while among the latmul, membership in patrilineal descent groups is strictly ascribed. And in Murik, big, seagoing outrigger canoes, rather than river canoes and hunting, are the principal means through which the ceremonial economy is funded.

Since Bateson, several theoretical and ethnographic projects have refined analyses of gender and rituals of reproduction in Melanesia by focusing attention on the dynamic role of objects in these processes. Elsewhere in the Sepik, Forge (1962) linked the magical agency of paint applied by Abelam bigmen in ritual contexts to the distinctiveness and agency of men. In subsequent studies of Massim cultures two scholars extended Forge's point: Munn (1977, 1983, 1986) examined how the construction and exchange of outrigger canoes and other valuables by the men of Gawa Island reproduced the identities of individuals and community by affording them control over space and time, while Annette Weiner (1976, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1983) argued that in various ways the exchange of yams, banana leaf bundles, and skirts dynamically constituted the reproduction of Trobriand society as a whole and of gender categories in particular. In the Highlands, Wagner (1986) interpreted the meaning of Daribi mortuary exchanges through paradoxical metaphors of human and bird reproduction. Interwoven, these metaphors reverse themselves—as figure to ground—expanding into ever larger frames of reference. And finally, in a powerful critique of unexamined Western assumptions about gender in Highlands ethnography, Marilyn Strathern (1988) exposed how concepts of unitary biology, property ownership, and the bounded individual violated local understanding of the reproduction of society. According to Strathern, both persons and objects are construed as microcosms of relations that consist of both male and female qualities. Composed of a set of same-sex and cross-sex relationships “made manifest in objects” (1988:121), sex differences turn on interaction, not on attributes. Thus defining the gender of persons and objects as either male or female is but a momentary accomplishment that reduces their otherwise composite nature to context-bound “unitary and singular entities” (1988:121).

Taken together, the findings and approaches espoused by Forge, Munn, Weiner, Wagner, Strathern, and others (e.g., Battaglia 1983) have emphasized the agency that Melanesians bring to the construction of plural, potentially contradictory metaphors of social reproduction through material objects. We have not found among these analyses, however, an apt conceptualization
of those gendered voices that must accompany these processes in relationship to each other. We have therefore turned to a quite different methodology in order to understand multivocality: the dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin.

For Bakhtin, culture consists of interactive sequences of discourse that he calls “dialogue.” His view of dialogue is distinctive in that none of the constituent voices engaged in it are subordinate to any canonical or subversive ideology. Dialogue is never finalized. Multiple, equally authoritative voices constitute a deeply ambivalent whole. Bakhtin’s concept of culture is a rupture-prone, paradoxical environment, which does not give rise to utopia, chaos, or even the renewal of flawed order.

None of the . . . contradictions and bifurcations ever become . . . set in motion along a temporal path or in an evolving sequence; they are, rather, spread out in one plane, as standing alongside or opposite one another, as . . . an eternal harmony of unmerged voices or as . . . unceasing and irreconcilable quarrel. [Bakhtin 1984:30]

Dialogues in culture are not necessarily subject to dialectical change, according to which order and conflict lead to new, totalizing syntheses. The disjunctive relationship of dialogue to any cultural totality may remain open to the “double-faced fullness of life” (Bakhtin 1984:62; see also 1981).

The dialogue between Murik men and women about premodern outrigger canoes possessed just this unresolved quality by virtue of its being encoded in performative and graphic genres as well as verbal ones. The exegesis of problems in the poetics of these vehicles is therefore somewhat more refractory than that of, say, a Dostoevsky novel, because performative and graphic meanings must be translated into language before they can be interpreted. A new canoe, intricately decorated with many condensed images, “spoke” of multiple kinds of experience to many people in different ways. As a graphic vehicle of plural meanings, the imagery of a canoe possessed a simultaneity before which both the metaphor of dialogue and the sequential requirements of written analysis must pale (see also Forge 1973). In a strictly linguistic sense, the canoe was no vehicle of dialogue; to a certain extent its enormous referential power and consequent multivocality remained, like MacLeish’s view of poetry,

... palpable and mute
As a globed fruit
Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb.
[1985(1926):106–107]

methodology and sources

An important resource for the dialogic approach to material culture that we advocate has been our own ongoing argument about the meaning of Murik institutions, an argument that derives from our respective research experiences in the different, but related, cultural realms of men and women. Men who were actively engaged in canoe construction, trade, and the organization of rituals in several communities instructed Lipset about canoes. Barlow, meanwhile, had to attend to sporadic comments and explanations about canoes, voyaging, and trade from women who were engaged at the same time in the many kinds of work that supported canoe construction: childcare, cooking, household maintenance, seafood production, and basket weaving. In coming to terms with these voices, we have repeatedly had to reconcile our disparate understandings, not as opposed male-versus-female viewpoints, but as complementary male-and-female rejoinders. By acknowledging the relatedness of our perspectives we were able to recognize the applicability of Bakhtin’s dialogical framework to our exegesis of what
Murik outrigger canoes might mean and in what way both the Murik and we created those meanings.

Motorized during the early 1970s, the premodern outrigger canoe (as documented between 1910-53) no longer exists (see Figure 1). Our intention is to analyze the ritual process by which these vessels were built and consecrated and to interpret the repertoire of the iconography with which they were adorned. We have had to supplement firsthand knowledge of contemporary outriggers with remembered accounts by older informants and archival resources, and have therefore had to grapple with the problem of the ethnographic present. Combining contemporary and archival sources to analyze a much-changed cultural symbol has meant that the vessel we discuss is a kind of historical ideal type rather than specific canoes. We carefully distinguish among interpretations extrapolated from our own observations, those expressly held by Murik informants and expressed in interviews, and those based on our other, older sources. We tend to use the past tense for historical sources and informants' recollections of their own experiences with sailing outriggers. We limit our use of the present tense to observed and directly reported commentaries and significant continuities. Although the Murik no longer build sailing outriggers, motorized outrigger canoes remain metaphorically salient in the culture. Our analysis is thus one episode in an ongoing dialogue with the Murik about the past and present meanings embodied by these vessels.

Figure 1. A premodern sailing outrigger in the Murik Lakes. Photo by René Gardi, 1953. Used by permission of Museum der Kulturen Basel, Switzerland.
outrigger canoes and the metaphor of reproduction

As the most active fishing and seafaring group in the North Coast region between the Sepik River and Aitape (see Figure 2), the Murik are quite clearly a “canoe people.” Situated in five communities along the coast directly west of the mouth of the Sepik River, they maintain exclusive fishing rights to approximately 350 square kilometers of mangrove forests and brackish lagoons, an immensely rich marine ecosystem. They live in communities on the narrow sandbanks that separate this large estuary system from the sea and their houses (on stilts) stand along the beach facing seaward or on the tide-flats facing the lakes. Storms and the shifting coastline sometimes destroy all or part of these beachfront sites. Only one village abuts a significant plot of arable land; the other villages manage limited coconut groves, sago stands, and small gardens. The precapitalist Murik adaptation was distinguished by its total reliance on fishing and trade via canoe with inland, coastal, and island trading partners for sago, pigs, garden produce, and other material goods. Today, in an era of petty capitalism, the Murik continue to specialize in the harvest of mangrove products (e.g., fish, shellfish, reeds, and shells) and the manufacture of plaited baskets and ornaments. Regionally, they continue to play the role of cultural impresarios who export ritual, art, and dance (Barlow 1985a; Hogbin 1935; Lipset 1985; Lipset and Barlow 1987; Mead 1938; Tiesler 1969/1970). Canoes, of which the Murik build three kinds, remain essential for fishing, trade, and travel to market and between villages.

In precapitalist times (before 1920–40), the moral compass of regional relationships turned on various types of gift exchanges among hereditary trading partners who classed each other as fictive kin. But regional ties were also riven by sporadic warfare among male cults. Murik men, personifying war spirits, fought with inland neighbors but never with overseas trading partners. Since the early 1950s the market in the provincial capital, some six to eight hours away by motorized canoe, has come to preoccupy the thinking of the great majority of villagers, but certain kinds of goods continue to be primarily or exclusively obtained through hereditary exchange partnerships. Today—as in the era before 1920—the likelihood that intertribal space
might be threatened by magico-religious violence continues to inform the thinking of Murik men about the vessels and relationships that occur there. Women, as we will soon explain, were and remain less compelled by this assumption.

Murik outrigger canoes play a crucial role in the enactment of an aesthetic metaphor of social reproduction. In the Murik ceremonial economy, male and female elders representing rival descent groups compete to confer individually named ornamental insignia, generically called sumon, on children (see Lipset 1990).6 Villages consist of multiple, politically equal, sumon-holding groups (poang), each of which is composed of related sibling groups. These sibling groups are genealogically ranked according to the relative ages of common ancestors. Ideally, the local segment of a descent group is led by the firstborn member of its most senior sibling group, the man or woman who bears its insignia. Claims to membership in poang are reckoned cognatically and therefore overlap: their extremely ambiguous boundaries give rise to custody disputes among insignia bearers, who compete to recruit children into their descent groups by publicly bestowing sumon ornaments upon them during rites of passage. These displays are validated by elaborate presentations of food given to representatives from the men's and women's spirit cults, who serve as ritual guardians during these sacred times.

Although elders of both sexes hold and deploy the regalia and own outrigger canoes, only male insignia holders, with the assistance of the men's cult, build the vehicles. As on Gawa Island in the Massim (Munn 1977, 1986), Murik outrigger canoes permitted men to extend their identities in space and time. Unlike their Gawa counterparts, however, Murik canoes were seldom traded (cf. Tiesler 1969/1970). Their value to senior individuals was as vehicles, not as gifts, which is one reason these vessels are also known as “paths” or “routes” (yakabor). From one point of view, outrigger canoes enabled a claim that the aesthetic reproduction of children as jural citizens was the result and the prerogative, not of the women who bore them, but of a gerontocracy of both men and women, for whom the initial purpose of the vessels was to provision ceremonial exchanges. From another, more narrowly male point of view, outrigger canoes were masculine vehicles, whose contribution to regeneration could be said to be the exclusive responsibility and outcome of the male war cult.

Women's views of outrigger canoe manufacture largely arise from their position that society primarily depends upon them. While acknowledging the import of descent group regalia and the male cult, from women's perspectives the reproduction of society ultimately results from pregnancy, birth, acts of maternal nurture, and feminine industry. Women bear children, gather food, cook, and feed kin in the community. They fish, plait baskets, and process shells for both subsistence and trade. From their standpoint, all male enterprises are supported by their work, a point that men not only accept but state as a general principle.10 This principle is clearly exemplified by the role of women in canoe production. Although they did not—and do not—build the vessels, and although they rarely accompanied the men on overseas expeditions, women have generally seen the finished canoe and imported goods as products of their own labor. To them the canoe rites did not allude solely to the male cult or the attribution of ceremonial status, but to birth, nurture, and important dilemmas in social relations: the simultaneous separateness and unity of men and women and of parents and children.

The phases of the canoe construction process—cutting the log, assembling the vessel, launching the canoe, taking it out for a trial run, and, last, returning to the log giver—were seen differently by men and women. We shall present men's views first only because men, not women, began each phase of the actual construction process. But the vessel's meanings presented themselves simultaneously and polyphonically, not sequentially. In this sense, material culture does not resemble either a text (contra Geertz 1973) or a dialogue. We remain aware that distortions result from granting sequential priority to one perspective over the other. Moreover, prioritizing one perspective violates the Murik view that the respective contributions of both men and women to the canoe are vital. Although the war-cult view privileges men, the
pervasive feminine metaphor of reproduction affords women a more originary role. Certainly, the major images defining their perspectives support both phallocentric and gynocentric slants on canoe construction. What is more, seduction, nurture, and parenting are not unique to either gender but are enacted by both men and women, albeit in different contexts and modalities (see Barlow 1995). The construction process thus constituted and gave expression to a complex interweaving of double-voiced metaphors and analogies.

importing and cutting the log

The canoe builder was compelled to propitiate trading partners, spirits, and workers through magic in order to oblige them to do his bidding. Logs were (and remain) gifts that supplemented an ongoing exchange of seafood for sago and other garden produce. Whether the trading partner had his own people cut down the tree or Murik men did the job themselves, both groups became morally obliged to do the work by receiving an enchanted meal prepared by the kinswomen of the canoe owner and secretly bespelled by him to assure the workers’ compliance.

Several ritual operations upon the log metamorphosed it into a distinctively male “body.” First, the gender of the log had to be changed. If donated by Lower Sepik trading partners, the log was a gift from men called “trade mothers” (asamot ngain). When Murik men cut down the log themselves, they started a process that transformed it from a being associated with a feminine, maternal body into a male initiate who would be invulnerable while doing battle with “his” adversary, the sea. For women, as we shall see below, the very same process evoked associations with conception, pregnancy, and birth.

The canoe-builder’s first acts dramatized the metamorphosis of the log as a shift away from a maternal body. He decorated the tree with a “skirt” of sago fringe adorned with sago bread and betel nuts that the laborers cut off and then ate while they worked. This image accorded with the Murik adage that a good mother should always keep many things hanging from her skirts for her children to eat. It also identified the log with its donor, the landed “trade-mother.” The log was fashioned into a canoe hull in a process separating both it and the workers from young women’s fertility. As a finished canoe, however, the log would once again possess a maternal quality as a provider of food and other trade goods.

Canoe manufacture, like male initiation, was thought to be jeopardized by female sexuality. While the men worked, intercourse with women was forbidden because the “odor” of sexual fluids was considered to attract maggot spirits (son menumb) capable of damaging the log. The man who was selected to make the first cut in the tree, like the other workers, had to be chaste, lest the tree split. (The husband of a pregnant woman is believed to endanger her unborn child if he is unfaithful. Similarly the fate of a new canoe could be sabotaged by a man having intercourse with a woman the night before he went to help to cut down the tree.) The woodsprite in the log, in some accounts a sexually aggressive woman, was then ordered by the canoe owner to vacate “her house” just before the tree was cut down (cf. Malinowski 1961[1922]:127; Munn 1977:41). For women, who saw canoe production in terms of pregnancy and birth, we infer that the banishment of the woodsprite may have resembled the departure of the placenta spirit (nabwag ngain), which is said “to fly away” when the human mother takes over the care of her newborn.

After the men pulled the log down from the forest, they were sometimes ritually attacked by village women armed with clamshells: the men, in other words, had to take the log by force from the women. On the one hand, clamshells are a Murik euphemism for female genitalia, suggesting that the village women, as personified woodsprites, sought the men for having stolen their “child.” On the other hand, this scene is reminiscent of the way in which representatives of the men’s cult begin the initiation process by dragging youths one by one from their mothers’ houses while women try to fight the marauders.
Murik women acknowledged that canoe construction began with a sexualized encounter. They also knew that their men would be fed a conciliatory meal and then perhaps be presented with small gifts by the same women who had fought them. Sexual liaisons are assumed to be a real possibility on such occasions and are even celebrated in both the male and female cults. Whether or not sexual intercourse or "conception" actually took place, this sequence of events is full of erotic connotations from both women’s and men’s respective points of view. Murik women do recognize the relationship between intercourse and conception; early accounts suggest that they have long done so. When they talked about getting the canoe log, they emphasized the highly eroticized (and therefore potentially procreative) aspects of the visit. Indeed, we infer that the chastity expected of the carpenters the night before the felling of the log and while it was being carved out in the canoe shed was analogous to the chastity expected of husbands during pregnancy and birth in order to protect the fetus. Conversely, infidelity was and is understood to sabotage both reproductive processes, the success of the canoe carving and the birth of a healthy baby. Whether or not these associations were articulated—and we have tried to differentiate those expressed by Murik from those inferred by us—cutting the log clearly elicited double-voiced associations—with physiological reproduction and male-cult initiation alike.

The men worked in a canoe shed, where they continued to separate and protect the purity of their collective "body" from women (see Figure 3). The men might work naked in the shed, an exclusively male space. Both the men and the hull were influenced by the male-cult spirits, who, in this context, recoiled from intercourse. As a senior man said, "the canoe hull will break if a man touches it when he has been with a woman." Rather than overtly worrying about the scorching effects of the sun on a green log, informants told Lipset that they feared the log would...
"split open like a woman's genitals" from contact with son manumb, the spirits attracted by feminine sexual fluids, the presence of which is evidenced by maggots. The fluids to which the actual maggots are attracted is in fact the oozing sap of trees. This sap was formerly used to endow male and female novices with love magic during a now defunct phase of initiation. Figuratively, however, people claim that the feminine fluids may have come from the sexually aggressive woodsprite.

The construction of the canoe came under the joint aegis of a senior group of siblings and the male cult (see Figure 4). Through the cult the men appeared to contribute to the ceremonial reproduction of society in a manner that partially distinguished them from childbearing women. Many images of masculine generational continuity and patrilinial duty were associated with the canoe construction process. There is a sense in which the outrigger canoe and its owner were considered to be a "son" and "father." At one point during the consecration rite, the canoe owner used to insert the jawbone of his deceased father into his armband in order to bespell the canoe and make it swift. Senior carvers at work in the canoe shed were attended by their sons, nephews, or grandsons throughout the workday. As young women brought food to a new mother still quarantined in the birthhouse, the youths appeared bearing gifts of coconuts and betel nuts and, at day's end, brought a meal cooked by the senior kinswomen of the vessel's owners.

Men also viewed the initiation of the canoe—the transformation of a feminine log into a male warrior—in terms of an alimentary metaphor rather than as an idiom of birthing. Once the log reached a Murik village it was said to be "fed" to the male cult spirit who "ate" it. The canoe owner would meanwhile feed the cult spirit on a daily basis while "the spirit" worked away at hollowing out the log and shaping the hull. When the hull was completed, it was "cooked by the male-cult spirit"—that is, it was dragged from the shed and charred black with burning torches. Then a large pig feast was prepared to honor the workers. Other canoe spirits (as figurines) and the ghosts of the canoe owner's parents (manifest in wooden masks) received cigars and betel nuts as a way of obliging them to protect the canoe. These gifts were consumed...
by the members of the male cult, who were again fed on separate occasions—for lashing the 
float, for attaching the sideboards, for building the platform, and for sewing the sail. Finally, the 
men of the cult were fed a great banquet during the launching rite in order to oblige them to 
decorate the canoe, step the mast, and honor the spirit of the canoe with a dance performance. 
The male-cult members would then shove the canoe into the sea for the first time. In so doing, 
they pushed the vessel over a small clay pot previously used to cook food for them and filled 
with their spittle (stained red from chewing betel nut). The pot would burst open: the male-cult 
spirits, having "eaten" and "cooked" the log, then "spat it out" as a newly consecrated canoe. 
Men also still use this alimentary imagery to describe the metamorphosis of youth into male-cult 
initiates.

Women’s views of outrigger canoe construction were informed by images of nurture, 
guardianship, pregnancy, and birth. In Murik culture these capacities, classed as maternal, are 
evident in the women’s role; they are contrasted with men’s work in the canoe shed, the outpost 
of the male-cult house. After the log was cut and brought back to the Murik village to be carved, 
women supported the manufacture or “gestation” of the new outrigger by cooking for the 
workers (Barlow 1985a). They commented on the male workshop, saying that the men there 
“work naked, like children.” Their phrasing alluded to jural minority, vulnerability, inability to 
provide for oneself and—notably—dependency on the nurture of a maternal figure, instead of 
representing the workshop as an exclusively male space.

Women assumed a strong analogy between gestation and this phase of canoe manufacture. 
With the exception that women continued to do the cooking, the expected roles of husband 
and wife were now reversed. During his wife’s pregnancy, a husband’s duty was to supply her 
with wholesome, fresh, varied, and abundant food in order to ensure a robust and well-formed 
child. A mother-to-be, meanwhile, remained in at least semi-seclusion in or near the home of 
her husband or parents and was relieved of mundane work (Barlow 1985b). Similarly, men 
were relieved from such everyday duties as fishing and house repair and had to remain chaste 
as they spent their days carving the hull inside the canoe shed. Women obtained, prepared, 
and sent food to the workers via their sons. Just as a father maintained his kin group’s claim on 
a newborn by feeding its mother, so the women maintained their rights in the canoe by feeding 
the workers.

The simultaneous expression of multiple metaphors of reproduction reached its greatest 
complexity in the launching rite (gai’gar). The jural identity and prestige of the outrigger were 
declared, as in initiation, by the sumon ornaments with which it was decorated. Only the 
firstborn received a full complement of his or her group’s ornaments and was allowed to carry 
the sumon basket (see Lipset 1990). Outrigger canoes, like siblings, were similarly differentiated. 
The more prestigious ones, the construction rights to which were exclusively held by the most 
senior ceremonial leaders in the descent group, were called “insignia canoes” (sumon gai’iin) 
or “elder sibling canoes” (tata gai’iin). The construction rights to lesser canoes, meanwhile, 
belonged to junior kin. For all rituals in which sumon regalia are conferred, but in particular for 
initiation, elders convene from throughout the Lower Sepik to witness and affirm the legitimacy 
of the insignia bearer whose emblems were being transacted. Similarly, they were invited to the 
launching rites of the higher-ranked vessels. While they danced and sang with great fanfare, 
the mast was stepped and insignia, made of cassowary, hornbill, and other kinds of feathers, 
were placed atop it (see Figure 5). The ceremonial display of insignia determined and signified 
the reproduction of these groups. Consequently, children were never far away during the 
launching rite. The day before the canoe’s trial run, beautifully decorated young boys between 
the ages of 6 and 20 climbed onto the vessel, packing as many of themselves aboard as possible.
The younger ones held branches of flowers while older ones carried lances decorated with cassowary feathers. These emblems belonged to the two junior age-grades in the male cult, its warriors. Senior men and women sat nearby, beating handdrums as they sang the canoe’s spell songs while the youngsters made rowing motions with their paraphernalia (Schmidt 1923/24).

During the launching rite, the new canoe was anointed with substances that were thought capable of transforming it from an inert, man-made object into a cosmic agent of productivity on behalf of the descent group and, ultimately, of the community. In two successive phases,
boys and girls rubbed incised designs on the canoe hull with a white lime paint and, together with women, painted it with rough graffiti (see Figure 6). The prows of new outrigger canoes were also daubed red, like initiates whose bodies were formerly decorated with three hues of red (each of which conferred agency on them). One was a mixture of red ochre and coconut oil and was meant to enhance sexual attractiveness. A second was the blood of purification expelled from the penis by urethral insertion. During cult initiation, novices learned to cleanse their bodies of female sexual fluids before engaging in any important extracommunal endeavor, whether battle, overseas trade, or, today, sports competitions, and this blood was then smeared over their bodies.

A third hue of red was the blood of human sacrifice. We know little about this aspect of male-cult initiation or outrigger canoe launching, and what we can interpret is speculative. At one phase of a launching rite, which Father Schmidt watched in 1920, however, a dog was killed by a male-cult monster and its blood was smeared on the canoe prow. Schmidt asked about the practice and was astounded to hear that in the past both a dog and a human being (most probably a woman captured from a non-Murik village; see Tiesler 1969/70) were put to death and the blood of both was used to paint the prow:

I inquired again of several people about human sacrifice at the canoe consecration. Some claimed that they did not know . . . whether each poang [descent group] had killed a human being on this occasion. It seemed alot to me for there are 50–60 [descent groups], and on the average one can figure that the canoes become unusable every five years. And every year, on average, one is lost through storm, etc.; therefore I wanted to limit it to a few [descent groups], because some of them said this too, but . . . the answers to one’s questions correspond to how one phrases them. In theory, however, each [descent group] ought to sacrifice a human being for the consecration of a new canoe. [Schmidt 1923/24:722]

Perhaps the sacrificial blood painted on the canoe prow was analogous to the penis blood that the male-cult sponsors drew from novices and smeared over their bodies. According to this analogy, the effect of both acts would be to transform the novice (and canoe-as-novice) by anointing his body with fluids that would otherwise defile him (see Douglas 1985[1966]:159–79).
From the men's perspective the red blood of sacrifice conceivably turned the Murik vehicle into a single-sexed vehicle that had the potential for warfare and for trade, nurture, and pacification. The achievement of separation for the canoe and its transformation into an initiated warrior thus demanded the death of a captured non-Murik—a person who was neither a source of nurture nor an object of attachment and thus did not connote dependency. But the rupture of ties figured by the sacrifice was momentary, and perhaps illusory: relationships between men and women, with trading partners, and between the insignia-holding group and male cult sustained the vessel from beginning to end.

We suggest that for women the blood on the prow might have two other associations. The first would allude to the tragic culture heroine, Jari (see Meeker et al. 1986:40–42), the mythical non-Murik woman who gave outrigger canoe technology to men and introduced vaginal birth to women. Before Jari's arrival, all women died during childbirth, as their stomachs had to be cut open to deliver their babies. Jari therefore invented the capacity that enabled Murik women to become social mothers. If the canoe launching is analogous to birth, as we shall suggest, then to Murik women the blood on its prow might also suggest a mother's blood on her newborn's head. Soon after birth, they shave off the baby's straight, smooth hair, which is evidence of the baby's passage out of the realm of spirits and into the human world as it has been contaminated by this blood. During the launching, there is much shouting and calling of the canoe's name, which is meant to summon a spirit to the vessel—just as in illness, trance, or dreaming, shouting bids a person's soul return to its body. If the blood on the canoe prow was a vestige of its metaphorical "birth," the transformative power of blood would draw a spirit to its material vehicle. Whether or not these conjectures are correct, the multivocality of the sacrifice drew on an enormously condensed signification that came to a climax in the bloodied prow image. To empower the vessel to the maximum extent possible, all the metaphors that resonated for men and women were potentially evoked here.
During the launching rite, imagery of maternal agency was also prominent. The particular canoe spirits (gai'masok) that safeguarded each outrigger were fed twice. First, before launching the new vessel, a man's wife or sister had to prepare a meal that she then presented to the gai'masok; it was subsequently eaten by the canoe owner's sibling group in the house of their firstborn member. The figures were then carried in procession to the male-cult house, where they were fed again, but they were taken to the canoe by the sister of its owner in a canoe-shaped plate (see Figure 7). There one of the spirits was installed in the canoe. Then the plate of figurines was returned to the dwelling house. The distinction between nurture that takes place within the domestic house and the nurture that occurs within the male-cult house is crucial in Murik culture. In the domestic setting, food is given by mothers and wives to ensure the well-being of their families. It creates enduring dependence, emotional attachment, and lifelong indebtedness, sentiments that can and should be ritually honored but can never be fully recompensed. By contrast, foodgiving in the context of the male-cult house is aggressive and competitive and must be reciprocated. The canoe was therefore bound to the community by both feminine nurture and the competitive reciprocity of cultic ceremonial exchange.

Women safeguarded the canoe by nurturing its builders and spirits; when the new vessel was launched, they midwifed its "birth." Two objects were placed in the path of the canoe as it was shoved across the beach and into the sea. The first was a clay pot filled with water in which food was cooked for the canoe workers. This receptacle was said to contain the boiled remains of "purpur," the magical herb that the men chewed while carving the canoe, but that women also used to anoint newborn babies and in curing rituals to summon womb spirits. Murik women agreed with Barlow's inference that the pot was analogous to the bag of water that breaks open just before birth. Once the pot has been broken, the canoe was shoved through a small bonfire (Schmidt 1923/24:720). Although there are other apt associations of fire with transitions (see also Lipset, in press), with the power to cook and feed, and with the co-optation of these powers by the male-cult, Murik women speak of the sensation of childbirth as one of acute burning, like fire in the vagina, and pour buckets of water over the belly and genitals of a parturient woman. Fire is also equated with the vagina in the myth of Jari, the culture heroine who domesticated her lover by giving him fire extracted from her genitals.

Schmidt observed that the new vessel was rocked back and forth before being pushed all the way into the water (1923/24:720). On other occasions a canoe is shoved down by successive forward thrusts only. During labor a baby is moved through the birth canal by similar efforts. Murik midwives assist this movement by placing their hands on both sides of the baby's buttocks, pushing down on the mother's stomach with each contraction. Once afloat, the "canoe-baby" was protected by the sister and wife of the canoe owner, the women who were known as "mothers" of the canoe. Just as the symbolism of canoe manufacture evoked conception and gestation to women, the launching rite depicted an image of birth.

the trial run and first voyage

Premodern outrigger canoes ferried passengers and crew across dangerous boundaries imbued with the potential for warfare (until circa 1920). These vessels, as "sons" of the male cult, were empowered to battle the sea and to conquer and bedazzle trading partners. According to Schmidt, when the actual trial run took place older boys were taken on board. Once at sea, they put on headbands of human hair (duar'takiin), the emblem of cult members already initiated into the paramount echelon of the male cult. When the youth came ashore, they received gifts of domestic goods and were splashed with white lime powder and daubed with red paint—honoriﬁc gestures marking first achievements and changes of status (Bateson 1958[1936]:12–22). Thus the rite of the trial voyage reenacted the bestowal of cosmic, masculine status: in the future, the canoe would return with the wherewithal to fund the attribution of jural status.
The outrigger canoe, from one point of view, was prepared as if for battle. According to both the Murik and their island trading partners, when the canoe first arrived it had to be disarmed by a mock attack. The ritual attackers shot spears at its masthead in an effort to cut down the mast rope and drop its sail. On the islands, this attack presaged an exchange of prestigious valuables. New outriggers from the Schouten Islands arriving in Murik were greeted in the same way. Visitors called the names of their hereditary hosts, each of whom took one shot. The guests then presented their hosts with an ornament, a gift that obliged the recipient to return a pig. The arrival of a new canoe thus converted a state of warfare into an exchange of more comprehensive wealth that affirmed what was actually problematic—for example the proposition that hosts and guests shared common interests.

Certain other canoe paraphernalia suggest that the vessel was understood not only as a male-cult initiate but also as a female-cult initiate. Around its hull and platform, for example, the new canoe was decorated with a fringe of dried sago leaves, called its “skirt.” Another skirt decoration, made of sago fringe and flowers, was hung on the mast and was called “the mother of the mast.” This ornament was supposed to induce trading partners to give up many shell valuables (Ledoux n.d.). Newly initiated young women also emerge from their ordeal beautifully decorated, wearing small fringe “skirts” above their breasts to cover their new scarification and new skirts with designs identifying them as members of particular descent groups. As they parade through the village avenues, their beauty compels onlookers to present them with gifts.

Murik women receive the right to deploy seductive powers and the right to engage in overseas trade when they are inducted into the female cult (Barlow 1992, 1995). At the same time that women “sent” the canoe by provisioning and honoring it, they took steps to ensure its safe return. According to Ledoux, during the all-night dancing that preceded the canoe’s maiden voyage to trade, young women sent younger girls as messengers to the men asking them not to decorate themselves too beautifully and inviting the men to come to them. The women thus addressed the “desires of the canoe” as a young male warrior, attempting to bind the canoe to the community with the allure of their magical sexuality.

When the canoe initially set sail, a small basket on the bow was opened “to catch the wind.” The Murik occasionally refer to features of baskets in terms of the female body. Corners are called “breasts.” The fringe around the top is a “skirt.” The woven design on the side of the basket, which often identifies an individual’s descent group status, is its “face.” Handles are “hands” or “arms,” and the interior is the “belly.” The basket made by—and representing—the “mothers” of the canoe was stored in the dwelling house but was carried on voyages, during which it was opened to ensure a good wind. It was said to contain the canoe’s “first breath.” The newborn child’s first breath (its “winds”) was thought to come from the mother. In the final contractions of hard labor, Barlow observed, women are urged to breathe deeply and long, in order “to give their breath to the baby.” The newborn’s “wind,” in other words, was held to respond sympathetically to its mother’s breathing. Thus by opening “the mouth” of the basket, “a mother” gave breath to “her child,” the canoe.

Pregnancy, birth, and the postpartum period constitute an extended period during which a new Murik father is understood to have great power over the well-being of a fetus and newborn through the magicoreligious consequences of his actions. In general, a father’s sexuality is believed to endanger the health of his children. During pregnancy and the postpartum period, he should remain chaste. If he carries on extramarital affairs, he may convey a message to the soul of the baby that it is unwanted, thus causing it to desert its “canoe-body.” The baby will die before, during, or soon after birth. In addition to chastity, many other restrictions are imposed on a prospective father. He should not tie knots in ropes, chop wood with an axe, or bury houseposts. Each of these actions is believed to impede the birth of a child in particular ways (Barlow 1985b). During the actual birth, the moment of utmost danger for mother and child, the father should repair to his sleeping mat, sit quietly, and loosen the clothes around his waist.
in order to facilitate the birth. In addition to the couvade, other magic, controlled by senior men, must be deployed in the event of a difficult childbirth.

On the canoe's trial run and during subsequent voyages, the women assumed the couvade. During the carving process, their caution helped preserve the integrity of the canoe log. While the canoe was at sea, the women's role at home was understood to protect the vessel from shipwreck, just as a father's actions safeguarded childbirth. The wives of the crew, especially those of the steersman, had to abide by an extensive number of injunctions, neglect of which might cause the canoe to break up, be blown off course, sink, or be carried out to sea. "They must not have sexual intercourse. The canoe will imitate their undulations and go down at sea. They may not cut grass. The outrigger lashings will break . . . They must not chop firewood. The canoe will split open and sink . . . They may not lean down to scoop up water. The canoe will also 'lean down' and take in water and sink" (Barlow 1985a:118). We have already mentioned the seclusion of men during birth. Ideally, the wives of the crew should sit quietly in their houses, concentrating on the traveling canoe. Just as men played an indirect, but essential role in ensuring successful reproduction and childbirth, women played an analogous role in voyages, except that in both instances women went on cooking.

Bakhtin might have appreciated "hidden dialogicality" in the "women's couvade," viewing it as a kind of response in which the statements of the second speaker are omitted ... in such a way that the general sense is not at all violated. The second speaker is present invisibly, his words are not there but deep traces left by these words . . . influence . . . all . . . present. [1984:197]

The difference here is that the practices of "the invisible speakers," who in this case would be men, were not at all definitive, because they were no less under the influence of other even more "invisible speakers"—childbearing women. In Murik, the women's couvade might then have been dialogically related to their own procreative force as this force was refracted through the men.

As the canoe returned from its trial run, a woman belonging to the owner's descent group waded out and scooped up foamy spray from the bow in a bark container. The Murik call this act "catching the spittle" of the canoe. In relay fashion, the bark container was then carried back to the dwelling-house by some of the women of the descent group. As long as they held onto this "spittle," said the women, the canoe would "always come home to its mother." Saliva is strongly associated with appetite or desire—with a longing for some delicious food or other valued object. According to the Murik adage, those who are speechless with desire for another person's food or property "just swallow their spittle" in order to control themselves. Possession of another's spittle provides a means of magically manipulating that individual's desire. Predictably, those persons who arouse and gratify male "spittle" in many ways are often women. Just as the women seek to bind the canoe to the community through the allure of their sexuality, the canoe was also bound to it as a child is bound to its mother who gave it breath and satisfied its hunger.

Through these analogies and associations (Wagner 1986) to mothering, we maintain that the canoe came to signify the parental dilemma of how to sustain loyalty while fostering initiative. Children should go, yet they must return. Children should remain indefinitely attached to parents and elder siblings so that they will feel obliged to offer the parents work and support throughout their lifetimes. Parents and elder siblings invest much in children. Motivated by gratitude for the receipt of such care, children should honor elders by eventually presenting each parent, or eldest sibling, with a major tributary feast. This presentation is both an act of homage and a rite of jural succession during which donors retire a parent or elder sibling as insignia holder in the descent group. Among other things, ritual succession attests to the incumbent's success in imparting to the heir the initiative and resourcefulness necessary to mount a major ceremony. The sequence of early childhood rites and subsequent cult initiation also celebrates the growing
independence of a child from the household and reiterates the tension between initiative and attachment. At the end of initiation, the celebrated child returns to the household for a meal. According to Schmidt, when a newly initiated youth did so and reached for the food the mother had prepared, she would slap the outstretched hand, calling the youth “a rat” and complaining that the child still wanted “to eat from [her] . . . hand” (Schmidt 1926:51).

As children reach adulthood, parents must forego influence over them, even as they worry and hope that their childrens’ attachment will remain strong. In a society so dependent on trade expeditions, a similar apprehension was raised by each canoe voyage, and much was done to ensure the canoe’s safe return. Accounts of trade invariably note that the canoe or some of its crew did not return, or that a few of the sailors, having enjoyed their role as guests overlong, established permanent ties with the trading partner by marriage or adoption. For children or outrigger canoes, to remain at home is impossible: they must both be sent away only to be lured back with the promise of nurture, even as they are chastised for their dependency so that they will again depart. The dilemma of initiative and attachment was never resolved, nor can it be.

return to the log-giver

Following completion of the canoe’s maiden voyage to the islands, the owners’ thoughts returned to the log-giver (the “trade mother”). A Murik man would sail new outrigger canoes upriver, arriving fully adorned at the village of their trading partners to honor them with gifts of seafood, canarium almonds from the Schouten Islands, and perhaps the performance of a folk opera. One inland trading partner told us, “The arrival of a new canoe is like the emergence of a woman from a menstrual hut [for the first time]. I want to celebrate it, without expectation of return.” The appearance of the new vessel might prompt him to break open a coconut and expel the juice at the canoe, in honor of the regalia it bears. To the upriver trading partner, the new Murik canoe evidently evoked an image of a young, marriageable woman, presumably in possession of her newly active fertility.

For Murik men, however, the end of the sequence of building and launching the canoe squared the log-debt to the “trade mother” from whom it had originally been “stolen”; this act of compensation was understood, as we have seen, as part of making the canoe into a man. To Murik women, meanwhile, the appearance of the decorated vessel, loaded down with an abundance of food to be distributed to eagerly awaiting kin, evoked a comprehensive discourse about feminine rather than masculine experience. It was an image of women’s productivity and female cultic identity. The canoe was simultaneously a mother’s child and a male lover, sent out from, and drawn back to, the community by women’s powers of birth, nurture, affection, and sexual allure. However feminine the vessel might have seemed to women, its masculinity was no less evident to men. The figural complexity of the canoe composed a deeply gendered polysemy. But more than two equally authoritative discourses become evident in the vessel’s iconography, to which we shall now turn; equivocal dialogue was revealed there in an intricate array of double-voiced images.

iconography of dialogue

Replete with emblems of identity, the iconography of the premodern outrigger canoe was more than a mere accumulation of figures. Some images gave voice to strategies of trade and the metamorphoses of status and gender occasioned by voyaging, while others depicted the dialogue between men and women engaged in its manufacture and launching rites. Canoes differed in design and ornamentation and, since colonization and statehood, have incorporated new emblems of identity. In 1953, for example, Gardi photographed a canoe with a cross on
its prow (see Figure 8), while in the early 1980s other signs of literacy and political identity were visible. Most of the changes have simplified the vessel: they entail less carving, less decoration, and more use of store-bought paint (see Figure 4). We consider a selection of frequently utilized premodern motifs that convey the vessel’s plurality of meanings.

The relationship of the descent group to male-cult spirits was apparent throughout the vessel. The masthead was decorated with named sumon insignia meant to identify the owners to trading partners who, recognizing the vehicle from a distance, were then supposed to begin preparing their hospitality and gifts. Each canoe had a repertoire of attendant spirits collectively owned by the descent group (see Figure 9). Two male spirit faces (brag sebug) were carved into the mast step inside the hull of the canoe, one or both often on the prow (see Figure 8). On the block at the top of the mast (namoan) appeared a male spirit figure (kandimboang) that faced downward, overlooking the platform and crew. At each end of the canoe stood at least one male spirit figure and, sometimes, a human figure. Canoe paraphernalia such as marlin spikes and paddles sported spirit figures on their handles. The symmetrical spiral motif inscribed in many places on the canoe is called nabran (see Figures 8 and 10), which means both “spider”
The male cult transferred a carved lintel board (the “eye” of the cult house) to the platform of the canoe. This board was decorated with nabran designs, or with other bird motifs, expressing the desire that the canoe would “fly” directly toward its destination. Carved birds mounted on the outrigger platform were also meant to impart both lightness and speed to the canoe (see Figure 11). The wings and head of the predatory brown and white sea eagle were represented in a carving that

and “soul” or “ghost”—a double entendre upon which the Murik play. The male cult transferred a carved lintel board (the “eye” of the cult house) to the platform of the canoe. This board was decorated with nabran designs, or with other bird motifs, expressing the desire that the canoe would “fly” directly toward its destination. Carved birds mounted on the outrigger platform were also meant to impart both lightness and speed to the canoe (see Figure 11). The wings and head of the predatory brown and white sea eagle were represented in a carving that
fit over the tip of the mast. The Murik sometimes speak of desired objects such as pigs, enemies, or valuables as “fish” they are “circling” and intend to “kill.” Taken together, these images animated the vessel and imbued it with the fortifying presence of its ally, the male cult.

Other animal figures reflected Murik strategy toward trading partners. Carved images of flying foxes (bats), sometimes engraved with the faces of war spirits, hung from the mast (see Figure 12). These peculiar creatures were one of the most complex metaphors on the canoe. Not only did they have multiple associations, but they simultaneously stood both for the Murik and for their trading partners. Among the Murik bats are understood to steal fruit from other men’s gardens, then to return home to roost and drop the seeds, which grow there. Stealing, in the more general sense of robbing people of the fruits of their labors and future productivity, may be accomplished by charming away what someone does not wish to give (as in the American metaphor of “stealing someone’s heart”). Murik men voyaged to the offshore Schouten Islands to obtain garden produce and pigs. They expected that through magic they would obtain much more than the island gardeners would otherwise have given them. Returning home, they reaped the benefits of other men’s gardens by mounting feasts through which status was attributed (or reproduced); in this way they enhanced their prestige and reputation and perpetuated the descent group. According to these associations, the sailors were “bats” who would steal a man’s fruit (the island trading partner’s goods), which they would carry away to eat, dropping the seeds in their own territory—where they would bear fruit through Murik ceremonial exchange.
Like the Wogo Islanders, their trading partners (Hogbin 1935), the Murik also envisioned overseas trade expeditions as sexual seductions, both literally and figuratively. Men might conduct trysts with women in the communities they visited by “stealing” the affections of their trading partners’ kinswomen. The bat metaphor may have also alluded to the effects of their spells upon trading partners, who were magically seduced into being magnanimous (cf. Malinowski 1961[1922] and Scoditti 1989). The Murik say that those who are charmed or infatuated “hang upside down like a bat,” unable to move of their own volition. The bat figures were said to make the trading partner’s stomach “hot” with desire. In this way they represented trade as an illicit form of male virility, whose force might create in them a feminine desire to give.

A further meaning of the bat motif derives from Murik views of the reproduction process. We noted that women provide a home for, and install, the canoe spirits: the “mothers” serve as a kind of canoe for these spirits in the same sense that the Murik consider a pregnant woman to be a canoe. They say her body is “just the canoe” (kuja gai’iin) for the fetus, whose “real mother” (nago ngain) is the placenta spirit that creates the face and personality of the child, determining both its sex and resemblance to the father or the mother. This placenta spirit is called, literally, the “flying fox mother” (nabwag ngain). Thus the bat figures potentially represented not only the traders themselves but their agency in making the voyage productive. More generally, the metaphorical associations with the bats hanging on the mast suggested that the trade voyage could as easily be understood in androgynous terms. The double-voicedness of this image lends credence to the view that the canoe represented not only a male warrior but also a mother returning to her children loaded down with a bounty of pigs and garden produce.

The combined figure of a hornbill and possum (see Figure 13) that appeared in a stern piece and other fittings revealed a more benign—or moral—aspect of the traders’ view of their hosts. Neither hornbills nor possums are often seen in the Murik environment. This combination of nonaquatic creatures on a sailing canoe is therefore curious; it may be no less multivocal than the bat figures. Murik comment that the possum has large and staring eyes, expressive of the
Figure 12. Small bat (nabwag) figures were hung on the mast. Their size and inconspicuous presentation camouflage their symbolic import as metaphors of male and female powers in trade. A. B. Lewis Collection, ca. 1910, Field Museum of Natural History. Photo by Kathleen Barlow, 1987. Image used by permission of the American Museum of Natural History.

desire and acquisitiveness assumed to pervade the trade encounter. They also say that the possum eats whatever it is given and so can be easily tamed. This confirms their cultural strategy of pacifying potential enemies through enchanted acts of abundant, immobilizing nurture. The Murik share the view with their island trading partners that hospitality is the basis of trade. In this sense the little possum image also expresses a willingness on the part of the Murik guests to be tamed with food. The hornbill is well-known, not only among the Murik but throughout Melanesia, for its unique nesting habits. It frequently appears as a symbol of regeneration through male nurture (see, e.g., Wagner 1987). When the female makes its nest in a hole in a tree, the male closes the hole over with mud while the mother stays inside to incubate the eggs. During this time the incubating female is fed by the male bird until she breaks out with the newly hatched young. The hornbill is thus an apt metaphor for two forms of seclusion that come to an end as a consequence of successful overseas trade. According to this image, the traders go forth to the islands “as hornbills,” seeking provisions to nurture and intending thereby to release their dependents who are confined at home. Upon the men’s return, their wives, who have sat quietly at home to ensure their safe passage, receive the trade goods and immediately redistribute them to the community in order to reciprocate the care they have received and to
instigate feasting. The second kind of seclusion is directly associated with ceremonial reproduction. Trade expeditions usually occurred in order to provision initiation or end-of-mourning celebrations. Before these ceremonies initiates and mourners alike underwent periods of isolation, which were concluded by the trade work. Like incubating eggs, they remained in seclusion while preparing to reenter society in a transformed state. When the canoe returned with the feast goods, the ritual was performed within a few days. Like birth, the ritual created
(through initiation) or recreated (through end-of-mourning rites) active and productive members of society. By representing Murik traders as tractable and as seeking to fulfill moral obligations to pregnant women, the paired figures of possum and hornbill took exception to the predatory inflections of the bat and the sea eagle. Dual points of view have coalesced in these contrasting images, but they have coalesced incongruously.

Designs on each side of the sail depicted trade as resulting from cooperation between male and female. On one side appeared the figure of a warrior, an image of aggressive male expertise, and a pig, the object of the warrior-traders’ desires. On the other was a star shaped figure (go’im) (see Figure 5), which is also, according to Murik belief, a navel or belly and a center of agency. This design is frequently found engraved on the base of the round wooden plates used by women to serve cooked food. It may also be relevant that the two stars in the Pleiades, whose appearance on the horizon marks the beginning of the trading season, are said to be husband and wife: the wife initially led the way, but then, having gone back to get the sago pudding, ended up trailing after her husband. The two-sided representation on the sail clearly affirmed the indivisibility of male aggression and enterprise from female powers of sustenance and nurturance.

The combination of both male and female agency was further acknowledged in the role given to children in the launching ritual. As we have already mentioned earlier, both Schmidt and Ledoux observed that boys bespattered the hull with white lime paint and drew graffiti on it, while girls painted the outrigger.33 We have argued that, at launching, women see the canoe as a newborn baby. The white paint may be analogous to the vernix on newborns, a substance that Murik mothers liken to coconut oil and rub into their infants’ skin to protect them.34 But we have also argued that the canoe is a maternal vehicle that reproduces “children,” the next generation of Murik traders, warriors, and insignia bearers, and thus the future of society (see

Figure 14. The outrigger canoe was a vehicle of social reproduction; children were drawn to it. Note the spider (nabran) motif carved into the side of the hull. Photo by René Gardi, 1953. Used by permission of Museum der Kulturen Basel, Switzerland.
Figure 14). The rough, white images children drew may also have expressed their vitality and social potential. Although our data about the meaning of specific designs are limited, support for our general conclusion may be found in the white color of the lime-based paint. White is culturally associated with individuals who have survived dangerous transitions to and from extracommmunal realms. Ghosts appear white, as do newborn babies, novices, and mourners. At the same time, white is an honorific color. Dousing virtuoso dancers’ shoulders with white lime powder is a gesture of approval and a measure of the beguilement felt by the spectators, who may be so deeply moved as to give up a child for adoption. The color of the children’s art, in short, suggested that the canoe was both an object of admiration and a person who had succeeded in moving across social boundaries.

According to the dialogue we have adduced about its ritual construction, the canoe was multiply understood as a newborn baby, a newly initiated warrior going off to do battle, and a woman going off to bedazzle and seduce trading partners with her beauty. The canoe approached the islands as a member of a particular descent group, protected by masculine and feminine imagery. To men, the vessel might be a thief and a seducer (a bat) who returns home as a more powerful, senior man possessing the wherewithal to win in ceremonial rivalries and effect ritual status (a hornbill). To women, the canoe might be a mother (a bat), but would also, as we noted earlier, be a newly initiated woman, who mesmerizes trading partners with her gifts of baskets and food and then returns home laden down with the abundant returns of her productivity. If constructing the canoe recreated processes of conception, birth, and initiation, its multilayered iconography connoted the agency and purposes of men and women as they reproduced society separately and together.

the dialogics of material culture

There are four notable sociocultural approaches to the study of material culture. The first emphasizes the role of objects in the maintenance of social relations (Malinowski 1961[1922]; Mauss 1954). The second focuses on the production of objects (Marx 1976[1867]:245–53), and the third emphasizes the transformations of their meaning through the course of use (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Thomas 1991). The fourth approach, a meaning-centered, or semiotic, framework, is the one that most nearly resembles our own. We have interpreted the construction and iconography of premodern Murik outriggers as a symbolic performance through which fundamental cultural messages and values are communicated (see Bowden 1983; Forge 1966, 1970, 1973, and 1979; MacKenzie 1991; Morphy 1984; Munn 1973; Sillitoe 1988). We have traced to largely unresolvable dilemmas the logic internal to the imagery of the canoes (Wagner 1986). In contrast to the semiotic analyses cited above, however, we have emphasized the Murik’s and our own multiple perceptions of this imagery and the dialogical relationships among them. By calling attention to how we, as ethnographers, possess different views about the production and iconography of the Murik outrigger canoe, we have not meant to challenge the existence of ethnographic reality, as some critics accuse postmodern epistemology of doing (Spencer 1989). Rather, we have sought to complicate the theoretical study of material culture by using our own dual perspectives to gain insight into the polyphony and intricate recursiveness this vehicle inspired.

The methodological lesson for symbolic analysis exemplified here rests on the recognition of the perpetual dialogue provoked by material culture. The significance of outrigger canoes that was most compelling to one gender in Murik was evidently quite different from that which most intrigued the other. Moreover, the two interpretations, we have argued, were rejoinders to one another. The Murik outrigger canoe fascinated both men and women, serving to instance their shared and ongoing dialogue about their respective roles in, and contribution to, the reproduction of society. It enabled Murik women and men to “produce their world in a particular form
or aspects of themselves in the same process" (Munn 1986:11). We have tried to show how this dynamic process of identity formation was multivocal in culturally distinctive ways.

Attended by symbols of masculine cosmic agency, the canoe enabled the bestowal of identity upon the young for which men alone might claim responsibility. To senior men, the canoe itself became a novice, whose "body" had to be purged of feminine fluids and attachment through magical operations in order to be transformed into a pure, male warrior. Perhaps the image that made this metamorphosis most plainly evident was the sacrifice of a (captured) woman whose blood was used to anoint its hull in order mystically to empower the new canoe. At this moment, Father Schmidt was told in the 1920s, men, women, and children—in other words, the entire community—would flee, leaving behind a solitary cult monster to perform the homicide. The male cult, suffice it to say, may have been consecrating new vessels with an illusion of its ability to sever ties to women by violence.

The agency of Murik women was (and remains) a creation of their own spirit cult no less than the agency of Murik men was created through the male cult. Unlike men, however, women also tended and continue to view themselves as intrinsic, unmediated agents of productivity and fertility on whom men must rely. Their role in the process of canoe manufacture and in the trade voyages was, to them, another illustration of their ubiquitous power in society. The women's rejoinder to the image of male initiation was a view of the process through metaphors of pregnancy, childbirth, nurture, and guardianship, domains to which men contributed only indirectly. To women, the men who carved outrigger canoes resembled both vulnerable children (who should be protected and fed) and expectant mothers (who should avoid sexual relationships, be relieved of subsistence duties, and, above all, be well fed). When the new vehicle went to trade, closely related women adhered to couvade-like restrictions. While the vessel sailed through open water in dangerous circumstances that tested its powers, their inactive presence at home personified an axis of feminine power to sustain relatedness in the community, which in turn sustained the masculine vehicle under trial. The safe, bountiful return of the "canoe/child" attested to their success: the canoe had withstood the challenge and

Figure 15. A returning canoe laden with trade goods is greeted with great excitement and pulled ashore by the entire community of men, women, and children. Kaup village. Photo by Louis Pierre Ledoux, 1936. Used by permission.
demonstrated its loyalty to the vessel's "mothers" in an ideal manner, bringing back a bounty that rewarded "their labor." For women, acts of nurture, couvade-like avoidances, and the breath and the spirits they gave the canoe exemplified their procreative and maternal force.

By means of these dual voices and logics, the manufacture and voyages of premodern canoes confirmed feminine assumptions about maternal powers and filial duties while they also provided Murik men with a literal vehicle with which to reproduce themselves and others (see Figure 15). In order to understand these discrepant meanings, we were led to view them as dialogically related and found evidence for this articulation in the combined imagery in the canoe iconography. The figures of the flying fox and the hornbill/possum simultaneously represented virile warriors and pregnant women assisted by male nurture. When launched, the canoe was a composite site for a plurality of Murik identities (Strathern 1988; see also Forge 1973:xx). When launched, the new outrigger was a newborn, a cult novice, a young male warrior, and a beautifully decorated woman, and was introduced to the community as a new citizen in a descent group. Murik men and women clearly understood outrigger canoes in different terms that respectively subjected them to different emotional inflections. Today, at least, all Murik openly and unhesitatingly acknowledge both viewpoints, not to mention the possibility of others. As traders, they have continuously engaged a world of sociopolitical and cultural differences, differences that they not only accept but seek to exploit or at least to turn into obligations to themselves.

If we were to settle upon a single image with which to epitomize the dialogue we have sought to analyze in the canoe, we might return for a moment to its sail imagery. Here, what we found was indeed a double-sided figure: a masculine warrior and pig on the one side, a star-shaped image of feminine nurture on the other (see Figure 5). The sail represented the relationship of trade to sexuality and violence as well as, more generally, to the productive combination—but also the inevitable separation—of male and female. This dialogical relationship and its tensions
informed the construction, iconography, and voyaging of the Murik outrigger canoe and imbued its imagery with a single, contrary system of meaning. "One could put it this way: the . . . will of polyphony is a will to combine many wills, a will to the event" (Bakhtin 1984:21).

Only to view the canoe as an occasion for equivocal action, or, more generally, only to view canoes as a residue of gendered dialogue about social reproduction would mean ignoring the mutually constitutive relationship between canoes and persons. "Actors," as Munn has argued (1986:6), "construct [their] meaningful order in the process of being constructed in its terms" (see also Miller 1987:50–67). Murik persons, as we have shown, are understood to be "canoes." If a youth underwent initiation into the male cult, was subjected to penis bleeding for the first time, and did not faint, his father might have been led to exclaim, "My canoe has arrived!" (see also Figure 16). Or, when an outrigger canoe returned to port after its trial run, its owner might shout, "Oh! My 'son' has come shore!" The metaphorical influence of the two images proceeded in both directions. Subjected as both were to the irresolvable dilemmas Murik men and women perceived in social life—the necessary separation and unity of gender and age across the life-cycle—canoes and persons were reciprocal metaphors of and for each other. The vehicle served as a means of constructing dialogue about the meaning of personhood. Conversely, concepts of personhood provided a means of constructing dialogue about the meanings of canoes.

notes

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1. For other ethnographic case studies of gendered dialogue, see Briggs 1993, Lipset and Stritecky 1994, and Tannen 1990.


3. Initial research by Barlow and Lipset consisted of 17 months in the Murik Lakes during 1981–82. We spent three field seasons in Murik and other North Coast villages in 1986, 1988, and 1993. Funding for the original fieldwork was provided by the University of California, San Diego and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. The Australian Museum sponsored the second two visits under the auspices of its "Sepik Documentation Project." Barlow received additional funds from the Institute for Intercultural Studies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the American Museum of Natural History. Lipset received funds from Sigma Xi, the University of Minnesota, the McKnight Foundation, and the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at UCLA, which sponsored a short visit in 1993.

4. The Louis Pierre Ledoux accession at the American Museum of Natural History contains many pieces of canoe paraphernalia as well as Ledoux's fieldnotes, unpublished diary, manuscript, and photographs of the launching of a sailing canoe in 1936. In 1982 we were present when a motorized outrigger was launched in an attenuated version of the former celebrations, and we gained important insights into this event from Ledoux's more detailed description of what he had observed. The canoe launching rite was also described by Father Joseph Schmidt (1923/24; 1926; 1933), the resident Society of the Divine Wood priest in the Murik Lakes (c. 1910–40). In addition, we studied photographs taken by René Gardi in 1953 and by Barry Craig in 1981 and inventoried objects in the A.B. Lewis Collection (1909–13) stored at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago.

5. Our summary of Murik adaptation and social organization is written in the present tense. We assume that its features remain similar today to what we knew of it during our original fieldwork in 1981–82 and in three subsequent field seasons, the last of which was in 1993.

6. Sumon refers both to a category of insignia and rank, and a sacred quality contained within them. One Murik university graduate once translated the term as "authority" because the men and women who hold rights to sumon not only possess entitlements over property but also have duties to safeguard moral order.
7. The insignia may be conferred during any one or all of the rites of early childhood: to introduce a firstborn to the community, to commemorate first teeth, and to learn to climb down the houseladder. They are also bestowed at descent group and male-cult initiation rites, at installation rites, and at the end of mourning rites.
8. When Murik talk about the impossibility of obtaining something because one has either no transportation or no trading partner in the place of supply, they say, "There is no path!" (Yakabor ongwende!).
9. Today they are primarily used to transport seafood to sell in the provincial market.
10. A senior Murik man once told Lipset, "The ancestors used to say, 'All power comes from women.' "
11. There is a 1936 photograph taken near Kaup village by Ledoux that clearly depicts a leaf "skirt" attached to a treetrunk. In his diary Ledoux notes being told that the lattice framework built around the base of the tree was called "the platform of the outrigger" (Ledoux n.d.:158).
12. The expected outcome of a physical fight between a man and a woman (including married couples) is sexual intercourse, and nonparticipants in a conflict may say that a woman who deliberately inflames an argument to the point of violence implicitly communicates her desire for sex.
13. See also the myth of Sendam in Meeker et al. 1986:62 and Lipset, in press.
14. This is more strictly observed for the birth of the first child than for subsequent children, although the degree of caution exercised to protect a pregnant woman also depends on how easily she bears children.
15. The gender of the sacrifice is ambiguous in Schmidt's ethnography. At one point, however, he specifically states that "a woman" was killed as late as 1918 in conjunction with a launching rite (Schmidt 1923/24:722; see also Tiesler 1969/70).
16. We did not find the association reported by Munn for Gawa, where "the most marked connection is [made] . . . between the redwood . . . of the hull and blood, which is the body's maternal component and the essential medium from which Gawans say the fetus is formed" (Munn 1986:138).
17. Women regard the competitive exchange of dishes of food in the male-cult as manifestations of their abundance. A man who sponsors a feast there may be seen trotting to and from his dwelling house to make sure that his wife has what she needs and to ensure that she knows which individuals are being fed and for what reasons. She in turn allocates the different kinds of food and the plates of different quality in which she serves them according to the status of the recipients and according to whether they are her own feasting partners or affines. This exchange is a cooperative effort between husband and wife and is a performance that represents their own resourcefulness and reputations.
18. This substance is used by men in love magic and curing and by women for curing.
19. But semen is also called "water."
21. This reverses what the women do to send the men to war; the warriors are then only fed by their mothers and are secluded from all contact with their wives or lovers.
22. A slow birth was traditionally hurried along by a woman who took a drag on a cigarette and then held her breath in order to compel the child to leave the womb and emerge into the fresh air to breathe (Schmidt 1926:45).
23. In 1982 Barlow and others were expected to practice a modified version of these restrictions in order to protect a Murik copra boat on a trade expedition in which Lipset was participating.
24. Cultures along the Sepik River and in the North Coast region are well-known for androgynous, ritual embodiments of male and female that are not sex-linked in a static, unitary way. What Marilyn Strathern has said of Melanesia in general applies to this region in particular: "a totalistic sexed identity" is absent (1988:107). Gender does not inhere in attributes of a fixed kind or in the exclusive possession of genitalia. Instead, the body registers in microcosm the dynamic relationships of which it is composed. In Murik and elsewhere in the Sepik, we might say that the ritual body specifically reflects its reliance upon maternal relationships and capacities. Thus Bateson observed the honorific buffoonery of male mothers fawning over their daughters' sons (1958[1936]). Hodgkin called nearby Wogeo an island of menstruating men (1970). The image of Murik women abiding by couvade-like restrictions on behalf of their voyaging canoes is consistent with this region-wide theme.
25. On Gawa outrigger canoes are also called "mothers," not only because of the produce stored within their hulls but also because of the "children"/crew they carry (Munn 1986:147; see also Strathern 1991:66).
26. Similarly, ghosts are "given" sumon so that they will be recognized and admitted into the ghostly community of their ancestors.
27. These double spirits represented the two brothers, Andena and Arena, who invented and donated magico-religious outrigger canoe technology throughout the North Coast of Papua New Guinea, although not directly to the Murik (see Lipset n.d.).
28. In Murik iconography, a distinction is made between two kinds of noses: naturalistic noses represent human figures while elongated ones belong to male spirits.
29. For example, a parent may run fingers lightly over a child's arms and squeal with mock fear, "Nabran! Nabran!" A spouse or close relative in mourning may feel threatened by the excessively close presence of a deceased person's ghost (nabran), felt by the sensation of something lightly touching an arm or leg.
30. We first heard the bat metaphor used to describe the attitude of a brother toward his sister's husband; the latter was a bat who stole his sister (fruit) and claimed her children (seeds).
31. Forge observed that the flying fox motif inscribed on the facades of the Abelam cult houses connoted "the very large and obvious . . . penis with a single female breast" (1966:29).
32. Sir Michael Somare, the Murik native son and first Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, has recalled,
I learned many things from my father. But perhaps the most important of all was what he called “Sana’s peacemaking magic”... He used to say to me: “Every clan has its own special magic, and ours is the magic of peace. When people come to fight us, we call them to eat first. We sit down together. We talk. We eat. Then we say to them: ‘All right, if you want to fight take your spears and stand over there. We also will take our weapons, and we will stand on this side.’ But we believe that after eating, their minds will be changed. They will not want to fight us any more” (Somare 1975:23).

33. Gawan outrigger canoes are also painted white. But only young, virile men, do the job. They observe food taboos during the day on which they work in order to insure that the canoe will come to resemble themselves, shine “like lightning,” and not remain feminine wood (Munn 1977).

34. Coconut oil mixed with red ocher also rubbed on the skin of initiates to make them beautiful and strong.

35. Should a canoe experience difficulty while at sea, women were usually beaten by their male kin (usually husbands) upon its return.

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