13.4 Two Case Studies About Objects in Non-verbal Communication

It is one thing to develop theoretical arguments pointing to the importance of the 'agency' of objects, the local ins and outs of 'materiality' or the crucial interaction of bodies with the material world. It is another thing to document these theoretical intuitions in real life, in a real human group. Now is the time for patient and detailed case studies taking into account and investigating the manner by which systems of meaning and actions on matter are organized and enmeshed in human thoughts and actions (e.g. Lemonnier 1993b; 2005; Sillar 1996).

The following ethnographic examples are illustrations of anthropological research paying close attention to making and using artefacts. I have chosen them because they both point to contemporary problems in the study of technology and fit my own interest in this field; but they should be understood as illustrating only one possible way to study technology. In particular, they present a hypothesis about a possible *unnoted* role for objects simultaneously bringing together entire series of thoughts and dealing with several (and various) aspects of the culture and social organization belonging to those who make and use them. In other words, the making and physical usage of some artefacts may be the only way people become aware of key
p. 306 aspects of a system of values and actions. Both case ↳ studies are from the Anga people of Papua New Guinea, where I started my anthropological fieldwork in 1978, notably in the study of technology.

13.4.1 A sturdy fence to build social order

The first object I will discuss is an ordinary garden fence observed among the Baruya of Papua New Guinea. Generally in New Guinea, the enclosures surrounding tuber gardens (and those containing sugar cane, bananas, etc.) result from a series of technical choices: rather than enclosing the animals and feeding them intensively, people prefer to protect their crops by enclosing the tuber gardens, while letting the animals forage freely. The women raising the animals then give them a kilo or so of tubers a day (Lemonnier 1993b).

On the whole, this method has been retained by the Anga groups, but on closer observation, several important differences can be seen from group to group. In particular, the observer who visits the valleys on foot is struck by the 'details' of technical function, which are difficult to interpret or even seem quite aberrant. In Ankave villages, for instance, it is rare and even extremely rare to see a completed garden fence, which raises doubts as to their function as garden protection. The Baruya, on the other hand, erect barriers of sharp pointed stakes regularly measuring over 1.5m (up to 2m) in height, something which can seem surprising if one knows that even hungry pigs in New Guinea are hardly noted for their jumping skills, nor do they try to break through far flimsier obstacles ('Chimbu' fences are not even lashed together) (see Fig. 13.1).

These extremely sturdy Baruya fences are as impressive as they are non-'functional'. Comprising three layers of interlaced planks tightly lashed together, they can, when maintained, firmly withstand the onslaught of any pig. My notes indicate that each running meter of fence contains over 50 boards, all painstakingly interwoven and tied together with lianas. This sturdy 'aspect' and the solidity of the oversized garden fences are the result of ten or fifteen men working together clearing a new garden in the forest. The women transport the fence stakes from old gardens in the valley, then gather and burn the underbrush, while the men—especially the garden-'owner's' brothers-in-law and co-initiates—fell trees and build the fences over the course of a week or two. As the tree trunks are turned into boards or sharpened stakes and the fence is assembled, a veritable open-air workshop is on display to the observer.

It is hard, too, not to notice that the fence is one of the occasions when male solidarity is displayed for all to see. In itself, this collective fencing effort is a reaffirmation of certain social relations, between close blood relatives, between brothers-in-law (above all), between co-initiates or between friends. The Baruya's