OCEANIA

Oceania, Vol. 83, Issue 1 (2013): 1–15
DOI:10.1002/ocea.5003

The Composition of Kwermin Design

Sveinn Eggertsson
University of Iceland

ABSTRACT

This paper is about designs placed on house-boards, shields and drums in the Min cultural sphere of Papua New Guinea. It is argued that the shields and drums can be understood as extensions of the Taro Mother ritual house built in the last of seven male initiation rituals performed in the area. The drum grows taro like the ritual house grows men, the shield attracts ancestral support to warriors like the façade of the ritual house attracts ancestral benevolence to the novices inside. In order to accomplish this the objects, and importantly their designs, are imbued with qualities considered agreeable to the ancestral spirits. It is suggested that as much as these qualities can be understood as part of the visual aspect of the designs, they are also, and importantly so, inherent in the substances used in their composition.

Keywords: shield, drum, design, substances.

INTRODUCTION

The people jointly referred to as Kwermin inhabit the southeasternmost lands of the Min cultural sphere in Papua New Guinea, between the rivers Murray (Wongop) and Strickland (Ok Aum) (Figure 1). The close to five hundred Kwermin are divided between four settlements, the northernmost of which, Senganabip, is where most of my fieldwork took place. Tukitebin, the largest settlement, and Sereptekin, are situated by the Tuki river that flows into the Strickland River to the east. A fourth Kwermin community, Woniabil, occupies the southernmost Kwermin lands, bordering those of the Aukopmin, who settled there after having been driven off their lands by the Baktaman (Swadling 1983). The few remaining inhabitants joined the Woniabil people in the 1980s. The Menumin were ousted from the Murray Valley by the Seltaman and the Baktaman and moved to the foothills to the south (Swadling 1983). They are important trading partners to the Kwermin, providing them with black palmwood bow-staves. In the lowlands to the south and in the foothills to the east are the Konai (Dwyer et al. 1993) with whom the Kwermin have little contact, referring to them as Ngoropmin, the 'people of the place of the guests'.

Relations with lowland people have predominantly been friendly as have those with highland people, predominantly Bimin, and to a lesser extent Oksapmin from whence some dominant Kwermin clans trace their ancestry. The Bimin and the Kwermin speak the same Mountain Ok dialect (*nimtep*) and the Kwermin have tended to follow in the path of the more numerous and powerful Bimin who are also important trading partners. The Bimin were dominant in Kwermin ritual activity prior to Christianisation, and when the Bimin joined the Australian Baptist Church the Kwermin followed suit. Again, men of important clans trace their ancestry to the west, to Faiwol speaking Olsobip and Angkayakmin Selbang. Due to these different origins of its people, I argue, the composition of Kwermin, as a political unit, is complex and not particularly stable. This became evident in 1993 in a dispute between the

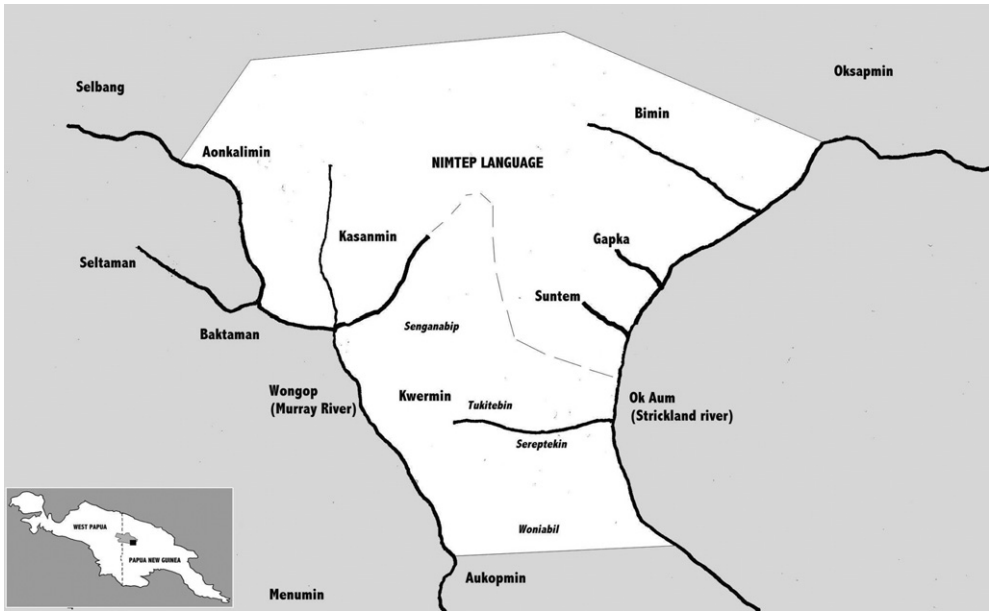

Figure 1. The Kwermin and their neighbours.

two largest settlements, Tukitebin and Senganabip, over the placement of an airstrip. Many Senganabip Kwermin were quite ready to leave the Kwermin association and join the Kasanmin.

In addition to Bimin and Kwermin, people speaking the *nimtep* dialect are the Kasanmin and the Aonkalimin, as well as those living in the settlements of Suntem and Gapka. Referred to as Nintepmin, they are distinguished from the relative newcomers to Murray Valley, the Watepmin (Baktaman and Seltaman) and the Angkayakmin who took much of the Aonkalimin people's lands in and around Selbang shortly prior to pacification. The Kwermin intermittently fought both Suntem and Kasanmin people as well as the Faiwol-speaking Baktaman in the west. All of these groups occupy the same ecological zone, the 'mid-altitude fringe' (Hyndman and Morren 1990), supporting the notion presented by Kwermin elders that relations with the neighbours on their 'sides' were precarious whereas relations with people 'above' and 'below' (north and south) were beneficial (*cf.* Craig and Hyndman 1990). Certainly differences in environmental resources are important in creating peaceful trade relations and, I suggest, this is also the case with differences in terms of knowledge. Despite their occupation of similar environments, Kwermin relations with the Aonkalimin in Dimtekin, who would sometimes oversee ritual performances of the Kwermin, were peaceful.

The Kwermin were first visited by representatives of the Australian government in 1965 and by the early 1980s most of the population had been converted to Christianity. In 2004 an airstrip was completed in the central settlement, opening a long awaited route of travel between Kwermin and the mining town Tabubil, situated roughly a hundred kilometres to the west. In anticipation of this facilitation in transport Kwermin men had begun to make things to sell to visiting foreigners in Tabubil as early as 1994. Among the objects they produced were drums and shields, the latter quite similar in their fabrication to decorative house-boards previously made for the Taro Mother House built in the most elaborate of seven male initiation rituals held by the Kwermin and their Min neighbours (Eggertsson 2003:116ff).

In this paper I discuss various aspects of the particular kind of design placed on these objects. It is not found on any other Kwermin article though the much smaller decoration

sometimes placed on arrow foreshafts has many similar features, the designs on smoking-tubes and ochre containers less so. I owe much of my interest in these objects to the writings of Craig (1967, 1988) and Cranstone (1967, 1968) as well as my encounter with numerous shields and boards in The Papua New Guinea National Museum shortly before my initial fieldwork with the Kwermin. The focus in my writing about these objects is somewhat different from that of my predecessors, attesting to changing theoretical positions in the field and, even though the paper is predominantly ethnographic, I hope that my interpretations with less cognitive and more existentialist orientations may provide a complementary accent to that of previous writings on the subject.

I first present a consideration of the objects, their composition and their use, in the context of Kwermin conceptions of man and the world and in order to do so I briefly outline what I consider to be their basic understanding of the cosmos. Secondly, I discuss the making of the designs, aspects of their carving and naming, and, importantly, the substances that are used to coat their different surfaces and how these bring together in the design, elements from the different spheres of the tripartite cosmos. A central question throughout the paper is: what are the objects with this particular type of design intended to accomplish?

THE OBJECTS IN A CONTEXT OF PRACTICE

In contrast to many western and highland Min, the Kwermin did not place large door boards or other decorative boards on their houses except on the culthouse built in the performance of the Taro Mother House Ritual, an event that culminated with the presentation of drums to the novices who thereby became true men (*kunum*). There are interesting points of comparison between this ritual house and the drum. Both bear design and both are said to have ancestral skin (*kar* 'skin', 'bark'). I will discuss the skin of the drum in a later section. The skin of the ritual house is represented by sheaths of bark placed on its inside walls and referred to as 'skin of father' and 'skin of mother.'

It can be argued that these acts give surface to an ever present ancestral past, separate the men inside the house from it, and emphasize the ritual interaction between the living men and the bygone ancestors on whom the ritual masters call for assistance in the growing of the novices. During the ritual action inside the house the young men sit near its entrance, behind a wall of carved boards invariably referred to as *weit*, which can be translated as 'beautiful' or 'attractive'. In this paper I aim to show that the designs on the boards, shields and drums are composed so as to attract and capture benevolent ancestral powers and mediate them to whatever they are intended to strengthen or grow, be that novices, warriors or taro.

The drum as an instrument of fertility

In order to explain how the drum is to be understood as a model of taro-growth I must first present a brief outline of how I have come to understand the Kwermin cosmos to be: as tripartite, with each of its three spheres associated with a particular life-force personified by a named ancestral being (Eggertsson 2003). The human knee is an important reference point. The space above knee-height is associated with attributes pertaining to the ancestral figure of Eisaorim, a bellicose character linked to, among other things, the heat of the sun and the confrontational personality of younger brothers. The invisible space below ground is the world of ancestral spirits with whom humans must communicate in order to assure their assistance. This is the space that corresponds to the male ancestor Webnok, Eisaorim's elder brother (*cf.* Jones 1980:128–9). He is considered to be a wise and creative being linked with notions of garden fertility. It is towards his world that much ritual practice is directed. Between these two fraternal spheres is that of the ancestress Afek, 'old woman' (Brumbaugh 1990). Her position

in the cosmological configuration typifies that of most wives who travel to their husbands' lands bringing with them the abilities to make productive gardens and give birth to children. Appropriately, what I refer to as 'Afek's sphere' extends from the knee into the soil, comprising the space in which important garden food, pigs and children grow.

I suggest that the depth of this Afekan layer is measured by the length of the drum. The drum originating from the *was* tree is often likened to the base of a tree (*mongom* 'base' of tree or plant). The word also refers to 'origins' and 'meaning' and can be understood as the locus of a plant's growth, from which its roots go inside the soil and the shoot emerges from the ground. The upper part of the drum is compared to such unfolding growth by naming it *fur*, 'new shoot'. It is debated whether the drumskin (obtained from either of two kinds of lizard) should be associated with Afek's knee or those of her younger or elder brothers. The debate reflects a local argument over which of these ancestral beings should be considered the most important in bringing fertility to Kwermin lands.

One can imagine the drum situated vertically in the tripartite cosmic space with its skin placed at human knee-height (Figure 2). The length of the drum would then penetrate the Afekan field creating a passageway between the above ground sphere of Eisaorim and the below ground sphere of Webnok, between the world of the living and the world of the benevolent spirits of the dead. Such an idea of a channel between the human and ancestral worlds finds another expression in the understanding that the *kwiem* marsupial (*Kuskus*

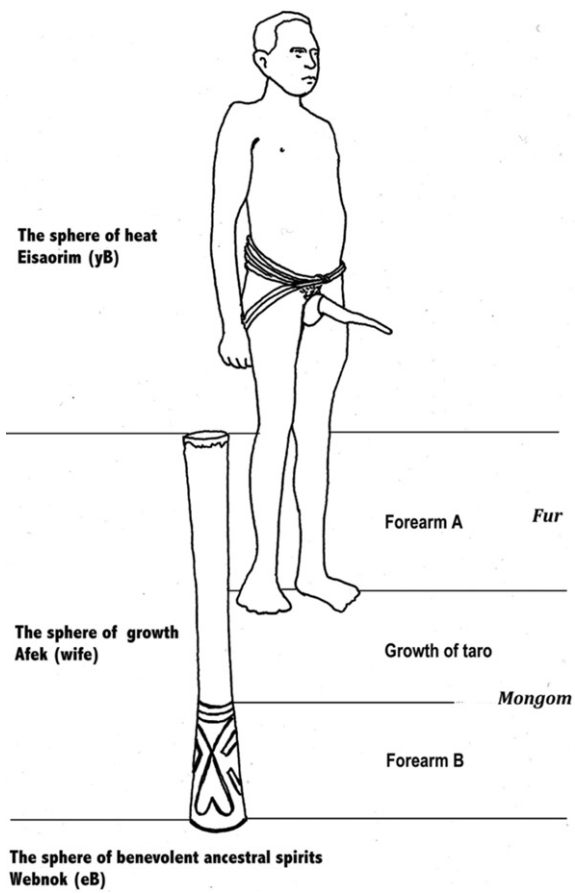

Figure 2. The cosmological context of the drum.

Abu-abu, Flannery 1990:118–9), said to be the ancestor Webnok's assistant, passes between the above ground and the world below through the roots of a tree that also provides the material for the main post of the Taro Mother House (*cf.* Wheatcroft 1976:500–1).

The drum, the forearm and male initiations

When a drum is made, great care is taken to ensure its proper proportions. The drum is waisted, it narrows in the middle, and an arm inserted in its upper end (*fur*) should reach the biceps as the fist runs into the narrowing inside. At the distal end the arm, again with fist closed, should go in almost up to the elbow. The space that is not reached by this form of measurement is approximately a third of the length of a drum and concurs – considering the drum as representing the Afekan layer – with the space in which taro and other tubers grow. A further association between forearm and drum is evident when a drum is presented to young men at the completion of their initiatory process when they must beat such an instrument which the ritual master has prepared for the occasion by fastening human forearm bones to the outside of the upper part of the drum and placing the same kinds of bones inside its lower part.

Men sometimes illustrate their status of full manhood (*kunum*) by holding out an arm with the elbow up in the air and fingers pointing downwards making the claim that they 'have all the roots', meaning they have been through all the seven initiations. In Kwermin, forearm, ritual, and the number seven are indicated by the same word: *ben*. In Bimin *ben* is translated as 'left forearm; number seven; ritual' (Poole 1976:2073) and also as 'activity', one form of which is 'ritual activity' (Thomas Weber, personal communication). In the Kwermin counting practice the number seven is indicated by touching the forearm. Each of the twenty-seven numbers in the counting system corresponds to a particular part of the hands, arms, shoulder, neck or head. The bones that are associated with these body parts are kept in the culthouses because these are the parts of the human anatomy that are understood to bring food.

I suggest that the strong association between drum, forearm and male initiation indicates that the beating of the drum, an activity of true men, extends the ritual acts of the Taro Mother House to the fertile Afekan layer of the gardens promoting the growth of taro and other food. It is the men who have been grown in the Taro Mother House who use the drum to grow food in the gardens. In this the drum can be understood as a metonymical extension of the ritual house and men's initiatory acts originating with Afek. In a similar way the war-shield can be thought of as a prolongation of the Taro Mother House and Afek's powers.

The fear-inducing shield

A shield would be made, or restored, prior to an attack on the enemy – its sparkling appearance being an indication of the fabulous strength of the raiding party (*cf.* Muke 1993:204). The warriors would carry the shield face down until they came within close enough range of the hamlet to be raided where the shield would be raised so that the enemy could see its bloodlike ochre and brilliant limestone in sharp contrast with the green and brown forest. As opposed to the pleasant perception of a decorative board on a ritual house it would not have caused any delight to see a very similar design on a war-shield fronting an attack on one's home-stead (O'Hanlon 1995: 481). Gell comments on an Asmat shield that '[a]nthropologically, it is not a "beautiful" shield, but a fear-inducing shield' (1998:6). The Kwermin (or Min) carved board can be either, depending on its practical context.[1]

Again, shields are perceived differently by their owners according to their success in battle. On a visit to the Baktaman I asked permission to turn a shield facing a corner of the room around to see its design. My request met with heated refusal by a Baktaman elder. 'No', he told me, 'that would mean war.' My Kwermin companions nodded their agreements. The shield was not shown and my companions and I headed towards the neighbouring Seltaman.

In the evening we sat in a men's house where an old shield hung on the wall facing the entrance. I inquired about the shield and was told that it had been used in a very successful raid against the Baktaman nearly three decades earlier. The elders spoke of it proudly, naming the man who had carried it. The shield's proud and prominent position was in great contrast to that of the Baktaman shield bound to face a corner as if in shame over its terrible defeat.

The Baktaman shield is apparently understood to embody some form of agency rather than being just an insentient object used in a purposeful human act. The notion that the turning of the shield, so that its frontal design becomes visible, means war could be an expression of an underlying urge to retaliate, the desire having been transferred to the shield relieving the men from the persistent frustration of unaccomplished revenge. However, an elder Kwermin and former warrior's claim that the meaning of a shield is 'war' also presents an understanding of the implement as embodying some belligerent essence. It is clear that many important objects, such as the bow or water-gourd, were considered having sentient aspects to them, a spirit given to them through initiatory acts analogous to those performed on the human body. According to Craig (1988:57) the Faiwol speaking Angkaiyakmin initiated their shields before battle, the wood was then thought to respond to arrows by contracting and thickening around the point of impact. Such reaction could not be expected from mere wood and thus one must consider both the acts and the substances involved in transforming a piece of soft wood into a sentient being such as a shield, in order to better understand what is thought to imbue it with spirit.[2]

THE COMPOSITION OF THE DESIGN

Aberngam: the carved out parts

When a design is going to be carved onto a drum or board it is first drawn with moistened soot after which a layer of wood between the lines is cut away, leaving them to stand out a few millimetres in relief. Such carved out spaces are said to be *aber*-like (*aberngam*) in reference to the *aber* fern whose trunk is covered with marks left by old leaves falling away as new leaves unfold above them (Figure 3). A crown of leaves surrounding unfurled fronds at the top of the fern is compared to the way initiators look after novices during the initiatory process. The indentations left by the leaves are referred to as *aberngam* and, in the context of leaves being likened to an initiating cohort, the series of marks these leave down the length of the fern's trunk acquire the sense of bygone men. The notion of male ancestors becomes implicit in the reference to the carved out spaces of designs as *aberngam*.

The aber fern belongs to a category of plants the Kwermin refer to as *eis ayem* 'sacred trees' in the vernacular and *bik man* 'big man' in Tok Pisin. These are considered the possible abodes of *eisaor*, spirits of men who have suffered a violent death and are understood to be quite temperamental and possibly hostile towards humans. People treat their dwellings with courtesy lest they take savage revenge on the disrespectful person often by killing his or her children. The fern can be cut down without risk of its spirit's revenge if offerings are placed on the remaining stump. In times of food scarcity its croziers and the pith at the top of the trunk are eaten and this benevolent aspect of the fern as a source of nutrition during times of hardship is frequently mentioned by reminiscing elders.

On a more interpretive note, the fern's dual sense of lethal danger and life giving nurture – the abilities to kill and nurture being opposing qualities cultivated in novices during initiations – is replicated in the drums and the carved boards by the application of ochre and limestone to the *aberngam* spaces. The former substance is considered to be imbued with dangerous ancestral heat, the latter is associated with the benevolence of the undergound ancestral spirits.

Figure 3. Pockmarked stem of an *aber* fern.

***Fut:* the protruding lines**

The Kwermin word for design is *fut* and refers to figures and patterns of various kinds, to drawing and writing as well as interesting natural markings. It need not be a reference to anything. I believe it is quite important in a consideration of what the designs are thought to accomplish to reduce the emphasis often made on the semantic aspects of design (Campbell 2001, Morphy 1992) even though I would not advocate ignoring them completely (Gell 1992). It is rather that in a study of Kwermin design the semantic information is usually meagre and ambiguous. This, in itself, is informative and suggests that the protruding lines of their carvings should perhaps be understood in a different way from the way western literary conventions tend to make us understand them.

If one considers the significance of the patterns the Kwermin tattoo onto each other's faces, these bear witness to meaningful acts rather than being semantic statements. Tattoos on people's faces are said to be meaningless as such, but the act of tattooing, which usually takes place between young people of opposite sex as a display of affection can be said to be an index of fondness (Gell 1998:13). The tattoo patterns are fairly uniform in that they often follow the contours of the face as a curve around an eye or a line down the middle of the nose. Zig-zag lines across foreheads are also common as are circular forms to highlight cheekbones. The prevalence of facial designs throughout the community indicates that tattooing is a conventional way to express personal feelings and make publicly visible the appropriation of a friend or lover.

There are usually stricter conventions regarding the placement of shapes and patterns onto decorated objects than onto the human face and such designs or design elements have names. The Kwermin smoking tube (*suk sen*) has an etching associated with three different things. At the top and the bottom are bands with a << pattern referred to as lizard's feet (*atem sigar*). Next to these are bands of identical width but made by cross-hatching and referred to as sago fruit (*wom dem*), in the middle is a larger image referred to as pig's tusks (*ngasen*).

There is no self-evident association between these phenomena, but one could suggest that they are all indirect references to food items, lizards being food for children, sago being food for anyone, and wild pig exclusively eaten by fully initiated men. Such an interpretation fits the way the Kwermin speak of a smoking tube's development from freshly cut bamboo to 'mature' implement as showing different stages of a man's initiatory progress. Pandanus or mushroom juice is applied to the *aberngam* spaces of a tube giving it a blood-like appearance, in Kwermin terminology, while the outer layer of the bamboo slowly transforms from a raw or unripe (*feis*) state to a ripe dry one. In terms of colour, the bamboo turns from green to white around the red *aberngam* of the design. The unripe tubes are explicitly likened to uninitiated boys whereas tubes with a dry outer layer are referred to as true men (*kunum*). Only such men are permitted the infusion of heat and courage through smoking and they are the only people allowed to eat wild pig. Different aspects of the smoking tube and its use seem to combine and strengthen each other in the presentation of what could be understood to be its meaning, but in this the interpretation of the verbal references is quite dependent on that which other features reveal. The names are here only assumed to refer to food as quite vague indicators of successive stages in a man's development from boy to fully initiated man. They could quite easily be interpreted in a number of different ways.[3]

In other contexts a name can seem to fit perfectly with an overall sense of the object and its use. The central feature of a ritual (*kukurem*) performed in times of food scarcity is an arrow with a foreshaft decorated with a design similar to those on drums and boards. A pig is killed with this arrow while a spell urging the cutting of Telefolip – the central cult-house of the Afek cult in Telefolmin – grass is uttered (*Telefolip weik takataka*). This grass is thought of as alien weed and likened to the *weik* bird (most likely Black Butcherbird, Beehler *et al*. 1986:218) often spoken of as 'cannibal' or, in Tok Pisin, *stilman* 'thief' because it is known to grab birds men have shot and eat them. When the pig has been killed the ritual master pulls the arrow from the carcass and pushes the arrow into the ground and sits down on it while uttering a spell urging the unwanted weed to stay down (*Telefolip weik netnet*).

The design on this arrow, an elongated triangle with a row of small points protruding from the *aberngam* space has the same basic elements as those of drums, shields and boards except the *fok* sap is missing. Its design is said to represent the teeth and backbone of a *singer* bandicoot. Marsupial teeth were often used to carve the rather fine design on to the hardwood foreshaft and the notion of sharpness and cutting is reiterated: Real marsupial teeth carve an image of marsupial teeth onto hardwood that holds the arrowblade that kills the sacrificial pig. There is repeated cutting in this act of sympathetic magic intended to destroy the alien weed that prevents tubers from growing in the gardens. Here the act of carving, the design, the metaphors, the actual utterances, the physical act of killing the pig with the elaborate arrow, combine to form a complex and coherent symbolic act.

Craig (1988:56ff) suggests that the designs on shields and house-boards have 'an underlying structure which is a metaphor for the human being, that is, for the ancestors'. According to his Telefolmin informants, entire designs do not have names, but the details are referred to as parts of human bodies, animals or birds all of which can also be understood as ancestral references. Kwermin shields, not their designs as such, had names and these names reflect their purpose in battle and, perhaps as Jorgensen (1981:111) suggests, as leading participants in raids on the enemy. The name of one Kwermin shield, 'Stand up straight', appears to support this view.

Words referring to different parts of the designs of carved boards were obtained from Kwermin elders by showing them pictures and drawings of different Min shields. The design elements of a shield from Telefomin were explained as follows: zigzag lines on the edges were invariably referred to as snake-tracks, the central vertical carved out space was commonly said to represent a waterfall (*ok dis*); the central lozenge of the design was referred to as bees' nest

(*imeram*) or some other enclosed space with the suffix *–am* 'house' or 'womb'; the coiled lines, in each corner of the board, were said to be feathers of the *akit* bird. Hook-like shapes on the central lozenge were referred to as eyes by some but as large stars, *ngorkin*, literally 'guest-eyes', by others.

It is possible to interpret the relation between the named elements in different ways. Human activity expressed in terms of snakes' movements (or tracks) elicits notions of clans, all of which claim primordial coming into being through the acts of some particular snake species and their interaction. The way the water is said to fall down the centre of the image, between the 'snake tracks' from high masculine space onto a central containing form evokes notions of procreation and continuation of human being. Focusing on other elements of the design, one can suggest that the vertical waisted form with a central circle surrounded by elements referred to as *kin*, the same word as is used to refer to wax pellets placed on a drum

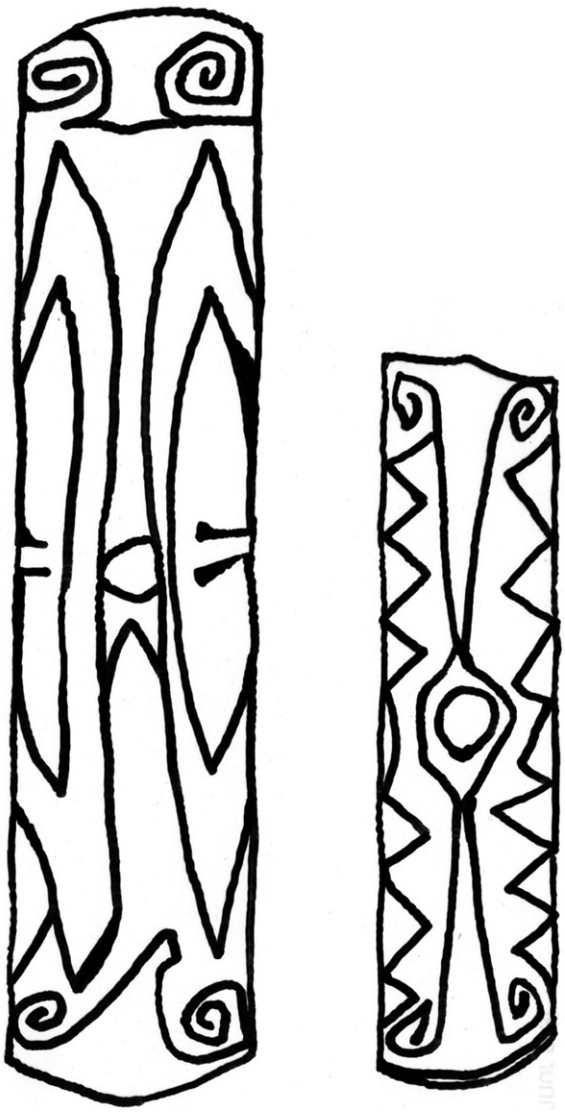

Figure 4. The lines of two Bimin shield designs.

skin to adjust its sound, refers to aspects that are associated with this instrument, perhaps the way the drum is understood to unite different ancestral forces in the growing of food.

I am only speculating of course, but then that may be an indication of what the designs did in a peaceful context, evoked thought and stimulated discussion resulting in certain conventions regarding their interpretation and fabrication. Cranstone notes in relation to highland Min, 'certain types of pattern seem to be favoured by, and so become typical of, each group. Similarly each group seems to favour certain categories of meaning' (1968:619). The designs are not a form of writing, the different named elements do not make a clear semantic statement. They do, on the other hand, invite personal or local interpretations. As with the smoking tube, aspects of the object other than semantic references associated with its design elements may be more helpful to an understanding of what the designs are intended to accomplish.

This seems to be true for the drum as well. Writing about this instrument Craig notes that '[t]he design is identical for all the Mountain-Ok groups but the meanings of the design elements may vary' (1988:53 and Figure 9). As with the design on carved boards, the form of the design is fairly fixed, the verbal explanations quite variable. The design does not speak out as much as it is read into.

Contrary to Craig's assertion of there being only one design on the Min drums, the Kwermin carve at least three designs. The most common is that which Craig mentions (1988:53). The Kwermin call it 'frog' and the mention of its name usually elicits laughter. They also carve a design that resembles the central image on the smoking tube and refer to it in the same way as *ngasen* 'pig's tusk'. A third motif consists of a number of zig-zag lines, referred to as *kaer mit* 'hornbill's beak', its irregularities variously said to have been formed through hornbill initiations akin to those of humans or by the hornbill male's furious wife beating him with cooking tongs.

Two of these three references, pig's tusk and hornbill, make sense as names associated with drums. Men insert a pig's tusk in their septum during the *Seip Mom* initiation in which mens' sexual potency is celebrated. In the same ritual the novices are made to imitate the hornbill's sound. Both tusk and bird can be understood as references to such masculine capabilities deemed necessary for a man to be allowed to beat the drum. One could argue that a frog is not a credible representative of such qualities, being a creature that suggests features associated with women and the unmanly wet and cold environment of ponds and brooks. It is an animal that women gather largely to be eaten by *wonengamerin* 'womenhouse dwellers' – women and children. It is also, by men, somewhat jokingly said to be the animal a woman's spirit transforms into after her death.

Having said this, a common design of hourglass shape was carved on palmwood clubs and said to represent a frog (Craig 1988: 55). Such clubs were used in internecine quarrels (Cranstone 1971: 136) and Kwermin relate stories of duels with such clubs. Again, a man about to execute his enemy or sacrifice an animal in ritual would often utter *kor bon doko doko* 'frog mouth grab grab' at the moment of putting man or beast to death. The frog is clearly associated with masculine violence and killing as well as with feminine features. This contrast seems to underline that the semantic references of the designs are not central to an understanding of what objects with such design, are thought to achieve; here, I believe, a consideration of the materials (*cf.* Ingold 2007) used in the production of the designs is helpful.

MATERIALS

Essences

Melanesian peoples' application of substances on to their skin has been associated with the expression of inner state (Strathern 1979). People cover their bodies with ashes or mud when

grieving or display solidarity and strength through uniform physical appearance in a public performance. Novices were anointed with cucumber juice (*kimit ok*) before they entered a clan culthouse for the first time, the sweet smell of the cucumber was thought to please the ancestors, making them more accepting of the young novices (Eggertsson 1997). In addition to expressive display or masking smell, the Kwermin make use of the reverse effect of anointing the skin with certain substances as a way of instilling in the body qualities considered intrinsic to the material applied. This is done in the first male initiation ritual when dew is considered conducive to the young initiands' growth. Adult men use pig fat to instil well being and to look good in the eyes of women. Ochre is understood to make hunters and warriors hot and courageous killers.

Certain objects are also anointed with substances as part of their initiation ('giving them spirit'). Bows, traded from the lowlands in the south, or stone adzes, do not acquire any designs, but both kinds of objects are coated with substances (given 'skin') and through these acts are understood to acquire a spirit that gives strength to the object. Bowstaves that come through trade are invariably reshaped in a Kwermin fashion, but great care is made not to remove all the *marita* pandanus oil sheen, rubbed on to them by Menumin craftsmen and referred to as their 'skin', lest the bows will lose their strength. Still, some older men complain that the bows are not as strong as they used to be and blame this on the discontinuation of their proper initiation.

The carved out spaces are referred to as 'floor of ochre' (*ngik-ebin*) and 'floor of limestone' (*bukum-ebin*) according to the substance they are coated with. These substances are not just pigments used to give colour to a design, but materials that in themselves are understood to have active properties and are always referred to as particular phenomena. Colour, as a named abstract quality does not have priority in the way Kwermin talk about the world, and using the word 'pigment' to refer to the matter used to cover shields, house-boards and other objects belies the fact that there are other qualities of the substances that are of equal importance, such as their perceived heat or their transformative powers.

Nevertheless, colour does influence the way the Kwermin classify substances. Most *kaisngam* 'light-like' substances or things, such as semen, milk, bone, taro and sago, are understood to be different manifestations of the same basic matter. Similarly, 'blood-like' things such as flesh, blood, and *marita* Pandanus are thought to be different materializations of the same basic stuff. These are the two fundamental elements of the Kwermin cosmos that in a complementary fashion are understood to constitute the lifeworld and can in a rough sense be associated with 'semen' and 'menstrual blood'. Nevertheless, such simple dichotomisation has certain problems, for example the local notion that menstrual blood is considered dark (*bukngam*, 'coal-like') in appearance rather than blood-like (*kaimfingngam*), but I suspect that this is so because menstrual blood is – at least in certain contexts – understood as being a form of female knowledge and thus akin to substances such as the transformative *fok* tree sap discussed below. But first, I turn to ochre (*ngik*) and limestone (*bukum*) as manifestations of the basic elements of the life-world that human agency must keep in balance.

Ochre (*ngik*)

Ochre (*ngik*) is gathered where it accumulates around springs in the hills, sometimes in such abundance that men express feelings of apprehension at the sight of it. The moist substance is gathered and subsequently dried and hardened by heating in hot ashes with 'bloodlike' leaves. This act constitutes men's appropriation of the moist and cold material gathered from water near places where people are considered to have come out of the ground in earlier times. The original exit-hole from whence all Min people came is Yam 'mother' located on Oksapmin land, Kwermin clans having one or more subsequent exit-holes according to their mythical trajectory from Yam – the common exit from the ground of all Min – to the land where they

reside at present. After people's exit from the ground came water and ochre is said to have followed. Its association is with ancestral menstrual blood and it is considered particularly powerful and dangerous (*cf.* Barth 1987:51). But menstrual blood is also thought to be dark in appearance and *ngik* 'ochre' is not a reference to this bodily fluid as such, but to its essentially dangerous potential appropriated by men. It was mixed with pig fat and placed on men's skin in order to imbue them with fierceness and increase their ability to kill game or enemies.

Exceptionally potent ochre, according to well respected Bimin ritual specialists, was brought for use on the house-board in the last Taro House Ritual held in Kwermin. An elder carried the ochre on a stick from Bimin to Kwermin after being instructed not to place it in his stringbag, being warned: 'If you do so your wife will give birth to children with tiny legs, tiny hands and head, and a huge belly'. In other words, what the Kwermin and their neighbours consider to be the female part of the anatomy would have been exaggerated and the male parts diminished. The novices were instructed to be very careful when they entered or exited the culthouse so as not to get any ochre on their bodies since this would kill them instantly.

Bukum: limestone

Limestone (*bukum*) is gathered where rivers have eroded their banks leaving the underlying rock bare. Its geological origins associate it with the four-layered underworld of ancestral spirits. The oldest of such spirits are thought to have reached the lowest underground sphere and become embodied as the *kwiem* marsupial closely associated with men's ritual abilities in the growing of taro. The substance is not exclusively masculine, milk is one form this 'light-like' basic substance assumes, as is water, often understood as the antithesis *par excellence* of masculine ancestral heat.

After placing the moistened limestone on a carving, the artisan exposes the design to the sun for the limestone to dry and to increase its brilliance, a desired effect that can be compared to the shine of pig fat on men's bodies, a sign of good health and wellbeing.

Sap from the *fok* tree

The 'coal-like' (*bukngam*) sap from the *fok* tree is used by the Kwermin to darken the lines of the designs. Unlike limestone and ochre, there is no information on the use of the *fok* sap for this purpose from other Min settlements. In Bimin, shields are placed over fire so that they gather soot, after which limestone and ochre are added to the design, and Barth (1975:177) claims, for the Baktaman, 'that the pigment for black paint is scraped or soaked off the inside thatch of the men's house ceiling.'

There is only one *fok* tree near the northernmost Kwermin settlement where I lived. It was planted there some years ago, and its trunk is scarred from repeated cutting made to obtain its sap. The tree is an ugly presence, does not seem to thrive well and is spoken of as evil because contact with its leaves or sap can cause sores and subsequently scars. It is this power to transform human skin that makes the *fok* sap important. It embodies the efficacy of male initiations to change the novices' skins. The notion of transforming a person's skin is central to Kwermin understanding of how people assume new social positions (Eggertsson 2003).

It is the idea of attracting and mediating ancestral forces I consider the most important aspect of the design when considering what it is intended to achieve. Feld (1986), in writing of the Kaluli drum, suggests that there is a visualist bias in western attention to the appearance of the drum, that too much is made of its carved design as compared to its carefully adjusted sound. This comment is supported by the fact that performances where the drums are a central feature take place during night when the instruments' visual aspects are not all that easy to perceive. The importance of its sound does not, however, necessarily detract from the importance of its design, relegating it to mere image. Its efficacy is not limited to the visual aspect,

but is intrinsic to the substances that are placed on it. One could perhaps argue that the drum is a chemical tool as much as a visual display or an aural instrument.

Novel material

Due to Australian Baptist influence ochre has come to be considered an evil substance, and the Kwermin now use in its stead the juice from red berries of a *burusi*-tree donated by missionaries. They also introduced chalk for writing on the piece of blackboard brought for the prayerhouse and this is sometimes used instead of limestone on carved designs.

It could be argued that the use of chalk and berry-juice instead of limestone and ochre indicates a visualisation of the designs. That substituting berry-juice for ochre has transformed a potentially dangerous object into a less spirited thing. However, to many, this pacification of the shield is without doubt welcome and the use of *burusi* is taken as an indication of the biblical spirit having replaced a constant threat of violence. In a similar vein one may consider the use of foreign chalk as an essential modern upgrading of the notions of wisdom and benevolence associated with the use of limestone. Writing in the prayerhouse and in Tok Pisin classes is related to a western way of life now considered to be more capable than the ancestral spirits of improving life conditions. It is quite as reasonable to broaden the reference to wisdom and benevolence to include the foreign potential of writing and knowledge as it is to replace the bellicose ochre with pacific missionary berry juice.

In Bimin one craftsman had begun using the chemical mixture obtained from discarded batteries to darken the lines of his designs. This foreign substance has also replaced moist soot as pigment in tattooing. As with the use of chalk, the zinc-carbon of the batteries can be understood as a modern upgrading of the designs. However, when Kwermin elders heard of this novelty they did not seem to approve and shook their heads in what seemed like mild disbelief. This may indicate that there is greater resistance to replacing the *fok* sap and its qualities of transformation than to replacing the other substances. It may also suggest that the *fut* 'drawing' has greater significance to the elders than the *aberngam* carved out parts, the lines of the design being understood as expressing human activity in the task of maintaining a balance between the fundamental forces of the lifeworld and the fact that such acts must follow the guidance of the forefathers and be represented by authentic substance.

One can contrast this with a modern reinterpretation of a shield design (Figure 4, left shield). A young Bimin man explained the various parts of the shield by referring to the central vertical space as 'waterfall', the central lozenge as 'flat rock' onto which the 'water' falls. Ochre-filled spaces each side of the 'waterfall' were referred to as 'soil' and the limestone filled spaces at the sides as 'cliffs'. At the top, coiled lines were described as 'mountains' and between them was 'water'. At the bottom of the shield were 'streams' coming from the 'waterfall'. Here the image is described as a landscape devoid of human action.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that the shield and the drum should be understood as extensions of the Taro Mother House and the ritual activities associated with this house. A single shield with its design can be seen as an extension of the façade of the ritual house where many boards with designs similar to that of the shield are placed together. The façade displays the alliance of many men from different Min settlements gathered in one place to perform this final ritual in the male initiation process culminating with the presentation of drums to the now fully initiated men. Just as the house has grown the men, the drums, correctly beaten by the mature men, will grow taro in the gardens. The womblike attribute of the house is replicated in the drum whose cosmological position is in the fertile Afekan sphere mediating between the hot

world of Eisaorim (and the living) and the netherworld of benevolent ancestors, bringing together the three major ancestral forces in the growth of taro.

The nameless design is often said to be 'ancestor' and there are clear references to forefathers in the notion of the *aberngam* carved out spaces, which form the background to the linear *fut* 'drawing', which I have suggested represents the knowledge of the living. This knowledge is skin-like, as much Kwermin knowledge is understood to be, and the work of this knowledge is predominantly to keep a balance between the two basic elements of the world, sometimes manifest as blood and semen, but on the shield design as *ngik* 'ochre' and *bukum* 'limestone'. In the design, the lines separate and order these substances, just as ritual activity separates and orders the social world of the living. For Kwermin, the most common visual resemblance to a shield's design is the open carcass of a pig being butchered. Its different skin-like tissues separating blood-coloured entities from light-coloured ones, the skins giving form to the substances.

The notion of attracting benevolence is not uncommon in Kwermin who in earlier times would make charms out of eagles' claws in order to attract wealth. I believe that the designs on the carved objects discussed here should predominantly be understood as intended to accomplish the attraction of ancestral benevolence in order to grow food and novices and to protect warriors. In addition to looking and sounding good, the objects should have been given their proper essence through the application of appropriate substances, an act that in other instances is explicitly referred to as initiating objects (bow and adze) and thereby giving them spirit. This essence is understood to make the objects effective agents in the world. The design, traditionally, brings together elements from three cosmic spheres: limestone from the ancestral underworld, ochre from the fertile Afekan layer and the transforming sap from the world of the living (and, that of the younger brother ancestral being, Eisaorim). It can be thought of as part of a dialogue between living acting men and their bygone fathers, the lines being fairly closely reproduced but with certain innovations. The use of novel materials is the most prominent change in recent years. A design may now bring together the chalk from the prayerhouse, the pacific berryjuice introduced by missionaries and even the zinc-carbon from within used batteries. The Christian God is now the benevolent father, the emphasis on 'killing' has been replaced by an emphasis on peace, and the knowledge associated with western technology is replacing the ritual wisdom of the forefathers.

NOTES

1. As Craig (2005a: 7) points out, the criteria for defining an object as 'shield' can be difficult to argue, and the similarities between some boards carved for the façade of a ritual house and warshields are quite considerable (2005b: 120–1).
2. Tony Crook (2007:24–8) presents a vivid account of modern day Bolovip shieldmaking.
3. For example, a different interpretation of the smoking tube's design could focus on the increasing penetrating qualities of lizard's claw, sago thorn, and pig's tusk.

REFERENCES

BARTH, F. 1975. *Ritual and knowledge among the Baktaman of New Guinea*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, New Haven: Yale University Press.

1987. *Cosmologies in the making: A generative approach to cultural variation in inner New Guinea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BEEHLER, B.M., T.K. PRATT and D.A. ZIMMERMAN. 1986. *Birds of New Guinea*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

BRUMBAUGH, R.C. 1990. Afek sang: The 'old woman' myth of the Mountain-Ok. In Barry Craig and David Hyndman (eds.), *Children of Afek: Tradition and change among the Mountain-Ok of Central New Guinea*, pp. 54–87. Sydney: Oceania Publications, University of Sydney.

CAMPBELL, S. 2001. The captivating agency of art: Many ways of seeing. In Cristopher Pinney and Nicholas Thomas (eds.), *Beyond aesthetics: Art and the technologies of enchantment*, pp. 145–62. Oxford: Berg.

CRAIG, B. 1967. 'The houseboards of the Telefomin sub-district, New Guinea', *Man* 2:260–273.

1988. *Art and decoration of Central New Guinea*. Aylesbury, Bucks: Shire Publications Ltd.

2005a. Introduction. In Harry Beran and Barry Craig (eds.) *Shields of Melanesia*, 117–26. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
2005b. Highlands of Central New Guinea. In Harry Beran and Barry Craig (eds.) *Shields of Melanesia*, 1–12. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
CRAIG, B. and D. HYNDMAN. 1990. Introduction. In Barry Craig and David Hyndman (eds.), *Children of Afek: Tradition and change among the Mountain-Ok of Central New Guinea*, pp. 1–8. Sydney: Oceania Publications, University of Sydney.
CRANSTONE, B. 1967. Some boards from a New Guinea *haus tambaran*. *Man* 2:274–277.
1968. War Shields of the Telefomin Sub-District, New Guinea. *Man* 3: 609–624.
1971. The Tifalmin: A 'Neolithic' People in New Guinea. *World Archaeology* 3: 132–42.
CROOK, T. 2007. *Exchanging Skin: Anthropological Knowledge, Secrecy and Bolivip, Papua New Guinea*. The British Academy, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
DWYER, P., M. MINNEGAL and V. WOODYARD. 1993. Konai, Febi and Kubo: The North-West Corner of the Bosavi Language Family. *Canberra Anthropology* 16(1): 1–14.
EGGERTSSON, S. 1997. Knowledge and skin among the Kwermin of Papua New Guinea. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Manchester.
2003. *Transforming skins: Kwermin sequences of growth*. Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press.
FELD, S. 1986. Sound as Symbolic System: The Kaluli Drum. In Charlotte Frisbie (ed.), *Explorations in Ethnomusicology: Essays in Honor of D.P. McAllester*, pp. 147–58. Detroit: Information Coordinators.
FLANNERY, T. 1990. *Mammals of New Guinea*. Carina Qld: Robert Brown & Associates.
GELL, A. 1992. The technology of enchantment and the enchantment of Technology. In Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (eds.), *Anthropology, art and aesthetics*, pp. 40–63. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
1998. *Art and agency*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
HYNDMAN, D. and G.B. MORREN. 1990. Human ecology of the Mountain Ok. In Barry Craig and David Hyndman (eds.), *Children of Afek: Tradition and change among the Mountain-Ok of Central New Guinea*, pp. 9–26. Sydney: Oceania Publications, University of Sydney.
INGOLD, T. 2007. Materials against materiality. *Archaeological dialogues* 14(1): 1–16.
JONES, B. 1980. Consuming society: Food and illness among the Faiwol. PhD thesis. University of Virginia.
JORGENSEN, D. 1981. Taro and arrows: Order, entropy and religion among the Telefolmin. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of British Columbia.
MORPHY, H. 1992. From dull to brilliant: The aesthetics of spiritual power among the Yolngu. In Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (eds.), *Anthropology, art and aesthetics*, pp. 181–208. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
MUKE, J. 1993. The Waghi *Opo Kumbo: An Account of Warfare in the Central Highlands of New Guinea*. PhD thesis. University of Cambridge.
O'HANLON, M. 1995. Modernity and the 'Graphicalization' of Meaning: New Guinea Highland Shield Design in Historical Perspective. *Journal of the Royal Anthropolocical Institute* (N.S.) 1: 469–93.
POOLE, F.J.P. 1976. *The Ais Am: Introduction to male initiation ritual among the Bimin-Kuskusmin of the West-Sepik district, Papua New Guinea*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Cornell University.
STRATHERN, M. 1979. The self in self-decoration. *Oceania* 49: 241–57.
SWADLING, P. 1983. *How long have people been in the Ok Tedi region?* Boroko: PNG National Museum.
WHEATCROFT, W. 1976. *The legacy of Afekan: Cultural symbolic interpretations of religion among the Tifalmin of New Guinea*. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Chicago.