

THE SURVIVAL OF TRADITIONAL ART FORMS ALONG
THE MIDDLE SEPIK RIVER IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA
AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE
CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

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The Survival of Traditional Art Forms Along
the Middle Sepik River in Papua New Guinea
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Ill. 1 Author in front of Debating Stool in Haus Tamberan, Korogo. with left to right Mwai and Wood Gable Masks.

I INTRODUCTION

In my course of study with the Pacific Islands Program at the University of Hawaii I was able to delve more intensely into an area that had always held great appeal and fascination for me - Oceanic art. This paper is the result of a number of these art courses, an August '80 trip to the Middle Sepik River area of Papua New Guinea, and information gained from other Pacific Island Program courses. All these sources merged to complement, enrich, and enlarge my understanding of the many facets and complexities of Middle Sepik life and art. Together they serve as a background for this paper.

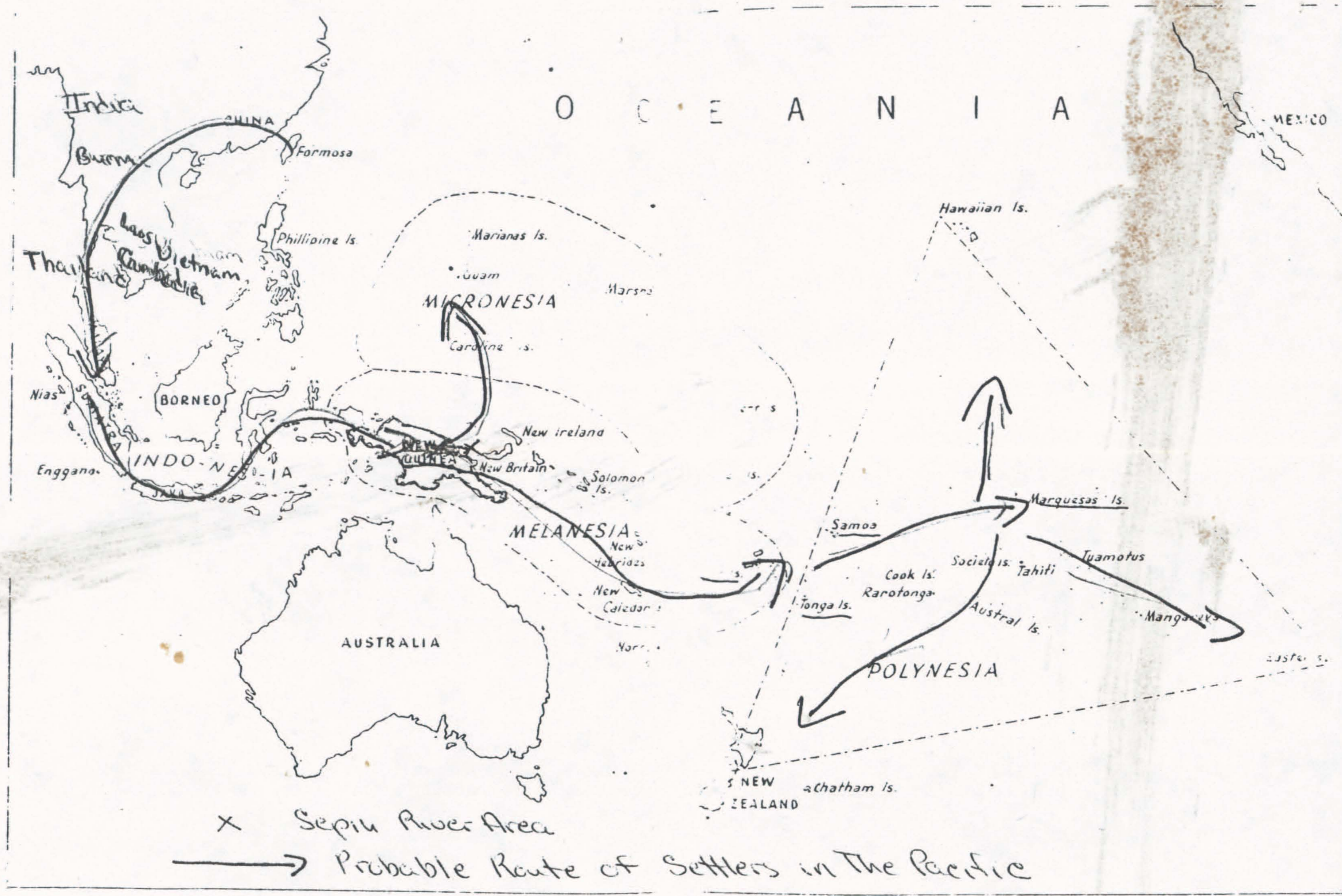
Concurrent with my interest in primitive art has been an affinity I have always felt for so-called "primitive" cultures. The interrelationship of art and society is well known. It has often been said that to understand people fully one must look at their art. Nowhere is this concept more relevant than among non-literate societies. Among people that do not read or write, art assumes an essential role. It embodies the essence of their culture and is also the means of communicating various aspects of this culture. Today, although a few people along the Sepik River are literate, and some at least nominal Christians, many aspects of their traditional cultures remain. It is mainly by studying their art works that we can appreciate and understand these traditional beliefs and practices which continue to influence their lives today.

Gregory Bateson, in Naven, his definitive study of the Iatmul people of the Middle Sepik River area,¹ pointed out the

interrelationship of their ethos and art. He suggested that nearly every aspect of Iatmul culture is expressed in the traditional art and architecture.

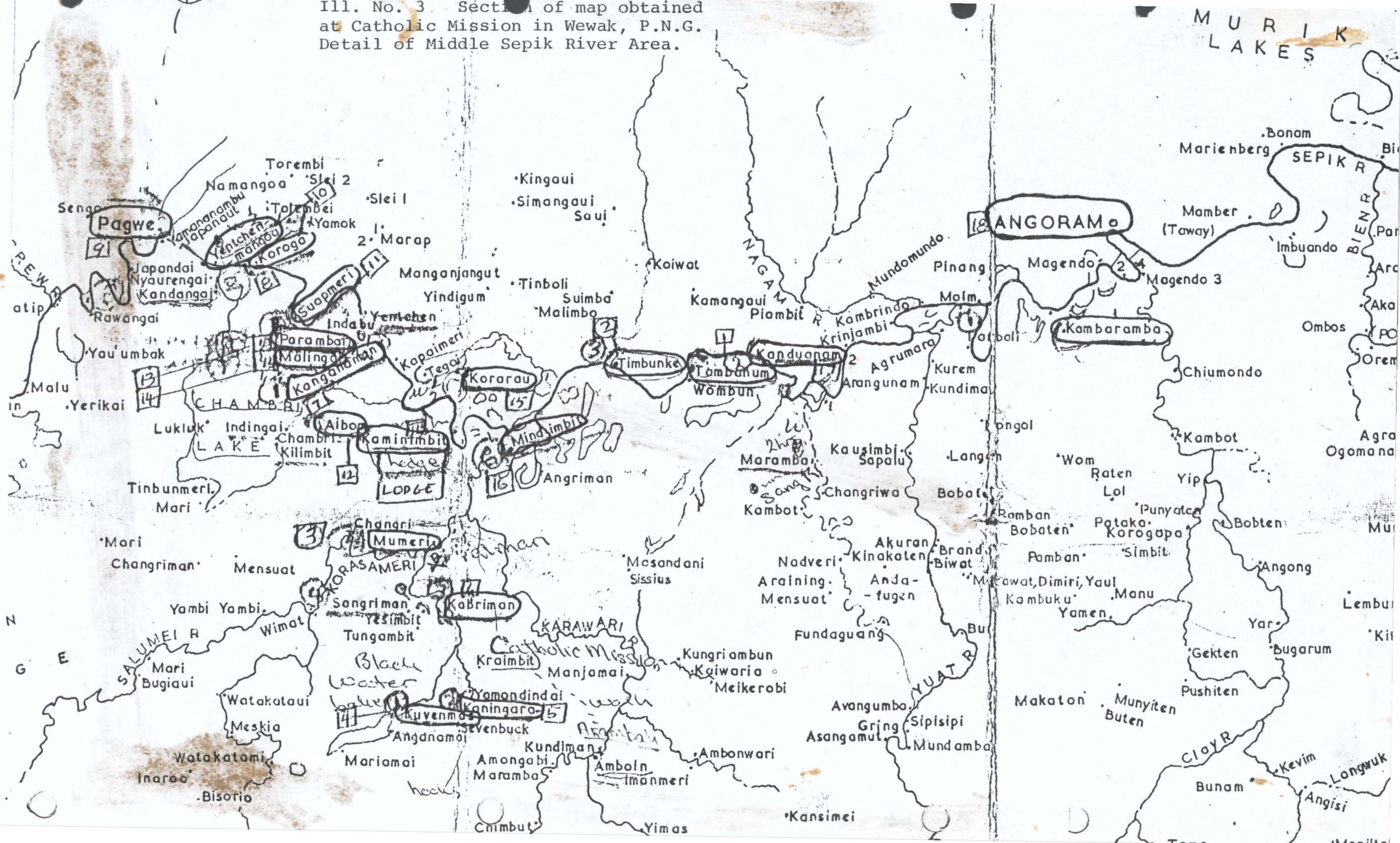
Anthony Forge came to a similar conclusion after studying the art of the Abelem people in the Maprik area a little north of the Sepik River: "There is no escaping the fact that [art] styles have social functions and are maintained because they are useful to the members of a society and to the preservation and transmission of their culture."² He further states that traditional cultures are not only preserved but fortified and passed on by the repetition, ritual and symbolism of the art forms used.³ According to Forge, art is in fact another language and once one knows the alphabet (in this case the iconography) it becomes possible to decipher the meaning and basic beliefs of a culture.⁴

I had an opportunity to evaluate these theories during the trip my husband and I made to the Middle Sepik River area in northeastern Papua New Guinea last summer. (Ill. 2) The people of this region, according to the anthropologist Carl Schmitz, consider themselves to be the "Real River People".⁵ It is this section between the Ramu River and the Waskuk mountains known as the Middle Sepik that is considered by art connoisseurs to have produced the most vital, original and prolific art in Melanesia. For ten days we traversed the course of the Sepik and its tributaries: the Karawari, Shortmeri and Krosmeri rivers. From the towns of Angoram to Pagwe, to the Black Water and Chambri Lakes, we covered hundreds of miles and visited



Ill. 2 Map showing New Guinea and Sepik River in relationship to S.E. Asia and the rest of the Pacific.

Ill. No. 3 Section of map obtained at Catholic Mission in Wewak, P.N.G. Detail of Middle Sepik River Area.



twenty villages (primarily of the Iatmul tribe): Kambaramba, Tambanum, Timbunke, Kanganaman, Korogo, Parambai, Yentchenmangoa, Malingai, Korarau, Mindimbit, Mumeri, Suapmeri, Kanduanam, Aibom in the Chambri Lakes, Kuvenmas, Kaningara, and Kabriman on the Black Water Lakes, and Kaminimbit where our base lodge was located. (Ill. 3) We made these arrangements through Sava Matsick, a long-time resident of the area and the owner of the lodge and canoe. In determining the itinerary I drew heavily on information gained in the course "Art and Melanesia" (Art 478).

The language of the Middle Sepik River area is predominately oral and many variations exist in the spelling of village names. For uniformity I am using the names on the map prepared in 1978 by the Catholic Mission at Wewak, although there is often a discrepancy between their spelling and that of others who have written about the Sepik region. It may be noted that reference is not made to works on the area written in German. This is because I do not read German.

A major purpose of this trip was to observe the state of traditional and new art forms. What influences had contact with Western civilization had upon the predominately primitive cultures of the Middle Sepik River area and how had this contact influenced their art? To maintain its integrity and viability art must have a direct relationship to the needs and beliefs of a culture. Unfortunately, in many areas (for example part of West Africa) contact with Western industrialized society has brought about disintegration of the traditional

local culture and, as a consequence, degeneration of the traditional art forms that once expressed it. This has not happened in the Middle Sepik region.

This paper does not presume to be an in-depth examination of the traditional art forms along the Sepik but I believe that my background in the arts and culture of this area equipped me to make knowledgeable observations and assessments and to describe accurately the viable, prolific state of the arts as it exists in the Middle Sepik River villages today. Due to the limitations of time and the exigencies of travel in this area, I was not able to develop informants. Neither was I able to compare and contrast the Haus Tamberans or detail their contents as thoroughly as I would have liked. Another obstacle to research was the traditional custom of denying women entry to the upper levels of most Haus Tamberans. Nevertheless there appears no question that both traditional and new art forms are being produced along the Middle Sepik area in a manner that equals the quality, productivity, vitality and originality of pre-contact times. As Deborah Waite noted this is a different picture than the current literature on the area indicates but from my observations it is the case. Much more work could be done on this subject if funds and time were available. Of particular interest might be a study of the village of Korarau. This was the smallest, most traditional (and least friendly) of all the villages we visited yet the producers of the most unique art objects.

Ideally the pieces my husband and I collected along the

Middle Sepik River would constitute an important part of this project. As logistics make this impossible, I have included photographs and slides of these artworks. Slides of the villages, architecture and peoples of the Middle Sepik are also a supplement. (All slides are at the end of this paper.) I would like to point out that in assessing the artistic merits of the art work discussed I was greatly aided by my husband's aesthetic judgment. He is a professional contemporary artist and a professor of art at C. W. Post College, Long Island University.

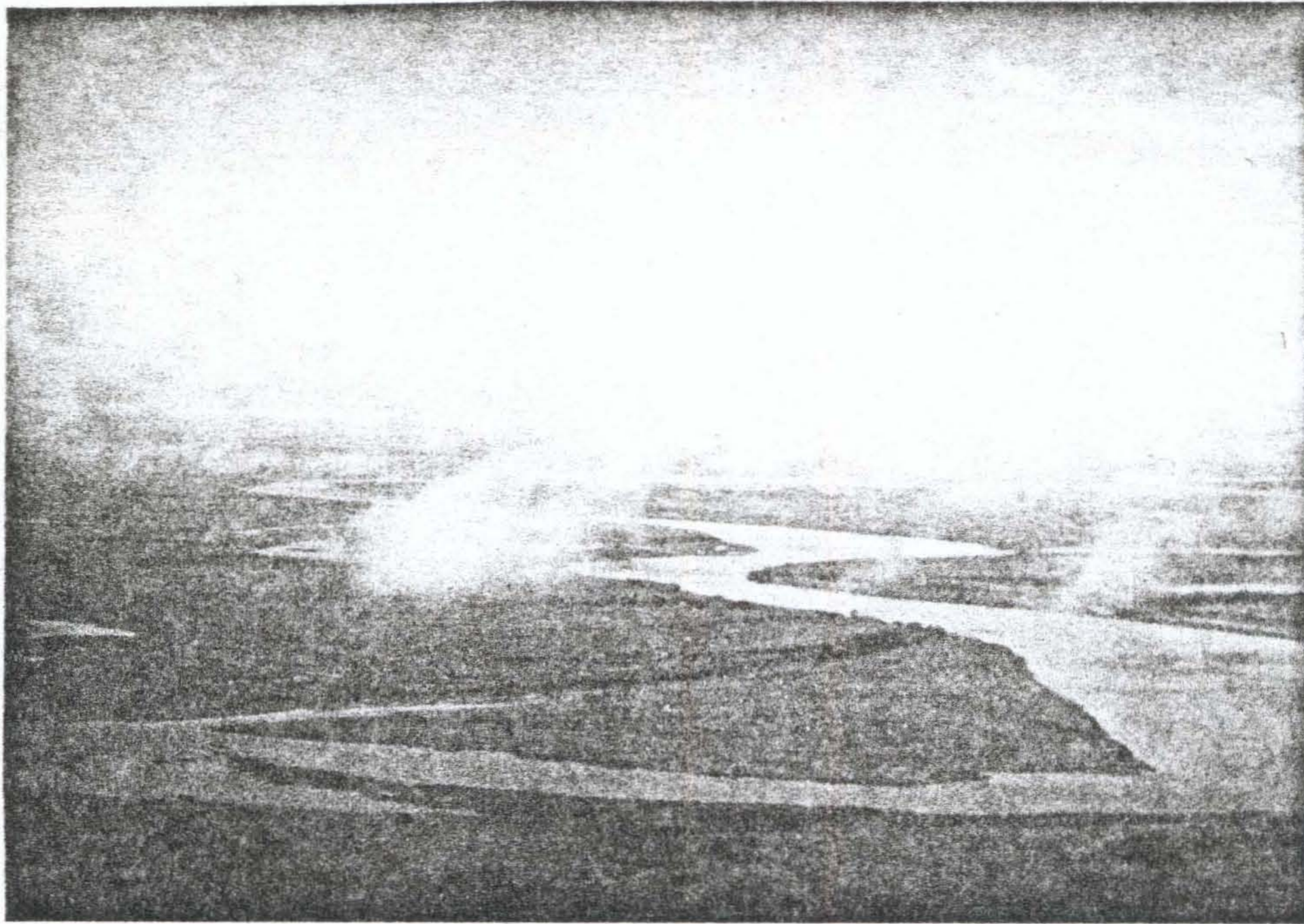
We traveled the Sepik in a 40 ft. dugout canoe which was built, carved, decorated and captained by the inhabitants of Kaminimbit - a village which featured prominently in Gregory Bateson's study Naven. The local people have found that a canoe is the best way to navigate the Sepik because it is able to pass through areas of clogged vegetation which would bar a broader boat. Only the noise from our 40 horsepower Yamaka engine seemed an intrusion in the peaceful world of the Sepik. But a boat with a motor was necessary to travel the four hundred miles we covered in 10 days and to make headway against the 5 knot current of the river.

II THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT, GEOGRAPHY, POPULATION AND VILLAGES

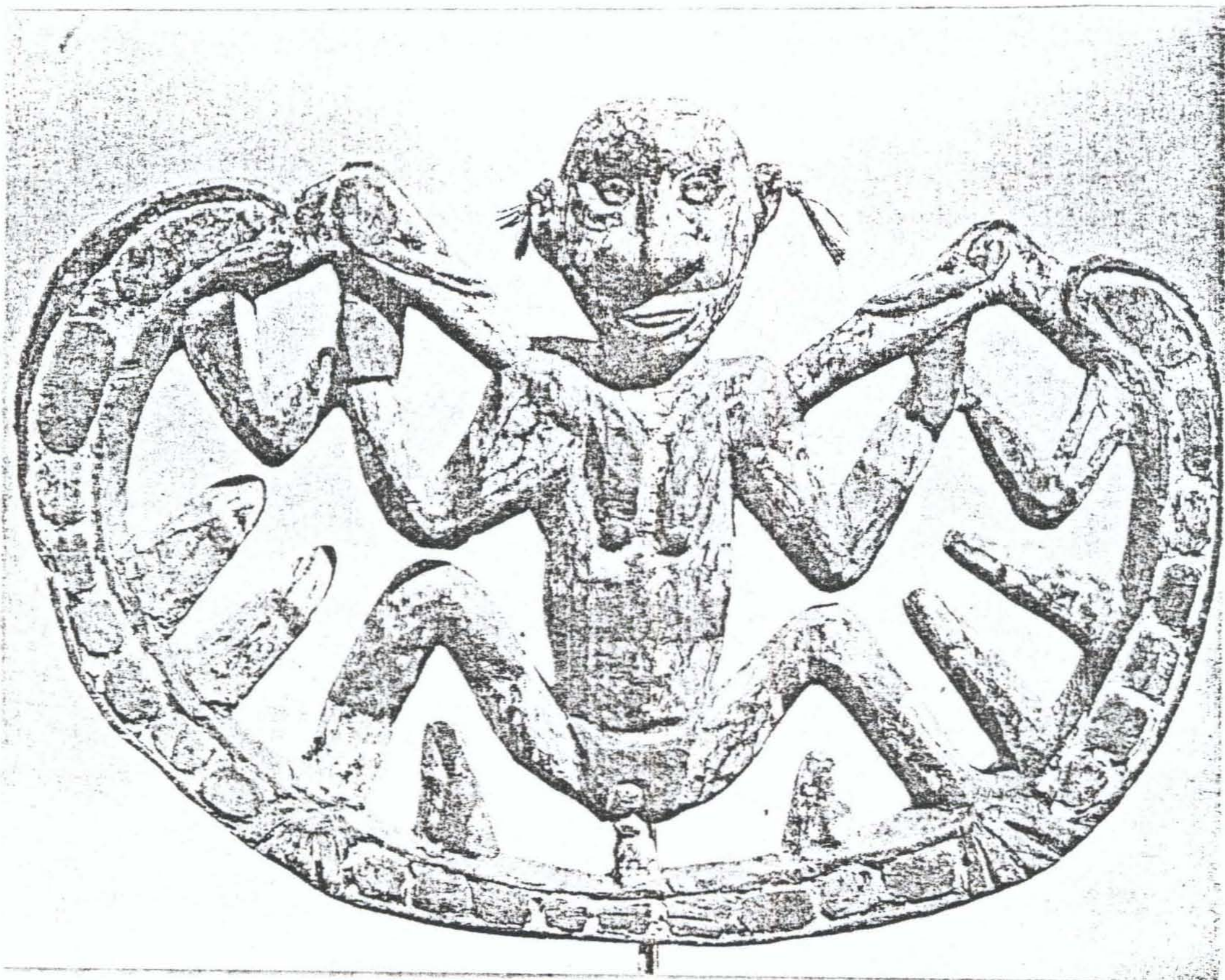
The Sepik River is a dominant feature of the environment. Constantly changing course, the river meanders the nearly 1126 kms. from its source in the mountains near the Irian Jaya border to its mouth on the east coast of Papua New Guinea. (Ill. 4 & G.S. 1-4) The waters of this mighty river range from totally clear and limpid areas as in the Black Water Lakes to muddy and rushing sections, so filled with vegetation as to make passage next to impossible. Unfortunately the latter situation prevented our reaching Kilimbit and Indingai in the Chambri Lakes. At times, entire small islands broken from the river banks sweep past your canoe. These constant changes in the features of the landscape make navigation extremely difficult for even the most experienced captain who may suddenly find a former passage or short-cut blocked, or, conversely, that a dead-end passage has turned into an ox bow. Navigability is crucial in this area, for the river is the only means of transportation, communication and distribution of both goods and ideas.

Sepik legends tell of the river's creation from a woman's child who became a lizard. As it crawled upon the land the course of the Sepik was formed.⁶ This myth is commonly represented in the art work of the Sepik. (Ills. 5 and 57)

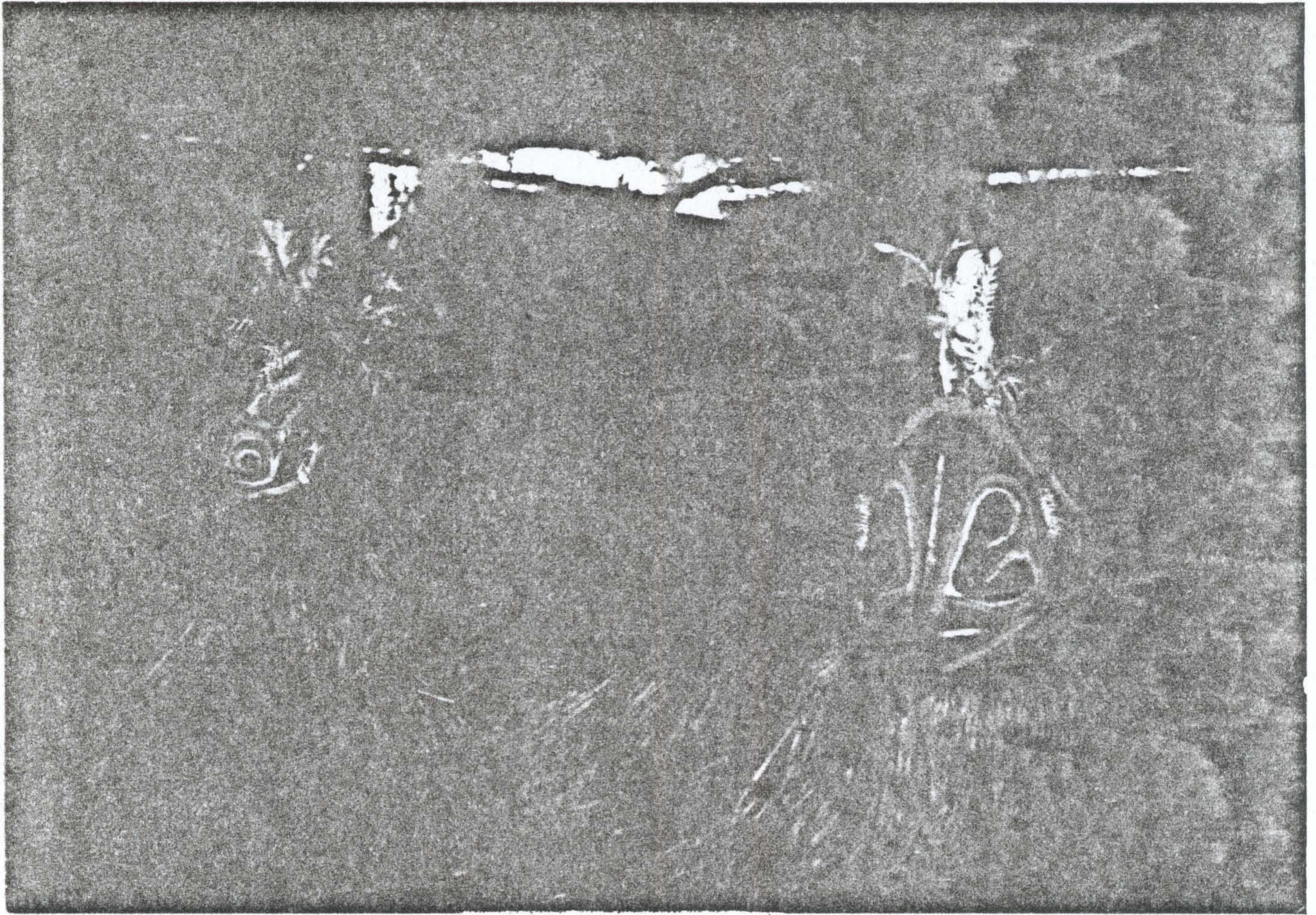
Swamps and jungles line the river banks. (G.S. 5) From these the villagers obtain small birds, animals, and sago, the essential staple. But it is the Sepik's fish and shell fish



Ill. 4 The Sepik River showing meandering course ox bows etc.



Ill. 5 Sculpture depicting the origin of the Sepik River
From Douglas Fraiser "The Heraldic Woman".



Ill. 6 Dance Costumes from the village of Tambanum, possibly related to tree and bush shapes along the Sepik River, note also beak noses.

that are the main source of protein in the inhabitants' diet. A greatly prized supplement to their regular fare is betelnut which is chewed extensively throughout the area. This habit is reflected artistically in the production of beautifully decorated lime and betelnut containers and spatulas. While betelnut is a narcotic, I did not observe it to have any noticeable effects on the indigenous inhabitants. Perhaps this is because they are used to it. For, after chewing only one nut with lime and ginger, I experienced dramatic changes: a brief period of equilibrium disorientation and a slightly altered state of consciousness.

Papua New Guinea lies in the humid tropic zone, with heavy seasonal rainfall patterns.⁷ In the winter when precipitation is heavy, the river rises over 6 feet above its banks to flood the surrounding villages. Anthony Forge points out how this natural phenomenon has facilitated the Iatmul art production.⁸ The flooding of the river uproots large trees. The villagers are then able to take advantage of the rising waters to transport these huge trunks to desired locations. Later they carve them into the distinctive debating stools, slit gong drums, and support pillars for the Haus Tamberan.

A geological element that I believe affects the life and art forms of the Middle Sepik River people is their location on the edge of the Pacific Plate.⁹ This is an extremely unstable area, subject to severe earthquakes. These dramatic environmental changes directly affect the lives, welfare and even survival of the villagers. They explain these natural phenomena

by using social models from everyday life. For example, an earthquake can be construed as representing the anger of gods, spirits or even ancestors. The consequent placating or appeasing of such forces is carried out at least partly by the creation and ritual use of artistic objects. (See F. Speiser & D. Newton quotes on page 21.)

Traveling along the Middle Sepik, one sees no high hills to disturb the horizontal planes of sky and river. (G.S. 4) The landscape provides a vista of great space and creates a feeling of vulnerability - particularly from the perspective of a canoe passenger. At dusk a fantastic quality is imparted to the environment. The silhouettes of trees and bushes distorted by the river mists are descended upon by flock after flock of birds swooping down to roost for the night. Every floating object in the river appears to be a crocodile. Visually, this is a very impressive sight and it was easy for me to speculate on the connection between the natural landscape and the art work of the area. The art historian Paul Wingert has referred to a similar quality in Sepik art: "Although there is always an obvious basis in reality, the shapes are often combined in a weird or fantastic way to create arresting and dynamic effects."⁶ After ten days on the river it seemed to me that the weird and fantastic shapes upon which he commented, particularly those of the wicker animal figures, fetishes and anthropomorphic dance costumes, appeared to have a direct relationship to the natural shapes of bushes, trees and animals transformed by the special qualities of the sky, light and

water of the Sepik. (Ill. 6, G.S. 6)

Marshall Sahlins has proposed the theory of a direct relationship between the natural resources of a land and the types of societies that evolve in a given area.¹¹ He believes that countries with many varied natural resources, such as Tahiti and Hawaii in the Pacific, develop stratified societies. Conversely those lands where usable natural resources such as food supplies and fertile soil are minimal, for example, the atolls of the Pacific and the Sepik River area, develop more egalitarian societies.

From an art perspective the highly stratified societies tend to restrict the use of art to the upper classes; whereas in those societies which are more egalitarian, such as are found in the Sepik area, art forms are created and used by all. This lack of restriction may have contributed to the extremely prolific production of art along the Sepik although, admittedly, this is only one of many possible causes.

Anthony Forge estimated the 1965 Iatmul population to be 8,000. A more accurate and higher count will probably be revealed by the census currently taking place all over Papua New Guinea. Most of these people live in villages either along the banks of the Sepik such as Korogo, Kaminimbit, Kanganaman and Tambanum or set back a distance of a mile or more from the river such as Yentchenmangoa, Parambai and Suapmeri. This latter location may stem from earlier times when there was a lot of intervillage fighting and being back from the river (the only route of attack) was a protection. Another reason

for locational differences is undoubtedly the changing course of the river.

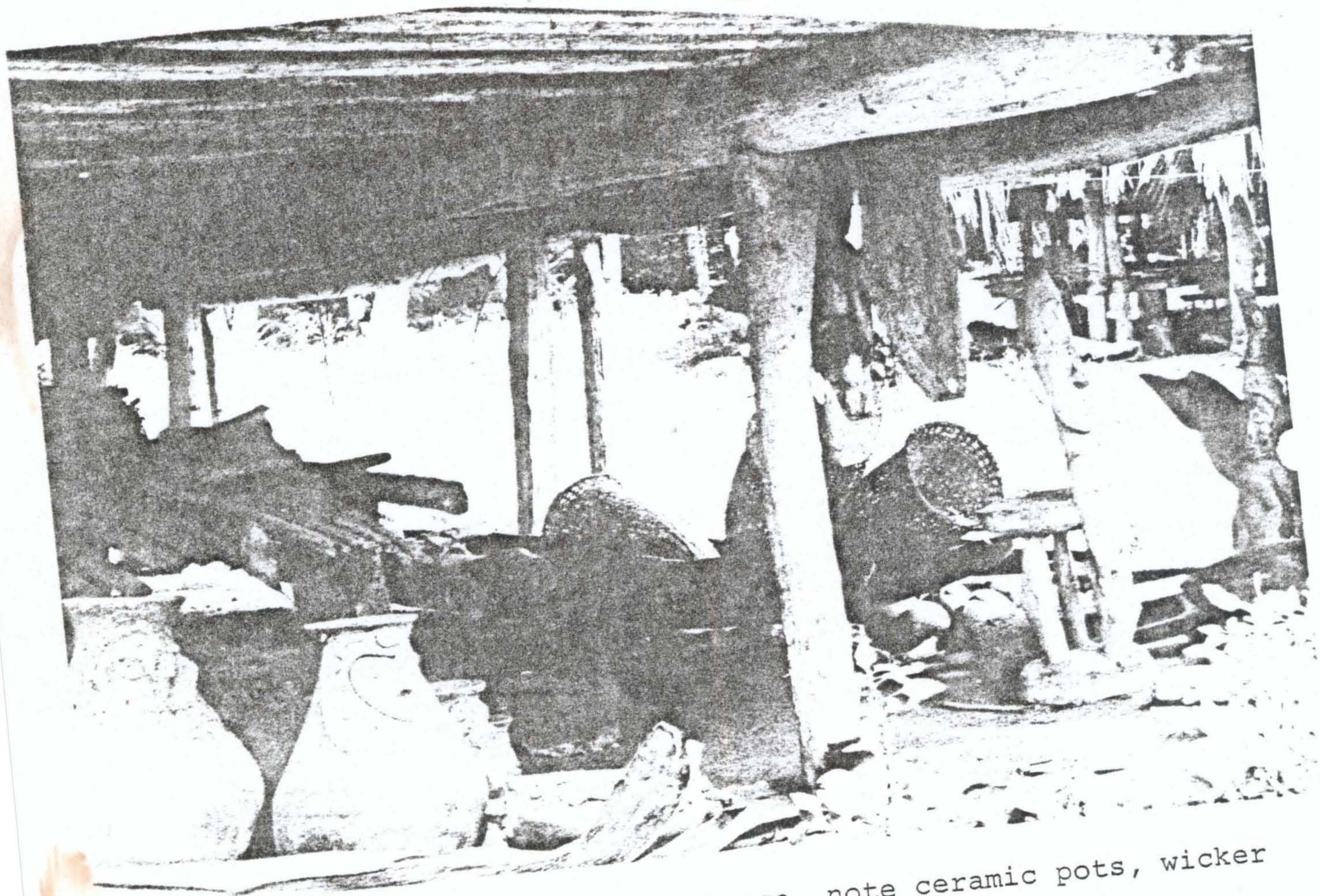
In general, we received a friendly and hospitable welcome in all the villages. This was probably due to the fact that there is very little interaction with tourists in this area. A few art dealers traverse the area, one excursion boat takes people on a four day cruise to villages around Pagwe, but very few tourists (probably under a hundred a year) go to the Black Water Lakes area and other more remote villages such as Korarau and Mumerick on the Karawari and Korasmeri tributaries of the Sepik.

Without exception the villages are physically very attractive, neat, clean and with a pleasant tranquil atmosphere. Coconut trees grow on slightly raised mounds amidst the houses and on the banks of the river. (Ill. 7) Canoes with carved crocodile prows are tied up in front of the villages directly on the river and wicker fish traps add a practical and pleasing note. Village paths are bordered by tropical plants, fruits and flowers; in Aibom these plantings included pineapples. Nearly every village contains a crocodile pen; crocodile skins provide a main source of cash income. Pet cassowary birds are also prevalent and greatly prized, for the plumes of the adults are a major component of dance costumes and decorations on masks and sculptures. (G.S. 7-16)

The population of the villages ranged from around 100 to 1,000 with 300 being about average. Korarau was the smallest with approximately 100 people in 10 houses arranged along the



Ill. 7 The Village of Korarau with family dwelling house, woman in mourning by fire.



Ill. 8 Lower level of Aibom house, note ceramic pots, wicker fish traps, debating stool and Kao image sculpture.

banks of a tributary of the Sepik. This village was isolated and very difficult to get to as the river was choked with vegetation. As we approached Korarau the staff from the lodge at Kaminimbit who accompanied us on this trip appeared uneasy and began talking among themselves. We learned that Kaminimbit and Korarau had been traditional enemies and they were not sure how we would be received. In fact, we were greeted in a rather reserved manner (G.S. 16) but after some mutual assessing we felt it acceptable to walk around the village. In front of one house a woman smeared with mud (the old custom of mourning) stood by a fire. Korarau appeared to be the most traditional of all the villages we visited, yet it produced some of the most unusual and non-traditional art forms we saw. (These are described in Section IV.) We found this very puzzling.

Aibom, with a population of approximately 1,000 in 35 or so houses, is set back a short distance from the Chambri Lakes and was the largest and most prosperous village we saw. This is undoubtedly due to its position as the pottery producers for the Middle Sepik area. The potters are all women who use the coil or slab technique of production for the base pot or bowl but, according to Alfred Buhler, the decorations are put on by men.¹² There are no pottery wheels. The water and sago storage jars and unique shallow, open fireplace bowls (Ill. 8, G.S. 17-19) are traded for use throughout all the other villages. These unglazed, unslipped pots and jars are generally brown and decorated with faces painted in white and reddish colors. The open fireplace bowls have a scalloped shell-like edge. Aibom

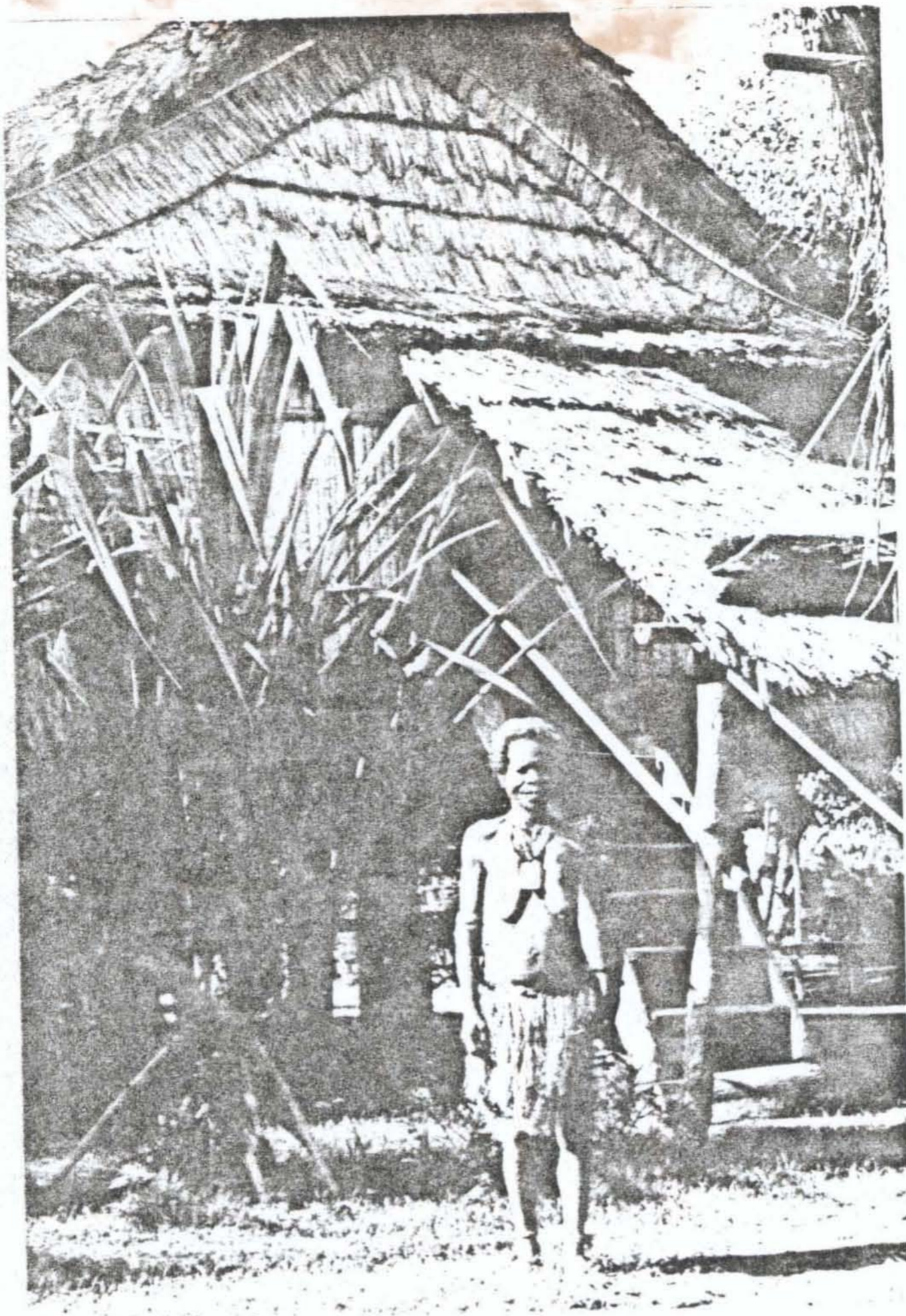
was one of the few villages with a missionary school of which they were very proud. Another locally-acclaimed asset was the betelnut-producing trees in the dense jungle behind their village. (G.S. 2)

Kuvenmas on the Black Water Lakes with a population of 300 was most typical in size of the middle Sepik villages. Kuvenmas contained the most beautiful and most traditionally used Haus Tamberan that we saw. This was the backdrop for a dance the villagers performed for us utilizing the traditional ceremonial ground. (Ill. 9 & G.S. 42-44) We were happy to pay the small fee charged for this performance because these people did not as a rule perform for outsiders. The village Big Man told us that the only reason they were able to dance for us was because the costumes were available (having been constructed for a recent ceremony for themselves). It was in Kuvenmas that we purchased many pieces of our collection. I would say that their traditional work was among the finest of all the villages we visited.

The general village layout was similar regardless of size or location. All contained at least one Haus Tamberan (described in Section IV) near which was the ceremonial ground used for dances and other communal village activities. The regular dwelling houses did not appear to have changed much since Bateson described them forty-five years ago. They are still built on stilts with a ladder leading to the second level entry. Some have decorated thatch on the outside and gable decorations while others have neither. (Ills. 10 & 11, G.S. 20,



Ill. 9 Dancers performing on the ceremonial ground by the Haus Tamberan at Kovenmas in the Black Water Lakes area.



Ill. 10 A woman of Kaminimbit in front of family Dwelling.



Ill. 11 Village of Malingai.

25 & 21) These regular dwelling houses are divided in three parts as are the Haus Tamberans, with the lower part in most use when the river is not flooded. The middle level contains the fireplaces which demark each family's living area. On an average 5 to 8 families shared a house. Hooks hang from the ceiling rafters with bilum bags of food and clothes. There are no windows in the second story of these houses but light filters in through the rush walls. (G.S. 22-24) One contemporary innovation is the presence of mosquito netting. The rush bags described by Bateson for mosquito protection are gone. Unfortunately the mosquitoes are not. The severe malaria endemic to this area remains very much a problem and contributes to the short life span of Papua New Guineans. Otherwise we found the people appearing in generally good health, though I was told by a Canadian doctor, also traveling in the area, that the habit of chewing betelnut mixed with lime causes mouth cancer.

Outside of a few types of clothing: shorts, pants and shirts, there is little evidence of Western culture in these Middle Sepik River villages. No machinery or transistor radios interrupt the peaceful sounds of jungle and village life. A few people speak English or Pidgin and have learned to write their names but most are illiterate. I saw no government schools and while there are missionary schools such as at Aibom and Kaningara, it will take quite a while for these to have much effect on the literacy rate of the general population. An interesting example of assimilation between contemporary Western culture and traditional Sepik cultures is a new church being

built at the Catholic Mission station of Kaningara on the Black Water Lakes. There is no Haus Tamberan in this village although the very beautifully carved support poles of a former one remain in a deserted field nearby. (G.S. 32) However the church now under construction on top of a hill near the Mission Clinic incorporates windjimbu posts, crocodiles, lizards and other traditional imagery and designs along with the Christian cross and Virgin Mary.

III WHY ART IN A PRIMITIVE SOCIETY AND THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST

Going from village to village, one is almost overwhelmed by the great profusion of art works produced and the importance attributed to them. Here is a subsistence economy, yet, as in Mindimbit, three out of four villagers are carvers. In Tambanum every house has carvings stored on the lower level. In some affluent Western societies art is considered a frill or luxury even now. Yet here among still basically primitive people, there is this amazing outpouring of art (i.e., house carvings, debating stools, sculptures and masks, etc.) and it is a large and integral part of their daily lives.

An example of the pride and value the Iatmul have in their own work can be seen by the fact that many of the fine old debating stools and mwai masks were not for sale, although they were glad to show them to us. Another expression of this appreciation can be found in the smiling reply of the Big Man from Kanganamum to my husband's question as to the whereabouts of the art work of his grandfather's time: "In the museums of the world."

Many people have attempted to address the question of why art is so important among the Iatmul as well as other primitive societies. Anthony Forge's belief, stated earlier in this paper, represents one very good reason: "There is no escaping the fact that [art] styles have social functions and are maintained because they are useful to the members of a society and to the preservation of their culture."²

According to Raymond Firth: "Art is a patterning not

merely of the seen, the images of the contemporary external world; it is also a patterning of the unseen."¹³ Firth goes on to state that the artist presents elements of emotion, imagination and experience according to his aesthetic sensitivities and utilizes them to personify the unknown. Where, Firth asks, is the line between creating a work of art for its own qualities and that of a stronger creation to ensure life or economic assets?¹⁴

This concept is not limited to primitive people. In our own times Picasso, who was strongly influenced by African art, states that "Man created art to give shape and substance to the unknown."¹⁵ By making tangible objects (art) out of intangible ideas and feelings such as life, death, fertility, the power of nature, these forces become less frightening, more understandable and perhaps even controllable.

Felix Speiser has put this same idea in still another way: "All primitive art is religious art a hymn to gods, demons and ancestors."¹⁶ I think this can be interpreted to mean that it is a hymn to appease or influence the powers, whatever they be, that shape the life and destiny of man. Also appropriate in this connection is Douglas Newton's definition of religion: "by 'religion' I mean those systems of theory and belief which are intended to reconcile the natural and supernatural worlds."¹⁷

It is again Raymond Firth who points out that the role of an artist in a primitive society is different from that of the artist in a developed Western culture. In cultures such as

those along the Sepik the artist "reinforces the bonds of the community rather than make manifest the oppositions within it."¹⁸ This is the more typical role of contemporary artists in our Western societies. According to Firth, while the artist in a primitive society is first and foremost a craftsman, this art is not purely pleasurable but produced to fulfill specific social demands within a known tradition. The artist is bound in a kin network like everyone else in the village and feels a close identification with his community. He is basically in harmony with the group, not (as in some cultures) against it. All of these factors contribute to an artist's work being viewed with respect, pride and appreciation such as one sees today in the Sepik villages.

IV HAUS TAMBERANS

Note "Haus Tamberan" appears to be a name inherited from German colonial times. It refers to the main building in a village otherwise known as the Men's or Spirit House and is the term used by the inhabitants of the Middle Sepik.

Of the many artifacts created by the Iatmul, none embody the expression of their culture more than the Haus Tamberan. Anthony Forge has stated: "It is the ceremonial house where communication (of the culture) reinforced by aesthetic appreciation appears to be most intense."¹⁹ Bateson reported that the Haus Tamberan was the center of village life and that remains true today especially for the men.

I have classified the Haus Tamberans that we saw into two categories: traditional and modified-traditional. In 1935 Gregory Bateson described the Haus Tamberan at "Kankanamun" (Kanganaman) as the oldest and most beautiful one in the Middle Sepik River area. Although dilapidated, this house is still standing, and I have used it as a model for judging the traditional characteristics of other Haus Tamberans.

Traditional Haus Tamberans

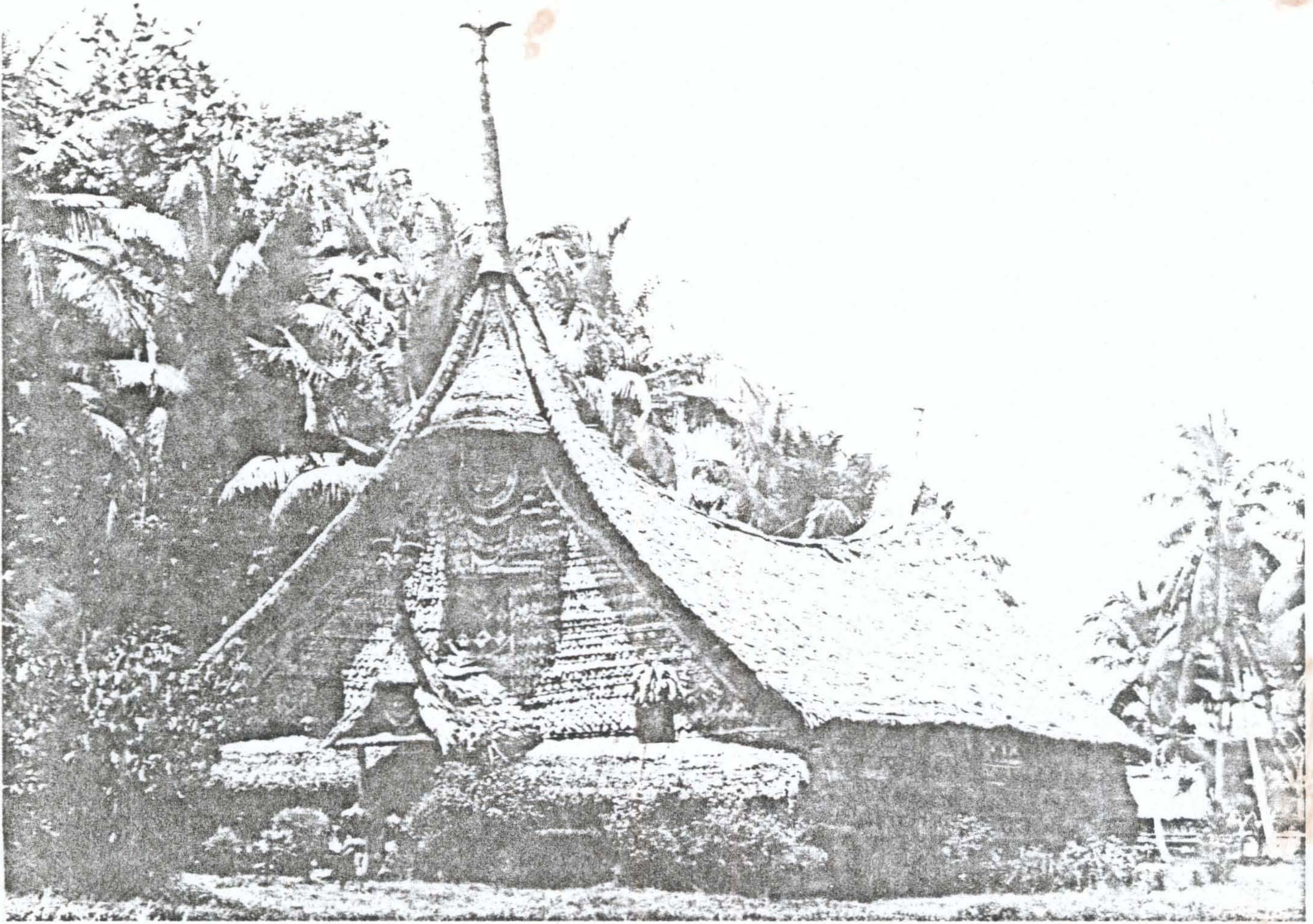
We found houses of this type in Kuvenmas and Kabriman on the Black Water Lakes, and in Tambanum, Timbunke, Korogo and Angoram. (Ill. 21, G.S. 26 & 27) Principal architectural features are: 1) rectangular shape; 2) a length of up to 120 feet long by 30 feet wide; 3) roofs with asymmetrical gable peaks front and back in some cases such as at Kuvenmas soaring

up to 50 feet in height; and 4) construction on three levels with many large carved posts as the base support for the second level which starts 6 to 8 feet above the ground level. I felt that the Haus Tamberan at Kuvenmas in the Black Water Lakes area was the most beautiful example of these traditional Haus Tamberans. (Ill. 12)

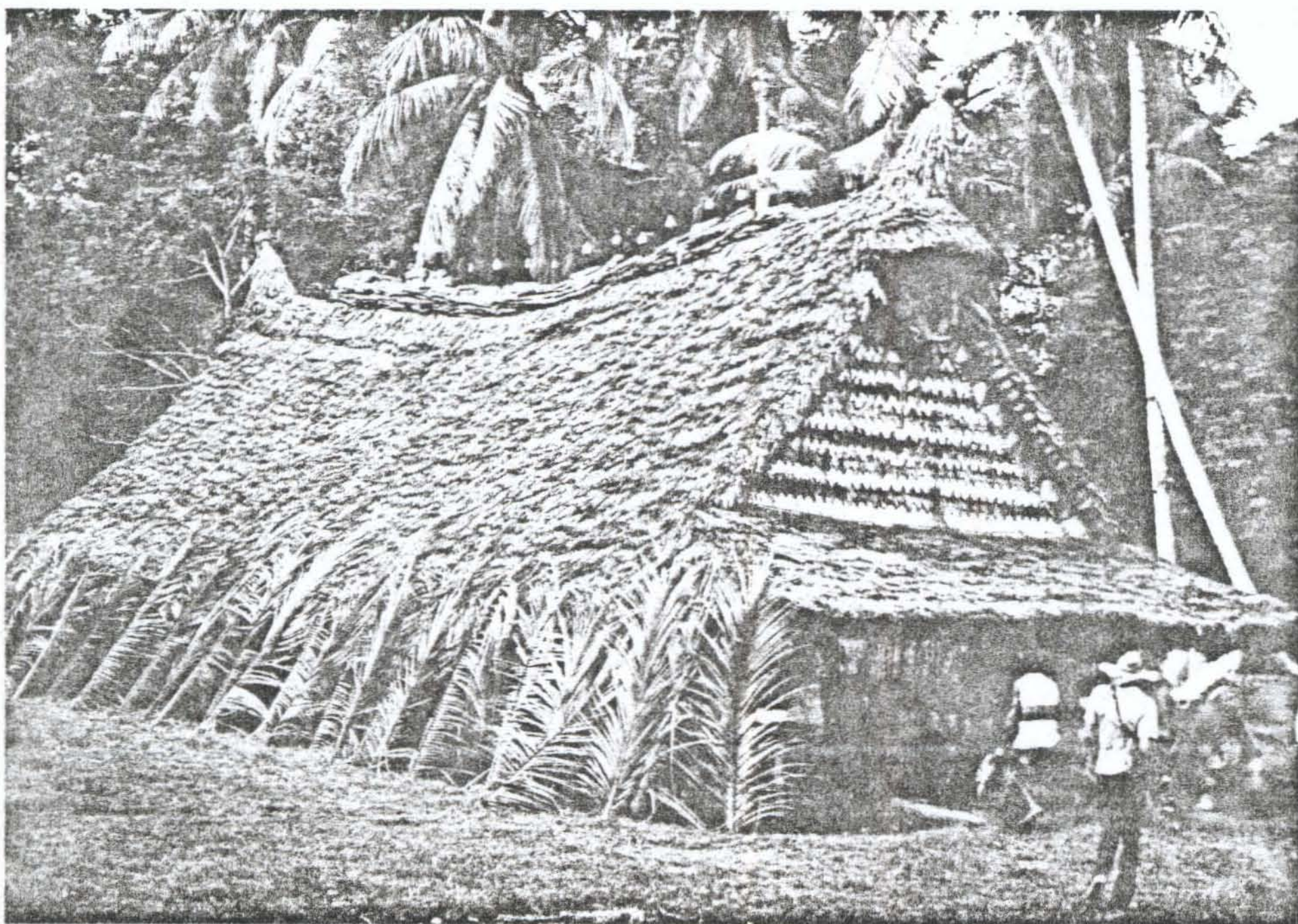
Modified Traditional

The main difference between these houses and those of the first category is the omission of a third level. At Mumeri, Yentchmangoa and Parambai we found Haus Tamberans that were not raised off the ground and consisted only of two levels: a main ground floor with rafters above that served as a storage area. (Ill. 13, G.S. 29) These Haus Tamberans are somewhat smaller than the traditional ones in the first category. However the twin structures at Parambai had the highest roof spires of any we saw. It is possible that the structural modifications of these Haus Tamberans may have resulted from their location in relation to the river. They were all found in villages set back quite a distance from the Sepik which would reduce danger from flooding and hence the necessity of raised levels.

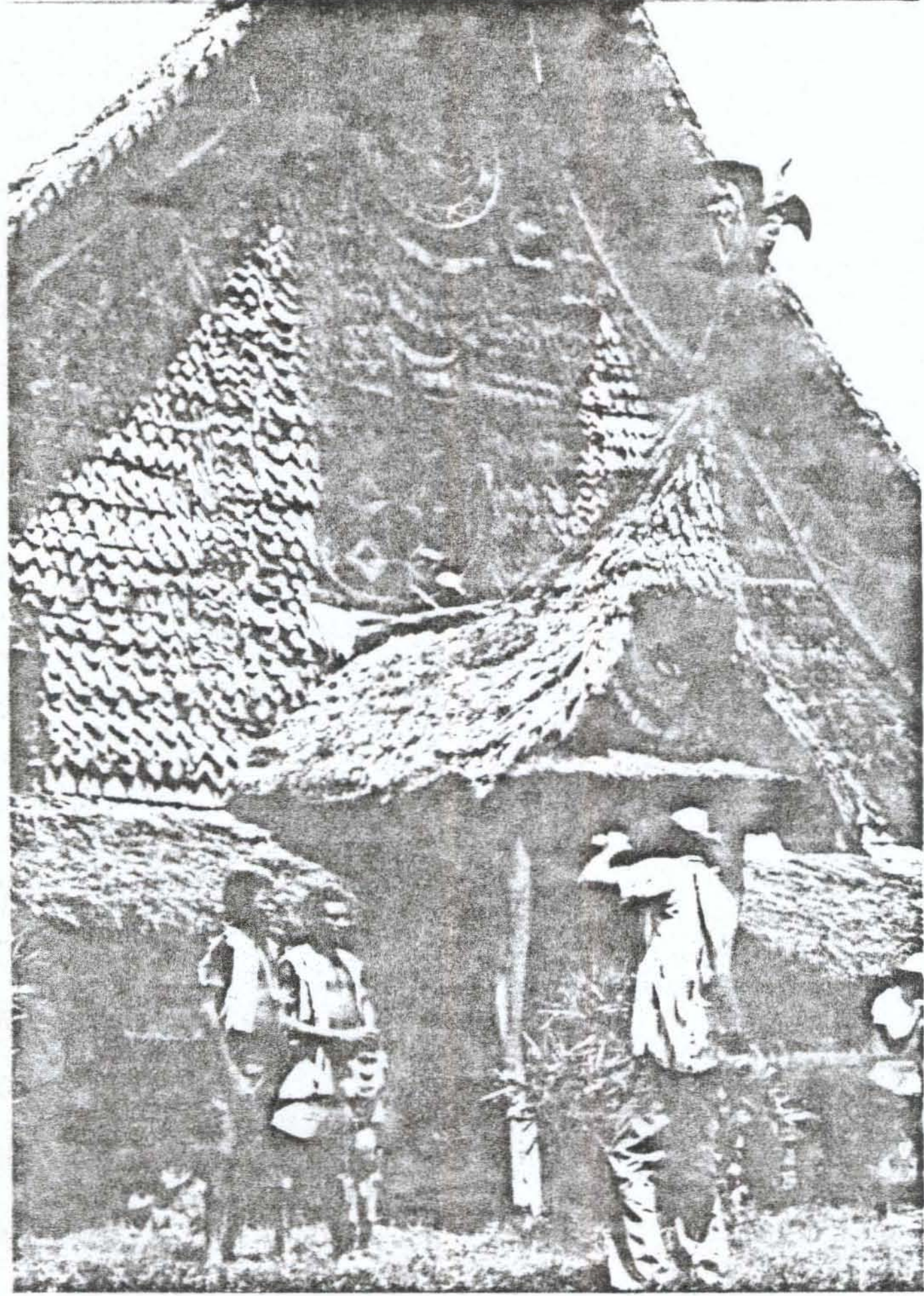
The exterior of both traditional and modified traditional Haus Tamberans were of woven or plaited thatch and sago palm leaves. There is a difference in the degree of decoration on this thatch. Some buildings such as the ones at Korogo, Timbunke and Kuvenmas were highly decorated with painted designs on the front and back. (Ill. 14, G.S. 30) These traditional



Ill. 12 Traditional Haus Tamberan, category 1, at Kuvenmas,
Black Water Lakes



Ill. 13 Modified Traditional Haus Tamberan,
category 2, at Yentchenmangoa.



Ill. 14 Front of traditional Haus Tamberan at Kuvenmas showing decorations, Gable Mask, Kao figure finial and ancestor figure in front of inhabitants being photographed.

Haus Tamberans were also open on the lower level, whereas the modified traditional ones had palm fronds extending from the thatched area to the ground.

Kao Image

All the Haus Tamberans had what is called a Kao figure on their gable finials. This image of a predatory bird on the shoulders of a person symbolizes the collective fighting strength of a village.²⁰ (Ill. 15) Sometimes these Kao images were of wood as are the current ones at Kuvenmas. (G.S. 30) In other cases this Kao imagery consisted only of an inverted clay pot with or without a bird image on it. (Ill. 16 and G.S. 33) At Kanganaman the Big Man proudly showed us two wood bird and human Kao images. One is kept now on the second level of the Haus Tamberan and the other is in a private home; previously both had been fastened to the gable peaks. These particular figures were from his grandfather's time and may have been the ones Gregory Bateson saw when he described this Haus Tamberan as the most beautiful in the area. They are superb examples of Kao images but there appeared to me to be very little difference in the design or quality of workmanship between them and the new Kao images.

Gable Masks

Another traditional image found on all the Haus Tamberans are gable masks which appear under the peak of the front and back roof gables. (Ill. 16 and G.S. 33). These masks are also sometimes found on regular dwelling houses but in those



FINIAL

Wood, paint
 122 (48) high
 Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province:
 Iatmul

Washington University Gallery of Art, St.
 Louis, WU 3767

Iatmul ceremonial houses had a gable at either end, each capped with a finial figure of a man (or woman), and bird. These are described as enemies in the grip of eagles which symbolized the aggressive force of the village. They may also refer to bird-human spirits who gave human beings the secrets of sacred musical instruments.

Linton and Wingert, *Arts of the South Seas*,
 frontis.; Parsons, *Ritual Arts*, pl. 84

GABLE FINIAL

Pottery, paint
 33 (13) high
 Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province,
 Aibom: Iatmul
 Collected by William A. Robinson, 1930

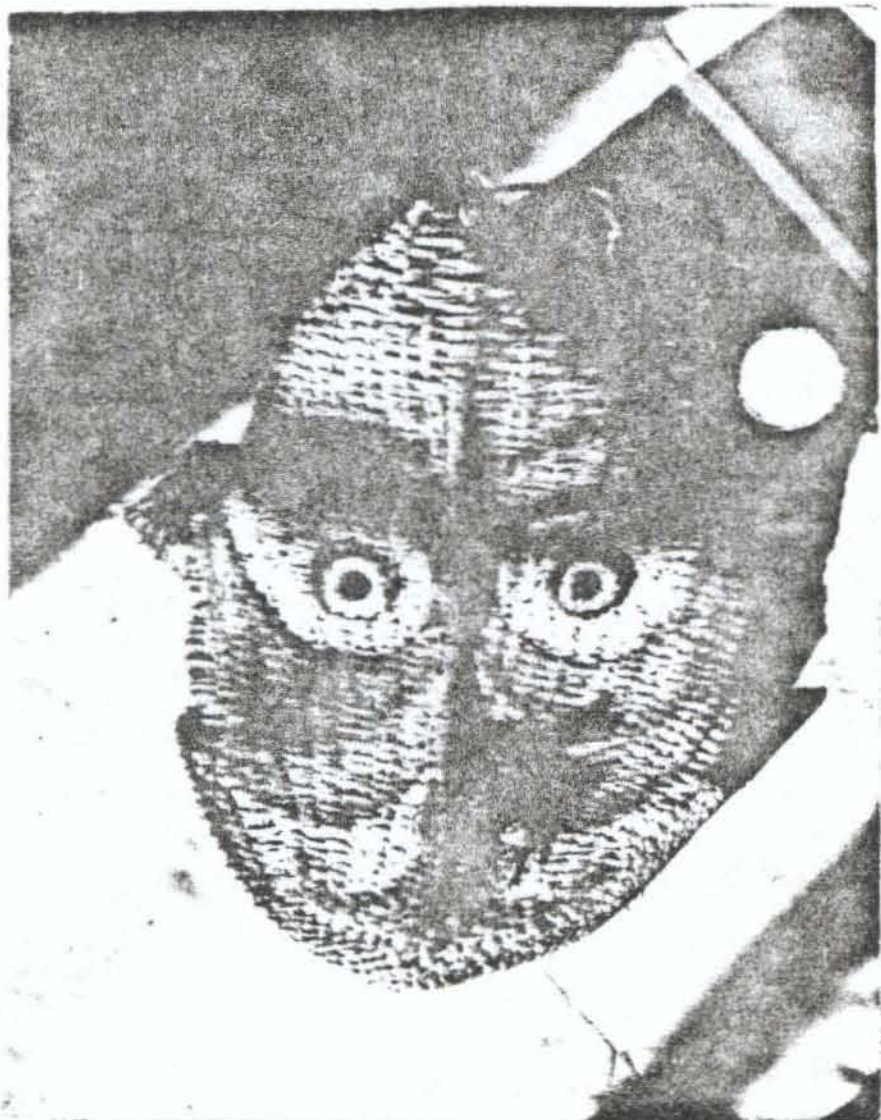
Peabody Museum of Salem, Massachusetts,
 E 24553

Ceramic analogues of the wooden finials placed on ceremonial houses were made by the villagers of Aibom, as part of their notable pottery industry. Their main products were utilitarian vessels for food storage and cooking which were widely traded throughout the Sepik River area.

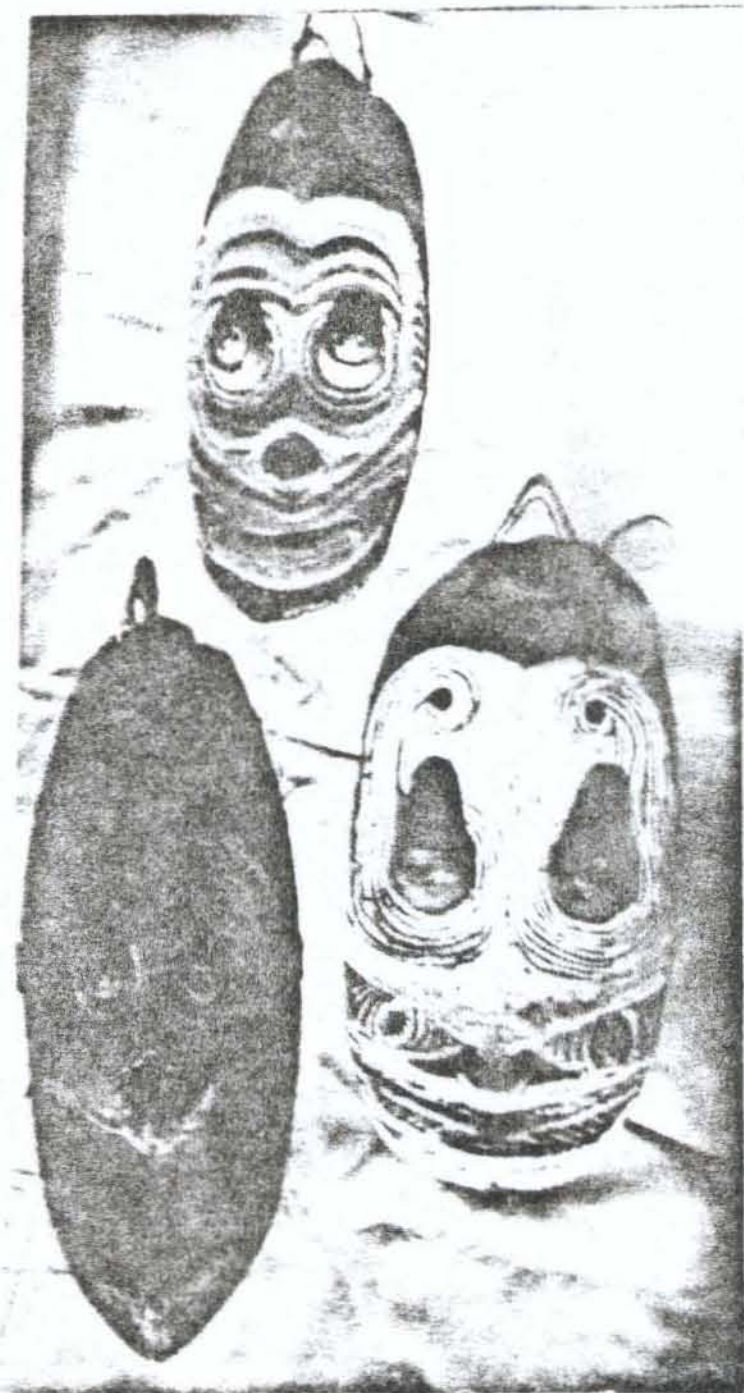




Ill. 16 Gable Mask on Haus Tamberan at Timbunke
Note also clay pot Kao image and frontal decorations.



Ill. 17 Basketry Gable
Mask from Mumeri.



Ill. 18 Wood, peg-eye
gable style masks from
Korogo.

instances they are located over the entry door. (G.S. 20) There appear to be at least two sets of symbolic meanings connoted by this imagery: one, that it is the face of the house itself, and secondly, that it is the personification of the cannibal giant who will scare off all enemies and disasters. According to Iatmul legend in earlier days a woman conceived and bore twin boys without male participation. The boys subsequently grew up big and strong and in time slew a cannibal giant that had been terrorizing the community.²¹ This myth goes on to say that the giant's body was planted, crops grew from it, the villagers returned and normal life resumed. Such turning of a destructive act into a positive force is frequently found among Iatmul beliefs. The legend can also be interpreted as expressing the Iatmul's concept of creativity. As Bateson discovered, the Iatmul believe that birth is the ultimate creative achievement. Since this is the woman's prerogative, all creative acts are therefore considered female. (See p. 31 for further details.) The gable mask may be viewed also as incorporating a potent guardian spirit image, a concept expressed through gable masks in many parts of Southeast Asia as well as other Pacific cultures. Thus, here among the Iatmul tribes on the Middle Sepik River the gable mask appears to personify both their cultural concept of creativity combined with a more common protective image to ward off evil.

Gable masks vary considerably in visual appearances. One of the most traditional appears on the Haus Tamberan at Timbunke village. (Ill. 16, G.S. 33) Gable masks of this type are at

least three feet across with an approximate height of two feet. They are constructed of a woven or plaited basketry material upon which are painted white, black or reddish brown spiral style decorations radiating out from the eyes. Also characteristic is an elongated nose with bone, shell, and/or raffia decorations inserted through the pierced septum. (Ill. 17) A slightly different type of gable mask was observed at Korogo. Here the mask proper is made of wood rather than basketry and has peg-eyes as a distinguishing feature. These masks are painted predominately white, and while other surface decoration is in the traditional spiral style, the overall appearance is very restrained. We collected several smaller versions of these gable masks (Ill. 18) In Korogo there were more regular houses with gable masks than in any of the other villages. On one building we observed four of these white masks with peg-eyes running horizontally under the eaves of a roof. Unfortunately I did not hear any theories as to why Korogo had gable masks in a greater profusion and different style than the other villages. However it might be noted that Korogo is also the production center of another special type of Iatmul mask - the Mwai which is traded to other villages along the Middle Sepik.

Radja Figure

One of the most important images in the Haus Tamberan in traditional times was the Radja, a displayed female figure. (Ill. 19 & G.S. 35) The utilization of a female figure in a house strictly limited to men represented once again the

SEATED FEMALE FIGURE

Wood, paint

112 (44 $\frac{1}{8}$) high

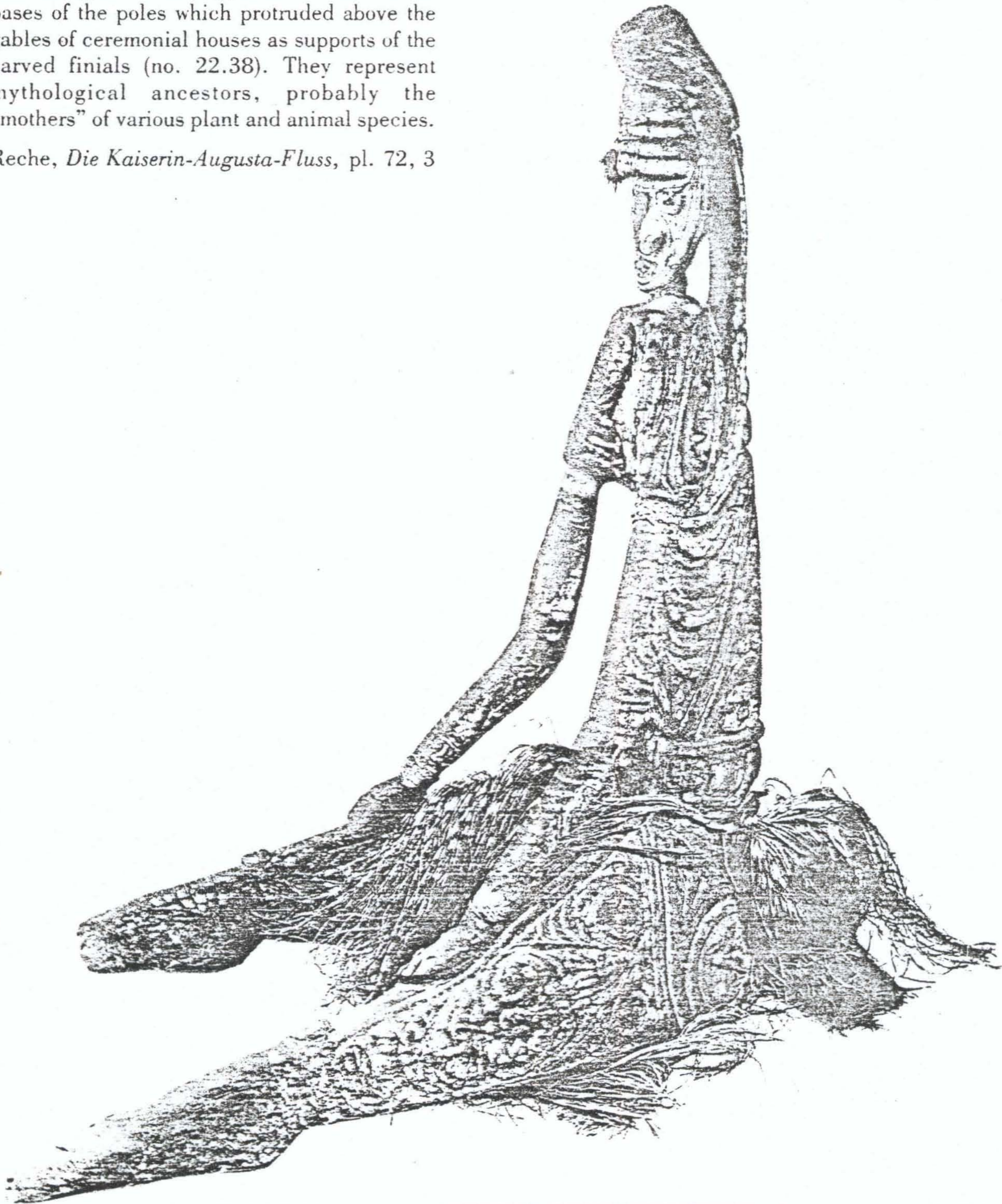
Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province,
"Radja" (Angerman): Woliagwi Iatmul

Collected by Captain Haug in the *Siar*, 1909

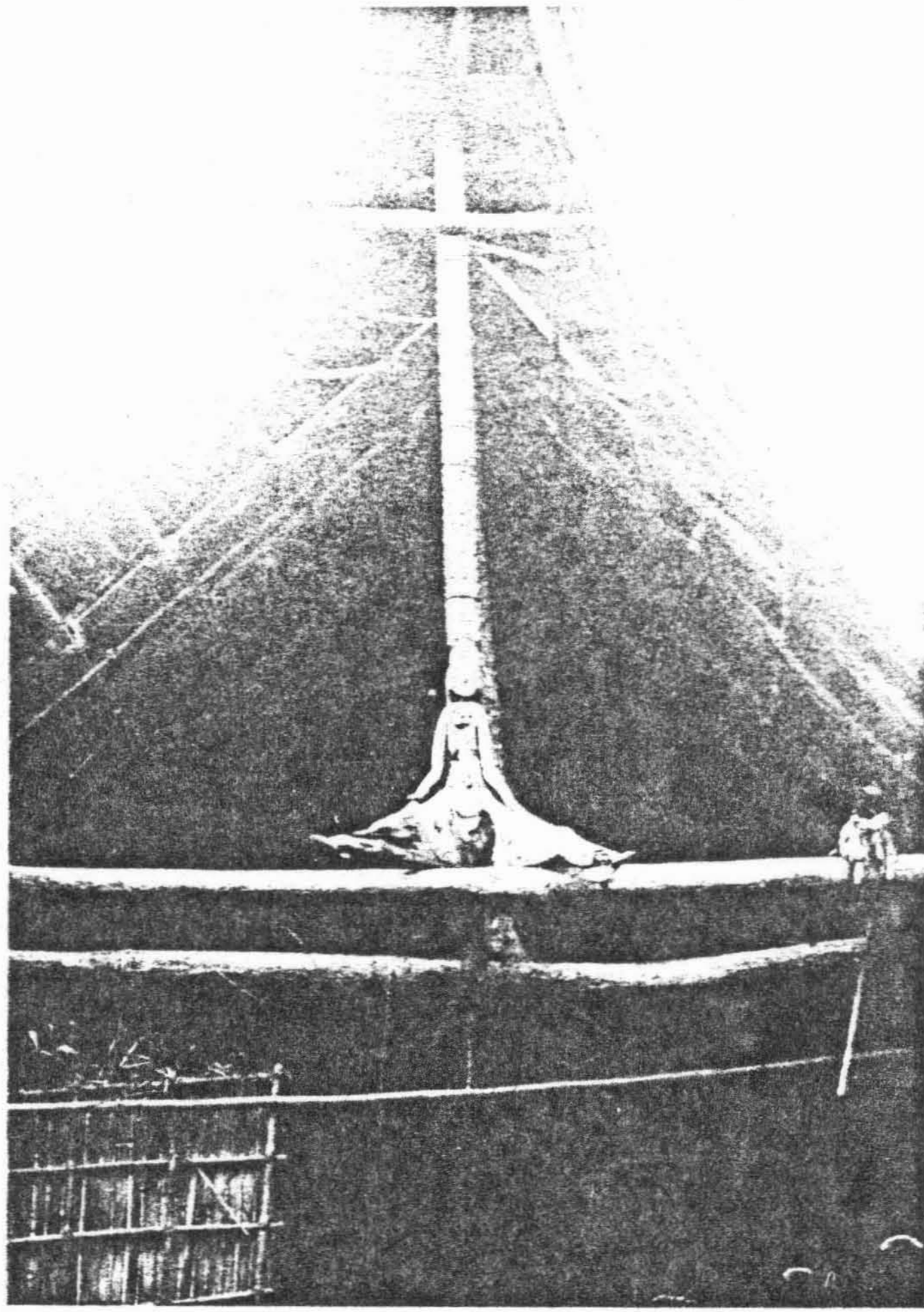
Linden-Museum, Stuttgart, 61 610

Female figures of this type were carved at the bases of the poles which protruded above the gables of ceremonial houses as supports of the carved finials (no. 22.38). They represent mythological ancestors, probably the "mothers" of various plant and animal species.

Reche, *Die Kaiserin-Augusta-Fluss*, pl. 72, 3



Ill. 19 Traditional Radja figure from The Art of the Pacific Islands.



Ill. 20 Radja figure in traditional location above entry to second level of Haus Tamberan at Kanganaman.



Ill. 21 Displayed Female Figure purchased at Yentchenmangoa.

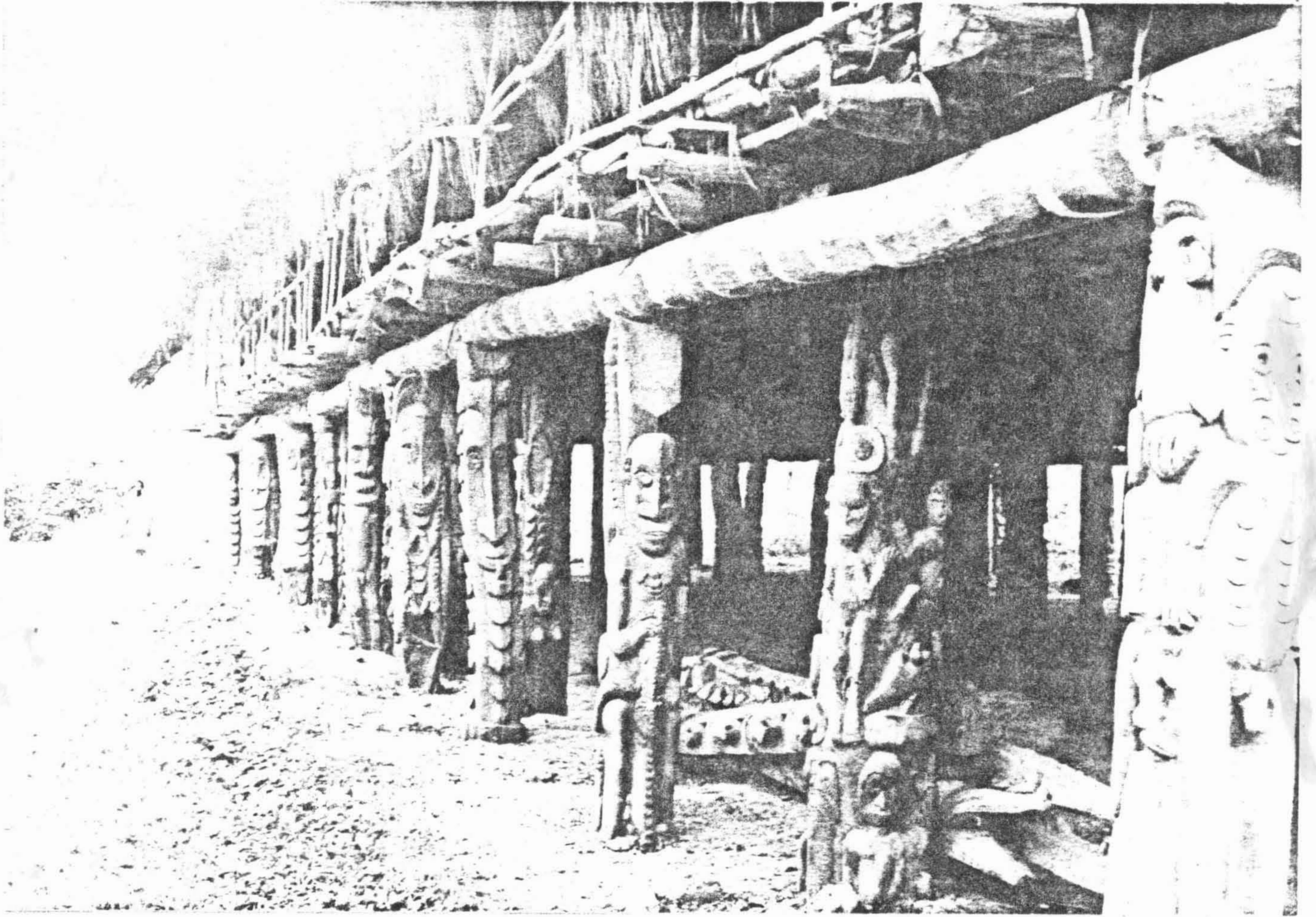
importance the Iatmul attributed to the female creative ability. As the birth of a child constituted the ultimate creative achievement, so all creative acts were believed to stem from women. Gregory Bateson detailed a most unusual expression of this belief, the Naven ceremony, in his book of the same name.²² On these occasions a child's uncle dresses and acts as a woman to honor the child's accomplishments ranging from hunting skills or achieving puberty.

Other interpretations of the Radja figure include those of: "A mother, fertility, vegetation and water deity"²³ as well as symbolizing the clan origin. Whatever the symbolism, I believe Douglas Fraiser is correct in his belief that the use of a displayed female is a compelling image with inherent fascination. Public exposure of the genital area like this is an act of enormous consequence in nearly all cultures. So it is used only for ultimacy occasions or times when great strength and efficacy are needed. As important as this Radja image was, it seems to be the art form that today is least in evidence in the Haus Tamberans. I know of only two that occur in the traditional position just above the entry to the second level of the Haus Tamberan: one is at Kanganaman (Ill. 20) and the other at Kuvenmas. The Kuvenmas figure was unusual in that it was hidden from outside view by an extra gable-shaped entry. At Angoram and Timbunke, a displayed female type image was found carved on the gang plank leading to the upper level but there was no Radja figure sitting on the post above the entry. At Yentchenmangoa I purchased a small image of a displayed female.

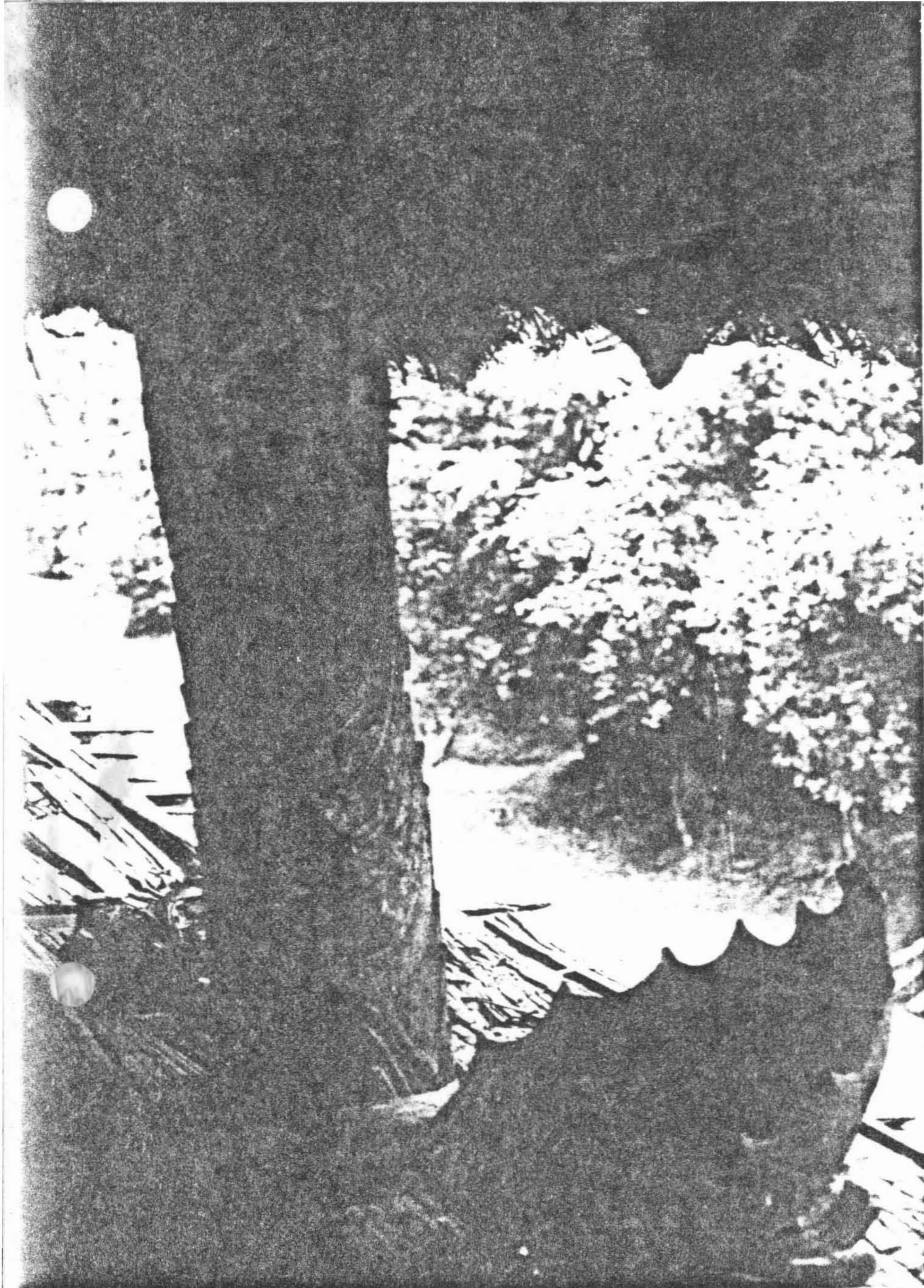
(Ill. 21) It was the only image of this type I saw outside of a Haus Tamberan. This figure is executed in a non-traditional style but possibly it represents a new approach to an old image.

Gregory Bateson has documented the strong duality between male and female characteristics and areas where this is found in Iatmul life. These beliefs stressed by Bateson in 1935, are incorporated in the structure of the Haus Tamberan where the Radja, the female displayed figure, and the open spaces were considered feminine, while the main wooden support post and the structural frame epitomized the male aspects of the house.²⁴ Many elegantly carved and decorated posts form the supports for the second story of the traditional Haus Tamberans. (Ill. 22, G.S. 36 & 37) but it is the central Windjimbu post that is believed to incorporate a particular male essence. This is appropriate considering the inherent phallic shape of a post. Another characteristic of the Windjimbu post is the face with protruding tongue that is carved on its upper part. The Windjimbu has also been reported to represent a male bush spirit. While the Windjimbu posts which I observed all over the Middle Sepik were relatively recent they appeared to be carved with even more particular care than the other support posts. I could not detect any deterioration in form, design or workmanship from those photographed by Bateson in 1935. (Ills. 23 & 24, G.S. 38 & 39)

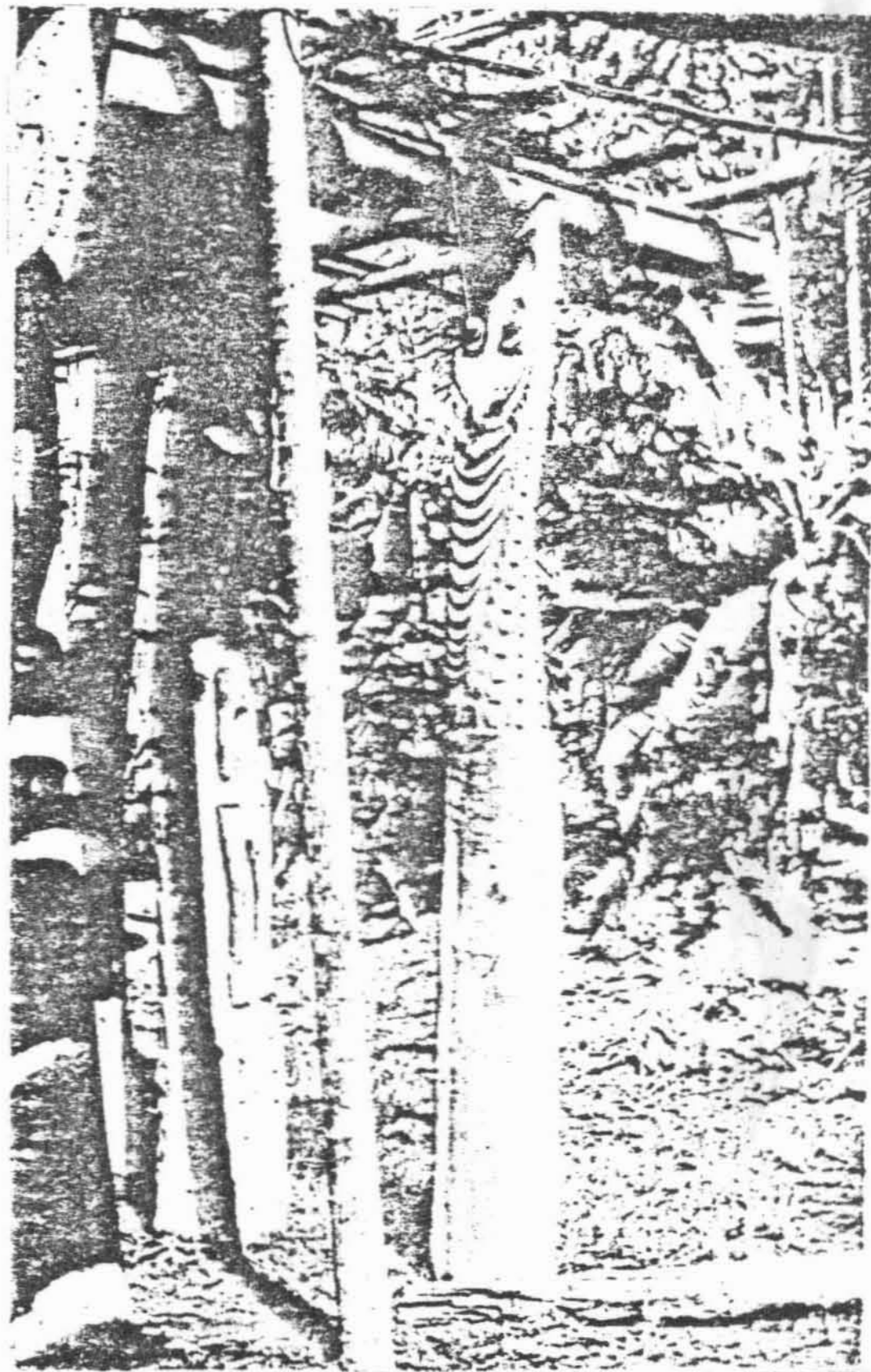
The Haus Tamberans are the gathering place for the men of the village. Specifically this means the ground floor level of the house. In this area (at least when the river is not



Ill. 22 Carved posts supporting the second level of the Haus Tamberan at Angoram. Note also Karawari crocodile logs under house.



Ill. 23 Windjimbu post and Aibom fireplace bowl in house at Suapmeri. Note similarity to Windjimbu Post in Bateson photograph below, ill. 24.



A. The corner of a ceremonial house in Palimbai. The photograph shows one of the posts which support the floor. The top of the post is carved to represent a windjimbu or wood spirit.

Ill. 24 from Naven by Bateson.

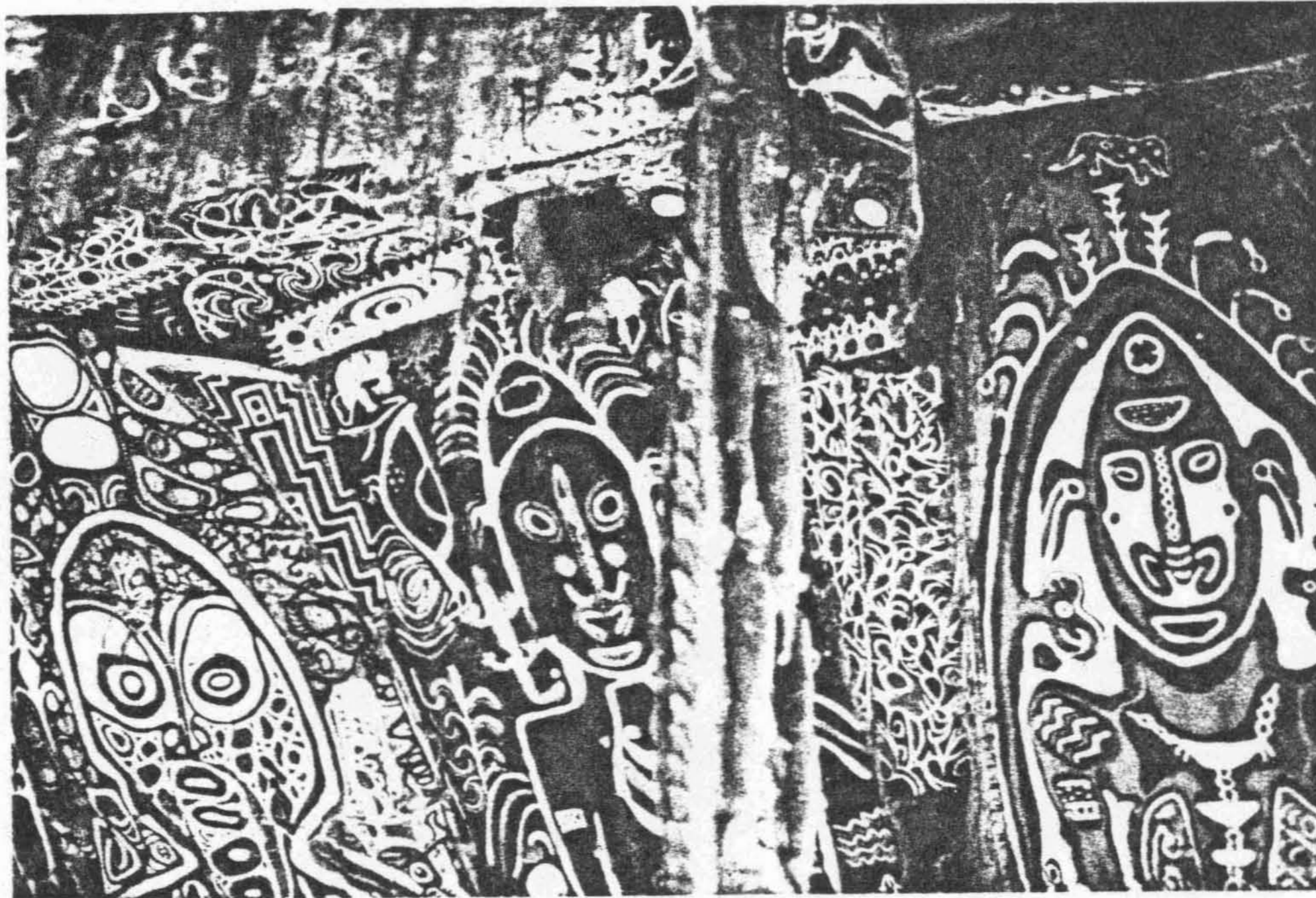
flooding) fires are always kept going to ward off the mosquitoes, dogs wander in and out, and the men of the village congregate, smoke, sleep, and work. (G.S. 40, 45 & 47) Here too are most of the artifacts. On the second floor of the traditional houses a very different state of affairs prevails.

I was allowed to enter the second level of a Haus Tamberan in only three villages, Kanganaman, Timbunke and Angoram. This was probably permitted because these houses were not being used in a completely traditional manner. At Kuvenmas in the Black Water Lakes where cultural tradition appeared very intact, I was emphatically denied entry to the Haus Tamberan's second level. According to Michael Somare, the ex-Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea who comes from the Murik Lake region of the Middle Sepik, these upper levels of the Haus Tamberan are used to store the sacred images of the village which can be seen only by the initiated elders.²⁵ These objects include the sacred spears of "Kakars", as Somare calls them. In Somare's case, the spears are relics of the journey made by his people en route to settlement by the Sepik. He describes these "Kakars" as richly ornamented wooden spears that widen out into a face or a full human figure about three feet above the ground. The Kakars are not referred to as carvings, but people, and are consulted or honored in every important event or ritual in the Murik Lake villages. I saw similar types of spear with a face/figure in many of the lower levels of the Haus Tamberans, but obviously these were no longer considered sacred. However, even from my limited observations it appeared that the more valued and

possibly still "sacred" pieces were kept on the second levels of the Haus Tamberans. Examples of these objects include the old Kao figure at Kanganaman (previously discussed), some older masks of the "mwai" style and pairs of long (5 foot) flutes. In traditional times flutes were considered sacred because their voices were believed to be those of the spirits.

The third level of a Haus Tamberan, as far as I could tell, is now used for storage of dance costumes and the wicker animal figures. Traditionally though this level would contain the most sacred items.

I have not included the Haus Tamberan at Angoram in either of the two groups discussed because it is used in a unique way. (G.S. 32) While originally a traditional Haus Tamberan it has become an exhibition house, and the second level is a showcase for art works from the surrounding villages. Angoram is accessible by road and is one of the two entry points to the area so it is convenient for people who do not really want to travel on the Sepik but desire some exposure to Sepik cultural properties. This Haus Tamberan is a magnificent building and incorporates all the characteristics of traditional architecture, materials, and decor except, strangely, the Radja figure. This was also the only building we saw with paintings on the ceiling. (Ill. 25 & G. S. 34) While these paintings were executed in traditional Sepik style and imagery, painting the roof area in this manner is more typical of tribes found further south around the Keram River than in the Middle Sepik area.



Ill. 25 Paintings on the ceiling of the Haus Tamberan at Angoram. Curvilinear style and motifs of faces, lizards and birds is typically Middle Sepik, but we did not see any other Haus Tamberans painted like this on the ceiling.

V ADDITIONAL ART FORMS OBSERVED IN THIS MIDDLE SEPIK AREA:
1) FREE STANDING SCULPTURE, 2) MASKS, 3) ENIGMATIC PIECES

1) Free Standing Sculptures

The debating stools of the Iatmul tribe represent an excellent example of an art form that reflects certain aspects of the culture. One of the most important achievements of an Iatmul man is the ability to debate, and orators are highly regarded. (It may be more than coincidental that the first Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Michael Somare, came from this region.) Iatmul debates are really a series of monologues during which the speaker slaps the seat of the stool for emphasis with a bunch of leaves. (Ills. 26 and 27) Debating stools range in size from over 8 feet in height to about 1.5 feet; most, however, are about three feet tall. (Ill. 1 & G. S. 45, 46 & 48) They are anthropomorphic in design with the legs of the stool said to represent the legs of a person and the portion forming the back of the seat carved as a face. This is usually decorated in the manner characteristic of Middle Sepik village styles: painted with spiral or curvilinear designs in red, black and white. Felix Speiser describes this style as follows: "The curvilinear style appears in an incomparably fine form. The curve in this case attains its greatest freedom. It develops with the utmost lightness and animation. It can scarcely exhaust itself, setting forth on every new course with sharp spiral hooks, forming meanders circulating around the whole surface and swooping again towards the middle. Every part is alive and is interlaced with every



III. 26 Iatmul Debating Stools, decorated and undecorated, on lower level of Haus Tamberan at Kanganaman. Note also slit-gong drums and hanging hooks.



b. A man debating. The man was posed for this photograph. He stands beside the elaborately carved debating stool, and holds in his hand the three bundles of leaves with which he beats the stool during his speech. Photograph taken in a ceremonial house in Malingai village.

III. 27 Photo from Bateson's Naven.

other, where it is impossible to fill surfaces with curves, concentric circles appear."²⁶

The debating stools presented the largest range in quality of execution of any artifacts that we saw in the Middle Sepik. Some of the older stools which exhibited the finest workmanship were not for sale. Others varied in having a lesser degree of decoration, and in the quality of the carving, but these factors did not appear to relate to price or age. The debating stools constitute a unique and traditional art form of the Iatmul which show no signs of diminishing.

Kao

The Kao images found on roof gables of the Haus Tamberans have been previously described. However, we also saw quite a few pieces of this same image as separate sculptures. These varied in height from approximately 2 to 4 feet. In some cases the bird was depicted with wings extended and in others with wings closed. The sex of the person on whose shoulders the bird is perched varies and sometimes it is indeterminate or hermaphroditic. I wonder why this symbolism is still being used now that intra-tribal fighting has ceased and a "collective fighting spirit emblem of the men of the village" should no longer be necessary. Yet the traditional imagery still remains both as gable finials and in free standing sculptural form. In either case these Kao images are found only among the Iatmul tribes of the Middle Sepik.

Kamanggabi

The Kamanggabi figures made by the Arambak people on the Karawari River represented fertility of crops, prowess and success in hunting and war. (Ill. 30) According to Anthony Forge these figures were the special responsibility of the senior clan of the Arambak people. The Kamanggabi were kept in the back of the Haus Tamberan and only carried out with great ceremony. At times food offerings were made to the spirits believed housed in the images and the figures were consulted prior to the departure of war parties. Somehow a shaman interpreted their replies which determined whether a raid was carried out or not. The profile head, sometimes adorned with a crested headpiece and elongated beard, sets the Kamanggabi figures apart from other opposed hook motif images (such as the Garra in the Upper Sepik). Also characteristic is the single leg and foot but most important are the unique opposed hooks in the center (abdominal) section. These are believed essential to the potency of the figure. Anthony Forge has stated that the central projecting part within these hooks probably represents the phallus with all its associated implications of male aggression and fertility or the heart.²⁷ The graceful, elegantly interlocking shapes of these figures are counter-balanced by open negative spaces that repeat the curvilinear rhythms. The design elements of these Kamanggabi figures are particularly impressive when one visualizes how they were traditionally used. In a dark Haus Tamberan lit only by a fire the shadows thrown from their opposing hooks would be magnified



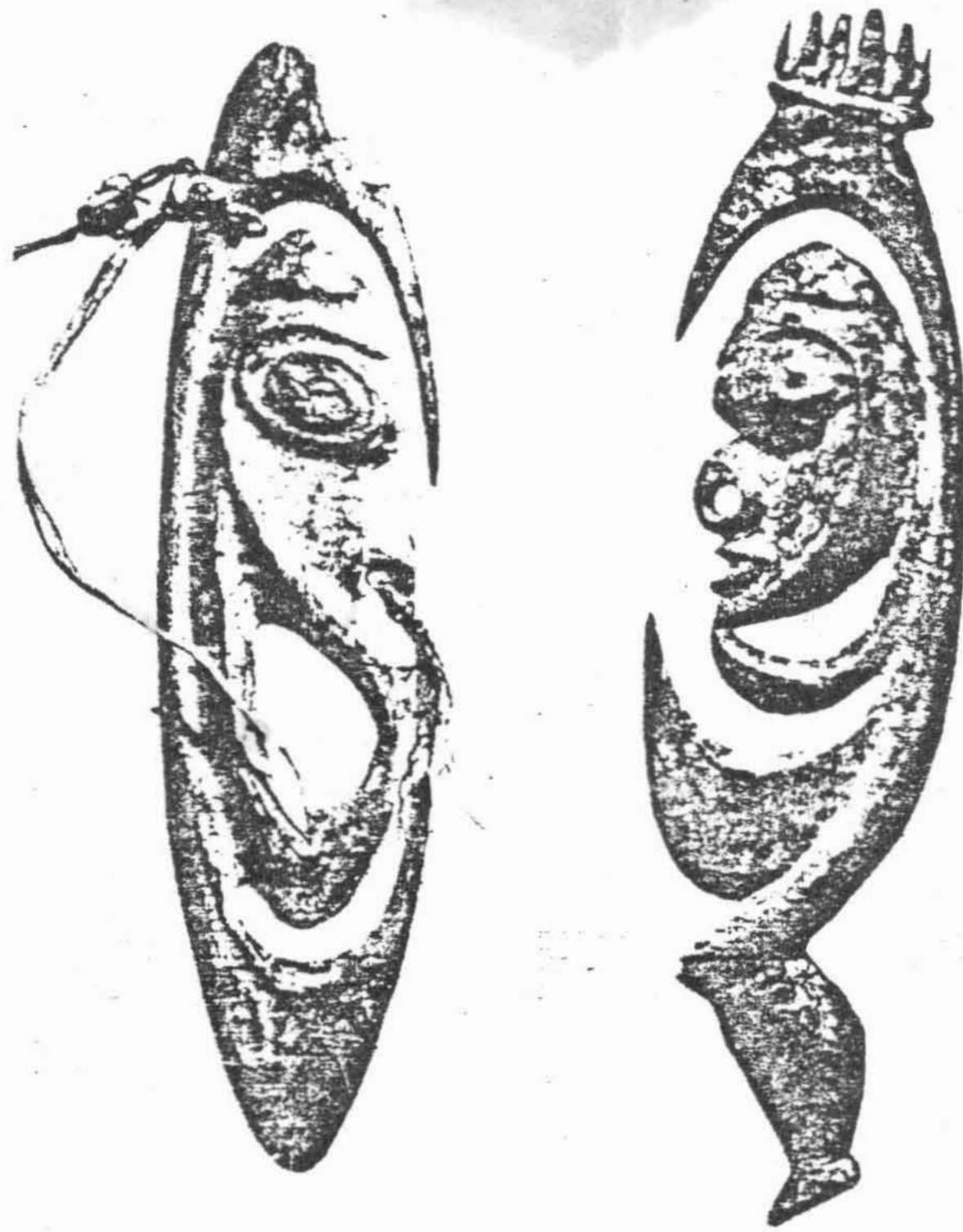
Ill. 28 Contemporary
Kamanggabi figure
from Kovenmas.



Ill. 29 L. Contemporary
Yi'pon figure from
Kaningara. R. same as
ill. 28.



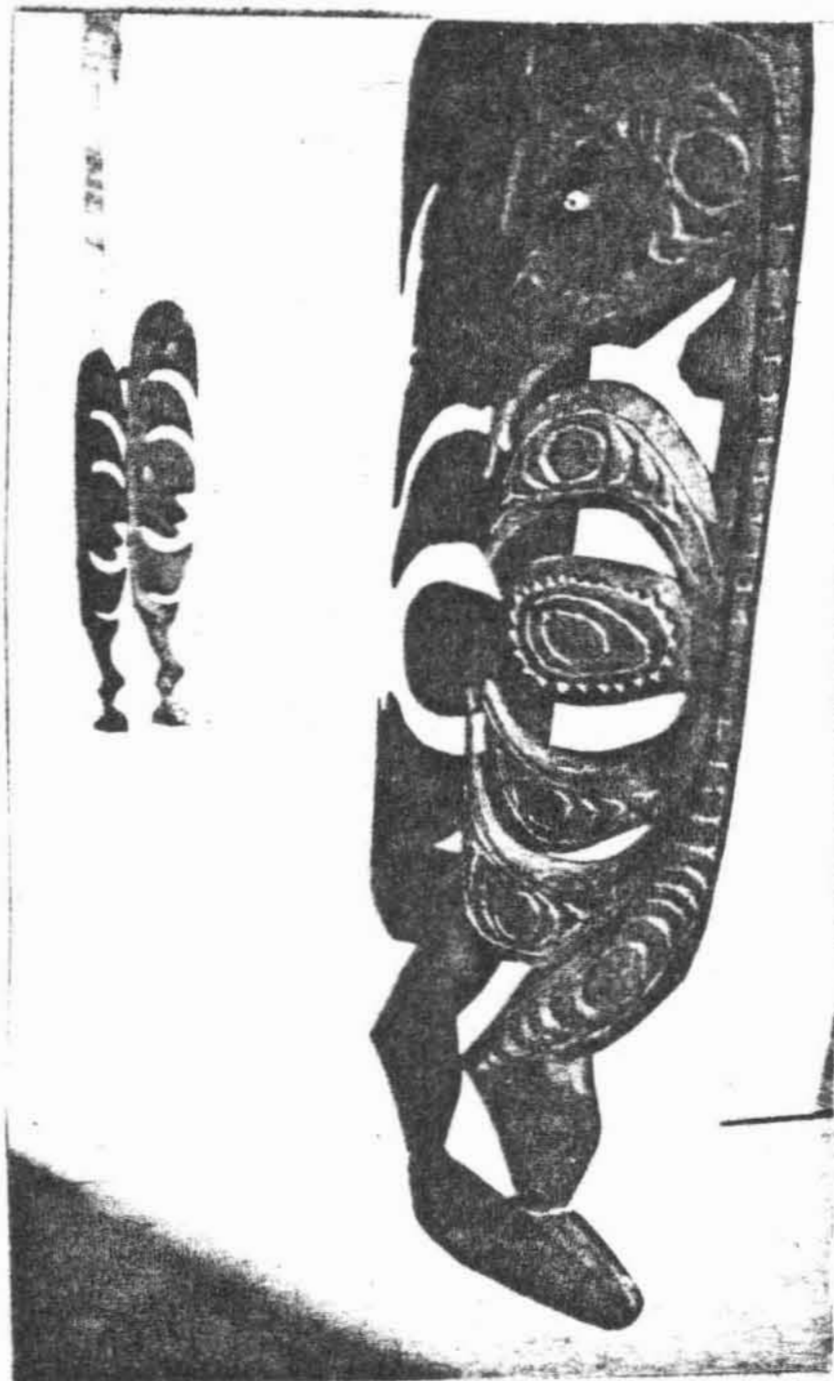
Ill. 30 Old Kamanggabi
figure from Forge's Three
Regions of Melanesia.



Hunting charm
(*Yi'pon*). Arambak.
Wood, 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ " high.
University Museum
of Archaeology &
Ethnology, Cam-
bridge

4 Hunting charm (*Yi'pon*).
Arambak. Wood, 8 $\frac{7}{8}$ " high.
Ethnographical Museum,
Budapest

Ill. 31 Old Yi'pon figure from Forge's Three Regions
of Melanesian Art.



Ill. 32 L. Contemporary Yi'pon
from Kaningara. R. Contemporary
Kamanggabi figure from Kovenmas.

and could easily be seen as presenting an image of tremendous force and awe.

A smaller variation of the Kaminggabi image is found in the Yi'pon hooks. (Ill. 31) These little figures were (are) rubbed with the blood and excrement of an animal similar to the one being hunted, and then are hooked into the belt of the hunter. It is believed that the spirit of the yi'pon will go out and make the pursued animal easier to kill.²⁸ Anthony Forge has said that the Arambak continue to produce a few yi'pon although they are of inferior quality when compared to the older one. The Yi'pon we collected (Ills. 29 & 32) certainly reflect a deterioration in workmanship but it is interesting to note that these artifacts are still being produced.

In 1960 Forge reported that the Kaminggabi figures had not been made within the living memory of the people in the Arambak towns.²⁹ However, as one travels along the Sepik nearly every Haus Tamberan has copies of these traditional figures. Furthermore, every auction and New York gallery which contains a collection of Oceanic art appears to have a Kamanggabi figure. Perhaps a possible explanation for the frequent occurrence of these figures when they supposedly were not being produced is the well-documented tendency of differing tribes to adopt and adapt artistic styles and motifs from one another, especially for sale purposes. The river itself is a great means of transporting ideas and images as well as people and products. As a case in point, the small version of a Kamanggabi figure which we collected (Ill. 28) came from Kuvenmas in the Black

Water Lakes area. This village was a traditional enemy of the Arambak people so there was contact between them, and it would seem very possible that the people of Kuvenmas, along with others along the river, simply copied the Arambak art style. Unfortunately, as my figure clearly shows, there is no comparison to the exquisite delicacy and subtle balance of forms that characterize the original Arambak carvings. (Ills. 28-30)

There are, however, very fine copies of traditional Kaminggabi figures being produced today by the people of Kaningara. This village is upriver from the Arambak and ironically was once their traditional enemy. Kaningara is also the base for the Catholic Mission in this region of the Sepik and presents some interesting examples of assimilation between old and new cultures and beliefs. One, mentioned earlier, was the use of traditional Haus Tamberan architectural forms in the construction of a new church. Another is the placing of two magnificent Kamanggabi figures on either side of the entrance to the Mission Clinic. These are believed to provide protection and promote the well being of the inhabitants of the Clinic just as they did for members of the traditional Haus Tamberan. Their efficacy was put to test in mid-August when a severe earthquake centered very close to Kaningara destroyed the Mission landing strip but, seemingly, left the Clinic undamaged.

Crocodile Images

Huge carved crocodile posts represent another very distinctive art form that originated in the villages along this

same tributary of the Sepik, the Karawari. Like the Kamanggabi figures, these completely carved posts up to 25 feet in length, can now be found in many villages along the Middle Sepik. Some excellent examples may be seen at Angoram under the Haus Tamberan and in the front yard of Sava Matsik's house (the organizer of our trip). (Ill. 22, G. S. 36)

The same crocodile motif is incorporated into the bows of the canoes used by the inhabitants of this area. Here a naturalistic style is combined with the curvilinear to produce very handsome images. As can be seen in Illustrations 33 and 34 the contemporary crocodile canoe prow heads are nearly indistinguishable from the older ones.

Certain types of free standing artifacts are found throughout Melanesia. However, in style of workmanship, decoration and motif those produced in the Middle Sepik have a certain distinctiveness.

Slit-Gongs

Slit-gong drums weighing nearly a ton, up to ten feet in length and approximately three feet wide are found on the lower or ground level of every Haus Tamberan in the Middle Sepik. (Ill. 35 & G. S. 45, 47 & 48) These carved drums are still used to call the villagers together for general news (such as our arrival) as well as for ceremonies and festivals. Hand-held hourglass-shaped drums are common throughout Melanesia. However, those of the Sepik area are distinguishable by their curvilinear style of decoration and use of faces as a motif.

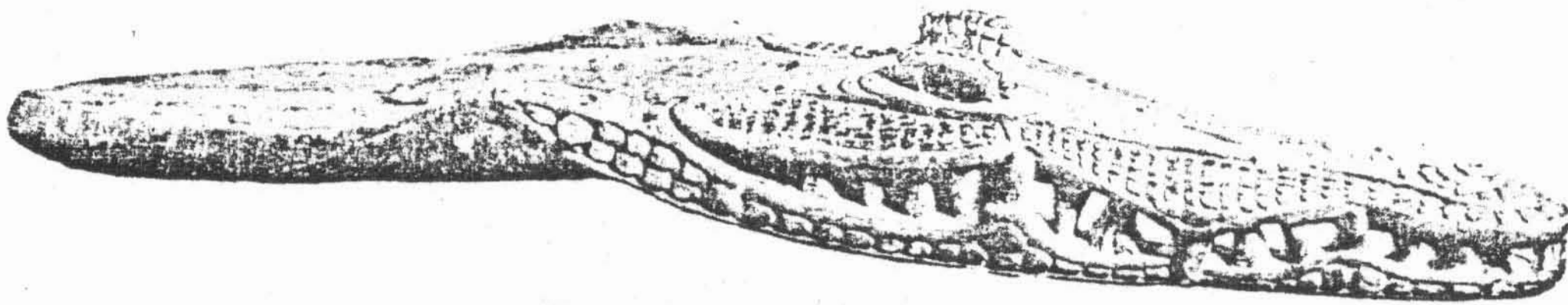
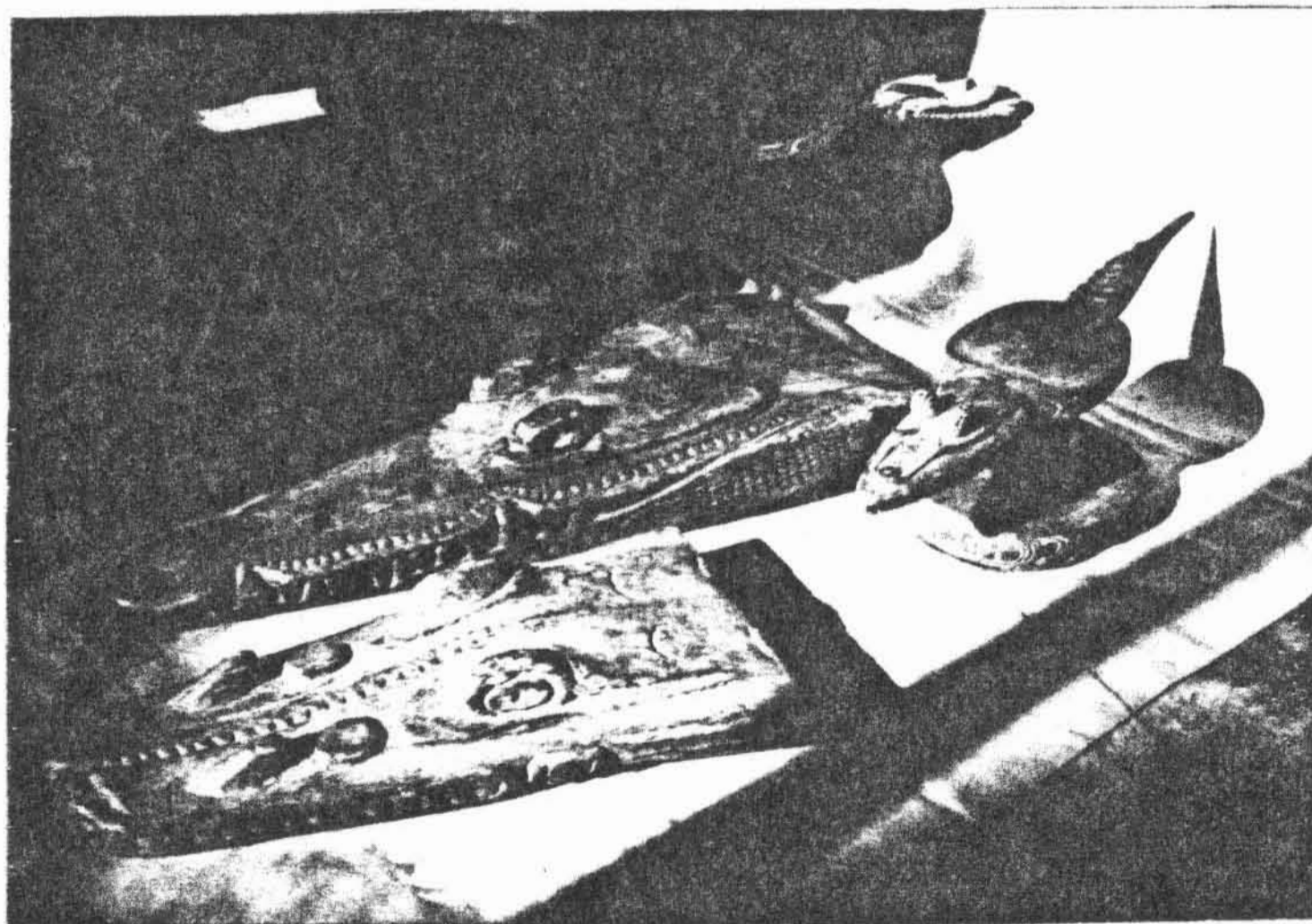


FIG. 4.

Wooden Canoe Prow in the Form of a Crocodile Head.
Sepik, New Guinea. Length of head, 107 cm. A combination of great naturalism and pure Curvilinear style.

Ill. 33 Old Crocodile Canoe Prow from Felix Speiser's "Art Styles of the Pacific".



Ill. 34 Current examples of Crocodile Canoe prows, Headrest and stool. Note continued combination of curvilinear and naturalistic style.



Ill. 35 Slit-gong drums on lower level of Haus Tamberan at Kanganaman.

We saw these drums used extensively in the dances performed for us at Kuvenmas and at the celebrations attending the ordination of a Bishop at Wewax. (G. S. 49-53)

Beak Figures

Beak figures are particularly characteristic of the Lower Sepik (the region from the Ramu River to the coast and around the mouth of the Sepik River) but many can also be found in the Middle region such as the piece we collected at Kaminimbit.

(Ill. 37) Gregory Bateson theorized that the beak style stems from two sources: Firstly, it reflects the Iatmul appreciation of long noses as physically attractive; secondly, the phallic connotation of a long nose relates to the male mystic and proud ethos that is so much a part of Iatmul culture.³⁰ Felix Speiser took a very different and no longer acceptable view from the standpoint of valid historical contact. He believed the Beak Style originated from the Hindu deity Ganesha, the man-elephant with a long trunk.³¹ (Ill. 36) Whatever the source many free standing figures along the Middle Sepik exhibit variations of the Beak style.

Ancestor Figures

Ancestor figures are found in profusion in all the villages we visited. (Ill. 40) Although Christianity has made some converts, every Haus Tamberan and many private homes still contain these figures in a great variety of sizes and styles. An ancestor figure we purchased (Ills. 38 & 39) was one of three owned by a family in Mindimbit. (G. S. 56) All these figures

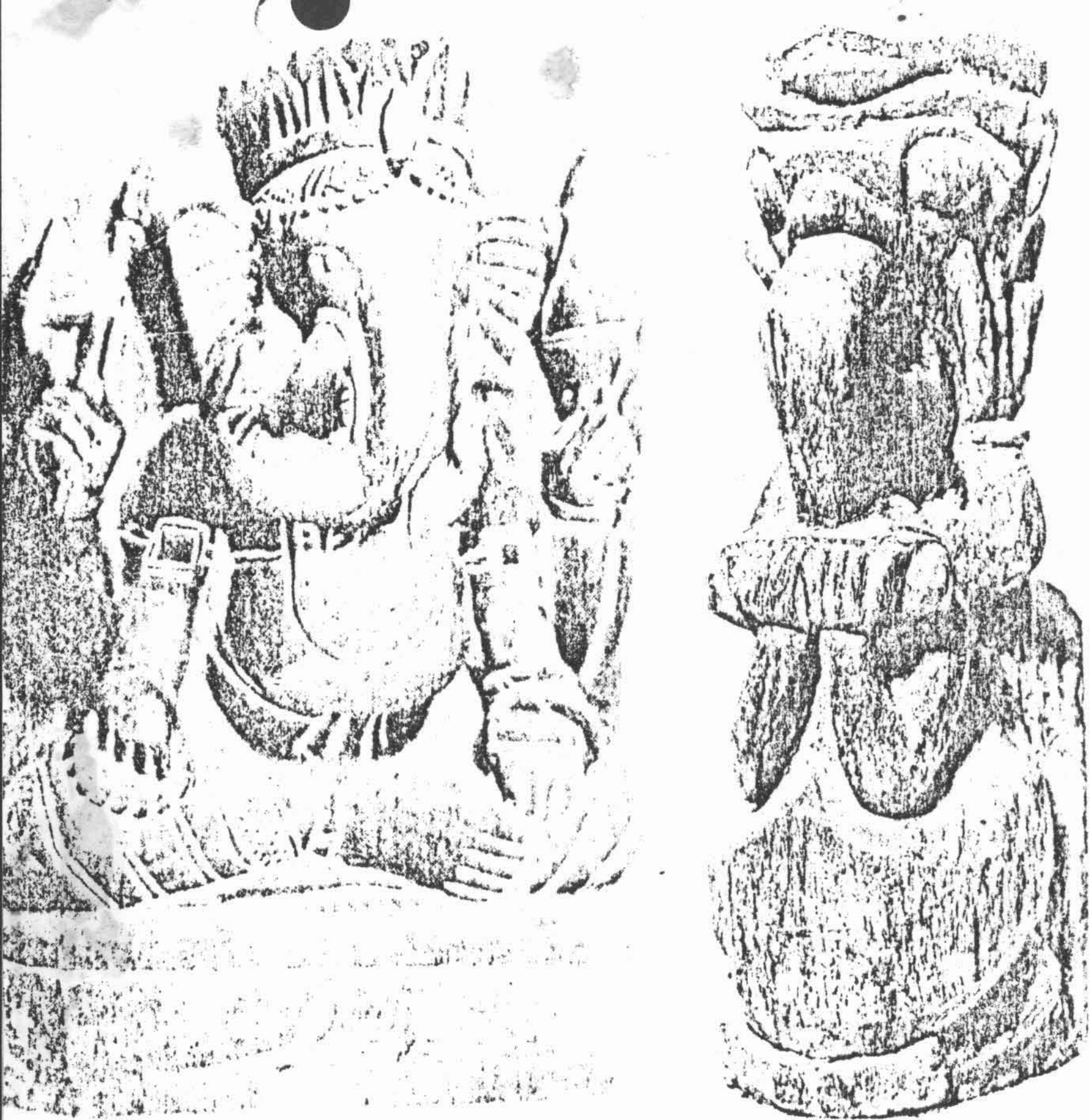


FIG. 8.

Left to right: a, Stone Image in Dark Slate, Benares, India. Probably the point of departure for Beak style.

b, Wooden Idol.

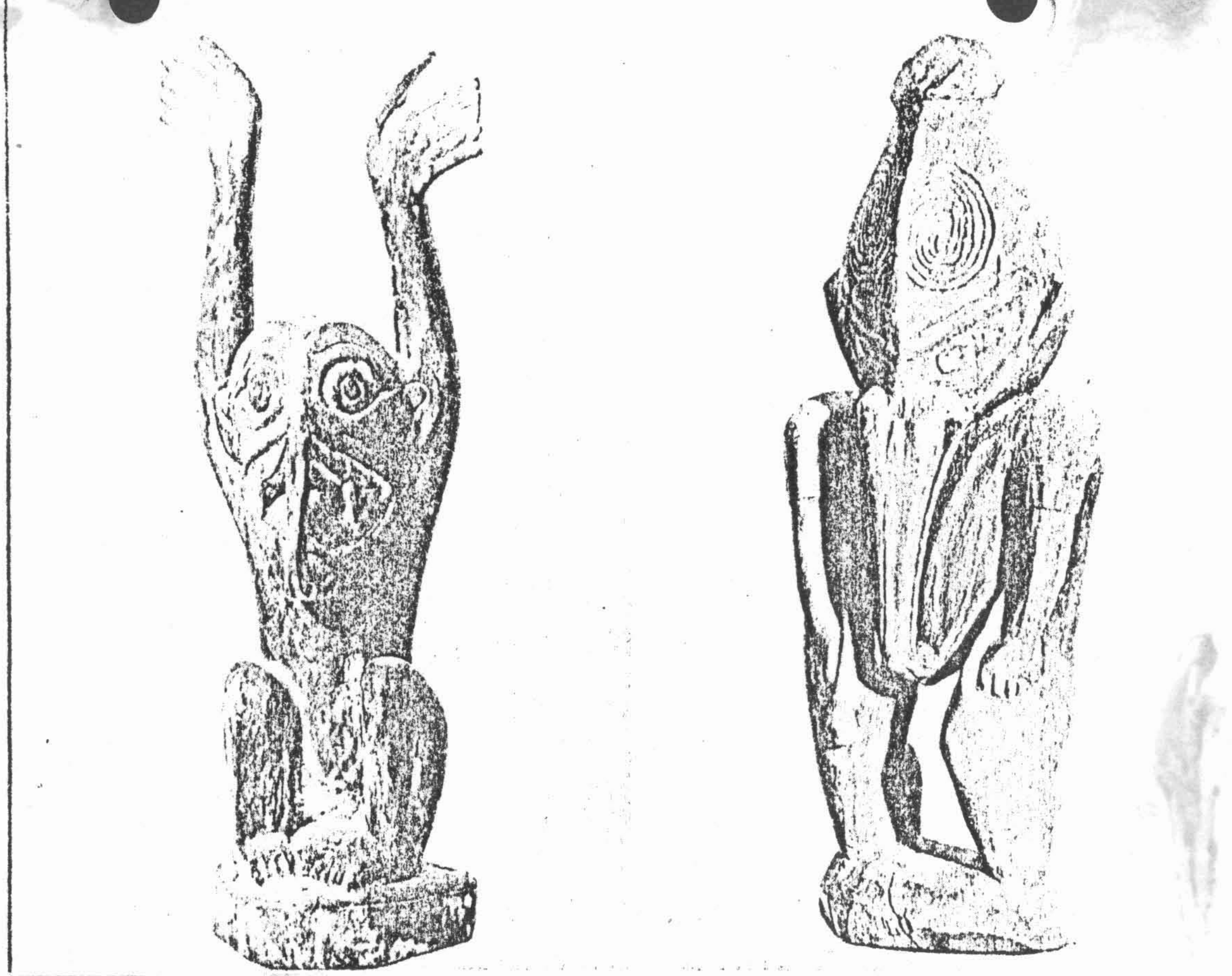
Bali, Indonesia. Height, 28.5 cm. A transformation of Indian Ganesha figure, the trunk of which is still recognizable as such.

c, Wooden Idol.

Bali, Indonesia. Height, 33 cm. Transformation of Ganesha figure; the trunk form has now taken the shape of a long nose, as is typical of Beak style.

d, Wooden Ancestor Figure.

Sepik mouth, New Guinea. Typical Beak style: slanting eyes, angular hairline, nose extending down as far as the hips. Influence of Curvilinear style on hairline.

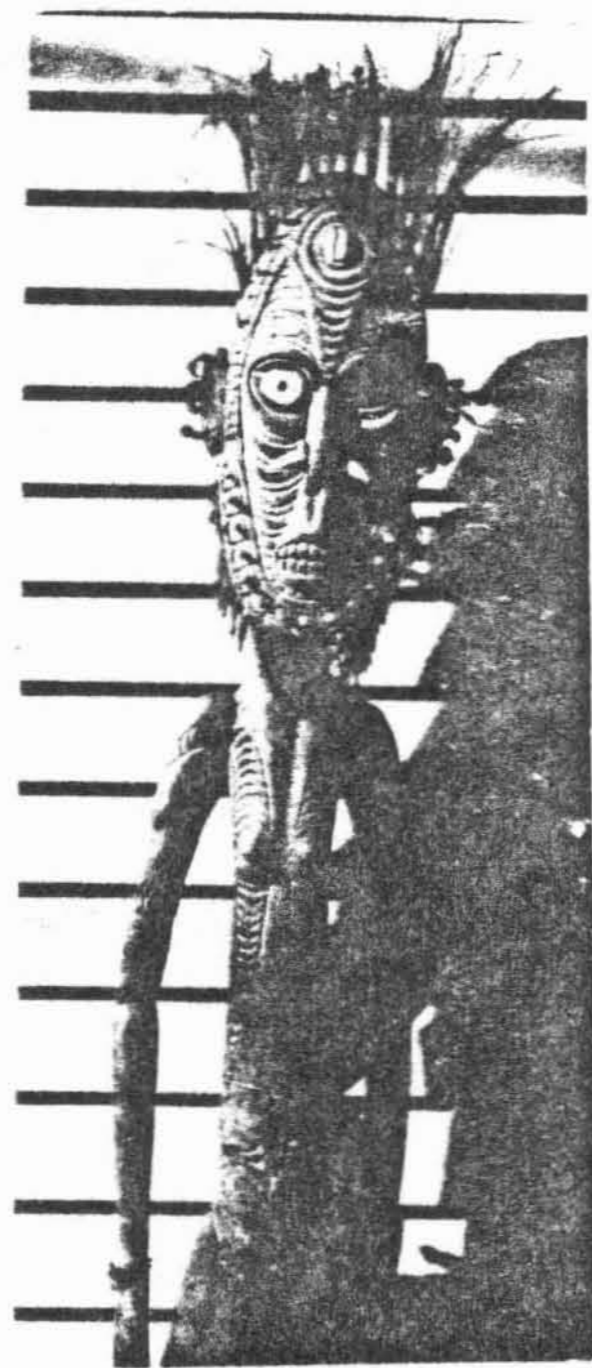
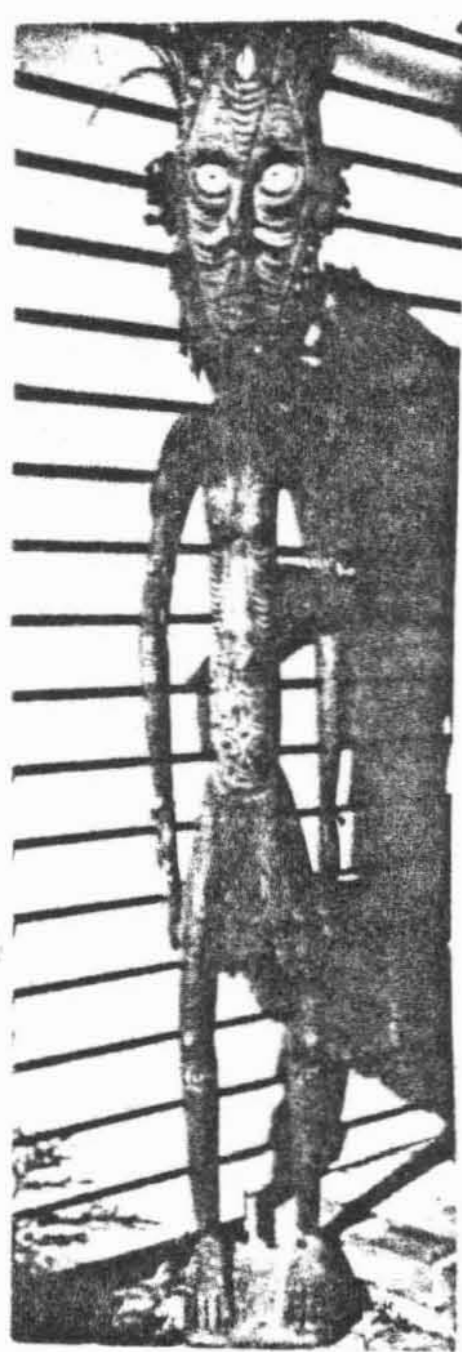


Ill. 36 Origin of Beak Styles according to Felix Speiser in "Art Styles of the Pacific".

Ill. 37 Current Beak Style Figure from Kaminimbit.



Ill. 38 Ancestor Figure and family in Mindimbit.



Ill. 39 Close ups of Ancestor Figure note curvilinear carving on face, dog's teeth, bone and feather decorations. Also scari-
fication pattern on body, arms, legs and navel. Figure on far
right is a simpler Ancestor image from Kuvenmas.



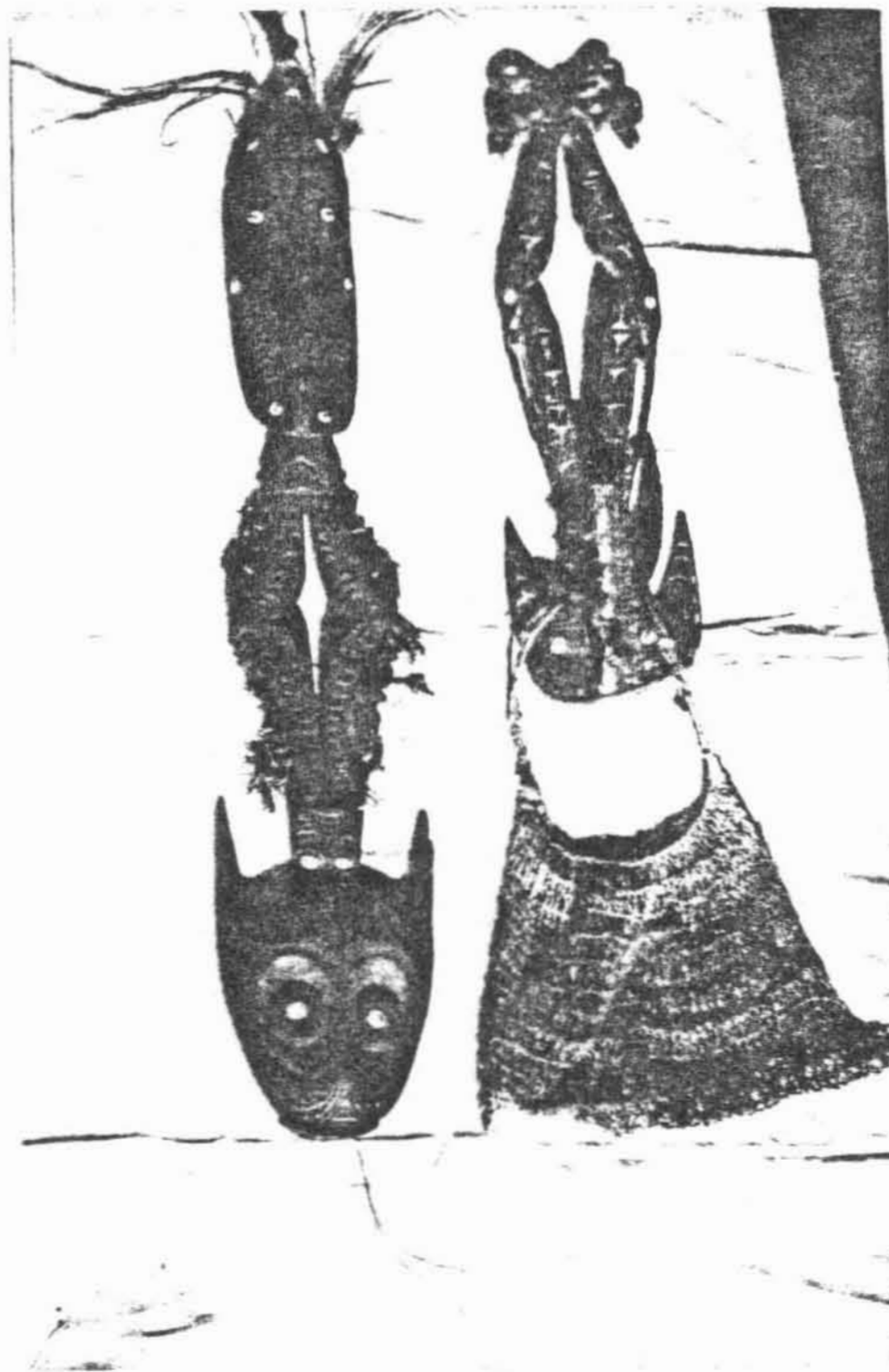
Ill. 40 Traditional Ancestor
Figure from Paul Wingert
Primitive Art.



Ill. 41 Traditional Hook from Jean Guiart
The Arts of the South Pacific.



Ill. 42 Hook incorporating human figure from Aibom.



Ill. 43 L. Hook from Mindimbit heavily carved with face motif.
R. Hook from Kabrیمان with bilum bag.

were life-sized with scarification patterns along the breasts, at the navel, around the arms, legs and back that accurately reflected the tattoos still found among the inhabitants. The use of cassowary feathers and dog's teeth around the face of the figure and spiral designs circulating out from the shell eyes are very typical of traditional Middle Sepik style. Another figure on the right in Ill. 39 & G. S. 58 is from Kuvenmas. It represents a less ornate style where carving is the main form of decoration.

Hooks

Hooks are prevalent throughout the Pacific as well as in the Middle Sepik area. The most common usage of these hooks today is the same as it has been for generations - to hang bilum bags containing food and clothes. Many of these hooks are carved and also painted while others depend upon just the masterly incised carving for decoration. Designs found on hooks incorporate all the iconography familiar to the Sepik: birds, crocodiles, snakes, lizards and human faces executed in a curvilinear manner. (Ills. 41-43)

Masks

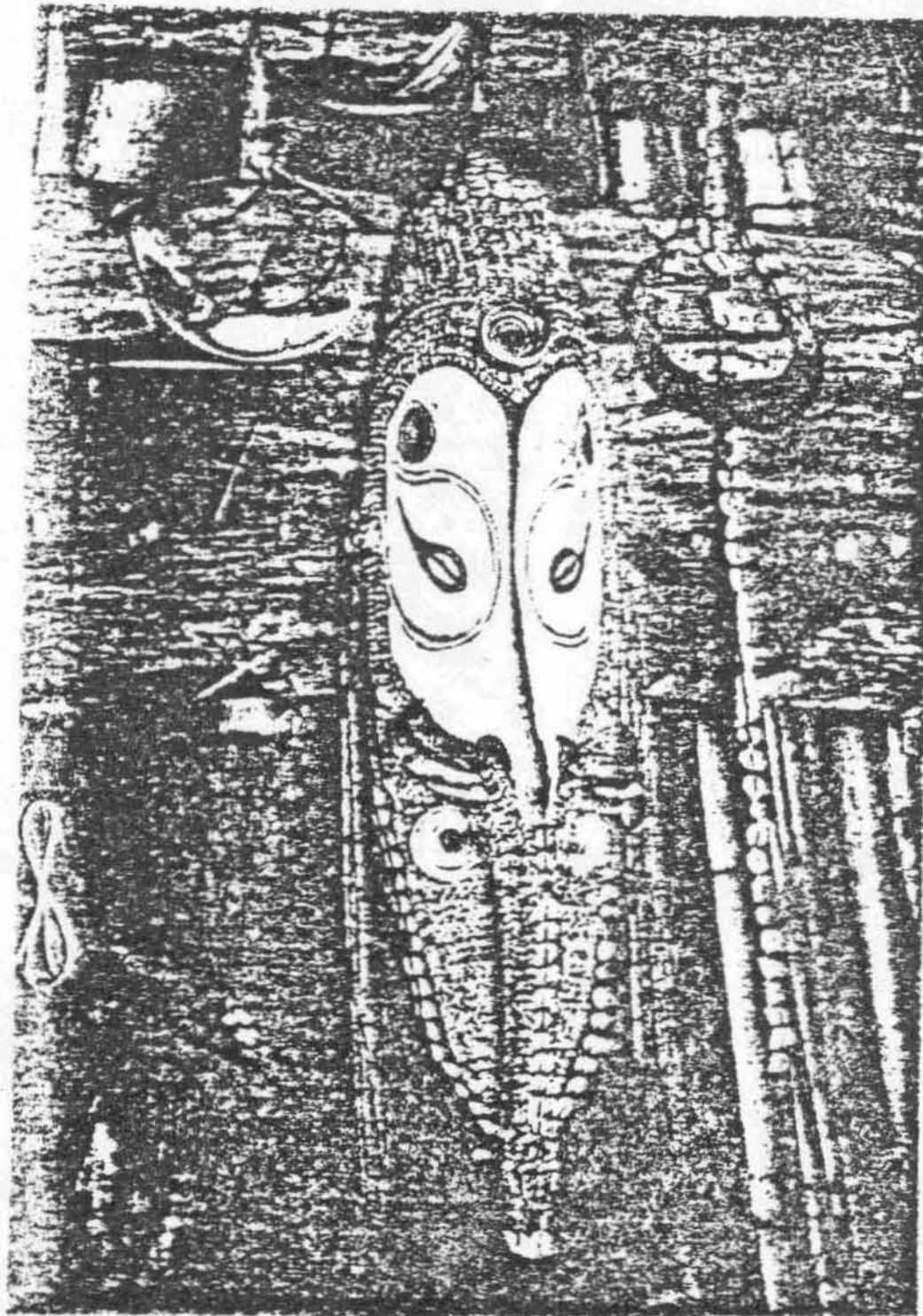
Masks are used by many Melanesian people in distinctive and unique ways. Among the Iatmul, the Haus Tamberan Gable Masks (already discussed) Mwai, Basketry, and Portrait masks are particularly impressive and expressive of their cultural beliefs.

According to Bateson's informants, Mwai masks were believed to be junior versions of Wagan - an abstract wicker image

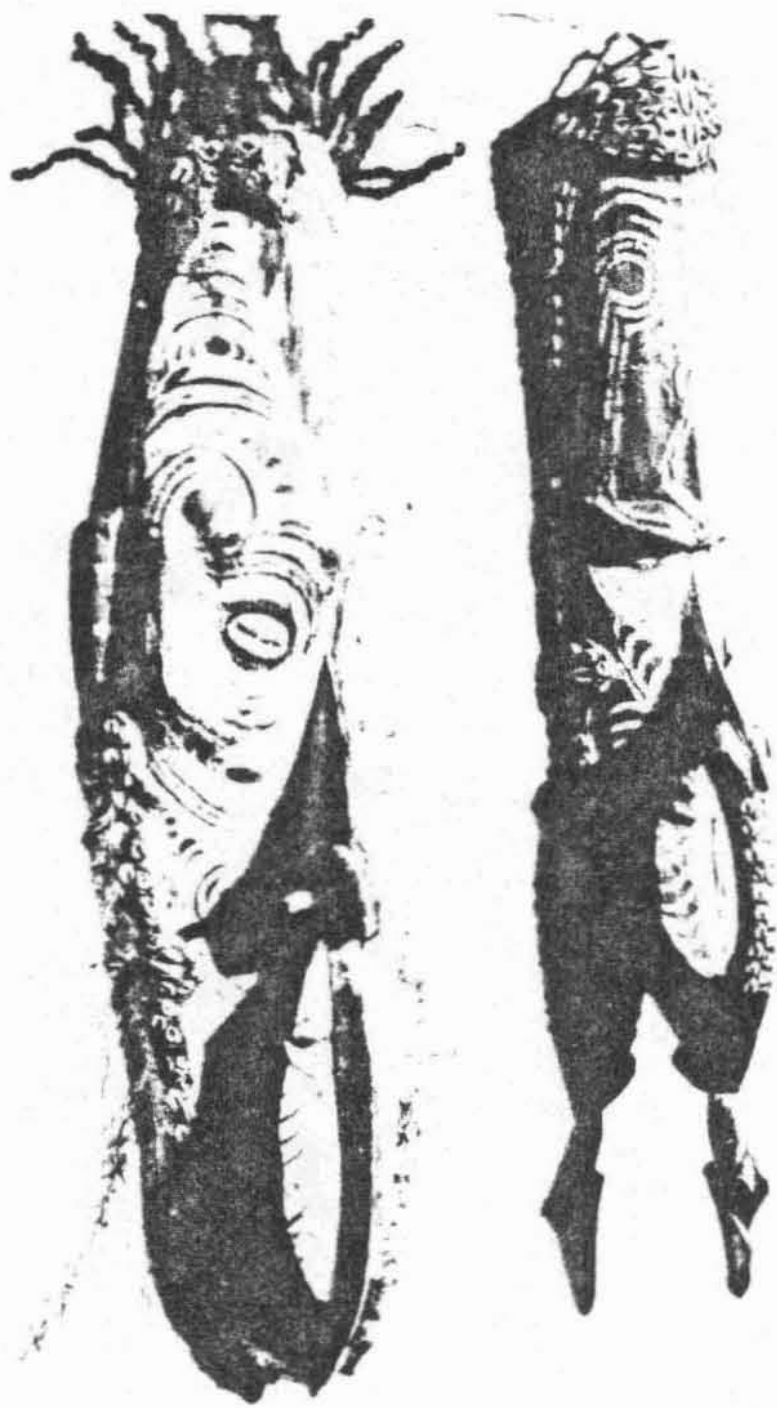
representing ancestors of the clan and/or devil spirits. We did not see any Wagen images, but found Mwai masks in all the Haus Tamberans and many private homes. These masks are noted for their elongated shape and a beak-nose usually ending in a totem animal such as a lizard or crocodile. (Ills. 44-46) Slanted eyes often inlaid with cowrie shells are also characteristic of Mwai masks. Could there be a direct relationship between this eye shape and the eyes of owls found in the jungles along the Sepik? Birds, in Melanesian thinking, are associated with spirits, so the incorporation of this form in an ancestor image would be consistent. These slanted (sometimes called "coffee-bean") eyes are occasionally found in other masks and figures too. If they do originate from owl eyes this could be another example of a direct relationship between the physical environment and the art form.

Basketry Masks

As Illustrations 47 and 48 show, it is hard to say where basketry masks leave off and figures and/or costumes begin. Masks of woven materials are found in other Melanesian areas. Many are still being produced along the Middle Sepik, while areas such as the Papuan Gulf no longer create them. Basketry masks and costumes are used during initiation ceremonies and other rituals. These works often utilize both the modified and extreme beak style. (Ills. 47 & 48) It is interesting to note that the nasal septum of the faces is often pierced and inserted with bone or shell, in the same manner as the noses of



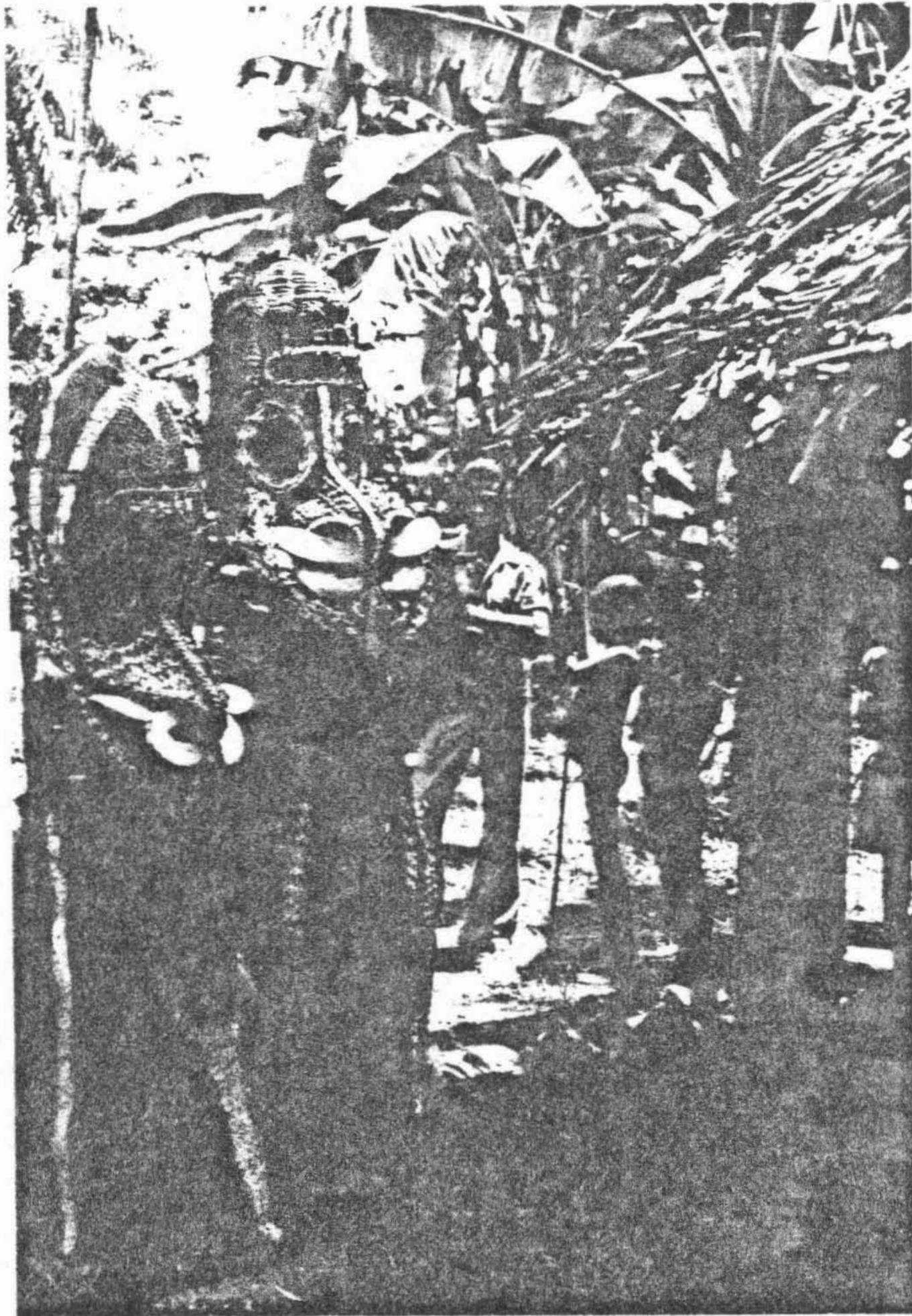
Ill. 44 Mwai Mask 1936 from Bateson's Naven. Some of this style can still be found.



Ill. 45 Contemporary Mwai Masks L. from Kaminimbit note human hair, cassowary feather decorations, bone in nose and cowrie shell eyes. R. mask from Korogo.



Ill. 46 Same contemporary Mwai Masks L. from Korogo R. from Kaminimbit.



Ill. 47 Basketry Masks and Costumes
from Tamnanum. Note Beak style and
shell insertions in noses.

22.28 MALE SPIRIT MASK (*didagur*)

Basketry, paint

57 (22½) high

Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province,

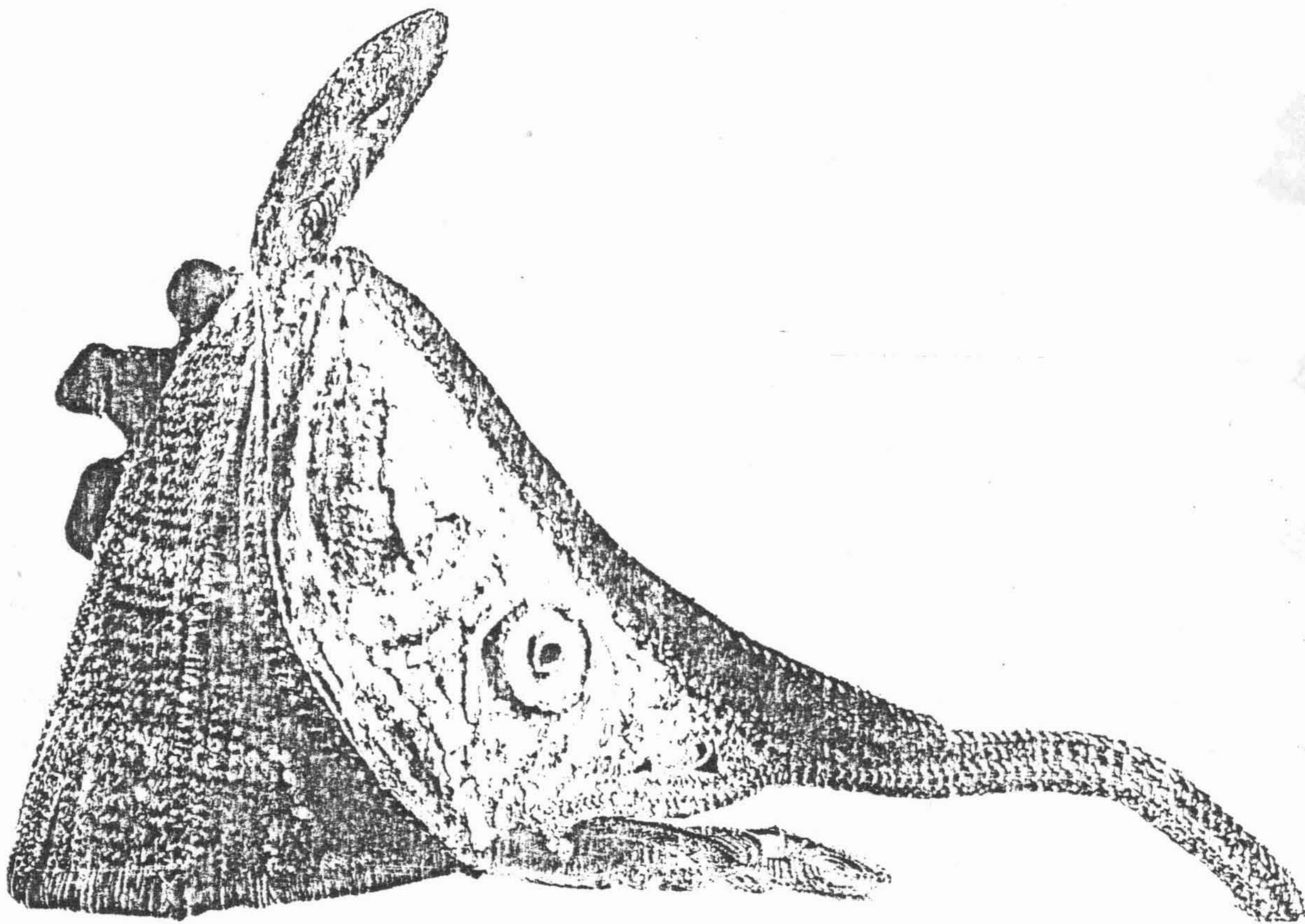
Karawari River, Wolpam: Alamlak

Collected by Fike Haberland, 1963

Museum für Völkerkunde, Frankfurt, NS
43202

Didagur masks appeared at initiation, in both male and female form, the females having shorter noses. The type is also found among the latmul people of the Sepik River itself, from whom the Karawari probably adopted it.

Haberland and Seyfarth, *Die Yimar*, pl. 17, 1



Ill. 48 Extreme Beak Style Masks. Similar types are found in many Middle Sepik River Villages today.

the inhabitants of the area. Michael Somare describes this practice which occurred during his initiation in 1955. However, due to his position as Prime Minister his nose was not pierced.³²

Among the villages we visited Tambanum appeared to be the main supplier of these basketry masks and costumes as well as woven animal figures and fetishes. (G. S. 54 & 55)

Portrait Masks

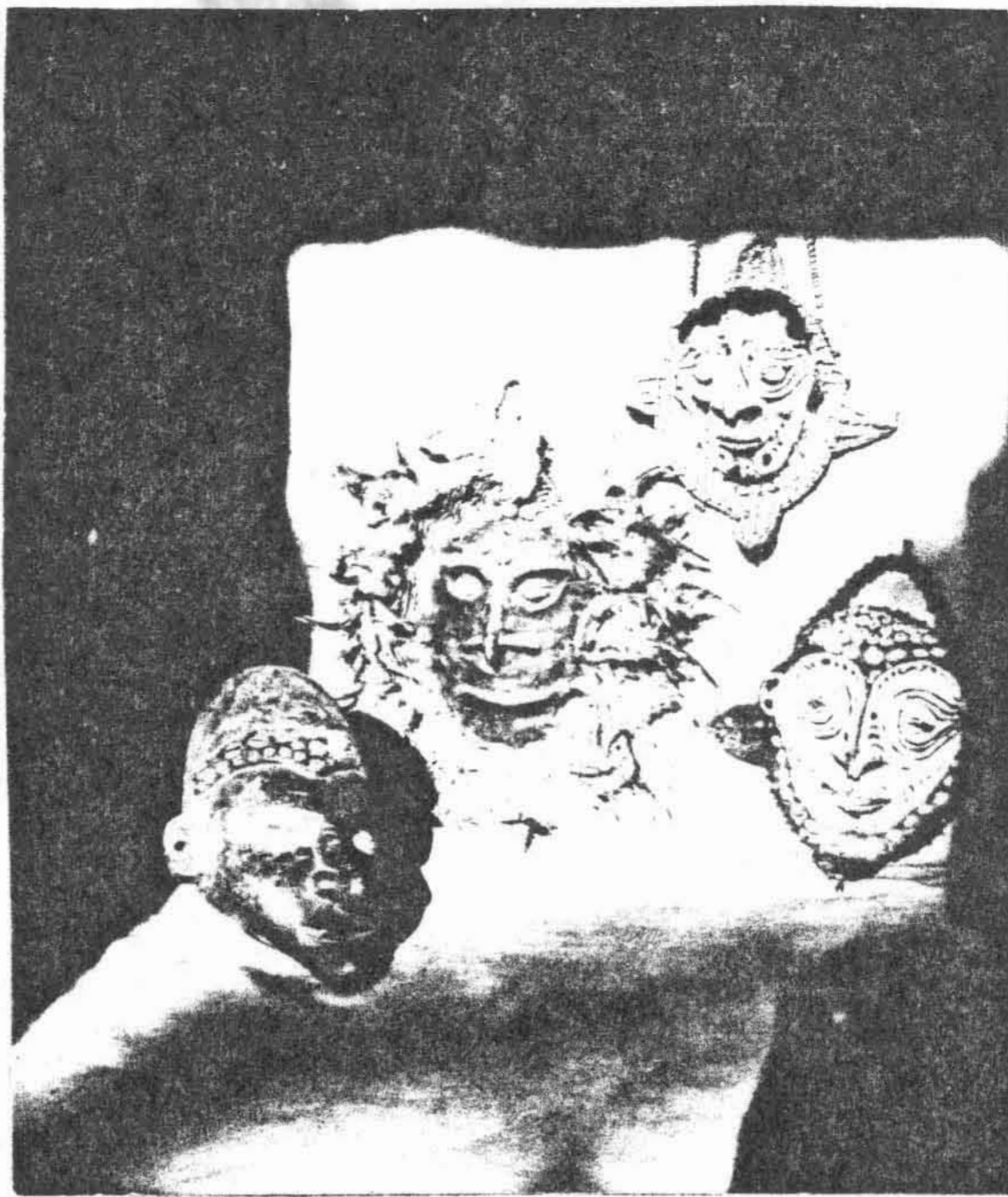
Portrait masks, in traditional times, were constructed on actual human skulls with features modeled in clay; painting, feathers and shell inlay completed the decorations. (Ill. 49) Skull portraits were created to honor personal attributes of the deceased. These qualities ranged from having achieved Big Man status to simply being considered physically attractive as in Illustration 49. Often these decorated skulls were incorporated into Mbwatnggowi puppets used at festival times to ensure the fertility of the harvest.³³ Portrait skull production continues to present times. But now, instead of a human skull, the shell of a turtle is used as a base. These are then modeled with clay and decorated in the traditional manner with painting, feathers, shell inlay and bone. (Ills. 50, 51)

The art forms discussed so far have all been previously reported and are well documented. These works are basically traditional or reveal variations or developments within a prescribed form. However, we were startled to come across two pieces of sculpture and one type of mask that did not fit into



The portrait skull of a woman. She was a native of Kankanamun who died some three generations ago. Her skull was cleaned, exhibited at mortuary ceremonies, and finally buried as is customary. But as she was considered to be strikingly beautiful, the men later dug up her portrait (and probably substituted another skull in the grave). Since then, her skull has been used in mbwatnggowi ceremonies (cf. Plate XXVII). Her long nose was especially admired. In the photograph, the breast is a half coconut shell.

Ill. 49 From Bateson's Naven.



Ill. 50 Current examples of Portrait Art. Head on left is made of wood, all others are clay, modeled and painted over turtle shells.



Ill. 51 Most elaborate example of turtle shell mask. Note bone in nose, real human hair on eyebrows, cassowary feathers on head, basketry frame and raffia trim. From Tambanum.

any of the recognized traditional or stylized categories that demark Middle Sepik art. These enigmatic pieces are as follows:

1) Female figure (Ill. 52) This three dimensional figure stands about 32 inches high. The stance with arms straight down and bent knees is traditional as is the shape of the face with its curvilinear designs and the treatment of the eyes. However, the sharp cheek bones are not at all usual, nor are the angular appendixes on the head, sharp pointed breasts, and elongated angular ears. The use of gray paint is also uncharacteristic, for red, white and black are the usual Sepik colors; so too are the polka-dot type of body decorations. (It has occurred to me that this sharp angular design form, which we also noted in a contemporary wooden mask (Ill. 56) might have been borrowed from the art work of the Huon Gulf area, on the coast of Papua New Guinea not too far from the mouth of the Sepik. Perhaps this is a current instance of style-borrowing as has so often occurred in the past.)

2) Figure (Ill. 53) This piece utilizes the silhouette shape and facial curvilinear spiral designs that are so often found in Sepik art. But the body shape and overall format are the most unusual and least related to traditional art forms of any work I saw. However, its workmanship and design relationships of positive forms and negative space make it a piece of high artistic quality.

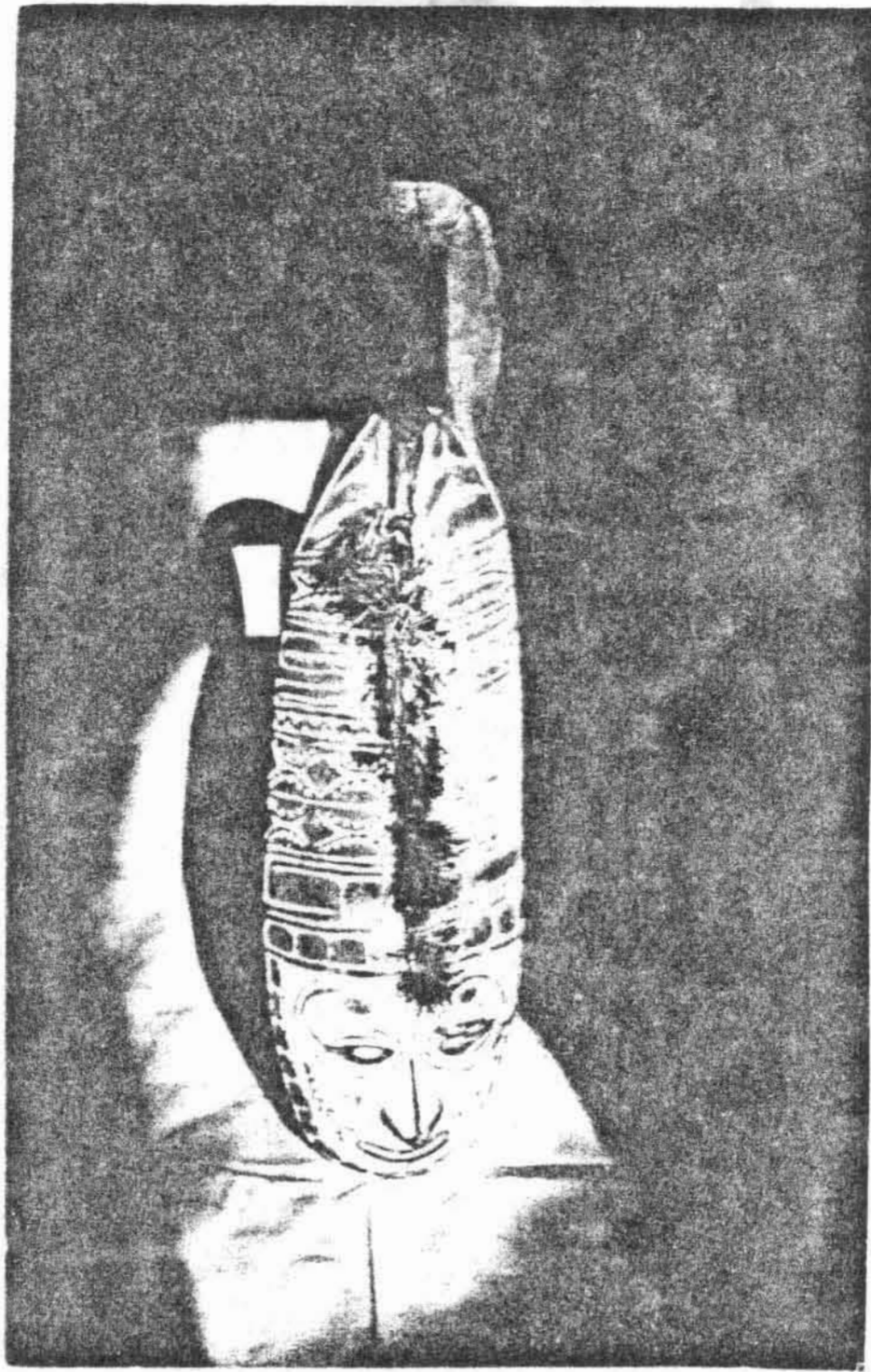
We saw several examples of this style of female figure in other villages but the one we collected and the other enigmatic piece both came from Korarau. This isolated village, located



Ill. 52 Female Figure from Korarau.



Ill. 53 Figure from Korarau.



Ill. 54 Elongated Decorated
Headdress Mask from Aibom.



Ill. 55 Highly carved and
decorated mask utilizing
opposed hook motif from
Kovenmas.

way down a vegetation-choked tributary of the Sepik, was the smallest and most traditional appearing of all the villages we visited. It was also the least friendly, although we felt that might be explained by the fact that we came with people from Kaminimbit, a village that was their traditional enemy. Yet it was at Korarau that we found the two most unique and least traditional art pieces of the entire trip. I can offer no explanation for this unusual situation but the art production of this village definitely merits further, more concentrated research.

3) The "Elongated Decorated Headdress" mask (Ill. 54) These masks are now found in nearly every village along the Middle Sepik. The upper two-thirds of the mask is highly decorated in traditional curvilinear designs which may or may not incorporate an animal image. The bottom third of the mask represents a face. Another example of this Elongated Decorated Headdress style mask may be seen in Illustration 56. The other mask in that illustration shows unusual angular designs that may relate to the figure in Illustration 52 from Kuyenmas. In contrast Illustration 55 is an example of a very traditional style mask utilizing the opposed hook motif.

The art objects described in this paper by no means include all the art work found in the villages we visited along the Middle Sepik River. The elaborate and varied religious and social ceremonies which express the cultures of the area create an incredible profusion and variety of art forms. In addition: "The Sepik's inhabitants' unbelievable love for art may be seen



Ill. 56 Contemporary Masks (L. Elongated Decorated Headdress type) on fence of crocodile skinning shed in Angoram.

from the fact that scarcely any implement in common use is left undecorated . . . "34 These factors result in almost every object in a village falling into an "art" classification. However, the art works I have discussed in this paper appear to be the most traditional and important from the point of view of reflecting the culture.

The term "traditional" needs to be somewhat qualified. It is a common practice in the Western world to identify the characteristics of a society - including art works, as "traditional" upon first contact. This freezing of a culture and defining its attributes as those of a specific moment does not take into account the natural state of constant evolution that applies to all cultures. I believe that cultures as well as the art works that express them, are in a continuous state of change. Variations or developments of the stylistic elements of a given form considered to be a representative specimen of "traditional" art, do not render that piece any the less authentic or traditional.

VI CONCLUSION

The last 60 years have seen a growth in appreciation of Pacific art. As a result the demand for artifacts from the Middle Sepik area has also increased. Art dealers move through this region buying in bulk. This has undoubtedly stimulated the production of carvings. However, most of the artifacts made for sale are indistinguishable from those made for the villagers' own use. In the villages along the route of the tourist boat "Melanesian Explorer," prices of the art works are somewhat higher and there exist some obviously inferior objects in both form and carving that have been turned out for tourist sale. But we did not find this situation elsewhere nor was "sale" the underlying motivation for production of art works. The impetus for creating art appears to be as it has always been: to give expression to an integral part of the cultures of the Sepik. This situation and the high quality and quantity of both traditional and innovative art works came as a pleasant surprise. For the current literature on the area and the general opinion of art historians and gallery dealers regarding the traditional arts of the area is that they have died out and that few other good pieces are now being created. Our findings present an entirely different picture. Not only are most of the traditional art forms alive and well but new, unrecorded pieces are appearing.

I believe this viable state of the arts has continued because as Raymond Firth says: "The primary value of [art] work has not been disturbed though it may be enlarged."³⁵ In spite

of the introduction of Christianity and of the scientific 20th century explanations of natural phenomena, many Melanesians still believe in the ancestors, spirit forces and the mystical powers of nature. These unseen forces are believed to be responsible for earthquakes, floods, illness, the fecundity of people, crops, and animals. The creation of art objects through which these powers may be appeased and/or controlled remains the underlying *raison d'etre* for primitive art.

The powerful emotional quality and vitality of these art works is readily apparent, both to those who are knowledgeable about art and those who are not. Strong reactions are due to the remarkable technical skill exhibited by these artifacts as well as the intense, dramatic, and sometimes foreboding visual appearance of these images. Distortion and exaggeration, as well as the use of unfamiliar materials such as dog's teeth, bones, human hair and feathers may account in part for these responses. However, the fact remains that these art works, though removed from their original culture and environment, are able to evoke strong feelings and emotions in viewers who are totally unaware of the original concepts being visually represented.

Westerners may approach Pacific art for a variety of motivations. One may seek pure aesthetic pleasure, to understand the culture of the people who created it, or even to prove or disprove theories of cultural origins. There is, however, another reason which I feel is especially relevant for an understanding and appreciation of art from the Pacific. In

many cases the traditional pre-contact societies of these island communities were nearly destroyed by colonial regimes. Now most of these countries have gained independence and are in the process of trying to pick up the pieces of their traditional cultures and identity and assimilate those with the modern world. This is not an easy task and many Pacific people appear to have lost the best of their old cultures while gaining only the worst of the new: alcohol, drugs, and material goods of questionable value in their environment. I think an appreciation and understanding of their traditional arts can contribute a more positive assessment of how rich and meaningful their old cultures were. As Felix Speiser says: ". . . ask oneself whether in such circumstances so rich . . . an art could well have come into existence and one must also bear in mind that wherever such delight in the beauty of form and colour is evinced, the spirit cannot be living entirely in the shadows, but must know also joy."³⁶ I believe pride and self-esteem in where Pacific Islanders came from is gained from an appreciation of their art and could be a vital element in establishing a new order and positive image both for Pacific Islanders themselves and in their relationship with others. As Michael Somare says: "Only if we learn to understand the values of our traditional cultures will we be able to bring to the task of modern nation building that special touch that will allow us to build a unique country."³⁷

VII FOOTNOTES

¹ Gregory Bateson, Naven (Stanford University Press, 1958).

² Anthony Forge, "The Problem of Meaning in Art" in Oceanic Art. ed. Sidney M. Mead (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1979), p. 281.

³ Anthony Forge, "Style and Meaning in Sepik Art" in Primitive Art and Society. ed. Anthony Forge (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

⁴ Forge, "The Problem of Meaning in Art."

⁵ Carl Schmidt, Oceanic Art: Man, Myth and Image in the South Seas (New York: Harry N. Abrahams, 1966), p. 63.

⁶ Douglas Fraiser, "The Heraldic Woman: A Study in Diffusion" in The Many Faces of Primitive Art. ed. Douglas Fraiser, p. 49.

⁷ H. C. Brookfield with Doreen Hart, Melanesia: A Geographical Interpretation of an Island World. (London: Methuen, 1971).

⁸ Anthony Forge, "Art and Environment in the Sepik" in Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1965.

⁹ H. C. Brookfield with Doreen Hart, Melanesia: A Geographical Interpretation of an Island World.

¹⁰ Paul S. Wingert, Primitive Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 197.

¹¹ Marshall Sahlins, "Differentiation by Adaptation in Polynesian Societies" in Polynesia. ed. Alan Howard.

¹² Alfred Bühler, Art of Oceanic: A Descriptive Catalogue (Zurich: Museum Rietberg), p. 138.

¹³ Raymond Firth, "The Social Framework of Primitive Art" in The Many Faces of Primitive Art. ed. Douglas Fraiser (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), pp. 31, 13.

¹⁴ Ibid.

15 Françoise Gilot and Carlton Lake, Life with Picasso (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1964), p. 34.

16 Felix Speiser, "Art Styles in the Pacific" in The Many Faces of Primitive Art. ed. Douglas Fraiser, p. 134.

17 Douglas Newton, Crocodile and Cassowary (New York: The Museum of Primitive Art, 1971), p. 7.

18 Raymond Firth, "The Social Framework of Primitive Art" in The Many Faces of Primitive Art. ed. Douglas Fraiser, p. 22.

19 Forge, "Art and Environment in the Sepik", p. 23.

20 Ralph Linton and Paul Wingert, Arts of the South Seas (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), p. 84.

21 Deborah Waite, Lecture in Art and Melanesia Course, Fall 1979, University of Hawaii at Manoa.

22 Bateson, Naven, Ch. 7.

23 Douglas Fraiser, "The Heraldic Woman: A Study in Diffusion" in The Many Faces of Primitive Art. ed. Douglas Fraiser, p. 49.

24 Deborah Waite, Lecture in Art and Melanesia Course, Fall 1979, University of Hawaii at Manoa.

25 Michael Somare, Sana (Port Moresby: Niugini Press Ltd., 1975), p. 15.

26 Speiser, "Art Style in the Pacific," p. 144.

27 Anthony Forge, "Three Kamanggabi Figures from the Arambak People" in Three Regions of Melanesian Art (New York: The Museum of Primitive Art, 1960).

28 Deborah Waite, Lecture in Art and Melanesia Course, Fall 1979, University of Hawaii at Manoa.

29 Forge, "Three Kamanggabi Figures from the Arambak People."

30 Bateson, Naven, p. 163.

- 31 Speiser, "Art Styles of the Pacific."
- 32 Somare, Sana, p. 34.
- 33 Bateson, Naven, Plate XXVII.
- 34 Speiser, "Art Styles in the Pacific," p. 130.
- 35 Firth, "The Social Framework of Primitive Art," p. 21.
- 36 Speiser, "Art Styles in the Pacific," p. 134.
- 37 Somare, Sana, p. 14.

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- X Description of General Slides taken between 10 and 20 August 1980 by Caroline Yacoe, except Nos. 15, 32, and 46, which were taken by Donald Yacoe
- 1 The Sepik River as it appears flying out of Angoram. Note meandering course and ox-bows.
 - 2 The river and canoe at Kaminimbit where the lodge is located.
 - 3 Close up of canoe built, carved, decorated and captained by inhabitants of Kaminimbit.
 - 4 Traveling on the river in a tranquil section. Note horizontal planes of river and sky.
 - 5 Dense jungle growth behind the village of Aibom. Betelnut from here was very popular with all the Middle Sepik inhabitants.
 - 6 Dance costumes on lower level of a house at Tambanum. Note possible relationship of natural bushes and shrubs to costumes.
 - 7 The village of Kambaramba from the river.
 - 8 Crocodile-headed canoe prows tied up in front of Korarau.
 - 9 Regular dwelling houses in the village of Malingai.
 - 10 Korarau, the smallest and most traditional village we visited. Woman by the fire is smeared with mud in old custom of mourning.
 - 11 Stream by village of Kanduanam. Note wicker fish-traps and banana trees.
 - 12 Kaminimbit, one of the villages featured in Gregory Bateson's study Naven.
 - 13 A family of Kanduanam utilizing the lower level of their house since the river was not flooding.
 - 14 A bridge in the village of Yentchenmangoa.
 - 15 Author and baby Cassowary bird at Suapmeri. The plumage of the adult bird is used to decorate many of the art works and for decoration during dances.

- 16 The people of Korarau. The only village that was not too friendly, possibly because we were accompanied by villagers from Kaminimbit - their traditional enemy.
- 17 Ceramic pots under a house in Aibom. This village was the largest and most prosperous of any we visited due to their production of pottery.
- 18 Close up of Aibom pots, storage jars and fireplace bowls. The basic form is made by the women and the decoration is put on by the men.
- 19 More Aibom pots but note also in front right Kao figure, debating stool and wicker fish traps.
- 20 A regular dwelling house at Tambanum. Note raised level, decorated front and Gable mask over door.
- 21 A woman of Kaninimbit in traditional dress.
- 22 A woman of Kuvenmas by Aibom fireplace bowl.
- 23 Interior of regular dwelling house at Suapmeri. Fireplaces designate each family's space.
- 24 Same as 23.
- 25 Woman and children on the path to Malingai. Note Bilum bags carried by woman.
- 26 Haus Tamberan at Kuvenmas, Black Water Lakes region. The most traditional in appearance and use of any Haus Tamberan we saw.
- 27 Same as 26.
- 28 Haus Tamberan at Yentchenmangoa. Classified as "Modified Traditional" due to its construction on two rather than three levels.
- 29 Structural framework of house being built outside Malingai.
- 30 Close up of Kuvenmas Haus Tamberan's front. Note decorations on thatch, Gable mask and Kao image.
- 31 Big Man of Kanganaman and Kao image from his grandfather's time, on the second level of the Haus Tamberan.
- 32 Front of Haus Tamberan at Angoram showing carved wood posts, Gable mask and wood Kao figure.

- 33 Front of Haus Tamberan at Timbunke. Note ceramic pot, Kao image, Gable mask and thatch decoration.
- 34 Paintings on ceiling of Angoram Haus Tamberan. Style is typical of the Middle Sepik area but I did not see any other Haus Tamberan ceilings painted in this manner in the villages we visited. However, such painting is found in houses further south around the Keram River.
- 35 Radja (displayed female) figure over entrance to the second level of Haus Tamberan at Kanganaman.
- 36 Carved support posts for the second level of the Haus Tamberan at Angoram. Note also Karawari crocodile posts under house.
- 37 Old Haus Tamberan posts in a field by Kaningara, Black Water Lakes. Windjimbu image found on these posts and other traditional iconography has been incorporated in the Catholic church being built on top of the hill in this village.
- 38 Windjimbu house post and Aibom fireplace bowl at Kanganaman. Post is believed to represent male qualities and those of bush spirits.
- 39 Windjimbu post at Suapmeri.
- 40 General view of lower level of Haus Tamberan at Kanganaman.
- 41 Dancers getting ready on lower level of Haus Tamberan at Kuvenmas.
- 42 Inhabitants of Kuvenmas performing on Ceremonial Ground by Haus Tamberan. Note Cassowary and Bird of Paradise feathers used for ornamentation.
- 43 Dancers at Kuvenmas.
- 44 Dancers at Kuvenmas.
- 45 Iatmul Debating Stool and Slit-Gong Drums on lower level of Haus Tamberan at Kanganaman.
- 46 Large Debating Stool behind author. Note also Mwai and Peg-eye Gable masks. Korogo.
- 47 Slit-Gong Drums on lower level of Haus Tamburan at Kanganaman. Note also hanging hooks.
- 48 Detail of finial on Slit-Gong Drum.

- 49 Hour-glass shaped drum used in dance ceremonies to celebrate the ordination of the Catholic Bishop of Wewak.
- 50 Dancers at celebration ceremony, Wewak.
- 51 The Bishop of Wewak and others from the Mission.
- 52 Dancers at celebration ceremony, Wewak.
- 53 Dancers at celebration ceremony, Wewak.
- 54 Woven basketry dance costumes used at initiations and other ritual ceremonies. Tambenum.
- 55 Woven basketry mask/costume by house in Tambenum.
- 56 Ancestor figure and family in Mindimbit.
- 57 Carver working on wood figure in Mindimbit.
- 58 Inhabitants of Kuvenmas with Ancestor figure in front of Haus Tamberan.
- 59 Contemporary wood masks on fence in front of crocodile skinning pen at Angoram.
- 60 Wood sculpture possibly representing mythical origin of the Sepik River and two children of Kanduanum.

- 23 Carved Crocodile Canoe Prows
Left from Tambanum, 15 inches.
Right from Kabriman, 20 inches.
Stained carved wood, inlaid cowrie shell eyes.
- 24 Same as 23.

- IX Description of Art Works Collected by
Caroline and Donald Yacoe along the Villages
of the Middle Sepik River, Papua New Guinea,
August 1980. Colored Slides 1-24.
- 1 Ancestor Figure, Mindimbit
6 ft.+, carved wood stained black, Cassowary bird feathers,
bone, dog's teeth, shell and raffia ornamentations.
Scarification patterns on torso, back, arms and legs
represent actual tattoo designs.
 - 2 Close up of face of this Ancestor Figure, note curvilinear
spiral designs.
 - 3 Same Ancestor Figure on right. Ancestor Figure on left
from Kuvenmas, Black Water Lakes area.
3 ft. carved wood stained black, painted red, black and
white lines to emphasize carved designs.
 - 4 Beak Figure, Kaminimbit
26 inches high, carved wood with painted spiral designs in
red, black and white on the face.
 - 5 Right: Kamanggabi type figure, Kuvenmas; 26 inches high,
carved stained wood with inlaid cowrie shell eye.
Left: Yi'pon Hook, Kaningara, 8 inches high, carved stained
wood.
 - 6 Same as in slide 5.
 - 7 Left: Hook figure from Aibom, 24 inches tall, very thin
in width. Red, black and white painted lines to emphasize
carved lines, on face and tattooing. Note also elongated
Beak Style nose. Right: Hook figure from Kabriman,
carved stained wood with red, white and black paint.
 - 8 Displayed Female Figure, Yentchenmangoa
8 inches by 18 inches, carved wood.
 - 9 Left: Figure, Korarau
30 inches tall, carved stained wood with brownish red,
black and white spiral style decorations on face and raffia
tassels along back.
Right: Female Figure, Korarau
33 inches high, carved stained wood with painted black,
white and gray spiral and polka-dot style decorations.
 - 10 Frontal view of Female Figure from Korarau.
 - 11 Side view of Female Figure from Korarau.
 - 12 Figure, Korarau.

- 13 Left: Elongated Decorated Headdress Style Mask, Kuvenmas
30 inches, carved stained wood, with painted red, black
and white decorations and raffia ornaments.
Right: Same style mask from Aibom
33 inches, same materials.
- 14 Left: Mwai Mask, Kaminimbit
18 inches, carved wood with painted red, black and white
spiral designs, Cassowary feathers, human hair, bone and
inlaid cowrie shell eyes.
Right: Mwai Mask, Korogo
15 inches, carved wood with brown and white painted
decorations and inlaid cowrie shells.
- 15 Portrait Style masks, Kaminimbit
12 to 6 inches in size, based on turtle shells, molded
over with clay and then painted. Cowrie shell inlaid eyes,
chicken feathers and rolled coconut fiber frameworks.
- 16 Portrait Style Mask set in basketry and raffia headpiece
20 inches, turtle shell base, covered in clay, painted
black and white decorations. Inlaid cowrie shells, human
hair, Cassowary feathers and bone.
- 17 Basketry Gable Mask, Mumeri
24 inches, woven materials painted with black, white and
brownish red, raffia tie accessories.
- 18 Side view of slide 17.
- 19 Peg-eye Style Gable Masks, Korogo
12 to 15 inches, carved wood, painted with white, black
and reddish brown, bone in nose of middle mask.
- 20 Traditional Style Masks from Kuvenmas
Left: 24 inches, elaborately carved wood painted in red,
black and white.
Right: 20 inches, carved wood utilizing the opposed hook
motif. Also painted in red, black and white.
- 21 Open-work Beak Mask, Tambanum
24 inches, carved wood, painted red, black and white.
- 22 Foreground: Headrest from Wewak, made by grandfather of
seller. 6 inches high by 18 inches long. Carved wood
stained black.
Background: Fantastical crocodile headed stool with
characteristic face and spiral designs on base. Malingai
8 inches high by 24 inches long. Carved stained wood with
painted white, black and brownish red designs.

