

∞  
OCEANIC  
SOCIALITIES AND  
CULTURAL FORMS  
∞

*Ethnographies  
of Experience*

Edited by  
*Ingjerd Hoëm and Sidsel Roalkvam*

  
*Berghahn Books*  
New York • Oxford

- Kapferer, B. 1997. *The Feast of the Sorcerer: Practices of Consciousness and Power*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Léonhardt, M. 1937. *Do Karro: la personne et le mythe dans le monde mélanésien*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Lévi-Strauss, L. and D. Eribon. 1988. *De près et de loin*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- Mauss, M. 1950. 'Les techniques du corps' in *Sociologie et Anthropologie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de la France.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. trans. James Edie. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Strathern, M. 1988. *The Gender of the Gift. Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wiener, J. 1982. 'Substance, sibblingship and exchange: Aspects of social structure in Papua New Guinea' in *Social Analysis*, 11: 3-34.

## Chapter 2



# Sociality as Figure

## Bedamini Perceptions of Social Relationships

Arve Sørum

Food is a medium through and around which relationships shape themselves; its giving and sharing is a privileged social idiom. Exchange and sharing are general features of existence and general vehicles of understanding. The production, distribution, sharing and consumption of food also have a central position in Bedamini life.

In the evening, there is usually a common meal in the sense that everybody is cooking and eating at the same time. If there is a period when many people sleep in the longhouse, a 'happening' unfolds which at first I found pretty weird. Lots of whooping men run around each other, handing each other bananas and other garden produce. They end up with fewer bananas than they started out with, and mostly eating everybody else's bananas. It amounts to a generalised distribution of one's own food to others, and reception of food from everybody else. The women do the same among themselves, although more discretely, and the 'give and take' also crosses sex boundaries outside the family in cases where that is appropriate. A generalised sharing of the day's collective harvest follows that distribution. These happenings are explicit and moving examples of the fundamental role of foodstuffs in the expression of social relationships, and in the necessity of their continual confirmation.

Special obligations pertain to meat. Prestations received at feasts and game hunted down are expected to be shared with everybody present in the longhouse. (I might add that on such occasions several people bring back their own shares.) Small game are shared out as far as possible, which normally means within the family, or may be eaten out of sight by a very few. If somebody wishes to have delicacies for themselves, and most do, they cannot bring it to the longhouse, unless the feelings of those normally expecting a share will be hurt. Witchcraft beliefs are of some significance here. Staring eyes create unease, and nobody can stand the staring for very long, before sharing out what s/he has got. In fact, a failure to share amounts to a denial of the relationship. On the other hand, a secret meal may mark the beginning of a new named relation of friendship.

I am supposed to be a member of Pitifi clan with the range of rights (and duties) that entails, but obviously not because of descent. Still my membership in the clan is real enough, as I have become a member by subsisting on the foodstuffs grown on the Pitifi clan lands. In fact, this is the way the Bedamini customarily conceptualise redefinition of clan membership amongst themselves. The foodstuffs growing on the land is part of it. The land is a fundamental part of human identity. Through eating the food, one appropriates the land on which it grows. The longer one subsists on it, the more complete the appropriation. This is yet another fundamental way in which food figures in the constitution of social groups and social life. It is also an expression of the 'objectivity' of a social relation.

My starting-point is meaningful human activity. Inspired by Wagner's (Wagner 1977,1986) conception of a cultural dialectic between convention as communicational foundation and invention as the interpretative disclosure of meaning. This implies a dialectic between referencing, or abstraction, as restriction of meaning and analogue imaging, or concretisation, as expansion of meaning. I will proceed on the assumption that part/whole relations have holographic properties. Any concrete image as individual fact embodies within itself a whole, which is larger than itself, a whole of which it is part. In a sense the creative construction of analogue images is a kind of miniaturisation, which in turn is connected with remembrance and recognition, the basis of conventional coding.

In a phenomenology, which heavily exploits the description of processes of perception in its elucidation of meaning, figure/ground reversals, in which part is exchanged for whole, are important phenomena in this regard. A phenomenon is the aspect of anything that reveals how its particular context, linguistic or

social, allows it to show up. Cultural traditions may be conceived as relative styles of revealing; i.e., within each cultural tradition there is a certain way in which phenomena show themselves. What figures emerge from a ground depends on a style of revealing inherent in perceptive acts. The following pages are devoted to a concretisation, i.e., the meaning, of these assumptions.

Approximately 4,000 Bedamini live in the Nomad River area east of the Strickland in Western Province, Papua New Guinea. They subsist on horticulture and hunting in the border zone between highland and lowland. In the east, the mountains of the Southern Highlands form an effective barrier in the landscape; in the west, sky and earth melt together beyond the Strickland River. Theirs is a small world, traditionally reaching as far as the eye, and only in the east pierced by hearsay, due to the trade route to the Huli of the Southern Highlands. As we go on to explore cultural conceptions and perceptions it is important to have in mind, both the size and the relatively closed character of this universe.

The longhouse (*mosomo*, *tiasu*) is the concrete, and also the conceptual, centre (*mogua-fi*) from which a Bedamini experiences the world, regardless of its present position in space. It represents symbolically the nexus of the Bedamini social world. The classification of the surrounding space into kinds of places in terms of the traces of human productive activities, is founded on a tacit understanding of the longhouse as genuinely appropriated space opposed to the realm of the uncontrolled wilderness (*soge*), which includes the very old areas of secondary growth and primary forest. In the centre of this landscape, in its 'heart', as the Bedamini perceive it, is the Bedamini population. In this naturally based, but culturally constituted Bedamini world, the perception of replicating patterns is perceived to inhere in different phenomena. One of these is the forked branch, an elementary figure of relationship, an image of eternal becoming.

All the great rivers have their sources in the mountains to the east. In the west all rivers converge to form one large river (the Strickland), and the Bedamini think that this eventually ends in a big pool beyond the horizon, from whence the water is brought back with the clouds, replicating the perceived direction of the sun and the moon. The rivers and the brooks have a particular significance in the Bedamini perception of space. While the forest covers most of their world, it is structured in the Bedamini mind according to the system of brooks and rivers, which are the points of reference in spatial orientation and the identification of places, in spite of the fact that they are obstacles to, rather than means of, communication. Most sites of the Bedamini landscape are

named after a brook or a river. This also applies to the names of most longhouse sites, and also to the clan names, which derive from site names. Abodes of ancestral spirits are associated with a waterway, which is also the imagined site for one of the great ceremonies performed by the spirits. The rivers give the landscape form and direction. It is significant that they also perceive them as a unity.

When two rivers flow together, they form an *adimi*, conceived as analogous to a forked branch. The merging brooks and rivers, perceived as a totality, is called a *sosogo*. The sensual medium of this perception is the mists of early morning rising from the rivers of the plateau. As the forks add up, they resemble the branches of a tree. The stem and branches of a tree as a whole is called a *sosogo*. The Bedamini perceive a relation of analogy between the river system and a tree. One Bedamini expressed it this way: 'the rivers "carry" the forest like a tree "carries" its foliage'. The similarity is morphological in nature. The link of equivalence between the markers of the *sosogo* concept, which sustains the metaphor, refers to the abstract property of (inverted) ramification revealed in the concrete phenomenon of in-branching. The figure of the forked branch, like the rivers, is perceived as confluence rather than bifurcation.

It is a figure, which discloses itself on shifting grounds. The *sosogo* image patterns the closed landscape and the tree, but also the human body. The Bedamini perceive morphological similarities between humans and trees. From the top, *muni*, which is the exit and entrance of the spiritual essence of both men and trees through the skin and bark, to the toes and roots; most of the main elements and the structure of a tree and a human body are terminologically identical. Tree and man are each other's analogues. The most significant analogy is the relation between the human chest-bone and ribs and the branch structure of a tree, conceived in its totality. Both are referred to as *sosogo*. The 'inner reality' of men and trees are fused through a perception of the abstract property of inverted ramification in both. What is expressed through the concept of *sosogo* in relation to trees as well as humans, is the coming together of separate units to be one.

The chest-bone and ribs are said to be the 'house' of the heart and liver, where spiritual essence (*æsetibu*), is supposed to be located. *Togo* is the term for heart, *togua* means 'in the middle', i.e., the term refers to the centre. The ribs thus become endowed with a symbolic potential in this regard. Besides naming the heart, *togo* also connotes the 'heart-region', the chest as a totality. In the term *sosogo*, the *so*-prefix specifically refers to the ribs and the branches.

The concrete connotations of the term extend beyond the human body to the body politic. *Sosogo* is one referential term for clan, connoting (patrilineally based) kinship relations in general. A row of male initiates in front of the longhouse activates this connotation of the *sosogo* image: the basic constitution of kin relationships (Sørum 1982). The initiation ceremony is arranged by a local community. A local group normally consists of male members of agnatically related clans. The novices (at least ideally) form a set of 'brothers', an ideal that is explicitly emphasised in moral lectures given them. A clan is defined by an idiom of siblingship rather than descent, and understood through the *sosogo* concept. The boys impersonate the 'merging branches' of brotherhood.

Heavy bark wigs are used for marking out a group of boys as novices, whose transformation from childhood to adult malehood is imminent. The 'skin' of the *otorobo* tree is tied to their hair. Covering the wig is a piece of bark cloth with a stylised pattern of flowing water representing the river system in its totality. At the same time it links trees and rivers, as the patterns are also used to represent palm leaves and branches, and as body paint may reflect the ribs of their own chests. The wig and the bark cloth are signs standing for the status of the novices, 'emblems' for the ceremony, but as signs with signifying functions, they also connote the cosmic connections and practical interactions of social life in which the initiation ceremony is situated. The initiation ceremony, and in particular the initiates, is strongly associated with growth. The novices stand in front of the longhouse, within a conceived space, as the personification of growth as well as the relation between the human body, the trees, and the rivers as the 'skeleton' of the landscape, in addition to their symbolic role as embodying basic kinship relations and idealised friendship, symbolically condensing the relationship between human beings, their body politic and their world.

The perception of an elementary structure, turned into an analogue sign, provides the concrete model of a process of ordering. The Bedamini imagine that the tree 'starts' at the top and 'ends' on the bottom. Movement and direction are from 'on top' to 'below', differences tend towards unification. This is the similarity which makes different phenomena into metaphoric substitutions for each other, but which also makes differentiation as such a vital cultural concern. At issue are the ways in which relationships are formed, perceived and interpreted – in short, the processes through which the ordering of social life become possible.

## Kinship and Local Organisation

A kinship system is a cognitive construct, an image formed on the perceptual ground of social encounters. Here I will merely sketch the basic relations of kinship and affinity. Patricians defined in terms of sibingship rather than descent are the only named kinship groups, and the only groups in which ownership of land is vested, as its members have collective rights of ownership in a specific area. Local groups, i.e., the longhouse and its membership, is at any one time associated with such a clan land, in terms of which the land-owning clan may be described as 'dominant'. In practice, male members of several patrilineally related clans typically co-reside.

Sibling groups can be identified as the categorical 'building blocks' of the system. They can be unambiguously defined in terms of descent, sibingship and exchange. Between more inclusive categories of kin, interrelation is overlapping and ambiguous. The agnatic status of clans and sibling groups in relation to each other is determined both by a tradition of patrilineal descent from a collectivity of common ancestors, and by common intermarriage with another clan. This happens when two men from different clans marry women from the same other clan. Different sibling sets within a clan are tied to each other by shared matrilineal relations subsequent to former common intermarriages, and clan-fission seems to follow the cleavages that occur between sibling groups with the least matrilineal relations in common. Relations with non-agnates depend on the particular pattern of intermarriage between groups at any one time. The codification of intergroup relations as being essentially collective ignores the inconsistencies of real-life situations. The conceptual, and statistical, transformation from a micro- to a macro-level is effected by concentration of marriages with a few other clans. This is related to both demography and strategies of political consolidation.

Bedamini social organisation to a large degree is constructed on the basis of marriage transactions, and the particular constellations of kin relations that they entail. The exchange of women is central to the Bedamini comprehension of their social universe, a fact that I think is replicated in their construction of reality in different domains of belief. It is based on a distinction between those whom we do not marry (*fi*) and those from whom we take women (*uda-lasu*), a relative distinction between 'them' and 'us'. The wife-taker must necessarily be transformed to a wife-giver in order to become a wife-taker again. The cyclic nature of the system is evident. Furthermore, this entails a necessary complementarity

between *fi* and *uda-lasu*, since reproduction is founded on the reciprocity of exchange.

The only relatively invariant characteristic of a community with some degree of continuity is the land that its members exploit, and the agnatic core of its membership. A community is alternatively referred to by the longhouse site, which continually changes just as its composition does, and in terms of the landowning, and normally numerically dominant, clan. Local groups thus can be conceptualised as if they were descent lines, and the interaction between local communities can be modelled on the complex relationships between kin groups. Locality is a medium facilitating the emergence of fraternal relations.

Considering the environment to which any local group must adapt, one of the main properties of the system is its flexibility, the relative ease with which a redefinition can be made and relations transformed into something else, as 'the organised flow' (Watson 1970) of personnel between the localised units unfolds. Thus conceived, the social system is a working solution to the Bedamini confrontation with reality.

## From Distribution to Sharing

The proper names of persons are individual; i.e., they name a separate individuality. There are a great variety of them, and people often change their names twice or even more as they grow into adulthood. Few people have the same name at the same time. Names are rarely used in direct address, except for children and young people, while teknonyms like 'father of' and 'mother of' are commonly used both in address and reference.

Kinship terms are widely used in address as well as reference, but relationships between Bedamini are certainly not relationships of kinship only, even if these are important in most contexts. People build personal relations of friendship or acquaintance whose role content may be more immediately relevant in daily interaction. It is some measure of truth in saying that unless one can understand friendship, kinship will be beyond our grasp (Keesing 1972). In the Bedamini situation, this saying can also be turned around.

Bedamini friendship relations are labelled, that is, each individual relationship is named as a reciprocal call-name, and this particular term the friends use for each other in address as well as reference, rather than proper names, teknonyms or kinship terms. Relationships of friendship may potentially be established between anybody, agnates as well as affines, young and old, men

or women, and between men *and* women. The call-names that all Bedamini may use for each other are derived from an experience or object (mainly food) which two persons have shared, and which they decide, by mutual agreement, often quite impulsively, should signify their subsequent relationship. These idioms are used to create personal and private social relations of a non-kin nature. The call-names are commonly used instead of kin terms or personal names, in reference as well as address. They are the reciprocal term of a dyad. In other words, social relations are named in terms of that giving, taking and sharing which created them, or transformed them. They are confirmed by the continued use of the name, and by an occasional repetition of the original experience, or sharing of the original object.

The referential objects that are used seem limitless, and at first their profusion leads to much confusion for an outsider. Some objects are more favoured as a mediating element and a concretisation of the relation than others. This means that if more than one pair of people who are for instance *sogonasu* (smoke-eater) to each other is present in the house, which often happens, one has to recognise voices and know about the separate relationships. In fact, within a closer group of communities, people know most of the different relationships existing between individuals, and thus they may function as referential terms as well. People avoid establishing several identical named relationships to different others and only one object or phenomenon mediates a relation between any two people.

Adding the word *nasu* to the term for the mediating phenomenon forms the majority of the call-names. *Na* is a verb that refers to more or less everything you can do with the mouth, from biting and kissing to putting something in it. *Na* is the word for 'to eat'. The suffix *-su* turns the verb into a noun. In the present case, *nasu* can thus be translated as 'eater', implying those who have eaten (shared) something together. It must be noted that *nasu* also is one of the terms used for eatable things in general, thus it simply means 'food'. Thus the importance of food in social relationships in general reappears in the mediating element of a majority of these interpersonal relations.

Giving and consuming food (and experiences) is a way of initiating relationships. Once initiated, they must be confirmed. Refusal of gifts and shared consumption terminates them. The sudden act of reaching out a particularly valuable piece of food to somebody, while proposing a *-nasu* term, is a deliberate attempt to establish a lasting relationship. Or it may happen as an after-thought. Two persons have shared something, once or repeatedly,

and at one time realise that it may form the basis of their relationship. The gift may also be formally prescribed, as the giving of tobacco smoke to visitors before a (temporary) relationship as host and visitor can be established at all.

In connection with marriage, small gifts (mainly food) are expectantly brought to a girl's mother by a would be suitor, or a pig may be slaughtered and distributed to her mentors. These gifts do not compel these people, but is conceived as a necessary softening procedure opening the way for the establishment of the desired relations. Suitors are often unsuccessful, and are left with the regret of a lost pig. Formally, a common feast in which the kin of both bridegroom and bride participate, and the subsequent transfer of a variety of foodstuffs from the groom's kin to the bride's kin, is an essential aspect of the marriage ceremony as it confirms their relative status as affines. Finally, before the full consummation of the marriage, the girl prepares food she has grown as a gift to her husband, and they eat it together.

When a part of what a man has in his possession is given to another, they think of it as sharing the whole if they both consume it. Thus a relationship may be actively sought and established by one party. The sharing of an experience, like strangers sleeping under the same roof in a foreign place, or the sharing that emerges from exchanging jokes, are seen as analogous to the sharing of a thing. In both cases one reciprocally brings a part of oneself, or even oneself, to a common consumption. This is basically what happens even in kinship relations. Sharing creates relations, and sharing implies distribution. The image of social relations seems to be acts of distribution merging in a fork, an *adimi*, to become relations of sharing.

'Sharing' is the key concept. (In the present volume this is evident in the essays of Roalkvam, Perminow and Paulsen, as well as Hoëm.) A gift of food given by a host to a visitor is another thing, as are the trading of items. The important thing is the establishment of a dimension of identity through which they analogically can perceive themselves, and be perceived by others, as 'one kind', through the metaphor of the mediating element. This is the fundamental way of relating in Bedamini culture as perceived and practised by themselves.

The *sosogo* can be interpreted as an image of what technically can be called 'transitivity'. As mentioned, the Bedamini use this concept as an image for the totality of kin relationships a person is involved in, and they use it to describe the properties of a clan founded on a father-child relationship. Parent-child child relations are perceived and codified as transitive through the sharing of

substance (male seeds and female blood) that asymmetrically flows, is 'distributed', between them. This metaphor turns the siblings of the parents into their analogues in the sense described by Wagner (1977).

The exchange of spouses establishes a relationship of sharing through the complementary distribution of rights in persons. Affinal relationships are constructed in the same way as relations of friendship and they are expressed in a similar way. The point is that some object, in this case a person, is somehow 'shared' by two parties, and that sharing is the consequence of a 'redistribution' of rights and duties. However, in the case of affinal relations, as against substantial kin relations, the parties have shares of different qualities. Rights and duties are different, though complementary, for the two positions of any dyad. (Paulsen, this volume.) The differences are rooted in the taking and the giving, and the seniority that is therein implied. (Hoëm, this volume.) The giver is consistently conceived as senior in such a relationship. This is also reflected in the kinship terminology. Seniority is connected with hierarchy and authority. Hence the importance of conceptualising a relationship of equality in terms of sharing.

Like the foundational relations between siblings, the named friendship relations are excellent examples of equivalent transitive relations (Kelly 1977). Friends explicitly define the relationship between themselves with reference to a mediating object or phenomenon, to which they have identical co-relations. In this way the concrete world of things, acts and experiences is brought into the social sphere. This practice suggests an implicit understanding on the part of the Bedamini, that the contexture of the object world is part and parcel of the social sphere; it is innate to the formation and formulation of social relations, an indispensable aspect of the relationship. Social relations without a world are unrealisable. Objects and phenomena become a means of understanding social life by concretising it. If the basic idea of social life is 'a distribution that leads to sharing', something has to be shared. That something embodies the relation, gives it 'blood and bone'.

This is the 'forked branch of social life': the 'confluence' of people and the precarious units they continually attempt to build. We may have glimpsed the Bedamini perception of ordered impermanence and their continuous attempt to cope with social existence through 'the spirit of the gift', on the material 'grounds' on which they dwell.

A lifeworld is informed by a horizon of shared meanings, which is basically a perceptive transformation of its material grounds in

cultural terms. Technology, the human production and use of artefacts to transform life worlds, employed through skills or techniques, can for instance be seen as a tool of apprehension through its use in practical and symbolic activities. But performances, as in gift giving and food sharing, are also events in a material world. The objects and actions used to carry performances through, in a sense may be seen as 'equipment' as well, as tools for constituting the collective life-world of which they are part.

Signification systems materialise in work and action, which articulate the relation between concepts and the phenomena to which they refer through perception. Thought is brought into a dialogue with matter (Sørum 1991) mediated by objects as symbolic products. The use of material objects as significations in a symbolic product, can be seen to represent a 'flow' of nature into the conceptual world of the users, to use a formulation by Barthes (1977). The connotative fan thus called forth discloses relations in nature, which have their source in a conceptual world, in other words, in a set of cultural conventions.

### Organisation and Cultural Relations

At the outset we saw that the Bedamini seem to sense a pattern, an elementary figure of order, in the relationships between the most diverse of phenomena. The forked branch is its concrete expression. It has the power to evoke images carrying information through connotation. Perceived as confluence the figure of the fork patterns the tree, but also the landscape with its river system; the human body and the body politic; movement, exchange and sharing; providing an element of continuity and order in the world. In fact, it is the closest you can get to a cultural concept of order in the Bedamini language.

The *sosogo* concept does not imply an identity between phenomena, but a family resemblance. It is an ambiguous concept and accordingly filled with inventive potential. As a term is 'stands for' all the phenomena listed above. It means all these things, none is privileged and the exact value of the concept depends on context and situation. Yet each use evokes the other phenomena the concept denotes, and thereby their attributes as connotations. In cultural terms these phenomena are made to belong together naturally. Thus belonging together, they are vehicles of systematisation of an idiom cluster representing a significant sector of Bedamini cultural knowledge. To the degree it stands for a totality, the *sosogo* enframes that totality and thus stands for itself (Wagner 1986).

As I interpret the concept of *sosogo*, it implies the quality of ordering as merging. It is a cultural concept of order as process, as something 'on the way'. Its recognition in natural and social phenomena is based on analogy. These relations of analogy, when established, provide the conditions for its transformation into a sign, i.e., permit it to be used informatively. For instance, attaching the signs of tree and river system to the novices, with the meanings of growth and decay already attached to their status, lends new dimensions of meaning to the differences and similarities of landscape and bodies, of human and cosmic forces, of male responsibility and power (Sørum 1984).

To organise is to give something a form. An organisation will therefore always have formal properties. To organise is also the process of bringing that form into being. The formal properties of a social organisation assure its recognition, i.e., its relationships to a meaningful context, and hence its reproduction through socialisation. The notion of the social nature of the sign is rooted in its replicability.

A code presupposes some kind of correlation, usually fixed by convention. The conventionalisation of the image of the fork is thus an act of code-making. The image is iconic, and as such it is established by the context, as it is the context which makes possible any resemblance and thus recognition, the perceptual ground of all figurative cognition. Recognition presupposes the perception of replicas. Replication is the 'fuel' of convention; but replication is also a mode of sign production, as correlation produced by invention. To organise is a productive act and thus within the order of events. Events may upset a code or a form through invention, i.e., the choice of a new vehicle of organising, reshaping it, transforming it.

If organisation is an event, culture that of course is a symbolic construct invented by us, can also be thought of as an event in the world of the senses, rather than as a pattern of the faculties of the mind, which at best can be its mediator. Culture may not primarily refer to a programme producing a message, nor mental 'reality posits' or abstract rules for/of conduct.

While not denying that the concept of culture must have its cognitive and emotional dimensions, it is possible to make a shift of emphasis, and situate it more explicitly within the level of events. Culture is practised, while unpractised culture in a sense is absent and thus non-existent. The traces left in a memory cease to be a cultural force, unless it is communicated and objectified. The significance is in the concretisation. I imagine events, which humans produce and to which they respond, to be the analytical

loci of creative cultural processes. As meaning thrives on concrete images, culture thrives on what humans do. What is hidden is most realistically revealed in the event of disclosure itself, to take a lead from Heidegger's hermeneutics (Heidegger 1980). While events may appear to an analyst as manifestations of 'culture', I am now playing with the idea that culture just 'happens' as an event. Still, insight into the tension between the traces of memory and the necessity of acting is a precondition for grasping a cultural 'happening' in a more meaningful way.

### Knowledge and Sociality

The relativity of references in Bedamini culture is striking. There are few absolutes. Most phenomena are interpreted and codified in relation to something else, either by being directly opposed in a relation or by being seen as opposed, or alike, in relation to something else: a third reference. This is essentially how the relative identity of groups as well as individuals is defined and redefined; how social relationships are created, recreated and conceived on the assumed absoluteness of clan membership, whose appearance as an absolute derives from the (relatively) invariant concreteness of the land.

Meaning depends on the position of the person making a reference, relative to that which he refers to, intends or addresses. Meaning also depends on his relation to the medium of comparison and determination: the third reference. Intraculturally, any cultural expression is relatively designed and is ultimately dependent on the position of phenomena in relation to each other as perceived by an interpreter. Interpretation and understanding may seem to be the outcome of a dialectical process in which concept and act always reciprocally determine each other, mediated by the intentionality of perception which is dependent on a pre-understanding that is already there. Perception is naturally based, but culturally differentiated, inbetween sensing and conceptualisation. Perception carries within itself a composite process of recognition and definition.

If you allow me the analogy, a similar problem applies to the determination of significance of cultural phenomena as that which occurs among nuclear physicists trying to grasp the natural world: the observational interference that makes relative positions uncertain. They cannot be pinned down with certainty, only estimated in terms of a series of possible solutions. One analytical solution in cultural analysis may be to look for processes of replication over a range of differing circumstances. People everywhere, and



some with a larger degree of contrivance than others, build on replication in most communicational acts. Replications are the 'stuff' of recognition, which lies at the heart of cognition. In replication there is a 'control' on the uncertainty principle in observation. This property of replication may be fundamental to an explicit theory of cultural relativity of meaning, which is valid *within* a cultural tradition, and which can be articulated with an assumed intercultural relativity.

Knowledge is always on the way to realisation, and there is no possibility of a final evaluation, until it can be looked at from the end of the road. To the degree that knowing is an open process, that location cannot be reached until the knowledge is gone. In some core domains of thought, knowledge tends to close in on itself in a process of involution. When the end of the road is near, knowledge repeats itself and can at best be open to complication or simplification, as the case may be, on the level of events.

The *sosogo* in all its appearances is a leverage that controls the social, rather than a social construction. The referential points of the branches – be they ancestors, persons, groups, body parts or geographical locations – are rendered diffuse and ambiguous by the definitive power of the *adimi*, their merger. In the Bedamini world, social groups have a precarious existence. When established they always dissolve and diffuse to some degree. They are always on the way to somewhere else in order to return as 'the same'. This immediate and definitive power is not a meaning in itself, but a power over meaning, as it is the resolution of the *sosogo* image and thus the end point of Bedamini knowledge and sociality. In general, we may conclude that the construction of social relationships as 'figures' is a way of creating 'truth', by making meaning perceptible and thus into a determinant of social action. A social relationship is an 'object' of truth recreated through acts and events of symbolic production.

## References

- Barthes, R. 1977. 'Rhetoric of the Image', in R. Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 32–52. London: Fontana Press.
- Heidegger, M. 1980. *Being and Time*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Hoëm, I. (this volume) 'Making Sides: On the Production of Contexts and Difference in Tokelau'.
- Keesing, R. 1972. 'Simple Models of Complexity: The Lure of Kinship', in Reining P. (ed.) *Kinship Studies in the Morgan Centennial Year*. Washington: The Anthropological Society of Washington.
- Kelly, R. 1977. *Etoro Social Structure. A Study in Structural Contradiction*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

- Paulsen, R. (this volume) 'Fighting Hierarchy. Relations of Equality and Hierarchy among the May River (wam) of Papua New Guinea'.
- Perminow, A. (this volume) 'The other Kind. Representing Otherness and Living with it on Kotu Island in Tonga'.
- Roalkvam, S. (this volume) 'Pathway and Side: An Essay on Onotoan Notions of Relatedness'.
- Sørum, A. 1982. 'The Seeds of Power: Patterns in Bedamini Male Initiation', in *Social Analysis* 10: 42–63.
- Sørum, A. 1984. 'Growth and Decay: Bedamini Notions of Sexuality', in G. Herdt, (ed.) *Homosexuality in Melanesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sørum, A. 1991. 'Magic Gardens as Symbolic production', in R. Grønhaug, G. Henriksen and G. Håland (eds), *The Ecology of Choice and Symbol*. Bergen: Alma Mater.
- Wagner, R. 1975. *The Invention of Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wagner, R. 1977. 'Analogic Kinship: A Daribi example', in *American Ethnologist* 4 (4): 623–43.
- Wagner, R. 1986. *Symbols that Stand for Themselves*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Watson, J.B. 1970. 'Society as Organized Flow: the Tairora Case', in *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol 26, No 2, 107–241.