NOTICE OF ORDINARY MEETING

The next meeting will be held in the Museum Education Building, North Terrace, Adelaide
at
8.00 P.M., MONDAY 27 MAY, 1974

AGENDA

1. Apologies.
2. Minutes of Meeting held 22nd April, 1974.
3. Tabling of Papers and Journals.
4. Speaker. PROFESSOR B. KAPFERER, Department of Anthropology, Adelaide University will give an address entitled:

"DRAMA AND RITUAL IN SOUTHERN SRI LANKA (CEYLON)"

5. The next meeting of the Society will be Monday 24th June, 1974.
RITUAL AND SELF-DECORATION AMONG THE ONABASULU OF THE GREAT PAPUAN PLATEAU

MR. T. M. ERNST

A paper was given to the Society at the General Meeting Monday 25th March, 1974.

"In this presentation, I will outline some Art forms - both verbal and non-verbal of a people who call themselves Onabasulu. In addition, I will make suggestions as to the significance of some of these. The Onabasulu are not given to what we would consider straightforward explication of symbolic material. Therefore, and because of gaps in my data due to other circumstances, some of the interpretation is speculative, some of it incomplete. In its favour, some makes sense not only to me, but to various Onabasulu also.

BACKGROUND

Although they dwell on the fringes of the Southern Highlands, and have been placed administratively within the Southern Highlands District, the Onabasulu have cultural and linguistic affinities to the west, east and south, rather than with the Huli and other Highlanders to the north. Their language, of the Bosaviyan Family, has connections to Strickland and Gulf District languages (R. Daniel Shaw Forthcoming, Languages of the Papuan Plateau). They live in or around longhouse communities - moving far afield rapidly because of the large amounts of land and long fallow periods of their gardens, and the dispersed locations of small sago stands they exploit. This section of the plateau, with an altitude of 2,500-3,000 feet, a.s.l., is covered in dense rain forest and extremely wet, having clay sub-soils and high rainfall (over 250" p.a.). The onabasulu longhouse and its territory are 'owned' by a kin group, although access to most resources is in fact provided by residence in a long house community. Agriculture is geared to the high rainfall and rather rough terrain in the area.

Everyday dress among Onabasulu males includes cane belts, strings, 'tanket' or some other leaf, and an apron, now usually of cloth but formerly of netting. The hair is traditionally shaved at the front, giving an appearance of a high forehead. Leaves and ferns may be worn in the hair, and aromatic leaves are frequently tucked into the belt, particularly after washing. Leaves are important, and are frequently worn even when short trousers are used. The Strathern's notes that in the Mount Hagen area leaves or ferns denote 'freshness or newness of appearance', and may convey particular messages, indicated by the choice of leaf (1971, p.142, 144). I know of no specific messages communicated by leaves worn by the Onabasulu, nor do they state anything explicitly about freshness or newness, but when leaves are used (especially in conjunction with bathing) other than the usual back covering implies a cleanliness or purity. Many times leaves are tucked into the back of the belt when wearing shorts - particularly when entering a long house not ones own or on ritual occasions. Often, the face is painted with the white clay - usually in a pattern of spots around the eyes and a smudge on the head. Red is less frequently used. Men who are homocides may paint themselves black when visiting another long house. They, and others as well, may paint themselves red alternatively. This is to make an impact on the group being visited, and a cassowary plume headdress is usually worn in conjunction. This is particularly appropriate if the visit is a ceremonial occasion or is to make a demand. A red body is considered attractive, stunning, and almost all men engaging in ritual performances are painted red. The Onabasulu decorative items are not static - to draw a line between 'traditional' dress and that 'introduced' is not just difficult, but would be misleading. Many wealth items
(wealth of a type used only for the discharge of social obligations) are worn decoratively. Thus, Kina shells and the Cowrie shell strands are two important types of wealth. Although the latter have been of importance for some time, the Kina shells as a result of 'dumping' about 1955 by the Huli (as administration officers paid for services with them) have replaced dog tooth head bands both decoratively and in exchange. Coloured 'trade beads' have replaced jobs Tears seeds, and have been woven onto fibre chest bands. Coloured paper (from mackerel tin labels) is used for decoration. The Stratherns note this in the Mount Hagen area, and I assume it was and is a part of most all viable Niaginian social systems. To quote the Stratherns:

"Coloured paper is used to give a bright effect: men pin fish-tin labels to their foreheads, or cut-out circlets from Players cigarette packs which they stick to their forehead bailers. At one Mhili dance we saw a girl wearing a City of Adelaide pennant between her breasts instead of a marsupial tail." In Onabasulu ceremonies, a towel may be worn on the head in place of a (more desirable) cus cus skin.

I should note here that there is a great deal of variety in men's decorations and clothing on any occasion other than a ceremony. Much more so, for example, than among the Huli, or the Yalpa of the Mount Hagen area.

Women's everyday dress is a multi-layered skirt of the fibre (unrolled) from the inner bark of Gnetum Gnemon (tulip in Pdigen). A married woman with a child wears over this a darker brown string skirt of a fibre from the inner bark of the sago (metaxylon) roll. (Men's public aprons and the net bag are produced from string roller from the inner fibre of Gnetum Gnemon.) Women also wear a net bag on their heads. Obviously utilitarian, new ones are worn empty for decoration only. Women wear capes of red cloth. Previously bark cloth was used, but this is now almost totally replaced with 'trade cloth'.

Women and children frequently wear their heads shaven except for a small tuft of hair (called a kunitogo). It is pulled by someone else when the wearer is frightened, and the pulling provides relief.

The kunitogo is our first obvious connection with the mythological realm. An important myth involves the destruction of the world by sky people (mujinoro). The world is three layered - above are mujinoro, 'below' are spirits of the dead and in the middle 'world' (floating on fluid) are people. When this latter world was tipped over and returned to right side up, a pregnant woman was lifted above by her tuft of hair by a mujinoro. She gave birth to a son who copulated with her, and then with his sisters/daughters to populate the world with his descendants. Although women and children wear the kunitogo, they, in theory, do not know this myth.

A ceremonial performance, which may be held at any occasion is called Iba. Another, which accompanies the killing and distribution of pig meat (and formerly, the cooking of a slain enemy) is called Iba. Both involve dancers dressed in sago bark streamers and headdresses of cockatoo feathers, with a prominent feather on a long flexible shaft at the top of the headdress. The ceremony takes place inside the long house, with the men moving up and down the long passageway - between the men's and women's sections. Women will sporadically move across the passage. Note that there are just four men involved. Onabasulu ceremonies do not serve the communicative function of displaying large numbers of men, showing thereby the strength of political units and their allies as do some Highland groups' rituals. No aesthetic pleasure in seeing long lines of men is expressed by the Onabasulu.
If I may relate a subjective impression, I have the feeling at Onabasulu ceremonies - carried out mostly at night inside a long house in its pitifully small clearing surrounded by the imposing rain forest - of a small group of people working at creating an orderly universe into which they may fit. Important oppositions, nature and society or culture; male and female, the living and dead, seem to interpenetrate - and all of these opposite categories have things in common.

Male and female are socially separate. They have different sections of the long house and should only copulate in the bush. A spiritual aspect of the earth - roots, damp places, etc. - a different plane - the plane of witches and spirits of the dead - may manifest itself in women. They then can see witches invisible to others. Sky beings, on the other hand, can only be manifested in men.

Let us examine the decoration of a man dancing the Iba or iwa. Marsupial fur is worn on the head. An apron of unrolled Gnetum fibre is worn. These materials may represent the bush or nature, and females respectively (the latter, remember, is the fibre of the unmarried woman's skirt). Here, the material contains a message as important as the object fashioned from it. Cassowarys are inhabited by a type of spirit. Their foot print is on the dancer's chest. No Onabasulu has ever said to me what the dancer is supposed to be. The Etoro (a neighbouring group) say it is a Bird of Paradise, the streamers representing the tail feathers. The Kalali (to the south) say it is a waterfall. When I asked if the Onabasulu dancer was a waterfall, I was told yes. When I asked if he was a Bird of Paradise, I was also told yes. For the Bird of Paradise is like a waterfall in two ways. His tail feathers are like a cascade of water, and he is the abode of the spirits of the dead. The drum, the variable tone of which is more important than the rhythm's beat, is the voice of Gesami - spirits of the dead. The feather on the top of the crest headdress moves back and forth as the dancer jumps up and down. The feather is the Gesami becoming from the rippling waterfall (or cascading tail feathers). So much I was told after I asked about the waterfall and the Bird of Paradise.

The dancer, moving between the male and female sections of the long house, wearing a man's clothing but a female's apron, is representing the points of contact, but a tantalizingly incomplete reconciliation. The spirit is corporally visible, but can't be reached. It is only the spirit medium during the seances, who makes further communication possible. The spirit medium becomes the body used by the Gesami through the intermediary of his bush wife who is a Bird of Paradise. (This, incidentally, helps explain why the male Paradisea ragniana is called a female by the Onabasulu, who are keen naturalists and would be quite unlikely to do this mistakenly.)

The verbal drama of a seance cannot be covered in detail here, but it is striking, with beautiful singing by the Gesami, repeated in response by a human chorus.
This brings us finally to the most dramatic of performances — that of the Gasa. Only two other peoples perform this ceremony - Katuli and Etoro. To the west of the Etoro, it is not practical (see Schieffelin, 1969, 1972, Kelly, 1974, other information from Shaw and Sørum, personal communication.)

Here it is the opposition of the World of the Living, and the World of the Dead which is again important. The ceremony accompanies the exchange of women in marriage. The men, wearing ropes in their hair, painted beautifully in red, and wearing a cassowary headdress with a wooden stylized humanoid figure in the place of the beckoning feather of the iba-ibo costume, sing songs about the parting of people through death. They sing about the water in streams whose noises may be the futile attempt of a Gesemi to reach a relative. They sing of grief and of the anger of the living at being left alone. The song of the lone singer is echoed by a chorus. The songs are of specific instances of grief among spectators. If effective, the spectator cries. The angry spectators then advance on the singer with cries of the fight and brandishing weapons. The resin torches dimly lighting the affair are plunged into the singer's back. The frustration of the grief situation, the frustration of the total separateness of the living and the dead, receives a focus. But the categories cannot interpenetrate completely.

When the world was reformed, the Muqinoro gave something to men, but they lost it. It became the snakes which do not die, but shed their skin. Men die. Men dance and sing Gasa. This, then, is the brief account of Onabasulu ritual and self-decoration. The two are most striking artistic expressions. The drama and poetry of the ceremonial performance and the colour and presentation of the decorated person.

REFERENCES


