

WORKSHOP 5

THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM  
ON THE ART OF OCEANIA

THE CURRENT STATE OF ARTIFACT PRODUCTION  
IN KILENGE, WEST NEW BRITAIN

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### Introduction

In Kilenge, as in communities in many developing countries, the nature and meaning of the plastic arts is being significantly altered, both in the ideology of the people, and in the estimation of the outsider. Although production of items for daily use continues to flourish, their decorative designs are becoming increasingly insignificant and rudimentary, while artistic refinement is being directed towards production of artifacts for markets outside of the local community.

Unfortunately, little in the way of traditional heirlooms or valuables remain in Kilenge. Previous researchers, museum personnel, and collectors bought up many of the surviving artifacts of the past. This makes comparison of traditional styles and contemporary art styles impossible from our position in the field, although the specimens are undoubtedly available for comparative purposes in public museums. At any rate, our intuition is that the aesthetics of much artistic production, most especially wood carving, has not significantly altered, at least in the production of items which are geared for the outside market. In the production of composite items, such as head-dresses, designs seem to be continually replicated in a relatively uniform manner. However, the materials for the items have undergone substantial change, with store-bought materials frequently replacing their bush counterparts.

### Markets

Most artifact production today remains directed towards the local market. Each individual will make items which he or his family needs in their daily lives. Most men have the necessary skills to produce for their immediate families. However, there are some men who are endowed with superior skills and who are in demand to produce finer or more difficult-to-complete artifacts. Such men are known

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as namos tame, 'master artist or craftsman'. When someone who can claim any sort of kinship connection<sup>1</sup> to a namos tame asks him to make something, there will be no payment for the work. Kinsmen are expected to oblige each other with such help. If the artifact to be constructed takes considerable time (such as a canoe or a house), then the commissioners of the work will be expected to feed the namos as he works, and provide him with betel nut and tobacco. They will also provide all of the construction materials, but the namos will use his own tools. If a man is asked to produce an artifact for someone within the community who is not a kinsman, then the commissioner of the work will reimburse the namos for his labour (with either traditional valuables, food or money).

There are regional markets for which some artifact production takes on some importance. Trade with Lolo, Bariai, Sasissi, Arove, and Kombe peoples continues as it has for generations. Craftmanship of articles (utilitarian or ceremonial items) sent in this trade is usually very good. This market utilises cash to a relatively limited extent, with barter continuing to be the main mode of exchange. Most Kilenge people have long-established trading partners (levola or legulava) in each of these areas, and they handle their exchanges only through those men. Intermarriage through the generations has created innumerable kinship ties across these communities, so artifacts often exchange hands as gifts (which may engender immediate or delayed reciprocation). When people give such gifts the workmanship is usually of fine quality so that the gift pleases the receiver and makes the craftsman proud.

The entrance of art researchers and collectors into the Kilenge community introduced a whole new feature into art production--an outside market (both national and international). Ever since, artistic production geared toward this market has been increasing. Manufacture of ceremonial items has declined as interest has shifted to more decorative and ornamentative items, or replications of traditional war and ceremonial gear, that are attractive in the outside market. For a community whose members have limited access to monetary rewards, yet who desire the amenities that money promises, the production of artistic items for cash sale proved to be an attractive proposition. During the times that art collectors were in Kilenge, and for a short period after their departures, it appears that artifact production reached peaks. For a time an art distributor arranged for Kilenge carvings to be sold in Lae on mainland New Guinea, but for some reason the market disintegrated--some say because of a glutted art showcase, while others say that the local organisers feared sorcery because of their success. Now the only cash markets available to Kilenge craftsmen are the personnel of the local mission and school, or kinsmen in Papua New Guinea towns who try to locate buyers for local items. Our arrival in Kilenge could very easily have created a new peak of artifact production if we had not made it immediately clear to the artists and craftsmen who waylaid us that our funds did not allow for the acquisition of a considerable number of ethnographic specimens. During the ten months that we were in Kilenge, few, if any, artifacts were produced for sale in the open market--most were commissioned by collectors previously acquainted with the area, or currently in the area.<sup>2</sup>

For our purposes it will be simplest to describe four 'types' of Kilenge arts: utilitarian, ceremonial, personal ornamentation, and commercial.

Utilitarian arts

Items manufactured for every day use from locally available materials require at least a minimal amount of refined craftsmanship. Sometimes such items may be decorated upon completion of the basic form. There are several techniques important in the manufacture of utilitarian items. Many of the artifacts used each day by Kilenge people are carved from locally available timber. These items may be simple in design with no unnecessary decoration (such as axe or hammer handles), or they may be finely finished and incised with symmetrical geometric patterns, or animal or facial representations (as, for example, adze handles and canoe bailers). The more elaborate decoration seems to be increasingly rare, however, and most decorated items are simple in pattern. Of utmost importance in manufacture is the shaping of the item--it must be properly constructed--its decoration is secondary.

Canoe hulls and other parts are shaped from felled tree trunks. There may be some simple markings made on the hull near the bow and stern, that is the incision of a panel, but other than that no carving is used to embellish the personally-owned fishing canoe. It appears that in times past the larger voyaging canoes were elaborately carved and painted, but they were by-and-large imported from Siassi, and not of Kilenge manufacture. Canoe hulls are painted at both ends, but usually with only one coat of enamel paint. Traditionally all canoes were painted with bush paints, and the range of marks utilised was fairly wide. Now only the larger group-owned canoes are thus painted with the markings of the family of the owners of the canoe. When these paints wash off they are not renewed. Paddles used to pull the canoes are finely crafted out of local wood and quite often are decorated on the blade and handle. Poles used for pushing the canoe through

the shallows are roughly hewn and unembellished. Wooden bailers are often carved with representations of faces, but in some instances these locally manufactured specimens are being replaced by imported plastic and tin vessels, or the omnipresent shells of coconuts.

In house manufacture, wood crafting is still an essential skill. While the availability of industrially-produced construction material is increasing yearly, many men still rely on hand-crafted timber for building their homes. Traditionally, it appears that some of the support posts of a house were carved with intricate representations, but in the village in which we worked we know of only one such post now surviving. None are currently being produced.<sup>3</sup> Also common in the past were carved mobiles, natalakeringa, which were hung on houses. However, now these objects are produced only in miniaturized form for sale in the outside market.

Wooden utensils and vessels for the preparation of ceremonial food are still hand-crafted. Mortars, nailivua, for making the all-important napolonga (a taro/coconut cream mixture) served at all ceremonial functions, are still possessed by most households. Some of these are undecorated, but most have at least an incised panel on the sides. Large wooden spoons, naitar, used for mixing another taro dish, are often intricately carved, and some replicas of these are manufactured for the outside market. Carved wooden bowls, natevila, are used for the presentation of food at ceremonies, and are an important item in marriage payments. However, these valuables are imported from the Siassi islands and are not locally produced.

Many people whose teeth are no longer strong use small mortars for mashing betel nut to a chewable pulp. These vessels are often nicely decorated. There again, however, the facsimilies produced for the consumption of the outside market, or for regional trade networks, are generally of superior craftsmanship than those used daily in the village.

#### Personal ornamentation

Tattooing is very popular in Kilenge, but it is not a highly developed art, being practised mostly by school children and young women. Simple geometric, floral or alphabetical designs are incised into the skin with a razor blade, and soot is then rubbed into the cut. The result is a black-blue scar which fades slightly with age. Scarification is not widely practised, but is far from unknown. The usual method employed is puncture of the skin of the arm (or leg) with a lighted stick. Ear lobe cutting was once a virtually universal decorative mode for both sexes--a concomitant of initiation. However, it is no longer practised in Kilenge and only those individuals of middle age or older have incised earlobes.

The dying of hair to hide greyness, or to darken or lighten the natural colour, is frequently practised. Hair is cut with razors to raise the hairline to what is considered an attractive style, but many young people prefer to let their hair grow fairly long. Some older women cut their hair very short and plaster it with red or black earth paints (the latter a symbol of mourning).

On ceremonial or festive occasions both men and women use red and white powder to paint their faces with the marks, namer, of their family lines. They also wear fragrant leaves and flowers to make themselves smell and look attractive.

Both sexes wear beads, chains and armlets (anything from thin tortoise-shell to the rubber seals of empty kerosene drums), to further decorate their persons.

#### Commercial arts

Wood carving is the most important manufacturing technique for products designed for sale outside the community. Some of the objects

Hair combs of bamboo are also carved by Kilenge men. Sometimes these combs are finely shaped and incised with decorations, but generally they have only a few markings on them.

Painting as a method of decorating utilitarian items is relatively rare. As previously mentioned, only a few canoes are given more than a minimal painting. Only a few houses are thus decorated --less than 5%.

Weaving is still an important skill for the production of hand baskets, fish and pig nets, and wall blinds. The weaving of blinds from cane or bamboo is a post-war skill acquired from Tolai catechists stationed in Kilenge. However, net weaving and basket weaving are traditional crafts. Basket weaving from coconut fronds is one of the few arts which is generally the prerogative of women.

#### Ceremonial arts

It is in the production of artifacts for ceremonial purposes that artistic talent may truly flourish in Kilenge. Ceremonial items are as finely crafted as the products for the outside market. Masks, drums, and fighting gear are intricately carved from the finest woods. Head-dresses are elaborately painted in symbolic designs owned by family lines. Women fabricate colourful grass skirts and other ornamentation from materials gathered in the bush.

However, most of these items (except for the grass skirts which women make to sell to other visiting New Britain peoples) are not made continually. Much of the ceremonial gear, especially those items which are carved, are passed on through family lines, and the art technique of their manufacture is almost lost. Such is the case with armbands made of tortoise-shell. (The ancestors of the Kilenge people were skilled in their production, but only a few specimens now remain in the community, and no one is currently attempting to make replicas.)



made may be stained, varnished and/or polished with imported products, but many are sold unfinished. Among the decorative utensils which find a ready market are large spoons, paddles and betel mortars. Non-utilitarian items produced for sale are: war clubs, mobiles, masks, engraved coconut shells, and animal forms (although this last art form is not/well developed here as it is among other neighbouring New Britain peoples). These items are only manufactured if there is the likelihood of a market for their sale. The workmanship, design and finish of these items is usually of a superior quality and refinement to that of utilitarian artifacts. Kilenge products may sell for a few dollars to hundreds of dollars.

Such is the adaptability and skill of Kilenge artists that one was commissioned to produce a Jesus crucifix for the local church as well as carve replicas of artifacts from other parts of Papua New Guinea, for a collector.

It appears likely that the products of weaving might be easily marketable. Some women have sent woven hand bags, navEsinga, to kinsmen in town to sell, and they have been well-received. (The neighbouring Lolo peoples sell large, and often quite elaborate, woven baskets, natika, both locally and nationally, but few Kilenge people have the interest or skills needed to make them.)

#### Kilenge craftsmen, namos tame

In Kilenge, a man in part inherits, and in part acquires, the skills and status necessary to be a craftsman. These qualities come to him from his father or other close kinsmen of ascending generations. The ideology is that a namos tame (master artist or craftsman) position belongs to a family line, and preferably the eldest male

of the line should inherit it. However, it proves to be the case that any male who has the necessary creative skills may become a namos tame.

It seems that in the past, as well as now, each community had only a few very skilled craftsmen who would be known as namos tame. But, almost every man was, and still is, competent enough at woodworking to hew out at least the small artifacts that he needed for daily work. To the master craftsmen was left the production of ceremonial gear, the shaping and decoration of large or important canoes, and sometimes the supervision of work on houses and smaller canoes.

Today the namos tame often complain about their workload. Whenever anyone in the village wants a house built, or needs help in carving a canoe, one of the few namos tame is called on, usually a kinsman of the commissioner of the work. Unless the namos tame has other pressing obligations, he is unable to refuse to come. His own garden may suffer from inattention as he toils repeatedly for other men. For this work he receives no pay--only the food he can eat as he works, and local acknowledgment of his skills. Some of the namos tame feel that they should be paid for their work, but none of them refuse to work because they are unpaid. (It would not be socially acceptable--the namos' skills are at the disposal of his family. He could not deny them without engendering considerable enmity.)

It is in production for the cash market that a namos tame can benefit most from his own work. He temporarily sets aside his kinship obligations and produces a work of art for which he himself

will be monetarily reimbursed. (He controls his own production.) Also, he gains esteem both within and outside the community--reknown as a talented craftsman whose artifacts can command good prices from whites.

Today the names tame still produce ceremonial artifacts when there is a call for them, but they concentrate their production on the internal utilitarian, and secondarily, the external commercial market.

While the older generation complains that the artistic skills and techniques of the past are being lost through the apathy of youth, it would appear that a few of the younger men are attempting to follow their fathers by learning the arts. As of yet their skills are rudimentary, and only time will tell if they can equal their predecessors in style and skill. These younger men may in large part be attempting to utilise art production as a means of obtaining money. their production of decorative artifacts is primarily for sale (most of them are not interested in producing locally-consumable ceremonial objects). But they also contribute significantly to the supply of locally-utilised artifacts and structures.

#### Materials for artistic production

Materials used in the production of all kinds of artifacts come from both the local bush and from the trade stores (and school). Native timber is utilised for carving, for canoe construction, and still, by-and-large, for house building. Bush materials are transformed into rope, glue, paints and cloth. But store materials are increasingly in evidence; paint, glue, paper and cloth. In the

production of such ceremonial gear as head-dresses, these store products appear to be rapidly replacing bush materials, primarily because of their ready accessibility, and ease of preparation.

Few traditional tools are still used in art production. Steel tools rapidly replaced their stone, bone, shell and obsidian counterparts, especially for wood working. Paint is still applied with sticks found in the bush, or with betel nut husks, but if brushes are available they may be preferred.

#### Summary

In conclusion then, we believe that art production in Kilenge has undergone modification in certain respects in the last few years. Traditionally, there were undoubtedly two types of artifact production--one for daily use, and another for ceremonial purposes. Those utilitarian artifacts, while well crafted, were not heavily decorated. On the other hand, ceremonial artifacts were finely and elaborately designed, with considerable symbolism in the engraved or painted graphic representations.

Today, Kilenge craftsmen continue to produce for their own and their kinsmen's use those objects which can be fashioned from locally-available resources. But they are increasingly gearing non-utilitarian production away from the ceremonial sector--only the unreliable market keeps the volume of ornamentative artifact production at its present minimal level. The reversion of this trend away from the making of ceremonial objects for local markets seems unlikely, since in a time where development and self-improvement are much lauded in Papua New Guinea: any means by which new money may be brought into the community is appreciated and utilised. Sales of art to the outside are more remunerative than the production of ceremonial art, and are thus seen as a positive step toward development.

In terms of local social relationships, the presence of a cash market with a different set of 'game rules' may eventually have some impact on Kilenge society. Already one villager tells us that he pretends to his kinsmen that he lacks the skills of namos tame. Why? Because he does not like to work for nothing. He prefers to make articles which he can sell in the cash market. Will other namos tame also forsake their social obligations in order to devote their artistic production solely to the cash market, or will they continue to try to participate in local, regional and national markets--keeping their standing in the local community while also gaining access to the benefits of the outside world?

Footnotes

1. Kinship is reckoned cognatically in Kilenge. As well, ties are widely extended and the terminology system is of the Hawaiian-generational type. Thus, the network of potential and realised kinsmen is very large.
2. We have been requested by some villagers to try to locate North American outlets for the sale of Kilenge art--they understand very well where the lucrative markets are.
3. However, a recently constructed naulum (men's house) in one village had a representation of a nausang (mythical creatures important in social control and ceremonialism) carved on its central support post.