
ABELAM:
GIANT YAMS
AND CYCLES OF SEX,
WARFARE, AND RITUAL

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This article describes sex, warfare, and ritual in a New Guinea tribe. For the Abelam, sex, warfare, and ritual all have to do with giant yams, single specimens of which may be over ten feet long. Members of this tribe decorate and display these enormous yams, talk to them, exchange them, and organize much of their lives around them. However, this article is also about anthropological theory.

Now, many of my students' eyes glaze over at the mere mention of "social science theory." However, theories aren't really as complicated as they sometimes seem. A theory is actually nothing more than an idea or mental plan for analyzing or thinking about the things that interest you. It's a framework to help you organize these variables. If a theory helps you to better predict and understand human behavior, then it's a heuristic, or "good," theory.

Further along in this article we'll be looking for some theories to help us understand some basic questions about the Abelam. Why do the members of this New Guinea tribe abstain from sex for six months while they grow their giant yams? Why do they engage in sometimes violent warfare, but then agree to a truce every year so that enemies can visit each other's villages to measure and inspect the giant yams? Why do they have feasts and ceremonies together, and then try to kill one another? What's going on here?

The Abelam people, who are the subject of our ethnographic inquiry, live in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea. I've done my fieldwork among the Samukundi, a subgroup of the Abelam who speak a distinct dialect and live in the Prince Alexander Mountains, a sometimes rugged mountain range near the north coast of the island of New Guinea. These particular Abelam live in a dense tropical rain forest. They clear patches of it to build their villages and grow their gardens. Their main food-stuffs are yams, taro, bananas, and sweet potatoes. However, they grow a wide variety of other crops, and gather still more products from the forest. They supplement their garden produce by hunting and by keeping pigs and chickens.

Some of my beginning students seem to think that tribal people have to work very hard to eke out a meager existence. A common misconception is that tribal people all live miserable lives, often on the verge of starvation. Such is certainly not the case with the Abelam, who are well fed and comparatively well nourished. I once did a time-allocation study among the Abelam,¹ measuring how they spend their time. Among my findings were that Abelam like to sleep a lot: They average about nine hours

and twenty-four minutes each day. On the other hand, the daily workload on average is about three hours a day spent gardening and one hour a day spent hunting. Abelam would consider an American eight-hour workday to be cruel and unusual punishment. Abelam always have enough to eat, and have plenty of time left over for a very rich religious and ceremonial life.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of European relations with the Abelam is relatively short. As nearly as I can estimate,² the Samukundi Abelam were first "contacted" by European labor "recruiters" in the 1920s. Neligum, the village in which I do most of my fieldwork, was preparing for an initiation ceremony for its young men one quiet afternoon when suddenly two white men (thought at the time to be spirit people) burst upon the scene, shooting off guns, which the Abelam had never before seen. In the ensuing confusion, the whites captured a young man, trussed him up like a pig, and carried him off to work on a plantation. He returned after several years, full of marvelous stories of the new world he had seen.

However, the Abelam weren't to participate very much in this new world for quite some time. A few government patrols passed through their territory now and then, but quickly left. A little gold was found in some streams in the Prince Alexander Mountains in the late 1930s, sparking a brief flurry of mining activity and the establishment of a government patrol post at Maprik in Samukundi territory in 1938, but the deposits weren't very rich and the patrol post was abandoned during the Second World War.

Elderly Abelam tell some fascinating stories of these days, however. The most interesting to me is always the story of the first airplane that landed at the newly constructed Maprik airstrip. People were working in their gardens when they heard a strange sound, *brrrrr...*, like a giant insect. They looked up and saw this weird thing, like a great bird, in the distance. The bird got closer and closer. It swooped around, flying in circles over Maprik. People laughed, people cried, people ran off into the jungles in fear. What the heck was this thing?

A few brave Abelam who happened to be near Maprik saw the bizarre creature land. Imagine their utter amazement when a hole in the side of the thing appeared and out stepped a person! Well, a white spirit being to be more exact. This was Ray Parer, a pioneer of early aviation in New Guinea.

After the disruptive events of the Second World War, which saw some fighting between Japanese and Australian troops in Abelam territory, the Abelam were left pretty much to themselves for several decades. The patrol post at Maprik was reestablished, and government patrols revisited Abelam villages from time to time, but Abelam lives were little changed from the precontact era. However, the government was gradually suppressing tribal fighting, and, in 1973, a government Local Court was established. In 1974 I arrived as a young anthropologist, seeking to study how the Abelam would react to these introduced courts.

While I was pursuing my graduate studies in the United States in 1973, I had been looking for a fieldsite where I could study the relationship between recently introduced Western law and a tribal legal system. A friend of mine, Peter Huber, an anthropologist who had recently returned from New Guinea, had told me a little about the Abelam people. On the way back from his own fieldwork, he had visited their area. He told me that a Local Court was just then being established. He said that the people had large ceremonial houses, truly colossal yams, and "looked interesting." It seemed to be a likely place to do the sort of research I had in mind for my Ph.D. thesis.

ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

I began to do some research on the Abelam people to see what was known about them. The earliest mention of them by name that I could find was by the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead in her book *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*. In describing the culture of the Plains Arapesh, who were distantly related to the Mountain Arapesh whom she had studied, Mead gave a thumbnail sketch of the Abelam tribe I planned to live with:

As the mountain people look to the beach for all their new

inspirations, the Plains Arapesh look to the neighbouring Abelam tribe, a gay artistic head-hunting people, who occupy the great treeless grass plains of the Sepik Basin. From the Abelam the Plains Arapesh have borrowed the style of their tall triangular temples, which rise seventy or eighty feet above the square plaza of the big villages, temples with sharply sloping ridge-poles and brilliantly painted facades. And with the Abelam and other plains people, the Plains Arapesh share the practice of sorcery, through which they terrorize their mountain and beach neighbours.³

Not a very flattering profile, I thought ...a bunch of happy-go-lucky headhunters who were sorcerers to boot! "Gay headhunters" seemed like a terrible oxymoron to me. How happy can headhunters actually be? Oh well, I thought, I planned to study the Abelam of the mountains, not the plains. Perhaps they were different.

As my research continued, I discovered that there were actually three major dialect groups of Abelam: the Mamukundi, Kamu-kundi, and Samukundi. The Kamukundi people were the Plains or Wosera Abelam of whom Mead had spoken. This group had been previously studied by anthropologist Anthony Forge⁴ and also by a human geographer, David Lea.⁵ The Mamukundi Abelam, more similar to the mountain-dwelling Samukundi whom I hoped to study, had been previously described by anthropologist Phyllis Kaberry,⁶ whose works I studied carefully. One passage in Kaberry's writings caught my eye: I read how headhunting was carried out only

...on a limited scale, since only the heads of important men were taken. These were left in the stream till the flesh had rotted; the skulls were then painted, the eye-sockets were decorated with orange berries, and they were placed in the *house-tamberan* [the tall temples described by Mead], where they constituted ritual objects in one of the stages of initiation. They were supposed to endow those initiated with strength for fighting.⁷

This made me feel somewhat more secure. After all, I wasn't an important man (I reasoned); therefore, it was unlikely that my head would end up in an Abelam ceremonial house imbuing any Abelam initiates with strength. Or so I hoped.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PRESENT

Thus far in this essay I have touched upon various periods in the Abelam people's history of contact with Europeans. All of this history has been seen firsthand by Abelam people I've interviewed. Indeed, I heard the story of "first contact" from Mambil, the man who was captured by the labor recruiters, as well as others who witnessed the events of that day. Since that time, there have been dramatic changes in Abelam society. Mambil, now deceased, was a *matukulaa* (stone axe)—the Abelam name for someone who grew up before the introduction of steel tools. Mambil's son, my friend Tusais, uses steel tools and uses them well. He's an accomplished carpenter. Mambil's grandson uses books as his tools. He's a lawyer. Thus, Abelam society as it exists today consists of people with radically different world views. In fact, Abelam society was never an unchanging entity. According to Samukundi tradition, ancestral populations lived on the plains before moving into the mountains. Apparently, taro was the staple crop before yams were adopted. Abelam people have always been a dynamic and changing society, adapting constantly to both environmental and social changes.

How then do ethnographers write a single ethnographic profile of a people like the Abelam? One strategy is to use a theoretical construct called the ethnographic present. Very simply, the ethnographer picks a single moment in time, typically the time of first fieldwork. The ethnography is then written in the "timeless" present tense, whether or not the behavioral patterns being described are still going on. In other words, the ethnographer picks a single "slice of time" and tries to understand how the society operates at that moment in time.

This strategy for analyzing cultural patterns was popularized by the British structural-functionalists of the early 1900s, epitomized by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and his students. These anthropologists were interested in knowing what structures were present in society at a moment in time, and how those structures worked or functioned. They were particularly interested in kinship structures and other forms of social organization, since anthropologists were then beginning to realize that tribal societies are organized very differently from complex society. They used an "organismic analo-

gy" for societies: that the parts of societies have particular functions and work together like the organs of biological organisms. This theoretical approach is *synchronic* (at a moment in time) rather than *diachronic* (through time).

For the purposes of this essay, I'll begin by using an ethnographic present of around 1974, the time of my first fieldwork. By this time, Abelam society was already altered from what it had been immediately before contact. For one thing, although enemy heads were still to be seen in the *haus tamberans* (temples), headhunting was no longer actively practiced. As one of my informants confided to me, "We were never very interested in headhunting anyway, certainly not as much as those Eastern Abelam were. We only took their heads to make them mad. We didn't bother to take the heads of our other enemies." Chronic warfare and raiding had been eliminated by the government, although specific conflicts often precipitated fights and raids in the "traditional" style. The "culture of warfare" was still very much alive. A few other practices, such as burying people in the floors of their houses, had been outlawed by the government, and indeed had been abandoned. Otherwise, the behavioral practices described here, including the growing of ceremonial yams and the consequent cycles of sex, warfare, and ritual were not significantly different from what they had been immediately before contact.

The Problem

I originally set out to study the interaction between introduced law (the newly established Local Court) and customary law. I wanted to know what elements of Western introduced law the Abelam would accept, and which they would reject. I quickly realized that this problem would make for a very short Ph.D. thesis, because the Abelam categorically rejected *all* aspects of the introduced law.

Essentially, the Abelam saw the Local Court as a foreign institution, completely at odds with their own practices of dispute resolution. In their own villages, they settle quarrels in village meetings (which legal anthropologists call "moots") that may last several days. In these meetings, people have ample opportunity to express their feelings, and a solution is often reached by consensus. A communal meal and an equal exchange of yams or shell money sym-

bolically seals such an agreement, to which all present are witness. The government courts, on the other hand, consisted of a judge from outside of Abelam society who did not understand their customs. There was little "bargaining," only a unilateral judgment. As a result, Abelam did not bring their civil disputes to the Local Court, and only appeared there when they had been charged with tribal fighting or some other offense. As a result of this, I began spending most of my time in Neligum village observing daily life and looking for a new "problem" to study.

One thing immediately became clear to me: Large, ceremonial yams were then the central focus of Abelam life, and perhaps still are. This seems like a good time to begin the "ethnographic present" narration of this essay. You may have noticed that, in the above paragraph, I used the past tense for behavioral patterns that do not now exist (for example, there is no longer a total rejection of introduced courts, and some Abelam now bring their civil disputes to court). I used the present tense for ongoing patterns (for example, Abelam still use village meetings to settle disputes). However, the extent to which yams are still the focus of Abelam life is hard to judge. For most of the older generation, yam growing and yam taboos are still of paramount importance. However, the younger generation has developed other interests. Consequently, I will now begin to describe things as they were in 1974 in the "ethnographic present," thus relieving myself of the burden of making judgments about the current state of affairs of Abelam society (about which I am much less familiar).

Ceremonial yams are grown in special gardens only by adult men. Once harvested, the very best specimens, which have attained truly gigantic proportions, are decorated and displayed at yam festivals, where they are the focus of a great deal of ritual attention. Men from "enemy" villages come to measure and inspect these yams. After the displays, yam growers give away their best tubers to their worst enemies and rivals as part of a competitive exchange process. When an Abelam man gives a tuber to a rival, it obligates the rival to grow a yam of equal or higher quality to be given in return. Until the rival can grow such a yam, his status continues to drop relative to that of the donor. Thus, to a large extent, male status, prestige, and power are dependent on the quality of the ceremonial yams that they grow.

Women's status and, indeed, the status of entire kinship groups, also rises or falls at these yam festivals. Yam displays are

accompanied by elaborate feasts prepared for the visitors from rival villages. Preparing more food (especially high quality food, such as pork) than the visitors can eat and giving them more than they can carry off increases the status of the group holding the festival. Thus, women can display their own skills at such events, and can impress their own female rivals with the quantity and quality of the food they have produced and prepared.

These yam festivals are truly spectacular events that may last for days on end. They are accompanied by considerable singing, dancing, feasting, and revelry. Men parade on ceremonial grounds with spears, chanting songs full of veiled metaphors that insult their rivals. There are ritualistic spear fights. Tempers sometimes flare, and actual fights sometimes break out. Every night, singing, drumming, and dancing last until dawn. In the late night hours, young people often engage in rather casually concealed sexual liaisons.

These festivals were virtually constant events during the early part of my fieldwork. The festivals last for several months, with various groups taking their turns at displaying their yams. One day, shortly after the group with which I was living had taken their turn and displayed their yams, one of my Abelam friends asked me how I had liked the festival, and how Abelam life compared with American life. "Well," I replied, "the festivals remind me a lot of American television: lots of sex and violence."

"Oh," replied my Abelam friend, "we're not always like this. During the yam growing season, we never fight, and there is a total taboo against sex for everyone."

"How long is the yam growing season?" I asked.

"Six months," he replied.

"You mean nobody in this entire society has sex for six months?" I asked.

"That's right," he said.

Anthropologists distinguish between *ideal culture*, which is what people say they do, and *real culture*, which is what they *actually* do. For example, most Americans would describe our standard cultural marriage practice as "monogamy" (one person married to one other person) while an anthropologist might describe our practice as "serial monogamy" (one person married to one other person *at a time*, with several partners likely over the course of a lifetime). I thought something like this might be at work with my informant's assertion. People might claim that there was a total taboo against

sex for six months, but I doubted that they would actually practice it.

However, as my fieldwork continued, I noticed something rather startling. I had been in the field for some six months. I had attended most of the major life crisis events, such as funerals, weddings, boys' initiation ceremonies, girls' first menstruation ceremonies, and so on. But I had never attended a birth ceremony, and, to my knowledge, there had not even been a birth in the village during that time.

After gardens had been cleared and the yam growing season began in earnest, I noticed a dramatic change in the "feeling" of the village. Whereas before people had been friendly, somewhat loud, outgoing, flirtatious, and obvious, people were now acting shy, reserved, quiet, and innocuous. The taboos against fighting and sex, practices thought to adversely affect yam growth, were in force. Something else became obvious: A great many of the women in the village were pregnant, and I soon became aware of many of the births I had been anticipating. A "baby season" was in full swing!

As I began to search for a theoretical framework to help me understand some of these relationships, I thought of an important article that had been written by Donald Tuzin, an ethnographer who had worked with the nearby Plains Arapesh, who also grow ceremonial yams. In this paper⁴ Tuzin took a symbolic approach to analyzing the importance of yams. A symbol is something that "stands for" shared cultural understandings, which may have no direct natural link to the symbol itself. For example, the American flag "stands for" shared cultural understandings about the country, about its values, history, freedoms, etc. that have no intrinsic link to the actual pieces of cloth that comprise it. Just like the American flag, which is a very complex symbol, Tuzin showed how yams represented complex shared cultural understandings about fundamental and meaningful aspects of Arapesh life.

I realized that the same was true of Abelam yams. For Abelam, yams are imbued with extraordinarily complex symbolism. Perhaps most important is that yams form a link between people and their ancestors. Yams are propagated vegetatively. This means that particularly fine tubers are stored and allowed to sprout, then are cut up and used as "seed" for the next year's crop. So people are planting the "same" (that is, genetically identical) yams as their ancestors, since yams are passed down from parents to children.

Furthermore, yams never "die," but are (actually and metaphorically) "reborn" each year.

I often translate the Abelam word *gwaalindu* as "ancestral spirit," but it means much more than this. It also means something like "soul substance" or "life force." Abelam believe that, just as individual tubers die but the yam is reborn, so individual human beings die, but *gwaalindu* lives on and is reborn within the clan. Yams symbolize these complex religious beliefs.

Tuzin also took up other aspects of yam symbolism: Yams symbolize the body. People decorate and adorn yams in a manner linked to the adornment of the human body. Yams have pedigrees. When a young couple is married, they each bring their own family's yam "lines" to the marriage, where they are symbolically "joined" by being planted in the same garden. Yams are linked with the psychology and mythology of these people, and, in fact, permeate all aspects of life.

I began to better understand the reasons for the taboos. Yams are thought to have souls. They are sentient beings that have a sort of extrasensory perception. They can "feel" things. They appreciate tranquility, and can perceive social discord. Various other things, defined as "hot" activities, upset their serenity. Yams can "sense" an act of sexual intercourse, because it is "hot." Fighting is "hot." The killing and butchering of animals is also "hot," so there is a taboo against these activities while yams are growing.

Some of these beliefs may seem rather odd to you, as they did to me at first. But the Abelam firmly believe them. Once I expressed some doubt as to whether having sexual intercourse would really affect yam growth. "Do you grow yams in America?" an Abelam friend asked me.

"Sure we do," I replied.

"And do Americans abstain from sex while they are growing these yams?" he queried.

"I doubt it," I said.

"How long are your yams?" he asked.

"Oh, about eight or nine inches," I answered.

"See!" he said in an amused tone.

Considering that Abelam yams are more than ten times longer, I couldn't very well argue with his logic!

As I pondered these kinds of issues, I began to wonder about the functions of these beliefs. What did this complex of beliefs do for these people? After all, I reasoned, people aren't stupid. Unless

these beliefs made some sort of sense, they would probably have been abandoned long ago. And Abelam invest such physical and emotional energy in planting, tending, harvesting, displaying, and thinking about their yams! Certainly yam beliefs seemed to synchronize and structure many aspects of Abelam society, including the timing and intensity of warfare and the timing of human births. What else did they do? I began to consider another theoretical paradigm or model to help guide my thinking: *functionalism*.

In 1922 anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski published a book entitled *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*.⁹ In it he analyzed the Kula Ring, a complex set of trade networks linking the Trobriand Islanders with their neighbors. The *kula* are special shell valuables. Malinowski showed the importance of the exchange of these valuables for these islanders, and the complex ways in which this trade functioned. For example, through the secondary utilitarian bartering that accompanied it, kula trading helped to distribute specialized products throughout the ecologically diverse islands that comprise the ring. I started to think about Abelam yam beliefs in similar terms.

The Ritual Cycle

I began by considering what I knew about the yam "cycle." The yearly cycle begins with a formal ceremony called *waapike yapevu*, "blowing on the yams." Exchange partners (rivals) from other villages come to symbolically "breathe life" into the planting material that has been displayed. This reminds me of a coin toss before a football game, or the opening instructions in a boxing match. Boxers shake hands, then try to beat each other senseless. Why are these niceties necessary? Very simply, I think that rivals are demonstrating their reacceptance of the structured rules of yam rivalry. Although yam exchanges are competitive, often angry affairs, men achieve their status by beating their rivals in a "fair fight" with structured rules. The mutual obligation of participating in these ceremonies underlines the fact that everyone has agreed to "play by the rules."

For the next month or two after this ceremony (which usually takes place in August or September), men begin to clear and burn

the special yam gardens in preparation for planting, and the taboos begin. Yam growers spend much of their time in the gardens during this time. They only visit with a few trusted friends. They generally eat only at home, for fear of indirect pollution. After all, who could know if the food preparer had had sexual intercourse? If so, the food would become "polluted," the grower would ingest some of it, and the yams would suffer. Even something simple, like lighting a cigarette on a fire, can have adverse consequences. What if a sexually incontinent person had stepped over the fire, thus polluting it? A yam grower could ingest the pollution and ruin his yams!

Social conflict is to be avoided at all costs while yams are growing. People must put aside their differences in the interests of the yams. Hostilities must be repressed. People must act in calm, mild, balanced ways. If a neighbor's pig enters someone's garden and eats his produce, the garden owner must control his anger. I once saw such an incident. A pig had eaten several of a yam grower's very best tubers. The man sat down on a rock at the edge of his garden and cried. But he never became overtly angry. He couldn't kill the pig, because that would have been a "hot" action. He never even mentioned the incident to the pig owner. To do so might have precipitated an argument.

At the end of the dry season, gardens are cleared, and yams are planted at the beginning of the wet season. Once planted, the yams are lovingly cared for. Growers spend considerable time arranging the vines on trellises, digging around and inspecting the tubers, and backfilling with rich, fertilized soil. Towards the end of the wet season, when yam growth is completed, yams are harvested according to individual inclination. Although the first yam festivals may not be held for another month or so, the rigid taboos become slightly relaxed as people worry less about the possibility of indirect pollution affecting the yams. Visiting again becomes common.

After all the yams are harvested, the yam festivals begin, usually around March. After a few months of yam festivals, equally elaborate male initiation ceremonies are held in some villages. There are four basic stages of initiation. Each moiety¹⁰ in a village takes turns initiating the young males of the other moiety in collective, spectacular ceremonies held every few years. Sacred ritual objects are displayed to initiates in the haus tamberans mentioned earlier. Costumed dancers with towering headdresses adorned with colorful feathers perform on the ceremonial ground in front of the temples. These ceremonies are accompanied by the same sort of

ments like, "Some people fight with spears, others fight with yams." I once witnessed a case in Neligum Village in which one man was threatening to get his spears and kill another man. As the first man strode off to gather up his weapons, the other man shouted after him, "You talk about fighting, but your yams are inferior!" This put the first man in an extremely awkward position. If he got his spears and ran the other man through, he would just be proving his rival's point that he really was a violent man, and that his "hot" blood no doubt prevented him from growing admirable yams. The only way to really answer this challenge was for him to present his rival with a huge yam, thereby proving his yam-growing prowess. The potential fight never occurred, and the incident ended in the institution of a competitive exchange relationship between the two. Thus, through yam exchange, conflict was redirected into a socially approved, nonviolent channel.

Conflict is not only redirected by yam growing, but it is also regulated and synchronized. As I mentioned before, Abelam are quite serious about their yam taboos, and conflict is relatively rare during yam-growing. For the inevitable few problems that do arise and must be resolved, the Abelam use a different management style than they would otherwise employ.¹¹ During the yam growing season, mediators seek to bring about an immediate settlement by stressing areas of agreement. In the interests of the yams, most litigants are willing to compromise, at least temporarily. However, resentments sometimes remain, and, during the ritual season, mediators encourage catharsis by emphasizing areas of disagreement and exploring the full range of the dispute. This way, they allow people to "blow off steam," air all the issues that are bothering them, and come to a lasting agreement. I have seen many disputes that were brushed aside during the yam growing season emerge again during the ritual season. However, by now some months have passed, tempers have cooled, and people can be more reasonable.

Warfare, of course, cannot take place during the yam growing season without endangering the yams of all of the hostiles, so it rarely if ever occurs for these six months. However, even during the ritual season, the expression of warfare is regulated by yam beliefs. During yam festivals, male initiation ceremonies, and waapike yapevu, enemies must cooperate with one another by

suspending hostilities and visiting one another's villages to measure and inspect yams, feast together, deliver yams, blow on each other's planting materials, and so on. Thus, the actual time available for warfare is quite limited. In other words, warfare is kept in check by the yam cycle.

Previously, I mentioned the "baby season" that I had observed. Counting back nine months from these births, it became obvious that virtually all of these conceptions would have occurred during the yam festival period, just after the six month taboo on sexual activities had ended. Since the Abelam do not practice any form of birth control, it seemed that my informant had been right, and that people really didn't have sex for six months! To further check this, I collected a small sample of twenty-nine birth months, analyzed the sample, and confirmed the existence of a pronounced birth season.¹² I realized something else, too. For most of the six-month period that sexual taboos were in effect, many of the women in the village were in their third trimester of pregnancy, were actually giving birth, or were recovering from their deliveries. Suspending sexual activities during these times didn't seem so strange as I had first imagined.

The clustering of births had another interesting and, in my opinion, rather beneficial result for the Abelam. I myself was one of those unfortunate American children born in the cut-off month for attending school. This meant that my parents were forced to make the decision either to send me to school early, or to hold me out for a year. School officials felt that I was intellectually ready for school, but they weren't sure that I was socially ready. My parents decided to send me early, which caused me problems all through school. I was always the youngest in my class. I was somewhat of a discipline problem in the first few years of elementary school (and possibly far beyond). I hated dating in my senior year, because I still wasn't old enough to drive. But for the Abelam, all of the babies born in a particular year are virtually the same age. Thus, age cohorts are very discrete. In Abelam they are collectively called a *tembu*, a garden section. People of the same age cohort form very close bonds; they can "substitute" for one another in all sorts of social situations. Symbolically, the display of yams during the festivals is a time to reflect on both kinds of *tembu*: on the year's "harvest" of both yams and children.

Self-Regulation of a System

By now I was thoroughly intrigued with Abelam yam growing. It permeated so many aspects of Abelam life, it seemed an obvious focus for my Ph.D. thesis.¹³ Having thought about some of the functions of the yams cycle, I began to consider another theoretical approach: cultural ecology. Cultural ecology is concerned with the relationship between people and their environments. In a now-classic study entitled *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People*, Roy Rappaport described the ritual cycle of the Tsembaga Maring people as a "self-regulating system." He stated:

...Tsembaga ritual, particularly in the context of a ritual cycle, operates as a regulating mechanism in a system, or set of interlocking systems, in which such variables as the area of available land, necessary lengths of fallow periods, size and composition of both human and pig populations, trophic requirements of pigs and people, energy expended in various activities, and the frequency of misfortunes are included.¹⁴

He described one particular ritual, the *kaiko* ceremony, as a sort of thermostat that kept all of these variables (the system) within tolerable limits. I realized that I could easily analyze Abelam yam growing in this way too. I thought of Abelam yam growing as a sort of "pressure cooker valve" that relieved pressure and thus regulated some of the variables in the Abelam ecological system.

The Abelam had moved up into the mountains from the plains, where they found a lush environment ideally suited to yam-growing. They had an appropriate technology, life was good, and their population began to rise. Now if we hold land constant for the moment, increased population density has several effects. For one thing, studies have shown that when people are crowded together, conflict usually rises. For one thing, since Abelam families need a minimum number of pigs, the pig population would rise, and, with land held constant, pigs would cause more and more damage to gardens, which would in turn cause a rise in the rate of conflict between pig and garden owners. Also, with an increasing population, the hunting of wild game, such as marsupials and cassowaries would increase, thus reducing their numbers.

Ritual yam exchanges can act to correct all these imbalances.

As conflicts precipitated by increasing population density escalate, more and more competitive yam exchange relationships are created, since these yam exchanges are one of the most common ways of handling conflicts. This makes people pay even more attention to yam growing and be even more serious about the taboos. This reduces social conflict, particularly disputes about sexual jealousies and sexual behavior, which are the most common causes of Abelam conflict.¹⁵ Whenever yams are exchanged, pork must also be given. So more yam exchanges means more pork, which of course means fewer pigs, thus the pig population is reduced and conflicts over pig depredations to gardens are lowered. Furthermore, the more serious people are about yam exchanges, the more strictly they adhere to prohibitions against hunting wild game, a "hot" activity. This creates a shortened hunting season, giving the wild game populations a chance to recover.

Yam growing can even act to adjust people/land ratios and thus reduce population density, which was the starting point for this analysis. When Samukundi Abelam wish to grow truly splendid yams, they clear virgin forest, since this land is known to be particularly good for yam growth. Later the land is given over to ordinary garden use. Thus, increased population pressure can increase conflict, which can increase yam exchanges, which can expand the amount of cultivated land, which can decrease the people/land ratio, which can relieve the population pressure and result in a balanced system once again.

DISCUSSION

In the roughly twenty years that I've been studying Abelam culture, I've had occasion to use quite a few theoretical models to help me understand or think about various aspects of Abelam behavior. If I were to continue with the sort of analysis that I sketched out in the last section, I might consider employing a cultural adaptation model. Cultural adaptation is the idea that, as a result of a process of selection through time, societies will develop complexes of behavioral patterns that are adapted to their natural and social environments. I might want to think about what happened to the Abelam as they moved from the plains to the foothills, and why

plains Abelam seem much less psychologically invested in yam growing than are mountain Abelam. Could it be that an increased interest in yam growing was a response to their changing environment? How would this have worked? To answer these questions, I would have to abandon the ethnographic present, and return again to the sorts of historical considerations that opened this paper.

There are all sorts of other theoretical frameworks that I could consider in thinking about this essay. No doubt some of you have noticed that I am male, and that Abelam ceremonial yam growing, the focus of this essay, is a male activity. Women play an important part in these activities, of course. Women take pride in their husbands' yams, because it shows that they, too, have rigidly followed the taboos. Women grow the crops that are eaten and distributed at feasts, they rear pigs that are slaughtered and distributed with the yams, they prepare food for feasts, they also maintain sexual continence in the interests of the yams. However, I was not able to observe the activities of women in as great detail as I could for the men.

Feminist anthropologists have made the very valid point that this state of affairs was all too common in the early days of anthropology when most ethnographers were men. Fortunately, the Abelam have been studied by at least four female ethnographers, including the previously mentioned Phyllis Kaberry, Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin,¹⁶ Diane Losche,¹⁷ and Barbara Huber-Greub.¹⁸ Their work has helped provide a gender-balanced ethnography of the Abelam people. Yet it would be very difficult for any one ethnographer to provide such a picture. Abelam practice a fairly strict division of labor, which often keeps males and females working apart. Especially during the yam growing season, when contact between the sexes could lead to dangerous sexual temptations, the sexes are often segregated. It would not be appropriate for an ethnographer of either sex to be spending time with the opposite sex during this period. A focus on gender and the anthropology of women can help us understand these sorts of relationships between ethnographers and the people they study.

Another possible way for you to think about this essay is by employing a body of theory called postmodernism. Postmodernism is concerned with, among other things, the acquisition, classification, production and control of knowledge. After all, knowledge is power, particularly in the contemporary (com-

puter-dominated, postindustrial, postmodern) world. Who decides what needs to be known? Who decides what knowledge needs to be disseminated? For what purposes?

Anthropologists employing postmodern theory have been concerned with analyzing the task of writing ethnography. Can an ethnographic profile, such as the one you've just read, really be objective? In the words of Michel de Certeau, how do anthropologists authorize themselves "to speak in the name of the 'real'?"¹⁹ In writing this essay, I have had to make certain decisions about how I would present the Abelam to the outside world. What were my motivations? What were my reasons for studying the Abelam in the first place? How did I choose what to present in this essay, and how to present it? Postmodernism provides a useful theoretical framework to think about these sorts of issues.

There are many other theories that could be explored depending on one's interests. Marxist analysis, for example, initially focuses on the mode of production of a society, which is taken to be of paramount importance. Once the mode of production and control of the means of production are understood, other aspects of society are related to this and can often be explained as consequences. Using this theoretical framework, the primary Abelam concern with yams is not at all surprising, since yam growing is their major means of production. The fact that the religious system is related to (or, perhaps, results from) the mode of production also follows.

I hope that I've made the point that, while there are occasionally rival theories that can't both be true, most theories aren't mutually exclusive. Theories are just formulations of apparent relationships or underlying principles of certain observed phenomena that are only partially verified. If theories were totally proven, they wouldn't be theories, they'd be laws. So we have to keep experimenting with theories.

I believe that good social scientists are open minded enough to employ different modes of analysis for different problems. Theories should be judged by how useful they are in helping us understand human behavior and how accurate they are in predicting it. If they do those things well, they're "good" theories, and we should continue to employ and modify them. If they cease to be very useful to us, we should be dispassionate enough to abandon them.

 NOTES

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4. J. A. W. Forge, "Art and Environment in the Sepik," *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (1965), pp. 23-31; J. A. W. Forge, "Marriage and Exchange in the Sepik: Comments on Francis Korn's Analysis of Iatmul Society," in R. Needham, ed., *Rethinking Kinship and Marriage* (London: Tavistock, 1971), pp. 133-144; J. A. W. Forge, "The Golden Fleece," *Man* 7 (1972): 527-540 (originally the Malinowski Memorial Lecture delivered at the London School of Economics and Political Science, March 7, 1971); and J. A. W. Forge, "Style and Meaning in Sepik Art," in J. A. W. Forge, ed., *Primitive Art and Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 169-192.
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7. Phyllis M. Kaberry, "The Abelam Tribe, Sepik District, New Guinea: A Preliminary Report," *Oceania* 11 (1940–41): 240.
 8. Donald F. Tuzin, "Yam Symbolism in the Sepik: An Interpretative Account," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 28 (3) (1972): 230–254.
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SUGGESTED READINGS

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