

Cultural Memory on Tapa: Bark Cloth from the Uruwa Valley of Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

This study explores the production and cultural significance of bark cloth garments on the Huon Peninsula of New Guinea, with a particular focus on the Uruwa River Valley. The richly decorated tapa cloth, locally known as *tik orip*, is chiefly used for crafting men's cloaks. Beyond the Huon Peninsula, similarly ornamental forms of tapa are produced only in a few other regions of New Guinea, notably in Papua New Guinea's Oro Province and around Lake Sentani in Indonesian Papua. The article draws on field research conducted in the Uruwa Valley, home to the Nungon cultural group among others. Owing to sustained contact with Western culture and Christian missionaries, much of the detailed knowledge concerning the symbolic meanings of individual tapa motifs has been lost. The purpose of this study is to present ethnographic insights into the little-known traditions of painted tapa from New Guinea, particularly those of the Huon Peninsula.

Keywords

Painted Tapa, New Guinea, the Nungon People, Huon Peninsula, New Guinea Art, Bark Cloth, Cultural Memory

Introduction

The most renowned bark cloths are produced by the peoples of Samoa, Tonga, the Marquesas, and other Polynesian islands. The knowledge of tapa-making reached these islands with the earliest settlers, who are believed to have migrated from Taiwan and southern China. Yet tapa production is by no means confined to Polynesia. The technology is also known among the

inhabitants of the tropical island of New Guinea¹—not only those living along the coast, who might be expected to possess such knowledge as part of the migratory routes from Asia, but also among groups dwelling in the island's interior. Tapa is made from the processed phloem fibres, the living tissue just beneath a tree's outer bark. Species such as the paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) and the dye fig (*Ficus tinctoria*) are most commonly used. The paper mulberry, native to southern China and Taiwan, spread throughout Southeast Asia and Oceania alongside human migrations from the Asian mainland. This study focuses on the tapa of New Guinea's Huon Peninsula, particularly that produced by the Nungon cultural group, who use the bark of the paper mulberry tree to create their *tik orip* cloth (fig. 1).



Tapa is produced in various parts of New Guinea, where it serves as material for garments and a range of everyday items, including cloaks. However, highly ornamented forms of tapa are made in only a few regions. The most renowned examples originate from the area surrounding Lake Sentani in Indonesian Papua and from the Oro Province of Papua New Guinea. These regions are the source of the most celebrated and sought-after tapa products from New Guinea, which have become popular as tourist souvenirs. Painted tapa from Oro Province is commonly sold in hotels, resorts, and at the international airport in Port Moresby, while tapa from the Lake Sentani area is offered not only locally but also at international airports across Indonesia.² Decorated tapa is also found on the island of New Britain, where the Baining people use it to fashion richly ornamented dance masks that have likewise become commodified for the tourist market.

¹ Neich and Pendergrast 1997.

² Personal communication of the author with Jan Rendek, a Czech traveler and collector.

By contrast, painted tapa from the mountainous interior of the Huon Peninsula remains little known and scarcely documented. One likely reason is that encounters with the inhabitants of this region attracted less attention than the better-known contacts established in the Central Highlands of New Guinea, even though they took place at roughly the same time, during the 1930s. From the perspective of collectors of so-called ‘primitive art’, the interior of the Huon Peninsula appeared far less enticing than regions such as the Sepik River, the Gulf of Papua, or the Highlands. The local communities did not produce elaborately decorated wooden shields, statues, or masks. According to the available evidence, even the dedicated collector Albert Lewis, who undertook several expeditions to assemble artefacts for the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, did not acquire any painted tapa from the interior of the Huon Peninsula. His photographs nonetheless suggest that the inland inhabitants maintained contact with coastal communities, as indicated, for instance, by the design of certain headdresses.³

There exist numerous theoretical approaches to the study of artefacts within their broader cultural contexts. Among the most influential are structuralism (Claude Lévi-Strauss), which seeks the underlying structures of human thought reflected in material culture; symbolic and interpretive anthropology (notably Clifford Geertz), which treats objects as systems of meaning; practice theory (Pierre Bourdieu), emphasising how material culture participates in everyday actions that reproduce or transform social structures; and actor-network theory (ANT) together with thing theory, which attribute agency to objects as components of wider assemblages of human and non-human relations. A post-colonial perspective is equally vital, highlighting the ways in which the influx of Western goods has reshaped traditional systems of material culture. No single interpretive framework can claim universal validity: artefacts remain open to multiple, context-dependent readings. The same is true of tapa cloth from the Uruwa River Valley.

In Melanesia, material culture concerns far more than the production of objects: it embodies relationships, meanings, and transformations. Theoretical anthropology has moved from viewing artefacts as passive reflections of culture to recognising them as active participants in social life. Classic Melanesian cases, such as the Kula exchange system or the Moka ceremonial exchange, demonstrate how material goods mediate kinship, status, identity, and cosmology, revealing how societies use objects to think, feel, and relate. This perspective also illuminates the cultural practices of the Nungon people of the Uruwa River Valley. Among them, tapa cloth continues to be used in ceremonial contexts, expressing a worldview rooted in

³ Welsch 1998, p. 160.

pre-contact cosmology. The motifs often depict nature spirits and cultivated plants, symbolising the community's spiritual and ecological interconnections. Because this remote region attracts little tourism, tapa has not yet become a commodified souvenir, unlike its counterparts from Oro Province, which are now widely sold in resort markets. As mentioned above, tapa from the Uruwa Valley remains poorly known, and ethnographic information about it is still remarkably scarce.

Fieldwork background

This review study concentrates on tapa produced in the valley of the Uruwa River. The information heretofore published on this subject is rather scanty. Publications by Tibor Bodrogi, who specialized in the material culture and art of northeastern New Guinea, mention bark cloth only in passing. Bodrogi reported that tapa is seldom used in the interior, mainly for making shields.⁴ The Nungons also told me they used layers of tapa for making shields. They covered their backs and sides with cloaks made from tapa to protect them from arrows shot from enemy bows.⁵ Bodrogi's book, *Art in North-East New Guinea*, is one of the best overviews of the native art from the Huon Peninsula, but it is not especially helpful on this subject because its references to painted tapa are rather imprecise.⁶ The manufacture and use of tapa is however mentioned by the first visitors to the area, for example Otto Finsch, who described the process of making tapa, but did not give any more detail about it.⁷ Thomas Harding focused on trade and commerce between communities on the Huon Peninsula and the nearby islands of Astrolabe Bay. Among other things, he states in his book⁸ that the communities of the interior were making clothes from tree fibers, which they traded with the communities on the coast and offshore islands (especially Tami and Siassi). In return for those goods, they obtained clay pots⁹ and wooden bowls¹⁰. The clay pots and wooden bowls are still used, at least occasionally, in the Uruwa River valley (fig. 2).

⁴ Bodrogi 1961, p. 138.

⁵ Tapa is in no way a reliable protection against enemy missiles. I've tested it to see if an arrow can penetrate the tapa, and it can. Rather, the tapa just dampens the kinetic force of a fired arrow.

⁶ Bodrogi 1961.

⁷ Finsch 1914, pp. 361–362.

⁸ Harding 1967, p. 44.

⁹ May and Tuckson 2000.

¹⁰ Reichard 1969



This study is based on multiple visits to the Uruwa Valley for research into the culture of the Nungon group.¹¹ The Nungons live in six villages and a few other settlements in the valley of the Uruwa River. The Australian colonial administration of Papua first contacted them in 1934 in the course of a patrol led by Patrol Officer Leigh Vial, who later returned to the area in 1936. Further contact with the inhabitants was prevented by World War II. The Papua administration renewed contacts with the Nungons as the war drew to a close in 1944.¹²

Not all the reports written by Vial about his patrols have survived, but excerpts from them have been published.¹³ His accounts of his patrols to the regions of Uruwa, Yupna, Timbe and other parts of the Huon Peninsula have been summarized in popular magazines, but the excerpts do not give details about the material culture there, nor do they mention that the inhabitants were wearing cloaks made from tapa.¹⁴ Contacts between the colonial administration and the Nungons were fully renewed after the war, but they were far from intensive. Patrols managed to reach the region about once a year and stay in the Nungon villages for two or three days at a time.¹⁵ Altogether in the colonial period they spent about three months with the Nungons. Memories of the patrols' activities are still very much alive among the older generation of Nungons even though they lasted for such a short time.

¹¹ The author completed his first stay for research among the Nungons in 2009 and has returned to their villages several times since then.

¹² Soukup 2023a.

¹³ Vial 1979.

¹⁴ Vial 1943.

¹⁵ Soukup 2023a.

The Nungons speak a unique Austronesian language.¹⁶ The organization of their social relations is based on patrilines. They are Christians, either Adventists or Lutherans, and are subsistence farmers, which is the usual model of existence in New Guinea. They cultivate taro, yams, sweet potatoes, and sugar cane. Since making contact with the colonial administration, they also grow other crops, especially potatoes, onions, and chilies. They obtain nutritional protein from hunting wild animals and raising domesticated animals, mainly pigs and chickens. Since April 2015, they have had access to the internet because the cellular provider Digicel built a station for transmitting mobile telephone signals. The Nungons have even created their own groups on social networks (for example, the “Uruwa Elites Group”). Young people study in the towns, and some adults find work along the banks of the Uruwa River. Economic migration is mainly into the provincial capital Lae, or to Kimbe on the island of New Britain. Migration to Kimbe is not surprising, because as Thomas Harding showed in a detailed study, trade between the communities on the Huon peninsula and those on New Britain has long existed. A study published by Jane Fajans¹⁷ found a close resemblance of tapa produced in the interior of the Huon Peninsula to the abstract designs of Baining *avutik*. At this point, however, that seems to me to be no more than speculation.

Huon Peninsula Bark Cloth

Various areas of Northeastern New Guinea were known for the different uses they made of tapa. Harding says that the coastal areas were known mainly for the production of loincloths made from tapa, while the communities in the interior produced cloaks from it.¹⁸ We are aware that painted tapa was used to make masks on the coast and the adjacent islands. However, it does not seem that the inhabitants of the mountains in the interior of the Huon Peninsula exported other kinds of tapa already “branded” as a specific commodity produced by a specific community. I am led to this belief because the early collectors traveling along the coast of the Huon Peninsula did not acquire examples of tapa bearing designs traceable to the peninsula’s interior for their collections. Most likely the barter trade made undecorated tapa from the interior available on the coasts as a raw material. The same does not apply to goods traded from the coast into the interior. The Nungons did not decorate wooden bowls or ceramics but rather obtained finished goods in trade. On the other hand, it must be added that the Swiss

¹⁶ Sarvasy 2017.

¹⁷ Fajans 1997, pp. 185–186.

¹⁸ Harding 1967, p. 44.

ethnographer Paul Wirz, who is celebrated for his ethnographic work on the Marind-anim group, apparently obtained tapa from the interior of the Huon Peninsula in 1930's. At least, that is what one auction catalogue claims.¹⁹

Tapa (known as *tik* in Nungon) was produced by the Nungons in the same way it was elsewhere in New Guinea. The whole process required two or three days. It was first necessary to loosen the bark from the trunks (*fabong*) of felled trees by beating it. The logs were then slowly turned and a long wooden tool (*bongok*) was used to gradually separate the bark from the wood. At the same time, the bark was expanded by beating on it. Next, the outer layer of the bark was cut away with a knife. What remained was then sliced lengthways and beaten some more over the log (*han*). It was then folded into layers and beaten again, gradually increasing its size. It was then dried in direct sunlight. The process was similar in all the areas of New Guinea where tapa was produced. The technical details of the process and the great deal of time it required were described by Paul Sillitoe,²⁰ among others. Not all tapa was used to make clothes like skirts for the girls and other garments for the men. Tapa was used to make a wide spectrum of objects for daily use, including blankets, on which one could among other things for drying coffee beans (fig. 3).



The Nungons commonly used tapa to make mats and bedsheets. However, it had many other uses. String for making net bags (*yok*), headdresses (*yokyok*), women's grass skirts (*bin*), and men's clothing (*nap*) were all made from tapa. A bone knife (*atak*) was used to shred tapa

¹⁹ Schmid 2016, pp. 298.

²⁰ Sillitoe 2017, pp. 275–276.

for the purpose of making grass skirts and the strings used to make net bags.²¹ Only the male attire, *nap*, was decorated with abstract designs. In the Nungon language, *orip* is the usual word for the patterns used to decorate various objects. Therefore, for example, the decoration at the tip of an arrow shaft is called *kondong orip*, *kondong* being the word for shaft. *Tik orip* refers to decorated tapa used to make a man's cloak. If a woman or girl wears a tapa cloak, the term *orip* is not applied to it because *tik orip* is exclusively a male thing.

Nungon Tapa Patterns

The Lutheran missionary Urs Wegmann published further information, albeit only fragmentary, about the tapa produced in the mountainous Saruwaged region. Wegmann was active as a missionary in the 1980s. He worked in Boksawin, which is not a Nungon village, but whose inhabitants are culturally close to the Nungons. In his anthropological study, he talks about tapa and the patterns with which it was decorated.²² He states that the patterns on tapa were inspired by nature, but also by the mythology of the inhabitants' ethnic origins. Wegmann reproduces and comments upon several patterns that originated in the dreams of their creators and may have their roots in natural phenomena.

Like Christin Schmid, Wegmann mentions the cultural significance of colors.²³ Schmid has mainly studied tapa from the Yopno region, while Wegmann worked mainly with the Yau group.²⁴ My experience on the ground supports Schmid's and Wegmann's reports of the meanings of the colors used on tapa produced in the interior of the Huon Peninsula. Black, red, and white are the basic colors used, of which white is the natural color of tapa when it is produced. The Nungons associate the color red (*gomono*, in Nungon) with magic and spells, and with bitterness, which they understand to be a symptom of the casting of spells. They also associate red with evil and danger. Black (*dok*) is understood to be an unfortunate color. Contrarily, white (*nögök*) is considered the color of happiness. According to Wegmann, the first color applied to tapa is red, which forms the background for the pattern. After that, black is applied to create the outline of the artist's intended design. Some headdresses (*yokyok*) made from tapa have designs painted only in red. From my experience with the Nungons, the order of application of the colors is not all that important. Rather, Nungon designs are produced gradually with all colors applied in no particular order.

²¹ Soukup 2023b.

²² Wegmann 1990, pp.

²³ Schmid 2016, pp. 290–291.

²⁴ Wegmann 1990.

Tapa is used to make the typical male garments (*nap*), which besides colorful cloaks also include “trousers,” or loincloths: a long strip of tapa whose end a man must first pull between his legs and then in several layers wrap around his waist. Women and girls wear skirts made from the same material and their color varies depending on their village. Contacts with the Australian colonial administration and above all the longtime activities of the Lutheran missionaries have inevitably resulted in far-reaching cultural changes among the Nungons. These Westerners are in part responsible for the very vague knowledge that prevails today among the Nungons about the various patterns of painted tapa and their meanings. Another explanation for this may be that the makers of tapa reportedly created their designs in private. This is no longer the case. Today the designs are created with the input of many people and even more people usually participate in their application onto the tapa.

Despite repeated attempts, I have not been able to create a catalogue of individual tapa patterns during my field trips. If, as the local people say, dreams inspire the artists to create their patterns, one cannot speak about a universal Nungon grammar of tik orip, because dreams depend heavily on the individual’s human imagination. At the end of the 1980s, Wegmann was already saying that the memory of the designs on tapa was fading and that the local people had only a general understanding of their meaning. I repeatedly tried to acquire samples of all the various types of tik orip on my field trips, but I never succeeded in obtaining a complete typological set of designs. Tik orip always was and still remains a very individual thing. Opinions differed about whether a particular orip was meant to represent taro, nature spirits, or objects sent by the spirits to the artist in a dream. Examples of tapa that I have either had a chance to see during my field trips, or that I have received as gifts, are adorned with anthropomorphic figures. Normally, there is more than one such figure on each tapa, as can be seen from the examples pictured below (fig. 4, fig. 5, fig. 6). In these cases, the anthropomorphic figures are rendered in white, which the Nungons associate with happiness.

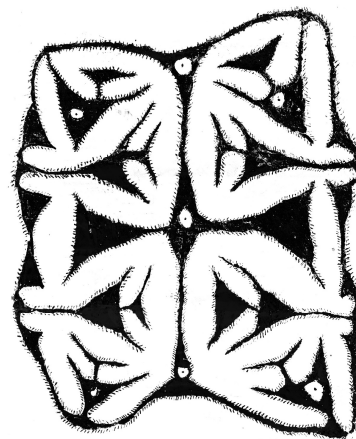
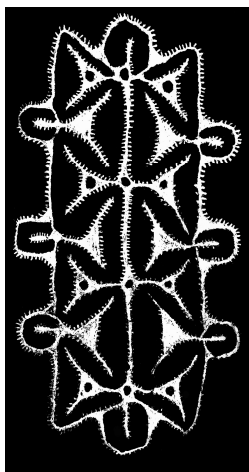
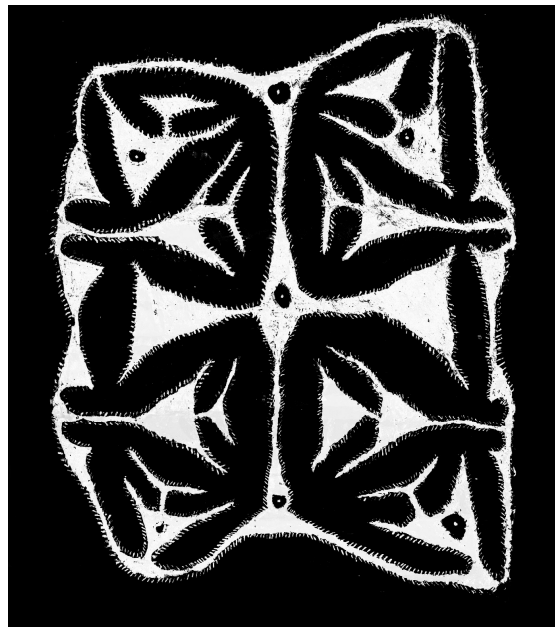
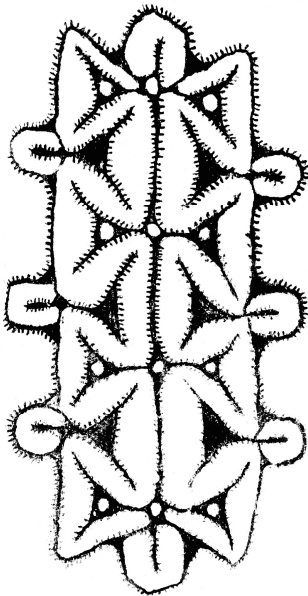




Tapa is the medium and the medium is the message, to paraphrase media theoretician Marshal McLuhan in the introduction to his pioneering work.²⁵ In the case of the Nungons, processed tapa is the material background for the message. Gestalt psychology is based on the idea that people give priority to shapes over particularities, for example, by perceiving three individual dots as a triangular whole. The geometric shape of a triangle is more than just three dots. Proponents of gestalt psychology have conducted a number of experiments investigating the perception of wholes. Tapa in itself is a background material, something like office paper,

²⁵ McLuhan 1964, p. 1.

on which it is possible to capture a world of meaning. The pictorial material that is applied to it is the “message on the medium,” and the white color of the tapa is part of that message. Indeed, we can see the imagery of the Nungons expressed on tapa just as if it appeared on bright white office paper. If we look at the examples of tapa below and convert them to black and white, we can clearly see the gestalt by inverting the colors. If we look at the design in black, it is possible for us to see the abstract representation of a fish (fig. 7), as in the next picture (fig. 8). If, however, we allow the shapes of the “office paper,” i.e., the tapa background, to stand out (figs. 9 and 10), we can clearly see anthropomorphic figures. Fig. 4 represents eight figures standing in a circle and holding each other (see fig. 9) and four abstract figures sitting back-to-back and mirroring each other (see fig. 10).



In the following examples, I draw on the situation in the village of Yawan. For comparison, Schmid said that the men in the area of Yopno create their designs in private and that particular designs were associated with individual patrilans. However, among the Nungons I identified just one basic design, while there are six different patrilans living in different villages. Completely independent individual creations are not likely to be found in the Uruwa Valley, although Wegmann stated that such was the case in the Yau group in the past. The first Yau village (Boksawin) is barely five kilometers away from the first Nungon village as the crow flies, so one wonders why it was different for the Nungon. Even so, decorating tapa may have been an individual spiritual experience in the Yau villages, even if the villagers ended up reproducing the same cultural patterns. It is not possible to confirm that reliably now that the production of *tik orip* takes place in public. Artists openly create and display their *tik orip* creations without any limitations (fig. 11). The photograph below suggests that the creation of tapa designs, at least at present, is not an individualized affair, nor is the order of application of designs and colors important anymore.



It is possible to see some local variations, however. The fact that in the Yau group, anthropomorphic figures are rendered in red²⁶ gives weight to Wegmann's statement that the design process begins with the color red. Among the Nungons, the white background forms the

²⁶ See Wegmann 1990.

anthropomorphic figures, emphasized by the binary opposition of a black outline. Anthropomorphic figures also appear on tapa produced in the Yopno area, but they are rendered in red and white. These examples suggest that differences exist between places rather than in places, that is, differences arise between communities rather than between the patrilans of a single community.

These days painted tapa is used for various ceremonies, for example Papuan Independence Day, and also for welcoming important guests, weddings, and other such events. Except for wedding celebrations, the Nungons wear ordinary western dress — trousers, t-shirts, jackets, etc. Besides wearing *tik orip* on ceremonial occasions, Nungons give it as a welcoming gift to their honored guests. It is entirely normal for hosts to welcome their guests with gifts of *yok* net bags and on important occasions to give arriving guests *tik orip* as well. They make these items specially for the occasion or for the particular person they want to welcome and honor.

The Nungons' Cultural Memory

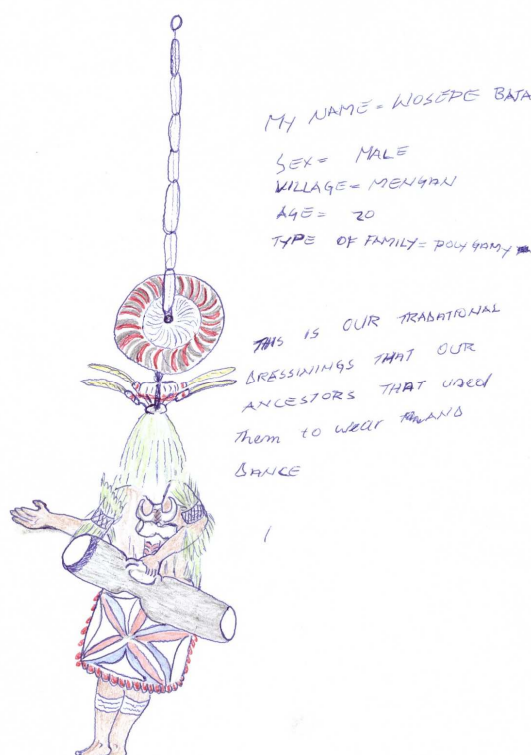
Bark cloth designs are a part of the Nungons' cultural memory. Students at the elementary school in Yawan learn about the standard themes of world history, the history of Papua New Guinea, and the history of the wider region of Melanesia. In their textbooks, students learn about Papua's past, including the predominance of subsistence farming employing digging sticks and stone axes, even though most elementary school students have never seen a stone axe in actual use.²⁷ Local themes stand out in children's drawings that I have collected. The students in the elementary school in Yawan in effect represent national Papuan cultural and historical themes in their own terms.²⁸ I obtained drawings made by Yawan elementary-school students during my visits to study how the students visualize and represent their culture.²⁹ It is unsurprising that the students included stone axes in their drawings because every textbook makes students aware of the role played by stone axes in the New Guinea communities of the past. However, the elementary-school students in Yawan also repeatedly drew representations of *tik orip*, which is not produced everywhere in New Guinea. They always drew it when I asked them to visualize and represent their culture in the course of my research.

²⁷ During all my research stays among the Nungons, I noticed only one stone axe. They do not use such axes and the students knew them only from their textbooks.

²⁸ Part of my research on the ground was a detailed study of how the Nungons perceive their culture.

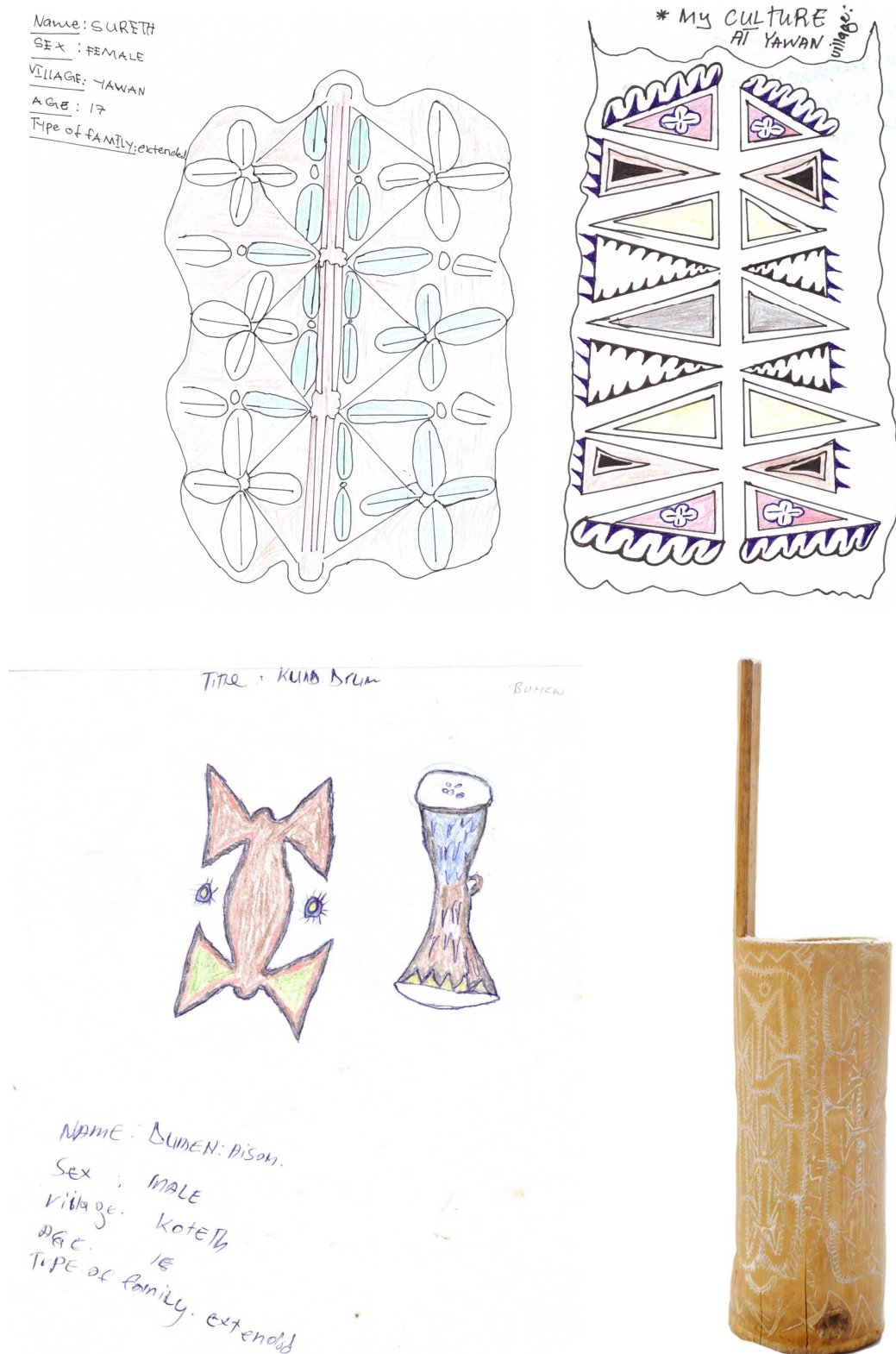
²⁹ Soukup 2011. Hubeňáková and Soukup 2012. I continued this avenue of research over the course of several research stays and collected hundreds of drawings of various themes made by the students.

Themes like tools (bows and arrows, stone axes), skills (making fire), agriculture (taro, yams), and ornament and festivities (tapa, kundu drums, headdresses) appear in the student drawings I collected in 2015. That part of my overall collection consists of nineteen drawings made by students up to 20 years old. Tik orip appears frequently in the drawings, either as an independent design or as part of the outfit of a human figure. From the explanations they attached to the drawings, it is clear that the students associate *tik orip* with celebrations and special events: “This is the traditional dress our ancestors used to wear while dancing” (fig. 12, male student, 20 years old). “Painted tapa is associated with the people who created the designs” (fig. 13, male student, 16 years old). Bark cloth is closely tied to the past. From one student we learned: “Today they make tapa clothing . . . to present at events in the community . . . today I’m happy to get tapa cloth [as a gift]” (fig. 14, male student, 20 years old). The creator of another drawing told me that she included “traditional designs” that were an important part of her culture in the past (fig. 15, female student, 17 years old). It is interesting that this last student recognized that a variety of designs exist in Papua New Guinea.



People in the Nungon villages are unable to explain in detail what a particular design means. I repeatedly tried to construct a typology of *tik orip* designs and their meanings during my trips to the field, but without success. The Nungons still make *tik* (tapa cloth) and decorate it with orip (designs), and this is one aspect of their visuality. During my stays in the Uruwa

River valley, I noticed elementary students making cases for their pens and pencils from bamboo, which they decorated with patterns commonly used on tapa (fig. 16).



I understand cultural memory to be the conception of the past constructed by a community, society, or nation. In other words, people are taught how to remember past events.

This can be seen in the everyday life of the Nungons. Examples are their conception of recent historical events like the forced relocation of the Yawan village to a new location and the arrival of the Adventist missionaries in the Nungon villages, which before that had been subject to the religious control of the Lutherans. The Nungons' contacts with the colonial administration and the activities of the missionaries resulted in the disintegration of the cultural memory associated with *tik orip* as their traditional animist beliefs and the rituals connected with agriculture and their ancestor cults were replaced by Christianity. This religious conversion most likely occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. The traditional ancestor cult, which was associated with agriculture, died out in the space of a single generation. Wegmann, the missionary, wrote that by the 1980s the villagers found it difficult to recall the details of the agricultural and ancestor cults.³⁰ In New Guinea, it was not unusual for local religious cults to coexist for a time with Christianity, but generally, it required only one or two generations for Christianity to completely replace the old traditions.³¹ The period of coexistence of traditional religions and Christianity is described by Donald Tuzin, among others. Tuzin provides the example of the Arapesh cultural group and the "fast and furious" collapse of their traditional animist cult, which happened with the de facto but unwitting complicity of the anthropologist himself.³²

Tik orip remains a part of the Nungons' everyday life and is one of the elements from which their cultural identity is constructed. The curriculum of the elementary school includes teaching students how to make bamboo containers for pens and pencils. The students decorate them with designs used for *tik orip*. At one point in my research, a student expressed his local understanding of various cultural themes in doodles that imitated designs on tik. The student whiled away his time by drawing *orip*.

Cultural memory can be expressed in the simple reproduction of patterns without any ability to understand or interpret them. In such a case, we can ask whether a culture has continuity or can still even be considered a culture at all. Is culture something that is "downloaded" into people's heads or should we understand it as patterns of behavior? The Nungons in their postcolonial situation still reproduce the precolonial patterns, but they cannot systematically explain their meaning in a way that would satisfy a Western mind that is heir to the Enlightenment. On the other hand, not even we in the West can always give a satisfactory

³⁰ Wegmann 1990.

³¹ See Lužný and Soukup 2023.

³² Tuzin 1997.

scientific explanation for the inspirations and significance of contemporary art. Take for example the works of Picasso, which are always open to new interpretations.

Conclusions

This study is devoted to tapa from New Guinea, specifically the Saruwaged mountains on the Huon Peninsula in the state of Papua New Guinea. It is impossible to draw general conclusions, as this is a local and living production of tapa cloth, which has been preserved despite the Christianization of the community that began in the mid-1930s.

The people from the Nungon cultural group living in the Uruwa River valley still make tapa, which forms a part of their cultural memory. It is true that the Nungons cannot reliably describe and explain the individual patterns they paint onto tapa. This may indicate a loss of cultural memory, but the question arises, whether they ever were capable of providing the scientifically trained mind of a European with an explanation of what tik orip means and why. We could ask the same question about Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* or Munch's *The Scream*. I ask myself, in what language does tapa speak to us? It's as if the Nungons can never be totally free to create tapa designs because everything has to mean something in the world of ethnography. The West reads the non-European world in terms of its own language and scientific concepts, whereby everything is something. Painted tapa from the interior of the Huon Peninsula has received little notice from ethnographers. The meanings and functions connected with tapa in the precolonial period have been lost, but its designs are now being actively reinterpreted by locals. Tapa remains part of the everyday life of the Nungons.

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- Fig. 10: Positive image of the design in Fig. 6.
- Fig. 11: Members of the community decorate tapa with *orip*. Photo: Dušan Lužný, 2019.
- Fig. 12: A student's depiction of tapa design (*tik orip*). Source: Martin Soukup's archive. Photo: Martin Soukup.
- Fig. 13: A student's depiction of tapa design (*tik orip*). Source: Martin Soukup's archive. Photo: Martin Soukup.
- Fig. 14: A student's depiction of tapa design (*tik orip*). Source: Martin Soukup's archive. Photo: Martin Soukup.
- Fig. 15: A student's depiction of tapa design (*tik orip*). Source: Martin Soukup's archive. Photo: Martin Soukup.
- Fig. 16: A bamboo container bearing *tik orip* designs. Collected by Martin Soukup in 2017. Photo: Martin Soukup.

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