

Imagery, Pronouncement, and the Aesthetics of Reception in Gebusi Spirit Mediumship *Bruce M. Knauft*

IN the growing literature on shamanism and spirit mediumship, the performative process whereby images and meaning are formulated has largely been neglected. Typically, linkages are asserted between spiritual experience and symbolism, social action, and/or psychophysiology without considering how meaning is produced in the shamanistic performance itself. In many respects the various concomitants of shamanism and mediumship are themselves generated through the process of symbolic production; spiritual orientations, social desires, and internal states are formulated and elaborated through the creative imagination and practical contingencies of the performative moment. From this viewpoint, shamanism and mediumship are forms of symbolic production that have significant similarities with (and differences from) imaginative experiences such as dreaming and private fantasy.

In this chapter I focus on the performance dynamics of image-making in Gebusi spirit mediumship.¹ After introducing Gebusi spirit mediumship, I present a rather detailed case study of symbolic production in a typical Gebusi sickness-inquest séance. This exposition raises two particularly poignant questions. First, why does Gebusi spirit séance imagery shift so pervasively and discordantly between ribald sexual camaraderie and extremely serious decisions concerning sorcery accusation and potential homicide? Second, why are Gebusi séance audiences so passively disposed to accept the indictment of the medium's spirits as to who the sorcerer is and what action should be taken against him or her? (This question is particularly striking since séances do not simply legitimate decisions reached elsewhere; outcomes are in important ways formulated at the public séance itself.) Consideration of these questions brings into focus the relationship between spirit mediumship and distinctive features of Gebusi sexuality, sociopolitical organization, and psychophysiology. These connections reveal selective ways in which Gebusi spirit mediumship is different from and similar to spirit mediumship and shamanism in other parts of New Guinea and elsewhere. My goal is to move in a gradually widening arc, beginning with the specific images of Gebusi spiritual experience and expanding

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toward assessments of larger comparative significance—without thereby compromising the particularities of Gebusi spiritual formulations.

Background

Gebusi inhabit a small area (sixty-five square miles) east of the Strickland River at the northern reaches of the vast tropical lowlands of south central New Guinea. In 1980–1982 the Gebusi population of some 450 persons was dispersed among seventeen longhouses and numerous smaller dwellings. Gebusi share broad social and cultural similarities with the dozen or so other groups of the Strickland-Bosavi area (Knauft 1985a, 1985b, cf. Kelly 1976, 1977, 1988; Schieffelin 1976, 1977, 1985; Feld 1982; Sørnum 1980, 1984; Ernst 1978, 1984; Beek 1987; Shaw 1975, 1982). As is general in the region, Gebusi subsistence is based on sago production and foraging as well as on rudimentary horticulture and nonintensive pig husbandry. Male coresidence in the communal longhouse is based on a diverse combination of agnatic, affinal, and matrilineal ties. On a daily basis, people move flexibly within the community, sometimes sleeping in small garden dwellings or makeshift forest shelters, frequently visiting neighboring permanent settlements, or retiring to their own longhouse of principal residence. There is a notable absence of big-manship and of competitive exchange, and a strong belief in sorcery. All-night ritual dances between neighboring settlements are common, as are all-night séances led by a spirit medium.

Within the Strickland-Bosavi area, Gebusi are particularly distinctive for (among other things) their hot and flat lowland environment; their extremely decentralized politicoeconomic structure; strong sexual imagery and ritual male camaraderie in rituals, narratives, and spirit séances; and their extremely high rate of homicide—typically against community coresidents suspected of practicing sorcery (see Knauft 1985a, 1985b, 1986, 1987a, 1987b, 1987c). Gebusi are also distinctive in remaining effectively outside the purview of mission and administrative influence; their rituals, séances, sexual practices, and sorcery inquiries were practiced avidly and in a surprisingly traditional manner in 1980–1982 (contrast Schieffelin 1981 concerning the Kaluli).

Gebusi Spirit Mediums

Gebusi spirit séances are centered around a spirit medium, that is, a person whose spirit (*fin*) can “go up and talk together with” (*koywfwada*) the beneficent spirit world people (*to di as*). Crucial to this process is that a spirit exchange is made: spirit people come and inhabit the medium’s body during the séance while his own spirit is absent. It is these spirit people, particularly the beautiful

spirit women (*to di ulita*), who sing the songs that constitute the séance. A clear dissociation is thus marked between the persona of the medium and that of the spirits who enter his body; he may summon them to the séance, but he need not be responsible for their actions, and they are neither fused with nor impersonated by his spirit. The medium’s own spirit plays little or no role in the performance. The effectiveness of this culturally constituted dissociation is consistent with the fact that Gebusi mediumship is neither initiated by nor associated with traumatic sickness, hysteria, disruptive or untimely possession, or elaborate personal dreaming (contrast Hertz 1977; Stephen 1979; Wagner 1977).

Gebusi mediums are preeminently men, and only one case of an initiated female spirit medium is known.

As Gebusi say, who will be a spirit medium is not easily recognized a priori on the basis of personal qualities or “symptoms” exhibited by the person himself. (The main exception here is statistical—that close agnates and descendants of existing spirit mediums have a much greater likelihood of becoming mediums than do others). Which young men will become spirit mediums is generally decided by existing middle-aged mediums through their own spirit familiars in séances. The initiating spirit medium sings that a spirit woman is developing a strong and continuing sexual attraction to a Gebusi man. When the spirit woman voices her desire to marry him, the prospective medium undergoes behavioral restrictions that demonstrate his commitment to her. He is then initiated as a spirit medium and holds his own séances several nights in succession to reinforce his relationship with her. (This does not prevent the spirit medium from marrying, or from already having married, a real Gebusi wife. The spirit wife and the Gebusi wife are covies of one another, polygyny being infrequent but acceptable among real-world Gebusi.) Through his spirit world wife, the new medium gains access to other spirit people, including the spirit children his new wife bears him. It is these spirit persons and their friends who come and reside in the medium’s body during séances. This allows the medium’s own spirit to depart during the séance and experience firsthand the hedonic life of the spirit world.

Although spirit mediums seldom convey or talk about their own spirit world experiences, those few accounts that could be elicited were ones of great personal pleasure, for example, attending spirit feasts and dances, having sexual affairs with spirit women, or accompanying the spirits on a successful inquest. The opportunity to become a spirit medium is gladly embraced by most young men if it is presented to them.

Spirit mediums exhibit a wide range of temperaments, personalities, and intellectual abilities or limitations, and they constitute approximately 15 percent of the adult male population. The practical sense one gets is not that mediums are chosen primarily for their imaginative abilities, but that of those who are chosen, some develop much greater acumen and creative imagery than do

others. It is the former who receive greatest social reinforcement and who are in greatest demand for their services. Correspondingly, it is they who have the greatest opportunity to further develop and elaborate their spirit world renderings through the frequent giving of séances.

Gebusi spirit mediums are not paid or otherwise remunerated for their services (contrast Dwyer and Minnegal 1988); mediums are considered to have a civic responsibility to make spirit world inquiries on behalf of their community at large. Mediums, for their part, are afforded the ability to experience and to create an elaborate spirit world reality, and they are an artistic and entertaining focus of community attention during their séances. Spirit mediums also have a significant degree of de facto authority about this-worldly issues subject to spiritual pronouncement.

In the all-night séance itself, a Gebusi spirit medium becomes entranced and his spirits sing numerous spontaneous songs, these being chorused by the male audience. The trance of Gebusi mediums is voluntarily self-induced; he sits in the longhouse, closes his eyes, and in a few minutes begins mumbling the increasingly audible songs of his spirit familiars. Unlike shamans in many parts of the world, Gebusi mediums do not rely on drugs, sleeplessness, strenuous exertion, percussion, sickness, fasting, or other forms of stress to induce their entrancement, even when this is first experienced (contrast Winkelhan 1986; Locke and Kelly 1985; Prince 1982).² Nonetheless, Gebusi mediums do appear to experience an altered state of consciousness during their séances. The medium's songs and his occasional comments between them conform consistently with the distinctive persona of spirit world people and with their strange falsetto voices. In their speech, medium's spirits employ highly metaphoric idioms that are multifaceted and often obscure. This is said to reflect the fact that spirit world speech and experience are by nature not totally comprehensible to Gebusi. As discussed below, the medium's song imagery reflects cognitive processes that can perhaps be characterized as free-associative. The spirit medium's own spirit is perceived both by himself and by others to be relaxing elsewhere in the spirit world while the séance is taking place. (The adventures of the medium's own spirit during the séance are generally not related or referred to during the séance itself and are not considered particularly relevant to the proceedings.)

The altered experience of the spirit medium during the séance often affects his activity afterward: spirit mediums typically emerge from the night-long performance refreshed and ready for a day of full activity. This stands in marked contrast to the audience of singers (and the ethnographer), who generally spend much of the following day catching up on their sleep. The feat of the medium in this respect becomes more noteworthy when it is realized that he not only stays awake all night but typically composes and sings a hundred or more songs, often about momentous current social issues. It is perhaps significant that Gebusi spirit mediums do not exhibit the deep muscle tremors or other unusual physical

movement commonly reported in entrancement. The psychophysiological state of Gebusi mediums is perhaps more akin to self-hypnosis or to the deep relaxation of trophotropic arousal than to the sympathetic central nervous system activation of ergotropic arousal (see Fischer 1971; cf. Prince 1982; Joralemon 1984).³

Spirit People

The Gebusi spirit pantheon is rich and multifarious, containing the spirits of many animals and beings. Within this pantheon it is the true spirit people (*to di as dep*) who are the locus of Gebusi spiritual communication, and of these, it is the spirit women (to di ulia) who conduct the bulk of the spirit séance. Although a few mediums have spirit familiars with recognizably different personalities, preeminent focus is upon spirit women, whose individuality is unimportant relative to their generalized traits of beauty, sexual receptivity, and caprice (Cantrell n.d.).⁴

At spirit séances members of the Gebusi male audience often joke sexually with the spirit women and with each other. This joking has a significant practical effect as well as being extremely entertaining; it is believed that spirit women must be enticed to stay at the séance through the night in order for its instrumental goals to be effectively accomplished, for example, cure the sick person, find the lost pig, or determine the sorcerer's identity. If the enthusiasm and participation of the male audience flag too greatly, the spirit woman also loses interest and flies off, forcing the spirit medium's own spirit to return to his body. This terminates the medium's trance and ends the séance prematurely. Since the divinatory work of the spirits is typically believed to take until almost dawn to be accomplished, the termination of a séance before this time typically means that its instrumental goals are not achieved. The persistence of joking audience camaraderie during the night is thus necessary as well as enjoyable for a successful séance.⁵

Despite the preeminence of spirit women in Gebusi séances, their importance is culturally masked. When asked, Gebusi men generally credit the medium's eldest male spirit child (*wuli as*) with having orchestrated the spirit-world inquest and informing the Gebusi audience of its result. Likewise, they say that the spirit séance begins when the wuli as comes down into the spirit medium—often attracted by the prospect of smoking tobacco pipes proffered during the séance—and allows the medium's own spirit to fly off. These statements belie the fact that the male wuli as very infrequently speak and are very infrequently referred to during the séance. When a wuli as does speak, it is usually as a brief ribald jest with the male audience members during the interlude between songs sung by spirit women. It is thus rare for the wuli as to make a substantive pronouncement, and in these cases his statements tend to reiterate the point of view

already developed by the spirit women. As will be shown further below, the attribution of divinatory activity to the male wuli as parallels the symbolic appropriation and spiritual control of femaleness in the séance by Gebusi men. As will further become evident, the substitution of a male for a female sexual object also symbolizes the transference from heterosexual to homosexual eroticism among the male audience during the séance.

The beneficence and attractiveness of true spirit world people such as the wuli as and spirit women are reflected in their lively participatory enjoyment of the feasts and dances that are held nightly in the spirit world. In these and other respects, the true spirit people contrast with the general irritability and malice of the spirits of deceased Gebusi (*as goloŋ e fin*). These latter are thought to be angry over their real-world death, and although they can live in the spirit world, they are carefully distinguished from the true spirit people (to di as dep). Spirits of the dead play a minor role in Gebusi séances and rarely speak to the audience directly. In daily life such spirits can induce minor misfortune and illness, but they seldom cause serious illness and almost never cause death. Life-threatening and fatal illness are attributed instead to the agency of living humans—to sorcery (Knauft 1985a).

The main avenue of communication and influence from Gebusi to the spirit world is thus through the beneficent to di as dep, and this contact occurs almost entirely via the spirit medium. Gebusi cannot effectively contact or influence spirits about important matters except through the spirit medium in a séance.⁶ Conducting spirit séances is the main distinctive activity undertaken by Gebusi mediums.

Spirit Séances

As aesthetic and entertaining events, Gebusi spirit séances are all-night songfests. They are held frequently—averaging once every eleven days per major settlement—and may address one or more issues for which the omniscient vision of the spirit people is believed crucial, particularly sickness inquest or hunting guidance.

The occurrence of a séance is usually known hours or sometimes even a day or more in advance; the spirit medium quietly lets it be known that he has agreed to the requests of coresidents or visitors to hold a songfest with the spirits. Séances are held at night, usually in the dark interior of a longhouse, and particularly in the men's sleeping section (*tam*). Women are normally prohibited from participating in séance performances, though they can easily hear the proceedings through the thin sago-leaf wall that separates their sleeping section from the men's area of the longhouse. When there is strong urgency or desire to hold a séance despite an insufficient number of male singers (at least four or five), women may be asked to sit with the men and sing.

During the séance the medium sits still—usually in a cross-legged position—and closes his eyes in a meditative posture until his own spirit departs and a spirit woman takes its place. After a short period she begins to mumble and hum, eventually producing intelligible songs in the high falsetto chant characteristic of spirit-world speech.

Each song line sung by the medium is repeated in a full chorus of song by assembled singers who sit huddled around him. These singers are predominantly adolescent and young married men, while other men, often older, listen and comment or joke from the periphery. Males of all ages are free to occupy either role, however, and there is no rigid division between singers and listening audience. The séance as a whole consists of a night-long progression of séance songs, each of which usually lasts several minutes. During the night the singers and other men periodically get up and stretch and talk between songs, sleep sporadically, and may come and go at will from the longhouse. The medium himself, however, remains almost motionless through the night, the main exception being the brief but dramatic “claiming of the spirit” (*fin hup*).

In the fin hup, the medium's spirits attempt to cure a sick person by throttling maleficent beings who have captured his or her spirit. At the séance itself, this is seen as a tumultuous thrashing: the medium suddenly springs up and smashes firebrands and implements wildly about the house. (He returns shortly thereafter to his sitting position and continues his quiet singing for the rest of the night.) Fin hup is performed for sick persons who, though conscious, are believed to have lost their spirit or social essence (*fin*) in illness. This condition is believed to persist until the spirit is recovered by the true spirit people (to di as dep) and returned to the sick person's body (Knauft 1985a: 86–93; cf. Sørnum 1980 regarding the nearby Bedamini). Fin hup cures take place primarily in the unseen spirit world; indeed, the sick person rarely attends the séance and is often not at the settlement where it is held.

Whereas fin hup is used to cure mild or moderate sickness, spiritual loss that becomes potentially life-threatening is believed caused by sorcery: the sorcerer has effectively taken away or tied up the victim's spirit and may destroy it by burning or eating it. The most frequent form of sorcery is *bogŋŋ*, a variant of parcel sorcery in which the victim's excrement is believed collected by the sorcerer and eventually burned by him or her to cause a slow death. Assault sorcery (*ogŋŋviti*) is believed to involve the direct killing and eating of the victim's spirit by sorcerers who attack when the person is alone and unsuspecting of their presence; its effects are rapid and believed almost invariably lethal. To investigate either form of sorcery, the medium's spirits attempt to identify the sorcerer and locate and/or destroy the means he or she used to make the person sick. As with “lost spirit” sickness and other issues of spiritual inquest, the curing of sorcery can only be undertaken through the spirit world—it requires the cooperation of the spirits (and the spirit medium) in holding an all-night séance. Such

sorcery inquesters are critical in ascertaining the identity of the sorcery suspect as well as the action to be taken against him or her. This indictment is of particular practical import since virtually a third of Gebusi adult deaths (32.7 percent) are caused by homicide, and the largest category of homicide is the execution of suspected sorcerers in retribution for one or more preceding sickness deaths in the suspect's residential community (Knauft 1985a:chap. 5: 1987c).

In aggregate terms about half (50/101) of Gebusi spirit séances are minor sickness investigations and cures (*fin hup*); an additional fifth (21/101) have as their main instrumental purpose inquest for sorcery, including postmortem inquiries (death inquests). Other séances may be conducted to inquire about hunting or the finding of lost pigs (8/101), to divine the success of fish poisoning (5/101), or for simple entertainment with no instrumental reason ascribed (13/101). Virtually all spirit séances contain a strong element of entertainment if not exuberant festivity, the serious nature of their more instrumental inquiries notwithstanding.

Within these general outlines, the diversity of Gebusi spirit séances is enormous; the issues of séance pronouncement are diverse and the characteristics of the spirit world are creatively malleable. The present study considers only one séance genre—that in which images of sexual incitement are engaged with those of sickness inquest and sorcery indictment. The presentation is in this respect but a prolegomenon to explicating the fuller range and significance of Gebusi spiritual meanings.⁷

A Sickness-Inquest Séance

The effects of spiritual image-production upon Gebusi perception and action can be illustrated by considering a typical sickness-inquest séance. This séance was held primarily to investigate the temporary illness of a teenage boy, Terkabo. Terkabo's settlement was planning a ritual feast, and it was hoped that he would recover so that the event could take place. Since the boy's sickness was of recent origin and was becoming moderately acute, it was generally believed that the illness was of the easily cured "lost spirit" (*fin forogop*) variety. There was always a possibility, however, that the sickness was caused by potentially lethal parcel sorcery (*bogay*). The persons within the community frequently suspected as bogey sorcerers in the recent past were two senior men. One of these was Terkabo's senior clansman from a different settlement; the other was Terkabo's true and coresident mother's brother (MB). Neither man was present at the séance. The following is an account of the séance edited from field notes.

Swiman, a middle-aged spirit medium, left word that he was going on a foraging trip for several days to collect sago fronds. When he returned to the

main village, he related, he would give a séance to inquire about the sickness of his noncoresident classificatory "MB," the uninitiated youth, Terkabo. Terkabo's elder brother Hogoswiman, who was himself a young spirit medium, came down to the main village for the event, along with his aged mother. The sick boy, Terkabo, did not attempt to make the trip. However, a number of other men were present in the central village, mostly by chance, including the seven other adult men and five boys who attended the séance. (With the exception of Hogoswiman, none of those in attendance was of the same clan as Terkabo.) It was generally anticipated that Swiman, as both a relatively neutral party and the more experienced of the two spirit mediums, would take the greatest initiative in investigating the sickness.

About 8:00 P.M., Swiman and Hogoswiman both went into trance and the séance began. The two mediums each sang songs as the séance progressed.⁸ The songs became increasingly ribald, and the issue of Terkabo's sickness was seemingly neglected. In one of Swiman's songs, for instance, a spirit woman coyly teased a male suitor by manually propping up her breasts and then covering them up. Various audience members responded by saying that they would massage her breasts, joking that, if they couldn't, they would have to rub each other's penises (homosexually) instead.

Swiman then sang a brief song announcing, "We will go look. Her child is sick. She has come down." This indicated that his spirits were hoping to investigate Terkabo's sickness, and they conveyed their sympathy for the boy's aged mother, who had come to the central village to listen to the séance.⁹ The male audience, however, continued with their sexual banter after the song. Hogoswiman then sang the following song, which further presaged the sorcery inquest. (The song, like most, was sung by a young female spirit. Each line was sung in a small spirit voice by the medium and immediately repeated in a loud chorus of song by the singers. This collective voice was then quickly superseded by another line from the medium, maintaining the lively tempo of the song. Men and boys singing remained huddled about the medium, while other males listened and/or made comments from further away).

SONG TEXT 1

Elder sister

We'll search here, we'll search there

Here elder sister

Here's the yadu, here's the yadu! [Yadu in this context usually means sorcery packet or small object, though it can also mean young spirit world pig.]

At the degwa tree I grab it

Come here, help me get it

Should you sit first? Should I sit first?

Elder sister

To sleep, to get up and to lay down
 If I had heat [strength, anger, passion]
 To me it's gone, it's losifinished
 Elder sister, Elder sister
 Over there, what's happening?
 My elder sister sleeps, it's losifinished
 Elder sister
 It won't be
 Upon waking up, she'll call to me
 You stretch apart the wall boards
 Ulkip [forehead, glans penis! Sticking through the wall boards [to the
 woman's sleeping section]. Come in!
 [Yells and hollers from the audience]
 By dawn we'll be friends/lovers [literally, like initiation
 sponsor/sponsee]
 Go close up the door [to the woman's sleeping section]
 I'm joking/lying to you; it's only a dog
 Dog, what did you come looking for?/end song
 WABOY [audience member, answering the spirit woman's rhetorical
 "question"]: He came to dig in a woman's crotch!! Moist vaginal!
 SOLWOY [another audience member]: Hey Yaba, you'll have to find a dif-
 ferent woman [because the dog has already occupied the spirit woman]!
 YABA and SOLWOY [leaning heads together]: YEY!
 OMAY: I'm sadd/horny (fatadagin-da)!
 YABA: I can't wait, I'm too horny right now! I'd take a freal Gebusi/
 woman and have sex with her. But our women aren't like the spirit
 women: they'd yell, "Way, Way Way!" They wouldn't lie and say, "It's
 only a dog." They'd just [tell the truth and] say it was a man trying to
 get them!¹⁰

This séance song, like most, contains emergent and constantly changing song images that promote dramatic tension, arousal, and aesthetic creativity—as well as moving sporadically toward pronouncements concerning the instrumental goals of the séance. The primary referent in each song line is often if not typically superseded within a few seconds. Such unpredictable changes of context, scene, and object continually recontextualize the meaning of previous song lines. The latter, in turn, become post facto metaphors for the next image of spiritual reality that emerges. The song thus contains an internal hermeneutic that is both very rich and very complex.¹¹

Let us trace selected image-transformations as they develop in the song. Near its beginning, the song depicts a search by a spirit woman and her elder sister, the search being at one level for a sorcery packet (*yadit*), which is then

found near a large *deguwa* tree. (During inquests, sorcery packets are commonly found at the base of large trees.) This is followed by images of asking to sit down, possibly taking turns, sleep, lamenting a loss of energy and strength, and, finally, admitting that the chance is finished. The dominant image evoked here—common in sorcery inquests and attested by informants—is of a spirit woman trying to wrest the sorcery packet from an angry but unidentified sorcerer. The spirit woman tires from the struggle, unsuccessfully solicits help from her elder sister, and finally gives up her attempt, at least for the time being.

Correspondingly, however, a subsidiary theme is simultaneously evoked—superimposed upon the first. In this interpretation the two spirit women are trying to catch a young pig (also a *yadu*) that they have happened upon. They tire and give up their attempt, due to lack of manly hunting skills. This episodic scenario, like the first one concerning sorcery, is common in spirit séances and is thus easily evoked by cryptic song references.

These two interpretations are mutually informing rather than mutually exclusive; there are important conceptual linkages between the sorcery search and the pig hunt. Accused Gebusi sorcerers are, like pigs, often hunted down, killed, and traditionally, cooked for eating in a feasting oven. Indeed, the spirit of the executed sorcerer is reincarnated as a wild pig that is particularly difficult and dangerous to hunt.

These associations are brought to a yet more complex level by considering a third interpretive frame for the song episode: that of sexual adventure. As suggested to me by one young man during transcription, the same initial search scene suggests a sexual escapade in which the woman invites a young man to sit down, wants to sleep with him, but then laments her waning passion and the lost love chance because her elder sister is sleeping nearby and could easily be awakened by the sound of lovemaking.

This theme of sexual lust, which is submerged and secondary in the first half of the song, comes quickly to the fore in the second half—when the spirit woman invites the “glans penis” to stretch the wall boards apart and squeeze through the hole. This depiction, with its obvious coital imagery, marks a major turning point in the song—away from the sorcery inquest and toward an overt sexual adventure. This plot is drawn out and made tantalizing by the quick remetaphorization of the phallus back into a full man, who, as is commonly narrated in séances, has snuck bodily into the woman's section for a sexual rendezvous. By dawn, the spirit woman tells her companion, he'll be her friend/lover. However, the spirit woman then says that she has been joking and that her lover was in fact just a dog. This is comprehensible since the original intruder, the *ulkip*, means both glans penis and head. As such, she jokes, it was only a dog that squeezed its head through the hole to her quarters; she wanted him merely for canine companionship rather than for sexual satisfaction.

As if to compound the complexity of interpretive possibilities, the joke of the capricious spirit woman—that her apparent lover was in fact only a dog—itself remains ambiguous. Spirit women are often depicted as having sexual trysts in the longhouse while their spirit world cohorts are sleeping. Correspondingly, spirit women are often portrayed as trying to hide these affairs from those spirit people who are disturbed and wake up from the sound of lovemaking, for instance, by protesting that the noise “was only a dog that has come in.” Whether the spirit woman’s joke is on the Gebusi listeners or on her spirit world cohorts is thus uncertain. This is the background for Yaba’s audience comment after the song, that is, that spirit women are apt to hide the presence of their lovers, and that this poses a contrast to real Gebusi women, who cannot be so easily accosted for sex because they resist and advertise men’s advances. As aptly evident from the other audience comments, the spirit woman’s bold and perhaps capricious seduction is for the Gebusi men a cause for much mirth, fantasy, and exclamation of their own sexual frustration.

It is evident from their various interpretive possibilities that Gebusi songs are what Umberto Eco (1979) terms open texts rather than closed or bounded ones; they contain a myriad of overlapping and nonexclusive meanings. This openness, which at one level stems from the free-association consciousness of the spirit medium, is intrinsic to Gebusi séance songs; because their imagery is cryptic, emergent, and often discordant, séance songs require constant shifting of interpretive possibilities to be made comprehensible.

At the same time, a common repertoire of spirit-world metaphors poses important outer limits upon interpretation: the actions of spirit women tend ultimately to congeal into standard plot lines, and superimposed meanings and recontextualized images are thus often resolved with ultimate clarity. This is apparent in the coordinated and internally consistent comments of Gebusi audience members at the end of the song; the ultimate meanings and sexual innuendos were quite evident to those present. This is true generally of Gebusi séance songs; although the interpretive possibilities are in principle endless, the most important plot lines and spiritual pronouncements are ultimately conspicuous to most or all of those in attendance, especially since the more basic themes are progressively elaborated and reinforced over eight to ten hours of singing. The openness of the song for Gebusi audiences thus facilitates polysemic richness without obscuring its basic scenarios and meanings. The potential in the séance for highly unambiguous communication is especially evident in the spirits’ ultimate divinatory pronouncements, which can be both quite clear and quite serious in their social repercussions. This is aptly illustrated in the very next song of the present séance, sung by Swiman, which identifies and indicts a sorcery suspect for Terkabo’s sickness.

SONG: TEXT 2

Elder sister, it's dawn already [the séance is almost over]
 Now you wait for me [while I look for the sorcery packet]
 Sitting, sleeping there
 Their men [the Gebusi singers] are sitting with us
 Small man [the sick boy, Terkabo]
 You go out to look and find it [find the sorcery packet that made him sick]
 [Then] come back and give it to his mother [to the sick boy's mother] . . .
 My friends, stay here now, wait
 My skirt string is loose
 I'll sit down on top of your fingers there
 I'm scared of you my friends/lovers
 Mother, father, mother, father
 The wai spirit—I went to his house [There is a prominent wai spirit
 house right next to the sick boy's longhouse]
 Mother, father, mother, father
 There he is, the elder man [the sorcerer] with his child [son or sister's son,
 the sick boy]
 The child is there with his mother's brother [i.e., the sorcerer is the sick
 boy's mother's brother]
 Upper, lower
 Is it "upper" Gigi [sub-clan] to whom he [the sick boy] is sister's son?
 [No] It's "lower" [Gigi sub-clan]!
 Other men have died, you're the only one. [You, the sorcerer, are the one
 remaining senior man from lower Gigi sub-clan.]
 "Mother's brother" [the sick boy had said] "Let's live together."
 What can I say [of the sorcery sickness]?
 What can I say?
 There, now wait for me [while I look/find something]
 A little one? A yadu?
 You adopted and raised a small yadu [pig/sorcery packet]
 At your ritual feast [like the one planned for Terkabo's settlement] you'll
 hit/kill this one
 Along with the greens, I too will eat this one [i.e., I too will eat it along
 with the greens of the feasting oven]
 Mother, father
 Your eyes [Terkabo's], I won't poke them [like a sorcerer would]
 This seems to be, yes, this is it! [emphasizes the certainty of the
 pronouncement]
 The child's sickness, will we see it get better?

Don't lay it [the sorcery packet] down
Mother, father

There wouldn't be any more children living there [if we were to allow sorcery like this to continue]

Again, later, we won't need to do this again [won't need to have another séance for this sickness]

[Because] this that we now see [the sorcery packet] we'll give to you/!end song

KIPTABULBWI [a spirit man, speaking from inside the spirit medium Swiman, immediately after the song]: The women from Kukubodi [settlement from adjacent society] are saying that you're really good singers; they want to have sex and marry you! They don't want to stay married to their husbands; they want to come here and sing and take off their skirts!

OMAY: Rub a vaginal! I'll have to pull on a "noseplug" [penis] [because I can't wait for the women]. [General laughter]

GWABI: Why don't you pull on Mogosoy's, he's no longer a spirit medium. Omay: I'll pull on his little nose plug and hide it away.

GWABI: We'll all pull on it.

OMAY: Yes, we will! [All laugh]

YUWAY: I'll also pull yours!

SOLWOY: And I'll pull yours!

SOLWOY and YUWAY: Yeyi!

UBOLE: The spirit women's vaginas, we'd really like to see them and "stick" them, we're so sad/horny! . . .

KIPTABULBWI [spirit man]: The drum opening is leaning over and a finger comes up [inside it].

[Audience erupts in laughter and yelling—at the metaphor of vaginal penetration]

OMAY: The "skin" hair [pubic hair], I'll take that, too!

KIPTABULBWI: Are you thinking of that also [as I am]?

YABA: Mogosoy's nose plug can't come up.

KIPTABULBWI: The drum was wrapped up [out of public view] and the finger went up inside it. [pauses] It's getting to be dawn. The kosaym [nightly spirit-world dance] is almost over.

IMBA: Mother's vagina, that guy [the spirit man, Kiptabulbwi] is really seeing a lot of dances up there!

In stark contrast to the joking that immediately follows it, this song gives for the first time a specific and unambiguous pronouncement concerning the bogey sorcery now assessed to have caused Terkabo's sickness: it was sent by his true mother's brother, Muswayay. This pronouncement is clear from (a) the designation of the kin relationship (mother's brother) between the sorcerer and

Terkabo, (b) the fact that the sorcerer and Terkabo are depicted as coresident, (c) the specific designation of the sorcerer/victim coresidence site (by reference to the wali spirit place), (d) the subclan identification of the sorcerer ("lower" Gigi subclan), and (e) the fact that, as indicated, Muswayay is the only surviving adult male of Gigi-lower subclan. In short, the sorcerer must be Muswayay.

Partway through the song, as in the previous one, the sorcery accusation was mediated through the word *yadu*, which means both sorcery packet and young pig. In the present case, the spirit woman proclaimed that she would like to eat the young pig that Terkabo's kinsmen would slaughter at the upcoming preparatory feast for the male initiation—a feast that was to be held only if Terkabo recovered. The double meaning was that if the sick boy did not recover, the one who "adopted the sorcery packet"—the sorcerer—would be the one eaten instead.¹²

Toward the conclusion of the song, the spirit woman promised that she would give tangible evidence of her sorcery indictment by producing the sorcery packet itself, so that no more séances would be necessary to find the cause of Terkabo's sickness.

Despite the seriousness and specificity of the sorcery indictment—which was first made evident in this song—the focus of the audience was, in seeming paradox, one of sexual joking. As narrated above, one of Swiman's own male spirits, Kiptabulbwi, teased the audience immediately after the song by saying that the women at Kukubodi were sexually attracted to the Gebusi singers. This fostered a round of ribald joking about frustrated sexual desires among the men present. Through this process the sorcery indictment was rather soft-pedaled, though it was no less definitive on that account.

It could be argued in one sense that norms of friendly camaraderie were invoked by the medium at the end of the song to defuse potential disputes between relatives of the sick boy and the closest kinsmen of Muswayay, the indicted mother's brother. (Muswayay was himself not present at the séance, though several of his clansmen were in attendance.) At the same time, this denial or supersession of tension did not preclude a later consensus of judgment against Muswayay. Indeed, it is possible, as discussed further below, that sexually provocative imagery itself predisposes acceptance of negative assessments against the sorcery suspect.

Though there was neither discussion of the sorcery pronouncement nor an aura of particular seriousness among the audience, the indictment of Muswayay by the spirit woman was accepted de facto and acted on convincingly by those present (see further below). This indictment had not been agreed upon or publicly discussed prior to the séance; indeed, it was a surprise that Terkabo's sickness was attributed by the spirits to bogey sorcery at all, as opposed to being a transient illness that could be easily cured by the medium's claiming of the lost spirit (fin hup).

The sorcery indictment and audience banter were followed by a song sung by Hogoswimam. His spirit woman narrated how she was alone and wanted a sexual partner. She joked with several of the Gebusi men present, saying to one of them that he was too young to have sex with her, and complaining to another man that he was married already. When a widower in the audience spoke up and said that he was sexually available, she joked that his "head" was down: that he was too tired/hunched over to be sexually responsive; that his phallus was too limp. The men in the audience, including the targeted individual, joked heartily in response. In short, the sorcery indictment was again left in abeyance.

The next song, sung by Swiman, started with a sexual tease by a spirit woman. She proceeded to describe Terkabo's weathered longhouse, which had been newly enlarged to accommodate extra guests for the coming feast. The spirit woman lamented rhetorically that if Terkabo's true father were alive, he would have helped build an entire new longhouse for the anticipated festivities. She concluded by saying that because the pigs at Terkabo's settlement were becoming a nuisance in their gardens, they should hurry and have the feast, pending the repentance of the sorcerer and the recovery of Terkabo.

Several songs later, Swiman spat out the purported sorcery packet (bogay) that had been ostensibly used by Muswayay to ensorcell Terkabo. The packet, which appeared to be a small, partially decomposed seed assemblage (i.e., a totally natural object), was received matter of factly and without much comment by audience members, and it was given to Hogoswimam and Terkabo's mother following the séance. The rendering of the bogay packet by the spirits during the séance was taken as tangible proof that they had indeed identified the correct sorcery suspect.

(There is neither wonderment by the audience nor flagrant deception by the medium in the production of such a sorcery packet during the séance [contrast Lévi-Strauss 1967:chap. 10]. Spirit women may direct spirit mediums to find such packets in the course of their daily foraging activity as well as during séances. It is but a short metaphorical extension of this capacity for the medium-as-spirit woman to introduce such a sorcery packet at the séance itself. From the medium's point of view, it would appear that the spirit woman is simply retrieving [e.g., from the spirit medium's hair] and then expectorating the same packet she had directed him to obtain previously. There is no objective evidence that any of the ostensible sorcery packets found were actually made by Gebusi.)

During the remainder of the séance, the spirits made only sporadic references to the sorcery inquest; given the certainty of the pronouncement and the concrete "evidence" of the sorcery packet, the séance focused increasingly around spirit women's sexual enticements and ribald audience commentary. There was no discussion of the sorcery indictment during the night; the indictment was accepted *de facto* as a social and cultural fact (notwithstanding that it was not preagreed upon).

Following the séance, the two spirit mediums left the main village and re-

turned to their respective settlements. Most of the rest of the men went to sleep. Later in the day, several of the séance participants (four men, along with their wives and children) went up to the settlement of Hogoswimam and Terkabo to formally communicate the findings of the séance to Muswayay, the indicted sorcery suspect.¹³ Swiman, the medium whose spirits had made the indictment, was not present and played no further role in the emerging accusation.

Muswayay was confronted with the bogay packet and accused of sorcery. Terkabo's aged mother, who had listened carefully to the séance, took the leading role in the accusation despite the fact that she was also Muswayay's true full sister. Hogoswimam took very little role in the proceedings, apparently since, as an entranced spirit medium, his own spirit had not been present; he had not "heard" the séance accusation and thus could say little to substantiate it.

The implications of the accusation were extremely severe; if Terkabo were to die of sickness, Muswayay would run a high risk of being executed as a sorcerer. (Muswayay's father's brother [FB] and father's brother's son [FBS] had both been executed as sorcerers.) Despite this threat—or perhaps all the more because of it—there was an awkward reluctance on both sides to confront the issue of sorcery except through innuendo and deferral to the evidence supplied by the spirits. Thus, accusatory statements were hedged, many conciliatory remarks were made by both Muswayay and his accusers, and there was little if any direct animosity. Although both sides were privately incensed at each other—the accusers at Muswayay for ensorcelling his true sister's son [ZS], and Muswayay and his accusers for believing that he could actually do such a thing—both sides implicitly realized it was too risky to express these sentiments. Muswayay, for his part, risked reinforcing the perception of himself as an irascible man who was unwilling to admit or relent in his practice of sorcery; an expression of anger on his part would risk increasing his chances of being executed were Terkabo to die. The accusers, for their part, risked antagonizing Muswayay to the point that—so they thought—he might make another bogay packet and kill Terkabo or someone else. Given the "evidence" of the "sorcery packet" supplied by the spirits and given the general consensus against him, Muswayay could put up little in the way of effective verbal defense. The meeting ended with a show of conciliation on all sides, though these feelings were somewhat discounted later in private conversations. Fortunately for Muswayay, Terkabo recovered from his sickness, and the feast planned by his settlement was held as originally anticipated.

Discussion

The events recounted above are indicative of numerous Gebusi sorcery inquests observed in the field, several of which were documented through complete transcripts of the spirit séances and public discussions (cf. Krafft

1985a:chap. 2). Many aspects of the séance and its aftermath could be discussed; however, my primary present concern is the aesthetic and pragmatic impact of spiritual imagery in the séance. These images constitute the spirit world as Gebusi know it, and provide their recognized reason for undertaking various forms of this-worldly action, such as accusing or executing a given sorcery suspect.

Sorcery indictments in Gebusi spirit séances appear to have a formal truth value by the simple fact of their legitimate proclamation: they have poignant illocutionary force (Austin 1962). Like a court judgment in our own society, this does not mean that there are never objections, but rather that the verdict itself is a preeminent social fact that puts those who may disagree decidedly on the defensive and makes them very quiet.

Hence, Gebusi sorcery indictments generate a surprising degree of consensus and compliance among the coresidents and close kinsmen of both the person indicted and the sickness-victim—despite the lack of any objective evidence that parcel sorcery has been practiced, and despite the life-threatening results that the attribution of such sorcery entails. In the present case diagnosis of boggy, much less the indictment of Muswayay, was not preexpected, and yet it was not disagreed with in any significant way, even by Muswayay himself! Indeed, it was Muswayay's own true sister who took the role of primary accuser. In several ways, then, the indictment of Muswayay appears as a particularly powerful genre of deviation attribution or scapegoating.

The consensual acceptance of the accusation against Muswayay can be traced back to the way the indictment was originally formulated within the spirit séance itself. In terms of spiritual imagery, this outcome appears curiously linked to the overarching context of ribald sexual banter and entertainment within which the sorcery indictment was couched and by which its poignancy was effectively masked. Indeed, one of the most striking and ultimately revealing aspects of Gebusi inquest séances is their seemingly discordant superimposition of matters of life and death concern—indictment and potential execution of sorcery suspects—with ribald camaraderie. What makes the disjunction between ribaldry and serious pronouncement so pervasive and so aesthetically appealing in Gebusi spirit séances? And why should this disjunction so strongly predispose the audience to accept spiritual pronouncements that have potentially violent this-worldly import? These questions can be approached by considering two key aspects of Gebusi sexual and emotional life: the relationship between sexual arousal and homoerotic transference, and the linkage between sexual frustration and the incitement to anger.

Homosexuality and Erotic Transference

Perhaps the most aesthetically central and emotionally charged theme of Gebusi ritual, spiritual, and mythical practice is the heightening of eroticism

through gender transference. A number of South New Guinea cultures, including the Gebusi, have practiced ritualized male homosexuality (Herd 1984a; Knauft 1986, 1987b). Among Gebusi, male homosexuality has several interlocking dimensions. In one respect it is a significant dimension of masculine growth and development; boys' sexual relationships with initiated men are believed to imbue them with semen as a vital life force, allowing them to reach full male stature and vigor. Oral insemination of adolescent boys by adult men is pronounced prior to the boys' initiation in late adolescence, and it is during the preinitiation period that boys' sexual and physical capacities are believed to burgeon. This celebrated development culminates in the elaborate costumed display of the novices at the male initiation (*wa kawala*), literally, "child become big."

In a second respect, Gebusi homosexuality is part of a more diffuse pattern of homoeroticism among Gebusi men. Although homosexual insemination is most appropriately directed from initiated men to those uninitiated adolescents who are unrelated to them, a strong sense of homoeroticism pervades adult male relationships in general. This is reflected in affectionate sexual joking relationships among male affines and matrilin, and in lewd banter of homosexual attraction among adult men who are unrelated (*awa*). Such homoeroticism is especially evident at those collective events that constitute the primary focus of Gebusi collective interest and symbolic expression: ritual feasts and dances, spirit séances, and the telling of narratives. These events are not necessarily accompanied by homosexual trysts (indeed, sexual trysts among the primary joking participants—adult men—would be anomalous), but they do entail a strong aura of collective camaraderie and diffuse homoeroticism. In their jesting with each other, men loudly lament their pent-up sexuality and joke that they would gladly use each other for purposes of sexual gratification, often feigning to grab another man's genitals as the mock prelude to such an encounter.

In a third respect, Gebusi homosexuality and homoeroticism are regarded as replacements for heterosexuality. This is the dimension of homoeroticism perhaps most highlighted in men's own jokes and teasing. Hence, the preeminent male joking theme: "If there was a woman available I would have sex with her, but I'm so pent-up I can't wait for a woman! I'll have to have sex with *you* (another man)!"¹⁴ The theme of frustrated male heterosexuality—and its transference from fantasized female objects onto men themselves—is pervasive in Gebusi ritual dances as well as spirit séances; it merits further comment.

In Gebusi dance rituals (*rigibri*), the center of attention is an elaborately costumed male dancer (Knauft 1985a:chap. 9; 1985b; 1989). Although the dancer embodies many spiritual images, the preeminent one, both iconically and in Gebusi description, is the red bird of paradise—the primary incarnate form of beautiful young spirit women. During the dance, the assembled men comment lewdly on their arousal in watching the beautiful red bird of paradise, who dances to the accompaniment of Gebusi women's off-stage songs of loneliness

and seduction. In reality, of course, the dancer is a man. This sexual replacement finds its culmination in the men's pronounced sexual joking and camaraderie: a man's attraction to the dancer is teasingly redirected in friendly sexual frustration to another man near him. This sexual transfer from hetero- to homoeroticism is paralleled by the inversion of male and female space in the longhouse during the dance. The men watch the male dancer(s) from the communal dirt floor and domestic hearths in the lower part of the longhouse (*ba masani*), while the women are granted ritual license to occupy the men's sleeping platforms for the purpose of singing—they occupy the elevated male part of the house normally off limits to them. The normal positioning of men and women is thus reversed during the ritual while gender separation between them is maintained.

Themes of sexual arousal and erotic transference also infuse Gebusi spirit séances. Here the focus of erotic attention is the spirit woman, who is in one very concrete sense impersonated by the male spirit medium. In addition, the amplified voice of the spirit woman is that of the young men, who chorus the medium's song lines. These singers, predominantly the younger men, are frequently the same males most active as recipients in homosexual relationships.¹⁵ This gender transference is symbolically indicated by the Gebusi designation of the wuli as, the spirit medium's male spirit child, as responsible for the spiritual work of the séance, though it is in fact the spirit women who sing the songs, carry out the inquest, and make the pronouncements.

The transfer of erotic attention from spirit women to Gebusi men is effectively predisposed by the teasing and caprice of the spirit women themselves. During the séance, the spirit women fly capriciously about the forest looking for sexual adventure, hover about or come inside the longhouse where the singing is taking place, and teasingly describe acts of sexual foreplay and coitus. To the male séance audience, these erotic portrayals are both extremely entertaining and exorcising. The spirit woman presents the fulfillment of Gebusi men's heterosexual fantasies: she is beautiful, alluring, openly seductive, and quite available for sex. However, the spirit woman remains on a separate plane of existence; she lives in the spirit world and is hence unavailable to the Gebusi audience regardless of how much she and they both wish to consummate their relationship. (There is apt evidence that Gebusi men's heterosexual desires are quite strong and genuine in their own right [see Knauft 1986]). Men's sexual arousal is thus crosscut by intense sexual frustration—a pronounced sense of longing (*fafadagin-da*) (Knauft 1986; Cantrell n.d.:chap. 3). This sentiment of passionate longing is the preeminent emotional dynamic of the successful séance, and one that strongly engages erotic transfer under conditions of gender separation.

Most immediately, of course, men at the séance make uproarious comments and displays of their pent-up sexuality, for example, bawdy screams,

stomping about, or shaking houseposts. In concrete social terms, these displays of frustrated heterosexuality are directed to the other men present. In this context men's cries of longing for the spirit women easily become lewd jests that a male comrade could substitute as a means of obtaining more immediate sexual release.

In the most boisterous séances, teasing between a man and a coy adolescent can escalate until the pair make a departure from the longhouse for a brief homosexual tryst in which the adolescent manually stimulates the man to the point of orgasm and orally consumes the semen. Although most séances do not entail such homosexual trysing *per se*, they typically do entail a large measure of homoerotic joking and display during the night. It is this more diffuse aura of homoeroticism as collective camaraderie—rather than completion of the sexual act itself—that is central to the performative dynamic of the séance.

In summary, although spirit séances and ritual dances entrain heterosexual arousal that is quite genuine in its own right (Knauft 1986), they simultaneously escalate homoeroticism through gender switching and erotic transference. First, the ostensible female love-object is in both cases actually a male impersonator. Second, the heterosexual arousal incited by the impersonator's persona is redirected among the men present: it is the male audience members themselves who become the social and sexual targets of each other's eroticism. Significantly, the absence of available women which necessitates this homoerotic transfer is itself mandated by men; Gebusi women are excluded by men from participating in the séance, and the imagery of the spirit woman is, of course, also a product of the men's own creative formulations. In important respects, then, it is men themselves who preclude heterosexual contact; they actively create the gender separation that drives their heterosexual frustration and homoeroticism (Cantrell n.d.). Men thus effectively distance themselves from female sexuality at the same time that they appropriate and redirect its erotic potential among themselves (Knauft 1987b). What results is the symbolic construction of male sexual autonomy, epitomized in the notion that men can "grow" boys into adulthood through homosexual insemination.

Longing and Aggression

Erotic transfer in Gebusi séances is strongly juxtaposed against and complemented by the displacement of aggression directed against the various targets of longing (*fafadagin-da*). As will be shown, *fafadagin-da* motivates the linkage in Gebusi spirit séances between sexual arousal and the potential violence associated with serious spiritual pronouncement.

The sentiment of *fafadagin-da* encompasses for Gebusi both the frustration of sexual separation and the disquietment of social loss or grief. Both these dimensions of longing are deemed to motivate aggressive anger (*gof*). Thus, for

instance, male cries of sexual frustration are explicitly tied to those of animosity; the exclamations "I'm lonely/longing!" (*ay fafadagin-da*) and "I'm angry" (*ay gof*) are practically synonyms for one another in audience commentary, and they are often shouted together in a single phrase. Such expressions are often accompanied by aggressive or violent display, e.g., stomping about the longhouse, grabbing and thrashing about with sticks, plucking bows, throwing cooking stones, or firing arrows into the longhouse roof, thus feigning in anger to hit or shoot the source of sexual arousal and frustration.

The Gebusi association between sexual arousal and aggression is virtually intrinsic (Cantrell n.d.:chap. 3). The word *gof* means angry, violent, strong, and hard. An erotically aroused man is inherently "hard" (phallically) and is aggressively strong. Likewise, the pursuit of a sexual mate is often portrayed through hunting metaphors, with the sexual act itself often being described as "fighting" (*bwisam*) or "bow-and-arrow shooting" (*geala*), in which the successful arrow is the phallus penetrating its target.

The object of this sexual antagonism, as with sexual arousal, slides easily between the men present and the spirit woman, who may be the subject of misogynistic or sexually aggressive remarks, that is, how the aroused man is going to pierce her with a vengeance. These displays of aggressive virility are common to both Gebusi ritual dances and spirit séances.

In addition to its primary association with sexual longing and frustration, *fafadagin-da* also evokes separation in the sense of grief or bereavement. *Fafadagin-da* in this respect conveys the sorrow of loneliness that stems from the loss of deceased relatives as well as the separation from a sexual partner, the former theme being quite pronounced in some other groups of the Strickland-Bosavi area (see Schieffelin 1976 concerning the Kaluli). Although this dimension of longing is not emphasized in most Gebusi séances, it can subtly inform the proceedings at key junctures, particularly during séances for sickness and death inquest. In particular, the mock anger of sexual frustration can subtly inform the more serious anger ultimately targeted against the sorcery suspect believed responsible for the illness or death of the sickness-victim.

The shifting of context from mock to more serious anger is linked in important ways to the transference of erotic arousal between female and male objects of sexual desire described above. Gebusi women, like sorcerers, may be subject to unilateral and unreciprocated violence—from their husbands (Cantrell n.d., chap. 9). The force of this gender animosity in the context of heightened sexual arousal may be playfully dispelled among men themselves during the séance, but it can fuel a sense of righteous indignation and underlying animosity with respect to the sorcery suspect.¹⁶

The outcomes of this affective transfer are variable, depending on the spirit medium, the audience, and the social context. In some séances the anger of sadness or grief for a sick or deceased community member is largely ameliorated

through the longing of exaggerated homoerotic joking and display. Often this articulates as well with the symbolic displacement of aggression into the spirit world through the medium's violent "claiming of the spirit" (*fin hup*). In other cases, however, sexual frustration and aggressive anger may be displaced onto the sorcery suspect. Gebusi séance songs frequently superimpose images of frustrated sexual opportunity with those of lethal hunting and sorcery inquest. The violent fighting terminology used for sexual adventures facilitates this association on the lexical and conceptual level. This aura of heightened aggressiveness provides the overarching context of the séance, and it is within this context that information concerning the sorcery inquest is so quickly intruded and extruded. In short, the imagery of the sorcery inquest is contextually saturated with the residue of sexual animosity and with the dynamics of aggression-transference. Under these conditions, the maintenance of friendship and cooperation among those in attendance easily finds its complement in the fermentation of anger against the sorcery suspect who is not present. The collective and beneficent setting of the séance itself is thus vouchsafed, while the suspect is scapegoated through the attribution of deviance (see Foucault 1976; Becker 1963; cf. Durkheim 1964 [1895]:66–67).

In facilitating damning assessments, if not lethal violence, the sexually arousing imagery of Gebusi inquest séances appropriates deep-seated psychophysiological potentials. That frustrated sexual arousal facilitates aggression has been frequently documented under laboratory conditions by Western psychologists and physiologists (e.g., Zillmann 1984; Langevan 1985; Baron 1980; Jaffe, Malamuth, Feingold, and Feshbach 1974). Although the mediating cognitive dynamics are certainly culture-specific, the connection between sexual arousal and aggressive incitement is underlain by the fact that the centers of activation for these emotions are only a millimeter apart in the brain (Maclean 1962). As a result, the response of these centers to direct stimulation is rather undifferentiated in terms of nervous system response. The linkage between sexual arousal and aggression is thus inherently potent as a source of cultural elaboration.¹⁷

It is significant in this regard that Gebusi executions of sorcery suspects were in the past themselves perpetrated through the sexually provocative guidance of spirits in a séance. Informants said that such séances, like those observed in the field, were pervaded by aggressive rivalry. This rivalry undoubtedly fuelled damning assessments that the sorcery suspect should be attacked summarily and without mercy. In many such cases, the men attending the séance departed at dawn and went immediately to carry out the killing the spirits had mandated, saying that they were happy (*obeagin-da*) to perform this civic duty.

On other occasions, as is increasingly true today, action against the sorcery suspect is not taken until days or weeks after the final death-inquest séance.

Here, as in the case of Muswayay discussed above, it is the cognitive assessment of the suspect by the community—the extent of the guilt and the magnitude of the alleged crime—that are deeply influenced, if not formulated, during the *séance*, viz., in the context of sexually arousing and frustrating spiritual imagery. In some cases this connection is quite direct; songs of sexual frustration in the spirit world become thinly veiled allegories for this-worldly discontent over sexual or marital frustrations caused directly or indirectly by the sorcery suspect him- or herself (see further below and *séance* case example in Knauft 1985a:311–317).

Acceptance of damning sorcery pronouncements is also facilitated by the larger performative structure of Gebusi *séances*. It has often been remarked that communication frames such as ritual and liturgical orders employ arcane, ineffable, or inchoate imagery, and that this imagery instills special believability because of its nonquotidian nature and extraordinary signification (Rappaport 1971, 1979; Bloch 1973, 1986). Correspondingly, the fantastic spiritual aura of Gebusi song imagery facilitates its ultimate believability. In Gebusi *séances* the alluring ambiguity of spirit world sexuality forms the ever-present context in which serious pronouncements are briefly intruded. Given fervent participatory embracement by the audience of the larger performative context, these pronouncements are themselves imbued by association with a strong sense of reality and audience concurrence. Particularly for persons neutral to the central issue, it is easy to accept the spirits' instrumental pronouncements almost casually. Hence, audience embracement of spirits' titillating sexual adventures predisposes their acceptance of definitive spiritual pronouncements as well as imbuing this acceptance with particularly deep-seated affective force.

The Sociology of Sexual Asymmetry

The linkage between sexual incitement and this-worldly anger articulates in important ways with the sociology of Gebusi sorcery attributions. Gebusi accused of sorcery following death-inquest *séances* tend to be persons whose marital interests were actively or tacitly opposed to those of the sickness victim's patriline. For instance, sorcery victims and suspects are frequently affines or matrilin who have been party to an unreciprocated marriage. Such relatives are expected to be—and are overwhelmingly, in fact—indulgent and supportive of one another despite the marital imbalance between them. However, when such persons or their close relatives die from sickness, sorcery attributions across the affinal linkage are made with surprising frequency (Knauft 1985a:chaps. 5–7).

The connection between unreciprocated sexuality and violent sorcery attribution is in important ways backgrounded if not denied by Gebusi themselves (in the same way, perhaps, that the connection between frustrated sexual arousal and sorcery attribution is more experientially real than cognitively realized by *séance* participants). Even though the accuser and victim have them-

selves typically long since found wives, and even though their relationship may seem peaceful if not friendly for all intents and purposes, it is easy for latent animosity to be read post facto into an asymmetrical affinal relationship when sickness or death strikes one of the patriline members or their spouses. Marital and sexual asymmetry are in this respect structural fault lines that the perceptive spirit medium can use to locate a "natural" sorcery suspect and generate a convincing sorcery indictment.

This pattern dovetails with the cultural construction of Gebusi emotions. Nonreciprocal marriages are conceptualized by Gebusi as prompted by an inextinguishable sexual desire that overrides the demands of reciprocity. As such, nonreciprocal marriage almost inherently evokes the notion of self-willed sexuality. In such cases the reduction of *fafadagin-da* as sexual frustration that the new husband finds in unilaterally claiming a wife finds its natural and ultimate complement in sorcery attribution by his affines—their angry *fafadagin-da* combining both grief for a deceased relative and the anger of their own lost sexual opportunities. The two notions of aggressive *fafadagin-da* thus entail each other through cultural and emotional logic.

The sorcery inquest for Terkabo may be reconsidered in this light. As may be recalled, Terkabo was a sister's son to the accused sorcerer Muswayay; Muswayay's sister had been given in marriage to Terkabo's father (now deceased). However, this marriage had been completed without the reciprocity of a young bride for Muswayay himself; he had been forced to marry the widow of his deceased clan brother. That Muswayay and his wife remained childless while his sister had borne her husband two surviving sons and a daughter furthered the potential for the childless couple's disgruntlement and antagonism between the two family groups. Yet Muswayay continued to live in the small hamlet in domestic cooperation with his sister and her grown sons Hogswinam and Terkabo. Such a situation is easily perceived to engender unacknowledged resentment by the elder man, though the structural origin of the asymmetry was many years in the past, i.e., had no bearing on current marital concerns.

The asymmetric social relationship between Muswayay and Terkabo, like the spirit *séance* itself, thus combined and yet dissociated friendly camaraderie and potential animosity. Whereas in social life the transition between these states was believed to engender sorcery against the sick boy, this process was reversed in the performance structure of the *séance*; a juxtaposition between camaraderie and animosity produced an indictment against the sorcery suspect himself.

Good Company and Violence

The striking collapse of friendly camaraderie with ultimate anger, both at the *séance* and in affinal relations, is informed by larger cultural antinomies as

well by affective and sociological dynamics. Preeminent here is relationship in Gebusi culture between good company (*kogwayay*) and violence (*gof*) (Krafft 1985a). The Gebusi concept *kogwayay* is also their word for custom or culture; it is the preeminent concept of their collective identity. The three morphemes of the word—*kog* (togetherness), *wa* (friendly talk), and *yay* (joking yells)—accurately convey the intense sociality of Gebusi men from diverse clans within the residential community (Krafft 1985a:chap. 3). As has been shown, these same dynamics of communal camaraderie and joking banter are strongly characteristic of Gebusi spirit seances. Indeed, the same three concepts that constitute *kog-wa-yay* are present in Gebusi referents for "spirit séance": *kog-wa-tadu*, literally, "go up and talk together in friendship (with the spirits)"; and *hi-yay-dogwa*, "to cause a joking yell to be 'thrown.'" The séance is thus in several respects an epitome of Gebusi male good company—of togetherness, talking, and joking.

As has been described, the norms of good company so strong and prevalent among Gebusi, particularly between affines, juxtapose against the reality of ultimate violence between these same community members. The most severe context of this violence is, of course, the sorcery attribution and subsequent execution of a suspect within the community following a sickness-death. Yet such sorcery killings are seldom avenged or reciprocated. Neither do they lead to other forms of violence such as feuding or warfare; such collective violence has been statistically rare in Gebusi society.¹⁸ Rather, these killings tend—like scapegoating often does—to intensify the spirit of community solidarity. As Kenelm Burridge (1969) might put it, the tension between good company and violence is the primary dialectic of Gebusi society and culture. This same tension between a predominant spirit of *kogwayay* and a discordant but intensive thrust of projective aggression is seen in microcosm at the spirit *séance*, viz., intense male camaraderie crosscut by deeply damning indictments against the sorcery suspect.

Culture and Politics in Spirit Mediumship

Given the complex sociosexual and symbolic dimensions of Gebusi spirit pronouncements, it may be asked what kinds of political ramifications they have. Do spirit pronouncements serve some kind of ideological masking function? Do they legitimate some kind of authority relationship? On one level, Gebusi spirituality enacts the male appropriation and control of female sexuality. This is an important and complex issue that is being considered elsewhere (Cantrell n.d.). For the present, we may consider the political advantages that accrue to the spirit medium.

As has been illustrated, Gebusi spirit mediums have a significant degree of latitude and control in their spiritual pronouncements, including both the

naming of the sorcery suspect and the severity of action to be taken against him or her. This influence is highlighted by the fact that the spirit medium's indictment may reflect neither a current dispute nor the prior opinion of the audience. However, the cultural logic of the medium's pronouncements is strongly shaped by the existing norms and constraints of Gebusi sexual, emotional, and cultural life—parameters deeply internalized by the spirit medium himself.

Although a few exceptional Gebusi spirit mediums may be able, if motivated, to use their spiritual pronouncements to enhance their personal interests, the dominant practical sense one gets in the field is that they do not. The pronouncements made by a medium's spirits are expected by other Gebusi to be impartial. Given that séances are public events attended by men of diverse clan affiliations, a spirit medium is unlikely to be successful in generating support for pronouncements that are in the narrow interest of himself or his close kin as opposed to the collective interests of the several clans within the community. Attempting to do otherwise would tarnish a spirit medium's reputation and eventually threaten his status as a conduit to the spirit world. It may be recalled that spirit mediums are not paid or otherwise rewarded for their services; they are supposed to conduct séances as a civic service for their communities. Gebusi also state, however, that a medium's own spirits may become sympathetic or biased to his own point of view in issues about which he has very strong personal feelings, such as the death of his close relative or spouse. For this reason, sorcery and death inquest séances should not be conducted by spirit mediums for those who are of the same patriline or subclan affiliation as the medium himself.

The most important advantage that accrues to Gebusi spirit mediums is that as formulators of sorcery attributions they are themselves relatively immune to sorcery accusation and subsequent homicide. Spirit mediums meet a violent death only about half as frequently as nonmediums—21 percent of all deaths for spirit mediums versus 37 percent for men who are not mediums. This is consistent with the public perception of spirit mediums as the enemies of sorcerers.

The relationship between the collective interests of the community and the self-interest of the spirit medium can be illustrated by a final consideration of the sorcery inquest *séance* discussed above. It may be noted that the kinship relationship between the spirit medium, Swiman, and the sorcery suspect, Muswayay, was a close one—they were agnatic half-brothers. Such a relationship typically entails close alliance and support in Gebusi society. What, then, motivated Swiman to indict his half-brother? Quite plausibly, several factors were involved, including (a) Swiman's sincere desire to free Terkabo from sorcery, (b) the knowledge that Muswayay had been previously indicted as a sorcerer, and (c) the liberating effects of the dissociated consciousness experienced by Swiman during his *séance*. A more practical factor, which emerged in discus-

sion following the accusation of Muswayay, was that Terkabo's sickness might retard or even prevent the holding of a feast for the upcoming male initiation. Feasts are a major focus of social attention and cultural value; along with spirit séances, they are the epitome of kogwayay. Yet preparation for and organization of such a festive event are difficult as well as improper when one of the central participants is seriously ill. In his pronouncement, then, Swiman both focused attention on Terkabo's sickness at an early stage in its development and heightened awareness of its larger potential impact on the community. Correspondingly, by identifying and confronting the alleged sorcerer before the sickness became severe, Swiman's indictment was designed to short-circuit both the threat to Terkabo's health and the larger threat this posed for the community.

The question of self- and kin-group interest may also be considered in historical perspective: what patterns of political interest or conflict do spiritual pronouncements reveal over time? Although Swiman and Muswayay were agnatic half-brothers, their patriline had been residentially split since the previous generation, at which time Swiman's patriline segment became allied to a different subclan affinally, through sister exchange (Krafft 1983:571–574; Cantrell n.d.). When two men in this affinal subclan died and two senior men in Muswayay's patriline segment were accused as responsible, the agnates of Swiman's segment had supported the final execution of these sorcery suspects, notwithstanding their own close "brother" relationship to them. Reciprocally (some twenty years ago), Swiman's coresident agnate and maternal half-brother was accused of sorcery following the death of Muswayay's father's brother's wife; Muswayay's segment—including Muswayay himself—took the initiative and carried out the execution. In short, a pattern of sorcery accusation and corresponding execution ultimately pitted the halves of the split patriline against each other.

In the present generation, this conflict between the patriline segments appeared to continue; Muswayay had been indicted on five occasions by Swiman's spirits for having sent bogay sickness against members of the community. In four of these cases, the sickness had been diagnosed early by Swiman and the victim had recovered—due, it was believed, to Muswayay's prompt exposure and repentance. In the one remaining case, in which the victim had died, Swiman's spirits had themselves ultimately deflected the indictment away from Muswayay, retargeting it against another person from a different clan (Krafft 1985a:chap. 2). This accusation pattern is thrown into further relief by the fact that a full 80 percent of living Gebusi men in Muswayay's age category have been accused of sorcery (Krafft 1985a:141). That Muswayay's eldership status was cross-cut by sorcery attribution on a continuing basis was thus normative and indeed quite expectable.

Through the pronouncements of Swiman's spirits, the lingering tension between his and Muswayay's patriline segments was both dovetailed with and mediated by collective community orientations and concerns, specifically, the

desire to quickly diagnose and cure sick persons such as Terkabo, the desire to expose elderly sorcerers, and the desire for the community to cohere through the holding of feasts and initiations rather than break apart over sorcery deaths and subsequent accusations. As inheritor of the structural tension between his own patriline segment and that of Muswayay, Swiman's pronouncements reflected and reinforced the expectable community sentiment that Muswayay was a sorcerer but also maintained strict propriety; he allowed Muswayay maximal opportunity both to successfully repent and to effectively avoid the most damning and life-threatening portmortein indictments.

A Comparative Hypothesis

The balance between community interest and the shamans' or spirit medium's self-interest can be highly variable from case to case and with different personalities—much less in different cultures. In many societies, including a substantial number in Melanesia, Amazonia, and the circumpolar regions, ambivalent spiritual power and the potential for self-interested or nefarious behavior have been almost intrinsic to the role of shaman or spirit medium, reflected in his frequently imputed ability to cause as well as cure sickness (e.g., Stephen 1987a, 1987b; Goddier 1986; Descola and Lory 1982; Granero 1986; Brown 1988; Balkeci 1963; 1970:chap. 12; cf. Taussig 1987). In a sociopolitical perspective, such self-interested assertion by a shaman or spirit medium complements or reinforces other aspects of political leadership and status rivalry, for example, competitive headmanship, kin group leadership, ritual age-grading, gerontocracy, or opposition to external political hegemony.

Among Gebusi, such forms of adult male status differentiation are relatively undeveloped; Gebusi lie at the highly decentralized end of the Melanesian political spectrum. Correspondingly, self-interested political competition or aggrandizement by spirit mediums has been minimal. Conversely, their sensitivity to the collective interests of the various clan segments within the community has been high. It is consistent with this that the potentially threatening and ambivalent role of the sorcerer- or shaman-as-extortionist is virtually absent among Gebusi—a trend contrastive with sorcery in many New Guinea societies (see Krafft 1985a: 339–348). Constraints against self-interested and intimidating shamanistic authority are particularly strong in those societies where political decentralization is most extreme: societies such as the Iking (Lee 1978; Katz 1983) and the Copper Eskimo (Jenness 1972; Rasmussen 1932)—cf. also Turnbull (1961, 1965a, 1965b) concerning African pygmies, and comparatively, Woodbum (1982).

It may be hypothesized in general that the actions of shamans and spirit mediums will be lacking in intimidating and self-interested leadership prerogatives to the degree that these features of adult male status differentiation are

otherwise absent in the society in question. In societies where political decentralization is most extreme, the success of the spirit medium or shaman is most closely tied to his or her ability to mediate narrower self and kin-group interests with the collective interests of a much wider community. The consciousness of an entranced shaman or spirit medium in the most highly decentralized societies may thus exhibit a particularly pronounced form of what Michele Stephen (1986; this volume) has called "the autonomous imagination"—a mode of consciousness that can transcend the self-interested motivations of the actor in waking consciousness.

Conclusions

Imagery and pronouncement in Gebusi spirit séances instantiate diverse interconnections among spiritual, sexual, psychophysiological, and sociopolitical factors. The heightened sexual arousal of the Gebusi audience during the séance effects (a) the transfer of erotic attention from the spirit women to the male audience and (b) the mock expression of anger at the séance itself. This anger can be articulated through the Gebusi experience of longing with a parallel opposition and anger among the male audience with respect to the target of séance pronouncement, that is, the sorcery suspect. This process engages the frustration of unsatisfied sexual arousal and gender ambivalence with the more subliminal anger of social loss and separation. This connection appears to be facilitated by the cultural appropriation of underlying psychophysiological propensities as well as by a séance communication structure that predisposes audience acceptance of the spiritually-identified suspect.

On a wider symbolic level, séance performances articulate with the dialectical antimony in Gebusi culture between good company (*kogwayay*) and violence (*gof*), this being reflected in the tension between male camaraderie and the potential for aggression against the targets of séance pronouncement. Similar underlying themes of nonreciprocation and potential anger in the face of stringent norms of good company are evident in marital structure, that is, the schism between Gebusi expectations of affinal forbearance and the violent attribution of sorcery in these same relationships. The symbolic logic of these processes both informs and reflects the highly decentralized and publicly non-confrontational nature of Gebusi politics, including a mode of spirit mediumship that to a significant degree transcends the individualistic self-interests of the spirit mediums themselves. It is suggested that this pattern has been most highly developed in the shamanism or spirit mediumship of societies exhibiting the most extreme political decentralization. In these and other respects, it would be fruitful to compare Gebusi spiritual practice to shamanism and other forms of elaborate image-making in Melanesia and elsewhere.

NOTES

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1. Shamans and spirit mediums are here defined as part-time but all-purpose spiritual practitioners who interpret and define the relationship between people and supernatural forces through encounters with the spirit world. The term *spirit medium* has been prominent in African contexts and in British usage (e.g., Firth 1959:141; Beattie and Middleton 1969), whereas *shaman* has been more commonly used in reference to the New World and Asia, particularly by French and American researchers (e.g., Eliade 1964 [1951]:3ff.; Wallace 1966:86; Reinhard 1976; Lessa and Vogt 1972b:381). In the case of Melanesia, each of these terms has been used, and they will be employed interchangeably in the present context as defined above (see Julliat [ed.] 1977; Scheffelin 1985; Goddler 1986; Fortune 1935; Layard 1930a, 1930b; Sram 1980; Van Baal 1966:890ff).
 2. The spirits of Gebusi mediums are said to enjoy indigenous tobacco, which is proffered to them in smoke-filled pipes from audience members during the séance (see Knauft 1987a). Such tobacco sharing is also pervasive among the audience, however, and the spirits of mediums do not smoke appreciably more than do other men who are present (contrast Wilbert 1987).
 3. As Fischer (1971) has shown, euphoria has a common physiological basis regardless of which channel (intense relaxation versus intense sympathetic arousal) is used to induce it. In this respect the emphasis in much of the current literature on ergotropic concomitants of shamanism and on autonomic nervous system tuning needs to be complemented by greater consideration of intense trophotropic stimulation (relaxation) in shamanism and spirit mediumship.
 4. The pervasive Gebusi focus on the idealized spirit woman contrasts with some other Strickland-Bosavi societies, in which there is great differentiation and dramatic particularity of the medium's spirit families (cf. Scheffelin 1977, 1985, concerning the Kaluli).
 5. This necessity can be partially abrogated if the spirit woman herself takes a brief nap during the night. This can allow the medium and the singers to doze for a few minutes or perhaps up to an hour in the middle of the night, though they retain their sitting position clustered close together. After such a period, the spirit woman again starts to chant and the singers revive their own song to continue the séance.
 6. Gebusi place little emphasis upon magic, spells, sacrifices, or personal dream interpretation. A few forms of minor sickness remedy can be performed by individuals, but these are believed ameliorative rather than curative. One form of cure—invariably attempted—entails the daytime supplication of spirits by the spirit medium to draw a stone or bone out of the sick victim (*hoxo*). However, for any important or persisting divinatory issue, the holding of a full spirit séance is requisite.
 7. Other selected symbolic and sociological dynamics of Gebusi séances are discussed in Knauft (1985a:chaps. 2, 4, 12, 1986); some of their psychodynamic features are considered in Knauft (1987b).
 8. In my sample of 101 spirit séances, 13 were performed jointly by two spirit mediums. Two of these 13 séances included participation of a third spirit medium as well. In jointly performed séances, the spirits of one of the mediums take primary responsibility investigating the principal issues of social concern, whereas the second medium participates in a demonstration of friendly support and cooperation. In the present case, Swiman was the primary spirit medium and Hogoswiman supported him.

9. Although women rarely participate in séances, they follow with interest topics of special concern to them by listening to the proceedings through the thin sago-leaf wall that separates their sleeping quarters from those of the men (Cantrell n.d.).
10. The séance from which this text was taken took place on October 13, 1981, in Yitihiliu longhouse. It constitutes part of a large corpus of séances and song texts recorded, transcribed, and translated in the field between June 1980 and March 1982. Transcription and exegesis of tape-recorded events were made with the help of monolingual informants. (All fieldwork was carried out in the Gebusi vernacular.) It is unfortunately not possible in the present context to detail the linguistic and musical features of Gebusi séance songs (cf. Feld 1982).
11. This makes coherent translation into English difficult, as ease of comprehension is increased, the polysemic richness of song images is reduced. The intricacies of converting spoken (or sung) narration into written text is an important topic but one beyond the scope of the present paper (see Tedlock 1983). In general, I have tried to make the present text as literal and as open to interpretation as was the original.
12. Gebusi have until the very recent past cannibalized persons executed as sorcerers.
13. Three of the men were true or classificatory clansmen to Muswayay. One of these men was also a classificatory sister's child's husband (ZCH) to Terkabo and sister's husband (ZH) to Hogoswimm.
14. The most fervent homosexual insinuations in fact tend to be those adult men without wives; widowers and unmarried male initiates.
15. A few of these persons actively recapitulate spirit woman themes in daily life: they thrive on relations of coquettish allure with each other and with the initiated men who joke with and inseminate them.
16. Though the point cannot be developed further here, Gebusi place greater emphasis on the metaphoric linkage between women and sorcerers as common targets of legitimate violence than do societies of the nearby Great Papuan Plateau. Conversely, the latter societies place more emphasis than do Gebusi on the metaphoric connection between male depletion and heterosexual contact (Kelly 1976; compare Cantrell n.d.).
17. Interestingly, an analogous conclusion has been reached by Stoller (1979) through psychodynamic analysis of erotic fantasies, viz., that aggression and sexual excitement are in significant ways inextricably linked.
18. See Knauft (1985:chap. 5). Because sorcery-related violence tends to be directed surgically against the scapegoated suspect within the community, the predominant response of community members is to downplay and minimize the killing's significance. This orientation reflects a strong desire to return to a state of collective good company as quickly as possible. The closest kin of the person executed may privately dispute the killing, but against the opinion of the other clans in the community they have little option but to acquiesce, accept their kinsman's fate, and gradually reintegrate themselves into the social life of their community.

Spirit Familiars in the Religious Imagination of Sambia Shamans

Gilbert Herdt

A story about a shaman's (*kwooluku*) dream will serve to introduce the themes of this chapter on spirit familiars (*numeyu*) among the Sambia of Papua New Guinea. If shamans are the central religious authorities of Sambia culture, then their familiars are the key concept for understanding their inner worlds, and a cypher for interpreting how they organize and experience their social roles and cultural identities. Indeed, a central point is that the familiar is neither clearly of spirit, body, or mind, but is a holistic representation of aspects of self and world, and this linkage fundamentally obviates any simple attempt to argue for what is empirical or non-empirical (Lawrence 1973) in New Guinea religious experience and practice. The speaker is Sakulambei, now the greatest practicing Sambia shaman, and a man with whom I have worked for some years (Herdt 1987c; Herdt and Stoller 1989). The story is one of many he narrated to me in 1979.¹

Saku performed a healing ceremony, a *kwoyi*, on the small, sick child of a classificatory clan brother—Erjundei—one night. He went to bed and dreamt the following:

I go and fight with a *kumamulu* [ghost], at Pundei [his natal village]. Erjundei, his father, and my woman [wife] all jump me . . . I'm very strong . . . I really beat up my wife; her eye swells up where I hit her . . . They leave . . . I see my [paternal uncle] Kunouwioko . . . "I had to fight, I wasn't thinking straight, I hurt them, I think they'll bring a *kor* [native litigation and local council trial] against me," I told him. He asked me, "Why did you fight them?" And I woke up. When I woke I thought, "I've got trouble, I'll be *koted*"; but then I realized I'd dreamt.

Later that morning a woman came by to say my old stepmother was very sick, "the one you struck." "The village sat in on a healing ceremony and they pointed to [blamed] your *ainmwogwambu* [female hamlet spirit, personal familiar]," she said. And then I thought to myself, "Last night, I hit my wife [dream], but I think it was actually *her*—the old woman. If I hadn't hit my *ainmwogwambu* [in the dream], my old stepmother wouldn't be ill. But at least since I didn't kill her she's not dead."

So I went to heal her. I "smoked" [shamanic exorcism] her. She was shaking. Meioumjim [powerful, now deceased, male shaman] said my