Chapter 3

MEN’S HOUSES,
OTHER PEOPLE’S HOUSES

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Sepik art

In 1965, Anthony Forge published ‘Art and Environment in the Sepik River’.1 The article had an enormous impact. In it, Forge resolved one of the major problems that had been eating at anthropologists since they had become interested in works of art: the laconic — and even lack of — response on the part of local artists when questioned about their work. At best, a Sepik artist will explain to the poor anthropologist, in a curt phrase that brooks no appeal, that such a work represents simply a plant, an insect, a fish or reflections in the water. Any attempt to get more out of him is unfailingly countered by the argument that the pieces are made according to unchanging laws, ‘because this is how our ancestors did it’. The refusal to comment is all the more disconcerting because the Sepik is one of the most prolific sources of artistic creation. Sepik villages are laid out around a Men’s House, the facade of which is sometimes decorated with impressive paintings — as among the Abelam, where Forge worked — while the interior features a highly complex decor. Confronted with such evasive and stereotypic responses, Forge, and those who worked in the Sepik after him, wondered — and continue to wonder — whether each representation had a meaning and whether an iconological study might be envisaged. The question is unsettling for Westerners, who envisage art, at least in its classic forms, as a means of communication.

What Forge did was to demonstrate that art, and particularly that embodied by Men’s Houses, is indeed a means of communication, but one that has its own rules. In view of the artists’ obstinate silence and the absence of major myth cycles that would have facilitated an interpretation, he decided to analyse the myths he found and to compare them with those of neighbouring societies. He was thus able to demonstrate that, aside from their ritual uses, Men’s Houses constituted a dormant world of symbols whose meaning could be detected in the mystification that consisted in convincing the women that these houses embodied a supernatural power.
The comparative study enabled Forge to show that, above and beyond the difference of architectural forms, similar modes of construction argued for a homogeneity of the representations, which have never been expressed in any form other than buildings and carvings. Men's Houses are thus another way of expressing representations of the world, they are ‘a statement about … culture and society made in architectural terms’. They are not amenable to discourse, but express the men's world without using words. He ends his article by showing that, whatever the forms and the symbolic references, the message is always the same: all speak of man's nature and his culture.

This idea, which is altogether classical for the Western mind where every architectural feature, and particularly the main structural elements, is supposed to reflect, on a series of different levels, the foundations of the social organisation — even if the meaning of these elements is never explicitly admitted or recognised — would become one of the obligatory passage points for all art analysis. The method used, and subsequently adopted by many researchers, was less classical.

In the thirty years since Forge's work, the situation in the field has changed radically. In the 1950s, when Forge was conducting his Sepik study, the societies there had already undergone some modifications as a consequence of the war, but they were still living at their earlier pace. Modernity was not yet on the agenda. As the 1960s drew to a close, the forced march towards independence imposed by the colonial government induced a social and economic revolution. Men rose up preaching a return to ancestral ways; old ceremonies and initiations were revived and new buildings flourished. This revival, in many cases undertaken to ward off a much-feared modernity, soon flagged in proportion to the hopes that had been aroused by the advent of a new society. Then, year in year out, villagers found themselves obliged to adapt to the modern world. Today, only a very few villages, like Palimbei, have managed to preserve their old atmosphere and the theatrical majesty of the Men's Houses. But the benches under these houses, where the men once spent so much of their time, now stand empty. And in the near future, Palimbei will probably suffer the same fate as the other villages: following the decline in population, the Men's Houses along the river have turned into modest buildings, sometimes even humble barn-like structures whose importance is apparent to the visitor only from the position at the centre of the village. There, as elsewhere, villagers have been forced to adapt to the laws of the market. Gradually the use of money — whose mysterious origin remains the object of much speculation — has superimposed itself on the traditional exchange values. Tourists, those strange beings who spend their time walking around with their hands in their pockets, have become the principal source of this money. Not only has it been necessary to organise, to rethink and to adapt *kastam* especially for them, the villagers also needed to create those objects of which tourists were so fond, even if they bought all too few: *turist*, carvings or ornaments that often bore only a remote relation to the ancestral objects, but whose sale could represent a major portion of a family's income. It was for the tourists too that, in Angoram, Yentchan, Korogo — and perhaps soon in Kaningara — strange buildings were erected sprouting the new name of 'cultural centres'. These descendants of the Men's Houses are at the heart of a misunderstanding, however. For the tourists, they are the highest expression of local culture; for the locals, they are often merely a locale for the sale of souvenirs.
If one abides by Bateson’s description of the Men’s House — a place subjected to numerous taboos, a ‘hot’ place due to the violence and the murders necessary to its construction — then there are no longer any Men’s Houses in the Sepik. Or rather, there is every possibility: from those Houses that have survived in a world totally alien to the one in which they were built, to those that have been transformed until they are no more than skilfully decorated empty shells, to those that no longer exist, having disappeared altogether. But whether through adaptation or resistance, they show that their transformation was also a political tool that enabled societies to find a place in the modern world by playing on Western expectations: after all, isn’t the Sepik synonymous with art and Men’s Houses?

The Porapora region

To show this process of adaptation more clearly, we have taken the example of a small region located between the Lower Sepik, the Ramu and the Keram Rivers. It is known in the literature as Porapora. This region is inhabited by three linguistic groups — Aïon, Adjirab and Armé — who share a number of cultural features. We will be dealing primarily with the Adjirab. This group lives in the centre of the region, on a territory bounded by the Ramu River to the east and, to the west, by the Keram, a tributary of the Sepik. The population is made up of exogamous matrilineal descent groups divided into moieties — in turn split into sub-moieties — and dispersed throughout the territory. The territories and their use-rights are controlled by an older man, but, unlike the practice in the islands or in the Murik region, there is no hereditary chief nor is there competition for an object that would ensure access to any kind of status or rank. Political power rests with a gerontocracy, the older men being obliged to redistribute to the younger ones the goods received in the course of exchanges. The production unit, however, is the household.

Until today this region was the object of very few studies. All patrol reports since the Second World War mention its isolation. The difficulty of access, due to the frequent obstruction of canals by fallen trees and floating weeds or to the armada of mosquitoes that ensures that each passing canoe is a feast — and thus torture for the passengers — has ensured the region is not overrun with visitors. It was ‘pacified’ by the colonial forces in the early 1930s (no specific date can be established for lack of colonial archives). This belated pacification together with the presence of few missionaries — religious sects having had only a recent and superficial influence — has allowed the memory of the past to survive relatively intact. The situation is therefore not the same as that of other regions, even those close by: amnesia is not complete, as among the Banaro or in the coastal villages.

Although the brand of ethnography that I practice comes under the heading of historical anthropology, the period when village life marched to the drum of ‘tradition’ is still partly with us, even if it is often evoked with ambiguous nostalgia. I was therefore quite surprised to find, in spite of this isolation, on my first visit (1984) to one of the remoter villages of the region, one of the most thoroughly forgotten by the provincial government, the beginnings of an urban centre. There, between several hamlets, around the inevitable soccer field, proudly stood a church, a school and a small pavilion built for inter-village meetings. Oddly enough, whereas one might have expected a modern copy of colonial-style
architecture, the new buildings were modelled on ... Men’s Houses. Some young boys improvised a guided tour for us. Eagerly they directed our admiring gaze to the paintings, the carved posts and especially to the figures hung, in accordance with tradition, at the end of the crosspoles of the church roof. They saw nothing incongruous in this: such borrowing has a long history. From a Western viewpoint, it can be understood if one thinks of the propensity of Sepik cultures to import elements from neighbouring groups.13 It can be understood, too, in the context of the movements that arose in the wake of independence when the young political leaders advocated a return to traditional culture. It becomes harder to explain, however, when one remembers that the transfer was carried out by elderly men trained in another tradition altogether. How and why did these men, in possession of knowledge and in charge of the new building program and its iconography, agree, even under strong pressure from outside, to adopt styles of construction and representation belonging to what were a priori antithetical worlds? How could men with modern convictions accept to represent giaman god on the house of papa god? Through what irony of history had mutually alien buildings come to co-exist in forms that, even though they were only a distant echo of their original model, nevertheless bore it a strange resemblance?

If we are to analyse these transformations, we need to adapt our methods. While we remain strongly indebted to Forge’s masterly work and accept that Men’s Houses are indeed ‘a statement about culture and society’, the disappearance of the rituals and the numerous elements that were once a part of these Houses, and the absence of documents on the architecture of the Lower Ramu — the Adjirab’s original home — make it impossible to construct a meaning this way, even if we resort to induction or comparison. I have therefore replaced the study of rituals by a comparison of the buildings as they now stand: the Men’s Houses from the past with today’s modern buildings; I have further replaced regional variations by a diachronic analysis of the transformations. Admittedly this method is not without its problems, the most important of which is the reconstruction of the state of the Houses at the time of pacification. I am aware of the limits inherent in this kind of reconstruction, but the example of Porapora is typical in that the opening up to the outside world — and the need felt by the groups to redefine themselves or to think their identity — did not arise with regard to the white world as represented by the rapid and transitory tourist trade, but with regard to specific enduring political and religious entities, which reduces the factors to familiar worlds. By proceeding in this way, I hope to show how these transformations, whether repeated or abandoned, resulted in the Adjirab adopting representations in which they attempted to associate events and structures. In other words, I am going to try to provide some insight into how the Adjirab acclimated their history and thus moved from traditional forms to new structures and ultimately came to demand their inclusion in the imagined chorus of those nations from which they receive, from time to time, the occasional muffled signal.

Construction and internal organisation of the Men’s House

Even today the Men’s Houses are the most imposing buildings in an Adjirab village. A great part of male social life goes on here: young bachelors and widowers live here, old men spend
the better part of their time here. Here is where they sleep in the daytime, where they repair their arrows or spears for hunting or fishing; where they hold their informal meetings, discussing — far from the indiscreet ears of the women — sometimes the thousand tiny events that make up village life, sometimes news of the world that arrives belatedly and often distorted. Here too is where they gather when an illness calls for propitiatory rites or when political decisions must be taken that are vital to the life of the village.

At first glance, the Houses have a simple architecture: a roof over an unbroken expanse of floor. Closer scrutiny of a cross-section of the roof shows it is divided into two parts: at the front, an A-frame construction projecting beyond the front of the building and, at the back, an overhang resting laterally on the eave poles, which in turn lie on two rows of side posts, is supported in the centre by a ridge pole which itself rests on posts of an often impressive size. The entire construction is unified by a roof thatched with sago fronds attached to wooden slats. The roof proper is a complex construction. It is comprised of large rafter poles lashed at the top and bottom to the ridge pole and to the eave poles. These rafter poles in turn, by means of a system of vertical poles themselves resting on cross poles, hold the smaller rafters that receive the slats to which the thatching is attached. The flooring is made of unjoined planks laid crosswise over a series of joists supported on posts. These planks are fashioned by unrolling the trunk of a palm tree. The roof and the floor are structurally independent: each rests on its own system of posts. All parts of the roof and the floor are lashed together, making the entire building highly flexible and therefore fairly resistant to earthquakes, which are frequent in the region.

The overhanging porch roof is a remarkable system, at once unusual, refined and complex. It is modelled on the spider’s web, which makes it very resistant to high winds: two large poles crossed scissors-fashion rest on two scaffoldings that form a bracket supporting the entire structure. These diagonal poles receive a series of forces distributed by cross poles that are lashed together. The ends of all the large cross poles are carved with ancestor figures. From an architectonic standpoint, this overhang is separate from the back of the floor. The overhang and the roof are joined by the simple expedient of rafters lashed together in bundles of three and are covered by a single roof.

The difference in the principle of construction and particularly the independence of the two main elements would seem to indicate that these two parts were joined at a recent date. For the moment, I will simply say that the roof and the floor are initially constructed exclusively by the members of the descent group to which the house belongs. They are assisted by all their kinsmen, young and old, from near and far, and by their affines. Next, often several months later, comes the second stage, in which the overhanging roof is erected under the supervision of their adje. An adje is an exchange partner from whom one receives and to whom one gives, formally and according to a strict rule of reciprocity, a certain number of items, among which used to feature yams and the bodies of men killed in war. Every elder of a descent group, and therefore in charge of a Men’s House, is in an adje relationship with one of his counterparts. Each man has several potential adje, who belong to the different descent groups, but only one of these relationships is active and only the elders of a descent group can initiate exchanges with their adje. Apart from the occasions already mentioned, such exchanges can occur at any time, whenever a man so wishes: it is said that
'the road to the adje is always open'. The adje relationship is inherited through a naming system: it commemorates an earlier feat of arms and disappears if two adje become brothers-in-law. To finish the roof of a Men's House, an adje is obliged to have a tree felled; the trunk of this tree will be used to make the post that supports the end of the roof beam. This post is carved with the figures (totemic animals or heroes) of his own descent group. The setting of this post terminates the construction of the new House. On this occasion, the two groups exchange food— which will be returned with exactitude when the adje builds his own Men's House — and sing songs celebrating feats of arms, migrations and the number of enemy heads taken in war or on raids and exchanged by their ancestors.

In the course of this ceremony, the young boys from the descent group to which the House belongs hang from the projecting roof some of the objects and utensils used in previous festivals: food dishes, earthenware cooking pots, fish traps, fibre skirts, animal bones, torches that lit the night dances and so forth. The children of the House also have the right to lay hold of any of the goods in their own father's house without incurring opposition. Bows, arrows, assagais, adzes join the earlier trophies. Among these memorials are hung diamond-shaped or spherical wickerwork constructions representing, respectively, the web of the akwemp spider and the nest of the agem bees (both insects are especially feared because of their deadly sting). The considerable accumulation of objects gives an impression of wealth: it is a visible sign to visitors of the group's strength, of its capacity to organise exchanges and its power to reproduce itself. The hanging objects symbolically connect the women's world (the House mothers, responsible for a plentiful food supply and its preparation) with the men's (the fathers, whose role it is to protect and feed the children of the House).

This impression of wealth stands in stark contrast to the characteristic emptiness of the interior of today's House. All that it now contains are a few flutes and the belongings of its inhabitants or guests. Once carefully closed off, the House was the men's space par excellence, the place of their complicity with the ancestors, there where the most secret rituals were carried out. To protect this place from prying eyes, an enclosure was erected all around the house and behind the first side-posts. This fence delineated the strict separation between the space inside and the space covered by the overhanging roof. Inside, the House was divided into several areas whose boundaries were not physically evident. The first zone, immediately behind the front wall, was where the men slept in times of war or when ritual demanded their strict segregation from women. It is also where the young initiates lived during the time of their seclusion. Further on were the fireplaces, one or several; the men cooked their meals on these whenever taboos forbad their eating food made by their wives. Over these fireplaces stood structures comprised of several racks. The men would lie on the lowest — closest to the fire — when they were sick or needed to warm themselves or simply to escape the mosquitoes. On the upper trays, precious objects were placed in the smoke, which protected them from wood-eating insects. Some Men's Houses had large slit-gongs (usually two) the sides of which bore wooden carvings representing the spirits. These large drums were never shown in public, and their voices — those of the descent group's founding ancestors — were heard only at the most important ceremonies. To the left and right of these slit-gongs, enclosures made of fronds and leaves might be constructed for storing objects or masks. The
further one penetrated into the House, the more powerful the objects found there. Along one wall were arranged the skull-stands. A few rare examples were collected in the 1950s and are now to be found in European collections.17 These stands consisted of a post in the middle of which a cavity had been made to hold the skull. The shaft was carved, sometimes with simple rings or exceptionally with the representation of a human body. But the majority of these stands were not sculpted: all the care went into the skulls themselves, coated with red earth modelled into a face, the eyes suggested by shells. The red earth, obtained in the vicinity of Senai,18 was periodically smeared with vegetable oil so as to preserve the deep glossy finish of the face that was proof of its power and vitality. When a new stand was made, a head-shaped stone was placed inside the skull, though it would be hard to see in these stones an anthropomorphic shape and even more a set of ‘ears’, the feature determining the choice of the stone. These stones were even more important than the skull.19 They were the invariable component of the object, which gave it its power. A house might have anywhere from five to seven skull-stands. Each was named for an ancestor. In front of these stands, on the floor, were placed skulls of wild pigs, crocodiles or marsupials.20 All around the stand, sitting on shelves, hanging on the wall or suspended from the roof beams, were skulls, the trophies of head-hunting expeditions.21 Finally, at the back of the house, behind the partition lined with the skull-stands, was a small room. This was the most secret part, where the most powerful figures were kept: probably wickerwork or wooden representations of the founding animals of the clans. These objects were brought out only on rare occasions, and were guarded by a few men, who were the only ones allowed to approach them.22

The problem of description

Like any description, the one we have just read is deceptive. It rests on partial data collected from those who, in their youth, had seen ‘big’ Houses, if by that we mean those that existed at the time of contact with the white world and which, in some cases, were still standing in the 1950s. Due to the absence of both visual and written archives, however, none of this information can be checked. Furthermore, memory has had time to winnow out what now appears to be fundamental from what can be considered anecdotal. And some elements have been blocked out, as they no longer played any role. Therefore, what counts today is no longer whatever each Men’s House held, but the architecture itself, stripped of its inner trappings, which affirms the existence and the strength of a descent group. Paradoxically, the description of the earlier state in fact reflects the situation at the time of the study: it stresses what all Men’s Houses had in common (mainly the construction principles, which probably did not vary from House to House) and sets aside the many discrepancies between them. In other words, it reduces all Men’s Houses to a sort of ideal model common to all groups: the wealth of impressions, the multiplicity of references and the objects kept there have yielded, in recent times, to a certain aridity that overshadows the many variations that once made up the ‘system’ of Men’s Houses.

Yet the study suggests that each Men’s House was a complex world of its own, a testament to the individual history of each descent group. Its material wealth was made up of the many objects that comprised the group’s memory. The identity of these objects yielded
itself up only gradually and often through a casual phrase in a conversation that did not concern them directly. As our knowledge stands at present, they can be thought of simply as ‘signs’, traces, props indispensable to the remembering of events. They form groups, but no simple description can render their place or their function, and even less that which ties them together.

What was the relationship between the paintings on the inner walls or the inside of the overhang (or overhangs, since one might be built at both ends of the house), the masks, the personal belongings of an outstanding ancestor and the carved stones — extremely secret objects — kept inside a fibre framework covered with shells and embellished with an animal figure such as a dog or a crocodile? For instance, the only Men’s Houses that had paintings were those belonging to the group traditionally recognised as descending from the first founding ancestor to have appeared. The masks belonged to the group which, with respect to its predecessor, occupied a symmetrical position in the dual organisation. Some of the signs formed specific categories, either because they could be reproduced and their possession was linked with a special fabrication skill (flutes fall into this category) or because they were objects that ‘came with the elders’ and were therefore irreplaceable. Objects once owned by warriors or remarkable ancestors came under this heading. Their special status probably explains why a few rare examples have been preserved to this day. Some, such as spears or shields, were associated with warfare. Others, such as lime gourds and spatulas, body ornaments or the small bags that elderly men used to wear around their neck and in which they kept ‘precious’ objects, were probably connected with magic and divination.

All of these objects are feared because they are imbued with a power that their owners can use. Many of these items were wrapped and concealed in enclosures woven from palm-fronds in the Men’s Houses, where they bore witness to the history of the groups and secured their continued existence. Skull-stands too fell into this category. Their form varied with the descent group that owned them: some had tall carved posts and the head was coated with thin layers of earth; others were small tripods holding skulls that had been greatly enlarged by the many coatings of soil. The first, concealed behind a screen when decorated with tall featherwork structures, were the only ones shown to the new initiates. The second were never decorated and could be seen at any time.

Each Men’s House thus had its individuality, the singular product of the founding hero who, in creating it, had endowed it with a name and a personality, and had bequeathed it a certain number of ‘signs’. Over the course of its history, it accumulated the traces of numerous events that enhanced its prestige, an indispensable asset for a society in which competition between groups is a major feature of social relations. So it was, then, that, behind a seemingly invariable architecture, Men’s Houses displayed a multiplicity consonant with the logic of identity, where the unique and momentarily intangible character of each descent group was affirmed. For every Men’s House was an ongoing process of reconstruction. Its prestige could be challenged at any moment, either after a war in which a portion of its goods was destroyed, or following a dispute in which the right to the possession of one object or another was denied. But colonisation eroded these specific features, and no new signs emerged to replace them. On the contrary, the invention of new signs or the introduction of new ‘spirits’ whose powers renewed the perpetually dwindling
powers of the Men’s Houses suddenly came to a halt. By putting a stop to the exchange circuits, colonisation signalled the decline of the Men’s Houses. There was now nothing to arrest the inevitable progress of their entropy.

Given the disappearance of a large portion of this wealth, a study of the architectural structure is the solution of last resort. As we mentioned, the more-or-less two-speed transformation of the Men’s Houses accentuates what the morphological analysis already suggested: the building is indeed comprised of two separate elements, each of which corresponds to a specific function. This bipartition is never openly asserted by the informants. The men of the descent group to which it belongs regard the House as a whole, as a structure whose overhanging roof is the sign, provided by the *adje*, that its existence is recognised. It would be unseemly for the *adje* to lay claim to this construction. In no case can he demand repayment or boast: the position of *adje* implies extreme urbanity and great reserve, which contrasts with the somewhat cocky attitude of the men in general. The difference between the two parts appears clearly only during the construction process or in certain exchanges.

*Oral tradition, or rethinking an identity*

To explain the different functions connected with the parts of the Men’s House, the Adjirab turn to their oral tradition. Before presenting these texts, though, I would like to say two things. First, these texts, at least in their exoteric versions, never allude to the creation of Men’s Houses or to any original model. And second, we will leave to one side the enormous problem of their symbolic interpretation. Not that the question is not fundamental, but the near complete disappearance of every representation makes it practically impossible to elucidate. Alternatively, we will retain from the oral tradition the passages to which the men refer explicitly when, in the course of the interviews, we talk about the relationship between the *adje* and the building’s functions. These texts show that each part of the House originates at a different time and in a different place. They thus provide a key to the identity of the groups even as they enable us to understand how the Adjirab, by clever use of history, explain their place among the Lower Sepik cultures by way of the Men’s Houses.

The first text is a song cycle (*anga*) that tells the story of the Adjirab groups. Or to be more precise, the text contains two song cycles, one for each moiety, in which each descent group recounts its own history. Each segment of the song relates a specific event, usually a war or the conquest of a territory. The verses are deliberately obscure, their meaning being known only to the oldest men, thus establishing their authority. These songs were performed for major events: return from a head-hunting expedition, opening of a House, end of mourning period — unfortunately the most frequent case today. On these occasions, the song may be interpreted in its entirety, each descent group presenting its segment, in chronological order. The complete performance takes from twelve to fourteen hours; but it can stretch over two days if a certain number of incidents are added which are often left out of ordinary performances. A fragment may also be performed in the event of a land dispute, by two or three men, in the course of the argument. In this case the performance takes only a few minutes.

Throughout the Sepik, these songs begin with an account of the way the world began.26 This is the most secret part. Then they relate the origin of the moieties: how groups living in
two villages along the Ramu were plunged into a shared adventure. At the outset, a man or a child of each moiety having died in mysterious circumstances is changed into a tree. The two trees grow on a bluff in the middle of the abandoned villages. In these trees live a number of families. Life is peaceful until one day a conflict arises. Each family sets upon one part of the tree, which succumbs to the blows and falls into the river. It drifts downstream until it reaches the sea, where it disappears. The now homeless families, having metaphorically killed their tutelary figure, flee the spot. They leave the two villages and disperse. Thus begins a time of wars and conquests, waged no longer on outside groups alone, but among the newly independent descent groups themselves. The fortunes and misfortunes of war threaten to undo alliances and territorial possessions. Even worse, certain descent groups, reduced to a handful of women, are taken in by more powerful groups, thus changing from one dual unit to another and undermining one of the major principles of equilibrium and the very existence of each unit. In the song cycles, or in certain portions that can be told, such changes and mobility are often portrayed by two female ancestor figures who roam vast expanses of land playing the savoury but dangerous game of encounter and massacre.

In the two origin stories, the tree is a metaphor for the Men’s House: the latter is without any doubt the ancestor after whom it is named. To rebuild a Men’s House is therefore to reiterate the act that begot the descent group, it is a way to reaffirm one’s identity by celebrating the names of the founding hero and his epigones, represented by the skull-stands. It is they who demand the body of a man or a pig when they are thirsty; they who order wars or initiations. It was to quench their thirst that one of the most important rituals was performed: the giving of the blood of men killed to the enemy. After having been offered to the ancestors, the corpse was given to the *adje*. The *adje*’s kin group could then consume them, before the heads, and these alone, carefully prepared, were returned and hung with the other trophies. The names of the dead and the events of the battle were made into songs, and these became part of the existing cycles. Corpses, ancestors, songs and territories therefore form a chain that confirms the links between land, community and ancestors — since the blood spilled onto the ground opens rights to this land. The identity of each descent group is thus founded not only by the sharing of ancestors, but also by the dead that are offered to them. The interior of the Men’s House is therefore the place of the descent group *par excellence*, not only because it is there that they keep the representations of their ancestors, but because it is there — in the strict absence of any outsiders — that they also confirm the ties that bind them to these same ancestors. It is there that the certificates of ownership — the heads — are kept, in a chronological and spatial order ordained by oral tradition. Thus the Men’s Houses multiply ancestor images: not only do they preserve their trace in the form of objects or skull-stands, they *are* the ancestors, whose exploits are recalled by each war. Within these Houses is re-enacted the alliance indispensable to the continuation of the group: the men feed the spirits who in turn feed the men.

The second text the Adjirab refer to when speaking of Men’s Houses is the cycle that tells the story of Nduara and his younger brother, Emprung. Nduara is common to the whole Lower Sepik Valley, where he is known by various names: Mopul in Kambot, Andena in Murik, and so forth. Nduara is often depicted as an ambivalent character. In the Adjirab version, he is violent, but also the inventor of civilisation. He gives humans their staple food,
sago, but sentences them to work for their living. He possesses marvellous decorations and magic powers, and he seduces all the women. Finally, he reinvents the Men's House, but uses it as an instrument of revenge. It is this last episode that interests us here. The myth tells how Nduara gets his younger brother to help him build his Men's House. He asks him to dig a big hole so as to erect the centre pole that is to support the roof beam. In reality, however, Nduara is planning to kill his brother. He wants revenge for a simple reason: Emprung not only seduced his wife, he proclaimed his victory by incising a design on her pubis. So the younger brother digs the hole, but his cunning is a match for Nduara's violence, and he makes a hiding place to one side of the hole. As he works, he chews betel nuts and collects the red juice in the halves of coconut shells. When Nduara suddenly stands the post upright, Emprung dives into his hiding place. The betel juice spurts out, and Nduara thinks he has been killed. Emprung makes his way through an underground passage to a garden belonging to his mother. She discovers him when she follows a bird that has stolen her mourning hood. She returns to the village with Emprung. They arrive on the day Nduara is to commemorate his brother's death and the inauguration of his new Men's House, a huge building decorated with paintings and carvings as no other building before it. Nduara's sister and his wife have prepared two fibre skirts for the occasion, one long and black (as a sign of mourning) and the other short and brightly colored. Nduara is infuriated by the return of his brother and pulls down the Men's House on top of all the inhabitants of the region, who are gathered there. Some are killed and turn into crocodiles, others manage to escape.

Like any literary text, these two myths are open-ended and can be interpreted in many ways. One way is to analyse the relations between the three main characters — the two brothers and their mother — of the story played out here between the House and the garden. The elder brother murders his adulterous younger brother. The latter returns to a female place of abundance (the garden) from which he emerges reborn. While he lounges in this garden, eating and attempting to repair the severed thread tying him to his mother, his elder brother founds the culture by completing the construction of the Men's House. Opposite the female world to which the hero regresses through his symbolic death, stands the male world; opposite the original state of plenty, the family gift, stands the world of the law. Another interpretation sees the woman as the object of contention and the Men's House as the instrument of revenge. The two men clash over the possession of the woman, and the younger seems indeed to be the hero of the tale. As for the Men's House, intended as a tomb for Emprung and a monument to the glory of Nduara, it collapses, crushing the men who had come to take part in the inauguration, thus triggering the metamorphosis of two women, one into a bird, the other into a tortoise. All interpretations and commentaries are unanimous on this point: the Men's House is dedicated to war and to the law. But nowhere in this battle do the other men intervene. They are reduced to the role of hapless witnesses to the cosmic battle between two brothers. The law is overriding and is not to be questioned. The story of Nduara thus replays a moment of unity that is immediately destroyed by the violation of a taboo. To this extent, it re-enacts the story of the origin of the two parts. It shows that a Men's House is also — and above all — a story of the exchange of women. If women were admitted on a few very rare occasions, the House ‘Mothers’, on the other hand, were strictly forbidden entry.
More than the various episodes of the myth, it is the commentaries that reveal some unexpected aspects. First of all, Nduara is shown as a tumbuna bilong namel, a middle ancestor, not featuring in the genealogy, without a beginning or an end: he mysteriously vanishes — at least in the exoteric versions — after the fall of the House in Ombos. His sole mission thus seems to be to reinvent the Men’s House by showing how to make the carvings and paintings. For the Houses on the Ramu, which are also the founding ancestor, are said to have no representations whatsoever. Nduara leaves a legacy of representations in his own image: without a beginning and without a past. Adjirab culture thus denies any borrowing from other societies; the story of Nduara sets the representations free of prior meaning. Each listener may play on any representation, or shift it around without having to worry that some story may have already given it a meaning and a status. This refusal to acknowledge a beginning goes hand in hand with the affirmation of locality: Nduara erects his house at Ombos. The site is still there. It lies on the way to the Sepik, and whenever a canoe passes over the former hearth, a silence infully descends on the passengers. For the river now covers the former site. Its course coincides with the orientation of the House: the overhang faced the coast, the back faced the mountains. There is nothing remarkable about the site itself, unless it is a rise that seems to indicate an old dwelling. But the choice of the site is not indifferent: it stands on the border between the Armé, Adjirab and Aïon groups. The commentaries add that those men not killed or changed into animals with the collapse of Nduara’s house ran off in all directions, taking with them the carvings or the designs he had invented. Ever since, his shattered legacy lies dispersed over several regions: one sign is found in Murik, another in Sepik villages, still another in Aïon villages. The story of Nduara thus enables the Adjirab to affirm at the same time their particularities and their oneness with the local cultures. Lastly, another commentary, less common it is true, reveals that Nduara had the idea of honoring his adje by building an overhanging roof. He simply added this new structure onto the existing building. This commentary confirms not only the architectonic independence of the two structures, but suggests that the adje relationship (or its formalisation in the building) is a more recent invention. At the same time, it shows that the overhang is connected with a function that is of a different nature than that governing the inside of the building. This link between form and function was confirmed on the occasion of a brief visit to the Banaro village of Toko, in 1987. The large Men’s Houses had disappeared long ago, but when I asked about their form, people described a simple large building without an overhang. Seeing my astonishment, they told me: ‘Here we do not have exchange partners as they do in Porapora.’

The oral tradition reflects two worlds that exist side by side: the song cycle that justifies dual organisation and assigns each group a place of origin, an itinerary and an order of precedence, is echoed by the Nduara cycle, of which we have given only a small fragment, relating the invention of culture, its emergence in the region and the formalisation — or perhaps the introduction — of a new form of social relations. The first period, when each Men’s House was centred on the family, thus gives way to another period, in which the Men’s Houses bear signs of relations within the society as a whole. These dual representations — the world of war and the world of culture, or more accurately the world of the ancestors and the world of alliances — are bodied forth in the two parts of the Men’s House. These two
complementary worlds are mutually exclusive and their respective spheres clearly delineated. The mutual exclusion stems from more than the simple fact that the overhang is built by the *adje*, and this is confirmed by a number of ethnographic features, in particular the fact that, during exchanges between two *adje*, any food that crosses a certain boundary (roughly the imaginary line running between the first side posts supporting the roof) ceases to belong to the recipient and must obligatorily be offered to the ancestors. Likewise, the bodies or the heads of enemies, mediums of exchange, are not the same substance when they are used inside the building as when they are used outside.

The edifice is thus divided according to very simple criteria: opposite the closed back end, where the objects founding the identity of the descent group are kept, stands the open front end, which is the site of exchanges between (at least) two descent groups. This complementarity and the exchanges that accompany it are an inevitable component of society. A descent group could not exist without another descent group with which to exchange. Each Men’s House is a world that records and preserves, in a variety of forms, the traces left by a group as it competes with other groups while at the same time affirming its relations with them. As a consequence, the Men’s Houses scattered over the Adjirab territory and belonging to the same moiety have more features in common than two Houses standing side by side but belonging to different moieties. Their differences might be signalled by architectural features — which are minimal — or by the type of objects stored inside. Membership in a genealogical entity here comes into competition with belonging to a territory. Yet the system is not conceptualised in terms of nested boxes, like Russian dolls, but as juxtaposed units: the rule of first born is superseded by that of first come to the soil.

From a local standpoint, to speak of Adjirab Men’s Houses as an entity is a misnomer. And yet the Adjirab do have a representation of their Men’s Houses that sums up all the features and opposes them to the other Houses of the region. It is these features (which supplant the individual characteristics of the descent groups) that are held to be specific to the Adjirab culture. The notion is probably recent. Like certain commentaries, it must have been formalised after colonisation, when the multiplicity of contacts with other cultures, from the Sepik or elsewhere, obliged the Adjirab to rethink their identity. Strikingly enough, it is the Nduara cycle that provided the framework. One can wonder to what extent the story of Babel may have served as a model. There is no way of verifying such a hypothesis, but like the tower raised to scale the heavens, the House in Ombos enabled the Adjirab to reassert their particularity and to explain that, over and above the multiplicity of signs and forms, there existed a greater geographic entity of which their culture is a part. Finally, the commentaries on the myth of Nduara provide a place of origin for those who had none, thus engineering an imperceptible passage from myth to history. For what we see here is indeed the invention of history, in the Western sense of the term: the passage from a local idiom to a broader ensemble.

**Recent transformations: a church and a school in the shape of a Men’s House**

Some understanding of when and how the social transformations came about would illuminate many dark areas and permit a finer-grained analysis of the evolution of the Men’s
Houses. But unfortunately, not a lot is known. The factors that, in part, protected Porapora — its remoteness and the difficulty of gaining entry to the villages — also favoured its fall into oblivion. The region was rarely visited by Australian patrols and their reports were extremely succinct; the earliest ones disappeared with the last world war. Under such conditions, any attempt to establish even the simplest chronology of the facts runs up against numerous obstacles: the scarcity of documents on the region makes it impossible for the fieldworker to recover lost or forgotten aspects; almost all the eye-witnesses have died, and those who are still living do not see any interest in reconstructing their past experience. Even were one to discover an orthodox reading of the past, one would have reason to wonder whether it might not have been recreated to fit the story.29

Confronted with these restrictions, my first task was therefore to try to determine a chronology. Once one has a rough sequence — often established by cross-checking testimonies — another problem crops up: the existence of two kinds of historical knowledge having often contradictory goals and logics.30 Seen from the West, the history of social change in the area begins with the colonial period; seen from the village, however, this history is part of a long time-line and follows its own models. Seen from the West, history is a single strand; seen from the village, it is made up of a number of parallel strands. For example, a number of events have been appropriated by groups when they directly affected their own rights and customs. They were therefore incorporated into the songs celebrating the history of their ancestors. To this end, they were encoded so as to fit a prosody and a rhythm that made them easier to remember. Their translation does not fail to raise several problems of interpretation. The events themselves are told according to the rules of the genre: factual, descriptive, highly detailed, the story-line is often muddled, and the teller plays on images that draw their meaning from his own reference system. Finally, depending on the informant, there is often considerable variation: between full acceptance or total rejection of the Western world, there was probably a wide range of attitudes.31 Some events are talked about and commented on freely, others are furtively acknowledged, without further commentary. The elements presented here are therefore partial and to a large degree stem from hypotheses. Because of the lack of documentation, they should by no means be taken for an ethno-historical study. They are based simply on what was perceived by the ethnologist and said by his informants concerning changes in the society some ten years after independence.

As in many places in the Sepik Basin, the history of the eruption of ‘modernity’ is marked by two turning points: the first was the ban on head-hunting, the condition sine qua non for pacification. The end of generalised warfare resulted in, among other things, a rapid transformation of the residence pattern. Formerly, each descent group had had its own Men’s House, built a short distance from the village in order to preserve it from contact with the women and children. Each descent group lived together in a hamlet. Today’s Adjirab village is a collection of hamlets whose population hovers around 300; the Men’s Houses are built at one end of a cleared ground ringed with dwellings. It is not unusual for two historically linked descent groups to build a common Men’s House.

The second turning point came in the early 1960s, with the end of the initiations and the exposition on the village common of the objects that used to be kept in the Men’s
Houses, out of sight of the women. This display was accompanied by the conversion of younger generations to Christianity, but also by the purchase, by a few priests and unscrupulous merchants, of all the old objects. Within a short time, the Men’s Houses were emptied of their objects, and thus of a large portion of their power and their character. But by the time the merchants and missionaries did what they did, the ground had already been prepared. Several Houses had been destroyed by bombardments of the valley in the Second World War; by an irony of history, the inhabitants of the Sepik watched the very White men who had forbidden them to make war engage in an act of massive destruction whose purpose has always escaped them. The Men’s Houses were never rebuilt. No explanation was given for this refusal, though it is probable that the fires destroyed objects deemed to be irreplaceable. No doubt this was the sign that times had changed for good.

Several years passed. We have practically no information on the post-war years except that a strong cargo-movement appeared and rice-growing developed and was then all too quickly abandoned. Not living directly on the river, the Adjirab were not subjected to the hoards of tourists that thronged to the Sepik in the 1970s or to the economic development that hit the villages along the river or near the urban centres. All that reached them were the echoes of distant upheavals and those of the modernisation taking place in other parts of the province. Yet these were important years in historical terms. They marked the passage from one set of generations to the next, from those initiated and educated in an unchanged society to those who had gone to the baible skul (English ‘Bible School’), and then on to Western-style high-schools.

Then came the end of the 1970s and Father Jünnemann. He began the construction of the church at Muruken. His building comes as no surprise: he was part of a two-pronged trend: the rediscovery of the ‘traditions’ by political leaders and the Church’s application of the reforms recommended by Vatican II. Without the Bishop’s permission and his logistical support, the building would not have been possible. The Church was beginning to change tactics: instead of rejecting all compromise with the devil, it now advocated getting to know the local customs and retaining those best suited to the praise of God’s glory. The Roman Catholic Church of New Guinea, and the diocese of Wewak in particular, applied these divinely inspired changes with no less than religious fervor. After all, hadn’t the Church, from the outset and in spite of the danger of drawing down the wrath of a hypersensitive hierarchy, implemented certain reforms advocated by a renascent Rome? ‘Some missionaries have been enthusiastic about the use of indigenous motifs and styles in church architecture, music, vestment and ceremony.’32 A church-raising in all its splendour was the ideal occasion for celebrating the glory of God. No means were spared. The posts and roof were made of local materials; but the paint, nails and certain components of the architecture were flown in by helicopter, as is the custom in New Guinea. A few architectural innovations were introduced: a system of trusses dispensed with the need for the centreposts that cut the line of sight; a row of windows was set into the outer walls to let in the light needed for the readings. Every surface was covered with paintings. The pangal33 walls were painted on the outside with brightly coloured faces and on the inside with geometric designs. The side-posts and underside of the tie-beams were carved and painted with particular care. As a finishing touch, panels were fastened between the beams and the rafters. These featured semi-realistic
paintings, some of which were inspired by Biblical themes taken from Western artworks seen in books. The altar, chairs, bishop's seat, confessional and baptismal font were all carved and painted as well. No surface was neglected. The worship of God, like worship of the spirits, brooks no approximations. Everything must conform to the desires and the traditions reinvented in this framework. As the perceptive psychologist he was, Father Jünnemann had understood that the success of the building and, as a consequence, of the implantation of the faith, depended on the success of the exchanges: in New Guinea anything perceived as boring loses some of its power. And so rice and canned goods appeared at each of the festivals that traditionally marked the end of one of the phases of construction: people still evoke these with emotion.

The result met every expectation. The church, which was a startling sight in this backwater, gave off an aura of wealth that might be the envy of certain Baroque monuments. It contrasted oddly with the little gray corrugated metal buildings along the Bien River. Everything was luxury and profusion. For the Adjirab, not only did the construction seal a new alliance, it also signalled the recognition of their culture by the very people who had combatted it. This about-face of religious policy (the Church was one of the Adjirab's few points of contact with the outside world) must have seemed suspicious and even bewildering to some. There had to be something behind it. But it did open up new possibilities which, given the times, must be seized.

Jünnemann seems to have given the elders, even those who were not baptised, a great deal of latitude in determining the iconographic program. A number of men had in fact already taken part in the construction of the cathedral in Wewak, so building a church was no novelty for them. Nevertheless, a few guidelines as to symbolism and part of the program were in order. The program itself was simple. At the front of the church, the post — the one traditionally provided by the adje — was carved with the ancestor figures of all the descent groups. Inside the church, the side-posts and the beams carried the figures of mythical ancestors, executed according to tradition. A change was made in the two posts closest to the altar, however, as though the closer one drew to the sacred spot, the more the West regained its power: these bore two totally different figures. Black skinned, dressed in a loincloth, arms raised, they were accompanied by a bird with outspread wings. For the Western eye, there was no doubt as to their interpretation: they represented Christ, blackened by the tropical sun, with the Holy Spirit. Over the altar, that is on the side facing the apse, a painter had represented 'Revenge pursuing Crime', and facing the public, a naive figure that looked something like a devil but without his attributes. However, in spite of the clear break with traditional style and iconography, further investigation revealed that these two figures, far from being taken from religious history, belonged to the local past.

Why this ambiguity, this twin reading? The explanation lies, once again, in the past; it is based on an interplay of correspondences established early on by the missionaries themselves. To explain that, even though they might be black, headhunters and polygamous, Papuans were still like other men, they called upon representations of humanity's origins. Their demonstration was based on both the Bible and myths, which they had listened to attentively and collected. Unfortunately, we will never know the reaction of the old Adjirab men on hearing the story of Adam and Eve for the first time or whether it was obvious for
them to compare Biblical characters with those from their own tradition. But the analogy between certain passages enabled them in part to lay one text over the other. When this was not possible, the missionaries could easily explain that the Bible was a secret text that told the true hidden origin of things. This explanation also validated future changes, endowing them with a prophetic character not present in the myths. From the meeting of the two traditions, sprang a new version of Genesis. Today it tells how, in the beginning, were Adam and Eve. This couple lived a holy life until one day Adam took a bite of the mango. That was the beginning of problems for mankind, because there would be Blacks and Whites ever after, and for history, because things became less clear. For, while some agree to date the split between the two worlds back to this time, others favour a version centred on Noah’s drunken sleep and the scandalous conduct of his son Ham. In the second version, the priests’ influence is more directly apparent, reflecting an interpretation of the texts that was current in nineteenth-century scientific circles to account for the existence of black-skinned peoples.

In any event, after these episodes, the fate of mankind was sealed: Blacks and Whites went their separate ways. Time passed. Fortunately for the white world, Christ came. Like Santa Claus, he brought with him the things that had vanished with the dawning of time: cars, radios, money, in sum all those items that make life so pleasant. Alas, blocked by incomprehensible forces, this wealth did not reach New Guinea. There men were left with nothing but their flutes and canoes. And that is how they missed their entry into the modern age.

This story shows how close we are to the cargo cults. The figure of Christ is associated with modern techniques and objects, with wealth. It would probably not take much to rekindle these cults, which were particularly powerful in the area throughout the 1950s. But once man’s single origin had been established and the struggle between Blacks and Whites had been engaged under the august protection of the Church, events took a different course, divided into several once again hard-to-reconstruct stages, but which ultimately aimed to despoil the Men’s Houses to the benefit of the new cults. If certain informants are to be believed, the most important stage was the ‘transfer’ of certain stones to Marienberg, accomplished by young men who held political responsibilities in the village. At the time, they had not meant to dispose of the stones definitively, but to get them out of the immediate vicinity by entrusting them, together with other important items, to the missionaries and by limiting their power: there, on the hill dedicated to the Virgin Mary, shut away and guarded by a good shepherd, their effectiveness was supposed to dwindle. However, the missionaries put them up for sale, to the indignation of the very people who had sold them in the first place. The stones and objects reverted to the Whites, where they could no longer be controlled. When it came time to build the church, history had to be reinterpreted to fit the new genealogy. To this end, as the carvings and their placing in the church show, the Adjirab played on the names common to both systems, replacing the ones with the others. Nothing could be simpler, since myth, history and the Bible all share the same fascination with names, places and travels. It was sufficient to look. Among Noah’s descendants was the name Akab, which was none other than the secret name of the ancestor of the aka (‘wild pig’) descent group, the very one who had donated the land for the church. He was therefore represented on the last panel. Christ himself was depicted as a pregnant
woman. The reason for this is not clear. His ability to perform miracles, but above all, to appear after death in different forms probably favoured this substitution: like mythical characters, Christ has the gift of ubiquity. Furthermore, he is an ambiguous figure because he did not marry.

In the course of these strange manipulations, the ancestor figures lost one of their old functions — that of protecting the group from outside attack, of overseeing their good conduct and morality — and acquired a new one: that of ensuring the continuity of history. This little game of Musical Chairs is not new to the society: to take a different name is to change groups or lineages, and thus to lay claim to a new position as well as sometimes to reinvent history. Here too the Adjirab were playing on their tradition.

From this standpoint, the church cannot be likened to a Men's House, but rather to a pantheon, one of whose functions is to weave ties between the old and the new, between here and there. The church is an abstract place, which establishes a genealogical chain for the benefit of all, while creating a distance between present-day individuals and their ancestors. Because of this, it stands at the opposite pole from the Men's Houses, which underscore the close, unshakeable ties between the living and the dead. In place of the plurality of the Men's Houses, the church establishes an *ecclesia*, whose fundamental characteristic is its unity, as though the entropy of the world had at last imposed its law, reducing the many Men's Houses to one.

This opposition can easily be read in the architectural elements of the church: it is transparent, open to one and all, where closure and taboos used to reign; it is decorated on the outside with thousands of figures, where the inside used to be painted with representations of the natural elements. At the prow is a post featuring all of the group's ancestors, where a single lineage used to be represented. Furthermore, it turns the world upside down, since where once sacrifices were offered to the ancestors, the church commemorates the sacrifice of one ancestor offered for all mankind. But above all, one feature indispensable to the Men's Houses will always be absent: the water holes scattered throughout the marshes that are home to the spirits of the descent groups and where the representations of the ancestors were buried. The church and the Men's House can therefore not be reduced to each other.

This new twist given to history by the church had enormous repercussions for the Men's Houses: dispossessed of their ancestor figures by modernity, they became mere abstractions, empty shells of limited symbolic value. The only reminder of their association with warfare were the ropes that told the score of the head-hunting expeditions and the cage-like structure woven from palm fronds hanging from the ceiling, which indicated the spot where the bodies taken in raids were once exposed. Their only function seems to come down to affirming the group's identity by means of the *adje* relationship. And now, this last remaining function, already badly eroded, is coming under severe attack. For several years now, it has been at the centre of a violent debate. The younger men condemn it as a dangerous institution, claiming that it reawakens old quarrels, appeals to the ancestors' spirits and encourages constant recourse to deadly magical practices. This accusation clearly shows that the dismissal of the ancestral spirits into the forest or their forced departure from Marienberg are perceived as having failed. The destruction — or sale— of the skull-stands did not suffice to drive them away or to circumvent their power. They still prowl the village.
Whenever something goes wrong, the young men immediately accuse the Men's Houses of being behind the disorders and the old men of keeping up an outmoded tradition that jeopardises the group's survival. This conflict stems from an episode of recent history. At the demand of the missionaries and with the complicity of certain elders, an entire age group was irrevocably excluded from the initiations, and more globally from traditional knowledge. With the end of initiations came the disappearance of the basis of political organisation and authority. From there it was only a short step to questioning the construction of the Men's Houses that founded the old men's authority and their momentary glory; and this step was gradually taken.

An irreversible evolution is thus taking shape, the last stage of which seems to be the end of the *adje* system. For the young people, however, things are somewhat more complicated. However anxious they may be to create a society free of sickness and death, and therefore dream of going back to the way things were, in the beginning, without sin and therefore without Men's Houses — which is why they condemn them — they are nonetheless the heirs of their past. They cannot ignore the system that underpins the land-distribution pattern and the relationships among descent groups. Obliged to compromise, whereas some would prefer to reject all concessions (the only way to ensure the success of their undertaking), young people are forced to acknowledge at least one of the functions of the Men's Houses, which is to express the identity of a descent group, thereby opening the door to all they contain. At least until now. For the generation gap is widening apace, not only because the old laws obliging the young to produce the wealth have disappeared, but because it is now they who are best equipped to cope with the modern world and to get the most out of it. Local schooling and, for some, continuing their education in the city, has given them an understanding of things that had totally escaped previous generations. And so the gerontocracy is gradually being replaced by the growing power of the younger generations.

Some time after the church was finished, the Muruken community, following a sinister affair of rivalry with neighbouring villages, decided to build their own school. This they did with mission aid. The new building was erected on one side of the soccer field, some distance from the church. With all the majesty of the Men's Houses, it too adopted the same form, but with a variant: both ends terminated in an overhanging roof decorated with all the elements required by tradition. The building housed several classrooms, which had been left without ornamentation. From the inside, the school seemed a model of sobriety compared with the church.

Whose idea was it to make a school in the image of the Men's Houses? Probably the first headmaster's. A native son of the village, he had become a teacher at the normal school in Wewak. There he was won over to the ideas of the Pangu Pati and, upon returning to the village, worked — without much success — to revive the initiations and preserve the traditions. Nevertheless, he stated — too loudly and too strongly — that he did not believe in the ancestors' power or in magic. It seems that it was obvious to him that the school should be built on the lines of the Men's House: after all, in these societies didn't power rest on knowledge, and wasn't the new power therefore to be found in education? But from there to concluding that the school was perceived as the Western form of the Men's Houses and
that the grades of school were the equivalent of initiation grades would be a naive step to take. It would be assuming an equivalence between Western education and initiation on the pretext that both are systems of education. Such an assimilation forgets rather quickly that initiations are reserved for men, are based on esoteric knowledge and, above all, form an introduction to the world of politics; whereas in Western education, knowledge is open to all, and politics plays only a minor role. Western schooling cannot be reduced, in either form or function, to a traditional system of knowledge. The deliberate and much vaunted shifting of the architectural forms was possible only because these forms had lost much of their original meaning: in the school building, these forms and representations no longer bear witness to a body of knowledge, they now proclaim an identity. The traditional world has been so rejected and made so abstract that its representations now have only a very general value. The problem is no longer one of filiation, but of a still vague set of ideas gravitating around an emerging definition of Adjirab identity. For the moment, however, the forms that have been shamelessly adopted and applied denote a process of folklorisation for which the school is the most widely chosen vehicle, busily engaging students in the manufacture of traditional articles devoid of any utility (coconut-shell eye-glasses) or converted to a new use (sacks for washing sago made into book bags).

The construction of the school thus marked the end of a trend that began with the Western invasion of this remote corner of swampland. The three buildings cited (the modern Men’s House, the church and the school) illustrate three phases of this transformation. After a period during which the old system withstood the shock of contact with the white world, then another during which the church became a way, through filiation, of discovering a past, thus reestablishing a link with an original state of society, the school seems to be one of the final manifestations of the transmigration of forms that is now nearly exhausted. Efficacy has yielded to claims for identity.

Between 1987 and 1992, the old decrepit school was torn down. Today all that is left is a slit-gong once used to call the children in the morning and two tall poles on which, following a ritual practised in all schools, the national flag was raised at the start of the school-day. The church was destroyed in 1992. Its posts lie on the ground, useless but carefully stacked. Another page has been turned, and with it, modernity has driven its wedge a little deeper: in place of the old-fashioned traditional school stands one of those soul-less buildings for which the modern age has such a gift, with its corrugated roof and gray walls. A present from the local government shortly before the general elections, it bears no trace of the past; instead, it shows all the signs of a break yet to be completed.

Footnotes
1 See Forge (1965: 23–31).
2 See Forge (1965: 29).
4 On the role of Australian advisers in this revival as well as in the construction of Men’s Houses, see Beier (1976). The reader may also consult Tuzin (1980) and several articles published in Sepik Heritage (Lutkehaus et al. eds., 1990).


Laycock recognises four linguistic groups. He mentions, effectively, Gorovu, spoken by the people of Bosmun and the language of Kambot. The groups retained here are those given by the Adjirab people themselves. For them, Bosmun is a remote place, as is the village of Kambot, though they once often warred with the latter. The language of the Armé people may be a dialect of Adjirab, but is perhaps closer to Banaro. We have separated the two here for ethnographic reasons. The Armé group settled this region long ago, but was pushed back by the Adjirab at a relatively recent date. A number of their traditions (mortuary and marriage rites) are radically different from those practised by the Adjirab groups. Laycock (1973) calls the Adjirab, Adjora. Curiously, this name is rejected by the region's inhabitants. The name Adjirab is said to mean 'the good eel place' (djir: 'eel', ab: 'good')

Properly speaking, these descent groups are exogamous units. All claim to descend from a single apical ancestor, although the genealogical link is not direct. Marriages are made by sister exchange or by preferential cross-cousin marriage. Residence is uxorilocal. Each descent group lived in its own part of the territory. This usually comprised a tract of swamp, a tract of sago plantation and a tract of forest where gardens were cleared in the dry season. Each descent group also belonged to a totemic unit that was divided into halves and sub-halves, following a classical dual system.


There are only two studies on Porapora: Schwab (1970) and Huppertz (1977).

The only recent work on a region bordering the Adjirab is B. Juillerat's study on the Banaro (Juillerat, 1993). The Banaro live on the banks of the Middle Keram. Although they are neighbours of the Adjirab, contact between the two groups has been infrequent. Nevertheless, they share a portion of their history. One Adjirab descent group took refuge along the Keram, where they planted fields of sago palms. The Banaro still recognise the rights of certain Adjirab groups in these fields. A number of the inhabitants of Yar village are descended from a group from Ombos (or, according to information collected by Juillerat, from Ogomania), who fled, probably at the beginning of this century following a war, and settled on the Keram (Juillerat, 1993: 80).


A propensity amply demonstrated in M. Mead's work (see Mead, 1938).

The Pigdin term used by churchmen to designate 'idols'. The word-for-word translation is 'false gods'.

Readers interested in a more extensive comparison of the construction principles may consult the drawings made by Wallace and Ruth Ruff for the houses in the Sepik (Ruff and Ruff, 1980, 1990) and by Christian Coiffier for those more specifically on the Middle Sepik (Coiffier, 1990). The initial drawing of the Agur house in Armada was done by Gérard Clavé, in July 1987. Upon his return, a study of the structures and the drawings was carried out under his and Pierre Jacquot's direction by the third-year students of the Environment department of the Institut d'Arts Visuels d'Orléans. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them all.

Unlike Banaro practice, each House belongs to a single descent group. This group may be aided by other groups of the same kind from the same sub-moiety (therefore having the same totem) if they are too few in number to build their own House.

Principally in one German missionary museum, see Huppertz (1997).

The Senaï site is of cultural importance. It was on the outskirts of the present-day village that the mango grew which gave rise to one dual unit, see below.

It must be remembered that the Adjirab territory is swampy and has no stones. Their very scarcity makes them valuable. All the stones had therefore to be imported, but we have very little information as to their sources. They probably came from the hill region, but some may have been exchanged, in villages on the coast, for skulls or children.

Photographs of these displays can be found in HOLTKER (1966) or Hauser-Schäublin (1989: 355, ill. 97). The Men's House in the photo is from a neighbouring region, however: very slight but real differences may have existed. The construction of the Bosmun Men's House together with part of the opening ceremony is described by HOLTKER (1966). The Bosmun site, too, is of cultural importance. The village is presently occupied by a population with whom the Adjirab claim not to have any dealings. Relations with Bosmun, though rare, were nevertheless not exceptional. From the standpoint of form, the Men's Houses look much alike.
21 The custom reported by Father Lehner of hanging bones from trees has been strongly deplored by the older men of the village. Nevertheless, it did exist in other areas. What Lehner saw in the village of Pinam must therefore be regarded as an exception corresponding to a particularly turbulent moment in its history.

22 In spite of my questions, I never received any explicit information about them. Höltker (1966) also mentions a wickerwork figure kept in this room. In 1987, in Pinam, in the Men's House that was still standing at the time, this room contained a series of carved characters that had disappeared a few years later. Bernard Juillerat describes the Banaro Men's House (Juillerat, 1993: 130–132). The same components are found there, with a few variants that are not without their importance. Can the geographical distribution of the figures kept in the back room be used to determine a culture area characteristic of this region or must we be content with broader criteria? The question will be left open for the moment. Nevertheless, I must point out that the architecture of the Men's Houses in this area is radically different from that found on the Middle Sepik. There the space is divided into top and bottom, whereas on the Lower Sepik the division is front/back (Schuster, 1985: 24–25). We may suppose that this variation reflects different functions — and different symbolic representations.

23 Object MNAO 66-12-14, in the Musée National des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, is to my knowledge the last exemplar of these hoods. These were objects having a similar shape and appearance, but much larger. They represented the founding ancestors of certain descent groups.

24 The documentation provided by old photographs poses a problem. As far as I know, no systematic record was ever made of all the Men's Houses in a region. It is possible therefore, that, following a widespread habit of travellers, the first photographers took pictures of the Houses that struck them because of their size or their decoration, ignoring the simpler buildings and so condemning them to oblivion. This approach distorts any reading we might make of the material culture in general and of Men's Houses in particular.

25 One of these heads is conserved in Basel's ethnographic museum. The wooden stand has been lost (destroyed by insects while the object was in Marienberg). It carries the catalogue number Vb 14 399.

26 For a complete study of one of these songs, see Jürg Wassmann's (1991) remarkable work.

27 This interpretation follows B. Juillerat's work, which sees the Oedipal conflict as the key to the explanation. On this subject, and on Yafar myths whose themes resemble those of the Nduara myth, see Juillerat, 1991, esp. Ch. 1 and 2.

28 I heard this only once, but from the lips of the oldest men. They gave this commentary considerable importance.


31 This remark, made by Bernard Juillerat concerning the Banaro, applies equally to Porapora (Juillerat, 1993: 34).


33 Pangal — the base of the sago palm which, once flattened into a thin layer, prepared and dried, is painted.

34 One of the few articles published on Porapora is a set of myths collected in the 1950s by one of the priests living in Marienberg and who, for several months, was in charge of this region that had long been the preserve of Father Lehner (see Schwab, 1970).


36 A number of uncertainties surround the status of this mango, some of which, via an alternative route, connect with the question that worried Medieval Christian Europe: was there sexuality in Paradise?

37 According to the same version, these stones disappeared in the forest.

38 After the 'revocation of the tambaran' (see Juillerat, 1993), in other words after the abandoning of traditional religion under the impact of missionary activity and the dismissal of the spirits (Pidgin: tambaran) that used to be summoned up in the Men's Houses. The Banaro use the term to designate both the spirits worshipped in the Men's Houses and the objects they inhabit. The ritual alternated between calling the tambaran (to come and live among men) and dismissing them to the forest (1993: 123 f). In the late 1930s, pressed by the missionaries, the tambaran returned to the forest for good. I did not collect any specific information on the circumstances of this revocation.

39 One plank of the political platform of the Pangu Pati, founded by Michael Somare, the first Prime Minister of independent New Guinea, was defence of local traditions and cultures. The party is strong in East Sepik province.