



PERGAMON

Language & Communication 23 (2003) 359–383

LANGUAGE
&
COMMUNICATION

www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

The semiotics of world-making in Korowai feast longhouses

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Abstract

Among spatially-dispersed Korowai speakers of West Papua, Indonesia, the members of a land-owning clan aggregate every 10 years or so to build a huge longhouse for purposes of sponsoring a feast and giving food to people from elsewhere. This paper analyzes the semiotic links between a feast longhouse and multiple spatiotemporal layers of the building's context of occurrence, including: the space and time of the owning clan's internal social relations, the space of the wider interlocal Korowai landscape, long-term biological cycles of resource expenditure and regeneration, and short-term cycles of food production. I argue that links of causation are integral to the total semiotic character of the feast building, and that the overall skein of dense semiotic links between building and sociocultural world embodies a reflexive historical sensibility on the part of Korowai speakers about the contingency of cause-effect sequences in their practices of life.

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Keywords: Architecture; Iconicity; Indexicality; Feasts; Contingency; New Guinea

1. Introduction: signifying effects

Sociocultural worlds are composed of disparate forces. Yet in people's actions in particular times and places, forces of their sociocultural worlds are made to converge with each other, however problematically. Buildings and rituals are often exceptionally dense nodes of conjuncture. They depend on diverse elements of a wider sociocultural world for their constitution and sense, even as they shape a wider world's constitution and sense in turn. The question is, how does this work? How are buildings, rituals, or other phenomena of conjuncture related to the wider worlds that are their contexts of occurrence?

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This article is a study of the semiotic relationship between a building and the sociocultural world in which it is built. The building is a type of feast longhouse made by Korowai speakers of West Papua, the Indonesian-controlled half of the island of New Guinea. Korowai pass most of their lives residing in single or paired small households, separated from their nearest neighbors by vast stretches of forest. These households meet basic food needs by processing one sago palm for starch flour about every 10 days. From time to time, though, different families build houses together in one place in order to sponsor a feast. For about a month, feast sponsors work to fell several hundred mature sago palms. Soon plump beetle larvae begin developing in the felled palm trunks' pith. Feast sponsors pledge gifts of these larvae to a select handful of other persons. While the grubs mature, feast sponsors spend a further month building a longhouse in which food gifts will be cooked and consumed, and then they produce a huge surplus of sago flour. Finally they harvest the larvae, now on the verge of pupating, and several hundred guests travel from all directions to the longhouse for a day and night of celebration. Most of them arrive in performance troupes organized by the designated food recipients, and these troupes are fed with cooked larvae and sago starch presented by the feast sponsors in fulfillment of their earlier pledges. The morning after the celebration, visitors return to their own lands elsewhere. The feast sponsors and their supporters also soon leave the feast longhouse behind and resume their earlier pattern of residential dispersion.

One main goal of this essay is to delineate how Korowai make their feast longhouses signify many things at once, and how they make the longhouses signify those things in many manners. Korowai build into their longhouses a dense multiplicity of semiotic links to different levels of spatiotemporal context. A further, related goal here is to delineate how this density of signification makes longhouses an effective means of creating a world. By making longhouses, Korowai shape social time and the social landscape. Longhouses are powerful causal forces in major part through their poetic force, the way their builders superpose into this single sign-vehicle different orders of signification. Longhouses' force is a matter not only of the intellectual, aesthetic, or political efficacy of signification (Lévi-Strauss, 1963 [1949]), but of the signification of efficacy. In the relation between the building and its surrounding world, links of representation and links of causality (which I take to include 'function' or 'effect') are intertwined, and reciprocally constitutive (Keane, this volume). This essay's contribution to the established, increasingly influential field of semiotic anthropology lies in taking as an object of semiotic theorization not a primarily linguistic phenomenon but a material entity that people create to fulfill material goals, such as keeping themselves dry. Eco (1973, p. 131), remarking that architecture is a particular challenge to semiotics because most architectural objects 'function' rather than 'communicate,' suggests optimistically that 'seeing functions from the semiotic point of view might permit one to understand and define them better.' I try to do that here (compare also Bogatyrev, 1976 [1936]).

In this study I follow other semiotic anthropologists in making use of Peirce's categories 'icon,' 'index,' and 'symbol.' In North Atlantic popular and scholarly discourse, 'cause' has often been conceived in naturalistic terms, while 'representation'

has often been held to be coextensive with imitation or depiction (Peirce's 'icon'), structuralism offering a late counter-view of representation as code (Peirce's 'symbol'). Peirce's most widely known typology is notable against this background for recognizing that sign-vehicles signify in multiple manners. Above all, the typology is notable for recognizing, in the sign-type 'index,' that some sign relations are relations of cause or other spatiotemporal connection, not depiction. Once Peirce's typifications are introduced, one may well query the autonomy of types from each other, as in the view that judgments of iconic similarity are irreducibly conventional (Gombrich, 1969 [1960]; Eco, 1976), or the finding that pronouns and other shifters conjoin conventionality and indexicality (Jakobson, 1971 [1957]). Peirce's opening up of a differentiated field of sign-types might also raise a spectre of infinitude. If the actual and imaginable world has unity on dimensions of space, time, and kind, then is everything potentially indexical or iconic of everything else? This is one side of Mitchell's (1986, pp. 56–62) charge that semiotics 'merely redescribes' basic metaphysical problems. Yet Peirce's categories, heuristically adopted, offer preliminary terms for parsing the composite make-up of signs, their layers of interacting iconic, indexical, and symbolic sign relations (after Tambiah, 1985 [1979]; Caton, 1986; Mines, 1997; Irvine and Gal, 2000; Lindquist, 2001), especially as these are conceived by sign-users themselves in explicit or implicit semiotic ideologies shaping which sign-functions dominate different sociocultural fields (Bedos-Rezak, 2000). I shall document that Korowai, for example, approach much of the work of feast longhouse construction with an ideology of iconic causation, according to which iconic work has indexical purposes and indexical effects.

At the same time, I shall take the ubiquity of Peircean 'symbolic' sign-functions for granted in this study. Merely that there is a named Korowai building-type, *gil* 'feast longhouse,' and that they are collectively-held rules of how and why to make these buildings, means that we are squarely in the domain of convention or code, and that all aspects of longhouse practice are symbolically mediated. Most sentences in this study could be reasonably prefaced with 'It is a convention of Korowai longhouse-making that...,' but I leave those words out because I am concerned here to foreground the iconicity and indexicality of longhouse semiosis more than the symbolic layers with which those elements of iconicity and indexicality are indissolubly melded.

One reason for foregrounding the semiotics of causality in any analysis of Korowai feast longhouses is that this is an area of life in which people are transparently working to accomplish certain goals. Feasts are among the most sensuously and intellectually valued events of Korowai existence, and they are very hard work. Producing feasts, people are variously concerned to produce food, to make guests comfortable, to support humans' health and bodily growth, to make new social bonds or fulfil existing social obligations, and to create experiences of aesthetic and sensuous pleasure. Yet when a person works to bring about certain effects in the world, he or she also creates and confronts the possibility that chains of cause and effect will lead in unexpected, undesirable directions. Correlatively, a further goal of this essay is to delineate the ways Korowai feast practices focus reflexively on all that can go wrong in feast events. Feast-related semiosis is pragmatic semiosis, in the

sense that people are doing things in their signifying acts, to such a degree that feast signs are inherently and irreducibly signs-in-use. Even more, feast-related semiosis is also ‘meta-pragmatic’ semiosis, in the sense that people build their efficacious feast practice out of reflexive representations of that practice, particularly its contingency and uncertainty.

2. Longhouses as indexical icons of their owners

Each section of this paper discusses a different layer of spatial and temporal context that is signified in the built space of longhouses, with a view to showing how these different layers of signification coexist and interlock in the building as a total action (compare Munn, 1977). I begin with the building’s semiotic links to its builders, a network of persons living at a particular kind of place and moment.

Korowai speakers are several thousand in number. They live dispersed across 500 square miles of lowland forest, a little south of New Guinea’s central mountain chain, between 50 and 90 miles west of the Indonesia-Papua New Guinea border, and over 100 miles inland from the Arafura Sea, into which the region’s southwest-flowing rivers drain. The Korowai landscape is a patchwork of hundreds of *bolüp* ‘territories, places’ owned by named patrilineal groups (groups people belong to by virtue of their paternity). Korowai residential dispersion is organized around this institution of place-focused clanship, in combination with an ethos of autonomy. People live on their own land or that of close relatives rather than aggregating at central localities, because being a *bolüp giom-anop* ‘place owner’ means being able to exploit the land base and otherwise act out, free from others’ control or criticism. When built, a *gil* ‘longhouse’ is always associated with the owned land and food resources of a particular named clan, or occasionally a pair of clans with adjacent homelands. A longhouse stands for a clan, the *gil giom-anop* ‘longhouse owners.’ The building directly indexes the clan’s existence as a named entity controlling a resource-laden stretch of land.

Feast longhouses are also striking for the directness with which they signify time. In Korowai speech the term *gil* ‘longhouse’ is the main word for feasts as such. To speak of a particular feast event, people speak of such-and-such clan’s ‘longhouse.’ To speak of the activity of holding a feast, people say *gil ali-* ‘construct a longhouse.’ Using the building to speak of the event is not an awkward catachresis, because the building is a central instrument and setting of that event’s performance, and because the building as physical entity is deeply evenemential. It is a sign in and of time, or a medium of what Lefebvre (1991 [1974], p. 71) terms the ‘incessant to-and-fro between temporality (succession, concatenation) and spatiality (simultaneity, synchronicity)’ characteristic of all productive activity.

One of the temporal processes in which a feast building is semiotically embedded is people’s alternation between long periods of dispersed residence in normal houses and short periods of aggregation for feasts. House living itself is prominently temporal. Built of wood, rattan, and palm leaves, a house is physically inhabitable for only about 20 months, and people continuously move from one house to the next. They narrate their lives as successions of house occupations and the events that

occurred during them, thereby temporalizing dwellings as markers of history, and spatializing history as a sequence of residential episodes. At intervals of anywhere from 5 to 20 years, though, clan members' independent histories of dispersed residence in normal small houses are interrupted by a few months spent living together in a village-like cluster of houses to build a feast longhouse. Longhouses thus index not only a landed clan as such, but a clan engaged in a distinctive kind of social project. In contrast to patterns in 'house societies' of Southeast Asia (Macdonald, 1987; Fox, 1993; Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995; Sparkes and Howell, 2003), the close identification of these longhouses as physical dwellings with clans as social units is transient and inherently processual rather than enduring. The identification lasts as a material presence only as long as the activities of feast celebration, and dissipates with owners' return to dispersed residence.

The first anthropological attempt to understand this kind of regular oscillation between radically contrastive patterns of residence was Mauss's (1950 [1904–1905]) classic account of seasonal variation in 'social morphology' among Inuit peoples. Mauss suggests that as far as their alternation between winter aggregation and summer dispersion, one might speak of Inuit as 'two different peoples' (1950 [1904–1905], p. 462). By contrast, the two Korowai residential forms are closely-articulated counterparts, each immanent to the other. There is one 'people' or society, but it is a society in motion, resting neither at one pole nor the other. While living in dispersed houses, people walk by their old feast sites, and they talk longingly about their own past and future feasts. So, too, during hardships of festive aggregation people speak ruefully of how good it will be to return to living far apart. Since feast sponsorship is not something everyone across the landscape undertakes at the same time, dispersed residence and festive aggregation coexist. While living in dispersed houses, people attend the feasts of others, sometimes traveling to multiple feasts even in a single month. Korowai traverse the contrast between residential dispersion and festive aggregation almost constantly in their mental and practical lives, however infrequent a particular clan's actual feast undertakings. In all this, longhouses stand in very complex semiotic relations with their unmarked opposites, the time of dispersed house residence and the space of the overall landscape of widely dispersed clan territories. As the marked term in these polarities, a longhouse is an instrument and image of a distinctive, aberrant form of social life. Yet a longhouse is also an instrument and refracted image of the overarching system of residential oscillation as such, including its counterpart terms in that system, small houses and far-flung lands. Or so I argue empirically at different points below.

Apart from the position of longhouses in long-term cycles of residential alternation, a shorter-term level of the buildings' time-saturatedness is their physical transience. Like normal houses, feast buildings do not last. After a feast, the abandoned building remains prominently visible to passersby. Within months, though, the building becomes more a ruin iconic of the feast event's receding distance in history, than a mnemonic that preserves an intact event into the present. Meanwhile, though, the construction phase of a longhouse's developmental cycle is even more significant than the building's deterioration. An average patriclan has only a dozen living members. Feast owners receive fleeting or sustained aid from dozens of other

relatives (such as in-laws, children of clan women, and maternal kin), but building a longhouse is a huge, slow effort for the handful of focal adult clan members at the center of feast labor. Longhouses consist mainly of a two-sloped roof. The largest buildings are about 30 feet wide, 15 feet tall at the roof apex, and 200 feet in length. They are built directly on the ground, with low side walls, open gable ends, and no floor. Owners work steadily for over a month to complete the structure. During this time the longhouse is a construction site, not a dwelling. As a work-in-progress as well as in its completed state, the structure stands prominently as a material index of the labor of its creators.

Feast-making is a labor of coordination as much as one of muscles and fatigue. Cooperation and coordination are challenges, but also opportunities for practical and aesthetic achievement (compare Munn, 1986, p. 12; Itéanu, 1999). Korowai clans do not have recognized leaders, and structures of authority are quite limited even within families. Much of the struggle of coordinating feast labor under these egalitarian political conditions is waged through people's continuous invocation of a fixed recipe of steps that, with limited variation, all Korowai I have listened to and spoken with consider the appropriate way to produce a feast. In the first step of longhouse work, feast owners clear trees and undergrowth from the building site. They then perform several major steps of framing: layout, planting, and bracing of vertical posts; raising of ridgepole segments; laying of several hundred rafters; installation of hundreds of vertical scantlings along the length of the sidewalls; hanging of split rattan on the rafters, for securing battens; and installation of battens at close intervals across the tops of the rafters, running the length of the building. Different owners take responsibility for different segments of the building. At the onset of each framing step, all of the owners carry out a principal amount of work in a single day of coordinated effort. Completing the step often requires several more days of less coordinated work, as people responsible for particular segments lag behind due to health troubles, shortage of manpower, and concern to attend independently to immediate food needs or to competing feast-related tasks in outlying sago groves. Owners do not begin a step of longhouse construction until the prior step has been completed along the whole building's length. For persons accustomed to doing as they please and at the pace that they please, this dependency on the progress of others' work as a condition of moving forward with one's own is an extraordinary and often exasperating constraint. Owners often disagree silently or openly about whether to hasten or delay their feast preparations. In this and other ways, a longhouse is a focus of anxiety and wrangling at the same time that it is a would-be demonstration of unity. The building is not only an effect of cooperation but also a cause and instrument of it. Against the tide of cooperation's difficulty and improbability, people achieve whatever measure of cooperation they do spurred on by the imperatives of the construction project itself, and by the fact of their being collective owners of the building's full length. Once feast owners fell their sago palms, a building must go up. There is no turning back, and the only way forward is coordinated step-by-step construction work.

While a longhouse indexes owner social relations via categories of possession, cause, and effect, it also stands as an icon of those social relations. A feast building's

dominant characteristics are its length, and its structural homogeneity and continuity along that length. Builders of a longhouse deliberate over how long it should be, and all across the land people remark on a feast building's length, expressed in terms of the number of poles tied end-to-end to make the roof ridge, as a way of describing the scale of the feast event and the owners' productive ambitions. Here and in other respects, the length of the building verges on a kind of qualitative picture of the owning body of people.

3. Longhouses as indexical icons of regional social engagement

Signifying owners at a moment of aggregation and cooperation, a feast building also signifies social relations of the wider landscape. The paradigmatic opposite of *giom-anop* 'owners' is *xuol-anop* 'guests,' the people who come to owners' feast. The purpose of making feast buildings is to facilitate a massive act of interlocal hospitality across the divide of owners and guests. Korowai speakers' ethos of egalitarianism and autonomy exists in productive tension with desires to be connected to strange people. Feasting is motivated by owners and guests' hopes to create histories of encounter and collaborative social achievement, within the volatile field of regional social life. A longhouse is a vehicle through which diverse impulses of separation and conjunction are acted upon, across social relations between all different sorts of others, from intimate housemates and family members to long-distance acquaintances, enemies, or complete strangers.

While feast buildings and normal houses contrast in time, as poles between which people's residential lives oscillate, the two dwelling types also contrast in qualities of built space. The ways a feast building differs spatially from a normal house are also the ways a feast building signifies interlocal social relations. The most striking feature of normal Korowai houses (*xaim*) is that their floors are elevated about 15 feet above ground. The main reason Korowai give for why they build their houses aloft is that they fear attack by two categories of death-causing monsters, cannibal-witches (*xaxua*) in the community of the living (Stasch, 2001b), and after-death demons (*laleo*) who resemble walking corpses. Yet these fears of monsters are penumbral to a basic and general concern with spatial separation. Houses' height makes entry into them a physically marked act, intensifying the domus's separation from the surrounding world over and above the already considerable separateness of houses from each other across the land's surface. Feast buildings, meanwhile, trade height for length. Many times longer than a regular house, a feast longhouse emphasizes permeability, ease of entry, and wide social inclusion over separation. The building does this in part through effects of its physical form on the felt bodily, sensory qualities of feast-goers' social movements and interactions (Helliwell, 1992). Alongside the functional, indexical link between longhouse size and owners' project of expansive hospitality, there are several levels at which a feast building, and particularly its longitudinal axis, is also made *iconic* of expansive social bonds and owners' hopes of achieving them. The iconic portrayals of interlocal social connections in longhouse architecture are 'moving pictures,' rather than static ones, in several

interrelated senses. The pictures dramatize longhouses as a processual space of attempting to authorize a safe event of massive interlocal sociability through various observances of restraint. They portray not just amicable interlocal connections as such, but also opposed anxieties of interlocal grievance and violence. And the pictures draw attention to the longhouse's longitudinal axis as a transformation of more usual socio-spatial arrangements, not a static building feature.

Relations with outsiders are semiotically present in the length of a building in part via work and giving. People describe the different posts that support a longhouse's ridgepole down the length of the building as parts of the owners' total gifts to their invitees, integral and subsidiary to the focal gifts of cooked sago starch and grubs. At the feast's peak, guests occupy different segments of the longhouse according to which longhouse owners have invited them and put up that building segment. A longhouse's roof is also representative of the interest and anticipated presence of outsiders. Thatching a longhouse involves folding into place about a hundred thousand sago palm leaflets, and is the most laborious and dramatic step in the building process. This literal and figurative watershed is carried out as a rehearsal for the feast's culmination. Once the building's frame is completed, feast owners send others news of when the thatching job will take place, and a hundred or more visitors congregate to work for a day on the task, registering and enacting their support for the feast. Persons designated to receive food gifts make a particular point of attending the thatching party. Across the land, persons who have not seen a feast work site speak of whether the longhouse has been thatched yet or not, as a figure for talking about owners' progress generally. The roof is a focus of outsiders' investments in the owners' event.

Another level at which Korowai make their longhouses iconic of the surrounding social field is by building them in notional alignment with the motion of the sun (not unlike Versailles, for example, but embodying radically opposite political conditions). Local geography is dominated by streams. In Korowai speech, streams are the only landscape features that bear proper names, and stream-based deictic locatives meaning 'upstream' and 'downstream' are the principal terms of spatial reference. The major waterways flow east-northeast to west-southwest, such that in the axial order of feast buildings the east gable end is termed the *gun* 'inlet, upstream end' and the other end is termed the *maxol* 'outlet, downstream end.' People say that in so orienting their longhouses their intention is to *dadamo*- 'imitate' the world, particularly the coordination and orderliness of its sun and streams, because crossing this order would prompt environmental calamity. A longhouse's length is here made into an indexical icon of the basic spatial organization, and widest spatial horizons, of the Korowai world. The building stands *on* the social landscape in a position relative to which other people live as faraway 'upstream' or 'downstream' strangers, but the building also stands *as* an imitation of that landscape, a vessel inside and around which the encounters between upstream and downstream strangers will occur. Owners make a further minor link between longhouses and streams when, upon completion of the building's basic shell, they install three pairs of origami-like leaf streamers on the building's ridge at the gable ends and midpoint. These square strands of alternating convex and concave corners are called *bi-magel*

‘depths and shallows,’ after their resemblance to a streambed. People characterize the arching streamers as *gil ye-xuxul* ‘the feast building’s adornments,’ by explicit analogy with the bodily adornments that humans themselves don for feast celebrations. People say that the building is adorned in this way so that people will see that the building has put on decorations and so be prompted to put on decorations themselves. There are diverse further minor fashions of speaking in which Korowai personify or anthropomorphize feast buildings, and these ways of speaking are characteristic of the building’s status as a formidable presence on the land. A longhouse occupies the attention of disparate people, and becomes in time something like what a stream is in space. A feast acquires such pan-regional notoriety that diverse smaller histories are lived or told relative to the common coordinates of that large event.

A feast building stands for interlocal social bonds not only by depending on, eliciting, or exemplifying them, but also by providing opportunity or reason for them to fail. Outsiders might not show up to help, they might come to the main feast celebration at the wrong time or with an undesirably large number of guests, and they might malign owners’ efforts verbally or sabotage them materially. Feast owners are particularly preoccupied with the possibility that visitors to their feast will release arrows at the feast’s culmination, whether out of anger at the owners or due to some other interlocal grievance. Men generally travel with their bows in hand, and bows are integral to certain genres of feast performance, so there is always a lot of weaponry in evidence at a feast. Owners’ concern with preventing a party from becoming a fight is registered in diverse longhouse features. A metalinguistic notion holds that the hidden identity of *gil* ‘feast longhouse’ is *balol* ‘four-tined arrow,’ as though arrow and building stand in some foundational metaphoric relation. Accordingly, people are not supposed to say ‘four-tined arrow’ near a longhouse, lest fighting break out during the feast peak (see Stasch, 2002, p. 350 on this type of avoidance). At various stages, owners slap posts of the building with leaves of a tree called ‘lazy,’ to make would-be shooters feel heavy and disinclined to commit violence. As a feast’s peak approaches, owners widen the clearing around the longhouse to extreme proportions, to make it hard for prowlers and shooters to approach furtively. The inside of feast buildings is particularly marked by practices of spatial restraint, and by installation of barriers partly meant to manage the movements and perceptual experiences of feast visitors. For example, late in feast preparations owners construct a solid panel wall laterally across the building’s width at the midpoint. People typically say this wall is needed because it is not good for the building to be ‘clear’ inside, for reasons at once aesthetic and strategic. The wall prevents people from being able to see from end to end, and owners’ notion is that this segregates interlocal strangers or enemies from each other’s visual field, and more generally restrains visitors’ perceptions and actions amidst the feast’s overall press. Paradoxically, though, the building’s end-to-end runway (*xandin debüif* ‘prime path’) passes through a wide doorway in this ‘middle wall,’ and is a kind of stage on which different visitors to the feast pass as part of their repetitive end-to-end traverses of the building’s length, past all the different longhouse spaces in which other visitors are stationed. Longhouse form, like the owners’ project more generally, is in tension

with itself. A longhouse is built as a continuous, expansive structure for drawing large networks of people together into a common encounter, but the structure incorporates hedging gestures by which owners seek to limit the terms of this encounter.

The same double-movement is discernible in two large tympana that are installed in a longhouse's gable ends. A day after installation of the middle wall, almost everyone leaves the feast compound to gather cooking leaves, but the most central owning men stay behind to make these tympana. Each tympanic panel is roughly 5 feet square and consists of about 10 dry sago leaf stalk bases flattened between a dozen elaborately leveraged vertical poles. The men hang a large horizontal knocker against the inside of each panel, and then during nighttime dance performances back and forth on the building's interior runway the marchers beat the panels with these knockers. In this way the tympana effectively turn the feast building into a gigantic drum. Their loud reports travel farther across the landscape than any other Korowai-made noise. The panels are valued for their capacity to attract attention across the landscape and draw people to the feast. Their reports do not often reach the ears of people who are not already aware of the feast preparations, but more basically the tympana amplify in sound the bigness and centrality of a longhouse as a built dwelling. Installation of these tympana, though, also creates a physical and ritual barrier across the open gable ends of the building. At all stages of feast preparation it is taboo to step through the middle of the feast's gable ends where the tympana will be installed, and when the tympana are finally made it is only possible to enter the gable ends at the outside margins of the building, due to a sill that is installed below the tympanic panels across most of the building's opening and that is taboo to step over. The event of tympana installation is itself accompanied by a rite that is mimetic of interlocal encounter and that emphasizes blockage and restraint. At the outset of the work, one man puts up a temporary barricade across the aperture in the 'middle wall' that was built the previous day. This act separates two groups of workers at each end of the building. Once the two parties of workers are satisfied with the tympana they have built, the man removes the barricade at the building's middle, and an emissary from each party comes to the aperture, holding his bow and arrows. While the remaining men at each end of the building slam the knockers against the two tympana for the first time, the two emissaries shake each other's right hands and address each other repetitively by all different kinterms (not just terms the two men normally use for each other). This is followed by a collective procession up and down the length of the building, after which the two sets of men return to their respective ends of the buildings to prepare cooked food and other provisions for each other. Korowai say these observances help make the tympana resound well, and keep the feast free of violence. In hopeful prefiguration of the feast's actual unfolding, the procedures enact a dialectical movement from a state of restraint on motion through the center of the building to the loosening of restraint in interlocal social encounter, mingling, and symmetric food exchange.

It is particularly notable that the noise-making tympana are installed at the ends of a feast building. They not only supplement and expand the gesture of inclusion embodied in feast buildings' length, but also shape feast buildings' length-focused

architecture as an orthogonal transposition of the layout of normal houses. The side walls of a normal house usually consist of tightly-bound sago palm leaf stalk bases, and people as a matter of course beat those walls with wood to make noise when they are distressed, angry, or restless. These house side walls and the gable-end tympana of a longhouse are both termed *bani* ‘palm leaf bases,’ and the expression *bani ü-* ‘beat palm leaf bases’ is used to speak of both noise-making actions. Meanwhile, the wall installed laterally across a feast longhouse at its midpoint, halfway between the gable ends, is referred to as the longhouse’s *waliüp damon* ‘middle wall,’ the same expression Korowai use to designate a wall that runs from gable end to gable end of normal houses directly beneath their roof ridges, dividing the dwellings along their *length* into two sides. Longhouses turn the order of house space (two side walls with a middle wall between them) by 90 degrees. More, these longhouses dramatically stretch the longitudinal axis of living space, as an architectural gesture of solicitousness and inclusion toward outlying social locations. Korowai to my knowledge do not regularly remark on these ways a feast building appears as a deformation of the schematic order of houses, yet they live out the deformation in their bodily, social actions in longhouse space. Above all the back-and-forth motions of performers between the upstream and downstream ends of the building at the time of the feast’s culmination, and people’s casual movements along the building’s length, are the very image of social life as consisting of back-and-forth encounters between parties living at different places on the land.

4. Longhouses as indexical icons of palm expenditure and regeneration

Feast owners work even harder to produce food than they work to produce a longhouse. In feasting, food production and social relations are intertwined. The social encounter between owners and guests is organized through and around food. Yet while food production and host/guest relations affect each other, in food production feast owners grapple with causal forces that are partially independent of causal forces organizing human social relations. These owners tend to inscribe representations of many problems of food production into longhouse space, partly through ritual acts that are as constitutive of the longhouse as its lasting features of built form (compare Sather, 1993). There are two main ecological processes semiotically immanent in longhouses as material forms: the long-term cyclicity of sago grove regeneration, and the short-term cyclicity of grub development.

Sago grove regeneration is parallel in time to people’s residential cycles of alternating dispersion and aggregation, and is in some degree a biological metronome influencing the pace of those residential cycles. Since a feast involves a huge expenditure of resources, clans cannot hold well-provisioned feasts at will. Feasting is constrained by a clan’s sago holdings, and the periodicity of those holdings’ recovery from prior feasts. Feasting may also be urged by palms’ regeneration, because massive culling of mature palms for feasts increases the vitality of successor palms, and keeps the mature palms from becoming valueless, grove-cluttering snags. Whether sago regeneration is more a constraint or an impetus to feasting in any given

case, clans typically put on full-scale feasts at intervals of between 5 and 20 years, in keeping with the size and fecundity of sago holdings on their lands.

There are a number of ways Korowai make iconic relations out of these indexical, causal links between longhouses and sago regeneration. For example, people speak of a past longhouse (and with it, feast event) as the 'mother' of a current one, as a way of saying that the earlier longhouse was built for consuming grubs from the same sago stands now being exploited for the successor feast. This idiom of maternity highlights the close identification of longhouses with palm groves, and the dependency of feast timing on grove regeneration, by posing the building as a kind of child of the previous building and of the regenerative process that has unfolded over an intervening period of time. Similarly, after a feast is over, young boys among the owners shoot numerous play arrows, fashioned from sago leaflet midribs, into the underside of the longhouse's peak, and the shafts protruding downward from the roof ridge are thought to support the rapid, prodigious growth of young palms in the groves. This rite draws upon diverse iconic connections: between the smallness and shape of arrows, the smallness and shape of sago sprigs, and the smallness and shape of boys; between the arrows hanging downward and sago palms growing upward; between the youth and vitality of boys and the growth of palms, or between the boys' passage into adulthood and the palms' similarly-timed maturation (there is a rough fit between the tempo of a single clan's successive feast events and the coming-of-age of successive cohorts of clan youngsters); and between the sago groves' rejuvenation and the abandonment and dissipation of the feast building. Like the 'mother' idiom, the rite iconizes in longhouse space the causal, indexical fact that feast events are premised on decimation and regeneration of a clan's sago holdings, in a manner that links longhouses not only to sago grove regeneration but also to the growth of human generations.

A third example of iconization of sago expenditure and regeneration in longhouse architecture also centers on the roof. Inserting sago leaflets into the roof on thatching day, workers frequently tear from leaflets a thin outer strip of tiny thorns. Afterwards, wispy sticker threads lie strewn about the ground of the building's interior. At the next construction step of closing the roof ridge, a feast owner gathers these threads into a loose ball about one foot in diameter, termed *lelel-amüil* 'sticker nest.' Eventually someone hangs this nest from the longhouse ridgepole just inside the building's upstream end, where it remains until the feast's consummation. Far into the main feast night, a non-coresident relative of the feast owners clambers up to fetch the nest, and carries it through the building and out the downstream end at the head of an ululating procession of other men. He places the nest on a stump and others set it alight. As it flares, men sing soft lyrics exhorting the growth of bachelors, maidens, and sago palm varieties (see van Enk and de Vries, 1997, p. 220). The ball seems to be an icon of the excess of sago resources accumulated and expended in the feast, a semiotic function aptly served by the ball's character as a remainder or residue of roofing work, and by the association of nests with generational reproduction. When a clan fells its sago, other people are likely to take offense against the expenditure. This is one of the most common reasons visitors release arrows in the midst of the feast celebrations. Hostile outsiders are said particularly to target the

man who carries the thatch nest, and there have been feasts at which this man was actually shot. The fact that persons angry about the clan's expenditure of its sago holdings would choose to shoot at the nest-bearer further implies that the man's act of retrieving the ball and carrying it to be burned is iconic of the sago expenditure at large. An iconic link between rites of the 'sticker nest' and the temporality of sago expenditure and regeneration is also suggested by the notion that feast owners should designate the nest-bearer to receive grubs at the owners' next feast.

Feast owners, like other people, do not take lightly the massive expenditure of sago resources involved in putting on a feast. Sago is Korowai speakers' most valued land resource. Following a feast, the members and associates of the owning clan endure major food hardships. Korowai use sago palms as the basis for their feasts because sago products are the main foods in their cultural ecology that can be produced in surplus quantities on a predictable basis. Yet this predictability (just like the predictability of the healthy maturation of children into adults, amidst a broad social experience of devastating mortality) is far from absolute. It is in this context of sago ecology's conjoined value and fraughtness that Korowai make feast buildings into dense signs of the developmental cycle of sago groves, as part of a big effort to make their feasts successful. Significantly, the roof, wall paneling, 'sticker nest,' and countless other appurtenances of a longhouse are all made from sago palm materials, such that expenditure of sago resources for building supplies is literally of a piece with the even greater expenditure of sago resources to make food. That vertical toy arrows look like upside down sago saplings, that the thorn ball and the longhouse roof are made of sago leaflets, and other such links of similarity in form or material make-up support people's perception of causal relations between building and groves. Conversely people's perceptions of causal relations between these elements—such as that a building is created as an effect of grove development and imperatives of grove management—support perceptions and portrayals of similarity. These are some of the ways a feast longhouse and overall feast event amount to a symphony in sago, as Hugo (1978 [1831], p. 123) termed Notre-Dame 'a vast symphony in stone.'

5. Longhouses as indexical icons of grub development

The semiotic links between longhouses and a second level of sago ecology, the short-term temporality of grub development, are even more intense. As I noted earlier, feast owners' first act of felling palms for grub production is a point of no return. It sets into motion inexorable biological processes, and it demands the raising of a longhouse in its wake. As a necessary correlative of the felling of grubs, a longhouse stands intensely as an index of the fact that grub production is underway. Over the longer haul of feast preparations, longhouse construction and grub production are carried out in close parallel. For much of the course of feast work, owners continuously alternate between the two labors. The two processes merge in later phases, as construction of the longhouse shell gives way to stockpiling within it of firewood, stones, sago, and grubs for the ultimate moment of hospitality. As

complementary strands of the total feast effort, grub production and longhouse construction inform each other in countless practical respects. The temporal progress of each must be constantly intermeshed with the progress of the other, if owners are to bring about a happy confluence of different causal forces at the feast's peak.

Grub production's uncertainty is a major concern of feast owners. These owners have several grub-focused hopes and fears. Most generally, they are preoccupied with whether grubs will develop (*alu-*, lit. 'cook') prolifically in the felled sago palms or not. Will the trunks' pith become warm, soft, and increasingly wormed with burrowing larvae, or will the pith remain hard and almost devoid of grubs? Relatedly, owners are intensely concerned about rainfall. Because the Korowai region is flat and drainage is slow, heavy rain leads to inundation of sago groves (which develop on low, recurrently flooded ground anyway), and the death and rotting of any grubs in felled trunks. Yet because rainfall in this tropical and seasonless micro-region is both heavy and erratic, and because feast preparations take so long, it is very common for feast owners to suffer substantial losses of larvae due to rainfall. A final major concern of owners is the timing of grub extraction. If they bring their feast labors to culmination too early relative to the pace of the grubs' development in felled palm trunks then the yield of fat grubs will be low, but if they are too late then the grubs will turn into beetles and leave the palm trunks behind. Humans can influence grub development by felling palms, breaking open or protecting the trunks, and related actions. Yet flooding or other causes of grub death, prolificness or sparsity of grubs, and timing of grubs' pupation into beetles are all at base beyond human determination. Longhouse construction is a relatively certain enterprise by comparison. Owners take up the building as an icon through which to apprehend and ameliorate grub production's uncertainties. They believe the work of longhouse construction causally influences grub development.

For one thing, Korowai think the pace of longhouse construction influences the grubs' maturation. When thatching the building, owners leave a foot-wide gap at the roof's peak, running the entire length of the building. The building stands with its roof incomplete for some time, until in a single morning the feast owners carry out the further step of closing the roof peak. People generally say that the reason for leaving the ridgepole exposed to the sky is that if they are hasty in completing the roof (thereby making the building into an inhabitable dwelling), grubs in turn will develop quickly and fly away as beetles. Meanwhile, too, a small hole that is left in one of the roof slopes at the center of the feast building is termed the *non-abüo* 'grub doorway,' and is similar to an identically-named deep lateral notch cut into every sago trunk when first felled for grub production, to facilitate grub development. In feast work, closure of the roof ridge with split sago leaves coincides in time with the act of opening a crack in the length of felled palm trunks to give beetles easier access to the softening pith, and then covering the cracked trunks with sago leaf materials, to keep the grubs from being eaten by pigs. Korowai do not describe these conventions of longhouse construction (leaving holes and gaps in the roof) as imitative of grub production processes, despite the evident resemblances. Rather, people's reflexive emphasis is on causality. They focus more overtly on the similarities in

temporal quality of two processes—the incompleteness of building construction and the hoped-for incompleteness of grub development—than they do on similarities between physical features of the building and physical features of the grub trunks.

Owners represent iconic links between building and grubs most starkly in an altar they install at the building's midpoint. I treat here only two components of the altar array: a post and a fire. This post and fire are installed by a temporary priest among the feast owners called *milo-n* 'Precedent,' after his role of performing the first bit of labor in every step in feast production. The evening after the roof peak has been closed, the man Precedent brings from the forest a pole two or three inches in diameter and nearly 20 feet in length, and pokes the pole's tip up through the roof slope near the building's exact center. He digs a shallow hole in the ground, embeds a stone there, wraps the end of the post tightly with leaves of a vine salient in cosmogonic narratives, and sets the base in the hole. He also installs a special beam between the post and the building's side wall, somewhat below the ceiling, to secure the post horizontally. People say that this *xandin-fenop* 'prime post' keeps rain from falling, and subsidiarily that it keeps feast visitors from releasing arrows and generally ensures the good development of the grubs and felicitous feast celebration. The actions of planting and wrapping are understood to be iconic of stream closure and the restraint of enemies' hands and weapons. Lyrics that Precedent sings softly on the occasion name particular streams whose apertures are being closed. Some people spontaneously compare the actions of wrapping and planting to the Korowai practice of damming segments of stagnant streams during droughts, prior to bailing out those streams to capture fish. People also speak casually of the tabooing and physical closure of the gable ends of feast buildings, as well as the construction of the building's middle wall, as *yefo-* 'damming' the building, a reminder that long-houses' length-focused iconic relation to streams and their center-focused iconic relation to the flooding or dryness of felled sago palms are unitary in their concern with the world's water.

The same evening that he installs this post, Precedent builds a fire near the post's base. This fire is called *xandin-melil* 'prime fire' or *milon-melil* 'Precedent-fire,' and like the 'prime post' the fire is construed as a medium of communication with forces beyond the building and as an icon of grub development's uncertainties. People say the fire causally affects the warmth, dryness, and development of the grub. If the fire is well-tended, the grubs develop or 'cook' well, whereas if the fire goes out then the grubs become cold and inactive, or are flooded. Hence, the man Precedent is careful to keep the fire smoldering continuously from the night he first ignites it until the feast peak about a month later (cf. Young, 1971, p. 234). He rests near the fire in the day, and sleeps near it at night. Indeed the fire's links to the heat of grub trunks run parallel to sensuous links between the body of Precedent himself and those same trunks. For the entire period of feast preparations, the man Precedent refrains from drinking water. He slakes his thirst only by eating cucumbers and sugarcane, and his dehydration is thought to prevent rainfall and the flooding of sago groves. Beyond this semiotic focus on heat and dryness common to Precedent's body and the altar items, there are also several ways the prime post and fire instantiate general qualities of restraint and separation reminiscent of a complex array of bodily observances by

which Precedent separates himself from other people (Stasch, 2001a, pp. 514–535 discusses Precedent's work in detail). The 'prime fire' is not used for cooking, it is not tended or disturbed by anyone but Precedent himself, and it is started from scratch using an indigenous fire saw rather than by being lit from some other fire. Similarly the 'prime post' (along with the 'prime rafter' that secures it) serves no discernible physical function in supporting the longhouse. The fire, the post, and the body of the man Precedent join together in a logic of non-use and non-contact that supports their causal influence over the warmth, dryness, and fecundity of the grubs. The fire, the post, and Precedent's bodily practices broadly construe the central space of the longhouse's interior as a displaced indexical icon of the interior space of the grub trunks, an indexical icon through which people may influence the condition of those trunks from afar, including their inundation or dryness (compare Keane, this volume, on Weber's exclusion of floods from the scope of interpretive social science because they are not determined by meaningful human action).

In a similar way, during roughly the last 20 days of feast preparations, youths and other persons among the owners perform songs and dance steps back and forth down the length of the feast building early each night. At this stage few people actually sleep in the longhouse and there is not much nighttime activity in it. People say the purpose of the nighttime performances is to warm the building, lest it be left cold and the grub trunks themselves be cold and the grubs few. Here too, people's exegetic emphasis is on longhouse space's causal links with grub development.

That the 'prime post' signifies the overall state of hope and uncertainty the feast owners face is suggested also by the timing of the post's presence in the ground, coinciding exactly with the critical period of feast preparations. The post not only says 'Here!' (as a period critic quoted by Pevsner, 1976, p. 22 wrote of the Washington obelisk), it also says 'Now!' Two nights after the feast's culmination, when guests are gone and only owners and their closest supporters remain at the feast compound, the man Precedent lifts the prime post back out of the ground, leaving it standing with its base to one side of the original hole. He performs this act following a nighttime rite of grub consumption identical in details to a rite of consumption performed on the night of the post's installation, which I do not discuss here for reasons of space (Stasch, 2001a, pp. 557–571). The post indexes the markedness of the entire month or more during which the post's base is planted in the ground, as a period of risk and apprehension. Where the earlier rites of the post's planting are generally said to make the feast grubs develop well, the later rites of 'post pulling' are undertaken 'lest some person die,' and subsidiarily with a view to regeneration of sago holdings. In the aftermath of a feast, there is considerable concern that someone among the owners and their associates will die. People expressly hold that if there is water in the hole from which Precedent withdraws the 'prime post,' this water is *yanop nen-ax* 'rotten drippings of human corpses' and someone among the owners is going to die. Rarely does the hole actually have water in it, but the fear that it might, and that this would portend death, is symptomatic of the anxieties that hang over a feast's end. Through the post, the practices of the man Precedent, consumption of small ritual meals, and other practices of restraint, feast owners seek to allay the contentiousness of their big expenditure of sago resources,

and the presence on their homeland of crowds of pleasure-taking outsiders. Owners hope that exemplary acts of restrained consumption will allow the larger unrestrained consumption of the feast's climax to occur free of harmful consequences. In all of these respects the post is an intensified double of the feast building at large, an icon of an icon.

Further post-centered observances of restraint are directed toward other risks besides unsuccessful grub production. Soon after installation of the post, the man Precedent ties his unstrung bow and bundled arrows to the central pole for storage, as part of a more general renunciation of contact with weaponry on his part meant to keep visitors from fighting at the feast peak. Similarly, about 10 days or more before a feast's culmination, when the owners start producing and stockpiling sago starch, Precedent catches a specimen of a pale species of lizard that lives in sago palms, and places it on the prime post. If the lizard climbs up the post and rests calmly in the roof peak, this prefigures absence of violence at the feast event, whereas if it runs to the ground and flees this portends that fighting will break out. The particular species of lizard used suggests an identification of the post and the feast building at large with a sago palm. The rite not only construes the feast longhouse itself as an icon of visitors' reception of the feast event, but also specifically represents and dramatizes the *contingency* of that reception by linking guests' actions to the unpredictable behavior of a wild animal. At the time of this lizard rite, Precedent also ties to the post a small packet of the first raw sago starch produced for feast consumption, with the intention that this act of renunciation will make the overall quantity of sago starch produced over successive days adequate to the needs of the feast guests. In sago starch production, there is always suspense surrounding how plentiful or meager the yield of starch will be, until at the end of a workday a settling trough's water is drained away and starch chunks are broken out to carry home. On a much larger scale, feast owners are deeply concerned with the sufficiency of the overall quantity of sago they will stockpile during the many days of starch production. Precedent's act of placing the first sago on the post, where it remains unconsumed and kept apart from the other sago stores, metonymically displaces risks of sago production onto a first action and first object. The guests, the sago provisions, and the building are tied to one another in a dense figurative field of small initial acts of restraint meant to authorize subsequent acts of large-scale appropriation, expenditure, and consumption.

A longhouse's 'prime post' and related furnishings thus represent multiple feast forces at once: the weather, the temperature of palm trunks, grub development, sago grove regrowth, starch yields, Precedent's body, the mortality of feast owners, the peacefulness or rowdiness of visitors, and more. Characteristically, owners' multiple concerns are mingled and superposed in one sign vehicle. One reason this makes sense is that at other levels of the practical conduct of feasting the different forces also interact with each other. The difficulty and uncertainty of producing a large quantity of food is the most obvious focus of feast owners' prospects for success or failure, but success or failure in food accumulation is causally tied to successes or failures of interlocal amity among humans. The uncertainties of grub production are not self-contained, but are amplified by grubs' social consequentiality. If the food is

insufficient, particular guests are likely to act belligerently at the feast's consummation (even as, confoundingly, expenditure of resources as such may also provoke acts of belligerence). On the other hand, good grub prestations make for good interlocal relations. It is partly by drawing together different forces and different areas of risk in unitary iconic sign-vehicles that owners apprehend and influence the uncertainties of their feast work. These owners manipulate icons for indexical purposes, prefiguring and creating contextual effects out of rites' dense arrays of signs.

Venturi et al. in their remarkable tract *Learning From Los Vegas* (1977 [1972]) characterize architecture at their moment and place as a choice between 'the duck' and 'the decorated shed': a choice between on the one hand 'the special building that *is* a symbol,' as in a Long Island drive-in selling roasted fowl out of a building shaped like a giant duck (or numerous cognate commercial structures in the United States and Australia, the Sydney opera house, JFK airport's former TWA building, and the like), and on the other hand 'the conventional shelter that *applies* symbols,' as in the case of nondescript gas stations, motels, or casinos with giant signs out by the road (p. 87, italics in original). Korowai feast longhouses seem to choose both of these options at once, with little trouble. The 'depths and shallows' streamers on the buildings roof and the diverse accoutrements of the central altar space are visual decorations in the architects' sense, while the tympanic panels at the building's ends are effectively decorations in sound. Yet these decorations only say again, in focused or oblique forms, statements that the functional shell of the longhouse itself causally and iconically embodies: expenditure of sago food resources and its risks; a local kin network's cooperative gesture of engagement toward interlocal others, and that gesture's risks; and the potentially volatile interaction of these two independently volatile levels of feast endeavor.

6. Longhouses as indexical icons of gender and marriage

A further layer of a longhouse's semiotic links to human social relations, beyond its links to owner unity and to the interlocal landscape, rests in the gendering of longhouse space. At all stages of feast production, women work hard along with men at procurement of building materials, and at provisioning workers with food. Yet women usually do not work at actual longhouse assembly. Initially, it is taboo for women and girls to enter more than a few wary steps within the building's footprint. When the prime post and fire are installed, women begin entering the feast building, and they sleep in it along with men and children, but they stop short of approaching the altar space at the building's midpoint. Men and women alike say that if a woman nears the prime post (or at earlier stages, enters too far within the building), rain will fall or the grubs will otherwise develop poorly.

Yet the antipathy between women's bodies and the building's center is transient, not absolute. Longhouse construction begins with an act of unrestrained female motion. Once men have laid poles out in the feast clearing to be planted as vertical posts, everyone leaves the longhouse footprint, and two women walk a sinuous route over the base of every post. People say this prevents rain, and makes the feast

peak free of violence. The women's gesture of totality is iconic of the amicable future gathering of people from all directions in the building. Much later, the restraints on women's movement, after receiving their fullest objectification, are relaxed altogether. Following construction of the 'middle wall' across the longhouse's midpoint relatively late in feast preparations, it is taboo for women to pass through the aperture in that wall, itself just a few feet from the prime post and related objects. Yet the wall is an architectural sharpening of the general taboo on women approaching the center of the building that is built for the purpose of staging relaxation of the taboo. In nighttime celebrations leading up to the feast peak, women who wish to sing and dance along the central runway follow behind a body of male performers marching back and forth from end to end. Each time the men approach the center of the building, the women from that end of the building stop performing. Instead of following the men through the central aperture, the women wait along the sides of the runway until the men come back in the opposite direction, when they again take up following those performers. On the night before the feast peak, women begin following men closer and closer to the wall, until finally a woman from among the feast owners passes through the central aperture. After this, all women may pass through this aperture indiscriminately. The construction of this middle wall and the gendered observances of restraint are thought to support the success of the sago grub harvest, which begins only 2 days after the wall is built. The ultimate loosening of the prohibition on women passing through the wall comes after the extraction of grubs, when uncertainty over the grub yield has vanished. In this respect, the center wall fits the broader temporal organization of the feast building's center as an initially negative space of restraint, through which people produce the larger well-provisioned building as a space of ultimate unrestrained congregation of a huge body of people. Women's lasting restraint vis-à-vis the longhouse's middle is of a piece with a broader range of observances of restraint so far discussed. Through these observances of restraint, owners seek to leverage a later moment of totality when the building at large will be occupied by all comers in a relatively full and free way.

The middle wall's significance as a vehicle of dramatized loosening of gender-centered restraints on motion is broadly consistent with the practical character of feasts as occasions of admiration, flirting, courtship, illicit liaisons, elopement, and marriage proposals or negotiations (cf. [Welsch, 1994](#), pp. 101–103). During the press of a feast, opportunities for interaction between men and women from different places are much higher than usual. This loosening of restraints on cross-gender interaction is part and parcel with loosening of interlocal restraints generally. To attend a feast is to seek interaction with spatial strangers. As a general matter, women's residential movements across the land following marriage are prototypic bases around and through which other perduring relations between spatially separate people come to exist. Feasts are important times for social interaction between in-laws, and between other networks of persons linked to each other ultimately by histories of women's marital movements. In the space of a longhouse, marriage-focused feast transactions and interactions are the sharpest of a wide array of ways in which relations between people of different places are enacted through relations between people of different genders. Cross-gender relations and interlocal relations

are reciprocally mediative. Women's observances of restraint toward the building center, and then relaxation of that restraint, are iconic not only of gender relations as such, but also of a movement from initial social restraint to unrestrained social mixing in interlocal relations generally.

Significantly, the gender-related rites and restrictions of the middle wall appear to comment on and rework the normal division of household space. Korowai divide normal houses into a 'men's territory' and a 'woman's territory' that are usually separated by a solid panel wall beneath the roof ridge, the wall I mentioned above when suggesting that longhouses transpose the lateral order of normal houses onto a stretched longitudinal axis. This wall is built in normal houses for a diverse set of reasons ranging from a prohibition on visual and bodily contact between mothers-in-law and sons-in-law, to men's fear of the bad medical effects of contact with menstrual blood, to house owners' concern to prevent men and women from being able to touch each other furtively at night. In a feast longhouse, too, the area beneath one roof slope is the seating place of men, and the area beneath the other roof slope is the seating place of women, but there is no panel wall between the two sides. As I have described above, the only 'middle wall' in a feast building is short and lateral, not longitudinal. This middle wall is first a center from which women are asymmetrically excluded (rather than a vehicle of relatively symmetric exclusion of men and women from each other's space, as in the 'middle wall' of normal houses). This stage is followed finally by a regimented negation of this exclusion. In the longhouse, men and women have their own territories, and yet they may ultimately move together along the length of the building, passing through a middle wall rather than being divided by it.

7. Conclusion

As an image that is medial to the imagery of feasting, burial, the human body, and the social and spatial surroundings of the human body, [a Barok feast building] cannot be equivalent to any single one of the more specialized images it 'contains.' Nor, because of its very specificity, can it be adequately generalized. Like the proverbial picture that is worth ten thousand words, it *wastes* glosses or descriptions upon an object whose concise incongruity to any gloss or description inevitably demands further glossing. The force of what Freud called 'condensation symbolism' is not simply that it contains many metaphors in one, or even that it serves as a 'converter' among its constituent images, but that the image with these properties attains a synthetic singularity beyond the meanings of its constituent possibilities. (Wagner, 1986, p. 154, italics in original)

In one late manuscript, Peirce wrote that 'On a map of an island laid down upon the soil of that island there must, under all ordinary circumstances, be some position, some point, marked or not, that represents *qua* place on the map, the very same point *qua* place on the island' (Peirce, 1932, p. 136, italics in original). A Korowai feast longhouse is like such a point. It is both a location in the Korowai sociocultural

world and a portrayal of that world. In Peirce's evocative image, though, there is only one map, and it probably portrays only basic geography of the island. Moreover, the map is wrought only in one medium, the island's soil. What I have shown in this essay is that Korowai longhouses, by contrast, consist of many intersecting 'maps,' that represent many different aspects of the surrounding Korowai socio-cultural world, and that are wrought in many different media of that world's makeup.¹

This theme of pluri-signification has been touched on many times in the substantial anthropological literature on houses (e.g. Waterson, 1988; Strathern and Stewart, 2000; see also Heidegger, 1971, p. 160; Foucault, 1986, p. 25), and some studies have explored the theme in depth (Ellen, 1986). Less frequently, though, have writings in explicit theoretical terms addressed the multiplicity of *ways* a building may signify: the fact that, in the terms of the philosopher Goodman (1985, p. 649), 'a building may reach symbolically to the same referent along several routes,' involving qualitatively distinctive 'varieties of symbolization' (p. 648). Anthropologists studying the meaningfulness of houses often implicitly assume a microcosm-macrocosm model according to which there is a straightforward iconic mapping between the organization of house space and the organization of the surrounding sociocultural world, and the analyst's main question is *what* the building signifies, not *how* it signifies (e.g. Cunningham, 1964; Bourdieu, 1979; for departures, consider Moore, 1996 [1986]; Keane, 1995). A crucial fact about living space, though, is that as microcosm it not only gives a picture of the wider sociocultural world, but is a part of that world, and makes that world. Living space shapes the world's characteristics. To show this, I have consistently emphasized the indexical, causal dimensions of links between longhouses and different spatiotemporal levels of Korowai life. Among the major levels of spatiotemporal context semiotically present in longhouses are: the space of a clan's owned territory, a fraction of a square mile in expanse; the time of residential cycles, many years in length; the time of the building process and feast event, a couple months or more in length; the space of interlocal invitations and interlocal geography, stretching miles across the land ultimately to the far limits of vision, travel, and imagination; the time of sago palms' regeneration, and analogous time of human generational growth and succession; and the space of human bodies, such as bodily difference between men and women. At each of these levels, the building's semiotic links to its contexts are partly causal, or 'logico-causal' (Munn, 1986; Keane this volume). A longhouse signifies a clan's existence and its ownership of land by being an effect of the labor of the clan and by being dependent on the resources of the land. (Conversely, too, clanship and land

¹ In order to highlight this one dimension of longhouses' complexity, their superposition of different levels of spatiotemporal context into a single semiotic form, I have oversimplified in many other respects. I have not sought to document any one layer of longhouse signification adequately in its own right, nor have I attempted to give any full account of feasts as total events (including the gift transactions and aesthetic performances at these events' center). Even focusing narrowly on the feast building alone, I have not introduced case materials on the politics and design of particular longhouses, nor discussed important trends in longhouse-making at the current historical moment. Studies of these aspects of Korowai longhouses would lend further support and complexity to the main points I have sought to make in this essay.

ownership depend on feasting. If clans do not put on feasts, they will ultimately be chastised by other people as not properly fulfilling the ‘owner’ role.) A longhouse signifies the relative unity and cooperation of its owners by being a causal consequence of their cooperative work, and by eliciting that cooperative work from them. A longhouse signifies interlocal geographic relations by being an instrument of hospitality, purpose-built to keep people, food, and cooking fires dry, and to support the general comfort of visitors from elsewhere. A longhouse signifies sago regeneration by being causally linked to the decimation of sago groves and the character of their later regrowth. A longhouse signifies grub development by being a culturally-automatic sequitur to the felling of large quantities of palm trunks to set in motion grub development, and by being temporally coordinated with and dependent on owners’ further work of grub production. And to Korowai eyes, a longhouse signifies rainfall or its absence, by causally affecting the weather. These various types of causal, functional links between building and context are not non-semiotic. As sign relations they are fully continuous and co-mediative with other linkages that are more prominently iconic or symbolic in character.

One of the consequences of taking links of causation and dependence to be integral with semiotic process generally is that semiotics becomes irreducibly a study of the production and scansion of sociocultural space and time, or a study of the varieties of logics of spatiotemporal linkage through which people live their lives. Korowai feast longhouses are particularly notable for their transience (cf. Waterson, 1991: 48–52), and for the degree to which the process of longhouse construction, provisioning, and consumption, more than the finished or stable product, is a focus of semiotic elaboration. A longhouse is a complex ritual event, and a form of motion (Sather, 1993). Longhouses are monumental material objects and as such they signify in visual, tactile, and broadly imagistic ways, and as images they are profoundly consequential. Yet these longhouses are monuments in time, rather than perduring through time. It is the iconicity and indexicality that people carry with them away from their feasts back to their dispersed houses, not the material presence. This motional quality of longhouse semiosis is not only a corollary of the building materials and technologies of Korowai cultural ecology. It is deeply tied to the culturally distinctive character of the egalitarian Korowai social landscape as a kind of polity.

A related, distinctively Korowai slant to longhouse practice lies in people’s recursive concern with the contingency of their own semiotic, causal efforts. One more kind of answer to the question of how a longhouse signifies is that it signifies creatively and non-deterministically. This is most apparent in the regularity with which Korowai use longhouse space to signify not only what they are trying to achieve but also what they hope will not happen. These signified risks and uncertainties, as we have seen, range from problems in the coordination of different people’s actions, to disasters in the ecology of food production, to outbreaks of violence, to deaths of longhouse owners or their relatives in the wake of a feast. I have sought to show a few ways in which the dense superposition of diverse iconic and indexical meanings in longhouse space makes the building into an apt total icon of the uncertain conditions of a feast’s own realization, and an icon that owners optimistically regard as able to create the conditions of its own success.

These findings bear superficial comparison to Malinowski's (1948) theory, famous and much-criticized in anthropology, that people form magical beliefs around precisely that which is chancy and beyond human control. Many of the particular Korowai approaches to contingency I have discussed are reminiscent, too, of phenomena Frazer (1900: I, 9–62) and others have grouped under the label 'sympathetic magic.' Making one object similar to a second object is a way of affecting that second object's characteristics, even from a distance: the prime fire affects the heat of palm trunks, actions of blocking or wrapping affect rainfall, a proliferation of toy arrows induces a proliferation of palm sprigs, a mimetic rite of hospitable encounter leads to an actual peaceful feast, and so on. The point of my semiotic treatment of these sorts of actions, however, has been not merely to lump them together but to begin pulling them apart and discerning the constituent layers of representational relation joined together in each one of them. I have argued that the efficacy of feast-making actions, whether involving relatively magical or self-evidently physical paths of causation, lies in their dense *coordination* of multiply iconic, indexical, and symbolic links between signs and objects. A longhouse draws different spatiotemporal forces into a single complex nexus of iconic and causal articulations, and thereby shapes those forces. The building is organized as a recursive, world-shaping intervention into the uncertain conditions of its own existence and of an overall feast event's achievement. Yet the building also represents the refractoriness of those different spatiotemporal forces to being represented and shaped. This is a major point of disparity, too, between Korowai facts and the above-mentioned theory of Malinowski. In Korowai feast-making the risks are ones that feast participants create and confront in the very acts of setting a feast in motion. A feast gives people reasons to fight. It creates conditions for ecological processes such as grub development to go wrong, with unwished social consequences. The uncertainties and anxieties of feasting are not culturally vacuous or a-cultural, but are rather constituted in and by feast action. Feast participants embrace gambles and gambling as a positive basis for trying to have social ties, and a positive basis for creating 'events.' To signify unwanted effects, as in feast owners' reflexive representations of what might go wrong, is not only to attempt to forestall those effects but also to signify the contingency of cause–effect sequences as such. This is why the best sign is one that is insistently temporal and transient. Through the sign of a longhouse, owners and audience represent their own reflexive meta-practical sensibilities about historical action, or the spatiotemporal unfolding of events: open and expectant toward the future's likely setbacks and surprises; seizing on contingency as the creative medium out of which to fashion a life; and simultaneously optimistic and pessimistic about the prospects for achieving survivable, successful acts of appropriation and collective encounter by continuously inscribing them within acts of renunciation and restraint.

Acknowledgements

My 16 months of fieldwork with Korowai speakers in 1995–1996, 1997, 2001, and 2002 have been facilitated by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) and

Universitas Cenderawasih. Different phases of this research were funded by a Fulbright IIE student fellowship, the Wenner–Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Reed College, and a Luce Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship in Southeast Asian Studies at the Australian National University. I am grateful to Tom Boellstorff, Laura Hendrickson, Andy Kipnis, Paul Manning, Bill Maurer, Francesca Merlan, and Kathy Robinson for comments on this text, and to Nancy Munn and Michael Silverstein for writings, lectures, and conversations that have influenced how I have set about composing it. My deepest debts are to all Korowai who have spoken with me about feasts.

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