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## LANDSCAPE AS ART AND AS PERSONS

During my fieldwork with the Fuyuge people who reside in the Papuan highlands of Papua New Guinea I was often captivated with the way they spoke about and related to what I would call their landscape (they did not have a word for landscape but did for the related idea of place). Every area of land, however small, had a name and men and women could recount which people in the past and present inhabited, cultivated or performed rituals in that place. Their detailed knowledge impressed me as someone coming from an urban environment with little knowledge of that kind for the surroundings I inhabited. On many occasions I would be walking with a Fuyuge person and we would stop and rest and he or she would look out across the valley and tell me stories about what had transpired in a place that was pointed out to me. Aside from the knowledge of the places that constituted the landscape there was what I would call an aesthetic appreciation of the surroundings. One could almost say that Fuyuge people valued the collective ‘art’ they had produced and were producing, a point I return to below.

Studies of English landscape painting from the eighteenth and nineteenth century, for example, have highlighted the idyllic way the reality of the rural poor were depicted in this form of art. In many cases the art was produced for wealthy estate owners who valued to see their land represented in a particular, ideological manner.<sup>1</sup> Beautiful landscape views, including such paintings, are still favoured by the English whether it is in county estates now owned and managed by the National Trust or what are designated as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty such as the Lake District in the north of England. This natural beauty has an artistic quality to it and that is why it is often painted and photographed and transformed into pieces of art that can be valued and appreciated.

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<sup>1</sup> See John Barrell, *The dark side of the landscape: the rural poor in English painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

At the same time, such Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are not untouched nature. They are areas of land that have been transformed by various forms of use, such as sheep farming, agriculture, forestry, and so on. They have been transformed in such a way that they conform to places and views that the English and others perceive as aesthetically pleasing. The people viewing and appreciating the qualities of natural beauty are, on the whole, not the same people that have transformed or maintain the places that are viewed in such a manner.

The case of the Fuyuge people is different. Not only is everyone engaged with the land in a way few are in urbanised environments but the manner in which they are engaged has a particular structure that I will now turn to. It is this structure that provides the form to the landscape and the aesthetic appreciation of the landscape by those who produce it.

The social life of Fuyuge people revolves around the performance of a collective ritual known as *gab*.<sup>2</sup> The ritual marks and celebrates the life-cycle transitions of the dead, the old (i.e. those ‘white hairs’) and the children (including women with their first pregnancy). Each *gab* is performed in a specially built village, also known as *gab*. The village houses are built around an oval shaped plaza that accommodate both hosts and guests. The dances, pig-killings and other events of the ritual are performed in the plaza. The village is constructed by the relations of the cohorts of men, women and children whose life-cycle transitions are marked in the ritual. The timing of the ritual is linked to the cultivation of garden crops, especially yams and to the size and number of pigs that are reared and then ritually sacrificed. Dancers from neighbouring Fuyuge areas are invited to perform in a series of competitive dances. Personal exchange partners are invited who take part in more restrained transactions. The relation with dancers and personal exchange partners is reciprocal. As such, each *gab* anticipates the next ritual, just as the growing of yams, rearing of pigs and birth, aging and death of persons are synchronised in each *gab* performance. Fuyuge social life is importantly synchronised by *gab*.

After a *gab* ritual has ended and hosts and guests return to their places of residence the village is largely abandoned and the houses allowed to decay and eventually disappear. Although the *gab* village is no longer occupied and may become overgrown with vegetation it continues to be recognised as a place on the landscape where men, women and children gathered and where the events of the ritual were performed. Depending on the age and status of the person this will influence how they perceive and understand such a place and for that matter all places across the landscape.

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<sup>2</sup> See Eric Hirsch, *Ancestral presence: cosmology and historical experience in the Papuan highlands* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

Because a *gab* cannot be organised until sufficient yams and other garden crops are available as well as pigs of appropriate size and number, each of these pursuits contributes to the form of the landscape while enabling each *gab* to be performed. It is this recurrent cycle that provides the Fuyuge landscape with its specific form that also includes changes to elements of this structure as a result of mission, colonial and post-colonial influences. It is the recurring performance of *gab* and how it and the associated pursuits enable its enactment that shapes the aesthetic appreciation of landscape and its constituent places.

If one were to ask a Fuyuge person why they perform *gab* and why they perform it in the manner they do they would reply that they do so because they are following in the way of *tidibe*. In Fuyuge understanding their world as well as the world more generally originates from *tidibe*. *Tidibe* is a creator force, a mythical being and the source of all Fuyuge myths, also known as *tidibe*. This creator force journeyed from east to west, across and beyond the Fuyuge world in the past, and in the process formed their landscape by establishing all the powers upon which Fuyuge social conventions, such as *gab*, are based. What *tidibe* established were the Fuyuge leaders and the prototypes of all things central to Fuyuge social life. While *tidibe* at once disappeared, *tidibe* is simultaneously ever-present in the powers and conventions established.

So when Fuyuge people stage and perform *gab* or when they cultivate their gardens or rear their pigs they are abiding by the ways instituted by *tidibe*. Each collective of men and women that organise and stage a *gab* for their various relations do so to fulfil obligations but also to act and appear powerful against the collective of dancers invited to the ritual. *Gab* is a competitive display of power on all sides and by appearing powerful one becomes *tidibe*-like because one has correctly followed in the way of *tidibe*.

With the above in mind the following question can be asked: Is *gab* and the way the ritual and how all it entails shapes the landscape, is this complex of actions and agency, a form of art?

Alfred Gell (1998: 7) in his book *Art and agency* argues that art from an anthropological perspective is the study of objects that mediate social agency.<sup>3</sup> He suggests that art objects are the equivalent of persons, persons composed of social relations. More specifically, art objects are comparable to social agents.

My discussion of *gab* brings to mind Gell's examination of Maori meeting houses – a particular form of art object. There he notes:

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred Gell, *Art and agency: an anthropological theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 7.

All Maori meeting houses... followed a common ‘ground plan’, all were designed with a common purpose, namely to serve as an objectification of the wealth, sophistication, technical skill, and ancestral endowment of the community responsible for the construction, and as a means to ensure that persons not of this community, who might be entertained there, would be consumed with jealousy and thoroughly intimidated.<sup>4</sup>

As with *gab*, Maori meeting houses are instruments of a collectivity’s power. Gell<sup>5</sup> refers to these collective undertakings as collective ‘indexes of agency’—that is, material signs which permits the abduction or capture of social action—a description that is equally applicable to *gab*. As such, these indexes are analogous to other art objects analysed by Gell.

In general, any instance of a *gab* performance is an innovation in the sense that the construction of the ritual village is orientated in the direction of the future, towards the political victory over its competitors. It is this which is the anticipated outcome of the effort devoted to the creation of each *gab*. More specifically, what applies to both indexes (*gab* and Maori meeting houses) is their status as both traditional and innovatory but not in any absolute sense. In the case of Fuyuge *gab* any particular instance of the ritual is only ‘traditional’ ‘when viewed from a latter-day perspective and as a screen, or transparency, through which its precursors are adumbrated’.<sup>6</sup> Any instance of *gab* is simultaneously innovatory but ‘only on condition that we situate ourselves anterior to it in time (i.e. at a moment in time at which it has not yet, or is just about to, come into existence) – so that we can likewise see it as a screen through which still later [*gab*] may be protended, as a protention, protention of protentions, etc.’.<sup>7</sup>

Prior to Gell’s analysis of Maori meeting houses—as I indicated which also applies to Fuyuge *gab*—he examined the *œuvre* of artists with particular reference to the work of Marcel Duchamp.<sup>8</sup> In that analysis he highlighted the temporal relation between individual works of art that bears some comparison with the relation between ‘traditional’ and ‘innovatory’ instances of *gab* considered above, while also noting the differences. In particular, Gell<sup>9</sup> suggests that ‘the arrangement of individual works in an artist’s *oeuvre*, [are] partly a recapitulation of previous works and partly an anticipation of works yet uncommenced’.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 232-251.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 236.

<sup>10</sup> Gell’s interest is to draw attention to this process and to show a connection with the artist’s mental states or cognitive processes understood as consciousness, a connection I do not pursue here.

Works by individual artists such as Duchamp are the work of one person applying a single agency. Gell<sup>11</sup> asks: “What about the art produced, not by individuals over a lifetime, but by collectivities over longer periods of time; what, in other words, can we say about collective ‘traditions’.” His answer to this is the analysis of Maori meeting houses and by extension, I have argued, Fuyuge *gab*.

The final point I want to make concerns Gell anthropological theory of art where art objects are comparable to persons and because they are person-like they have the power to captivate just as human persons do. Gell’s theory has transformed the way scholars understand and analyse visual arts. However, from the perspective of people like the Fuyuge and other peoples of Papua New Guinea and Melanesia more generally many aspects of Gell’s theory is familiar to the anthropologists who have conducted research in this part of the world.

The reason for this is because of the pioneering studies of Strathern,<sup>12</sup> Wagner<sup>13</sup> both of which were anticipated by Leenhardt (1979 [1947]).<sup>14</sup> As these writers have documented all entities, whether persons or other objects (e.g. land, pigs, trees, food, etc.) are composed of social relations because all entities derive from persons and their relations. So when a Fuyuge person looks out across the valley and identifies places from the past or from the present what they are seeing are the relations – the social agents – that have composed those places and the landscape more generally. The view is pleasing because the Fuyuge person sees the outcome of social relations that are known to exist in distinctive places. They are not gazing at a view – a landscape view – as favoured by the English. Fuyuge people perceive other Fuyuge persons in a transformed state, the outcome of their recurrent engagement with persons and the periodic performance of *gab* that structures their world and the persons that live therein.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 250–251.

<sup>12</sup> Marilyn Strathern, *The gender of the gift: problems with women and problems with society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> Roy Wagner, “The fractal person,” in *Big men and great men: personifications of power in Melanesia*, ed. Maurice Godelier and Marilyn Strathern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 159–173.

<sup>14</sup> Maurice Leenhardt, *Do kamo: person and myth in the Melanesian world*, transl. Basia Miller Gulati (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979 [first published 1947]).

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