

15 Waterfall, movement, life

Woven bark-fibre skirts on the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea

James Leach

During night-long dancing performances called *sar'e*, women encircle their men folk, their rolled bark-fibre skirts swaying from side to side, emphasizing flow, lateral movement and dynamism. Their voices rise and fall in expansive and sweeping volume, carrying men and their spirits along with their flow, rapidly pouring their sound down the channels of silences between men's words and the hoarse cries of the spirits. These men/spirits are static, a promontory emerging from the flat space of the dancing ground, further dramatized by the long *torr* posts (Figure 74) that they carry as headdresses.

Like water rushing over boulders and rocks, filling in, and pouring from pools as it tumbles down steep streams in the nearby jungle, women's contribution to *sar'e* makes for an image of a surface unbroken by the high points, and the lulls, in the spirit voices that animate the performance. Just as water smoothes out features of a creek bed, women's circumambulatory trajectory rounds out the shape on the dancing ground. It makes a whole in which flowing voices and movements complement the staccato up-and-down dancing of men, who bounce from their knee joints, rooted to the spot.

The contrasts thus presented have analogies in many aspects of life in Reite. *Sar'e* might be seen as a moment in the Blakean sense of an image containing, within its internal references and relations, the cosmos (Fox 1976:153; see Wm. Blake Milton 35:42–5, Leach 2004:157). *Sar'e* is a presentation of a place in all its multifaceted beauty, intended by its makers to have the depth,

complexity and power to move others into new social, physical and emotional connections, remaking the future in the work of presenting current relations and their possibilities (Leach 2003:200). As such, it is appropriate to examine what Reite people do and say around *sar'e*, to investigate how elements of gender differentiation in the making of *sar'e* objects are linked to wider processes of forming persons: how persons are connected to places, the different ways these connections appear in men and women, and how principles, visible in microcosm in any important endeavour that these people undertake, generate their distinct form of life.

It is to the production of one vital element of women's appearance for *sar'e* that I address myself here. In doing so, the themes of differentiation, of flow and movement, and of women's sense of their power in relation to men and to places, will guide my description. I follow the connections Reite people themselves make, and thus the chapter is an active attempt to model description on Reite logics and understandings.

Far from separate spheres, textile production, marriage, exchange and the flow of life are practised and understood as part of the process of being a particular, gendered, situated, person, of being a woman who is a woman because of her specific movements through the landscape, and how this is a poetics of life manifest in making things and persons (Weiner 1991). Analogic flows of meaning (Wagner 1977) between processes of making, processes of emergence as particular persons, and of sites and elements of a landscape

are indigenous connections, pursued here for what they reveal about Reite people's porous distinctions between persons and things (Bolton 2003:129). The work of the anthropologist in presenting something of the making and significance of bark-fibre string skirts (*naie*), then, is one of description: description of these relations and how they constitute things and persons, effects and connections as they emerge in logics where *aesthetics* (scale, value and power) are differently imagined.

When we think of aesthetics, we must think about the person experiencing or perceiving objects as well as the qualities of the objects themselves. Doing so follows from many of the most significant philosophical engagements with beauty in made objects. Most famously, Kant's interest in and concern over the aesthetic experience (in the third critique) locates the interest of this field for philosophers as the way such experience, while wholly interior and personal to the subject, is also all about imagining other people having the same responses. Criticism, and the process of discussing artworks, is important for the Kantian tradition exactly because in finding the language to express interior and subjective perceptions, people develop the ability for intersubjective experience, communicating the human aspects of perception in ways which bind and develop the people involved (see de Bolla 2002). This chapter presents a challenge to those fundamental Kantian assumptions. Here, we see how the mutual constitution of persons, meaning, objects and significance makes notions of a singular interiority, an individual subjectivity wholly divorced from others, seem absurd. Through following through analogies and connections as understood by people whose aesthetic sense has not been shaped by the Enlightenment, its philosophers and the resulting institutions that separate art and artefact from the everyday world, we get a glimpse of another kind of person and another kind of object, one that demands a different appreciation from the indigenous viewer. It requires a consideration of the way others are drawn into the appreciation and understanding of the object through its process of making, as well as its finished form. Form and meaning are generated in relationships to others,

Figure 74. Wooden *torr* post, purchased through James Leach in 1995, made by Sarangama hamlet in Reite (Oc1995.06.82, length 241 cm).





Figure 75. Isuwing with bark strips, drying and bleaching in the sun (photograph by James Leach, 1995).

whereby shared perceptions of the object form an aspect of wider social and political developments. By situating the making process as an aspect of the wider reproduction of the social world, this chapter gives an insight into the significance of *naie* for the people who make and use them.

Women's things

Naie are dyed bark-fibre string skirts made by people from Reite and Sarangama hamlets that lie about 10 km inland from Singor village on the Rai Coast in Madang Province in Papua New Guinea. In past times they were women's only dress, with newly made, smart examples kept for best – for dancing and singing with the male spirit cult (*sar'e*) – and old, dull and faded items worn everyday. Isuwing (Figure 75), on whose skill and understanding this chapter is founded, remembered the time when *naie* were replaced with imported clothes in Reite in the 1970s. She recalled that when her family descended to the site of their present camp at Yaping, *naie* began to be kept for ceremonial occasions and not worn

daily. *Naie* are strong and long lasting (because they are made from fibre string, rolled tight on the leg, Isuwing said; Figure 76). They are never washed.

I know of nothing written (other than by myself) about the things women made in this area of the Rai Coast, and note that previous ethnographers and collectors from the region have always focused on men's activities, fabrications and customs. Further afield, in the 1970s the anthropologist Annette Weiner, undertaking research based on fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands in Milne Bay Province (Weiner 1977), noted how women were absent from (the famous, widely known) accounts of exchange in that region (Malinowski 1922). She sought to balance this absence from previous accounts, asserting the significance of women and women's things (banana-leaf bundles and skirts) to Massim economy and exchange. 'Throughout history, cloth has furthered the organisation of social and political life... Cloth helps social groups to reproduce themselves and to achieve

autonomy or advantage in interactions with others.' (Weiner 1989:1). As Lissant Bolton has argued, this work drew attention to the kinds of objects 'which Western eyes easily overlook' (Bolton 2003:127). For women in Vanuatu (where Bolton's research is located),

Plaiting is analogous to drinking kava [a male group activity that binds people together]. Women sit together to plait and talk. Men sit together to drink kava and talk. Just as women are excluded from men's kava drinking sessions, men are excluded from women's plaiting sessions. By this means, women are distinguished from men not merely by a negative definition – men drink kava and women do not – but by a positive – women plait textiles together.

(ibid.:123)

It is interesting to note, following Weiner and Bolton then, how many 'Western eyes' have overlooked the things women make and the things they say and do in their ethnographic accounts. This is nowhere more apparent than in accounts of spiritual practices, initiation ritual and cult activities. Indeed, women are distinguished not just by the absence of their practices from these accounts, but in the way they were made present in a series of analyses, based in psychological theories, that asserted 'sexual antagonism' lay at the heart of many Melanesian cultures (e.g. Meggitt 1964). Analyses of spiritual life in the region asserted that men had to be removed from the influence of their mothers and (often violently) assert their independence and control over female powers of fertility and reproduction (Herdt 1982). Such lopsided accounts are explained less by the (limited) access that male ethnographers had to female informants, and more by predilections and biases in theories about the significance of Papua New Guinea as a window on a more primitive or essentialized humanity, and thus on gender and psychology. It took something of a radical re-appraisal of gender (Weiner 1977; Strathern 1972) and its significance in processes of exchange, personhood and social form (Strathern 1988) for there to be a rethinking of this approach, a rethinking that has opened the possibility for examining male and female cult activity.

This is particularly pertinent to Reite, where alongside the male cult (famous from previous accounts, e.g. Lawrence 1965) it became clear that there is a women's cult, secret from men, and

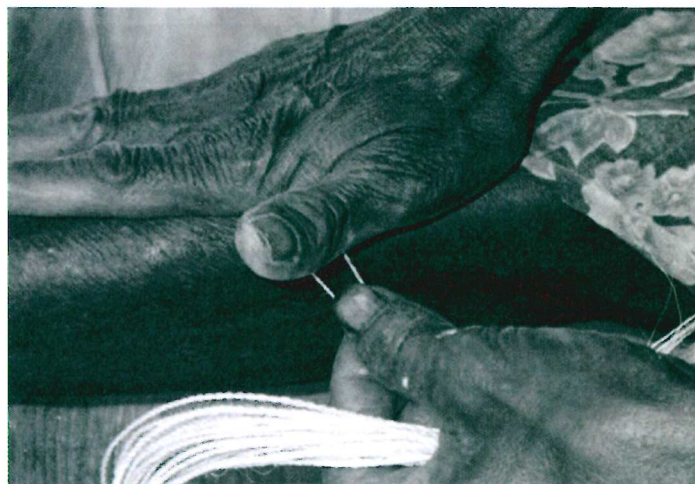


Figure 76. Isuwing rolling bark fibre into string (photograph by James Leach, 1995).

addressing the transition to female adulthood, gestation and childbirth. An interest in women's institutions has emerged alongside that in textile production (e.g. Mackenzie 1992) for a very good reason. They are linked in practice.

Making *naie*

The time women spend sitting together plaiting involves mutual support and shared talk. In the European tradition, it is usual to distinguish the manufacture of a thing from its use; ... The period of manufacture, during which the object is incomplete, is a period in which it has no use... Encounters with the manufacturing of objects in other societies ... have introduced the idea that in some cases ... it is while it is being made that it has value.

(Bolton 2003:124)

The information in this chapter was gathered through accompanying Isuwing, born in Saragama, married to the Reite Yawaspiring man Pulumamie, and resident in Reite for fifty years, while she and her daughter Kerep made *naie* for the British Museum in 1995, and in conversations with her other daughters, Tariak and Kambuing, in 2000 and 2009.

There is no particular time in the year when skirts are made: simply when the intense labour involved can be accommodated around gardening activities. *Naie* are made from the inner bark of a semi-domesticated tree species (*Abroma augusta* (L.) Willd. (Malvaceae s.l.)) that is also called *naie* in the Nekgini language. Women tend these trees when they find them in convenient places on their land.

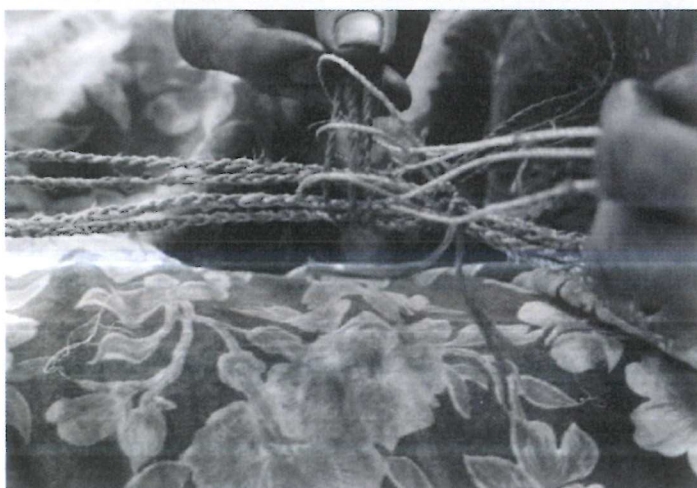


Figure 77. Dyed strings knotted carefully onto the belt (photograph by James Leach, 1995).

Women who undertake the making of *naie* leave the village before dawn to cut bark strips from *naie* trees. They strip the trunk of the living tree in pieces about a metre long. Older, thicker bark is beaten to loosen the outer scaly surface, younger bark is used as it comes from the tree. The strips are folded over and then sunk in a pool under stones and branches, out of the current of one of the fast-flowing streams that run through the limestone karst of the surrounding forest. The strips are left for around ten days in the water, during which time they begin to rot. Isuwing and Kerep emphasized both the huge amount of work that making *naie* demands as they began this process and, more specifically, the pungency of rotting *naie* bark when it is removed from its

Figure 78. Tying string into the *paata* (photograph by James Leach, 1995).



submersion. When the bark strips are removed from the water, they are scraped clean of the slimy coating that has formed on them using a bamboo knife, and then hung in the sun to dry suspended over a fine vine drawn taught between trees or posts (Figure 75). The sun bleaches the fibres until they are pure white and no longer smell, while the time immersed in water softens and separates the tough fibre of the bark so it can be worked more easily.

Fibres are then pulled from the strips of bark, and rolled together, on the leg (Figure 76), into strong strings. Each string consists first of two separate rolled strands that are then combined into a single string. The finished strings, about 80 cm in length, are tied into neat bundles and put aside for dyeing. While talking with Tariak in 2009, she told me her daughter, at that time (ritually) secluded in her house during her first menses, had been instructed in the rolling of string formally for the first time. 'I told her, you won't be idle while you are here,' Tariak reported, 'this is the time you roll skirt [string]'. About 70 per cent of the white string is dyed, leaving the rest bleached for the design ('colour', as they say in Nekgini) to be created during the knotting of the string onto a belt.

In the process of making *naie*, people are drawn together in the effort to establish response and effect in other people. Skilled effort is devoted to making skirts in particular ways that have these effects – from the rotting and bleaching of fibre, through the intricate knotting of the resultant string, to the processes of dyeing the fibres – and draw upon spiritual as well as botanical knowledge. 'Plaiting binds women together in relationships of assistance, obligation, and shared labour. Dyeing, a process formerly associated with risk and anxiety, has a different set of associations.' (Bolton 2003:130).

'Pulling' colour into string

There are three ingredients for the red dye used with *naie*: *kako'ping* bark, *ataki'taki* flowers and *ropie* bark (see Nombo and Leach 2010). Women rise before dawn and collect the ingredients for the dye. They do not eat or drink, smoke or chew betel, or relieve themselves on such mornings. It is imperative that they slip away from the village out of the sight of men, in particular men who are

ritual or hunting specialists, men in tabooed states – those, in other words, who have ‘hot blood’. Encounters with these men will make the colour in the dye dull, and mean it does not take properly. Once the pot of string and bark/flowers is boiling and the colour of the dye is visible, the women may eat, smoke and so forth. The dye boils with the string as the sun rises, ‘pulling the colour’ into the fibres, as women say. At noon, when the sun is at its zenith, and thus the colour highest and fullest of all, the pot is removed from the fire, the string drained and cooled, and then returned to the village, where it can now be made into skirts. The coloured and uncoloured string are made into bunches, and attached to a belt made from the same fibre string (*paata*; Figure 78).

Red and white bunches are alternated over the front and rear of the skirt, creating layers and patterns (Figure 79), while the sides are made of the dyed string only. The front and back of the skirt is tied separately, with a gap at the hips. Finally, some vegetable dyes of other colours (turmeric species, mango bark, green leaves) may be rubbed into the white strings to create patterns on the surface of the white string. The *naie* will now be fastened around the waist of its intended owner, and the skirts trimmed to a length just above the knee at the front. At ceremonies, women will likely wear three or four *naie*, one above the other, until they feel enough ‘weight’ to the skirt for it to sway as desired.

It is during a girl’s seclusion at her initiation (prompted by her first menses) that she learns the rolling, dyeing and tying techniques to make *naie*. The time of initiation is seen as an extraordinary time in the girl’s life, a time of explicit rather than implicit instruction, and the important time for her subsequent character development. The association of *naie* with this time, rather than everyday life, further marks the skirts out as significant, and makes clear their association with adult female knowledge of menstruation, gestation and birth. ‘*Naie* have so many uses,’ Isuwing said. ‘They are for women secluded, they are for when women are taken to their husbands. They were worn everyday until recently. There are many individual designs and patterns, each belonging to a place. There is a spreading hornbill’s tail, there is a waterfall, there is a landslide.’



Designs

The coloured patches on the surface of the undyed fibres have no names or particular significance. They are only added to the front apron of the *naie*. However, the patterns in which the white and red strings overlap and mingle at the back of the skirt are given different names, are owned by particular kin groups and places, and have deep connections with those places. In this, these designs are closely allied to the elements of the male spirit cult, *kaapu* (Leach 2003:175–85). Carved headdresses, perfumes, spirit voices and accompanying songs also arise from, and draw in, particular places, their powers and spirits.

The *naie* pictured here carries the design *tupong saarung* (waterfall; lit. water decorative; Figure 81). It is a design that Isuwing brought with her from Sarangama on her marriage to Yawaspiring. All the other designs, I came to realize, also mark something we might call *located movement*. The hornbill tail spreading into a fan (*sawing apo'wung*) is based on what a women saw in a particular spirit grove in her forest, as is *tiak* (from Ripia place), the opening tail of a Raggiana bird of paradise. A landslide, a dramatic movement witnessed in the past, names another design, and draws landscape and its changing form into the dancing ground as effectively as the waterfall image. One kin-group has a sunrise design, the ‘eye of the sun’ (*usau ting* as it is termed in Nekgini), with eye (*ting*) a

Figure 79. Intricate and beautiful knotting of strings on the belt (photograph by James Leach, 1995).



Figure 80. Waterfall on Holiting stream, Reite lands (photograph by James Leach, 1995).






Figure 81. Tariak wearing *tupong saarung* (photograph James Leach, 2006).

verb not a noun, a movement into space, not a passive receptor of light. The ‘eye of the sun’ makes this understanding of the eye as an active organ of intervention comprehensible. As it rises, light pours from the sun’s eye, touching the world in its vital movement.

Designs on the back of the skirt are placed where they are visible, where the eye is drawn to the swaying and flowing motion of the dancing women, and the image of rushing/falling/opening water or feathers, light or land, in particular places. Designs belong to places – like spirit songs (*kaapu*) or specific taro varieties; like people themselves. In fact, whose distinctiveness and visibility is made through their constitution in relation to taro, spirit, landform and myth. Women use the designs of their natal hamlet, and its places, rather than inherit them from earlier generations through descent. In this way, design and place are kept together, adding *naie* to all the other elements of *sar’e* that are drawn from the particularity of named places (Leach 2003:170). As with *torr*

posts (Figure 74), songs and tunes, spirits and perfume, the design of *naie* thus add to the sense of a presentation of a particular place, the one of in-married women with their kin in their marital hamlet. But the significance of movement and flow in the images carried by *naie* also distinguishes them from other items. They are specifically women’s creations by referencing the very movement of women through the land in marriage.

The voices of the spirits that men control are taken from where the water rises from the earth and sits in pools before flowing away. Women’s *naie* designs dramatize their connection with flowing and moving water, places fed by, but very different from, the stasis of men’s spirit pools. In the case of Isuwing’s skirt *tupong saarung* (Figure 81), the naming of the skirt design as the name of the place of a waterfall is an equivalence between the two movements, that of water and that of person. This is further enhanced by the flow and swish of the *naie* as they are worn, as they are danced into life and



movement during the *sar'e*. The effort going into the production of *naie*, then, is an everyday effort for women in Reite and Sarangama. It was the everyday effort of making gender, and thus making kinship possible.

Women bring designs, much in the way they bring songs or taro plants, with them on relocation in marriage, but they do not pass them onto their daughters without special payments that mark the movement of a valuable item from one place and its incorporation into another. When women compensate their brothers and fathers for their bodies (as Nekgini speakers describe marriage payments), they can specify and add valuables to the body payment for the right to pass on skirt designs to their own daughters. The value of these designs is to demonstrate historical ties with other places through marriage (and the power of the particular place that captured them by drawing women there, in marriage, through love magic or visibility in exchange cycles). A history of movement and connection, demonstrated by the use of married-in designs through generations, connects a place with powerful ancestors, and with the lands of other places. Women's connections to flow and movement – their animation of the lands by their movements through it in marriage (reproducing the social world) – are made present in ceremonies of *sar'e* by the differently named images of land and place on the skirts.

Aesthetics

People make things for practical reasons. They also make things for decorative purposes. In many cases, we are used to seeing the two combined. Here decoration and function are not separate aspects of the endeavour of making *naie*. In their making women emerge as particular women from a place, connected through a history of relations to other places, embedded in histories of the development of places and their ties and interests. Making *naie*, then, is to make the vitality of life in this place, as a complement to other vital endeavours: gardening, initiation, child-bearing.

Hot male power dries and solidifies places, landscape features and the pools where water

collects. The animation of the land is given by movement: of water tumbling down steep stream beds, gushing and making smooth patterns over rocks and waterfalls; of women between hamlets in marriage; of menstrual cycles and childbirth. *Naie* are not ancillary to Reite womanhood, they are central to, and part and outcome of, the processes in which persons are made, the landscape takes its form, and history gains significance as places and kinship. The major moment of dramatization of these processes is *sar'e* itself, when *naie* are in full view, moving, flowing, filling in spaces and fattening the image of the whole that is a place.

Effort put into making these things is in the service of making gender and therefore kinship. This is shown most clearly in the ritual practices women undertake to dye the skirts, and their equivalence with men's practices with spirits and the male cult. For things to have the right effects, they have to be made in the right kinds of relationships. It is in those relationships that the effects are registered. Here, what we may recognize as a complex and skilled practice producing a beautiful object outcome is indeed that, but it is also a process which registers in a different aesthetic schema: one in which for things to have the effects that they are intended to have, they must already be tied into specific relationships to others, and those others must know that these processes are happening for them to respond to. This chapter documents the complex process of making *naie* in Reite as the complex practice of an aesthetic form.

Appreciating the indigenous aesthetic power of these pieces entails understanding the relational nature of their constitution, significance and appreciation. People are already seeing things through other's eyes here, as those eyes were constituted in processes such as the making of skirts. These are processes in which things and persons and places are parts of each other, where a single interiority of perception is not possible. It follows that the appreciation of these items and objects is inseparable from the desire, movement and the reproductive cycles of the social world itself, perceived through lenses of affinity, kinship and placement.

Figure 82. A vegetable-fibre skirt purchased through James Leach in 1995, made by Isuwing, from Reite (Oc1995,06.6, length 61 cm).



Conclusion

It is never long, when discussing *naie* with people in Reite, before humour and wonder at the power of these items comes to the surface. Tariak told, with great animation and laughingly, how recent efforts (the conversation was in January 2009) made by Reite women had been appreciated by the people of Gabumi, a village in another language group over a river to the west:

They praise us over there for our skirts alone! We went with all new *naie*, nothing old or dull [for *sar'e*]. They are still crying over our skirts. But we didn't leave a single one with them! Brought them all back, and now all the men and women over there are still crying, 'oh *naie*, the river Mot cuts us from you'.

