# From Papua New Guinea to the Museum: (re)collecting Abelam assemblages (1955-1987)

Volume I – Text

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# Abstract

This research investigates the histories and itineraries of Abelam collections from the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea held in museums in Europe (the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and the UK), Australia and Papua New Guinea. These collections were acquired between 1955 and 1987, mostly at the turn of Papua New Guinea Independence in 1975. It aims to interrogate why and how museum institutions have collected very large quantities of material from the Abelam region, especially *haus tambaran* painted and carved contents and initiation-related material, and what processes contributed to transforming these artefacts into museum objects.

This thesis aims to re-collect the multiplicity of human and non-human actors who contributed to the formation of these collections, taking into consideration their interacting agency and focusing not only on the collected objects but also on the accumulated archival documentation. In doing so, it contributes to creating a fresh perspective on the history of these collections-as-assemblages and on the collecting practices in the Abelam region during the second half of the 20th century. Rather than studying each assemblage independently, it proposes to question their emergence and trajectories in relation to one another, highlighting how collecting endeavours have informed each other and contributed to shaping a certain representation of Abelam (material) culture.

Through this specific focus, this research in turn interrogates the ongoing lives of Abelam collections within museum institutions and proposes to re-define what are more broadly understood as 'ethnographic collections' as fluid and ever-growing assemblages, of which archival documentation forms an essential part. It aims to historicise these collections, to complicate their history while framing collecting practices as relational events. As such, it falls into the ongoing call to re-complexify the history of collections, to thicken collecting narratives, and for provenance research to account for these complex encounters at the heart of ethnographic collection-making.

# Statement on the impact of Covid-19

This PhD dissertation was completed during the troubled times of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic. The impact of the pandemic on the research process has been multifarious and forced me to adapt a number of aspects of the planned research.

The ban on international travel meant the cancellation of fieldwork originally planned between April and June 2020 in Papua New Guinea. It soon became apparent that it would not be possible to reschedule at a later date within the timeframe of my doctoral degree. During this field trip, I was supposed to conduct research at the National Museum and Art Gallery in Port Moresby, and to carry out fieldwork in a number of Abelam villages in order to conduct a photo-elicitation project in the hope of reconnecting the collections under study with Abelam creating communities. A research permit, sponsored by the National Museum and Art Gallery, had been granted to conduct this two-month project. The impossibility to travel to Papua New Guinea acted as a strong reminder of the distance and disconnection between the collections under study and where they originate. The abandonment of that aspect of the research therefore implied a necessary recentring of my dissertation on the museum lives of Abelam assemblages, while still hoping that future research in Papua New Guinea will allow me to conduct that part of the project. However, at the time of submitting this PhD dissertation, many uncertainties remain and the health situation in Papua New Guinea is more than ever critical.

Travelling bans also meant that further research on some of the collections stored in Europe was not possible within the allocated time of the doctoral study. In particular, I was not able to consult the photographic archives of the Groenevelt collection, now held at the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam. In addition, the exhibition history of the collections under study and the public reception of the agency of displayed Abelam objects would also have required renewed access to museum exhibitions or, when not on show anymore, to archival materials documenting these displays and related visitor experiences. This ended up difficult to secure in the context of the

pandemic and closure of museum institutions. For lack of a comprehensive overview, the public reception of Abelam material in museums is consequently not directly addressed in this thesis.

The limited access to libraries and research facilities also proved challenging at times, especially at the beginning of the pandemic during Spring 2020. But more than the access to resources, and although the PhD is intrinsically a solitary endeavour, it is the separation from my colleagues and research community that proved the most difficult, as my research was initially nourished from our daily conversations and the intellectually stimulating environment of the Sainsbury Research Unit.

# Table of contents

All translations from German, Dutch and French are mine unless otherwise stated.

Please be aware that this dissertation mentions and includes photographs of deceased people.

# List of tables

# List of abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| ADC | Assistant District Commissioner |
| ADO | Assistant District Officer |
| AHRC | UK Arts and Humanities Research Council |
| AMS | Australian Museum, Sydney |
| ANGAU | Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit |
| ANMEF | Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force |
| ANT | Actor-Network Theories |
| AOG | Assemblies of God |
| BM | British Museum, London |
| CAAB | Commonwealth Art Advisory Board |
| DC | District Commissioner |
| DO | District Officer |
| LM | Linden-Museum, Stuttgart |
| MAA | Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge |
| MKB | Museum der Kulturen, Basel |
| NGA | National Gallery of Australia, Canberra |
| NMVW | Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen |
| PMV | Public/Passenger Motor Vehicle |
| PNG | Papua New Guinea |
| PNG NMAG | Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery |

| | |
|---|---|
| PRM | Patrol Reports Maprik |
| SMB | Staatliche Museen zu Berlin |
| SR | Stadsarchief, Rotterdam |
| SRU | Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania & the Americas |
| SVD | Societas Verbi Divini (Society of the Divine Word) |

# Preface

In early November 2011, while starting my journey at the Ecole du Louvre as an undergraduate Art History student, I had to choose what would become one of my 'speciality modules' for the three years to come. I had already attended a module dedicated to African Arts in the morning and decided to attend the first lecture of the Arts and Anthropology of the Pacific module later that day, mostly because the description in the handbook, referring to notions of 'enchantment' or 'efficacy' of art, had piqued my curiosity.

While pushing the door to the dark and cold lecture theatre, I had not yet realised that this lecture was the first of a long series of what would then guide my studies and learning pathway for the decade to come. It is on that special day, which happened to be my 18th birthday, that I most likely heard for the first time the word 'Abelam', as Dr Ludovic Coupaye was enthusiastically telling us about the importance of yams in that part of the Pacific, alongside many other exciting things we would discover throughout the year thanks to the expertise of Philippe Peltier and Magali Mélandri (then respectively Head Curator and Collections Manager in charge of the Oceania collections at the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac). At the time, I could barely place some of the Pacific islands and related cultures on a map, but it became obvious that this was what I wanted to learn about, and that it would become the focus of my studies.

After a first Master's dissertation dedicated to the study of Kanak shell money from New Caledonia in the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac (2015), through which I developed a strong interest in collection-based research, I left Paris to do a one-year exchange with Leiden University in 2015-16. Following the advice of my former lecturers, I contacted Dr Wonu Veys, curator in charge of the Oceania collections at the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, in the hope of volunteering at the Museum Volkenkunde, and of possibly doing some research on one of their Pacific collections. She warmly welcomed me and offered the possibility to work on several

collections, among which was the Abelam material acquired in 1987 by her predecessor, Dirk Smidt. Indeed, the documentation of the collection needed to be sorted out, and this would be my starting point into investigating this Abelam assemblage. From this initial opportunity and the resulting dissertation I wrote about it, it soon became apparent that further research into Abelam museum collections needed to be conducted, and that this could constitute an original doctoral research project. My Abelam journey therefore continued when I moved to Norwich and joined the Master's programme at the Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania & the Americas in October 2016. While elaborating my PhD project with my future supervisors, Dr Karen Jacobs and Professor Steven Hooper, I decided to continue working on Abelam collections, and dedicated my MA dissertation to the Abelam/Wosera collection preserved at the British Museum. This study was another milestone in the build up to my PhD research, and as with the Leiden collection, remained an essential case study in my doctoral project.

Therefore, although my PhD officially began in October 2017, this dissertation is not only the result of the past four years of doctoral research, but of a journey into Abelam collections that started in late 2015, itself nourished by the multiple encounters, university training and professional experience which led me to work on museum collections from the Pacific.

# Acknowledgements

This thesis is the result of a research journey that could not have come to fruition without the help and support from many people and institutions.

First of all, this research was made possible thanks to a two-year scholarship from the Consortium for the Humanities and the Arts South-East England (AHRC UK) and to the generous support of the Sainsbury Research Unit.

I would like to warmly thank my supervisors Dr Karen Jacobs and Professor Steven Hooper for their time, insights and strong support throughout this research project. Thank you, Karen, for your enthusiasm, mentoring and unwavering guidance throughout this journey, especially during this difficult past year.

At the SRU, my sincere thanks go to Lynne Crossland who kindly proofread this thesis, and to Lisa Farrington. Thank you to Pat Hewitt, Laura Armstrong and Jeremy Bartholomew at the Robert Sainsbury Library, and to the lecturers with whom I gladly shared thoughts and lunches along the years. Thank you to the SCVA Gallery Assistants for always making the Sainsbury Centre feel like home.

I would like to take this opportunity to also express my deepest gratitude to Dr Ludovic Coupaye, Philippe Peltier and Magali Mélandri, for initially passing on their passion for Pacific arts and anthropology and for making me want to conduct academic research in the first place. Thank you to Dr Wonu Veys for encouraging me to pursue research on Abelam museum collections.

Collection and archival research was facilitated by many people around the world:

At the British Museum (London): Dr Julie Adams, James Hamill and Jill Hasell; at the Museum der Kulturen (Basel): Dr Béatrice Voirol, Angelika Kutter and Doris Kähli; at the Linden-Museum (Stuttgart): Dr Ulrich Menter; at the Ethnologisches Museum (Berlin): Dr Dorothea Deterts; at the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (Leiden) and the Wereldmuseum (Rotterdam): Dr Wonu Veys, Sijbrand de Rooij and Paul van Dongen; at the Australian Museum (Sydney):

Patricia Egan and Sue Wyatt; and at the National Gallery of Australia (Canberra): Crispin Howarth. Thank you also to Dr Andrew Moutu at the PNG National Museum and Art Gallery (Port Moresby) who initially sponsored my research project in Papua New Guinea, and to Cynthia Kwamillon who had originally kindly accepted to host me in Maprik.

My warmest thanks go to Dr Noel Mc Guigan, Dr Dirk Smidt, Dr Fred and Nel Gerrits, Dr Diane Losche, Helen and Paul Dennett, Professor Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, Dr Christian Kaufmann, Dorota Starzecka and D. John Lee who generously and enthusiastically spent time answering my questions and sharing their precious knowledge and experience with me.

While travelling around the world to conduct this research, many people, strangers and friends alike, hosted me. In this regard, many thanks to Edmund in London, Marike and Mathilde in Leiden, Cécile in Berlin, and Béatrice and Martin in Canberra, who not only offered me their hospitality, but made the research process much less lonely.

Finally, thank you to my substitute family in Norwich, inspiring SRU colleagues and friends: Amy, David, Giulia, Rachel, Abigail, Etai, Jacob, Maja, Alex, Claire, Bolaji, Rosalie, Sylvia, Francesca, Will, Cindy, Clémentine, Chloe; to my French anchors around the world: Simon, Cécile, Louise, Caroline, Maxime, Alexandre, Coline, Sarah, Gwen and Alexia. To my family for their unconditional love and encouragements, and to Ed for bearing with me all this time.

# Introduction

> The centre of the village is formed by the squares on which the feast halls stand [...]. Whereas in the south they are built more horizontally, in the north they are distinguished by what may be termed a titanic height of gable [...] From the peak of the gable there hangs a long string or chain on which dangles a bird out of wood or a stick with skulls from which sago leaf fringes like ghost bodies hang down. Under the gable there are paintings nearly all the way down, mostly heads. Among them are carvings, especially eels, tortoises and birds in extraordinarily tasteful arrangement. In this wall, spear and arrow heads stick as trophies. On one side the front wall has a low opening only about one meter high, a projecting structure like a prompter's box through which one crawls into the dark interior. The dark lofty space, which only receives a little light from the rear, [...] reminds one of the interior of a Gothic church. (Thurnwald 1914: 82-83, translated from German by David Lea and quoted in Scaglion 2007: 350).

In 1914, the German ethnographer Richard Thurnwald (1869-1954) described in his travel account and photographs what would become the first recorded testimony by a European of Abelam ceremonial houses, *haus tambaran* in Tok Pisin[1] or *kurabu* in Ambulas **(Figs. 1 to 4)**. Almost a century later, in 2012, two initiation chambers **(Figs. 5 and 6)** from a *haus tambaran* built in Bilgwin hamlet of Apangai village were collected on behalf of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin by Noel Mc Guigan, a retired northern-Irish teacher and anthropologist. These chambers and their painted and carved contents were created under the supervision of the renowned Abelam artist and big man Keli Kandi, who asked Mc Guigan in 2009 if he could find a market for the chambers' contents. In 2021, they are to be exhibited as part of the soon-to-be-opened Humboldt Forum in Berlin, behind the *haus tambaran* façade acquired by Franz Panzenböck in 1963-64 **(Fig. 7)** and alongside the façade of a yam storage house and other yam-related objects collected by Gerd Koch in 1966 **(Fig. 8)**, in what promises to be a complex Abelam re-assemblage.

[1] Papua New Guinea pidgin, lingua franca and one of the three official languages alongside Hiri Motu and English.

Since the first recorded encounter between Thurnwald and Abelam people at the beginning of the 20th century, and until this recent acquisition and upcoming display of parts of an Abelam *haus tambaran*, the visual impact of Abelam artefacts and especially of the towering ceremonial houses has not ceased to fascinate anthropologists and museum curators. Museums, particularly so-called 'ethnographic', 'anthropology' or 'world cultures' museums, have been attracted by these magnificent ceremonial houses, by their distinctively colourful façades and painted and carved contents. Therefore, in order to understand how and why in the 21st century such a high-profile European institution decided to acquire, and eventually to display, reconstituted Abelam initiation chambers, this thesis proposes to explore the collecting practices and trajectories that led such artefacts from Abelam villages in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea **(Maps 1 to 4)** to be housed in museums around the world. To be fully comprehended, the Humboldt forum Abelam collection and planned display – itself an assemblage of several assemblages – needs to be articulated against the backdrop of previous collections and encounters.

This research focuses on four decades of collecting endeavours, from the mid-1950s to the late 1980s, a period during which most Abelam museum collections were acquired, from the first substantial collection gathered in 1955-56 by the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel to the assemblage gathered in 1987 by the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden. These four decades are also significant as they centre around the Independence of Papua New Guinea in 1975. Such a temporal framework raises further questions concerning the possible reasons for this momentum, both in Abelam artistic production and concomitant collecting enterprises, which this thesis aims to uncover.

Although the collections which constitute the case studies of this research have been acquired by institutions with varying agendas, and by a multiplicity of actors, they all relate one way or another to the *haus tambaran*, which appears to be the primordial object of desire and the conducting thread bringing all these collections together. This central place of the *kurabu* – as one of the prime locations of Abelam ceremonial life and artistic praxis – is reflected in this collecting frenzy and in the assembled collections held in museums in the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Australia and Papua New Guinea. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, one can indeed observe a progressive focus on collecting assemblages of *haus tambaran* related material, in particular façades and initiation scenes. Earlier collections did not always comprise such complete sets, for various reasons, such as

the practicalities of packing and transport, lack of funding, or Abelam people being less willing to part with *haus tambaran* contents. But all these assemblages aimed to be as representative of Abelam (material) culture as possible – at least according to the collectors – as comprehensive and in most cases as thoroughly documented as the collecting conditions and the willingness of the collectors allowed for.

This thesis analyses how these collections were, and still are, the incarnation and catalyst of complex historical encounters. These assemblages cannot be fully comprehended without placing them in the broader historical, colonial and anthropological contexts which affected the north-eastern part of the island of New Guinea. It is these historical interactions that I want to address, in order to better understand the collecting processes that led to these Abelam artefacts being stored and showcased in museums world-wide. Beyond the grand schemes of (post-)colonial and anthropological histories, I want to weave specific narratives from the perspective of particular individuals, whose voices, personalities and own networks have shaped a certain understanding of collecting practices in the Abelam region.

By writing an historiography of collecting practices in the Abelam region during the second half of the 20$^{th}$ century, this research aims to create a fresh perspective on the itineraries (Joyce and Gillespie 2015: 11-19) of Abelam museum collections, on their histories from their pre-collecting to their ongoing post-collecting lives, and the different systems of values accorded to them along the way. Eventually, I want to draw a more comprehensive picture of what these collections are and what they do, to rethink collections as complex assemblages encompassing multiple kinds of human and non-human actors that this thesis in turn tries to piece together, to (re)collect. This process of re-collection is undertaken by following what happens to Abelam artefacts while becoming museum objects, what they have undergone during their journey from Papua New Guinea to a number of museums around the world. Through this re-collection, this thesis studies the added layers of information that Abelam objects may have gained along the way and how this information eventually becomes part of the collected object.

Through the examination of collected Abelam objects, together with the preserved archival documentation of these collections, I will re-evaluate the roles played by specific actors and question the boundaries of ethnographic collections: where do these collections start, where do they end? And eventually, what does 'Abelam' in the museum mean? In doing so, I will progressively challenge accepted museum

classifications and categories which often exclude archival documentation from the collection, and which are often insufficient or obsolete when it comes to representing a more dynamic approach to collections. This thesis tries *in fine* to redefine Abelam collections as fluid, not only material but also social assemblages (Byrne *et al.* 2011b: 4), of which archives form an essential part. By reappraising these collections and their histories in all their complexity, it proposes to highlight their points of connection, and how they relate to one another in order to constitute a better overview of the collecting landscape in the Abelam region.

From this focused study, this thesis also engages with wider questions concerning the role of ethnographic museums, their collections, knowledge systems and display strategies, hoping it will contribute to considering museum collections not in isolation but informing one another, as representatives and parts of wider networks. Therefore, through the lens of Abelam collections, this thesis aims to examine broader perspectives on heritage creation, preservation and valorisation within ethnographic museums today. The latter are currently under particularly sharp critical scrutiny as institutions that are historically deeply entangled with oftentimes dubious colonial activities and violent encounters. By studying Abelam collections in detail, this thesis proposes to investigate the complex reality of such institutions and collections. In this regard, the time frame of this research is especially coherent, and helps to highlight the intricate parameters at play in the creation of such museum collections.

Hence, before getting back to the politics and poetics of the upcoming exhibition of Abelam initiation chambers at the Humboldt Forum, and in order to fully articulate its emergence and display, this thesis invites you not only to step back but also to zoom in, in order to get a better comprehension of the creation and ongoing trajectories of Abelam museum collections.

# Research background

## Historical overview of colonial and early post-colonial Papua New Guinea

Collecting endeavours in the Abelam region from the mid-1950s onwards were the heirs of older encounters and collecting practices in Papuan and New Guinean territories, and must be understood against this historical backdrop of early colonial and more recent encounters. Indeed, even if some of these institutions or powers have officially disappeared in the second half of the 20th century, and in particular after 1975 when Papua New Guinea gained Independence, they have had important and lasting ramifications in the relationships between Abelam individuals and outsiders – be they administrative (colonial) officers, expatriates, anthropologists or art dealers – and therefore inevitably on collecting encounters and the resulting museum collections (see **Appendix A**).

### German New Guinea: first (collecting) expeditions in Kaiser-Wilhelmsland and early encounters with Abelam people

In November 1884, the German Empire annexed the north-eastern part of the island of New Guinea, a territory comprising the mainland as well as offshore islands (the Bismarck archipelago), forming what would be known as Kaiser-Wilhelmsland. The western part of the island was then under Dutch control, while the south-eastern area had been declared a British protectorate **(Map 5)**. In March 1885, the Neuguinea Kompanie was granted a charter by the Imperial Government to administer the new German territory, with the prospect of developing the colony economically and of supervising the "cultural advancement of its indigenous population" (Sack 1997: 191). Its impact, in part because of the setting up of copra plantations, was mainly concentrated on the coastal areas, and inland penetration remained relatively scarce – by 1885 the interior of German New Guinea was still uncharted. The first European to explore the Sepik River was the naturalist Otto Finsch, who travelled 50km upriver in 1885 and decided to name it Kaiserin-Augusta-Fluss. Such a 'discovery' opened up new perspectives for the Germans, who saw the river as a new route to unexplored inland areas, offering new possibilities in terms of labour recruitment and spread of mission influence (May 1990: 176). However, after the

Neuguinea Kompanie's important financial difficulties, the Reich took over its administrative functions in 1899 (May 1989: 111-112; Henderson 1993: 72).

More than reflecting institutional structures, the very expression of colonial rule was rather dependent on individual personalities (Hempenstall 1987: 98). In German New Guinea, Albert Hahl, Governor from 1902 to 1914, left an important legacy, especially in fostering the development of anthropological research in the region (Buschmann 2003: 233). However, the Sepik area remained relatively unknown to European visitors until the beginning of the 20th century, when in 1907, the exploration of the hinterland became the main objective of German scientific institutions, in terms of anthropological, geographical and botanical research (Scaglion 2007: 346).[2] Early collections of material from German New Guinea also found their way to German ethnographic museums, notably the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, where its Director, Adolf Bastian, took a great interest in the material coming from the Pacific territories. As summarised by Buschmann, "New Guinea became the playground for German museological rivalries" (Buschmann 2003: 234): not only Berlin, but also museums in Bremen, Cologne, Dresden, Hamburg, Leipzig, and Stuttgart competed for ethnographic material to strengthen their collections. However, this anthropological interest was not the only reason to support further exploration of inland areas of the Sepik region. More pragmatic issues, such as the decline of the indigenous population, resulting in part from the introduction of diseases by the colonisers, led plantations to put pressure on colonial authorities to open up new grounds for labour recruitment (Schindlbeck 1997: 32-33).

It was not until the last years of German control over the region that Europeans embarked upon the exploration of the area between the northern coast and the Sepik. In 1913-14, Governor Hahl approved a development plan with the main objective being to open up the interior of Kaiser-Wilhelmsland, and the settlement of stations on the three main rivers, Sepik, Ramu and Markham (May 1989: 115). This official plan coincided with the Kaiserin-Augusta-Fluss Expedition (1912-1913), during which the territory between the northern coast and the Sepik was explored by Europeans for the first time. This expedition was the largest one mounted during German colonial control over the region, organised by the Museum für Völkerkunde of Berlin, and financed by the Colonial Office (*Reichskolonialamt*) and the German Colonial Society

[2] More information on the different early expeditions in the region can be found in Schindlbeck (1997).

(*Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft*). It was the first German expedition in the region that followed a specific set research programme (Kaufmann 1990: 592). Its main goal was nonetheless "to open up new territory in the colony, mainly along the hitherto unknown tributaries of the Sepik River" (Schindlbeck 1997: 42, note 17), with the prospect of more labour recruitment. The expedition team stayed on the Sepik River from September 1912 to February 1913 and was composed of six scientists[3] (accompanied by the crew of the ship, some 120 carriers and 50 native soldiers), among whom was the ethnographer Richard Thurnwald **(Fig. 9)**.[4] As a scientific assistant at the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde, Thurnwald was assigned the inland region between the coast and the Middle Sepik River. After his first trip as a member of the expedition between the Sepik and the coast through the thinly populated grassland to the east of the Abelam territory, he seems to have operated almost independently from the rest of the expedition team, and even stayed in New Guinea once the expedition was over. In October 1913 he went on a second trip to the northern coast, this time from the village of Marui on the Sepik bank **(Map 3)**, following the 143rd meridian up to the coast, through the much more densely populated foothills of the Wosera and Abelam region **(Map 4)**. This trip constitutes the first official contact between Europeans and the Abelam, described by Thurnwald in his 1914 report *Vom mittleren Sepik zur Nordwestküste von Kaiser-Wilhelmsland*. While these early encounters seemed relatively friendly, they also identified the way to major labour recruitment in this densely populated region. Thurnwald estimated that between 10,000 to 15,000 people were living in the southern Abelam (Wosera) region, making it a prime new location for recruitment. Although he advocated for "recruiting with skill and without violence" (Thurnwald 1914: 81-84, translated from German and quoted in Scaglion 2001a: 152), subsequent encounters testified to condemnable – not to say brutal – practices by German planters, as has been thoroughly discussed by Richard Scaglion (Scaglion 1983; 1990; 2001a; 2007).

This first direct contact between Europeans and Abelam people happened at the very end of the German colonial control over the north-eastern part of New Guinea, only a few months before the outbreak of the First World War in July 1914. Consequently,

[3] Altogether, they collected 5,800 objects (Schindlbeck 1997: 36; Melk-Koch 2000: 54). According to Marion Melk-Koch (2000: 54), 85% of the artefacts collected during the Kaiserin-Augusta-Fluss Expedition went to the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, and the remaining 15% were shared between museums in Dresden, Munich, Stuttgart and Lübeck.

[4] For more details about the life and career of one of the most influential representatives of German anthropology, see the substantial work by Melk-Koch (1989; 2000).

most of the objects that Thurnwald collected on his own (after the end of expedition), possibly in the Abelam area, never arrived in Germany (Melk-Koch 2000: 63-64).[5]

## From Australian New Guinea to independent Papua New Guinea: towards an increasing anthropological interest in the Abelam region and its material culture

Before the end of the First World War, the territory of north-eastern New Guinea had already been taken over by Australia. As early as September 1914, after securing the surrender of German troops and administration, the region was administered by the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF). The initial impact of the change of colonial power seemed relatively slight, especially in the hinterland where the contacts and colonial presence were still limited (May 1989: 119). The ANMEF took over the colonial administration of the German Reich, but German plantations and missionaries could pursue their work, before being progressively expropriated (Scaglion 2007: 346). From 1921 to 1945, Australian civil administration was established, under the status of a League of Nations Mandate (Brown 2001: 19).

Further exploration of the Wewak hinterland, and more specifically of the Abelam region, was not conducted until the second half of the 1920s by the Australian colonial administration. There was very little contact until the 1930s when government patrols (in particular the Townsend-Eve mapping expedition led by the District Officer G.W.L. Townsend), missionaries (with the establishment of the Roman Catholic mission at Kunjingini and Ulupu in 1938), labour recruiters and miners further penetrated the region. The discovery of gold in the Abelam region in 1934 led to a minor rush, which helped open up the area (May 1989: 127; Scaglion 2001a: 153). An airstrip was built in 1936, and Maprik station was founded in 1937, which soon became an important administrative centre. Roads were also built linking Wewak to Maprik, and Maprik to Marui **(Maps 3 and 4)**, involving mainly Abelam work forces, in far from ideal – if not coercive – conditions (Scaglion 1983: 476). This development of infrastructures, which will be detailed in Chapter 2, also allowed for easier access to the region, and consequently for the first thorough ethnographic study, conducted over nine months between 1939 and 1940 by the Australian anthropologist Phyllis Kaberry (1910-1977). Working in the village of Kalabu where

[5] The fate of these collections remains relatively unclear. For more information, see Craig (1997: 393-408); Kaufmann (1990: 592) and Melk-Koch (1989).

she did extensive fieldwork **(Fig. 10)**, she wrote several functionalist studies dealing with general aspects of Abelam culture, such as language, kinship, native law and socio-political organisation (Kaberry 1940-41; 1941; 1942).[6]

The progressive development of infrastructures and anthropological research was abruptly stopped by the outbreak of the Second World War in the Pacific and, especially, by the bombings by Japanese aircraft on the north coast of New Guinea in 1942. As early as February 1942, the Australian civil administration had been replaced by the military administration of the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU), and Maprik station and mining activities were abandoned. By December 1942, the Japanese had landed at Wewak, but in 1943 defeats forced the Japanese army to take refuge in the hinterland. Despite an initial cordial relationship with the local population, this relationship with indigenous people quickly deteriorated largely because of the exhaustion of food supplies. By late 1944, with the advance of Australian troops, Japanese soldiers had to retreat even further into villages in the Wosera area. The region was particularly affected by Allied bombings, destroying villages and ceremonial houses, and causing casualties among the Abelam people (Scaglion 1983: 477-479). Suffice to say that the Second World War had a profound effect on the Abelam people and the other groups closest to military action.

After the war, the former mandated territory became a United Nations Trusteeship under Australian administration, uniting the territories of New Guinea and of Papua (the south-eastern part of the island), thus becoming the Territory of Papua and New Guinea. From 1945 to 1952, the new Governor, Jack K. Murray, put new emphasis on economic and political development, with the creation of an expanded body of officers, specialised in agriculture, education and medicine (Brown 2001: 19; Scaglion 2001a: 156), and from 1949 of Native Local Government Councils. The first council in the East Sepik Province was established in 1957, and by 1968 ten were sitting. They allowed for people to gather at a supra-village level and were also used for trade purposes (May 1990: 179). However, their powers remained under Australian law, and consequently local councils appeared fairly inefficient in terms of indigenous self-expression (Healy 1997: 221-222). This paternalistic view was further pursued by the new Governor's administration, Paul Hasluck (1951-1963), emphasising "the primacy of white controls, concepts and values, [which] conflicted with any suggestion of

[6] Margaret Mead, who had conducted extensive anthropological research in the neighbouring Arapesh region (Mead 1938), and Gregory Bateson, who had worked with the Iatmul (Bateson 1932; 1936) suggested to Kaberry to focus on the Abelam (Kaberry 1940-41: 233).

ceding local powers to indigenes" (Healy 1997: 223). However, New Guinea was never meant to be a settler colony (contrary to Australia), and Australians and other expatriates knew they only settled temporarily in New Guinea. The Australian colonial project in New Guinea was consequently affected by this specific approach which progressively led to the idea of Papua and New Guinea's self-development, and by extension to independence perspectives (McPherson 2001: 4), with the first House of Assembly being elected in 1964. Between 1968 and 1972, the newly founded Pangu Party, led by Pita Lus and the late Michael Somare among others, became increasingly influential in the East Sepik Province. The 1972 elections saw the appointment of Somare as Chief Minister and led to the self-governance of Papua New Guinea in 1973, paving the way to Independence on 16 September 1975.[7]

## Overview of anthropological studies of the Abelam

When writing about Abelam people and (material) culture one is soon confronted with a number of definition problems. What does 'Abelam' mean – geographically, culturally, stylistically or linguistically speaking?

The Abelam people are generally introduced as living in villages constituted of several hamlets in the hilly region between the Sepik River to the south and the Prince Alexander Mountains to the north. They numbered around 40,000 people[8] in the 1980s (Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993: 127), making this part of Papua New Guinea one of the most densely populated areas of the country. The name 'Abelam' was initially used by the Arapesh, to identify their neighbours (Koch 1968: 5). In 1933, Margaret Mead was the first anthropologist to employ the term 'Abelam' to qualify Ambulas speakers in a publication, although they originally did not have a specific ethnonym under which they identified (Mead 1933: 38; Kaberry 1940-41: 233-234).

Following Thurnwald who had already observed variations between northern and southern Abelam groups, Kaberry pointed out that although Abelam people are all Ambulas speakers (a language which is part of the Ndu language family, of the Middle Sepik stock), they do not constitute a homogenous grouping: indeed they display important local cultural and artistic variations, corresponding especially to the

[7] For more information, see Somare (1975).
[8] The upcoming results for the 2020 Papua New Guinea population and housing census may give more accurate numbers for today's population. For more information, see Papua New Guinea National Statistical Office 2021: https://www.pngcensus2020.com/.

dialect alterations from one part of the Abelam area to another (Kaberry 1940-41: 234-236).[9]

The Second World War brought anthropological research in the Abelam region to a halt, and it did not resume until the 1950s. One of the first anthropologists to return to the Abelam area was Paul Wirz (1892-1955), who unfortunately died there in the village of Ulupu **(Figs. 11 and 12)** on 30 January 1955, during a research journey started in late 1954 which was supposed to be his last collecting trip to New Guinea.[10] His interest in the Sepik material culture and in the Abelam paved the way for another generation of anthropologists.

Following Wirz, Alfred Bühler (1900-1981), Director of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel from 1950 to 1964 and first holder of the Ethnology chair at the University of Basel, went on a research and collecting trip along the Middle Sepik River and the Abelam and Washkuk foothills, from November 1955 to April 1956 with the Swiss photographer and travel writer René Gardi (1909-2000). Bühler's work and exhibitions at the Museum für Völkerlunde contributed to defining artistic styles of the Sepik, including what he would eventually term the 'Maprik style (northern fringe of the Sepik lowlands)' (Bühler 1960). In 1954, in collaboration with Paul Wirz, he had already organised the exhibition *Kunstwerke vom Sepik* ("Artworks from the Sepik"), including some Abelam carvings.[11] Following the 1955-56 expedition by Bühler and Gardi, the special exhibit *Heilige Bildwerke aus Neuguinea* ("Sacred sculptures from New Guinea") was displayed from late 1957 until the end of March 1958. As highlighted by the cover of the catalogue (Bühler 1958) – a photograph of the façade of a ceremonial house in Ulupu **(Fig. 13)** – half of the material exhibited came from the Abelam region and had been acquired by Bühler during the 1955-56 expedition. In 1960, a third exhibition entitled *Kunststile am Sepik* ("Art styles in the Sepik") opened. Through this display, Bühler pursued his work in defining six main artistic styles for the Sepik region, the fifth one corresponding to the Maprik area (Bühler

[9] For more information on the Ndu language family, see Laycock (1965).
[10] An accomplished Swiss anthropologist and traveller, Wirz had participated in the Dutch Central New Guinea Expedition in 1922, and worked in various regions of New Guinea, producing important reports about the Marind-Anim, the Lake Sentani and the Papuan Gulf, before turning to the Sepik (O'Reilly 1955: 131; Gross 2004: 141). During his various journeys, he had collected more than 10,000 objects, as well as photographs, films and sound recordings, now held in European museums, notably in Basel and Amsterdam (Gross 2004: 141-142; Duuren 2011: 146-152).
[11] The eponymous catalogue illustrates three Abelam wooden sculptures collected by Wirz (Wirz 1954: cat. nos. 33 to 35): one was part of a *waken* headdress, another represented a hornbill (most likely coming from the façade of a *kurabu*), and the last one, a snake.

1960). These three early exhibitions highlighted the durable interest of the Swiss institution, and especially leading individuals – Wirz and Bühler – in promoting the research and collection of New Guinean and in particular Sepik/Abelam material culture in the 1950s. Gardi's travel account *Tambaran: an encounter with cultures in decline in New Guinea*[12] and photographs (Gardi 1960 [1956]; Gardi and Bühler 1958) also contributed to popularising Abelam art, as will be discussed further in Chapter 5.[13]

At the end of the 1950s, more extensive fieldwork-based anthropological research in the Abelam region achieved recognition with Anthony Forge (1929-1991), who, following Bühler's advice (Kaufmann 2017: 181-183), arrived in Maprik in late 1957. Between 1957 and 1963 he conducted several extensive field research trips in the Northern Abelam and also in the Wosera,[14] accompanied in 1959 by Bühler on a collecting trip for the museum in Basel (Bühler 1961); a collecting enterprise that he continued in 1962-63. Forge, a student of Raymond Firth at the London School of Economics, is certainly one of the anthropologists who most thoroughly reunited the anglophone social anthropology with the study of material and visual culture throughout the 1960s and 1970s, paving the way for future anthropological studies of art. His publications on Abelam ethnography highlighted the importance of what has been commonly called the *tambaran*[15] cult and its related male initiation cycle, the meaning of Abelam art and ceremonial architecture (Forge 1962; 1966; 1967; 1970; 1972; 1973a; 1973b; 1979; 1990).[16]

[12] Originally published in German in 1956 under the title *Tambaran: Begegnung mit Untergehenden Kulturen auf Neuguinea*.
[13] The recent documentary *African Mirror* by Mischa Hedinger (2019) paints the portrait of a complex and problematic figure, who had been convicted in 1944 of sexual abuse on some of his pupils while working as a teacher in Switzerland. Hedinger shows how Gardi's films and books recounting his trips to Cameroon in the 1950s contributed to creating a fantasised image of Africa for a Swiss audience. Although Switzerland never had colonies *per se*, his highly staged accounts helped shape colonial desires and images 'by proxy' for an audience eager for exoticism. The documentary does not mention Gardi's work in New Guinea but certainly sheds a new light on some aspects of his work alongside Alfred Bühler.
[14] Despite Bühler's and Forge's early interest and research on the Wosera (respectively in Numbungai and Kwanabandu), and although Wosera people were the first to have been in contact with Europeans during Thurnwald's 1913 expedition to the northern coast, anthropological research on the latter has been comparatively more limited than for the Northern Abelam. One can nonetheless refer to the works by Noel Mc Guigan (1992, particularly the first part of his PhD thesis), Roger Schroeder (1992), Richard Lornie (1975), J. Whiteman (1965; 1966a; 1966b) or David Lea (1973).
[15] *Tambaran* is the Tok Pisin word to qualify a wide range of spiritual beings.
[16] Forge's publications were recently compiled in a comprehensive edited volume, see Clark and Thomas (2017).

The main expression of the *tambaran* cult is the *haus tambaran* (or *kurabu*), standing on the ceremonial ground (*ame*) at the heart of the village, and which used to play an essential role in some advanced stages of the male initiation. Following Kaberry (1940-41: 239), Forge noted that the Abelam society was divided into two moieties (*ara*): men from the two halves were exchange partners with one another, and alternately men from one *ara* would initiate the non-initiated boys or men of the other *ara* (Forge 1967: 68-69). Across the Abelam area, the number, names and content of the different grades of the male initiation cycle used to vary considerably. Each stage was always marked by food and comportment restrictions, as well as an ordeal to which the novices were subjected, before specific items, artefacts and musical instruments were revealed to them by their initiators. For a man, being fully initiated opened the way to important knowledge related to the *tambaran* cult and to the successful cultivation of ceremonial long yams, while conferring him to higher status. The whole cycle of initiation could take up to a lifetime; each level requiring relatively lengthy preparations. Earlier stages of initiation were performed outside of the *haus tambaran*, while higher levels culminated with the revelation of complex initiation displays specially built within the ceremonial house. The associated ritual paraphernalia consisted of anthropomorphic painted sculptures and panels depicting a variety of spiritual beings, notably *gwaldu* ancestral spirits affiliated to particular clans. Forge was particularly keen to try to understand the meaning of such painted designs, even encouraging some of the men in Bengragum to paint for him on paper to supplement his field notes and photographs (Forge 1960: 12; 1973b; 1979).[17]

Forge's works, which remain a cornerstone in the field, inspired a number of followers, among others, Diane Losche, whose extensive fieldwork in the villages of Apangai and Magapita between August 1976 and August 1977 (after Forge's suggestion, Losche 1982a: iii) constituted the core material for her PhD thesis. In the latter, as well as in her subsequent publications, she addresses Abelam social organisation (Losche 1982a), gender divisions (Losche 1990), but also artistic production and aesthetic considerations following and discussing Forge's insights into the meaning of Abelam art (Losche 1995; 1996; 1997; 1999; 2001; 2013).[18]

[17] These paintings on paper are now preserved at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Clark and Thomas 2017: 276).
[18] On a similar topic, see also Coupaye (2017).

In the 1970s, following Bühler's impetus and under the leadership of Meinhard Schuster,[19] the Basel museum and university played a prominent role in fostering research in New Guinea. Regarding the Abelam, Barbara Huber-Greub carried out extensive research on social structure, settlement patterns and the use of land in the village of Kimbangwa in 1978-79 (Huber-Greub 1988; 1990). Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin also conducted a thorough anthropological study in the region, based in Kalabu (where Kaberry had conducted the first Abelam ethnography), where she carried out extensive fieldwork between 1978 and 1985. She contributed above all to the documentation of (ceremonial) house building (Hauser-Schäublin 1989a; 2016) and in line with Forge's insight, continued researching the meaning of Abelam aesthetics and material culture (Hauser-Schäublin 1985; 1989b; 1990; 1994; 1996; 2011; 2017).

During this period, the American anthropologist Richard Scaglion also conducted fifteen months of fieldwork between 1974-76 in Neligum (with several subsequent visits between 1979 and 1981). His research, happening at the turn of Independence, paid particular attention to the history and consequences of contacts between colonisers and Abelam people (Scaglion 1983; 1990; 2001a; 2001b; 2003; 2007; Roscoe and Scaglion 1990).

Yet, to date, some of the most thorough studies of the Abelam *tambaran* cult and related initiation ceremonies were conducted not by trained anthropologists (at the time), but by expatriates. Noel Mc Guigan, then a teacher in the region between 1973 and 1976, documented initiation ceremonies in Sarikim in 1975, and later in Apangai in 1984 (see Mc Guigan 1989). Godfried Johan Marie Gerrits (known as Fred Gerrits, born in 1933), a medical doctor based in Maprik from 1972 to 1977,[20] conducted his research in the village of Bongiora (Gerrits 2012), where he documented the interrelation of the *tambaran* cult with the growing and displaying of ceremonial yams, also called yam cult. Although already pointed out by Kaberry in her early studies,[21] the importance and significance of yam growing has been the focus of some

[19] Meinhard Schuster became Assistant in the Oceania department at the Museum für Völkerlunde, Basel, in 1965, before becoming its Curator in 1967. In 1968-69 he became the Deputy Director of the Museum, before succeeding Bühler as Professor in charge of the Chair of Ethnology at the University of Basel.
[20] Fred Gerrits was then attached to the Maprik Hospital and was the Provincial Officer for the Control of Leprosy and Tuberculosis (Gerrits 2012: 22).
[21] Kaberry had compiled documentation on the 'yam cult', but the planned book remained unpublished (Coupaye 2013: 52).

important ethnographic studies,[22] the most recent one by Ludovic Coupaye (2009; 2013), who worked in the village of Nyamikum between 2001 and 2003. Abelam people are renowned horticulturists, growing several varieties of taro and yams, which constitute the main staple food. But they are particularly known for the cultivation, ceremonial display and exchange of long yams (*waapi*, i.e. *Dioscorea alata*). Producing long yams is the main source of prestige for Abelam men and testifies to their status as influential social beings capable of managing good exchange relationships with different partners (*sabura*). Long yams are displayed during the *Waapi Saaki* ceremony, when they are abundantly decorated and evaluated.

Interestingly, a correlation between the way yams, initiates and ancestral carved and painted figures are ornamented has been shown by several of the aforementioned scholars (Forge, 1966: 28; Hauser-Schäublin, 1994: 142-144). Adorning bodies, sculptures and yams equally aimed to "create desire and awe in the audience" (Coupaye 2013: 78), thus testifying to the strong link between the yam and *tambaran* cults, and to the porous boundaries between objects and people. These artefacts, created as part of the yam cult and initiation ceremonies, also seem to have piqued collector's fascination early on, and constitute today the core of Abelam museum collections.

[22] Mc Guigan also highlights the interrelation between the *tambaran* and yam cults in a Wosera context (Mc Guigan 1992: 282-289; 1993: 45-47).

# (Re)-collecting Abelam: research rationale, methodology and case studies background

## Research rationale

Despite the substantial ethnographic scholarship dedicated to the Abelam, and even though many anthropologists or expatriates who conducted fieldwork in the Abelam area assembled either personal collections or collected on behalf of museum institutions, Abelam artefacts have yet to be studied in terms of the museum collections of which they now form a part, that is as *museum objects* created through processes of selection, classification, documentation, possible exhibition and (re)circulation (Desvallées and Mairesse 2010: 62; Jacobs 2021: 303).

The original purpose of this research is to understand what Abelam objects *in the museum* are and what the musealisation processes creating such objects entail, how they operate and eventually transform Abelam things into museum objects. If thorough studies have documented the creation, use and meaning of Abelam artefacts in their context of origin, little research has been conducted on what these things become once they are part of museum collections, and what are the processes at play throughout this transformation. This thesis therefore proposes to fill this gap in the scholarship, by means of a comprehensive collection-based ethnography. At a time when ethnographic museum institutions are more and more challenged, it seems appropriate, if not essential, to question the history and provenance of their collections. As proposed by Clémentine Deliss in her "Manifesto for the Post-Ethnographic Museum", this idea of conducting fieldwork inside the museum, also termed 'domestic research', aims at:

> repositioning collections both conceptually and physically.
> It's about rethinking possibilities
> of research inside a museum
> through self-critical and recursive inquiry
> slow, prone to change, not always visible
> reintroducing a laboratory into the practice of a museum
> developing new assemblages based on historical collections
> (Deliss 2020: 12)

This work therefore tries to disentangle musealisation processes at play in the creation of Abelam museum collections. Sometimes more pejoratively termed

'museumification', musealisation is "the operation of trying to extract, physically or conceptually, something from its natural or cultural environment and giving it a museal status, transforming it into a musealium or 'museum object', that is to say, bringing it into the museal field" (Desvallées and Mairesse 2010: 50). Such processes are in no way smooth, or neutral, and "through the change of context and the processes of selection and display, the status of the object changes" (Desvallées and Mairesse 2010: 51). Musealisation processes, from the assemblage of these collections to their integration and their "creative recontextualization" (Thomas 1991: 5) into museum knowledge and storage systems and exhibitionary complexes, need to be unpacked and interrogated to get a better understanding of what Abelam museum collections meant and represented at the time of their creation, but also what they can *do* today.

## Methodology: conducting an ethnography of Abelam museum collections

The starting point of this research project unfolded from the list of Abelam collections compiled by Noel Mc Guigan (Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993: 125), which I first came across in 2016 while working on the Abelam and Wosera collection acquired in 1987 by Smidt and Mc Guigan on behalf of the then Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden (Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen). Spending almost a year documenting the collection while volunteering at the museum, it became evident that a project looking at a possible comparison with, and further insight into, similar collections could be a potential doctoral research topic. It soon appeared that rather than focusing on the history of one specific collection, it was the analysis of the conjoint histories of collecting endeavours in the Abelam region that would prove original and more fruitful.

The selection of the collections that would constitute the case studies started from this original list and followed a more or less organic development, while complying with a number of criteria that I had established, in order – amongst other reasons – to be able to conduct this study within the temporal and financial limits that necessarily restrict the doctoral thesis exercise. These criteria were the following: (i) the collections under study would be museum collections (and not private ones, although Abelam material permeates many private collections), acquired under the impetus of museum professionals, that is museum curators or their hierarchy

(Directors, Boards of Trustees); (ii) collections would have been acquired in the second half of the 20th century, broadly from the mid-1950s to the late-1980s (dates of the earliest and most recent comprehensive collecting endeavours in the region, which coincide with the progressive Independence process of PNG in 1975), in the field, that is the Abelam region of the East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea (the notion of geographical provenance being progressively questioned); (iii) their contents would mostly revolve around whole or parts of ceremonial houses, or when not collected, would acknowledge the original wish of the collectors to acquire such objects; (iv) they would aim to be notionally as representative of Abelam material culture as possible, at least according to their collectors – a notion that will be discussed further in Chapter 4. Rather than being imposed on Abelam museum collections, these criteria stemmed from what I was able to find in museums, and progressively drawing out these discriminatory factors constituted in itself an important part of the research.

According to these criteria, thirteen collections were selected for further investigation, in Europe (London, Basel, Leiden, Rotterdam, Stuttgart and Berlin), in Australia (Sydney and Canberra) and in Papua New Guinea (Port Moresby). It appeared that these collections were attractive from a research point of view because they could be related to each other in terms of a number of recurring actors involved, but also places or mediators (see Chapter 2). The serendipity of some encounters also sometimes guided and oriented the research, allowing access to collections and documentation, or pointing towards materials of which I had previously been unaware. Contrarily, a number of other collections were also consciously excluded from this list – partly due to time and financial constraints, but also if they did not correspond to the criteria listed above. This is the case of collections in Germany, in Munich (Museum Fünf Kontinente) and Frankfurt (Weltkulturen Museum), in Adelaide (South Australian Museum) as well as a smaller one in Salem, USA (Peabody Essex Museum), or any museum collection comprising Abelam material that would not constitute a coherent whole originally acquired as such by the institution (for instance in the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris). These collections nonetheless constitute many potential future research projects, and their exclusion from this thesis should be considered a conscious decision for the sake of clarity, and not for being of lesser interest.

This selection of case studies echoes the creation of what could be framed as a collection of collections, a 'meta-collection', whose characteristics respond to specific

criteria of my choosing, embedding the meta-collection and its items into precise categories and classification schemes, while the ensemble thus created takes on new meanings and values that exceed the ones conferred to each individual collection. Such a collecting process positions myself, by conducting this research – this (re)collection – as a collector, and this thesis can consequently be envisioned as my ever-growing collection.

This research project relied on a richness of sources and was conducted primarily as a museum and archival ethnography. Fieldwork was therefore carried out in the multiple institutions where the collections under study are preserved, whether museum storerooms, consultation rooms where selected objects could be examined more thoroughly, curators' offices, library and archive reading rooms, etc. From the most obvious place – the museum building where collection objects are preserved – the research progressively unfolded to many parts of the world, rendering fieldwork a complex enterprise in terms of space, but also temporally. Indeed, a number of the actors involved are now deceased, while the collection itself is still in a perpetual process of becoming, relating past, present and future by its very nature as fragments detached from their original context in view of future preservation (Gosden, Larson and Petch 2007: 15).

In this sense, museum and collection ethnography differs from traditional Malinowskian long-term fieldwork, also in terms of the time spent at each institution, which depended on the availability of local staff, my own time and budget constraints, and the necessity to accommodate the contingencies of different parties' agendas. When possible, engagement with the collected artefacts themselves (or at least a selection, most of the time kept in storage) proved very informative in drawing a better picture of the typologies of objects collected, the similarities and disparities between collections and across time, while sometimes allowing for gathering precious data from older labels.[23]

Considering the very large number of objects acquired by each institution, it soon became clear that a study of each individual item would be impossible, and that studying these collections through a wider prism would prove more manageable and

[23] Depending on the availability of curators and the time I could dedicate to their study, some collections could benefit from a more thorough study and consequent update of their records. That is the case of the 1980 British Museum Wosera collection (Oc1980,11*) and the collection acquired in 1987 by Dirk Smidt and Noel Mc Guigan for the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde (Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, RV-5526*), both of which have been the focus of previous MA dissertations.

eventually more productive. Each Abelam collection that constitutes a case study in this thesis, although varying in size and content, encompasses for the most part several hundred objects – and in some cases more than a thousand. In order to deal with such large numbers of artefacts, the quantity of material being excessively large to allow for an investigation of each individual object, an approach was developed focusing on the different typologies, or repertoires of objects constituting these collections, which will be discussed further in Chapter 4. This 'field' research was supplemented by substantial library and archival research, engaging with online and paper databases, collection cards, museum accession and registration records, diaries, letters, administrative and official documents, newspaper cuttings and photographs – prints, slides and digitised files. Interviews or more informal conversations were conducted with individuals identified as key actors in these collecting processes. Finally, another aspect of this research, which unfortunately could not be completed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, was a planned two-month fieldwork trip to Papua New Guinea, during which research at the National Museum and Art Gallery in Port Moresby as well as a photo-elicitation project in several Abelam villages (see Chapter 5) were to be conducted.

## Introduction to the case studies

To give the reader a chronological overview of these collecting practices, and as a foundation to their thorough analysis throughout this thesis, the collections which constitute the case studies of this doctoral project will now be briefly introduced.

| Collecting date | Museum | Collector(s) | Collecting location(s) | Content |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1955-56 | Museum für Völkerkunde, Basel | Alfred Bühler and René Gardi | 4 separate journeys from Wewak:<br>- Washkuk foothills<br>- on the Sepik: from Ambunti to the Iatmul, Chambri, Keram and Angoram<br>- Maprik region, Numbungai and Ulupu<br>- Angoram | - More than 1500 objects from the Abelam region only<br>- Photographs and films by René Gardi<br>- Photographs by Alfred Bühler |
| 1959 | Museum für Völkerkunde, Basel | Anthony Forge | - Bengragum and Wingei (1957-1959)<br>- other locations (Kalabu) | - Ca. 320 objects<br>- Photographs |
| 1959-62 | Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde, Rotterdam | Carel M.A. Groenevelt | At least 4 trips to the Sepik and/or Abelam regions:<br>- January and February 1959<br>- April and May 1959<br>- September and October 1959<br>- February and March 1961<br><br>Numbungai, Ulupu, Saulik, Jama, Wosera, Kalabu, Masalagar, Kaugia, Chiginambu, Dreikikir (among others) | - Ca. 375 objects from the Abelam region<br>- Photographs? |
| 1962-63 | Museum für Völkerkunde, Basel | Anthony Forge | Kwanabandu and other locations in the Wosera and Abelam areas | - Ca. 500 objects<br>- Photographs? |
| 1966 | Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin | Gerd Koch | Kalabu (and in the Wosera area to a lesser extent) | - Ca. 260 objects, incl. the façade of a yam storage house<br>- Photographs |
| 1969 | National Gallery of Australia, Canberra | William Dargie | Kalabu, Kuminibus | - Façade of a *haus tambaran*, Kalabu<br>- Sculpted contents of an initiation room in Kuminibus<br>- ca. 30 other objects |
| 1972-73 | Museum für Völkerkunde, Basel | Fred Gerrits | Bongiora | - Painted and sculpted contents of the Putilago initiation room from the *haus tambaran* in Bongiora |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | - Photographs and films |
| 1972-73 | Linden-Museum, Stuttgart | Fred Gerrits | Bongiora | - Painted and sculpted contents of the Lungwallndu initiation room from the *haus tambaran* in Bongiora<br>- Photographs and films |
| 1973-74 | National Museum and Art Gallery, Port Moresby | Fred Gerrits | Sunuhu | - Painted and sculpted contents of the *haus tambaran* in Sunuhu (ca. 200 bark paintings and 80 sculptures)<br>- Photographs and films |
| 1979-80 | Australian Museum, Sydney | Diane Losche | Apangai (and other parts of the Abelam region to a lesser extent) | - Commission of a *haus tambaran* façade and initiation scene, of a yam storage house and a sleeping/cooking house.<br>- Additional objects from various parts of the Abelam area<br>- Photographs<br>- Film by H. Hughes |
| 1980 | Museum für Völkerkunde, Basel | Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin | Kalabu | - Commission of a *haus tambaran* façade<br>- Photographs |
| 1980 | Museum of Mankind, British Museum, London | Dorota C. Starzecka and David John Lee | Sarikim and Stapikum | - Painted and sculpted contents of the *haus tambaran* in Sarikim<br>- Additional collection of objects from the Wosera area (in total ca. 300 objects)<br>- Ca. 600 photographs by D. John Lee |
| 1987 | Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde | Dirk Smidt and Noel Mc Guigan | Apangai (Nyambikwa and Brikiti hamlets), Wosera region | - Painted and sculpted contents of the three initiation chambers (Lu, Puti and Gambawut) of the *haus tambaran* in Nyambikwa<br>- *Haus tambaran* façade from Brikiti<br>- Additional collection of objects from various parts of the Abelam and Wosera region (in total ca. 600 objects)<br>- Photographs by Smidt and Mc Guigan |

**Table 1** – *Abelam museum collections (1955-1987) – thesis case studies.*

As previously mentioned, the first substantial collection of Abelam artefacts was gathered by Alfred Bühler, then Director of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel, accompanied by René Gardi from November 1955 to April 1956 **(Figs. 14 and 15)**. One of the reasons that originally motivated this trip was the sudden death of Paul Wirz in January 1955 in Ulupu. In November 1955, Bühler arrived in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea in order to sort out Wirz's personal effects and the export of the items he had collected, as well as the purchase of the collection assembled by his son, Dadi Wirz, which had been confiscated by the local authorities (Christian Kaufmann, personal communication 13 June 2018). But beyond this initial matter, Bühler was willing to go back to New Guinea to fill the gaps in the Basel collection, especially in "the area of the Sepik River and the Maprik Mountains, where the natives have long been known to experts as unrivalled, almost unique, carvers and painters" (Gardi 1960: 18). During the five months they spent in Australian New Guinea, they remarked that although "numerous scientific expeditions had collected on the Sepik before [they] went there, [they] were among the first in the Maprik Mountains, and the results were most encouraging" (Gardi 1960: 22). Based in their 'headquarters' of Numbungai or Ulupu, Bühler would then visit the neighbouring villages to meet people, make them aware of the purpose of their visit, and to invite people to come to their settlement if they were willing to part with any objects (Gardi 1960: 63-64). Bühler was then choosing from the proposed artefacts, and after having negotiated the price and paid each Abelam seller, each acquired object was labelled, while some basic information (name of the object and of the maker or artist – when known –, meaning, use, price, etc.) was recorded. In total, more than 1500 objects were acquired, together with hundreds of photographs by Bühler and Gardi, and even some colour cine films by Gardi.

Three years later, following his extensive fieldwork in the Abelam region between February 1957 and May 1959 (in the Eastern Abelam villages of Bengragum and Wingei), Forge **(Fig. 16)** collected a large collection of Abelam material culture on behalf of Alfred Bühler and the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel.[24] Bühler was planning to re-visit the Sepik in 1959, but was not considering going back to the Abelam area. He therefore asked Forge if he would be willing to collect on his behalf, between March and May 1959, before joining him on his trip along the Sepik River:

[24] Forge had originally considered collecting for the British Museum, but eventually the project was not fulfilled (MKB 08-0007: letters from Forge to Bühler, 22 January and 3 March 1959).

> Would your [sic] consider to collect for me during this time? [...] I should like you to collect in your own area, which you know best, and I am certain that you could buy good material from the artistic point of view, small pieces as well as big ones. (MKB 08-0007: letter from Bühler to Forge, 29 December 1958)

Bühler remained fairly vague in his instructions on what to collect, but was hoping Forge could help him fill the gaps in the collection he had gathered with Gardi in 1955-56, and in particular to acquire a "'head board' [*tékét*, the row of carved heads on ceremonial house façades] for £10 and a complete façade of a house tambaran for £50, as well as big wooden figures" (MKB 08-0007: letter from Bühler to Forge, 20 March 1959).[25] Forge later returned to the Abelam for an additional twelve-month research trip in 1962-63 in the Wosera, in Kwanabandu village (Losche 1982a: 37; Kaufmann 2017: 194-204; MKB Einlauf V_0392), during which he again collected artefacts from the Abelam/Wosera for the Basel museum, alongside detailed ethnographic documentation.[26]

During the same period, between 1959 and 1962, the Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde in Rotterdam commissioned the private collector Carel M.A. Groenevelt (1899-1973) **(Fig. 17)** to collect artefacts in New Guinea, in the western part of the island formerly under Dutch control (Jacobs 2012: 57-62), but also in the Sepik and the Abelam regions.[27] Groenevelt's collecting methods appear to be somewhat different from the way Forge was proceeding at the same time: for Groenevelt, it seems that his – and Rotterdam's – main purpose was "buying up as many figures and objects as possible without giving any further thought to the culture from which they came" (Hollander 2011: 133). Although he kept a thorough record of correspondence with Christiaan Nooteboom (Director of the Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde) and especially with the Curator Johan Victor Jansen (1898-1970),[28] detailing his purchases and the costs, he provided very little information concerning the artefacts themselves. As reported by the Dutch art collector Jac Hoogerbrugge, Groenevelt's way of collecting was "too colonial: he would sit under a tree in the shade and order the people to bring him all sorts of things; he just barked at them. [...] As much as

[25] However, no *haus tambaran* façade was eventually collected by Forge during this collecting trip.
[26] For an overview of Forge's collected material around the world, see Clark and Thomas (2017: 275-277).
[27] Carel M.A. Groenevelt had already been working with the Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen in Amsterdam during his first expedition from 1951 to 1956, and at the beginning of his second expedition to New Guinea (1957-1962), until 1958 when the Tropenmuseum had to drop out due to financial problems (Hollander 2007; 2011: 125).
[28] SR 563_107/108 and 1407_147/148/149/150.

possible had to be snatched together as quickly as possible" (Corbey 2000: 146). Groenevelt was working mostly following Jansen's instructions. From what I have been able to infer from the archival record, Groenevelt conducted at least four trips to the Sepik and/or Abelam regions between January 1959 and March 1961, and progressively shipped the artefacts to Rotterdam between 1959 and 1962.

A few years later, the second half of the 1960s saw an increased enthusiasm in terms of collecting Abelam material. In Berlin, the Museum für Völkerkunde held important collections from the Pacific and prominently from the Sepik (Kelm 1968), but the material culture of the Abelam was not yet represented. The museum thus decided to organise a collecting trip to the region, undertaken in September and October 1966 by Gerd Koch (1922-2005) **(Fig. 18)**, then Curator in charge of the Pacific Department, in order to assemble a collection of artefacts as comprehensive as possible. The collecting trip (which lasted only six weeks) mainly took place in the northern Abelam area, where the initiation practices and yam cult were still most prominent, around the village of Kalabu, and to a lesser extent in the Wosera area (Koch 1968: 7). Koch insisted on the fact that Abelam people were "not at all averse to the trade" (Koch 2003: 45, translated from German), but that he would only buy providing people would answer his questions so that he could document the objects (Koch 2003: 45; 2005: 139). The collection, once shipped to Berlin, was published in the thoroughly illustrated catalogue *Kultur der Abelam* (Koch 1968), the aim of which was not to be a monograph, but rather to act as a point of reference for further ethnographic investigations in the region and its material culture. From 1970 until 2018, the yam storage house façade was displayed in Berlin in the then newly opened permanent exhibition of the Oceania collections alongside the *haus tambaran* façade previously collected by Franz Panzenböck **(Figs. 7 and 8)**.

In 1969, the Australian painter Sir William Dargie (1912-2003) **(Fig. 19)** collected on behalf of the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board (of which he was a member before becoming its chairman in 1969). He organised the collection of artefacts from New Guinea for the future National Gallery of Australia, which was due to open in Canberra. Between January 1969 and June 1970, Dargie undertook four collecting trips to New Guinea, of which the first one is of interest with regard to Abelam collections. During this first trip, he went to the Maprik area from 10 to 12 February 1969, before re-visiting for another two days on 14 and 15 February 1969. Nonetheless such a short visit allowed him to commission the creation of a *haus tambaran* façade

in Kalabu **(Fig. 20)**, and to acquire the sculpted contents from the initiation chamber of another ceremonial house in Kuminibus **(Fig. 21)**. The collection arrived in 1972-73 in Canberra, but soon became a burden – especially the façade – due to its dimensions and the consequent impossibility to integrate it as part of the newly proposed display. It has subsequently never been published, although it seems to be one of the largest façades from an Abelam ceremonial house preserved in any museum (Crispin Howarth, personal communication 3 December 2017). Yet, even if assembled on behalf of an art gallery whose vocation was to "focus on the region by building strong collections of works of art from South and South-East Asia and the Pacific" (Dargie 2011: 21), this collection did not differ substantially from other Abelam museum assemblages in terms of its composition. It revolved mostly around the acquisition of the contents of a *haus tambaran*, in the prospect of reconstituting an initiation scene. However, the very brief duration of the collecting process implied that only a little information – if any – could be compiled about the objects.

The 1970s, marked by the progressive self-government which culminated with the Independence of Papua New Guinea on 16 September 1975, were the time of some major collecting enterprises of Abelam material culture. These were conducted by the medical doctor Fred Gerrits **(Fig. 22)**. After arriving in Maprik at the end of 1971, Fred and his wife Nel Gerrits soon had a six-month leave, during which they went back to Europe and visited the museum in Basel, where Christian Kaufmann (whom they had already met in 1966 with Meinhard Schuster in Angoram, then both working for the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel) showed them around. At the time no ceremonial house was represented in the Swiss museum.[29] On their return to Maprik in 1972, Gerrits was informed of the existence of a recently built *haus tambaran*:

> the councillor from Bongiora came and said 'I thought you would like perhaps to have a look'. He insisted three or four times so we ended up driving there. And then we saw the *haus tambaran*, in a decayed state. The initiation was over, we had missed it because at that time we were on leave in Holland, but still the interior was in such a state that you could recognise everything. It was quite impressive! (Interview with Fred Gerrits, 29 March 2019)

The *haus tambaran* contained two initiation rooms, one for the Lungwallndu (Lu) stage and one for the Putilago (Puti) stage of initiation **(Figs. 23 to 26)**, two of the

[29] Gerrits had already collected a yam house and a full-size canoe for Basel while working in the Trobriands, in 1969-70, but initiation houses were not represented in the museum (interview Fred Gerrits 29 March 2019; MKB Einlauf V_0432).

highest stages of initiation in Bongiora, which were culminating in the revelation of complex painted and carved assemblages (Gerrits 2012: 55-85, 193-231).[30] This ceremonial house constituted the perfect opportunity to thoroughly study initiation practices and related material production, and in 1972 Gerrits started to document all the contents of the *haus tambaran* display, as well as the initiation process and its relation to yam cult (Gerrits 2012: 17). In 1973, Kaufmann and Schuster visited the Gerrits in Maprik and were shown the *haus tambaran* in Bongiora. Kaufmann agreed that the museum in Basel would certainly be interested in acquiring its contents and was originally thinking of acquiring the two initiation chambers (Lu and Puti). However, it soon appeared that there was too much and too voluminous material for one institution. The Lu chamber was then acquired by the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart, although the original idea was to keep the two chambers together as a coherent and thoroughly documented ensemble.[31]

All the material was sent to The Netherlands by Fred Gerrits to his brother Hans (J.S.M.) Gerrits, based in Bergen op Zoom, who was then dealing with the museums in Basel and Stuttgart to transfer the respectively acquired collections. The material was shipped to Basel in November 1975, but did not go to Stuttgart until July 1977, as F. Kußmaul, the Linden-Museum Director, wanted to see the material stored by Hans Gerrits (which he had only seen in photographs) before confirming the purchase and transfer of the collection. In 1978, the museum in Basel acquired the three *urungwall*[32] that were also part of the *haus tambaran* contents in Bongiora (MKB Einlauf V_0460).

In 1973, another initiation ceremony happened in Sunuhu.[33] Fred Gerrits first encountered the Sunuhu *haus tambaran* **(Fig. 27)** by accident while he was looking

[30] For detailed information about initiation cycles and ceremonies in Bongiora, see Gerrits (2012: 109-192).
[31] "Traditionally Lu- and Puti-initiations were separate happenings. But in the 1970s many young boys attended High school or University in far-away places (Wewak, Lae and even Port Moresby). To make it possible for them to be initiated during their holidays at home people had no choice but to combine several stages of initiation into one happening" (interview with Fred Gerrits, 29 March 2019).
[32] An *urungwall* is "a sacred wooden resonator; shaped like a hand drum [...]; Lit. voice of the *ngwallndu* [...]. Used with a long bamboo trumpet [...] a very important object in both the Initiation Cult and in the Yam Cult [...]; the most important object in the communal and in some private Yam scenes" (Gerrits 2012: 468).
[33] Sunuhu is a Kwanga village but is included here because of its strong relations with some Abelam/Wosera villages and close cultural proximity. Indeed, several Wosera villages such as Sarikim are exchange partners with Sunuhu, thus implying strong ties with regards to initiation cycles.

for a Hansen's disease patient. Initiation ceremonies were happening so the ceremonial ground was fenced off:

> We went through the fence and saw the six initiators "blowing" their urungwall. I was most impressed but they all ran away. Only weeks later, when Taro [one of Gerrits's main informants] had talked with them and had told them about our connections with the *haus tambaran* in Bongiora they allowed us to go inside their *haus tambaran* and asked if we would be interested to obtain their *haus tambaran* as well. But although we were very impressed with the inside of the Sunuhu *haus tambaran* we were not in a position to obtain that as well and we also did not have the time to regularly visit Sunuhu to collect all information, like we were doing in Bongiora. (Interview with Fred Gerrits, 29 March 2019)

Gerrits contacted Dirk Smidt who was then Director at the Papua New Guinea National Museum in Port Moresby, and who agreed to acquire the Sunuhu *haus tambaran*, an exceptional ensemble which included some 200 bark paintings and about 80 sculptures **(Fig. 28)** (interviews with Dirk Smidt, 13 March 2018 and with Fred Gerrits, 29 March 2019). However, in contrast to the assemblages acquired for Basel and Stuttgart, Gerrits had very little time to document the initiation scene, therefore recording information about only 60 of the paintings. The packing and shipping of the initiation assemblage was organised by the Museum in Port Moresby, and not by Gerrits as would be the case for the Bongiora *haus tambaran*. Nevertheless, by photographing and filming them, he immortalised the *haus tambaran* displays before being dismantled in September 1974, as well as the initiation performances that took place in May and June 1973. To this day this collection remains to be fully documented.

Since 1975, the Australian Museum had also been planning the renovation of its Pacific Gallery. After some preliminary field trips, it was agreed that the gallery would focus on Abelam culture and would recreate an Abelam village. Diane Losche **(Fig. 29)** was hired in 1979 as Assistant Curator of Anthropology and Abelam Gallery Scientific Officer to lead the Abelam Gallery project. In September and October 1979, she conducted her first field trip to the Abelam in this capacity to collect a number of artefacts from various villages and to set up the collaborative project with the village of Apangai. The Australian Museum could also rely on the collection already assembled by D. Miles and M. Cameron during the 1964 Sepik expedition, comprising some 150 artefacts acquired mainly in Kalabu. The aims of the Abelam Gallery project were:

> to collect a certain range of Abelam material culture as well preserved and with as much documentation as was possible to collect in the time available. [...] to document and purchase an Abelam initiation scene, parts of a haus tambaran, a sleeping/cooking house and a yam display house. [...] A second aim was the collection and documentation of additional items from various regions within the Abelam area in order to represent in the gallery and in the collection the stylistic range of Abelam material. A third aim was the completion of a film on village life which would be suitable for viewing by the general public and parts of which could be used within the audio-visual unit of the gallery in order to make the Abelam way of life more tangible to the viewing audience. (AMS 235/1334: 'Abelam Field Trip Report', 1980: 2)

After three collecting field trips, the Abelam Gallery – which remains the most comprehensive Abelam exhibition to date – opened on 30 April 1982 and stayed on display until 1993 **(Figs. 30 and 31)**.[34]

In 1980, Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin also commissioned a *haus tambaran* façade in Kalabu for the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel. As previously pointed out, the museum already held a large collection from the Abelam region acquired in the 1950s-60s by Bühler and Forge. However, this material needed to be better documented, which motivated Hauser-Schäublin to conduct her fieldwork in 1978 in Papua New Guinea to study, among other things, Abelam ceremonial houses, and in particular their architecture, construction and significance (Hauser-Schäublin 1989a; 2016). But such a field trip was not originally meant to acquire objects. It was only because of the museum's project to recreate and display an Abelam ceremonial house that Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, accompanied by her husband Jörg Hauser **(Fig. 32)**, went back to the Abelam region in 1980. Indeed, the museum originally wanted to display the façade which had been acquired in Kuminibus in the early 1960s by Franz Panzenböck and sold in 1965 to the museum, but it was too large to fit within the exhibition setting, and moreover it lacked any documentation about its iconography (Hauser-Schäublin 2016: x). Hauser-Schäublin therefore travelled back to Kalabu in order to gather information on the architecture and art practice, and ended up commissioning a façade specifically for the Basel exhibition **(Fig. 33)**, with dimensions which would fit within the museum, and which was finally displayed from 1982 onwards, together with the Putilago initiation chamber collected in the 1970s by Gerrits **(Fig. 34)** and other elements reconstituting the village ceremonial ground (personal communications Christian Kaufmann, 13 June 2018 and Brigitta

[34] For further information on the exhibition, see Losche (1982b).

Hauser-Schäublin, 15 June 2018). A long yam tuber had also been moulded in 1980 in order to reproduce a yam display as part of the museum exhibit (Hauser-Schäublin 2017: 255, 291, note 179).

At the same time as the Australian Museum and Basel were collecting and commissioning projects, from 5 August to 7 September 1980, Dorota C. Starzecka from the British Museum (then Assistant Keeper in the Department of Ethnography, Museum of Mankind) **(Fig. 35)** helped by David John Lee (Conservation Officer) **(Fig. 36)**, acquired the painted and sculpted contents of a ceremonial house from the Wosera village of Sarikim no. 2 **(Figs. 37 to 40)**. They also bought a complementary collection of artefacts from Sarikim and Stapikum (BM Archives Oc1980,11). The initiation display had been built during 1974-75 for the Sakindu ceremony, the highest and most prestigious stage of the male initiation in the southern part of the Abelam region (Mc Guigan 1992: 184-186; Schroeder 1992: 153). Once the ceremonial stage had fulfilled its purpose in November 1975, the villagers expressed the wish to sell it to a museum. Noel Mc Guigan **(Fig. 41)**, who was then teaching in the region and who had attended the ceremony in 1975, acted as the primary intermediary between the British Museum and the Wosera people. He informed the British Museum in a letter dated 5 June 1977 that the Sarikim villagers were willing to sell the complete contents of their initiation scene. This letter acted as the starting point for the collecting negotiations, culminating in the collecting trip held during the summer of 1980. Interestingly, Starzecka made the most of this collecting trip and took this opportunity to send approximately 50 smaller Wosera objects to Bryan Cranstone, Curator from 1976 to 1985 at the Pitt Rivers Museum, which were added to the Oxford collection in 1981.[35]

Only a few years after the first contact between the British Museum and Mc Guigan, the latter initiated what would become one of the largest assemblages of Abelam material held in any museum. In 1984, Dirk Smidt **(Fig. 42)**, then Curator in charge of the Oceania collections at the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden, had expressed the wish of acquiring an Abelam collection with Mc Guigan. That same year an extraordinary ceremony grouping three initiation displays (Lu, Puti and Gambawut) was held in the Nyambikwa hamlet of Apangai village **(Figs.**

[35] Pitt Rivers Museum collection 1981.10*. Although not discussed here, the museum notion of 'duplicate' objects has been the focus of several studies, notably Philp (2011) and Jacobs (2019: 133-134).

**43 to 49)**. Mc Guigan informed Smidt of the possibility of collecting such a unique assemblage, as the villagers were willing to sell it. At the time, the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde already held some Abelam material, first acquired in 1967 by Adrian A. Gerbrands (1917-1997), then Professor of Anthropology at Leiden University and Curator in charge of the Africa collections, who had also conducted fieldwork in New Guinea and assembled a small collection of objects both from the northern Abelam and the Wosera.[36] Although comprising only around 40 items, it laid the foundation for further interest in the Abelam region by subsequent curators. It is also interesting to note that some 80 Abelam objects acquired by Gerrits during the 1970s were bought by Simon Kooijman (then Curator of the Oceania collections) on behalf of the museum in Leiden in 1978.[37]

Smidt and Mc Guigan ended up collecting the contents of the three initiation rooms of Nyambikwa from 22 July to 25 September 1987. They also acquired the façade of another ceremonial house in Brikiti hamlet **(Fig. 50)**, as well as a complementary selection of artefacts both from the northern Abelam and the Wosera (Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993; interview with Dirk Smidt 13 March 2018). Substantial documentation (see especially Mc Guigan 1989) also accompanies this collection of artefacts (NMVW DS RV-5526).

These collecting endeavours and assembled collections have influenced one another and will be examined as interconnected wholes, rather than as independent or isolated phenomena.

[36] NMVW DS RV-4322 and RV-5884.
[37] NMVW DS RV-5002.

# Assembling a dissertation

## Research questions and thesis outline

With this historical and ethnographic background in mind, and from the collecting overview detailed above, a number of points of interrogation arose, around which my research would eventually unfold. My project was originally articulated around the following questions:

- What are the collecting processes that led these Abelam assemblages to museum institutions?
- How can such a collecting impetus (mid-1950s – 1980s) be explained and interpreted?
- What impact do these museum institutions have on Abelam collections and material culture?
- How can ethnographic museums best manage their guardianship of Abelam material?

Although these have been structuring my research endeavours, the following overarching question has progressively framed my work: How can we redefine (Abelam) ethnographic collections in a way that does justice to their complexity and which allows for a more 'membranic' understanding of their boundaries? Following Eric Ketelaar:

> no longer can we regard the record as an artefact with fixed boundaries of contents and contexts. [...] It is open yet enclosed, it is 'membranic', the membrane allowing the infusing and exhaling of values which are embedded in each and every activation (Ketelaar 2001: 138).

To answer these questions, this thesis is divided into five main chapters which progressively explore several aspects of Abelam museum collections, from the theoretical and methodological approaches that have helped me frame these collections, to the emergence of these collections and to possible redefinitions and reappraisals of these assemblages. Each chapter highlights one of these facets and aims, through specific examples, to challenge existing understanding of what 'Abelam museum collections' mean.

**Chapter 1** '(Re)collecting Abelam: an ethno-historiography of Abelam museum collections in theory and practice' highlights the theoretical framework and methodology that has guided this research project. Through specific examples it frames Abelam collections as ongoing processes and tries to see how concepts such as 'assemblage', 'network' or 'meshwork' can help us to conceptualise these collections, while also acknowledging the limits of these notions. It also places this research within current debates on provenance research, with the help of more historical approaches, in particular microhistory. Chapter 1 aims to historicise these collections, to complicate their history while framing collecting practices as historical events.

**Chapter 2** 'Collecting Abelam in the field: an historical overview' details the various actors involved locally in the collecting processes, whether Abelam individuals, administrative officers, missionaries, expatriates (teachers, medical doctors, traders, etc.) or art dealers, and the roles they played in relation to the collections under study. This chapter also aims to set the research into the more specific context of the development of local infrastructures and cultural policies and institutions in Papua New Guinea, especially around the turn of PNG Independence in 1975, and how these may have concretely influenced what was collectable, where, and under what conditions.

**Chapter 3** 'Why collecting/selling Abelam? Focus on intricate agendas' explores why museums have wanted to collect Abelam, what were the institutional motivations behind such collecting endeavours and how they were performed according to individual collectors' understandings of what 'collecting Abelam' meant. In parallel, this chapter details the crucial agency Abelam individuals had in shaping these assemblages and how they may have integrated collecting practices into local social, cultural and economic frameworks.

**Chapter 4** 'Becoming Abelam in the museum' zooms in and interrogates what museums did collect, in other terms what the Abelam 'object-scape' in the museum is and what strategies did the collectors implement to create it. It also discusses the impact the Abelam 'object-scape' in the museum had (and still has) and how Abelam museum collections have helped shape a constructed image of Abelam (material) culture through specific processes such as commissions and collaborations. This chapter in turn aims to challenge the classifications and categorisation processes

within museum institutions, eventually asking what does 'Abelam' really mean in the museum and beyond.

**Chapter 5** '(Re)collecting Abelam archival assemblages' further questions the definition of 'Abelam' museum collections. It challenges the boundaries of the collection-as-assemblage, and aims to embrace a much more fluid and encompassing approach, reconsidering the archival documentation of the collections under study as an integral part of 'Abelam' assemblages. In a similar manner as has been done in the previous chapters, it details the content of archival collections, not only through a material lens, but also by framing archives as ongoing processes which strongly contributed and still contribute to shaping an 'ideal' portrait of Abelam (material) culture. This chapter also focuses on the role played by photographs and cine films as collecting processes on their own and how these have influenced what 'collecting Abelam' in the second half of the 20th century implied and still means today.

## Note on terminology and spelling considerations

Before heading to the heart of the matter, I would like to conclude this introduction with two brief remarks.

The first one concerns the terminology used throughout this thesis to designate the Abelam collections' content. Words like 'object', 'thing', 'item', 'artefact', 'art', 'material culture', or even 'actor' or 'agent' have been used – sometimes interchangeably – by the main protagonists encountered along the research journey. These terms have been employed to qualify what Abelam individuals have created for everyday use or as part of complex ceremonial and social endeavours, and what is now preserved in museums around the world. Henare, Holbraad and Wastell (2007: 5) have pointed out the advantage of the term 'thing' in carrying minimal theoretical baggage, especially over terms like 'object', 'artefact' or 'materiality'. I have used most of these terms, keeping in mind that what eventually matters is that materiality "is always there affecting and being affected by our own existence, perceptions, practices and beliefs. [...] it is constantly in flux making and being made by social actors" (Bampilis and ter Keurs 2014: 3). In short, what is of interest here is not so much how Abelam material creations have been qualified or fixated in different contexts. Or on the division between the 'material' and the 'immaterial'. Rather, this thesis takes its starting point by trying to understand how various actors have interacted with these

objects, that is how people create things, which in turn create persons. As put by Eleana Yalouri, this thesis focuses on "the relationship between people and the [Abelam] material world, 'the social' and 'the material', the dynamics and affordances of materials as well as their transformative power" (Yalouri 2014: 10).[38] The position taken throughout this thesis, while acknowledging the imbrication of objects and subjects beyond modernist dichotomies, is that objects, and in particular museum objects, need to be addressed as nexuses of and catalysts for relationships. Following Joshua Bell, despite the apparent fixed nature of objects once in the museum, it seems most fruitful to address objects as ongoing processes (Bell 2017: 245).

The second disclaimer relates to spelling considerations, whether concerning Abelam toponyms, proper nouns or vernacular words. For most of them, several spellings have been encountered, varying more or less from one source to the other. For vernacular nouns, I have decided to follow the spelling indicated in the Ambulas dictionary (Kundama and Wilson 1987), and when not recorded, as well as for toponyms and proper nouns, to stick to the spelling encountered in archives or museum collections documentation, while acknowledging, when necessary, the alternative common spellings that the reader could encounter. It is important to keep in mind that the standardisation of Papua New Guinea Tok Pisin only begun in 1971 (Mihalic 1971), while the first Abelam language (Ambulas) dictionary was only published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics in 1987 – i.e., after most of the collecting enterprises discussed in this thesis – based on data mostly gathered in the village of Nyamikum (Kundama and Wilson 1987).

Similarly, the museum institutions that now hold Abelam collections have often changed name since the 1950s. One can refer to **Appendix B** for an overview of these changes.

[38] For a summary on material culture studies' ongoing debates, see Bampilis and ter Keurs (2014); Bell and Geismar (2009); Buchli (2002); Henare, Holbraad and Wastell (2007); Jacobs (2012: 34-36); Miller (2005); ter Keurs (2006); Tilley (2006).

# Chapter 1

# (Re)collecting Abelam: an ethno-historiography of Abelam museum collections in theory and practice

> For objects, too, are migrants, and embody partial or incomplete knowledge. [...] the museum offers less a static endpoint than a dynamic moment of connection in an ever-fluctuating assemblage of identifications between people and things.
> (Deliss 2020: 38)

## I. Conducting an ethnography of Abelam museum collections in theory and practice

### 1. Collecting theories and museum lives of objects: a brief literature review

Unpacked, hunted, mapped, biographed, explored, revisited, rethought, reassembled, contextualised, investigated, interpreted, re-collected, reconnected, entangled, (re-)mobilised, (re-)activated, repatriated, restituted – collections and collecting practices have been under particularly sharp scrutiny for the past four decades. Whether addressing museum and archival collections or more mundane forms of collecting, such studies have resulted in an extensive literature forming what can be considered a distinctive sub-field of museum and material culture studies.[39] Depending on their angle of approach, scholars have defined collections and collection-making according to a number of varying criteria and parameters, but

[39] For a comprehensive overview of the literature on the material (re)turn in anthropology and approaches to collection studies in the past forty years, see Bell (2017).

which overall revolve around the following characteristics: the intention of the collector/institution and their selection process according to specific criteria (which will be discussed further in Chapter 3); the extra value and/or meaning accorded to the set of objects thus formed, which exceeds the one conferred to each individual collected item (Pearce 1992: 50, 66; Moutu 2007: 108); and the classification scheme in which the collection is embedded and which it contributes to or challenges (Cardinal and Elsner 1994; Turner 2016; also see Chapter 4). As such, the notion of choice (Clifford 1985: 240, 1988: 221; Pearce 1992: 5, 1995: 7) and how it may be influenced by a number of (local) agents, coupled with the idea of the fragmentary nature of the collection (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991: 387) – or the collection as 'discrete lump' (Pearce 1992: 5), necessarily implying a sense of 'loss' (Moutu 2007: 94, 109) – is at the heart of what characterises any collection. As Pearce pointed out:

> everything which goes into a collection of whatever kind has done so as a result of selection. The selection process is the crucial act of the collector, regardless of what intellectual, economic or idiosyncratic reasons he may have when he decides how his selection will work, what he will choose and what he will reject. What he chooses bears an intrinsic, direct and organic relationship, that is a metonymic relationship, to the body of material from which it was selected because it is an integral part of it. But the very act of selection adds to its nature. By being chosen away and lifted out of the embedding metonymic matrix, the selected collection now bears a representative or metaphorical relationship to its whole. It becomes an image of what the whole is believed to be, and although it remains an intrinsic part of the whole, it is no longer merely a detached fragment because it has become imbued with meaning of its own. (Pearce 1992: 38)

However, the act of selection as sole result of the collector's wish was soon complicated by the increasing recognition of the various agencies at play in the creation of the collection. Challenging the role of the collector as a unique agent in the formation of the collection in favour of a more accurate acknowledgement of the agency of creative communities has proved an important step in the reappraisal of museum collections and collecting practices (Jacobs 2012; O'Hanlon 1993; O'Hanlon and Welsch 2000; Schildkrout and Keim 1998; Schindlbeck 1993; Thomas 1991). One of the aspects discussed by Pearce which is nonetheless of interest here is the transformation that is operated by the very act of collecting, that is what is created by the collecting action. This transformative or potential dimension of collection-making has also been discussed by Carreau by drawing a parallel respectively between the notions of *bricolage* and *bricoleur* as defined by Lévi-Strauss (1966) and those of collection and collector:

> Like the *bricoleur*, the collector collects and recycles fragments of events by combining them into a wider project – the collection. The tools and materials employed (in particular the artefacts he collects and accumulates) are, themselves, fragments of previous `bigger wholes'. [...] They are rarely collected with a *specific* goal in mind but, rather, are selected for their potential to serve a future purpose. [...] Discrimination is thus not based solely on the object, but also on a projection and/or imagination of a potential use. (Carreau 2009: 33-34, original emphasis)

This creative dimension of the collecting act is aptly described by Belk:

> collecting is an act of production as well as consumption. Collectors create, combine, classify, and curate the objects they acquire in such a way that a new product, the collection, emerges. In the process they also produce meanings. (Belk 1995: 55)

Approaching the collection as a creative act of production allows us to reconsider museum collections as accumulations not only of things, but also of the various meanings and values attributed to them. Hence, collections have more recently been comprehended not so much in terms of the resulting 'product' or set of objects they constitute, but as a process (Gosden, Larson and Petch 2007: 12; Bondaz 2014), rather focusing on the collecting practices themselves – an approach that will be further developed in this chapter.

## 2. Re-collecting the collections: writing an ethno-historiography of collecting in the Abelam region

Museums and archival institutions (and even more so in the case of institutions dealing with what has been coined 'ethnographic' collections) have long, complicated and highly loaded histories which have been investigated by many authors since the 1980s (Bell 2017; Modest *et al.* 2019; Jacobs 2019: 30-32). These studies of 'ethnographic' or 'world cultures' museum institutional and collection histories coincided with their increased postcolonial scrutiny, while feeding into more general examinations of the role of museums in representational economies (Clifford 1997; Deliss 2020; Karp and Lavine 1991; Karp *et al.* 1992, 2006; Modest 2019: 11-12). Such critiques and debates have been fundamental to the reappraisal of museum collection histories and provenance research. They were also influential in the introduction of important collaborative projects, not only between museum institutions and creating communities (Peers and Brown 2003; Peers 2019; Golding and Modest 2013; Noack and de Castro 2018), but also between museums themselves,

with for instance the European Union funded *Pacific Presences: Oceanic Art and European Museums* project (2013-2018), led by the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge (Carreau *et al.* 2018), or the projects *Sharing a World of Inclusion, Creativity and Heritage* (SWICH, 2014-2018), or more recently *Taking Care* (2019 – ongoing). The UK's Arts & Humanities Research Council also recently funded a number of collaborative research projects, such as *Museum Affordances*, principally based at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (2018-2021, see Basu 2021).[40] Such scholarship and initiatives have tried, and still try, to redefine what roles ethnographic museums can play today and what contributions they can bring to shape alternative and decolonised futures (Thomas 2016; Plankensteiner 2018; von Oswald and Tinius 2020; Deliss 2020).

This thesis falls into the ongoing and pressing call to re-complexify the history of collections and collecting practices, and for provenance research to account for the historically situated, interacting and sometimes difficult (if not violent) agencies at play in the formation of such ensembles. It appeals for a less unilateral vision and understanding of the processes which resulted in these collections, while aiming to challenge or even re-define the notion of 'provenance' itself. Paraphrasing Pearce, this investigation in Abelam museum collections questions how we can study collections and collecting practices in a way that aims to shed light on the nature of the profoundly social experiences and encounters which they embody (Pearce 1995: 4).

As such, museums and museum collections are "a launching place for anthropological adventures into the past and, indeed, the future. To study a museum [collection] is to study an endless, endlessly shifting, assortment of people and things. Its possibilities are infinite" (Gosden, Larson and Petch 2007: 5-6). This study of Abelam collections aims to embrace such a call to unravel these assortments of people and things and was conducted as an investigation into the ongoing histories and destinies at play in these collecting encounters. It aims to examine the history of collecting practices in the Abelam region in order to write an historiography that reflects the complexity of the encounters at the heart of such collections' creation.

To do so, this project was framed as a museum ethnography:

[40] See SWICH 2015: https://www.swich-project.eu/; Taking Care 2020: https://takingcareproject.eu/about and [Re:]Entanglements 2021: https://re-entanglements.net/ for more information.

> [it] looks, with varying degrees of engagement in the process under way, at constructions of the past, the present and the future; at plans and visions and what actually happens; and at the negotiations taking place. What happens in the process of making a collection? How is it shaped, and what agency does it contain (and not contain)? (Bouquet 2012: 99-100).

This research as a museum ethnography therefore studies Abelam museum collections and in particular the museum processes that have transformed Abelam artefacts into museum objects: What layers of meaning and information have they lost or gained along the way? How does this information become part of the museum object? And how can it be re-collected?

As pointed out by Sharon MacDonald, Christine Gerbich and Margaret von Oswald while drawing on the case study of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, most museum ethnographies "have approached the museum via their work cultures and, or particular practices, such as exhibition-making, conservation, archiving and digitization [...], education and other forms of public engagement [...]" (MacDonald, Gerbich and von Oswald 2018: 141). But only a few do focus on the process of collection-making *per se* and on the museum's collecting practices (O'Hanlon 1993; Bouquet 2012: 99-104), although the current re-appraisal of museum collections' histories and provenance does challenge this relative limitation.

Hence, rather than conducting an ethnography of each museum institution under study, this project aims to reframe Abelam museum collections and the institutions which hold them not as independent 'islands', but rather as necessarily interconnected wholes, (in)forming one another in a relational perspective. It is therefore based on a multi-sited, multi-institutional and multi-collection ethnography, investigating the multiple histories of these collections and how they have been portrayed. In doing so, this research challenges the "methodological containerism" which often characterises museum ethnography, and which has been denounced MacDonald, Gerbich and von Oswald (2018: 140). From this study results an historiography of collecting, combined with an ethnographic study of collection making in the Abelam region during the second half of the 20th century, hence what I have named an 'ethno-historiography' of Abelam museum collections. In conjunction with this approach to the research, a number of concepts have helped to encapsulate this work and my research practice, and it is this conceptual framework that will now be developed.

# II. Process, network, meshwork, assemblage: framing Abelam collections in the museum and beyond

## 1. Abelam collections as ongoing processes

> Not only do objects change through their existence, but they often have the capability of accumulating histories so that the present significance of an object derives from the persons and events to which it is connected. [...] There is a mutual process of value creation between people and things. (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 170)

During the past three decades, collections and collected artefacts have progressively been reframed as potent rather than passive entities, not only resulting from multiple agencies but also with agency of their own. Unravelling their social and cultural biography or trajectory (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Hoskins 1998; Gosden and Marshall 1999; Joy 2009) has become common practice and has inspired many studies throughout the world, in resonance with a reappraisal of the complex social, human and non-human dynamics at play in the creation of artefacts, their exchange, acquisition and ongoing lives as museum objects. At the heart of this biographical or itinerary approach (Hahn and Weiss 2013; Joyce and Gillespie 2015) lie interrogations related to the bonds between people and things, how these interactions continuously create new values and statuses for people and objects alike, and how these relationships are constantly reframed. Therefore, the main question which arises is what if collections, rather than being understood as a fixed *product*, were framed as a continuing *process* (Byrne *et al.* 2011b: 15; Silverman 2015)? As has been summarised by Hill in her study of the Wellcome collection:

> collections are enmeshed within diverse cultures and networks of collecting and the mutual constitution of relational biographies involving objects, people and places. [...] collections should be viewed as changing narratives, which continue to evolve beyond the period of their establishment. (Hill 2006: 341)

These travelling objects have ongoing life histories, carrying a multitude of meanings accumulated through their spatial and temporal travels (Hill 2006: 340-341). It is these lives, these *relational processes* that are at the heart of this study of Abelam collections, whose aim is not so much to focus on the outcome, that is on the collection as a fixed result, but rather to unravel the multiple threads of the collecting processes and to follow them in the many directions they point us to. These 'relational

biographies' do not necessarily have to be linear or follow a coherent narrative, but rather are the sum of the social relationships which in turn constitute the object (Joy 2009: 545). Moutu has even pushed the idea of the collection as a 'way of being', in a way that highlights the "conceptual capacity of collections to organise and create the possibilities for re-conceiving meaning and reconfiguring social relations" (Moutu 2007: 94). The collection is therefore not just a set of artefacts, but can also be envisioned as a collection of people, collecting themselves in response to a specific event or impetus: the collection thus "interrupts the sequential flow of temporality, impregnates this interruption with loss, and then prompts people to reconfigure themselves" (Moutu 2007: 96; Gosden, Larson and Petch 2007: 64-65, 88).

To illustrate and further discuss this idea of the collection as *process*, I would like to focus on one specific example, that of the Tappoka figure (the *gwalndu* of the Gilakwara clan) which was originally part of the display in the Gambawut room for the Puti stage of the initiation conducted in 1984 in Nyambikwa hamlet of Apangai village **(Fig. 51)**. It was collected in 1987 and is now preserved at the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Leiden. This figure is made of several heterogeneous elements, including a carved and painted face (RV-5526-0-42), sculpted by Kipa Wian **(Fig. 52)**, big man and main organiser of the initiation ceremony, and limbs (RV-5526-386-21b/c/d/e) made of vegetal materials and recycled fish tin labels, by a number of contributors of the initiating moiety, such as Kwaminsimbia, Lim, Yesin, Nyamio, Waikwa and Gilikuk **(Fig. 53)**. As recorded by Noel Mc Guigan, the figure was put together according to the following process:

> Inside and to the open front of the carving a light framework of branches was made. [...] This framework is essential to the construction of the limbs. [...] Lengths of cane were bent round the lower cross members of the framework on either side of the *Puti* carving. The folded cane was tied together to provide a rigid core around which various natural materials were built up giving bulk, strength and stability to the legs. These were flexed at the knees and spaced apart in a naturalistic position of a seated person with legs drawn towards the body. The dark outer layer was created from black palm leaves soaked in water for a long time, then dried. They are then dark brown in colour, stiff and brittle. In contrast with this background are the narrow strips of bamboo patterned in string bag designs which are the finishing decoration of the limbs. When the legs are completed the arms, elbows resting on the knees are then constructed. Once the legs and arms are shaped considerable time is spent on making the fingers and toes of the figures. Short lengths of cane, with sharpened ends are forced into the materials making up the limbs. These are then surrounded with slim strips of the fibrous interior of sago palm leaf. Bound firmly

> with bush rope the widely spaced fingers and toes are finished with croton leaves, being tied round the core material with narrow strips of binding.
> Vacant spaces between the limbs on either side of them were filled in by the use of a number of small sections of sago spathe cut approximately to size. Painted with string bag patterns appropriate to initiates of the final grade of initiation, they were tied to the framework to complete the figure. [...] a small fence was erected round the Tappoka figure. The final decorations were not added to the figure till the day preceding the initiation ritual. The fence was hung with white ovula ovum shells. Within the fence freshly collected croton and bright tree leaves (with an iridescent silver hued underside), and red hibiscus flowers were laid in a thick layer. They were enhanced with rounded white stones, small inedible yellow fruits and large shell ring valuables. The whole effect was to create a spectacle in bright colour. [...] Two spears project from shoulder height 'held' between the fingers of the figure and a lime pot and lime stick are fastened to the left arm. (Mc Guigan 1989: n.p.)

At the back of the Tappoka figure the *ngwalnduwut* (RV-5526-0-114, literally 'the string bag of the *gwalndu*') was placed **(Fig. 54)**, carved from the buttress roots of a tree by Keli Kandi, another renowned carver from Apangai **(Fig. 55)**. This sculpture, a recent innovation at the time (Mc Guigan 1989: n.p.) came to replace the woven rattan matting structure which was usually found at the rear of the figure. It included many carved and painted motifs, among which were some unusual depictions of the head of a cow and the Papua New Guinea bird of paradise national crest (Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993: 134, 137). Such an innovative variation of the *ngwalnduwut* had been inspired by Keli's father, Kandi, and by the design of an up-turned Sulka canoe prow the latter had seen while working as an indentured labourer in a plantation in New Britain (Mc Guigan 1989: n.p.; Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993: 137, 141).

Several biographical layers already emerge from this short description of the Tappoka figure. It is interesting to note that parts of it were restored by Apangai men at Smidt and Mc Guigan's request, in view of its acquisition (an aspect of collecting practices that will be discussed further in Chapter 4). In the case of Tappoka, it specifically concerned the limbs, on which brightly-coloured tin labels were added to replace the decayed vegetal materials and previous tin labels, as well as the fragile toes and fingers **(Fig. 56)**. A number of elements were also not collected, thus enacting the necessary fragmentary nature of the collection, and the sense of loss it embodies. The artefacts were then photographed and documented by Smidt and Mc Guigan before being dismantled, packed and shipped to Europe, where the different constitutive elements of the display were inventoried under individual, often non-related

numbers, before being partially re-assembled for exhibition (2001-2011).[41] These heterogeneous elements, both non-human and human, have also been re-activated through my own work with the collection, and could be further revived through engagement with contemporary Apangai villagers.

From this elementary assessment, how could the ongoing life of this multi-layered Abelam artefact, and of the collection of which it is now a part, be constructively reframed? The idea of the collection as an ongoing construct, and of collection-making and collecting practice as a process, essentially derives from two concepts which have been made use of by many scholars: the network and the assemblage. Following Byrne *et al.*:

> in characterising collections as 'networks' or social and material 'assemblages', we think it helpful to consider the range of human and non-human agents involved [...] at every stage of creating a collection, from the field to the storeroom, from display to repatriation, another suite of links and interconnections are created. (Byrne *et al.* 2001b: 15)

Although not recent and somehow mobilised at every opportunity, it seems appropriate to see how these concepts could be disentangled and possibly applied to frame this study, how they could help us shed a new light on Abelam collections while also acknowledging the limits of this conceptual framework: "the time has come to have a much closer look at the type of aggregates thus assembled and at the ways they are connected to one another" (Latour 2005: 22).

## 2. Abelam collections as networks, meshworks and assemblages

Following the French sociologist Bruno Latour's insight in characterising Abelam museum collections as not only material, but also social processes, this research aims to 'trace the associations' that are constitutive of these collections, and which bind the heterogeneous elements of which such collections are made. This thesis therefore needs to be understood as a "movement of re-association and reassembling" (Latour 2005: 7). Rethinking Abelam collections in terms of networks – as defined by actor-network theories (ANT), that is as a performative rather than fixed ostensive definition – implies framing them as "a string of actions where each participant is treated as a

[41] See Chapter 3 for more information about exhibition displays of Abelam collections.

full-blown mediator [...] where all the actors *do something* and don't just sit there" (Latour 2005: 128, original emphasis). All these actors – human and non-human – are interconnected, make others do things and can themselves be considered networks of their own, whose action "should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled" (Latour 2005: 44). Considering what non-human actors and in particular what collected objects *do* strongly echoes the notion of agency as popularised through the works of Alfred Gell (Gell 1992; 1998). According to Gell – whose supervisor was none other than Anthony Forge (Coupaye 2017: 243) – agency is defined as the capacity of objects to engage with human actors, that is what these objects do rather than what they mean. By focusing on the effect they have in the world and on their onlookers, the creation and activation of these objects can therefore be conceptualised at the heart of social networks, triggering interactions and relationships between various actors. The "efficacious role" of Abelam objects (Coupaye 2017: 247), that is their capacity to enchant their viewers (Gell 1992), whether in the context of large initiation displays inside the *haus tambaran*, on its painted façade, or through the ornamentation of yams or initiated bodies, can help us understand why collectors have been particularly drawn towards them. This "captivation" (Gell 1998: 68-72), that is "the demoralization produced by the spectacle of unimaginable virtuosity" (Gell 1998: 71), can in part explain the effect Abelam objects had on the many actors who interacted with them, and how they captivated collectors at the time of their acquisition, as well as museum curators and audiences since then. This efficacy of Abelam objects relies not only on representational or aesthetic characteristics, which appear remarkably stylistically coherent and recognisable (despite regional variations), but also and especially on their capacity of "re-presencing" (Coupaye 2017: 247), that is to make present what is not told, what remains hidden, contained, or secret, linking a multiplicity of actors, contexts and referents through the strong visual identity of Abelam material culture.

ANT methodologies therefore encourage us to follow these actors, to track them back following the traces they leave while performing their diverse actions: in short it entices us to retrace the networks at play, in our case in the formation and ongoing lives of Abelam collections. As noted by Cheetham:

> adopting an actor-network theoretical perspective in conjunction with ethnographic fieldwork facilitated a conception of [...] collecting as something that is produced, shaped and contested through interactions among a variety of activities, people and things [...] distributed geographically and through time. (Cheetham 2012: 129)

Hence, if we continue with the example of the Tappoka figure, looking at it while using the concept of network as a methodological tool (Larson, Petch and Zeitlyn 2007: 217) helps to highlight a number of parameters and to complicate our understanding of such a multi-layered artefact. From the brief account outlined above, it seems that by progressively unpacking and listing the various constitutive elements of the Tappoka display, a complex and dynamic picture can emerge. Each human or non-human element can be considered an actor and following each of them starts to take us in many directions, far from the original Nyambikwa hamlet location.

As has been pointed out, many artists contributed to the creation and sale of the figure, not all necessarily coming from Apangai, and each of them with their own set of relations, of actions and impact in this creative process. A number of other actors, of exchange partners, were also involved by sponsoring the initiation for which such a display was put together. The figure of Tappoka itself echoes more broadly the Gilakwara clan members and ancestors, which exceeds temporally and spatially the confines of the hamlet. Each physical element of the figure also needs to be deconstructed in terms of its materials, of their origin: whether the wood comes from that specific secluded part of the bush, the vegetal materials from specific plants with precise qualities, the paint from pigments obtained from precise sediments or recipes with particular properties (Forge 1962), the ephemeral elements chosen for their sensory (visual, olfactory and sound) dimensions, the imported fish tin labels added for their bright red and yellow colourful properties, and so on. To this specific sculpture's multifarious aspects, one can add the fact that it was displayed as part of a larger room **(Fig. 46)**, with many other carved and painted artefacts **(Figs. 47 and 48)**, while this room was itself a part of a larger architectural complex **(Fig. 49)**, including three other rooms in one ceremonial house, which had been put together for two combined initiation stages (Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993). As Losche noted in her field diary:

> Today went to visit Yalucoli in the forest. [...] Had a conversation with Kauki, Araki and Lacti on road to Yalucoli – they clarified sequence of initiation & exchange. [...] Change in initiation sequence – traditionally the sequence would go from 1-8 but now they say they almost never perform Ulkekutagwa & Kutagwa [the earliest two stadia of the initiation cycle]. [...] Lu & Puti are the major stages performed now, and perhaps are put together. They say they do this now because of business there is no time. (AMS 317: Losche Field Trip Notes [Abelam Gallery], 16 July 1980, Book 1: 18-23)

The need to combine initiation stages – although not exceptional (Gerrits 2012: 85, 153-154, 160, 163) – in part resulted from contingent reasons, especially from boys attending school far from home or men working as indentured labourers away from their village: initiation ceremonies thus needed to be condensed during shorter periods of time when future initiates were back, often during the holiday season.

Other important actors in this unfolding network are the museum collectors themselves, as well as all the other persons, institutions and infrastructures that contributed to the acquisition, preservation and further display, storage and documentation of the figure once acquired. This is without mentioning myself as a researcher, who by writing this account and by creating an Abelam meta-collection somehow contributes to performing this network one step further (Strathern 1996: 521). This unpacking (Byrne *et al.* 2011a), which will be developed throughout this thesis, echoes the de-embedding of Russian Matryoshka dolls, and could go on and on, in an ever-expanding and at times seemingly impracticable network. While this research progressively unravelled the numerous interconnected actors and relationships at play in the creation of Abelam collections, I attempted to draw a relational map that would help visualise and follow these interconnections. However, it quickly became apparent that such a diagram was growing out of control in every direction, and its rendering, even though making a clear statement about the complexity of the recovered networks, was eventually unreadable. This paradox has been pointed out quite rightly and humorously by Latour himself:

> how ridiculous is it to claim that inquirers should 'follow the actors themselves', when the actors to be followed swarm in all directions like a bee's nest disturbed by a wayward child? Which actor should be chosen? Which one should be followed and for how long? And if each actor is made of another bee's nest swarming in all directions and it goes on indefinitely, then when the hell are we supposed to stop? If there is something especially stupid, it is a method that prides itself in being so meticulous, so radical, so all encompassing, and so object-oriented as to be totally impractical. (Latour 2005: 121-122)

To counter the flaws of network theories, the British anthropologist Tim Ingold has proposed conceptualising these interactions between actors, this "web of life", "not [as] a network of connected points [or actors], but [as] a meshwork of interwoven lines" (Ingold 2011: 63). While a network conceptualisation of the collection would see it as "an assemblage of heterogeneous bits and pieces", the collection as meshwork is "a tangle of threads and pathways [that] emerges from the interplay of

forces conducted along the lines of the meshwork" (Ingold 2011: 64). Contrary to ANT which envision actors and their relations as two distinct conceptual entities, Ingold proposes to address the relationships as the core of the matter, and eventually to abolish this distinction between things and their relations, each thing or actor being a meshwork in itself, constituted of a multitude of relations (Basu 2017: 10-12). In a way, the meshwork is not dissimilar to the notion of 'dividual' in a Melanesian context, developed by Marylin Strathern and according to which "persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them," implying that "the singular person can be imagined as a social microcosm" (Strathern 1988: 13). Hence, rather than being framed as points connected in a web of relationships, the collection could be framed as flowing and interwoven knots forming and being formed by a meshwork of relations. While offering a possibly more dynamic and organic conceptualisation of the collection, and while giving primacy to movement and to itineraries, the notion of meshwork – as does the network – still poses the same issue of its almost limitless nature.

Therefore, in questioning the limits of the network/meshwork, or in wondering where to cut it (Strathern 1996: 523), one directly interrogates the boundaries of the collection itself. Paraphrasing Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in her seminal reflection on objects of ethnography, by tracing back the networks or meshworks at play, this study also questions where Abelam collections start and where they end (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991: 387), and what should be included or excluded within these limits. The network and its inversion, the meshwork, therefore, appear as double-edged concepts and research methodologies: their apparent limitlessness both opens up exalting perspectives to reframe collections, while the immense and everlasting succession of possibilities can at times be dizzying if not disheartening.

Such a networked biographical approach (Foster 2012: 152) or relational biographies (Joy 2009: 545) can be pushed further if envisioned through the lens of the concept of assemblage. The idea of assembling the collection, or of the collection as assemblage, appears fruitful in many ways, and draws on insights and theoretical approaches from several disciplines, notably archaeology, sociology and philosophy (Harrison 2013: 18-21; Byrne and Tetehu 2013: 204-206).[42]

[42] In an anthropological context, Marilyn Strathern (1979: 243-245) uses the concept of assemblage in her work on body adornments, in order to qualify the combination of ornaments worn by Hageners.

First, in an archaeological context, the term assemblage refers to:

> a collection of artefacts or ecofacts (animal bones, or seeds, etc.) recovered from a specific archaeological context – a site, an area within a site, a stratified deposit, or a specific feature such as a ditch, tomb, or house. So, an assemblage is a collection of material related through contextual proximity. (Joyce and Pollard 2010: 291-292)

As such, the grouping and contextual association of items allows for interpretation of a specific event, process or practice. The notion of assemblage includes not only the items that have been deposited, but also for some archaeologists the sediments forming the matrix of the deposit (Joyce and Pollard 2010: 292). Questions related to the agencies at play surrounding the creation of the archaeological assemblage soon emerge: who has assembled such a deposit and why? How is the archaeologist's engagement essential in the formation and recognition of such an assemblage? Numerous points of comparison can then be drawn between assemblages of an archaeological nature and ethnographic museum collections. As pointed out by Byrne and Tetehu:

> this essential quality of an assemblage as a material collocation, how objects are situated or juxtaposed in relation to one another, is pertinent when thinking about ethnographic collections. The actual physical collocation and relationship between objects, be they in storerooms or on display, obviously bear little reality to the way in which these objects were used or assembled by source communities or, indeed, collectors. (Byrne and Tetehu 2013: 204)

The sediments or context in which archaeological assemblages are found during excavations can thus be paralleled with the context in which museum artefacts and in particular ethnographic collections, can be found in museums, notably museum storerooms, and which in turn are part of the broader collection assemblage. In this respect, encouraging an archaeological sensibility in 'unpacking' and 'reassembling' collections, some scholars have suggested considering the storeroom, or even the museum institution as a whole as an archaeological field site, in which the collections of objects echo an archaeological assemblage, whose formation results from the agencies and engagements of multiple past and present actors (Harrison 2013: 18-20; Byrne and Tetehu 2013: 205-206).

The second, and possibly most fruitful understanding of the assemblage is the one derived from the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Felix

Guattari's seminal work, drawing on the metaphor of the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 7 *et seq.*). Accordingly, the assemblage as rhizome:

> assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers. [...] The rhizome includes the best and the worst: potato and couchgrass, or the weed. [...] any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order. (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 8)

These principles of connection and heterogeneity are at the heart of the Deleuzian characterisation of the assemblage, as well as the fact that it always has multiple entryways (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 12). In short, Deleuze defines the assemblage as "a multiplicity which is made up of heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them [...] It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys" (Deleuze and Parnet 2002, 69). This absence of start or end echoes the concept of the Latourian network discussed above. Accordingly, the collection as assemblage can be approached from any of its constituting elements, and one can progressively follow the unfolding ramifications of all of the collection's constitutive actors: "the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and...and...and'" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 25). As summarized by Paul Basu, "the rhizome is non-hierarchical, horizontal and dynamic. [...] The rhizome is nomadic, it forges linkages and connections between multiple and seemingly incompatible elements; it is transversal, random and unregulated" (Basu 2017: 10). The rhizomic metaphor somehow takes an even deeper resonance in Melanesian and particularly in Abelam contexts when considering the importance of tubers like yams and taros within Abelam society (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 18; Coupaye 2013). Drawing on the work of the French ethnobotanist and linguist André-Georges Haudricourt on the cultivation of yams in New Caledonia (Haudricourt 1962; 1964) and its ramifications with local socio-cultural characteristics, the rhizomatic model developed by Deleuze and Guattari becomes a paradigm which can help us rethink the collection as an acentric and anarchical multiplicity. It therefore highlights an important point common to assemblage, network and meshwork theories, that is the idea of a flattening out of all the actors, the exclusion of hierarchy among them (Strathern 1996: 522). In that sense, and as Tony Bennett interestingly remarked, this flattening out of the collection as network or assemblage:

> approximate[s] the "death of the author," which characterized poststructuralist debates in literary studies, in that the traditional authors of museum displays – directors and curators – have now to be conceptualized as points within the sociomaterial networks that constitute the museum rather than as the sources of a singular and controlling vision. (Bennett 2015: 13)

We could however argue that although the network and assemblage concepts go against any form of hierarchisation, eventually limits will always be imposed by one of the actors, whose role will somehow appear predominant or more conclusive. With these limitations in mind, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's work, the Mexican-American philosopher Manuel De Landa's articulation of the concept of assemblage is particularly enlightening when trying to frame Abelam museum collections as assemblages. He starts by pointing out the limits of the English translation of the term 'assemblage', which cannot fully convey the meanings of the original French concept of '*agencement*', which "refers to the action of matching or fitting together a set of components (*agencer*), as well as to the result of such an action: an ensemble of parts that mesh together well" (De Landa 2016: 1). The notion of assemblage therefore should be understood at the same time as the action of assembling and its result. In his summary of the main characteristics of the assemblage, he acknowledges the fact that assemblages always need to be composed of heterogeneous components, including, in addition to persons, "the material and symbolic artefacts that compose communities and organisations" (De Landa 2016: 20), thus being in accordance with Latour's inclusion of both human and nonhuman elements within the network or assemblage. The properties of a given assemblage result from the interaction between its various heterogeneous components: as such, these assemblages as social wholes exist alongside their parts, in the same ontological framework (De Landa 2016: 12). Hence, when considering Abelam collections as assemblages, it implies acknowledging the fact that the meaning or properties attributed to the collection exceeds the properties of each of its individual components, therefore echoing the definition of the collection as stated by Pearce (1992: 50, 66) and previously discussed. But what is particularly relevant here is the fact that assemblages can themselves become parts of larger assemblages, in what becomes a set of assemblages, an assemblage of assemblages (De Landa 2016: 14, 20): "what is an assemblage of varied elements at one scale of analysis is thus, at another scale, an element that is in its turn a constitutive component of other assemblages – and of many different assemblages at the same time" (Bennett 2015: 15).

If we come back to the Tappoka figure example, this idea of an assemblage being part of other assemblages is fully realised, as already hinted at when discussing it under the lens of the network concept. Each constitutive component can be envisioned as an assemblage itself, while simultaneously being a part of other assemblages. For instance, if we take the two collectors, Mc Guigan and Smidt, they were both involved in other collecting enterprises in the Abelam region – respectively for the British Museum and the Berlin Ethnologisches Museum, and for the National Museum and Art Gallery in Port Moresby, thus being part of other assemblages, which are themselves all part of the larger all-encompassing meta-collection-assemblage that I eventually created through my own engagement with these collections.

Tappoka is in itself the *gwalndu* of the Gilakwara clan, living some distance from Nyambikwa in Wilnilmo hamlet, and who have combined with the Kwaru clan of Nyambikwa to form a ceremonial group[43] for ritual purposes, notably the initiation ceremony for which this display was created. The *gwalndu* of the Kwaru clan, Skurnbun, is represented by other figures in the initiation displays, for example by one of the two carved figures in the Lu room,[44] and by the central figure in the Puti room.[45] The initiation display therefore indirectly represents and relates to the alliance of the two clans, spatially extending beyond Nyambikwa to other hamlets, but also temporally going back to the ancestors of each clan gathering for this specific initiation ritual. Hence, each constitutive element of a collection as assemblage can be isolated in this way and become a starting point from which other assemblages

[43] As Noel Mc Guigan summarised in 1989 about Nyambikwa, "Village structure are composed of a number of hamlets. These hamlets are patrilineal based clan segments. Each hamlet may be composed of one or more patrilineages, ideationally descended from a common ancestor. In practice even in hamlets where the members are of the one clan there may be difficulty in identifying a common ancestor. Nyambikwa is an example where members recognise only a putative common ancestor. Clan membership may be confined to one hamlet or found in a number of hamlets. Each clan, or *kum* is named, has a bird totem, an identified ancestral spirit called an *ngwal* and has access to clan lands. Thus at Nyambikwa the patrilineage belong to the Kwarukum, the clan with the bird totem Kwaru. Clan based hamlets are essentially politically independent presided over by the most politically active bigman. A man is born into the clan of his father. In Mange Abelam society considerable flexibility in clan membership exists, and men may change clan allegiance for various reasons. A number of bigmen at Apangai were residents at hamlets other than those of their natal clans. A number of clans combine to form a ceremonial group for ritual purposes. It is within this ceremonial group that a man in initiated. A ceremonial group may be composed of all the clans within a village or may include only a small number of clans if, like Apangai, the village is composed of a large number of hamlets and a large number of clans. Ceremonial groups are formed on a highly localised basis, between neighbouring clans. The mechanism for the regulation of initiation rituals operates within each geographically based ceremonial group. (Mc Guigan 1989: n.p.)

[44] Inventory no. RV-5526-0-43, carved by Kipa Wian (see **Fig. 44**, carving lying on the floor closest to the camera; the other sculpture on the floor RV-5526-0-35 represents Tappoka, carved by Kunjinjambe of Chiginambu).

[45] Inventory no. RV-5526-0-6, carved by Kipiwan of Chiginambu (see **Fig. 45**).

emerge, as if pulling a thread in a tangled-up conglomerate, and progressively letting yourself being carried along in new directions, toward new actors, and new assemblages **(Fig. 57)**.

The 'multiscalar' quality of an assemblage of assemblages is especially illuminating when trying to encapsulate Abelam collections and their multi-layered constitutive elements. It pushes the idea of the collection as an ever-expanding network of actors a step further, in the sense that it allows us to conceptualise the relationships between all the actors or heterogeneous components in a dynamic way, while keeping these various assemblages on the same plane of conceptualisation, thus decentring actors normally seen as the main entry point to the collection – for instance the museum institution. But mostly, going back to the original notion of '*agencement*', it is this insistence on *assembling* the assemblage as an ongoing process and its ever-changing result which appealed to us in trying to re-collect Abelam museum collections. In this sense, the collection becomes a "creative technology, a means of making new things" (Thomas 2016: 9).

With this conceptual framework in mind, it is henceforth possible to move from a categorical approach to a relational understanding of Abelam museum collections. Such a relational model of museums, and by extension of museum collections, proposes to focus on mapping out all the past, present and future relationships between people and objects (and any other kinds of non-human actors) that constitute the museum institution and its collections (Gosden, Larson and Petch 2007: 242). As summarised by Gosden and Larson:

> People, objects and museums do not exist beyond the sets of relationships that involve them. In exploring the collective that is, and was, the [...] Museum, our aim is to try and allow the associations between people and things to blur the boundaries of the Museum itself, so that it can be seen as a shifting set of people and things. [...] The difficulty is that the links are infinite. (Gosden, Larson and Petch 2007: 11)

By drawing out the countless relationships at the heart of each constitutive element of the collections under study we can progressively start pulling the threads of this complex meshwork, unfolding in space and time, and in turn retrace the itineraries and entangled pathways of the collections-as-assemblages.

# III. Provenance research: historicising Abelam museum collections

Provenance is most of the time understood as the pedigree of an object, that is the list of its previous owners. In this respect, provenance research has primarily been undertaken with regard to private collections (often with the prospect of selling), and in particular for earlier collections, dating back from the late 18th to the first half of the 20th century (Waterfield and King 2009; Cornish, Driver and Nesbitt 2021: 12-13). It has also taken a particular dimension in Germany where provenance research has focused essentially on politics of remembrance and the search for Nazi-looted art (Förster *et al.* 2018: 16). Following recent debates on collections acquired under imperial regimes (cf. Sarr and Savoy 2018), important research has been launched on the provenance of colonial collections and the sometimes murky, if not violent, context of their acquisition. Such an impetus has put research projects in the spotlight, usually focusing more specifically on collections originating from the African continent.

However, many projects have been conducted by various institutions and scholars on collections from other parts of the world – for instance collections from the Pacific, which are of specific interest here. It is the case of the aforementioned *Pacific Presences* project at the University of Cambridge MAA, the *Inventaire du Patrimoine Kanak Dispersé* led by Emmanuel Kasarhérou and Roger Boulay, the *Fijian Art Research Project* (2011-2014, AHRC, SRU and MAA), the British Museum *Melanesia Project* (2005-2010, see Thomas 2015), or the *Excavating MacGregor: reconnecting a colonial museum collection* (Australian Research Council, University of Sydney, Australian Museum, Queensland Museum, and PNG NMAG, see Chan and Ryan 2018). Important research is also often conducted in the lead-up to museum exhibitions and catalogue publications. Förster (2018: 17) also reminds us that the transfer of the term 'provenance research' from the field of art history to broader (museum) anthropology studies is not as recent as what could be implied by current debates. Many anthropologists have been conducting innovative research following concepts such as the 'social lives' (Appadurai 1986) and 'cultural biographies' of things (Kopytoff 1986) since the mid-1980s. This research often focusses on early collections, and little has been done on more recent, late colonial or even post-colonial acquisitions – the provenance often being better known in the case of later collections, but not necessarily better documented.

Rather than addressing the provenance of Abelam museum collections and objects as a mere chain of ownership, I would rather advocate for a more complex construct, following the idea of an itinerary. As Joyce and Gillespie point out, an itinerary:

> traces the strings of places where objects come to rest or are active, the routes through which things circulate, and the means by which they are moved. Itineraries are spatial and temporal, and they converge with sites and routes singular, multiple, virtual, and real. They have no real beginning other than where we enter them and no end since things and their extensions continue to move. Itineraries may include stoppages, knots, or nodes. Our understanding of an itinerary may be fragmented, filled with gaps. (Joyce and Gillespie 2015: 3)

In promoting movement as method, "an ontological shift from stasis, totality, essentialism, and boundedness to travel, flow, incompleteness, and permeability" can be operated, while acknowledging that periods of inertness along the way do not equate with the death of the object (Joyce and Gillespie 2015: 9; Hahn and Weiss 2013: 8). Therefore, this section aims to discuss how provenance research unfolds in practice (von Oswald 2020: 107) with regard to Abelam museum collections acquired during the second half of the 20th century, at the turn of Papua New Guinea independence in 1975. Tracing the provenance as itineraries of things implies taking into consideration not only the former owners, but also the technologies of circulation, and the facilitators and impediments to movement encountered along the way, as will be detailed in Chapter 2. Progressively, a historiography of collecting practices in the Abelam region can be written. Such a historiography needs to be understood as a moving image, that of an ever-growing collecting landscape emerging from these irregular, meandering itineraries that include the many people, things and places they connect across time and space.

## 1. Why make things simple when one can make them complicated?

In order to bring Abelam collections into historical perspective, and by following the call to trace the actors who contributed to the creation and who form an essential part of these collections, this thesis proposes to frame Abelam collections not only as ongoing social and material assemblages, but also as historical events created and performed by historically-situated actors. As O'Hanlon remarked, "a focus on the

ethnography of collecting" (and I would add on its history) "has the potential for historicising present debates" (O'Hanlon and Welsch 2000: 4) – that is debates on provenance research, or a more general incentive to thoroughly question the origin, modes of acquisition and trajectories of what has been termed 'ethnographic' collections. Conceptualising collections and collecting practices as social encounters, and therefore as particular actions, as significant events, allows asserting their historicity, while outlining their singularity. Such an approach, following actor-network, meshwork and assemblage theories, aims to shed light on the effective course of (inter)actions performed by identified human and non-human actors (Bensa 2006: 7-8, 11). The event, in its historical specificity, manifests what Bensa has called a 'rupture of intelligibility': "an event, it is not that *something* is happening, no matter how important, but rather that something *happens* – a becoming" (Bensa 2006: 150, translated from French, original emphasis). He adds that "any event, as a manifest modification of ratios of power and of the configuration of possibility, is both political and epistemological" (Bensa 2006: 155). In this respect, the collection and collecting act as an event opens up a whole new set of possibilities, reconfiguring relationships between people, but also of people with objects. At the same time, it disrupts the temporality of the lives of objects but also of the community, by creating an 'anomalous' interruption in powers at play, allowing people to reconfigure and collect themselves around this specific event (Moutu 2007: 96).

Therefore, paralleling the renewed interest in the historical reappraisal of (ethnographic) museum collections, the return of the narrative and of narrativity in historical writing (Burke 2011; Stone 1979) provides a number of clues as to how to approach provenance research in the context of the Abelam collections under study. This call to thicken historical narratives, echoing Clifford Geertz's "thick description" (Geertz 1993 [1973]), entices us to reduce the scale, to play with the focus, as with "the dilation and constriction of a camera lens" (Ginzburg 2005: 665). By putting the stories of ordinary individuals into the spotlight, one therefore hopes to illuminate broader structures, phenomena and histories (Burke 2011: 292-293). The 'micronarrative' proposed by Burke directly emerges from microhistorical approaches developed by Italian historians from the 1970s onwards, among others Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi. As Levi summarises:

> microhistory as a practice is essentially based on the reduction of the scale of observation, on a microscopic analysis and an intensive study of the documentary material. [...] the real problem lies in the decision to reduce the scale of observation for experimental purposes.

> The unifying principle of all microhistorical research is the belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved. [...] Phenomena previously considered to be sufficiently described and understood assume completely new meanings by altering the scale of observation. [...] The microhistorical approach addresses the problem of how we gain access to knowledge of the past by means of various clues, signs and symptoms. This is a procedure which takes the particular as its starting-point (a particular which is often highly specific and individual, and would be impossible to describe as a typical case) and proceeds to identify its meaning in the light of its own specific context. (Levi 2011: 99-102, 110)

One of the main characteristics of microhistory also lies not only in thickening the historical narrative, but in incorporating the research process in this narrative too, therefore including and reflecting on research procedures, documentary limitations and interpretations – in sum, "the researcher's point of view becomes an intrinsic part of the account" (Levi 2011: 110). Thereby the research process becomes visible, and the historical or anthropological narrative turns into a form of dialogue between the researcher, the reader and the subjects of this study. As Revel mischievously suggested, a slogan for microhistory and for my approach to the study of Abelam collections and collecting practices could be "why make things simple when one can complicate them" (Revel 1989: xxiv, translated from French).[46]

By zooming-in, and by navigating between micro and macro levels,[47] a multi-layered narrative can progressively unfurl, highlighting on the one hand what collectors (in their diversity) wrote and described in their accounts and letters, in their private notes in comparison with their official reports, and on the other hand trying to piece together how local Abelam individuals (once again in all their heterogeneity) perceived the collecting encounter and how they were involved. Moreover, beyond these already complex narratives can be added my personal understanding of these different collections and collecting processes and my own storytelling of which this thesis or 'meta-collection' is the result.

These multi-layered and complicated narrated collecting stories themselves form a part of the collection. Pushing it a step further, one could question whether this thesis-as-collection, and by extension the Abelam collections under study, are a

[46] In French, "pourquoi faire simple quand on peut faire compliqué ?"
[47] For a discussion on the relationship between microhistorical methods and global history, see the supplement 14 'Global History and Microhistory' to *Past & Present*, in particular Ghobrial (2019), De Vries (2019) and Levi (2019).

fiction.[48] If not fictitious, their largely constructed nature as assemblages and their 'idealised' dimension will be further discussed in Chapter 4.[49] As reminded by Ginzburg, such an approach is:

> based on the definite awareness that all phases through which research unfolds are *constructed* and not *given*: the identification of the object and its importance; the elaboration of the categories through which it is analyzed; the criteria of proof; the stylistic and narrative forms by which the results are transmitted to the reader. (Ginzburg 1993: 32, original emphasis)

Trying to reconstruct and to understand the perceptions of Abelam individuals of these collecting events remains a difficult exercise. Few documents attest straightforwardly of reactions, comments or specific actions by historically-situated Abelam men and women in the light of museum collecting endeavours. However, some clues can be deciphered when looking not only at the collected objects, but also at reports that indirectly illuminate some concomitant phenomena and activities.

## 2. Zooming in: focus on collecting Abelam in the light of cargo cults

To illustrate how some of these traces can be deciphered and how collecting histories should be 'made complicated', let us have a closer look at the cargo cult[50] as it unravelled in the Abelam region from the mid-1950s to the 1970s, in particular in the village of Apangai. Through the lens of colonial patrol reports and ethnographic accounts recording and narrating this specific phenomenon, one can start to unpack how important notions such as Abelam relationship to temporality and understanding of traumatic events can shed some light on their perception of collecting encounters. Phenomena such as the progressive rise and abandonment of millenarian movements and in particular cargo cults – which are in no way limited to the Abelam area, but whose development in the Abelam region took specific turns – may in some ways have significantly influenced how western outsiders, especially

[48] In his recent book *L'Autre-Mental. Figures de l'Anthropologue en Ecrivain de Science-Fiction* (2020), the French anthropologist Pierre Déléage pushes this idea even further by demonstrating how some anthropologists (such as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl or more recently Eduardo Viveiros de Castro) have resorted to writing processes substantially similar to those used, for example, by the American science fiction writer Philip K. Dick.
[49] To some extent this has always been an issue with all anthropological representations.
[50] For more general information on cargo cults, see Lawrence (1964) and Lindstrom (1993).

collectors and their collecting practices, could have been perceived and understood locally. Trying to make sense of these significant traces, even if not seemingly directly related to museum collecting practices, can therefore help understand how these collecting events would have been perceived by Abelam individuals from the mid-1950s onwards.

As pointed out by Theodore Schwartz, cargo cults seem to be a "type-response" (Schwartz 1976: 157), that is a mode of reaction to a situation of strong and rapid culture change induced by European contact and colonial rule in Papua New Guinea, but also more broadly in Melanesia. This type-response also related to the Abelam perception of history as "a process of gradual change punctuated by specific, cataclysmic events which may precipitate drastic sociocultural changes" (Scaglion 1983: 463). Among several characteristics, it was believed that Europeans possessed a secret allowing them to access supernatural sources of wealth and goods, or what is termed cargo (Schwartz 1976: 157-160). Following the cargo cult would thus allow to reveal the source of the goods and would lead to the day when people could enjoy this wealth, often brought by returning ancestors and meant to arrive by ship or plane.

To ensure the coming of the cargo, varied techniques were implemented, such as ritual marching, prayers, frenetic dancing, attempts to communicate with the dead, etc. One of the aims of the cargo cult was the "resynthesis" of (Abelam) society (Schwartz 1976: 161), of "stability and change, past and present, diachrony and synchrony" (Sahlins 1985: 144) in the face of powerful changes brought by the colonial Administration, which durably transformed local patterns of behaviour, notably in terms of exchanges (Schwartz 1976: 164; Allen 1990: 185). Cargo cults can thus be understood as a response to face such crises or to take advantage of the opportunities they could offer.

Since the end of the Second World War, many cargo movements seem to have grown in the East Sepik Province. In 1956, a strong and rapidly spreading cargo movement appeared in the region, notably around Dreikikir, paralleling the development of rice cash crops and its consequent impact on local hierarchies and power influence (Allen 1990: 191). People believed that through rice-growing, they would access the tremendous wealth of Europeans, and by extension their material affluence (Roscoe 1988: 519). It was progressively suppressed but many such outbreaks happened in the region, the most famous being the Peli Association, also known as the cargo cult of Mount Hurun, whose leaders, Matias Yaliwan and Daniel Hawina, were based in

Yangoru. This cult started in the late 1960s, but soon developed far beyond the Boiken area, its unprecedented influence spreading as far as the West Sepik Province to the west and to the Sepik River to the south by the early 1970s (Losche 1982a: 39; Roscoe 1988: 520). As observed by the Political Education Officer R. Blackburn in 1971:

> The cargo cult [Peli Association] [...] is in evidence in all the villages visited by the people, either as a belief of the people or a point of discussion which could be taken as a belief by the villagers later. (PRM 4/71-72, August-September 1971: 3)

The Peli Association movement also coincided with the 1972 elections to the Third House of Assembly and the progressive path to Independence, with Yaliwan strongly opposing the Government and Michael Somare and Pita Lus's positions in the region (Somare 1975: 83-84).

Interestingly, such cargo cults, in their re-synthesis attempt, seemed to "maximize opportunities for contact", turning to new activities and new forms of wealth, to the detriment of local ones (Schwartz 1976: 164). Cultists' efforts were indeed concentrated on activities and practices that would lead to the coming of the cargo, such as important gatherings, rituals involving money in the hope that it would then miraculously multiply etc., (Scaglion 1983: 482-483) thus (temporarily) abandoning *tambaran* practices and associated material culture to focus on this new millenarian promise. As Diane Losche recalled in 1982 about Apangai village:

> nowadays the decision to build or not build [a haus tambaran] is also subject to the rise and fall of such competing belief systems as cargo cults and missions. When I left Apangai at the end of 1977 there were only two haus tambarans in the village, both in Apangai 2 and both had been sponsored by men of one *ara*. The building of haus tambarans in Apangai 1 and by the other *ara* had fallen off primarily because the people of this *ara* and in Apangai 1 had for a number of years been actively involved in either missions or cargo cults and the most influential senior men in these areas had consciously given up the building of haus tambarans. When I returned to Apangai in 1979 three more haus tambaran had been built, one in Apangai 1 and one sponsored by a senior man in Apangai 2 who had formerly been active as a leader in cargo cult activities. It is likely that the incentive to build in these particular hamlets came partly from a waning belief in the 1972 cargo cult called the Peli Association, the most active cult ever to enter the Abelam area. (Losche 1982a: 286-287)

Thus, cargo cults had ambiguous effects in Apangai. On the one hand, the disinterest for *tambaran* ceremonial activities and any related form of material culture production (especially the building of *haus tambarans* as discussed by Diane Losche),

meant a temporary detachment from such artefacts, implying they could be more easily parted with. In this specific environment of cargo cult dynamics, how were (museum) collectors perceived by Abelam individuals? In such an "outwardly oriented" context (Schwartz 1976: 164), where Abelam people would be seeking means to control access to European wealth and goods, were European collectors, proposing large sums of money in order to acquire objects locally, considered as outdated in the light of new cargo cults or Christianity, seen as providential – or at least useful – mediators to access such sought-after wealth, the road towards cargo?

On the other hand, when people realised the inefficacy of the cult, for instance from around the mid-1970s for the Peli Association, the renewed interest in *tambaran* activities paralleled the failing of cargo cult promises and consequent waning of cargo activities, leading in some cases to the revitalisation of *haus tambaran* construction and related artistic forms. This renewed production implied the creation of new material, drawing collectors' and art dealers' attention, while perhaps being paradoxically more difficult to acquire considering the restored significance Abelam people accorded to it.

However, other incentives also need to be taken into account when one tries to understand the reasons for building new *haus tambarans* and performing related initiation ceremonies and yam displays. A strong competition between certain Abelam villages, moieties and/or individuals could justify the sponsorship of such activities and material production. As Losche stated concerning Apangai:

> the incentive to build was also the result of competition perceived by the senior men who sponsored these new haus tambaran, who, as the power of cargo cults waned, realized that they would have to boost their status vis-a-vis other senior men, who had never ceased haus tambaran activities. Thus some senior men of *ara* A in Apangai 2 sponsored an initiation in 1977. The waning of power of the Peli cargo cult together with the initiation performed by *ara* A for *ara* B thus acted as a spurt to the building of the new haus tambarans in 1978 and 1979. (Losche 1982a: 287)

Museum collectors throughout the second half of the 20th century thus operated within this complex context of alternating attachment and detachment from *tambaran* activities and related material culture. Therefore, consequent collections acquired in Apangai in 1980 by Losche on behalf of the Australian Museum and later in 1987 by Smidt and Mc Guigan (as previously discussed in this chapter) put on another level of historical depth when zooming in and looking at particular individual

positionalities and competition against ritualistic movements emerging and/or dying out during the same time period, such as the Peli Association and its aftermaths. Even if it seems difficult to draw any clear pattern, and that the archival record shows significant limits when investigating possible Abelam reactions, it appears that collecting processes can only be fully comprehended in the light of these concomitant phenomena, notably millenarian (cargo) movements and the influence they often had over local beliefs, ceremonial practices and material culture. It is only by considering all these acting parameters (and this was only one example as part of the many that will be explored through this thesis) as so many symptoms or traces of the collection as historical event, and by operating a constant back and forth between highly localised and broader scales, that a thicker and clearer picture of collecting endeavours in the Abelam region will be unveiled.

## 3. Provenance as assemblage: complicating histories

Collecting enterprises therefore should be understood as historical events within this broader context and local historicity, as specific actions which triggered various responses or re-synthesis from Abelam individuals – one of these processes of mediation and negotiation being the stimulation of material culture production. What do we research when we research the provenance of an object or of a collection? As reminded by Förster (2018: 17) and Basu (2011: 29), the collection itinerary has to be unfolded to draw not only the 'routes' taken by the collected objects, but also their 'roots', taking into account "deviations and circulations, multi-facetted entangled histories, multi-directionality and multi-layeredness" (Förster 2018: 17). However, going back to the rhizome scheme as discussed above, this idea of provenance following the arborescence of a tree, with its branches and willingness to go back to the roots, can appear somewhat insufficient to account for the complexity of the collection-as-assemblage. Rather, working with insights from network, meshwork, rhizomic and microhistory theories, if the collection is framed as an assemblage, its provenance necessarily needs to be complicated. The notion of provenance itself will be unpacked and challenged throughout this thesis and will soon appear to be much more complex than a list of names or places; if the collection is an ever-growing and fluid assemblage, so is its provenance.

The next chapters will therefore aim to 'remediate' what appears to be too simplistic a vision of Abelam collections' provenance and history. Following Deliss's take on the American anthropologist Paul Rabinow's concept of 'remediation' and its two facets of "improvement of a deficient situation and change of media" (Rabinow 2011: 103), I wish not only to remedy the way these collections have been framed so far, but also to remediate, that is to "bring about a change of medium, to experiment with other ways of describing, interpreting and displaying the objects in the collection" (Deliss 2020: 37).

As pointed out by Ginzburg, "a historical phenomenon [the collection as event and as assemblage] can become comprehensible only by reconstructing the activities of all the persons who participated [and still participate] in it" (Ginzburg 1993: 24). By zooming in and reducing the scale – at least temporarily – while investigating conjointly Abelam artefacts and archival collections, it will eventually allow us to rethink not only Abelam collections', but also more largely ethnographic collections' definitions and status. Following the (incomplete) traces left by some of the actors involved in these collecting endeavours, we can progressively reconstruct, narrate, and possibly rethink from whom, where and what these collections originate and what they can in turn create.

# Chapter 2

## Collecting Abelam in the field: an historical overview

How did museums acquire Abelam assemblages of artefacts (in sometimes tremendous quantities)? Who were the actors involved, both locally and from distant institutions? What were the institutional and legal contexts within which these enterprises took place?

This chapter aims to give an historical overview of collecting in the Abelam region, from the perspective of the various institutional and local individual actors, agendas and legal contexts throughout the second half of the 20th century, while trying to highlight the potential links and relations between them. Such an overview needs to be related to, and can only be fully comprehended with regard to the broader colonial and anthropological contexts operating in what became independent Papua New Guinea on 16 September 1975.

Following Bruno Latour's prompting, this chapter aims to have "a much closer look at the type of aggregates thus assembled and at the ways they are connected to one another" (Latour 2005: 22). I wish to address these collecting events as actions, as a conglomerate of actors and agencies, as a "concatenation of mediators" (Latour 2005: 59) which will be disentangled here.

# I. Historical overview of museum collecting endeavours in the Abelam region: focus on the actors involved locally

Although the recognition of a multitude of intermediary actors in collecting and exploration enterprises has been the focus of recent studies (Byrne *et al.* 2011a and 2011b; Harrison *et al.* 2013; Konishi *et al.* 2015), the involvement of these mediators remains to be fully acknowledged, especially with regard to museum collections. Indeed, historical understanding of exploration (and in our case of collecting enterprises) is often fixated on the individual figure of the European explorer or collector (Driver 2015: 14). Whether guides, hosts, informants, carriers, local authorities and gatekeepers, expatriates, or missionaries, local (but not necessarily native) actors played important and complex roles in facilitating the smooth running of these endeavours. Museum collectors could not have achieved the acquisition of these tremendous quantities of Abelam material without the active help and mediation of a strong network of locally involved actors: "who was leader and who was led in this context is a matter for debate" (Driver 2015: 15). As put by J. Victor Jansen in a letter to Carel M.A. Groenevelt:

> there is still a lot to do before we can even mention a more or less representative Maprik collection. [...] It is first and foremost a work of patience, which will probably have to be carried out in several steps, whereby you cannot, in my opinion, manage it without the active help of others. (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 19 February 1960, translated from Dutch)

Because of the relatively short time period during which these collecting trips took place, this network of relationships has been maintained and strengthened from one expedition to the next, and most of these actors have been involved with more than one of these assemblages. Once back in Europe or in Australia, museum collectors also often kept in touch with some of these intermediary agents, giving them updates on the outcome of the collecting trip, sometimes even sending the resulting publications and photographs in order to inform them of the ongoing work on the collected assemblage. It was also a way of thanking people, in order to maintain friendly relationships with local authorities and intermediaries in the likelihood of possible future journeys.

However, framing collecting practices in opposing collectors to local mediators and facilitators soon appeared to be limited, if not flawed. Indeed such a polarisation erases the more complex dynamics within which collecting relationships emerged. Rather, Abelam museum collections-as-assemblages need to be addressed with a much more granular approach, shedding light on these 'go-between', whose diverse roles have often been silenced, but eventually not altogether erased from the archival record.

How can archives help us, through their materiality and content, and alongside collected artefacts, to write a history of museum collecting practices in the Abelam region? How can collecting narratives and voices of the multiple actors involved be deciphered among these dispersed clues? Each document, each photograph constitutes a fragment of realness which, when assembled together, give the illusion of re-creating past experiences. In order to unravel these "fragments of life", it is hoped that searching through these archival documents will bring stories, so far silenced, to the surface (Konishi *et al.* 2015: 6). According to Ann Stoler, one such approach is to try to feel the "pulse of the archive" (Stoler 2009: 35): paying closer attention to the tone, formulae employed, to the quality of the paper, to the headings and handwriting, the density of the writing on the page, etc. – that is, all the countersigns, the coarseness which constitute as many elements contributing to the bigger story (Douglas 2015: 103-104). All these more or less deeply buried (counter)signs testify to the complex nature of the collecting processes. Long before Stoler suggested this idea of a "pulse" to be experienced by investigating archival documents along and against the grain, the French historian Arlette Farge (2013 [1989]: 30-31) had discussed the notion of a "topography" [*relief*] beneath the archive:

> Beneath the archives lies an organized topography. You need only know how to read it, and to recognize that meaning can be found at the very spot where lives have involuntarily collided [...]. A sudden shock brought these situations to light, and so it requires patience to identify the dissonances and the gaps, to put the different elements in order. The reality of the archive lies not only in the clues it contains, but also in the sequences of different representations of reality. The archive always preserves an infinite number of relations to reality. [...] Narration and fiction are woven together. The resulting cloth is fine-spun, and one cannot easily spot the seams. You could painstakingly put this all in order and meticulously examine it, but there is something else, something without a name that scientific examination cannot quite explain. [...] It is, of course, the surplus of life that floods the archive and provokes the reader, intensely and unconsciously. The archive is an

> excess of meaning, where the reader experiences beauty, amazement, and a certain affective tremor. (Farge 2013: 30-31)

Such a pulse, "surplus of life", transpires through seemingly insignificant comments, phrases, which, when picked up, inform us about the more or less convoluted paths collecting enterprises took, and how these affected the different actors involved. This chapter therefore aims to chase all the actors constituting the collecting networks at play in the creation of Abelam museum collections. It aims to do so without any specific hierarchical classification, in order to treat all the actors as equal nodes forming the broader assemblage under study. Such a re-collecting endeavour was operated mostly through a meticulous, time-consuming and sometimes laborious investigation of archival resources, cross-referenced with published material, inventory lists and museum database information. When the name of an actor was retrieved, it was then tracked through other sources, sometimes matched with another recorded spelling (as was often the case with the names of Abelam actors), linked with specific objects, places, and eventually to other actors. This chapter therefore proposes to trace and follow the residues of their "partial visibility" (Driver 2015: 17-19) in order to piece together the collecting picture, the collected objects with the names of specific artists and other related actors,[51] highlighting the networks, logistics and various resources implemented and mobilised along the way.

## 1. Abelam individuals

Abelam individuals who played a crucial role in collecting endeavours throughout the second half of the 20th century occupied several (sometimes overlapping) social positions. A number of them were recognised artists, carvers and/or painters, but also potters. As explained by Forge, the preparation for *tambaran* ceremonies (i.e., mostly initiation ceremonies) provided the main context in which Abelam male artists worked, with initiation scenes being the principal opportunity to display their work. This specific context would also allow for future leading artists to train, and it is within the *tambaran* cult that artists would acquire and perfect their artistic skills,

[51] As will be discussed further in Chapter 4, the names of the Abelam artists or other individuals, when known, have often been separated – voluntarily or not – from the associated collected artefacts along their transformation as museum objects and consequently are often absent from the museum database records. This thesis has tried as much as possible to uncover such information and to piece together some of these actors with the artefacts they created or sold to museum collectors.

especially alongside a master painter who would supervise them (Forge 1967: 68-69). However, only men initiated in the higher stages of the initiation cycle (who had seen the *gwalndu*) would be allowed to produce carvings and paintings for initiation scenes (Mc Guigan, personal communication, 18 January 2021). Abelam artists would create paintings and carvings in preparation for the initiation of members of the other *ara* of their ritual group, but also if particularly renowned, their services could be requested by partners in other villages (Forge 1962: 12; 1967: 73; Gerrits 2012: 114). Painting was carried out on the *ame* (ceremonial ground), in an area secluded from the view of uninitiated members of the village by fences, while the painters were submitted to specific food and behavioural taboos. Contrary to painting, which was a collaborative and highly-ritualised enterprise, where the master painter would outline the design with a thin white line and supervise the painting of colour patterns by less experienced artists, carving in most cases fell under the responsibility of a single carver (except for the creation of the large *tékét* crossbeam found on the façade of the *haus tambaran*), and was performed in seclusion but was "hardly a ritual activity" (Forge 1967: 75).[52] The terms *yigendu* and *maira yagwandu* are used to qualify Abelam artists, especially painters (Hauser-Schäublin 2016: 192, 201). However, as Forge remarked, the term '*yigen ndu*' literally means 'good man', as Abelam people would have "expect[ed] their artists to be good men [according to local values], and by and large the artists conform to those expectations" (Forge 1967: 74). Therefore, artists of considerable experience and local renown would often have the status of big men, as influential and respected members of the community. Abelam big men were men of great prestige whose power relied essentially on their capacity to gather supporters through the redistribution of wealth but also through their charisma and great qualities as orators and yam growers. As such, they often played an essential role as gatekeepers in the collecting process, and their local reputation often preceded them and often caught collectors' attention. Some of them also developed further influence through their involvement with colonial administration, as councillors, or through investment in the cash economy.

Before the collecting trip conducted by Gerd Koch in 1966 on behalf of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, it seems that the names of Abelam individuals who would have played an active part in facilitating the sale or negotiations were not recorded. Names of artists have sometimes been kept in relation to the collected artefacts, but

[52] For more information about Abelam painting and carving techniques and processes, see Forge (1962; 1967) and Hauser-Schäublin (2021).

no mention of specific Abelam individuals who would have acted as guides, informants or main points of contact within villages have been found – which in no way implies that these contacts and relationships did not exist.

The first to consciously acknowledge the crucial role of some Abelam people in the collecting process is Gerd Koch, who was mainly accompanied by Ignas Ipiban (also known as Ignas Leni) from Kimbangwa **(Fig. 58)**, who was already working in the colonial administration (Koch 2003: 43):

> We have now travelled through the country together for a long time and have always understood each other well. There has never been a problem. He tried to establish the contacts, to mediate and to explain every situation to me freely and openly, so that I could behave in such a way that everything happened in peace and friendship. (Koch 2003: 49, translated from German)

His other main contact was Waiwu Urula **(Fig. 59)**, master carver and painter and one of the big men of Kalabu, who let Koch observe him create a frieze beam *tékét* which he would later acquire for Berlin (Koch 2003:46-47), alongside a five-metre high façade of a yam storage house.[53] Koch however recounted how the façade painting was unfortunately damaged, while being transported by truck on its way to Wewak. Inadequately covered with tarpaulins, it did not resist the heavy rains, which washed off parts of the designs. For some time Koch considered a possible restoration by the museum team in Berlin, but eventually decided to ask Waiwu Urula to come to Wewak in order to restore the façade himself:

> it should be an original work. So the next day I try to get the help of the government station Maprik with a radio telephone call. From there one sends messengers to Waiwu Urula in Kalabu, ask him if he is ready to travel to the coast with a man from his village as a companion in an airplane and to take over the work. Waiwu, who has never left his homeland before, is ready! He comes with his son in a small Cessna flown to Wewak. [...] The master does not seem to be confused by the sudden change. Decorated with his ceremonial arm rings, he follows me with his light "luggage", the bamboo pipes with earth colours and feather brushes [...] Waiwu does not start working straight away [...], wanders around, sits introverted. But after a few days he managed to summon the helpful spirits in a magical way (we are talking about "inspiration" here), in order to then let the faces on the gable wall reappear, naturally much better than our good restorer would have ever been able to. (Koch 2003: 50, translated from German)

[53] Inventory numbers VI 48639 and VI 48603.

More than being a simple informant, Waiwu Urula thus played a crucial and active role in the constitution of the collection and the transformation of Abelam artefacts into museum objects.

A few years later, William Dargie dealt mainly with two Abelam artists, Gunjel and Waiu of Kalabu (NGA FD Dargie, 10-12 February 1969: 50-52). The two artists led the creation of the façade commissioned by Dargie during his lightning trip in 1969. Although little information has been recorded about them, it seems probable that Waiu was the same person as Waiwu Urula, whose name would simply have been spelt differently by Dargie. Such conjecture can also be supported by the fact that Waiwu Urula had already worked closely with Koch only three years prior to Dargie's visit to Kalabu and was therefore most likely aware of what commissioned work for a museum entailed and the price he would be willing to accept for it.

From 1972 to 1977, the main interlocutors and informants of Fred Gerrits were Nyurek of Bongiora and Taro of Kuminibus **(Fig. 60)**. Nyurek was a big man and famous carver and had a very deep knowledge of the initiation cycle and of the yam cult as implemented in Bongiora and was also able to introduce Gerrits to other important men in the village. Taro, on the other hand, was a big man of Kuminibus and a Head Nurse at Maprik Hospital. Thanks to his position, he had contacts throughout the Abelam area, which allowed Gerrits to attend and document initiations in Kuminibus, Chiginambu and Sunuhu (Gerrits 2012: 17-18; interview with Fred Gerrits, 29 March 2019). Both men also enabled Gerrits to be trusted and welcomed throughout the region and hence he was able to see and document not only initiation scenes and preparations, but also secret private and communal yam scenes. As the latter recalls:

> Nyurek and Taro really worked together, as a team. [...] Both men were highly regarded by the people in the Maprik area and we were extremely lucky to have both of them as informants and helpers. Without them we could not have gathered all info and would certainly never have been allowed to see the yam-scenes. (Interview with Fred Gerrits, 29 March 2019)

Between 1972 and 1977, Nyurek and Taro met regularly with Gerrits (once or twice a week), at the doctor's residence. At first, as Gerrits recalls, "they had very little concept of what a museum is" before he explained to them what it entailed. But they were conscious that their cultural and ceremonial practices were changing rapidly and

were thus more than willing to make sure their stories were going to be recorded for future generations (Interview with Fred Gerrits, 29 March 2019; Gerrits 2012: 23-24).

In Apangai, in 1976-77 and later in 1979-1980, Diane Losche's main interlocutor was a man called Nera Jambruku (also known as Nera or John Nera) **(Figs. 61 and 62)**, Councillor of Apangai no. 1 and 2, who had been President of the Maprik Council prior to its amalgamation with the Amuk Council, thereby forming the Greater Maprik Council in 1966. His influence was covering not only the different hamlets of Apangai, but also the villages of Magapita and Yamelikum. Before Papua New Guinea's Independence, he was very pro-Administration and took an active part in the affairs of the government primary school at Brikiti, a hamlet of Apangai. He was also a strong advocate of cash cropping in the region and owned a trade store and a coffee plantation of 400 trees (PRM 7/66-67; PRM 12/72-73). Nera was also a renowned big man and artist, whose reputation was not only local but also among art collectors (as will be discussed in Chapter 4). The other principal informant of Diane Losche was the artist Narikowi Konbapa of Apangai **(Fig. 62)** and, together with Nera, they supervised the creation of a ceremonial house façade, of a yam storage house and of a yam display, that were to be acquired by the Australian Museum. As such, they came to Sydney as consultants to help install the Abelam Gallery in September 1981 (AMS 235/1334: letter from Losche to the Australian Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, April/May 1981; Losche 1996).

During the same period, in the Wosera area, a number of men (especially big men), played an essential role in assembling the collection for the British Museum (BM Archives Oc1980,11). Niagara Kwarkwai from Sarikim no. 2 (ca. 1925 – 1998) **(Fig. 63)**, a renowned painter locally but also an influential man who "encouraged and promoted Abelam art and culture from the earliest days" (Boylan 1998: 7), became Dorota Starzecka's main interlocutor. Numba Wambungai, former Councillor of Sarikim **(Fig. 64)**, Kinbagi Wangumbu, Councillor of Stapikum no. 2, and Soali Naurikia, Magistrate, also played an important role in the collecting process, alongside the artists who originally created the artefacts for sale, notably the painter Wangi Wanembangi **(Fig. 65)** and the potter Bangi Mali **(Fig. 66)** whose role will be detailed further in Chapter 3. Teachers from the Nanu River Community School also played a determining role, especially Ganui Gabb, Headmaster of the school, and William Wote, teacher who acted as translator **(Fig. 67)**. All the transactions happened

in the school and were witnessed by the teachers who guaranteed the good understanding and smooth running of the sale.

Throughout the field research that she conducted in the Abelam region between 1978 and 1983, essentially in Kalabu village, Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin collaborated with many Abelam people. Two privileged informants were nonetheless the artist Waulemoi of Kalabu no. 2, Numbunggen hamlet **(Fig. 68)** and the respected big man and yam grower Kambe (Hauser-Schäublin 2017: 259-261). Waulemoi was one of Kalabu's most renowned artists and was the master painter who had supervised the creation of the façade commissioned for the museum in Basel. Waulemoi was considered one of the most famous artists in the region. As Hauser-Schäublin explains:

> He had been invited by a number of other villages to act as the main artist leading the team of painters who decorated the gable front of ceremonial houses with the rows of figurative motifs typical for Kalabu. By painting façades in other, neighbouring, villages, he contributed to the spread of the Kalabu style. (Hauser-Schäublin 2017: 259)

Previously in Kalabu, this position had been held by Waiwu Urula, whose work with Koch and Dargie in the 1960s was detailed earlier. However, the latter, while getting older, had lost his eyesight and Waulemoi progressively took over his position. Waulemoi was considered an innovator, in particular because he had replaced the grey mud coating, usually used by painters as a primer before applying white, black, red and yellow pigments, with a black earthy substance, whose adhering properties to the smooth surface of the wood or of the sago spathe were much stronger than the common grey mud. His style also differed greatly from his predecessor's (Hauser-Schäublin 2016: 66-70).

Finally, in 1984, Kipa Wian **(Fig. 52)** and Peter Yipime **(Fig. 41)**, the two custodians (as main organisers of the recent initiation ceremonies) of the *haus tambaran* of Nyambikwa hamlet, Apangai village, had invited Noel Mc Guigan to photograph and document the initiation chambers, hoping to sell their contents. They remained, alongside Councillor Nera (who had already been the main informant of Diane Losche), the principal interlocutors of Mc Guigan and Smidt during the 1987 collecting trip on behalf of the museum in Leiden. Big man Kipa Wian had been the main organiser of the initiation ceremony held in 1984, while Peter Yipime was then working with Fred Gerrits in the Department of Public Health (Malaria Control). With Nera, they were both aware of the wider interest in Abelam material culture, especially

on the part of museum institutions (Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993: 121-122), and were the crucial initiators of the sale to the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde.

Alongside recorded Abelam individuals, one should not forget the roles played by many Abelam people, whose names have not been recorded, but whose help has been invaluable, especially with regard to the practical aspects of transporting the assembled collection. The crucial role of the Abelam carriers and workforce who helped carry the collectors' equipment **(Fig. 69)** and the acquired artefacts, and who often also helped to make the crates in which they would be shipped overseas, should be acknowledged. As René Gardi recalls:

> We usually set out on long journeys before eight o'clock; if we were lucky, an hour earlier. Small, curly headed fellows [...] carried our tin boxes slung from poles, one man at either end; others carried lighter burdens singly. They mostly took short steps and ran – at least in the first few hours – up and down hill in advance of us, and out of sight. We proceeded a little more comfortably, with the usual bearers bringing up the rear: young fellows who carried photographic equipment, water-bottles, and coverings against the rain. With them were often a few old men who, to do us honour and for their own amusement, accompanied us to the next village. (Gardi 1960: 34)

On arrival in the next village, the carriers were lined up and paid in money **(Fig. 70)**, or other goods such as tobacco and salt (Gardi 1960: 65).

## 2. Administrative officers

A number of official agents, both local ones and high-ranking, helped museums in their collecting activities. Most of the time, they were the privileged interlocutors for matters related to the practicalities of collecting in the Sepik and the Abelam regions, and their approval was necessary to conduct fieldwork in these regions as well as to obtain export licences. Maintaining good relationships with them was therefore of primary importance for museum collectors and it enabled them to have access to first-hand information.

Before Independence, the locally-based authorities were the *kiaps* (white District Officers, DOs), who were working conjointly with the Patrol Officers, the *luluais* (indigenous village chiefs appointed by the Australian Administration) and *tultuls* (translators, that is native men who could also speak good Tok Pisin). District Officers were officially renamed District Commissioners (DCs) and Assistant District

Commissioners (ADCs) in 1951, but their roles did not change, and it seems that the title 'Officer' was still used without distinction (Brown 2012). Although they were officially not allowed to collect for themselves (Christian Kaufmann, personal communication, 26 March 2019), some of these officers appeared to be of primordial help to collectors.

As such, in the mid-1950s, Alfred Bühler and René Gardi benefited from the help of Elliott Smith and David Marsh (DCs), in post at Wewak, to arrange official aircrafts to carry the collected material (Gardi 1960: 30). Bühler subsequently kept in touch with David Marsh, asking for his advice concerning possible places where there would still be interesting material to collect:

> As to my plans I have not yet decided where exactly to go. [...] Would you advise me to visit other places where especially the Arts are still living? (MKB 8-0007: letter from Bühler to Marsh, 23 October 1958).

Indeed, being based in the field for long periods, in Maprik, Ambunti and Angoram, these officers were more likely to hear about interesting offers or to know where to find specific typologies of objects. For instance, it seems that Carel M.A. Groenevelt relied on the services of Mr. Bunter, the District Officer of Maprik, to acquire less accessible items:

> A little about Mr. Bunter, the D.O. from Maprik; he will seriously search for large rings and rare pieces; now has more time for it. (SR 1407_150: letter from Groenevelt to Jansen, 1 June 1961, translated from Dutch)

> Much more important for our Museum is the willingness of the D.O. [Mr. Bunter] to look out for rare pieces, which could be of great value to us. (SR 1407_148: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 11 July 1961, translated from Dutch)

The help of Assistant District Commissioners and of District Commissioners was essential in order to facilitate the itinerary and progress of the collectors, and to make sure people in the villages would be informed of their intentions. They often delivered letters of introduction to ensure the smooth running of the collecting trips. However, it seems that such a facilitating role was not always fulfilled, as William Dargie complained about:

> When I agreed to the planned itinerary in Moresby, I was under the impression that senior officers (D.C.s and A.D.C.s) had been well informed in advance of my requirements. It

> seems, however, that few of these officers can understand what we are about, have made no real preparations, and need a day's educational assistance from me on my arrival before anything can be got going. I don't blame them for this; they have many other and urgent problems. (NGA 69/0694-01: letter from Dargie to W. R. Cumming, 23 January 1969)

Nonetheless, in the late 1960s, Michael J. Cockburn, Assistant District Commissioner stationed in New Guinea from 1949 to 1976 under the Department of Native Affairs, and in charge for some time at Maprik, seems to have been of crucial help to several collectors, for example Koch (Koch 1968: 8) and Dargie. The collection the latter gathered in the Maprik region would indeed not have come together without the help of Cockburn. As Dargie recalls in his field diary:

> 12.0 Arr. Maprik. Met by A.D.C. Mike Coburn [sic – Cockburn]. By 4-wheel drive to KALABU no.1 village and inspected Haus Tambarans (3) and carved and painted tambu figures inside. Then on [...] steep and slippery hills to KALABU no.2 where I negotiated to buy some painted and carved figures if they could be got out to a truckable road by tomorrow afternoon. (NGA FD Dargie, 10 February 1969: 47)

The next day he went on:

> Saw collection of figures, snake and birds and made preliminary arrangements to purchase all together later this work if villagers would carry to A.D.C.'s office at Maprik. (NGA FD Dargie, 11 February 1969: 50)

Cockburn was then left with the money to pay the men in Kuminibus and in Kalabu, and was eventually in charge of storing the collected artefacts in Maprik while Dargie was visiting other parts of the Territory or even back in Australia (NGA FD Dargie, 10 February 1969: 46).

Alan A. Roberts, in charge of the Department of Native Affairs from 1953 to 1966, also proved to be an interlocutor of prime importance, in order to ensure the approval and support of the Territory's authorities regarding the collecting enterprises.

Various individuals in charge of cultural institutions also played an important role in the collecting processes. Among many others, Sir Alan Mann, first President of the Board of Trustees of the National Museum and Art Gallery in Port Moresby, and Roy Mackay, Preparator-in-charge of the museum's collections since October 1964 (and Acting Director), were privileged interlocutors of William Dargie in 1969 (NGA FD Dargie: 63, 68-70). Later on, the following Directors of the museum, Dirk Smidt, Geoffrey Mosuwadoga and Soroi Marepo Eoe, also contributed to the collecting

activities of museum collectors, dealing respectively with Fred Gerrits, the British and Australian Museums, and the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, in approving export licenses and by easing complex practicalities.

## 3. Missionaries

> We can be glad, as far as the Maprik area is concerned, that the Mission is now so active there. It would be impossible for me to get such things together. (SR 1407_150: letter from Groenevelt to Jansen, 1 June 1961, translated from Dutch)

Throughout the different colonial and post-colonial administrative regimes, the Abelam region constituted the scene for the implementation of different Christian missions, such as the Roman Catholics of the Society of the Divine Word (*Societas Verbi Divini,* SVD), the Protestant Assemblies of God and the Seventh Day Adventists. The Roman Catholic Mission (SVD) was established at Kunjingini and Ulupu in 1938 (Losche 1982a: 33). Their activities were however interrupted by the Second World War but resumed in the post-war period. The main Catholic villages, apart from Kunjingini and Ulupu, were Roma, Kaugia (where Father Soellner was in charge), Bongos and Maprik (with Father A. Cruysberg). The Assemblies of God (AOG) Missions were for their part established at Hayfield, Kalabu, Cheragum, Wingei, Bongiora and Maprik (with the Pastor H. Davidson). The Seventh Day Adventists had the smallest establishment, only at Maprik and Neligum, but had the most ardent following. To the west of the Abelam territory, in the Ilahita Arapesh, the Bumbita-Muhiang and Dreikikir census-divisions **(Map 6)**, the South-Seas Evangelical Mission was the most avidly followed. The fact that so many different missions were present in a relatively small area added to the confusion of local people. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, the SVD and AOG missions had a relatively equal share of influence, with occasional tensions between the different cults and their followers.

From the various ethnographic testimonies and patrol reports in the region, it appears difficult to establish a clear-cut tendency of the evolution and impact of missionary activities on the creation and sale of Abelam material culture. It seems that these phenomena were highly localised both in time and space, with diverging consequences on Abelam *tambaran* practices and related material culture production.

For example, the first establishment of the SVD Roman Catholic Mission at Kunjingini in 1938, and the zealous practices of some missionaries such as Father Paul Blasig, seem to have led to the almost total decline of the construction of *haus tambaran* and to related ceremonial activities around that village by the mid-1950s, as has been noted by several patrol reports in the Wosera area:

> It will be recalled that Fr. Vlasig [Father Paul Blasig], one of the resident missionaries at Kunchingini No.1, was committed for trial a few years back on a charge of arson arising from the burning of a number of tamboran houses. His subsequent acquittal in the Supreme Court may possibly have strengthened his hold over the population in the vicinity of his station, because it seems that he has to a large extent suppressed the tamboran activities. Whether those villages who no longer have tamboran houses in them, have such houses in the bush or not, I do not know, but it is very apparent that Fr. Vlasig wields very considerable influence amongst the people. (PRM 1/53-54, June-July 1953: 3)

However, it seems that this decline was limited to Kunjingini and to some villages in its direct vicinity, not affecting other Wosera villages located further away:

> The "tambaran" cult flourishes throughout the area patrolled with the notable exception of all villages in the vicinity of the mission at KUNJINGINI. In other villages new "HAUS TAMBERANS" were frequently seen [...]. (PRM 8/53-54, January-February 1954: 5)

According to patrol reports, it appears that villagers were sometimes confused as to what was allowed, or not, by the Government and/or the missions in terms of ceremonial activities, often mistakenly thinking that the Administration was supporting the ban on *tambaran* cult extolled by certain missionaries. Some Abelam people were thus afraid of building new *haus tambarans*, fearing it would provoke the anger and retaliation of the local mission, as they occasionally shared their concerns with patrol officers, possibly hoping to obtain their official support:

> At KUMINIBUS natives approached me and said they wanted to build a new HAUS TAMBERAN but they were afraid to incur the anger of the local Missions. (PRM 5/54-55, March-April 1955: 3)

During the 1950s, this decline in *haus tambaran* construction and consequently in the vitality of the *tambaran* and yam cults was not observed at the same level of intensity throughout the Abelam territory. It was dependant on each Mission – whether Catholic or Protestant – also combined with other factors such as how strongly each village had been affected by the Japanese invasion and Allied bombings during the Second World War (Scaglion 1983: 477-479), and individual motivations. For instance, the AOG Mission at Wingei seemed to be losing considerable influence

over its followers, as was reported by the Assistant District Officer W.T Brown in 1958-59. He even observed a phenomenon of what he termed a "distinct disobeyance [sic]" towards the teachings of the AOG Mission throughout the Wingei and Tamaui Census Divisions **(Map 6)**, with a revival of *haus tambaran* building, and with no less than twenty ceremonial houses built in the region around that period (PRM 5/58-59, August-October 1958). The same level of defiance towards the AOG Mission seemed to be noticed in the Mamblep Census Division (with villages such as Apangai or Bongiora) between the late 1950s and the early 1960s:

> Many "Haus Tamberans" were seen and in spite of Mission activities in the area the people still retain many of their old beliefs and customs. (PRM 6/58-59, October 1958: n.p.)

> Although the A.O.G. have been operating thus for quite a few years now the MAMBLEP people have stubbornly resisted the attempts of the A.O.G. missionaries to renounce their tamberan customs and traditional beliefs. In fact the TAMBERAN cult would seem to be as universally adhered to as it was in the past and new "HAUS TAMBERANS" are continuously being built. (PRM 3/60-61, August 1960: n.p.)

Therefore, it seems that the strength and influence of these Christian missions might need to be nuanced, as pointed out by the Cadet Patrol Officer J.P. Wright in 1959:

> actual religious influence is probably very limited. Evidence of this is the fact that much time is still spent on tamberan and long yam ceremonies. Additionally practically every village contains at least one "haus tamberan" including villages such as KALABU where a mission is established. (PRM 1/58-59, October 1958 – January 1959: 19)

In the 1960s, the overall feeling that permeates most accounts is the strong confusion and indecision, especially among younger Abelam people, with regard to the conflicting ideals of the mission and of *tambaran* and yam cults. A sharp contrast seems to be observed from one mission station to the next, with general differences in approach between Protestant and Catholic missions. Indeed, Patrol Officer R.J. Brown reported that in 1966, in the aforementioned Mamblep Census Division, the AOG Mission "has been somewhat too severe in its efforts of spreading the Christian faith because through this Mission's activities a large number of traditional activities no longer occur" (PRM 7/66-67, December 1966: 16). On the contrary:

> Trade stores for the Catholic Missions is a necessary part of their station, for finance for their work, but this gives the people the impression that the missionaries are businessmen. Their apparent lack of restrictions reduces the effect of the religion on the

> people. [...] Catholics smoke and drink, allow the Tambaran symbols and even purchase them for resale to provide an extra income. (PRM 7/68-69, June 1968-January 1969: 13)

In the early 1970s, in the Mamblep, Yamil (including Ulupu village) and Tamaui Census Divisions, it seemed that the influence of the Catholic and Protestant Missions was generally declining. The strength of the Mission influence in the Abelam region was also nuanced by Diane Losche who noted that despite the large number of mission posts in the region, "which perhaps gives an illusion of zealous missionaries and fervent native believers", their influence was relatively minimal. She even observed that during the entire duration of her fieldwork in Apangai in 1976-77, not a single missionary from the AOG Mission visited the village (Losche 1982a: 41).

Even if it appears relatively arduous to draw any clear pattern in the influence Christian missions may have had locally on Abelam people, it seems that the fluctuant adhesion to and directives from the Missions may in some cases explain the greater incentive for Abelam people to part with artefacts related to the *tambaran* and yam cults. As Gardi summarised with regard to his collecting trip in the Abelam area in 1955-56 with Bühler:

> Where the missions have penetrated and gained a firm foothold, and where the Kanakas come regularly into contact with white people, buying is of course much easier than in areas where men cling to their old customs and still take cult seriously. [...] Sometimes it was also our ill fortune to come upon a village which was under the influence of a missionary who, not appreciating their scientific value, had had the carved figures, whether of ancestors or of spirits, cleared out, and had exerted such an influence on his flock that they had broken them up and burned them. Other missionaries, however, have a full understanding of aboriginal art [...]. (Gardi 1960: 59, 62)

Missionaries were nonetheless essential intermediate actors for museum collectors, in particular Catholic ones. As Gardi recalls, Catholic priests were always able to help him and Bühler, providing them with precious information and directing them to people or places that they would not have noticed otherwise (Gardi 1960: 121-122). This strong position of Catholic missions was also emphasised by Dargie, who wrote in 1969 in his diary:

> These German missions are in a very strong position in the Territory. Established long before Australia acquired the mandate after the 1st World War and today economically independent in all substantial ways because of their ownership of plantations, saw-mills, small ship-building yards and other real assets, they await with confidence the granting of Independence. There is little likelihood that their position will be at all disturbed under

> self-government, because they are certain of the support of the very large number of native people who adhere to their faith and the local missions [...]. I got the impression of a state within a state, self-confident in its capacity to survive, and with a strong emotional tie to Germany. (NGA FD Dargie, 31 January 1969: 25-26)

Some missionaries even seem to have specialised in collecting activities, such as Father Joep Heinemans[54] in the Sepik. Of particular interest is the role played by Father August Knorr (SVD) **(Fig. 71)**, based at Ulupu from 1950 to 1972. Of German nationality but of Polish descent, he was a former soldier who had fought at the Battle of Stalingrad. While working as a missionary, he also conducted what could be considered a form of ethnography of the Abelam, collecting myths, painting watercolours of Abelam motifs and writing notes about different aspects of Abelam culture (MKB 8-0007). Rather than condemning native ceremonial practices, he was promoting them in his own fashion, encouraging men to paint and to decorate his church the way they would have ornamented their *haus tambaran* (Gardi 1960: 118-121). Not only did he advise Anthony Forge on his fieldwork (Kaufmann 2017: 182), he was also collecting on behalf of Bühler:

> I want to fulfil your urgent request and collect something for you. I've been researching for weeks. [...] Next week, I will ride or drive in another direction, there are several old spirit houses, want to try. In any case, I will not give up hope! [...] I also know a lot of old carvings, which I can probably buy more easily. Because I have not led anybody there yet. (MKB 8-0007: letter from Knorr to Bühler, 9 March 1958, translated from German)

Father Knorr, in his relative flexibility, nonetheless appeared to be more of an exception than the rule. Consequently, the relationship between museum collectors and missionaries was somewhat ambiguous. The money raised by missionaries' collecting endeavours was used to expand the work of the Mission. Hence, by working with missionaries as privileged intermediates, museums were financing in part the Mission and its work, and paradoxically the 'decay' of indigenous cultural practices that they deplored.

[54] Father Joep (Franciscus Josefus Elizabeth Maria) Heinemans (1926-2020), SVD, stayed in Papua New Guinea from 1954 to 1988. He was notably based at Timbunke and soon became vicar to the Bishop in Wewak. He collaborated with a number of collectors, such as Bühler, Groenevelt or Dargie.

## 4. Teachers, medical doctors, traders and other expatriates

Similar to some administrative officers and some missionaries, expatriates who were living in the Sepik and Abelam regions, or in Port Moresby, proved particularly useful when it came to arranging practical aspects of the collecting expeditions, hosting the collectors or even buying objects on their behalf.

Teachers were among the most involved in this regard. First of all, Noel Mc Guigan **(Fig. 41)**, who taught at the Maprik High School from 1973 to 1976,[55] had suggested in 1977 the sale of the *haus tambaran* from Sarikim to the British Museum. A few years later, he was the one who mentioned the purchase of the contents of the ceremonial house of Nyambikwa hamlet, Apangai, to Dirk Smidt, for the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden. As Dirk Smidt emphasised:

> He was driving the moped, and I just jumped on the back. That's how you basically can see it. It was his idea, he knew the people in the field, he had already experienced that the people were willing to part with the initiation display. So I arrived and the barter was already made up. I didn't really need to negotiate with the people in Apangai, Noel had already done the negotiations. We only finalised the negotiations there. I think we had a kind of paper, an A4-size sheet of paper, on which were listed the things we wanted to discuss with the owners of the display in Apangai. We negotiated about the payment. If I remember correctly the people mentioned a price and we thought it was much too low. I think it was our initiative to raise the price during the negotiations. (Interview with Dirk Smidt, 13 March 2018)

The other teachers who played an especially important role in the region were Helen and Paul Dennett **(Fig. 72)**. Helen Dennett, from Tasmania, trained as a teacher and was sent through the Franciscan Church to the West Sepik in 1963 where she spent two years volunteering and re-opening the school. There she met Paul, also a teacher, and they were married in 1967. After being back in Queensland for a while, they both became teachers at the Nanu River Community School (in the Wosera region) from 1967 to 1969. They then moved to Maprik Community School (1970-72) and to Angoram (1973-75), the Western Highlands (1976-77) and back to the Sepik at the Yangoru High School (1978). In 1979, they relocated to Port Moresby, where Helen Dennett worked for the Office of Cultural Affairs (National Cultural Council) as an

[55] Mc Guigan subsequently undertook a PhD degree in Anthropology at the University of Ulster, with his thesis entitled *The social context of Abelam art: a comparison of art, religion and leadership in two Abelam communities* (1992), based on his experience and thorough field observation in the Abelam region, in 1973-76 and later in 1986-87.

Executive Officer from 1980 to 1982. After a break in 1983, she worked for the NGO Village Crafts in 1984-85, which had opened a shop in Port Moresby to sell arts and crafts. In relation to this enterprise, she went back to the Abelam and Wosera. In 1986, they settled back in Australia (Helen and Paul Dennett, personal communication, 6 April 2019). Helen Dennett played a crucial role in the collecting process of the British Museum collection. In 1979, she went back to Sarikim and wrote a report on the condition of the *haus tambaran*, what was still available for sale, how accessible the village was, etc. **(Fig. 73)**. She thus acted as one of the main intermediates in arranging the collecting trip, as the lengthy correspondence that she exchanged with Dorota C. Starzecka testifies (BM Archives Oc1980,11).

Other essential expatriate actors were medical doctors. One could think of Werner Stöcklin from Basel, who had worked in the Territory of Papua and New Guinea in the 1960s, including some time in Maprik (Stöcklin 1984), and who would become an important informant for Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin (Christian Kaufmann, personal communication, 13 June 2018). But the most important one remains Fred Gerrits **(Fig. 22)**, who had arrived in Port Moresby with his wife Nel in December 1963. Gerrits started to work in Goroka and Okapa (1964) in the Highlands, but following political tensions in the region was transferred to Angoram (1964-67) and then to Popondetta (Saiho) (1967-68) before working in the Trobriand Islands (1968-71). In these different places, he was the only doctor in charge of the local hospitals. He was then promoted to Head of Leprosy and Tuberculosis Control in the East and West Sepik Districts, and based in Maprik from 1971 to 1977. Because of his new position, he often had to travel from Maprik to the different District Hospitals in the Sepik area. It was through his work as a doctor that he would be introduced to the *haus tambaran* of Bongiora (1972) and eventually witnessed the initiation ceremonies in Sunuhu (1973).

Finally, expatriates were for the most part traders in various domains. A mercantile and shipping company like Burns Philp & Co Ltd. – established in Sydney by Robert Burns and James Philp,[56] who owned a trading company and department store in Wewak – was unavoidable for whoever wanted to venture further into the New Guinean territory, and was "legendary in the Pacific for being able to get anything, anywhere around the world" (Losche 1982a: 19). Neville and Josette Jenkins, who owned the Sepik Trading Company at Wewak, proved to be not only precious hosts

[56] For more information about Burns Philp & Co Ltd, see Foster (2012).

and friends to Alfred Bühler in the 1950s, but also crucial intermediate agents collecting on his behalf:

> We haven't gone into Maprik yet so I haven't been able to do anything about obtaining the front of a House Tambaran for you. From what I have heard it will be quite a hard job but when the time come[s] I will do my best. (MKB 8-0007: letter from N. Jenkins to Bühler, 28 March 1957)

> If you should have the opportunity to buy front parts of a whole one of houses tambaran, paintings and big carvings, as well as other big carvings from Maprik preferably old ones I should thank you very much to get them for me. I am quite prepared to cover whatever you would charge me for them. (MKB 8-0007: letter from Bühler to N. Jenkins, 9 January 1958)

In Maprik, Ron and Denise Smallwood also played a decisive role in the 1980 British Museum collecting enterprise. Manager of the Sepik Maira Motors Company, a part of the Sepik Producers Cooperative Association, they became invaluable mediators, facilitating the trip of Dorota Starzecka and David John Lee:

> Ron Smallwood proved to be an inexhaustible source of help and a very good friend. He gave us a base in Maprik (a house for various visiting SPCA officials where we were allowed to stay when not leaving to Sarikim), transport whenever required, and he produced timber and labour for making crates, and packing materials. (BM Archives Oc1980,11: letter from Starzecka to Mc Guigan, 27 July 1981)

This list of expatriates who actively contributed to the smooth running of collecting expeditions (or even collected on behalf of museum institutions) is by no means exhaustive, but it already highlights the network and diversity of people who took part – one way or another – in these collecting endeavours, and without whom the latter would never have succeeded.

## 5. Art dealers

The Abelam region has been the setting for increasing collecting activity from the mid-1950s, both by museums and private collectors/arts dealers. This intensified presence meant that in the field, most museum collectors worked alongside art dealers and developed a rather ambiguous relationship with them, both benefiting from their services while competing with them and deploring their sometimes dubious methods and somewhat overwhelming presence:

> Yes, New Guinea is getting more and more in the spotlight of interest. I notice that even here in Ulupu, where now more and more people get lost to squeeze me out. At least you are partly guilty of the mention in the books, and Mr. R. Gardi of course, too. (MKB 8-0007: letter from Knorr to Bühler, 6 October 1957, translated from German)

Interestingly, most museum collectors were buying objects from private dealers in order to complete their collections, as they sometimes seemed to be the only providers of certain types of artefacts, in particular large ancestral carvings. In this regard, it seems that in the Maprik region two dealers mainly operated: Bruce Lawes and Emil Storrer.

Lawes was a constructor based in Wewak who therefore owned trucks, necessary to move large carvings or *haus tambaran* façades (Christian Kaufmann, personal communication, 26 March 2019). He soon developed a strong interest for art dealing, and not only worked with Forge (MKB 8-0007), but also with Groenevelt:

> Mr. Bühler was of the opinion that your dealer [Bruce Lawes] in Maprik had such sculptures! Here is another good opportunity for you. You did not mention such carvings at the time of your visit, but Mr. Bühler seems to know that the person concerned must have them. In any case, you must not lose sight of this dealer or trader [...]. That can be of great use to us. But ah, you know that by the way! (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 2 February 1960, translated from Dutch)

Lawes also seemed to employ quite intervening methods, not hesitating to repaint artefacts[57] in order to make them look more appealing for the market:

> You will remember that at the end of your previous journey, you photographed seven statues and a large mask. Several of those figures had no more colours, at least to judge by

[57] The practice of repainting or restoring artefacts appears to have been practiced following art dealers' and some museum curators' requests alike, although for differing reasons, but in both cases to conform to a relatively specific idea of what Abelam artefacts should look like, as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

> the photo, and I am convinced that the photo, which was very sharp, did not lie. As I wrote to you at the time, the carvings were from the South, and we had a need for such sculptures. [...] You wrote to me that people from Yama had painted several statues in the original colours [...]. Our friend Bruce Lowes [sic] has now hired a number of men to give the carvings a nice colour, but these men have painted the figures that were eligible for it in the style of the North!! [...] I showed Forge the picture, and he was aware of the practices of our friend Bruce Lowes [sic]. [...] Forge advised me, if I felt, to wash the dyes again. (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 16 August 1960, translated from Dutch)

Another art dealer was Emil Storrer from Zurich, who visited Maprik and the Sepik regions in 1958, and who later sold an Abelam *haus tambaran* façade to the Museum Rietberg in Zurich (Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993: 125). Bühler had warned Forge against his somehow dubious methods, preventing him from any further partnership that Storrer had solicited (MKB 8-0007: letter from Bühler to Forge, 19 November 1958).

The often-high prices that these dealers were asking for the objects they were (re)selling, their interest in business rather than a scientific approach, as well as their sometimes unethical practices made them often unreliable intermediates, although still somewhat sought-after and sometimes appreciated by museum collectors as working partners. But as summarised by William Dargie a decade later, "'Business masters', as they call the traders in artefacts, seem to be hated all down the Sepik" (NGA FD Dargie, 13 February 1969: 55).

# II. Evolution and roles of infrastructures, cultural policies and institutions in Papua New Guinea

After shedding light on a number of 'go-between' or mediators who contributed significantly to the collecting endeavours organised in the Abelam region during the second half of the 20th century, the second part of this chapter proposes to place these actors back into the practical and legal frameworks within which they operated. Collecting was indeed facilitated (but also sometimes refrained) by specific infrastructures, progressively developed in the Abelam region after the Second World War, but also by local cultural policies and institutions which need to be taken into consideration in order to better understand what was eventually collected (or not), where, how and under what circumstances.

## 1. Infrastructures in the Abelam region

> Ahead stretches the road which has cut down journeys that used to take days and weeks to a matter of a few hours. This road has made the exotic and unknown reachable and everyday. (Losche 1982a: 24).

With these words, the anthropologist Diane Losche pointed out the core importance of infrastructures and transport as essential means and agents in the collecting process. Indeed, as has already been hinted at, a number of practical aspects, such as transport, the presence (or absence) of roads and airfields, as well as access to packing and storage facilities, are factors which need to be taken into account in order to understand why the Abelam region has been the scene of such intense collecting activity. By having a closer look at these parameters, no matter how trivial they may appear in the first place, we can also try to explain why certain specific locations have been the common field of collecting endeavours for several museums.

Since the post-war period, it seems that the Abelam area was on average rather accessible, however with important seasonal variations between the dry (May to October) and wet (November to April) seasons, and also with sub-district disparities. As pointed out by the Patrol Officer K.A. Brown, "the months of June, July, August and possibly September are the best months to walk through the area as tracks are dry and rivers easy to forde" (PRM 7/54-55, June 1955: 2). These weather conditions might

explain the seasonality of collecting enterprises, which happened in most cases during the dry season.

## Transportation: roads, footpaths, rivers and airstrips

Prior to the Second World War, there had been little attempt to develop a road system in the Abelam region (Losche 1982a: 33), and it is only after the war that the construction of roads became a priority (PRM 3/54-55). Progressively, good access to the area was afforded by a network of main and subsidiary roads. Three major roads radiate from Maprik station: Maprik-Marui, Maprik-Dreikikir and Maprik-Yangoru-Wewak. All these roads were adapted for four-wheel drive, but were very muddy during the wet season due to the clayey nature of the soil and the steep gradients in this hilly region **(Fig. 74)**. The road linking Maprik to Wewak was the privileged link with the District Office and constituted the closest access to the sea and harbour for overseas shipping. Other important roads around Maprik also included the Maprik-Ilahita, Maprik-Wingei-Yangoru and Maprik-Pagwi roads, the latter being the main road to the Sepik river. Many subsidiary roads were branching off to the main villages, while new settlements were often built alongside these main roads. The Sepik Highway, 120 miles long and linking Wewak to Dreikikir, was completed in 1972 **(Maps 3 and 4)**. The importance of these roads represented more than a guarantee of access to remote villages: it meant access to schools and medical infrastructures, but first and foremost a network where cash crops (especially coffee and rice) could flow from the villages to the milling centre at the agricultural station in Bainyik, and a link with bigger towns. As Diane Losche eloquently recalls, the Sepik Highway was (and still is):

> A dirt and rock surfaced road, it cuts a brown, diagonal scar through the province. Its hazards, failures and problems are legendary to those who use it. It floods in the rains, raises suffocating dust when dry, its rough surface of rocks destroys cars, its shoulders erode, it has made the people whose villages it passes through permanently terrified that their children, pigs, dogs, and chickens will be run down. Yet its achievement is immense, whether one gauges its effects to be that of bringing realistic hopes or final havoc to the life of the village. (Losche 1982a: 17)

Many patrol reports in the Maprik area detail the state of the roads, which, although not even from one census division to the other, proved to be comparatively well-developed. Indeed, from 1957 it seemed to be possible to reach every village within three hours by vehicle and foot from Maprik (PRM 6/56-57). The construction and maintenance of roads in relation to economic development also benefited other

activities, for instance those of missionaries, who could visit villages more easily (MKB 8-0007: letter from Knorr to Bühler, 6 October 1957), and by extension facilitated the work of collectors.

Alongside the main roads, most villages were (and still are) linked to one another by an intricate network of native foot paths, which, for most of them, were well-maintained.[58] The Abelam country is undulating, which makes walking a primary mode of transport. From the mid-1950s to Papua New Guinea Independence, Patrol Officers made sure that the tracks were kept in good order, drained and cleared to the regulation width by the population throughout the Maprik Sub-District.

The development of roads also allowed the development of public transports, commonly known as PMVs (Public/Passenger Motor Vehicles). The first mention of PMVs in patrol reports for the Maprik region dates back to March 1971 (PRM 5/70-71). Although their arrival might be anterior, it seems that their number increased from the 1970s onwards, facilitating the transportation of people and cargo for a small fee, in particular to get to the big markets in Maprik or even Wewak. The acquisition of such motor vehicles also constituted a status symbol, a form of prestige: as one village would buy a vehicle so would the neighbouring one in order to equate.

Another major characteristic of the Abelam territory is that although it is crossed by a number of rivers (Amuk, Screw, Ninab, Nanu, Amogu, Parchee and their tributaries), they cannot be navigated as they are too shallow (even for canoes) with stone beds. Most of these rivers are fordable but not always during the wet season when they often flood, and bridges were relatively rare. People often had to cross rivers to reach the main road, as was the case for collectors who sometimes had to carry their acquisitions across the water, making the collecting enterprise quite hazardous in such instances **(Fig. 75)**.

In the Wosera area, the Nanu, Amuk and Amogu rivers were rendering the road system unusable when in flood. In February 1969 Dargie faced the consequences of such flash floods: in his field diary, he wrote on 11 February 1969 that he had attempted to reach the Wosera region from Maprik, but his trip was prevented by the flood occasioned by the overnight heavy rain (NGA FD Dargie, 11 February 1969: 48).

[58] The significance of these foot tracks is beyond the scope of this study, but nonetheless needs to be pointed out (see Coupaye 2013: 172-174).

Heavy rains and their consequences on access and transport were also commented on by Groenevelt:

> Already two days in Maprik, and can intone the eternal lamentation of the last year: "Rain, rain, rain". It is simply unbelievable. [...] Making trips is excluded, and the airport is closed since yesterday afternoon. (SR 1407_150: letter from Groenevelt to Jansen, 1 June 1961, translated from Dutch)

The Abelam region was indeed also served by a number of airfields, the first one being built in 1938 in Maprik (Losche 1982a: 33), which was suitable for aircrafts up to Junkers. Other principal airfields in the region were located at Hayfield, which was upgraded in 1968 as an all-weather airstrip (thus leading to the closure of Maprik airfield in 1969) and Yamil (only for Cessna) (PRM 6/56-57). The development of airstrips was particularly appreciated by the expatriates working in the region, as highlighted by Gardi:

> For the administrator, the colonist and the missionary living in the bush the aeroplane is a tremendous boon; it has simplified life and made it more enjoyable, for twice a week it brings mail, modern medicines and fresh provisions. It provides an opportunity to evacuate white and coloured patients straight to hospital. True, these people often still live in oppressive loneliness, but this is greatly relieved by this speedy link with civilization. (Gardi 1960: 27)

Most mission stations also possessed a small airfield which could accommodate smaller planes. Planes were often used by collectors in order to ship their acquisitions to bigger centres such as Wewak. Interestingly, it seems that it was sometimes easier to travel by plane than by car in the Abelam territory, especially when it was a matter of shipping large quantities of collected material. Planes, apart from the ones delivering mail, were not operating according to a fixed schedule, but could be hired when convenient (Gardi 1960: 28, 30).

## Accommodation facilities

The success of the many collecting endeavours in the Abelam region also relied on the availability of accommodation. One of the main facilities were the rest houses which had been built in almost every village for Patrol Officers:

> we would install ourselves in the rest-house which in every village is at the disposal of Europeans. It is always a simple hut, built in the same way and with the same materials as those of the natives. Since we never arrived unexpectedly in a village – the drums had

> announced the news hours before – our quarters were usually more or less clean; the dogs and pigs had been driven out, and often kindling wood had been laid in beforehand. (Gardi 1960: 37)

The latter were regularly inspected by Patrol Officers during their visits, making sure they were kept in a good state. Abelam and Wosera villages being situated fairly close to one another (sometimes less than an hour's walk), rest houses were not always needed in every village, as Patrol Officers or visitors could settle in one village and then visit the others from their 'headquarters' (PRM 1/56-57; PRM 2/56-57). Although they could vary slightly, most rest houses would contain one or two bedrooms, a camp-shower recess, a covered veranda and a small separate hut for cooking (PRM 8/72-73). Therefore, Alfred Bühler and René Gardi were able to stay at the rest house in Numbungai in 1955-56 **(Fig. 76)**, while Gerd Koch mentions he was able to use the rest house for Patrol Officers in Kalabu in 1966 (Koch 2003: 43).

Apart from these lodgings in villages, the Maprik Hotel could also accommodate up to twelve people (PRM 1/72-73) and acted as a form of entry point to the Abelam territory for many visitors and collectors. Many of them were also welcomed by expatriates and by Abelam people who would host them in their houses, as was, for example, the case with Peter Yipime of Apangai and his wife Nimbeso who hosted Mc Guigan and Smidt in 1987. This intricate network of intermediary actors and their help in facilitating accommodation (often as well as transport) also greatly contributed to the smooth proceedings of the collecting trips. Anthropologists or expatriates who were collecting for museum institutions and who stayed for longer periods in the Abelam (especially Anthony Forge, Fred Gerrits or Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin) had built a house in the village where they were based.

## Packing, storing and shipping

Once artefacts had been acquired, they needed to be packed and shipped back to the museums in Europe, in Australia or in Port-Moresby. The first step was the packing of objects, sometimes making do with what was available locally (Bühler was for example wrapping the more fragile artefacts in palm leaves in order to protect them, see **Fig. 77**). The collectors then commissioned crates (mission stations often provided the necessary wood) or built crates themselves which were then transported by truck or by plane to Maprik and/or to Wewak, where they would be stored while waiting for overseas shipping **(Fig. 78)**. As Gerrits recalls:

> We got timber from a sawmill in Wewak and then I made the boxes underneath our house and packed them. Then we sent them to Wewak by truck, and then by ship to Moresby and then straight to Holland. It was not cheap. We were in Maprik for five years between 1972 and 1977, and during that time the initiation chambers were being dismantled so we started to send the objects progressively. (Interview with Fred Gerrits, 29 March 2019)

The packing and shipping of the assembled material sometimes took up to several months, and in some cases years, the collectors having to finalise the shipping of artefacts during a later trip. As explained by Bühler in 1959:

> As much as I regret the need to break off so early with my collecting activity, on the other hand, the remaining two months will be needed to pack the collection and to do all the necessary formalities. [...] One must wait for days to get wood for crates, as long as an official takes the trouble to control the collections to be packaged. Packing has to be done outdoors, which is not very comfortable with the frequent rains and especially with regard to collectibles. Fortunately, it has gone away without major damage. In addition to my own collection, I will also have to pack a large collection, which is located in Maprik. It was created on my behalf by Mr Forge. But he could not find any wood for crates. Now I have it sent by plane to this mountain station, so I can then go through the work immediately. (MKB 8-0007: Bühler quoted in letter from Hindermann to the members of the Kommission des Museums für Völkerkunde und Schweizerisches Museums für Volkskunde, 3 September 1959, translated from German)

In February 1969, Dargie had left Michael Cockburn, then Assistant District Commissioner at Maprik, in charge of the packing and storing of the collected artefacts before arranging shipping back to Australia. However, six months later, the collection had still not been sent, and Dargie was worried that the material would deteriorate quickly if not stored in appropriate conditions (NGA 69/2739: letter from Dargie to the ADC Maprik, 31 August 1969). Local storage facilities were indeed not always adapted for the conservation of artefacts, often being warehouses used for other economic activities (for instance for coffee production, belonging to the Sepik Producers Cooperative Association). During later collecting trips, museum professionals, especially conservators (notably David John Lee for the Museum of Mankind and Sue Walton for the Australian Museum), took part in the enterprise, to ensure that the packing of objects was done in the best conditions possible, also sometimes treating artefacts with chemicals (insecticides and fungicides) before being shipped (Lee 1986; BM Archives Oc1980,11: 'Report on the Collecting Visit to the Wosera-Abelam of Sarikim Village and a Note on Conservation Requirements'; AMS 235/1334: 'Abelam Field Trip Report', 1980: 14-15). Concerning the collection acquired in Sarikim for the Museum of Mankind, Lee explained **(Figs. 79 and 80)**:

> The collection was moved by truck from the village to a nearby town and prepared for packing. The first task was to sort the collection making sure that all the carvings had arrived safely. The figures were then lined up along the wall of the storage area, and put into suitable groups for packing. It was important at this stage to dry out the carvings as much as possible and standing them on the concrete base of the storage area helped with this drying process. The additional use of a large electric fan to keep the air constantly moving also proved very useful. The carvings and other ethnographic specimens were sprayed with the fungicide ortho-phenylphenol, to prevent mould growth. All carvings, panels and the interiors of packing cases were sprayed with an insecticide aerosol spray containing pyrethrum. The packing cases were made by two local carpenters who constructed sixteen of them in ten days. [...] The sea voyage to the United Kingdom took two months. (Lee 1986: 24-25)

Further cleaning and conservation treatments (especially consolidation of the wood and of pigments) were carried out on the objects upon arrival at the museum storage (Lee 1986: 25-27).

## 2. From the Papuan Antiquities Ordinance to the Cultural Development Programme

Alongside the development of these practical infrastructures, important changes in the Papuan and New Guinean cultural legislation and institutions took place throughout the 20th century, which need to be acknowledged as an essential and influential backdrop in the collecting processes.

### From Antiquities to National Cultural Property: change of paradigm

Before and after Independence, significant legislation has progressively been implemented by the government in order to ascertain "the importance of restricting the acquisition, ownership and movement of [...] certain categories of objects thought to be of importance to a wider segment of people than those individuals or groups who owned or controlled them" (Busse 2013: 83).

In 1913, the Papuan Antiquities Ordinance of the British Territory of Papua was drafted by J.H.P. Murray, then Lieutenant Governor and Administrator of British Papua (Eoe 1990: 58). Under the term "Papuan Antiquities" were included "Papuan relics" and:

> such articles manufactured by Papuan tools and according to Papuan methods and such other articles or things of historical or scientific value or interest and relating to Papua as may be prescribed by regulation but does not include any botanical or mineral collection or specimen (Papuan Antiquities Ordinance 1913-1940, § 2, quoted in Busse 2013: 84).

The Ordinance (§ 4) also stated that it was against the law to remove from the Territory any "Papuan Antiquities" without first offering for sale the equivalent to some appointed person for the benefit of the Territory. It was the duty of European constables and custom officers to seize any objects classified as "Papuan Antiquities" which were attempted to be removed from the Territory (§ 5).

In 1922, the New Guinea Antiquities Ordinance came into effect to regulate the export of cultural material in the Mandated Territory of New Guinea (Moutu 2011: 4). Its content was almost identical to the Papuan Antiquities Ordinance, defining "New Guinea Antiquities" as:

> New Guinea relics and curios and articles of ethnological and anthropological interest or value, and articles manufactured by the natives with New Guinea made tools and according to New Guinea methods, and such other articles or things of historical or scientific value or interest and relating to New Guinea as may be prescribed. (Craig 1992: 1529)

It was amended in 1936 in order to delegate authority to act under the Ordinance to District Officers, in order to reduce the delays in obtaining export permits (Busse 2013: 87). In 1953, following the administrative amalgamation of the two territories, the Antiquities Ordinance was enacted by the Administrator Sir Donald Cleland, which simply incorporated the provisions of the two Ordinances (Smidt 1977: 227; Eoe and Swadling 1991: 20).

The term "antiquities" indicated an evolutionary paradigm, implying the remoteness in time or rather technology of the people creating such artefacts, although these objects might have been contemporary in their creation to the collecting activities of which they were the purpose. To justify the protection of typologies of artefacts, the emphasis was placed on their manufacture, rather than on their significance for the people of Papua and New Guinea. The latter were not consulted in order to establish what should be considered for protection or not (Busse 2013: 84-85).

In 1965, the National Cultural Property (Preservation) Ordinance was passed by the House of Assembly. It became the National Cultural Property (Preservation) Act after Independence, supported by Michael Somare and the Pangu Party (Edwards and

Stewart 1980: 175-183; Somare 1975: 72). The Preamble of the Act stated that it aimed at the preservation and protection of "objects of cultural or historical importance to Papua New Guinea" (Busse 2013: 82). "National Cultural Property" was defined as:

> any property, movable or immovable, of particular importance to the cultural heritage of the country, and in particular (but without limiting the generality of the foregoing) includes any object, natural or artificial, used for, or made or adapted for use for, any purpose connected with the traditional cultural life of any of the peoples of the country, past or present. (National Cultural Property (Preservation) Act I.1, quoted in Busse 2013: 88)

It was the National Museum and Art Gallery's task to implement the Act to make sure Papua New Guinea's heritage was protected. Specific objects could then be declared "Proclaimed National Cultural Property", whose acquisition and transfer were limited and highly controlled. Other restrictions concerned specific typologies of objects, such as archaeological and human remains, artefacts carved in stone and objects playing an essential role in the ceremonial life of indigenous people, providing they had been made before 31 December 1960. Exemptions concerned objects recently made for sale (Smidt 1977: 234-35; Eoe 1990: 599).

Interestingly, the move from the "Antiquities" definition to the "National Cultural Property" one implied a change of paradigm. As early as 1966, the Patrol Officer K.N.J. Allen reported that:

> In observance of a letter received by the council from the Sub-District Office people of various villages were invited to declare any artefacts to which stories were attached and therefore had some significance to the villages to which they belonged. In due course four villages brought forward articles that played an important part in the well being of the villages. A report with the relevant information on each has been forwarded to the Sub-District Office. These articles even though not looking very significant are very significant to the people to whom they belong. And for this reason they have been encouraged to keep the articles in their villages and not to sell or surrender them to the common artefacts hunter. This suggestion was very well received by all those concerned. (PRM 3/66-67, October - November 1966: n.p.)

The legislation progressively evolved towards the protection of objects because they were important to Papua New Guineans' own understandings of their cultures and their past, rather than according to Europeans' criteria (Busse 2013: 88).

## Export permits

Since the 1913 and 1922 Papuan and New Guinea Antiquities Ordinances, the export of "antiquities" was prohibited without the written permission of the Commissioner or the Administrator. In 1953, the Antiquities Ordinance specified that the Administrator could delegate his power to provide export licences to any other official, especially District Commissioners. For example, in 1963, Charles Julius, the Anthropologist of the Department of Native Affairs, himself a delegate of the Administrator of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, granted permission to the Customs and Forwarding Agent M.P. Bohman to export the collection Forge had assembled on behalf of the Basel museum **(Figs. 81 and 82)**.

From 1965, the Trustees of the PNG Public Museum and Art Gallery were empowered to provide written approval for the export of any national cultural property. They could also delegate it to any designated person. In 1970, an amendment provided for the licencing of collectors and dealers of artefacts (not restricted ones): this aimed to allow museum collectors in particular to assemble collections for their respective institutions, but also to facilitate the marketing of artefacts made for sale (Craig 1992: 1531, 1551). In 1980, a specific unit was created as part of the Anthropology Department of the National Museum in order to conduct further inspection in the field (Eoe 1990: 600). According to Soroi Marepo Eoe, five main criteria were considered when it came to evaluating whether an artefact could be exported: Was the object rare? Was it likely to become rare in the near future? Was this type of object already represented in the collections of the PNG National Museum? Was the object of strong aesthetic value? Was it of significance to local people (Eoe 1990: 599)? Throughout the second half of the 20$^{th}$ century, museum collectors complained about the increasing difficulty in exporting artefacts. In 1969, William Dargie wrote that "as the Trustees attitudes have hardened considerably in recent months, there is every likelihood that they will exercise their pre-emptive right to have first choice of anything good" (NGA FD Dargie, 8 September 1969: 112-113).

Nonetheless, the efficiency of this legislation sometimes proved limited, especially so as the Museum staff and Customs Officers in charge of inspecting what required export permits (often only from photographs of objects) were insufficient to cope with the task (Craig 1992: 1552). The application of the Ordinance/Act seemed however to be more or less flexible, depending on who was the collector, and the outcome or purpose of the collecting expedition. The network of the collector (especially among

officials and higher authorities of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea) also seemed to play an important part in the obtaining of the export licence. As the District Commissioner David Marsh wrote to Alfred Bühler in 1958:

> I do not think you will have any trouble exporting the antiquities. The Ordinance has not changed & the Administration holds both you & your methods in high regard. I would write to Native Affairs HQ if I were you & perhaps send the Director (now Mr Roberts) a further complementary copy of your Sepik Books. (MKB 8-0007: letter from Marsh to Bühler, 16 September 1958)

> I do not think you need have any fears about any serious restriction on what you can collect in the way of specimens. You are recognised as a highly reputable person and the ordinance is only there to curb people who are not. (MKB 8-0007: letter from Marsh to Bühler, 5 December 1958)

Moreover, the high value of Papua New Guinea artefacts on the international market also implied that art dealers and collectors were sometimes willing to take significant risks to illegally remove the artefacts from the country (Busse 2013: 92).

## The Cultural Development Programme

In 1973, the Australian Government granted AUD 5 million, allowing for the creation of the Cultural Development Programme. This grant, to be matched by an equal amount provided by the Papua New Guinea Government in the following years, had to be spent over five years in order to promote cultural development at a national but also at regional and local levels. It aimed to help the development of already settled cultural institutions and/or their establishment, in particular the National Museum and Art Gallery in Port Moresby, the National Arts School and the Institute of PNG Studies. The implementation of local and regional cultural centres and the stimulation of cultural activities at the village level were also at the core of the programme (Smidt 1977: 227-228; Somare 1975: 145-146).

As part of the Cultural Development Programme the National Cultural Council was created in 1973-74, which was established to organise and co-ordinate cultural programmes and institutions throughout Papua New Guinea, while providing financial assistance to such activities (Eoe and Swadling 1991: 37-38). As a policy-making body, its main functions were:

> to formulate and implement a program for the preservation and development of all aspects of culture and the arts in Papua New Guinea; [...] to establish national, provincial and local

> cultural institutions and cultural centres; [...] to promote and encourage the development and preservation of national and local culture; [...] to promote the appreciation, understanding and enjoyment of the arts; [...] to provide and encourage the provision of opportunities for persons to practise the arts; [...] to promote the knowledge and appreciation of Papua New Guinean culture and arts by persons in other countries. (Wari 1980: 111)

Along with other important cultural institutions, and by creating an awareness of, and pride in, their cultural heritage, the main objective of the National Cultural Council was consequently to support the emergence of a Papua New Guinean identity. As pointed out by Michael Somare, this understanding of the values and multiplicity of Papua New Guinea's cultural heritage was at the core of nation building and national unity (Somare 1975: 14). Collecting practices, especially from the early 1970s onwards, were thus understood in another light, also feeding into the creation of a new nation. In this regard, and as part of the Cultural Development Programme, the National Museum and Art Gallery alongside local cultural centres played a crucial role in the recognition of PNG cultural heritage.

## 3. Focus on two PNG cultural institutions: the Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery and the Maprik Cultural Centre

### History and roles of the National Museum and Art Gallery[59]

In 1954 the Papua New Guinea Public Museum and Art Gallery Ordinance was acted, under which the Papua New Guinea Public Museum and Art Gallery was established in Port Moresby (Smidt 1977: 227; Busse 2010: 7). The Ordinance also led to the establishment of a Board of Trustees, in charge of controlling the Public Museum and of specifying its policies, which appointed the Government Anthropologist, Charles Julius, as Curator of the Museum (Moutu 2011: 5). In 1959, Sir Alan Mann (Chief Justice of the Territory) became President of the Trustees, a position that he held until his death in 1970 (Busse 2010: 7). In 1960, the Public Museum (alongside the Public Archives) moved to the basement of an old hospital building, which was then hosting the Old House of Assembly (Beier 1969: 478). As Andrew Moutu eloquently remarked:

[59] For further details about the history of the Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery, see Craig 2010 (especially chapters 2, 3 and 4) and Eoe and Swadling 1991: 19-29.

> one could say that if modern Papua New Guinea was founded on ancestral wisdom as the *Constitution* asserts in its preamble, then the imagery of this ideological foundation is nowhere more visually expressed than in the Old House of Assembly. Ancestral wisdom, objectified in the form of museum collections, was neither rejected as archaic nor relegated to the basement of our memories but rather provided the ideological foundations for the emerging Papua New Guinean nation-state. (Moutu 2011: 5-6)

In 1969, Michael Somare was appointed Chairman of the Museum Board of Trustees (Somare 1975: 30), before he became its President in 1972, after John S. Womersley, who had served as Acting President for the Board of Trustees since Alan Mann's death.

However, due to a lack of funding, facilities and professional staff, no real professional development of the Museum took place until 1972 when the Papua New Guinea Government took office and subsequently doubled the budget allocated to the Museum (Smidt 1977: 228). That same year, Dirk Smidt was appointed first Director of the Museum, replacing Roy Mackay, and in 1973, the Cultural Development Programme largely contributed to the development of the Museum, especially with the planning of the construction of the new (and present) dedicated museum building at Waigani, designed by the architect Martin Fowler **(Fig. 83)**. The construction took place from 1975 to 1977 and the National Museum and Art Gallery was inaugurated on 27 June 1977. In 1975, Geoffrey Mosuwadoga became in the first Papua New Guinean Director of the Museum (Moutu 2011: 5). The idea was that progressively the expatriate staff would be replaced by trained Papua New Guineans. In 1983, the Trustees were abolished, and since then, the National Museum has been the responsibility of different departments, among others the National Cultural Council and the Department of Culture and Tourism (Eoe and Swadling 1991: 21). In 1988, Soroi Marepo Eoe, an anthropologist who graduated from the University of Papua New Guinea, succeeded Geoffrey Mosuwadoga as Museum Director.

As evidenced through this brief overview of the National Museum and Art Gallery's history, its roles and rationale have evolved through time, from its creation in the mid-1950s to post-Independence. From a colonial institution, which was mostly based on European conceptions and ideas of what a museum is, it progressively incorporated local values and concepts in order to become a Papua New Guinean institution (Busse 2010: 5).

Echoing the salvage paradigm which justified (in part) many collecting enterprises in Papua New Guinea,[60] the first purpose of the National Museum and Art Gallery was to preserve artefacts from cultures the Australian colonial authorities believed were disappearing (Busse 2010: 5). However, with the progressive self-government and achieved Independence, the museum incorporated other missions which were more targeted towards the documentation and protection of cultural heritage, with the prospect of supporting contemporary creation. As listed by Dirk Smidt in 1977, the roles of the National Museum were to preserve the cultural heritage of the people of Papua New Guinea (as had been the case with the acquisition in 1974 of the contents of Sunuhu *haus tambaran*), to guarantee adequate facilities for both researchers and the audience, to make sure that the museum was an institution dedicated to all Papua New Guinea language groups both in their diversity and unity as a nation, and to preserve past cultural heritage in order to inspire future generations and artistic creation (Smidt 1977: 237). This shift testified to the greater appreciation of the National Museum as the promoter of Papua New Guinea's national identity while fostering a sense of unity as a nation, being even compared to "the glue that holds people and varying interests together for the common good" by its former Director, Soroi Marepo Eoe (Eoe 2010: 20).

As previously mentioned, another essential responsibility of the National Museum was to enforce Papua New Guinea's cultural heritage legislation, in particular the National Cultural Property (Preservation) Ordinance of 1965. The objects which had been declared national cultural property could not be sold, bought or moved without the written consent of the Board of Trustees of the Museum. The museum was therefore entitled to inspect and report on the condition of these artefacts, sometimes still kept in the villages from where they originated. The museum team was trying to assist the villagers in their preservation of such artefacts, despite the great monetary pressures and temptation to sell to art dealers or other collectors (Smidt 1977: 236). The collaboration with Papua New Guinea and foreign Customs aimed to facilitate such tasks, although the efficiency of the legislation and of its application did not always prove a success (Busse 2010: 16-17).

The National Museum and Art Gallery therefore acted as the ultimate gatekeeper in establishing what could be exported or what was considered too culturally valuable

[60] The different motivations which justified collecting endeavours in the Abelam region will be discussed in Chapter 3.

and therefore had to be retained by the museum as exceptional Papua New Guinea cultural heritage. The negotiations that took place for the export of the Sarikim *haus tambaran* contents to be acquired by the Museum of Mankind are quite illuminating in that regard. At first, Mc Guigan, who had contacted the Museum of Mankind about the possibility to acquire such an assemblage, and who acted as the primary mediator in the negotiations, had obtained the following approval from the PNG NMAG:

> The National Museum will issue to an approved Museum an Export Permit for all the Saragum [Sarikim] carvings made for the recent initiation. If there should be any older carvings associated with this ceremony which would also be available individual consideration will have to be given. The Museum did acquire certain old pieces which were used in the Sunuhu initiation ceremony along with the newly made paintings and carvings. These were of exceptional importance and if pieces of like cultural importance were available at Saragum the National Museum would wish to retain them. Thank you for your continued interest in the people of the Sepik and if the Museum can be of further assistance in the placing of the Saragum initiation figures in another Museum please feel free to request our aid. (BM Archives Oc1980,11: letter from Geoffrey Mosuwadoga, Director of the PNG NMAG to Mc Guigan, 3 October 1977)

However, failing to receive confirmation of the state of the carvings and paintings in Sarikim (which had been created in 1974) and the delay in obtaining the sought-after export permit, Starzecka wrote to Mosuwadoga in 1980 to clarify what the NMAG's position was on the acquisition of such a collection:

> We heard about the house for the first time from Mr Noel Mc Guigan from Ireland who wrote to us in June 1977, offering the house and its contents for sale on behalf of the Wosera people. The Trustees of the British Museum authorised the purchase, on condition that the collection was granted an export permit, and that it could be established by a responsible body in Papua New Guinea and that the collection was intact and available. Mr Mc Guigan assured us that there would be no difficulty about obtaining an export permit, and he sent us a copy of your letter, in which you stated that an export permit will be issued to an approved museum for all the Saragum carvings made for the recent initiation [...]. We wrote then to the National Museum asking for help in establishing the whereabouts and the condition of the collection. When it turned out that the Museum could not spare its staff's time to do so, we approached the National Cultural Council with this request. As a result, Ms Helen Dennett agreed to survey the collection for us. You may recall that when you were in London in November, I discussed it with *you* and you seemed quite satisfied about the arrangements and did not forsee [sic] any problems about issuing the export permit. To my surprise, Ms Dennett writes now that after having surveyed the collection *in situ*, she submitted her report on the Sarikim *haus tambaran* to the National Cultural Council, and on the strength of her report the Council decided that the house and its

> contents should be purchased by the Papua New Guinea Government. She writes also that in view of this decision, she asked the Museum to take over the responsibility for explaining to us the reasons for it. Ms Dennett emphasises that her letter is informal as she is in no position to speak in an official capacity about this matter. We have not received any letter from the Museum and to put it quite plainly, we do not know where we are. I will be most grateful if you could clarify the situation. We have conducted protracted negotiations about the purchase of this *haus tambaran*, all with the full knowledge of the National Museum and the National Cultural Council, and we would be bitterly disappointed if we were now disbarred from concluding the purchase. I anxiously await your reply. (BM Archives Oc1980,11: letter from Starzecka to Mosuwadoga, 1 February 1980, original emphasis)

The PNG NMAG eventually approved the exportation of the Sarikim collection in a letter from Mosuwadoga dated 5 March 1980, allowing Starzecka and Lee to collect the assemblage during their trip from 5 August to 7 September 1980.

Alongside these gatekeeping and broad preservation roles, it seems that the National Museum also contributed to the assemblage of other museum collections. As can be inferred from Dargie's field diary, as well as from some letters he exchanged with various actors while being in Papua New Guinea at the end of the 1960s and at the beginning of the 1970s, the National Museum sometimes sold artefacts from its collections to other institutions, in particular because of its lack of adequate storage and exhibition space, before being hosted in its dedicated building in Waigani. In some cases, it was also acting as a mediating agent between sellers and other museum institutions which could be interested in the purchase of objects when the latter happened to be too expensive for its acquisition budget:

> 10.0 am. Interview with Mr Mackay, Director of the Moresby Museum. [...] Mackay is quite ready to co-operate by helping us to purchase any important pieces which may come his way but which his Museum has not the money to buy. In fact, he is intensely interested in what we are doing about Melanesian art in Canberra. [...] the Museum has only the barest facilities for displaying, storing and conserving the small collection it now owns. (NGA FD Dargie, 13 August 1969: 68-70)

> Mr. Mackay, Director of the Territory's Museum, has told me the Museum has in its possession a certain number of duplicates and that, under the powers accorded in its Ordinance, these may be sold or exchanged with other reputable institutions. (NGA 69/2739: letter from Dargie to Womersley, 31 August 1969)

As a national institution, the National Museum and Art Gallery played an essential role in shaping Abelam museum collections. It also contributed in a crucial manner

to, and was shaped by, the development of Papua New Guinea as an emergent nation, aiming "to forge a new national unity out of the multiplicity of cultures" (Somare 1975: 1).

## The Maprik Cultural Centre

Beyond the prominent position and role of the National Museum and Art Gallery, the emerging cultural policies of Papua New Guinea were expressed through several institutions, notably the development of regional and local cultural centres. The creation of cultural centres was widely promoted from 1973 onwards by the Cultural Development Programme. The main aims of such institutions were to host and preserve the "arts and crafts" locally produced in each province, district or local area. Broadly speaking, cultural centres were dedicated to "record, store or preserve local songs, music and legends. [...] To publish and provide publications of local arts and crafts. [...] To develop programmes and educate the public about local legends, arts and crafts" (Eoe and Swadling 1991: 11). Each cultural centre was supposed to assemble and display a collection of local material culture and artistic production; to provide cultural education, for instance by collaborating with local schools; to record data related to material culture, local cultural practices, and archaeological sites, to be made available through publications; to work in close collaboration with national institutions such as the National Museum and the Institute of PNG Studies, the University, the National Arts School and the National Theatre Company; and to assist in the sale and marketing of local artefacts (Eoe and Swadling 1991: 38; Crawford 1977: 47). The collections of local material which were sometimes gathered by regional or local cultural centres could also be sent (or duplicates) to the National Museum and Art Gallery in Port Moresby in order to ensure better preservation (Smidt 1977: 234).

In the Abelam region, the Maprik Cultural Centre consisted of four *haus tambarans* built according to the architectural styles of the four sub-regions: Maprik, Yangoru, Dreikikir and Wosera. The juxtaposition – or one could say the collection – of four ceremonial houses on one open ground formed a rather unusual, if not an artificial grouping,[61] allowing nonetheless for a representation of the various artistic styles of the main sub-groups of the region **(Figs. 84 to 88)**. The project was initiated in late

[61] In most cases, there would only be one *haus tambaran* overlooking the ceremonial ground in a village or hamlet.

1974 as an outgrowth of the Wewak Cultural Centre, with the help of an AUD 15,000 grant from the National Cultural Council (Beier 1991: 79). The decision to build four *haus tambarans* resulted from the collaboration of the Australian architect Chris Boylan with the chairman of the Greater Maprik Council and a committee of councillors formed from the different sub-regions. In 1983, due to mismanagement and as it had been kept unmanned, the Maprik Cultural Centre unfortunately burnt down.

* * *

Interestingly, it appears that a progressive shift in the values and roles associated with the *haus tambaran* can somehow be observed, but not necessarily in conjunction with an abandonment of initiation ceremonies (or at least a clear pattern cannot be obviously drawn). As Hauser-Schäublin reminds us, "located as they usually are at the most elevated spot in a settlement, *korambo* [*kurabu*] have always stood as a symbol of local pride and identity" (Hauser-Schäublin 2016: xii). But progressively, it seems that paralleling the political emancipation and building of the Papua and New Guinea nation, the *haus tambaran* took on a whole new set of values, becoming more than ever a form of epitome of Abelam and by extension Papua New Guinean (material) culture, not only locally in the Abelam region or from an outsider's point of view, but also at the scale of the Papua New Guinea nation. The New Parliament House's main building, formally opened in 1984, indeed echoes the architecture of Sepik ceremonial houses, and more specifically of the Maprik Abelam *haus tambaran* **(Fig. 89)**. Therefore, by choosing the *kurabu* to "symbolize the national heritage and manifest political independence" (Rosi 1991: 291), it seems that the architect Cecil Hogan, then Director of the Department of Public Works, not only chose "a form that is aesthetically powerful, but also one that the outer world associates with Papua New Guinea" (Rosi 1991: 296). The façade of the building however drew inspiration from the different provinces of Papua New Guinea, and depicts in a mosaic mural the natural and developing resources of the nation: in that way, the Parliament House uses the Abelam *haus tambaran* form as a framework for displaying new Papua New Guinean symbolism of *bung wantaim,* of 'coming together', and unity in diversity (Rosi 1991: 299-300). This apparent 'Sepik-centrism' has been criticised (Vale 1988: 142-179), pointing out that this choice was biased because of Somare's origin from and attachment to the East Sepik Province, but also because it was "the indigenous architectural form most widely known to foreigners" (Vale 1988: 162).

This use of Abelam *haus tambaran*'s distinctive features in contexts other than the building of a ceremonial house for initiation purposes could echo a form of museumification of the ceremonial house as an artefact in its own right. Such a process, operated through the interaction of a multiplicity of agencies, be they outsiders, colonial and newly independent government bodies, but also Abelam individuals, testifies to the creation of new values, associated with national and local heritage and identity building, monetisation of heritage as part of a nascent touristic industry. These new contexts for the creation of Abelam (-inspired) *haus tambarans*, be they for the Maprik Cultural Centre, National institutions or even churches, remained powerful and legitimate to the main interested parties, that is Abelam individuals.

This progressive shift in values is best exemplified with the *haus tambaran* built in Nyambikwa hamlet of Apangai in 1984 **(Fig. 43)** – the same year as the opening of the New Parliament House – which became a 'tourist attraction' after completing its ceremonial purpose before being dismantled and acquired by the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde. As noted by Mc Guigan and Smidt:

> After the ceremony was over, the owners had used the existence of the scenes displayed *in situ* as a tourist attraction, and charged a small fee, between two and five Kina, for viewing them. In the period between the conclusion and the purchase by the museum [in 1987], hundreds of tourists had viewed the collection. The impression made on the visitors can only have been most favorable. On one occasion, during Mc Guigan's 1986-87 field work, backpackers visiting Maprik asked directions to Apangai, as they had been told of the initiation display by others when in the highlands! (Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993: 121)

Abelam museum collections therefore need to be understood as the materialisation and result of the complex interplay of human and non-human (infrastructures, institutions, etc.) actors. New values were progressively incorporated locally by Abelam actors throughout the second half of the 20th century, and in particular around the time of Independence. This progressive emergence of the Papua New Guinea nation went hand in hand with the local recognition and institutionalisation of a PNG national cultural heritage, of which the Abelam *haus tambaran* became one of the most visible and easily recognisable (locally and outwardly directed) symbols, alongside other aspects of Papua New Guinea (material) cultures such as the Highlands *moka* or the mighty Sepik River. As will be detailed in Chapter 3, it seems that Abelam people were very pragmatic in incorporating these new layers of meaning, acknowledging this new (monetised) heritage value to perpetuate artistic

creation, for it to be shared with the outside world, and to be preserved in museum institutions worldwide. This interplay of factors, notably associated with the time period of the Independence of Papua New Guinea, therefore helps us get a sense not only of the reasons why collectors were so eager to acquire Abelam material and especially *haus tambaran* contents, but also why Abelam people were keen to participate in this new cultural heritage recognition.

By systematically using variations in focus, and by tracing back all the actors at play in the construction of these assemblages, we can eventually start to understand the series of nested contexts that constitute Abelam museum collections. In that way, at each level of reading, the reality appears different. Following Revel's insight, "the game [...] consists in linking these realities together in a system of interactions with multiple inputs" (Revel 1989: xxxii, translated from French). This network of interconnected actors and contexts can explain not only the way outsider collectors were able to acquire Abelam material and their motivations, but also why Abelam individuals were willing to part with artefacts and how they progressively included collecting practices into emic frameworks.

# Chapter 3

## Why collecting/selling Abelam? Focus on intricate agendas

After a focus on the myriad individuals, as well as institutions and infrastructures, involved in the creation of Abelam museum collections, this chapter aims to look into the various and intricate motivations that led these diverse actors to either want to collect Abelam material, or to sell artefacts to collectors. What were the rationales behind such exchanges, both on the part of museums and of Abelam people? It interrogates in the first place the motivations of museum collectors for acquiring tremendous quantities of Abelam artefacts, and how institutional agendas were entangled with individual interests and understandings of what 'collecting Abelam' meant. Collecting agendas were further complicated by Abelam agencies who contributed significantly to shaping what was available for acquisition. How did Abelam actors help shape the museum Abelam repertoire? How did they integrate collecting practices into emic frameworks? The second part of this chapter will address how Abelam individuals incorporated these collecting expectations within local economic and social frameworks.

# I. Why collecting Abelam? Intricacies of museum and individual collecting agendas

Before addressing the contents of Abelam museum collections, and in order to understand their constitution, it seems necessary to examine the motivations behind such collecting enterprises. Why did museum institutions decide to collect such large quantities of Abelam material? And why specifically from this region? For the different museum institutions under study, it seems that collecting in the Abelam (and by extension the Sepik) region was motivated by several interrelated reasons.

## 1. Collecting motivations

### Collecting to salvage

First, the idea that Abelam and Sepik areas were particularly rich and varied in terms of material culture, while being exposed to a supposedly increasing threat of cultural decay, was common among collectors. These views were supported by a number of actors based in the Abelam region, for example Father August Knorr in Ulupu:

> I tell you, it will not take 10 years, then it's over here with the old art. I was able to follow the decay for 9 years and in the future it will be even faster. [...] I studied the art very intensively all the year and especially in the last 2-3 years, looked at hundreds of individual motifs and studied again and again and really felt it. The vast majority of Kanaks also have no idea of the true art. [...] It really hurts in my soul that this certainly large and expressive art, completely dies out. That's why my restless worry saved all these motives! (MKB 8-0007: letter from Knorr to Bühler, 9 March 1958, translated from German)

This argument of a cultural decline was notably used to justify funding requests, often adopting a rather alarmist tone. In this regard, Alfred Bühler's correspondence is particularly revealing, especially when requesting support from possible private sponsors:

> New Guinea is especially important for our collection work. Although we have magnificent collections of this great island, there are still very painful gaps in it. According to reports I have received in recent months, it seems that in remote areas of New Guinea the culture is decaying even faster than previously thought, and on the other hand that the Australian administration in the eastern part of the island, which is of particular interest to us, is putting up stricter export regulations for ethnographic objects. As a result, it is to be feared that even in this part of the island in just a few years there will be no possibility to work

> and collect for our museum. (MKB 8-0007: letter from Bühler to possible private sponsors, 5 November 1958, translated from German)

For his 1959 expedition, Bühler relied mostly on the financial support from private sponsors, as most public subsidies had already been spent on his previous 1955-56 collecting trip. The archival record attests to the numerous demands of private sponsorship (MKB 8-0007). These requests reflect the integration of the Basel Museum für Völkerkunde within a large network of institutional and personal relationships including the principal industries in Basel and more broadly Swiss and German companies, especially pharmaceutical and chemical industries,[62] the food industry,[63] banks, and horology companies, but also the support of Globus, Basel's largest department store. In addition, Bühler did not hesitate to ask for in-kind support, for example to Knorr for food supplies and to Sandoz for medicines, as well as to Swissair for sponsorship of his first-class flight tickets (MKB 8-0007: letters from Bühler to the respective Directors of Knorr, Sandoz and Swissair, 12 December 1958). Dramatising the supposed state of cultural decline in New Guinea seemed to be a convincing argument to justify the urgency for such a collecting trip and therefore for rapidly obtaining funds. Whether Bühler truly believed in such an alarmist assessment remains unclear, but it was definitely a good argument for finding sponsors, while contributing to building a well-curated image of the heroic anthropologist-collector, as will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Such a salvage discourse was still prevalent in the following decades. In later publications about his fieldwork experiences, Gerd Koch clarified his collecting method and motivations for his 1966 trip:

> With the help of my "assistant", to whom I first explained my "project" in detail, I now make the reason for my coming clear to the old men of Kalabu: I want to get to know their way of life, their "story" and tell others about it. For this I need some of all the things they make. But they should only sell me what they can spare, which they may soon replace with their own work. Because according to the old rule I only want to collect what I can take with a clear conscience, but if necessary I also want to save visibly disappearing cultural assets. (Koch 2003: 44, translated from German)

[62] For example, Lonza, Chemischen Fabrik Schweizerhall, Buss, CIBA, Sandoz, and Hoffmann-La Roche.
[63] Knorr, Ziegelhof Bier and Warteck breweries, Max Ramp sausages.

In the same vein, the acquisition of the Lu room contents collected by Fred Gerrits in Bongiora in the 1970s was justified in those terms by F. Kußmaul, Director of the Linden-Museum:

> This circumstance and the quality of the documentation make the acquisition at least as desirable as the pieces themselves. [...] Over the years, we have been able to acquire a number of good individual pieces from there, such as the gable decoration of a men's house, which was shown for many years in our New Guinea exhibition.[64] Here is now the opportunity to acquire from the same cultural group a complete initiation inventory, and that at a very reasonable price [...]. I hardly believe that there will ever be any other chance, because the cultures of this place are now disappearing in their traditional form. The Maprik area lies in the mountainous area between the Sepik and the northeast coast of New Guinea. These two areas are excellently represented in our collections, so that one may say that there are hardly any better collections from this region. The inventory now offered would gap the bridge between the north and the south, rounding off the existing collection in an ideal way. (LM 2867/2868: letter from Kußmaul to the Kultusministerium des Landes Baden-Württemberg, 20 September 1974, translated from German)

In order to comprehend this salvage discourse, it seems that we need to go back a bit further in time, to the first collecting expeditions in the region while it was still under German control. The notions of loss and 'salvage paradigm' seem to have dominated the collecting narrative (Kuklick 2008: 53) as 'early' as the late 19th century. As highlighted by Rainer Buschmann, Adolf Bastian, who was then the Director of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, was urging his peers "to engage in 'salvage anthropology' before Melanesia suffered the same fate as the Polynesian islands". Prolonged contact with Europeans had led to "the demise of traditional Polynesian society", and Bastian was worried that Melanesia would suffer the same fate (Buschmann 2003: 233). Salvaging material culture went hand in hand with 'salvaging knowledge'.

However, while most museum institutions pleaded for collecting – objects and ethnographic data – as much as possible 'before it was too late', the vitality of Abelam culture was still acknowledged, and the argument of the cultural decline was relativised by certain actors who had been involved locally:

[64] The Linden-Museum had already acquired a façade collected by Gunthert Markert in 1962 (Heermann 1977: 117).

> We know men's houses in the Maprik area that are in good condition. We also know how difficult it is to get the most sacred ancestral statues from the tambaran house. [...] Also my conversations with Forge and with Gardi on this point leave nothing to be desired in terms of clarity. The Abelam culture is still a living culture, and damaged tambaran houses have in any case nothing to do with neglect because one would no longer be interested in one's own culture. Why would it be so difficult to get those big Tridacna rings, when the Abelam are busy getting rid of their own culture? (SR 1407_148: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 16 May 1961, translated from Dutch)

The difficulty in acquiring some artefacts, such as the Tridacna shell rings mentioned by Jansen, is a point which will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

## Collecting to compete

A second important factor justifying such undertakings is the noticeable emulation between museum institutions. Early on there was strong competition, especially between German ethnographic museums, to acquire as many artefacts from New Guinea as possible. Despite the agreed arrangement with the colonial administration that let the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde have first access to the material collected by colonial servants, missionaries or planters, before being offered to other institutions, the reality seemed more complex, and soon numerous museums entered the collecting game (Buschmann 2003: 234). This national and international competition between museums, or at least the comparison between their collections, seems to have been one of the driving forces which explain such an interest in collecting New Guinean, and in particular Abelam, material. For example, the 'rivalry' between the museums in Basel and Rotterdam, or one could say the fascination and high respect for the work of his Swiss colleagues, considered as authorities in the field, stands out in the correspondence of J. Victor Jansen of the Rotterdam Museum with Carel M.A. Groenevelt. In a letter to Groenevelt dated 25 October 1960, Jansen wrote:

> It is therefore quite possible that I will write soon that I feel that we have equalled Basel, or even already surpassed it. I am really starting to believe that that moment will indeed come. You were inclined to reproach me that we should certainly not turn the Rotterdam collection into a duplicate of Basel. Well, I made it clear that this was definitely not possible (because no two objects are exactly the same!), but that was *not* my intention either. What I personally strived for was a good *representative* collection. [...] You, Mr Groenevelt, said 'let us make the Rotterdam collection better and more interesting than

> the Basel one'! Agreed!! That is a sound principle, with which I can fully agree. (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 25 October 1960, translated from Dutch, original emphasis)

The Basel collection acted as a point of reference for many later collecting endeavours, and it seems that Bühler was often solicited for his valuable experience and suggestions (Koch 1968: 8).[65]

Most museums already held collections from New Guinea but considered that important gaps still needed to be filled in order to better represent the Abelam region. Collecting first-hand was the best way to obtain comprehensive and well-documented collections. In a letter dated 5 November 1958 to the Administrator of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea, Bühler was trying to justify his planned re-visit to New Guinea in these terms:

> it seems very important to complete the collections of our Museum as quick[ly] as possible. Big as they may be already, there are still many gaps which prevent successful comparative studies in arts and crafts. In order to fill them in we need Your Honour's consent. I must mention in this connection that of course all the collected specimens would become property of our Museum, to be used purely for scientific reasons, and not to be sold to private dealers. (MKB 8-0007: letter from Bühler to the Administrator of TPNG, 5 November 1958)

Such arguments were still going strong in the 1970s and 1980s, for example when Mc Guigan contacted the Museum of Mankind about the Sarikim *haus tambaran*'s potential acquisition:

> The purchase of this collection would have several benefits. Many museums have collections of Abelam material most of it poorly documented, much of it from uncertain locations, only rare pieces fully documented, but all totally out of context from the ceremony it would be used in. The carvings and paintings from this scene are fully documented. Each carver is named, each motive explained in relation to the culture, etc. The ceremony is fully documented and much of the Abelam ceremonial and ritual was observed in relation to the ceremony and recorded. [...] Another consideration to be taken into account is that most art work available for study from the Abelam originates from the Maprik Abelam that is the area north west of the administration centre of this district. (Basle Museum has lately purchased a "Puti" scene, and Stuttgart a "Lu" scene both from

[65] Bühler appears not only to have initially advised Forge about conducting research in the Abelam region, but he also advised the ethnologist Meinhard Schuster about his 1961 collecting trip for the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt, recommending commissioning a façade in Ulupu (Christian Kaufmann, personal communication 13 June 2018).

> the Maprik Abelam). This is a regrettable situation as by far the largest amount of art work is produced from the Wosera and much of the ritual and belief of the Abelam originates in the Wosera. Finally the purchase of this initiation scene directly from the people of the Wosera would provide the Museum of Mankind with a truly fine display of the workmanship of one of the Commonwealth's more interesting nations, eliminating artifacts dealers and their extravagant profits. (BM Archives Oc1980,11: letter from Mc Guigan to the Director of Ethnography, Museum of Mankind, 5 June 1977)

As highlighted in Chapter 2, this competition was therefore not only a matter between museum institutions, but also between collecting for what was termed 'scientific' purposes and collecting for the art market.

As has also been previously mentioned, the stricter export conditions implemented by the Australian authorities from the 1950s onward and later by the Papua New Guinea Government also motivated the collecting race, museum collectors being worried that it would become more and more difficult to export ethnographic collections in the future.

## Collecting to exhibit

The idea of collecting whole *haus tambarans* and/or initiation scenes also responded to a wider exhibitionary context with an important trend in exhibitions built around reconstitutions of cultural ecosystems. This type of "staged reconstruction" (Mack 2001: 202-204) was particularly exemplified by the Museum of Mankind in London in the 1970s and 1980s, and also by other museums around the world which tended to display not only the collected artefacts but to exhibit them as part of a mock architectural and environmental reconstruction, as if *in situ*. For instance, the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel had long exhibited entire architectural complexes, such as a yam house from the Trobriand Islands collected by Fred Gerrits in 1969 or a Malanggan assemblage from New Ireland, collected in 1930-31 by Alfred Bühler (Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993: 124; Kaufmann 1979; Schuster 1970). The Abelam Puti initiation scene from Bongiora collected by Gerrits in the 1970s was acquired with the same prospect of a staged reconstruction:[66] "these collection pieces are important for the museum not only as documents for the art and religion of Abelam, but above all

[66] The shipment also included all the raw material to rebuild the walls of the initiation chamber, as well as the white stones meant to be displayed on the ground. The reconstitution of the Puti scene within the museum was nonetheless not entirely faithful to the original, only displaying one of the two Puti figures that were originally part of the scene.

also as attractive exhibits", still enjoyed by visitors nowadays (MKB Einlauf V_0454: letter from G.Baer to H. Schaub, 22 January 1975 translated from German) **(Fig. 34)**. A similar reconstruction could be observed in the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart from 1985, which rebuilt the matching Lu room (Heermann 1983) almost identically **(Figs. 90 and 91)**.

Likewise, while reflecting on the collection he gathered in 1987 for the museum in Leiden, Dirk Smidt recalled:

> When you look at the collection, you may be wondering if it was really necessary to have that many shell rings, to have that many daggers, whistles, and so on. In a way, you could say that we had enough, we had so much that we could give away some of the material. But you could also think in the back of your mind that maybe you will need material if you want to do any sort of evocative exhibit. Then you need more than just one or two of this type of objects, you need a lot of them. (Interview with Dirk Smidt, 13 March 2018)

The exhibition project Dirk Smidt originally had in mind **(Fig. 92)** was indeed:

> to reconstruct the initiation scenes in a full-size Abelam spirit house, which ha[d] to be erected in a courtyard adjoining the museum building, and protected from the weather by a glass encasement. Such a display of Abelam art in its own architectural context is the most satisfactory way of presenting an adequate impression of this art to a Western audience. [...] A display of isolated carvings in a showcase would surely miss the point. (Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993: 138-139)

Hence, the acquisition of Abelam material was in part motivated by future possible exhibition projects and display trends. Eventually, the display of the Gambawut initiation chamber from 2001 to 2011 was more an evocation of the original setting rather than a faithful reconstruction (Staal and Rijk 2003: 113-117) **(Figs. 93 to 95)**.[67]

This tendency reached its height in the 1980s with the Abelam Gallery project on display from 1982 to 1993 at the Australian Museum, Sydney **(Figs. 30 and 31)**, which will be detailed in Chapter 4. Not only had several architectural features been rebuilt with local materials, but a concrete floor mimicking the earthy soil of the ceremonial ground was created, while flora and fauna from the Abelam region were also collected with a view to reconstituting as complete the environment of an Abelam village as

[67] "It was quite an evocative exhibit, a reconstruction – as far as possible. But still, this reconstruction of the initiation chamber was embedded in the entire aesthetic of the museum, which fitted the view of the people who did the interior design of the museum. It had to fit within that particular concept: although it was an informative exhibit it as an aesthetic exhibit in a Western sense, to some extent." (Interview with Dirk Smidt, 13 March 2018)

possible (AMS 235/1334: 'Abelam Gallery Outline', 1982?). According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, this art of mimesis:

> places objects (or replicas of them) in situ. In-situ approaches to installation enlarge the ethnographic object by expanding its boundaries to include more of what was left behind, even if only in replica, after the object was excised from its physical, social, and cultural settings. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991: 389)

However, she points out that such reconstructions, no matter how faithful they seem, are in no way neutral, but that "those who construct the display also constitute the subject" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991: 389). Collecting and displaying Abelam was thus shaped by, and contributed to, wider anthropological and curatorial strategies, implying numerous actors and impetuses beyond the scale of the individual collection. As such, the fact that most of the collections under study revolved around the acquisition of whole or parts of architectural assemblages (ceremonial houses) and/or initiation display scenes justified but also equally stimulated the wish to re-assemble them as part of exhibition strategies.

## 2. Collectors' choices: instructions and individual understandings of 'collecting Abelam'

Beyond museums' general motivations for collecting Abelam, the variations that can be observed in the composition of Abelam museum repertoires could be understood in the light of what specific collectors (and their institutions) were eager to acquire, at a particular moment in the history of collecting in the Abelam region. Collectors' agencies are more or less explicit but can sometimes be deciphered through specific instructions on what to collect, thus shedding light on what they thought was desirable, worthy or simply possible to collect.

With regard to the Abelam material collected for the museum in Basel during the 1950s-1960s, Alfred Bühler insisted on several aspects: in general, the acquired objects needed as much contextual information as possible, and rather older specimens than contemporary ones, with a specific focus on what he termed 'art'. When he was not collecting himself on behalf of the museum, his instructions to various intermediary agents, in particular Anthony Forge, remained fairly vague, insisting nonetheless on a preference for large objects, and possibly a painted façade from a *haus tambaran* and related carvings. Bühler also indicated the typologies of

artefacts he had not been able to collect during his 1955-56 expedition with René Gardi:

> As to the collection. I shall leave it to you whether you prefer to do the work in your main village area or on a survey trip. Both ways may have advantages. In your own area you might know about good specimens and get them cheaper, at other places there might be more opportunities. You should decide what you think to be the best. From the point of view of the people who finance my trip the main thing is to bring back as many and as good ones as possible. I can't give you special instructions about the objects which we should like the most. Our collections should be as complete as possible to represent the material aspects of a culture and especially the art. Therefore everything will be of interest as long as it is well documentated [sic] (origin function etc.). We prefer big specimens of carvings and paintings (f.i. a wholefront of a small house tambaran?). But small good stuff (f.i. carved coconutshells and headdresses) are welcome as well. In my own collection I miss helmet masks entirely made of wood, in shape similar to the big tumbuan-masks made of wickerwork (Ratan). A few specimens of this kind would be valuable. In general: collect whatever you can and especially old pieces. (MKB 8-0007: letter from Bühler to Forge, 11 February 1959)

Around the same time period, Groenevelt's second expedition (1957-1962) for the Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde was coordinated from Rotterdam by the Curator Victor Jansen, who wrote to him on a very regular basis sending him very detailed instructions on what to collect, or indeed to report on what had already been shipped to the museum. Jansen urged Groenevelt to collect not only objects, but also information about the objects' significance and use, as well as photographs: "Such data is also of great importance to us. In short, everything you can find out!! This also gives the objects a deeper background. That is very important for later publications" (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 29 January 1960, translated from Dutch). Contrary to Bühler, Jansen did not necessarily insist on collecting old artefacts, but was rather expressing some aesthetic preferences:

> As far as the emphasis is concerned, which is so often placed on "old", we must gradually keep in mind that the term "old" is very relative. [...] I know that not everyone agrees, but we cannot pursue a phantom in New Guinea. From time to time we will find [...] a really old piece, [...] but in general one can expect that pieces from the nineteenth century have disappeared because of the climate of New Guinea. (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 2 February 1960, translated from Dutch)

> Now I believe that we should not look too closely at the Abelam pieces from a Western aesthetic point of view. We have to get over the fact that several colour combinations do

> not suit us at all. The blue is personally not my favourite at all, but I do my best to get over it. (SR 1407_148: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 7 February 1961, translated from Dutch)
>
> I prefer the *absence* of colours over the *presence* of exaggerated colour combinations, as is so often the case with Abelam objects. (SR 1407_148: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 22 August 1961, translated from Dutch, original emphasis)

Interestingly, most of the artefacts collected by Groenevelt from the Abelam area and now preserved in Rotterdam were painted with industrial pigments, sometimes with quite bold colour combinations, namely green, pink, blue colours contrasting with the regular red, yellow, black and white. This characteristic, for a corpus of artefacts coming from a wide range of locations within the Abelam territory (Numbungai, Ulupu, Saulik, Jama, Wosera, Kalabu, Masalagar, Kaugia, Chiginambu or Dreikikir), could testify to an experimentation specific to a relatively condensed time period (late 1950s-early 1960s), as it does not appear so strikingly in later collections, resulting from the introduction of industrial pigments in stores and possibly through the impulse of missionaries. As Hauser-Schäublin explains:

> When imported oil paints became available in the middle of the 20th century the Abelam also began to experiment with blue and green. Sometimes they employed blue for those parts which they had previously painted black. They used the same name for blue and black; the same applied for green, which was sometimes used to replace yellow. In the 1970s the Abelam returned to the traditional colours. Whether this was on the advice of the many European collectors who, as far as possible, wanted to buy 'authentic' painted artefacts, or on the initiative of the Abelam themselves, as colours are not just colours, is not completely clear. (Hauser-Schäublin 2021: 147)

It could also denote the particular taste of Groenevelt himself, who might have been attracted to more colourful and/or freshly painted artefacts, despite the recommendations of Jansen, thus creating a quite 'unconventional' museum portrait of Abelam material culture. These freshly made artefacts could also be easier to acquire than older 'heirlooms', an aspect which could possibly reflect Abelam agency in the collecting process, and which will be discussed at length in the second part of this chapter.

Jansen also insisted on collecting a variety of objects that would constitute a 'representative' collection, testifying to the local Abelam styles and variations, and with a strong emphasis on artefacts relating to the ceremonial house such as large carvings created for initiation scenes. He also enticed Groenevelt to collect several specimens of each type of object to allow for comparison:

> we must take into account that there are various art styles in the Maprik area. In particular, there is a remarkable difference between North and South. Already with your first shipment (January/February 1959) this proved to be very clear. We need to have a good assortment if we are to get a good overview of wood carving in the two main regions of the Maprik area. [...] Mr. Bühler told me that he had acquired some formidable sculptures from the Maprik region, which he had not seen at the time, but which now, *as the people become more and more detached from their old culture*, gradually emerge. Here are your chances!!! [...] There is, of course, much more that is missing from the Maprik area, and I will write about that later when I have had the opportunity to go through all my notes. However, Mr. Bühler drew particular attention to those large ancestor statues. Without such specimens, a Maprik collection can hardly be considered complete. Our duty is therefore to strive to obtain these objects *before it is too late*! (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 2 February 1960, translated from Dutch, original emphasis)

Jansen appeared to be extremely precise as to what types of objects Groenevelt should collect, notably basing his instructions on what he had been able to observe in other collections (especially in Basel) and in publications:

> I still want to have those big woven masks, but *they have to meet the following conditions*: A. The masks must have a special, bizarre shape [...] B. Masks must have a fresh colour [...] C. All masks must be intact. (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 19 February 1960, translated from Dutch, original emphasis)

In a letter dated 19 February 1960, Jansen recapitulates the recommendations he had sent Groenevelt in a previous letter dated 6 September 1959, but which had unfortunately not reached him in time prior to his trip to Maprik. In it, the curator lists a whole series of artefacts he wishes Groenevelt to collect: adzes, digging-sticks, cassowary-bone knives, spinning tops, jewellery, wooden figures, shell armbands, Cymbium pendants, a belt of Ovula shells, feather yam decorations, headdresses, yam masks, big carvings, etc. (SR 1407_149). On 23 February 1960, he went on ("Please pay attention to these matters, Mr. Groenevelt! They are important for the collection"), asking for coconut spoons, breast pendants, nose ornaments, earrings, bone daggers, grass skirts, carrying bags, and so on (SR 1407_149). This wish list was further expanded based on the photographs published in Gardi and Bühler's *Sepik* book (Gardi and Bühler: 1958), again listing what should be acquired: shell rings, body ornaments, but also artefacts related directly to ceremonial houses, in particular painted panels from the façade, carved lintels from the Northern Abelam, carved wooden panels, etc. He also listed items which were not represented in *Sepik*, such as various large ancestral carvings, as well as:

> The painted sheet sheaths mentioned [...] for the exterior of a tambaran house, irrespective of which part of the Maprik area they originate, must of course be regarded as *extremely important*. In a representative Maprik collection, such pieces should therefore not be missing. (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 25 October 1960, translated from Dutch, original emphasis)

The very high level of specification of Jansen's instructions can be explained by the little resources Rotterdam had for their expedition (for instance, compared to Bühler's 1959 privately-funded expedition for Basel), so money had to be spent carefully: "I am giving you this guideline, because we must continue to use our resources economically. There is so much to acquire, even in the Maprik area!" (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 19 February 1960, translated from Dutch).[68]

For later collectors, who were usually collecting first-hand rather than sending their instructions to intermediate agents on site, less precise accounts of their selection criteria have been found in the archive.

Although less detailed, Gerd Koch also reflected on the way he was collecting in 1966 and what he was aiming to acquire on behalf of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin:

> the Abelam in the Maprik region make it especially easy for me. They like to sell, are used to trading with their objects. And so they bring me ethnographica every day, I can choose and only have to make sure to get as complete a collection as possible together with thorough documentation, unfortunately I even had to reject an oversupply of individual object types. In general, I acquire the objects during longer stays systematically step by step according to the conditions on site and according to the mentality of the locals with the usual incoming documentation, whereby a certain routine develops. The rule is that nothing should happen against the conviction and the will of those affected. (Koch 2005: 139, translated from German)

In other cases, the core of the collection was often a whole initiation scene – if not several – which were offered for sale to the collectors. This idea of 'completeness' of the collection was often reiterated by the collectors, for example, from the British

[68] Funding indeed influenced what was possible to acquire, and in what condition. As reminded by Dirk Smidt for the 1987 collection in Leiden, "Professor Dr Willem R. Van Gulik, the then Director of the museum, enthusiastically supported the project, and colleagues of the various departments of the museum agreed to pool their respective acquisition funds for the Oceanic department to make major acquisitions, and for me to undertake appropriate field work" (Interview with Dirk Smidt, 13 March 2018).

Museum, the Australian Museum and the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, who eventually collected large quantities of material alongside the content of the ceremonial house. The specific interests of some of the collectors also helped to shape the collection: for instance, Gerrits's research on the role of *urungwall* and yam cult altars between 1972 and 1977 led him to acquire extra material related to these aspects of Abelam material culture (Gerrits 2012: 281 *et seq.*), now preserved in Basel, Stuttgart and Sydney. Losche's approach to collecting in 1980 was conditioned by the needs of the Australian Museum Abelam Gallery exhibition project and privileged the acquisition of objects made specifically for the project and for which creation and use could be documented (AMS 235/1334: 'Abelam Field Trip Report', 1980: 11). In the case of the collection acquired for Leiden in 1987, beyond the exceptionality of the third initiation room (Gambawut), which is unique across the numerous collections studied here, Dirk Smidt's own curiosity for the "use of imported materials and new design elements" (Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993: 126, 138) also gave an unprecedented dimension to the constituted assemblage.

Individual collectors' motivations and museum's agendas cannot therefore be understood in isolation, but as permeating and influencing one another. They were also significantly shaped by Abelam individual motivations for parting (or not) with artefacts, as will be discussed in the second part of this chapter. The emergence of Abelam museum collections-as-assemblages hence needs to be understood dialogically as a complex network of influences, a set of (sometimes imbalanced) relationships not only between different institutions and individual museum collectors but also between collectors and Abelam people.

# II. Abelam agencies in the collecting processes

While it is commonly admitted that the contents of Abelam assemblages acquired by museum institutions result in great part from the agency of Abelam individuals involved in the collecting processes (O'Hanlon 1993: 12, 55, 60; Schindlbeck 1993: 59, 63; ter Keurs 2007: 5, 9; Harrison 2013: 6-8), not much has been recorded about the perspective of Abelam people on collecting processes and their possible response(s) to it.[69] How can this agency be traced back when very few – if any – written sources or primary testimonies have been preserved in the archive?

In order to get a sense of Abelam agency in the assemblage of collections, it seems necessary to decipher such "indigenous countersigns" (Douglas 2006: 29) in the archival record, through the contents of the collections and the objects' own materiality, but also indirectly from other actors' accounts of the broader issues at play locally:

> indigenous countersigns matter because they enable the construction of ethnohistories which decentre Europeans and take local agency seriously. But they are never transparent because they are always embedded in alien representations. (Douglas 2006: 29)

This interpenetration of Abelam and outsiders' frameworks will be analysed from the perspective of how collectors' practices were integrated within local economies. The creation of a market as a concrete result of this dialogue will also be addressed.

## 1. Integration/adaptation of collectors' practices into local economies

> Local people had a whole set of possibilities for manipulating the white men who arrived in their region: anthropologists, colonial officers, missionaries or soldiers. The strategies the local population developed for dealing with the newcomers were sometimes successful and sometimes not. Yet the image of the 'tribal' group passively waiting for the outcome of the encounter with the foreigners, is probably far from reality. Even in very early scientific expeditions this observation should be kept in mind. [...] the local population had ways of manipulating the 'white man' and could influence to a large extent what was collected and what was not. (ter Keurs 2007: 9)

[69] Despite the commission and collaboration processes that helped shape Abelam museum collections and that will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Far from observing collectors' demands and activities passively, it seems that Abelam people actively shaped – if not constrained – collecting practices, and it could even be said that the collections now preserved in museums around the world testify, at least indirectly, to Abelam socio-cultural structures and concepts (O'Hanlon 1993: 55). Drawing on Susanne Küchler's work (Küchler 1997), Bell and Geismar remind us that "European collecting activities often fed into pre-existing local sacrificial economies of object disposal" (Bell and Geismar 2009: 8). Indeed, most of Abelam material culture was created in relation to specific events and ceremonial settings, and a significant part of these artefacts was meant to be left to decay after they had fulfilled their role. It was the case of initiation scenes that were dismantled, with most of their components, especially painted panels, left to decay behind the *haus tambaran* (in an open area called *twoimbu*, see Gerrits 2012: 29-35) or in the adjacent bush. When not meant to rot, certain composite objects were also 'deconstructed', as was the case for the impressive *waken* headdresses, whose various constitutive elements had been gathered thanks to the network of exchange partners who had contributed to the creation of the initiate by lending feathers (as well as other body ornaments), which would then be returned to their owners once the ceremony was over (Gerrits 2012: 218), only leaving the bare structure of the headdress **(Fig. 96)**. An important part of the material culture of the Abelam was also made of organic (essentially vegetal) materials, ephemeral by nature, even more so in a tropical climate, and thus not meant to be preserved. Consequently, in some cases the collecting process was seen as an alternative to decomposition or deconstruction, as a way to dispose of these artefacts (Küchler 1997: 40). This emic understanding of what was worth keeping or disposing of sheds a different light on why Abelam individuals parted so easily with sometimes whole carved and painted initiation scenes, which from an outsider's perspective would seem to be most valuable. Indeed, following Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin (1985: 28), the most valued 'artefacts' in the eyes of Abelam people were not the permanent elements of impressive and composite initiation scenes, but rather ephemeral art forms, by definition non-collectable, of which the most praised one was the adorned body of initiates.

Hence, more than the presence of certain objects in museum assemblages, it is sometimes the noticeable absence of some others that can be particularly telling with regard to Abelam agency in collecting practices. The (sometimes explicit) refusal to sell specific artefacts has been reported by Father August Knorr, who wrote in 1958 to Alfred Bühler:

> You want a carved crossbeam! 9 years ago I wanted to buy one, it was in an old hut. "No, we need it for a new house!" - They built a new spirit house, carved a new beam. When your letter reached me, I immediately asked for this beam. - "I stink finisch". - Is already rotten! I visited several villages, but still without success. My master painter has his own spirit house and a rare beautiful beam on it, but he also does not want to. [...] I imagined it would be easier, you probably too! [...] I also think of a closed façade gable, but there is still no chance to acquire one. You do not touch a spirit house until it disintegrates by itself [...]. (MKB 8-0007: letter from Knorr to Bühler, 9 March 1958, translated from German)

Such a reluctance to sell some artefacts was still observable in the late 1980s, as recounted by Dirk Smidt and Noel Mc Guigan:

> Like the large slit-gongs, the two *urangwal* of the Nyambikwa *haus tambaran* were not acquired, for the owners made it clear one night, by removing them from the *haus tambaran*, that they were not to be parted with. This was done at the instruction of the hamlet's most senior Big Man, who, although no longer engaged in the active political life of the village, enjoys continued authority. By this move, apparently, he avoided the situation where we might set our eyes upon the *urangwal* and express an interest in acquiring them, which would have put him in the awkward situation of having to refuse while not wanting to disappoint us. (Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993: 133-134)[70]

The difficulty in acquiring certain types of artefacts thus sometimes obliged museum collectors to demonstrate inventiveness in order to convince their interlocutors to part with the desired objects. This is notably exemplified by the polished shell rings (cut from *Tridacna gigas*, see **Fig. 31**, displayed on the floor), which can be considered the ultimate Abelam wealth items, involved in every stage of Abelam life cycle and rituals, and that were mostly exchanged as wedding and ritual payments (Forge 1990: 165; Gardi 1960: 128-134; Koch 1968: 26).[71] Because of their significance within exchange systems, it seems that Abelam people were particularly unwilling to part with them. In order to acquire such sought-after items, collectors had to implement strategies to get hold of them; one of them was to consider other modes of transaction, replacing money with pigs, whose value was praised throughout the region. As Father Knorr explained to Bühler: "Since I could not have a good shell for money, I gave a little pig. For 3 years I have a little pig breeding to keep me afloat. Pigs

[70] Three replacement *urungwal* (RV-5526-335/336/337) were nonetheless acquired from other sources (see Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993: 134 and Mc Guigan 1989: n.p.).
[71] Interestingly, these shell rings were not made by the Abelam themselves but by a limited number of Arapesh villages, acquiring the Tridacna shells from the north coast and manufacturing the shell rings before exchanging them with the Abelam (Forge 1990: 165; Gardi 1960: 129; Koch 1968: 26).

mean everything for my kanakas" (MKB 8-0007: letter from Knorr to Bühler, 9 March 1958, translated from German). Such a technique in order to acquire shell rings was also advised by Anthony Forge to Victor Jansen, with the alternative of providing a Tridacna shell (acquired on the north coast or on the reefs near Port Moresby) to be solely carved with the prospect of letting the collectors acquire the rings (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 10 August 1960).

This adaptation to local exchange systems and values testifies to the interpenetration of Abelam frames of reference and the collectors' frameworks. It is also worth noting, as pointed out by Forge, that Abelam people were used to selling rituals and artefacts to their neighbours for significant quantities of pigs and shell rings (Forge 1990: 163-165). The dialogic nature of Abelam material culture production and creative activity (Phillips and Steiner 1999: 9) did not suddenly appear with the arrival of collectors, but rather was one of its intrinsic qualities. The exchange and/or commodification process of specific motifs, artefacts, rituals, etc., between Abelam villages and among exchange partners, but also with other language groups, has long been observed, and seems to apply more generally to the Sepik River area (Silverman 1999; Clifford 1988: 250, note 13). Such practices could indicate how collecting enterprises by outsiders were perceived by Abelam individuals, who were "very cynical about this process" (Forge 1990: 163):

> In these transactions, the Abelam did not consider that they were losing control of any supernatural power or giving anyone else control of any. [...] From the Abelam's point of view, they made objects which, when complete, were charged with power, but the recipients did not know how to use the power and were more likely to be damaged than blessed by the result. (Forge 1990: 165)

Hence, it seems that Abelam people preserved a certain degree of control over what would be sold and what such transactions meant to them. In the monograph *Tambaran: an encounter with cultures in decline in New Guinea*, Gardi highlights Bühler's collecting procedure, as waiting for the people to bring artefacts along, rather than rummaging around in the houses:

> So we had constant visits from the surrounding settlements. Towards evening more than fifty people might be squatting outside our hut. This was just what we wanted, for they were always witnesses of the deal which was developing, and none of them would ever keep to himself what he saw and heard. Alfred Bühler often made little speeches to them and encouraged his listeners to pass it all on and to send along anyone who would like to sell something. (Gardi 1960: 63-64)

In this way, Abelam people were more ready to part with the artefacts they were bringing for sale, and negotiations about the prices were carried out more smoothly (Gardi 1960: 52). This readiness to sell artefacts reached yet another dimension in 1973-74 in Sunuhu **(Figs. 27, 28 and 122)**, where the painted and carved contents of the *haus tambaran* were acquired by the National Museum and Art Gallery in Port Moresby. As Helen Dennett explained in 1980:

> Approximately 8 years ago the museum here bought most of the contents of the haus tambaran at Sunuhu, a village an hour or so by foot from Sarikim. They (Dirk and Risongo [Resonga Kaiku, then Junior Research Officer at the PNG NMAG]) arrived in the village to find that each carving already had a price ticket on it [...]. (BM Archives Oc1980,11: letter from Dennett to Starzecka, 12 April 1980)

Furthermore, as pointed out by Michael O'Hanlon with regard to his collecting trip in the Wahgi, "as people became clearer as to what I wanted to collect (once they had internalised my stereotype of their material culture), they began to become interested in the collection's contents and representativeness." (O'Hanlon 1993: 61). The collection-as-assemblage therefore needs to be understood as the dialogic materialisation of several historically and geographically situated understandings of what 'Abelam material culture' means, back and forth between collectors' desires and Abelam agencies.

## 2. Creation of a market: an Abelam response to collectors' tastes and desires

### Selling artefacts as a source of income

As part of the wider local economy, mainly based on cash crops imported by the colonial Administration (coffee, rice, peanuts and cacao for the most part), the sale of artefacts constituted a fluctuant source of income for Abelam people throughout the second half of the 20th century.

The collecting intensification that was observed in the region during that period had an important impact on the price of such artefacts, as private dealers did not hesitate to offer very high prices for certain objects with which people were reluctant to part – an aspect that was often deplored by museum collectors and sometimes missionaries (SR 1407_148: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 4 August 1961). The eagerness from

both museum collectors and art dealers led to a strong inflation alongside a production targeted for sale:

> Prices are likely to be higher than when you were here before; you started a fashion. B. Lawes alone must have exported some tons since, and many other visitors have bought, some in quantity. There is also a certain amount of inferior stuff produced for sale (which I won't buy). [...] For a complete h-t [*haus tambaran*] façade I should estimate £50 for one in good condition. Please let me know your reaction to these prices. One may be asked £5 for 7 or 8ft figures but I shan't spend money like that until I have your approval. (MKB 8-0007: letter from Forge to Bühler, 3 March 1959)

As reported by several patrol officers throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the sale of artefacts by Abelam villagers was also encouraged by the Greater Maprik Council, which would then resell the objects to collectors, expatriates and dealers:

> The village of Ulupu has a small steady income from the sale of "tamberan" figures, carved paintings, etc., and is the biggest single supplier to the Maprik Council for resale. Income figures are not available. (PRM 22/63-64, April-May 1954: 3)

> Traditional art is practiced enthusiastically and this is a minor source of income for those who wish to sell their artefacts to the Greater Maprik Council. The traditional art of these people, especially those further south has been maintained at a higher standard than that of people closer to Maprik and who have been exposed to tourists who will generally buy anything that is 'native' irregardless of quality. Here too the Greater Maprik Council endeavours to maintain the standard by refusing to purchase artefacts of poor quality. [...] The only other commercial activity – other than cash cropping – in which the people are engaged, is the production of traditional carvings and paintings for sale. These are generally sold to the Greater Maprik Local Government Council which then resells them to Tourists and Collectors for a small profit. (PRM 8/66-67, June 1967: 6-8)

Although hardly quantifiable, the income derived from the sale of Abelam objects was often noted in patrol reports. In 1967, the Cadet Patrol Officer C.J. Rawlings reported that over AUD 800 net profit had been made through the sale of artefacts by the Greater Maprik Council during the previous year (PRM 1/67-68). Between 1972 and 1974, the sale of carvings and other artefacts from the Tamaui Census Division reached between AUD 2000 and 3000, according to the estimates given by the Patrol Officer and Assistant District Officer G.E. Clapp (PRM 8/72-73; PRM 7/73-74).

Recalling his 1966 journey, Koch noted that 'the Abelam only accept[ed] "green notes" and silver in Shilling coins' for payment (Koch 2003: 45, translated from German).

Later on, Dirk Smidt also recounted the eagerness of Abelam people to sell artefacts. Remembering his collecting trip in 1987, he pointed out that the acquisition of the complementary collection – alongside the initiation display contents of the *haus tambaran* of Nyambikwa – resulted mostly from agencies beyond his control:

> We collected about 200 objects from the Northern Abelam, and also about 200 from the Southern Abelam – for these in two days! It is not the type of purchase you do in a shop, where you can walk in freely and leave the shop again without buying anything. It is a different social setting, and as a collector you feel some kind of psychological pressure when you enter those villages: all the people are here with their artefacts, one group here, another group over there, and they all want to sell their artefacts. Ideally, if you go up to somebody, you know exactly what you have got in the museum collection, and you decide that you only want these specific objects and that's all. But then it creates an aggressive atmosphere as people will be discontent for you buying only a few objects. So this kind of collecting is a bit of a tricky situation. It almost feels, as a collector, as if you are trapped. So you end up buying more than you really want. And after, when you are back at the museum, you have to document all these artefacts. Of course, you try to do as much as you can while in the field, but it has to be done very quickly and consequently not very thoroughly in only two days. (Interview with Dirk Smidt, 13 March 2018)

Abelam willingness, if not eagerness, to sell artefacts therefore largely influenced what collectors were assembling for museum collections but also the way they were able to document their acquisitions.

## Example of Bangi Mali and Wosera pottery

This interactive process of creation and sale is exemplified by the case of pottery production in the Abelam, and more specifically in the Wosera area, which used to be the primary pottery producing region within the Abelam territory. Women were responsible for the manufacture (coil technique) of the clay pots used both for cooking and eating, and in some cases made for ceremonial use, while men were in charge of their decoration. Pots used to be exchanged throughout the Abelam area, as well as with villages on the Sepik River, in exchange for which Wosera people obtained dried fish (May and Tuckson 1982: 278-279). Pottery used to be produced essentially in Sarikim and Stapikum, as well as Numbungai and Isogum. Furthermore, Sarikim used to sell clay to potters from other villages as it possessed important clay deposits. The production was mostly centred on cooking pots (*ake*) and painted ceremonial ones (*kwam*), the latter being mostly used during initiations to serve the white soup

of yam and taro (Gerrits 2012: 151, 209) to the men being initiated. Small clay whistles or ocarinas with two holes (*kutagwa*) were also made and decorated by men, and were used as part of initiation ceremonies (May and Tuckson 1982: 285-286).[72]

In Sarikim, the most well-known and regarded potter from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s was a man called Bangi Mali **(Fig. 66)**.[73] At the end of the 1960s, he and his wife Nemi Magret went to Angoram to attend a training programme which had been implemented by the International Labour Organisation and the Australian Government in 1967. The course was led by the Danish potter Jørgen Petersen, who had been commissioned to research the various pottery-making areas in Papua New Guinea and to create a training programme in order to help local potters make their creations more marketable. In Sarikim he built up a kiln to fire the pots, with the help of Paul Dennett, who was at the time the Headmaster of the nearby Nanu River Community School. The latter and his wife, Helen, contributed significantly to the marketing of the pottery. The construction of a kiln was an event remarkable enough to be reported by the Cadet Patrol Officer R.C. Blackburn:

> At Saragum[74] a kiln has been built and pottery of the Wosera design is fired. There is not a great market for this type of artifact because of the danger of breakage in shipping. Fired pots and Tambaran whistles have been produced and are of good quality and attractive design. (PRM 7/68-69, June 1968-January 1969: 4)

Petersen mainly encouraged potters to create smaller versions (hence more easily transportable) of the decorated ceremonial bowls and whistles, to emphasise the decoration while spending less time on each pot in order to increase the production with the prospect of selling them (Tuckson 1990: 554-557). Although the kiln did not last very long, as Bangi Mali and other potters preferred the open fire technique, production still increased. As Patricia May and Margaret Tuckson observed in the 1970s:

> Wosera pot making, unlike the neighbouring Abelam industries, is increasing due to economic necessity (the sale of clay pots brings in a much needed source of cash) and the abundance and high quality of the clay. That Wosera vessels are an item of exchange with neighbouring people is evidenced by examples of pots found in villages in the Sepik plains

[72] For more information about pottery making in the Abelam region and more generally in Papua New Guinea, see the seminal research compiled by Margaret Tuckson and Patricia May (May and Tuckson 1982).
[73] Alternative recorded spellings include: Bangimali, Bangimale, Bangamali and Bangimalei.
[74] Other spelling for Sarikim.

> and in the Boiken, Kwanga and Wingei-Maprik areas. Resident expatriates and tourists purchase these pots from the Maprik market, at the Maprik High School, along the Maprik-Wewak road and in Wewak township. (May and Tuckson 1982: 280)

The clay artefacts produced by Bangi Mali thus illustrate the "transcultural encounter" (Phillips and Steiner 1999: 19) between local aesthetic canons and uses and the local interpretation of Western tastes (Silverman 1999: 51, 57). Indeed, one can observe an almost baroque multiplication of figurative motives such as faces, as well as innovations with the representations of male and female figures with genitalia exposed, in response to an increased interest by expatriate buyers (May and Tuckson 1982: 289).

In 1969, C.J. Rawlings, Patrol Officer, reported on the possible solutions to help local artists sell their creations, possibly through the Greater Maprik Council, whose role was discussed previously:

> To date the sale of artefacts in the area has been restricted to the odd private sale. The primary objects are the well-known clay pots of SARAGUM Village and the Yam masks or 'Tumbuans'. Here again the council has suggested that it organise the sale of these things, through the WEWAK-BUT or GREATER MAPRIK Councils but individuals have not shown a real interest in the plan. I have suggested to BANGIMALEI, the maker-in-chief of the pots, that he use the council to display his wares, as the road to his village is not good, at the best of times, being about six miles from the council chambers, about half an hour drive in dry weather. He has not yet responded to the idea. I would envisage that the council sell these items for the owners, keeping the very minimum in commission for itself. It would this way provide a more reliable source of income to the manufacturers. (PRM 1/69-70, June-September 1969: 18)

Bangi Mali eventually opened a little store in Sarikim, where he was selling his pottery alongside other artefacts such as masks and small sculptures, not only to a few occasional tourists, but also to art dealers and museum collectors **(Figs. 97 to 99)** (as has been previously detailed). On a photograph taken in 1980 by David John Lee **(Fig. 99)**, who accompanied Dorota Starzecka on her collecting trip in the Wosera area, one can observe the way objects – including many pots, most likely created by Bangi Mali – have been lined up on the ground. Starzecka is accompanied by Bangi Mali himself (in striped shorts) and by William Wote who was acting as translator. Interestingly this type of setting echoes the artefacts on display for sale to tourists (Silverman 1999: 57-58). Even if Starzecka's motivation was most likely different from that of tourists – operating on behalf of an institution (the Museum of Mankind – British Museum)

and not buying the items as personal souvenirs – such a comparison can lead us to question the status and values accorded to such artefacts as Bangi Mali's pottery. It also demonstrates how Abelam people were used to selling their artefacts and having their works collected by outsiders. Designed to be marketable and with hypothetic touristic buyers in mind, they ended up in prestigious museum institutions, where they became branded as ethnographic artefacts. As pointed out by Phillips and Steiner:

> distinctions between categories of art, artefact, and commodity are projections of individual experience that reveal, in the end, far more about those who collect objects than those who produce them. [...] Thus, the solution to defining the authenticity of an object circulating in the networks of world art exchange lies not in the properties of the object itself but in the very process of collection, which inscribes, at the moment of acquisition, the character and qualities that are associated with the object in both individual and collective memories. (Phillips and Steiner 1999: 19)

Bangi Mali's example thus clearly illustrates the porous boundaries between sometimes arbitrary and foreign classifications (Clifford 1988), as well as the strong adaptability and response of Abelam people in the face of important economic and cultural changes that affected them throughout the second half of the 20th century. Bangi Mali and other Abelam artists seem to have been very pragmatic in the face of cultural and economic changes. The potteries he produced for sale were therefore unambiguously made for trade, but not necessarily perceived as less 'authentic' by their maker, simply reinvented and redeployed in another realm of values (Kasfir 1999: 81).

## Stimulation of artistic production in response to museum collecting

Following the collecting trip led in 1980 by Starzecka on behalf of the Museum of Mankind in the village of Sarikim, she remained in contact with some of the main actors who had locally contributed to the sale. Among several Wosera men, she corresponded with the big man and renowned artist Niagara Kwarkwai, who was then very keen for her to come back in order to acquire more material. He invited her and David John Lee to travel back to Sarikim to see the ceremonial opening of two new *haus tambarans*, with a view to acquiring their whole contents:

> I am very pleased indeed and would like to give you a very special thanks to the Museum of Mankind in sending you and John out here to buy our artifacts. I am expecting that one

> day both of you will visit us again. Back here in the village, the people of Sarikim and Stapikim villages are all very busy in the construct of the tambaran houses. We are also very busy in painting our art and crafts. The people of Sarikim and I have painted many brilliant paintings and they'll be all placed inside the newly built tambran house by the end of September this year 1981. I have also arranged a customary initiation ceremony to co-insight [sic] with the celebration of the newly built tambran houses. [...] I would greatly appreciate it if you and John would return to Sarikim village to collect these newly made artifacts and also to have a clear picture of how the Sarikim and the Stapikim people celebrate the initiation ceremony. [...] If you and John are planning to return, do invite other guests from London to come with you to see the most exciting activities that will be taking place very shortly. [...] I also would like to inform you that the new tambran has been built on the very sight that you, councillor Numba and I have discussed about. [...] After the completion of all the work, I will be forwarding you a telegram so that you and John would come here to collect all the artifacts while they are fresh and in good conditions. (BM Archives Oc1980,11: letter from N. Kwarkwai to Starzecka, 4 September 1981)

According to the letter, it seems that the construction of the new ceremonial houses, although part of an initiation cycle, responded to the solicitation and views of the collectors. He wrote in a subsequent letter:

> We have put up two Haus Tambaran already. This was for the request of yours. At present we are seeking for such people like you to come and have a look at our two Haus Tambaran. Your assistant will be appreciated. (BM Archives Oc1980,11: letter from N. Kwarkwai to Starzecka, n.d., stamped by the Museum of Mankind on 8 February 1982)

Considering that the British Museum did not have the budget to fulfil such a request, Starzecka politely declined the invitation, but offered to spread the word to other museum colleagues that such an assemblage was available for acquisition.[75] Nonetheless, this example allows us to highlight how museum collecting, among other factors that have previously been addressed, in some cases stimulated the local production.

Collecting endeavours also had later repercussions, as was the case for the collection made for the Australian Museum in 1980. In 1995, Isador Nibituo, then Headmaster at the Brikiti Lower Secondary School, contacted the museum in order to ask them to send documentary material related to the Abelam Gallery to the school, but also in the hope of furthering possible artefact export:

[75] To date I have not been able to find out what eventually happened to the two *haus tambarans*.

> Since you have used our people to promote our culture Internationaly [sic] we now appeal to give full suport [sic] if you could assist in Exporting our Apangai Artifacts direct to you or other markets or buyers over-seas. We have BILUMS, YAM MASKS ETC. for sale. Our patron "Mr. NERRA JAMBRUKU" will be so anxious to visit you to see his "HAUS TAMBRAN" and perhaps make life history for old man in the history books. He is now planning to build a huge Haus Tambran at the school to celebrate our 20t[h] Birthday after Independence in 1975 when Australia left us. I hope your interest for our Apangai are still vivid in your Museum's perspective. Please respond to our appeal to assist the school. (AMS 235/1334: letter from Nibituo to the Australian Museum Director, 2 February 1995, original emphasis)

This letter also testifies to the ongoing relationship between Nera Jambruku, who had been the main Abelam interlocutor in the Abelam Gallery project, and the Australian Museum.

Alongside collecting enterprises, the construction of the Maprik Cultural Centre **(Figs. 84 to 88)** also seems to have acted as a strong incentive to spark off a form of renewed interest in the building of *haus tambarans*, especially in the Dreikikir area, where no ceremonial house had been built since World War II. Therefore, the *haus tambaran* representing Dreikikir at the Cultural Centre **(Fig. 88)** was the first one to be built in more than 30 years, and acted as a confirmation that the Government was sympathetic with, if not encouraging, the perpetuation of ceremonial activities, which had sometimes been presented as detrimental to the development of business activities, especially cash crops (Beier 1991: 81-82). Soon after, in 1977, it seems that ceremonial activities regained strength around the village of Dahungai (Allen 1990: 195), near Dreikikir, suggesting the possible influence of the Cultural Centre in encouraging such practices and related artistic production.

Collecting Abelam was therefore first and foremost a dialogic practice, materialising the complex and multiple values accorded to 'Abelam material culture', whose definition remains fluctuating and was built up conjointly between the numerous actors involved in the collecting processes. Following Tony Bennett's advice, I have tried to:

> explore the new entanglements that these processes of collecting gave rise to and the new forms of combinability they permitted. These were, in the main, entanglements between materials coded as "ethnographic", museums and museum personnel, the institutions and practices of the public sphere, and the apparatuses of colonial administration. (Bennett 2013: 40)

Such entanglements will be addressed and deconstructed further, within the context of the museum, highlighting the processes Abelam artefacts have undergone after entering the realm of museum institution and classification systems.

# Chapter 4

# Becoming Abelam in the museum

What do Abelam museum collections consist of? This chapter zooms in and aims to address what, at first glance, seem simple or obvious questions: what do these assemblages encompass and why were such tremendous quantities of material acquired? What do their content tell us about collecting practices and about whom? What strategies were implemented by collectors in order to materialise these Abelam assemblages in the museum?

Two main concepts will help us address these questions: the notion of "object-scape" as developed by Miguel John Versluys (2017) and the idea of "object habits" (Stevenson, Libonati and Baines 2017; Stevenson 2021: 262). The first one, defined as "the repertoire(s) of material culture available at a certain site in a certain period in terms of their material and stylistic characteristics", invites us to focus on the impact of such a repertoire of material culture, that is "what it does at a certain site in a certain period, and how it moulds human behaviour through its material and stylistic characteristics" (Versluys 2017: 197). Furthermore, it entices us to view "material histories as being relational; performative and emergent" (Versluys 2017: 196) by shifting the focus from single individual objects to classes of objects.

Thinking of Abelam material in the museum in terms of 'object-scape' therefore allows us to address the collections at the level of the repertoire, further considering this assemblage in its social dimension as a relational network of people and artefacts.[76]

[76] As mentioned in Chapter 1, each Abelam collection under study, although varying in size and content, usually encompasses several hundred objects – with more than a thousand for some of them. In order to address such high amounts of artefacts, the quantity of material being way too large to allow for an investigation of each individual object, this research followed an approach focusing on the different typologies, or repertoires of objects constituting these assemblages.

In that sense, the concept of "object-scape" meets the notion of "object habits", that is:

> an area's customs relating to objects, taking into account factors that influence the types of things chosen, temporal variations in procurement, styles of engagement with artefacts or specimens, their treatment, documentation and representation, as well as attitudes to their presentation and reception. These customs emerge not just within the museum or out in the field, but between the two and affected by the full agency of the world. (Stevenson, Libonati and Baines 2017: 115-116)

Object habits allow us to shed new light on the various factors which can explain the creation of Abelam object-scapes within the museum, notably what Abelam type of material has been collected (or not) and why these particular objects, from these specific locations and by these identified artists were assembled into a museum collection.

However, defining the Abelam object-scape within the museum or simply providing an overview of the collected Abelam material did not appear as straightforward as initially thought. Such a task was in part complicated by the fact that for some of the collections, inventory lists were not always easy to compose, and their accuracy was not always guaranteed – depending on the terms used to search for objects in the database, whether ethnonyms like 'Abelam' or 'Wosera', or more or less precise geographical provenance (and with varying spellings), such as names of villages, or more general locations, for example 'Maprik' or 'Prince Alexander Mountains'. The accuracy and length of the resulting list of objects also depended on the categories imposed by different institutions and individual museum staff, and because inventory numbers can sometimes include several objects. The inventory list became an object of its own, constructed through the cataloguing technology of museum cards and registers, and later on of the database, by museum staff as well as by my own agency trying to recollect these assemblages. It is consequently deeply subjective, if not biased. The definition of 'Abelam material culture' is also problematic and not clear in itself, as will be further discussed later in this chapter, alongside issues directly related to museum classification systems. Hence, and because of these limits, it quickly became impossible to draw exact numbers or statistics out of these collections, as they would have necessarily reflected these biases. Instead, a reflection on the collecting tendencies and choices materialised by such assemblages was progressively elaborated. From that overview of the Abelam object-scape in the museum, this chapter interrogates what the 'ideal portrait' of an Abelam collection is

according to museum institutions and collectors, and how this materialisation influenced a specific understanding of 'Abelam (material) culture' and consequently other collecting practices.

However, as seen in Chapters 2 and 3, this notion of an 'ideal' representation, of a constructed image of Abelam material culture through the prism of museum collections, was nonetheless complicated by Abelam agencies and local dynamics, which contributed tremendously to shape such assemblages. How did this material become museum collections, and what transformations did it undergo along the way? How have Abelam and other actors' perspectives been translated (or not) into the museum? These collections will be addressed as museum processes, whose translation, classification and ongoing lives within the museum need to be further problematised.

## I. Materialising Abelam: reflection on the constructed image of Abelam (material) culture

How can 'Abelam material culture' be defined within the framework of museum collections? According to museum collectors, it generally implied the whole repertoire of portable goods, sometimes dismantled in order to be packed and transported, most of the time non-perishable,[77] and with an emphasis on 'completeness' in the case of the collections that constitute the focus of this study (O'Hanlon 1993: 58). Or, as James Clifford put it, Abelam collections represent "what from the material world specific groups and individuals choose to preserve, value, and exchange" (Clifford 1988: 221), and therefore reflect, among others, the specific interests of their collectors.

This notion of 'completeness' or 'representativeness' (Lawson 1994: 8-18; O'Hanlon 2001: 22) of Abelam material within the museum collection recurs throughout the different collections studied here and the collecting instructions or 'wish-lists' collectors had in mind, as previously shown. As summarised by Anthony Shelton, "the most singular aspiration behind collections is the desire for completeness and

[77] The focus of these museum collections is on tangible material things, non-perishable and non-ephemeral, but it is worth remembering that a large part of Abelam creativity as expressed in the context of initiations and yam displays was ephemeral and immaterial (see Hauser-Schäublin 1985).

graspable panoptical and universal gaze; to create 'the great metaphor' of the world', or a defined part of it" (Shelton 2007: 16). By trying to model assemblages 'as representative as possible' of Abelam material culture, according to their own understandings of what 'Abelam' means and based on what had previously been collected and published, collectors have consequently shaped a certain vision or image of 'Abelam', sometimes – and almost inevitably – verging rather on the level of the ideal, if not of the fantasy. As such, most of the time, "these collections 'say' more about the contacts these cultures had with the European collectors, than about the cultures in which the objects were made or used" (ter Keurs 2007: 3). This 'ideal' portrait of Abelam collections was also shaped to a large extent by what Abelam people were willing to part with, and by their own vision of how they wanted to be represented through the prism of their material culture. It will be addressed in the first place by highlighting the recurrences of artefact typologies, of places and of artists across collections. Further strategies implemented by collectors in order to tailor the collection according to their understanding of an 'ideal' Abelam collection, such as commissions and collaborations with Abelam artists, will then be discussed.

## 1. 'Ideal' portrait of an Abelam collection

From one collection to another, one can observe the recurrence of certain typologies of objects, but also of specific geographical provenances (understood here as where the object was acquired)[78] and even of some artists/makers when recorded.

Alongside whole ceremonial house-related assemblages of painted panels and sculptures, museum collections also preserve panels and statues (large but also smaller ones) acquired individually rather than as part of a larger display. Also, most collections include what was often termed an "additional" (Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993: 137) or "general ethnographical" collection (BM Archives Oc1980,11: letter from Starzecka to the British Museum Trustees, 13 December 1980), testifying to the variety of Abelam material culture and trying to be as representative as possible – according to the institution's or the collector's criteria – of Abelam production. Despite some differences resulting from regional variation as well as changes in material culture throughout the second half of the 20th century, such collections usually include the same typologies of objects, for the most part categorised by museums as: *baba* cane

[78] The notion of provenance will be challenged later in the second part of this chapter.

helmet masks, body and yam ornaments[79] (*waken* headdresses, *karawut* mouth pendant, shell, cane and feather ornaments, yam masks, etc.), netbags, lime gourds, pottery (notably *kwam* profusely decorated pots used to serve the white yam soup to feed initiates during initiation ceremonies), coconut cutlery and cooking utensils (coconut spoons, bowls, etc.), yam digging sticks, spears, bone daggers (most of the time made of cassowary bone), musical instruments (hourglass drums, ocarina whistles made of coconut or other seeds, or sometimes even of pottery, as well as bullroarers, flutes, Jew's harps), spinning tops.[80] These objects are sometimes represented by only one or a few examples within a collection, sometimes by a whole series whose purpose was to allow for stylistic comparison and/or to study local variations around a similar typology of object.

As Rebecca Duclos points out, the tangible nature of the collection *materialises* the ideal image of Abelam material culture that the collector had in mind, while further contributing to this idealisation of what an 'Abelam collection' should look like:

> like a map, the collection offers itself as a tangible entity for contemplation, its particular arrangement helping to orient its viewer towards specific themes, chronological sequences, geographic, aesthetic, or cultural points of view. But at the same time, the collection operates on another dimension. It has a metonymic, representational power that allows a viewer to move beyond it, as a traveller moves from the dot on the map into the vast, uncharted landscape of personal encounter which the map is said to represent. (Duclos 2004: 101)

Operating metonymically, the collection also acquires a metaphorical dimension (Duclos 2004: 85), whose "agency of representation" (Jacobs 2012: 16-19) further influences later collections and understandings of what 'Abelam material culture' means.

Furthermore, while comparing the geographical provenance of the artefacts held in museum collections, or at least the names of the places where they have been acquired – when recorded – it appears that a few toponyms regularly recur. This is the case, among others, of the villages of Apangai, Kalabu, Ulupu, Bongiora in the northern and north-eastern parts of the Abelam territory, Sarikim and Numbungai in

[79] With regard to the relationship between the ornamentation of yams during ceremonial displays and of the body of initiates, see Coupaye (2013: 9); Forge (1966: 28) and Hauser-Schäublin (1994: 142-144).
[80] This list is based on the terminology found in most museum inventories. It is in no way exhaustive and presents a number of important epistemological and classificatory problems which will be addressed later on. It is nonetheless helpful so far for the sake of clarity.

the Wosera **(Map 4)**. As has been discussed earlier, the predilection for collecting in these specific locations could be explained by the presence of local infrastructures, especially roads and airfields facilitating access to the villages and the transport of artefacts.[81] Some villages have therefore been the scene of many anthropological fieldworks and collecting endeavours. That is particularly the case of Kalabu, where Phyllis Kaberry first conducted fieldwork in the Abelam over nine months between 1939 and 1940 (Kaberry 1940-41; 1941; 1942) and set the trend for many more to come. After the Second World War, Anthony Forge acquired around 60 artefacts in Kalabu during his collecting trip on behalf of the Basel Museum für Völkerkunde in 1962-63. A year later, in 1964, D. Miles and M. Cameron bought some 150 objects from Kalabu for the Australian Museum. In 1966, Gerd Koch was based in the same village for his collecting trip, and it is also where William Dargie commissioned the *haus tambaran* façade he acquired for the National Gallery of Australia in 1969. Later on, this was once more the village that Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin chose to conduct her fieldwork (over extended periods of time between 1978 and 1985) and where she commissioned another ceremonial house façade for the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel.

Other factors explaining the important production of material culture in specific locations and/or the willingness of people to part with these artefacts have been addressed in Chapter 3. What is nonetheless interesting to note is that some of these villages also take on a deeper significance within the Abelam cosmology. This is the case of Apangai and its numerous hamlets, where Diane Losche and later Dirk Smidt and Noel Mc Guigan acquired substantial collections, respectively for the Australian Museum (1980) and the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde (1987). Apangai is indeed at the heart of two of the main Abelam narratives recounting the stories of Wapigen (also spelt Wapiken or Wapikany) and of Sërapwan (or Serapan).[82] In both cases, Apangai holds a central place in relation to the cultivation of long yams and is even considered as being the location from where long yam ceremonies originate (Mc Guigan 1989: n.p.; Coupaye 2013: 232), thus being a prominent spiritual centre, whose influence radiates over the region. The fact that large collections of material come from this

[81] For more information on the development of local infrastructures in the Abelam region from the post-war era onwards, refer to Chapter 2.
[82] For detailed accounts of these stories, see Gerrits (2012: 289-291); Coupaye (2013: 199) about Wapigen/Wapiken/Wapikany and Gerrits (2012: 334-335); Coupaye (2013: 200) and Hauser-Schäublin (1989a: 199) about Sërapwan/Serapan. Apangai means "the place of the bones", as it is said that it is where the bones of Wapigen rest (Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993: 128-129).

specific village is therefore not inconsequential, but rather testifies to another layer of the significance of such assemblages.

Outlining such convergences also contributes, as emphasised by Robert J. Foster:

> to understanding the geographical nature of collections and practices of collecting, that is, the ways in which processes of acquisition and exchange stretch across space and trace a network of mutually defining objects, people, and places. (Foster 2012: 151)

This "network of mutually defining objects, people, and places" is further noticeable when comparing the names of Abelam and Wosera artists associated with museum collections. Indeed, alongside similitudes in typologies and geographical provenance, and in many respects intertwined with these previous observations, it appears that several artists' names (when recorded by collectors) were repeatedly encountered in the collections' inventories, and sometimes with a significant time interval between when the different collecting enterprises took place. The practice of naming individual artists appears at times problematic, paradoxically imposing external Eurocentric frameworks and values, therefore perpetuating the power imbalance in creating a new externally imposed 'art' status for the object while trying to counter the anonymity in which most ethnographic collections are still maintained (see for instance von Oswald 2020: 120-122; Clifford 1988). However, it seems that in our case identified Abelam individuals did play an essential role in fashioning Abelam museum assemblages, in particular a number of influential artists – a prestigious emic status acknowledged within Abelam society (see Chapter 2). Among others, I would like to highlight the cases of four of them: Waiwu Urula, Waulemoi, Bangi Mali and Nera Jambruku.[83]

The works of Waiwu Urula **(Fig. 59)** from Kalabu village no. 1 feature prominently in the Berlin collection[84] and were acquired by Gerd Koch on behalf of the Museum für Völkerkunde in 1966 **(Fig. 8)**. Interestingly, and as has been previously noted, it seems that three years later Waiwu Urula was also one of the privileged interlocutors of William Dargie, during his collecting trip in 1969 for the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board on behalf of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. The façade he was commissioned to create[85] **(Fig. 20)** testifies to his reputation as one of the most renowned painters of the region at the time (Hauser-Schäublin 2016: 68). Dargie also

[83] For more biographical details, see Chapters 2 and 3.
[84] Waiwu Urula notably created – among many other artefacts – the façade of the yam storage house (VI 48639), as well as the carved lintel *tékét* (VI 48603).
[85] Inventory nos. 69.230.145.A-F and 69.230.144 (carved lintel *tékét*), both created with Gunjel.

collected a number of sculptures **(Fig. 100)**,[86] as well as two *karawut* mouth pendants **(Fig. 101)**[87] created by Waiwu Urula.

His 'successor', the painter Waulemoi **(Fig. 68)** of Kalabu no. 2, Numbunggen hamlet, formerly known as Kopira (Hauser-Schäublin 2016: 68, note 50; Koch 1968: 40), is also represented through his works in several collections. Koch collected a large sculpture of the clan ancestor (*gwalndu)* Bira[88] **(Fig. 102)** that Kopira/Waulemoi had created in 1965 for the erection of a new *haus tambaran* in Kalabu no. 2. But what would remain his most famous piece as part of a museum collection is the 16.8m high façade[89] commissioned by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin on behalf of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel in 1980, which is currently still on display **(Fig. 33)**.

Another celebrated artist whose prolific work is found across museum collections is the Wosera potter Bangi Mali **(Fig. 66)** from Sarikim no. 1. His extensive pottery production has been discussed in Chapter 3, but it is worth pointing out that not only his clay artefacts, but also other objects of his making have been identified in at least three museum collections: in the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Leiden,[90] collected in the 1970s by Fred Gerrits **(Figs. 103 to 105)**; painted panels in the British Museum,[91] collected in 1980 by Dorota Starzecka **(Fig. 106)**; but also in the Australian Museum, acquired in 1979-1980 by Diane Losche[92] and by Fred Gerrits in the 1970s, later bought by Losche on behalf of the Australian Museum in 1984-86.[93]

Finally, the works of Nera Jambruku **(Fig. 61)** from Apangai village, thanks to his strong collaboration with Losche in 1979-80 and later with Smidt and Mc Guigan in 1987, can be found not only at the Australian Museum in Sydney[94] but also in Leiden at the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen **(Figs. 48, 50 and 107)**.[95] Interestingly,

[86] Inventory nos. 69.230.71 (male figure 'Yagwadmo'), 69.230.72 (male figure 'Imowati') and 69.230.73 (smaller male figure 'Kiagliagin').
[87] Inventory nos. 69.230.69 and 69.230.70.
[88] Inventory no. VI 48564.
[89] Inventory no. Vb 28556 a-i.
[90] Inventory nos. RV-5002-51; RV-5002-59; RV-5002-71.
[91] Inventory nos. Oc1980,11.145 to Oc1980,11.150.
[92] Inventory nos. E76832 (*kutagwa* clay whiste); E76837 and E76838 (daggers); E76839, E76840, E76841 and E76842 (bone lime spatulas); E77680 (sago peg).
[93] Inventory nos. E79327 (1-10) and E80544 (1-11) (yam displays).
[94] Inventory nos. E76693; E76802; E76803; E76807; E76814; E76823; E76824; E76835; E77114; E77119; E77121 to E77124; E77135; E77136; E77146; E77171; E77609; E81599; E87185; E87463 to E87465; E87511 to E87518.
[95] Inventory nos. RV-5526-0-2 and RV-5526-0-36 (the whole internal painted façade of the Gambawut room created with Kipa Wian); RV-5526-384-05/07/08a/10/12/15; RV-5526-385-29/42; RV-5526-386-02/02a/14/15a/16/17/18. Nera also created the *haus tambaran* façade that was collected in Brikiti hamlet.

it appears that some of his works were also collected earlier by Gerrits in Bongiora, where Nera had contributed to the creation of the initiation scene. As pointed out by Gerrits, there is a degree of cooperation between *ara* of different villages, and one of the villages whose *ara* cooperated with one of the *ara* in Bongiora was Apangai:

> Members of a cooperative *ara* will help the Bigara [initiating moiety, which organises and performs the initiation] with the preparation of the display and during the initiation ceremony itself. For example, one of the Apangai *ara* helped the Bongiora Bigara by carving an important statue for them. This statue was carried to Bongiora, later painted there, and then called Ragi. Thus, although being carved in a village with a different *ngwallndu*, the statue eventually received the name of Bongiora's Wakenara's [the moiety that is being initiated] *ngwallndu*. [...] By accepting such statues with gratitude, the Bigara thereby accepts a debt, which eventually will have to be paid back when Apangai [...] will organize their own ceremony. (Gerrits 2012: 114)

Consequently, the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart holds a prominent sculpture by Nera, which depicts the *gwalndu* Ragi,[96] and which used to be displayed lying on the ground in the Lungwallndu room of the *haus tambaran* in Bongiora (Gerrits 2012: 395) (**Figs. 23, 24 and 91**, originally right sculpture on the floor, but placed to the left in the Linden-Museum reconstruction). Another carving of Ragi by Nera[97] can be found in Basel, originating from the other initiation room (Putilago) of the ceremonial house in Bongiora (**Figs. 25, 26 and 34**, right Puti figure in the original display, central figure in the Museum der Kulturen reconstruction). Nera's renown locally and overseas culminated with the 1988 creation of a 10 metre-high *haus tambaran* façade,[98] for which he led the creation. The façade was commissioned by Jean-Hubert Martin for the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, displayed at the Centre Pompidou and Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris (Martin 1989: 156-57) **(Figs. 108 and 109)**.[99]

The presence of these artists through their work – and these are only a few telling examples – across collections and sometimes throughout extended periods of time testifies to the importance of certain Abelam individuals in the constitution of these assemblages. It is also interesting to note, as in the case of Nera Jambruku, that some

[96] Inventory no. S 40682.
[97] Inventory no. Vb 28418.
[98] Bought in 1990 by the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris (inventory no. AM 1990-34).
[99] Although beyond the scope of this research, the commission and display of an Abelam ceremonial house façade as part of such a turning point exhibition in the recognition of what was then termed 'global contemporary art' deserves to be pointed out here. It further illustrates how the *haus tambaran* eventually became the epitome of Abelam (material) culture.

of the works by identified artists were not necessarily collected in their village of origin, thus enticing us to reflect on the much more complex provenance of such artefacts and on the interwoven relationships between artists, places, contexts and processes of production in the creation of the Abelam object-scape.

Moreover, the Abelam 'ideal collection' or object-scape progressively created within museum institutions was not fixed: Abelam material culture changed throughout the second half of the 20th century, as did collectors' tastes, and what was then represented within museum collections.

## 2. Commissioning Abelam

Collecting Abelam often went hand in hand with commissioning specific items according to the needs and/or wishes of the museum collectors. Such requests were often formulated in order for the collectors to document creation processes, notably carving but also painting techniques. As early as 1955-56, Alfred Bühler and René Gardi commissioned one of the renowned painters of Ulupu, an old man named Namgu, to demonstrate bark painting and in order for them "to discover the source of these colours and how they are ground down" (Gardi 1960: 143) **(Fig. 110)**. Gardi tried to persuade him, with the help of a few Abelam men, to paint for him, in order to film the whole process, but Namgu was reluctant to engage in such an activity, even for money and with the possible outcome of his work being bought on behalf of the museum in Basel. It took a lot of negotiation to finally convince him to paint the sago-spathe panel Gardi had provided him. As the latter recounted:

> I hurried off for my camera and he patiently let himself be persuaded to carry the whole painting out of the shade into the bright square. For about four hours he was busy with four helpers painting on the piece of bark – which was about two yards square – a mask exactly like those which cover the front of the spirit houses everywhere in the Ulupu district. [...] It was entertaining to watch the figure gradually grow and assume a definite shape, to take a few photographs from time to time, and shoot a few more feet of film. [...] I realized very vividly on that afternoon how exciting it must be to watch when some twenty boys, under the orders of a master, painted the whole front of a Tambaran house [...]. But I was quite content; we had after all seen how one of the great grotesque faces was made, and we could now appreciate the work as a whole much better. When the picture was finished and there was scarcely a trace of the ground colour visible anywhere, Namgu put the painting up against the wall of our house again, grinned, and gave a friendly laugh.

> Then he went home without mentioning payment. [...] We had to take the money we had promised him to his house. (Gardi 1960: 145-147)

The artificial nature of the whole commission process is particularly exacerbated here: the payment of an individual painter for his work outside of any ceremonial context; the individuation of the painting process which would have customarily been done in a group under the supervision of a master painter; the insistence on having the painting process performed in the open rather than in a secluded space only in order to meet the technical requirements of camera recording – all these appear retrospectively problematic and contrast with later examples of museum commissions.

Indeed, this idea of documenting and completing the collection via specific commissioning was further conducted for Basel twenty-five years later by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, in a very different manner and through what she termed "applied research" with the prospect of an exhibition project (Hauser-Schäublin 2016: x). The Museum für Völkerkunde was indeed planning to reconstruct a *haus tambaran*, displaying a façade which had been acquired in Kuminibus by Panzenböck in the 1960s alongside the Puti initiation scene collected by Fred Gerrits in Bongiora **(Fig. 34)**. Unfortunately, the façade was too tall to fit into the allocated exhibition space. Hauser-Schäublin thus conducted this research trip to Kalabu accompanied by her husband Jörg Hauser, in order to commission a façade whose dimensions would fit precisely within the display constraints, while thoroughly documenting the painting and architectural techniques, as well as other aspects of Abelam ceremonial life. The painter in charge of the façade was Waulemoi of Numbunggen hamlet **(Fig. 68)**.[100] At first, the idea of creating a façade not destined for a new *haus tambaran* but for a museum was dismissed by some Abelam artists, since they did not know what a museum was. But as Waulemoi, the master artist, had already sold artefacts to museum collectors and art dealers, he accepted. Despite this specific commission context, the façade was created following the customary prescriptions and restrictions: painting was happening in a secluded and fenced location, while the painters were respecting food and sex taboos. The frame on which the sago-spathe panels were attached was however constructed by Jörg Hauser and made of small timber, and not of bamboo as would normally have been the case. The reason was that the façade had to exactly fit into the museum hall and the *haus tambaran* built

[100] For further information about the detailed steps of the façade painting, see Hauser-Schäublin 2016: 67-77.

there. Moreover, the 12-metre high façade could not be transported in one piece. Therefore, the frame made of timber could be disassembled into nine pieces of equal length for the transport and later easily put together for the mounting of the façade to the house. Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin also documented the preparation of paint, while her husband documented the whole architectural process (especially the various lashing and binding techniques) in order to be able to reconstruct the façade and house structure once back in Basel. It had been envisaged that some men from Kalabu might have travelled to Basel to construct the *haus tambaran* and install the freshly made façade, but it soon became apparent that it would be too complicated in terms of logistics and none of the artists had ever been outside of the East Sepik Province (Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, personal communication, 15 June 2018).

However, the commissioning of artefacts was not always a matter of documenting their creation process. It could also be justified when certain coveted objects were not available for sale. As previously discussed, in the late 1960s, during his first collecting trip to Papua New Guinea, William Dargie commissioned the painters of Kalabu to not only produce a painted panel, but a whole façade on behalf of the National Gallery of Australia **(Fig. 20)**. Apart from a few instructions about the size of the façade, he left the two main painters in charge, and very little – if any – documentation was compiled. The Assistant District Commissioner, Michael Cockburn, was asked to deal with payment and storage once the façade had been completed:

> During my visit to Kalabu yesterday I completed arrangements for WAIU and GUNJEL to paint and carve a whole front of a 60' Haus Tambaran, everything to be in the old style and with old colours. There is hardly any need for these stipulations because the old way of doing things is alive as long as old painters and carvers like Waiu and Gunjel are alive, and the god Gwando is still sacred in the perpetual darkness of the Haus Tambaran. The cost of this complete façade cannot be known until the work is finished. It should not be excessive. (NGA FD Dargie, 12 February 1969: 52)

Finally, some commissions were also made in order to restore or replace certain parts of initiation displays at the discretion of the collectors. This was the case in 1973 when Fred Gerrits agreed to acquire the two initiation chambers from Bongiora on condition that the painted and carved components of the scene would be restored to their initial state (Gerrits 2012: 22) **(Figs. 24 and 26)**. As explained by Gerrits:

> When the author and his wife first visited the Haus Tambaran in late 1972 the initiations had been completed about 6 months earlier. Although all sculptures and paintings had been left in their original positions, many of the items of value that were used to decorate

> them had been returned to their owners, and the leaves and bush fruits that once brightened the Lu scene had shrivelled or fallen apart. [...] upon our request the men of Bongiora restored the Lungwallndu room to its original state. They decorated the floor [...] with multi-coloured leaves and orange bush fruits, the statues with Hibiscus flowers [...], added the lost spear and placed the statue in its original position. However, they could not muster the many shell rings [...] that had been laid out on the floor in longitudinal rows parallel to the *ngwallndu* statues during the initiations [...]. Also missing from the reconstructed scene were the *Ovula ovum* shell girdles [...] and the crest feathers of the white cockatoo [...], which normally decorate the cane fence. (Nonetheless at a later date the author obtained both the shell girdles and crest feathers from another source and they now form part of the total Lungwallndu scene housed in Stuttgart). Informants repeatedly stressed the lightening effect on the whole scene of the display of white leaves, white shell rings, white stones and white *Ovula ovum* shells. (Gerrits 2012: 56-57)

A similar process was undertaken concerning the Putilago room:

> Although all carved and painted objects had been left in their original position, much of the decorative material had either withered or been removed. Thus the arms and legs of both statues had sagged, their head dresses had been removed and Balimo (the statue on the left [...]) had been attacked by termites. As with the Lu room, the villagers were asked to restore the room, to the greatest extent, to its original state. (Gerrits 2012: 73)

A similar request was formulated in 1987 when Dirk Smidt and Noel Mc Guigan collected the contents of the three initiation chambers of the ceremonial house in Nyambikwa hamlet, Apangai. For instance, the limbs of the Puti figure had to be replaced according to Smidt and Mc Guigan **(Fig. 56)**, as was its giant feather *waken* headdress **(Fig. 111)** (Mc Guigan and Smidt 1993: 135). Abelam views on these restoration processes have unfortunately not been made clearly explicit, and such a refurbishment process could appear somehow counter-intuitive for artefacts which would have eventually and for the most part been left to decay. The anecdote of Koch asking to Waiwu Urula to join him in Wewak in 1966, to repaint the damaged yam storage house façade he had bought from him, before shipping it to Germany[101] can nonetheless testify to the possible acceptance and willingness of Abelam artists to undertake these restoration processes. Some larger sculptures were sometimes kept and washed in the river before being repainted on occasion of another ceremony. It was however understood that certain elements of initiation displays, such as the

[101] See Chapter 2.

precious Tridacna shell rings, could not be included in the sale, as these would be recirculated as exchange wealth in other circumstances (as detailed in Chapter 3).

Commissioning new items and/or the restoration of existing ones thereby contributed to shaping Abelam museum collections in accordance with collectors' representations of what Abelam artefacts in the museum should look like.

## 3. Collaborating with Abelam people: the Abelam Gallery at the Australian Museum

Another strategy which contributed to the creation of Abelam museum collections was the collaboration with Abelam artists, as is best exemplified in the case of the Abelam Gallery at the Australian Museum.

Since 1975, the Australian Museum had been planning the renovation of its Pacific Gallery: instead of presenting a superficial overview of various Pacific cultures, it was agreed to focus on one selected Pacific Island culture, which was to be examined in depth. The main idea was to "give as complete as possible a picture of everyday life using artefacts from [their] collections and new items collected from field trips by officers from the Australian Museum", the area to be represented being chosen during a dedicated field trip conducted in Papua New Guinea in May 1978 by Jim Specht (Curator of Anthropology) and Jeffrey Freeman (Exhibition Officer). The criteria presiding over the selection of the area were "the beauty and availability of the art forms and, of course, the willingness of the people themselves to participate in the exhibition" (AMS 207/3: 'A Papua New Guinea village at the Australian Museum Sydney', 1977/78).

In the Maprik area, Specht and Freeman visited the Maprik Cultural Centre **(Figs. 84 to 88)** as well as *haus tambarans* in eight villages, while establishing contacts with some master carvers. A short trip was also conducted in the Wosera territory, but the two villages they visited (not named in the report) did not present any *haus tambaran* at the time. The northern Abelam region was thus chosen as the one to be displayed at the Australian Museum,[102] praising the visual qualities and vigour of its artistic practices, the willingness of Abelam people to collaborate on the project as well as the comparatively easy access to the region. It was therefore decided to design an Abelam

[102] The other regions which had been considered were the Middle/Upper Sepik (Iatmul, Kwoma) or Balimo (Gogodala).

village setting including a *haus tambaran* **(Figs. 30 and 31)**, a yam storage house, and a living (sleeping/cooking) house. Three trips to the Abelam region were planned, the first in order to choose the village and artists who would collaborate on the gallery project, and two further journeys to collect and commission the necessary material and gather information and photographic material. The project was to be conducted by a team including an anthropologist, a designer, an education officer, a photographer and a conservator (AMS 235/1334: 'Pacific Gallery: P.N.G. Reconnaissance Trip 1978', 16 June 1978).

According to the project proposal, it was envisioned:

> to commission master craftsmen from the Maprik area to make additional items. In particular we need good examples of the main architecture – spirit house, yam store house and a living house – and of the large wood carvings of spirit figures (*ngwalndu*) which are kept inside the spirit house. [...] To ensure authentic presentation of these buildings within the gallery, the Museum proposed to arrange for two Abelam craftsmen to spend three months in Sydney to supervise the construction of the major components. [...] It is anticipated that one 7m high [*haus tambaran*] will be commissioned for The Australian Museum's display due to the limitation of the gallery ceiling height. (AMS 235/1334: 'The Abelam People – a new gallery at the Australian Museum, Australian Museum', 1978/79)

In 1979 Diane Losche was appointed as Assistant Curator of Anthropology and Abelam Gallery Scientific Officer to lead the Abelam Gallery project. After her first collecting field trip in this capacity during September and October 1979, she conducted a second field trip from 1 June to 31 August 1980, this time accompanied by Sue Walton (Conservation Officer), Jeff Freeman (Designer and Exhibition Officer) and Howard Hughes (Cinematographer). This trip was dedicated to the commission of the *haus tambaran* and initiation scene, as well as the yam storage house and the sleeping/cooking house. Under Losche's overall supervision of the project, Walton was in charge of documenting the materials and manufacturing techniques in order to better preserve the material collected; Freeman aimed to document the architectural structures as much as possible to be able to rebuild them in the Abelam Gallery, while supervising the packing and transporting of the commissioned houses; and finally, Hughes was gathering material for a documentary film on the way of life of Apangai villagers to accompany the planned display.

A third and final trip was undertaken during July and August 1981 by G. Hangay and Mr Dingley (Preparators), to collect flora and fauna specimens for the Abelam Gallery (AMS 235/1334: 'Proposed Overseas Visit to Papua New Guinea', 27 May 1981).

Beyond the commission of a *haus tambaran* façade, as well as an initiation scene, and the other architectural features, all according to clearly established practical specifications (to fit the museum gallery), the collaboration with Abelam artists was perceived from the onset to be an essential component to the success of the project. One of the aspects of this collaboration was the fact that the artefact commissioning was planned in such a way as to cause as little disruption as possible to the seasonal cycle and working patterns of the villagers of Apangai, while working within the framework of the village social organisation (AMS 235/1334: 'Proposal for Anthropological Fieldwork in East Sepik Province 1979', 1979). The initiation scene which was commissioned by the Australian Museum was therefore temporarily placed within the village *haus tambaran*, where an initiation ceremony was performed.

Concerning the acquisition practice, Losche wrote:

> While this method of collection, that is, buying objects after they have been made, is not as desirable as that carried out in Apangai village where we were able to see the objects made and used, nevertheless it allows one to collect many items from a number of areas in a short period of time. Many of the items purchased will be used in the gallery. A total of 174 items were purchased in this manner from the villages of Ulupu, Malnba, Yenigo, Kasagu, Patigo, Jama, Apangai, Micau, Kamge, Kwimbu, Mylac. (AMS 235/1334: 'Abelam Field Trip Report', 1980: 10-11)

During the installation of the gallery, two Abelam artists, Nera Jambruku and Narikowi Konbapa **(Fig. 62)**, travelled to Sydney in September 1981 for a planned visit for two months in order to supervise the reconstruction of the different architectural assemblages. The aim was to "ensure the continued input of Abelam ideas about the presentation of their own society within a gallery" (AMS 235/1334: 'Abelam Field Trip Report', 1980: 7, 9-10). Nera and Narikowi thus actively contributed to the display by advising the museum designers, but also by assisting with painting and decorating some of the artefacts to be displayed. Losche, who was in charge of the Abelam Gallery project at the time, worked towards making this collaboration a success, even hosting the two men at her home (AMS 235/1334: letter from Losche to the Australian Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs April/May 1981). She knew the two Apangai men since the late 1970s when she had conducted her fieldwork in the region, and was the only person on the team to speak Tok Pisin fluently. It became the lingua franca between the three of them, since none of the two Abelam men were

fluent in English and Losche could not speak Ambulas well enough (Losche 1996: 305).

Through the Abelam Gallery project, the process of collecting Abelam thus took on another dimension, that of an explicit conversation involving Abelam actors not only in the constitution of the collection, but also in its display, thereby pushing the collecting dialogue and the Abelam response to collecting processes a step further. Although taking on a relatively new discursive dimension, such a co-collecting and exhibiting project nonetheless testified to the ongoing unbalanced nature of the collaboration process, where Abelam people, especially Nera Jambruku and Narikowi Konbapa, were consulted and actively contributed in some ways to the enterprise, but were not the ones who initiated it, nor were they in charge of the project. The agency of Abelam individuals in shaping such assemblages therefore needs to be traced back through different narratives, allowing for local perspectives on collecting practices to surface.

## II. Translating, containing and becoming Abelam in the museum

> Classification, as the primary act of scholarly museography, contains a phenomenon by naming it. Performative, it nails each experience to the prefabricated cross of meaning. (Bensa 2006: 130, translated from French).

What happened to the enormous volume of material collected in the Abelam region once it entered the museum realm? How were these complex assemblages of objects – but also of all the human and non-human agents previously discussed – integrated into the institutional contexts of museums? What processes did these assemblages go through and how was their dialogic nature and multiplicity translated within these new institutional contexts?

The transformation processes undergone by objects within museum institutions, especially cataloguing and classifying issues, have been broadly discussed recently (Bolton 2001; Byrne *et al.* 2011a; Cameron and Robinson 2007; Cameron and Mengler 2009; Chapman 2015; Geismar 2018; Geismar and Mohns 2011; Harrison *et al.* 2013; Jacobs 2012, 2019; Karp and Kratz 2014, 2015; Krmpotich and Somerville 2016;

Silverman 2015; Thomas 2016; Turner 2016 – to cite only a few), and this part aims to shed new light on museum "strategies used to reconstruct, retell and represent the narratives of objects and the persons with whom they are or once were associated" (Dudley 2012: 1). It is through the prism of collections as museum processes that Abelam assemblages will now be envisioned.

The transition point of entry of the collection into the museum is first and foremost operated through a fundamental musealisation process of translation of values and meanings inscribed in and around objects travelling between the creator communities of the Abelam region and the different museums under study (Silverman 2015: 3-4). The second process that will be analysed is the containment, if not silencing, of the collection's complexity, with regard to specific classifying categories such as the provenance of the objects. The ultimate process resulting from the incorporation of the assemblages within museum institutions is the (re)definition of what Abelam signifies, in the museum context and beyond.

As reminded by Bowker and Star, classification systems and categories are "historically situated artifacts, and are "both conceptual (in the sense of persistent patterns of change and action, resources for organizing abstractions) and material (in the sense of being inscribed, transported, and affixed to stuff)" (Bowker and Star 1999: 287, 289; see also von Oswald 2020). They are in no way neutral, and the way they are implemented, their consequences and limits will now be analysed with regard to Abelam assemblages in the museum.

## 1. Translating Abelam into museum knowledge systems

From catalogue cards to online databases, the incorporation and classification of objects within museum knowledge systems implies a necessary translation process,[103] in order to make sense of this very large amount of material. To translate etymologically means "to transfer", "to carry across", thus implying the notion of movement from one place to another. Hence, the collection, by nature, implies a translation if we understand it in its original sense, that is a movement of things, a spatial change, in our case from the Abelam region of Papua New Guinea to various

[103] Translations have been the focus of numerous studies whose contents are beyond the scope of this research. One can refer, among others, to Benjamin (2012 [1923]), Asad (1986), or more recently Clifford (2013: 48-49).

museum institutions around the globe, without mentioning the numerous intermediary storage and transition places. But what I would like to focus on is the phenomenon of translation understood as the interpretation, transformation and displacement of meaning correlated with this change of location, as well as the agencies at play within these processes (Glass and Phillips 2010).[104] Going back to Actor-Network theories and methodologies, translation is understood here to be a process "which generates ordering effects", as "a verb which implies transformation and the possibility of equivalence, the possibility that one thing (for example, an actor) may stand for another (for instance a network)" – in short, translation is a process through which "actors and organizations mobilize, juxtapose, and hold together the bits and pieces out of which they are composed" (Law 1992: 386).

Therefore, the translation process is always a complex one, and necessarily a problematic, approximate one; with its "imperfect equivalences" (Clifford 1997: 11), it always implies some misunderstanding, some loss of meaning while some other elements or values are created and added.

In addition to the physical migration of material objects, it is the movement and translation of knowledge associated with and inscribed into them that seems the most complex and fluctuating:

> Although it is an abstraction, knowledge seems to exist as a remarkably concrete notion, as something that can move through space and time, something that can be shared between cultures and across generations. However, in its migrations it is always reshaped. [...] its substance invariably changes as it moves through space (from culture to culture) and time (from generation to generation). [...] The movement of objects of knowledge between a community of origin and a museum [...] is a multivalent political, economic, social and cultural process. (Silverman 2015: 3)

The first level of translation, and maybe the most obvious one, lies in the translation of the vernacular names of items from several Ambulas dialects, with countless written transcriptions (more or less erroneous), or Tok Pisin, to not only English, but also to German and Dutch terminologies. Beyond the literal translation of the name, it is also the incorporation and classification of such concepts in the various museum knowledge systems which takes the translation a step further. Such a process will be discussed, taking for example the telling case of several *yéna* (also recorded as *ina,*

[104] The translation process from one documentation technology to another, i.e., from registers and cataloguing cards to online databases, constitutes another level of museum translation and classification issues, along which information is often lost in translation.

*jiwi*,[105] *yina*,[106] or *ako*, *narina*,[107] or *akau*, *aaggo*, *yunna*[108]), made of a carved cassowary (or more rarely human) bone. Similar artefacts such as the items Oc1980,11.239 (British Museum, London), WM-49741 (Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam), 69.230.61 (National Gallery of Australia, Canberra), RV-5526-161 (Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Leiden), Vb 16491 (Museum der Kulturen, Basel) **(Fig. 112)** have been respectively registered as '(bone) dagger' in English, '*dolk*' in Dutch, and '*(Knochen)dolch*' in German. While being translated into these seemingly equivalent words, these *yéna* then became integrated into different pre-existing thesaurus sub-categories of artefacts, thus imposing a new framework of understanding onto those objects. In the British Museum, the Wereldmuseum and the National Gallery of Australia they are thus categorised as and limited to their status of weapon, while in the Museum der Kulturen, the mention '*als Verzierung*' ('as ornament') is added, and in the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen it is categorised as being part of '*cultus- en andere heilige objecten*' ('cult and other sacred objects'), thus adding another layer of meaning to its narrative. However, none of these translations and categories fully reflect the "epistemological patina" (Silverman 2015: 3) of these objects. Indeed, in 1962-63, Forge had already noted the permeating importance of *yéna* in several aspects of Abelam society:

> Yina, carved cassowary bone daggers are very important throughout the Abelam having a vital symbolic function to play in the tambaran cult as well as being used in the yam cult [...]. In the S.Wosera small thin carvings with pointed bases so that they can be stuck into the ground, are freely used in important tambaran ceremonies and are called yina. (MKB Einlauf V_0392)

As explained by Hauser-Schäublin:

> In earlier days, the people used to excavate the bones and keep the humerus (*ngguai*) of the most important clan ancestors, occasionally also the skull. The bones served the purpose of attracting the netherworldly powers, above all the ancestors, in the context of the yam cult. Before going on a raid, the old men used to show the young warriors the *ngguai*; these were often engraved and called *yina* in this function. Viewing the *yina* was said to lend the young fighters courage and fighting spirit and to make them practically invulnerable. (Hauser-Schäublin 2016: 103)

[105] Gerrits (2012: 422, 424).
[106] Forge (1966: 30); Hauser-Schäublin (2016: 201).
[107] Koch (1968: 76-77).
[108] In the inventory list of the collection acquired by Alfred Bühler in 1955-56 for the Museum für Völkerkunde in Basel.

She continues, noting that beyond fighting and war-related values, *yéna* were essential as part of the ceremonial displays for the highest levels of initiation:

> Apart from the mighty *nggilenggwal* figures themselves, shell rings and cassowary bone daggers (*yina*) constitute important components of the initiation scenes. Beside or in front of the figures, bone daggers decorated with feather tufts are stuck in the ground (*narina*). [...] Puti stands for the ultimate ending in this gradual process of unravelling – but only few men ever get to experience it. [...] In other words, Puti is the personified cosmos that contains everything that humans need. At the same time he is void because he has passed on all *maira*, actually the secrets of life as such, to the men in initiation, granting them the knowledge to grow yam and perform the rituals they need to manage daily life. The Puti figure, equipped with the claws of the cassowary, also stands for the mythical cassowary woman, one of the major culture heroes among the Abelam people and neighbouring groups. It was the cassowary woman who built the first ceremonial house. [...] The cassowary representation also finds expression in the cassowary bone daggers that feature in the *nggwalndu* initiation scenes [...]. (Hauser-Schäublin 2016: 169-170)

Whether worn as *ako,* a body adornment on the upper arm by men (Hauser-Schäublin 2016: 187), as a symbol of male aggression (Forge 1966: 30), used in relation to yam growing and as part of initiation displays (Hauser-Schäublin 2016: 169-170), or to seal the relationships between two exchange partners (Gerrits 2012: 199-204; Newton 1989: 316), *yéna* embody complex cosmological associations, linking back to both human and mythical ancestors.[109] The complex engraved designs also echo patterns carved and painted as part of initiation scenes and/or on the *haus tambaran* façade (Newton 1989: 316-318).

Therefore, these "losses and slippages" (Glass and Phillips 2010: n.p.) are paradoxically the most telling about museum translation and classification practices: by trying to make sense of these objects, their emic senses and meanings are most of the time (partly) silenced, if not completely erased. The example of *yéna* is only one among the multitude of artefacts collected during the second half of the 20th century in the Abelam region, and almost any other typology of object could have illustrated such classification matters. However, it epitomizes questions around epistemological intersections and frictions that museums need to navigate in order to manage their collections. As pointed out by Karp and Kratz:

> Translations are not just across languages but involve bridging and understanding different forms and ways of knowing as defined in varied social and historical settings.

[109] About the mythical cassowary Kwatbil, see Losche (1997; 1999).

> How do objects, photographs, oral narratives, and maps produce and encode different forms of knowledge? How do community and museum-based epistemologies intersect and clash around each? How did early scholars and travellers understand and shape the collections we have inherited and what community collaborations were involved? How can museums accommodate community understandings that define some objects as living beings, connected with ancestral spirits [...]? (Karp and Kratz 2015: 280)

By labelling alien categories and classifications onto the collected items, museum institutions separated them into exclusive categories although they were not originally understood in such terms. As reminded by Forge, "Abelam art is about relationships, not about things" (Forge 1970: 290). As such, Mc Guigan explained:

> in context, permanent objects are elaborated with decorative appendages of feathers, feather headdresses, shell decoration, leaves and fruit. No art object is seen in isolation but in combination with many others of a similar class and form, perhaps differing in content, and with decorative elaboration. [...] It is in the context of ritual that Abelam art communicates meaning. In ritual, patterns of cultural meaning emerge, relationships are given visual expression and themes expressed. (Mc Guigan 1992: 12)

The affective and effective presence of all the elements of initiation displays inside the ceremonial house, which is thought of as a womb (*wut*) from which the newly initiated men will emerge, has been eloquently summarised by Losche:

> I suggest that the painting and carving which occur in the *korombo* [...] are more suitably linked to chemical or alchemical laboratories in which materials are assembled together and placed in contiguity with one another in order to create the conditions for the transformations, productions and reproductions which Abelam men hope to control. This transformative system is a most elaborate one [...]. To prepare for initiations men make paintings and carvings which are assembled in the *korombo*. Once these are assembled a number of objects, for example, white stones, red flowers, whitish leaves, bones, either human, cassowary or even cow, and white shell rings are placed in front of the paintings and carvings. [...] All of these objects are chosen or made, including the song, because they have some quality, or function that will make the entire assemblage a transmitter of transformative force as well as very beautiful and desirable to the initiates, who will be shown the entire assemblage under the flickering light of bamboo torches or flashlights. [...] In sum, all of the objects are used because they have a characteristic or activity which, when placed in contiguity with all the other objects and subjected to heat and love songs, make the entire assemblage attractive, beautiful and powerfully transformative of men's desires. (Losche 1997: 44)

This understanding of Abelam material culture, notably as part of initiation displays, as a comprehensive and transformative whole whose parts cannot be understood in isolation, has been mostly lost through the translation of the objects into the museum knowledge system. Indeed, in most museum databases and cataloguing records, each painted panel, sculpture, and other items are attributed an individual inventory number, consequently becoming a stand-alone object. Such practice points to the possible hiatus between the meaning and narratives of an object when singled out or when apprehended as part of a group (Karp and Kratz 2014: 52).

This problem of "conceptual fit" (Cameron and Robinson 2007: 167) between vernacular narratives and museum classification schemes also highlights the dissonance between two different ontologies and epistemological approaches. By extension, it points to the primary role of the museum as a knowledge-producing institution, replicating – when not creating – unbalanced relationships, therefore testifying to the power dynamics at stake in what would at first seem to be only specialist terminology quarrels.

Such classification systems, although considered a necessary translation of artefacts into museum objects, with the primary aim to make sure that objects could be easily found and identified, indeed had (and still have) consequences beyond the realm of the institution that implemented them. In turn, these typological and other classifying categories have influenced what has been assembled by later collectors, from the same institution, but also on behalf of other museums. By establishing clear categories and typologies of artefacts labelled as 'Abelam', they have therefore actively contributed to the making of the 'ideal' portrait of Abelam collections, and furthermore to the canonical representation (McChesney 2015: 138) of what 'Abelam material culture' is or what it should be according to museum institutions, or more precisely by individual museum practitioners. This constitution of a more or less rigidly defined 'Abelam' museum nomenclature, or what has been previously discussed as an Abelam 'object-scape' within the museum, consequently durably affected the way collecting Abelam was envisioned by museum collectors (and one could add private ones), sometimes preventing them from addressing or representing the dynamic and changing nature of Abelam material production (Cameron and Mengler 2009: 190-191). As has been previously discussed, these sets of features thus influenced (if not commanded) what needed to be acquired in order to have a 'complete' or 'valid' collection, transforming collecting plans into extremely precise wish-lists, and leading to uncompromising comments such as "without such

specimens, a Maprik collection can hardly be considered complete" (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 2 February 1960, translated from Dutch).

The translation and classification processes within museum knowledge systems appear even more contestable when dealing with "boundary objects" (Bowker and Star 1999: 297), that is objects whose epistemological frameworks and meanings are already unstable and multiple, testifying to complex entanglements. For example, this is the case for objects produced partly to respond to collectors' demands, such as the pottery produced by Bangi Mali, which to date remains classified as any other pot within museum collections, without acknowledging the more complex narrative from which it resulted and which it in turn contributed to create.

As summarised by Bowker and Star:

> Classifications are powerful technologies. Embedded in working infrastructures they become relatively invisible without losing any of that power. [...] classifications should be recognized as the significant site of political and ethical work that they are. They should be reclassified. (Bowker and Star 1999: 319)

Therefore, beyond the loss, de- and re-contextualisation of meaning, such translations and resulting classifications are not stable or definite, and as a "discursive practice" (Cameron and Mengler 2009: 213) only await re-appraisal.

## 2. Containing the collection: focus on provenance

Beyond pointing out that museum databases and categories do not accurately represent or encompass the reality and complexity of the objects they classify, I would like to unpack such limitations and inadequacy with regard to one specific (but particularly porous) classifying category, that is the registered items' 'provenance'. As emphasised by Diane Losche:

> Provenance, a category pertaining to origin and ownership, is the most significant of museum categories. However, these supposedly precise bits of information can obscure an important issue: that provenance is by far the most difficult and problematic of categories associated with museum objects. Questions such as: 'From where does the object come?', 'Where does an object originate?', 'Who collected it?' and 'What is its museum history?' may seem straightforward, but the answers are as interesting for their difficulties and absences as they are for the 'facts' that one can discover. (Losche 2013: 123)

Indeed, such a category can be understood in many ways: does it refer to the geographical provenance of an object, or does it equate with the cultural group from which the object originates (two notions which also need to be deconstructed)? Does it refer to a set of stylistic criteria? What does 'Abelam' *within the museum* mean?

The understanding of what 'Abelam' signifies has changed through time, not only locally but also for the numerous outsiders involved – among others, collectors, anthropologists, museum curators, etc. It is important to remember that it is the Arapesh who gave their neighbours such a name, and not the 'Abelam' themselves who originally identified under this ethnonym. It was Margaret Mead, working among the Arapesh, who first made use academically of the term 'Abelam' (Mead 1933: 38).[110] Later on, collecting expeditions from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s were also not limited to what could be defined as the 'Abelam' region, but were always extended to neighbouring areas, especially the Middle-Sepik.

Hence, when one looks at the vocabulary used by these 'early' collectors in the Abelam region, the term 'Abelam' is not always used to define the provenance of the artefacts or the region in itself. It seems that it is under the impulse of thorough anthropological research, and more specifically thanks to Anthony Forge, that the word became more commonly used.[111] It is worth noting that in the case of the collection assembled by Carel M.A. Groenevelt from 1959 onwards for Rotterdam, the Curator Victor Jansen only used the word 'Abelam' for the first time in correspondence in a letter to Groenevelt dated 10 August 1960 (SR 1407_149). He uses the term while reporting on Forge's visit to Rotterdam, referring to his comments on the collection.[112] Before, only the word 'Maprik' was used to geographically define the

[110] It was then adopted by Phyllis Kaberry, and by the following anthropologists and collectors who carried on projects in this area (Schroeder, 1992: 58).

[111] Paradoxically, Forge only defines 'Abelam' in relatively broad terms, as "a tribe of about 30,000 living on the southern foothills of the Torricelli Mountains in the Sepik District of the Trust Territory of New Guinea. They live in hilltop villages of 300 to 800 inhabitants. Each village is an autonomous political unit, and before the imposition of control by the Australian government, inter-village fighting was common [...]. The Abelam, although they were brought under control in 1937 and were subsequently occupied by the Japanese who were only expelled with heavy and destructive fighting, are remarkable among New Guinea tribes for the tenacity with which they have clung to their ancestral culture, particularly their art and architecture, which in so many other parts of New Guinea has disappeared soon after contact with the white man's technology and the establishment of missions." (Forge 1962: 9)

[112] Because of his extensive fieldwork experience in the Abelam region, Forge appeared to be a primary interlocutor for Jansen and Groenevelt. Forge visited the museum in Rotterdam in August 1960 to see the collection, to take photographs of objects and advise Jansen about the Groenevelt Expedition, especially with regard to what and how to collect in the Abelam and the Middle Sepik areas (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 10 August 1960).

region and by extension the artefacts originating from the area that had been shipped to Rotterdam. Thanks to his discussions with Forge, Jansen progressively redefined and refined his understanding of the 'Abelam' territory and cultural characteristics, while acknowledging the porosity of the region as being the stage of numerous exchanges (notably with neighbouring groups such as the Arapesh, Kwanga and Yangoru-Boiken). This more nuanced comprehension of what 'Abelam' meant nonetheless resulted in the difficulty in defining exact provenances of objects or drawing precise boundaries of the Abelam territory **(Map 4)**. In his obsession for classifying collected objects into Abelam artistic sub-styles, Jansen was sometimes struggling with making artefacts fit his 'Abelam' categories:

> Our Maprik area is just an isolated region but has all kinds of contacts. Foreign objects come in and native objects emigrate elsewhere. Several of the objects you have found and sent are typical examples of this. It is not always possible to immediately put our finger on it and say: this comes from this or that place. But eventually we will find out. (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 16 August 1960, translated from Dutch)

> In the meantime, I am curious about further information concerning the places where the objects are said to have come from. […] we need to know exactly for an investigation where this or that village is located. My doubts about Dreikikir remain. The question is: Is Dreikikir located inside or outside the Abelam area? As things currently stand, I would have to say that Dreikikir is outside, and this village belongs to the territory of the Arapesh. The same also applies to Illahita […]. But this village is known to follow its own path, and to have affinities with the Abelam as far as material culture is concerned. […] It could now be very well possible that the figures of Yama indeed belong in form and painting to the Wosera group. […] This needs to be investigated further. (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 9 October 1960, translated from Dutch)

The confusion surrounding geographical attribution and provenance is further perpetrated by museum geographical thesauri and their pre-indicated sub-categories such as "country", "region" and "ethnic group", which compound "temporal, geographical, and cultural entities", while "de-historicis[ing] contemporary and historic contexts" (von Oswald 2020: 112-113). In turn, such pre-fabricated classifications omit the dominant political context at the time of the acquisition of some of these collections, that is the colonial governance of the Territory of New Guinea, under Australian rule until Papua New Guinea's Independence in 1975. Therefore, when databases indicate "Papua New Guinea" as the main geographical provenance for an object, it often neglects the historical and political reality at the time of its acquisition, at least for the Abelam artefacts collected before 1975,

eventually imposing a national geographical provenance that simply did not exist at the time. Even though it can be easily understood that catalogue records have been updated to conform with current political denominations and to avoid an obsolete nomenclature, the 'notes' or 'comments' section often available in database systems could be used to offer a more nuanced and historically grounded record of collected objects.

To this confusion were often added stylistic understandings of what could be classified as 'Abelam', with the obvious biased limitations that such categories imply. Still in the case of the collection acquired for the Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde in Rotterdam, Jansen did not hesitate to question, and even modify the geographical provenance of artefacts based on comparisons with other objects and/or collections, or based on more arbitrary stylistic criteria, as was the case for the figure WM-54128 **(Fig. 113)**:

> Nr. 2974 B [WM-54128] [...] This male figure was described by you as coming from Blaga. It is quite possible that the piece was acquired in Blaga, but it has all the characteristics of a product from the North. I have therefore taken the liberty to change the origin "BLAGA" to "KALABU". (SR 1407_148: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 22 August 1961, translated from Dutch)

As a result, this carved figure is registered as coming from Kalabu in today's Wereldmuseum inventory, and no mention is made of Blaga as a possible geographical provenance. This comment also raises the question of the ambiguity of what is implied by the geographical provenance of an item: does it mean the place where it was acquired, the location where the owner of the object came from, or where the artist who created it originated (Hamilton and Leibhammer 2016: 43)? As pointed out previously, it is worth keeping in mind that Abelam material culture, and in particular ceremonial assemblages produced in the context of initiations, resulted from the creative efforts of artists based locally but also coming from other hamlets and villages. As reminded by Diane Losche, "from their inception, at their origin, Abelam ceremonial houses are hybrid products of local exchange, and the origin of materials of an assemblage extends beyond one village" (Losche 2013: 127). But how to translate this complex and multi-layered exchange context of production – this network – within the rigid museological category of provenance?

One possible answer to this puzzle and one way perhaps to more accurately translate emic relationships in museum records would be to open up the notion of provenance

by acknowledging – when known, which is not always the case – not only the location where the object was acquired, but also the names and places of origin of the precedent owner of the artefact (the seller), and of the original maker(s). To illustrate this point, let us go back to the example of one of the Ragi sculptures carved by Nera Jambruku of Apangai in 1972 for the Lungwallndu and Putilago initiation scenes in Bongiora. The central sculpture he carved for the Puti room, now preserved in Basel (Vb 28418) **(Fig. 34)**, is only referred to as coming from "Papua New Guinea, North West PNG, Bongiora, Maprik Area" in the '*Herkunft geographisch*' ('Geographical origin') section of the museum database. Beyond the sole use of 'Papua New Guinea' as geographical provenance while it was not yet an independent nation in 1972-73, not acknowledging the multiple layers of colonial governance and historical territorial subdivisions, no mention is made of Apangai as the place where the sculpture was carved before being transported to Bongiora. However, the seven-volume documentation compiled by Gerrits and provided alongside the collected material to the Basel and Stuttgart museums mentions that the sculpture was carved by Nera of Apangai and details the general context of creation of the initiation scenes in Bongiora, including the contribution by artists from other villages. The database record thus does not reflect the complexity of the contexts which led not only to the creation of this sculpture as part of a larger assemblage of artefacts and people, but also to its acquisition and eventual preservation and display in Basel.

It is nevertheless worth remembering that all the collections under study were acquired and added to museum knowledge systems and inventories at a time when computerised records did not yet exist. Paper registers and collection cards were used with the prime purpose of facilitating the identification of individual objects and to keep track of their location within often very large museum collections and storage facilities. Such records were therefore compiling a limited set of information, while further documentation about the objects and collections was preserved as a side-archived record, to which museum staff (and later researchers) could refer when needed. With time, the location and status of such documentation has often changed (as will be detailed in Chapter 5), and its relation to the inventory has sometimes become looser.

To further elaborate on this point, the sculpture Oc1980,11.22 of Windu, *gwalndu* of Stapikum no. 2 **(Figs. 114 and 115)**, collected in 1980 by Dorota Starzecka on behalf of the Museum of Mankind (British Museum), is another example that I would like to unpack. This sculpture was acquired as part of a larger assemblage which had been

created for the Sakindu initiation ceremony at Sarikim in 1974-75. On the British Museum online database,[113] the categories referring to the provenance of the object are "Production ethnic group: made by Wosera" and "Findspot: found/acquired: Sarikim-2". Only the "Acquisition notes" provide a little more detail about the fact that it belonged to a ceremonial house "with some additional material from Sarikim and other neighbouring villages". Although the names of the various artists and former owners had been recorded by Starzecka in her field notes[114] **(Fig. 116)** (in order to sort all the individual monetary transactions when acquiring the collection), they are to date not included in the inventory record, whether in the old paper register **(Fig. 117)** or on the online database.[115] Beyond negating the identity of the creator(s) of Oc1980,11.22, it is the whole provenance of the carving that is mostly silenced. From Starzecka's notes, we learn that the former owner of the object who sold it to the museum was Damian Balanembang **(Fig. 118)**, indeed of Sarikim no. 2; however, it had been carved by Gumbira of Stapikum no. 2, and that both men were *sabura*,[116] that is exchange partners. However, Stapikum is not acknowledged in the record as part of the provenance of the object, nor is the exchange relationship between the two men which triggered its creation. If we start unravelling the provenance of other artefacts from the same assemblage, other artists who contributed to their creation were indeed exchange partners of Abelam men, but were themselves from villages geographically located in Arapesh, Kwanga or other neighbouring groups, that is outside of what could be considered the strict boundaries of the Abelam territory. Then, is it still sustainable to define the object as purely 'Abelam' or 'Wosera'?

I would like to push this re-appraisal of the complexity of provenance a step further. Taking into account the ever-growing list and multiple networks of actors and intermediaries involved into the collecting processes, it would seem legitimate that such agents were also referenced as part of the provenance of 'Abelam' museum objects. Present-day online museum databases and their capacity for cross-referenced records can allow for this multi-layered account of objects' provenance, including

[113] British Museum (n.d.): https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Oc1980-11-22
[114] BM Archives Oc1980,11.
[115] What is intriguing is that the same register includes for each item the corresponding field number that was given by Starzecka at the time of the transaction, as well as the price for each object. Such information could only have been gleaned in the field documentation and notebooks, exactly where all the names of the makers and owners of the artefacts have been recorded. Not including the names of the Wosera creators or owners therefore seems to constitute a deliberate choice, accentuating (voluntarily or not) the anonymity of the artists, referred to uniquely under their belonging to the Wosera group.
[116] Also spelt *chambera*.

levels of information that were in the first place relegated to supporting archival documentation. To make online records a full research tool would however require significant additional time and financial resources to allow for the knowledgeable transfer of this information into online databases, which in most cases remains to be achieved.

As Fiona Cameron and Sarah Mengler advocate, I wish "to put the complexity back into collections records in a way that resonates with complex and multi-dimensional lived realities to which collections now connect" (Cameron and Mengler 2009: 193). By trying to comprehend the "forms of the relationships in which things operate" (Bolton 2001: 266) throughout the collecting process (before, during and after they have entered the museum knowledge system), one can hope that such arbitrary categories as provenance will be challenged and eventually will be more adequate to translate the complexity of 'Abelam' collections, beyond the "flattening of meaning" (Hamilton and Leibhammer 2016: 45) so far endured.

## 3. Becoming Abelam in the museum

> The notion of being and becoming – the fact that things are not determined by their logical relations within a classification scheme but by their working relations with other things and humans in their environment – is crucial and can significantly contribute to a more complete theoretical model of how material culture works. (Versluys 2017: 195)

This chapter started with a wish to unpack 'Abelam' collections in order to analyse their content, to get a sense of what Abelam 'object-scapes' within the museum encompass, and how and why they came into being. The more such an unravelling process progressed, the more the concept of what 'Abelam' means was eventually challenged. What does an 'Abelam' assemblage really signify? And according to whom? The collections under study are the result of many agencies and of historically and spatially defined understandings of what the term 'Abelam' encompasses. What 'Abelam' meant for native people[117] and for outsiders in 1955 was different from what

[117] People in the Abelam region would have identified mostly to their *kém* (also spelt *kum*, like in many village names such as Nyamikum, Stapikum, Yamelikum, Kuminibus etc. or *kim*, like in Sarikim or Kimbangwa), a term referring both to the clan and to the village/hamlet (Coupaye 2013: 175 *et seq.*; Hauser-Schäublin 2016: chapter 1) and related bird clan totem *jaabu*. They would also have referred to the *ara* (moiety) to which they belonged. It was not possible to directly confirm it, but it seems that the identification as 'Abelam' would have been mostly used toward outsiders.

it implied in 1987. Collecting practices in turn contributed considerably to defining, when not essentialising, what 'Abelam' means culturally and geographically (O'Hanlon and Welsch 2000: 6). If it appears more and more difficult – and ultimately unsustainable – to work with such a fixed definition, it seems more fruitful, as advocated by Versluys, to understand the idea of 'Abelam' material culture as not only "being", but as effectively "becoming" throughout these collecting practices, and notably through museum processes which have been previously addressed. Becoming Abelam in the museum can thus be framed as an ever-ongoing process:

> Essentially, museums have always been complex systems characterized by fluidity, uncertainty, ambiguity, all of which have been denied and controlled by the imposition of museum order. [...] In this context, it is perhaps more productive to conceive of collections interfaces as spaces for translation and consumption. That is, where traceable associations might be mapped as a network and where the translation of an object is an ongoing process. (Cameron and Mengler 2009: 207-208)

By addressing the boundaries of the collection and the definition of 'Abelam' in a more permeable way, museum institutions and their knowledge systems would become much more accurate in incorporating and appreciating the instability and relational dimensions of Abelam assemblages. In approaching 'Abelam' collections as ever-growing and fluid assemblages, I hope to expose the dynamics at play in the construction of what 'Abelam' means for different parties, in order to better "counter the dehistoricised, depersonalised and tribed status of material objects" (Hamilton and Leibhammer 2016: 44). Such a re-appraisal of the fluidity of 'Abelam' assemblages leads to the necessary examination of the collection boundaries. Following Deliss's insight, these collections need to be inserted into "a critical and experimental process of remediation" (Deliss 2020: 30), as she advocates in her "Manifesto for the Post-Ethnographic Museum":

> It's about daring to change
> the anthropological classification of the collection
> suspending the *logos* of *ethnos*
> and earlier organizing principles:
> region, religion, ethnic group, culture, society, and function
> developing alternative metaphors through dialogical research
> healing a deficient situation
> shifting medium, enabling interpretation.
> (Deliss 2020: 12)

Provenance research is a complicated endeavour. It troubles, on the one hand, museum epistemologies and knowledge systems, while, being at times deeply troubling, in revealing how profoundly engrained such categories and classificatory systems are, and how they still shape our views of what 'Abelam' means (von Oswald 2020: 107, 109). More than ever, 'Abelam' museum collections need to be understood in relation to one another, as entangled and intricately related assemblages. This research proposes to collect these collections-as-assemblages anew, thereby activating "taxonomic transgressions, clashing entrenched identifications and highlighting the underlying structures of power generated by listings, narratives, visualizations, and omissions, dating from different periods and authors" (Deliss 2020: 31, 65). In order to effectively unravel all these epistemological layers and to re-complexify the collection, we need not only to shed new light on the archival documentation of the collections under study, but to dive into the archival underbelly of these assemblages to collect these archives anew and to redefine them as part of museum collections.

# Chapter 5

# (Re)collecting Abelam archival assemblages

> It is a double-storiedness that involves working simultaneously with the story of the making of an archive over time and the making (of the story) of the past to which the archive attests, also often a matter extended across time and itself involving change. (Hamilton and Leibhammer 2016: 21)

Following the unpacking of 'Abelam' collections, it became apparent that the definition of the collection itself needed to be questioned, and in particular what its boundaries include or exclude. Embracing a much more fluid and encompassing approach, this chapter proposes to reconsider the archival documentation of the collections under study, not only as supportive information to the objects feeding into museum knowledge systems, but also as an integral part of 'Abelam' assemblages.

What do archival collections entail? What does the archival documentation of Abelam collections contain and what forms do these documents take? This chapter approaches the material dimension of the archive in the same way as is done for 'Abelam' artefacts: by investigating the materiality of documents – in their multiplicity and in whatever form they assume, whether letters, photographs, fieldnotes, administrative documents, etc., – one progressively unravels layers of meaning as much as by elucidating their informative content. Considering archival documents as objects, and more specifically as objects of ethnography, also helps to illuminate the processes that led to their production, assemblage and preservation, and in particular their collection alongside 'Abelam' objects.

While being re-appraised as objects, this chapter aims to frame archives as ongoing processes, which have contributed and still contribute to the shaping of collecting narratives and the construction of the 'ideal portrait' of Abelam collections and material culture, and of museum knowledge systems. Disentangling these processes allows us to decipher and possibly reactivate silenced voices and counter-narratives

whose contributions to the collecting endeavours and the formation of these assemblages need to be fully appreciated.

Following Carolyn Hamilton and Nessa Leibhammer, it is hoped that studying these archival collections in a new light will help "not only to see how archives give shape to history, but also how history gives shape to archives and to grasp something of their mutual constitution over time in a manner that facilitates critical interrogation of the processes involved" (Hamilton and Leibhammer 2016: 22). In this respect, photographic and film archives constitute an essential resource, not only as a window on collecting practices in the field, but also as enchanting tools that lastingly contributed to the shaping of 'Abelam object-scapes' in the museum and beyond.

By framing archival collections as an active part of 'Abelam' assemblages, I hope to bridge a gap in the scholarship: although archival documents and photographs in particular have been well-acknowledged for their materiality, they are rarely taken into account when it comes to discussing collections and collection-making. Furthermore, despite an important and fairly recent literature on early (late 19$^{th}$ – early 20$^{th}$ century) ethnographic photography, little has been written about ethnographic photographs as part of collecting processes, or even as collecting tools in the second half of the 20$^{th}$ century.

# I. Archiving collecting processes: constitution and narratives of archival assemblages

## 1. Encountering the archive: materiality and spatiality

"Are you aware that the correspondence between you and Mr. Jansen already includes 1000 to 1200 sheets?" (SR 563_107: letter from Nooteboom to Groenevelt, 5 December 1959, translated from Dutch). By asking this question to Carel Groenevelt, Christiaan Nooteboom, then Director of the Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde, Rotterdam, was pointing out an important aspect of the correspondence and, by extension, of archival collections under study, i.e., their sheer abundance.

My engagement with 'Abelam' collections often first took place through an encounter with their archival documentation – sometimes because of practical calendar considerations or limited access to object stores.[118] What struck me was the multiplicity of archival documents, with files containing hundreds of pages of written correspondence, administrative documents, inventory lists, field notes, collection reports, as well as thousands of photographs, preserved in various formats and in various places – on site, in curators' offices, in dedicated archival departments or in external archival institutions. In short, "a collection of more or less connected, and more or less disordered, disparate entities (often but not always documents)" (Zeitlyn 2012: 467). Not knowing what I would find was simultaneously exciting and vertiginous, and having to navigate the way these documents had been organised (or not) sometimes proved disconcerting. It often entailed trying to put myself in a former collector's, curator's or archivist's shoes, in order to get a grasp of why these documents had been preserved and ordered in a specific way. At first, this encounter with the archive was essentially a phenomenological encounter, an engagement with its materiality – and it is as forms of material culture that I want to address such archival and documentary sources (Wingfield 2013: 69). This material form,

[118] In some rare instances, notably at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, I was not able to access the core of the archival documentation, as it was temporarily inaccessible because of a cleaning and digitisation project, due to be completed by 2021. In the case of Anthony Forge's fieldnotes, they are preserved at the University of California San Diego (https://library.ucsd.edu/speccoll/findingaids/mss0411.html), with the rest of his papers, however their consultation was beyond the scope of this research project. Only a few of Forge's documents have been found in the Museum der Kulturen (Basel), as part of the collection documentation (MKB Einlaufen V_0320 and V_0392), and at the National Gallery of Australia (copies of photographic contact sheets).

characterised by Arlette Farge as "excessive and overwhelming, like a spring tide, an avalanche, or a flood" indeed soon became challenging: "when working in the archive you will often find yourself thinking of this exploration as a dive, a submersion, perhaps even a drowning…" (Farge 2013: 4). Contrary to this often multiplicity of documents, it was sometimes their scarcity that would stand out, and which could leave me with without answers to my questions. This encounter with archives also materialised through the necessary tactile and sensory approach to these objects (Mbembe 2002: 20-21): the feeling of thin faded typed carbon copies of letters, the smell of dusty field notes, the cold feeling of glossy photographs, or the close encounter with photographic slides or negatives, squinting against the light in order to decipher what they depict or bending over a light table when I was lucky enough to find one.

Such a material dimension often reflects the time of the archival document's creation, for instance with most of the letters being type-written, or hand-written aerograms, while some are faded photocopies of the originals. It could sometimes take a letter several weeks to travel between Papua New Guinea and Europe, depending whether it was sent by airmail or not, which can explain the sometimes hit-and-miss communication. For instance, the curator Victor Jansen regularly complained that his letters posted from Rotterdam would not arrive in Papua New Guinea early enough for Groenevelt to take his instructions into consideration:

> Presumably you did not receive the instructions in time, but I am confident that you would have bought such a giant statue anyway. (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 26 February 1960, translated from Dutch)

The scribbling of some field notes, notably those written by William Dargie in 1969-70, Diane Losche and Dorota Starzecka in 1980, or Dirk Smidt in 1987, with sometimes torn or stained pages, and not always decipherable, can attest to the hurry in which information was recorded during intense collecting endeavours, trying to keep a trace of transactions or accounting for the organisation of practical aspects such as packing and shipping. On the other hand, more settled collectors such as Alfred Bühler would take the time to type his notes, attesting to somewhat different collecting practices. Various photographic formats also testify to the technological evolution of such practices throughout the second half of the 20$^{th}$ century, to which I will return later in this chapter.

Trying to make sense of these assemblages did not always prove easy, as the documents were not necessarily tidily organised in folders or identified bundles with a clear pattern, chronological or other. Why in the first place someone – collector, curator or archivist – had decided to preserve these documents, in that order (if any order was there), was not blindingly obvious. To the often-enormous amount of material was added the inversely proportionate time constraint – of archives' opening hours, of limited time spent in a city, of consultations only by appointment, of trying to find where files had been stored, etc. As pointed out by Farge:

> whatever the project is, work in the archives requires a triage, a separation of documents. The question is knowing what to take and what to leave. [...] The historian's approach is similar to a prowler's; searching for what is buried away in the archives, looking for the trail of a person or event, while remaining attentive to that which has fled, which has gone missing, which is noticeable by its absence. Both presence and absence from the archive are signs we must interpret in order to understand how they fit into the larger landscape. (Farge 2013: 70-71)

Processing such archival material was therefore done via note taking, as well as, when permitted, thousands of photographs of documents, methodically turning pages, photographing one after the other if they seemed of any relevance, in what constituted a repetitive and sometimes laborious, but nonetheless effective process. I would then transcribe and often translate documents once I was back in Norwich. Doing so, I would in turn constitute new archival series and assemblages, digitally or manually ordering them according to their informative content or other criteria (for instance by chronological order, author etc.). These "banal manual tasks" of "combing through the archive [*dépouiller*]", as discussed by Farge (2013: 55-56, 62-63), were at the core of this material encounter with the archive.

This voluminous presence of archival documents is certainly the most obvious aspect of their materiality, and consequently the archival collections under study take up a lot of space. As we are reminded by Achille Mbembe, archives imply not only the collection of documents, but also the building, the location which preserves such an assemblage (Mbembe 2002: 19). Such a location varies according to the archival collection under study **(Table 2)**: archives may be stored in a specific archival department or in the museum research library, or in the case of photographs in a dedicated photographic department. In other cases, they may be kept in curators' offices, passed on to the succession of curators in charge of Pacific collections, waiting to be awakened by some curious researcher. Archives might even be preserved

in national or city archives, or on the contrary retained in private hands by their creators, whether collectors and/or retired museum curators.

| Collecting date | Museum | Collector(s) | Archive location(s) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1955-56 | Museum für Völkerkunde, Basel | Alfred Bühler and René Gardi | - Library/Document archive of the Museum der Kulturen, Basel (08-0007)<br>- Photographic archive of the Museum der Kulturen, Basel<br>- Museum der Kulturen collection documentation (Einlaufen) |
| 1959 | Museum für Völkerkunde Basel | Anthony Forge | - Library/Document archive of the Museum der Kulturen, Basel (08-0007; 09-0068; ID 688)<br>- Photographic archive of the Museum der Kulturen, Basel<br>- Museum der Kulturen collection documentation (Einlauf V_0320)<br>- University of California San Diego (Anthony Forge Papers, https://library.ucsd.edu/speccoll/findingaids/mss0411.html)<br>- National Gallery of Australia, Canberra (copy of photo contact sheets 1958-59) |
| 1959-62 | Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde, Rotterdam | Carel M.A. Groenevelt | - Stadsarchief Rotterdam (563_107; 563_108; 1407_147; 1407_148; 1407_149; 1407_150).<br>- Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam |
| 1962-63 | Museum für Völkerkunde, Basel | Anthony Forge | - Library/Document archive of the Museum der Kulturen, Basel (09-0068)<br>- Photographic archive of the Museum der Kulturen, Basel<br>- Museum der Kulturen collection documentation (Einlauf V_0392)<br>- University of California San Diego (Anthony Forge Papers, https://library.ucsd.edu/speccoll/findingaids/mss0411.html) |
| 1966 | Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin | Gerd Koch | - Archive of the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (SMB) – Preußischer Kulturbesitz)<br>- Ethnologisches Museum Berlin collection documentation (G. Koch 3 B /1967:5) |
| 1969 | National Gallery of Australia, Canberra | William Dargie | - National Gallery of Australia collection documentation (NGA, TRIM files, 69/0694-01 and 69/2739; Field Diary William A. Dargie 1969-70) |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1972-73 | Museum für Völkerkunde, Basel | Fred Gerrits | - Library/Document archive of the Museum der Kulturen, Basel (01-0044)<br>- Photographic archive of the Museum der Kulturen, Basel<br>- Museum der Kulturen collection documentation (Einlaufen V_0454 and V_0460)<br>- Iconothèque du Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris |
| 1972-73 | Linden-Museum, Stuttgart | Fred Gerrits | - Museum collection documentation (lists no. 2867/2868)<br>- Photographic archive of the Museum der Kulturen, Basel<br>- Iconothèque du Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris |
| 1973-74 | National Museum and Art Gallery, Port Moresby | Fred Gerrits | - Documentation in private hands (Fred Gerrits)<br>- Photographic archive of the Museum der Kulturen, Basel<br>- Iconothèque du Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris<br>- Museum collection documentation (?)<br>- National Archives of Papua New Guinea (?) |
| 1979-80 | Australian Museum, Sydney | Diane Losche | - Australian Museum Archives (AMS 317; AMS 235/1334; AMS 207/3) |
| 1980 | Museum für Völkerkunde, Basel | Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin | - Library/Document archive of the Museum der Kulturen, Basel<br>- Photographic archive of the Museum der Kulturen, Basel<br>- Museum der Kulturen collection documentation (Einlaufen) |
| 1980 | Museum of Mankind, British Museum, London | Dorota C. Starzecka and David John Lee | - Anthropology Library and Research Centre, British Museum (documentation of the collection Oc1980,11) |
| 1987 | Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde | Dirk Smidt and Noel Mc Guigan | - Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen collection documentation (collection RV-5526)<br>- Research Library, Museum Volkenkunde, Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Leiden |

**Table 2** – *Abelam museum collections (1955-1987) and related archival locations.*

The location of archives can also indicate how they are perceived by the collecting institutions and the status and/or value they are conferred: whether as supportive information (collection documentation), actual archival documents, identified and inventoried, whose value as archives is acknowledged, or sometimes simply forgotten amidst other documents, and eventually re-activated and re-valued through my own engagement with the collection. Archival documents are therefore not fixed objects by nature, but rather circulating between different realms and statuses, and it is to these archival processes that I will now turn.

## 2. Archives as collection/collecting archives: selecting process, detachment and classification

Rather than being settled objects, archives are the results of complex and ongoing processes – or as termed by Mbembe (2002: 19), "rituals" – of selection, detachment and classification:

> archives are the product of a process which converts a certain number of documents into items judged to be worthy of preserving and keeping in a public place, where they can be consulted according to well-established procedures and regulations. As a result, they become part of a special system. (Mbembe 2002: 20)

This quality of "archivability" (Mbembe 2002: 19) is only fulfilled by certain documents, which in turn become archives: a more or less drastic and/or conscious selection is operated in order to decide which documents should be kept or discarded. The most telling examples are the correspondence between some collectors and various actors found in several archival collections. Amongst a great number of letters, originals, carbon copies or duplicates, it is evident that not all letters have been kept: some might have been lost, or purposely removed from the record.[119] Other documents, notes or photographs may have been removed because they were not deemed worthy of being preserved, of becoming an archive. Like any collection, the archive is first and foremost a matter of selection, of discrimination,

[119] It is worth noting that in some cases some letters or documents have been retained in the archive despite the clear mention by their authors that they should be treated as confidential and removed from the record (for example see BM Archives Oc1980,11). These examples bring to the fore a number of questions: what should be taken into account when selecting which documents to archive? Should the archivist follow the wishes of the author, when explicitly stated? Or should a document be preserved no matter what, if considered informative, despite its author's clear statement?

entailing choosing what should be retained or not (Ketelaar 2001: 136): the archive is "not a piece of data, but a status" (Mbembe 2002: 20).

My own engagement with the documentation of the RV-5526 collection acquired in 1987 in Nyambikwa by Smidt and Mc Guigan, held at the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden), testifies to my implication in the 'archivability' of some documents and the complex processes at play in the creation of the collection's archive. What should be kept or discarded? How should documents be organised and stored? Should photographic material be preserved alongside other documents, or should it be treated separately? When first encountering the material related to the Leiden 1987 Abelam collection, documents were kept in two binders and a box, containing some envelopes and sub-folders where original documents were mixed with photocopies, typed inventories and manuscript notes, printed photographs, reports, exhibition plans, and so on. All the documents had been created during or after the collecting expedition, but the folders did not include pre-collecting documents or correspondence that could attest to the organisation of the 1987 collecting trip. These documents were the first point of entry into the collection – even before working on the collected artefacts – and the first task was to try to get a sense of what was there, what the informative content of the documents was relating to, and why documents had been ordered (at all) in that way. With approval of the curator in charge of the collection, I progressively created new bundles of documents, new thematically organised files, with documents relating to each initiation room (Lu, Puti and Gambawut). Also with the agreement of the curator, exact copies or duplicates (often illegible photocopies of existing documents) were discarded, while the newly ordered documents were re-classified in dedicated and identified folders.[120] This change of status of documents becoming archives was also spatially signalled while being moved from the curator's office where they had remained and passed on since their creation from the late 1980s onward, to one floor down, in the dedicated archives cabinet, alongside the archival documentation of the other museum collections, therefore officially signalling its new status as 'archives'. All the documents and photographs were also digitised and linked to the artefact collection on the database.[121]

[120] Interestingly, sometimes the copy of a document acquires the status of an original, for example when the original document has been retained in the private hands of its creator, as is often the case with field notes.

[121] However, they retain their status as supportive information to the object collection and have not been inventoried as individual objects.

The detachment of the archival document can also be taken a step further, especially when it is officially archived by the institution (and not retained in private hands by their creators). The document then ceases to belong to its author, henceforth legally belonging to the institution holding it.

Another type of document found within the archive poses an additional set of questions: what is the status of the countless inventory lists, collection cards and former paper registers? In short, should these documents be considered only as tools helping to feed museum knowledge systems, as "technologies of inscription" (Wingfield 2013: 75), that is a part or extension of the collected objects, without a reason of being on their own? Or should these documents be considered as archives? Let us take the case of the old register book for the Oceania collections at the British Museum/Museum of Mankind **(Fig. 117)**. This book was used as a register, an index for the Oc1980,11 collection, where each object was inscribed and listed according to its inventory number (in this particular case by Caroline Ingham, so not by the collectors, Starzecka and Lee, themselves). For each one, a short description was included, as well as categories about how it was acquired, its price, and other miscellaneous information. All the objects were also depicted by a black line drawing, clear enough to be easily identified.[122] What this register tells us, beyond its informative content about the collected artefacts, and as an object of its own, is how the Museum of Mankind was performing its classificatory and preservation endeavours for a specific collection, that is the Wosera assemblage collected in 1980, at least up to the transfer to online database software. Hence, if it seems difficult to establish a clear designation for such ambiguous documents/objects, they might be better framed as a bridge between archives and collected objects: once their function as classification tools was over, they eventually became testimonies, or one could say archives, of museum practices, of collecting performances. As such, they are, like other archival documents, as many fragments contributing to the broader assemblage narrative and performance of collecting practices in the Abelam region in the second half of the 20th century.

Therefore, just as artefacts become ethnographic when selected and detached from their original context by ethnographers, archival documents are created in virtue of their selection by archivists (Farge 2013: 3; Marquis 2007). Collecting archives in

[122] Some of these drawings have had their own ongoing lives on the British Museum online database, where they have been digitised and are used to illustrate some of the Oc1980.11 objects that have not been photographed yet.

many ways echoes the salvaging practices of ethnographic collecting (Bell 2009: 152; Edwards 2001: 10). In this respect, the role of the archivist as mediator in curating the archive needs to be highlighted, especially with regard to the ongoing archiving/collecting processes of selection, detachment and classification. As pointed out by Stuart Hall:

> the very practice of putting the collection together is informed by practitioners who are themselves active participants in defining the archive. They may have contributed to it. They may have collected some of it. They have appreciated and helped to interpret it. They have learned from the work in their own practice: and this new work will, in turn, become candidates for inclusion. An archive of this kind is a continuous production. (Hall 2001: 91)

As discussed in Chapter 4, classification systems implemented by curators/archivists imply numerous "tacit narratives" (Ketelaar 2001: 135), creating "'archival representations' through appraisal/selection, organization, and cataloguing" (Zeitlyn 2012: 463). Such representations are not static or definitive, nor are they neutral repositories, but ongoing and discursive processes which are challenged and enriched every time one engages with the archive (Yakel 2007: 151-52; Dirks 2002: 58). In this sense they contribute to the shaping of certain narratives around the assemblage of 'Abelam' collections, while helping to shape the 'ideal portrait' of Abelam object-scapes in the museum. As previously discussed, my own engagement with archival collections often preceded my encounter with Abelam objects: archival documents were my starting point or impulse to imagine such assemblages and collecting practices, to build up my own idea(l) of what Abelam museum collections would be.

It is this continuous assembling process which further defines the collection – of objects or archives. Hence, following Ann Stoler, I would like to engage with "archiving-as-process rather than archives-as-things" (Stoler 2009: 20). Through this assemblage – which is nonetheless often serendipitous (Morton and Edwards 2009: 10) – archival documents undergo a process of what Derrida has termed "consignation":

> By consignation, we do not only mean, in the ordinary sense of the word, the act of assigning residence or of entrusting so as to put into reserve (to consign, to deposit), in a place and on a substrate, but here the act of *con*signing through *gathering together signs*. [...] *Consignation* aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which

> all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. (Derrida 1995: 10, original emphasis)

This "unity of an ideal configuration" parallels the 'ideal portrait' which has been drawn of Abelam material culture through collecting practices and museum processes. Like any artefact that undergoes a process of translation once being grouped with other objects and once entering the museum knowledge system, documents are attributed new values and significations by becoming archival fragments, assembled into an archival collection. Documents are as many signs, actualising links between the past and present, con-signed by being preserved together with other documents and objects and constituting the archival assemblage under study. A letter found in the Stadsarchief in Rotterdam may seem insignificant at first sight, but might eventually make sense once read against other documents that have been found in the research library of the Museum der Kulturen in Basel. This constant construction and deconstruction of meanings in the archival collection, this "active historical process" (Morton and Edwards 2009: 10) emerged through my own engagement and creation of new archival assemblages, of new 'con-signments', thus bringing new narratives and voices to the surface.

## 3. Fragments and meanings: fabricating collecting histories

> Through archived documents, we are presented with pieces of time to be assembled, fragments of life to be placed in order, one after the other, in an attempt to formulate a story that acquires its coherence through the ability to craft links between the beginning and the end. A montage of fragments thus creates an illusion of totality and continuity. (Mbembe 2002: 21)

These 'fragments of life', unpacked throughout this thesis, give the illusion to the reader of gaining access to the essence of how things happened, how the collecting processes took place. The very act of unravelling such details and dissonances, far from being anecdotal, brings life and humanity back into the collecting history, beyond anonymity and mere numbers (of collected objects, of their prices, of documents accumulated, etc.). They allow us to understand the dialogic dimension of collecting endeavours and the co-production of knowledge which resulted from this dialogue (Douglas 2015: 103-104). At the same time as they give the illusion, the

certainty of facing the real through these documents and the many traces they contain:

> we must be careful to regard archival documents not as repositories of facts of the past but as complexly constituted instances of discourse that produce their objects as *real*, that is, as existing prior to and outside of discourse. (Axel 2002: 13-14, original emphasis)

By focusing on these details and by operating a constant variation in the scale of focus, this research has been able to unfurl and to progressively draw a clearer picture of collecting practices in the Abelam region. These snippets have helped us to get a sense of the ways collecting endeavours were performed and perceived by various actors. Beyond their content, this thesis questions the statuses and values accorded to such archival testimonies, and what they in turn achieve or fabricate today. These archival documents inform us, and are a part in their own right, of the creation of 'Abelam' museum collections, and by extension to the 'ideal portrait' or representation of 'Abelam material culture' through the prism of the different actors involved: they are archives of the performance of collecting (Zeitlyn 2012: 469). Such a performative dimension of the archive can be deciphered through the examples of a number of documents: field notes, documents highlighting the importance of mediation in the performance of 'collecting Abelam', administrative documents (such as funding requests, proposals for fieldwork or export permits), as well as documents testifying to post-collection and museum processes (various reports, exhibition plans, etc.).

First, field notes, either as dispersed notes or as carefully written notebooks, are the most obvious document-object testifying to the performative nature of ethnography and collecting (Taylor 2003: 75-78). In some cases, originals have been retained by their authors, providing only duplicate photocopies to the archive. In 1969, during his first field trip to New Guinea on behalf of the Commonwealth Art Advisory Board, William Dargie progressively sent his notes back to Australia, reflecting in these words on his collecting and documenting process:

> Here are copies of my Field Diary to date. I think it a wise precaution to send these to you from time to time because – dull reading though they may be – they contain a pretty complete record of places, times and people, of proposed follow up action and, of course, a list of artefacts so far acquired. Also, prices paid. It would be a great misfortune if all trace of this record were to be lost through some misadventure I shall pass the original to you for typing on my return. (NGA 0694-01: letter from Dargie to Cumming, CAAB, 1 February 1969)

Some field notes also testify to the complex process of collecting and of interactions to assemble the collection. For example, Dirk Smidt's notebooks (1987, NMVW RV-5526) include notes and comments in Dutch (his mother tongue), but also in English (most likely as a result of his conversations with Noel Mc Guigan who was accompanying him), in Tok Pisin and in local Ambulas languages depending on his interlocutor. Such a multilingual archive highlights the complexity of collecting ethnographic data as much as artefacts. It also sheds light on the importance of intermediary actors, without whom such endeavours would have failed. These archives thus help us to understand "the historically situated processes and practices of 'mediation', particularly within cross-cultural encounters and exchanges" (Konishi *et al.* 2015: 2). These mediators have been detailed in Chapter 2, but it is worth reiterating that it is through this activation of the archival record that their voices have been recollected.

A great number of archival documents also highlight the administrative and organisational side of collecting enterprises. Whether they are funding requests to possible sponsors or to the Board of Trustees of their museum institution, proposals for anthropological and collecting fieldwork, or requests for export permits **(Figs. 81 and 82)**, they are often remarkably informative documents as they clearly state the aims of the collecting trips and the range of actors involved in order to complete these successfully.

Reports of various kinds help us reconstitute the processes involved in the collecting endeavours and the ongoing life of these assemblages once preserved in museums. Reports of reconnaissance and collecting trips clearly inform us of the objectives and outcomes of collecting projects. The tone adopted by their authors differs significantly according to whether the report was destined for internal use or for external recipients, such as funding bodies.

For example, Alfred Bühler regularly wrote to his sponsors to report back on the results of his endeavours, abounding in entertaining anecdotes. In a letter dated 5 July 1959 to the members of the Fünfliberklubs and the sponsors of the New Guinea Expedition (MKB 8-0007), he recounted a story from the Yellow River involving cannibalism and revenge between two enemy villages, insisting on the hazardous nature of his trip down the Sepik, hence feeding into the sensational common tropes and popular beliefs possibly expected by his sponsors. Beyond the amusing dimension of these reports, Bühler seemed to be aware of the image he was conveying

of himself as an explorer and collector, carefully crafting a specific portrait of himself and of his collecting performance. In this sense it substantially differs from the precise and less dramatic notes Bühler was consigning in his personal travel diary (MKB 08-0038).

Twenty years later, in a very dissimilar fashion, the "Report on the Haus Tambaran at Sarikim Village – East Sepik Province" written by Helen Dennett on 20 October 1979 (BM Archives Oc1980,11) **(Fig. 73)** summarised the results of her reconnaissance trip on behalf of the British Museum to establish whether the ceremonial house was still available for sale. Since it was commissioned to obtain clear and practical information as to the local state of affairs, it includes concise descriptions of the interior and exterior state of the house, while detailing the painted and sculpted contents, and provides advice as to road access to the village. It was later supplemented by the reports written by Starzecka ("Report on a collecting trip to the village of Sarikim, Wosera Sub-district, Maprik District, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea, 5 August – 7 September 1980", 31 October 1980) and by Lee ("Report on the collecting visit to the Wosera-Abelam of Sarikim-Village, and a note on conservation requirements", n.d.) (BM Archives Oc1980,11).

For the Australian Museum, several reports written by staff members (in particular Jim Specht, then Curator of Anthropology, and Jeffrey Freeman, Exhibitions Officer) from 1975 to 1980 highlight the progressive steps undertaken in view of the completion of the Abelam Gallery. Among others, the "Abelam Field Trip Report" written by Diane Losche, Jeffrey Freeman, Sue Walston and Howard Hughes in 1980 (AMS 235/1334), details the field trip's aims and proceedings, the team members and their roles, the assessment of the collecting project and results, as well as future plans regarding the Abelam Gallery at the Australian Museum, in terms of exhibition and conservation.

These documents, despite their informative character and the enumeration of some of the problems encountered, provide a somewhat plain account of the collecting processes, smoothing out the 'topography' or dissonances these endeavours necessarily entailed.

On the other hand, the most thorough reports on object documentation were written, somehow paradoxically, by collectors who were not trained as museum professionals or anthropologists at the time, namely Fred Gerrits and Noel Mc Guigan. The former progressively sent his seven-volume documentation about the *haus tambaran* in

Bongiora to the Linden-Museum (Stuttgart) and the Museum für Völkerkunde (Basel) throughout the 1970s.[123] Mc Guigan, who had already compiled an important documentation on the Sarikim *haus tambaran* collected by the British Museum, wrote an extensive report about the contents of the ceremonial house acquired on behalf of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde (Leiden), *Apangai Ngwalndu Maira. Documentation of artefacts from the Lu and Puti initiation ritual at Nyambikwa hamlet, Apangai village* (Mc Guigan 1989). In both cases, in addition to thorough descriptions of initiation ceremonies, of the general Abelam creative and ritual context, highly-detailed data was recorded in a similar fashion for each painted and/or sculpted artefact which formed part of the initiation display (with a photograph and a sketch to highlight specific elements), including names of their creator, what it depicts, specific names of motifs and their significance. These documents clearly demonstrate how collecting ethnographic data was going hand in hand with collecting objects, creating an assemblage as complete and as well-documented as possible, also with the prospect of a possible reconstruction within the museum exhibitionary context. However, these reports are more than an accumulation of data. When read against the grain they magnify the complexity of Abelam material culture production, its entanglement within multiple networks of socialisation, and the amount of actors coming into play in order to create such assemblages and who consequently played a role in their acquisition by museums. They also account for the changes in ceremonial and creative practices during the 1970s and 1980s in the Abelam and Wosera areas, and for the pragmatic stance of Abelam individuals regarding their artistic heritage.

Trying to reconstitute collecting narratives and performances through archival fragments is nevertheless not a straightforward task. As pointed out by Farge, archives – as any other collection – are as much about what is present as what is absent (Farge 2013: 71). This "relationship between archival visibility and what counts as authoritative historical knowledge" (Driver 2015: 16) is especially slippery when it comes to the archival documentation of 'Abelam' museum collections, where so many voices have been silenced, or on the contrary exacerbated, made visible in the official record. Piecing back "disjoined fragments" into "imagined totalities" (Basu and De Jong 2016: 15) takes on an even more promising dimension when unravelling photographic and film archives, to which we will now turn.

[123] This documentation was eventually published in a comprehensive volume (Gerrits 2012).

# II. Imag(in)ing Abelam collecting: focus on photographic and film archives

Upon encountering the myriad of photographs and films kept in archival records in the different institutions preserving Abelam material (or affiliated ones – see **Table 2**), and past the excitement and slight recoiling when realising the large scale of these collections, a number of questions arose. What roles do photographs and films play as archival objects? How were film and photographic media used to perform collecting endeavours? How have photographs and films contributed to the construction of an image, of an imaginary vision of Abelam (material) culture? In short, beyond what they depict, what do these (moving) images *do*?

Photographic and film collections can be approached in various ways, but what I would like to concentrate on is the ways in which these photographic and cine film objects perform and have shaped a certain understanding of what Abelam (material) culture is and how the practices and processes of 'collecting Abelam' were envisioned through photographic and film media. Because of the very large number of photographic documents (and to a lesser extent of cine films) preserved, I will focus on a few specific examples selected for their capacity to shed light on collecting processes and the ongoing agency of these visual objects. As pointed out by Edwards (2001: 3), these photographs and films constitute as many "little narratives", whose meanings are at the same time encompassed within "'grand, or at least 'larger' narratives", while contributing to the bigger picture of collecting histories. Such a micro-historical approach will focus on particular visual documents as specific experiences or events that can help picture the grand narrative of collecting practices in the Abelam region during the second half of the 20th century, while being actualised throughout their ongoing lives and dissemination. As such, photographing and filming are considered through their capacity to materialise and prompt encounters: "a photograph is not just a recording: it constitutes the event. [...] it makes a record of that little group, but it also occasions it" (Ketelaar 2001: 133).

In order to complicate the understanding of photographs and film archives, this part will focus on a re-appraisal of the agentive qualities of these documents, notably by reconsidering photographing and filming as collecting practices of their own, convoking and consequently assembling a large range of agents, both human and non-human.

The ongoing lives and dissemination of these photographs and films will also be discussed, highlighting the processes through which these objects have helped to shape and spread a certain vision of what Abelam (material) culture and its collections were (and still are), and how they could be re-appraised.

## 1. Forms, format and content: photographing and filming in the field as collecting processes

### Technical aspects

Before focusing on a number of examples of photographs and films as archival objects, it seemed important to bring back such visual practices into their creation contexts. Photographs and cine films are first and foremost the outcomes of technical processes, whose developments throughout the second half of the 20th century, alongside local infrastructure in Papua New Guinea (as detailed in Chapter 2), have profoundly influenced the collecting practices and representations of collecting trips and resulting assemblages. The technical possibilities offered by the democratisation of photography and film, which were not available to such an extent to previous collectors in New Guinea, may have come to replace previous or contemporary drawing practices (Morton 2018), which are noticeably mostly absent from Abelam archival collections. Apart from a few doodles that have been drawn to highlight some object specific motif or part, no field illustrations have been recovered. As will be discussed later in this chapter, collectors were very aware of the possibilities offered by photography and film in terms of collecting praxis.

These photographs and films are the materialisation of the encounter between a number of human and non-human agents, namely and among others, the photographer, the photographic apparatus and surface to be inscribed, environmental conditions (light, weather, and so on), and the photographic subject, actively contributing to the making of the shot. As summarised by Geismar:

> A photograph is born of the act of looking through a viewfinder, framing the image in the context of the relationship between one's eyes, the camera viewfinder, one's perception of space in both the broader environment and the dark-rimmed box of vision made by pressing the eye up against the machine. [...] It is also made out of the photographer's environmental awareness, perception of light and shadow, and tinkering with flashes, film speed and filters [...]. It is in turn created out of the physical world—the play of light, the

> time of day, the weather and the environment—that these complex subjectivities inhabit. [...] All of these environmental, bodily, retinal, perceptual, creative, imaginative and replicative processes combine materially to produce a single image. Then, of course, comes the process of developing, printing, editing and presenting the photograph. (Geismar 2009: 62-63)

Depending on the collector, different photographic devices have been used, whether with medium format 6x6 films (mostly used by Gardi in 1955-56, Forge in 1959 and 1962-63, Groenevelt in 1959-62 and later on by Hauser-Schäublin in 1978-80) or 35mm ones (Bühler in 1955-56 and 1959, occasionally Forge, Koch in 1966, Gerrits in the 1970s, Lee in 1980 and Smidt and Mc Guigan in 1987). By the mid-1950s, colour photography was commonly available, and most collecting expeditions have (at least partly) documented their endeavours in colour. The availability of highly sensitive films, as well as portable electronic flashlights, enabled the recording of artefacts and creative processes in detail, even inside the dark *haus tambaran* chambers (Gardi 1960: 20-21; Koch 2005: 45-46).

This heavy equipment (with sometimes several cameras per collector, as well as in some cases video-cameras and tripods) often had to be carried by local carriers, and collectors often complained that the environmental conditions of the Prince Alexander foothills, especially the tropical heat and humidity, were the main detrimental threat to the films. The latter were most of the time not developed in the field, but upon return to Europe and/or Australia for the shorter collecting trips or were progressively sent back by airmail to be developed and printed.

In a letter dated 1959 to the ADO in Ambunti, Alfred Bühler made explicit how he was processing his photographic material:

> As you will be aware, my anthropological research work in this District involves the taking of a large number of photographs. These form a vital and substantial part of the scientific material I am gathering during my stay in New Guinea. It is consequently of the greatest importance that the films are not affected by the tropical atmosphere, to which colour films particularly are very susceptible. To cut any risk of damage to a minimum, I arranged with a photographic store in Basel, Switzerland, to develop both my colour and black and white films and to store them in Basel until my return. [...].

He went on, complaining about the mismanagement of postal services, and the consequences it would have on the films:

> Of these only ten have arrived in Basel, while six colour and five black and white films have reached Kodak in Melbourne, who have processed the colour films and returned the transparencies to me in New Guinea, returning the black and white films undeveloped. As a result I have quantities of transparencies in New Guinea, where they are in danger of deteriorating and the black and white films have been exposed to tropical humidity for weeks [...]. (MKB 8-0007: letter from Bühler to the ADO in Ambunti, 4 July 1959)

Koch later reflected on similar climatic issues with regard to the preservation of photo-films, which should be left in the cameras for as short a time as possible. Once fully exposed, films were to be stored in their tins, sealed and kept tight with tape after having added silica gel to absorb humidity. In this way they could be preserved for several months before being developed in Europe (Koch 2005: 42). In 1966, he travelled with two single-lens retina reflex cameras: one for black-and-white shots (he specifies that it was used mostly to photograph artworks), and the second one for colour photographs (slides), generally to photograph the same motif twice (Koch 2005: 45).

This back-and-forth of photo-films was particularly evidenced by Groenevelt and Jansen during the collecting expedition led for the Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde in Rotterdam (1959-62). Groenevelt was progressively sending his films to Jansen in the Netherlands, who was in turn forwarding them to the photographic laboratory to have them developed. Films were often arriving a long time before the artefacts they were depicting, and it was these photographs that Jansen was sending back to Groenevelt in New Guinea to comment on the objects and to specify his 'wish-list', while giving advice as to the quality of the photographic shots:

> Apart from a number of setbacks, the Fodorflex seems to be keeping well. Magnifications are necessary, however, since the details cannot be clearly distinguished on the 6 x 6 prints. I wish you good luck with your camera on the new trip. [...] Please pay particular attention to setting it clearly. As sharp as you can. With magnification, something of the sharpness is always lost. (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 5 February 1960, translated from Dutch)

However, despite all the necessary precautions, environmental harshness sometimes defeated the most robust equipment, as William Dargie unfortunately experienced during his 1969 collecting trip for the future National Gallery of Australia:

> From about 12.2.69 on my carefully maintained system of photographing every item in colour and black & white broke down. This was due to sheer exhaustion and the [?] of the

> situations I found myself in. However, the items should be sufficiently identifiable from my field diary, especially under my personal inspection. (NGA FD Dargie, 18 Feb 1969: 65)

Despite these drawbacks and technical complexities, it did not prevent collectors from producing hundreds – if not thousands – of photographs each, as well as a number of cine films (by Gardi in 1955-56 and Gerrits in the 1970s). These assemblages of visual material resulted from many agencies and projects, and not all of them ended up having similar destinies. These various institutional and ongoing lives will now be unpacked in order to fully comprehend the complex nature of these objects.

## Photographs and cine films as 'non-collections'

Photographs (and cine films to a certain extent) are the most ubiquitous documents, present across all departments in museums, in archives, photographic departments, collection documentation files, but also beyond the museum. Indeed, photographic collections relating to Abelam material are not always kept in the same institution: for instance, the photographs taken by Groenevelt during his collecting trip for the museum in Rotterdam (1959-62) are nowadays kept at the Nederlands Fotomuseum. In other cases, such as the collections assembled by Fred Gerrits and now preserved in Basel, Stuttgart and Port Moresby, photographs and cine films are partly retained by him and some have been deposited at the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris, while a few duplicates can also be found at the Museum der Kulturen in Basel. These various locations testify to the diverging statuses these photographs have acquired throughout time: are they considered objects? Or archival materials? Or mere souvenirs?

Combined with the various locations where photographic material has been preserved, the diverse material forms that these documents take can also inform us of the status museum staff conferred on them in relation to the collected Abelam objects. In the cases where photographs have been preserved in dedicated archival departments (especially in Basel and Berlin) they can be found as prints mounted on cards, with one or several photographs per card, and with more or less detailed information written on the mount (inventory number, film and shot number, photographer, sometimes the location where the photograph was taken, technical information as to the photographic apparatus, further documentation and/or related literature, etc.) **(Figs. 119 and 120)**.

At the Museum der Kulturen, Basel, some photographs and cine films (notably taken by Bühler and Gardi in 1955-56) have been digitised and are available for consultation on the museum database and are inventoried in the same way as ethnographic objects. But such careful treatment is not the rule in most institutions. At the Australian Museum, where photographs are also preserved within the Archival department, they are still stored as negatives kept in adequate binders. However, in many cases, many of the photographs encountered during this research were found more or less coincidentally, scattered through the collection documentation, often as loose prints, occasionally with what seemed to be an identification number on the back or the scribbling of a date and/or name of the photographer. Many were kept as slides, waiting in boxes (sometimes with no more indication as to the content than a mere title such as "Ornaments" or "People") to be ordered, seen against the glow of a light table, or eventually projected **(Fig. 121)**.

Hence, even if their materiality has been the focus of numerous studies (Edwards 2001, 2002, 2010, 2012; Edwards and Hart 2004; Edwards and Morton 2015; Caraffa 2018; Bärnighausen *et al.* 2019 – to name just a few) and is increasingly taken into consideration when it comes to re-evaluating photographic documentation, photographs and cine films often remain overlooked and are not acknowledged as part of larger museum collections. As pointed out by Edwards, "these photographs were there but not there, materially present, previously dynamic, yet intellectually invisible. They were outside the hierarchical structures that render some things preservable and others not" (Edwards 2019: 67).

As a conceptual entity, these thousands of photographs, in whatever format, seem to have been left behind, or at least their trajectories seem to differ drastically from one institution to another. Despite their imposing physical presence, they paradoxically constitute what Edwards has termed "non-collections":

> those myriads of historically located material photographic practices which exist in institutions but are not "collections." If they are acknowledged, they often exist in a hierarchical relationship and are sequestrated to the margins of curatorial practice and kept, that is located, as "archives" or "related documents." They are seen as servicing "real" collections, and understood as merely supporting, or providing information about, for instance, how ethnographic objects were worn [...]. Many more are sequestrated physically in service departments – photographic studios, design studios, and so forth – separated from the main business of "collecting." (Edwards 2019: 68-69)

As has previously been highlighted, photography played a particularly important role in the field. However, such an essential role of photographic documentation does not necessarily seem to be acknowledged in the museum today. Indeed, photography and filming in the field are processes which have often been employed in order to record, to 'collect' what was not available for sale: as summed up by Gardi, "whenever we met resistance we always contended ourselves with photographing the fine masks or drums from a variety of angles" (Gardi 1960: 62) – a process which will be discussed in the following section. Yet, although making up for non-collected artefacts, the photographic object never benefited from the same museological treatment once entering the museum institution, if entering the institution at all.

From this assessment, I want to shed light on their epistemological invisibility and to reconsider photographic material as an integral part of 'Abelam' collections, and photographing and filming as essential collecting processes. One fruitful way to challenge the silencing of photographic and cine film objects is, following Jamon Halvaksz, to consider them as "photographic assemblages" (Halvaksz 2010). Photographs and films, as material objects, accumulate or assemble an ever-growing network of relations, actively relating the photographer and the photographed, but also archivists, curators, ancestors and descendants, places, other objects, and so on. What these (moving) images do, like the collection, is to assemble. By acknowledging their nature as nexuses of relationships, that is by recognising the full network of agents from which photographs result but also which they in turn create, allows us to reconsider photographs and cine films as essential collecting processes, but also as objects part of larger collections-as-assemblages, like any other collected object.

## Photographic assemblages: photographs and films as collecting processes

Photographing and filming have been performed as collecting processes in the field during all the collecting endeavours under study. These processes had several (more or less) intentional aims, which have been gathered into two main categories that will be further detailed. On the one hand, scientific documentation of creation processes, of original object displays and uses, and of material culture that could not be acquired; on the other hand, performing collecting and research endeavours, that is portraying or staging the collecting processes themselves.

First, scientific documentation through photography and films as direct observation and recording methods, was perceived, alongside collecting objects, as the ultimate

way of salvaging Abelam (material) culture while it was still possible to do so (Gerrits 2012: 24). As recounted by Gardi:

> my main task was to photograph as much as possible of what in a few years' time could no longer be photographed. [...] So, just before the final disappearance of these cultures, it was possible to record adequately what earlier explorers, for technical reasons, could not photograph at all. (Gardi 1960: 20-21)

This idea that photographing and filming were key elements in salvaging 'disappearing' practices was also expressed by Koch, whose photography documentation methods proved to be particularly thorough:

> On a small notebook, which I always carry in my shirt breast pocket, I write down exactly for each, but really each shot, the location, motif, local designation, lens focal length etc., then in the evening I add the notes to more detailed entries in the photo book. [...] I believe that with these photos something like a historical fixation of an essential phase of the last of all traditions and the beginning of a stronger cultural change in Oceania has been created, as I have consciously and purposefully visited the regions in the "South Seas" beyond global networks, where acculturation had not yet progressed as far as elsewhere. The greater effort of the more cumbersome journeys was probably worth it. The recordings are already "historical" today. (Koch 2005: 42, 44, translated from German)

It is interesting to note how Koch reflects on how he felt photography, even more so than the objects he collected, had the power to salvage and fixate a specific timeframe. Even more than through collecting objects, photography and film had the capacity to collect in a (moving) image what could not always be acquired: some typologies of objects (as discussed in Chapter 3), but also ephemera as well as indirectly recording aspects of Abelam (material) culture that were not deemed worthy of acquisition by some collectors.

As seen in Chapter 4, photographing and filming to document Abelam creation was especially undertaken while commissioning painting or carving for collection and/or the restoration of pre-existing artefacts. Abelam artists were often asked to perform their creation processes in the open so they could be more easily photographed rather than in the secluded and more shadowy designated areas where painting and carving would normally take place. The practice of photography in this context allowed for the assembling of a number of actors, not only the photographer/cameraman and their depicted Abelam subject, but also often curious onlookers, as well as the artefact under creation, possibly soon to be collected. This rather artificial staging also fed

into the depiction of an ideal vision of Abelam creation seen through the collectors' lens, while being actively shaped by Abelam individuals willing to demonstrate their creative steps.

A number of photographs across the collections were taken with a view to another re-creation, that of *haus tambaran* chambers and initiation scenes as museum exhibits. Such a practice was particularly illustrated by Fred Gerrits for the Lu and Puti initiation chambers from Bongiora respectively collected for the museums in Basel and Stuttgart, as well as the contents of the *haus tambaran* from Sunuhu **(Fig. 122)** documented for the National Museum in Port Moresby (1973-1974). The photographs were accompanied by a sketch of the *haus tambaran* floor plan indicating the layout of the different chambers **(Fig. 123)**.

A similar photographic documentation process was undertaken in 1987 by Noel Mc Guigan and Dirk Smidt for the *haus tambaran* they collected on behalf of the museum in Leiden in Nyambikwa hamlet of Apangai. They thoroughly photographed each of the three initiation chambers and sketched the arrangement of the numerous elements **(Figs. 124 and 125)** in order to identify each painting and carving for their future possible re-positioning within an exhibition display.

These photographs acted as an effort to assemble these artefacts before the original assemblage was to be dismantled as individual painted panels and sculptures, for practical packing, shipping and storing reasons. As such, photographs become surrogates for the initial Abelam assemblage; and, following Halvaksz's insight (2010) as a *mise en abyme* process, they can ultimately be envisioned as an assemblage of an assemblage.

The substitute nature of photographic and film documentation was even more obvious when used to make up for what could not be acquired. Whether depicting objects not for sale, or ephemeral elements of initiation and yam display scenes, as well as performative aspects of Abelam culture (especially dance and initiation ceremonies), these photographs compensated for the absence of artefacts within the collection. In this regard, photographs depicting Abelam individuals wearing body adornments that were to be collected (or similar ones) aimed to offset the absence of the donned body as part of the museum collection. The individuals portrayed were however rarely identified, simply asked to act as mannequins, photographed under various angles, in what often seemed to be staged happenings. This practice, which could be understood during the early collecting trips undertaken in the 1950s when

no comparable photographic documentation had been gathered, was nevertheless still in use as late as the 1980s, as illustrated by the photographs taken by D.J. Lee of several Wosera men and women wearing adornments now kept in the British Museum collection, in a slide box only labelled as "Ornaments" **(Fig. 126)**.[124] Paradoxically, this type of photographic practice implied a far more systematic form of collecting, the adornment being photographed while worn, in what seems to be its original context (even though Niagara Kwarkwai was obviously posing for these staged photographs). While this type of object is not what was originally planned to be at the core of the collecting enterprise, and was only part of the 'general ethnographical' supporting collection, it appears more documented than the *haus tambaran* which was the corner stone of the collection. Indeed, the initiation display as it was originally conceived was eventually not thoroughly photographed as it was already undergoing dismantlement when Starzecka and Lee arrived.

Such photographs therefore help us to re-assemble what is present in the collection with what has remained absent – in this specific case, only the *tupu* feather head-ornament was acquired by Dorota Starzecka **(Fig. 127)**, and not the beadwork or the plastic 'leaf', nor the hair pin to fix the headdress, and obviously not the body of the person who used to wear them. It therefore highlights the various agencies at work in the collecting process, making certain artefacts available for purchase, while others may have been retained by their Abelam owners, or simply not deemed worthy of acquisition by the collector. The photograph makes up for what has not been collected, while pointing out the larger assemblage of objects and agencies at play during this photographic and collecting encounter. It did collect these absences, just not in a physical way. It testifies to the willingness of Niagara Kwarkwai to be photographed with his finery, but possibly not to part with all of it. Equally it could demonstrate the interest of Lee and Starzecka to photographically document this ornament assemblage, but not to acquire all its elements. Past the first approach as mere portraits of a Wosera man posing with some of his ornaments, this simple series of photographs thus acts as a nexus concentrating these different tensions and negotiations, projecting them out of the frame, hence giving the viewer a glimpse of

[124] I eventually managed to identify some of the men and women portrayed by cross-referencing sources and archival documents, but when the photographs were encountered none of these names were associated with the photo-slides. Yet, it could be argued that the recurring presence of these photographs of adorned bodies across collections could be a useful resource to compare the changes in body adornment throughout the second half of the 20th century.

the relationships and power relations at stake during the photographic and collecting encounter.

Following on from this, the second aspect of these photographic and film objects that I would like to analyse is the ways in which they testify to the performance of collecting endeavours and how collectors have portrayed themselves at work. Many photographs found across collections depict landscapes – sometimes with photographs taken from a plane – as well as infrastructures (or absence of), such as more or less muddy roads, bridges, and so on (as has been previously discussed in Chapter 2). Such photographs anchor the collecting work into the roughness of the terrain, implicitly insisting on the strong – if not almost heroic – nature of the collector, sometimes portrayed as an expedition leader, a lone anthropologist, if not an adventurer. However, what appears more strikingly is the ways most of these collectors have documented – either in photographs or cine films – not only the objects they were collecting or Abelam cultural practices, but also the manner in which they collected them, that is negotiation and selection processes, (photo)-documentation (even photographing the photographer/cameraman at work, **Fig. 128**), packing and storing of the collected items, their transport, etc.

These photographic and film objects thus constitute a kind of meta-collecting discourse, acting themselves as collecting processes, as an assemblage of the collecting endeavours undertaken by the collectors. In this regard the cine films shot by Gardi in 1955-56 can be envisioned as an epitome of collecting performance. In the half-hour 8mm silent film AV-00058, Gardi captured short scenes of everyday life with Alfred Bühler, depicting the Basel curator acting as chief negotiator in Numbungai, choosing which of the objects offered for sale he would buy from queuing Abelam individuals, later documenting the artefacts one by one, recording data on his typewriter, while attaching a little label to each object **(Fig. 129)**. As Gardi explained:

> Then began the really exacting work of cataloguing. Every article received a label with a number, every object was entered in the book with its number, purchase price, place of origin, the name of the native seller and, in cases where it was not immediately obvious, with a note on its significance and use. [...] Besides all this the lists must be written out in English, with several copies of course, because ethnographical objects, even if they are collected by an official mission from a national museum, need export licences. (Gardi 1960: 65)

The video also depicts the packing of artefacts and their transport, carried by local men to the collectors' base camp or to the airfield. Gardi recounts how he carefully staged the recording of the carriers' caravan crossing a river **(Fig. 130)**, meticulously choosing his viewpoint to obtain the best and most impressive images:

> One afternoon we were wandering home, thirsty, sweating, dirty, tired with honest toil but also well pleased. About forty lads and men were carrying what we had collected; [...] finally reached a river, whose yellow clayey waters had risen considerably after the rain of the preceding night. I had hurried on ahead and stood on the far bank with my camera at the ready to film the happy band of Kanakas who were singing and shouting as they waded through the water. First of all came my friend and since, after the hot day, we could not really get any dirtier and scarcely any wetter, he waded [...] up to his neck in shoes and stockings, trousers and shirt. He was followed by the throng of bearers, each carrying above his head a bit of the day's haul. (Gardi 1960: 64)

Beyond the anecdote, this short film and the multiple photographs also taken of similar collecting scenes highlight the ways in which Bühler and Gardi were strongly aware of what they were accomplishing and the need to portray it. These photographic and film documents are thus not so much about Abelam people and material culture, but eventually they are about the collectors themselves and the way they performed their collecting undertakings.

It is interesting to compare this portrait of how 'collecting Abelam' was envisioned in the 1950s with photographs taken almost three decades later. When looking at the six hundred photographic colour slides taken in 1980 by Lee during the collecting trip led by Starzecka on behalf of the Museum of Mankind, it seems that despite a number of changes and developments in the field of anthropology and museum collecting practices, not much had changed. In both cases, the museum curator and collector was accompanied by a photographer (who also acted as a collecting assistant, and in the case of Lee, as a conservator in charge of ensuring the good treatment of objects for packing and transportation). The same eagerness to portray the collectors at work transpires, as if these photographs would eventually constitute the proof that they were performing what was expected from them by their respective institutions, while also responding to a pre-conceived understanding of what collectors and anthropologists should 'look like' and do (immersion within an exotic landscape and community, thorough documentation, etc.). Among the photographs taken by Lee, similar depictions of what Gardi portrayed in the 1950s can be found, although maybe with less self-awareness (but nonetheless pervaded by the same tropes) and actualised

in 1980: analogous scenes showing Starzecka while negotiating and selecting objects for acquisition, note-taking while in conversation with Wosera men, documenting individual artefacts, or again scenes of packing and transport of objects by local carriers **(Fig. 131)**.

Hence, these photographic and film archives demonstrate that collectors of Abelam material culture throughout the second half of the 20th century did not confine themselves to assembling objects; they actively performed and documented collecting endeavours. As such, they were creating not only a particular image of what Abelam (material) culture was through the lens of museum collections, but also simultaneously a specific portrait of what 'collecting Abelam' meant. Paradoxically, it could be argued that these photographs and cine films are more about the collectors and collecting processes than about Abelam (material) culture. As Morton and Edwards aptly summarised, ethnographic photographs and films "effectively silenced precisely those voices – the indigenous, the "Other", the disempowered – that they were intended to valorize" (Morton and Edwards 2009: 3).

## 2. Ongoing lives and dissemination of photographic and film archives

### Exchanging, publishing and displaying photographs and cine films: shaping an ideal vision of 'Abelam' across museums and beyond

Like any museum or archival object, the lives of photographs and cine films did not stop once entering the institution where they are now preserved. Thanks to their material forms, usually as small and light objects, by nature reproducible, photographs (and cine films to some extent) could easily be exchanged, sent as attachment to letters, be projected, reproduced in books, enlarged to be displayed, and so on. The various formats in which they have been (re)produced and preserved, and that have been detailed in the previous section, allowed for diverse material, social and phenomenological engagements with these photographic objects – implying not only the ways in which they would be looked at, but also held or touched (Edwards 2001: 16). It is also interesting to note that the period during which these collections were constituted, and these visual materials produced, corresponds to a critical renewal towards photography, from the 1960s onwards, with

the emergence of a nascent visual anthropology (Joseph and Mauuarin 2018: 5). Although not necessarily embracing these debates, the collectors/photographers discussed here were most likely aware of these concerns and of their resonance on fieldwork and collecting practices.

This section will develop three aspects of these objects' ongoing lives: their circulation and exchange between institutions, collectors and anthropologists; the publication of some of these images and their dissemination to a larger audience beyond the realm of the museum/archive, and; the use of some of these photographs and cine films as show or exhibition prompts. Rather than focusing solely on field practices of photography or on later circulation of these images, it appears that the cross-comprehension of these different aspects of their lives enables us to get a more accurate understanding of the complexity of these images and of their essential role as collecting processes and collected objects (Joseph and Mauuarin 2018: 6).

As pointed out by Edwards, "as objects, the photographic negatives literally passed from the sharp edge of the colonial periphery where they were inscribed to the metropolitan institutional centres of interpretation" (Edwards 2001: 122). Photographs were therefore sent back from Papua New Guinea to Australian and/or European institutions, as has already been discussed, but also the other way round for curators to specify the typologies of artefacts that should be acquired by collectors working in the field for them. Once more, the correspondence between Jansen and Groenevelt enlightens us on this matter:

> The aim is to create a collection that is as extensive as possible, and with extensive I mean first and foremost a collection of a very varied composition. That is why there is an endeavour to place what we do not have or not yet have on the wish list (including all objects admired in Basel) [...]. That is why as much photo and other material as possible is sent to New Guinea in order to make your work easier. (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 16 September 1960, translated from Dutch)

As such, the circulation of photographs became the core of exchanges and relationship building – if not initiating or strengthening such relations – between museum and archival institutions, their curatorial staff and researchers, especially anthropologists, in this case (Edwards 2000):

> I spoke to Forge about it in London again [...]. I suspect that Forge will return to the Abelam in the autumn of 1962 for a period of 12 to 15 months, to supplement his study of this people. I showed him some of your photographs regarding objects, which we received last

> autumn and also about objects that are currently on board the Langkoeas. At his request I gave him a number of photos for his study collection. (SR 1407_148: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 11 July 1961, translated from Dutch)

It is through these exchanges and the inclusion of these visual objects within museum and anthropological networks that they were conferred a status as ethnographic data (Bell 2009: 149), before being envisioned as ethnographic objects in their own right. This flow of photographs progressively constituted a profusion of data, to be acknowledged as 'ethnographic' and available for comparison even if not necessarily produced with this prospect in mind (Debaene 2018: 92): "'ethnographicness' resides in the absorption and consumption of images within specific discourses, rather than in the intention of images at their inscription" (Edwards 2001: 15). Such a labelling of these visual documents echoes the way through which artefacts become 'ethnographic' by virtue of their selection, detachment from their original context and use by ethnographers (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991: 387). Therefore, the definition of such images as "ethnographic" documents or objects relies on the discourses in which they have been, and continue to be embedded, especially through their exchange and, as will be developed further, through their publication and exhibition, hence conferring new values and meaning to them beyond their original content (Joseph and Mauuarin 2018: 26).

In the context of 'Abelam' museum collections, the publication of images of objects and of photographs taken in the field has played an active role in the fostering of a specific understanding of what Abelam (material) culture looked like according to museum collectors. Taking photographs was greatly encouraged by some museum curators specifically in order to be able to publish original (scientific) accounts, without having to rely on others' images.

The selection process already initiated through the circulation of photographs along anthropological/museological circles took another dimension in the publication of exhibition and collection catalogues, expedition accounts, etc. The creation of a book or catalogue implies the selection of photographs in order to create an autonomous totality, a process that can almost be compared to a staging of the selected photographs (Joseph and Mauuarin 2018: 18). Thus, they acquire a specific meaning through their juxtaposition with other photographs and with the text, forming a new meaningful entity – a new assemblage in some sense – more or less independent from

the original context of creation of the photographs (Debaene 2018: 105-106; Morton 2009: 140). As Shields points out:

> The act of publication [of photographs] can be viewed as the production of another micro-collection – book illustrations – with highly divergent histories and uses. Further to these histories, publication also brought the images into relationship with specific, yet somewhat unstable, textual and literary meanings. (Shields 2015: 28-29)

One example which addresses these publications as production and circulation of "micro-collections" or assemblages, is the two emblematic books, *Tambaran* (Gardi 1960 [1956]) and *Sepik* (Gardi and Bühler 1958), which gather a number of black and white and colour photographs by René Gardi (and to a lesser extent by Alfred Bühler).[125] These two books seem to have been actively circulated among museum and anthropological circles soon after their publication, and also sent to a number of colonial administrators and mediating agents based in New Guinea who had helped Bühler in his collecting enterprises, as a way of thanking them but also to ensure lasting good relationships for future collecting trips. As early as December 1956 (shortly after they came back from New Guinea in April 1956), Bühler was promising to send copies of *Tambaran* by Gardi, which had just been published, to a number of missionaries and colonial officers stationed in the Abelam and Middle Sepik areas, sometimes alongside other publications and photographs:

> These days the book by René Gardi about our journey came out. We will send copies of them to you, to Father Lehner, and to the mission station in Wewak (by ordinary mail), and I hope that these books will be well received. Furthermore, I will send you more photographs by airmail these days. The others have obviously been lost, otherwise they would have been in your possession long ago. Thanks again for all your kind efforts that are so precious to me. (MKB ID 688: letter from Bühler to Father Heinemans, 5 December 1956, translated from German)

> Now as to your request. The negatives were cleaned as well as possible, and the prints are ready too. Gardi's book Tambaran lies on my desk ready to be sent to you since many months. Only René has forgotten to put his name in it and so you must wait a bit longer. I should send you as well a small publication of myself and some catalogues of the New Guinea-Exhibition which shall be opened today a week [?]. Please give some of these copies

[125] Interestingly, it is worth noting that colour photographs first circulated in popular circles rather than scientific ones, and that for a long time an entertainment and commercial rather than documentary quality was associated with them (Boulouch 2005: 3). According to Debaene, colour was rather a "rhetorical" process, attracting attention to the image but distracting the viewer from its actual content (Debaene 2018: 109).

> to our friends. As to René's other book, we shall arrange this matter within a fortnight, as soon as he will be back from Germany. (MKB ID 688: letter from Bühler to E.D. Robinson, District Office, Angoram, 11 November 1957)

This book, alongside *Sepik* and its large colourful plates, seems to have been very positively received at the time by numerous intermediaries:

> Thank you very much for this delightful book! How pleasingly written, exciting like a novel and yet again a delight for the ethnologist! I have read it several times as have many others who came to Ulupu. (MKB 8-0007: letter from Knorr to Bühler, 12 June 1957, translated from German)

> Your letter reached me recently and the Sepik books arrived this week. The timing was excellent since the Council is now discussing New Guinea. I have been passing them around informally among the Australian delegation and other members of the Council before placing them in the Trusteeship Library. I hardly need say that they are attracting very flattering comments, and it would be ridiculous for me to even try to tell you what I think of the color plates. I thought the black and white photos in Tambaran were excellent – and they were, but these! Gardi, I am convinced, must be a sorcerer. (MKB 8-0007: letter from James L. Lewis, United Nations, to Bühler, 3 July 1958)

> I wish to thank you ever so much for the nice "Gardi Sepik" Book which arrived a good while ago into my busy days here in Papua. It was a very pleasant surprise, the book is very beautiful, most attractive and many friends have already enjoyed it. It is very nice to know that you remember me. With pleasure I think back to those few days when you were in Moresby and I hope that you will call here again, you will be very welcome at all times. (MKB 8-0007: letter from B. Rusterholz, Papua Agencies Ltd., to Bühler, 29 August 1958)

> Thank you for your offer of the Sepik book with colour plates. I would be very pleased indeed to have it. (MKB 8-0007: letter from C. Julius, Dep. of Native Affairs, to Bühler, 24 June 1959)

The lasting influence of these publications, and especially of the colour photographs taken by Gardi, can be highlighted through a series of pictures taken inside the *haus tambaran* in Numumoaka hamlet of Numbungai village,[126] of which images were first published in *Tambaran* (Gardi 1960 [1956]: plate 40) **(Fig. 132)**. One was later reproduced in the catalogue of the Basel exhibition *Heilige Bildwerke aus Neuguinea* (Bühler 1958) which displayed the results of the 1955-56 collecting trip **(Fig. 133)**, but also in colour in *Sepik* (Gardi and Bühler 1958) **(Fig. 134)**. Interestingly, this photograph has been reproduced as a drawing in a popular Australian booklet

[126] Inventory nos. (F)Vb 13561; (F)Vb 13565-67; (F)Vb 36180-91, Museum der Kulturen Basel.

collection "Peoples of the Pacific", in the volume dedicated to *The Abelam People* (Schubert and Fowler 1966). Although no credit to the original photograph or its author is mentioned, the drawing clearly references the alignment of *mayéra* sculptures characteristic of the initiation scene in Numbungai **(Fig. 135)**, while being juxtaposed with a drawing adapted from another eminent photograph of the façade of a *haus tambaran* in Ulupu, also taken by Gardi and also present in *Sepik* **(Fig. 136)**.[127]

The two books, *Sepik* and *The Abelam People*, are both centred on illustration rather than text, both in a popularisation attempt. In the case of the second book, mostly targeted towards a younger audience, the translation of photographs into drawings pushes this simplification, or idealisation, a step further, in particular by mixing artefacts from different areas and contexts of the Abelam region without acknowledging locations or possible variation. The homogenisation of the drawings and consequently of what 'Abelam' is according to the authors, serves an almost propagandist discourse, praising that since the establishment of missions, who contributed to pacifying the region, and schools, Abelam people "are not afraid anymore" (Schubert and Fowler 1966: 15).

This ongoing trajectory of some photographs – much more so than Abelam museum objects – sometimes escaping the control of their creators, contributed considerably to the creation of a preconceived idea of what Abelam (material) culture should look like, both in institutional and popular circles, according to what catalogues and other publications may have selected as worthy of being included as representative of 'Abelamness'.

Another instance which testifies to the importance of the publication of photographs in the creation of a specific understanding of what 'Abelam' meant according to museum collectors and the ways in which such photographs acted, and still act, as points of reference is the no less recognised catalogue *Kultur der Abelam* (Koch 1968). It compiles the collection acquired in 1966 by Gerd Koch on behalf of the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde (alongside a few other Abelam artefacts held in the Berlin museum) and constitutes the first collection catalogue entirely dedicated to an Abelam assemblage. Each collected artefact is illustrated by a photograph, for the most part in black and white, but also includes some colour plates with a few field photographs and portraits of Waiwu Urula and Waulemoi (also known as Kopira), the

[127] Inventory nos. (F)Vb 14070; (F)Vb 36654-56, Museum der Kulturen Basel.

two main artists-informants of Koch. This thoroughly illustrated catalogue acted as the ultimate 'Abelam' collection reference, whose influence was still strong even at the end of the 1980s. As recounted by Dirk Smidt, when asked whether other older Abelam collections had acted as references for his own collecting work with Mc Guigan in 1987, this publication allowed for a retrospective comparison of the Berlin and Leiden collections:

> we could only do this comparison thanks to the beautifully published catalogue by Koch. That's why I could compare. The Berlin collection looks like a rather comprehensive, complete collection. But it is only after I collected the material that I started to compare, and that it turned out that there were a few objects not to be seen in the Berlin collection for instance. (Interview with Dirk Smidt, 13 March 2018)

Through their publication, photographs have therefore continued to be exchanged and circulated way beyond the life of their creators, ensuring comparison and emulation between collections and therefore, durably influencing what would be understood as 'Abelam' (material) culture.

The use of photographs and cine films within exhibitions and in performative displays such as projections have also played an important role – alongside and as a counterpoint to absent objects – in shaping museum viewpoints and broader understandings of what 'Abelam' meant for collectors throughout the second half of the 20th century. For instance, slide shows played an active part in sharing collecting results. As a way of thanking his sponsors (mostly Basel industrial and pharmaceutical companies, see Chapter 3) for the Basel 1959 collecting trip, Bühler wrote:

> In January or February 1960 I will have the pleasure of inviting you to a slide show and at the same time showing you some of the most beautiful pieces of the collection. In the summer of 1960, in connection with the University jubilee, a major exhibition is planned on the expedition, to which I, in turn, will personally invite you. (MKB 8-0007: letter from Alfred Bühler to the sponsors of the 1959 expedition, 11 November 1959, translated from German)

Such conferences with (colour) slide shows and/or projection of cine films, sometimes alongside exhibition tours, constituted what Edwards has termed "an extension of the replication and virtual witnessing" part of the circulation of these images (Edwards 2000: 11). From images categorised as 'anthropological' through their incorporation into museum institutions and discourses, they became

performative devices shaping not only scientific, but also popular understandings of distant cultures, in that particular case of Abelam (material) culture.[128]

The display of photographs and of moving images within exhibitions also motivated the creation of such images from the earliest collecting expeditions in the Abelam region. As early as 1957, Bühler was writing to Gardi while planning for the future *Heilige Bildwerke aus Neuguinea* exhibition displaying the results of his 1955-56 collecting trip (9 November 1957 – 31 March 1958):

> For our upcoming exhibition it would be nice to have two close-ups of 160 cm height from a Tambaran house in Maprik, namely Film 176, no. 3 and no. 6 or 7 (the best one), from the second shot maybe a cut-out if this should look better." (MKB ID 688: letter from Bühler to Gardi, 30 August 1957, translated from German)

The photographs mentioned by Bühler **(Fig. 137)** depict a ceremonial house in Maprik (or possibly Ulupu as annotated in pencil on the card mount of (F)Vb 13974), as well as a close-up on the façade, hence insisting once more on the overlooking *haus tambaran* as the epitome of Abelam material culture. As highlighted by Edwards, "shown with objects in the museum's displays, such photographs become active in the economy of truth in the museum's public spaces and are thus launched on yet another trajectory of institutional meaning" (Edwards 2000: 8). The representative active power of images was clearly understood by the collectors and photographers who worked in the Abelam area. Gardi recounted in *Tambaran* his views on the role of photographs within exhibition displays, insisting that "it makes for vividness and helps towards a better understanding if the exhibits of a museum are supplemented by photographs which link living man with the objects displayed" (Gardi 1960: 21). The way photographs acted as surrogates for absent objects was clearly stated by the Rotterdam curator Jansen, while writing to Groenevelt about the *Tambaran: een verzamelreis in Nieuw-Guinea* ("Tambaran: a collecting trip in New Guinea") exhibition (opened on 13 October 1959):

> It is a great pity I could not bring those rings [rattan rings to measure the size of yams] to the exhibition; they would have been an extra attraction. However, we were able to make

[128] This type of performative screening of images echoes the famous popularisation conferences organised by the association Connaissance du Monde from 1945 onwards in France, but also in Belgium, Switzerland and Quebec (and still organised today). Its slogan "*A l'écran un film, sur scène l'auteur*" ('On screen a movie, on stage its author') summarises the concept of these conferences, where a famous anthropologist, explorer, artist or scientist presented a documentary on his/her work and came to comment on it. (Debaene 2018: 95)

> do with the pictures of Gardi. (SR 1407_149: letter from Jansen to Groenevelt, 19 February 1960, translated from Dutch)

The surrogate role of photographs and moving images continued to play an important role in collecting and display practices throughout the second half of the 20th century. The use of (moving) images in order to palliate the absence of certain objects and of their original context of use was particularly emphasised at a time when museums wanted to recreate entire architectural scenes and immersive environments (as detailed in Chapters 3 and 4). This degree of contextualisation was made explicit by Diane Losche when planning for the Abelam Gallery at the Australian Museum (opening in 1982):

> Photos and possibly videotapes will be used to show how people actually engaged in the various activities which are the subject of the individual display units. (AMS 235/1334: 'Proposal for Anthropological Fieldwork in East Sepik Province 1979', 1979)

To obtain such documents, Howard Hughes (Museum Photographer and Visual Aids Officer at the Australian Museum) joined the crew and embarked on fieldwork in Apangai from 7 July to 8 August 1980. His main objective was to film an initiation ceremony which was expected to take place during July-August 1980, while Diane Losche had ensured villagers agreed on the matter and would cooperate in the filmmaking process. As a result:

> a total of some 10,000 feet of 16mm cine film was exposed and twenty sound tapes were recorded. This amounts to about 280 minutes screening time of film and 360 minutes of sound effects. At the same time over one hundred still photographs were taken. [...] we have sufficient film for a thirty minute sound documentary film as well as film clips and sound effects which can be used in the new Gallery and a set of still photographs which can be used for Gallery reference and promotional material for the cine film. [...] It will be different from the general run of New Guinea films which usually present an extreme view of the people. This film will show the life in the village climaxing with an initiation scene showing one stage in a series of initiation steps. I am confident that it should please not only the New Guinea authorities but most audiences because of its presentation in a sensitive way of a gentle and interesting community. The film will contribute in a positive way to the better understanding of one of our close Pacific neighbours." (AMS 235/1334: 'Abelam Field Trip Report', 1980: 17-18)

These different examples testify to the ways in which photographs and cine films taken during collecting trips in the Abelam region and their dissemination, reproduction and exhibition have contributed, and still contribute, to the

construction of a specific image/imaginary vision of Abelam society and material culture. In some instances, such photographs also helped to fuel fantasies around collecting practices and the almost-heroic nature of the field collector. Such images have been "active participants in the making of meanings around material culture and culture" (Edwards 2000: 7-9), and in our case an extremely powerful tool to lastingly define what 'Abelam' meant for museum collectors and by extension in popular imagination. Interestingly, and as pointed out by Geismar, it seems that a multi-faceted image of what 'Abelam' meant from the mid-1950s to the late 1980s progressively starts to emerge, "within the interplay between photographers, photographed, and photographs", alongside collected objects and other archival documents. Eventually, "making photographs not only objectifies imaginations, but mediates particular kinds of relationships and, by extension, understanding between people" (Geismar 2006: 524). It also appears that these images in turn acted as "visual lures" (Geismar 2006: 528; 2009: 57), enticing later generations of anthropologists and museum collectors to go and collect in the Abelam region, influencing not only where they would go in the field, what they expected to find, but also what they would in turn acquire. Such images and processes of visualisation drew me into studying these collections, actualising furthermore the dynamic relationships at the heart of these visual assemblages.

## From Papua New Guinea to the Museum – and back: reconnecting photographic collections and Abelam people

As initially planned, future steps in reactivating these collections would be to reconnect photographic and film material with Abelam people, especially from the villages where these assemblages originate. Indeed, the ongoing life of these collections, and in particular of photographic assemblages was supposed to be taken a step further while conducting fieldwork in Papua New Guinea from April to June 2020 – an aspect of my research project that unfortunately had to be aborted due to the Covid-19 pandemic and consequent travel restrictions. The second part of this field trip was meant to be spent in the Maprik area and dedicated to investigating the impact museum collecting enterprises may have had locally at the time of the collection, but also their ongoing consequences today. Around 100 photographs from the various photographic collections discussed above (mostly taken during the collecting trips, including many portraits of Abelam people: artists, big men, individuals involved one way or another in the collecting enterprises) had been

selected, printed and laminated, with the prospect of conducting a photo-elicitation project. It was to be carried out in several of the villages where many collecting endeavours had been performed, that is Apangai, Bongiora, Ulupu, Kalabu in the Northern Abelam area, and Sarikim in the Wosera area. In relation to the work that was initially planned on the collection acquired in Sunuhu in 1973-74, now held at the National Museum and Art Gallery in Port Moresby, a visit to Sunuhu was also considered. Through a number of established contacts, but also relying on the serendipity of encounters, I was hoping to meet Abelam artists who had been involved in relatively recently acquired collections and/or their relatives. The expected outcome of this project was to gather precious knowledge not only about the collected objects, but also on the history of collecting practices from Abelam perspectives. It aimed to contribute to drawing a more comprehensive and more complex picture of the collecting practices and resulting collected assemblages, while initiating a form of reconnection between these museum collections and Abelam people. The project aimed to foster a collaborative dialogue, where Abelam individuals would be free to comment on the photographs and to offer any thoughts or information about the shared documents. It was also hoped that these encounters would help elucidate the meanings these collections hold in contributing to the construction of Abelam and more generally Papuan contemporary identities. As pointed out by Paul Basu, current debates on the repatriation of artefacts acquired during colonial times often focus exclusively on the artefacts themselves, and rarely on the other elements forming the collection-as-assemblage, in particular archival documents. With regard to the *Museum Affordances* project, he notes that:

> as we have recirculated such collections among 'originating communities', it is the prospect of seeing the faces of one's ancestors in a photograph, or hearing their voices in scratchy recordings, that usually elicits the most powerful responses, while interest in the artefacts is often more limited. (Basu 2021: 51)

Re-mobilising Abelam collections therefore should be envisaged in its plurality, engaging not only with museum objects but with the wider collection-as-assemblage, in its full complexity.

# Conclusion

This thesis started by questioning how and why in 2021 a scrutinised and due to open institution, the Humboldt Forum, decided to display a reconstruction of several Abelam *haus tambaran* elements, a façade and two initiation chambers, as well as the façade of a yam storage house and other Abelam artefacts.

In order to get a better understanding of this forthcoming display, this thesis proposed to step back in time and examine thirteen Abelam museum collections held in museums, not only in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany, but also in the Netherlands, the UK, Switzerland, Australia and Papua New Guinea, all acquired between the mid-1950s and the late 1980s. These collections were selected because they revolved mostly around whole or parts of ceremonial houses, or acknowledged the original wish of the collectors to acquire such objects if they were not available for collecting, while also being as representative of Abelam material culture as possible, at least according to their collectors. However, because of the astounding quantity of collected artefacts, it was decided early on that this research would not focus on each individual object. Substantial studies had already been compiled about Abelam material culture, in particular the very detailed reports written by Noel Mc Guigan (1989; 1992) and Fred Gerrits (2012) on initiation scenes, or publications by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin on Abelam art and *haus tambaran* architecture (1985; 1989a; 1989b; 1994; 1996; 2011; 2016), and studies by Anthony Forge (1967; 1970; 1973b; 1979) and Diane Losche (1995; 1996; 1997; 1999) on the complex meaning of Abelam art – to name just a few. Therefore, it was decided to approach this research more systematically at the level of the collection (Cornish, Driver and Nesbitt 2021: 7).

This decentring from the objects (but not a complete move away) sometimes derived from the impossibility to access artefacts, when storage facilities were under relocation, and to the practical limitations within which this research was conducted. This initial constraint however forced me to think differently about museum

collections: they were approached not as final results or static independent wholes, but as multifarious, heterogeneous and interconnected assemblages. By decentring the focus from the collected objects to, what may seem at first, less obvious aspects of the collection-as-assemblage, it allowed us to outline often overlooked aspects of museum collections, in order to re-historicise and re-complexify the narratives around them. Consequently, this research redefined collections as assemblages including not only the collected artefacts, but also all the human and non-human actors involved in the process, the (power) relations therefore created, the collected archives (documents, photographs and cine films) and the complex processes prevailing in the creation of museum objects.

Accordingly, Chapter 1 proposed to set the theoretical concepts and methodology that guided this research, that is framing collections and collecting as processes, as networks composed of actors, their actions and relationships, and the collecting events they in turn performed, creating ever-increasing assemblages. Chapter 2 put into practice this call to re-historicise Abelam museum collections by analysing all the actors composing these networks of relations. It focused especially on all the actors involved locally in the Abelam region and more broadly in Papua New Guinea at the time of the collecting endeavours. It also uncovered what can be considered trivial but nonetheless essential aspects of collecting trips, that is transportation, packing, storing and other facilities that contributed to understanding what enabled such a collecting frenzy in the Abelam region from the mid-1950s to the late 1980s. It offered to put this collecting enthusiasm back into the historical, cultural and legal contexts of the concomitant rise to Papua New Guinea Independence in 1975, and emphasised how local primordial institutions such as the PNG National Museum and Art Gallery were crucial actors in this collecting context. Chapter 3 examined the motivations for both acquiring and selling Abelam artefacts, highlighting how various agents' agendas, in particular Abelam individuals' motivations, contributed to shaping Abelam museum collections. Chapter 4 investigated the Abelam 'object-scape' in the museum, and what processes (especially commission, translation and classification) have been implemented to create a specific understanding of what 'Abelam' means within the museum and how this understanding has influenced other collecting enterprises. Finally, Chapter 5 proposed to rethink the definition of 'Abelam museum collections' by including the archival documentation, photographs and cine films created during the collecting endeavours to the broader understanding of the collection-as-assemblage. It also contributed to highlighting the role played by

these documents and images in shaping a specific understanding of the collecting history in the Abelam region during the second half of the 20th century and beyond.

This thesis proposed to rethink the collections under study from a more all-encompassing approach, including not only collected artefacts from the Abelam region, but equally importantly the archival documents and photographs produced throughout the collecting process, and which are at best preserved in dedicated departments or as collection documentation, when not scattered around between various institutions or retained in private hands. In any case, these archives are rarely (if at all) considered part of Abelam museum collections. This research project contributed to acknowledging their value as collected objects in their own right, alongside the less tangible but nonetheless highly crafted artefacts that are the relationships between all the human and non-human actors involved during the collecting processes. The mechanisms and technologies implicated in the transformation and recognition of Abelam artefacts as museum objects have also been reframed and challenged as these are in no way neutral, indeed they are an essential actor in the museum collecting process.

With these elements in mind, let us return to the collection acquired by Noel Mc Guigan for the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. In 2009, while on a self-sponsored trip to the Abelam region intending to revisit several places where he had previously conducted research, Mc Guigan was asked by Keli Kandi **(Fig. 55)**, big man of Bilgwin hamlet of Apangai village and renowned artist, whom he had known since the 1980s, if he could find a market for the carved and painted contents of the Bilgwin ceremonial house. The *haus tambaran* included two initiation chambers, Lu and Puti, whose contents had been created under the supervision of Keli Kandi **(Figs 5 and 6)**. In 2012, after several museums had declined the offer, Mc Guigan contacted Markus Schindlbeck, then curator in charge of the Oceania collections at the Berlin Ethnologisches Museum, who eventually accepted the acquisition of the contents of the two *haus tambaran* chambers. The objects arrived in Berlin in 2013-14, together with related documentation about the collection (Noel Mc Guigan, personal communication, 18 January 2021).

The collection was inventoried under around 135 item numbers, including painted panels, carvings, and other elements constitutive of the initiation scene, such as the limbs and headdress of the Puti figure, as well as speers, 'shell' rings originally displayed at the foot of the Puti figure, which are unusual as they are carved out of

wood and painted in white.[129] Two *baba* masks with their full costume also form part of the collection.

As has been detailed in this thesis, the Ethnologisches Museum (formerly known as the Museum für Völkerkunde), Berlin, already held large Abelam collections, especially a *haus tambaran* façade acquired in the early 1960s by Franz Panzenböck and the comprehensive collection assembled by Gerd Koch in 1966, including a yam storage house façade created by Waiwu Urula from Kalabu, on permanent display at the museum in Dahlem until January 2018 **(Figs. 7 and 8)**. However, the museum did not hold complete initiation room contents, and this gap may have justified the institution's eagerness to acquire the two rooms from Bilgwin hamlet.

The Bilgwin collection is interesting for many reasons, as a cohesive and independent ensemble, but takes on other layers of significance once we decentre the gaze from the objects alone. As mentioned previously, the two initiation chambers were created under the impulse and supervision of Keli Kandi. Born in 1947 at Bilgwin, he remains, according to Mc Guigan, one of the most active artists in the northern Abelam region, and a respected yam grower. He was initiated in 1963 into the Lu and Puti stages and was willing to become an artist early on. However, in 1966, he was recruited to work as indentured labour at Aropa plantation on Buka island, in the northern Solomon Islands, where he worked for two years alongside 11 other men from Apangai. Upon his return to Apangai, he started creating carvings and paintings for initiation ceremonies, notably for an initiation ceremony in the early 1970s in the neighbouring village of Chiginambu. At the time, he took advice from other respected artists, namely Kokopati (also from Bilgwin hamlet of Apangai) and Nyurek of Bongiora, who was simultaneously one of Fred Gerrits's main informants, and who had contributed greatly to the creation of the Lu and Puti displays now held in Basel and Stuttgart. It is worth remembering that Apangai and Bongiora were historically exchange partner villages, explaining the strong links between artists from the two villages, who would have contributed to each other's initiation scenes. In 1983-84, Keli participated in the creation of the Lu, Puti and Gambawut scenes in the *haus tambaran* of Nyambikwa hamlet of Apangai, alongside Kokopati and many other artists, whose works are now

[129] Some of the reasons suggested by Keli Kandi for the use of carved wooden rings in place of Tridacna shell rings was to avoid any accidental risk of breakage of the precious shell rings while being displayed on the floor for tourist visits. Also because of their intrinsic cultural and wealth value within Abelam society, genuine shell rings were unlikely to have been included as part of a tourist display, so wooden ones appeared to be a satisfactory alternative, while also much cheaper to acquire (Mc Guigan, personal communication, 25 May 2021).

in the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Leiden. In particular, Keli Kandi created the wooden *ngwalnduwut* for the Tappoka figure in the Gambawut chamber (see Chapter 1). Mc Guigan first collected and documented Keli's works on this occasion. At the time, however, he was still considered a contributor, training alongside more established carvers and painters, but not yet a leading artist. Since the mid-1980s, Keli Kandi has built two other *haus tambarans*, one of which was collected by the art dealer Noel McLeod in 2003-04, before being donated to the South Australian Museum in Adelaide in 2009-10. According to Mc Guigan, Keli also produced hundreds of artworks for sale and tourist trade, and to date remains an active yam grower and one of the main organisers of ceremonial activities in the region. He actively promotes performances for tourists, in the hope of encouraging artistic production. For the Lu and Puti rooms created in the Bilgwin *haus tambaran*, Keli Kandi worked with the help of many other artists, especially Arop, his main collaborator, and younger artists like Sakias and Kumbwe. The Bilgwin assemblage was created as part of a continuing project led by Keli Kandi to perpetuate artistic creation in Apangai, especially in Bilgwin hamlet,[130] and to demonstrate to the younger generation the original role of painting and carving in Abelam society. Although no initiation ceremony sparked the creation for the Lu and Puti displays, a re-enactment of an initiation ritual was performed after the scenes were restored and before they were dismantled, for younger men to see the displays if they wished. In 2009, when Mc Guigan went back to Apangai, the Bilgwin *haus tambaran* was a major attraction for guided tourist groups, and the ceremonial house tour was even promoted on a billboard outside Wewak airport. (Noel Mc Guigan, personal communications, 18 January, 25 May and 4 June 2021)

Therefore, far from the anonymity in which many ethnographic collections are often kept, by starting to disentangle the complex assemblage that the Berlin Bilgwin collection forms, we can see how this collection is composed of an accretion of multiple relationships, whose mediators take us in many temporal and spatial directions, towards other museum collections and other actors. Hence, we can only get a sense of why Keli Kandi wanted to sell this assemblage to a museum by

[130] In other hamlets of Apangai, other cultural groups are also perpetuating artistic creation. This is notably the case with the rival cultural group of Brikiti hamlet, led by Waikwa Nera (Nera Jambruku's son) **(Fig. 29)**, who created a façade with the help of other artists, displayed as part of the 2012 7th Asia Pacific Triennial, QAGOMA, Brisbane (see McDougall 2014). According to Mc Guigan, Kipa Wian was the last major artist in Nyambikwa hamlet, and today the hamlet is without a noted artist or group concerned with art production. Some Nyambikwa artists have however joined the Brikiti cultural group. (Mc Guigan, personal communication, 4 June 2021)

acknowledging previous iterations of such sales of *haus tambaran* initiation scenes to museum collectors. Indeed, the Bilgwin collection, even if standing as an assemblage of its own, can only be fully comprehended when pulling together the threads that relate it to other collections, whether held in Basel, Leiden, Adelaide, and so on. Its association in Berlin with artefacts collected in other parts of the Abelam region and in previous decades in turn creates a new, somewhat artificial, assemblage part of the Humboldt Forum exhibition display. This fresh assemblage is itself further related to other assemblages held in other institutions and radiating in many directions. The display strategy of a reconstructed heteroclite assemblage is also reminiscent of previous or ongoing exhibitions of Abelam collections, as has been the case in Basel since the 1980s, and as detailed in Chapter 3.

Only by briefly hinting at the multiple layers of relations and interconnections that the Bilgwin collection, and by extension, the upcoming Humboldt Forum display embody, can we see how ethnographic collections can be rethought and fruitfully redefined and actualised by acknowledging the porosity of their boundaries. These collections are fluid, 'membranic' (Ketelaar 2001: 138), 'liquid' (Cameron 2015), multi-sited and multi-temporal assemblages, enmeshed in complex networks that eventually contribute to creating new relationships. Consequently, this approach to the collections, which privileged several points of entries decentred from the collected objects, can in turn tell us a lot about the objects themselves. Such a reframing of the collection allows us to rethink how the collected objects are the results of often collaborative creation processes, of complex sets of relationships emic to the Abelam context but also imposed by external frameworks. Most collections were indeed assembled within a specific context where the significance of Abelam creation and the notion of cultural heritage changed and was progressively recognised as essential to the foundation of the Papua New Guinean nation. Abelam artefacts collected during the second half of the 20$^{th}$ century, were also created as part of a growing cash economy, within changing religious and educational contexts where the creation and sale of artefacts could fulfil several (sometimes concomitant) goals. Hence, while the close study of the materiality and the handling of Abelam objects is irreplaceable to obtain specific information about artefacts, their original use and possible chain of ownership, approaching the collection from other angles of study can allow us to reveal additional layers of significance in which objects are entangled and that they create through their accretion as museum collections. By studying these artefacts and collections not in isolation but as interrelated

assemblages informing one another, progressive comparisons can also be drawn between collections, highlighting how they may have influenced later collecting endeavours, how some recurring actors may have played an essential role in shaping these collections, or how some Abelam artists have set a pathway for later generations of makers. The provenance of Abelam collections is therefore not linear, but multidirectional and needs to be apprehended in all its complexity "by paying attention to the diverse, overlapping, discontinuous and unequal histories that are reflected in the making and remaking of collections" (Cornish, Driver and Nesbitt 2021: 7). As such, the example of the Berlin collections, redefined as complex, relational and fluid assemblages, and the emergence of the Humboldt Forum Abelam exhibition, can only be understood against the backdrop of, and in dialogue with, previous Abelam collections and displays. As ever-growing assemblages of assemblages, these collections expand in many directions, from Papua New Guinea to museums arounds the world – and, hopefully, back.

At a time when so-called 'ethnographic', 'anthropology' or 'world cultures' museums are more than ever under critical scrutiny, and when acute provenance research appears to be one of the answers to questions about their history and consequent legitimacy, the methodological approach developed in this thesis can prove widely relevant beyond the scope of Abelam collections. Unravelling and re-collecting the bundles of relationships relating the multiplicity of heterogeneous actors that compose collections-as-assemblages has proved a fruitful endeavour to bring complexity back into what could easily be overly simplified debates. This effort to re-complexify ethnographic collections' definition as ever-growing and fluid assemblages can indeed contribute to highlighting the multiple agencies at play in the formation and ongoing (museum) lives of these collections. Such an approach requires time and meticulousness and may seem counterintuitive in light of how pressing having such a conversation is.

Yet, by zooming in and operating this back and forth between a multiplicity of sources and collections, while ideally coupling such research with active collaboration with creating communities, not only can we draw a more fine-grained picture of what ethnographic collections entail and how they came into being, but also shed new light on their relevance today. As has been demonstrated in this thesis, collaboration should also be envisioned between museums holding such ensembles: if we want to genuinely complicate the histories of these collections, they need to be articulated as

interrelated assemblages, and not apprehended as independent islands, isolated from one another.

As such, museum knowledge and classification systems have often denied the layers of relationships at the heart of these assemblages, for practical reasons such as the essential indexation of objects for inventory purposes. However, these have eventually contributed to silencing the (sometimes imbalanced or violent) relationships from which museum objects emerge and that they in turn create. In light of current debates, bringing complexity back into ethnographic museums' discourses is of great value. Decentring the gaze from the collected objects only, in order to acknowledge the value of other constitutive elements, such as archival documents and museum knowledge technologies, contributes to rethinking what 'ethnographic' collections are, how they were acquired, what they encompass, what meanings they carry and to whom they are most relevant today.

This thesis aimed to reframe Abelam museum assemblages as "creative technologies" (Thomas 2016: 9). By extension, ethnographic collections and the museums that hold them, rather than being exclusively perceived as flawed and illegitimate structures, should be thought of as a "generative space", that is:

> a space to really think through the present, what is happening, how to think of it as historical, in its historical contingencies, and how to map out other possibilities for the future. [...] The museum is that space where a certain kind of complexity can be added to reductive thinking. (Modest 2020: 69-70)

In sum, we need to rethink ethnographic museums and their collections as "an investment in critical discomfort about the taken-for-granted-ness" (Modest 2020: 72). Re-collecting collections-as-assemblages should therefore be understood as a search for nuance, against the grain of preconceived answers: a plea for complex, complicated and relational collection histories.

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Patrol Reports Maprik, East Sepik District

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## Interviews

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