



Vulva for Naven Ceremony

Stylized representation of a vulva worn by travestied men during the Naven ceremonies. The two sides of the vulva are composed of stylized bird heads with the triangular clitoris in between. latmul language group, Middle Sepik, PNG. Coconut and lime. 9 cm. 19th/20th century.

Literature:

The latmul naven is a ritual event whose name means “going on view”. During naven, men and women mimic and mock each other, variously laughing at the social conventions of gender and crying at their psychic consequences. Men display their envy of female procreative ability; women mock that yearning and reveal themselves to be figures of disgust and repulsion. Both men and women transvestite themselves donning the others apparel including mock genitals and breasts. Female “mothers” symbolically squirt menstrual blood and fling feces onto their “children.” Mother’s brothers humiliate their nephews by “grooving” their buttocks over the nephews’ thighs and legs, evoking anal eroticism even as

they performatively cast themselves in the role of birth mother. Spirit figures emerge from cult houses and sway lewdly for beholders. It is as though the whole culture periodically rescinds the mores of routine social life to reveal the confusion and turmoil roiling beneath the surface. It is argued that naven makes visible a partially hidden dialogue in latmul culture, a tension between (positive) notions of nurturant motherhood and (negative) notions of grotesque maternal excess. Naven appears to put the unconscious of latmul culture "on view", an unconscious consumed by a persistently frustrated masculine yearning for and envy of female reproductive powers.

Naven is of course one of the most storied rituals in the annals of anthropological investigation, thanks to Gregory Bateson's epistemologically and ethnographically experimental 1936 account. The focal interest of latmul culture is the achievement of masculinity (male gender identity) vis-à-vis female motherhood; it involves Oedipal resentments and desires, incestuous fantasies, "womb envy", sublimated homosexuality, and many other Freudianisms. Indeed, the artefacts of latmul culture - myths, architecture, everyday social practice - seem to lend themselves to this sort of analysis, as they are obsessed with gender, the body and sexual reproduction.

Ref. :

Bateson, G. : Naven : A Survey of the Problems suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe drawn from Three Points of View (1936). Stanford University Press, 1958.

SILVERMAN, Eric Kline : Masculinity, Motherhood, and Mockery: Psychoanalyzing Culture and the latmul Naven Rite in New Guinea. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

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