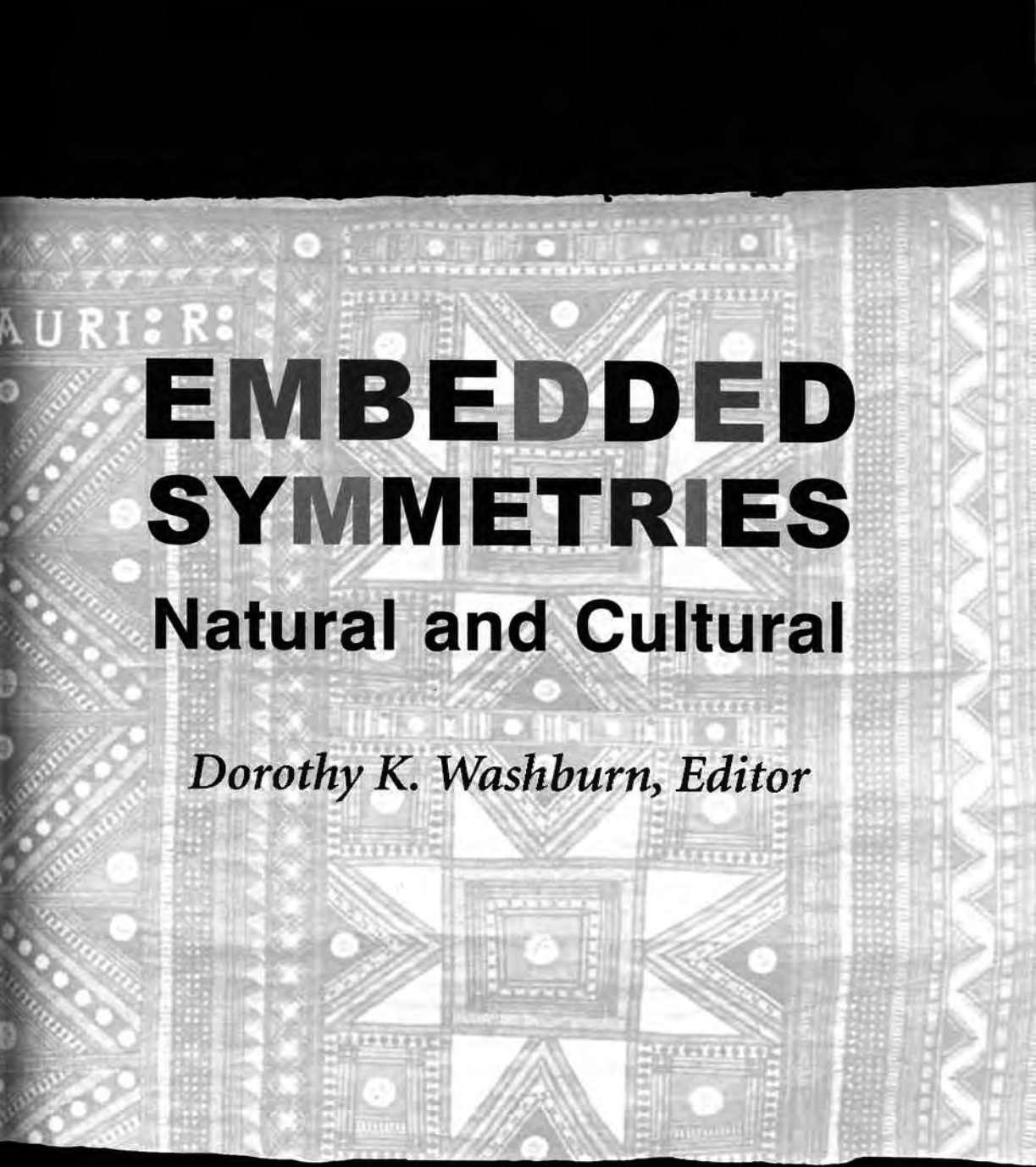

# EMBEDDED SYMMETRIES

## Natural and Cultural

*Dorothy K. Washburn, Editor*

University of New Mexico Press ■ Albuquerque

Published in cooperation with the Amerind Foundation

*To Anne Paul, and Ed Franquemont.*
*Their groundbreaking work has opened our eyes*
*to the language of symmetry.*
*They are greatly missed.*

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**Figure 9.1** A work group of women beating out bark cloth, Ekubu Village, Vatulele Island.

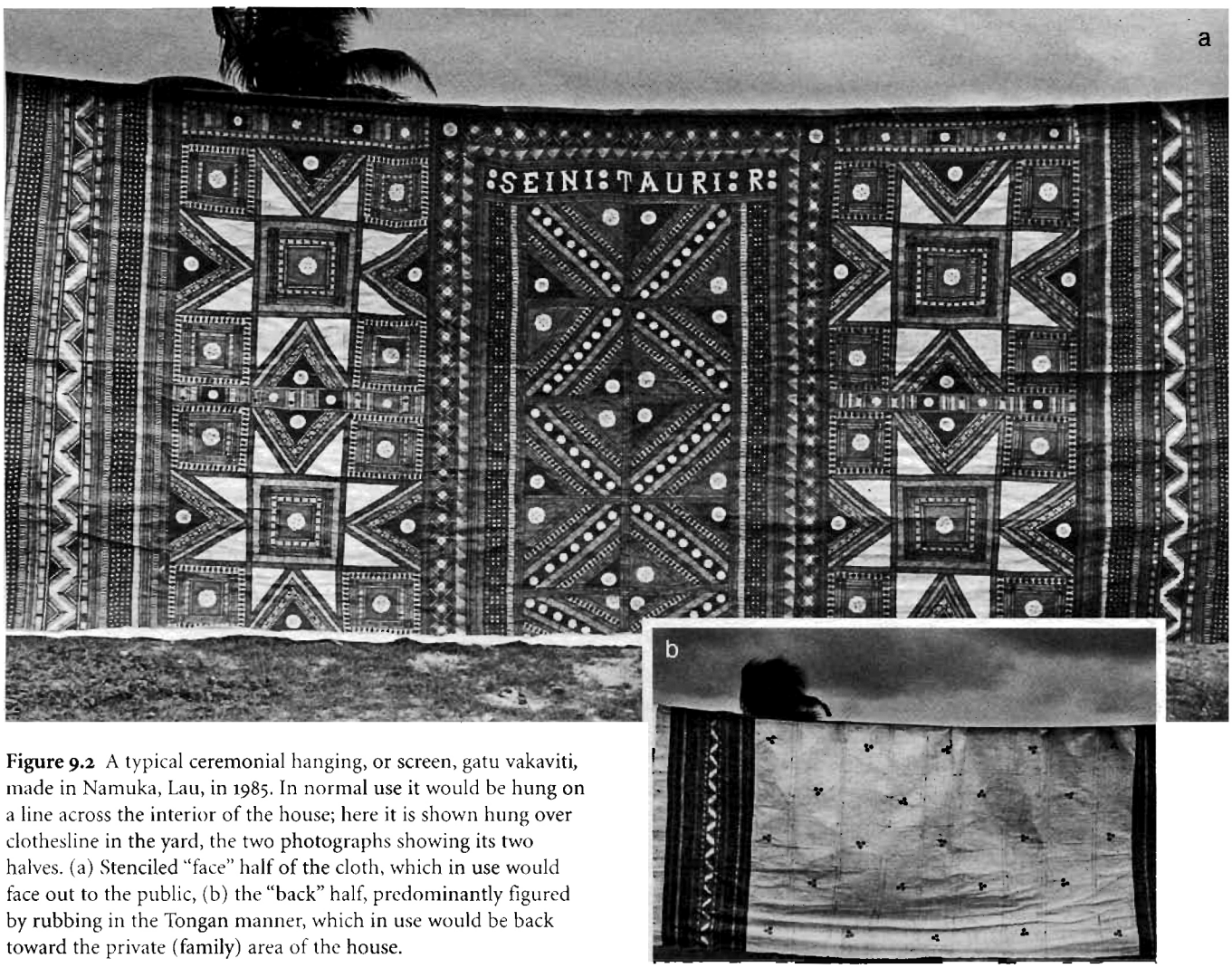


**Figure 9.2** A typical ceremonial hanging, or screen, gatu vakaviti, made in Namuka, Lau, in 1985. In normal use it would be hung on a line across the interior of the house; here it is shown hung over clothesline in the yard, the two photographs showing its two halves. (a) Stenciled "face" half of the cloth, which in use would face out to the public, (b) the "back" half, predominantly figured by rubbing in the Tongan manner, which in use would be back toward the private (family) area of the house.

CHAPTER NINE

# Symmetry and Semiotics

## The Case of Fijian Barkcloth Figuration

*Rod Ewins*

**Figure 9.3** Group of women stenciling the design onto the gatu vakaviti illustrated in Figure 9.2, Namuka, Lau, 1985. They are working on the "face" of the cloth; the blank area to the left of the picture will be rubbed with weak, watery paint to produce the "tasina" area of the "back."

Washburn and Crowe (1988:268) set a challenge when they wrote that "even . . . nonrepresentational art has important cultural communicative value . . . and we must investigate the significance of different geometries in different cultural contexts." Wise counsel, but it must be followed with caution. Today at least, in many societies such art is made within parameters of traditional form and style, which the makers understand in very general or emotional ways rather than as carrying specific information. Therefore, rather than directly seeking to identify particular ideas or objects that such "geometries" might or might not signify, I propose here that we should look at the entire systems of meaning of which they are component parts and attempt to understand their sociocultural role in that totality.

The particular signifier I focus on in this chapter is Fijian barkcloth, today called *tapa* by most westerners but actually called *masi* in Standard Fijian.[1] To make it, Fijian women first beat the inner bark (bast) of the paper-mulberry plant (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) into thin sheets (Figure 9.1). These are then felted together with further beating to make rectangular units of strong, even-textured fabric that traditionally performed all the functions of both cloth and paper in Western society. Its use as clothing has long been supplanted by Western cloth except in the case of ritual dress. Most of its other utilitarian roles have been lost.

But quite separate from these, masi carries arguably the most diverse range of meanings of any Fijian artifact, and it is these that secure its ongoing importance to Fijians. Its "official valuable" status means that it is produced by certain designated areas/groups of people, both as their principal item of ritual exchange as well as a commodity in nonritual trade between groups. The 1.8-by-0.5-meter pieces that result from the process of beating and felting are end- and/or edge-joined to make often huge pieces of ceremonial cloth for these ritual and trade purposes; for example, the typical size of ceremonial hanging cloths or screens (called *taunamu* or *gatu vakaviti)* is 5.5 by 3.7 meters (Figure 9.2). Some are as large as 7.5 by 5 meters. These are commonly figured[2] with nonrepresentational geometric designs arranged in symmetrical patterns (Figure 9.3).

My chosen task in this chapter is to establish that the symmetries that exist in the form and figuration of masi draw directly on the same sources of cognitive understanding, spiritual belief, and social knowledge that have generated the symmetries, reciprocities, and resonances that can be clearly seen to operate in Fijian social structures and processes. It would be difficult to sustain an argument that the cloth itself, its design,[3] or its abstract figuration *directly* symbolize, or are signs or metaphors for, any specific natural forms or social structures. However, I contend that masi in all of its particulars *does* signify, indeed stands as a tangible physical expression of, the overarching idea and organizing principles of symmetry. By corollary, therefore, it relates to, indeed in light of its role as a signifier may be regarded as at least an *indirect* symbol of, every other Fijian social and cultural expression of symmetry.

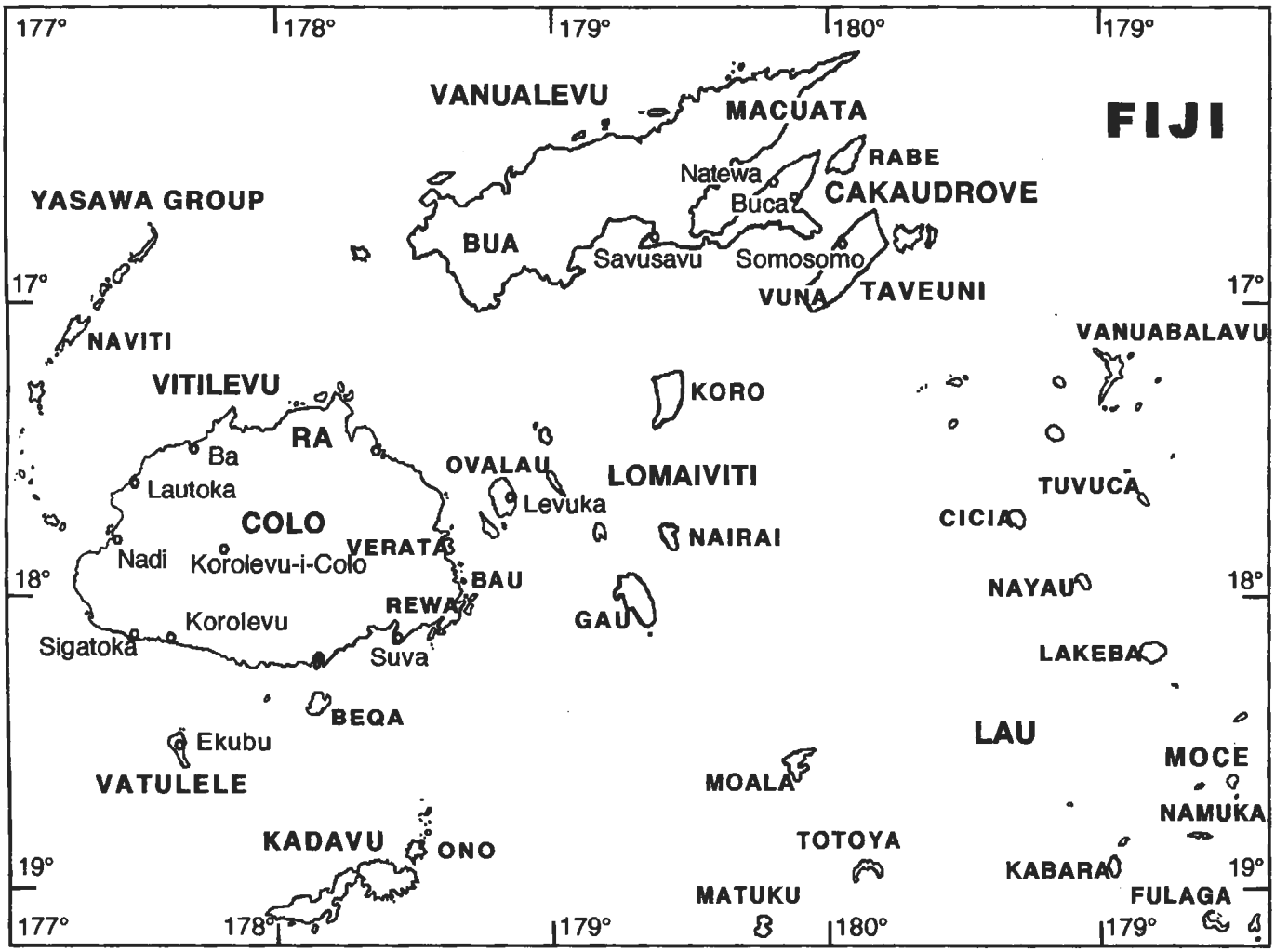


**Figure 9.4** Fiji.

There is a long sociological precedent for postulating such connections between ideas, social structures, and significant objects. Eighteenth-century Scottish philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith held that human intelligence and sentiments derive from society (Shott 1976), and Emile Durkheim extended this to include the physical domain, suggesting that societies classify "things" on the same basis as they order their social structure and interpersonal relationships (Durkheim 1976 [1912]:esp. Chapter 3; Durkheim and Mauss 1963 [1903]:esp. Chapter 5). He recognized that all classification is based on an "ensemble of mental habits by virtue of which we conceive things and facts in the form of coordinated or hierarchized groups" (Durkheim and Mauss 1963 [1903]:88). What is relevant here is not how such "mental habits" may have initially been formed, but that for the people concerned they have effectively constituted a virtual lens through which to view the world. The perception that results from this view is what the French philosopher Durand (1999 [1960]) terms an "imaginary" and is applied to not merely understanding, but also organizing both conceptually and physically virtually all aspects of existence. This conceptualization has resonances with Thomas Wynn's discussion of algorithmic thought in Chapter 3 of this volume.

## Cultural and Social Symmetry

The "imaginary" relevant to the present discussion is one that is common to many cultures—the conceptualizing of everything as existing in pairs. Maybury-Lewis (1989:vii) writes that "the human predilection for binary systems . . . [is] a mode of thought and social organisation that has represented an attractive option throughout human history. . . . [For some societies it] involves their cosmologies, their ideas about time and aesthetics,

their ways of dealing with age and gender, their structures for coping with power, hierarchy, competition and exchange, and a host of other factors." The concomitant human predilection for balance and stability means that the pairing is very commonly symmetrical.

Symmetry pervades the Fijian imagination in all of the ways Maybury-Lewis describes—spiritual, social, political, gendered, and aesthetic. An informant declared to the anthropologist A. M. Hocart that "all things go in pairs, or the sharks will bite" (Hocart 1952:57). The comment was neither whimsical nor theatrical, nor, I would argue, even metaphorical (cf. Toren 1998), but in the informant's view, a statement of literal fact, elegant in its simplicity. He was from northeastern Fiji (Figure 9.4), from a region called Cakaudrove (pronounced *thah-cow-n-draw-veh*), the art of which is discussed at some length in this chapter. The people there trace their descent from Dakuwaqa (pronounced *nda-coo-wah-ng-ga*), a powerful god who often takes physical form as a great shark. Through him, they possess immunity from attack by sharks, which are not viewed as totems, but literally as kin.

This man was, therefore, explaining his group's perception of the symmetries both between and within the earthly and cosmological orders, the disruption of any part of which would "inevitably result in natural calamities" (Maybury-Lewis 1989:4). It is common in Fiji to hear the remark that failure to observe some custom would "bring harm to my family," which of course extends conceptually to the entire clan, the phratry (group of clans), even the large geopolitical group within which the phratry operates. A Fijian from a different region would have chosen a different disaster to illustrate this point, but a belief in the continuities of symmetry in and between the natural and cosmic orders would hold good throughout Fiji, as would the perils of disrupting them at any level.

## Symmetries in Ritual and Nonritual Social Practices

Reciprocity in Fijian society relates to kinship, gender, and the mutual obligation that exists between all members of groups and the kinship-based networks of ritual and nonritual exchange through which they simultaneously provision themselves with life's necessities, construct and define group identities, and maintain social interconnections and solidarity.

Bloch (1977:283–287) has pointed out that there are two cognitive systems, which he calls "ritual communication" and "nonritual communication," which societies use at different moments in the "long conversation" of social intercourse. They can compete for precedence and can merge at their boundary. Ritual communication mediates the relationship of past, present, and future and has generally been drawn on in positing "social structure," whereas nonritual communication, Bloch proposes, is a different cognitive system, which deals directly with the more worldly concerns of the present.

Because many anthropologists have seen social structure as their primary concern, they have tended to focus on the ritual interactions that epitomize and reinforce social structure. This has resulted in a failure to note coexistent systems of nonritual interaction or to see them merely as aspects of ritual systems. The corollary of this is that since the first formulations of Mauss (1969 [1925]), though direct observers regularly stressed the social roles of ritual "exchange" systems rather than economic roles, the reciprocities associated with ritual goods presentations have been persistently defined in terms of Western economic notions of direct exchange and debt.

In the language of symmetry, direct exchange is a mirror reflection,[4] a rarity in ritual exchange systems. There is often an apparent imbalance in a ritual "exchange," or a time lapse between a goods presentation in one direction and an answering presentation in the other direction. Both occur in Fijian rituals, and they have normally been analyzed in similarly economic terms of debt and obligation. Exchange theorists have therefore viewed transactions such as those of Fijian rituals as examples of "asymmetrical reciprocity." This too is misleading, since Fijians require that the reciprocity should actually be absolutely symmetrical, even though the element of time is built into it.

What occurs is a glide reflection—an action (normally with some form of response, but one that does not purport to mirror the initial action), a translation (passage of time in the ongoing relationship), and then a reaction, which is equivalent in meaning and social value. Meaning and social value are far more nuanced than purely economic value. The "glide" between action +

response and reaction + response ensures the continuity of the system through time. Indeed, perhaps the most important social utility of ritual is that it can mediate relationships between past, present, and future, whereas, as Bloch (1977) points out, nonritual interactions tend to primarily address the needs of the present.

In fact, the mirrored symmetrical interchange that theorists have tried to construct out of ritual goods transactions *does* exist, but not in ritual. It exists in the anthropologically neglected interactions of nonritual trade, or barter, through which societies such as Fiji's deal more directly (and far more extensively) with their worldly concerns. The economically balanced symmetry found here is actually much less demanding and sociopolitically sensitive than the symmetries of kinship and gender that are critical to ritual and thus facilitate the servicing of everyday needs with minimal strain. Through such trade, they also provision themselves with much of the wherewithal for their ritual encounters.

In Fijian ideal types, then, ritual interaction may be defined as a kinship-based system in which exchange takes place as a glide reflection and nonritual interaction as transgressing boundaries of kinship and taking place as a mirror reflection. In practice, however, the distinction is not always so clear-cut. It is often obscured by the fact that most, if not all, ritually sanctioned goods may, at some stage in their lives, be bartered nonritually (though of course there are also routinely bartered goods that are never involved in ritual). Further, the kinship-based networks of production and distribution through which ritual interaction occurs were virtually the only channels of social intercourse (other than war) in pre-Western Fiji, and therefore nonritual exchanges utilized these networks. Many observers, therefore, have found it difficult to know whether they were observing ritual exchanges or organized bartering and have tended to lump them together as ritual.

Further complicating the ideal types, mirroring is absent from perhaps the famous Fijian nonritual institution, called *kerekere,* in which people may solicit goods and services from those with whom they have social connections of almost any sort. Ritual is either totally absent or minimal, and no direct reciprocity is implied. However, an overall symmetry is notionally the ideal, and recipients accept an obligation to perpetuate the *system* by being ready to give at some future time; their obligation is not necessarily to the original donor. Therefore, in kerekere there is not a specific exchange relationship between two individuals or two groups to provide a temporal band along which glide reflection occurs. Rather, the institution itself is symmetrical. What goes around comes around, with a pool of participants giving and receiving on an ad hoc basis as their relative need and affluence dictate. For the survival of the system, participants have to feel there will be a roughly equivalent return to them for their input, but there is never a final point at which "the books will be balanced."

## Symmetries of Kinship and Gender

Pre-Christian Fijian religion was essentially ancestral, but kinship continues to pervade every aspect of Fijian social life. Gender symmetry is the overarching principle that organizes individual identity and social structure. Male and female "sides" determine every individual's relationships, responsibilities, and rights. Personal clan membership, land entitlement, and sustenance are mainly (though not absolutely) inherited patrilineally, while important aspects of assigned status and intra- and intergroup relationships are derived matrilineally.

The individual may be represented as the axis of the symmetry established between the social groups whose relationship, in terms of that individual, is configured as male and female. For a different individual, the two groups may reverse that gender "polarity" and thus their relationship to each other. This is important in determining the formal relationship of clans to one another in different situations and is critical to the perception an individual has of him/herself.

In many ways, one's most profound relationship exists with the oldest of one's mother's brothers, called *gadi* (pronounced *ngah-n-dee*), and one's cross-cousins, the children of maternal uncles or paternal aunts, called *veitavaleni* (prounced *vay-tah-vuh-lennie*). The gadi is mentor as one grows up. He organizes one's marriage and other critical life stages, finally making all of the arrangements for one's burial. Cross-cousins are predestined to be one's best friends and associates in all of life's projects if of the same sex, one's natural marriage partners if of the opposite sex. So integral is the concept of friendship with kinship that one's best friends will be referred to as

*tavale*—"cross-cousin." "Parallel" relationships (with siblings or parallel cousins who are regarded as siblings) are seldom as strong for same-sex members and are often subject to avoidance rules across sexes.

When groups engage in rituals, whether solely with members of their own group or with people from external groups, symmetries between male and female principles configure the action and determine the principal actors and the goods that change hands. Rituals are the traditional means Fijians have employed to gain power over forces that cannot be controlled by either might or logic, from those of the cosmos and the spirit world to temporal processes. In the latter, as "rites of passage," they mediate transitions and facilitate changes in social structure and process and so connect past, present, and future. Thus, though rituals are the means by which traditional social knowledge is sustained and reiterated, they are also always implicated in change concerning births, deaths, marriages, installations, and most other transitions and changes. Because they are the means by which the society maintains steerage of its identity and norms through times of change, they have been of particular significance in the unsettled recent history of Fiji (see my comment cited in Boissevain 1996:18).

*Masi* is one of the sanctioned goods that are indispensable to ritual, and here the meaning it carries is most completely expressed in its functions as both ritual dress and presentation wealth. Ritual goods are produced and distributed through a carefully regulated system of geographical, political, and social networks that both guarantee need (by exclusive "licensing" of certain places to produce items many other places require) and ensure supply (by obliging each area to always and only use its own "licensed" products in ritual exchange and/or barter). A further layer of symmetry exists in this arrangement insofar as all of these goods are gender specific, both in terms of who makes them and in terms of who controls them.

Masi is an exclusively female product and operates with other female products such as hand-woven pandanus mats, scented coconut oil, and Western "female" items such as soap and bedding. But no ritual is complete if it involves the passage of goods of only one gender, and these female goods "answer" (and are answered by) only male goods, including sperm whale teeth, carved wooden artifacts, plaited coconut fiber (sinnet), and today, drums of kerosene. Similarly, males and females control different components of the provision, preparation, and presentation of the food that is essential to such ritual exchanges, for both prestation and for consumption in shared feasting.

The manner in which Fijian ritual is implicated in gender symmetry (and vice versa) is clearly manifested in "lifting of mourning" rituals. This is the third set of rituals after death, following the funeral proper and the "hundred nights" rituals. In all three sets of rituals there are elaborate interchanges in which much masi and many mats change hands between maternal and paternal kin. These rituals first rehearse the connection that the individual's identity created between the two groups and then renegotiate their altered relationship following his/her death. In the first two ritual rounds the maternal uncle of the deceased dominates proceedings but not in the lifting of mourning. Here the two sides formally acknowledge the finality of the death and prepare to move on in life. In doing so, they first make manifest the symmetry that the deceased established between them and then ritually break it. In this way, they not only lift the mourning of those bereaved but facilitate their transition to the altered roles they must now play in relation to each other and to other groups.

In the central "act" of the ritual, there are obvious mirror symmetries. There is always the same number of mourning "lifters" as there are mourners. Second, although they are all women, these "lifters" are drawn equally from the male and female sides of the deceased. They sit directly facing the principal mourners (men and women) on the village sward (Figure 9.5). All wear barkcloth over street clothes (or if they do not have barkcloth, as in the photograph here, a plethora of Western cloth), and the principal mourners top off the whole with black overgarments. The mourners' herald (in the photograph, seated near the hurricane-destroyed building) then presents one whale tooth (the most weighty of male ritual objects) for each mourner and in return receives one from each of the "lifters," presented jointly by their herald. Then the mourners divest themselves of their black overgarments and their garments of barkcloth or Western cloth (female goods). Each one presents these to his or her designated "lifter,"

**Figure 9.5** A *Luvabenu* (also called *vakataraisulu*) ritual, Ekubu Village, Vatulele, 1993. The "lifters of mourning" can be seen seated in a row, with their backs to the camera and facing the row of mourners.

who responds by taking off and presenting her masi or surplus Western cloth. Thus, everyone comes out even, but a total interchange has occurred.

The other exchanges are reciprocal but subject to competitiveness as each "side" attempts to outdo the other with the munificence of its gifts. Female goods relevant to their area are presented by both sides, at the beginning of the ritual by the mourners and near the end of the ritual by the women of the "lifter" clans. In each case, the goods are brought onto the ritual grounds with much ceremony and heaped up for later collection by their opposite numbers. The display at all stages is ostentatious. In the photograph, the mourners "supporting" women can be seen passing from hand to hand great lengths of bolting cloth. This is a surrogate for masi because these particular women came from a mat-weaving district that no longer makes or has ready access to masi. Although mats were essential at earlier funerary rituals, their mats are not an appropriate signifier at this particular ritual. Similarly, also at the beginning of the ritual, the mourner men place male goods (carved wooden objects, woven sinnet, and drums of kerosene) in a heap together with the female goods of their women. These are reciprocated by the men of the "lifter" groups as the last act of the ritual, when they present much sanctioned "special" food, cooked and uncooked, to the mourners, who take it away for future consumption. The glide reflection, and an opportunity to reverse any competitive advantage either side may have achieved, will occur at a future ritual, arranged following another death or on some other pretext, in which today's mourners become tomorrow's hosts, today's hosts the guests. The process then starts again, the order reversed.

## Meaning in Masi

The nature of the meaning *masi* carries for Fijians is generally difficult for them to elucidate and even more difficult for others to understand. Most modern Fijians, for example, would probably agree readily enough with the populist view expressed in a recent Fiji newspaper article that its designs are merely decorative (*Daily-Post* 2000). Yet they value their masi as a powerful, if not the principle, Fijian identity marker with which they distinguish themselves from Others and as a deeply spiritual sign, particularly in rituals such as those described above. They also make it very clear that the form of the cloth itself, and its figuration, determine both the purpose to which it can be put and the style to whom it belongs (Figures 9.6, 9.7). Clearly, a good deal more is going on than mere decoration, and meaning *is* being carried and transmitted both by the cloth itself and by its figuration. Equally clearly, the designs are not recognized as illustrations or even as symbols in any easily understood sense of "this-stands-for-that."

**Figure 9.6** Three different garment cloths, Buca Village, Cakaudrove, 1984. Left: a "double width" (*matairua*) skirt or *i-sulu;* center: a "single-width" (*mataidua*) cummerbund or *i–oro,* and right: a single-bark noble's shoulder shah, or *wabale.* The picture shows how even within one place, differences in size, shape, figuration, and symmetry are all specific to the particular cloth type and the use to which it is put.

Bourdieu (1992) insisted that it is not possible to adequately comprehend the full meaning of art without an appropriate and specific knowledge of aesthetic context. Without that understanding, a work of art may be interpreted as having a totally contrary significance to that which would be perceived *with* it. As he summed up: "The aesthetic disposition . . . is . . . inseparable from specifically artistic competence" (Bourdieu 1992:50). It is part of the group's "cultural capital." Cultural capital, however, like economic capital, is far from being an immutable resource. It is subject to accumulation, to exchange, to inflation, to deflation, and to loss. Through any of these processes, meanings that would have been immediately apparent to a group member a century ago may well be obscure to group members today.

Such a process of change may result in the sort of distinction Chomsky (1977) draws for language between *grammatical competence*—understanding its rules, principles, and particular meanings—and *pragmatic competence*—having the ability to use it to achieve certain ends. Applying this distinction to masi, it may be said that pragmatic competence remains widespread, but few Fijians beyond the actual makers can demonstrate much grammatical competence in terms of design "correctness." In addition, after twenty years of working with makers and users all over Fiji, I have found *none* who can clarify the connection between the powerful

**Figure 9.7** The three types of garment *masi* worn by the daughter of the *Ramasi,* or paramount chief of Moce Island, Lau, in 1985, who "modeled" her elder sister's bridal dress for this photograph. Moce's motifs and design layout can be seen to be regionally distinct from those of Cakaudrove. The chiefly sash is figured here but minimally, a style called *tutuki* and specific to sashes. The masi bow (*tekiteki*) in the model's hair is ornamental only.

emotion masi engenders in them and the embedded/transmitted meaning this implies. If we are to gain any understanding of this, therefore, we must seek other analytical tools than simple empiricism.

## Sociosemiotic Analysis[5]

A sociosemiotic approach recommends itself, since as Barthes (1972:111) pointed out, semiotics "studies significations apart from their content." In other words, it permits a degree of detachment in teasing out the manner in which systems of social knowledge (including art) work. It offers the possibility of approaching some understanding of *what* things mean by analyzing *how* they transmit that meaning. In the case of highly evolved systems such as the social use of masi, there is in such an approach less temptation to use guesswork to fill in gaps that exist in our knowledge of which things or ideas were being encoded in which signifiers by the originators of the system, how those associations have changed over time, and how the signifiers have come to operate today.

Unfortunately, while semiotics may be simply enough defined as "the study of signs," there are many theoretical approaches to it, and the writing is too often "in a style that ranges from the obscure to the incomprehensible" (Lewis 1991:25). However, as Edmund Leach remarked, "Although the jargon is exasperating, the principles are simple" (1989:48). The simple principle he refers to is that signs work by association of two sorts, contiguity and similarity. In this volume, Allan Hanson (Chapter 8) reminds us that this was actually proposed long ago by David Hume, who wrote, "To me, there appear to be only three principles of connexion among ideas, namely, *Resemblance, Contiguity* in time or place, and *Cause or Effect* [or meaning]" (Hume 1986 [1777]). In his discussion of how Lévi-Strauss used this dichotomy, Leach distilled the perceptions of Roland Barthes and Roman Jakobson, both of whose work extended Saussure's.[6] As well as those authors, I will also draw on the work of Peirce. But to avoid semiotics' common malady of getting hopelessly bogged down in definitions, I will use as little of the "exasperating jargon" as possible or, where it is unavoidable, will limit it to that used by Saussure and Barthes.

Before going on, it should be noted that the semiotic analysis of signs and symbols has had mixed support in anthropology, ranging from rejection (e.g., Sperber 1975), through every stage of flirtation, to wholehearted embrace (e.g., Jules-Rosette 1984). The main disquiet has been semiotics' origins in linguistics, from which persist attitudes that do not sit well with nonlinguistic symbolism. For example, Douglas (1994:17) insists that if it is to be used, semiotics must disengage from the "authority of linguistics which too much dominates the analysis of the meaning of objects." She is highlighting what Gottdiener, a strong proponent of the sociosemiotic analysis of art, calls the "linguistic fallacy" of assuming that object-based systems such as art function exactly like spoken languages, with meanings that are specific, literal, or even constant. To account for this widespread fallacy, Gottdiener (1995:20, 66–67) suggests that it is because most of us rely on spoken language, which extensively employs the *specific* communication of *connotation,* whereas art depends heavily on the more *general* communication of *denotation* to transmit meaning.

In day-to-day speech, the terms *connotation* and *denotation* are frequently used as though they were synonymous, but in fact, they are subtly different. *Denotation* might be described as the "first order" of meaning of a sign—for example, the way a fur coat signifies warmth. *Connotation* would then be the second order of meaning, those associations that progressively become attached to the sign in a particular cultural milieu. In the fur coat example, in the West today these might include wealth, social status, fashionability, or increasingly, ecological insensitivity. Because denotation is broader and less culture specific, it is readily assimilated and crosses cultural boundaries easily, and often with greater emotional force, than specific connotation. Gottdiener's point is that nonlinguistic art tends to operate in this more general manner, which means that while it is more immediately and easily grasped and functions across cultures in ways that verbal language does not, it is less effective at communicating specific detail.

In fact, the more literally visual art sets out to convey specific connotations, the weaker its denotation often becomes—one of the key observable differences between advertising art and "fine" art. It is possible to see a connection between this proposition and that of the psychologist Paivio, who holds that images are

assimilated independently of words, in a cognitive process he calls "dual coding." He considers that images operate in synergy with words but speaks of "picture superiority" both in terms of the directness with which images communicate ideas and the recipient's recall capacity, which experimentally is twice as great for images as for words (Paivio 1986:esp. 159–161).

## The Mythification of Meaning

Barthes (1972) provides a means of understanding that what appears to be a loss of "grammatical competence" in relation to masi may rather be read as a change in the way its meaning is now perceived. It was noted above that it is often difficult to be sure exactly what signifieds (things or ideas) may have originally been referred to by particular signifiers (words, motifs, or designs). Baudrillard (1981) has famously argued that (post)modern societies are content with "detached signifiers," which have often lost any relation to original signifieds or referents. He suggests, indeed, that they are now autonomous of their originating signifieds; others hold that this is not possible (e.g., Eco 1973, 1979). Actually, the process of attenuation between signifiers and their signifieds is far from a new phenomenon but is an inevitable part of the changing ways in which societies interpret their signs, as Peirce (1955) stressed.

Barthes (1972) shows that it is possible to see those changes in terms other than those of detached signifiers or lost signifieds. He explains that in the case of groups of particularly potent signifiers (both words and objects), their meanings can become conflated and generalized as *myths*, losing specificity but increasing their impact and the breadth of their applicability. As used by Barthes, a myth, by its incorporation of many signs, becomes in effect a single enlarged, composite, and multivalent sign, which conveys numerous important cultural ideas in a general, even ineffable manner. To those who insist that "myth" means a story, his extension of the term to include objects such as photographs may seem strange, as it may to those who impute to "myth" a sense of unreality or falsity. However, while Barthes's usage does not preclude either of these, they are merely two of the ways in which signs may be assembled to transmit the generalised meanings characteristic of myths. He points out that "every object in the world . . . [may be subject to] a type of social *usage* which is added to pure matter . . . [and] by no means confined to oral speech. . . . Myth can be defined neither by its object nor by its material, for any material can be arbitrarily endowed with meaning" (Barthes 1972:109–110). Thus, despite his debt to his fellow structuralist Lévi-Strauss, Barthes's is a more encompassing conception of myth.

A shift of the sort Barthes describes is argued here to have occurred with masi. Specific connotations, even denotations, of designs and motifs have been progressively submerged in, and incorporated as component parts of, masi's myth, which is its widely perceptible, if somewhat vague, association with "Fijianness." Such a broad idea, embodying as it does ethnicity, cultural values, behavioral norms, geopolitical associations, and so on, needs to embody the meanings conveyed by the battery of signs that have over a long time come to be associated with masi. However, within the totality of the myth, not only do these no longer require separate decoding, they must actually operate *only* in concert, or the myth's immediate impact would be lost. Hence, their sublimation.

Such myths change and develop, just like the signs they incorporate. Groups that own myths progressively adjust their meanings in response to changing interests and needs. Those meanings can be redefined with little need to adjust the myths' constituent parts, since the autonomous meanings of those parts have become obscured. Therefore, they travel through time very successfully. Hagen (1986:117) noted this with her observation that a given style structure within the art of a culture tends to remain remarkably internally consistent across great spans of time. We have learned the folly of regarding any whole culture as immutable; nor, therefore, should we imagine that the meaning of the art Hagen saw remained static, though meaning change and stylistic change can occur at different rates.

That having been said, one must understand that the remarkable flexibility of myths does mean that even dramatic stylistic change need not be disruptive to the system of meaning. In the case of masi being discussed here, since its constituent signifiers (motifs, designs, and patterns) are making only small contributions to the meaning of the myth ("Fijianness"), there can be considerable change in these over time without diminishing its

**Figure 9.8** A ceremonial cloth colored by rubbing in the Samoan/Tongan manner. The repeat pattern is a result of rubbing over the same plate many times. Photographed in Somosomo Village, Teveuni Island, Cakaudrove, in 1984, but the owner (seated with the cloth) was unsure whether this piece was made there or not since this type of cloth (here called *'umi*, elsewhere *kumi* or *gatu vakatoga*) has not been made there for many years.

force if those changes are consistent with any revised meanings of the myth and the relevant group "imaginary." To reiterate, for Fijians symmetry is the relevant "imaginary." Therefore, since symmetry is not merely a formal device, it must remain part of the structural template employed in making and figuring the cloth—though it is quite conceivable that the type of symmetry employed may also change.

To more easily conceptualize all that has been discussed above, meaning might be imagined as a nested structure, like Chinese boxes, Russian dolls, or the layers of an onion. In this imaginary model, myth, denotation, and then connotation are the outermost three layers. Myth is both the first encountered and the most readily grasped but communicates the least specific information, through emotional impact and general feelings. The most specific, esoteric meanings exist in the innermost layer. However elusive, it is only here that we may find clues about "lost signifieds" and an understanding of how the "sublimated" signifiers function in their revised role.

## Barkcloth, Color Symbolism, and Symmetry

Perhaps the first place we should look for a simple relationship between masi as signifier and that which is signified by it (its perceived meaning) is in one of the oldest and most pervasive of human sign systems—color symbolism. Masi can be used as plain white cloth (*masi vulavula*), or it may be stained a golden color with turmeric (*masi vakarerega*), smoked to a red-ocher color (*masi kuvui*), or rubbed on one surface with weak red dye (*kumi, masi vakatoga)* (Figure 9.8). In some places it may be rubbed over with black paint (*liti*), or, finally, it may be figured with geometric patterns in black and red paint (*masi kesa*).[7]

We do know that throughout Polynesia, white is the male color, associated with life, light, and day (Hanson and Hanson 1983:20). It is also described as the color of *tapu* (Barrow 1972:55), which is perhaps best defined as "the [divine] rules governing human conduct" (Hanson and Hanson 1983:49) and conveyed in Fijian by the word *lewa* (pronounced *leh-wah*). Unstained, unfigured masi is white to off-white in color, and this supplements the fact that in Fiji, as in a great diversity of other cultures across time and geographical boundaries, fabrics and/or textiles carry the denotation of spirituality (see Barber 1994; Ewins 1987; Gittinger 1989; Weiner and Schneider 1989).

Thus, whereas Peter Roe in this volume (Chapter 7) proposes that Antillean art was not considered complete until it had been decorated, that has never been the case for Fijian masi. Plain white masi is a potent sign in itself, particularly in religious applications. The early missionary Thomas Williams observed that in Fijian temples, "a long piece of white *masi*, fixed to the top, and carried down the angle of the roof so as to hang before the

corner-post and lie on the floor, forms the path down which the god passes to enter the priest, and marks the holy place which few but he dare approach" (Williams and Calvert 1982 [1858]: 222–223).

Figuration, therefore, does not complete the masi, but rather adds further layers of meaning to it. These meanings may well originally have been both specifically and widely understood, though today all that we can do is to infer what they might have been from our broader cultural and historical knowledge. What *is* clear is that different types of figuration specify particular roles for the cloth, and thus to some extent they are restrictive rather than additive. In other words, while in its plain white state it can perform in virtually any situation where it is appropriate to use masi, as soon as figuration is added, its applicability is both directed and limited. The specificity starts with the very limited color palette used.

The main color of figuration is black, the color of death, of nature, and the earth, and of women, who are the guardians of all of these. In Vanualevu, mortuary-cave human remains that were investigated by the Fiji Museum in the 1980s were shrouded in masi that was principally black. Black remains the color of masi or bolting-cloth mourners wear right up to, and during, the lifting of mourning ceremonies described earlier in this chapter. I have also been told in Cakaudrove that traditionally, during the time women had to remain cloistered following giving birth, they were required to shroud themselves totally in black masi whenever they had to venture out of the house for calls of nature. The symbolism of female fecundity, birth, and death may be seen to interlock in these usages.

Apart from such completely black cloth, much masi was traditionally figured simply as black figures on a neutral white "ground." Sometimes the design is such that black-and-white forms work together simultaneously in counterpoint, a feature I have also noted in relation to patterns on mats (Ewins 1982b:16) that, in the literature of symmetry, is commonly referred to as "two-color" symmetry. Nowhere is it more evident than in Cakaudrove cloth. Western artists speak of such black-and-white forms as positive and negative (Figure 9.9).

The device of alternating and/or interlocking positive and negative was explored most famously and wittily in Western art by Maurice Escher. He relied on

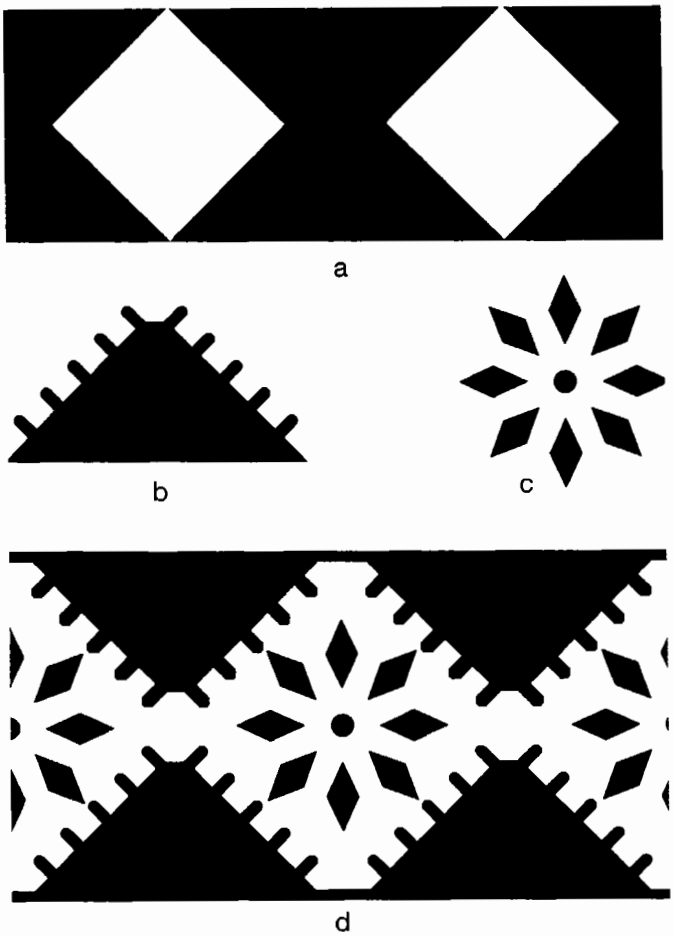


**Figure 9.9** Recombined symmetrical design components, with both positive and negative elements. (a) *Drali* (to knead or daub), (b) *Vetau* (species of tree), (c) *'Alo'alo* (star), (d) unnamed composite design, combining (b) and (c) in a variation on the theme of (a). #M499, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (see Ewins 1982a:20), possibly from Yacata or Kanacea, Southern Cakaudrove.

the unexpected juxtaposition of recognizable depictions of people, animals, and objects. But in totally abstract Fijian art, the color symbolisms of black and white can be "unpacked" as denoting life and death, male and female, traditions and laws, nature and the land—the building blocks of Fijian identity.

As described above, the other colors that occur in masi figuration (and indeed in barkcloth throughout Polynesia) are those covered in Fijian by the word *damu*, broadly translated as "red" but actually spanning a broad segment of the spectrum from brown through red ocher to vermilion and even to the warm golden orange of some types of turmeric. Red is associated with Burotu, the spirit world of Fiji and Polynesia (Geraghty 1993:363–364), the gods, and chiefs who are gods-on-earth (Barrow 1972; Sayes 1982:5). Thus, when it is used,

**Figure 9.10** Corner of the face of a taunamu ceremonial hanging/screen, Somosomo Village, Taveuni, Cakaudrove, 1981, showing the traditional Cakaudrove style of bold black-and-white two-color patterns, here including panels of the *ceva* and *drau ni niu ceva* motifs (see Figure 9.18 and 9.20). Red-ochre colored bands (here lighter gray) form a separate two-color pattern. The white inclusions in these red bands, of "Maltese crosses" and asterisks, bear the name *tu'i tu'i pu*, a nondialect name that may relate to the strong Samoan connections of this area and of these large ceremonial cloths.

red adds further cosmological and hierarchical connotations to the existing spiritual denotation of the cloth.

Red elements are always added last in the printing sequence, and are normally arranged in red-and-white bands or grids in such a way as to be contiguous with but separate from the black-and-white patterns (Figures 9.9, 9.10, 9.11). Thus, the three colors are organized as two discrete two-color patterns. In some rare museum examples, there are instances of genuine three-color patterns, in which black, red, and white have equal roles in the pattern, but instances of this level of design sophistication are extremely rare in masi today.

Today, barkcloth is seldom printed in black only but typically is figured with both black and red on white, and in such a piece, color interrelates the spiritual and temporal domains, life and death, male and female, human and natural laws. The simple device of using two colors on a white ground thus enables the embedding of a remarkable range of conceptual symmetries. Whether today's masi makers think consciously about all (or any) of this as they figure a piece of cloth, color symbolism is still a widespread part of Fijian cultural capital, and I propose that, in this way, the color signifiers contribute, even if only subliminally, to the impact of masi as myth.

## Figuration and Meaning

While it is possible to speculate on a number of now-enigmatic denotations and connotations that might exist in the figuration on masi, one thing we do know with certainty is that, as mentioned above, it has traditionally functioned as a group identity marker. How it performed this role relates to its "visual semantics."

The kernel of our imaginary nested layers described above, the detailed mechanics of how form and content interact to convey meaning, takes us back to the earlier brief discussion of the "simple" semiotic principle emphasized by Leach (1989:48–50), that the meaning of signs is transmitted through two types of association, those of contiguity and those of similarity. It was schematized by Saussure (1974 [1916]) as functioning on two axes, defined as "associative," or *syntagmatic*, and *paradigmatic* (Adams 1996:134–141; Culler 1986:59–62, 102–103; Gottdiener 1995:6–7)[8]:

- The syntagmatic axis concerns juxtaposition, such as the way words occur in sentence chains or visual elements interrelate in a work of art.

- The paradigmatic axis concerns the recognition of similarity, analogy, or difference, such as linguistic similes and metaphors or art that references the natural world in some way.

Meaning always engages both axes, but which axis is preeminent in a particular instance or in a particular type of meaning transmission varies between different groups, times, and media. In the twentieth century, some Western visual artists realized that the art of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas was operating in a quite different way from Western art, which since the Renaissance had embraced pictorial illusionism and sculptural naturalism. They began to imitate or appropriate non-Western forms and restructure them in novel ways. Though some of the early examples of this in Fauvism, Cubism, and Expressionism may today seem ingenuous, they were attempting to shift the weight of meaning more toward the syntagmatic axis. None of the major twentieth-century art movements could have emerged without this axis shift, in particular Western abstraction. However, over the next half century this

**Figure 9.11** The face of a ceremonial hanging/screen (*taunamu*), Buca Village, Cakaudrove. While the corners bear large drau ni niu motifs and the endemic red ochre panels have white tu'i tu'i pu Maltese crosses, the maker of this cloth has also borrowed many stencil motifs from Lau. These are also, however, invariably symmetrical, as is their placement within the overall design.

developed its own authority, and as Clifford (1988:192) has pointed out, its intentions, forms and meanings today bear little relation to those of non-Western art.

The insights that resulted from this focus on syntagm have contributed greatly to the understanding of symbol and meaning. Douglas (1973:11) asserted that a symbol "only has meaning from its relation to other symbols in a pattern. The pattern gives the meaning . . . no one item in the pattern can carry meaning by itself." Even Sperber, opposed as he was to a semiotic approach to meaning, acknowledged that "the interpretation [of symbols] bears not on the elements but on their configuration" (Sperber 1975:48).

Notwithstanding this, the fact that much ethnic art remains enigmatic to Westerners is at least partly because contextual (syntagmatic) meaning transmission in art still remains less widely understood or appreciated by nonartists than associative representation (paradigmatic). Rather ironically, this Western bias has, because of the inordinate weight of Western culture, actually provoked a shift away from traditional approaches and toward representation, illusion, and naturalism in much postcolonial art.

## Syntagm, Paradigm, and Symmetry

As pointed out above, syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes invariably operate together. Not merely their relative weight is variable, but also the *manner* in which they operate. Historically, Fijian two-dimensional art as seen on masi, mats and pots, plus sinnet lashings, female tattooing, and "decoration" on wooden artifacts has never been representational, let alone realistic.[9] Here paradigm operates not through imitative similarity of aspects of the natural world, but rather through something resembling the parallelism that Jakobson stressed for poetry (and which also exists in music)—similarity or contrast expressed internally through repetition of motifs and shared structural features (Kiparsky 1983). Symmetry, therefore, operates on both the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes of masi figuration since *both* relate to the form of the art itself rather than referencing externals.

Masi figuration consists of geometric patterns of grids and panels with one- and two-dimensional symmetric arrangements of geometric elements, predominantly triangles. All four types of planar symmetry motions—translation, reflection, glide reflection, and rotation (Washburn and Crowe 1988:44–51)—are found in profusion in the overall organization of the figured/nonfigured sections of the cloth, the arrangement of motifs into patterns, and even the motifs themselves.

The overall design of the cloths varies according to type and has changed over time. However, symmetry is always the dominant rule of design. In the simplest types, such as the long narrow cloths worn as loincloths (*malo*), sashes (*wabale*), and cummerbunds (*i-oro*) and also the decorative friezes in houses (*i-uku-uku ni vale*), parallel bands of repeated motifs run the length of the cloth. With the development of wider "skirt lengths" (*i-sulu*) in the Christian era, the same design system was applied to them. At some stage, it became customary to make the bands mirror one another from the center outward, and the ends of the cloth were "closed" with a set of bands at right angles to the main direction (Figure 9.12). The larger cloths, bedspreads, or *solofua* (Figure 9.13 and 9.14) and the great ritual cloths that are in different parts of Fiji called *taunamu* or *gatu vakaviti* (Figure 9.15, and Figures 9.6, 9.9, 9.10, 9.11) and *kumi* or *gatu vakatoga* (Figure 9.7) measure many square meters and provide the greatest scope for spatial organization and for layer upon layer of design symmetries. Even large finite designs seldom "stand alone" but are combined "to stop

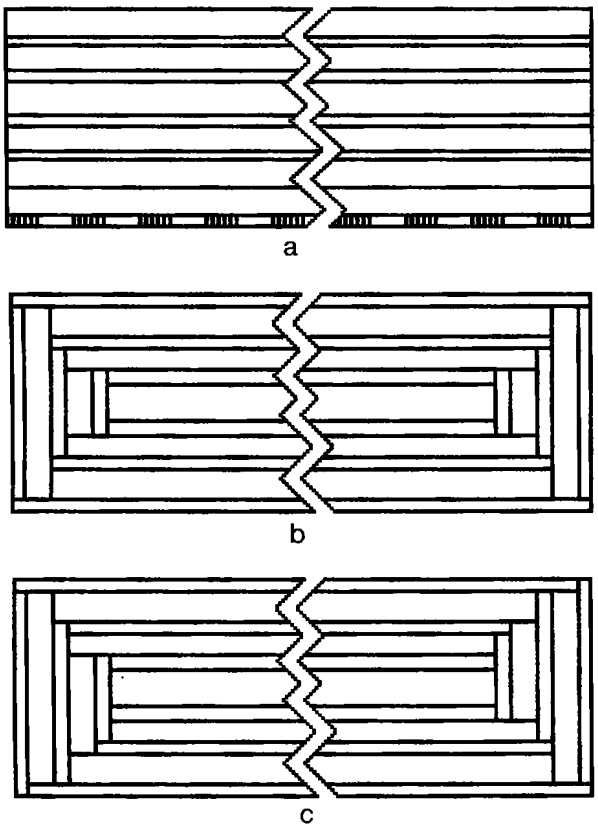


**Figure 9.12** Different design layouts of "long" masi such as is worn or used for house decoration. (a) Simplest layout with translation symmetry. Still used in some places on ritual clothing and house decoration strips, though the striped bottom edge, once an absolute "marker" of Fijian cloth, is now seldom seen (b) Layout used in almost all tourist tapa and some *i-oro, i-sulu,* and *solofua,* displaying translation and mirror symmetry, and (c) translation symmetry with layout rotation.

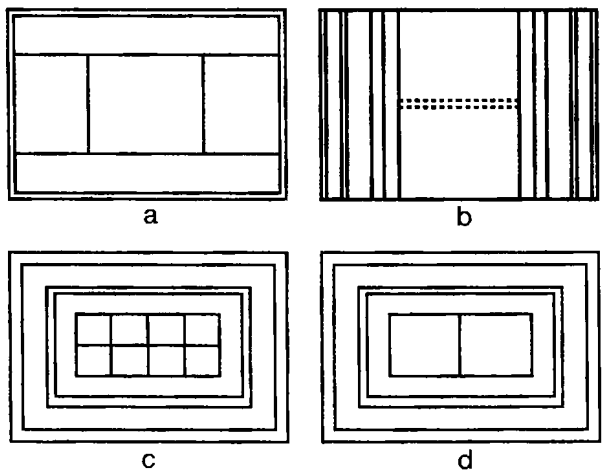


**Figure 9.13** Typical solofua (bedcover) pattern layouts: (a) Moce, (b) Namuka, (c) Oneata, (d) Vatulele.

them feeling lonely," as one informant expressed it.

The geometric structuring in Fijian masi figuration produces the identity marker. Both the specificity of motifs to the group *and* how they are arranged spatially in the overall design play a part. As I pointed out nearly two decades ago, "Some areas which share virtually all [of] their motifs can still distinguish their *masi* by the actual placement of these" (Ewins 1982a:11). That insight was based on explanations provided in Natewa Village (Cakaudrove Province). There, within living memory at the time of my initial research in 1981, the three large clan groups or phratries (called *yavusa*) within the village could distinguish their masi from that of other areas by both the specificity of their motifs *and* the arrangement of these. However, each phratry, indeed each clan *within* each phratry, had been able to distinguish their masi by design arrangement alone. That level of detailed knowledge had been lost even at the time of my research, but the people of Natewa Village were still readily able to distinguish their masi from that of the village of Buca, within the same geopolitical grouping (*vanua*) and a few miles distant, though the motifs used were largely the same in each village.

It is also in Cakaudrove that symmetry is most overwhelmingly obvious as the basis for overall design organization (see particularly Figure 9.10), a fact highlighted by Crowe and Nagy (Crowe and Nagy 1992; Crowe 1991; Nagy 1993). Symmetry in fact occurs consistently in the regionally distinct design systems of *all* of the masi-producing areas in Fiji, both within motifs and in their disposition in the overall design of the cloth.[10]

## Names, Meanings, and Notations

Apparently contradicting the above assertion that Fijian masi figuration does not directly reference the natural world, the names that motifs and designs bear are often nouns for flora, fauna, or even ideas. These hint seductively at totemic or other socially significant meanings, and for decades Western students of Fijian art have been dutifully recording names and then hunting about in their lists for clues to the meaning of the art. Names such as "clothespin," "safety-razor blade," and "motorcar tire" have been recorded apparently unquestioningly, though to imagine that profound social significance

**Figure 9.14** Putting finishing touches (highlighting figures in the "rubbed" area) on a solofua bedcover, Namuka Island, Lau, 1985. This has both continuities and differences in design with taunamu from the same island (Figures 9.2 and 9.3).

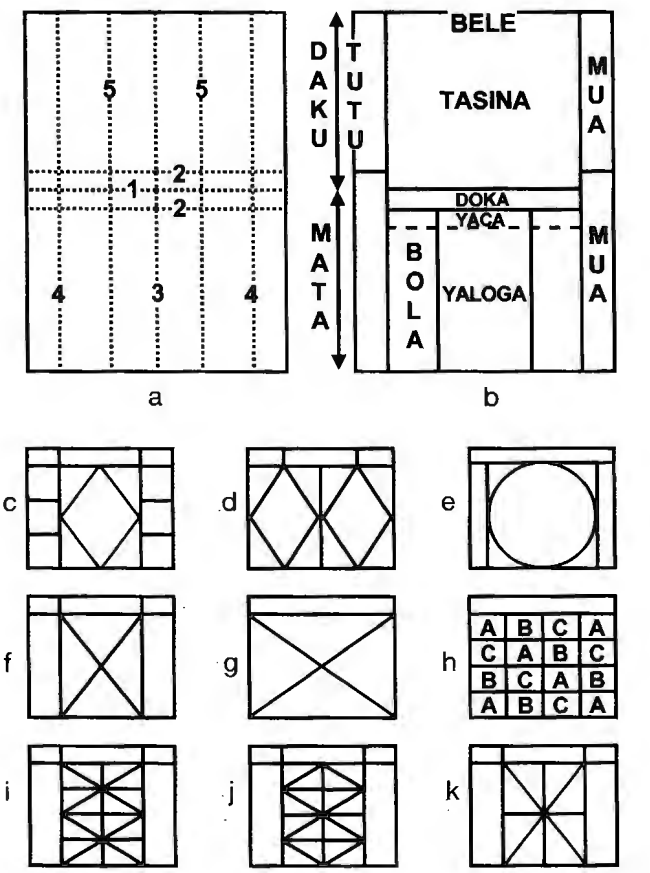


**Figure 9.15** Some typical layouts for the great ritual cloths taunamu/gatu vakaviti. (a) Order of preliminary creasing of the cloth to determine layout. (b) Division and nomenclature for Vatulele taunamu: *daku* means "back," the "Tongan" rubbed half of the cloth, while *mata* means "face." Lauan layout is very similar, but the *yalogo* is called *i potu loma, tasina* is called *potu tasina, mua* is called *i potu sau,* and *bola* has no name. (c) to (h) Layouts used in Vatulele for patterns in the critical *yaloga* panel. In (d), (g), and (h) the bola are not discrete panels, the large patterns extending right to the mua. (h) A now virtually obsolete form, using four patterns in what is effectively a glide arrangement. (i) to (k) Typical layouts used in Lauan gatu vakaviti for the same panel, there called *potu i loma:* (i) Namuka, (j) Moce, and (k) Kabara.

attaches to any of these stretches credulity.

I have proposed elsewhere that these names were assigned after the motifs were developed by the artists, perhaps as "nicknames" to serve as aides mémoire to classify abstract forms (Ewins 1982b:16). This practice is familiar to Western abstract artists, who, without implying any literal representation, often give names to elements in their work, or to entire works of art, based on some likeness these are fancied to bear to things or ideas. However, to infer that the image and name in such cases are both signifiers relating back to a single "ultimate signified" is unnecessary and unjustified. Generally the more fanciful the name is, the more memorable. To recall again the work of Paivio, he has shown experimentally that recall of images is greatly enhanced by associating them with words, even unrelated words, through the "code additivity" or synergy of "dual coding" (Paivio 1986:160).

The names, then, function very much as Goodman (1976:128) proposed operates with systems of "notation," providing "authoritative identification" from one usage to the next. He rejected the use of such a system for fine art on the basis that it relies on the originality of its invention and thus requires a system of specific and/or explanatory naming for each unique piece. However, Fijian art does not operate in the manner of Western "fine art." In Goodman's terminology, it is "allographic" rather than "autographic," which means that the social value of the art lies in truth-to-type, not uniqueness.

A finite number of motifs are found within the totality of each group's masi (though over time they may be reduced or added to, as described above in the discussion of the signs within myths). They are used in specific sequences and combinations depending on the particular type of masi. This may be compared with music, where a finite number of sounds and structures

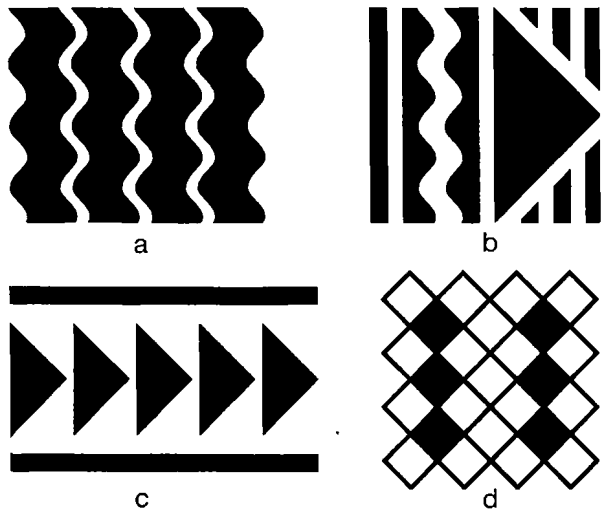


**Figure 9.16** Disparities in naming motifs. All of these motifs are named for the chiton or tadruku, though they share few features: (a) *Bati ni tadruku* (Vatulele), (b) *Vacu ni tadruku* (Moce), (c) *Bati ni tadru'u* (Cakaudrove), (d) *Vakabati ni tadruku* (Gau, mat-weaving

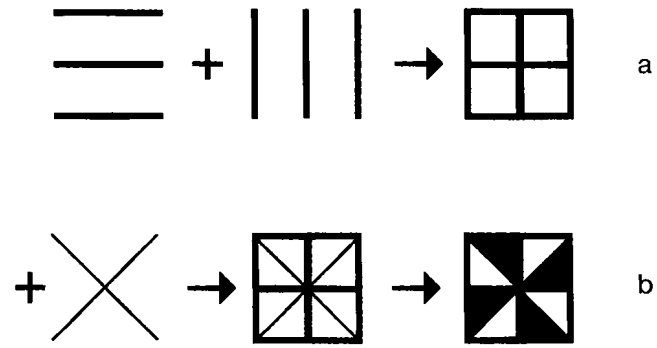


**Figure 9.17** The "box-frame" module. Top row: method of first using a stencil to create a *waqani matairua,* then restenciling at right angles to produce a box frame, in Lau called *kamiki.* Bottom row: this frame may be further divided by drawing diagonal pencil lines and finally filling alternate "vanes" to produce what is called either *bika ni kamiki* or *boko ni kamiki* (meaning either "divided" or "blocked" frame motif).

are rearranged within a particular conventional form—sonata, symphony, etc. A system of notation is all that is needed for identification, recollection, and replication of the motifs. In categorizing the symmetries that occur in other allographic art systems, Washburn and Crowe (1988) and other analysts use systems of notation with letters and numerals to identify the elements and organization of the patterns and designs they study.

Finally, in masi, just as I have pointed out previously in relation to mats (Ewins 1982b:16), the same motifs often have totally different names in different regions, or, conversely, quite different motifs may be named after the same object. For example, in Figure 9.16 are illustrated a group of motifs that are all called *tadruku* ("chiton"). Most of the names specifically refer to the distinctive serrated plates that make up the shell of this small limpet like reef dweller (a little like an armadillo's carapace). Certainly, their interest in it is purely formal—it is of no symbolic or economic significance to Fijians, and omnivorous though they usually are, they do not eat the chiton. The manner in which they depict its twofold repetition varies, perhaps coming closest to "illustration" in the Vatulele motif. The complex and totally nonillustrative little motif that is called "chiton" in Moce is also used in Vatulele but is called "in the style of Tuvuca," another island that actually does not use the motif!

Therefore, the value of the motif names is not that they refer us to the objects named, but that they provide a notational system. The manner in which that system works in turn supports the argument that paradigm operates here through formal similarities rather than representation or facsimilation. The following "pattern system" may help clarify this. Throughout Fiji, there is a very simple masi pattern of a number of parallel lines, applied with a stencil of three to four short lines, printed end to end to achieve the desired length. The pattern is widely called *waqani* (pronounced *wah-ngah-nee*), a word that means a frame, boundary, or border and is today applied to window frames among other things. The pattern is designated as "double" (*matairua*), "triple" (*mataitolu*), or more, based on the number of *enclosed* spaces, not on the number of lines. It may be used end to end to create continuous bands, or a *matairua* "double frame" (three parallel lines) may be printed once and then the same three-line stencil overprinted at right angles to create a gridded square or "box frame" (Figure 9.17). In Lau (southeastern Fiji), the resulting box-frame module is called *kamiki.*

Triangles may be established by folding diagonal lines (today by ruling with a pencil). A variety of motifs are created by selectively filling component parts of the frame, and the resulting patterns are differently named. For example, when every alternate triangle is printed solid, resulting in what Kooijman (1972:377) referred to

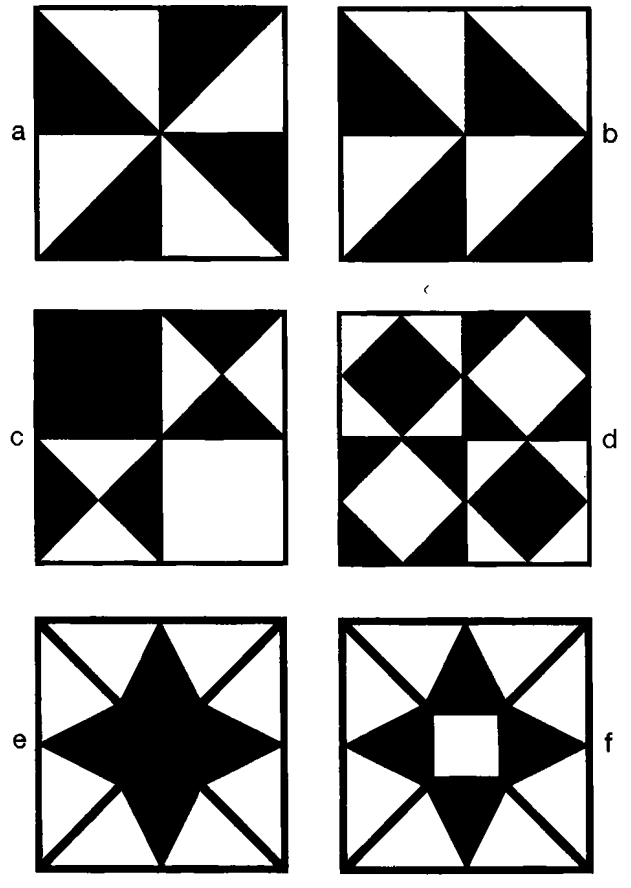


**Figure 9.18** *Ceva* ("south wind") family of motifs, Cakaudrove. (a) *ceva*, (b) *ceva musu ti'i dua*, (c) *ceva-i-soni 1*, (d) *ceva-i-soni 2*, (e) *ceva 'ubutawa 1*, (f) *ceva 'ubutawa 2*.

as a "vane swastika," it is called *bika ni kamiki* (divided frame motif) or *boko ni kamiki* (blocked frame motif).[11]

In Cakaudrove the identical pattern is called *ceva* (pronounced *theh-vuh*), an enigmatic name that refers to a certain southerly wind. However, then starts the notational naming, with a whole sequence of variant forms based on the box-frame module classified as types of ceva (Figure 9.18). First is the *ceva musu ti'i dua*,[12] which means "single component of chopped ceva." As can be seen, the component is one-half of the ceva that, instead of being rotated, is merely repeated. The *ceva i soni* apparently derives from the verb for making small incisions (*soni-ta*), a reference to the ceva motif being "diced up." This quality becomes obvious on the printed cloth, since this motif is always repeated two dimensionally, making a very intricate, "busy" pattern. Finally, the ceva *'ubutawa* appears to mean "ceva motif full of projections," which it clearly is!

Another such name family exists for *da'ai*, a word

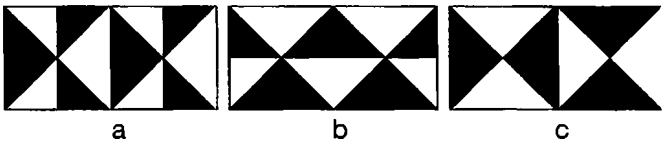


**Figure 9.19** *Da'ai* ("bow" or "gun") family of motifs, Cakaudrove. (a) *Da'ai* or *Kubu ni da'ai*, (b) *Da'ai balavu*, (c) *Da'ai musu*.

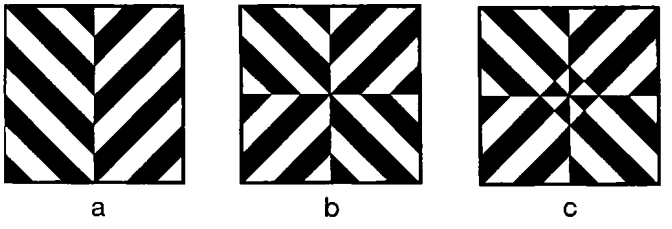


**Figure 9.20** Chevrons, called *drau ni niu* ("coconut leaf") family of motifs, Cakaudrove. (a) *Drau ni niu*, (b) *Drau ni niu musu*, (c) *Drau ni niu ceva*.

that originally meant "bow" and by association was applied to guns when these were introduced. The motif that is called simply *da'ai* is also referred to as *kubu ni da'ai* ("gunstock"), but this was probably a later elaboration. The visual elements of the motif are actually far closer to the ceva motif than to any representational resemblance to either a bow or a gun. However, the ceva series already contained sufficient motifs to test the memory, and following the argument advanced above, that the names were an aide-mémoire, a case clearly existed for a further classificatory title—ergo the da'ai name family. Visual associations were established between at least three motifs, *da'ai* or *kubu ni da'ai* ("bow/gun" or "gunstock"), *da'ai musu* ("chopped da'ai"), and *da'ai balavu* ("long da'ai") (Figure 9.19).

Yet another name family is that of the chevron figure (Figure 9.20), which is arranged in glide reflection and called generically *drau ni niu* ("coconut leaf"). When this is "chopped" and opposed within the box frame, it is called *drau ni niu musu*. While this literally means "chopped coconut leaf," it is far better understood as "chopped drau ni niu motif." A version of it also bears the small ceva vane swastika in the center of it and is accordingly called *drau ni niu ceva*.

There are many such name families in all of Fiji's masi-making regions, always using names systematically to group motifs that share important visual

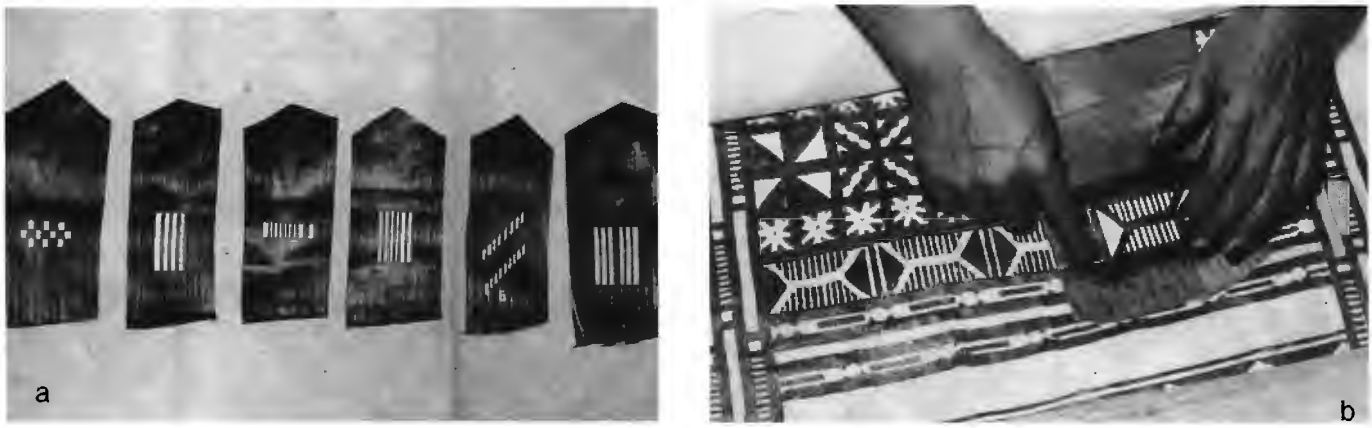


**Figure 9.21** (a) "Straight line" stencils made from banana leaves, Moce Island, Lau, 1985. (b) Printing with a banana-leaf stencil, Natewa, Cakaudrove, 1984.

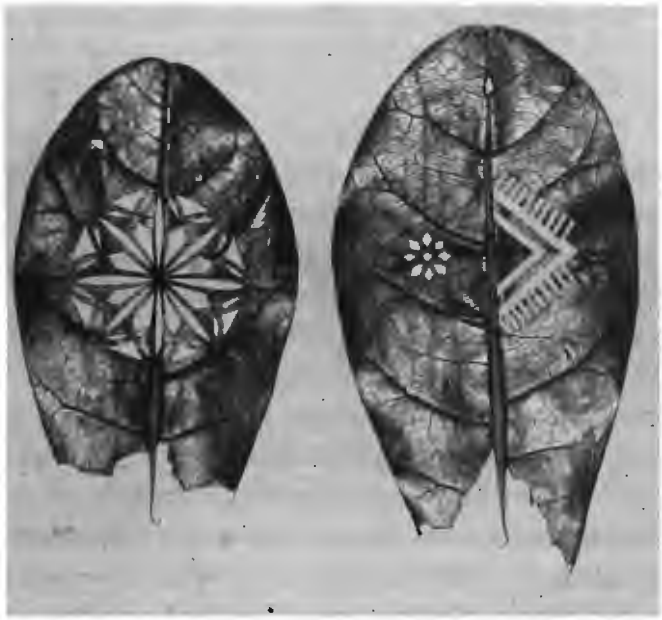

**Figure 9.22** Complex stencils made with leaves of a beach-growing tree. Moce Island, Lau, 1985.

**Figure 9.23** Cutting a stencil in light cardboard with scissors, Vatulele Island, 1985.

elements and/or technical procedures for making stencils or printing motifs. With frequently very great differences between individual motifs within a given name family, it is implausible that the makers have convinced themselves that they all resemble, or are visual metaphors for, the object that designates the name family, even something as amorphous as a wind!

## Stencil Motifs

All of the Cakaudrove motifs illustrated here have reflection symmetry within the structure of the motif itself, and most show rotation symmetry. Most were not originally stencil motifs but until the last half century were produced by direct painting. This involved careful drafting out of the cloth and then painting in the black and red areas with small brushes made of swabs of masi, using the edge of a coconut leaflet as a frisket or mask. The name given to the technique is *bolabola,* which means "to divide up (generally into equal parts)" and refers to the preliminary drafting, which is far more extensive than is necessary with stencil printing. This was originally done by a process of folding the cloth to create a seam, running a paint swab along it, then folding it again in a different direction. The resulting cloth is therefore properly called *masi bola* (Ewins 1982a:16, n. 58), as distinct from the generic term *masi kesa* applied to stenciled cloth. A sort of symmetry was thus inherent in the process of dividing up the cloth, but the carrying through of this to figuring masi bola was a deliberate design strategy. Today, because of its relative ease and speed, the stenciling process has widely supplanted this

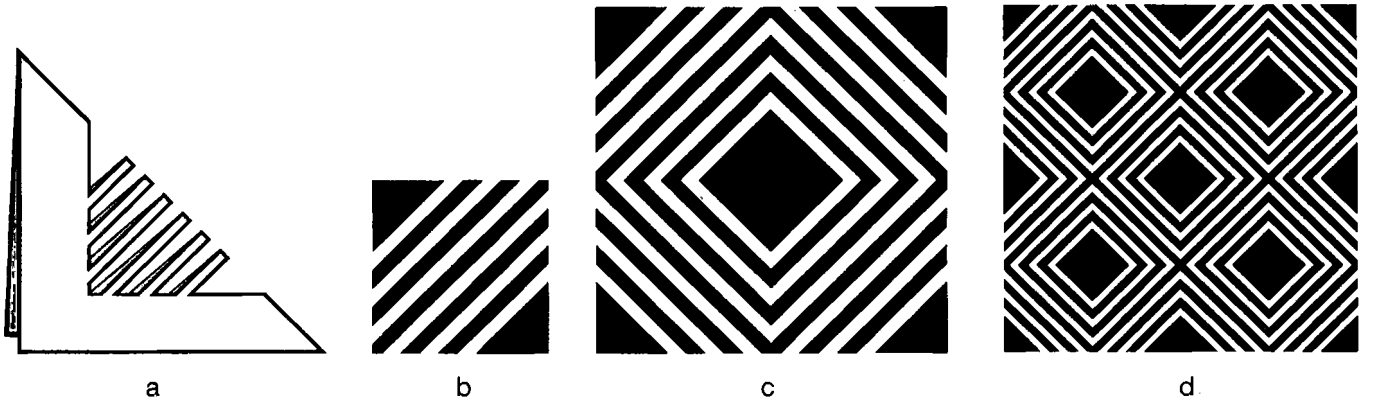


**Figure 9.24** Stenciling a composite image: (a) method of folding the stencil material to cut symmetrical image, (b) resulting print, (c) composite image, stencil printed four times, (d) large composite image, stencil printed sixteen times.

technique, both for printing bola motifs (such as those illustrated above and many others—see the plates and drawings in Crowe and Nagy [1992] for a representative selection) and for some motifs that were imported, along with the technology, from other regions.

While virtually all Pacific peoples made and figured barkcloth, stenciling was unique to Fiji. Originally, banana and pandanus leaves were used to make stencils for rectilinear motifs because of the ease of slitting with a lemon thorn along their parallel venation (Figure 9.21a), while stencils for more complex forms were made by cutting large fleshy leaves with sharp shells (Figure 9.22). Today stout paper, cardboard, and x-ray film are used, first because they can be kept from one printing session to the next without curling or shriveling and second because they are easier to cut with scissors (Figure 9.23). When paper or thin cardboard are used, the symmetry inherent in most motifs facilitates the method of cutting. Almost invariably, the paper is folded and half of the design cut, in exactly the manner of making paper-chain figures. When the paper is unfolded, the full stencil is revealed (Figure 9.24). The method is less suitable for x-ray film, which retains any creases made in it.

The majority of stencil motifs tend to be printed repetitively in horizontal or vertical rows, exploiting translation, reflection, and glide reflection symmetries. However, some motifs employ rotation symmetry and sometimes reflection within themselves. Still others occur most often as components of two-dimensional patterns (e.g., Figure 9.24).

## Conclusion

Sociologists as early as Hume and Durkheim noted that societies order the world of things according to the same patterns and structures they use to organize their societies. Kopytoff (1986:90) sums up that societies "mentally construct" objects simultaneously with, and according to the same rules they use for, constructing people. Durkheim traced this to the "ensemble of mental habits" societies have, which Durand has termed "imaginaries"—ideas about how the cosmos and the natural world is ordered and accordingly how they believe they should order their own social constructions and material inventions.

This chapter has asserted that for Fijians, symmetry is such an overarching idea. It is made manifest in their visual art, particularly in their very important barkcloth or masi, which is pervaded in every aspect by symmetry, from the rectangular shape of all of the different types of cloth through to its figuration, including the design layout, patterns, and even the structure of individual motifs.

Such a dedication to the principle of symmetry, and its consistency and pervasiveness in Fijian two-dimensional art, goes far beyond aesthetic style or convention. Masi, in fact, stands as a physical symbol of the principle of symmetry and references, at least indirectly, all things Fijian that are based on it. The degree to which social structures are similarly structured has been discussed here in terms of kinship relationships and the rituals that celebrate and perpetuate these while simultaneously facilitating social transitions from past to present and present to future. The illustration used here

is the lifting of mourning ceremony, the activities of which embody both mirroring and glide reflection. These two symmetries are represented in this chapter as configuring the social interactions in the ritual and nonritual life of Fijians.

The way meaning is carried and transmitted has been analyzed here using a sociosemiotic approach. It has been shown that masi carries perhaps the greatest range of signs of any Fijian artifact. By the process of "mythification" described by Barthes, the particularity of the meanings in the patterns, designs, and motifs in the figuration has been largely subsumed within the overall myth of "Fijianness," but masi's sign value has been strengthened, not diminished. Traditionally the clearest role of masi was as a group identity marker, the uniqueness of each sign shown here to have been achieved through a combination of the particular motifs used by each group and the overall design organization of the figuration. Indeed, the latter was what imparted the greatest particularity to the sign.

Thus, what Saussure termed the syntagmatic or contextual relations of the elements is critically important. The *paradigmatic* axis of meaning, dependent on similarity, which is so important in Western representational or metaphorical art, functions differently in Fijian abstract two-dimensional art. Here similarity and contrast relate not to the external natural world, but operate through repetition and symmetry of elements, in a manner similar to the parallelism Jakobson noted for poetry. This particular form of associative relations carries through into the naming of motifs and patterns, with names being developed as systems of relationships that permit classification of the visual forms to which they are appended.

Today there is much cultural and social interchange between regions, which in precolonial Fiji had little intercourse. One result of this is that the regional group-identifying motifs and design layouts of the masi are, in most areas, being supplemented with, or even supplanted by, those from other areas. Gradually a single homogeneous Fiji-wide masi style is emerging as Fijians redefine their identities in terms of a common ethnicity rather than their regional group particularities.[13] While there is inevitably some loss of aesthetic diversity associated with such a process, the norm of symmetry remains as pervasive in structuring and figuring this new cloth as it was in the original regional types it has incorporated. I contend that this nexus between aesthetic and semiotic comprehension is the major element in the remarkable durability of masi as a current and relevant art form. While retaining its essential elements, it is proving to be sufficiently flexible to carry changed meanings during rapidly changing times. ■

## Notes

1. The term *tapa* is of Austronesian linguistic origin. Ling and Ling (1963) point out that in the aboriginal language of Taiwan, the word for *barkcloth* is *tap*. That root form has been modified in other languages that are descended from proto-Austronesian to signify particular types or aspects of barkcloth. This includes several Polynesian languages, whence sailors adopted it as a generic term. However, to use *tapa* as the generic term for Fijian barkcloth is inappropriate since that word has a specific and limited meaning in Fiji, as it does in Tonga and Samoa (Ewins 1982a:5; Thomas 1995:131).

2. The terms *figured, figuring,* and *figuration* are commonly used by artists but less often by anthropologists, who often blur niceties of artistic terminology. The terms are used here because they broadly describe intentionally applying two-dimensional forms to the surface of an object and the visually perceptible result of such action. Each of the terms *design, pattern,* and/or *motif* has a more particular meaning that will emerge in the detailed discussion that follows. *Print(ing)* and *paint(ing)* describe specific and distinct technical processes and the product of these. Finally, *decoration* is not used since it does not suggest (in fact among artists has often been held to specifically exclude) the transmission of meaning, which is argued here to inhere in both the act of figuring and the resultant figuration of barkcloth.

3. The word *design* is used throughout this chapter in the sense normally understood by artists, as an intentional action of visual organization or the output resulting from that action. This usage includes but is not limited to symmetric designs as stipulated in Washburn and Crowe (1988:52).

4. The terms and notations used here are those given in Washburn and Crowe (1988) and summarized in Crowe and Nagy (1992).

5. This term is borrowed from Riggins (1994) and Gottdiener (1995), whose work makes an important contribution to highlighting and overcoming many of the inadequacies of earlier semiotic approaches, as well as symbolic interactionism and postmodern theory/culture studies, in dealing with the social life of material culture. The brief remarks made on theories of semiotics in this chapter are acknowledged as being only superficial notes on particular aspects of what are complex and nuanced theories. For instance, though there are important differences between how Saussure conceived of semiology and Peirce of semiotics, in this discussion they will be treated as broadly consonant and semiotics used throughout. Similarly avoided are arguments about the relative appropriateness of a Saussurean "dyadic" or Peircean "triadic" system, though the discussion here makes it clear that context is critical to meaning. Readers who may not be familiar with semiotics are referred to the succinct Internet article "An Introduction to Semiotics," by English academic Daniel Chandler (1994). Deeper semiotic analyses that are of particular relevance to art may be found in Thibault (1991) and Gottdiener (1995).

6. De Saussure's name is customarily used without the *de* qualifier, given simply as *Saussure* or *Saussurean.*

7. For a broader discussion of the methods of figuring and uses of Fijian masi, see Ewins (1982a:5–21) and Kooijman (1972, 1977). Note that "red" is the color designated by Fijians for the red-brown or brown paint they use, the color deriving either from bark, iron-bearing clays, or both. Not only linguistic but also conceptual continuities exist for Fijians between the golden dye of turmeric, the red of vermilion, and the red-brown of hematitic clay. All are numinous (Geraghty 1993).

8. Jakobson (1960) restyled these terms *metonymic* and *metaphoric* respectively. The Peircean terms sometimes used are indexical and iconic, but even these are not exactly analogous, first because they are two parts of a tripartite rather than a dual system and second because Peirce's definition of *index* and *icon* is closer to the distinction drawn between above between *denotation* and *connotation.*

9. Prehistoric Fijian two-dimensional art, evident on potsherds and petroglyphs, is also principally abstract. The one clear prehistoric exception is the human faces and other representations of fish, birds, and a sailing canoe painted on a limestone cliff in Vatulele Island (Ewins 1995). While these have certain affinities with other Pacific art, there are no evident connections between them and Fijian two-dimensional art in the historical period.

10. A detail of Cakaudrove masi design was also used for the dust jacket of *Symmetries of Culture* (Washburn and Crowe 1988) and other examples illustrated on pages 102 and 177.

11. Kooijman (1977:52, 55) mistakenly recorded this "swastika" as kamiki, but the people of Moce and elsewhere are adamant that *kamiki* refers to the box frame, and *bika ni kamiki* is merely one of the possible elaborations. The word *kamiki* is a now-obsolete name for a type of strong vine used for lashing structures together (its leaves also have medicinal value), today generally called *komidri.* It is unclear why that name was chosen, unless it is an elliptical reference to the shared integrative structural quality of vine and frame.

12. The apostrophe so frequently occurring in the Cakaudrove language represents a glottal stop where the letter *k* would occur in Standard Fijian. A similar linguistic form occurs in Samoan.

13. Whether the reassertion of geopolitical regionalism that has occurred among Fijians in the turbulent wake of the coups of 1987 and 2000 will reverse this trend and result in a return to regional identity markers in masi remains to be seen.

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