

## Diagrammatic Icons and Historical Processes in Belau

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*In this paper I analyze the relationship between diagrammatic representations of social relations and historical processes in Belau (formerly Palau), Micronesia. Four diagrams, linear paths, balanced sides, quadripartition, and graded series, are discussed in terms of their lexical labels, schematic arrangements, prototypical embodiments, and semantic fields. Ethnographic and historical examples presented reveal the differential historical vulnerability of social institutions modeled by these diagrams. The use of Peirce's typology of signs is demonstrated to be an important corrective to the structuralist notion of transformation.*

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THE PHILOSOPHER PEIRCE, IN HIS CLASSIC DISCUSSION OF SEMIOTIC RELATIONS, notes a connection between three types of signs and three modes of temporality. Signs that he classifies as “icons,” in which the relationship between expressive sign vehicle and represented object is grounded in some formal resemblance, are inherently oriented toward the *past*, since these signs function meaningfully without the actual spatiotemporal existence of the represented object. In contrast, signs labeled “indexes” require some relationship of contiguity between expression and object and are thus necessarily anchored to *present* experience, discourse, or action. Finally, signs that Peirce calls “symbols” bring some formal representation into relation with an object represented only on the basis of further representation’s action of imputing or endowing that relation with a conventional linkage. As such, symbols always point to the *future*, in that this semiotic relation is essentially a processual regularity. As Peirce concludes (1931–35, iv:447),

Thus the mode of being of a symbol is different from that of the icon and from that of the index. An icon has such being as belongs to past experience. It exists only as an image in the mind. An index has the being of present experience. The being of a symbol consists in the real fact that something surely will be experienced if certain conditions be satisfied.

This essay takes up this Peircean insight into the functional potential of certain types of sign relations and applies the notion of iconic signs to the cultural coding of social relations in Belau (formerly Palau), a Micronesian society in the western Pacific Ocean.<sup>1</sup> At issue are certain signs within a subclass of icons which Peirce calls “diagrams,” which represent the relations among parts of some represented object by analogous relations among component parts of the sign vehicle. Cultural diagrams are well documented in anthropological literature. The elaborate temple organization of Bali (Geertz 1980) represents the hierarchical relations among social units and cosmic categories. And the residential organization of Tiv hamlets (Bohannan 1958) is a concrete diagram of the segmentary genealogical relations among lineages. In the Belau case discussed here, however, multiple diagrammatic icons are analyzed in order to understand how each is differentially engaged in channeling social activity and in directing the course of social

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change in the face of exogenous factors such as colonial domination, induced political modernization, and sudden shifts in population.

#### Four Diagrams of Social Relations

In order to properly analyze the role of diagrammatic icons in Belau, a more complex theoretical apparatus is required than these oversimplified illustrations might suggest. In Belau there are four principal diagrams that organize the composition and interrelations among persons, roles, and sociopolitical units and whose lexical labels are used frequently in discourse about the nature of social action: “paths” (*rael*), “sides” (*bitang*), “corner-posts” (*saus*), and “larger”/“smaller” (*klou/kekere*). (Although the discussion will use these English glosses rather than indigenous terms, only Belauan meanings are implied.) Each of these expressions is associated with a particular schematic arrangement of elements, as well as a range of semantic meanings derived principally from reflection on a physical prototype or exemplar conceived of as the basis for metaphorical analogy. The argument will proceed in terms of these four dimensions: lexical labels, schemata, prototypes, and semantic fields.

To begin with the first diagram, the word “path” refers primarily to numerous trails running across hillsides and through forests which connect villages. The word can also be used to refer to social action in two related senses. A “path” is a method, technique, patterns, or strategy—in short, a “way” for doing something. Warfare strategies, fishing techniques, oratorical skills, and patterns of exchange are also called “paths.” But “paths” are also established linkages, relationships, and associations among persons, groups, and political units which were created by some precedent-setting action in the past and which imply the possibility as well as the obligation for “following the path” in exchange, marriage, cooperation, and competition. The corresponding schema of “paths” involves a series of homologous elements tied together in a linear thread, beginning at a spatiotemporal origin point and concluding at a terminal point.

And the associated semantic field of “paths” includes three general features that derive from reflection on journeys or migrations along trails. First, points linked together by a clear path have achieved a degree of structural homology and hence positive cultural identity. This set of elements functions as a unit vis-à-vis other sets of elements and shares a sense of commonality signaled in myths and stories by the depositing of identical symbolic markers—sacred stones, trees, valuables, place names, and titles—at each location where a god or ancestor stopped on the journey that began the “path.” Second, the linked elements can be viewed in terms of sequential precedence, with the origin point outranking all other points, according to a logic that stipulates that priority in time implies seniority in ceremonial precedence. Third, underlying all the examples mentioned above is the notion of a culturally created regularity that imposes upon inchoate experience a degree of linear order. A “path” implies the possibility for repeated action with prescribed confines, whether it be retracing a footpath through the forest, pursuing well-attested methods of fishing, or following established social linkages. In semiotic terms, “paths” in Belau function as “sign types,” that is, general regularities that impose their template or pattern on “sign tokens,” so that these individual occurrences are meaningfully categorizable as instances or “replicas” (to use Peirce’s terms) of the general rule. Much more needs to be said about “paths,” but the purpose of this initial overview is to clarify by one example the relationship among analytic categories of label, schema, prototype, and semantic field.

If linear linkage is the organizing principle of “paths,” then pure opposition is the essential feature of the second diagram, “sides.” A Belauan “side” is not like our notion of a “side of a house” or “side of a mountain,” but rather is one half of an oppositional pair in which both halves are identical yet inverse. A common expression for sets of pairs in many contexts is “one side and the other side,” the implication being that the relevant universe of elements is exhausted by the combination of two halves and, further, that

there is pressure keeping the two "sides" from converging, overlapping, or collapsing. Even the use of the single term "side" implies that a matched partner exists: to walk to the "side" of the village implies that one is presently standing on the "other side" of the same village. Obvious physical prototypes for the diagram of "sides" include riverbanks, especially when the water divides a village into two symmetrical parts, and bilateral body parts, especially eyes, legs, and breasts. As these natural embodiments suggest, the value of identical yet opposed terms is matched by the sense that each member is substantively and functionally complete, and that each member exists at the same ontological level. The "side" of a riverbank can only be another riverbank. Finally, the semantic field of "sides" carries the meaning that the two elements are related by balanced reciprocity, either peaceful or hostile. Exchange goods, feast foods, and head trophies moving from one village, house, or club to another require that return or revenge be made after a time delay proper to the custom in question. It is this aspect of "sides" that leads to the apparent paradox that opposed social units can be said to be simultaneously "mutual friends" and "mutual enemies," since aggressive competition between units presupposes the perpetuity of the structure as a balanced whole.

The next diagram, "cornerposts," combines features of "paths" and "sides" to express the relationship between four coordinated elements supporting a total structure: individual "cornerposts" are said to be linked by "paths" and the set can be divided into opposed groups of two "sides." Used primarily to refer to four stone or wooden pillars supporting the roofs of various buildings, the term "cornerpost" is also used in talking about the coordinated system of political relations among the four chiefly titleholders in a village (the "cornerposts of the village") and among the four principal villages of the archipelago (the "cornerposts of Belau"). These villages (Imeiong, Melekeok, Imeliik, and Oreor) are described in myth as the four stone-children of the goddess Milad, who gave birth to the present race in a creative act signaling the final transformation of natural lawlessness into sociopolitical order.<sup>2</sup> In both of these examples, the four chiefs and four villages are hierarchically graded and functionally differentiated. Often, the highest-ranking element represents the set in relation to other sets, while the second-ranking element takes responsibility for the internal workings of the structure.

More generally, however, the diagram of "cornerpost" is a quintessentially *cultural* sign. There do not appear to be any naturally occurring objects in the Belau universe that exhibit this particular property of coordinated integration of four elements supporting an encompassing structure. In fact, the prototype for the "cornerpost" diagram is the chiefly meeting house where the four high-ranking titleholders take their prescribed seats at the four corners. The meeting house, in turn, stands metonymically for the order of Belau culture as a whole.

The final diagrammatic icon that figures prominently in categorizations of social relations does not have a single lexical label. The pattern of "larger"/"smaller" is a continuum of elements in a series which are ranked according to the degree or strength of a single feature. Any two elements can be compared as "larger" and "smaller" on the basis of features such as "worth" (for pieces of money), "social rank" (for persons and houses), "power" (for chiefs), and "sacredness" (for gods and chiefly titles). While these various referents are typically associated with these features, it is also possible for more than one feature to be used in reference to a single, graded object: a high chief possesses social rank, sacredness, as well as power. Given a single dimension of contrast, however, a ranked series of elements can be constructed, and individuals are fond of drawing up cognitive as well as written lists of graded titles, houses, clubs, villages, valuables, and land parcels.

The most obvious prototype for this diagram of graded series is the biological fact of relative maturity, ripeness, or size. Relations among men, especially among brothers, are carefully graded by age, with a distinct term of address used for males senior to and junior to speaker. (Interestingly, female siblings, not implicated to the same extent in the manipulation of power and status, exchange a single term of address.) As a class, "older people" are distinguished from "younger people," and implied in this differentiation is a

gradation from dominance to subordination. Similarly, the political authority of a chief possessing an “important title” both surpasses and encompasses that of a lesser chief with a “minor title.”

### Awareness and Combination

These four diagrams, then, provide cognitive templates with corresponding lexical labels, prototypical embodiments, and semantic fields. Each of the diagrams also has institutional instantiations in social and political contexts which are structured according to the iconic features represented in the schema and which are labeled with the same term used in reference to the prototype. And these prototypes are the most obvious explanatory referents for the cultural meanings of each institutional pattern. Informants who reflect on the connection between social institutions and existing prototypes frequently give a causal argument, that, for example, balanced “sides” of a village exist because the river happens to divide the land into symmetrical sections, or that houses in different villages are linked by “paths of mutual houses” because an ancestral migrating group cut an actual trail through the forest or across the lagoon. In other words, the iconism of the prototype is interpreted by causal contiguity (what Peirce calls “indexicality”)—much like the argument that a photograph resembles the depicted object because it was produced in contiguity with it. That is, from the Belau point of view, prototypes are not merely convenient objects for metaphorical or analogical reasoning, but are in fact pre-supposed causal models that generate patterned social reality.

One consequence of this is that an understanding of social relations and institutions tends to focus on these diagrams as internally coherent, distinct patterns, rather than as systematically or transformationally related complexes. Furthermore, the selection of lexical labels in discourse about social relations is never trivial, since each diagram is associated with a core semantic meaning: sequential linkage, balanced opposition, differential support, and graded dominance. If a group of titleholders, for example, could be alternatively referred to as having a “path” in common, or as sitting on opposite “sides” of the meeting house, or as being sacred “cornerposts” of the village, the choice of vocabulary will automatically carry with it the particular cultural *valuation* of the associated diagram. Because of this fact, the four diagrams cannot be analyzed as if they were merely abstract geometrical patterns related by transformational rules or mutually reducible without change in meaning.

The analytical problem is that while awareness focuses on simple or transparent cases of the diagrams, ethnographic evidence suggests that the social instantiations of these patterns occur in *complexes*, either the multiplication of one diagram (intersecting “paths,” overlaid “cornerposts”) or the interpenetration of different models. Given this inversion between awareness and reality, the task becomes to show that there are certain potentials inherent in diagrammatic complexes which are not subject to high levels of awareness and manipulation and yet which do have vital consequences for the historical and processual realities of social relations and institutions.

### Typification and Nodality of Paths

If “paths” function as sign types by allowing for repeated action along or within narrowly defined ranges of variation, then in principle it would seem that all “paths,” whether followed or not, whether clear or obscure, would be equally immune to change by real social action and historical contingency. This is, however, far from the truth for several reasons. First, “paths” are commonly categorized along the dimension “strong”/“weak” and less frequently differentiated along the dimension “ancient”/“recent.” Like the real paths through tropical forests, social paths can become overgrown and indistinct without constant activity in the prescribed direction. A neglected social tie can, however, be rejuvenated by actors who take advantage of the fact that even the dimmest “paths”

never really “die”; they merely “sleep” awaiting future recognition. A “strong path,” correlatively, exercises a compelling force on social action; such linkages convey obligations that cannot be regarded as optional, since they are often constitutive rather than accidental features of the social units in question.

There is a built-in paradox here between the degree to which a given use of a “path” in exchange, cooperation, or warfare can be contextually marked by some feature of the “path” itself (so that this *particular* event stands out against the accumulated weight of all previous events) and the clarity and strength of the “path.” The most creative action is the one that “invents” the social relationship in the first place, whereas subsequent action within the established constraints is relatively presupposing of this invention. In other words, a traveler choosing the “path less traveled by” succeeds in marking this individual journey only at the expense of avoiding main arteries of social relations.

So, repeated actions that ultimately guarantee the clarity and power of a “path” do not themselves index a particular journey as distinct. An initial journey blazing a new trail will not, on the other hand, achieve recognition as a legitimate “path” until a second traveler decides to retrace the new trail. This accounts for the way in which a visitor arriving at some customary event such as a funeral, money collection, or feast can be quickly integrated into the prescribed order of exchange and service if a recognized “path” is announced. Only a high-ranking or wealthy person is daring enough to “invent a path” or “plant a relationship” not followed before—in fact, rank can be seen as the culturally constituted capacity to create “types” of relations. Such action is more normally thought to be the domain of gods or heroic ancestors.

The second dimension of “ancient”/“recent” ensures that not all “paths” are equal. An “ancient path” is one that was instituted by a god or ancestor; a “recent path” is of historical or contemporary origin, and its permanent institutionalization is not yet ensured. Expert knowledge of these “ancient paths” is an essential part of the responsibility of chiefs, and great rhetorical power can be harnessed by a learned elder who, upon hearing the creative postulation of a new “path,” can narrate a story accounting for some earlier pattern of which the proposed action is merely a presupposing replica. Such rhetorical one-upmanship carries the additional implication that the visitor who claimed creativity does not know the “real reason/origin for the path” and so in a real sense does not know what he is doing at all.<sup>3</sup>

Thus Belauan “paths” have the potential for what I have called cultural typification, that is, the power to categorize or denominate token actions as being significant instances of an instituted regularity (Parmentier 1981:49–54). And, furthermore, the criteria of strength and temporal priority make it possible to express progressive states of the transformation from creative origination to presupposed regularity.

A second potential inherent in “paths” is the capacity of “path” complexes to specify the differential nodality and directionality of social relations. The term “nodality” here refers to ways in which social linkages cross each other at a shared point, by merging two separate lines into a single unified “path,” or by joining minor elements at a central point. Nodality is best illustrated ethnographically by the system of “house affiliation” (Parmentier 1984) which organizes networks of houses in intravillage and intervillage contexts. Briefly, within a village, houses of “cornerpost” titleholders function as foci of networks of dependent, satellite houses. Satellite houses enter into social relations with houses in other villages only by passing through or following along the more direct relations established by nodal chiefly houses. In addition, chiefly houses enter into “paths” of affiliation with houses in other villages according to ancient migration traditions and stories of former cooperation and allegiance to common gods. Since each important house in any one intervillage network is also a member of other crosscutting networks, bonds of “mutual house affiliation” are both directional and nontransitive. In either intravillage or intervillage cases, it would be a breach of protocol for an individual from a satellite house or from an indirect “path” to contribute money or service outside the prescribed lines of nodality or to jump over the nodal house to claim a direct linkage.

Typification and nodality, then, are two inherent potentials of social relations and practices modeled according to the diagram of “paths.” Both result from the fact that, contrary to the simple perception of an isolated prototype, social relations occur in interlocking, intersecting complexes and are evaluated along criteria such as strength and temporal priority. Ethnographic and historical records reveal the most important processual consequence of “path” complexes, that once established, “paths” and the nodal articulation of elements tend to be self-perpetuating. The continuity of house affiliation links, for instance, is maintained despite on-the-ground trends in demography, ecology, and history. This is because a house in a network that becomes abandoned, destroyed, or encompassed is perpetuated *both* conceptually and practically by means of a cultural fiction. The existence of a sequentially continuous “path” is inconsistent with the disappearance of any one of its intermediate points, since a broken or interrupted line forfeits the priority residing in the temporal depth of its “origin point.” That is, a given element is strong relative to its position from the point of origin. And, more importantly, the overall depth or lateral extent of a “path” contributes to the rank of the linked elements taken as a set: chiefly houses display numerous gravestones of ancestors and engage widely dispersed exchange relations during customary events.

As a result, even abandoned houses are still formally invited to attend social events, and titles are still awarded to men who rule over nonexistent social units. Satellite houses also work to perpetuate the fiction of continuity, since they will contribute money in the name of the extinct nodal house in the hope that future benefits and prestige destined for the fictional category will accrue, albeit mediately, to them. Also, in order for a satellite house to assert its direct nodal status it must arrange for some even lower-ranking house to “pass through” it in exchanges. Thus the power to create cultural fictions operates in harmony with the status-maintenance potential in “paths” to enable the house affiliation system to resist attempts by series of colonial governments to dismantle allegedly wasteful ceremonial exchanges. Even in the face of the forced breakup of extended households, the construction of privately owned residential houses, and the imposition of patrilineal inheritance against the traditional matrilineal pattern, this system has become rigidified or “frozen” in both conceptualization and practice.

### Recontextualization and Revaluation of Sides

The second diagram of opposed “sides” is embodied ethnographically in the division of a village into two “sides of the mangrove channel” (*bita el taoch*), which splits the men’s and women’s clubs into competitive halves, in the balanced organization of titleholders of a village into two “sides of the meeting house” (*bita el bai*), and in the political opposition between two warring “side heavens” (*bita el eanged*) confederations focused on the powerful villages of Oreor and Melekeok. In each of these expressions the term “side” is modified or specified by a noun referring not to the opposed elements themselves but to the inclusive contextual domain (“channel,” “meeting house,” “heaven”) of the pair. This contrasts with the normal pattern of “larger”/“smaller” expressions, where the adjective modifies the object referred to (e.g., *klou el udoud* “large valuable”), leaving the determining feature (here, “worth”) formally unspecified. The point to note is that in “side” expressions, neither the typical object referred to nor the relevant encompassing domain of opposition specifies a *positive evaluative feature* in respect to which the two elements differ.

A second general observation is that in the three examples given above each “side” contains a *set* of member elements, not just a single term. Traditionally, a large village contained six meeting houses for men, divided into two sets of three according to the position of the two highest-ranking chiefly houses. The clubs on each “side” were additionally graded into junior clubs (for young unmarried men skilled in fishing and warfare), middle clubs (for heads of independent households who have not received chiefly titles), and senior clubs (for “retired” elders too weak to participate actively in village

affairs). The physical arrangement of these club houses often reflects the division of the village by a mangrove channel, with the junior club houses located near the landing, the middle club houses set back along the main road, and the senior club houses located near the central village square. In other words, the actual instantiation of “sides” here involves the diagram of “larger”/“smaller” as well. Contrary to the simple meaning of pure opposition or twinned inverses, the on-the-ground realization of “sides” can be described as the opposition of a set of graded elements—but *not* the graded opposition of sets of elements. A similar combination of diagrams is evident in the arrangement of seating positions of titleholders in the meeting house. While the “cornerpost” chiefs sit at the four corners of the building, all other titleholders sit along the two long sides. The opposed “sides of the meeting house” are oriented to the first and second ranking chiefs, who sit facing each other at the “face” of the building.<sup>4</sup> This illustrates the principle of focalization of “sides,” for exchange, discourse, and alliance between titleholders on each side is possible only through the first two chiefs. Thus, sets of elements grouped together as “sides” become articulated by the dominant term in a “larger”/“smaller” series.

These two aspects of “sides,” independence from a differentiating feature and focalization of graded sets on the dominant term, help account for some of this diagram’s processual consequences as revealed in the historical record. The first consequence is that social categories or institutions organized by “cornerpost” relations tend to become reduced to “sides” in the face of imposed social changes. The functional differentiation of four coordinated elements required for “cornerpost” institutions is difficult to maintain, given factors such as depopulation, abandonment of houses and villages, linearization of lines of authority transmitting colonial rather than local commands, and intensification of status competition due to the importation of Western guns, goods, and money. A village council, for example, without the manpower to maintain the functional differentiation of four “cornerpost” titleholders can salvage some of its dignity by replacing the four-part organization by a two-level opposition between titleholders as a group and commoners as a group. Or, the efforts by colonial powers to locate the reigning chiefs of a village undermined the delicate balance among political roles and encouraged head-to-head competition between the two leading chiefs on opposed “sides.” The number of title reversals and violent usurpations involving these two offices is a striking aspect of 19th-century Belauan history (Parmentier 1981:606–616). Finally, there has been a general collapse of the quadripartite polity established according to myth by the goddess Milad into a competitive hostility between “side heavens” focused on Oreor and Melekeok. Although this intensification is directly linked to the importation of firearms, the resulting political opposition is structured by indigenous patterns of social relations.

A second consequence, one that seems to run counter this notion of “sides” as the reduction of “cornerposts,” is that pure “side” oppositions in several contexts have become progressively recontextualized and revalued with positive differential features. In traditional village political life, for example, the opposition between two “sides of the meeting house” is symbolized by reciprocal giving of valuables and foods by an incumbent chief to his newly appointed counterpart. This form of delayed reciprocity has largely vanished in the contemporary scene, partly because a new form of two-level government consisting of a body of titled chiefs and an elected municipal council has displaced the axis of political competition and responsibility. In Ngeremlengui district, chiefs and elected officials meet independently (although in the same building), take responsibility for different aspects of village life (roughly, customary vs. acculturated), and operate according to radically different procedural styles (consensus vs. voting). Thus, the graded opposition between inherited and elected office has replaced the symmetrical balance between “sides of the meeting house.” One elder noted that the modern council was the “new sails,” in contrast to the “old sails” of traditional chiefs—making an allusion to the distinction between recent and ancient lines in a village. This is an excellent example of the reinterpretation of one diagram by another—“sides” by “paths”—for rhetorical effect.

Similar recontextualization is evident in the development of club organization during

the colonial period. The German administration encouraged the merger of men's clubs, not merely across age grades but also across "sides of the mangrove channel," on the grounds that severely reduced population made interclub competition a waste of manpower. This organizational collapse was artificially halted during the Japanese administration, when all Belauan men were again divided into three club grades, but this time ignoring the "side" pairing of identical clubs. Today in Ngeremlengui, club organization reflects the complete abandonment of "side channels" along with a recontextualization of clubs along lines of village rank. That is, the men's club from high-ranking Imeiong village now encompasses all the other clubs, whose men "enter into" it in order to participate in districtwide activities. There has also been a reevaluation of club structure along gender lines, with unified men's clubs and unified women's clubs taking responsibility for specific duties and competing with each other to increase the reputation of the village.

### Structural Complexity and Historical Vulnerability

At this point in the argument, with processual consequences of "cornerposts" and "larger"/"smaller" diagrams remaining to be discussed, it should be apparent that it is misleading to artificially isolate the four diagrams for the purpose of orderly exposition. As long as abstract awareness of their structure and meaning is at issue, the four diagrams could be treated independently, but when actual ethnographic instantiations are under consideration, complex implicational relations and rhetorical effects become the rule rather than the exception. To put it simply, ethnographic realities and actors' awareness are inversely correlated, since complex structures involving different diagrams (historical condensation of "cornerposts" to "sides," articulation of "sides" by "large" elements of a series, or alternative codings of "cornerpost" and "side" title affiliations) have properties not subject to overt manipulation and simply lexical labeling. Opacity to consciousness, however, far from being a protection against the impingement of real historical forces, in fact can be seen as contributing to the immediacy and unavoidability that characterize the interaction between colonial policy, demographic variation, and ecological limitations and the Belauan social institutions instantiating these diagrammatic icons.

Quadripartition in Belau shares with similar iconic forms found through the Austronesian world an intrinsic potential for coding historical transformation.<sup>5</sup> This potential operates along two related dimensions. First, "cornerpost" organizations such as the four powerful villages of the group, the four chiefly houses within a large village, the four ranking titles in a council, and the four satellite houses surrounding a principal house all mark the cultural accomplishment of order and maturity out of chaotic lawlessness and structural immaturity. Scattered villages connected by overlapping ties of alliance and hostility become a total *Belauan* polity only when these linkages are organized by the unifying figure of quadripartition. Similarly, unconnected migrating groups can establish houses in a given locality, but the achievement of their political integration as a coherent *village* is coded by the quadripartite coordination of ranking houses.

Second, "cornerpost" patterns also function as historical signs of stages of institutional development. The fact that quadripartite diagrams form overlaying complexes, each layer mirroring and thereby reinforcing each other layer, might lead to the premature conclusion that this diagram is essentially static. But "cornerposts" have the additional potential for coding social process in terms of "episodic sedimentation," to borrow a phrase from geology. This potential is clearly illustrated by the example of the development of four-part household networks within a village. Each principal house (that is, a house with an important chiefly title) is conceived of as one of the "cornerposts" supporting the village as a whole. As this village expands (because of general population increase or relocation of abandoned inland sites) additional houses are established on land controlled by these principal houses. In time, the newer satellites themselves become organized by a quadripartite ideology according to which they are the "cornerposts of

the house affiliation network." A chiefly house is thus a "cornerpost" member of the village and, at a lower level, the organizing principle of "house affiliation" for lower ranking houses. Thus, the *reduplication* of "cornerposts" within "cornerposts" serves as a sign of historical depth: social units subdivided into iconically similar nested structures are regarded as having temporal priority over internally undifferentiated units. Not only is structural complexity a sign of historical precedence, but processual development is registered in stages, since the gradual ramification of houses acquires political significance only when four elements are joined together.<sup>6</sup>

To these positive potentials for layered reinforcement and staged reduplication must be added two additional features contributing to the vulnerability of "cornerpost" institutions. The first, noted briefly above, is that the coordinated, differential functioning of "cornerposts" is difficult to maintain given the linearization imposed by colonial powers (Parmentier 1981:76–77). The decision to base colonial governmental and commercial institutions in Oreor village automatically undermined the coordinated political relations characteristic of the traditional "cornerposts of Belau." Oreor in fact became a district center, a notion completely alien to Belauan political ideology. Also, the use of appointed "acting chiefs" to substitute for traditionally selected leaders repudiates the quadripartite principle, since the second-ranking chief's function is bypassed. In fact, the concept of political representation is incompatible with the ideology of coordinated, differential support among "cornerpost" chiefs.

A second source of historical vulnerability is the requirement that "cornerpost" structure be contextually anchored by the first-ranking element in the set. Like the directional orientation of Christian cathedrals, a north/south calculus governs the placement of the "face" of chiefly meeting houses; this orientation then determines the pattern of roof beam construction, which in turn points to the seating position of the first-ranking chief. In the ideal case, a village's four principal houses, four chiefly land parcels, and four high titles all form a vast homologous system of overlaying iconic levels. But the potential for reinforcement is countered by the need to anchor the structure, since a change in the anchoring element can upset the entire system. A reversed title, a usurped seat, an abandoned residence, or an alienated land parcel can create a skewing of the entire "cornerpost" structure. More generally, however, the failure of one overlaid iconic structure tends to lead to the disruption of its mirror images. The collapse of the chiefly meeting house in Imeiong was quickly followed by the abandonment of all four "cornerpost" houses in that village. To paraphrase a local interpretation, once one pillar of the system is withdrawn, the roof can no longer be supported.<sup>7</sup>

The processual consequences of cultural elements graded in terms of "larger"/"smaller" series follow from the fact that this diagram, unlike the other three, is not constituted by entirely formal relations. Elements can be linked in a line, opposed as paired inverses, or set in quadripartition without specifying any positive feature that would link the elements to some aspect of the social life. That is, "paths" and "sides" are elementary formal relations, and "cornerposts" are more-complex logical structures; but the diagram of graded series always implies some *positive feature* that elements possess differentially, such as physical size, biological maturity, monetary wealth, political authority, sacredness, or social rank. A chiefly title is "important" relative to another title with respect to "political power"; a bead valuable is "large" relative to another piece with respect to its "worth." All graded series in Belau require the distribution of a feature value *in* the elements referred to.

This quality implies that "larger"/"smaller" series function to implicate elements in each of the other diagrams into the pragmatic realities of social action and historical experience, as well as to integrate a given diagram with replications of itself. Several illustrations of these principles have already been given: (1) the principal house (*klou el blai*) in an affiliation network provides the institutionalized "paths" between satellite houses and the extravillage world; (2) the corner of the highest ranking chief (*klou el rubak*) is the point of orientation for the seating positions of all other "cornerpost" titles; and (3) the

men's club from the dominant village (*klou el beluu*) of Imeiong becomes the encompassing club for districtwide activities.

Identifying this integrating potential as an inherent feature of the "larger" element in a graded series is actually to restate the processual truth that an element that acquires an integrative, constitutive, or nodal position in social life becomes thereby the "larger" term. And, furthermore, because "larger" elements perform these three systematic functions, they acquire the additional capacity of being the repository of cultural history. History is constructed in the sense that these dominant elements structure the impact of events and record the impact in their own complex institutional shapes. Belauan history is told about and by capital villages, ranking houses, and high chiefs (cf. Sahlins 1983). Whereas the constructed image of the past is, as Peirce argues, largely iconic in character, the actual process of historical creation requires contextual or "indexical" signs—precisely the domain of "larger"/"smaller" series.

And because of this engagement in historical processes, the diagram of graded series more than the other diagrams is subject to erosion in the face of imposed change. This erosion can be seen as a result of two policies: first, the attack by colonial authorities on elements labeled "larger," and second, the repudiation and replacement of the cultural principles underlying the differential values of these series. Inculcation of democratic egalitarianism in politics challenges the principle of inherited social rank and thus the grounds for the grading between "high ranking" and "low ranking" houses and persons. Introduction of quantitatively graded Western money implies a homogenization of the qualitative, functionally specific system of Belauan money. Legislation dealing with joint tenancy and patrilineal land inheritance removes one of the important supports of the strict grading of male siblings. And representation of villages in national legislative bodies according to relative population renders the traditionally sanctioned status of "dominant villages" inoperative.

Belauan responses to these developments are especially interesting, given the focus of the arguments presented thus far. The collapse of graded series of titles, land parcels, money, houses, and villages has led to a situation in which these elements as a group are lumped together as "traditional," in contrast to acculturated, Western, or recent institutions. Leaders selected by traditional procedures are opposed to elected officials; Belauan money joins with American cash to give customary exchanges twin sources of value (Parmentier 1985); and the populous, Western-oriented capital at Oreor has become politically and ideologically opposed to villages on Babeldaob island.

A second response to the collapse of graded series is to remove or isolate from action, discourse, and experience the actual signs embodying the highest ranking terms of the set. Ethnographic examples of this include the following: (1) at the moment when Imeiong village was victorious over enslaving Uluang village, the Imiungs Stone emblematic of the village's sacred rank was removed to the distant village of Ngellau on the other side of the island; (2) the valuable Bederiich piece of money which cemented the final peace between Imeiong and rival Melekeok is today on display in a German museum; (3) in the 19th century chief Ngirturong of Imeiong abandoned his residence and built a new house at neighboring Ngeremetengel, and from that time the graves of Ngirturong titleholders were placed there rather than at the ancestral burial platform in Imeiong; and (4) during the American period many district chiefs moved to Oreor, thereby removing the sacredness of their high titles from the local village context.

Unseen, unoccupied, unused, and unspoken, these signs continue to perform their integrative and constitutive functions even though *and because* they are removed from the exigencies of ongoing social activity. This paradoxical combination of immunity from historical impingement and continued cultural functioning characterizes the top, sacred, or transcendent position in hierarchies found in other Austronesian and Southeast Asian societies. In semiotic terms, these "larger" elements isolated in practice from contact with other elements in a ranked series take on the function of a sign type; but as a sign type without meaningfully existing instantiation its continuity is maintained only at the cost

of vacuity. Chiefly meeting houses no longer stand at the central square of large villages but rather are preserved as museum specimens, on emblematic flags, and on picture post-cards. Sacred stones representing village gods are left hidden under forest cover. Money pieces, taken out of customary circulation, are stored in private safe deposit boxes. And ranking village sites, long abandoned for more convenient coastal locations, are visited by school children as archaic remnants suitable only for photography.

### Conclusion

The ethnographic analysis of cultural diagrams is, of course, only one facet of a total understanding of the link between social relations and historical process. The discussion here has focused on the function of these diagrams as instruments of limited self-representation, that is, as meaningful constructs in which the structure and processual regularities of Belauan society are recorded, imagined, and interpreted. The ethnographic particulars, combined with data presented elsewhere (Parmentier 1981, 1985), demonstrate that the diagrammatic representation of social institutions and relationships seizes as its semiotic means the very organizational structures of society itself, as Fortes realized in his classic analysis of Tallensi shrines. The importance of this seemingly trivial claim is the implied criticism of the notion, formulated with clarity by Durkheim and Mauss (1963), that the formal relations among social groups are the natural source of concepts of space and time. In their view, collective representations are universally *about* social relations, and consequently—if unintentionally—those relations are themselves rendered meaningless or noncultural (Sahlins 1976:115). The argument here, in contrast, is that patterns of social relations are valid vehicles of expression as well as denoted objects.

In this paper I have also attempted to counter a theoretical practice in the other direction, namely, the technique found frequently in structuralist writings of manipulating cultural symbols according to transformational rules in such a way that the underlying “structure” remains constant. This practice makes the unwarranted assumption that structure consists entirely of “patterning of internally organized relations” (Leach 1973:41). To be sure, relational paterings are widespread in social representation, but they exist as *cultural* rather than purely logical constructs. As has been demonstrated, while there is a syntax of the four Belauan diagrams that governs their compositionality and contributes to their relative historical vulnerability, each of these diagrams is endowed with semantic meanings derived from the prototypical referents that are *not* reducible to properties of geometrical relations. That is, Belauan diagrams are not just icons; they are iconic *symbols*, and consequently their instantiations are meaningful not only as formal resemblances between expression and object (that is, as icons), but also because of the culturally specific valuation imposed on each pattern (that is, as symbols).

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Space limitations preclude presenting an historical and ethnographic introduction to Belau; see Barnett 1949; Force 1960; Force and Force 1972; Krämer 1917–29; McKnight 1960; Parmentier 1981; Smith 1983.

<sup>2</sup>Texts of this myth are given in Parmentier 1981:252–293.

<sup>3</sup>The Belauan term covering both “reason” and “origin” is *uchul*; this polysemy is paralleled in many related cultures, see Bamler 1900:237; Hogbin 1963:14; and Fox 1971:221.

<sup>4</sup>See Aoyagi 1979 and Parmentier 1981:356–361 for differing accounts of chiefly seating positions.

<sup>5</sup>On quadripartition see Blust 1980; Eyde 1969:42; Cunningham 1965:364–365; Feldman 1979:136–137; Nooy-Palm 1979:83; and van Wouden 1968:187.

<sup>6</sup>The argument here is intended to be a corrective to quantitative studies correlating, for example, burial platforms and sociopolitical status; see Kirch 1980.

<sup>7</sup>This combination of orderly stability and inherent fragility is found on Ponape (Caroline Islands), where the polity is described as supported by four cornerstones: “Now, for all these corners, if one of these collapses, a time of trouble will occur in the state which made it” (Bernart 1977:30).

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