Ephemeral images, lasting memories

The sand-drawings of Ambrym Island, Vanuatu

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In the northern and central islands of the archipelago of Vanuatu (Melanesia), a few men and women hold the knowledge of an ephemeral and refined art. This art consists of tracing on the ground, by means of a finger, geometrical forms whose meaning can be shared or kept concealed. Following the region's wide linguistic variety, the local name for this art changes from place to place. This has made prevalent the use of the general and somewhat imprecise term "sand-drawing" (fig. 1).[1] This term is inaccurate for at least two reasons. First, these designs are traced not only in the sand of beaches but also on the soil of villages distant from the shore. Second (and most importantly), this practice is not just a graphic art. As I will try to demonstrate, it is an art of words, an art of power, and, despite its material fragility, an art of memory. The tracings are associated with orally transmitted information (simple messages, traditional tales, secret personal names, and power-laden songs) that through this device are preserved and transmitted from one generation to another. As William Rodman beautifully wrote, "Sand drawings are symbolically charged filigree that the wind blows away, myths in pictures that the tide wipes clean" (1991, 422).

The stability of these designs (and their stories) over time is not a recent discovery. Raymond Firth, among the first to document the practice in the 1920s, wrote that "only a few experts know how to do these; tales and drawings are traditional, usually handed down in families from father to son" (1930, 59). Since then, scholars have often referred to this practice as a mnemonic device (Cabane 1997; Rory 2013) or even as a kind of writing (Huffman 1996a; Zagala 2004; cf. Lind 2018). However, its mnemonic principles have never been the subject of dedicated analysis.

This essay aims to provide a first step in this direction. It is based on fieldwork conducted in the northern and western regions of Ambrym Island during 2017, 2018, and 2022, which resulted in the recording and description of more than one hundred sand-drawings (Baron 2020). The current study has three primary aims: to introduce the art of sand-drawing as it is practiced in Ambrym, to present the most relevant features of this tradition by means of ethnographic examples, and to provide an analysis of its mnemonic processes, inspired by the most recent developments in the anthropology of memory (Severi 2015, 2019).

Sand-drawing on Ambrym Island

Ambrym is the fifth largest island in Vanuatu (Siméoni 2009). The large, active volcanic complex at the island's center naturally divides it into three parts: north, west, and southeast. Its approximately seven thousand inhabitants are scattered in relatively small hamlets, connected by paths that cross portions of tropical forest, coconut plantations, and vegetable gardens.

In north Ambrym, sand-drawing is called *tuhan ran tan*; in the languages of west Ambrym it is known as *tisan yan tan* (Daakaka), *tuhan ran tan* (Dalkalaen), *tisan lan tan* (Daakie), and *ta'han tan* (Ralcaca). All these local expressions can be translated as "drawing/writing/

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1. On the island of Vao, the term used to indicate the execution of a motif is *ghir*, and the result is called *wör*. On Pentecost, the act is called *uli* and the complete design *uliuli* or *ululan*. On Malakula, the terms used are *rolu*, *nana*, *nitüs*, *nitüsna'ana*, *watatés*, and *naites*, among others (Deacon 1934a; Huffman 1996a). In addition to English, Vanuatu has two other official languages, French and Bislama. In these languages, the practice is known as *dessin sur sable* and *sandroing*, respectively.

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Figure 1. Edwin Taso of Polipetakever (west Ambrym) tracing a sand-drawing. Polipetakever, December 18, 2017. Photo: author. See the electronic edition of *Res* for color versions of most images.

tracing signs on the ground." The difficulty of translating the verb *tis* offers an immediate clue as to the difficulty of classifying such an art form. At the same time, the vernacular references to "ground" rather than "sand" derive from the material support on which these images are usually traced on this island.

As a result of both its volcanic origin and its ongoing volcanic activity, Ambrym has a highly porous, dark, compact soil, generally covered by a thin veil of tephra (volcanic ash). This combination makes Ambrym ground an exceptionally apt medium for drawing. Unlike sand, the thinner composition of tephra produces a lower lateral accumulation of the material moved during the tracing of the lines. This characteristic allows for greater detail and an enhanced legibility of the image, which consequently appears as if carved in sunk relief. Perhaps because of their capacity for detail, Ambrym sand-drawings are among the most graphically complex of the whole archipelago. Their dimensions generally vary between twenty and 150 square centimeters, but some are even larger. In these exceptional cases, two people will collaborate in drawing the design, sharing the task of completing it.

Ambrym sand-drawing experts have generally agreed that the practice was imported from southeast Malakula and the small islands off its northeast coast several generations ago, in the context of the ritual exchanges held with the populations of these areas (Guiart 1951; Huffman 1996b; Patterson 2001).[2] In discussing the functions of sand-drawing, James HangHang Tainmal, esteemed elder of Fanla (north Ambrym), argued that sand-drawing was once often employed as a leisure activity.[3] Indeed, the construction of a sand-drawing is, even today, a stimulating intellectual challenge for performers, and witnessing a well-executed performance is a source of wonder for both children and adults. This aspect of the art form is amply magnified when coupled with (or followed by) the oral performance of a

2. This consideration may suggest that sand-drawing was already known on the island in the second half of the nineteenth century, but neither Lamb (1905) nor Speiser (1913) mention it.

3. HangHang Tainmal, in conversation with the author, Fanla, north Ambrym, January 2, 2018. Conversation held in Bislama. The same function is documented for neighboring islands (Firth 1930; Deacon 1934a; Layard 1942).

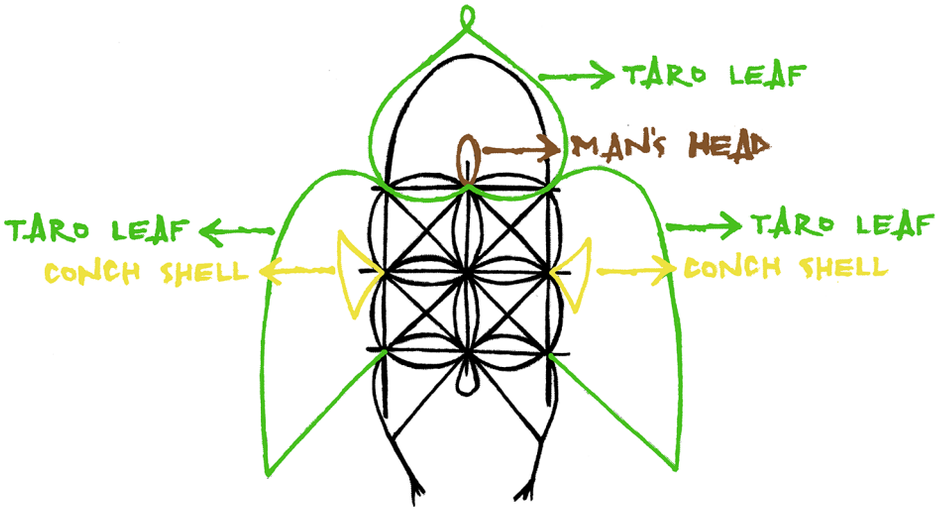

Figure 2. Reproduction of *Bekeli*. Originally traced by Philip Talevu Bongmial of Emyotugan (west Ambrym), on March 19, 2017, in Yautilie (west Ambrym). Drawing: author.

captivating tale, which, in parallel with the drawing itself, gradually reveals something unexpected.

An old design that illustrates this point is known in the Daakaka-speaking district of west Ambrym as Bekeli (lit. "Baldhead"). According to local sand-drawing experts, Bekeli was a man renowned for his shrewdness:

> The story goes that this fat, short man always carried two *bubu* [*Charonia tritonis* conch shells, customarily used as trumpets] hanging at his sides. When he blew his *bubu*, people could hear him from every corner of the region. He was cunning, and a flatterer: anytime he asked someone for a pig [an essential element to perform Ambrym ritual ceremonies], he always got it, but he never paid back. So, one day, the men of his village decided to kill him. They took their bows and arrows, and then they disposed themselves at the two sides of the path that led to his hut to ambush him. However, Bekeli was too wise: he sensed the danger, so he cut a taro leaf and covered his bald head. Then he cut other leaves and covered his *bubu*. Then he went down the road where the men were waiting for him. The killers saw him but thought: "No, we must wait! He is another man!" So, he passed beyond them and went away. Now safe, Bekeli got rid of the leaves and blew his *bubu*. The men waiting for him heard the powerful sound and said: "Alas! He fooled us! He got away!" They left their hideouts and tried to chase him, but without success. He disappeared, and they never found him again.[4]

The British ethnographer Bernard Deacon first documented this sand-drawing in west Ambrym in the spring of 1927 (Royal Anthropological Institute Archive, MS 90/4/395-396; Deacon 1934a). Deacon did not report the story associated with the drawing, but the annotations left in the margin of his pencil sketch suggest that he came across the same story that I recorded in the same region ninety years later. As noted by Deacon, this sand-drawing, generally drawn before the recitation of the story, shows the short, fat man, his bald head covered by a taro leaf, as well as the hidden *bubu* hanging at his sides (fig. 2). In this sense, the sand-drawing graphically represents Bekeli's ability to foresee the road and gain a vantage point from which to look at things, avoiding the trap.[5]

However, sand-drawings were not produced just for amusement. According to local experts, particular designs could be used as a form of communication, to make promises, perform acts of divination, and record ritual knowledge (Baron 2020, 2021). Ritual-bound sand-drawings were traced exclusively among the initiated (Guiart 1951, 1963), while others had their esoteric contents protected behind an exoteric meaning and could be performed in front of a wider audience. This strategy was used to hint at ritual powers without revealing them, drawing the attention of people

4. Philip Talevu Bongmial and Benson Masing, in conversation with the author, Yautilie, west Ambrym, March 19, 2017. Tale told in Bislama.

5. Foresight is a highly valued ability in this area of Vanuatu (see Rio 2007, 29–30).

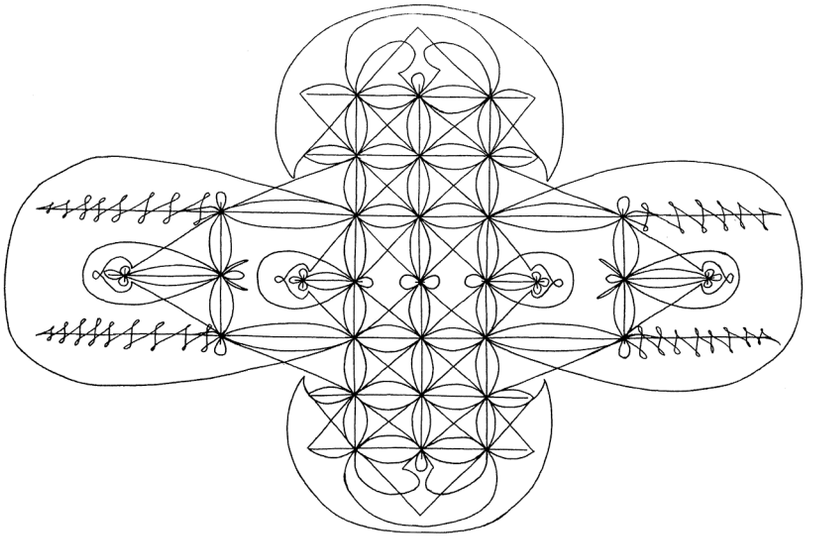

Figure 3. Reproduction of *Tan Menok*. Originally traced by Bae Wilpen of Emyotugan (west Ambrym) on March 26, 2017, in Emyotugan. Drawing: author.

potentially interested in their acquisition (Huffman 1996b). In all this, a deeper level of meaning could replace or enrich the former one during initiation to a higher rung of the *mage*, the local variety of the hierarchical "politic-cosmic institution" (Patterson 2002, 209), which at the time of European contact held sway over a large part of the northern islands of Vanuatu.[6]

By the mid-twentieth century, with the general conversion to Christianity completed in most of the island, sand-drawing lost its role as an initiation tool but did not disappear. In the new spatial arrangement of Christian villages—deprived of the ceremonial grounds and men's houses that had represented the core of the *mage*—men would wake up early in the morning, come out of their huts, and gather in the open space in the middle of the village to "warm their bones in the sun."[7] There they traced and shared sand-drawings, exchanged knowledge about old and new figures, and, depending on the age of the young people attending the performances, used sand-drawings to entertain them or instruct them in local myths and tales. In this new context, many experts renounced transmitting the old esoteric meanings of the drawings, which were considered at odds with the precepts of Christianity. An example of this tendency is a sand-drawing known in the Daakaka-speaking district of Emyotugan as *Tan Menok* (Land is finished; fig. 3). This sand-drawing was described to me as depicting "a land dispute between two families"; once the conflict was solved by dividing the area into two parcels (hence "finishing the land"), this sand-drawing was conceived to seal the agreement and commemorate the event.[8]

However, the ethnographic literature suggests that this story may represent only the surface of the information related to this design. The term *Tan Menok* appears quite early in the Vanuatu ethnological records. According to Douceré (1924, 41), on the island of Pentecost it refers to the highest rank of the local hierarchical institution: nothing would be above or beyond this title (the "land" would be "finished"). In addition, scholars working in Ambrym described *Tan Menok* as a significant ceremonial title reserved for high-ranking men, imported from Ambae (Guiart 1951; Paton 1979; Patterson 1981, 2006). According to Patterson (2006, 333), "*Tan Monong* means literally 'the ground is finished', but its meaning is comparable with the English

6. This system, described by ethnologists as "graded society" (Deacon 1934b; Layard 1942), consisted in "formalizing access to local political power by establishing a series of hierarchical grades" (Bonnemaison 1996, 200). For Ambrym in particular, see Lamb (1905), Guiart (1951), Paton (1979), and Rio (2007).

7. This phrase was employed by several sand-drawing experts in villages of both west and north Ambrym, recurring almost as a topos.

8. Bae Wilpen, in conversation with the author, Emyotugan, west Ambrym, March 26, 2017. Conversation held in Bislama.

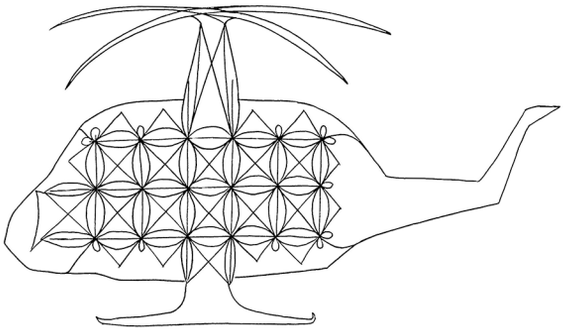

Figure 4. Reproduction of *The Helicopter*. Originally traced by Karu Ifrem of Fanrereo (north Ambrym) on January 3, 2018, in Fanrereo. Drawing: author.

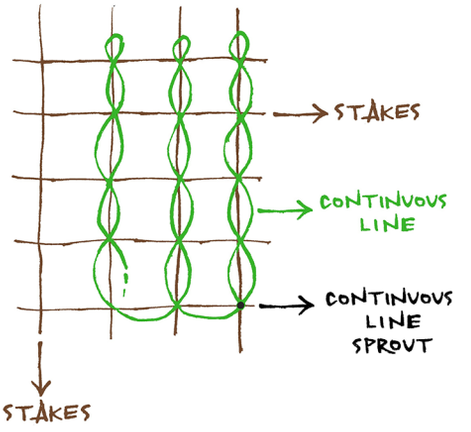

Figure 5. Graphic rendering of yam cultivation terms applied to sand-drawing construction. Drawing: author.

phrase 'known throughout the land' in the sense of 'renowned throughout the land' and can be translated as 'lord of the land.'" Among the various peculiarities that characterize the ritual that gives the right to this title, one of the most striking is that it allows the candidate's mother to acquire the title of *Jamarkon*. With this title, women had to observe, "like high-ranking *mage* men, the restrictions on commensality with those of lower grade" (Patterson 2006, 333; see also Patterson 2001). At this point, it is worth reporting a passing comment made by Huffman (1996a, 249) that "there are indications that [sand-]drawings were used in part of the higher-rank rituals for the now long-defunct *yemarkon*, the women's graded society in the Meltun'n area of west-south-west Ambrym." This sand-drawing—linked to the *Tan Menok* title and precisely recorded in Emyotugan (Meltun'n)—could be considered empirical evidence supporting Huffman's thesis.

Be that as it may, the very fact that sand-drawings were transmitted regardless of their esoteric meaning acts as indirect evidence that the practice remained a popular leisure activity. This situation lasted until the 1990s when the formal education system took over the time previously devoted to sand-drawing, and new forms of entertainment replaced the older ones. However, just when the practice seemed destined to oblivion, the proclamation of sand-drawing as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2003 and the subsequent organization of sand-drawing festivals in four different islands in northern Vanuatu gave a new impetus to sand-drawing production.[9] These festivals have seen the presentation of newly designed sand-drawings, inspired by subjects as varied as biblical characters, Ambrym's volcanoes, local places linked to traditional tales—stones, creeks, abandoned villages—and even modern means of transport, such as *The Helicopter*, created by Karu Ifrem of Fanrereo (fig. 4).

This brief summary of the history of Ambrym sand-drawing illustrates the transformations that occurred in the practice over time. However, it also implies fundamental continuities concerning the principles underlying sand-drawing composition and the intrinsic polysemy of its graphic elements.

A morphology of dynamic relationships

In order to better understand the graphic construction of sand-drawings, I began by studying the simplest cases, gradually moving on to more complex ones. This analysis resulted in the identification of five types of sand-drawing, which I classified from 0 to 4 according to criteria of increasing morphological complexity. The more complex types retain the construction principles of the simpler types, while adding new ones. In this article I focus exclusively on the sand-drawings I have classified as type 4, the ones for which Vanuatu is best known within the country and overseas (Huffman 1996a).

In a sort of emic reversal of the analogy elaborated by Gell about the Melanesian garden as a work of art (Gell 1992, 60–62), in north and west Ambrym, sand-drawing design is conceived as a work of gardening; in particular, sand-drawing is linked to the art of cultivating

9. See "Vanuatu Sand Drawings," UNESCO, https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/vanuatu-sand-drawings-00073?RL=00073.

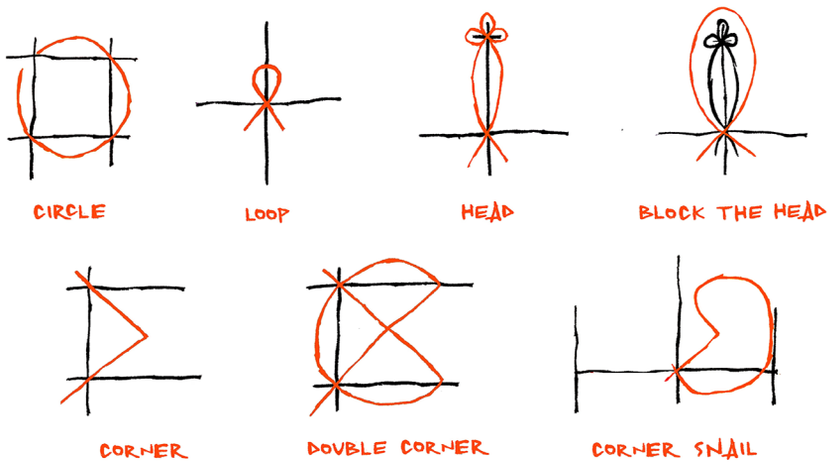

Figure 6. Examples of standard movements employed in sand-drawing construction. Drawing: author.

yams (*Dioscorea*).[10] In order to produce a sand-drawing, one begins by tracing a sort of grid or scaffold on the ground. This scaffold is made of perpendicular lines called *lee* (Daakaka), *lie* (Ralcaca), *lihé* (Daalkalaen), or *liye* (North Ambrym). These terms can be translated as wood, stake, post, or pole: terms evoking the wooden stakes used to support the growth of yam vines (in Daakaka, *lee né dom*, "the stake[s] for the yam").[11] Once the stakes have been "grounded," the performer locates the starting point of the sand-drawing's continuous line. This point is locally known as *bweti tis* (Daakaka) or *pari tu* (North Ambrym), which may be rendered, following the horticultural metaphor, as the "sprout [of the] tracing" (fig. 5).

From the "sprout," the performer traces a sort of a coiling loop without lifting his or her finger from the ground. This continuous line intertwines with the scaffold, producing the sand-drawing's sinuous path. In this entanglement of lines, the performer must never trace the same stroke twice and must finally close the path by returning to the sprout.[12] If a sand-drawing is well executed, the performer will not hesitate in drawing the continuous line, giving the viewer an impression of an unbroken movement. However, this is not always the case. The continuous line can be split into a series of locally recognized graphic acts, which I term "standard movements." In the Daakaka-speaking district, for instance, these include *keviti* (to circle/go round), *lisi* (to loop/knot/fasten/wind), *baten* (head), *sekyo baten* (to block the head), *si swa* (to corner once), *si lo* (to double corner), and *si bek* (to trace a corner snail), among others (fig. 6).[13]

These standard movements appear "woven" together in *Tan Menok* (see fig. 3), but to illustrate how standard movements combine to produce a sand-drawing, I will refer to a much more straightforward example: *The Kingfisher*, as traced in Ranon, in north Ambrym, by Longne Bong of Emyotugan in west Ambrym (fig. 7).[14] The scaffold of this simple sand-drawing consists of three stakes: a single vertical stroke perpendicularly crossed by two horizontal lines. After tracing the scaffold, Bong

10. HangHang Tainmal, in conversation with the author, Fanla, north Ambrym, January 2, 2018. Conversation held in Bislama. On the role of yam gardening in Ambrym society, see Patterson (2002) and Rio (2007, 2009).

11. Longne Bong, Malipu Tininkon, and Edwin Bongmage Kintor, in conversation with the author, Ranon, north Ambrym, November 25–26, 2022. Conversation held in Bislama.

12. "In sand-drawing, you start from a given point. Then you go around as much as you like, but you have to close your tracing by coming back to the point from which you started" (Benson Masing, in conversation with the author, Yautilie, west Ambrym, April 2017; conversation held in Bislama).

13. Philip Talevu Bongmial, Damne Bae Luke, and Beunkon Bongmial, in conversation with the author, Emyotugan, west Ambrym, October 30, 2022. Conversation held in Bislama.

14. *The Kingfisher*—called *Ebror* (North Ambrym), *Seboro* (Dalkalaen), *Eboro* (Raljaja), *Seebwiyo* (Daakaka), or *Sebolo* (Daakie)—is a very common sand-drawing, known throughout Ambrym and in neighboring islands.

Figure 7. *The Kingfisher*, traced by Longne Bong of Emyotugan (west Ambrym). Ranon (north Ambrym), November 26, 2022. Photo: author.

locates the continuous line sprout by pointing his index finger at the intersection of the upper cross. From there, Bong starts to unfurl the continuous line, which begins with the standard movement known as "double corner." He then traces a triangle representing the bird's tail, followed by a second double corner that mirrors the first. The sequence continues with Bong's tracing of the kingfisher's head, one of its wings, and then a small loop to avoid interrupting the continuous movement, until he finally heads back to the "sprout" after having outlined the bird's other wing (fig. 8).

The Kingfisher is relatively simple, since the continuous line sequence is short and the scaffold consists of only three stakes. However, during my fieldwork I documented designs having scaffolds counting up to twenty-eight stakes. The intersection of these perpendicular lines generates squares that impose two new graphic principles: each square must be circled and have its diagonals traced, with significant consequences in terms of graphic composition (fig. 9).[15]

These consequences are clearly evident in the sand-drawing known as *The Water of the Cardinal*

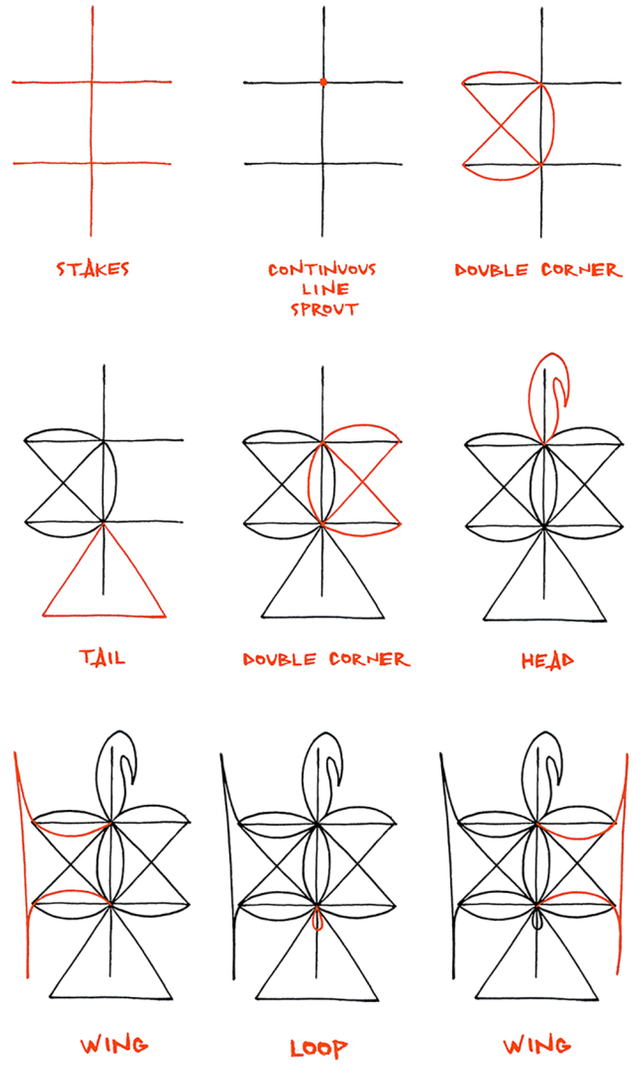

Figure 8. Sequential reconstruction of *The Kingfisher*. Drawing: author.

Honeyeater (fig. 10).[16] Unlike *The Kingfisher*, the construction of this sand-drawing is not developed in a single sequence but by means of the consecutive unfolding of three subsequences, each resulting from the triple rotation of a few selected movements, which I

15. "That is important, my grandfather said so. You must circle every square and you must pass through the corners. If the performer gets through the middle of the side of a square, that is not a sand-drawing—it is a scrawl" (Benson Masing, in conversation with the author, Yautilie, west Ambrym, April 2017; conversation held in Bislama). Nonetheless, there are a few accepted exceptions: *Bekeli*, for instance, does not respect the diagonals rule.

16. In west Ambrym, *The Water of the Cardinal Honeyeater* is known as *Wi man patipasél* (Dalkalaen), *Wì man pwetepehel* (Raljaja), or *Wì man bwetebàséé* (Daakaka). In north Ambrym, sand-drawing experts call it *Ol man rabu* (lit. "the coconut of the redheaded pigeon").

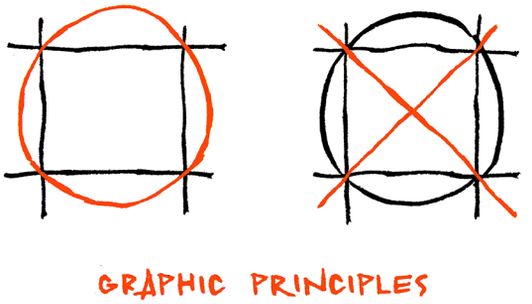

Figure 9. Graphic principles of sand-drawing imposed by the squares within the frame. Drawing: author.

term "key subsequences." This example shows how the combinations of movements that a performer has to learn by heart to trace a sand-drawing properly are relatively few. Still, looking at the sand-drawing, a viewer may be struck by the complexity of the last key subsequence, especially when compared with the relative simplicity of the previous ones, and may wonder how this could be recalled. I argue that the increasing complexity of the key subsequences is tempered by the progressive reduction of the graphic possibilities generated by the stacking of the previous tracings. The scaffold conditions the first subsequence, the combination of scaffold and first subsequence conditions the second, and the three together influence the path of the last. This progressive increase in the "structuring power" of the background, combined with the requirements set by the graphic principles (circling each square and tracing both its diagonals), limits the performer's maneuvering possibilities until he or she has no other option but to follow the only viable path to the sprout.

Figure-ground semiotics and avowed secrecy

The examples given so far have shown how sand-drawings are composed. However, they also offer the first clue for understanding their particular semiotics. Each sand-drawing is made of a sequence of locally termed standard movements (*keviti*, *lisi*, etc.). These movements have, in themselves, no inherent meaning. Rather, it is their combination and their subsequent recognition as part of a structure within the larger set of lines traced on the ground that makes them meaningful. Consider three sand-drawing reconstructions of *The Kingfisher*, *The Reef Fish*, and *The Water of the Cardinal Honeyeater* (fig. 11). The standard movement known as "double corner," perceived in *The Kingfisher* as the bird's breast, becomes, in *The Reef Fish*, part of the scales covering its body, while in *The Water of the Cardinal Honeyeater* it assumes no defined meaning, although it is essential to the broader graphic structure.

The versatility of the standard movements is a pivotal feature of sand-drawing and the key to its protean semiotic structure. The same standard movement can assume different meanings even within the same pattern. By modifying the figure-ground relationship in a given composition, the performer can alter the viewer's perception of the image, endowing it with a new significance.

An example is provided by the pattern known as *The Yam*. During several sand-drawing recording sessions, this design was described to me as simultaneously a straightforward representation of the plant, a stylized depiction of its growing process, and a formal projection of its entire life cycle (fig. 12).[17] The sand-drawing performers first associated the vine's growth around the stakes to the sinuous path of the continuous line. Then, upon completion of the sand-drawing, they described it as a picture of the fully grown plant. Finally, most of them illustrated the plant's life cycle too: to evoke this latter picture, performers pointed at (or even retraced) some elements of the continuous line, highlighting two somewhat flattened ovals at the center of the figure. The first oval is the old yam from which the plant originated, while the second is the new one, ready to be dug out of the ground.

Changing the image's perception by altering the figure-ground relationship is not the only way to endow a sand-drawing with multiple meanings. As already mentioned, another solution is to conceal esoteric meanings behind an exoteric veil. To illustrate this, I return to *The Water of the Cardinal Honeyeater*. Deacon first documented this sand-drawing in west Ambrym in 1927. In the margin of his sketch, Deacon noted: "*Wî man bwetewàsee*—a small bird, black with red head" (Royal Anthropological Institute Archive, MS 90/4/396).[18] When I asked Ambrym sand-drawing expert John Beunkon if he knew *Wî man bwetewàsee*, he replied

17. For the information concerning *The Yam* I am indebted to several sand-drawing experts: Bambu Masing, Bongo Rovo Masing, and Bae Taetas, as well as Philip Talevu Bongmial, in west Ambrym; Luan Ruth Belang, HangHang Tainmal, and Aram Sam, in north Ambrym.

18. In 2001, Zagala included this sand-drawing in a catalog redacted for the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, translating *Wî man bwetewàsee* as "a species of bird" (Zagala 2001, sand-drawing no. 15). Zagala states that the sand-drawing may represent "the bird's distinctive acrobatic movements around a flower (or the flower itself)" or "the nest of the bird, which is a small cup-shaped form built from spidersweb and fine roots" (ibid.).

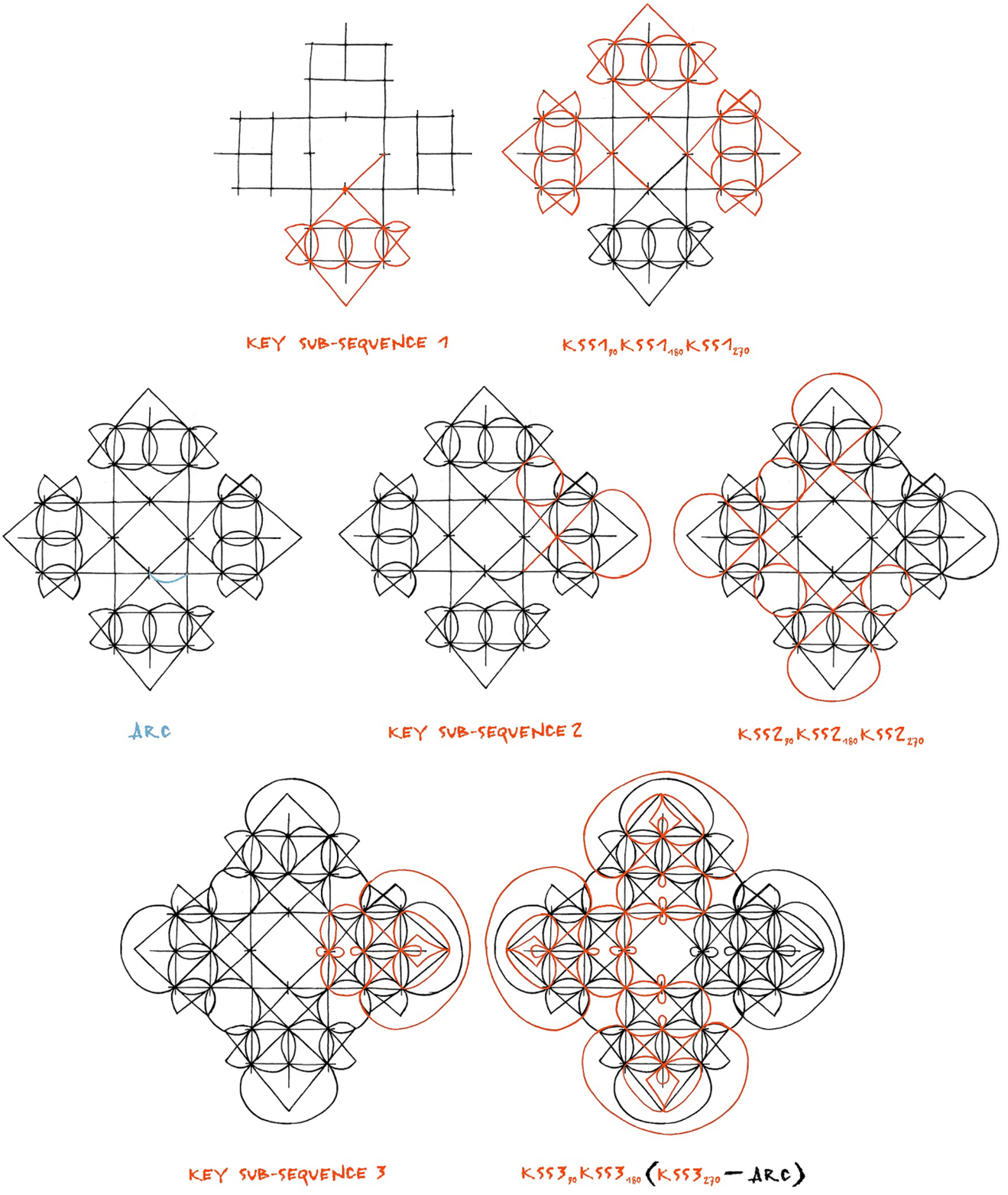

Figure 10. Sequential reconstruction of *The Water of the Cardinal Honeyeater*. Drawing: author.

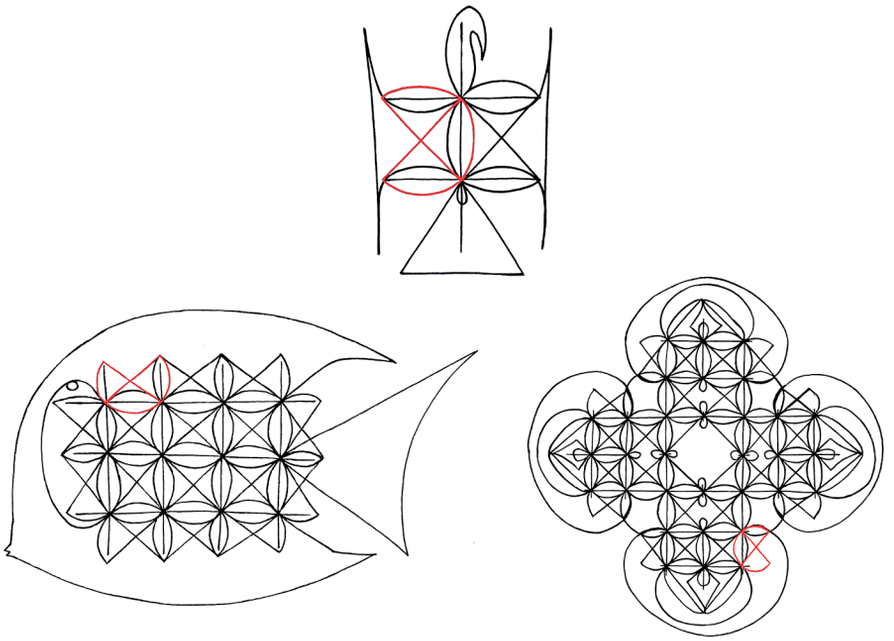

Figure 11. Polysemy of a standard movement. Drawing: author.

that the term translated as "The Water of the Cardinal Honeyeater," and then he proceeded to trace the figure on the ground (fig. 13). Once it was complete, Beunkon first pointed at the circles at the central square's vertices and then at the diamond inscribed therein. He described these respectively as four open coconuts and a body of water—a reflective pond (fig. 14). According to the story Beunkon's father used to tell, four cardinal honeyeaters (at the side of the square) bathed in a coconut, and then went together to the pond. Looking at themselves as in a mirror, they found themselves shining and, pleased with their own appearance, finally flew away.[19]

By the time of the sand-drawing session with Beunkon, I had become accustomed to the relatively short and somewhat cryptic stories associated with sand-drawing designs in Ambrym, so I considered the matter settled. I verified that I had adequately understood, and then I recapitulated the whole tale. Beunkon first confirmed this version, but as he kept talking, he became more and more uncomfortable with it. Eventually, he could no longer contain himself and burst into a liberating statement: the sand-drawing, he said, was not actually about birds, but about men—men who knew a secret charm. This charm, recited with a certain leaf in the mouth, allowed these men to charge coconut water with the power to make them attractive in the eyes of women, just like the birds that had originally attracted the men with their shiny, colorful feathers. "Hem i no rilli pijin ia!" (In truth, these are not birds!): Beunkon pronounced this last sentence with a big smile of relief on his face, as if he had freed himself of a heavy burden. As he later told me, it had probably been a decade since he had last traced this sand-drawing and told this tale. His father was among the men who possessed the charm. However, because of his conversion to Christianity, he did not pass on either the charm or the knowledge of the plant in question. Therefore, this knowledge has (apparently) been lost, and consequently, while describing *The Water of the Cardinal Honeyeater*, Beunkon thought there was no reason to conceal any longer the deeper meaning of the figure. Its revelation, he said, would avoid banalizing the narrative depth of the sand-drawing, turning it into a simple children's story. Indeed, once I returned from the field, I found that the extent of the traditional esoteric implications of the cardinal honeyeater goes much deeper, as the bird's name recurs in the description of an old, highly prized west Ambrym ritual mask (Craig 2003).

The question of what else *The Water of the Cardinal Honeyeater* may hide in its tangle of lines must for now remain unanswered, but it indirectly brings to the

19. John Beunkon, in conversation with the author, Wuro, west Ambrym, March 27, 2017. Conversation held in Bislama.

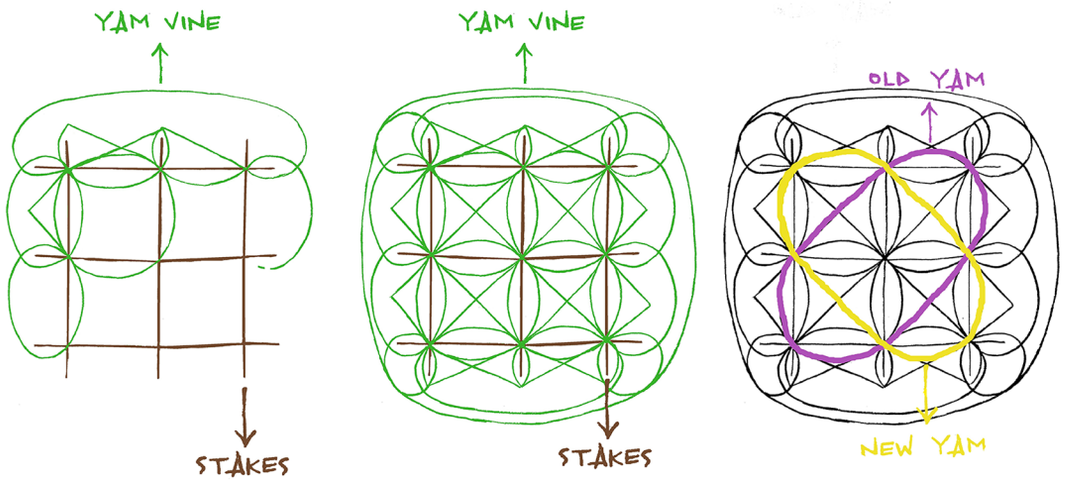

Figure 12. Semiotic versatility of sand-drawing elements in *The Yam*. Drawing: author.

surface another aspect of the semiotics of sand-drawing. During interviews, the most experienced sand-drawing experts considered the interpretation of the patterns as perennially contingent, always open to further (or deeper) meanings. It is now time to account for the reasons for this persistent and pervasive "communicative uncertainty."

The materialization of embedded values

The analysis carried out so far has shown that strict constructive principles counterbalance the material impermanence of sand-drawings and that the visual complexity and semiotic ambiguity of the patterns are not communicative flaws but characteristic features of a well-designed technique. That said, the logical premises of this communicative strategy have still to be clarified. In order to do so, we should briefly consider the sociocultural context from which this practice developed.[20]

The spread of sand-drawing in Ambrym resulted from the broader process of ritual trade that, in the nineteenth century, brought the Malakulan *mage* to the western part of the island (Patterson 1996). The institution of this graded society can be considered an original development of cosmogonic, cosmological, and ontological premises shared by several Melanesian societies. According to these premises, humans perceive their surroundings as the "shadow-world" of a concealed but immanent, more-than-real existential dimension inhabited by spiritual forces. These spiritual forces are considered the ultimate source of all generative power. Thus, coming into contact with these spiritual forces is the necessary condition for making any human action effective—from the cultivation of gardens, to the preparation of a war expedition, to the destruction of an enemy through sorcery.[21]

Historically, in Melanesia, the system of graded societies developed in two main variants. In the area between the Torres Islands and north Pentecost, it involved economic competition. Men sought the help of the spirits to support them in their efforts, but they did not identify with them, remaining grounded within the world of the living (Bonnemaison 1996). In contrast, in the graded societies of south Pentecost, the small islands off northern Malakula, south Malakula, and north and west Ambrym, the aim of rank ascent was the progressive inclusion of men in the "higher," all-encompassing world of the spirits. In this context, the objective was to move away from (or rather, to rise above) the ordinary world and reach a position from which to better control it (Deacon 1934b; Layard 1942; Guiart 1951; Guidieri and Pellizzi 1981; Rio 2019a). In the *mage* of Ambrym, this upward movement conditioned the procedures of the rituals. The "peak of the *mage* ritual hierarchy ceremony"

20. This sociocultural environment has undergone significant changes over the past century (Rio 2019a, 2019b), but during sand-drawing sessions I found that some of its old principles are still respected.

21. For similar formulations of the same concept in northern Vanuatu, see Mondragón (2015); for other cases in Melanesia, see Wagner (1967), Barth (1975), Harrison (1990), and Wassmann (1991).

Figure 13. John Beunkon of Wuro (west Ambrym) after tracing *The Water of the Cardinal Honeyeater*. Wuro, March 27, 2017. Photo: author.

occurred when "the candidate for the new rank climb[ed] a ladder up to a platform raised above his newly carved tree-fern statue." Then, while standing atop his ritual effigy, "he shout[ed] out his new name and thus announce[d] his ritual rebirth" (Rio and Eriksen 2013, 411; see also Guiart 1951; Rio 2009). The detachment from the ordinary world was mirrored in the progressive self-estrangement of the men of higher rank from communal life. Each grade in the hierarchy allowed access to private fruit trees and a separate fire lit in the men's house, and rank members could "only eat food cooked on the *fangkon* or sacred fire kindled by someone of the same rank" (Patterson 2002, 203; see also Rio 2009). "The higher up in the hierarchy one was, the further inside the men's house one moved, and the more dangerous one became to other less-initiated persons of the community" (Rio and Eriksen 2013, 410). A man who reached the highest grade, that of *mal*, would leave the men's house to build his own sacred house outside of the village, by now too "spirit-bound" (and thus too dangerous) to share the everyday life of others.

This spirit-bound condition rests on the understanding of the self and the concept of "relationship" in several Melanesian societies. In this region, relations often do not take the form of interaction between distinct entities but follow a dynamic better defined in terms of containment and release (Wagner 1986, 1987, 1991; Strathern 1992, 2013; Rio 2007). The ambition of Ambrym men participating in the *mage* was not so much to establish contact between the self and a spiritual entity as "to grow a soul within," that is, to "encapsulate" spirituality, to increase one's own efficacy and generative power. This spiritual development was achieved by acquiring progressive levels of secret knowledge and metaknowledge, which was transmitted by elder members to the candidates during their initiation to a higher rank (Rio 2009).

The power of the *mage* hierarchy was, therefore, not based on wealth or violent coercion but on the unequal possession of ritual knowledge (Rio 2007, 28).[22] Within the *mage*, this knowledge represented the means to enter into relationships with the spirits—and to "grow" as spirits—and eventually control the world through the magic power deriving from this relationship. As noted by Rio, this power consisted in the acquisition—or rather, the introjection—of a new perspective, capable of offering the initiate a broader and more penetrating understanding of society. Rio (2007, 30) writes that "a key ability of great men is to 'see things differently'"—a quality demonstrated by Bekeli (see fig. 2) in preventing the ambush. In Rio's words, "the expression *vanten ngele meje foforo* (lit. this man opens his eyes and turns around) expresses the power of such men to be able to grasp every side of a matter and see things from different perspectives simultaneously" (2007, 30). In this context, ceremonies were the occasion to bring out of the body—to "evert" (Strathern 2013)—this new part of the self, this new perspectival capacity. With the display (and the mastery) of complex paraphernalia with esoteric meaning, the initiate marked the distance thus established with the profane. The very success of the ritual event certified access to those ancestral reserves of power that represented the initiate's most significant acquisition (Patterson 2002; Ammann 2012). Rio (2007, 130) describes sand-drawings as "micro-representations" of this form of power, a definition that helps us to further

22. On this aspect in the broader Melanesian region, see Harrison (1992, 235).

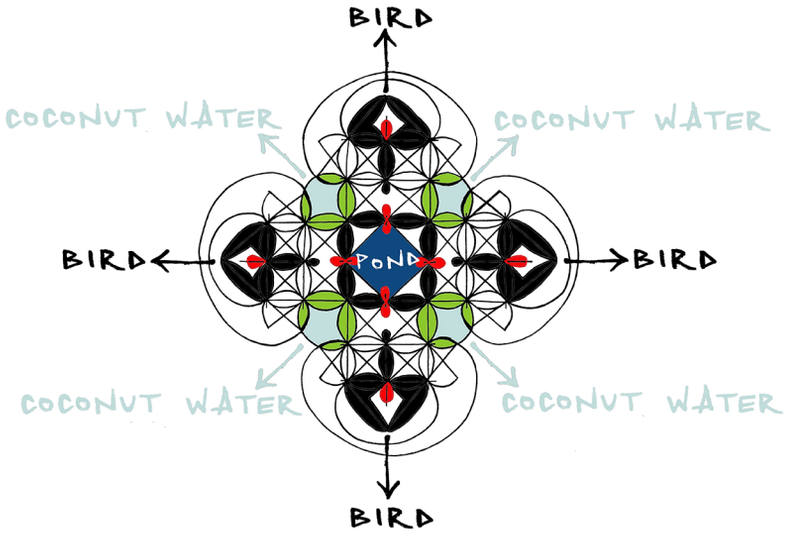

Figure 14. Graphic rendering of Beunkon's commentary on *The Water of the Cardinal Honeyeater*. Drawing: author.

elaborate on the logic that may subtend the features of sand-drawing.

The three aspects that define sand-drawing as outlined here are material impermanence, visual complexity, and semiotic ambiguity. With the recognition of embedded fundamental notions—such as those of power as an accumulation of spiritual relationships and communication as a process of releasing privileged information—material transience ceases to be perceived as a system flaw, becoming instead the most appropriate solution to store ritual knowledge safely. However, transience can be more than a strategy: in this game of perspectives, impermanence reveals itself to be necessary to the system. Sand-drawings are dynamic graphic artifacts in which the process is as important as the images ultimately produced, an act of progressive construction that certifies the performer's mastery of the trajectories that make up the figure. Once completed, sand-drawings are either swept away or left to fade away in the dirt, but this is for three logical reasons. First, they are just copies of stable mental artifacts. Second, they cannot be stolen or used against their authors. Finally, given their role as instantiations of processes, their completion exhausts their role. The process calls for an end—a design capable of visualizing the multiple characters, perspectives, and outcomes of a story as a whole. Once such an end is reached, the design is erased—an erasure that allows new processes to unfold. In this context, the visual intricacy that characterizes most sand-drawings reveals itself to be not an obstacle to communication but a particular form of "enchantment" (Gell 1992, 1998). By appearing as something beyond the grasp of its witnesses, sand-drawing materializes that network of spiritual relationships that are thought to be at the core of every complex and successful feat.

Given the medium's semiotic ambiguity, the witness of a sand-drawing performance will never be entirely sure of the full range of meanings of the motif traced onto the ground. Further interpretations of the message orally expressed and the emergence of additional graphic details of significance will always be possible. However, this mechanism of "relevance control" is not just a means to protect the performer's knowledge and to safeguard the witness who is unsuitable for the reception of the deep meaning of the motif. It is also an elegant and effective way of making perceptible the nature of the power that materializes during the performance: a power ideally derived from the performer's participation in a dense network of human and extrahuman relations, whose ultimate extension remains, by necessity, unfathomable.

A Melanesian art of memory

As already mentioned, the memorial function of sand-drawing has long been acknowledged by scholars (Cabane 1997; Rory 2013). This recognition has led some to

define it as a kind of writing (Huffman 1996a; Zagala 2004). This approach to sand-drawing has the merit of drawing attention to the complexity of the practice, freeing it from its reductive definition as graphic art. However, comparing sand-drawing to writing—conventionally understood, after DeFrancis (1989), as a system based on the reproduction of the sounds of a language—obscures the cultural peculiarities of the practice. In other words, writing as a model leads to a perception of these images' material fragility, visual complexity, and semiotic ambiguity as communicative shortcomings rather than a radically different way of dealing with social memory.

A starting point for moving beyond this impasse can be found in Severi's comparative study of several non-Western mnemonic traditions (Severi 1993, 2004, 2012, 2015, 2019). His analysis reverses the common perspective according to which these iconographic traditions have been considered: instead of looking at them as naive or failed attempts to constructing a writing system based on the phonetization of the script, he treats them as culturally situated ways of organizing the relationship between images and words for mnemonic purposes. This solution allows us to dispense with an unproductive comparative model while also endowing the concept of the "art of memory" with a new meaning. This notion, previously only employed to describe mnemonic devices developed between antiquity and the Renaissance (Yates 1966; Rossi 1983; Carruthers 1998, 2008), becomes a general reference from which to develop an authentic anthropology of memory, understood as an investigation of the thought processes that regulate the relationship between word and image, conducted from the analysis of culturally situated cases.

According to Severi (2015), mnemonic devices are usually bound to a determined linguistic set, which gives them a specific logical power. In order to be archived, this information is conveyed in the artifact through a process of ordered encoding. Then, during the evocation of information, the person in charge of the process retrieves the stored, ordered data, relying both on memory and the cues offered by the salience inherent to the object, which in turn determines the system's expressivity. Employing this analytical approach, we can consider sand-drawing as a Melanesian art of memory and evaluate the contribution of the analysis of this practice to Severi's project.

What distinguishes sand-drawing from the arts of memory examined by Severi (2004, 2012, 2019) is the extreme material transience of the artifacts on which the system is based. Consequently, in contrast with "standard" arts of memory, the encoding and evocation of information do not occur in separate moments. Instead, they are condensed in a single act: that of the performance, in which the mental mnemonic object is both recalled and reproduced. To show how encoding and evocation are concretely achieved, we must focus on how the principles of order and salience find their expression in the performance.

First, order: on the ground, sand-drawings have a brief "life"; their existence is thus mainly a mental one. This fact demands very strict rules to prevent oblivion. How is this mental stability achieved? As we have seen, sand-drawing construction presupposes the careful tracing of a scaffold, followed by a correlated continuous line. These two phases may be broken up in a linear sequence of locally recognized, standard movements that the performer must remember and reproduce correctly. Detecting the sequential nature of the continuous line is crucial to understanding sand-drawings' memorability—and, consequently, the graphic stability of the figures despite their impermanence on the ground. We may thus speak of a sort of linear order used in constructing both the scaffold and the continuous line. But that is not all: in the unfolding of the continuous line, the performer must comply with a series of formal rules that emerge through the interaction of the line with the scaffold. This interaction imposes a geometrical order based on the relationship between the form of the scaffold and that of the continuous line.

In the case of *The Kingfisher* (see fig. 8), for instance, as soon as Bong grounds the sprout and traces the continuous line's first combination of standard movements (double corner + tail), the structure of the scaffold "calls" for the fulfilling of the bird's bilateral symmetry, which, as a consequence, prompts Bong to trace a second "double corner." He then traces another small combination (head + wing): once again, this interaction between line and scaffold, combined with the need to not interrupt the continuous line tracing, determines his subsequent movements (simple loop + wing) as he channels his way up to the completion of the figure. In other words, as Bong progressively unfolds the continuous line, the increasing number of relations between foreground and background caused by his movements narrows down his freedom of action, up to the moment when he is eventually bound to follow the only path left at his disposal. Keeping in mind the support given by the scaffold and the location of the sprout, *The Kingfisher*'s *key subsequences* (which, as already mentioned, are those that are essential for the memorization and the recollection of the sand-drawing as a whole) come down to: *double corner* + *tail* + double corner + *head* + *wing* +

loop + wing, as both the second double corner and the second wing are, in a sense, produced by the sand-drawing itself, that is, by the bilateral symmetry induced by the relationship between scaffold and line—the tracing of the simple loop being a consequence of the general smoothness required by the practice. In relatively simple designs, like *The Kingfisher*, the graphic effort is minimal and therefore the mnemonic support provided by the key subsequences is negligible. However, in more complex sand-drawings, the importance of such key subsequences is apparent, as they considerably reduce the continuous line operations that a performer must recall while tracing a design. Such is the case with *The Water of the Cardinal Honeyeater*, traced by John Beunkon (figs. 10 and 13).

We can now consider the salience of sand-drawing, that is, the mnemonic principle that assists the mental evocation of information. In other arts of memory, such as Amerindian pictography, salience is clearly focused on a particular detail of the image; for instance, the name of a horseman can be deduced from a small drawing connected to his head by a line (Severi 2015, fig. 39). In sand-drawing, by contrast, salience permeates the whole figure, as each part of the design is essential to the image that will emerge at the end. In sand-drawing, there is thus no distinction, within the design, between salient and nonsalient parts: at most, it is possible to talk about an intensification, almost in stages, of salience, as the mental image is progressively realized in the visible drawing. In sand-drawing, salience can thus be understood as a result of order. Another crucial aspect of the medium is that it is also possible to infer implicit images other than the final one, making a sand-drawing performance an even more complex communicative act. As we have seen, an essential feature of sand-drawings is their potential multiplicity of meanings. On this basis, we can now distinguish a progressive salience, which concerns information connected to the image construction, and a retrospective salience, which results from a series of possible operations "on the ground"—operations like localization ("this is a coconut"), substitution ("not birds but men"), and so on—exploited by the performer to manage the interpretation of the image.

Turning to the power and expressivity of the system as a whole, we can ask whether sand-drawing is restricted to a limited linguistic set. The answer seems to be negative. Contrary to what is generally observed by Severi in Amerindian as well as other Melanesian devices (Severi 2004, 2012), a sand-drawing may transpose, within its tangle of lines, a broad set of information: narratives, formulas, and songs (Baron 2020). In addition, new subjects can be treated and woven into patterns, and one may also identify a certain number of implicit meanings in an already given figure. For this reason, we could describe the power of this system as extensible.

The comparative work conducted by Severi (2012) has shown that in the universe of Amerindian arts of memory, the power/expressivity ratio is characterized by a certain complementarity: a great logical power generally corresponds to a limited expressivity and vice versa. Can the same assessment be applied to sand-drawing? Apparently it can, as the system's expressivity seems, at first sight, somewhat limited. For instance, not much can be said about a kingfisher: in its sand-drawing representation, neither its colors nor movements can be graphically expressed, only its anatomical structure. However, a performer can enrich the figure's expressivity through the interpretation of certain parts of the drawing or by uncovering its hidden meanings. It should be remembered that a sand-drawing is not just a figure traced on the ground. It always implies the existence of stories, messages, and verbal formulas. Thus, just as a sand-drawing may contain several implicit images embedded in the general figure, its verbal commentary may hide different stories or implicit meanings. Such is the case of the four cardinal honeyeaters that were later revealed to be men without any intervention in the graphic appearance of the sand-drawing. For this reason, we could argue that the expressivity of the sand-drawing system should be considered at least as extensible as its logical power.

This extensibility, and the consideration of the variety of contexts and functions for which sand-drawing is (and has been) employed, leads us to an important point. Unlike the memory systems described thus far by Severi, sand-drawing is not characterized by an exclusive ritual dimension but instead represents an unusual example of a "general" art of memory, suitable for several purposes. It is characterized by a power and expressiveness that can be extended according to need (through the composition of new designs or the reinterpretation of existing ones) and by a particular relationship between the encoding and evocation of information. Indeed, these are not separated in time but activated simultaneously during the performance. During this materialization process, the progressive establishment of a complex order generates a progressive salience, which allows the step-by-step evocation of the image. Eventually, an overall, retrospective salience is added, produced by the closing of the continuous line and the sudden appearance of the total figure (fig. 15).

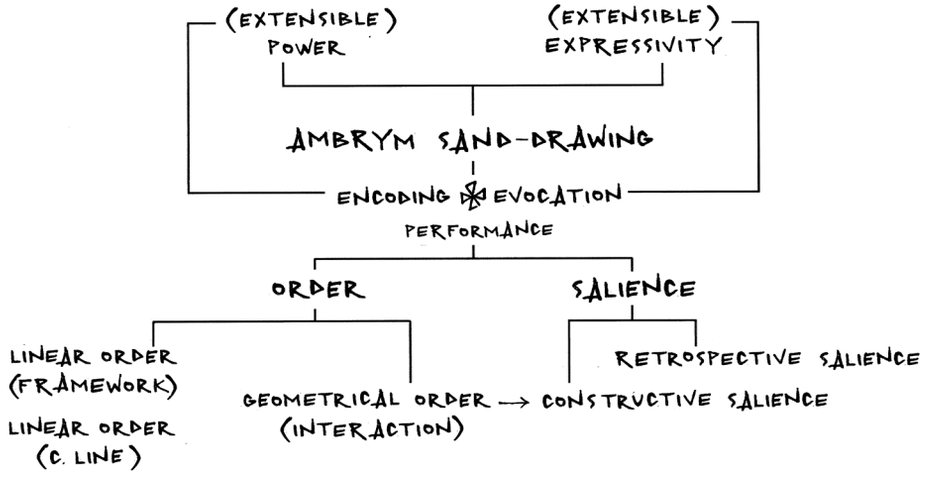

Figure 15. Ambrym sand-drawing as an art of memory, following the diagram designed by Severi (2012, fig. 7). Drawing: author.

* * *

My work on Vanuatu sand-drawing has long been stimulated by what I perceived as a paradoxical aspect of the relation between the form of the designs and one of their main social functions. During a study of the social effects of climate change on the islands of Pele and Efate in 2014, some local practitioners had described to me figures traced on the sand, evanescent and fragile, as a traditional system used to preserve information, memories, and knowledge in a lasting way. My astonishment prompted me to examine this practice more closely and to attempt to glimpse its inner logic. However, as Marilyn Strathern warns: "Description includes explanation, and sometimes explanations can vaporize what requires explaining—an original puzzle vanishes. But since what they are often trying to explain are aspects of people's work and lives they know that they have only partially grasped, anthropologists will as often try *not* to erase the original puzzle. On the contrary they (the anthropologists) may take pains to convey what interested them in the first place and made them 'see' a puzzle" (2013, 2). Mindful of this lesson, I have aimed not to dissolve the paradox I perceived between the form and function of sand-drawing, whether through avoidance or undue simplifications, but instead to keep it intact. The goal has been to challenge the gaze that was the basis of my perception and to search for a different standpoint from which to look at this practice anew.

In this sense, sand-drawing represents a classic challenge for anthropology. This elusive, enigmatic practice has fascinated generations of ethnologists, putting various theoretical assumptions into crisis (Baron 2020). In an attempt to resolve the issue by recognizing its communicative and mnemonic value, some scholars have described sand-drawing as a sort of writing (Huffman 1996a; Zagala 2004). However, I believe that when sand-drawing is compared with such a well-defined system, it ends up being defined in negative terms: defined for what it is *not*. Thus, I adopted an ethnographic approach. New firsthand data have allowed me to sketch an oral history of the art of sand-drawing as practiced on Ambrym Island. This gave me a glimpse of the transformations that have occurred in the use of these drawings in the last hundred years and allowed me to highlight some aspects of continuity. Among these, the rules that guide the construction of the motifs and the laminar semiotics that characterizes them are crucial. Sand-drawing is not writing, at least not in terms of its classical definitions, and its transience, complexity, and semiotic opacity are fundamental to its practice.

Consequently, sand-drawing appears to be neither a sort of writing nor art for art's sake but a systematic cultural variation (Severi 2015, 12) in the way of dealing with images. Sand-drawing is an art of memory that is, first of all, a craft of thought (Carruthers 1998, 2008; Severi 2004, 2012) through which a new relationship between image and word is established and secured. Its semiotic opacity and material impermanence are sophisticated,

practical solutions to the central enigmas of Melanesian mnemonic traditions: the materialization of (understood as a form of control of and power over) processes, trajectories, and relationships that by their very nature are not directly expressible, as well as their ultimate protection and their lasting storage.

The analysis of sand-drawing presented here has allowed a glimpse of what might be called an initiatory structure of knowledge transmission. Nonetheless, many ethnographic and theoretical issues are yet to be explored. As Huffman (1996a) noted, sand-drawing does not exist in a cultural vacuum: more attention should be paid to the relationship between sand-drawing and other forms of north Vanuatu cultural expression, such as masks, dances, songs (Ammann 2012; DeBlock 2019), string figures (Vandendriessche 2015; Huffman 2019), and ritual forms of speech (Rodman 1991). A comparative study of these devices, which I am currently undertaking as part of a project on the perception and use of ritual imagery in Melanesia, may help to better define the features of this initiatory dimension.[23] Finally, at a more general level, this analysis of sand-drawing could be considered as a first step toward the definition and description of the "universe" (Severi 2012, 457) of the Pacific arts of memory. The full parameters of this project have yet to be outlined, but its objective is already clear: the deepening of our understanding of a region that, although traditionally devoid of writing (Cardona 2006), has not remained without memory.

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