

The Semiotics of Cultural Signs in Nali Marriage Rituals

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Kipli Joan Minol | University of PNG
kminol@upng.ac.pg



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Introduction

- Couples upon making the decision to seal their marriages, can choose between any of the 3 available choices—
 - *a State or Civil Marriage,*
 - *a Religious or Christian Wedding and/or*
 - *a Traditional or Customary Marriage.*
- Many of our cultures maintain the facilitation of customary marriages and accompanying ceremonies and rituals in the process of traditional marriage. Given PNG's rich linguistic and cultural background, customary marriages differ from province to province.

Introduction (cont.)

- *This study focuses on understanding the marriage ceremonies and rituals of the Nali culture.*
- *My perspective:*
 - *Papua New Guinean - mixed parentage*
 - *Raised (mostly) in Port Moresby*
 - *Cultural immersion (into my parents cultures) was not fully complete in my upbringing.*
 - *As an observer and participant in bride price rituals on my father's side, I am attempting to better understand them.*
 - *Nali is the language and cultural grouping of my paternal grandmother from Kapou village in Manus province.*

Aims of Research

This study aims to

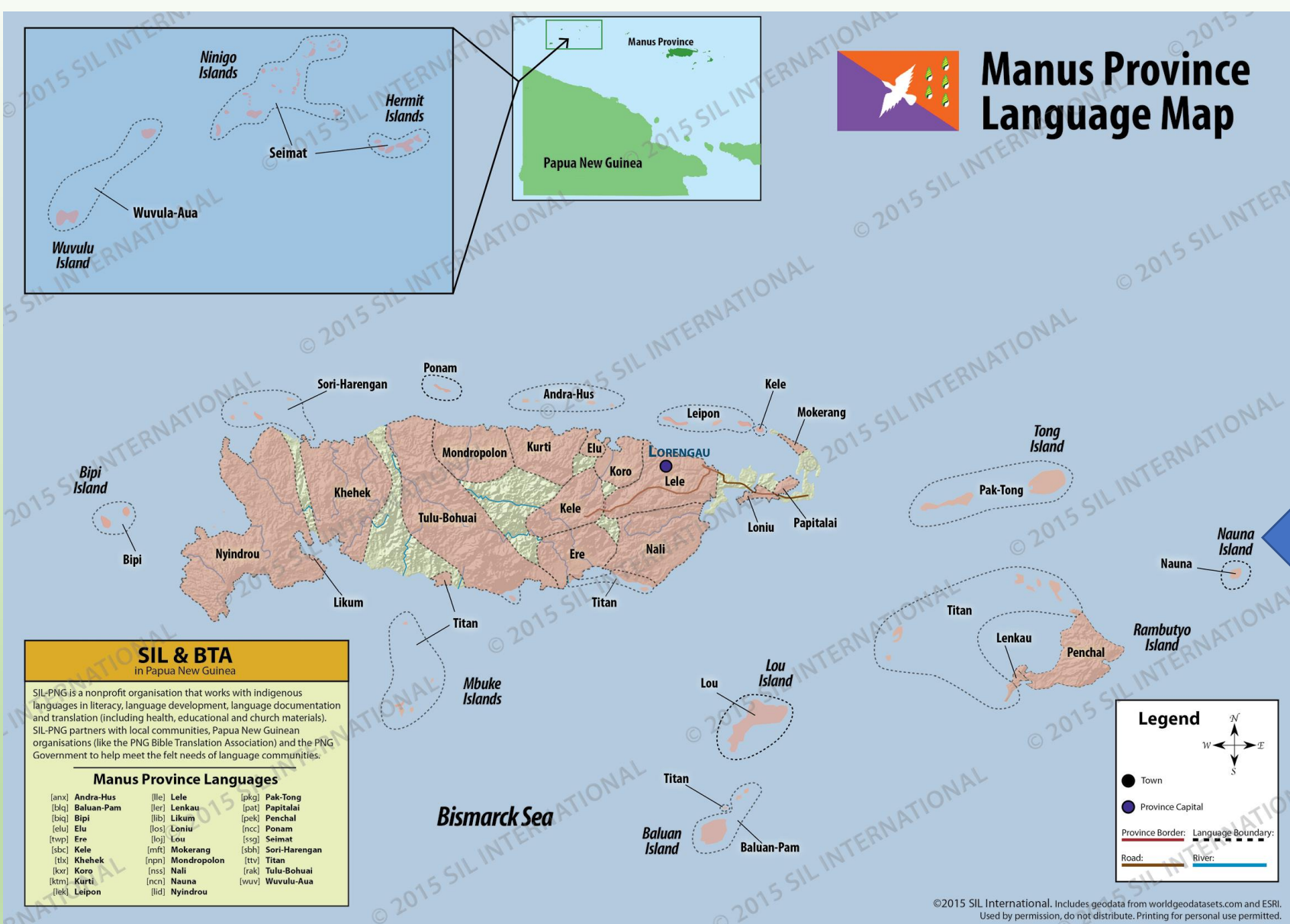
- *discuss the significance of deeply rooted cultural signs to the overall concept of marriage in Nali by interpreting objects of meaning contained in these signs.*
- *gain a wholistic perspective of the meaning of marriage in the Nali culture and its value to all parties involved.*

Significance of Research

- Guiding questions:
 - *What is marriage and what does it mean to the Nali?*
 - *What do the Nali marriage ceremonies and rituals tell us about the meaning of marriage?*
- *Marriage Rituals and Associated cultural signs help to give meaning to the overall concept of marriage in the Nali culture.*

Background

- Language Grouping:
 - *Austronesian language spoken within Admiralties higher order sub group of the Oceanic languages.*
- Location:
 - *It is located between the central and south coast of Manus*
- Dialects:
 - From the local perspective, the following dialects or variants are used:
1) *Lawes*, 2) *Katin*, 3) *Yiliu/ Yapap* , 4) *Yesei*, 5) *Nohang*, 6) *Drapirou/ Yiringou*, 7) *Sohiniliu/ Kapou/ Silah*, 8) *Bulihan/Karun* and 9) *Tamis*
- Number of Speakers:
 - *Approximately 2,500*



Source: <https://pnglanguages.sil.org/resources/provinces/province/Manus/map>

Phase 1: Pre-Kowas Phase

- Taurre – 2-3 week event involving preparation for a Kowas or bride price ceremony.
- Takon – part of the Taurre, involving various rituals and the contribution of money, food and gifts.
- Pre-kowas festivities – Festivities in the week leading up to a Kowas.

Phase 2: Kowas Phase

- The actual marriage ceremony in which the bride is presented to the groom by her family and bride price received.

Pre-Kowas Rituals

- **Taurre -**
- **Purpose:**
 - *to arrange for contributions for the kowas (the gifts of food by the bride's family (saksak, pik) and the bride price by the groom's family (cash)).*
 - *to arrange the date of the Kowas Ceremony (groom's family will set a date and communicate to bride's family after taakon – - cooking of ceremonial food, who will then ask for time to get ready – usually 2 weeks) One week to prepare and one week for festivities.*
- There are a number of Rituals that are carried out during the Taurre ceremony to make it complete. The following are 6 key rituals:
 1. *Cutting of the Betelnut Bunch by the Payambrue (Head of the Betelnut)*
 2. *Distribution of Betelnut Branches to Sub Clans*
 3. *Acceptance of the Betelnut Branches and Pledges from Sub Clans*
 4. *Taakon – Contributions by sub clans (1-2 weeks) according to order of betelnut branch*
 5. *Announcement on total amount of food, livestock, gifts, monies collected*
 6. *Beating of the garamut to communicate amount of food, gifts (bride's family) and date of kowas (beat blo kauntim moni)*

Pre-Kowas Rituals (cont)

- Pre-kowas festivities
 - Bringing the sago and pig to the groom's family's house by bride's people.
 - Beating of garamut and dancing.
 - Cooking of ceremonial food for groom's people by bride's people

Kowas Rituals

- Purpose – to seal the marriage union through a ceremonial exchange of food, gifts and money.
- There are a number of Rituals that are carried out during the kowas ceremony to make it complete. The following are 6 main rituals:
 1. Handing over of the decorated bride by the bride's family to the groom's family and offering of betelnut bunch by payambroe on bride's side to the groom's family Or his father OR another male clan elder and bride's father's speech.
 2. Acceptance of betelnut bunch symbolizing acceptance of bride by Groom's family and removal of bride's decorations (except for asbasket)
 3. Speech by groom's father with an Announcement of total money contributed. A bunch of Betelnut offered to the bride's family and a call for the bride's family to accept the monies contributed.
 4. Acceptance of bride price.
 5. Distribution of money and Distribution of food
 6. Thank you ritual from Bride's family and Groom's family

Signs

- It is vital that a definition of the sign is first offered.
- *Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as 'signifying' something – referring to or standing for something other than itself. (Chandler, pp 13)*
- *Signs are present in all cultures of the world and their forms vary across cultures. They play a vital role in the representation and communication of meaning. In his 2006 lecture, Dr. R Seiler defined Semiotics as 'the study of signs'.*

Piercean Model of the Sign

- Sign
 - Representamen - *The Form which the sign takes or sign vehicle.*
 - Interpretent - *The Sense made out of the sign.*
 - Object - *Something beyond the sign to which it refers*
- Beyond Saussure, Pierce offers a third element in semiotics – the Object which is determined by the interpretant.
- (Source: Chandler, D. Semiotics: The Basics)

- Given this definition, Peirce further categorises signs into 3 types:
- Here then are the three modes:
- 1. **Symbol/symbolic**: a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional.
- 2. **Icon/iconic**: a mode in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified (recognizably looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling like it) – being similar in possessing some of its qualities.
- 3. **Index/indexical**: a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the signified (regardless of intention) – this link can be observed or inferred: e.g. 'natural signs' (smoke, thunder, footprints, echoes..)

Cultural Signs Identified

- Pre-kowas

- Bunch of betelnut (mbrue)
- Head of the betelnut (payambrue)
- Branch of betelnut
- Pre-kowas contributions (Taakon)
- Ceremonial Food (Puu, Nipii, Mah)

- Kowas

- Bunch of betelnut (mbrue)
- Head of the betelnut (payambrue)
- Conch Shell (Ndrah)
- Garamut (Ndrami)
- Rectangular (or square) basket (ndop)
- Stone Adze
- Breaking of Limegourd (talwe pusngah)

- *Note: This list is not exhaustive. These are some signs identified and selected for this presentation only.*

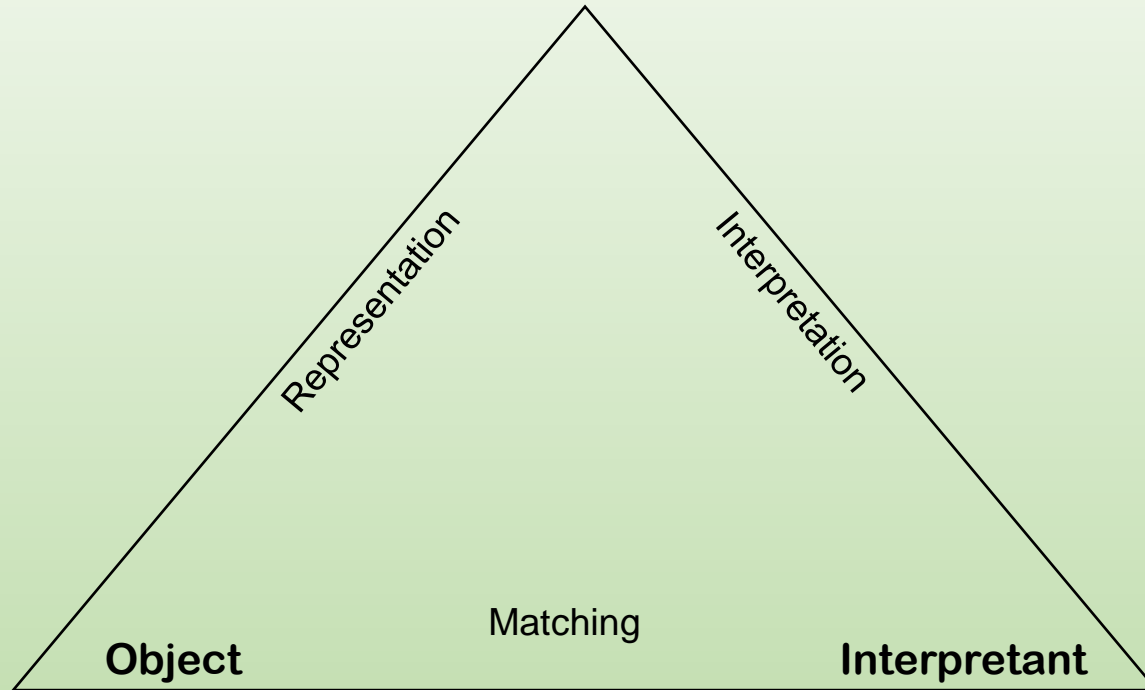
Cultural Sign 1



- A full bunch of Betelnut (Mbrue) is present before and during a kowas.
- Sign Type: Iconic

Representamen

Bunch of Betelnut (Mbrue)



- In the context of Kowas preparation, the bunch of betelnut which will eventually be distributed is always carried by the payambrue (clan elder) as he begins kowas preparations.
- During a kowas, a bunch of betelnut is offered to the groom's family by the bride's family when they go to leave her.
- It is also offered to the bride's family by the groom's family when they provide the bride
- **Unity or oneness** is a common feeling amongst all present in kowas preparations that begin with the clan elder bringing a bunch of betelnut. It symbolizes that all present share a common ancestor.
- **Courtesy, Politeness and Respect** are shown between the bride and groom's family through the offering and acceptance of betelnut

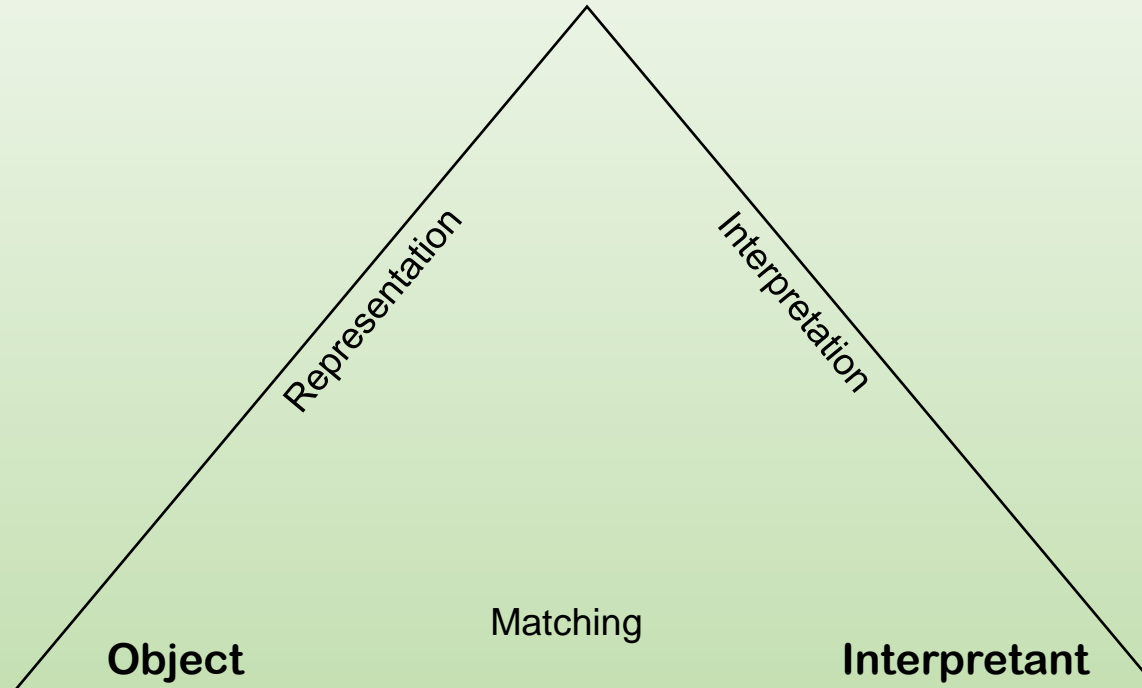
Cultural Sign 2



- Head of the Betelnut
- Sign Type: Iconic

Representamen

Male Elder (Yapan [Chief]/ Other
Senior Male Member of Clan/ Hausboi)



- In the context of Kowas preparation, the metaphorical title of Payambrue (*Head of the Betelnut*) is given to a male elder, who will be representing the entire clan in leading preparations.
- **Respect** and **Obedience** is shown and given to the Payambrue
- **Confidence** in the Payambrue's leadership is evident
- There is **Trust** in the Payambrue's ability to provide the initial mbulyundrop (*money, pigs, food*) to begin kowas contributions
- **Loyalty & Commitment** are shown and given in accepting a branch of betelnut offered by the payambrue during a taurre (*pre-kowas ritual*).

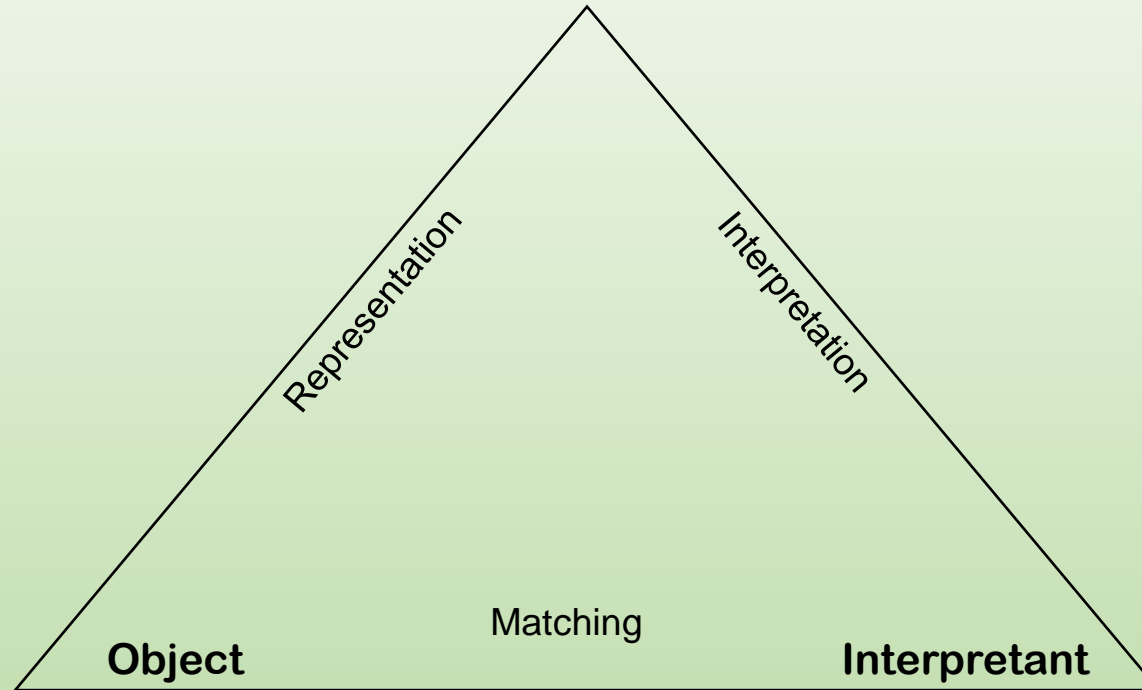
Cultural Sign 3



- Betelnut Branch
 - During a Taurre, a bunch of betelnut is cut up and its branches distributed to sub clans who will later accept a bride into their clan. They will be in receipt of ceremonial food during the kowas.
- Sign Type: Iconic

Representamen

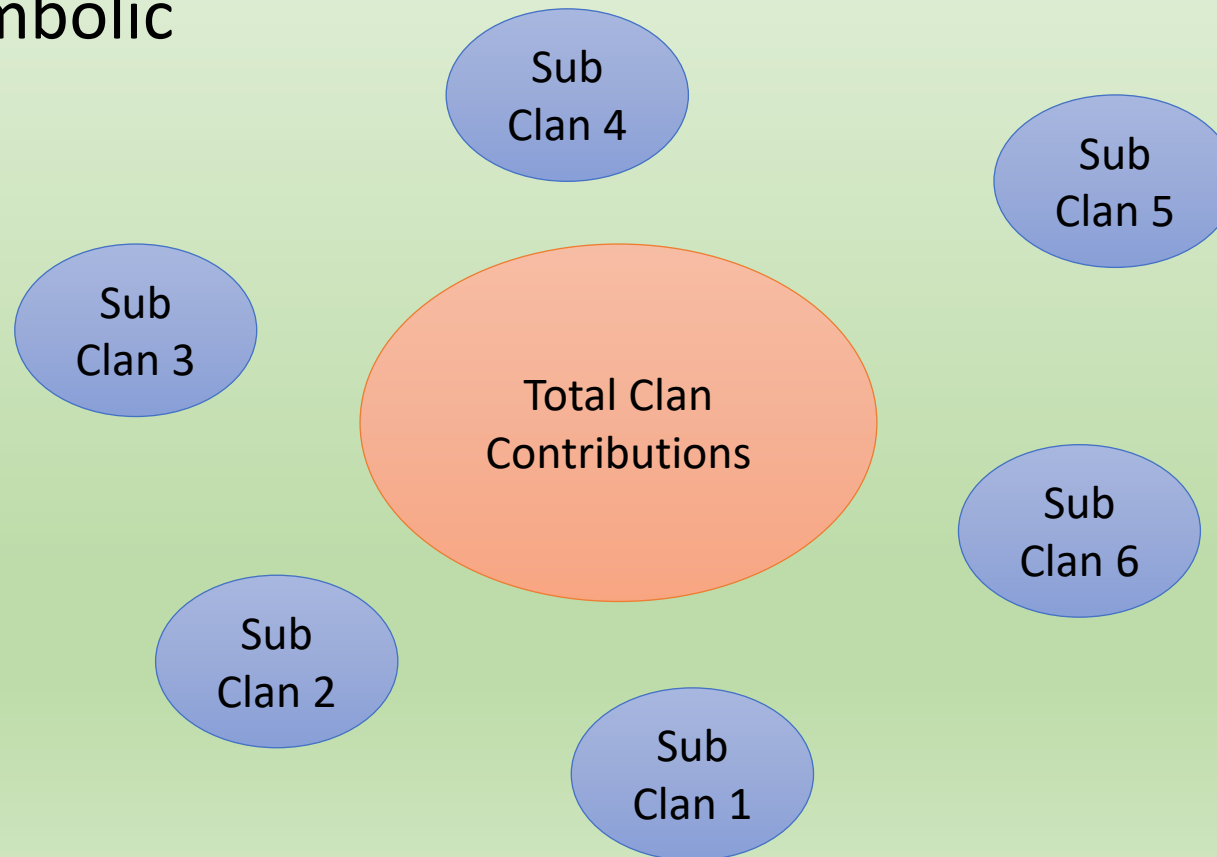
Betelnut Branch
Distributed from a single bunch

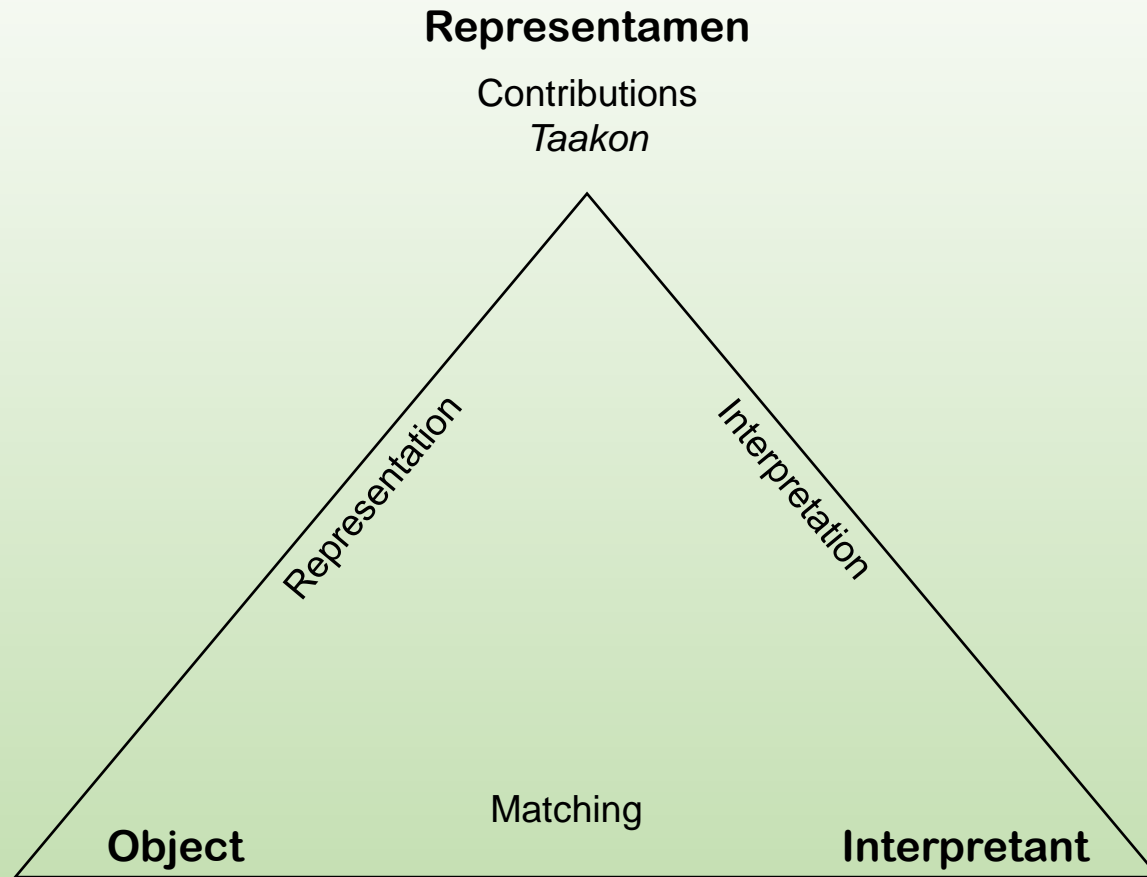


- In the context of Kowas preparation, a single bunch of betelnut is cut up and into a number of branches by a payambrue (clan elder/ leader) according to the sub clans.
- After distribution, all who have received a branch are asked to produce a specified targeted amount of money, pigs or sago, etc.
- **Acceptance**, although obligatory is given without duress and with much **enthusiasm** by the sub clans.
- **Loyalty, Commitment and Perseverance** are assumed in the acceptance of a branch of betelnut offered by the payambrue during a taurre.

Cultural Sign 4

- Taakon (Contributions)
- Sign Type: Symbolic





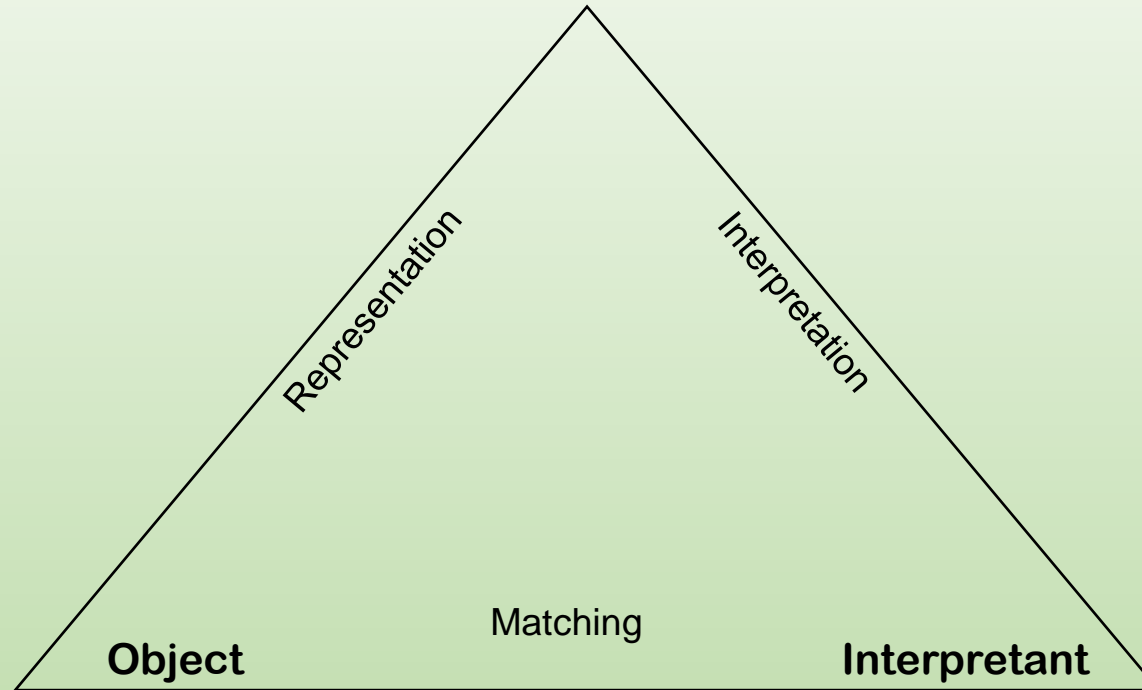
- In the context of Kowas preparation, all sub clans will at different dates within 1 or 2 weeks present their contributions of the targeted amounts during a period known as taakon.
- Once all sub clans have completed the taakon, the total amount of food and livestock or money is announced.
- **Perseverance**, is shown by the sub clans and their members in reaching their targets and contributing to the overall clan target.
- **Teamwork or cooperation** is evident in the work of contributing the required goods.
- **Transparency** is shown in the communication of each sub clan's amounts contributed and the total amount of the clans contributions.

Cultural Sign 5

- Ceremonial Food & Livestock
 - Sago, Taro, Pigs,
 - Turtle, Cow
- Sign Type: Symbolic

Representamen

Ceremonial Food and Livestock
Pigs (puu), Sago (nipii), Taro (mah)



- In the context of Kowas preparation, ceremonial food and livestock are contributed by the bride's family and are to be presented to the groom's family at least a week before kowas. Foods traditionally categorized as being for special occasions are sago, pigs and taro.
- On accepting this ceremonial food, the groom's people are **grateful and happy**. It allows them to recognize the bride as becoming now a fully fledged member of their clan.
- They will from now on **recognize her as their daughter** and provide her necessary support in her time of need.

Cultural Sign 6



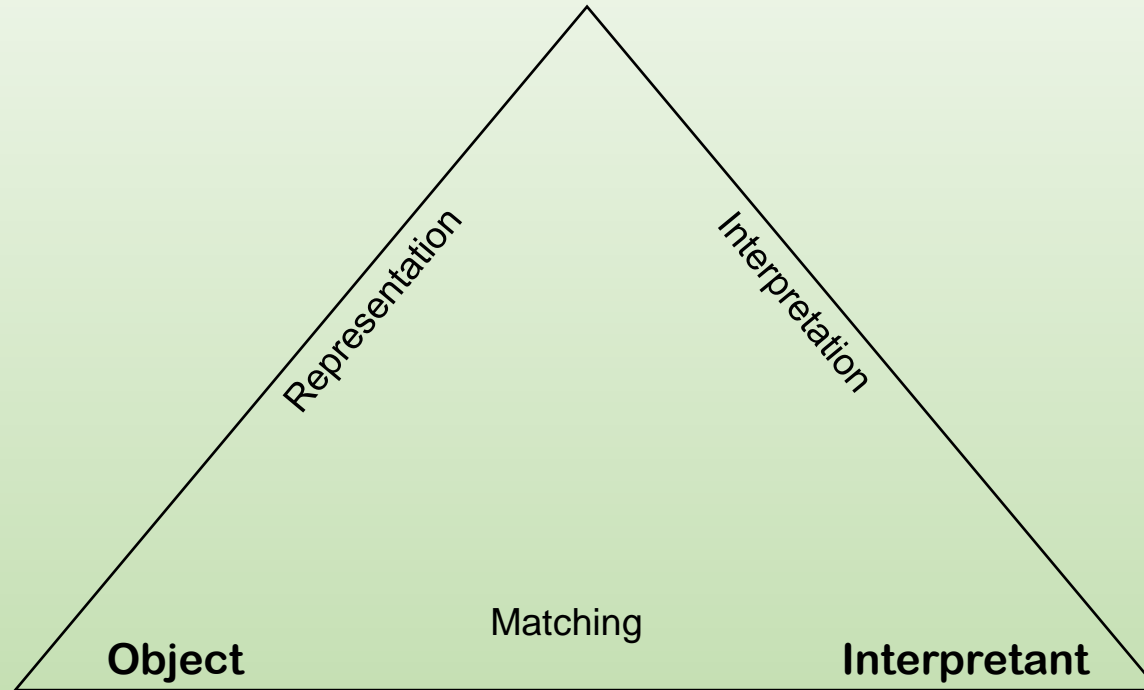
Source:

<https://ethnographica.net/2015/12/17/garamut-slit-drum-baluan-island/>

- Beating of the Garamuts and Blowing of the Conch Shells
- Sign Type: Symbolic

Representamen

Garamut (Ndrami) and Conch Shell
(Ndrah)



- In beginning the kowas, there is a special garamut beat accompanied by the blowing of conch shells when the decorated bride is brought to her new home by her clan.
- There are **mixed emotions** evoked on listening to the garamut beats and conch shells vary. Most importantly it heralds the arrival of the bride and her people and creates a joy in the community as they welcome the bride. It can also evoke sadness in the bride's clan members as she leaves them to begin a new life.

Cultural Sign 7



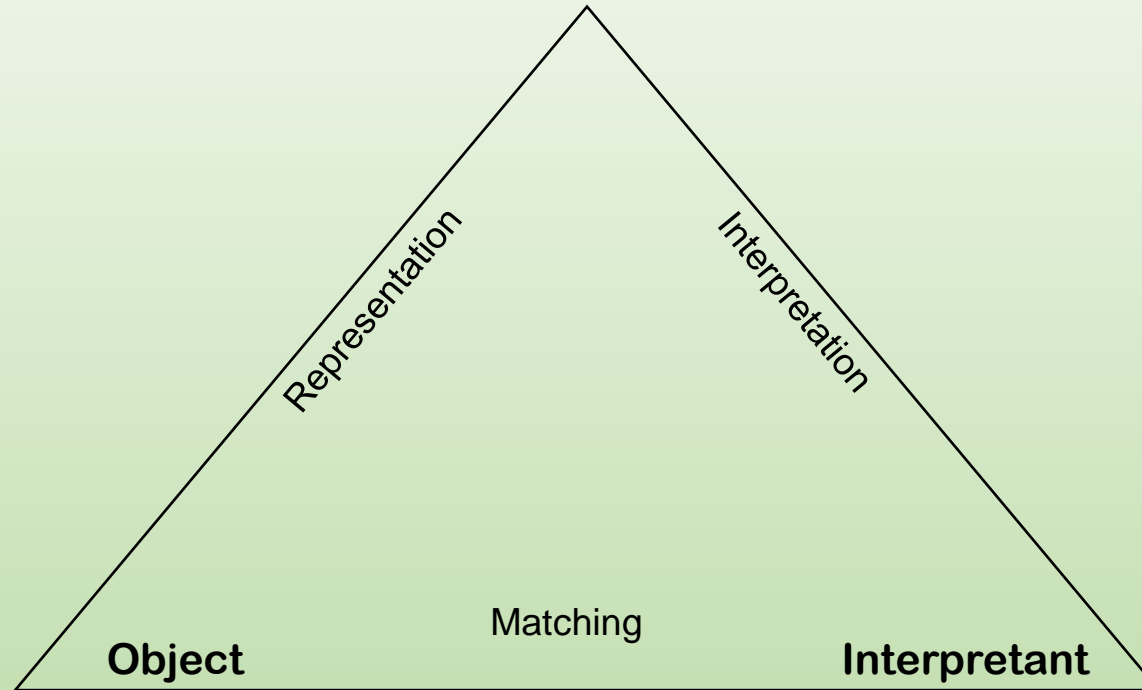
- Stone Adze (Kalyu)
- Sign Type: Symbolic

Image source:

<https://www.arthurbeaupalmer.com/cms/images/new-guinea/blackadze2.JPG>

Representamen

Stone Adze (Kalyu)



- The kalyu is a ceremonial stone adze that rests upon the shoulder of the clan elders or representatives of the clans (on both the bride and groom's side) as they make speeches and lead rituals.
- The kalyu symbolises the **status of the person as a chief** or head of his clan. It is no ordinary object and is said to contain **special powers** to help the clan head to succeed in all that he is required to do as a leader.
- A leader wearing the kalyu on the neck or shoulder automatically demands the **respect** of the people.

Cultural Sign 8

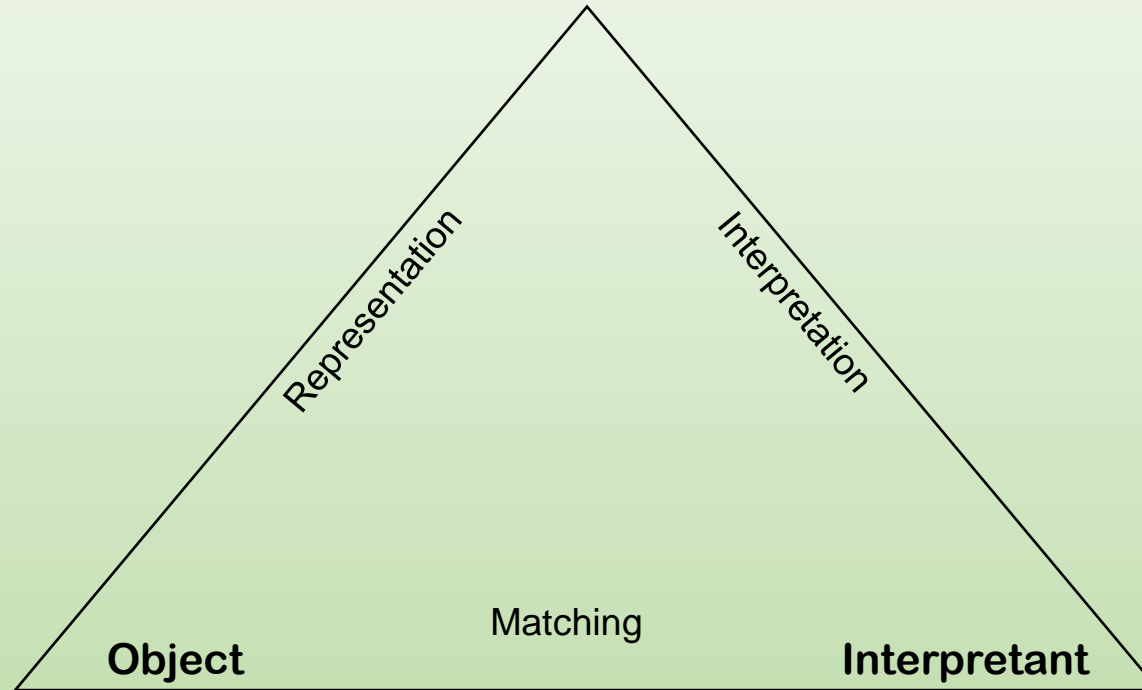


- As Basket (Mbulundop)
 - Amongst the bride's decorations, there will also be special baskets for both the bride and groom to carry known as As Basket (Mbulundop)
- Sign Type: Symbolic

Source: <https://kowanding.com/bilum/manus-basket-4/>

Representamen

As Basket (Mbulyundrop)



- During the kowas, the bride will be heavily decorated with traditional ornaments of wealth. When she is received by her groom's family, most decorations will be removed except for the most special *as basket*. The groom will also carry a special *as basket* throughout the entire kowas ceremony.
- The as basket (mbulyundrop) symbolizes the firm marriage base or foundation that is now set as a result of the kowas.
- The feelings by the newly wedded couple are a sense of **fulfillment** at meeting their customary obligations to their families and a **high degree of preparedness** to enter into their marriage.

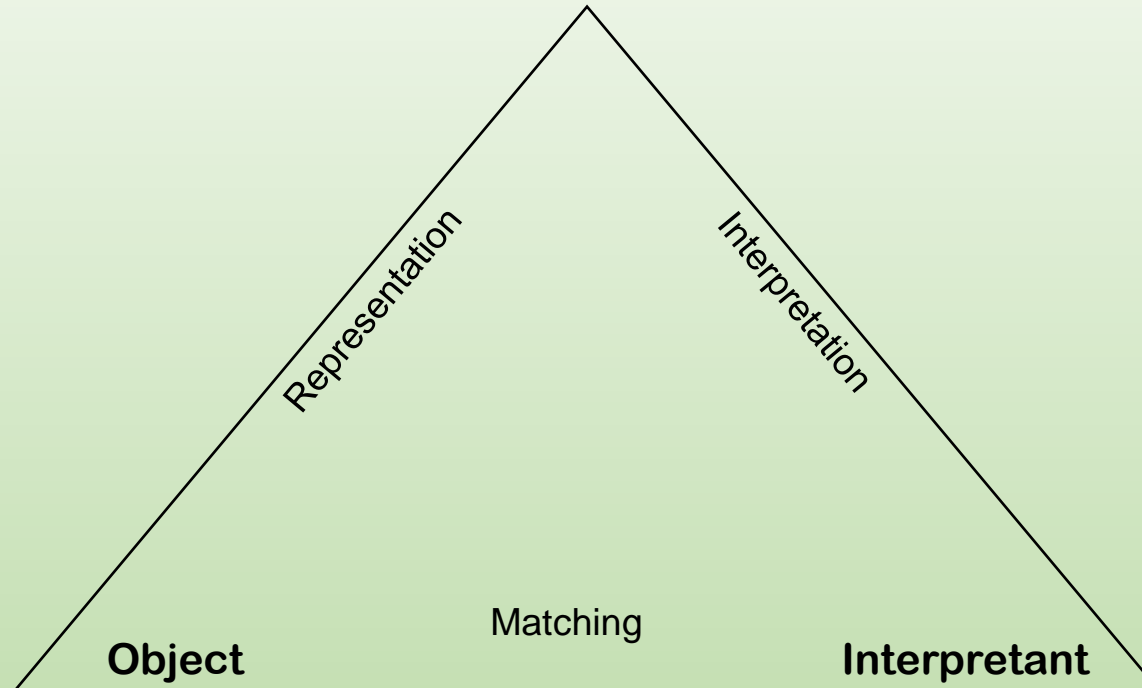
Cultural Sign 9



- Lime gourd (Pusngah)
 - In thanking the groom's family and concluding a kowas, a (lime filled) lime gourd is stepped on and broken by the payambrue of the bride's clan.
- Sign Type: Iconic

Representamen

As Basket (Mbulyundrop)



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Discussion

- The process of marriage in Nali serves a number of functions or goals based on various rituals, signs contained within and their deeper meanings.
- *For the couple*
 - Uniting the couple and validating their marriage
 - Establishing the groom as a respectable member of his clan and society
 - Recognising the bride as a new member of the groom's clan
 - Providing a security blanket to the bride amongst her new clan in the event the groom passes on, is critically ill or injured
 - Preparedness for married life

Discussion (cont.)

- *For the bride and groom's clans*
 - Acceptance, Obedience, Perseverance to achieve clan goals.
 - Allegiance to clan and loyalty to clan elders
 - Promoting joyful, harmonious relationships within individual clans
 - Establishing harmonious relationships between the bride and groom's clans
 - Strengthening social fabric amongst or within clans
 - Happiness and gratitude by clan members
 - Highly organised and functioning social structure

Discussion (cont.)

- *For the Clan Leaders*
 - Demonstration of good leadership,
 - good organisational skills and
 - power

Conclusion

- This study has attempted to present a semiotic analysis of cultural signs present in Nali marriage rituals using the Peircean 3 part model.
- The Peircean approach has resulted in a detailed analysis of signs present in Nali marriage rituals.
- A deeper understanding of the concept of the Nali view of marriage has been gained through an understanding of the rich cultural signs and their associated meanings as well as their effects on all parties involved.

Limitations

- The main limitation of this study lies in the number of Nali informants consulted for the write up of this paper (5 people).
- Further research will include more informants to verify information given.

Further Study Needed

- Further research is required on the cultural signs found in other important rituals associated with events important to Nali society such as death, harvest, blessings, etc.

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