

# Technics of a Knot in Oceania

## Cords and Networks as an Architectural and Environmental History

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# Technics of a Knot in Oceania

## Cords and Networks as an Architectural and Environmental History

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Between the high plains of (what is now) Papua New Guinea (PNG) and various Bismarck archipelago shores lay a rift: a deep historical cleft between two Indigenous peoples coming into tangency yet hardly crossing or mixing. The Aboriginal peoples from Sahul (the old continent from which Australia emerged) and the Austronesian peoples (who populated much of remote Oceania) shared little; each were distant “islands to the other” across cosmological horizons. Inhabiting the same island (PNG) even, temporal rifts – between cultures over 40,000 years old and those just over 4000 years old respectively – separated their cosmic and spatial understanding. The notion of islands here encapsulates differentials in time, communication, and genealogy.

Yet, there is something shared, one of the oldest human technologies, in fact: a knot. As per Gottfried Semper, a knot is “the oldest tectonic, cosmogonic symbol.” I will consider the material cultures of each: a) the *Kirugu*, a knotted cord of the Sepik river peoples, which is a cartographic and information-keeping artefact used to recall and recount the migration history of the peoples; b) knots involved in the Austronesians’ outrigger canoes and used

subsequently in tying piles and buildings together. That is, I will study the looped, braided, plaited, and woven artefacts of everyday use, totemic objects of symbolic value, and high-technological knots that sustained much friction and motion in the South Pacific. Stilt houses and other architectural types of the littoral zones emerged precisely from the various technics of tying and holding together at sea. In a world with little to no metal, fiber and wood formed the very material stratum that enabled sustenance. Our focus on these techniques, these non-lithic artefacts hardly index-able or amenable to inscription, and on the androgynous labour involved, promises also a history of the least decay-proof and most taken-for-granted aspects of making buildings and environments.

As Michel Serres points out in *The Natural Contract*,<sup>1</sup> the cord is akin to a treaty or a contract between the forces of nature and us. A knot, once bonded, “materializes our relations or changes them into things. If our relations fluctuate, this solidification settles them.” The forces that a knot self-regulates or mediates between at its ends may be either human-induced or environmental. For Serres, natural and social contracts are undoubtedly mirror

1.

Michael Serres, *The Natural Contract* (University of Michigan Press, 1995).

images. So, what contracts are inevitably drawn in tectonically moving, assembling, and holding together? How do artefacts and material cultures hold together, when challenged by not only the environment but also new social realities? In the 18th century, rope was precisely the technology that enabled the Europeans to not only set sail towards but also maintain themselves in the South Pacific. How might the knot offer a comparative tectonic framework across cultures to consider material histories, techniques, and the very physics of “holding together” in Oceania? Addressing the histories and cultures of using knots and rope also compels rethinking the terrestrial, static, and arid logics that undergird much architectural thought and history and renew it with the informational paradigms emerging out of enduring through fluidity, wetness, and continuous motion.

Our access to these cultures is mediated chiefly by (German, British, and Australian) anthropologists and archaeologists who have who spent time with the peoples and revealed their material histories of deep time. While they expose us to corded artefacts and networks of strings (for example, *Bilum* looping from PNG) that form the material cultures

of the South Pacific, they also reveal the links and webs of globalisation that brought them – and us – to those places. Their “how-to” diagrams of plaiting, for example, raise questions about Westerners’ relations with the various Indigenous peoples, bringing into question why and how knowledge was learned, shared, or divulged with, and given its non-textual nature, how this tacit and tactile know-how persisted through time. Straddling both the material and the conceptual, this architectural historical approach will also ask: how is the act of making or tying itself an epistemological format? How does knowledge transmission differ when it is passed on by showing “how” rather than telling “that”?