

Person, Space, and Memory

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Among the Iatmul of the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea, in the event of a conflict about the rightful possession of cosmologically significant names, the opponents and their supporters meet in the center of the men's house, near the ceremonial stool, pabu, for a special debate in which ownership of name is contested. For the Iatmul, debates over the ownership of names involve mastery of the most complex of intellectual activities, combining elaborate feats of rhetorical skill and memory. The secret sacred names of persons and places are at the centre of their ramified mythological system, a system that is anchored in the landscape, and combines the past and present. Remembering the thousands of mythologically significant names that may be the subject of dispute thus works through localized mental representations.