Object Type: Spirit House
Date: Early 20th Century
New Guinea, East Sepik
Materials: Wood, Thatched Roof, Paint
Südseeabteilung - Ethnological Museum, Berlin

Object Type: Finial for a Ceremonial House
Date: Late 19th, Early 20th Century
New Guinea, Iatmul
Materials: Wood, cowrie shells, paint
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979.206.1560

Though New Guinean communities commonly represent cultures of relative social independence and mobility, men's age grade societies represent a way in which New Guinean ethnic groups structured their lives and communities. The societies of New Guinea are organized by intricate systems of social power structures within individual communities on the island. Every male in the community takes part in the rites and ceremonies performed by the societies. The rites and ceremonies serve to initiate men and mark milestones in their lives. These trials continued after death, as the living practice ceremonies to commemorate the deceased and allow their continued participation in the community. The theatrical aspect of these rituals is reflected in the objects. I am interested in the objects and structures that serve central roles in ceremonial practices, used as milestones in the life of an individual within the community. The communities in the Sepik River region of New Guinea are rich in visual culture and therefore, present myriad objects for further study. These objects are typically communally owned, not belonging to any specific individual, but meant for public display. Collectively used architecture represents the most monumental of these creations, as illustrated by the spirit house from the East Sepik River and the finial for an Iatmul men's ceremonial house. These spaces and objects served to connect the community to the spiritual realm, a central concern of Melanesian cultures. Furthermore, in their original contexts, these spaces and objects are not owned by individuals, but collectively owned and publically displayed within the community.

The East Sepik spirit house illustrated above currently resides in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. Originally built in the early 20th century, the spirit house is most clearly defined by its high peaked gable roof and imposing, painted facade. This is the focal point of the exterior, and as the peak of the roof slopes downward towards the rear, it touches the ground at its extremity. In a sense, the facade is the most significant feature, as the component most frequently encountered by villagers and the most decorated component typically seen by women. Additionally, the interior is intended more so as a home for spirits than for the living (Austin 1997, 10). The front is dominated by expressively painted palm bark and basketry, in a theatrical style common thematic of Melanesia. In the corner of the base is an uptick in the basketry, serving as the structure's sole entrance. This small, low entrance contributes to the construction of a "thick edge," as defined by Iain Borden (2000, 231). Borden describes a thick edge as a compilation of, "subtle yet distinctive signs (to) mark this inner social cordon" (2000, 231). This low door requires the user to alter their posture, physically lowering themselves and therefore, making them more conscious of the space into which they are entering – a space distinctively different from its exterior. In the context of this spirit house, this thick edge divides the space of the living member of the community from the spirits. While Melanesian cultures typically did not see these two groups as clearly delineated, spirit houses like this serve to elevate the spirits by creating a space exclusively for honoring the spirits and giving them a home. However, the publically prominent facade reminds the entire community of the spiritual realm's importance to society.

The Iatmul finial for a ceremonial house above plays a different role than that of the spirit house. The finial is a component of the ceremonial house's architecture, adorning the gabled roof (Dinerman 1981, 815). Typically, this finial is found on the peak of the triangular gable of the house, looking down on the men as they enter and leave the ceremonial house (King 2003, 56). The ceremonial house serves as a space reserved for initiates of the men's society. The space is highly coded as a space important to the men's society, with prominent painting and carvings throughout, a high-peaked roof, and highly decorated interior, all adding to a sense of monumentality. This finial is carved as a bird – most likely an eagle –perched on a human form. The bird may be a totemic reference to the clan or community (King 2003, 56). Considering Ina Dinerman's classification of Iatmul iconography, this finial lies in the domain of manhood because of its eagle form and its connection to a ceremonial house's roof gable (1981, 816). This finial is one component to an overwhelming ensemble of imagery, sculpture, and architecture that creates an intensely coded space. A carved figure of a woman with outstretched legs is usually affixed to the front of the structure and carved house-posts are

featured within the house (Austin 1993, 10). The bird of the finial represents strength pertaining to war and its prominent place on the front of the house demarcates the structure's importance to the strength of its community (Dinerman 1981, 816). The house serves primarily as a meeting place and ceremonial space for the living community, rather than its importance to the dead (though in Papua New Guinea, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive). In Iatmul men's ceremonial houses, the interior is organized based on the community's social structure and divided by interior features, such as house-posts (Dinerman 1981, 815). The space is divided between clans, with spaces for each group to store their clan's ritual objects, such as flutes, masks, slit gongs, and skulls (Dinerman 1981, 815).

Like the spirit house's deliberately small door, the finial contributes to a thick edge, intending to mark a 'social cordon,' to demarcate the ceremonial house as a space for the ceremonies and practices of the living, strong community (Borden 2000, 231). Some of the house's iconographic decoration is perceived as female, though solely males use the space (Austin 1993, 10). As a gendered space, the ceremonial house reinforces the gender roles of the community. This finial serves a prominent iconographic purpose of marking the ceremonial house as a male space, while the interior of the house further reflects the social structure of the community's various clans. As collectively owned and publically displayed objects, the spirit house and ceremonial house finial help maintain social structure and relations while referencing the spiritual realm to the community at large.

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