



Object Type: Mask  
Indigenous name: Kavat  
Location/Culture: Baining People (New Britain)  
Date: 1972 or 1973  
Materials: Bamboo, barkcloth, paints  
Dimensions: H. 39 x W. 33 x D. 22 in.  
Institute and accession number: The  
Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
2004.552.1



Object Type: Mask  
Indigenous name: Mai  
Location/Culture: Iatmul People (New Guinea)  
Date: Late 19<sup>th</sup>- Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
Materials: Wood, paint, fish vertebrae  
Dimensions: H. 28 x W. 3 7/8 x D. 4 3/16 in.  
Institute and accession number: The  
Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
1979.206.1480

The *Kavat* and *Mai* masks are both masks from different ethnic groups in two different islands of Papua New Guinea. The Baining people inhabit New Britain, a large island off the eastern coast of Papua New Guinea. The Iatmul People reside on the mainland of Papua New Guinea on the Sepik River. The Sepik River region is a vibrant area inhabited by multiple ethnic groups located on Main River and along the tributaries that run off of the Sepik River. Melanesia is a large area west of Polynesia that consists of many islands. Melanesia covers a large area of Oceania, but trade networks and mobilization of groups to different islands have brought a rich diversity of ideas and ways of living all over the various islands. Although Melanesian culture is very diverse, Melanesian artwork shares some similarities including theatricality, connection to the spirit world and nature, perishable materials, and the traditional use of masquerades for ceremonies.

Masks are very common art objects that were used for multiple reasons in Melanesia. Both the *kavat* and *mai* masks were used in ceremonies for the Baining and Iatmul people. The *kavat* and *mai* masks were important for the Baining and Iatmul groups as both were used to connect to the spirit world. Although the ceremonial use for each mask differs, they were essential components of each ceremony. The *kavat* mask was used in harvest, funerary, or celebratory ceremonies while the *mai* mask was used for initiation ceremonies for young men.

Both of these masks reflect the importance of different Melanesian cultures' connection with the spirit world and nature. Whether it is an initiation ceremony or a celebration of life or death, masks represented and reflected certain ethnic groups' culture and way of life.

The *Kavat* mask is made of bark cloth, which is stretched over a wooden frame. It is then tied together with fibers and painted with black and red pigment (Corbin, 3). This particular mask is in the form of a cassowary bird that represents a spirit. The red pigment on the mask depicts the eyes of the bird while the white area between the black and red pigment below the eyes represent the footprint of the bird. The black and red pigment under the eyes represents a ranit motif, which is a type of fern and is said to be a favorite food among spirits (Bateson, 336). The *kavat* spirit is believed to live in the trees and bushes just like other birds. The split form of the *kavat* mask represents the fork in the trees where the *kavat* spirit lives (Metropolitan, Kavat). *Kavat* masks are traditionally used in special funeral, harvest, or celebratory ceremonies. Men of rank would wear bark cloth clothes and the *kavat* mask for the ceremony. These ceremonies would usually take place at night, while the performer would dance around a fire. After the ceremony, the *kavat* masks are burned (Corbin, 3). The traditional nighttime ceremony and burning of the *kavat* mask was said to nourish the *kavat* spirits living amongst the Baining people. This practice of burning the *kavat* mask goes along with a common theme in Melanesia that artwork is perishable and not meant to last. The needs to nourish the spirits that live in and around the Baining people indicate a strong connection with both the spirit world and nature.

The *Mai* mask was carved and developed by the latmul people of the Sepik River. It is made of wood, which is inlaid with bones and painted over. Each *Mai* mask is unique to a family as it represents a specific mythical ancestor. All *mai* masks are carved and performed in pairs, with a brother or sister mask (Metropolitan, Mai). While each *Mai* mask shows variations; there are commonalities among all of them. The connection of the nose to the chin is common among all *Mai* masks, as well as the small totem at the bottom of the mask. The connection of the nose to the chin is a symbolic physical form that represents a family's lineage as well as a connection to the spirit world. Each totem is specific to a family as it has a certain connection and representation for that family (Friede, 590). Totems were seen as emblems and ancestors that protect each family (D'Alleva, 36). *Mai* masks were worn during initiations for young men (Heider, 278). During the ceremony, the other members of the family, usually women, would wear traditional clothing as well as the masks, which were placed on their heads (D'Alleva, 35). In the age grade society, men move up through the ranks as they grow as men within their society (Tomasetti, 155). There comes a certain time where young men are old enough and

qualified enough to become men, and when that time comes, the traditional latmul initiation ceremony takes place.

Both of these masks are significant in understanding culture in a different light. Although these cultures are differing from each other, they hold some important truths about life in general. By comparing these two different masks and their use, I hoped to better understand the importance different ethnic groups' and cultures' connection with nature. In modern society, we rarely stop to think about how important nature and our family lineage is. Researching these two masks from two different cultures in Melanesia made me realize how important family lineage and nature is to every person as both define and shape who we are.

### Works Cited

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