



Object Type: Mask
Indigenous Name: Kepong or Ges
Culture/Location: New Ireland
Date: Late 19th century
Materials: wood, cane, fiber, pigments
Dimensions: 36 cm
Institution and accession number: Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 1991.1072



Object Type: Mask
Indigenous Name: eharo
Culture/Location: Papua New Guinea
Date: Late 19th-Early 20th
Materials: barkcloth, fiber, cane, paint
Dimensions: 61 cm
Institutions and accession number: Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 2014.308

The emphasis on community-based art used in social organizations rather than focusing more on the individual and more on ceremonies is prevalent throughout the Melanesian islands (Grabski 2016). Objects of ritual, if not destroyed by the Melanesian people as objects were not meant to last, were taken and placed in museums to extend the life of the inhabitant's beliefs and activities. I will be summarizing a comparison of the ceremonial usage of two masks: a *kepong* from New Ireland and a *eharo* from Papua New Guinea. I explored the association of both masks within society and religion and the representations that the masks displayed. The masks' places of origins are relatively close, so I found it intriguing to compare and contrast the ceremonial and spiritual components and the relationship of the people with the spirits that encompass the masks.

Papua New Guinea is populated with a multitude of masks, those of which have different purposes. Some are used for comedic performances while others withhold a religious significance by representing a supernatural spirit or being (Lewis 1922, 3). Stylized masks make a statement by making the invisible power a visible being integrating the supernatural into a mask. A style of expression and emotion took over Melanesian art dominating the previous styles. This expressionistic style is considered to be a part of ritual and ceremonies as reality is revealed to them through art (Kaepler 1963, 121). Aesthetic performances serve as opportunities for knowledge to be passed on, a time where the deceased will be commemorated and honored, and as a gift at feasts (Denner 2008, 22). In ritual use, masks represented certain

deities or spirits. Ceremonial use of masks, for example, took place during a boy's initiation into manhood where they were not allowed to be seen publically outside the special house unless they were concealed by certain masks (Lewis 1992, 4). In general, masks feature as reversals, making the normal person who is visible set behind the now brought forward spirit who is animated through the person and the mask. This focus makes the masks the overall subject during ceremonies, elaborating their importance and the spirit incorporated and represented by the masks itself (Jedrej 1980, 226).

Northern New Ireland is well-known for a type of art known as *malagan*, which is art that is traditionally associated and centered on ceremonies. The most important moments of social and ceremonial life took place during different rituals, such as funerary practices. The purpose of *malagan* ceremonies was to "send the souls of the deceased to the realm of the dead" (Caglayan 2004, 1). Although the ceremonies and objects were of great value to the people, the art was not meant to last and would often be abandoned once the ceremony was completed (Grabski, 2016). David Hertz studied societies reasoning's for these ceremonies and concluded that they were a response to the threat of death and a means to establish social relations, thus establishing an importance (Lincoln 1989, 200). The climax during funerary rituals was filled with performances such as dances in which masks were worn over the face. Masks, in this case, were used to represent the deceased or spirits (Denner 2006, 21). Emotions were "culturally induced by the associated ceremonies" (Kaepler 1963, 122) and manifested into the masks exhibiting the relationships between the artists and the masks. Artist express over exaggeration were implemented by supernatural spirits who hold an abundance of power in certain New Ireland cultures. Certain masks were also able to gain their own life and exist on their own as supernatural beings instead of being ruled by their creators as believed in other cultures (Denner 2006, 22).

The region of Papua New Guinea and its providences, including that of New Ireland, has extreme genetic diversity among different cultural groups along with a language barrier. Language results in the differentiation between social and cultural habits, that of which cannot be heavily noted in this region (Aikhenvald 2008, 8). This similarity in culture, especially art involved in religious practices, is almost identical in composition and in how tradition is carried out. The power of a lasting tradition and the influence that tradition has on society is evident in both cultures and societies. The use of masks for funerary purposes in both Papua New Guinea and New Ireland as a representation of a supernatural being demonstrates the value of art within their societies and the relationships that remain with the people through generations.

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