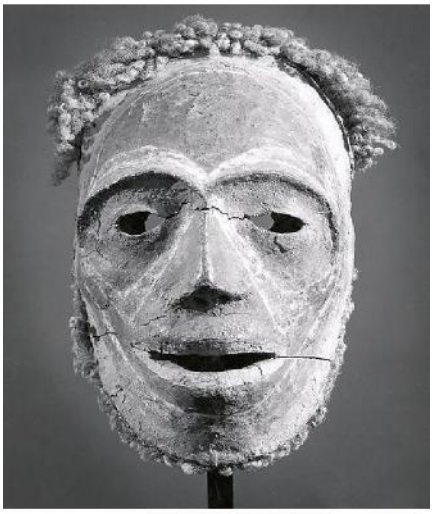
Object Type: Funerary Carving (Malagan)
Culture/Location: Northern New Ireland
Date: Late 19th–Early 20th Century
Materials: Wood, paint, fiber
Dimensions: 108in
Institution and accession number: Metropolitan Museum of Art 1978.412.712



Object Type: Skull Mask
Culture/Location: Tolai People, Papua New Guinea, New Britain
Date: Late 19th–Early 20th Century
Materials: Human skull, parinarium nut paste, human hair, paint
Dimensions: 9 7/8 x 6 x 4 1/4in
Institution and accession number: Metropolitan Museum of Art 1978.412.758

Prior to contact with Europeans, ritual practices, social relations, earned status, and spirituality acted as driving forces behind Melanesian culture and art. Many of these practices were centered on the human life cycle and the fluid development of an individual over time. The interaction between the living and the dead is a crucial component to many rituals and ceremonies related to initiation and death, two key points of transition in one's life in Melanesia. For this module, I compare and contrast a funerary carving from New Ireland and a skull mask from New Britain. I have selected these objects because they reflect the importance of the human life cycle, spirituality, community, and memory in Melanesia by virtue of their formal properties, use in ceremonies, and projected meanings. While these objects come from two different groups of people and were used in different ceremonies, they both act as the necessary material links between spirits of the deceased and the living, providing access to ancestors with the power and knowledge to aid the living.

Communities from northern New Ireland, an island in Papua New Guinea, practice the *malangan.* The *malangan* is a series of ritual practices that is principally concerned with honoring the deceased while marking the transition from life to death (Caglayan 2004). These ceremonies were public and communal in nature, indicating the importance of community over private personal lives, a theme relevant to Melanesian culture generally speaking. One crucial

component of the ceremony involves the use of the funerary carvings. The formal qualities and iconography of the carvings represent identity, kinship, gender, death, and the spirit world (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2016). The process of the carving is called *tetak*, which means, “making of the skin.” In this way, these objects function as places for the spirit of the deceased to go when interacting with the living (Kuchler 1987, 240). The formal appearance of the objects constructs a projected meaning with references to the deceased and ancestral spirits that continues to exist in the form of memory. The funerary carvings were made for the occasion, and then destroyed. This short “life cycle” of the carving was meant to be analogous to the human life cycle, marking its fluidity during times of transition (Kuchler 1988). This intended ephemerality reflects the importance of memory of ancestral spirits in the community. The reproduction of the spirit of the deceased is to come from one’s memory (Kuchler 1968). As a result, the reproduction of a carving can only be done through mental images captured in one’s memory. By virtue of the public nature of the ceremony and objects, in addition to its ephemerality, this object reveals the nature of shared memory in Melanesia.

The Tolai skull mask exemplifies many similarities with the practices of shared memory and emphasis on ancestral spirits. Like the funerary carving, the skull mask functions as a space for spirits to inhabit (Kaeppler 1963, 133). The Tolai would have most likely used the mask during secret society rituals and initiation ceremonies. During these ceremonies, the masks were held over the face and summoned the spirits of the deceased. Part of the mask was constructed from the forepart of a human skull, reflecting the use of relics to provide a material connection between the living and the dead (Kaeppler 1963, 133). The skull incorporated into the mask would have most likely come from a powerful ancestor who acquired a significant amount of power throughout their lifetime (Lewis 1964, 136). Like the funerary ceremonies, the secret society ceremonies placed importance on community and shared memory. Moreover, they highlight the significance of relationship in Melanesia not only between different living individuals, but also between the living and the spirits of the deceased (Lohmann 2005, 192). The collective nature of spirituality and memory worked for the benefit of the society and aided their endeavors toward becoming more knowledgeable and powerful people (Lohmann 2005, 191-192).

The Melanesian culture surrounding death, ancestors, memory, and spiritual engagement with the living manifests itself through the formal qualities and uses of these objects in ceremonies and rituals. In similar ways, the funerary carving and the skull mask show the fluidity of the human life cycle, and that the death of an individual does not stop their engagement with the community. The funerary carving denotes these themes for the deceased in

the community, while the skull mask signifies these concepts during ceremonies for secret societies. The performative aspects of these objects are important for the transformations to successfully intersect with the living. As a result they reveal some clearer insights as to what constituted Melanesian culture in the late 19th and early 20th century.

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