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Mask of a forest spirit (kavat)

Papua New Guinea, New Britain, Gazelle Peninsula

Late 19th – early 20th century

Bamboo, barkcloth, pigments

73 x 90 x 40 cm

FGA-ETH-OC-0009

Provenance

Former German private collection, 1960, then Ludwig Bretschneider collection, Munich; purchased at Christie's, Paris, on 04.04.2017, lot n° 95

Unpublished



Under the Scrutiny of the Mosquito Spirit A Baining *Kavat*

Lingan, *kavat* and *vungvung*: these are the three main types of masks used by the Baining peoples, inhabitants of the central Gazelle Peninsula, in New Britain, one of the islands off Papua New Guinea. The *kavat* which concerns us here, a mask-helmet embodying a forest spirit, is from the collection of Melanesian masks belonging to the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art. It is a mask that, in all its apparent simplicity, reflects a poetic and extravagant imaginary world. Worn for spectacular night dances performed around and over a large fire – dances which are characteristic of the Baining – these masks were destroyed in the flames once the festivities were over.

The Baining

The Baining are an unusual people, regarded by ethnologists as a population impossible to study¹. Reference has therefore been made to the "Baining problem": that of a people with a repetitive way of life and no form of social or cultural organisation, festivals, political hierarchy or religious authority². What's more, they give no other explanation of their famous fire dances than: "It's a game"³. In other words, a people who do not or who no longer interpret their rituals. "*The dullest culture on earth*" it says on the internet⁴. A boring culture, really? And what if the apparent dullness of their daily routine gave free rein to the imagination to express itself? Living in the mountainous central part of the Gazelle Peninsula, these semi-nomadic populations, who existed in total isolation until the 1960s, are made up of indigenous groups speaking non-Austronesian languages⁵. Two of these groups have closely-related artistic traditions: the Kairak and the Uramot, who both perform night dances with "masked costumes"⁶. The custom of fire dances among them predates the 20th century. Although Christianised over the course of the previous century, the Baining have incorporated their former religions into their new one, with the spirits becoming creations of the Christian God⁷. This integration

¹ Gregory BATESON, *Field Notes*, 1927-1928; unpublished notes, cited in FAJANS, *They Make Themselves*, p. 3; Jeremy POOL, "Objet insaisissable ou anthropologie sans objet ? *Field Research among the Northern Baining, New Britain (1969-1970)*", *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, n°40, 1984, p. 219-233; Gail POOL, *Lost among the Baining. Adventure, Marriage and other Fieldwork*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 2015.

² On these questions, see FAJANS, *They Make Themselves*, p. 3-6.

³ FAJANS, *They Make Themselves*, p. 165-171.

⁴ www.psychologytoday.com

⁵ FAIK-SIMET, "The Politics of the Baining Fire Dance", p. 252-253.

⁶ KÜSTER, CORBIN, "A Special Baining Mask", p. 78.

⁷ KÜSTER, CORBIN, "A Special Baining Mask", p. 80.



has meant that the fire dances have remained a living practice, still capable of assimilating new elements. Thus, in 1983, the *Guaradingi*, a very large, four-sided, composite mask, an unprecedented embodiment of a forest spirit, was added to the traditional masks⁸.

Who is this creature with a hypnotic expression?

This helmet mask, which was intended to sit on top of the dancer's head and hide his face, consists of a large elliptical crest decorated with a painted face, set on a tall shaft with a flared base (*fig. 1*). The face is enclosed within a black diamond shape on which two arrows, which have been left white, point towards the eyes, a detail that gives them almost hypnotic power. The huge eyes, encircled with bamboo, are composed of slightly irregular concentric rings, painted in black and red on a white ground. These large eyes are what all the different forms of *kavat* have in common. The shaft connecting the eyes to the mouth is also decorated with black and red motifs, which, according to George A. Corbin, are stylised fauna and flora elements⁹. Jutting out from under the petal-shaped, protruding lips is an appendage that may suggest a tongue, but is probably inspired by a bird's tail¹⁰. Lastly, a long piece of fine barkcloth hangs down from this appendage, intended to cover the mask wearer's neck and torso. The back of the mask is also partially decorated with rows of downward-pointing triangles, alternately painted red and black (*fig. 2*).

This helmet mask belongs to the category of *kavat*, which, in the mind of the Baining, shares with birds a certain propensity to perch in trees. With its bird attributes, its appearance of a stunned mosquito, its smiling mouth and large dimensions, this mask is all things combined, but it is above all a supernatural creature with everything it takes to terrify, and which looks straight at us ...

Happy is he who dreams of forest spirits

For the dark and damp tropical forest is swarming with spirits that find concrete form in the *kavat*. These spirits belong to the animal or plant kingdom, but can also be also abstractions. They are beings directly connected to life in the forest of the Gazelle Peninsula. These large masks are therefore relatively naturalistic, even if stylisation also has a major role to play. As in any initiatory society, these spirits only reveal themselves to the initiated. By doing the latter the honour of entering their dreams, the spirits ask the initiated to bring them to life in a mask¹¹.

⁸ KÜSTER, CORBIN, "A Special Baining Mask", p. 80-81.

⁹ CORBIN, FABRICANT, "Some Notes", p. 5.

¹⁰ CORBIN, FABRICANT, "Some Notes", p. 5.

¹¹ KÜSTER, CORBIN, "A Special Baining Mask", p. 82.



The butterfly spirit mask, or that of the mosquito, are among the most poetic of these *kavat*. Some of the more unusual include the spirit masks of the taro, the clover leaf, that of the *rangi* tree leaf¹² (fig. 3) or of the pig's shoulder¹³ (fig. 4). In the present case, the fragile and airy crest, which gives the face a haughty, strange and comical appearance, represents a forest mosquito spirit. Given the fragility of the bark cloth, the natural ageing of its structure and the slightly faded colours, this mask probably dates from the early 20th century. This same period was also the time when most Baining masks entered the collections of major Western museums—especially German ones—and those of Australian museums¹⁴.

Alongside the *kavat*, the *lingan* is a simpler type of mask in the form of a cone-shaped headdress made of leaves, while the *vungvung* is an elaborate form of the *kavat*, with an adventitious element in the shape of a trumpet¹⁵. All are the masks of the dancers, the *Atutki*.

Men and masks

Like anything important in this world, and particularly in initiatory societies, the masks are men's business. In fact, though the original myth relates that women created the first masks, men stole the technique from them and then barred women from their production¹⁶. The art of the masks and of the masked dances are therefore traditionally handed down from father to son and practiced among the initiated¹⁷.

Ethnologists have had the opportunity to observe the masks being made outside the village in a forest shelter, access to which was dotted with signs evoking the taboo in the tangible form of fern branches¹⁸. The overall shape of the mask, that of the spirit it must embody, is made first. This bamboo structure is the skeleton of the mask, designated by the pidgin English word *bun* (*bone* in English, betraying perhaps the fact that the mask was assimilated to a living being). The barkcloth too is prepared, using the bark of certain specific trees (*mandetki*, *kambulungi* and *mamamigi*)¹⁹. This is the activity that takes the most time. After being beaten, washed and wrung out, the bark forms a canvas that is fixed while still wet onto the *bun*. On drying in the sun, the canvas stretches and

¹² Metropolitan Museum, Inv. 2005.460.1.

¹³ Metropolitan Museum, Inv. 2005.460.2.

¹⁴ CORBIN, "The Central Baining Revisited", p. 45; KÜSTER, CORBIN, "A Special Baining Mask", p. 80; on this question, see: KNOWLES, GOSDEN, LIENERT, "German Collectors...", p. 39-52.

¹⁵ CORBIN, FABRICANT, "Some Notes", p. 3-5; see also FAIK-SIMET, "The Politics of the Baining Fire Dance", p. 255-256.

¹⁶ COIFFIER, "Masques. Masques en Océanie", p. 3.

¹⁷ KÜSTER, CORBIN, "A Special Baining Mask", p. 82-84.

¹⁸ CORBIN, FABRICANT, "Some Notes", p. 5.

¹⁹ KÜSTER, CORBIN, "A Special Baining Mask", p. 81-82.



becomes thinner. Finally, the application of black and red coloured pigments with a wooden stick²⁰ completes the process of breathing life into the white mask. The black colour comes from a dried resin: wrapped in a piece of cloth and then chewed, it dyes the saliva black, which is then used for painting. The red is obtained from saliva coloured by chewing betel and, occasionally, from blood²¹. Black is associated with the feminine principle, red with the masculine principle, whereas white, which evokes the colour of bones, forest mists and tree secretions, is connected to the spirit world²². Glowing white in the darkness, with their large black and red eyes, it is clear these *kavat* were meant to impress when seen all lit up by the fire's dancing flames.

Watch out for the Atutki!

Two types of dances are indeed known among the Kairak and Uramot peoples: firstly, the day dance, devoted to the dead and to fertility, performed by the women every two or three years and, secondly, the *Atut*, or night dance, dedicated to the forest spirits. The latter are much more frequent, and can be held once a month. They are masked dances exclusively for men, the pretext for which appears simply to have fun²³. But is it really just that? Have not the explanations given to ethnologists been shortened or simplified on purpose, purely because the Baining preferred to withhold the meaning of their rites from the missionaries? This "game" nonetheless demands real physical prowess, given the weight of the attributes worn by the dancers, the strength needed to jump over the fire and the duration of the performance, which lasts all night long.

It was probably during such nocturnal dances that the *kavat* in the foundation's possession was worn by the *Atutki*, the dancers. The *Atutki*'s bodies are painted black and white and they are dressed in barkcloth and foliage, with a train of ferns and fragrant flowers hanging down from their shoulders, worn together with leggings and very long sleeves made of leaves that sweep the ground. This costume has two functions: to complete the assimilation of the initiated to a spirit, which, as mentioned earlier, has bird-like behaviour—and more prosaically, to protect the dancer from the fire and hot embers²⁴.

At sunset, a chorus of men begin to sing and a large fire is lit in the dance area. At this point, the women and children begin dancing around the fire; these are the dances of the uninitiated. Then the mood changes, the songs become more staccato, and the first *Atutki* come out of the forest, led by

²⁰ CORBIN, FABRICANT, "Some Notes", p. 5.

²¹ CORBIN, FABRICANT, "Some Notes", p. 5; KÜSTER, CORBIN, "A Special Baining Mask", p. 82.

²² CORBIN, "The Central Baining Revisited", p. 45.

²³ On these questions, see FAJANS, *They Make Themselves*, p. 165-168 and p. 248.

²⁴ CORBIN, FABRICANT, "Some Notes", p. 5.



the *lingen*, followed by *kavat* of different forms, and then the *vingvung*²⁵. The *lingen* pave the way for the other mask bearers, whose vision is inevitably limited, and guide them around the fire²⁶. As for the *kavat*, they sometimes approach the spectators, mainly the uninitiated and the children, to harass and frighten them. In some circumstances, the *kavat* can even go after difficult children. The *Atutki* are scary... Baining parents can threaten their misbehaving offspring with the phrase *Atutki kit al nyi* (literally: "the Atutki will carry you")²⁷. Yet the *Atutki* also heal, since sick children are pushed between their legs²⁸. As the atmosphere heats up, the *kavat* leap over the fire, kicking out showers of sparks from the embers. The dances continue in this way until sunrise, when the dancers retire. Burned in the same fire after use, the masks must not survive these performances. The ones that have been preserved are therefore rarities.

By way of a conclusion, this is an apparently simple and yet highly intriguing mask, which attracts the attention of us Westerners to the underlying-and sometimes unspoken-complexity of its symbolism and of the rituals in which it was used. All things that remain largely incomprehensible to those who do not dream like the Melanesians...

Dr Isabelle Tassignon
Curator of the Ethnology Collection
Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, December 2018

²⁵ KÜSTER, CORBIN, "A Special Baining Mask", p. 84; FAJANS, *They Make Themselves*, p. 248-249 and p. 434; FAIK-SIMET, "The Politics of the Baining Fire Dance", p. 254-255.

²⁶ CORBIN, "Some Notes", p. 3.

²⁷ FAJANS, *They Make Themselves*, p. 253.

²⁸ FAJANS, *They Make Themselves*, p. 253.



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Additional illustrations



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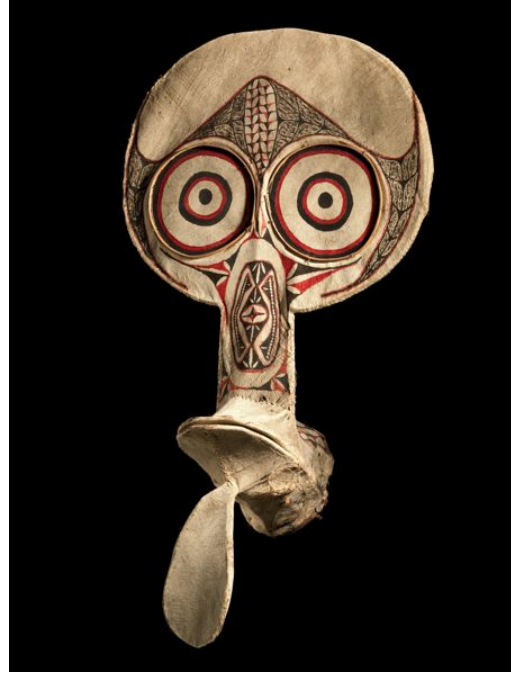


Fig. 3 © Metropolitan Museum



Fig. 4 © Metropolitan Museum