

Chachet Baining Art

In a Day and Night Dance Celebration at Walmatki Village on the Gazelle Peninsula, East New Britain, Papua New Guinea

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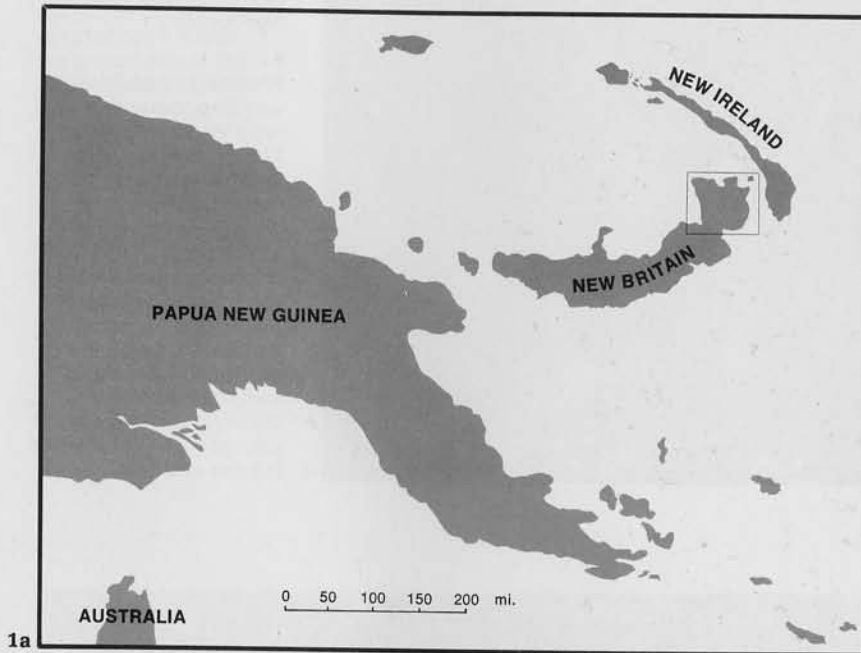
Note

All of the photographs were taken by the author at Chachet Baining, Walmatki village in 1972-73.

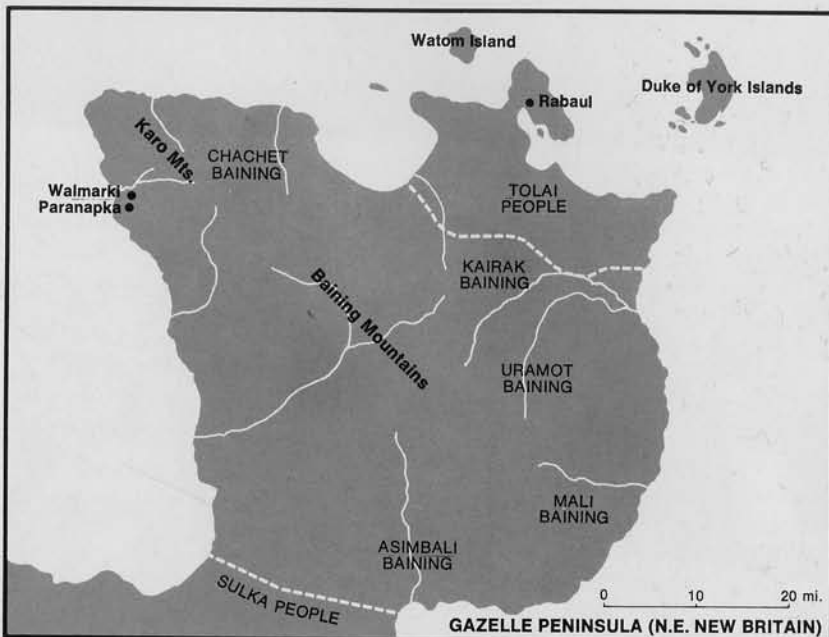
The Chachet Baining people live in the northwestern area of the Gazelle Peninsula. They have long been known for their dramatic daytime dances with colossal barkcloth display pieces, headdresses, and masks. At the time of first Western contact in the 1890s, the Chachet created the now extinct "hareiga" display pieces for use in a day dance ceremony to celebrate the harvest, and the recent births within each hamlet, and to commemorate the dead. Although somewhat changed over the past seventy years, in spite of disruptive world wars, disease, and the impact of Western institutions and economic forces, the pattern of creating and using barkcloth art forms has continued. In recent years the Chachet have also adopted from their neighboring Baining peoples, the Kairak and Uramot Baining, the tradition of making headdresses and masks for use in a night dance.

While in East New Britain during 1972-1973 I had the opportunity to see and record a day and night dance celebration at Walmatki village among the Chachet Baining where dozens of barkcloth art forms were used. The celebration took place on October 20, 1972 in honor of two Summer Institute of Linguistics researchers, Mr. and Mrs. James Parker, who were about to embark on an extended holiday after living at Walmatki for a couple of years. A neighboring village, Panarapka, also took part in the day and night dance celebration, the first to be held by the villages in over three years.

The preparation for the day dance took



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2 Men seated within the bush hut making preparations for the day and night dance celebration.

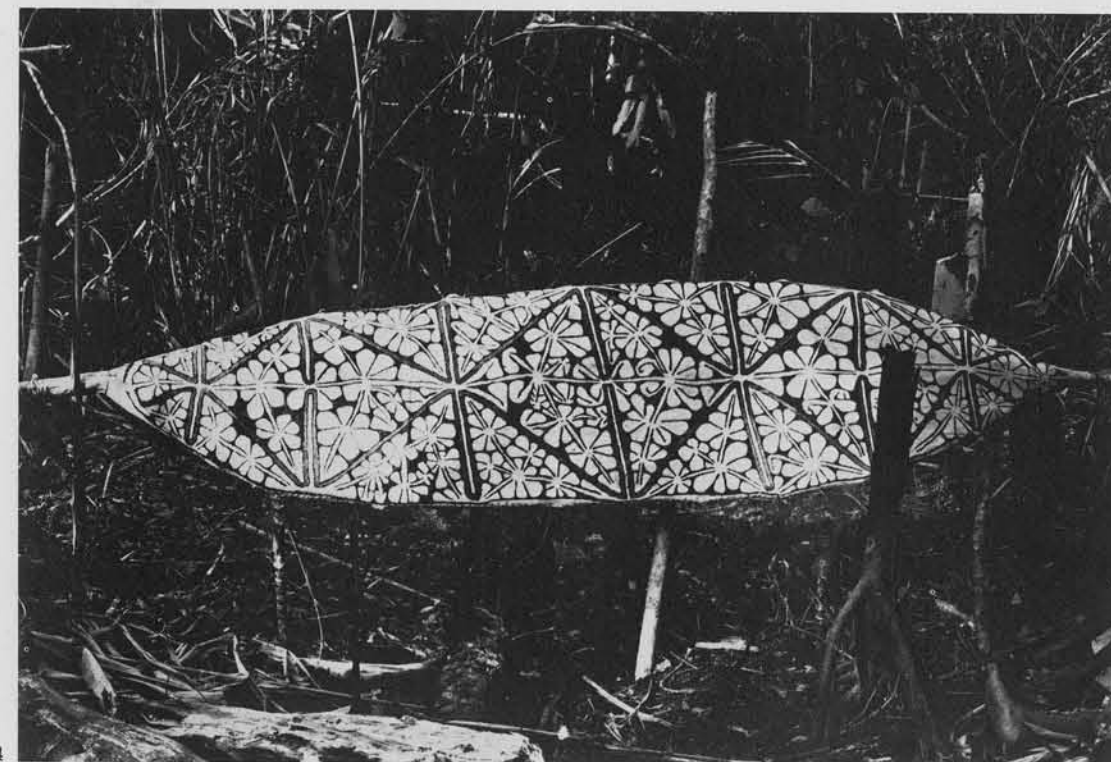
3 Women and children washing themselves near Walmatki River. The women put splotches of lime on their forehead, each temple, the lower part of the throat, the upper stomach between the breasts, and on the inside of each wrist and ankle. Some also put lime under their armpits and near their genitals. A similar procedure was followed for the children.

place in a secret bush area where a temporary hut with open ends had been constructed to protect the various display pieces, headdresses, body spears, and masks to be used in the day dance celebration (Fig. 2). At Walmatki and other Chachet Baining villages there is a certain order to the preparation of art for use in the day dance: first a large barkcloth display piece is made, then smaller head-dresses and masks, and finally, elaborately decorated body spears covered with hundreds of bird feathers. (Figs. 10, 14; body spears are ceremonial spears which were formerly attached through the skin of the dancer at the base of the spine and the pectoral region of the chest. Today the spear is held up using a barkcloth pouch held between the legs of the dancer.) Preparations for both celebrations may extend over several months. Women were generally not allowed access to the preparations in the bush area (there are some exceptions for women of special ritual status) as the making of the ritual paraphernalia is considered "dangerous" to



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4 A large display piece covered with barkcloth and painted with white plant-growth patterns (negative forms created with black pigment against the white ground of the barkcloth) and red "blood" lines cutting through on the vertical and on the diagonal.



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women, and therefore, the area is "taboo" until a special "presentation ceremony" the day before the day dance.

The barkcloth is made from the inner bark of the breadfruit or paper mulberry trees. The wood is softened in water and beaten with a wooden beater, or a special hammer made from two mussel shells tied to a stick. After it has been stripped from the tree trunk and beaten together to form larger pieces, it is dried and bleached in the sun. Later, it is sewn onto bamboo armatures to create various display pieces, head-dresses, and masks. The white barkcloth is painted with black pigment to create a negative image, with red used as an outline color, and sometimes to represent the "blood" of the spirit. Various design motifs are painted on day dance art forms, including flora such as betel nut leaves, fern fronds, and generalized flora representing garden growth. In addition, red and black biting ants, dog's teeth, butterflies, and nuts are among the motifs painted on day dance art.

On the day before the celebration, an

entourage of women and children from Walmatki accompanied Mr. and Mrs. Parker and their son to a place alongside the Walmatki River where the women bathed themselves and their children before rubbing small blotches of powdered lime on various parts of their bodies to protect them from the power of the spirits awaiting them on display as day dance art forms next to the bush hut (Fig. 3). They entered the presentation area in a single file, shaking hands with the men who were lined up at the entrance, and who had a hand in preparing the day dance art objects. Each piece was wrapped with a protective leaf knot which was untied by an old woman past child bearing age. A man ritually "killed" the vessels used to contain the red and black pigments by chopping them up with his bush knife. After this, he pointed to each object on display and named the person who made it and would use it the following day. Then, the women sat back relaxed, smoked, and talked in hushed tones before the large barkcloth display piece (Fig. 4), decorated body spears,



5 Five vertical extended cone-shaped head-dresses (*seraraki*) on display near the bush shelter. They terminate with leaves and symbolize the growth of flora towards the sun.

6 Composite helmet masks (*oggeroggeruk*; also *churukchruk*) on display in the bush area. The heads on the bottom represent various birds, including (from left to right) the cassowary, a chicken, unknown species, an owl, a chicken, and a hornbill. The shaft itself is covered with plant-growth designs, and at Walmatki, the trunk was said to represent a coconut tree.

elongated cone-shaped headdresses (Fig. 5) and large composite helmet masks (cover and Figs. 6, 7), before returning to the village to prepare for the next day's activities.

The following morning, after a period of feasting and a local church service for those wishing to celebrate Christian ritual, the women sat beneath a temporary shelter (Fig. 8) and began singing while beating percussion rhythms with various sized



bamboo sticks against logs, stones, and the bare ground, thereby creating an all female "orchestra" for the day dance. A small group of women, many with a child on her back, began dancing in a slow clockwise circle where they barely shuffled along. At about 9:30 A.M., a loud report from the bush opposite the women's orchestra signaled the entrance of the first display piece being carried by thirteen men and boys (Fig. 9). The display piece (called *remortki*, meaning a long flat tail-like thing) approached the women, backed off in a series of alternating hop-like steps, turned in a semi-circular direction counter-clockwise, before circling the women and children on the dance ground, after which they made a hasty retreat off the dance area with the display piece in hand. The display piece serves to frighten away evil spirits from the



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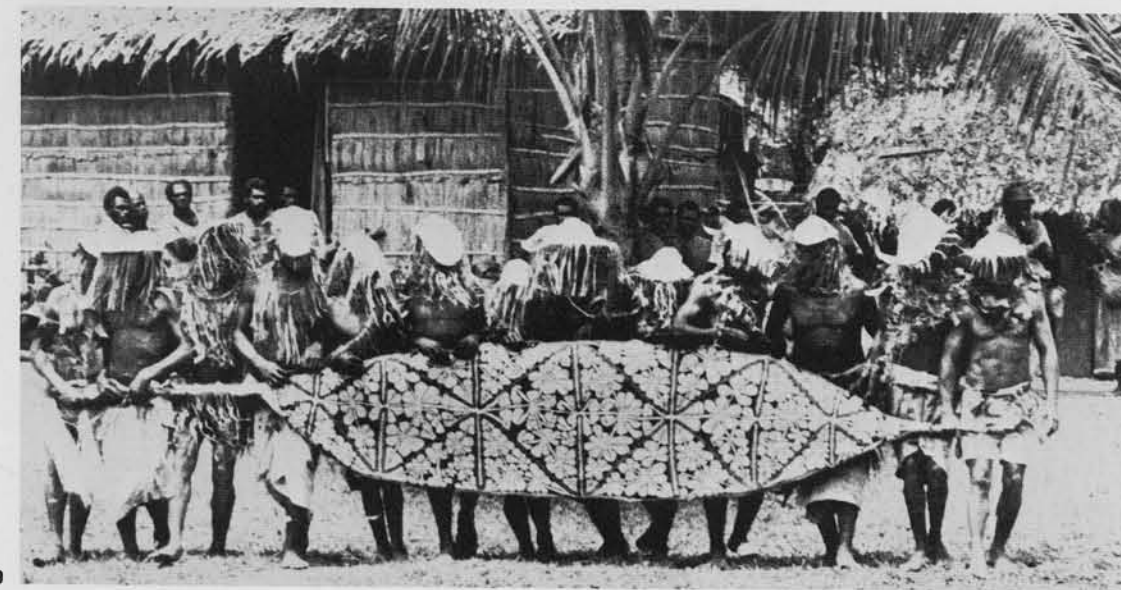
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7 Composite helmet mask for the day dance. The head at the bottom represents an owl; above, on a vertical strut, is a human-like face. Informants at Walmatki said that the human head was put there to make people laugh.

8 Women's orchestra seated beneath a protective scaffolding during the day dance. The women beat percussion rhythms against sticks, stones, and the bare ground with varied sized bamboo sections while singing day dance songs.

dance ground with its power, thereby protecting the ceremonial area (it is also used in nearby gardens for the same purpose). Sometimes the painted barkcloth is stripped off the display piece and used by women as a form of "fertility blanket" to give them magical aid in future childbearing.

9 A group of thirteen men wearing dance hats bringing in the large display piece during the early part of the day dance.



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At about 11:45 the number of female dancers thinned out, and after a short while, a group of men wearing decorated body spears (Fig. 10) entered the dance ground and approached the women's orchestra, moving in a dance pattern similar to that performed by the men with the display piece. After they left the dance ground, a second display piece was brought in by seven men and boys, carried around in a circle in front of the orchestra, then

10 Men wearing decorated body spears (the one on the right has a complex superstructure of twigs and feathers) with cassowary rosettes in front of and behind their lower body. Each spear has a gaily colored feather covering over bamboo extensions behind the dancer's back. Around each man's neck are hung women's skirts, thereby adding to the temporary identity as a female spirit.

11 Seven men and boys from Panarapka village entering the Walmatki dance ground with a day dance display piece. To their right are women and children dancing in a counter-clockwise circle. The young children have been born since the last day dance and, in part, the day dance celebrates their birth.

12 Four men and a boy standing in front of the women's orchestra, each wearing an extended cone-shaped headdress and covered with women's skirts. **11**



taken away by several men (Fig. 11).

At 12:25, the women stopped singing and beating their rhythms. Another loud report from the bush heralded the entry of five dancers wearing decorated cone-shaped vertical headdresses topped with leaves (Figs. 12, 13). They presented themselves to the orchestra, where they were, one by one, relieved of their costumes which consisted of several layers of women's ceremonial skirts, before taking off the headdresses and

leaving the dance area. About an hour later, a second group of men with decorated body spears entered as had several earlier, and one of the men separated from the rest and circled the women, dancing at least twenty-five times in an exceptional display of power, stamina, and dancing ability (Fig. 14). After he left, there was a pause for about a half hour. At about 3:30, three additional dancers appeared wearing vertical headdresses topped by leaves. Five com-

13 Another view of the dancers and orchestra seen in Fig. 12

14 A Panarapka man wearing an elaborate decorated body spear, accompanied by his sponsor, as he dances in front of the women's orchestra.

15 Five composite day dance helmet masks as they enter the dance ground accompanied by women and children.



posite helmet masked dancers entered about 4:00 o'clock, accompanied by women and children with a great hoopla of fireworks, gunshots, and shouting (Fig. 15). They danced towards the orchestra in a series of slow, ponderous movements, in which they often pulled in their stomachs (to display their thinness after many days of fasting) and crouched into a deep-knee bend before standing nearly erect again. They stood in front of the orchestra, bending, retreating,



16 View from behind the women's orchestra as three composite helmet day dance masks dance before them.

17 Panarapka village men wearing composite day dance helmet masks crouching before the women's orchestra. The mask on the left has a strut extending from the head of a hornbill. Attached to the strut is a barkcloth snake.

and advancing in slow movements (said to symbolize the slow growth of garden trees and plants) (Fig. 16) before the masks were removed and taken away from the dance ground. A second group of these composite helmet masks entered shortly afterward (Fig. 17), danced as the others had previously, then were taken away. The end of the day dance celebration was signaled late in the afternoon when the women who had been dancing in a circle throughout the day grabbed bunches of leaves, stood in front of the women's orchestra, and threw the leaves at the orchestra, while emitting blood-curdling screams and shouts. The temporary shelter was torn down, the dance ground cleaned of branches and stones in preparation for the night dance celebration

where an all male orchestra replaced the female orchestra of the day dance celebration.

Shortly before dark a huge bonfire was lit and the men's orchestra (Fig. 18) began singing and beating percussion rhythms on logs, stones, and the bare ground. Suddenly, out of the pitch black of the night, from the direction of the bush, there appeared dancers wearing headdresses, helmet masks, and composite helmet masks with cut pandanus side panels. They arrived singly, approached the orchestra, then went to the side of the dance ground to form a long line of masks dancing in place. In all, more than thirty masks of various sorts lined up before breaking away to dance throughout the night in opposition to the male orchestra. They were lit only by the ambient light of the fire (it was a moonless night) and appeared to be floating above the dark ground. Whereas the art used in the day dance celebration symbolized the products of the gardens, a realm of feminine activity and slow gradual ripening of food, the majority of the night dance masks and designs symbolized the domain and creatures found in the bush, a realm where the more active pursuits of hunting, trapping, and exploitation of various wild flora and fauna, are characteristic of a masculine nature. The night dance masks had been constructed in a special bush hut (Fig. 19) away from the village.

The dance movements of the night dancers differed greatly from the slow ponderous ones observed in the day dance. Each individual masked dancer seemed to be engaged in an alternating approach to, then movement away from the all male orchestra, after which he would dance into the bonfire, kicking up sparks and, on occasion, picking up glowing embers from the fire and, after dancing with them around the dance ground, giving them to the orchestra (this probably symbolized the creatures of the bush ultimately in the service of people in the "civilized" villages). Between about 6:00 o'clock and sunrise the following morning, over thirty masks participated in the night dance.

Immediately before dawn, the numbers of masks gradually decreased, the few remaining dancers stomped out the last of the bonfire, and the orchestra succeeded in "chasing" the spirits (the masked dancers) back to the realm of the bush, just before the sun arose and a small group of women began dancing in a small circle to signal the end of the night dance and the beginning of a new day.



18 The men's orchestra just prior to the beginning of the night dance ceremony. A huge bonfire was lit and kept burning throughout the night. Various masks and headdresses danced through the fire and postured in alternating sedate and wild dance gestures before the men's orchestra throughout the night.

19 A Walmatki village man holding a one-eyed owl mask used in the night dance. He is standing before a bush hut where night dance masks were made and stored.





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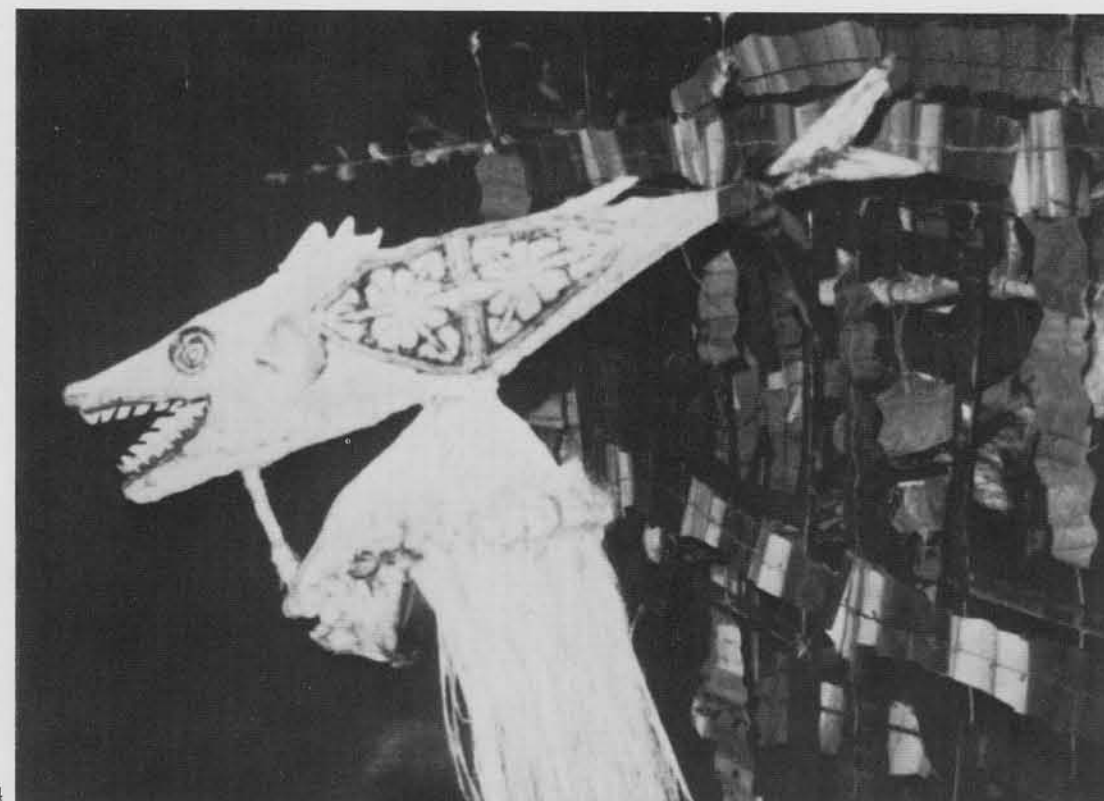
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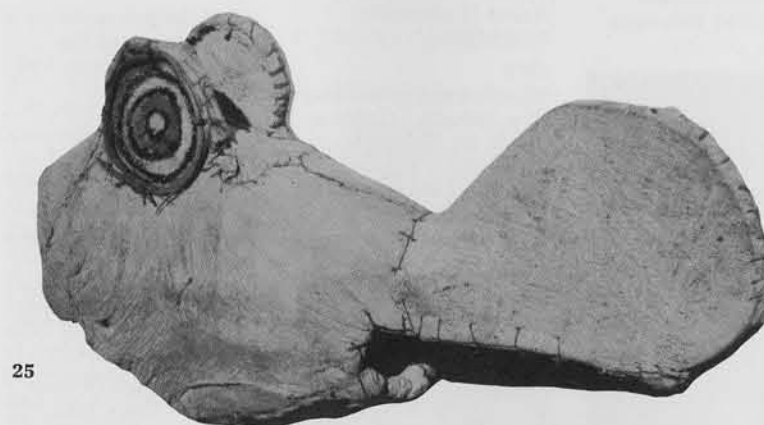
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20-26
Masks used in the
night dance represent-
ing the spirits of
20 a wild pig
21 an owl
22 a hornbill
23 a hornbill
24 a fresh water fish
25 a rat
26 a bush bird

27
Pandanus side panels
from a composite hel-
met mask also used in
the night dance

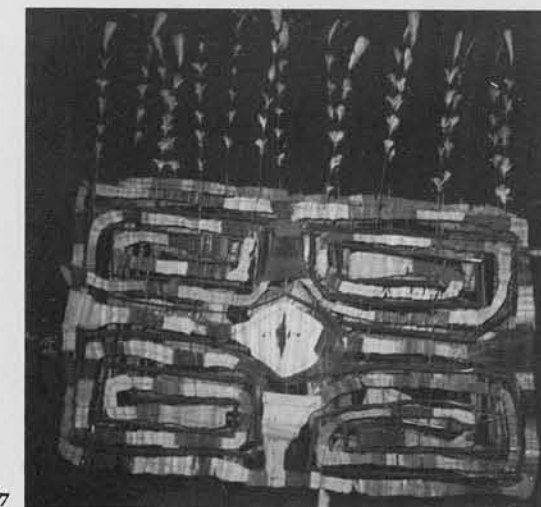


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Masks of various sorts (Figs. 20-26) were used in the night dance including representations of the spirits of a wild pig, an owl, hornbills, a fresh water fish, a rat, a bush bird, as well as composite helmet masks with pandanus side panels (Fig. 27) representing spider's webs or useful vines and plants from the bush. These all represent creatures which live or grow in the bush and which are hunted or gathered as food, or animals which are known for their hunting or trapping abilities. In recent years



27

new mask types (Figs. 28-30) have been created by the Chachet including one representing a domesticated cat, a cow, a helicopter and a "wise-old-man" spirit called Surrugga, as well as many others.

As this account indicates and the photographs reveal, the art of the Chachet Baining at Walmatki and Panarapka villages is still an active and vital expression of their traditional culture as it experiences change and developments brought on by a newly emerging nation, Papua New Guinea.



28-30
Three of the new mask
types used in the night
dance:
28 a cow
29 a helicopter
30 a "wise-old-man"
spirit called Surrugga



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of the Baining of New Britain." Since 1969 he has been a member of the faculty in the Department of Art of Herbert H. Lehman College, City University of New York. This year he is also giving a graduate course in the art of the South Pacific at Columbia. Beginning in 1972, Dr. Corbin has done considerable field research in Papua New Guinea, particularly among the Baining and Tolai people. He has also published and lectured extensively on this area.