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Oceanic art, a living art : Episode 2

From a shared house to another : fate of a gable mask

On the banks of the Sepik River in northern Papua New Guinea, the men's house or "Haus Tambaran" in Pidgin*, is a highly symbolic place, erected on the central square of the village. This majestic hut, placed in the heart of the tribe, breathes to the rhythm of the palaver, the singings, the initiation ceremonies or yam festivals.

If the supporting posts and beams are associated with male strength, the inside of this imposing hut on stilts symbolizes the nourishing belly of the primordial woman. Two huge gable masks placed at the main entrances represent the head of this spirit house, a sacred place, personified, to which a proper name is attributed.

Like any "living being", it is commonly accepted by the tribe that the house of men is not timeless. The climate, the ambient humidity, the materials used, imply an existence of between 15 and 25 years: the time of a generation... The community project of building a new "Haus Tambaran" is motivated by the absolute necessity to offer the ancestors of the different clans of the tribe a place of worship worthy of their rank.

The construction of a new building may be the moment for us to acquire elements of the old men's house. We waited 10 years before obtaining the unanimous acceptance of the community, which imposed a desacralization ceremony beforehand, to acquire a mask of exceptional quality and size in the village of Kanangara (Blackwater region).

To our great joy, this mask measuring 305 x 215 cm, which we photographed in situ in 2008, found its place in the new shared house; it is now on display in the permanent collections of the "Musée des Confluences" in Lyon.

Fate of a gable mask ...

See you soon for a new episode.

Amélie et David Godreuil

* Simplified vehicular language created on the vocabulary and certain structures of various basic, generally European, languages.
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Spirit house in Kanangara village photographed in 2008

One of the two frontage of the "Haus Tambaran" with its huge gable mask protected by its fibre roof.



The natural elements making up the roof of this ceremonial house were already showing some signs of fragility in 2008.



Waiting...

Once the house was knocked down due to decrepitude, and following a ritual ceremony of desacralization, the mask was put aside in a hut for our attention...



Transport by canoe

The logistics of transporting such a piece is complex. Dugout canoe and truck were necessary to bring it back to Wewak (on the north coast), where it was put into our container.



Exceptionnal piece

After 3 months of sea transport, this mask made of wickerwork, wood and natural pigments, finally arrives in Brittany (France).



Installation of the mask at the "Musée des Confluences" in Lyon

This gable mask was installed on 16 December 2019 on one of the walls of the Musée des Confluences in Lyon and is now part of the permanent exhibitions.

Visit the "Musée des Confluences" in Lyon



Now exhibited in his new shared house ...

Placed in a space linking the temporary exhibitions, let's bet that this mask keeps its symbolism of maternal protection, looking resolutely towards the future in this museum "at the confluence" of cultural diversity?

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