



## **‘Decolonising’ Tropical Collections: Cultural Material from Papua New Guinea in Museums**

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### **Abstract**

Museums are western institutions that house the remnants of colonisation. They are fraught institutions in which cultural heritage issues arise due to the differences in western and indigenous societies. Most tropical collections were acquired during colonisation through unjust means by government administrators, missionaries, and dealers. In more recent times the ‘decolonisation’ of museums has begun, with developing nations and source communities demanding the repatriation and restitution of their cultural material from museums. This signifies political redress and self-determination from the effects of colonisation on former colonised nations and those that are still experiencing colonial occupation. This paper focuses on the collection and removal of cultural material from Papua New Guinea (PNG) during the colonial era. The paper discusses views among the Papua New Guinean diaspora in Australia on museums and PNG collections, and argues that cultural heritage issues must be addressed before the work of decolonisation can begin. Museums that house Papua New Guinean collections must follow the cultural protocols of the relevant Papua New Guinean source communities. Decolonisation will require an overhaul of the western museum structure and principles, and Papua New Guinean vision, values and voices must be at the forefront of this work.

**Keywords:** decolonisation, cultural material, cultural heritage, tropical collections, museums, Papua New Guinea

## Decolonising Colonial Collections: Introduction

In recent times, there have been increasing efforts to decolonise museums. European Museums that hold colonial collections are now being challenged to consider repatriation (Geismar, 2013; Hicks, 2020; Mataga 2018; Mbembe, 2021). Cultural heritage issues arise in museums due to the differences in western and indigenous societies. These issues concern the politics of representation and the power dynamics determining what is represented, by whom, and for what purpose (De Largy Healy & Glowczewski, 2014; Ngcobo, 2018; Stanley, 2007). Museums that hold colonial collections symbolically perpetuate colonisation (Mataga 2018). For many indigenous nations whose cultural objects were collected during colonial rule, repatriation is representative of self-determination, cultural sensitivity, and social justice (Glass, 2004). Repatriation, restitution, access rights and source community partnerships are indicative of property rights that are inherently human rights and cultural rights (UN Declaration of Human Rights, Article 27). In the film: *How Can You Decolonise Museums?* (Museum Next, 2020), Shaheen Kasmani, a museum curator, defines the decolonisation of museums as:

the upfront challenge of white supremacy, [that] de-centres the Eurocentric view, [and] values narrative that has been made Other. It dismantles systems of thought [that places] the straight white man as standard.

This paper aims to present issues that must be considered before the work of decolonisation can begin by focusing on the collecting of cultural material from Papua New Guinea's (PNG) colonial past. The paper is based on preliminary research conducted for the author's doctoral thesis. It explores how Papua New Guineans living in the Australian diaspora today view museums and the PNG cultural material that is held in museum collections.

### Colonial Rule

Before discussing issues of decolonisation in relation to PNG cultural heritage today, it is important to consider the nature and impact of colonial rule on Papua New Guineans at the time when most of their cultural material was collected and removed. PNG has been under more than a hundred years of colonial rule from different world powers. The north-western half of the island known as New Guinea was under the control of Germany from 1884 to 1906. The south-eastern half, known as British New Guinea, became a British protectorate in 1884. Later, in 1905, Australia was given responsibility for British New Guinea, and it became known as Papua. During the First World War, commencing in 1914, Australia took over German New Guinea. Japan

invaded the area of German New Guinea in the Second World War. After the war ended, New Guinea became a United Nations trust territory. In 1949, *The Papua and New Guinea Act* was passed, which amalgamated New Guinea and Papua under the 'The Territory of Papua and New Guinea'. This shared administration under Australia lasted until the implementation of self-governance in 1973 and subsequently Papua New Guinea's independence in 1975.

PNG's transition to independence was relatively smooth compared to other countries which experienced bloodshed and warfare. During the period of colonial rule, however, Papua New Guineans were racially segregated and discriminated against. Papua New Guineans were known as 'Natives' and all Caucasians were referred to as 'Europeans'. The term 'Native' was expressed to maintain control and separation from Europeans, who considered themselves superior to 'Natives' (Firth, 1997). Despite their efforts to assimilate and educate 'Natives', Europeans became threatened once 'Natives' had begun to emulate their ways, as this became a threat to their white superiority (Inglis, 1972). Although Papua New Guinean indentured labourers supported Australians in their Second World War effort, they were unfairly treated both during and after the war (Riseman, 2010). Riseman argues that racialism and white supremacy led to the abuse of Papua New Guinean labour.

Such racialism was also behind the *White Women's Protection Ordinance*, which was discriminatory legislation that made it an offence for a Papuan male and a White woman to have any sexual relations (Nelson, 1978). This legislation was enacted out of fear and to further the racial divide, as there were no instances of European women being raped or sexually assaulted by Papuan men at the time (Inglis, 1972). Relations between white women and black men were viewed to be damaging to the racial purity and white superiority that Australians held (Inglis, 1972). Denoon (2012) provides an account from 1958 about a Papuan woman Tessie Lavau, who had applied to visit Australia. She had been employed as a servant by an Australian family who had invited her to visit them. At the time, Papuans were deemed to be Australian citizens. In trying to deny her entry, Tessie Lavau's application raised the issue of whether and on what grounds an Australian citizen could be excluded from Australia. This matter was escalated to the Minister of Immigration, who ruled that any person can be considered an immigrant and barred from Australia, regardless of their citizenship. This case is telling of the race-based nature of Australian immigration policy at the time. Similarly, Crocombe (2006) delivers a harrowing account from 1964 when, on a Qantas flight from Port Moresby to Brisbane, a Papua New Guinean was isolated on the flight and refused a meal, unlike the European passengers, due to company policy that prohibited 'Natives' to be fed. Papua New Guineans experienced many different forms of racial discrimination and mistreatment under colonial rule, including the significant exploitation of PNG cultural material.

Figure 1. Map of Papua New Guinea provinces



Source: World Atlas Map/Papua New Guinea.

## Colonial Collecting: Administrators, Dealers and Missionaries

During the period of colonial rule, many cultural objects were unlawfully removed from Papua and New Guinea by the government, administrators, missionaries and art dealers. Despite the presence of legislation since 1913 in Papua and 1922 in New Guinea,<sup>1</sup> that aimed to protect cultural objects, masses of objects were collected and ‘artefacts’ sent to overseas museums. Various forms of collecting took place during Papua New Guinea’s colonial rule, as outlined below.

### Government Administrators as Collectors

British New Guinea’s first colonial administrator Sir William MacGregor built a collection of over 15,000 objects between 1888 to 1898. Macgregor feared that

<sup>1</sup> In 1913 the *Papuan Antiquities Ordinance* came into effect followed by the *New Guinea Antiquities Ordinance* in 1922. Both ordinances were amalgamated into the *Antiquities Ordinance* 1953. Then the *National Cultural Property (Preservation) Ordinance* 1965 was passed. At the time of Papua New Guinea’s independence in 1975 the current *National Cultural Property 1965 Act* came into effect.

colonisation would deplete Papua New Guinean culture and this foresight led him to collect as much as he could. The MacGregor Collection holds items that were freely given, items that were seized, and items that were gifted to him. In 1892, MacGregor started to send his collection to the Queensland Museum to hold for safe-keeping with the intention that it would be returned when PNG established its own museum. When they heard the collection was being sent to the Queensland Museum, other colonies (which later became states) in Australia insisted on having a part of the collection for their own museums (Torrence et. al., 2020). This resulted in a selected set of cultural objects known as the 'duplicates' being given to the museums in Brisbane, Sydney, and Melbourne, as well as the British Museum (Torrence et. al., 2020). Shortly after independence in 1975, the National Museum and Art Gallery in Port Moresby began with a collection of 4,000 cultural objects from the MacGregor Collection (Haraha, 2007). Recently, efforts have been made to repatriate thousands of items from the original collection to PNG and to have the duplicates remain in the Queensland and British Museums (SBS, 2018). The 'Excavating MacGregor'<sup>2</sup> project has resulted in the book *Kambek Reconnecting Collections* (Chan et al., 2018) that features thirty-six different traditional objects from the collection reconnecting with present-day Papua New Guineans. As Francis Bafmatuk, who was featured with a Canoe water breaker from his place of origin in New Ireland, PNG states:

The MacGregor collection reflects the diversity of the country, the people and their way of life. Sir William MacGregor wrote to the Board of Queensland Museum that his collection was to be held in trust until Papua New Guinea was able to build its own museum. It was not possible to do this in MacGregor's time but he envisioned Papua New Guinea as wanpela (one people) becoming self-governing. This is something that we Papua New Guineans must appreciate. (Chan, et. al., 2018, p. 27).

The MacGregor Collection repatriation is exceptional, in contrast to the conventional repatriation that is being requested by the Lake Murray villagers discussed below. The success of the MacGregor repatriation can be attributed to its national importance. However, the question remains as to how local source communities whose objects were acquired unjustly can exercise their cultural and human rights to have their traditional objects repatriated.

Australian government officials who were field officers from the Department of District Administration and Native Affairs, also known as kiaps, were sent to the most remote parts of PNG from 1878 to 1978 and were involved in administering those areas. Their

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<sup>2</sup> 'Excavating MacGregor' is a research project that aims to analyse Papua New Guinean conceptions and reactions towards British colonial rule. This will be carried out through comparative study of the different subdivisions of the collection that were freely given, seized, and gifted to MacGregor.



varied roles involved dispute resolution, census recording, service delivery, and preparations for independence. The kiap acted as the magistrate, administrator, gaoler and police officer concurrently while administering the *Native Regulations* that applied to Papua New Guineans (Bragge, 2007). During their work, kiaps were also expected to document and report on social organisation, leadership, land tenure systems, customary law, and other cultural matters of the people. In the course of their work, they also sometimes collected artefacts (Bragge, 2007).

The kiaps were seen by the locals as ‘the government’ because of their varied roles. Some kiaps were able to achieve their objectives by being culturally aware, and considerate, instead of using an authoritarian approach (Bragge, 2007). They worked through reinforcing and accepting traditional leadership structures. For example, former kiap Laurie Bragge (2018) provides an account of his time in the middle Sepik in 1970 when he was sent out to Parimbe village to resolve a land dispute issue between two opposing villages that had resulted in an outbreak of violence. Bragge was informed by a resident anthropologist that the *garamut* drums had been beating for a few days and that the message was for Bragge, telling him, as the magistrate, that ‘six months is too much, and three months is okay’. Bragge adhered to this message and sentenced the wrongdoers to three months. This was accepted by all the parties. Some kiaps were feared and despised while others were liked and respected.

Bragge was one of those who was well respected. He worked as a kiap in PNG from 1961 to 1978. He began as a Cadet Patrol Officer and was promoted to Assistant District Commissioner. During this time, he had developed a deep respect for PNG and its peoples and gained the trust of the people of the Ambunti district in the Sepik region. While investigating land dispute issues, he interviewed and recorded Sepik elders, who then asked him to document their oral histories for their future generations. In a recent interview with Bragge, he noted that the elders’ request, “they put an obligation on me to do something about it; to get it published for them because when I asked why are you telling me this – they said if you write it down our future generations will know what the story is now because every time one of our elders dies we lose part of our history because our only records are in our minds and memory” (pers. comm., 13 December, 2022). Keeping true to his word, Bragge has since written five volumes on the history of the Sepik. In 2019, he donated his collection to James Cook University. The Bragge Collection consists of over 200 transcribed interviews with the Sepik elders, 600 artefacts, 3000 digitalised photographs, copious documents, and his books and papers on PNG.

During Bragge’s tenure as a kiap, while at the same time being a collector himself, he was required to enforce the *National Cultural Property Ordinance 1956*. He challenged the sale and destruction of Sepik cultural objects on a number of occasions. To export

artefacts, collectors, including Bragge himself, were required to obtain the proper permits from the PNG National Museum and Art Gallery (NMAG). According to Bragge, he would have loved to be able to legally obtain some of the objects that other collectors were collecting illegally, but he could not compete. As he explains:

There was a sacred hook from the Karawari River. The dealer who obtained it paid a (something like a motor vehicle plus four thousand pounds) huge amount of money. I had to enforce the *National Cultural Property Ordinance* as I was the magistrate. I had that boundary. The dealers who were illegally obtaining these things were paying much more than I could ever think of and only because they had markets for that in America and other places. That's how it works. (pers. comm., 13 December, 2022)

### ***Artefact Dealers***

Masses of cultural artefacts from the Sepik were sent to the museums and galleries in Germany. This influx from German traders led to German galleries exporting Sepik art to the global north. However, the outbreak of WWI disrupted the trade, and it took almost fifty years before more Sepik art was brought to the large museums in Europe and the United States (Maksic & Meskil, 1973). Some artefact dealers and collectors went to great lengths to illegally obtain and export cultural material due to the high value of Papua New Guinean artefacts on the international art market (Busse, 2013).

Sava Maksic is an Australian-Yugoslavian former crocodile hunter and artefact dealer who had a market for Sepik artefacts in New York in the 1960s. Sava met Paul Meskil an American journalist, who went to the Sepik to document and collect artefacts for a newspaper article (Maksic & Meskil, 1973). Together Maksic and Meskil travelled along the Sepik River and visited numerous villages to collect artefacts and crocodile skins. Maksic became a huge exporter of Sepik art to the international market and with his partner Mate Latin opened a Sepik art gallery in New York. In their book, *Primitive Art of New Guinea Sepik River Basin* (1973), Maksic claims that he befriended local villagers and gained their trust, which led them to disclose to him their tribal legends and the secrets behind their cultural objects. However, Maksic's narrative is archaic and racist in tone, which suggests that his artefact dealings with Sepik people may have been questionable and unethical. According to Sally,<sup>3</sup> a Sepik woman interviewed in 2022:

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<sup>3</sup> Unless they have given consent for their names to be revealed, all interview participants in this study have been given pseudonyms.

Especially from the Sepik area there are a lot of artefacts that have gone overseas. It's things that have been collected before during colonisation when people were going into those isolated areas and collecting them. I think they knew they had anthropological significance, and they took them. Whether they know the stories behind them or the secrets that go with that, I don't know. (pers.comm., 1 July 2022)

Similarly, there were concerns raised about how PNG cultural material displayed in museums were acquired and whether it involved unjust means. As Tabitha from Morobe Province on the north-eastern coast of PNG stated, "Sometimes I wonder how they made it into the museums, whether they have done it through protocol from the country of origin to the museum" (pers. comm., 19 July 2022).

Bragge (2018) notes that between 1909 and 1913 anthropologist Albert Buell Lewis, led the Joseph N. Field South Pacific Expedition which documented and collected more than 14,000 items, predominately from the Sepik region. The collection forms part of the Melanesian section of the Field Museum in Chicago, and is supplemented by further cultural objects collected by dealers, traders, ship captains and others. As indicated by Sally, the manner in which these artefacts were acquired is concerning, especially given the uncertainty about whether the provenance of the collected artefacts travelled with these objects to the other side of the world.

An example of unethical practice is the theft of the *Magisaun*. Bragge recounts how the *Magisaun* was, in fact, declared National Cultural Property under the National Cultural Property Ordinance (AGMANZ News, 1973). He explains:

The *Magisaun* was purchased by a dealer who lived in Ambunti. This dealer came up and saw me in Ambunti and said he wanted to report the theft of the *Magisaun* from his house. I put out the word with the government. Another dealer came through who was with the New York Museum of Primitive Art. I asked him how I could best prevent the dealer taking the *Magisaun* out of PNG. He gave me some advice and I implemented it. The *Magisaun* was in Wewak being kept by another European trader from Ambunti who first had the *Magisaun* and had reported it stolen. He had given it to him to look after for him, but it become too hot.... He came and said to me if this thing was discovered what would be the outcome and will I be in trouble? I advised that if it was found and if it was donated to the Port Moresby Museum there would be no consequences. So that's what happened the *Magisaun* is now in the National Museum. (Pers. comm., 13 December, 2022; see also Bragge, 2018)



Among the collectors known to be unethical in their practices was Frank Hurley, a photographer who had been issued permits through the Australian Museum to photograph and collect artefacts from Papua (Australian Museum, 2018). McDonald (2022) outlines how, after arriving in the Lake Murray area, Hurley traded pieces of cloth and empty tins in exchange for permission to take photographs. It is alleged that when the people were away at a mourning feast, unbeknownst to them, Hurley crept into their secret/sacred man's house and photographed sacred crocodile carvings (Dixon & Lee, 2011). It is also claimed that, as well as photographing, he removed sacred objects and brought them to Australia (Dixon & Lee, 2011). At the time when he was collecting, he had armed men in his company. Presumably, this would have instilled fear and the villagers may have been coerced to part with their objects. Hurley's unethical practices were reported to the Governor of Papua, Hubert Murray, who was known to be sympathetic and protective of Papuans (McDonald, 2022). This resulted in Hurley being banned from returning to Papua. The objects Hurley took are housed in the Frank Hurley Collection in the Australian Museum and recently there have been calls from the relevant source communities for the Australian Museum to repatriate their secret/sacred objects (ABC, 2018). The village chief and clan members from Lake Murray are adamant that their objects be returned. They have stated, "The concern here is white men came into our place 100 years ago, and up until now, these artefacts have ended up in museums" (ABC, 2018). Similar to the Lake Murray people's concerns, the interviews conducted for this study with members of the PNG diaspora indicate a consensus that repatriation should take place at all costs, especially when objects were acquired unjustly.

### ***Christian Missionaries as Collectors***

The nineteenth century brought the arrival of early missionaries to different parts of Papua New Guinea. In their attempts to evangelise the Pacific, the Catholic church was the first to venture into the Pacific, followed by Protestant groups. The first German Lutheran missionary arrived in 1886 in Morobe Province, followed by the London Missionary Society (LMS) in Western Province in 1871. Despite mission societies and churches providing necessary education and health services throughout PNG from pre- to post-independence, the arrival of Christianity has been damning to the cultural practices of Papua New Guineans. For instance, the founder of the first LMS mission in Port Moresby, Dr William George Lawes, condemned the traditional Motuan dances by stating, "it has been an unwritten law that all who join our church shall give up all connexion with the dance" (Groves, 1954, p.76). Malone (2005) notes that the LMS disapproved of cultural practices, while the Catholic missions valued Melanesian cultures at the time.

The first contact into the Highlands region in the 1930s was soon followed by church missions. In the Hagen area, the earliest prominent churches were the opposing

Catholics and Lutherans. Christian teachings were responsible for the decline of traditional practices in the Highlands, such as the Moka (Stewart & Strathern, 2001). In the Sepik region, the Catholic mission was the first and only mission in the area from the mid-1890s until after the Second World War (Huber, 1987). Bragge (2018) provides an observation made by Sarah Chinnery the wife of anthropologist Ernest Chinnery, on a visit to the Sepik River:

Missionaries have destroyed or removed a lot of the old masks and figures in their efforts to break down old beliefs and instil their own teachings...one father went into a Haus Tambaran and brought out the fearful carvings and showed them to the women “Look this is the tambaran you are afraid of it is only a piece of wood”. Of course, this was a great tribal sin for the women to see these things. The men were shamed and everything there was thrown away – the father took all he wanted of ethnographical interest to Germany.

Similarly, after the mid-1950s in the Lumi and Nuku areas of West Sepik, the customary practices of Yam Festivals and traditional dances became reduced due to the influence of missionaries (Duggan, 2008). These practices of discouraging cultural traditions and the removal and destruction of cultural objects were a common occurrence across Papua and New Guinea with the arrival of missionaries and churches. The author interviewed several members of the Papua New Guinean diaspora in Australia who commented on this history. Tabitha, a Morobe woman, stated,

The fact that the church came into the picture a lot of these things (cultural material) they were told to destroy them. So, the Lutheran had an influence where I come from, and I am aware that a lot of these things had to be destroyed without proper safeguards on its continuity. (pers. comm., 19 July, 2022)

This point was supported by Sally, the Sepik woman mentioned above, who said that the traditional initiation ceremonies in her area were opposed by the Catholic church as they were considered ‘pagan worship’ (pers. comm., 01 July, 2022). She further stated:

The church has a lot to answer for in terms of discouraging the appreciation and acceptance of cultural objects because they were comparing that to their western concept of Gods and civilisation. They did not appreciate that those things come with people’s identity, connection to land, connection with each other. That had a lot to do

with discouraging people to follow their traditions and to not keep their objects but to destroy them.

The removal, destruction and prohibition of cultural objects and practices by early church missions during colonial rule has contributed to the loss of traditional cultural objects and cultural practices.

### **Papua New Guineans and Museums**

When PNG was entering its early days of nationhood, the protection of cultural objects was thought to be important to Papua New Guinean identity. They were not just mere objects defined in terms of western interests (Busse, 2013). Vrdoljak (2006) supports this by stating that the development of a national museum with a national collection was significant in asserting a sovereign identity for newly independent states. Thus, restitution and repatriation of cultural material also became an important issue leading up to and after independence. In 1972, Sir Michael Somare, Papua New Guinea's first Prime Minister, stated, in reference to revitalising national identity, that:

Many of our ways, our arts and our beliefs have already been forgotten.... I believe that the Museum has a vital role to play in preserving that culture. The museum must not be a place where our past is stored and displayed but must act as an inspiration to our people in the effort to keep our culture alive. (Quoted in Vrdoljak, 2006, p. 220)

To build their national collections, newly independent states across the Pacific began to advocate for the repatriation of artefacts and other archival materials. Australia responded by repatriating parts of the MacGregor collection to the PNG National Museum (Vrdoljak, 2006; Torrens et al., 2020).

Unlike traditional western museums, which are institutions that house the remnants of empire and colonisation, the PNG National Museum and Art Gallery (NMAG) serves many purposes. Haraha (2007) expresses that the museum acts as a modern *Haus Tumbuna*, meaning 'house of the ancestors', and as a storehouse for cultural objects from the past – including some that are considered culturally dangerous. Papua New Guineans that worked at the museum believed that the objects in the museum's collection were powerful and could influence people (Busse, 2008).

The detrimental effects of colonisation have a lasting impact on former colonised nations and those that are still experiencing colonial occupation with their relationships with museums and collections. According to Bolton (2003), because of the disruption caused by colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people value

reconnecting with their cultural objects, and museum spaces are utilised for self-determination and political redress. Like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Melanesians value land and knowledge preservation. In interviews among the Papua New Guinean diaspora in Australia, they highlighted the significance of their traditional knowledge, oral histories, customs, and languages. Despite not being regular museum visitors, the majority of the interviewees said they experienced a sense of pride and connection when they saw PNG cultural objects on display, whether those cultural objects were specifically from their areas or not. As Katrina, a Tolai woman, reflected:

I feel a sense of pride, I guess, a sense of connection. Like, Oh, I know what that is. That's from where I come from. It sort of feels like home. Even if it's not from where I am from for example, if I see like a carving or something from Sepik. (pers., comm. 02 November, 2022)

The author also noted that some participants identified themselves with the objects, seeing them as tied to personhood and sense of self. For example, Timothy, a man from Hela, asserted:

That's my identity, regardless of what's happened. That's who I am. I don't care if I live in Australia, America or Japan...but I am still that person. That's my culture. I am who I am because of that. (pers., comm. 04 September, 2022)

Timothy's statement was supported by Grace, a Tolai woman, who stated: "If I go into a museum, and if I see that little bit of *Tabu* (Tolai shell money) that will make my day, like that's my shell money. Yeah, that's me." (pers. comm., 23 September, 2022)

Objects give rise among Papua New Guineans to different emotions, thoughts, feelings, meanings, and stories. They are never just mere objects. Among the PNG diaspora there is a shared feeling of pride and connection that comes with cultural material. This is supported by Strathern (1999), who outlines the Melanesian view that what you see is there to be seen and what you do not see is not to be seen, based on your point of being in it. On the other hand, the western exhibition of objects is 'what you see is what you know'. As Sally, from the Sepik, stated:

Usually what they link the stories with it (objects), it comes to land, it comes to where you're from. I think you lose all of that when it's just taken out without context. Maybe it's a little sad because the object is more than that. (pers., comm. 1 July, 2022)

Bolton (1997) supports this by arguing that there is a difference between the western and Melanesian exhibition of objects. Sally's statement relates to the interrelationship between tangible and intangible, and natural and cultural. Cultural objects are

inalienable from the traditional knowledge that generated them and the lands that they are made on, while the separation of nature and culture stems from western Eurocentric perspectives (Dailoo & Pannekoek, 2008). These differences between western and Melanesian relationships with objects and museum practices are matters that must be considered in order to decolonise museums and collections.

### **‘Decolonising’ Papua New Guinean Collections. Where Do We Start?**

Decolonising a colonial institution that holds Papua New Guinean cultural material will require adjusting western models of museology to Papua New Guinean-led practices and values. In order to start the process of decolonialisation, we must ensure that Papua New Guinean museums, collections and exhibitions promote PNG values of traditional knowledge preservation instead of limiting ourselves to the western emphasis on objects. These same ideals were expressed by Sogbesan (2022) in discussing the decolonisation of Nigeran museums. Sogbesan describes the colonial construct of the museum and argues that they were made for the amusement of colonial expatriates. According to Sogbesan (2022), the inclusion and involvement of Nigerans and their local cultural perspectives is needed for the decolonisation of Nigeran museums.

If there is one institute that the National Museum and Art Gallery (NMAG) in Port Moresby can emulate, it should be the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, also known as Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta or VKS. Vanuatu is another Melanesian state in the tropics that has established a leading culturally centred museum. This institution is unique as it incorporates western museum notions with its Vanuatuan cultural values (Bolton, 1994). Unlike western museums that place an emphasis on objects, this museum has a focus on traditional knowledge through the recording of oral traditions using tape recorders and the preservation of traditional practices and languages (Geismar & Tilley, 2003). The Oral Project began with the aim to record unwritten knowledge and to stimulate the renewal and continuation of traditional ways (Bolton, 2007). This involved volunteer fieldworkers equipped with tape recorders, who went to their homes and villages to record their elders accounts. The knowledge gathered from the Oral Project has assisted the Vanuatu government to make informed decisions and this has contributed to national development in Vanuatu (Bolton, 2007). PNG is known for being the land of 800 languages, but with change, migration from rural villages to urban centres, and intermarriages, local languages are dwindling, and there is concern that many will become extinct. There is room for the NMAG to learn from the VKS practice by focusing on local language preservation. This cause for concern was raised by Agnes, a Morobe woman, who stated:

There are a lot of languages; but now we are finding that as people get married between PNG different cultures there are no languages.



It is becoming a problem. My son's roots is Port Moresby and I am from the North, two different language groups. My son doesn't know my language, he has no idea about his Dad's language, and he can only understand Pidgin and English because it's easier. You will find that languages fall out. They don't hold that significance anymore. (pers. comm., 10 July, 2022)

The recording and presentation of traditional knowledge in Papua New Guinean collections and museum spaces was mentioned by several participants in the study. For example, John, a Tolai man, suggested that:

If the museum can come up with audio, then people can go in to listen. So when people come in, they can spend a bit of time there and sit down and listen to what they're looking at...the story that will be told about these objects. That's one good thing about it, because then somebody will have to go all the way to Rabaul...to get more stories from the people. (Pers. comm., 4 September, 2022)

In the work of decolonialisation, the starting point must be community partnerships, engagement, and consultation for museums who house colonial collections. This was expressed by MacDonald who states that "decolonising initiatives is a collective practice, it is a community effort and must be led by the wants and needs of the community" (2022, p. 15). The University of Alaska Museum has engaged their indigenous community as partners in the preservation of traditional knowledge (Linn et al., 2017). These partnerships will allow for repatriation, restitutions, and ascertaining the correct protocols and safeguards. This will also ensure that collections are catalogued with the proper provenance and, if they are not, attempts should be made with source communities to appropriately provenance these objects. Furthermore, Silvester and Shiweda (2020) argue that the meaning of objects changes over time regarding restitution and that it is important that provenance research is not limited to archival research but that descendent communities must also be consulted. Grimme (2020) provides an account of provenance research at the Linden Museum in Germany. This project covered the provenance research into collections from the three former German colonies of South West Africa, Cameroon, and New Guinea. It found that the majority of the objects were acquired during the German colonial era and were donated by military and colonial government staff. Compared to the African collections, the New Guinea collection has donors from expeditions and a lesser number of objects from military donors. The research confirmed that the Linden Museum relied on colonial relations and suggests that many of the objects were acquired in violent colonial circumstances. Tracing how these colonial objects made their way to the museum provides an avenue to begin the work of in depth contextualisation of its collections in partnership with former colonised countries.

Mataga, Chabata and Nyathi, argue that in the decolonisation of museums, the local level in each country must not be overlooked. The Codrington Collection at the Zimbabwe Natural History Museum does not provide provenance or context for its cultural material because the colonial collector used violence to acquire the items (Mataga et al., 2022). DeBlock (2019) argues similarly in reference to the African Museum of Tervuren in Belgium, which contains one of the biggest collections from its former tropical colony the Democratic Republic of Congo. These authors argue that provenance research is an important tool in the work of decolonisation in museums.

In her interview, Katrina, a Tolai woman, also raised this concern for provenance research while reflecting on an exhibition she visited in Melbourne, Australia, called *Bit na Ta*<sup>4</sup>:

She (Lisa Hilli) did her research on the Midi. I think she discovered that it was something that we used to wear before but then the white man came and took it away. She went back to East New Britain, and she was teaching people and telling them that this is something that we used to do. No one's familiar with it at all. She's a younger person coming back to the village and teaching these elders, that this is something that our ancestors used to wear. I think what she did was good, she didn't just allow them to put it on display. She went back home, all the way back to PNG and tried to find out what she could and teach them, because people had no idea. Maybe some people had some idea about it, but I don't think a lot of people are familiar with it. It's so foreign. This is in another country but something that belongs to us. I think more museums should do that, especially with the ones overseas, I think they should feel obligated to do that. (pers. comm., 2 November, 2022)

The above account is on the work of a Tolai woman, artist, and museum professional Lisa Hilli, who has worked at Museums Victoria for four years dealing with Indigenous collections. She has advocated for community consultation and engagement and for the onus to be placed on museums and institutions to approach and engage with the Pacific community. Hilli (2014) provides an example of when the British Museum published photographs on their website that were taken during colonial rule. The images contained disturbing photographs of naked Motuan women. Hilli contacted the British Museum to enquire if community consultation was carried out before they published these images. The British Museum responded that that was not the case and that they would take down the images only if source communities requested it. In

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<sup>4</sup> The exhibition of a *Bit na Ta* project<sup>4</sup> within 'No.1 Neighbour: Art in Papua New Guinea 1966–2016.

an interview with the author, Hilli (pers. comm., 7 March, 2023) also said: "I've voiced it publicly, online and in person, and stated that you have to demand it, nothing's going to change unless you demand it." To start the work of decolonisation there is a moral duty for institutions to act with due diligence and engage and consult with source communities (Brown & Peers, 2003). This will ensure that the correct measures and cultural protocols are followed, whether that is repatriation, reparation, or collaboration. This was also articulated by Hilli:

The way that museums need to do it, they need to do it in terms of a community approach. So, they identify the materials from a particular region, and then just focus on that. That's it, just do all the work on that, and then go to the next cultural group... it is going to be slow and long, and it's probably going to take like 10 lifetimes to do, but they've got to start it. It just needs to be done. (Pers. comm., 7 March, 2023)

Thus, the work of decolonising museums must begin with a long process of provenance research that engages directly with the source communities from which the cultural material was collected. At the same time, source communities must be consulted about how repatriation can be made. The interviews revealed strong views about whether PNG cultural material held in museums should be repatriated and on what grounds. Emma, an Australian-Papua New Guinean woman, argued:

In terms of repatriation, I don't think that we should have anything in museums at the moment that were acquired through unjust means. If that means half of the museums are empty, then so be it. They shouldn't be there in the first place. (Pers. comm., 13 August, 2022)

However, the repatriation of cultural material is a complex matter. There are issues to consider such as determining who the rightful owners are, whether they want their material returned, who will facilitate and fund the process, whether the material should be returned to source communities or be housed in the PNG National Museum and Art Gallery and who should have access rights. These are some of the practical issues that must be determined before repatriation can be facilitated. These concerns were also raised by Laura, a woman from the Gulf:

I think I was a little bit more militant, like everything needs to just come back to PNG. Then working with people that are in this space, people from the museum and having these conversations with them on the practicalities of where would we actually put this stuff is one thing, do people even want it back and if they do, how do we then support them to create these spaces and curate them in the way that they want to? Would it then be used for them, as a community, as a place to go for

community themselves? Would they then replicate the model of this museum to outsiders? There's a lot of big considerations in the conversation. What I think first and foremost, for those that were forcibly removed, the acknowledgement of what has been done historically needs to be more prominent. As a place to start. (Pers. comm., 18 May, 2023).

### **Conclusion: Vision, Value, Voices**

It is important that cultural heritage issues are addressed before we can begin the work of decolonisation of museums. To completely 'decolonise' a colonial institute will require an overhaul of its entire structure and principles. Indigenous standards, in this instance standards that follow the cultural protocols of the relevant Papua New Guinean source communities, need to be developed. This paper has looked at the effects of colonial collecting on Papua New Guineans and the views of Papua New Guineans in the diaspora in Australia concerning museums today. Museums throughout the west hold collections that were made during the colonisation of the tropical world. The manner in which objects from many of these collections are stored, displayed and managed reveal that colonial attitudes, ideas and practices continue into the present. Many museums are beginning to develop strategies towards decolonising their collections, but much work remains to be done. In questioning where to begin the decolonisation process in relation to Papua New Guinean colonial collections, this paper concludes that it should begin and end with Papua New Guinean vision, values, and voices.

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