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La-sisi Malangan Canoe



LA-SISI is the name of this malangan canoe carved by Hosea Linge of Libba village, New Ireland, Papua New Guinea. It is on loan to the South Australian Museum for display in the Pacific Gallery.

This canoe was modelled on a piece collected early this century, now in the Linden Museum, Stuttgart, Germany (Poignant 1967:78-9). The copyright to that *malangan* had been lost. The New Ireland Provincial Government has assumed responsibility for lost *malangan* copyrights. Permission to carve such *malangan* must be obtained from the Provincial authorities.



Map showing New Ireland and New Britain

The carving of this canoe was commissioned by Harold Gallasch of Hahndorf, South Australia and Neil McLeod of Melbourne, Victoria, in 1994. Traditional feasts and ceremonies were organised in which they paid shell money (*mies*), pigs, betel nuts and cash at various stages of the project. The carving and ceremonies were recorded by Neil McLeod on video tape and film, copies of which are being provided to the Provincial government for tourism promotion. Noah Lurang of the New Ireland Office of Culture and Tourism acted as liaison with the people of Libba village.

The first ceremony, to mark the commencement of the project, took place in July 1994 and required the construction of a thatched hut in which the carving was to take place.



*Getting the log from the forest.
Photo: Harold Gallasch.*

The canoe was carved from an eight metre log of *sabah* (*Alstonia scholaris*). 32 men felled the tree and dragged the log down to a road where they loaded it onto a small truck for delivery to Libba village. A feast and payments marked this stage of the project.

Within a week, Hosea Linge and his apprentices commenced carving and the canoe with its six seated and seven standing figures was ready in February 1995 for painting. white is from pulverised heated coral and in powder form is used in magic spells; black is from burnt *Calophyllum* nuts and is associated with warfare; red is an ochre and recalls the spirits of those who have died from violence (Clay 1987:66); juices from the roots of plants provide other red and yellow colours. (Continued on page 2)



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Painting was completed in April 1995 and preparations began for the final ceremony. For several days prior to the handover of the canoe on 12th May, groups of dancers arrived from distant villages. Pigs were killed and taro and sweet potato cooked in stone ovens. In the night, the completed canoe was transferred to a display hut near the beach at Libba village.

Next day, the people assembled, Provincial government officials arrived and Sala-Mangas, the chief (*mai-mai*) of Libba, initiated the celebrations with a small feast for everyone. The screen hiding the canoe was removed and shell valuables (*mies*) were paid over. Several masks from Marai village on Tatau Island then danced in front of the unveiled canoe.



Hosea Linge carving the canoe in Libba village.

Photo: Harold Gallasch.



Masked dancers from Marai village, Tatau Island, performing in front of the unveiled canoe at Libba village, 12th May 1995. Photo: Harold Gallasch

The carver, Hosea Linge, recounted what was known about this *malangan* and then the Minister for Culture and Tourism, Alison Bovi, ceremonially handed over the canoe and its copyright to the new owners, Harold Gallasch and Neil McLeod.

Hosea Linge died in October 1995, LA-SISI being his greatest work. Over the past 20 years the tradition of *malangan* has experienced revival. Several older men, such as Hosea Linge, improved their skills in the old style of carving and painting, and some have been training apprentices. LA-SISI is the most significant *malangan* carving produced by this revival of traditions to date.

MALANGAN

Malangan are objects which are made and displayed at ceremonies in memory of the recently dead; the word also applies to the ceremonies. *Malangan* images were briefly displayed in public and then taken away and destroyed or deposited in caves. Nowadays they may be sold to outsiders instead.

Malangan take many forms - carved and painted figures set vertically or horizontally, masks of many types, woven circular objects (*wowora*), and canoes with figures such as LA-SISI.

Most of the objects in the New Ireland display cases of the Pacific Gallery are *malangan* collected by Edgar Waite, a previous Director of this Museum, in 1918. There are also masks bought by the Museum during the Pacific Arts Symposium in Adelaide in April 1993.

New Irelanders have maintained many aspects of their traditional culture despite the pressures of colonisation, missionary evangelism, the money economy and the requirements of political independence on the world stage.



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This Malangan canoe is in the Linden Museum in Stuttgart, Germany.

One reason why *malangan* has endured is because it is not just associated with mourning; at every funerary ceremony, the opportunity is taken to reaffirm clan rights to land. This has the effect of reinforcing the solidarity of the clan. Küchler (1992:96) says: "Those who share land on account of sharing the memory of [a *malangan*] image call each other 'of one skin'. . .".

The LA-SISI canoe and its figures represent an ancestral migration and a claim to particular land. The transfer of the copyright to the carving does not transfer these rights to land but only the right to carve that particular image. Other images could make the same claim. It appears that the copyright to this particular image lapsed as it was never reproduced after the piece now in Stuttgart was obtained. In effect, it was forgotten. The provision of a photograph of the *malangan* canoe in Stuttgart overcame this loss of memory.



DESIGN MOTIFS

The head at each end of the canoe is that of the 'marselai' fish called *vardahl*. 'Marselai' is a Pidgin English word referring to spirits that live in the bush, in the rivers or the sea. They can take various forms which might include the physical characteristics of humans and/or animals, or of several animals at once. *Vardahl* has boar's tusks and a long tongue which suggests a snake or lizard's tongue.

Along the sides of the canoe are the banded sea snake (*Leticauda colubrina*) called *aralawizi*, with flying fish (*Exocoetidae spp.*), called *elalelilio*, on either side. The white petal-like forms between each set of snake-and-fish motifs represent splashing water.

The names of the ancestors represented by the figures have been forgotten. Most of them wear a white disc on their chest called a 'kap kap' in Pidgin or *arekap* in the local languages.

This is a badge of authority and can be worn only by a chief or an elder.

Examples of these can be seen in the Pacific Gallery's table-cases along the northern side of the Trobriand trading canoe.

The long-tailed bird associated with the first and eighth figures is the New Ireland drongo (*Dicrurus megarhynchus*), called *kriskau*. The white slats that look like horns on the head of the first figure represent two feathers from the tail of the *chilulu* bird. The figure is shown wearing a forehead band of tapa cloth dyed red with a design on it called *boto-lingit*; the septum of the nose is pierced and through the hole a carved piece of tridacna shell is represented.

The bands painted on the figure's arms are called *magil* and the leaves painted on the figure's chest are of the cordyline plant, called 'tangket' in Pidgin and *abung* in the



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local languages. People must pay respect to those entitled to wear these leaves.

The bird perched on the head of the second figure is the sea-eagle (*Haliaetus leucogaster*) or 'taranggau' in Pidgin, *manuengak* locally. The bird on the head of the fourth figure is the hornbill (*Aceros plicatus*) called 'kokomo' in Pidgin, *bangbange* locally. This bird is noted for its nesting habits, the male bringing food to the female and its chicks interred in a tree hollow until the chicks are mature enough to be let out, a metaphor for the process of male initiation in many New Guinea societies.

The sea hawk *seengor* sits on the head of the sixth figure, grasping a banded sea snake in its beak. The cockatoo *klanga*, stands on the head of the seventh person with a piece of cane in its beak; cane is the universal fastening material essential for the building of traditional structures in New Guinea.

Other birds represented include the seagull *adul*, a wild duck and a long-billed wading bird. The birds represent totems of the clans (*afabung*) of the people in the canoe. These clans are usually divided into two groups classified as 'Big Bird' and 'Small Bird' and people from one of these two groups must marry partners from the other group.



Word List

- Marselai - Fish called Vardehl
- Aralawizi - Sea Snake
- Elalelilio - Flying Fish
- Arekap - or Kap Kap; white disc on their chest by chiefs or elders.
- *Haliaetus leucogaster* or taranggau - Sea-eagle
- *Aceros plicatus*, Kokomo or bangbange - Hornbill
- seengor - Sea hawk
- Klanga - Cockatoo
- Adul - Seagull
- Mies - Money

