

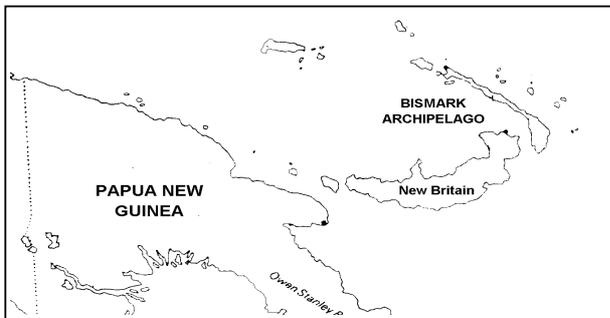


Pacific Islander News

Sulka Dance Masks



Hemlout dance mask named "Bethlehem", featuring a nativity scene. Used in a performance at Guma Mission in 1982. Photo courtesy PNG National Museum.



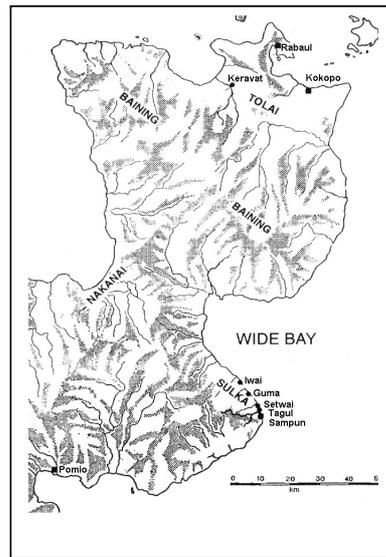
Two *susu* and two *keipa* masks also were collected and are on display. These masks had been made to celebrate the initiation of Sulka boys and girls during the Christmas school vacation period.

Christianity, brought to New Britain by missionaries of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart late last century, has been a feature of Sulka life for several decades but has not displaced all traditional beliefs. In

The Sulka people live along the southern shore of Wide Bay in East New Britain Province. They have maintained their traditional dances, songs and masks up to the present day.

The large umbrella-like masks on display at the eastern end of the Pacific Gallery were made by the Sulka people. They call these masks *hemlout*.

A joint South Australian Museum/Papua New Guinea National Museum project in January 1993 collected a *hemlout* mask to bring back to Adelaide to provide a comparison with a rare double-headed *hemlout* obtained in 1917 from Major H. Balfour Ogilvy. It was also intended that the mask be danced at the opening of the 5th Pacific Arts Symposium, held in Adelaide during April 1993.



January 1982, a *hemlout* mask was danced to celebrate the induction of a Sulka man into the Franciscan priesthood.

This mask, which was collected by the PNG National Museum, featured a nativity scene below the "umbrel-la"— Mary, Joseph and two angels surrounding Jesus in a manger. The mask was named "Bethlehem".



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A similarly complex mask was danced in January 1993 which illustrated an episode in the myth of the Sulka ancestor named Noot. The story tells how Noot was so angered by a quarrel with his younger brother that he considered the possibility of cannibalism but rejected it in favour of eating pigs. This mask was named "Noot".

A *Hemlout* mask takes several months to make but the performance only lasts for about ten minutes. It is danced surrounded by a crowd of men, the women watching from a distance. Towards the end of the performance, everyone stands back and the dancer dips the mask several times, so that the "umbrella" is vertical to the ground, to show off the design underneath.

The women are strictly forbidden from observing the construction of the masks and from knowing that they are danced by their men—the masks are "spirits".

Following the ceremony, the mask is secretly destroyed. As it is a spirit, there must be no evidence remaining that it is made by the men.

Collecting the masks for a museum requires tactful negotiation and removal under cover of darkness, unobserved by the women and children. The transport of these masks to Adelaide was done with the permission and full co-operation of the relevant Sulka men and of the Provincial and National cultural authorities.

This exhibition is subject to continuing approval by Sulka elders. It must be removed if they consider there is a risk of secrets being divulged to Sulka women. However, they do appreciate the interest shown in their culture by foreigners and accept that this may be expressed as a peculiar desire to display objects which normally they would have destroyed.



The susu mask has a fringe of long leaves attached round its base and is worn on top of the head; the wearer has another "skirt" of long leaves suspended from shoulder straps. When the "spirit" stands straight, it appears to be over seven feet (2.1 metres) tall; when it crouches it shrinks almost by half. Susu masks are danced several in a line. Photo: Tagul village 1993; © SA Museum.

The other types of Sulka masks are also "spirits". The *susu* mask consists of a cone-shaped head in human form, sometimes shown wearing a hat, with a skirt of long glistening palm leaves reaching the ground. These masks are danced several in a line.

The *keipa* mask is a simple woven cap, usually painted with eyes and surrounded by a "skirt" of long leaves. It is used to enforce the provision of food to the men making the *hemlout* and *susu*. It also bursts in on the women's dance on the first day of the ceremonial food presentations and whips the people who are to receive the food. (Continues on page 3).





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During the masked dances, songs are sung by the men and women separately, accompanied by the rhythm of handdrums. The *susu* and *hemlaut* masks are danced as part of the ceremonies performed at significant events such as the initiation of boys and girls, marriages and funerals.

A song to accompany the dancing of the *susu* masks reveals something of the nature of Sulka poetry:

A man was standing on top of a hill overlooking a village called Indaru when he heard an echo, bouncing from a cliff, of a woman singing. Out of the waterfall came her two sons; they were as beautiful as a pair of white cockatoos.

They were sitting on top of the cliff, one on each side of the waterfall. The man

saw them both and as he fixed his gaze they merged into the white flowing waterfall and kept flowing and flowing.

*The *susu* mask is dancing like a flower blowing in the wind. Its skirt like leaves is swinging to and fro. The mask is like the flower dancing on the stem.*

Further information:

Corbin, G. A. 1990 Salvage Art History among the Sulka of Wide Bay... pp.67-83 in A. Hanson & L. Hanson, Art and Identity in Oceania. Bathurst, NSW: Crawford House Press.