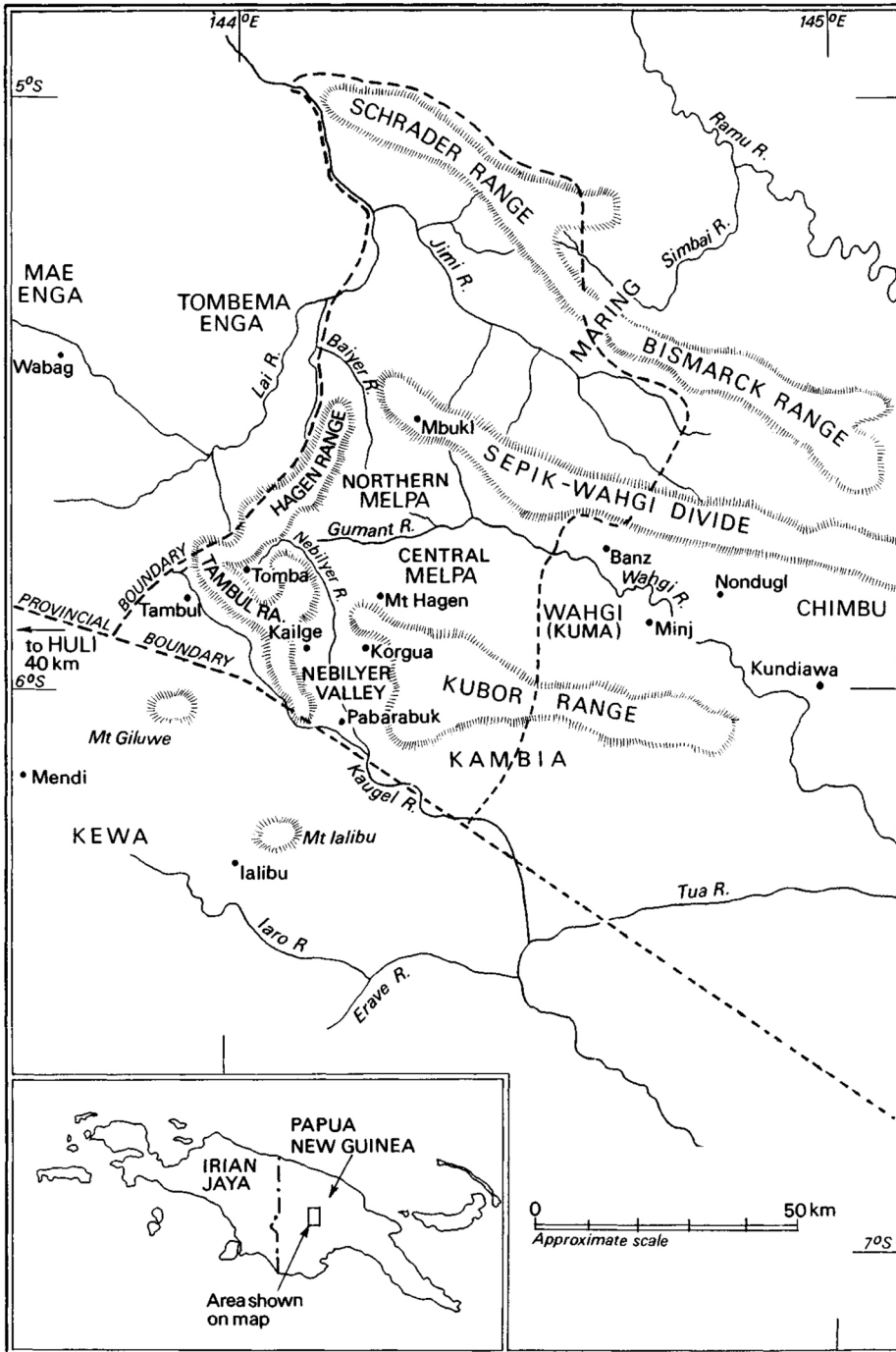


*Navigating for a Place in the Museum:  
Stories of Encounter and Engagement  
between the Old and the New from the  
Highlands of Papua New Guinea*

*Michael Mel*

There has long been a need for privileging Indigenous voices and concerns in the context of ethnographic collections and museums, and voices crying out this need have become more audible over the last century (Smith 1999; see also Smith; Kim, this issue). In response, Western collectors and curators and Indigenous artists and community members have participated as partners or collaborators in the collection of materials and the designing of exhibitions (Stanley 2008). However, these approaches, while embracing Indigenous subjects and objects, have often continued to be steeped in Western ideologies regarding ethnographic collections and their display. More recently, collection and exhibition practices in art galleries and museums in and around Australia and the Pacific have begun to move beyond the confines of Western conceptions of museums and art spaces, as well as other particular sociomaterial environments (see Smith, this issue). Notwithstanding such trends, the need to talk about cultural materials from an Indigenous point of view remains. As a member of the Mogeï community of the Central Melpa area of the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Highlands (map 1), I ask: What do cultural objects mean when engaged in museum and gallery spaces? How do these objects come to be used? What is the worldview in which they make sense and have purpose and value? And how do they connect the environments and relations of viewers to nature in the museum to the environments from which the objects hail?

This article focuses on two performances of encounter and engagement in an art gallery and a museum, respectively: *Ples Namel* (1996) and *Rituals of Seduction: Birds of Paradise* (2010). These performances set out to challenge pervasive ideas regarding the showing of cultural objects that



MAP 1 The Melpa areas in the Central Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Adapted with permission from Francesca Merlan and Alan Rumsey's *Ku Waru: Language and Segmentary Politics in the Western Nebilyer Valley, Papua New Guinea*. (Cambridge University Press 1991, xv).

were removed from the societies that made them and thus from the originating environments through which they were mobilized and enacted and through which they gained meaning and efficacy. Importantly, the potency of such originating moments includes the profound connections between natural and cultural environments in the objects' homelands. The performances' art gallery and museum exhibition contexts were reframed not only physically but also through a conceptual approach that allowed the performers to represent, share, and experience PNG Highlands culture in these spaces with those that consented to witness the occasion. Cultural materials were reconfigured in order to facilitate engagement with members of the community and to enable them to carry their legacies and tell their stories in their own ways. Moreover, the Mogeï's cultural environment was brought to the fore, experienced, and shared—from the personal to the social and vice versa—in order to constitute or reconstitute relationships through performance processes, as I explain in more detail later. In a Mogeï worldview, the Mogeï person is not necessarily the master of his or her universe but rather an important component in relation to a saturated environment in which everything is interdependent (Narokobi 1983).

*Ples Namel* and *Rituals of Seduction* were, for the Indigenous participants, opportunities that built on lifeworlds in which “all the things have always been a part of our daily mix of life—they [were] not hung on walls to be seen by crowds of people” (West and Cobb 2005, 519). The Queensland Art Gallery and the Australian Museum, respectively, brought together PNG dancers and Australian audiences in the process of decolonization, offering opportunities for all parties to converse, converge, and diverge from one another. The performances provided platforms to dismantle and dislodge the imprints of history. They also allowed others to engage in dialogue. Between us, performers and onlookers, we needed to break down the ready-made frames of reference and dismantle processes and conventions of meaning. Such encounters should provoke a sense of disruption and feelings of unsettlement. In both *Ples Namel* and *Rituals of Seduction*, there arose opportunities for both performers and onlookers to be entangled and intertwined in a synergy of experiences and collective memories and to be connected through shared histories.

In this article, I first provide an overview of the history of material entanglement between Indigenous Papua New Guineans and Europeans. Then, because the presentations of *Ples Namel* and *Rituals of Seduction* must be materially and spiritually grounded, I present an account of the

Mogei worldview. Following this, I describe both exhibitions as they were performed and then conclude with a summary.

## A HISTORY OF MATERIAL ENTANGLEMENT

Papua New Guinea, prior to its colonization by Europeans, had numerous Indigenous communities—each with its own art, history, language, values, and beliefs passed down over many generations. Communities sometimes fought wars with their neighbors, which they resolved through the brokering of peace (usually accompanied by grand ceremonies), and they established various trading ties. Throughout the ages, they experienced many shifts and changes in their ways of life (M Strathern 1988; Thomas 1991). The most dramatic changes, however, began over a century ago when colonial powers divided and claimed everything on and around the islands. Imperial representatives established outposts at select locations and imposed new laws to control the population. To entice and engage the locals, the colonizers brought with them new charms, knickknacks, tools, clothes, and numerous other materials. The new objects beguiled and mesmerized the Indigenous communities, while colonial figures were drawn to the material aspects of the local cultures. At the same time, local tools, weapons of various description, costumes belonging to men, women, and children, and masks and carvings of extraordinary design and construction all overwhelmed the colonizers' eyes.

The initial encounters between Europeans and the Mogei began in the early 1930s with the arrival of gold prospectors, including Michael and Danny Leahy, who were accompanied by James Taylor, an assistant district officer, and Ken Spinks, a surveyor from New Guinea Goldfields, Ltd. They were among the first Europeans to facilitate contact between the Mogei *wamp* (the Mogei people) and the *kund wamp* (the white people) (Willis 1969). Father William Ross, a Catholic priest of the Divine Word Missionaries, soon followed and was among the first missionaries to contact the Mogei.

Not long after such early encounters, prospectors began collecting cultural materials from the Mogei communities in exchange for new objects like mirrors, pieces of fabric, steel axe blades, and knives. Government representatives established systems of law and order with local leadership, and, through these, they too collected materials as ethnographic objects for the colonial government (Bell 2017). *Mbu rui* (axes), *kumba reipa* (shields), *kupanda tembin* (long spears), *bal omb* (male aprons),

*kak wulana* (bark belts), *peng depa* (male wigs), *kei wagl* (feather head-dresses), *diding* (hand drums), and numerous other artifacts were gathered and became scientific specimens, ethnographic objects, artworks, or commodities. The new *kur rui* (devil's axe), *kur koia* (devil's knife), and *mulgh bal* (airy net bag) received in return held much fascination for the Mogei, who were initially inquisitive about the new gadgets and gizmos and then impressed when they saw what could be achieved through their use. They sought to acquire these items and to engage in trade with the new European arrivals, bringing sweet potatoes, bananas, pigs, firewood, bows, arrows, spears, and shields in hopes of exchanging them for the new and different (O'Hanlon 2000). According to the prospectors, the Mogei were happy to use the new *tarpor* (shovels) to help dig and harness the waterways as the fossickers searched for gold nuggets. For their efforts, the locals were rewarded with salt, tobacco, knives, axes, shovels, and other trinkets.

This is just a snapshot of the early encounters and engagement between Europeans and Indigenous communities in one part of what is now Papua New Guinea. The charm and enchantment of the new and different provided for both sides' profound experiences and for the transformation of their respective environments, which encompassed both material things and social settings. This entanglement between Indigenous and European ways of accommodating the cultural materials of others is a central aspect of this article, as both its legacy and culturally rooted notions of objects' relationships with people and the surrounding environment influence museum spaces and practices to this day. Cultural materials within Indigenous communities have their own histories, taxonomies, and interconnectivities between people, places, knowledges, and philosophies. For any member of a community to learn and know the community's cultural materials would take a lifetime, including making, rituals and other performance, and use. All of this would involve an interconnected knowledge and awareness of the materials' and the community's ancestry and history, as well as of the physical and spiritual environments in which things have come to be—an array and assemblage of knowledge that is as vast as the universe.

## THE MOGEI CONTEXT

In many Western perspectives, the world and human beings form a dichotomy: the world is separate from the person, and the person makes sense of the world. This enables people to construct and impose meaning. In the

Mogei context, an individual's capacity to live and work is referred to as *nanga noman*. *Nanga noman* relates to an individual's feelings, thoughts, interests, fears, knowledge, and desire, and it is only realized through the idea of *mbu*. *Mbu* is the living relationship between a person and the world—a tripartite relationship between *pulg wamp* (all people living and dead), *mbu wamp* (individuals in a family and within a community), and *maei mbu* (the physical environment and all things around us). *Mbu* and *nanga noman* are not separate entities but rather a singular and total entity. *Mbu* shapes *nanga noman* as *nanga noman* recognizes and shapes *mbu*. This means that the world is not dichotomized into inner and outer realms or divided into material and spiritual things. There is only *mbu*. Likewise, there are no feelings separate from thoughts. There is only *nanga noman*. The two are intertwined and can only be known and lived as such.

This way of seeing and knowing affects the way we talk about many aspects of life, such as land, time, spirituality, teaching, learning, responsibilities, and expectations. Mogei people perceive and know the world as interconnected and interwoven through the concept of *kanamb*—to see—which refers to seeing with the eyes. In the Mogei context, we can also “see” through the ears and nose. Our skin and hair can see. We also see in dreams. Experiences of the present moment in *nanga noman* are always in contention with *mbu*. There is this tension between what is perceived through *kanamb* and what are known to be the expectations, values, beliefs, knowledge, histories, social networks, and relationships of our reality (the tripartition of *mbu*). The encounters through and in *kanamb* are not about confirming the world as it is—solid, secure, and unitary. Instead, our *kanamb* experiences challenge our conceptions of the world, and *mbu* is brought into sharper focus. In this context, then, where do art and cultural materials fit?

Mogei people do not objectify cultural items as art. That said, Mogei individuals do sense and recognize balance and beauty. In the past, *kin* (kina shells), *mbu rui* (stone axes), and *kupanda tembin* were highly sought after when well-crafted by their makers. *Mbu rui*, *wal* (woven net bags), and other skillfully crafted objects were made to be a part of the daily mix of life, and *mburui*, *kupanda tembin*, *wal*, *kin*, and other manufactured items became a part and extension of a person through their use, care, and upkeep. These cultural materials were therefore not meant to become objects for study or to be hung and admired. Rather, they were and are still considered to be living, breathing extensions of people's livelihood and well-being in which objects and people are entangled as part

of the vitality of the process of living (M Strathern 1988; Bell and Geismar 2009).

For Mogeï communities, it is not the object as an entity that is of importance, a crucial point illustrated by the *rumul* (figure 1). Each *rumul*'s creation necessitated much scraping, polishing, and cutting of a large *kin* (mother-of-pearl shell; can also refer to the completed *rumul*) by a knowledgeable and skilled man. The shells originated in the coastal areas and ended up in the Highlands, demonstrating sophisticated trade routes between the coastal communities and those in the interior. The iridescent inner surface of each shell (where the pearl would have grown) was turned downward and placed on a platform, and the outside surface was scraped to remove coral and reveal a yellow nacre-like surface, which was then polished. The hinge end of the shell was cut out, forming a *U* shape, and the *kin* was then mounted on an oval-shaped wooden surface using *kilt* (resin). A small row of tiny bamboo pipes was arranged above the *U*. Finally, the face of the *rumul* (the side with the *kin* and bamboo pipes) was covered with *rongma kela* (finely ground red ochre). A length of net bag was bent into a *U* shape, and each end was placed on the back of the *rumul*, behind the row of bamboo pipes above the *kin*. The net bag was held in place with *kilt* and served as a handle. The *rumul* could be held up by hand or hung around the neck and displayed on the chest. If a *rumul* was admired by many, the maker would usually require a large pig from the prospective owner in exchange. The owner, in a bridal gifting ceremony, would give several *rumuls* to the bride's family and relatives. The beneficiaries would then share the *rumuls* among their family members, and the new owners would keep them. During events in which the owners were compelled to display and gift the *rumuls*, up to fifty or sometimes even a hundred or more of these *rumuls* (together with others that would have been accumulated) would be taken out, displayed, and given away in a *moka* (ceremony). One or two *rumuls* obtained during the *moka*, in the hands of new owners, would be gifted to in-laws during a coming-of-age occasion. The *rumul* served as a platform on which relationships were borne, friendships were made, or peace was brought about between communities. Sometimes a *rumul* that had been gifted to a community would return to the original person or a close relative. It would be admired and then touched up with a new batch of *kilt* and a fresh coat of *rongma kela*. The "new" *rumul* would glow, shine, and shimmer and in time would bring wealth, health, and prestige to a person, a family, and, in turn, a community.

Also important for Mogeï communities is the establishment of a *maei*



FIGURE 1 *Moka kin* (mounted pearlshell for *moka* exchange). Mid twentieth century, collected in 1967. Melpa people, Mounth Hagen, Western Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea. Gold-lipped oyster shell (*Pinctada maxima*), kilt tree resin (*Rutaceae Evodiella sp*), red ochre pigment, bamboo, 26 × 30.5 × 2.5 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW). Gift of Stan Moriarty, 1978. Photo by Jenni Carter, AGNSW. Copyright Melpa people, under the endorsement of the Pacific Islands Museums Association’s Code of Ethics. Reprinted with permission.

*mbu*, as evident in the *mbu* tripartite of *mbu wamp*, *pulg wamp*, and *maei mbu*. Literally, *maei* means “land” and *mbu* means “seed.” To plant a seed is to *mbu munda*. And to reason and gain knowledge and wisdom is to attain *mbu noman*. The establishment *maei mbu* translates into the making of a physical space identified as the *moka pena* (A Strathern 1971; Vicedom and Tischner 1983). It is the central space where the community comes together to hold talks and conduct ceremonies. Historically, when forebears came into existence, the place where this occurred was known

as *maei weangnti* (land of creation). On the *maei weangnti*, a site was selected and cleared. The *moka pena* was built, and around its borders special cordyline plants, trees, bamboo plants, and shrubs were planted. In the center of the *moka pena*, a *nti malt walg* (a sapling of a ceremonial tree from high up in the forest) was planted and named the *pulga mbu*. Usually it was fenced in to keep people and animals away. A *manga rapa pulguim* (men's round house) was built at the *peng* (head) of the *moka pena*. Behind the *manga rapa*, there was usually a special space called the *kur kona* (spirit place). After the establishment of the *moka pena* and the *manga rapa*, in the very first *kur kona*, a *kur waup* (creation ceremony) was conducted. As a major part of the *kur waup*, pigs were slaughtered and cooked in earth ovens. Portions of cooked pork were shared with families and relatives. A selection of heads, backbones, kidneys, and livers from the cooked pork was consumed in the enclosure. Male dancers, who prepared in seclusion, would come out dancing the *kur waup*. The *kur waup* ceremonies related to ancestors (*pulg wamp*), who were called forth to the ceremonial ground. The *nti malt walg*, or *pulga mbu*, referenced this relationship (A Strathern 1971; Ketan 2004). As the *pulga mbu* grew on the *maei mbu*, it provided a connection with the *mbu wamp* and enabled communities to grow and prosper.

All events, including coming-of-age gift giving, bridal exchanges, maternal acknowledgments, peace ceremonies, and mortuary observances, took place at the *moka pena*. The lower jaws from the heads of the pigs that had been consumed would be hung on the branches of the cordylines, casuarinas, or *nti malt* as indicators of appeasement and continuity among all. Once the *moka pena* was established in this way, it was considered a living, breathing public space, a civic center in which family, relatives, friends, and neighbors could come and gather. This center space, or *ples namel*, was both physical and metaphorical—a symbol for all living beings to congregate to sing, dance, dialogue, share, reconcile, and connect. The processes of gifting and reciprocity formed new and consolidated existing relationships among individuals and communities. Some of the very old *moka penas*, now disused, can still be seen; the *pulga mbu* or some of the cordyline plants and casuarinas that still grow there serve as reminders.

There is one more aspect of the Mogeï context related to framing and embedding a performance or exhibition that needs eliciting here before turning to *Ples Namel* and *Rituals of Seduction*. At the *moka pena*, during the ceremonies of peace making and gift giving, body adornment is a key element and includes both the decorated body itself and the materi-

als used for body adornment, such as feathers, net bags, woven aprons, leaves, facial designs, shells, beads, and countless other objects (A Strathern 1971; O'Hanlon 1989). As mentioned earlier, the Mogeï view is that the body is not an enclosed unit or entity separated from the world outside. People's group affiliations in terms of patrilineal and matrilineal links connect them to their communities. This happens through *mema* (blood), which establishes important relationships between individuals, especially through matrilineal links. This is signified by the bestowing of gifts at various life stages, from birth and the cutting of the umbilical cord and burial of the placenta, through to old age and death, when the maternal parents, uncles, aunts, and cousins receive offerings. Everything that happens must be done to acknowledge, value, and build on these links. Additionally, ancestry and historical links and connections to in-laws and allies that provide support can represent complex levels of affiliation and types of relationships between Mogeï individuals and their families and communities. These kinds of relationships, as well as their depth and quality, lie in each person's *noman*.

*Noman* encompasses a person's thoughts, plans, activities, past deeds, and prospects and often includes information desired by other members of the family, other subclans, or indeed tribal rivals. There are many ways a person's *noman* can be revealed. The person may share information; a leader, by inference, may provide a hint through a speech; or another individual may report on or tell of the person's *noman*. Events can also be sources of information. An elder, through dreams and the juxtaposing of characters and activities encountered in sleep, may provide some clues about an event that has happened or might happen. When someone is contemplating something, the call of certain birds at odd times or a sudden change in the weather may provide signs of what might be in store for the observer or for others, depending on the former's *noman*. Often the reader of the signs in the landscape may interpret them as ominous. Questions and reflections proliferate as to how and why these premonitions have been revealed to the observer's *noman*.

There are other ways to read or interpret a *noman*. For example, a sweet potato harvest in huge number and size; a banana plant whose bunches are numerous with sizable fruit; a pig or pigs whose skin is glowing and smooth with thinning bristles; and a chubby child smiling, interacting, and responding are all said to be windows into the state of the owner's or parent's *noman*. All is well when the land and everything the person touches and connects with is well. Similarly, an observer may see that a

wig, apron, and other accessories sit well on a person's skin. Indeed, it is said that a person's goodness is visible when his or her skin glows and imbues warmth. When the opposite is sighted, and a person's appearance is haggard and scruffy, his or her skin dry and flaking, the observer may seek out discussions with the person's family or the community, often in secrecy, to dissect and interpret how and why this is the case. In these cases, stories are told and rumors abound.

Mogei communities pay close attention to the grand occasions when groups of clans get together for exchange ceremonies, which are often undertaken through the *moka* ceremony. In the past, gifts of pigs, *rumuls*, and cassowaries were presented to express appreciation of allies following wars (A Strathern 1971). Other times, when allies lost warriors in conflicts, the loss of lives was acknowledged, and gifts were given to support and assist in healing the pain and suffering endured. Today, as in the past, *moka* ceremonies call for very fine embellishment and adornment of the skin (which for the Mogei person is inclusive of the whole body). Feathers of various birds, marsupial furs, cordyline leaves, *rumuls*, *diding*, *kupanda*, and many other materials are gathered and brought together to decorate the skin. The maternal uncles adorn the dancers (men and women), who, once fully decked out, perform dances on the *moka pena*.

For the community, this adornment served as an indicator of each participant's *noman*, similar to what Michael O'Hanlon observed in the Wahgi context:

The body, and skin in particular, is felt to have this authenticatory capacity during the daily round, but especially on corporate ceremonial occasions when people decorate elaborately and dance before friends, rivals and enemies, adorned in pelts and plumes, belts and aprons. . . . The existence of internal treachery, of unreciprocated debts, the true state of relations with maternal kin, are thought to reveal themselves in the condition of the skin: in whether it looks glossy, glinting, glowing, clear, and sparkling, or dull, dark, ashy, flaky and sallow. (2005, 63)

For Mogei people, the sovereignty of the body and its adornment lies in the sound of the dancers' voices, the shimmering feathers, the odor and glistening of the oil on their skin. The effectiveness of the experience relates to the impact of the performance on the onlookers. It is about a personal and embodied experience, an "undeniable experience of the present" (Williams 1977). The revelatory nature of the skin and its reception

by the observer provide an important nexus of encounter and engagement in the Mogei context, as well as in *Ples Namel* and *Rituals of Seduction*.

## THE PERFORMANCES

One of the initial concerns for each performance was how to translate the respective art gallery and museum exhibition spaces into *mbu* and *moka pena* as conceived and articulated in the Mogei context. While the cultural objects located in each institution could not be separated from their histories as items divorced from their original contexts for the sake of research and display, the Mogei worldview required fostering an environment that allowed for and encouraged a relational approach to viewing people, land, and things. This meant grappling with the embedded ethnography and (art) history that has shaped these spaces and collections (Thomas and Losche 1999), while placing emphasis on Indigenous systems of knowledge. Exhibition spaces and similar sociomaterial environments must offer and cultivate opportunities for both audiences and source communities to take part in encounter, engagement, and dialogue, and both *Ples Namel* and *Rituals of Seduction* serve as examples of how this can be done.

### *Ples Namel*

*Ples Namel* was a collaborative performance installation by my partner, the late Anna Mel, and myself. It was one of four works selected to represent Papua New Guinea in the second Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT2), which took place at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane in September 1996. The preparation of the space for *Ples Namel* involved replicating the village center of the Hagen area of the PNG Highlands. In keeping with the Mogei *ples namel*, we created a miniature rectangular space on the lawn outside the gallery. Along the perimeter of the space, we placed cordyline plants, with bamboos at each corner. The middle was bisected lengthwise by two casuarina trees planted near the edges. We placed a large (1.5 by 2.5 meter) picture frame on the edge of the *moka pena*, and around and in front of the frame, we set out an array of feathers, beads, shells, necklaces, oil containers, leaves, paints, brushes, water, and various odds and ends that we had been gifted by members of our community at home for the performance. The gifts were to be reciprocated after the performance when Anna and I returned home.

Inside the dressing room, Anna changed into the women's *bilas*, or body adornment from the Mogei community. I changed into a lavalava

and singlet and wore garlands of plastic tropical frangipani around my neck, over my shoulders, and around my head. I picked up the *kundu* drum and struck it to sense its pliability. We went out and headed toward the *moka pena*. We walked along the line of cordyline plants and then into the frame, where we stood and looked out at the onlookers who had come to watch the performance. I stepped out of the frame and, facing the onlookers, shouted a monologue to the sound of the *kundu*:

Come, ladies and gentlemen, to the world of the native. Located here for all to see, framed and captured. Come and see for yourselves the specimen of a native. Never seen before. Now made present before your very eyes. But, ladies and gentlemen, we should allow the native to sing, dance, and perform for us. Come and help decorate her, and she will perform. Who wants to decorate her? Please . . . yes, thank you, up you come.

I moved around and through the audience waiting for someone to volunteer. For a brief moment, there was an air of uncertainty among the audience about what was unfolding in front of their eyes. I chose people randomly, and they walked up to the space. I told each one to select an item that had been laid out and put it on Anna. Adhering to the Mogei performance process, we started with the face painting. One of the participant's hands dabbed some blue over Anna's face with the brush, following the designs on a painted face in a small photograph (figure 2).

Another person's hands followed, painting red and white stripes down Anna's cheeks. These hands were shaking. I encouraged the hands to be careful not to smudge the paint. Soon her face was painted. I moved over and again randomly picked members to put the beads, necklaces, and shells around Anna's neck, each item carefully placed. Next, other selected onlookers planted the plumes atop her wig. The final stage in Mogei body adornment is to put oil on the skin, usually using leaves to apply the oil and the palms of the hands to massage it in. I selected a couple for the task and poured a sizeable amount of almond oil into their cupped hands. I then gestured for them to rub and spread the oil over Anna's body from shoulders to toes. One of them was very slow to touch Anna's skin, and she ultimately decided not to rub the oil on her body. The other member was encouraged and took to rubbing Anna all over her body, from shoulders to breasts, sides, thighs, legs, and feet. Finally, Anna was ready. I thanked all those who came up and decorated the native. She would now perform. I beat the *kundu* and sang a women's song for the dance, and Anna followed and danced (figure 3).



FIGURE 2 Anna Mel preparing for *Ples Namel* (Our Place) with Michael Mel at the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT2). Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 27–29 September 1996. Photo by Andrew Campbell. Reproduced with permission of the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art.



FIGURE 3 Anna Mel and Michael Mel perform *Ples Namel* (Our Place) during the APT2 opening ceremony. Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 27–29 September 1996. Photo by Andrew Campbell. Reproduced with permission of the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art.

After several songs and dances, I asked for members of the audience to remove the feathers, beads, and other accoutrements and leave them on the side for packing away. Several volunteers willingly stepped up to remove the objects and lay them out on the prepared cloth to protect them from dust and dirt. Finally, we bowed to the onlookers and walked back to the dressing room amid applause.

*Ples Namel* represented an encounter. Historically, such encounters led to the collection of cultural objects, which were taken by collectors away from the original communities. These communities were objectified and categorized through imposed languages as objects of curiosity and scientific inquiry. With the evolving disciplines of anthropology and museology, the objects became specimens, artifacts, or art. Very rarely were these objects named or displayed with reverence for and recognition of the Mogeï worldview and its manifestations. In the context of an art exhibition, when *Ples Namel* was selected for APT2, every aspect of presentation and encounter was predefined. Papua New Guinea as a postcolonial site had a meaning in its own right. Collections littered the corridors of museums. The Queensland Art Gallery building and its surroundings were defined. This was done so that people who came to look at and talk about the activities and events of APT2 (writers, critics, and the general public) could operate within a familiar set of protocols. Within such a context, *Ples Namel* could be cogently located within these frames of reference and then dismantled and constructed as knowledge. However, in our view, *Ples Namel* was not to be another object from Melanesia. It was an activity that had its own rules of behavior and conduct, and its meaning ultimately derived from within the Mogeï context.

The main performance area was reconstructed in keeping with the *moka pena* as a demarcated outdoor space. As collaborators in the performance of *Ples Namel*, members of the audience were asked to come around the *moka pena*. They were asked to contribute to and engage in the performance. In the Mogeï context, audience members attended each performance by choice, as family, ally, or enemy. Each person was prepared to take up the role of onlooker, participant, collaborator, or all three with an air of expectancy—within their own *noman*. As participants came to be part of *Ples Namel*, the feathers, beads, shells, and oil seemed disconnected from their familiar museum environments—without any display cases or labels. The objects were also far removed from their Indigenous makers and the conventions of use and meaning within the dynamic cultural and natural environment in which they were created and that they in turn helped create. From a Western perspective, this view made sense. But

the purpose of *Ples Namel* was to bring Western ways of defining cultural objects into an encounter and engagement with Mogeï ways of knowing and making meaning. *Ples Namel* was a collaborative endeavor, focused not on cross-cultural dialogue and discussion but rather on embodied encounter and engagement (Thomas and Losche 1999). Arjun Appadurai's notion of the "social life of things" (1986) and Alfred Gell's insights into the "agency of art" (1998) resonate with the Mogeï perspective on objects as conduits that pierce and reveal.

In closing this section, allow me to use the analogy of a territory and a map, with ethnographic objects, colonial histories and their legacies, and *moka pena*, *mbu*, *pulg wamp*, *noman*, and ancestry being the territory and *Ples Namel* in its discursive performance being the map. The placement of the map over the territory was the embodied performance. It was a process of simulating for both performers and audience members the Indigenous performance processes. Importantly, the effectiveness of the encounter and engagement could not be based on the conceptual knowledge held by those involved. Rather, the focus was on body adornment, the medium through which an awareness of a relationship was brought into existence in the performance. It was about selecting a feather, a shell, a circle of beads to adorn the dancer. Participants who were eager or willing to join in found themselves required to submit their bodies. What was real and what was play? The final assemblage created and installed on the dancers did not indicate who had brought what or put what where on the dancer. It was no longer about the objects or about the person—the assemblage became a flurry of movement and color. As they decorated Anna's body, some participants showed signs of reluctance, such as shaking, while others did not. In this context, as all of the participants decorated and embellished her skin, to paraphrase O'Hanlon (2005), Anna danced before friends, rivals, and enemies, adorned in pelts and plumes, belts and apron. If there had been any internal treachery or unreciprocated debts, then this would have become apparent in the condition of her skin. In *Ples Namel*, there was an opportunity for a meeting between the participants through the movement of and via objects, which could reveal the true state of each participant's relations (M Strathern 1979; Gell 1998).

### *Rituals of Seduction: Birds of Paradise*

The plans for the exhibition *Rituals of Seduction: Birds of Paradise* began in September 2010 when Yvonne Carrillo-Huffman, a senior collections officer at the Australian Museum in Sydney, visited the PNG Highlands.

She met with Dilen Doiki, Klinit Barry, Kai Boma, and me to plan a trip to interview, photograph, and film various cultural groups in the Highlands. She also aimed to connect with communities from the Wahgi, Jimi, and Huli areas in order to establish opportunities for the communities and the museum to enter into dialogue in relation to the cultural collections from the Highlands housed in the Australian Museum, largely brought by early patrol officers, missionaries, and members of the colonial administration. The communities' areas of interest for the exhibition had been identified based on their performance traditions. The museum collection included a range of materials from Highlands communities: woven aprons, bark belts, cane belts, armbands, male wigs, shells, beads, marsupial furs, and a multitude of feathers from birds of paradise, parrots, owls, and eagles. One of the first key individuals who met with Yvonne was the late Chief Koken Kauke, a leader of the Golgoi Cultural Centre in Minj. His community had prepared a *geru peng* (a large wig) for presentation to the prime minister of Papua New Guinea, Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare, when he arrived in Minj to declare Jiwaka as a new province of Papua New Guinea. Koken's cultural knowledge and his collection of costumes during the presentation made an impression on those who witnessed the occasion, so he was selected to participate in a performance at the Australian Museum in 2011.

Following the celebrations in Minj, the team went to the 2010 Mount Hagen Cultural Show in Papua New Guinea. Among the numerous performing groups participating in the event was a Huli group led by Chief Tom Tika and including dancers Magabe Pale, Tucus Panda, and Thomas Tendewa from Tari. The group, decked out in their wigs and plumes, had their faces painted bright yellow with spots of red and white to accentuate their eyes. They planned for a detailed interview and filming of their wigs, plumes, and body adornment at the Kumul Lodge. Photos and film footage were taken of the group dressing up and performing. In April 2011, the group members, including Chief Koken Kauke and Chief Tom Tika, were invited, together with their *bilas*, to Sydney to participate in the *Rituals of Seduction* exhibition. There was much anticipation and excitement since none of them had been overseas before.

For five days prior to and following the performance, the dancers stayed and interacted with members of the audience. They gave floor talks about the plumes, body adornment, songs, and dances from the PNG Highlands. Members of the audience could come close to the dancers and talk and interact with them, focusing on the feathers and other adornment that



FIGURE 4 Dancers Koken Kauke, Tom Tika, Magabe Pale, Tucus Panda, and Thomas Tendewa prepare for their public performance during the exhibition *Rituals of Seduction: Birds of Paradise* at the Australian Museum in April 2011. Photo by Yvonne Carrillo-Huffman. Reproduced with permission.

decorated their bodies. The group was also able to visit the Australian Museum's collection of objects from the members' respective areas. Members selected items and provided additional information on their construction, use, and value. The *geru peng* brought by Chief Koken and used in the performances was gifted to the Australian Museum's cultural collection. A wig, axe, string bag, jaws harp, and pig-tusk necklace were also given to members of the Australian Museum in appreciation of the exhibition's focus on Papua New Guinea.

Inside the Australian Museum's atrium, the dancers' bodies were embellished with shells, armbands, hand-knit aprons, necklaces, carved bones, marsupial furs, oil, and select leaves from the local Australian environs (figure 4). This demonstrated that people, land, and everything on and around permeate and are infused with each other (Teaiwa 2014).

Songs were sung in unison to the beat of *kundu* as fully adorned warriors stepped lightly, performed gentle pliés, and moved with grace while the plumes of the birds of paradise swayed back and forth and glimmered



FIGURE 5 Koken Kauke, Tom Tika, Magabe Pale, Tucus Panda, and Thomas Tendewa perform during the exhibition *Rituals of Seduction: Birds of Paradise* at the Australian Museum in April 2011. Photo by Yvonne Carrillo-Huffman. Reproduced with permission.

under the lights of the Australian Museum. The Australian audiences that had shortly before conversed with the adorned men now surrounded the dancers and watched. The treated bird-of-paradise plumes from the exhibition came to life as the dancers (decorated with their finery) moved and swayed (figure 5).

*Rituals of Seduction* received the 2011 International Council of Museums Australia Award for International Relations and was nominated for the “Exhibition and Public Engagement” category at the 2011 Museums and Galleries of NSW IMAGinE Awards. The Australian Museum’s efforts to reshape museum approaches and collections and to engage in processes to bring in Indigenous knowledge and practices represent steps toward Indigenizing and decolonizing museums. The inclusion of Indigenous languages and performance processes and the engagement with source communities by groups in Sydney and its surrounds are ways to recognize Indigenous peoples and enable them to feel safe within and to take ownership of museum spaces. Communities like those of the PNG Highlands

region may be cautious at the beginning. This can be expected, as the history and impact of colonialism and anthropology as an inheritance will take time to unpack. But the tide is changing.

### OBJECTS: TRANSIENT EXPERIENCES

Chief Koken Kauke gifted to the Australian Museum his *geru peng* head-dress along with all the plumage that bedecked the wig. Chief Tom Tika also offered the museum armbands, cassowary-bone daggers, and male aprons to be kept on behalf of his group. In a reversal of history, the members of the source communities handed over to the museum their gifts, fully knowing that a part of them now lies with the peoples of this place. This process of gift giving and reciprocity means that these objects, far from being static items, ignite new relationships among communities.

The Australian Museum was established on Gadigal land “in 1827 with the aim of procuring ‘many rare and curious specimens of Natural History’” (Australian Museum 2019). Construction began in 1846, and the museum opened to the public in 1857. The institution has grown to house more than eighteen million cultural and scientific objects. For too long, the museum’s Indigenous collections remained largely inaccessible, thus rendering them invisible, and they were often kept as mere sets of objects with abstract information. This gatekeeping of knowledge and stories marginalized Indigenous peoples. Extracted and imprisoned cultural objects laid dormant, awaiting their reawakening. Recently, however, members of Indigenous communities have begun accessing the collections, engaging them through conversations, performances, and workshops and by introducing and reasserting Indigenous languages, knowledges, and processes to members of the Sydney community. When museums engage with source communities, there occurs a reimagining of Indigenous taxonomies and ways of knowing in the present, which can also reawaken the past as presented and shared from their perspectives.

Projects like *Ples Namel* and *Rituals of Seduction* place more emphasis on the individuals’ contexts. The performances challenged the dehumanized collections of the Western museum. Opportunities arose for members of the community where *Ples Namel* took place to see and experience the environment within and around them through objects. Each person, within the context of the social space, was active and engaged in a volatile and dynamic way, in contrast to the values around which museums had originally been established and carried forth. An environment of posses-

sion and preservation gave way to more productive cultural, political, and economic practices between individuals and between communities. It is indeed the “subjects who in the routine course of their everyday lives, are constantly involved in understanding themselves and others, producing meaningful actions and expressions and interpreting the meaningful actions and expressions by others” (Thompson 1990, 21). Institutions—be they represented by curators or gallery directors—and public audiences play important roles in identifying and supporting new visions brought forth by Indigenous communities. This will inspire actions that enable the rethinking and reconfiguring of history to empower Indigenous peoples and their sovereignty in the present and future.

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*Abstract*

In this article, I describe two exhibitions that were developed and shared in order to recognize and value Indigenous ways of seeing and experiencing the world: *Ples Namel*, held at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1996, and the award-winning *Rituals of Seduction: Birds of Paradise*, held at the Australian Museum in 2011. In these art gallery and museum spaces, source communities engaged in conversation and dialogue with the institutions and their collections. In order to enable audiences to experience Pacific environments, the exhibitions' collaborators established the *moka pena*, or center space, from the Mogeï community in Mount Hagen, Papua New Guinea. In each event, individual experiences, recollections, and knowledge were brought together in a social encounter in this center space—the *ples namel*. In the Mogeï worldview, this *ples namel* is at the same time a physical presence and an imaginary one, a duality similarly reflected in Indigenous communities' and audience members' participation in the two exhibitions. The natural environment, the accoutrements adorning the body, and the performing bodies all came together in a volatile, dynamic, and productive political and cultural space of meaning making. There were opportunities for unsettlement and disruption of knowledge. Such negotiations or acceptance of the new in the unsettled and disrupted space of performance may realign and rewrite history—experienced personally and realized socially.

KEYWORDS: Mogeï worldview, museum spaces, performance, relationships, *ples namel*