

Art/Body: In and through the 'eyes' of the Mogei in the highlands of Papua New Guinea

By Michael Mel

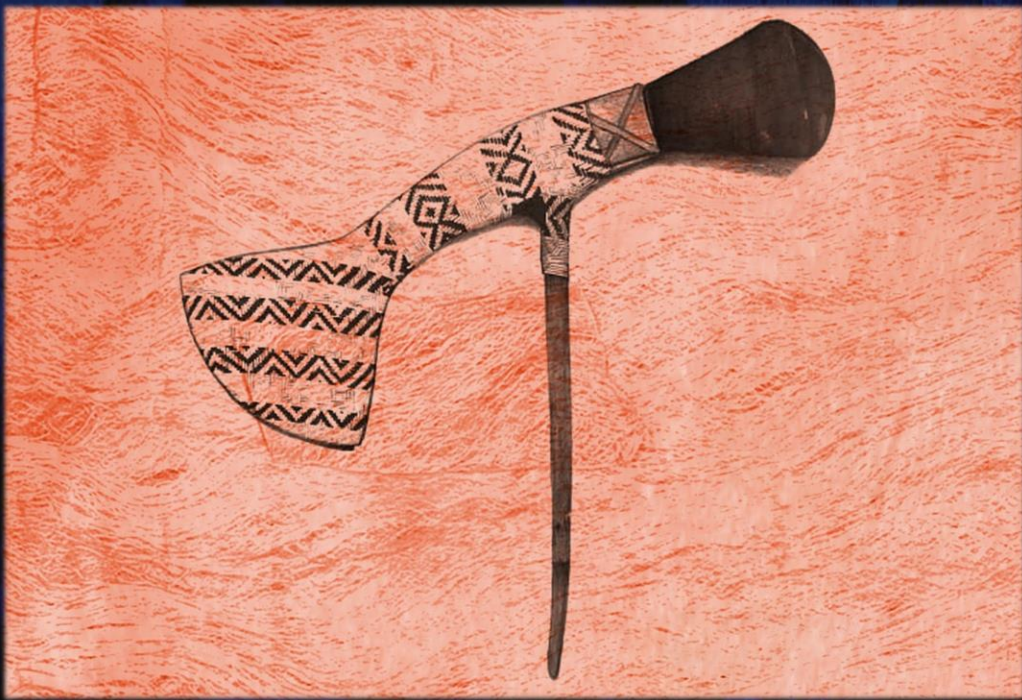


Illustration by Cecelia Faumuina

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Michael Mel is of the Mogeï community in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG). He completed a Ph.D. from Flinders University in South Australia and has worked to promote Indigenous art through teaching, writing, curating and performing in PNG, Australia, New Caledonia, the UK, Canada and the US. He is currently Manager for Pacific and International Collection at the Australian Museum. He was appointed to the position since November 2016.

Front image caption & credit



Name: Mbu Rui

Description: *Mbu Rui* is the ceremonial axe for the Mogeï. Crafted by skilled crafts person, it is owned and held by the *wo nuim* – a male knowledgeable in history of lineage and ancestry, articulate and proficient in language and poetry, respectful and considerate in demeanour, conducts his affairs with wisdom and insight, and maintains material wealth and links to neighbouring clans. It is a marker of him as *wo nuim*. Carried in the hand or worn with the handle tucked in his bark belt on the side and blade facing back, he steps out for an oration during special exchange ceremonies.

Credit: Collected from the Mt Hagen area in the early sixties and sold recently in a Sydney Tribal Art Fair. In private collection.

ART/BODY: IN AND THROUGH THE ‘EYES’ OF THE *MOGEI* IN THE HIGHLANDS OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

In my context, the Mogei of the Mt Hagen area in Papua New Guinea (PNG) people have an avid desire to make sense of the world. The inquisitiveness to construct and impose meaning is referred to as *Nanga Noman*. *Nanga Noman* relates to a person’s feelings, thoughts, interests, fears, knowledge, desire. But these attributes within the person are not contained, closed from the world outside. A person’s *Noman* is surrounded by and connected to everything around. This connection is integral to what the Mogei call *Mbu* (seed). *Mbu* comprises a tripartite. The first is *Pulg lamb* which is relationships between people (living and deceased) through *mema* or blood. Secondly, *Mbu lamb* is each living person and the actions and activities, or referred to as *Ulgh*, to maintain and sustain livelihoods. Thirdly, *Mbu Kola* or *Mae Mbu* is the physical world with land, the environment and all things around. *Mbu* and *Noman* encompass a unified and cohesive world. *Mbu* shapes *Noman* as *Noman* recognizes and shapes *Mbu*. There are no inner and/or outer realms such as a material dominion and spiritual realm. There is only *Mbu*. Likewise, there are no feelings separate from thoughts. There is only *Noman*. The two are entwined and can only be known and lived that way. The relationships and connectedness are maintained by conducting *Mbu Ulgh* (seed acts). The more one conducts life through *Mbu Ulgh*, a person attains *Mbu Noman* (wisdom, insight). Anyone with numerous *Mbu Ulgh* among the families in a clan or between communities among neighbouring clans and tribes is usually accoladed with the status of *nuim* – highly esteemed person.

This way of the Mogei, of seeing and knowing, affects the way we talk about many aspects of life including land, crop bed and yield cycles, spirituality, teaching, learning, responsibilities and expectations, and so on. There is a way to describe and share the idea of art and making art from the Mogei view. The skill and dexterity of the maker with which a tool (digging stick, axe, woven net-bag), or an adornment object like a head-band made of gold-coloured peels of orchid stalks and iridescent green scarab beetles, a carved pearl shell, or sets of beads made from cowry shells) may be admired. But for the Mogei, what is even more significant is the way the person using the tool or wearing the adornment is able to achieve the task or performance. A Mogei person ‘sees’ the task or performance and experiences art in terms of the level and depth of accomplishment with the object, an activity, or a performance or ceremony through *Kanamb*. A literal translation would read ‘I look/watch’. *Kanamb* is not about an inner world



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watching an outside world. *Kanamb* can refer to as “seeing through ones’ eyes”. A Mogeï person can see through their eyes. The Mogeï also ‘see’ via ones’ skin, ears, nose or in visions revealed during deep sleep. *Kanamb* relates to ‘seeing’ objects, ‘watching’ performances, ‘listening’ to poetry through refined eloquent language in speeches, occurrences in dreams, or in ‘reading’ the environment. The environment may include the call of a bird, formation of clouds foreboding rain, sighting of insects, marsupials, lizards, and snakes. The appearance and actions of certain people, what they say and their actions ‘seen’ during dreams; the colour and tone of the worn adornment on a performer; the sharpness and shape of the cut of the blade slicing food; these can provide through *kanamb* an opportunity for rumination and interpretation.

For the Mogeï ‘seeing’ a performance is about experiencing the sound of the performer’s voice; the fragrance of the adorned body covered with the scent of oil. The effectiveness of the experience of *kanamb* relates to an embodiment that is not about form or style. Nor is it about creating or informing a particular artistic object or event. *Kanamb* is a personal, embodied and visceral experience that is at times the basis for reflection and discussion among close-knit members of community and their relationships. This underlines the fact that *Mbu* shapes *Nanga Noman* as *Nanga Noman* recognizes and shapes *Mbu*. This means that the world is not a chasm between inner and outer realms. There is no disjunction between materiality of things and spirituality in things. Likewise, there are no feelings separate from thoughts. These are entwined and can only be known and lived that way. Indigenous art is *mbu ulgh*, and that moves beyond subject and object, inner and outer worlds. *Kanamb* through *mub ulgh* focuses on relationships and connectivity located between simulation and reality; between play and actuality; somewhere amid the personal and the social, and between psychological rationalization and actual experiences.