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Decolonial Knowledge Production and Reconnection through a *Mormah* Headdress from Simbu

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between knowledge, colonial entanglement, and material culture through the case study of a ceremonial headdress, a mormah, from Simbu Province, Papua New Guinea, currently held in the Linden-Museum Stuttgart. The mormah, once used during highland rituals such as buka ingu, exemplifies how colonial collecting practices decontextualized culturally significant objects, transforming them from living ceremonial regalia into static museum artifacts. Drawing on postcolonial theory and Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges," the authors adopt a collaborative, decolonial methodology that brings together archival museum research and oral history interviews conducted in the Kuman language with a key cultural informant: co-author Clara Bal's grandmother. This interdisciplinary and transnational research design highlights the epistemic authority of insider knowledge and the ethical imperative of trust-based engagement. By analyzing the symbolic, ecological, and ceremonial meanings of the mormah, the article foregrounds the object's role within Indigenous systems of memory and social reproduction. The authors argue for a reorientation of museum practice that goes beyond provenance as property tracing, toward provenance as a relational, ethical, and political project. Through this approach, the mormah becomes a site of cultural resilience and epistemic repair, offering new pathways for restitution, reinterpretation, and collaborative knowledge production between museums and societies of origin.

Keywords: *Decolonial knowledge, collaborative research methods, Simbu, mormah headdress, Papua New Guinea Highlands, material culture, colonialism*

Introduction

Understanding the historical context of knowledge production is essential to examining its role in shaping colonial dynamics. The production of knowledge about the Simbu Province in the Highlands Region of Papua New Guinea (PNG) was integral to the facilitation of German and Australian colonial expansion in the

area during the twentieth century.¹ Beginning in the 1930s, scientific research and the generation of knowledge were deeply embedded in the power dynamics of colonialism in the region, especially through Christian missionary work and gold mining—both of which are ongoing.² Today, knowledge produced and researched by local scholars is of great importance as local scholars are able to quickly break down language barriers, recognize bias toward foreigners, and appreciate cultural differences through the development of trusting relationships.³ Even in advanced research processes including data analysis and interpretation, different perspectives are essential for decolonial knowledge production. We use a theoretical framework based on Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledges” for understanding how knowledge production is not a neutral or objective process but is instead embedded within broader structures of power.⁴ This conceptual framework is equally relevant to the study of colonial history. Which methods are most effective in re-establishing the web of relationships, practices, and meanings and reconnecting material culture that is stored in former colonial nations’ museums with its societies of origin? This article discusses these considerations in concrete terms using a Simbu *mormah* headdress located in the collections of the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart, Germany. A *mormah* is a traditional headdress made using what is known as the kamb *mormah* beetle (Fig. 1). It is worn by people of all ages on ritual occasions such as the *buka ingu* as a symbol of status, tribal affiliation, and cultural identity.



Figure 1. Artist unknown, *mormah* headdress, before 1956. Dried orchid stems, beetle carapaces, agave, rattan, trade cloth, cotton string, and cuscus fur; 43 x 4 cm. Simbu Province, Papua New Guinea. Inventory #119652, Linden-Museum Stuttgart. Courtesy of Linden-Museum Stuttgart

While Western museums act as temporary custodians of the collections they are currently hosting, these collections contain vital and missing knowledge from the artifacts’ place of origin. Activists and scholars from the Global South and societies of origin have been calling for closer cooperation with museums and

advocating for relationships based on trust.⁵ Their aim is to discuss from a postcolonial perspective the interwoven connections between power relations and knowledge production, both of which may be understood through material culture.

The study of the *mormah* headdress intersects directly with questions of authority, cultural sovereignty, and the politics of representation. The headdress, removed from its Indigenous context and reinterpreted within colonial and institutional frameworks, illustrates how material culture can be mobilized to assert control over historical narratives. In the case of the *mormah*, this process of appropriation reflects the broader power asymmetries characteristic of colonial governance in the Pacific, in which, as Nicholas Thomas argues, the exchange and collection of material culture was deeply entangled with systems of Western domination, often subordinating or erasing Indigenous knowledge systems.⁶ The removal of Pacific objects from their cultural contexts not only disrupted their ceremonial and social functions but also embedded them within Western classificatory frameworks that rendered Indigenous epistemologies marginal or invisible. By employing decolonial and participatory approaches to reinterpret the *mormah* headdress, the research offers a model for redistributing epistemic authority back to source societies. This political reorientation underscores the potential for material heritage to serve as a site of resistance and reclamation, linking cultural revitalization to broader movements for justice and self-determination.

Ethnographic objects like the *mormah* are embedded in historical trajectories of dispossession, negotiation, and reinterpretation. To engage critically with such material requires deconstructing the power relations that have governed their interpretation and imagining alternative futures for their cultural return. Although the politics of knowledge in postcolonial research has been widely examined, there remains a notable gap in case-specific studies that trace the epistemic trajectories of individual artifacts across time and space. This *mormah* headdress presents a particularly valuable case through which to explore the enduring afterlives of colonial knowledge production. Our research seeks to intervene in the current debates by focusing on how cultural knowledge embedded in material heritage can be recontextualized through collaborative, decolonial methodologies. By doing so, we aim to contribute to theoretical discussions on power and epistemology and to practical strategies for ethical engagement with museum collections.

Literature Review

Ethnographic studies of material culture in Simbu Province offer critical insights into how colonial and postcolonial processes shape knowledge production and power relations. Key scholarly works examine the entangled histories of object collection, Indigenous agency, and epistemic authority, foregrounding the role of museums and anthropological practice in constructing and contesting cultural knowledge. A foundational contribution to this discourse is Nicholas Thomas's *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*, which argues that the movement of artifacts across colonial boundaries is never one-directional. Thomas posits that material culture must be understood as "active in the formation of colonial relations."⁷ In the context of Simbu, where ceremonial objects such as *mormah* circulated within complex exchange networks, their appropriation into Western museum collections exemplifies how colonial collecting practices both extracted cultural value and obscured Indigenous systems of meaning. The detachment of these objects from their ceremonial contexts reconfigures them as specimens of scientific interest, thereby consolidating Eurocentric forms of knowledge while silencing local epistemologies. The act of silencing signifies a suppression of knowledge, an act of ignoring and devaluing local epistemologies that are deemed irrelevant or unworthy of documentation.

Material culture has emerged as a critical lens through which to examine colonial encounters for Indigenous resistance and cultural negotiation.⁸ Scholars including Chris Gosden, Dan Hicks, and Mary C. Beaudry advocate for the integration of postcolonial theory into material culture studies in order to better understand the layered meanings embodied in objects and built environments.⁹ This approach emphasizes how material culture both shaped and was shaped by the power dynamics of the empire. Further enriching this discourse, scholars such as Gosden and Tania M. Li show how material culture was central to both imperial control and Indigenous agency.¹⁰ Gosden and Chantal Knowles argue that museums used to define and fix colonized cultures but now challenge colonial narratives when the societies of origin recontextualize museum objects through postcolonial lenses.¹¹ Nicholas Thomas reframes colonialism as a set of colonial situations.¹² Feminist and Indigenous scholars including Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Clare Anderson push this analysis further, advocating for approaches that center lived experiences and cultural embodiment in order to understand materiality

under colonial rule.¹³ Together, these perspectives call for a deeper, more ethical engagement with the physical legacy of empire.

Expanding on this call, Chris Ballard and Bronwen Douglas emphasize the co-productive nature of ethnographic knowledge, arguing that Pacific Islander contributions to colonial knowledge systems have historically been marginalized, yet were essential to the production of ethnographic data.¹⁴ In regions like Simbu, Indigenous knowledge-holders acted as guides, interpreters, and informants, shaping how material culture was collected and understood. However, this co-production was rarely acknowledged in official documentation. The resulting asymmetry exemplifies what Smith has termed “the colonizing logic of research,” in which Western scientific frameworks extract, classify, and archive cultural knowledge without reciprocal recognition or return.¹⁵ These dynamics persist through institutional memory practices in Western ethnographic museums, which often retain colonial-era artifacts without engaging source communities in curatorial decisions or restitution debates.

Background and Methodology

Our collective research follows a decolonial and interdisciplinary methodology rooted in qualitative practices and collaborative knowledge production.¹⁶ Katharina Nowak is a social- and cultural anthropologist whose work centers on the critical study of ethnographic collections from the Pacific, with a regional emphasis on Papua New Guinea. Her scholarly interest in the *malagan* societies of New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea, underscores her broader commitment to understanding the shifting meanings of cultural objects across temporal, geographic, and epistemic boundaries. Her academic and curatorial work reflects a sustained engagement with questions of colonialism, material culture, and the practice of knowledge production within museums. Clara Bal is a political scientist specializing in national security and international relations in PNG. Having grown up in the Highlands of PNG and possessing intimate cultural knowledge of the region, Clara brings a distinctive insider perspective to issues concerning governance, community resilience, and Indigenous knowledge systems. Her academic trajectory, anchored in PNG Studies at Divine Word University and Community Development at Yeungnam University, reflects a deep commitment to research that is locally grounded and globally informed.

We (Clara and Katharina) first met in Germany in 2023 through the Erasmus+ exchange program.¹⁷ In 2024, Katharina traveled to PNG for the second time to continue her research in New Ireland, work at the National Museum and Art Gallery in Port Moresby, and teach at the University of Papua New Guinea. During this time, we co-taught lectures that were focused on reflections about the intertwined colonial history of PNG and Germany and its impact on the present day. While preparing our lectures, we worked through photographs of the collections from Simbu in the Linden-Museum Stuttgart. The *mormah* headdress immediately caught our attention because of its use of colorful beetles. Despite her familiarity with highland traditions, Clara had never encountered a ceremonial object like it. Our visual curiosity led us to conceptualize a research project that connects museum-held material culture with living cultural memory. Similar to the concept of *punctum* in Roland Barthes's theory of photography,¹⁸ we chose to use the *mormah* headdress as our object of focus because of the emotional intensity we experienced while engaging with it.

The next step in our methodological approach was to brainstorm research questions. We came up with the central question "How can historical knowledge embedded in a museum artifact be reconnected to its cultural origin through local oral histories and lived experience?" To find answers and explore the cultural significance of *mormah*, we planned a trip to Simbu Province to visit Clara's grandmother, Kunum. We felt it was important to interview her about her knowledge of the pre-colonial period and her experience in the postcolonial period, as well as to center her voice.¹⁹ Using the framework of a polyphonic ethnography²⁰—combining postcolonial theories with dissonant voices and perspectives from PNG in order to consciously counter the standardization of scientific theorizing—we developed a loosely structured series of questions to ask Clara's grandmother Kunum to guide our qualitative family research and gather data.²¹ Clara conducted the interview, as Kunum speaks only Kuman, one of the many local languages of the Simbu Province. This ensured both linguistic accuracy and cultural sensitivity, while reinforcing the central principle of trust-based and community-grounded research. Clara subsequently translated and transcribed the interview, a process that not only preserved linguistic nuance but also allowed her to embed interpretive meaning that might otherwise be lost in standard translation.

Katharina conducted archival research at the Linden-Museum Stuttgart to reconstruct how the headdress came into the museum's collections, learn about its provenance, and discover any associated documentation.²² After collecting

both the oral and archival data, we conducted a collaborative coding and thematic analysis of the interview.²³ Through this process, we identified the production, use, social functions, and underlying colonial systems of power attached to the headdress within the Simbu context. To guide our interpretation, we employed a theoretical framework grounded in both anthropological and political science literature.²⁴



Figure 2. Artist unknown, *mormah* headdress (detail), pre-1956. Dried orchid stems, beetle carapaces, agave, rattan, trade cloth, cotton string, and cuscus fur; 43 x 4 cm. Simbu Province, Papua New Guinea. Courtesy of Linden-Museum Stuttgart

Unveiling the *Mormah*: Knowledge, Power, and the Colonial Legacies of a Simbu Headdress

The Linden-Museum's *mormah* (Fig. 1)²⁵ is a slender forehead band crafted from a complex assemblage of local and introduced substances. These include dried orchid stems, red commercial trade cloth (replacing earlier barkcloth), cotton string, cuscus (*Dactylopsila* sp.) fur, woven threads derived from the agave plant, and iridescent green scarab beetles (*Cetoniinae* sp.) known as *kamb mormah* in

the Kuman language. The beetles are securely bound between parallel braids of dried orchid fiber, the headdress's primary structure, using twisted cords of woven thread (Fig. 2).

In 1956, the Linden-Museum acquired this headdress as part of an object exchange with Stuttgart-based private collector Ernst Heinrich, who described it only as "composed of multiple components of meticulously woven straw. Two cords are attached lengthwise along the inside."²⁶ Heinrich attributed the object to the "Chimbu-Gebirge, Deutsch-Neuguinea," but museum archival records do not include information regarding the circumstances of its acquisition, insight into the object's ceremonial use, or its original ownership. From a museological standpoint, the *mormah* is a paradigmatic example of ethnographic material culture whose biography is marked by epistemic rupture. A thorough review of the museum's records revealed no evidence that the headdress has ever been exhibited; it appears to have remained in storage, absent from the museum's interpretive narratives. In this context, museum archival research uncovers and underscores not only archival silence but the systematic decontextualization characteristic of colonial collection practices.

The intricate entanglement between knowledge and power has long been a central concern within social and cultural anthropology. Postcolonial perspectives offer a lens through which to examine how scientific and ethnographic knowledge was historically mobilized to sustain colonial domination.²⁷ In the case of PNG, specifically the Simbu Province in the Highlands region, the entwining of knowledge and colonial power is particularly stark. During the twentieth century, colonial administrations and Western anthropologists alike engaged in the systematic documentation of Indigenous life worlds, languages, and material cultures. These practices served the broader apparatus of colonial governance.²⁸ As Edward Said and Linda Tuhiwai Smith have observed, colonial regimes rendered colonized people legible through Eurocentric knowledge systems.²⁹ The *mormah* headdress exemplifies this dynamic. Removed from its ceremonial context and reclassified as an ethnographic object, it became part of an archive that privileged Western taxonomies while erasing Indigenous epistemologies. Reinterpreting the *mormah* through the voices of Simbu community members like Kunum Mond not only repositions Indigenous actors as epistemic authorities but also challenges the institutional frameworks that have historically excluded them. This shift from objectification to collaboration marks a methodological and ethical reorientation central to decolonial research.³⁰ Moreover, such efforts contribute to a broader project of epistemic justice that

seeks to rectify the historical asymmetries embedded in the archive of anthropological knowledge.³¹



Figure 3. Left to right: Katharina Nowak, Kunum Mond, and Clara Bal, September 2024, Gena, Kerowagi District, Simbu Province, Papua New Guinea. Photograph courtesy of the authors

Field Encounter in Gena Village

In order to interview Clara's grandmother, Kunum, we left Madang on September 11, 2024, embarking on a road trip that would take us across several provinces of PNG. We drove fourteen hours, eventually reaching Jiwaka Province, where we stayed overnight. The following morning, we drove to Clara's home village, Gena, located in the Kerowagi District, where Kunum currently resides. We had not been able to inform Kunum of our visit ahead of time, as there is no electricity in the village to charge her phone; residents rely on limited solar power instead.

When we arrived at Gena, Kunum was in her garden harvesting *kaukau* (sweet potatoes). She was visibly surprised and delighted to see us and came to embrace us warmly. She was especially excited to meet Katharina, as she is from Germany—a country with a close connection to the Lutheran mission, which is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of PNG.³² We made our way down the hill to Kunum's front yard, where we sat together and exchanged gifts (Fig. 3). After the exchange, Clara showed her grandmother a picture of the *mormah* and explained our interest in learning more about it. Kunum's face lit up. She smiled and shared a heartfelt moment of cultural reconnection: "I was a young girl when we used to wear this during celebrations. Sometimes we even wore our traditional dress to the elections of the Kiaps in Kerowagi. They really admired me. That was how I met your grandfather!"

Passing and Missing Knowledge of *Kambu Mormah*

Clara explained to Kunum that we had several questions about the *mormah* headdress, and that our conversation might take some time. She gently encouraged Kunum to eat and drink the food we had brought first, and then, once she was ready, we could begin. Once Kunum had finished her meal, we proceeded with the interview, which was conducted in the Kuman language. Clara interpreted key points into English, so that Katharina could follow along and ask follow-up questions when necessary. When asked whether the youth of past generations and those of today still produce *mormah*, Kunum responded, "Youth today are no longer able to produce *mormah* for three main reasons. First, they are no longer members of the *yagl ingu* (men's house) or *ambu ingu* (women's house). Secondly, parents now send their children to school to receive formal education. Finally, during colonization, missionaries played a significant role in discouraging our traditional practices."

Kunum elaborated, saying, “In the days of our forefathers, and even when I was a young girl, there were specific houses built for boys and girls where they would receive cultural teachings.”³³ In Tok Pisin, these were known as *Haus man* for boys and *Haus meri* for girls, and in the Kuman language, they are referred to as *yagl ingu* and *ambu ingu*, respectively. Kunum explained, “In the *yagl ingu*, fathers taught their sons crucial life skills such as hunting techniques and how to be responsible men. One of the important teachings passed down in this setting was the process of producing *mormah*.” Kunum explained further: “In the *ambu ingu*, mothers taught girls how to plant and maintain gardens and how to support their husbands.” She emphasized that today, these traditional institutions, *Haus man* and *Haus meri*, no longer exist in many villages. As a result, young boys are no longer being taught how to make *mormah*, and the skills are quickly fading.

Kunum continued, saying that “parents today are more focused on sending their children to school to receive formal knowledge so they can have a better future. Because of that, they don’t take time to teach them our traditional knowledge and skills. Instead of showing them how to make their own traditional attire, they just buy it for them. That’s why many of our young people don’t know how to make *mormah* anymore.” This intergenerational gap in the transmission of knowledge is deeply rooted in historical processes of cultural disruption and is not an isolated phenomenon.

The decline in *mormah*-making skills reflects broader patterns in which colonial and missionary interventions reshaped values and modes of learning in Simbu society. The *mormah* thus exemplifies the asymmetries of colonial-era knowledge production. Before 1958, during the final years of Australian administration in PNG, the object’s extraction took place within a wider context of missionization, the expansion of road infrastructure, the development of cash-crop economies (notably coffee), and a shift in clan relations—all of which transformed the socio-material landscape of Simbu. That such transformations are absent from the museum’s documentation reflects an enduring hierarchy of knowledge that privileges Western scientific taxonomies over Indigenous epistemologies. These processes of change in knowledge and the erasure of knowledge were made possible by the complicity between colonial administration and Christian missions.

Kunum said that missionaries in the 1930s to 1970s “told us that wearing our traditional clothes was sinful. They said if we wanted to be good Christians, we had to cover our bodies and wear *lap-lap* (a fabric worn by both men and women as a skirt, which they tie around their waist). They gave us salt to taste and

lap-lap to wear and told us to burn our traditional garments. Most of us listened to them and accepted these changes. We followed Christianity, and because of that, many people stopped teaching these traditions to their children and grandchildren.” Kunum’s reflections reveal how the interaction of colonial influence, missionization, formal education, and the loss of traditional institutions has deeply affected the transmission of cultural knowledge, especially practices like *mormah*-making.

Production, Techniques, and Materials Used in Making *Mormah*

Kunum explained that in Gena they usually collect the *kambu mormah* when the beetles come in large numbers to feed on the nectar of the flowers of two special trees deep in the forest. “In our language,” she said, “we call these trees *ende yokind* and *ende mine*.” She explained that sometimes you might find a few beetles in the jungle, but that most are gathered during the flowering season, when they appear in abundance. “We catch them carefully by hand to preserve their delicate wings, which are very important to us. . . . The *kambu mormah* are more than just beautiful beetles. Our ancestors chose them for their shiny green color—it really catches people’s attention. They were used as adornments in traditional headdresses, a symbol of identity, pride, and aesthetic appreciation. Our elders knew that color could speak; it could draw the eye and show respect. So, when we wear *kambu mormah* . . . we’re wearing something that represents who we are.”

Kunum explained that “to make the *mormah*, the men collect several important materials . . . First, they go into the forest to gather the stems of the orchid nodes. These are split in half and left to dry in the sun. After they’re dry, we split them again into thin strips.” She continued, “We also use agave plants.³⁴ The stalks and leaves are cut, and then the leaves are sliced into strips. We scrape off the outer skin to get the fibers inside, and these are twisted into strong, thin strings. The *kambu mormah* are collected from the jungle and left to dry in the sun.”

Supplementary literature, particularly the comprehensive volume *New Guinea Highlands: Art from the Jolika Collection* (2006), supports the identification of the *mormah* as part of a broader regional practice. Headbands embedded with beetle carapaces were used across the Western Highlands and Simbu Province, typically worn with elaborate wigs—such as the large *peng koem* or “judge’s

wigs”—during male initiation and ceremonial performances. Initially, the objects were backed with red-dyed bark cloth; however, they were subsequently covered with lighter European commercial fabrics. This shift in material preferences may have been driven by the relative ease of trade during the colonial encounter.

“Once the men have all the materials,” she added, “they weave the agave fibers into thicker cords. Then they take the dried *kambu mormah* and the thin strips of orchid stem, place them on a dried red pandanus leaf, and tie everything together using the cords. That’s how proper *mormah* is made.” Despite Kunum’s detailed descriptions, one question remained: Are the scarab beetles whose carapaces embellish the Linden-Museum *mormah* still present in Simbu Province ecosystems? Preliminary ecological data and local testimonies suggest that such beetles have become increasingly rare, potentially due to habitat loss, pesticide use, and climate change.³⁵ This raises ethical and environmental dimensions around material sustainability, Indigenous biodiversity stewardship, and the invisibility of ecological knowledge in ethnographic museum collections.

The Use of the *Mormah*: Past and Present

Kunum told us, “We wear the *mormah* during special occasions, especially during *buka ingu*, which is one of our biggest ceremonies. In our language, *buka ingu* means ‘pig house.’ It’s a time when everyone in the village comes together. We slaughter pigs and exchange them with other people in the village. For example, one man might give away ten pigs to someone in the village. Later, that person must return the favor by giving back even more pigs. That’s how we show respect, and build relationships, and keep our traditions strong.”

The continued use and creative development of the *mormah* in contemporary ceremonies such as *buka ingu* not only underscores its vibrant cultural relevance but also casts a critical light on museum practices that often removed such objects from their social and performative context. In Western ethnological museums, headdress objects such as *mormah* are usually presented as aesthetic artifacts or testimonies to “lost” cultures—a practice that fails to recognize the dynamic and vibrant significance of these objects.³⁶

Kunum continued that “during *buka ingu*, the *mormah* is very important. It serves as a base to support and secure the decorative bird feathers worn above it on the head. The green from the *kambu mormah* beetles shines in the sunlight, it makes people notice you. Wearing it shows pride, strength, and status. When

people see the design of the *mormah* they know the tribe that you originate from, making it a symbol of identity. The *mormah* from Gena will be designed differently from that of Western Highlands or Jiwaka province.”

Conclusion

A central principle of our methodology is the recognition that knowledge produced by local scholars, particularly those with personal or familial ties to the community in question, holds unique epistemic value. Clara’s position as both co-researcher and cultural insider enabled us to have access to knowledge that would have remained inaccessible to outside researchers. This form of situated knowledge is essential for disrupting the extractive legacies of colonial ethnography. This kind of research also reflects the benefits of interdisciplinary and transnational cooperation. Clara’s grandmother Kunum, a respected elder, shared insights that revealed the *mormah*’s ceremonial and spiritual significance. Combining ethnological research methods, museum archival analysis, and political science theory enabled us to approach the Linden-Museum *mormah* from multiple vantage points, while also fostering a research relationship grounded in trust and mutual respect. In doing so, we aim to contribute to broader efforts that challenge hegemonic knowledge systems and advocate for more inclusive, ethically grounded approaches to material culture research.

The oral history interview we conducted expanded a museum object’s fragmentary written archive. The *mormah* headdress, according to Kunum’s recollection, was worn during high-level ceremonial exchanges that solidified political alliances, resolved disputes, and reinforced social hierarchies.³⁷ Such insight stands in stark contrast to the object’s inert presence in a European storeroom, challenging museological representations of such artifacts as static or anonymous cultural specimens.

Framing the *mormah* within decolonial museum practice compels us to ask: What forms of knowledge are privileged or erased through the object’s institutional framing? What kinds of memory—colonial and/or Indigenous—does the object embody? How might the *mormah* become not only an index of historical violence but a medium for epistemic repair? In its current circumstances, the object both illustrates and obscures colonial legacies. Yet, by engaging with descendants of its makers from its place of origin and meaning, we reanimate its social life and resituate it within a network of Indigenous agency, environmental

change, and museological accountability. The object's materiality further reflects its geographical and cultural origin. Simbu's mountainous terrain, limited arable land, and historically peripheral economic status within PNG's colonial administration shaped both the modes of production and the circulation of ceremonial items. Objects like the *mormah* were not commodities; they were embedded in gift economies. Their appropriation into European collections thus entailed not merely physical relocation but ontological transformation: from ceremonial regalia to scientific specimen.

This *mormah*'s trajectory reveals the entanglement of colonial knowledge production, climate precarity, and museum ethics. Our present collaborative research proposes that decolonial object-centered methodologies—especially those privileging oral testimony and Indigenous scholarship—are the most effective means of addressing the aforementioned issues. Museums must move beyond provenance as property tracing and toward provenance as a relational, ethical, and political project. The *mormah*, in this light, becomes both a witness to colonial disruption and a potential conduit for renewed cultural dialogue and restitution. Artifacts in Western museum collections, such as the *mormah*, are deeply rooted in colonial knowledge systems that document material culture while marginalizing Indigenous perspectives. This tendency has been criticized by Ciraj Rassool as part of a “postcolonial archive” that aims to stabilize Western power over definition.³⁸ Christina Kreps also argues that decolonial museum work must not stop at the presentation of objects, but must actively involve Indigenous actors as curators, commentators, and knowledge bearers.³⁹

The *mormah* has changed in its materiality without losing its traditional meaning. Its contextualization in a museum must be reflective and seriously address questions of restitution, digital repatriation, and participatory research methods. *Mormah* are still in use today, although they are now often made with a combination of traditional and introduced materials including red *laplap*, thread, woven plastic laces, *cuscus* or possum fur, and bird feathers. Despite these changes in production, the *mormah*'s function and cultural significance remain unchanged. The *mormah* should therefore not be understood as a static collection object, but as a living archive of cultural resilience and innovation.

Clara Bal holds a master's degree in public administration and community development from Yeungnam University, South Korea, and a bachelor of arts in PNG studies and international relations from Divine Word University in Madang, PNG. Her research focuses on national security issues, including cybersecurity,

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Katharina Nowak received her master’s degree in social and cultural anthropology and museum studies from the University of Bremen and Oldenburg. She is currently a PhD candidate in the “A Doctorate in the Museum” (DIMA) scholarship program at the University of Tübingen and the Linden-Museum Stuttgart. She previously worked as an assistant curator of the Oceania collections at the Museum am Rothenbaum, Hamburg, and has ongoing teaching appointments in the Department of Anthropology and Cultural Research at the University of Bremen. Her research interests include collaborative forms of knowledge production and the decolonization of knowledge, with a regional focus on Oceania, especially Papua New Guinea.

Notes

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- ¹³ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*; Clare Anderson, *The Indian Uprising of 1857–8: Prisons, Prisoners and Rebellion* (Anthem Press, 2007).
- ¹⁴ Chris Ballard and Bronwen Douglas, *Foreign Bodies: Oceania and the Science of Race 1750–1940* (ANU Press, 2012).
- ¹⁵ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 60–61.
- ¹⁶ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 127.
- ¹⁷ Clara was part of the PNG delegation as a lecturer from the University of Papua New Guinea. Katharina, who was teaching at the University of Bremen and a PhD candidate at the University of Tübingen, was part of the receiving team in Germany.
- ¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1981), 25–27. Barthes distinguishes two modes of engaging with photographs: the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* refers to the cultural, political, or thematic interest evoked by an image, shaped by shared codes, education, and social context. In contrast, the *punctum* is a subjective, affective detail that "pricks" or "wounds" the viewer, introducing emotional intensity beyond cultural conventions.
- ¹⁹ The pre-colonial period in the Highlands was before the late nineteenth century (pre-1884), the colonial German period was 1884–1914, and the Australian Administration under Mandate and Trusteeship was 1914–1975. Kunam was an infant during World War II.
- ²⁰ Kien Nghi Ha, "Postkolonialismus," in *Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht: (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutsche Sprache*, ed. N. Ofuatey-Alazard and S. Arndt, (Unrast Verlag, 2011), 180.

²¹ James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979); Aglaja Przyborski and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, *Qualitative Sozialforschung: Ein Arbeitsbuch* (De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2021), 143, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110710663>.

²² Susanne Scholz, "Transkulturelle Zusammenarbeit in der Museumspraxis: Symbolpolitik oder epistemische Pluralität?," in *Museumsethnologie. Eine Einführung. Theorien, Debatten, Praktiken*, ed. Iris Edenheiser and Larissa Förster (Reimer, 2019), 162–79; Joanne Rappaport, "Beyond Participant Observation: Collaborative Ethnography as Theoretical Innovation." *Collaborative Anthropologies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 1–31.

²³ Giampietro Gobo and Andrea Molle, "Coding and Analyzing Ethnographic Data," in *Doing Ethnography*, Part Three: Analyzing Ethnographic Data and Theory Building (SAGE Publications Ltd., 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529682847.n14>.

²⁴ Luke E. Lassiter, "Ethnography and Public Anthropology," *Current Anthropology* 46, no. 1 (2005): 83–106, <https://doi.org/10.1086/425658>; Luke E. Lassiter, *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Roger Sanjek, "Anthropology's Hidden Colonialism: Assistants and Their Ethnographers," *Anthropology Today* 9, no. 2 (1993): 13–18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2783170>; Marilyn Strathern, "An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology," *Signs* 12, no. 2 (1987): 276–92.

²⁵ Collector list no. 2211, collector number 64, Linden-Museum Stuttgart, translated by Katharina Nowak.

²⁶ Collector information, Linden-Museum Stuttgart.

²⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon, 1978); Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

²⁸ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Harvard University Press, 1988); Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (Columbia University Press, 1983).

²⁹ Said, *Orientalism*; Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

³⁰ Kauanui, *Hawaiian Blood*; Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (Routledge, 2018).

³¹ George J. Sefa Dei, "Rethinking the Role of Indigenous Knowledges in the Academy," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 4, no. 2 (2000): 111–32; Zoe Todd, "An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' is Just Another World Colonialism," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29, no. 1 (March 2016): 4–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12124>.

³² The Evangelical Lutheran Church of PNG emerged from the missionary work of the Neuendettelsauer (Lutheran Mission) and Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (Rhenish Missionary Society) in the late nineteenth century.

³³ For a deeper look at women and politics, see Abby McLeod, "Where Are the Women in Simbu Politics?," *Development Bulletin* 59 (2002): 43–46.

³⁴ *Agave angustifolia*, *Agave garciae-mendozae*, and *Agave impressa*.

³⁵ Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *The Anthropology of Climate Change: An Integrated Critical Perspective* (Routledge, 2018); Susan Crate and Mark Nuttall, *Anthropology and Climate Change: From Encounters to Actions* (Routledge, 2009); Jerry Jack, "Global Averages, Local Extremes: The Subtleties and Complexities of Climate Change in Papua New Guinea," in *Anthropology and Climate Change: From Encounters to Action*, ed. Susan Crate and Mark Nuttall (Routledge, 2009), 197–208.

³⁶ Thomas, *Entangled Objects*, 4–8; Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 222–32.

³⁷ She also noted the *mormah*'s gendered and clan-specific usage, and described strong taboos associated with it, including the idea that women are not supposed to touch or wear men's *mormah*.

³⁸ Ciraj Rassool, "Museums, Heritage and Decoloniality," *African Studies* 74, no. 3 (2015): 221–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020184.2015.1086175>.

³⁹ Christina Kreps, *Liberating Culture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation and Heritage Preservation* (Routledge, 2003), 144–47.