

## DERK HARM VAN GRONINGEN À STULING Kilenge Nausang Singing (West New Britain, 1977–1978): A Visual Essay

### Abstract

*In this visual essay, the author documents the Kilenge Nausang masks he photographed in 1977 and 1978 during a Nausang singing in the Kilenge village cluster of Ulumainge, Waremo, and Saumoi in West New Britain. The Kilenge people describe the Nausang as a giant of extraordinary power, a being with an essentially malevolent character who serves a corrective function. The author also presents his photo-documentation of a Nausang mask depicted on the men's house (naulum) in Potne, New Britain, as well as the construction of the men's house.*

**Keywords:** *Kilenge, West New Britain, Nausang, masks, initiation, art, material culture, visual anthropology, architecture, Papua New Guinea*

In my 2023 publication *Kilenge: West New Britain, Papua New Guinea. A Pictorial Ethnography*, I narrate the different art forms I encountered and was privileged to photograph in 1977 and 1978 while conducting field research centered on the circular migration pattern of the Kilenge people on the northwest coast of the island of New Britain.<sup>1</sup> Being permitted to take photographs of their daily activities, my research focus became much broader, to include various Kilenge-oriented material art forms featuring designs related to a mythical personality called “Nausang.”<sup>2</sup>

The Kilenge figure of Nausang is a giant of extraordinary power, a being with an essentially malevolent character who serves a corrective function.<sup>3</sup> The images I saw of Nausang's face in 1978 were depicted as a human face in the colors white, red, and black on wooden masks. I also found stylized, simplified Nausang-face figures on various objects like Siassi-origin bowls, dance clubs, and chisel sticks.<sup>4</sup> Women and noninitiated children were not allowed to see a Nausang mask, and if this ban was not complied with, repercussions could follow. In fact, before the establishment of colonial rule in western New Britain in 1890, the sight of a Nausang mask by women or uninitiated children could even lead to the killing of the perpetrator's entire family by villagers as a deterrent act.<sup>5</sup> Due to the efforts

of the colonial government and missionaries, and conversion of the Kilenges to Christianity, such practices were no longer occurring during the period of my research.

This visual essay—consisting mostly of photographs that have not been previously published—documents the Kilenge Nausang masks I encountered during a Nausang *singsing* in the Kilenge village cluster of Ulumainge, Waremo, and Saumoi in 1978. A singsing is a periodically recurring festival lasting several days during which there is drumming, dancing, and singing that accompanies male children undergoing various phases of initiation. The Nausang masks I saw were the property of families or clans residing in these villages. While conducting my research, I also photographed the construction of a *naulum* (ceremonial men’s house) in Potne village, also located on the northwest coast of New Britain, and a Nausang mask included in that structure. I describe some of the features of these masks and the contexts in which they were made.



Figure 1 (left). Tavelemanugé Nausang mask decorated with white dots. Painted wood, approx. 60 x 30 cm. Waremo village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, March 1978. Photograph courtesy of the author

Figure 2 (right). Nausang dancer Talania Aigilo wearing the Aisivok mask. Waremo village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, March 1978. Photograph courtesy of the author

By the time of my visit, anthropologist and curator Adriaan Alexander Gerbrands (Leiden University), in collaboration with anthropologist Philip J. C. Dark (Southern Illinois University), had already conducted research in the Kilenge

villages. Their research spanned several years, with Gerbrands conducting fieldwork in 1967, 1970, 1973, and 1978, while Dark's investigations occurred in 1964, from 1966 to 1967, and in 1970. Part of their research also included the documentation of the Nausang face in words and images, which I gratefully reference.



Figure 3 (left). Front of Ulumainge Nausang mask. Unpainted wood, approx. 60 x 30 cm, 1977. Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea. Photograph courtesy of the author  
Figure 4 (right). Rear view of Ulumainge Nausang mask. Painted wood, approx. 60 x 30 cm, 1978. Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea. Photograph courtesy of the author

### Kilenge Nausang Masks

The Kilenge Nausang masks (*tumbuans*) I saw in 1978 were beautifully carved in the form of a human face. They were hand-made by a local woodcarver (*namos*) who had been commissioned by a Kilenge family. Their shapes were more or less identical, measuring approximately 60 cm high—about twice the size of a human face (Fig. 1). Rather thin, wide-eyed, oval-shaped gaps are carved into the mask and serve the purpose of allowing the Nausang dancer to maintain his position during the performance. These gaps become invisible to spectators after the painting of the masks is completed in the *naulum*, as well as during the dance performance. Other mask characteristics include an open mouth with visible teeth (Figs. 1 and 3), a protruding tongue (Figs. 5 and 7),<sup>6</sup> and elongated ears with

pierced earlobes through which clumps of leaves can be hung. The base color of a Nausang mask is white (*koki*; Fig. 3), with the characteristic features of the forehead, cheeks, nose, ears, chin, eyes, and mouth indicated in reddish brown and black (*kuruk*; Figs. 5–7). The protrusion on top of the high forehead is for attaching the headdress, consisting of black cassowary feathers as well as a bamboo stick adorned with white cockatoo feathers. During a singsing, a bullroarer called “Nausang’s tongue” is swung about by the men and produced a menacing wail that announced Nausang’s arrival.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 5 (left). Aisivok Nausang mask. Painted wood, approx. 60 x 30 cm. Waremo village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, March 1978. Photograph courtesy of the author  
Figure 6 (right). Marimbu Nausang mask. Painted wood, approx. 60 x 30 cm. Waremo village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, March 1978. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 7. Kaiwakaaingé Nausang mask. Painted wood, approx. 60 x 30 cm. Waremo village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, March 1978. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 8. Kilenge men repainting Nausang masks in Ulumaingé naulum (men's house), Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, March 1978. Photograph courtesy of the author

An important activity during the preparations for the Nausang singing that took place in 1978 in Ulumainge village was the repainting and fitting of the Nausang masks (Fig. 8), which had been stored in dried banana leaves in the Ulumainge ceremonial men's house, together with feathers, pig's tusks, and leaves. As not every male painter was able to complete the repainting task in one go, the masks were placed on wooden posts along a wall in the men's house so that progress in the restoration process was clearly visible to the other painters (Fig. 9). Finally, all the masks had colorful leaves and a pair of round tusks from a mature pig attached to the mouth openings. Figure 10 shows Kilenge men affixing pig tusks and red fibers to the mouth of the Tavelemanugé Nausang mask with great care and precision.



Figure 9. Nausang masks on wooden posts in the naulum (men's house) during the restoring process. From left to right: Tavelemanugé, Aisivok, Navantamé, Marimbu, Aulamainge, and Kaiwakainge. Ulumainge village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, March 1978. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 10. Kilenge men fitting ornaments on a Tavelemanugé Nausang mask in the Ulumainge naulum, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, March 1978. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 11. Nausang masks with adornments erected on poles in the Ulumainge naulum. From left to right: Tavelemanugé, Aisivok, Navantamé, Marimbu, Aulamainge, and Kaiwakaainge. Ulumainge village, Kilenge, New Britain, Papua New Guinea, March 1978. Photograph courtesy of the author

Figure 11 shows six Nausang masks, fitted with black and white feather headdresses and other adornments, erected on poles in the Ulumainge naulum. All six masks were meant to be worn while performing by Nausang dancer Talaria Aigilo during the various 1978 Nausang singsing ceremonies. During the April 1978 singsing, Aigilo actually used a seventh mask known as Marimbuainge (see Fig. 12 and the far-left mask in Fig. 14) during his performances in front of the Waremo naulum. This mask had not been repainted in the Ulumlaut men's house. The significance of Marimbuainge is rooted in its correspondence with the number of clans (*Lains*) that were present in the Ulumainge village in 1978.<sup>8</sup>

### Mask Names and Designs

Although the Nausang masks used in the 1978 Ulumainge Nausang singsing were given names, I have not been able to verify the possible meanings of the individual masks' names. In a 1994 publication, Gerbrands mentions names of Nausang masks—including Aisiwok, Esugal, Kaikai, Kanamuré, Moro, Sago, Sengkana, and Talawagi—that had formerly been used in one of the Kilenge villages. In his opinion, the names were more or less comparable to a family coat of arms.<sup>9</sup> While the 1978 Ulumainge/Waremo/Saumoi Nausang singsing bore the name “Angkuruainge,” no Nausang mask bearing this name was made due to lack of resources. Like Kilenge family genealogies, a kind of Nausang family tree exists. In this lineage, the Angkuruainge Nausang was stated to be the “father” of three “sons”—Aulamainge, Kaiwakainge, and Tangaiva—and Ulumainge men made masks for two of these Nausang in 1978 (Figs. 11–13).<sup>10</sup> The suffix “ainge” stands for “bik-pela” (“big” in Pidgin). Following the Nausang family tree, this could mean that the owners of the “ainge” masks had a higher status. Potential meaning for the names ending in “tamé” and “manugé” was not as clear.

The names and designs of Nausang masks appear to correspond to a Nausang lineage and the clan with which the mask is associated. The resemblance between the face designs on the Marimbu, Marimbuainge, Aulamainge, Kaiwakainge, Navantamé, and Tavelemanugé Nausang masks is clearly visible (Figs. 11 and 14). This similarity indicates that the owners of the masks belong to the same clan. As for the Aisivok Nausang mask (Fig. 13), the top of the head section is painted with a completely different design, lacking the stripes featured on the other masks, suggesting that the owner is from a different clan.<sup>11</sup>

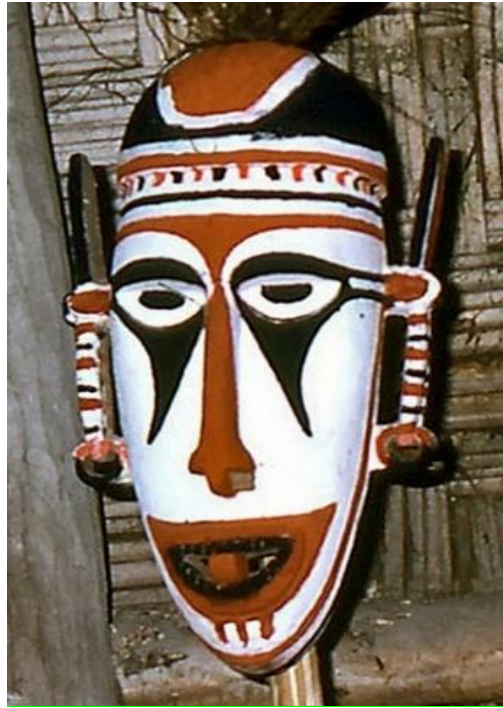


Figure 12 (left). Marimbuainge Nausang mask. Painted wood, approx. 60 x 30 cm. Ulumainge village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea. 1978. Photograph courtesy of the author  
Figure 13 (right). Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea. Aisivok Nausang mask, Ulumainge village, 1978. Painted wood, approx. 60 x 30 cm. Photograph courtesy of the author

The geographical proximity of Ulumainge, Waremo, and Saumoi—the three villages that were the main villages within a comparatively diminutive cultural area—facilitates a more precise description and comparison of the mask designs in Figure 11. This is a shift from earlier studies, which focus either on a specific design on masks originating in communities located hundreds of kilometers apart or on isolated masks in museum collections. A few observations, for instance (see Fig. 11):

- It is evident that all six Nausang masks exhibit a similar horizontal line pattern above the eyes, and five masks are characterized by vertical red and black lines above these.
- Navantamé and Tavelemanugé Nausang masks are notable for the absence of triangles above the eyes.
- Marimbu (Figs. 6, 9, and 11) and Marimbuainge (Figs. 12 and 14) Nausang masks both display two tapered fin shapes located above their eyes.
- Aulamainge and Kaiwakainge Nausang masks share three tapered fin shapes above their eyes.



Figure 14. An arrangement of Nausang masks to be used by Talania Aigilo near the naulum. From left to right: Marimbuainge, Aulamainge, Kaiwakainge, Navantamé, and Tavelemanugé. Waremo village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, March 1978. Photograph courtesy of the author

### Arrangement of Masks at Ulumainge

The fact that the arrangement of the Nausang masks at the nighttime Nausang celebration in front of the Waremo naulum (Fig. 14) was in reverse order of their arrangement during their painting in the Ulumainge naulum (Fig. 11) had eluded me; I only noticed it when editing the ceremony photo for publication. This change of position and the genealogy of the names of the Nausang singsings—expressed through the variations in the masks’ face designs—led me to believe that this Nausang art reflected a partition in the Kilenge social structure.

This hypothesis is also supported by Philip Dark’s ascertainment that

traditionally, most people living in a village would have belonged to one of the two named social grouping or patri-sibs or *namon-ainge*.<sup>12</sup> One of these is associated with the founding of the village and is considered the most important. Marriage would have been with a person of another sib. Each *namon-ainge* is associated with a particular bird, its founding ancestor.<sup>13</sup>

Dark's statement regarding the association of the Kilenge clans with a particular bird bears some resemblance to the statement of Jerry Navoge Kenda from Ongaia village. Kenda claimed that each Kilenge clan was linked to a specific Saumoi—a white-tailed eagle that resided in their clan territory—which led to separate Saumoi bird names for the different territories.<sup>14</sup> The mask designs did not indicate this specific knowledge, which was reserved for the clans involved.



Figure 15. Tree trunk with a hole on the backside. The front is partly covered and ready for the reconstruction of the naulum in Potne village, Kilenge, New Britain, Papua New Guinea, c. 1977. Photograph courtesy of the author

### **A Kilenge Nausang Mask Depicted on the Central Naulum Pole in Potne**

In the Kilenge sub-village of Potne, a painted Nausang mask was attached to the central pole of the men's house (naulum). During a walk through Potne, I wondered about the purpose of cut tree trunks that were lying under a tree. A large hole was visible on one side of the longest trunk (Fig. 15), while on the other side tied banana leaves seemed to protect something. I later discovered a Potne artist in a dark, remote place, painting a Nausang mask attached to a pole in the

traditional white, red-brown, and black colors (Figs. 16–17). Upon completion of the painting, the trunk with the painted Nausang image was carefully covered with leaves, which would not be removed until the pole had become the center of the men's house and the construction of the naulum had been completed (Figs. 18–21).

Why had the repainted Nausang mask on the central pole in Potne's naulum been covered with leaves during its storage and the rebuilding of the ceremonial men's house? The answer was that in Kilenge communities in 1978, women and uninitiated boys were not allowed to see or admire the Nausang face. This applied not only to the mask on the pole in the Potne men's house, but also to the Ulumainge Nausang “dance” masks.<sup>15</sup> The Nausang image on the central pole was uncovered upon completion of the naulum restructuring, though only inside the naulum, signaling the presence of the Nausang spirit. Figures 18–26 document some of the stages in building the Potne naulum.



Figure 16. Poles lying ready for the reconstruction of the naulum in Potne village, Kilenge, New Britain, Papua New Guinea. c. 1977. Photograph courtesy of the author

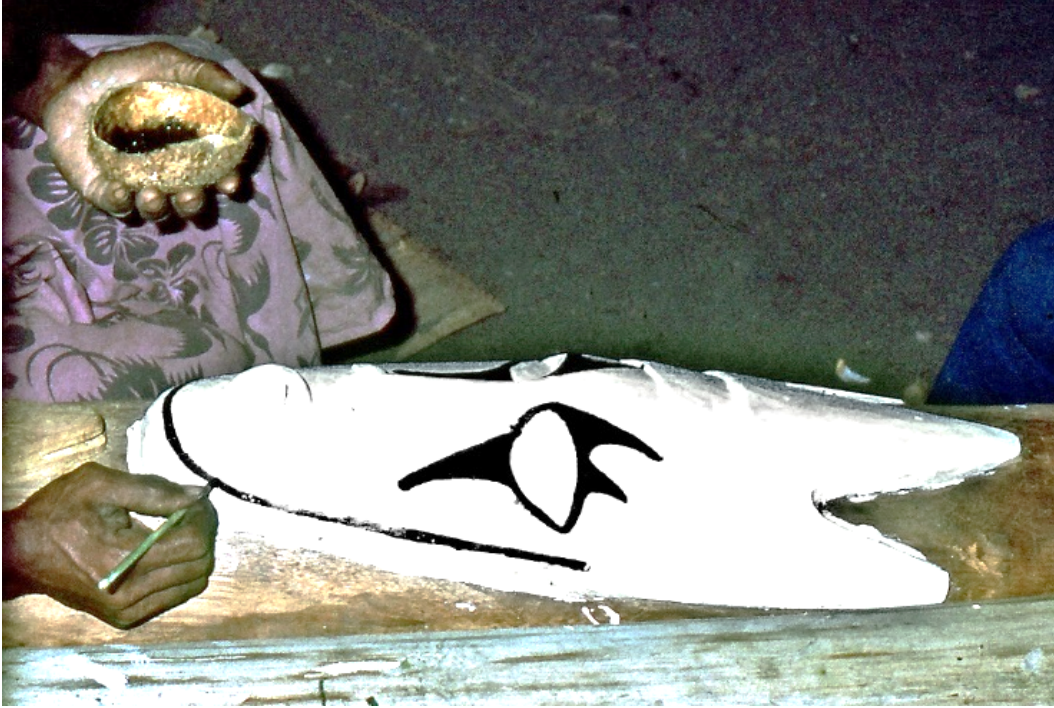


Figure 17. Black paint being put on the white surface of the Nausang mask. The paint is contained in a coconut shell. Potne village, Kilenge, New Britain, Papua New Guinea, c. 1977. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 18. Erecting the central post of the naulum. Potne village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, c. 1977. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 19. Central pole of naulum is erected. The Nausang face on it is covered with leaves in order that it not be seen by women or uninitiated children. Potne village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, c. 1977. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 20. Construction of the naulum. Potne village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, c. 1977. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 21. The central pole of the naulum is erected with the Nausang face still protected by leaves. Potne village, Kilenge, New Britain, Papua New Guinea, c. 1977. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 22. Construction of the naulum. Potne village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, c. 1977. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 23. Construction of the naulum roof. Potne village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, c. 1977. Photograph courtesy of the author



Fig. 24. Construction of the nalum roof. Potne village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, c. 1977. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 25. Having completed their work on the nalum for the day, the builders enjoy a meal sponsored by the local big man and prepared by Potne women. Potne village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, c. 1977. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 26. Having completed their work on the naulum for the day, the builders enjoy a meal sponsored by the local big man and prepared by Potne women. Potne village, Kilenge, West New Britain, Papua New Guinea, c. 1977. Photograph courtesy of the author

***Derk Harm van Groningen à Stuling*** was born in 1940 in Groningen, the Netherlands. From 1970–79, he studied cultural anthropology at Leiden University, devoting himself to visual field research on the daily life of a farming family in the Netherlands (1972) and the circular migration patterns of the Kilenge in New Britain, Papua New Guinea (1977–78). His publications include *Inventory for Profile of Villages. Oksapmin, Waulap, Aranimap, Tomianap and Divanap. Oksapmin Sub-district, West Sepik Province, Lahara 1977–1978 (Port Moresby, 1978)*; “*Migration of the Kilenge: A Village Study*,” *Yagl-Ambu: Papua New Guinea Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities* (1980); and “*Oksapmin Photographs*,” in *Oksapmin: Development and Change* (1981). The 2005–6 exhibition *Singsing Iapun Talania (Bildungswerk Cloppenburg, Germany)* featured 250 of his photographs of daily life among the Kilenge. Additionally, van Groningen supervised various educational and agricultural projects in Tanzania (1980–86), served as project manager of a water supply project in Rwanda (1987–89), and was a coordination consultant for water supply and sanitation facilities in four provinces of Zimbabwe (1990–2000).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Derk H. van Groningen à Stuling, *Kilenge: West New Britain. Papua New Guinea. A Pictorial Ethnography* (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2023), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.423490>.

<sup>2</sup> Van Groningen, *Kilenge*, 96–100 and 138–9. See also A. A. Gerbrands, “Die furchterregenden *Nausang* der Kilenge (Neubritannien),” in *Geschichte und mündliche Überlieferung in Ozeanien*, ed. Brigitta Hauser-Schaublin (Ethnologisches Seminar der Universität und Museum für Völkerkunde), 187–201.

<sup>3</sup> Gerbrands, “Die furchterregenden *nausang*,” 192.

<sup>4</sup> Over time, the Kilenge Nausang masks became well known for their beauty among private collectors, and some made their way to ethnological museums including the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum-Cologne (from Huon Gulf); the Museum of Ethnography, Budapest (from Tami); the Wereldmuseum Leiden (from Kilenge); the Linden Museum-Stuttgart (from Western New Britain); and Southern Illinois University, Carbondale (from Kilenge).

<sup>5</sup> Other scientific publications dealing with the Nausang phenomenon include Philip J. C. Dark, “Die Kunst der Kilenge für Tanz und Zeremonien,” in *Form, Farbe, Phantasie: Südseekunst aus Neubritannien*, ed. Ingrid Heermann (Arnold, 2001), 176–79; F. Geldof, “Het kunstcomplex van de Tam eilanden” (MA thesis, Ghent University, 2007); and Ingrid Heermann, “West-Neubritannien und die Witu-Inseln,” in *Form, Farbe, Phantasie: Südseekunst aus Neubritannien*, ed. Ingrid Heermann (Stuttgart: Arnold 2001), 164–68.

<sup>6</sup> “Aankomst van Nausang wordt aangekondigd met het dreigende gebrul van zijn ‘stem’, voortgebracht door de mannen die in de grauwe ochtend een zogenaamd bromhout rond-zwaaiend. Dat bromhout, de ‘tong’ van Nausang, is een dun lancetvormig stuk hout.” (Nausang’s arrival is announced by the menacing roar of his “voice,” produced by men waving a so-called “humming stick” around in the grey morning. This humming stick, or “tongue,” is a thin, lancet-shaped piece of wood.) Adrian A. Gerbrands, “In naam van Nausang,” internal publication, Cultural Anthropology Department, State University of Leiden, 1990, 2. Translation by the author.

<sup>7</sup> Adrian A. Gerbrands, “Report on Project: To aid filming of Kilenge Nausang mask ceremony, West New Britain,” University of Leiden, June 21, 1972, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Van Groningen, *Kilenge*, 26, 170.

<sup>9</sup> Adrian A. Gerbrands clarifies this as follows: “Wesentlich wichtiger ist die Bemalung, die für jeder *nausang* unterschiedlich und zugleich typisch ist. Durch sie wird die Identität einer bestimmten *nausang* festgelegt [(ein gemaltes Kennzeichen)].” (The painting is much more important, as it is different for each *nausang* yet still typical. It defines the identity of a particular *nausang* [(a painted mark.])). A. A. Gerbrands, “Die furchterregenden Nausang der Kilenge (Neubritannien),” *Basler Beiträge zur Ethnologie* 37 (1994): 190. Translation by the author.

<sup>10</sup> In daily life, however, people referred only to the Nausang singsing. See Van Groningen, *Kilenge*, 97.

<sup>11</sup> It is evident that Gerbrands previously referenced the name of this mask, which he designated as “Aisiwok,” exclusively from the older Nausang masks. It is noteworthy that Gerbrands mentions the name of an Aisiwok mask, while I have mentioned a mask in the Ulumainge naulum called “Aisivok.” Given the close proximity of *v* and *w* in the Dutch alphabet and the remarkable similarity of their phonetic qualities, I assume that the name “Aisivok” I use is due to a discrepancy in articulation, more specifically a transition from *w* to *v*, and that this is the same Nausang mask. This observation leads to the hypothesis that the design depicted on the mask may already be quite antiquated. Despite extensive research, a resolution to this issue has yet to be found.

<sup>12</sup> The generic term for a category that breaks down into the sub-classifications of patri-sib, referring to patrilineal clan descent, and matri-sib, referring to matrilineal clan descent.

<sup>13</sup> P. J. C. Dark, A. A. Gerbrands, and Mavis H. Dark, *The Context of Art in Culture: An Ethno-aesthetic Study of the Kilenge of Western New Britain: Report to the National Science Foundation on Field Work* (Department of Anthropology, Southern Illinois University, 1969), 26.

<sup>14</sup> However, due to the extension of the Kilenge clans, as well as the living and working together in the villages and gardens, this subdivision gradually had become mixed up.

<sup>15</sup> Before the establishment of colonial rule in western New Britain in 1890, the sight of a Nausang mask by women or uninitiated children could even lead to the deterrent act of killing an entire family of the perpetrators by the villagers. Due to the efforts of the colonial government, missionaries, and conversion of the Kilenges to Christianity, such practices no longer occurred during the period of my research.

During the Ulumainge, Waremo and Saumoi Nausang singsing in 1978, I did not observe any violation of this prescription by the villagers. When the Nausang spirit was present, women and uninitiated children had to leave. Consequently, they had to enjoy themselves outside the village or stay with families in neighboring villages where the Nausang singing was not celebrated. Nevertheless, unannounced visitors from other areas, such as users of the Cape Gloucester–Sagsag public road or a helicopter pilot who landed at a new airfield in the Kilenge area, had to pay a symbolic fine in the form of a pig.