Two rather obscure axes in The University Museum's Melanesian collection (Figs. 1, 2) reveal interesting facets of a secret male masking society. The axe handles (here supplemented with blades obtained from European traders around the turn of the century) have a distinctive sectioning that is often adorned with a conical face (see Figs. 1a, 4). That face is the face of tubuan, a masked figure of great authority in southern New Ireland and in neighboring New Britain and the Duke of York Islands. Tubuan figures in New Ireland carry such axes when they appear in villages. More ominously, at one time they used the axes to kill people who had transgressed their law. As each tubuan has a distinct name, so axes belonging to the figures bear the same personal name, though the generic name for this type of axe is firam.

I did not know of firam and its use among the Lak of southern New Ireland when I arrived to begin my field research. I had read early accounts of southern New Ireland that claimed the people were practitioners of tubuan, but I did not know if the secret society still had adherents.

Once resident among the Lak, I heard next to nothing about this tubuan. Direct questioning was futile. Younger men claimed they knew nothing about it; older men smiled knowingly but assured me they knew little. They were certain, however, that some "big man," or...
Introduction to the Lak and Southern New Ireland

New Ireland stretches 220 miles in length, with a width that narrows to as little as 5 miles in some sections, and which bulges out again to about 30 miles in the mountainous southern region (Fig. 5). Sparsely populated, and economically important only as a source of copra, or dried coconut, the island was never very significant as a colony of Germany (until 1914) or territory of Australia (until 1975, when Papua New Guinea gained independence). Even today the island remains relatively undeveloped, though efforts to exploit the vast timber and mineral resources of the interior are now underway. The traveler to New Ireland will be struck by a forceful contrast between the subdued spots of sweet potato, sago, and cassava that lie along the coast, made without the use of machines or tools beyond the digging stick, and the vast plantations that ply the sea barrel a mile or two from the coast.

The southern tip of New Ireland, the least populated and least developed area of the island, is home to the Lak, a population of about 2,400, who speak an austronesian language and live a way of life far removed from the modern world. Many of the Lak are clan possessions, the leader who hosts the appearance of a tohuan at a mortuary feast claims to control the tohuan. Producing the tohuan in such a context is an overt, public claim of leadership. A man in this case claims for himself the authority and supernatural sanction with which the tohuan is invested. Only a very secure "big man" would risk such a demonstration of authority, for it is likely to raise envy and a resort to sorcery, or sometimes more direct action, on the part of rivals.

Thus, many big men insisted that though they controlled clan tohuanas, they learned to produce them in such public events.

General Features of the Tubuan System

The word tubuan, in fact, is not a Lak word. It is the term for the figures used by the Tolai in neighboring New Britain. The Lak term is tikona. Yet use of the New Britain word is appropriate, for some of the masks used by the Lak today have come from the Tolai. Lak men purchased these masks from Tolai or Duke of York Island owners. These masks differ from Lak masks in characteristic iconographic features. Such masks also differ in the type of ownership they allow. While Lak masks are usually clan possessions with sanctions against alienation, masks acquired from outside the Lak area are personal possessions that can be seen.

Tubuan means "old woman" in Tolai and in many New Ireland languages. Likewise, the Lak name of the mask is said to be a tubulandu, "ancestor," though the literal meaning of tikona is no longer known. Both the Lak and Tolai say the tubuan is a female. Each tubuan bears a personal name (Fig. 1), its own characteristic iconographic features, and a set of associated ritual prescriptions. Consistent with its sex ascription, the masks are also assigned "children," other masked figures that are known as dukulak (cover, Fig. 11). Again, dukulak is a Tolai word; the Lak simply call the children tubulandu, or "bubu, "old one." While the Tolai say dukulak are male, the Lak do not.
specify their sex. Not all tubuan have children, but those that do may have as many as 10 or 20, each assigned to a named type.

The origin of the tubuan is quite straightforward. Swilik, the mythical founder of Lak society, who is now simply called God, was the first to make the masks. He made two such masks, one called Xapoto, assigned to Bongian or little bird moiety, the other called Nubelehe, assigned to Koroe or big bird moiety. Swilik built the masks in his hidden workshop, along with a ship. The two tubuan pulled Swilik's ship out to sea when it was time for him to leave New Ireland, and Lak see in the arrival of whites since the turn of the century a return of Swilik and his ship. Their "ancestor," quality points to the antiquity and authority of the masks. Indeed, Lak say the tubuan are these pre-eminent ep tubul taniii, "old work," something old and not subject to change. Historical research shows, however, that the tubuan is actually rather new to the Lak. Until the turn of the century, the Lak population resided in the interior reaches of New Ireland. At this point, they lacked tubuan; they adopted the ritual figures only with resettlement on the coast, when they came into contact with coastal populations who used tubuan. Yet evidently the tubuan system is indigenous to southern New Ireland, even if the Lak adopted the system rather late. For Tolai origin myths relating to the tubuan specify that the masks originally came from southern New Ireland (Parkinson 1907).

According to the Lak, the tubuan are put to two major uses. First, as clan possessions of great value and authority, they are used by big men (see cover) to demonstrate their control of a clan. A leader will arrange for a clan tubuan to appear in a village during the mortuary feast for a major clan figure. This appearance is a major event. All work in a village must stop; all men leave the village and reside either in the leader's men's house or in the trun, the place where the tubuan emerges. The tubuan will patrol through the village nightly, as it enforces a certain authority or "law" over the village. At this time no fighting is allowed, no loud talking, no work on houses, and no mention of the tubuan. This has been called "the tubuan peace" (Errington 1974).

Men who violate the peace are fined by the tubuan; in fact, the tubuan may appear at any time to enforce a penalty on a man who has unwittingly revealed tubuan secrets. Unauthorized disclosure of knowledge relating to the tubuan is called kising. The tubuan will appear at night and plant a certain type of bush before the house of the man. Other men then knock on the door of his house and say, "a pig is tied up out there." The man then knows he has offended according to the tubuan.

Glossary

duku: The "child" of tubuan; a smaller figure equally bound up with the male secret society.
frem: The axe used by tubuan that bears at one end the characteristic features of the figures.
kambentuktuk: The Lak style of tubuan, also called natau.
kiung: General offenses against the law of the tubuan.
kisuisu: A magical technique allowing the tubuan to dance on water.
korepo: The New Britain, or Tolai, tubuan style.
kuru: A magical technique attributed to tubuan. The figures fashion powdered lime into a lightning bolt that can kill.
natau: The original Lak word for tubuan figures.
pal: Men's house.
trun: The secret place from which tubuan emerge.
tubuan: The "female" masked figure that is the object of a male secret society in southern New Ireland and neighboring islands. The term can refer to the mask, the masked figure, and the secret society.
uanga: Offense against tubuan, in particular fighting when the tubuan is abroad.
and that he must provide a pig as compensation. The pig will be consigned in the trim (see below). Similarly, a man who has quarreled with his wife when a tubuan is abroad commits the offense of ergong: the tubuan is authorized to approach the man's house and break down its walls with the firn axe, which we saw was once used by the tubuan to kill offenders against its laws.

The second use of the tubuan involves aluman, the taking of young men into the trim to learn the secrets of the tubuan. The tubuan used for this initiation may be a big man's clan tubuan, that is, one inherited from the man's predecessor, or a tubuan acquired through purchase from another man.

Use of the tubuan for initiation (and the related sale of rights to produce a tubuan or dukduk) is a major source of wealth for big men. Young men must pay for the right to see the tubuan. Though the cost is borne by their fathers or uncles, it is considerable: a pig and usually about 10 tafons of shell money (a total of about $125). Adjusted for differences in per capita income, this expense is comparable to such major investments as our own purchase of a car; a young man thus owes a great debt to his sponsor. Since the tubuan-owning big man is likely to have more access to pigs and shell wealth, he often sponsors many young men, in this way gaining their loyalty and labor power for future feast orders.

Ambitious young men will try to proceed to further stages of initiation. This includes buying rights to produce or own a dukduk "child" and finally becoming an owner of a tubuan. The latter is quite difficult. Without the support of a tubuan owner and the backing of clan followers, a man stands little chance of access to this paramount symbol of authority. And we have already seen that owning a tubuan is also a burden, in that it makes one a target for an ambitious rival. For this reason, some elder men content themselves with learning the magic and technical skills associated with the masks, leaving actual administration of the masks to others.

A non-traditional use of the tubuan has also recently emerged among the Lak. Today, major civic events, such as national independence celebrations or the yearly provincial agricultural show, may involve appearance of a tubuan as an entry in dance competitions. Lak see no contradiction between the spiritual or secret qualities of the masks and their appearance in such public contexts.

Ownership and Use of the Tubuan

The autonomy of a clan or one of its segments is often determined by its possession of a tubuan. Thus, if a big man wishes to exert control over a segment, he must gain control of its tubuan; if he wishes to merge other segments with the one he controls, he must administer other tubuan in addition to his own.

Closely associated with ownership of a tubuan is ownership of a trim, the secret place where the tubuan is produced. Surprisingly, most of these trim are not placed deep in the bush, but rather lie adjacent to villages. If a man's house, or pal (Fig. 12), has been built in the trim, the pal is said to "have a tubuan," which makes it utterly taboo to women and to uninitiated men. Other men's houses do not have this association with the tubuan and are consequently governed by fewer restrictions.

Tubuan is placed close to a village, men and women studiously avoid mention of it. In fact, speaking of the trim outside of a man's house is cause for a fine. If men wish to assemble in the trim to prepare for production of a tubuan, they do so secretly. They are barred from walking directly to the trim; they must take a circuitous route to deceive women. Men concoct various stories to dissuade their destination. Ingenious on this score is highly prized and considered great fun.

What goes on in the trim? Here older men supervise construction of the mask and introduce new initiates to its significance. The trim in many ways represents the extreme limits of Lak social order. On the one hand, the tubuan is an anti-social principle, something raw and wild. Men say that in collecting materials for its construction, for example, they cannot use paths and must

8 Young girl after an ocean bath. Even a girl five or six years old is a valuable source of labor for a household.

9 People returning to Maskalung village by wong, the outrigger canoe that is still the standard mode of transport in the Lak region.
spirit he had always been told it was.

Do young men know what awaits them once they enter a tribe? They evidently not, for many men describe the intense fear they felt when first confronted by a tubuan. Some lost control of their bowels; others expected to die and were paralyzed with fright. But these reports are also conventional descriptions of what is supposed to happen. The entire initiation procedure rests on a delicate balance between uncertainty over the true nature of the tubuan and recognition that the tubuan demands certain responses, such as fear on the part of initiates and women, and subordination on the part of men.

Because much of the initiation procedure is still an active secret among the Lak, I cannot go into further detail on the treatment of initiates. It is enough to note that the trian rites first demonstrate the superiority of the tubuan over the initiate and men generally, and then as it were, switch gears, stressing the solidarity of the men, now joined by the newly admitted novice, as initiates in a secret hidden from women. In fact, the Rev. George Brown, who resided among the Toli people in the 1890s, witnessed one such initiation and describes it this way: 'The female Dukulaks (tubuan) then dance in front of them and jerk off the mask and lead giraffes and throw them at them, and thus the girls are supposed to know for the first time that one of their own people was under each mask' (Brown 1910:65).

The Iconography of Tubuan and Dukulak

The ritual figures consist of two parts, a head and a body of bask material. The latter usually consists of three giraffes of bush grass or leaves, which are tightly woven together. The mask and body cover its bearer almost entirely, only its legs go from below the knee are visible.

Tubuan and Dukulak bear characteristic differences in form. The tubuan has a short, more gradual conical shape. The Dukulak has a much longer, thicker base, and a 'head' proper, that may extend as high as 2 meters. The tubuan has floral deorations on the entire length of its head, but the Dukulak has a block of floral materials or feathers only at its apex. Finally, the Dukulak has a three-color scheme, consisting, for example, of black, white, and green, while the tubuan is black and green only.

The facial features of the two also differ in significant ways. One tubuan, Mila, has eyes, but no other facial feature except the stripe down its center (see Fig. 11). The eyes consist of three concentric rings, an important feature because the number of rings often varies differentially in the tubuan. The eye form and stripe down the middle are made with powdered line, or burnt-down bone, which is first soaked. Once the appropriate eye form has been fashioned, the tubuan is said to be able to kill.

Dukulak Lamunum contains eyes, a mouth, and a drop-like form between the eyes that extends above them (see Fig. 11). This drop-like form is not a nose, but rather the dukulak equivalent of the long stripe of the tubuan mask. The eyes of the Dukulak have no particular signjificance. The three-color scheme of this dukulak, however, is important. Lamunum is the name of a species of bird, and the species bears this particular set of colors, namely, a black head, then a band of white, and finally a green body.

In fact, the relation between the masks and birds is worth a comment. Dukulaks are often named after species of birds and bear their characteristic colors. Also, many of the dances performed by the tubuan and dukulak mime the movements of birds. For example, one dance involves the tubuan and dukulak in the role of two kati birds, black birds with red eyes, which fight over a fruit that has fallen from a tree.

What then, do the Lak say about these two iconographic features? The critical feature for the classification of a tubuan is the presence or absence of a mouth form. The tubuan shown here, Mila, lacks such a form. This type of tubuan, called Dukulak lamunum, is indigenous to southern New Ireland and should properly be termed nailaku, as we have mentioned above, rather than tubuan. Masks of this type may have two eyes with as many as six concentric rings.

Opposed to this type are the Toli tubuans, called kantama. These always contain a mouth form, such as the one shown in Dukulak Lamunum, and appear to have more than two concentric rings for eyes.

The facial features of the masks that appear to us as 'tears' and 'nose' are assigned very different meanings by the Lak. The stripes down the center of the tubuan face and the drop-like figure in the dukulak are described as karivian manum, 'tears' or holes of the eyes. And the mouth-like crescent on the dukulak and tubuan of the katya type is described as kaling, 'nose'.

These are tantalizing equivalences: one wants to ask why these forms appear on the masks, and what it is about the forms themselves that allows them to stand for such objects. Unfortunately, such inquiry is quite difficult even for the Lak; let alone the anthropologist. Because the tubuan is produced only as the occasion warrants and in different parts of southern New Ireland, no Lak person ever has a complete view of the system. Mask owners are far-flung, and realization of the masks is irregular.

The scattered and inherently incomplete aspect of the system means that the masks produced today hear only an indirect connection to the larger "semantic" order that might account for the forms. While the system functions perfectly well in this dispersed and "virtual" form (as is the case with much Melanesian art; see Albert 1980), the art does not easily lend itself to semantic analysis.

Conclusion: Masks, Secrecy and Belief

We have seen that an important aspect of the tubuan is that it is not what it appears to be. This is true most simply in the claim that the tubuan is a spirit: men say it is a spirit but clearly know that it is they who make the mask and don it. However, even in the act of making the mask and deceiving women, very intelligent Lak men insist that the tubuan is meant to be understood as at least kind of spirit. This offsets against our feeling that deceptions of this sort and spiritual claims are mutually exclusive. But the Lak evidently do not feel this way. What then are we to make of the tubuan?

We can hardly accept the answer given by the Rev. Brown. He claimed that the 'principal objects' appeared to be to extort money from everyone else who was not a member, and to terrify women and those who were not members' (Brown 1910:50). There are certainly easier ways to extort money from a community, and we cannot forget that the tubuan system contains many irrational features for a system purportedly designed for such exploitation. For example, excluding the tubuan is quite a burden, and many men who would otherwise appear to be exploiters have alone one point or another infringed against the law of the tubuan and paid a fine. But the greatest argument against Brown's explanation is that quite reflective Lak men, who themselves only marginally profit from the system, insist that the masks are spirits.

11 Tubuan Mila with its child, Dukulak Lamunum. Mila is of the kaunbenganaktok type of tubuan, indigenous to southern New Ireland. Big men distribute shell money as a sign of the man cooperation necessary for appearance of the figures.
and wonderful powers ascribed to it all lead men to wonder if they have gotten to the bottom of its mystery. Perhaps it really is a spirit: the initial revelation that the tubuan is not what it appeared to be now leads men to wonder if it is in fact something else entirely. A chain of doubt and significance is thus set off and nourished by a diet of secrecy, exclusion, terror, and wonder.

In short, the revelation that would seem to rob the tubuan of its mystery in fact enhances it. It becomes more mysterious. The revelation that it is not a spirit in a straightforward sense now implies that it may be a spirit in a more complicated way. When Lak men say the tubuan is a spirit, then, they mean that spirit, mask, and men's activity stand in a complex relation of doubt and knowledge, obvious deception and potential significance.

If it is a spirit, however, it is clearly not a spirit in the way women think it is, for we have seen that they are rigidly excluded from this realm. What do women make of the tubuan? Most, I suspect, recognize that the tubuan is not a spirit in the straightforward sense demanded by public propriety. They know men gather in the trium, and thus it is likely that they recognize that men have something to do with the ritual figures. What they do not know is how men make them, and what this connection between masks and men signifies. And this is a source of wonder and jealousy for women.

Exclusion of women and conscious trickery on the part of men is actually fundamental to tubuan. If women were not interested in the tubuan, and if men did not have to work so hard to disguise and hint at their connection to it, much of the significance of the tubuan would be lost. It gains its rich meanings from this game of exclusion and partial disclosure. Thus, in the Duke of York Islands, men say that women possess a kind of magic that brings a man to lose his grasp on the mask (Errington 1974), forcing him to drop it while walking through the village. Men must consequently perform a counter-magic and tightly grasp the mask when they produce tubuan.

This exclusion of women is not

the sign of male superiority it appears to be. If their exclusion from knowledge of the tubuan is more complete than men's, men themselves have only a partial or incomplete idea of its significance. Initiates can never know if they have been shown the true nature of the tubuan.

Even a tubuan owner must worry if some other big man elsewhere actually knows more than he. The tubuan system is thus driven by necessarily incomplete knowledge, which allows the Lak — men as well as women — to speculate that a mask made by men may yet be a spirit.

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12 Men's house (pal) of traditional style, with characteristic "two eyes" (i.e., doors). This type of pal is very rare today among the Lak.

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