



Head

Not on display

Title/Description: Head

Born: 1900 - 1999

Measurements: h. 540 x w. 103 x d. 112 mm

Accession Number: 177

Historic Period: 20th century

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Heads of this type were used in the extensive rituals of the men's grade societies of Malekula in Vanuatu, formerly known as the New Hebrides. The principal grade society was the *nimangki* (or variations of this name), and by successfully amassing and distributing wealth, usually in the form of pigs, men were able to progress through a series of named grades and thereby increase their status.

The role of such heads in the rituals of *nimangki* and other secret societies, such as *nevinbur*, is not clear, but a comparable head is illustrated in Deacon (1934: pl. xvi), which is referred to as a 'dancing stick', held aloft by men when dancing so as to be just visible to women and children outside the special men's enclosure.

This hollow head is modelled in a vegetable fibre compound (see Deacon, 1934: 545 for the full recipe), and the hardwood stick which passes through the centre is fixed with pieces of shredded cotton cloth. The face is painted red, white and black - colours which were adopted by men who had achieved particular grades in the *nimangki* hierarchy (Deacon, 1934: 282-4). The red forms triangular areas around the eyes and also appears in V-shaped designs on the back. A ridge encircles the face, and others delineate the brows, cheeks, nose and mouth.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 76.

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1967. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

