

OCEANIC ART COLLECTION

Uramot Baining people New Britain

Bark Cloth Mask (*kavat*)

Twentieth century

Wicker, bark cloth, pigments

48 × 24 × 22 in. (121.9 × 61 × 55.9 cm)

Gift of Dr. Samuel Spring

S85-SPNG-G250

The Uramot Baining people live in the mountainous, heavily forested region of the Gazelle Peninsula, on the ortheastern tip of New Britain. Their ritual life centers on a series of dances that focus on mourning, initiation, and birth. In the early twentieth century, the dances occurred in a sequence that began in the day and continued throughout the night. The masks and headdresses, display sculpture, and body adornment used in these rites were made of ephemeral materials including sticks, leaves, bark cloth, and feathers. At the conclusion of the ceremony all of the ritual objects were destroyed. By the mid-twentieth century, when foreign observers expressed interest in procuring the masks, they were used in performance and then sold. In recent times, the dances occur less frequently and are usually scheduled during Christian holidays such as Easter and Christmas, or to celebrate the completion of a community project such as the construction of a church, school, or clinic.

The masks are made by young men in agegrade societies whose skill is gradually honed so that they are recognized as specialists who can produce the most complex masks. Uramot masks are specific to their use as either daytime masks or night masks. The masks used for night are said to represent spirit beings, such as leaf spirits, tree spirits, and the spirit of a pig's vertebra. Typically they are made of a rattan and bamboo frame with a mulberry bark covering. The Harn example represents a leaf spirit. It has an ovoid face with large concentric eyes, a protruding duck-bill-shaped mouth, and a tongueshaped appendage curling below the mouth. The forehead is covered with black stippling and a red and black leaf shape between the brows. Jagged lines under the eyes represent tear tracks, as it is believed the spirit is mourning its own death. The back of the mask is covered with red and black triangles that play against the negative space of the raw white bark cloth.

