

## **Thesis Abstract: "Where The Spirits Meet" A History of The National Museum And Art Gallery, Waigani, Papua New Guinea**

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Abstract of a Thesis submitted for the Degree of Master of Arts (Hons)  
at the Charles Sturt University, Bathurst Campus

This thesis examines the history of collecting cultural material during the first century of colonial impact, 1884-1984, beginning with the British colonization of the territory in 1884; the use of temporary museums established in Papua by Australian government officials after it was proclaimed a Territory of the Commonwealth in 1906; to the Independent State of Papua New Guinea in 1975 followed by the establishment of the permanent Papua New Guinea National Museum at Waigani in 1977.

The notion of a museum was brought to Papua and New Guinea with the English language by government officials, explorers and missionaries who came for a variety of reasons. The new residents of the islands began collecting specimens of cultural material regarded as 'curios' from the colony before it was greatly altered or completely lost with the encroachment of European civilization. Many of these artefacts are stored in museums and private collections throughout the world. A small band of the government officials collected cultural material with the intention that it be returned at a later time to Papua New Guinea.

In traditional times village societies had special places for particular and religious artefacts associated with their way of life. The goal of the carvers and artists was not noble simplicity but multiplicity of visions, as the objects combined formal discipline

with diversity of motifs for their own needs. Nothing was left to chance: to the villagers, all things were linked and merged into one another. The term 'museum', a building used for the storage and exhibition of objects, has been embraced by Papua New Guineans to take over the functions of their own traditional communal houses. This pre-existing cultural attitude towards collections of objects of social importance made the western 'museum culture' easy for Papua New Guineans to assimilate.

Early colonial officers, such as MacGregor, Murray, Cleland, McCarthy and others established policies that sought to protect and preserve the country's cultural heritage until Papua New Guineans could implement their own cultural policies for the nation. These early 'Heads of Government' took advantage of the work done by the anthropologists, Haddon, Pitt-Rivers, Seligman, Williams and others in seeking to understand the ways of the indigenous people of the new colony. The role played by the professionals (both from outside the Museum and as employees) has been very influential in enlisting Australian and international aid, including UNESCO support. Despite the good intentions behind the National Cultural Property (Preservation) Act to protect the country's cultural heritage, the Museum has encountered many difficulties in enforcing the law.



When contrasting the position between Papua New Guinea's National Museum and museums of other Pacific nations, it can be seen that early colonial officials in Papua New Guinea have been most supportive and protective of the culture and the development of museums for the people. This has not always been the case with other Pacific Islands. There were times when those involved with the National Museum succeeded in their objectives and other times when some poor decisions were made. However, the basic policies of promoting national identity and encouraging people's pride in their own individual cultures has always been of paramount importance to those involved with the Museum. The Constitution of the Nation acknowledges the noble traditions passed from one generation to another. (See Appendix 1)

After Independence, the historical account of the progressive development of the Papua New Guinea National Museum was followed by a setback in 1984 when the Head of Government support was withdrawn and funding to the Museum severely cut.

It will be seen that the Papua New Guinea National Museum has been forged out of British Imperial culture and early colonial foresight. There has been a blending of 'native' and European cultures by Papua New Guineans to meet their own particular cultural needs. Sir Bernard Narokobi, while President of the Museum Board of Trustees, said 'We should start with our ways and make use of other people's ways to uplift and improve upon our ways'<sup>1</sup>

The Museum reflects the nation's cultural background aesthetically and spiritually and it '... stands as a monument to the past, a source of study to the present and an inspiration to the future.'<sup>2</sup> It is a place '**where the spirits meet**'.<sup>3</sup>

### Notes

1. C. B. Narokobi, *The Melanesian Way: Total Cosmic Vision of Life*, Institute of PNG Studies, Port Moresby, 1980, p.12.
2. Michael Somare, President, board of Trustees, Papua New Guinea Public Museum and Art Gallery, *Annual Report of the Trustees, 1975-76*, Port Moresby, p.ii.
3. Mr Geoffrey Mosuwadoga, in discussions with Mrs. Chris Wright, referred to the National Museum as the place '**where the spirits meet**'.

### Appendix 1

The following extract from: "**The Constitution of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea**" acknowledges the noble traditional wisdoms passed from one generation to another:

"We the people of Papua New Guinea

United in one nation

Pay homage to the memory of our ancestors — the source of our strength and origin of our combined heritage

Acknowledge the worthy customs and traditional wisdoms of our people — which have come down to us from generation to generation

Pledge ourselves to guard and pass on to those who come after us, our noble traditions..."

Therefore let us live and be guided by our Constitution.

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