



## Wave Splitter (Tabuya)

**Date**  
mid 20th Century

**Primary Maker**  
Massim

**Medium**  
Wood

### Description

Wave splitters (tabuya) are a part of the elaborate canoes used in the Kula trade ring in the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea. Wave splitters are decorated prows fixed above the actual prow of the canoe and attached under the splashboard (lagim). Each canoe has two wave splitters that are located on both the bow and the stern of the vessel. A tabuya is cut from a single piece of wood and is intricately incised on each side with mirroring designs. Boomerang-shaped wave splitters such as this example are commonly found on nagega canoes, which are larger and sturdier Kula vessels that are intended for rougher voyages on open waters. Wave splitters feature openwork carvings of motifs that have been attributed to the Massim area. The doka is an ‘animal’ motif described as a small chain with tightly coiled ends and is found all over the tabuya. The doka is an imaginary animal and has no real counterpart in the natural world, yet some argue it represents a flying animal with a head a bird and a body of a snake. The woodcarver utilizes the doka for more than just an embellished feature, but also as an organizational device to outline the rest of his designs on the tabuya. Another element often found on similar wave splitters—but noted to may have been sawn off this example—is a prow ornament known as a munkuris. The munkruis is thought to have serves as a protective function against bad weather. Wave splitters are traditionally painted with black, white, and red pigments obtained from a burnt coconut, a red berry, chalk or coral. Red is the color seen most predominantly in these splashboards for its ability to elicit passionate responses. Canoes are status markers in Massim society, much like luxury vehicles in our society, and wave splitters are ornamental features that serve the purpose of beautifying the canoe and charming spectators when they arrive on the island during Kula trade voyages. It is thought that visually-pleasing canoe with intricate wood carvings would “soften” the minds of other Kula participants and make them relinquish their valuable gifts.

### Dimensions

6 × 33 1/2 × 2 1/2 in. (15.2 × 85.1 × 6.4 cm)