



## Lime Spatula (Ghena Ngaa)

### Date

early to mid 20th Century

### Primary Maker

Massim

### Medium

Wood, shell and pigment

### Description

This lime spatula was collected from Vanatinai Island in the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea and dates from the early to mid-20th century. Lime spatulas are commonly made of whalebone, cassowary bone, human bone, ebony, wood, or turtle shell. Depending on the intended purpose, a lime spatula may be decorated with shells or incisions. This particular style of lime spatula is also known as ghena ngaa, which translates to wealth spatula. The openwork carvings presented here are indicative of other lime spatulas from the Massim region.

The primary purpose of a ghena ngaa was to exhibit a form of red shell money currency known as bagi. These wealth objects were given to a widow during elaborate funeral feasting ceremonies and also used for other traditional payments. A lime spatula is commonly employed as a tool for the preparation of betel nut chewing—a mild stimulant used in many parts of Southeast Asia. The practice involves using a lime spatula to bring lime made of burnt coral to the mouth, where it is chewed with a mixture of betel nut and betel pepper leaves. The consumption of the blend reduces hunger, produces a sense of well-being, and increases the capacity of work. During traditional ceremonies, a new lime spatula may be crafted and decorated for the reserved use of a chief or shaman. According to some researchers, lime spatulas such as this one would not have been used for betel nut chewing. Instead, they are part of the ritual gifts used in the inter-island expeditions of Kula trade voyages. These excursions required women and men to sail on outrigger canoes in search of valuables such as decorated lime spatulas and other ritual commodities. These items would be used in their mortuary or bride price requirements as currency. Lime spatulas decorated with layers shells were considered valuable and would convey the high rank of the person who gifts it away during these rituals. Lime spatulas held a deep significance and hallowed respect, signifying status, chieftdom, ownership and historical record. Today, lime spatulas are most frequently used as heirlooms and reminders of deceased family members.

### Dimensions

19 × 13 1/4 × 1 in. (48.3 × 33.7 × 2.5 cm)