Slit drums on Atchin

JOHN LAYARD
Edited and introduced by HAIDY GEISMAR

Introduction

And I had always hoped to be the uniter of anthropology with psychology.

—Layard n.d.2:26

In April 1914, a young Cambridge graduate, John Willoughby Layard, set sail for Australia on the S.S. Euripides, accompanied by his supervisor, the eminent ethnologist and psychologist, William Halse Rivers Rivers. They were part of a larger group of British academics bound to attend the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Australia. The outbreak of World War One, which famously interned Layard’s contemporary, Bronislaw Malinowski, in the Trobriand Islands, inevitably affected the group of Cambridge scholars. Alfred Cort Haddon abandoned his plans to take Layard on survey work in a naval gunboat down the New Guinea coast, and his colleague Rivers suggested that the aspiring ethnologist accompany him to the New Hebrides.

At the time, the New Hebrides (the name Vanuatu was taken upon independence in 1980) was governed by a rivalrous and inefficient Anglo-French Condominium (see MacClancy 1981; Miles 1998). With the encouragement of the British Resident Commissioner, Merton King, Layard and Rivers decided to go to the Small Island of Atchin, a mile from the coast of the island of Malakula. The Small Islands were, and are, famous for a lengthy cycle of ceremonial status alteration known as Maki, one variant of a ritual complex that exists throughout the region of north and north-central Vanuatu. Taking place over the course of a generation, the lengthy series of preparatory Maki rites culminate at a lavish ceremony, where a man sheds his old name and title and acquires a new rank and attendant status. Such ceremonies primarily comprise the sacrifice of pigs on stone tables, and the erection in the sacred dancing grounds of stone dolmens and figurative carvings covered by small houses with hawk-carved finials, accompanied by lavish dancing, singing, and feasting. The importance of standing stones, both small and large, in this rite led Rivers and Layard to consider such rituals as “Megalithic,” comparing them to the megalithic practices of Stone Age Britain. Rivers was intrigued by a recent publication that described the material culture of the rite throughout the archipelago (Speiser 1913), and was keen to develop his interests in mapping patterns of cultural diffusion in Melanesia (Rivers 1914; see also Langham 1981). Layard was later to write about the “Stone Men of Malekula” and throughout his life continued to trace the formal connections between Melanesia and other parts of the world, focusing not only on megaliths but also on other “universal forms”: labyrinths, flying tricksters, and dreams.

Unbeknownst to Layard and Rivers, the Atchin community had recently had a violent altercation with O’Farrell, a despotic Irish trader. They had evicted him and his family from the island, and pillaged his store (see Layard ca. 1936; Monnier 1991). Previous violent encounters between natives and foreign traders had resulted in punitive visits by the British Navy, which had burnt houses, killed valuable sacrificial pigs, destroyed crops, and arrested prominent men (see Geismar, forthcoming). Not surprisingly, villagers were distrustful of the arrival of two white men. In his unpublished autobiography, Layard describes how the two anthropologists based themselves upon their arrival in an abandoned Roman Catholic mission and initially were scrupulously avoided by local people (Layard n.d.).
After a few days, much to Layard’s chagrin, Rivers seized the opportunity of a passing skiff to leave Atchin, and revisit old acquaintances throughout the islands. His departure to undertake survey work from the relative comfort of various mission stations, left Layard feeling bereft, but also forced him to begin one of the first periods of intensive, solitary anthropological fieldwork, cotermious with Malinowski’s first stay in the Trobriand Islands. Between 1914 and 1915, Layard collected what has come to be considered one of the most detailed and evocative sets of early ethnological data about customary life in Vanuatu. In December 1914, after three months alone on Atchin, ill and increasingly worried by the news from Europe, Layard left for Sydney, where he attempted to enlist. After being rejected by the army, he stayed for several months recuperating from his island fevers, aches, and pains on Norfolk Island before returning to Atchin on April 28, 1915. From April to October 1915, he spent what he later was to recall as some of the happiest times of his life. There were nightly gatherings on his dilapidated verandah, when the youths of Atchin would gather to teach Layard Atchin language and songs. His participation in their dances is still remembered to this day. During research on Vao and Atchin last year, I recorded several stories about Layard dancing in rituals and speaking Atchin language. I heard tales about how his penis-wraper (nambas) needed to be tied firmly on with leaves, and how he fastened chicken feathers into his straight hair before the dance. Layard also travelled with the youths on their journeys to the neighboring Small Islands, on their initiation pilgrimage to Ambae (then known as Oba or Leper’s Isle), and to South-West Bay, Malakula, all the while taking copious notes and photographs, and collecting artifacts.

Layard’s experiences on Malakula were to nourish him throughout his life, despite the fact that it was the only fieldwork he ever did. In 1915 he hastily returned to England, once more eager to enlist. His return precipitated a crisis in his health. Already strained and exhausted from the intensity of fieldwork, the death of his father resulted in a series of increasingly serious breakdowns that Rivers, by that time his doctor as well as his supervisor, described as a “severe attack of neurasthenia” (Rivers 1918). He enlisted in the Officers Training Corps at King’s College, Cambridge, but was unable to participate in active service. From 1915 until well into the 1920s, Layard was almost completely bedridden and incapable of work. After a rupture with Rivers concerning his treatment and their relationship, he eventually sought psychological care with the unorthodox American analyst Homer Lane. Liberated sexually, emotionally, and physically, he gradually abandoned anthropology in favor of psychology, first training under Homer Lane and then Carl Jung and his wife (MacClancy 1986). His interest in psychoanalysis took him to Berlin in the mid 1930s where he socialized with Wyman Hugh Auden and Christopher Isherwood, and experimented with the personal freeforms that the city afforded. Isherwood described his “X-ray eyes, his mocking amusement, his stunning frankness” (1985:13) and Layard’s entwined psychological and anthropological theories left a profound mark on both Auden and Isherwood: Auden distilled some of Layard’s thinking about flying tricksters (Layard 1930) into the character of the Airman in his poem “The Orators” (see Firchow 2002), and after much discussion with Layard about the psychosomatic origin of illness, Isherwood was able to overcome a strong sense of physical self-loathing (Isherwood).

During his time in Berlin, Layard began systematic work on his Malakula fieldnotes, a period of fermentation that gave rise to the monumental Stone Men of Malekula (1942), a work that combined Layard’s growing interest in Jungian psychoanalysis with Rivers’s interests in cultural diffusionism and psychology. Ostensibly based on only three weeks of fieldwork on Vao, the island adjacent to Atchin, the monograph also drew upon Layard’s material from the other Small Islands.

While Layard’s potential impact on the discipline of social anthropology was largely unrealized due to his relative lack of publication and his unorthodox theoretical perspective, Stone Men of Malekula continues to be an important reference work both for students of the history of anthropology and for researchers working in Vanuatu. The islanders of Atchin and Vao are familiar with his work, mainly through the work of returning anthropologists, including myself. Stone Men is considered to be an important historical document, a reference work for those interested in kastom (the local term most broadly translated as “indigenous custom,” encapsulating a complex mixture of native self-consciousness and politicized identity, e.g. Jolly 1992). Indeed, it has been described by one islander as “the Bible and Dictionary of Vao” (Vianne Atpatun, personal communication, January 2001). Vao natives keep photocopies of Layard’s maps and genealogies in their homes, updating them with each new generation, and using them in land disputes and in the consolidation of genealogical claims (Geismar 2005).
Stone Men was to be the first in a series of monographs detailing life in each of the Small Islands, but in fact Layard went on to publish little more about Malakula, gradually growing preoccupied with his therapeutic practice. Toward the end of his life, Layard began to revisit his Atchin material, and contacted a number of people in Cambridge, Chicago, and Sydney for assistance in publishing his material. There is an almost complete manuscript of Layard’s Atchin monograph, and several other unpublished papers, in the archives in the Manneville Special Collection, University of California, San Diego (MSS 84).

The paper printed here for the first time was initially written to assist the ethnomusicologist Raymond Clausen in the preparation of his Oxford dissertation (see Clausen 1960). It is characteristic of Layard to be so generous with his own material. The piece may be seen as a companion to the chapter on slit drums in Stone Men and summarizes a much more detailed chapter entitled “Gongs and Dances,” which was to be part of the projected Atchin monograph (Layard, n.d.3). When reading this brief sketch of drums on Atchin, it is important to remember that there are two “ethnographic presents”: the present of 1914–1915, when Layard was on Atchin, and the present of 1958 when he was resynthesising his practical work in Jungian psychoanalysis with his Malakula material. The document is of interest not only in the description of the musical material culture of Atchin but also for the insights it gives us to the idiosyncrasies of Layard’s thinking: the marriage of his interest in the diffusion of cultural forms, mapped through a structural-functional analysis of how shifts in kinship organization from matrilineal to patrilineal descent were entwined with the broader psychological, sexual, and spiritual workings of a social group.

Until his death, Layard remained at the margins of anthropology. His early alignments with the hyper-diffusionism of Grafton Elliot Smith and William Perry alienated him from Haddon and the Cambridge school (and it was for this reason that Haddon chose Camilla Wedgwood rather than Layard to edit the fieldnotes of the young ethnographer Bernard Deacon, who passed away on Malakula in 1927). His later analytic unorthodoxy and Jungian-inflected thinking set him apart from the structural-functionalism of Evans-Pritchard and the Oxford School, even though for many years he continued to attend anthropological meetings while he worked at private practice in Oxford. However, reading his work in the present, we may be struck by the resonance of many of his ideas with contemporary anthropological thought. For example, his discussions of the synthetic, “psychic” transformations that Atchin drums facilitate, resonate strongly with the more recent discussions of the social efficacy of material culture, and the powerful potential of material culture to extend and manifest social agency (see Gell 1998). Layard’s analytic insights into the transformational power of the substances of initiation, which ultimately provide a formal resolution to tension between genders, may also be seen as a precursor to much work undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s around sexuality and initiation (e.g. Herdt 1981) and on the performative nature of gender relations in Melanesia (e.g. Strathern 1988). Indeed, his work on ritual and initiation in Malakula inspired one of the foundational texts for this journal (Guidieri and Pellizzi, 1981).

Alongside the notes from which this piece was drawn, Layard took nearly four hundred photographs and recorded many drum songs and dances on wax cylinders during his stay in the Small Islands. The images accompanying this paper, taken from the collections of the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, are published here for the first time, reunited with a list of captions drawn from Layard’s archive, in San Diego. Layard’s multi-media and multi-sensory approach to the aesthetics of slit drums as visual and aural ritual phenomena establishes him, alongside Rivers, Haddon, and Mafinowski as a pioneer practitioner of anthropological methodologies.

Today, drums are still produced and played on Atchin and Vao, although it may be as much to call people to church as to herald the start of a ceremony. In bringing together Layard’s text and photographs for the first time, I hope that this document will not only be of interest to anthropologists and historians of anthropology but will make Layard’s work more accessible to the descendants of the islanders with whom he worked so closely.

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Slit drums on Atchin

Slit drums

Slit the same length as the circumference of the drum

Slit drums made of the hollowed-out trunks of forest trees are one of the two central features of every dancing-ground in Malekula and the surrounding islands. In the small Malekulan island of Atchin with which this thesis deals there is a direct proportion between the size of the tree trunk and the length of the slit through which it is hollowed out and which emits the sound when the drum is struck. The expert drum-maker charged with supervising the work of making it measures the circumference of the trunk with a rope, which he then lays lengthways along the place where the slit is to be made, and marks it off in such a way that the length of the slit equals the circumference.

I do not know whether this is the case everywhere, but it is at least so in Atchin, and therefore probably among neighbouring communities.

Drums and stone monuments both represent ancestors, whose “voices” speak through the drums as part of a soul-making process.

The other notable feature of each dancing-ground is the megalithic monuments set up to commemorate ancestors, to which are tied the tusked boars destined to be sacrificed to them and to the Female Devouring Ghost or Goddess who seeks to annihilate the souls of men if she is not thus constantly propitiated by endless sacrifice. But the drums also represent ancestors, the difference being that the drums are “living” and can “speak” by means of the sounds which they emit which are thought of as voices of the ancestors, whereas the stones are dumb. For it is the stones that receive into themselves the spirits of the boars sacrificed to them, and which then dwell in them. These “spirits of the boars” thus sacrificed to the ancestors symbolise the incest-libido of the sacrificers transformed through sacrifice into that invisible psychic substance elsewhere in Melanesia called mana but in Atchin called ta-mats, which literally means “dead man” and in the natives’ visual imagination is what we translate as “ghost” meaning “ancestral ghost” but inwardly means “what has been sacrificed,” that is the sacrificer’s own transformed libido. A man is called ta-mats while he is yet alive if he has sacrificed enough to be recognised as being possessed of psychic power before he physically dies. It is this power which is released at death to carry on its work as an ancestral ghost to influence the lives of those still living in the tradition of what the tribe regards as its moral code, that is to say those moral or psychic attributes which help it to survive and to improve itself both in this world and “the next.”

It is this power which is thought of as being infused into the megalithic stone monuments representing the ancestors at the moment of sacrifice. But these stone monuments, being dumb, are not capable of giving it forth. This is the function of the slit drums which are their “living” counterparts and which are thus capable of “giving voice” to the transformed spirit in the stones, both in the form of commands (for there are drum signals which command) and of that psychic inspiration which flows back from them to mankind (who are the “sons” and “grandsons” of these “ancestors”) in the excitement of their complex rhythms which incite them to dance, often through the night, and in this way give outlet to their emotions and so in turn help them to be transformed into the psychic experience which it is one of the slit drums’ functions to promote.

Matrilineal and patrilineal areas, in the former of which the slit drums lie horizontally on the ground, and in the latter stand phallically upright.

The use and function of these slit drums cannot be understood without reference to the general culture which they serve, and here a remarkable difference is immediately noticeable between those areas in the New Hebrides which are predominantly matrilineal and those which are predominantly patrilineal. For in this part of the world the kinship systems are all emerging from a condition of bi-lateral kinship which still existed until recently in the 6-section kinship system of the island of Ambrym which lies immediately to the south-east of Malekula, in which both lines of descent operated simultaneously, with the matrilineal moieties non-

"A group of newly made slit drums at Emil Marur carved and set up by a man named Mari who was famous in his time. In the old days there had always been sporadic fighting between the members of the two opposing 'sides' of Atchin, and between the villages composing them. But there had been few serious casualties because of intermarriage between all these villages and the nature of the weapons used. But when the white men first arrived they had sold old muskets to the natives as well as sometimes shooting them. The first village on Atchin to acquire muskets was the double village of Ruruar which lay nearest to the best landing beach. On the first occasion after this when the men of Ruruar for some traditional reason raided Mari's village of Emil Marur, they used these muskets instead of clubs. The result was that almost all the members of this village were wiped out. This terrified the men of Ruruar at the massacre which the possession of fire-arms had given rise to in the first flush of their use to the extent that general agreement was reached on Atchin never to use fire-arms again against inhabitants of their own island. But the damage had been done. Most of the few survivors of the decimated village left Atchin to repair their fortunes by working on white men's plantations on other islands. Mari as a young man was one of these, and incidentally was one of the most capable that Atchin had produced. But he was cheated of his pay. Meanwhile it had become generally thought that the reason for the incipient decay of native culture on Atchin was not so much the white man's activities as the decline of ritual observances which the intrusions of the white man had in fact brought about. Mari returned to Atchin with this in mind, determined to restore the fortunes of his village by starting a new cycle of Maki rites. To this end he first had to set up a new slit drum ensemble. But the old methods of carving with shell adzes in the old style had meanwhile been replaced by the use of white man's knives and other iron implements. With this the skill in carving had declined. Therefore these drums that Mari made with such devotion and such reverence for the ancestors were far inferior to any that had been made before. This is part of the tragedy that has overtaken native culture here as elsewhere."

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localised but the patrilineal element in paternal villages. In islands lying to the north, stretching from North Raga (Pentecost) as far as the Banks Islands described by Codrington, the matrilineal element predominates, and it is to be noted that in all these matrilineal areas the large slit drums, though of the same size as the Malekulan ones (that is, longer than a man) are laid horizontally on the ground and are beaten by men standing or sitting beside them. But in the more patrilineal islands such as Malekula and neighbouring ones, with patriloclal residence and recognised patrilineal descent, the slit drums are planted upright in the ground, “like men” as the natives say.

There is thus a significant correspondence between the posture of the slit drums and the predominating sex as a means of tracing descent. In the predominantly matrilineal areas the slit drums are equated with the mother-principle and the earth, and “give voice” to the earth principle of matrilineal descent. But in the predominantly patrilineal areas they are planted in a phallically upright position. This does not signify by any means that the horizontal slit drums of the matrilineal area symbolise women. Far from it, for they are everywhere the exclusive property of men, and are adjuncts of that religious system by means of which men hope to establish their individuality as over against women and so also at the same time develop their psychic life. But in a matrilineal society (as in the Banks Islands) it is in a man’s capacity as mother’s brother that he promotes this process in favour of his sister’s son whom he thus introduces into the sacrificial life in the society of matrilineal men. So here the male ancestors are conceived as matrilineal ones. Their wooden counterparts, the slit drums, though symbolising males, thus lie down on as of the earth earthly, uttering their voices from the ground and stretched out horizontally as part of it, as the males in such a society are still representative of the patriarchal system. Their voices support that system to which those who construct them in psychic imitation of themselves and play on them belong.

But in the patriloclal areas, including Ambrym and the whole of Malekula, where men are patrilineally dominant, and particularly in Malekula where the father’s position has become so strengthened that he has ousted the mother’s brother as the leader of the main sacrificial rites, the slit drums that the men erect, though similar in form to those erected in the matrilineal area, are erected phallically upright, so as to correspond with the social recognition of fathers as paters as well as progenitors.

Two types of dancing ground: a) circular with slit drums in the centre; b) elongated with slit drums at the side.

In Malekula itself there are two types of dancing-ground, those being the “open-air temples” of the whole male population as opposed to the enclosed men’s houses (club-houses or lodges) which are more family affairs. In some parts, such as Seniang in South West Bay, first visited by Layard and subsequently by Deacon, and in some other parts of Malekula, the dancing-grounds are circular with the megalithic monuments tending to be ranged round the periphery and the slit drums grouped centrally so that they can be danced around. In others, as in Atchin, the dancing-grounds are elongated in such a way that the main stone monuments are ranged along one side and the orchestra of slit drums is placed in the middle of this side, with the ancestral stone monuments to either side of it. In such an arrangement the slit drums are still central enough to dominate the dancing but are not danced around, the dances in this case being more usually procession, from one of the dancing-grounds to the other and back again.

The Atchin slit drum orchestra: three types of drum.

It is the Atchin slit drum orchestra that will now be described, as being that from which these records were made.

This orchestra consists basically of three main elements. The overall word for slit drum, including all three types is na-mbwe of which na- is a for the most part inseparable indefinite particle and the noun is mbwe or bwe.

The Mother drum (mirem) and the “Lord Mother”

Having described these Atchin drums as phallic owing to their patrilineally conditioned upright position, it may at first sight appear as somewhat incongruous that the main and largest of these slit drums, which leads the orchestra, is throughout the whole of this area called the “mother drum” (in Atchin mirem, “mother”), as though she were the mother of all the rest. This would at first sight appear to contradict all that has been said about the matrilineal nature of this drum orchestra, and of each upright element in it. But it is not so anomalous, for the whole trend of Malekulan ritual and concept of psychic development is that, in men’s freeing themselves from
external dominance by women or by the matriarchal principle externally, this very female principle gets constellated in them internally by means of the transforming sacrifice, and it is that which becomes constellated in them as psychic life, mana, or the “dead come to life,” in such a way that a man thus transformed becomes psychically hermaphrodite. While remaining physically a man and having all the power of a man, he has at the same time acquired the psychic characteristics of femininity in the form of what is thought of as social and psychic “motherhood” in such a way that he is entitled to adopt the title of “Lord Mother” or “Mother of the Place.” This is a phrase which to the Atchin mind expresses what we might describe as “wisdom” or the power to reflect, or as the benevolence that comes from the psychic growth arising from the conscious acceptance of the feminine principle. An old or well-developed man of this kind becomes a peace-maker and the controller of the younger men’s propensities to fight or in other ways trouble the social order which also includes femininity as well as masculinity.

It is such a man who, on all important occasions, is leader of the drum orchestra and plays the “mother drum” which, being at the same time phallic, is thus an extension of his own hermaphroditic personality as “Lord Mother” and so shares with him his leadership.

The anthropomorphic nature, or ghost nature, of this drum is shown by the upper part of it, immediately above the slit, being carved to represent a man's head which often is enclosed in a conventional diamond-shaped frame symbolising ghostly (psychic or spiritual) qualities, of which the “mouth” is at the same time the top end of the slit through which the ancestral voice emerges as the booming of the drum when it is in action by being struck. This design is sometimes elaborated into two faces which join and have a common “mouth,” but the voice issuing from it is the voice of the collective ancestors who speak through it with the combined wisdom of male and female.

The slit is regarded as a “mouth” throughout all its length, and as a mouth having lips. The drum is hollowed out by means of this slit with shell adzes in such a way as to turn that portion of it which is hollowed out into a wooden cylinder with one side of the slit thicker than the other. It is the thin side that is struck and which is therefore called “the crying lip,” and the thick one which is not struck that is called the “dumb lip.” Above and below this slit with its two lips the trunk is left solid, the upper part with the carved face being called the “head,” and the lower part being left solid for planting in the earth.

These phallic drums are never planted quite upright, for two reasons, one symbolic, the other practical. Symbolically, since the male organ is at no time quite vertical, they are planted leaning backward, with the slit facing to the front. This also serves the practical reason that the drum is more easy to strike in this position, in ways that will now be described.

The mother drum is always in a central position, with other upright drums on either side of it and smaller portable ones (to be mentioned later) in front. It is the largest of the slit drums, and may stand anything up to ten feet high above the ground, that is a great deal taller than a man. This drum is played by the leader of the orchestra, who sits on a stone seat or small dolmen placed immediately in front of it, and strikes it with a soft-wood stick some fifteen inches long and three to four inches thick held in both hands; one hand on either side so that the middle part can unimpededly strike the drum's crying lip and thus produce the sound. This drum emits a deep boom, deeper than any other in the orchestra, which controls the others and gives out the basic rhythm, and is the slowest of all, since it is played with both hands on one stick and usually by one of the older men with less agility than the younger players in the orchestra.

Two secondary upright drums (pwe-tur)

While there is only one mother drum there are at least two other upright drums called pwe-tur (pwe=bwe=slit drum; tur means “to stand”) which are still taller than a man and roughly seven to nine feet high above the ground. These also have carved faces with the slit as the mouth, but those who play them do not sit (which is the privilege of the leader only) but stand and play each on a separate drum with a stick held in the right hand only, with rhythms usually faster than that of the mother drum but fitting in with it, and each separately from the other. There may be more than two of these, old ones erected from some previous orchestra on the same site that have not rotted away enough for them to be out of use and may be used to double the sound of a newer one. These stand to right and left respectively of the mother drum, each group playing its own rhythm in contradistinction to one another. These secondary upright drums are played usually by the middle-aged married men who have not yet reached the dignity of playing the mother drum but may aspire to it, and may on occasions of lesser ceremonial importance play it in the absence of some older man.
"Head of the mother drum (miren) . . . carved in the form of two faces enclosed in the usual lozenge-shaped design. Between the two faces is the slit in the hollowed-out tree trunk. In simpler and less decorative slit drums there is carved only one face, of which the mouth is at the same time the top of the slit, in such a way that the slit itself represents the mouth continuing downwards, and is therefore said to have two 'lips' which are the two sides of the slit. Of these two sides, the thinner one is called win dang, the 'crying lip' because it is on this side of the slit that the drum gets beaten with a wooden beater, the sound issuing from it being said to be the voice of the collective ancestors. The other lip is win mbut, the 'dumb lip.'"

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Small portable horizontal drumlets (tsoron)

The third type of slit drum is at the same time the least important and the most vociferous. These are the small portable drumlets called tsoron about two feet long, that are placed on the ground in front of the upright drums and can be moved about. There may be any number of these, and each drum orchestra may have at least half a dozen of them. They are played by the younger, mostly unmarried men, and boys can play them down to any age so long as they can play them properly. They are played with two hard-wood sticks held in right and left hands in the manner of a kettle drum, and emit a loud shrill noise which is the loudest of all those standing near but does not carry the distance for long-distance messages that the much larger and deeper-toned upright slit drums do. We will call these "portable horizontal drumlets" or simply "portable drumlets."

The three types summarised

These three elements of an Atchin slit drum orchestra may be listed thus:

(a) Mother-drum (miren), played by an older man, the leader of the orchestra, who sits on a stone seat and plays the basic rhythm with a single stick held in both hands.

(b) Two secondary upright drums (pwe-tur), fulfilling separate parts (which may be doubled by older drums not yet rotted), each played by a middle-aged married man standing beside it with a single stick held in his right hand.

(c) Portable horizontal drumlets played by young men or boys with two sticks, one in each hand, with quick rhythms after the manner of a kettle drum.

Occasions when the slit drums are played

There is no complicated personal drum language that I know of in Atchin corresponding to the personal drum signals described by Deacon from the region of South-West Bay Malekula, which has a different type of megalithic culture with circular dancing-grounds, and where each man, woman, or child can be summoned individually by means of drum-rhythms indicating his or her village, descent line, kinship category, or sex.

Drum-rhythms are used in Atchin, with few exceptions, exclusively for dancing or summoning members of other villages to dance in connexion with rituals involving boar-sacrifice. One of the chief of such exceptions is that of drum-signals sounded in honour of each boar thus sacrificed, these being graded into four main grades, each having its own sacrificial rhythm (asar). Another important exception is that of the special drum-signal sounded immediately after the burial of a dead man, when the mother drum alone is struck with a series of single blows representing the supposed sounds of the footsteps taken by his soul (ta-mats) as it wends its way, according to native thinking, along the path beset with dangers which it has to follow to reach the land of the dead where it will live on in bliss (and dance) as an ancestral ghost. This may indeed be a basic one, closely connected with ancestral ghosts and the whole spirit world as we have seen these slit drums to be.

Other drum-rhythms connected with death and resurrection are those sounded in the song-and-dance cycles connected with the annual reappearance of the dead collectively in the form of the palolo worm appearing on the sea at night at specified times, mainly connected with the shining of the October–November moon, which gives rise to a feast called Palu-ulen having to do with the return of the dead. There are special signals also for announcing an attack or summoning for war, or giving news of the capture of a victim intended for a cannibal feast. The last two of these verge on dance rhythms, since body movements are set in motion by them, particularly the latter which gives rise to a dancing procession to meet and convey the body home.

Apart from these, every orchestral performance has to do with dancing connected with one of the major rites forming part either of the Initiation ritual or of the generation-long religious cycle called the Maki (see Layard 1942, Chapters XI to XVI) which centres around the sacrifice of tusked boars already mentioned, basically a soul-making process which has at the same time great social significance in binding together what otherwise would be hostile tribes connected by kinship alliances into a complex whole welded together by the sacrificial rites in which all kinsmen perform their allotted roles.

Repeated at intervals throughout all these rites are seven major song-and-dance cycles accompanied by slit drums, each having its own particular rhythms and its own subject matter such as foundation-myths, praise of tusked boars or of the ancestors, or current stories.

Songs: “leaf and flower” meaning refrain and verse

Each such cycle has many songs, all characteristic of it, both old and new, ancient traditional songs of which nothing may now survive excepting the refrain and a
"An old man named Melteg-to, the leader of the ensemble at Pweter-Tṣuts, playing the mother drum on its thin 'crying lip' with a wooden beater held in both hands. He is sitting on a stone dolmen. Note the boar's tusks used as bracelets on both his wrists to signify his high grade in the Maki hierarchy."

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few scraps of verse, others better remembered, and new ones always being added as one individual experience after another gets added to the collective memory.

There are innumerable other forms of song, such as love-songs and children's songs, songs having to do with magic and sea-songs, that have no drum accompaniment, which do not concern us here.

All songs of whatever kind have both refrain, called ro-in literally meaning a "leaf," and verses called wenen literally meaning "flower," so that a song is itself thought of as a flowering plant. And, as in the growth of a plant, the refrain comes not last as it does with us, but first, as does the leaf before the flower in the sequence of nature. Such songs, accompanied by the appropriate drum-rhythms, may be sung all night long from sundown to sunrise, while the moon at the time of most major rites rides high and full. But the same song may never be repeated. As each song, with its refrain and verses, may last about ten minutes, with a short pause before the next one is begun, an average night's singing may include some 50 songs belonging to one cycle alone, and there will be many more belonging to that cycle that there was no time to sing. On the contrary, if memories that night are short or there are not enough singers, someone may on the spur of the moment invent a new one, which may or may not catch on in the repertory of that particular cycle, to be elaborated later, or may die out.

No solo singers. Songs come in dreams

For there are no professional singers, nor is there such a thing as solo singing. All singing is collective, and all can sing. There is no person who cannot sing, nor did I ever hear singing out of tune. For singing is as natural in Malekula as talking, though in a different medium and always thought of as group singing, never individual. There are, however, naturally, those who are better at singing than others are, whose voices are louder or more powerful, and there are some who invent songs more easily than others do.

Apart from extemporisations such as have been mentioned above, songs usually come to a man in dreams. As one Atchin native put it: "A man will be asleep and will dream about something and a song will come to him. He will start up wide awake and say to himself 'What is this? A ghost has come and taught me this song.' And he will sit up all the rest of the night singing, singing this song over and over again, and in the morning he will tell his friends about it and they will learn it. He knows immediately which song-cycle his song belongs to, by the rhythm and also by the subject matter."

If we now multiply the 50 songs sung in any one night in one cycle by the seven major ritual song-and-dance cycles, we get straight away 350 songs that every Atchin man knows at least something of, and if we add to these all the other songs in any one cycle as well as songs of every other description that everybody knows, we may well arrive at a figure of something like 1000 songs that every Atchin man can sing, or at a minimum can join in the singing of. Experts may well know many more, so there is no dearth of music on that island, or indeed in any Malekulan community.

Types of song and dance accompanied by slit drum-rhythms

Of the seven major song-and-dance cycles accompanied by the slit drums, some are processional and some are circular. The circular ones are probably the older, and are certainly the most dramatic in their combination of stately order of some dancers while others are almost possessed by ecstatic mimery [sic]. Descriptions and plans of two of these are given in Layard 1942, pp. 353-358 and 330-332. They probably derive from those formerly danced in circular dancing-grounds in which the slit drums were in the centre and were danced around. More stately and less spectacular but still exceedingly dramatic for those for whom the drum-rhythms and the singing and dancing combined have a compelling appeal, are the processional dances which move up and down the elongated dancing-grounds of more recent construction and belonging to a later level of culture. These are in turn connected with the processional dances danced when members of one village approach another's festivals as guests along the narrow forest paths which separate the villages, and which abut on to the long dancing-grounds at either end of them.

These processions have been called forth by the drum-rhythms played in the home-village to summon the visitors. Once arrived on the dancing-ground, the formal dancing begins by the relevant party, or different parties joined in a bunch at one end of it, starting to sway with a peculiar movement of the feet, when one of them, who for the moment leads, starts off by singing the first phrase of the refrain of the song chosen, after which the rest all join in, and together they dance up to the far end of the dancing-ground, still singing the refrain. Then someone utters what is called a shout of joy in a high-pitched, almost screaming voice, and others reply with a set syllable. These antiphonal cries are repeated several times, and end the refrain.
whereupon they all dance back again to the continued strains of the refrain, then stop for a few seconds before the leader again starts, this time with a verse. In this way verse and refrain alternate until all verses have been sung, and, after a short pause, a new song is begun.

All such singing is in a kind of high false-falsetto very difficult for an ordinary European to achieve but which is not strained and has a quality of ringing through the forest and the night-time air in a way that no ordinary European voice could do.

In addition to these cycles which are sung mostly at night time, though not invariably so, there is an entirely different kind of dance called na-leng, danced mainly at dawn after an all-night performance, consisting of beautifully executed set figures in squares, circles, spirals and serpentine waves which show forth a special mythology having to do with birds of prey (hawks and night hawks), chasing and scattering smaller ones, based on a much earlier mythology of more serious intent having to do with the Journey of the Dead as still remembered in South West Bay. These dances are performed by set troupes, and in the Small Islands of Malekula, of which Atchin is one, are primarily aesthetic performances in which individual male dancers show forth their skill and beauty of body. There are two kinds of these, set dances and burlesques. The dancers wear ankle rattles, and in the burlesques shuffle their feet in a characteristic way, being in the end beaten off the state with laughter and much horseplay quite foreign to the more serious ritual dancing. Some of these also are accompanied by slit drum-rhythms of a comparatively simple kind. Some of them are described in Layard 1942, p. 336, but are more basically discussed in Layard 1936, particularly pp. 152 ff. All have to do ultimately with death which, for the Malekulans, means, or is an introduction to, psychic life.

Rites performed in connexion with the erection of slit drums

Among the song-and-dance cycles already mentioned is the important one called Durei Na-mbwe, which means literally “the setting up (or erection) of the slit drums.” Durei is the nominal form of tur, to stand or to erect, used also to designate the secondary standing drums called pwe-tur which have already been described. Na-mbwe, as we have seen, means “slit drum.”

This is the main, though not the only, song-and-dance cycle danced during the protracted and elaborate rites accompanying the manufacture and setting up of a new orchestra of slit drums to replace an old one that has begun to rot or become unserviceable.

Connexion with sacrificial religious cycle called Maki

There are indications that at one time in Malekulan history the use of the slit drums was not an integral part of the protracted Maki sacrificial rite. It is thus doubtful what connexion there may have been between the use of horizontal slit drums in the matrilineal Banks Islands and the boar-and-sow sacrifice ceremonies there, which include the sacrifice of specially reared hermaphrodite boar-sows which symbolise the same coming together of male and female attributes as does the title of Lord Mother in the Malekulan human hierarchy. The main instrument connected therewith the whole syndrome of pig-sacrifice is the conch-shell trumpet, which is used also in Malekula on specified occasions. The use of upright slit drums in connexion with boar-sacrifice in Malekula, where it is now invariable, seems to be connected with patrilineal descent which is predominant there, where sows are never sacrificed (at least in the Small Islands of which Atchin is one) and there are no hermaphrodites.

However this may be, the setting up of a new orchestra of slit drums is essential for the prosecution of a new series of Maki rites, and is the first act to be undertaken with regard to them.

Connexion between slit drums and canoes, both actual and symbolic of link with “the unknown”

Atchin is one of a string of small coral islets lying just off the Malekulan coast, which have for centuries been the centres of populations defended by the sea from enemies but being themselves so small that there is no room in them for gardens, so that they possess no forest trees. Their populations, however, own large tracts of jungle-covered bush on the Malekulan mainland immediately opposite to them, in which they burn small patches to make gardens, and in which also grow the forest trees which they cut down for the construction of houses, and more important still, for making their dug-out canoes and their large slit drums.

It is significant that the same kinds of tree are used for both, and that the rites accompanying the felling of the trees and their transporting to the small islands are similar both for canoes and for slit drums. The natives recognise this similarity, and conclude that, as they are both “dug out” in similar ways with shell adzes, there is
"Another slit drum with two faces sharing one eye. Hanging from its head are the jaw-bones of five tusked boars which were sacrificed when the drum was set up. Projecting from the top is the thigh bone of a bullock which natives have acquired from a white man and sacrificed during the Maki in place of the traditional tusked boar."

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a generic connexion between the two, the symbolism of which is that, just as canoes transport men over the ocean and are thus the means by which the ocean can be used for the benefit of man for purposes of trade (mainly in boars, sows, and small piglets), so also the slit drums are like “canoes” on the ocean of the spirit world, connecting mankind with the otherwise unknown world of the ancestral ghosts whose voices they represent and who “live on” (literally “feed on”) the psychic essence of the boars that are sacrificed to them and thus constitute a psychic medium of exchange corresponding to the trading voyages in external life.

Matrilineal moieties: each symbolising what is “unknown” to the other. “Fathers” and “sons” belong to opposite moieties. Each moiety possesses its own slit drum orchestra, erected during the term of office of each moiety in the Maki ritual cycle which covers roughly a generation.

The Maki religious and ritual cycle is organised according to strict kinship rules based on the matrilineal moieties which underly the overt patrilineal organisation and which divide all men into two groups, each group consisting of men belonging to alternating generations in the direct male line, in such a way that all “fathers” are in the opposite matrilineal moiety from that of their sons. From the point of view of each matrilineal moiety the other is the “stranger” or the “foreign” or “unknown” one, and therefore contains for him the psychic value which his own moiety does not.

Each of these moieties performs alternately the Maki ritual cycle which takes approximately 30 years or a generation to perform, and each moiety possesses its own sea-going canoe (which women may not enter) and slit drum orchestra (which women may not play). It takes about the same period of years for a drum orchestra or a sea-going canoe to begin to rot. This physical fact coincides with the psychic one expressed in the organisation of the ritual into generation-long cyclic periods, that each moiety succeeds the other in performing this rite, and constructs its own drum orchestra for it.

The moieties thus alternate generation-wise in this performance, which has as its object the mediation of value from “one side” to “the other side,” both social and psychic.

It is thus significant that, in the organisation of this Maki rite, in which the fathers introduce their sons generation-wise into the spirit world, it is the fathers who construct the new set of slit drums, the voices of which thus mediate the world of the fathers to the sons, that is to say the world of the spirit or the unknown (the father-world) to the material world of the sons who are but growing up and are still relatively mother-bound. Other aspects of social organisation somewhat obscure this pattern, but it is nevertheless basic to the whole Maki rite of introducing the young into the spirit world. In the next generation the same process will be repeated the other way round. Those who in one Maki cycle are the sons receiving spiritual knowledge from the fathers now themselves become the fathers transmitting it to their sons.

This is the function of the slit drums in Malekulan religion, to transmit psychic value from the unknown to the known, sociologically from one matrilineal moiety to the other, and as a religious concept from the ancestors to men, which would be equivalent in our own religious terminology to saying from God to man. It may be expressed psychologically as mediating the unconscious to the consciousness, or as turning death into life through transforming the death of incest (with which all sacrifice is concerned) into the free life of the spirit.

The matrilineal moiety of the “fathers” provides the slit drum orchestra for that of the “sons” and does the work while the sons sing and dance and sacrifice and provide the food.

It is the matrilineal moiety of the fathers that thus fells the trees, transports them from the mainland, hollows them out, and carves the faces on them for their sons who thus become the “owners” of the slit drums thus constructed. It is the old story of the father yielding to the son in an Oedipus situation in which the sons do not, however, have to conquer their fathers, but in which the fathers willingly yield up their power to the sons, knowing that in the next generation the process will be reversed and that the sons will in their turn then yield it up to their own sons, who are of the same matrilineal moiety as the fathers.

Thus from generation to generation, each yields to the other, and each transmits its value to the other, partly through sacrifice, partly through the mediation of the slit drums which always mediate “the other side.”

In all these operations it is the “Maki-men,” the sons (who may be of all ages, since men of alternating generations in the male line combine to form one matrilineal moiety and are all, in the kinship system, in the position of sons and fathers to the other one) who
provide the material food for those of the other 
matri-linear moiety who do the work, and who will 
return these gifts of material food with the "psychic 
food" or inspiration that will later emanate from the 
slit drums which they construct. At the same time they 
dance and sing around the workers to encourage them, 
mainly from the song-and-dance cycle called "Drum 
Raising," but also on special occasions from others. Each 
stage of manufacture is further sanctified by the sacrifice 
of a boar, smaller or larger as the occasion warrants, 
which the workers will eat (for no moiety will eat the 
boars which it has itself sacrificed; the sacrificers imbibe 
the spirit of the boar, the others eat its flesh), and on 
each such occasion the old drums are sounded with the 
drum-signal appropriate to the grade of boar (depending 
on the elongation of its tusk) that has been sacrificed.

Drum raising rites

Manufacture

A full description of the drum-raising rites carried out 
in Vao (the next small island to Atchin) will be found in 
Chapter XIII of Layard 1942. These are sufficiently 
similar to those carried out on Atchin for it to be briefly 
summarised here. Suffice it say that the whole process of 
manufacture takes about two years. The trees have first 
to be felled on the Malekulan mainland, their branches 
cut off and the trunk cut to the approximately correct 
length. They are then left there for a year to dry. The 
following year they are hauled down to the coast, and 
the trunks ferried over the sea-channel to the island 
where they are to be set up. The hard work of felling 
and trimming having been done by the matri-linear 
moiety of the fathers, the lesser work and extreme 
pleasure of ferreying them over to the small island is 
accorded to the sons, who sing and jubilate as they do so.

As the logs touch the shore of the small island a 
small boar is sacrificed so as to purify the logs from 
contamination with sea-water (that is, water not 
regulated by man or contained by man’s earth as is fresh 
water, which does not contaminate. The difference is 
similar to that thought of in other religious systems as 
between “blessed water” and “unblessed” because 
unpurified).

The logs are now hauled up on to the land where 
they can dry again. Accompanied by further sacrifice, 
the logs are then hauled by means of ropes and wooden 
rollers to the main village men’s lodge (ghamal) 
adjourning the dancing-ground where they are hollowed 
out and carved. During this process they are surrounded 
by a screen, so that those only who are engaged on this 
work and those whom they permit may see what is 
going on. All women are excluded from this.

Those working on them have to observe many food 
taboo, and during this time neither they nor any 
member of the village may have sexual connexion, lest 
this should interfere with the hieros gamos between man 
and his spirit (as opposed to man and woman) that is 
essential if the drums are to serve their purpose of 
mediating the psychic world.

Putting the voice into the drums

When they are finished and now ready to be erected, 
an expert arrives to “put the voice into the drums.” This 
is done by collecting the spray from a hole in the coral 
reef surrounding the island on which the waves break 
with a resonating sound. The drum-makers collect this, 
and bring it to a magician who on the following day 
goes in alone behind the screen and, singing softly over 
the spray, pours it, and with it the voice of the 
resounding waves, into the drums (Layard 1942, p. 356). 
This once more demonstrates the close connexion 
between the sea (and therefore sea-going canoes) and 
the slit drums. Then the magician sounds all the drums 
in turn, giving four strong strokes to each (four being the 
chief magic number), so that everyone can hear that the 
drums are now finished. Those concerned in the 
manufacture now enter in to inspect them, but even 
they are not yet allowed to play on them.

Drum raising dance, and setting up of the drums

Rites and dancing now start in honour of the drums, 
performed first by the members of the home-village and 
then in turn by those of the other villages on the island. 
The dance thus danced is called Vao Velal and is a 
circular dance of a comparatively simple nature 
preparatory to the much more complicated drum-raising 
dance which is also circular and which is briefly 
described below.

On the appointed day the now finished drums are 
taken on the last lap of their journey into the dancing-
ground. The ghamal is surrounded by a stone wall which 
separates it from the dancing-ground but has in it an 
opening called the “road’s eye” through which the 
drums are hauled. As each drum passes through this 
opening a further boar is sacrificed, this sacrifice having 
a special name which means to “cross over,” the 
implication being that the drums are now passing from 
the material world from which they came into the world
of the dancing-ground where matter and spirit meet in the rites that are performed there.

As each drum is planted in its allotted hole there is a preliminary consecration rite in which a live boar is thrown into the hole, wherof the drum is immediately set up, crushing the boar to death beneath its weight. This is precisely what happens when a man dies and is buried, and a live boar is thrown into his grave, the crushing of the boar signifying the transformation of unregulated libido into psychic substance, in other words the conquest of incestuous desire and its transformation into spirit.

The expert magician then sounds the mother drum, and following him all sound it too, each paying a live pig to the last sounder.

That night drum-raising is danced in all its glory (for full account with ground plan see Layard 1942, pp. 325–328), with guests from other villages dancing round a central post set up in the midst of the dancing-ground, the Maki-men themselves dancing round them in pairs with lighted torches piercing the darkness and, outside all this, a circle of women facing inwards and performing billowy movements representing waves of the sea (with the male dancers as the “island” which it
surrounds), who sing high descant to the roaring voices of the men, while the drums roll and rattle out their complicated and emotionally exciting rhythmic utterance.

Consecration of the drums

In native thinking the night precedes the day. The 24-hour period begins at sundown and the night, far from being (as among ourselves) thought of as rest after day, is universally in Malekula thought of as psychic preparation for the day. In this way, every major feast begins with its Eve, which continues throughout the night and culminates at dawn. In the case of a really major feast like this the dawn lasts a long time, so that the great occasion takes place in broad daylight.

All is now ready for the final consecration. Before the assembled multitude the tusked boars that are to be sacrificed are tied by their owners to long ropes, the ends of which are passed through holes in the eyes of the human faces carved on each drum. These are then sacrificed and placed beside the yam heaps made ready for the visitors.

The consecrating magician is then rewarded with the gift of a valuable live boar, each of the drum-makers is given a lesser one, and the guests who have been dancing all night then retire with yet other boars that have been sacrificed and piles of yams with which they also are provided.

After they have gone, and there are none left now but the Maki-men themselves and all the other members of their own village, the completion of the consecration through sacrifice of tusked boars is now announced by the sounding of the sacrificial signal of the drums. Each of the many boars thus sacrificed has to be sounded for, and their number is so great that it may take most of the day to sound the drums for all of them.

Now all and any of the villagers who may want to test the quality of the drums and hear the sounds which they emit may come and play on them as a special privilege accorded on this and the following days only. For the next few days full advantage is taken of this right, and the voice of the drums may be heard intermittently throughout the island.

The jaw-bones of the sacrificed tuskers are subsequently returned by those who took them away to eat, and are displayed publicly by being hung on to the drums by means of ropes ties either to the pierced projection on the top of each of the larger upright drums, or, in the case of the smaller ones, to the hole pierced through the nostril of the face carved on it or through that joining the eyes.

By this means all can see the grades of tusked boars that have been sacrificed, as an outward and admittedly vainglorious symbol for the inner transforming sacrifice that the whole rite is designed to promote, and in a way does promote while mixed with so much external work, display, and rivalry of neighbours in the erection of ever better and more magnificent instruments.