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Slit drum, Vanuatu

Chantal Knowles

This Efate drum, now displayed in National Museums Scotland in Edinburgh, was collected by the missionary James Lawrie, who volunteered to serve for the Free Church of Scotland in the New Hebrides (modern-day Vanuatu) with his wife Margaret in 1878. Presbyterian missionaries had been established on Aneityum, Vanuatu, in 1848 with the arrival of Canadian John Geddie. By 1878 they were well established, with congregations across the southern New Hebrides, including Efate and as far north as Santo (Lawson 1994, 80). The large-scale slit drums of central Vanuatu were unique to Oceania, but their presence in the world's museums today is suggestive of their absence in the village locations for which they were originally made – a direct outcome of missionary encounters.

Although meaning and use varied from island to island, slit drums were typically assembled in groups or orchestras in a public space and added to as new drums were commissioned. Described as “sonorous ancestral figures” combining the voice and the appearance of ancestors (Fischer 1983[1932]: 28), their centrality to village architecture and ceremonial practices meant they became a focus for missionary concerns in central Vanuatu. Drums were played by men as they circled the drums in a clockwise direction – when sounded they signalled an important event and called participants to order and action.

Cylindrical in form, with a slit along its length, the drum would sound out a range of notes. Drums from this region are less obviously anthropomorphic than those found on neighbouring islands; the features of this example include the long gaping slit terminating in a circular aperture at either end, with a bored hole at the tapering top. Incised lines on the left side of the aperture, formerly highlighted with blue and red, are a more abstracted form of mouth and eyes. Speiser (1996, 348) likened them to hollowed out statues and noted that the rank of the owner was expressed in the carvings on the drums. The top-sail schooner carved in the upper portion of the drum represents a European vessel of the type used by missionaries and traders, but is likely to be associated with the attributes of the original owner.

Figure 1: Upright slit drum, Efate, Vanuatu. A.1889.37 National Museums Scotland. Courtesy of National Museums Scotland.

Missionaries in the region understood drums as religious statues and their toppling became a powerful indication of the conversion of the community to Christianity. In some cases the drums were put to new uses, literally converted following the adoption of Christianity. Rev. J. W. MacKenzie, a missionary in southern Efate, described the drums in his area:

We have a fence around our church of what was once their heathen gods. These gods were made from a very hard kind of a tree, and they stand a long time. They are about ten feet long, and are carved and hollowed out. They had set them up, a great many of them together, in their dancing-ground, and when struck with the fist they give a hollow sound, which is heard at a distance. (MacKenzie quoted in Steel 1880, 233-4)

MacKenzie was perhaps more proactive than many missionaries, having sited his home and church on and adjacent to the drums. His new architecture occupied an existing sacred space, and desacralizing the drums through silencing them and integrating them into the utilitarian fence of the church complex signalled their displacement by Christianity.

The removal or displacement of objects appears to have been central to efforts to extend the evangelisation of the community, and Lawrie's published letters highlight his own efforts to remove certain artefacts and end their production. These included bamboo containers filled with earth for sorcery and sacred stones for good garden weather. He recounts the burning of a kava bowl by locals to demonstrate to him their rejection of kava consumption.

Lawrie's regular correspondence with the church in Scotland was published in their newsletter. He uses words such as "heathen", "rude" and "meagre" to describe the objects and lives of the locals but also gives detailed descriptions of local practices. This regular correspondence was a call to action, a reminder of occupations abroad as the Lawrie family relied on Scottish donations of clothing, tools and trade items to sustain their supplies. His letters had to muster and maintain the interest of the Scottish congregations. His donations to the National Museum were publicised at length in the national newspaper *The Scotsman* and amongst highlights to see was "a stone god (a water-worn stone) whose aid is invoked by natives before going to fish" (Anonymous 1889, 7).

In addition to his writings for the church and elsewhere, Lawrie was a keen photographer, and his photographs of the Vanuatu landscape and local people were commended in photographic circles (Edwards 2012, 169). When all of his writings over the years are read together, Lawrie expresses a deep interest in the region and its culture, and sympathy and warmth for Ni-Vanuatu. He expressed regular concern about population decline, chiefly resulting from contact with Europeans and successive waves of imported diseases. Over the course of his sixteen years in the region, he recognized that congregation numbers were dwindling, not always

due to lack of converts or some reverting to traditional practices, but rather due to rapid population decline.

It is his published letters and photographs that are best known to Ni-Vanuatu through their exhibition in the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta in 1998 (Adams 1998). A gift from the Australian Museum in 1980 of a smaller drum from the large grove on mainland Efate to commemorate independence resulted in the drum briefly being taken out to Mele, where it had originally stood. The relevant descendants of the lineages associated with the orchestra were able to assemble beside it.

Although based on Aneityum rather than Efate, Lawrie travelled widely round the southern islands in the *Dayspring*, the missionary schooner, not unlike the one depicted on this drum. He went to meet with congregations and support the many indigenous missionaries who were deployed across the region, but could easily have loaded items such as this slit drum on to the *Dayspring* for removal from the islands. This drum and another in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, are the largest objects collected by him and provide, in their present isolation, solitary reminders of the orchestras in which they once stood. Like the drums converted to fence posts, they are emblematic of the displacement of the old with the new, the physical manifestations of the missionary enterprise and the rejection of traditional objects as part of embracing Christian doctrine and ritual. What could be a more physical or tangible message to supporters in Scotland than the erection of a drum in their National Museum?

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