DRUM AND VOICE: AESTHETICS AND SOCIAL PROCESS ON THE RAI COAST OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA*

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Reite people on the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea describe a large ceremonial drum (a *garamut*) as a man. In its construction, a *garamut* is the focus of a process which brings forth a form of social relations, as well as the object itself. I ask, 'What language might we use to describe such a creation?'. In recent discussions of art, the concepts of aesthetics and technology have been central. Drawing briefly on this literature, I approach an ethnographic description of *garamut* construction as revealing the particular way in which Reite people generate their social world. The construction is based upon mythic knowledge. This shapes the mode in which persons as gendered agents, and with particular identities, are made to appear. A specific 'aesthetic' scheme is thus apparent. The emergence of the *garamut* cannot be seen as the end of the process. The object has effect within and upon the relations given form by its emergence. Formation is ongoing, with becoming built in.

Introduction

Nekgini-speaking people living in the hinterland of the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea (PNG) will often say, 'a *garamut* is a man'.[1] A *garamut* – Neo-Melanesian for a slit-gong (Fig. 1), an idiophone[2] made from a hollowed tree trunk – is said to have a voice. It appears in the village of its owner for the first time in the same garb as a new man, that is, as an initiate returning from the seclusion which marks his passage into adulthood. The decoration of the drum, like that of a new man, includes the development of a face, and also of sexual organs.

Slit-gong drums are common along the north coast of PNG, and beyond.[3] People in the village of Reite, where I was able to participate in *garamut* construction during 1995, put an enormous amount of time and effort into the rare occasions when they make *garamut*. However, all this effort does not produce an object with intricate design or adornment. In fact, they are somewhat crude to behold. Attention is given to their appearance. But this effort is for transitory effect. The *garamut* itself, however, is not a transitory object.[4] Like a man, it has a span of life, and is precipitated from, generated by, and thus participates in, ongoing relations between persons.

The issue I address in this article is the connection between the construction of a *garamut* and the generation of social form. Recently, it has been suggested that objects can have agency (Gell 1998) and, following from this,

FIGURE 1.   Tewu and his slit–gong in 1995. Photo: J. Leach.

that classifications which separate objects from the processes in which they have effect must be called into question (Bolton 2002). Taking up this last point, my discussion has two key components. First, I provide a straightforward (yet detailed) account of a technique – the construction of a large ceremonial drum (a *garamut*). This technique is wholly enmeshed with 'ritual' which combines the elicitation of a specifically configured sociality with the material form of the object. Thus secondly, I also explore and analyse an instance of creativity, a bringing forth of the social, in the mode recently described by Weiner as 'mythopoeisis' (Weiner 1995). What language do we have available to capture something blurred, existing and operating to powerful effect between material and social creation? Can we describe 'genesis' and form in the same frame? With regard to the visual arts, the painter Paul Klee has written, 'The way to form, dictated no doubt by some inward or outward necessity, is higher that its own end and goal. Thus form may never be regarded as solution, result, end, but should be regarded as genesis, growth, essence' (Spiller 1961, and see Kudielka 2002: 103). I describe a creation, the bringing–forth of an object, and a social configuration in the same process.

I begin by examining certain aspects of recent debates in the anthropology of art. Here, the notions of aesthetics and technique/technology have been central. The process I describe reveals 'an aesthetic', the form that relations

must assume if they are to be recognized (Strathern 1988: 180-1) as persons. The form and effect of the drum, and the form of relationships in which it is situated, are inseparable. They come into being as one. The drum's effect is something we might see as being built into the process of its becoming. A *garamut* is itself a 'technological' artefact – it is used to communicate over distance utilizing a series or code of beats.[5] Yet it is not this aspect that is problematic for description. That lies elsewhere. What are we to call the process itself, one which brings forth sociality in a configured, or aesthetic, mode? While the codes used in communicating messages on the *garamut* are complex, they seem as nothing compared to the complexities of compelling others to hear them. When Nekgini speakers say that a *garamut* is a man, they mean that it has a voice which others are obliged to hear.

The article is ethnographic. By this I mean that my theoretical argument is demonstrated through close attention to a process whereby a particular form of sociality is elicited. I consider the detail of this process vital to an understanding of how persons are positioned. And as this is also the 'effect' which I describe, my conclusions are bound to my description of the realization of this effect.

Magic, production and aesthetics

When constructing slit-gongs, Nekgini speakers follow a process akin to the process whereby young men are initiated into the male cult. The culmination of this initiation is the decoration of the neophytes. Young men are consciously turned into objects to be viewed. Preparations are also made by the people who will view the initiands, in order to protect themselves from the overpowering image. They attempt to nullify the effect of the preparation on the boys' skins[6] with magic of their own. Consistent with the equation between men and slit-gongs, this precaution is also taken when an audience gathers for the first revelation of a series of slit-gongs (Figs. 2, 3). Although this is perhaps a peculiar Melanesian response to the dangers of emotion or desire (Harrison 1993: 122), it highlights a fact that Gell (1992) has discussed. That is, the preparation of art objects (in this case decorated men and *garamut*) overlaps with, or has features in common with, the practice of magic. Gell suggests that this coincidence stems from a genuine similarity between art and magic. Both present the everyday technologies of production and reproduction transformed into an enchanting appearance (or process). As it is these same everyday technologies which structure the relations of production and thus structure social form, this seems a useful place to start in thinking about *garamut*.

In the same article, Alfred Gell commented that the aim of an anthropology of art should be 'the dissolution of art' (1992: 41). Just as the sociological study of religion rests on a premise of methodological atheism, Gell tells us with a characteristic blend of humour and insight anthropologists must approach art objects from a position of 'methodological philistinism'. The point of an anthropology of art, he says, is not to discover the 'True and the Good' in an object, but to understand the specific 'social consequences which ensue from the production of these objects' (1992: 44). For this reason he

FIGURE 2. A group of newly initiated men appears for the first time. Sorang village, 1995. Photo: J. Leach.

FIGURE 3. A group of new slit-gongs appears for the first time. Reite village, 1995. Photo: J. Leach.

rejects the notion of a universal or transcendent aesthetic (see also 1995: 26-7). An aesthetic sensibility is a discursive product, and thus particular to a specific history.

Gell makes a suggestion as to how art achieves its social effect: 'The power of art objects stems from the technical processes they objectively embody' (1992: 44). In other words, by thinking of how the object itself is the outcome of a skilled process, beyond the competence of the observer but appealing to their particular aesthetic sensibility, we can understand how it has its effect of 'enchanting' that observer. This enchantment has consequences for social relations. Hence, he continues, 'there is a fundamental scheme transfer, applicable, I suggest, in all domains of art production, between technical processes involved in the creation of a work of art and the production of social relations via art' (1992: 56). In this vein, he quotes Bloch (1974) who has argued that the art work secures the acquiescence of the observer to the intention of the artist in a non-verbalized way. Because of this, art and ritual can serve as 'propaganda on behalf of the status quo' (Gell 1992: 44).

Whereas Gell starts from the object, focusing on the technical mastery of the artist embodied within it, I attempt something different here. While agreeing with Gell that the search for a set of meanings specified in a transcendent aesthetic schema is unlikely to take us far in understanding Rai Coast *garamut*, I am not as concerned with seeing what technical process is embodied by the object I discuss as much as I am concerned with seeing how technical process is itself built upon − or has its effect because of − a particular existential and perceptual orientation (Mimica 1993: 87). A Nekgini aesthetic would be an aspect of that particular history. I argue that the elicitation of a particular configuration of social relations is an 'aesthetic act'. And it is here that my argument differs from Gell's in the two articles cited. The process of *garamut* construction, and the object itself, are not a representation of more fundamental sociological reality. They are the elicitation of social form.

James Weiner (1995) has argued in response to Gell that viewing art as a technology 'oriented towards the production of social consequences' is to defer uncritically to a productionist bias in Western metaphysics. Art, 'in certain non-western societies … is not a condensed version of technology, but something very opposed to it' (1995: 35). Following Heidegger (1977), Weiner says that art reveals not only the kind of conventionality of which technology is an aspect, but also gives clues as to how this conventionality is concealed in the everyday processes of production. Thus art and myth expose the 'rift' between what Heidegger called 'earth' and 'world', that is, they reveal the gulf between an unknowable objective nature, and the intersubjective and historically specific world of human cultural or linguistic actuality. Conceptual categories are misperceived as the world itself, and the success of productive regimes fosters this concealment. Weiner suggests that the art work has the special place it does in our and in others' life-worlds because 'it serves to expose the mode of being upon which the whole normative regime of ordering, producing and making is founded' (1995: 35). Art reveals the ground against which human productive and technological activities find their scale.

Here I am following Weiner's suggestion that we accept ritual and art as foundational in certain non-Western societies, and production as an outcome of the social relations elicited on this foundation, not the other way around.

He argues that relations of production may not always be the foundation of social relations, but rather that the elicitation of response from others, thereby defined as specific persons, establishes 'production' as its by-product. It is the foundation provided by myth, in this case, which allows an autopoetic generation of a social world in which production is something people do for one another because they are related. It is not the basis on which they are related in the first place (Wagner 1975; 1977; Weiner 1995). What they elicit from one another defines their respective positions.

One of the main concerns in slit-gong production is with the 'voice' of the drum. The questions I wish to ask, 'How might a drum be a man?'; 'What does it mean to say a drum has a voice?', and 'What does this tell us about the generation of meaning through lived process?' (Gow 1999), might be brought together in the simple question, 'What is a man?'. It appears that for Nekgini speakers, the answer may lie in an analysis of aesthetics. If a man and a drum are produced in the same process, then how is it that this process elicits the particular form of sociality which recognizes created entities (drums/men) as persons? I show that the process of initiating young men and that of producing slit-gong drums make use of knowledge of, and practice in, techniques whereby forms appropriate to the perceptual schemes of Nekgini people are brought into being.

Slit-gongs, spirits and names

Among Nekgini speakers, marriage is virilocal, and social groups are based on residence in small hamlets. These occupy the tops of rugged limestone ridges which rise to an altitude of around 500 m, and are all within about 10 kilometres of the north coast of the mainland. Fenced in from behind by the massive Finisterre range which rises steeply to a height of 4,000 metres within 30 kilometres of the coast, the land is broken by fast-flowing streams and rivers, and covered in rainforest vegetation. Little of that vegetation is primary climax forest, testimony to a scattered but dense population and shifting cultivation which produces staple taro and yam tubers. There are patches of emerald green among the lighter areas of secondary growth. These darker patches are sacred places of uncut forest, the home of land-based spirits, mythic ancestors, and of water-dwelling spirits with musical voices. The latter are the main focus of the male cult (*tambaran* in Neo-Melanesian[7] [Lawrence 1965; Niles 1992]).

Slit-gongs have two functions here. They are used on a daily basis as a means of signalling between the ridge-top hamlets. Much can be said using a combination of beats on a slit-gong, and in favourable conditions the sound will travel for many kilometres. Slit-gongs are stored propped against the posts of houses; they are kept in the open meeting-house (*palem*) adjacent to the male cult-house of the hamlet (*passae*) or, for convenience, in times of cult activity, they are sometimes kept inside the cult-house itself.[8] Only a few men and women are skilled in using the full range of beat combinations which enable one to say such complex things as, 'the whiteman will come to eat banana in [a particular] hamlet tomorrow afternoon, as long as there is no rain'. Everyone, however, is able to hear their own name, and simple instructions (as in

the favourite, 'Hurry up!'). Slit-gongs are also used to accompany the (musical) voices of water-dwelling spirits (*kaapu tupong yarung*) when the spirits are drawn to the village by men of the cult. Each spirit is known by the unique tune of its voice, and by the unique beat which properly accompanies it (Leach 1999).

Initiated men have 'names' made out of beats (what Burridge [1959] terms 'call signs'). A man receives a call sign from his mother's brothers when he pays them in pigs and wealth for his initiation into adulthood. This is also his initiation into the spirit cult. His beat will be drawn from the tune and rhythm of one of the sacred spirit voices belonging to these maternal kinsmen.[9] A man's name, then, is not only supplied by his maternal kin, but continues to be identified, through association with their spirits, with those kin throughout his life. On his death, the call sign reverts to the maternal kin of the deceased. The means of his distinctive identification is, in fact, borrowed from others, and refers to this relationship.

Marriage ideally joins a man and his cross-cousin at a certain generational distance. However, it is also not unusual for marriage to redefine relations between parallel cousins (siblings) as those of cross-cousins, nor for the location of each respective hamlet to provide justification for this redefinition. Physical separation in the landscape is taken to be separation in terms of kinship, as all hamlet formation is predicated on the removal of women from one group of siblings in marriage, and their incorporation into another. This separation is properly accompanied by hostility, initially at least, and physical removal. People from other hamlets, then, are 'as' cross-cousins, in that it may be assumed there has been a separation between a brother/sister pair in the past to account for their physical distance (Leach forthcoming). This is significant in that it means that one's mother's brother, and therefore the origin of one's name (as a man), is always beyond one's own hamlet. Cross-sex siblings are separated physically and socially by marriage, and their ensuing offspring live as cross-cousins in different named hamlets. I return below to affinity and siblingship, that is, to the context in which *garamut* are 'men'.

One is able to add other beats to the names of men. For example, 'woman', and/or 'child', may be added to a man's call sign to identify a wife, or male/female offspring. All hamlets also have an identifying beat. There are some 'verbs': come, go, sleep, bury; there are times: night, sun, morning, dusk, now, tomorrow; there are also beats for animals and foods, and for weather. There are also beats for danger, for fights, and for meeting as a hamlet group. Nekgini speakers playfully liken their slit-gongs to a telephone system, and it is common to hear one person say to another, 'ring me on a slit-gong' in the lingua franca (Neo-Melanesian: *ringim mi long garamut*).

Constructing a slit-gong

It is the brothers of a married woman who make a slit-gong for their sister's husband.[10] They will not consider doing so unless their sister and her husband have fulfilled their bride-compensation payments.[11] In turn, having done so guarantees these affines' co-operation. It is sometimes the case that a particularly successful man may receive a slit-gong at the time that he 'buys' his

wife's body (*parieng huli*), but this is dependent on the level of trust and previous satisfactory exchange that he has achieved with his affines. It also requires extra wealth. Most men will wait until they are well into the cycle of affinal payments which ensure the emergence of their children into the social world before they are 'ready' in the local idiom. These payments are made in the currency of kin transaction in these villages. In 1995, the essential elements were pigs, garden food, decorative ancestral wealth items (*palieng*), rice and tinned fish, small amounts of cash, betel-nut, and coconut.

A central element in the process of constructing slit-gongs is the spirit cult known to Nekgini speakers as *kaapu*. Glossed as *tambaran* in Neo Melanesian, this cult, and the paraphernalia associated with it, are the province of initiated males. There is a variety of types of *kaap*, and multiple examples of each type. For the current purpose, it is enough to describe the distinction made between *kaapu tupong yarung* – spirits belonging to the water (Leach 1999) – and *kaapu sawing*, wild spirits belonging to the forest. *Kaapu tupong yarung* are known by their musical voices, while *kaapu sawing* transform bodies. These spirits are hidden from women and non-initiates in a kind of consensual secrecy which Gourlay (1975), following Bateson's much earlier insights (1958 [1936]), describes as '[b]oth male and female connivance in mutual deception and the subsequent rituals [made possible by that deception which] operate as interacting forces to ensure the survival and wellbeing of society as its inhabitants see it' (1958 [1936]: 120). I am obliged to maintain the 'secrecy' surrounding the paraphernalia of *kaapu* by agreement with Nekgini speakers.[12] Yet I can say that idioms of gender are crucial to the transformations achieved by the work of the male cult. This is familiar enough from other parts of PNG, where male initiators are the 'mothers' of boys, for example (Bateson 1958). The contrast between encompassing and transforming bodies (*kaap sawing*) and giving or developing voice (*kaap tupong yarung*) also utilizes these idiomatic separations.

Reflecting the shifting encompassments and exclusions of gender as a central trope in eliciting particular persons (Strathern 1988), women also have *kaapu* among Nekgini speakers. The literature on *tambaran* along the North Coast of Papua New Guinea refers exclusively to a male cult (Gardi 1960; Tuzin 1980), but women in Nekgini-speaking villages also have a form of *tambaran* activity (*kaapu parieng*: women's spirits) which are hidden from men. Men's *kaapu* activities are concerned with making boys into men, and logs into slit-gongs, while women's concern menstruation and childbirth. It may or may not be unique to find an equivalent women's practice covered by the same term in this region but, departing from the conclusions of previous analyses, the fact allows us an insight into the meaning of the term *kaap* for these people which is relevant to the argument here. *Tambaran/kaapu* is essentially not best characterized as a male club, but as an indigenous gloss on gendered aspects of the process of growing people and plants, or effecting change upon them. Achieving such an effect always involves the seclusion of the subject. And this encompassing act is gendered as female.

One entity is lodged within another for its growth. Thus it is a wife's brother's spirits which come onto a man's lands, and transform a log into an entity within which a voice may be developed. Nekgini speakers emphasize

bringing a containing body onto their own lands to grow their children (marriage), and also when growing staple taro tubers in their gardens (a spirit 'mother of taro'). In each case an affinal relationship is generated, or established, and two kinds of spirit (containing body, and voice) are brought into productive relation. Through women's professed ignorance of male spirits with voices, the contrast between voice (a male gardener's spells, a *garamut*'s call, musical spirit voices which act as love magic) and body (wife, affinal forest spirits, mythical taro mother) is instantiated. Production relies upon eliciting one form to combine with another.

There are four phases to constructing a slit-gong which correspond to four sections in what follows. As the reader will see, the activity of *garamut* construction takes on mythic or cosmological proportion. And it does so because it compels persons to act in certain gendered and hierarchical modes. Acting in these ways generates the form in which they may become particular, defined entities – men able to command wealth and a name – and thus embody creative power itself. My description of the process (felling a tree, arrival of *kaapu*, decoration, and revelation) has woven into it a description of social organization and political position as elicited by the process itself. But, as I mentioned, this process actually begins with the attraction of a bride. This too is an elicitory, or compelled, act, requiring love magic (Leach forthcoming).

(1) FELLING A TREE

After identifying a suitable tree on his own land, a man calls upon his wife's brothers to collect their *kaapu sawing* (bush spirits) and come to construct his slit-gong. Only a man with no brothers may fell the designated tree. This is because, as the tree is cut, a myth is invoked which accounts for the advent of wealth items in the world. This myth, *te tangaring patuki*, relates how a tree was once cut down to the west of Reite lands. As it fell, the trunk and branches modified the landscape. They also crushed those people who were unable to stop it from falling on their villages. But brave men stood forth in high places and through heroic feats of strength reached out and fended off the falling trunk, pushing it onto the next hamlet. Any without the strength to achieve this were crushed by the weight of wealth in its branches, while those who stood proud, and called their own names loudly, succeeded in dislodging prototype wealth and food items which fell into their lands. A man with brothers would 'crush' them by felling the tree as *te tangaring*.

It is most important that a man does not have a slit-gong constructed before his elder brothers. In fact, in a parallel stipulation, a man who marries before his elder brother is required to make payments in recompense for 'stepping over' this brother. Both marriage and slit-gong construction bring a man to prominence in affinal-based exchanges. Cutting a tree for slit-gong construction thus has implications for the political order in Nekgini hamlets, stemming from the prominence of men in their exchanges with affines in other villages. This is because social organization itself (and political position as an aspect of this) is based on the generative principle of the *palem*.

Palem   The pinnacle of achievement in affinal exchange (that is, payments for wives and children) is the construction of a structure called a *palem*. A *palem* combines a meeting-house for visitors to the hamlet, and a platform for the display of produce and wealth items. Only wealth given in the form of a *palem*, itself described as an assemblage of body parts, has the effect of making a name for the giver. In fact, it achieves far more than this, as those people resident in a hamlet which has successfully completed affinal payments from a *palem* are subsequently known by the name of the land upon which they built their *palem*. *Palem* construction generates named social groups, which are specifically elicited and compelled by the relations of affinity. They are subsequently known to others as 'one *palem*', named after the place in which they achieved the construction. *Palem* sites shift over generations, and it is up to each new generation to make their place of residence known in the landscape of named places, through constructing a *palem* on that site. The first member of a sibling set to make a *palem* is said to have 'gone first'. They become senior through demonstrating knowledge, and receiving external recognition prior to their co-residents.

(2) *Kaapu* (spirits) hollow the trunk

Once the tree is down, everyone who is to receive a section of the trunk walks along it. The man who will receive the topmost section as his slit-gong goes first, followed in order by the others, with the 'base man,' the man who will receive the lowest portion, walking last. The principle that all work proceeds from base to tip is thereafter followed in everything that is done. These stipulations make the tree like a sibling set. It is on the strength of the base, the eldest brother, that others too achieve prominence. The trunk is marked off into sections, and each section is then cut.

The way is now clear for the arrival of *kaap sawing*, that is, the bush spirits that effect the hollowing of the trunk. Reite people say in public that this spirit manifests itself as different birds, which eat away the wood. The first to appear is *kengiau*, a green parakeet which drills holes in forest trees. Men who 'attend the spirits' as they work,[13] and 'clear up after them' must observe dietary and behavioural restrictions. Any type of food which splits (sugar-cane, certain bananas) must be avoided, as must the use of cutlery (or sticks) to spear food. Sexual contact is particularly inimical to the work of *kaap sawing*. A man who arrives at the secluded site of manufacture carrying *samung* (dirt) from contact with women risks frightening away the 'spirit'. *Kengiau* is followed by *siurr songarangting* (a hornbill), which breaks away the upright pieces left by the parakeet's boring (see Fig. 4). It is quickly followed by *nung sarr* (white cockatoo), which peels the bark from the exterior of the slit-gong.

With the bark removed, the slit-gongs are played for the first time. For this, they must all be at the same stage of development, the first or base slit-gong awaiting the completion of its siblings. A stick which is described as 'rubbish', a 'bad and wild' stick (*tokung sawing*) is cut from a softwood tree. This is used to beat the slit-gongs in turn from base to tip while all the while men shout '*korowei, korowei* (deaf or closed ear)', and the stick is then launched

FIGURE 4. The work of *kengiau* complete. Photo: J. Leach.

into the bush from the tip of the trunk with a great shout. Men say at this point that this 'opens' the ears of the slit-gong. The notion of reciprocity or response appears to be built into the object in the very construction. The concern expressed is not, as yet, that it shall have a good voice, but explicitly that it shall be able to hear. Another stick, this time from a light hardwood tree, is brought, and this beater (*tokung maning*) is said to be a 'good' stick which will produce the correct response from the slit-gong. It is not thrown away.

From this point onwards, all episodes in the development of the drums are announced on them. At the end of each day's work, a sequence of beats is played. These are, first, the call sign of the man who is the 'base' or reason for the work (the base slit-gong), then that of each of the men who will, by virtue of his strength, receive a slit-gong. This is followed by the identifying beats of all the men who are in residence with the slit-gongs and are 'watching over' the work of the *kaapu*. Finally, the call sign known as *te keramung* (the call sign of the slit-gong itself) is played.

(3) DECORATION

Once the hollowing process is complete the dangerous *kaap sawing* are removed. A bird is shot, fed to the 'teeth' of the spirit, and then thrown from the tip of the trunk into the bush. The mood among the men at the site changes from serious and fearful to playful and relaxed. The bush spirit which encompassed/formed the body of the drum is replaced by the *kaap tupong*

yarung. Rather than the call sign of the body in transformation (*te kiramung*), it is now the musical voices of the water spirits which fill the locality. They become a constant feature of the secluded clearing made by the felling of the tree and facilitate the development of the projected voice. Their arrival also prompts a change in the messages sent out at the end of each day. The call signs of men are replaced by those of the *kaapu* which are present, and *te kiramung* is replaced by *palieng kiramung* (that is, the call sign of decorative ancestral wealth items). The replacement of *te kiramung* with *palieng kiramung* is a sign that the slit-gongs are nearing completion and emergence. Male spirits add something male (voice) to the new body. In response, women begin the wild play called *rauang*, directing their highly disturbing attentions to the prospective owners of the new slit-gongs. Naked women pursue these men when they come into the village, attacking them with stinging plants or forcing rotten food upon them.

  Rauang reverses the nurturance and containment provided for men by their wives within the village, as that nurture is now provided by other 'mothers', the affines who are secluded in the bush. In the bush clearing, the water spirits also 'play', 'eating' any receivers who venture there. Acting as spirits, affinal men jump upon their backs and hit them without warning. In response, the receivers are required to react vigorously, calling their own names, and mimicking the parrying of the falling tree. It is said that each time a man is successful in this, he gains strength to make gardens, rear pigs, hunt, and make food for ceremonial occasions. One 'voice' (a man's) displaces the presence or power of others (affinal spirits).

(4) DISPLAY

The arrival of the set of new slit-gongs (or initiated men) in the village of their owners is an important event. In preparation, food is set out, while the initiators work through the night. The *kaapu* make music to attract people from afar to witness the coming revelation. Some important finishing touches are made to the slit-gongs, including 'burning their skins' with flaming leaves ('to make them strong'), while the call sign for wealth is played. A hole is drilled in the wood at the front of the slit-gong, allowing the attachment of a rope for it to be pulled along the ground. The protuberance through which the hole is drilled is called the 'nose' of the drum,[14] and above it is incised a particular design − *sima arling* (Fig. 5). This design comes from the shape of the fruit-bearing bough of a betel palm (*sima*). Its shape is like the end of a man's torso, and the fruit hanging beneath are likened to genitalia. The sides of the slit-gong may be rubbed with oil and red paint, while its 'face' (also referred to as *sima arling*) is cleaned with yellow flowers and painted. Slit-gongs are always dragged along the ground and never carried. To lift and carry a slit-gong on one's shoulders is *awarlung*, an image of the death of its owner.

  The line of slit-gongs is assembled, trunk top first. They are then dragged along the ground to the edge of the village, all the while being beaten with a lolloping beat (Fig. 6). From this point onwards, they are hounded and corralled into the central place, and then lined up, as are new initiates, to be observed by the throng (Figs. 2, 3). Women and men from other hamlets

FIGURE 5. Pinabin Sisau carves the design *sima arling* onto a secluded *garamut*. Photo: J. Leach.

approach them with care, throwing torn-up leaves and grasses over them to protect themselves from the sight, and women attack the base *garamut*, attempting to cut it with an axe. 'Promises' of payment are made by all the owners of the new slit-gongs by placing a rope of tied coconuts and betel-nut at their feet.

Containment, growth and the mortal limits of identity

The emergence of a *palem* (an entity disposing of a 'body' of wealth) is compelled by what is also its enabling condition, 'external' cross-cousin marriage. In the flow of women and slit-gongs one way, and wealth the other, the existence of each is brought forth in and through the distinction between them. Felling the *garamut* tree creates the conditions for the distribution of a man's voice. The wealth items in the myth are replaced here by the call sign for wealth. And the mythic figure who performed the great act of fending off the falling tree is replaced in the body of the *garamut* by the name of the man receiving it. Thus the call sign for wealth, and a man's voice, 'carry' across the landscape, in place of the falling tree and its wealth items. Rather than one big tree connecting the land yet distinguishing places by the different kinds of wealth they reveal, there are many trees which move, as call signs, from *palem* to *palem*. Wealth is thus both the general condition for exchange, but also particular, like men and their names, because of particular relationships in

FIGURE 6. A line of new slit-gongs awaits emergence outside Reite village in 1995. Photo: J.
            Leach.

which it emerges. (Production is particular, a consequence of affinal relations).
A voice is always a version of other peoples' voices. It displaces another voice,
just as a presentation of wealth displaces the body of a bride.

    Notice that the substance of what is made among Nekgini speakers is sup-
plied by a man himself. The tree used is his own tree and comes from his
land – comparable in this respect to New Ireland *malangan*, where the carver
provides the image on behalf of the owner of the carving (Küchler 1987).
Payment, we might accurately say, is anticipated for the elicitation of a form

from a potential. In an acknowledgement of the man's position as a significant actor in affinal exchange relations, others produce for him a metonymic extension of himself which they implicitly agree to recognize.

The power to achieve the growth of particular recognized entities is something people claim to control by eliciting gendered positions from others. The difference between having the bush grow up in an area and having tubers grow under the ground is a product of people's agency in making relations with affines. Similarly, trees grow of themselves. Slit-gongs, however, are grown or formed in the context of affinal relations. It is this that makes them 'people'. If affines/maternal kin elicit form from children and from trees, paternal kin in turn elicit this labour and nurture from their affines. Work is required to direct growth into something recognizably human. This work lies, for Nekgini speakers, in producing the enabling conditions for human growth as a set of relations. It is through these relations that potential, or unformed substance, may be transformed into something effective. The form of persons, how they appear (are named, decorated, and known as part of their originating *palem*), arises directly from and within specific, affinal relationships.

The identification of a man with his slit-gong is very strong. Slit-gongs do not usually survive men. They are used as coffins, with a man's bones placed inside the broken container, and are left to rot in a spirit abode. In other places along the north coast, and in certain middle Sepik societies, slit-gongs survive men and have been described as a row of ancestors lined up along the centre of the cult-house, producing the voices of the ancestral spirits (Bateson 1958 [1936]). But here, the voice of the slit-gong dies along with the voice of the man.

I have shown that identity and names have a complex gestation in Nekgini social process. It is affines that form the appearance of boys in initiation, and also that of slit-gongs. It is their spirits that give form to substance, and their work decorates the form for its appearance. They contain and enable the emergence of a particular person: a man with a *palem* name. These relations are finished on the death of a man (through payments made to his sister's children, who in turn 'bury' him), when his 'voice' is silenced.

So, we may view the process of complementarity between affines as a process by which social identity, a person's name (literally in the sense of the call sign by which they are known) and their political or social standing, all come to be nurtured. The growth of the person itself – the tree or the boy – occurs in the nurture provided by a kin group and the land they own. But the emergence of a recognizable social identity only happens in the context of encompassing relations with affines. A boy in the process of initiation calls upon his father's affines for his transformation. Emergence is what makes him a man in his own right. Once he has become a man with an effective social presence, he is able to attract his own wife, and thus instigate his own affinal relations. It is in his exchanges with these people that he emerges again through his metonymic voice, a voice which carries across the landscape. The culmination of this development is his identification with the voice of his own slit-gong. This covers the voices of his affines and father.

Maurice Leenhardt, writing of New Caledonia in 1930, saw a similar process in operation there. I quote from him:

no clan has life by itself; it receives it from another clan to which it gives it in return. It is the exchange of women that realises this rendered service from clan to clan and establishes between them this relationship of uterine to paternal, of feminine to masculine which is the base of all familial society (quoted in Crapanzano 1979: xii).

But something is needed from which to fashion this life. The raw materials for a political persona are provided by the place of origin. The work of the father and his kin, and of the lands upon which they nurture children, is to produce potential from which form can be made. There is nothing mystical about this process, as that form is one which is given by the set of relationships into which that potential person is propelled. The boy is this man's nephew and not another's, this set of cross-cousins' joking-partner, not another's. That Nekgini speakers dramatize this understanding in the form of initiations and slit-gong manufacture indicates that 'social relations are made the overt objects of peoples' activities' (Strathern 1988: 180). An aesthetic of process itself is revealed to us.

The resemblances between the uncut tree and the adolescent boy are apparent. While the boy would become a man physically (whereas one must assume the tree would never become a series of slit-gongs), without the possibility of extending themselves into the social and physical landscape through marriage and exchange boys would remain boys: like the tree, unformed and without voice. The destruction of the *garamut* on the death of the man, and the placement of his bones within it at a point in the landscape which is associated with his ancestral spirits (Lawrence 1964: 17), ends his political projection. Its destruction removes the audible signs of a man's life, its efficacy and purpose – and an opportunity is made for the next generation's appearance in the social world of exchange, and their audible presence in the landscape.

This is a region where complex cognatic kinship is the norm. Social organization as a simple system of descent or landholding is absent. Enduring corporate groups are elusive. New named places, and new social groupings associated with them, emerge in each generation. Each generation has the chance to bring their own place, and their own position in the landscape, to prominence through marriage exchanges and the process of making entities with voice out of the substance of their lands, and through their position in a network of affinal kin.

When Reite people say, 'slit-gongs are men', would they also agree that men are slit-gongs? It seems unlikely. There is not a direct equivalence. But equally, in the sense that a man and a slit-gong are formed by the same process, they have an intertwined emergence and presence.

The aesthetic of a slit-gong's voice

As mentioned above, despite the extensive care taken over their making, Reite slit-gongs are 'crude' in comparison to say, middle Sepik or Vanuatu slit-gongs.[15] We might speculate as to why this is so. Perhaps recent arrival in the area means there has been little time for carving skills to be perfected. Perhaps Nekgini people have an impoverished symbolic repertoire to add meaningful beauty to their carvings. But this is not the line of argument I have taken

here. Instead, I have argued that effort is directed into how the drums sound. But by this, I do not mean merely that they are good and loud. I am not, in other words, replacing an aesthetic of the visual appearance with an aesthetic based on the quality of sound. Where Nekgini speakers appear to emphasize the sound of a slit-gong by attention to its voice, this does not primarily index a concern with the aesthetics of sound quality itself. Effect is judged by how 'moving' the slit-gong is. And this is an element of relationships and their quality. Hence, it may move people to emotion while silent: lined with others, like initiates, to be viewed. The 'voice' of a man or a slit-gong might then accurately be thought of as their ability to move others, to cause them to act. This is a matter of relational positioning, of political achievement. It is still an 'aesthetic' moment, but one on a different register to our usual concern with visual or tonal 'beauty'. There is a complex technology here for ensuring that there will be someone to hear a slit-gong. In keeping with the Nekgini joke, there has to be someone who will answer the telephone. This is what is means to have a voice (*punging*).

The parallel with initiation can be brought out clearly here, recalling the similarity suggested by Gell between art and magic. Initiation in this context may be defined as producing socially efficacious (gendered, adult) persons. Onlookers protect themselves from the first emergence of this efficacy, fearing that they will be emotionally drawn to (fall in love with) the new man. This is a recognition of their potential entry into the realm of affinal relations. The brief but arresting appearance both of slit-gongs and of men elicits a response. It draws others to recognize work, productivity, and ultimately position, in the extended socio-physical landscape of the Rai Coast hinterland. People drawn to see the emergence of the new person are those who may be coerced into acting because of this recognition. Display and magic are aspects of elicitation.

Reite people could make their own slit-gongs, and they could initiate their own sons, passing on the knowledge of how to grow tubers and how to perform as adults. But the logical extension of this is that they could also marry their own sisters. This is the kind of weight that making one's own slit-gong would have in this place. It would be 'eating' one's own substance (*ne naki*), that is to say, avoiding productive relations with others, and trying both to produce and consume oneself (Leach forthcoming; Mimica 1991). Instead, Reite people ensure that the voice of their slit-gong is audible by getting others to provide it. Others must hear the voice of the drum because, in a way, they are hearing their own work. They acknowledge the voice of the man because they have been instrumental in developing this voice.[16] If one wants response from people, and thereby a recognition of one's presence in the social and physical landscape, one extends oneself in exchange. The voice of the slit-gong follows the roads of exchange, carried to affinal villages by the pig you give in return for the labour of making it. The pig is also a payment for the fact that affines will hear you in the future. They are open to a summons in time of trouble, and open to being moved in other ways. Quintessentially, this means the movement of women in marriage which, as we have seen, is also the enabling condition of *palem* formation.[17]

Conclusion

To reiterate: echoing Marx, Gell describes technology as that which generates social relations (1992: 57). That is, it is through the technologies of production that the form of social relations is given. This in turn generates the reproduction of society. Technology is foundational to human social existence. Like magic in Melanesian societies, art works are representations of this technological wonder, and thus 'enchant' the observer or practitioner with the awe of human achievement. Weiner (1995) takes Gell to task for what he considers a productionist bias in his definition of aesthetics. Following Strathern, he suggests that we must view aesthetics as the specification of the forms, in perception, by which phenomena come to register as meaningful. This takes us beyond the notion of representation when looking at art (Ingold 1998) and magic. Weiner suggests that art 'reveals the counter-invented world', the world that emerges as a by-product of our intentional engagement with it. It reveals the concealment of 'convention' (Wagner 1975) and thereby transcends the everyday technology of production. As such, the study of aesthetic form lies beyond the study of representation.

Garamut construction brings forth a form of relations, and this elicitation is possible because the object is not simply produced through a complex technical process, but because the technology of production is also the technology of elicitation. It works on and through social relations, drawing sociality from others, and directing that sociality into a form recognizable as human (political, affinal, reproductive). The difficulty is not to get the raw materials of tree and paint into a finished product (the source of value/effect, according to Gell). This is far from easy. The real achievement, however, is to bring forth a form of sociality itself.

Nekgini speakers displace the power for generating social form from any one person or object. What they do instead is to locate that power within processes which are the only existence of the *kaapu* spirits, affinal co-operation, and the revelation of the person. That this process inspires awe, anxiety, and emotion on the part of the participants makes it all the more appropriate to describe it as appealing to Nekgini aesthetic sensibilities. The process brings forth a particular social world, and it is a social world Nekgini people recognize and value.[18] For Weiner, this would make *garamut* production a work of art. The process is not primarily one of production. Instead it reveals the ontological basis of human existence. The production of the object is this mode of revelation. The knowledge of how to transact with spirits, affines, and bush material manipulates existing social relations and instigates new ones to produce an effect. That effect has its nexus, its point of convergence, in the object (the slit-gong). Yet it is not the slit-gong that is the 'object' of the process.

Perhaps we could say that *garamut* are not strictly art works. The idea here would have to be that the process itself is the artistry, and as well as eliciting social relations in a compelled or aesthetic form it produces an object which is then an aspect of those relationships. It is this that makes it like a person, because a person of course elicits sociality in others, some of the by-products of which (according to Weiner) are technology, production, and so forth. A *garamut* demands a response because of 'who' it is. And this response is gen-

erated through the complex processes involved in the emergence of relation-
ally constituted social entities (*palem*). As Wagner observed, 'the elicitation of
social collectivities by indirect means is more than a mere rhetorical device
among the Daribi; it is a style or mode of creativity that pervades a whole
range of their activities' (1974: 108).

   People in Reite will say that a slit-gong 'is a man'. The question here must
surely be, not how is a drum like a man, but – echoing Primo Levi (1979):
'What is a man?' I have outlined the particular form that an answer to this
question might take among Nekgini speakers. Here, an exploration of the
meaning of an art work has proceeded from the inside outwards, as it were.
I have charted a process whereby the creation and use of an object elicits a
particular form of social and political relations between persons.

NOTES

   [1] References to 'Nekgini speakers' in this article are to the residents of Reite, Sarangama,
Asang, and Sorang villages in the Mot 1 census district of Madang Province. Fieldwork was
carried out during 1994-5, 1999, and 2000.
   [2] As Burridge (1959) points out, 'gong' is an accurate description, as a *garamut* has no
membrane.
   [3] For an overview within Papua New Guinea, see Gourlay (1975).
   [4] In the sense of *malangan* (funeral carvings from northern New Ireland). See Küchler (1987,
1992).
   [5] See Ingold (2000: 296-300, 312-21), however, on the difficulties that arise in the use of the
term 'technology'.
   [6] Compare O'Hanlon (1989).
   [7] This is the language called *Tok Pisin* in PNG.
   [8] Gourlay attempts to distinguish between 'common or everyday' and 'secret or sacred' slit-
gongs in his overview of the instrument. In doing so, he makes the interesting observation that
anthropologists have assumed that there is 'an entity known as the slit-gong' (1975: 38), imply-
ing that things which look the same may have very different meanings depending on whether
they are everyday or sacred items. However, among Nekgini speakers the same object is moved
from one place to another (men's house to public meeting-house) for reasons apparently of
convenience.
   [9] This contradicts Lawrence, writing about slit-gongs among the neighbouring Ngaing lan-
guage group, when he states that personal call signs are derived from the sacred melodies of
'the clan' (Lawrence 1964: 15; 1965: 200-1).

[10] Burridge, writing about Tangu on the coast of Madang Province at Bogia (150 kilometres from the Rai Coast) tells us that either a man or his affines may construct a *garamut*, although it must be the wife's brothers who drag the new drum to the village for a man. This is not the case for Nekgini speakers where the affinal relationship is the crucial element of construction.

[11] Married couples bear the responsibility of bride payments together and work as a couple to produce gardens and livestock to be used in these payments.

[12] The male cult is a significant part of contemporary ceremonial life. It was impressed upon me that children from Reite and Sarangama were even now at university, and I was therefore not to write about the *kaapu* in any way other than referring to those forms of speech used in public, mixed contexts in Reite.

[13] I follow the euphemisms used by Reite men, indicating such by inverted commas.

[14] Nekgini men used to have their septum pierced.

[15] Compare, for example, plate IX in Bateson (1958 [1936]) and plate 14 in Gourlay (1975). See also Bonnemaison, Huffman, Kaufmann & Tryon (1996).

[16] '[A] slit-gong talks for a man as, if not more powerfully than, his voice does. A man mourns on his slit-gong and announces feasts, complaints, claims, anger, threats, confessions, warnings, dances and births of children, betrothal, marriage, the killing of a pig or a cassowary' (Burridge 1965: 245).

[17] Perhaps for a younger sibling, to hark back to *te tangaring* and its implications.

[18] Writing of Heidegger, Roy Wagner, and Marilyn Strathern, Weiner says 'in their appeal to the alternative social-existential tasks of evocation, elicitation and gathering, they have made the calling forth of a human world of action, relation and production a matter of the elicitation of forms and their proper grounding conditions, what we would conventionally label an aesthetic process' (1995: 39).

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Le tambour et la voix: l'esthétique et les processus sociaux sur la Côte de Rai en Nouvelle Guinée papouasienne

Résumé

Les Reite qui vivent sur la côte de Rai en Nouvelle Guinée papouasienne décrivent un grand tambour cérémonial (un *garamut*) comme étant un homme. Lors de la construction, un *garamut* est le centre d'un déroulement d'activités qui produisent une forme de relations sociales autant que l'objet lui-même. D'où ma question: 'Quel language pourrions-nous utiliser pour décrire une telle création'? Les concepts d'esthétique et de technologie ont été cruciaux dans les récentes discussions sur l'art. Après une présentation succinte de cette littérature, j'aborde une description ethnographique de la construction du *guaramut* en tant qu'elle révèle la façon particulière dont les Reite produisent leur monde social. Cette construction est fondée sur le savoir mythique. Ceci donne forme au mode dans lequel les personnes, en tant qu'agents sexués et pourvus d'identités particulières, sont censées apparaître. Un schéma spécifique d''esthétique' est donc apparent. L'émergence du *guaramut* ne peut pas

être considérée comme la finalité des activités. L'objet a un effet à l'intérieur des rapports et sur les rapports auxquels son émergence donne forme. La formation est continue, et le devenir en est partie intégrante.

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