

## Unwrapping the social and cultural meaning of Garamut (slit-drums) of Papua New Guinea

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**Figure 1: Garamut from Kayan Village, Bogia District Madang, Papua New Guinea. 2012**

### Abstract

In almost all communities in the Pacific and especially in Papua New Guinea, certain objects are considered indelibly linked to the lifecycle of the people. These objects are revered, even feared as imbued with power of life and death. Therefore, as revered objects they find themselves shrouded in rituals and ceremonies which pertain to matters of life and death. Among these groups of objects are the garamut (slit-drums). For these communities, since the days of the ancestors garamut have made a significant contribution to their livelihood. However, with the intervention of European contact, there is extensive literature which, describes slit-drums/garamut as primarily musical instruments. Thus over the years garamut have been misunderstood. But deeper cultural analysis suggests that garamut were much more than musical instruments which early literature led us to believe. Garamut were multifaceted objects imbued with power of social influence over people.

### Introduction

Since the days of ancestors, garamut<sup>1</sup> (the Tok Pisin<sup>2</sup> word for slit-log or slit-drum, sometimes referred to as slit-gong) played a significant role among some groups of people in Papua New Guinea. Garamut constructed their social and kinship structure. Garamut were considered to be living social agents which, fostered intimate and personal relationships of the people in their political, social, economic and religious domains. There were different distinctions and uses of garamut; from spirit garamut, to clan garamut, and to private garamut

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<sup>1</sup> Garamut: A Tok Pisin word for slit-log which has been referred to in English as slit-drum or slit-gong. Throughout the paper, I will use the term garamut and not anglicise the plural spelling to garamuts.

<sup>2</sup> Tok Pisin: One of the lingua francas spoken in Papua New Guinea.

which were used as general purpose garamut during singsing<sup>3</sup> or sending messages. However, based on my research in 2012, among the Kayan people of Bogia District in Madang Province, I argue that since the time of European intervention, there has been a cultural shift in the social and cultural understanding of garamut, and now they are collectively misunderstood as musical instruments.



**Figure 2: Map showing location of the Kayan people**  
*Map from [sil.org/pacific/pngmaps/Madang](http://sil.org/pacific/pngmaps/Madang)*

This article presents some of my findings. These findings unwrap the foreign wrappings that have obscured the social and cultural understanding of garamut from the lens of the local people. By the term social, I mean how people regarded garamut as social persons who connected kinship relationships, bestowed leadership and demarcated gender roles. By the term cultural, I mean how garamut as material cultural objects ranked social status, unified people and gave them identity as belonging to a particular group of people.

### **European intervention and imposition of definition**

Upon their arrival in the Pacific, colonisers and missionaries were often not aware that in the making of sacred objects, the carver(s) was creating the habitat for a spirit being who was believed to have particular functions such as protecting the health and welfare of the community and providing assistance in hunting, fishing or warfare etc.. They did not realize that among traditional communities of Papua New Guinea, people see their masks and other artifacts as spirits who happen to be residing in certain man-made objects. These objects were motivated by beliefs in spirits and consecrated by magic rituals during their production process. Those who do not understand the spiritual dimension of the objects consider them merely in aesthetic terms, in order words; in much

<sup>3</sup> Singsing: A Tok Pisin word for traditional dance

the same way as they describe Western Art (see Poletan 2012). Lipset (2005, p.12) says this about Murik art objects, ‘such objects possessed agency because culturally speaking they were persons and not inert art. In Melanesia, art was no less embedded in society than were people – not figuratively, but literally’.

Early literature on slit-drums/garamut indicate that in many cases, definitions and meanings introduced by early researchers on some traditional cultural objects of the people of the Pacific, especially Papua New Guinea, have become the standard reference upon which further studies have been conducted. This, as my research shows, applied to garamut as well. Garamut were subjected to these new sets of descriptions and definitions. For example, works of early anthropologists during 1800’s, such as Finsch (in 1893), Eberlin (in 1910), Ivens (in 1927), Layard (in 1942), and Blackwood (in 1951), cited by Fischer (1983), suggest that the basic function of the slit-drum is to give signals and to produce dance rhythms. Hermann (1943) having examined the drum signals came to the conclusion that Oceania does not have a true “drum language”. I argue that this definition, describing garamut as slit-gong not only infiltrated indigenous knowledge but also obscured the social and cultural meaning of garamut.

Early studies do not capture the in-depth understanding of garamut but generally identify or refer to garamut as musical instruments or for signalling purposes or as used during initiation ceremonies in male cults. Works of Schmidt (1923), Wedgwood (1933), Bateson (1958), BurrIDGE (1959), Lawrence (1964), Tuzin (1980), Fischer (1986), Spearitt (1987), McDowell (1991), Niles (1992), Yamada (1997), and Zemp & Kaufmann (2010) present more of the use of garamut as musical instruments. This emphasis reinforces the definition and classification of garamut as slit-gongs, similar to sound producing instruments. Whereas my study though acknowledging the use of garamut as accompanying music at times, looks beyond music as the primary role of garamut.

Waiko (1993) writes that Papua New Guinea’s images of history and its people have been pieced together by scholars from a wide range of disciplines, such as anthropologists, botanists, linguists, and archaeologists. My research findings resonate with the view expressed by Waiko. I am also of the view that the current meanings and definitions accorded to garamut, have been heavily influenced by earlier anthropological work, and over the years eroded their social and cultural understanding. Subsequently, the arbitrary introduced meanings did injustice to the social standing of garamut. From my inquiries, the word garamut has a deep socially and culturally embedded meaning.

### **The word garamut**

The source of the Tok Pisin word garamut is said to have been from New Guinea Islands especially from the Kuanua language of the Tolai people of East New Britain Province. Since then the word garamut has now become the common word used throughout Papua New Guinea. Mihalic (1971) provides the following meanings of the word garamut, 1) a tree with hard white wood

(*Vitex Confossus*), and 2) a native wooden signal drum, the slit-gong, used to give short signals as well as send messages. This definition I argue was influenced by early anthropological studies some of which I have identified. Even some of my interlocutors referred to *garamut* as musical instruments. It is interesting to note from literature that many anthropological studies and ethno-musicological studies use the term slit-drum and slit-gong interchangeably. These works still present *garamut* primarily as musical instruments or gongs for signalling events similar to bells signalling clock time for beginning or ending of activities such as class periods in schools.

The slit-gong definition was popularised when *garamut* began to be pounded as a signalling gong outside of its cultural context. Taken away from the custodianship of the big-men and their restricted use, *garamut* were now used in a similar way to metal bells in indicating clock time. The *garamut* was placed at the school as a cultural symbol. A male School Board Member told me that only male teachers especially the Headmaster beat it on a few occasions when they want to call together School Board Members for a meeting. Interestingly the *garamut* is placed under the School Notice Board.



**Figure 3: A *garamut* at Kayan Primary School**

### **Meaning of the word *garamut***

According to three Tolai elders I interviewed in 2011, the word *garamut* refers to a long slit-log traditionally used for sending messages. It is a compound word made up of two words ‘*gara*’ and ‘*i mut*’; *gara*, means singing/calling out, and *i mut*, means be quiet, and listen. It also has a meaning relating to the voice of a young virgin calling. This explanation of voice calling out and keeping quiet to listen, is in agreement with Eberlein (1910, pp.635-36), who suggests the etymology of the word *garamut* as *gara* “song” and *mut* “to silence”. Eberlein explains that the muted singing and striking of bamboos, common in

the evening, is an order to be silent (a gara i mut) in order to understand what the garamut was signalling. However the three Tolai elders I interviewed did not mention bamboos (known as Tidirl or Pakupak in their language) which are basically used in accompanying songs/singing and not for sending messages. I suspect that Eberlein referred to garamut as sound or a signal producing instrument which can also capture the attention of others whilst tapping it to accompany a song being sung, not an object for communicating messages as locals would have understood it. This is because a bamboo would not carry the message far. The three gentlemen also told me that garamut are highly revered objects. Special garanuts are kept in houses and only sounded on special occasions, such as announcing the death of a big-man or someone in the community.

They further stated that, following tradition even at this modern time, the garamut is sounded by male elders for sending out messages, as well as during custom related ceremonies and special occasions. Garamut are not used on every occasion and also do not accompany every song and dance. However they also said that in modern music and art performances or in Church worship, garamut are sometime used but these garamut are newly made ones and are not custom garamut. This means that the making of the garamut has not undergone some form of ritual. Also not everybody owns a garamut, only the Kukurai or the big-men.

Even the Tolai story of origin of garamut cited by Fischer (1986, p.25) from Meier (1908) does not refer to garamut as musical instruments but rather talks about two brothers, To Kabinana and To Karvuvu who wanted to make canoes. To Karvuvu, the bringer of misfortune instead makes a slit-drum, and To Kabinana tells him: "the deaths of our children will be drummed out on it when they die". Tolai people regard To Kabinana and To Karvuvu as their mythical 'big-men' or spirit ancestors who introduced garamut to them. To ascertain whether young male Tolai students at Divine Word University, Madang, knew what garamut meant in their language, I asked them what might be the meaning of garamut. Each one of them told me, they did not know, they had no idea. They know garamut primarily as musical instruments. Even a prominent Tolai local musician, who had been trained at a PNG Music Arts School, responded that garamut are musical instruments. This response was not surprising given the fact that garamut are becoming more and more divorced from their use in the cultural context.

In Kayan village I also enquired about the language meaning of their term *rumbung*. The elders explained to me that the word *rumbung* is also a combined word, rum-bung, which means, wind from the belly or stomach. In general, *rumbung* is the name given to a carved slit-log from a tree named 'Waor' in their language, (garamut in Tok Pisin). They are considered sacred and powerful objects. In Tok Pisin, they said, 'Garamut em ol i no pilai samting, ol i ken bagarapim ples na kilim man', translated in English as, garamut are not toys, they can destroy the village and kill people. Similar to the Kuanua meaning of garamut, the Kayan word *rumbung* anticipates listening in silence to the voice.

### **To the question what are garamut?**

The young peoples' response was broad; they said that garamut are used for many purposes such as in singing, and sending messages. This reinforces my argument that the introduction of new meanings applied to cultural objects such as garamut obscured the traditional cultural and social meaning. I realised that when I asked the elders the question what is a garamut, they did not directly answer the question, but they gave answers of what a garamut does, that a garamut is a powerful object of social control. However, for most young people, they answered that garamut are primarily musical instruments. This is obvious because as garamut are now being used more frequently in art and music performances throughout the country, the word garamut has become synonymous with musical instruments. My conversations with elderly people from groups where garamut are used, such as the Sepik, Manus, Rabaul, Bougainville, and Madang, all commented that culturally in the past, garamut were not understood as musical instruments. They were only used to accompany singing when special occasions arose. They said that since garamut were considered sacred objects, they were used cautiously with diligence and care. Interestingly one person I interviewed expressed that it is an offence to call garamut musical instruments. I now share some of my key findings.

### **Garamut connects people**

For the Kayan I observed that garamut is intricately linked with what they believe to be a sacred residential power. This power is linked to the agency of spirits who are considered the primary source or agents who animate the garamut. Thus the inanimate material object becomes animated sacred object. This belief I observed is at the core of their beliefs that they share their landscape with a multitude of spirits (see also Poser 2008, pp.39-40). Besides, as elders told me, they attribute the knowledge of making garamut to the spirit garamut. Therefore, the agency of garamut among Kayan is not only about the human agency, it is inclusive of spirit agency. From my observation and based on stories told to me by informants, I shall now categorise the belief in the agency of garamut among Kayan in three observational frames. First the spirit agency; second the human agency; and third; the garamut agency. Garamut agency can be said to have an indexical agency of both spirit and human. I shall now write about these three different yet interlocked frames of agency of garamut.

#### ***Spirit agency***

Spirit agency – in the past, Kayan believed that the production of garamut was a collaborative work of the spirits called *ggunmtik* with the people. These are spirits who live in the forest and were credited with giving voice to the garamut especially in the most critically part of digging out the slit from which the voice or sound is produced. The *ggunmtik* were considered primary agents who animate the garamut with their presence thus empowering garamut with power

of agency. And sacred garamut are considered abodes of these spirits. Some of these spirits are considered members of clans and some are spirits known only to some people or individuals. I observed that garamut among Kayan are not only material objects but a spiritual phenomenon.

The Kayan belief that garamut are imbued with the agency of the spirit, especially the clan and sacred spirit garamut. As Strathern (1986) speaks of the distributed personhood of human persons extended through gifts or objects, Kayan also believe in the distributed personhood of the spirit being present in a spirit or sacred garamut. In other words, the material agency of garamut mediates the personal agency of the spirit. That would explain the reason I heard the Kayan speak of certain garamut as possessing personal characteristics and attributes of a spirit whose presence is acknowledged to be present in the garamut. I noted that though Kayan community profess to be Catholic Christians who are not to believe in other spirits other than God alone, still they believe in the immediate presence of other spirits.

### ***Human agency***

Human agency – garamut are the work of human hands. Therefore, garamut are also imbued with human agency and represents human intentions. Apart from the belief that garamut are animated by the spirits I would suggest that for Kayan garamut, they are also animated by humans whose agency find expression in garamut. A concept that Gell (1998) wrote about in his *Anthropological theory of Art and Agency* suggests that objects mediate social agency and can be considered as secondary agents because they extend the agency of persons. Applying this theory to garamut, it begins with the process of production as well as when they are used on various occasions. The Kukurai and certain influential leaders use garamut as social indicator of their status in the community. Garamut endorses their leadership. For the Kukurai of Kayan, garamut is the agency of their voice. Garamut as the Kukurai themselves told me is the ‘Chief Kukurai’. As the process and production of garamut involved numerous people and process, my observation suggests that garamut encapsulates representational agency inclusive of the owner, the clan, the carvers, and the Kayan community as a whole. The agency of garamut among Kayan weaves them in a web of interconnected relationships not only with humans but with the spirits as well.

### ***Object agency***

Object agency – for the Kayan garamut is not just a hewed piece of log bearing inscriptions of clan designs, totems and motifs. These elaborate patterns, designs, totems and motifs connect them as members of their respective clans and sub-clans. Garamut gives them identity and unifies them as clan members of their respective clans or sub-clans. As an object, a garamut connects and expands the agency of human relationships as secondary agents. I also observed that the size of the garamut indicated the status of the Kukurai or an influential leader. They were social indicators of wealth and authority of leadership.

### Garamut are social persons

One of the intriguing findings was that Kayan people refer to their garamut as 'social persons' who have their own characteristics and personality. They believe that garamut are animated by the spirits and are considered sacred and powerful objects that need to be revered and feared. Equally garamut are considered abodes of the spirits. They also claim that garamut are capable of destroying the village if they are not properly taken care of. Garamut are living objects and are considered powerful and they can both give life or destroy life. Right relationship means prosperity of life and broken relationship means death to life.

The following sentiment expressed by a Kayan elder, "***You buy this garamut, you are killing my entire family***", to a potential buyer who offered money to buy his garamut, demonstrates this close affinity to garamut.

The elder explained to me that since the garamut was carved by his grandfather, the garamut carries his grandfather's clan and family name and status. Therefore, as the male child, he is obligated to look after the garamut in order that through the garamut, his family's name would be kept alive, connected to his clan members of the village. He said in Tok Pisin, 'sapos mi salim garamut, mipela bai no gat nem', translated in English as, if I sell the garamut, my family would not have a name. Garamut is an extension of that connectivity to keep his family and kinship lines alive. To sell it would be like cutting off the life-line or the umbilical cord which connects his family to the womb of the community. Hence for this Kayan elder, his garamut was not an object of mere sentimental value but a life-animating object.

Garamut are considered to have unique personal characteristics which set them apart from other cultural objects. They hold a high rank and are closely associated with big men leadership. They command respect and reverence and also have influence on the social conduct and behavior of the people in villages. These characteristics of garamut led me to investigate further beyond the now popular and simplistic understanding of garamut as musical instruments.

As influential objects, garamut construct ordered social structure in kinship relationships. I use the term social structure to mean how people organise themselves in clans and family units in the village and their relationships to each other. Furthermore, it takes into account the connected bloodlines in kinship relationships. By the term kinship I mean the various descent groups who live in the village which is a feature of many traditional societies in Papua New Guinea. These descent groups could either be from patrilineal or matrilineal lines. For example, Powdermaker (1971) as cited by McElhanon and Whiteman (1984, p. 115) provides one form of kinship relationship which, is called matrilineal kinship found among the Lesu of New Ireland. She writes



that among the Lesu both the descent and the inheritance of property rights are passed from mother to daughter.

Garamut on the other hand is passed on from father to son and is embedded in kinship relationship, social ranking, leadership, gender roles, and contribute to debates on exchange, modernity and religiosity. Among the Kayan I found that since the days of their ancestors, garamut has had immense influence on their lives. Garamut are multifaceted prestigious objects of high status which have intimate and personal relationships with people. They drive political, social, economic, and spiritual values of the people and empower leadership with the voice of power and authority. Garamut connect people in a web of relationships. Garamut bestow and legitimise the leadership of the big-men commonly known as Kukurai. Garamut give them power and authority to govern or have a say over the affairs of the village. Garamut connect clan members together and give them identity in their respective clan groupings. The designs on the garamut and code patterns for sending messages are clan specific. Each garamut also has its own cultural biography. This means they have their own names, who carved them, which clan they belong to as well as which spirit is related to them. For example, this particular garamut in the photo bears the name of the spirit Ruknai, however a spirit by the name of Babacbi is said to live in it. It is a spirit garamut and is always covered with weaved coconut leaves. The custodians of the garamut are the Samngae clan.



**Figure 4: Garamut named Ruknai**

### **Garamut is the voice of Kukurai**

Another key finding was that garamut bestowed leadership and gave ‘voice’ of authority to Kukurai, the big-men or the Chiefs. When I began the research the Kukurai told me that garamut is the voice of Kukurai. They said that they use garamut only on special occasions such as announcing someone’s death, warning of danger, calling people together and at times use it to accompany song and dance to celebrate life. This can be interpreted that garamut is an agency of Kukurai. In other words, garamut expands the personhood of the

Kukurai to his clan members as well as to extended family through kinship and blood lines. For the Kayan, a Kukurai without a garamut has no ‘voice’.

### **Garamut perpetuates gender demarcation and gender roles**

Another finding central to garamut is that garamut demarcates social space, assigns gender roles and perpetuates male dominance. According to custom laws and taboos, garamut are carved in secluded areas away from the prying eyes of women and children. In the past any woman who trespassed near the secluded area where a garamut was carved, was killed and the story told was that the spirits killed the woman. Women are also forbidden to beat garamut nor sit near or on garamut. Unlike a bilum (string-bag) which is considered an androgynous object which can be used both by men and women, garamut is reserved only for men. Therefore the stories of garamut are reserved only for men, especially certain male elders of notable families such as the Kukurai and certain influential elders. It is a type of elite knowledge that not everybody in the village can provide. Furthermore, women are not in a position to provide this knowledge. During my research, women only shared with me stories about their contribution in cooking and preparing decorations for the launching of the newly carved garamut.

### **What is the gender of garamut?**

A few of my colleagues raised the question of what might be the gender of garamut. In Papua New Guinea many stories have been written about objects once owned by women and stolen by men and men have taken advantage of this to exert their dominance. The research found that garamut claimed as male objects, also contribute to male dominance. Yet garamut are neither male nor female. This is because some garamut are carved bearing female features. Interestingly among the Kayan, it is the women who give names to garamut, especially the garamut which have followed the custom way of production, not the ones carved for sale.



**Figure 5: Women giving names to the garamut**

The names are told to the women by the men. These women are those who have passed child bearing age. They perform this act by breaking a dry coconut in front of the garamut and giving the garamut its name. This can be interpreted as giving a name to a child who then is recognised and identified as a fully fledged member of the community. Some garamut are named after female spirits but importantly, the shape of the garamut represents a human body. From this observation, I arrived at the conclusion that garamut can be referred to as transgendered objects. However men claim ownership because they are the ones who carve garamut. This can be interpreted that by claiming ownership of garamut, men claim ownership of the body of women, and subdue the voice of women.

### **Conclusion**

The research journey I took investigating the depth and breadth of garamut from the days of ancestors to the contemporary times has profoundly brought out an understanding of garamut to a level that has not been explored before. It demonstrated that indeed garamut are in some mysterious sense, part of the human and spirit experience.

The research has brought me to a conclusion that garamut are powerful ambivalent social agents. They are neither spirits nor human. They find common bond in the body of the materiality of the garamut thus sharing in both the spirit and material agency. It is this mix of existence of garamut being spirit objects, as well as material objects that conjures up ideas of the supernatural relationships of garamut and the people.

Locating this study at Kayan, I discovered that a living and organised community existed in Kayan of more than 600 people, with the garamut, in a sense as 'spirit beings' at its core. It has a social organisation built around the clustering of people in clan groups, with big men, the Kukurai, or elders providing leading roles. The people of the village must balance contending influences in the cultural and social domains: an enduring belief in spirits which inhabit the area, are like persons, and can be very influential; belief in God and the teachings of the Catholic Church; urgent interest in economic development and demands of the cash economy; with that, modern-day politics, schooling, policing, and the benefits and problems of change.

Change has affected the practices surrounding the garamut such as the logic of producing more garamut as objects, for new, varied purposes, and a wider range of owners, because of the advent of steel tools that make possible this diversion from tradition. Yet despite the pressure on the Kayan from diverse quarters, and overbearing problems like severe economic stress and deteriorating productivity in the natural economy of gardens and forests, it was clear to me as the researcher that Kayan is not a dysfunctional community, not a community marked by fragmentation and destruction of culture.

The research has discovered that garamut is primarily a voice, agency or embodiment of the spirits. The spirits of the men's house, and garamut, still

give notable power, influence and status to traditional leaders, who in other respects are becoming marginalised in the modern village. How do individual people of Kayan village see themselves as they grapple with the various dichotomies of everyday life? Persons are deriving private identity from belonging to this group, and part of that membership of community is participation in a belief in the spirits, or at least acknowledgment of the idea of the supernatural having a bearing on the fortunes of life. The belief may be qualified and compromised, the spirits relegated to a lesser place than in the generational past, but respect remains due to the *garamut* and the elders.

The findings establish that *garamut* among the Kayan are literally objects imbued with ambivalent power of efficacy. That is to say that to live their lives tenably, the Kayan make conscious choices between their traditional cultural beliefs and modern values. Though there was a general agreement that most of the rituals have become weakened, if not emptied of power to affect real-world events, I observed that there still exists a firm belief in the power of the spirits, with whom the Kayan share the social and physical environment.

To conclude, my findings show the following as key attributes of *garamut* among the Kayan:

- 1) they are ambivalent objects, imbued with both spirit and human agency
- 2) they have voice like a human body
- 3) they have their own biographies
- 4) they contribute to the social and kinship structure of the Kayan people
- 5) they empower the *Kukurai* with power and authority of the voice
- 6) they suppress the voice of women
- 7) they demarcate gender space and gender roles, and social ranking
- 8) they promote masculinity and power of the men
- 9) they give identity to the Kayan and connect their kinship relations to neighboring villages following family and ancestral bloodlines
- 10) they are considered person-like. They are seen as spirits themselves, and have immense power of social influence.

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