

The death of a drum: objects, persons, and changing social form on the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea

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Slit-gong drums, made and used as part of affinal exchange relations on the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea, are considered to be a kind of person. They cannot be extracted from the kin formations in which they came into being because they are part of the transformed relations that their manufacture effects. In an unprecedented event in 2010, a large slit-gong used by a local community school was attacked during a dispute. In light of this, I examine irreplaceability and substitutability in relation to persons on the Rai Coast and explore what the attack implies about the changing status of objects and things under new economic and social conditions.

On a dark night in August 2010, a slit-gong drum belonging to a community school on the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea was 'attacked' and 'killed'. People were outraged. Their commentaries made explicit that a slit-gong is a kind of person, and thus this was an act of violence. They also took seriously a perception of social pathology. Violence towards other people is known in the area, but the attack on the slit-gong was also shocking for its novelty.

To understand the reaction, we might consider what kind of person a drum could be. Since Mauss (1985 [1938]) drew attention to the 'law and morality' by which persons are recognized in different societies (see also Carrithers, Collins & Lukes 1985), questions of personhood have been a central element of social anthropological investigation. As Fortes asserted, understanding personhood in particular instances is a direct route to revealing the principles by which a society is organized, its kinship, ritual, and legal institutions, even a human's place in the cosmos (1987 [1973]: 282). In fact, the anthropological study of personhood has become yet more central in recent decades through work questioning assumptions about the 'individual' cross-culturally, and thus highlighting the specificity of attendant ontologies of the social, and cultural, that rely upon the 'natural individual' as the primitive human element (see, e.g., Ingold 2000; Strathern 1980; Viveiros de Castro 1998). Spurred in part by these interventions, extensive attention has been given to how persons emerge against or alongside, and become involved in, or reliant upon, objects, networks including nonhumans, agents,

animals, or things of various kinds (e.g. Holbraad 2011; Ingold 2011; Latour 2005; Miller 2005; Naveh & Bird-David 2014; Willerslev 2004). Through these studies, the relation of persons and things has emerged as a central concern in the analysis of cosmology, perception, ecology, art, religion, and political economy. What we learn from analysis of specific ethnographic materials has enlarged the analytic vocabulary of anthropology and allowed insight into the dynamics of different social forms. I offer a contribution that engages with the idea that Rai Coast slit-gongs are a kind of person.

Slit-gongs on the Rai Coast are quite explicitly seen as a kind of person. They are also understood to be 'part' of another person. They have a 'voice' (see Leach 2002) that is also the voice of their owner. Because of this, they are also said to be 'irreplaceable', highlighting a sense of unique value. To understand what makes something irreplaceable in the context of a connection with or perception of personhood invites us to consider what is and is not substitutable about a person. Melanesia, with its long history of ethnographic work that demonstrates the centrality of exchange (a form of substitution) in the constitution of persons (e.g. Foster 1995; Strathern 1988) as well as of 'possession' (Weiner 1992), offers us a nuanced conceptual arena within which to further explore persons, things, and forms of social relation. The notion of 'irreplaceability' that is asserted by Rai Coast people also suggests we consider essence and identity. Many analyses of Melanesian material demonstrate that things and persons are defined not by an internal essence (see, e.g., Bamford & Leach 2009), but by their participation in moments, and as moments (what Strathern calls 'reifications': 1988: 177), in generative social processes. With this in mind, I analyse how people in Reite, a village in the hinterland of the Rai Coast in Madang province, come to look at a particular made object, a slit-gong drum, as a kind of person.

Recent analyses of Melanesian material often point to and assert the similar status of persons and things, of how things can be persons, and, following from this, how they have kinds of 'agency'. Many people in Melanesia can and do operate as if things were persons, while apparently knowing full well that there are differences between these person-things and person-persons. The problem or opportunity that this poses for our understanding has reappeared over and over again, and the solution does not seem to be to follow Alfred Gell in considering a kind of secondary or mediated agency for objects (see Gell 1998: 7; Holbraad 2011; Leach 2007: 169). That position relies on a theory of representation attributed to the ethnographic subjects: that objects represent people for them, as in Gell's notion that they index the agency of their creator. Slit-gongs in Reite do not index a person; they are said to 'be' persons. What they index as such is an emergent form that 'bodies forth' specific productive relations between other people. They are generative elements in social processes; they are themselves a series of relations, taking an effective form.

My purpose in this article is not in fact to discuss agency or prove that a thing can be a person, but to show where and how these things that are made objects are both like and *unlike* persons, and, as such, participate in the emergence of a particular social form. I take seriously the task of understanding what it is about a thing that makes it a person for people in Reite through attending to the moments in which they allow it aspects of personhood, and the moments in which it is obvious to them that it has a different kind of presence to human persons. The distinction is not between a primary and secondary kind of agency, but between *things* that have the generative position of persons, things that articulate their difference and connection as active entities, and *objects* that stand in place of something otherwise absent. Both kinds of thing/object influence the shape

of social relations ‘in their vicinity’ (to use Gell’s phrase), but the latter do so through eliciting memory or affect, the former by participating in the transformation of relations between persons and thus in those persons’ very constitution. I use the ‘thing/object’ distinction to capture this difference later in the piece. I suggest, in conclusion, that the unprecedented attack on a slit-gong was made possible by the fact it was, in some ways, of a new kind for these people: a piece of wood made to look like a slit-gong – an object not a thing. That is to say, it was not successfully positioned as a kind of person, and thus not ‘irreplaceable’.

Reite villagers perceive profound changes that have taken place over the last few decades. Early mission influence among their neighbouring language groups (but which did not take hold in Reite) corresponded to a lack of interest in customary ways (*kastom*) in surrounding villages. In Reite itself, recent population growth, expansion of the local school, an expansion of cash cropping, and the arrival of a mine processing plant in the vicinity (Leach 2011) correspond to a noted decline in the ritual attention some people give to subsistence agriculture. People continually articulate concern over the morality and appropriateness of recent marriages, a decline in respect, a growth in market-orientated activity, and a decline in sharing. This is attributed to an increasing desire for money (Leach 2014) and a lack of knowledge of *kastom*. It also forms the background to changes in the way slit-gongs are made and used. As part of a perceived need to change behaviour in order to bring ‘development’, many villages beyond Reite have not bothered to pass on or learn aspects of *kastom*. These villages no longer have the capacity for slit-gong manufacture, and there was a period from the mid-1970s until the mid-1990s when very few slit-gongs were made.

In the last two decades, a growing interest in manufacturing and possessing slit-gongs has emerged among both adult men and local institutions. Under these circumstances, those few hamlets (limited to Reite) that have retained the knowledge of slit-gong construction have stepped in and made drums on several occasions. These have usually been made for inclusion in affinal exchanges, but unlike before, it has not been the affinal kin themselves who have undertaken the manufacture. Although the items produced in this way look and sound very similar, as will become clear below they are, in fact, (potentially) different in their constitution and thus capacity for effect.

I note for clarity that these observations are not a complaint (on my part) about ‘authenticity’. I go on to make a distinction between what we might call ‘real’ and ‘simulacra’ garamut, but each is a real reflection of the conditions of their production, and each participates in relations between persons. The difference is that whereas slit-gongs used to be (perhaps) *the* crucial moment in the emergence of a man, their manufacture also the emergence of the social and political landscape of affinal obligation and assistance, some contemporary slit-gongs are just one of many kinds of object produced. The social and political landscape is now partly given form elsewhere (by the school, the market, differential income, and cash cropping) and that results in the possibility of slit-gongs being made in ways unthinkable in the past. The analytic strategy of this article is intended to make exactly this point apparent, not claim authenticity or inauthenticity for one or the other. They are different *forms*, constituted as such in their varying processes of emergence. The analysis aims to reveal how different forms of object and of person figure in different regimes of economic and political organization. A theoretical contribution is intended by showing how each kind of garamut participates in generating different forms of social relation between people. The changing status and use of garamut, revealed by the attack, is, then, a window on wider social change.¹



Figure 1. A Reite garamut. (All photos by the author.)

Slit-gongs, yams, and effigies: an excursion into substitutability

Slit-gongs (garamut in the Neo-Melanesian lingua franca, Tok Pisin, *kiramung* in Nekkini vernacular) are idiophones. They are sounded by knocking on the outside surface of the hollowed log (Fig. 1). Slit-gongs (garamut from here on) produce a deep and resonant booming sound, one that carries over long distances. Until very recently, they have been used daily for sending messages between hamlets in the rugged and steep-sided rainforest terrain of the Rai Coast, and particularly intensively in Nekkini-speaking hamlets, which lie about 500 m above sea level and 7-10 km inland from the coast. Messages consist of a series of coded beats. The possibilities for ‘saying’ things on a garamut are extensive. Reite people often joked with me that they are the Papua New Guinean telephone system.²

In Reite, a garamut is understood to be special because it has a voice. It can speak for the person of its owner in a manner impossible without its physical presence. This seems obvious, but I aim to show that it is true in a special sense. What is being ‘made’ in the manufacture of a garamut is both the possibility of speaking in a particular manner (over distance using a hollowed log) *and* the conditions under which the noise that the



Figure 2. Yam skin.

hollowed log makes can be and is considered a voice. People must recognize that noise as the voice and intentions of a particular person.

Each initiated man in Reite has a slit-gong name, that is, a unique pattern of beats that are given to him by his mother's brother during his initiation. In fact, that pattern of beats is one taken from the mother's brother's repertoire of sacred music. In a previous article in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, I examined the manufacture of these objects, starting from the local premise, articulated repeatedly by Reite people, that a garamut 'is' a man (Leach 2002). It explicitly has the status of a person, and because it has a voice it must be treated with respect. A garamut is also *part* of another person, as the man for whom it has been made is closely associated with its sound and appearance. The analysis in that earlier article focused on the fact that a garamut is made for a mature man by his affinal kin. So as well as receiving his 'call sign' (Burridge 1959) from his mother's brother (a person categorically and physically separated from him in this virilocal marriage system), he receives his garamut itself from such physically separated kin: from his affines who reside in another place.

That persons are thought to take different forms, or that things can take the form of persons, is a long-observed fact in Melanesia: from Fortune (1932) on Dobuan yams to Gudeman's (1986) important articulation of the political economy behind Dobuan's logic, through Strathern's (1988) formulation of gender as the idiom in which forms of persons are recognized, to Damon (1980: 284) on the substitutability of persons and things more widely. In this regard, Marilyn Strathern writes (characteristically), 'We must remember that persons objectify relations: bodies and minds are consequently their reified manifestation. And they must always take a manifest shape, that is, display a differentiated condition' (1988: 299).

In Reite, persons, and indeed bodies, are formed out of other bodies and nurture. Figure 2 shows a yam in Reite, cleaned of earth and part of a display in itself said to be an effigy. Note the quality of the skin, the very *human quality* of the thing. While there is no simple correspondence between that visceral sense of the human-ness of the yam and what Reite people think, nevertheless, for them, yams *are* a kind of person.



Figure 3. Takarok and a yam.

The myth of origin for a yam is of how a man, mistreated by his greedy children and grandchildren, transformed himself into a yam and told them to eat him to sustain themselves after his demise. His (secret) name is the centrepiece of the practices needed to make yam gardens successful. This does not speak of a category error on the part of Reite people. Just as ‘Dobuans are not confused about the difference between yams and humans; the point is that lineage persons can take the body of either kind of being’ (Strathern 1995: 17) (Fig. 3).

For sure, yams grow wild in the jungle, but yams from a garden are different things; they are already anticipated as a future part of the socially produced bodies of others. People know for whom yams are grown, which bodies they will contribute to forming. Their growth in the ground manifests the labour of someone working for another, their success indexes the moral and ritual condition of the gardener, and their production contributes to a persona and reputation by which others guide their own labour and actions in the vicinity of that producer. Yams are grown for other people – they make up a part of wider ceremonial exchanges in which bodies are replaced by other bodies. These exchanges are not empty performances, not for the sake of ‘tradition’. They are the vital and necessary ways in which reproduction occurs in Reite.



Figure 4. Taro pile on a *palem*.

Until the advent of cash cropping in the 1980s and 1990s and the much more recent introduction of significant markets for garden produce (see Leach 2011: 302–8), all horticulture and animal husbandry was directed towards these cycles of growth, exchange, and reproduction. All gardens, and all produce from those gardens, have ideally been given to others in return for bodies that one receives. So the yam is for these people very much in the image of, responsive to, and constitutive of other persons. It is equally formed by, and responsive to, other persons. Figure 4 shows more garden food (this time taro tubers). They are piled onto a construction where the yams are also displayed, and which is explicitly an *effigy*. It has a backbone, ribs, a face, and insides – that is, viscera, the taro itself – that constitute the substance of the body (Leach 2003: 162–8). It is called a *palem* (Fig. 5). A *palem* is consciously made as a body, as it is the centrepiece for a presentation in return for another body – that of a wife in marriage, and of their first child (who is owed to her natal kin). The *palem* is never said to be a person. It is said to be a body, formed by one kin group and given to another in return for a body received on marriage. The *garamut*, by distinction, is called a person. It emerges between kin groups, whereas the *palem* emerges from one kin group. The *garamut* gives form to the connection between kin groups, much as other kinds of person do. That is to say, a newly initiated boy or girl also stands between their mother/father and their mother's brothers.

The decoration of the effigy of garden food is mirrored in the decoration of the human body. Figures 6 and 7 are images of Reite bodies showing their insides on the outside (cf. Strathern 1979: 254): red ochre-coloured skin with white dogs' teeth and shell valuables showing the strength and persistence of bones. These 'bones' are detachable. They can be given, and are given in combination with garden food to replace the bodies of other people.³ This is what Reite people say about *palem*. Not only is garden food



Figure 5. Completed *palem*.

and domestic meat grown for and given to others in reproductive exchange cycles, the *palem* is accepted as replacement for the substance of the body given in marriage. The body, then, is made up of, is already owed to, and is the 'reified manifestation of relations to others', to repeat Strathern's language. Its appearance – as yam, as *palem*, as human adult – manifests its differentiated condition. The person is never finished, is always being nurtured, fed, is nurturing, feeding; giving and taking with others and transforming in the process.

If relations to others are manifest in the form of the body, then the specificity of those relations is clear in the capacities of the person. A young married man (Fig. 6) has different relations to others than his wife, or his father-in-law, or his daughter, or, indeed, the yam he has grown (Fig. 3). His appearance, what is appropriate for him to display, reflects this position.

Reite people make transformations in status through and in their ceremonial exchanges, the most significant for a man being his receipt of a *garamut*. The emergence of persons as politically significant entities is an outcome of the exchange of bodies. A *garamut* is only made for a man at a particular moment of his life-cycle, when he has married and has fulfilled the major obligations of marriage. That is, when he



Figure 6. Sambong (male) wearing a dog's teeth back piece.

and his wife have replaced or purchased the 'body' of the wife from his affinal kin. These exchanges explicitly replace her body, brought onto the husband's lands, with another body: the effigy made from garden food, a pig, valuables, and so on, called the *palem*. Now of course, to reach this stage, the man is already well advanced in fulfilling obligations through ceremonial exchanges. To marry, he must have already been initiated and successfully paid for this transformation in his body by his mother's brother in a demanding exchange. In fact, each moment in the development of the person in Reite makes particular pertinent relations to others *visible* as the person is transformed through substitution of elements of his or her body (see Leach 2003: 140, 148, 151). The time a *garamut* is made for a man is seen as a culmination in his emergence as a man with a presence and authority. That is made dramatically apparent, visible, not only in the thing itself, but in his ability to 'speak' across the landscape, to have his voice 'heard' by others.

It was the final aspect of this process that I focused my attention on in the earlier article (Leach 2002: 728-9). That is, while the making of the *garamut* clearly requires some skilled work, it is the elicitation of kinship and political relations that are tied into its manufacture and appearance that receives the most attention.



Figure 7. Tariak (female) wearing *kombi* shells and dog's teeth head band.

Garamut are made, in seclusion, by the male cult. The affines of the man for whom it is constructed come to the man's land, bringing their spirits with them. It is these spirits who are said to transform a tree trunk into a series of garamut, with the main sponsor, the 'base' or 'reason' for the work, taking the largest garamut from the base of the trunk. His siblings may take others made from higher up the trunk, garamut/voices supported by and reliant upon his foundational position with his affines. All come underneath the authority of the 'base' man/affine relation – his voice. A position of political authority over his siblings is made present and real by the emergence of garamut as manifestations of the alliance through marriage that the 'base' man has achieved.

The spirits work to transform logs into garamut by 'eating' their insides, and the process is exactly analogous to the process whereby boys are hidden in the bush, 'eaten' by the spirits of their mother's brother, decorated in seclusion, and finally emerge from their transformation to be seen for the 'first time' as 'new men'.

When Reite people talk about the garamut as a person, as part of a person, and as a man's voice, they refer to this complex inter-digitation of the emergence of a physical object *alongside and inseparable from* the emergence of a man as a particular man, situated in a landscape of kinsmen and affinal relations. He has a position and a

presence that he did not have before the garamut was constructed. The ‘voice’ of the garamut is not just the sound it makes – which must be loud and clear – but, much more importantly, it is that the sound is heard *as* the voice of a particular man, and that means there are people who respond to that sound as the voice of a man to whom they have been further obligated *through this very process of manufacture*. (That is, the very fact they have been gathered together to make it in the first place, and received substantial wealth in return for these labours.) It has a voice because it has been *made* to be heard. The ‘hearing’ is specified in the construction as much as the ‘sound’. ‘Voice’, then, means being able to speak *and* having others who will hear.

Non-substitutability and the temporary stability of form

Many men have garamut. Their ‘irreplaceable’ aspect is not given by the fact that they are rare. It is given by the fact that they are unique in a much more significant sense. They are uniquely positioned as a fulcrum of, and generator for, a series of relations between persons that are unique. A garamut has the identity and effect it does because of the relational position it occupies. Many people have garamut. Many people are people. But that does not mean garamut and person are substitutable for one another in a simple sense. Each is unique. And this is where the consideration of something as unique becomes so interesting. That is, I am going to demonstrate how persons and garamut *are different in this logic as well*, and why. This demonstration refers to the material appearance of relations in different forms, different forms of reification at particular moments.

The person is unique, yet elements of the person’s body, or his or her body *in toto*, are substitutable at certain points in the life-cycle, as we have seen. The garamut is not in fact so hard to replace (as a hollowed log), but it is *not* substitutable. In other words, there is an inter-digitation of person and object here that makes both into a form that cannot be substituted. In this, the garamut is again shown to have attributes of a particular kind of person: a man.

In 1995, I had the opportunity to make a collection of items from Reite for the National Museum in Port Moresby (PNG), and the British Museum in London. Obviously, as the garamut is largest and most significant item of material culture, I wanted to include it in the collection. It very quickly became obvious, however, that I was not going to be able to collect an existing garamut. No one would consider selling one. It was that simple.

I have already described the effigies (*palem*) that are given in replacement for bodies in this area of the Rai Coast. Their use demonstrates that certain bodies are substitutable and exchangeable in this region. The person as a nexus of particular relations to affines is an appearance of those relations, an objectification of them, at a particular moment. Those relations naturally and necessarily change during a life-cycle, and thus the very constitutive substance of the person (i.e. the origin-in-labour of the foods consumed to sustain the body, or the decoration worn on the skin) is ‘replaced’ by different elements (coming from different sources) at each stage. Building bodies from one series of relations (to garden land, spirits, natal kin) makes for a different body to one built from other, transfigured relations (see Biersack 1982 on relations that initiate form to particular spirits that grow them into different persons). The ‘person’ in Reite is a process and a trajectory emerging as the active nexus constituted in these relations. Persons continually undergo transformation (physical, material, and relational): that of birth, of growing up and eating pig, having paint put on the skin, of initiation, of marriage, of

gaining a garamut, and finally, of course, of death, where their dissolution is managed by surviving kin through material substitution until the substance and nurture that have constituted them has been re-circulated through others (Leach 2003: 186–9; cf. Battaglia 1990; deCoppet, Barraud, Iteanu & Jamous 1994). To be accurate, then, we must say that particular gendered persons are substitutable at specific moments in their life-cycle for items that replace and re-circulate the substances of human relationality. Their personhood is constituted as an addition to or consequence of this specific outcome of those particular relations: who it is that is involved and what capacities their presence makes possible.

Regarding substitution and re-circulation, Douglas Dalton (1996) has written about the emotional loss entailed in the departure of a sister to another kin group in marriage, or in the death of a kinsman, and compensation payments of shell decorations in such instances. His focus is on what he terms the ‘sublime’ beauty of shell valuables (such as the ones Tariak is wearing in Fig. 7 above) for Rawa-speaking people (who are neighbours to the south of Nekkini-speakers). Shells are ‘sublime’ for Rawa people, he argues, because they substitute for and replace the person, but leave a gap, leave the pain of loss intact while compensating and recompensing the loss of substance that such exchanges or death entails. Their beauty is tinged with agony. Nevertheless, persons, by dint of their existence as human persons, are made up of the work and substance of others. That substance and work is only ever borrowed, as it were. It is the substance of kinship because its appearance always entails an obligation to others. And it can be substituted, made into objects of exchange value. The person is in this sense replaceable, always being replaced and regenerated. Dalton’s point is that shell decorations fall short in their symbolization of the person and thus are both necessary and inadequate for Rawa-speakers.

Now no one in Reite would argue that a garamut is the same thing as a flesh-and-blood body, for all it has a voice, and even though it is said to be a person. When Reite people say that ‘a garamut is a man’, they may mean it literally, but then the question becomes, what aspect of a man; and, indeed, what is a man in this case? Here, then, is the nub of this part of my current exposition.

The garamut is not an item of substitutable wealth because it is the appearance of a transformed relation at a particular moment *that cannot be replicated*. As the relation itself, it is not the man’s, nor his affine’s, but something that constitutes them both *as such*. It is emergent from a specific and particular transformation: one that leaves a man with an audible presence in a landscape; one that transforms affinal and sibling relations to position that man as a man with a voice – as someone with people who will respond to him because of their obligations to him. Obligations are formed in the very emergence of the thing that is the manifestation, the visible and audible aspect, of that process of material, social, and spiritual transformation.

The only time that a garamut is transformed is on the death of the particular man it was made for. In the past, men’s bones, once the flesh had rotted away, were placed in their garamut, and the whole lot was moved to one of the hot, dry spirit abodes in the forest. To insert the bones, the mouth of the garamut was broken open. It was rendered silent. Garamut were not inherited. I suggest, then, that in a Reite garamut we have an ‘irreplaceable object’ (see Revolon, Lemonnier & Bailly 2012).

To replace a person in Dalton’s analysis is to leave a residual gap. (‘Rawa speakers explicitly recognize that *kunawo* [shell decorations] can never make up for the person for whom they have been exchanged’ [Dalton 1996: 398].) In this sense, shell decorations

are a kind of token event, something that stands in the place of the real thing (the absent sister). The person is substitutable, but that is not to say that his or her uniqueness and emotional attachments with others are obliterated by such exchanges. For a Reite garamut, it is also the relations with others that make for something being irreplaceable, but in the case of the garamut, its material form, given specifically by certain relations, is both the source of its presence and sustained power, and also the source of its irreplaceability: it cannot be subsequently transformed in the same relations that brought it into being. Those have also transformed, and no longer exist as the same thing. Garamut are an instance of a thing taking attributes of and thus being seen as a person, and a gendered and specific person at that. Yet this does not imply there is a free-for-all substitution between person-things and persons. I have put pressure on what it is about each instance of the body/person/form that is different, and what the implications of those differences are, to comprehend exactly what the capacities of a garamut and a man respectively are.

Each garamut makes visible a moment in relations between persons, their spirits, the place of manufacture, and so on. It also works a transformation in those things. For this reason, each one is different. Reite people emphasize that a garamut's sound quality is dependent on the correct ritual procedures in construction. It is also dependent on the moral and spiritual state of the people making it, and of those who are to receive it. Conflict, grievance, pollution, and so forth, may result in a cracked slit-gong, or a slit-gong without 'voice'.

The drum made for the British Museum (the one that I sponsored) emerged with a 'face' or 'head' that resembled very closely a rock in a spirit abode on the lands of one of my neighbours. This old man became very exercised by the resemblance, one that had apparently emerged spontaneously at the hands of several different carvers. The fact that my house was present on his land was discussed, and at one point it seemed that the whole project of making the collection was put in jeopardy by the emergence of this spirit face on the Museum's garamut. To take away a garamut that I had sponsored was one thing. To remove a visible manifestation of a powerful mythic ancestor was quite another. No one was quite sure what the emergence of this form implied, but it was clear to them that there was something being manifest about my relationship to the land on which I was staying, and therefore an obligation to those who were descended from it. In the end, we acknowledged the similarity, apologized for its unwitting revelation, and gave wealth to the old man and his kin in recognition of the obligation that was clearly manifest in the form the garamut took. The story illustrates that form is seen to manifest the state of relations between the key parties. It is in the qualities of appearance and voice of the garamut that people themselves see uniqueness.

We can conclude, then, that the garamut is like and unlike the person in that the last transformation in the body and presence of a man is effected by the making of the garamut. The fixing of the voice in *this* formed wood is also the fixing of his affinal relations, and thus this aspect of his identity, until death. The irreplaceability is given as a temporal unfolding that cannot be repeated; the personhood in the position between others with the capacity to transform them.

I have suggested that garamut are like and unlike persons, and that they are irreplaceable in ways that are like and unlike persons. That is, certain persons can in fact be more readily extracted from their kin groups, and persons are more readily transformed over their life-cycle, than garamut. Garamut are an image of a transformative moment in relations between affines, and are thus powerful in reference

to the ongoing relevance of that transformation. But once the moment has happened, the work of transformation is complete; they cannot be remade or replaced.

The silencing of a drum

Having established a sense of the qualities and capacities of a garamut in relation to persons and social form, I now move on to discuss the unprecedented event mentioned at the outset. This involves briefly describing how historical changes have provided a new context for garamut manufacture, and leads to a consideration of different ways that objects and things can be positioned in different kinds of social form.

After a period in which very few garamut were made in this area, there has been a revival of interest locally, and a new external interest, in acquiring them. One was the instance mentioned above, in which I sponsored a garamut for the British Museum. A precursor to that was the manufacture of two garamut for local schools, which I attend to in detail below. Two other instances (of which I am aware) were part of major affinal exchanges, but in which pigs were cooked separately for the people making the garamut, who then passed them on to the people making the exchanges. That is to say, garamut were part of what was given by one group of affines to another, as has always been the case. But as those in the affinal relationship did not know how to make garamut, Reite people agreed to 'help' them by doing so. When I recently questioned people about the manufacture of these garamut, they responded that if people do not know how to make garamut, yet want them, what else could they do other than ask for help? They readily agreed, though, that this was a change in response to contemporary circumstances.

The first school in the area was built at a place called Lamtub, a village on the coast (and in a different language group). That school had been the nearest local school to Reite since it was built in the colonial period, and several Reite children had been there over the years. Reite village got their own community school in 1991 after much voluntary community labour in clearing forest, making classrooms and houses from local materials, and so on. During the 1990s, Lamtub School Board decided they would like a garamut as a school bell.⁴ As people from Lamtub, which was a 'progressive', mission village, had long forgotten how to make garamut, they approached Reite people. As initiators and sponsors of the manufacture, Lamtub school offered to provide the required meat to feed spirits, a pig on completion and delivery, and money for payments at each stage of manufacture (see Leach 2002: 721–5).

The request for a garamut was discussed at a village meeting in Reite. A man called Nim from the hamlet of Marpungae spoke up, saying that there was a fallen ironwood tree on his lands and that he would be happy to donate it. Given that the request was unprecedented, the tree would otherwise only have rotted away, and the entity making that request was something people were by now used to donating labour or materials towards, the solution did not seem out of keeping. Reite people, proud of having retained *kastom*, were keen to accommodate the request. At the same time, a representative from Reite School Board asked if their school could also have a garamut made. So two slit-gongs were made from Nim's tree. Whereas Lamtub, the sponsors, provided the major payments for the manufacture, Reite School Board gave no pigs or other meat. They did, however, give K200 cash as a contribution to the men whose spirits had hollowed out their log. This money was divided between those seven men. The finished garamut was dragged to Reite school without further ceremony or payment. Years passed during which this garamut was used daily. Then in July 2010, in the pitch



Figure 8. Broken garamut at Reite School.

dark on my second night back in the village, I heard it making a very unusual sound as someone took an axe to it (Fig. 8).

This act of destruction caused a violent response, as people ran in from distant hamlets with knives and axes and chased the perpetrators. There was ongoing turmoil for the weeks I was there. People cried over the garamut. Those who were most incensed were the men who had made it for the school. It was they who emphasized that it was an act of violence, an attempted ‘murder’, and sought the strongest possible retribution. It was also these men who were most visibly saddened by the subsequent loss of sound quality from this garamut.

The story of the dispute behind this attack is involved. In brief, one of Nim’s sons, a pupil in Grade 8, had a girlfriend who was also a pupil at the school. It is against school rules for pupils to be married, or ‘grease’ (flirt/seek engagement), while at school.⁵ The father of the girl was angry at the liaison, and refused to pay her school fees. ‘Let them be married’, he said in anger and frustration.⁶ The boy was angry in turn about possibly being excluded from school as a married man. He directed this anger at the school board, who were rumoured to be about to enforce the rule, and at specific others who had complained about his ‘marriage’ in the first place. On that night, he attempted to

destroy the school garamut (with some Marpungae siblings) as a way of demonstrating this displeasure. He then left the area in haste to stay with his mother's kin, many miles distant and out of reach from physical retribution.

I repeat: this had never happened before. No one has ever attacked someone else's garamut. Reite people were adamant about that fact. How, then, could this happen? What is different about the garamut of the school that made it possible, available, for the demonstration of anger in this unprecedented attack? It is in the process of manufacture that garamut have their major effect of refiguring relations between persons, relations that are given a solidity and temporary persistence through the appearance of the thing itself. I suggest we turn our attention there.

The construction for the school did not involve an affinal connection or development. It is obvious both from the kind of entity the school is (an externally specified institution), and from the way it was recompensed, that the garamut was of a different kind. The relation of the school to its garamut was not the same as the relation of a man, his affines, and the garamut that lies at the nexus of their emergence. Its appearance did not effect a transformation in position and authority of both parties (although it may have been meant to represent the authority of the school); it did not place the school in any particular relation to specific others who would be obligated to it. The fact that it was made from a tree on Marpungae land made it seem that the school, its identity, was closely linked to Marpungae. Perhaps even that the school was in some way more 'Marpungae's' than other people's. And supporting this, there has always been a sense of ambiguity around the slit-gong's detachment from that place. The K200 had been given not to Nim and other Marpungae people, but to the men who made the garamut. The dispute that caused its demise was all about marriage, but marriage in which the school was a strange and unwelcome third party. Instead of being a supporter for the boy, as it should have been as the recipient of a garamut made on his lands, the school was the obstacle to his marriage. That meant he was justified, in his own thinking, I would argue, in destroying the embodiment of their link. The link had proved worthless.

In fact, this garamut itself was made in a simplified sketch of the process of garamut manufacture. Many of the elements were there in one sense or another. (The school does have authority and could move people [children, their parents] with its volition [its voice] once it had a garamut. Lamtub was the senior sibling and caused the production in the first place. The work was undertaken 'for the community' and it was they who would hear the voice of the garamut, etc.) But instead of that obligation being generated in a specific transformation of particular persons, tied to the material appearance of a unique thing they were obligated by, the school's authority is diffuse, over a 'community' who want to see their children educated as if they were all the same (and not in specific kinds of hierarchical sibling-like, or affinal, relation). So there was confusion, or a difference in perceptions of who the school was and is, and how the garamut was part of that presence, and thus there was confusion over the relationship the garamut manifested and operated.

There was another confusion: the school clearly and understandably thought of the garamut as *its own*. (It bought it for cash, and the teachers, often from other parts of Papua New Guinea, used it as a simple bell to call everyone in an undifferentiated manner: that is, without reference to any specific relationship of mutual constitution.) For the school, the garamut was a replicable or replaceable *object*, just as other kinds of purchased item would be. They were angry at the loss, and demanded their money back from Marpungae people, but unlike many in Reite, the school teachers and the

police who came from far away to hear the case did not consider the attack to have been particularly shocking. They treated the matter as destruction of property.

For Marpungae people, the garamut was not a simple item of property. It made visible an unfulfilled obligation that the school had to them. The choice of the garamut as the outlet for their grievance made their special relation to the school apparent. They acted as they did as they had an interest in the garamut in a way the school could not acknowledge. The crux of the difference is that relations of obligation and mutual constitution inherent in a slit-gong's manufacture were transformed into something that looked like exclusive ownership rights over an object.⁷

The garamut is owned by the school; it has rights over it because of the purchase. But that is not the same thing at all as having a relationship to others through obligations made visible and made effective by the thing itself. An abstraction of connection has occurred, where what in other garamut is part of its constitution – obligation to others – is in this case a right of ownership over an object *qua* object.

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has suggested that rights are the relational corollary in a commodity economy to the gift in a gift economy (2009: 250–1). Rights are the way relations are made visible. Not through the constitution of things, but in an abstract form as the rights a person holds. I think we might understand the attack on the slit-gong as part of the emergence of this form of abstraction in Reite over the last twenty years.

Conclusion: representation, affect, and generic forms

What makes the generic possible (Hayden 2011)? What historical changes and social conditions make it possible to copy, to make an object that is not unique? These are of course highly involved questions (see, e.g., Benjamin 1968). I do not assume to anything more than the articulation of a thought in the light of the above analysis. But think of a version of an abstracted connection through legal rights: the law of copyright, for example. A copyright is a right an individual holds over his or her expressions, as the product of individual (mental) labour. The expression is logically separated from its creator. It is expressed! The object is then connected to the person through a legal mechanism that remakes, in the abstract form of a 'right', a connection that was previously internal to him or her. (Before expression, the idea was physically in, part of, someone.) So we might say that the physical connection to an idea is substituted for a right over an object once that object comes into being *as such*, under copyright law. That abstraction of a connection into a right has multiple permutations and effects: for example, rights to copy an expression can be traded, or they can be infringed upon.

The majority of garamut that I have discussed here are not constituted within such regimes of rights over objects, over expressions. *The garamut is not an expression*. It is a manifestation, in physical form, of a transformation of persons that requires their presence to have its effect. It has its reality and effects in those persons. People are obligated to one another through its manufacture, and every time it sounds, these obligations and connections are made present. I have indicated how it is impossible to produce a generic version of a garamut for this reason. Each one is a unique transformation.

Yet Reite school had a garamut as if it were possible to make a generic garamut: something that looks and sounds like a garamut, but *is not* actually quite the same thing. Their school bell was constituted in a process that was ambiguous in its referents, and in who and what became obligated through it. The attack demonstrates that it

was still considered important; it retained some semblance of that uniqueness. It is this that made it 'inappropriately appropriate'⁸ for it to be attacked, because although through that attack an attack was intended on people (the school board, the image of community), it was the rights that these people had over the *garamut* that were violated, not actually a physical connection or person. The *garamut* at the school was a simulacrum, a generic copy *as if* a *garamut* could be copied.

A man's relation to his *garamut* is not a right over an expression. It is a relation of mutual constitution, specifically tying him into exactly the relations that give him a form as a particular man with a voice. For each man a *garamut* is irreplaceable. Or rather, in the system where *garamut* are effective, to remake them is impossible. The school case and other recent examples of manufacture show a shift away from such a system: an unprecedented and unthinkable act became possible because the socio-economic situation on the Rai Coast is changing or because the slit-gong in question was not really a slit-gong, or, more accurately, owing to a mixture of the two. The Marpungae boys were offending against taken for granted moral principles because it was now possible to do so. Circumstances have changed with the arrival of new institutions and new possibilities for authority and wealth creation. Those circumstances are made apparent as part of the entanglement of persons and things, and the very form of those things – technologies, *garamut* – their material form manifesting or making visible certain relations. The school bell was available for attack owing to its ambiguous position, achieved through a new kind of manufacture and use.

Referred to above, Dalton writes convincingly about the 'inadequacy of symbolic shell images to convey the ideal concepts they embody' (1996: 394). He explicitly links this perception of inadequacy to colonial violence and disruption – that is, to new institutions and economy. He tells us that '*kunawo* mark the absence of the individuals for whom they were exchanged by being associated with their separation and "death"' (1996: 399). As a token event, a representation of a person in another form, they carry affect and symbolize loss, as well as the possibility for exchange and compensation. It seems reasonable to think of *kunawo* as 'absent presence', then, or representation of the person who cannot be recuperated. Affect, sorrow, and feelings of loss are the result, however 'beautiful' they may be.

The same inadequacy might be attributed to the school's *garamut* in the sense that it could never perform the role of a real *garamut*. The actions of the Marpungae boys reflect this inadequacy, as do people's feelings of sorrow in its presence. It is an inadequacy of *effect* because of its incomplete realization. It could never partake of the unique and generative unfolding of affinal relations.

Dalton alerts us to the inadequacy of objects actually to substitute for persons. But his analysis is about *symbolic objects*. The issue with transferring Dalton's analysis wholesale to Reite *garamut* would lie in his assertion that shell valuables represent the persons whom they substitute for. *Garamut* do not. *Kunawo*, as Dalton describes them, are wholly unlike Reite *garamut* in this regard. The *garamut* is *not a representation of a man or his voice*, nor does it substitute for him. It is the affinal relation, which is the man's voice, and holds a relational position as such. It is constituted in its effectiveness by and in those relations and thus is not a representation of something otherwise absent at all. It is the thing itself.

The sorrow people felt over the attack on the school *garamut* was more like the affect associated with a symbolic object. In fact, 'affect' is what people feel in proximity to objects that invoke memory through association with or representation of past loss. But

excepting for the school garamut, and possibly those others made recently by people other than affines, the irreplaceability of garamut has nothing to do with representation and affect. It has to do with their active part in the generation and maintenance of particular relational forms between persons. An old and broken garamut after the death of its owner does not carry affect. Sorrow is left behind as the work of the person is 'finished' by their kin. After this, the broken garamut elicits awe and respect. It contains the final transformation of the body into hot, dry, powerful bones that give ancestral and spiritual power to the lands on which they are kept.

We might follow Dalton as far as saying *objects* have the capacity to carry and elicit *affect*. They are token events that never quite substitute for the 'real' thing. Their 'agency' is of a secondary rather than primary kind, a mediated agency. This is not an adequate description of *things* on the Rai Coast. Garamut are not objects in the sense that Gell (1998) means when he presents art works as indexing the agency of the creator. Garamut are emergent moments in relationships that belong to no one party. They belong to and are the affinal relation itself.

NOTES

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¹ I do not suggest the trajectory is teleological. Cash cropping comes and goes, as does the intensity of ritual attention to gardens. The revival of interest in possessing slit-gongs indexes a complex oscillation in attention to and valuation of *kastom*, with various factors involved. These include senses of local pride, the changing priorities people have over a life-cycle, disaffection from the cash economy, opportunism, and so forth. *Gardening* as a subsistence necessity, and a source of pride, however, remains, as does an unquestioned commitment to reproductive, kin-based wealth and food exchange.

² While garamut themselves are widespread in Melanesia, it is important to note that on the Rai Coast this ability to speak through a garamut, dependent on an extensive vocabulary of beats, is geographically limited to the Nekgini language area and their immediate neighbours.

³ The decorated *person* emerges between kin groups as well. Valuables from the MB side complete the body and make a person, a socially constituted and recognized emergent entity.

⁴ There is another whole article to be written about the desire for a garamut in this context. It could plausibly be linked to a growing awareness of regional styles in the independent nation of Papua New Guinea. People simply wanted to demonstrate their unique identity. It also seems possible that Lamtub people were not clear about the complex structuring of affinal relations that garamut manufacture elicits, or if they were, it would only have added to the desire to demonstrate something uniquely 'Rai Coast' in this significant venue. The desire of Reite school to follow suit was likely just that: a garamut was something a school should have on the Rai Coast after Lamtub took the lead. Lamtub did crucially offer a pig, and in doing so, at least in potential, established the possibility of ongoing exchange relations. Indeed, other coastal people who have recently asked Reite people to make garamut for them do so with a pig, and as such are establishing or maintaining a relation of exchange and potential affinity.

⁵ As children begin their school career at quite advanced ages at Reite school, several Grade 8 pupils are in their late teens or even early twenties.

⁶ Marriage made it very unlikely she would go on to high school and thus find salaried employment to enable her to send home remittances, an expectation most parents who send their children to school entertain.

⁷ The garamut made for the British Museum is part (of course) of a relationship to me, a relationship Reite people often assert they elicited and desired. As witnessing the construction of the Museum's garamut was my opportunity to gather information about the manufacture of these items, I was careful to observe

all the conventional procedures, including agreeing to the suggestion that those who supported me ask their affines to construct garamut from higher up the same trunk, and myself giving pigs to those who made the item for the museum. While neither I nor the Museum is in an affinal relationship with Reite people, I do have significant obligations (that I am known to attend to) and an ongoing presence in the village. What is more, some Reite men were invited by the Museum to London in 2009, where they saw the garamut they had constructed and were offered recognition and hospitality. It is possible that this, alongside my sustained presence and contributions, is understood as a response to constructing a garamut for me/the Museum.

⁸ I am indebted to Kath Weston for this formulation.

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Mort d'un tambour : objets, personnes et changement de forme sociale sur la Côte de Rai en Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée

Résumé

Fabriqués et utilisés dans le cadre des échanges affinaux sur la Côte de Rai, en Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée, les tambours à fente sont considérés comme des sortes de personnes. Ils ne peuvent pas être extraits des formations de parenté transformées qu'a causées leur fabrication. En 2010, lors d'un incident sans précédent, un gros tambour à fente utilisé par une école locale a été la cible d'une attaque au cours d'un conflit. À la lumière de cet événement, l'auteur examine ce qui est irremplaçable et substituable dans une personne sur la Côte de Rai et explore les implications de cette attaque en termes de changement de statut des objets et des choses dans le nouveau contexte économique et social.

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