

# EXPLORE

Australian Museum Magazine  
SUMMER 2015

## Jessica Watson: Trailblazer

Story inside

Simpson Desert  
Expedition returns

Sydney's Wild  
Mammals



AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM



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Above: Trailblazer Hubert Wilkins in his Arctic submarine *Nautilus*.

## EXPLORE

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Tehmi Sukhla (Director, Development, Marketing & Communications)  
Kirsten Downie (Head of Marketing & Communications)  
Catherine Beehag (Manager, Science Communication)  
Serena Todd (Members Events Coordinator)

**Design management** Louise Cornwall

**Design and layout** Cameron Emerson-Elliott

**Production** Jenny Hooker

**Advertising** Brendan Atkins 02 9320 6249

**Prepress** Spitting Image Sydney

**Printing** Peachy Print

We welcome your feedback, comments and enquiries.

Email the Editor at [explore@austrmus.gov.au](mailto:explore@austrmus.gov.au)

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### Australian Museum

6 College Street Sydney NSW 2010  
Open daily 9.30 am – 5 pm (closed 25 Dec)  
t 02 9320 6000 (switch)  
t 02 9320 6225 (Members)

**Australian Museum Trust President** Catherine Livingstone AO  
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> NOW SHOWING

# The drum is the voice of the chief

## Slit drums and language in northern-central Vanuatu

The AM's new *Pacific Spirit* exhibition features four Vanuatu vertical slit drums. Scale and craftsmanship aside, these impressive pieces signify a diversity of rich cultural traditions, says anthropologist **Kirk Huffman**.

**T**he public focal point of almost any village in Vanuatu is the dancing or ceremonial ground, and it's in northern-central Vanuatu that you'll still find the carved wooden drums that play various roles in the cultural life of this diverse nation.

Of the four vertical drums on display in the *Pacific Spirit* exhibition, two are recent ones from north Ambrym, and two are 19th century examples from the island of Malakula.

Because of their scale and craftsmanship, the types of slit drums from these two islands are probably the most 'famous' within and outside of Vanuatu. Not all slit drums from Vanuatu are so decorative, and not all are played vertically, but various aspects of their production and use encapsulate the complex worlds related to slit drums: of cultural identity, ancestors, status, language, music, myth, history and communication.

### Ambrym

The slit drums produced in the northern and western parts of the island of Ambrym are the most widely known in the West. This style is world-famous, and justly so, as it is

**"This style is world-famous, and justly so"**



### Funeral notice

Left: *Nambulkai* (slit drum) orchestra in use, interior of south-central Malakula in 1974. The drum rhythms being played are coded rhythms forming part of the periodic public mortuary celebratory announcements for Ayal Lawan, whose desiccated body (he had died 6 months previously) lies in state in a funerary lean-to nearby. The rhythms describe in detail his ritual life history to confirm the deceased's status to the public spread across the high mountainous interior, and for the deceased's spirit to hear and be content with this public recognition. The late Kailab'nelang plays a small horizontal slit drum in foreground. Yabkeotas village, Botgot-speaking area, interior of south-central Malekula.

© KIRK HUFFMAN

## NOW SHOWING > The drum is the voice of the chief

visually stunning, but perhaps more in the European sense of 'art' than in profound cultural complexity.

Called *atingting* in north Ambrym, and *etingting* in the west of the island, the drums are the personal property of the prestigious owners who sponsored them to be carved. For ritual use, the atinging is usually paired with a much smaller vertical faceless cylindrical slit drum, *oré atinging*, without which the larger drum could at times be ritually incomplete. These smaller drums can be carved by anyone (*oré* means *Carve!*) and have been largely ignored by overseas collectors. The Australian Museum is one of the few institutions outside of Vanuatu to have one of these essential *oré atinging* in its collection (though not currently on display).

Such slit drums from Ambrym represent the voices of the ancestors, not necessarily of the chief. The wood used to make the drums is from the breadfruit tree, *Artocarpus altilis*, and is of a beautiful golden colour and very easy

## > "Each dance has its own meaning"

to carve. The wood can age beautifully and rapidly when exposed to the elements, which may explain the popularity of these drums among foreign collectors obsessed with 'old' objects. With a few notable exceptions, almost all atinging in collections overseas have been carved since the 1950s.

### Malakula

Malakula's most 'famous' slit drums are those on the megalithic dancing grounds on the Small Islands off its northeast coast. Here, the massive trees are cut on the neighbouring mainland and floated to the islets for carving and erection adjacent to dancing grounds. Many of these dancing grounds have now fallen into disuse, except for those on Vao and a few scattered others that are still periodically used.

The two early Malakulan slit drums in *Pacific Spirit* are from two points on the eastern coast of the island and stylistically are steps on a path leading to the Ambrym styles.

Less known to the outside world – and even within Vanuatu – are the slit drums of southern Malakula, particularly those of the 'Botgot-speakers of the mountainous interior (see photo). Made of heavy *nambetap* wood, they are slightly shorter than others on the coast, owing to the extreme difficulty of transporting them in the rugged terrain. They represent ancestors.

In these areas, there are numerous rhythms for numerous rituals, and numerous codes for communicating messages. Each dance has its own rhythm and meaning: the drums speak language and the dances speak myths. In the days before massive depopulation hit Vanuatu (with the arrival of the White Man), the mountains and valleys rung with beautiful music and incessant complex coded messaging – a traditional form of ICT technology use, free and completely sustainable.

### Other Areas

There is much more to say about the myriad types of wooden slit drums in Vanuatu: the horizontal orchestras of the northern islands, the rare orchestras played by women for high-ranking women, the ground-beating rituals of Tanna in the southern islands (which have no slit drums).



### A DIFFERENT DRUM

#### *H'mao Ivi nandr'en an M'lin*

[lit. 'The drum is the voice of the chief' in Ph'n'n taut, the language of the Big Nambas peoples of north-western Malakula.]

The *h'mao* slit drum is rare in overseas collections. It is extremely heavy, and because it represents a living chief would not be sold easily. Also, its style – powerful and brooding – has not caught on with art collectors (many of whom may not know that this style exists).

This drum, photographed in 1973, belonged to (and represents) M'lin Tarap Vihapat (Chief Virhambat d. 1988) of Amah/Amok, north-western Malakula. Chief Virhambat had three mouths: his own; his appointed 'mouth' or spokesperson (*m'ldaun a M'lin*, lit. 'right hand of the chief'), who conveyed his words to lesser mortals; and his slit drum which, when beaten using the proper codes, could convey his words far and wide.

One of the chief's sons, Gregoire Nimbtik, kindly gave this article its title in memory of his late father and in respect for the current chief who is Chief Virhambat's grandson.

### Rare drum

Above: *H'mao miel* slit drum on *vit'lamel lil* (the big dancing ground) at Amah/Amok, Big Nambas area, interior north-west Malakula, in 1973, belonging to Chief Virhambat.



### Dancing to the beat

Above: One of the many drumbeat-led dances during male *maghe* graded rituals in Fanla village, north Ambrym, in 1984. The famous high-ranking man Tofor Tain Mal (then Tofor Rengrengmal) stands at left in the photo.

Right: Four vertical wooden slit drums from northern-central Vanuatu on display in the *Pacific Spirit* exhibition. On the left are two recently made slit drums from Fanla village, north Ambrym (see photo above), and on the right are two 19th century examples from points along the central-east Malakulan coast.



Mobile phones took off in a big way in Vanuatu in 2008, but when Cyclone Pam hit the nation in March 2015, modern telecommunication systems broke down, with extensive delays in restoring service to many areas outside the capital.

By contrast, heavy wooden slit drums are only rarely put out of action during cyclones and are traditionally extremely useful in sending important messages before and after such catastrophic events.

A wise word of advice from old chiefs might be to use the modern technology while it works, but don't throw away your old traditional equivalent – you may need it when the modern systems break down (which they always do, periodically).

Kirk Huffman, *Research Associate, Australian Museum and Honorary Curator (National Museum), Vanuatu Cultural Centre (Port Vila, Vanuatu).*

### DEDICATION

The author would like to dedicate this short article to the following recently deceased ni-Vanuatu (and one honorary one), all involved one way or another in the protection and promotion of traditional identity:

- Chief Willy Taso, *Wuro, west Ambrym, d. circa 1987.*
- M'lin Tarap Vihapat (Chief Virhambat), *Amah/Amok, NW Malakula, d. 1988.*
- Chief Tofor Rengrengmweleun, *Fanla, north Ambrym, d. 1999.*
- Chief Etoul Tainmal, *Fanla, north Ambrym, d. 2008.*
- Chief Emmanuel Viralalao, *Nabangahake, west Ambae, d. 2009.*
- Professor Darrell Tryon (ANU), *d. 2013.*
- Chief Telkon Watas L(iv)usbangbang, *Bunlap, south Pentecost, d. 2014.*
- James Nobuat Atnelo, *Umpon(y)ilongi, south Erromango, d. 2014.*
- Chief George Kapiar Kapere, *Imaki, southeast Tanna, d. 2014.*
- Touman Akau, *Pango, Efate, d. 2015.*
- Aileh Rantes, *Wintua, SW Bay, Malakula, d. 5 October 2015.*