



## Beat It! Percussion Instruments in the Pacific

### Percussion instruments in the Pacific

Pacific Islanders used gongs and drums to call villagers to a meeting or to warn of an approaching tribe. The percussion instruments were made of wood and may have had a skin membrane (such as sharkskin or calfskin) stretched over one end of a hollow log to make a drum. Percussion instruments that are played by striking or hitting are called idiophones.

Slit drums are a type of idiophone, made from wood or bamboo. The log is hollowed out through a slit (or long narrow opening). Slit drums are normally laid horizontally and hit with a hammer. Sometimes a stick is used to scrape inside the hollow drum. The larger the cavity and the narrower the slit, the lower the pitch. The shape and material of the instrument determines what it will sound like. Most idiophones in Oceania were made of wood, which produce a short 'muffled' sound. This is because the lower density wood stores less energy and has higher internal loss of energy.

### New Zealand – Rimu (*Dacrydium cupressinum*)

The writer's gong in the *Beat It!* exhibit is made from rimu, which is endemic (ie only found) in New Zealand. Maori people used war gongs and clapping sticks rather than drums with skin membranes. They also used their bodies as percussion instruments by slapping their chests as they danced. Pahu in Polynesian societies is the name for a drum with a skin membrane. In New Zealand, pahu refers to a solid, wooden war-gong.



The Maori pahu was used to warn of approaching enemies and indicate that the watch guard was on duty. It was made from an oblong shaped piece of wood about two metres long, with a groove carved in the centre. The pahu was very large and was hung from ropes on a platform, so the person on duty could hit the grooved section with a stick from underneath. The pahu or wooden gong was often made from a single slab of totara (*Podocarpus totara*) or matai (*Podocarpus spicatus*). The striking club was often made from maire (*Olea Cunninghamii*) and could be heard ten to fifteen kilometres away.

### Tahiti – Sandalwood (*S. album*)

Sandalwood is common throughout the Pacific region – including Tahiti. The Tahitian pahu is usually made of hollowed coconut tree trunks, covered by sharkskin or calfskin on both ends of the trunk. The Fa'atete is similar, though it has a tight, single membrane and a distinct, high sound like a drum roll. The Tahitian to'ere is a slit log drum made from the hollowed trunk of tou wood and struck with a wooden beater. Larger logs give deeper sounds when struck.

### Tasmania – Huon pine (*Lagerstrobus franklinii*)

Huon pine is endemic (ie only found) in Tasmania. HMS *Resolution* II was in Tasmania for a short time and James Cook did not notice any Tasmanian Aborigines using musical instruments.

## Other Polynesian Islands:

Percussion instruments are important for communicating messages as well as accompanying ceremonies and dances. Many societies still use percussion instruments in their daily life.

**Samoaans** use wooden gongs called longo which are similar in appearance and size to the log gong pahu of the Maori. They also had two smaller gongs formed by hollowing out logs, the smallest of them, pate, may have been introduced from Tahiti. The lali (medium sized gongs) are made in the same way as the pate, but are hollowed from larger trunks. They are used in pairs which have a slightly different note, purposely tested during the hollowing-out. Each lali is placed under a shed in a central part of the village and beaten by two men who blend the different notes as they play. The lali is believed to have been introduced from Tonga. In Samoa, lali are used for calling people together.

In **Tonga**, lali were used to summon chiefs during peacetime or surround a village before attacking it during warfare. Tongans also used a hollowed log gong called a naffa. The log was hollowed out through a slot three inches wide extending from end to end. They would sit and beat it strongly with hard wood sticks about 30cm long and as thick as the wrist. Tones can be changed by beating in the middle, or near the end of the drum.

**Papua New Guinea** had garamuts made from the garamut tree (*Vitex cofassus*). They are played to communicate messages and support singing and dancing. Messages may include making public announcements such as the arrival of visitors, calling people to gather together, a request for an item, a death, etc.

## Hawaii

The Hawaiian pahu or hula drum is a membrane drum similar to the Tahitian pahu (where it originated from several hundred years ago). It was an important instrument for performing the hula and they were generally made from a hollowed breadfruit or coconut tree, sharkskin and coconut fibre. Hawaiians also had the puniu – a knee drum made from coconut shell, covered with fish skin.



PAHU



PUNIUI

James Cook collected a Hawaiian pahu drum during the HMS *Resolution* II voyage. It had human figures forming crescents with their up-stretched arms and is now housed in the British Museum, London.