

latmul (Melanesia, Papua New Guinea)
Kundu (Hand Drum), 20th century
Wood, rope
H.8½ x W.26¾ x D.6½ inches
The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund, 98.37.3

Key Ideas

This hand drum with a crocodile-shaped handle was used in important ceremonies by the latmul (**yaht**-mool) people of the Middle Sepik River region of Papua New Guinea. The symbolism of the crocodile is rooted in latmul mythology, which traces the latmul ancestry back to a great primordial crocodile. The crocodile imagery is connected to ancestral devotion and the initiation of young boys into the men's secret society. The drum's sound, representing voices from the spirit world, strengthens these associations.

Wagen, Crocodile Ancestor

The latmul believe they were spawned by *Wagen*, a great mythological giant in the form of a crocodile. They believe the world floats on *Wagen*'s enormous back and the earthquakes and meandering rivers are created by the movements of its giant swishing tail. Musical instruments, such as this hand drum, are used to accompany the songs that recount the creation story of the great crocodile.

Ornamentation of the Drum

Like most hand drums from Melanesia, this latmul drum was carved from a single piece of wood. The drum has an hourglass shape with patterns of arcs, dots, and zigzag bands shallowly carved into the surface and painted black and white. These designs depict the gaping jaws of two crocodiles, their open mouths directed toward either end of the drum.

One end of the drum was once covered with animal skin, possibly from a lizard. A recessed lip indicates where the skin was stretched and secured to create the drum. The other end, encircled by intricately carved geometric designs, is left open. For the latmul these two sound chambers—one open and one closed—symbolize the earth and sky, the two major components of the cosmos.

The drum's handle, in the center position, links the two worlds represented by the sound chambers. The handle is fully carved in three dimensions and represents the ancestral crocodile with reptilian patterned skin, long narrow snout, and exposed, dangerous teeth. Rows of small projecting spikes carved on the sides and underside of the drum resemble aspects of the crocodile's being, such as its knobby, spiked skin and sharp teeth.

Spiritual Connections

Every object the Iatmul use, both sacred and secular, is decorated in some way. Tools, weapons, masks, and musical instruments become spiritually charged when elaborately ornamented. The surface appearance expresses the spiritual power within the object and ultimately has the ability to affect the welfare of the whole village. Ornamentation often includes animal totems which are associated with the ancestors.

Iatmul Totems: Paying Homage to Ancestors

Each kinship group within a village takes an emblematic name, or totem, from the birds and animals of the Sepik River region. A totem serves as the group's symbol and signifies their ancestral heritage. Elders who have memorized the numerous totemic emblems hold great prestige and power within the village. The Iatmul use hand drums and flutes to play song cycles which honor the totems. The songs can recount up to 20,000 totemic names. Representations of the animal totems, such as the crocodile, are important in honoring and nurturing relationships with the ancestors.

The Iatmul revere their ancestors, who they believe possess *mana*, a potent force that requires respect and attention through ritual and ceremony. Ancestors serve as intercessors between the living and the supernatural worlds. If the ancestors are pleased, they will obtain help for the living from the spirit world. If aggrieved, ancestor spirits can cause sickness, death, failed crops, and other natural disasters.

The Men's House

Iatmul kinship groups are based on descent from the male ancestor. Men from various kinship groups come together to form secret societies. Their meeting place, the men's house, is where they gather to talk, eat, relax, and discuss problems confronting the community. Important ceremonies and celebrations of the village take place in the area surrounding the men's house. Ceremonial objects, such as this hand drum, are stored inside the house.

Initiation into Adulthood

One of the most important events to take place at the men's house is the initiation of young boys to mark their transition from boyhood into manhood. During initiation the boys display feats of physical and mental endurance and are taught the sacred ritual knowledge of the Iatmul ancestral heritage. When the rites are completed, the young initiates earn the privilege to enter the men's house, and are ready to marry and have children. Drums provide rhythmic accompaniment for the dances and songs performed during initiation. Sounds from musical instruments, such as the hand drum, are said to represent the voices of the spirit world.

During the initiation, the men form a long line representing Wagen, the returning ancestral crocodile from which all Iatmul people descended. Some Iatmul groups create huge basketry masks representing the great crocodile in which young initiates are symbolically devoured. This act marks the death of childhood and the beginning of adult life. The initiates are decorated with small lines suggesting teeth marks on their chests

and shoulders. Scarification is considered a mark of beauty which distinguishes the initiates as members of the men's secret society.

The latmul Today

Today the latmul number about 10,000. They live in large villages located along a 100-mile stretch of the banks of the Middle Sepik River. The Sepik River region is located in the northwest corner of mainland Papua New Guinea (see map). New Guinea, the largest of the Melanesian islands, is divided between two countries. The eastern half is part of the nation of Papua New Guinea and the western half is a province of Indonesia, Irian Jaya. Although accouterments of the modern world have reached much of Papua New Guinea, many native religious and social traditions are still practiced today.

EXTEND THE DISCUSSION:

See "Tips for Talking about Art" in the introductory pages for more ideas.

Look

Imagine that you came across this object in an antique shop. What clues can you see to help you figure out what it is?

What things do you recognize? What things surprise you?

Describe the crocodile on this drum. What can you tell about it?

Think

The latmul consider the crocodile to be a very powerful animal. How did the artist show the crocodile's power on this drum? Why do you think it was important to the latmul to put the crocodile on this drum? What animal do you consider to be powerful?

The latmul played drums like this on special occasions. Do you have music for special occasions? If so, when and what kind of music?

The latmul pay homage to their ancestors through song, music, and decoration. Are there ways in which you pay respect to important members of your family?



Southeast Asia and the South Pacific: Political

