

## SOLOMON ISLANDS CULTURE

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While Walter Cline was instructor and tutor in anthropology at Harvard it was his practice to require undergraduates to become thoroughly familiar with a half dozen whole-culture ethnographies before setting forth on excursions into more theoretical works of ethnology and social anthropology. "Next to living among primitives," he used to say, "this is the soundest way to approach the subject you say you're interested in." This was a tedious and chastening task for students who, like the present writer, conceived of anthropology as an adventurous quest for big ideas traced on canvasses of continental size. In time, of course, we came to recognize the pedagogic wisdom behind those exercises. Moreover, some of us also learned to value the reading clue he gave us as being one of the simplest yet surely one of the most effective of all keys to understanding any culture. "In every department of culture you are reading about," he suggested, in effect, "pick out the key native words and try to translate them." Years later, another gifted and highly experienced anthropologist made the same kind of observation, "--- the most difficult task in anthropological fieldwork is to determine the meanings of a few key words, upon an understanding of which the success of the whole investigation depends; ---" (1).

These remarks apply with particular force to the culture of the Siuai people which the present writer studied intensively during 1938 and 1939, and two papers previously published (2) have been devoted to descriptions of the meanings attached to the key words "leader" (mumi) and "land owner" (muhni ukum) by the Siuai. The intent of the present paper is to inquire into the logic underlying the Siuai practice of using metaphorically the phrase "renown making" when describing the beating of wooden slit-gongs.

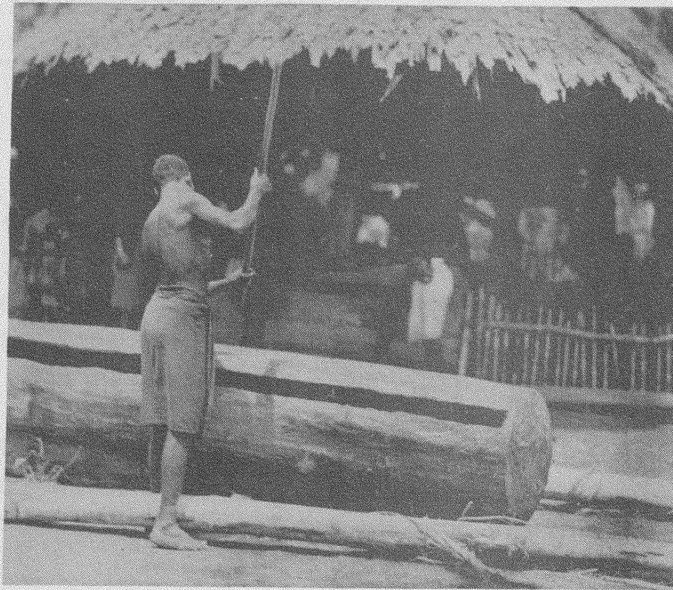
The name Siuai applies to all those natives of southwest Bougainville (Solomon Islands) who speak the Papuan Motuna language. There are about 4650 of these negroids (3); and although they possess no over-all tribal organization they do recognize themselves as being culturally distinct from peoples living around them and speaking different languages. The Siuai live in small hamlets scattered throughout the tropical rain forest, and subsist mainly on the products of their gardens and groves. Hunting and fishing are unimportant, and pigs are raised only for feast occasions. Nuclear family households are the residential and subsistence units, while small, totemic, exogamous matrilineages are the focal points for most beliefs and practices which might be called religious. Patrilocality is slightly more prevalent

than other forms of residence, but not sufficiently so to have resulted in a consistent resident pattern. Siuai natives say that formerly their hamlets used to be drawn together under the leadership of war-making leaders who possessed powers of physical coercion over their underlings and who used to vie with one another in organized head-hunting forays. In the early 1920's the Australian administration of the Mandated Territory of New Guinea established effective control over Siuai, outlawed warfare and the use of physical force by the indigenous leaders, and set up a new system of native administration involving appointed native officials and a legal procedure culminating in the courts of Australian magistrates. Meanwhile, the indigenous political system persisted, although in greatly altered form. Instead of gaining a leader's renown (potu) by means of organizing and financing successful wars, ambitious natives now turned to feast-giving as the most effective means of acquiring the renown essential for leadership; and that man who surpasses his rivals in feast-giving has the pleasure of hearing himself acclaimed as "he who has most renown" -- not a very tangible reward for the enormous effort that goes into such enterprises but apparently sufficient to encourage the ambitions of most men.

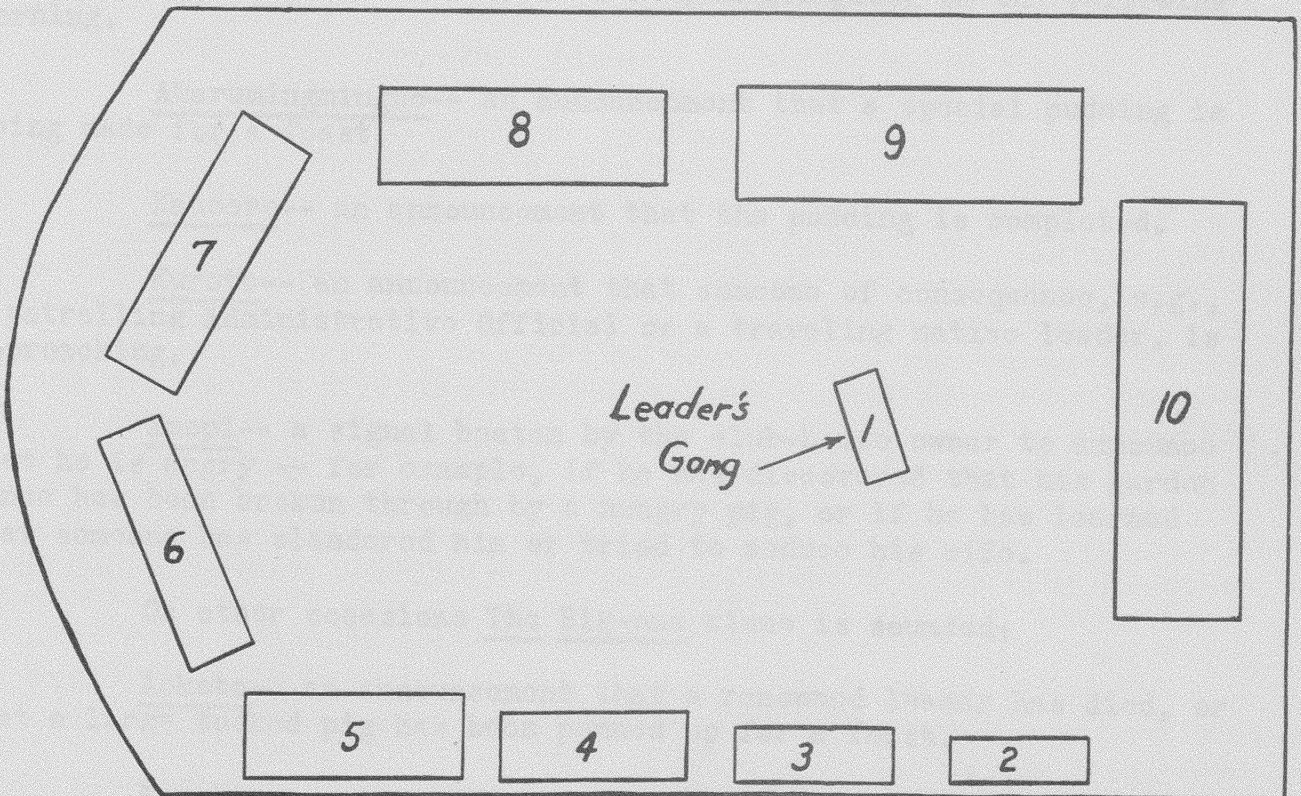
These feasts take place at the men's club-houses, large and open-sided structures which are located along the main paths and away from dwellings-- for women are prohibited from visiting or even passing close to a club-house. No man can become an active feast-giver without having a club-house of his own, and no club-house is complete without a full complement of wooden slit-gongs, usually nine in number. It is to these gongs that we now turn our attention in order to gain some insight into the reasons why the Siuai describe the beating of gongs as "the making of renown."

Gongs range in size from three feet long and one foot in diameter to fifteen feet long and five feet in diameter. They are made by felling a moikui tree of desired diameter, cutting out a piece of log to the desired length, and hollowing the interior through a narrow longitudinal slit. The ends of the gong are chopped nearly flat and the bark is stripped away, otherwise the surface is not rounded or smoothed. Hollowing the log requires considerable skill since the slit opening has to be kept narrow. Nowadays steel trade-adzes are used for this operation, but there are still in use many gongs that were hollowed out with stone adzes, which must have been a delicate and lengthy process since some of these old gongs have walls only two inches thick, thinner in fact than most of the modern stool-made products. Throughout northeast Siuai there are only a dozen or so men capable of making first-class gongs. In making a gong the log is shaped and hollowed out in the forest at the place where the tree is felled, being carried to the club-house only after it is ready for use.

The ideal arrangement of slit-gongs in a club-house is shown in Figure A, although there is some variation in this according to the number of gongs present. Gongs are placed and labeled according to size, the largest one being called The Big-one, the next His-younger-



Siuai native beating a wooden slit-gong before it has been installed in the club-house which is seen in the background.



The ideal arrangement of slit-gongs in a club-house.

Figure A.

brother, then Their-younger-brother, Muuoming, Fifth-one, Sixth-one, Seventh-one, Tapiuo, and Ragoi. Also, the seven larger gongs are sometimes called The Body to differentiate them from Tapiuo and Ragoi; and individual gongs are sometimes given specific names, such as The Thunderer or The Killer. Many club-houses possess more than nine gongs; in such cases the intermediate ones are grouped with those of nearest size and are named accordingly.

Gongs rest on small wooden sleepers with the slit side up and are beaten with the butt-end of a four foot long stick struck sharply against the center of the lip of the slit. Tones vary with the size and hollowness of the gong, although the tonal intervals between the gongs in any club-house are by no means regular; in fact the Siuai have no concept of regularity of tone interval in their pan-piping or in their gong-beating.

Gongs are beaten on a number of occasions, and although there is no systematic code, alphabetic or otherwise, the sound pattern of each kind of signal is universally well known and various patterns can be put together so that they describe a varying sequence of events. The following signals are beaten on only one gong, usually on Their-younger-brother:

Kungkungkungkung-- a call to assemble, usually sounded by the club-house owner to call together his supporters for some work project.

Atara-- an announcement, usually made in the evening, alerting supporters that there will be a kungkungkungkung on the following morning.

Akarumingmingno-- an announcement that a special pudding is being made for a feast.

Kauoro-- an announcement that the pudding is completed.

Kuroto-- an announcement that someone of consequence, e.g., a patrolling Administrative Official or a traveling native leader, is approaching.

Enopi-- a signal beaten by the club-house owner to announce that he is angry -- for example, if he has discovered that his garden fence has been broken through by a hungry pig, or if he has learned that someone has slandered him or tried to seduce his wife.

On other occasions The Big-one alone is sounded:

Aokoto-- an announcement that a renowned leader has died, or that a large tusked pig has been penned up for a feast.

Eruoto-- a signal that used to be beaten to announce that a man has been killed in fighting.

Ekuoku-- an announcement of the cremation of a man who has met his death by falling from a tree. On hearing this signal all other adult males keep away from the funeral in order to avoid having similar fates befall themselves.

Takiruoto-- a signal that used to be beaten to summon warriors for a raiding expedition.

On the occasion of a large feast all the gongs in a club-house are beaten in unison at various stages of the preparations. The climax of these events is reached the night preceding the feast, at which time "pig-counting" takes place. The host's supporters assemble at his club-house after dark and take up their posts, one beater for each gong. The most expert beater sounds the small Ragoi lead gong, while the strongest man present sounds The Big-ono; both of these posts are coveted, for though there is no special honor attached to them the Siuai nevertheless take great pleasure in sounding the deep-voiced The Big-ono or in leading their fellows on Ragoi. The host usually assigns these two key posts, while the other beaters pick their own places; there will always be more beaters than gongs so that the beating is done in relays. When everyone is ready the Ragoi beater sounds his gong, beginning with Vitality-getting, a quick warm-up signal. He first plays the signal twice through, then as he begins it for the third time Tapiuo joins in. The two smallest gongs beat the signal through in unison and then as they start it again Seventh-ono joins in, and so on until all the gongs are being beaten in unison. After three or four repetitions of the signal with all gongs beaten together, Ragoi sounds a quick series of terminal beats and leaves off beating. Following this Tapiuo does likewise, and so on around the oval until finally only The Big-ono is beating; and then The Big-ono stops. Following this the beaters pause for a minute or two and congratulate themselves over their fine performance, then Ragoi sounds off on another signal. The initial Vitality-getting is followed by Shell-ornaments, the general name for a large number of gong calls beaten for pleasure rather than for signalling specific information. The expert lead man may have as many as forty or fifty of these in his repertoire, and he takes great pride in his ability to lead for several hours at a stretch without repeating. Shell-ornaments vary greatly in length and complexity. Some are very simple, like One-at-a-time, a series of ten moderately slow beats evenly spaced and without variation in accent. Others are meant to describe real or imagined events, such as the lament for the kouakoua bird who has become separated from her mate:

"As I, the kouakoua bird, was warming my eggs on the bank of the stream the water suddenly arose and washed me away downstream. And now I search for my mate."

This lament is known to nearly every Siuai, and as the Ragoi beater sounds it he reproduces each word in terms of its syllables and accents so that all hearers recognize the little poem on which it is based.

A shorter example of Shell-ornaments will illustrate the technique:

Moroking            pupu                    neuitong,            neuitong.

The flying-fox    sap-of-wild-banana    it-is-drinking,    it-is-drinking.

When spoken, the line carries these accents and syllabic lengths:

Moroking pupu neuitong, neuitong.

And this is reproduced on the gongs by accent of beat and by tempo.

Some Shell-ornaments are humorous and evoke laughter, such as the plaint of the faithful wife who tells how her husband always dreams of seeing her fornicating with strangers, and believing his dreams to be true, beats her every morning upon awaking. Others are solemn, such as the sorrow of the man who has been driven out of his community on the untrue accusation of sorcery. A number of them describe little events which are always occurring: "The frog is caught in the fish trap;" "The eel swims down the stream bed;" "Pigs have eaten my taro;" and so on. Many of them are direct borrowings from neighboring peoples. Siuai take great pleasure in performing Shell-ornaments, one of the few activities in which they coordinate their efforts willingly and effectively for hours at a time.

When the repertoire of Shell-ornaments runs out, after hours of drumming, the lead man pauses for a few minutes and then introduces the climactic Pig-counting signal with a few repetitions of Man-killing, the gong phrase that used to be sounded to announce the killing of an enemy. When Man-killing thunders through the night people for miles around strain their ears and tell one another: "Now it is coming. Now they will make the host's recknow." Whereupon the whole gong chorus beats out in unison the value, in shell money, of each pig destined to be given away at the forthcoming feast. Natives two and three miles away will waken one another to listen to these meaningful sounds, and to many hosts and prospective guests this event is the high point of the feast.

So explicitly does gong-beating signalize specific events that no knowing person would beat one without cause. If a sane man were to beat a gong signal for no good reason he would risk losing his power of speech.

Small Siuai boys play at gong-beating as avidly as American youngsters imitate their current cowboy heroes, but usually they have to be satisfied with beating on logs and house timbers. Before a big feast, however, the grown-ups sometimes indulge the small fry by depositing a small gong at one of the hamlets and allowing them to beat it to their hearts' content. Even little girls join in this play, much to the amusement of their elders, who accuse them of "wanting to own a penis." There is no mystery associated with gongs and gong-beating, and by the time boys begin to frequent the club-houses they are well acquainted with the patterns and meanings of

most of the signals; nevertheless it is considered improper and dangerous for them to play with club-house gongs without cause—except on the occasion just described.

The serious intent of gong-beating is also shown by the injunctions on use following a death. Mourning is an improper time for acquiring renown, and a sorrowing man will usually declare a temporary taboo upon the beating of his gongs. To restore them to use—in other words, to terminate the period of mourning—it is necessary to provide a feast for neighbors and kinsmen, and at this time the taboo is removed by beating on The Big-one with a coconut, part of its liquid being afterwards drunk by the club-house owner and part offered as a sacrifice to the demon guarding the club-house. In former days to terminate the mourning for a great war-leader it was necessary to secure a human victim and use his severed head as a beater in order to restore the deceased's gongs to use.

Whether or not a man inherits any slit-gongs, he must obtain a few of his own if he wishes to acquire renown. For one thing, people will speak disparagingly of a man who possesses mostly inherited gongs; and in addition, obtaining new gongs provides the ambitious man with excellent opportunities for building up his own renown—provided, of course, they are obtained in the proper manner. Any able-bodied man can cut down a tree, hollow it out enough to make a passable sound, and drag it to his place with the aid of two or three helpers; some individuals actually do this, especially Christian catechists who need gongs to place in front of their chapels to call together their congregations for services. But this is not the way of the ambitious man. For him a gong is both a means and an end. He acquires renown in obtaining it, and then it serves as a continuing symbol of that renown. When such a man wants a new gong he commissions the leader of a neighboring community to fashion one for him, and then rewards him for his service with a pork feast. In this case the contractee usually furnishes a suitable tree from his own forest preserve and pays an expert to fashion the gong; and the reward he receives from the contractor usually exceeds his costs—a circumstance which reflects even greater credit upon the contractor.

The next step is to transport the new gong to the owner's club-house, and this may cost the owner as little or as much as he cares to invest in the enterprise. Usually he will commission the leader of another nearby community to transport it, afterwards rewarding the latter and his supporters with a feast. Depending upon his ambition, he may cause the transporting to be carried out easily and quickly or he may attach practical and magical impediments to the job. Practically, he may build around the gong a carrying frame made of such large timbers that the whole burden will weigh several times the weight of the gong itself. Or, magically, he may increase the difficulty of carrying the gong by "tying" the essence of its weight to various places along the trail to the club-house. This he accomplishes by use of the same kind of magic which is normally used to prolong life. In the case of a gong its owner gathers some of the chips hollowed out of the gong and ties them with bespelled leaves into a small bundle, thereby capturing the essence of the gong's weight. Then he hides the

bundle at the spot in the trail where he desires the gong to become too heavy for its carriers to bear. He must guard against encumbering the load beyond the patience of the carriers; and, even more important, he must be prepared to reward them with a feast commensurate with their labors--for woe to the reputation of the man who causes people from other communities to waste their efforts in unrecompensed work. With all this in mind the shrewd owner will recover the gong's weight essence from its hiding place, and running ahead of the carriers, will hide it further along the trail.

Meanwhile the carriers will know fairly well the intent and the ability of the owner to reward their efforts, and they will play along with his maneuvers accordingly. If, for example, they are dubious about the prospect of recompense, one of the magicians among them will sit astride the gong and cause his spirit-familiar to sever the link between the gong and its tied heaviness.

Another technique for increasing the weight of a gong is for the owner to induce his club-house demon to sit astride it. In this case, the weight can be decreased only through having one of the carriers cause his club-house demon to unseat the owner's; and this can come about only if the second demon is larger and stronger than the first--i.e., if the master of the second demon has more renown than the master of the first. This technique is not often employed because it represents a too naked and direct comparison of affluence between host and guest, and may result in unnecessary ill-feeling.

Most gong-carrying events last only a few hours, but some take up to three and four days; and while it would seem that the owner, having a given number of pigs to distribute among the carriers, would derive more credit by rewarding them with extreme liberality for what was an easy task, it actually transpires that more credit is derived from rewarding them merely adequately for a more difficult and time-consuming job. As one articulate informant put it: "When a gong is heavy many men will struggle day after day to carry it to the club-house. And all the while they are struggling they will think about the owner and the heaviness of his gong. Throughout Siuai people will ask: 'Where are all the big men? We have not seen them about for days.' And others will answer: 'They are all carrying so-and-so's gong. It is very heavy and they seem never to get it far along the road.' Thus will the owner's name and his renown spread, so that people will be obliged to hear and think about him."

Gong carrying is one of the Siuais' most spectacular activities. One occasion witnessed involved some two hundred men; and a twenty-five foot wide trail had to be cut through forest and grove to get the gong to the club-house. Many coconut palms had to be cut to clear the trail--a most painful expedient for these thrifty, property-minded natives. As the motley crowd of swearing, shouting, perspiring natives stagger along the trail carrying the gong, boys walk ahead of them blowing on conches. In some cases the men deposit the gong directly into the club-house and then take turns trying it out. Other owners make a separate occasion of the



first beating of a new gong, and in such cases the owners commission other leaders to bring their supporters to help try out the new instrument--and, of course, these too must be rewarded with a pork banquet. Still other owners, who either cannot or will not require the gong to be manufactured, carried, and beaten as three separate operations, commission one neighboring leader to perform all three; or they may call on their own supporters to do the whole job. But in any event it is essential that a feast be provided for the laborers, for unless some pigs are killed and their blood-essence offered to the club-house demon the latter will cause the gong to crack open and become useless. (Informants stated that formerly all war-leaders used to consecrate their new gongs by dismembering a man, stuffing his broken body into the hollow, and using his head to beat the first signal.

It sometimes becomes necessary to move slit-gongs from one club-house to another; if, for example, an old club-house is abandoned for a new one; or if a man inherits some of the gongs but not the club-house of a deceased kinsman. These gongs should also be formally carried and installed in the new club-house, and a feast must be provided for those who assist.

Finally, after a gong has been installed in the club-house, and after the laborers have been rewarded with a pork banquet for their efforts, the gong remains a symbol of the owner's renown. When natives hear the familiar gong sound thundering through the night they recall with pleasure the festival and the food which accompanied its installation, and they regard with respect the man who made these things possible. Whatever the origin of the metaphor may have been, there is no difficulty in understanding why the Siuai now identify metaphorically the making of a man's renown with the beating of his slit-gongs.

ENDNOTES

- (1) Evans-Pritchard, E. E.

1951 Social Anthropology. Cohen and West, Ltd., London, page 80.

- (2) Oliver, Douglas, L.

1949 "Studies in the Anthropology of Bougainville, Solomon Islands; Parts 2 and 4." Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol. 29, Cambridge.

- (3) The present tense is used throughout this article to refer to the years 1938-1939, when the field work was carried out.