Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

NEW GUINEA G36

The island north of Australia is called New Guinea. It is split between two countries. In the east is Papua New Guinea and in the west is an Indonesian territory called Irian Jaya. Papua New Guinea became independent from Australia in 1975. It has a few small cities but most people still live in tribal communities. There are hundreds of different groups and over 700 languages are spoken.



Kundu

We would recognise this as a drum. In Papua New Guinea this musical instrument is called a kundu. It appears on the country's coat of arms and their banknotes so this object is very important to their culture.





Above: Papua New Guinea coat of arms



A large river in the north, called the Sipek, runs from the mountains to the sea. For local people this river is the main source of transportation, water and food. Its importance to their life is reflected in the reverence shown to the crocodile. The creature has survived in the region for millions of years. To the tribes, this shows how the land around them can maintain life. When a young boy moves into adulthood he takes part in a 'manhood initiation' ceremony. Bamboo blades are used to cut a pattern of a crocodile lying on the riverbank into the young man's back.

Many museums that display items from Papua New Guinea have objects from Sipek. Their popularity has led to the region being described as a 'cultural treasure house'. This kundu was carved in Sipek. Our museum records suggest it was made at the end of the nineteenth century.

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Above: Carved table with a painted face

This kundu has been shaped to look like a crocodile opening its mouth and showing its teeth. The sound made when playing it is said to be the crocodile speaking. If you look down on the drum it is possible to see a face. This image is similar to paintings and carvings on Sipek shields and other objects. Most kundus have patterns at both ends but this one does not. Do you think it has been finished. What designs would you finish it with?



Above: A Sipek shield

Kundus are wooden and usually about a metre long. They are made by cutting a section of the tree trunk. The wood is then shaved to form an hourglass shape. A great deal of skill is needed to carve such a complicated design. The inside of the trunk is hollowed out by chiseling both ends so that a small fire can be started. It is controlled so that both the fires burn towards the trunk centre. Once this has finished the last part of the inside is rammed through.



Gum is spread around the top of the kundu so that the drum covering can be stuck down. The covering is made from lizard skin and is held in place with a cane rattan hoop. When the drum has been completed it is played on special occasions. On the right is a picture of a tribal ceremony where the men are playing the kundu. Singing and dancing are an important element to the native groups of the Sepik.