

The image features three wooden flutes standing vertically in the background, each with intricate carvings. In the foreground, two wooden gongs are lying horizontally. The entire scene is set against a background of the West Papuan flag, which consists of a white star on a blue field, with green and red horizontal stripes. The text is overlaid on the center of the image.

SOUNDING OUT THE MORNING STAR

# MUSIC AND WEST PAPUA



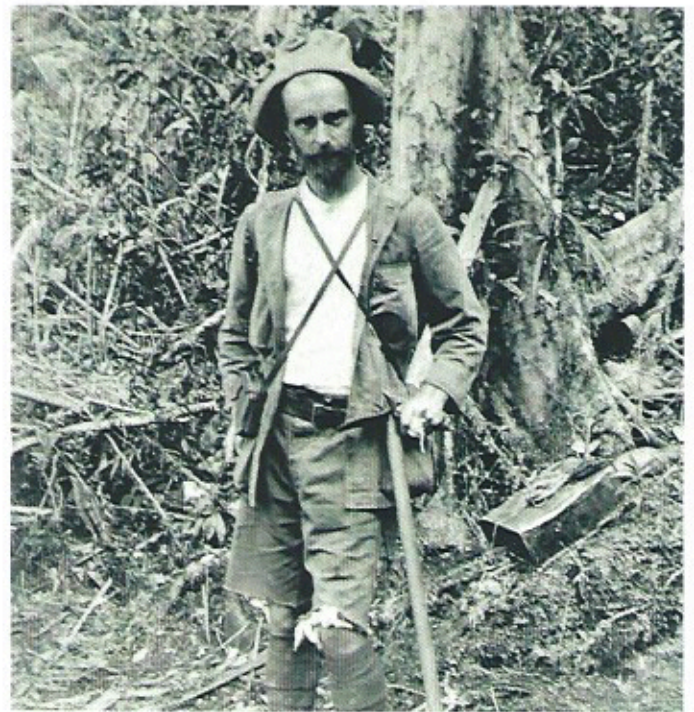
### Sound is a significant part of the human experience.

The ways that people create, distinguish and interpret sound can profoundly influence how they engage with, transform, and value their surroundings. Sound provides a vital means of communication and its uses shape social interaction between individuals and communities. Language and music can be tools for reinforcing cultural identity and mediating social stress or uncertainty. Similarly, the importance of environmental sounds is often deeply fused within world views related to perception, sense of place, and belonging.

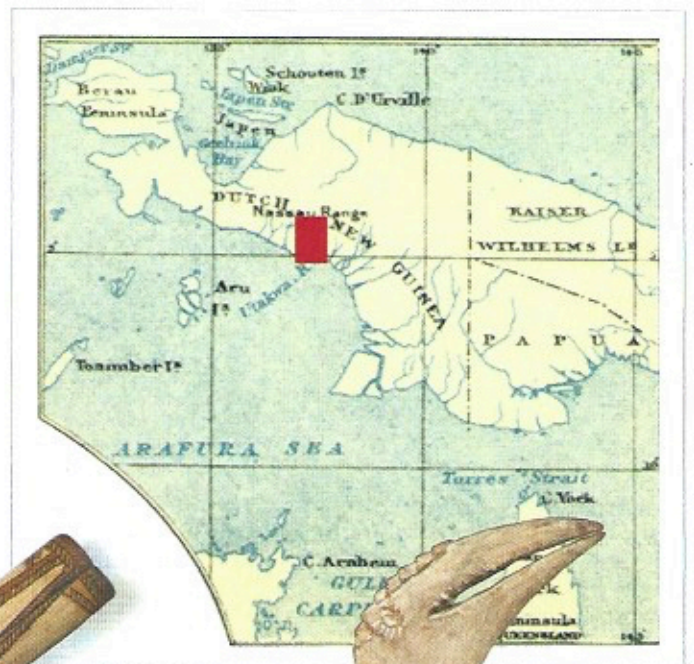
In this exhibition, the objects, images and sounds on display convey different aspects of the significance of sound and music in the history of the western half of the island of New Guinea.

**Located in the southwest Pacific Ocean**, New Guinea is the second largest island in the world and is both ecologically and culturally diverse, with hundreds of tribes and over 800 languages being spoken. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the island was of great interest to European naturalists and explorers and has a long history of colonization, predominantly from the Netherlands, Germany and Britain. Until 1962, the western half of the island was under the control of the Netherlands and was known as Dutch New Guinea.

In 1910-1911, a British Ornithologists' Union (BOU) team set out on an expedition to explore the interior of Dutch New Guinea. Their intention was to travel along the Mimika River and reach the summit of Mount Carstensz, today known as Puncak Jaya in the Sudirman Mountain Range. In the end, the expedition failed in its goal. Yet even before the team left Dutch New Guinea, one member was already planning to return...



Alexander F.R. Wollaston (P.126099.WLS)



Wollaston's expedition area,  
*The Geographical Journal* 1914



Kamoro drum  
(1914.231.40)



Bamboo jaw harps  
(1914.231.236, 237)



Carved hornbills  
(Z 9185, Z 9186)



From a young age Alexander F.R. Wollaston wanted to travel and explore the world. He joined the BOU expedition as a medical officer, botanist and entomologist. Wollaston was also a keen ornithologist, lover of music, and avid climber. During his time in New Guinea he was enthralled and fascinated by its people and environment, describing the region where he was camped as being 'heavy with the scent of vanilla' and venting his frustrations at being able to hear the distinctive call of the greater birds-of-paradise all around him but not being able to see them. Wollaston was also keen to learn more about the music of the local people, recognising that their drums were used in many aspects of their lives for social interaction.

Captivated by his experiences in New Guinea, Wollaston returned in 1912 with a team of over two-hundred people. This time the expedition planned to travel up and along the Utkwa (Otkwa) River, east of the area where the 1910-1911 expedition ventured. In addition to collecting plant and animal specimens, Wollaston obtained many significant objects from the Kamoro people in coastal lowland areas and from the

highland dwelling Amungme, whom he met whilst setting up supply camps and passing through or near settlements.

As well as collecting a number of the drums that had so interested him during the first expedition, Wollaston also sought out items that incorporated the feathers of birds, such as armbands, waistbands and a headdress made from the feathers of cassowaries, which were worn by Amungme men. Through the wearing of feathers, the mimicking of bird calls and ceremonial dances, local people demonstrated their close relationship to their environment and its inhabitants. A Kamoro story that tells of the origin of drums describes how an ancestor who had drowned was brought back to life by birds pecking at his joints. The objects that Wollaston collected reflect his attempts to grasp something of the connections he was witnessing between people and their environment and the part that sound played in their world.

Though the expedition was successful in acquiring objects from people and a vast amount of plant and animal specimens, Wollaston's team did not reach the summit of Carstensz due to treacherous climbing conditions, falling short by only a few hundred metres. It was a great disappointment for him and he planned to return for a third time, but the start of the First World War in 1914 and funding problems prevented this. Ultimately, the 1912-1913 expedition was his last trip to New Guinea. In the years that followed he served in the Royal Navy as a surgeon, an expedition to Mount Everest, married in 1923, and had children. He became a tutor at King's College, Cambridge in 1929. Tragically, on 3 June 1930 Wollaston was murdered by one of his students.



*Cassowary feather armbands (1914.231.166, 108)*



*Cassowary feather headdress (1914.231.211)*



*Greater Bird-of-Paradise  
(Paradisaea apoda)  
© Timothy G. Laman*



*Carved figure on a Kamoro  
drum (1924.1183)*





The Wenda Family © Dominic Brown and The Lani Singers

The importance of Wollaston's collection cannot be overstated. These objects, and those like them in other museums around the world, are still important to the descendants of their creators and to present-day West Papuans in general. They may have fallen silent, but their stories reverberate across the centuries.

**Sound - especially in the form of music** - continues to play a role in shaping West Papuan identity. Throughout the twentieth century, West Papuans experienced a complicated and dislocating history of colonialism. After the Dutch left, Indonesia took control and, following a controversial vote in 1969, in which local people became Indonesian citizens, a resistance movement began fighting for independence. The region's name has been changed many times over the years and has, itself, become a symbol of the continuing struggle for power. Today, Indonesia has divided the region into two provinces, but to its indigenous Papuan population it is one: West Papua.

West Papuan independence leaders have long recognized the power of music to challenge authority by demonstrating cultural resistance and to champion nationhood and unity. In the 1980s, the music of a group called Mambesak connected with many Papuans and inspired other music groups to promote identity through song. It has also been a way of expressing social stress and sharing concerns about cultural uncertainty. The arrest and subsequent killing of two of its members, Arnold Ap and Eddie Mofu, by Indonesian Special

Forces, only served to strengthen the resolve of West Papuans to convey their experiences through song.

**The music of The Lani Singers**, a group made up of West Papua independence campaigners Benny Wenda and his wife Maria and their children, has been at the forefront of bringing attention to the struggle. Benny and Maria are from the Baliem Valley, a central highlands region located northeast of the area where Alexander F.R. Wollaston travelled. In 2003, after being imprisoned and tortured, Benny and his family escaped West Papua and were eventually granted political asylum by the UK government.

Soon after their arrival in the UK, Benny and Maria started playing music for audiences. Maria explains that they feel music is a way of connecting with people who are unfamiliar with West Papua, and that, even though they do not sing in English people seem to understand their longing for a West Papua to which they can return. The Wendas believe that the music contains their human spirit.

Living in exile, Benny and Maria can now only imagine the sounds of the environment that shaped them and that is their home. Maria recalls her childhood in the mountains where women would race to the top, singing on the way up and on the way down, carrying laden bilum bags and babies.

The personal objects that Benny and Maria have loaned to this exhibition tell their story. They are active links to the past, present and future. Benny's ukulele and headdress have accompanied him on his journeys around the world to speak and sing about West Papua. The ukulele is painted with a Morning Star flag – the flag of an independent West Papua. For the supporters of the Free West Papua Movement, the Morning Star is a powerful symbol of unity and resistance to what they see as colonization. Benny's headdress is adorned with cassowary feathers, the skin of a bird-of-paradise and shells. Maria's bilum bag is a connection to the stories of her childhood, and songs on their CD albums convey hope for a future in which West Papua and its people are free.

For more information see:

Free West Papua Campaign <http://freewestpapua.org>  
 "Forgotten Bird of Paradise" and "The Road to Home"  
<http://www.dominic-brown.com>

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Cover: Kamoro drums collected by Alexander F.R. Wollaston (P126110.WLS) and the Morning Star flag.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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