

Waulking and waulking songs from the Outer Hebrides

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The women on the Outer Hebrides, for centuries kept alive a tradition of working their woollen cloth accompanied by song. The tradition was still alive about 50 years ago and has never died out completely.

The women shrank the cloth, making it strong enough to wear when it came off the weaving loom. This particular process is known as waulking (Pronounced as in walking). They used a long narrow board to put the cloth on that was raised on trestles known as the waulking *board*. The women sat around the waulking board with the cloth in their midst, as they waulked and sang pounding the cloth on the board, swaying backwards and forwards and from side to side as they worked.

Waulking Songs

Walk, love, *hù ill o ro*
White-handed youth, *ho i ibh ó*
Take a greeting for me, *hù ill o ro*,
To Harris, *och hoireann éo*
Take a greeting for me, *hù ill o ro* to Harris
To brown Ian Campbell, *ho i ibh ó* my sweetheart.
Tell him, *hù ill o ro* that I am well,
That I put *och hoireann éo*, the winter behind me;
Often I lay, *hù ill o ro* beneath your clothes
If I did it wasn't *ho i ibh ó* in the town,

In a lonely hollow *hù ill o ro* in the bower of branches,
The birds were *och hoireann éo* our watchmen,
And the wind of the mountains *hu ill o ro*, ripping across,
And water pure-clean *ho I ibh ó*. pure-cold healthy
Like proud wine *hù ill o ro*, pouring into a glass,
We mouth to mouth *och hoireann éo*. I wouldn't lie,
Your delicious mouth *hù ill o ro*, sucking my breath,
And me under the edge of your *ho i ibh ó* striped tartan.
Under the lip of the *hù ill o ro*, long ship,
Under the tongue of the deer *och hoireann éo* who bellows.

(Translation: Heather Larsson. The woman's voice in Gaelic Poetry. Ph. D 1999: 43)

The songs, which were of the waulker's own making from earlier generations and handed down in an oral tradition, were sung in their native Gaelic tongue. These songs were particular to waulking and known as *waulking songs*. Waulking songs were essentially *love songs*. They were about the life of the woman, but in relation to the men she loved or admired or other matters concerning love. The above waulking song is a translated extract of one of the women's love songs with the Gaelic refrains.

The women might also sing over their sorrow of their man drowned at sea, or of choosing a man – deciding on his merits or defects. They would sing of loosening their belts to accommodate their growing size when pregnant; or of noblemen, of one of the men's beautiful brown hair or the clothes he wore; and they would sing of crime or abuse too.

At a waulking there was a leader of the singing known as *the woman of songs or lilt*. It was she who set the tempo of the work, which began first with pounding the cloth. It was she who decided the moment when she would sing the call or verse and the rest of the women would answer with the response that was generally in vocables (i.e. sounds without meaning), such as "ho ro i o." As well as this, as the women sang and pounded the cloth whoops or cries would rise from one or the other of them. The woman of songs or lilt also chose which songs would be sung at a waulking. It was she who called one song after another. Waulking was a lengthy process and was sung from beginning to end and therefore a lot of songs would have to be chosen by the women of songs or lilt, one after the other. The choice of songs could always be different from one waulking to the next. This was because there was the possibility of constant variation of songs due to the large number known to the waulkers. The waulking songs had a large repertoire of songs.

The melodies of the waulking songs were pentatonic and modal and their poetry belonging to the songs has been traced back to the poetic tradition among women in Early Medieval Irish oral narrative verse.

A closer look at the waulking songs shows that they were categorised by the women according to what work was being done. Pounding the cloth, which has just been described, is only the first work process in this cloth tradition from the Outer Hebrides. There were several work processes (all of which are described in detail in the dissertation) and hence several work song types, each having their own tempo, character and content as well as mood. The songs are named after their particular work process. There were different traditions of waulking. In the tradition that will be considered here, known as a 'full waulking', the waulking process began with songs known as *waulking or heating songs*, because the cloth got hot in the pounding process. These were slow songs of lament. There were *improvisational songs*, sung by the young girls as they circuited the board, where they would banter about whose boyfriend was best, or which girl had stolen whose boyfriend and so on. There were possibly washing songs when the cloth was being washed in a tub or nearby stream. There were *folding songs* when the cloth was folded; *stretching and rolling songs* when the cloth was stretched and rolled, and *clapping songs* when the cloth was slapped with the palms of the hands to raise the small fibres upright on the cloth (this was known as raising the pile), and these songs were fast and happy songs. At the end of waulking there was the *intoning of prayers*, done by the oldest women at the board, involving sacred movements as the cloth was being blessed. This was known as the Consecration of the Cloth and was solemn in character. The person receiving the cloth would also be given an intoned blessing.

Waulking songs therefore had several specific types of song that belonged to the several different work processes that make up waulking altogether.

From this short orientation about waulking and the waulking songs from the Outer Hebridean cloth tradition of the past, there are already indications that the work is

complex (because apart from other things there are a number of different work processes) and that there is an extensive and intricate musical and poetic structure that supports the work, represented in the many waulking songs.



The cloth from the Outer Hebrides

The woollen cloth that the women made on the Outer Hebrides in pre-industrial times used to be known as *clo mor*, which is the Gaelic word for *strong* or *big* cloth. *Clo mor* was a woollen tweed. In the 10th edition of The Concise Oxford Dictionary it is described in the following way: ‘Tweed is a rough surfaced woollen cloth typically of mixed flecked colours, originally produced in Scotland’. Janet Hunter, a native of the island of Lewis and Harris, writes:

Perhaps the only exceptional feature about cloth in the pre-industrial age was that cloth woven in Harris was noted for the tasteful combination of colours used by the home weaver. (Janet Hunter - *The Islanders and the Orb*. 2001: 17).

Clo mor was never sold. When it was given away it was handed over with a blessing, both for the cloth and the person who was to wear it. This meant, amongst other things, that the cloth was not known off the Islands therefore. But around the 1850s, when industrialisation began to affect the Outer Hebridean cloth tradition, the women’s cloth left the Isles for the first time and trade began. *Clo mor* was immediately liked and demands soon came for it from around the world. It was liked because people realised that it was a universal cloth, both in design and use and could be worn across the social spectrum and on any occasion. *Clo mor* was then re-named Harris Tweed after the Outer Hebridean island of Harris. During the last century Harris Tweed was famous to the extent that it was worn as a statement of authenticity and it was even worn by main characters in classical literature and plays. The word tweed entered the English language – to be tweedy – meaning to be authentic, and from the country. The importance of this cloth to the Islanders and the British people as such is borne out in that it is protected by Acts of Parliament as late as 1993, binding Harris Tweed to its place of origin with the consequence that the wool that is now manufactured off the islands has still to be taken to the Outer Hebrides to be hand woven there. And today Harris Tweed competes on the world cloth market, as it has for the last 150 years, holding a noticeable position now as an exclusive fabric that maintains the qualities of an authentic weaving tradition.

It is the *clo mor* from the cloth making tradition of the Outer Hebrides that is at the

centre of concern in this dissertation.

Around the world, the women of the past had more or less the same method of making woollen cloth. There was no great difference between, for example, the way spinning and weaving were done. But the last work process, known as waulking, which was to shrink the woollen cloth slightly in order to stabilise, varied. On the Outer Hebrides, (and in the past the close geographical region too,) waulking was exceptional in how it was carried out. The women gathered together, all of whom would have been experts in their art of cloth making, dying and design. And as a crown to the final stage of their cloth making they engaged in a stylised work process that could sometimes last several hours and was sung from beginning to end. It is the way the women of the Outer Hebrides waulked their *clo mor* whilst singing their own waulking songs that I have chosen to analyse in this dissertation.

Field work on the Outer Hebrides

In 2001 I went to the Outer Hebrides to see waulking being re-enacted. This was on the Isle of Barra in the south of the archipelago. The Barra waulkers, who lived and worked in the community, had met on a weekly basis for more or less 20 years and would re-enact waulking whilst singing the waulking songs as well. Waulking is not needed any more. It has been replaced by other techniques. But the songs and the tradition live on, and the women sometimes show waulking at music festivals to demonstrate how this used to be done. I met up with them in their village hall. They joined two tables together to get the effect of the long waulking board. That evening there were nine waulkers and they sat around the table with a woollen blanket laid out on it. This blanket was a substitute for the long length of cloth that came off the loom that would have been there in the past. The waulkers grasped the edges of the woollen blanket in their hands and adjusted themselves so they were comfortable. When they began waulking, everything was suddenly in motion, and yet completely synchronised. The blanket was being lifted up and pounded back down on the table whilst the women were moving in all directions. They were singing in Gaelic in strong lyric voices, with the sound of the work – the rhythmic pounding – ever present as well. The women were looking down at their work, absorbed in what they were doing. The overall effect of seeing waulking was not totally unlike a boat being rowed at sea.

As I was watching the waulkers it became clear to me how waulking is an abundance of song, movement, socialising, bonding and celebration which goes far beyond the actual need for shrinking the cloth. Shrinking woollen cloth in its simplest form can be done by tossing the cloth into a stream or tub of water and trampling on it for a while. That is all that is actually required. Added to this impression was knowing that they were singing love songs whilst almost never singing of the work they were doing, which can be a characteristic of some work music types. Their songs were indicating that waulking was to do with the women's lives in some way as well as the work. It becomes obvious, therefore, that waulking is a carrier of something larger than the work itself.

It was also striking to observe how different this work and work music was. One of the reasons for this being that there was no audience and performer relation that I could detect. This was another delivery of music that I had never seen before: this was work music, where the women were connecting to their work – their cloth.

Having this opportunity to see waulking re-enacted by the Barra waulkers raised questions that I would not have been able to ask from reading about this topic or listening to tapes of the songs. This is because there was an overall picture that was there to be seen. I wanted to understand this music and this tradition and how they interrelated together. And to enquire into the difference in the delivery of this work music that became recognisable when seeing the waulkers working.

What is this dissertation about?

In this dissertation, I first have to decide whether the music in waulking is confined to the singing of the women or whether the work they do that creates a characteristic pounding effect is also music. This requires asking questions such as: how musical was their work? And was the waulking board merely a work table, or was it a musical instrument too? This is the first of several discussions that show that work music is an interesting exploration into different deliveries of music and oral poetry, even though the outcome sometimes proves to be quite familiar in the end. What is the musical form to waulking and the waulking songs? Because the process of waulking and the waulking songs have not yet been analysed together, and waulking has not yet been analysed, this is one of the challenges that needs to be enquired into. But how is it possible to find a foothold here in such an unusual tradition? It required exploring the poetic heritage from which the waulking song is derived. This proves to be a woman's poetic narrative tradition from Early Medieval Ireland from the 800s when Ireland and Scotland shared one single culture.

But waulking and the waulking songs also show that they are bound up to culture from far older times than Early Medieval Ireland. What is waulking a carrier of over and above the work itself? This question I find is bound up with Archaeoastronomical and Mythological contexts found in the Bronze Age. It was possible to trace this because the movements of the Sun itself are at the very heart of waulking and there was just sufficient material to reconstruct this. Waulking we will find contains the archetypal life of the Gaelic women in the cloth tradition of the Outer Hebrides of the past. From out of what comes to light here I consider whether waulking is there, not only for the sake of the work, but also there to serve every woman whoever waulked in these lonely islands to know who and what she was and what her responsibilities were to the community.

Every step of the way in this analysis brings out one surprise after another. But finally, in the last part of the analysis, the question as to whether this music is simply an interesting musical phenomenon of the past or whether it brings into focus, because it is work music, another way of looking at music opens up an interesting enquiry in itself.

The following is the first chapter of the analysis.

Finding the drum in waulking, introduction

In a musicological analysis, for example, that of classical, jazz or rock music, the instruments involved, such as the voices and orchestral instruments in an opera are already known. In fact most instruments and the music they are a part of are so familiar to us that we do not need to give them a second thought. But in this analysis where the enquiry is concerned with work music, namely the waulking songs and waulking, this is not the case, since another instrument apart from the women's voices still has to be established.

Waulking Songs are usually considered as a cappella songs. Therefore this uncertainty as to whether there was an instrument in waulking other than the voice alone is not usually questioned. The songs have been transcribed and published as a cappella songs too. But in this dissertation, because it is concerned with analysing the songs and the work together, the enquiry asks whether this was actually the case when waulking occurred. And just because the work process is being considered as well here, the sound the women made in the hand waulking (sometimes referred to as 'pounding', because they were pounding the cloth), and when raising the pile, which had a different sound because the cloth was being slapped, comes into question as to what its relation was to the songs. It cannot be taken for granted in this analysis as it has been hitherto, that this sound was work related only. But instead I consider that I have to find out, as the first demand of this enquiry, what its status in relation to the songs was, and whether the sound of the work that was so prominent a part of waulking might not be an integral part of the music.

The question

The question which is asked here in this initial stage of the analysis is:

Could the sound of the work that was obviously functional also have been drumming? This in turn would mean considering, amongst other things, that the waulking board would in fact have been a large communal drum upon which all the women played simultaneously as they sang and worked.

To establish the answer to this question is essential, not only for this part of the analysis but also for the analysis altogether. This is because if the songs and the work sounds were not musically related then the analysis would be concerned with two separate entities. But if the songs and the work sounds were musically related then the analysis would be concerned with an unusual musical unit of some kind.

The procedure

The first enquiry is concerned with looking for any musical elements between the singing and the work sounds, which are common to the structure found between a solo and accompanying instrument. What I am looking for are elements such as an intro and outro, interludes or variations in instrumental combination as the music progresses, and tempo and mood changes.

The second enquiry is concerned with rhythm. Was there a rhythm to the work sounds, or was it simple repetition? Was there a rhythmical musical interaction or even counterpoint between the work sounds and the voices? This is important to establish because, after all, this is the hall mark of a drum.

And lastly the enquiry is concerned with the waulking board and the characteristic features of a drum.

The sources used

The sources for this enquiry include:

Francis Collinson. 1966. *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland*.

Francis Collinson's musicological analysis of the waulking pulse from: J.L. Campbell and Frances Collinson, 1969. *Hebridean Folk Songs Vol.1*.

Miss G. Freer's description of waulking from the turn of the 1900s, quoted from the above. My own observations I made whilst watching waulking re-enacted on Barra.

Thorkild Knudsen's¹ waulking song tapes from his collection of them from Hogager.

Mircea Eliade. *Shamanism*. 1998



¹ Thorkild Knudsen was the last collector of waulking songs. He did his work in the 1950's and 1960's. All his work is found in Folkemusikcenteret in Hogager.

Enquiring into whether the structure between the voices and the work sounds in waulking is a musical one.

In this section the whole of waulking is considered in a time line. This is in order to see how the work sounds and the voices interrelate to each other in their sequence.

Waulking actually begins with the work sounds alone. I had the opportunity to see this on Barra when the women re-enacted the work. Whilst this had the functional side of establishing the tempo of the work in the group, there was also a musical effect. This is because the pounding, whilst slow, also had a tension and suspense in it. After a short period the singing began with one of the women giving the call. Francis Collinson, in his analysis of the waulking pulse, describes the work sounds which he heard between one song and the next as the waulking proceeded. Francis Collinson writes:

The thumping invariably commences before the singing of the song. And this preliminary rhythmic pulsing may vary in duration from the equivalent of a bar or two of the succeeding tune to perhaps nearly a full minute before the song begins. Such a setting up of pure rhythm becomes almost hypnotic in its insistence and excitement accumulating in its intensity, to the point when one feels that it positively demands a song to go with it. (Campbell and Collinson, Vol. I 1969: 220)

Hand waulking is a long work process, and Collinson writes that it could last from half an hour to two hours. So there would be many times when there would be the alternating between the voices and the work sounds. When the hand waulking was finished there was no more work sounds for the next four work processes. There was only singing, but who was singing varied. When the hand waulking was over the girls would circuit the board. Here there was a contrast in the voices from that heard in the hand waulking where every one at the board was singing. Now the solo voices of the girls were heard. After the girls had finished singing, there was the washing of the cloth, the folding, stretching and rolling of the cloth, and all this time, it was the voices of all the women, including the girls that were heard. But when the raising of the pile began the work sounds were introduced again. But now it was the voices of the women only, along with the work sounds which were heard, as the women sang to the girls. There are no more work sounds after this. Finally, in the Consecration of the Cloth there was intoning either by all of those present or by the single voice of the oldest woman there.

The following is a diagram to show the combination of the work sounds with the voices in waulking that have just been described.

Hand waulking		Circuiting	Washing	Folding	Stretching and rolling	Raising pile	Consecration of the cloth
	Singing together	Girls' solos	Singing together	Singing together	Singing together	Women singing to the girls	Intoning Single voice
Work sounds	Work sounds					Work Sounds	

This diagram shows that the timeline in waulking presents a continually changing progression between the work sounds and the voices. There is also a balance in the whole structure as well, formed through the work sounds and the singing coming at the beginning and the end, flanked by the work sounds only at the start and the intoned consecration as the final part, as though one was an intro and the other an outro. Whilst in between there is singing, that is varied through who amongst the women and girls is singing.

The balanced overall structure that is found in waulking between the work sounds and the voices, the interesting variations of the voices and the interludes between the songs, and the marked beginning and end are what is found in instrumental combinations.

Therefore, in this first part of the enquiry, there are indications that there is a musical relation between the voices and the work sounds. On the one hand this is basic

instrumental form, yet on the other hand it is also the demands of the work. The next considerations are concerned with whether there were tempo and mood variations in waulking.

The contrast in tempo and feeling between the two times the voice and the work sounds are combined

Hand waulking begins very slowly. From a functional point of view, this was originally due to the cloth being heavy and wet because it was sodden with sheep's urine². And in the raising of the pile, the work sounds were fast, because now the cloth was damp or dry and the work required rapid hand movements. It was for functional reasons that these two work processes had a difference in speed. But in both these cases, whilst the tempo of the work sounds is appropriate to the work, it is equally appropriate to the type of song sung in each case. In the slow hand waulking, the songs were lament songs and the tempo was appropriate to this type of song. In contrast to this where the pile was being raised, the clapping songs were fast and joyous.

So, in this role that the work sounds had between function and the songs, it fulfils both, on the one hand fulfilling the demands of the work and on the other hand similar to two contrasting movements in music. To use traditional musical terms of tempo and character, the hand waulking I suggest is characterised by the term Grave, and the clapping songs by the term Allegretto.

In hand waulking there was sometimes a gradual increase in tempo from very slow to somewhat faster as the work progressed. The gradual increase in tempo occurred, on the one hand for functional reasons because the sheep's urine in the cloth was being pressed out of it, and was therefore lighter and easier to move. When this happened the songs gradually changed in content from lament, to the beginnings of hopefulness. This was another contrast between these two work processes therefore. It is included here because it is a known musical effect particularly in drumming as a means of creating excitement and changes in consciousness such as trance, found in some kinds of music.

An eyewitness of waulking at the turn of the century writes about this, and although the increase in tempo seems extreme in this case, it might not have been. It is quoted here because it illustrates the point made above. Miss Goodrich Freer writes:

The movements of the women are at first slow, but soon the process becomes so rapid that we can distinguish nothing but the swaying of their figures. (Campbell and Collinson, Vol.1 1969:9)

In considering the results of this part concerned with tempo and feeling, as was found in the first section, there seems to be a functional as well as musical relation that are inseparable. There was the hand waulking and the songs of lament, and the raising of the pile and the clapping songs, as well as a contrast between the two that was summed up as Grave and Allegretto. Also the gradual increase in tempo which sometimes occurred in the hand waulking whilst being functional, is a known effect in some kinds of music particularly characteristic of a drum in building up suspense and tension, and this is what is found in the work sounds here also.

However, even though musical characteristics are being found, such as the likeness to an instrumental combination, and different 'movements', I still consider these insufficient material to conclude that there might be two instruments in waulking. What I am looking for also are signs that there were musical interactions between the voices and the work sounds, identical to those found between voices and drumming. The result of this enquiry is dependent on the outcome of the following considerations.

2 Sheep's urine was used in waulking to help shrink it, set the dyes, soften the wool and remove excess fat from it.

Is there a musical relation between the voices and the work sounds in waulking similar to that found between voices and drumming?

This section is primarily a discussion based on Francis Collinson's analysis of the waulking song pulse and these considerations. Collinson noticed that there were rhythmic patterns in the work sounds. But because of the theoretical angle from which he came, which was to consider the songs and the work as two separate entities, he did not consider these rhythmic patterns to be drumming, even though he experienced them as such. Here, I use what he found; but because my theoretical angle is different from his, namely to look beyond the functionality of the rhythmic patterns, my task is to see whether what he found was not music too.

Frances Collinson writes on the nature of the rhythmic pulse of waulking:

The first and third thumps (of the cloth on the board) are more strongly accented than the second and fourth, making a vigorous, strongly accented rhythm, a rhythm which becomes strangely mesmeric in its insistence. After a minute or so, this Thump, thump, Thump, thump becomes as exciting as an African drum beat. Then the leader begins to sing, and the chorus chime in with the refrain. (F. Collinson, *Traditional and National Music of Scotland* 1966: 68).

And here he already describes the natural alternation of strong and weak beats found in music as well as vividly describing his own musical experience of these work sounds where he even refers to them as being similar to a drum. Collinson finds more diversity in these patterns in his analysis of them three years later.

The author writes:

The standard rhythm of the waulking song tune is of two pulses to a bar of 2/4 or 6/8 time. The most frequent accentuation is that of a strong beat, followed by one less strong. Sometimes, however, a bar of 3/4 time is introduced into the tune, most often at the last bar, which has the deliberately calculated effect of reversing the position of the accents in the bar in the next repetition of the tune, the accent reverting to the normal on the succeeding rotation, and so on - a sure sign that the singers feel the pulse of the thumping to be of a musical as well as functional effect. In some songs the elaboration of the further bars of three instead of two pulses are introduced, throwing the accents into a series of cross rhythms. (Campbell and Collinson Vol.1.1969: 220)

The following are examples Francis Collinson gives of other patterns of

A variation of the strong and weak beats in the bar:

$$\begin{array}{cccccccc} \text{||} & \frac{2}{4} & \overset{>}{x} & x & | & x & x & | & \overset{>}{x} & x & | & x & x & \text{||} & \text{etc.} \\ & & f & pp & p & & f & pp & p & & & & & & \end{array}$$

Where the second pulse was so weak that it gave the effect almost of a rest:

$$\begin{array}{cccccccc} x & \text{r} & | & \overset{>}{x} & x & | & \overset{>}{x} & \text{r} & | & \overset{>}{x} & x & \text{||} & \text{etc.} \\ & & & f & p & & f & & & & & & & \end{array}$$

Other rhythmic patterns:

$$\begin{array}{cccccccc} \text{||} & \frac{2}{4} & \overset{>}{x} & x & | & \overset{>}{x} & x & | & \overset{>}{x} & x & | & \overset{>}{x} & x & \text{||} & \text{etc.} \\ & & mf & & f & mf & & f & mf & & & & & & \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{cccccccc} \text{||} & \frac{2}{4} & \overset{>}{x} & \overset{>}{x} & | & \overset{>}{x} & x & | & \overset{>}{x} & \overset{>}{x} & | & \overset{>}{x} & x & \text{||} & \text{etc.} \\ & & f & & p & f & & p & & & & & & & \end{array}$$

And here the verse has four strong beats, and the refrain four weak beats:

$$\begin{array}{cccccccc} \text{||} & \frac{2}{4} & \overset{>}{x} & \overset{>}{x} & | & \overset{>}{x} & \overset{>}{x} & | & \overset{>}{x} & x & | & \overset{>}{x} & x & \text{||} & \text{etc.} \\ & & f & & p & & & & & & & & & & \end{array}$$

In the reversal of strong and weak beats and cross rhythms, Collinson writes how this was ‘deliberately calculated’ and that the women felt both the musicality as well as the functionality of the work sounds. And it is here that I consider that Frances Collinson is describing drumming. But he concludes that this was for functional reasons. Collinson writes:

The question also arises as to whether or not such differences of pulsation accents result from a modification or difference in the actual movements at the waulking board. Such differences of hand movements are indeed said to exist, but would have been described as a variation between one locality and another rather than within the course of the same waulking. (Campbell and Collinson Vol. 1. 1969: 221)

Francis Collinson found this work sound sufficiently musical to include it in his analysis of the waulking songs. However, despite him finding characteristics that could be attributed to a drum, in its musical counterpart with the waulking songs as well as in his emotional reception of it, he called the sound the waulking pulse and concludes that: ‘The thumping of the cloth on the board is of course primarily functional to the process of shrinking the cloth. (Campbell and Collinson, Vol. I. 1969: 220)

But in these considerations, I conclude that what is found here is similar to what has been found so far in the two previous sections. Namely that what is functional in waulking is equally musical, and in this case shows that the women were drumming as they sang and worked.

What has been found so far therefore is the similarity between the work sounds and the singing and the musical structure between two instruments. That there was a contrast in tempo and feeling between the work sounds and the songs, namely grave and allegretto, similar to that of contrasting movements found in music. And lastly, that with the help of Francis Collinson's analysis of the waulking pulse, which showed the musical intent of the women found in his rhythmic examples above, I argued that the pulse was musical to the extent that the women were drumming as they were singing and working.

The following is to show these results in a diagram.

Hand waulking		Circuiting	Washing	Folding	Stretching and rolling	Raising pile	Consecration
Intro	Singing	Girls' solos	Singing	Singing	Singing	Women's solo	Intoning
Drum	Drum					Drum	
Grave						Allegretto	

Thorkild Knudsen's waulking song tapes

I used Thorkild Knudsen's waulking song tapes in order to have another way from which to approach this enquiry. I wanted to listen to the women singing and the sound of the work undisturbed by anything else. What I heard were the women singing to the low rhythmic sound of the work, which was connected musically to the voices, giving the impression that this was women singing to some kind of drumming.

The next and final consideration in this part is whether the waulking board had characteristics of a drum to the extent that it can be called one.

Is there a communal drum in waulking?

One of the greatest hindrances for Francis Collinson and the other collectors of waulking songs to begin to consider the work sounds as drumming, was the waulking board itself, which creates the overwhelming image of work alone. It was either made of makeshift wood, from driftwood, a borrowed barn door removed from its hinges, or even planks taken up that formed a bridge across the nearby stream. And the women sat around the waulking board on whatever they could find in the way of chairs or boxes. None of this gave the picture that the collectors or others would have had of a drum, because they were used to seeing finished instruments that were recognizable without a doubt, and played in the appropriate places too. Furthermore, they were used to a drum being played by a single person and most frequently by a man. So the image of several women playing on a communal drum must have been far from their minds.

Finding the drum in waulking

The way I approach this enquiry is to first find a generic concept of the drum as such. The one that I consider appropriate for here is derived from the perception the shaman had of the drum, because it defines the instrument without describing a specific kind. Mircea Eliade writes:

We will only note that the drum depicts a microcosm with its three zones - sky, earth, underworld... (Mircea Eliade. Shamanism. 1996:173)

This describes the three main parts of the generic drum: the upper, middle and lower parts. The upper part ('Sky') is above the physical drum. The middle part or ('Earth') is the skin of the drum which is played upon. The lower part (the 'Underworld') is the resonating area. Into this overall concept of the drum, there is any number of variations. In asking whether there is a drum to be found in waulking requires looking

at the waulking board and the women who sit around it, as well as including what has already been found here and seeing whether this corresponds with the concept of a drum as such. There are the three areas. There is the upper, the middle and the lower parts. But in the case of waulking, the drum is particular unto itself. The upper part, or sky, was filled with the songs of the women that told about their love and encounters with their men. The middle part, Earth or skin of this drum, is a combination of wood and cloth, where the cloth is also wet or damp. The lower part, or Underworld or resonating area of the drum, was open, though the women themselves who sit around it close it to a certain extent with their legs and feet. And the ground itself defines the drums lower limits. As well as these particular characteristics the waulking drum was a communal drum, and a woman's drum.

But just as the planks across the stream that were temporarily borrowed became the waulking board because of the purpose the women gave to it, so was it in the case of the drum at a waulking – it became one, not only for the basic characteristics that it shares with a drum as such, but also because it was used as one. This women's communal drum had other characteristics of its own that must also be included here. In reality, the drum was one and the same as the waulking board; just as the work and the drumming were two sides of the same coin. In waulking, therefore, where the cloth, work and the drum interplayed inseparably together, work was music and music was work.

How was this drum played?

When I was watching waulking being re-enacted on Barra, the women grasped the cloth in both their hands, when they were hand waulking. The cloth was raised up simultaneously by all the women and then pounded back down on the table with the flat part of their closed hands. This was how they played the drum in the hand waulking. In raising the pile where the open palms of the women hands slapped the cloth in rapid alternating motion, I found this was identical to one of the drumming techniques used in playing the congas. Waulking therefore, when considered as drumming, displays its own particular drumming technique as well as that identifiable in known drumming.

The sound of this drum

The sound of the drum was bound up, not only with the wood, but with the cloth too, where both were always heard together. Therefore the cloth was not only cloth during waulking that was there to be finished. The cloth was a part of the drum itself. It came between the hands of the women and the board, so it sounded together with the wood, thus influencing the drum sound. The drum sound had to have varied between the hand waulking and the raising of the pile, because the cloth was sodden in the one and much dryer, if not dry in the other. This would also have been a musical feature. In Thorkild Knudsen's tapes of waulking where the cloth was wet, in the hand waulking the sound was dampened and the voices nasal. But today, on Barra, the voices are lyrical and the drum sound sharp because the cloth is dry in the re-enacted waulking.

Summing up

In summing up this first part of the analysis on Finding the Drum in Waulking, the following elements have come to light: A structure was found between the voices and the work sounds that had musical aspects to it similar to what is expected in two instruments where the one is the solo instrument and the other the accompanying one. Tempo and mood change was also found. The relation between the voices and the work sounds was both a rhythmical one and even contrapuntal to a degree. I found that listening to the tapes of the songs and the work confirmed the growing evidence that the work sounds were used as drumming. Finding the drum in waulking showed that there was one – a women's communal drum – which had characteristics of its own. And when considering how it was played and what it sounded like, both these appeared to be drum related as well.

When waulking was over, the borrowed planks from across the stream or the door from the barn or whatever was used would be put back. Any sign of the waulking board or communal drum vanished, without a trace. But the finished cloth that had been a part of the music itself was now seen both in the community and out at sea in the cloths the people wore.

Conclusion

I find that the waulking songs that are usually considered as a cappella songs, as well as having been transcribed and printed as such, can no longer be thought of in this way. But the waulking songs are here considered as a combination of women's voices accompanied by their own communal drumming. Therefore waulking is concluded here to have had two instruments, namely women's voices and a communal drum.

I can therefore draw out a first theory from this investigation, namely:

Waulking was a musical whole.

Jane Brewer, 2008

Inge Bruland Tutor