
AFRICA AND INDONESIA RECONSIDERED

by

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In 1964 the late Dr A. M. Jones published a book entitled *Africa and Indonesia: the evidence of the xylophone and other musical and cultural factors*, in which he set out a quantity of data which he considered in sum to constitute evidence for cultural and social contact between Africa and Indonesia at a period well before the heyday of Portuguese exploration. Not all of his points had to do with music, but to his case music was central and pre-eminent and the musical and musicological arguments he presented were detailed enough to carry a great deal of conviction.

The theory of cultural contacts between Indonesia and Africa was not original, nor did Jones pretend that it was. The Indonesian archipelago possessed craft capable of long sea voyages; the south equatorial current streams inexorably from Java towards Madagascar, and in the season of the south-west monsoon sufficient northing can be made for a sailing vessel, even one incapable of tacking, to gain either the counter-current that dips south or to take advantage of the deflection of the winds near the equator and turn eastward again. It would be more surprising if some such contact had never occurred, even if only very occasionally, than if it had. Furthermore, the probable relationship between a Malaysian language and Malagasy, the language of Madagascar, had been recognised as early as 1603 by Frederic de Houtmann, the Dutch compiler of a word list cited by Malzac (1926).

The similarities between the xylophones of the *gamelan* orchestras of Indonesia and African xylophones, the focus of Jones's argument, had been noticed by several previous writers, but never before discussed so intensively. For instance, though Tracey (1948) makes no suggestion of any Indonesian influence on the Chopi, Jones is able to advance consequently non-contingent examples from his book to underpin similarities with south-east Asia not only in xylophone tuning (pp. 133-136) but in the actual complexities of style. Accident, or outside influences on both traditions, might conceivably account for the former, and for the slightly less convincing correspondences in scales – the aesthetic acceptability of sounds is, after all, ultimately physically based – but the technique of interlocking and dovetailing of parts to produce not only polyrhythms of a set order but an independent overriding rhythmic system (pp. 256-261) demands a degree of sophistication unlikely to have arisen independently in two regions known to have been in contact. It is interesting to note that this probable Indonesian influence is not detected in Chopi music unassociated with *timbila* xylophone *migodo* dances; Valenca (1975) finds close similarities between the songs of Chopi children and those of African children in general.

Interestingly enough Sorrell (1990) is either unaware of or chooses not to note the possible connections between Indonesian and African xylophones. It is, in fact, easy to understand why; and this apparent reason gives some grounds for stressing that the resemblances, considerable as they are, do also embody striking evidences of autochthonous elaboration or possibly, in the African case, simplification almost to the level of deconstruction. While the Chopi *timbila* (Tracey 1948) and the *amadinda/akadinda* of the Ganda court (Kubik 1960, 1964) play as ensembles, the instruments which accompany the xylophones are generally either human voices or untuned, and the actions of the performers constitute an essential part of the performance, whereas the constituents of the *gamelan* are far more instrumentally varied and the *gambang*, the true xylophone with wooden bars, does not predominate among them.

This is perhaps a cavil, since the principles of construction and tuning apply equally to all instruments made of metal or wooden laminae (*wilah*), and the *gambang kayu* is frequently played as a solo instrument. In Africa metal struts are virtually confined to the much smaller hand-held *mbila* played without mallets (*tabuh*). It is curious that Jones does not invoke, indeed rejects, the *rebab* or bowed lute as supporting his contentions, though he mentions the instrument several times as a constituent of the *gamelan*. Not only the patently recently introduced *engididi* fiddle in Uganda (Kubik 1964) but also the *ramgyib* of the Nama, the *ramkie* of the Cape farmlands, bears an obvious resemblance to it, though it occurs independently of, and in fact at some distance from, the xylophone ensembles of the Chopi. Jones may be right in claiming for *engididi* and *rebab* a common origin from Persia; a case can also be made out for the derivation of both via the *rabequinha* of the Portuguese (Nurse 1994).

The ethnological significance of the similarities of construction and tuning of the xylophones, though apparently misinterpreted by Ellis (1885), and not remarked by Tracey or Sorrell, have been weighed up on several occasions, most notably by Hornbostel in 1911 and again in more detail in 1933. In 1935 Kunst presented a conference paper on musicological evidence for linkages, laying particular emphasis on the close correspondences in tuning, which Jones quotes at length. These similarities are dismissed by Sachs (1940) with the comment that "the advanced xylophone of African primitives, like many other of their implements, was not developed by themselves but borrowed from the higher civilization of the Malays, who had a strong influence on Bantu Africa" (p. 54), though, considering the diversity of African scales, that might not be an altogether convincing argument when trying to account for the persistence of similarities in tuning (p. 239).

Despite his recalcitrance on the topic of African inventiveness, Sachs fails to stipulate any other examples of borrowings. The importance of Jones's book, in contrast, lies at two quite different levels. At one, he presents a case for an essentially auditory diffusion, of words and musical sounds and techniques, from the East Indian

archipelago, and possibly beyond it, not only to the eastern fringes of Africa but also to the western seaboard and hinterland; at the other, he endeavours to support his main contention with evidence of a far greater though less well defined expansion of the cultural influence of Indonesia.

The contexts are treated as being either equivalent or closely connected, but in fact they are not necessarily either. The conditions for the spread of a language or other set of auditory signals are not dependent on those for the adoption of customs or material techniques. The extension of the compass, gunpowder and the consumption of noodles from China to western Europe in the late middle ages was in no way associated with linguistic or musical influences. The contrasts are evident especially where a *lingua franca* emerges to satisfy a narrow set of functions relating to interactions between different societies with only enough in common to need to communicate over a limited range of concepts. Neo-Melanesian, for example, which has a grammar and syntax largely Austronesian but a vocabulary in the main recognisably derived from English (Steinbauer 1969, Mihalic 1971), is spoken in areas to which, on the whole, the anglophone peoples do not adapt readily. It is only when the societies merge that *lingue franche* can go on to become true languages by joining seamlessly the fabrics which have gone into their formation. An analogous syncretism might be anticipated where two musical traditions fuse; and in fact this is to be found frequently with the assimilation of formal and stylistic traits to an array of instruments which have evolved quite independently, as is apparent, for instance, in the emergence of jazz.

Contrasts in functional domains may nevertheless persist, as may be seen in the well-known case of the Norman/Saxon interface in English words relating to livestock: where these refer to the husbandry of animals they tend to be Saxon-derived (sheep, ox, hog, fowl), while when the same animals appear on the table they become Norman mutton, beef, pork and poultry. This may also be an example of the tendency, to which Jones draws attention, for a generalised term in one language to take on a specialised significance in another language by which it is borrowed; he holds, probably correctly, that this gives an important clue to the direction of the borrowing (and, in the foregoing example, would help to confirm that modern English is basically a Saxon language rather than a Norman one). Something similar may be described in the adaptation of the penny-whistle and the guitar, but not of Western piping or guitar music, to African village scales (cf Malamusi 1994 *inter alia*). Here it is the introduced elements which have taken on a specialised significance in an essentially unchanged African idiom. At this level Jones's hypothesis is certainly a tenable one.

It is when the hypothesis is extended and expanded, apparently in an effort to amass cumulative evidence for interaction between the cultures, that it most forfeits credibility. The non-auditory examples the author gives extend through ship-building, principally methods of designing and fashioning hulls and ways of rigging, cloth

dyeing, metal-working, decorative patterns, and the popular board game known by various names, some related to the Arab term *mankala* or variants on the Bantu radical *-solo*. This game can easily be dismissed as evidence of immediate contact between the two culture zones: it is far too widely distributed within Africa and in the Near, Middle and Far East, around the Indian Ocean and even to Micronesia (though, pertinently enough, neither it nor any similar game is found in Melanesia) for it to be possible to stipulate any specific area of origin.

In his review of Jones's book in this Journal (1966/7) the Africanist M. D. W. Jeffreys drew attention to the two aspects of the author's approach, and while seeming to give some half-grudging acknowledgement on the musical side poured erudite scorn on the supporting, non-musical evidence. For much of what he said he had a great deal of justification; unfortunately, though, he went on to construct an alternative set of explanations of his own which, even at the time he wrote, were completely untenable. He attempted to set Jones's findings on their head, and to establish that, far from the specified elements indicating Indonesian influence in Africa, they represented the cultural consequences of African impingement on the Far East. Given the absence of any long-range African maritime culture he was impelled to account for this by postulating an extensive slave trade.

According to him, the outcome of slave trading conducted by Arabs accounted for the presence in Melanesia of a large black population. There certainly was some export of slaves from Africa to the Far East, but there is no evidence whatsoever that it was more than a luxury trade; nor would one expect anything else where at the destination there was already no shortage of labour. Jeffreys quoted no direct evidence of the trade, nor is there any mention of it on the scale he stipulates in any of the excerpts given in Theal (1898-1903) or Freeman-Grenville (1962). Bellwood (1986), in his review of theories respecting the ways in which the western Pacific region might have been populated, does not so much as mention it. Jeffreys, however, ascribed all the cultural factors cited by Jones, except those of which he denied the existence, with a few more in addition, as supporting this hypothesis. He made no attempt to explain why all these black people lived at some distance from the centres of Indonesian trade rather than, as in the analogous American situation, being concentrated in those areas where their labour would have been most useful.

In drawing on bodily characteristics he displayed both an inadequate knowledge of their true heritability and an unhappy reliance on outdated authorities. About philology he was better informed, but he tended to stretch what evidence he supposed there was well beyond what it could support. For instance, he claimed that "phonological similarities" between the two enormously wide categories of "African" and "Melanesian" languages, reported by Sir Harry Johnston and Father Torrend, neither of whom spent any appreciable time, or travelled widely, in Melanesia, were sufficient to establish a relationship. On the whole his arguments were no more probable than those adduced by Jones.

This prompted me to answer him in a letter published in a subsequent issue of the *Journal* (Nurse 1968), not, as he appeared to think, in support of Jones, but in refutation of his own mistakes. The argument became quite heated (Jeffreys 1968, Nurse 1969) until wisely stopped by the editor. As with most such altercations neither side could claim absolute victory. Jeffreys died without ever having visited Melanesia himself (and it was suggested that it might be tactful of me not to attend his funeral); I, still vexed by the reflection that I might, after all, have been in the wrong, eventually left Africa and settled for a time in Melanesia, in Papua New Guinea.

During the thirty or so years that have elapsed the controversy has died away. Even Jones himself ignored the argument and pursued a more placid line of work during his few remaining years. Diffusionism has ceased to evoke fierce reactions; there has perhaps supervened a greater readiness to accept that unassociated groups of people faced with similar objectives may devise similar answers; much as Darwinian processes encourage the evolution of different species faced with similar physical challenges into similar phenotypes often determined at totally different genetic loci. Few scientists at any time, and perhaps none at all now, would consider the black peoples of the Pacific and the black peoples of Africa as having a close common origin, or see the influence of Indonesia on Africa as any greater or more remarkable than that of the Sung dynasty on the Italian *quattrocento*. Nonetheless, a few salient points do remain, and the subject can still bear some discussion.

Since the argument, at least on the part of Jeffreys, centred less on the civilizations of the Malay peninsula and archipelago than on possible equivalences between Melanesians and Africans, it might not come amiss to look first at the possible musical affinities between these, starting with a consideration of their musical instruments. The sound-producing instruments of Oceania, including those of Melanesia, are treated in detail by Fischer (1958). There are xylophones in Melanesia, but their distribution is limited and they are primitive in design; they are found only in the Bismarck Archipelago and are made up of two pieces of wood laid across the thighs and struck with beaters. They appear not to form parts of orchestras. There are no hand-held lamellophones, and rattles, unlike those in Africa, are not sounded usually as part of movement of the body but independently, as they generally are in Europe.

It is as difficult to identify correspondences among membranophonic drums as it is to regard the common presence of Jews' harps or bull-roarers as signs of contact: after all, these, like Pandean pipes and rattles, are found in Europe as well as Africa and Oceania. Melanesian membranophonic drums are not free-standing; they are steadied with one hand holding either a handle or a narrowing of the body of the instrument. They are often open at one end. The slit drum, characteristic of and widespread in the Pacific islands, is as absent from Africa as it is from Europe. As in Africa, there are musical bows, both monochordal and having two or more strings, which have derived from hunting bows, but the derivation in both cases is usually so

obvious that the independence of the development of the instrument can be in no doubt; one might more easily claim the presence in both regions (and in Asia, the Americas and Europe) of the hunting bow itself as evidence of cultural contact. Among the traditional chordophones of Melanesia there are no harps or zithers.

Nor does physical anthropology supply any more convincing evidences of close similarity. Both Africans and Melanesians live principally in the tropics, and that both have shown some measure of physical adaptation to them is unremarkable. The ostensibly common factor of pigmentation actually shows wide variation; the skin colours both differ to the eye of the trained observer and may be shown histologically to be dissimilar. There are environmental similarities and contrasts, and the latter are clearly shown in the differences in gross measurable dimensions. Africans are mainly plains-dwellers living under conditions which are either arid or subject to frequent periods of marked aridity, and their bodily shapes reflect this; the distribution of Melanesians is attributable to dissemination by sea, their physiques are those of seafarers and rain-forest-dwellers, and the highly characteristic build of New Guinea highlanders is notably different from that of the mountaineers of Africa. On a molecular level we may expect indications of ancestry deeper and more ancient than any selectively regulated spurious resemblances. There are striking differences between Africans and Melanesians in the types of aberrant haemoglobins they display (Hill et al 1989), and even the occasional ostensible biochemical similarities (Kirk 1986) are more likely to represent selective parallels than close genetic affinities. Most conclusively of all, studies at the level of the DNA itself, summarised and amplified by Soodyall (1993), attest a very ancient distinctiveness of African human stock quite unlike the ancestral Melanesian pattern. Interestingly, though, these studies do confirm the movement of human genes from Indonesia into Africa (most probably via Madagascar), though none of these derive from Melanesia.

Despite all the mass of evidence to the contrary, the suggestion of identity or close relationship between Africans and Melanesians is still occasionally heard. Not as frequently these days as when I first went to Melanesia; and so I shall end with an anecdote. I arrived at Jackson's Airport in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea, in October 1977, half expecting to be met by a representative of the organisation for which I was to work; but as I emerged from the customs hall and looked around there seemed to be nobody to meet me, and I could pause to assess whether the physical identity between Melanesians and Africans asserted by Jeffreys could, after all, exist. I gazed out over the mass of dark faces, and was reassured: to a physical anthropologist knowledgeable about Africa there could be no doubt that what I was looking at was no gathering of Africans. And then, far back, at the edge of the crowd, I detected one face which could only originate from somewhere between the Sahara and the Limpopo. My heart sank; how does one apologise to a ghost? The young lady concerned became aware that I was staring at her, and to my surprise waved and made her way towards me. When she was close enough she greeted me in Cewa. She had been an orphan adopted in Malawi by a British couple

I had known there, now living in Port Moresby, who, hearing that I was expected, had sent her along to surprise me.

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