

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTATION AMONG THE SAN (BUSHMEN) OF THE CENTRAL KALAHARI

by

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The G/wi and G//ana of the Central Kalahari fall into the Central division of the Bushman peoples, and speak languages resembling Nama¹. To refer to them as San, as recommended by Wilson and Thompson² and resolved at a meeting of anthropologists, sociologists, historians and linguists in Johannesburg in 1970, might therefore seem infelicitous; their word for *person* is not cognate with *san* but with the *keboi/keð/kewa* set found among the Hottentots, or Khoi. The author nevertheless feels bound for the sake of consistency to follow the ruling of a meeting which he could not attend but where a number of his colleagues supported the change in nomenclature.

These two groups of San, then, are to be found in the desert regions east of Ghanziland in Botswana. They are hunter-gatherers, and migrants rather than nomads, insofar as the wanderings of each band tend to be cyclical over the same territory³. Despite their retention of a largely traditional way of life, they have significant contact with the Ghanziland farms, where some of them have settled as workers and a good number

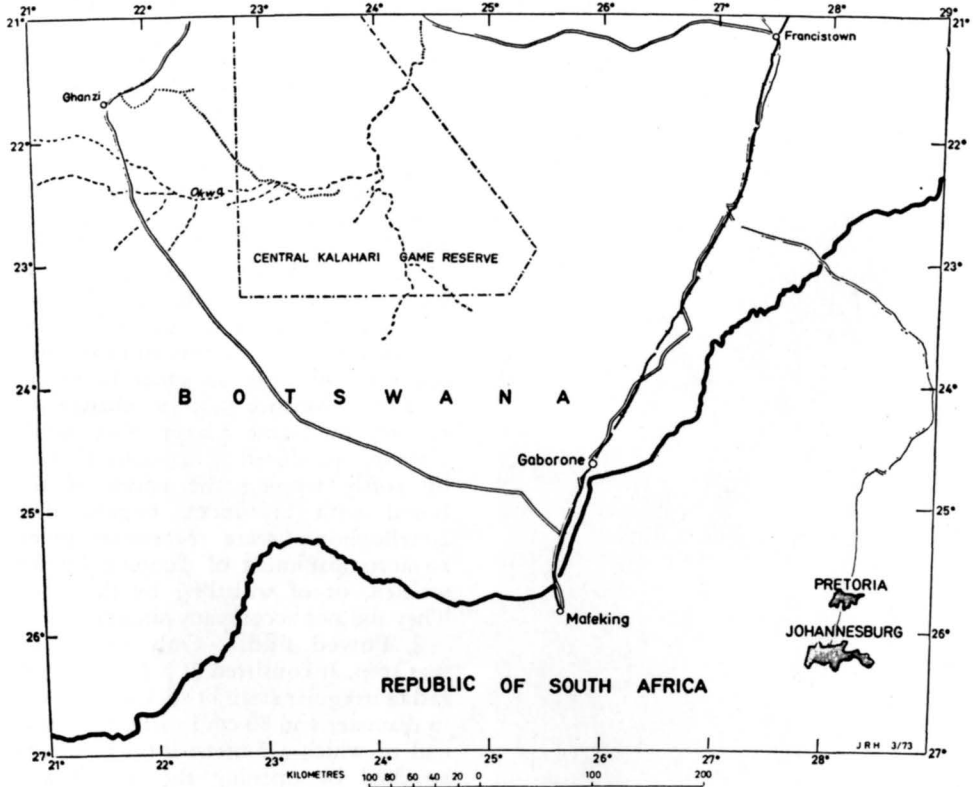


Fig. 1—Map showing the situation of the Central Kalahari Reserve relative to eastern Botswana and the main Transvaal cities.

seem to have kinsfolk, and with the town of Ghanzi, which they visit to sell their surplus products and to buy tobacco and the sugar which has replaced honey as the principal ingredient of their beer. They also have extensive contact with bands of Kgalagadi, a Tswana-speaking people some of whom appear to be true nomad herders and hunters⁴.

The author was fortunate enough to be able to spend some days among them in the company of Dr Jiro Tanaka of Kyoto University, who was in the process of winding up his second extended period of fieldwork. This meant that not only was an expert interpreter on hand, but that unusually favourable opportunities of observing San musical life were provided by the eagerness of the people to show their appreciation of Dr Tanaka. It was also possible to make some assessment of the nature and extent of the influence of outside musical styles on them.

The results of the assessment have led to the use of the cumbersome term "instrumentation" in the title of this paper. Of the six varieties of manufactured musical instrument encountered, only two appeared to be authentically San. Three of the other four incorporated worked metal in their construction, and though the G/wi now have the knowledge to work iron it is not sufficient for the production of the metal parts of their instruments. The two "native" instruments were constructed of locally available materials and produced sounds which were of so different a pitch and timbre from those of the metal-containing instruments that they could not be played at the same time. In addition, the use of hands and feet, and to a certain extent of the voice, was instrumental.

The four "foreign" instruments all closely resemble those found among Bantu-speaking Negro peoples, and have probably been introduced by the Kgalagadi, the only Negroes with whom the G/wi and G//ana come into frequent close association. They are:

1. **Lamellophones.** Two types of these were observed, one with a double row of steel



Fig. 2.—San musician displaying lamellophone (*ténkana*) with a single row of keys.

keys, and the other with a single row, affixed to a wooden sounding-board. Both had the same name (*ténkana*) and were played by holding in both hands and plucking the keys with the thumbs. One player fixed a tin can below the end of the board farthest from the free edges of the keys, in order to secure greater resonance and a change of timbre; the same player also, while playing, produced a counter-rhythm by softly tapping the edges of the board with his index fingers. The lamellophones were sometimes given an accompaniment of clapping by the women, or of whistling by the boys. They did not accompany singing.

2. **Bowed fiddle.** Only one fiddle was seen. It consisted of a polished but rather irregular straight stick about 5 cm in diameter and 80 cm in length, to one end of which a 5-litre oil-tin had been attached by opening the mouth and fitting the resultant flanges around the stick. The tin had been roughly knocked

into a shape which both enabled it to fit better and reduced its protrusion from the stick. At the furthest point along the shaft to which the tin extended a hole had been bored through the wood, and the fixed end of the single (thin wire) string was held in place by leading the wire through the hole and then winding it several times firmly around the stick. At the other extremity of the stick an adjustable wooden tuning peg, wedged into a cleft of the wood, served as attachment for the other end of the string. The string was tuned by forward and backward adjustment of the peg, a procedure carried out with some difficulty. The instrument was played with a curved bow made of wood between the ends of which a tense thin metal wire was attached. Pitch was changed by variable depression of the string of the fiddle against the stock with the middle finger of the left hand, while the right hand was used for bowing. The instrument was played only by elderly men; I did not see one in the hands of a woman, and, to judge by the apparent trepidation with which it was regarded by the children, it would seem to possess some connotation of taboo. This instrument had the name *xabaâ* (low tone on the last *a*).

3. **Mouth bow.** A carved wooden bow using the mouth as resonator, with the single hide or gut string divided unequally and held tense by a thong near, but not at,



Fig. 3—Woman playing the 4-stringed harp (*djamaâ*.)

the mid-point, and played by rapid tapping with a twig or grass-stalk, was seen among the G/wi. It was not nearly as long (about 30-40 cm in length) or as sturdy as the similarly played bows described by Kubik⁵ and Kirby⁶, and in fact closely resembled the *ngangala* found among the Zulu and Swazi (the *mkangala* of the Ngoni of Malawi). The *ngangala* is, of course, played only by women and girls; the mouth bow of the G/wi is played even by adult men. The note made of its name has unfortunately been mislaid.

4. **Harp.** A four-stringed harp made of four tuning-pegs inserted into a resonator fashioned from a one-gallon oil-can is rather dimly illustrated in the accompanying photograph. The metal strings are attached at one end to the resonator and at the other to the pegs, which are of varying length and set at varying angles to the resonator. This instrument appeared to be popular among the women, both on its own and as an accompaniment to singing. In one vocal duet, the voice part of the player consisted of wordless ejaculations and humming; when she wished to sing the melody, she handed the instrument to her companion. The elder women played this harp by plucking the strings with a grass-stalk; younger ones used their fingers. The instrument was known as *djamaâ* (low tone on the last *a*).

The two instruments which appeared to be authentically San were:

5. **Ankle-rattles.** It was not possible to examine these closely, as they were seen only during the performance of the gemsbok dance, a ritual which has been very well described by Silberbauer⁷. They consisted, as far as could be seen by firelight at night, of reddish-brown objects about the size of pigeons' eggs, strung together on cords and wound around the ankles of the dancers. It seems likely that they were either the shells of the *moana* fruit, as described by Kirby⁸, or else the shells of *Bauhinia* spp. nuts, which form an important part of Central Kalahari diet, and probably resembling or identical with the "hard seed-shell rattles" mentioned by Baines⁹. There were also occasional white discs, apparently of ostrich-egg shell. No note was made of their name.

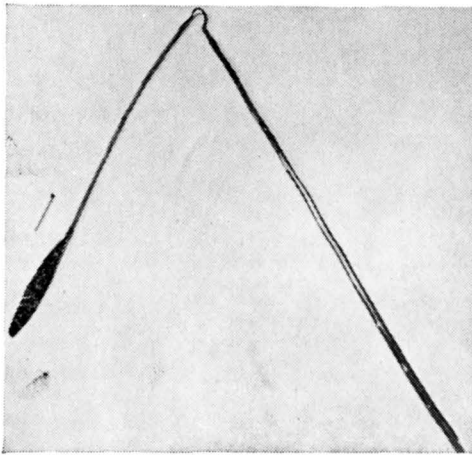


Fig. 4—Feather-bladed bull-roarer (*gig/û*).

6. **Bull-roarer.** A bull-roarer made of a slender stick, about 30 cm long, with about 5 cm of free *riem* (leather lace) attaching a thinner (15 cm) stick to the end of which a carefully trimmed *korbaan* tail-feather was fastened, was played only by young boys. It was capable of being whirled around in several different rhythms, producing a buzzing sound which acted as a stimulus and accompaniment to clapping songs sung or hummed by children of both sexes. The adults seemed to regard my interest in this instrument, which is called *gig/û* (high tone on the *i*), and my wish to buy one, as ludicrous; but it appears that though bull-roarers are counted as toys, they are made for the children by the men.

In addition to the instruments just described, the clapping of hands and stamping of feet figured instrumentally in the music of the G/wi and G//ana. Wordless singing, and occasional vocal ejaculations, appeared also to play an instrumental rôle; that is, they figured not melodically or harmonically or as components of songs but as subordinate parts of the music played on other instruments.

Several points of interest arise from the foregoing findings. There can be no doubt that the lamellophones are foreign introductions into San music. Kirby¹⁰ does not mention them among the instruments played by "Bushmen", and neither of the types seen in the Central Kalahari accords with the descriptions of the *likembe* and *mandumbwa* which Kubik¹¹ found among the !Kung. In any case, Kubik relegates the lamellophones among the !Kung to the category of non-indigenous instruments. The question of the bowed single-stringed fiddle is more complicated. The !Kung have a variety of musical bows, none of them exactly resembling this one; Kirby mentions a single-stringed fiddle with a calabash resonator as a recent innovation among the "Bushmen". My own inclination from the beginning was to regard the almost lavish use of metal in its construction as conclusive evidence that the instrument was not indigenous. Both Kirby and Kubik make the point that musical bows among the San seem to have been derived from the musical use of the hunting bow. This is patently not the case with *xabaá*, since the stick of which the body is made is not flexible, and there is nothing on a hunting-bow resembling a tuning-peg. On the other hand, the mouth-bow, which does seem to have developed from a hunting-bow, could have spread either from the San to the Bantu-speaking Negro, or in the opposite direction. Its presence in Malawi is entirely ascribable to Ngoni influence, and this does suggest that it originated south of the Zambesi.

The harp, *djamaá*, poses a different kind of problem. It contains as much metal as does *xabaá*, but its resemblance to the "Ovambo guitar" described by Kirby is remarkably close. In his text¹² he describes it as being seven-stringed, and postulates a San origin (based on a painting copied by Stow and never rediscovered) from several hunting-bows in line. The illustration he gives, however, (plate 70B), of a Bushman playing it, shows an instrument with five strings; it is difficult to make out precisely of what the resonator consists, but it could be either hollowed-out wood or a rusty metal can. In either case, the instrument looks very like *djamaá*.

There can be little doubt that the ankle-rattles and the bull-roarer are characteristically San. Kirby devotes considerable attention to them and to the various materials from which they can be constructed. In what appears to be an early note on "Bushman" music he describes a bull-roarer with a wooden blade¹³. Bleek and Lloyd¹⁴ refer to a similar instrument, call *Igoi Igoi*, a word which could be cognate with *gíg/á*. In his later and larger work¹⁵ Kirby mentions a feather-bladed bull-roarer among the "Red Dunes Bushmen" of the Western Kalahari; presumably one of the groups from the vicinity of the Gemsbok National Park. He emphasizes that bull-roarers are devoid of any ritual significance; but I was told by a reliable informant in Botswana that at least one San group (which I promised I would not name; my informant's name must consequently also be omitted) uses a bull-roarer in certain ceremonies.

The short period spent living among the G/wi and G//ana of the Central Kalahari scarcely qualifies me to pronounce with any kind of assurance on their musical practices; but it has seemed worthwhile to place on record what little I was able to observe of them. They are not accessible people, but my visit was paid under favourable auspices; it may be that, in the absence of other information, these few notes will prove of some use.

Acknowledgements

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