

## *Fragment of an Essay on 'Music and Sociology'*

by Jaap Kunst (1891-1960)

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FRAGMENT OF AN ESSAY  
ON "MUSIC AND SOCIOLOGY"

All over the world it is found that certain musical instruments are reserved for the exclusive use of either men or women. Take the flute for instance: among most peoples, past and present, playing the flute — almost any kind of flute — is regarded as a masculine prerogative, while sometimes prejudice has gone so far in this connection as to forbid a woman even to look at this instrument on pain of death. Yet on the other hand, for some inscrutable reason that rather rare variety, the central-hole flute, may be played only by women. I noted this myself among the Ngadanese and Nagas of Mid-Western Flores<sup>1</sup> and Van der Tuuk records the same custom among the Toba-Bataks.<sup>2</sup> The same applies to the use of the Panpipes in some regions, as for instance among the Macao Indians in Venezuela and the Tinguians in North Luzon (Philippines).<sup>3</sup>

On the island of Nias, off the West coast of Sumatra, the *doli-doli*, a primitive xylophone, is only used when the rice is ripening and the fields are guarded, and then by women only.<sup>4</sup>

The above-mentioned Batak tribe also makes a distinction between the kind of mouth harp played by girls and that reserved for the use of the young men. For instance, among the ornaments suspended from the little instruments meant for the youths there is always a miniature bamboo spring clapper which is never found on the girls' harps.

Among the Bunun tribe on the island of Formosa, the musical bow is solely for the use of the male; the mouthharp usually for the female; the flutes restricted to male use are played only on occasion of triumphal head-hunting, but not for amusement.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. Kunst, *Music in Flores*, Leyden 1942, p. 150 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Bataksch Woordenboek*, p. 152a.

<sup>3</sup> Curt Sachs, *Geist und Werden der Musikinstrumente*, Berlin 1929, p. 49 ff.

<sup>4</sup> J. Kunst, *Music in Nias*, Leyden 1939, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Takatomo Kurosawa, *The Musical Bow of the Bunun Tribe in Formosa and Suggestion as to the Origin of the Pentatonic Scale*, Tokyo 1952.

Regarding the flutes of the Venda of Northern Transvaal, Kirby<sup>6</sup> states: "They are made in a special area, which is protected by special sacred ceremonies and taboos, by a specialist maker, and their sale is a monopoly. They are constructed in sets, and are always placed in charge of a selected individual. The players are always males."

The Central African *marimba* (*m'bila*, *timbila*, *balafon*) is a typically male instrument; the same may be said of the wooden slitdrum of Indonesian culture.<sup>7</sup>

In Surinam, women, the principal singers, never play drums. They believe that if they break the taboo their breasts will grow to the ground.<sup>8</sup>

On Manam Island (New Guinea) girls are called upon to sound a single death beat but do not use drums at any other time.<sup>8</sup>

Among the Kissi (French West Africa) the *seo*, a rattle made of a gourd, is a women's instrument in that it is made as well as played by women only, and furthermore is used, except sporadically in very special cases, exclusively for accompanying women's dances;<sup>9</sup> the Baganda (British East Africa) have castanets made of a particular kind of seeds which only girls are allowed to play,<sup>10</sup> while the Big Nambas (Malekula, New Hebrides) consider the musical bow a definitely woman's instrument.<sup>11</sup>

In how far this assigning the use of a given kind of instrument to one sex or the other is connected with the sex-suggestion inherent in some instruments I do not know. Sometimes such a connection seems quite evident, as in the case of the flute, which is commonly regarded as a phallic symbol and to which naturally — one is reminded of certain equivocal expressions in many Western languages — male characteristics are ascribed, even though the word itself — in West-European languages at least — may be feminine. But in other cases no such connection exists — or perhaps we should say exists no longer.

In Indonesia and elsewhere the drum itself is felt to be feminine. In those regions this instrument belongs to a group of concepts including darkness, an empty cavity, moisture, the maternal womb, the moon — ideas obviously related in the subconscious in true Freudian fashion. Yet for all that the *beating* of the drum is not confined to one sex only. On the islands of Java and Bali the instrument is played by men exclu-

<sup>6</sup> Percival R. Kirby, *The Musical Instruments of the Native Races of South Africa*, London 1934, p. 168.

<sup>7</sup> D. H. Meijer, *De spleetrom*, in *Tijdschrift van het Kon. Bataviaasch Genootschap*, vol. lxxix, 1917, p. 415 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Sophie Drinker, *Music and Women*, New-York 1948, p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> André Schaeffner, *Les Kissi. Une société noire et ses instruments de musique*, Paris 1952, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> K. P. Wachsmann and Marg. Trowell, *Tribal Crafts of Uganda*, Oxford University Press 1953, p. 325.

<sup>11</sup> A. Bernard Deacon, *Malekula, a Vanishing People in the New Hebrides*, London 1934, p. 42.

sively, but in Timor and West Flores I saw it oftener, though not always, being played by women. It is quite possible that the cultural phase still manifesting itself on the Lesser Sunda Islands — and perhaps the same may be said of Borneo, where the Dyak priestesses often beat a narrow, high one-headed drum (*ketobung belian*) — is an older one which clings more closely to the original view of things. The fact, as stated by Marius Schneider,<sup>12</sup> that drums were originally used to produce rain, accords with the above in so far that it is suggestive of one of the components of the group of concepts already mentioned, namely, moisture.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Marius Schneider, *Australien und Austronesien*, in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol. i, col. 877, 1950.

<sup>13</sup> The bronze kettle-drums of South Eastern Asia are also said to have originally served for the magical production of rain.