Running Head: THE MAGIC

Didgeridoo You Know About The Magic? An Exploration of The Significance of The Australian Didgeridoo

Evan Jones

Simon Fraser University

Archaeology 301

Dr. Annie Ross

Due: November 26th 2008

When I was a boy, my cousin traveled to Australia and returned with a bizarre, bamboo, wind instrument that no one in the house could play correctly. For whatever reason, be it fate, chance, or happenstance the day stuck with me for many years and as an adult I found myself wondering more about the strange tube that mimicked the earthly grumble of a rumbling elephant. The instrument I speak of, of course, is the didgeridoo, didjeridu, or yidaki. The didjeridu is a beautiful and fascinating wind instrument that comes from northern Australia's Aboriginal people. It has cultural, musical, and anthropological significance on a world stage.

Physical Characteristics

The didgeridoo is said to be one of, in not the, oldest wind instrument in the world (Aboriginal Arts, 2008, Moyle 1981). The traditionally accurate didgeridoos are made of tree braches or trunks that have been hollowed out by termites. The artist finds these branches and trees with a combination of experience and local ethnobotanical arbor knowledge. The trees traditionally used are hardwoods, especially eucalyptus, which grows locally in Northern Australia (Moyle 1981). ~~He then~~ The Artist takes a sample chop of the branch or tree in order to be sure that the inside diameter is of the appropriate width before he completely removes the branch. If the inside diameter is too small, he will leave the section on the tree and come back to it after the termites have eaten more of the section; if it is too large the tree will be left alone. If the branch or trunk is appropriate, he will chop it off so that the didgeridoo measures from 1 to 1.6 meters, though this length is certainly not set in stone and a variety of sizes of didge can be found. The 1 to 1.6 meter length is very common because it produces the best tones and ideal resonation for traditional play, though, as I have mentioned, there are a variety of shapes and lengths. The artist will

usually take hot coals and drop them down the length of the tube in order to help smooth out the inside and remove any pieces that the termites might have missed (Moyle, 1981). He may leave some of the bark on the trunk of the didgeridoo if he wants to make a "bark bottom" or he may remove and smooth the whole length. Usually, he will decorate his didge with paint spots (see image one) burn marks, Aboriginal images or traditional Aboriginal representations of lizards, turtles, kangaroos etc. One of my didgeridoos has speckled paint images of two turtles and a colorful speckled paint pattern. My other is a 'bark bottom" and has a painting of a eucalyptus leaf and a burned image of a kangaroo. All these images have a very Aboriginal feel to them and add character and spirit to the didges. Finally, he will add a beeswax mouthpiece, which warms and molds to the players lips, to the top opening of the didge so that the lips form a comfortable airtight seal. There are, however, a couple other styles of didgeridoo. These two other styles though, are not traditionally accurate.

As mentioned above the didgeridoo that my cousin brought home was made from bamboo. This style of didgeridoo is quite common and is easier to make, but is more prone to cracking. The bamboo that is used is indigenous to Northern Australia. The process of construction is much the same as a eucalyptus didgeridoo but the maker will always use hot coals to clear out the tube because the bamboo shaft has narrow sections along the inside of it length. The third type of didgeridoo is any long tube that a person might put a mouthpiece on. These include PVC tubing, metal tubing or cardboard tubing; just about any type of tube, of the appropriate diameter, can be used as a didgeridoo!

Play

To play the didgeridoo the player holds it in his hands, presses the top opening to the lips, either in the center or off to the side of the mouth (see image two), and then blows into it while making the "motorboat" sound. (see image three) This creates the rumbling sound, which resonates through the chamber to create the unique tone of the instrument. The challenging part of play comes when the player's lungs become empty and he needs to refill them. Rather than stop playing and take a breath the player uses a technique called circular breathing. While circular breathing is difficult, anyone can master it. The cheeks are used to hold a small pocket of air so that the player can 'snag' a breath from his nose while he exhales the small store of air that is in his mouth. This popping of the cheeks creates the distinguishable 'womp' sound that accompanies didgeridoo play. Through this technique of snatching breaths and circular breathing the player can refill his lungs and carry on playing during a ceremony, uninterrupted.

Cultural Significance and History

The didgeridoo is an Aboriginal instrument coming from northern Australia, specifically Arnhem Land. Arnhem Land is located in North Eastern Australia and is about 500 kilometers from Darwin, the capital of the Northern Region of Australia (Moyle, 1981). The Aboriginals used, and still use, the didgeridoo during ritual ceremonies. It is accompanied by clap sticks, which keep time, while the lone didgeridoo player produces his melodious drone for the singers, who are singing ancient traditional songs (Moyle, 1981). The rhythm of the clapsticks and the didgeridoo are of traditional significance and the specifics of each part during a ceremony have been handed down through the generations. There is very little data to be found on this subject as I suspect

Play

To play the didgeridoo the player holds it in his hands, presses the top opening to the lips, either in the center or off to the side of the mouth (see image two), and then blows into it while making the "motorboat" sound. (see image three) This creates the rumbling sound, which resonates through the chamber to create the unique tone of the instrument. The challenging part of play comes when the player's lungs become empty and he needs to refill them. Rather than stop playing and take a breath the player uses a technique called circular breathing. While circular breathing is difficult, anyone can master it. The cheeks are used to hold a small pocket of air so that the player can 'snag' a breath from his nose while he exhales the small store of air that is in his mouth. This popping of the cheeks creates the distinguishable 'womp' sound that accompanies didgeridoo play. Through this technique of snatching breaths and circular breathing the player can refill his lungs and carry on playing during a ceremony, uninterrupted.

Cultural Significance and History

The didgeridoo is an Aboriginal instrument coming from northern Australia, specifically Arnhem Land. Arnhem Land is located in North Eastern Australia and is about 500 kilometers from Darwin, the capital of the Northern Region of Australia (Moyle, 1981). The Aboriginals used, and still use, the didgeridoo during ritual ceremonies. It is accompanied by clap sticks, which keep time, while the lone didgeridoo player produces his melodious drone for the singers, who are singing ancient traditional songs (Moyle, 1981). The rhythm of the clapsticks and the didgeridoo are of traditional significance and the specifics of each part during a ceremony have been handed down through the generations. There is very little data to be found on this subject as I suspect

these secrets are for Aboriginal ears only and not for the ears of the prying westerner. In ceremonies, only men play the didgeridoo but women are free to play it in a casual setting.

The didgeridoo's history is a bit unclear, to the westerner at least, as the people of Northern Australia have no written record. It is certainly old though as "There are almost as many Aboriginal names for the instrument as there are identifiable language groups" (Moyle, 1981). The modern names are from recent, 20th century, European excursions and given to the instrument for onomatopoeic reasons. (Aboriginal Arts 2008) There have been cave drawings of men playing didgeridoos found in the outback of Arnhem Land. These images, depict men holding 'trumpets,' as they are so affectionately called by the early Australian explorers, and are often times shown with people holding two sticks, which we now know to be the clapsticks, that are used to keep time in the ceremonies (Moyle 1981). While there is not one group of Aboriginals that will lay claim to the instrument to a westerner, I feel certain that they are just not saying which community started with the instrument. The white man is not highly regarded in the Aboriginal community of Australia for the same reasons he is not highly regarded amongst many Native peoples. These secrets are kept from the prying eyes of academics so that their Aboriginal heritage can be kept intact. Some people feel that the aboriginal heritage of the didgeridoo is slipping away though.

Current Issues

Due to globalization and tourism the didgeridoo has become a symbol of the entire continent of Australia and has lost its direct connection to the Northern Aboriginal tribes. Global markets have been flooded with didgeridoos that are not made in a

traditional way, have not been harvested in a sustainable manner, were not naturally hollowed by termites, were not carefully selected for instrument appropriateness, and were not made with the spirit of the instrument in mind (Seeger, 1999). Globalization and the drive for capital is a strong one in the world and it takes a toll on the spirit of the people who originally used the items a piece of their identity (Aboriginal Arts 2008). Globalization often takes culturally significant items: masks, didgeridoos, ivory art and various other ethnographic symbols, and popularizes them for a world market. What a lot of critics claim is that the instrument has been taken from the mouths of the Aboriginals and allowed to be played in contexts that it was not intended for. The rule of thumb for traditional didgeridoos is that 99.9% of the ones seen on the market are not traditionally accurate and have not been made by an Aboriginal from North Arnhem Land. While it is important to learn about other cultures and bring their unique characteristics onto a world stage for respect and understanding, it must be done in a way that preserves the rights of the people and shows them the utmost regard.

Artistic Significance

The didgeridoo is, in itself, an art form. As I have mentioned it is often brightly colored and has images of local flora and fauna all over it. The usual technique is one th involves a variety of paint speckles. The artist will put a solid color down then dab hundreds and hundreds of paint speckles of a variety of colors in order to produce his desired image. The unique shapes of some didgeridoos make them an amazing palette for any artist to work on. Some bell-ended didgeridoos have openings that look like the bases of trees (see image 4) and only need to be polished and sanded to become emotionally evocative pieces of natural art. The didgeridoo also appears in other mediums as well.

The rock art that I have mentioned (images 5-7) is an example of the instrument in the local heritage of the Aboriginals. These rock art images are placed within the 'post-estuarine' period or more than 1000 years BP (Moyle 1981). What these ancient images and pictures tell us is that the didgeridoo has been an integral part of the Aboriginals' life for many generations. They also tell us that the instrument is highly regarded because it has been celebrated in rock art images.

The didgeridoo seems to have a soul resonating from its mystical exterior. It is a fascinating instrument with an enigmatic history that is not quite clear and, it seems to me, will remain cloaked in secrecy for years to come. There was certainly a reason that the memory of my cousin's didgeridoo stuck with me from the time I was a boy to when I became man and I am happy it did. When I play the didgeridoo I am sent into a rumbling trance that is unlike any other realm of consciousness.

References

Aboriginal Arts. (2008) *History of the Didgeridoo.* Retrieved November, 19, 2008 from http://www.aboriginalarts.co.uk/historyofthedidgeridoo.html

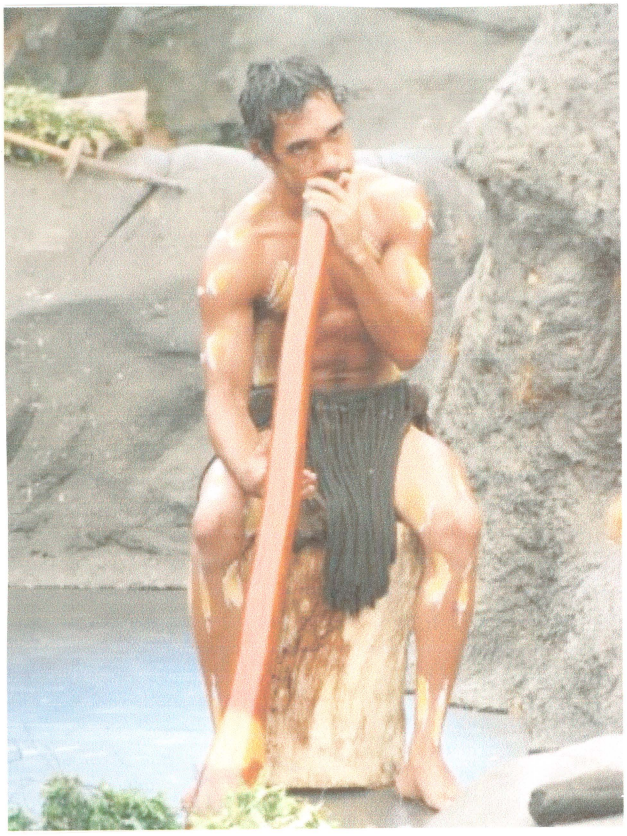
Moyle, A., (1981) The Australian Didjeridu: A Late Musical Intrusion. *World Archaeology, Vol. 12 No. 3 Archaeology and Musical Instruments.* Feb. 1981 pp. 321-333

Seeger, A. (1999) Untitled. A review of *Didjeridu: From Arnem Land to Internet by Karl Neuenfeldt.* Ethnomusicology, Vol. 43 No. 2 (Spring-Summer 1999), pp 367-369 Retrieved November, 20, 2008 from Jstor Database.

#1

#1

#2



#4

#3

#3