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# THE ORIGIN OF THE TRADITIONAL MUSIC / DANCES OF THE REPUBLIC OF SEYCHELLES

JEAN-CLAUDE PASCAL (ZAN-KLOD-PASKAL) MAHOUNE

Anthropologist\*

## Résumé

L'archipel des Seychelles est l'une des terres où le peuplement est le plus récent de la région du Sud-Ouest de l'Océan Indien. Ce sont les descendants des peuples africains et européens qui ont perpétué notre héritage musical à travers maints instruments. Les plus grands artistes

traditionnels seychellois étaient des Malgaches et, la plupart des instruments d'origine africaine nous venait justement de Madagascar.

**Mots-clés :** Seychelles, origine des danses traditionnelles et des instruments de musiques.

The Republic of Seychelles consisting of some 115 islands in the Western Indian Ocean, north east of Madagascar, has a population of only 80,000 but remains one of the most racially mixed and harmonious societies of the region. Originally from Africa, Europe and Asia the groups have developed a kreol culture which is very evident in the traditional music / dance heritage.

The Republic which became independent from Britain in June 1976 took a socialist orientation in June 1977 and created, for the first time in its 200-year human history a Ministry responsible for culture (« kiltir »).

Research in oral traditions was initiated and the author was amongst the first to record the fast disappearing music.

## TRADITIONAL MUSIC INSTRUMENTS OF EUROPEAN OR EURASIAN ORIGIN

The traditional musical instruments of Seychelles of European or Eurasian origin consisted amongst others of : the violin, banjo (of African origin but imported from Europe to accompany dances of European origin), mandolin, accordeon, harmonica, bass drums (grosse caisse), guitars, triangle...

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\* Jean-Claude Pascal (« Zan-Klod-Paskal ») MAHOUNE works as Principal Research Officer with the Ministry of Culture and Information in Seychelles. He is a graduate of the University of Madison — Wisconsin (U.S.A.).

These were used to accompany the « Kanmtole » dances consisting of « waltzes », « polkas », « Berlin » « mazurkas », « Scottish » etc., and kontredans. These dances were longer practiced and preserved than those of African origin.

#### THE ORIGIN OF THE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

It is logical to assume that there is an interlink between the musical instruments and the origin of the population. Whilst the instruments of Eurasian origin are known to have been used to accompany the dances adapted from the same continent, the instruments of Africa origin were not, until recently, the subject of much research, let alone research on their origin.

#### TRADITIONAL INSTRUMENTS OF AFRICAN ORIGIN IN SEYCHELLES

The very few documents which have been published so far offer mere speculation on their origin. Most researchers affirmed, without any hesitation, that the *moutya* drums (high, medium and low pitched), which consisted of "... a goat" skin stretched over a wooden hoop made out of timber... », came from Africa (Mahoune : 1979, *Nation*, 5<sup>th</sup> October).

Some younger researchers today have started to ponder aloud on the possible « oriental » origin of the instrument. Nketia (1974 : 85) does affirm, however, that in Africa drums are usually carved out of solid logs of wood in Africa but round frame drums could also be fabricated. The potsherd, for example, could be used as a hoop. Rakotomalala (1986 : 47) affirms that this kind of drums would be one of the oldest used in Antiquity (see the *Bible*). It was also found in the south east of Africa among the Zulus, Thonges, the Vaudoos... the ex-Portuguese controlled regions. It was very widespread in India, Melanesia, Polynesia...

#### « SEGA OTANTIK » DRUMS

The drums accompanying the original sega dances (Sega « tranble » or « otantik ») fit the normal classification of an « African » drum. The traditional sega drum is made by stretching a goat's skin at one end of a long dugged — out coconut palm trunk two to three feet high (Mahoune : 1979, Oct. 12).

#### « ZEZ », « BONM » AND « MOULOUMBA »

One of the most well known traditional artists in Seychelles Jacob Marie (« Ton Pa ») who was an expert in « Zez » playing affirmed that he learnt how to make and play the instrument from his Malagasy forebears. Koechlin (1981 : 4) confirms that the « dzedzi » or « dzedzu » is from

Madagascar but « zeze » is also a Swahili word for a two-stringed instrument. « Dede » was the harp from Ancient Egypt (Rakotomalala, 1986). Nketia (1974 : 103) writes that the « one-string fiddle » is found in eastern and central Africa. It is called the « sese or Zeze » tube fiddle in Zaire, Kenya, Tanzania. (Nketia 1974 : 100) places the *Valiba* in the category of tube zithers whose strings run across the shell of a tube such as a hollow bamboo stem. Mahoune (*Nation*, 5<sup>th</sup> October, 1979) states that the « mouloumba » could certainly be an « ancestor » of the *Valiba*. It can be used both as an aerophone and idiophone to accompany, for example, « sokwe » « dancers ».

Giselle Dupin (1993) describes two types of musical arcs in Brazil (the « berimbau ») originating from Angola. One of them is the berimbau barrigao (belly) and is exactly similar to the « bonm » in Seychelles.

The berimbau de boca (mouth) said to be a wind instrument resembling the « mbulumbumba » from the province of Wila in the southwest of Angola is most certainly the « mouloumba » of Seychelles.

From the « *Musique Traditionnelle de l'océan Indien à Madagascar* » (1983, no.3 : 14), we read that of the various *Valihas* existing in Madagascar at the moment, that made out of bamboo with raised strips (or strings) is the most ancient.

It is however interesting to note that this type of zither made out of bamboo can also be seen in the mountain (High Plateau) of Vietnam, Philippines and many regions of Indonesia. The authors believe that the idiochord zither is closer to the Indonesian model.

#### « MAKALAPO »

The « makalapo », in its sophisticated form, would also be attributed by some to Madagascar (Koechlin 1981 : 28). Nketia (1974) affirms that of the variety of chordophones (string instruments) found in African societies the musical bow appears to be the most widespread. It exists a variety of forms, the simplest of which is the earth bow. This consists of a flexible stick stuck in the ground to whose upper end a piece of string is attached. In places like in northern Ghana and Uganda it is regarded as a toy instrument. In Seychelles, it was popularly associated with the « supernatural ».

## CONCLUSION

### MUSIC / DANCE — AMBIVALENCE?

As in most traditional societies, traditional music in Seychelles was always accompanied by dancing — The same could be said, however, of music of European origin as « Kanmtole » was made for dancing and had a social role to play too. The « call and response » may not have been

evident as it was for the « moutya » of African origin, but people were satirized as was usually the case for the latter. It was full of social commentaries !

Work songs like the « sanson pirog » sang in chorus as the fishermen rowed, hunting sea creatures could not be accompanied by dancing ! The same would apply to the cradle songs, « bersez », and the « romances » or ballads from France sung at weddings in particular, though some of the latter could be turned into waltzes !

Most of the musical instruments were played by men but it was not at all unusual to have the women doing the same and at times in their own groups. The « Tinge » (reminding one of the « capoeira ») was performed by the men mostly though women could accompany with hand clapping and singing. The « madilo » (madelon or Kaloupilon) associated with the island of La Digue, performed by jumping over two sticks or poles, was a women's affair. The « zwe kafoul » (« criss-crossing » of empty coconut shells while singing) was associated with women and children in particular. As the men beat the « sega otantik » drums women could accompany them by striking a piece of bamboo (« la sinyal »).

Women were indispensable for the call and response in moutya dancing and singing.

One of the most important aspects of the traditional music / dance of Seychelles was the virtual absence of ceremonies or rituals. It appears that the « sokwe » could have been a mask dance or a theatrical play (Koechlin, 1981) but was later deprived of its ritualistic elements.

The « moutya », not unlike the maloya from Reunion, could have been deprived as well of its « religious » or « ritualistic » components. The impact of Christianity, (almost 100% of the population were Christians) would certainly have contributed to this state of affairs. Rites such as baptism, first communion, confirmation, funerals, etc. were accompanied by European hymns, and the organ...

The stigma associated with Africa almost brought to extinction, over the years, all the elements that came from that continent !

**TRADITIONNAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF AFRICAN / MALAGASY  
ORIGIN**

*A) Membranophones*

*Moutia Drum (Accompanies « moutya » dancers)*

**1. MOUTIA DRUMS**



a) High pitched



b) Low pitched



c) Medium pitched

*Sega Drum (Accompanies « sega otantik » (or « sega tranble » dancers)*

**2. SEGA ("OTANTIK") DRUMS**



a) High pitched



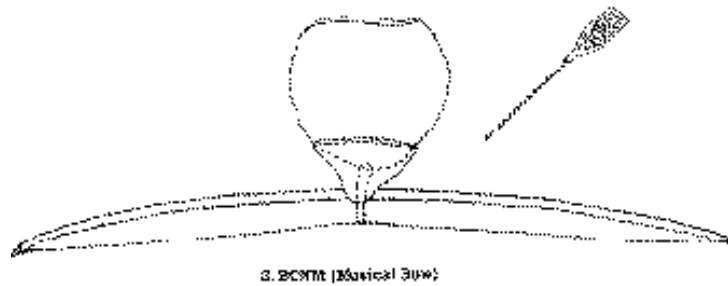
b) Low pitched



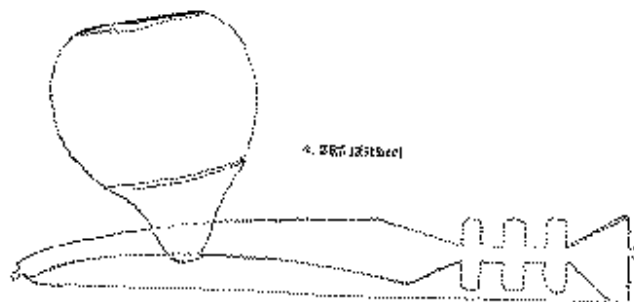
c) Medium pitched

*B) Chordophones*

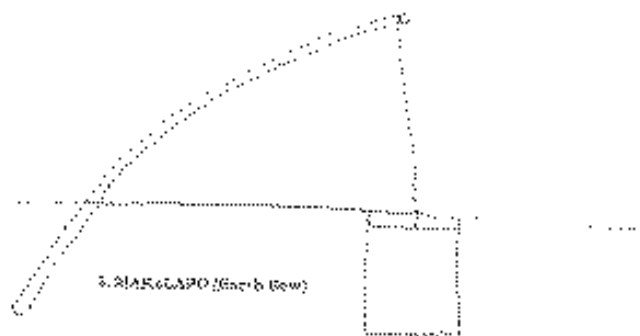
*Musical Bow (Bonm) (played solo or could accompany dancers or performers of tinge, « sokwe » etc.)*



*Zither (Zez)*



*Earth Bow (Makalapo)*



C) Aerophone

*Mouloumba (could accompany « Sokwe » dancers)*



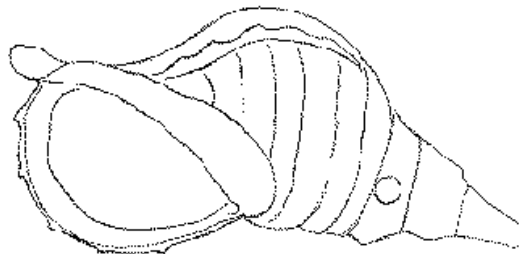
6. MOULOUMBA

*The ancestor of the Valiha, it could also be classified as a scraped and friction idiophone.*

D) Idiophones

*Shaken Idiophone*

*7a. Lansiv (or conch shell) (has been used until recently by fishermen to call their clients rather than as musical instrument.)*

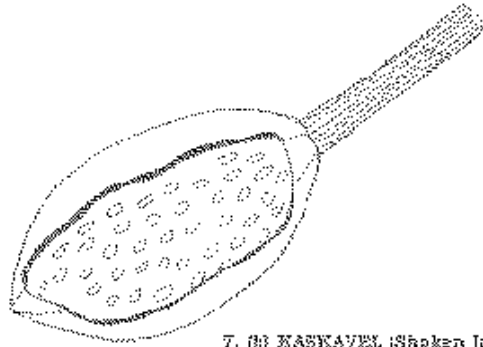


7. (a) LANSIV

*The « lansiv » (conch shell), as the violin or fiddle, made out of bamboo grass (« rafya ») have all disappeared.*



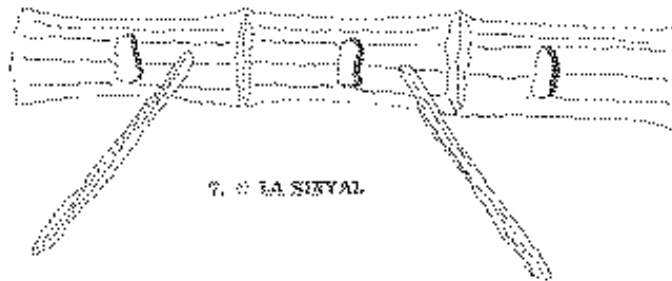
7b. *Kaskavel* (usually used by « Bonm » Players)



7. (b) KASKAVEL (Shaken Idiophone)

*Struck Idiophone*

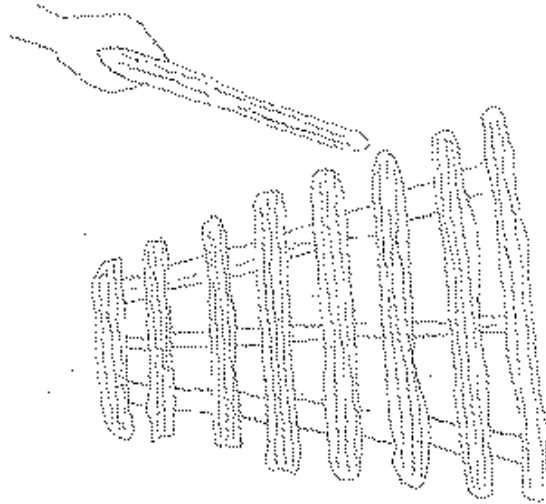
7c. *Lasinyal* (bamboo struck to accompany « sega otantik » drummers)



7. c. LASINYAL

E) Xylophones

8. Piano Grann Ter or « Zoulofon » has disappeared or forgotten as probably many other instruments of African / Malagasy origin



3. ZOULOFON (OU PIANO "GRANN TER")

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