

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL STUDIES



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Mr W.C. Wentworth,
Jarawee Road,
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2 February 1989

Dear Bill,

Thank you for your letter of 3 January and for your New Year wishes which I now reciprocate.

I had not seen that cutting from "The Australian". It makes good Press copy but I would dispute the young Irishman's claim that he is restoring the didjeridu "to its rightful place in Ireland's heritage". The accompanying picture of a bronze, arc-shaped horn side-blown -- not end-blown as are didjeridus -- disproves this theory on sight! If he learns to play the didjeridu with only half the skill of a good Arnhem Land player this young man will be doing well.

It is my belief that so-called didjeridus were originally lengths of bamboo. The horn played by the young man photographed in "The Australian" would have evolved from an animal horn or tusk. Because bamboo is not as plentiful in northwestern Arnhem Land as it is in New Guinea (where bamboo musical instruments abound) this is probably the reason why 'bamboos' were frequently replaced in Australia by hollowed branches.

According to George Chalupka's observations of rock art in the Arnhem Land Plateau, the didjeridu is not depicted in rock art until the 'post-estuarine' period which he dates from about 1000 before present. This theory makes the "bamboo" or didjeridu an eleventh century musical instrument.

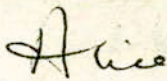
The origin of the bagpipes seems to be unknown. As folk instruments, they were, and probably still are, widely distributed.

In a book on bagpipes by Anthony Baines (1960) of the Galpin Society, he discusses the many types of bagpipes in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. As you say, bagpipes have European (East and West) and Middle Eastern associations. They are also known in India. But bagpipes contain more than one pipe and these are sounded by reeds. The drone or drones have single reeds like a clarinet, the "chanter" which has finger holes by which the melody is played, has a double reed like an oboe.

I suppose it could be argued that the didgeridu player's cheeks, which contain a reservoir of air released as required, are precursors of the bagpiper's bag.

I would like to have more time to go into the points you have raised: many Scottish people have settled in Northern Ireland and I would not be surprised to learn that there is a similarity between Scottish and Irish bagpipe playing but I doubt whether a Scot or an Irishman would be prepared to concede any similarity at all.

With kind regards,
Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Alice".

Alice Moyle