

The patterns of musical practice in Melanesia: can this be tied to linguistic affiliation?

Roger Blench

Kay Williamson Educational Foundation

8, Guest Road

Cambridge CB1 2AL

United Kingdom

Voice/ Ans (00-44)-(0)7847-495590

Mobile worldwide (00-44)-(0)7967-696804

E-mail rogerblench@yahoo.co.uk

<http://www.rogerblench.info/RBOP.htm>

The musical instruments in use in Melanesia are extremely restricted compared with island SE Asia. In particular in the Non-Austronesian area, they are few both in number and organological type. Typically these are large slit-gongs, hourglass drums, end-blown trumpets, flutes, ocarinas and jews' harps. It seems likely that the incoming Oceanic speakers brought new instrument types and that their distribution can be plotted against linguistic affiliation. However, there is some evidence the Austronesian also borrowed musical instruments and carried them onwards to remote Oceania. In addition, there appears to be a comparable pattern with respect to vocal music. Papuan music can sometimes be polyphonic, with two or more distinct vocal lines sung against one another. In the Austronesian world this is only known from Taiwan, Flores and Timor, and otherwise music tends to be monodic, despite the complex heterophony of Java and related cultures. However, there is a striking example of two-voice polyphony on Manus, a key site where early Oceanic speakers interacted with speakers of NAN languages. It is suggested that this is the origin of the polyphony characteristic of Malekula and Grande Ile in New Caledonia. The paper synthesises the distributional data on musical practice and language to suggest how the impact of Austronesian speakers on the culture of Papua can be detected.