

# The African Bagpipes

By WM. A. Cocks, F. S. A. Scot.

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Kindly provided for the Pipe Band Resource Centre by Allan Chatto.

Whenever I see this photograph, I have a little smile all to myself, the reason being the great difficulty I had on taking it. I could not speak the language of the "band," nor did they know mine, but the sight of the camera (and of silver) did the trick, and the drummer insisted on posing as well as the piper. While I was preparing to photograph them, a huge jabbering crowd collected all around, considerably impeding my actions, but I had to hand over a tip for the privilege of photograph them, and before I could say the proverbial "Jack," the drummer had run off with the lot, and the piper was in hot pursuit. He was saying lots of things to everybody in general and to the drummer in particular. Probably his remarks would not have been fit for publication in a Sunday School book!



However, the bagpipe itself is what interests us most. The bag is the skin of a gazelle turned outside in and tanned by some process other than salt, as it was quite dry and supple. The blowpipe as seen in the illustration was a tin tube, but I believe the usual pattern is a leg bone from some large bird such as a flamingo. It was tied into the bag midway between the forelegs, which were both closed by having very small horn tips tied into them.

The neck of the skin was used to accommodate the chanter stock, which was about three inches in diameter and held two separate bamboo chanters. These each had six finger holes if I remember correctly, very similar to the Egyptian Zummarah or reed flute which I have in my collection.

Each chanter possessed a terminal bell formed of cow horns and facing outwards. There were no drones and the chanters were not in perfect accord, but the weird effect was not altogether displeasing. It was impossible in the conditions under which I was working, to determine the musical intervals, but whatever shortcomings were inherent in the chanters were pretty well drowned by the whole-hearted energy of the drummer. He took good care that his presence was not overlooked and he certainly lacked nothing in assiduity! I have seen a similar instrument which was lavishly decorated with large seeds, strung as beads, included among them being a trousers button.

It has been said – with what truth I know not – that African bagpipers lie, down on the bag to produce the necessary pressure. I have not seen this done, but should think it quite possible, having regard to the strange ways of natives.

Those readers who have read Dr. A. Duncan Fraser's book "The Bagpipe" may remember that he mentioned an African bagpipe which he saw in Newcastle but which had since become lost. Actually it was never lost at all, but Dr. Fraser did not look for it in the right place. It is still to be seen in the museum of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle.

I have made many efforts to acquire an African bagpipe, but have been told, no doubt in jest, that the only way to secure the instrument is to kill the piper! I rather draw the line at that and still hoping that a less drastic method may be found. Perhaps some reader knows of one?



*Print of the original 1939 article.*

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