

Bamboo Tamboo

Bongo and the Belair

Generic Afro-Caribbean rhythms and forms

Recorded in the hills of Trinidad



- From machetes and a bamboo grove near Cantaro, a tamboo session appeared like magic. Now nearly extinct, this is a primitive predecessor to steelband. "Is a Burial Today" and other songs.
- From the fishing village of Carenage, Charles the Bongo King leads a session, dozens of voices in chants, beating sticks and drums; not to be confused with the "bongo" drum, much larger drums are used here.
- **The Belair** a pre-Carnival dance performed in costume dress by the older women. They sing with male drummers and *shac-shac*.

Bamboo-Tambo

The practice of bamboo-tambo was carried into the Caribbean from Africa. Although the drum was then their accepted musical instrument, the dormant *tambo* experienced a rebirth when the Europeans banned drumming in the effort to maintain law and order.

Tubes of hollow dry bamboo are cut carefully to length with cleavers or machetes so that they operate in musical thirds, fifths, etc. In the case of the bass booms, tone is produced by ramming them vertically against the hard ground in rhythms characteristic of some drumming modes. Higher pitched bamboos are held in the hands, and several different tones may be produced from a set of two, by striking them against each other at various joints.

The effect is like bagpipes in that the drones have no variety. Bamboo has little melodic or harmonic flexibility, but the chanter—in this case human voices—sings the story, usually a repetitive chant or a dance. They sing about *calinda* (stick fight), *bongo* (wake), gossip in the village, prowess in fighting, and occasionally make threats.

In days gone by, tamboo bands were comparable in size to the large Trinidad steelbands of today, and played in Carnival on the march during some years. For the manner of a steelband "clash," they would occasionally come together for directions on a street. In resolving which would be the one to give way, the bamboos themselves, sharpened nicely at the upper end, developed into instruments of violent persuasion. Finally bamboo, too, went the way of drums, and was banned.

*Is a Burial Today—We Goin' Cut the Wood—
Calinda*

Belair

Bélé is a dance of the women. Performed with drums and *shac-shac* in infrequent sessions that may last all night, it is now rare, with the result that it is remembered and danced only by the older women. The dance is found among Trinidad people of French-African ancestry, such as are settled in Diego-Martin, Maraval and Laventille.

Dress is typical Martinique costume of madra cotton plaid of a particular kind, *foulard* or neckerchief, *zancoes* at the ears, a *druillette*, or dress gathered fully at the back, full petticoat run thru with ribbon, and with frills of lace at the bottom. Each hair tie tells a different story of the love life of the wearer.

The way to locate a Bélé session in Trinidad is to call the police, because licenses must be obtained for the drumming. We struggled up a difficult dirt road into the hills, and alongside someone's house was a 15' x 20' pole-framed area,

PHOTO: BOB BOLLARD



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with thatched sides and top. It was four in the morning, and the session was relaxed, the women tired. Some of the two dozen onlookers, including a little girl, were asleep. When the women rested, a man sometimes danced in their place, causing great merriment. It is typical of such operations that in order to record, a bulb occupying the only indoor light socket had to be removed, decidedly increasing the area of darkness . . . an Afro-Chinese man talked excitedly to us all thru the session about high fidelity.

Calinda—Grand Bélé—Eloir éh

Bongo

Carenage is a village of fishermen, and in it lives Charles, King of Bongo. There, in the evening just outside a modest corner store well stocked

with the best brand of Trinidad rum, the bongo session took place.

Bongo is essentially a male dance, having competitive dance movements. Two at a time perform in a typically Russian step; with movements of animal quality they imitate a bird or an animal, accompanied by drums and *qua-qua*. The singing leader is called the *chantelle*, and a group of singers chant to his lead, striking together sticks of bamboo in rhythm.

Bongo is usually danced at wakes, in order to carry the spirit safely across the passage to the other world. *Mama kilio, kilio!* (the devil's money eater) — *Gabitan bombé* (Stout bird) — *Duma, duma, doome lélé* (Douma dance) — *Play, young boy, play* — *Nooka boné patatate de lingo* (we are digging potatoes) — *Give me my top for us to play in the ring* — *The water too cold, too cold.* E.C.



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