

Ethnic Folkways Library Recorded by Andre Didier Folkways Records FE 4402

MUSIC OF EQUATORIAL AFRICA

BAYA MBOKO YASWA BONGILI N'GOUNDI BADOUMA KOUKOUYA BABIMGA OKANDI KOUYOU

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE



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Music of Equatorial Africa

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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Introduction by Harold Courlander

The music of West and Central Africa, after centuries of unrecognized existence and influence, has been "discovered." Explorers and visitors to the African continent have noted in their journals the "savage" and "primitive" chants of the African peoples, and have commented on the "simple rhythms" and "monotony" of the music. How, then, taking these observations at face value, can one explain the pervasion of the African influence into the music of Spain and Portugal, of Arab North Africa, of Brazil and the West Indies, and of the United States itself? How can it be explained, on this basis, why Negro music -- deriving large elements from the African music brought to the new world by Negro slaves -- has permeated our popular idiom to an almost incalculable extent? For little of our popular music has been wholly "created," despite the almost frantic efforts of thousands of popular composers. While the controversy over the musical origins of Negro spirituals still goes on, few scholars would take the position that such spirituals are not essentially Negro, and by Negro we mean music with implicit African connections.

The Negro worksongs and blues of this country also have deep roots in an old tradition, even though their component parts are hybrid. What modern jazz and popular songs owe to this vast body of Negro musical lore is now widely recognized. What perhaps is not widely recognized is that tricks of African and Afro-American musical styles have been incorporated into the delivery of many of our popular song forms, as well as into popular band music. Even other folk musics of the United States have been deeply touched.

In many of the white mountain songs of South-eastern United States an acute listener may observe elements which have been borrowed from the African tradition. Musical acculturation was a two-way affair; the Negroes absorbed European elements into their music as well. Among the American cowboy songs which are so widely familiar are a certain number which bear the mark of Negro influence, just as cowboy and mountain songs often have been taken over and recast into a Negro musical mold. Sea chanteys have influenced Negromusic in the coastal areas, and they in turn have sometimes taken on a Negro flavor. Latin-American musical forms, such as those current in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil, have deeply impressed Americans without their being aware of the strong African elements of much of this music.

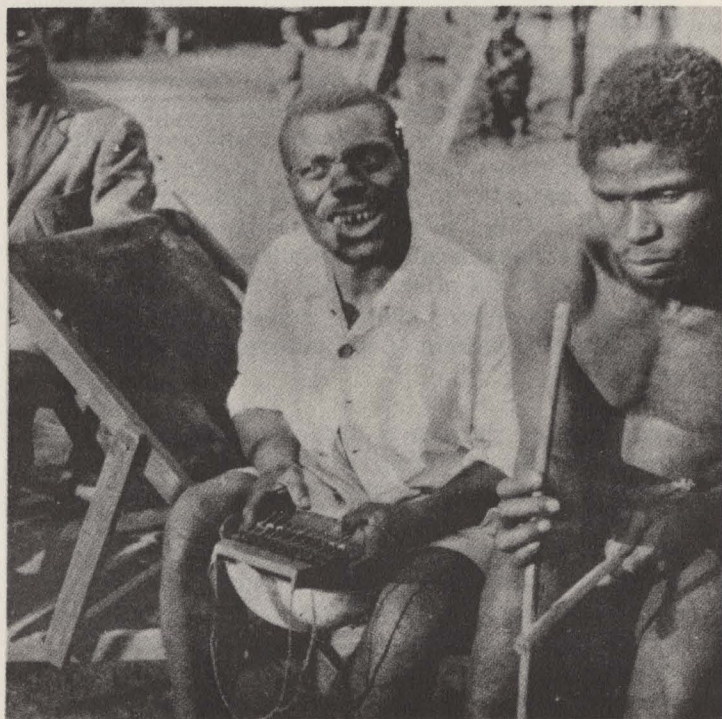
Only as we have slowly become aware of the fact that our music did not arise in a vacuum, nor has ever been completely cut off from its past, have we looked at African music as music, and not as an aspect of primitive life. This second look will reveal that behind the exoticness of African music there lies quality, distinction, and an old seasoned tradition. There is form in it, vitality, exuberance, restraint, and social meaning. Explorers and visitors to Africa who henceforth refer to "monotonous chants," "chaotic noise," and "simple rhythms" will only reveal personal aesthetic blindness. For the rhythms are not often simple, there is rarely "noise" and never "chaos," and an acute ear will discern nothing of the monotony so often described.

The over-all picture is that of a high degree of sophistication and musical learning. The drums carry not only complicated rhythmic patterns, but melodic lines -- often in counterpoint. Since much African music is in a sense action converted into auditory terms, rhythms are likely to predominate. Music is used for dancing, for parading, for marching, for working, and for ritual activities. It is frequently an interpretation of these physical acts, as well as accompaniment or encouragement. Just as it is not easy to comprehend Balinese music without understanding what is going on in a physical sense, so it is impossible to completely understand African music without a knowledge of its social meaning.

But despite this limitation, much of African music stands up completely independent of the setting. Often one is aware of impressive choral and orchestral effects, despite the limitation of the instruments used. And the music is always alive and sensitive to new influences, probably more so in view of the African lack of scoring techniques. While there are rigid forms, the musical performers must 'feel' their way. The forms thus tend to become elastic. What happens when a European influence comes into the picture is evident in one of the pieces in this collection.

The instruments which may be heard are typically African -- horns of various types, drums, whistles, rattles, bells, clappers, xylophones, zither-harps, and the sansa, or thumb piano. A large number of these same instruments have survived in the New World, particularly in the West Indies and Brazil. A comparison of the music and instrumentation of these selections of Equatorial African music with the Cuban and Haitian albums of the Ethnic series will demonstrate the considerable extent to which old African traditions have survived in America.

These recordings were made in 1946 by André Didier, in French Equatorial Africa. Performers were members of the Badouma, N'Goundi, Mboko, Yaswa, Bongili, Baya, Kouya, Babinga, and other tribes of that region. The notes on individual pieces were prepared by another member of the expedition, Gilbert Rouget.



Playing the sansa -- the blind musician at right beats two sticks together to set the basic rhythm.

NOTES ON THE RECORDINGS by Gilbert Rouget

Record 1424 A (1): BADOUMA PADDLERS' SONG (Male Chorus). --

The word miseria which occurs in the text frequently is of European origin, but this music has in no way been influenced by the West. The paddlers sing of the hardships of their work, which is often tiring and sometimes dangerous. This is truly a working song; its role is to set the pace and coordinate the efforts of the crew of the dug-out. The soloist improvises the words, the chorus always answers by the same refrain. The beauty of the theme and of the voices, the precision and at the same time the flexibility of the rhythm, shows once more, in this case, that the working chants are in Africa a highly developed form of musical art.

Record 1424A (2): BADOUMA PADDLERS SONG (Male voices, sansa, rattles, horns) --

This is modern African music; European influences can be discerned in the playing of the sansa, or thumb piano, and as a whole it contains suggestions of the music of the Antilles and modern jazz. The Badouma paddlers are singing here: "For the celebration" it is of good taste to "act like the whites" and it is very stylish to speak French. A dancer shouts "Attention!" to dancers who have run into him, another gives directions to the dancers as for a quadrille, all this with a mixture of African seriousness and sly humour.

Record 1424 B (1): N'GOUNDI SONG (Male solo and mixed chorus, sansa) --

This piece is sung by a reputed N'Goundi singer, who also plays a sansa, or thumb piano. He is accompanied by his brothers, his old mother, and a blind man. This song belongs to the secret society of which the singer is a member -- "The Sons of Sô." Sô is the totem of the society, from whom the cult members believe themselves to be descended. Tattooed on their shoulders is a pattern representing the toothmarks of this mythological being. The story of the song is that of a woman who complains that her husband eats too much manioc and loses his capacity for lovemaking.

Record 1424 B (2): N'GOUNDI GIRLS' SONG (Girls' chorus, hand-clapping) --

This is a satirical and licentious song. The young N'Goundi girls scoff at a young boy who has bragged too much about his capabilities. It is accompanied by clapping of the hands. The solo girl singer intermingles in her song a sort of yodel, a technique probably acquired from neighboring pigmy tribes.

Record 1425 A (1): MBOKO SONG (Solo voice and musical bow)--

There are a number of different types of musical bows, which is one of the most primitive forms of string instruments. This one, which is usual in Equatorial Africa, is at the same time a musical bow and a jew's harp, it is therefore capable of a fairly wide musical scope. It is the instrumentalist himself who stops playing and sings a few bars.

Record 1425 A (1) -- MBOKO RIDDLE SONG (male voices, zither-harp, wooden sticks, rattle) -- The instrument is a huge zither-harp, made from the central nerve of a palm, of which the fibres stretched by means of an easel form the strings. The musician, seated on the ground, scratches the strings of the instrument which rests on his knees. To his right and to his left, sitting next to him, two others strike the harp with a small stick. A fourth shakes a rattle. They all sing, intermingling their voices in a very flexible part singing which has no resemblance to the European part singing. These musicians are Mboko. They sing a riddle concerning the antelope, or djombi.



Babinga drummers

Record 1425 B (1): OKANDI WOMEN'S SONG (female chorus, drums) --

This is dance music for women. Only the three drummers are men. The soloist always asks the same question: "With whom will my husband spend the night?" (That is, with which of his wives). Each time the chorus replies to the question it gives a different answer.

Record 1425 B (2): YASWA MARIMBAS (three xylophones) -- The instruments, of very complex design, show that the people of this area are very familiar with accoustical principles. The calabashes placed under wooden keys of different sizes are chosen so that they may serve as resonators for the corresponding keys. Furthermore a small hole has been drilled into each gourd or calabash and covered with a film which acts as a reed-pipe. This results in a buzzing noise of which Africans are very fond. The musicians are professionals. They go to the neighboring festivities, two teams work in relays, from sunset until day-break; not one moment does the music stop, while men and women dance in circles round the three xylophones placed in a triangle.



Kouyou musicians with zither-harp and rattles

Record 1426 A (1): BONGILI WORK SONG
(Girls chorus, pestle sounds) --

The young women sing about the delights of beaten out banana, a variety of food much appreciated by the Bongili. The women are occupied several hours a day beating out bananas, both the fruit and the skin, into a kind of paste, which is eaten after it has been cooked. The anti-phonical form of this piece -- a solo which is more or less varied according to the skill of the singer, and a chorus which is always identical -- is very current in Africa.

Record 1426 A (2): BAYA DANCE (male and female singers, drums, rattles) --

The three drums are in the center of the circle formed by the Baya men and women dancers. The largest cylindrical drum, tied to the belt, is struck with naked hands; a second one, similar but smaller, is struck with one hand and a stick; the third is a little square drum, held in one hand and struck with a stick held in the other hand. The singer shakes a wicker-work rattle.

Record 1426 B (1): POMO PERAMBULATING CHANT (mixed voices, horn, bell, rattle)--

The solo singer walks at the head of the procession, shaking a rattle and singing an exhortation, to which all answer in chorus. The procession, which includes women and men, moves through the village. One man blows on a large antelope horn, and another strikes an iron bell.

Record 1426 B (2): KOUKOUYA HORNS

AND DRUMS (ivory horns, drums, solo voice)

-- The five ivory horns are played by a company of professionals who hire out their services in the event of a large celebration or the burial of an important personage. Each horn has a particular name which is related to the single sound it produces. The musical interest lies less in the melody than in the mosaic of these five sounds in a polyrhythm peculiar to this set of horns. The singer who is also the drummer, sings, according to the circumstances, the virtue of the deceased or the solemnity of the celebration. (These Koukouya are not related to the Koukouyu of East Africa - Ed.)

Record 1427 A (1): BABINGA PIGMY

CHORUS (flute, women's chorus, handclapping)-- This song, called Yeli, is a ritual

chant which the Babinga women sing before the departure of the men for the elephant hunt. The magical role of Yeli is to ensure a successful hunt.

Record 1427 A (2): BABINGA DANCE
(mixed voices, drums) --

This music accompanies djoboko, the favorite social dance of certain Babinga. All the essentials of Babinga singing are found here: the chorus divided into two separate masses, one consisting of the women who sing a kind of very clear yodel, and the other of the men who generally prefer long notes confined to the bass. The very complex intermingling of voices in the two opposite choruses give this music a very noble bearing.

Record 1427 B (1): KOUYOU MEDICINE

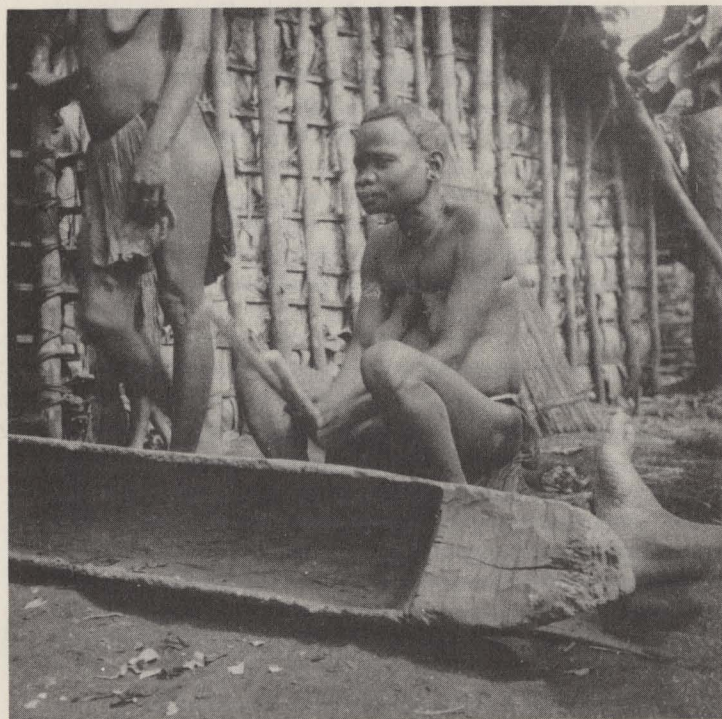
SONG (male voices, horn, drums, sticks, handclapping) -- This song, called Kabe,

is a magical chant, previously sung by the medicine-men to attract the alligators. The antelope horn instrument has a hole in the side for a mouthpiece. The chorus is very compact and gives some idea of what Andre Gide called "lepaisseur harmonique" peculiar to certain African songs.

Record 1427 B (2): KOUYOU WOMEN'S

DANCE (women's chorus, drums, bell) --

The women dance in a circle taking small steps. One of them strikes a large iron bell with a stick. In the center, three drums are beaten by young men. This tune called kano, is sung mainly to celebrate the birth of twins.



Babinga beating a cradle which acts as a wooden slit-log drum