

Folk Music of the Western Congo

Introduction and Notes on the Recordings by Leo A. Verwilghen/Ethnic Folkways Library FE4427



BAMBALA DRUMMING, Single Drum
BAMBALA DRUMMING, Two Drums
BAMBALA LITIGATION, Male Voices, Drums, Whistle
BAMBALA TALKING DRUM
BAMBALA DANCE, Drums, Rattles, Mixed Voices
BAPINDI HUNTING, CALLS, Voices, Horns
BAPENDE XYLOPHONE
BAPENDE AND BAKWESI CHILDREN'S SONGS

Office of the Assistant Secretary
for Public Service

EDITED BY HAROLD COURLANDER / PRODUCTION DIRECTOR, MOSES ASCH

Library of Congress Catalogue Card No. R 59-77
©1952 FOLKWAYS RECORDS & SERVICE Corp.
701 Seventh Ave., New York City
Distributed by Folkways/Scholastic Records
906 Sylvan Ave., Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 07632

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

Folk Music of the Western Congo

Archival Property
Smithsonian Institution
Office of the Assistant Secretary
for Public Service

FOLK MUSIC

OF THE

WESTERN CONGO



Bambala drummers at extreme left is signal or "Talking" drum. At extreme right is player with basket rattles.

THE WESTERN PART OF THE BELGIAN CONGO IS INHABITED BY NUMEROUS TRIBES OF THE BANTU GROUP. SOME OF THEM ARE PATRIARCHAL IN THEIR FAMILY ORGANIZATION, BUT A MAJORITY SEEM TO BE MATRIARCHAL.

THE FAMILY IS COMPOSED OF PARENTS, CHILDREN, ADOPTED CHILDREN AND SERVANTS. ALL OF THEM CALL THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY **TATA**, OR FATHER. THE CONCEPTION OF THE FAMILY IS THUS LARGER THAN IN EUROPE AND AMERICA. MARRIAGE IS A LEGAL CONTRACT, AND THE DOWRY IS A GUARANTEE OF ITS BINDING QUALITY. CHILDREN ARE THE GREATEST WEALTH OF THE FAMILY. DIVORCE IS ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY BASED ON STERILITY OF THE WIFE.

DIVISION OF LABOR IS STRICTLY OBSERVED. THE WOMEN ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR CULTIVATION OF THE FIELDS, PREPARATION OF FOOD AND DRINK, EDUCATION OF THE CHILDREN, AND VENDING PRODUCTS OF THE FIELD IN THE MARKETS. THE MEN MUST CONSTRUCT THE HOUSES, CUT DOWN THE TREES AND CLEAR THE LAND FOR FARMING, AND HUNT FOR GAME. IN FORMER TIMES THEY ALSO HAD THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF WAR.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION IS HIERARCHICAL. AT THE VERY TOP ARE THE CHIEFS AND THEIR PARENTS. THEN COME THE LESSER NOBILITY AND THE CHIEFS OF SUB-GROUPS. BELOW THEM ARE THE FREE MEN, AND FINALLY AT THE BOTTOM ARE THE SERVANTS ATTACHED BY CONTRACT TO THE HEADS OF THE FAMILIES.

THE ROLE OF THE CHIEFS AND THE LESSER NOBILITY IS TO ADMINISTER JUSTICE AND ADJUST DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEMBERS OF THE SAME CLAN, AND TO PROTECT THE INTERESTS OF THE GROUP.

GENERALLY THERE IS ALSO A MEMBER OF THE CLAN WHO IS HISTORIAN AND PRESERVER OF TRADITIONS. IT IS HE WHO KNOWS HOW TO TRACE THE MIGRATIONS OF THE CLAN BEFORE IT CAME TO ITS PRESENT LOCATION. IN THE EVENING BEFORE THE FIRE HE RECITES THE LEGENDS OF THE CLAN AND THE GENEALOGY OF ITS ANCESTORS.

THERE IS BOTH COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL PROPERTY. THE FARMING LAND IS COLLECTIVELY OWNED. COLLECTIVE OWNERSHIP EXTENDS TO GAME, FISH, THE FOREST, THE RIVERS, THE PLAINS AND THE PASTURES. EACH MAN HAS THE FREE DISPOSITION OF THE GROUND HE IMPROVES OR DEVELOPS THROUGH HIS OWN WORK, BUT THE CHIEF HAS ULTIMATE AUTHORITY TO REDIVIDE THE LAND.

THE PEOPLE OF THESE TRIBES RECOGNIZE A SUPREME DEITY (NZAMBI), CREATOR OF ALL THINGS. BUT THIS SUPREME SPIRIT IS TOO DISTANT FROM MEN TO ENLIST ACTIVE WORSHIP ON THEIR PART. THE BASIC WORSHIP IS TO THE ANCESTORS OF THE CLAN. THE CLAN IS IN EFFECT A COMMUNITY CONSISTING OF ALL THE LIVING AND THE DEAD DESCENDED FROM A COMMON ANCESTOR. TOWARDS THE DEAD IT IS NECESSARY TO MAKE OFFERINGS AS A MARK OF DEFERENCE WHEN ONE WISHES TO CONSULT THEM ON PROBLEMS. THE DEAD ARE SPOKEN TO THROUGH THE CHIEF, WHO USES A SPECIAL DRUM FOR THIS PURPOSE. THE DEAD HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PROTECTING THEIR DESCENDENTS.

THE CLAN IS THUS THE CENTER OF RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL LIFE. ETHICAL BEHAVIOR IS BASED ON GROUP WELFARE, RESPECT FOR THE SUPREME BEING, RESPECT FOR PARENTS, AND RESPECT FOR CHIEFS. IT PROHIBITS STEALING, ADULTERY, LYING, MURDER AND DECEPTION. THESE MORAL CONCEPTS ARE SUPPORTED BY CUSTOM AND ENFORCED BY TRIBAL JUSTICE.

THE CREATIVE IMPULSES OF THESE PEOPLES ARE EXPRESSED IN BASKET-MAKING, POTTERY, SCULPTURE, AND ABOVE ALL IN MUSIC AND DANCE. IT IS MUSIC

AND DANCE WHICH MORE THAN ALL OTHER ARTS PERMEATE THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THE GROUP.

THERE IS DANCING FOR A MARRIAGE, FOR A DEATH, AND FOR A BIRTH, AS WELL AS FOR ITS OWN SAKE. MOST DANCING BEGINS IN THE EVENING. DRUM RHYTHMS USUALLY ACCOMPANY THE DANCING, BUT THEY ARE NOT THE EXCLUSIVE INSTRUMENTS FOR SUCH OCCASIONS. THERE ARE ALSO BASKET RATTLES AND CALABASH RATTLES, BELLS, AND OTHER PERCUSSION INSTRUMENTS.

THE AREA REPRESENTED BY THESE RECORDINGS INCLUDES ABOUT 25,000 KILOMETERS, AND EXTENDS FROM THE KASAI RIVER (ON THE NORTH AND WEST) DOWN TO THE ANGOLA BORDER, WITH THE KWANGO RIVER ROUGHLY FORMING THE WESTERN LIMIT. THE REGION IS JUST EAST OF THE NARROW STRIP THAT CONNECTS THE BELGIAN CONGO WITH THE ATLANTIC.

BABUNDA SONG: MIXED VOICES. THIS SONG EXPRESSES JOY IN THE COMING OF THE NEW YEAR.

BAPENDE WORK SONG: MALE VOICES. THIS SONG IS SUNG DURING A BUILDING OF A HOUSE FOR THE CHIEF. THE BAPENDE MEN CUT DOWN THE TREES IN THE FOREST AND CARRY THE TIMBERS TO THE VILLAGE. THERE THEY DIG HOLES IN THE EARTH IN WHICH THEY SET THE UPRIGHTS. THE VARIOUS TIMBERS ARE TIED TOGETHER WITH VINES, AND THE ROOF IS COVERED WITH DRY STRAW. THIS ENDS THE WORK OF THE MEN. THEN THE WOMEN TAKE OVER. THEY PLASTER THE OUTSIDE OF THE WALLS WITH MUD. WHEN THE MUD IS DRY THE WALLS ARE SOLID AND STRONG.

THE PEOPLE OF THE VILLAGE ARE UNDER THE COMMAND OF THE CHIEF, WHO IS THE JUDGE IN DIFFERENCES ARISING AMONG THE VILLAGERS. THE CHIEF DETERMINES WHEN THERE SHALL BE A COMMUNAL HUNT AND IN THE NAME OF THE CLAN HOLDS THE LAND WHICH IS THE COMMON PROPERTY OF ALL. AND HE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR MAINTAINING THE PEACE AND SUPPORTING THE TRADITIONS OF THE ANCESTORS.

BAMBALA DRUMMING, SINGLE DRUM. THIS IS THE BEGINNING PORTION OF A DRUMMING SESSION. LATER OTHER DRUMS JOIN IN.

BAMBALA DRUMMING, TWO DRUMS. THE "NGOMA" DRUM PLAYS A PART IN MOST OF THE SIGNIFICANT HAPPENINGS IN THE BAMBALA COMMUNITY. THE DRUM IS NECESSARY FOR DANCING, SINGING AND MOURNING. THERE ARE DIFFERENT TYPES OF DRUMS, AND ONE MUST PLAY THE PROPER DRUM CALLED FOR BY THE OCCASION. THUS THERE IS THE SMALL DRUM WHICH IS THE PROPERTY OF THE CHIEF, WITH WHICH HE SPEAKS TO THE DEAD, SENDS MESSAGES AND NEWS TO OTHER VILLAGES, AND BEGINS AND ENDS RENDERING OF LEGAL JUDGEMENT. WHEN HE PLAYS, THE PEOPLE MUST STAND SILENTLY AND LISTEN. THOSE WHO VIOLATE THE RULE ARE PUNISHED. THE DRUMS ARE PLAYED ALSO TO MARSHAL FOR WAR, AND TO CELEBRATE A VICTORY.

BAMBALA LITIGATION: MALE VOICES, DRUMS, WHISTLE. THIS TYPE OF LITIGATION IS COMMON THROUGHOUT THE WESTERN CONGO. WHEN A DISAGREEMENT ARISES BETWEEN MEMBERS OF THE CLAN OR VILLAGE IN CONNECTION WITH HUNTING, WOMEN, FIGHTING, AND SO ON, THE PARTIES REFER THE MATTER TO THE CHIEF, WHO CONVOKES A TRIBUNAL FOR A SET DAY. EVERYONE ASSEMBLES — MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN. THE DRUMS HAVE BEEN READIED. THE CHIEF OPENS THE COURT BY PLAYING UPON THE SMALL SIGNAL DRUM. THEN EACH OF THE LITIGANTS, REPRESENTED BY AN OFFICIAL, RISES IN TURN AND PRESENTS HIS ARGUMENT. HE ATTEMPTS TO CONFUSE HIS ADVERSARY BY PROVING HE IS WRONG AND THAT HE CONTRADICTS HIMSELF. WHEN HE HAS FINISHED HIS ARGUMENT HE SINGS AN ALLEGORICAL TYPE OF SONG IN WHICH THE VILLAGERS AND DRUMMERS JOIN. THE CEREMONY IS AN ORATORICAL CONTEST IN WHICH THE JUDGES SHOW A PROFOUND UNDERSTANDING OF CUSTOM AND EQUITY, AS IT IS IN



BAPINDI SANSA PLAYER

THE NAME OF THE CLAN ANCESTORS THAT JUSTICE IS METED OUT.

THIS RECORDING IS A PORTION OF AN ACTUAL LITIGATION AMONG THE BAMBALA. THE LITIGANTS, WITH THEIR SUPPORTERS, FACE EACH OTHER IN TWO LINES. THE SUBSTANCE OF THEIR ARGUMENTS IS AS FOLLOWS:

FIRST PARTY: "I WAS IN MY HOUSE AND WOULD HAVE LIKED TO STAY. BUT HE HAS COME AND WANTS TO DISCUSS THE MATTER IN PUBLIC. SO I HAVE LEFT MY HOUSE AND THAT IS WHY YOU SEE ME HERE."

(SINGS) "I AM LIKE A CRICKET. I WOULD LIKE TO SING, BUT THE WALL OF EARTH THAT SURROUNDS ME PREVENTS ME. SOMEONE HAS FORCED ME TO COME OUT OF MY HOLE, SO I WILL SING."

(CONTINUES ARGUMENT) "LET US DEBATE THE THINGS, BUT SLOWLY, SLOWLY, OTHERWISE WE WILL HAVE TO GO BEFORE THE TRIBUNAL OF THE WHITE PEOPLE. YOU HAVE FORCED ME TO COME. WHEN THE SUN HAS SET, WE SHALL STILL BE HERE DEBATING."

(SINGS) "I AM LIKE THE DOG THAT STAYS BEFORE THE DOOR UNTIL HE GETS A BONE."

OPPONENT: "NOBODY GOES BOTH WAYS AT THE SAME TIME. YOU HAVE TOLD THIS AND THAT. ONE OF THE TWO MUST BE WRONG. THAT IS WHY I AM ATTACKING YOU."
(SINGS) "A THIEF SPEAKS WITH ANOTHER THIEF. IT IS BECAUSE YOU ARE BAD THAT I ATTACK YOU."

BAMBALA TALKING DRUM: THIS IS THE CHIEF PLAYING UPON HIS LITTLE SLIT-LOG SIGNAL DRUM TO CLOSE THE DAY'S TRIBUNAL. THE DRUM TONES ARE ACTUALLY STYLIZED SIMULATION OF WORDS, WHICH ARE UNDERSTOOD BY THOSE OF THE TRIBE WHO HEAR.

(FOR LITERATURE ON DRUM SIGNALING, SEE GEORGE HERZOG, "DRUM-SIGNALING IN A WEST AFRICAN TRIBE", WORD, DECEMBER, 1945. -- ED.)



BAPENDE XYLOPHONE PLAYER

BAMBALA DANCE: DRUMS, RATTLES, MIXED VOICES.

BAPINDI SANSAS: TWO SANSAS. THE SANSA IS AN INSTRUMENT KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE GREATER EXPANSE OF AFRICA. IT CONSISTS OF METAL OR BAMBOO STRIPS MOUNTED ON A FLAT PIECE OF WOOD, WHICH IS SOME-TIMES HOLLOWED TO FORM A SOUND CHAMBER. THE KEYS ARE PLUCKED WITH THE THUMBS -- AND THE INSTRUMENT IS THEREFORE ON OCCASION REFERRED TO BY NON-AFRICANS AS A "THUMB PIANO." SOMETIMES THE SANSA IS PLAYED AGAINST A GOURD OR CALABASH, WHICH PROVIDES A SOUND CHAMBER. IN THE WEST CONGO THE SANSA IS FREQUENTLY PLAYED WHEN ONE IS ALONE, USUALLY IN THE EVENING. THE PLAYER SINGS OR HUMS TO HIMSELF, ACCOMPANYING HIMSELF ON THE SANSA. THE SANSA IS ALSO USED TO BREAK THE MONOTONY WHEN ONE IS WALKING ON LONG TRIPS.

THERE ARE TWO SANSAS IN THESE RECORDINGS, A LARGE ONE AND A SMALL ONE. THE SELECTIONS WERE TAKEN IN THE VILLAGE OF KIKONGO.

BAPINDI HUNTING CALLS: VOICES, HORNS. THE BAPINDI HUNT THEIR GAME WITH BOWS AND ARROWS, AND WITH THE HELP OF THEIR DOGS. ATTACHED BELOW THE STOMACH OF EACH DOG IS A WOODEN BELL. THIS MAKES IT POSSIBLE TO KEEP TRACK OF THE DOGS WHEN THEY BECOME LOST. ONE OF THE HUNTERS HAS A WOODEN HORN, ON WHICH HE BLOWS SHORT CALLS IMITATING THE CALLS OF THE ANTELOPE. THE CALLS EXCITE THE DOGS TO HUNT FOR THE SCENT OF THE GAME.

THERE ARE DIFFERENT TECHNIQUES OF HUNTING. WHEN A MAN HUNTS ALONE HE MAY LIE IN WAIT OR TRACK HIS GAME FOR AN ENTIRE DAY AND NIGHT. TOWARD THE END OF THE DRY SEASON THERE ARE COMMUNITY HUNTS. THE VILLAGERS GATHER AROUND THE FOOT OF A HILL, SETTING THE BRUSH AFIRE, FORCING THE GAME TO RETREAT TO THE CENTER. FINALLY THE ANIMALS JUMP THROUGH THE FIRE, BUT ARE SHOT DOWN BY THE HUNTERS AS THEY ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE. AN ANIMAL BELONGS TO THE

ONE WHO FIRST WOUNDS IT. BUT A PORTION OF ALL ANIMALS SHOT ON LAND BELONGING TO THE VILLAGE MUST BE GIVEN TO THE CHIEF.

BAPENDE XYLOPHONE: THE BAPENDE XYLOPHONE IS TYPICAL OF WEST AFRICA. IT CONSISTS OF A NUMBER OF FLAT WOODEN PIECES MOUNTED IN PARALLEL. THESE PIECES ARE BEATEN WITH STICKS WITH GUMMED HEADS. UNDERNEATH EACH KEY IS A HOLLOWED GOURD WHICH ACTS AS AN INDIVIDUAL SOUNDING CHAMBER. THE GOURDS ARE OF DIFFERENT SIZE, ACCORDING TO THE TONE OF THE WOODEN KEYS. ON SOME OCCASIONS TWO MEN WILL SIT ON OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE XYLOPHONE TO PLAY TOGETHER. MORE OFTEN EACH MAN PLAYS A SEPARATE INSTRUMENT.

BAPENDE AND BAKWESI CHILDREN'S SONGS: THE FIRST OF THESE THREE SONGS HAS TO DO WITH THE DEATH OF A WITCH DOCTOR, OR MEDICINE MAN. WHEN A MEDICINE MAN DIES, THE NAME OF HIS FETISH MUST BE REVEALED SO THAT A SUCCESSOR MAY BE APPOINTED. THIS SONG ASKS THE DEAD TO REVEAL THE NAME OF THE FETISH OF THE DECEASED.

THE SECOND IS A SONG THAT IS HEARD AT THE TRIBUNAL. IT SAYS: "YOU, YIMBI (THE HAWK), YOU ARE FROM THE SKY ABOVE, WHAT ARE YOU COMING TO DO HERE ON THE EARTH BELOW?"

THE THIRD SONG IS ALSO A TRIBUNAL SONG. IT SAYS: "WHY DON'T YOU CHANGE YOUR MIND AND GO AFAR FROM THE WISDOM OF OUR ANCESTORS?" IT IS A TAUNT FROM ONE LITIGANT TO ANOTHER.

NONE OF THESE SONGS ARE TRUE CHILDREN'S SONGS, BUT THEY ARE SONGS IN WHICH CHILDREN PARTICIPATE.

PHOTOS BY LEO A. VERWILGHEN
EDITOR - HAROLD COURLANDER
PRODUCTION DIRECTOR - MOSES ASCH