ETHNIC FOLKWAYS LIBRAR

Spear Song **Elephant Hunting Song**

Net Hunting Song Hunting Cries

Honey-Gathering Songs Animal Dance Song

Village Dance Initiation Songs

Alima Songs Lusumba Songs

The Pygmies of the Ituri Forest

Recorded by Colin M. Turnbull and Francis S. Chapman



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INTRODUCTION

by

COLIN M. TURNBULL

The Pygmies of the Ituri Forest, or BaMbuti as they are known to themselves and to neighbouring Bantu and Sudanic tribes, are considered one of the most primitive peoples in the world today. In one sense they are. They still exist largely by hunting and gathering (probably the earliest form of economy known to man), though barter and trade with neighbouring Negrotribes is playing an increasingly important part. Their life is simplicity in the extreme, their material culture minimal. Visual art is practically nil beyond the occasional daubing of a dark cloth with a red or blue dye, smeared on with finger or a twig; there is no carving. But with all this the Pygmies, or BaMbuti, rise head and shoulders above their more "advanced" neighbors in the realm of music.

Not only is BaMbuti music interesting because of its relative complexity, but also because of the tremendous importance it plays in the social life of the people. The selection that follows is designed to show something of this, and to give a picture, in sound, of the life of these forest hunters and gatherers, in all its simplicity and splendor.

The music itself is marked off from other African music most clearly, perhaps, by three characteristics. It is essentially vocal and non-instrumental; it incorporates a relatively complex harmonic sense with a well developed sense of rhythm, in a show of technical virtuosity that would baffle any musicologist who could not see as well as hear what was going on; and lastly BaMbuti music is based almost entirely on the dominant, with the occasional addition of the seventh interval, and this is probably responsible for the resulting complexity. In a way it is simple rather than complex because given a dominant mode, whatever notes are sung at the same time result in the same chord. There can be no disharmony. The genius of BaMbuti music lies in the fact that given this very limitation they can do so much with it.

The essentially vocal nature of the music is interesting in that the surrounding tribes abound in a wealth of instrumental music while their song is relatively undeveloped. This gives us some idea of the insularity of the BaMbuti in their forest, and their ability to withstand foreign influences. The more so as they are perfectly capable of playing any of the instruments they come in contact with, often with greater dexterity than the originators. For this reason the first side of the record is given entirely to Pygmy forest life, and the first part of the second side to their life when in a Bantu village. They are two separate lives, and two very different kinds of music.

Finally, a word about the other characteristic that adds to the uniqueness of BaMbuti music, its harmonic, rhythmic and technical complexity. As we have seen, given the dominant mode, one-chord harmony is inevitable, and the thing to look for is the ability of the BaMbuti to improvise within this self-imposed limitation. Another apparent limitation is the insistance on descending patterns, and this is seen, I think, in all their songs. Rhythm is made not with drums (except when they are in or near a Bantu village), but with 18-inch lengths of wood, split and shaved at one end and either struck together or 'brushed" on a log -- they are called banza. These are used in the religious songs of both men and women, particularly, it seems of the men. They may leave the sticks unshaved, in which case when clapped together they give a hollow sound -- these are called ngbenbe and are used in hunting and gathering songs. They give the basic beat, in four or eight time. The ngbenbe are more likely to develop a syncopated beat than the banza, which divide the eight-beat measure in one of the two following ways:

Against this a cross rhythm may be effected by handclaps, by drums if they are used, but, par excellence, by the voice. There are several different styles of singing, varying with the type of song. The form is often in canon, and the BaMbuti give this a special name, rondisa; if they want to use this form one will give the command rondisai. In this form of song the BaMbuti compress or expand the melodic phrase, it would seem instinctively, according to the number of singers in the group, so that the canon comes out in the right place at the right time. If the

group is large, each singer, as the phrase is passed around anti-clockwise, will take his cue from the accepted beat, but will extend the phrase with elaborations according to his fancy so that there is no hiatus. This is again made possible by the use of the dominant mode in which, harmony-wise, it really doesn't matter which note is sung, since it is impossible to get away from the one chord. The elaborations will usually be at the low end of the scale, but sometimes the singer will break into a delicate falsetto.

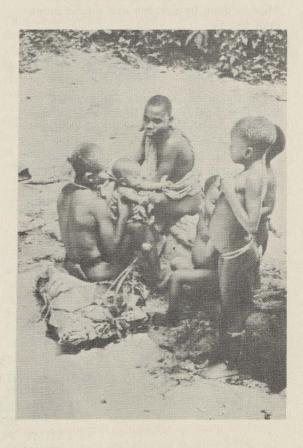
Another form is a solo sung over a chorus. A song will be known to have a general meaning, but it may well be totally devoid of any words at all, and simply a succession of vowel sounds. If words are used they are extremely simple, rarely even amounting to one complete sentence, and they will be changed mercilessly, both vowels and consonants, to please the Pygmy ear. The sound itself is what is important, and the Pygmy listens intently to his own music, even as he is making it; the real meaning of the song, its importance and power, is in the sound.

SIDE I, Band 1: BIRDS AND CRICKETS;

BARK-CLOTH HAMMERING WITH THE VOICES
OF YOUNG BOYS IN THE
BACKGROUND

The BaMbuti are essentially people of the forest, and they refer to themselves as such in opposition to "the people of the village". The Ituri forest is in the north-east of the Belgian Congo; a dense, tropical rain-forest with gigantic trees that meet high overhead, shutting out the sky and the heat of the sun, filling the glades below with a cool shimmering green light. Only in certain places is the undergrowth thick and tangled, generally it is remarkably clear. Pygmies use animal paths, along which they move swiftly and silently if they are hunting, or swiftly and noisily if they are just going from one place to another. A long way before you reach a forest camp you can hear its sounds rising above the incessant chirp of birds and crickets and the rasping of frogs. You can hear the chatter of the youngsters left in the camp while the others are out hunting, the hammering out of bark on fallen tree trunks as the men make their strips of clothing, and if there are enough people in the camp they will sooner or later fall into song.





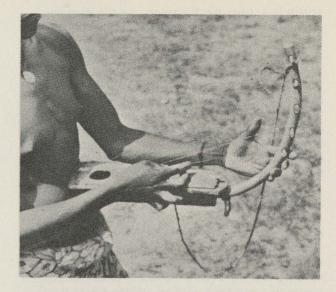
WOMEN AND CHILDREN

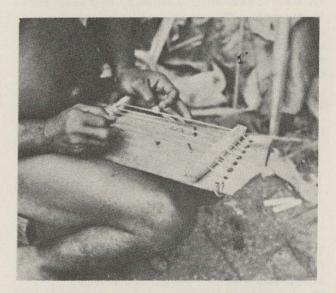
SIDE I, Band 2: ELEPHANT HUNTING SONG.

Hunting is the major activity of BaMbuti men, and it is their chief joy. Nothing is so good as a good hunt, and no-one is so great as a great hunter. And the greatest hunter of all is one who has killed an elephant. This they do eitner by slitting the tendons on the rear heel of the animal, and as it turns in rage another Pygmy placed in the right spot dashes forward with his spear and slits the tendon on the other heel after which it is easy to finish off. Or else they may run up right underneath the animal and thrust their short spears into its stomach. Some say they aim for the bladder, and if they see urine come out, they know the elephant will die. Then they call the rest of their group to track it. The whole camp breaks and follows the trail of the wounded elephant and, when they find it, they camp around it and feast, dance and sing. In such a song they tell how this particular elephant was killed, with a few exaggerations, and then relate tales of how their fathers killed elephants before them. This is done by actions and sound more than words.

SIDE I, Band 3: SPEAR SONG.

Some Pygmies use bows and arrows, but they are mostly found in the east of the forest. All Pygmies know how to use them, and carry them with them for protection, but other groups, particularly in the north and west, use spears. Their song is different.







ABOVE:
MUNDAKA VILLAGER
WITH HARP.
CENTER: ZITHER.
BOTTOM:
PYGMY PLAYING
MUSICAL BOW.

SIDE I, Band 4: NET HUNTING SONG.

The Pygmies in the center of the forest use nets. Each family will have a net, about four feet high and up to a hundred yards long. As they go off to hunt, and in the evenings when they come back from the hunt, they sing of their real, and imagined, exploits.

SIDE I, Band 5: HUNTING CRIES OF BEATERS; ARM CLAPPING (SIGNALLING) AND SHOUT-ING.

They tie their nets together in a vast semicircle, then as the men stand guard the women go off and at a given signal start driving the animals into the nets, crying and whooping as they advance. By clapping their elbows, which they cup against their sides, the men can tell each other from a distance how the beat is going.

SIDE I. Band 6: HONEY-GATHERING SONG.

Just as important as hunting, as an economic activity, is gathering. This is the work of women, and as they go on the hunt with their menfolk, or as they move about their various chores, they stop every now and again and dart off the path to pick mushrooms, or nuts, or edible roots. But one form of gathering excels all others -- the gathering of honey. The honey season lasts for only two months, and all other activity is abandoned as far as



possible. Of all foods honey is the most delicious to the BaMbuti, and they distinguish many different kinds of it, and savor them all as a European connoisseur savors wine ... but only for a moment. Then it is a free-for-all and everyone plunges into the haul and in no time it is all gone. Some honey is found in the ground, but most is high up in the trees and it is the work of men to climb up, carrying fire with them, and fetch it down. Honey-gathering songs seem to convey something of the gaiety and lightheartedness of the season, and the ngbenge clappers give an added stimulous and vitality to the music.

SIDE I, Band 7: ANIMAL-DANCE SONG.

Much of the two honey-gathering months is given over to feasting and dancing. The dances are usually in imitation of various animals, or of a hunt with the leader imitating the actions and sounds of an antelope or some other beast.

SIDE I, Band 8: OLD PYGMY TELLING LEGEND.

This is also the season for legend telling, one of the favorite BaMbuti recreations. This is something that really has to be seen as well as heard, because as the legend teller tells his story he lives it, and his face and his gestures all add to the beauty of his poetry. This is an old man telling, as Pygmy legends so often do, of how a man went hunting for food and had it stolen from him by a mischievous forest spirit.

SIDE I, Band 9: FLUTE DUET

The only kind of instrumental music one might hear is either the <u>lukembi</u> (elsewhere known as <u>sansa</u>) or the flute. The latter is made out of one of several different kinds of reed or cane, is notched and end blown; four holes are placed (with remarkable accuracy for the speed at which these flutes are made -- a matter of a couple of minutes) at the lower end, which is stopped with a rolled leaf. Sometimes the flute is played singly, sometimes two of them together. They are seldom used for long. They are thrown away and forgotten almost as soon as they are made. But for a brief moment the

Pygmy takes great delight in the sound he manages to get from these simple instruments.

SIDE I, Band 10: <u>LUKEMBI</u> AND SOLO <u>VOICE</u>.

The <u>lukembi</u> is far more common than the flute. The BaMbuti borrow or steal them from the villagers, and tune them to their own scale. The following two example shows how they are used with solo voice (they sometimes are used with chorus). But again it is a temporary whim, a passing fashion, and whether it be in the village or the forest it is nothing more than an amusing but trifling incidental in the music of the BaMbuti.

SIDE II, Band 1: PYGMY DANCE IN BANTU VILLAGE.

For the moment we leave the forest and follow the Pygmies to a Bantu village. Ever since the Pygmies first came in contact with the Bantu tribes, when the latter invaded the forest and used the BaMbuti as scouts, spies and mercenary soldiers, there has been a very definite but difficultto-define relationship between the two peoples. Now that there is no more intertribal warfare, the Bantu have no further use for the BaMbuti as soldiers; but the people of the forest are above all else hunters, and the Bantu are cultivators, so a loose exchange relationship has grown up. The Pygmies supply meat and the Bantu supply plantains, rice, manioc, and other plantation products.

Both Bantu and BaMbuti recognise a hereditary system by which certain Pygmies are always associated with certain Bantu, but the relationship is by no means rigid. When a Pygmy wanders off to a different part of the forest he will find a different patron, though he will never forget his hereditary mkpara. The BaMbuti regard the Bantu village as a place where they can have a rest from the rigors of forest life, and a change from forest diet. They do a little work for the Bantu -- cutting wood and carrying water -- and are well fed and cared for. The two peoples are friends, though each regards the other as essentially inferior. The Bantu always give the Pygmies a warm welcome when they troop in from the forest because it means not only





ABOVE: SHREDDING VINE FOR NET TWINE. BELOW: ROLLING VINE FOR NETS.

that they will have meat (as much as the Pygmies see fit to give them) but also that they will have dancing. The Pygmy is regarded by the Bantu as a sort of professional dancer.

The Pygmy's village dance is very different from his forest dance. He seems to cast off forest values, and take on a quite dissociated life. Hunting is forgotten; this is a time for eating and drinking and merrymaking. He takes over the Bantu drums and performs a dance which is a by-play not only between the sexes but also between the individual dancers and the main drummer. The BaMbuti form a circle, one half women and one half men. There may be from one to four drums, usually three. Of these, all except the main drum have their own distinct patterns. The main drum alone is allowed to improvise, which it does to such an extent it appears it must have forgotten the basic eight-beat measure, but it never does. The men and women come out in pairs and dance toward each other, pretending to offer advances, accept or reject them -- all with great humor. Their feet and gestures follow the drums, and work up to a sudden twist of the body which comes on the eighth beat and should coincide with a climax on the main drum. The main drum has different ideas, and sometimes pretends to lead up to it, then veers away at the last moment, leaving the dancer almost literally suspended in mid-air. The dance is fast and exciting, and always draws a large crowd of Bantu onlookers.

SIDE II, Band 2: BACHELOR DUET, WITH LUKEMBI.

This is also the time when the youths flirt with all the eligible girls. Here two of them, one of them playing the <u>lukembi</u>, sing to each other about the joys of being single and the fun of being able to chase women instead of animals.

WORKING ON THE NETS. BOTTOM PICTURE SHOWS MAN SIGNALLING BY CLAPPING ELBOW.









STARTING ON THE HUNT

SIDE II, Band 3: TWO INITIATION SONGS, SUNG BY PYGMY BOYS LED BY A MuNDAKA

One strange thing about the relationship between the BaMbuti and the Bantu is the thoroughness with which the Pygmy seems to adopt, even to have forced on him, the habits and customs of the Bantu, and the ease and completeness with which he throws them off when he returns to the forest. Perhaps the most interesting example of this is the fact that BaMbuti boys undergo initiation, including circumcision in most cases, at the hands of their Bantu patrons. This is done when the boys are between 9 and 12, and Pygmy and Bantu boys are initiated together. During the two or three months that follow they are taught a number of these initiation songs.

SIDE II, Bands 4,5: TWO SONGS OF THE ALIMA, WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS SOCIETY.

At the end of the festival there is a "comingout" dance, and the boys are then considered as men -- by the Bantu -- and treated as such -- in the village. But as soon as the Pygmies return to their forest, those same boys are once again treated as children; the initiation in no way affects their status of life in the forest. This divorce is further marked by the fact that whereas the BaMbuti sing about everything that is important to them, they have no initiation songs at all in connection with the Bantu nkumbi ceremony.

With the girls it is different. There is a form of initiation which the Pygmies and two of the Bantu tribes (BaNdaka and BaBira) share in common, the Alima. This is an individual affair, the girls undergo their Alima when they have their first menstrual period. If two or more girls are nearly ready at the same time they may wait, and both will enter the Alima house together. They stay there a month. They will be surrounded by their friends, and chaperoned by one or two older women. They are not as closely secluded as the initiation boys, and make frequent sorties from their house to beat up the youths who gather around. It is difficult, if indeed it is possible at all, to say whether this is originally a Pygmy or Bantu custom, but that it is of importance to the BaMbuti, unlike the boy's Nkumbi, is clearly shown by the very special songs the BaMbuti women have for the Alima. In the evening the older women will sit outside the Alima house, the girls may be with them or may be inside. All will sing, and slowly a circle of boys will form, and they will add a throaty chorus to some of the songs. When the women sing you can hear more clearly that distinctive and extraordinary BaMbuti trait of singing in parallel seconds, and continually harping on the musical second interval.

SIDE II, Band 6: MOCKING SONG OF THE LUSUMBA.

The Alima in fact is very much a part of Pygmy life, far more so than it is of Bantu life among those tribes that have the custom. It is truly an initiation, it initiates girls into womanhood, and fits them for married life. Their songs are sacred in the sense that they can only be sung under certain conditions. They are sacred in another sense, in that they are used to consecrate any rite de passage affecting the women of the group -- a birth, marriage, or death of a girl or woman. The Alima songs are a way of sanctifying an event, simply by singing them. It is the counterpart of the men's religious society, the Lusumba (or sometimes Essumba).

We are now in the realm where Pygmy life, and Pygmy music, is furthest from that of their Bantu neighbors. The Bantu world is a world of spirits, or magic, of sorcery. The forest is a place to be afraid

of, a place of evil. The Pygmy world is the forest, and to them it is good and kind, providing all the shelter and clothing and warmth they need, protection from the sun, and food is plenty. There are mischievous spirits that play pranks, and are convenient as excuses when a Pygmy returns from a honey tree with empty hands (and a full stomach), but they are not evil. The Pygmy seems to have no concept of evil. Trickery he condemns, and to him the Bantu and their magic and sorcery are tricky. And when the Pygmy is down in the village he answers trickery with the like. But in the forest his approach to life is as direct and as simple as his life itself.

In times of crisis, when a great hunter dies, or when hunting is excessively bad (which it seldom is), you might expect to find the Pygmy practicing magic. Perhaps he does, but in that case music is his magic, for under stress and strain the Pygmy finds the solution to his plight and problem in song, and above all in the songs of the Lusumba, the religious association of the men.

The men meet in the evening, and they chase the women off to bed with mocking songs.

SIDE II, Band 7: <u>LUSUMBA FIRE</u> DANCE SONG.

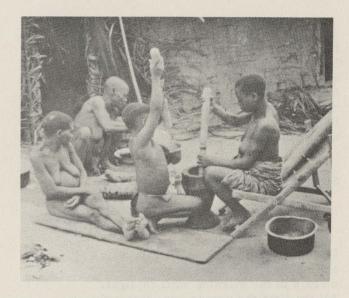
When the women are all in their huts, the real singing begins. The men sing to the forest, to the god of the forest. As they sing they dance around the fire at their meeting place.

SIDE II, Band 8: LUSUMBA FIRE DANCE SONG.

Occasionally they will dance through the fire, scattering it as though plunging their world into darkness. Then from out of the darkness comes

> ABOVE: MAKING BARK CLOTH CENTER: POUNDING MANIOC BELOW: MEAT-DRYING RACK









FOREST CAMP SHOWING TYPICAL PYGMY HOUSES

the sound of their own song being echoed by one of their best singers into a long wooden horn, passing the song into the forest, to their god. The following recording has not got the horn in it, but it has caught a Pygmy singing in imitation of the horn.

SIDE II, Bands 9,10: TWO <u>LUSUMBA</u>
SONGS SUNG ONLY
ON OCCASIONS OF
GREAT IMPORTANCE.

The singing will go on all night, with a short break, and start up again at 5 o'clock in the morning until daylight. All the time the women are rigorously excluded. The songs are graded in importance. Some of them are only sung on occasions of prime importance, such as the death of one of the elders or great hunters. These songs are virtually wordless, they are an expression of a feeling in terms of pure sound.

SIDE II, Band 11: SONG OF DEVOTION TO THE FOREST.

The answer to the inevitable question, why are words so unimportant, lies in the BaMbuti attitude to their forest world. It is a world that is essentially good, and where life normally runs smoothly and easily. Any break in that flow is abnormal, but the Pygmies do

not attribute this break to any malevolence, nor to any evil person or spirit at work, as would the Bantu. This concept is creeping in, but still carries little weight. I have heard Pygmies say, that it seems to fit so perfectly with their general attitude that I believe it to be a general belief, "If things go wrong, it must be because God is sleeping. If he were awake and seeing us he would not let this happen."

So what do they do? They sing. And the power of the song is to awaken their god -- and that is all that is needful, for when he is awake then everything will automatically return to normal. There is no need to ask for this or that, and hence, it seems, the unimportance of the words. Hence also the special sanctity of certain songs, both of the Alima and of the Lusumba, for it is by a special sound that God can be awakened. This also in part answers the question, if the Bantu nkumbi is not considered as real initiation by the BaMbuti in their forest life, what form of initiation is there? There is certainly no ceremony. But ceremony itself is as foreign to the BaMbuti as is magic and sorcery. The real initiation for the BaMbuti boys is like that of the girls; it is the acquisition of the right to take part in these sacred songs, on which the welfare of the community depends. That right is not given in bulk to boys simply because they are between the ages of 9 and 12, but to individuals because they have shown themselves to be full members of the community, i.e. have proven themselves to be hunters. Only then may they take full part in the <u>Lusumba</u>, and be regarded as men.

In a sense all Pygmy songs are sacred because they all concern the forest, which is their supreme value. But the songs of the Lusumba more than any convey the depth of their devotion to their forest home, their faith and trust in it.

Photographs by Colin M. Turnbull Harold Courlander, General Editor Moses Asch, Production Director

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LC R-65-1682