

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS FE4477

Bwale Music
Lukembi Tune
Men's Worksong
Play Song
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Drums For Girls' Dances
Palm Fruit Cutter's Song
Hunting Calls
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Mouth Signalling in Imitation of Trumpet
Mouth Signalling in Imitation of Flute
Gourd Percussion
Musical Bow
Zither, With Voice

THE TOPOKE PEOPLE OF THE CONGO

RECORDED BY J. CAMPS

Recorded by J. Camps Notes by Pete L.A. van Hest Folkways Ethnic Library FE 4477

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LUKEMBI

DRUM DANCES

WORK SONGS

HUNTING CALLS

MOURNING CRIES

DRUM SIGNALLING

HORN SIGNALLING

MUSICAL BOW

COMPLAINT SONG

ZITHER

Harold Courlander, Editor

FOLKWAYS FE4477

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Notes by Pete L.A. van Hest

The Topoke tribe or clans live in the middle of the equatorial forest; therefore their life is one of laboring, hunting, and, in a small way, fishing. They live between the Lualaba and Lomami Rivers and west of the Lomami river. The Congo River is the northern frontier of this conglomeration of small clans which make up the Topoke tribe.

As a social and political unit the clan has at its top a headman, called Fafa. Polygamy is permitted among the Topoke, and there are usually several wives with their children in a family. The Fafa is assisted in his work by what we might call the lower or lesser nobles -- the Bainagoio, or "ancients" of the clan. The conception of the family is larger than among Europeans, because all aunts, uncles and their children are included in the group.

The villages or communities are organized as a hierarchy. The Fafa is the head of the village. Ordinarily a village is inhabited by a single complete clan. However there are clans composed of several villages. The clan chief is in

such cases the Fafa of the most important village; he is considered to be the "father" of the clan. There is no general chief of the Topoke tribe. Formerly there was such a tribal head, but the expansion of the families broke down the old intimate unity. The Fafa administers justice and adjusts ("cuts", as the people say) the differences between clan members. He also protects the rights and interests of the group.

The Fafa, although the head of the village, is not the head of the family. The family head is the oldest brother of the mother, and is called Tata. The Topoke family is composed of parents, children, and grandchildren, and sometimes includes the children of ancient house slaves.

Labor is strictly divided. Men cut down the forest and clear the land of large trees and stumps. They do the hunting, and protect women and children against animal and human attacks. Therefore they never bear loads. The men have only their lances and knives for protection. They always go in front. Women do all the cultivating of the fields. They prepare food and drinks, and sell the

products of the fields at the local market. As far as children are educated, mother does it. Boys soon go their own way. Girls are well fed because that insures a large dowry (marriage settlement) when they are grown up. Men make the frames of the houses and women do the rest of the work. Most houses have a wooden framework, plastered over with mud. A new village is built when one of the nobles no longer wants to live under a chief he does not like. Then he migrates with his family and starts a new village.

There are still within the Topoke community two or more villages comprised of descendents of ancient slaves who liberated themselves and went to live in a separated place. They are now a part of the Topoke, but they have refused to accept the tattooing. This tattooing is done by scratching the skin till blood comes, then rubbing the ashes of certain leaves in the scratches. After some months the keloids are formed. Topoke tattooing has a line of dots running from the upper part of the forehead to the base of the nose, or sometimes to the point of the nose. All other tattooing designs are those of individual families.

The Topoke know individual and collective property. Woods are the property of all, but special fruit trees belong to one family or another, even if in the middle of the forest. Anybody may cut a field in a place that is not occupied by others; once cut this place remains the property of the person who cut it, and of his children. There is work to be done for the community: repairing roads and bridges, hunting to get meat for the Fafa, and so on. Private ownership

extends to game, the forest, fields and the parcel a man has made his house on.

But the Fafa ultimately redivides the land with the assistance of his council of nobles.

The Topoke recognize a Supreme Diety to whom they have given the name Iongyaogya. In their religious system most value is given to what might be called "the power of life." This means "the force to live" and "the soul" at the same time. Somebody who is mentally sick has lost a part of his "power of life." Casualties are caused by evil spirits or men. "Natural" death never enters in the mind of a Topoke. Death is either punishment for some sin or crime, or caused by witchcraft or an evil spirit. The cause of death can be determined by consulting the Kanga ("witch-doctor"), who may consult the ancestors or try the poison ordeal.

God is far away and not the legislator of the tribe. Laws have been made by the ancestors, who are regarded as still living among their tribesmen. They are never forgotten, and their names are given to children as a reminder that the late ancestors always are present. Their presence helps to preserve the observation of laws and traditions. It is the Kanga who translates their will and tells people what they want.

Childbirth has religious as well as family aspects. Some days before the child is to be born, the pregnant woman, who lives with the clan of her husband, goes to the village

WOMEN AND
GIRLS PLAYING
A LINE GAME
(SIDE I, BAND 4)



where she came from and stays with her parents. There the child is born. Two or three days before birth her relatives make a small enclosure of palm leaves, so closely woven that nobody is able to see what is going on inside. In this enclosure the woman gives birth to the child, and she remains there with her child for a number of weeks. When she is feeding her child no one may pass behind her, as this is supposed to be a bad omen for the child. The child is given the name of one of the ancestors. When the time of isolation is over, the mother shows herself and her child to the whole village. They call her Bwale or Liombi. She is accompanied by the grandmother of the child (her own mother) and most of the teen aged girls of the village. They go singing and dancing all around the village.

The clan or village is the center of religious and social life. Ethical and moral laws are based on the welfare of the group. They include respect for God, for the ancestors, the parents, and the chiefs; they forbid stealing, adultery with married women (not with girls), lying, stealing, and murder. The Fafa of the village is the judge in civil matters; tribal justice is carried out according to customs and unwritten laws.

When somebody dies, everybody shows, by mourning as loud as he can, that he is not guilty of the death. Women wear mourning clothes of a dark blue color called Pili.

The cultural achievements of the Topoke are

on a lower level than those of many other Bantu tribes. They make baskets and pottery, and some sculpture of wood and ivory. Music and dance are the arts that they best know. They dance for marriages, for births, for deaths, to honor a chief, and when somebody comes out of prison. But they do not need a special occasion. Usually dancing is done at night and begins in the evening after sunset. The instruments that produce the music usually are drums, rattles and other percussion devices.

SIDE I, Band 1: BWALE MUSIC

This is the singing heard when the mother of a newly-born child comes out of her isolation (see above) and makes her first trip around the village to show the child. (this trip is made only after the birth of the first child.) Accompanying the young mother are girls of the village and her own mother, who carries the infant. All of the women are dressed in loincloths made of grass ropes, decorated with beads and nuts. Others who participate in the ceremony are covered with a red powder made from ngola wood. They dance from house to house, and the mother and child are thus shown to the people of the community. Everyone gives the mother and child presents. The name the child receives on the day of its birth is a permanent one, in honor of an ancestor. It receives other names later on, however. The father must pay the family of the

SMALL SLIT BAMBOO
DRUMS OR GONGS,
WITH LARGE SLIT
LOG DRUM IN
BACKGROUND



mother when the child is born -- usually in chickens. He also pays the midwife.

SIDE I, Band 2: LUKEMBI TUNE

The lukembi (known elsewhere in Africa under other names such as sansa) is a small instrument with forged iron keys which are played with the thumbs. Some of the keys have little metal fragments attached in such a way as to rattle or buzz when the keys are played with the thumbs. The instrument is often played by a man who travels from one place to another, to "encourage" him and keep him company.

SIDE I, Band 3: MEN'S WORKSONG

Sung in the forest while clearing for planting. The men are hauling a tree from the place where it has been felled.

SIDE I, Band 4: PLAY SONG

Women and children are playing together. Standing in two groups which face each other, the participants sing and dance.

SIDE I, Band 5: GIRLS' DANCE

SIDE I, Band 6: DRUMS FOR GIRLS' DANCES

The drums used for these dances are of the so-called "signal-drum" type -- slit log drums or, better, gongs. The same instruments are used as "talking drums" for simulating words. Each Topoke family has its own drum. At night, when the air is still, a good drum of this kind may be heard at a distance of twenty miles or more.

SIDE I, Band 7: PALM FRUIT CUTTER'S SONG

The cutter of palm fruits climbs the tall palm trees with the assistance of ropes made of liana vines. Sometimes these trees are forty-five or fifty feet high. While he chops out the palm fruits he sings:

Here I am,
I am the man
Who does the difficult and dangerous work.
The other ones don't want to do it,



MUSICAL BOW (SEE SIDE II, BAND 6)



GIRL PLAYING LILOLO (SIDE II, BAND 5)

But I don't fear the tallness of the tree
I do the hard work,
And I get only small pay.

(He is paid according to the amount he cuts.)

SIDE II, Band 1: HUNTING CALLS

These animal calls, by Topoke children, are used by hunters when in the forest seeking game. Heard first is the call of the mboloko, a kind of deer about the height of a small dog. Next, the call of the pambi, a kind of deer about the height of a shepherd dog. And finally, the ngulube, or wild boar.

SIDE II, Band 2: ANNOUNCING A DEATH

The "talking drum" (the same instrument that is used sometimes for dance music--see Side I, Band 6) here announces the death of a member of the family. The drumming passages begin with praise of the ancestors as founders of the family or clan. Then the drum message calls upon the relatives to come and give last honors to the person who has died, and to pay their respects by giving the usual gifts, called misolo. When a man dies, his family receives misolo from his wife's relatives; when a woman dies, her family receives misolo from the husband's family. When a child dies, the misolo is paid to the father's family by the mother's family.

SIDE II, Band 3: MOURNING

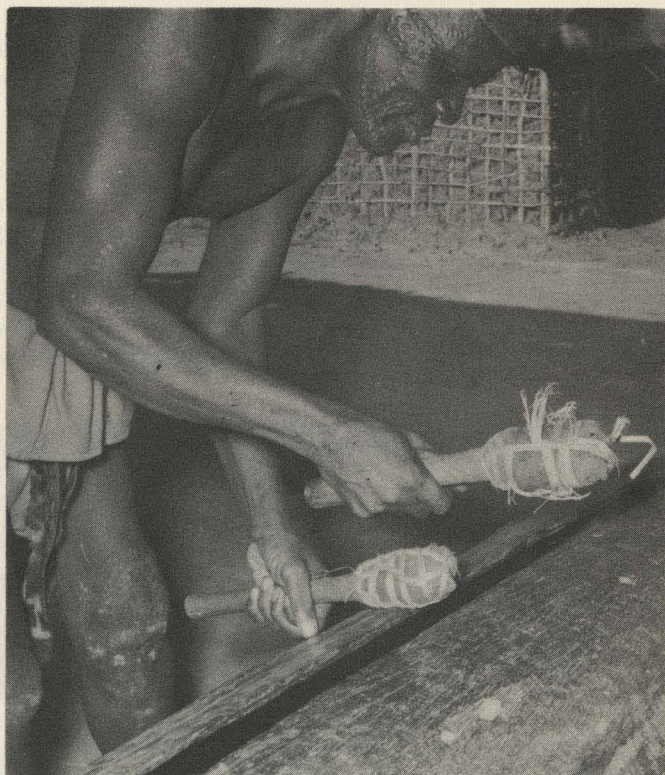
The ritualized mourning for a dead person is done by women. They rub their faces and bodies with white ashes or earth. They cry, weep, strike the ground with their heads, and strike blows on themselves with their hands. Not only is this an act of lamentation, it is also a demonstration that they could not have possibly been responsible for the person's death.

SIDE II, Band 4: SIGNALLING

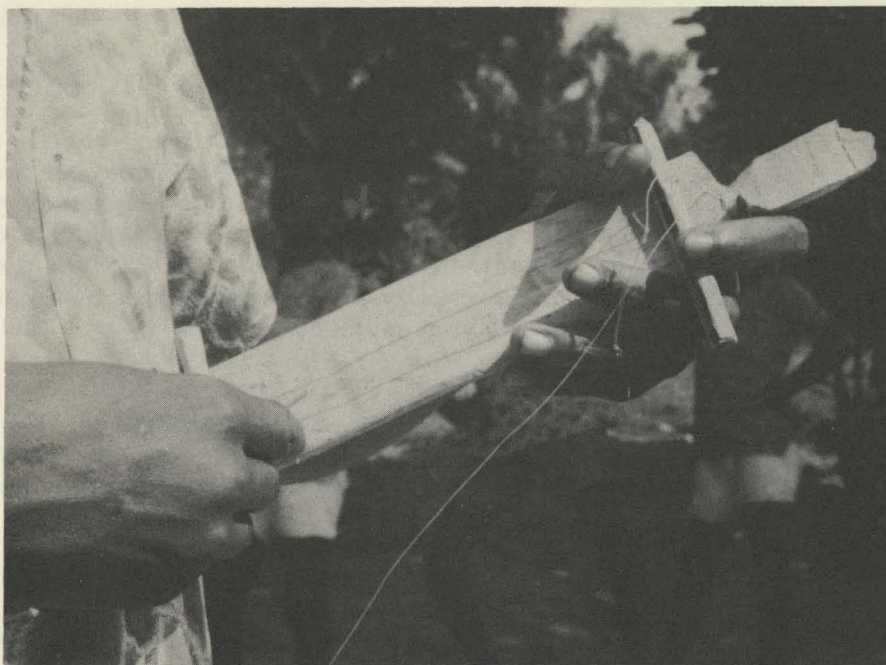
The Topoke have a variety of methods of vocal or instrumental signalling. There is of course the slit log or "talking drum," which simulates words of the Topoke language. The same type of signalling is done on horns and flutes, and the voice is used to produce tonal effects that can be translated back into words. The voice is also used to imitate signal horns and flutes. This is very intriguing, as it is



A SMALL LUKEMBI -- LARGER ONES ALSO ARE IN USE AMONG THE TOPOKE



PLAYING THE LARGE SIGNAL DRUM



THE TOPOKE TWO-
STRINGED FLAT
ZITHER (SIDE II,
BAND 7)

a situation where the voice is imitating an instrument imitating the voice.

4 (a) SIGNALLING ON SLIT LOG DRUM
(See photograph at left.)

4 (b) SIGNALLING WITH THE VOICE.

Topoke is a two-tone language. The two tones emitted by the voice here, like the two tones produced on the slit log drum, are translated by the listener back into words. In this recording a man calls into the forest and is answered by a second man.

4 (c) HORN SIGNALLING

Two men signal back and forth on ivory horns.

4 (d) MOUTH SIGNALLING IN
IMITATION OF TRUMPET

The voice is projected through a sound chamber formed by the hands.

4 (e) MOUTH SIGNALLING IN
IMITATION OF FLUTE

Here, too, the tone is controlled by using the hands as a sound chamber.

SIDE II, Band 5: GOURD PERCUSSION

This percussion device, played by girls, is made of a fruit called lilolo. The

fruit is cut in half in such a way that a membrane covers the flat side. The contents of the fruit are removed from under the membranes, and when the shells are dry, two small pebbles are inserted in each half. The dried halves are struck so that their flat sides come together. The resulting sounds are those of the rattling pebbles and the percussion of the hollow shells.

SIDE II, Band 6: MUSICAL BOW

This instrument is made of an ordinary hunter's bow with its wooden part resting on an inverted cooking pot, which acts as a sound chamber. The string is played in a horizontal position, two men participating. At one end, one player taps on the string rhythmically with his index fingers, while at the other end the second player varies the tension of the cord, pressing with a stick or a finger, producing different tones.

SIDE II, Band 7: ZITHER, WITH VOICE

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