FOLKWAYS FE 4483

MUSIC OF THE ITURI FOREST

DANCE SONGS
INITIATION SONGS
HUNTING SONGS
DRINKING SONG
LUKE MBI
MUSICAL BOW
MUSICAL STICKS
BOARD ZITHER
SIGNAL GONG
GUITAR SONG

MUSIC OF THE ITURI FOREST

Recorded by Colin M. Turnbull and Francis S. Chapman / Ethnic Folkways Library FE 4483

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

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ETHNIC FOLKWAYS LIBRARY Album No. FE 4483

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INTRODUCTION BY COLIN M. TURNBULL

The Ituri Forest, lying in the north-eastern section of the Congo Republic* was one of the last regions in Africa to be affected by Western culture. In its depths we might expect to find music relatively unaffected by outside influence. We do, but we also find a strange contrast in culture.

Various tribes, some of them driven from the east by slave traders, others driven out of their homeland by other warring tribes, have been converging on the forest for some hundreds of years. From the north come the great Mangbetu group; from the east the BaLese; from the south the BaBira and BaNdaka; and the slavers themselves, the BaNgwana.

These various groups brought to the forest Sudanic, Bantu and Arabic influences. Add to this, unknown infiltration of influence from West Africa and the recent all-pervading aroma of Western society, and you have as nice a hodge-podge of cultures as could be asked for. Even the languages become confused.

Vocal music, which is not outstanding, shows plain signs of adulteration, but instrumental music seems to preserve something of its originality. The people make and play many different musical instruments -- the harp, lyre, zither, musical bow; the sansa (here known as lukembi); the fixed and moveable-key xylophones; the sacred makata sticks; and various types of flute, single and pan pipes, horns, trumpets, drums and gongs.

There is as much skill in making these instruments with crude tools and simple materials as there is virtuosity in playing them.

But right among these tribes, and living in close contact with them, are the original inhabitants of the forest - the BaMbuti Pygmies. The contrast they offer is striking. They have no instrumental music of their own, delighting in song and dance. Unlike the simple and rather monotonous succession of parallel thirds which pass for harmony among the other tribes, the BaMbuti have a delicate sense of harmony, and as intricate a way of producing it as could be devised -- giving to each singer one note which he hoots at a given moment producing a melodic line that is passed around the circle of singers, note by note; and sometimes a second note that forms a part of the harmonic pattern. This technique is not used all the time, but in certain types of song, particularly hunting songs.

Words are unimportant in Pygmy songs -- texture of tone matters a great deal however, and the BaMbuti use four basic vowel sounds (ee, eh, oh, oo) to achieve this. They also use effects achieved by holding the nose, or singing from the throat or the stomach. Rhythm is given out by sticks, which may be split at the end and used as a "brush". Drums are never made by the Pygmies, and only used when they can be borrowed or stolen from their neighbors. They would be too much trouble to make, and too cumbersome as property in the nomadic life they lead.

The BaMbuti are hunters and gatherers, and live on the products of the forest. Since the invasion of the other tribes, however, they have developed a liking for the crops grown on plantations -- bananas, corn, manioc, and rice. For this, and for other reasons, Pygmy hunting groups form alliances with non-Pygmy villages, and supply them with game from the forest in return for garden produce. When down in the village, the Bambuti enjoy a holiday, and spend as much time as possible dancing and drinking palm wine. The dances are accompanied by drums and slit-gongs, and are performed by the Pygmies, with a natural air of showmanship, to delight their hosts.

But back in the forest the Pygmy is a different person. This is his real home; shady and cool, unlike the plantations; full of game and wild fruits and vegetables; free (strangely enough) from danger. Life is certainly not hard, but at

*Formerly the Belgian Congo.

the same time it is not too easy. However it is, it pleases the BaMbuti, who take a positive pride in their forest home. The non-Pygmy people distrust and fear the forest, and believe it to be full of evil spirits. To the Pygmy it is kind and gentle, if sometimes inclined to be aggravating. It is difficult to say what the Pygmy concept of religion is, but it can be said with certainty that whatever hazy ideas he might have about a supreme being, so inaccessible as to be virtually ignored, he has a definite feeling of some benevolent power who either resides in, or actually is the forest -- the source of all good, and, ultimately, of all bad.

This is necessarily a very incomplete account of the Pygmy and his dual life, but it is sufficient to help understand his music. Music is of the utmost importance to the Pygmy. It is not merely a recreation, as it is with his neighbors; it is, at times, a serious occupation, undertaken with a specific purpose. In other arts the Pygmy is lacking; but in story-telling, in mime, and in music, he shows an extraordinary imagination.

His music can be divided into five categories: two types of religious songs - those appropriate to the religious societies of the men and women, the Molimo and the Elima* respectively; two types associated with their main economic activities — hunting and gathering; and finally play songs. The first four groups each have their own distinctive technique by which they can be identified.

Hunting and gathering songs are mainly recreational, those of the Molima and Elima are sacred and their use is restricted to initiates. But in fact none, except possibly the play group, can be said to be secular, as all concern the forest. Hunting and gathering songs are often sung as a thank offering for a good day's hunting; they might recall stories of hunting in the distant past. They might even parody the day's hunt and make fun of some unfortunate person who trod on a twig at the wrong moment. Such songs are frequently accompanied by mime.

Because of their association with the non-Pygmy people, pygmy boys undergo the formal Nkumbi initiation, including circumcision. It is significant that for all the other important events in their life the BaMbuti have an appropriate form of music, but for this initiation they have none. They merely learn and repeat the initiation songs of the other tribes. That fact alone indicates to some measure the value the Pygmy places on the Nkumbi, and other facts bear out that he regards it as a matter of convenience, and little more. It gives him status among his neighbors, to whom the uninitiated are regarded as children without rights. But among the Pygmies themselves it makes little, if any, difference.

Initiation, for the Pygmy, is something quite different. It marks the passing from childhood into adulthood, and it confers the right to take part in the songs of the Molimo and Elima -- that is to say, it confers the right to commune with the god of the Great Forest. For girls this right is conferred on reaching the age of puberty, after a period of one month's seclusion. For boys it is conferred when he has proven himself as a hunter -- which may be some years after his "nkumbi".

The Molima is a striking institution as, unlike the usual run of African secret societies, it is virtually devoid of ritual. (Occasionally some non-Pygmy element creeps in, but is of little significance.) At times when we might expect some formal ritual or magic -- that is to say at times of sickness, bad hunting, or death -- the Molima is called.

In the evening the women and children are shut up in their houses, as they are not allowed to take part or even to see the proceeding. The men gather around the only fire, all the others having either been put out or taken into the huts. They start singing, and may continue for hours without working up any particular enthusiasm -- a very desultory chorus with a scrappy solo being passed from one man to the next.

But then, perhaps when they are sure that all the women are asleep or at least safely shut up, one of the great Molima songs will begin, quietly at first, never rising to more than their usual volume. There is no frenzy or fanaticism in this music, but it is of the deepest religious significance to them. They are, by their act of singing the sacred songs, communing with the god of the forest. He will hear them, whereas he ignores their ordinary songs. As they sing, with growing intensity of feeling, from far off in the night comes the echo of the Lusumba trumpet. One of the hunters has taken this into the forest and echoes the song of his fellows, passing it on still further so that their god may be sure to hear it.

This is all that is required. As in other songs the words are incidental -- there is no invocation for divine intervention, and no reproof for divine neglect. If the forest hears its people calling, that is sufficient.

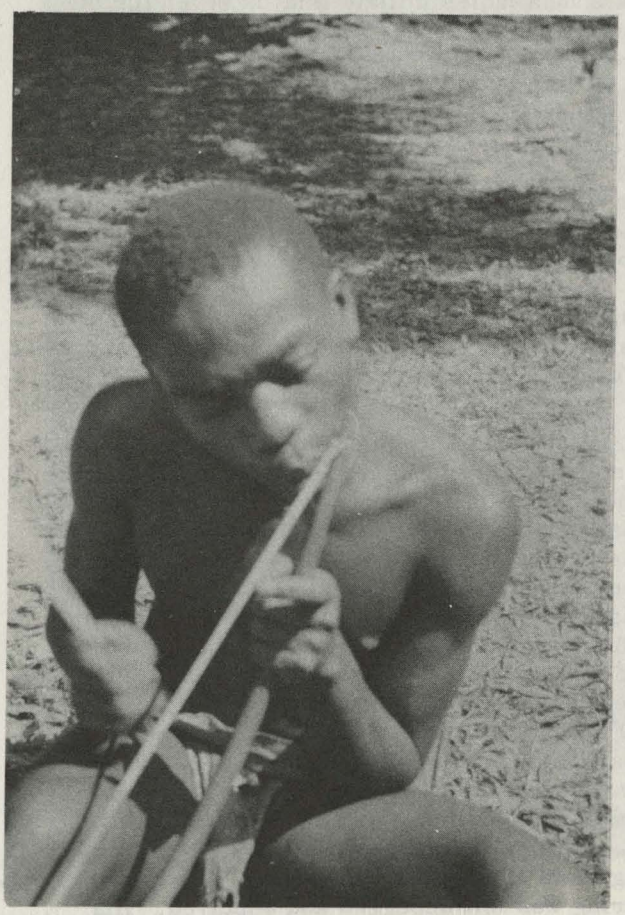
This is perhaps one of the most striking con-

*On the label these names appear as Lusumba and Alima.

LEFT: PYGMY ARCHER WITH BOW.

BELOW: PYGMY ARCHER USING BOW AND ARROW AS MUSICAL BOW.

trasts between the real people of the forest, the BaMbuti Pygmies, and the more recent invaders, for whose magic and ritual the Pygmies express such contempt. Music helps us to understand not only how far apart these people are, but it shows the strength of BaMbuti culture, in its ability to withstand, in music at any rate, the influence of the non-Pygmy neighbors. It also gives a pointer, as can be seen in the case of the initiation "nkumbi", as to what the real values of the Pygmy are. A closer inspection of their forest life and forest values will show that in other respects than music these people have retained a remarkably high degree of cultural purity, and are still strongly resistant to influence from outside - African or European.



SIDE I, Band 1: LUKEMBI AND VOICE. BaNguana. This young BaNguana, Abdel Aziz, accompanies himself on a small instrument made from a hollowed-out piece of wood (6" x 4" x 1 1/2") to which ten metal keys are fitted, passing over a bridge and bound at one end with vine. Each tribe has its own particular tuning for these keys, sliding them in or out to vary the pitch. Originally the keys were made of bamboo, but today old umbrella stays are found to be more convenient, and require little hammering out.

Like many of his tribe, Abdul Aziz sings in a quiet falsetto. His joy in the music lies

mainly in his skill with the lukembi. He shakes his head from side to side as he sings:

> "Ah me! I've lost my wife, and don't know where to find her." Then, after a miniature cadenza on the lukembi: "Alas, alas, and now I've lost my hen."

This is typical of the plaintive little song you might hear in any Ituri village, as the player lolls back in a chair on his veranda, gazing up at the sky, the lukembi held loosely between his knees. Lukembis are also used when walking from one village to another. Known by many different names elsewhere (the best known perhaps being sansa) this instrument is probably the most common of all musical instruments south of the Sahara. The number of keys and the tuning varies from tribe to tribe, as does the construction. Instead of the box construction described above, the keys may be fitted to a flat board which inturn may be placed in a calabash to add resonance.

SIDE I, Band 2: DRINKING SONG. Voices accompanied by drum and mgungu gong. BaNguana. The opening screams by the young BaNguana ladies initiate what is, even for the BaNguana, a slightly pedestrian chorus. It is led by the chief, Musafili. The accompaniment is by a wooden drum covered at one end with antelope skin, and by the mgungu, a slit gong made from a tree trunk and measuring 18" x 9" and standing 12" high on its four carved legs. These mgungu are also used for sending messages, each side of the slit, when beaten, sounding a different pitch.

The song explains its rather heavy, clumsy self. "We have had lots of palm wine," sings Musafili, "And we are drunk."

SIDE I, Band 3: BOARD ZITHER. The mapili, or board zither, is at the same time one of the simplest and one of the loveliest instruments to be found in the Ituri forest. If the BaNguana lack imagination in their singing, they make up for it as instrumentalists. The player here is Dawesi, and he belongs to the village of Effundi Somali, an old chief who was alive when Stanley passed through the forest. He made the zither himself from a flat board 20" long and 8" wide (not a trough, like some), a stout twig at each end serving as a bridge. Dried vine was wrapped tightly around from end to end, forming thirteen strings, twelve of which were pegged with bamboo pegs varying from 1" to 1 1/2" in length. The center string was left unpegged and unplayed. His left hand crosses a six time rhythm against the four time rhythm of his right. As with lukembi, tuning of the strings varies from tribe to tribe.

SIDE I, Band 4: RELIGIOUS SONG. Voices and drums. BaNguana. The BaNguana tribe came into the Ituri forest from the east in quest of two things, slaves and ivory. They set up as traders in these commodities and built up a flourishing business with the east coast. Their connection with the Arabs was close at all times, and they were early converted to Islam, in name at least. This particular song is one of their religious songs. Not only children, but even women take part, an unheard-of-procedure in more orthodox Muslim quarters. The drum is the small box drum found among the Arabs, played with the fingers and palms. The ritual grunting is a feature in most of the Aribisé songs, and can be heard quite plainly in this recording. Musafili's sub-chief starts the song, then Musafili takes over and the solo alternates between the two of them. Crickets and a brewing thunderstorm are heard in the background.

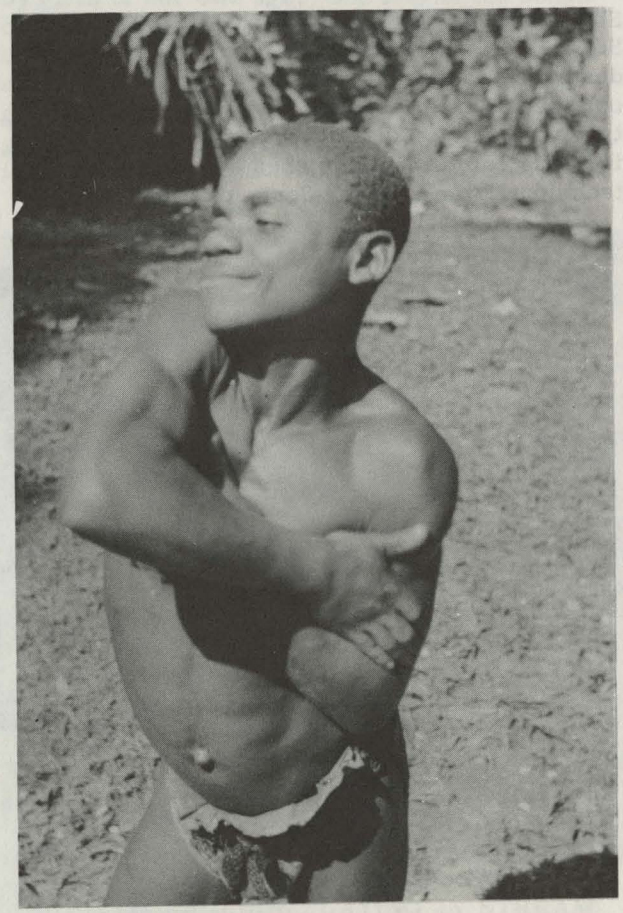
SIDE I, Band 5: MGONGO UTULE. Women's chorus. BaNguana. This song is found in almost exactly the same form among Arabisé tribes from the east coast through to the far side of the Ituri forest. [A recording has been made by Columbia (Tanganyika and Zanzibar Recording W63341/WE32) of this same song as sung by the Kinyamwezi tribe in East Africa.]

SIDE I, Band 6: DANCE MUSIC. Clappers, mgungu gong, drum, voices. BaMbuti (Pygmy). While this is a typical Pygmy dance, it is only typical of Pygmies when they are down in the non-Pygmy village (see introductory notes). Their dancing in the forest is equally fine, in many respects a great deal finer, but it is accompanied only by song, sticks and handclaps. In the village they borrow drums, clappers and a mgungu gong.

A steady stick beat that never falters through the dance starts the music. The "birds" in the background are in fact Pygmies. The mgungu, drums and voices come in together and the dance begins with little delay. The hooting sound which could be mistaken for horns is also made by Pygmies. They form a circle, women facing men. They hoot a chorus, with snatches of solo being passed

RIGHT: FIVE PYGMY BOYS SHORTLY AFTER CIRCUMCISION INITIATION. BELOW: PYGMY MAN CLAPPING BENT ELBOW TO SEND SIMPLE SIGNALS IN FOREST.

from one to another, singing encouragement as each dancer leaps into the center and performs in turn. The dancing is a game between feet and drum, the drum leading the feet for a while, then the dancer suddenly syncopating his step and making the drum follow him. After displaying his virtuosity as a dancer he jigs along the line of girls and eventually leads one out into the center for a brisk whirl. Both return to their places and another couple takes the floor. As dancers the Pygmies are inexhaustible. Dancing by firelight into the early hours of the morning, they truly earn the title given them by the ancient Egyptians: The Dancers of God.



SIDE I, Band 7: GONG SIGNALLING. Mabudo. Here the gong is used not for dance but for signalling. While not able to "talk" like the west coast talking drums, it sends out recognized signals each with its own accepted meaning. It is most frequently used for calling people together, announcing arrivals and departures from the village, etc. All the villagers understand the signals, whether they are BaBira, BaNdaka, BaNguana, Mabudo or BaLese. The gongs vary in length from twelve inches to four feet.

SIDE I, Band 8: TRAVELING SONG. Voices, drums, clappers, mgungu. Mixed Pygmy,

BaBira, BaNguana. "Tu na Kwenda" means "We are going"; and "Tu na rudi" means "We are returning"; and this is the sum total of the song. It is popular throughout the forest from Stanleyville to Irumu, and came into being during the war when there was much movement to and fro. It is now used as a marching, or better, a traveling song. Whenever a group of tribesmen in this area set out, on foot, bicycle, or perched on a truck, they are likely to sing this song.

SIDE I, Band 9: FLUTE SOLO, Ba buti. The Pygmies seldom bother with instruments of any kind, but when they wish to they can show great proficiency. This Pygmy, Pakasi, cut a piece of cane, burned four stop-holes at the lower end, plugged that end with a rolled leaf, and then notched the top end, all in a few minutes. After playing a while he seemed to lose all interest in the flute. That is the measure of Pygmy interest in instrumental music, but when they start singing it is hard to stop them.

SIDE I, Band 10: ELEPHANT-HUNTING SONG. Voices, split stick. BaMbuti. As described earlier, the real Pygmy music is only heard in the forest. They have distinct types of song for distinct activities. A Hunting Song can be distinguished by scale and technique from a Honey Song, or from the songs of the Elima or the Molima — the religious societies of women and men.

Hunting songs may be sung when setting out in the morning, but more often in the evening, after a meal around the camp fire. The men all eat together while the women and children eat outside their beehive-shaped huts. The forest all around is dark and silent, except for the crickets and frogs, and an occasional distant growl of some animal looking for a meal. The circular camp is lit by a large fire in the center, and a number of smaller fires, one outside each hut. The group of men in the center are the main singers, but sometimes the solo or even the chorus is passed around the circle of huts in canon form — one group taking over a measure before the other finishes. Clapped sticks are used for accompaniment -- either split at the end, or unsplit -- giving a harder, hollow sound.

In this elephant-hunting song split sticks are used to mark the time, and only the group of men and boys around the main fire sing. A couple of chords start them off, but then there is, as usual, a long warming-up period. The solo is taken up by two young hunters, overlapping, taking over from each other the story of the hunt. The chorus, very hesitant and uncertain to begin with, slowly gets under way, using the peculiar hooting technique in which each singer has one particular note which he hoots at the appropriate moment. Sometimes a singer will have two notes, and in this way

MAKATA STICK DANCE WHICH ACCOMPANIES INITIATION FESTIVAL.

a harmonic as well as a melodic pattern is passed around the circle.

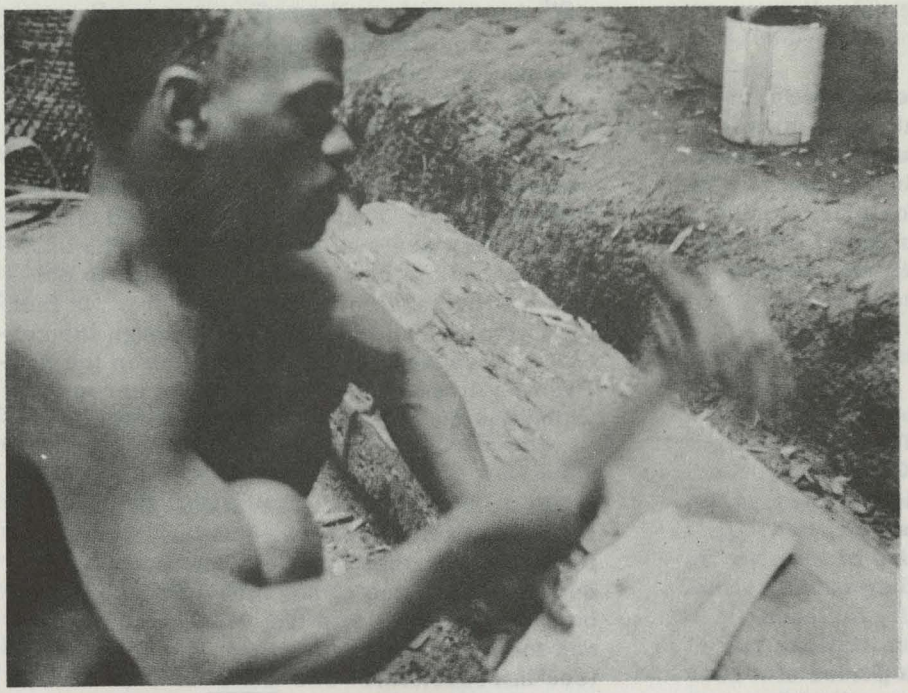
As the chorus takes shape the soloist tells his simple story, occasionally breaking off to tell the others that they are putting up a pretty poor show, and he stands up and begins to dance. The chorus and the split stick continue without change now, and the soloist, instead of singing, dances in the firelight and mimes the story of the elephant hunt. He ends this act with a series of yodels of satisfaction.

SIDE II, Band 1: MUSICAL STICKS. Mixed Pygmy and non-Pygmy group. Once every three years the Nkumbi, initiation of boys, takes place. This is a Bantu festival, but Pygmies take part. The beginning of the Nkumbi is heralded by the sounding of the makata, which are made specially for each nkumbi, and destroyed with the initiation camp when it is all over (after a period of about three months). The number of sticks varies from six to nine; during this initiation nine were used. Each player takes a stick and holds it under his left arm, hitting it with a wooden clapper held in the right hand; the bass stick is about three or four feet long, the treble only eighteen inches. The sticks are carefully shaved until they sound exactly the right pitch. They are sounded one after the other, and changes of pattern are "rung" just as in European campanology. (This is also, incidentally, the technique frequently used by the BaMbuti in their hunting songs.) Eight sticks form the "chorus", the bass stick is beaten by the leader of the makata group and is used something as the master drum is used in West Africa, to produce a variety of cross rhythms, and quite deliberately, to try and draw any one of the players off beat. The beating of the makata is accompanied by a dance, led by the makata players, followed in single file by any who care to join in, men or boys. The bells heard are ankle bells worn by the masked dancer who accompanied the makata on the actual day of initiation, the man who performs the circumcision operation.

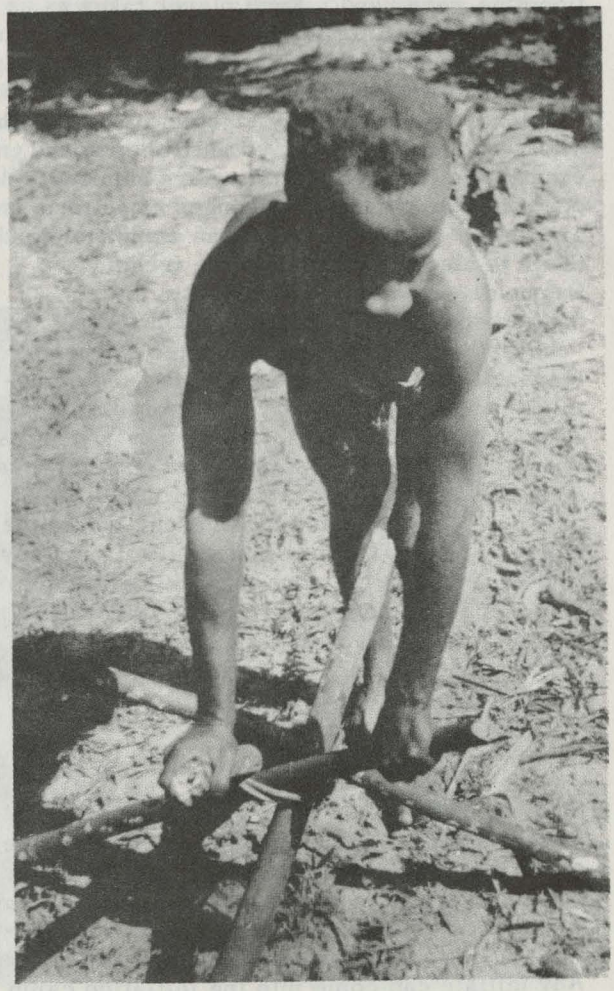
SIDE II, Band 2: INITIATION SONG. MaNdaka soloist, Pygmy chorus. This is one of the many initiation songs the boys (who are between the age of nine and twelve usually) have to learn, starting from the moments immediately following the circumcision operation. Any initiate can come into the initiation camp and sing these secret songs to the boys, who have to chant the appropriate replies. The singing goes on day and night, with very little respite, sometimes for a couple of hours on end without as much as a minute's break, one soloist taking over from another. On this occasion the only boys of an appropriate age were Pygmies, but usually Pygmy and non-Pygmy boys are initiated together. The bass makata stick is clapped by the soloist to emphasize the sanctity of the procedure. In fact the Pygmies, although they go through the ceremony because it gives them status in the non-Pygmy village, set no store by the ceremonial which has no relevance to their forest life.

SIDE II, Band 3: ALIMA SONG. If the Nkumbi has little relevance to the Pygmy's forest life, it does not mean that he is without initiation rites of any kind. In fact the boys are initiated into the Molima society, and the girls are initiated into the Elima (see introduction). The Elima is held whenever a girl reaches the age of puberty. She retires into a special hut and is watched over by an old lady for a month, kept company only by girls of her own age. She learns the songs of the Elima, and on occasions appears in front of her hut, her body shining with palm oil, and sings while the young men form an admiring group nearby and chant the chorus. Here three girls are singing together, and show a very delicate sense of harmony and a fine ear for pitch.

PYGMY CHILDREN PLAYING IN STREAM



LEFT: PYGMY MAKING BARK CLOTH. LOWER LEFT: ILLUSTRATING LEGEND WITH FINGER-CLICKS. LOWER RIGHT: PYGMY MAKING A SEAT OF FOUR STICKS.



PYGMY WOMEN PEELING SWEET POTATOES.

SIDE II, Band 4: LUSUMBA SONG BaMbuti. This is one of the more serious Molima songs, and may be sung only by initiates. It expresses the devotion of the Pygmy to the great forest, and his trust in it. This is one of the songs that are sung in times of crisis, and it puts the Pygmy in communion with his god. He sings to the forest, and from far off the Molima horn echoes his song, passing it on into the night, into the depths of his forest home. The words contain no plea, no reproof. They repeat over and over again one of the many names by which the BaMbuti call their god, and express their trust. A free translation is:

"Where is there darkness? Darkness is all around us.
If darkness is, then darkness is good."

Such is the faith of the BaMbuti.

In the recording the Molima horn is not heard, to the BaMbuti it would have been a sacrilege. But echoes from groups in distant parts of the camp are heard. It is obligatory for all initiates to take part in the Molima.

SIDE II, Band 5: LUSUMBA SONG. BaMbuti. The preliminary argument is such an invariable occurence that it is worth including. The Pygmies are, like many artists, a tempermental people. In matters concerning their songs they are particularly so, and this argument is because the men insisted on singing Molima songs, which meant that the women could take no part. The complaining voices of some of the women can be heard in the background during the song, hurling abuse as the men sing.

The curious tone produced by one of the singers as he hoots "hoo-eh, hoo-eh", is almost certainly in imitation of the Molima horn.

SIDE II, Band 6: BOARD ZITHER. BaNdaka. A similar instrument to that played by Dawesi on side one, but this time played by a MaNdaka, Sale ya BaPesoa. The tuning of the zither is that of the BaNdaka tribe.

SIDE II, Band 7: BOARD ZITHER. BaNdaka. By the same artist, but this time using the tuning of the BaBira tribe.

SIDE II, Band 8: MUSICAL BOW. BaNdaka. One of the most primitive of all instruments; a bent sapling stretching a piece of dried vine. One end is held on the ground with the toes, the other close to the mouth which acts as a resonator. Occasionally a Pygmy will use his hunting bow in this way, the arrow-shaft serving to tap the string. The shout of "Budah!" in the middle is an expression of achievement.

SIDE II, Band 9: LUKEMBI AND VOICE. MuBira. The MuBira singing this song was surprised at being asked for it, as it was one he had sung some three years previously, and normally songs are not remembered that long but are rather creations of the moment. He struggles to remember the sad story of how a young lady named Albertina went to Kisenyi to buy some fish and never returned; injecting a "Budah!" of satisfaction when he remembers, and alternating, when he forgets, with a shake of the head and "Bwana has returned, Calume is still here, and Bwana remembers Calume's song."

SIDE II, Band 10: GUITAR AND VOICE. Mabudo. Bottle and Spoon accompaniment. Civilization has brought many strange things in its wake, and Omboko, a Mabudo from Wamba, uses the guitar much as he would a Lukembi. He is accompanied by Abdul Aziz (heard singing on side one), hitting a bottle with a spoon. This kind of music has travelled across from West Africa, where it is popularly known as "High Life". Omboko sings:

"Friend, I am about to sing. What does the White man want? He wants to hear my music."

GENERAL EDITOR, HAROLD COURLANDER

PRODUCTION DIRECTOR, MOSES ASCH

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